

TWO WHEELS TO ADVENTURE

A GROUP OF BUDDIES, SOME FAT BIKES,
AND THE BLACK HILLS OF SOUTH DAKOTA
MAKE FOR THE PERFECT DIY HUNT.

BOBBY DAHLBERG



IMAGES BY
SAMSOHOLT

A GOOD HUNT IS MORE THAN JUST THE PURSUIT OF AN ANIMAL. IT'S A CHALLENGE, A TEST OF FORTITUDE, AND AN ADVENTURE.

THE 7:30 A.M. wake-up call came early, considering we didn't roll into our sleeping bags until after 1 a.m. The group—Josh Linderberg, Sam Soholt, Will Jenkins, and I—assembled bleary-eyed but ready to go at a campground near Reva, South Dakota, a wide spot on Highway 20 on the far western edge of the state. After nearly a year of planning, our mountain-bike-based DIY deer hunt had finally arrived.

The bikes were unloaded, and our gear was heavily packed into panniers and frame bags. It was more than I would usually bring, but the plan was to set up a comfortable base camp, so I rationalized that a single day of extra work on the pedals would be rewarded by several days of extra comfort. With all the gear loaded up, we headed out, bound for public land that lay a few miles away.

As Murphy's Law would dictate, the access we scouted on the Topo and GPS, which we had planned to use to access the National Forest, was closed and posted "No Trespassing." A little bummed to run into trouble so early, we headed back to the campground to regroup and figure out a new access point.

Cogburn CB4 Fat Bikes served to transport hunters and mountains of gear in the backcountry on the group's DIY deer hunt.



THE SECOND ATTEMPT

At the campground we were fortunate to run into a Fish and Game officer who gave us some much-needed intel. The new plan was to drive around to the south end of the unit and ride the bikes north from there. The bikes were quickly loaded back into the bed of my truck, and we made the drive south and located the entrance. We decided to pull in far enough to get the truck out of sight. Due to recent rain, the road was pretty slick with clay-like mud, and we narrowly avoided getting seriously stuck.

After finding a good place to stash the truck, the four of us grabbed the bikes and were on our way again. The mud that nearly stuck the truck wasn't much nicer to the bikes, and it was definitely a moment to appreciate the fat tires on the Cogburn CB4s. The thick and sticky terrain made the going slower than normal, but we still made significantly better time than we would have on foot. And we had the added bonus of the bikes shouldering the load.

The southern route was mostly uphill, and after about three hours of riding, we crested the top of the butte and got our first look at the plains below. It was truly beautiful country straight out of a Western movie. The rolling hills and cattle trails on top of the butte were ideal for the bikes and made for much faster riding, which allowed us to cover a lot of ground very quickly.

We rode until we found a good location for camp in a little gully that provided a bit of shelter from the wind and was near water. Making good time to the spot allowed us to sneak in a little evening scouting and glassing before the sun dipped below the horizon. It was a great day, but a long, tiring one, and the sleeping bag was welcome that night.







BUSTED BY BUCKS

At first light we broke into pairs. Josh and Will decided to hike out from camp, and Sam and I jumped on bikes to hunt some country farther from camp. Almost immediately, Sam got a flat from what we could only guess was an unseen cactus. It was not a huge problem as we had a spare tube and it doesn't take long to fix, but racing the oncoming dawn, we decided to leave the bikes and cover the rest of the way on foot so as not to miss first light.

We crested a ridge, and a large draw sprawled out before us. It looked ideal, and sure enough, after only a few minutes on the bins, two does emerged, then a few more, until when all was said and done, Sam and I had 13 does feeding far below. Hunting for the freezer as much as for the trophy, we watched patiently to see where they would bed to decide if a stalk would be possible.

Sam and I settled in for a long sit when three bucks suddenly appeared. They wandered through the does and worked their way across the draw, finally turning straight toward us. Soon they were directly below us, not more than 150 yards away. Caught slightly off guard by how quickly the scene had unfolded, it finally set in that the time to move was now. I hustled around the backside of the hill for an unseen approach, but the wind swirled, they scented me and were gone as quickly as they had come in. Unfortunately, with our attention directed at the bucks, we lost our group of does. With no more deer to be seen, we headed back to the bikes to fix the flat and return to camp for a midday respite before the evening hunt.

THE EYE OF THE STORM

Josh and Will returned shortly after us and told us the details of their morning trek. They had hiked out to investigate a distant tree line and discovered the area showed some serious promise with sign everywhere. We agreed that would be the location for our evening hunt. What had taken Josh and Will nearly an hour and a half to reach on foot we covered in about 15 to 20 minutes on the bikes. Once again, I was very grateful for the CB4. We stopped to double-check the GPS and discovered we had worked our way considerably farther north and east than originally intended and were getting close to the property line.

As we paused to consider our options, the sky got dark, and nasty weather rolled in. The wind picked up to a steady 30 mph with gusts kicking up to 50 to 60 mph. If that wasn't crazy enough, the rain soon followed. We huddled under the trees in hopes that it was a fast-moving front. Eventually, the rain gave up, but the wind did not. Considering the weather and our proximity to the property boundary, we bailed from the tree line and moved south to hunt closer to camp.

Brutal is the only word I can think of to describe the conditions. It was hard to stand up, never mind hiking or pedaling.

Trying to salvage a bad situation, we split up and made an attempt to at least glass a little. Will and I rode most of the way to where Sam and I had seen all the deer earlier that day and then dropped the bikes to sneak the last few yards over the top of the ridgeline and get out of the wind as much as possible.





The eroded landscape of South Dakota's Black Hills is amazing and breathtaking, while at the same time ideally suited for two-wheeled adventure.

