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ANALYSIS OF THE MULE DEER DECLINE

Not Your Typical Day at The Office

A network deadline and a bonsai scouting trip lead to a giant nontypical buck

July 18th found me stressed to the max and sitting at the computer. I was in full stride trying to complete the seventh episode of our “Live2Hunt” series to send off to the network. Imagine standing flat-footed, staring down at a football, cradled in your arms, and hearing the thunder of Julius Peppers coming at you. The deadline I was faced with wasn’t going to break any bones, but you get my drift.

The door of my office opened, and in walked my fiancé, Kelsy Claypool. “You should take a break, Hun,” she said. “Why don’t we go scouting or something?”

Scouting? Who goes scouting in mid July? I had two options: stare at my screen and wait patiently for my creativity to

return or go look for big bucks with the prettiest girl in the world. I didn’t even bother to grab my binos, as I was in such a hurry to escape the dungeon.

“Code, stop the truck, there’s one right there!” Kelsy said. I glanced in the direction Kelsy was looking. An ocean of bright yellow canola flowers sparkled in the evening light and what I thought to be a whitetail’s back protruding above the petals. Expecting it to be nothing special, I kept on rolling, until Kelsy insisted I stop. Awaiting the diagnosis, I heckled her that we better not be stopping for a doe. As we looked for headgear, if any at all, nothing could have prepared us for what was about to appear!

A set of velvet-covered antlers emerged from the crop...a set of antlers unlike I had ever seen before in my life. With my naked eye I couldn’t make out detail, but knew this was a “once-in-a-lifetime” buck!

Scrambling to locate my Vortex Razor spotting scope, I wrestled with disbelief. As I cranked the focus ring, it reality hit. An animal with a set of antlers that only a healthy imagination could create; a typical frame that had 14-inch forks all around, stickers everywhere and drop-tines that extended out of sight into the crop.

The last two hours of daylight found Kelsy and me taking turns staring through the scope, admiring every angle this giant buck offered, counting points, measuring tines and envisioning a chance at such a sought-after prize.

Finding an animal as rare as this in



mid-July taught me the reason why mule deer fanatics should never start scouting so early. If I thought I was having trouble getting my editing done before, now with 96 percent of my brain consumed with club drop-tines, and waves of velvet, it was nearly impossible to accomplish anything. My brain was mush. I was obsessed, consumed and anxious for a hunting season still nearly two months out.

Knowing how lucky I was, I decided to live with this buck for the rest of the summer until bow season opened. Every morning at 4:15 a.m., I headed out to find him, watched him go through his morning rituals, and bed down. Two hours before sunset, I would be right back on a vantage, waiting for him to go on with his evening routine.

Over the 42 days of scouting before the season, I saw this magnificent buck approximately 35 of those days. Knowing how rare this was, I wanted to take every one of my hunting buddies there to witness him in all his glory, but knew that drawing attention would do me no

good. So, for the most part, I kept it to myself, under the radar, doing my best to follow the “loose lips sink ships” motto. But, of course, a secret this good had to be told to someone. I took a select few buddies that I could trust, to experience the unparalleled sight.

On one particular night while we

now nicknamed “Tiny.” Driving down a back trail, I jumped a buck right beside the truck. It was the same young buck that was hanging with Tiny the night before, but he wasn’t a baby at all! He was a big-bodied mature buck with a 170 frame and cheaters. Absorbing the illusion from the night before, my mind began to race, trying to fathom how big Tiny really was.

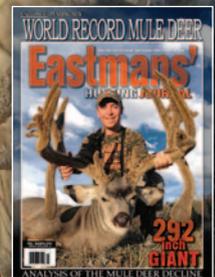
I had stared for hours upon hours through my scope over the summer. During the days that I found him, I

wrote numbers down on paper and added them. No matter how critical I was on the buck, I would never get less than 262 inches of antler. I told myself that it just couldn’t be. The days that I couldn’t find him, I would enjoy the sunrises, fresh morning air and the same 10 songs that play over

“Now with 96 percent of my brain consumed with club drop-tines, and waves of velvet, it was nearly impossible to accomplish anything.”

were watching him a mile away, he had a sidekick with him...a deer that looked to be a baby two-year-old that was destined for greatness. He too, had a drop-tine and a flyer out one side.

