

# THE HARD WAY

**Frozen snow, wary prey, and an unforgiving mountain await two hunters as they bowhunt for mule deer in the wilds of Washington.**

## It was cold and quiet.

The alarm went off. I bolted up and silenced it. The ice crystals of my breath hung across the rooftop tent. Minutes passed as I sought to make sense of where I was.

The six-hour drive to the trailhead began late the previous afternoon after work. As a consequence, we arrived in the dark. The parking lot afforded no luxuries, not even a place to build a fire.

The darkness was so sharp it penetrated my emotions. I only saw stars. They cast enough light as I climbed down to barely see the ladder's steps. My descent ended as I finally felt the rocks below my feet. Graveled footsteps harmonized with the chorus of coyotes that sang me to sleep. Now, that orchestra played the theme for the beginning of the hunt.

"What time is it?" said a groggy voice from the tent. I could hear Larry shuffling out of his sleeping bag. I wasn't sure how reluctant he was to get started. Or how eager. This plan was audacious and stupid, but it could work.

"It's three," I muttered. I have always hated talking in the wilderness, especially in the morning. The icy hell I had stepped into was both. There is a certain sanctity to silence. Speaking seemed to mar its virtue. My words made the cold, dark, star-filled prairie less than holy.

Guilty of disruption again.

Larry fumbled down the steps of the tent. He is twice my size and half of my coordination. Everything Larry does looks like a choreographed struggle against himself. However, he was there beside me. You choose a hunting partner the same way you choose a wife, by God's grace.

The blue flame of the Jetboil stove exploded brilliantly. The rolling explosion would have removed the hair on my knuckles if previous hunts hadn't already done so. Instant coffee and some cereal would fuel our journey into the unlit ascent.

## INTO THE SUCK FEST

I had never been to Tunk Valley in Washington before. However, my prior pursuit of blacktail deer in the mountains yielded beginner results, and I was desperate for success. Late-season archery presented a few days to correct my shortfall, and I wasn't about to leave it unattempted.

I had always wanted to arrow a mule deer anyway.

Larry was just along for the adventure. Perhaps we would be packing out a mulie in a few hours. He was good company and conversation despite not owning a bow. If the hours of coyote howls and subzero temperatures weren't enough adventure for him, we had a full day of fun ahead of us.

"That's the mountain we have to get on top of before sunrise," I said, pointing at the dark outline of the horizon that projected a black pyramid into



High above the clouds on a frigid morning, the author is treated to a picture-perfect view. Below, a deserted parking lot makes for a great camping spot and base camp.



This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

## BEYOND THE SCORE

**BB Sanders**  
PHOTOS COURTESY  
OF LARRY CHAFIN

the field of brilliant stars. My foggy breath obscured it rhythmically. The cereal crunched loudly from inside my head, disgracing the hal- lowed quiet.

Larry didn't care. The more the climb sucked, the better. Being out here wasn't as much about being successful but instead hunting something in himself. He wanted to test himself against the challenge of the dark mountain. He needed to know that he had what it took to climb it. His opportunity was coming.

We set out following a path that I had plotted in my head. We quickly picked up the property line for an adjacent farm, and, as I expected, there was a trail. It followed the four-strand barbwire for some distance. But, it would only be a part of our journey. Soon, we would have to turn and begin our climb.

When the time came, I thought it would be the steep angle that would slow us. I could not have been more wrong. To remain stealthy, we limited ourselves to a single red lens flashlight affixed to my forehead. We encountered blown-down limbs, small trees, and other debris as we departed the rutted ATV trail along the fence. Each step was a loud crash. Larry followed and crashed.

The entire side of the mountain had been decimated by a fire an indeterminate time ago. Only a labyrinth of limbs remained. I stepped over and under what I could, tripping over the rest. Larry followed, but less gracefully. With twice the body mass, the obstacles were only half the challenge. Still, the maze of charcoaled vegetation soon became a grand suck fest, and I was ready for it to end.

I watched my heavy breath cool, freeze, and crystalize. Tiny red light refractions dissipated into the sub-zero air in front of me. Ice was everywhere, roosting in spaces not covered in fallen, charred trees. Patches of rock began to protrude into the burnt landscape. Every enormous boulder left behind by retreating glaciers was covered in ice. If we stepped on it, we slipped. There was no exception.

We proceeded cautiously through the dark, with only a dim red light leading. We slipped, fell, and cussed. As the daylight began to penetrate the darkened hell, it slowly silenced the coyotes and illuminated our path.

The black hell soon began to fade, and a water-color gradually appeared. Deep blues, purples, and stunning white began to surface where there was once a void. The wind waned. I knew that wouldn't last long.

The sun scorched color along our path. White emerged everywhere. We now could see the source of the crunching underneath our feet. The warm day before had melted the snow. As the temps dropped overnight, the melt formed a solid sheet of ice over everything. The sheet would soon be our undoing.

