

# *HOMECOMING KING*

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*NOVEMBER 2019*

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*“The more I see of deer, the more I admire them as mountaineers. They make their way into the heart of the roughest solitudes with smooth reserve of strength, through dense belts of brush and forest encumbered with fallen trees and boulder piles, across canyons, roaring streams, and snow-fields, ever showing forth beauty and courage.” – John Muir*

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The date was September 10<sup>th</sup>. My family had completed the lengthy journey from central Oklahoma to Salt Lake City, Utah, where I now reside, the day before. I was to be married that upcoming weekend, but all that was on my mind was a monster mountain mulie or spike elk, both species for which I had archery tags. A rainstorm rolled in that night, forcing my dad and I to abandon our cowboy camp and crawl back into the Jeep as we waited for the first bit of sunlight to start melting away the clouds.

As soon as the skies suggested we would be able to stay dry we took off from the truck, our packs loaded down with camping gear, food, water, and hope for a successful hunt. It would be a two day blitz up into the high country. Looking down, we could see the parched valley floor drinking in the fresh precipitation. Looking up, it was a lush mix of aspens, ponderosa pines, Gambel oaks, and grasses – a big game hunter’s paradise.



Consider this the 'before' photo – my dad was still all smiles to this point. With another couple miles remaining until we reached spike camp, the mountain and I knew we would get the last laugh.



It wasn't long until Mark, my dad and hunting mentor for the past twenty years, was neck deep in his reckoning with the elevation and terrain. An old school frame pack, complete with oversized sleeping bag and ingredients for PB&J's, weighed down on his shoulders. He had talked a good game up to this point, but the game was starting to talk back.



One of the many breaks we had to take up the mountain for the old flat-lander to catch his breath. With his pack already full, it appeared my dad was expecting me to pack out a whole deer by myself.



It wasn't much, but a couple tarps with a hot bed of coals and plenty of deadfall kept us plenty warm in the frigid temps of Utah's central mountains.

We were only able to get in an evening hunt that first day, but it was enough to make the long uphill trek worthwhile. Only a small fork horn buck revealed himself on our way up, but nature's trumpets bugled their war cries from deep within the pines late into the afternoon. It was enough to keep our tired minds and bodies amped for what the following morning might bring as we stoked the fire for what was sure to be a bone chilling night in the high country.

The following day brought a new level of excitement. We slept in longer than is normal for most hunters, but we were waking up in the middle of a hunting haven with no need to drive or hike much further. We decided to go explore a ridge with which I was not yet familiar, and we were rewarded with a conversation most people will never have the pleasure of knowing. A mature bull elk screamed from an opposing ridgeline across the bowl from where we stood, eager to assert his claim on that particular feature in the landscape.

We decided the time required to circle around and close in on him for a photo opportunity was more than we had that morning. However, we did have one trick up our sleeves – a simple turkey diaphragm call. My dad pulled it out of his pack and mustered his best bugle response. Shaky as it was, it lit a fire under the bull and sparked his impulse to respond. What ensued was a thrilling back and forth discourse between man and beast with only a single latex reed disguising our true identity. In our minds, the hunt was made. We were all smiles and laughter from that point on with a memory we'll never forget.

With an influx of friends and family to host and entertain, it was time for us to retreat back down the mountain and make our way back to the busy metropolis of Salt Lake City. If nothing else, my dad was at least able to get a taste of what I now call the deer woods. Best of all, it was all downhill back to the truck.



During that next month and a half, I was only able to hike my way back up into the high country for another couple days during Utah's elk rifle season. I was unable to seal the deal and fill my spike tag, but I did enjoy conversing with several other bulls, three of which I laid eyes on within fifty yards.

Nonetheless, I had other goals in mind for this hunting season. This year, I was forced to make my annual holiday visit back home in Oklahoma earlier than normal. With more than 1,100 miles stretching out between me and my parents' house, I decided to take the scenic route through southeast Utah, southern Colorado, and down into the Oklahoma panhandle.

My route wasn't haphazard, though. A 0230 departure time from Salt Lake City meant I could time the drive perfectly to see one of the endless Oklahoma sunsets at Black Mesa Preserve. From there, I finished up the last couple hours to Beaver WMA. Too tired to lay out my sleeping pad and sleeping bag after 18 hours of driving, it was another cold night of sleeping in the Jeep, something that was becoming too familiar this hunting season.

This time, I woke up before sunrise, eager to enjoy the last weekend of Oklahoma's muzzleloader season. However, I could see hunting pressure was still pretty high on the small WMA, so I only spent a few hours exploring the tamarisk-choked flood plain to no avail. The temperature was rising quickly anyways, so a 1030 departure time meant I would arrive at my parents' house just in time for the start of that weekend's Oklahoma State football game.

The next nine days once again saw me in respite from the rigors of deer hunting. With only one day remaining before I was to begin my return trip back to Utah it was time to give it one last attempt with my bow. On a small

private parcel along the Cimarron River near Langston my dad and I went out for the last few hours of the evening. I stalked my way back into the timber where we always keep a deer stand hung up.

