

Deer
January 1, 2019 New Mexico

Matthew 5:16 “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”



A real winter meant hunting deer in the snow this year

This season I invested a tremendous amount of time and effort before tagging a unique buck. The catalyst for these activities actually started a couple of years ago during small talk with other parents at Robin's swimming meets. Innocuous questions like "What have you been up to?" led me to share my passion for hunting and the outdoors. One family in particular expressed a keen interest and I provided them with a variety of frozen game meats to try at home. My mantra "organic, free range, steroid and hormone free" resonated with them and soon the dad announced he wanted to try hunting. I pointed him in the right direction to begin the daunting process of learning the rules and applying for tags through NM Department of Game and Fish.

Unbeknownst to me, his son (who was not a swimmer, so I hadn't really chatted with him) was also intrigued, and they took it upon themselves to complete Hunter's Safety (required for those under age 18) and both apply for tags. They were blessed to each draw cow elk tags and the boy also drew a pronghorn tag!

Robin and I committed to helping since they would be starting from scratch, having never hunted before. They borrowed a rifle from one of their friends who was a target shooter and devoted time practicing throughout the summer. I assembled a pile of hunting gear to loan them so they could try out hunting without investing a small fortune.

We took them scouting, showed them how we try to locate animals, instilled in them our affinity for lacing on boots and getting off the traveled path away from roads and simply shared our love for the outdoors. There is so much to see and experience when you're unplugged and out in the fresh air: red-tailed hawks screaming; jackrabbits, a variety of footprints in the mud, garter snakes, and roadrunners, not to mention game animals like pronghorn, deer and elk.

I kicked off the season by helping a couple of out of state friends with whom I had hunted pronghorn in Wyoming back in 2017. They had drawn elk tags here in New Mexico and the plan was for me to hang out with them a little, and since I had a bear tag, I'd carry my bow "just in case". As many of you read that prior story I killed my first bear right off the bat and after packing out the meat and I hide I spent a few days helping my friends. They

had several really close calls but didn't get an elk while I was with them. A few days after I headed for home they each killed bulls and they swung through Albuquerque to share their stories and get some rest (and a shower!) before continuing their long drive home.



One of the bulls my friends killed

Up next the swim team family boy had drawn the same pronghorn tag as Robin and before we knew it summer was over and hunting season was upon us. Due to conflicting schedules Robin and I were on our own for opening day and although we made a handful of stalks that brought us within range of good bucks, Robin wasn't able to get a shot for a variety of reasons.

On the second day of hunting I took our friend on a belly crawl stalk to 400-yards from a herd of feeding pronghorn. I whispered that we'd bide our time as they were moving toward us. Eventually the boy killed a nice buck at just a tad over 100-yards with one shot – what an exciting introduction to hunting!



Sweet success!

We instructed our friends how to butcher a wild animal to ensure quality table fare and put the meat on ice in coolers. Robin and I got several more stalks that were so close we could almost taste it, but each time none resulted in a shot opportunity. Robin was skunked on that hunt but displayed maturity beyond her youth by proclaiming that if only one of the two kids ended up being successful she was glad it had been our friend so he would be encouraged to keep hunting.



Robin had one noteworthy achievement: she braided her own hair for the first time!

Next up was the dad's cow hunt. We hiked a bunch and discovered old tracks in the snow but couldn't seem to find any elk. We managed to sneak within 50 yards of a nice mule deer buck, which was exciting and proved to my friend that getting within range of animals was actually possible. Late one afternoon we found fresh sign and decided to sit and wait

for elk to move out of the timber to feed in the evening. Everything fell into place with a 60-yard shot on a young cow, cementing our friend's promise to his wife that if he was successful a new refrigerator/freezer would be in order.



Honey guess what...we'll be needing that new freezer!

Another friend's son had drawn an archery deer tag in the same unit as me. I killed two birds with one stone by helping them scout a couple of times and joining them for a few days during the hunt. The lad was trying for his first archery kill and any information I gathered while assisting them would be useful for my own hunt in January. I carried my own bow in case we happened up on a lion or another predator for which I held a tag. I shadowed the youth on some stalks that just didn't quite come together.



