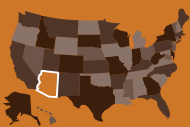


RIDING ON COATTAILS TO THE STRIP



HUNTERS: JOHN MARIN & MANUEL ARMENDAREZ
SPECIES: MULE DEER
LOCATION: ARIZONA

LAST SPRING WHEN MANUEL ASKED ME TO PUT IN FOR DEER WITH HIM IN UNITS 13B AND 12A, I SAID SURE, WITH A 1% CHANCE OF getting drawn, I said yes because I knew there was no way we would draw tags. I had already planned an elk hunting trip to Colorado in October and a Coues deer hunt in Old Mexico the following January. Manuel had accumulated 14 bonus points and had not been drawn since his last trip to the Kaibab when he harvested a 189" 5x7 Mulie. I had amassed a whopping 2 bonus points and hoped that Manuel hadn't asked me to put in with him because of our work relationship (the fact that indirectly I'm his boss), but instead because of our same passion for the sport.

Summertime rolled around, and Manuel came running into my office and said, "We've been drawn for something!" He was given a courtesy call from the Arizona Game and Fish Department asking for his credit card information because of a glitch with the information given when his wife applied for our hunt. By now you've probably guessed that luck was on our side for a number of reasons.

Without knowing which unit we drew and hoping it was 13B, Manuel began a search for guides on the Strip. Manuel had made only one call to Travis McClendon with Arizona Strip Guides and convinced me that Travis had a successful track record and seemed more than accommodating. Once confirmed that we did draw 13B, I quickly cancelled the other hunts to concentrate my efforts on this trip. Knowing this was more or less a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, we booked the whole enchilada – a 10-day, fully-guided, one-on-one experience.



ON JUST THE SECOND DAY OF SEASON, JOHN PUNCHED HIS ARIZONA STRIP TAG ON A GIANT BUCK KNOWN AS "FIFTY FOUR!"

Finally, after a long summer, November arrived. With my wife's permission and reluctance to get a scratch on what she believed was her truck, we loaded our 2015, 2500 Chevy Z-71 for its maiden voyage. Manuel and I drove the 400 miles to St. George, Utah to meet my guide, Josh Corbin, who would escort us the

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last 70 miles to our hunting camp. While waiting to meet Josh, Manuel and I talked to a couple of guys from Casa Grande, Arizona who had spent a week before the hunt scouting. They

informed us that they had not even seen a deer, and our spirits sank. We told Josh the same story, and he said, “Well, they should have hired guides.”

Upon arriving at camp, we were introduced to Travis, the entire team of Arizona Strip Guides, and the other hunters. We got acquainted and were shown trail camera footage of deer our guides hoped to encounter. They had names for some of the bucks like “Baby Face,” “Fifty Four,” “RG3,” and “The Wall.” We were psyched and couldn't wait for the hunt to begin the next day.

After a long day, morning came early. I climbed into the truck with Josh, and Manuel went with Travis. The Strip country is beautiful, and I anticipated seeing deer everywhere, but quite the opposite occurred. After the first day Josh and I hadn't seen a deer, and Manuel and Travis had only seen a few small bucks.



The one thing Manuel and I both learned, though, was that our guides were knowledgeable, professional, and committed to finding us 200" plus deer.

My second day was a little more fruitful. After glassing from a hill, Josh spotted deer and we began a trek across a flat to size up the deer he had seen. I immediately learned that I had better keep Josh's pace or be left in the dust. Josh glassed the deer up and determined it was a "no go." Once again, I hadn't even seen a deer and it was back to the truck to go to a new location. In route to his new spot, we stopped to glass an open area and finally I saw deer, a few does and a 2-point buck. Josh got excited and said to shoot that buck. At about 150 yards I saw the buck Josh

had pointed to. As I pulled my rifle up and looked through the scope, I saw heavy beamed antlers and trusted in Josh that this was the deer to take. I pulled the trigger, heard the "whop," and saw the buck hunch. Just for good measure, I hit him again. I couldn't believe my eyes when we got up to him and Josh informed me that we had just killed Fifty Four. Since the previous year, Fifty Four had grown to be a 4x6 with eyeguards and two kickers on each side. Wow, the second day of a 10-day hunt and I was done! Relieved and excited, we took the buck back to camp where it was caped by Travis's partner, David Pareda.

Our attention then turned to Manuel's hunt. Needless to say, it would require an additional week to fill Manuel's tag. During



ON THE SECOND TO LAST DAY OF SEASON, MANUEL MADE A GREAT SHOT, HAMMERING THE BEAUTIFUL 4X5 IN HIS TRACKS!

that time, two of the other hunters in camp would fill their tags with impressive bucks before Manuel. This is where his story begins.

On the third day of Manuel's hunt, after passing several 190" bucks, he had a shot at what looked like The Wall's brother at 295 yards. After a few shots and, to Manuel's surprise, a clean miss, he was disgusted with his performance. On the way back to camp we saw a coyote and ranged him at 350 yards. Manuel shot and smoked him. In a reluctant sort of way, Manuel was happy the gun was spot on, but the thought of missing that monster buck still played with his emotions.





TRAVIS AND MANUEL WITH MANUEL'S ANTLERS,
JOHN AND JOSH WITH JOHN'S ANTLERS



Three or four more days would go by with several bucks located, but Manuel passed on them to pursue his dream of taking a 200" deer. I think it was on day seven, after glassing a meadow, that Travis spotted a 5x4 buck that was recognized as a shooter. After closing the distance to 50 yards, Manuel shot and missed again and struggled to chamber another round. This was truly a classic case of buck fever. Guess what happened the next morning. We saw yet another coyote at 150 yards, and wouldn't you know it, our sharpshooter nailed him.

On the second to last day of the hunt, it was redemption time. At the opposite side of the same meadow early that morning, a shadow and glimpse of deer proved to be the same buck rutting does at approximately 500 yards. Travis and Manuel began their

stalk and got to within 380 yards of this 5x4 monster. This time, after pulling the trigger and hearing a click, he quickly put a round into the chamber and dropped him in his tracks.

This hunt was much more than Manuel and me taking 216" and 217" deer, respectively, and fulfilling lifelong dreams, it was the friendship and comradery of the camp. We learned so much from Tyne Heckathorn, Cliff Amator, Reggie Miller, and Dillon Currie. These guys and this trip will forever be embedded in my memory. Thanks again to my guide, Josh, and my hat's off to all involved. If you want to hunt Mule deer in Arizona, I highly recommend Arizona Strip Guides LLC. This experience will only get better when we get our trophies back from Game Trail Taxidermy. **EF**