

Oryx Robin 2021 August, New Mexico

2 Timothy 4:7 “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Despite RPMs to the redline, my truck slowly ground to a halt. We were stuck fast in mud. I leapt out carefully to assess the situation. One rear tire submerged to the axle, the front tire on the same side sunk in a muddy pool, both tires on the opposite side out of water but tenuously resting on greasy clay. “No service”, Robin lamented. No AAA out here, getting out would be solely up to AA (Abrams and Abrams). I began unloading our camping gear and coolers from the back of the truck to access tire chains, shovel, and hi-lift jack. Robin was doubtful, but I assured her we’d make it out...eventually. It took me nearly an hour to shovel mud and install chains on both front tires. Next, I jacked up the rear and tossed boulders into the ooze. We loaded everything back into the bed then Robin stepped back to watch and cheer...and maybe even say a prayer. I switched to 4-wheel low and threw it into reverse. I moved immediately but without chains the rear tires refused to pull me out of the ruts, and I began to slip deeper into the muck and bog down again, so it was back to 1st gear. With no other option, I pointed the front end across the road and floored it. The chained tires bit hard and threw mud and spray everywhere, wipers on high to offer any hope of seeing where I was going. The truck clawed its way through the deepest part of the quagmire with enough momentum to scramble up onto the saturated desert floor. Realizing I didn’t dare stop until I reached drier ground, I churned a hundred yards before coming to a halt. “Now we’re back to hunting,” I quipped to Robin as she arrived. “That was *crazy!*”, was her reply.



Typically, oryx hunting means sunshine, blistering temperatures, and plenty of electrolyte drinks but this year on Robin's hunt we found ourselves in the middle of an actual monsoon season. Although our first foray had its share of heat, frequent rainstorms bumped up the humidity and at one point it rained so hard we resorted to cutting face holes into our game-butchering contractor bags to create improvised ponchos and wait it out.



This picture sums up the weather conditions!

Our best opportunity on that outing was hampered by shooting sticks that collapsed at the worst possible moment, a drizzle that built into a tempest just as we were trying to get set up for a shot, and restless oryx that refused to stand still. Despite the challenges Robin had gotten to the point of pushing off the safety with a broadside bull inside of 150-yards, but he turned before she could squeeze, and next thing we knew he was trotting away on the wrong side of a private fence. Oh, so close! But I suppose if everything had fallen into place, we would have missed out on a lot more time together.

As this hunt began, I told Robin it might be a sort of last hurrah with big changes looming in the future. With this being Robin's last year as a youth hunter, tags would become more difficult to draw; college away from home would make it even more difficult to squeeze in hunting trips; and who knew what the next year would hold? I certainly wanted her to get an oryx, but I also wished to savor our time afield as I could feel the way things had "always" been slipping away all too quickly...

Although Robin isn't as focused on hunting as I am, make no mistake when it's time to get serious she's as tough as they come. Still, often while my eyes are glued to my binos, spending hours behind a tripod seeking game, Robin will be chatting away or devoting time to writing stories or ideas in her notebook. She's quite an accomplished writer and her latest endeavor is a 3-volume modern-day Peter (Pan) Wilde romance adventure

series that she's been diligently completing over the past year or so. Who knows, someday maybe she'll be publishing her writing.



No oryx? No problem, Robin can work on her story!

During one hike a concentrated storm cell must have hit somewhere upstream, and we happened upon an arroyo that looked more like a river. It was too wide to jump and wading didn't seem appealing, so I ended up tossing a boulder partway across the churning water to create a step to leapfrog to the other side.



I thought this was supposed to be a desert?



We had to work to cross this arroyo and keep our feet dry!

Our second foray was even wetter. A lot wetter. Immediately upon leaving the pavement we were confronted with a roiling arroyo, which was only a precursor of things to come. We probed it with gauging sticks before deciding four wheeled drive and a healthy dose of the accelerator would get us through. We pressed on and gave my truck a workout. For the duration of our trip, we basically couldn't see out of the side windows and were constantly battling with water and mud.