Nice buck during a scouting foray



Snow hit during another scouting trip



Plenty of snow should help our drought situation around the state



Nice herd of deer

Of course you can guess that the one day I left my bow behind Mr. Bob(cat) strolled past at 20 yards without a care in the world. I've heard they are good eating and of course their pelts are beautiful, so it's been my goal to get one for years.



Mr. Bob checking things out

I had to peel off to help the boy who killed the pronghorn on his cow elk hunt, but my friend's son killed a dandy deer just a day later. I was thrilled for his success even though I couldn't be there in person to rejoice with him. He's a tough hunter and I'd wager the future holds plenty of adventure for him given his dedication and enthusiasm.



What an accomplishment – a youth's first bow kill, and a dandy trophy too!



Bedded doe

Sometime during my whirlwind of activity I managed to call in a bobcat but only skimmed an arrow below his chest. They aren't a very big target and after the shot I ranged his location to be 25 yards, rather than the 20-yard distance I had previously ranged the boulder upon which he was standing.



This lucky cat used up one of his lives

The cow hunt with the first boy took place in bitter cold and snowy conditions. We hiked and glassed a lot, spotting a few bulls but no cows. My trusty Jetboil stove and cup o' noodles helped warm our insides during a lunch break, and I tried to keep his spirits up.

Day-old elk tracks seemed to be everywhere, and given the quantity I was confident we would find an elk sooner or later. Late one afternoon we peeked into a small drainage off a main ridge and spotted a bedded bull. The boy whispered "Dang, another bull." I replied that there could be a cow nearby and to remain hidden and carefully scan the area. A few minutes later I picked out a cow and just like that we were in business!

We sneaked to about 100-yards just as the cow bedded down, which provided a great shot opportunity. The boy shot perfectly and the huge old cow simply relaxed her head and rolled over. That success underscored their need for a new freezer!



Teaching beginners was challenging, but a load of fun!

Up next was my own late season archery elk tag. I hunted hard but ultimately didn't even see a legal elk. I hiked out after dark on the last day, broke down camp, piled everything into my truck and pointed it for home. When I reached cell service my phone pinged "heading for last day bonsai trip for ibex". A close friend held a muzzleloader tag and had

hunted for over a week earlier in the season without quite sealing the deal. I had put the bug in his ear that if I tagged out early I might have time to join him for a Hail Mary attempt. Until then I hadn't heard back from him, and of course I didn't tag out early.

I hesitantly texted my wife about my potential change in plans. She assured me that everything was under control on the home front so I asked my buddy if he was interested in a sidekick. He was elated since his wife was understandably worried about him tackling the brutal terrain solo. I diverted my truck toward Deming rationalizing that it would be quicker to get there than to head home. I arrived at midnight but had to spend 45 minutes reorganizing the mess of gear I had hurriedly tossed into my truck. We hatched a quick plan for the morning and hit the sack.

At zero dark thirty we bowed our heads for a quick prayer and began our ascent of the Rock. We started glassing for ibex as soon as there was enough light and before long we spotted some nannies on a rocky crag. Soon a small billy made an appearance and eventually a couple more billies stepped into view including one we deemed worthy of pursuit. Although it was the last day of season, my friend wasn't willing use his precious tag for an immature billy or a nanny.

We never did get within range of those ibex. In fact they ended up traveling past nearly the same spot from which we had originally glassed them! As the day wore on all we could do was keep pushing ourselves and try to keep our hopes up, but the sun's relentless march across the sky did not go unnoticed. Our time was dwindling. Early afternoon we spotted another good billy and worked our tails off to close the distance, but by the time we got within range we couldn't find him. I left my buddy in shooting position while I scrambled to look from a different vantage point. My friend quipped "If you hear me shoot, he stepped into view." I chuckled and eased around some rocks, but couldn't spot the billy. I returned and we waited awhile longer, but losing precious time on the last afternoon was unsettling. My buddy was certain the billy held tight near a particular boulder and cactus, but we hadn't seen him in well over an hour. Before I descended to look from yet another vantage my buddy queried for the umpteenth time "If I shoot him over there, are you're sure we can get to him?" to which I replied, "I'm confident we'll find a way" (what can I say, I'm crazy).

