

SKULL



AN OUTFITTER'S JOURNAL



THE MOST
DIFFICULT
STALK

PERSONAL BEST TYPICAL

SHHC
JULY 2021

LOVE TO SUFFER

It always feels good to be heading west on I-80 headed towards the Eastern Plains of Colorado, but after being in a locked-down COVID world all summer, it felt especially sweet mid-October of 2020.

This was the third year in a row that I'd be meeting up with Neil Emick of Sandy Hills Hunt Company for an archery mule deer hunt. It's never a surprise that the Sandy Hills crew will have several big bucks lined up and this year was no different. Day one got started quickly with Neil finding our target buck right off the bat. After watching him for some time he disappeared into some thick sage. While we had a general idea of the buck's location the wind was fickle and kept us at a distance. As with any bowhunt, patience plays a large roll in spot and stalk mule deer hunts. Plus, if history was any indication of how this hunt would go we'd be in this deer's bedroom the next day. Neil and I had tagged out the second morning two years in a row. True to form, we found this buck in the early morning light coming off of a harvested wheat field and heading into a pasture with tall brush. Once we had him bedded we worked our way into position. It was a familiar routine, find the buck, sneak in, and put an arrow in him. It always amazes me how consistently we find great deer and get within bowrange. I've hunted with

other outfitters and these guys are second to none. That morning we stalked to 48 yards and could see the buck and several other smaller buck's racks sticking up above the brush. A couple of hours later we got our opportunity. Neil ran the camera, I drew and anchored like I had many times before, and then settled the pin. Feeling good about the shot, I dumped the string but this is where the story goes in a different direction than years prior. We watched my arrow sail high, miss clean, and the buck turn and run. He stopped once more at 62 yards, but again, a clean miss! I couldn't believe it, but later that evening we found my bow had somehow come out of timing.

After a quick tune by Neil, we set out the next morning to find the buck again. We located him across the road from the pasture he was in the day before. Once we had him and several other bucks bedded we switched gears for a quick shooting session. Everything was dialed in and my confidence was back! We drove around to a more ideal location to begin our stalk and after a quick quarter mile walk we arrived at a ridge and began glassing for the bucks. Knowing they shouldn't be far, the pace really slowed and we invested all of our attention to determining their location. We slowly pushed forward for what seemed to be hrs, and still no sign

of the bucks. We new we had to be within a 100 yards, so we sat still for awhile just watching and waiting, but there was still no sign. Finally, Neil decided to stand slowly and scan the area...nothing! We couldn't make sense of it, but they were gone. Once we got to the ridge we would have been able to see them leave the location and they never could have saw or smelt us prior to getting to the ridge. Regardless, they were gone and what happened that day is still unknown. After pressuring that buck a couple times, we decided to check a different ranch and give him a break. That

evening we watched three huge racks float through some standing milo from a half a mile away. I'd have been happy with any of these bucks, but two were especially nice, big typical.

We watched the bucks for two days before an opportunity finally presented itself. The bucks bedded in a sand dune bowl with three other bucks and what appeared to be a couple does. The wind was marginal for the intial portion of the stalk, but if we could get through the first 150 yards we had a



THE BUCK WE MISSED

chance! Good enough...we were off! Over the next five hours we slithered through crunchy sunflowers, short grass, sand, ants, and cactus. Unfortunately, there were triple the deer in the bowl than we originally thought. Every time we made a plan, we ran into more deer and by the time we got to the buck's last known location they were up and moving to a new place to bed. We spent hours slithering around a one acre area! To make matters worse, it was HOT! It got over 90 degrees that day and we were right in the middle of it fully exposed. Finally, we were 45 yards from the second biggest buck with no apparent move on the biggest buck. No sooner than I decided I would be happy with this buck the wind died and began to swirl. A short time later the buck jumped up looked around and bounded off with a smaller buck that was bedded below him. Similarly, the does between us and the biggest buck caught the movement and after some surveillance decide to move off and out of sight! To our amazement the big buck never moved. His back was to all the action. We had 50 yards to cover before we would be in range. The problem was there was zero cover between us and the buck and a marginal wind. Neil suggested we stand up and walk right at him. Like many times, I thought to myself....we're going to do what?? No sooner than we stood up, a lone floppy-eared fawn stood up 30 yards from us. We froze and waited for it to make a move. And as if everything hadn't gone in our favor to this point, the fawn slowly walked away and over a hill - the big buck remained. We tip-toed straight at the buck and sat down at 50 yards. At this point, Neil and I really couldn't believe what had happened over the past



5 hrs. I sat and visualized the shot over and over so when Neil said “Draw” it would be imprinted in my mind. Ten minutes later I heard Neil say, “Get ready, Todd. He’s gonna get up.” It never gets old...the adrenaline dump is unreal. Just as the adrenaline hit, I heard the words...“Draw, Todd!” The big typical stood at 50 yards! I steadied the pin and the shot felt great. The buck jumped, stopped, then looked back at us. The shot looked great, but had apparently not connected. Unaware of where the first shot hit, I nocked another arrow and sent it down range. We heard and saw that arrow hit hard and the big buck took off. He ran down the hill and around a ridge. We hurried to the ridge and began glassing. Deer were standing everywhere, but there was no sign of the buck. Neil quickly caught the buck’s antler tips in a thick weed patch 20 yards below us. Amazingly, we were able to watch his final minutes and it gave us the opportunity take the entire experience in for what it was.

Sometimes things go exactly how you expect, but sometimes you airball a shot, have to stay patient for extra days, go on an absolute GRIND of a stalk, and then end up with a 185” typical mule deer. It’s like Neil says, “If you wanna kill a big deer out here with your bow, you better love to suffer. Patience and persistence are king out here.” Either way, it makes that drive home feel awfully good and leaves me looking forward to that next trip out West with Sandy Hills Hunting Co!





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