

It Can't Be Bought

By: Mike Mitten

I wrote the following poem “It Can't Be Bought” for the concluding narration of the *Primal Dreams* film. It was inspired by my belief that not all short cuts are a good thing. A good friend told me about a private operation that taught young hunters the basics. In addition to learning how to shoot their bows and track animals, the youngsters learned woodsmanship, wildlife habits, hunter safety, hunting heritage and many other noble things to get them started as hunters. At the culmination of the week-long class, the youths were put into tree stands in a very small enclosure filled with many deer. They were allowed to shoot one when the time was right. Boy, oh boy! This program sounded good, right up to the point that organizers robbed the youths of their hunt. The enclosure was too small, so there was no challenge. Sure, the participants all made their first kill, but they also all admitted they really hadn't hunted. Some new hunters may expect to “buy” the hunt like they do nearly everything else in life. I hope this poem can convey the experience and feelings of the hunt in such a way so that the young hunters can know the truth and won't let someone rob them of their *hunt*.

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When an exposed tine reveals the hiding place of a discarded antler, its extraction from an encasement of snow is met with watchful eyes beneath empty pedicels, Wonderment cannot be bought.

When a calf moose struggles on restless legs, owing it's fate to a guarding mother, the perils of the first week as prey escaped, defining a lifetime for most, Hope cannot be bought.

When a velveted buck emerges from dark timber and feeds uncharacteristically in brightness of day, fueling magnificent augmentations from seasons past, Anticipation cannot be bought.

When solo spirits meet nature's worst, kindled flames take on life, warmth battles back frostbite's march, sleep is welcomed and anxiety is relinquished, Self-reliance cannot be bought.

When a floating anchor results in targets missed, practiced form forces trained muscles, confidence replaces apprehension as marks are consistently struck, Responsibility cannot be bought.

When courtship-screams echo to predator's ears, and conflicts besiege attention, roles have changed from species propagated to the giving of life in the form of flesh, Providing real sustenance cannot be bought.

When goals are achieved, the strenuous effort it took to get there intensifies and unites cherished rewards; accomplished feelings can't be acquired without the journey, Pride cannot be bought.

When Wonderment, Hope, Anticipation, Self-reliance, Responsibility, Sustenance, and Pride can't be bought, we are left one with God's gifts, and a way of life where memories and dreams flourish.

Hunting is full of wonderment, questioning, and searching for answers. I can read about the natural world and search endless topics on the Internet, but challenging postulates and testing my own theories is much more rewarding if conducted in the field. When my curiosity is quenched through careful observations and puzzle pieces of an individual animal's life put together after much effort, the feeling of satisfaction is so gratifying. Gaining knowledge is a bi-product of the hunt, and often starts months and even years prior to the actual event. That's why I feel so sad for people who view the kill as the sole reason for the hunt, and end up purchasing the knowledge of others to guide them to the kill.

I once met a "successful hunter" in Anchorage who was in the airport standing next to the antlers of his recent moose kill. I asked him to tell me the details of his hunt, and I inquired whether that was the only moose he saw. His response caught me off guard. He traveled from Germany to hunt the Alaskan moose using a fully guided outfitter service. On the first day of the hunt he traveled up river in a boat with the guide. Rounding a bend in the river they saw a bull crossing the stream. Putting the boat to shore, the guide directed him to shoot. The hunter touched off the rifle round and fulfilled his long-time dream of taking a bull moose. He said that after collecting his trophy, he and the guide left right away. This hunter's experience left me kind of flat. Not only could he not describe what the animal was doing prior to the shot, but also he had no comments about the weather, terrain, vegetation, or other native wildlife. I know many other people who choose to hunt with a rifle and employ a guide to help them access the wilderness, but they come back from a successful hunt full of stories and excitement about their encounters. Some of them were also lucky enough to find their prey early during the scheduled hunt, but unlike the fellow from Germany, they elected to stay camped out to photograph wildlife and explore this unique habitat. I realize that for some people, hunting is a business and they must stake their livelihoods on the outcomes of the trips. So getting clients in and out of the bush as fast and as efficient as possible will put more money in their pockets. Of course, taking an animal will help promote their guiding service, but think of how far reaching a successful hunt would be if the hunt and the kill were the result of an adventure. Even if the kill comes early, the adventure parts needs to be addressed. This may sound ridiculous to some outfitters, but I feel the future of hunting needs to include the adventure fueled by wonderment and the enthusiasm of discovery. The outfitters could argue that they have no control over their client's emotions or predispositions. But I would rebut that it is their responsibility to plant the seeds of learning, which includes the desire for knowledge. Most of the successful guiding services that I know incorporate teaching outdoor lore with the hunt. In reality, that is one of the components they are getting paid for, along with accessing good habitat, which they directly or indirectly control. If the service recognizes this and accepts this as a responsibility for keeping the hunt alive and a reality for their clients, then they would be contributing in a positive way to the promotion of the spirit of the wild.

