

Deer & Bear September 2023, New Mexico

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ...your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Matthew 6:25-34



The dawn of a new season



A buck seen while scouting– they rarely feed broadside without a care during hunting season!

After our unexpected pronghorn double blessing of success, we had no idea what was in store for our fall deer hunt. Similar to our pronghorn season, numerous scouting trips had turned up a few legal bucks here, but no firm plan and nothing that made us say “Whoa, let’s go after that one!”

Opening morning found us bouncing around half-baked ideas over a hasty breakfast. Finally, Brian announced “We don’t have a great place to start, so how about we try an area we didn’t have time to scout and see what turns up?” It doesn’t get more harebrained than that...count me in!

We quickly loaded our gear, made a short drive, and began hiking in the dark toward a ridge on the map that appeared ideal for glassing. The stars were beginning to fade as we finished our climb, and within minutes we put our binos to work scanning in opposite directions to increase our chances of finding deer. Initially it seemed Brian’s hunch hadn’t paid off, but after about 20-minutes he announced a small buck had emerged from a bush and was feeding. Soon another joined, perhaps a little bigger. I quickly scanned them and agreed they weren’t worth pursuing on opening day. Brian chose to keep an eye on them to see if anything else appeared as I continued scanning other areas. I spotted a handful of does and fawns, then a spike-antlered buck. Then a coyote. Then a red-tailed hawk, and likely a golden eagle soaring across my view.

Eventually, Brian noted two larger bucks had appeared, quickly followed by “There’s a big one!” I immediately swiveled my glass, and it was obvious the new buck was head and shoulders above the others. As we scanned the surrounding brush more bucks materialized, including several more that got our hearts pumping. We never got a firm count as they moved in and out of the brush, but the bachelor group held about 7-8 bucks, 2-3 of which were very nice. Their velvet antlers bobbed as they fed, the early morning sun lighting them up like golden crowns. They were too far for a decent photo, but the view was magical and is permanently etched in my mind.

Although deer can disappear pretty easily, the bucks were on a gently sloping hillside with no drainages or severe topography nearby, so the terrain was good for us. Since Brian had spotted them, he would be the designated shooter and although we always bounce around ideas, it would generally be his call for our approach. He simply stated, “I think I should just head over there and shoot one of them.” I chuckled at the simplistic approach, knowing things rarely go that smoothly. I asked if he wanted me to hang back and keep an eye on them to help steer him to the bucks, as we would certainly lose sight of them for a while when we dropped from our glassing perch. In fact, as I watched, one of the nicer bucks split from the group and began climbing straight uphill – had I missed his move, he would have vanished without a clue. At first, I thought they would all follow him, but it soon became apparent he intended to find a secluded spot to bed – quite likely one of reasons he had grown to be one of the bigger bucks.

“Nope,” Brian replied, “you come too, maybe we’ll both get a buck today.” Yeah, right.

We quickly stowed gear in our backpacks and dropped elevation. We were able to keep an eye on the bucks for a while, but eventually lost sight of them. We noted a few landmarks where we hoped to find them again.



Spotting deer from afar is possible; however, once on the same slope as them, seeing them again becomes much more challenging.



What appears to be semi-open short brush on the opposite hillside can transform into a wall of green once you get there...

When we got within about 100-yards of the bucks' last known location we slowed way down, Brian knocked an arrow and took the lead, and we gently eased along a game trail. Each step provided a new glimpse of our surroundings. We assumed the herd was still feeding nearby.

Suddenly a nice buck stepped out from behind a nearby bush and stared at us! He was really close...like 15-yards! I hissed "Left". Brian slowly swiveled his head, attempting to peer between openings in the brush, not realizing the buck was nearly behind him. "Hard left!" I whispered. Instantly Brian twisted, smoothly drew his bow, and sent an arrow through the buck! Wow, that happened fast and took me by surprise. The buck was a dandy, no doubt, but I assumed Brian would try to locate the big boy, instead he whispered "Sorry, but I wasn't about to pass up that gift!" We watched Brian's trophy bound around the head of a small arroyo, immediately slow down, then sway on his feet and promptly lay down.

Confident the buck was down for good, I softly suggested, “How about you keep an eye on your buck, and I’ll ease on ahead?” Brian nodded, so I nocked an arrow and proceeded at a snail’s pace. After perhaps 25 yards a huge set of antlers materialized in front of me! I knew instantly there was no need to poke around looking for the big buck – it was him! I drew and let fly as the brute emerged from the brush. He took 4 jumps and crashed to the ground! I quietly retreated to Brian. “I heard you shoot; did you get the big one?” I sheepishly replied, “I’m pretty sure I did,” then chuckled “I guess that worked out pretty well for me, I point out one of the other bucks for you to shoot, then get the big one myself?!” Brian just grinned with enthusiasm - he’s that kind of hunting partner - and reiterated, “Like I said, a buck like mine at close range, I’d take that shot any day. It didn’t want to risk spooking him and ending up with nothing. I can’t believe we got another double!”

