

**Oryx Robin**  
**November 19, 2017 New Mexico**

**Galatians 6:2 “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”**



It seems like yesterday that Robin and I decided it was worthwhile to extend her first elk hunt beyond the planned weekend and miss a couple days of 5<sup>th</sup> grade with a case of “backstrap fever” (Robin Elk 2014). At that time I surmised it would become more and more difficult for Robin to squeeze in hunting time as school became more demanding in later years. I look back now and realize I had no idea just how true that would be.

This year Robin didn’t fare so well in the hunting draw, but was blessed with an off-range oryx tag. It seemed perfect because the season is a month long, which would provide ample opportunity for us to devote to the pursuit of arguably the tastiest of table fare. The month of November included four weekends plus Thanksgiving break. All too quickly our allocated free-time disappeared like vapor.

First my sister and her family bounced around the idea of visiting from Alaska for Thanksgiving. It sounded great, as we aren’t able to get together often since we live so far apart. After all we had other spare weekends and could bring some of them along should Robin fail to fill her tag earlier in the month. Next Robin improved her swimming times in several events and qualified for two different weekend swimming meets in November. Yikes! We were down to one free weekend just like that.

Our hunting weekend loomed and the forecast called for sunshine and no wind. I was elated because wind or a fickle New Mexican snowstorm can be the death knell for oryx hunting. Despite the excitement I also felt a little stressed. A coveted tag like this demanded more than a couple of days, but all we could do was try our best and figure out the next step if and when the need came.

We headed out late Friday after swimming practice and set up our tent a little before midnight: typical modus operandi. As predicted, the temperature was mild and the winds calm, and we fell asleep in good spirits.

The next morning I had a little trouble rousing Robin from her sleeping bag but it wasn’t too long before we were organized and our trusty Vortex binoculars were panning the desert landscape.



Robin spread her time between snacking, reading and glassing, while I kept my eyes glued to the glass, knowing that we had to first spot something to have any chance at all of killing something.



My not-so-little huntress

After devoting the bulk of the morning to one area I suggested that we hop into the truck and move before the day got away from us. Robin was open to the idea of looking over some new country so we shifted our location. As we hiked to a new

vantage I happened to glance down and spotted a small arrowhead sitting in the sand. Apparently we weren't the first hunters to try our hand in the area!



What a treat!

We soon resumed our glassing routine, but with renewed interest given our new vista. Suddenly I picked out a handful of oryx feeding! They were farther than I had hoped and quickly consulted my OnXMaps GPS chip. Rats: I suspected they were on private land. After studying their location I eventually spied a fence that corresponded to the private boundary and confirmed that they were off limits. I told Robin to occasionally check back on the group in hopes they would decide to take a walkabout under the barbed wire, but generally wrote them off as I focused on finding others that were fair game.



High clouds made an interesting pattern

After another hour of scanning I blurted out "bingo!" having found 2 oryx about a mile away and definitely on public land. The key would be to try and identify landmarks that might help us relocate them in the scattered brush and cactus. I always find it amazing that the desert can appear wide open from one point, yet

seem thick as pea soup from another. Given the tendency for oryx to roam, barging willy-nilly in their direction without first making a plan is a recipe for failure.

We did our best to identify the direction to intercept the feeding oryx and hustled to close the distance, slowing when we believed we were approaching rifle range. I continuously scanned “through” the brush with my binoculars, attempting to relocate our sharp-eyed quarry before they spotted us.

This cat and mouse searching is part of what makes hunting so challenging and fun. We knew that the oryx should be well within rifle range once we found them, but the tricky part was to stay quiet and move slowly as we searched.

Eventually I caught movement and confirmed the greyish-tan body of an oryx feeding beyond some desert scrub. I motioned to Robin and we prowled forward searching for a shooting lane. From the shade of a large bush I was able to range the oryx at 169 yards. Robin whispered “that’s a little far”. While it’s actually not, conditions were good and I felt we could get closer so I pulled her back and we used cover to move another 50-paces.

As I peered out from the shade of another bush I immediately spotted 2 oryx feeding and unaware of our presence. I set Robin’s shooting sticks and she prepared for the shot. A third oryx ambled into view as I hovered over Robin’s shoulder. It actually didn’t look like we had closed any distance since I had last ranged them, but I didn’t worry since the oryx were definitely within range. I whispered for Robin to shoot whenever one of them turned broadside. After a short time the third animal, apparently a bull, turned to sniff one of the cows and Robin’s rifle barked.

I had been watching the animals through my binoculars and saw no indication of a hit. The oryx wheeled and disappeared from view almost immediately, and we were surprised when others we hadn’t seen thundered off in a pack of perhaps a dozen. I asked Robin how she felt about the shot and she told me she was on, but that some nearby branches had been in her way from her point of view, which was lower than mine. I explained to Robin that despite her thoughts that her bullet would zip right through anything, it wouldn’t take much to deflect it off course. This would be a painful lesson if we didn’t find a dead oryx nearby.