The next morning I was having trouble finding the big fella that I had



COVER STORY

and over on the local radio station.

Going to bed on the eve of the 2011 Saskatchewan archery opener, I wasn't in the confident, prepared frame of mind I had planned to be in. My goal upon reaching the big day was to have Tiny's travels cased. But the truth was that I had only seen him once in the last five days, leaving me frazzled. Deep down, I knew he was right under my nose, but he was starting to become more nocturnal. I would have six days to succeed before having to depart for the Yukon for an archery moose hunt. Six days to shoot the largest deer I'd ever seen.

2:00 a.m., September 1st: The steady hum of what resembled a Peterbuilt idling in the distance was our 22-year-old corpse of a house cat, Ernie, purring on my chest. Even with a lazy eye and three paws sliding through heaven's gate, she had the ability to be content and sound asleep. Kelsy, in the fetal position, dreaming of barrel horses, was also sound asleep. Surrounded by peacefulness, I still

couldn't relax. My body was tired, but my mind was in the front row of an AC/DC concert, headbanging to "Thunderstruck."

As the sky in the east slowly developed color, I went over the game plan with some buddies of mine who had offered to come help glass, hoping to up our odds of success on day one. Sitting with me, I had Kelsy, and two of my best friends, Shane Hunter and Chaddy Laing.

Twenty minutes after sunrise Chaddy indecisively whispered, "Code, I think I can see antlers." I turned my spotting scope in the direction he was focused. "Look just above the patch of weeds, along the left edge of the water," he added. I could see velvet tips moving through the weeds. The buck was walking steadily toward a slough where I had seen different bucks drink over the summer...IT WAS HIM! A rush of adrenaline paralyzed my body! I had spotted this buck a million times in my spotting scope, but never once when hunting season was open, and the option to pursue him was present.

He waded far out into the water, almost belly deep, took on a charge of water, and waded back toward shore. He slowly browsed his way out into the center of a

big a clover flat, fading in and out of sight. In places the clover reached over six-feet tall, meaning this foliage could swallow him up and cheat us out of a chance on day one.

We watched the tips of his antlers meander through the clover jungle. All we needed to do was spot him bed down. We lost him for a few seconds, which turned into minutes. Did he lay down? Was he still traveling? Even though it was just the opening day of the season, my mental state was fragile, and the pressure was devouring me whole.

I conferred with my good friend, Bill Longman, as to the best and safest approach, and the bottom line was, there wasn't one. We were going to have to sneak into his bubble, in a blinding, loud jungle or, just wait for another day and a better opportunity. Waiting would be the safest, but after not seeing him in five days, and only having five more to go, there was no question, it was time to cinch up.

Closing to within 100 yards, Kelsy and Shane hung back to capture a second camera angle, as Chaddy and I moved in closer to try and create some type of opening in the maze of clover. At 80 yards, the buck stood up for a brief moment, giving us the chance to hone in on his



What Cody saw before the shot.



With huge drop-tines, incredible mass, great tine length and cheaters, it's easy to see how this buck racked up the inches so quick.

exact location.

Every time the wind would gust, we would take advantage of the muffling grass and move a few steps closer. Within 25 yards, a 3x3 stood up right where we were expecting the big guy to appear. Chaddy turned the camera on and hit the record button. All we could see of the smaller buck were his antlers, making it evident that a chance for a shot was slim to none. The buck slowly made his way to our left, walking through one small opening at 22 yards where his vitals were wide open for a few seconds, maybe. When the big guy stood up, I would have to pray that he moved to the left exposing himself in the same window.

Moments passed and out of nowhere, the most spectacular sight on earth emerged from the weeds. A massive configuration of antlers; G-2s that looked like fence posts and drop-tines like baseball bats with softballs on the ends! He began slowly moving to my left, straight at the only window I had. On my feet, I crouched with tension on my bowstring...I was ready! Seven yards from the window...five...now three yards! Not wanting to miss my chance, I raised a bit higher, ready to draw. His antlers froze, and then turned straight in my direction! His neck extended four inches like a giraffe. I was busted!

