

Deer & Bear September 2022, New Mexico

“The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:14



Sunrise, opening day of deer season, when dreams are big and it feels like anything can happen...

This fall our hunting took a major setback when Brian completely tore his left bicep, which required surgery and screws to reattach muscle to bone. He wouldn't be able to lift anything with his left arm, including holding his bow. After experimenting with a mouth tab and shooting a low poundage bow Brian was frustrated with accuracy, so he applied for a handicapped permit through NM Game & Fish and was granted the use of a crossbow for our upcoming archery hunts. He borrowed one from a friend and sighted it in, but the weapon proved to have its own challenges, including needing shooting sticks since he couldn't hold it up, as well as it being unwieldy and awkward to carry and shoot. Still, it would be better than sitting at home.

Our first hunt was for pronghorn, where we intended to sit blinds at waterholes, which would allow Brian to have the crossbow set up in advance. However, the weeks leading up to our hunt were filled with waves of precipitation and damp weather. During the hunt it rained almost every day and the prairie was dotted with standing water and even mushrooms! The result was we didn't have any action and the hunt we assumed would prove Brian's best chance for success was a total bust.

Next came spot and stalk mule deer, which is difficult enough without the added challenges of having only one good arm and having to carry and set up shooting sticks. However, when I picked up Robin's pronghorn meat from our butcher, whom we've gotten to know very well over the years, he asked if I had any other hunts coming up. I told him about our upcoming deer hunt and lamented it would be tough given Brian's "handicap". He replied with a chuckle, "I'd still put my money on you two!"



They only pose like this when we're scouting – ha!

Our deer hunt began before daybreak with a hike to our pre-planned vantage to begin glassing at first light. It took a while, but Brian spotted a doe feeding, and then I spotted a doe with two fawns. The fawns initially caught my eye because they were sprinting after each other in large figure eights and cloverleaves orbiting their mother. She seemingly ignored their antics and browsed while they stotted (4-legged bound that mule deer do) and bounced around her. Eventually Brian glassed a small fork-antlered buck feeding alongside another doe and yearling. Brian had previously stated he wouldn't be picky and would be thrilled to take any legal buck if provided an opportunity. We studied the trio and Brian asked me if I had any interest in trying a stalk. I suggested he go for it and asked whether he wanted me to carry his shooting sticks or stay put to help direct his stalk (in NM it is legal to use radios/cell phones to communicate while hunting). Brian decided it would be more helpful for me to remain where I had a good view and help steer him, so he loaded his gear and I wished him well.



Greenery and wildflowers were abundant

I bounced my binoculars between the feeding trio, Brian's progress, and searching for other deer. When Brian was about halfway along his stalk, I spotted a larger buck and several does downhill from

him. I texted the new information, after which Brian called to discuss options. The deer appeared to be meandering uphill toward Brian and it seemed worthwhile for him to descend and ambush them as they fed by. Brian quickly shifted direction until he could see the buck, before they all disappeared into the same small drainage. Things were looking good.

Nearly half an hour later Brian texted that the buck hadn't appeared, and he didn't know where any of the deer were. I replied they were still in his drainage and to hold tight. A few minutes later a doe and fawn trotted out of the swale and dropped into the adjacent ravine directly below me. Since deer tend to follow one another, I suspected the buck might take the same route, but it's hard to second-guess wild animals.

Less than 10 minutes later the buck and 2 does trotted out of Brian's ravine along the previous doe and fawn's route into the drainage below me. I quickly called Brian and instructed him to hustle my way. I caught glimpses of the deer feeding at the very bottom of the valley, generally headed uphill. I told Brian to get somewhere he had a clear shot to the bottom and set up; hopefully they would feed right to him. Soon Brian appeared and then dropped down toward the deer. I lost sight of him again, but his position appeared to be good, and he was within 80-yards of the deer. Assuming he could find an opening in the brush, and the deer kept ascending, his setup would come together.

