

# A SMOKE POLE SAGA: PART III - DEDICATED

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DECEMBER 24, 2018

If you'll remember back in part two of this series, *Irons & Optics*, my hunt essentially started before I even drew a permit when I got a new muzzleloader for Christmas. It wasn't but a month after that when I finally became a Utah resident after having already lived here for a couple years. Accordingly, this was my first year applying for hunts in the Beehive State. After researching and planning out my applications I was fortunate enough to draw a Dedicated Hunter permit in a spectacular unit, Central Mountains Manti/San Rafael Swell! This unit is composed of a large swath of mountainous Forest Service land along the whole western edge with the remainder of the unit composed of vast BLM expanses. The Dedicated Hunter permit guarantees hunters a three year period in the same unit in which they can harvest a cumulative total of two bucks during any of the general season hunts to include archery, muzzleloader, and rifle, as well as extended archery in some units.



For this first year my map study was based solely on one criterion: where are the places people have to walk a mile or more to reach? Since my job as a wildland firefighter kept me in great hiking shape, I knew one of my better assets would be my ability to cover long distances with a heavy pack, so I figured putting in the extra work others weren't willing to put forth would be a step in the right direction. I knew most hunters selected for this unit would be drawn to the mountainous terrain of the National Forests, and I was no different. With most of the population in Utah living in the Salt Lake Valley a couple hours north of the unit I knew my odds

would be better avoiding other hunters in the southernmost portion, so that's where I focused my attention.

I didn't get a chance to go hunting during archery season. Furthermore, I didn't finish tuning my new muzzleloader until the afternoon before the opening day of the general muzzleloader season, so I didn't even arrive at my hunting unit until about an hour after the sun had already set. I was driving in blind, mostly unsure of what the landscape actually looked like. I passed roughly seven elk and deer camps during my drive in, most of them containing at least six hunters.

The moonlight and my headlights informed me there was much more than just the juniper and sage brush I expected. My education in wildlife ecology stressed the need to manage the plant community if one wants to manage the wildlife; higher biodiversity in the plant community lends way to a larger and healthier wildlife community, so I was happy to at least see the tree diversity was relatively rich.

Finally, I arrived at my intended camping spot. As luck would have it, I was the only camper in the area for nearly a half mile, and there was even a Forest Service bathroom facility all to myself! Two does crossed the road out ahead of me as I backed into the open campsite, what I hoped was a good sign for things to come the next day.

As I set up my campsite that first evening I heard an elk hunter's pack horse whinny about a mile down the road in a camp I had already passed. Looking on the map where I was going the next morning I saw Dead Horse Ridge. I interpreted the two signs as an omen that meant there must be a buck as big as a horse out there, and it was going to be my job to put the smack down on him.

After all the struggles with tuning my muzzleloader I fell asleep thinking a monster mulie wasn't just a goal. It surely had to be a part of God's will, and so I drifted off in the hopes that His will would be so.



## DAY 1

At nearly 8,000' in elevation, it ended up being colder than I expected that first night, especially for September. After all, I was simply cowboy camping on a safety tarp and air pad with a mummy bag. The cold woke me up several times throughout the night, and I woke up with sore muscles from being curled up so tightly for all those hours.

But it didn't matter. My 0430 alarm didn't matter either. It was the first day of muzzleloader season, and I was eager to hit the trail to get ahead of the folks on four wheelers. I smashed down my breakfast, stripped down out of my sleeping clothes to put on my hunting duds (a real wake-up call in the frigid open air), double checked my pack had everything I would need for a full day in the field, and headed toward where my map suggested the trailhead started. Turns out, the cartography was off quite a bit, so I ended up bushwhacking in the general direction of my destination about a half hour before I finally intercepted the trail. From that point, I still had another three miles to my morning destination. I soon heard other hunters start rumbling into the timber with their four wheelers.



I had a good head start, but my legs weren't exactly gas powered and four wheel drive like theirs were. Luckily, only one hunter passed me on the way up the mountain on a parallel trail. I eventually passed his parked ATV with about a mile left to my end point. I smiled because I had an idea where all the OHV trails were in the area, and I didn't hear anybody else driving up to where we were. The next closest hunters would be a whopping 5+ miles away coming from the opposite direction, so I felt confident I would have a good 4 square miles to myself once I reached my destination.