Just after I left "BOOM!" I scrambled to where I could see the last known position of the billy and saw him on his feet turning his head as if seeking the source of danger. My first thought was "Oh no, he missed", but no sooner had that entered my mind than the billy's rear legs wobbled and I knew it was a good hit. I also noted that his horns were bigger than we had first surmised. He fell to his knees, rolled over the small lip on the rock face upon which he had been standing, and plummeted nearly 100 vertical feet in a sliding free-fall. We had done it! I quickly returned to my buddy and proclaimed "Bonsai, baby!" He was on the verge of tears as the emotions hit him. Given all the pain and effort he had put in, the sweet success in the final hours was nearly overwhelming.

Despite the shot being under 200-yards, it took us over an hour of extremely challenging mountaineering to reach the fallen monarch. Suffice to say hauling the meat, horns and hide to the truck was the most difficult pack I've ever had. The initial climb to where he had shot from was incredibly challenging and not one I'd like to repeat. I was sore for days. But the pain has long since faded and the memories will be with us for eternity. Me squeezing into in the trophy photo has nothing to do with stealing my buddy's thunder - it was a monumental team effort and we'll both cherish the time we spent together. We

reached the truck at 10:30, mentally and physically exhausted. “Um...honey...I ah, won’t make it home tonight, either...”



Bonsai, baby!

Next thing I knew Christmas was upon us and our family celebrated the birth of our Savior with a delicious meal of Osso Bucco: braised shanks slow-cooked until the meat falls off the bone, with veggies and potatoes. Not exactly the traditional Christmas turkey but was it ever tasty.

The following day it was off to team up with my same buddy whose son had the deer hunt earlier. His daughter had her first big game hunt: a cow elk, and Robin also held a tag. Robin announced that her priority would be to do our best to help our friend be successful. Our freezers were bursting and Robin didn’t “need” to fill her tag: for her it was more important to help another new hunter. Our dream was for two cow elk, but we promised to let our friend shoot first if the opportunity arose.

Our first day hunting began with a lot of walking and ended in a full-blown blizzard. The weather became so bad we could barely see and it didn’t seem worthwhile to be out and about. Early evening I cracked down the truck window to glass through the spitting snow and spied a cow feeding in a steep drainage. At first everyone thought I was joking, as it was ludicrous to expect to see anything, but we blitzed out of the truck for a hasty ascent. Unfortunately we lost shooting light by the time we closed within shooting range.

The next morning we began glassing in the same area and spotted a group of cows higher up the mountain. We climbed and got within shooting distance but as we tried to get the girls organized some of the cows began to spook. I blew a cow call in an attempt to settle them down as our friend hurriedly prepared for her shot. It was too hectic to get Robin ready to shoot simultaneously and we had vowed to let our friend shoot first anyway.

The herd scattered at the report and although we shifted position Robin couldn’t get a shot opportunity. I had been watching closely through my binoculars and hadn’t seen any sign

of a hit, but we hiked to the elk's last position to search for blood or other clues. It was pretty easy to find their hoof prints in the snow, but we didn't turn up any positive evidence.

Robin and I had planned to return home for her swimming practices and for Laurie and I to celebrate our 30th Anniversary, so we bade farewell and wished our friends luck with a promise to rejoin them.

