

Trinity Dream Come True



By **J. Peter Morish**
Columbia Blacktail
Current Rank: No. 7

*An excerpt from Boone and Crockett Club's newest book—**Big Trophies, Epic Hunts: True Tales of Self Guided Adventure**—due out in September.*

LOCATION: TRINITY CO., CALIFORNIA

DATE: SEPTEMBER 2005

SCORE: 185-1/8 B&C POINTS

THIS BUCK RECEIVED A FIRST PLACE AWARD AT B&C'S 26TH BIG GAME AWARDS PROGRAM.

TOP COUNTIES SINCE 2004
Typical and non-typical Columbia blacktail entries combined.

LOCATION	TROPHIES
1. Trinity Co., CA	45
2. Mendocino Co., CA	41
3. Humboldt Co., CA	32
4. Clackamas Co., OR	24
5. Jackson Co., OR	18
6. Tehama Co., CA	13
7. Glenn Co., CA	8
8. Linn Co., OR	7
8. Shasta Co., CA	7
10. Pierce Co., WA	6

The views are breathtaking, the air is clean, and the hunting is exceptional. For 27 hunting seasons, I have experienced all that the Trinity Alps had to offer. For anyone who desires to hunt public land and wants a memorable hunting experience, the Trinity Alps may be their dream area; it has been for me.

I have taken many deer in the Trinity Alps, both small and big. As the years passed, I became more specific on what size of deer I wanted to harvest. I found that passing up a legal buck was just as rewarding as taking a deer. When I got to the point of passing up a decent four-point buck to try for a larger one, then I knew that my perspective on hunting had changed. Most hunters in the United States don't associate good hunting with California, especially trophy deer hunting. However, I do.

*CIRCA
2005*

The name Alps speaks for itself. Though the height of the Trinity Alps does not come near to the elevations found elsewhere, the steepness and ruggedness of the backcountry rivals the most well-known of tough hunting areas. Add to this the thick underbrush and you have a challenge for even the most seasoned hunter. The Columbia blacktail is certainly not as well known, or even hunted as much as the mule deer or the whitetail deer. However, it is every bit as much of a challenge and worthy adversary as any other species of deer. For many, the blacktail is one of the most difficult deer to hunt. To find a nice buck is a difficult and oftentimes daunting and consuming task. A trophy buck can require a lifetime of hunting. If you are able to hunt hard and choose to do so, then a trophy can be found in the coastal mountains of northern California.

As I have done for 26 prior seasons, I headed for my favorite hunting grounds in mid-September of the 2005 season. I often choose to not hunt the opening weekend because of the increased hunting pressure. After the opening weekend, the number of hunters in the backcountry drops significantly. Usually, the only hunters you see, if any, are those like yourself who have also hunted the area for years.

On this particular weekend, I planned on going with a hunting buddy but, at the last moment, he canceled. Hunting in the wilderness is certainly not something I would recommend someone doing on his or her own. However, I had been planning this hunt since the end of the prior season, so I decided to go anyway.

The first leg of my hunting trip was to drive to the trailhead. I arrived early on a Friday morning. It was mid-September, which is often just an extension of summer. This day was clear, with temperatures in the low 90s. Though this area is known for hunters who horse pack into the wilderness area of the Trinity Alps, I had chosen to backpack. I did this because I have been able to do so physically and because I just didn't want those who would pack me in to know just how well I did hunting. It takes about seven hours of hard hiking to reach my camp. It is only about four or five miles, but the terrain is either up or down.

By the time I got to camp, I was extremely tired and sore. I was reminded of earlier hunts when it was difficult but not so consuming, and I wondered how much longer I would be able to do this kind of hunting. But, I was here now and tomorrow would begin another hunting season.

First, I needed to set up camp. When backpacking, you learn to pack in only the essentials. If you do get a deer, then you will be packing out both the deer and all your gear. This can be a very heavy pack if you do not wisely choose what you bring. If I did get a deer, I would bone out the deer, cut the antlers off the head, and take the cape if the deer is a trophy animal. One of the positives of hunting blacktail deer when backpacking is its size. It is smaller than mule deer or whitetail, so packing out the meat isn't too bad.

My camp was relatively simple. Over the years, I had cut out a level pad in a timber stand on the side of a mountain. This time of year the weather is often very nice, so a tent is not needed. I lie out under the trees and peer through the tops to watch the stars. This is when I think about what tomorrow may hold and where I would hunt. The air was still and the skies were clear. Not the best conditions for hunting, but I was in the backcountry of the Trinity Alps and anything was possible.