Let's do this!

We eventually arrived at our intended destination and gathered our gear to search for oryx. The air was damp but temperature pleasant and conditions were great for glassing. We reached a point where we could literally see for miles and began picking apart the landscape. The desert was "greener" than we had ever seen, and we encountered critters we typically don't notice in New Mexico: toads, millipedes over 6" long...and mosquitos! Aye caramba the mosquitos were bad at times. Thankfully, after enduring the biting flies on my pronghorn hunt, I had packed bug repellent, which helped keep the bloodthirsty little devils at bay. I managed to spot one oryx late that evening, but it was far off and moving away from us. Additionally, it appeared to have both horns broken (they often break horns when fighting) and there simply wasn't enough time to make a move on it.



Green, green, green!

The one place the mosquitos seemed to be the thickest was around our camp. I don't know if it was because the breeze died down that night or if we had just picked a bad place to park, but we wouldn't have survived without insect repellent. Even so, we were forced to eat dinner inside the truck and keep one hand free to swat those that managed to sneak in when we had to open the doors! We were very careful to keep the tent screen zipped tightly and strategically slipped in and out. The mesh exterior was covered with them, like little zombies trying vainly to get inside and their buzzing was audible. Thankfully we slept comfortably inside, although we still ended up with a few bites over the weekend.



One of many giant millipedes



Even Clarice helped look for oryx!



Wildflowers and flowering cactus were abundant



More pretty wildflowers



This little guy blended right in



One of the bigger horned lizards we found, sporting trophy horns!

The next morning, we glassed for oryx again, but all we spotted was a rain squall marching toward us. For a while it appeared it might swing past, but eventually we felt the pitter patter of raindrops. Since we hadn't seen any game, and we had no cover from a storm, I suggested we head to the truck and move to a different area. We quickly stowed our gear in backpacks and broke out our umbrellas. They may seem out of place, but I've found that a small umbrella not only helps fend off rain while glassing but provides shade from the blazing sun when needed. We retreated to the truck and thankfully the drizzle

let up briefly so we could roll up the tent and toss our sleeping gear into the camper before pressing on to a new area.



Robin's umbrella helped deflect the "liquid sunshine"



The roads were saturated and ruts overflowing with water. In that type of conditions my mantra is "when in doubt, give it more gas!" Some areas were mellow enough I could take it out of 4WD, while others were so wet and slippery, we might have been better off with an airboat! Depending on the appearance, sometimes we'd stop and assess the situation before plunging ahead, and others we'd just charge in full throttle. At one point we were slip-sliding along when I glimpsed a distinctive little shape at the edge of the road and whipped the wheel left to avoid a box turtle. The truck just kept sliding toward him, so I mashed the accelerator for traction and screamed past. Robin didn't know what I was doing, so I hastily explained as I came to a stop and headed back to check on him. Thanks to quick reflexes and a little bit of traction, I had just barely missed him; we had been so close, the mud and slop from my tires had tossed him upside down onto the shoulder. He as a mess, but none the worse for wear.



Very close call



We turned him upright and left him to enjoy the wet conditions

We eventually got stuck, as described in the opening of the story, but most of you would be stunned by the mess we made it through. After getting unstuck, the rain resumed, which kept driving conditions challenging to say the least.



We discovered this cute little snake under a rock I moved to put under the tire for traction

We continued to press on, attempting to reach a particular area I had in mind. I kept hoping the road conditions would improve, but it was not the case. I'm pretty sure we were the only ones clawing our way *farther* from civilization in those nasty conditions that day. We finally reached our destination, but the rain continued, so we sat in the cab, ate lunch, and played several rounds of Trophy Buck, a hunting-themed dice game. Robin kept score by writing in the fog on the windows and she beat me soundly.

Eventually the rain eased up, so we loaded our backpacks and geared up to hike. But the drizzle increased again, so we retreated to the cab for a few more rounds of dice before heading out for real.



