

Mule Deer
September 1, 2019 New Mexico

Ephesians 3:20 “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think...to Him be the glory ...in Christ Jesus...forever and ever.”

My long-time hunting partner Jason continued to be overloaded by his career, forcing me to revise my hunting strategy. I had reconnected with a friend known through cycling after his brother passed away tragically in 2017 (see my story Pronghorn 2017 for my reflections). Although his brother had been an avid hunter, Brian hadn't begun hunting until later in life. You would never guess it based on his passion for the outdoors, and he's blessed with a family that loves to hunt and fish: his lovely wife, two sons and a daughter.

Although I applied with Jason for a few hunts, we didn't draw anything together this season; however, it was a blessing to draw a deer tag with Brian, and our kids drew cow elk tags together too. We invested time throughout the summer: planning, mapping our unit, mulling over hunting strategies and on-the-ground scouting. By the time season arrived we had an opening morning game plan.



Curious doe during one scouting trip

Our friend Victor wanted some fresh air and volunteered to join us to help glass for deer. He planned to remain behind at a vantage behind his optics to help steer us if we had an opportunity to stalk (visual aids and radio communication are legal during pursuit of game in New Mexico).

Opening morning began with a hike by headlamps toward a knob our scouting had proven to be a great vantage for glassing at first light. We got comfortable and mounted binoculars atop tripods in anticipation of methodically picking apart the opposite slope.

I munched on a cold breakfast burrito; my morning staple at glassing points on countless hunts, as the eastern sky began to brighten. Opening mornings seem to hold the possibility that anything can happen, that anything is possible, and are full of hope. We relished the silence and awesome beauty of the dawn.

Initially the only sign of life was a trio of gray fox pups chasing each other and frolicking in the brush. They were a hoot to watch: wrestling, rolling, jumping, scrambling into trees and pouncing on each other. They were so entertaining I could have watched them for an hour, but Brian hissed "I got a buck!"

I reluctantly panned away from the frisky foxes and searched for the buck based on Brian's whispered landmarks. The buck was a dandy: tall tined and narrow, but resplendent with antlers enveloped in velvet. Neither of us were picky: taking any buck with a bow is an accomplishment - but this buck was a good one!

As we studied him Victor whispered that more trailed just out of our view. These bucks were also solid and it was wonderful to spot quality animals right off the bat.

I reached for my camera for some pictures, only to discover that it had been left on: the battery was dead and I had no spare. So much for recording memories to share with friends and family. I managed a few grainy pictures with my cell phone through binoculars, but it appeared if a story came together it would be mainly text.

Eventually we spotted a handful of bucks in addition numerous does and fawns feeding in the scattered brush. From what we could tell there had been a bumper crop of acorns and the deer were gorging on the sweet nuts. Additionally every sprout and plant was green and lush so there was no lack of food.

We watched the deer meander, trying to keep tabs on them to formulate a plan. Eventually a few bucks began to bed down and we mentally charted routes that might allow us to sneak within range. Some of the deer bedded in brush so dense as to become invisible, while others flopped down in plain sight. The hidden ones, especially non-target does and fawns, could be deal breakers – accidentally startling them during an approach toward a buck could ruin a stalk.

Brian became antsy to try a stalk...and I admitted the same. Our "problem" was no direct approach. We would have to descend, detour far around the deer, ascend much higher, and finally drop toward them from above. A solid plan, but one that would expend a lot of energy. We loaded our backpacks, Victor wished us well, and we set off.



A couple of bucks we were eager to go after



Look at this brute's antlers gleaming in the sun! Remember this one...

In no time we were huffing and puffing, plodding up the steep slope that the deer had bedded on, but out of sight in the next drainage.

We finally made it to the top and stopped for a breather to reassess our route. We could see 2 of the bedded bucks by peeking down on them and our confidence soared upon confirming they remained in their original positions.

I insisted that Brian take the first stalk since he had invested a lot of time finding this area. In turn he asked me to shadow him in case an opportunity arose for both of us to shoot. We dropped our packs and slipped into 5-Fingers minimalist running shoes. I had never stalked in them, but was impressed. They were nearly as silent as sock-feet (which I've employed numerous times) but provided substantially more protection and traction.

We made it within 40-yards of the uppermost buck in short order. He was lying tightly against a boulder, making any shot difficult without being right on top of him. As we eased

toward him our stalk went south almost immediately. I suspect the buck heard us, and although Brian glimpsed him arise, he was gone in an instant.

All we could do was shake it off and hope he hadn't spooked the next buck laying a hundred yards down the slope.

As we readied ourselves to move on Brian announced "Well, that was my chance, it's your turn." I tried to argue that hadn't really counted, but he would have none of it. I went into hunt mode. Brian suggested he remain behind to reduce noise and avoid repeating our initial failure. We moved 40-yards along the contour and eventually I discerned a velvet antler tine buried in a patch of brush. The buck had relocated from his prior bed and tucked himself inside some scrub oaks to become all but invisible. Without Vortex optics magnifying my eyes he would have been impossible to see.

Brian stuck to his proposal and insisted that I put a sneak on the buck while he held back and kept an eye on him. I crept stealthily toward the dozing buck, vowing to advance so slowly and silently that my stalk would come to fruition.

Although I did my best to keep an eye on the thicket, I had to look down at every foot placement to ensure total silence. I periodically glanced toward Brian and each time he'd flash "thumbs up" – the buck hadn't moved. When I reached 60-yards I nocked an arrow, as every step brought me closer to my preferred range of 40-yards or less.

