

ALBERTA PRAIRIE BUCKS



Hunting mule deer in open country is one of the best kept secrets of the American West, but until you participate in one of these hunts, you can't quite relate. Walking the everlasting prairies with deep coulees where the bucks hide, spotting them in their beds, formulating a stalk to dope the wind and getting within bow or rifle range is a joy that I cannot begin to articulate. To me, it beats perching in a tree stand or sitting on a cutline. You find the game and go to it versus waiting for it to come to you. Big difference!

In this type of terrain, a 30x spotter is a must and will save you many hours of futile foot travel.

ALBERTA'S MULE DEER COUNTRY—AS GOOD AS IT GETS!

Unfortunately, as a species, and despite all the efforts by western states and provinces, the population of mule deer is slowly declining. Possible reasons could be hybridization with whitetail deer, loss of habitat, and susceptibility to chronic wasting disease (CWD). This also means that the number of available tags for hunters will decrease accordingly and prolong the wait time to draw a tag.

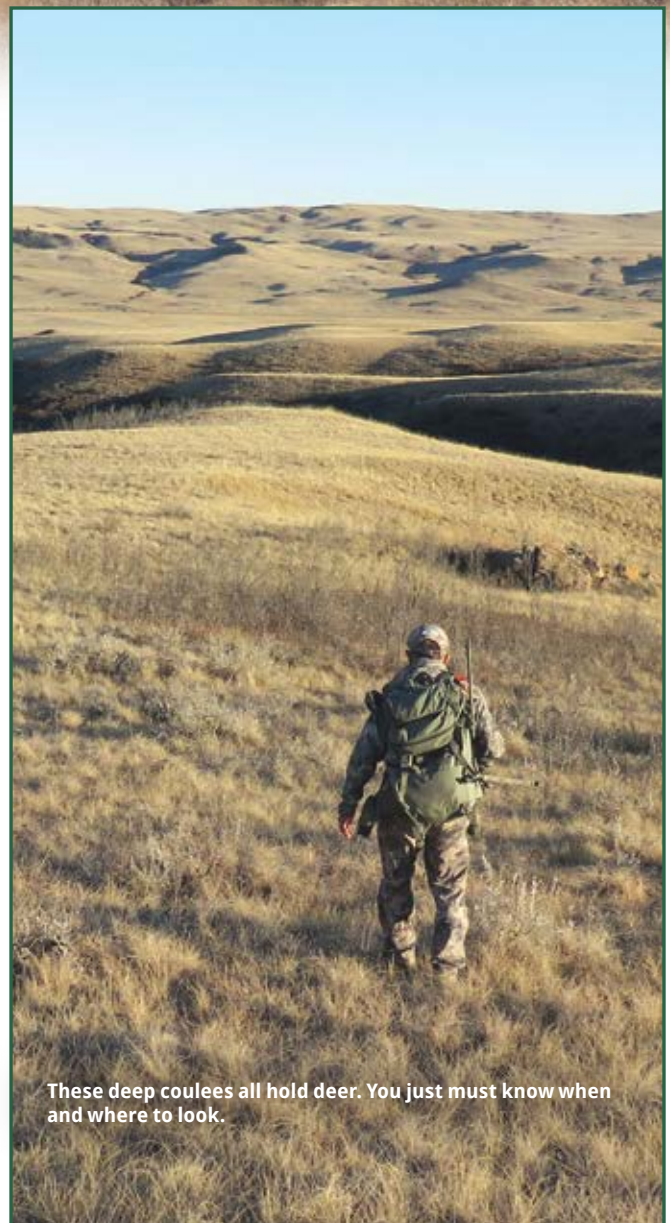
However, in my home province of Alberta the estimated mule deer population stands at roughly 130,000 animals. With 120,000 hunters applying and buying licenses every year, the odds of drawing a tag are fairly high. Obviously, for wildlife management units that have the genetics to produce high scoring bucks, the wait time is also high—perhaps as long as seven years.

A couple of years ago, I cashed in my four priority points and drew a tag in one of the average prairie zones. I had asked my friend Mikel to apply as well, and he drew, too. Mikel was a new hunter who I had mentored and recruited.

Alberta's prairies are a combination of private and leased land. In general, getting permission to hunt is not as difficult as in the lower 48. Part of the reason is that the wildlife belongs to the public and landowners are not allowed to sell the hunting rights to outfitters. There are, of course, exceptions, but there is plenty of elbow room and opportunities if you are willing to put some miles on your rubber soles.

Early in the fall, we made a couple of scouting trips, spoke to some landowners, and went for a couple of hikes. By the time the opener rolled around, we knew exactly where we needed to be. Because I had shot several bucks before, I gave Mikel the first shot at a good buck. After hiking up some steep hills (for prairie country), we sat, glassed, and spotted several bucks. However, I wanted Mikel to shoot a four-pointer at a minimum.

We hiked and walked some more. As we crested a rise, we spotted a patch of forested hillside with spruce trees, which is an anomaly on the prairie. We watched a moose, a few cow elk, a group



These deep coulees all hold deer. You just must know when and where to look.

of whitetail deer, and mule deer emerge from the thick-
et. It was at that moment
when I told Mikel we were
sitting at the edge of Atilla's
hunting paradise.

