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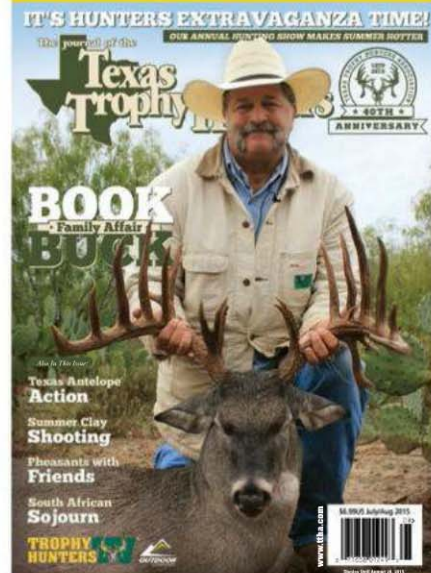
By Jeff Schneider

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ON THE COVER

Photo By: Jason Shipman

Phil Hunter had never killed a buck on his own ranch, until this past deer season. His buck would be one for the books—more specifically—Boone and Crockett's record book.





AXIS BONANZA

By Scott Murray



The happy couple became successful with their free management hunt they won at the Hunters Extravaganza. They each took axis bucks with their rifles and axis does with their bows.

As we wandered through the maze of vendors, guides, and retailers at the annual Hunters Extravaganza show in Houston, we happened upon the Joshua Creek Ranch booth. Each year I attend this show and always stop to talk with those folks. Their booth and hospitality is always inviting. I've always wanted to hunt axis deer, but I'm not interested in high fences. That's another element that kept me interested in hunting with them, a free ranging operation for both whitetail and axis deer.

As we approached, Jesse, their lead guide said, "Well...are you going to hunt with us this year?" Before I could get out a word he explained they were going to draw for a free management hunt after all the Extravaganza shows. This is where it gets interesting. I'm one of those lucky guys who has a woman in his life who loves the outdoors: hunting, fishing, or anything outdoors. Cindy grabs one of the information cards, fills it out, and with all the confidence in the world says, "Here is the winning card," as she drops it in the box.

Four weeks later she received an e-mail that said she is the winner of the free management axis hunt. Finally, the motivation I need to buy a trophy hunt. We completed the agreement forms, sent in the deposit and began the first phase of our hunt.

It was a long 8 months until our hunt dates. We selected the time when the majority of axis bucks are hard antlered and rutting. I had never hunted in the heat of May before. It would be new experience for me. Since we both bowhunt we did have some lightweight camo, but it would be 90 degrees plus while we were there. Shorts might be in order.

My initial plan was to bowhunt for my buck, but my guide Brad convinced me to use my rifle for the buck and then try for a doe with my bow. He knew that axis bucks, especially the mature bucks, are very weary and wise. Success rates of shooting trophy bucks with a bow are extremely low. I listened to him and changed my plans accordingly. I'm glad I did.

The first evening out we saw a lot of whitetail, axis and

turkey. Just before dark we saw a nice axis buck at 230 yards. It was too dark to shoot and Brad said we could do better. Later Cindy and I enjoyed a great meal and comfortable accommodations.

The next morning we headed out while still dark. We got in the stands just before daylight and settled in for a quiet sit. I saw so many axis and whitetails that morning it was amazing. There were a few small bucks, but no mature shooters. It was still a great time in the stand with so much activity. We returned to the lodge around 10 a.m. for brunch. After a short rest we went out for a mid-day sit in the stand just in case a bruiser was chasing does in the daytime heat. We did not see anything, but we did manage to work up a major sweat sitting it a hot box for three hours.

We ate an early dinner before heading out for the evening sit. Brad and I got in our new stand location about 4:30. We spooked up some pheasants while getting in the stand, a few lucky birds that did not get shot during the upland bird season. We did not have to sit very long when the whitetails began to move in. One young axis buck came out just as the wind began to pick up. Eventually the wind became gale force and spooked all the animals back into the thick brush. I didn't think we would see anything more with it being so windy. Our blind was shaking and I had to remove my hat, even inside the blind.

