

Man the Hunter - Fall 2011

Warning - This Blah Blah contains graphic images of gore and redneck hunting language and attitude. Viewer discretion is advised.



Heading up to Carrot River in September for one of my two annual bird hunts

I passed through Tisdale. I'll tell ya, this town has a sense of humour. While the rest of the West has gone politically correct and eschews calling "rape" rape in favour of the bland word "canola," good ol' Tisdale sticks with their decades-old motto: *Land of Rape and Honey*. We used to play Little League baseball against them when I was a snappy shortstop, but they

invariably won. Tisdale's population is now 2,980 and Carrotville's is 1,200. The bigger towns always won, it's Darwinian.



It's not surprising Tisdale has a sense of humour - it's the home town of Brent Butt, star of *Corner Gas* which was a huge Canadian TV hit. It took a light hearted, comedic look at small town prairie life and he knows all about it. If you wonder where he came up with the fictitious name of Dog River for the town in his show look no further than the Doghide River which dribbles along the edge of Tisdale. River? You can *step* across it.



I see young Freddie was the incumbent in the provincial election. That's how old I'm getting, he laughs: I refer to the area Member of the Legislature as young Freddie. He's from Carrotville also. Not sure if the kid's still crop dusting or not? He and the free enterprise Sask. Party won by a huge margin, the largest in provincial history actually.

While the rest of the world is going bust, Saskatchewan continues to boom. May it continue. It's a great place to live, especially now. You can't say the province doesn't have a sense of humour as well, not with place names like Moose Jaw, Eyebrow, Southend which is in the far north of the province, Love and Smuts, and then there's Climax to top them all. I'll bet that town's sign has been stolen a thousand times. Hell, I'd steal it.



And then one of the corniest names, of course, is Carrot River, fifty miles along. When I majored in beer drinking at Simon Fraser University in a Vancouver suburb in the '60s I quickly learned to stop telling people where I came from and switched to saying "Saskatoon." Otherwise the reaction was predictable. They'd be rolling on the floor howling. The town's named after wild carrots, ie cow parsnip and deadly hemlock, that grow along the banks. The river was named back in fur trade and early exploration days when it had a modest prominence.



Ol' Griz a.k.a. Brian Gentner and I were after grouse, geese and ducks but we saw a good number of whitetail deer. I was brought up in major hunting country. The Hanson Buck, a monster 12-pointer that scored 213 5/8 after Milo, an acquaintance from Biggar, shot it in '93 a few miles east of Saskatoon holds the Boone and Crockett record for the biggest horns in the world. That's the kind of deer this country produces and it attracts hunters from all over, especially the US. You can see the horns at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcqn1-4xvro>. It's a birthright of every rural boy to receive a .22 on his 14th birthday. I grew up hunting, snaring rabbits, fishing. On this trip, it was the peak of Injun Summer and just gorgeous. I just love stomping across fields and through the bush breathing in those great fall aromas. It's been the best summer and fall in anyone's memory, just gorgeous.



Here's my artillery. I don't know how the hell I ended up with so many guns...? The pump second from the bottom is for canoeing. I call it my .12 gauge bear spray. The lower rifle with the scope is a Savage lever-action .243 and my deer rifle. It's fast and flat and very comfortable on the shoulder. Given a place of honour third from the top is the bee bee gun my old man gave me when I was five. We start young in Western Canada. You can see my crossed-rifles marksman badge from Army Cadets, where Jim Lunan and I vied for best shot in the troop. Later, at the UofS, I was on the Arts and

Science rifle team. Target shooting is an entirely different skill than shooting at a live, moving target though.



This is the Carrot River itself from Kent and Lori Wolowski's outfitting home/camp looking kinda bony at this time of the year. It's sure ain't in the spring when it's scary.



And the grouse hunting along it was fantastic - the best since 1995. Don't believe the myth about an 11 year cycle for grouse and rabbits. Yes, there's cycles but that's just a rough date; spring weather is a far more important determining factor. Note the mud. We were way back on bush trails on Ol' Griz's 4-wheel quad and we barely got through some bogs. That Carrot River mud is legendary. Fortunately Griz was in the front and ate most of it. That's my Remington 1100 semi-automatic, a helluva good shotgun though it doesn't eject well when it's cold. I don't eject well when I'm cold either. That's why I escape to the tropics of Southeast Asia each winter. It's true: happiness *is* a warm gun.



