

The Texas Safari

By Doc Barranti

Good friend Mark Hargrove had been trying to get me to visit him at his ranch for a hunt for the past few years, and we finally decided early this year that this would be the year. Joining us on this hunt was to be Bobby Tyler of Tyler Gun Works, his 9 year old son Dylan, and Fermin Garza of 2Dogs Custom Sights. Unfortunately, Bobby and Fermin weren't able to join us, but Bobby asked his right hand gunsmith Matt Grabbe to be Dylan's chaperone on the hunt.

In our conversations leading up to the trip, Mark and I decided this would be a lever gun and sixgun hunt. I selected my Marlin model 1893 in 38/55 that I got from my brother-in-law, and my custom MagNaPort Predator in 44 magnum, recently built by friend Ken Kelly. Mark, acting the role of PH (Professional Hunter), would be carrying his Bighorn Armory 89 Trapper model in 500 S&W, while guiding me on his ranch.

My flight landed that Thursday a few minutes ahead of schedule, and my checked luggage which included my clothes and guns made the trip without issue. Waiting at the curb was my host, the Tall Man from Snyder, Texas, Mark Hargrove. He greeted me with his signature million dollar smile and we made the hour and a half drive to his ranch, making plans as we drove, for a quick evening hunt.

The ranch is home to a growing whitetail population, uncountable hogs, coyote, jackrabbit, and most recently, a fairly healthy population of aoudad. The aoudad is native to Northern Africa, and sometime shortly after WW2, some Texas GI's who had seen the aoudad while serving in the war, thought they might be adaptive to the similar terrain and climate of Texas. They have since prospered and expanded their territory to include the Mighty Horseshoe Ranch.

Upon reaching the ranch, we grabbed some gear and hopped into his ranch truck and headed out into the field. The first thing we had to establish were "rules of engagement". With so many opportunities of game in the area, we had to decide which animal was the priority. The PH, Mark, asked me my choice and I settled on whitetail. We were in the blind by 4:00, and had about 2 hours of light left. Glassing the area, Mark spotted a few aoudad about a mile off, grazing along the distant hillside. We watched the ewe and kids as they moved up the slope. Just a few minutes later, a few more were making their way up the finger-like hillside from the creek bed below towards the other three. They were quite a sight in the late afternoon sunlight.

We turned our binoculars to the tree line below us that separated us from the creek bed. After an hour, I noticed a hog making its way through the mesquite trees towards us. A moment later, another hog appeared. They both were sows, and following behind them were several piglets. For those unfamiliar with feral hogs, they are a very destructive animal. They reproduce in such numbers that they are considered a pest, and ranchers and farmers do their best to reduce their numbers any chance they can. We did however have our Rules of Engagement in place, so rather than culling these, we watched them as they plodded along, not knowing just how lucky they were!

A short time after the hogs left we began to see a few whitetail coming in to eat corn from a nearby feeder. Soon we had several doe and fawn moving in but no buck. We watched for several

minutes when we saw a decent looking buck coming in from our right. He was a shooter, so I quickly brought the Marlin up but in the excitement, shot under him while he kept moving quickly into the brush not offering a follow up shot worth taking. I know what I did wrong on the shot and kicked myself the rest of the evening. Lesson learned. That evening, we had a nice dinner of previously harvested venison, and shortly after, Matt and Dylan arrived. Plans were made for the following day, and we all retired for the night.

Friday morning came quick, and found us all out the door to the blinds an hour before first light. As the morning passed, Matt and Dylan spotted what Dylan dubbed The Awkward Buck, a wide 7 point with a forked main beam, but Dylan decided to not shoot the first thing that came along. Meanwhile, Mark and I sat in our blind scanning the trees and saw some doe moving in feeding.

Mark had carried two rifles to the blind; his Bighorn Trapper, and his legendary Ruger Boddington No.1 in 7x57. This rifle has made incredible shots on game and never letting him down, and had earned a reputation in that part of Texas as a game killer. Something caught Mark's eye and he whispered "that's a big buck!" Looking to my left I saw what he saw. I tried to open the window in front of me, and much to my dismay, I couldn't figure out the latch and watched as the buck trotted past us and angled away and moving into the distant tree line. Well heck!! I kept watching as he moved through the trees and saw that he was circling back towards the doe in front of us. By then I had the window open and was about to grab the Marlin. Worried that he wouldn't stop, and end up far out of open sight rifle range, my PH Mark looked at me with his magical No.1 in hand and said, "you need to shoot that deer, use this!" He may have used more colorful language than that, but you get the idea.