Much to my surprise, the whitetails began to slowly work their way back out, but were very skittish. It was still almost two hours from dark when we saw the young axis buck coming out again. But there was something behind him. It was behind some brush, but we could see it was something big. Then he stepped out a bit more and we could see a huge set of antlers and a big body. I was already reaching for my rifle when Brad said, "Get your gun." The crosshairs were on his shoulder and I was clicking off the safety when Brad said, "Get ready." The buck stopped at about 130 yards when I squeezed the trigger and he fell straight down. I dropped him in his tracks.

It was still almost 2 hours from dark when we saw the young axis buck coming out again. ... It was behind some brush, but we could see it was something big. Then he stepped out a bit more and we could see a huge set of antlers and a big body. I was already reaching for my rifle when Brad said, "Get your gun."

Brad was hooting and hollering as I chambered another round. After a high five Brad was out the door and headed to see him, I had to catch up. This was my first axis and I was pumped. It then hit me what a nice animal this was. It was only about five seconds from the time I first saw this buck and the time I pulled the trigger, so I did not have much time for "buck fever." Once I got my hands on his antlers the "fever" began. I was shaking with excitement. Brad was trying to take pictures when he asked me if I was ever going to stop shaking. It was a great moment.

After loading him up and heading back to the cleaning rack Brad asked me if I heard if Cindy had shot yet. I said "no, but not to worry. She will shoot a bigger buck than mine". At which he gave me a funny grin. She is a great hunter. Like I said, I'm a lucky guy.

Just before dark, as we finished cleaning my buck, my phone went off. I laughed out loud when Brad said, "What?" I read the text message from Cindy saying she had just shot a giant axis buck. Brad said, "You told me so." Shortly thereafter we got another message asking for tracking help. We headed over to them and in short order found her buck, and he was really a nice one. High and wide, just like she said she wanted. It could not have been more perfect. She was thrilled and I was so happy for her. Especially with all this happening on my father's birthday who passed away the prior year. Thanks, Dad; this hunt is for you.

The celebration went late into the night so we decided to sleep in the next morning, since we had another day and a half of hunting. Before I went to sleep I packed away my rifle and got out my compound bow for my axis doe hunt the next afternoon.

After a great night's sleep and hearty breakfast we took pictures of our trophies. The photographer did not need to say, "smile." One was planted on both our faces. We had the middle of the day to do as we pleased, so we elected to go kayaking down the Guadalupe River. It was a beautiful stretch of the river and we only saw two tube floaters the entire trip.

Later that afternoon we set out for our axis doe hunts. When bowhunting I prefer to be elevated, but Brad convinced me to hunt from a ground blind setup that he knew of. I was dreading sitting in a hot blind in 90 degree heat. I was surprised to find a nice blind set up inside a bush. The breeze was flowing right through and in our faces. It was close by the first box blind we sat in on day one, where we saw a bunch of axis does. My worries quickly became anticipation. And we did not have to wait very long.

Shortly after sitting down we saw turkey and whitetail. We were not there more than an hour or so when two axis showed up. Brad explained we should take the first opportunity before too many other axis show up—and we would be watched by too many eyes. The big doe was not quite in my shooting window at first, but eventually worked her way into one of my lanes. I drew back my bow and held the second pin behind her shoulder. I had previously ranged the area and knew she was between 30 and 35 yards. As soon as I got a quartering away shot I let the arrow fly. I could not tell exactly where or if I hit her, but I thought I saw the arrow pass through. She ran a short distance, stopped and then tumbled over. She was down.

After a round of high fives we got out of the blind and picked up the arrow. We found the front half of the arrow, but the back half with the fletching and nock was nowhere to be found. There was no tracking job required. The blood trail was heavy and we could see where she fell. The rocks where she was standing before falling over were covered in blood. The arrow entered a bit low and exited near the opposite leg, cutting straight through her heart. We later found the back half of the arrow inside her chest.

Just like the previous evening hunt, Cindy shot right before dark. It was a very mature old doe with a gray face. We both were able to take a great trophy axis buck and doe. Cindy's buck was 33"x33" and mine was 33"x32". Hers had the width she was looking for and mine had great cottle tines. Both rough scored over 150 gross—truly a hunt of a lifetime. 🦌



The author with his bow shot axis doe.