

Hunting season.

With the rise in the feral hog population, that almost means “all year” these days, but it begins proper in September. Not because that’s when the dove season opens, or because that’s when my old license expires and I have to go buy a new one, but because that is when my mental state shifts from pondering the heat to *whitetail starts in a couple months, I’d better get ready*. The hunting “infrastructure” of blinds and feeders stay in place and running year round, so “get ready” has to do with the guns. And then, the scouting.

I was a quail hunter for most of my life from college age til I was 30 or 32; I quit it after losing my last German Shorthair. That was also about the time I started shooting a lot of centerfire rifles and handguns, and handloading for them. I spent a couple of years trying to figure out the “how” of whitetail deer hunting, and then really learning to shoot. Unlike most hunters, I started out hunting whitetail with a handgun.

Well, this is how it actually went down. I had a 7.5” Freedom Arms Model 1997 in 45 Colt, scoped with a fixed power Leupold 4X, and a 9” or 10” Freedom Arms 454 Casull, also scoped with a variable Leupold in a Lovell mount and set up like a stalker with sling studs fore and aft. I had free time then, and shot a *lot*, until I could hit a vitals sized plate at 100-150 yards each and every time from a seated and braced position. Thus armed, I stumbled around down on the creek my first year with the 97 thinking that stalking was the only way to go, and never had anything to show for it other than wet boots.

The next year, I approached it differently, this time hunting out of a tripod blind at a little 15 acre wheat field on my farm. Despite having a dramatic fear of heights, I had a lot of good times in that blind, pushed up into a mesquite tree, learning about whitetail deer behavior by glassing them from hiding. I also learned about buck fever – after wounding a good heavy eight point whitetail at 70 yards, I chickened out the rest of the season and went and bought a Marlin Guide Gun in 45-70 and put a 4X Leupold on top of it. I shot a little whitetail with it, to figure out how in the world I was supposed to field dress a deer, then wound up making game in a big way.

My pregnant wife and I had been up on a high point on our farm in September or October when we heard a noise down in the brush below us. A whitetail came crashing out behind us and hightailed it to the south. I had my binoculars on him pretty fast – *a buck, a good buck, a really good buck, a ten point buck, holy – a drop tine!* That was enough to get my interest level piqued. I didn’t expect to ever see that buck again, but later that season, was hunting with the Marlin on a very cold morning. I was hunkered down on a camp stool behind a holly bush, ready to pack it in because my feet were numb and I was shivering, when I heard a rattling in the brush, looked up to see that same buck looking at me. Rifle up! The buck wheeled about the time I pulled the trigger! The bullet, a Remington factory 405 grain, grazed his hip and he ran about 90 yards. Young and smart, I kept my eye on that buck; he stopped at about 90 yards to turn and look at his hip and I shot him in the neck, aiming for his lungs, but he went down and my first whitetail buck was on the ground. Beginner’s luck. I have been chasing a better deer ever since. But it was a heck of way to start out – and set the bit in my teeth.



*1 My first whitetail buck*

The next year I had learned my lesson and spent even more time at the range and was confident with my Freedom Arms 454, even more so now that I had actually shot something. I took it elk hunting with my old friend Bill Buckman, who had schooled me in handgun hunting in general and the 454 in particular. Hunting in northern New Mexico with Lobo Outfitters and guided by a bowhunter named Jake Powell, I hunted *hard*, particularly so since I was recovering from surgery. I had learned a little about trigger discipline and had the caution to pass on a daisy of a bull at 150 yards because it just didn't feel right. Ah, but, in writing this, I recall being on top of a ridge, running smack dab into an elk herd that eventually fanned out around us like a horseshoe, and Jake tapping me on the shoulder and whispering that there were a couple of bulls down the slope to our left. I scooted around on my butt as slow as can be done, particularly with cow elk everywhere, and got my gun up, a 6" scoped 454, lined up on a good bull, and promptly missed him. 60 yards but about a 60 degree slope down. I assume that I shot over him, but it was probably a shot that a novice should not have attempted with a handgun.

