

# *Behind* The LENS

*Making a high-quality television show like Benelli on Assignment isn't easy, but the cast and crew get it done week in and week out.*

*by Matt Coffey*



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*Steve Panciera, one of three cameramen on the Greystone Castle shoot in Texas, has filmed hunts in some of the most remote places in the world.*

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The music plays and the opening of the show is a panoramic shot of some faraway, gorgeous country. It may be Africa, possibly Alaska or it could be the Hill Country of Texas. Regardless of the location, the game always seems plentiful and the scenery couldn't be more beautiful.

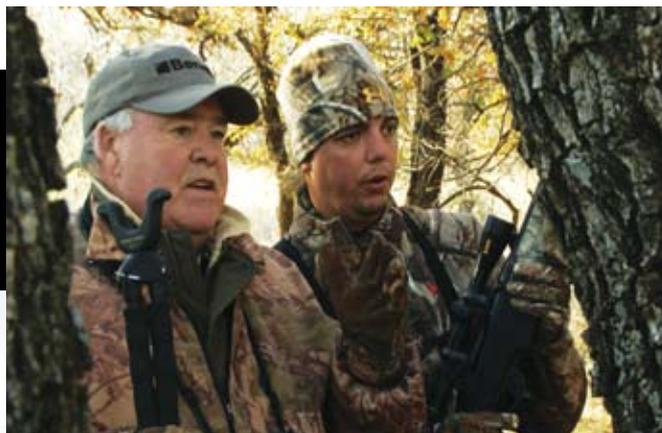
The hosts make killing game look easy and you want to experience the hunt for yourself. If you feel this way – even for a second – then everyone involved in the production has done their job and the show is a success.

But anyone who's ever been part of producing a top-quality hunting show will tell you it's not as simple as pointing a camera at a wild animal while someone else pulls the trigger. Sure, the final product is polished; the host never flubs a line and an animal is always killed. But when it comes right down to it, pulling the trigger is the easy part. The rest of the production – from interviews, to retakes, to getting enough B-roll footage – is the real work and that work is carried out by a camera crew that rarely gets to be in the spotlight. The host is always in front of the camera, the crew working behind the scenes to make the best show possible so people like you and me can lose ourselves in a distant land for 30 minutes.

Last fall I had the privilege of joining the cast and crew of *Benelli on Assignment* at Greystone Castle outside Dallas. Known for trophy-class whitetails, fast-flying quail and gourmet food, the lodge offers a stellar outdoor experience. What I noticed, however, was that while some of us were enjoying an after-dinner cocktail, the camera crew continued working. In fact, there was a constant flurry of activity in their room. From transferring footage to a separate hard-drive, backing up that footage on yet another hard drive, cleaning lenses, fixing tripods and removing dust from the inner-workings of the HD cameras, their work was nonstop.

"Filming for television adds tremendous challenge and difficulty to a hunt for everyone involved, but most especially for the videographers," says Joe Coogan, Benelli Brand Marketing Manager and host of *Benelli on Assignment*. "They're the ones who live or die knowing that if they don't capture the action on film, in essence it never happened."

"As the host of *Benelli On Assignment*, one of my main responsibilities is making the guest feel welcome and comfortable with the filming, but I also remind them that there's no trigger-pulling until we get a thumbs-up from the videographer, no matter how big, how close or however easy



*From top, clockwise: The author, right, and guide George Privett discuss their next move in a hunting scene from Benelli on Assignment. • Videographer Mason Gertz lines up one of the hunters' bucks for the camera. • Matt Coffey and his fine Texas ten-point. • Cameraman Randy Wimberg ponders an interview question. Opposite: Host Joe Coogan, right, talks on camera with Stephen McKelvain, Benelli's VP of Marketing and Communications.*



the trophy might be to kill. It's important for everyone involved to remember that our goal in the field is not the hunt itself, but rather the filming of the hunt," Coogan adds. "If we can accomplish that successfully, then the completed show will be a source of pride shared by everyone who was on the hunt."