Brian’s wisdom struck me. Had I been the designated shooter I realized I probably would have been tempted to push my luck and perhaps blow out the whole group with neither of us getting a shot. I humbly vowed to consider the overall big picture in future hunts with Brian.



Brian was rightfully proud of his “small” buck LOL



My buck



The buck's body was enormous!

With two big bucks on the ground, and the day rapidly warming, our work began. Brian's buck lay in a good spot for butchering, but mine was on a steep slope and in the hot sun. I suggested we drag mine to the nearest shade, perhaps 30-yards away...uphill. I knew my buck was large and mature, but it wasn't until we tried to drag him that we realized just how enormous his body was. We could barely

move the beast, and within seconds we were forced to settle for a marginally shaded relatively flat spot only 10-yards away. This is by far the biggest-bodied buck I've ever shot.

We quickly snapped photos and butchered the precious table fare. Throughout the chore we chided each other about our original plan to divide our bounty –never imagining repeating our pronghorn success, with each of us bagging a deer – and within minutes of each other, again!

We cached gear and meat in the shade and ferried loads of meat to the truck. After completing our third and final trip we were thankful to take a seat and crank the air conditioner. Brian quipped “So are you going to look for bears now?!” I'm not sure if Brian is psychic or if I just have a one-track mind, but admitted I was already scheming...

Our first order of business was to get the meat on ice. After that I reorganized my gear and checked my watch. I theorized there might be enough time to head to another area and hike to a remote water source that had appeared to have bear activity. Brian wanted to reduce scent and noise at the ambush, so wished me well and promised to be ready should I need help packing out another animal.

During our scouting we had discovered a seep with promising sign and I later constructed a brush blind for potential ambush. In fact during a lull in my work, I happened to notice a bull elk headed my way and he eventually drank just 30-yards from where I sat!



Nice bull elk while scouting



The valley with the seep had quite a bit of bear sign, including rotten logs ripped apart for insects



And more obvious bear sign...

My hour-long hike was hot, but I knew animals would be thirsty and eager to cool off. I settled into my natural blind 30-yards from the seep with several hours remaining before sunset. I nocked an arrow and readied my bow. I set my binoculars within easy reach, equally handy for identifying songbirds or evaluating game animals. Then opened my book to pass the time. I had originally wanted to spend a little time reading *Slaying the Giants In Your Life* by David Jeremiah, but given the length of my hike I brought only one book and settled for a light-hearted Clive Cussler adventure novel. The afternoon passed quietly with only songbirds and chipmunks darting around my hide and the seep.

Over the next few hours Brian's comment bounced around in my head. Of course, I like trophy-sized animals, but anything taken with archery tackle is an incredible achievement, and the end goal is to feed my family. My new skulls and antlers are relegated to the garage, so Brian's insight stuck with me. Although I vowed to pass up young, small bears, I decided any mature animal would be fair game. Based on my prior two, the meat is delicious and worth filling my tag if the opportunity arose.

Despite my optimism nothing showed during my first sit at the seep, although I heard a few far-off elk bugles late in the evening, and the weather was pleasant.

The next morning, I had high hopes for an all-day ambush. I left Brian in camp and began hiking in the dark to get set up early. It was a little chilly and I needed an extra layer for a few hours, but by midmorning the sun beat down and it began to get hot. Sitting in ambush isn't for everyone, as it requires a healthy dose of mental fortitude plus the ability to remain quiet and fight boredom. Often, I find myself wondering if it's a waste of time as it seems I'm doing nothing. Which makes me think

about all the other things I should be doing instead: tackling tasks at my day job, the never-ending list of projects at home, working out, spending time with Laurie, and on and on...

I passed the time by reading, snacking, scanning the area, and repeating. Suddenly, in the early afternoon I glimpsed brown fur through the vegetation and a small bear appeared. I immediately dismissed it as a shooter but practiced preparing for a shot while studying it. The bear was extremely skittish and hesitantly approached the seep angled toward me. It kept snapping its head up and sniffing as it lapped the water, before wading in facing me directly. It laid down, but then promptly stood up, spun directly away and fast-walked into the brush. It was an exciting encounter and fun to watch, but even if it had been a larger bear, I never had a shot opportunity, and I realized this was no slam-dunk. I remained on high alert for quite some time afterward, but no other bears showed.



Small, skittish bear



Large ears compared to its head are a sure sign of an immature bear

The sun began to dip below the ridgeline, putting me in shadow. I heard some noise in the brush opposite me and scanned with binoculars. A young bull elk cautiously emerged from scrub oak brush. He gingerly approached the seep and drank briefly before whirling and trotting away. He let out a

half-hearted bugle, which was immediately answered by an aggressive bull farther up the valley. The bull meandered that direction and soon disappeared in the timber, wrapping up my evening sit.



