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## So That's Hunting

by *Teresa Cole*, e-newsletter editor

I leaned into my rifle, my cheek pressed against the stock, my finger resting above the trigger, every molecule in my body quaking like an aspen leaf in the stiff Wyoming wind.

“Take a breath, let half of it out and squeeze the trigger,” I thought in my head, remembering my hunter ed instruction and the hours of practice at the range leading up to this moment.

But that was then, on flat ground with paper targets. This was now, with sage scratching my knees and a living creature in my sights.

Through the scope, I watched the antelope take a few more short steps, then stop and turn broadside toward me.

“Shoot! Shoot,” voices urged. Not in my head this time, but voices behind and to my right. It was Michael, my trusty hunting guru on this trip, and a few men in a pickup that had stopped to chat as I set up away from the road. Just what I needed my first time out – an all male review.

I steadied my hands, put the crosshairs in place and squeezed.

And just like that, I was a hunter. The antelope took a few faltering jumps and fell. One shot, 230 yards, my muzzle still warm.

Holy cow.

“How do you feel?” Wendy asked, eyeing me. It was a question I was to be asked time and again by fellow hunters, family and friends– How did I feel? What was it like?

How could I answer that? Elated? Sad? Excited? How exactly do you describe the experience of hunting big game? I was at a total loss for words for the strange mix of emotion I felt coursing through me – a combination of satisfaction, humility and even some sadness, with a little bit of adrenaline thrown in for good measure.

As we walked down the hill, it only got more difficult to comprehend. My prey was dead, life having drained from its eyes just moments ago. My shot was a little forward, hitting through the meat of the shoulder instead of just behind it, but the job was done. A small trickle of blood showed where the bullet had entered.

My god. I did that.

Until that moment, that experience of my first hunt, I had no idea what hunting was really all about. Oh, I thought I did. I figured folks liked it for the excitement, the challenge and the basic fun of being outdoors. True, its all those things, but hunting is also so much more.

I’ve heard hunters described as blood-thirsty, trigger-happy, or killers. As I prepared for this first hunt, I wondered if I could pull the trigger. After all, I cried each and every summer when I’d have sell my 4-H and FFA animals, even the summer I was twenty. I rescue birds trapped in Christmas lights and kittens trapped in window wells. Could I really knowingly, intentionally kill another living creature?

Obviously the answer is yes. And those same anti-hunting voices will call me names and blaspheme me to the heavens. True, I did kill. But the moment when you pull the trigger is just a tiny part of the whole hunting experience, one moment in a string of memories that makes the whole experience special.

Hunting is learning something new, from calibers and manufactures to bi-pods and cammo patterns.

It’s the tiny bit of vindication felt when Outdoor Guy picks up the Cabela’s flyer and discusses what would be a good woman’s gun without finally dumbing-down the conversation so said woman can keep up.

It’s a sick feeling in your stomach when you sign the credit card receipt for a brand-new Remington 700 SPS 7mm08 in Mossy Oak break-up when

you really needed new carpet in the living room.

Hunting is the smell of gunpowder, a good three-shot grouping and adjusting for wind and distance at the range.

It's a spur of the moment scouting trip with a good friend, filled with good conversation and sightings of antelope, deer and sage grouse that perk your senses and make you happy for reasons you still can't explain.

Hunting is the anticipation of the season opener, not sleeping the night before you have to get up at 3:30 am, or if sleep comes, dreaming weird dreams of four-horned antelope, getting to the field without your gun or ammo, or *Wyoming Wildlife* magazine editors in trees calling elk in the city park.

It's knowing almost everyone else in the world is still asleep while you have the privilege of witnessing the glorious reds and pinks and yellows of the sunrise from a fourth-generation working Wyoming cattle ranch.

It's ham and pastrami sandwiches and Doritos on the tailgate plotting strategy after a morning of getting skunked.

It's confidence in yourself and your firearm when the heavens smile upon you and the conditions finally come together and you draw down in the perfect moment.

It's a text message with just three words – “Got my antelope,” and feeling a tremendous sense of pride, accomplishment and camaraderie as you press the send button.

And hunting is all the work that comes after the shot. Its learning to skin and butcher your quarry, following the natural lines of bone and muscle to remove tenderloins and hams and that will fill the freezer and your belly for months.

Hunting isn't just the moment you pull the trigger. The whole hunting experience is the awakening of a part of your soul– the part that is wild and primal and guttural and instinctual – a part you did not know existed, the part that connects you to the creatures and the earth and the sky and the very essence of our being.

So that's hunting.

Now I get it.

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