

The Buffalo Hunters

The more I tell this adventure the more I am made aware of how impressive this achievement was. My son Blake, and I have not hunted together for ten years since we camped on an island in McCleod Lake and harvested a moose.

McCleod Lake Moose

Blake was fourteen then and we set out in a 12 foot aluminum boat with all the gear I normally take on a fly in hunt and camped for 5 days.

The trip to the Island was an adventure in itself. I took a compass heading as there was fog on the lake and stayed close to shore as long as possible. It started to rain and then the wind came up. The lake is 20 miles long and is located between two small mountain ranges. The wind funnels from the valley in early afternoon and dies down near dusk. The waves were breaching over the bow but as Blake wasn't complaining I didn't think much of it. I was intent on not grounding the boat and finding the island. When we did land I realized that Blake was soaked. He laughed when I inquired if he was all right and said it was the greatest trip we had ever taken. We built a fire to keep warm and then set up camp.

We had a collapsable wood stove, tarps, army cots, sleeping bags, a coleman stove and a small generator for lights and recharging batteries. A space blanket proved invaluable in the evenings for Blake and once when we were on the lake. We tried to fish during the day and then slowly troll around the bays and call moose to the water's edge in the afternoon.

One afternoon we saw a thunderhead north of the lake and under it the valley was blurred with rain. A squall was quickly developing. Lightening began to strike the land north of us and the interval of thunder to the lightening strikes became less and less. The rule of thumb is for every second of interval between the lightening strike and the boom of thunder the storm is a mile away. This storm was moving fast and the wind began blowing quickly and fiercely. I told Blake to hold on and I gunned the outboard engine to full throttle as whitecaps appeared on the lake. I aimed the small open boat into the back of the nearest bay and beached the boat unceremoniously. The aluminum boat although not big had riveted sides and a welded keel, I knew it could take the pounding and because of the circumstances I really didn't care. As soon as I beached the craft I grabbed my gun and the space blanket

and we scampered for the nearest large fir tree. We hunkered down near the trunk of the tree and covered our heads with the space blanket. I held Blake close to me with his head in my coat. Then the storm hit. Ice balls the size of softballs pelted the forest and the boat. We were protected and the storm only lasted 10 minutes. When it was over we peeked out from underneath our cover to see the shoreline thick with white snowballs.

The last adventure of our trip was the boat ride six miles back to the truck. We were loaded down with the moose and only had a few inches of freeboard. I waited until the lake was calm and feathered the throttle so that we didn't take on any water. It was a very long six miles.

Bufflers

This year's trip was a sneak away from work. Blake and I were producing and filming a training video for the waterfront and working quite hard. I had applied for a lottery draw to get a permit to hunt buffalo for 15 years without any success. The odds were often 300 to one. 300 times 15 years is 4500 to one. When I hesitated about going because of our work schedule my good hunting partner and friend Shawn Lochbaum convinced me that I had to go regardless of the cost. "You will only win the lottery once in a lifetime," he said.

The literature from the ministry of environment cautioned against taking the hunt lightly. From the variable weather to the brutish nature of charging buffalo this was a challenge even for the most experienced hunter. Usually I am an onery curmudgeon when it comes to hunting. I've hunted since I was ten, guided hunters for years, and even hunted grizzly with a bow. Put a gun in my hands and drop me off on a lake 100 miles from the nearest human and I finally feel safe. I've had run-ins with grizzlies, charging moose, mountain slides, loosing my way, but always man has been the greatest threat. I've been shot at and stabbed, but as Arnold said in the movie "If it can die, I can kill it." So with my foolish attitude but years of preparing precise lists of things to take, I spent 3 hours getting my kit together and Blake and I set off in my '78 Chevy 4x4 on a 3000 mile hunt.

We left on a unseasonably warm December Friday afternoon after a meeting with the sponsors for our film and drove all night. We picked up my buddy Bobby and his nephew Wayne and then drove all day Saturday to Pink

Mountain. We stayed overnight at the only Motor Inn. The forecast was for cold weather starting on Monday at 6 degrees below zero. This would be ideal because it would help cool the meat during our ride back to Vancouver. We had to be home for our film's screening on Friday.

When we woke up at 5 AM Sunday morning it was 18 degrees below zero. Freezing, we headed to our start off point 20 miles from the Halfway River. I had to leave the doors unlocked, the keys in the ignition and the tailgate down with the canopy up. The quads we were to use had to be started with the truck's battery. Not an auspicious beginning.

