

Travel
January, 1895

Hunting in the Cattle Country

For the last two or three years whatever hunting I have done has been from my ranch house, or while out on the range among the cattle. It is still possible in the cattle country to kill an occasional mountain sheep, bear, or elk; but nowadays deer and antelope are the only big game upon which the ranchman of the great plains can safely count.

In September of this year I made a ten-days' trip out on the great plains some fifty miles from my ranch, part of the time riding among the cattle, part of the time hunting antelope. My foreman was with me, and we took the ranch wagon, driven by a cowboy who had just come over the trail with cattle from Colorado.

After inspecting a lot of Maltese-cross "dogies" which had been put on in the spring, and which were still hanging around the river bottoms, as stock generally do until the winter weather gets them back into the hills, we headed for the prairies. The first night we passed by a stagnant pool in a creek bottom, and late on the second day reached the hunting-grounds; we struck a region where I had found antelope very abundant in 1893. At that time they had been so plentiful that it was an easy matter to get as many fine heads as one wished, and our party had spent but one or two days on the ground before killing all that we felt we had any right to; but as we left we encountered several bands of Sioux Indians from the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River reservations, coming in to hunt, and I at once felt that the chances for any future sport were small. Indians are not good shots, but they hunt in great numbers, killing everything, does, fawns, and bucks alike, and they follow the wounded animals with the utmost perseverance, so that they cause great destruction to game.

On reaching the ground, in this year, I found my fears sadly verified; and there was one unforeseen drawback to our sport. Not only had the Indians made a great killing of antelope the season before, but in the spring one or two sheep-men had come into the country. The big flocks had been moving from one spring pool to another, eating the pasturage bare, while the shepherds, wild-looking men on rough horses, each accompanied by a pair of furtive sheep-dogs, had taken every opportunity to get a shot at antelope so as to provide themselves with meat. Two days of fruitless hunting in this sheep-ridden region was sufficient to show that the pronghorns were too scarce and shy to give us hope for sport, and we shifted quarters. As so often on such a trip, when we started to have bad luck we had plenty. One night two of the three saddle-horses stampeded, and went back straight as the crow flies to their home range, so that we did not get them until on our return. On another occasion the team succeeded in breaking the wagon pole, and as there was an entire absence of wood we had to make a splice for it with the two tent-poles and the picket ropes.

Nevertheless it was very enjoyable, out on the great grassy plains. Although we had a tent with us, I always slept in the open, in my buffalo bag, with the tarpaulin to pull over me if it rained. On each night before going to sleep I lay for many minutes gazing at the extraordinary multitude of stars above, or watching the rising of the red moon. We had plenty of fresh meat;

prairie fowl and young sage fowl for the first forty-eight hours, and antelope venison afterwards. We camped by little pools, generally getting fair water; and from the camps where there was plenty of wood we took enough to build the fires at those where there was none. The nights were frosty and the days cool and pleasant, and from sunrise to sunset we were off riding or walking among the low hills and over the level uplands ; so that we slept well and ate well, and felt the beat of hardy life in our veins.

Much of the time we were on a high divide between two creek systems, from which we could see the great landmarks of all the region round about, Sentinel Butte, Square Butte, and Middle Butte, far to the north and east of us. Nothing could be more lonely and nothing more beautiful than the view at nightfall across the prairies to these huge hill masses. The lengthening shadows at last merged into one; the faint after-glow of the red sunset filled the west; the rolling prairie, sweeping in long waves to the feet of the great hills, turned violet and purple in the dim dusk; while the buttes themselves grew into vague, mysterious beauty as their sharp outlines softened in the twilight.

Even when we got out of reach of the sheep-men we never found antelope very plentiful, and they were shy; yet I had pretty good sport. There is no kind of hunting in which one spends so many cartridges as with antelope, and though, if anything, I spent rather less for each head of game killed than usual this trip, I still used up a good many. The first animal I killed was a doe, slain for meat, because I had missed two long shots at bucks already, and we were all feeling hungry for venison. After that I killed nothing but bucks.

