

Muleys on the Moon... Whitetails Too

Wily outlaws of the Old West used the rugged terrain of the Badlands to keep them safe... just like the big bucks of today.



By Joe Byers

That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mule deer. OK, OK, maybe that's a stretch, yet we had just climbed a steep slope right out of a lunar landscape and the buck we spotted ducked into the likings of a lunar crater. After glassing miles of the most intriguing geography anywhere, we struck out into the badlands, stopping every quarter mile or so to glass for rutting mule deer. We'd seen several mid aged bucks, yet this remote section of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation surely held one or more of the mega-bucks we sought.

As we sneaked over a ridge, almost in range of the deer's last location, we suddenly heard engine noise. To our amazement, a small yellow airplane began buzzing a distant canyon a mile ahead. Circling and cruising just 100 feet off the deck it was surely looking for something, probably the same big bucks we were.

"Duck down and let's get its ID number." said, Travis Brave Bird, a Ranger on the reservation and our guide for the short three-day hunt. "It

may be a poacher, and I'll radio for help," he said keeping an eye toward the sky. My partner Neil Davies and I glassed the plane carefully, yet could find no markings, raising serious doubt about its activity. Finally, the plane left, but returned half an hour later, putting an unsavory end to a terrific morning hunt.

Deer Hunt of a Lifetime

Ten years earlier I enjoyed a fantastic buffalo hunt on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation thanks to Ralph Bearkiller, a ranger and keeper of all things *tatonka*. That adventure netted a huge bull buffalo for the tribe and made a most interesting article in Heartland USA Magazine. Not only was I given the Sioux name Wahin-ka-pe (Four arrows), but the spirit of the fallen buffalo seemed to guide events that landed me into a buffalo activist camp resulting in an article in the Washington Post pleading the plight of the tribe's sacred animal.

Pitching a similar plan to Bear Killer, my brother was able to wrangle two licenses for the eastern section of the Reservation, tags I shared with hunting buddy Davies who saw it as a chance to test Hornady's brand new

Superformance ammunition, his in 30-06 and mine in 300 Winchester
Magnum.

The Pine Ridge abuts the Badlands National Park on three sides and much of its spectacular landscapes spill into the reservation. In the park, it's one thing to ogle at the amazing spires and pastel hues of every clay imaginable, however, on this hunt we would be able to walk and stalk on the near lunar surface.

Mule Deer/Whitetail Combo

Since the Pine Ridge Air Force was a bit short on fighter jets and Snoopy on vacation, we couldn't be sure that the "yellow barren" wouldn't return and chose a section on the far eastern boundary. As typical on the reservation and South Dakota prairie hunts, we drove and stalked, allowing us to cover 20 miles a day and glass ten times that amount. As darkness fell we spotted several medium size bucks, yet not the quality we sought.

The next morning, we were about to enter the prairie when we saw a 150-class whitetail standing in a section of "deeded ground" private land within the boundaries of the reservation that our license didn't include. Neither Davies nor I had decided definitively on a muley or a whitetail. If it was big... the hunt was on.

Throughout the day, we stopped, glassed, hiked, stalked and glassed some more. Although Brave Bird patrolled the boundaries of these sections, he had never hunted them and shared our excitement of exploring new lands.

Along with the hunt came a cultural experience and we discussed the events like “sun dances” where he fasts and dances for four days without food or water. Some were difficult like Wounded Knee. Brave Bird’s mother died when he was five and he was raised by his grandparents who saw that he finished high school. He worked in drug prevention programs until becoming a ranger eight years previously.

“The Oglala Sioux are one of the few “treaty tribes” he explained, a reminder that the once mighty nation never surrendered to the USA, only signed a peace treaty. *“As long as the wind blows, the water flows, and the sun shines, the Sioux have the right to hunt,”* he quoted the treaty adding that more and more of his brethren now buy tags and comply with the hunting regulations on the reservations.

When Chronic Wasting Disease was a national threat six years earlier, the five Rangers on the Reservation asked hunters to turn in deer heads for testing, yet got little cooperation. “I had to shoot nearly 20 deer, dress, skin, and test them myself,” lamented Brave Bird. “That squelched my drive for hunting for several years until my son was old enough to go afield. Now I

hunt with him and the thrill has returned, however, I have to make sure that I hunt at times when I'm clearly off duty," he said with a laugh.

The Last Sunrise

Despite 100 square miles of prime mule deer and whitetail habitat, Davies and I wondered if we'd made the right decision for such a short hunt. This "badlands" terrain had a myriad of coulees and spider draws, ideal cover for muleys and some whitetails.

Entering the reservation the final morning, a red dawn lit up the eastern horizon. Davies raised his glasses, and then burst into action. I remember him saying, "That's one heck of a whitetail," before dashing toward the horizon. Later I'd learn that he'd spotted a high raked buck with stickers and extra points silhouetted and fleeing on the skyline.

In the dim light of a deep ravine, Davies spotted big antlers, aimed and fired, dropping the buck in its tracks. Approaching one part of him was delighted to see the 130-class whitetail lying before him, yet the other yearned for what might have been.

