

The TROJAN HORSE

KNOWING WHEN TO IMPROVISE AND SEIZE THE MOMENT ARE SKILLS EVERY GOOD BOWHUNTER LEARNS.

Muley

My first muley with a bow gave me an amazing story to tell friends and family. Joining me in this photo is outfitter Tom McReynolds (right).

STORY AND PHOTOS BY

JAY BURNS

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AS THE HEAVY MULEY

with all of the stickers finally stood up, offering me a shot, I couldn't help but think I was dreaming. My mind raced. *Did I just make this crazy stalk? Did I really find the buck I was hoping for? How much time did I have before he bolted headlong into the coulee below, as he had done less than eight hours before? If I make this shot, no one will believe this story.* Suddenly, I snapped back to reality and focused on the task at hand, the big muley standing broadside on the canyon ledge, in the fading light, at 52 yards.

My spot-and-stalk mule deer trip to South Dakota began two years before as I strolled for hours down every aisle at the Dallas Safari Club meeting. I was looking for a fair-chase hunt. I didn't mind optimizing my chances with a quality hunt, but I was not looking for any guarantees. A good hunt is about the fellowship and quality opportunities. Finally, Tom McReynolds from Black Mountain Outfitters described a great spot-and-stalk mule deer hunt in South Dakota that seemed exactly like what I was looking for.

I took up bowhunting seven years ago at the age of 50, at the urging of my nephew and best friend, Matt Burns. It was



South Dakota has vast, wide-open country with rolling hills and coulees. If bucks are found in such open terrain, they are extremely challenging to stalk, thus the need to get creative like Tom and I did.

love at first release, even as I faced the challenges that every novice bowhunter faces. I found that after years of rifle hunting, I didn't know what it meant to be truly quiet, patient, still, and focused.

As a surgeon, I must prioritize discipline and detail. The same is absolutely

required for bowhunting success. However, this challenge is the addiction.

The progress from failure and frustration to increasing success has been driven by learning from my many mistakes and from reading voraciously. My passion for the sport and late start is

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The Trojan Horse Muley

pushing me to try new experiences each year. When I booked my spot-and-stalk mule deer hunt, I fully realized I was signing up for a challenge.

My long-term surgery partner and great friend Steve Byrd joined me. He had not bowhunted in years, but he was eager to return to the sport. Tom told us we needed to be able to shoot out to 80 yards on this hunt. I have to admit that I thought that request was an exaggeration, but Steve took him seriously. What I thought was impossible, Steve actually accomplished. He began to drop his G5-tipped arrows into the bull's-eye from 80 yards, so I had no choice but to follow suit. Practicing at this distance would pay off big for me on this trip.

In November, with the rut set to kick in any day, we flew to Pierre, South Dakota, met Tom, and got settled in. The hunt started slowly, but a bitter cold front arrived on the second day, which set up the last half of our hunt with hope. Tom assured us the rut should kick in any day. Fortunately, he was right.

On the third morning Tom decided to make a change, so I went with him



On our hunt, Tom and I were caught on top of a plateau with no cover, necessitating our creative stalk technique with a ground blind.

to a new ranch. As daylight began to break, we were greeted with a beautiful, calm, crisp, clear day, and the difference in muley activity was amazing. We saw large groups of does, and almost by the hour, the bucks began to show up, introducing themselves to the ladies.

South Dakota is beautiful, with rolling grass plains and ravines, which

the locals call coulees. I was amazed that with every 10 yards of advancement, you could see deeper and deeper into the coulees. Occasionally, minor changes in angles would allow you to see antlers sticking out from above the sagebrush deep in the coulees. We backtracked by one such coulee we had covered less than an hour earlier and

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Here's my muley buck stopping to look back at us before bolting over the hill.

spotted antlers. As we both ducked out of sight, we tried to size up the muley buck. I perceived mass and Tom saw kickers. We both saw enough to decide this buck should be my first stalk. Tom and I identified the coulee the buck was in and we both agreed on his location. Confident of my course, I began to duck-walk and crawl toward my target.

All I had to do was drop down in a little ditch and then climb 10 yards up the rise to get a shot at my prize.

Just when I think I have made every possible bowhunting mistake, I make another one! The "little ditch" was, much to my surprise, exactly where the big boy was bedded. This fact was realized when I caught a glimpse of his rear end

bounding straight away. He stopped and looked back briefly at 100 yards, and I threw up my binoculars. Tom only had a video camera and his naked eye to judge the target. I reassured him that I really liked this buck for his mass and character, and I would love another chance at him if we could pull it off.

Over the next couple of hours we worked our way around to a meadow, where I was humbled yet again by a failed stalk. We drove the 30 minutes back to Pierre for a quick lunch and some hot coffee, and then we went back to the ranch for what would be one of the wildest, craziest hunts I could ever imagine.

