

PREDATOR HUNTING MECCA

By Brandon Miller

From California to Carolina, South Texas is known as the predator hunting mecca — boasting some of the highest coyote populations in the U.S. Follow along as this newbie predator hunter receives some serious on-the-job training!



THIS WASN'T WHAT I IMAGINED WHEN I THOUGHT OF PREDATOR HUNTING IN SOUTH TEXAS.

Shooting bobcats and coyotes, sure. But I found myself the first afternoon of our trip, chasing peccary through mesquite trees and other spiny bushes. Minutes earlier, we spotted 25 javelina about 400 yards away.

After some fancy off-road maneuvering across the desert, one



istock



Hunting predators in Texas comes with the added bonus of riding around vast ranches sitting on high racks atop big trucks.

guy hopped off the truck, and the next thing I know, three of us are carefully running down a grassy embankment after peccary that are scrambling through mesquite trees 50 yards away. Though I didn't plan it before climbing on the high rack atop the Ford F-150, this

was the moment I realized it was a great decision to wear my Nike running shoes while camoed head to ankle.

Off we went up a sand hill and through the mesquite trees looking for the peccary. Leupold's John Snodgrass yelled my way



Though not anticipated, the author's choice of Nike running shoes worked well for literally chasing skunk pigs.

as he spotted them. These things were moving; it was another 75 yards before we were close enough to get a good shot. I lined up a free-standing shot, really taking my time to make sure the cross-hairs were perfect. The Browning X-Bolt Varmint Stalker let out a boom, then there was a thud as the "skunk pig" dropped. There was a small celebration, as this was my first javelina. It was a good start to the trip, but my goal was to get a coyote and a bobcat.

If You Call Them, Will They Come?

After the javelina shootout, we grabbed a quick dinner at Rayo Ranch and it was back to business. The four of us climbed back atop the F-150 around 8 p.m. for a traditional South Texas night hunt with a spotlight, scoped rifle, shooter and e-caller all sitting high above the pickup truck on a high-rack shooting platform.

The view from the truck's high rack makes spotting predators easier than being on the ground. It makes for quite a ride, too!



I wasn't really sure what to expect as we rode around Rayo Ranch, but what I quickly learned is there's nothing cooler than hunting predators at night. The four of us sat on the truck while Mike and main guide Jim Roche swapped shining the Coyote Light while the FOXPRO e-caller played into the desert. Each hunter also used Leupold's new LTO-Tracker, which is Leupold's first thermal optic. The concept of night hunting is pretty simple: see a set of red eyes, confirm the critter is a bobcat or coyote, line it up in the scope and shoot.

Unfortunately for our group, there wasn't a lot of the latter. We saw a lot of deer, but only a few

bobcats and no coyotes. To make matters worse, our marathon hunt that lasted until 3 a.m. included only a tag-teamed bobcat kill. One bobcat was on the neighbor's property, so we passed on it, and another wasn't recovered. It wasn't the way I expected my first nighttime predator hunt to go, but that's how it played out.

Calling And Shooting Coyotes Are Two Different Things

Being an inexperienced hunter, I have no problem taking tips from those whose experience can make me better. I welcome it, and I learned that Jim is one of the guys you listen to closely when he talks.



Here's a view from a typical South Texas coyote stand. Locating small openings in the cactus and mesquite can prove lethal if you're ready for a quick shot.

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Leupold's VX-3i LRP provided a crystal clear view at critters whether during the day or at night.

John and I were riding inside his F-150 late that afternoon to get set up. We heard coyotes howling during the previous day's javelina hunt, so the four-man group of hunters and two guides decided we needed to get to work earlier the next day. Jim and Mike switched hunting duos, so we were now with Jim.

As we rode, Jim talked to us about spending the last few days scouting the 400,000-acre property. Previous to that he wasn't familiar with Rayo Ranch. That transitioned into our plan for the late afternoon and into the night. Suddenly, however, while riding to our first setup, the plan changed.

It was about 5 p.m. when Jim stopped the truck on a dirt road. Mesquite trees were spaced out everywhere. We were driving up hill, the sun to our left and the wind blowing west, as well. "This



is it," Jim said. "Sometimes you have to go with your gut."

The three of us got out of the truck and walked quietly up the hill and down the other side. John

was on top of the hill facing the road and focused on a field of low cactus across it. I was between cactus plants and a mesquite tree at the bottom of the hill in a valley.

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The valley was wide open, with the same field of cactus across the road. Jim was between us with the e-caller.

I bought in to what Jim said about this being where we'd see some action, so I was fully attentive while scanning left to right and right to left through Leupold's new BX-3 Mojave binos. Within 5 minutes I spotted a coyote coming at a quick jog straight across from me. As my stomach dropped and heartbeat quickened, I realized this was it; this was the moment. There it was, wide open, ready to taste this 50-grain BXV Predator & Varmint ammo.