Mud!

The ground was thoroughly saturated, and we had to pick our route with care to keep our feet dry. We could even hear toads croaking happily in several directions!



Wet hiking conditions!

The uncharacteristically wet conditions revealed numerous insects and amphibians we had never seen before, many of which were brilliantly colored.



Vivid beetle



Large, bright caterpillar



A nearly fluorescent toad



The rain created beautiful rainbows



This horned lizard was probably shocked by the precipitation



Robin photographed of all sorts of neat things, such as this cute little horned lizard



Another bright toad



A horned lizard, happily sunning during a brief break in the weather



This horned lizard certainly blended in with the rocks and sand

We sloshed our way around puddles as wet grasses dampening our pant legs. Although overcast and damp, it was far from cool, and the warm humidity was unlike what we are used to. I glassed constantly as we hiked, hoping to see some oryx for Robin. After a short while I scanned a rolling ridge and was rewarded with a handful of oryx, and they all appeared to be nice bulls! I excitedly pointed them out to Robin and estimated their distance to be about half a mile. They didn't appear to be on the move, so we quickly charted a route to shave the distance.



Great bull!



Bull on the move

Terrain and vegetation helped us remain out of sight as we approached, but the bulls began slowly meandering over the rise until we could only see their horns. A small bump in front of us offered an elevated advantage from which I thought we might be within range, so we eased to the top and used some bushes to our advantage. Robin suggested we take off our backpacks in preparation for a shot, so we dropped them (and marked their

location!) and crept ahead with shooting sticks, rifle, and earplugs. Unfortunately, the oryx had moved just out of sight and we were faced with a dilemma: keep going or retrieve the backpacks. I knew I might regret it but decided to push on rather than risk losing ground to the bulls. We thought they might appear at any moment, so cautiously continued in hopes of getting the jump on them. One swale turned into another, and before we knew it our backpacks were far behind and we wouldn't be retrieving them anytime soon. Thankfully the skies remained overcast and the temperature not overly hot.

Robin pointed out their tracks, sunk deeply in the muddy soil, and easy to follow. Soon we regained sight of the oryx walking away from us at a fast clip. The wind had changed direction and I worried they might have smelled us and picked up their pace. All we could do was hope our scent dispersed before it reached them and stay on their trail. They disappeared into a low area and we hurried in hopes they would slow and feed, and our vantage would provide a shot opportunity.

Suddenly we spotted them again, trotting to our right. Unbeknownst to us they had turned 90-degrees and apparently seen us. We had been so focused on their tracks heading straight to where they had disappeared that only our diligent scanning permitted us to notice them in the unexpected direction. But we hadn't spotted them quite soon enough it would be even more difficult to close the distance. We froze as they trotted out of view and then jogged at an intercept angle toward them. With little cover, we slowed as we reached a point where we expected them to come back into view and stopped beside a bush to see if they materialized.

The herd trotted into sight, but we had lost ground and they were well out of range. They slowed and scanned their back trail. After a while some began to relax and feed, and one even bedded, but we were pinned down without any way to approach without sticking out like a sore thumb on the flat, open ground. All we could do was sit, wait, and watch. After quite some time it appeared the herd was content to hang tight, so I suggested we carefully crawl forward to another bush, from which it appeared we might be able to drop out of their sight and continue. Unfortunately, as soon as we began to move, some bulls stared toward us and then whirled and began walking away. I was surprised they had seen us, since we moved very slowly and were fully camouflaged, but their sharp eyes and cautious nature had served them well. We were back to chasing them again.

We continued to dog behind them and finally closed the distance. A large boulder provided a cover and I tried to range their location. I had trouble obtaining a reliable reading due to tall grasses nearby and finally determined it to be 250-yards, so dialed Robin's scope and told her to shoot if she felt comfortable. Two oryx moved without any shot opportunity, but one stopped broadside and I heard Robin click off the safety. I stared at the bull through my binos as she pulled the trigger. At the report, the bull didn't even flinch, but the group turned and trotted diagonally away and disappeared over the next rise. I watched them carefully and none exhibited a limp, stumble, or any other sign of a hit. I stood and re-ranged the distance and was dismayed that with few landmarks in the vicinity of where they had stood, I could obtain readings anywhere between 250 and 400-yards.

