

A Decoy's Delights

Steven Maichak - 2010

As per Martinez Ranch ritual, all twenty-plus hunters laced their boots, grabbed their binoculars, and crammed the bed space among the battalion of gurgling, dirt-plastered pickups, eager to navigate the extensive stretch of land as a pre-hunt tour. Seemingly frothing at the mouths in anticipation, young and old alike readied their minds in hopes of glimpsing what the following dawn might bring. Disappointingly, only anxiousness and doubt appeared to roam the barren plains and rolling hills; pronghorns were few and far between. Similarly, one was just as likely to encounter the ocean as he or she was to find a blade of green grass. Parched clumps of ankle-high vegetation drowned in the surplus of dirt. One might as well have deemed New Mexico the "Sandbox State." Upon first impression, it appeared it would be a long, tedious hunt.

In preparation for the few minute opportunities that would present themselves during the hunt, many soda cans fell prey to my pellet gun. The repetitions of deep breaths and smooth trigger pulls would hopefully pay dividends with a trophy of a lifetime. Eventually, school work was shoved aside, and my imagination went into overdrive, dreaming of what the hunting gods might afford me. All extra time was spent practicing with the air rifle, amassing my clothes and gear, or envisaging bruiser bucks only fit for wall mounts.

Always looking for new ways to become more in touch and personal with his quarry, my dad constructed a life-size decoy with the hopes it might intrigue, challenge, and lure in rutting, harem-holding bucks. Complete with a realistic paint job, carrying handle, shoulder straps, and a built in shooting window, this trick would prove to be our ace in the hole. Others would eventually reap its rewards as well.

With an eye on securing every possible advantage to succeed my dad arranged for us to spend a preceding night to the hunt on the Sharp Ranch, located just outside of Boise, Oklahoma. It was there that my dad harvested his second pronghorn two years before, courtesy of the ODWC draw hunt program. Mr. Dan Sharp and his family generously allowed us to camp under the stars next to the Santa Fe Trail, which runs through the majority of his property. I am now privileged to say I have slept beside the same wagon ruts, still

visible to this day, that were carved into the landscape by the endless wagon caravans long ago. Most importantly, however, it was there that I was able to begin sizing up bucks of different maturity. This would prove to be critical experience come the actual hunt time. It was also there we first began to experiment with the decoy. Lo and behold, it was a huge success! The life-like pronghorn cutout allowed us to close the distance of once impossible shots to makeable opportunities. Nonetheless, a key trick to making a successful hunt is to see the game before it sees you, nothing exceptional to the decoy. One of the most exhilarating trials at the Sharp Ranch was when my dad and I, hunkered down behind the cutout, crept to within twenty yards of a bedded fawn pronghorn. Creeping up so close to one of Mother Nature's most stately specimens, especially in such an expansive and free environment, was a real treat.

The following morning saw us blazing a trail the rest of the way to the hunting grounds. One would think a panorama as dull as the Oklahoma panhandle would cause its victims to feel an overwhelming urge to sleep. Contrarily, the outlying circumstances supplied an endless flood of eagerness and energy; every valley, hillside, and flat that juxtaposed the highway seemed to be decorated with horns of varying shapes and sizes. Antelope dotted the countryside as prolifically as pools in suburban California. My binoculars never got a rest, constantly employed to observe what, clearly, was a pronghorn paradise. However, the trip was still a long one, fueled by an assembly line of impatience, anticipation, and an unquenchable desire to taste a savory antelope steak.

Luckily, midday offered some relief when we finally arrived at the reputable Martinez Ranch. Untainted air, a lack of fences, and a warming host family welcomed hunters as well as anyone could have hoped. Mr. Martinez gave a short tour of the camping area; Mrs. Martinez graciously offered all her services; and their son, Jack, made all the youth hunters feel more comfortable and accepted amongst the crowd of old, achy geezers lumbering around. The grill's smoky aroma wafted through the air as more parties arrived and conversation picked up. Our hosts initiated the pre-hunt tour soon after all tag-holders had arrived. Afterward, nightfall quickly descended as our new comrades slowly made their way to an assortment of cots, sleeping bags, and

RVs. Looking out through a mesh-walled tent, I was able to see the Milky Way as I never had before. I nearly felt like I could reach out and grab a handful of stars to take back home as a keepsake. Shooting stars, planets, and satellites were easily differentiable. The crisp images that adorned the night sky were almost ominous; it seemed the whole universe might collapse down on us. Bright and beautiful as the heavens were, I eased into a deep sleep soon after closing my eyes.

The next morning, Mr. Martinez made his rounds through the camp to personally make sure each and every hunting party was awake and ready to go. Normally, a 4:30 a.m. wakeup call might irritate me a bit. This time, however, I wouldn't have preferred anything different. I threw my hunting duds on, crammed a quick breakfast down my gullet, and gathered my gear in nothing-flat. Almost as quickly, all hunters were boarded in the brigade of rumbling trucks, ready to hit the field. At a distance, we might have looked like a miniature army; camouflaged clothing and high-powered rifle artillery were all the eye could see. Kenny, our guide, my dad, and I hopped off our truck midway through the ranch. Making sure to have all our gear, the rifle, and the decoy, we laid low until the back lights of the pickup broke over the next rise. From there, a quick check of the watch told us we were way ahead of the sunrise – a good omen in the hunting world. However, time passed quickly, and the heavens were soon painted by King Midas's touch. Vivid yellows, golds, and oranges embellished the east as the west faded into oblivion amongst its many blues, purples, and blacks.