With the sun just under the horizon, we snapped a few photos, loaded the buck into an ice sled and hustled back to the truck. The morning air was still and frosty, prime time for a second opportunity.

Cresting the next rise, we spotted a mixture of whitetails and mule deer, but no shooters. Crossing two gates, we reached a 200 foot high butte where we'd seen several bucks the evening before. Moving slowly, glassing often, we worked the ridgeline, checking the open prairie below for movement.

“A buck and a doe,” whispered Brave Bird, stretching his 6' 3" frame for optimal advantage. Glassing and ranging the buck, I could see it's 5x5 rack in stark contrast to a cedar bush 256 yards away. This wasn't mega-buck, but it was a good one, the range was right and the rest was solid. I squeezed the trigger of the Howa 300 and the buck rodeo-kicked and disappeared. A doe quickly bounded from the area, stopped and looked back as I chambered another Superformance round.

The shot looked good according to my buddies, yet we waited just in case. After several minutes we moved cautiously down the ridge and found the buck 20 yards farther. The bullet had taken out both lungs and the demise was remarkably quick.

A Spiritual Experience

The day was barely 90 minutes old, yet our fortune had changed in dramatic fashion. Better yet, the early morning light would allow a photo of

magical proportions and we loaded the second deer in the truck and drove to a section that overlooked a mile of badlands strata in three directions.

Davies and I lay our deer on the edge of a bluff hoping to capture in some small way just a portion of the majesty of the land we'd shared.

After dressing both animals where the coyotes would recycle the lost protein we loaded them a second time and prepared to leave. "Give me a moment," I said to my friends feeling a spiritual tsunami swelling inside of me. I walked to the edge of the bluff, scanned the vast and amazing landscapes and fought back my emotions (and tears). The deer was great, the photos fantastic, yet filling the tag meant the hunt was over and I inhaled the intoxicating landscape, like a last breath. "Deer hunters don't cry," I chastised myself, turned away, and tried to regain my composure. Perhaps the spirit of the buffalo maintained its grip for I felt a supernatural attachment to this land and its creatures. If ever a deer hunt was about the thrill of the outdoors, this was it. Like a lunar astronaut, I'd visited the heavens, touched its landscape, and captured an inspirational memory.

Sidebar- **Hunting Central South Dakota**

Seventy-five million years ago, the Great Plains were an inland sea until it was drained by the uplifting of the western mountains. Inhabited by humans for 11,000 years the sharply eroded butted, pinnacles and spires of what the Lakota Sioux call “mako sica” translates to “bad lands.” The Pine Ridge Oglala tribe offers drawings for deer licenses and other big game species on the reservation at www.osprabuffalokeepers.com or call the Oglala Sioux Parks and Recreation Authority at (605) 455-2584. South Dakota offers non-resident “any deer” and “any whitetail” tags in counties surrounding the Badlands National Park. Call 1-800-SDakota or check www.travelSD.com for a map of the area and www.sdgifp.info for license information. A day of pheasant or fall turkey hunting makes a great combo.

Captions for “Muleys on the Moon”

265 The Badlands National Park is one of the more unique landscapes in the world, the result of millions of years of erosion of its fossilized soil.

63 Scenic mule deer in foreground.

100 Bouncing mule deer. Enlarged, this will make a great action shot.

33 Dawn or dusk on the prairie.

46 South Dakota offers an increasing number of “walk-in” areas allowing those adventurous hunters a shot at great deer.

338-394 Our hunt was a fascinating journey through unique landscapes all the while glassing with binoculars and spotting scopes. Ranger Travis Brave Bird acted as guide through remote regions and schooled us in Sioux history and culture.

404-413 Barely off the highway the second day, Davies spotted a big whitetail on the horizon and dashed for the shot. Although he poses with a good deer, he believes the really big one slipped away.

418 A deer cart is a god-send on the prairie where a hunter can easily travel miles on a single hunt or stalk.

421-460 The author poses with his mature mule deer buck, taken on the last day of the three day hunt. Another time, he'd schedule more hunting days.

484-486 The author and Davies celebrate their great deer with a gesture of excitement.

487-494 Brave Bird (In black) and Davies pose with the two bucks in the landscapes that typified the hunt.

504 Byers, left, and Davies celebrate their great morning in the unique habitat of the badlands.

509 Neil Davies shot this good buck at first light, yet it could have been the lesser of two monarchs.

514-529 The author approaches his mule deer with caution. The .300 Winchester Magnum Superformance round hit both lungs and downed the big buck in seconds.

534 Ranger Travis Brave Bird acted as guide on his days off.

540 The Pine Ridge Reservation covers nearly 3,500 square miles in Southwestern South Dakota. Although contained within the state, tribal lands have their own seasons and bag limits.

543-51 Optics are as important as hunting boots on the wide open prairie. Zeiss 10-42 range-finding binoculars and the 85 mm “eye of god” spotting scope were of immense help.

62-74 Mid November was unusually mild on our trip, however, snow is a distinct possibility.

421-37. Note hunter in each of these landscapes.