

**Antelope (Pronghorn)**  
**August 23, 2013 New Mexico**

**Jeremiah 29:11**

**“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”**

This hunting story is a little different and over 9-years in the making. You see, since Robin was 11-months old, she has accompanied me on numerous adventures in the outdoors. Her first camping trip was a solo turkey hunt where I snuggled to keep her warm in the tent during overnight frost, served her bottles of formula and changed her diapers as we trekked through the woods. I didn't quite get a turkey on that trip, but we sure had fun!

As Robin grew older, our forays became longer and she spent less and less time on my back and began to put miles in burning her own boot leather. All the while learning about the outdoors, enjoying God's creation, and being immersed in something that most kids from her electronics generation unfortunately never get to experience.

In the spring of 2013, after much procrastination and a last minute cramming session, Robin passed Hunter's Safety and became eligible to enter the hunting lottery here in NM. She wasn't entirely sure she was ready to be a hunter, but we discussed it and prayed about it. We recognized that God knew if she would be ready when the time came, and that she would only draw a hunting tag if He knew she was ready. Imagine our surprise when Robin drew both a pronghorn tag and a mule deer tag on her first try!

Emma, the daughter of my hunting partner Jason, also passed Hunter's Safety this spring and the girls had drawn tags for deer together. In addition, Emma had drawn an oryx tag! Immediately after receiving the draw results, we settled on a plan that Jason and Emma would help us on Robin's pronghorn hunt, we would help them on Emma's oryx hunt, and we would all be together for the girls' deer hunt! It was shaping up to be a busy fall :o)

Shortly after the results were posted, I called the owner of the ranch to which Robin would be assigned for her pronghorn hunt to introduce myself. I thanked him for the opportunity provided through agreements with NM Game & Fish that would enable Robin to hunt on his property. The rancher was enthused about a young girl hunting for the first time, and thanked me for calling, informing me that I was the only hunter that had given him a courtesy call, despite it not being mandatory.

We immediately began planning and preparing for her late August season, although Robin was a little intimidated by firing a rifle. We employed a friend who is a firearms instructor to help teach Robin the basics and become more comfortable shooting.

Robin shot our .22 and a borrowed a .223 rifle, which had a thick “bull barrel”, resulting in a heavy rifle with little recoil. Robin still wasn’t thrilled about shooting and was mainly bothered by the air concussion she could feel in her chest, saying that she didn’t even like loud drums or other noises (even with ear muffs).

After our initial shooting session Robin inquired “How will I know where to shoot - animals don’t have circles or diamonds on their sides?” So we began a fun exercise where I would periodically give her hunting magazines and a sharpie marker and have her put a dot where she would aim on various animals. She went on virtual safaris; bagging elk, deer, pronghorn, and exotic species such as cape buffalo, African lions and kudu!

The ranch spanned several County roads, which made it accessible without needing to enter private property, so Robin and I made a camping/scouting trip in mid summer. During our trip, we found the area to be lush and green thanks to summer rains, and we saw several pronghorn. Robin offered a first glimpse that she might be ready to hunt when the season arrived while we glassed the first group of bucks. She stated “I’d shoot the one on the right”. I asked why, and she replied “Because he’s standing broadside”. She was beginning to think like a hunter!



First pronghorn sighted while scouting

During our scouting trip we dropped by the ranch house to introduce ourselves to the caretaker. Mr. Jake was enthused to meet a youngster preparing for her first hunt and was very friendly and helpful. Given that the nearest public land was nearly an hour’s drive away, I inquired whether we might be able to pay him to camp somewhere on the ranch. Jake wouldn’t take payment, but offered us an out-of-the-way location where he would allow us to camp. He also gave us permission to scout anywhere on the ranch while we were in the area. As we returned to our truck, I told Robin that meeting the ranch caretaker and receiving permission to camp had made our entire trip worthwhile. It would save us hours of driving, fuel, and more importantly, sleep! Jake reiterated that we were the only ones who had spoken with him and that if anyone else inquired; they were to speak with him personally before he would consider allowing them to camp.