Small, skittish bull

The next day began as a repeat with me sitting in wait. For variety, I carried *Slaying the Giants In Your life*, and found myself in the chapter *Winning against Worry*. Although I wouldn't say I worry a lot, I often tend to see the glass half-empty, and lean toward pessimism or afraid to get my hopes up. The gist of the chapter is worry is irrational, illogical, and ineffective. Matthew 6:26 "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" Don't dwell on yesterday's stress. And perhaps more importantly, don't dwell on tomorrow's stress. As the chapter quoted Mark Twain's eloquence "I'm an old man and I've known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." Reading this wisdom in peaceful solitude outdoors touched my heart and I vowed to spend my time focusing on the present and not what *might* happen tomorrow. Perhaps the reason I didn't see a mature bear the prior day was God wanted to teach me some of His wisdom through reading?

The hours passed pleasantly as I relaxed in my hideout, when mid-afternoon I glanced up to see a bear making a beeline to the water! It wasn't a monster, but its hide was beautiful and thick, and by its lack of caution, I sensed it was mature. My heartrate spiked as it began to drink facing me. I carefully grabbed my bow, and when it waded into the water, I was able to stand for a more comfortable shot. It sat down in the pool broadside, and I drew my bow. My sight pin was shaking all over the place, so I held, relaxed, and focused until it became steady before releasing my arrow. The broadhead hit here exactly was aiming, and I was immediately confident in my shot.



This mature bear strolled right in!



My shot opportunity!

The bear exploded from the water and galloped up a trail opposite me. I was only able to see it for about 20-yards before it disappeared into thick brush, but I visually confirmed a good hit, and already blood was visible on its side. What a rush!

I took a seat to get a handle on my heartbeat, then offered a prayer of thanks to the Lord. I hiked to a high point for service to text Brian and request his help that evening.

By the time Brian reached me we still had a couple of hours before dark, and quickly took up the blood trail. Bears are notorious for not leaving much sign, since fat can plug holes in the hide, thick fur sops up blood before it can drop to the ground, and paws don't leave marks in the soil like hooves do. I had seen the initial path taken, but we couldn't find any blood for the first dozen yards until spotting a smudge on the trunk of a sapling. We found a few more smears on leaves and a couple of drops on a fallen log, but all in all very little sign, although I wasn't particularly surprised.

We pressed on the most likely path but failed to turn up any additional sign. We fanned out, circled, zig-zagged and grid-searched. In my heart I knew the shot had been fatal, but we didn't turn up any more evidence and failed to find my dead bear. As the sun set and visibility dimmed, I became more

upset and frustrated. When it became dark enough to need headlamps, our search became futile; in the thick vegetation the lights lit up close branches and leaves, creating impenetrable shadows beyond. We bumbled around for a while but were forced to give up, vowing to return at first light to resume the search. I prayed the meat and hide would be fine.

As we marched silently back to our vehicles, I beat myself up for a while, questioning my shot and agonizing about the possibility of losing the meat. But as the steps fell behind, I became at peace, knowing the outcome was in God's hands and no amount of worry on my part would make any difference on the outcome. My spirits began to lift, and I began to simply enjoy the hike and chatting with Brian. The air was cool, the stars were stunning, and I was in the best of company.

The next morning, we began our hike early, just barely able to see without headlamps. The air was brisk, and I was in good spirits. I led, with Brian following close behind. After about 10 minutes a white triangular piece of "trash" beside the path caught my eye, glowing against the dark background in the dim light. I poked it with my hiking pole to get Brian's attention as I had already passed it, and he picked it up. "That would be...an arrowhead...", he said with chagrin. Honestly, I didn't think it was one, although I would have checked on my own it regardless. Nevertheless, despite traveling miles, both together and apart, Brian has never found one. This was the second time I'd discovered one right under his nose, and I almost felt bad about it. Almost. Brian just shook his head and reiterated that one day he would discover an entire mummified native American, complete with a bow and quiver full of arrows. I laughed and sensed the piece to be a very good sign.



Just luck? Or divine providence?

Before long we reached our search area and quickly began radiating from the point where we had lost the trail. I retraced my steps from the night prior, but curved back toward the spring after just a dozen yards. A large fallen log blocked my progress, and I stepped over it to discover my dead bear! Praise God! I immediately called to Brian, "Thank you Lord!". I confirmed it was a mature sow (female), as I had assumed.

My immediate concern was to check the condition of the meat, and thankfully the carcass felt cool to the touch. In hindsight perhaps having been in the water had helped cool it, plus the night had been chilly. Regardless, the Lord reinforced His lesson that I should not worry!

Again, I offered a silent prayer of thanks, and we quickly snapped some photos, skinned the beast, and placed the meat into game bags to stay cool as we worked. An examination of its teeth indicated substantial wear, a clear indication of a mature animal.



Not my biggest, but certainly my prettiest bear!

As we shouldered our packs for the hike out Brian simply stated, "Now our slump is *really* over!" Amen, brother, amen! Thank you Lord!