Sitka Blacktail In The Morning

A Thrill After A Decades-Long Hiatus

BY STEVE COMUS
PAGE DESIGN BY MEG BENHASE

Early morning scene in Juneau harbor in November, taken from the *Alaskan Grandeur* as it headed to offshore islands for the hunt.

An early morning misty cloud not hundreds of feet overhead still silently shrouded the estuarial flats just above tideline. It was cold. It was wet. Nearly nothing more than a ghostly illusion, the buck stood motionless just inside the rainforest's shadowy, dark treeline curtain, aware of our presence nearly a couple hundred yards away, yet curious enough to continue watching. That is, until the silence was shattered by the .308's report. The buck fell in place at the shot and then there was a return to an eerily pervasive silence. The hunt was over. Life moved on.

November in Southeast Alaska is a fascinating time. It's on the cusp between cold and colder. Yet it is so incredibly and oxymoronically beautiful that it fills nature's temple with a spiritual wholeness that is as filling as it is daunting. Alaska is a big place.

On the island-hopping trip aboard the *Alaskan Grandeur* from Juneau to Admiralty Island, humpback whales tail-flapped their greetings as dolphins buzzed the bow like nature's pilots, symbolically showing the way as their kind has done since mankind first ventured forth onto the sea in boats. Humans are relative newcomers on this timeless stage. Hunters belong in such settings.

It had been a couple of decades or so since I hunted in Southeast Alaska. Always before, bears were the reason for going, but this time it was for the compact, secretive little Sitka black-tailed deer that occur in this part of the world. And the expedition was a virtual concert, orchestrated among SCI and several of the organization's major corporate partners. Literally, it became a study in synergism for all involved.

Early this past year, the SCI Convention and the industry's Shooting, Hunting and Outdoor Trades (SHOT) Show overlapped for all but a little more than a day. This left me shooting across the floor of the SHOT Show in a blur, attempting to take care of four days of SCI business in eight hours of concentrated networking.

Guide/outfitter Jimmie Rosenbruch, right, and Ruger's Ken Jorgensen show a nice Sitka blacktail buck Jorgensen took on the hunt.

Author Steve Comus shows the Sitka blacktail buck he took during the hunt.

Muskeg parks such as this provide prime areas for calling Sitka blacktails to the hunter.

Alisha Rosenbruch-Decker is among the top hunting guides in Alaska.

Four members of the Rosenbruch family aboard the *Alaskan Grandeur*. From right are MaryAnn and Jimmie with daughter and son-in-law Alisha Rosenbruch-Decker and Zach Decker.

As I rounded the corner at the Swarovski booth, Jim Morey literally grabbed my sleeve and pulled me from the aisle.

"Sitka blacktails, what do you think?" he interjected.

"Always thought about hunting for them, but never quite got around to it when I used to hunt in Alaska a lot," I replied as my eyes searched past him to see where I needed to go next.

"Want to do it?" he continued.

"Why not?" was my robotic reply.

Turned out that the folks from Swarovski and Sturm, Ruger & Co., both staunch supporters of SCI, had huddled and were putting together an expedition for later in the year. More details were discussed in the ensuing hour with Ken Jorgensen of Ruger, and the plan took shape.

Such a venue would provide ample opportunity to check out the new Swarovski Optik Rail system riflescope, and Ruger was introducing its new Super Redhawk Alaskan, which is a very big bore, snub-nose, double-action revolver. Originally, plans called for the rifle to be Ruger's No. 1 stainless steel single-shot with laminated stock chambered for the .30-06 Springfield cartridge. But by the time the trip took place, the rifle was Ruger's Model 77 Sporter bolt-action model in .308 Winchester. This is the Model 77 with a 22-inch stainless steel barreled action and laminated stock.

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Gear for the Sitka Blacktail Hunt

Deciding what gear is best for a Sitka blacktail hunt in November in Southeast Alaska can be both easy and confounding. Several factors are "known." For example, the weather forecast can be made months, even years, in advance: it's going to be cold and wet. The only question is exactly how cold because it's going to be either very wet, or very, very wet.

For this expedition, the drill would include seeing just how Ruger's new Super Blackhawk Alaskan snub-nose double-action revolver "carried" in the real world. Brown bears occur where the blacktails live, and that means there is always an off chance of a bear encounter of undesirable kind.