The reason that, in antelope shooting, more cartridges are expended in proportion to the amount of game killed than with any other game is because the shots are generally taken at long range, and yet, being taken in the open, there is usually a chance to use four or five cartridges before the animal gets out of sight. These extra shots do not generally kill, but every now and then they do; and so the hunter is encouraged to try them, especially as, after the first shot, the game has been scared anyway, and no harm results from firing the others.

In 1893, on this same ground, I had a friend from the East with me, to whom I gave the shots, and I only fired myself at two antelope, both of which he had already missed. In each case a hard run and much firing at long ranges, together with, in one case, some skilful maneuvering, got me my game; yet one buck cost ten cartridges and the other nine. This year I had exactly the reverse experience. I killed five antelope for thirty-six shots, but each one that I killed was killed with the first bullet, and in not one case where I missed the first time did I hit with any subsequent one. These five antelope were shot at an average distance of about one hundred and fifty yards. Those that I missed were much farther off, on the average. The number of cartridges spent would seem extraordinary to a tyro; and an unusually good shot, or else a very timid shot, who fears to take risks, will, of course, make a better showing per head killed; but I doubt if men with much experience in antelope hunting, who keep an accurate account of the cartridges they expend, and who are game shots of only ordinary excellence, will see anything out of the way in the performance.

During the twelve years I have hunted in the West, I have always, where possible, kept a record of the number of cartridges expended for every head of game killed, and of the distances at which it was shot. I have found that with bison, bear, moose, elk, caribou, big-horn, and white goat, where the animals shot at were mostly of good size and usually stationary, and where the mountainous or wooded country gave a chance for close approach, the average distance at which I have killed game has been eighty yards, and the average number of cartridges per head three—one of these representing the death shot, and the two others standing either for misses outright, of

which there were not very many, or else for wounding game which escaped or which I afterwards overtook, or for stopping cripples and charging beasts. Black-tail deer I have generally shot at about ninety yards, at an expenditure of about four bullets for every deer bagged. White-tail I have usually killed at shorter range; but the shots were generally running, and often taken under difficult circumstances, so that my average expenditure of bullets was rather larger. Antelope, on the other hand, I have on the average shot at a little short of one hundred and fifty yards, and they have cost me about nine cartridges apiece. This, of course, as I have explained above, does not mean that I have missed eight out of nine antelope; for often the entire nine cartridges would be spent at one antelope which I eventually got. It merely means that, counting all the shots fired at antelope of every description, I had one head to show for each nine cartridges expended.

On this trip the prongbuck were shy, and they were for the most part out in the flat country. Of the five I killed, one I got by a headlong gallop to cut off his line of flight. As sometimes happens with this queer, erratic animal, when the buck saw that I was trying to cut him off, instead of turning he simply raced ahead just as hard as he knew how; and as my pony was not fast the buck got to the little pass for which he was pointed two hundred yards ahead of me. I then jumped off, and his curiosity made him commit the fatal mistake of halting for a moment to look round at me. He was standing end on, and offered a very small mark at two hundred yards, but I made a good line shot, and though I held a trifle too high, I hit him in the head and down he came. Another buck, a young one, I shot from under the wagon early one morning, as he was passing just beyond the picketed horses.

The other three I got after much maneuvering and long, tedious stalks. I made several such stalks that were failures. Sometimes, after infinite labor, and perhaps after crawling on all-fours for an hour, or pulling myself flat on my face among small sagebrush for ten or fifteen minutes, the game took alarm and went off. Sometimes, when I finally did get a shot, it was under such circumstances that I missed. Once or twice the buck was too far for accurate shooting; once or twice he had taken alarm and was already in motion. One afternoon I had to spend so much time waiting for the antelope to get into a favorable place, that when I at last got within range I found the light so bad that my front sight glimmered indistinctly, and the bullet went wild. Another time I met with one of those misadventures which are especially irritating. It was at midday, and I made out at a long distance a band of antelope lying for their noon rest in a slight hollow. A careful stalk brought me up within fifty yards of them. I was crawling flat on my face, for the crest of the hillock sloped so gently that this was the only way to get near them. At last, peering through the grass, I saw the head of a doe. In a moment she saw me and jumped to her feet, and up stood the whole band, including the buck. I immediately tried to draw a bead on the latter, and to my horror found that, lying flat as I was, and leaning on my elbows, I could not bring the rifle above the tall, wind-shaken grass, and was utterly unable to get a sight. In another second away tore the antelope. I jumped to my feet, took a snap shot at the buck as he raced round a low-cut bank, missed, and then walked drearily home, chewing the cud of my failure, and trying to convince myself that it was due to ill luck rather than to my own shortcomings. Yet again, in more than one instance, after making a good stalk upon a band seen at some distance, I found it contained only does and fawns, and would not shoot at them.

