

Ibex Robin
March 13, 2016 New Mexico

Psalm 121:2-3 “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip - He who watches over you will not slumber.”



“Daddy that looks like the American Ninja Warrior Wall – how are we ever going to get up that?” Robin asked. “Climb up the right side where there are some cracks for traction. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right behind and won’t let you slip, I promise” was my confident reply. And with that, my little mountain goat placed both gloved hands on the rocky face and began to ascend.

We found ourselves clinging to a steep crag in gale force winds after receiving a telephone call several weeks prior. “May I speak to Robin please?” I immediately thought it odd, since we don’t receive calls for Robin from any numbers we don’t recognize. “I’m her father, may I ask what this is about?” I responded tersely. “This is the NM Department of Game & Fish asking whether Robin would be interested in participating in a female/immature ibex depredation hunt...” Now THIS was an interesting turn of events! “Thank you sir, I’m certain she would be thrilled with the opportunity”. Just that quickly, Robin had an unexpected adventure penciled on the calendar.

I had been keeping tabs on the weather forecast leading up to her hunt and it remained unchanged: WINDY. Although Robin did tag a javelina in February, she had endured an ice storm, wind and fog on her unsuccessful oryx attempt, followed by a blizzard on her unsuccessful deer hunt, so a bonus hunt was welcome. However, facing another round of bad weather dampened our spirits somewhat, but sometimes great challenges yield great rewards. From the start we made up our minds that we’d try our best, praising the Lord if she got one and praising Him if she didn’t.

We hit the road immediately after school Friday with a particular spot in mind for our two-day assault. Robin has found that Middle School is a lot more demanding than elementary school had been, and it didn’t appear that we’d have the opportunity so spend more than just the weekend scrambling on the Rock.

As we pulled up to the mountain, we noticed several hunting camps scattered in the desert. There would be hunting pressure: never a good thing when the goal is to stalk within range of undisturbed quarry.

Our backpacks were already loaded, so it took no time at all to don our hunting gear and headlamps for a nighttime ascent. Most hunters have a hard enough time tackling the Rock during the daylight, but Robin's a trooper and dove in with gusto. The eyes of small spiders on the ground glowed in our headlamps, and during our hike Robin suggested we count "sparkle spiders" to pass the time! We quit at something like 42 spiders, 3 crickets, 2 stink bugs and 4 fuzzy caterpillars. From past experience I knew that finding an area level enough to pitch even a small tent would be challenging.

The cool night air made for comfortable climbing conditions and we quietly chatted as we churned out the vertical feet. When we reached the vicinity of where I had planned to bivy, we dropped our packs and searched for a relatively flat spot to sleep. The weather forecast called for howling winds from the west, which meant we had to be on the eastern side of a bush or rock outcrop. Anyone familiar with the rugged Floridas knows that remotely flat areas are few and far between – add the caveat of having to be on the eastern side of a windbreak and our options were greatly limited. I finally found a potential site and used a sharp stone to loosen the soil, while Robin used her feet to flatten the area and kick the larger stones aside. The resulting pad was small, but afforded enough room to tuck out of the wind. We quickly slipped into our bags and promptly fell asleep.



Sunrise on the mountain

All too soon I perceived the tent ceiling brightening and forced myself to get rolling, despite the chilly. Robin lagged a little, but with some coaxing and hot oatmeal, I got her geared up and ready for the day.



Good morning – did stuffy Clarice sleep well? (right side of photo)

I reckon not many young ladies would have a smile like Robin did after awakening to a near freezing morning, following a grueling night-time ascent of one most rugged mountain ranges in New Mexico.

