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AUGUST 2022

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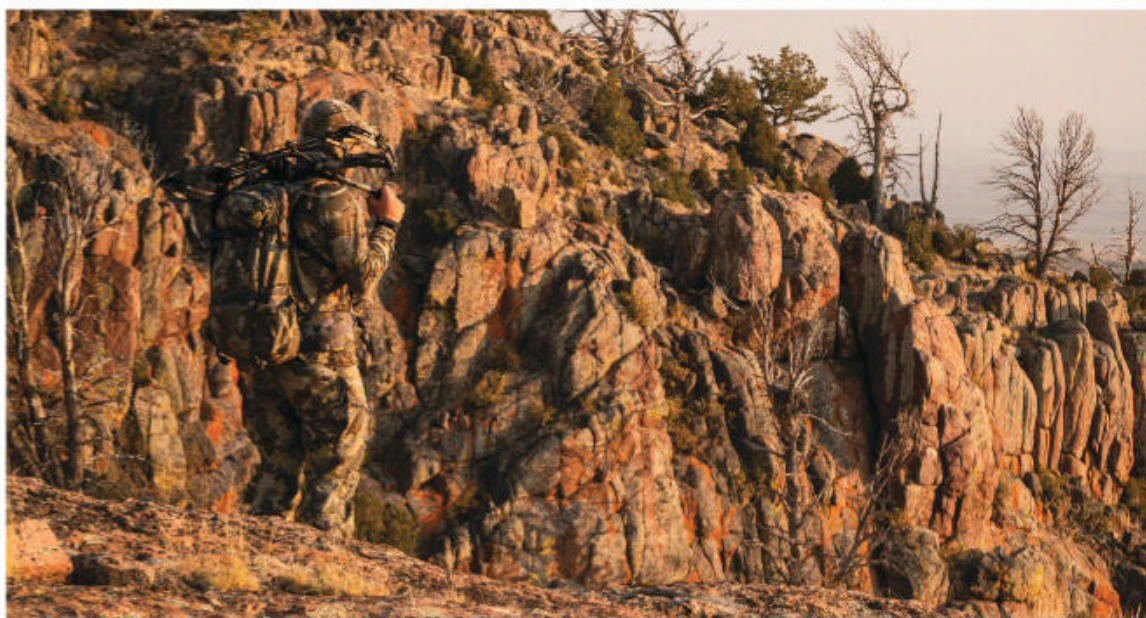


