

A man wearing a camouflage hat and an orange vest is kneeling by a pond, holding the antlers of a deer. The deer is lying on the ground in front of him. The background shows a pond with reeds and a clear sky.

Doing

The Right Thing

By Mel Lofftus

Photo by Author

“Oh no!” went through my mind as I crossed the 327 yards to a water hole where I had just put down a buck. When I reached the 40-foot-wide pond, my fear became reality. I stared at my buck in the middle of the pond — only part of the buck’s shoulder, side, and one antler tip were visible above the murky surface. I contemplated my situation: I was hunting alone, the temperature was still in the thirties, there was ice along the pond edge, and I was quite sure the bottom was all mud. How had my quest for a trophy buck in one of the most famous deer hunting areas, Arizona 12B, come to this?

Living in Southern California and having a passion for hunting qualifies me as an oddity in the eyes of local residents. When I asked out my wife for the first time, all her co-worker could say is, “He has a gun rack in his truck”!

As the summer of 2005 set in, my wife reminded me I had not checked the Arizona state web site for draw results. Over the past 13 years I have begrudgingly donated my license fees to Arizona to build points toward drawing a 12B tag. When I checked the web site for results, the word “Successful” followed my name. I closed the site and reopened to double check the results. It was not until my wife read the results and confirmed what I was holding

my breath to believe, it finally set in. I drew one of the finest, most-sought-after deer tags in the world.

The following months were full of preparation and scouting. Not a day passed that my mind did not wander over all aspects of the coming hunt. I prepped every piece of gear and worked out religiously. I settled on using my Remington Model 700 in 7mm Magnum with my Remington Model 700 in .264 Magnum as a back up. I shot often and achieved consistent accuracy to 500 yards. I consulted other hunters who had drawn the same tag the previous year, spoke with the wildlife biologist for the area, and scouted the zone. I was more

“I waited until the buck was finished drinking and had turned away from the water before sending my bullet to end his pain. I watched the bullet strike its mark, and this story should end here...”

ready for this hunt than any other I have undertaken.

I opted to hunt alone, to the displeasure of many of my hunting companions. I had a bad experience in the past with a hunting partner losing interest and finding reasons we had to leave a quality hunt early. As one good friend said, “I understand, this one has to be a purist hunt.” Additionally, I weighed the advantages of an extra set of

eyes compared to doubling my detectable scent and movement by game. I go to great lengths to keep myself as scent free as possible on hunts, and it is difficult to persuade companions to do the same when it is very cold out. I decided to leave my camper and horses home and travel light because of the terrain and lack of water. I built a removable bunk in my truck shell so I could fit my old quad in the back of my truck and also sleep. I used all my back-packing equipment to keep space down to a minimum, and handy in case I found a need to pack into an area.

I have an external truck-mounted antenna for my cell phone, which would allow me to communicate with my wife nightly to update her on my position for safety. I covered the inside of the windows in my truck shell with cardboard to help insulate. My kids colored pictures and wrote notes on the cardboard to remind me of them while I was away.

The day to leave for hunting finally came. I put on a book tape and barely noticed the eight-hour drive to camp. Up well before light, I found my way to an area I calculated would produce the buck I had been dreaming of. During the course of the morning, I counted more than two dozen does with small bucks in tow. I spent the middle of the day building a blind overlooking a route from a deep canyon to one of the scarce water holes in the region.

I spent the next several days basically the same. My alarm went off at 3:30 a.m.

each day. My thermometer in the mornings read a steady 22 degrees throughout the week. A cold breakfast bar, a wipe down with scent eliminating lotion, change into hunting clothes kept in sealed plastic bags, and I was ready for the day. I made my way to my blind by moonlight and spent the last hour before light dozing. The morning hours I spent glassing deer moving between the canyon and water hole. Each day brought several new and more mature bucks as the rut heated up. I spent midday along the canyon rim, glassing for any monster buck moving into the area. I stayed in my blind well after dark to depart the area as undetected as possible. Evenings I ate soups and crackers, no meat or anything spicy. I read my books, evaluated trophy deer photos in hunting magazines to better judge the bucks I was seeing, and called my wife and kids. I kept a very quiet camp.

