

DEER CAMP ETIQUETTE

by Bill Cooper



Every year millions of deer hunters across the United States anxiously await the arrival of the annual whitetail deer season. With a near religious fervor, these hordes of hunters make a yearly pilgrimage to their favorite hunting grounds. Many are fortunate enough to share a deer hunting camp with family and friends.

Tradition Continues

Deer camp is a long standing tradition among many hunters. Some attend these annual camps in the woods more for the exciting social interaction with their buddies than the deer hunting itself. "No doubt about it," says professional hunter Ray Eye, "deer camp is a social environment like no other. In my younger days, all of my family, including cousins and uncles would gather for this big event. We all camped together on National Forest land.

Sometimes there would be as many as 30 of us. We longed for deer camp time to arrive. It was always our main event of the year."

Deer camp is a special place and everyone has his place and that rule may either be written or unwritten. "The old guys in camp were the bosses in our day," Eye continued. "They were the guys with all of the experience, or at least that is what they told us. At any rate, they talked and we listened. We heard the same crazy stories every year and we would all laugh again and again. Those stories never grew old and we revered the elders of camp and all secretly hoped to be like them one day."

Each member of the Eye camp had assigned responsibilities and everyone understood that they had to perform their assigned duties to make the large camp function properly. "There would occasionally be some arguments among the young guys about who did the most work, but when the old guys had heard enough, they would put a stop to it and that was final," said Eye. Tradition ruled. When large groups of people come together for any occasion there can be problems and deer camp is

no exception. Eye's camp proved no different. "There was one old uncle in our camp who liked to drink a bit too much," Eye explained. "We tongue lashed him several times, but it didn't help. So, the next year, when deer season rolled around, we all snuck off without old Uncle Joe. Well, one morning we all left camp well before daylight and had agreed to meet there at 10:00 a.m. for a big breakfast. When me and the guys in my truck were returning to camp via an old gravel road, some guy came running out of the woods waving us down. It was Uncle Joe. "Ya'll come on into camp guys. I've got a big breakfast cooked for all of you guys." "Well that is mighty fine of ya Uncle Joe," Eye said. "But that ain't our camp!"

Camp Problems

Despite the well meant intentions of hunting buddies, all of whom like each other when camp starts, problems do arise. Every year stories abound about the wonderful deer hunting camps hunters enjoyed. However, there are many stories, as well, about camps where something went wrong, tempers flared and hunting buddies parted company.

Men generally consider deer camp a place where they can get away from it all, kick back to enjoy themselves and pretty much do as they please. Behaviors often become relaxed. Bawdy jokes, loud talking, braggadocio and a repose from personal hygiene form a basic recipe of behavior for many deer camp participants. Toss is a little too much drinking and the scene is set for problems or maybe even disaster.

Establish Camp Rules

The elders used to rule the deer camps in the old days. However, that may not be the case in every situation these days. Camps are often organized by much younger men now. Camp rules, of

some sort, are more often the case than not. Land leases are a common denominator among deer camps. Leases usually contain rules specified by the landowner. Every camp attendee should have a copy of those rules. Likewise, each member should have a copy of the rules established and agreed upon by everyone attending the camp. Anyone who does not agree with the established rules should not come to camp. An individual arriving at deer camp with an attitude is a potential problem for everyone and the success of the camp. Establishing a firm set of camp rules pertaining to safety, individual camp responsibilities, what each person is to bring, acceptable language, stand assignments, drinking, uninvited guests, noise levels and lights out policies should be discussed and put in writing. Every camp member should be required to agree to and sign a copy of the rules. Too, do not assume that everyone knows the game laws. Go over them and make sure everyone understands the laws pertaining to game and trespass.

Safety

Safety must be paramount in the mind of every camp member. Every hunter must have had some sort of hunter education and safety program. It is the best insurance available against accidents. However, camp safety rules should be discussed at the beginning of the camp. Camp members should agree to a pact among themselves that they each will accept oral correction from any other member should a safety violation occur. Most accidental shootings in a hunting situation occur between family members. Harming a family member is a hard matter to live with. In camps, the most prominent accidents involve loaded guns in camp or someone pulling a trigger on what they thought to be an unloaded gun. There is no substitute for gun safety.

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Well organized deer camps are fun for everyone and a place where stories flow freely and memories are made.