It was about the time I passed the other hunter's four wheeler that there was enough light in the sky to get a better sense of what it looked like around me. I was pleased to see aspen groves intermixed with grassy meadows and patches of evergreens. It was clear the only long shots would be exclusively on the ridge tops and south facing, rocky slopes.

The forecast suggested a high in the low 70's so I knew it would be important to stay on the north facing aspects where the game would seek cover, shade, food, and moisture. My strategy was to descend down the slopes until I found a "shelf" that revealed good game traffic. From there, I could setup and wait or keep stalking, trying to stay on the high ground and below the crest of the ridge when possible.

Right on cue, I received an inspirational greeting just as I reached the crest of Dead Horse Ridge. An elk bugled multiple times about a half mile below me in the drainage I already planned on hunting. I took it as a pretty good welcome tune, sort of a victory trumpet for my effort climbing all the way to the top. I decided I was in no rush to get a buck the first morning and could have more fun trying to drop down on top of the bull to hopefully get a few good pictures. While planning my approach I realized there were actually two distinctly different bulls bugling about a quarter mile apart from one another, both in the same general direction from me. I decided pursuing the closest one was my best option.

An hour and a half later, my stalk landed me right in the lap of the quieter of the two bulls with a couple cows! I somehow managed to get within 50 yards of them in a mature aspen grove without even realizing it. I had no idea they were there until they busted my swirling scent on the narrow shelf. They took off down the ridge only about 300 yards before they held up and the bull started bugling again. I at least proved to myself I was capable of sneaking in on them semi-blind to their exact location.





I began plotting my next move to either go after them again or hold tight. Had I not bumped them I still would've thought I was in a good location – a north facing shelf only 40 yards wide that made a nice pinch point for traveling game. After 10 minutes of strategizing I heard something else coming through the timber where I had just passed through. A few seconds later, 3 cows followed by 3 bugling bulls came crashing through the timber only 65 yards upslope from me! I whipped my phone out and got some decent footage of the action before they disappeared down the ridge, seemingly unknowing of my presence.

Clearly, I stumbled into a great travel route. I decided to climb back up the slope to get above where the elk passed through and intercept them if they came back. After settling into position another two cows came to within 25 yards of me. I figured the challenge of getting a mature mulie buck would be enough to keep me busy, but that close up encounter made me wish I had purchased a cow tag as well. I would've tagged out before 0930 the first morning!

Nonetheless, I knew I was on the right track because all that elk activity occurred at a pronounced "shelf" mid-slope. It seemed my strategy was worthy of further investment. I just needed to find another good bench and hold tight for a nice buck to pass by.

A short while later, I heard the first shot of the day at 0923. A second shot, presumably a finishing follow-up shot, came at 0933. Someone else about two miles across the drainage was having some good luck too.

Four miles west of me stood Steves Mountain, a prominent feature I figured could only be as handsome as myself. Southwest of me a couple miles was Bull Valley Mountain. No matter the name, I couldn't imagine it had more bull elk activity than what I had just experienced.

After settling into a nearby spot around 1000 I waited nearly three hours, but my inner explorer urged me to get up and check out what else the area had to offer. At 1250, I began pressing down the ridge when I heard a bugling bull almost exactly where I put a pin in my Google Maps as a potentially good spot during my pre-hunt map research. At 1430, I finally got to that place near the bottom of the ravine and named it "shelf booty". With all the hiking up and down this steep terrain both man and beast must have huge asses to power them up and down the mountainsides.



Though I had a great time taking in the beautiful landscape, the remainder of the day provided no more action. I was eager to catch up on a little sleep, so I started the trek back to camp, hoping to time my arrival just before the skies went black. I used the evening sunlight to slowly stalk my way back in the hopes of catching a buck in one of the trail side meadows. Of course, after hiking nearly 9 miles that first day, the only deer I saw were 5 does within a half mile of camp. However, I didn't regret the effort put in as I knew it was worth experiencing all that elk activity up close and personal.





I studied my map while eating dinner and decided I would try a different spot the following morning. It was further than my destination for the first day, but it was still roughly in the same direction, so I would be able to take advantage of my new familiarity with the OHV trail network.

