

In Search of Velvet Bucks

A velvet buck during mid-October from the road is rare. For me, it was a true trophy.

Fifteen years ago I was on a motorcycle in eastern Utah when my bike hit a stray horse. I was air-lifted to the University of Utah Medical Center, where I spent the next three months. Knowing I would probably never walk again, I was determined not to let that circumstance get in the way of the things I loved most—anything having to do with off-roading or hunting.

In the beginning my right hand was completely paralyzed, so I began to learn how to do everything left-handed. This included shooting rifles and driving my Jeeps and trucks with specially equipped hand controls.

I began driving professionally in the extreme sport of rock climbing and was featured on MTV's *Nitro Circus* with Travis Pastrana. I went on to compete in four Supercrawl World Championships and regularly placed in the nation's top ten.

The 2009 Utah rifle deer hunt started in October. I received a call from my good friend Kelly Edwards, who had permission to take me on some of the most pristine private property in northern Utah. This area has everything anyone would want for hunting trophy mule deer—plenty of water, lots of canyons and draws, and cover. But it also has some

great meadows that opened up for visible shots.

A Plan Takes Shape

Six days after the season opened, Edwards and I met at the property's entrance gate and made a plan. We discussed where to position my truck for the best vantage point.

Since I'm a wheelchair user, I can get a special permit to shoot from a vehicle. I used a specially made rubber mount that fits perfectly on the window. It's a pretty cool way to hunt, as you have access to the heater, goodies, water, and a dang good rest for your rifle.

Edwards and I hunted the day before and saw some great bucks but were never able to get a good, clean shot. One of the bucks was a four point that was still in the velvet. We planned to try and find that buck.

The Quest

Edwards got me into position and waited for sunup. As the

sun rose, he was glassing down a draw where we had seen the buck the day before. He spotted about 20 deer, about half of them bucks. Four were pretty decent four

point bucks but weren't having any luck finding the velvet one.

At about noon we met up with Carrie Atkinson, a local who was familiar with the property.

The day before, we had arranged for her to help push some of the draws where we had seen the velvet buck.

Around 3:00 p.m. we went back to the draw where we'd seen the buck and decided to make a push. I drove Edwards and Atkinson up the draw and dropped them off, then went back down the canyon to get my truck set up to see both sides of the draw.

As I was watching the canyon, I took out my Nikon Buckmaster rangefinder and ranged some

different points on the hillside. Not five minutes after I got there, a couple of deer walked just below the top of the ridge at about 300 yards. I used my binoculars and looked at them. One was a nice four point, but it was too far to tell if it had velvet.



Hunting on private property in northern Utah, Clay Egan bags his dream trophy: a velvet buck.

points about 500 yards out and grazing.

We watched the deer for a while, but no velvet buck appeared. We decided to drive some of the trails and see if we could spot it somewhere else. Throughout the morning we had seen quite a

After watching the deer, I got excited and decided to take the shot. It stopped and gave me a perfect broadside target. The shot rang through the canyon. The animal was down.

I got my binoculars and tried to see the buck, but it was still out of view. Just then my cell phone vibrated. It was Atkinson, who asked if I had taken the shot. I said yes, that I'd hit a nice buck.

Atkinson and Edwards hiked over the hill, and I guided them to the buck. As they got down to it, Edwards got on the phone and said the animal was a three by two.

Say It Isn't So!

My heart sank. I thought, *How could it be?* I knew it had to be bigger.

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "It looked so much bigger!"

I sat in the truck in disbelief, stewing over my poor judgment and rethinking the scene in my mind. I couldn't understand it.

After about 45 minutes waiting for Atkinson and Edwards to retrieve the buck, I finally got a glimpse of it. It was larger than they had told me. It was a perfect four point with a small kicker off the G3 on the right side, and it was all in velvet. Edwards and Atkinson burst out laughing and gave me a high-five.

"I was so mad for shooting such a small buck," I said. "I can't believe you lied to me and let me sit here for an hour feeling sick about it."

This was the hunt of a lifetime. Many thanks to Paul Reeb and his family for allowing me to hunt on their property. Also, I appreciate Edwards and Atkinson for all their help. I couldn't have done it without them.

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A-Hunting We Will Go!

After spinal-cord injury (SCI), people with disabilities face numerous issues when participating in deer hunts. Following are a few techniques that can make these outings more enjoyable and provide greater independence.