When Robin and I reached our truck we heard faint hollering from up on the mountain and the only reasons we could think of for the ruckus were a severe emergency or our friends finding a dead elk. I glassed up to see them descend into a hidden valley, so we drove to a point where we could spot them again and confirmed they had recovered an elk! Due to our commitments and already being at the bottom of the mountain we knew our friends could handle the chore of butchering and packing out the meat so reluctantly pointed our truck for home. They later reported they had found blood 60 yards beyond where we had separated from them and her first trophy was piled up a scant 100-yards farther along the trail. It was a wonderful success even though Robin and I weren't with them to celebrate.



Mission accomplished on our friend's first big game hunt!

With a winter storm forecast I texted our friends to head for home while they could rather than wait for our return. Although they generously offered to stay to help us, we didn't think it wise for them to stick it out and implored them to retreat.

The storm hit as forecast, making travel conditions hazardous and bringing bitter wind chill, so Robin and I couldn't return for our own Bonsai run until the last day of season. Although we located some cows and nearly made it within range, we ended up falling short

and once again Robin didn't get a shot opportunity. We returned home thankful for our time afield and happy that we had at least seen legal game. I told Robin "We had all of the fun and none of the work." And that's pretty tough to beat.

I summarized all of these outings to an acquaintance and he replied "By helping all of those people you built up some serious hunting karma!" Well, I don't believe in karma. There isn't any mystical "force" or "power" that somehow balances things in the cosmos. Any power comes from the Lord, pure and simple. But I appreciated his attitude.

So all of this activity led up to my January archery deer hunt. For a variety of reasons I hadn't killed a deer with my bow since 2005. Lack of tags, poor units, busy schedule, blown stalks, missed opportunities...you name it, it's happened to me.

My hunt began on New Year's Day and another blizzard was in the forecast. Specifically 25-35 up to 55mph winds plus snow. The forecast was so bad I almost skipped opening day to wait for the weekend. But I'm crazy, I had the day off from work, and I'm fairly certain you can't kill anything from the couch, so I reluctantly donned multiple layers of Sitka Gear technical outdoor wear plus a white overcoat and braved the foul weather. I slung my trusty Vortex binoculars around my neck but wasn't too optimistic for putting them to use given the low clouds and blowing snow.

I finished up with heavy gloves, a tightly cinched hood over a balaclava and was thankful for my Jetstream Jacket to block the wind. Conditions were abysmal. I didn't have much of a plan since I knew deer would be hunkered down like I probably should have been. I figured that finding a sheltered area out of the wind or crossing fresh tracks in the snow would be my best bet, so trudged into the storm. Visibility was barely 100-yards and I felt foolish for even trying, but at least I was comfortable in my warm layers.

Suddenly I caught movement 20 yards in front of me. A small buck materialized, unaware of me as he browsed! Although I admit a little temptation, I dismissed shooting, despite him being legal. However, I pulled off my heavy glove, readied my bow and nocked an arrow in the off chance more deer might be nearby. I had stowed lighter weight shooting gloves deep in my jacket pocket but it was too difficult to dig them out with my bow in hand. The icy weather bit into my bare shooting hand pretty quickly so I balled it into a fist and pressed it against my jacket in a nearly futile attempt to save a little heat.



Small buck that caught my attention

As I froze, somewhat literally, the buck wandered to my left and I carefully shadowed him. Within a few steps more movement revealed a couple does milling below me in a small arroyo partially sheltered from the icy blast. I quickly ranged them to be 23 yards.

Suddenly a bigger buck raised his head beside the does. I could see he only had 1 antler, but the remaining side looked pretty darn good. His body was hidden by the lip of the arroyo, so I didn't have a shot, but that gave me plenty of time to weigh my options. It was only the first 15 minutes of my 2-week hunt, but if the buck had both antlers it would be a no-brainer for me to shoot given the opportunity. With plenty of time to ponder I decided that losing the antler hadn't diminished his trophy value to me. I whispered to the Lord that if the deer spooked and bounded off I'd have no regrets, but if the big buck presented me with a shot I wouldn't pass it up. With that decision I carefully eased a few feet closer to the deer to set up for a shot opportunity.



Methinks this buck is a shooter!