The deer was tucked in so tightly I had trouble spotting him even with binoculars at close range. Finally I thought I spotted a fuzzy main beam and glued my eyes to the spot, in an attempt to confirm the buck's position. Suddenly he turned his head and my entire view twisted – what I assumed to be the main beam of his antler was instead one small tine and the swinging of his full headgear looked like a prehistoric beast twisting in the thicket! Dang I was close! I ranged the brush at 35-yards. It had taken me over an hour to close the distance. But it had been worth it.

Suddenly something caught my eye in the bottom of the drainage. My binoculars confirmed the antler of another bedded buck perhaps 200-yards away. I gave Brian hand signals: "eyes", then pointed down. He quickly interpreted my signing and began glassing below. Soon he signaled that he could see the new buck. I signaled for him to stalk it. I was well within range of "my" buck and all I could do was wait for him to stand and hopefully get a shot. There was nothing further Brian could do to help me.

Brian quickly began to slink down the drainage and I lost sight of him.

I decided a few steps would bring me beside an old standing stump that would provide camouflage as I stood and baked in the sun. I could clearly see the buck's rump, but his vitals were obscured and his head was mostly obscured by branches. He panted heavily in the heat, having already grown most of his heavier winter coat.

After my slight move I could no longer see the buck below me, but in short order I heard a distinct "whap" of a bowstring, an arrow whirring through the air and the sharp "crack" of a broadhead striking home! While thrilled for Brian, I admit my first thought was "That DOG!" I had crept for over an hour and stood at attention in the hot sun for another thirty minutes waiting for a shot, yet Brian had whisked down and shot his buck in 10-minutes!

I had no time for further thoughts; however, as the drainage erupted with the racket of deer stampeding. A dozen of them charged away and the ruckus would likely be the catalyst to encourage “my” buck to rise. I mentally prepared for a shot. The buck whipped his head toward the commotion but astonishingly remained bedded for a minute or two before beginning to rise.

As he came to his feet he twisted toward me and craned his neck toward the noise he had heard below. I studied his body language and came to the conclusion it would be wiser to shoot while he was unaware of my presence. I drew, aimed at his vitals and let my arrow fly. “CRACK!” it hit him like a lightning bolt and he sprinted over the rise.

Not wanting to push him, I decided to retrieve my backpack and check on Brian, but as I approached our packs it began to sprinkle. I quickly stuffed Brian’s boots into his pack and donned my own as the sprinkle transitioned into a deluge. Neither of us had raingear (Brian had insisted the forecast would be dry), so all I could do was seek cover as lightning cracked overhead. The base of a nearby cliff offered a little respite from diagonal sheets of water, which soon turned to hail. I pressed against the rock, half my body dry and the other half gradually getting damp, resigned to sit it out.

After a half hour that seemed more like a day the rain began to slacken. When it became a drizzle I revised my plan and decided to locate my buck, fearing that tracks and blood trail had been obliterated. With a little guidance from Victor and his view from across the valley, and a healthy dose of guidance from the Lord above, I found my buck bedded against a boulder in thick brush. I was positive it would be his death bed, but his head was still up, so to finish the deal as soon as possible I carefully crept within range. The storm had made the fallen leaves as silent as soggy newspaper, so it the second time was relatively easy to sneak within 25-yards for a finishing arrow.

I marked the location and retreated to look for Brian. From above I spotted him almost immediately but he was zigzagging across the slope. I whistled, unsure what he was up to. “I can’t find my buck” he called. “I’ll glass from up here” I replied.

I parked myself on a boulder and methodically scanned below. From my eagle’s vantage it didn’t take long before I spotted Brian’s buck piled up by some logs. I quickly whistled and pointed Brian in the right direction before hurrying to join him.

He excitedly relayed his story: he had plenty of cover for an approach and had made a perfect shot from last bit of concealment. The buck’s charging death run had taken him a hundred yards or so and Brian simply had trouble tracking its mad dash after the same deluge. Brian even thanked me for ensuring his boots remained dry!

His buck was a dandy and his first velvet antlered buck. We relished in the abundance of successfully stalking two bucks simultaneously on our first day!

Victor arrived soon thereafter, having watched most of our shenanigans unfold through his spotting scope, and hunkering in his raingear during the storm (he apparently hadn’t gotten the memo from Brian to leave his raingear at camp!) Victor shook his head at me “You’re crazy – it took you forever to close on that buck!” I took that as a compliment.



Brian's dandy buck!

After much thanksgiving and a few photos, Brian dove into butchering while Victor and I ascended the ridge to recover mine.

While Brian's buck was impressive, and I wouldn't have hesitated to shoot it, mine was an absolute brute. He was obviously older and his body was massive: more than I could have wished for in my first velvet-clad buck. Without exaggeration his body appeared to be one and a half times the size of Brian's younger buck. His antlers weren't symmetrical, so they wouldn't score highly, but they had character and were wide – nearly 28" from tip to tip! I was thrilled and couldn't believe that after coming up empty for well over a decade, for the second time in as many seasons I had tagged a great buck on opening day! (See my January 2019 mule deer story).

After butchering and stuffing our backpacks we were heavily laden. I instinctively looked for my trusty hiking poles strapped to my backpack only to recall Brian announcing that we'd have an easy walk that day so no need for them. I'll reconsider following Brian's advice in the future: no raingear, no trekking poles. I employed a dead tree limb for a staff and we made the grueling nighttime hike to the trucks. Despite the pain once I dumped my pack on the tailgate I quipped "That was brutal - it doesn't get any better!"

Who could have predicted even one of us would tag out opening day? Both of us killing great bucks during simultaneous stalks was abundant beyond imagination and can only be attributed to divine intervention!



Brian, me and Victor



Wide load coming through...



Another heavy load – what can I say, it doesn't get any better!



My biggest-bodied buck and first velvet-antlered mule deer



Although the prior photo shows off his antlers better, God lit up the sky for this one
Lord, thank you for Godly friends and for your abundance...amen and amen!