

Oryx Robin
November 1, 2014 New Mexico

Job 39:9–12

“Will the unicorn be willing to serve you? ...Can you bind the unicorn with a harness?”

Numbers 23:22

“God brought them out of Egypt: their strength is as of a unicorn.”



While the use of the word “unicorn” in the Bible came about by a (mis)translation of ancient Hebrew word “reym”, it is recognized that the animal to which it refers was real and not what we think of as a mythical one-horned horse. There are many theories as to what actual animal “reym” refers to including rhinoceros or auroch (extinct wild ox); however, I like to think that it refers to one of the mightiest, magnificent creatures: the Gemsbok or Oryx.

Since being transplanted to New Mexico from the African Kalahari Desert in 1969, these “unicorns” have thrived and become as much a part of our home state as pronghorn or mule deer.

Robin beat the odds and drew an oryx tag this year and we knew it was special. Give how delicious oryx meat is and how difficult they can be to hunt; we knew this tag was worthy of doing everything in our power to help her capitalize on it.

With activities like races, swimming meets and other commitments eating up numerous weekends, I strategized potential scouting dates. Unfortunately, our available scouting time would be in July, when temperatures soar in the desert.

Despite the hot weather, Robin and I made the best of it, and explored many areas. Along the way we found horned lizards, a box turtle, hawks, pronghorn, mule deer, a camouflaged baby Whip-Poor-Will, desert flowers, stunning sunsets, a remote spring that Robin dubbed “the Grove”, stone ruins, fossils, a black bear and even a few oryx.

Over the course of several weekends we traveled numerous desert roads and hiked several loops. I was impressed with Robin; some of our marches were during the heat of the day and she didn’t complain any more than I did – it was

blistering. I just kept pouring water on her and into her and she held up fine. One day I calculated that we hiked over 6-miles throughout various loops!

The vast majority of our exploration resulted in finding places to avoid: either devoid of oryx sign or subject to a lot of hunting pressure. Still, here and there we found nuggets worth keeping tabs on. We brought Katie dog on one camping trip and one of Robin's friends from church accompanied us on another day trip. On more than one occasion we enjoyed dinner in Socorro at Frank and Lupe's El Sombrero on our way home, which is a big hit for Robin.

Throughout our scouting trips, we were treated to everything offered by creation: photos pale in comparison, but it's the best we can do to share. In fact, compared to the hunt itself, our scouting was every bit as enjoyable and memorable.



We scooted this box turtle out of the road



This horned lizard squirted blood from its eyes when I picked it up – a trick I had heard about, but never seen before



Can you spot the camouflaged Whip-Poor-Will?



The chick even kept its eyes closed for further concealment: how are they programmed to know to do this?



Summer rains made for stunning flowers on the ocotillo cactus



It's no wonder this spiral design is a common theme in Indian art. How did these fossils end up miles and thousands of vertical feet from the ocean again?



If you didn't know better, you would swear this was Africa



There be oryx nearby...



Stone ruins



Red tailed hawk and nest atop an old windmill



Soon free rides atop daddy's shoulders will be a thing of the past



Eating lunch in the welcome shade of "The Grove"



Our trusty sidekick Katie even joined us on one scouting trip



This bull wasn't very skittish; probably because Robin's tag wasn't valid yet



We left the fly off the tent for star gazing during the heat of summer

With successful pronghorn and cow elk hunts under her belt, Robin's oryx hunt was upon us. The timing was good, with opening day being a Saturday; however, she wanted to attend a swim team party and go trick-or-treating before hitting the road late Friday evening. Typical daddy hunting schedule; no big deal.

We arrived at our predetermined hunting spot and quickly threw down the tent. Staying light and mobile has served me well over the years, and Robin has grown up understanding that we typically don't spend very much time in camp, so there isn't much need for creature comforts.



Robin's a trooper: a simple, quick camp allows us to stay mobile and strike fast

After a quick breakfast, we started hiking and glassing for oryx. On this trip Robin was ready to carry her own pack, containing water, snacks and stowaways. Of course I had extra snacks, emergency gear, and butchering supplies, plus served as her gun bearer.