Best of all, most were ruffies, or ruffed grouse - with white breasts and an epicure's delight at the table (see final shot). I don't shoot anything I don't eat. Eventually I came home with 19 ruffies and 1 spruce hen. I got in three full days of successful hunting, two with Ol' Griz and one with Frank Norrish. Coincidentally, we came back with 13 birds each of those days! I spent the rest of the time visiting. Hunting is my annual excuse to see old friends and haunts. Normally there's thousands of snow geese migrating from the high Arctic- and they're great eating, far better than gamey Canada geese - but I didn't run into any this year for some reason. Saskatchewan - and Carrot River which is right on the southern tree line - gets first whack at them on their long flight running the gauntlet of hunters down to the Gulf of Mexico. We're in a very privileged position.



Burning stubble. Who'd think pollution could be so magnificent?



Besides the infamous Carrot River mud, there's the equally infamous dust I remember only too well from the '50s and early '60s when there were no paved roads. This is on the Smoky Burn road, made famous on one of the *Dust Up* episodes on History Channel. The crop dusting Jardines are well known in this part of the world as Nipawin is only 24 miles from Carrotburg, and Smoky Burn just six miles north of my old home town and right on the tree line (immediately north of here starts hundreds of miles of forest to the Arctic).

"Maverick" pilot Brennan called Smoky Burn the Burmuda Triangle: every time he dusted here, something went wrong. In that episode that gluey mud jammed his stick so he could barely control the plane. Love that show. It's home country all the way.



Fast forward to November 1 and it's whitetail deer opening day. We're now near Shell Lake in the northwest corner of the populated part of Saskatchewan, 90 miles north of Toontown, instead of the northeast. Injun Summer is over. The leaves are gone.



This part of the province, unlike around Carrotapurna, is very hilly. There's bush everywhere - and it's loaded with deer. Like Carrotville, Shell Lake is right on the tree line. Everything north of here is bush; everything south is farm land - and deer are highly concentrated along this line: they eat grain all night and bed down in the bush for safety during the day. In 20 years of hunting here we've never failed to bring home steak. There's a group of us old friends who have been hunting since God was a diaper dumper.



I never shoot bucks - I hunt for the table, not the wall - but this guy, a five-pointer that would score a modest 140-150 on the Boone and Crockett scale, trotted down a slope where I was staked out, then stopped, sideways, just 100 yards from me. I couldn't not peg him, so I tapped him in the boilermaker, a clean kill. And that's the part about hunting I hate: the actual killing. I love the camaraderie, practising the skill set, the autumn smells, outdoors, ambience, the whole anthropological primordial part of me that bubbles to the surface - man the hunter - and I absolutely love the eating. But the actual killing has always bothered me and I actually quit for a couple of decades, not taking it up again until I moved back from Bangkok in '89. My tongue is hanging out like the buck's. I'm being a jerk. The deer died and I'm making fun of it. He had as much right to live as I do.



More traditional stupid pose of hunter with "trophy." I rationalize, try to convince myself that I'm not being a self-satisfied anti-hunting hypocrite kicking off leather shoes and loosening a leather belt to dig into a steak while being wilfully blind to the fact that someone along the line killed and slaughtered what became that juicy t-bone or pork chop or chicken breast or poached salmon. I'm also doing my bit to keep the exploding deer population down: last year there were 13,733 collisions with eight deaths and 376 injured in the province, and there's only a little over a million people. And, as I said, I only shoot what I'm going to eat. I regularly drive up to sloughs (ponds in Yankinese) and if I don't like the kind of ducks there, I'll head to the next one, until I find a tasty canvasback, or a snappy teal, or perhaps one fat mallard. If you eat meat or wear leather you're as guilty of murder, by association, as I am pulling the trigger. I'm a carnivore facing the hard, cruel facts of life and death head on as a hunter. It ain't easy though.



As I say, I never shoot bucks - this is my first ever. It sounds bloody awful but the fact is I shoot women and children, Bambi and her mother, though if one speaks of "heifers" and "veal," as they do about cattle, and call it "harvesting" it comes out sanitary. They're the best eating - tender, delicious, low in fat and with the healthiest of diets, no antibiotics or growth hormones etc, the healthiest of meat. Bucks, especially older ones, in rut are tough and stinky and taste wild as hell. Fortunately Al zapped this puppy so I traded my big buck for his Fido. I go for quality, not quantity. Al gave the buck to a grateful Laotian family he knows. Like many of my hunting friends, he doesn't like eating game but just loves hunting, plain and simple, and has no qualms about the kill. I'm the only milquetoast among all my hunting friends.



