

County Line Game Ranch

See those bushes moving? Those aren't bushes!



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We've all seen pictures of big Michigan white-tailed deer and you may have seen a few big buck or elk racks on those TV cable shows. But when you see the bushes move and you realize they are antlers- holy Jesus, Mary and Joseph- those are BIG.

Located just off Lyle Road, County Line Game Ranch to be accurate is actually half in Clare County - hence the name. In addition to white-tail and elk, the 500-acre ranch (320+ acres of natural habitat) offers hunts for American bison, Red Stag, Fallow or Sika deer, wild boar and several species of rams.

I had an opportunity to see some of those racks up close on a recent trip to the ranch thanks to the owners, Felice (Felix) and Sal Palombo. You might ask: how does an Italian father/son team end up in Gladwin County managing rather large herds of antlered herbivores (grass-eaters). I was wondering the same thing.

Hunting has been a part of life in the Palombo family for generations beginning with Sal's grandfather. "My grandfather went to Africa big game hunting in the '30's," said Sal. "Back in Italy my father's whole family were very well known and respected as game hunters."

While listening to Sal and his father talk it became quite apparent they not only cherish the thrill of the hunt but also admire their quarry for their abilities to evade them. Their love of animals and love of hunting is evident. They're concerned about making the experience pleasant and successful for the clients but also desire to maintain a healthy group of animals in as natural environment as possible.

They have implemented their own breeding program with an aggressive natural feeding program to keep a trophy-quality herd of wild animals. Standards and safety rules are "carved in stone."

I myself as a young man tempted the wilds of northern Michigan in search of the elusive white-tailed stag. The itch to bag that big deer was there but my aim wasn't. Alas, I have no great tales of success in my quests for the behemoth buck. I prefer now to leave the hunting to others as I watch them from the warmth of my living room on the Outdoor Life Network.

Just a few miles down the road was an opportunity to at least see what I had missed in my youth. So first I sat down with these two game hunting conservationists to hear firsthand about the call of the wild that brings so many hordes of orange out to hunt the wily beasts.

ROR: How does an immigrant Italian end up with a game ranch in Gladwin/Clare County?

Felix: He comes to look at some land for sale. While walking the land he sees a white-tail deer running through the woods. Where there's one, there's more. So I bought the land. I came to America; worked construction during the day and the midnight shift at Ford. But I was always looking for my own place to hunt.

ROR: How did the game ranch come about?

Sal: State land to hunt on is shrinking and the availability of animals will shrink without proper management just as it did in Europe. Our first thought was to preserve a place for our kids and grandchildren. This ranch was started from scratch as the DNR rules state. After running all the deer off your property, they have a formula that determines an estimated number of deer you missed and are remaining and you pay them for those deer to start your herd. From that point we have constantly mixed and upgraded the bloodlines to improve the stock. Now our herds are big enough so we've implemented our own breeding program.

ROR: Why should “Joe Public” go to a game ranch instead of the State land to hunt?

Sal: The average guy can't take a week or two off to go deer hunting in Michigan or out west. He comes home from work and has maybe two/three hours of light but he's an hour from the woods; has to pack up and it just isn't worth the hassle especially if he doesn't see any deer. Even the guy who goes out west or up north runs the risk of not seeing anything. We have virtually everything he needs right here and can be ready for him when he gets here. And we offer an opportunity to shoot a wide variety of antlered animals of all sizes.

ROR: Are antlers pre-determined genetically or do they grow with age?

Felix: There are some genetics involved with certain deer families producing a big deer. But to produce the massive racks the herd needs to be supplemented with food. We use only natural foods, no chemicals - hay, corn, soybeans, salt and trace minerals.

ROR: When you say massive rack or Boone & Crockett rack, what is that?

Sal: We aren't Boone & Crockett certified for measuring. That organization has a point system based on variables like height, width, and beam measurements. Our rate is determined on rack points and we use an eastern count, which means a 10 pt. buck with a symmetrical rack would be 5 legal tines (at least 1" high) on each side. Out west they would say a 5 pt., meaning 5 on one side and the other side equal or less. Any buck in the 150 pt. range, Boone & Crockett, is a big white-tailed deer but we've estimated some 175-180 bucks taken here. The selection is totally up to the hunter.

ROR: What is the determining factor for selecting an elk or bison?

Sal: A big elk here is 1000+ lbs. with a 6x6 or 7x7 rack. There is a 17 pointer running around out there now. For a bison, it's all about size. The more the bison looks like a freight train engine the better.

ROR: How much meat should I get from a 200 lb. deer?

Felix: You lose approximately 20% on the head/legs, 20% for the skin/hide and 20% for the internal organs. Your butcher will make a difference and whether you want it deboned. You can figure on 80 to 90 lbs. of meat.

ROR: What technique is most effective for getting the big buck and what is the biggest mistake a hunter makes?

Felix: Patience. Waiting for the big one. That answers both questions. First you see the does, then the littler bucks. Then you see an 8 pt. Bang. I got the big one. Yes, maybe. He's a nice big buck but the ten or twelve pt. or even bigger buck might be back there 80-100 yards watching and waiting. When he thinks the coast is clear, then he comes in and runs everyone off. Yes, don't move. Yes, don't make noise. But even more, be patient.

ROR: What do the animals rely on most: sight, smell or hearing?

Felix: Smelling first, then hearing and the least is sight. The exception to the rule is movement. When they spot movement, they go on full alert. Many times when standing perfectly still, I've had deer walk right up to me and stomp their feet trying to get me to move. Deer are very curious animals but they also learn fast; the older they get the more cagey they become.

ROR: In your opinion, what is the best way to cook venison?

Felix: There is only one way to cook venison- on the grill, preferably barbecued. Put your special spices and sauces on to your liking but remember game animal meat was always meant to be cooked outdoors.

ROR: What is the item hunters forget that they need the most?

Sal: Well, the most common item they forget is a camera. We always keep one around for photos. But believe it or not we've had some hunters forget to bring ammo. We keep some extra of that too.

ROR: What is the strangest request you've had?

Sal: We've had people show up with tomahawks, knives, swords or spears ready to go hunting. Sorry, guys, guns and bows, that's it.

ROR: Tell me your best hunting story?

Felix: (laughing) Tell him about the first time I took you out to Montana hunting.

Sal: Yes, the great big hunting trip when I was eleven years old. We drove out there to hunt mule deer. You could shoot two back then. We got out to where we wanted to hunt. Right at daylight I spotted two deer up on the mountain. Bang. Bang. My hunting trip was over in less than a minute!

ROR: So the big buck is still out there?

Sal: We have 260 acres just for the whitetail to roam and almost half that area we never go into. There is a 14 pt. that we've seen a few times. We've got a picture of him but no one's ever got a shot at him yet. He's still back there.

Felix: A few years back I found one side of a rack that had been shed. It had eleven points, so yes; there are a few really big ones out there.

ROR: Maybe the proverbial 30 pt. buck is not in the U.P. Maybe it's right here in Gladwin County.

After hearing the dangers of a wild boar hunt; the presence of one mean unruly bull elk and the possibility of seeing the really big one, I decided to risk it and take the cook's tour of the ranch by way of an ATV 4-wheeler with Felix and Sal. The boars headed for the woods. The unruly bull gave us a pass (from a safe distance) but we missed the behemoth buck.

I did however see several big white-tails (estimated 10 pts.), a gigantic Red Stag buck and a domestic cow with horns bigger than Babe the Blue Ox - she was brown though and named Daisy Duke. Oh, and I wasn't kidding about seeing those bushes moving either



Felix and Sal Polombo