We crested the hill. I won't call it a mountain, despite the temptation. The blowdown and char had done a number on our legs. My pants were garbage bound. The hike had damaged them beyond repair.

Taking a moment to catch my breath from climbing the charred, icy obstacle course, I looked back down to see the truck. It was tiny and alone against the



Still-hunting mule deer with a bow is not easy. Throw in a little frozen water and the deer maintain an edge that has kept them alive for eons. So it goes.

vastness that stretched into Canada. My breath glinted in the morning light as my mind wandered.

My ancestors likely once climbed this same hill, hunting the forbears of the deer that left tracks, rubs, and scat along our path. In my hands hung a compound bow. In theirs would have been one of lesser complexity but more artistry. Both were trusted friends. I was happy to be tied to their legacy.

### LIVING STUMPS

Sitting on my pack, I began to glass, though it was far too early. The anticipation was unyielding. I needed to know if we had successfully climbed over our prey. Or if they had heard us coming.

As the sun painted the hills with its slow ascent, one stump stood out. I took out my binoculars and looked at the dark mass, studying its every detail. It seemed off. I had reached a zen-like state

consuming the image in front of me, only to be snapped out of it by the noise of Larry's footsteps. He attempted to get another angle on the finger ridge below, but the snow was deafening.

"I bet they can hear us walking three counties over," I whispered to him. He nodded in agreement. Now that we could see the terrain, there would be no stealthy movements. Then a twitch caught my eye.

The stump raised its head, and its ears snapped toward us. Our loud footsteps had passed by a large 3x3 mule deer masquerading as a stump in its sleep. It had bedded down with three does that were also stump impersonators.

I threw up the binoculars to see its tall rack

catching the first warmth of the day. Both ears were forward as it picked apart our hill. Our infiltration early in the morning had worked, and we were above.

Now to just get within range. Had we been rifle hunting, I would be writing this in the shadow of its rack. At a mere 300 yards, the buck would have been within my reach as a marksman. Sadly, I am below average on a good day as an archer. I had to close the distance. I slowly stood and dropped back out of sight. Then, using the hill to mask my movement, I circled wide and found the top of the mulie's finger ridge. My approach was set.

I started slowly walking. Each step caused physical pain as the racket of the frozen snow proved unbearable.

Yet they would have to come to me if they wanted to escape. Sheer cliffs boxed in the ridge on all but three sides. Slowly I descended. Bow range was within my grasp. Every step was a painful, slow crunch.

The pitch of the ridge was far more aggressive than I expected. Yet, I was within 100 yards of the buck's bed. Looking through the trees, I scanned for one of the four deer that I knew were below me. I searched to no avail. I began to rethink my strategy. Then I saw an icy patch that a bedded deer had made. Body heat had melted the snow, leaving it to freeze in a glass-like fashion. They were up and moving, but where?

The easiest way for them to leave the ridge was to my left. A box canyon was beyond that. Even with goat-like climbing abilities, it was hard to imagine them descending into it. My right was too open for them to get through without me noticing. I had to close their most likely escape route.

As I picked up to move, I saw the twitch again. Then, through the brush, I could see one of the does. Its head and ears pointed forward, looking up the hill. I pulled the binos out and began to scan for the buck, which couldn't be far.

An antler moved in the burnt orange rays of the dawn. Through a hole in the brush, I looked into its eyes. It had no idea I existed but was concerned with chasing his harem up the ridge. Still, it remained out of range.

Stopped on the side of the hill, my legs were engaged, holding me in place. Feeling the first tinge of muscle fatigue, I knew I needed to move. The problem was the sound of my steps in the snow. The deer loitered at 60 yards, out of range of my skill. I needed at least another 40 silence-killing steps that would sound the alarm of a predator closing in. My options were more than limited. I had to maintain my altitude advantage while maneuvering in front of them, or they would escape. So I took the first step.

I don't know if the crash I heard was my foot entering the frozen snow or my heart breaking. The deer didn't care to tell me as they bolted. I watched them as they quickly and quietly bounded off the finger ridge. In moments, they ascended the hill that took us hours to summit.

"They just took off," Larry whispered when I returned.

"Yeah," I sighed. He had no idea how close I was to success. "I was at 60 yards and took a step. It's unbearably loud to walk. They heard me and then took off over the hill".

We spent the rest of the day searching for them, but it was useless. They were gone, and so was another deer season. Another one marred with unfilled tags but filled with memories and lessons learned. It was a formative experience in every way.

We had map-scouted those mule deer and snuck up on them in the middle of the night. It was an old ambush technique I had learned in the Army. Now the method was validated, and we knew how to hunt them. We just needed to try again.

So we did. ■



**Naps in the sun, a hot lunch and coffee make for a good day afield—regardless if a tag is notched. Here, the author is treated to all but that notched tag.**

