

Journal

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The Twenty-four-hour Hunt

by Jim Baichtal

August first broke cool and slightly overcast. We had slept at the trailhead that night. I was hunting with Dave Schmid and Moriz Mertz, my wife's second cousin visiting from Germany. We awoke at 3:30 a.m. and fifteen minutes later we were on the trail. It took us three hours to hike the seven miles to where we started up the mountain. We saw no deer along the way but were entertained by two different black bear. We began the climb from the trail up to the alpine. We flagged our route for an easier return. I had made this trek last year so generally knew the route. I had also gotten off the route on the way back down last year and knew the perils of drifting a bit to the south. It was imperative that we find the one crack through the cliffs to the alpine above and the same crack for our return. The climb took two hours.

We called in several does on the small muskeg benches on the way up. At about 8:30 we broke into the open alpine. The day was warming and the deer would be heading for their beds if they were not already there. Within moments we began seeing deer. A half-mile away a large buck was just feeding into the timber and several smaller bucks and doe fed on the distant slope. As we still-hunted through the hummocky alpine meadows and stunted timber, I looked left and saw two bucks and a doe at sixty yards; the biggest buck was a really nice, heavy 4 x 5. I had already made up my mind that Dave would have first shot, since his opportunities to hunt are far fewer than mine. We crept up behind a ridge and pond coming out forty yards from the feeding trio. The buck ran up an alpine draw a few yards before Dave's shot put him down for good.

*A rugged trail
and hard-earned
success*

When Dave fired, a buck whose antlers were at least as wide as his ears rose from his bed, gave us one quick look, and disappeared over the ridge crest. I dropped my pack, grabbed my possibles bag, and worked over a couple of ridges and up an adjacent alpine draw to try and cut him off. As I crested the ridge, he was standing some fifty yards away. At the moment I got my sights on him he dropped over into the adjoining basin. I moved to that basin's edge as fast and quietly as possible. I crept up behind a large boulder and small stunted hemlocks to find him silhouetted, this time some 150+ yards across the basin just before he dropped off the backside of the mountain and into the timber. We would have to match wits another day. In trying to outmaneuver the buck, I had busted from their beds at least a dozen deer, several of them smaller bucks. I went back to find Dave and Moriz halfway through the boning of Dave's fine buck. We finished the boning, packed the deer up, and moved it to the shade and found a place for lunch and glassing. The deer were bedded deep in the timber from about 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. A few does and smaller bucks fed in the shadows of the cliffs or moved between bedding areas. We glassed, ate, napped, and dried our socks and feet. We discussed our afternoon hunt options as we glassed. I convinced Dave and Moriz to head back to the trailhead

and to home. I had all I needed to stay the night here on the mountain, and I really wanted to see what moved later in the evening and at dawn. Dave reluctantly agreed, leaving his cell phone with me for emergencies. At about 2:30 p.m., I accompanied them to the edge of the alpine and the head of the game trail down. We bade *adieu* and I turned to position myself to the evening's hunt. I relaxed at our previous vantage point until about 4:00 p.m. I had decided to work my way up to the top of the mountain and wait for the deer to begin to feed. As I crossed the wide alpine bowl between my vantage point and the ridge's peak, a nice forkhorn and a doe appeared out of the shadows of the creek bottom. They were some 400 yards distant. I was caught in the open; I slowly sat down and watched. It was too late, for they had me pegged. I was not interested in harvesting the buck, but I also didn't want to spook them out of the country. Nervous, the doe and buck crossed the draw and ran upslope into a narrow stringer of timber. Much to my surprise, a very nice 4 x 5 ran out the other side; this must be the first buck we saw heading for timber earlier in the morning. He immediately had me located, even though I was not moving. He must have been watching me from the security of the timber.

