

CRKT Chugach Range Pro Hunter

(Tom Chesterman)

(ed. review not suitable for small children, or at least make them wear a red bandana)

I'll have to start this review with a confession, and then I'll end it with another:

I can't come up with a legitimate reason for a ski patroller to carry a full-on hunting or skinning knife while on patrol, without devolving into bad jokes about snowboarders.

But I am very tool-oriented, always wanting the perfect tool for the job. I am also an avid hunter, seeking to make my bump shack lunches a bit more memorable by substituting venison sausages for PBJ sandwiches. In this quest for the perfect venison, and having a very large circle of co-consumers of my winter meat, I spend a fair amount of time during the summer and fall hunting and gathering.

To the point here, I've been a satisfied customer of two Buck knives for the last twenty years: a fixed blade hunter for field dressing and a folding hunter for skinning. They've always gotten the job done, they're sturdy if a little plain. I didn't think it got any better than that.

I was wrong.

My test piece was a smallish fixed blade hunter from CRKT, a very fine and growing knife company. The design came from a collaboration with Russ Kommer, a custom knifemaker with extraordinary credentials and price-tags. To quote the catalog:

Construction is the best we can achieve, and we think it is unique. We start with a full tang premium AUS 8 stainless steel blade that will hold an edge while dressing the largest big game animals in North America without constant need for touch up. We add a stainless steel bolster, oversize rings of leather cut and dyed in Oregon, and a stainless butt cap, swedged in place by a stainless steel tube rivet. Finally, the entire handle is hand-shaped and finished to achieve the perfect contour, so each knife is an individual work of art. The high hollow ground blades, bolster and butt cap are given a high satin finish to close the metal pores, which makes cleaning easier and fights corrosion. All blades are sized so when skinning with the three-finger grip your index finger is right at the blade tip.

OK, so it comes out of the box, drop-dead gorgeous. "There is no way I'm going to use this in the real world," I think to myself. Fortunately, I remembered that it's not mine, so I can risk it on real blood, guts, bone and dirt.

It fits incredibly well in my hand, perfectly balanced. Thoughts of becoming a neurosurgeon cross my mind. It is incredibly sharp, but, then, all new knives are incredibly sharp. I couldn't believe that it would stay sharp. The grip is perfect, neither too grabby nor too slippery. The finish was excellent, at least from my user-eyes. I'm sure that Mr. Kommer's custom knives are much "better", but this one is clearly to be used, and used hard.

And use it, I did. By the end of the season, it had field-dressed and skinned two wild boar, one blacktail buck, one black bear, and two whitetail deer. It went through bone as easily as through hide, but was so well-balanced and fine, that I could also do the delicate caping and tenderloin-removal without flinching. I never had to sharpen it during an animal, nor did I do anything more than touch-up the whole season.

It wasn't just my opinion, though. In fact, I found the Chugach to be an ideal tool in the Tom Sawyer school of chores – my hunting partners and guides were all eager to “try it out”. I actually never had to finish any of the above animals.

One hunting partner was particularly awestruck, one I'll call “Jimmy”. Jimmy is a professional chef, though in a prior life he was some form of a Special Operations soldier. I try not to ask too many questions, but he seems way too comfortable handling knives and guns...Anyway, Jimmy takes the knife and starts testing it as he would his chef's knives...and he likes it. Then he starts working on a whitetail carcass in a way that makes me feel truly sorry for the Iraqi army...and he likes it. Jimmy can't let go of the knife, that's how much he likes it. So it's time for me to go, and I need the knife back, but I'm not too encouraged by the look in Jimmy's eye...

Time for my second confession: I “lost” the knife. Sorry, CRKT, I'm not sure where it went. You might ask Jimmy.

CRKT Chugach Range Pro Hunter

Model 2760: Modified Drop Point, Razor-Sharp Cutting Edge

Blade: Cutting edge: 3.12” (7.9 cm)

Thickness: 0.16” (0.40 cm)

Steel: AUS 8, 57-58 HRC

Knife: Overall length: 7.62” (19.4 cm)

Weight: 4.8 oz. (136 g)

MSRP U.S. **\$149.99**

www.crkt.com

Addendum:

I went pig hunting this past weekend with Ken and Ron Whittaker, two guides up near Healdsburg. I took along the replacement Chugach that CRKT so kindly provided as a replacement.

Well, we got our pigs (three for the party), and started skinning. Ron kept looking over at me, then looking at his custom-made knife, back and forth. Eventually, after we finished two of the boar, he asked me how it (the knife) was cutting. I said, "Fine. Still good to go on the third little piggie." He asked to borrow mine, since his was needing a touch-up, it was starting to rain, etc.

He started making happy sounds. Sort of "Hmmm, ohh, yeah, hmmm." He liked it so much, he kept laying it down "accidentally" in his bag. Then zipping the bag up. Twice, he tried to swap me for it. I'm sure if I had offered, he'd have taken the Chugach instead of his fee.

Here's a professional boar hunting guide, complete with custom made knife, and he's coveting my little Chugach. Very, very sweet.

-tom