Blake is a snow boarder and had \$1,000 of snow gear including a \$300 pair of goggles. I had years of practicing for the cold and wore everything I owned. I even took Blake's tightly woven wool blanket to put over my knees for the ride. Bobby and Wayne weren't as well prepared. They froze. We had to stop twice to make fires to warm up. I was wearing two woolen full face toques. I removed my glove to adjust one of the toques as my eyes were running and the tears were freezing. When I put my hand back into my glove I couldn't feel it. My hands and toes lost their feeling a few times on the trip.

We drove the quads almost 40 miles. The scientific interpretation of a wind chill factor is for every two miles an hour of travel you reduce the temperature by one degree. Well that was made up by someone sitting in a nice warm laboratory. I suspect the equation equals itself as the temperature descends. It felt as though it was minus 50 because I know what minus 40 is like.

After hunting for some eight hours we were just about finished. We saw some gorgeous country nearing the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. We had stopped as Wayne spotted some sheep under a small bench clinging to a hillside. We glassed the sheep for awhile and then saw a herd of elk and a pure white billy goat.

I really didn't mind the thought of turning around as it was a great outing. We had traveled through some very rugged country crossing the Halfway River a dozen times. We thought the name was appropriate because it was half frozen and half running with icy water. We came close to dumping the quad only once. We lost the trail once and traveled over 18" logs regularly. Blake fell once moving a tree when it sprang back after he pushed it aside and hurt

his knee. But all in all we were ok but cold. If this was the hunt, it was 2 PM, I was satisfied. We gave it a good try and luck was against us. We had heard that no one had seen the Buffs for two weeks and so we were experiencing the same luck. None. The animals were beautiful and Blake had never seen so many species at once. They stood on a southern slope in the bright sunshine. Guy showed up on another quad and asked us how the stalk was going. We said that we were using the range finder to estimate distances. He said what the hell were we doing looking in the wrong direction. There was a huge bull buffalo behind us.

I turned and saw a huge black shape a mile or so running into the tall buck brush. I thought it was a moose. It was a hundred and fifty yards to the Halfway at this point and down a twenty foot embankment and across the semi-frozen river and up the other side and then a mile walk through the buck brush to the huge critter. I looked at Bobby and he at me. A smile crossed our frozen lips. "Did you see it?" "Yep. Think so." "Maybe not though. Huh?" "Naw. Probably gone by now." "Yeah." And so we got on the quads and road off.

We crossed three sets of fresh grizzly tracks and constantly saw wolf sign. The wolves would hunt the buffs and then the grizz would scare away the wolves and eat their fill. Hundreds of years of buffalo history repeating itself right here. The buffalo ate all the elk feed down low and that was why the elk were up high on the valley walls. The myth is that buffalo cannot balance themselves on their short stubby legs so they stay in the valley bottoms. Ain't true Bub. Them thar critters go over mountain peaks of snow and ice jus' like moosers.

We rode on for a half an hour and while Blake and I stopped for some pictures Bobby suddenly came running towards us that they had seen a big bull just ahead. Wayne and I made a stalk but the buff had made good his escape. Suddenly the cold wasn't so cold. But I knew that we would be going home in the dark I only wish that we could traverse some of the nastier streams before dark especially one spot with many grassy humps that threw you off the quad. It was so cold the the GPS wouldn't work and the chainsaw wouldn't start. Was there trouble ahead?

We drove together and rounded a turn and there on the path 250 yards ahead of us was a beautiful bull. The head was dark and full of curly hair and

the body was cream colored and smooth. An ideal specimen. But it was facing directly away from us and I would have to shoot and thread a needle for a perfect shot. Could I do it?

His Car Accident

I digress now. Something in everyone's life should be their ultimate enjoyment. But it must be personal. Not the family, not the job, something that is inside you that gives you that inner smile every time the subject comes up. Something that you can think about when times are great and it makes them greater, something to think about when times are bad and it makes the time transitory. When you're bored or have the blahs your thoughts bring some rest and peace to your soul. If you have this in yourself, you have a special private place to retreat to that you alone can enjoy better than anyone else. For me it is hunting and being outdoors. Not the kill, not the chase just the experience of being "out there again" for another time. Whether I'm successful or not doesn't matter.

Two years ago I was in a severe car accident and died three times in the hospital. I recovered but was supposed to have a cornea transplant. The eye surgeon after a year said that God had performed a miracle and my eye had healed to a point that he couldn't improve upon nature and refused to interfere. But, I would never recover completely. Typically, it had to be my shooting eye. I had sighted in my grandson Cyrus's new scope and did pretty darned good. I knew my eye was getting better and the eye surgeon simply confirmed that, but I hadn't really proven the fact under field conditions. A few weeks earlier I traveled to my friend Glen's ranch and hunted whitetail deer in a farmer's field. My girl Kim had bought me a range finder and I shot a beautiful buck at 428 yards. That's another story but it gave me the confidence to line up on this buff.

