

Oryx
October 11, 2019 New Mexico

3 John 1:4 “I have no greater joy than to hear that my child is walking in the truth.”



October was a busy one for our household with Robin and I both holding tags for some of the most sought-after exotic species in New Mexico: oryx for Robin and ibex for me. It's become ridiculously difficult to even draw the tags, and when the lottery delivered overlapping opportunities it was a challenge to juggle our time to best accommodate both.

Robin's season began with a surprise in the summer when a friend invited us to attend the local Dallas Safari Club banquet in Albuquerque (DSC is a conservation organization funded by hunters around the world www.bigggame.org). His offer included raffle tickets for amazing prizes ranging from art to firearms and everything in between.

After perusing the dizzying array of goodies I suggested we put all our tickets toward a custom rifle. I was dumbstruck when I received a telephone call the following day announcing Robin had won it! She was presented with a Howa 1500 chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor, arguably one of the most popular cartridges in America today, perfectly suited for any big game species in New Mexico and renowned for its low recoil and flat-shooting long-range performance. The icing on the cake was the beautiful custom stock courtesy of Frank Anderson's Guns in Cloudcroft, NM.

The barrel's matt gray cerakote (durable ceramic) finish and the striking colors of the stock make Robin's new rifle absolutely perfect for my fashionable young lady hunter, and it should last her a lifetime. I topped it with a Leupold 4.5-15 VX-III scope to give it a little more reach than the 3x9 on her venerable .243, which we have known is on the small end of the scale for big game hunting despite Robin proving otherwise over the years.

My friend was excited to hear Robin had won a prize on "his" ticket and Mr. Anderson was thrilled to learn his prized work would be treasured by a youth hunting lass.



Frank Anderson presenting Robin with her beautiful new rifle!

After spending a week getting schooled by ibex with my bow in the Florida Mountains in southern New Mexico (see my Ibex 2019 story) I tore myself loose for a “rest break” and Robin’s oryx hunt. Our original intent had been to hunt 4 days over fall break, but activities cropped to tighten our schedule. The high school rivalry football game was to be played Friday night and Robin’s swim team organized a balloon fiesta social event Saturday morning. Robin opted to attend both, which meant we could only hunt Thursday and Friday morning, return home, and then possibly try again Saturday afternoon and Sunday. As our departure date loomed Robin (and mom) decided it best to only hunt part of her fall break and try again later in the month. I chafed at the prospect of not filling such a coveted tag, but understood Robin’s priorities differ from mine: had it been my own tag I’d chase oryx every spare minute I could find.

My “rest” from ibex hunting was more like a whirlwind: race back home, work for a day, reorganize all my hunting gear, wash my dirty clothes, repack my gear plus Robin’s, replenish food, water and other stores and finally hit the road after Robin’s late evening swim practice. We made the conscious decision to leave Clarice at home this time. Robin has outgrown her “stuffies” (somewhat bittersweet she’s growing up) and we reasoned, her hunting success couldn’t be attributed solely to her good luck charm, could it?!

We arrived at our campsite just before midnight, which is becoming par for the course for our adventures as Robin’s schedule continues to get busier with school and athletics. I let Robin doze inside the warm truck while I hastily erected our tent and arranged pads and sleeping bags. Morning would come early. The night was blustery and the tent fly fluttered like bat’s wings. All too soon it was time to rouse and prepare for the day: warm up the truck for Robin, arrange her hunting garb, cook oatmeal and finally drag my not-so-little hunter from her cozy cocoon. As she pattered getting ready I casually glassed the desert. It was downright chilly and my gloved fingers numbed on my binoculars. Even I

retreated to the truck to warm up a few times! However, between mouthfuls of breakfast burrito I spotted 2 oryx moving across the flats!

Robin was halfway through her oatmeal, but otherwise ready to roll, so I pointed the truck down a two-track that would narrow the distance on the fast-moving oryx. When we could drive no closer I stopped and attempted to relocate them in the monotonous landscape. Although I eventually caught a glimpse of them, they were travelling with no indication of stopping in the same zip code. Despite our initial excitement, it was back to the bins.



Typical landscape: devoid of landmarks and hard to glass

We hiked, drove, and glassed all day but didn't spot anything else until late afternoon when a lone oryx appeared near private land. I surmised it might be on the "right" side of a barbed wire cattle fence that delineated the property boundary.

The oryx was distant but a dirt road brought us a little closer before again having to shoulder our packs and trek into the desert. The temperature was comfortable although a cross breeze from behind us meant we would need to be careful in our approach. With few landmarks to guide us we set off with hope and a prayer.



Our little girl is growing up – she's taller than mom now!