Three times, however, my stalk was successful. Twice I was out alone; on the third occasion my foreman was with me and held my horse while I maneuvered hither and thither, and finally succeeded in getting into range. In both the first instances I got a long standing shot; but on this last occasion, after half an hour's running and crawling on my part, two of the watchful

does which were in the band saw me, before I was within rifle-shot of the master buck. I was creeping up a low washout, and by ducking hastily down again and running back and up a side coulee, I managed to get within rather long range of the band as they cantered off, not yet thoroughly alarmed. The buck was behind, and I held just ahead of him. He plunged to the shot, but went off over the hill, and when I had panted up to the crest I found him dead just beyond; a fine old fellow, with the best head I got.

After killing the antelope, if I was on foot, I would take the head, saddle, and hams, and bring them in on my shoulders. If on horseback, I would take the whole antelope, packing it behind the saddle—of course, after it was dressed, and the legs cut off below the knees. I cut slashes between the sinews of the legs just above the joints; then I lifted the buck behind the saddle; then I ran the picket rope of my horse from the horn of the saddle, under the belly of the horse, to the antelope's legs on the other side, and through the slashes, bringing the end back, swaying well down on it, and fastening it again to the horn; after which I repeated the operation for the other side. Packed in this way the carcass always rides perfectly steady, and cannot by any possibility shake loose. Of course, a horse has to have some little training before it will submit to being packed.

After coming in from the antelope hunt I did but little shooting. Yet on the last day I spent at the ranch, and with the last bullet I fired from my rifle, I killed a fine white-tail buck. The sharp fall weather had just begun, and the river bottoms were very beautiful, for the clusters of wild plum-trees had turned dull red, and the young cottonwoods bright yellow, while the old trees, gnarled and storm-splintered, still kept their dark green foliage. On the day in question I left the ranch house early in the afternoon, on my favorite pony, Muley, my foreman going with me; and, after riding a couple of miles, by sheer good luck we stumbled on three white-tail, a buck, a doe, and a fawn. They were in a long winding coulee, with a belt of brush and timber running down its bottom. When we saw them they were trying to sneak off quietly through the brush; and immediately my foreman loped to the upper end of the coulee and started to ride down through it, while I ran Muley to the other end, to cut off the deer. They were, of course, quite likely to break off to one side, but this happened to be one of the occasions when everything went right, and they came straight on. When I reached a place from which I covered the exits from the timber I leaped off, and immediately afterwards heard a shout from my foreman, to tell me the deer were on foot. Muley is a pet horse, and he always enjoys immensely the gallop after game; but his nerves invariably fail him at the shot. He stood snorting beside me, and finally, as the deer came in sight, away he tore; only to go about two hundred yards, however, and stand on a hillside to watch us, with his ears pricked forward, until, when I needed him, I went for him. At the moment, however, I paid no heed to Muley, for a cracking and snapping in the brush told me the game was close; and in another second I caught the shadowy outlines of the doe and fawn as they sped through the low, thick growth. By good luck the buck, evidently a little flurried, came along on the edge of the woods next me, and as he passed, running like a quarter horse, I held well ahead of him and pulled trigger. The bullet broke his neck, and down he went in a heap—a fine fellow, with a handsome ten-point head and beautiful coat. He was very fat, for it was just before the rut.

Then we rode home; and I sat in a rocking-chair on the ranch house veranda, looking across the river at the strangely shaped and colored buttes, and at the groves of shimmering cottonwoods, until the sun went down, and the frosty air bade me go within.