The northeastern corner of Wisconsin is a rugged and heavily forested land dotted with scenic lakes teaming with fish. Over 100 years ago, huge draft horses helped skid huge piles of logs out to the roads and waterways that wound their way out to the area sawmills. Nearby, Iron Mountain, Michigan, was at one time a mining boomtown. Immigrants from around the world settled there in the quest of a better life for themselves and their families.

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A Cedar Swamp Giant

While the thud of hoofs belonging to ponderous logging horses has long since been replaced by the buzz of fishing boats, the lure of this unique area of Wisconsin remains undeniable. The area is known for producing large whitetail bucks, which makes the area high on the wish list for many trophy deer hunters. Derrick Kuschel has dreamed about trophy bucks his whole life. Unfortunately, a disease called cystic fibrosis has wreaked havoc in his life and prevented him from pursuing his dream.

Derrick's parents, Albin and Jodi, contacted me, the president and founder of the United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA), regarding the possibility of Derrick matching wits with a trophy whitetail. All over the nation, sportsmen are stepping up to help others experience the sport we all love, and it didn't take long for me to line up a hunt for Derrick.

Wild Rivers Whitetails is a 900-acre facility located in rugged northeast Wisconsin. Sections of this vast ranch lie in three different counties and contain a variety of habitat. The hunting terrain is diverse. Fields of food plots are surrounded by thick cedar swamps along creek beds that make the perfect hiding place for a huge buck. The rolling hills and ravines are predominantly mixed hardwoods, which make a fall hunting trip both scenic and exciting.

Wild Rivers Whitetails, a family-run operation, was established in the summer of 1996 and is owned and operated by the Nelson family. As an active member of the Texas Deer Association (TDA), Safari Club International (SCI) and other pro-hunting organizations, the Nelsons believe in helping others enjoy the positive aspects of deer hunting. They were grateful to get the opportunity to take Derrick hunting.

It wasn't long afterwards that a dream trip to Wild Rivers Whitetails was set up by USSA, and Derrick was thrilled when he heard I was going to join him in his quest for a trophy buck.

Derrick and his father arrived late in the afternoon and settled. After an informative deer management discussion, Gary also treated them to an extensive tour of the ranch. The early afternoon was quite warm, and deer movement seemed to be minimal. While slowly navigating the network logging trails, a real nice buck was spotted as it trotted off down a ravine to a cooler, more secluded place.

A few minutes later, another buck was spotted that exhibited an unusual white color phase. Although it was easier to spot than its traditional brown counterparts, this buck also slipped off into parts unknown to those watching it.

Upon returning to the lodge, a game plan for the evening's hunt was established. With twilight about four hours away, Gary told his hunters to start getting ready for the evening hunt. With the temperature so warm, he doubted there would be a lot of deer movement, but waiting too long to approach the stand may spook nearby deer and effectively ruin the hunt.

Nervous anticipation marked the drive out to the stand. Northern Wisconsin whitetail bucks are known for both their huge antlers and large bodies. The buck seen earlier in the afternoon was enough to make the throat of any seasoned trophy hunter dry, and Derrick was hoping he would get an opportunity to shoot the buck of his dreams.

Arriving at a comfortable stand built into the side of a hill, the hunters settled in for what they hoped would be a memorable afternoon of trophy hunting. Derrick loaded his .30-06 topped with a Bushnell trophy scope and unpacked the

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field glasses from his backpack. The warm sun would have made anyone sleepy if there weren't the thought of what kind of unseen trophy whitetails lingered in the cedar swamp.

Early on, it became evident Derrick and his crew had to contend with another problem besides the warmer than normal temperatures. Derrick's lung tissue has been attacked by cystic fibrosis, which causes a steady deterioration of his normal lung function. One of the side effects of his form of cystic fibrosis is the presence of a persistent cough in the body's attempt to clear itself of fluids.

