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January 2016

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BIGHORN SHEEP

Skier conflicts in Tetons

SWAN HABITAT

Not black and white

WINTER SURVIVAL

Wildlife need a few tricks
up their sleeves



‘Meanwhile in the nearby snow-filled chutes and basins, more and more backcountry skiers are carving turns and also, according to a recent study, disturbing bighorn sheep already struggling to survive.’

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A bighorn sheep ram surveys the elk refuge in Jackson Hole.
Photo by Elizabeth Boehm

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Hunting with Heroes co-founder Colton Sasser heads to the top of a hill with Game and Fish Game Warden Bill Brinegar on a hunt for pronghorn.

Photo by Justin Joiner

PRONGHORN- HUNTING HEROES

By Jeff Obrecht and Dan Currah

CASPER — Hunting with Heroes has always lived up to its name, but it especially hit the bulls'-eye this season.

The organization that lines up every detail of a hunt — from license to lodging — took 135 disabled veterans afield in Wyoming this season. One of those was U.S. Army Staff Sgt. and Iraqi War veteran Joel Tavera, who has experienced more than 80 surgeries as the result of his service — and now a Wyoming pronghorn hunt.

Although he's often referred to as the second most injured serviceman from the Iraqi War, Tavera is an avid hunter, and a student at the University of Tampa. He worked his Wyoming hunt, Oct. 2-4, around his classes at the University of Tampa and he can't wait to hunt again in the Cowboy State.

"What a great experience with a bunch of great people," Tavera said. "We worked

hard — getting started at 5:30 each morning and getting both antelope around 2:30 in the afternoon."

Tavera heard about Hunting with Heroes from a fellow disabled veteran hunter. Their hunting passion put them together on the national stage in October 2014 on "Amazing America," the outdoor TV show hosted by Sarah Palin. Tavera had always wanted to hunt an antelope-type animal but didn't know if he'd ever get to Africa to do it. With the tip about hunting Wyoming pronghorn, he jumped at the chance and contacted Hunting with Heroes.

In addition to losing much of his right leg and suffering 65 percent of his body burned, Tavera lost his sight as the result of a rocket slamming his SUV March 12, 2008. So he has a specially-rigged rifle with his scope tied into his iPhone to alert him to the shot. Ken Thoren and Game and Fish wildlife supervisor



Decorated veteran Joel Tavera, left, jokes with Hunting with Heroes guide and contributor Tom Whitmire. Whitmire donated his precious bighorn sheep license to a disabled veteran in 2015.

Photo by Amber Leberman

Brian Olsen were Tavera's guides the first day. The result was Tavera dropping a nice buck Saturday afternoon.

Teaming with game warden Daniel Beach, Tavera was back out on Sunday, and they tried a new system with the game warden's rifle. On a swivel tripod, Tavera had the rifle in his right shoulder and Beach looked through the scope from the other side of the stock. The game warden had Tavera swing the .308 and when

the crosshairs were on the animal — Tavera pulled the trigger and the doe was his.

"Daniel's funny as heck," Tavera said. "I not only like him, but his rifle, too. So much I'm going to get a .308, too."

Tavera's been enjoying the venison taken off the Green Acres Farm west of Casper. He plans to treat some friends to the remaining steaks, and enjoys jerky and sticks daily.

Tavera volunteered to fill in for a comrade



on the fateful patrol. Five soldiers were in the vehicle; three died. Tavera was in a coma the following 81 days. But he keeps looking forward with his history major and cyber security minor, and another Wyoming hunt.

"I look forward to coming back to hunt an elk," Tavera said.

Two avid hunters, and both U.S. Army veterans and Wyoming natives, founded Hunting with Heroes in 2013. Co-founders Dan Cur-

rah, who served in Vietnam in the late 1960s, and Colton Sasser, who was wounded in action in Afghanistan, April 15, 2012, take great pride in hosting new disabled veterans each hunting season — and they enjoy welcoming back some returning hunters as well. In the inaugural year 13 veterans were taken afield, 55 hunted in 2014 and this year 135 disabled veterans from 18 states joined the Hunting with Heroes team. Currah takes calls almost daily from new disabled vets interested in the program, and he is confident Hunting with Heroes will continue to grow.

