

BIG MULEYS IN ALBERTA

CONFIRMED

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We had been waiting in the same place for close to five hours, moving as little as possible, and doing our best to be silent. My hunting partner, mentor and dear friend, John Martin, was

doing a commendable job of sitting motionless even though he was suffering with a sore back. When our guide, Kelly Wiebe, finally broke the silence with a whisper, it was music to my ears. "Don't get

excited, guys, but that buck is here."

Being the pro that he is, Kelly was trying to keep me calm, but it was evident the sight had given him an adrenaline rush. Staying low, I aligned my binocular to where Kelly was look-





ing and saw the magnificent mule deer through blowing grasses. Working hard to stay calm, I worked to raise my rifle slowly and get him in my scope without giving away our position.

Our adventure began in 2006, after reading an article by Bob Robb in the September-October edition of *SAFARI Magazine*. For some reason the article titled "Big Muleys in Alberta?" stuck with me. Mule deer have intrigued me for a long time. Being from the East, the muley has always represented the magic of the open West. A mule deer hunt was high on my long wish list. John felt the same way so it didn't take much convincing to look into things further when I shared Bob Robb's article with him.

After numerous email exchanges and a couple of phone calls with Andre VanHilten, owner of Willow Creek Outfitters in Southern Alberta, John and I were impressed and booked a hunt. The quality of animals shown on his website didn't hurt either.

When the big day finally rolled around, John and I arrived at the airport in Calgary, Alberta. Andre picked us up for the drive to his hunting area. While we drove, he did a great job of explaining our approach for the hunt and letting us know exactly what to expect. The plan was to leave camp well before daylight with bag lunches, hunt all day

through a combination of driving to different areas and hiking, and return after dark.

When we arrived at Andre's, daylight was fading. We didn't take time to unpack. Andre introduced John and me to Kelly Wiebe. We jumped into Kelly's truck with our rifles to head to the range. I knew that we were in good hands with Kelly. He was from the area, so he knew it well, and he had a great deal of experience guiding not only locally but in the Yukon. His friendly manner and obvious knowledge made us feel comfortable.

At the range I was happy to see that my Dakota Model 76 .300 Winchester Magnum had survived the baggage handlers with no point of impact change. John was not as fortunate, with his bullets flying about 12 inches too high at 100 yards. Before the light left us John's rifle was grouping well, where intended.

Early morning found us overlooking a valley in the foothills where we would do some glassing. Pre-scouting proved to Kelly that this was a productive location. As dawn crept in John and I got a better perspective on what we were looking at. A stream, small hayfield, windmill and low hills surrounded the area with patches of buck brush for cover. There was a beautiful view of the Rocky Mountains to the west. This definitely

felt like mule deer country. What a great feeling to finally be there.

"I see some deer," Kelly said softly. We learned that he had well-trained guide eyes. Following his line of site we also picked out deer, the closest at about 800 yards. While John and I glassed to locate more, Kelly went to work with the spotting scope. There were a couple of very good looking bucks in the group, which was made up of about 25 animals. After a bit of discussion about the deer, we decided we would attempt a stalk to get John an opportunity at the largest buck. The three of us patiently worked in on the herd, paying close attention to the wind and staying low out of site. At the last minute a wary doe caught our movement and led the group up a draw. The opportunity for a shot evaporated too quickly to take advantage, but we weren't disappointed. This was our first experience being close to mule deer, and having seen as many deer as we had before 10 a.m. on opening morning, our confidence was high.

The next morning brought some misfortune. John, whose back had been bothering him on the first day, slept poorly and woke-up in pain. Rather than push it so early in the hunt, he wisely chose to rest for the morning. We planned to contact him

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before noon to determine if he was well enough to join us.

Kelly and I returned to the same location as the prior morning, but went farther into the valley. On opening morning some deer had left this area early to bed, and Kelly had a hunch. We waited until it was light enough to glass and immediately started to see deer. A group of does began to head up a draw to cover, with one small buck following and another, which looked like a giant to me. Since this was my first time hunting mule deer, I was counting on the notion that the big ones just look big. I set up the spotting scope, trying hard to control my excitement. Now that was a deer. Not fully trusting my own judgment, I passed the scope to Kelly for an expert evaluation. I could tell from his reaction that this one was well above average.