Grabbing the No.1, I got it out the window as the deer was just about to trot in front of us. Following him with the rifle, I squeezed the trigger and at the shot he fell over onto his side. I reloaded just in case a follow up shot was needed, but it wasn't. We waited a few minutes to see if he would try to get up but he never did. The bullet had hit the deer just behind the near side shoulder, passed through the lungs and exited just in front of the offside shoulder. The 7x57 did its job well, and the legendary rifle's reputation was still intact! Walking up to him he looked even more impressive than he did through the binoculars. While I didn't take him using my Marlin or Ruger, it was still a lever action...sort of! We still had two more days of hunting before flying home, and there were hogs and aoudad on the hunting menu.

After trophy photos, we dressed the deer out and loaded him in the truck and headed back to the ranch house. I sat with a grin the whole way back and mentioned that I wouldn't mind finding a No.1 in 7x57 to which Mark replied that he just happened to have a spare that he recently picked up in trade and if I wanted it, it was mine. After the legal paperwork was done, I was now the owner of a 1981 vintage, red pad No.1 in the classic 7x57. Woohoo! Matt and Dylan were waiting for us and after all the high fives, Mark whipped up a quick late breakfast of bacon and eggs before we headed to the barn to skin and quarter the buck. After we spent the next few hours skinning, quartering and packing the buck in ice. Even 9 year old Dylan, who already shows a great work ethic, thanks to his great parents, was lending a hand! After we had everything cleaned up, it was time for lunch!

Once the dishes were washed and kitchen straightened up, we all headed back out to the blinds. Mark and I were watching for hogs, while Matt and Dylan were waiting for whitetail but it wasn't to be, and once the shooting light was gone, we all headed back to the ranch house. A quick supper was prepared and we spent the next few hours talking about hunting, sixguns, rifles, and good people. As we chatted, plans were made for the following day's hunt. We were to be joined by Mark's 14 year old son

Ethan, so the plan was for Ethan, Matt and Dylan to head out early in pursuit of whitetail. Mark and I decided that aoudad should be next on my itinerary, which meant an afternoon hunt, so we got to sleep in!

Ethan stars on his high school's football team and had a game that night over 2 hours away and by the time he finally made it to the house it was 2:30AM Saturday and the alarm went off a mere 2 hours later to get up for the hunt. Like a trooper, he jumped up and headed out the door with the others. Mark and I were up having coffee when Mark got a call with good news; Dylan had a deer on the ground! We pulled on our boots and jumped in the truck heading for their blind and got there as they were finishing field dressing the buck. It was Dylan's 'Awkward Deer'! Loading the deer up, we all headed to the barn. A vote was taken and we decided to have some breakfast before skinning and quartering the buck. Mark and Ethan took the roll the Camp Cook, and spent the next few minutes arguing about who was making the better waffles. I don't know who made mine but they sure were good! Once all the work was done and the deer was in the cooler, we did some shooting and got our guns sighted. It took a few rounds with my new to me No.1 but was soon hitting right. We all grabbed our gear and headed out the door. Ethan, Mark and Dylan would be in a blind waiting for hogs, while Mark and I headed back out to our first blind to watch this distant hills for aoudad. Ethan carried his dad's Ruger No.1 RSI in 30-06, Dylan his bolt action 223 and Matt was armed with his custom Ruger Flattop 44 Special.

We got to the blind, Mark with his Bighorn Trapper and me with my new to me No.1, at about 2:00pm and started glassing the hills for aoudad. After an hour or so, Mark said "well, there they are!" Nearly a mile away, a small bunch of aoudad were slowly grazing as they moved up a hill across from us. A quick plan was made, and we began the stalk. We headed down the slope to the creek bed below us, sweeping wide to our left and started up the other side to approach them from the south with the wind in our face. As we moved north, we had to cross several finger-like hills that stretched down towards the creek between us and the aoudad. As we were nearing the crest of the last hill, we peeked over the top and saw a ewe and a few 'kids', I guess you'd call them, a little more than 100 yards away. The ewe and young ones moved up the slope further and disappeared behind the next finger. We knew there were more aoudad on the other side of that finger, so I took the lead and started to inch forward. I had gone about 10 yards when all of a sudden, they all walked right up on top of that finger with me out in the open. I froze in my tracks as did Mark about 10 yards behind me. A ewe was staring at us but figured we weren't anything to worry about so they all kept grazing. We sat still, muscles cramping, watching through our binoculars for a ram. Just then, from behind the bunch, there he was! I slowly brought the rifle up and waited. It was the longest couple of minutes in my life! The ram finally made his way in front of the others with none behind him. He was quartered towards me facing my left so I held just in front of his shoulder and squeezed. I heard the bang of the rifle and the whop of the bullet! He tipped over, kicked his back legs once. I reloaded the rifle and held on him just in case he tried to get up but he was finished. The shot was just under 100 yards. Walking up to this trophy was a unique experience and one I won't forget. Mark called it an epic stalk, and I have to agree with him. We rolled him over to see if there was an exit but there wasn't. After closer inspection, I noticed a cyst-like bump on his side just in front of his offside hip and wondered. Pulling out my knife, I made a cut and out popped the expanded bullet, another trophy to remember the hunt by. I had already decided that I would be getting European mounts from this hunt, so we packed out the head and meat.

