

Central Prince of Wales Island Sitka Hunt, August 14-15, 2002

It was one of those hard-to-get-to places that held my fascination for several years. The ridge nagged frequently at me since it was in my back yard. Friends had made the climb at my urging only to come home with tales of seeing big bucks but coming home empty handed. Long time residents slowly gave up stories of hunting the peak in their younger days and harvesting and seeing great bucks. The time had come; it was time I made the trek up the mountain. A relatively new logging road got me near the slope's base but the historic route up the mountain's southern flank now had been harvested via helicopter logging. Those familiar with conventional timber harvest methods that utilizing cable logging, even with down-hill yarding, understand that skid trails make relative easy going up to the back-line of a harvest unit. Helicopter yarding however, results in unorganized and most importantly unconsolidated slash randomly spread on the landscape. Place this on 80 to 100% slopes and it definitely makes crossing these areas a challenge. One person that had hunted this mountain years ago suggested an alternate route, a route that timber harvest and wind-thrown trees would soon rule out.

I waited until the weather forecast and the satellite imagery agreed on a two-day favorable weather opening. The two friends who were to go with me backed out the night before so I repacked for a light, solo hunt. I figured I would leave after work working my way as high up the mountain as daylight would allow. I gave my somewhat skeptical wife a good-bye hug and kiss and told her I'd see her the next evening or the one after that. With a raised eyebrow she wished me luck mumbling something about some crazy person. Obviously she was not referring to me. I parked the truck at the base of the helicopter unit, dawned my pack and began the climb. I had planned on trying the alternate route suggested only to find the harvest unit had been expanded and the stream buffer I was going to climb through had blown down. The unharvested corridor we thought was still there was gone. This left me little choice. I turned to face the helicopter unit. For two hours I climbed through the slash to the back line of the unit. I entered the timber and raced against the setting sun to find a place on the 80% plus slopes to pitch my tent. A somewhat level spot on the uphill side of the base of a large spruce would have to do. I pitched the tent, threw in my sleeping bag and pad and hung my pack and gear. I stretched out for the night and let my muscles relax drifting off to sleep in anticipation of the morning's hunt. I awoke at 5:00 am, discovered by a pair of ravens. With their urging I dressed and donned my pack, now much lighter without the tent and sleeping bag. Forty-five minutes later I broke out into the alpine. It had been clam in the timber on the south-facing slope during the climb up. On top the wind howled, the top of the mountain obscured by the fog that cascaded over its crest from the north like a waterfall. Everywhere else, all the surrounding peaks and ridges were clear, stirring under the first sun's rays. Even with the wind and fog, I spotted two large bucks feeding in a protected hollow nearly a mile away. I continued to climb the ridge, working my way through the alpine meadows, small ponds, and cliffs. By 7:30 am I was within ¼ mile of the bucks but they had taken refuge from the wind. I did not want to spook them from their resting spot. As the morning progressed, the wind increased in velocity and grew colder. I climbed back down below the fog, put on my rain gear to break the wind, and cowered behind a small rock ledge out of the wind. For an hour I glassed the surrounding

basins and ridges, trying to absorb all the warmth I could from the rising sun's rays. Several times I braved the chilling wind so I could see if the bucks were back out feeding. The second time I crested the ridge I came face to face with a black bear. With the wind howling from him to me, he lumbered along head down. Even from less than 20 feet it took three tries for me to get his attention. He finally snapped his head up giving me a look that combined surprise with disgust. He spun and disappeared up the ridge into the fog. I returned to my sheltered outcrop. At about 8:30 am the fog began to lift and the wind calmed. I took my binoculars and scanned where the bucks were last seen. They were back out feeding, in fact two other smaller bucks and two does had joined them. I decided to work closer. About 15 minutes later I found myself within 350 yards of the closest deer planning my stalk. I glassed the bucks again, the big, wide, three-point nearest me would do if I could get close enough. As he and two of the other bucks fed behind a stringer of alpine trees I began to cross the open alpine slope. I had only gone ten or so yards when out of the deep draw directly below me stepped a heavy-horned 4 X 5. I had never spotted this buck. He fed with a small fork horn and a doe. Needless to say my focus changed from the wide three-point across the bowl. There was only one problem, they were 200 yards below me and I had no cover for the first 150 yards. I was caught out in the open in the head of a steep alpine bowl. All three deer fed down hill and away. I took off my pack, grabbed my possibles bag, and carefully cradled my Hawken in my arms across my lap. My plan was to move when all three deer fed. Bit by bit I should be able to cut down the distance. As the trio began to feed, I inched forward. For the next hour I moved when their attention was elsewhere. They fed, scratched, bedded, groomed themselves and each another and from time-to-time stared intently at that dark form in the alpine bowl above them. One of those intense "looking through you" stares. I thought I was



busted at least a dozen times. They tried the stare-feed-got ya routine, each time satisfying their curiosity, relaxing and feeding more. Finally I slid into a fold in the earth that allowed me to duck-walk into a boulder field directly above the buck. I picked the rock I wanted to reach, checked the wind and the powder under the nipple, cocked back the hammer, placing my thumb between the cap and the hammer, and crawled forward. Upon reaching the boulder I peered around its base from behind a small stunted cedar, the buck was feeding a mere 40 yards distant. I took the extra few moments to watch this incredible animal as he scanned his surroundings. He fed closer to the base of the slope, momentarily hiding all but his antler tips. I inched to the side of the rock resting my elbow on my knee to steady the heavy-barreled rifle. I was now in the open, 30 yards above the buck. I set the rear trigger as he stepped from behind the ridge. Once more he scanned the valley, watching the bucks on the far slope. The thick smoke briefly obscured the buck from my vision. I rolled from beneath the rising smoke to find the buck lying still on the bench below. The doe and fork horn that fed with him were 40 yards to my left. As the roar of the Hawken echoed off the surrounding hills the deer across the valley stood motionless. I reloaded and moved to pay respects to the buck. As I sat by his side the doe and small buck moved across the basin to the other deer. They too had begun to slowly move away in to the timber. During my stalk the fog had completely dissipated and the wind all but subsided. The warming rays of the sun felt good, it had turned into one of those days we cherish in Southeast. I climbed back up to my pack and returned to take photos and bone out the deer. With the boning complete I packed up the meat and my gear and began the climb back up the ridge. I had all day, so



I took my time resting often and exploring the ridge top that was earlier obscured by fog. I got to my camp by about 2:00 pm. I took down the tent and stuffed the sleeping bag. I added the gear to my already heavy pack and started the climb through the slash of the helicopter unit below. I had thought that negotiating the slash on the way up was difficult. The combination of the heavy load and the unsure footing the logging slash provided required I move with extra caution. I took 2 ½ hours to work my way back to the truck. My somewhat skeptical wife was surprised when 1.) I was home before dark, and 2.) I had not stayed for two days on the mountain given our weather.

The buck was a massive 4 X 5. His rack is only 13 1/8" wide but it is 13 1/2" tall with heavy bases with nearly 4" circumferences. His rack scores a gross of 100 7/8", netting 94 3/8". The buck should place in the top 10 of the Sitka blacktail deer in the Longhunter Records.