Our only chance was to quickly work our way up the hill parallel to the draw while keeping out of site. We had to intercept the buck before he made it to cover. I learned the foothills are bigger and steeper than our hills



back east. We made it to the top in good time, with me trying to control my panting in case a shot presented itself. Peering over the top into the draw, we caught the last doe, but the big guy was already into cover.

We sat thinking about our next move. Then we saw deer moving into another draw over a hill from where we were. Now the run began. About halfway up the next hill, the run slowed to a walk for me. Kelly waited, working to make sure I could take a shot if needed at the top of the hill. We made it to the top and there were deer close. A 150-class buck was well within range. We waited, but "my deer" didn't show.

What incredible excitement. We lay back in the mid-morning sun to rest. A large flock of sharp-tail grouse flew

low over us. That morning, it struck me how fortunate I was to be in such beautiful country doing what I love.

After the hike back to the truck, Kelly had a plan. It was admittedly a long shot, but a plan. We would have lunch and wait on the ridge overlooking the draw where the deer left, on the chance they would re-enter the same way in the evening to feed. And on the chance the big guy would still be with them. With the rut starting, it was a gamble.

We contacted John to see how he was feeling. Being the trooper he is, he wanted to be part of the scheme. We picked him up and were back quickly. Kelly was adamant, and rightly so, that we be extremely quiet all afternoon and stay in one place to contain our scent. The three of us were off with all we needed for an afternoon sit.

Just before dusk, things started to happen. Does, fawns and small bucks materialized, some moving toward the draw we were watching, some one draw over. They were on their way to lower ground to feed. We watched in silence as 26 mule deer moved by us. I was getting nervous that the plan wasn't going to work, when the whisper came, "Don't get excited, guys, but that buck is here."

Keeping low, I slowly raised my binocular to where Kelly was focused. I could see the buck through the blowing grasses. A majestic animal, following a doe and fawn, presumably the same pair he had been following that morning. I reminded myself not to look too long at his rack, but focus on his body and try to relax. I swapped my binocular for my rifle, and worked to get him in my scope, which I'd set at six power. There he was as planned, and I adjusted slightly to get farther above the grasses. The safety on the Dakota silently slipped forward, and I began to take up slack on the trigger. Then he vanished. I returned to the binocular to see where he was. John informed me later a panicked expression came over my face. It turned out there was a dip in the terrain, and the buck reappeared.

I was surprisingly calm waiting for the best sight picture I could get, a slight quartering away angle. Kelly confirmed he was at 248 yards. Quickly considering bullet drop and the slight breeze, I pictured the off shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The sight picture was lost in recoil, but we heard the reassuring thwack. Kelly indicated the shot hit hard while cautioning us to keep our heads down so the deer wouldn't know where the shot had come from. This move was smart as the doe and fawn ran closer to us, down the draw, with the buck following but lagging behind. When he was below us in the draw, I readjusted my shooting sticks and fired the final shot.

Now the surprisingly calm feeling vanished. Pure excitement, shakes and amazement replaced it. After a celebration complete with slaps on the back, I kept watching the buck, not completely convinced that it was truly there. John came down to where I was for more congratulations. From where we were standing, he could see the body but not the head. When we made it down to the buck, John realized why I looked panicked when the deer had disappeared from my scope. On the ground was a beautiful, mature mule deer buck in his prime with long, heavy antlers.

I'm not a person focused on record books and scoring of animals. I use estimated scores to understand the size of animals I'm hunting, but rarely care about final measurements. With this animal I was curious. Kelly and Andre are both certified scorers, and were anxious to measure him when we got back to camp. The tape showed a 186 3/8

gross score. That's helpful to show the quality of deer that exist in Andre's area. For me, I just know that I was blessed with a great deer and an incredible hunting experience with a long-time dear friend and a couple of new ones.

Later in the week, Kelly guided John to a unique drop-tine buck. While I watched close by, they got to within 156 yards of the buck even with John's bad back. The deer was fairly intent on the does with him because the rut had picked up. One good shot ended the pursuit. More congratulations and picture taking followed. After thinking

about a hunt like this for so long, John and I together had fulfilled our wish.

John and I are rebooked with Willow Creek for an upcoming bear hunt. Andre runs a great operation. We look forward to hunting again with Kelly as our guide.

I'm very fortunate to have a wonderful wife who is understanding and supportive of my passion for hunting and the outdoors. With three young children at home, these trips aren't common but are difficult for her when they do happen. Still, she encourages me to go, knowing how much it means to me. I'm a lucky guy. 🐾

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