

The Alberta Deer Zone

By Christopher Stotka

What started as a Goose Hunt ended up as a premier Whitetail / Muley Combination Hunt of a life time!

Five buddies and I first hunted geese and ducks with Boss Guiding Service in 2005. Alberta delivered all the water fowling I've always read about! In 3 days we all shot possession limits of both ducks and geese. What gave me the WOW factor was that each of the 6 hunts in 3 days was never in the same field. Even more crazy was that hunts were either all Canada Geese, or all Ducks, or all Canada & White Front Geese, and often all three combined. Have you ever had 300 ducks in one group land in a dry wheat field with Canadian Honker Decoys? It happens here!

During this first year of goose hunting I inquired about the source of the beautiful whitetail and mule deer mounts in the lodge. To my amazement the answer was "Around Here, Eh". These two species live together in the same aspen groves, river bottoms, and on the prairie/parkland farms that cover the landscape. Surrounded by wheat, barley, canola, and alfalfa fields they have both extremely large bodies and big antlers. Jason Byers and Cody Rowledge are Boss's main guides for geese & ducks but they are also deer hunting fanatics. On our way home from the evening hunt they would drive me around spotting deer. As well, they showed off their video clips and trail cam pictures of deer caught feeding in the fields they scout for geese. That was all it took for me to book the next year for geese AND deer.

My 2006 deer hunt was for Mule Deer only in a zone near Medicine Hat near the South Saskatchewan River. This area is about three hours south of the lodge so we planned on staying in a hotel close to the hunting grounds. The river is approx. 500 feet lower than the surrounding wheat fields and prairie. Hundreds of cooley's run out of the river bottom into the fields and prairie where the deer feed. These cooley's can be anywhere from a half to two miles long. It is similar to hunting inside the Grand Canyon.

Well before light we would get ourselves into a viewing position that allowed us to monitor deer travel from the night time feeding areas to their bedding areas in the coolies. Finding a shooter, a 170 + four by four, and watching him bed down allowed us to plan our stalk.

Being careful to monitor the wind we would attempt to get within the “red zone” and take a snap shot or wait the animal out until a shot presented itself.

This scenario happened 9 times on my four day hunt, allowing me to shoot 5 arrows. Never before have I hunted deer all day long. I learned a lot from my guide Aron Graves, another deer hunting fanatic, about the red zone and shooting in all types of situations. One of the most important lessons I learned was to use Silent Stalkers over my boots when getting into shooting range and to wait the deer out if a shot can not be made. Sleeping mule deer get up every 2 hours to stretch, move into the shade, or just spin like a dog. If you are positioned so that you can see antler tips with binoculars through the grass then you are in a great position to shoot when he stands up and spins! My problem on this trip was that when inside the red zone I got buck fever every time. I shook like a leaf, breathed heavy, rushed, and made horrible mistakes. We chased and stalked a typical 190 buck 3 times, flung an arrow at a 165 perfect 4x4, a 170 (really wide), and a 5x6 narrow 180.5 buck that I missed the second day and then shot and killed the last night. It was a great introduction to hunting mule deer with my bow on the southern Alberta prairies.

I booked in 2007, this time for both whitetail and mule deer. The mule deer hunt was first, once again hunting the breaks on the Saskatchewan River. This 3 day hunt allowed me to chase and fling arrows at a beautiful 190 plus buck that had a typical 4x4 ivory white rack. I still had that same damn buck fever in the red zone and I missed the buck numerous times during the first two days of the hunt. I finally shot a buck on the last evening of the hunt by waiting for him to leave his bedding area. The 3 hour wait was worth it as he walked out at 22 yards. This buck scored 171.

The next day I was back at Boss’s lodge and ready to sit in a tree. The boys had all the deer picked out and named for me. Tree stands were set up for every kind of wind. My first evening presented a glimpse of a shooter that walked out the wrong way. Lots of does and little bucks played under my stand. The next morning presented only small bucks and a coyote that I should have shot. That evening I was back in a newly relocated stand where I had seen the shooter the night before. Shortly after the shadows grew tall on the grass a nice little 10 point walked out and under my stand. Not being the shooter I had seen before no longer mattered as I wanted to fling an arrow. One shot at 20 yards sent him running out of sight before he collapsed. I texted everyone I knew and waited for the boys to arrive. The deer scored out at 122 and was a perfect 10 point.

