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Planting the seeds for a family whitetail deer hunting tradition

By Irwin Greenstein

Talk to the young Kohler boys about their deer hunting experiences, and their faces light up.

Ten-year-old Grayson grows animated when he describes waking up his father, Jon, in the camp house on the family's Lick Skillet Plantation in North Florida, before the sun came up in early November 2021, saying he wanted to go deer hunting.

Fifteen minutes later, father and

son were in the field, with Grayson taking to a tree stand overlooking a food plot. Looking through the rifle scope, he patiently waited to take the winning 100-yard shot.

Grayson was thrilled that he killed his first buck ever with only a single shot. "I was very happy," he said. "I want to go deer hunting again."

His 8-1/2-year-old brother, Ashton, meanwhile, harvested his first buck only a few months later. The younger



FIRST BUCK! - Grayson shows off his first whitetail, harvested while hunting with his dad, Jon, and his brother, Ashton, on the Kohler's Lick Skillet Plantation.

Kohler boy took his deer at Deep Creek Farm – a 2,100-acre high-fence plantation in Florida with some 4.4 miles on the world-famous Suwannee River. It had been the fourth time that Jon, Broker/Partner at Jon Kohler & Associates in Lamont, Florida, had sold the property during his 30 years in the real-estate business. Jon Kohler & Associates is the leading authority on hunting plantations, ranches and high-quality properties representing the best land stewards in the Southeast. Ashton's hunt took place with the new owner's permission shortly after closing on the sale.

"We rarely hunt our clients' properties, but Deep Creek Farm is a special place for Ashton to get his first buck," Jon said.

Ashton had showed the virtue and maturity of perseverance beyond his years. Four deer had been attracted to the food plot that morning, but the fifth one, a buck, had appeared out of the Suwannee River swamp about 20 yards away. With Jon at his side, Ashton knew that 10-pointer was destined for him. The culmination of Ashton's hunt was one of those life lessons that the Kohlers want to instill in their sons.

"It was hard being patient and quiet while all those other deer were looking in our direction," Ashton recalled. "That buck took two steps, and it went down. I was very excited and happy that I killed the deer."

Jon and his wife, Erica, who is a Director/Partner at Jon Kohler & Associates, see themselves as embodying the

lifestyle and traditions inherent in their property portfolio. Raising their two sons to hunt ensures a lifetime of self-sufficiency while bringing the family closer together, especially over the variety of venison meals stocking their freezers. Erica points out that they eat all the deer they harvest. And, every Thanksgiving dinner features a wild turkey from Lick Skillet Plantation.

"Erica and I are starting a new Kohler family hunting tradition," said Jon, an ardent deer hunter himself. "I try to point out the reverence for nature

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FIRST TURKEY! - Ashton proudly displays his first turkey, harvested while hunting with his dad, Jon, on the Kohler's Lick Skillet Plantation.

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'He took me out to watch deer when we first started dating'

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when we're in the field with the boys... all the animals and how the seasons change."

The endeavor has become a bond, of sorts, for the Kohler family. Erica, who had never hunted until meeting Jon, went on to become a passionate deer hunter.

"He took me out to watch deer when we first started dating," she said. "I had Jon's rifle in the stand. A buck came by, and I shot it. I thought, this is cool."

With trail cams placed around Lick Skillet Plantation, Erica will select a single buck to watch throughout the year. If she doesn't get the buck she's after, she won't shoot a different one. She'll spend as much time as possible in a blind or stand, watching for deer. But she admits that she also does some work on her phone, especially if a real-estate deal is in the works.

"I work, pick up the kids from school and go directly to the deer stand," she said. "I'm alone, I study the deer and wildlife, and I'll do some work."

While the Kohlers' lifestyle sounds idyllic, behind the scenes Jon, Erica and a hand-picked team of experts have over the years developed the best way to improve and sustain high-fence deer hunting on Lick Skillet and the properties they list. Their approach requires hard work, patience and a commitment to success.

One of their key partners is David Morris, a whitetail manager biologist and game manager. David has pioneered modern food plot strategies to yield more and bigger whitetails on private

lands. He's partner and co-founder of Tecomate Wildlife Systems and Tecomate Seed Company, which specializes in deer food plots.

"At Tecomate, we don't advocate bringing deer in. We like to manage the native population," he explains. "Genetics are what you inherit in an area, but of course, we want to grow bigger deer. The traditional way is for you to manage age, genetics and nutrition."

In addition, "Culling or select harvest in inferior deer will result in a better genetic expression of the deer," he said. "If you have a significant culling program, the fawns will be better. You're improving the genetic expression of the herd."

But, instrumental in optimizing a herd's genetics is raising the deer to their peak age.



A LEGACY OF STEWARDSHIP - Jon Kohler and Tecomate's own David Morris show off the impressive results from Tecomate's first Florida show. Jon and David share a passion for the stewardship of the land and the use of proven, science-based systems to optimize the native whitetail population.

"Age is simply a matter of holding off the deer to reach their full genetic pressure," he continued. "That's usually three years, but it can be five or six, when their antlers reach their full potential."

Deer antlers are about 75% protein. Managers need to provide a higher protein food during antler and fawning season. You can do that through supplemental feeding and food plots. After that, mortality plays a role. And, it de-

pends on what your target age is. In the South, it's 3 to 4-1/2 years old."

The Kohlers' Lick Skillet Plantation is living proof that their program works. In talking about it, Jon will tell you how their expertise has enhanced the Kohler family lifestyle. "It's all orchestration through habitat management. That means my sons are going to become deer hunters."

And, he has similar high expectations for his clients as well.

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