What’s Up?

Cheaters
(No it’s not going to be what you think.)

I don’t think I’ve ever admitted this in print. And I’d appreciate it if you’d keep this just between us. But I’m slightly dyslexic. Not in the classic ‘can’t read well’ sense dyslexic. It’s converting stuff from short term memory to long term memory, like John says, “I’m going to Finland on the 18th,” and the night of the 17th he’s packing, and I haven’t a clue why. Or, it shows up in time management: I have an appointment at 3 in the afternoon, and I’m anxious to be there on time at 10AM.

Then there are rifle scopes. I don’t do the adjustments anymore because no matter how long I think about how to do it right, I invariably turn the knob the wrong way. So I shoot at the target, we check through the scope and John adjusts the turret. (It just saves time.)

So last year when I had the chance to borrow a Swarovski Z5 3.5 to 18, the one with the color coded elevation turret, I’m sure John was a little surprised. I’d shot the scope at FTW shooting school and was taken with the concept of not having to think where to hold at 200, 300 or 400 yards. (Plus the glass was great, and I was hitting out to 600 yards at a pretty small gong, with 68 grain bullets in a .223, while the rest of the group was banging gongs at 1,000 yards, consistently, with bigger calibers–and from 6.5 Creedmoor to .300 Win Mag and 140 + grain bullets.) What a concept: just twirl a dial. But first I had to sight in to those 200, 300, and 400 marks. (I also wanted to have at least one mark beyond 400 to groove my breath control and steadiness, so I could shoot more accurately at critters at 3 and 350 when I needed to.) Right.

A year later I finally admitted to John that I just felt intimidated by the thing and was going to send it back. Need I say he wasn’t surprised. (And yes, John offered to help me get it set up.) The problem was, the more I thought about it the more I worried that having to remember what color was for what yardage would be even more arbitrary a memory problem than how many chucks could a woodchuck chuck…. And of course when it comes time to remember arbitrary connections, it’s always harder to do it under stress, or when excited which, after all these years, I still get when I have an animal in the crosshairs. Any animal. Any crosshair. Even when it has cool dials.

So I’m back to my old cheaters. The one on my .243 is a bit ratty these days. John wrote it up the year I bought the rifle, and it’s seen many animals, rain, snow, mud and sweaty hands. We spent a little time deciding what side of the stock it should sit on: the question being would I take the time to look at it while I

Where Else Are They Now?


Eileen wants everyone to know that Tenderize the Wild is now available. 212 pages, 112 marinades, brines and rubs for all the animals we Americans hunt: from deer, elk and antelope, to upland birds and waterfowl, and wild pig. (Buy several—simplify your Christmas shopping.) www.riflesandrecipes.com

While you’re there, please notice the web site is all brand new. It’s much faster, easier to navigate and now that the web designers have finished the house, they’re starting on the outbuildings: a new subscription-driven recipe section. We’ll keep you posted on that.
was on an animal, or walking around in the woods trying to find said animal. Neither as it turned out. I tend to look at it when we’re driving to the trailhead. Or while I’m pulling on my gloves, loading the magazine, getting ready to head out. So it’s just behind the cheekpiece.

What I find myself concentrating on is the middle range numbers: 250 to 300, reminding myself that that’s where the trajectory starts to drop off, and that beyond that, I not only need to hold steady but be ready to calculate how much higher I need to hold to make a clean kill shot.

Despite the Ugly Stick having been in my arsenal far longer than the .243 Husky, it just got the new and improved cheat sheet. Specifically designed for dyslexics who can’t remember numbers—the most arbitrary thing to remember—it’s a picture of an average deer-sized animal with an average deer-sized 18 inch deep chest and how that 18 inches fits in the reticle at 300 yards. The scope is a Leupold VX3 3.5 to 10x40 with a Boone and Crockett Big Game Reticle with CPC-style hold points. At 300 yards, an 18 inch chest fits between the crosshair and lower cross bar. It’s a system John’s used for years to make ranging in the field quick and reliable, when the animals are nervous and fleet footed, and you don’t have time for range finders. If the animal fits into the picture, it’s in range. Smaller, I’ve got to calculate trajectory, or pass up the shot. (The only improvement I’d make to the new improved cheat sheet is to slide the scope to the left, over the vitals.) So far no animals have fallen to the new cheat sheet, but I have plans.

And we have a new cheater. The Chip. I almost bought it last Christmas for John, but convinced myself it was a lot of money and wouldn’t make a big difference. We both know how to use maps, to coordinate them to our old GPS’s, and generally hunt places we know by heart, and if we wanted the chip we also had to buy a new GPS that could read it. But John went bird hunting with our friend Bob Jeffrey in October, and Bob had the Garmin GPSMAP64 with Montana chip.

John was pretty impressed the first day, knowing exactly where boundaries were, but the second day the two got confronted by a landowner who told them they were on his land and they had to get off. Bob turned the Garmin screen toward the fella, and showed him the map, and that was the end of the confrontation. They were where they were supposed to be, and they had proof. We went down to Capital Sports and bought one as soon as John got home again.

What’s really great about this new technology is that it lists property owner’s names right on the maps so when you’re scouting, preseason, you know who you need to contact to ask permission to hunt. That’s a big deal.

John and I are both a bit obsessive compulsive about being where we’re supposed to be. A couple of years ago, we’d signed in to a Block Management area to hunt pheasants. The first half mile driving into the place was barren as a billiard ball, and John wanted to turn around and give up. But I insisted.

“It might get better,” I said. “Go a little further.” We hadn’t even gotten to the sign-in box yet.

So we drove further and were rewarded with a perfect piece of pheasant cover. Small hay fields, bordered by generous breaks, with tall wild grasses. The sign-up box had plenty of maps of the property, but one look at the map and the fencing in front of us, we decided it was pretty obvious, so we left the map in the truck.

Twenty yards out, a rooster got up right in front of me, and I shot. One. A few yards farther, another, two. Then another got up in front of John, before we’d gone 70 yards. He shot, then turned to me.

“Yeah,” I said. “We need to go back to the truck and get the map.” We were in the right place, it was amazing pheasant hunting, the birds were incredibly dumb, and we both limited out.

That year, having the Garmin with the chip, we could have just looked for the pink polka dots that signified Block Management (or blue for state land and yellow/tan for BLM rather than white, which is private) rather than walking back to the truck. This year, we’ve already found that some of our favorite hunting spots extend a few hundred yards farther than we’d thought, and some of the local fences aren’t quite on legal boundaries. (We figure the neighbors must be family or someone would have moved them by now.) And on block management, stretches that zig and zag around streams and fences, where walking a straight line will put you on the wrong side of a property line, the chip is indispensable.

