

**Antelope (Pronghorn) Robin
August 24, 2014 New Mexico**

Proverbs 22:6

**“Train up a child in the way (s)he should go,
And when (s)he is old (s)he will not depart from it.”**

<Successful> <Successful> <Successful>...The emails kept coming for Robin as the annual hunting draw results were posted. We were awestruck in discovering that Robin would have an opportunity to tackle the New Mexico safari this year with a pocketful of tags for numerous species!

Her first hunt of the season would be for pronghorn and after her success in 2013 we looked forward to going after them again, along with the potential to add tasty meat to our freezer.

We had a great hunt and learned a lot of lessons this year.

Despite using a rifle last year, Robin isn't thrilled with shooting a rifle/shotgun, and with her daddy being mainly a bowhunter, she thought that would be a more enjoyable way to hunt. Although it certainly can be done by youth, it's a lot harder to hunt with bow than rifle, and requires a fair amount of practice and strength that typically prevents youngsters from tackling big game with a bow.

With recent rule changes in New Mexico to allow the use of crossbows during rifle seasons, I thought the hybrid weapon might be a fun way for Robin to try for spring turkey (we got out several times, but didn't end up with any shots, for various reasons) or for big game.

We purchased a crossbow around Christmas time and Robin began practicing with it regularly. It requires cocking and loading by daddy, as well as a set of shooting sticks to steady the front end, but after sighting it in Robin began shooting it very well.

Although it would be unwieldy for spot and stalk hunting, her crossbow would be a perfect challenge for ambushing pronghorns at a waterhole, so immediately after drawing her tag I called the rancher for the area to which she was assigned and inquired about a likely water source for this endeavor. He was very helpful and said he thought he had a perfect place for us!

With high hopes we drove up to meet the rancher a week prior to her season to assess Robin's hunting options. It turned out the "rancher" contact to which NM Game & Fish assigned Robin was instead an outfitter who leased multiple properties for antelope and had both state-assigned draw hunters such as Robin and paying clients. He indicated that he preferred to place hunters in certain locations to keep them from bumping into each other. I initially wondered if he was actually placing his paid clients in the best areas. However, Kyle made a good impression with me right off the bat when we stopped to drive through a

gate and he began apparently shooing invisible critters off the road, and then called Robin to jump out of the truck to see scads of baby toads hopping about. Kyle told us he tried to scoot them out of the way before driving across a damp road crossing. It was apparent that he cared about even the small critters and went out of his way to point them out to Robin. As he gave us the tour and pointed out antelope, places where he typically saw them, likely ambush locations, a recent scrape and other details, I must admit, given the quality and quantity of pronghorn we saw I felt that Kyle was a straight shooter and had chosen a great area that he felt would be best suited to give Robin a good chance of taking a buck with her crossbow. Knowing that Robin was the only hunter in the area gave us peace of mind that nobody would interfere with our plans or pose any safety issue during the rifle hunt. I don't know any details about his professional hunting operation, but after our interaction, I'd recommend anyone interested in northern New Mexico elk, antelope, mule deer or even black bear consider giving Kyle a call at Folsom Antelope Management Group.

The only downfall was that since Kyle was not the landowner, we could not camp at the property and instead had to stay at the nearby Capulin RV (and tent) Park. It was noisier than we were accustomed to, but tidy and the nightly fee included access to restrooms and showers. I got a chuckle when we inquired at the front desk during our week-prior scouting visit as to whether we needed to make a reservation for Robin's upcoming pronghorn hunt. "You and everybody else; you have an RV?" (no, we'll be tent camping) "Oh, we'll never run out of tent spaces, just show up and you'll be fine". Apparently few hunters planned on roughing it. Upon our arrival every RV/Pop-up space was filled, but only a couple of tenters were spread out in the grassy field.

During our scouting visit Kyle drove us around the "pasture" where he recommended we begin hunting. He pointed out numerous groups of pronghorn and the only water source in the area; a windmill that filled a metal cattle tank and overflowed to an earthen-bermed pond. He also assured us that if we didn't like the area or opportunities after the first day we were free to call him and move elsewhere.