In any event, we got onto another couple of bulls, one at 70 yards came in to a bugle call but was a pass because at the time New Mexico had a restriction that a bull had to be six or better on at least one side to be shot. On our third day of hunting, Jake took it easy on me and set me up under a tree at the head of a draw, and bugled in another bull; this one we could hear splashing around down in a creek below us before he headed in to the call. My 300 grain Freedom Arms-made jacketed flatpoint hit him in the shoulder, putting him down and letting my followup shot in the lungs kill him.



*2 My first bull elk, taken with a 454 Casull at 70 yards*

A month later, I was in the whitetail fields in peak form with my 9" 454, and in near perfect conditions (meaning I was shivering in a tripod, about to head out due to cold, but with a good rest and a rangefinder) a 10 point came in at 150 yards and paused to graze. When my shot took him at 165 yards, he ran 100 yards to the west, turned and ran 100 yards to the east, and dropped within ten feet of where he was when I shot. A heart shot – something to brag about except I was aiming for the lungs – but still the best game shot I have ever made with a handgun.



*3 My first handgun buck, taken with a 454 Casull at 165 yards*

I was thinking that handgun hunting was a pretty cool way to go about it. Not long after that, I tore a tendon in my right arm while trying to hook up a PTO shaft, and had to give it up for a while. That is when I got into Ruger No. 1 single shot rifles.

After tinkering with the Thompson-Center G2 Contender rifles for a bit, I had decided that I liked the single shot concept but not so much the T/C. I found a Ruger RSI in 30-06, but a 4X Leupold on top of it, and hunted all of our country with it. Feral hogs were in abundance at the time, and it was nothing to stumble into a herd of 50 or more when coming into sight of a hay field. I doubled on pigs with that rifle a lot, took coyotes and a couple does with it, and took it back to New Mexico the next season for elk.

This time, I was hunting by myself, in the rain, when I came across an elk herd at the head of a draw. The ground sloped up at the end of the draw, like an amphitheater, and there arrayed before me were a bunch of cows and several bulls. I had my eyes on a 6x6, and I swear had my scope on a 6x6, and made a pretty good shot at about 175 yards with a 180 grain Nosler Partition; the bull dropped at the shot and he turned out to be a nice symmetrical 5x5 – at least he was legal, because New Mexico had dropped the point restriction.



*4 My second bull elk, taken with a Ruger No. 1 30-06*

For the next several years, I continued whitetail hunting in a big way, and lost count of the number of feral hogs I took with Ruger No. 1's, but with a very young family and toddlers, it was a few years before anything remarkable occurred in my hunting life. I don't remember any more animals to speak of during those years, though I am sure we took them, but I do recall hunting with my daughter Callie and later my son Ethan – popup blinds with Barbie dolls and toy tractors, hijacked bobcat calls blown by my kids driving off every animal in the area. Teaching my kids about the kill, respect for game, gun safety, deer behavior, and learning to shoot took up most of my time and make up most of my memories.



*5 Hunting with my kids*

And the rifles. The RSI was joined by other favorites, a 1-S in 45-70, a 1-A in 7x57 and 243 and 30-30 and 6.5x55 and 30-06, a 1-H in 375 H&H. I took whitetail, hogs, coyotes and bobcats with all of them. I never failed to make game on account of the rifle being a single shot, and never failed to make a necessary followup due to using a single shot. I did learn quickly to keep my followup shot in my support hand for a quick reload.



*6 A rank boar, taken with a Ruger No. 1 375 H&H*

Then my kids started hunting. My daughter took a whitetail buck and a feral hog with the T/C in 30WCF, both heart shots at 70-100 yards, but never really got into hunting much – she would rather photograph. My son, however, took to it immediately. He took game in those years before he was ten years old, particularly a huge boar with a 60 grain 223 softpoint out of an AR-15, a nine point basket racked buck with a 150 grain softpoint out of a 308 Larue AR10, but his best animal was a wide, heavy 10 point whitetail at 100 yards using a Ruger American Compact in 7-08. All very good guns and very good shots. I am sure I was armed on these hunts, but couldn't tell you anything much about my own hunting in those years!