Before beginning, determine how to do everything in the dark. This will save time and frustration, and you will be stealthy when you reach your deer stand. Organize your gear inside fanny packs and small bags; memorize where every item is stored. Place these bags within one large waterproof carry bag. Be certain you can access items with minimal difficulty. All stow bags should have loops or belts so you can hook and retrieve them. Hook-and-loop closures work best, and small external pockets are useful. Be sure the gear you need first is on top in the large carry bag; don't bury your clip and ammo.

Wear a flashlight around your neck and know where you can find another. Bowel

and bladder issues may arise, so keep an extra backpack of supplies and a change of clothes handy and separate. Pack plenty of hand wipes in various places. A large-mouthed plastic jug makes a good urinal—it doesn't crush and can be quietly resealed to avoid contaminating the ambush site.

Smart Choices

Dress in more layers than you think you will need. Nothing is worse than constantly focusing on pain and spasticity. Take extra gloves and be sure you can stuff them into jacket pockets, or find another way to assure hand warmth. Once, I barely made it out of the woods due to cold hands. Footwear should be light enough to function and warm enough not to freeze. Take time deciding what works best for you.

Choose clothes you can put on/remove quietly and independently. Analyze if your upper-body layers ride up and create a draft while you sit. Coveralls are hard for me to manage, but they address this concern.

Think through what you're planning to eat before and during the hunt. The right choices can make the difference between a great time and a hassle. Avoid chocolate or quick-energy products with caffeine, as they are bowel stimulants. Have plenty of bottled water to drink and for unforeseen cleanup.

Practice Makes Perfect

Practice your plans and be sure you are safe and confident before heading out. Based on individual rifle swing, determine your personal shooting zone ahead of time. Define safe mobility needs and sustainable postures. I started hunting on a garden tractor adapted with a tall boat seat and floor-board and progressed to a four-wheeler with shocks. I arrive in the dark at an ambush site and transfer off my ATV into a camo lawn chair, face the machine, and prepare to use it as a gun rest. Using a small head lamp, I quietly spread camo nets over the ATV and double check they won't flap in a wind. Set up all gear where you can reach it without causing detected movement.

Pop-up blinds are ideal in certain settings, but using them decreases independence.

Lastly, before sunup, I load and place my thumpin' stick securely across the ATV seat and sit still. Making arrangements for help is wise. Can you safely transfer to and from a four-wheeler, maintain balance on a rutted surface, and operate the controls without issue? If not, consider other adaptations.

Most people will need help retrieving a downed deer, so plan ahead. Age causes me to need more assistance, but through trial and error I have found ways to do it alone. I have discov-

ered a few adaptations that might help. Pack a half dozen six-foot-long cotton ropes with pretied loops on both ends, and load extra bungee cords on the ATV rack; in a pickup truck you can carry a light plastic pull sled. These three items always seem to help in strange circumstances.

Lessons for Success

Here's a typical retrieve: Back the ATV up to the animal. Lace a rope around its back legs, and pull the rope tight. Maintain tightness and slip a second rope through the loop at the other end. Place

both loop ends of this second rope over a tow ball mounted on the ATV. Slowly drive away and let the rope extend and squeeze firmly around the animal's legs until it secures a grip. Carefully drag the animal to the truck.

My pickup bed has an electric lift installed for my scooter. I tie one of the deer's back legs to the lift, hit the up button, and use ropes and bungees to open and stabilize the carcass for field cleaning at chest level. Without the lift it is much more difficult, but you can tie ropes and bungees to trees

and the ATV to create a similar position.

If you have hand paralysis and poor balance, patience and time are required. However, you can use a piano-wire pelvis saw and a sharp short-bladed knife to field clean a deer in a couple of hours.

Turn the gutted carcass around in the truck bed and tie the head facing toward the front of the truck. Peel the hide back from the top of the neck far enough to wrap and tie a golf ball inside the loosened skin. Hook the tie rope to the ATV behind the truck and pull away slowly on the

ATV to grip the skin around the golf ball. Once secure, ease away and automatically and completely skin the animal.

Take your field-cleaned game to the processing plant and turn it into yummy steaks and burgers. Want to do it yourself? If I work at it a little daily, it takes almost a week to quarter and debone one—and that's another story.

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