Kyle's initial suggestion was to sit in a treestand on the windmill framing, and while I agree that it would be ideal for a solo bowhunter, it would have been difficult for both of us to sit together and would not allow me to help Robin reload or maneuver the crossbow. Additionally, we would be exposed to the elements with little to do but sit in a fixed position, likely for hours.



We instead opted to hunt from the ground where we could sit in a blind with plenty of snacks, lunch, drinks and games, plus room to sit, stand, lay down and stretch out. Our original plan was to wrap leafy fabric around the inside base of the windmill frame since the pump shaft was located in the center of the frame and a popup blind could not be placed there.



However, when we returned a week later for Robin's hunt to discover that the cattle had shredded the leafy fabric. Not sure if they were just curious or dumb enough to think it was edible, but they literally ripped it to shreds. Additionally, the game camera we had locked to the windmill leg to track antelope habits had been battered out of alignment and contained only hundreds of photos of cattle close-ups (often at night) and the sky or ground. Lesson learned: cattle are vile disgusting creatures...well, perhaps that was one thing we already knew! Realizing that we could not leave anything overnight for fear of damage, we instead changed gears and nestled our popup blind right next to the windmill and metal tank with the assumption that pronghorn would most likely drink from the earthen pond.

In order to get situated before daylight we arose at 4:40 (at least I did) and loaded our day cooler, hastily packed the truck and rolled toward Robin's windmill. I tossed Robin directly from her sleeping bag into the reclined passenger seat and didn't rouse her until the popup blind was set up and all of our gear situated inside. To keep a low profile, I wanted to park the truck out of sight, which meant nearly a mile away in the prairie flat land. Robin insisted she didn't want me to leave her snoozing in the blind, so we parked the truck, got her dressed in day clothes and did our best to hustle back to the windmill. Despite our best efforts it was getting light as we walked and we began to see antelope around us. One buck was fairly close to the windmill and spooked off as we arrived (drat); however, we made the best of it and settled in for the day. Lesson learned: get settled into the blind well before daylight.

Although we could see a dozen or more pronghorn scattered in all directions, none seemed to be too keen on drinking water, so we ate breakfast and periodically scanned in all directions.

We played board and trivia games, read books, and generally relaxed. In order to reduce any movement should a shooting opportunity arise, I rigged a rear

stock support from parachute cord and supported the front of the crossbow on my shooting tripod, which worked very well for keeping things in a good position when the time came. We could quickly and easily slip off the cord, which allowed Robin to maneuver and aim with almost no movement.



Two people, cooler, games, stuffed animals, water, hanging crossbow, shooting stool, pillow, backup rifle and other odds and ends made for tight quarters, but it was quality daddy-daughter time.

By early afternoon no pronghorn had approached the water, although several had passed by well within rifle range, including an impressive buck we dubbed "big whopper" due to his large and uniquely widely spread horns. I quizzed

Robin as to whether she wanted to try for one like that with her rifle, but she adamantly stated that something would eventually come closer.

Sure enough not much later we saw a lone buck making his way toward us. This was her opportunity, so we prepared her for the shot and I whispered his progress and told her that he would be visible through her shooting window shortly. He acted very skittish and danced back and forth, never standing still for a quality shot. He eventually dipped his head to drink, but he was facing toward us at the other side of the pond, which was a poor shot angle. He finished sipping almost as quickly as he arrived, whirled and trotted off, never offering Robin a shot.

What excitement! Bowhunters understand that those close encounters, while sometimes frustrating, are often the most memorable events during our time afield. Robin was able to experience the thrill and excitement of a close call that would have been entirely missed had she simply used her rifle. We counted it as a success and great fun, hoping for another chance with hours of daylight remaining.

Although no animals besides cattle watered, flocks of birds often kept us entertained by perching on the edge of the metal tank and dipping their wings and tail feathers for a refreshing bath.





Additionally, we could constantly see pronghorn in all various directions around us, giving us hope and confidence that eventually one would become thirsty.

Our routine was read, glass, play a game, glass, eat a snack, glass, drink some water or cold juice, glass...and repeat. While sometimes bordering on boredom, it was a far cry from the busy hustle and bustle of day-to-day life in the real world. Later another buck approached and we again readied for action. This buck was also skittish and didn't even make it to the water before nervously walking away stiff legged. Another fun experience.