I'll save you from the gory gutting and butchering pictures, of hoisting the deer on the front end loader, peeling the bark off, filleting them etc and cut to the drinks afterwards. If you read *Opium Dream*, there was a debonair, handsome lady killer named Carson Battersby. That's the real Carson next to me and his two kids, Captain Morgan and Evan, on the far right, chips off the old block. They live out here on a cattle ranch. The next time I'm landing at Normandy or fighting the Battle of the Bulge, I want to be right behind Carson. I don't know anyone who is faster and deadlier with a rifle, in his case a .270. He just snaps it to his shoulder and squeezes and it don't matter how far that deer is away, and how fast it's bootin' - it's gonna tumble. In the blue jeans is my old buddy Al McKenzie. We started hunting and fishing together in the 1960s. Actually, Al's a helluva fine shot too. I'd like him just ahead of me too shoulder-to-shoulder with Carson all the way to Berlin. I borrowed Al's name for a grizzled colonel in *Thai Gold*.



Okay, fast forward again, this time to Nov. 26

and I was out again since I had a second tag to fill because 35 pounds of Fido wouldn't last all year. When Canada's stupid long gun laws came into effect, the number of hunters dropped off precipitously. Before on opening day we'd see up to eight other parties cruising the back roads. Since then, maybe one. And some of them don't know what the hell they're doing and there's lead flying all over the place. "Citiots" Carson calls them. He had to put up this sign because three different hunting parties shot at deer feeding on the hay bales just behind! Just 100 feet to the right are his cattle. Unbelievable. (The moronic gun laws will be repealed before Christmas, which is a great present to those of us who grew up hunting and resent being treated like criminals by a moronic, myopic and former Liberal federal government centered in highly urban Toronto geographically 2,000 miles and culturally a million miles away. The Liberals manage to hold on by their fingertips to only a single seat in this rural province, understandably.) One can also lay some of the blame for the escalating death toll on the highways on them because of the exploding deer population; those idiotic laws also helped to effectively kill off a fresh generation of hunters who kept the deer population in check in the past. (Urbanization

would have done it anyway; city kids don't learn how to hunt. Hell, most don't know what a tree is, unless a picture appears on their iphone.)



This time we had snow, that four letter word, which makes it much easier to spot deer.



Like these two. By this time I'd already whacked Bambi's Mommy...uh, I mean harvested a doe...so I was only shooting with a camera. The temperature was right around zero C, which was really comfortable weather to hunt in.



Once again we either cruised back roads or "pushed bush." Ie, 2-3 shooters would post at one end (usually downwind if possible) of a bluff while others walked through the other end, "pushing" the deer out into the field of fire. I've always loved pushing bush. I've always loved bush period, both kinds. It was while on point when others were pushing that I nailed my two deer this fall. On one push, over a dozen deer squirted out of the jungle!



That's Ted Skibinsky on the right with a huge doe he blasted as it ran out of a bush I helped push. He's a damned good shot too. Ted and I first hunted together when we were 12-years-old in 1950 bloody 8. He had an ancient, single shot .22 then, when I'd stay with him on his folk's farm where light was provided by a coal oil lamp and heat from a wood stove. I borrowed Ted's name too, for a Russian ambassador in *Thai Gold*. When you've been hunting together with old friends that long you don't want to be a party pooping drop out but when Al and Ted pack it in, if they ever do, I'll end my deer hunting days too and sell my armory. I won't miss the killing part. I will the hunting - and most certainly the table fare....



And this is what it's all about at the end of the season. Slow roasted tender grouse garnished with fresh dill - and sided by medallions of succulent young venison tenderloins sprinkled with Montreal Steak Spice and sauteed in caramelizing onions. All laid on a bed of 5-varieties-of-wild-mushrooms sauteed separately in butter. With tasty garden carrots, asparagus, baby peas - and a glass of heady Nero from the heel of Italy. You will never see this epicure's delight on a menu and I can't describe the pleasure of sitting down to it and the luscious, comingling flavours. With rewards like this that I'll enjoy over the next year I hope I'll be able to fight off my angels to the killing part again come next fall....