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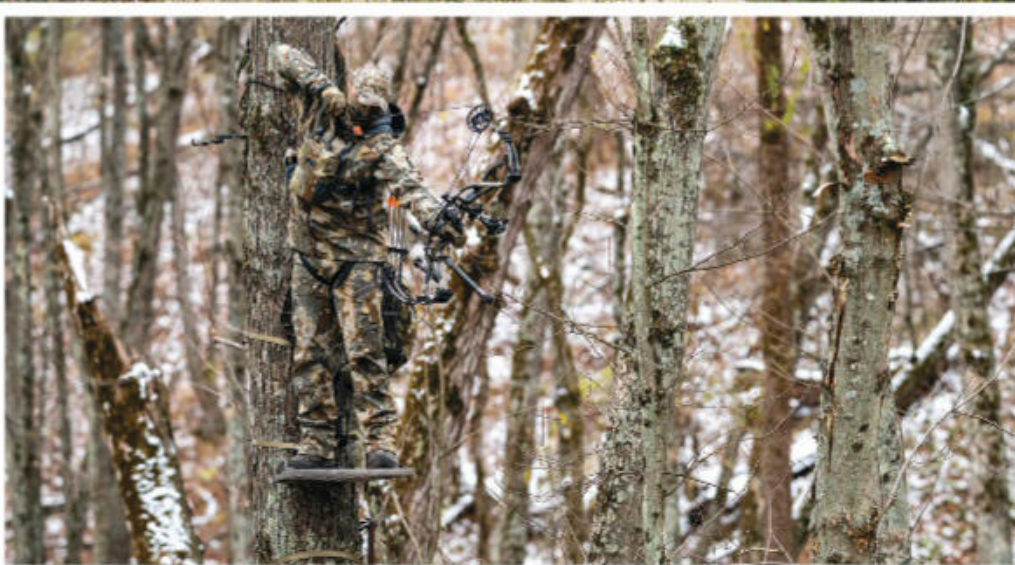
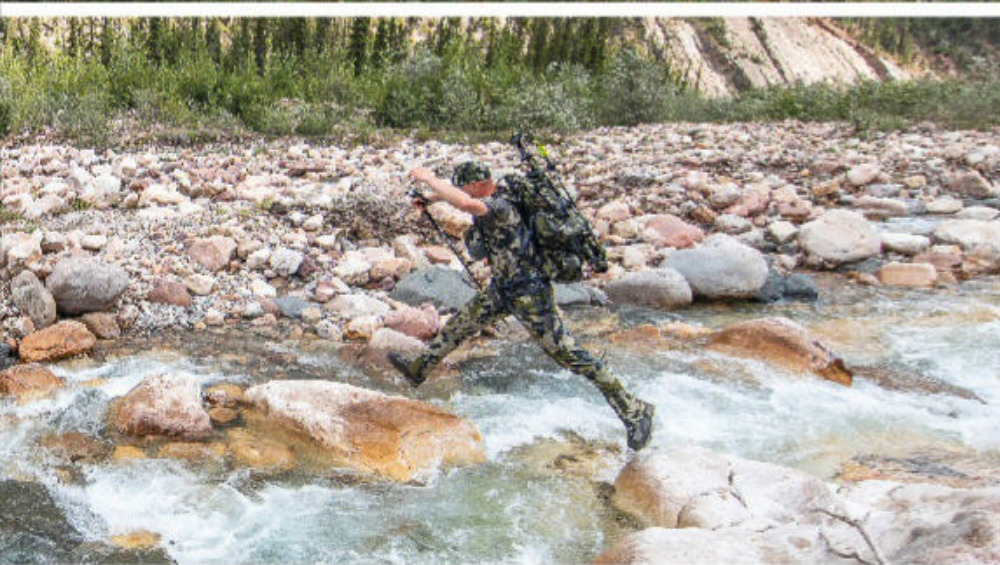


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EDITORIAL

CURT WELLS | EDITOR

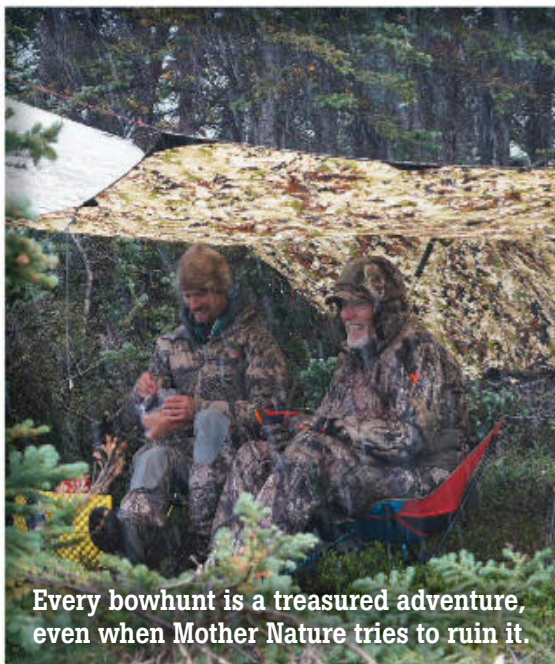
DEFINING ADVENTURE

EVERY HUNT CAN TURN OUT TO BE AN ADVENTURE. SOME ARE JUST MORE ADVENTUROUS THAN OTHERS.