We promptly evaluated our designated campsite and found it to be a secluded area near an old storage building and corral, adjacent to a trickling creek and working windmill. It was not visible from the main road and tucked out of the wind. Robin was thrilled with the prospect of having our own little camping spot. As a bonus, a rocky outcrop ran along the drainage, and Jake had told us that it concealed little grassy pockets where ones and twos of antelope often hung out. He went on to say that nobody ever hiked there, but instead opted to drive along the ranch roads. I mentally filed it away as being exactly the type of area we were looking for: terrain relief to provide stalking cover and little to no pressure from other hunters assigned to the ranch. We had a game plan that would allow us to hunt directly from camp without having to begin our morning with a drive.



View toward campsite. The rocky outcrop along the drainage continued for nearly 2-miles to the ranch boundary.

After returning home from scouting, the summer flew by with little time for Robin to practice shooting – it didn't help that she wasn't overly enthused about it either. Finally I drew the line and told Robin we'd dedicate the upcoming weekend to shooting. We drove to a remote area in the desert where we could shoot without the distraction of other gunfire at the city range and began practicing with my .22. Not too long after we started, the semi-automatic jammed and forced us to step up to the .223 sooner than I had planned.

I set a target at 50-yards and we prepared to practice from a prone position under the shade of my truck – it was HOT out! With trepidation and tears Robin did not want to shoot. Finally I told her that was fine by me, but without practice we would not go hunting. Robin asked about camping and I let her know that we could go camping any time she wanted, but not on the ranch: it was intended for her hunt only. That was the turning point, because Robin REALLY wanted to camp at the special spot! She wiped her tears and agreed that she would practice. We finished the day pleased with her progress and planned to build on our practice the following day.

The next morning Robin began with much more confidence and she shot several dozen rounds at 100-yards, all within the kill zone of an antelope. I knew the gun was plenty accurate at 200-yards and beyond, but recognized that Robin was not

ready for ranges even pushing 200-yards. Robin inquired how much longer we'd practice and I told her that when she felt ready to hunt we'd call it a day. She replied "I think I'm ready...but let's shoot a few more times to be sure". Given her response, I knew that Robin would be ready when the time came. She has always performed on game day: whether dance or piano recitals, running, swimming or triathlon, she has never failed to surprise us with her focus when it counts!

Before we knew it, it was time for Robin's hunt. We caravanned up to the ranch late Thursday evening in preparation for Robin's 3-day season beginning Friday. Of course that meant missing school, which entailed calling the school district to report an absence. I told Laurie to report that Robin was suspected to have a case of "backstrap fever", which the girls laughed and laughed about! I think Laurie chickened out on actually reporting that diagnosis.

Opening morning we awoke an hour before sunrise, dressed, and ate breakfast in the chilly air. The girls were excited and eager to find out just what hunting was all about and we set off hiking when it was barely light enough to see.



Sunrise in God's country!

Jason and I glassed constantly and taught the girls how to ease up over a ridge or around a corner while carefully scanning ahead. We kept our voices to a whisper and moved slowly, knowing that pronghorn could appear at any time.





Excited, but a little tired



The flowers were stunning – a feature not only appreciated by the girls

Not long after we began hiking, a lone buck popped up about 300-yards away. He had seen us before we spotted him, and was suspicious despite us freezing immediately.



First excitement of the day

The nervous buck sauntered stiffly out of sight, and after a quick conference we decided to hustle to where he had disappeared in hopes that he might remain within range. As we eased over the rise, the buck suddenly popped up CLOSE – like 70-yards! Up to this point Robin and I had discussed whether or not she would have an opportunity to shoot. I told her that I wouldn't let/make her shoot farther than we were confident in her ability. And that if God knew she was ready, He would provide her with an opportunity. If not, we would simply have a fun time camping, glassing and stalking pronghorn. With a buck staring at us within archery-range, it was apparent that Robin had been provided with a shot opportunity!

