**Prairie Dog Hunt 2018**

**The Approach**

We started this hunt about 6 months ago. One evening we were looking at our African safari trophies, longing to go on another hunt. But this time we wanted to go to someplace we hadn’t been before and hunt something a lot cheaper than a kudu or zebra. We also wanted to do some long-range shooting and that’s when we thought of a prairie dog hunt.

Linda got onto the internet looking for an outfitter that would do that for us. She found one in South Dakota and we both thought that since we had never been in that part of the continent, we could drive there and see lots of new scenery, and could take our own rifles and lots of ammo.

I had just finished a new rifle for Linda in 22-250 AI, worked on some loads and confirmed them at 600 meters – it shot a 2-inch group, 8 shots at that range. So, it was going. We each had a 6.5-284 that we had used for years in the National Sniper matches. We tested each one at 600 meters and they both produced .3 moa, 5 shot groups – so they were going. I had recently built a long-range hunting rifle in 7mm WSM. It produces a .5 moa group at 600 meters – and it came along as well.

As a last thought, we wondered if there would be an opportunity to shoot some prairie dogs at distances less than 100 meters. It seemed like such a waste to shoot one at these short distances with a rifle capable of hitting one at 1000 meters. So, I rigged a couple of our smallbore competition rifles (not in much use these days) with scopes and tested them out to 100 meters. We were able to frequently hit a 1-inch patch and decided to bring them along – you know, just in case. We eventually got our paperwork through the ATF and we were set to go.

Linda had planned our trip in great detail, researching interesting sites to visit. She planned each day so that we didn’t end up driving too much, being exhausted at the end of a day’s drive. We left a week before we were scheduled to begin our hunt and spent time visiting places, so we could get a better appreciation of how the history played out.

We visited a town from the 1880s – where we saw tools and other items that were still in use when I was growing up (not sure how that happens), we drove through the Badlands – where we saw incredible terrain, big horn sheep, mule deer, a mountain blue bird and no rattle snakes (I hate rattle snakes), and we visited several cultural museums – where I finally found out how the natives attached arrow heads and fletchings. After our hunt, Linda has more of these types of places to visit – I did say, she had it all planned out.

**Day One**

Today, we finally arrive at our hunt sight. It was drizzly with a temperature of about 9C, which made us glad this was our “settling in” day and we weren’t out hunting. We are quartered in the most wonderful chalet, with mounts and hides on the wall, a front veranda and a view that goes to the horizon. All day you can hear the cackle of a pheasant rooster off in the distance. Once moved in, we were visited by our host who said we could go ahead and zero our rifles, explaining where the range was, where the targets and stapler were and once finished at 100 yds could go up on a hill and shoot at some gongs. With that, she was gone.

So, we had the whole afternoon to play with our rifles and it appeared that we were totally alone. There were other guests, but they were out hunting. We were told that the host would be back in time to make supper at about 1830. Yep, we were alone with nothing to do but shoot our rifles – like it was the perfect vacation.

So, throughout the rest of the afternoon, we took each of our rifles and shot them at 100 yds and then got into a golf cart, which was in place for our use, and went up on the hill to shoot at steel gongs at 600, 1000 and about 1200 meters. Because the day was so misty, we couldn’t see any splash at 1200, so stopped shooting at that distance after the first try. We confirmed the zeros on our 22 cal rifles out to 100 yds, noticing a difference of 1 moa between our home zero of 100 meters.

I commented to our guide later, about being alone on his range all afternoon, which wouldn’t happen on any range back home. He smiled and said, “What could go wrong?” Linda and I looked at each other, knowing that although we have a number of shooters we trust to be on our range alone, we would never allow strangers from another country to do that.

During the evening, we all met in the main lodge for supper. We met the other hunters, who, in fact, where not serious hunters, using factory rifles in .223, with hold over type scopes. One of the eight actually understood something about spotting and apparently tried to help the others. In the end, they all agreed that they might have actually hit one prairie dog.