I was extra tired and extra sore, but it was finally bed time. I took a melatonin to help me fight the cold and stay asleep that second night. Thankfully, it worked like a charm.

## DAY 2

Now that I knew where the trailhead was and how long it would take for me to reach the crest of Dead Horse Ridge I was able to sleep in a little longer the second morning. I took off from camp at 0600 and reached the ridge line at 0740. Unsurprisingly, the elk were no longer bugling. It seemed they were privy to our game.

Something I pondered during my morning ascent was whether I'd be better off sticking exclusively to prominent ridges. The first day confirmed I had a huge swath of land to myself, so I thought it might be better to leave the lower elevations undisturbed as a sanctuary. If it came down to the last few days of the muzzleloader season and I still wasn't seeing any bucks, then it would be time to descend down into the ravines and create a new opportunity.

Though my muscles were a little sore and stiff, my pack was more refined the second day. I had figured out what was useful and what was dead weight during the first day, so I carried only exactly what I needed, plus a few other small items to account for a potential change in strategy.

Speaking of a change in strategy, it didn't take long for me to realize the spot I picked out for day two was a waste of time. After a half mile of busting through thick brush down Dead Horse Ridge and scouting ahead with my binoculars I could see there was nothing but impenetrable brush for another two miles ahead of me. One thing I did find, however, was a deflated balloon with the image of characters from a children's cartoon show, *PAW Patrol™*. I folded it up and stuffed it into my back pocket as a good luck charm.



From there, I decided to turn around and summit the actual peak of Dead Horse Ridge if for nothing else than to say I did it and enjoy the vista, so I back tracked the half mile to get there. After enjoying the view for 15 minutes I took off from Dead Horse Peak at 1045 along the spine of an intersecting ridge that jutted out and I hadn't explored the day before.





A half hour later I was still walking down the cattle trail that ran the length of the spine and noticed some coyote prints in the dirt. In all seriousness, the first thing that came to my mind was “alright, the *PAW Patrol* crew is already up ahead of me setting the stage, it’s just on me to capitalize now.”

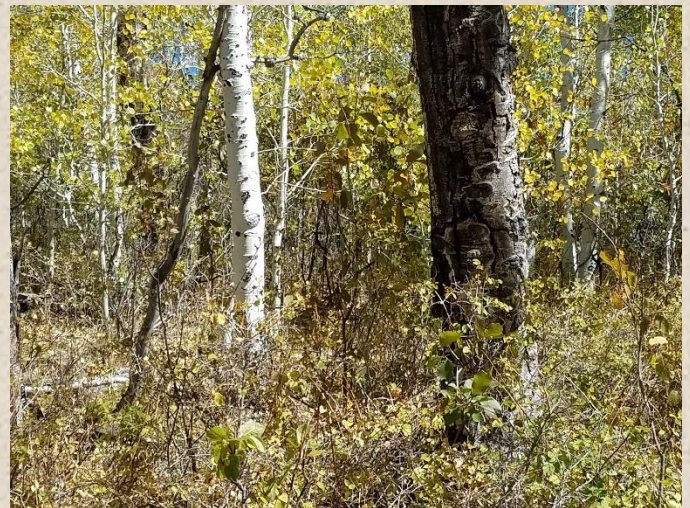


A short while later I was sneaking along the cattle trail with a particular destination in mind near the far tip of the ridge. At 1130, I kicked up what I thought were a pair of does bedded down in a brushy aspen grove only 30 yards off the cattle trail. I confirmed the closer of the two deer was definitely a doe, but I couldn’t see whether or not the other was as well. I assumed it was, but I didn’t want to move until I knew for sure.

What unfolded was a lengthy stare down between me and the two deer. The bare dirt of the cattle trail kept my footsteps quiet which is why I was able to get so close to them in the first place, so I just knelt down to keep a low profile. The deer were almost directly north of me with a light breeze coming from the southeast. I figured it was only a matter of time before the wind swirled just enough to alert them of

my true identity. The further of the two deer, after slinking away deeper into the brush, began coming back to try to get a closer view of me. Finally, at a mere 35 yards, I was able to confirm it as a nice buck!

