

Web Exclusive

Run, Bambi, Run! Run Like the Wind!

In which our correspondent puts his thumb on the scales in the eternal contest of predator vs. prey.

By Steve Tuttle

We live in a world in which some lapsed vegetarians justify eating meat—as long as it's happy meat. And according to tree-hugger.com, PETA was recently described as a “terrorist threat” by the USDA. Can a shift in the cultural zeitgeist that surrounds hunting be far behind? Will killing your own dinner become the rage among the tofu-and-bean-sprouts crowd? After all, what's “greener” than eating a deer that grazed on acorns its entire life while frolicking in the woods, the ultimate definition of free range?

Where our food comes from and how it gets to our tables is front of mind these days. There's a compelling argument that standing face to face with what you eat and accepting the moral responsibility of the kill is superior to blindly picking up a package of meat at the grocery store. I grew up hunting and still hunt a little, so maybe I think about this sort of stuff more than the average person.

If this new movement catches on, and people in Park Slope suddenly feel the need to chase down their own dinner, the good people who brought you Gore-Tex are here to help. Hunters have been able to choose from a bewildering array of gadgets at sporting goods stores and online for years. But this season saw the introduction of a new product that might arguably make the biggest impact on hunting since the gun. It's a new “visual concealment technology” by W. L. Gore & Associates called Optifade, or in other words, digital high-tech camouflage.

Big-game hunting season just wrapped up in many parts of the country, and this was the first season that Optifade was available on the mass market. I'd been reading about the new technology throughout last year, and admit at first I was skeptical. Camo that makes you practically invisible to deer? Optifade sounded too devious to be true, so I went to W. L. Gore headquarters in Delaware and interviewed the team that came up with the concept.

The original idea was born—as so many great ones are—over a few glasses of wine. Two members of Gore's hunting team, David Dillon and Brad Yeomans, were having a meal in Ogden, Utah, at a 2007 conference and brainstormed together about possible new hunting products. Eventually they simultaneously arrived at a eureka moment, which Dillon said boiled down to a simple concept: “How does prey see camouflage?”

They brought the idea home, the company gave them seed money, and they sought out experts in the world of military camouflage and animal vision. Gore's primary partner on the animal side was Dr. Jay Neitz, then at the University of Wisconsin. His NIH-funded research looks at deer and animal vision to find potential cures for humans. Cleverly, to me at least, they also consulted with researchers in the car-insurance industry who've been studying deer vision for years in an attempt to figure out how to reduce the number of deer killed on the highway. Combining these resources, they came up with a product

that went on the market less than two years after its humble Ogden beginning.

Gore and its team applied the existing digital camouflage research to hunting and devised a pattern that works based on what the deer sees rather than mimicking the background like traditional camo. The macro and micro patterns trick the animal and make the hunter fade into the background, unrecognizable as a predator even at very close distances. Gore claims it's the first camouflage based on how animals—and not humans—see.

Ungulates, or hooved animals such as deer, see the world in a slightly blurrier way than we do, but they also have a wider field of vision: 280 degrees, compared with 120 for us. In addition, they suffer from red-green color blindness. After it went through the usual trial and error and was subjected to field tests by selected big-game hunters, the product was unleashed on the hapless deer population. When it was first offered to stores, retailers were cautious, but once customer demand picked up they ordered nearly three times as much as they had in initial orders. Run, Bambi, run! Run like the wind!

That all sounds great on paper, and my interviews with the Gore folks were convincing, but before I believed it really worked I decided to put it to a field test. Gore sent a complete loaner set of Sitka gear with Optifade—hat, gloves, pants, and jacket—to my brother, Chris, an avid hunter with 35 years of experience. He's killed dozens of white-tailed deer over the years. Our one-man focus group found that

not only does it work, but it fairly astounds.

The first day he wore Optifade on a hunt in the mountains of rural Virginia, Chris heard the telltale sound of two bucks fighting off in the distance, their antlers clanging together in the fall ritual of establishing dominance in the rutting season. He took out his own set of antlers and started rattling them together to simulate the sound, hoping to call the bucks in to shooting range. At first he thought he'd scared the deer off by rattling too loud, but soon one of the large bucks started to walk toward him.

The deer ambled slowly toward Chris, occasionally stopping to look—like he knew something wasn't right but couldn't figure out what. One thing was for sure: the deer simply did not see my brother, who was sitting out in the open on the edge of a field, in a lawn chair. (He chose this instead of a tree stand so we could better test the product.) "It was as if he didn't consider me a threat. He was almost looking through me," he said. The deer eventually came within 15 feet before Chris pulled the trigger on his muzzle loader.

Not 15 yards, but feet. In a last-gasp effort to survive, the seven-pointer darted into a nearby river, where he died and started to drift downstream. My brother was forced to make an adrenaline-fueled plunge into the icy water to retrieve the animal.

Not only did the camo allow Chris to get close to the buck, but after jumping into the river in 20-degree weather, he remained completely dry and warm because the Optifade camo suit was lined with waterproof Gore-Tex. "This stuff is unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it in all my years of hunting," he said. Chris kept a detailed diary of his season, and at least 10 deer came closer than he would normally expect from past experience. On another day, three small bucks walked within 20 yards. "They looked over in my direction but kept slowly walking," he said. Another buck circled his location on the ground for 20 minutes until he caught wind of his scent and took off running.

Sadly, because of stupid journalistic ethics, we had to return the Optifade. My brother would have loved to keep it, but the gear he tested cost well over \$1,500.

Another unintended side effect: until this stuff catches on in the hinterlands, Chris found himself too embarrassed to stop by the local country store after a hunt because the quirky digital pattern was so odd. He thought the local hunters would think he was a "Fudd," as in Elmer. That's what we used to call the city slickers that came out to our home county in rural Appalachia all gussied up in fancy Orvis hunting gear with the tags still attached. If he had stopped, the formerly free-range buck in the back of his truck would have told the hunters otherwise.

It's a far cry from the days when we'd go out on hunts in jeans and orange vests and be lucky if we got within shooting range of a deer. I'm not suggesting we go back to the way I hunted as a kid, but now it seems like we're watching a Harlem Globetrotters game, and the deer are playing the role of the Washington Generals. I wonder if recent advances in gear are tilting the scales too far in favor of the pursuer and taking more of the sport out of hunting. But on the other hand, ethics schmethics ... the venison sure is tasty.

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