



by Gracie Howard  
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The 2019 South Carolina Wildlife Outdoor Writing Contest top five entries have been selected and are featured right here on SouthCarolinaWild.org! The top five student writers include: Kassie Burkett, Madison Greer, Gracie Howard, Caleb Reed and Emily Thigpen.

The first place honor goes to Gracie Howard, who receives a \$250.00 prize, sponsored by Harry Hampton Wildlife Fund. Her essay will be featured in South Carolina Wildlife magazine this fall.

"Get out now," is all the text from my dad read when it come through around 7:35 p.m. Immediately after I received his text, and as if on cue, the wind started violently blowing. Colorful autumnal leaves were swirling around and around in mini leaf tornadoes. The tops of the needle thin pine trees had started to sway, threatening to break off above my head at any moment.

We were at Smoaks, our hunting club down in Colleton County, trying to test our luck at claiming a trophy buck on what had appeared to be a beautiful, cool afternoon. My dad and I left the house earlier that day to get to Smoaks and into our one-man stands before the deer started walking. We not only loved deer hunting because it was a family tradition or gave us a chance to stock our freezer with deer meat, but because of the serenity of the nature around us.



...it filled me with wonder and curiosity to see such life trying to burst forth in a place that seemed barren of it.

Each time we went to Smoaks, we could choose from at least seven stands. Yet, for the last three hunts in a row, I chose the "pondstand" (It was named appropriately as it was placed near the pond). I loved that stand, not only because of the deer that walked out on it, but because of the beautiful scenery. The pond directly behind the stand, though stagnant, was beautiful and hardly ever had any woodland debris floating in it. The reflections cast down by the trees were beautiful, branching out in every direction, trying to bend down and touch the water. When deer walked up to the pond, you could see their reflection. In fact, that was sometimes the first thing I saw before I saw them as their bodies blended in with the dead leaves on the ground.

On the other side of the stand, to its right and directly in front, there were pine trees taller than power lines all surrounding two beautiful, lush, green food plots. The pine straw from the trees seemed to avoid falling directly into the plots of soybeans, corn, and other mixed seed, though they surrounded them. The fallen pine straw seemed to just border the plot, thus emphasizing how green it was. To my left was a dirt road, the road I walked in on. Though there was nothing spectacular about it, I could look out and see across the cutover. It appeared gray with only the green needles of baby pine trees trying to show themselves, yet it filled me with wonder and curiosity to see such life trying to burst forth in a place that seemed barren of it.



Oh my gosh, I am going to get struck by lightning.

Is the rain coming already? It is only 7:35 p.m. This is definitely not good. We might get soaked. My mind was racing with frantic thoughts as I put my phone down. I looked out

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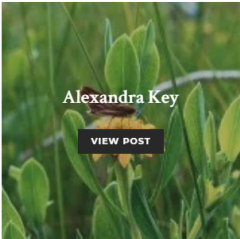
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the stand window and could see that the sky had turned a grayish blue and light pink to my right, while it was just grayish blue to my left. As I reached to unzip my bag, lightning lit up the woods and thunder shook the stand. I knew it was time to go. I knew I was in a metal stand. It was very tall, and I knew that lightning loved tall, metal structures. As my dad and I pulled up to the sign-in box around 3:55 p.m., we were feeling hopeful that we would see something this afternoon, yet in the back of our minds we were slightly skeptical about the rain that was supposed to be coming in around eight that night. The news report said that around eight there would be a forty percent chance of rain, with the bulk of it coming in around nine. That was less than a fifty percent chance, but the weather is always unpredictable. Still, we knew though that a little drizzle wouldn't hurt us. In fact, deer will come out and eat in light rain or at least shortly thereafter. As soon as we signed in, we unlocked the cutover gate, parked, and prepared to walk to our stands. We grabbed our bags, turned on our Thermacells, wished each other luck, and quietly departed from each other. It was such a nice day with blue, sunny skies and huge, fluffy clouds.

I eventually made it to my stand in about five minutes, climbed up, and settled in. I put the gun up, adjusted my scope, put it back down, got my summer reading assignment out, and commenced to reading and writing.



**When it struck, I felt as if I was going in slow motion, and for a split second I wondered why I couldn't go faster.**

Oh my gosh, I am going to get struck by lightning. We should have never gone hunting. I might be fried alive as I climb down the stand, I thought as I struggled to put my summer reading assignment back in my bag along with my Thermacell after reading the text. The wind started violently blowing and the leaves were swirling everywhere. I awkwardly grabbed the gun and very quickly started climbing down the stand. Lightning still kept cracking in the distance, and I was scared to climb down the ladder in fear of getting struck, but when my feet hit the ground, I started a hurried journey back to the truck almost five minutes away. I looked back and the sky had turned dark pink while the sky in front of me had turned bluish gray.

As soon as I made it out from underneath the trees and out onto the dirt road, going through the cutover, the sky suddenly turned nearly black and the wind almost knocked me over. The rain then started falling sideways. I knew it wasn't good to run with a gun, but I really wanted to. Lightning was lighting up the whole cutover, turning it white. I couldn't even see the color of my surroundings in peril around me. I clenched my bag with white knuckles while dodging potholes in the road. Now the rain was coming down even harder and the thunder boomed directly over my head. I just knew I was going to get struck by lightning. I was carrying the only piece of metal in that cutover, my rifle, and its barrel was sticking straight up. I knew the lightning would try to follow me, but it hadn't caught me yet.

As I thought that, lightning came down almost right beside me. It must have felt taunted, because it and the deafening thunder had to have been only a few feet away. When it struck, I felt as if I was going in slow motion, and for a split second I wondered why I couldn't go faster. The lightning not only turned everything white, but at the same time it managed to turn everything a dark blue. I turned my head in the direction of the lightning and felt as if I could see it ascending from the ground, but instead my eyes focused on the rain drops. They were beautiful.



**It was unlike anything I had ever seen before.**

They seemed to be falling in slow motion and were perfectly illuminated, enabling me to see how God had shaped each one. Had the world stopped, I could have counted them. I wanted to reach out and touch them as they were the most amazing things I had ever seen. I wished I could stop and take a picture, but I kept moving with extra hurriedness not wanting the next bolt of lightning to come down right on top of me. Even after that bolt had come and gone, everything was still white. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

After I finally made it to the truck, I was soaking wet and struggled to get in with my bag and gun. When I got in, I slammed the door and hoped that my dad would get there soon. I turned my gun over to make the barrel faced the floor and water came out of it. It was 7:40 p.m.

Lightning kept flashing and commenced to being the dominating force in the storm over the wind and rain. When my dad finally made it to the truck about a minute later, he was wetter than I was, as he had to go a longer distance. He too struggled getting in the truck with his gun and bag.

When he finally did get situated, he asked me if I was okay, and we started talking and laughing about what we had just experienced. I told him about the rain drops and how they fell in slow motion, enabling me to see each one's beauty. Who knew there could be so much beauty in the midst of so much danger? I would pay anything just to get that moment back, but only with the guarantee that I would not get struck by lightning. That unforgettable experience was a chance for God to show me how spectacular the things of this world are, even in the midst of danger.

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