The hunting area is so steep, rugged, and dense with brush that you just don't do any walking or stalking for deer. The area I wanted to hunt overlooks two ravines and a sidehill. It usually takes me about 30 minutes in the dark to find the rock outcropping where I would sit for the next three or so hours. From this place I would setup and spot for any deer that might be around.

I awoke well before dawn. I took my pack, which has an external frame. It comes in handy should I need to pack out a buck. I left for one of my favorite hunting sites.

I hiked out of the timber from camp and into a manzanita patch on the south side of the mountain. I snaked my way through brush and finally came to my rock. It was still dark and I had made little noise. I had made this trek from camp many times and I can do it in the dark with the help of a small flashlight, which I keep pointed on the path in front of me and toward the ground. I didn't want to alert the deer or other hunters that may be across the canyon. As I quietly set up on the rock, I began to see the faint light of the sunrise to the east. I could see the outline of part of the Alps. It was very quiet and still.

I use a lightweight eight power pair of binoculars and find that binoculars are the most important item in harvesting the deer other than my firearm. I began this morning by slowly working my binoculars

across the hillside just adjacent and below me. With the binoculars, I continued to follow two ravines below the rock I was sitting on. I began to glass a second time, starting with an area directly across from me. I looked intently into an opening in the brush patch. The rays of sun were beginning to show over the mountains, but it was still relatively dark in the lower parts of the canyon.

I saw something across from me that looked out of place, but I couldn't see if it was a deer or just a shadow. I looked away and began to look lower on the hillside. It was still quiet and I hadn't heard or seen anything. I looked back at that spot adjacent to me and felt that something just wasn't right. I again looked intently, but I wasn't convinced that there was anything there. It was less than 100 yards away and I figured that I should be able to see a deer if it was there.

I looked downhill and then felt I needed to look back to that partial opening again. As I studied the area with my binoculars and as the light was getting better, I thought I saw what looked like a fork to a set of antlers. I just wasn't sure because there was so much brush in the area and things were not clear. As I was straining to see what was in the brush, I saw the entire top of the brush patch move slightly! I realized immediately that I had spotted a buck and the brush that moved was the deer's rack! I couldn't tell how

many points it had but, as it moved, the rack looked to be the extensions of the brush patch that it was standing in front of.

I had seen and shot many big black-tails, but rarely had my heart begun to race at the sight of a deer. This was certainly the exception and my heart was pumping fast. It was now getting light enough that I could make out the outline of the deer's body. The deer was facing uphill and the front half of the body was behind a brush patch. Only his antlers from the middle of the ears up were visible above the brush. In the opening of the brush I could see from the middle of the deer's body to its back end. I immediately thought that all the buck had to do was take one step forward and he would be safe. From where he was standing, there was a steady and thick patch of brush running up the mountainside. If I was to get this deer, I was going to need some luck.

My gun was already positioned on the top of my pack on the rock. I quietly slid down onto my stomach and positioned the gun toward the deer. I located the deer in my scope, which I later determined to be 65 yards away, and to my surprise it was still standing in the same position. I could see him from midway back and felt this was going to be my only chance. Because of the size and number of points to the antlers, I was going to have to give it a try. I decided I had a pretty good chance of getting this buck if he would just stay still for another few seconds. If I could get a spine shot midway on the deer, it would be fatal. Being that the deer was as close as he was, I decided to take the shot. I lined up on the deer, held steady, and fired!

Through the scope, I saw the buck flinch and take a step backward. As I pulled away from the scope, I looked up to see the buck take another backward step and fall to the ground. He fell partially in the open in the brush, but only enough to see part of the body. He was down on his side and wasn't getting up.

It took a couple of minutes to compose myself and realize what had just happened. I knew I had just harvested a deer and he was huge, possibly the largest deer I had yet taken. It was still very early, so I decided to sit on the rock outcropping and relish the moment. I sat on that rock for an hour watching the sunrise and taking in the beauty that was revealed before me. The morning colors seemed brighter and the view even more majestic. I thought then that I probably had taken the deer of a lifetime. It had taken 27 years for my dream of a trophy to come true, but it happened and it occurred in the most beautiful area I have been fortunate enough to hunt — the Trinity Alps. ■

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