2008 was set up exactly like the year before. My luck was awesome the first morning as we ran into a typical 200 plus Mulley still in full velvet. He looked like an Elk when standing next to other bucks. However, my luck ran out as I missed this buck on two different

occasions. I was sick about missing this lifetime opportunity but was ecstatic about the opportunity to get a chance at a book buck. Sometimes you can have a great hunt without harvesting something. In another area, we quickly regrouped and shot a nice 165 4x4 that had velvet hanging like stencil on a Xmas tree.

Back at Nighthaven Lodge I decided to hunt geese and ducks with the other hunters as previously our morning tree stand hunts were unproductive. The morning duck and goose hunts were excellent and the three evening hunts from the tree stands produced big shooters each night but unfortunately they were all just out of range. The biggest was probably 165-170 and was a typical 12 point. I could have shot other smaller bucks but this year I had decided to hold out for a wall hanger.

So when the time came to hunt deer in Alberta in 2009 with Boss Guiding I decided that my friend Steve and I would hunt whitetails, ducks and geese first and close out our hunt with the mule deer in southeastern Alberta. With the opening day of deer season on September 9, I wanted a chance to hunt whitetails before I did anything else.

The first morning I passed up a nice 8 point that would have scored 145 and my buddy saw a huge deer that ran between us. That evening I was put into the same stand that I saw all the big deer from the previous year. While watching a very nice 145 ten point buck, a “toad” walked out of the woods towards me. Immediately my heart started beating and I had to fight buck fever. He walked right in and stopped in front of and below of my stand, offering a perfect shot. He was distracted by the other bucks now all watching him. This allowed me to stand and shoot. After taking a big breath and careful aim I arrowed him through the spine and he dropped, paralyzed, kicking with his front feet. I notched another arrow and shot him again. He expired within seconds.

I was totally in awe at what had just happened. I had no idea how big this deer was until I got out of the tree and approached him. He was still in full velvet! All the other bucks we had seen were hard horned. He had small double drop tines. The most unique thing about this huge typical eight point was the base of its antlers. The seven inch antler bases were surrounded by what looked like a boney burr, some twelve inches in circumference. I was so excited I could not text and email pictures fast enough. The whitetail unofficially scored 170.1 and could possible become the #2 Alberta Archery Velvet buck.

My friend Steve finished out his whitetail hunt, turning down some great deer. We both went on a goose hunt Saturday morning and were ready to head down to southeastern Alberta to finish off with our mule deer hunt. Saying goodbye to the crew at Nighthaven

Lodge we drove for three hours to arrive at the South Saskatchewan River hills in time to do some morning spotting.

The first day out was rather slow for me but not Steve who saw 18 bucks and 2 were 180+. However, the next morning I was already on to some good ones. Spotting a buck in full velvet, again all the others were hard horned, we decided to try for him. He had a good sized drop tine and looked to be reasonably wide. By 2pm we had an arrow into this deer and shortly after another fatal shot sent him across the river collapsing on the other bank dead. This mule deer had beautiful velvet, a six inch drop tine and an inside spread exceeding 26 inches. It was another classic hunt for mule deer in Alberta filled with many stories to tell my friends when I arrived home.

My buddy Steve missed a "Toad" at 40 yds, stalked several 180+ bucks, and passed up numerous 160 size typical 4x4's almost everyday. His hunt like mine in 2008 with all the opportunities sent him home happy and booked for 2010.

Boss Guiding provides excellent goose and duck hunting. Their best kept secret is the bow hunting they have provided to me and some of my friends over the past five years. I can't keep quiet about this special place for ever, so I will tell you that as long as I am able I will be there in the fall hunting ducks and geese and flinging arrows at some incredible whitetail and mule deer.