Personal Responsibilities

Nothing sours relationships in a deer hunting camp quicker than someone shirking or failing to fulfill their personal responsibilities to other camp members. When every hunting party member takes care of their assigned duties, deer camp operates like a well oiled machine. And it is common knowledge that happy hunters are more successful hunters. Problems divert time and energy away from the intended task of hunting deer. The intention of every deer camp is for participants to have a good time, enjoy one another's company and certainly to enjoy the deer hunt. Sitting on stand stewing about someone not washing the dishes nor having a meal on the table on time cuts into one's concentration and enjoyment of the hunt. The bottom line is: do your job, period. If you don't, expect to be admonished by the appointed camp

If your bad behavior continues, don't act shocked if you are booted out of the group. You earned it; you deserve it.

Uninvited Guests

There is no excuse for someone bringing an uninvited guest to deer camp. You made an agreement with your buddies about who would attend camp. No one else should be there. Bringing an uninvited guest to camp is one of the worst things a camp member can do to other party members. In most cases, uninvited guests are not known by other camp members and certainly have not earned the right of passage to be there. Camp is not the place to introduce someone new. Too, an uninvited guest has not been assigned camp responsibilities and everyone is on edge because no one knows the skill level of the new person, nor

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his reasoning abilities and dedication to safety.

Camp bosses should insist on uninvited guests leaving immediately. Camp members should back his decision. There should be no discussion of the matter. Camp rules must prevail. Too, many land leases list who is to attend the camp. Extras become a heavy liability.

Many of the horror stories I hear each year about tragedies in deer camps happen as the result of uninvited guests being allowed to stay in camp. A dear friend of mine experienced one such tragedy in a camp he hosted in Michigan many years ago. A member brought an uninvited guest. My friend, the camp boss, asked the uninvited guest to leave. His friend insisted that the guest stay. An argument ensued. The uninvited guest stayed. At 10:00 a.m. the next morning, the party member who brought the uninvited guest came to the camp boss's deer stand to report that the individual had been killed in a firearms accident. The uninvited guest attempted to pull his loaded firearm, barrel up, up his deer stand. The firearm discharged and the .30-06 round struck the ill prepared hunter under the chin, killing him instantly. The tragedy did not end there. The wife of the deceased sued the landowner. He had to sell 40 acres of his farm to pay the settlement. End result: my friend lost a landowner friend and was never allowed to hunt on his property again. Moral of the story: never allow uninvited guests to hunt with your party.

General Etiquette

Most problem areas should be covered in written agreements signed by camp members. Communications within camp need to be announced to everyone at the same time when possible. Posting notes, sending texts and even e-mails can eliminate communication problems. Camps vary by individuals. Members of one camp may agree among themselves to stay up late every night. Others may elect to retire much earlier. Regardless, every last member should abide by the rules. They is nothing in deer camp more obnoxious than someone staying up past the curfew and

being loud and obnoxious. Such individuals should not at all be surprised when they are either asked to leave camp, or dropped from the roster for the next year's camp. The bottom line is that every deer camp member has a responsibility to every other member to follow the agreed upon rules. It is not a bad idea to have punishments for failure to follow rules listed in the written agreement. And they should be carried out. These may range from actual monetary fines to being expelled from participating in the group's future deer camps.



Every deer camp member must be familiar with game and trespass laws.

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Dian Cooper drags her own deer out of the woods, but asks her husband to field dress it.


Ladies in Camp

Award winning outdoor photographer Dian Cooper has experienced many hunting camps as the only lady present. "Women are a growing force in the outdoors," she began. "In the past, women have stated that they do not go hunting with their significant others because they feel out of place, looked down upon, feel intimidated, or do not like the profanity and general bad behavior of guys in deer camp."

Cooper feels that females should be treated with equal respect while in camp. "Women simply want to be treated in camp the same way they are treated anywhere else, with respect. The surest way to end the attendance of your wife or girlfriend at deer camp is for the guys to make fun of her abilities or express sexual innuendo," Cooper said. "We as women hunters like to be treated with normal respect. It doesn't have to go over board. I drag out the deer I harvest, but I do ask my

husband to field dress it for me. He loves having me in camp and he shows it."

Conclusions

Eye and Cooper both agree that camp etiquette is important for a successful deer hunting camp. "Simple kindness puts everyone on equal footing," Cooper commented. "Deer hunting time is too precious to be wasting time over silly problems," Eye said. "And it is an absolute tragedy for camp members to have to deal with serious problems from a group member. Deer camp should be one of the happiest and most memorable events of everyone's year. And everyone in camp should work hard to make sure that is the case. However, I am old enough now that I still like that philosophy that youngsters look up to us old geezers and listen to our stories over and over and over again!" 

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