



BY BRAD FRY

*This photo really shows all of us the mass this buck has. Saskatchewan had the world by the tail when it came to mule deer hunting. The province had a huge herd of trophy bucks, but the chronic wasting disease kill-offs changed all of that in an awful hurry. Now it's a waiting game to see how the herds regroup and how many draw tags are issued.*

My weather-worn hands dug into the dashboard of the circa 1950's vinyl that graced the interior of the ancient Cessna that was now hurtling down the makeshift runway. My death grip wasn't caused from lack of bush plane experience but rather from the horrendous speed at which we were travelling. You see, I had just completed my three-month "tour of duty" in the Yukon, and during that entire time, my derriere had not ever exceeded five m.p.h., a direct result of being confined to either horse or human power.

Eventually, the small bird gained enough speed to avoid the tall spruce trees that signalled the end of the runway, and I was officially on my way back to civilization. As the altitude revealed the timbered, snow-filled valleys below, I couldn't help but feel for the guides left behind with the unenviable task of trailing the ponies out to the road. This marked the first year that I would not be joining them on the six-day trail ride out, thus signifying my elder state, as this type of task is only reserved for the toughest of the young. On the bright



side, the early arrival home would give me an excellent opportunity to chase one of my favourite prey species: the prairie mule deer.

Just prior to leaving for the Yukon in early July, I had received confirmation of drawing the special tag for an area of Saskatchewan known as the Great Sandhills. Now, as far as game-rich country goes, the mountains of northern Canada are hard to beat, but if there is one other place on my list of favourite regions to hunt, it would certainly be southwestern Saskatchewan. At first glance, this arid desolate area surely couldn't hold much game, but upon closer inspection, seemingly every available chunk of cover is utilized by some species of game, the mule deer being no exception.

Once I overcame my speed shock of the civilized world and finished staring in amazement at flushing toilets and running water, my mind began planning a trip south to try and put a 200-inch mulie to rest. Within a week of arriving home, and still not unpacked, I dug through my duffle bag of dirty hunting gear, did the smell test, and threw the passing items into the truck. Later that night, I carefully rolled out of the driveway, not wanting to wake up my pregnant wife, as I couldn't remember if I had in fact told her I was leaving again or not.

Hours later, and with no calls from home, I concluded I had made a clean getaway and was now officially on a mulie hunt. The four-hour drive was easily burned up by rehashing old hunting memories and pondering new ones.

Brad Fry of Spiritwood, Saskatchewan, with the massive mule deer he anchored while hunting the Great Sandhills. The antlers carry good tine length, long brow-tines and abnormal points to give this Sandhills monster extra character. The antlers ended up grossing over 202 inches.



Eventually, I was witness to the glow on the eastern horizon as my anticipation boiled over. I could now make out dark objects in the fields as I found my way down the bumpy pasture trail that led to my starting point for the hunt. Gathering up my essentials, I headed off to my usual high vantage point and began glassing the familiar area.

By noon on the first day, I had found several nice bucks and a few good ones, but nothing that crowded the magical 200-inch mark. I took the next few hours to get situated in camp, grabbed a short nap, and before I knew it the sun was on the move to the west and it was time to get back into the hills.

No sooner had I started glassing and the mulies appeared to be up and moving. Again, numerous bucks were located, but it wasn't until just before dark that I spotted something that got my adrenaline flowing. The massive-bodied buck just basically stood up in front of me about 500 yards out and began making his way in my direction en route to the sparsely vegetated fields in the distance. I instinctively dug for my spotting scope, like I had thousands of times before on the sheep trails, and dialed the buck in. At first glance, his mass stood out as well as a sturdy sticker growing from the crotch of his right back fork. I put that ol' buck through the judging list countless times over the next few minutes, but I just couldn't deceive myself: he wasn't going to make the cut. He was just a few ifs, ands, or buts short.

And so it went for the next few days as each potential candidate fell to the criticism of the powerful spotting scope. I was into buck after buck, and although plenty of them were mature, I just couldn't dig up a really good one. Now faced with the final day I could justify being gone for, I made the risky decision to try a different ranch that I had never hunted before.

Arriving at the new ranch well before light the next morning, I soon realized I would be making a dint into my thermos of coffee because, not knowing the land, I would have to wait for first light to help locate a starting point. After two cups, I began to notice an extremely flat landscape – even for Saskatchewan – emerge before me. The only height of land just so happened to be right beside the truck, so as soon as it was bright enough, I made the long 20-yard hike from the truck and began scanning the horizon for movement.

Doubt and disappointment were feelings I quickly experienced as this new ranch appeared completely void of any life. I hadn't even heard the usual coyotes taunting their prey, and I cursed myself for giving into “the grass is always greener” mentality. Then, as if fate intervened, I spotted a group of about 20 deer a few miles distant, right at the entrance of the pasture. I had glassed this exact spot only minutes before with no success, but now not only had a few deer appeared, but I could make out some solid headgear on a few of them.