I kept catching movement as the deer browsed in the thick brush, but they were taking their sweet time. Still, I discerned consistent uphill progress and remained hopeful. After another 30-minutes Brian texted that he still hadn't seen anything. I replied they were near the base of two tall dead snags, which Brian could see nearby, and to remain vigilant.

Soon I spotted a doe approaching the location where I had last seen Brian. Surely, the buck had to be close. Minutes later I heard the distinctive report from his crossbow! I glued my eyes to the thicket as 2 does bounded out and stared in Brian's direction – a good sign, as I didn't see the buck exit.

Brian texted that he had taken a shot and thought it was okay, but he wasn't positive. I had a better view from above so told him to stay ready as I hurriedly packed my gear and dropped elevation for a closer look into the valley. The does were still hanging around, so I suspected Brian's buck remained there somewhere, but I couldn't spot him. I met up with Brian and we discussed the conditions leading up to his shot. The does had strolled right into his shooting window at 20-yards, but for some reason the buck had detoured to bushwhack behind Brian. Unable to rotate the sticks, Brian awkwardly supported the crossbow with his bad arm and twisted around before snaking an arrow through a small window in the brush. He admitted to being a little unstable, but the shot was close, and he had definitely hit the buck. Brian's arrow was covered in blood, and we were confident the deer hadn't gone far. We dropped our backpacks and slowly followed the path where the buck had jumped, his hoofprints gouged deeply into the soft soil.

Within 40-yards I spotted antlers beyond a boulder. The buck was bedded but still alive and we felt it best to get a finishing shot. We backed out and approached from a different angle. Unfortunately, we ended up almost directly behind the buck, which was bedded just 25-yards from us. We decided to get Brian set up on the shooting sticks and wait. After a while the buck shakily lurched to his feet and stumbled into brush directly away from us, offering no shot. I quickly ran around in front of him and when he didn't appear I was confident he hadn't gone very far. I rejoined Brian, and we carefully crept forward until we found the buck just a handful of yards farther, and Brian finished him with another arrow. One buck down, and it was the tag we didn't expect to fill – praise God!



Not too shabby for a gimpy hunter!

After butchering Brian's deer and packing it to the truck it was up to me, and we spent the next couple days hiking and glassing. We saw plenty of does and fawns but very few bucks, all relatively small. On our third day I asked Brian about a valley where he had found lots of bear sign last year, as I also held a bear tag.

We changed locations that afternoon and hiked up an old logging road. We didn't cross any bear droppings, certainly not like Brian had seen in the past. At one point we found a fresh moo-cow patty and I teased Brian that maybe that's what he had been seeing. A little farther along I smelled something pungent, and I noticed another fresh cow pie beside me as I turned back to Brian. "I just got a whiff of something, but I think it's moo-cow," I whispered. Brian was still facing forward and could see behind me "There's a bear!" he responded. My first inclination was that he was joking...but we never joke about stuff like that. I turned just in time to see the rear end of a bear disappear into the brush, headed up the side slope. I didn't even have my bow ready as we hadn't seen any bear sign to that point, so it took me a little while to buckle on my release, grab my predator call and slip up the hill, squalling like a tasty dying morsel. I called for about 15-minutes but didn't see the bear again, although I did find several fresh bear droppings.

I returned to Brian and suggested we continue up the valley and set for more calling since we had actually seen a bear. When we got to the spot where the bear had been there was a fresh bear pie in the middle of the trail – alas if we'd found it sooner, I would have had my bow ready. Off to the side was a muddy wallow with a heavily beaten down bear trail leading to it! Since bears don't have hard hooves, and they tend to step in the exact same tracks each time, their trails are distinctive and consist

of rounded divots. Also, since their feet are padded, I knew there must be a considerable amount of activity for them to pound a trail into the dirt. I quickly decided we should set an ambush.



Methinks bears are in the area...