I could see the sunlight glistening off his eye through the tangle. We stared each other down for what seemed like hours, both waiting for the other to make a move. He snorted and dropped the hammer all in one fluent motion, ran out to 60 yards. He stopped and gave me another look. I feel comfortable at that distance, but didn't want shoot with him locked on me; it was way too risky.

So, Chaddy and I cowered out of sight. I gazed down at my untied shoelace, and listened to him blow. I was now living one of my worst nightmares! I made myself a promise in the beginning that I would take no risks and wait for the perfect situation to capitalize. I knew that the weeds were too high, and the odds were low, and went for it anyway. He blew again. We had just educated a seven-year-old buck and knocked him out of his laid-back summer routine and back to the reality of fall survival.

Chad shoved the camera in my face recording every frame of my pain. When I trained him as a cameraman, I gave him orders to capture emotion, because that's what makes a story real. At this moment, I regretted telling him that, just as much as the mistake I made on the deer. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to wake up in my bed and realize that it had all been a bad dream. That was the most important stalk of my life, and I blew it.

Not knowing how bad we really spooked him or how far he ran out of

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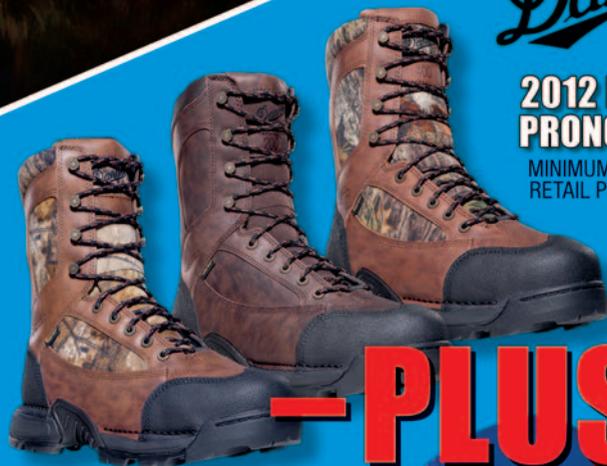


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Big mule deer are no stranger to Cody.



Cody has certainly paid his dues following Jim Shockey all around the world. Here he is in Iran in 2004.



Cody's fiancé, Kelsy, also has giant buck to her name.

the country, I had no idea where to start looking the next day. Sunrise, there was no sign of him. By lunchtime, hiking and glassing turned up nothing more than the odd doe and fawn. At sunset, I finally surrendered to the fact that it wasn't going to happen on day two.

I stayed up late that night calculating the most probable odds of where we would find him. I thought back to all my different hunting experiences in the same country and tried to remember the very best vantages where a person could expect to locate him from.

First light, nothing. Sunrise, nada. The sun slowly made its way higher in the sky. I glassed more intently with every minute. The cool wind froze tear trails to my cheeks.

I met up with my brother, Brandon, and he told me he found the buck. I was hesitant to believe him, but he said, "Well unless there's another buck around here that has matching 15-inch drop-tines and typical frame bigger than the average elk, yes, it's him." Within a few minutes, the buck was in my sight. He only traveled a short distance before bedding down in a line of silver willow half a mile away. It was show time!

Kelsy, Shane and I made it to a poplar bluff only 100 yards from the buck with no problem at all, but from there we couldn't see him. The country was flat and moving in blind was risky, quite similar to our approach on day one. So, we decided to camp out in the bluff and wait for a better visual before moving in.

Hours passed with no change. Far too anxious to sit still, I decided to climb a tree for a better view of the brush where he bedded. I made it 16 feet up and instantly spotted antlers. I did my best to find some different landmarks for when we moved in, but there was nothing. The buck was surrounded by thick brush that all looked the same. The only way we could make this work was if I convinced Kelsy to climb the tree so she could direct us in closer for a shot.

Five minutes later, Shane and I were half way to him, taking signals from Kelsy high in her perch. We made it to a cow path that looked to be a highway-straight in his direction. Moments later, Shane spotted a velvet tine directly in line with our trail. All we needed was 20 more yards. Deathly afraid of spooking him, we moved one inch at a time. I could see a heavy clump of brush, a stone's throw in front of us and decided we would wait for him to stand from there.