While hunting spring black bear in Alaska, I came upon a newborn calf moose. You could say that the calf and its mother momentarily interrupted my bear hunt, but I would argue that they were not only part of the hunt, they were one of the reasons for the hunt. Yes, bear meat would help feed me and its coat could be used to warm me when cold, but hunting predators like bears will also help increase prey species like moose and caribou. Seeing the helplessness of a newborn ungulate, and knowing that Alaska allows predator

control, inspired hope for its future. Those wishing to abolish hunting need only view the statistical mortality reports of various species in specific regions to realize that more than mere hope is needed to enhance survival and population growth. The controversial taking of predators is certainly warranted. In my mind, responsible and respectful predator hunting should be encouraged wherever appropriate.

A good hunt is often like a fine wine; it takes times to mature. The anticipation of the hunt is the yeast that ferments the sweet dreams produced from scouting. While alone in the woods I take my time and slow down to enjoy the finer things. As a kid I saw that my dad always seemed to have a feather in his hatband; it may have been from a grouse he shot or he may have simply found it in the woods. To this day it's difficult for me to see a feather and not pick it up to admire it and marvel at the uniqueness of its color pattern. I may carry it on my quiver or bow, or simply hold it for awhile and send it aloft. Finding a fresh shed, discovering huge rubs, watching a massive buck in velvet, locating wide bear tracks pressed deeply into the mud, or glassing a feeding ram with horns sporting huge bases that have yet to be broomed are all fruits of scouting that advance the expectations for future encounters in the fall. These anticipations can't be bought, and are among the rewards that toast the do-it-yourself hunters.

I have had the opportunity to deer hunt the same property for multiple years, and the anticipation of the hunt is so much a part of me every time I get a chance to walk it. I knew many of the bucks and does that lived there, and that hope to cross their paths in the fall really motivated me. I hunted antelope in Wyoming, but my thoughts were consistently on a whitetail buck I saw in velvet in August just before leaving for the antelope trip. Even though I never got a chance to take the buck, its presences not only added to the November hunt during the whitetail rut, but it added to the antelope hunt over a thousand miles away. In the simplest terms, anticipation is paramount to hunting success.

Anticipation built up before the hunt cannot pull you thru the rough times during your hunt. Just as the sun brings reassurance and salvages a hunt after a storm, a campfire is universally comforting to a solo hunter going through some tough times. Regaining warmth following a wet, cold, and exhausting day alone can be achieved by crawling into a sleeping bag, but nothing corrects emotional or mental uncertainty and anxiety like fire. A focused heat source created by my hands sends a message to the harshness of nature that I won't be claimed as her prey. Instead, I still maintain my individuality as a participant in natural life. The licking flames bring joy to my soul.

After climbing to a high lookout, it started to rain. Even though I put on my rain gear, I still got damp and cold. Glassing for moose grew more difficult by the hour, and I finally had to give up my post. About halfway back to camp the rain stopped, but the damage was done. The drenched vegetation continued shedding water on me as I made my way through the tag alders. My luck got worse when I slipped on some rocks and fell hard to the ground, spraining my thumb. I hoped nothing was broken, and I knew I needed to find my way back to my tent before it got dark. Cold muscles and the slight mishap set me back a little, but when the ground fog took daylight away earlier than expected, I became very concerned. I knew my tent was directly across the river from a game trail crossing, but since this was the first time I came back to the campsite after dark it proved more difficult than expected. The tent was pitched at the edge of an opening that came down to the opposite shore, but my flashlight couldn't penetrate the

fog far enough to reach the other shore. The game trail crossing that was so obvious during daylight was now among many other trails that made their way to the river. As I tried to find my way through the thick alders, anxiety and doubt began to set in. I questioned, "Would I have to check over a half mile of shore line? Would it be easier to cross the river, then find the right clearing? If I crossed at the wrong spot would the water crest my hip boots? Did the river rise too much due to the rain?" I could feel frustration set in because I didn't have a good answer for any of the questions, and my thumb and heel of my palm started to swell from the fall.

The rain washed out most of the sign in the game trail, and I was wondering how long it would be before the batteries in my flashlight would need changing. Twenty minutes of uncertainty didn't help me stay in control of my cold and sore body. My prayers were finally answered when the yellow beam from the light revealed what appeared to be heel mark in a flooded trail depression. This had to be it, my crossing at last! With temperatures in the thirties, the wet conditions were very dangerous. My hands were so cold, I had trouble manipulating the waterproof matches and strike plate. The moisture didn't affect the jelled alcohol, and soon a slow blue flame worked its magic, igniting the dry spruce limbs in my fire pit. The rain had long since quit, and as long as I wasn't busting through the bushes anymore there was a chance to warm up and start to dry out. I can still feel the warmth of that fire on my face and see its glow cut through the fog, illuminating the exterior wall of my tent. Sure, I have had many campfires alone and with friends, but this one changed the nature of the hunt for me. Keeping my cool, I relied on my own instincts and my head to help me get back safely. During that hunt I saw over seventeen bull moose and passed up several legal ones at less than twenty yards, but sitting next to that fire while warming my body and simmering my supper will be one of the events I will always remember most when reflecting on that hunt. Self-reliance is not something found on a shopping list, but it must be with you on every solo hunt.