Earlier that afternoon, Derrick admired a camo shirt with USSAs logo I brought along for the hunt. As often happens at hunting camps, a friendly wager ensued and I gave him the heavy shirt if he promised to get a trophy buck later that afternoon.

While coughing is hard on Derrick's rib and stomach muscles, trophy bucks "home in" on noises that seem out of place. Hearing is a vital part of their survival mechanisms. Derrick did the very best he could to keep his persistent cough from scattering the area deer population. Using the heavy camo shirt he got from me, Derrick was able to do a decent job of suppressing the cough noise, especially if he bent over towards the floor and coughed into his left elbow.

As the shadows began to lengthen across the valley, the warm, daytime temperatures began to lessen. In the valley below, a nice fat doe began to forage along the opposite tree line. The mood of the deer blind rose as they watched intently for other deer that may also be coming out to feed.

As the doe paused and stared intently down the valley, expectations grew and Derrick wondered exactly what she saw. The question wouldn't last long because an immature, multipoint buck made its appearance and grazed along the valley like the doe did.

Whatever the cause, both deer spooked and ran up the opposite hillside. Spirits sagged within the deer stand and Gary tried to put a positive spin on the disappearance of the deer into the lengthening shadows. It seemed as though Gary knew his ranch very well because it wasn't long before three does warily returned to the valley in front of them.

Satisfied there wasn't any danger, the does resumed their grazing. The bad news was there wasn't much shooting light left and soon they would have to load up the truck for the ride back to the ranch.

Gary slightly signaled to his crew in the blind there were a couple nice deer headed down off the opposite hill toward them. Upon closer observation with their binoculars, a couple nice bucks appeared in the glasses. One in particular got everyone's attention as they too began to graze.

There comes a time in everyone's life when you have to be perfectly quiet and still, and that time had arrived for Derrick and the rest of the people in the stand. Miraculously, Derrick's cough had subsided a bit, and he deliberately raised his rifle onto a good steady rest.

After a relaxing breath, he leveled the crosshairs and gently squeezed the trigger. The bigger of the two bucks gave a telltale jump with a hunched back, usually a sign of a direct chest hit. "You hit him good," Gary said as the buck disappeared into the shadows across the valley. Derrick was in one of those states where you can hardly believe what you've just seen. "Let's go find him," Gary said and his confidence was contagious to the rest of people in the blind.

Grabbing their flashlights, the crew hurried down to where the buck was hit. Deer hair was sprinkled with frothy, bright red blood, which indicated a lung shot. Crossing the valley, the huge buck attempted to run back up the same hill he had come down from, but he was no match for the Winchester 150-grain Super X bullet.

In the cast of their flashlights, they saw the beautiful set of antlers the buck sported. A huge 11-pointer with a giant spread lay waiting for Derrick and his elated crew. With daylight all but gone, the happy crew had to get the truck and load this heavyweight on the tailgate for the ride back to the lodge.

After hanging the giant buck on the skinning pole, the hunters were surprised on just how huge the buck's body was. It was a time for personal reflection on what hunting as an experience meant to all of those who experienced the moment. Those feelings are often hard to put into words and this night would be no exception.

Colorful stories about Derrick's evening's hunt would continue into dinnertime and last until it was time to get some rest. There was no question that this day would positively touch many lives. Wholesome family activities like hunting have a way of doing that.

Warm embraces and countless expressions of gratitude were part of the next day's inevitable farewell session. Enjoying the chance to experience the thrill of a deer hunt is a true blessing for ill and challenged Americans.

Sportsmen and sportswomen like the Nelsons are making a huge difference in the lives of people like Derrick and his family. Helping others experience the great sport of deer hunting will be an experience that will forever touch your life, as well.

Editor's Note: The United Special Sportsmen Alliance is an all-volunteer, 501(c)(3) charity headquartered at 7864 Shotwell Road, Pittsville, Wisconsin 54466. For more information, call 800/518-8019, or log onto www.ChildsWish.com.