It’s the peace of mind, knowing we’re where we should be that made this a great addition to our cheater repertoire. Just like the cheat sheets on my two rifles, it let’s me relax and enjoy being afield.
Good Eats

Schizo Flat Bread Sandwich
Serves 4-6

This little dish just doesn’t know what it is. Turmeric is an Asian spice, most often used in curries; cilantro principally a Latino spice, though it can be used in hotter Southeast Asian dishes. And white beans tend to show up in Italian dishes. But its real confusion is over its presentation: Am I a sandwich or a main dish, it asks. I’d say it’s both, but I like flat bread, so here it’s a sandwich. And it would be a great game day treat: easy to make and easy to enjoy.

The Marinade Ingredients
24 hours ahead
1 pound wild pig meat, in 1” cubes
12 ounces ginger ale

Combine the ginger ale and pork chunks in a re-sealable plastic bag, seal it up and refrigerate 24 hours. When you’re ready to cook, pour the marinade off the meat.

*Don’t have wild pig in your freezer? Use any pale meated upland bird: pheasant, chukar, turkey or grouse will do.

The Rest of the Ingredients
3 tablespoons oil, in all
1 yellow onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, minced
15 ounce can white beans
14.5 ounce can chopped tomatoes
½ cup minced fresh cilantro
½ teaspoon dried leaf oregano
½ teaspoon turmeric
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
6 flat breads, about 6 inches in diameter

Cooking
1. In a large skillet heat 2 tablespoons of the oil over medium to medium-high until it just starts to smoke. Add the chunks of pig meat, sautéing them until golden brown. Transfer them to a plate. To the pan, add a bit more oil, then add the onion and garlic and sauté them until the edges of the onion start to brown, about 3-4 minutes. Now add the white beans and when they start to color a bit, another 3-4 minutes, return the meat to the pan.
2. Add the chopped tomatoes, cilantro, oregano, turmeric, salt and red pepper flakes and give the dish a good stir. Continue cooking until the liquid is almost gone, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from the heat.
3. Toast the flat bread in the toaster (cut in half) or in the microwave for a few seconds just to make it fold more easily. Once they’re toasted, divide the pork mixture among the flat breads, roll it up and enjoy. (A dollop of sour cream is totally optional. John likes it, I prefer this sandwich without.)

Cookie Corner

First Breakfast
Makes 4 or 8 rolls

We all know about Second Breakfast: eggs, bacon, hash browns, the breakfast you sit down to leisurely enjoy after the first hunt of the day. First Breakfast isn’t so elaborate—or leisurely. Most times it’s a bowl of cold kid’s cereal or a granola bar stuck in your pocket and a thermos of coffee. Well, I protest. With a bit of planning the night before you can have a first breakfast that’s as pleasurable as the second. Worthy of a day of hunting no matter what your prey. These cheese rolls not only taste really good but are perfect for days afield: protein for long term energy, with sugar to give you an instant burst when you need it.

Ingredients
8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
¼ cup powdered sugar
1 egg yolk
½ teaspoon vanilla
1 tube of refrigerator crescent rolls, 8 in all

For the icing
1½ cups powdered sugar
¼ teaspoon vanilla
5 to 6 tablespoons milk

Preparation
1. Combine the cream cheese, powdered sugar, egg and vanilla in a mixer bowl. Mix on medium speed until well blended and creamy. Transfer to a small bowl, cover tightly and chill.
2. Preheat the oven to 350ºF. Break open the tube of crescent rolls, and lay them out on a cookie sheet. Two by two, arrange each pair thin end abutted to fat end, and press the seam between the two to make a rectangle.
3. Divide the cream cheese mixture among the rectangles of dough, roll them up gently and press the edges closed. Place in the center of the oven and cook until the rolls are golden, about 15 minutes.
4. Now combine the powdered sugar, vanilla and 5 tablespoons of milk in a small bowl and stir until smooth. Fill the spoon and drip some of the icing back into the bowl. It should drip off the spoon slowly, rather than having it fall in clumps or like water. Add a bit more milk if needed. (It will harden again on the rolls.) Set that aside.
5. Let the rolls cool until you can handle them, then spoon the icing over them.
In case you haven’t noticed, antelope or pronghorns are different. Not only can’t you drive them like whitetail (it’s like herding cats) but they don’t have as much collagen as deer, elk, moose and caribou so you don’t have to age them to have tender meat. Their downside is it’s so warm when we hunt them, anywhere from late August to late October depending on the state, cooling them down often requires planning ahead. Cool them down properly in the first 3-4 hours and they’re great meat. Don’t cool them down, and they’ll haunt the freezer forever.

Other things about antelope are different too. For one thing they’re not nocturnal, secretive, or especially hard to hunt unless you insist on finding the tallest hill in the area, and walk upright all over it. But that’s John’s subject for today and this page is for game care, so let’s just talk about antelope as food.

See that antelope up above? That’s pretty much how big antelope are. Adults, male or female vary very little in size, something similar to the size of a whitetail doe, in the 70 to 90 pound range, dressed. When we got that one to the truck, John picked it up in his arms like a newlywed going over the threshold.

There’s one other thing about antelope. Recently someone posted a photo of a delicious antelope dinner on 24hourcampfire.com, and someone else responded with, “You need to cook that antelope till it’s well done. Wyoming antelope have tape worms.”

John and have both hunted antelope in Wyoming many times and never noticed the game departments warning people of tape worms, so we did a little research. Turns out some antelope do have tape worms, but there are lots of different tape worms and the tape worms present in some Wyoming antelope do not transfer to humans.

But there’s more. Last year we had to treat our chocolate Lab, Lena and her boyfriend Wilbur the Shih Tzu, for tape worms. We don’t feed the dogs raw commercial meat, so I immediately blamed the wild pig I’d butchered that winter since both dogs sit under the butchering table as we cut. (And both are very good at catching the few scraps we toss them.)

During my research I discovered that, while humans can’t get them, domestic animals can get tape worms from wild animals. Now you’re going to say, what’s the difference? Humans, animals—domestic and wild—are all mammals, all have stomachs and stomach acids, why does Fido get tape worms from eating infected animals and I don’t?

Simple. Humans have more acid stomachs, and the higher acidity in our stomachs kills the bugs that can thrive in the less acid stomachs of the animals we eat.

