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CZ Road Trip

A QUEST FOR STRUTTING TOMS
AND HIGH-COUNTRY BRUINS.

By DANA FARRELL



CZ 612 MAGNUM

CZ 557 SPORTER



The Rocky Mountains in the spring is a very special place. Wildflowers are blooming, the creeks are flush with snow-pack runoff, and the animal inhabitants are busy shaking off the effects of a long, cold winter. An early-May spot-and-stalk black bear hunt in the Frank Church Wilderness of Idaho, planned a year and a half in advance, took an interesting turn when a friend invited me to stop by his Nebraska ranch on my drive to Idaho to try my hand at a Merriam's turkey. This CZ Road Trip, as I would come to call it, would be my chance to put two contrasting guns to the test: a 12-gauge 612 Magnum for turkey and a 557 Sporter chambered in .30-'06 for black bear.

ONE POKE FROM THE CZ 612 AND THE 3-INCH HEVI-SHOT MAGNUM BLEND ROLLED HIM OVER AND CLOSED THE DEAL.



The author stayed for two evenings in High Plains Homestead, a quaint establishment outside of Crawford, Nebraska.

hardwoods, surrounded by gently rising meadows on both sides. A small stream wound its way through this break in the land, and grassy patches at the creek bottom

provided prime strutting arenas for love-hungry toms. Springtime was in full bloom, with trees leafing out and colorful wildflowers making their annual appearance. Nights were comfortably cool, with daytime temperatures approaching 70 degrees.

On a small meadow near the lip of the gully just before daybreak of my first full day, I set out a pair of decoys and settled against a tree as several toms sounded off from the roost in the distance. Gobbles came from several directions, answering my soft yelps as the sun edged over the horizon.

Ninety minutes after sunrise, when no toms had followed through with their chest-beating promises, I decided it was time to make something happen. Judging by his gobbles, one bird was playing hard to get in the open field behind me. Moving carefully to avoid being skylined, I crept to the edge of

My first stop would be a two-night stay at the High Plains Homestead outside of Crawford, Nebraska, a throwback to the gritty, hardscrabble 19th century American West. Offering clean, reasonably priced rooms and juicy steaks grilled over an open, wood-fired pit, this Old West town is aptly named and a great staging spot for turkey hunting in nearby 22,000-acre Fort Robinson State Park or any number of the private holdings in the surrounding area of northwest Nebraska. A labor of love for proprietor and history nut Mike Kesselring and his wife, Linda, the High Plains Homestead is an intriguing collection of historic buildings — part museum, part working resort — and an interesting and inviting place for a good meal, a cold beer to wash away the dust in your throat and a place to lay your head on a freshly laundered pillow

after a tiring day of chasing turkeys.

This area of Nebraska looks a lot like the Black Hills of South Dakota, only a short hop across the state line some 70 miles to the north. Timbered with tall pine, with large rolling grasslands cut with hardwood draws, elk, mulies and pronghorn roam the hillsides along with a booming population of Merriam's turkeys.

I was carrying a CZ 612 Magnum, a synthetic-stocked, full-camo pump gun that digests anything from light target loads to 3½-inch magnum thumpers. With a sling attached, it's easy to carry when packing along a bag of decoys. The 26-inch barrel is short enough to handle easily in the turkey woods, yet long enough to provide a stable sight plane when used for fast-flying waterfowl. The steep river gully I was hunting was maybe 100 feet from top to bottom and full of

CZ 612 MAGNUM

TYPE	Pump-action repeater
GAUGE	12 gauge
CAPACITY	2+1 rds. (w/plug)
WEIGHT	6 lbs.
BARREL	26 in.
OVERALL LENGTH	46.5 in.
LENGTH OF PULL	14.5 in.
FINISH	Camo
SIGHTS	Bead front
SAFETY	Crossbolt
FURNITURE	Synthetic
MSRP	\$428

the rise behind me to peer into the adjacent meadow. There, hung up 75 yards in the distance with a commanding view of his surroundings, was a gobbler awaiting a ladyfriend to take him up on his not-so-subtle invitations. Slowly backing down behind the hill, I weighed my options and made a plan to close the distance by belly crawling up a small draw toward the bird's position. At the top of the draw within view of the bird was a yucca that would provide cover for an attempt to call the bird in to shootable range. It was a stretch, but I had nothing to lose.

I crawled my way to the spiky plant at the crest of the ridge. Peering through it, I could see the bird strutting — now at around 50 yards — still a little bit farther away than I wanted. I yelped softly on my slate call, gaining his attention and cautiously coaxing him another 10 yards in my

direction. I was comfortable with the 40-yard shot and didn't wait any longer. One poke from the CZ 612 and the 3-inch Hevi-Shot Magnum Blend rolled him over.

LOADED FOR BEAR

With a longbeard in the bag, it was time to point the car west toward Idaho and the second leg of my hunt, a spot-and-stalk black bear hunt in the Frank Church Wilderness. This was a chance to put a CZ-USA 557 bolt gun through its paces. The 557 features a short extractor and plunger-style ejector and integrated dovetails that mate with the 1-inch scope rings that come standard with the gun. A two-position safety allows the bolt to be cycled while on Safe, and the trigger is fully adjustable for weight, creep and overtravel. Mine, chambered in 30-'06 and topped with a Bushnell 3200 3-9X scope, was the perfect combination for

the task at hand.

