

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES & CAPTURED MOMENTS

— BY VICTOR HARGRAVES —

Victor Hargraves of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, shows us the gigantic mule deer he took in 2007. Main beams are excellent at 27 2/8 and 27 1/8 inches. Longest brow-tine is way above normal at 5 6/8 inches. Longest G-2 is 16 4/8, G-3 is 10, and G-4 is 11 2/8 inches. Bases are massive at 6 4/8 inches each. After 8 2/8 of deductions, the big buck nets 194 3/8 typical points. With 43 5/8 of abnormals, the king of the pasture nets 238 non-typical points. Garry Donald photo.

It was the cooler weather we were experiencing in August that kicked me out of the numbing work environment and back into hunting mode. In years past I'd scout out the areas I intended to hunt with the same reckless abandon as a gopher daring a Goodyear radial tire, wide-eyed and ready to go. It was really just for the chance encounter, regardless how fleeting it might be. I no longer have the luxury of time with the elevated responsibility of owning a business and my dedication to my employees. I still try to get out as often as I can, but it's never ever enough.

The area I hunt is very familiar to me. Now here is the hook and bait: I know they are there just waiting for the opportunity to be hunted. They are there, but not in big numbers, just generally one or two that will set off the WOW meter. Of course, Lady Luck has to be your mistress to make it all come together. Now if our dim-witted wildlife department has their way, it may all be in vain as they continue their knee-jerk journey down a dismal path of decimation.

Back to my story. As usual, I relay any scouting reports back to my brother-in-law. "Hey, Brian, on that east-west road south of the old wooden shack, you know the spot? In between the irrigation ditch and big rock way to the east? Now just on the edge of that north bush. Two big boys." I knew Brian would know where this was because it's his spot. Later in the season, he confirmed that, yes, there were no less than four shooter bucks in the group.

A few days later, I was in my old familiar spot, glassing around. There were a few does, but nothing with antlers. However, I felt confident about the area and dragged out my two ladder stands and set them out. I set the first one up on a well-worn tree I've used in the past, and with a little trim I

was good to go. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail about how this spot is better than another, but I feel the deer like it because it is their first chance at cover after moving off the fields after feeding. Last year I took a pretty decent buck from this treestand (see 2006 mule deer photo). The second stand placement is only 100 yards west, which allows for different wind direction.

I also utilize trail cameras. They are great tools to have in your arsenal. They offer me the edge I need in order to stay patient. It also helps if you have an idea that something in the area is worth a tag.

After a couple of weeks, I ventured back to view the secrets held on the digital circuitry. I wasn't expecting what came up on the screen. Doe, doe, doe, buck. Lots of stickers and, yes, more stickers (see trail camera picture).

I only sat each of the stands twice in the first month of the archery season. The prevailing winds just didn't cooperate nor did work. Now with the muzzle season opening on Monday, I was going away on a business trip into the States for a week. While I was down there, I picked up a bad cold bug that was trying its best to become an illegal alien back into Canada. It succeeded.

Now Saturday morning and four days later, I crawled out of bed feeling just like something you might step in if you were in a feedlot. Looking outside, I could tell it was raining. Not real bad, but with cold shivers running down my back I wasn't overly thrilled.

Brian picked me up at 4:00 a.m. The drive was typical with few words spoken and our thoughts filled with anticipation of the hunt. Once there and out of the truck with my TC Encore in tow, I set out into the light rain. I walked toward my treestand knowing I wasn't going to sit it. Too wet



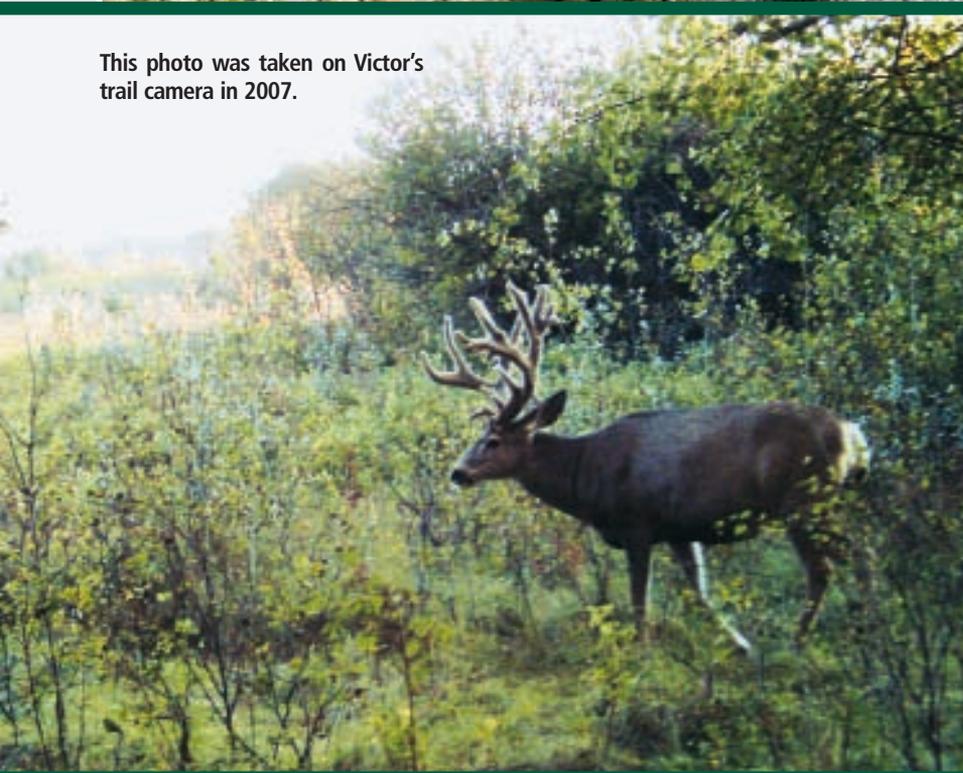


This photo was taken on Victor's trail camera in 2007.

