

HUNTER'S ★ HORN™





THE ODD ONES

Not all trophy animals are ‘conventional’

By Gayne C. Young

“I’ve never seen anybody as excited at shooting a giant rat than you are,” Jacob Osborn explained. He added that, as Assistant Manager and Head Guide of Oak Creek Whitetail Ranch, he had seen lots of excited clients who were ecstatic at taking record smashing whitetails but, “...not at having popped a woodchuck.”

“Trophy woodchuck,” I corrected Jacob. “He’s as big a trophy woodchuck as I’ve ever seen. Or taken!”

Yes, I’m a trophy hunter.

And, yes, I have some not so conventional ideas on what constitutes a trophy. They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and I believe the same holds true for what constitutes a trophy animal. For me, a trophy represents the time put into planning the hunt, my time in the field, and the actual animal taken. I love traditional trophy animals like whitetail, elk, and African plains game but I also love the odd animals. These weird animals no one else seems to consider worthy of their time hold a special appeal to me.

Here’s a look at some of my favorite oddities.



Left: The author with the first and only ever trophy woodchuck taken at Oak Creek Whitetail Ranch.

Right: Ox Ranch produces some HUGE ostrich.

WOODCHUCK

Why do I love my mounted woodchuck so much? Lots of reasons: I'm never seen a mounted one outside of my house or a museum, I went 30 years before actually seeing one in the wild, and I'm from Texas where there are no woodchuck. I first saw a woodchuck (AKA whistle pig, prairie beaver, rat, groundhog, etc.) while hunting Oak Creek Whitetail Ranch in Missouri. Five trips later I finally got the opportunity to take one. It was the week of Thanksgiving and I was sitting in a blind with guide Jacob and my friend Joel O'Shoney.

"What's that?" Joel said of the dark object waddling across the field.

"Gayne! It's your woodchuck!" Jacob exclaimed knowing of my wanting to take one. "It's a Thanksgiving miracle. He's supposed to be hibernating!"

I wasted no time at all and quickly took the over-sized rat with an easy 50-yard shot. He was every bit the trophy and then some. He carried massive claws, super elongated rodent teeth, a gorgeous red and tawny colored hide, and weighed more than 30 pounds. Despite the fact that he was obviously one of the finest woodchucks ever taken, I had to explain just how special a trophy he was and my thoughts on trophies in general upon my return to Texas.

"Why the hell do you want me to mount that thing?" My taxidermist Neal Coldwell asked.

"I asked Neal how many trophy rooms he had been in.

"Hundreds."

I asked him to describe the nicest one he'd ever been in. He told me of one located in the Hill Country that was so large it

featured manikins in native garb and a full-size replica of the straw hut they lived in. The room also contained full body mounts of the Dangerous Seven of Africa, shoulder mounts of all the oxen of the world, Grand Slam after Grand Slam, and more.

"The guy has hundreds of mounts," Neil explained. "The room rivals most museums of been in."

"Did you see a woodchuck in the trophy room?" I asked.

Neil laughed. "No sir, I did not."

"Mine will."

My woodchuck now commands full attention on my entry table where people ask about him and his story all the time. Usually things like, "What the hell is that?" and "Why would you mount that thing?"

OSTRICH

I fell in love with ostrich meat while in South Africa while hunting with Limcroma Safaris. During that hunt I took a fantastic kudu, an extraordinary eland, a superb bushbuck, and one helluva a nayla but got no opportunity at a wild ostrich. I did years later however when I made a special trip to the Ox Ranch near Uvalde, Texas specifically to do such. My 13-year-old son at the time of the hunt said it best when he exclaimed, "Ostriches are the world's largest bird. They're basically living dinosaurs. They even kind'a look like dinosaurs. Hunting one of those would be cool. Just like hunting a dinosaur."

It *was* cool.

