

THE COMEBACK KID

A ROOKIE GETS A SHOT—OR TWO—
AT REDEMPTION IN THE HEART
OF OKLAHOMA'S ROUGH AND
SCRUBBY WHITETAIL COUNTRY

By Natalie Krebs || Photographs by Tom Fowlks

The author
takes a minute
to collect
herself after
a frenzied 48
hours.



The way I was shaking, you'd have thought I'd seen a ghost. He materialized in the brush on Halloween night. I was hunting hills, picking sand burrs out of my bootlaces and watching the river-bottom bluffs turn pumpkin orange, when the biggest deer I had ever seen on the hoof appeared 100 yards out. It took a moment to dispel the disbelief. My body, however, continued to shudder as if I were possessed. I fought to hold steady, but I knew I had missed even before the smoke cleared to reveal the flagging deer. I reloaded and waited. Dusk didn't, and neither did the buck, who soon returned to his meal of corn kernels. With more composure now, I squeezed the trigger again. Click. I'd forgotten to replace the spent primer. I swore, a stream of filth filling the blind as I scrambled for a fresh cap. By the time I got off the shot, my adrenaline spiked and I missed a second time. He did not return again, and I left with an empty tag in my pocket.

COMEDY OF ERRORS

× My only comfort was that this horror story ranked relatively low on the long list of mishaps my buddies and I were responsible for that trip. As near as I can tell, the guides at Chain Ranch later pretended that week of blackpowder season never happened. They put us on mature deer and we whiffed—most more than once. Our group of six still managed to tag a pair of bucks, but even those successes were jinxed. One handsome deer was left afield overnight after the hunter erroneously reported the direction in which the buck had run; coyotes claimed him. The other took a .50-cal. cleanly through the forehead instead of the intended target (his vitals). He was destined to become one hell of a European mount. Before my own blunders, I passed on a younger buck—a shooter back home, but too young by the Chain's standards. I couldn't believe my apparent good luck: Thompson/Center had organized a handful of



Chain Ranch guide and native Oklahoman Lincoln Mulherin scans the horizon for deer.

writers to test a new muzzleloader (that year, the Pro Hunter), and this included me, a new *Outdoor Life* hire who had previously only chased deer in a small corner of southern Indiana. But I was optimistic, eager to hunt well and hard. I was a 23-year-old junior editor working out of the magazine's New York City office, and proving myself with a record-book buck wasn't exactly on the agenda. I just wanted to make a clean, legal kill. And after all, my very first deer had fallen to a T/C

harder than I had in a long time. So I returned to the city, sheepish about my failure but wiser for it. Consolation came in the form of a fat winter doe, tagged on the family farm after Christmas. Months passed and another deer season approached. Incredibly, an invitation arrived nearly identical to the previous year's: Did I want to attend another blackpowder hunt at the Chain? I accepted. It would be a new season, and a clean start. Or so I thought. By the time I arrived at LaGuardia Airport to catch the flight to Oklahoma City, my plane had already been in the air for nearly an hour. I had misread my itinerary and showed up to a canceled reservation. The self-sabotage had already begun, and I wasn't even in the blind yet.

RETURN TO CHAIN

× Jeff Puckett rolled down his window as he rolled up to the curb at Will Rogers World Airport.



A hunter heads afield after lunch (above); the author glasses for deer.

“**THE ANTLERS WERE DARK AND HEAVY, YET THEY SEEMED TO FLOAT ABOVE HIM IN THE TWILIGHT.**”



“Well, hello, hello,” he said, grinning from behind the wheel. “Glad you could make it.”

I dropped my bags in the truck bed and climbed into the cab, braced for a ribbing that didn't come. He spared me the jokes and instead we got to catching up. I had met Puckett one year earlier at this same terminal. On that occasion he greeted me at baggage claim and carried my duffle to the truck. Such niceties had lapsed now that we were buddies, both veterans of last year's ordeal, and I was grateful he was around to bail me out with a ride to Canton.

The small farm town sits 90 miles northwest of Oklahoma City, Chain Ranch just outside it. The Chain was born on a 160-acre patch in 1893, and six generations later it has exploded into a 60,000-acre farm, cattle operation, and hunting outfit. A row of Red Angus busied themselves at their troughs, eyeing us as we parked in front of the wooden bunkhouse. Apart from the cattle, camp was deserted. Everyone had already left for an afternoon sit.

Just inside the porch screen door was a gun rack. I lifted one of the remaining .50-cal. T/C Strikes from it and headed to the range, trying not to think about how I had squandered an evening hunt.

WAITING GAME

✘ Lincoln Mulherin flipped down his sun visor as we sped along State Route 51 early the next morning, blocking the full moon from shining in his eyes. My guide rubbed the whiskers that didn't quite conceal his boyish face before outlining the day's plan: Sit as long as possible. Deer had been feeding hard all night, thanks to the moonlight, and wouldn't move until late morning.

