

Pronghorn August 2023, New Mexico

**“Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that *I will restore to you double.*”
Zechariah 9: 12**



The great wide open makes for amazing sunrises

Brian and I were in a hunting slump. At least it felt like it. Our final hunt last year was a total bust; a combination of rain, mud, trucks getting stuck and our inability to locate any legal bull elk. Then we kicked off the spring with a Barbary sheep hunting fiasco where the hunting pressure was insane. We literally glassed hunters on every single high point, and saw other hunters everywhere we looked, hiked, or drove. It was the epitome of frustrating. Next, I wrapped up the spring turkey season with no birds seen and no gobbles heard after nearly a month of miles on my truck and boots.



The only trophy photo from our late-season elk hunt...LOL

Our summer scouting for pronghorn in a new unit had proven lackluster, and for the first time in a while we didn't have a clear plan for opening day. Although we had located a few bucks, most of the vast unit seemed devoid of life. Brian even suggested that since our options weren't looking

promising, we might consider splitting any meat we got. I agreed: if either of us managed to kill a buck, we'd share the protein.



Scouting photo



A praying mantis found while scouting – amazing variety in God's creation!



One of several mini-dinosaurs encountered while scouting



This waterhole appeared promising



A trophy-sized moth on a fence post while scouting

We spent the day before season setting up camp, frantically performing a final check of our handful of potential hunting areas and, unfortunately, cobbling together blinds that had been trampled and chewed by dastardly cattle. We ultimately finalized our game plan as we prepped our gear for the early rise.

During my final peek outside at the heavens before my head hit the pillow, a meteor flashed across the sky, burning with intensity before flickering out. Our pronghorn hunt coincided with the peak of the annual Perseid meteor shower, and the meteors were dazzling away from city lights – at least those visible between the scattered clouds. While some would consider my sighting “good luck”, I counted it an amazing display of God’s glory.

Of concern; however, Brian and I intended to sit in blinds near waterholes and rain was forecast for the first three days of season. In fact, thunderstorms ringed the horizon and the near-constant flashes of lightning were perhaps even more impressive than the meteors. My sleep was restless, accompanied by wind and thunder.

We arose at our alarm chime and drove to our respective blinds. We had enough cell service to stay in touch throughout the day, which would both pass the time and encourage each other. I dozed in the waning darkness, catching some rest before the mentally grueling day.

As songbirds began to chirp and the horizon brightened, I carefully raised my head like a periscope to scan 360-degrees. For about 120-degrees I could see perhaps 200-300 yards, while the other directions afforded only 50-100 yards visibility due to the terrain. Regardless, there were no pronghorn. Meanwhile, Brian reported the extended view from his blind location revealed a few pronghorn, albeit far off. Most were does and fawns, but a couple of bucks offered hope for the day.

An hour passed and it began to warm up. Suddenly I heard an odd grunting/coughing. What in the world? Perhaps a badger snuffling and rooting around? Silence for several minutes, then the odd sound repeated, but still nothing to be seen. Following another lull 4 bucks fed into view above me – it had been them grunting! One was small, two were medium and one was a stud! They meandered diagonally in my general direction, but one was on the opposite side of a barbed wire fence and the

other three seemingly wanted to cross and join him, hugging the fence line and eying the lone buck as he gradually worked away from the wires.

Suddenly two does and 3 fawns trotted into view, passed the single buck and made a beeline for the fence! The lead doe paused with her neck at the top wire and stared at the waterhole I guarded. I immediately understood her intent to cross, and in less than a minute she scooted under the bottom wire toward the water. The other doe and fawns quickly followed, as did the bucks!



Tension builds!

I focused on the largest buck as they neared the pond. I had ranged the far side at 35-yards, and he plowed right to the water's edge and began to drink facing me. I drew my bow, but he pranced to the side before I could even aim. I followed him as he moved left, parting through the other pronghorn like a boat through waves. He stopped broadside and I had a shot opportunity through side window in my blind lined with shoot-through mesh. I didn't have time to range him but was pretty sure he was at 40-yards. My release felt good, and he whirled at the shot, although I couldn't tell if I'd hit him. The herd quickly disappeared over the nearby rise. I pulled the mesh away to confirm the range had indeed been 40-yards, then waited a few minutes before quietly sneaking to check for my arrow, which had a tiny smear of fat on the shaft and very sparse blood on one vane – almost certainly only a flesh wound and not fatal. Perhaps the mesh had affected my arrow slightly, perhaps my aim had been a little off due to excitement.