With thirty minutes of shooting light remaining I finally heard something coming in. It was a doe that looked slightly frantic as she bounded through the undergrowth. She almost presented a broadside shot at thirty yards as she circled around my stand, but there were too many twigs and branches between us. She continued her escape as I heard leaves crunching from where she originally appeared.

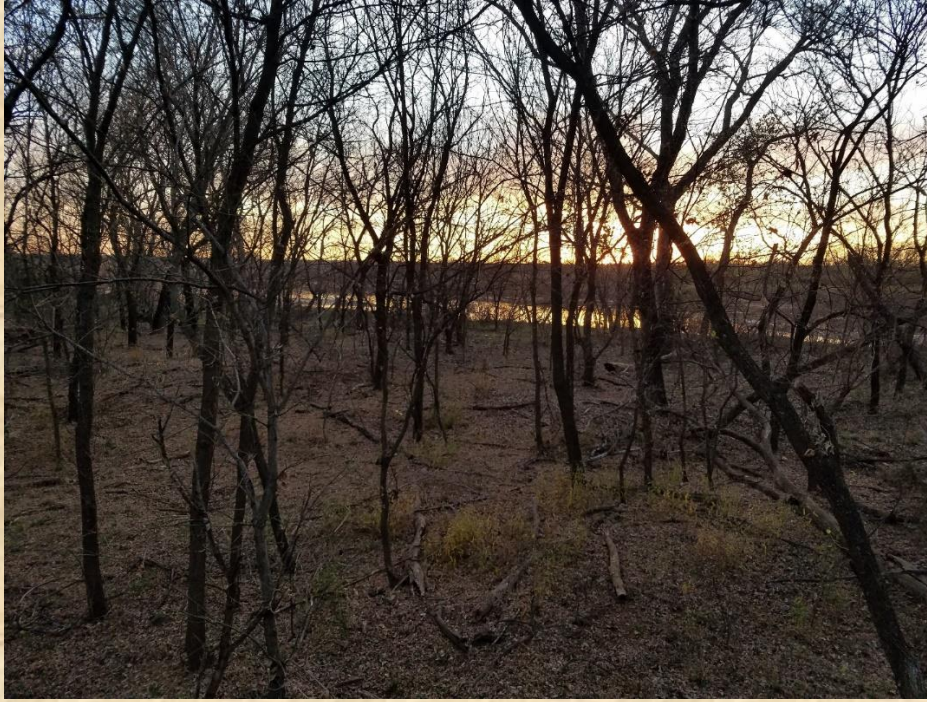


Clear skies and crisp temperatures welcomed a beautiful sunrise over the sandy hills of Beaver WMA.



My morning wasn't completely futile as I found this shed with three scorable points – one point for every hour I hunted that morning.





I looked over and saw a young buck making his way toward me. Instead of circling around my stand like the doe he ambled his way directly toward me. When his head disappeared behind a large cottonwood I took my opportunity to draw back my bow. After what felt like far too long with my muscles beginning to tire, he finally exposed his vitals. At a measly twelve yards I released my arrow directly behind his shoulder.

Until next year, this would be my last sunset in Oklahoma. I wouldn't want to enjoy it anywhere else than this little woodlot on the river.

He bolted back toward where he came in, and I heard a crash about seventy yards away, so I knew I just needed to give him some time. I sent a quick text to my dad and watched the final rays of sunlight fade away over the river until darkness set in. A quick tracking job was all that was needed to find the buck in a dense briar patch. From there, we deboned the meat and skull to complete the hunting ritual.



A quick, clean harvest made this author a happy hunter this holiday season.



Just like the sunrises and sunsets that paint the Oklahoma horizon, this little buck was a long time coming this season. Though humble his crown, he's more than a small trophy. He's a king in his own right, and I never enjoyed the taste of garlic roasted antlers anyways. With three hours during my one morning hunt in Beaver WMA and three hours during my one evening hunt along the mighty Cimarron River, I scored a handsome buck with one point for every hour I spent in pursuit of Oklahoma's elusive brush goats. Oh, what could've been had I committed myself to *one hundred* hours in the stand! Maybe next year...

Until then, I'm headed to my new home in the high-desert, mulie haven mountains of Utah with an ice chest full of whitetail meat and a future Euro mount fit for a king. They say beggars can't be choosers, to take what you can get. As luck would have it, I left Oklahoma with exactly what I came for – another year's supply of primo meat for my beautiful new bride and me.



The eye of the deer watches attentively as the happy hunters make their retreat from the woods.

Aching back and tired eyes aside, the 1,100-mile trip felt a little bit shorter on the way back to Utah. Maybe that's because I was already another day closer to making my return to that little woodlot on the river, a place we kings know as Okla-*home*-a.

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***“Going to the woods is going home, for I suppose we came from the woods originally.” – John Muir***

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