

A night scene with a campfire and a tent. The background is a dark blue sky. In the foreground, a large, bright campfire burns with logs, casting a warm glow. To the left, a dark tent is visible. The overall atmosphere is serene and adventurous.

A SON'S PROMISE AND AN ARCHERY WORLD RECORD

Decades ago, early in my bowhunting journey, I read a lot about hunting Sitka blacktail deer. Bowhunters like Chuck Adams and Jack Frost seemed obsessed with these little island deer and wrote amazing stories about their do-it-yourself escapades in Alaska. Their articles sparked my need for adventure.

Years ago, I decided the time was right to chase blacktail. I knew I wanted to go self-guided into remote Alaska as Chuck and Jack had done. The ultimate goal, I concluded, would be a Pope & Young Booner—what I call animals that qualify for both record books. Interestingly, even though Sitka deer are a popular animal to bowhunt, there are only a handful of Pope & Young Booners. And of those, Chuck Adams and Jack Frost each have one!

■ ALLEN BOLEN

This story was originally printed
in the Boone and Crockett Club's
31st Big Game Awards, 2019-2021.





In 2018, my 16-year-old son Jake and I planned a two-week backpack hunt. We were dropped by floatplane into remote southeast Alaska on July 30. The weather started beautifully, and on opening day, Jake arrowed a gorgeous 5x5 non-typical. It was his first animal to qualify for the P&Y record book. I could see Jake's joy as he stood over his buck and put his hands on those beautiful velvet antlers. He was so proud and so thankful.

"Dad, I'm so grateful for this experience and opportunity you've given me. I want to pay you back with a promise that I will stay with you and help you find your big buck, no matter how long it takes," he said. "I won't get impatient or want to go home. I'm here with you until we get it done."

As a father, these were some of the sweetest words I'd ever heard. My 16-year-old understood and was willing to give it his all to help his old man accomplish a dream in the tough backcountry. After arranging a pickup of Jake's deer meat, we climbed back to the

alpine. Both of us were ready and determined to do whatever it would take to find a giant buck.

Over the next 12 days, Jake and I endured some very tough conditions and explored some beautiful, albeit intimidating, country. Ultimately, we traversed ridges, crossed valleys, camped on five different peaks, endured gale-force storms, and spent countless hours behind glass. We were fortunate to look over 120 different blacktail bucks.

Nearly two weeks into the hunt, I reflected on the awesomeness of the trip as I sat on the edge of a cliff, 80 yards above the biggest buck either of us had ever seen. He was taking a midday rest with a few of his buddies. When he finally stood, I placed a perfect arrow in his vitals. Jake watched him fall as he glassed from a lookout above me. That 2018 buck scored 103-3/8 (P&Y/B&C) and earned the P&Y Club's First Award at the 2019 convention in Omaha, Nebraska. Although he was short of my dream (108 B&C all-time

minimum), he was a beautiful deer that meant a lot to Jake and me. The two bucks we killed on that trip will always be displayed together in our home. The bright side of missing the minimum was that our quest would continue.

In 2020, Jake and I decided to go back to the same spot we hunted in 2018. We were accompanied by Jake's friend Tyler Rose and my buddy Luke Johnson who was taking pictures.

Right off, we were pounded by copious amounts of rain and fog and ended up stuck in our tents. When we finally got out to hunt, the fog and rain continued to roll in and out, posing a glassing challenge. The conditions were some of the most frustrating I've ever

WE TRAVERSED RIDGES,
CROSSED VALLEYS, CAMPED ON
FIVE DIFFERENT PEAKS,
ENDURED GALE-FORCE STORMS,
AND SPENT COUNTLESS
HOURS BEHIND GLASS.

Epic views of Alaska's Prince of Wales Island.

dealt with. There were multiple three-day stretches where we didn't hunt at all. I was also frustrated because I wanted the boys to have fun. The only consolation was that their toughness and patience were being tested to the extreme, which was also a goal of the trip. I just hoped it wasn't too much. I was relieved to see that they stayed positive and entertained by playing cards and Yahtzee.

Thanks to everyone's good attitude, we jumped on every opportunity to get out and hunt, even when the weather wasn't ideal. On one such occasion, we decided to move camp deeper into the mountains. As we walked through the mixed fog in a historically good deer area, we found a very defined

deer trail and some large, smoking-fresh buck tracks. As we followed the trail across the main ridge, I spotted antler tips about 75 yards out. We dropped into the tall alpine grass and glassed ahead. There were a few bucks we could see that looked pretty nice. I was about to ask the boys if they wanted to stalk them when a giant buck appeared with the group from behind a rise. As we watched, I didn't know what to do. I really wanted to see the boys make a stalk. Luke got my attention and snapped me out of my indecisive trance. He looked directly at me and said firmly, "Allen, you need to shoot that buck!"

One of the bucks had noticed our movement and started to walk



Bolen's Sitka blacktail was on display at the Club's 31st Big Game Awards Banquet, held July 2022.

away. The herd divided as a few bucks went up the ridge, while two dropped down the ridge toward a saddle. They were suspicious of something but moved slowly and didn't know exactly what was wrong. Luke and I used the contour of some draws to get closer. The big buck was not in either of the groups moving off. We slipped into the area where we'd last seen him, but he remained out of sight. There was only one very small draw left. Did he somehow sneak out on us? My instincts told me that we would have seen him leave, yet it was hard to believe that he was completely hidden in that one small cut. We crawled to within 10 yards of the lip of the draw, where I decided to be patient and wait. I resisted the urge to peek over the edge. If he was in the draw, there was no way for him to exit without showing himself inside my bow range.

We waited several minutes, and I began to lose hope. Both visible groups of bucks were moving away quickly now. I looked back at Jake who was glassing my position from our original spot. He gave me

an encouraging gesture. Suddenly, a small buck fed out of the draw 14 yards in front of us. He saw us and started to walk stiff-legged to the rim of the draw. I knew it was likely that the big buck would follow him out, perhaps alerted by the smaller buck's posture. My muscles tensed with my release hooked on the string. I settled my bow grip into that familiar place on my left palm. This was going to happen fast, and I was way closer than I wanted to be.

Within moments the big buck lumbered out of the draw with his nose in the grass feeding. As I came to full draw, he saw the movement and looked my way. However, his reaction was too late and my arrow smashed through his ribs from 14 yards. He sprinted down the ridge and bailed into some timber where I would find him an hour later.

The boys and I celebrated in the pouring rain, taking photos of the giant buck. I told Jake that I thought we might be looking at a true B&C All-time buck and a new P&Y velvet World's Record. He couldn't believe it, and honestly,

neither could I. This buck was something special. Despite having seven inches of deductions (including a big non-typical point), he still carried enough of a typical frame to net over 108!

By some strange destiny, Jake and I had made a complete circle and ended where we started. Despite hundreds of miles hiked over three years, I shot my buck on the same ridge as Jake's first P&Y deer—within a few hundred yards of the place where he made his grateful promise to stick with me to the end. And that he had done.

The circles of human influence are an integral part of the magic of hunting. The way others inspire us and the way we inspire them make up the fiber of what fuels our passion in the field. Thank you, Chuck and Jack, for telling stories nearly 30 years ago. Without those, I would never have had a dream to chase. Thank you to Jake for being with me and living that dream. I hope that someday you're able to inspire your own child's life and pass the adventure-seeking baton to yet another generation. ■



Bolen and his son with the award-winning Sitka blacktail scoring 108-4/8 points.