Robin's stowaway helped sniff out oryx

I'm a believer in making sure kiddos are comfortable in the out of doors and equip Robin with quality gear to ensure nothing will slow her down or cause her to throw in the towel early. This philosophy has paid dividends over the years, as Robin loves the outdoors, and being warm and comfortable is a big part of that.



Well equipped kiddo



Hot mac and cheese lunch is hard to beat

After covering a 3-mile loop, and picking apart substantially more terrain with optics, we came up empty. We decided to move to another area, so headed back toward the truck to pack up camp and hit the road for the next area on our list. In short order we were on the road and eager to see what we might find in the new spot.



Unique lichen-covered seat was perfect for a rest

Upon arrival, we threw on our packs and headed for a place to glass and let our optics do the work. Not 30-minutes after we sat down, I spotted a group of oryx far off in the desert! They were in a line and traveling in typical oryx fashion. They reminded me of caribou from my home state of Alaska: nomadic and seemingly always headed somewhere. I wanted to show them to Robin, but when I centered them in my tripod-mounted binoculars and shifted so she could look, she had trouble picking them out. Finally she spotted them. We traded positions a few times as I attempted to keep tabs on them and at one point bumped the tripod off their position. Drat, where were they again?

There - one had stopped and was feeding. Wait, it was a single one in a slightly different area! Right away I was able to get Robin dialed in to see it through my

binoculars. I quickly made the call that heading for the lone feeding oryx in its fixed position would be a lot easier than trying to intercept the moving group, so we took a bearing and marched out into the desert. I estimated that we were over a mile from the oryx and told Robin that there was no way we could be seen. It was time to hump it and close the distance before it moved too far.

We wove through the scattered brush and cactus and in short order it was time to slow down and begin to carefully scan ahead in an attempt to relocate the animal. Robin shadowed me and like a team we moved, stopped, glassed, moved, stopped, and glassed. Without me needing to say a word, Robin would freeze when I stopped and then fall in behind me when I moved. It won't be long before she will be ready for her own binoculars and be able to act as a second set of eyes in the challenging task of locating game before it spots us.

Suddenly I picked out an oryx on a slight rise, perhaps 300-400 yards ahead. Some guys are ready to start slinging lead at that distance, but we wanted to be much closer. A second oryx moved into view; they were feeding and headed slightly to our right. I whispered to Robin that the terrain didn't lend itself to a further approach from our position and that we needed to back out, move right and then try to intercept them.

We reluctantly backed off and shifted position, gambling to relocate them before they picked us off with their sharp eyesight. I scanned with my eyes and binoculars as we eased forward. By moving slowly, we spotted them first and assessed the situation. We were directly in front of them and the wind was perfect. They were feeding our way and we were in an ideal position to simply get Robin set up on her shooting sticks and wait.

With Robin ready, the oryx dropped into a low area, which allowed us to quickly scoot ahead 30-yards. The next thing we knew, horns popped into view less than 80-yards away. Whew, this was getting exciting and had come together fast! The oryx continued to feed toward us, but we could only see its horns, head and top of its back. The second oryx moved into view and they fed back and forth in front of us, while Robin waited for a shot opportunity.

Finally one of the oryx gained a little elevation and turned broadside. Its belly was still obscured by the dirt bank, but its vitals were exposed. Robin fired and turned to me with wide eyes and deep breaths. I don't know what happened, but had clearly seen that Robin had missed: I saw dust fly from beyond the oryx just over its back. The startled animals jumped to the side and I could just make out their white facial markings through a nearby clump of brush as they stood still trying to determine where the noise had come from.

We chambered another shell and kept Robin ready in hopes that one of the animals would step out from the brush and offer a second shot. Soon the larger one hesitantly began to circle downwind of our position, and we shifted Robin's shooting sticks to get her pointed toward where we expected the oryx to emerge.

However, somehow our movement spooked the animal and it wheeled to run to our left.

Robin's face expressed dismay at having blown the opportunity, but I knew she might still have a chance, so dragged her through some nearby brush. A third, smaller oryx had joined the other two and they were trotting diagonally away. With nothing to lose, I set the shooting sticks and helped Robin rest her rifle while letting out a loud whistle. The oryx stopped and turned broadside to evaluate the odd noise. They were fairly close; not much more than 100-yards away. I whispered for Robin to shoot the one on the left as soon as she was ready.