I texted a report to Brian and retrieved my binoculars and other gear for a search in the off chance the hit was better than the evidence suggested. The terrain was open with nowhere to hide; if the buck was bedded or dead, he would be obvious. I traveled along the "high ground", which afforded a good view, but the vast prairie was empty. No way that buck was even injured. Still, to erase all doubt I continued for nearly a mile. I reported my progress, or lack thereof, to Brian as I hiked. I spotted a few lone bucks far off in various directions, none limped or acted injured, instead most were trotting or running for reasons known only to them.

At one point Brian texted he spotted a buck with a "droopy" horn. It was so far off he couldn't tell exactly what was going on, but one horn rose normally and the other pointed down. I glassed the direction he referred and eventually located it nearly a mile away. The heat waves made him waver like a funhouse mirror, but I confirmed his unique horn configuration. As I watched, he began trotting away. Yet for some reason I had an uncanny feeling Brian was going to kill that buck...

I retreated to my waterhole and arranged some sticks and debris around the edge to mark distances. As I entered my hide the temperature inside had officially reached “sweltering”. My misting fan and ice chest of water and electrolyte drinks barely took the edge off. After a few hours Brian reported some does and a small buck had come to drink. The does eagerly slurped but the buck hung back, and it appeared he wouldn’t come all the way in. Brian ranged him, drew his bow and then the buck took a few steps away. Brian estimated another 5-yards and let fly, only to have his arrow sizzle under the pronghorn’s body for a clean miss. He was a little down about it, but I chided we both were apparently practicing “catch and release”, just like fishing, and a better one was out there somewhere with his name on it anyway.

By midafternoon thunderheads were building and it wasn’t long before raindrops began to pitter patter on the roof of my blind. Within minutes it was raining so hard that running from the blind to the parked truck would have resulted in a soaking so we both sat tight and checked the local forecast, which called for about an hour of rain, a short lull, then rain until later that night. We agreed to bolt for the vehicles during the lull.

As we headed toward camp in heavy rain Brian noted the weather appeared to be clear in other directions, so we diverted and spent the remainder of daylight spotting, stalking, and trying to intercept moving bucks. Although we nearly managed to get within bow range a few times, no arrows were released and all we had to show for it were muddy knees and enough exercise to sleep soundly.

The forecast was to be even wetter the next day, and it sprinkled off and on throughout the night. Sitting at water didn’t sound overly promising, but the ground had been so dry most soaked in immediately, and a strong breeze was quickly drying up what remained, so we opted to try again.

We each settled into our blinds before daylight and repeated our vigil. Again, I dozed in the wee hours, before methodically glassing, peeking, and reading a book as time passed. Brian chose to listen to podcasts, but I’m not that tech savvy, LOL.



My view

As the morning warmed neither of us sighted anything. Midday came and went with some huge thunderstorms rolling across the prairie, thankfully bypassing us. By early afternoon neither of us had

any action and radar projected a squall bearing down. As the first drops began, I posed the question to Brian whether we should head for camp before it really came down. He replied there were 3 bucks perhaps a quarter mile out and even though they didn't appear to be heading his way, he was loathe to exit the blind and alert them to a predator lurking near the water. His logic was sound, so I relaxed and caught a catnap while the rain beat down for nearly an hour until the forecasted lull arrived.

Brian reported the bucks he had seen were long gone and he was ready to leave if I was. Just then 4 bucks strolled over a rise, and it was my turn to decide to sit tight. The sun broke through, and the bucks grazed on the freshly wetted grass. However, the breeze was hot and within minutes the ground began to dry before my eyes. Regardless, I assumed the rain would put a damper on, no pun intended, any waterhole activity for the remainder of the day.

The bucks fed and puttered around with no inclination of being thirsty. Half an hour later raindrops returned and as the intensity increased, one by one the bucks bedded. The deluge continued for nearly an hour, but when it finally ended the bucks simply meandered away over the rise. We had no better plan and since the sky would remain clear until dark, we decided to wait.



Bucks getting ready to meander away – drat!