IT WAS 1997. The place was Chesterfield Inlet, Nunavut, on the western shore of Hudson Bay. We'd boated 32 miles into the inlet to bowhunt caribou, and the hunting was tough. None of the hunters had a caribou as of the last day of the hunt. We were supposed to run back to the village of Chesterfield Inlet on Saturday afternoon. Instead, we decided to hunt one more evening, then leave Sunday morning. Bad decision.

At 3:55 a.m., we awoke to gale-force winds. Two of our freighter canoes were beached on the rocks, and the 18-foot runabout-style boat was upside down on the rocks in the bay. The anchor had broken loose, and it was low tide. Our native guides flipped the boat over, flushed the motor, added new oil, and got it running by the time the tide came in — but we weren't going anywhere. The wind blew hard. And kept blowing. Four days later, on Wednesday, we made a run for it. We had no communications, so no one, including wives, friends, relatives, or even bosses knew what was happening. As a bowhunt, it was a disaster — but it was definitely an adventure. That story has been told countless times even though no big game animals were harmed in the process.

Stalking into bow range of a grizzly is an adventure, but so is stalking an unsuspecting whitetail doe. My roe deer hunt in Hungary was an adventure, but so was driving to western North Dakota to hunt Badlands mule deer back in the 80s. Every single element of bowhunting, from checking trail cameras to flying into a remote lake to hunt Yukon moose, is an adventure and something to be treasured, regardless of the magnitude.



Every bowhunt is a treasured adventure, even when Mother Nature tries to ruin it.

Our August/*Big Game Special* is all about bowhunting adventure. We seek out stories that will take you along on an adventure. We do that with two purposes in mind. One, to inspire you to dream and plan your own adventure, be it big or small. And two, to give those who are unable to undertake such adventures a look inside the window of a bowhunt in a faraway place in pursuit of spectacular big game animals. You may ask, "Why do I want to read about a bowhunt that I'll never be able to experience?" My answer is, "Why not?" I've been on many adventures where fellow bowhunters have told me they never thought they'd find themselves on such a hunt. You never know what life has in store for you.

Our lead feature is a special one written by Kalan Lemon, who had the good fortune to be one of the first bowhunters allowed to hunt with a bow in Russia. I should note this hunt took place long before Russia's war on Ukraine. It's hard to say what the future holds there, but this was certainly a spectacular adventure. At the other end of the spectrum, you can read Maribeth Kulynycz's story about taking a fine velvet whitetail on her home hunting grounds in Maryland — an adventure in its own right. You could say the rest of our articles fit between those two.

Our point is to encourage you to treat every minute in the outdoors with a bow as an adventure. Do it precisely because none of us knows what the future holds. **BH**

