

Combo Hunt by John Mitchell

I had polio when I was nine months old and have been a member of Adaptive Sportsmen since the very start. Cowboys like Roy Rogers (who I got to see in person) were my first heroes. I think that led to my interest in guns and then to my interest in hunting with gun or bow. I have dreamed of hunting mule deer ever since reading a borrowed copy of Outdoor Life while in high school. Well this year it happened as a combo hunt (in several ways) during a trip to Wyoming. Garth Harris was the other hunter in the combo. We have been a combination hunting small game and big game in several states and provinces. Those hunts have all been great experiences in the outdoors. I have definitely received the better part of the deal since Garth has carried in my gear, dragged out my deer and also carried me out once when a kidney stone acted up.

A friend had made arrangements for us to hunt on some private ranches. These are not like Wisconsin farms. It is almost two miles to the house from the road. They do not milk their cows. It was very comforting to follow the GPS "breadcrumb trail" out to the entrance way point in the dark at night.

We started our mule deer hunt on the first day in shirtsleeves. The rancher showed us the property that was mostly rolling hills and grasslands but also had wooded areas in the creek bottoms. After seeing several groups of does, I saw my first bobcat walking across the lane. We continued our search for a mule deer buck after watching it go out of sight. We glassed two bucks in a meadow with some does. The rut was still more than a month away. The distance was a little far and the rancher thought he knew where one just as good was bedding with some other bucks so we quickly moved on while darkness began to approach. We arrived on a butte behind the ranch house and spotted one of the bucks. I confess my gaze had to be guided as I was looking out to far in the distance. Garth and I had gone out to practice at McMiller, which is an accessible range in the Southern Unit of the Kettle Moraine that has target distances of 100, 200 and 300 yards. My 6x4 mule deer was shot at about 80 yards. It is at Artisans Taxidermy in Burlington now.

With my tag filled we turned to the task of trying to fill Garth's. We glassed and drove looking for the right buck. It is really sort of neat when you are looking through your binoculars and then a deer appears in them. We saw one young buck just flopped out on the ground like my dog lies down. Garth completed his first stalk to less than 200 yards but after putting the cross hairs in place decided not to shoot the forked buck. Another stalk ended when it became apparent the deer he had selected through the spotting scope was actually across the fence on the next ranch. Now what are the chances a deer can be on the wrong side of the fence when you are hunting on a ranch that is eight miles wide?

We found out antelope tags were still available in the area so mid-way through our trip we decided to go to the Fish and Game Headquarters and buy two of them. Garth shot his antelope first while we still had the shirt sleeve weather. It

was a thrill for me being able to watch the entire episode looking down into the valley from the trailside. The stalk was a masterpiece of woodsmanship. The antelope were a good 800 yards away from the trail. Garth slipped into a creek bed and worked his way into the valley in the rolling hills. Garth was unaware a doe appeared above the creek bed and would have sounded the alarm but fortunately she joined the buck before he made his appearance out of the dry creek bed. He was crouched low moving forward to a stone shelf where he carefully removed his wide brim hat before peering over at the antelope. At this point I could see the antelope buck with three does on one edge of my binoculars and Garth on the other edge with his gun moving into position. Garth was within 150 yards of them. Then I thought he was busted as antelope began to run but a moment later I heard the report of a single shot and his buck was down.

The next day was nasty with rain turning to snow and blowing wind making all of the animals very spooky. The following day dawned clear with the promise of temperatures rising above the freezing mark. If deer are easier to see in the snow antelope are more difficult to see with all of their white blending in with the snow. Garth spotted my antelope first bedded in a heard of about twenty animals. They were resting up and eating since they were so worked up the day before. He was able to close the gap to about 140 yards by moving the vehicle forward. We checked the range and I tried to line up a shot but there were too many animals moving in front of and behind the buck that stayed bedded. I started to shake from trying to get a bead for so long so I took Garth's advice and looked up for a moment before starting to get into alignment again. The doe in front moved off just before the doe behind him so I took the shot before another animal could get in the way. It was chaotic to see so many antelope running away in several directions. All but one that is. The west does hold something special. What a blessing these trips are.