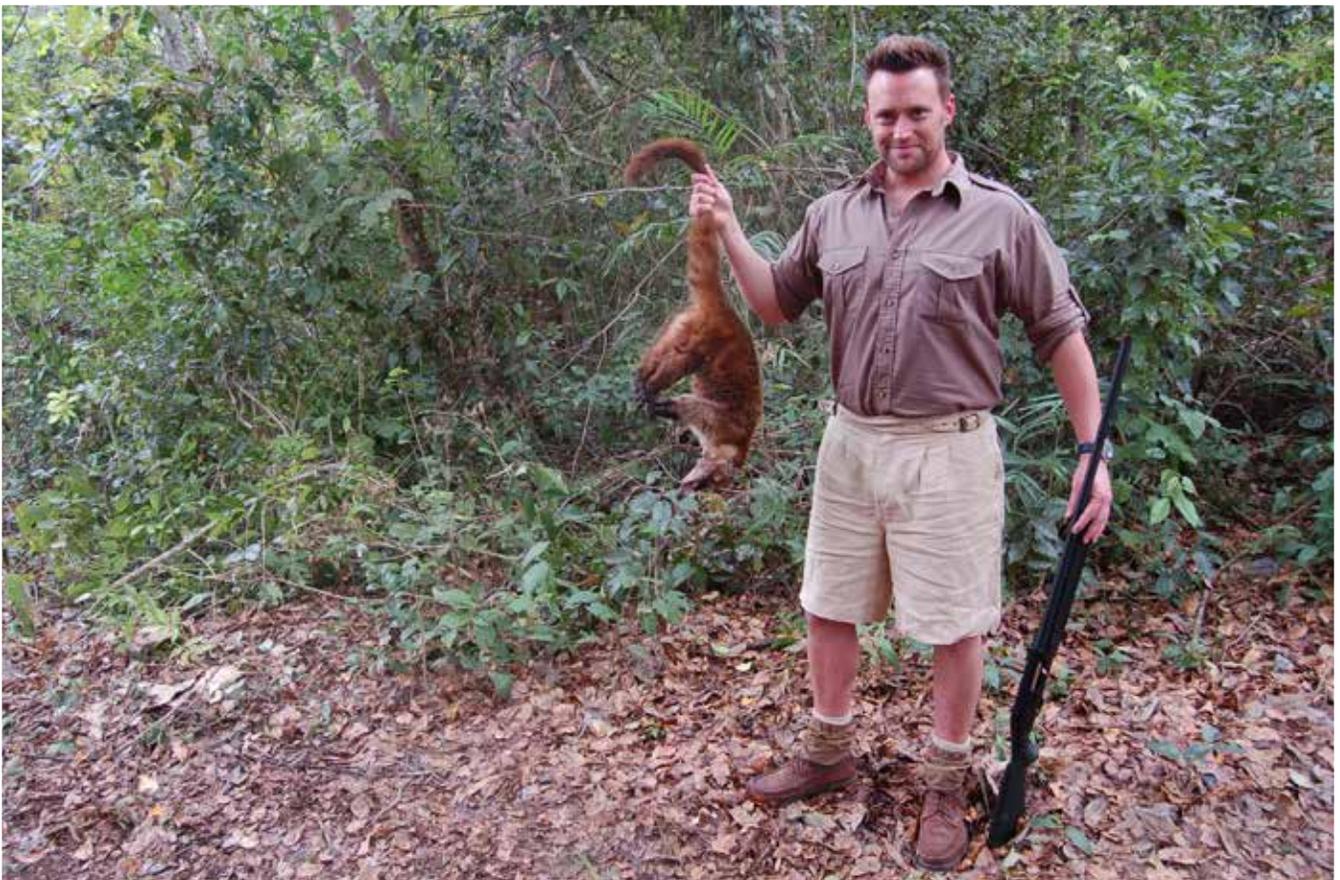
I can't say that it was the most difficult hunt I've ever been on, but it was a great hunt nonetheless.

After several failed stalks on foot, my guide Paul Hromadka



Above: A coatimundi in the canopy of the Yucatan Jungle.

Below: A hard earned "mutant raccoon."





This ostrich's foot puts the bird's true size into perspective.

got me within striking distance of an old rooster (Yes, male ostriches are roosters, females are hens) the color of tar and with a disposition almost as dark. Paul told me that the ancient bird was, "Too old to mate but not too old to fight. He beats up on the other males and even a few rheas."

Paul and I stalked through a motte of oak and errant yaupon trees to the open field where the rooster was feeding. At the end of the island of trees, Paul patted a tree and said it would make a good rifle rest.

"I don't want to get any closer. Like I said, he's a mean one n' can cover a lot of ground real fast," Paul assured me.

I leaned into my rifle and against the tree and made steady and found the dinosaur descendent in my crosshairs. I moved forward from the hip then to the of center chest and fired. The gargantuan lunged forward with legs in midair and poised for attack then tumbled to the ground. I chambered another round but there was no need. Paul congratulated me with a slap on the back and a fast handshake. The rooster stood almost nine feet tall and weighed over 280 pounds. His two-toed feet were larger than my hand, his legs almost as tall as my body, and his thighs half the size my of torso.

He was one hell'uva trophy.

COATIMUNDI

Out of all the animals I have mounted in my house, none garners more questions than my coatimundi. When people see him mounted in my house, they ask questions like, "What the hell is that thing?" "Is that some kind of mutant raccoon?" and "Where'd you find that thing?"

I took him while turkey hunting in the Yucatán Forest in Mexico along the Guatemala border with Balam Outfitters. This hunt was one of my most memorable hunts I've even embarked upon. It took place in one of the most remote and wildest environments I've ever been to and during that week long hunt I not only took a half a dozen jungle birds but also fell into the bottom of the freshly used eight foot deep latrine upon my first usage.

Happy times.

I had just taken my second ocellated turkey when, on the way back to the Jeep my guide Mencho and I came across a

band of nine coatimundis scrambling into the jungle canopy above. I took aim on the largest of the long-tailed raccoons and fired. The big jungle rat fell and Mencho when into the thick after it. He found it quickly and lifted it by the tail and smiled in triumph. The not-quite-dead-yet coatimundi didn't care for that and swung into my guide's leg and bit down hard. Mencho screamed in surprise and pain and dropped the vermin. The frantic attack took the animal's last moments of life as it died almost immediately after.

My coatimundi is the only mounted animal in my house that I've witness tear into human flesh.

NUTRIA

The first time I ever saw a nutria rat I was underwater. I was attending Lon Morris College in Jacksonville, Texas and spending the afternoon spearfishing for carp in the close to campus Lake Jacksonville. I shot the animal thinking it was just a huge rat but discovered once back at campus that it was an invasive species called a nutria. My friend told me the history of the animal, of its relation to the owners of Tabasco, of its destructive nature, and how some, "Cajuns in Louisiana eat 'em. They think it's a delicacy."

A case of beer later and my friends were grilling the nutria's carcass while I was rubbing salt into its hide.

"I'm gonna make this guy into a flat rug," I proudly exclaimed. "Gonna do the taxidermy myself."

"Oh yeah?" my friend slurred. "Well try what the inside of your rug tastes like."

My friends and I devoured the barbecued rat and drank more beer, then they watched as I prepared my nutria for high art.

Long story short:

Everyone that ate even the slightest amount of nutria got diarrhea for three days or more, my attempt at taxidermy was abhorrent, and my first and only nutria rotted. I miss him and long for the day I can spear another.

MORE TO COME

I love hunting the odd ones. There worth the effort and their pursuit always leads to one hell'uva story. ★