My heart was beating faster by the second as I looked into the scope to find the coyote running down the road. I couldn't find it. My heart rate continued climbing. I brought my face back from the buttstock and found the dog before looking in the scope again. I still couldn't find it. I started to panic!

The moment was so fast. Jim bought me some time by making several mouth calls to slow the coyote. I finally saw the coyote in the scope and immediately pulled — not squeezed — the trigger. My first ever opportunity to kill a coyote ended with it running away after a missed shot.

The best advice I've received in my young hunting career is to try to remain calm and lightly squeeze the trigger. Mark Olis, editor of this magazine, gave me that advice. In this situation, I did neither.

John salvaged my difficulties, firing two shots minutes after I did. He fortunately got a coyote to get us on the board. He added another coyote two stands later. Despite the disappointment, we were seeing dogs — and the action was incredible. We didn't know it at the time, but seeing eight coyotes in our first three stands was

John Snodgrass got the author's team on the board by taking these two 'yotes just before sunset.



just the beginning of a remarkable night.

Nighttime Is The Right Time, But It's Not Easy

Though nighttime hunting is awesome, it's also a new level of difficulty. Depth of field is harder to perceive and shooting under the cover of darkness takes practice. Plus, I had surgery to repair a

the wind picked up, we were back at it. A coyote at our first setup circled downwind just enough to smell us right as I was lining up the shot. The second setup ended up being one of the ultra-rare times we didn't have any action. By the third setup, we were shooting the rest of the night.

Jim had us in a beautiful spot for that third stand. I was on the left side of the truck with

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detached retina when I was 19, so my vision is already pretty bad — and it gets even worse in low light. That was a battle the entire trip, but it was never as frustrating as the last night of our trip.

Jim, John and I were feeling confident as we ate sandwiches next to the truck with the sunset fading in the distance. John's two coyotes laid on the tailgate. As the temperature dropped and

a large opening to my left. John was opposite with a clearing to his right. Within 10 minutes, Jim spotted eyes about 100 yards into the field, but they disappeared before John had a shot. Jim kept calling with his FOXPRO Shockwave, and within several minutes there was a coyote on my side of the truck. It wasn't going anywhere, but I ended up missing the long shot.



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The peccary are as thick as cactus in South Texas. Every member of the hunt team bagged one.

Jim asked where I was aiming. “The eyes,” I replied, already knowing that was wrong. Jim shook his head before saying, “Aim at the chest.” Due to my eyesight, I typically couldn’t see the chest, but I took his advice.

We moved on as the wind picked up more. Again, it was within minutes a coyote showed up. It was unbelievable. It was slightly behind me, sitting atop the 10-foot embankment on the edge of some shrubs. It was just looking at us. I aimed for what appeared to be the coyote’s chest, but it was another miss.

My confidence was still high when we saw a bobcat behind the truck 10 minutes later. It stalked slowly from the embankment down the hill. Jim was in my ear, “Be patient. Wait. Wait.” Several feet short of the road, it stopped. “Take the shot if you feel good about it,” Jim said. I did...another miss.

By the time we called it a night, we saw 15 coyotes and several bobcats that afternoon and night. It was an awesome experience. In fact, the other group at our camp killed all three coyotes they saw, yet they were jealous of us. That gave me some per-

This was my first predator hunt. I was the epitome of a rookie, but I gained immeasurable knowledge. After arriving in South Texas with the goal of taking at least one coyote and bobcat, I was instead humbled. I learned valuable lessons about the difficulties

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spective. Calling in coyotes and shooting coyotes are two different things. I now know specific ways to improve my shot, like remaining calm, taking enough time to line up the crosshairs and not rush the shot. Those are immediate things I can work on.

of gunning coyotes. I didn’t bag any fur, but I left Texas a more knowledgeable hunter. And I also killed my first javelina. Though you go out every hunt wanting to take game, sometimes there’s more you can take from a hunt. This was one of those times. 🐾

GEAR FROM THE HUNT

I spent most of the multi-day hunt using the smooth-shooting Browning X-Bolt Varmint Stalker. It was chambered in .22-250 Rem., but it’s also available in .204 Ruger, .223 Rem., .243 Win. and .308 Win. Three features that stuck out were the detachable rotary mag, 60-degree bolt lift and bolt-unlock button. We shot Browning’s BXV Predator loads in .22-250.

The Varmint Stalker was topped with Leupold’s VX-3i LRP 6.5-20x50mm scope. From the range to the field, this scope provided clarity in the bright South Texas sunshine and even at night when the only light we had was the Coyote Light.

Our camp also used the Winchester SX3 12-gauge shotguns, which provided a deadly punch for close-range shots. It featured Mossy Oak Break-Up Country. We used 12-gauge Varmint X with Shot-Lok technology for ammunition. It’s a 3-inch offering loaded with 1½ ounces of plated BBs that leave the muzzle at 1,300 fps.



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