We did have some very interesting conversations, including gun control, taxation and trading our dummy for their dummy - (so, we also talked politics). It turns out that the group was largely made up of big city lawyers, so you know they didn’t vote for Trump and kinda liked Trudeau. Still, we remained friendly. Once they knew we were into long range shooting, the rest of the evening was spent talking about tips and techniques on that topic – (so, the conversation become much more pleasant).

**Day 2**

We were expected at the Lodge for breakfast for 0800 – and we were on time. The day was drizzly, with wet grass and more mud. The group before us didn’t want to go out right away, so our guide asked us when we wanted to go out. The weather forecast said it was supposed to stop raining later in the morning, so we said we’d play by the game plan, to insert the other hunters first and we’d go in after them.

At about 1100, our guide came and got us. We would be driving out own vehicle and he would lead us to our first prairie dog town. He first stopped to pick up a cooler that had our lunch in it and then stopped again to pick up a couple of portable shooting benches – one right handed and another left.

We drove about 5 kms on a back road that was very muddy out to the main highway. It felt like driving on ice. The locals call it ‘gumbo’ and they say, “If you stick by it in the dry season, it’ll stick by you in the wet season.” The highway was paved, with virtually no traffic. We went about 10 kms and then turned onto a side road, which was muddier than the first. We had several large hills to climb and although we made it, at times we weren’t so sure.

We finally arrived at the field and there were prairie dog mounds everywhere. The guide opened a wire gate into a cattle pasture and we all drove through. We discussed where we would set up and drove to that particular ridge. The shooting tables were set up, our guide gave us some last-minute instructions and asked us to make an effort to not shoot any cows. There were cows everywhere. He said something like, “If you are a good enough shot to kill a prairie dog, you are good enough to not shoot a cow.” I had grown up shooting ground hogs in cow pastures so understood where he as coming from. No cows were injured in the production of day one of our hunt.

We set up our shooting position and since it was still misting out, we set up a pop-up and got ready to start the day of shooting.

The day went by so quickly. Linda was the first in the family to kill a prairie dog. Her 22-250AI was performing so well and, of course, she was shooting it like we know she can shoot. Her hits were spectacular, with the dog being nearly cut in two and hurled about a meter into the air. There was no problem confirming the kill with it laying dead on the ground.

I was using my 6.5-284 with match bullets. I had trouble with the wind because I kept thinking I needed less wind than was there. The wind was averaging 10 kmph, with gusts up to 15. The direction was mostly from 8 o’clock with switches to 9 and the direction would depend on the direction of the shot which varied frequently. I started with .5 moa and finally got it figured out at 1.25 moa – and this at 300 meters. Linda was using .5 mils. I finally got one at 104 meters with my 22-cal rifle. Later I shot a couple of probables out to just over 300 meters.

Looking back at the day for lessons learned, I think my match bullets were acting like FMJs and not creating enough trauma to keep the dog from getting down its always nearby hole. The 22-250AI won the day because it was making them die before they could get to their hole. In fact, we were certain they were dead before they landed back onto the ground.

These furry varmints are really very small, about half the size of a groundhog. Linda hit her first 3 or 4 targets and I missed my first 3 or 4. I just could not believe I needed over a minute of wind at 300 meters. To get a hit, you had to have the elevation and windage to a click on your sight. We had many incredibly close misses, whereby if we had made just a click in elevation and/or windage, we would have had a hit. Of these misses, the bigger number had the elevation right but just missed the end of their nose or their butt for having the wind just off. They offered the best target when they sat like a rabbit and the worst was when they laid flat on their dirt mound.

It was comical to watch some of the near misses. They would leap to the opposite side of the miss, land and look around as if trying to get their bearings and then scurry like the devil was after them back to their hole. I had one we called the Key Stone Cops. The miss was so close that he leaped off his mound and kept running in the wrong direction. He then realised what he was doing and ran back in the other direction, only to go past his hole. He then stopped, looked around, and finally ran to his hole and disappeared.