Robin stated the shot had felt good and she didn't know what had happened. I suggested we needed to first go out to their location, search for clues and proceed from there, although I hadn't seen any indication of a hit. We marched until we crossed their tracks pressed into the soft soil. I ranged back to our boulder and was chagrined to discover the distance to be about 360-yards, which is pretty far compared to our normal shooting distances. Coupled with me having dialed Robin's scope to 100-yards incorrectly, a miss

was likely. We were a little dejected after having finally gotten a shot. Robin said, "I'm sorry dad." I told her it was no big deal, and my fault for getting the distance wrong. She replied, "No, I mean for suggesting we drop our packs, I'm thirsty." I replied that was my fault too. I had almost rushed back to grab them when we hadn't seen the oryx where we initially thought they would be. By now we'd been on their trail for over 4-hours with no food or water, and our gear was miles behind. "Well, we've gone this far, we might as well keep after them," I urged.

Following their tracks was relatively easy and we pressed on until we caught a glimpse of them moving in another low, brushy area. They had changed direction again, so we headed for a small hill, which would hopefully provide a vantage point to relocate them or even get another shot.

We were able to get within 200-yards, but one sharp-eyed bull caught something amiss, and we couldn't get set up for a shot before they trotted off yet again. Back to trailing them. I spied a higher ridge ahead and suggested we follow until we reached it, and if we couldn't relocate them or close the distance, we'd give up and return to our backpacks. We spotted them once more as we made our way to the hill, but once we gained elevation, we couldn't find them. Robin lamented she was thirsty. I was too. To make matters worse, the clouds had begun to break up and when the sun hit with full force it was HOT. We'd been at it for nearly 6-hours and seemingly no closer to getting an oryx than when we had first begun. Robin laid down in meager shade and I promised we'd head to our backpacks...after I glassed the area one more time.

I panned a slow arc, and suddenly an oryx popped into view! We were back in business! I announced the sighting to Robin, but as I studied the animal, I realized it had two broken horns. I scanned the area but failed to turn up any other animals. I had Robin study it and asked what she wanted to do. She replied, "I don't know, what do you think?" While we always try to find the biggest animal possible, many times circumstances dictate the outcome of our hunts, and lean red meat takes priority over antlers and horns. I weighed our options. On the one hand even if she shot a trophy oryx, we didn't really have room for taxidermy, and it would likely end up as a European skull mount relegated to the garage along with numerous others. Robin had upcoming school activities she wanted to participate in: senior parking space painting, homecoming activities... I told her I'd do whatever she wanted, but even a broken horned oryx represented a lot of delicious meat and if her school activities were important to her, perhaps we should go after it. Or we could return to our packs and hunt the following day before returning home and trying again later. She remained a little unsure, so I tossed out another idea, "We could always try to get closer and then decide." Robin responded enthusiastically, "Let's do it!" and I could tell by her tone she would be satisfied no matter the outcome.

We backed down the hill and skirted along its base, using the terrain to get closer. I had estimated the animal to be only 500-600 yards away in the first place, so we didn't have to gain much to be within range. A small arroyo provided a perfect route and allowed us to move quickly. Suddenly Robin whispered "Dad, dad!" I froze, thinking the oryx had materialized, before she added "Check this out!" She had noticed a tarantula in the sand, and we paused to observe it and take photos. One of many things I love about Robin is she's serious about hunting but takes the time to stop and smell the roses...figuratively!