Late in the afternoon yet another buck came our way and we hastily shoved our Snapshots Across America board game aside and anxiously anticipated his arrival. This buck was much more relaxed, and although alert, he pretty much marched right in and drank broadside at 40-yards. Perfect! Except that one large weedy plant blocked his vitals and shielded him. I whispered for Robin to keep steady and on him in the scope and be prepared to shoot when he turned to leave, but when he finished it happened all too fast: he whirled and trotted away. Two lessons learned this time: clear away that weed and be aware that when pronghorn finish drinking they don't hang around to lollygag.

In the early evening a group of 5 large bucks began feeding their way toward our water tank, but they never got closer than 100-yards and it was apparent that they were nervous about approaching our area. We discussed whether it was worth using the rifle and she decided to consider it, so hastily swapped weapons and unzipped a side window toward the feeding bucks. However, by the time she was ready they had moved farther away and mainly had their rear ends facing us. Additionally, Robin had trouble identifying her target animal in the scope, and ultimately we decided it just didn't feel right, so she didn't attempt a shot. Lesson learned: run through some practice dry fire runs with the rifle unloaded to go through the motions of quickly getting ready, focusing on a target and squeezing the trigger. The following day we removed the shells and performed that drill 10-times, which ultimately paid off.

We sat until dark hoping for one more chance, but nothing else came to drink.

We hiked to the truck, returned and loaded up all of our gear, including the blind, and drove to our campsite for a welcome shower, dinner and much needed sleep.

Along the way toward camp I asked Robin pointed questions to get her thinking. I reiterated that this was her hunt and I would happily do whatever she wanted, but she needed to consider alternatives:

- Did she want to make it to school Monday?
- Did she want to continue trying with crossbow or switch to rifle?
- Was she OK sticking with crossbow even if it might mean going home empty-handed?
- Would she shoot a doe if the opportunity arose? (her tag was good for either a buck or doe)
- Could she handle another day in the "Hopi Sweat Lodge", as we jokingly referred to our hunting blind? I mean no disrespect to Indians: sweating out toxins is a healthy activity every once in awhile, but I think our daily 8-10 hours of baking is a bit crazy.

Robin mulled over each question and decided that she didn't want to miss school Monday. She had undertaken 3-hour's of training to become a playground Conflict Mediator and Monday was to be her first day of weekly duty with her partner. She felt responsibility to her partner and that leaving her alone, especially on their first day, wasn't right. She would be happy shooting a smaller animal with her crossbow than a bigger one with rifle. She would shoot a doe if it came to water, but not if it had a fawn with it. She would rather not go home empty-handed, but would not be too disappointed if that's how things ended. She would try her best to use crossbow for any pronghorn that appeared to be headed to water, but would switch to rifle for any animals that appeared to be walking by out of crossbow range and not veering toward us. All were valid feelings and helpful in cementing our plan for the next day: We would settle in at the water and gear up for crossbow, then see how the day unfolded.

By the time we brushed our teeth and hit the sack it was 11pm and I dreaded our wakeup alarm. I think we were both asleep by the time our heads hit our pillows!

All too soon my beeping watch roused me into action: load the day cooler with ice, drinks and cold snacks; grab the cook stove for lunch; warm up the car to reduce the shock to Robin from her cozy sleeping bag to the truck; lug Robin into the truck and make time for our windmill.

I let Robin snooze until the blind was up and everything piled inside, then insisted that to save time I wrap her in a blanket and let her doze in the blind while I parked the truck and ran back. She wasn't thrilled with the idea, but after assuring her that there were no cattle around I parked the truck and began my early morning run. About halfway to the blind it became just light enough to turn off my headlamp, so we were settled in place earlier than the prior day and enjoyed the view of the dark sky brightening as the moon and two planets blazed above the rising sun.



As soon as it was light enough I popped my head out of the top of the blind and began glassing in circles. Here and there pronghorn popped into view all around us and I felt that our arrival in the dark has been beneficial.