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# Behind the Lens

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The three cameramen filming for Warm Springs Productions – Randy Wimberg, Steve Panciera and Mason Gertz – were always the first ones up in the morning, waiting on the hunters at the vehicles. And while I carried a lightweight rifle, each cameraman carried a full-size camera. When I say that piece of equipment weighed 20 pounds, that’s guessing on the light side. In my pack I had a grunt tube, extra ammo, pruners, a snack or two and a bottle of water – all my essentials. The cameraman, on the other hand, toted extra batteries for both the camera and wireless microphone, his tripod and a host of other things I never learned the use of. And yet the entire time we hunted, whether in the blind or on long spot-and-stalk adventures, the camera was always at the ready.

Filming since 1977, Randy was the most veteran cameraman of the three-man crew, and has been around long enough to see the hunting television movement explode. (Check out [www.wimbergproductions.com](http://www.wimbergproductions.com) for examples of his work.)

“Killing an animal on camera is the money shot and everything is built around that,” Randy says. “Without compelling footage surrounding the kill shot, you’d have a boring show.

“You’re constantly thinking ahead and anticipating the shots you might need. We’re only given a certain number of days to make a show, but you can’t predict the behavior of the animals and it’s not uncommon to make a kill on the last day just before the end of shooting light. That’s stressful, because after the kill you have to backtrack to fill in shots you need to make the storyline sensible.”

I ended up hunting with all three cameramen at one point or another – sometimes more than one at a time – on my hunt, and to say they were professional is an understatement. Sure, there were jokes played, like when Mason, Steve, my guide George Privett and myself were in a makeshift blind

awaiting the arrival of a monster eight-point that had been seen in the area. Evidently, I made the fateful mistake of dozing off and was awakened to a flurry of activity and excited whispers from Mason and Steve.

“There he is Matt, get ready!” Steve said.

“I’m on him Matt, whenever you can shoot, go ahead!” came Mason’s response.

It wasn’t until the fog of the short nap had lifted from my head and I was looking through the scope, my heart racing in anticipation, that I realized I was the butt of a joke. Instead of a monster eight in my crosshairs, all I could see was a feral cat. Once I realized the folly of my mistake, the blind erupted in hushed laughter. And while the cat lived another day, it was a valuable lesson: don’t fall asleep with a cameraman around.

Even though there were moments of lighthearted joking on the trip, it wasn’t always fun and games. The crew was there to get enough footage for two separate *Benelli on Assignment* shows and only had three days to do it. With four hunters and three cameramen, the anxiety of pulling off a successful show mounted by the hour, but when it was time to work, the professionalism of cast and crew stood out. Interviews were concise, questions were poignant and joking was set aside. And while the trip was a treat of sorts for me, it’s how the camera crew earns a living. The guys behind the scenes face all sorts of challenges on a daily basis from equipment malfunction to weather to animal behavior, and it takes a special kind of personality and a skilled person behind the camera to make a show successful.

“It’s always a challenge when you have extra people along,” Steve says. In television for 27 years, he has been to some of the most remote places in the world and filmed just about everything a cameraman can.

“Animals are alert at all times and when you bring extra people you have to be sharp when trying to get a kill on film. One wrong move and you could lose a once-in-a-lifetime animal.

If that happens – and it does – blame is typically placed on the cameraman, no matter whose fault it is. That aspect adds to the pressure facing all cameramen. Not only that, but the person behind the lens has to make on-the-spot decisions for the hunter to take the shot or not. One wrong call could mean the difference in a trophy animal getting away or having an unusable footage.”

Along with all the natural unknowns, camera crews also face the real possibility of a personality conflict. When you work with someone so closely in tight quarters like a blind or treestand, it’s a necessity to get along. And let’s face it, not everyone is nice. Big egos combined with long hours and high stress can be a recipe for a disastrous experience. Not only can it be bad for all involved, a personality conflict can be a deciding factor in whether a show is great or simply mediocre.