Immediately Robin's eyes grew wide and she started breathing heavily, as adrenaline coursed through her veins. I quickly readied the rifle, as I was her porter for the heavy weapon. However, the vegetation was too tall for the bipod. As the buck nervously tried to identify what we were, I grabbed my spotting scope tripod from my backpack and extended it so Robin could shoot from a standing position. By the time we got everything sorted out, the buck had retreated somewhat, but was still only about 100-yards out. Unfortunately, we hadn't practiced shooting this way, and Robin's barrel was shaky, both from her excitement and her less-than-desirable setup. I whispered for her to relax and shoot whenever she felt ready, while the buck presented a broadside shot.

Robin pulled the trigger and the buck trotted off several yards and put his head down. For a moment I thought that he would topple over right there, but quickly realized that he was only taking a mouthful of grass and feeding. It had been a clean miss. He angled away and we tailed him for half an hour, but even though he wasn't overly spooked, we were unable to shave the distance to less than 200-yards. Finally he met up with another buck and together they trotted out half a mile and continued feeding away from us. I reassured Robin and we turned away to look for other one.



The area was so lush it certainly didn't look like typical pronghorn scenery



We glassed several pronghorn near the lake in the background above nearly 2-miles distant, and planned on driving there later in the day. We continued hiking toward the ranch boundary and then veered toward a lone bedded buck.

By about 8:30, both girls began asking when lunch would be. At home Robin typically eats like a bird (no pun intended), but there is something about the outdoors that brings out her appetite. We chided them that breakfast had been only a couple of hours ago, but soon acquiesced and stopped for a snack break.

As we approached the vicinity of the bedded buck I was startled by the buzzing of a grasshopper or cicada...but it didn't stop like they typically do when they fly off. I paused and scanned the grass ahead and discovered this little surprise...



Second excitement of the day

Thankfully old buzztail had done his job and given ample warning while we were still a goodly distance away, and we were able to safely snap a few photos and give the little bugger a wide berth as we continued.

Shortly thereafter out of the blue Robin said "Dad, you were right." Granted, that's always great to hear from your child, but about what I inquired? "When I shot at that antelope I didn't feel a thing". During our practice sessions I had vainly tried to explain that when hunting the recoil goes unnoticed and she shouldn't worry about it. Now she knew firsthand and understood what I had been talking about.

We eventually realized that the distant pronghorn had given us the slip, as we were unable to relocate him. So by about 10:30 with no other game on the radar we chose to swing by camp and feed the girls lunch before driving to the area near the big lake.

As we marched toward camp I constantly scanned the horizon and suddenly spotted a buck sprinting in our direction. I barked an order to drop, and we all but disappeared into the tall grass while I hastily got Robin ready with the rifle. The lone buck approached to within 100-yards and then picked out something about

us with his sharp eyesight. He stared at these camo-clad intruders with curiosity as Robin lined up on him. Just as she clicked off the safety, he trotted another dozen yards, and then stopped again. The rifle was too unwieldy for Robin to shift it very much by herself, so she clicked the safety back on and I repositioned it. Once again she acquired the buck in her scope and flipped the safety off, only to have him jump ahead again before she could fire. I could tell that Robin was much more relaxed and focused than our initial encounter earlier that morning and her attitude said "I'm ready to shoot this buck". However, the buck wouldn't cooperate and pranced nearly a full circle around us, as we repeated the safety/move gun/aim sequence a handful of times before he ran back in the direction he had originated from. Jason and I had never seen anything like it! The encounter was exciting and kept us jabbering the remainder of the walk to camp and long-awaited lunch.



Campsite for a well-earned refueling break

With full bellies, we piled into Jason's truck with a cooler full of water and juice and headed to where we had noted several pronghorn from our higher vantage point earlier. Almost immediately we spotted two bucks near the road. Knowing it was probably a losing battle, we passed them slowly until we dropped out of sight, and then hopped out of the truck and hustled down a swale in hopes of intercepting them. The breeze was probably to blame, but the next time we saw them, the bucks were galloping across the prairie well out of range and getting farther by the second. We turned tail and marched back toward the truck to discover caretaker Jake's truck approaching. We waved him down to say hello and tell him about our exciting morning.