Although there is only a remote likelihood of such an occurrence where this hunt happened, it is never a bad idea to be ready. Also, it is nice to know how something carries, should a future fishing trip in Alaska happen to come along.

The author's Ruger Alaskan was chambered for the .480 Ruger cartridge, and was carried in a synthetic shoulder rig from Uncle Mike's. Belt holsters make less sense in such settings, and the shoulder rig was worn on the outside where the revolver, in cross-draw mode, was always handy if needed. It wasn't.

Before the hunt, I contacted Steve Johnson at Hornady to talk about ammo for the revolver. He suggested the factory loading that features the 400-grain XTP bullet. A pre-hunt checkout revealed that there was no trouble hitting a grapefruit-size target at five yards every time, either shooting the handgun in the single-action or double-action mode.

The author used a Ruger Model 77 rifle in .308 Winchester, Swarovski scope and binocular, and Hornady ammo for the successful hunt.

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But back to the beginning.

During those initial talks at the SHOT Show, Morey mentioned that the hunt was to be with Glacier Guides, Inc.

"That's Jimmie Rosenbruch's operation, isn't it?" I quipped without missing a beat.

"Yep" was Morey's explanation.

He didn't need to say a lot more for several reasons, among which was the fact that mere days before, at the SCI Convention in Reno, Rosenbruch received the prestigious International Hunting Award. Also in recent times, his daughter, Alisha "Mutts" Rosenbruch-Decker had been recognized as one of the country's top guides. And if that wasn't enough, I still recalled vividly the day a couple of years before when my cell phone rang as I was talking about hunting with Inar Hoff of Merkel on the grounds of the Grand American in Vandalia, Ohio in August. Morey was on the other end of the call, wanting to know whether I could go with him on a bear hunt in Alaska – and Glacier Guides were to be the outfitters. Schedule conflicts precluded my presence on that trip, but the call served a pleasantly unrelated purpose nonetheless.

My hearing went south decades ago, so to complete the telephonic conversation, I walked around the building at the Grand American to get to a quieter spot. As I re-holstered the cell phone, I literally bumped into Tony Gioffre, one of SCI's leading volunteers in the Central Ohio area. Tony's a great guy and one heck of a trapshooter. But I digress.

Deep down inside, there was another more personal reason why I looked forward to the trip with Rosenbruch. Before joining the staff of SCI, I was an on-again, off-again member from around 1972 when the club was formed. Rosenbruch has been associated with SCI for at least most of that time (he signs-up clients who are not members, and is a champion of SCI's *Record Book of Trophy Animals*), so I had known of him for decades. Old-line members understand the feeling: You become unfamiliarly familiar with others in the organization and eventually kind of want to get together. SCI always has been that kind of club.

So, when I was unable to hunt with Glacier Guides that year, it was

Alisha Rosenbruch-Decker, an SCI Master Measurer, measures the antlers of one of the deer taken on the hunt.

more than merely the disappointment of missing a hunt. It meant missing an opportunity to share time in the wild with one of the organization's highly respected supporters. That's why the expedition took on new meaning when Morey explained the details this past year.

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Outboard-powered skiffs took hunters from the *Alaskan Grandeur* to the various hunting locations.

Fast-forward 10 months to this past November, and the hunting party boarded the posh yacht *Alaskan Grandeur* in Juneau, headed for various islands along the legendary inland passage from Seattle on the south to Anchorage and beyond to the north and west. The *Alaskan Grandeur* serves as a mobile base hunting camp, anchoring near prime hunting spots, which means that each day, it is a relatively short trip in skiffs to wherever looks good. The skiffs are beached and then the actual hunt begins afoot, negotiating everything from tidal flats to steep, moss-carpeted and dank rainforests to classic muskeg parks as the islands jut majestically from the cold Pacific into the low-hanging clouds.

The first couple of days resulted in no animals down, but served well to acclimate the group to the area and conditions, and to sort out all of the normal things like wardrobe malfunctions caused by the terrain and other demanding hunting conditions. The drill was repetitious: Hit the beach, trod upward, check out the deep forests and then sit and call on the edges of muskeg openings.

For example, day one with guide Zach Decker (Alisha's husband) and Swarovski's Dean Capuano resulted in the spotting of a black-tailed doe – twice. Day two with Alisha and Capuano was more interesting, but still nothing down. On that day, Alisha bleated on the mouth call, and just as though it was scripted that way, an aging but physically stout buck came cautiously yet steadily from the left – appearing first about 100 yards out.