Communities from across Wyoming have stepped up to create unique hunting experiences for these deserving men and women. In many cases, hosting a group of heroes has

Colton Sasser talks with Bill Brinegar on Gov. Matt Mead's ranch southeast of Laramie before heading out for a day of pronghorn hunting.

Photo by Justin Joiner



Katie Davison, a former Seabee, smiles as she hunts southwest of Laramie. Davison went after pronghorn in September as part of her first hunt. She had practiced shooting in the weeks leading up to the Hunting with Heroes event.

Photo by Justin Joiner

become a community-wide celebration with special events, parades, dinners and other programs designed to honor the veterans. In three short years, Hunting with Heroes has five established chapters across the Cowboy State, and they expect to add three more in 2016.

Currah says there are three cornerstones to the effort: participating veterans, landowners who open their gates and often host hunters in their own homes, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department that works closely with Hunting with Heroes to ensure the donated licenses are assigned to the veterans — and the department provides guiding and logistic services as well.

“When Colton Sasser and I set out to develop opportunities for disabled veterans to enjoy hunting in Wyoming, we had no idea that we were on to something that would be so incredibly rewarding personally, so humbling,

and so beneficial for so many — veterans and volunteers alike,” Currah said. “Hunting with Heroes is more than ‘just the hunt’ for many of these heroes. While the hunt is key, many veterans share that the interaction with fellow veterans has provided them invaluable emotional support. Everyone is pitching in to make the team’s efforts a success beyond our expectations. Wyoming has really given from the heart and we couldn’t be more grateful.”

In addition to Casper, 2015 hunts were hosted near Big Piney, Lander, Laramie, Lysite, Riverton, Pinedale, Shell, Star Valley and Gov. Matt Mead’s ranch near Tie Siding. The governor and the first lady also donated their pronghorn licenses.

One of those hunts, stalking a bighorn sheep in the badlands south of Dubois, was a 33-year-old Army veteran with a unique and heart-wrenching disability. Jon Shelton was



somehow exposed to some severe toxins during his Afghanistan tour. No one is sure how it was contracted, perhaps from a roadside food stand — but physicians are sure it will be fatal. Tom Whitmire of Casper guided Shelton on a pronghorn hunt in October 2013 and donated his long-sought-after bighorn sheep license to the Afghan vet in 2015. On Oct. 27, accompanied by experienced sheep outfitter Fritz Meyer, Shelton harvested his ram. Thanks to all who donated, it was Hunting with Heroes first bighorn sheep hunt — and a very memorable one to start with.

Hunting with Heroes welcomes veterans from all wars. They haven't taken a WWII veteran afield yet, but a WWII veteran — Bud Currah (Dan's dad) — guided hunters and is an active member of the team. At 90, the U.S. Navy veteran whose ship was sunk by a kamikaze in 1944, helped a disabled Vietnam vet bag his pronghorn near Lysite in 2014.

You don't have to guide to help. The organization will certainly put your donated big game licenses to good use. Volunteers are sincerely appreciated. And they definitely

welcome tax-deductable monetary donations. Hunting with Heroes is working hard to give something back to the brave men and women, like Joel Tavera, who gave so much to protect our freedom.

Bill Brinegar prepares to guide for Hunting with Heroes near Gov. Matt Mead's ranch.

Photo by Justin Joiner



To find out how you can help the organization visit huntingwithheroes.org, or contact Dan Currah at (307) 258-5880 or dan@huntingwithheroes.org.

— Vietnam veteran Dan Currah is a co-founder of Hunting with Heroes.

Game Warden Daniel Beach helps Joel Tavera sight-in a rifle before his pronghorn hunt.

Photo by José Tavera