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FEBRUARY 2026

48TH YEAR 7TH ISSUE

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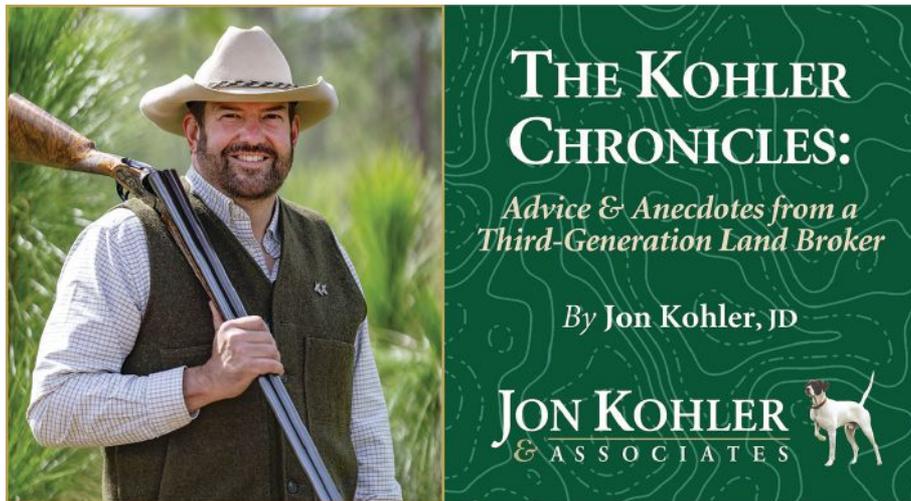
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When the woods come to town

by Jon Kohler

I've always believed there's a desire God built into our DNA that draws us to gathering.

It might look like church on Sunday morning, a fish fry at camp or a Friday-night football game under lights that draw more draw bugs than people. But the pull is always the same. We enjoy standing shoulder to shoulder with others who believe in the same things.

Hunting is a quiet passion. But it's never really solitary. It's tied to land, tradition, restraint and a shared understanding that only becomes visible when we come together.

Every winter, that understanding shows up again in a small North Florida town. A county that never had the need for even one red light.

In Monticello, Florida... every November, the woods come to town.

A Revival With Hooves

What happens here each year feels a little like an old-time revival, minus the hymnals, plus a few dog boxes. Hunters arrive from every kind of country you can imagine: flatwoods and plantations, river swamps and pine ridges. Some pull in from the concrete and holding pond world of Tampa. Different landscapes, same language.

And they don't come to show off antlers.

They come to celebrate does.

That's the irony – and the brilliance – of the Big Doe Challenge, hosted by Trophy Creek Outfitters. In a hunting culture long obsessed with inches of bone, this event flips the script. The winners aren't crowned for rack size. They're recognized for healthy animals, good habitat and disciplined management.

For one day, guns, beer and deer sit right next to the courthouse. Kids hover near the scales. Stories get better with

each telling. And, the entire town seems to understand exactly why this matters.

The Man Behind the Counter

If there's a constant in all of this, it's JT Surles.

Surles owns Trophy Creek Outfitters, but calling it a “shop” doesn't really cover it. It's more like a crossroads. Rifles, rods, reels, optics, boots, camo – gear stacked so deep it's almost overwhelming. He doesn't “sell” stuff. He guides folks on the best gear for the budget to improve one's outdoor experience.

He reminds me of a character out of an old Western – the guy everyone ends up talking to because if something's happening in town, he's already involved. If it has to do with hunting, fishing or the community, odds are Surles is part of it.

In our household, his shop is also where I've been told – more than once – by my wife, Erica, not to buy her any more gifts from Kevin's or Trophy Creek Outfitters. For years, this puzzled me greatly until one day it dawned on me. Unlike her, as a guy, I don't have a store that I can walk into and buy whatever I want, whenever I want, with automatic spouse approval... no questions asked.

A Growing Annual

Thanksgiving Tradition

The Big Doe Challenge has grown into a family Thanksgiving tradition. The 13th annual event drew 132 registered hunters, with youth participation especially strong – 80 young hunters took part. In total, 24 deer were weighed in, and four hunters harvested their first deer.

“Getting youth involved in hunting is an important initiative, and I want to recognize the parents of these kids,” said Surles. “This event wouldn't be possible without their consent and encouragement, and we're very thankful to the parents for their young hunter's participation.”

Surles also emphasized the impor-



Photo courtesy of Jon Kohler

tance of visibility and access, noting that while Trophy Creek Outfitters hosts the Big Doe Challenge, the event is put on in partnership with the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Kings of Spring chapter. There are no entry fees, and local businesses and partners step up to award hunters and donate prizes – including a raffle for an ATV, firearms and other giveaways.

“I also want to recognize the generosity of Beau Turner, who sponsors the youth part of the Big Doe Challenge, as well as Quail Forever's Kenny Barker, who was master of ceremonies,” Surles said. “The event also raised \$2,000 for the local youth scholarship program.”

Why This Matters More Than Ever

Events like this aren't just about camaraderie. They're about survival – of hunting itself.

Florida has about 240,000 licensed hunters. That's only one percent of the population. Put another way: 99 out of 100 Floridians don't hunt.

All Florida's hunters combined wouldn't fill three major college football stadiums on a single Saturday. Yet those same hunters are expected to fund wildlife conservation for everyone else.

In my world, it would seem that 40% of people hunted. The reality couldn't be further from that. Georgia sits around seven percent participation. Alabama pushes 10. South Carolina is near four. Florida isn't just low – it's an outlier.

Nationally, only about five percent of Americans hold a hunting license. America's hunting heritage – one of the pillars of wildlife management and conservation funding – has reached a generational inflection point. Wildlife populations in many places are strong, even growing. Hunter numbers and the funding they provide are not.

