

# The Hunt for Loverboy

BY MIKE TIFFANY

I never previously had the opportunity to hunt in the southwest and when Joe Schlueter of Outdoor Travel suggested a New Mexico antelope hunt, I jumped. I've hunted in the northern Rockies and Canada and when Joe casually mentioned there might be a chance at a Boone & Crockett buck, I started to sweat.

I arrived in Roswell, New Mexico about noon and met with Jess Rankin of West Tex-New Mex Outfitters. He and my guide, Mark Fullingim, had been scouting the ranch outside Carrizozo where we would be hunting. Mark said they had located two herds which were lead by big bucks. When I inquired about how big, he said, "15 to 17 inches." Jess also mentioned one buck had a very unusual shape to his horns. They pointed inward and the prongs were very flat and large. This long inward growth made the buck look like he had a large heart on his head.

It was about an hour drive to Carrizozo through some very beautiful country. There was a mixture of sage prairies and stark, high, purple mountains. The ranch was typical of a New Mexico cattle ranch having about 160,000 acres which seemed to this Ozark boy more range than we could possibly hunt effectively. But Mark assured me he had been narrowing down our hunt to two areas that held large herds. After arriving in Carrizozo, Mark wanted to spend the rest of the day scouting the ranch and locating the bedding spots of the herds for our morning hunt.

After a couple hours of glassing and moving we located one of our target herds. The herd was grazing on the top of a hill in a mixture of cactus and waist high sage. There were about twenty antelope just milling about feeding and looking up occasionally. At first we didn't see any bucks but then Mark directed me to

a particular spot and what I saw made me really excited. The buck was a beautiful animal with straight, tall horns about 16 inches, nice prongs and well proportioned mass. We backed off the location, careful not to spook the herd. Mark assured me that if the herd was not pushed from the area during the night by coyotes, we should be able to stalk these antelope at first light the next morning.

Next, Mark decided that we should try to locate the herd that held that big buck with the heart-

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**"The buck of my dreams was centered in my spotting scope."**

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shaped horns. We drove onto a long, flat plain where Mark and Jess had seen the buck the day before. We stopped and got out of the truck on a small rise and started glassing. Thirty minutes went by and we hadn't seen a thing. We loaded up and decided to move further down the plain about a mile and about 500 yards up the side of the mountain bordering the south side of the plain. We resumed glassing and searching for antelope. After about ten minutes Mark whispered, "Dar she blows."

I knew in an instant he didn't mean a big sperm whale. I focused in on a wash out about 400 yards off to the north and spotted a few moving animals. Some were grazing with heads bobbing up and down, watching for danger and feeding on the sage brush. Suddenly one bigger bodied antelope lifted its head and looked directly at us, I took in a deep breath.

The buck of my dreams was centered in my spotting scope. I couldn't believe what I saw. The horns of the buck formed a perfect heart and the prongs, or paddles as Mark called them, looked like the arrow through Cupid's valentine heart. I knew at that instant this was the buck I wanted on my wall. I expressed my wishes to Mark. It was decided. We would hunt this animal.

We kept glassing the herd and observing the movements of the big buck in particular. Over the last hour of daylight they stayed within one hundred yards of the spot where we first spotted them. We moved quietly back to the truck and retraced our path out of the area. Mark took me to the motel in Carrizozo and we made plans to meet at the truck two hours before first light the next day.

When we returned to the ranch the next morning two large mule deer does raced in front of the truck and my heart raced just as fast. We drove to a spot located directly up the mountain from the last location of the herd. Now came the hard part. We sat in the truck to wait for enough light to start glassing the plain to locate the exact target for our stalk. My emotions really began to dive when the sun started to rise. The herd was nowhere in sight.

Mark and I both spotted the movement near a large berm about 500 yards off to the northeast. A berm is a long bank of dirt built up about ten feet to form a pond from the drainage of the surrounding area.

It was our herd and there was Valentine boy. We planned our stalk. There was a patch of scraggly cedar trees between us and the herd, so we packed up and started down the mountain into the cedar. We had to half crouch and zig-zag through the cover to stay completely out of sight. As we reached the edge of the patch of trees Mark came to a complete stop and held up his hand. There



MIKE TIFFANY WITH HIS ONE-OF-A-KIND 82-6/8 POINT PRONGHORN TAKEN IN NEW MEXICO.

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they were about 250 yards directly in front of us. We crawled up the last few yards to the furthestmost tree extending from the patch of cover.

We counted over thirty does feeding around this berm. The buck was feeding just to the right of the main herd. I focused in on him through my scope. I had hand-loaded some 150 grain Nosler Ballistic Tips and had confidence I could put the shot where I aimed at this distance. But, as I peered through the scope my worst nightmare appeared. About 150 yards directly behind the buck was a gray pickup truck. We couldn't figure out how it got to the spot! It didn't look too old so I didn't think it was an abandoned junker. Mark asked if I was sure if I could hit the buck with a solid kill shot from this distance which he thought was about 210 yards. I said I could but I also knew my bullet could pass directly through the animal and possibly hit the truck. We decided to wait until the buck was clear of the truck.

It was a long ten minutes looking at the antelope as he casually fed on the tender cactus flowers. Finally he started to move to my left, away from the line of fire of the pickup truck. I waited until he had the berm behind him, making it safe to shoot. But just as quickly as I could spit, he walked behind the berm. The buck had disappeared. Mark sighed as he watched the scenario playing out in his binoculars. We watched the does continue to feed in the area, but still no buck.

Suddenly in the center of the hundred foot long mound of dirt three startled does appeared from the backside. They didn't break into the characteristic full-out dash, but just stopped and looked backward. Mark whispered, "Get ready."

I put the scope on the location where the does had come from. Seconds later the buck was in the clear and my cross hairs were centered on his shoulder. Before the sound of my shot finished echoing down the valley, the buck dropped in his tracks.

Mark patted me on the back and sprinted out after the dead animal. My shot had entered at the base of the neck at the start of the shoulder.

As we admired the buck another pickup truck drove across the valley toward us. The two guys were locals that had also been hunting the big buck. We found out the heart shaped antelope was a local legend. He had earned the name of "Loverboy", because of the large number of does in his herd and the heart shape of his horns. They took some pictures and congratulated us on taking the much sought after buck.

We returned to Carrizozo with the trophy and arranged for the mounting of the buck. A crowd gathered around the truck and many guesses were made as how high it would go in the record book. "Loverboy" was officially scored at 82-6/8 points and was recently accepted into the 22nd Awards Period.

I've been asked when my next antelope hunt will be, but after this show I think I'll just stick to elk and deer for awhile.

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