It had been calm for most of the night, but a stiff breeze had already begun as the sky lightened, and continued to increase. I began to doubt that Robin would have an opportunity before the wind got really bad. Just then we were startled by someone bidding us “Good morning.” I whirled to see three guys standing nearby. Two appeared reasonably fit, but the third (who turned out to be the hunter) was flushed and huffing like a steam engine. I was amazed that he had made it this far, even with his two sidekicks carrying all the gear. I detected a hint of a smirk when I informed them that I wasn’t the hunter, but my 11-year-old daughter held the tag. The leader informed me that he had been in the area the day before and had seen some ibex. They marched 50-yards above our tent, erected tripods and began glassing. Are you kidding me?! Inconsiderate posse.

Robin donned her backpack as I looked uphill toward the hunting party. The leader beckoned, so I crept up to see what he wanted. Turns out they had spotted a group of ibex across the canyon, and he asked how far Robin could shoot. I told him “a couple hundred yards”, to which he replied, “Well, these are 460, but this rifle can do it, so we’re going to shoot”. Really? Gusty winds and you’re going to sling lead across the canyon at that distance? Whatever. I told them to do whatever they wanted and retraced my steps down to Robin.

We held a short conference and elected to head in the opposite direction of the canyon where these clowns were going to stir things up. We dropped some elevation and then climbed onto a knob that allowed us to overlook plenty of country. We huddled against a bush to block the chilly wind as we began to glass. Several minutes later we heard “BOOM....BOOM.” And after a long pause, two more shots. I have a phrase I picked up somewhere that Robin and I

often share “One shot...dead elk. Two shots...maybe dead elk. Three shots...no dead elk.” We looked at each other knowingly – four shots probably meant the guy had missed.

We moved to a new vantage and continued glassing until I finally turned up 3 ibex on the edge of a rock face something like 600-yards distant. I ranged another rock outcrop at a little over 400-yards and by subtraction, cyphered that if we could reach that point, we’d be within range. The problem was we had a deep canyon to descend, and an equally brutal ascent to gain those precious 400-yards. Before committing to such a grueling undertaking we watched the nannies for a while. They milled around and fed until one by one, they bedded. Hopeful that they would hold tight given the ever increasing wind, we hoisted our packs and began our descent.



Letting Vortex do the work



This is a lot steeper than it appears!



Wind tunnel

The way down was tricky, but we were able to pick our way safely by moving slowly and carefully. I occasionally held Robin's hand for stability, but as often as not, it was her support that kept me from slipping! Once we reached the bottom of the canyon, we found the rock to be smooth and slippery from years of erosion polishing the stone. In some areas Robin sat down and just slid on her bottom. The wind whistled up the narrow chute and our eyes stung with dust. We both

wore facemasks, not so much for camouflage, but to serve as a filter. More than once Robin asked why I had forgotten our sunglasses in the truck, as dust and sand stung our eyes.

Our ascent up the other side wasn't too bad until we hit the American Ninja Warrior wall from the beginning of our story. The wind continued to increase and it was crazy to hope to find any animals in such conditions. Never the less, we pushed upward, planning to take a different route back to our camp. On the way Robin's sharp eye picked out a discarded ibex horn tucked in the rocks. Since ibex do not shed their horns, the billy had either broken it during a fall or a fight. It was weathered and old, but we snapped a photo as a memory.



Evidence of brutal life and death on the Rock

Our ascent pushed Robin to her limit. Several times she clung frozen to the steep rock face, afraid to move. Each time I reassured her that I was right behind and would not let her slip. Occasionally I'd have her hold tight while I repositioned myself to support her, before boosting her ahead. (Disclaimer to mommy: at no time were we in danger of falling to our doom - but I'll admit the ascent was pretty hairy) Once we made it to the top Robin confided that she was really scared. I reiterated that I was in control and that I wouldn't do anything to risk her safety or let anything happen to her. In life, there are times we are overwhelmed by the death of a loved one, finances stretched thin, or a car crash. We freeze, just trying to hold on, unsure if we can continue. In trying times, who do you rely on? Just prior to this hunt a close friend, an avid outdoorsman and lifelong hunter, had a heart attack. Thankfully he suffered no permanent

damage, but it serves as another wake-up call that life is fragile. In whose hands do you trust your life? Who is going to keep you from slipping when the going gets tough?