I carefully pulled myself in behind the brush. I was now out of the danger zone, and Shane only had a few more feet to go...then it happened. His antlers rocked forward, and he rose to his feet! Shane was caught mid-stride in the center of the cow path! The buck snapped his head in

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CLOTHING - DVD'S - DECALS



These scouting photos show just how big Cody's buck was in comparison to the other buck.



informed me that if I wanted him to be the new official P&Y world record, I would have to strip the velvet. And, if I wanted to leave him in velvet, P&Y would recognize him for only one year in the book for velvet-antlered animals, and then vanish from the record book completely. I asked the measurers again if I stripped the velvet, would this buck for sure be the new world record? All three answered, "Absolutely!"

For a split-second I wavered, but that was it. I didn't shoot this magnificent animal to deface him and change him into something he wasn't when I shot him. When I drew my bow back and took careful aim at the king, his antlers were covered in full velvet, and they always will be.

This animal deserves respect and recognition which he's receiving here in Eastman's Hunting Journal, a publication for serious hunters, who I know will see my side and understand my feelings. The buck can also be remembered as the "Live2Hunt" buck and will gain further acclaim when this hunt airs during our inaugural season on Outdoor Channel beginning July 2012. And that's good enough for me.



our direction and locked on Shane and the video camera. Defeat sickened me. All hope seemed lost. The buck stared right through Shane for an eternity, then turned away with a relaxed posture and started browsing, giving me the shot I had desperately been waiting for!

There was one catch; I hadn't even taken an arrow out of my quiver yet! As slowly and carefully as I possibly could, I knocked an arrow, clicked my release to my string and froze. I was so afraid of spooking him again that I could barely even look in his direction. Shane finally tapped my boot and got my attention, "He's wide open, looking straight away, what are you waiting for?!"

It was time to face the most intense moment in my hunting career. I figured him 22 yards quartering away. I drew my bow and rose to my feet, took a few steps to the left to get a better angle, and did my best to steady the pin. I held my breath, and squeezed. My bowstring snapped forward and the buck exploded out of the brush, kicked straight over his head, and took off like a rocket, only making it 80 yards before piling up!

I looked back at Shane in disbelief, "Did you get that?!"

"I got it all, Code, every second," he replied.

With the reality of what we just accomplished, I collapsed to my knees, trying to absorb what it all meant to me, my eyes filled with tears. The next five minutes is a blur. All I really remember is tackling Shane off his feet, and helping Kelsy out of the tree and the three of us hugging and celebrating like we had won the World Series!

Walking up to him, the whole experience was bittersweet. It's my love and passion toward animals that drives me to hunt. Carefully lifting his velvet covered antlers out of the brush, I was completely overwhelmed. He was more beautiful than I ever imagined. Admiring every detail, I thought back to the first day we spotted him and the joy that he brought me every time I saw him in the distance. Although I wouldn't have traded the outcome for anything, knowing he would never be standing proud in my spotting scope again was humbling.

While we were taking photos, we decided to put a rough score on him.

My good friend, Bentley Coben, did the measuring and Shane wrote down the numbers. Once Bentley was done, Shane started adding. A few moments passed, and Shane piped up to announce the score of 294-5/8. Everyone laughed at Shane and started teasing him about being a flunky in math class. Bentley grabbed the paper and took it to the truck to add it up himself. Turns out, Shane was right on the money, and this buck had the potential of being the new Pope and Young Club world record nontypical mule deer.

After the 60-day drying period, we had the buck officially scored by a three-man panel of P&Y measurers. He officially grosses 292-5/8, and nets 288-0/8 (13 1/8" bigger than the existing P&Y world record). Each measurer present that night agreed that if the buck were stripped of its velvet, there was a possibility he would score more, because of two points he wasn't getting credit for due to some velvet rule. If the velvet was stripped, both points could be measured and added on to the score. The measurers



About the author: Cody was born and raised on a farm in central Saskatchewan where riding horses and working cattle was the way of life. At an early age, Cody developed a love for hunting and the outdoors and it has only grown with time. With the dream of producing his own show, Cody has started a new television show called "Live 2 Hunt", which will debut in 2012.

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