

# There's A First Time For Everything!

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B Y B E N C O O K

If you will quit talking to me about it, you can go hunting anywhere you want. After two weeks of talking non-stop about where I should hunt, my wife was ready for me to start hunting in February and not come home until Christmas! Jim Welles, from JFW Ranch Consulting, had given me every possible scenario for public and private land hunting in New Mexico that could be imagined. However, one particular hunt kept nagging at me. Jim had a rancher with almost 18 square miles of property that had just recently agreed to allow

deer hunting for the first time in 20+ years on his place! Everyone reading this story knows the difficulty in drawing a tag in New Mexico or most any western state when trophy animals are involved, so having no points in any state, I decided this would be my first mule deer hunt. After three months of harassing my stepdad, Charles, he decided he would go with me. We hadn't hunted together in several years, so this had me even more excited about the upcoming hunt.

We arrived in New Mexico the same time a huge cold front was passing



*Finding an area that can produce trophy class mule deer is getting more and more difficult as the years pass by. The author ventured into the unknowns of northern New Mexico looking for his chance at the state's elusive muleys.*





## C O N T I N U E D

through and were greeted with 50 mph winds and 9° temperatures. Luckily, the wind didn't last long and opening day was perfect hunting weather. Deer and elk were seemingly everywhere! Right off the bat, we spotted one massive buck that gave us only ears, eyes, and horns to look at from 325 yards before vanishing. That buck would become my obsession over the next few days. During that initial stalk for him, we spotted at least five to six other bucks in the 140 to 150-inch range, and we even stalked to within 50 yards of a humongous 3x4! In fact, if it were any other day except the opener, he would have been dodging lead.

The cold weather and snow didn't last long, which completely changed everything. The temperatures were getting up into the 60's and the deer were bedding down much earlier and getting up right at dusk. We managed to spot and have a couple of blown stalks on the massive buck from the first day, however, he continued to remain but a ghost. By the end of the third day, I was beginning to think passing on that huge 3x4 was a mistake.

We awoke the fourth morning to thick fog that had visibility to less than 100 yards. We decided our best option would be to go near the top of the ranch and then split up. As I was putting on my backpack, the fog suddenly lifted and there was the massive buck, completely oblivious to us, standing broadside at 500 yards. When he fed behind a patch of brush, this gave us enough time to grab our things and take off to cut the distance. At 340 yards, there was a small strip of trees that we were able to get to about the time he stepped out from behind the brush...still completely unaware of us. Since he wasn't offering a good shot from that angle, when he stepped behind the brush again, we cut the



*The author snuck to within 125 yards of his unsuspecting target, and after fighting off a bad case of buck fever, he was able to anchor the great buck for good.*

distance down to 125 yards. I swear, just as soon as I had the rifle in position, the great buck stepped out broadside. Everything was going as scripted, however, I had buck fever so bad that I forgot everything I was ever taught about shooting and when I fired, I hit the only limb between me and the buck. Amazingly, he was more shocked than I was that I missed and he stood there for a few more seconds while I sent a second shot on its way. This time, I connected with lungs and liver and the mighty buck staggered a few steps before falling back into some brush.

The adrenaline in me said to immediately go and take a look and you can imagine what happened next. He was down, but not completely out, and when we walked up to him, he jumped up and took off. I had to back out and get more ammo, as in my haste of pursuit, I had only grabbed a couple shells. Luckily, my stepdad hadn't taken off and loaned me his rifle and ammo while laughing at me for not bringing more, (there's a reason I make lists for everything). I knew if I had to use Charles' gun,

there would be no end to the harassment I would get.

By the time I was back to the last spot I saw my buck, the adrenaline had subsided and I was finally thinking clearly again. I had learned a couple of valuable lessons already that morning and decided I better rely on my grandpa's teachings instead and take it easy. The area the buck went

into was a mixture of small meadows mixed with patches of scrub oak and cypress. I tracked the buck for about 30 minutes, cautiously looking for blood, tracks, or anything out of the ordinary while scanning the brush for any movement. I had only gone 125 to 150 yards when the wind shifted and I got a brief whiff of him. I immediately dropped down and began scanning in front of me and as I inched forward, I saw him lying under a small cypress. I made sure he was down for the count before breathing a sigh of relief. I had my first mule deer buck and it was an overwhelming feeling!

It was made even more special since I was able to share the hunt with my stepdad. We were able to spend more time together than we have in years, see some beautiful country, and take our first mule deer, and my first bull elk. It's a trip I will remember for the rest of my life...it has fueled an unrelenting passion for western hunting.