Hunting competition was low. The hunters I saw were mainly road-hunting in pickup trucks and on quads. Two groups of men whom I assumed to be guides with hunters and possessing video gear stopped in the general area of the water hole I had a partial view of from my blind. Each of the guides seemed to be aware of the location and value of the water hole. One guide studied the tracks around the water and opted to move on. The second guide I watched a few days later began building a ground blind 25 yards off the water hole, facing my blind. I stood outside of my blind wearing every piece of orange clothing I could muster. The men were so busy building their blind they did not notice me walk the several hundred yards towards them until I was on top of them. The guide looked up from his task and asked me accusingly, "Where did you come from?" I pointed out the area that contained my blind. The guide, to my surprise, said they would leave. I invited him to stay, explaining I was hunting the bucks coming into the area and just wanted to establish fields of fire for safety. The guide insisted they would move on and wished me luck. I wished them luck in return.

On the sixth day of my planned ten-day hunt, I was in my blind before light. The first couple of hours produced several respectable bucks, but nothing close to my aspiration of a 30-inch spread. I had time on my side and was determined to hold out for a really great buck. The morning's deer activity had all but come to an end, and I was leaving my blind for the canyon rim to glass. I took a last glance around the area and picked up movement in the direction of the water hole. I wish I could tell you the movement turned out to be my 30-inch buck of a lifetime, but God had other plans

for me. Standing near the portion of the water hole I could see from my blind, was a 21-inch 4X4 buck with a small kicker out the side of one antler.

As I put my glasses on the buck, he took a crippled hop on three legs toward the water. I could plainly see even from my distance, the buck had been shot in the left front knee. I scrambled for my spotting scope and determined the wound was not fresh. The buck's lower leg swung unnaturally free as he took another hop towards the water. My heart filled with sorrow, and I knew my hunt was over.

I waited until the buck was finished drinking and had turned away from the water before sending my bullet to end his pain. I watched the bullet strike its mark, and this story should end here. To my surprise and shock, the buck spun away from the impact of the bullet and lunged into the pond out of my sight.

As I stood next to the pond I found myself glancing around as if someone may be watching, as I contemplated stripping down and wading into the middle of the pond to retrieve my buck. This plan quickly passed as I figured I would get stuck in the mud, fall down, be soaked from head to toe, die from exposure and embarrass my hunting ancestors for all eternity. I retrieved thick nylon cord I had used to build my blind. I

used the nylon cord to try and lasso the tip of the antler showing above the water. The hard part was getting my lightweight lasso to land far enough out in just the right spot and then to sink over the antler tip. I could not help but to laugh out loud at myself, and the spectacle I presented. After over an hour of steady frustration, I pulled my buck to shore. I took pictures along the way knowing this was a story to remember.

As I headed for home, I called my father and various other hunting buddies who had been leaving voice messages demanding to know how the hunt was going. My words came heavy and my voice cracked often as I relayed my story, "I couldn't leave him wounded. I had to put him down". My father and friends all replied, "You did the right thing!" ■

Associate Hunting Journals

Share your adventures with your fellow Associates

SEND YOUR SHORT STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS TO:
 bclub@boone-crockett.org
 OR MAIL TO:
 Fair Chase, 250 Station Dr.
 Missoula, MT 59801

You know that a trophy will usually show up—if it shows up at all—at first or last light. A ghost in the shadows, barely visible. To an ordinary scope, perhaps not visible at all. Schmidt & Bender riflescopes possess the highest light transmission values of any scopes ever manufactured. That's not an exaggerated advertising claim. It's a fact. At dawn, at dusk, in snow or rain, it can make the difference between a perfect shot...or no shot at all. The most accurate rifle made is useless if the scope isn't up to the task. So look through a Schmidt & Bender. Just once. You'll see what you might be missing. P.O. Box 134, Meriden, NH, 03770, (800) 468-3450, email scopes@cyberportal.net, or visit www.schmidtbender.com.

**YOU'VE DREAMED FOR YEARS.
 PLANNED FOR MONTHS.
 HUNTED FOR DAYS.
 AND NOW YOU CAN'T SEE IT?**



SCHMIDT & BENDER
 See it our way.

2.5-10 x 56 with illuminated reticle