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# Bar Cross Bruisers

## Big Bucks and Big Trout

BY ALEX MAHER

PAGE DESIGN BY SAL MEJIA

I was a chilly September day, even by Wyoming standards with the sun still out mid-afternoon sending a mixed signal. The forecast called for snow, the temperature gauge in the truck dash read 53° F and dropping. A quick stop at the Daniel store for the usual gut bomb, and I pulled through the Bar Cross Ranch gates around 2 p.m.

A solo spot and stalk from the truck for a buck antelope was just what I needed after weeks of random four-mile, half-days chasing bugling elk south of Jackson Hole with the bow. Antelope herds grazed in the distance as I drove across the New Fork River, eyeing that favorite deep pool just downstream from the bridge, back into the heart of the sage and aspen covered hills. I had a certain willow-lined spring seep in mind for a closer encounter.

My mind wandered over the entire ranch, then settled on those deep pools downstream of the bridge. They just had to hold some bruiser trout. Almost a year later, my wife and I would trade off landing one after another big brown and rainbow trout out of those pools on the New Fork, another special day to be savored.

A half-mile south of the willow cover, I stopped to glass the country from the truck. There were two herds about a

mile above the spring. It was too far to judge the bucks, so I backed up and parked out of view. With a healthy walk ahead, I chose the shooting sticks instead of the bipod for the .300 Winchester Magnum, donned the orange, and headed north across the wind. I noticed the Gros Ventre Range had disappeared on the skyline, erased by that gray blur that signals snow on the way.

I kept the hill between me and the two herds as long as I could. Finally, I had to break across the open for 200 yards.

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## Bar Cross Bruisers

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When I reached the willows, I took a break and glassed the herds. They had moved farther away and were too far for a realistic shot. Then two bucks popped over the eastern hills and trotted down to the willows. I watched as one fed just off the two-track road to the right of the willows. The other disappeared in the willows to the left.

This buck was a shooter, so I eased up for a clear shot. When I had a clear path, he was standing only 150 yards out, and I stood to set the rifle on top of the shooting sticks. Then I realized I had a confidence issue. I had never shot from sticks standing up. I couldn't get steady on him. Then he lay down, so I could only see the top of his back above the sage brush.

I decided to move up and closed the gap to 70 yards by sneaking up through the willows along the creek. I was about ten yards from a clear shot when the Bar Cross ranch manager came bumping by in his truck, hauling horses up to the northern pasture.

The buck stood up at the sight of the approaching rig and ran off over the eastern hill. At one point, he stopped broadside at about 150 yards, but I would have had to shoot directly over the passing truck, not a good idea. Foiled, I poked out of the western side of the willows and glassed the other herds, but they had moved on, easily a mile distant.

Back to the truck and another two miles north on the Bar Cross Ranch, I

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turned the truck around at a high spot, facing south next to the northern pasture fence line. I could see three antelope herds grazing southeast of my position, and I thought they were worth watching.

The antelope were aware of the truck, but seemed content for the moment. I knew the instant I opened a door, they would put a mile between us faster than I could get my vest on. Fifteen minutes of vigil worked in my favor as the closest group of four fed behind a hillside.

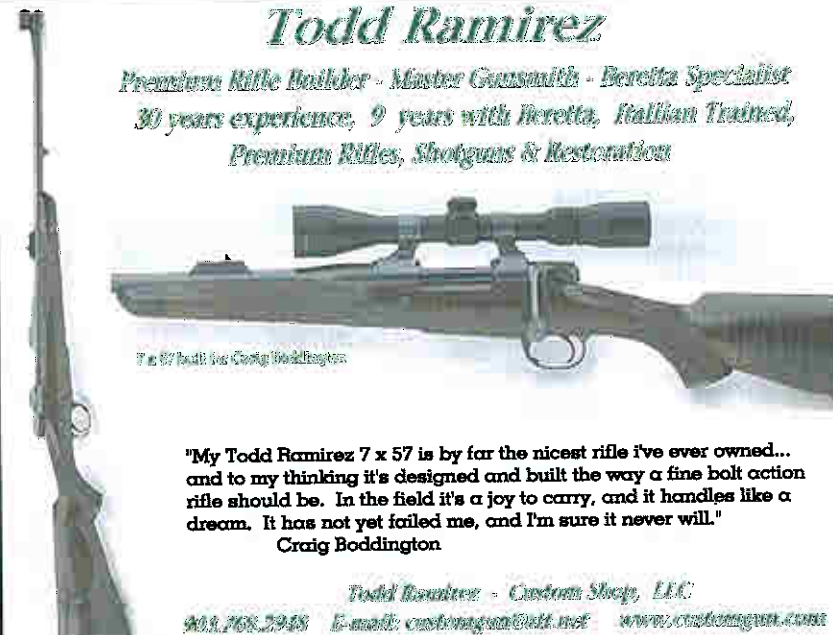
I eased out of the truck and put my bipod on the gun. I had lost confidence in my shooting sticks. This time, I left the pack and scooted quickly and quietly straight east hoping the wind stayed across me just enough. As I approached the crest of the hill, I still hadn't seen the herd run out from beneath, a good sign. I stopped to catch my breath and eased the bipod arms out to full length, hoping for a sitting shot position. Another 50 yards through the sagebrush and the herd broke straight away. The largest buck split right of the others, racing through the coulee and up the far hillside. Then he stopped to look back, quartering away.

The antelope's sprint had given me just enough time to sit on the downslope of the hill facing them and steady the rifle with the bipod rest. I had followed the big buck from bottom right to top left on the opposing hill, and when he stopped, I shot. He dropped in his tracks.

The light was failing, and snow came in flurries with large, heavy

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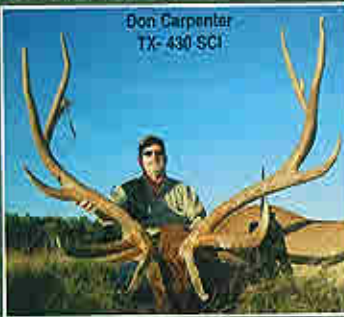
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flakes as I finished up packing out the meat and horns to the truck only 400 yards distant.

As I drove out of the ranch, I could see the outline of the Wyoming Range backlit with the setting sun. The Gros Ventres and the Wind Rivers may as well not have existed with the snow-storm graying out the northwestern and northeastern skylines. When I passed through the Willow Creek headquarters, I spooked a nice muley buck off the spring coulee that feeds a 40-acre lake. He angled up the hillside to the west, stopping less than 100 yards from the truck. I walked around the truck and glassed him, while he stood there in the alpenglow as if he knew I wasn't a threat that day. He was a shooter, too.

Just before the river, a small covey of sage grouse flew off the side of the road. Crossing the bridge, I wondered about those pools and knew the trout would be aggressive about this time of day. A six-weight with strong tippet and a big dark streamer would be my choice. I made a note to come back for that date, and I did.

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