A while later a doe sprinted over the horizon with a dandy buck in tow. Shortly thereafter more does and fawns appeared, and they went directly to where the prior bucks had hung out and began grazing. I wasn't hopeful, but at least they were on the move, albeit on the wrong side of the barbed wire fence. Over the course of perhaps 15-minutes they ambled downhill and slightly farther away from me, when suddenly one doe raised her head and stared at my pond. She angled my way and I realized she was on the exact route the herd had taken the previous morning, complete with her halting at the wire, acting like she'd never crossed under a fence before, then finally scooting under and trotting toward the water!

The entire herd quickly followed, and I prepared for a shot. The buck charged directly to the water's edge and began to drink. My cell phone vibrated. I drew, aimed for 35-yards based on him being about halfway between my 30 and 40-yard markers, and released. He jumped back, apparently unscathed, and approached the water again, directly at my 40-yard marker. My cell phone vibrated. I quickly nocked another arrow and sent it on its way. This time I had a solid hit and the buck charged over the nearby hill on a death run. My cell phone vibrated.



The glowing nock of my arrow on its way!

What the heck was going on with my phone? Most of the remaining pronghorn trotted away, but one doe stared for a long time where the buck had disappeared from my view. I interpreted her body language as a good sign; she was probably watching and wondering why he had suddenly keeled over.

I settled back down to calm my nerves and check in with Brian. When I retrieved my phone, I was astonished to read he had just shot a buck! It was surreal, his message to me was virtually identical to what I was getting ready to send to him! Incredibly we had both killed bucks within 5-minutes of each other despite thinking this hunt might very well be a bust! Yes! Thank you, Lord!

I quickly texted Brian my news and we exchanged more details. It turned out Brian had several does approach his waterhole, when suddenly the "droopy" horned buck sprinted in from out of sight and chased them away over the horizon before Brian could even react. Then 3 smaller bucks approached the water, only to have droopy blast back and run them off too! Again, the original does approached the water and Brian was ready when droopy charged back and stopped briefly. He had hit the buck solidly but wasn't entirely certain of his shot placement. Droopy lowered his head and walked about 60 yards directly away before bedding down with only his head visible. Soon his head slumped, and Brian could only see the tip of his horn. Brian worried if he bumped the buck too soon, it might run off, and he would rather wait a while to err on the side of caution.

I responded with my plan to creep out and check on mine and promised to stay in touch. I found my arrow covered in blood, and a heavy blood trail leading up the rise, with my buck dead just on the other side, only 40-yards from where I had shot him! I rejoiced and quickly took photos before butchering, bagging the meat and hauling it to the truck.



My buck as I found him - thank you, Lord; thank you, Lord!



One of my best bucks!



What a blessing!

When I reported my status to Brian he voiced concern and weighed the merit of backing out and waiting until morning to approach his buck since it would be dark soon. I was confident the animal was down for good, since he had bedded almost immediately after the shot. I suggested I make my way toward Brian, keeping to high ground and glassing, so I could view of the buck from a different vantage to evaluate. I promised to move slowly and not do anything to spook it lest it still be alive.

By the time I made it within sight of the buck's approximate location, dusk had fallen. I couldn't make out much with my naked eye, but with the aid of my binoculars I located Brian's buck lying flat on his side, with his head resting sideways on the ground. I texted Brian I was 95% certain the buck was dead, and it was safe for Brian to circle to me to assess and confirm. It took Brian only a few minutes to join me, but the sky had darkened and was harder to see the buck. I convinced Brian to approach carefully from downwind and back out if there was any indication the buck might still get up and run.

We slowly made our way to the fallen pronghorn and verified Brian had killed a truly unique buck - and another butchering job lay before us! Although the drop horn seemed solid, we theorized the buck may have been hit by a car, which had damaged his skull and caused his horn to grow oddly. Although the horn impeded a sliver of his vision, it's my understanding pronghorn can see 360-degrees, so in reality the buck only lacked a little from his normal field view. Judging by Brian's observation of him, the buck was an ornery fellow, so perhaps his injury had made him cranky.

As we knelt by his trophy Brian quipped "Well, I guess our slump is over!" I replied with a chuckle "So what are we going to do about splitting the meat?!"

Thank you, Lord for restoring our "slump" to double – within minutes, no less!



Brian's unique trophy



The buck's right horn reminded me of a musk ox



My buck



Praise God!