We drove to within a few hundred yards of where we saw the buck I liked that morning and began walking carefully along a plateau that was roughly 100 yards wide. Our plan was to advance slowly and carefully along the top of the plateau, glassing on each side. However, just a short way from the truck, we spotted a large group of muleys grazing 400 yards directly in front of us on top of the plateau, in plain sight! We immediately dropped into the tall grass at our feet and remained low and hidden in the grass as we glassed the herd. We counted 12 does and a couple of young bucks, but

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The Trojan Horse Muley

we were pinned down with no place to go. Tom wisely advised that we hold our ground, as mature bucks were roaming, and one might find such a large group of does. That statement proved prophetic almost immediately as we both saw a large mature buck slowly walk in to join the party. It was the buck we were looking for!

The sun was setting lower and lower when we came to the realization that we

had about an hour and a half of shooting light remaining. We lost sight of a few of the deer, including our buck, and had to come up with a plan. Tom was very familiar with this plateau and said an open stalk would be nearly impossible. He stated that if we were lucky enough to have the deer graze toward us, we might be able to ambush the buck from a ground blind. I was skeptical, but it seemed like our only option with time running out.

Tom crawled away through the grass to retrieve a popup blind from the truck.



After my buck disappeared over the hill, we used the ground blind to stalk within bow range.

He returned with the blind in short order, and we were inside it within a minute. We were able to glass better once we were within the ground blind, but the buck was nowhere in sight. As the minutes wore down, we decided to do something crazy. We began to crawl the blind on our knees toward the subtle crest 20 yards in front of us that would allow us a slightly higher vantage point. I shook my head in disbelief as we inched the blind, not so quietly in the stiff crisp grass. Once at our destination, much to my surprise and elation, we instantly spotted our buck grazing toward us on the edge of the plateau at 150 yards!

We sat there watching him for another 15 minutes, but his progress was clearly not going to put him in front of us before the sun, and my chances of a shot, would fade away over the horizon. Finding ourselves running out of options, we both considered the unthinkable. The grass now was only four to six-inches tall, and there wasn't a tree or shrub in sight. We decided to try to stalk this big buck using our ground blind as a Trojan Horse!

With less than 30 minutes left to try to get off a shot, I held my bow in my right hand and the front window of the blind in my left. On command, I lifted the front of the blind and inched for-

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ward on my knees, with Tom in the back doing the same. We kept our eyes on the grazing buck. As the blind scraped the grass, it sounded inside as if explosions were going off. Every time the buck raised his head at our sound, we immediately dropped the blind and waited for the buck to resume feeding. Tom and I looked at each other and fought back laughter as we shook our heads in disbelief. Eventually our target, confused, yet not startled, decided it was best to turn and graze away from us.

Every time the buck fed, his antlers rotated down and away. We had great difficulty making up ground until we got the break we needed — the buck bedded down. All we could see of him at this point was his antlers. With available time winding down quickly, we knew we would have to advance without delay. We would also need one more break. The buck would have to stand again, as I could not see his body at all. We advanced, stopped, and Tom whispered “76 yards,” and then “70.”

He asked if I could take the shot. “No way,” I replied, as I could only see his rack, which was getting noticeably larger with each crawling step. At one point I asked Tom, “Is this really happening? Are you believing this?”

Knees marching forward, Tom whispered “64 yards,” and then “56.” As quickly as the buck had bedded, he suddenly stood up. Without any request from me, I heard Tom gently say “52 yards.” I knew it was now or never. It was still legal light by less than five minutes; however, it was dark inside the blind. I tried twice to hook my release on my D-loop but couldn’t find it. I had to swing close to the front of the blind to find light. Finally, I connected. From my knees, I shifted to the shooting window. I settled my 50-yard pin in the middle of his chest and focused on as small a spot as I could until the release went off without a conscious thought. We both heard that welcome *thud* and Tom went nuts. For the first time in almost 90 minutes, we exited our “Trojan Horse.” We were both in disbelief as our conversation rocked back and forth from, “Nobody is going to believe me, I’m a Texan!” to questioning the quality of the shot. The light was not good enough for us to be sure at that distance.

As we crept to the edge of the ravine, we quickly saw our trophy belly up at 100 yards. Tom and I hugged and high-fived all the way to my buck. The arrow had penetrated both lungs.

The buck was a 4x4 with eight kickers. The only surprise was that he had broken off his entire right main beam just past the G-2. I have to admit that fact didn’t even faze me. This was my first muley, and with it came a story I can tell my grandkids and everyone who will listen. I am a Texan, born and bred, and believe me when I say we live to tell stories like this!

As Tom walked back to the truck and left me with my prize, I bowed my head and thanked God for blessing me beyond reason. <<<

The author is a plastic surgeon with a practice in Dallas, Texas.

AUTHOR’S NOTES:

My equipment included a Mathews Z7 set at 70 pounds, Carbon Express Maxima Hunter arrows fletched with Bohning Blazer Vanes, and 100-grain G5 broadheads, a Ripcord rest, and a Primos Ground Max ground blind.

To book a hunt with Tom McReynolds at Black Mountain Outfitters, contact him at (602) 705-4297, tom@bmohunts.com, www.bmohunts.com.

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