

Written by Texas Outdoors  
Sunday, 04 August 2013 13:11

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**This is part 2 of 4 of another masterpiece of storytelling by Bear Claw. Be sure to come back soon to read the rest of the story!!**

**PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:**

**OR HOW THE TENDERFEET SURVIVED THEIR ELK HUNT**

**JOHN A. HUDSPETH**

The big day arrived, and we left work at noon for our drive to Colorado. It must have been some state holiday, such as "all plumbing day" or such, since at every stop along the way, the restrooms were marked "Out of Order". This did have the effect of delaying our progress at about the halfway mark, until we found a state park with facilities that apparently were exempt from the celebration.

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We pulled into the last available campsite in a national forest just shortly before midnight and got out to stretch our legs and get the lay of the land as quietly as we possible could. Had this been one of the earlier season hunts, there would have been no sites available. A couple of other hunters were still awake in the cool evening air. We started one of our camp stoves to make some hot chocolate to share, and find out what we could of the area.

This was my first trip to the Rocky Mountains in the fall, although I went to the mountains almost every summer. The temperature was in the low forties, and the air was an absolutely invigorating tonic. The sound of the stream filled the air, and I nearly hyperventilated, trying to drink in the delicious aroma of pines and stream and ... horses! There was a remuda some of the camped hunters had set up just past the camping area. This was it. This was hunting season in the Rockies. After we had finished our late night libation, and very quietly wished our fellow hunters well, we turned in for a very short night's sleep.

About 4:00 am, I heard the horsemen leaving out with their pack string. I was eager to get started, but I knew it was still 3 hours before first light, and that we needed to acclimate ourselves that day. Sleep was fitful for the rest of the night, as first one group, then another of the campers moved out for their hunt.

By 6:00 am I could stand it no longer. I crawled out of my sleeping bag and began to put on the clothes I had laid out the night before. I opened the tailgate of my truck, and started the stove to reheat some of the coffee that remained in my thermos from the night before.

After a quick breakfast, we sorted out our hunting packs and rifles, and locked up the truck. We were the last of the hunters to leave the campsite. We followed up the creek approximately a mile and a half through several meadows, to the base of an inviting mountain. Crossing several deer trails, with fresh sign, we climbed above the stream to a high meadow at about 8,000 feet elevation.

Gale always walks as if he is late for something, and his hunting style is the same. He forged ahead into the meadow, leaving me about 50 yards behind, looking at the profusion of fresh droppings. As he reached the center of the clearing, we were both startled by the clamor of a good mule deer buck ripping his way through the underbrush ringing the meadow, trying to get down the mountain we had just hiked up. By the time I had him located in my scope, he lined out away from me behind a large pine tree. We tried to locate where his escape had taken him, but to no avail.

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As we worked through the clearing, a long wailing bugle was heard from the valley below. We crossed a corner of the clearing and found a 7 foot pine tree that had been totally stripped, except for an absurd little tuft of needles right at the top. Seeing a rub like that told me that we were not after the jack rabbit sized whitetails I had known and enjoyed for years.

By this time, the sun had risen above the surrounding peaks, but was hiding behind the thin grey clouds. The temperature was in the high 40's, and the light fog made the air delicious. Gale decided to work on up the mountain, while I picked out a prominent point from which to watch for a voluntary buck or bull elk.

The land had lost most of the bright colors of the earlier fall. There was still a hint of yellow in the litter below the trees, and the reds were just about faded to brown. The dark green of the pines was different than that of the summer. I was hooked already. I honestly don't know how long I sat on that rock looking over the valley. I ached to see the bull that had bugled working his way across the stream, but I almost didn't want to have to shoot and break the stillness. To this day, each time I close my eyes, I see a little bit of the view from that rock.

Before I had taken in my fill of the mountainside, Gale slipped up behind me. He had been over the top of the ridge, and found more sign in the clearing near where I had stayed. We needed to get on into town to meet with the guide and make our final arrangements. We worked on down the trail, back to the campsite where we had parked. As we crossed the stream the last time, I was saddened when I saw how the remuda had torn up the area during the night. As we were within 100 yards of the truck, a shot rang out near our camp.

Several local hunters had driven into the campground area to start their hunt, and had seen a young 3x3 mulie standing within sight of our campground, and were just getting down to the business of dressing their prize. Had I stayed in camp, I could have taken this fellow without spilling my coffee. Often, when I come in empty handed, I feel unsatisfied, compulsive. I think I got the best of that morning's hunt, though.

We drove into town and had large burgers before checking in at the condo. We called our guide, Gary. He was ready for us to come out to his place and make our final plans, and pay him the balance for our hunt.

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Gary looked pretty guide-ish. He was of medium height, lighter build, and red complexion. He had the stance of a man who had spent a lot of time on horses, and the wind-eroded look of someone who spends a lot of time out in the Rockies. I noticed that he didn't wear a cowboy hat, but a billed cap with warm ear flaps. He also didn't wear a coat, just an extra shirt, and wool pants.

