



“Do you think you can get my dad, Tony, a good deer?” inquired Rich Baalman from Oregon. “He is an older guy and he has some physical issues.” Without even knowing what his limitations were, I said “Yeah it shouldn’t be a problem. Our area is pretty easy to hunt, mostly farmland and the walking is on fairly level ground, not too far to go most times.” Even knowing that, I thought I better ask what he meant by physical issues though. “Why? What are his issues?” “Well he is 66 years old and pretty heavy, around 285 pounds at 5 foot 9 inches. “Okay, that’s not too bad,” I thought. “He also has some bad arthritis and his left hip especially causes him quite a bit of pain,” explained Rich. “Well, that might make walking tough,” I imagined, “but we should be able to do it. Is that it?” I asked. “Oh yeah, he is also missing his right leg,” said Rich. “What the heck!?” I was shocked by that one! “Well, he does have a prosthetic leg,” Rich countered. I was used to taking out hunters who are not in very good shape but this was a new one for me. I was a bit nervous about it, but I thought, “Why not?” Actually I enjoy the challenge of helping out guys with physical limitations- makes a guide feel good knowing you can get almost anybody his animal. It does help a great deal to be guiding in our part of Alberta, though.

It is what my hunters and I like to call a Big Game Hunter’s Paradise. The habitat is the perfect mix of farmland and big woods right along the huge Peace River drainage. My wife, Jen, and I live right in the area and run our business, Mike’s Outfitting, out of our home which doubles as a lodge. The deer in our zone can get all they need to eat in the crops and yet still have lots of escape cover in the thick trees surrounding the fields. It is also a limited draw area for resident hunter mule deer and moose tags. We have guaranteed licenses for our hunters. Along with the mule deer and moose, hunters can also see whitetail deer, elk, black bears and possibly wolves, sometimes all in one day. It really is an amazing place for animals and all of the hunting is accessible to the older, out of shape, or physically

—by Mike Ukrainetz—

disabled hunter. Knowing all of this I confidently booked Tony in for a trophy mule deer hunt for my next available opening. Rich said he would like to tag along as a non-hunter and help out any way he could. They booked the hunt back in 2006 and then I kind of forgot about Tony’s condition.

That was until they arrived for the hunt in September of 2008. They were both great guys, Rich and Tony, no high expectations just very happy to be hunting. Some of Tony’s problems had worsened, though. His hip had really needed to be replaced several months before the hunt but he didn’t want to do it and have to miss the hunt. Walking much at all was out of the question and that was kind of what we needed to do on the hunt this time. The hunting was tough due to a severe drought that we had been experiencing throughout May to September. Antler growth was down, so there weren’t as many good bucks as normal and the deer were scattered all over and staying in the trees which made the hunting conditions very challenging. This is extremely unusual for our area; usually we have to deal with too much rain and too much mud. Not this year, though. The crops were also very short so the deer weren’t bedding in them like they normally do throughout the summer, the bow season and the early rifle hunts. Deer bedding out in the open fields usually makes the hunting pretty easy, which was what I had been counting on to make this hunt work. Not this time, we were going to have to work for every big deer that we killed.

The main deer that we were after on Tony’s hunt was a buck that we had been trying to get on the previous hunt. Actually I had found him while scouting back in August and we had been trying to kill him as soon as the season had opened up, first with bowhunters and now with the rifle guys. He was a massive, old buck and he had been spending quite a bit of time out in the open, sometimes even bedding in the crops or in the small bush patches like we were used to.



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We almost killed him one day in the early bow season when we crawled up on him bedded out in the crop. We were also trying to film the hunt and we had left one guy behind on the stalk to film. He got the camera set up on a tripod 100 yards from the deer. We crawled another 50 yards closer and set up to wait the deer out, let him stand up on his own. Well, as soon as that smart old buck stood up he instantly spotted just the camera sticking out of the crop. He spun around and stared at it then bolted, running for miles. After that he went into hiding, but we ended up locating him again the day before rifle season started. We almost killed him on the first rifle hunt too, when we were still hunting through some of the trees. He was hiding in there like a cagey old whitetail buck and he let us pass by, then bounded out keeping trees between him and us and heading out at lightning speed. We never got a shot and the deer once again disappeared for several days. One of my guides did see him just one time right at last light as he stepped out of the trees into an alfalfa field. This was just before Tony's hunt started.

