



Return to the Double C

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I first went to the Double C Ranch in January 2006 for three hunts purchased on eBay for the family. Three days on the ranch with warm beds, three meals a day, guide service and processing for the animals was too good a package for me to pass up. This was a new experience for me, as all of my prior hunting had been confined to backpacking for elk and mule deer in the Colorado/Wyoming Rockies, slogging through the deep snow of Pennsylvania and Michigan during whitetail season and chasing cottontails and pheasants in the cornfields and fence rows of Ohio.

But, at almost 68, it was time to slow down and not stress out my body as much as I did in my younger days. No, I'm not lazy, just realistic. It takes longer to get going in the morning, I get colder quicker in the field, I can't walk as far or climb as high as before, and it takes a whole lot longer to recover. So, it was either give up hunting, or try something different. I chose the latter.

I am the first to admit that hunting some of the animals on the private game ranches in Texas are not as challenging as in the "wild." Compared to their counterparts in the Colorado Rockies, Texas elk are pretty dumb. But, if you want a real "wall-hanger," you have to be work at it and be patient. Garden-variety whitetails are there for the taking if you like venison. If you want a trophy-class whitetail, aoudad or axis deer, you have to work for them, and even then may not be successful.

There are two kinds of land in Texas: land that has pigs on it and land that is going to have pigs on it. They are about to overrun the state. However, if you are after a boar in the 250 to 350 pound range, you have to hunt, and hunt hard. There are hundreds of medium and small pigs all over Texas, but the big ones are smart and you need to be persistent and patient.

With all that said, there are more animals on the Double C Ranch than I have ever seen in my life. I filled the memory card of my camera three days in a row and had to download to the computer each night. Blackbuck antelope, Mouflon sheep, Texas dalls, whitetails, fallow deer, red stags just to mention a few.

Perhaps the most difficult animal to hunt in Texas and New Mexico is the Aoudad or Barbary sheep. That wasn't always the case. When they were first introduced into New Mexico over forty years ago, they weren't too difficult to get, *if* you drew for a license. But, now, with increased hunting pressure, they have become very wily.

Aoudads are by nature, very spooky critters, quietly fading into the deep brush at the sound of a dove flushing, even on the ranches in Texas. Only a small percentage of hunters ever see an Aoudad, let alone get a shot. I wanted an Aoudad, my daughter decided to go for an Axis deer, the second toughest animal in Texas, and my wife wanted a record class Blackbuck. Just like the whitetails, there are lots of immature Axis and Blackbucks running around, although they learn fast that those two-legged critters with the funny sticks represent danger. The trophy-class wall hangers are smart. If you get a 150-200 yard running shot at a good Axis or Blackbuck, consider yourself lucky.

The Double C Ranch is 750 miles south of where we live in New Mexico. As such, it is either a "killer" 14 hour drive in one day, or a relaxing two day trip. We chose the latter, driving to Del Rio, Texas, on the first day, staying at a local motel, and then, after a good night's sleep, lots of coffee and breakfast, we headed to Crystal City and the Double C Ranch, scheduling our arrival for 1:00 PM.

I booked a four-day hunt for the family. Friday afternoon, all day Saturday and Sunday, and Monday morning. Hopefully, enough time to find our quarry. We arranged in advance to have Kevin Cross as our guide, a man who hunted and guided in Colorado for years.

Kevin knows the animals, their patterns, and is great company. Back in January, he guided our daughter on her first hunt. His patience and advice resulted in our daughter getting a beautiful 6x6 red stag with one well-placed shot, and instantly created a lifetime hunter. And, after a two-day stalk, he found the bull elk of my wife's dreams.

As I said before, most Texas elk are kind of dumb, but this one proved to be the exception to the rule. He would not stand still for a clean shot, nor would he remain in one place on the ranch. When you did find him, there was always a tree or heavy brush blocking the shot. Once he spotted you, he took off to parts unknown. But, finally on the afternoon of the second day, Mary got a clean shot, and that 334 SCI 6x6 bull is now on the wall of our den. With that kind of success, we were not about to change guides.

Robb Furlow, another Double C guide, is from Louisiana. Robb is as personable as they come (and a superb tracker). He always has a smile on his face and works very hard for his clients. If we are ever required to have two guides for the family, Robb is up. You'll find out why, later in the story. There isn't a bad guide on the Double C Ranch. I could go on and on, naming each of the guides that Jeff Myers employs, but you get the idea; they all work very hard for you to be successful.