Later that day, we
spotted a group of deer and
amongst them was a good
buck. A perfect stalk led to a
perfect shot from Mikel's
.270. With my spicy 130-grain
handloads, the buck col-
lapsed in its tracks. Mikel
told me that was the high-
light of his short but fruitful
hunting career, and I was
glad to be a part of it. The
pack out was not easy, but we
got it done in about four
hours. A warm shower, a
schnitzel, fermented hydra-
tion, and a good night's sleep
dreaming of big bucks was

next on our agenda. I had set
a goal for myself to only shoot
a buck with something spe-
cial on top. That would mean
extra-large and heavy ant-
lers, complete with drop
tines or a buck that hit the
30-inch-wide mark.

The next morning, we
went to a different area alto-
gether, parked the truck,
climbed to a vantage point,
and started glassing. We spot-
ted several bucks in the early
morning hours, but none of
them fit the criteria. Through-
out the day, we hiked and
glassed continuously. Just as
we were thinking we had
covered enough ground in
this area, something caught
my attention in the distance.
We threw up the spotter
again. In the shade of a deep

canyon four kilometers away,
I noticed a bunch of deer. We
quickly closed the distance
to about two kilometers. I
could see a couple of bucks
that might be shooters. The
wind was strong and in our
favor, but the herd was on the
shady side of a deep and wide
canyon. The only way to ap-
proach them downwind was
via an adjoining ridge, which
would only offer a long shot.

We grabbed our gear
and soldiered there without
hesitation. Light was fading.
For the last 100 yards, I asked
Mikel to stay behind. With
my rifle strung across my
back, I belly-crawled through
some nasty cactus that con-
stantly poked my knees, bel-
ly, and elbows. Once I got to
the rim, I motioned to Mikel
to stay low and come along.
We now counted at least five
bucks. One caught my

attention. At first sight, I
thought it was an elk because
it was so wide. It was hard to
judge length and mass with
the sun in my eyes, but the
extra wide rack and white
muzzle, which typically iden-
tifies an older specimen, was
enough for me.

Unfortunately, we had
left the packs behind, which
would have provided an ide-
al shooting rest. The Leica
rangefinder displayed 460
yards. I was carrying my
custom Lilja-barreled .280
Remington which launches
a 150-grain Swift Scirocco
handload at 3,100 fps into a
small cloverleaf. I knew the
trajectory of my load well.
The only rest I had were my
bins and elbows. I went
prone, asked Mikel to look
through the spotting scope,
and dug my heels into the
prairie dirt. I settled the

Two full Mystery Ranch packs, gear, and clothing
ready for the packout.



Alexander with his
buck. These are
the moments we
will always cherish
and share with our
grandchildren.



Mikel was elated and Alexander
was there to not only help him but
also share his glory.

crosshairs on top of the buck's back. The sun was in my eyes, and it was hard to dodge. I took my cap off and put it over the scope to shield the sun, which helped.

With calm nerves and a deep breath, I gathered myself. The .280 barked, and I could not see the impact because of the distance and the sun in my eye, neither could I hear that loud thump that tells a seasoned hunter all he wants to hear. But Mikel saw the buck buckle at the report of the rifle. He tapped my back with a loud "hip hip hurray." The rest of the deer fled at once.

We grabbed our packs and made our way to the buck. It was an extremely wide (over 30 inches) buck with 16-inch G-2s and it had no G-3s. After seeing the antlers a few weeks later, my good friend and mentor Dr. Valerius Geist, who is now in the happy hunting grounds, described him as: An old, regressed buck, probably over 10 years of age and one that would never grow the fourth tine. It would have remained a breeding male feared by other bucks. Basically the perfect specimen to shoot.

We dragged it out into the open for a picture session

and used the gutless method to field dress it. The buck had a monstrous body, and I estimated that it weighed well over 300 pounds. With both packs filled to the brim, we loaded our quarry on our backs and started the six kilometer trek up and down several coulees back to the truck. We arrived at the truck exhausted but with a big smile in our hearts.

The five-hour drive home was no big deal as we relived our three-day stint on the prairie, making lifetime memories in the process. We stopped at the game check station on our way home to drop the heads for CWD testing.

This was a great DIY hunt for one of North America's most handsome members of the deer family. I was thankful to the good Lord for several blessings. First for having found and helped Mikel get his first buck, and second, for finding an old specimen for myself—one that I am proud to hang on my wall despite its 174-inch net typical score. In all hunting, whether you shoot a book buck or a doe, it is always the memories that count, and there was certainly no shortage of that on this hunt! ■

If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Karlie Slayer, Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org for details.

ADVENTURE
AWAITS



ABOVE: Alexander and Mikel's mule deer on display.
BELOW: Alexander's handsome, wide, mature buck laid there for keeps.



THE DRY ROLLING COUNTRY OF ALBERTA'S
PRAIRIES IS A LANDSCAPE THAT FANCIES MY
SOUL ESPECIALLY AFTER A SUCCESSFUL HUNT.