With my back against a small tree, I sat like a statue as I watched the buck approach, readying the rifle a bit more each time he disappeared briefly behind a bush in between. It was not unlike the classic wild turkey hunting scenario.

As he peered from around a bush at about 50 yards, I was able to see his antlers clearly. Overall, the main beam was quite massive and extremely wide, but tipped on one side by nothing more than a crab claw, and only a couple inches or so of tine on each side of the "Y" on the other side. He would not fall to my bullet that day.

But he was still there, and was becoming more curious by the minute. Capuano didn't have a clear shot, and I suspect Alisha was beginning to wonder whether I'd napped off or just went brain dead. We sat there, motionless, as the buck continued to move ever so cautiously toward the origin of the original call.

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The *Alaskan Grandeur* is a superb yacht that serves as the hunting base camp.

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Here, a humpback whale waves greetings with its tail.

I figured that if nothing else, the old buck served well as the equivalent of a live decoy, in case there was something bigger out there, just beyond a bush or a tree. Minutes passed and continued passing until the buck was quite close (I figured 18 feet, and Alisha put it at 17). I studied every detail of the deer, happy to have the opportunity to check out everything, including eyelashes. We stared at each other for the longest time. Neither of us blinked. Finally, he lost interest, turned and slowly ambled away – going back into buck mode a little over 100 yards out in front by thrashing a sapling with his antlers.

The real advantage of a mobile base camp became apparent when, after a couple of days of not much action, we were able to up-anchor and power to more prime places. This translated into a half-day cruise to Admiralty Island. In addition to serving as a convenient mid-hunt break of rest and relaxation, it was a great time to get to know the family and its operation even better.

On the trip were Rosenbruch, wife and camp cook MaryAnn, Zach and Alisha. Last fall was the third season for the *Alaskan Grandeur*, which is the third custom-built yacht the Rosenbruchs have used during their 41 years of operating in Alaska.

"This is a pure form of hunting," Rosenbruch explained as he gestured with his hand to a nearby island. And he knows something about hunting, having won nearly every major award the world has to offer. In addition to being this year's Weatherby Award winner, Rosenbruch has received the Professional Hunter, C.J. McElroy and International Hunter awards from SCI. And he is still an active hunter globally.

"We've been this year (hunting) in Ethiopia and New Zealand, and were antelope hunting (in the U.S.) a couple of weeks ago," he explained.

Yet Rosenbruch explained that initially he did not set out with awards in mind.

"I thought it might legitimize (the business) if they saw I was a hunter," he said, noting that he hunts off and on all year, every year, for himself. He's thinking about doing a Siberian sheep hunt in the future.

Idle talk of hunts past and future was interrupted by the hunt at hand. It was time to head into the pre-dawn darkness so Zach and I could be on-foot and in a hunting area at first light.

Although each day saw the deer becoming more active, we had noticed that there were already fresh hoof-prints in the estuarial flats each morning, meaning the deer were there and gone by the time we hit the beach.

After beaching the skiff, Zach and I moved slowly through some bushy thickets near the water's edge, hoping to get a glimpse of a buck, if one was still around. We'd gone less than a quarter mile when, through his binocular, Zach spotted the buck. He was only partially visible at the forest's edge, directly across the estuarial flats from where we stood.

I took a quick look through my Swarovski 10x32s, saw enough mass, width and tine length to know instantly that the buck was a shooter and switched automatically into kill mode.

The buck was looking directly at us from his partially protected position nearly 200 yards away. The air was still. All was quiet. Zach stood motionless in plain view, allowing the buck to concentrate on him. Meanwhile, I spotted a small deadfall log not 20 feet away and identified it as a great rest for a shot from the prone position.

As I took the few stealthy steps and then slowly slipped into the prone position, my right hand moved the power setting on the 3-10x42 Swarovski scope from the 3X setting used when walking to the 10X setting for the shot. With my left hand between the log and the forend of the rifle, I settled into position, sliding the manual safety off as the reticle found the buck across the wide open area.

The scope had the TDS reticle, which makes shots at virtually any distance easier and more predictable. The rifle was sighted so it was dead-on at 100 yards with the primary crosshair, on at 200 yards with the next crosshair down, etc. Due to grass, branches and extreme shadows, I could see well only the antlers, face and part of the chest area of the buck.

