

THE WILD HORSE BUCK

By Tim J. Bienski

My wife and I first met Ken Burton with Burton Hunting Services back in the spring of 2002 on a West Texas turkey hunt. Our friendship quickly grew. His great character and the love and respect of the great outdoors were outstanding. That first turkey hunt quickly lead to turkey hunting from Texas to Kansas and plenty of exotic game.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 36]



TIM J. BIENSKI PHOTO

THE WILD HORSE BUCK

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 34]

The talk of the outstanding mule deer that had been taken from a West Texas ranch quickly became a frequent conversation between the two of us. Trusting Ken's word, he eventually convinced me to book a hunt with him.

I had my first Texas mule deer hunt in the fall of 2004. The hunt and accommodations were fantastic. I passed up several really good deer before I took a buck that scored 171 Boone and Crocket (B&C), with a 21-inch spread and 12 scorable points.

Afterwards, it was time for me to return to my home in Bryan/College Station and get back to my family and a busy business. Upon my departure, Ken asked me, "Will you be back next year?" Being exceptionally proud of the buck I took, I quickly replied, "I will be back."

I waited patiently through the following year, keeping close contact with Ken. I liked keeping track of the ranch and Ken's thoughts on the

anticipated season. I arranged to take my hunt Dec. 2-10.

Checking in with Ken the week before my scheduled hunt, I learned that due to the oil field traffic, the number of bucks was low. That did not discourage me in the least; I was ready for another West Texas mule deer hunt.

Booking a hunt with me was my good friend and hunting partner of many years, Mike Gonzales of Laredo. Mike had to pass on the hunt due to an illness in the family. At that time, good friend Micky Hans of Houston joined the hunt. Micky and I left Bryan on Nov. 30 for the 7-1/2-hour trip to Fort Stockton.

Anxiously awaiting our hunt, we arrived at the ranch that evening. On arrival, we learned that they had some really hard hunting over the past week, and where the deer were previously in the flats, they had moved to the top of the mountain due to the oil field traffic. We knew then we had a hard hunt ahead of us.

After a good breakfast the next morning, Ken felt we should start driving the flats for at least a day. Our transportation was a dune buggy and the weather was a bit on the cold side, in the 30s to be exact. Needless to say, we were bundled up for the hunt.

After driving the flats, we saw several bucks. Taking the buck I had the previous year, my expectations were much greater, so I chose to pass on several really good deer.

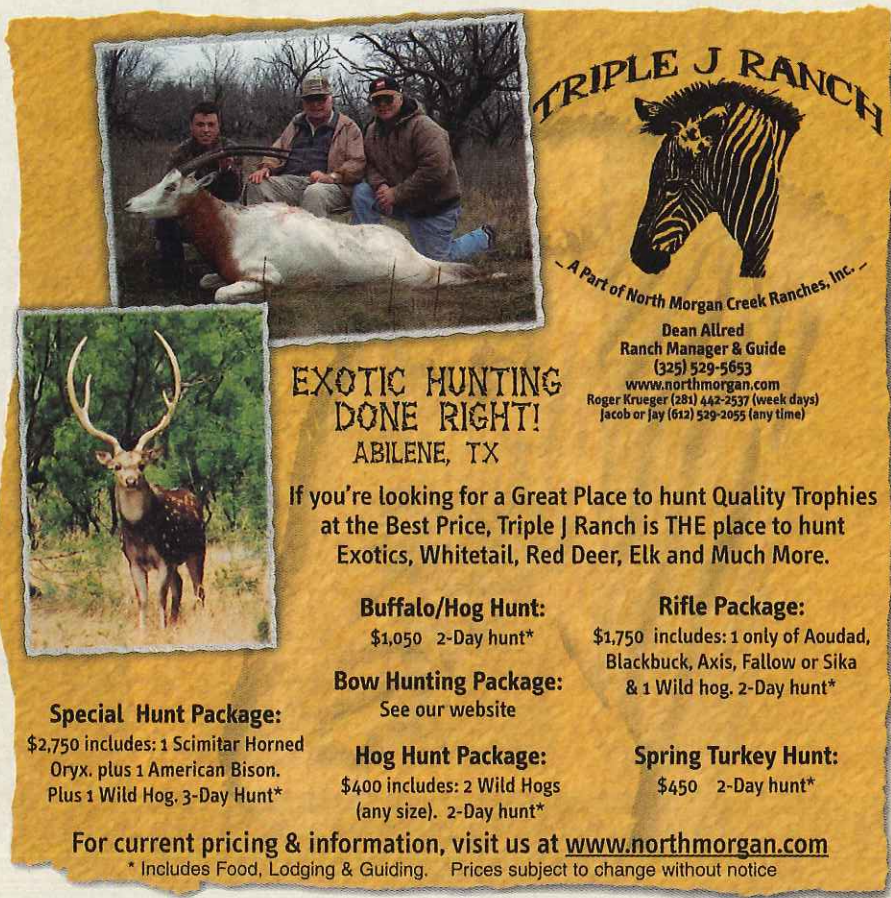
Returning to the camp after dinner and then brainstorming, we came to realize that the bucks we saw were on the edge of the flats going toward the top of the mountain. Our thoughts at that time were, the next morning we would get an early start and try to top the mountain by noon. Where we chose to top the mountain was about two miles from the lodge.

