



# Amber's First Trophy Whitetail

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**Goldthwaite Eagle**

We're a hunting family, but I've tried not to push my kids into deer hunting. I feel like I have taken them along as slowly as I could. But most of the time, they were so eager to go they had to drag me along behind them.

Amber grew up seeing deer mounts on our walls in the living room. When she was little she named the bucks funny names, like "Frederick," and "Ronald." At Christmas time, she still puts Santa hats and red clown noses on them.

She has been hunting with her mom and I dozens and dozens of times, sitting in the stands with us and watching. We slowly progressed from Barbies and toy horses on the floor of the blind to iPhone games and social media.

Amber started shooting at an early age also. She shot targets with a .22, moving up until she was eventually shooting with a deer rifle. I've chronicled her hunting stories over the years in *The Goldthwaite Eagle* and *The Mills County Hunting Guide*, and my readers have seen her progress from a doe shooter until now.

Only after a kid or a new adult hunter shoots several does and a spike or two do we advance them to trophy hunting. Last season, at twelve years old, her mom and I decided Amber was ready.

On opening day last season the weather was perfect for a deer hunt. It was not too cold and there was a light wind. The deer had been coming into the field and the bucks were already chasing does. The rut was just getting going.

I was pretty confident that we would see a mature buck big enough for Amber to take. Of course, when you're guiding, and especially when it's your daughter, there is added pressure. Amber was fine. She treated it like just another hunt. I was a



**ON THE COVER: Amber Bridges bagged her first ever buck on opening day on the XTC Graves Family Ranch in northeast Mills County. Amber downed the buck at 100 yards with her mom's .243 rifle. Amber is a 8th grader at Goldthwaite Middle School. Note: she also field dressed the buck all by herself.**

nervous wreck!

Amber had her mom's .243 rifle instead of her trusty little .22 Hornet that she had been using for the last few years deer hunting. As our bucks have gotten bigger, we now use the .243 as a minimum caliber for trophy buck shooting.

We got to the blind that afternoon

early. Amber did some math homework and then read one of her fantasy books featuring dragons. I don't get it, but I love that she is an avid reader.

About 30 minutes before sunset, five does came out of the woods. They were running along a trail from the brush leading to our deer food

plot. If they kept going, they'd pass right by our blind. I told Amber that because the does were jogging, there might a buck behind them.

Sure enough, as the last doe got about 50 yards out of the brush she turned and looked back into the brush. At this time of year, that is a sure sign more deer are coming. Just as I predicted, a beautiful buck appeared like magic out of the brush.

Amber started getting ready, cool as a cucumber. I, on the other hand, was again a nervous wreck!

The buck took a few steps out of the brush into the open at around 100 yards from the stand. He then turned and stood broadside. I could not have drawn it up better.

Like a champ, Amber shouldered the rifle and got her eye on the scope. I reminded her, "Don't look at the antlers, look right behind the shoulder. When you're ready just squeeze ..."

I didn't even get the word "squeeze" out, when I heard the boom of her rifle. The buck kicked with his back legs, a sure sign it was hit well. The buck dove into the brush, but I saw him go down hard. It was all over faster than I can type this sentence.

It turns out that with enough slow progress, we can raise the next generation of hunters to love and respect the outdoors. We're so very proud of Amber and especially how she progressed to the trophy buck hunting stage.

She was excited that she had made such a good, clean kill on that buck. When we went to the brush and she saw him, all she could say was, "Thank you so much, Daddy!"

Amber told me right there that she wanted to field dress her buck all by herself. I could not have been prouder.

I offered a prayer of thanksgiving and thought to myself, "I really love it when a plan comes together."