We hadn't packed any treestands and retrieving one from home would take hours. In the interest of time Brian suggested we construct a brush blind, so we piled up logs and prepared a place for me to sit. We finished around 5pm and I planned to return to sit the following day. When Brian announced, "You should just sit here until dark." it struck me like a thunderbolt – indeed I should! He decided to head back to the truck to reduce movement and smell at the blind and I settled in to wait.

Barely 45-minutes later chilling growls came from uphill. Minutes later I caught movement and spied a large dark cinnamon colored bruin lumbering down the bear trail. A smaller black colored bear followed, which I quickly identified as the original bear we had seen, likely an adult female following a big boar. My heart pounded and I grabbed my bow, arrow already nocked. I decided to draw as the boar passed behind a stand of small trees, so I could shoot when he stepped into the clear.

I thought I did everything right: I have silencing fleece on any areas my arrow might make noise, I drew my bow quietly and smoothly, and I didn't make any extra movement, but something alerted the bear, and he froze only 20-yards in front of me. I was at full draw, but he was screened by brush and trees. Slowly and silently, he backed up in his same tracks, causing the sow to veer from the trail. I frantically searched for an opening to sneak an arrow through. The boar turned and angled uphill, offering a quartering away shot between some branches. I distinctly thought to myself "This is a bear, don't force a bad shot". I was in a slightly awkward position, having to lean and tilt, and something didn't feel quite right with my anchor point, but everything else seemed fine, so I released my arrow. The lighted nock glowed as my projectile sped toward him. I hit the bear but cringed as it seemed low. He lurched out of sight and growled a few times, offering hope of a vital hit, but inwardly I

worried. I quietly backed out to text Brian. We discussed the situation and decided since it would be dark by the time Brian could reach me, it would be better to retrieve a pistol before following up.

We took up the trail about 9pm, with the first clue being very little blood on my arrow. Over the years I've had a couple kills where my arrow was relatively clean, but it's been rare. A knot formed in my stomach. We proceeded up the bear trail and found a few drops of blood, but not much. Perhaps his hair sopped it up, or perhaps his fat clogged the wound? Or perhaps my shot wasn't fatal. We followed the sparse trail for about 100-yards before losing it entirely. We backtracked, tried again, and pressed forward in every possible direction, searching for sign, but met a dead end every time. At midnight we decided to retreat and regroup in daylight the next day.



As we hiked out, we saw glowing eyes in our headlamps...

The next morning, we drove toward our parking area with tired eyes. I lamented that my arrow must have only skimmed the bottom of the bear's chest, never entering the ribcage and hadn't been fatal. Brian encouraged me not give up hope and that daylight might reveal more clues and allow us to see farther as we searched. We were so tired and engrossed in pondering "what-ifs" that we missed our turn. Brian's truck doesn't exactly turn on a dime, so we slowed and kept rolling, looking for a place to turn around. Suddenly I spied two nice bucks at the brush line next to the road! Brian gently drifted to the shoulder around the next bend and told me to go kill one of them.

I grabbed my bow, binos, and rangefinder, then crept back to where we had seen the deer, which had been headed up a steep hillside in thick brush. Relocating them and then finding an opening to shoot would not be easy.

As I approached the buck's approximate location, suddenly one bounded from me. All I could see were velvet antlers bobbing above the thick vegetation as the buck crashed to a halt. I had bumped him, but at least I had pinpointed their position. I eased ahead, searching for a shooting lane, then as if by divine providence, I entered a narrow, diagonal clearing leading directly to the other buck, which stood broadside staring at the one I had spooked. I quickly ranged him at 41-yards, drew my bow and

released a perfect shot. My arrow blew through his chest, and I immediately knew it was fatal. Had that really happened? A successful 2-minute stalk on bucks we had just “happened” to see because we had missed our turn?