At long last we reached the outcrop we had been headed for, but the wind speed had doubled since we had spotted the bedded ibex hours ago. I knew there was no way they would remain their semi-exposed location. We did our best to glass anyway, but noted that we could no longer see the desert floor due to blowing dust. Even the sky was tan. I had never seen such horrible conditions.

Robin was justifiably hungry after our effort, so we hunkered out of the wind and cooked some mac & cheese and ate strawberries and other snacks, while considering our options. I exchanged text messages with a friend of ours who was hunting elsewhere on the mountain. He echoed that the wind was horrible and that he was going to book a hotel in Deming and offered to get a room with 2 beds, if we decided to retreat. I relayed this information to Robin and admit it was tempting. It would be possible to drop directly down to the truck, although that would require an ascent to retrieve our bivy the next day. Or we could continue climbing, circle around the huge canyon we had just crossed and descend to our campsite for a windy night on the mountain.

Robin's initial thought was that it would be nice to drop to the truck for the luxury of a comfortable bed and hot shower, but I explained that it wouldn't be as easy as it sounded. It wouldn't be as bad as the canyon we just crossed, but it would be a rough descent and defeat the purpose of our trying to conserve energy by bivy camping.

We had just finished repacking our gear when out of nowhere a dozen ibex burst into view at about 150-yards! They were running, but well within range. I frantically grabbed Robin's rifle and tried to get her onto a solid rest. The ibex didn't give her much time, and none paused for more than a few seconds during their dash across the steep terrain. To complicate matters, some were small billies pushing the 15-inch horn limit for which Robin's tag was valid, so I couldn't just let her to pull the trigger on whichever one presented a shot. During a minute or so of chaos, Robin tried vainly to zero in on each target I would call out, but before we knew it the herd disappeared behind the spine of the ridge upon which we sat.

We rearranged Robin to take advantage if they reappeared, but after 20 minutes it was obvious that they had gone elsewhere. Never the less, a close-range sighting had buoyed our spirits and I suggested since we still had daylight, we should keep looking for ibex. A full belly certainly made the outlook more cheery, and Robin agreed to keep at it and rough it that night on the mountain.

We continued our ascent in hopes of relocating the group and soon were able to peer over the next ridge into a small basin. I managed to locate a medium-sized billy tucked against the rock face out of the wind. Despite being well within range, he appeared to be alone, with horns stretching well past 15". We

changed positions twice in hopes of finding a nanny tucked nearby, but came up empty.

With sunset approaching, we worked our way back to the tent. I spotted threesome who had glassed near our tent the entire day begin to hike down the mountain. I mentioned my annoyance to Robin, but she retorted that we had at least seen some ibex and besides the ones they lobbed lead at that morning, they probably hadn't seen any.

We reached our tent just before dark and discovered that everything inside was covered with dust. Fines had blown through the bug mesh and the inside was a mess. Robin was ready to pack up and head down right then and there. We were tired and hungry, but at least the wind had died down. I pulled our sleeping bags out of the tent and shook them off. I implored Robin to at least lie down on her bag to see how comfortable it was, while I brewed up some dehydrated moose meat spaghetti courtesy of my sister (a meal that Robin loves). I told her that even if we hiked down, we first needed to refuel, so we'd decide after dinner. After dinner I told Robin I was too tired to load our gear and hike down in the dark, and she concurred that hitting the sack sounded pretty good right about then. The wind had all but died, but Robin cinched her bag tightly, leaving only a small breathing hole, as protection against any dust.

The next morning I pried myself out of my warm bag and got breakfast cooking. Sure enough, just when we were ready to roll the three dudes arrived at what evidently was their favorite glassing spot. Or perhaps it was the farthest the out-of-shape hunter could make it up the mountain. The informed us that they had missed the prior day and that they not seen anything else within range (whatever distance that meant). They also indicated that they were surprised when we disappeared. I pointed out the massive canyon we had crossed and that we had gotten within range of a medium-sized billy, but no nannies.