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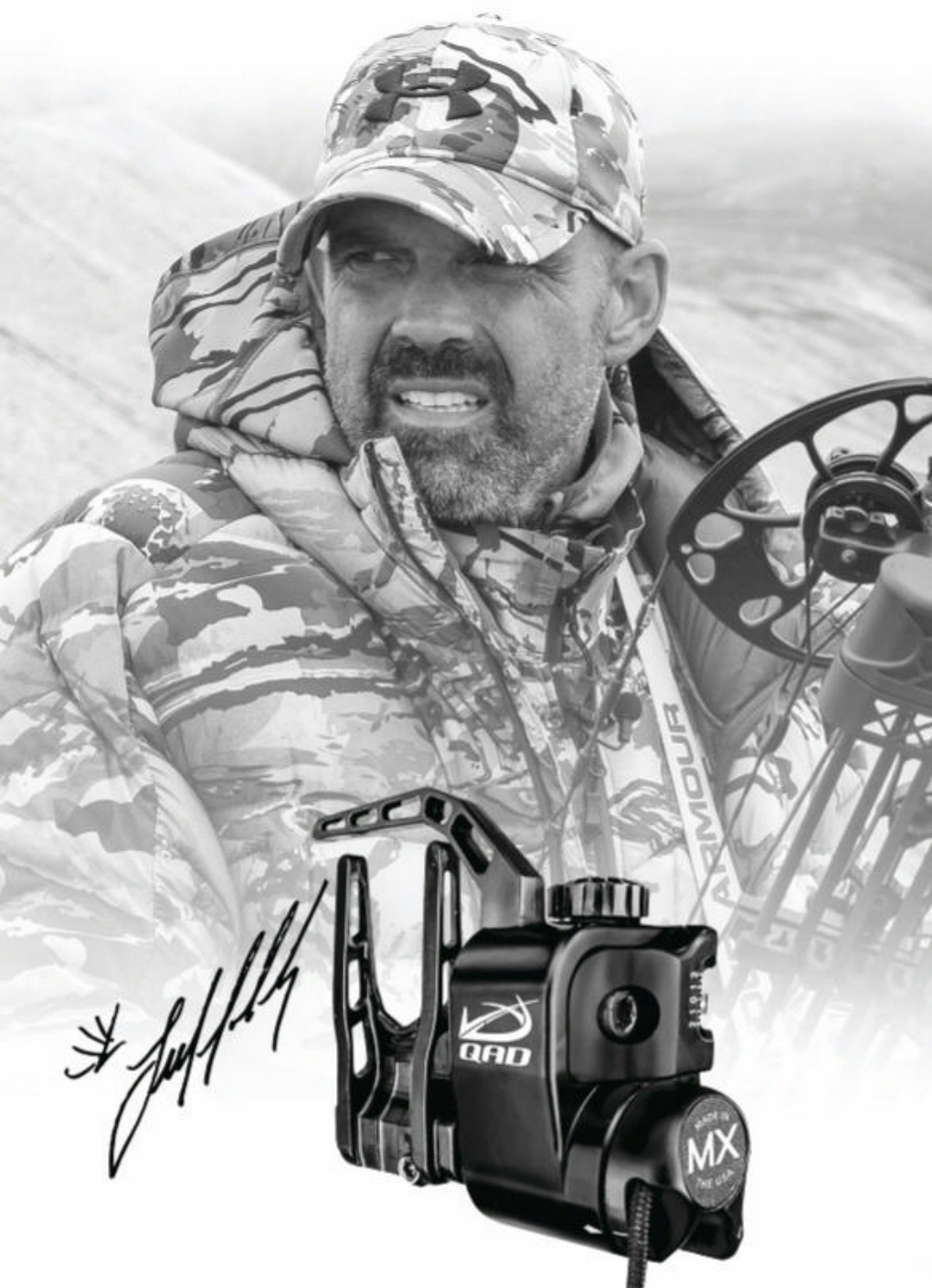
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BRIAN K. STRICKLAND | EQUIPMENT EDITOR



AN EARLY-SEASON hunt brings a unique set of challenges but you can answer the call if you have the appropriate gear.

THE RIGHT STUFF

DON'T LET EARLY AND MIDSEASON WEATHER SWINGS NEGATIVELY IMPACT YOUR HUNT.

MY HEART RATE was already elevated because of the dozen or so does that had already filtered through my setup. As I watched the sun set below the horizon, I knew that at any moment a mature buck could slip into view.

Nicknamed the “Ghost Of The Pacific Northwest,” Columbian blacktails are known to be creatures of the night — especially right after they strip their velvet in late August — and with temperatures hovering in the high 80s, releasing an arrow was no doubt going to be a last-light proposition.

With time dwindling from hours to minutes, deer started to seep from the

woods like a slow leak. Does were the first to appear, with a couple of young bucks in tow. As I watched them feed under the fading light, one by one their attention was drawn to a thick patch of timber below them. I was hopeful one of the two bucks on my hit list was the reason for their curiosity.

You're always on edge when deer are within bow range during primetime, but

when the buck showed, I thought that edge would turn into a total meltdown.