Why do I know this? I’ve also done a lot of research on how commercial animals are raised, and in the last decades, since corn has become the grain of choice for fattening our cows in feedlots, that change in diet has increased the acid their stomachs produce—and now matches our own. (That change had to happen for the animals to be able to digest the corn.) It’s part of why there are so many more cases of food-borne illness: not to be too indelicate, cows eat where they poop, and that’s how they get undesirables. When their stomach acid was less acidic, our high acid stomachs protected us. (The higher acid just killed the undesirables.) Now those beef animals have an acid content more like ours. Thus no higher acid digestive juices to kill them, thus no protective barrier, and we get sick if the meat isn’t handled properly.

But game animals don’t eat corn, at least outside of Texas and other states where corn feeders are rampant. And even there, they graze on their traditional foods the rest of the day. (Someone probably needs to research what % of the diet needs to be corn before the acidity rises.)

So, no. The woman who said you have to cook the stuffing out of game animals was wrong. It’s still a good idea to look carefully at the meat you’re butchering or about to cook, make sure it’s healthy red, and cook to about 135ºF, or medium rare, if you had it processed; a bit less is safe if you butchered your own and no digestive juices touched the meat.

Yes, it’s an indelicate subject, but you know what? All the years John and I have been eating game, and all our friends who eat it too, we’ve never gotten “stomach-flu” (that ubiquitous euphemism for food-borne illness) from wild meat. On the other hand you hear of it all the time at restaurants, just think Chipotle’s recent problems (not to mention the frequent beef burger recalls) and I’ve had it twice eating at restaurants in the Salt Lake airport. (The Center for Disease Control once posted on their website that we should never, never eat the sea food salad at a buffet because it is the #1 culprit. In this case, I’d say it’s not a good thing to be #1.)

Did you need another good reason to go hunting? There it is. Game meat is not only higher in protein, lower in fat, and isn’t fed antibiotics by the bucketful at feed lots, but it’s safer to eat. It also tastes good.

Anyone for an elk steak? Of deer Stroganoff?

Dig in!
Hunters often say things about binoculars that simply aren’t true, partly because few hunters have the opportunity to directly compare enough binoculars to know what they’re talking about. They may look through several in a store, but not under a wide variety of conditions in the field. Luckily, Eileen and I get to directly compare many binoculars, partly because of my optics columns in magazines, which result in companies sending test binoculars. (We also periodically let other people look through ‘em, to refine our findings.)

One of the more interesting comparisons occurred a couple of autumns ago, when I tried a new Swarovski SLC 10x42 HD. (For those less familiar with Swarovski’s models, SLC’s have always been their lower-priced brand—though “lower” doesn’t mean cheap.) The SLC was extremely good optically, in fact just as sharp and bright as my decade-old Swarovski 10x42 EL.

The SLC was also noticeably lighter in weight. The difference was only a few ounces, but since turning 60 I’ve been trying to reduce the weight carried when hunting, in order to continue hiking Montana’s steeper country. This included not just losing over 30 pounds from my body, but more from all my gear. Despite some hunters believing a pound or two off a rifle or a few ounces off a binocular won’t help, when you add up ALL the pounds and ounces in ALL your equipment, they definitely make a difference.

The SLC was so good I decided to buy it, but even at the writer’s discount would have to sell my older EL in order to write the check. So I advertised the EL at the writer’s price for the SLC. This seemed to be a good deal to me, but every interested person immediately inquired if the EL was made after the introduction of Swarovision, an extra lens in EL’s that flattens the field of view, making the edges sharper. When I told them it was a “pre-Swarovision” EL, they lost interest.

Thanks to Swarovski, I’d been able to directly compare a Swarovision EL during an elk hunt a couple years before, and decided the slightly flatter field wasn’t enough of an advantage to “upgrade” my older EL. In fact my non-Swarovision EL was slightly but definitely brighter, and the fuzziness around the edges so slight I’d never noticed it when glassing for game.

The Swarovski guy along on the elk hunt admitted as much, saying the extra Swarovision lens results in less light transmitted through the binocular. This is a basic rule of optics, and one reason the 10x42 SLC was really bright: None of the SLC’s have Swarovision. (They do have slightly more fuzz around the edges, but so what?) Yet many people report Swarovision EL’s being brighter than the pre-Swarovision version. This might be due to some variation in an individual’s eyesight matching up well with the EL’s color transmission, but I suspect the reports are primarily due to the psychological effect of advertising and higher prices.

I’ve mentioned this before, but many studies indicate higher prices can actually cause the human brain to
operate differently, and not just from sale-day excitement. One classic example was a California study of wine-tasting, where random prices were put on unlabeled bottles of wine. While tasting various wines, the "subjects" were hooked up to a machine testing activity in the "pleasure" portion of the brain. Not only did most tasters pick wines with higher price-tags as tasting better, but their brains registered more pleasure when tasting wines that "cost more," even if the real-world price was $5 a bottle. So yeah, we can not only be rationally fooled by price, but our subconscious responds as well.

Swarovski doesn’t claim Swarvision results in brighter optics, but apparently many buyers assume any improvement in optics—especially in Swarovski binoculars—means a brighter view, so perceive more brightness. (However, I've found very few have directly compared an older EL with a newer EL.)

Eventually I realized the "Swarovision effect" wouldn’t allow me to sell my EL for enough to pay for the SLC, so I quit trying and sent the SLC back. My search for lighter-weight gear was serious, but wasn’t serious enough to pay several hundred bucks for a few ounces.

Plus, Eileen and I also had on hand a number of recent lower-priced binoculars, some even lighter than the 10x42 SLC. However, none were made in central Europe by German-speaking people, though one had a German name. Instead they were all made in Asia, and on average cost around a quarter as much as a Swarovski SLC.

While none of several 10x42’s was quite as good optically as the SLC, the difference was so small most people wouldn’t notice unless they compared both simultaneously. This has actually been the trend for quite a while.

Fifteen years ago I used electrical tape to cover the names of what was then the hot Japanese binocular-bargain, and a high-priced European binocular of the same magnification and objective size. I then took both to a gathering of gun and hunting writers and had each compare the views. The result was basically a draw—but the European binocular cost twice as much as the Japanese model.

Since then European binoculars have become noticeably better, but their prices continue to climb. Asian binoculars have also become better, but their prices have dropped, and it’s now possible to buy binoculars for $400 to $600 with optics very close to those of European binoculars costing 3-4 times as much.

