

THE PLAINS GIANT

BY ROSS SEYFRIED
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

I WAS NOT CERTAIN AT FIRST. HE LOOKED SURREAL, perhaps artificial, in the orange-tinted predawn mist. The big buck was bedded, lying broadside, looking straight at me and giving me full benefit of his incredible spread. If he would blink, twitch an ear, or even breathe, I could believe it was a real deer instead of my imagination. But he remained a frozen statue next to the fallen cottonwood at the edge of the meadow. Minutes later, the grand fellow stood, took one last look, and slipped silently into the dense willows.

I was happier when I could see him, imaginary or not. As he left, I saw not only the huge spread and big beams, but the drop tine and extra points as well. When he vanished into the cover I wondered if I would ever see him again, and certainly hoped I would. He was not in a National Park, or some forbidden zone, but right in the middle of my hunting area. I had a license and the season opened in three weeks.

Normally I hunt whitetails in the area. In fact, I had never taken a mule deer on the plains, but this looked like a good time to change my hunting habits. This fellow had found my pressure point. Mule deer are easier than whitetails, if for no other reason than they are more visible. Unlike the sneaky denizens of the darkness and brush jungles, even old, wise mule deer bucks are liable to frequent open areas in the daylight. That's the good news. The bad news is that a deer that lives more with his eyes is less likely to let you get close. Yes, I believe it would have been reasonably easy to snipe the old fellow with a .270, but I had already begun to respect this buck beyond the desire to simply kill him. I would hunt him, win, lose, or draw, with a flintlock.

Knowing that a great buck existed whetted my appetite, and while I was keen to get started, I was also glad I had almost a month before the season opened. I had a month to fine-tune my rifle, myself, and to learn about the buck.



THE FLINTLOCK REIGNED AS THE KING OF FIREARMS FOR NEARLY 200 YEARS AND ADDED TO THE CHALLENGE AND TO THE MEMORIES OF A GRAND DEER.

My rifle was a paired companion to my pet shotgun, an identical Pedersoli Mortimer. The adjustable sear engagement feature in the Pedersoli lock allowed me to get the trigger pull down to a very crisp three pounds. This is a good weight. It is quite easy to shoot and still heavy enough to “feel” with frozen fingers. Because the season started on December 1st, chances were good at least some hunting hours would be very cold.



THE AUTHOR USED A BIG COTTONWOOD TO HELP STEADY HIS TREMBLING HANDS AT THE FINAL MOMENT.

BELOW THE AUTHOR HAD THE WONDERFUL LUCK TO PHOTOGRAPH THE BUCK EARLY IN THE FALL, WEEKS BEFORE THE HUNTING SEASON.



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The shooting qualities of the .54 caliber flintlock demonstrated attributes of any great rifle. That is, it really did not care what I fed it. With powder charges from 70 to 140 grains, it would reliably group three shots, with the bore clean and fouled, less than four inches at 100 yards. While this kind of accuracy might not excite a benchrest competitor, it demonstrated perfect reliability for a deer hunter. The groups were also realistic from a shooter's standpoint. I shot them sitting, resting over my knees, standing, and supporting my left hand beside a tree.

I chose a 120-grain charge, using Goeg FFg, mated to a .530" Buffalo Bullet swaged round ball and a .010" Ox-Yoke Wonder Patch, with a lubricated Wonder Wad over the powder. The combination went down the bore like an eel through a tin funnel, and came out at just over 1700 fps. This velocity would give me "point blank" trajectory out to 100 yards. That is, I could zero the load at 100 yards without having any appreciable rise at mid-range. Also, should I be forced into a long shot at 125 yards, I would not have to consider the drop at that range either. I carefully filed the front sight until the balls would generally wear out the center of a target, hitting right on top of the flat-topped post front sight, at 100 yards. The velocity of the load would flatten the ball some on impact, but would not be fast enough to tear it apart or flatten it into a silver dollar on heavy shoulder muscles. I wanted some splash when it hit, but also needed enough penetration to reliably punch through a buck that would scale at, or over, 300 pounds.

The rifle and load were ready. Now I needed to tune my skills and to reach a state of absolute confidence in the rifle's performance under a variety of conditions. At the same time I began, with camera in hand, to hunt the buck. I stole every sunrise and sunset possible, ignoring important things like making a living, just to try to see the old fellow again. He was not as easy as I hoped.