I quickly ranged the distance and confirmed they had been about 160 yards: within range, but not as close as our last stalking progress had suggested. We carefully made our way to the shot location and identified tracks in the sand. We scoured the direction in which the animals had run but found no evidence of a hit. The vegetation was relatively sparse and we had good visibility, so the farther we went, the more likely it appeared that Robin had missed. I was so engrossed with scouring the ground for blood and the immediate vicinity for a downed oryx that I was taken by surprise when I glanced ahead and saw a handful of oryx staring back at us. I whispered for Robin to freeze and studied them through my binoculars at perhaps 200 yards. None appeared to be injured although when viewed from the front it would be difficult to see any blood. We dared not have

Robin shoot again until we had spent more time searching the area, so all we could do was wait and hope that they might hang out in the area.

After a short time the herd began to act nervous, then wheeled and galloped away in a cloud of dust. So much for the sharp-eyed animals sticking around. We zigzagged back and forth between the herd and the shot location several times before resigning ourselves that something had gone awry.

We spent our remaining time until sunset tracking the herd to where they had crossed underneath a barbed wire fence and onto private land. To add insult to injury the group we had seen appeared to have joined with others so nearly two dozen animals browsed contentedly only a quarter-mile distant, safely out of reach.

We trudged back towards the truck with heavy feet. Off range opportunities are few and far between, and with limited time, the miss stung.

The evening was mild and with a roaring fire, food in our bellies and several rounds of our Trophy Buck dice game behind us, our spirits were lifted and we enjoyed our time together. The full moon bathed the desert with light and it was hard to complain. I wished Robin had tagged out, but tomorrow was another day and I cherished the opportunity to hang out with Robin and just relax.



The evening was warm and our bonfire made for good times



Camp can be pretty simple when the weather is mild and dry

The next morning began as a repeat of the day before. We glassed and tried to locate fair game. We didn't turn up anything until midday when a group of oryx appeared on a hill perhaps 2-miles distant. Although on private land, we hoped they might decide to make their way towards us and crawl under the fence so we might legally pursue them.



Clarice posed by some lichen-covered rocks



Robin posed too

Unfortunately the oryx seemed content to simply chill: sometimes feeding, sometimes bedding, but never moving towards us. By midafternoon with no other animals sighted and little hope that these would make a major move in our direction I suggested we shift locations and look at another area on our way back home. We retreated to the truck and meandered our way back home, glassing until dark, but didn't spot any oryx.

During our long drive home Robin and I discussed our next plan of attack. My sister and her family would arrive the weekend before Thanksgiving, during which Robin had a swimming meet. They were to stay through the weekend after Thanksgiving, and we had planned to visit Angel Fire for the bulk of their visit, which is the opposite end of the state from oryx country. Robin wasn't very troubled, but I couldn't help worrying that our best opportunity was now behind us and that it would be extremely difficult to carve out time for another attempt.

As the next weekend approached, we realized that Robin would only be swimming the first event on Sunday. It wasn't much of an opportunity, but we could have the truck loaded and ready to go, and then leave directly from the swimming meet with my sister Jill and Robin's cousin Jimmy for an afternoon foray. With a sliver of a chance we hit the road midmorning. We had a fun time catching up with family on the drive and the weather was ideal. I remarked that it seemed a little crazy to drive 6-hours to hunt 4-hours, but it was better than nothing.

Jimmy has hunted a little and you may recall I've hunted with my sister on several of my trips back home. Jill also gets out with my dad here and there. The majority of hunting in Alaska involves wrestling with the weather and the logistics involved

with cramming gear and people into my dad's plane, multiple flights to shuttle gear and meat, and more wrestling with the weather.

On this bonsai run the weather was mild, we had plenty of leg room in the truck, plenty of snacks and it was pretty much 180-degrees from what Jimmy and Jill were used to.

We pulled off the highway in the early afternoon and quickly changed into hunting/hiking gear. Jill and I stowed plenty of snacks and ice water in our backpacks. It was bone dry and downright hot: well above average temperature for the fall and air was calm – perfect conditions once again! With some extended family along to enjoy the adventure, the day was tough to beat.

We found a vantage point and before too long I spotted 2 oryx on private land, but making a beeline towards us and the boundary fence. We all took turns watching their progress, and although they occasionally slowed to browse, every time they began to move again it was in our direction. I predicted that they would eventually cross under the barbed wire fence and began to gear up to hike toward them, but then they really stalled.



Alaskans could get used to this kind of weather conditions!

Robin watched them for at least 15 minutes and stated that she didn't think they would continue. She decided she would rather wait a while to measure their progress, than to gamble and start marching a mile or more across the desert. I told her the worst that could happen is we would get some exercise, but Robin decided that some more snacks and sitting with Jimmy in the shade and playing games would be more enjoyable unless the situation improved dramatically.

Jill and I continued to keep tabs on the oryx, which appeared to be a bull with both horns broken and a medium-sized cow. Each step they took towards us seemed agonizingly slow and the sun marched steadily toward the horizon. Finally I made the call that if we didn't make a move, we would run out of daylight, so I roused Robin and we started our walkabout, leaving Jill and Jimmy on the spotting scope to keep tabs on our quarry and our own progress. I told Jill to text me if anything changed.