We sat by my aoudad, reflecting on the stalk, and taking in all the beauty that is Texas. Mark caught sight of movement on the far hillside and looking through his binoculars, saw a herd of 18 or so aoudad. Out in front was the Alpha, a spectacular looking specimen with dark red fur and long sweeping

horns that nearly touch his sides. Amazing animals, and only time will tell if they will stay on the Mighty Horseshoe. As the sun was going down behind the hills, we heard a few shots coming from the south where the others were hunting. All three of them were able to shoot hogs that came in to the feeders. A successful day for us all!

Sunday morning came, and Matt and Dylan packed up their truck to head back to Friona. We all said our goodbyes, and once they had gone, Mark, Ethan and I grabbed our gear and headed out for hogs! My goal was a trifecta; whitetail, aoudad, and hogs, with the 7x57. We walked for miles, following creek beds, trails, and through the mesquite trees but it just wasn't meant to be. Though there was plenty of sign, not a signal hog was seen, but that's why it's called hunting and not killing. The pleasure was in the country I was seeing, and who I was seeing it with. All else was secondary. As the sun set that day, my hunt had come to an end, but the memories will last me the rest of my life.

That night, my last night in Texas, we ate venison from my deer, finished the bottle of Pendleton, and talked of guns, leather projects, and of how much this Texas Safari felt like an African Safari. More on that later!

Great memories, like great friends, don't just happen, you have to make them....



Dylan wondering how long til the waffles are done?!



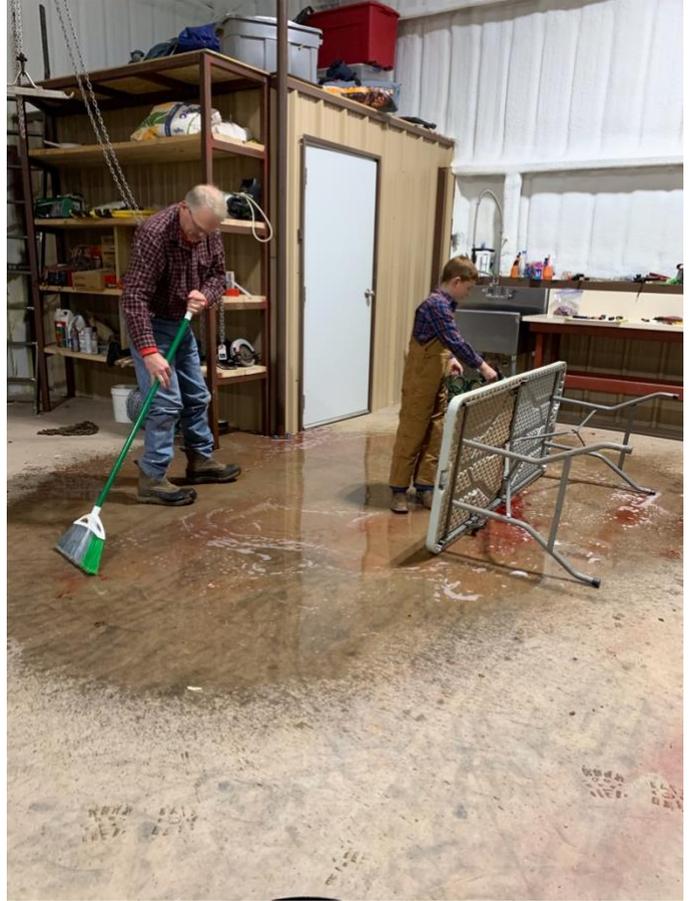
Matt Grabbe and Dylan Tyler with a coyote Matt shot at 400 yards





My buck, taken with the PH's legendary No.1





Dylan lending a hand



Dylan and the Awkward Buck



Dylan and the PH Mark Hargrove leading the way







Mark and his son Ethan





Mark and M





Sunset the last day of the hunt