Not easy? He had vanished! Four days passed without even a glimpse of the buck. I saw several other herds of mule deer, along with the usual mayhem mixture of

whitetails. Maybe he was just a product of my overly active imagination.

In the meantime, I shot the rifle every day. My target was usually an eight-inch iron disk. I tried it from 35 to 125 yards at least twice in each shooting session. The first shot was as I had put the rifle away the day before. That is, I fired my last shot and loaded the barrel while it was still warm. I poked a mallard tail feather in the touch-hole, as a simple warning that this was a loaded rifle, and to prevent any errant spark from finding the powder. After loading, I swabbed the bore down to the top of the ball with a patch thoroughly greased with Wonder Lube. The barrel, left in this condition, was "rust proof" and could be carried for days of hunting without consideration. Each shooting session proved that a shot fired from the bore in this condition would absolutely find the mark, as would a second shot fired out of the fouled bore. The day before the season opened, I fired several more shots, then pulled the barrel out of the stock, washed it thoroughly, and cleaned the lock. It was time for the final ceremony.

A small leather bag contained the magic jewels, or at least items that to me fit the description. I had a few old, original French amber gun flints. Surely they had seen war, and peace, and great stags. They carried a heavy burden of spirits and struck beautiful fire from the steel. I fitted the most perfect specimen in the cock, loaded the rifle, and fired a few rounds at the steel disk. These tested the flint, cleared the breech, and stabilized the bore. I knew the barrel was dry and ready. After the last shot, I reloaded with extreme care, this load was the one! Everything was perfect. If I could find the buck, if I could get close enough, if there was enough light to see the sights . . . and IF I didn't go blind and stupid when the chance came, he was mine.

I continued my morning and evening vigils. As I was beginning to give up hope, or give in to the depressing thought that some archer had speared my buck with a sharp stick, something unusual glinted in the early sun. There, in a dense willow patch, behaving like an old white-tail, head down, nearly motionless, was the unmistakable. I watched his minimal

movements for more than an hour and began to gain some very valuable intelligence. He had gathered four does, and one, while being a frightening adversary, would be an invaluable marker.

She may be the oldest living mule deer, or at least she looked like it. Her coat was grizzled, mixed gray. While she was in reasonably good shape, she was certainly thin for a deer in late autumn. Her face was almost white and her ears looked as if they had been trimmed with pinking shears. I could recognize her immediately a mile away, and know my buck was close at hand. At the same time, she never seemed to feed, or sleep, or stop testing the wind. She moved into the wind and constantly looked over her shoulder at the vulnerable back trail. This grand buck had picked the perfect bodyguard to be his mate during his time of blindness.

A few days later I had the extraordinary luck to be in exactly the right place at the right time. I had on my camo suit, and was buried in the leaves of a thicket on the downwind side of a trail that led from a tasty clover patch to the willow jungles. And, as if by a gift from the red gods, there was enough light to feed my 300mm lens as they ambled through the clearing. I grunted and they locked onto my position. The viewfinder glowed with a frame full of magnificent deer, highlighted by the sunrise, and only 40 yards away. It was a moment when a camera was worth 10 rifles, a moment that will keep them alive forever.

If the deer had a pattern, it was this one from the clover to dense river cover. They moved several miles, but from time to time they used this route, choked with second-growth cottonwood, to return to their secret home. Perhaps one day in four they would pass within 200 yards of this spot. I made the decision to hunt him from the same place I had taken the photograph, but when the season opened, he was not to be found, or at least he did not pass within sight of my ambush. I changed tactics and again returned to the high ridges, armed with my spotting scope and binoculars.

On the second morning of these high-ground vigils I found him again. He was a half-mile upriver, cruising with his

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THE AUTHOR WITH THE PLAINS GIANT.



head down, herding the does back into the thickets. I made every move with great caution, feeling if I did not do something stupid, do something to spook the band of deer, they would stay in their territory. It was better, early in the season, to fail out of caution than to make a brazen hunt that might run them out of the country. If I could locate them, I could stalk them, and sooner or later, if not today, or tomorrow, then later, I would have a chance.

This day the wind gave me real hope. It was strongly blowing out of the southwest. If I could watch the deer move into one of their thickets, the wind would offer perfect cover for both my scent and movements. The old doe led them into the perfect spot, a five-acre brush-choked hole. Big cottonwoods and a levee formed the downwind boundary and offered perfect cover for a stalk. I made the half-mile circuit, cutting under the wind, behind the highest bank and the biggest tree. As I moved up to the edge of the levee, crawling behind the three-foot tree trunk, the wind carried the unmistakable smell of an old buck in the rut. He was there, and very close.