This analysis was accurate, although plenty of action unfolded before first light. It may have been bright outside, but the blind's interior remained as black as on any moonless night. Coyotes howled incessantly, trotting past my hide on their own hunts. One ripped into a rabbit a dozen yards off, the high-pitched screams snapping my head to attention.

As the sun gradually replaced

the moon, I could see the box was situated on the point of a slope, an oil field station at its back and a wheat plot high and to the right. A meadow spread beneath, dry ridges and hills rose beyond. There was plenty to keep my binocular busy, but a morning of glassing didn't reveal so much as a tail flick.

A lunch break was scheduled for 11 a.m., but I remembered the moon and asked Mulherin for another 30 minutes via text, which he granted. Even so, he appeared sooner than expected. Not long after we exchanged messages he came running from the oil station, doubled over. He dove inside the blind and jammed his binocular to his face, whispering excitedly.

“Did you see him?”

Mulherin had already been en route when my text came through, so he parked 500 yards out and started glassing to pass the time. Minutes later a 150-class buck trotted into view along a ridge, doe in tow.

“I couldn't say if she was hot or not yet,” he said, eyes fixed on the ridge. “But the buck was leading, so I don't think so. They were headed this way. He was big. Really big.”

Mulherin rattled several times, but it was only late October and nothing moved on the horizon. Even with the promise of lunch, I was reluctant to leave the stand—there was a trophy buck in the neighborhood. But I was also supposed to meet my week's hunting

buddy on our break, and I decided I had better go collect him.

ANOTHER ROOKIE

✘ “Deer have really good noses, don't they?”

I kept my binocular trained on the same ridge Mulherin had glassed two hours before.

“Yeah, smell is their best sense.”

“So...this is a non-smoking blind, I take it?”

This time I lowered the eyecups and looked at my partner. Tom Fowlks had just arrived from a job in Texas and was now sitting beside me, adjusting his camera settings. The expression behind his rectangular glasses was part hopeful, part mischievous. I laughed, but hesitated at this new wrinkle in the week. I thought over for a moment, watching the photographer's knee jiggle.

“Smoke as much as you want now. But come prime time, yes, this is a non-smoking blind.” Then, in apology, I unzipped my pack. “Don't worry—I brought gum.”

I was determined to control the rest of my hunt as best I could. Instead of napping through the afternoon heat, I glassed while Fowlks and I passed the time getting to know each other. He lives in Los Angeles and, though he had done his share of extreme outdoor assignments, this would be his first deer hunt. The volume at which he relayed this information confirmed it.

For once, then, I had more experience than my hunting partner. This was refreshing, but it also meant I had suddenly become the teacher. I felt an imposter, but found I could answer his questions about deer behavior—and our subsequent behavior as hunters—reasonably well.

A trio of does finally appeared at day's end, their yearlings trailing behind. The party picked its way down a draw at 700 yards, and I struggled to keep track of them in the glaring sun. I was thrilled to finally spot deer and watched intently. Eventually I remembered the corn feeder down the hill from us and glanced that way—just in time to see a big-bodied deer leave the shelter of the tree line. The antlers were dark and heavy, yet they seemed to float above him in the twilight.

All hell broke loose inside the blind.

AFTERSHOCK

✘ He came back, I texted Mulherin. *I took a shot. Not sure about it. Ran into thick cedars to right of feeder. Tail wasn't up. Reloading.*

Awesome!!! Was he standing still when u shot?

Yes. But I was shaky. Did he kick when u shot?

I didn't see. Smoke. It was maybe 55 yards.

I bet he's dead. Proud of ya! Don't get ahead of yourself!

I put down my phone as the last bit of light trickled out of the blind, replaying the preceding minutes in my head.

There was no question about it: The huge deer that had stepped out was the buck from this morning.

When he appeared, Fowlks was between me and the window with the best line of sight. I crossed the box in a single lunge.

“Switch with me!” I hissed at Fowlks, swatting him out of his chair. He took my own newly vacant seat without protest. I poked my barrel through the window, searching for movement as the rattle of the metal folding chairs quieted. The deer had come from the bottom and disappeared behind a woodlot in the



▲ After the author dressed out the buck and they hung it to cool, Mulherin taped its antlers at an unofficial 169 inches.



▲ From left: Mulherin (left) and Clemons confer; the backup Buck 110; the skinning shed.

middle of the clearing. I guessed he would circle and, moments later, was relieved to see a deer where I expected, nose pointed at the blind and cruising in an arc.

"Watch him," I told Fowlks. "See what he does when I shoot." "Okay."

The buck paused, head down in the grass, quartering ever so slightly toward me, and as close as I had any right to hope. Instead of taking a moment to calm my nerves—or check with Fowlks—I pressed the trigger. Smoke hung in front of the window. The deer tore out from behind the cloud, beelining for the cedars 60 yards in front of him like a racehorse headed for the finish line. I waited before reloading, listening for a crash that never came.

