

Return to Camp Musselshell

Hunting on the prairie, a dad and his sons find something they thought they had lost.

By Craig Jourdonnais

When they were boys, my sons Adam and Jake would accompany me to eastern Montana each fall for our annual antelope hunting camp. I could not know then how much those trips would later mean to them—or to me.

Our hunting trips to a spot near the Musselshell River in Golden Valley County were the highlight of each year. For a few days, the boys were in paradise—sleeping in a wall tent, eating too many candy bars, and stalking antelope. As a dad showing his boys the ropes of camping and hunting, I couldn't have been happier. In addition to hunting, we had lots of time to sit around camp and do whatever we felt like doing. One year we brought a football and took turns kicking field goals through two tall gateposts sticking up from the prairie grass, miles from nowhere. Each evening we'd recall highlights of the day's hunt and discuss strategies that worked and those that didn't. Inevitably, we'd end up talking about past hunts, recalling the excitement, fatigue, and humor of those adventures. Our annual hunting trips were memory builders, a gift a parent can give that nothing can take away.

Eventually both boys became U.S. Marines and fought in Iraq. Adam joined in 2001 and was sent there twice over the next four years before returning home for good. He told me that memories of our hunting trips helped him find a sense of peace in the chaos of combat. Jake joined in 2005 and spent two years in that war-torn country, often in areas with the worst fighting. One of his toughest nights was after he'd lost a close buddy to sniper fire. He sat in a makeshift foxhole along a street in the city of Karma, thinking of home. Eventually his thoughts wandered to the Montana prairie and hunting pronghorn with me and his brother. Jake told me those memories helped him get through that night. He finally returned home in 2009.

My sons' combat duty forced changes on all of us. Adam and Jake had matured beyond their years, and my hair had grayed considerably from constant worry. Once my sons returned home, all of us were uncertain how their experiences in war would affect their lives. Neither came back with the same burning desire to hunt as before. Though I hoped they might want to revisit hunting camp and experience what we'd shared years earlier, I certainly understood if they decided never to pick up a firearm again.

A father dreams for his children. His heart aches for their well-being. Knowing your sons are in a combat zone is like a nightmare—the one where they are boys playing on a busy street and you're unable to do anything about it. I couldn't even comprehend their combat experience. I later found out that the only people who could

fully understand what Adam and Jake went through in Iraq were their fellow Marines. I was out of the loop on that one.

Then, last fall, Montana's prairie sunrise once again shined golden on my sons' faces as the three of us searched a sagebrush-filled basin for antelope. After nearly a decade, they had returned to hunt in the land the wind never fills. Setting up our traditional "Camp Musselshell" meant my sons and I were reclaiming activities important to us. Their excitement grew as the trip approached. It seemed that restoring one of their most cherished traditions was helping heal some of the emotional trauma they'd experienced over the previous years.

The trip brought back memories to all of us: smelling the pungent sage, crawling over cactus to spy on unsuspecting pronghorn, eating too many candy bars. We told jokes, shared stories, and ate dinner under the eastern Montana night sky. Never before had I taken such delight in sitting back and observing the laughter and smiles radiating from my sons. These are things only a father understands. They were out of the loop on that one.

Life will never be the same for any of us. But sitting around the campfire we found solace in knowing that some of our favorite traditions had not been lost. Who would have believed this connection would be so strong? Who would have thought that life would somehow weave a pronghorn camp, the Marine Corps, and the dirt streets of Karma together?

When your kids are wearing size four hiking boots and spooking every antelope within three zip codes, it's impossible to ever imagine a day when they will leave Montana—to attend college, follow a new love, or volunteer to fight

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in a distant, dangerous country. Only later, when they've left home, can you know that hunting traditions run far deeper than you ever imagined.

Marines will tell you that in the heat of battle they are fighting for the soldier next to them. In a way, hunting is similar. Sure, there's the wall tent with smoke drifting out of the stovepipe, bucks hanging from the meat pole, pack stock milling in a makeshift pole corral. But when you get down to it, those things aren't the cement that binds so many of us to hunting; people are.

On our trip last fall, I couldn't have cared less if I looked through my scope at an antelope. I savored every moment of just being outdoors with two great guys, sharing time together, and building memories. Antelope hunting was simply the excuse to make it happen.

My boys and I have no idea what tomorrow might bring. But we do know that we squeezed everything we could out of those three days together on that windswept prairie. 🐾



HUNTING AGAIN Jake, Adam, and Craig Jourdonnais.

