Proving ground

By Amy Bulger, editor

I think there's a point in a hunter's path when we make the shift from *saying* we're hunters to actually feeling confident in what we're doing. Maybe that realization is long past for you, or maybe it hasn't happened yet? Mine came a few years ago, and every fall it reminds me of the rancher with the Hollywood name.

Three summers before, my husband and I had knocked blindly to ask if this landowner would let us hunt. In his 50s, he wore layers of muscle and dirt built from his cattle ranch in Eastern Colorado. We returned that fall and five more with two guns and a "thank you" bottle of vodka. Over the years his wild beard narrowed into a goatee and his physique slimmed along with his cattle operation as drought years lengthened.

We never paid attention when he said we could sit at "The Homestead" (a windmill and cattle chute in the middle of nowhere) and wait for the pronghorn to come to us. No, we walked miles into the grasses and sweated defiantly as we dragged our harvests back.

He always met us after our hunts in his white flatbed diesel, laughing. Addressing my husband by name, but never me, he'd say, "Boy, you guys sure do it the hard way, don't ya?" We'd laugh too, because we knew he was right, and we were proud.

On the day things changed, I was after a particular buck bedded near the rancher's house with seven does and 14 extra eyeballs on alert. They were in the same field as the cattle, so I called the house first. "Heck yeah, go get him! Just don't shoot my cattle, I don't think you want to buy one of those," he said.

I'd only been hunting a few seasons. And that day was the first time I'd stalked an animal alone. My intent belly-crawling soon piqued the cows' curiosity and they swarmed my direction. But I was focused. Too focused. Until it dawned on me.

"Hey," I said out loud. "You're not a cow! You're a stupid bull!" … I didn't say stupid.

The largest led the pack and also had a serious ability to focus — on ME. He was 50 yards away and growling. Two younger bulls kicked up dirt. This, of course, put the pronghorn on alert. The rancher watched from inside his house, calling my husband to say, "You know, she's doin' that the hard way."

I tightened my grip on my rifle. How ironic, I thought, that I might really have to buy one of these bulls. Stay low so not to scare the pronghorn? Stand up so the bulls would not try to trample me? Thirty minutes went by. The pronghorn grazed. The bulls drifted closer. Eye to the scope, I thought a lot about bailing. I could find another buck that didn't come with a pasture of one-ton, growling land mines.

Then, finally, a shot. Anticipation, anxiousness and relief coiled in one bullet. The buck reared up, dropped. The bulls remained unfazed, but gave me time to hightail it to the fenceline.

The rancher came out to meet us later. But this time, he looked me in the eye and called me by name instead of saying "your wife." A near 400-yard shot through his backyard and a dance with his best bull changed our relationship. That buck was my badge of courage in this male-dominated outdoor world of dust and blood and lead.

This month, my husband and I will trek to a new pronghorn hunt area near Pathfinder Reservoir. I miss the ranch, but here we will hunt public land. Over the years, I've grown to appreciate the spaces in this world that aren't fenced in.

Sharing the hunt

By Amy Bulger, editor

It was Tall Boy who brought me to the rancher's house south of Chugwater.

An old muley with a gray-white face, his antlers were spindly tall and barely wider than his ears. But his signature mark was the near-black fur lining the bridge of his nose and encircling both eyes like a bandit's mask. I'd think of much better names in those following days as we watched him, but Tall Boy fell out of my mouth first. I was ready for a beer the afternoon I spotted his antlers poking from the buck brush and the name stuck.

Our GPS chip revealed Tall Boy bedded on private land. But we'd stop the truck anyway on our dawn-and-dusk drives to the public land we were hunting, just to see if he was there — a hundred yards beyond the sandstone cliff, up the hill from the cattle guard ... there he was. Everytime.

We were hunting a tiny square of public land two miles west of his lair. Pronghorn and general mule deer tags burned our pockets. After three days, my husband tagged a nice muley buck. But the weekend loomed with more hunting pressure, so we found our way to the landowner's driveway, a pristine white mailbox at the intersection of two muddy dirt roads. Near the house a worker commanded a tractor with tires as tall as our truck and a bucket of dirt on the front. He backed the contraption skillfully our direction, hopping out clad in Carhartts and the fur of a winter beard that masked a wide smile. He pointed us in the ranch manager's direction with a nod and handshakes and genuine wishes for good luck.

I'm taken by how friendly most landowners and ranch hands have been when us camo-clad folk interrupt their work looking for permission to hunt. I've knocked on doors in five Western and Midwestern states and, although those who answer don't always let us play, they have always been kind. Can I claim the same when someone interrupts my workday?