After nearly a week of 10-hour sits under Oregon's blazing late-August sun, he finally made a last-light appearance. Up to this point, this “Northwest Ghost” was only seen via trail camera a few minutes after shooting light.

As the buck walked into the meadow, his grayish body dwarfed the other deer around him. And like a playground bully, all others eased out of his path. Slipping behind a lone pine, I pressed my bow into service, and when he reappeared, I watched my arrow disappear through his chest.

Early season bowhunts have always been a challenge for me. Days are longer, and movement is muted. One misstep, and you're hosed.

Needless to say, it can be a grind, so having the best possible equipment, like the following, will help you stay focused.

What we wear can help us keep our heads in the game. Lucky for us, there seems to be no shortage of top-quality options at our fingertips today. Take the Sonora series from **Kryptek** (kryptek.com). The lightest collection in their lineup, the [1] **Sonora Pants** (\$109) and **Hoody** (\$99), are designed with a breathable, moisture-wicking mesh fabric to deliver maximum hot-weather performance, while also providing protection from the sun. And with their eco-safe DWR treatment, both prevent surface saturation from rain and sweat. The top features Kryptek's Cool Touch Technology for enhanced moisture-wicking properties, while also providing the breathability and antimicrobial properties desired in the early season.

Adding to their growing collection of technical hunting apparel, **Stone Glacier** (stoneglacier.com) launched the [2] **SG Synthetic Hoody** (\$79) this year. Ideal for early season hunts and as a layering piece for later on, its fabric wicks moisture to ensure that you stay cool when you're in the heat of battle. It's also infused with Polygiene Technology to prevent the growth of odor-



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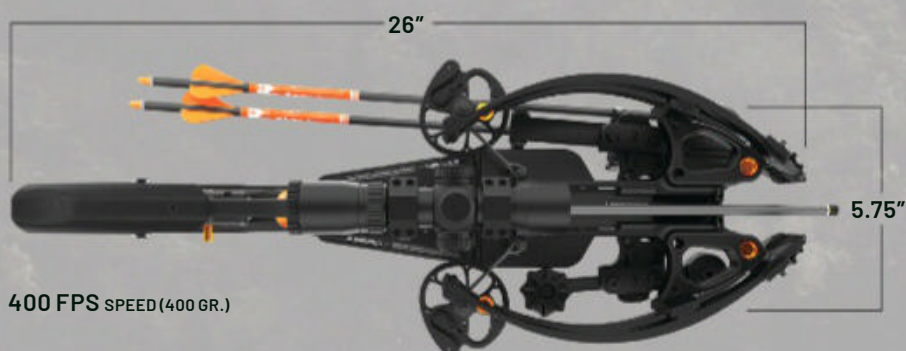
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causing bacteria, and with a UPF43+ rating coupled with a fitted hood and extended face covering, it also will provide additional protection against Mother Nature's beatdown.

Originally introduced in 1993 and still going strong today, **Browning's** (browning.com) Hydro-Fleece certainly fits the oldie-but-goodie category. Updated and revised over the years, the latest [3] **Hydro-Fleece Jacket and Bib** (\$136 each) version features a soft, water-resistant fleece shell that offers waterproof taped seams for added protection from the elements. The Jacket sports must-have handwarmer pockets, an adjustable hood, and an internal storm flap with a chin guard. The Bibs also feature handwarmer and chest pockets, plus full-length leg zippers.

ScentLok (scentlok.com) needs no introduction when it comes to the proven capabilities of their scent-controlling Carbon Alloy technology, and the updated [4] **BE:1 Reactor Jacket** (\$189) is another example. Retaining the best attributes of the original, plus new ones; it's still a highly versatile top that can be worn alone or as a layering option. Tailored for maximum mobility, it also

gives you improved thermal performance by way of its 60-gram PrimaLoft Silver insulation. A new microfleece lining and ergonomically fitted scuba hood keeps body heat from escaping, while also locking in human odor.