The temperature had dropped to the high 30s, and the wind was just plain cold. Realizing the deer were bedded as well and it would be impossible to actually shoot in the wind, we begrudgingly headed back to camp, where we found that Josh's tent had nearly collapsed.

That night the group discussed options, and we decided that if the wind didn't break the next morning, we would bail off the butte and head back to Reva to salvage the last day of the trip. Given Josh's tent situation, he moved in with me. Will and Sam elected to dine on Cliff bars, but Josh and I really wanted something warm. There was just enough room in the vestibule of my tent to boil water and make a hot meal. My face hurt from the wind and my fingers were chilled and clumsy, but it was incredible how good it felt to get out of the wind and eat a hot meal.

By 4 a.m. it was obvious the wind wasn't going to let up. The tent was shaking violently, and getting any more sleep was out of the question. Mentally, I knew it was time to break camp and try Plan B. Getting out of my warm bag and stepping out into the wind was difficult, but I kept telling myself, "You can't take a deer from inside your tent, and camps don't move themselves."

We knew there was a site back at Reva tucked behind a rock formation that would serve as a great windbreak. If we could get there soon, we could still do some recon for the evening hunt and the last hunt on Saturday. There was certainly some trepidation from the group about how hard the exit ride was going to be, but with camp broken down we headed out.

RETREATING AND REGROUPING

When we crested the top of the gully where our camp had been, the wind hit us full force for the first time. If the wind was strong below, it was simply insane away from the protection of the gully. With foot to pedal, we started slowly making our way out.

Never had I been in wind like this. The cross wind would blow you sideways, nearly toppling you. And when we turned into the wind, it was all we could do to not stop completely—or even roll backwards. Stopping to take a breather was difficult; if you weren't careful the wind would knock you right off your feet. The whole situation was just bizarre.

At first it was demoralizing, but at some point, I switched from being discouraged to being thoroughly amused about riding in these conditions.

It wasn't all bad; when we rode with the wind, it was like dropping the hammer on a big ol' V-twin, suddenly rocketing you forward. Couple that with nice downhill stretches here and there and it was one of those downright giddy moments on a bike I'll never forget.

With the bikes loaded in the truck, we drove back to the campsite behind the large rock wall at Reva. It was just what we needed. Shelter from the wind, a fire pit, and, less important but certainly welcome, pit toilets. While setting up camp, we chatted with another conservation officer who let us know that despite the action we saw, we had been hunting in the wrong spot.

Rejuvenated by this info, we quickly geared up and headed out to find a place to sit for the evening. Given the amount of sign we saw, it was immediately evident that this area had a lot more deer than the first spot. Movement was minimal that evening, but the area definitely had significant promise.



High winds made hunting unproductive and camping extremely difficult—ultimately leading the group to retreat to a more sheltered area.



Hunters are eternal optimists, only losing hope as the last rays of evening light fade, knowing that bad luck can change in a split second.

LAST DAY HIGHS AND LOWS

The next morning I settled into a promising draw only to hear voices of other hunters somewhere nearby. This is a fact of hunting public land that sometimes must be dealt with, but considering just how much land there was, it came as a bit of a shock to me.

I gathered my gear and headed west until I reached the edge of the butte to glass the grassland below. Within minutes, I had four does in sight with what appeared to be an easy approach. I was very hopeful for a successful stalk, but just as I was about to make my move, the doe jerked up and locked in on something coming in from the south.

Confident I was about to see a buck appear, I immediately glassed in the direction of her gaze. Instead of a buck, there was Sam, standing like a statue about 80 yards away from the doe. I thought for sure he was going to get close enough for a shot, so I sat back to watch the show. The doe soon bounded off, but Sam stayed put, which was a little confusing. What I didn't know was that he was actually

stalking a large buck. The doe had simply busted him along the way, and with the doe's alarm, Sam's buck had vanished.

Sam eventually made his way back toward the butte where I was able to get his attention and have him join me on my perch. We laughed over the morning's events and resumed glassing to see if we could locate Sam's buck from this higher vantage point.

The buck was nowhere to be found. We were about to call it for the morning when we struck gold. Two monster muleys were bedded barely in view. They were close to the property line, but there was no doubt we would be coming back to this spot in the evening to make a move on them.

After returning to camp, we learned that Will and Josh also had been on deer, and the conversation all afternoon focused on how much more action everyone had that morning. When the hour finally arrived to make our way back to the butte, our mood was very optimistic. While this would be our last hunt, we all had a good feeling that it was the last one we would need.

Sam and I split off from Josh and Will and returned to the perch overlooking the bedded bucks. Sure enough, they were still there.

Sam led the way, with me in tow, down through the lows, constantly checking wind and belly crawling over any rise that had the slightest chance of giving us away. The terrain and wind were both in our favor as we made our silent approach. We slowly slipped in close against a thick backdrop of cover just one swale over from the bucks.

Now close enough to know exactly where the bucks were in relation to the topography, we determined they were about 40 yards over the property line. We were in the perfect ambush spot, though, and that was better than nothing. So there we sat. All they needed to do was work toward us enough to cross the boundary and we would be in range. It was frustrating and humorous at the same time.

As shooting light expired, we stood with bow in hand, looking over the fence at "our" South Dakota monsters. It just wasn't in the cards this go round, but man, was it exhilarating.

Josh and Will had close encounters with a doe and buck that evening as well, and like Sam and me, they were unable to close the deal.

Although our trip wasn't a complete success, given that the coolers were empty, we all agreed it was a great experience and one we learned from. This is so much of what DIY hunting is: Every trip to a new area is a learning experience leading to success. And really how could we complain? We had spent four days on bikes, hunting in new and amazing country, learning, growing, and laughing as we went. It was truly an unforgettable adventure. **W**