Gary's string of horses were the ideal mounts for this terrain. They were the biggest mounts I had ever seen. Threequarter ton, four wheel drive horses with huge hooves and quiet dispositions. Well fed and strong were these animals. A lean nervous animal is not appropriate on these mountain trails. But I thought I was going to need some type of folding ladder for my pack, so I could reach the saddle. Stumps and big rocks would have to do for launching pads to blast into the saddle.

The plan agreed on was to meet Gary at 5:00 am Sunday morning in town, and then drive behind his truck up to a ranger station where the string of horses we would use were corralled. We would then ride on horseback into the mountains from there. We drove back toward the condo, stopping along the way to visit a meat processing plant, just to check on the procedure should we be successful. We went over our equipment that night, making certain that our boots were dry and sealed. We laid out what we felt we would need, and then turned in for a short night's sleep.

First call was at 4:00 am, and found us eager to start. The weather was cool, around freezing, with a light frost on the truck. We loaded up our gear and drove on down to the local cafe, which was already brim-full of men in all variety of outdoors dress, but all with some type of bright orange. Our guide soon arrived, and we ordered plates heaping with eggs, sausage, and gravy.

We arrived at the ranger station before the sky was completely light. The sun would not be visible above the mountains till mid-morning. The frost was heavier at the corral, at about 9,000 feet, than in town. The mountains above us were already showing the white of snow.

I met my mount, a big black half Barzion horse called "Tiny Tim". With little fanfare, we saddled up, mounted, and headed off up the mountain which was the back fence of the corral, and the horses weren't apt to climb without someone in a saddle urging them on.

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The trail was steep, but the horses managed with stops about every five minutes to catch their wind. After only half an hour, we were in the snow. We came upon elk beds so fresh that steam was rising from them. The elk knew the routine after bow season, muzzle-loader season, and the two previous rifle seasons, and moved out as we approached.

After another hour's ride, we crossed fresh bear sign at about 10,000 feet. The guide was concerned that the horses might get skittish, especially if the owner of the sign were about. This certainly gave me an extra "hunter's edge" in watching the woods around us. Snow had begun falling on us, the flakes drifting straight down in the incredibly still air. The effect was that of cloaking the aspen and fir growth in an intensely quiet atmosphere, which I rarely experienced at home on the plains.

At about 11,000 feet, we rode into one of Gary's drop campsites. Hunters had used this campsite in earlier seasons and had taken a couple of nice bulls. There was a small stream running beside the site, and several peaks were visible through the clouds of big, fat snowflakes which now poured out of the sky. The campsite would make a good day camp to work out of. We unbridled the horses and loosened the saddles and gathered wood for a fire to warm us up.

After an early lunch, we rode down from the mountain to try a different area. The snowfall and the exertion had the horses soaked in their own sweat, and the saddle was riding up on Tim's neck. We stopped once to correct the problem, but it wasn't effective. When we got to the elevation that snow had turned to slush, Gary insisted that I lead Tim down, rather than riding him.

Walking in front of a 1,500 pound horse along a slick muddy trail, where it looks as if the next step would be about 700 feet down was a new experience for me. Especially since Tim wasn't too sure he wanted to go that way. In fact, he was usually sure that he didn't want to follow, so it seemed as if I had to pull him down the whole mile. I had the nagging thought all the way that he knew from experience what soft flatland hunter felt like under his steel shoes! I was torn between aggravation at having to stumble along, and appreciation of the fact that Gary took such good care of his stock. I think Tim appreciated it, though.

That afternoon, we picked up different mounts, and tried hunting an area called "valle Seco". This was an entirely different type of hunting than the high mountain hunts of the morning and

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the rest of the trip. We rode through a large valley, and into the oak forest along the hills, predominantly looking for a mule deer to fill my tag. We saw a lot of sign, a few does, and quite a few hunters (the only time we saw more than one other hunter the whole time with Gary.)

My mount that afternoon was Red Man. He and I were old acquaintances, having met when my family and I had visited the condo several summers back, and visiting Gary's "Astraddle A Saddle" for a tourist ride. Red Man didn't seem impressed.

I was having a tough time avoiding trees, and every time he got close to one, I tried to lean away, not realizing that pulling myself toward the off-side of the saddle meant pressing my leg into his side, moving him toward the tree. I learned a lot about oak bark that day.

By the time we got the horses back to the trailer, I was ready to rest for the day. We returned to the condo just in time to see a storm front coming over the mountain range to the north. In the time it took me to run in and get my camera, it appeared that the dark blue clouds had advanced from the top of the range to the bottom, just out of town. The snow line was advancing from the high mountains where we had been earlier that day, into town.

That first night, as we brought our hot pizza and salad from the corner restaurant and the streets began to freeze up, I really began to appreciate the condo style of elk hunting. After we had dried out our boots and snow sealed them while we relived our day, we turned in early for a sound sleep.

**TO BE CONTINUED.....**

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