I knelt down behind Bobby's trailer and took off my glove. I felt no cold. As I brought the scope up to my eye the glare of the sun was in the scope and I couldn't see the buff let alone thread the needle. A few seconds can mean the difference between success and failure. I wanted to make this for myself, my friends, and my son. Buffalo hunting had taken on a mystique all of its own. I'm a moose hunter and I love hunting moose more than any other specie, but this was different. No longer was I a compatriot of ancient man hunting the Irish Elk or Alces Alces Gigas but I was a north american indian, a

plains indian participating in a group hunt for the tribe and having the honour of being the lead hunter sighting in on the kill. The sun became a little obscured by a cloud, my Dad and the Spirits wanted this for me. I sighted on the front shoulder and lowered my point of aim. Animals can see behind themselves because their eyes protrude away from the side of their heads. They are also naturally curious. Wild game as remote as this buff may only have seen a handful of humans in its life time. It turned its head and moved a half step around for a better look. I slowly took up the slack on the trigger.

Bamn. I heard the bullet thud into the thick skin through the broken cold silent air. "You got it!" someone screamed. "Shoot again!" "No. It's a good shot. It felt good. Heart lungs for sure. Let the lungs fill up with blood and it will drop there." "No. Shoot again before it runs." And with that Wayne made to run after it. "OK stop. Here's another one." And I moved closer and shot free hand. I pulled the shot but hit him high in the lungs again hearing the thud of contact. "Again. He's still standing." Now I realized that these guys have never shot a buff and they were into chase mode. I had better anchor it, but it still stood facing away. I aimed a little above the caboose and let another one rip. The bull hunched up and dragged itself into the buck brush with the brave hunters running after it. All I could think of was it crossing the Halfway and us spending a useless amount of time bringing it out when with a little patience the hunt could be measurably a lot easier. I hoped that I anchored it well.

After reloading I ventured to the spot of its last position and called to Bobby and Wayne. They had the buff in their sight 30 yards into in the brush. I walked in and couldn't believe that it was on its feet because I had never seen a buff in tall buck brush before and certainly was confused by its short legs. Wayne asked if he could now finish it and I said sure but if it ran we'd all be awfully mad. Wayne made a few steps towards the buff and it responded with a steam driven blood snort and a charge. I half expected this reaction and so I had hung back. You may think that you will always react to save your offspring or your friends. Nonsense. Some deep rooted mechanism of self preservation takes over when you have 2000 pounds of insane wounded fury running after you, you run for all your worth, or until you trip and fall which I did.

Fortunately, I had made my shots count and the buff had only made a false charge of some 15 feet. Wayne, the closest, had dropped Uncle Bobby's rifle

in the melee and Bobby left no word unuttered to show his displeasure. I however, complimented Wayne on his astute maneuver. I pointed out to Bobby that Wayne in fact had acted in good faith protecting the oldest of the group by willingly sacrificing himself by falling down behind me. If the buff came in our direction he would be distracted by Wayne and not venture any further towards me giving me time to either shoot the buff or shoot Wayne. Bobby didn't think my comment appropriate and continued berating his nephew. Then it was Bob's turn to show what a great hunter he was. Even before he took his first step I started laughing. And sure enough it was pandemonium under the bright blue skies of northern British Columbia as again the frolicking foursome scattered to the four corners of the compass as the legendary buffalo again charged showing all the primitive courage and tenaciousness of the specie.

The cold was impressed upon us while we skinned and cleaned the quarry. The buck brush around us and the front of our clothes were covered with the frozen steam of the carcass. The evening twilight cast surreal orange and gold on the artificial hoar frost as we loaded our meat into Bobby's trailer. The four hour ride back to our trucks was fraught with more adventure: freezing cold, getting lost, a spill or two, but tempered with a warm confident feeling of success.

When you pit yourself against Mother Nature you do so on her terms, always. Late that night I realized why years of learning from my mistakes and listening to the old man advice of keeping your eyes and ears open and your big mouth shut paid off. I couldn't turn the key in the ignition to start the truck. I had to use a propane torch to warm the cab and it froze on to my glove. Some ancient near the dying embers of a campfire had said to take this precaution in extremely cold weather, I had. Now as we drove through the night silently sitting in the cab of the truck I realize that Blake has been given someplace inside himself to retreat to. We drive non stop and the next night arrive in Vancouver. The butcher was visited on Tuesday and our film had great reviews on Friday. I think it will be summer before I warm up, but the warmth I feel having completed something very special with myself and my son warms me up and spreads tranquility throughout my soul. Never again will I freeze my kohoonas on some ridiculous life endangering adventure. But then again what are the odds of lightening striking twice in the same place? Blake can win the lottery next time. And then there's always Cyrus...