Just a few minutes later they came back down past our camp, indicating that they had spotted some nannies across the canyon we had traversed the day before, and they planned to go as far out on the near side as they could "and be within range of what this rifle can do". I knew the distance would be nearly 600-yards, and bid them adieu, irritated with them yet again.

Robin was upbeat and simply said "Daddy don't worry about it. Let's look the other way instead - you never know God might send some ibex over there". We hoisted our packs and climbed to a vantage point to glass. 15-minutes later a thunderous gunshot echoed along the canyon, followed by another. We just kept glassing and doing our own thing. I suggested that we continue up to the next knob and continue to glass. The wind was non-existent; however, the forecast called for it to build by midday.

I located a handful of nannies far beyond striking distance. They ambled along the base of a sheer face and then disappeared. Try as we might, we couldn't turn up any animals nearby. Robin decided she was ready for lunch, so I sliced

an apple to share as she took out a burrito to munch on. Suddenly I heard rocks rolling and urged Robin to listen. We heard another large rock tumble and roll, and quickly resumed glassing in the direction of the noise. Robin thought the sound came from below us, while I thought it was from the opposite side of the valley. Regardless, it sounded like there were ibex within striking distance. Robin immediately tossed aside her burrito and was all business as we tried to locate the source of the noise.



Robin taking a careful peek over the lip of a deep canyon

Half an hour of glassing failed to turn up anything. Robin even peeked below, yet whatever had made the noise eluded us.

I suggested we climb higher to gain a different perspective. We carefully moved and found a great spot under a tree tucked between two large boulders from which to glass – both out of sight and out of the wind. I scoured the area while Robin finished her burrito before joining me. We had planned to head home at a reasonable hour and Robin asked how much longer we could stay. It was approaching noon and I suggested that we glass for another hour and then call it a day. I forced myself to keep grinding away with my optics. Good glass, like Vortex, certainly helps, but at times it gets downright monotonous. Robin was losing enthusiasm and I often glanced over to see her staring without binoculars. “What’s up kiddo?” I’d inquire. “I’m just thinking of where ibex might be” was her reply. “Well, you’re not likely to spot them just using your eyes, try your binos again”, I’d suggest. And repeat.

Suddenly after my umpteenth pass I glimpsed “ibex tan”! I honed in and identified two nannies bedded just beyond the lip of a nearby ravine. I announced to Robin

that we were in business and guided her eyes to their location. Surely these were the source of the falling rocks we had heard earlier! The wind had picked up and I suspected they would lie tight for quite some time. We identified some landmarks and checked the distance: 360-yards. Sure a lot of folks would have shot right from there, but I knew that we could easily close the distance.

We quickly gathered our gear and hustled up the back side of a knife-edged ridge. Along the way I occasionally peeked over to confirm their location and that they hadn't moved. At about the 275-yard mark I suddenly noted that they had disappeared. The wind was strong enough to cover any noise we were making, and it carried our scent away from the animals, so I knew we hadn't spooked them. I scoured the terrain beyond their bed and was certain that they hadn't moved away from us: they had to be hidden from view below. We continued along our intended route until we reached a bench where we could move horizontally. We dropped our packs and crept forward with only our earplugs, rangefinder, Robin's rifle and shooting sticks. Confident that we had a really good chance at these ibex, I moved slowly so as to not blow what would certainly be our last opportunity.

At a sheer 20-foot drop-off we found a narrow crack filled with loose rock at about a 45-degree slope, and carefully began to pick our way down. About halfway into our descent the two ibex suddenly leapt to their original position, merely 160-yards away!