Jake listened intently and commended us for hiking. He informed us that it was "Fixin' to get a lot more crowded around here tomorrow". Apparently in addition to the ten or so other youth hunters, Saturday marked the opening day for not only adult hunters who had drawn tags, but for the ranch's private land hunters. Jake anticipated that as many as 30-hunters, mainly Texans who had purchased landowner tags, would descend upon the ranch the following morning! Jason and I exchanged glances that said "We need to ensure Robin gets an antelope today, before the circus begins". As we thanked Jake and prepared to leave, Jake piped in with one last bit of advice "If I was you, I'd take a look by that big lake to the north; nobody ever goes over that way and there are several antelope in that area". We informed him that was exactly where we were headed, having



spotted several pronghorn there ourselves that morning. Jake told us to be careful driving because just the week prior, he had torn up his truck on an unseen rock hidden by the tall weeds in two-track road that led to the basin. Tall weeds sounded like perfect stalking conditions to me! Jake bade Robin good luck, and we were off.

As we pulled onto the faint two-track that led to the lake basin, Jason cautiously navigated the weeds and mudholes. He eased to a stop well before we could see into the basin and suggested that we walk from that point, so as not to alert any antelope. As we walked along the road I commented that we were likely the only ones who had ever actually walked down that two-track, as Jake's observation was that hardly anyone ever left the main roads, let alone did any walking while hunting pronghorn on the ranch. The girls got a kick out of learning their daddy's techniques: get away from people, use optics to spot game before it spots you, and don't be afraid to use the quads that God gave us (as opposed to the plethora of ATV quads and side-by-side "mules" that seem to dominate the hunting scene these days).

As we eased forward a little bit at a time, I spotted a buck bedded below us. Unable to see the terrain or conditions, I suggested the other three take a seat, eat a snack and sip some water, while I crawled forward to assess the situation. Thanks to the tall weeds, flowers, and grasses, I was able to approach within 300-yards of the bedded buck and visualize a route that might allow Robin and me to crawl within range. I backtracked and presented the plan. I told Robin that we would not be able to take our packs, so now was the time for a bathroom break, to hydrate, and to get prepared to forego any conveniences for the foreseeable future.

Jason and Emma agreed to shadow us to the point where they could watch the action unfold, and be prepared to turn back any vehicles that might approach. Then Robin and I began to crawl...and crawl...and crawl. After several hundred yards I noted that my knees were beginning to tell me that the kneepads in my supply box at camp might have been a good idea, but there was no turning back. I periodically stopped to check Robin's progress and she kept up like a trooper. Occasionally we had to crawl on our bellies where the cover was lacking, and after 30-minutes or so we had cut the distance to 160-yards and reached the end the tall vegetation. Beyond the bedded buck, a small group of 2-3 bucks and 5-6 does alternated feeding and bedding about 260-yards out.

Only the pronghorn's head was visible above the tall grass, so we settled in and I whispered to Robin that we would have to wait for him to stand. We set the rifle, adjusted the bipod height, and tried to make ourselves comfortable in the hot sun. Soon Robin crawled onto my lap and she later told me she began to snooze a bit as she huddled in what little shade I created. After about 15-minutes the buck stood up and we hastily tried to get Robin ready to shoot. But he was simply changing positions, and bedded before she could find him in the scope. So we continued our vigil. Given the circumstances and the pace Robin is growing, we may never have a hunt like this again. I was sitting criss-cross

(can we even say Indian-style any more?) and Robin sat in my lap, leaning back against my chest like in a lazy boy recliner. I was doing my best to keep her comfortable, knowing that her success was dependent on us remaining immobile and invisible until the buck stood up for a shot, no matter how long it might take.

I asked Robin's couple times if she thought we should try to belly-crawl closer, but each time she replied that this spot was fine. I think she was just comfortable and tired from crawling over 300-yards. Our wait was entertaining enough, with nearly a dozen pronghorn in view to keep tabs on.

Again the buck stood up and we quickly tried to get Robin lined up on him, but just as rapidly he bedded. This happened a third time over the course of 45-minutes. Unknown to us, Jason was calling the action to Emma from their vantage behind us "He's up, the gun's up, oh, wait he's down. He's up, nope, he's back down..."

