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Sports

Bow packs plenty of power for trophy buck

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CATARINA — There was only one way to describe the north wind that was blowing across the brush out in the middle of Rancho Encantado during a recent hunt: “Biting.”

Drop down a window facing that wind and you were bitten immediately, feeling the sting of near-frost conditions in the desert. But the good thing about hunting here is that Jack Brittingham has dozens of bow blinds set up for every wind situation, and Bobby Parker didn’t have to worry about any of the deer at the blind he was hunting picking up his scent and blasting away without being seen or getting close enough for a shot.

Parker was there hunting a deer named Goosebump, so named for the skin conditions he brought forth any time a hunter got a glimpse of him in the brush. Parker had endured my ribbing him about whether the light draw weight on his bow would even break the skin on the big whitetails on Brittingham’s ranch.

Giving nothing away to the teasing, Parker would just smile and head out again, with nothing but a joke about all his “experience” bow hunting in Texas. Actually, he has just been hunting for two years, and he already has taken a

giant buck in East Texas and was hoping to duplicate that feat during his first trip to Encantado.

We arrived on a Sunday afternoon and headed out to hunt the bucks that had been picked for us. Ranch manager Cade Green names the bucks on the ranch, holding them out until they reach 7½ years old, when they move into the age bracket that Brittingham uses for harvest on his ranch.

And make no mistake, just because they have names doesn't mean they're tame or used to people or aren't as wild as any other deer. The names just make it easier to identify each buck during the offseason, when Green searches for and finds shed antlers and uses those to measure the quality of the deer's antlers the next year.

Goosebump had a good year in 2018, pushing his gross Boone and Crockett score up above 170 inches, even with a narrow frame, through long tines and incredible mass.

Parker chose not to see a picture of his buck ahead of time for fear of getting too excited, waiting for Green to make the call should the buck show up close to the blind. That happened on the second afternoon of our hunt when Goosebump slipped in to feed and Green gave Parker the green light.

However, while waiting for the buck to turn broadside, the hunters suddenly watched in horror as he turned directly away from them and left the area. "He never gave me a shot," Parker explained over a glass of wine that night. "He's a good buck, though. I could tell that."

The next morning Parker and Green were back in the same blind and shivering against the same north wind that was blowing a cold front down into South Texas. As they sat quietly, Green reached over and patted Parker on the leg.

“That was our signal that the buck was there,” Green said. “I told Bobby I would give him another pat when the buck was broadside and he should take the shot.”

Goosebump fed around in front of them for 15 long minutes before he finally presented them with a slightly quartering away broadside shot. Parker, who had shoulder replacement surgery earlier this year and has been hampered in terms of the draw weight of his bow, managed a very slow and smooth draw and held on the buck.

When Green gave him the double tap to take the shot, Parker released the arrow. Green was videotaping the event, and back at the lodge we could see the arrow disappear in the buck’s side, aimed at the off shoulder, just as it should have been.

The buck tore out of the area and jumped a short hog fence before stopping and just looking around.

“I got worried at that point,” Green said. “I could see him just standing there looking around. Then he started walking again. He walked a few yards and stopped again.”

Green watched the buck move a second time as he disappeared into heavy brush about 75 yards from the blind. After waiting an interminable 45 minutes, Green slipped out of the blind and walked to where the buck had stopped and stood.

He found blood, though not buckets of it. There was another puddle at the next spot where the buck stood and then just a few dribs and drabs as the old guy moved on into heavy brush.

“I stopped right there,” Green said as we watched the video back at camp. “I knew I was going to have to bust through some heavy brush, and I didn’t want to spook that buck and push him out of there if he was just lying in that thick stuff.”

Brittingham watched the video and declared the buck dead already and tasked Green with going back after breakfast to pick up the train.

“I’d rather wait to find the deer than push him out of there and lose him,” Parker said, agreeing to wait an hour or so before returning to the scene of the crime.

When we got back to the spot where the deer had last been standing, there was a small puddle of blood on the red soil. Parker and I waited there while Green and Brittingham eased off ahead of us following the blood trail. In two minutes they were back and motioning us ahead to pick up the buck’s track.

Goosebump hadn’t gone 15 yards past the place where he’d last been standing.

“Just like they all do, he fell with his head in a prickly pear,” Brittingham said.

“But there he is.”

The buck was a monster, 200 pounds of muscle and bone and a true trophy no matter the hunting technique or the ranch where he lived. He scored 175 inches on the Boone and Crockett scale and became the biggest buck Parker had killed in his entire life.

Parker couldn't resist a little needling of his own, offering to show any fellow hunters his tricks for taking a trophy like that, even with his little 43-pound draw weight toy bow.