In fact, one famous European optics company now has one of their binoculars made in China. The optics of the Zeiss Terra 10x42 aren’t quite as good as those of the Zeiss Victory 10x42, but the Terra’s real-world retail price is around $450, versus a minimum of around $1900 for a Victory. Just as important to me, the Zeiss Terra was the lightest of several recently tested 10x42’s—one pound, 12 ounces including the neck strap, almost half a pound less than my Swarovski EL.

You might reasonably ask why I’ve only mentioned 10x42’s, especially when an 8x32 Swarovski EL like Eileen’s is even lighter than the 10x42 Terra. It’s because I prefer 10x for all-around hunting binoculars, having found less magnification, or a smaller objective diameter, provides less detail than I want.

When discussions of recent binoculars come up, some hunters say there’s no sense in buying a “cheap” binocular when you can get an older, used “alpha” brand (meaning Leica, Swarovski or Zeiss) for only $800 to $1000. A lot of other hunters think this makes sense.

The only trouble is older alpha binoculars, like the one my writing colleagues test-compared in 2001, aren’t any better than new $500 Asian models, and sometimes not as good. Plus, new Asian binoculars haven’t had their lenses abused by the great outdoors, and perhaps their owners. I’ve taken several $500 Asian binoculars on hunting trips in the past few years, and used them alongside guides with older alpha binoculars. In every instance the new Asian glass beat the old alpha glass, sometimes by a considerable margin.

This doesn’t mean I’m giving up my pre-Swarovision EL—or my Leica Duovid 8+12x42, still my favorite big-country binocular, even at 15 years old. So far no Asian company has offered a changeable-X glass as good as the Duovid, and the 12x option provides a noticeable gain over 10x in long-distance glassing. However, the Duovid is almost a pound heavier than the Zeiss Terra 10x42. When hunting the high plains this doesn’t matter, but adds up after climbing a few thousand feet in the local mountains, especially for a hunter on the far side of 60.

A Little Extra Padding

I’ve made an awful lot of one-shot kills, but I like to prepared. Who knows? Someday I might make that perfect one-shot kill on an elk and have a wolf jump on top of it and try to lay claim. (And wolves don’t travel alone.)

So, when I go out in the woods, I fill the magazine, then put one shell in my right jacket pocket, one in my right pants pocket, and the rest of the box in my pack. Why only one shell per pocket? So they don’t rattle. And the extras in the box get a length of folded packing foam down between the rows, and another on top of the cartridges, to keep them quiet as well.
The Dreaded Donut

I can’t remember who first called the ring of thicker brass that sometimes appears around the base of the neck in bottle-necked cases the “dreaded donut,” but do recall it was a benchrest shooter. The ring occurs for a couple of reasons, and can not only interfere with accuracy but cause pressures to rise considerably. If the donut’s thick enough, chambering a round crimps it around the bullet’s shank, and when the powder ignites the crimp-ring tends to hold the bullet in place. How much extra pressure occurs varies with the donut’s thickness, so velocity will vary considerably from shot to shot. A really thick donut can raise pressures enough to blow primers, sending a blast of hot gas back into the action, or even your face.

I initially encountered the donut 40-some years ago, when first using a bench-mounted press. Before then I’d used Lee Loaders, hand tools that are highly portable (handy for a not-yet-settled guy) and make great ammo, but are very slow.

When I finally settled down enough to set up a bench, the used mail-order company, Herter’s, was having a clearance sale, so I bought a discontinued single-stage press and set of Herter’s dies for the .243 Winchester. I’d just gotten a good deal on an almost-new Remington 700 BDL in .243 from a co-worker. Back then BDLs came with a nice leather sling, and I got the rifle, sling and most of a box of 100-grain factory ammo for less than half the retail price.

After bolting the press to a bench I started to put together some loads with 105-grain Speer Hot-Cors and IMR4350. The rifle shot very well with 41.0 grains, but within a few loadings accuracy deteriorated and signs of high pressure started appearing. This seemed odd, but some research in my limited collection of firearms literature came up with the suggestion that the case-necks might be thickening.

According to the author (again, I can’t remember who), brass “flows” from the case body when high-pressure handloads are fired, like a glacier flowing down a mountain due to the pressure of gravity. He said this often happened in cartridges with relatively shallow shoulder angles, like the 20 degrees of the .243, but didn’t with steeper shoulders, such as the 28 degrees of the .22-250. He said the problem could be diagnosed by trying to insert a bullet into the necks of fired cases. If the bullet met any resistance, the necks needed to be outside-turned or inside reamed. I tried to insert a 105 Speer and found it wouldn’t fit in several case necks.

An outside-turning attachment for my Forster trimmer cost far more than an inside reamer, so I ordered a reamer. This solved the problem, but I didn’t realize until years later that the author didn’t really know what he was talking about. The real problem wasn’t brass “flowing” into the necks. Instead it was the dreaded donut, which doesn’t occur because brass flows during firing.

Instead it’s merely thicker brass from the top of the case shoulder, which in my .243 was getting squeezed forward during resizing.

This did involve the shoulder angle—along with following the directions for the die. Similar directions come with full-length resizing dies today, saying: “Screw the die into the press until it firmly contacts the shellholder.”

This does result in cases resized sufficiently to chamber in factory rifles—but because individual chambers and dies vary slightly, it sizes brass too much for some chambers, resulting in slightly excess headspace. With factory rifles this headspace isn’t normally enough for cases to separate and leak gas on the first firing, but if fired and resized several times cases will separate, normally in a partial crack at the front edge of the solid case-head, half an inch in front of the rim.

But before it cracks, the expanded case body not only gets squeezed to a smaller diameter during each resizing, but lengthens slightly. Cases need to be trimmed after each resizing, and the dreaded donut appears, because the front of the shoulder’s being squeezed forward into the base of the neck. The need to trim cases shows up immediately, but the donut appears gradually.

Cartridges with shallower shoulders do stretch more during firing, but not because of brass flow. Instead, the firing pin drives them further into the chamber, leaving more headspace at the rear of the chamber. As the powder charge starts to burn, the body of the case firmly grips the chamber walls. But as pressure rises, the rear of the case is stretched backward, until the case-head stops against the bolt face.

Lower-pressure cartridges don’t generate enough pressure to stretch brass, the reason fired .30-30 cases often have primers protruding slightly above the casehead. This normally isn’t because the rifle has excess headspace, as some shooters assume, because the amount of primer protrusion is normally within the .007-inch headspace tolerance of the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute (SAAMI).

Modern brass cases stretch at somewhere between the pressure of the .30-30, listed by SAAMI as 42,000 PSI, and the pressure of the .223 Remington, listed as 55,000 PSI. Which is why the dreaded donut doesn’t normally appear in .30-30 cases—unless they’re handloaded to higher pressures.

