

MONTANA MULEY

BYRON KIBBY

B&C REGULAR MEMBER

Photos Courtesy of Author

My son Clay and I have wanted to book a mule deer hunt for my 17-year-old granddaughter, Kate, before she enters Texas A&M next fall. I was well aware that such a hunt is auctioned at the annual meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club. Clay and I felt that such a hunt on the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial (TRM) Ranch would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue a trophy mule deer. Fortunately, we were the successful bidder on this live auction item at the 2018 meeting held in Nashville, Tennessee.

Kate had previously harvested several south Texas whitetail deer on their family ranch in Webb County, including a 150-plus buck; however, a mule deer hunt would present a new hunting experience. Whitetail hunting in the brush country of south Texas is primarily done out of elevated deer stands. A mule deer hunt in the mountainous terrain would require pounding the mountains on foot in search of a trophy.

The hunt dates were set for October 31 through

November 2. The excitement and anticipation for the hunt built for the three of us during the course of the year. On October 30, Kate, Clay and I flew from Austin to Great Falls, Montana, where we were met by Ranch Manager Mike Briggs. Upon arriving at the TRM Ranch, the wind was howling and the snow on the ground was deep and blowing. Mike explained to us that never before had so much snow fallen at this time of the year. After Kate sighted in her .270 Remington 700 custom rifle, we were treated to a wonderful meal before retiring to the members' house to get rested for the first day of a three-day hunt.

Day one began with a hearty breakfast prepared by Mike's wife, Kadie. In lieu of returning to ranch headquarters for lunch, we chose to take a sack lunch with us in order to maximize hunting time. No sooner had we left our abode than we immediately saw mule deer—and lots of them. The plan for the day was for Kate and Clay to hike up a ridge and traverse the rugged terrain with much

time spent glassing draws and hillsides until I would meet up with them at a predetermined location. We spotted many good bucks, including a couple that anyone would be proud to put in their trophy room, but Kate did not wish to end the hunt early on the first day. Kate's Fitbit told her that she covered five miles that morning. The remainder of the day consisted of glassing from the pickup and short stalks through the cedars. This first day we saw two to three hundred deer including three or four shooter bucks that Kate chose to pass up. That evening we were once again treated to a gourmet meal provided by Kadie. Each meal served throughout our stay was truly of five-star caliber.

Day two consisted of more stalk- and spot-hunting. Again, the number of muleys seen was hard to believe. Kate, again, passed up more trophy bucks in order to experience the full three days of the hunt. She stalked one group of seven mature trophy bucks—all having typical racks with deep forks, but Kate kept looking. The mileage on her Fitbit

for that day reflected seven miles covered.

As day three approached, we decided to hunt the more remote western part of the ranch as Luke Coccoli, B&C Director of Conservation Programs, had observed quality bucks in the area. Kate was advised that fewer deer frequented this location, but the possibility of a real wall hanger might present itself. After two long days of hunting from first light until day's end, this third day of hunting lasted only about one hour, but was it ever exciting!

The hunt began with a steep climb to the ridgeline of a basin. As Kate and Clay proceeded up the mountain, Clay kept looking behind him. He had a premonition that he was being followed by a grizzly bear. As it turned out Clay was wrong. What Clay saw at two hundred yards was not a grizzly bear, but two grizzly bears. The cross wind did not carry their scent toward the bears and the two of them hunkered down and remained motionless as the bruins passed by.

When all was clear, the two of them reached the



After they arrived at the TRM Ranch Kate sighted in her .270 Remington 700 at the Palmer Shooting Range.

forested ridgeline and glassed the snow-covered bowl of the basin. In the middle of the bowl, Kate spotted a single typical buck with deep forks. Clay instructed Kate that she should proceed closer and he would remain behind to reduce the likelihood of being spotted by the grazing buck. As Kate got in position to make a shot, she realized there was a second buck nearby. Kate motioned for Clay to join her as Clay was not in a position to view the second buck. He then crept to Kate's position and both concluded the second mule deer buck had multiple points, unique antler configurations, deep forks and a higher rack than the first one they had spotted.

It was now up to Kate to make a decision as to which buck she wanted for their family trophy room. After carefully examining the two trophy-caliber bucks through her binoculars, she chose the multi-point buck. Taking a rest against a nearby tree she placed a 130 grain Federal soft-point bullet from 130 yards behind its left shoulder. A second well-placed shot finalized

the kill, and Kate was ecstatic about her hard-earned trophy.

Concerned that the two grizzlies were still in the neighborhood, we prudently decided to only tag the buck and not field dress it immediately as the smell of blood could entice the bears to return. Instead, the three of us contacted Mike who brought a tractor with a front-end loader. We quickly field dressed the buck, packed the cavity with snow, wrapped the antlers with feed sacks for protection, and then loaded him into the bucket and returned to headquarters for further processing.

Over the course of three days, we estimated we saw several hundred mule deer, many of which were quality bucks that anyone would be proud to display in their trophy room. Mike, Kadie, and Luke outdid themselves in making this a hunt of a lifetime. Every aspect of our three days at the ranch were beyond exceptional. The camaraderie, the delicious meals, the attention to detail and the lodge accommodations were beyond all that we could ever have hoped for. ■



Kate and her dad pose for a photo with the mountain scenery while hiking and glassing for mule deer.



Kate and her dad, Clay (left) and grandfather, Byron (right) admire her hard-earned mule deer. It was a trip of a lifetime!

