

## **The Hunt by Donnie Plueard, 2018 Mule Deer Tag Winner**

I know you requested a short story but it would be almost impossible to put into a short story what a gift winning the Big Game Mule Deer tag was.

Let me take a moment to tell you just a bit about myself. I am a very avid hunter and will find any reason to get out and hunt. Hunting is something I learned at a young age and it has been a fun and adventurous part of my life. I am old school hunter and I believe in the traditions, honor, respect, gratitude, and adventure that is hunting. So with that said, winning what I think is the best deer tag in the country was an awesome opportunity to put a lifetime of experiences and skills to the test.

Once I calmed down and finished calling every hunting buddy I have to tell them about my good luck, I quickly got to work on my plan for hunting. As you can imagine, there was advice from everywhere on what I should do and where I should hunt. Within a few hours of being informed I had won the tag, I received calls from guides wanting to help me with my hunt. They were eager to tell me about deer that they had seen and how they could help me fill my tag. I was appreciative of the offers, however I wanted to challenge myself and do this on my own. I was told that hunting on my own would not go well and that I would be lucky to find a nice deer. I was told that without proper help I would be wasting not only my time but the tag and that there are only a few deer worthy of the tag. I even had times during the hunt when I ran into guides and hunters who went as far as to tell me to take my tag and go home and wait till next year to try and shoot a buck in velvet. This whole thought process was odd to me and so I would just smile and thank them for the advice.

To me, having someone else do all the work while I just show up and shoot an animal was not anywhere close to the tradition and honor that I grew up with when it comes to harvesting an animal.

Within a week of getting my tag, I set my plan in motion and was soon buying maps for the units I wanted to hunt. Along with maps, I read blogs and watched every video I could find on the areas I intended to hunt. I set my sights on all the units north of the Grand Canyon. The plan was to focus on 13B as my primary unit but also be open to 13A, 12B and 12A both east and west.

I made 7 trips to northern Arizona with each trip lasting between 3 and 5 days. I started hunting in late September in unit 13B. I used the first few trips to get familiar with the area and to fine tune the areas I wanted to hunt. I hunted 13B and 13A through late October. I saw a lot of great deer every time I went up but did not find anything I was looking for. It was on my first trip in September in 13B that I met an outstanding young man named Dillon Johnson from Fredonia Az. I ran into him on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere and we stopped



to chat as we passed each other. He was curious as to what somebody was doing out there and I will chat with anybody who will give me the time of day. I have learned that locals know where the best hunting is and a lot of times they will share good information. I informed him that I had won the super raffle deer tag and was looking for a nice buck with a good rack but that I was hopeful to find one with extras. He congratulated me on my tag and then looked around and asked where all my help was. I told him I was hunting by myself. He paused and then looked at me and asked again; "you are really out here hunting by yourself?" I can not tell you how many times over the course of the hunt I got that same look and question.

I chatted with Dillon for quite a while and we ended up exchanging phone numbers. I kept in touch with him and we communicated quite often as he was a good source of advice over the course of the hunt. It was also a plus to have a point of contact that was closer than my buddies and family back in the valley and he was familiar with the area and offered to help if I ever needed it.

I hunted several times in October and did not find the deer I was looking for however I did see a lot of nice deer and had a great time exploring new areas. I would plan my hunts around the rifle hunts in the units. I would hunt the weekend before and after the general hunt as I liked to have the areas all to myself.

I was on a hunt in 13B in late November when I ran into a gentleman name Tory Brock. He had stopped to chat with me and check out what I was doing as it was odd to find someone hunting in 13B after the hunt was over. As he approached he asked if I was hunting and when I told him I was he smiled and asked if I was the super raffle winner. We ended up chatting about deer that might still be in the area and everything to do with hunting. What made this conversation most memorable to me was when I asked him for pointers on scoring and field judging animals. He said it was simple, when I was glassing deer and I see the biggest deer I have ever seen in my life well then you know you have found your deer. It was also during this conversation that I decided to relocate my efforts and I moved my hunting primarily to units 12B and 12A west.

I hunted several more weekends in November and early December but had yet to find the deer I was looking for. All my efforts were now narrowed down to 12A west and 12B I was seeing a lot more deer as the rut was taking hold and I grew even more optimistic with each passing weekend hunt. By early December the snow was falling and the deer were pushing down to the lower range. By mid December the rut was going strong and bigger bucks were getting more plentiful however I was still not finding the buck I hoped to find. I drove up to the area after work the evening of December 20<sup>th</sup> knowing that time was running out and if I didn't find my deer soon I would either be hunting the desert for a big desert muley or waiting till August and looking for a velvet buck. I was excited to get hunting as I had been in contact with Tory Brock earlier in the week and he said the deer were just winding down on the rut and with a little luck I might find a big buck.

