



# ***Hogs at High Noon***

*By A. Preston Taylor*

**M**att Luedtke and I originally met each other on a hiking trail a few miles into a wilderness area in northwestern California. We were hiking in opposite directions and carrying longbows. It was Matt's first ever day of hunting. Since then we have become brothers through a shared love of the longbow, carving wood with hand tools, camping in majestic mountains, and getting close to wild animals. The first half-decade of Matt's hunting journey involved exciting encounters, but he had not loosed an arrow at a black-tailed buck during that time. As the wild hog hunt we had planned drew nearer, I could feel the pressure building on my shoulders. My goal was for him to shoot his first big game animal. While hogs are practically made for bowhunting, the ranch we had access to was heavily pres-

sured by dog and gun hunters. It wouldn't be easy, but Matt never wanted to take the easy road anyway.

A front pushed in as we drove to the land, and the storm raged all night. Cold winds and driving rain battered our cabin's roof, and an hour after daylight the front continued to push across the coastal mountain range. Because of hunting pressure, our quarry behaved evasively, and it was unusual to see a wild hog out moving or feeding much past daylight or prior to dusk. Sometimes during a cold, wet storm, the hogs hunkered down and stayed bedded all night and day. As unlikely as the prospects were, Matt and I walked out for a morning hunt because you can't shoot an animal if you're by the wood stove.

We walked through a mixed forest of tan oak, madrone,





*Like bears, wild hogs will root out grubs and other morsels from rotten logs.*

pepperwood, live oak, redwoods, and firs without seeing a pig or a fresh track, or hearing hogs talking in their beds. By noon we were wet and ready for lunch, so we walked back to the cabin to discuss the afternoon's plans.

After lunch we hunted a series of finger ridges descending from the main mountain down to the river, with meadows on top and thickly wooded draws below. A dark hail-storm approached, as we waited under the boughs of a giant Douglas fir. We hadn't seen any fresh sign, so we continued to sneak through bedding areas.

I could see a clump of redwood saplings shooting up around hollowed-out old stumps—what local old-timers called “goose pens.” Once, they were literally used to pen up domestic geese, and now wild hogs use as them dry bed sites. This was a new goose pen I had not previously explored. We approached the fortress quietly and peeked through a screen of redwood limbs, but there were no hogs in sight. I slipped under a branch and stepped softly into the middle of the four old stumps while Matt circled above. There was still one hollow I couldn't see into, so I crept forward. Incredibly, the texture of coarse hair materialized out of the shadows deep in the stump. Two hogs slept with their heads tucked into the depths of the hollowed tree, their backs to me. I was within three yards and contemplated shooting, but that's not why I was here.

A brief gesture to Matt signaled that the hogs were sleeping close by, and he circled back around to me. I explained the situation, how the hogs lay, and where to shoot. Matt began inching forward. This whole time the wind had been steady and favorable, but as Matt moved in close



*A wild hog wallow. After rolling in the mud, a pig the author was following walked down the path and chewed and rubbed against the little shrub to the left. Sometimes you can track a hog a fair way following the mud stains on trees after they leave a wallow.*

to the goose pen the wind swirled. My body tightened for the inevitable. It swirled again, and two fat sows burst out of the stump. They ran almost within touching distance of Matt and just as quickly were out of sight. We tracked the pigs for a couple hours until sunset, but we never saw them or any

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other hogs that evening.

The rain quit early that night, and when we awoke the second morning conditions for trailing were perfect. We cut the fresh track of a lone boar hog by a diesel tank where they like to wallow. This boar had been feeding on top in the open meadows and before dawn dropped into a steep, thick landscape cut up by ravines and ridges. As usual, once downhill and in the timber the hog got on a game path and started contouring the western slope. From the location the hog was travelling, the behavior of the animal, and the time of day, we knew this boar was looking for a bed site. His trail confirmed our hypothesis as his tracks walked through and by numerous old beds, but the tracks continued and never stopped.

The behavior of the hog required us to move carefully. The tracks were easy to follow, so we knew we could find this

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*This is an old hog rubbing post. The pigs rub their bodies against the sappy tree, probably to deal with external pests; they also rub their faces and tusks against the tree, likely a form of scent marking.*

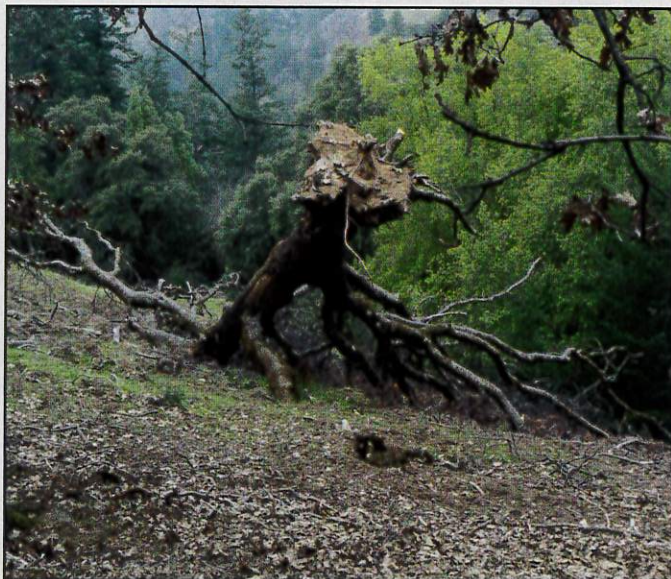
pig. But could we sneak up on him before he became aware of us? It took us two hours to stalk along the hog's trail until we found him in his bed. The tracks turned off the game path he had taken uphill and into a thicket of chamise. He had laid his trap wisely, since by the time we recognized his uphill turn we had already walked upwind of his bed. With a grunt the hog tore off downhill, never to be seen again that day.