The flat desert terrain makes it challenging to relocate animals, so we detoured toward each slight rise we found in hopes that the few feet of elevation would allow us to spot the oryx again. Eventually we reached the area we believed the oryx had been so slowed way down and carefully peered around, over and through the scattered creosote bushes and yucca cactus, using the cover to our advantage.

Suddenly Robin whispered "Dad, dad!" and I turned to see two oryx galloping in our direction perhaps 100-yards out and closing fast. We became a comical flurry of activity. I yanked Robin's rifle off my shoulder and we dropped to the ground. I chambered a round, popped up the bipod and set it in front of Robin while frantically whistling loudly in attempt to shock the oryx into halting. Despite our surprise it worked almost perfectly. The oryx duo blasted past within 50 yards and then stopped about 100 yards beyond. One turned broadside and looked toward the source of the crazy whistling noises. Robin exhaled, snapped off the safety and squeezed the trigger "click". "Dad, there's nothing in there." she whispered. DOH! In my haste I hadn't fully retracted the bolt and had failed to load a bullet into the chamber (for safety we never carry a bullet in the chamber while we're just walking around; only when we're ready to shoot). I reached over and correctly racked a round but by that time the oryx resumed their trot. I whistled and managed to make them pause about 250 yards away, but their hesitation was too brief for Robin to get lined up before they galloped straight away.

What a fiasco - we had oryx within archery range and failed to capitalize! Opportunities like that are few and far between and it stung to have squandered one with a simple mistake – on my part, no less. Or perhaps was it because we left Clarice at home?

I would be impossible to catch the beasts so we continued searching for the original oryx, unsure if it was one of the two that got away or a separate animal. Eventually just before sunset we located it a hundred yards on the "wrong" side of the fence on private land. It spotted us about the same time we saw it and simply froze staring in our direction until we lost shooting light.

It was a long, disappointing trudge back to the truck, but the sky was clear, the stars twinkled brightly and a nearly full moon permitted us to hike without headlamps. We began chatting about school, life and other things until the walk became enjoyable...except for a devil cactus I rammed my knee into!

At the truck we realized a jacket that had been lashed to Robin's backpack had slipped off earlier in the day. I surmised it may have occurred where we piled into the truck that morning so we decided to return and look at our parking site before setting camp. Although we found the correct spot we failed to locate the jacket, reinforcing our decision to hunt that area the following day, intending to follow our tracks in the sand in hopes of retrieving it.

After preparing camp we ended the day with delicious "combo" dinners (burger meat, veggies and tater tots wrapped in aluminum foil) cooked over an open fire while we played "Trophy Buck", a favorite dice game Robin and I often enjoy in hunting camp. To Robin's chagrin I won 3 straight games before lights out, but I consoled her by telling her she had saved her luck for an oryx the following day. Time would tell whether my statement would prove to be prophetic...

The next morning was warmer and calm, both good conditions for hunting oryx. I made breakfast eager to get rolling but Robin suggested packing up our camp so we wouldn't have to later in the day, which turned out to be a wise idea and a valuable timesaver.

We found her jacket literally less than 50-yards from the truck. We debated whether to move elsewhere since it had turned up so quickly but ultimately decided hunting that area "was meant to be" and moved to a rise to glass.

I settled in behind binoculars and systematically panned from horizon to horizon. Robin studied math and read her English assignment. She's committed to schoolwork: carrying straight A's, and I'm proud of her for balancing her priorities.

By 10am I hadn't sighted anything. Robin had been sitting comfortably in the shade. When she came over to check on me I reiterated the status plus we needed to wrap it up soon to get home in time for the football game. Robin nodded in resigned agreement and I turned back to my binoculars...as an oryx strolled across my view!!!

Robin quickly hopped behind the glass to see the bull. Almost immediately she whispered "He's gone". What?! I switched places and tried in vain to relocate the animal. I worried my eyes had been playing tricks on me, but Robin confirmed she had seen an oryx - complete with long horns, the distinct "racing stripe" and swishing black tail. I studied the area for another ten minutes without so much as a glimpse of the elusive beast.

With the clock ticking I suggested we had nothing to lose. We may as well try to close the distance: either the lone oryx would turn up and Robin might have a shot opportunity, or it had moved on and we would head for home.

We loaded our gear into our packs, took a rough compass bearing and did our best to hold a straight course as we weaved around thorny mesquite thickets. Eventually I spotted a distinct yucca that the oryx had been close to, confirming we were in the ballpark. We slowed and carefully eased around scattered vegetation, hoping to spot our quarry before giving ourselves away. I used my binoculars to scan "through" the bushes as best I could before carefully moving ahead and scanning our new vista.