The donut can be prevented by adjusting full-length dies so case shoulders remain in firm contact with the chamber’s shoulder. Cases won’t be pushed further into the chamber by the firing pin, so won’t stretch when fired or resized—and the front of the shoulder doesn’t become the lower part of the neck, forming the donut.

Or at least they won’t stretch much. Cases with shallow shoulder angles can still be wedged forward slightly by the firing pin, though how much depends on the rifle. A military Mauser’s heavy firing pin and spring
shove a case forward more than the typically lighter firing pin blow from a modern sporting rifle, and a steeper shoulder angle resists the blow far better. This is why “Ackley Improved” cases, with sharp 40-degree shoulders, normally don’t stretch at all—unless we set the shoulder back during resizing.

Some handloaders use case-measuring tools to precisely measure the amount of shoulder set-back, and set their dies accordingly. Or at least they think they do. Individual cases vary slightly in brass thickness and hardness, so head-to-shoulder length varies slightly. I just set the die so all cases chamber with a slight amount of resistance, and don’t worry about the exact amount of shoulder set-back.

Improper die adjustment is by far the most common cause of donuts, which is why my .243 cases acquired donuts during my first attempt at full-length sizing. The inside neck reamer solved the symptom (the donut) but not the cause, which took longer to diagnose.

The second cause for donuts is necking-up cases, something more “advanced” handloaders tend to do, either to create wildcat cartridges or use cheap and/or easily available brass. A good example was the 6.5-06 E.R. Shaw rifle I shot for a number of years. In theory, making 6.5-06 cases should be easy, since all you have to do is run .25-06 cases into a 6.5-06 die—but expanding the neck also makes the top of a .25-06’s shoulder the bottom of a 6.5-06’s neck.

The necks of the two cartridges are similar in length, resulting in a donut so small most handloaders don’t even notice. In my rifle, however, I tried both .25-06 and .270 Winchester cases of the same brand, both pre-sorted for consistent neck thickness. But when seating bullets in the .25-06 case I could feel a little resistance as the bullet’s base touched the bottom of the neck, and the same loads in .270 brass resulted in smaller groups.

Now, I could have reamed the donut from the .25-06 cases, or even outside neck-turned the cases down into the top of the shoulder, which normally eliminates small donuts. But it was a lot easier to neck .270 cases down, partly because necking down also normally results in straighter necks than necking up. (However, if I ever build another 6.5-06 it will be a 6.5-270, eliminating the need to trim cases after necking down, and providing slightly more protection against throat erosion.)

Recently the well-known benchrest shooter/author Glen Newick wrote that using bushing-type dies to resize cases also resulted in the dreaded donut, because there’s normally a little space between the bottom of the bushing and the top of the shoulder. In the same article, he also wrote that necks do tend to thicken with repeated firings. However, I use bushing dies a lot, and haven’t noticed either problem.

There are two big advantages to bushing dies. First, if brass is sorted for consistent neck thickness, or outside-turned to the same neck thickness, the right bushing eliminates the need to “bump up” the inside diameter of the neck with an expander ball—and expander balls are why cases come out of sizing dies with crooked necks. Second, using the right bushing also works the brass as little as possible, resulting in longer case life—un-
less you’re one of those handloaders who anneals brass after every firing.

Both reasons are why I use bushing dies when handloading for high-volume ground squirrel and prairie dog shooting. Neck-sizing bushing dies not only result in straighter necks (and hence finer accuracy) but don’t require lubing the cases or, usually, any case trimming. Eliminating lubing and trimming save LOTS of time when cranking out hundreds of .17 Hornet or .204 Ruger handloads.

Unlike most benchrest competitors, I also use bushing dies when loading 6mm PPC’s for my benchrest rifle. I don’t compete in matches, instead using the rifle to perform accuracy experiments. With neck-turned and sized brass, my Redding Competition dies result in bullet runout under .0005 inch. (Yes, one 2000th of an inch.)

These cases MUST be neck-turned to even fit inside the tight chamber neck, common with benchrest rifles, and I’ve bushing-sized my present batch of Norma cases quite a bit without ever finding donuts, or any thickening of the necks. But after reading Newick’s article I’m going to keep closer track to see if—or when—either occurs.

Good Stuff

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Christmas Books

Puppies on the Patio
Diane L. Johnson
$9.13 Amazon.com

Man does not live by bread alone--or only read books about hunting. Sometimes you need a little something different, and these two books fit that bill. Let’s talk about Puppies first.

Diane Johnson is the author, though she claims her Corgi wrote the book. It’s the first of several books she’s working on, in a Bedtime Stories for Dogs series. The puppy books are picture books with few words, for little kids, but they’re also perfect for kids and grandkids. Available on www.amazon.com.

My Parent’s Got Old: Now What do I do?
$11.99 in paperback

My sister and I both wish we’d had this book when Mom fell 6 years ago. Pat has a doctorate in bio-chemistry but still had to spend lots of time and energy researching end-of-life-issues, legal and otherwise, as well as Medicare reimbursement schedules for Mom. Had we had this book, we’d have had a good head start with lists of what you need to know and where to find it, My Parent’s Got Old will save you from pulling your hair out.

Perhaps you’ll buy it for your parents, or buy one for each of your kids (or the most responsible one) and fill out the pertinent info for them, so that when your time comes, they’ll know what to do.

Our friend Richard passed recently, and the next day, his wife and family had to go find his birth certificate and other information and hadn’t a clue where to look. Turned out Richard knew they’d need it, and had collected it in one box, on his dresser where his wife could find it easily. She said it was like getting one last kiss and a hug. We all deserve that.

This practical guide for caring for our aging parents is also available on www.amazon.com.
Grandma’s Rifle Hunts Again

Early in 2016 it occurred to me that my big game hunting over the previous quarter-century involved an awful lot of “field testing” of various new rifles. These included some of my own, but not the heirlooms in the safe. These included one rifle used by at least half-a-dozen family members, three for their very first big game animal—including Eileen, back in 1984, not long after we were married.

This rifle, a Remington 722 in .257 Roberts, appeared in the last “Honest Guns” column of 2009, during the first year of Rifle Loony News. It belonged to my grandmother Elizabeth, who used it for hunting around her home in Lewistown, Montana. By that time she was known in the family as Grandma B (for Barsness), and was evidently a life-long hunter.