I've tracked down hundreds of animals, but it is rare that the terrain, wind, brush, animal, and my abilities coincide to provide the opportunity to trail up on an unaware quarry. Understanding of the difficulty of our attempt, our faces wore smiles just for getting so close to such an elusive animal.

It was almost noon, and we were enjoying the day when we heard a hog squeal. We froze, our ears reaching for more noise down in the timber. A second squeal erupted, and I had the hogs' position pinpointed. Matt and I sprinted across a meadow and eased into the forest. I was pretty sure the hogs were close to the woodland edge on top of a small finger ridge. We maneuvered over to where I expected them to be and could see a huge goose pen fifty yards into the trees.

I whispered to Matt, "I think that's where the hogs are





*Wild hogs are excellent at using structure for concealment while sleeping. The tops of fallen oaks, such as this, are one of the features to look for on the landscape when hunting hogs in their beds. Often the texture of a pig's hair is what stands out as different than the log when searching through bed sites.*

bedded. Put an arrow on your string and creep up on that stump." Matt stepped in front and nocked a homemade ash arrow shaft on his longbow. We started moving toward the old, burned out tree trunk. Ten yards from the goose pen, I could see tracks and scat going into the bed site. Matt swung down to come at the hollow from the side, and I continued straight at it. Five yards from the bed I spotted a hog's ear. Matt drew his bow and eased up to an opening between the trees. Two hogs stood up and Matt loosed an arrow!

One pig tore off downhill, while the other lay in his bed kicking yet unable to get up. In seconds, two of my arrows and another from Matt hit the hog. Matt's first shot hit him in the spinal cord and immobilized the pig, while his second took the animal through the heart. The excitement of shooting was quickly over.

Through sporadic showers of rain and hail, we joyfully field dressed the hog. This was Matt's first big game kill after six years of hard blacktail hunting. We relished in this gift from the land. Soon we were dining on heart steaks, fried liver, and tenderloin tacos. We spent the rest of the day celebrating time spent in the outdoors, close encounters with big, wild animals, and some of the best eating food in the woods.

Saturday night it rained again, leaving the substrate excellent for trailing. Matt and I took off down a muddy road to cut for fresh tracks. After walking a couple of miles, we



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***Matt Luedtke, left, and the author. The greatest successes we can achieve in the field of hunting are friendships forged and memories made.***

crossed the trail of a big boar. These tracks were some of the biggest a guy could see in this country, and since the trail was heading into a known bedding area we began following slowly.

The hog walked downhill, with the wafting thermals. Potential bed sites were everywhere among all the fallen oak trees. Track by track we picked our way through the forest, scanning everywhere for a sleeping pig. Nearly at the bottom several hundred yards later I spotted the hog asleep in his bed at the base of a redwood tree. We were about sixty yards above the pig and upwind, so we crawled to the other side of a small ridge for concealment. Shoeless, we made our way down to the same contour line as the pig. I nocked an arrow and started stalking.

The hog was lying in a perfect position, on his side with his head facing away from me. Everything looked great as I closed to twenty-five yards. I was starting to taste fat pork chops on my tongue when the pig's head lifted. He stood from his bed and looked uphill with his attention focused upwind. I contemplated taking a twenty-five-yard broadside shot, but the hog never stood still long enough. He would stare and smell, then walk a couple paces to smell again. I believe our residual scent had finally made it down to him, and shortly the hog snuck off. His silent departure left me confident that he did not know how close we truly were. "Close" is what I bring home most often when hunting with traditional archery tackle.

The big boar hog walked back uphill. We tracked him until he got mixed up with a sounder of sows and piglets. In the mess and confusion of rooting hogs, we lost his trail. We spent the rest of the day examining hog sign and learning about these fascinating creatures.

Matt and I have roasted squirrels and jackrabbits over campfires, but it was really special to share the memory of his first large animal kill and then watch as he shared the meat with friends and family. We've been walking this road together since the first day we met. Who knows where the path will lead or how long we get to tread it? Regardless of the outcome, this journey is worth every sacrifice. Who better to share it with than a brother of the bow.

*Preston works as a groundsman for a tree-climbing arborist. He is a board member of the Humboldt Archers Club and hosts their traditional shoot each summer in north-coastal California.*



### **A Simpler Approach**

For me, the foundation of hunting with primitive tackle is an intimacy and respect for nature that few people (including a lot of "hunters") ever come to know. It is about engaging in one of the principal activities that molded us into *Homo sapiens*. However, modern technology, while perhaps making us more "successful" at times, can intrude upon the purity of the hunt. On this hunt, we neglected to bring a lot of gear most folks deem necessary in the woods. I readily acknowledge this was not a three-week, solo Alaska wilderness adventure. It might have taken us a while, but if we walked downstream we would have eventually hit the county road. The only electronic devices we carried were headlamps. Along with those, my pockets also held a compass, lighter, knife, hat, and gloves. We carried no GPS, binoculars, range finders, wind detectors, or cover scents. And no dang phones in the woods either!!

We can't step back into the romanticized era of living off the land among a close-knit tribe. Yet, we can dip a toe into the water, so to speak. Matt and I relied on our knowledge of the game, an understanding of the landscape and how the hogs used it, and our inherent abilities as predators to hunt. This simpler approach demands the most from us, and it offers a greater reward as well: the sweet pleasure of reaching a goal the hard way.