While driving through the flats, we spotted some deer in the distance. As we got closer to position ourselves to be in rifle range, we saw that there were a couple of does and a nice 10-point buck. Again, I chose to pass and we proceeded on our way to get to the base of the mountain. At that time, it was 7:30 a.m. or so.

We packed up our gear and lunch, and started walking up the mountain to glass the canyon we were walking up to. We stopped for several breaks during the morning and on our last break we sat and glassed for about 10 minutes.

As soon as we packed up to continue on, right above the ledge above us we heard rocks and limbs breaking. We were probably a couple hundred feet from topping out, but before we could, whatever was making all the noise had already topped out and moved into another canyon.

Ken and I agreed that it was a buck bedded down that just couldn't take the pressure anymore from us sitting and glassing the canyon. At that time, it was nearly lunch. The elevation at that point



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[CONTINUED ON PAGE 38]

THE WILD HORSE BUCK

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36]

was 5,200 feet. After lunch, we started walking the ridge and saddles for the rest of the afternoon, seeing several bucks in their bed on top, but nothing that stood out.

We started our descent down the mountain at about 4 p.m. to head back to the flats, hoping to catch something moving in that direction.

Once we arrived at the buggy, we started busting brush. We drove to an area where Ken had never hunted. We caught a glimpse of a nine-point buck bedded down with a doe on the hillside. His antlers were very heavy and tall. We watched to make sure there were no other bucks in the area.

We then packed out and started making our way back to camp. We came upon a dark, heavy-antlered buck overlooking the flats. Most of the dark-antlered bucks were the older bucks, and they would be shooters.

We then arranged the buggy to be parallel with the buck to get a better look. We estimated him to be 8-1/2 to 9-1/2 years old. He was on the decline, but

still a massive buck. At that time, it was close to dark, so we headed back to camp. Over dinner, we discussed the strategy for the next morning. We decided we would go back to the flats and bust brush.

We started out extra early the morning of the third day to go to a pasture called "Ten East," which was several miles from the camp. Ten East was the most rugged pasture on the 300,000-acre ranch, and was known to have a lot of aoudads.

When we drove up to a vantage point to glass, we spotted a few deer grazing on the side of the rocky ridge. The range was more than 800 yards away or so.

We needed to close the distance to see if there were any bucks in the group, so we closed the distance about 300 yards. We then got out of the buggy and stalked into a good vantage point to see if there were any bucks in the group. Needless to say, they were not mule deer, but a group of 18 aoudads.

During the hunt, the option of shooting an aoudad would be possible. I chose to concentrate on a mule deer first, so we returned to the buggy and

started walking all the canyons.

The terrain was so rough on the buggy that we heard some noise and found that we had cracked the frame on the buggy, due to too much torque and rough riding. We looked it over and decided it would make the day. To make our walk less in case we did break down, we started hunting our way back to camp.