Soon I noticed a train of 5 bucks a mile out but trotting our way. Just in case, I readied Robin's crossbow and informed her that their demeanor suggested they were headed to our waterhole. Robin was barely awake and didn't believe that they would arrive soon, given the slow, cautious approach of each antelope the day before. Yet each time I checked their progress they were closer and gobbling up the distance. I barely had gotten Robin situated on her chair when the first buck raised his head above the earthen dam!

Because the rising sun shone directly into the blind's shooting window it was difficult to stay hidden. Robin was in the shade but I was visible, so I eased to the side in order to reposition myself. I had only barely moved when Robin shot! Quickly I scanned outside the window and asked her what had happened. She said that the first buck had begun to drink in a broadside position and she knew that they likely wouldn't linger, so had taken the shot. However, as we watched the bucks nervously file away it quickly became apparent that she had somehow missed. I was able to see her arrow on the ground through my binoculars and it

appeared to be clean with no evidence of a hit. As I walked her back through the events we realized that in her excitement she had selected the wrong aiming point (much like several aiming pins on a bow, her crossbow has several dots inside the scope for different distances). Lesson learned: even during the excitement, ones brain must identify the correct aiming dot. Excitement gets the best of us, yet I was proud of her for taking charge and making the decision to shoot all on her own.

To her credit, Robin elected to pass on easy rifle shots as the bucks milled about and fed beyond crossbow range, exuding confidence that she would likely have other opportunities since it was yet very early in the morning.

We spent the rest of the morning eating breakfast and watching pronghorn feed and chase each other in various directions around us; however, none headed for water before lunchtime. In fact, for the first time in our day and a half sit, no pronghorn were in sight. Recognizing that the eleventh hour was looming, given Robin's desire to make it home for school the following day, I decided to climb up the windmill to enable me to scan farther and assess things.

I was able to locate a solo buck 600-800 yards away standing in a low area that might provide enough cover for us to approach within rifle range. He was the buck we had dubbed "big whopper". I climbed back down and explained the opportunity and that my recommendation was that we try something given that time was slipping away. Robin agreed and we donned our camouflage outerwear and slipped out of the blind. However, I immediately saw that the buck had moved onto higher ground and we would be unable to approach. Drat. We stripped back down and settled into our sweat lodge. Robin was unconcerned and said that he might come in for a drink later anyway.

Besides me smoking Robin in a streak of wins in the board game "Snapshots Across America" the afternoon was uneventful until about 3pm when I noted a small buck still some distance away pointing our direction. He was in no hurry, but his demeanor suggested he would be paying us a visit. The buck would nibble grass, raise his head and stare toward the windmill, then take a few meandering steps toward us and repeat the process. We watched him for a while and then, given his rate of progress, went back to our game.

Between turns we would glance in his direction to check his progress. After a time I noted a larger buck much farther away also heading our way. I asked whether Robin would try to shoot the smaller one if he came to us first and she replied that she would try as he would taste good. A little later we saw the smaller buck had bedded down and Robin said "Good, that means the bigger one will get here first!"



Sure enough the bigger buck kept moseying along and soon it was time to get Robin set in her chair and prepared for a close encounter! This time I was able to remind her of the distance and to use the bottom aiming dot in her scope. Robin squeezed the trigger and although I didn't see the arrow I could hear it hit. Another lesson learned: I think we'll use lighted nocks in the future to aid in verifying the shot location. The buck skittered over the top of the dam and out of our sight, but because he didn't reappear I could tell he was hit; otherwise he would have trotted away and into our view again like other pronghorn had. I knew at that point that one way or another Robin had gotten her second pronghorn!

We waited about 30 minutes before I quietly slipped out of the blind and up the windmill ladder to see if I could determine whether the buck was dead. I was able to see that he had bedded (good sign) and that his head was bobbing weakly. Surely Robin's shot had inflicted a fatal wound, although it must have been only marginal since a broadhead through the vitals results in a dead critter within minutes if not seconds. We talked it over and although conventional rule of thumb is to wait a minimum of 2-hours and even up to 4-hours or overnight on marginal hits, we decided that he was probably too weak to stand and even if he could walk, given the wide open prairie it was very unlikely that we could lose track of him. We gambled and tried stalking over for a finishing shot in order to wrap things up and get home at a reasonable hour.