Friday afternoon. After lunch and the requisite shooting of our rifles on the range (they always get a little off from the road trip), we headed out at 3:30 PM. Mary decided to use her pre-64 Win M70 .243, while Susannah selected her Ruger M77 in .270 Winchester. I had troubles with the scope on my .243, so I was "stuck" with my Ruger No. 1 in .300 Win Mag. Fortunately, I had loaded-down some 150 grain Noslers for just such a contingency.

Kevin put Mary and me in the "zebra blind" for blackbuck and aoudad. He took Sus to the other end of the ranch to look for the big axis that had been spotted two weeks earlier. Within fifteen minutes of settling into our blind, we had a variety of young animals playing around in the brush. Whitetails, immature blackbucks, pigs, some axis deer and sheep, but no trophy class critters. We tried to grow antlers on the spike buck whitetails and axis, and "stretch" the horns on the young blackbucks but, alas, it didn't work. Lots of animals, but nothing that we wanted.

Then, out of nowhere, a large blackbuck stepped into the open at 165 yards (according to my Bushnell rangefinder), a magnificent animal. Coal black on his sides and back, with a small patch of brown on the back of his neck, and his horns seemed to be reaching for the clouds. He was the one Kevin had told us about. BUT, the sucker would not stand still, and when he did, his butt was always pointing towards Mary. Mary is an excellent shot, and with her .243 she can consistently put five rounds into a bullseye at 300 yards, but she will not take a butt shot. For her, it has to be a clean shoulder or heart-lung shot, or she will pass. (*Good for you, Mary! -Ed.*)

We watched for what seemed like an eternity as he quietly grazed, occasionally checking the air, and then he was gone. During that time, I learned that my wife had some words in her vocabulary that I had not heard before. But, as frustrating as it was, she'd rather let an animal go than take a bad shot. And of course, no Aoudad ever stuck its nose out. Just after dark, Kevin drove up to take us back to the ranch house. He and Sus never saw the big Axis, but enjoyed the bugling of the elk about to enter full rut.

We ate a fabulous meal, enjoyed a glass of wine and watched our daughter shoot enough clay pigeons to make my shoulder sore. The kid got pretty good by the end of the third day.

Saturday morning came early at 0500. Two cups of coffee and a couple of cigarettes (yep, I'm still addicted to the darn things), and we climbed into Kevin's truck for another try. Kevin put me in a new blind alone to look for Aoudad, dropped Mary at the zebra blind for Blackbuck, and took Susannah to hunt for the big Axis.

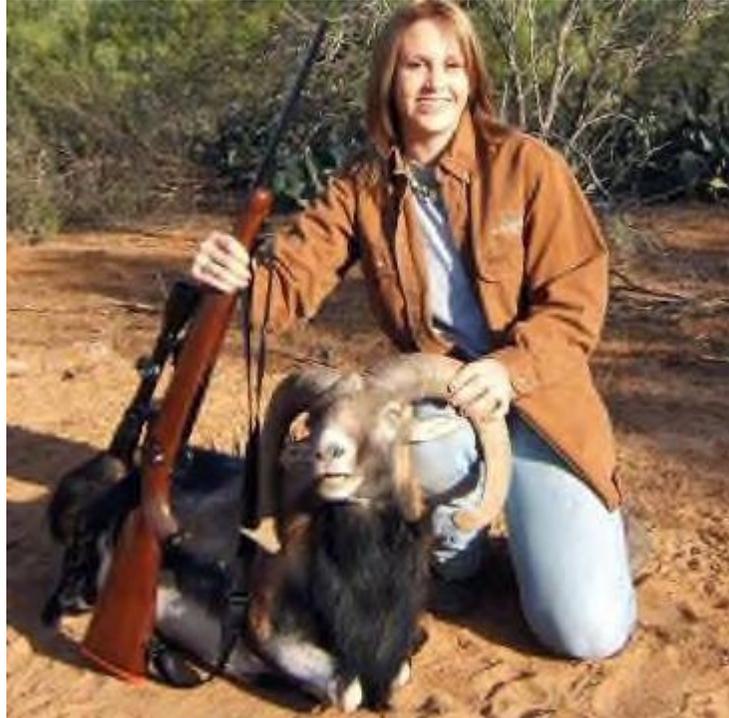
Again, not even a young aoudad came near my position. Three hours of sitting and watching all manner of animals and no aoudad. I was beginning to wonder if I smelled bad or something. Oh, I had sheep, hogs, small whitetail all over the place, and just after sunrise, a magnificent bull elk came to the edge of the clearing. He never stepped out, but I counted eight on one side and seven on the other before he faded away into the heavy brush. He would easily have scored 375 to 400 SCI, as big as I have ever seen.