Tony was on the second rifle hunt and still hunting for the deer was out of the question. Tony wasn't at all lazy- he wanted to do the walking, he just couldn't, either to get in shape before the hunt or during the hunt. The only two ways to do the hunt was to set up on a field and hope the buck showed himself or cruise around in the truck looking for him. Shooting from the truck was strictly against the law, though, so if we did see him while driving we would have to bail out of the truck and get off the whole road allowance before we could shoot. That would be very difficult at best. On the first day we tried a setup on the edge of the alfalfa field where my guide had seen the buck. The farmer who owned the land did not want us driving out into the field so we would have to walk just 200 yards to get in position. Rich and I supported Tony all the way there but he was in excruciating pain for the whole walk, and even just tufts of grass would trip him up. The buck was a no-show and at last light we cursed our luck and hobbled back to the truck. My wife, Jen, had better luck. She also had been hunting for the buck, that is, scouting, trying to help us locate him again. She knew how tough this hunt was going to be and she wanted to help Tony out any way she could. She went for a truck cruise and spotted him at last light right near the road, a very rare occurrence for that smart deer. We couldn't believe it and decided to do our own cruising the next morning to see if we could get lucky too.

We couldn't find the buck anywhere in the morning and for the evening hunt another hike, even a short one, was out of the question so we decided to cruise around in the truck looking for him once again. Our real challenge would be that if we did see him we would have to hop out of the truck, I would have to run to the field, set up three-prong shooting sticks, run back to the truck, and help Rich get Tony out to the sticks. All the while we would be hoping that the deer would stand around waiting for all this to happen. "Yeah right," I thought, "this is a five-plus year old deer. No way, but what the heck else were we supposed to do? Oh well, worth a shot," I thought. Once again there was no sign of him for almost the whole evening, that was, until last light. Then there he was! He was a half mile from where we had set up for him the evening before and in a different field than where Jen had seen him. We raced over there fully expecting him to take off across the field and hide in the trees, but for some odd reason he didn't. I jumped out



of the truck, ran into the field and set up the sticks, then spun around to see if Rich and Tony needed help. My jaw dropped open when I saw what had happened.

Tony's hip had given right out and there he was piled up, lying in the ditch! I ran over, grabbed Tony under his armpit and heaved up while Rich did the same on his side. Tony was struggling as hard as he could too. He fought to regain his balance and got upright, Rich and me supporting him while he stumbled to the sticks. Tony finally got to them, grabbed the sticks, tried to balance his gun on them, and then lost his balance again. He leaned on the sticks and snapped one of the legs in half. He almost went down. All three of us fought to keep Tony upright while I think the deer stared at us in disbelief. I quickly re-rigged the sticks so he could use them as a two-pronger and then encouraged Tony to take his time and make sure he was on. I was sure his heart was just racing. That normally wary old deer just stood there like a statue in the open field. "250 yards," I whispered. "Boom", a miss!! I just about starting crying. The deer hopped to the side a few yards and faced us head on. I blurted out, "Don't shoot, just try to calm down and get steady." Tony's heart was probably pounding out of his chest. After a couple of minutes the buck turned broadside and I said, "Let him have it." Boom, and smack, a solid hit. The buck jumped in the air and ran into a patch of trees and brush disappearing from sight. "Let's just leave him till morning," I advised, not knowing what kind of hit we had and not wanting to push him out.

We came back in the morning and after some searching we found the buck dead. He was awesome looking, really heavy with a big in-line point. He was old too, very worn-out teeth, probably eight-plus years old, with not many years left, if any. I am still baffled as to why that deer who had been so smart and hard to get stood around like he did. Maybe he just wanted the old man to get an old deer. He gross scored 193 inches non-typical. Rich later told me that at the start of the hunt he had already decided that they probably wouldn't get a deer and just to be happy that he was out hunting with his dad. They were both so incredibly grateful and excited that it was really satisfying to see. Jen and I were thrilled to be a part of it. 