To keep score, we called it “confirmed” if the dog was laying still on the ground, clearly and obviously having been hit. If the splash looked like a hit and there were any signs of difficulty as the dog ran to his hole, we called it a “likely”, with some being more obvious than others we called “Very likely”. By the day’s end Linda averaged slightly under 50% and I was at about 20%. Linda made 12 hits and I had 4. We both agreed that hitting steel plates was easier than hitting prairie dogs.

**Day 3**

This would be our second day of hunting and we were keen to go. We drove for about 30 minutes on side roads, that weren’t quiet as muddy as yesterday, although the forecast promised us a warmer and sunnier day, the morning was overcast and cool.

We finally made our way to a large fenced in pasture, this time with no cows. Our guide lead us to the high ground in the middle, with dog dens all around us. He gave us some last-minute instructions and left. We set up our tables and settled in for the day. As we were doing this, we heard, in the direction of the center of our arc of fire, what to me sounded like someone using a steel post thumper – a tool used to drive steel fencing posts into the ground. I had a look through my binos and sure enough, there was an ATV parked 750 meters down range with an individual near by mending fences. I watched him for a short while and figured he would soon finish up and leave, which in about 30 minutes, he did just that.

We were set up the same way as we did yesterday, I was on the right and Linda on the left. We divided the field in half and I would shoot at anything to the right and Linda would run roughshod over everything to the left. Usually we shot in turns, but sometime one of use would take several shots simple because they had targets. We shot steadily throughout the day, taking a break to get something to drink from the truck.

Each shot took a bit longer than it otherwise might, because I would set up my phone into a bracket that would attach to my spotting scope, so we could video each shot. So, we would spot a target with our binos, talk the other of us onto it, decide who was going to shoot it, find it in the spotting scope, get it centered in the field of view, magnify it, focus it, attach the phone/camera, get set up with the rifle, decide and set on elevation and windage, start the video, get back into shooting position and shoot the prairie dog. Then we would review the video of the shot and decide where we had hit and if that was the right elevation and windage for another shot a that distance.

After two days of hunting, neither of us have gone through our first box of 100 rounds. This is making us wonder how those who claim up to 500 kills a day are really doing it (even 500 shots a day seems like a stretch). Also wondering how they are confirming a hit. It is certainly obvious when Linda makes a hit with her 22-250AI but it’s not so obvious when I make a hit with my 6.5-284, although, in both cases, it is obvious when we make a clean miss.

I was curious to know what was really happening to the dog when I get a hit using match bullets. So, when I made a hit at 315 meters, we watched the dog trying to scramble about 2 meters to his hole only to die as he neared it, we figured this was the perfect one to examine. We walked out to have a look. The dog had been hit solidly through the front shoulders, with a tiny entrance hole and only a slightly bigger exit hole. It had travelled approximately 2 meters before dying. So, now I was wondering how many shots were in fact fatal, but because the dog was sitting on his mound and was able to immediately scurry down his hole, before the shot took effect. We did not count any of these as hits, unless there was clear indication of such a hit in the dog’s reaction. This, even if the video showed a possible hit but the dog still scurried down its hole acting healthy.

To do this over again, I would have made the effort to load the Hornady ELD-X bullets since they are designed to expand. Although the match bullets can expand into pieces when they hit a solid target, the prairie dog simply doesn’t have the mass to make this bullet explode. I did manage to recover one of my match bullets from a mound and it had expanded, leaving only a portion of the core and jacket in tack, but it wasn’t doing this on a dog.

By the end of the day, we had each made 6 solid hits for a total of 12 for day 2 and a total of 24 for the two days of hunting. So, it does make us wonder about those claims of 500 per day, as to just how they are counting hits, especially when hunting without the benefit of a spotter or video.

Our longest confirmed hit so far is 400 meters, followed by 385 meters.