Finally the buck stood up for a fourth time and began to nibble and feed. I whispered to Robin that I thought he would remain on his feet this time and for her to take her time and focus. I tried to hold myself as still as possible, as Robin was still sitting in my lap while she aimed. As the buck slowly turned broadside I hissed to Robin to shoot whenever she was ready. POW...the buck lifted his head at the unexpected sound like thunder. But again it was apparent that he had not been hit.

The small herd of pronghorn that were farther away began to trot diagonally toward us, unable to identify which direction the shot had come from. The close buck also began to angle toward us at a walking pace. I hastily helped Robin cycle another bullet into the chamber and she tried to follow the buck as he approached. I periodically had to adjust the rifle position, but the buck didn't slow and Robin knew that she needed to wait until he stopped before shooting. Meanwhile the herd surpassed the original buck and began filing past at about 120-yards. One of the lead herd bucks stopped and turned around to watch the rest of the group behind him and I suspected he would stand still for a while, plus he was the closest animal and the biggest buck too! I whispered to Robin to put the safety back on and spun her rifle 45-degrees to point generally toward him.

This time Robin's demeanor indicated "I'm dialed in" as she locked on him and squeezed the trigger. The buck dropped like a stone and Robin turned to me with eyes wide. "I got him!" she smiled excitedly. I hugged her tight and assured her that she had indeed made a perfect shot, and had just supplied our family with meat for the freezer this year.

The remaining pronghorn trotted off as we turned to see Jason & Emma standing with arms raised in celebration of victory!

We approached Robin's buck together and marveled. I had never drawn a pronghorn tag, as Robin proudly informed everyone prior to the hunt, so had never seen one up close. Emma asked "So are you going to hang it in your

room?” To which Robin replied “Oh, no, he’s MUCH too big to fit in my room!” Jason and I both chuckled. I had told Robin beforehand that if she shot one and wanted a shoulder mount I’d take the heat with mommy, who has pretty much drawn the line of no more trophies in the house.

While Jason and I admired the buck’s horns, Robin keyed in on different things “His hair is so smooth it looks like he’s been brushed – he’s beautiful”. True that.



Robin’s beautiful buck

Almost immediately Robin proclaimed “I’m glad I shot him when I did because I’m so thirsty!”

After admiring the buck, we sent Jason to retrieve the truck and refreshments, as Robin had conveniently dropped him within 50-yards of a two track leading to a windmill. Apparently she hasn’t yet picked up on the character-building practice of hauling meat 3-4 miles on our backs like her daddy and buddy are prone to. We’ll teach the girls that one day LOL!

Upon Jason’s return, we celebrated with ice water and Paradise Bakery cookies I had packed for just such an occasion.

Robin proudly told all of us that she was still a little nervous during the first shot, but when she lined up the second time, she kept saying to herself “this is the one, this is the one”. It sure was kiddo!

I couldn’t be more proud of her. It’s no small feat to pull off a stalk like we did, and then wait for nearly an hour for a shot opportunity, but as she is prone to do, Robin performed on game day.



We captured photo memories and told the kids how we'd salvage all the meat and get it into the coolers of ice we had in the truck in short order to ensure it would be delicious table fare.



Proud daddy, Robin and her buck

Jason and I are big fans of what's known as the "gutless" butchering method, which entails peeling the hide from the middle of the back and carefully removing all of the meat from the carcass without the need to get into any of the mess inside of the body cavity. We explained the process to the girls and all donned rubber gloves, which even at my age and experience go a long way toward making the process slick, easy and enjoyable; allowing one to simply peel off the gloves at the end and voila, clean hands.

As we jumped into the process, Jason and I worked as a well-oiled team, having lost count of the number of times we had done this together. Along the way we explained to the girls what we were doing, why we were cutting where we were, etc. We also pointed out the anatomy and asked each of them to help by holding here or pulling there. I didn't know what to expect, but both girls loved the procedure and expressed how cool it was to see how the muscles, bones and joints worked. As we neared completion and began to salvage the heart, tender loins and liver for a primal diet buddy who requested it, the girls got to see what the lungs and kidneys and other organs were like. They "oohed and aahed" as

they saw how everything was designed to function, and had entirely too much fun. Just the way it should be.