She grew up on a homestead farm in Minnesota, but during World War One homesteaded by herself in central Montana. This was on half a square mile of land, rather than the original quarter-section (160 acres) allotted by the original Homestead Act of 1862. A quarter-section was enough to make a decent living in southern Minnesota’s rich soil and abundant rain, but not further west, in what was often called The Great American Desert, so the Act was amended to give each homesteader twice as much land.

An old joke suggested the double allotment allowed Western homesteaders to take twice as long to starve out. Most did, only about a third “proving up” and gaining title by staying on the land for five years, while farming and building a home. But unlike most homesteads, a live stream flowed through my grandmother’s half-section. She eventually married the Norwegian who’d homesteaded the adjoining parcel, and together they lasted the five years.

But even a square mile of semi-desert wasn’t enough to make a living, so she taught in country schools, while he worked for Wells-Fargo 40 miles away in the nearest “city,” population 6000, spending only weekends and occasional holidays with his family. (Perhaps not so oddly, in 2016 Lewistown has almost exactly the same number of residents as in 1920.) They supplemented their living with wild game, but since she was the real hunter in the family, and lived where she taught, Grandma B took most. Their two sons lived with her in various “teacherages,” and she taught them to hunt.

My grandfather died during the Depression, so she went back to what was then called “normal school” and got an actual teaching degree, moving to Lewistown and eventually becoming the county’s superintendent of schools, while working the homestead during summers and weekends. After World War II she sold it for a pretty nice price, and after retirement married a hardware store owner from nearby Denton named Floyd Green, who bought her the Remington 722, probably wholesale.

She died a few years later, after using the .257 on a number of big game animals, including at least one elk. The rifle went to my Uncle Larry, because my father had pretty much given up hunting (he never was really into it as an adult, after shooting and eating too many jackrabbits during his youth). Larry already had a big game rifle, a sporterized Lee-Enfield .303, so his wife Pat used the .257 for several years before she too quit hunting.

Thanks to encouragement from a friend, my father decided to start hunting again in the early 1960’s, so borrowed the .257 and mounted its first scope, a 2-1/2x made by Light Optical of Japan, a company that still makes lots of optics. He took a forkhorn mule deer that fall, the second of three deer he killed in his life, at 250 yards while it trotted along a ridge south of Big Timber. (He wasn’t much of a hunter, but Grandma B taught him to shoot. One of her favorite techniques for keeping local cowhands from bothering the “lonely” country schoolmarm after she started at a new school was to wait until one rode by. She kept her Winchester pump .22 and an empty tin can by the door, and would grab both and head outside, throwing the can in the air and shooting it more than once while it flew. She never did own a shotgun, using the same .22 to take flying gamebirds.)

When my cousin Eric became old enough to hunt, Larry borrowed the .257 back, but Eric never took any big game back then, partly due to being right-handed but left-eyed, and quit hunting after a few years. In the meantime my father passed away, so the .257 remained with Larry, unused until Eileen decided to start hunting the second year we were married, partly because she started feeling guilty about me “working” so hard to fill our freezer by myself.

I borrowed the .257 again, working up a handload with 100-grain Nosler Partitions and IMR4350, eventually settling on 45.0 grains for around 3000 fps. Eileen killed a very nice pronghorn buck that fall (at left) and was hooked, the next year taking another antelope and a whitetail. However, she also decided the .257 was a little heavy for carrying up elk mountains, so we bought her a Browning A-Bolt .270 Winchester, the first rifle I’d ever been loaned for an article. The A-Bolt was as light as full-sized factory rifles got in those days, and she used it not only to take antelope, deer and elk but a Shiras moose over the next few years.

I took over the .257, using it not only for deer and antelope hunting but shooting rockchucks and even a few prairie dogs, since back then my only other centerfire rifle was a Ruger 77 .30-06. Like any rifle loony,
I’d long known .257 factory ammo was underloaded, so decided to see what it could really do, working up to 48.5 grain of IMR4350 with the 100-grain Partition for a muzzle velocity of 3250 fps, and 5-shot groups around an inch.

When sighted-in three inches high at 100 yards (common back then for open-country hunters) the Partitions were dead-on at 300, and only 10 inches low at 400. I used this load for several years, including a couple guiding for a nearby outfitter, taking what was my biggest pronghorn buck at 430 yards, and a buck wounded by a guide at around 550. (My buck was a 1-shot kill, but the wounded one required an extra “ranging” shot.) Then cousin Eric decided to start hunting again, so I took him out and he got a couple of mule deer with the .257, the second in 1992. At that point he decided he liked hunting enough to buy a used, left-handed Remington 700 BDL .30-06.

I went through several other .257’s after that, including a custom-barreled Ruger No. 1 and a Kimber 84M Classic Select Grade, while the 722 languished in our safe. It was first fired again in 2016, when I decided to try the new IMR4451 powder, a sort of modernized IMR4350, a double-based powder with short-cut granules and a decoppering agent that’s supposed to be temperature-resistant. I’d grown weary of trying to maintain an adequate supply of either IMR or H4350 during the Great Obama Shortages, but 4451 was easily obtained and looked like a good substitute.

After mounting a 6x36 Leupold, I tried several 100-grain bullets. It turned out the rifle didn’t like Partitions much anymore, probably because the chamber throat had eroded some. (Quite a few rounds were fired before we got the rifle in 1984, and we’ve logged over 1100 since, some with the barrel pretty hot when shooting varmints.) But with 46.0 grains, both 100-grain Ballistic Tips and Barnes Tipped TSX’s grouped five shots into around an inch, and to exactly the same point of impact at 100 yards, at 3100 fps. I’d long ago gotten over hot-rodding the .257, partly because of the higher ballistic coefficient of plastic-tipped spitzers like the Ballistic Tip and TTSX, and decided the load work fine.

Since the 1980’s I’d started sighting-in most big game rifles two inches high at 100 yards, but we’d drawn doe pronghorn tags for our local area, where shots can be a little longer, so sighted-in three inches high. The trajectory with both loads was very similar to 100-grain Partitions at 3250, and I decided to use the TTSX’s, since they chew up a little less meat than Ballistic Tips, and there’s only about 30-35 pounds to start with on a doe pronghorn.

When the opportunity came two weeks into the season the range was 345 yards, so I held near the top of the biggest doe’s back. Immediately after the shot the heartening thump of a solid chest hit came back on the cool morning air. The herd bunched up for a couple of seconds, then started trotting off. One, however, soon stopped and eased to the ground. Grandma B’s rifle had made meat once again.

What’s Next?

