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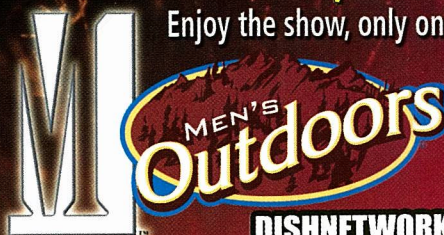
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ENDURING echoes

Getting Connected During a Colorado Pronghorn Hunt

By Steve Ramirez

I guess the true adventure of any hunt starts way before you ever set foot on the landscape your quarry calls home. It is the thrill of researching the possibilities, then booking the hunt, selecting your firearm and load, sighting in and practice, and dreaming, always dreaming, of how the hunt will be. The problem with dreaming, I am told, is that the "fantasy is always better than the reality."

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RESULTS on the VLC RANCH



Mr. Andres Fanjul 19-point 180 Gross B&C



Mr. Benno Bauer 180 Gross B&C

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ENDURING ECHOES

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This is one of those clichés that “they” say, whoever “they” are. I can only guess that they have never been on a pronghorn antelope hunt in northwestern Colorado because in that place, in that time, the reality was better than the fantasy.

My fantasy hunt became reality via Elkhorn Outfitters, Inc., of Craig, Colorado, which is owned and operated by Dick and Cheryl Dodds. I was connected to Elkhorn by Cy Angelloz, senior hunting consultant for Cabela's Outdoor Adventures. The first thing I noticed, besides the stunning scenery of the area, was how easy you came to feel as if you were one of the family that had come to visit.

On the morning of the first day, it was the crisp, cool breeze coming off Black Mountain that carried the sweet, pungent aroma of sage mixed with the smell of bacon and coffee that brought me fully awake into the first moment of a day of great adventure.

Traci, our camp cook, was working the same magic under the early morning stars as she would each night under those same stars. Just like in my own family, mealtime at Elkhorn Lodge is a

time for sharing stories and creating lifelong friendships. We had a wonderful crew of both guides and hunters.

We spent the evening of arrival day getting to know each other while sitting on the front deck of the lodge and watching herds of pronghorn feeding just 500 yards away. There was “Doc” and David from Arkansas. My hunting partner was John, who led a life of adventure on the sea as a merchant marine captain. The final two hunters of our party were Todd, the firefighter from Florida, and Steve from California.

We finished breakfast, packed our lunch and were out amongst the twisted sagebrush by sunrise. As we worked our way through the rolling high plains down winding, rutted, dirt tracks, I was amazed at the amount of game present. Mule deer rose out of the sagebrush like spring flowers. Pronghorn bucks and does dotted the hillsides and occasionally ran at warp speed across our track.

The sun was just rising over Black Mountain to the east, and the perfume of sage was almost overwhelming. It was a perfect day to hunt and a great place to feel alive in.

Our guide, Scott, stopped the truck at

the bottom of a sage and cactus-covered hill. The lupines were blooming and added a splash of color to the scene as we loaded up our rifles and began hiking up the hill through the thin, cold air. We agreed that John would take the first shot, so I held just slightly behind them in case he should have a sudden opportunity.

The area we had come to hunt was known locally as “the burn.” The name came from the fact that it consisted of a number of miles of short grass high plains that resulted from a fire of several years prior. The grassy hills were surrounded by sage-covered ridges that stretched as far as the eye could see. Scott told us that several large herds of pronghorns were making the burn their home, and that some nice bucks could be had if you could get close enough to them.

As we came close to the top of the first ridge surrounding the burn, we began to crawl on all fours so as not to silhouette ourselves on the horizon. If you haven't hunted the high plains of Colorado or Wyoming, let me tell you to watch out for the cactus. I had just hunted aoudad sheep in West Texas some months prior, and had only recently healed from the many cuts and stabs I received via cholla cactus and Spanish daggers.

Then, the three of us were low-crawling between the twisted sage and the small mounds of cactus with spines that looked as though they could cause a sucking chest wound if you weren't

careful.

We got our first look at the burn as we carefully peered over the screen of sagebrush that ended on the ridge top. What we saw was many miles of large hills covered only in ankle- to knee-high grass—and pronghorn. Surrounding the burn was miles and miles of sagebrush. It reminded me a lot of parts of the Mara in Kenya and the Serengeti in Tanzania.