Although **Rocky** (rockyboots.com) has been a dominant bootmaker for decades, their expanding line of clothing is also worth a look. Designed to deliver comfort, performance, and durability, their new [5] **Rugged** collection (prices vary) features lightweight, breathable materials with up to 100-gram PrimaLoft insulation, making them a great midseason option. Only available in Realtree EDGE camo, they are designed with a breathable poly shell that's equipped with Rocky's water-repellent DWR finish.

The early season often means blistering heat coupled with humidity, but let's not forget about bugs! To combat these annoyances, the geniuses at **Sitka** (sitkagear.com) break new ground with their ultralight Equinox Guard System. Keeping you covered from head to toe with a lightweight [6] **Hoody** (\$149), **Pants** (\$249), and **Gloves** (\$50), they incorporate a new tight-knit stretch fabric

with a built-in Insect Shield treatment that acts as a barrier against annoying insect bites while also offering UPF50+ protection, Polygiene Odor Control Technology, and moisture-wicking properties.

On those midseason hunts when conditions can fluctuate, **Huntworth** (huntworthgear.com) is a brand worth considering. Made for bowhunters, their Torrington line has a softshell design that is deadly quiet when drawing your bow. Both the [7] **Jacket** (\$119) and **Pants** (\$139) have a double-layer fabric that encompasses a flexible polyester outer shell bonded to a soft fleece interior to stave off those midseason chills. The fleece is also treated with Microban antimicrobial technology for scent reduction, and the shell offers a durable water-repellent DWR finish.

Another extremely quiet garment is the new [8] **Silens** series (\$199–\$349) from **Badlands** (badlandspacks.com). One that whitetail bowhunters are sure to latch onto this season, the high-pile fleece, with up to 120-gram PrimaLoft Silver Hi-Loft insulation (depending on the piece you choose), coupled with a wind-resistant lining and an array of



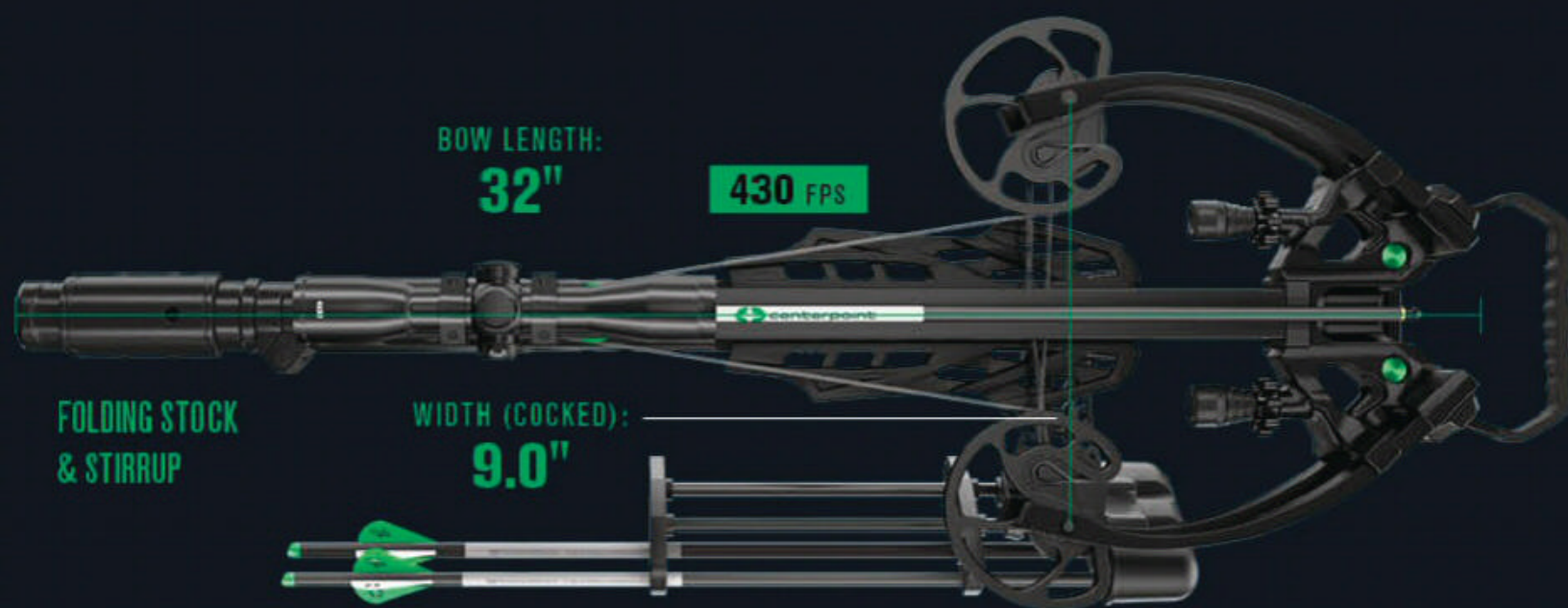
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pockets, makes this collection an ideal mid to late-season option. With five garments to choose from, each sporting the company's versatile Approach camo patterns, the Silens line is everything you'd expect from Badlands.