Upon being able to see at least a couple hundred yards, the stalk began. As explained earlier, doubt and uncertainty ran rampant through our minds the prior evening. Few antelope were spotted during the pre-hunt tour. However, a quick scan of the binoculars across the expansive horizon eradicated any previous disappointment or apprehension. Pronghorns were grazing in herds of up to fifteen every quarter-mile, or so. Apparently, the morning hours worked some magic I had never experienced. Such a transformation was absolutely miraculous! Recognizing the true potential of the ranch and giving it due respect, I knew walking away from the hunt empty-handed soon seemed more difficult than harvesting a mature buck.

Kenny, my dad, and I crept fifty to one-hundred yards at a time behind the decoy, pausing to glass our surroundings for newly revealed antelope. Within only a few hundred yards we located a solo buck worth pursuing. Frustratingly, however, we also spotted a pair of coyotes between us and our quarry. Debating whether or not to circle around them, we instead decided to walk directly towards the desert dogs. Previous success at the Sharp Ranch told us we should be able to trust our decoy to fool other critters as well. As expected, the coyotes continued about their way and never paid us anymore attention except to check our location. We proceeded to cut the distance to our selected trophy, stopping every fifty yards to ensure he had not been alerted by our presence. Slowly but surely, we were within shooting-distance, having stalked a half mile to make a shot. Deciding to be patient, we sat down about one-hundred and fifty yards from the pronghorn, hoping he would present a better shot by turning and grazing away from us. Instead, he gradually ambled our way, still unknowing of our proximity. By this point, the shooting sticks were already in a comfortable position, my rifle was secured in the rest, the scope was in the correct magnification, and the safety was off. All of my practice shots at the pop cans back home would come down to a final, make-or-break trigger squeeze. All it took was the go-ahead from Kenny and my dad. However, a quick scan of my dad's binoculars told him there were bigger things to be had.

“Forget him!” my dad ordered. “Swing around on this one! He’s closing down on us quick!”

Recognizing the urgency in his voice, I locked onto the new oncoming herd through my scope in record time. Even at the considerable distance of four-hundred yards, one thing was for sure - those horns were huge! The ease with which antelope gain ground is awe-inspiring; the buck and his harem were in our faces in only a few seconds. The only thing concealing our true identification was a thin piece of particle board painted to resemble a pronghorn as close as possible. Fortunately, that was all we needed.

“Shoot him when you’re ready, bud,” my dad whispered.

“Shoot him!” Kenny commanded, obviously more worked up.

“I can’t!” I responded. “All the does are still behind him.”

I quickly realized my last opportunity was nearing. The only thing that enticed the buck to stay there that long was our deceiving cutout. He closed another twenty yards, putting him a measly eighty yards out – a true blessing in pronghorn country.

KABOOM! An echo to match the bombing of Hiroshima sprinted across the landscape. Meanwhile, the buck had reared up and kicked his front legs like a boxing kangaroo! At the same time, his harem of nine does burst away in radial fashion, resembling a firework pattern. It took no more than fifteen seconds for my trophy to bed down and take his last breaths. The time was 6:34 a.m. A few deep breaths of my own and some pats on the back told me I could finally relax. We waited a few minutes before approaching the beautiful specimen. Ground shrinkage was nonexistent. Kenny radioed Mr. Martinez to come pick us up, and both agreed my buck was in the top three to ever come off the ranch! I felt like royalty, getting to have my mug shot in an endless array of pictures and poses. A quick gutting job and we were on our way to pick up the rest of the morning's successful hunters.

By the time we got back to camp, many other hunting parties had already reconvened to have lunch. Wandering eyes swelled to the size of baseballs when they saw the many trophies stacked on the old flatbed Chevy. The successful hunters couldn't move their mouths quickly enough to tell their stories to prying ears. Excitement was rejuvenated, and Kenny headed back out into the field with our proven decoy in hand, eager to lead another hunter into a triumphant stalk.

Later that night, I was awarded with a generous wad of cash for harvesting the best scoring buck of the youth hunters. The other half was awarded to another young man for harvesting his trophy the earliest of the youth hunters, beating me out by only six minutes. Only recently, however, did I get to realize the final stage of my saga. After impatiently waiting the required sixty-day drying period, I am now proud to say my pronghorn scores high enough to make the SCI record books, a tribute to the wonderful opportunity the Oklahoma chapter of SCI, ODWC, and the Martinez Ranch provide to aspiring youth outdoors writers.

The fun didn't end at the ranch though. My dad and I took the scenic route home, hoping to top off the hunt in the best way possible. We stopped at multiple public lands to do some predator calling and check out more antelope. Also, we asked local landowners for permission to video pronghorn stalks on their properties with our decoy, which proved to be quite entertaining. One of these little escapades included a five-hundred yard stalk to a bedded buck that allowed us to close in to a meager twenty-five yards! That stalk was, in all honesty, just as much of a rush as harvesting my own pronghorn. The last pit stop found us enjoying the breath-taking views at Gloss Mountains State Park.

Quite easily, this was the most thrilling hunt I have ever been on. The land, the hunt, and, most importantly, the camaraderie will never be equaled. I would like to thank the Oklahoma chapter of Safari Club International, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, and the Martinez Ranch for providing and hosting an opportunity as grand as this. I would also like to thank Mr. Lewis Clary for providing his taxidermy services and crafting a handsome mount that now rests on my wall. I have much respect and appreciation for those who have allowed me to partake in this incredible adventure. Perhaps, the future will grant my decoy and me one more chance to roam those hills in New Mexico, the "Sandbox State."