It's hard to explain, but I felt invisible. The deer acted a little suspicious like "something" was nearby but they couldn't seem to focus on me and certainly didn't spook. They basically just continued about their business and I was so close I felt like I was part of the herd. The does browsed and milled around, the small buck sniffed and cautiously paced the outskirts of the group and the big buck calmly stretched and bedded down with brush all but obscuring my view of him.



Right among the herd

I didn't want to move or do anything to disturb the serenity so just held tight. My bare hand was cold but I didn't want to drop my bow arm so I did my best to snuggle my hand into

the bottom of my hood with my release on the string to remain ready for action. It was mesmerizing to experience the deer interacting at close range. My leg cramping and hand slowly freezing were but a small price to pay for admission.

Eventually one of the young does focused on me and began to bob her head, look away, and then snap back to stare towards me in attempt to catch me moving. It's an intriguing, almost humorous, technique that I've witnessed deer and elk employ. They'll act like they aren't interested in you and will pretend to nibble a tasty branch or look in a different direction. Then just about the time you think it might be safe to scratch that itch on your nose or shift to relieve the cramp in your calf, BAM they snap their head back to stare at you. If you fidget or move it can all be over in an instant. But if you can keep still and not be fooled, the animals often eventually lose interest. It is agonizing, intense and frustrating...and one of the many reasons I love the challenge of bowhunting so much.

I remained as a statue as the performance unfolded. Soon the doe took a hesitant step toward me, and then another. At about 10 yards she still couldn't identify me, but apparently thought it wise to back off a bit. I suspected something would happen soon. Either she would spook and bound off with the herd in tow, or her suspicious behavior would make the buck would be intrigued enough to rise and follow her.

Thankfully the latter scenario played out and the alert doe led the other does at a walking pace right in front of me. The big buck rose just as I envisioned and began to follow them without a care in the world. I drew my bow as he passed behind a thick clump of bear grass. He paused for several seconds to nibble at a mountain mahogany, but I held full draw waiting for him to expose his vitals. When he did it was all over: my arrow sizzled through him like a hot knife through butter and he quickly darted to the does. I knew my shot was fatal and within seconds he laid down.

I nocked another arrow for insurance as I always do and waited. The does stared back at him as if wondering why he wasn't coming, and the smaller buck walked past him toward the does. The big buck was dead but just didn't know it yet. The arrogance of the smaller buck was enough to rouse the bruiser to his feet so I sank another arrow through his heart and he went down for good.

As the remainder of the herd stared at the fallen monarch I snapped photos and video during their confusion. Soon the smaller buck began to hound the does, the rut was on after all, and apparently the big buck no longer cared. The fact that the big buck wasn't anxious or following them seemed to put the herd at ease and I ended up watching them for another 15 minutes while the snow and wind pelted us as they went back to minding their own business and doing their thing.

Eventually they worked their way out of sight and I was finally able to relax and claim my prize. I approached my buck and his body was huge - bigger than I had realized. His right antler had been broken off above the burr, which must have taken a tremendous blow that I couldn't imagine. Maybe I'll find his rival next year.

It's not often that a hunt comes together quickly and I truly felt like the Lord had dropped this buck into my lap. Although some hunters may have passed up this buck given his broken antler, I am blessed to have taken him and I'm certain the Lord meant him for me.



Big-bodied buck

Even without thorough measurements this buck would easily be my biggest buck if he had both antlers. Even his left antler alone would score more than some of my past deer!



My unicorn

When viewed by itself, my deer season had come to fruition seemingly quick and easy. But when I look back it was more like the grand finale to a lengthy season.

I helped a lot of people this year and although it was challenging, it was also satisfying and a lot of fun. I invested time because I enjoy helping others and love the outdoors. I

helped them with no thought of personal gain, but I truly believe the Lord blessed me with a short deer hunt as a way of giving me back some of the time I had spent on others.

I pray that any of you reading this story would not be enamored with my hunting achievements but instead see the Lord's hand working through me and give Him the glory!

Happy New Year's and God bless!
Carl