Our next issue is February 2017. But right now we’re waiting on pins and needles for the new cookbook to show up. The printer sent it out a week ago Friday, they said, and usually it takes only 3-4 days to get to us. But we’re 10 days later and the glass-half-empty person in me is thinking of hijackings and accidents.

It’s not too far-fetched. A few years ago, a friend of ours who just happened to be a state legislator was getting ready for the every other year session, when he cracked his upper denture plate. With lots of trepidation he sent it off to be repaired. Well, it was repaired very quickly and put on a UPS truck for expedited delivery back to the owner. But halfway there, the little brown truck was in a pretty violent accident. All the boxes flew around, bottles broke and stuff got spilled. Now, Bob’s dentures were fine, except for one thing. One of the boxes that flew around was full of little bottles destined for Don’s Sporting Goods Store in Lewistown MT, and what was in that bottle? Doe in estrus urine. Gallons of it. Did the bottles break? Of course they did. And spilled all over everything else. I know Bob made it to the legislature in time, with teeth, but I never heard how he got the stink out, if he got the stink out.

Tenderize the Wild is coming. We don’t live near Don’s anymore and we promise to only sell the ones that smell good.

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Hunting Pressure and Big Game Wariness

Early in Theodore Roosevelt’s 11-month African safari in 1909-10, he hunted near Nairobi, the capital of what was then the British Kenya Colony, and noticed that even near what passed for civilization: “At one hour, or on one day, the zebra and hartebeest would flee from our approach when half a mile off; and again they would permit us to come within a couple of hundred yards, before moving slowly away.... Once, when we had vainly been beating for lions at the foot of the Elukania ridge, at least a thousand zebras stood in herds, on every side of us, throughout lunch.... I was especially struck by the fact that those which were to leeward and had our wind were no more alarmed than the others.”

Many hunters in the more civilized parts of the globe often fantasize about hunting “wilderness” where animals are relatively unwary animals, but even in frequently hunted country, whether around Nairobi a century ago or in hard-hunted country in modern North America, big game animals can “tame down” pretty quickly, especially if only a few tags are awarded for certain species.

One good example is bighorn sheep in Montana. The odds of drawing a tag are low even for ewes, and a ram tag is like winning a million-dollar lottery. In over 40 years of applying I’ve drawn one ewe tag, and in almost 30 years Eileen has done the same. As a result, the vast majority of bighorn sheep are never even pursued by a hunter, much less shot at and missed, despite half of adult Montana men buying hunting licenses each year.

I drew my ewe tag in 2007 for the mountains a few miles west of town. We knew where the sheep lived, and could drive to the base of the mountain where most hung out. But we had to wait until the 25th of September, 10 days after the season opened, because the smoke of remnant forest fires had continued to fill the mountains; we did not want to hike around at 7000 feet above sea level sucking smoke deep into hard-working lungs.

Finally a rainstorm cleared out the smoke, and when we drove up there two days later the burned ground had already started turning green with new growth. Our pickup spooked several wild animals grazing on the lower end of the burn, including a black bear and a small bunch of elk, the herd bull standing to watch us for a few seconds after his cows took off, as if challenging us for possession of the mountainside.

The road ended at the base of the sheep mountain, a long, half-timbered slope below a 200-foot cliff, most of the trees blackened by the recent fires. We glassed the mountainside, finding a herd of bighorn sheep grazing near the base of the cliff—a typical early-fall “ewe herd,” a mix of adult females with that spring’s lambs, plus a couple of young rams, who would be run off by mature rams during the November rut.

I gathered my rifle and pack and started hiking uphill, while Eileen stayed below to provide hand-signals in case the sheep moved. I decided to stalk in a long curve to my right, to stay downwind of the herd and, about halfway up my path edged an unburned draw. On the other side, in easy rifle range, six bighorn rams lay bedded, all with heavy horns right around a full curl. Their heads turned as they watched me hike by, but otherwise they never moved.

After another few hundred yards I “sneaked” through open, half-burned timber to within 200 yards of the ewe herd before they paid any attention. Lying down and glassing carefully to be sure the sheep selected didn’t have testicles, I rested the 7x57 over my daypack and, after one last check, held the reticle behind the ewe’s shoulder and pulled the trigger. I then dragged what will probably be the one bighorn sheep taken in my lifetime directly down toward the road, Eileen meeting me partway up to take some photos.

A little later we drove below the draw holding the rams, and they were still up there, bedded in the same places. Looking the other way, down the mountain, we could see our little town eight miles away, including the water tower a couple blocks from our house. Ah, wilderness!

We’ve now been living here 26 years. For most of those years we traveled a lot to hunt, not only to other states but other countries (for me a total of 14, including 15 trips to various parts of Canada). While there are still
a few places we’d like to see, these days we mostly hunt in Montana, and mostly locally. We used to make several expeditions to other parts of Montana each year, most involving a day’s drive just to get there, easily possible in a state over 550 miles long, with highways frequently winding through mountains and canyons. But almost every kind of gamebird and big game in the state can be hunted within half an hour’s drive of our house, and eventually shorter drives and sleeping at home appealed more and more.

For the past several years we’ve even been hunting antelope locally, instead of driving to the “real” pronghorn country further east. However, since the local “plains” are a valley bottom between two mountain ranges, there aren’t vast numbers of antelope. The mountains above are all public, but the valley is checkerboarded by ranches, farms and subdivisions, and even some of the public land is off-limits to shooting near houses and the few small towns.

There’s some state and BLM ground, but we mostly hunt a few Block Management ranches, where the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department pays landowners a small fee per hunter-day to allow public access. Since antelope are open-country animals, they’re easily seen from the state highway bisecting the biggest chunk of public hunting ground, a tract measuring about 2x3 square miles—which aside from the state highway and a couple of short county roads at either end, is walk-in only.

Suburban antelope calm down fairly quickly after opening weekend, but it may take them a while to wander back into a legal hunting area.

Ninety percent of the ground’s so flat a hunter slithering along like a snake can be seen for half a mile—and there’s so much prickly-pear not many slither anyway. The flatness prevents even high-quality laser rangefinders from reliably reading the distance, especially on a typical sunny day. As a result, some antelope are shot at by “long-range hunters” but very few hit.

By the end of opening weekend, when most hunters head out (though not us) the antelope have abandoned the flats. Most other pronghorn states have short pronghorn seasons, some as brief as two days, but Montana’s rifle season is five weeks long, overlapping the first three weeks of deer and elk season. The animals spooked by opening-week hunters start to calm down again pretty quickly, and the few hunters who draw antelope tags often head for the surrounding mountains after the deer and elk season starts.