I double-checked antler mass, width and points as I moved the proper reticle cross to the half-foot-in-diameter patch of hair I could see. It was clear that my only shot was to put the 150-grain Hornady InterBond bullet into the area where the left shoulder and neck came together. Given the orientation of the buck to me, that would put the bullet path and wound channel on a slight bias through the body of the animal, probably resulting in an exit wound just forward of the right ham. Also, it would logically take the top of the lungs and some other stuff with it.

Lighting was both dim and flat. Yet the scope divulged total detail. I do not remember squeezing the trigger. Rather, I recall concentrating so completely on the rock-solid sight picture that I might have "burned" a spot on the buck if one's eyesight were a laser. At the report of the shot, I watched the buck fall in place. Swarovski scopes are among the very few I've used in which I can routinely watch the hit, even in recoil. I think it has something to do with field of view, but whatever it is, it is great.

Quickly, I cycled another round into the chamber. Once an animal has been hit, there is no time for rookie mistakes. If that buck got up, I was going to be ready to hit him again. But there was nothing.

All the time, Zach had been watching the buck intently through his binocular. He said that the only thing I didn't see from my vantage point was the buck's legs thrashing in a brief spasm and then becoming still after he collapsed.

A postmortem check revealed that the bullet had entered exactly where I had been looking, and that it did precisely what I imagined it would do – and more. In addition to entering precisely at the right place, it went through the body on a bias and exited just fore of the offside ham. But in the process, it not only opened up perfectly, it sent bone fragments into the body cavity in the process, which means it was about like a grenade going off inside the animal. The buck literally never knew what hit it.

Meanwhile, Ruger's Ken Jorgensen scored a nice buck with a Ruger Model 77 in .270 Winchester – all on camera for Ruger's television show on the Outdoor Life Network.

Sufficiently de-iced, the Alaska Airlines 737 climbed through a layer of sleet, then snow as it lifted off from Juneau on its milk run to Seattle via Sitka and then Ketchikan. November is that way in Southeast Alaska. Successful? Yes, the hunt with the Rosenbruch family was that, and a lot more.

For more information, visit the website www.glacierguidesinc.com, or call/fax (435) 628-0973.

Gear

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As one might expect with a big bore handgun, recoil is robust, but not painful with this combination. Returning on-target from recoil and capping off a subsequent shot is both intuitive and quick. As a self-defense rig for the outdoors, it works well. I have no idea precisely how the bullet might perform on an enraged bruin. I had an occasion a few years back to take a bison with the Hornady loading for the .480 Ruger cartridge – then while hunting with Jim Skildum of Magnum Research and using a single-action revolver with seven-inch barrel and open sights. At 25 yards, the bullets took out both lungs and were resting against the hide on the far side of the bison. That's credible performance for a handgun round.

The rifle for the hunt ended up being the Ruger Model 77 Sporter in .308 Winchester, primarily because it happened to be handy when the trip came along. The longer answer is that initially I had planned to use a Ruger No. 1B in stainless steel with laminated stock, but found that the bases for the Swarovski rail scope system at hand at the time dictated a Model 77. No problem, however, because there isn't enough difference in performance between .30-06 Springfield and .308 Winchester to affect the outcome of the shot on game – assuming all else is addressed.

While I was talking to Hornady's Steve Johnson about the ammo for the Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan, he asked about ammo for the rifle. Initially, I hadn't given it much thought, because through the years I have concocted a long list of great handloads for that cartridge, and in previous sessions, that particular rifle showed that it could shoot virtually any of them quite well.

"Why?" I asked Johnson, "Do you folks have something that might be interesting?"

"Do you mind a little meat damage?" he quipped quickly.

"What I want is for the deer to drop in-place," I replied automatically. "It's thick enough and wet enough where we'll be hunting to lose a wounded animal quite easily if it runs off – even if it falls dead later."

Johnson detailed some of the in-field results he and others there had been getting with the InterBond bullet, so by the time the conversation ended, it was decided that the rifle ammo would be the #80939 .308 Winchester factory loading that features the 150-grain InterBond bullet at 2,820 feet per second muzzle velocity.

Sighting-in sessions revealed that the Model 77 would shoot tight groups with the Hornady loading – like 3/4-inch or less at 100 yards, and the determinate being more the shooter than the rig.

And, as it turned out, the gear was perfect for the trip. All went well, all worked well and success happened.