On the morning of December 21<sup>st</sup> I headed out to the area I was planned on hunting. The morning was scattered clouds and as the sun came up it made for an amazing sunrise and so I pulled to the side of the dirt road to take a few pics to send the wife. After taking a few pics I set my phone down and I noticed some movement in the brush. Grabbing my binoculars, I quickly located the movement and it was a couple of doe feeding. Soon a couple of does turned into a lot of does and a few bucks then more and more deer began to rise up in the brush and in no time there must have been 40 to 50 deer milling about. What was odd about this is that I had glassed this area every time I had been through it and had never seen anything more than a few doe and now there were deer in every direction I looked. I continued to watch the deer carefully evaluating each one that had horns. Fifteen to twenty minutes had passed and there were several nice bucks with all the does however I didn't see anything worth shooting. I sat on the side of the road as the sun rose higher and the day grew brighter. I continued to glass the area and as the sun got higher still and more deer appeared. I was busy glassing the entire area when all of a sudden the biggest deer I had ever seen in my life filled my binoculars. This buck was the biggest deer I had seen on any of my hunts and was by far the biggest deer in the area. He was walking

dead away from me but I got a good view of his rack and he was definitely a shooter to me. I quickly slipped out of my truck and slid off the side of the road to an opening in the brush. I located the buck about 150 yards away but did not have a good shot because either the brush or other deer blocked my chance at a shot as the big buck. I watched as he fed his way into the trees with all the other deer. I stayed in the area for the rest of the day looking for the buck but did not find him.

When I got back to town (Kanab Ut) I got a call from Tory to see how my day had gone. I told him all about the big buck I had seen and that I was heading back to the same area too look for the big buck in the morning. He asked if I wanted company and I was eager to have an extra set of eyes help me look for the buck. We met in the area before sunrise and glassed every nook and cranny. We glassed every draw and valley and looked under every tree or piece of brush but with no luck. Most of the deer I had seen the day before were still in the area just no sign of the big boy. By early afternoon Tory went off to glass other areas and I stayed in the vicinity of the big buck. I stayed in the area until dark and did not find him however all the deer were still in the area so I was hopeful that I would see him again. Talked with Tory again that night and said I was going to head out to the area again in the morning and give it a few hours before I needed to go home. After all it's only a few days before Christmas and the wife was home taking care of everything while I was out having an adventure.

We met at the same area as the day before and began glassing as the sun rose and soon found deer however things had changed overnight and the area that had so many deer in it recently only had a few deer in it now. We slowly drove to the bottom of the hill hoping that maybe the deer were down near the bottom but when we got to the bottom there were no deer to be found. I will admit I was a little disappointed at the turn of events and was quite surprised that the deer seemed to have just vanished. We decided to take a little spur road that would bring us up to the top of a hill so we could glass for a bit from there. As we drove to the top of the hill, it was clear to both of us that things didn't look good. Tory asked what my plan was since it looked like things were not going to work out. I talked about a big buck I had heard about out in the Gila Bend area and also waiting till next August to find a big velvet buck. As we got to the top of the hill we quickly spotted some deer that we had seen earlier from the other side of the valley. We watched them until they fed off into the trees. We had just started to drive again when we spotted a couple of new deer on the far edge of the cleared area. We stopped and glassed them. There was a nice 4 point and a little 3 point buck. We watched them for a bit and were about to give up when we noticed that the two bucks kept looking down the hill towards a draw. Tory had gotten up on the running boards of the truck to get a better view down the hill and I was glassing from the side of the truck. Within a minute or so another buck came walking up out of the draw and I was disappointed to see that it was only a forked horn. I was just about to give in when Tory leaned over and whispered that it was the big one. I quickly pulled up my binoculars and the only thing I could find was the forked horn buck. I told Tory that I didn't see him and he said the buck was coming out of the bottom and as I looked lower in the draw I saw what he was seeing. It was him! Tossing the binoculars into the truck I quickly grabbed my rifle and drew down on the deer. My view was blocked by brush so I quickly relocated to a position where I had a good shot. The buck was just under 300 yards away walking almost dead away when I took aim. The buck turned and gave me a good shot. I squeezed the trigger and watched him hump up as the bullet found its mark. He hopped up the hill a few yards and fell over.

I could not believe my luck I was 10 minutes away from going home and now I was walking across a brushy hillside to the biggest buck I have ever harvested. As we got closer to the buck we could see that he was a dandy. He had a good solid frame with great mass and he even had some extras that I was looking for. He is the biggest deer I have ever seen.

I could not be happier with the deer and it was just like it is was meant to be I was as excited as when I got my first deer and it felt good to me.

For me this was everything the Big Game Super Raffle tag was meant to be.

I got to hunt for a lot of weekends over several months

I got to hunt several of the best units the state has to offer

I got to meet great people

I got to live a great adventure

And I got to harvest a great animal

I got to hunt on my own but I did not get this deer on my own,

I want to thank my wife for putting up with me being gone for so many weekends.

I want to thank all my hunting buddies for being my sounding board and keeping me focused.

I want to thank Tim Shurtliff, Seth Pierce and Todd Buck with the Arizona Game and Fish for all the information and advice.

I want to extend a special thanks to Tory Brock who came out and hung out with me from time to time while I hunted and was there to help me when I got my deer. It is always fun to share a successful hunt with someone who loves to hunt.

And in conclusion I want to thank the Big Game Super Raffle without them this adventure would never have happened.