I couldn’t see exactly how big he was, but I knew he was bigger than all the bucks I had killed before. It was hard to judge his rack because his tines blended in perfectly with the aspens and brush. My nerves began settling in. I knew it was a good enough buck that I would take him if he gave me an opportunity, but the low level brush was so thick that I knew the odds of getting a clear shot were slim to none.



Luckily, the buck continued slinking toward his doe. I knew the opportunity was about to pass me by, so I slowly stood up and raised the gun to my cheek. I truly couldn’t have drawn it up better myself – the buck stopped in what seemed like the only clearing that offered an unobstructed shot at a mere 35 yards. The shooting window was only a half foot wide, but it was all I needed. With a squeeze of the trigger he dropped in his tracks and kicked for about 30 seconds. A glance at my watch told me it was 1140. I quickly determined my priority was to keep my eyes on him in case he took off rather than fumble around with a reload. A follow up shot through the thick vegetation would’ve been a wishful prayer at best anyways.

Though the stare down lasted a full 10 minutes my heart didn’t start pounding until the buck was on the ground. Suddenly, he mustered his strength and began bounding over the brush using only his back two legs. He went about 40 yards to the west and up the ridge until he tumbled back down. He kicked around on the ground another couple minutes before it was clear he had expired. I gave him an



extra 10 minutes to have his peace before going over to check out my trophy.



I was delighted beyond measure! He was handsome, healthy, and had a great rack to boot! Though his tines were exceptionally long, the first thing that stood out to me was how stocky his body was. His legs weren't particularly lengthy, and his main body was like a 55 gallon drum. Most notably, his shelf booty ass was huge! One thing was certain: I had succeeded in getting my horse.

There was a brief moment during that stare down that I almost convinced myself just to move on toward where I was initially headed because it took what felt like forever to confirm it was a buck. I'm glad I held out another couple minutes.

I had him fully deboned and the meat bagged up by 1340. The whole scenario played out only a couple hundred yards from a spot I picked out on my map as looking promising before the hunting season even started.



Once he was deboned I washed up, ate lunch, and drank a lot of fluids before starting back toward the Jeep at 1430. My conservative estimate on my combined pack and rifle weight was a hefty 110 pounds. I didn't mind. I had enough meat to fill my freezer and a handsome bone head (not me, you jokesters) strapped on as the crown of my success.

Was I disappointed my season ended after only two days of hunting? Not at all. If anything, I was simply caught off guard that I was lucky enough to tag out a mere 2 days in. But it was only part luck. My preparation and planning paid off better than I could've hoped. In reality, my season started when I was gifted the T/C Impact nine months earlier. The experience lasted as long as it needed to, until next season that is.

The adventure isn't over, either. It continues with every venison dish cooked up and every glance at my euro mount. And that means I get to move on to my next adventure that much sooner.

I feel very fortunate to have been drawn for the Dedicated Hunter permit in the particular unit I was selected. I learned so much in this first year, and I'm eager to build on it next year. Having been successful in harvesting a mature, handsome buck in the first year, the pressure is greatly reduced for me to take a buck as soon as I see one in year two. Essentially, my hard work and dedication paid off in such a way that I "bought" myself an extra year to hold out for a truly monster mulie until year three if that's when it happens.

Next year, I plan to improve by dialing in better with my map research and boots on the ground scouting throughout the massive tracts of land available in that area. It will be a lot of work, but dedication is the name of the game. I would like to go out with archery equipment for some early season hunting and pick up an extra doe or cow tag next year. For as much meat as I packed out I'm sure eating through it like a madman. One rule I won't break, however, is saving the back straps for last.

Arguably, the biggest bulk of the adventure, and the part that will make it so memorable, are the frustrations that came with troubleshooting the T/C Impact, the very same gun I now intend to sell. I have no need for two muzzleloaders, certainly not one that can be out performed by a shotgun. With the CVA Optima V2 being the smoke pole to draw blood, it rightfully earned its place in the gun safe.



As a born and bred “flat-lander”, I can get used to tromping around these here mountains. Not bad for an Okie, if I do say so myself.



I hope you enjoyed my Smoke Pole Saga series. I certainly had fun living it out in real time.

From one Dedicated Hunter to another, this is Muzzleloader Maichak signing out.

- *Muzzleloader Maichak*