I jubilantly returned to Brian, who had remained in the truck and hadn’t been able to see any of the action. He was surprised I had returned so quickly. “Couldn’t find them?” he asked. “We have some butchering to take care of,” I replied. Brian was incredulous, “No way!” he whooped. We waited a little while and then followed the ample blood trail to my buck, which had piled up in the bottom of an arroyo. I hadn’t realized it when I shot, but the buck’s antlers were unique, with 2 main beams on each side. Deer number 2 down!



The Lord’s grace abounds!

We quickly butchered my deer and returned to camp to put the meat on ice, before repeating our drive, sans missing the turn, and then hiked to search for my bear. Daylight didn’t reveal any new clues, but rather confirmed my suspicion that the shot hadn’t been fatal. Regardless, we grid searched and scoured the hillside. No ravens or vultures appeared, which further proved the bear wasn’t dead. By midafternoon I was bummed, kicking myself for blowing a great opportunity on a great bear.

I decided to sit at my blind for the rest of the day in hopes the big bruin would return, while Brian hiked down the valley a little way for a nap. I settled in and struggled to keep my eyes open.

As evening approached, my anticipation grew. Just before 7pm I detected movement on the bear trail when the same black sow descended toward the wallow. The short stool I had was uncomfortable, so at that particular moment I was sitting with my legs crossed. As she approached, I moved my leg slightly to get ready for a shot, but the slight noise of the fabric of my pants legs was enough to make her freeze. I couldn’t believe she had heard the faint “swish”! She scanned warily, and then silently turned and disappeared back up the trail. Dang it!

I continued to wait, hopeful she might reappear with the big boy in tow. Shortly after sunset another bear ghosted into view near the wallow. I assumed it would hit the water and give me plenty of time, but instead it angled toward me. I began drawing my bow when it was screened by a vertical stump directly in front of me, but it was moving so fast I only reached half-draw before it came back into view. Once again, whether it was some slight noise or movement on my part, the bear perceived

something amiss and sprinted up the bear trail before I could reach full draw. Why were these bears on such high alert? I had no idea.

Two more opportunities on which I had been unable to capitalize. Neither bear was very big, but both appeared to be mature adults and I would have been happy to notch my tag on either bruin. Twilight came and went, and when it became too dark to see my sight pins, I quietly packed up and hiked to meet Brian. I filled him in on the action as we marched to the truck.

The next afternoon I brought a more comfortable chair and switched to clothing that was all but silent (my Sitka Apex series). When I arrived, I also trimmed a shooting lane up to the bear trail and added more brush to my hideout for better concealment. Finally, I arranged a large log to set my bow on to raise it higher and reduce the movement needed before a shot. Alas, despite the afternoon and evening being warm and sunny, no bears visited.

Laurie still lingered out of town helping Robin get settled into college, so I decided to stay one more day to try for a bear. I hiked to my blind at midday and quietly settled in again. Nothing happened until about 5pm when thunder began rolling in the distance. Then clouds blotted out the sun and the sky grew dark. Thunder and lightning advanced and I could hear raindrops approaching. It began to drizzle, but I held hope it would blow through quickly, as the forecast didn't call for rain. The drizzle increased. I was relatively dry tucked underneath some giant pine trees but began to feel occasional drips. I held tight, hoping the storm would fizzle. Since I was sitting, more water hit the horizontal part of my thighs, which began to dampen as the rain increased. My raingear was in camp, so I rummaged through my backpack for a garbage bag to lay across my legs and tuck my arms under. After suffering the relatively heavy rain, thunder, and lightning for over half an hour I resigned to myself it wasn't meant to be, and hurriedly stowed my gear and began hustling down the old logging road toward my vehicle. As I broke into a small clearing, I noticed the sky looked brighter and the rain lessening. Not sure what to do, I stood under a large tree for several minutes as the rain faded to a drizzle and then ceased. I had planned to hit the road to get home at a decent hour, but decided I'd kick myself if I didn't head back to my blind and sit until dark.