There are many variables during the act of shooting an animal that are not under our control. But shooting accurately and, more importantly, knowing our limitations are our responsibilities. It does not matter what type of weapon we choose to hunt with; traditional and compound bows or rifle and shotguns all require shooting proficiency. I enjoy shooting traditional bows and accept the time dedication that is required by me to maintain my confidence during a hunting scenario. Sure, we all make mistakes and misjudgments, but going afield lacking confidence in ourselves and our shooting abilities is just setting up for failure. Hunting is more than a sport; it's a way of life that mandates honor and respect for oneself, fellow hunters, and especially the animals we pursue. The thing is, we are all responsible for our actions whether we realize it or not. There are many instances in my writings where I describe errors I have made and momentary lack of control that often occurs during the heat of action. I write about them so that you get an idea of what can happen in real-life situations, and to alert you to similar conditions that you may be faced with. It's also therapeutic for me to talk and write about my mistakes so that I can learn from them and get past them mentally. To be better able to handle the mental portion of hunting, I focus on physical training and practice shooting many months prior to the adventure, so that my confidence is at its highest level before I lace up my boots and take to the woods.

Shooting a traditional bow is fun, but I don't practice to increase my shooting range; I practice to increase my confidence at yardages I am already comfortable with. After

forty-two years of hunting, I am very familiar with my own limitations and effective range, but I don't impose them on others. However, I do encourage all hunters to know their limitations and understand the performance limits of the equipment they choose to hunt with. It's not good enough to just inflict a lethal wound; we must strive toward a quick and humane kill. With the act of buying a hunting license, I feel all hunters have accepted this responsibility and must do everything in their power to uphold high ethical standards.

Hunters have a long history of role-playing, and I am no different. I have been a love-sick cow moose, an overzealous teenager, a matriarch elk, a confident herd master, an insecure fawn, and battling bucks, all for the purpose of creating an illusion that lures the unsuspecting. Every time I go into the woods I become a tree, bush, rock, or log in hopes of getting closer to my prey or observing nature in its purest form. The flesh from a kill may provide physical nourishment, but the means to that end is what sustains our spiritual fitness. Real sustenance comes in many forms including the awakening calls of songbirds, the fruiting body of morels, and gentle breezes lifting milkweed seeds from their pods. The process of the hunt can be more life-supporting than the final rewards. That's why true hunters exhibit intense pride in their ability to stalk, call, and anticipate the movement of their prey. Buying food at the market can't provide this kind of nourishment, the kind that feeds the inner self.

My brother Mark and I were at the Eastern Sports Show in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We walked past a booth, which displayed an absolutely unbelievable bull elk mount. The non-typical antlers scored over 500 inches. We stopped to admire it, when an agent came over and ask us if we wanted to pay to "hunt" him. Confused, we asked, "What do you mean?" The guy responded that those are sheds, as he pointed to the mount, and we are looking for a client who wants to come up to our ranch in Canada and "hunt" him this fall. My brother and I said no thanks.

Later on that fall I saw pictures on the Internet of a smiling hunter and his two "guides" posing behind a great bull elk with the caption saying, "New Record Montana Bull." The antler configuration of the bull looked familiar, and after taking a closer look at the photo, I recognized one of the guides as the same salesman we met at the sports show. It looked like they did find a customer to execute the animal after all. Additional photos of the elk in velvet eating out of a bucket also surfaced, confirming a captive animal in a tight enclosure. At first these imposters posing as hunters turned my stomach because their actions are very detrimental to the continued privilege of the hunt, but then I started to feel sorry for men like them. No matter how much money they have to spend on buying what amounts to livestock with antlers, they will never be able to afford the feelings of achievement and accomplishment that come as bi-products of a sacred hunt. These feelings can never be bought.

I once showed a longtime friend the new recurve bow I was practicing with at the archery range. He looked at it and said, "A recurve? I used them things years ago. I don't need that romance anymore." That statement stays with me to this day, because that is exactly what I need. I need the romance of hunting with a bow I made myself, the romance of family traditions and shooting a deer out of the same tree that my son took his first one out of, the romance of wilderness once walked by Lewis and Clark, the romance of hand-me-down bows, the romance of skinning a deer with a knife I made, the romance of drying jerky and cooking wild meat for friends, and the romance of stories at the

campfire's ring while wearing a fringed shirt made from my first bull elk. I need the romance of the hunt!

Rich men can buy almost anything, but they can't buy romance. So I plead with all new hunters to ask themselves before they cave into the marketing of the next new product or system, "How will this product affect the romance I have with nature and the chase?" This gut-check will go a long way in keeping respect firmly bound to the ancient activities we know as hunting. So in the end it is fairly simple: we hunt because we must, and dreams can't be bought; they are free to those who have lived!

