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SPORTS

Sunset on Sunset Ridge Ranch

By Luke Clayton

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Leahey, Texas - During the course of the year, I have the opportunity to take you with me, via these weekly columns, on some fun and exciting adventures. This week, I am way down in the rugged country of Real County in Southwest Texas, about fifteen miles from the little town of Leahey. A couple days ago, I joined my friends Larry Weishuhn (Mr. Whitetail) and Wayne Hays, who owns Hogman Outdoors as well as this awesome Sunset Ridge Ranch where we are hunting. Because of a tight deadline for this article, I won't be able to detail the entire hunt, but the first couple days have been absolutely awesome. I'm writing this article in the evening from the bunkhouse on the ranch and the details of the hunt so far are freshly engrained in my mind!



Larry Weishuhn (left), Luke and Wayne Hays enjoying some good hunting talk around the campfire at Hay's Sunset Ridge Ranch. *photo by Luke Clayton*

Having the opportunity to spend time with these two great guys is always a treat but especially so when the setting is on Hay's well-managed Sunset Ridge Ranch. Devils Canyon traverses the ranch and the elevation difference of the terrain is well over 1,500 feet in elevation. This country can best be described as inspiringly beautiful but also extremely rugged. The ranch's name, "Sunset Ridge Ranch," came from the awesome sight of the sun setting over the distant mountains. The first evening of our hunt, as I set in a comfortable blind facing west, I watched the sun begin to disappear below a distant ridge. But I came here to hunt and I soon had to abandon my bird's eye view of the sunset and concentrate on my immediate surroundings. The varied animals on the ranch took their cue, almost as though an internal alarm clock had notified them that it was time to be up and feeding!

This part of Texas is home to a smorgasbord of wildlife. Native game such as deer, javelina and turkey are abundant but exotics such as axis deer and aoudads have also gained a strong foothold since they were first introduced back in the 1930s. On many ranches in the area, axis deer are as plentiful as the native whitetail.

As I watched a corn feeder situated about 40 yards to my right, I cast a glance over my left shoulder to a draw just below. Walking along slowly was a fine Axis buck. By the time I swung my Airforce Airgun .45 caliber Texan into position, the buck was within a few feet of cover, still ambling along slowly. He didn't stop and I didn't have a shot but his 30-inch plus antlers caused my hunting blood to rise a degree or two! Next I heard a turkey gobble just over the ridge. With each gobble, the bird was getting closer and closer. He was taking the path of least resistance, walking along the ranch road that led to my hunting blind. He passed within ten yards and disappeared in the canyon below. Things were heating up on this evening hunt!

Larry Weishuhn has long hunted with his Ruger rifles and pistols, and, on this hunt, he was packing his Blackhawk Hunter .44 Mag. If you've watched Larry's TV show "Trailing the Hunter's Moon" on the Sportsman Channel, chances are pretty good you have seen him at work with his handguns. He is a deadly shot with rifle or handgun and loves the challenge that handgun hunting presents. Larry was between speaking engagements and some time devoted to be at the Ruger factory. He had a couple of days to enjoy with us before hopping on a plane and departing to his next engagement. Anyone that knows Mr. Whitetail knows he dearly loves his "off time" when he can hunt with no real agenda and no deadlines. Wayne had dropped Larry off at another hunting blind, across the ranch from where I was watching the critters begin their daily late afternoon move from cover to feed.

Within a few minutes of the gobbler passing my blind, I spotted three cream colored spots heading my way. They were several hundred yards out and I guessed them to be aoudad sheep. I've never hunted a more wary animal; "wired" is the best way to describe their nature. As they came nearer, through my biocular, I ascertained the leader of the group to be a mature ram, followed by a ram just a bit smaller and a younger animal that appeared to be about half grown. It's hard to be successful when targeting a trophy animal unless you stick with your guns and wait him out. This often entails passing on other animals. My goal was one of the big axis bucks roaming the hills but, being a devout outdoor cooker of wild game, I found myself contemplating just how tasty that younger aoudad might be. The threesome stopped to nervously nibble of the pieces of alfalfa hay that Wayne had tossed about 50 yards from my stand. I had the scope on the smaller sheep's vitals but decided not to shoot. It was early into the hunt and I had those red colored deer with white spots and big antlers on my mind!

