

World Record Buck Hunt, August 1, 1998

Dennis Landwehr and I worked our way towards the three point he had just busted in its bed. We used the topography to keep as concealed as possible for we suspected that other deer were around. As we rounded one of the rock ledges, we spotted a group of five bucks feeding at about 600 yards. Several other deer were feeding on the adjacent ridges. We slowly glassed the landscape. One of the five bucks was a dandy, a large three by three with eyeguards and good mass. We were discussing how I might get close enough with my custom Hawken for a shot when in the periphery of my binoculars I saw a movement. I shifted and refocused my binoculars on the movement near one of the small trees in the alpine meadow. What I saw shook me to the bone. Rising above a rock ridge some 300 yards in front of us were a set of antlers, each side supporting four long points. In eight years of hunting the Sitka blacktail in Southeast Alaska I had never seen such a rack. The height, symmetry, and mass of the velvet-covered antlers were incredible. We were hidden from the buck's vision by the rock outcrop. Dennis' earlier shot had not alerted the buck, however, a doe just above him stared at us intently. I had to move fast. Dennis and I moved back behind the rock ledge. I took off my pack as I described how I thought I might get close enough for a shot. I backtracked into the draw we had just climbed. The wind was perfect, a light steady breeze from the buck to me. I moved forward keeping the rock outcrop between the buck and me. I tried not to think about the massive antlers I had seen through the binoculars. I tried to focus on the spot I had last seen the buck and on what I needed to do to make the shot. It took me about 15 minutes to get to within range, still out of sight of the buck and doe. I checked the powder under my nipple. The last 80 yards were the toughest. I crawled slowly to a rock outcrop only 30 yards from the bedded buck. I calmed myself once more and crept forward. I could see the doe, standing alert only 40 yards distant. As I crept forward the buck was suddenly in full view, still in his bed at 30 yards.

The hunt had started seven years before. In my work as a geologist with the US Forest Service I had flown by helicopter to this remote site in 1991, leaving an inventory crew in the alpine for a week. Upon returning, they had videos of huge blacktails crossing the alpine meadows in the rain. I again visited the area in 1993 and 1995, this time photographing large deer myself. In 1995, I tried a solo hunt to the area. I borrowed a skiff and motored the 50 miles to the beach below the alpine ridge. After securing the boat I began the climb from salt water to the ridge above. The weather front that had threatened had come early and clouds obscured the ridge by mid-afternoon. After many hours of pushing through the thick undergrowth and surviving a fall, I decided it best to return to the beach and spend the night on the skiff and return home in the morning. The weather and the terrain had beaten me. When I reached the beach at 10:00 pm I found the tide out. It took me until midnight to water the boat. I weathered the night's storm anchored in the bay and worked my way home the next morning. Weather hampered attempts to reach the ridge in 1996 and 1997.

Dennis and I had planned this year's trip well in advance, and when it looked like the weather would cooperate, we were ready. We chartered a ride to the beach and began our ascent in the morning hours of a crystal-clear day. The first three hours of the climb were not bad through the dense rainforest of Southeast Alaska but the last five were grueling. The only route to the top was through a Sitka alder choked shoot. The alder was entwined with devil's club, salmon berry, and current. For five hours we pushed against the wall of vegetation. We made camp that evening just below the alpine, gathered water, and went to bed early. On the morning of August 1, 1998, we climbed the last hour to the ridge crest and began our hunt. Within moments of reaching the alpine we spotted a nice three point in its bed. We discussed whether to take the buck or not and Dennis

decided to not let the opportunity pass. As I previously described, I now found myself 30 yards from the buck of my dreams.

I had expected the massive four point to rise and give me the shot I needed. The other deer we had spotted stood on the surrounding ridges seemingly unconcerned. The massive animal rocketed from his bed, running straight away. I rose to one knee and held on his shoulders swinging with him. I did not want to make a running shot but within 90 yards the buck would be into the next draw. Not believing that he would stop I set the rear trigger and took careful aim. At about 60 yards he suddenly turned full broadside and attempted to leap between two rock ledges. He faltered, missing his footing on the upper ledge. I swung the sights of the .54 caliber Hawken (a Track-of-the-Wolf custom rifle) deep into the buck's heavy chest and fired. At that same time he bent forward on his forelegs, preparing to leap onto the rock ledge above. The roundball smashed through his spine and the buck slumped to the base of the outcrop. He lay motionless. I slowly reloaded and Dennis appeared from where I had left him with both of our packs. Dennis quickly worked his way over towards me, announcing that he wanted a chance at the largest of the 5 bucks still watching from the meadow above. Suddenly my buck began to thrash coming to rest on his front legs. I sat down and took careful aim on this throat and fired. The buck moved no more. Dennis came to my side and stacked our packs on the rocks where we stood. He laid down and took careful aim on the massive three point who still watched with curiosity the intruders into his high country. Dennis' 30.06 roared and a third buck was added to the morning's hunt. At this point we had no concept of just how big my buck was. I did know that we had three deer on the ground which meant we would be boning and packing a lot of meat. Dennis and I gathered our gear and moved towards my buck which was closest. The closer we got the larger the animal became. Not only were his antlers unbelievable, his body was nearly twice the size of the average good buck we were used to. We paid our respects to the magnificent buck and stood by it for a long time both in admiration and awe. It was only then that I realized that I had shattered the existing record for a Sitka blacktail taken with black powder.

We photographed and cleaned all three deer and then began the boning process. We rested that evening in camp under clear starlit skies. We radioed our ride that we needed an early pickup the next morning. We then began what would be a 12-hour climb down off of the mountain. We finally hung the meat at 8:00 pm that evening in a large spruce near our camp at saltwater. As we made camp and gathered water a wolf howled in the distance. I howled back to the wolf and he came closer. Within moments he was just a few yards across a small bay in the timber. This is when he smelled the meat and for the next several hours he barked and howled at us expressing his desire for the conveniently delivered deer meat. We re-hung the meat and antlers far up in the branches of the spruce. The wolf finally ended his serenade shortly after midnight and we finally got some much-needed sleep. Our ride arrived promptly at 6:00 the next morning. The long ride home gave us plenty of time to reflect on the spectacular hunt that we had both experienced.

After the mandatory 60-day drying period the antlers scored 121 6/8" by the Boone and Crocket scoring method and 125 3/8" Safari Club International points. A version of this article has appeared in the North American Hunter Magazine, October 1999, Volume 133, Grueling Hunt Nets World Record Sitka, pp. 86-87) and in the Longhunter Muzzleloading Big Game Record book, 2000, Third Edition, pp. 68-69. This buck is officially the new world record Sitka blacktail taken with a muzzleloader, and is #1 in the Sitka Blacktail/Muzzleloader records for SCI.

I have hunted both Dall sheep and mountain goat and by far this hunt was more physically demanding. I can't wait to go back.