The ranch manager was equally friendly. Pronghorn? "Please, have at it," he chuckled. Muley bucks? "Well," he hesitated. "We're lettin' those grow before I let anybody hunt again. Maybe next year?"

Our conversation uncovered that he not only takes responsibility for the cattle and farming operation, but feels an obligation to the wildlife out here as well. Knocking on strangers' doors asking to hunt is a good way to learn that the desire to be good stewards of the land and friendly human beings runs pretty common. That's an important fact in Wyoming, where more than half of the land is privately owned and more than 354,000 acres of public land are fully surrounded by private parcels.

Though my husband and I are mostly public-land hunters and like the ability to roam freely, our forays onto strangers' private parcels have built relationships and forged memories that do-it-yourself hunts can't provide. We've had the good fortune to meet folks who care about the land and the wildlife and are willing to share the hunt.

Through their generosity I've learned that landowners — and land — aren't always inaccessible. In Kansas, a quick knock on the door turned into an afternoon lunch. In Eastern Colorado a rancher tracked us down with a map of his place to show us "the good spots." Whether we're successful or not, we always return the favor, somehow.

The ranch where Tall Boy hides out clearly belongs on this list. I'm glad the landowner is letting him grow. The general season is over, but sometimes I still drive until the rattle of the cattle guard shakes me from thought and I pull over and glass for him. He's still there. Even though the waiting feels long right now, the months from here to next October will eventually run together as one space between two hunts, one pause between two breaths in a story waiting to be continued.

Turkey stuff

By Amy Bulger, editor

I dug around last weekend for a turkey call in a big, plastic tub that looks just like 10 others on the garage shelves. Black Sharpie scrawled on peeling duct tape across its side told me I was in the right one: "Turkey Stuff." I was looking for my favorite — a nondescript wood and slate call — in the jumbled, colored textures of wood, ceramic and glass mingling inside.

There are so many tubs now. "Hunting Socks," "Hats and Gloves," "Elk Stuff," the row keeps going. Our gear has quadrupled for the worst of reasons: Inheritance.

I don't know if it's common to befriend your father-in-law before you're even friends with your husband, but that's how my story goes. I worked with him before I even knew he had a son. Seven years ago, he took me on my first hunt — a wild tom on the Colorado plains. He loved a hunt, any hunt — so much that he spent 14 years professionally teaching people how to do it.

I didn't yet understand birds or shotguns or the nuances that distinguish hunting from harvesting. But for weeks I wandered the office, scratching out yelps and purrs like a hen with laryngitis until, one day, I finally sounded like a wild turkey. Always guarded with his emotions, he pulled a call from his desk drawer, answered my yelp with an efficient gobble and a smirk, and then promptly went back to work.

He did the calling in the field that year, spewing an impressive array of sounds with both slate and mouth calls to concoct an imaginary flock of hens. I was busy shaking with adrenaline. I hadn't expected the power of the tom as he beat his wings on the ground, strutting just yards in front of me, answering the yelps. That communication hooked me as a hunter.

But it took a couple seasons until I started calling on my own. I was engaged to his son by then and we'd found our own turkey spot. The little oasis of public land was such good habitat for holding birds that we kept going back. It is the kind of secret spot we only shared with those closest.

We let my in-laws in on the secret, but it wasn't until two years ago we all were able to hunt it together. It was the most inconvenient of times for a turkey hunt. Everything my husband and I owned — minus turkey vests, decoys and shotguns — was in a moving truck headed from Denver to Montana. A 500-mile detour to our turkey spot in Nebraska was sold as a chance to hunt with my in-laws "on the way."

Opening weekend of the season fell on my birthday. German chocolate cake on a picnic table. Time sitting fields balanced with time over skillet dinners, watching my father-in-law deconstruct a blind we somehow managed to turn inside out. We waited on the sun to get low, waited for it to rise. Eventually, we chased our moving truck north and my in-laws headed back to Denver.

He called one month later. Illness. Surgery. Percentages. Anger shocked into hopefulness. But recovery isn't how his story goes. By the next spring turkey season, we moved back. Closer, anyway. A bucket list replaced with a bucket, full of prayers. But nothing could stop it by then. Services held in a shaded grove in July.

It's hard to count the number of extra miles on the road you're going to be thankful for later. Those 500 we'd gladly drive a thousand times over.

In a couple weeks, his son and I will chase birds there again, continue what a simple turkey call started. And so the "Turkey Stuff" tub is down from the shelf, and we search it for things we need. There's that wooden slate call. It's the one I learned on years ago, the only one with a pitch that sounds right to me anymore.