I’ve heard some wild stories – from hosts throwing scripts at their cameramen to those who refuse to work because of some perceived injustice. So how do these guys, whose job it is to make a great show, maneuver around such personality conflicts? Simple: they get along with everyone.

At 24, Mason was the youngest member of the crew and took quite a ribbing about being the “baby” of the bunch. But like a true professional, he let his work speak for itself and made the most of the good-natured ribbing.

“You can deal with great hosts and those who aren’t so great, but I’m usually pretty good at reading people,” Mason says. “I can typically tell if someone’s genuine, which allows me to go into a shoot with a good mindset. The key is being very personable, no matter what.

“I like to ask the hosts about themselves without coming across as a suck-up. By asking questions, I try to find similar interests and can expand on that when I’m sitting in a blind. I’m there to work, not to make friends, but if I can create a new friendship in a short amount of time, that’s great. The main goal is to have a good working relationship, no matter the personality differences.”

Setting aside the challenges all

outdoor camera crews face on a daily basis, the bottom line is that filming is their job. Sure they get to travel to exotic places, see some of the most amazing sights and meet and work with the biggest names in the outdoor industry, but rarely, if ever, do they get to pull a trigger. So next time you're watching your favorite hunting show, take a minute to reflect on the work that went into it behind the scenes. Chances are you'll have a newfound respect for those who take us away to faraway places, even if it is for just 30 minutes at a time. I know I did. 🐾

## IF YOU GO

Our hunt – and show – was a success. I ended up killing a great ten-point whitetail on literally the last hour of my hunt. To make my flight, I had 30 minutes to do the fill-in shots, pose for pictures and thank everyone. Somehow, we managed to get it done and the results can be seen on *Benelli on Assignment*, scheduled to air Aug. 2 and Aug. 9 on the Outdoor Channel.

Greystone Castle is one of the premier spots in the country for trophy whitetails and superb bird hunting. For deer hunting, I carried Benelli's R1 in .30-06 and it worked beautifully. I had never used an autoloading rifle to hunt whitetails and I will remedy that in the near future when I add an R1 to my collection. In the quail field we used Benelli's Legacy 28, a must-have for any serious wingshooter. The lightweight, smooth-shooting Legacy is as remarkable to look at as it is to shoot.

The five-star meals and accommodations at Greystone only added to the magnificent experience. Greystone's guides are extremely knowledgeable and more than friendly. It was truly a unique experience, one I won't soon forget. A special thanks to my guide George Privett who was a wealth of knowledge and a wonderful person to spend so much time with.

For more information about Greystone, call (800) 399-3006 or visit [www.greystonecastle.com/](http://www.greystonecastle.com/). To learn more about *Benelli on Assignment*, visit [www.benellitv.com](http://www.benellitv.com).

*Editor's Note:* Accompanying me on the hunt was *Sporting Classics'* 2010 Fun-n-Gun Sweepstakes winner, Clay Chandler. As grand-prize winner, Clay received a Benelli Legacy 28 shotgun and an all-expense-paid hunt at Greystone Castle. I spent quite a bit of time with Clay on the trip, and I'm reluctant to admit he shot better than I did, even though he'd never been on a quail hunt.

"It was a truly unique experience to hunt in Texas," Clay said. "I was lucky enough to spend time in camp with a wonderful group of people, experience some first-class wingshooting and even managed to kill a good whitetail."

On Clay's first afternoon at

Greystone, he whittled away the afternoon in box blind overlooking a food plot. Not long after setting up, the deer started to trickle in and before too much time had passed, Clay killed a nice eight-pointer with a Benelli R1 chambered in .300 Win. Mag.

"The hunting at Greystone was something I'll never forget," he said. "Their hospitality and the wonderful amenities made me wish I had longer than three days to spend in Texas. I would like to thank the folks at Benelli for the wonderful shotgun, *Sporting Classics* for such a wonderful trip, and the staff at Greystone for making sure I had an experience I'll always remember."



*Clay Chandler, winner of Sporting Classics' 2010 Fun-n-Gun Reader Sweepstakes, with one of two big whitetails he took at Greystone Castle.*