I held the trigger back and drew the cock, letting the sear silently fall into its notch. Then, moving inches per minute, I stood to full height to look over the levee. All I could see were willows flailing in the wind. And yet, from time to time, I could smell him. With 10x binoculars, I could focus through the willows and with them, he was in relatively plain sight. There, not 40 yards away he stood, preoccupied, watching his does. Moments like these are why we all hunt. It is difficult to create this much excitement without an 800-horsepower engine. Hearts pound, hands shake, and you are caught somewhere between a screaming urge to shoot and a desire to watch in silence.

Even though the willows screened most of the buck, I could see the rough brow tines and his spread that with little imagination went well past 30 inches. I believe, with a scoped rifle, I could have slipped a bullet through a hole and into the back of his neck. With the flinter, while tempting, the shot was out of the question. But I had a plan. My fiance was

with me and I asked her to make a long sweep downwind, then cut across to give them just a hint, just a sniff, that would make them seek cover deeper in the river bottom. Just a sniff that would make him walk out and pause on top of the levee to look back for a second.

Hours seemed to pass as she wisely went a long, long way downwind before cutting across the crease that would carry her scent into the willows. I could not smell her, but the bush folk could. A coyote slipped out first, then two whitetail does moved nervously before they nearly crawled past my position. It was going to work—the mule deer would follow the whitetails, follow them to pass only 15 yards to my left. I was beginning to mentally sharpen my knife when the powder keg blew. The old white doe exploded first, he was only feet behind her. Yes, they passed within 10 yards, but they might as well been F-16s with their afterburners lit. I did not know a mule deer could live to be 200 years old, or run 300 miles per hour. The gray blur disappeared into a willow thicket 300 yards downstream. I regained my composure, closed my mouth, and lowered the flint.

By evening the wind had stopped and I was buried in the leaves 200 yards from the thicket where I last saw the deer. Two does fed gently into the open timber, followed by the gray queen. He could not be far behind, but at deep dark, only four does had made an appearance. Perhaps he was only an apparition, or perhaps he also was very old and very wise.

With only two days left in the season, I found him at dawn. This morning he was farther than usual from heavy cover, but moving in a predictable direction toward the river. I took a chance, moving fast, circling into the timber below his most likely route. I took up a position, lying flat in a small depression and waited. There was a very good chance they would walk within yards of my ambush, but as it had gone in the past, it was their luck, not mine. The yards were almost 200. But the wind was okay and the deer were not hurried. After they disappeared into the tall grass and brush, I began to crawl, inch by inch, in as

perfect silence as possible. There was no way to know if I was succeeding or not, but each yard without snorts and barks raised my hopes.

When I felt I had crawled far enough, I hugged a big tree and slithered up its trunk, first to kneeling, and finally to full height. The first thing I saw was both comforting and depressing. I was looking into a pair of big brown eyes, framed by ragged white ears. I could have thrown one of the .54 balls and hit her. That I was thankful for a very good, leafy facemask, is an understatement. I held my breath and she looked, but if she saw me, she did not recognize danger. My eyes found one, two, three more deer . . . all does. He was there, somewhere, close enough to touch, but I could not prove it.

Then, in the brush, not 40 yards to my right front, the mist began to take shape. A leg at first, then a back line, then a sweeping left beam. Everything was in place, but I was trapped. The Mortimer was vertical, behind the bole of the tree, while the deer had a full view of me from three sides and I had to move the muzzle through at least 90 degrees to make a shot. Judging from their reaction the last time I was close, I was sure they would not trot a few yards and look back in typical mule deer fashion if they decided I was a threat.

Somehow, I had to make a major move with a 36-inch barrel while the deer surrounded me like a mouse in a box. Slow motion was the only hope, not inch-by-inch, but slower, much slower. I moved the barrel almost imperceptibly. It seemed to take hours, but I am sure only a minute or two had passed when the rifle was level. As the butt settled to my shoulder, I breathed again and began to wait. The buck was still in the small patch of brush . . . I thought. At least I had not seen him leave. Then, just as I began to worry, slowly, in a stiff-legged march, he moved toward the old white doe, moved into the open. Black sights centered on his shoulder and the ancient stone began to sweep downward in an arc. It cut white-hot pieces of steel that were driven into the fine powder, making a small mushroom cloud that lifted above the pan. ■