We were in a precarious position on loose footing. I hurriedly sat down, set up the shooting sticks and chambered a round for Robin. During our setup we inadvertently rattled a few rocks and when I shifted my weight, a large rock made a loud clunk. The ibex, edgy by nature, nervously flitted back and forth on the rock face opposite us. Robin was in an awkward position and even tucked inside the chute, the wind shook the shooting sticks, which were set extremely high due to the steep slope we were on. Robin tried to line up on them, but had trouble looking through the scope, given her uncomfortable position. Each time she was about ready to shoot, the ibex would dart a few yards farther, requiring Robin to readjust. I saw her opportunity slipping away, and I was helpless to do anything except steady her tripod and call out the changes in their location. Minute by minute, the ibex leap-frogged out of range until they disappeared. Robin lamented that she couldn't get steady on either of them. I shared her frustration, but quipped that we had been well under 200-yards of legal ibex – it had been a huge success compared to the boobs down below us.

I took the opportunity readjust the sticks and get Robin into a more comfortable position in hopes that more ibex might appear. After 10-minutes, it seemed that the two were alone and I took the bullet out of the chamber. I suggested that since we had come this far, we might as well continue until we could see fully into the ravine. I was just about to stand up when another nanny jumped onto the same rock across from us! We hadn't made any noise and it had no clue that we were around. I carefully chambered another round and Robin got settled in. The

ibex hopped along the route the others had taken, then paused for a long time. Robin whispered "I'm on it, what should I do?" "SHOOT!" I hissed back.

CRACK! (I used to type BOOM, but compared to the gunfire we heard on this hunt, Robin's.243 sounds distinctly smaller). The nanny took one leap, tried to scramble up a ledge, slipped and lay still. I threw my binos up to my eyes in astonishment. The nanny was splayed out in a most unnatural position - I was certain it was dead as a stone. I quickly ranged the distance at 209-yards. I'm not embellishing when I say that I'm not certain I could have made the shot. We were in a very awkward position, it was breezy, and an ibex is a small target. Yet Robin had drilled the bugger, later confirmed to be right through the heart. She has the knack, you might say. I hugged Robin and told her as much. She said that even though she was uncomfortable and unstable, she knew all she had to do was put up with it for a minute. She had taken a deep breath, steadied her knee against me and squeezed the trigger. One shot...dead ibex. That's my girl.



Dead nanny at the arrow



They don't go far when you hit them in the right place!



Rocky chute from which Robin shot

We retrieved our backpacks and made our way to Robin's trophy. It took us nearly an HOUR to cover the 200-yards - this mountain range is rugged to the max. We found Robin's nanny to be a mature animal, with horns just nearly 10" long. We quickly snapped trophy photos and made quick work of butchering the 60-pound animal with our Havalon knives. We were able to take a shortcut down

to our camp, so didn't have to repeat the difficult 200-yard route from where Robin had shot.



We came from WAY up there!



Nothing puts a smile on your face like a pack full of ibex!

As we approached our tent I was surprised to see the hunting posse just leaving their nearby glassing post. They noticed our heavier backpacks and veered our