*7 My daughter's first whitetail, taken with a T/C 30-30*



*8 My daughter's first boar, taken with a T/C 30-30*



*9 Ethan's first whitetail, taken with a T/C 30-30*



10 Ethan's start as a coyote hunter



11 Ethan's first whitetail buck, with a Ruger American Compact 7-08



12 Ethan's biggest boar, with a 223

I did get the elk bug again, about four years ago and wound up on a free range hunt for a wild herd in West Texas in the Glass Mountains near Alpine. I had practiced, and practiced with my 375 H&H, really wanting to take an elk with it, but the more I shot it, the worse I got, until finally I decided I would take it as a backup but would use my 1-A in 30-06 as my primary gun, loaded with 180 grain Nosler Accubonds in Federal Premium ammunition. That hunt is a whole another story, but it was awesome – my wife was with me, I was able to take a fantastic elk after a fantastic hunt in which everything went right; it was a time in life when my kids were starting to take less “raising” and were just more fun to be with and my own hunting life was starting to be active again.

We had hunted for a couple days, passing on a good 6x6, and finally stumbled onto some elk tracks on a ranch road. Friend Mike Molter and I were studying the tracks intently, while my wife casually pointed out that the bull was *over there ... right over there ...*

And there he was. He spotted us at 150 yards, took off at a trot, stopped to study us again at 240 yards and I was able to connect, having thrown myself into the dirt with my rifle and Bogpod shooting sticks.

The bull turned out to have been tranquilized and tagged by the RMEF at the age of 5 years – he was thirteen years old when we got him. My wife gets credit for the excellent photography.



12 My West Texas bull, right before the shot



*14 My West Texas bull, taken with a Ruger No. 1 30-06*

Later that year, with the same 30-06, I took a very nice typical eight point whitetail after what I still consider to be an epic stalk – also another story – in Kent County, Texas. Since then, it has been hit or miss, with a couple of poor whitetail seasons due to drought or hunting pressure, but a lot of the hunts have been with my kids or friends.



*15 My Kent Co. buck, taken with a Ruger No. 1 30-06 after a lengthy stalk*

Each hunting season, though, always starts the same way – poking around the safe and wondering *what next*, and then working up a handload for it, scouting, and shooting.

I have largely lost interest in scoped handgun hunting, mostly because it is a shot that needs to be “set up” – an offhand shot is very difficult, a seated shot isn’t easy; to be most effective requires a seated shot, with a pack across your knees for a rest, or sticks, at least when stalking. From a blind, it’s much simpler, but after my arm injury, I developed a much stronger interest in rifles than I did handguns.

Last year, I picked up a rifle that I had admired from afar for a little while – a Big Horn Armory lever action in 460 S&W. Shooting a 300 grain Hornady XTP Mag bullet, this carbine is handy, well balanced, fast to the shoulder with Skinner sights in the rear and a big Marbles bead in the front, and, after taking about 300 rounds to break in, smooth for fast followup shots. I am not the greatest of peep sight shooters, and for me this is a 100 yard rifle. That is fine – I took a nice whitetail at 70 yards with it and several pigs and a couple of coyotes.



*13 Whitetail taken with a Big Horn Armory 460 S&W*

My interest in the rifle piqued, and I wound up with another couple of them in 500 S&W, one of which I took to a class at the Gunsite Academy in Arizona, where we spent a few days learning how to really run that rifle, along with finessing some single action revolver techniques.

This fall, I set a couple of goals for the season. First, I was going to use iron sights, on revolver or rifle. Second, I was going to hunt – a lot. Third, I wanted to take a good whitetail, having been years since I had done so.

The early part of fall found me shooting an 8-3/8" S&W .357 Magnum – another story – which shot very well out to 100 yards but eventually, I chickened out on the cartridge selection. Not to worry! I also had a 7.5" Freedom Arms 44 Magnum, zeroed at 100 yards with iron sights for a Hornady XTP 300 grain hollowpoint. And – a 16" Big Horn Armory 500 S&W, zeroed at 100 yards for a 350 grain Hornady XTP hollowpoint, backed up with a 4.25" Freedom Arms Model 97 in 357 Magnum.



*14 Wyoming guns*

Leather is always an important part of any gun story. My friend Mike Barranti of Barranti Leather Co. supplies most of it. In this case, a bandolier chest rig for the 44 Mag, which makes for an excellent stalking rig; a CCR belt holster for the 357 Freedom Arms; a cartridge loop carrier for the 500 (not something you can find everyday); scabbards for my Dozier knives used to dress and skin. The green bag full of Barranti leather in wondrous variety is a subject for another day.