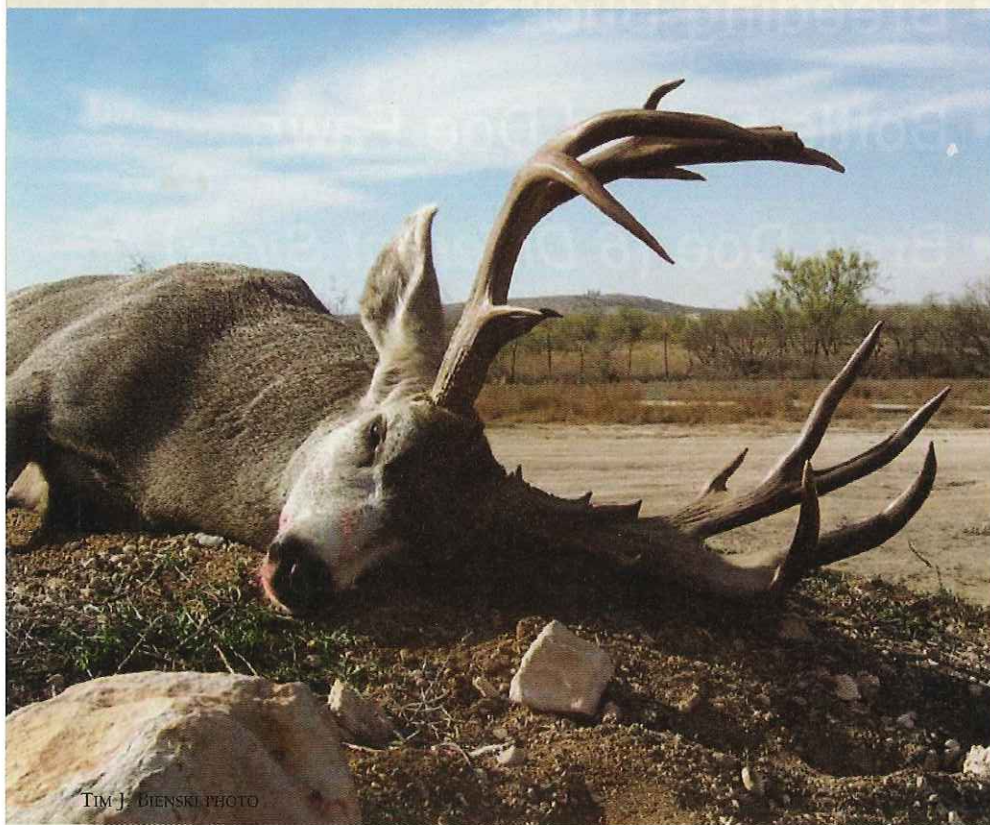
Once we arrived at camp, we took the buggy to the ranch shop and I got busy doing some welding to repair the buggy because it was the only transportation for hunting the rough terrain on the ranch. When I was finished, dinner had been prepared.

Over dinner, we talked among the other guides, discussing bucks they had seen on the road in one of the pastures called the "Wild Horse." We didn't think too much about it because no one expressed much excitement over the bucks they saw. We chose to go to "Ten West," which was another pasture that had over 10,000 acres.

As we arrived to the cattle guard to enter Ten West, we stopped and glassed and saw one lone deer to the right hand side of the road. Ken and I discussed what we should do. Ken wanted to go ahead and go into Ten West and do our "milk run." (A milk run means to go to the highest known spots on the ranch and glass.)

Since we saw one big-bodied deer alone, I thought we should go back and

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 40]



TIM J. CIENSKI PHOTO

The author's 18-point mule deer scored 207-2/8 B&C and came from a 40,000-acre West Texas pasture that no one wanted to hunt for the previous 4-1/2 years.

THE WILD HORSE BUCK

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38]

check out that area first. We knew he was a buck because we saw him hooking the cedar bush beside him. We were still over 1,000 yards away, but started closing the distance by driving straight across the flat where he was up on a ridge. So we could keep an eye on him all the time, we closed our distance to about 400 yards and arranged our approach to be headed into the wind.