After a day and a half's drive from northwest Nebraska, I pulled into Challis, Idaho, and walked up the tree-shaded steps of the Watermark Inn, a beautifully appointed 19th century bed and breakfast, where I was welcomed by proprietor Sahra Beaupre. I would enjoy Sahra's scrumptious homemade dinner and spend a cushy night at the Inn before hitting the dusty trailhead for my five-day pack trip. Built in 1896, the Watermark is operated by Sahra and her husband, Adam, who also own Horse Creek Outfitters, the outfit I'd be hunting with. Decorated with historic cowboy artifacts alongside a gurgling brook just steps off the back porch, the Inn and Sahra's wonderful cooking provided a warm and relaxing sendoff before the 8-mile horseback ride into bear camp the following morning.

The Frank Church — or the Frank,



Longbeard success came on day one with the CZ 612 Magnum and some determined belly crawling.

WITH A SOLID REST AND THE SCOPE DIALED UP TO 9X, I PUT THE CROSSHAIRS BEHIND HIS SHOULDER.

as the locals refer to it — is a massive, 2.3-million-acre expanse of rugged, unspoiled mountainous landscape that is home to mountain lions, moose, elk, deer, goats, sheep and, more recently, the reintroduced gray wolf. The resurgence of the gray wolf has caused the area's ecological pendulum to swing widely, drastically impacting the elk population and the lives of the locals whose livelihoods are inextricably linked to it. Protected for many years after their reintroduction in the mid-1990s, wolves are once again legal game, with hunters now doing their best to reduce the apex predators' numbers to a balanced level. Specifically targeting wolves is difficult, but chance encounters make buying a wolf tag a no-brainer. Seasons have been liberalized, now overlapping with spring bear.

Good food and rest can be found at the Watermark Inn in Challis, Idaho, just on the edge of Frank Church Wilderness.

A wolf tag adds a paltry \$31.75 to the cost of any hunt.

After glassing a side canyon all

afternoon on the second day of the hunt, outfitter Adam Beaupre and I led our horses down 1,500 vertical feet of switchbacks on the way back to camp. Reaching Horse Creek, a tributary of the Salmon River, we got back in the saddle for the ride back. Despite its ruggedness, the base elevation of the surrounding country is deceptively low, with the Salmon River sitting at around 3,000 feet elevation. What the area lacks in altitude, however, it more than makes up for in sheer leg-burning vertical relief. Mountainsides rise in dramatic, rocky fashion, and looking around, you'd swear you were sitting thousands of feet higher in elevation. Canyons and rock chutes are interspersed with multitiered meadows, chock full this time of year with lush grasses and the colorful blooms of balsam root and lupine, providing excellent graze for hungry bears fresh out of their winter sleep. Gnarly mountain mahogany clings to the rock outcrops like overgrown bonsai. Ponderosa and white pine,

some charred by wildfire, timber the draws. The highest peaks rise 4,000 to 5,000 feet above the river valleys, topping out at around 8,000 feet. Although navigating this huge roadless area is possible on foot, the distances involved and the difficulty of packing gear in and out will give you a newfound appreciation for a surefooted mountain horse.

Back on the trail with the sun at our backs, I spotted a bear grazing high on a hillside above Horse Creek. Dismounting, we quickly tied up the horses and climbed to better position ourselves for a shot. Five minutes later, we were breathing hard from the climb and watching the bear across the creek at about 450 yards — a little too far for my comfort level. With sunset fast approaching, we considered hanging it up for the evening when Adam pointed to another part of the mountain and said, "There's another bear!" The second bear was lower on the mountain at a distance of 300 yards. Wanting to



CZ 557 SPORTER

TYPE	Bolt-action repeater
CALIBER	.30-'06
CAPACITY	4+1 rds.
BARREL	20.5 in.
OVERALL LENGTH	41.5 in.
WEIGHT	7.25 lbs.
STOCK	Oil-finished walnut
FINISH	Matte blue
TRIGGER	Adjustable
SIGHTS	Integral dovetailed receiver
SAFETY	Two position
MSRP	\$792



Outfitter Adam Beaupre (left) and the author are pictured with a CZ 557 Sporter chambered in .30-'06 and the bear they harvested at last light.

close the gap a little more, I suggested moving to a finger ridge 100 yards nearer, which meant a hasty descent down the loose rock and a quick climb to the new spot. "If we're gonna do it, we better do it," said Adam. "We're running out of daylight." With the sun slipping behind the mountain, we hurriedly made our way down the slope and up the next ridge in the fading light. The bear was high on a pocket meadow surrounded by

rocky ledges and a few trees, maybe 400 vertical feet above Horse Creek. We settled on a pile of rocks and found a good one for a rest.

Adam ranged him at 190 just before the bear stepped out of sight behind a tree. "I need to catch my breath anyway," I said, trying to slow my breathing. A few seconds later, the bear made his way out from behind the tree at 195 yards and stopped. With a solid rest and the scope dialed

up to 9X, I put the crosshairs behind his shoulder. This time it felt right, and I touched off the round. Upon impact, the bear jumped and ran along a high ledge for several yards before tumbling down the embankment toward the roiling creek below. Local outfitters tell campfire stories of dead bears lost when they rolled off the mountain into the swollen creek. Luckily for me, mine came to a stop 50 yards before reaching the water. 🐻

SOURCES

High Plains Homestead
888-365-2592
highplainshomestead.com

Horse Creek Outfitters
208-879-5084
horsecreekoutfitters.com

The Watermark Inn
208-879-5084
thewatermarkinn.com