

ARGUING WITH THE TRIGGER FINGER

It can be terribly persuasive. ✨ BY BEN LONG

I thought I had everything figured out. That should have been my first clue something was about to go wrong.

Every hunting season I am pulled between two passions. First, I love hunting elk in the high country. A close runner-up is hunting river-bottom whitetails in the snow.

Because elk and deer seasons overlap, my heart is torn every fall.

Sometimes that dilemma causes me to make decisions I regret later. A few seasons ago I filled my deer A tag early with a young doe, stocking the freezer so I could focus on the more difficult and time-consuming prospect of chasing elk. The last day of hunting season, I watched a giant buck pursue a doe through the crosshairs of my rifle scope. Lacking a second deer tag, I had no choice but to let the wall-hanger drift off into the timber.

The following year, I figured things would be different. It had been several years since the last hard winter, meaning that the woods contained a crop of old, trophy-class bucks that would have died off otherwise. What's more, the growing whitetail population made wildlife managers generous with doe permits. When the season began, I had a passel of tags in my pocket and felt like some sly card player staring at a good poker hand.

I had drawn a cow elk tag and a doe whitetail B tag to add to my standard A tag, which was valid for a whitetail buck. I figured I could fill the doe tag early, hunt elk the bulk of the season, and still save some late-November days for hunting a mossback buck during the peak of the rut. All figured out.

Opening day found me with friends hunting elk. It was great fun until two buddies each killed an elk—on a mountaintop 4 miles from the trailhead. I took time off work to help backpack the 80-pound loads from the mountain. Despite generous doses of Ibuprofen, my knees were still complaining a week later, when the second weekend of hunting season rolled around.

My tender knees deserved a rest, so I took to the river bottoms

after whitetails. This was my chance to fill the B tag and relieve some of the pressure to get meat in the freezer.

A friend, Steve, and I arose early and drove to a logged-over section of a glacial valley, between two snow-capped mountain ranges. Because the chances of encountering elk there were slim, whitetail does were our primary prey.

We split up in the morning gloaming. I'm an impatient deer hunter. My style is to walk 10 minutes, then find a natural blind and wait a half hour or so, occasionally doing some rattling or grunting to attract bucks. My first wait produced nothing but suspicious snorts in the brush.

I cat-footed to the top of a knoll, which offered views of the logged-over swamplands below. A big Douglas-fir stump offered a good place to sit, and second-growth fir and larch provided adequate cover. The morning was balmy, but a breeze made it seem to snow larch needles. The sun cleared the eastern peaks and bathed the forest in rich light. Deer began to move.

The first pair I saw was a doe and a fawn. Call me sentimental, but I wasn't eager right then to shoot a 75-pound fawn or, for that matter, its mom. I let them pass into a stand of aspen.

A moment later deer number three emerged. I gave it a quick once-over in the scope. It was as large as the first doe, but had no fawn. I noticed no antlers. It was an easy 100-yard broadside shot from a sitting position. It was time to fill my B tag.

At the sound of my rifle, deer tails started flagging all over below me. The one I hit staggered and lurched awkwardly toward the others. I fired again as it disappeared into the aspen thicket.

I put another cartridge in the chamber while searching for any sign of my target.

That's when he showed up—a high-crowned buck, high stepping like one of those Spanish horses.

I had the wind at my face. The buck had the sun in his eyes. I put the crosshairs on him and the debate started between my brain and my trigger finger:

"There he is, a buck for your A tag," Trigger Finger said. "Shoot."



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"Now wait a second," said Brain. "You just shot a deer."

"You're allowed two!" said Trigger Finger. "A buck and a doe. Shoot, you idiot, before he makes it to the aspen."

"I'm not sure how well you hit that first deer," Brain countered.

"C'mon, it's dead by now," said Trigger Finger. "You've shot enough deer to know that."

"Yeah, and you've been wrong before."

I used to hunt chukar partridge alone and without a dog in the Owyhee canyons of Idaho. Chukar are a covey bird. You can get doubles on them, but downed birds are easy to lose in the steep, rugged canyons. I learned early the value of following a hit bird all the way to the ground before swinging on the second.

There was something else. "The buck is big, but not that big," Brain said. "Besides, it's still early in the season...."

"Oh for Pete's sake," Trigger Finger interrupted. "Many seasons you've been skunked and would be happy for such a deer. He's standing there. Shoot!"

"Oh, shut up," Brain said.

I stood up from my stump. The buck snorted and bounded off.

I walked to the edge of the aspens and found my deer crumpled a few yards from where I had first hit him. The first bullet had broken both front shoulders and the second had hit the lungs.

My surprise began when I looked at his head.

Two small, thin, 5-inch-long spikes sprouted from the forehead.

It wasn't a doe at all, but a yearling buck.

My first reaction was, Of all the bad luck! My plans for hunting big bucks were ruined.

My second reaction was, Of all the good luck! If I had shot the second buck, I would have broken the law.

Reality sunk in. The fact is, I'd screwed up. As any graduate of hunter education knows, it's the shooter's responsibility to know what he's shooting at before squeezing the trigger. I should have taken a closer look through my binoculars before even aiming at that deer.

As for passing up the second buck, I made the right decision. But deep inside, I had to admit it wasn't entirely for the right reasons. If he had been the old mossback of my dreams, Trigger Finger may well have won the argument.

As I punched my A tag and began gutting the spike, I asked myself, Was I disappointed? After some thought, I decided that any deer, taken fairly on a beautiful October morning, is a good deer. Any game animal is a gift and should be accepted with humility and honor. Being disappointed with that small buck seemed selfish and greedy, like a child whining because a Christmas present wasn't good enough.

Besides, a young buck taken before the rut is prime meat. And compared to the two elk I had helped haul down the mountainside the previous weekend, packing the little fellow out would sure be a lot easier on my knees. 🐾