"What did he do?" I asked Fowlks, a little desperately. "How did he react?"

"I wasn't watching," he said, snapping a photo of my

expression. My moment had passed, and now it was his task to capture what I'd set in motion. "I couldn't see, so I was switching to the other window when you shot."

I picked up my phone and texted Mulherin.

BOOTS AND BLOOD

× He arrived 20 minutes later, Alan Clemons in tow. I was relieved to see them both. Clemons is a lifelong Alabama hunter and managing editor of *Deer & Deer Hunting*. There was no dead deer anywhere I could see. No dead deer meant tracking. And for tracking, I wanted experts.

The four of us walked to where I figured the buck had stood at the shot. The hope that had risen in my chest soon vanished as quickly as the deer had: No one could find a drop of blood.

We expanded the search, then regrouped to review the exact sequence of events. Mulherin and I had joked together for much of the day but now he was all business, questioning me as a cop

might: Where was the deer exactly when I shot? Well, was it on this side of the bush or that side? Was I sure? Maybe I should go back to the blind—perhaps that would jog my memory.

I trudged up the hill, discouraged. Not a single speck of blood? But the deer had sprinted so fast—I was sure I had connected. I considered the view before clicking on the heavy flashlight and aiming it in the same spot where we had started.

The men shielded their eyes, squinting up at me before turning to examine the brush again. I held the light and used the moment alone to wring my brain. The most vivid memory was also the most useless: tall mahogany tines, symmetric, with beams that stretched out to his nose.

I rejoined the guys and we turned to the cedars. After much searching, Mulherin pinched a leaf from its stalk and raised it to his nose. I winced.

Gut shot.

He called Clemons over but told me to stay where I was. The two men had a hushed conversation. Fowlks snapped photos with gusto, lighting up the grass every few seconds with his flash.

This must be what it was like to stand outside an operating room, I decided. The outcome was known to a select skilled few while the emotionally invested fretted in the waiting area, safely out of the way. I suspected they were deciding how much to tell me. At last they turned and beckoned.

Mulherin broke the news: He had found a few drops of blood, but also a bit of clear slime that smelled, ever so faintly, of guts.

"I bet he's dead," Mulherin said again, without a smile. "But I don't want to risk pushing him. We're going to back out and come back first thing tomorrow."

I remembered the squealing rabbit and felt sick.

Clemons clapped me on the shoulder.

"You're in for a long night, my dear."

A CURSE BROKEN

× I slumped into the backseat of the truck, reminded of a similar drive on Halloween the year before.

That one had also been embarrassing, but at least the case was closed when we pulled away. Clean misses—I had been sure, and a thorough search of the area had confirmed it.

This time, though, the weight of my actions dropped into the cab with me.

My own guts writhed, and I found I had no appetite for dinner. A snore startled me out of my self-pity, and I looked across at Fowlks, whose head had tipped against the window. He was at ease after a night of hard work, and I envied him.

Everyone in camp did their best to raise my spirits. They were just being kind in their assurances that we would find my deer tomorrow—no one knew for sure. But their encouragement had its intended effect. Finally I filled a small bowl with stew, ate, and turned in. My eyes

ached from glassing, and the highs and lows of the evening had left me spent. Not even my queasiness or Fowlks' ear-splitting snores from the next bunk could prevent sleep.

By the time I woke in the morning, the other hunters were gone. My anxiety remained, along with a side of guilt for sleeping so soundly.

Day broke just as we reached the blind. Mulherin took the lead, picking up the trail where he'd left it and disappearing into the cedars. I looked around a moment. Things didn't seem so grim in the light of day.

I ducked into the cedars and

only made it a dozen yards before I heard the shout.

"Dead deer!"

I emerged to find Mulherin, a broad smile back on his face, pointing at his feet.

My buck lay 100 yards from where the bullet passed through him, just on the other side of the cedars and mercifully untouched by coyotes. Curiously, the bedrock underneath him was free of blood. His body was arranged as I had last seen it: neck stretched forward, antlers reaching high, legs bent as if running. Dark velvet still coated the tip of the left main beam. Shredded tree bark was lodged between the beads of his

bases. I brushed the entry wound with a finger: farther back than I had intended, but still deadly.

I spent the morning stunned at my good fortune, thoroughly relieved the buck had been recovered. After a night on the ground his belly had bloated slightly, but when I sliced into it at the skinning shed we found the meat unspoiled. All the blood that might have left a trail now pooled onto the concrete and we could see what had happened. The .50-cal. had pierced one lung, pulverized the liver, and exited in a bit of gut.

Never before had I needed to mind the cape while dressing a deer. I used Mulherin's Buck 110 to make my cuts, a spare he had fished from his pickup console when I mentioned I had forgotten to pack my own blade. A rookie mistake, I admitted.

"You can keep it," he said, dropping it into my hand.

I had cause to use the folder again sooner than expected. I dropped a doe in her tracks the next night, punching through her ribs exactly where I intended. ▲▲▲

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