I didn't need to learn this lesson because I knew we were pushing it, but it's worth reiterating: as soon as the buck saw us he stood up and slowly walked away with no chance for Robin to shoot her crossbow. Had we waited I'm 100% positive he would have expired in his bed. We watched him through binos until we lost sight of him in some tall grass.

As we returned toward the blind to retrieve Robin's rifle so as to avoid a repeat, a gust of wind suddenly rolled the blind right into the cattle pond! Yikes, it didn't seem any windier than it had been. We ran over to retrieve it and learned two more lessons: always stake down the blind and be careful with cell phones in the field, even in a "safe" location such as stowed in pockets on the blind walls. A Ziploc baggie would have saved both of them from a dunking meltdown...sorry we were out of contact there for quite a while mommy.



After that mishap we zigzagged our way through the tall grass searching for Robin's antelope and I was able to explain to her how difficult it would be to relocate an animal like this had we been in thick forest. Had this been an elk or deer in their typical habitat we certainly would have waited much longer to approach her quarry. Definitely another teaching moment.

At one point Robin noted that she smelled something and I concurred. She mentioned that our sense of smell was one of our most powerful senses and that her buck must be nearby. We didn't find him in that immediate area, but as we made our way through the grass (stepping carefully to avoid rattlesnakes – another learning opportunity) we smelled the peculiar aroma of pronghorn.

Suddenly the buck stood up in front of us and began walking away. Another buck popped into view on the horizon and trotted over to Robin's buck. I think the wounded buck would have stopped immediately except the other buck was rightfully nervous about the two humans dogging behind and he snorted continually while encouraging Robin's buck to continue.

With no time to really discuss a plan I simply grabbed Robin's hand and whispered that we needed to follow and keep her buck within sight until an opportunity arose to seal the deal.

We noted the bucks heading toward a low rocky hill, so I began to swing wide, suspecting that they would stop rather than climb the hill. The healthy buck finally had enough and trotted away as we reached the hill and we climbed to the

top, while staying out of sight. We circled across the top and crept to the edge to relocate Robin's buck.

We saw him standing perfectly broadside just a short distance below us. Later Robin lamented that she could have used her crossbow; however it probably would have been a tad too far.

I hastily got Robin settled with her rifle and bipod and told her to shoot as soon as she was ready. Our practice earlier in the day served us well and Robin aimed and fired almost immediately. But the buck didn't flinch. At the same time I realized that in our attempt to stay low and out of sight, Robin's bullet hadn't cleared some rocks below us even though her view through the scope was clear. Lesson learned prior to her upcoming ibex hunt. We scooted Robin forward a couple of feet and quickly chambered another round. At the second crack of the rifle the buck dropped like a stone and Robin grinned from ear to ear.

With a sigh of relief and a prayer of thanks, we dropped down the hill to Robin's trophy. The buck was bigger than hers from last year and we looked forward to another batch of delicious meat for our freezer.



As we walked back to retrieve the truck and butchering supplies, we chattered about Robin's hunt and all the events and emotions that it encompassed. What a wonderful time: holding my daughter's hand and walking in the cool of the evening as we basked in her successful hunt! The sunset was a stunning and fitting backdrop.



Even with Robin's help breaking the buck down into bags of meat and packing up camp at the RV park it would be a late night: Robin, welcome to daddy's world of bonsai hunting adventures!

We pulled into the driveway at 2AM on Monday morning, although Robin slept for most of the drive home with the adventures of Nancy Drew playing in the background. As we passed Santa Fe I had to break down and switch over to some livelier sounds from Switchfoot, Skillet, Demon Hunter and other favorites.

Although dragging out of bed was pretty tough for me, Robin made it to school on time and thoroughly enjoyed her first day on Conflict Mediation Duty!

What a trip and what a bunch of training opportunities. I wouldn't trade it for the world and am so proud of Robin. She's growing up all too fast, but I'll never forget this weekend. I love you, kiddo.

Next up...cow elk in October!