As soon as we got out of the buggy and stalked within 300 yards or so, we noticed the buck was gone. We looked at the top of the ridge and we both put our field glasses up to see how good a buck he was. It was easy to spot the buck because he was sky-lighted at the top. We both said nothing. We just turned to each other and said, "This is the buck we have been looking for."

The buck was wide and heavy and very tall for a mule deer. From that point, we ran to the top of the ridge where we last saw him and stopped and

then started our stalk very quietly because we just knew he was within 20 to 30 yards on the other side of the ridge.

We walked from cedar to cedar, glassing the whole time looking for this buck, knowing that he was within range, but we just couldn't spot him. We did spot about five does into the next flat, but he wasn't with them.

We glassed to the left of the does through the flat and found our buck running another younger buck off. He was now over 300 yards away and still running farther away, sometimes stopping and fighting with the younger bucks.

We tried to approach again downwind, going from cedar to cedar, and we knew as soon as we got into the flats that the cedar would be chest high, so spotting him would become hard.

We arranged ourselves to try to get between the does and the buck. It seemed like it took forever, but really it

only took three to four minutes. We were right on top of him, but couldn't find him. We could look back to the right and see the does on the ridge, so we knew the buck had not come back through the flats.

We continued to glass, moving from cedar to cedar. I had my shooting sticks arranged at the needed height in case I needed them and Ken was carrying them. We walked another 10 steps and there, right in front of us, he was standing broadside, staring at us.


He was only 80 to 90 yards away, but all we could see was the top of his back and his huge antlers. Ken put the shooting sticks down and said, "Kill him." The only shot I had was a spine shot and I had no choice but to take it.

From the time that we saw him until the time I took the shot was three to four seconds. We knew any minute he would blow out of there and I would never get the shot because he would hit the flats and the cedar would be too tall. After I took the shot, he just disappeared. I ejected the shell while running towards the area where he was to find out that he had dropped like a rock.


There was no ground shrinkage whatsoever. We both knew that we had probably just killed a buck that would score over 200 Boone and Crocket.

Once we knew that we had killed him, we made several calls, one to my ultimate hunting partner back home, who happened to be my wife, and back to the lodge to tell them what we had just killed in the Wild Horse pasture—a pasture that no one wanted to hunt in the last 4-1/2 years due to the huge flats, but the pasture was approximately 40,000 acres. So, I decided to stay with the buck and all the gear while Ken went back to get the buggy.

While I waited, it hit me that I had killed a buck of a lifetime. I knew that the spent cartridge was on the ground, so I returned there to retrieve the shell. (I load my own hand loads, so I wanted the shell.) Once there, I was able to range back to find the true distance,



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which was 83 meters.

While I was walking back to the buck, I saw the buggy topping the ridge. We loaded the deer into the buggy for the most exciting ride back to camp I have ever taken from a hunting area to a lodge. It took about 45 minutes to arrive at the lodge.

The news spread like wildfire across Pecos County, and we had at least 15 people waiting on our return. Everyone wanted to see what kind of buck we killed. No one expected that kind of buck out of the Wild Horse pasture.

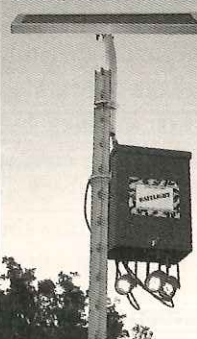
After numerous pictures with the buck, we finally arrived at the skinning rack. He tipped the scale at 256 pounds and Ken and I rough scored him at 206, with 18 points. He was 22 inches wide and had 7-1/4-inch bases.

The time was around 10:30 a.m. on the last day of the hunt. I was so glad that I had passed on all the previous bucks during the hunt. My perseverance paid off.

On the way home we stopped by the Mason Wildlife Area to get the buck scored. We called in advance to make sure someone would be available. There were people awaiting our arrival. Needless to say, everyone was excited about the buck. The buck scored 207-2/8 B&C.

I want to thank Ken Burton with Burton Hunting Service and Billy Jackson for such quality deer hunts. 🍷

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