If you just need something a little extra to take the chill off, **NOMAD's** (nomadoutdoor.com) [9] **Barrier NXT Vest** (\$110) would certainly fit the bill. Both windproof and water-resistant, the Barrier NTX is designed with a 4-way stretch fabric and features the benefit of a soft, heat-trapping fleece lining.

Although guys certainly dominate the

bowhunting space, our female counterparts have a stake in the game as well. Understanding this, **KUIU** (kuiu.com) introduced several new options that will be a hit among this company's faithful, and the lightweight [10] **Chugach TR Rain Jacket** (\$319) and **Pants** (\$259) are certainly two of them. Giving you the ability to pack down to size makes them an ideal choice when space is limited on those backcountry hunts. And unlike other raingear that's noisy and limits movement, the Chugach's Torain TR 4-way stretch material, coupled with a streamlined fit, makes you forget it's raingear.

A company that has built its reputation around women's outerwear, **DSG** (dsgouterwear.com) launches the new [11] **Ava 2.0 Softshell Jacket and Pants** (\$129 each) this season. Designed with the latest fabric technology and enhanced features to keep you warm and deadly silent, the Ava 2.0 is engineered with an ultra-soft and quiet micro-tricot outer layer that is bonded to a micro-fleece inner layer providing a windproof barrier that will keep you on stand longer. Plus, with both pieces incorporating Agion Active XL scent-control technology, stink won't be the spoiler of your hunt. **BH**

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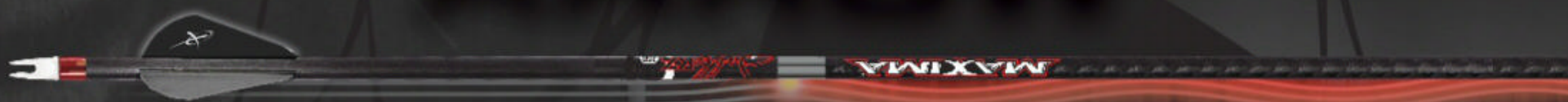
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A SURPRISE DEVELOPMENT LEADS TO THE FIRST



I'VE SPENT

the better part of my life guiding hunters across the West and have been blessed with amazing opportunities to hunt, guide, and develop a lifetime network of outfitters, clients, and friends with a knowledge of international hunting experiences. When I was 13, I accompanied my father, Wade Lemon, and a pack of hounds to Africa, where Dad pioneered leopard hunting with hounds. This sparked my love to travel and experience hunting on a worldwide scale.

As a young kid, I remember Dad's dislike for bows and arrows. Having had some unfortunate mishaps in the field, he preferred rifle hunters. As a joke to my father, some close

friends and clients started to nurture me into bowhunting. The joke really got played when they sent me a new bow and arrows — set up and ready to go — and I was hooked. Dad would joke that he would cut my bowstring if I left my bow out, so I developed a habit of hiding it under my bed.