Options were running through my mind. I really wanted a chance at this fine buck; however, I was over 400 yards away from him and out in the open. I decided to just slowly walk towards him, not directly but quartering, and to blow softly on my deer call on occasion. I slipped off my pack, put my possibles over my shoulder, and slowly began to move across the muskeg



The author with his Sitka blacktail.

meadow. I picked a spot below him on the far side of the basin from where I thought I could make the shot - that is, if I could get there, and he cooperated. Several times he made motions to move off. Twice I stopped, holding his attention and once a sharp tone on the deer call held his curiosity; after all, whatever that was out in the meadow was two ledges below and across the creek. At an estimated 110 yards I figured I had best try for the shot. The actions of the buck suggested he was not long for his vantage point, and he had just turned full broadside. I knelt, resting my elbow on one knee, set the rear trigger, estimated the drop, held a fine bead, and fired. The buck stumbled and raced into the timber. The crash of brush that echoed across the basin told me my aim was true. I returned for my pack and climbed to find the buck not twenty yards from where I last seen him, shot through the front shoulders and lungs. My custom .54 Hawken had made meat again. I took pictures and slowly boned out the buck, planning on spending the night on the mountain. I used the cell phone to call my wife and let her know of my success and plans.


As I finished my chores the distant rumble of thunder echoed from the sur-

rounding glacially scoured valleys. Through my glasses I could see that my home was right under the thunderstorm. I again called my wife Karen, who confirmed that soon after I called the storm moved in and it was dumping rain on Thorne Bay. I let her know that it was still clear and sunny where I was and I still intended to spend the night up high. As I donned my pack to look for a campsite for the evening, clouds began to form, rotating clockwise in the valley below. The storm had shifted direction; thunderheads were forming directly above me, and it was time for me to get my backside down off the mountain. Now! I headed for our lunch spot and crested the ridge, coming face to face with a young boar black bear. He was very curious about that sweet smelling package on my back. We discussed his options, and fortunately a rock I threw into his side moved him from the trail. I worked my way down the valley leading to the trail through the cliff, only to find that my young friend was following. I took off the pack, approached the bear and again discussed his options. He eventually left.

I dropped through the timber towards the end of the trail. I was about half way to the trail's end when the skies dark-

ened and lightning began to strike within the valley. The temperatures dropped and it began to hail. The average hail stone size was 3/8" ...enough to sting. I found a wind-thrown tree to take refuge under, donned my rain gear, and put my Hawken into a wool gun cover.

The hailstorm lasted for some fifteen minutes. When it let up, I continued my descent of the mountain. The forest floor was covered with hail, and the steep slopes were now especially slick. I found my way back to the trailhead even though a bear had removed much of my flagging since the morning's climb. I reached the trailhead at 8:30 p.m. I found a spring to fill my water bottle from and changed my socks to dry my feet for the long walk out. The clouds were threatening and distant thunder echoed through the valleys. I got my headlamps ready for I knew that it would be long after dark by the time I reached the truck. I began the long walk out, passing two different bear feeding on berries adjacent to the trail. I had made it about a mile when 200 yards to my left a tree exploded in a bright light and a deafening roar as the evening's storm began in earnest. The skies opened up. The trail began flowing water. Creeks that had been but a trickle flowed bank full. The waterfall from the Cirque Lake across the canyon echoed throughout the basin, only to be drowned out by the frequent thunder. Between about 9:30 p.m. and midnight I had front-row seats to an incredible symphony that reverberated off the surrounding mountains. The rain never let up. I was soaked. My high-tech rain gear was no match for the fury of the storm. I was warm, however, straining under the load on my back. At about midnight the rain abruptly stopped. The stars and moon came out. The storm echoed off in the distance, and now the sound of the waterfall across the canyon dominated the night.

I reached the truck at 2:30 a.m. and home at about 3:15. I hung the meat and slipped into bed. As I lay there sharing bits of my adventure with my wife, the sounds of the first birds of the morning came through the window. The skies began to lighten as I drifted off to sleep. My muscles finally relaxing, I dreamed of the adventure, the storm, and the events of the past twenty-four hours. This year or next I'll return to try my hand at the wide buck that slipped over the ridge. The buck I harvested provided a wealth of some of the world's best fare. He is a 4 x 5, nearly fifteen inches wide that green scores a gross of 95 1/8" netting 89 2/8" with deductions. 

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