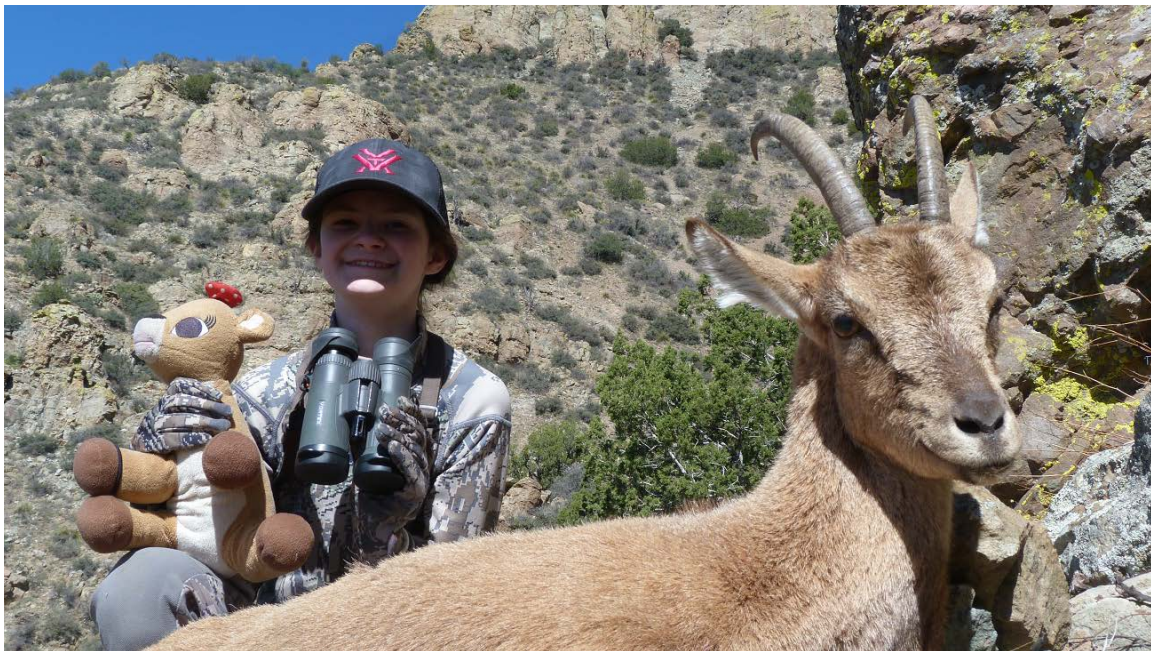
way. “Did you get one? We heard your shot!” (Um, yes, you heard ONE shot) “She sure did, 10-inch nanny” I smiled.

“How far did you shoot?” was the next query.

I turned to Robin, “209-yards!” she said with a broad grin.

“Girl, you’re putting us to shame up here on the mountain!” the other hunter blurted. (Yes boys, she did) I refrained from comment, but inside was bursting with pride for Robin’s success. We had kept our cool when the hunters bullied for the ibex they spotted from our campsite, attempting to justify their actions by saying they were more capable of shooting farther than Robin, and we had been rewarded for it. I don’t view hunting as a competition, but was this was sweet!

The guys headed down the mountain as Robin and I packed all of our gear and celebrated with slightly smashed, but delicious, baked cookies. The descent to the truck was uneventful and a wonderful time to chat and bask in Robin’s success. She’s one tough cookie and I couldn’t be more proud of her.



Vortex is Robin’s new favorite brand...along with Sitka Gear!



Ibex number two, kiddo – not many people can list that on their resume



It wasn't until I reviewed these photos that I realized how much Clarice the reindeer stuffy resembles a nanny ibex – coincidence?!

On our way home we realized that the time had changed and we were actually an hour later than we thought. We quickly pulled into a burger stop for to-go dinners for the drive home. They were just getting ready to close and were mopping the floor. After placing our order we waited while the cleaning lady finished near the bathrooms and placed a "Caution – slippery floor" sign. She said we could use the restrooms but warned us to watch our step. After she left Robin turned to me and whispered "We just finished hiking in the Floridas, I can handle this floor". What a crack up!

Footnote:

Subsequent to Robins' success I've had a few people, even relatives, say something to the effect of "Of course she got one – just look who her guide is."

While flattering, I need to set the record straight. Two weeks after Robin's hunt I helped a close friend for two days on a similar hunt. He's a tough hunter in his own right and we've hunted together many times over the past dozen or more years. Halfway through the second day, he asked me if I hit it as hard with Robin. He was somewhat chagrined when I told him that we hit it harder – she can keep up with me and is agile enough to traverse more difficult terrain, which allowed us to cover more ground as well as access more areas. Ultimately my buddy had opportunities, but wasn't able to capitalize. Hunting with him drove home the point that Robin is a very special girl and that her mental and physical toughness contribute greatly to her success. There's a lot more to it than simply me acting as her guide. Then again, perhaps it's Clarice the reindeer stuffy...

Congratulations and thanks for the adventure, kiddo!

Love,
Daddy