If that imbalance continues, the consequences won't just be cultural. They'll be ecological.

Recruitment Isn't a Buzzword – It's a Lifeline

That's where R3 – recruitment, retention and reactivation – comes in. In my youth, I would have never imagined the threat would come in the form of not enough hunters. I was solely focused on habitat.

Organizations like Quail Forever and NWTFF understand this. Habitat can be perfect. Wildlife numbers can be strong. But without hunters – especially young hunters – none of it holds. Fewer hunters may seem like more opportunities, but that's not how the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation works.

Kenny Barker is Quail Forever's regional representative in Florida and Georgia, supporting a growing network of six local chapters and 15-plus regional staff members that fuel habitat conservation efforts and shooting sports initiatives across the Southeast alone. He said the R3 initiative focuses on public-lands habitat and directs funding toward outreach events and learn-to-shoot programs.

“It's great to see the community come together and get behind events to weigh deer and encourage youth participation,” Barker said. “The event draws thousands, and our main goal is to get kids and young adults involved in shooting sports and to appreciate our heritage. This involves working with private landowners to make it happen.”

“These events center on improving habitat, and when we improve quail habitat, we also improve habitat for deer, turkey and everything else in the woods,” Barker added. “I'd like to thank JT and Beau for their support of our hunting heritage on local levels. Events like this wouldn't be possible without them.”

Leadership That Looks Forward

Few people embody the future of hunting and conservation like North Florida's Beau Turner.

(Continued on next page)

The most endangered species: young people in the outdoors...

(Continued from previous page)

Son of Ted Turner, he oversees habitat management and hunting across Turner-owned lands nationwide. He sees the big picture. His real passion has been introducing others to the outdoors... and he's very good at it.

For 20 years, Turner ran the Beau Turner Youth Center, a pilot program well ahead of its time that introduced kids and teenagers to shooting sports and the outdoors. I took my boys there. It was impressive. To a Florida Cracker like me, it was better than Walt Disney World.

That influence hasn't faded. Today, it shows up in the Big Doe Challenge and beyond. Whether promoting longleaf pine restoration before it was fashionable or championing youth engagement when funding was thin, Turner has consistently been out front.

"I always say, the most endangered species are young people in the outdoors," Turner said. "It's imperative that we start getting children offline – off their computers and video games – and get them into the wilds. Hunting and shooting are great ways to do it."

Turner said many of his friends are passionate about hunting and fishing and want to do everything possible to keep sporting heritage alive.

"When something is a success, like the Big Doe Challenge, you know it carries on," he said. "These types of events give young people the opportunity to get outdoors and keep their interest in hunting and habitat."

We all know that habitat is declining rapidly, and refuges have no public voice. It's imperative that we keep habitat protected and take kids to these places all the time."

Turner described himself as "a big habitat guy" and stressed the importance of finding tools and resources to manage land better. For newcomers, he recommends starting with hunter safety courses, pairing kids with adults to learn responsibly and safely. Nothing impacts a youth's life path more than having a mentor.

"Now more than ever, I think it's important to stay in one place and have a purpose," Turner said. "Recovering habitat is for everyone, and you don't have to be interested in hunting to do it. I think the Big Doe Challenge and other like-minded events are creative ways to

get kids outside – outside their backyards – and enjoy what we love. There's nothing like purpose."

What It Means at Lick Skillet

He is spot on. At Lick Skillet, the Big Doe Challenge has become the defining hunting event of the year. More planning goes into it than Thanksgiving.

My boys and their buddies have been attending for five years now. The high fence is off limits. Only native Aucilla River deer. Thanks to our fire-managed habitat and high-protein perennial peanut, someone from our camp has always placed in the top 3.

The family takes it very seriously – hours checking cameras, endless conversations about where the heaviest does might be and never-ending questions on the best stand.

The Chad Cole family has hunted it with us for years, driving five hours up and five hours back from Tampa. Several boys have harvested their first deer during this hunt. It's grown into a celebration on par with the Fourth of July. The boys now talk about doe weights, not antler size.

When Showing Up Matters Most

There's another reason events like the Big Doe Challenge matter, and it has less to do with trophies than it does with presence. The celebration is habitat, not horns.

A local Quail Forever chapter event is coming up soon. On the surface, it might look like just another dinner or fundraiser. But those rooms – and the people who choose to fill them – are where the future of hunting and habitat is actually decided.

Conservation doesn't happen by accident. It happens when people show up. When they buy a ticket, raise a hand, volunteer a weekend, bring a kid or invite someone who's never been before.

That's the common thread running from the courthouse square in Monticello to a Quail Forever or NWTF banquet table. Different settings. Same responsibility.

If hunting is going to endure – not just as a pastime, but as the backbone of wildlife conservation – we need more than strong opinions and fond memories.

We need participation.

We need presence.

Because when the woods come to town, what really matters is who's there to greet them.



Photo courtesy of Jon Kohler

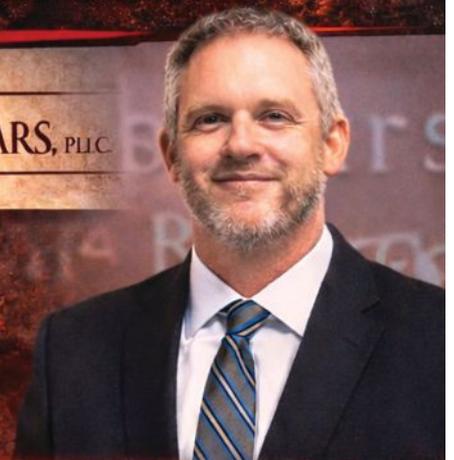
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