**Day 4**

Today is our last day. I’m feeling a little sad as I would like to have another go with better bullets – bullets specifically designed for this game. Linda is suffering from some spring allergies and didn’t get a good night’s sleep. As it turned out, Linda has come down with some kind of flu, and just to state the seriousness of this malady, she chose not to go out today. Instead, opted for a day of rest and, in fact, stayed in bed all day. I, on the other hand, realizing that she could probably sleep better if I wasn’t around, (sure let’s go with that), went hunting.

We have a robin with a nest nearby and early in the mornings it keeps seeing its reflection in the window and in an attempt to run off this interloper, keeps banging into the window. It would appear to not learn a lesson from this, as it continues to do it throughout the day without stopping.

I was put on the end of a very high ridge, so that I had a dog town in 360 degrees. Sort of like Col Chesty Puller in Korea, when he found himself surrounded by the enemy, “Good” he said, “now, no matter which way we shoot, we’re bound to hit one.”

However, I decided to focus on one side – you don’t want to take away from shooting time with all that moving of equipment. I initially thought that it had to be 600 meters across the valley to the other side and that I would finally get a chance at some really long shots. But, alas, when I used my range finder, it was only about 350 meters. I was reminded of one of my sniper instructors, who taught us that when looking from high ground, across the deep depression of the valley, things will look further away than they really are. (“Yes, Sergeant, you did give me that lesson… Yes, Sergeant, I was awake in your lecture on judging distance… Yes, Sergeant, I do think you are a good instructor… No, Sergeant, I wasn’t put here to make your life miserable… Yes, Sergeant, my error was 250 meters… what…Yes… Sergeant… 250 push ups…)

I wanted to video every shot but found that not as easy as it would seem. The valley had very few land features and therefore, hard to find reference points. I would spot my target with binos and range a distance. I then prepared the rifle with the required elevation and windage and loaded. I rechecked with binos to see if my target was still there and to find something I could recognize when trying to line up the spotting scope. Getting the spotting scope on the target turned out to be the hardest part of the day. Once I accomplished that, I would turn up the magnification to about 40 power and readjust the scope to keep the little darling centered. I would then attach the camera and hope I could still see my target in the center. With all that done, I now had to get on with the rifle which usually meant turning the power down for a bigger field of view. Once found, I had to hold the rifle very still while I turned up the magnification. I had to double check that my target was still in the rifle scope and finally, carefully reach out and turn on the camera. With all this in place, I could finally take my shot.

One of my misses was a bit comical. My shot landed low, creating a huge dust cloud in front of the little varmint. With the wind coming from the right and as the cloud cleared, the prairie dog stood up on his hind legs and gave me the finger – well, maybe not that last part, but the rest is true. He stood up as if to say, “Is that all you got, is that the best you can do?”

I shot my 6.5-284 for the first half day and scored 10 hits. I then switched to my 7mm WSM for the rest of the day and score 7 hits with it. It seemed that the 168 Sierra Match Kings I was using in the 7mm were doing a better job on the dogs than the 139 gr Lapua’s were doing. My last 4 hits with the 7mm were all at 328 meters with one of them getting it twice. I had clearly hit him with the first shot and put him in a bad way but hadn’t killed him. My next shot ended his life in a very spectacular fashion.

I just had to take at least one long range shot while out here. I located a rock at one end of the valley and ranged it at 637 meters – but it sure did look further than that. I set up on it and hit it with three shots. That was kinda fun too.

There was always wind, actually, it got tiring after awhile. It was normally blowing at 10-15 kph with gusts up to 20. Once I found what was needed, I seldom changed it, and chose not to shoot during the gust. We had to watch direction as we switched from one target to another.

So, our total count for the hunt was 41. I do believe more were killed having been hit and getting down their hole – we didn’t count these. It has been a great go, and ever so glad to have done it. Our hosts and guides here at Buffalo Butte Ranch have been professional and made us feel welcome and at home. Many of the other guests here have been coming here for a shooting vacation for many years.