This hairy tarantula paid us no attention as we stalked past

The brief interlude over, we resumed our approach toward where we had last seen the lone animal. Suddenly I spied an oryx...with both horns! I excitedly pointed it out to Robin and ranged the distance at 350-yards. It grazed with no clue we were nearby. We no longer needed to weigh options; it was a no-brainer to try for it. However, we needed to keep a sharp eye out for the original oryx, and perhaps others. We hunched over and crept to the end of the arroyo, and then moved ahead in line with a bush to shave off another 100-yards and set up for a shot. Robin was seated, rifle on the shooting sticks, as the unsuspecting bull continued to graze broadside. She snapped off the safety and took a deep breath...and the bull turned toward us. She waited for an acceptable shot. It took a few steps our way and then dropped into an unseen dip and disappeared. We waited a few minutes but worried it might travel out of sight and we'd lose it. I asked Robin if she wanted to keep waiting or move closer. After waiting a little longer, we decided to move, so carefully angled to a tall double-stalked yucca tree, which provided great cover.

When we reached the cactus, we could stand upright and I told Robin we'd set the sticks for a standing shot, which afforded a much better view of our surroundings. We still hadn't seen the original broken-horned oryx, but I scanned 180-degrees to be sure we wouldn't be surprised. I extended the tripod legs and Robin had no sooner rested her rifle on top when I glimpsed the bull's horns; he was still in the arroyo and we were much closer. I pointed out another yucca that generally lined up with his location and had Robin line up in that direction. We waited as I watched his horns bob up and down. Suddenly I saw his head begin to rise and I whispered to Robin that he was climbing out. He stepped into full view perhaps 150-yards, maybe less. So close there was no need to even range the distance. He took a few steps in our direction and then turned broadside and I knew he was in the bag. Robin shot and the bull immediately hit the deck. The original broken-horned oryx appeared out of the same arroyo and began trotting away. We hugged briefly, but suddenly the bull staggered to his feet and took a few lumbering steps. His body language suggested he wouldn't get far, but I'm a fan of follow up shots when possible, so told Robin to be ready to shoot again. He made it perhaps 50-yards parallel to us

before turning to face us and collapsing. I knew her shot was fatal, but his head was up, so we carefully side-stepped and then approached from the side and Robin finished him off. As we came up to him Robin exclaimed "Wow, he's big!" Indeed, he was. Honestly, even after hunting them for years, I still have trouble judging oryx: younger oryx have small bodies and small horns, mature ones have big bodies and big horns...but their relative size appears to be about the same unless multiple animals are standing together for comparison. I knew this was a good animal, but the closer we got the more he appeared to grow! This was a brute of a bull, with horns measuring right at 36"! His body was massive, and we had a mountain of meat (and work) laying before us! We were ecstatic! I shared with Robin I firmly believe the Lord rewarded her with a monster bull simply because He knew her heart and that she would have been satisfied with whatever the Lord had provided, whether the original broken-horned oryx, or another blown stalk.

After the initial high, reality set in. We were tired, thirsty, our packs far away, and it would be dark in a little over an hour. We snapped trophy photos, admired her bull, and then pulled ourselves away to march toward our backpacks, which also held our headlamps. We chatted and held hands as we walked, tired but happy. The sun began to set when we were over halfway to our packs. It would be close, but I thought we'd reach them before needing our telephone flashlights. We stumbled across our packs while we could just barely see. Cold water and electrolyte drinks had never tasted so good! We discussed our options. It was 8:30pm and we had a lot of work to do. Priority, of course, was to butcher the bull and get the meat cooling to ensure delicious table fare. But we had a very late night ahead of us and had been without food or hydration for over 8-hours. I suggested we return to the truck, which was a lot closer, drop all extra weight (binoculars, tripod, rifle, etc.), eat a solid dinner and continue hydrating, and then go butcher her bull. Robin agreed and we hiked to the truck by headlamp.

