

The Forest Has a Thousand Eyes

By Rett Davis

In 1962 Bobby Dee released his hit song 'The Night has a Thousand Eyes'. If I were to write a song, it would be titled 'The Forest has a Thousand Eyes'.

If you think you are alone in the woods, you are mistaken. All creatures are aware of your presence. Birds, squirrels and turkeys keep a watchful eye on all that enter their woods. Sometimes I surprise them, especially deer, rabbits and woodcocks. Coyotes however pay me no attention and will saunter by on their way to another meal. I greet them with a "good morning" especially when I am by myself.

As a rule I do not work alone but with another forester in our group. My wife prefers it that way. She worries about my getting injured, snake bit or having a heart attack. That is what wives do. However, there are times that I have to work alone. Therefore, I depend on my sixth sense to alert me when something is not right. I think it is the same as 'street wise' if you live in an urban environment.

A certain uneasy feeling comes over me if I sense something is not quite right. Animals do not trigger my sixth sense even in areas with rattlesnakes or water moccasins. I put on my snake leggings and press on to do my work. It is the presence of humans that evokes my sixth sense and alerts me to pay attention to my surroundings.

On one occasion we were hired by the U.S. Forest Service to mark timber on a large tract of woods in the Uwharrie National Forest. Therefore, we had to separate to cover as much acreage as possible. It was a 30-minute walk to reach my area. The work required measuring trees to be harvested and marking them with a special government paint. Unfortunately, it was during deer season, and the thought of being shot was always on my mind despite my orange vest and hat.

It was late in the day when I measured a big loblolly pine and painted a blue slash on both sides of the tree and one at ground level. When I looked up there was a deer hunter 12 feet above me in his deer stand. He looked down on me with disgust. He spoke not a word but his eyes and facial expression said enough. I had ruined his afternoon and offered an apology. He still would not speak to me. I slipped away with haste while watching his hands and his rifle. My fears were well grounded when only a few years later a forester we knew was shot in the back while working. Encounters with hunters can be unpleasant.

Another solo assignment took me back to the Uwharrie Mountains. The seclusion of this property was enough to keep me alert. My sixth sense proved right. I spotted a man and a woman in a pickup truck at the end of an old logging road. They emerged when they saw me. Both were clothed from head to toe in camouflage. It was not hunting season. We engaged in small talk, and I learned they were not the landowners. I returned to my work only to see these trespassers disappear into the woods. I felt their watchful eyes all day. At times I could hear their voices. When I told my coworkers about this, they surmised they were probably looking for arrowheads. I had my doubts.

Discovering cemeteries in the woods is a common occurrence and often a spooky one. Most have been abandoned. We treat them with respect and note them on our maps. They are

flagged for protection during logging operations. One day I encountered an old family cemetery. On my first passing I observed this small plot and made note of it. On my second pass, there stood a man in the center dressed in a red plaid shirt. Our conversation revealed he was not the landowner either. I proceeded with my work and looked back only to see that he was gone. But there was no road or trail for him to travel. With a tombstone epitaph that read "Remember me as you pass by, as you are now, so once was I, as I am now, you will be" you can understand why I went on with my work with lightning speed and headed home.

Recently I encountered a sign posted on a tree in the woods that read "I would turn back if I were you." It reminded me of a similar sign in the Wizard of Oz. My sixth sense sent me quickly in the opposite direction. During my work, I have breached Army Ranger training camps unseen by sentries, been surrounded by gun toting Department of Defense employees and discovered abandoned stills and marijuana pots. Once out of the corner of my eye I watched a man stalk us by hiding behind the trees as we worked.

When working alone, it is best to be quiet, look where you step, and listen to your sixth sense. Remember, the forest has a thousand eyes, and they are all looking at you.