

LUCKY CHARM



I don't think I'm much different than most hunters, unless perhaps I'm a little more unlucky. But for every several years that something goes wrong (forgot my sleeping bag one trip, forgot my license another), once in awhile everything goes right. This was one of those years.

I started like most hunters, going out with Dad, absorbing all the sights and sounds of the forest and uninhabited lands. I loved nature, couldn't get enough Natural History. But more than that, something about hunting captivated me.

Early on, my hunting was mostly about the meat. I read everything I could find in magazines and books, especially Jack O'Connor. I longed for a trophy. But in the end I had to bring home the bacon. This was the reality of my early hunting- meat, not trophies.

As the years passed by, I kept looking for, and hoping for, a real trophy; but it never happened. Now a trophy is what you make it. I tanned the hides and saved the horns and antlers, and savored the meat, but I never collected anything approaching the level specified by the Boone and Crockett Club.

When I realized I no longer needed the meat for the larder, though I still treasure and enjoy it, I began thinking about how many hunts I had remaining and if I would ever get that elusive record-book head.

by John Vanko

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John will receive a package from Trophy Hunter Magazine for his story. See page 40 for more information.

I took a toe-dip into the swimming pool of trophy hunts. My first attempt didn't work. My second attempt didn't work. But my third attempt, completely organized by myself, resulted in success. It wasn't guided, but I had help judging the taxidermy-worthiness of the bucks I encountered, and it paid off. Since then I've had more success. This hunt went like clockwork. I knew the drill. I knew what to expect. I knew what I had to do to make it successful. I had been hunting with the Grimmetts of Pronghorn Guide Service on and off for ten years, and had done well.

Now I had drawn a coveted tag in central Wyoming. Tony agreed to help me out. He had been scouting all over central



“Exceptional mass, long prongs, good main beams, extreme symmetry, all combine to make this a truly wonderful trophy - 88 2/8 B&C, 88 6/8 SCI. My Savage 7mm Rem Mag with 168-gr Berger VLDs at 3025 fps was just the medicine for this remarkable trophy.”

Wyoming looking for the best bucks. He's an SCI Master Measurer and a fine judge of antelope horns.

I arrived in Rawlins in the afternoon. He had finished up with a client early, so he had some extra time to help me. His son, Eli, finished with his client at lunchtime. He wanted to come along to see a new area, and what it might hold.

You might not realize what a boon this was. Not one pair of expert eyes judging bucks for me, but two! I wish I could tell you that I was an expert judge of antelope horns myself, but I can't. I can tell the difference between a 90-inch head and a 70-inch head when they stand side-by-side. But the difference between an 80-incher and an 82-incher, forget it.

So it was with great expectations that we set out in the afternoon to see what we could find. Tony had scouted this area and found at least five interesting bucks. One stood above the rest.

We looked and looked, but could not find the special buck. We found three of the other lesser, but still shootable, bucks, but not the one Tony wanted. The sun was very low now. We searched with binoculars and spotting scopes out three sides of the vehicle. The shadows of the distant mountains stole all our sunlight. We were in muted darkness. I saw a speck of white on a far-distant hillside. With binoculars I couldn't tell much. I told Tony to take a look with the spotting scope before the light got too dim. He said, "That's him!"

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It was growing darker by the minute- not enough time to stalk him in the remaining light. But we marked his position and vowed to return before first light in the morning.

This was a banner year for Pronghorn Guide Service and there was more to come. Their clients had all done well, some of them very well, and the season was not over. At least one of their Wyoming heads would break the magical 90-inch mark (and become the new Wyoming State Record). Every other head would also make the book.

Lest you think antelope are easy, let me recount my own experience of many years of antelope hunting. It's best summed up by saying I have the largest collection of 60- and 70-inch pronghorns in North America. All those years of reading Jack O'Connor didn't get me my 82-inch trophy. I needed professional help.

After you procure professional help you may think, "Okay, now those antelope are easy." Well I'm here to tell you, "It still ain't true." This is hunting. Things go wrong- you botch the shot, or a big buck disappears forever. But without question a good guide and outfitter will greatly improve your chances- that, and persistence.

Next morning we set out before light. We were searching in my area before the sun broke over the mountains- and we couldn't find this special buck Tony had chosen for me. If we

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"After years of shooting smaller bucks my quest for a magnificent trophy is fulfilled."

could find him again it would be up to me to bring him to bag. Tony would do his part, but I still had to do mine.

We searched all over the area and couldn't find him. But Tony doesn't ever give up. Sometime later, out of the corner of his eye he noticed something. He threw the scope on it just as it ran over a ridge and said, "That's him!" The buck disappeared and was nowhere to be seen.

We were in a hilly region. We looked and looked- no buck. Tony told Eli to take the spotting scope and walk to the second ridge and see if he was in the next little valley. Eli set out. Halfway there, Tony said to me, "You want to join him?" I replied, "I think I should."

I unzipped my rifle from its soft case. I stepped out of the vehicle and loaded rounds. Then I set out to catch up to Eli. Upon reaching the rim Eli pointed to the buck. He had come up out of the valley and was watching the vehicle, not us. I sat down for a shot, but there was too much grass in the way. By the time I adjusted, the buck ran back down into the valley. He still hadn't seen us.

I ran to the very rim to set up for a shot. He kept running. But to my surprise, instead of running away down the valley, he turned back up the ridge to get one more look at Tony in the truck. This was his mistake- once in awhile everything goes right. I set up for the shot. He moved again. I moved too,



GEAR LIST

- **RIFLE:** Savage 110L custom stocked in AAA Claro Walnut by Mark Moon of Grand Junction, Colorado
- **SCOPE:** Leupold 3x-9x VariX-II
- **BULLETS:** 168 gr. Berger VLD custom loaded in 7mm Remington Magnum by Gunwerks LLC, 3025 fps
- **BINOCULARS:** Nikon Monarch 12x56
- **BIPOD:** VersaPod

setting up once more. He looked like he was going to break through a little saddle and disappear forever. I took a hurried shot, somewhere between 150 and 200 yards.

I made a mistake, one that I will never make again. Because it had been raining at my base of operations two days before, I had not checked the sights of my rifle. This rifle had been well cleaned and properly treated since its last use so I had every expectation that the sights needed no adjustment. But what I had not done was to fire a fouling round through the barrel and blow out the coating of oil from its last cleaning.

Invariably, the first shot from a rifle, cleaned and oiled, will be a flyer that doesn't group with subsequent shots. So it was, I believe, with this shot. I mortally wounded the buck but it was not placed properly. I aimed true, and I didn't jerk the trigger, but the bullet didn't go where I pointed. He needed a second shot.

I ran down the ridge. I set down my rifle. I took off my blaze orange. I was in awe. This buck was massive beyond my expectations. Like most hunters, I notice the length of antelope horns above all else. What he lacked in length he made up in mass, double. Quick field scoring on just one side put him in the upper 80's. This trophy was more important to me for what he was than what he scored. I was savoring the moment. Accurate scoring would have to wait for later.

After the picture taking and congratulations Tony offered to cape my trophy, mount it, and field butcher too. He's an expert at more than just judging horns.

We were back at the motel a little after noon. Tony had business to attend to. Eli had a new client to meet. I had miles to go, and meat to process.

After 60 days of drying, my trophy scored 88 2/8 B&C, 88 6/8 SCI. I was in Wyoming barely 24 hours- sometimes everything does go right!

And just what was my lucky charm? It wasn't something like a smooth round pebble of Wyoming jade, or a metal cross. It was two expert guides without whom I never would have bagged this magnificent trophy. 