At the report of her rifle, the oryx crumpled to the ground without taking a step! We turned to each other in disbelief. Against all odds, she had gotten an oryx on the first afternoon! Despite her hiccup on the first shot, her second shot had been true and the .243 had downed the mature cow immediately.

We carefully made our way to her trophy and marveled at this blessed turn of events. "Kiddo, looks like our November schedule just freed way up!" I quipped.

Her oryx was a respectable 33" cow with unbroken horns. I asked whether she had seen that the first one she had shot at had both horns broken. "I didn't even notice; I was hyper focused" replied Robin. I had to chuckle.



Robin's 33" cow certainly resembles a "unicorn" when viewed from the side



Robin and guide extraordinaire

Between on and off range hunts, this was my 14th consecutive successful oryx trip, counting my own hunts and those helping friends and family. Trust me; it doesn't get any sweeter than helping my own daughter!

After her elk hunt, Robin had asked when she would be able to use a knife and help with the butchering, so I bought her a pair of cut-resistant gloves and planned to get her started this time. We snapped trophy photos and dove into the task of deboning the meat and loading it into bags for transport back to the truck. I did most of the trimming, but began to instruct Robin how to safely use my razor sharp Havalon knife. She performed 80% of the procedure of removing the backstraps as I held the cuts of meat and coached her. It won't be long until we'll be able to work simultaneously and really make short work of butchering.

By the time we loaded my pack with meat and Robin's pack with smaller odds and ends, then stashed the remaining bags of meat up in bushes out of reach of coyotes, it was nearly 9pm, but the night was mild and the stars were stunning. I programmed my GPS to point for the truck and gave it to Robin to navigate by headlamp. We arrived at the truck by 10pm without incident, threw down the tent and ate a hasty dinner before falling into our sleeping bags. I laid the meat bags on the cold hood of my truck to ensure they remained cool overnight.



Quick camp with meat bags on the hood to cool overnight

The next morning we awoke, enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, and purged our packs of all extra weight, including the neat rocks Robin had begged me to carry. We had saved the entire hide for my taxidermist buddy and I suspected it would take two more trips to get the remaining meat, hide, horns and other gear back to the truck. We programmed the GPS to lead us to the meat stash, took a bearing on the far horizon and once again set off into the desert.



Back for the second load

Our meat stash was untouched, and we were somewhat surprised that coyotes hadn't even visited the carcass or bones. We began loading my pack and it looked like we might make it in one trip until Robin inquired "Didn't we have another bag of meat?" Doh, we certainly did – it was stashed a short distance away in another bush.



Bags of meat and oryx hide stashed in brush for the night

I told Robin that she would have to carry more than she ever had before if we were going to avoid a third trip. She was willing to try, so we loaded a small bag of meat into her backpack, and then added non-essential gear that we had stashed the night before: tripod, spotting scope, etc. When it was all said and done I'm sure Robin's pack was over 20-pounds!



The oryx hide is in the plastic bag strapped to the outside of my meat-laden pack and was 50-pounds by itself: you do the math

We shouldered our loads and again Robin navigated toward the truck. This time she was every bit as eager as I was to take a seat and rest on arroyo cut banks! We made it back to the truck and Robin charged ahead to open the tailgate so I didn't have to drop my heavy pack all the way to the ground. Robin immediately flopped onto the ground, exhausted! We were both tired, but the load of meat in

Robin's pack had tipped the scales and saved us from having to make a third round trip.



"Daddy rest with me on the soft sand in the shade of the truck!"

We celebrated with personal pan pizzas and cinnamon rolls we picked up on the way back home. Another successful hunt was in the books!

On the way home I called a buddy and chuckled that if Robin keeps filing notches in the barrel, it's going to start getting pretty thin!

Although they aren't native to New Mexico, they may as well be given how well they fit into our landscape. Robin certainly couldn't be happier that these transplanted "unicorns" roam our desert.

Congrats again, kiddo, you're on a roll!

Love,
Daddy