Above: Victor Hargraves is all smiles after he anchored this gigantic mule deer with his muzzleloader in 2007. The Saskatchewan buck grew tremendous mass and character. The bases are simply huge with good brow-tines and extra stickers. The whopper netted 238 non-typical points.

and too cold. The thought of sitting in the rain sent a chill through me. I walked just a little farther to a meadow that the deer would cross to get back to the bedding area. I knew of a spot that would offer a good view of the meadow from the end of a tongue of bush to the southeast.

I was about 50 yards from my destination when, in the early morning light, I saw the unmistakable white rump of a mule deer. It was only 35 yards away. I slowly lifted my Swarovski 10x50s and viewed the buck. He was respectable, but not what I had in mind. I watched him for a few minutes until the wind swirled and he caught my scent. He made a westerly exist into the unknown.



I quickly got into position before it got too light. Panning west to east, the view remained the same. Light fog and rain drifted by with the east to west wind. The EL's brought out the best that the poor light could offer. Nothing was moving, but it was still early.

Glancing at an area to the east that was hidden by the tall grass in front of me, I stood up and took a couple of small steps away from the edge of the bush. I again started to glass the spot. Out of the mist, the form of a buck materialized. At that instant I could tell it was big and it had to die. I needed to see more and had to try to adjust the optics to squeeze out the best possible details of this buck. Light conditions were poor, and the light rain had me cursing under my breath.

With a slight focal adjustment the buck, which was walking directly toward me at about 300 yards, came to life. Dark, heavy, wide and tall. The adrenaline rush hit me like a wave. The wave was more like a tsunami as its effects caused me to shake uncontrollably. In my unhealthy condition, its effects became more apparent as my nose started to leak in torrents. I've shot deer in the past, experiencing the rush, but this racking in my body had me surprised. Was this deer that good or was I that sick?

The buck was heading across the meadow from where I had



The arrow that Victor spotted from his treestand.

just crossed. I had to find the perfect ambush point and find it real quick. I picked up my backpack and shooting sticks to make my way back for the interception. Back into the bush and along the edge I moved in order to stay hidden from the keen eyes of this big boy.

When Victor phoned and told me he had taken a big mulie with his muzzleloader, I figured it would be a respectable buck. When I at last saw the brute, I nearly fell over. All I could muster was, "Wow, what a monster!" Text and photo by Garry Donald.



When I got to a spot where a small grove of trees was between me and the buck, I made my exit from the bush. Now in the open I moved quickly in a crouched position. I wanted to get down into place as soon as possible. This was it, a slight knoll with a wisp of tall grass, good enough.

I settled onto my knees and adjusted the shooting sticks to the right height. Resting my TC on top of the sticks, I was ready. I waited, straining my eyes in the poor light. After 15 minutes, I was a wreck. The affects of the adrenaline rush had me weak. Even my Under Armour couldn't protect me from these violent shakes. Thoughts of "Where is he? He should have been here by now," started to enter my mind. Now I had the urge to cough. After a few minutes of swallowing almost non-existent saliva, the urge to cough was gone.

Nearly 30 minutes later, he finally appeared, quartering toward me in the clearing. How do they do that? Not in a good state of mind but needing to get into form, I settled into my routine. Shake and then shake uncontrollably. At 140 yards or so, I was sure I could make the shot. I settled in. Rock-like, the crosshairs settled onto his shoulder. The drizzly breeze blowing in my face and the cold steel of the trigger on my finger, this is what it's all about.

I took one last glance into the corner of the scope at his crown of bone and squeezed. Captured moments in time. I had just sent the buck 250 grains of mister Barnes X powered by 100 grains of black powder. Now for you guys and gals that shoot the black stuff, you know what happened next. I heard the hit, but couldn't see a darn thing.

When the smoke cleared, the meadow was empty. I set my gun down, straining my eyes in search of the buck's body. He was nowhere in sight, but the sound of the hit confirmed in my mind that he would not be far away.

I quickly reloaded and called Brian on the two-way radio to let him know he may want to start making his way over to me. He asked, "How good is he?"

All I said was, "Heavy, wide and tall."

It didn't take long before Brian was standing beside me. We tracked the last signs of this great buck through the woods for about 100 yards. We walked slowly, taking care not to step onto twigs that might alert the buck if he was still of this earth. I first saw the buck as he lay still in a bed of golden leaves. I pointed him out to Brian, and without a word, he quickened his step over to the deer.



Victor with his 2006 archery mule deer.

Brian grabbed the rack as he said, "You've set the bar high this year!" We marvelled at the size and mass of the deer and took a few pictures to capture the moment. With 26 points, the buck scored 238 non-typical on a 194 3/8 typical frame.

Things don't always turn out this way. Earlier in the season, on one of my sits, I was swivelling around in my tripod stand after I heard a sound behind me. It turned out to be a family of raccoons scrounging for food. Since I was out of position and not looking down my shooting lane, I just happened to focus on a very straight branch that was out of place. As my eyes tried to focus on this branch, it slowly transformed into an aluminum arrow. The arrow was imbedded in a poplar tree (see picture). I got out of the stand for a closer look, and it appeared to have been in the tree for awhile because the tree had grown around it. Hmm, missed opportunities.