We drove a little farther along the road and managed to cut our pack distance to just under a mile as the crow flies. I suggested we set up the tent and get our sleeping bags ready in case it rained and because we'd be too tired to do so later. After our meal we headed into the desert with empty packs and our butchering supplies. It took about 45-minutes to reach her bull. It takes longer and makes butchering a lot more difficult, but I wanted to save the entire hide for my taxidermist friend who has a long-term dream to create a diorama of two big bulls fighting. I had given him the hide from my largest bull nearly two decades ago and he still hadn't obtained a second. Between the delicate skinning method, and the fact that Robin's bull was so big it was unwieldy to roll around and salvage the meat, butchering took a very long time. Our energy waned as the minutes ticked by and we found ourselves still going at it well into the wee hours the next morning.

A plethora of moths and other nighttime insects congregated around our headlamps, but thankfully no mosquitoes. A trio of bats swooped through the smorgasbord, their leathery wings buzzing our heads on occasion. When we tilted our lights skyward, we could watch the little mammals bank and dive through the beams like science fiction space pilots zipping through an asteroid field.

We finally got all the meat into bags and laid to cool on what would be the shady side of bushes and rocks away from the main carcass by about 230am. Given the additional weight of the entire hide, I knew it would be impossible to transport everything in only 2 trips. It would be of no benefit killing ourselves with a heavy load: better to initially take a modest load to the truck and follow up with two more trips the next day...er, later that same day, I mean.

We loaded one large backstrap into Robin's pack, and I took the bulk of meat from both rear legs and we reached camp at 345am. We celebrated briefly with delicious cookies we had packed specifically for the occasion, brushed our teeth, and fell into our sleeping bags by 4am. Somewhere about 730am we were awakened from slumber by the soaring temperature as the sun beat down on our tent. "I'm hot," Robin mumbled groggily. "No kidding," I replied. "We need to get the rest of the meat on ice, so let's get moving".

We munched breakfast burritos and downed fluids. Robin was sluggish, and I initially thought I might have to head out on my own, but as the fuel in her belly began to kick in, she perked up and we launched into the desert. Daylight made it much easier to navigate so it took just over half an hour to reach the meat, which was shaded and cool as planned, and just over 45-minutes for each return trip.



A welcome rest break

As I suspected, my final load consisting of the head, hide and horns, was the heaviest. Each year I keep thinking I'm getting older and weaker, but later weighed it at about 90-pounds, so I guess I'm still capable. We dropped our final burdens at the truck at 1pm, making 3 trips within about 10-hours on less than 4-hours of sleep.



Although painful at times, a full pack with a trophy animal never gets old

I proudly congratulated Robin “Kiddo, you’re as tough as they come, and all that without complaining.” “Well, I *was* a little cranky when we woke up,” she replied. I laughed, heck *I was cranky* when we had woken up!

Our adventure was nearly over, but even though the day was warmer and drier, the roads were still a challenge not to be underestimated. We were hot, tired, and dirty, so I asked Robin if she wanted to change into casual clothes and shorts for the drive home. She suggested we keep our outdoor clothes on in case we got stuck again. My goal was to not repeat that episode, but I agreed with her logic and we waited until later to change. Our trusty steed hauled us back through the muck without major incident and we made it to Frank and Lupe’s El Sombrero in Socorro in time for a well-earned celebratory dinner, complete with sopapillas slathered with honey for dessert.



Well-earned desert



What a trophy!

We had never stopped fighting and pushing on, and by faith had finished strong. We had fought the good fight and finished the race; we had kept the faith. Thank you, Lord! This one ranked as perhaps our most challenging adventure, and a tremendously successful hunt for what may very well have been Robin's last hunt as a "youth". Then again, who knows, perhaps the Lord has even more in store for us this year!

Postscript:

With her new-found spare weekends, we were able to paint Robin's senior year parking spot the next weekend and Robin joined in Homecoming events and attended the dance with friends the following.





Robin and one of her best friends before heading to meet the boys and other friends for dinner before the Homecoming dance

I also “washed” my truck, which entailed using the pressure washer more like a cutting tool to slice mud from the under carriage rather than actual washing.



Pretty sure the car wash guys weren't overly happy with me the next morning, sorry about that!