Less than 10-minutes later my phone buzzed "*They are in front of the fence!*" I silently wished we had started an hour or even 30-minutes sooner since it would take us another 30-45 minutes to reach their vicinity, but all we could do was make the best of it. Then another buzz "*A third one joined them out of nowhere, and they are all moving to your right*". That last tidbit saved our bacon: we immediately adjusted our course, which not only shaved walking distance but kept us from searching futilely for the antelope in an area they had vacated.

Soon we had to slow down and try to relocate the beasts. It became more and more difficult as the sun turned blinding as it neared the horizon. The vegetation seemed maddening: it was thick enough that we had trouble seeing, but open enough that we felt exposed. We crept from bush to bush, carefully scanning ahead before breaking from cover to sneak ahead.

Finally I caught a glimpse of black and white, two striking colors that proclaimed "oryx". This first contact was all we needed to readjust our course to approach a shooting position. We dumped our backpacks, donned our earplugs and scuttled forward, searching for a shooting lane. The sun made for perhaps one of the most difficult stalks I've been part of. I knew it lit us up like a spotlight, while our quarry disappeared in a blinding haze. We crawled diagonally for about 100 yards to a position where we had decent visibility and anticipated the oryx would filter past.

Robin was ready on the shooting sticks as I tried to shield my binos from the sun's glare and spot our quarry. Soon one meandered into view and we tried to get Robin lined up but it disappeared behind a bush. Another popped into view and I tried to use my hand to shade the rifle scope to help Robin see, but it moved too quickly for Robin to get a bead on it.

We scooted another dozen yards to try again and almost immediately the lead oryx flitted past. We got Robin ready as the second 2 came into view. I could barely see them as I squinted into the sun. Again I tried to shield Robin's eye as she tried to find them in her scope. Finally Robin proclaimed "I see one"! "Shoot it" was my quick reply. POW – I saw one oryx make a high, twisting leap and disappear in a poof of dust. The other oryx trotted nervously off and soon it and another reappeared and stared toward us.

Robin whispered, "It was so bright all I could see was the outline, but I knew where to aim." Given the reaction of the oryx, plus the fact that we hadn't seen it stand up again, I was pretty confident she had hit exactly where she had aimed! Still, we sat tight for a few minutes to be sure.

The remaining two oryx milled around and stared our way. I'm sure that they could see something out of place with the sun shining brightly on us, but thanks to our Sitka camouflage they couldn't quite figure out what we were. They cautiously moved toward us and I wished I had grabbed my camera from my pack: my phone pictures were pathetic. We kept an eye in the direction of Robin's oryx as we watched the remaining two. Finally the sun dipped below the horizon and plunged the entire area into shade. Knowing that we had our work cut out for us and

daylight would fade quickly, I gently waved my arm to move the oryx away without educating them that we were predators, and they trotted off and were swallowed by the desert. We quickly confirmed that Robin's oryx was dead – with a perfect shot, despite horrible lighting conditions, and then sent a victory text to Jill telling her to leave the bulk of their gear behind, grab their packs and come over to help haul meat.

We retrieved our packs, Robin notched her tag, and we began to prepare our gear for butchering. In the fading light I glimpsed movement: light colored heads bobbed above dark bodies, and pointed them out to Robin. "Are those oryx?!" I said to myself, as I raised my binoculars for a better view. Instead I was astonished to see my sister and Jimmy running. Their light colored faces stood out from their darker clothing and from a distance in dim light actually resembled the white color of oryx heads! It had taken Robin and me nearly an hour to travel the distance yet our Alaskan speedsters made it to us in just a few minutes!

I whistled and they veered our way, greeting Robin with hugs, smiles and backslaps. My sister went on to explain that they didn't have any flashlights so made the best of what little daylight remained by running cross country! I had been planning to light a pile of brush on fire as a navigation beacon for Jill since I knew she didn't have a GPS, but their speedy legs made that effort moot.

Extra hands make for easy work, so I turned Robin loose to goof around with Jimmy and make a small fire to ease the evening chill while Jill and I butchered the young bull oryx. We skewered a couple tidbits of meat for Robin and Jimmy to char over the fire, but unfortunately the small shaker of seasoning I typically carry in my pack had disappeared. The caveman snack was a little on the tough side, a little on the smoky side, but still palatable. The company made up for it.



Fire, family and a successful hunt – it doesn't get much better

We distributed our burden of meat among the 4 backpacks, hiked to retrieve the gear stashed at our glassing spot, and then continued to the truck. Jill and Jimmy

saved us from making two trips. It made for a long day, but we pulled up a home right at midnight - with school and work the next day – if that’s not a bonsai hunt I don’t know what is!

Robin’s young bull was smaller than the one she missed earlier in the season, but she already has a trophy cow on the wall and I suspect the memory of Jill and Jimmy joining us for her success means more than a few more inches of horn. Thank God for or loving family and their willingness to share our load!



We couldn't skip a photo opportunity with Clarice



The gang