Emma commented that she learned more biology that day than any other kid in school, and Robin heartily (no pun intended) agreed! When one considers everything the girls got to experience, in addition to completing all of their makeup school work, I'm certain that this case of "backstrap fever" was no detriment to their education.

Robin cautioned me to be careful with her beautiful buck's hide as we rolled it into a cloth bag and packed it in ice, making it clear that she wanted her trophy to look as pretty on the wall as it did in real life. I assured her that by getting the meat and hide cooled almost immediately, every piece of her trophy would be protected.

As we drove back to camp Robin stated "I'm confident". I had to ask to what she was referring. Her reply: "I wasn't sure if I'd be able to shoot a deer in November, but now I'm pretty sure I'll be able to get one". Amen kiddo!

Emma proudly proclaimed "We got a buck on the first day, before all those Texans arrive". For that we are thankful, although I suspect none of them would have hiked like we did anyway, so the additional hunting pressure might have affected us less than Jake expected.

Beforehand Robin had written and colored a thank-you card for Jake, so at camp we retrieved it and headed to the ranch house to show off her trophy and tell him all about it. Jake was there with his brother Sam, the ranch owner. When we told them about the trek we had made that morning Jake said "So you're telling me you hiked along those rocks all the way to the ranch fence?! I'd die before I hiked that far!" Sam chimed in "Heck, my HORSE would give out before we finished that loop!" Needless to say we made an impression on the two of them and the girls were thrilled with the complements.

Both men praised Robin for her nice buck and congratulated her on her first hunt. We thanked them for their generosity in letting us camp on the ranch and Robin presented Jake with her special card. I had tucked in some thank-you bills too, as their kindness had made our stay and entire trip most memorable.

We bade them farewell and headed back to camp for a welcome hot sun-shower. On the way we actually saw a badger run across the road and were able to stop and get out in time to see him digging his hole. We saw a couple of other pronghorn bucks and later two trucks driving out from the two-track where Robin had killed her buck. "You're too late boys; Robin already got an antelope back there!" Emma sang out to all of us as we laughed.

I told Emma that her oryx hunt was next and that between my past experience helping friends (she'll be lucky #13) and her daddy killing one last year, she was

in good hands and destined to have a great hunt. Robin chimed in “And I just shot a pronghorn, which is kind of like an oryx, so I’ll be there to help you too!”

With success already in the bag as it were, we were free to leisurely shower, relax, prepare dinner over the fire and enjoy the bright starry sky that evening. We grilled fresh tenderloin as an appetizer and agreed it was delicious!



A warm sun-shower feels wonderful after a long, hot, dusty day

We saw a few shooting stars and viewed constellations and the Milky Way so bright and undiluted by city lights, it almost seemed we could reach up and touch them. It makes one feel small looking up at the heavens. It’s something more people should do more often, as it’s good for the soul.

The next morning we slept in and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and a beautiful sunrise.

While Jason & I broke camp and loaded the trucks, the girls entertained themselves by sneaking up on the local cattle with our unused Montana Moo Cow decoy that I had brought in case we needed to use it to sneak closer to pronghorn on the open prairie. I asked Robin if she had gotten over her “backstrap fever” and she thought she had...but anticipated a relapse when her deer hunt in November looms. Plus I suspect Emma may come down with a case of it prior to her oryx hunt at the end of September.





That's the strangest looking two-legged cow I've ever seen

All this and we made it home in time for Robin's dance class Saturday afternoon and church Saturday night! We shared the adventure story with "the boys" – twin friends from church, 3-months younger than Robin, who couldn't believe a girl had bagged a critter before they had even taken Hunter's Safety – a point that they made clear to their hunter daddy that they wanted to change.

God knows the plans He has for us. He surely knew Robin was ready to become a hunter.

Congratulations. I love you kiddo!

Daddy