*18 Barranti Leather Co. rig, and Freedom Arms 44 Magnum*

Thus outfitted for the season, Ethan and I began scouting, finding that this was going to be an extraordinary whitetail year. And it was.

Ethan, who by now has a long range rifle bug, took a nice 9 point with a 7 SAW built by our friends at Tyler Gun Works, after spending months working with the rifle at 100 to 1650 yards. The buck was not at long range, but he shot well, and followed it up soon after with a 500 yard stalk into 100 yards on a 29" aoudad, a recent development on the ranch.



*19 Ethan's recent whitetail, with Tyler Gun Works 7 SAW*



*20 Ethan's first auodad, taken with a Tyler Gun Works 7 SAW*

I first stumbled into a 30" aoudad at 25 yards, which I shot pretty high with my Bighorn 500 using a 350 grain cast WFN bullet ... the ram walked away, with me walking after him, until I had a clear shot and was able to take him down with a followup shot.



*151 30" Auodad, taken with a Big Horn 500 S&W 16"*

After that experience, I shot a 240 pound boar with the same rifle at about 40 yards – we swear he was sleeping. I shot him, and he tilted over; then Ethan shot him, and he finished laying over the rest of the way, never having raised up from the ground.



*16 240 lb boar taken with 16" Big Horn Armory 500 S&W*

Finally, I shot a good heavy nine point whitetail with the 500 at 60 yards using the XTP load, which performed just fine; the buck ran about 50 yards before piling up in the creek and rounding out the season for me, at least so far – I still have another buck tag and a pile of doe tags.



*23 Whitetail taken with Big Horn 500 S&W 16"*



*24 Nice whitetail taken with 16" 500 S&W Big Horn Armory*

But the season had its low points, too. I had a very good buck come into handgun range, only to raise up my 44 and find that my aging eyes could not pick up the front sight – at all. I had been glassing all day, and my eyes were fatigued, but this had never happened to me before. Having to pass on that buck, not once but three times, was not a happy moment.

And then – confident in my shooting and smart enough to limit my glassing this time – I had another good whitetail in handgun range. Range determined, Freedom Arms 44 up, sights on, trigger pressed, buck missed. I am still analyzing this shot, but am still at a loss other than to decide (or recall) that handgun hunting requires a lot more to go right than rifle hunting does. Simply, I probably jerked the trigger.

And, to also be reminded that trigger discipline is as important for a season hunter as it is for a novice.

Someday I would like to end my hunting season, not feeling like a novice. I am pretty sure that will never happen – there are always too many new things to learn from the animals, once you go afield.

I did, however, come out of the season with one thing in mind, which is that hunting with family and friends is the best. Just before the season opened, my old friend Jim Taylor and his son-in-law, Lane Fisher, joined me for some pig hunting. The week before Thanksgiving, Mike Barranti, Matt Grabbe, and Bobby Tyler's eight year old son Dylan joined Ethan and me for a long weekend of whitetail, aoudad and hog hunting – it was an awesome time, memorialized already by Mike's story here on this website. Finally, my old friend Jud Morrison and his twin eight year old boys joined me for whitetail, ending with Jud taking his first nice whitetail and his boys successfully staying quiet enough in a blind for it to happen.



*25 Hunting with Dylan Tyler of Tyler Gun Works*



17 Hunting with Mike Barranti of Barranti Leather Co.



*27 Matt Grabbe and Dylan Tyler of Tyler Gun Works with a 420 yard coyote, first shot*



*28 Mike Barranti walking up on his auodad, with a Ruger No. 1 7x57*



*29 The best picture of this hunting season, Dylan Tyler with his whitetail buck, taken with a Tyler Gun Works 7-08*

And, I came out of it with a rekindled interest in the single shot rifle, the lever action rifle, the single action revolver, and the leather gear that can make or break the hunt.

Like all things, I could pick any paragraph above and spend another page or two fleshing out the story – from little things like boiled ham and green chiles in elk camp to an appreciation for Havalon knives and Kenetrek boots. Maybe I will, since Mike has taken pity on my lack of technical skills and given me a spot to publish things here, but in the shorter term, I would really like to flesh out my current interests by writing more about the guns and gear that I am using every week in the hunting fields.