Our tactic is to hunt during weekdays, from Tuesday or Wednesday on, glassing both from the public roads and some higher spots we can hike to, until we find antelope in a stalkable area. Since the far end of the area’s only 15 miles from our house, we do this at least once a day, and over the past few years have sorted out their normal travel patterns, plus a few small pockets of public ground outside the flats where a herd’s occasionally found.

This year we drew doe/fawn tags, but didn’t find any stalkable antelope during the first week. The next week we went out one afternoon to find a silver pickup parked next to one of our favorite areas. That’s fine—it’s public ground—but we also saw two orange-clad “hunters” walking completely upright out in the middle of the big flat. They stopped every 50 yards to glass, but all the antelope within a mile had already seen them and crossed to non-hunting land, so we went home.

The silver pickup wasn’t around the next afternoon, and late in the day we found one herd half a mile out on the flats, right where we’d first seen the two hunters the day before, feeding along a shallow draw where antelope evidently find something very tasty. They often follow this draw to an area near the state highway, where a small underpass allows both cattle and antelope to easily cross from one side to the other. We got up early the next morning, and started glassing 15 minutes before legal shooting light, finding the herd within stalking distance of the underpass.

Oddly enough, doe hunting at this time of year is more complicated than “trophy” hunting. By late October the rut’s wound down, and herds often hold more than one buck. You can easily tell which has the largest horns, but picking a mature doe out of the bunch is tougher.

Fawns are legal and taste great, of course, but aren’t any better eating than older antelope, and have less than 20 pounds of meat. Bucks with horns less than four inches long can also be taken on a doe/fawn tag, but we would rather let them grow up—and really don’t want to take a mature buck that’s already shed his horn sheaths.

They normally lose the sheaths early in November, leaving only a short, black core, oddly reminiscent of “devil horns,” that immediately starts to grow the next year’s 2-pronged sheath. They can also lose their sheaths in late October, especially in country with a lot of fences—and several 4-stranders cross the big flat. Antelope normally slide under barbed wire, rather than jumping over like deer, and loose horn-sheaths are often pulled off by the lowest strand. Pronghorn bucks don’t naturally live much longer than six years on the northern plains, but with plenty of does around we see no reason to shoot one without horns.

The end of the stalk involves glassing a herd including as many as two dozen antelope without obvious horns, searching for the largest-bodied animals, without
the tell-tale black throat-patch of bucks. The patch isn’t very large and obvious on young bucks, and sometimes not on older bucks—and you also don’t want to shoot through one antelope and hit another. This is very possible, since even big does normally weigh under 100 pounds on the hoof, and both Eileen and I often use monolithic bullets. These don’t kill quite as quickly as lead-cored bullets, but also don’t shred as much of the relatively small quantity of delicious meat. And there’s no problem finding a downed antelope on the wide-open ground.

Antelope tend to be calmer in the morning, but this morning we could only approach within about 350 yards. While Eileen has taken antelope 100 yards further, she couldn’t get quite as steady as she prefers, and the herd was starting to get nervous, so I selected and shot a mature doe. Sometimes a herd will hang around if hunters remain still after a shot, but these wandered too far before stopping. There were still three weeks left in the season, so we retrieved my “goat” and waited for the next week.

Unfortunately, the same nitwit hunters showed up again, wandering upright across the flat along the same shallow draw. So we drove to the other end of the flat, where a county road forms the northern border of the hunting area, and found a herd feeding on a low rise, too far from any stalking cover but undisturbed. We decided to just sit and watch, in case they wandered into a stalkable area.

The silver pickup showed up about 10 minutes later. They’d obviously also seen the herd, and stopped to talk to us. It was a guy in his 30’s and a woman in her 20’s, and we explained we were watching the herd to see which way they’d feed. Eileen even explained how she’d taken a doe a couple years before, in the same area, by waiting for a herd to wander into a stalkable place, then scooting slowly closer on her butt while avoiding prickly pear. The herd had eventually become curious and wandered within 150 yards, shortening her scoot-stalk.

They frowned slightly at that, as if it didn’t compute, and then the guy said it looked like a nearby hill was close enough for a shot. I assured him we’d already laser-ranged it earlier that morning, and the top was well over 500 yards from the herd. He shrugged and said it didn’t look very far to him, and they’d already “gotten some shooting” at another bunch that morning. They drove off, and we did too.

We stopped along the state highway, near the underpass, to glass the west side of the flat. I also glassed briefly back toward the hill, and watched as the pair of “hunters” walked over the top, still standing straight up. Within a few seconds the antelope took off, splitting into two smaller bunches. The man hiked after one and the woman after the other, but all the antelope soon crossed fences into non-hunting ground.

In the meantime Eileen had spotted a small herd on the other side of the highway. They were traveling at a trot, but stopped briefly to look back toward the underpass before starting to trot again. No doubt they were the herd the other couple shot at, now heading for another stretch of wide-open country. We decided to come back the next day, hoping the nitwits wouldn’t be around.

They weren’t, and we found a good-sized herd along the low and tasty—to antelope—draw. But they were still far from anywhere we could stalk, so we went looking for the herd the nitwits had shot at. We found them less than half a mile from where they’d last been, and after some range-finding, decided they were a little over 500 yards away. However, a small and long-abandoned irrigation ditch angled closer, and while the ditch itself was too shallow to provide stalking cover, occasional piles of dig-up rocks lay along the edges, filled with weeds higher than the rocks. And the biggest weed-covered rockpile stood between us and the herd, 160 yards closer.

Eileen made the stalk while I stayed behind, again to provide hand-signals in case the herd moved. She bent over and slowly duck-walked to the rockpile, keeping it between her and the antelope.

In the meantime they’d wandered off a little, still feeding, their heads invisible in autumn-cured grass rising halfway up their chests. I watched Eileen lay her daypack on the rocks, then rest her rifle’s forend on the orange fleece. Evidently the position wasn’t quite right, so she started rearranging the rocks, still lying down.

Soon the biggest doe in the herd noticed the movement, raising its head and peering intently in Eileen’s direction, and eventually the rest of the herd started staring. Eileen kept rolling rocks around, then placing her pack on top and trying the new position. As she labored away, the lead doe started walking slowly closer, chest progressively rising from the blond grass, now backlit by the sun sinking toward the mountains beyond.

Finally Eileen had her rocks perfectly arranged, and lay glassing behind her rifle, the muzzle pointing toward the herd. When the doe’s chest rose completely out of the tall grass, she put down her binocular and eased into the rifle. The doe stood absolutely still, transfixed by the slight movement. Bang!

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