Just as it was getting too dark to make out my scope's crosshairs, I mounted my Nite Site atop the scope, plugged the little video camera into the eyepiece of the scope and attached the battery. It's perfectly legal to shoot exotics after dark and Wayne said he would return to get me about 30 minutes after dark. I might just shoot an axis while waiting! I had also packed my Nite Site Spotter, a hand-held unit that uses infrared technology; the Spotter works great on the darkest of nights.

Before the hunt, we had placed Wayne's Game Alert under the feeder. This unit is actually a highly refined motion detector. When game comes around the feeder, the light comes on, alerting the hunter to get his rifle/bow up and get ready to make the shot.

Just a few minutes after dark, the light on the Game Alert was glowing red. I scanned around the feeder with the Nite Site Spotter and observed 2 big wild hog sows with about 18 piglets between them munching corn. A lone sow and smallish boar were also running with the sounder. Normally, wild hogs are more than I can resist and I usually shoot the first good eater I see on a hunt. But, I stuck with my plan and continued waiting for that big axis buck to appear. Shortly thereafter, I saw the headlights of Wayne's ATV coming down the road. Weishuhn was with Wayne and said he saw several deer and hogs but decided not to shoot. Then, it was back to camp for a meal that you would have had to experience to believe! We could see the campfire burning brightly well before we reached camp. Wayne's longtime friend Jason Barron was at back at camp and I could see he was busy getting dinner together.

"Ever eat any fried wild hog backstrap?" quizzes Jason as we settle in around the campfire.

Well, we had all eaten fried backstrap steaks, but never backstrap fried whole.

Weishuhn and I are both old camp cooks and the idea of frying a whole backstrap perked our interest.

"The first thing I did was take a bottle of Zesty Italian seasoning and run it through a blender so the larger particles of seasonings would be reduced in size and go through an injector needle," says Jason. "And then I injected the backstrap with the liquid seasoning. Next, I added some Tony's Cajun seasoning to corn meal and coated the two halves of backstrap well."

Jason had some oil heated to 350 degrees in the fish cooker and slowly eased both the battered pieces of loin into the hot oil.

"Seven minutes per pound is a good average cooking time," Jason advised, "but I always use a meat thermometer to make sure the internal temperature is between 185 and 200 degrees."

As the loin pieces cooked, we enjoyed visiting around the campfire and by the time Weishuhn had wrapped up telling us a few details of his last hunt to Africa, Jason had prepared a pot of tasty macaroni and cheese and veggies to go with the loin.

Outdoor cooking is always a big part of every hunt I've been on and I always learn a thing or two from other cooks. When I sliced into Jason's fried pork loin, I learned that I had spent a lifetime missing out on an awesome method of cooking pork; a method that I plan to put to use often in the future!

After a great dinner and a few more hunting tales around the campfire, it was time to hit the sack for a good night's sleep. The next morning's hunt was somewhat of a repeat of the previous evening. Lots of game and shot opportunities on everything except one of those 300-pound axis with 31-inch main beams. A very relaxed Weishuhn departed the ranch mid day before the evening hunt for his speaking engagement. Larry really hated to leave, but duty called and if your name is Mr. Whitetail, your duties are varied and numerous!

Sunset fell on the Sunset Ridge Ranch and I still had not had what I considered a "comfortable" shot at a mature axis buck. The one I did see was through the brush at about 130 yards, much too far for any ethical shot with an air rifle, even the powerful .45 caliber Texan I was hunting with.

As I wrap up this article and file it just before deadline, I still have another day to hunt. There is a good chance I will connect with one of the big axis bucks of Sunset Ridge, but, even if I don't, this hunt will go down as one of the most enjoyable of my long career. After all, having the privilege of hunting and spending time with such quality gentlemen as Weishuhn, Hays and Barron is a treat in itself. A monster axis with my Texan will just be icing on the cake. Wish me luck tomorrow!

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