Then, I heard two shots in the distance. Mary, Susannah or one of the other hunters? No telling, so I waited impatiently until Kevin drove up with Mary and Susannah. I asked if they got a shot, and from the grins on their faces, I knew the answer. There, in the back of the truck was a huge blackbuck. He was the one Mary had passed on the night before. His back was black as coal with that small brown patch on the back of his neck. A clean shot through the shoulders as he ran across a road heading for the deep brush.



Kevin and Mary with her blackbuck

Although Susannah had not seen any good axis deer, she got a clean shot at a beautiful mouflon sheep with heavy 30" horns. The girls were now two-for-two, and dad still zero-zero.



Susannah with a very nice mouflon sheep

After dressing out the animals and fortifying ourselves with an awesome breakfast of eggs, pancakes, bacon and sausage, we drove around two different ranches, but saw no aoudads or axis deer. The girls saw a couple of really nice full curl dalls with 30" horns that were tempting, but decided to wait until Sunday.

Back to the ranch for a huge lunch of enchiladas and tacos, followed by a short rest until 3:30. Then, back to the blinds. Mary and I in the blind that I was now calling home for aoudad, and Kevin took off with Sus to hunt axis.

Just about dark, the biggest Texas dall that I have ever seen sneaked out of the brush, followed by two equally large Corsicans. I nudged my wife, but she was sound asleep in her chair, exhausted after her successful morning hunt and personally skinning out the blackbuck for mounting. She wanted to make absolutely sure that the skin was perfect for our taxidermist. I let her sleep while I marveled at the size of those sheep and their massive horns. They were definitely gold medal class, but I was after aoudad. Maybe next year.

Right after sunset Kevin & Sus pulled up to collect us for dinner. No axis or aoudad, another night without a shot fired. So far, we had seen more animals than we could count, but only fired two shots (or so we thought). When we got to the ranch, Sus told us there was something on the computer that we had to see. Come on, we are on a hunting trip. The computers and telephones are supposed to be at home.

But, we piled out of the truck and Susannah dragged us up the steps to the dining room and there on the computer screen was a picture of her with a magnificent Axis deer. My first comment was, "Who faked the picture?" Nope, it was for real. She and Kevin saw some Axis does crossing a road in the Box (one of the leased ranches), and he told her

to be ready in case a buck followed. One did, and Susannah nailed him with a clean heart/lung shot. He ran about 50 yards and dropped. Robb heard the shot and came over to take a picture and they (Kevin, Susannah and Robb) "cooked up" the plan to fool Mom and Dad. And, of course, we fell for it. The entire staff got a good laugh out of that one, and Sus had her trophy Axis.



Susannah's perfect 4x4 Axis buck

He wasn't the huge Axis that Kevin had spotted earlier in the month, but Sus decided that he was big enough and would look great in her bedroom. As a point of general interest, five different hunting parties were after that huge Axis during our trip, and none got a shot at him. I told you they were tough.

We finished the day with another fine dinner: Elk steak, potatoes, salad, desert, and hot coffee. I'd like to adopt Estella, the Double C cook, and take her home. Her deserts are incredible and guaranteed to pack on the pounds. And of course, after dinner, Susannah had a go at the clay pigeons again. I think she put an entire case of ammunition through her mother's Browning.

Sunday morning came really early for me at 0400. The third day of hunting is always the toughest, as I am not used to working so hard. I was sore all over, exhausted and getting a little frustrated. But, after three cups of coffee and sweet roll, I was ready. Or at least, I was upright and moving forward.

Kevin took me to what was, by now, my regular blind, and drove off with Mary and Sus to look for sheep and hogs. It was another chilly morning, but I had a good feeling after a couple of scimitar oryx wandered in like ghosts, followed by a small herd of axis. Kevin told me that several weeks earlier, he had seen a pair of nice aoudads around my blind. One was a monster with at least 27" horns and a smaller one with horns just under 20". For me, I'd take either one, just to be able to bag an Aoudad. Just as I was

about to give up on seeing, let alone shooting, an aoudad, three females appeared on the edge of the clearing. Talk about spooky; they looked around, listening for strange sounds, with every step.

About twenty feet behind them, a male stepped into view. He wasn't the monster, but he was definitely a nice aoudad. I watched them for 10 minutes, hoping that grandpa would appear. But, it was not to be. As the group started to leave the clearing and disappear into the brush, I decided that if I was to get an aoudad, this was it. So, I put the crosshairs of my .300 on the male's shoulders and squeezed the trigger. He dropped as though he had been hit with a sledge hammer, not even a quiver. He won't make the record books, but he is a trophy for me.