Suddenly I caught movement and the oryx appeared nearby – perhaps only 80 yards! He was feeding away from us, which allowed me to step back, whisper guidance to Robin, dump our packs and ready her rifle (correctly this time!). The tall vegetation would require

Robin to shoot from a standing position so I extended the shooting sticks before easing forward.

Despite being close, its vitals were obscured and Robin didn't have a shot. The very cover that helped conceal us made it difficult to find an opening and it was both frustrating and intense. The wind was in our face and we were both fully camouflaged so I was confident it would only be a matter of time before the stalk came to fruition so long as we moved slowly. We played cat and mouse for at least 10 minutes. A shot opportunity would loom, Robin would set her rifle on the shooting sticks, and then the oryx would meander behind another bush or turn away from us, then we'd shift a few steps and repeat it all over again.

Suddenly coyotes howled behind us and the oryx lifted his head to stare in our direction. Thankfully we had been still at the time, but we froze as the oryx bored holes through us now about 70-yards. Our camouflage did its job and eventually he resumed feeding. I scooted Robin a few steps to our right for a clear line and we waited for him to turn broadside. The bull began to spin and I heard Robin click off the safety. She squeezed the trigger and he dropped! With no need for a follow-up shot we hugged, relieved after the past minutes of intensity.

We brought our packs to the fine bull, snapped some photos and ate our lunch. As my dad always says "I might as well eat this food...I don't want to carry it back! (The pun being we'd carry it in our stomachs). I mentally assessed our schedule. It would be tight to butcher and pack the bull and be home before the football game.

As each cut of meat was placed in game bags and laid in the shade to cool I knew the weight was adding up. The bull was much bigger in body than the cows Robin had previously taken. We finally completed butchering, sipped cold water from Robin's thermos and began stuffing our backpacks. I announced to Robin that if we had any hope of making the game we'd have to carry it all in one trip. She had her heart set on it so I loaded her backpack heavy and everything that remained went into mine. We also saved the cape for our taxidermist friend, which added to the weight.

I surveyed our loads and mentally cringed before setting Robin's backpack on her shoulders and strapping into mine, hoping I'd be able to stand. By rolling to my knees I rose after letting out a weightlifter's grunt, but it was brutal from the start. Usually a full pack feels ok until I've walked for a while, so it was a bad sign that my legs hurt immediately. We grabbed our trekking poles and marched toward the nearest road, over a mile away. I made it less than 200-yards before I needed a rest – another bad sign. I was hurting and doubts began to crop up that perhaps I was out of shape and getting older. The problem was I couldn't rest unless I had something to sit on: rising again from the flat desert floor would be nearly impossible. A nearby arroyo provided short vertical bank where I could sit and rest my pack. I turned to survey the dismally short distance we had traveled and then sighted toward our goal. It seemed impossible to take it all in one trip and began to consider dumping half my load. "I don't think I can make it, kiddo". "We can do it" implored Robin, "give me the rifle, I'll carry more." We lashed the rifle to Robin's pack and resumed our march. Robin had her heart set on getting home, so I gave it my all. The difference in weight by removing the rifle may not seem like much, but my load went from "impossible" to "remotely feasible". Although we still needed rest breaks whenever we could find a reasonable seat, we made steady progress.



My smile says “ouch”

Finally we reached the road and dropped our packs in the shade with relief. Next we jogged a mile to the truck, drove back, loaded everything and changed into more comfortable clothes for the trip home.

Once on the highway I ciphered our ETA. We didn't have time to make it home, so we asked Laurie to grab our clothes and meet us at the game. I hitched onto the end of a squadron of “low flying aircraft” and we made record time to Albuquerque, walking into the football stadium just before the halftime break. Robin met up with a friend, her school dominated the game, and we were tucked in bed by midnight ready for her balloon fiesta swim team activity the following morning.

The next day I rearranged the meat in the cooler in preparation for delivery to the butcher. Out of curiosity I weighed our loads: I had hauled 85 pounds of meat, another 45 pounds of head and hide, plus backpack, water, binoculars, camera, and other and miscellaneous gear. Robin had carried 37 pounds of meat, plus the rifle, tripod, water and homework books. I guess my legs weren't hurting because I'm out of shape and old – the load was just ridiculously heavy!



Robin's 33" stud bull!



Hard to say which is prettier: the gun, the game, or the girl – a triple blessing!

Robin's early success had me daydreaming about chasing ibex with my bow during the last 3 days of season, so I reorganized all my gear, reloaded the truck and Saturday night after church I pointed my steed southward again. So much for my "recovery" from hunting ibex. But even though my body was hurting, my spirit was soaring.

Time would tell whether my ibex hunt would end up with a success story...