As we peered over the sage and used our binoculars to glass the grassy slopes, we soon noticed that the dots we were seeing a half-mile away were in fact pronghorns—lots of pronghorns—and they were already looking back at us. I'm sure I caught a 14-inch buck a half a mile away as he was reading the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation logo on my cap. Needless to say, in short order all we saw of that herd were white rumps running at 60 miles per hour over the hilltop.

After numerous attempts to use the sage on the edge of the burn for cover, in order to get close enough to a herd to find a mature buck, it became apparent that the “lopes” were keeping well inside the short grass hills. We were going to have to use the topography and not the vegetation for cover.

After several hours of cat-and-mouse stalking on a herd that had four nice bucks in it, John finally got within “long shot” range. We just couldn't get any closer than 350-400 yards of them. John took his long shot with the much-needed aid of the shooting sticks that Scott carried for us.

The 130-grain, .270 round struck the dirt a few inches over the buck's back and the whole herd began to run in a whirl of confusion. They weren't sure where the shot had come from and actually ran toward us before turning off over the next hill. John never got another clear shot at the buck. He had hard luck on a tough shot. Now, it was my turn.

We climbed to the top of the highest bald hill from which we could glass the burn. Soon, we located two herds of pronghorns. One group, which had two nice bucks, was feeding along a narrow valley and moving behind the next ridge about a half-mile away.

One of the bucks in this group had very wide horns that we estimated at about 14 inches. He interested me. The other herd was bedded down along a protected hillside a mile or more distant from our vantage point. It seemed to have several nice bucks in it, as well.

As the first group with the wide-horned buck moved behind the ridge, we quickly began our stalk. We dropped down in the valley below and then climbed half way up the hillside that separated us from them. The idea was to get into position at the end of the valley and let them feed toward us.

The only problem was that they walked faster than we could close the distance and we spent the next several hours walking, running and crawling to no avail. We just never got a clear chance at either of the bucks in that group. Eventually, they busted us and again we saw white rumps blazing off toward the next county. We began to work on the second herd.

Once we moved into position to check out the second herd, my eyes locked onto a beautiful buck that was bedded down in the center of the herd. I had been feeling bad about not getting a chance at the wide-horned buck until I saw this one. He had a perfectly symmetrical pair of lyre, or heart-shaped horns, with ivory tips and wide paddles. Even his markings seemed sharp and beautiful in the afternoon sun.

Soon after spotting him, they stood up and began to move along the other side of a long ridge. John hung back at the bottom of the far side of the ridge as Scott and I began our stalk. At first, we were able to walk, but the last 50 yards across the flat ridge top became a low-crawl through short grass and cactus patches.

As we were crawling toward the herd, I began to have memories of my Marine Corps days low-crawling through short grass in a different time and place. I thought of the rifle that moved through the grass with me this time—a sporterized Springfield 1903 in .30-06 that my dad built himself. Dad carved the walnut stock by hand during long nights at his workbench in our old

garage. He can't hunt anymore, but I can live it with him in a spiritual sort of way.

All at once, we reached the edge of the flat-topped hill. Not more than 100 yards away, the pronghorn herd stood, already looking at whatever movement they saw from our prone-positioned bodies. My buck stood in the center looking almost directly at me. Their muscles were tense and ready to bolt. Scott said, “Take him!”

I squeezed the trigger and the 165-grain bullet dropped him where he stood only a second before. I sat in the grass beside my pronghorn as Scott went to get the truck. The herd had almost run over John in the race to escape the sound of the shot.

The next thing that struck me most about this hunt wasn't even the fantastic scenery or the beauty of the antelopes as they raced over the high plains. It was the enduring echoes that followed each of us: My connection to my father through the rifle he crafted; Doc's stories of the son he lost that was supposed to go with him on this hunt; Todd telling of how much his father loved to hunt elk in this country, but had died of cancer a short time before they were to go; Steve missing his son, who could not make it this time; and me thinking of how much my daughter Megan would have loved sharing this with me.

It all showed how much hunting is really a connecting of spirits. We connect to the land, to the wildlife that calls it home and to other human spirits, both past and present.

As I boarded my plane in Denver to return home, I realized the fantasy was over for now. My plane rose above the clouds, leaving the mountains and high plains behind me. The adventure was not over. I could still smell the sage, hear the laughter around the table and see my antelope lying in the grass. The enduring echoes of this hunt will last a lifetime. ♪



STEVE RAMIREZ PHOTO

After several hours of cat-and-mouse stalking, the author (right) finally got his pronghorn.