Jim's aoudad, taken after a three day hunt

About 0830, Kevin pulled up with the girls and they saw my trophy. I got "high fives" from both gals and a "well done" handshake from Kevin. After breakfast, we dressed and skinned the Aoudad and set out to find a full curl Texas dall for Mary.

Just before lunch, we spotted a group of three off in the brush. Two were broomed out on the ends, and the third was virtually perfect. After glassing all three, Mary decided on the full curl without the broomed ends. It was a long shot, across an open field, but, the .243 hit home. He reared up and crumpled in a pile.



Mary's full curl Texas Dall



Telephoto picture a split second after bullet impact

By any standards, the girls are fantastic shots. They each fired two shots and each harvested two fine animals. Very impressive! As for me, call it luck, skill or just plain stubbornness, I finally got an aoudad after three days of hunting. I'm a happy camper.

We donated the sheep to the church in Crystal City, Texas. The folks down there are very poor, and meat is expensive. So, all contributions are appreciated by the local residents. The ranch butchers and processes the meat for them at no charge, so everyone comes away feeling pretty good.

Late Sunday afternoon, after a good deal of thought, Mary decided to try for a large axis doe (if she could find one) to mount next to Susannah's buck. Plus, we wanted the venison for the freezer.

Susannah asked the owner if she buy a whitetail spike hunt, since they were all over the place, and she loves jerky. Texas allows kids under 17, resident or non-resident to hunt with a \$6 license. However, non-resident adults require a \$300 license for hunting whitetail, a real budget buster. Mary and I set out in the late afternoon to locate a large Axis doe, while Sus went with Kevin to find a management spike whitetail.

I have never seen so many feral hogs in my life, well over 150 in the field in front of us, along with fallow deer, whitetails and sheep, but the axis deer were 200 yards out. In the fading light, Mary decided to hold her fire. I almost took a shot at a large boar hog, which I estimated to be at least 300 pounds, at 175 yards, but decided against taking the shot so near sunset. If you don't hit a feral hog just right, they run off into the brush, and it is no fun tracking a wounded animal in the dark. About that time, we heard a single shot from behind us. It had to be the Sus. Sure enough, when Kevin pulled up with our daughter, she proclaimed that she got a nice management buck, spike on one side and three points on the other. More venison for the freezer.

Sunday night, another fantastic dinner, double deserts, and a glass of wine. Susannah decided to go another few rounds of clay pigeons with the guys. By now, she was hitting almost every bird. I feel truly blessed to have a smart and beautiful daughter who also likes to hunt and fish.

Monday morning, our final day and last opportunity to find a large Axis doe. Kevin arrived on cue at 0515, more coffee, more coffee, some ibuprofen for the aching muscles, and we were ready. Susannah decided to sleep in. After all, she had filled her tags and had school on Tuesday.

Kevin put Mary and me in a blind together, gave us a radio, and waited in the truck. As the sun came up, we saw more animals come out than we ever thought possible. Elk of every size, young blackbucks, fallow deer, red stags and hogs entered the field from every direction. As Mary scanned for axis, I took enough pictures to keep Kodak busy for a week. She spotted a couple of axis spikes at the far end of the field, but no does.

By 0830, time was running out, so we called Kevin to pick us up. He told us that he wanted to make a couple of slow "passes" through the brush before heading back to the ranch, as a final attempt to locate an axis doe. Nothing and more nothing, then Mary spotted three does, off the road, deep in the brush. No clean shot, but, they were big does. Kevin figured that they were moving, so he drove past them, turning on several roads to intercept them. Finally, standing at the edge of the last road, was a large axis doe. However, there was a small herd of whitetail all around her. We waited for what seemed like an eternity, and finally the whitetails cleared away and Mary fired. Another clean shoulder shot and the axis dropped in her tracks.

Back to the ranch for a late breakfast, dress and skin out the Axis, wait for the butcher to process her, settle up with Jeff, pack up the truck and say our "Good Byes."

This was the hardest part of our trip. We have become friends with most of the folks at the Double C. Mary spent the evenings by the fire pit chatting with Marla, the evening hostess, while Susannah busted clay pigeons. And our meals with Kevin, Robb and Jeff

are always a pleasure. They made us feel like family and I guess we are now. The trip was a complete success!

As we departed through the gate for the long drive home, we were already planning our next trip to the Double C Ranch. It will be for Thanksgiving 2007. We haven't decided what we will hunt for; but, whatever we decide; it will be challenging and lots of fun. Of course, I'm biased because I got my Aoudad.

A final note: Mary used 100 grain Remington Core-Lokt bullets in her .243; Susannah was shooting 140 grain Winchester Silvertips in her .270, and I used 150 grain Nosler partitions in my .300. We never did shoot our pigs--maybe next time.