This time I didn't need to stare at the buck for long. I grabbed my video camera, held it up to the lens to document the distant buck, and I was on my way. Due to the extremely flat terrain and bad wind direction, I would have to make a huge loop, well over two miles to the south and west of the deer, to gain both the wind and cover. It was going to take awhile, but thankfully it appeared the bucks were pitted in for the day.

As I shuffled along, every so often I would straighten up from my hunched position to mark their location. Eventually, I had covered the distance needed to get behind the very slope they were bedded on. I was out of sight with the strong wind in

my favour. All I had to do now was inch along and try to relocate the bedded bucks.

One of the small bucks gave away their position. Instead of dozing away the morning like his elders, this little guy couldn't help but burn up some of his excess energy needlessly walking from buck to buck looking for a reaction. The snubbing he received was finally enough of a hint and he bedded off to the downwind side of the bigger boys. By this time, however, I had spotted the tops of his small forks on the horizon and located a shallow drainage to belly crawl through that brought me within 100 yards of the group, completely undetected. I was now out of cover as it started to drizzle.

Although I consider my muzzleloader to be anything but primitive, it does have one minor downfall: moisture! I needed to cover the exposed cap before moisture jeopardized my hunt. I settled on my oilskin hat as I jammed it over the cap and under the scope, hoping for the best as my total focus was now on the group of bachelors. The drizzle continued as I slithered forward, gaining the few precious inches needed to finally spot the buck that had lured me over here in the first place. He was exactly what I was looking for: an older buck with dark antlers featuring a couple of horizontal stickers, all packaged nicely with a little bit of mass. I was sold! My mind didn't even try to score him; his character was enough for me.

I had a great rest over the top of my pack, and there was no question about being steady enough. The wind wasn't going to be a problem either, the bucks were in plain view, and I had all day. The only curve balls being thrown were the constant drizzle and the fact I didn't have a clear shot yet because he was lying down facing me with his antlers resting on the ground, completely zonked out. *Great spot to be in*, I remember thinking, but after another hour of wishing I had my rain gear on, my body started to protest the temperature and the odd shake and shiver started to appear. Kudos to the guys who can lie beside a bedded buck for half a day. I'm not one of them. My patience had expired; it was time to make something happen.

With my scope focused on the big guy, I flicked the safety off and began to whistle at the dozing bucks. The first attempt produced nothing, not even the youngsters reacted. The second and third attempts were also futile. By now I had a case of the giggles because I couldn't muster up any volume at all; it felt like I was trying to whistle with a box of crackers in my mouth! It was time for plan B.

I swallowed hard and gave a loud “Hey!” Although not the standard phony grunt you hear on TV, it did the job as every buck except the big guy stood up to find the source of the intrusion. I continued to hold on the sleeping buck, pondering my next move. *Should I make another sound and risk having the alerted bucks bolt, taking the sleeping giant with them, or simply do nothing at all and wait things out?* Like I said, patience time was over, so I cozied up to the stock and trained my eye to see nothing but vitals when and if the big guy stood up.

All at once, I gave a hearty yell, and he arose. I silently begged for the cap to ignite as he turned to follow his buddies, exposing his right side, and in a flash of smoke the stalk was over. By the time his brain had registered the complete system failure, his legs had carried him over a distant rise 80 yards out.

The rain and cold were wiped away by a flood of adrenaline, and although my cramped legs protested, I

scrambled over the hill, hoping to see him piled up. The short, heavily grazed, prairie grass made him stand out sharply.

Arriving at his side, I enjoyed every inch of antler the ol' boy had grown. It doesn't happen often, but he was exactly what I thought he was. As my mind gradually came back down to earth, I couldn't help but let a small negative thought enter my mind. I realized it would be at least another four years before I

would have the chance to go head to head with another big ol' Saskatchewan mulie.

There is something special about hunting the badlands. Is it the smell of buckbrush and sage, the wide open spaces, the abundance of game, or simply all of the above? Whatever the reason, I have four years to convince my wife that I forgot she was pregnant! 🍷



*Above: Steven Kover of Manning, Alberta, found these whitetail sheds lying only 10 feet apart in the spring of 2009. Largest circumference is 6 7/8 inches. Giving it an inside spread of 18 inches, this buck grosses 162 7/8 points. Trevor Manteufel photo.*

*Right: Trevor Manteufel of Grimshaw, Alberta, got this trail camera photo in January of 2009. He looked hard for the sheds and was with Steven when he found them. Actually, Trevor had walked only 40 to 50 yards from the sheds the day before.*

