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I told her that if she continued to shoot like that, she could go after her first deer during the upcoming deer season. What can I say, I love squeals and hugs. I got plenty of both right then!

Fast forward to deer season. Amber and I sat atop a two-person ladder stand adjacent to an oat field at the XTC Graves Family Ranch in northeast Mills County. We got the stand early so we could settle in and have some time together. The temperatures were in the mid 60s, just crisp enough to feel like deer hunting and still be warm enough for Amber to be comfortable for a three hour sit.

Once we got settled in the top of the ladder stand, we "practiced" shooting deer. I hadn't loaded the rifle yet, but I double checked to make sure it was clear. I picked out various objects and had Amber dry fire at them. Before each shot, she got her rifle up and sighted the object to "bag". Then she took the safety off and slowly squeezed the trigger. She then worked the bolt and put another virtual round downrange at the object. She finished the practice by again working the bolt and placing the rifle on safety.

We "bagged" a mockingbird, squirrels and a bunch of white tops of metal T-posts surrounding the oat field. I watched the end of her rifle each time she pulled the trigger to make sure it didn't jump. She was shooting like a pro. The final test would come when she was aiming at a live deer.

About an hour into the hunt two young bucks and big doe

jogged into the field and began chomping away without a care in the world. Of course, Amber got very excited. To be honest, I got excited too. To slow the situation down, we looked each deer over in our binoculars. I informed

her that the two bucks weren't big enough to shoot yet, but the doe was just perfect. She eagerly agreed.

All the deer were still about 200 yards away, so I told Amber that we'd have to let the doe

come closer before she shot at it. But that didn't mean that we couldn't virtually "bag" her before the real shot. So, we set about dry-fire practice on the doe just as we done earlier in the afternoon. Amber took eight or ten virtual shots at the doe as she fed slowly toward us. She got more confident with each pull of the trigger.

We quit practice when the doe got within 150 yards. It was now time to be still and prepare for the real shot. We loaded her rifle and she got set up just like before. Every few minutes, I checked the doe's progress toward us with my range finder. Each time I lifted it to range the doe, Amber would stare up at me with those pleading eyes and ask in a whisper, "How far now?"

I replied with the distance as calmly as possible, 145 yards, 122, 105, 92 and then finally 85. Amber was remaining amazingly patient and calm. I, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck inside. My whisper voice quivered a little as I told Amber, "Okay, shoot her right behind the shoulder."

Amber calmly executed a perfect shot on the doe. At the little report of the shot, all three deer reacted and ran a few steps and looked around. For a split second, I thought Amber missed the doe. I was just about to whisper to Amber to shoot again when the doe simply fell over. What a relief!

All pretense of quietness abruptly erupted into squeals and hugs.

Did I mention that I like squeals and hugs?

Well I do like them. And I got plenty!



Amber Bridges bagged her first deer ever last season while hunting with her dad on the Graves XTC Ranch near the community of Caradan in northeast Mills County. Amber made a perfect shot on the doe with her early Christmas present, a Savage .22 Hornet rifle from Mills County General Store. Amber is now a fourth grader at Goldthwaite Elementary School and is the daughter of Steven and Debra Bridges. She is the granddaughter of Frank and Georgie Bridges and Dr. Tom and Carol Graves, all of Goldthwaite.