I hurriedly set up my bow, nocked an arrow and set up my seat. I was chilly, so removed my damp outer shirt to don an insulating layer. Although the rain had stopped, the forest was filled with the sound of dripping water. As I stood preparing to put on the warmer layer, I glanced up to see a huge bear strolling down the logging road toward me just 20-yards away! In shock, I turned for my bow as he veered up the bear trail. When I turned back, I feared I had already spooked him, but he reappeared ascending the trail, facing nearly straight away from me. I hastily drew my bow, but I could only see his rear end. I squeaked with my mouth, and he twisted to look back over his shoulder, offering a quartering away shot. I took careful aim and released, my lighted arrow blowing through his ribcage right where I had wanted, much higher than my previous shot at the other bear, and I immediately knew the shot was fatal! The huge bruin lunged out of sight, and I heard gurgling coughs, confirming the bear was in his death throes. I sat down, awestruck that not only had a big bear appeared during inclement weather conditions, but that I'd been able to shoot without spooking him.



The bear's path before I could shoot



My shooting window along the bear trail

Confident I'd be requiring Brian's help this time, I carefully arose and peeked uphill. I spied the monarch lying awkwardly on his side with paws in the air just a dozen yards from where he'd been hit – a certain death pose, versus "I'm waiting for you to come up here". Still, rather than rushing over I chose to relish the moment, settle down for a few minutes and hike to where I knew I could get cell phone coverage.

"Dude, I just shot a massive bear – and he's dead!" I announced. Brian whooped "I knew you'd get one!" He said he would head my way, but it would take well over an hour to drive from camp and then hike in 2-miles. I quickly called Laurie and my sister to share the news, and left a message with

my dad, before returning to the bear. My arrow was punched into the dirt in almost the exact same place as the shot I had taken days before, but this time it was thoroughly coated in blood and even without the bear lying just uphill I would have known my shot was fatal.



This is the kind of evidence I like to see!

I approached the bear, awestruck. He was big. Bigger than my previous bear, which I considered to be a real trophy. This boar was built like a freight train; solid muscle, with a head nearly as big around as my waist (I later measured its circumference to be 29" at his ears). Indeed, the Lord's grace was plentiful. Brian was blessed to kill a buck even with one bad arm, and on his first stalk, no less! I was blessed with two trophies on the same hunt, for the first time. I was blessed with a quick, clean kill on a dangerous game, and a soon-to-be overflowing freezer. And I was blessed to have such a friend and kindred spirit as Brian. Thank you, Lord, your grace abounds!



The fallen giant



Huge paws and claws!



Approximate shot, and where the bruin fell

I could barely roll the beast to arrange him for trophy photos. Surely, he weighed over 300-pounds, although I had no way to confirm it. His teeth were extremely worn, one huge canine was completely broken off, and his stumpy ears were torn and damaged from fighting with other bears – all indicators of an old, trophy bruin! I later measured his hide to be 6'-6" from nose to tail and 7'-2" from paw to paw, resulting in the average or "square" measurement of 6'-10": undeniably a big bear. I also later unofficially measured his skull "green" (before a required drying time) to be just over 20" – almost an inch bigger than my previous bear! The score is the total of length plus width, and the minimum size to be entered in the Pope & Young archery record book 18". As a side note, the minimum size for grizzly bears is 19" and polar bears is 20"!

We ended up with 3 full pack loads of meat, hide and skull, plus one more of miscellaneous gear (bow, binoculars, food, clothing, etc.) equating to two trips apiece. By the time we made it to the truck it was well past midnight...again. What abundant grace!



What a trophy – and a mountain of meat! Thank you, Lord!



And thank you, Lord, for my good friend Brian!

Postscript: A month later we captured a game camera photo of the first big bear I skimmed, which confirmed the wound was not fatal. Perhaps he and I will cross paths again next year...?



Recent bear skull (right) compared to my previous bear



Old, worn teeth