Since then, I have been fortunate to guide bowhunters to some of the world's top-ranking mule deer, elk, and desert bighorns. And I've been blessed to travel to multiple countries and enjoy some bowhunting success of my own.

All hunters have a mental list of adventures we plan to accomplish. We spend our lives consumed by these dreams. My passion has always been with antlered game and large preda-

HATKKA

TWO BOWKILLED ANIMALS IN RUSSIA IN YEARS...AND THEY ARE HUGE!

By KALAN LEMON



I arrowed this giant brown bear on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. The skull green-scored over 30 inches and may be the largest brown bear ever taken by a bowhunter.

tors. My guiding and outfitting schedule, however, is extremely busy in the fall, and with the giant antlers of a moose being the fuel of my dreams, I debated for years how I was going to pull it off.

One day, I suddenly realized that Russia was the place to make it happen. The late-season dates would fit into my schedule, and with the allure of traveling to a remote Russian wilderness in pursuit of my dream, I was committed.

For two years I researched this hunt and spoke with many Russian outfitters, booking agents, and countless clients about their experiences and recommendations. The general consensus at the time was that Russia was an established, accepting,

and accommodating destination for hunters, but that hunts were generally poorly run — with especially rough lodging and depending on old, broken-down equipment — but the trophies were amazing.

I was unable to settle on who I felt best about booking my hunt through, until I got a call from my good friend, Nate Somero. I was guiding mule deer hunters in Sonora, Mexico, when Nate explained that he was literally in the middle of a conversation with a Russian outfitter named Artur at the SCI Show. Then Nate put Artur on the phone. Artur promised me nicer accommodations, better equipment, bigger trophies, and guaranteed sizes, not to mention competitive pricing.

I eventually gained confidence in Artur, so a couple close friends and I booked the trip.

Then COVID happened, and we were unable to make the hunt. But here's the silver lining: During that COVID closure, Russia passed new laws that recognized bows and arrows as effective hunting weapons. There was no big announcement; I discovered it through my therapeutic research as I tried to calm my anxiety about whether the hunt would happen.

I contacted Artur and asked about getting a permit to bring my bow. He laughed and said, "Okay." Months later, we still couldn't find any permits, or get anyone to authorize my bow.

Then, the announcement was made that Russia was finally allowing foreign travel. My good friend had an unexpected heart surgery and was unable to make the trip, so I sent in my Visa application alone. Over the next few weeks, however, my father and my friend, Reed Mellor, decided to join me.

Like any wise archer, I spent countless hours dialing-in and practicing. Lucky for me, I have some great friends like Kevin Wilkey, Allen Bolen, and Will Waldrip, who are amazing archers. Kevin had my bow singing, and I was set. I just needed to somehow get this bow to Russia.

With the hunt approaching, I made countless calls in an attempt to get a permit, but the best answer I could get from a Russian official was, "Good luck! Bring it and see how it goes." So, that's what I did!

Every flight denied my bow. Every Customs clearance denied my bow. Everywhere I went, someone told me, "You can't have that." I made a few phone calls to someone in Moscow, and I was told to proceed.

We met Artur and his outfitting partner, Mariusz, in Moscow, and we spent a day touring the city. As we discussed the significance of the buildings around Red Square, it was brought up that Columbus was still on a boat when these buildings were standing there looking as they do today. To see and experience the culture and architecture alone was worth the trip.

When we landed in Petropavlovsk, Kamchatsky, and my bow was there waiting for me, I was amazed and nearly overwhelmed with excitement. It was actually going to happen!

Camp was extremely remote and consisted of a few cabins set in a beautiful, snowy valley along the edge of a big river. We were in awe of how nice these cabins were — as clean as any five-star hotel — and we had fleece slippers waiting for our feet after taking our boots off outside. Apparently, we weren't going to be roughing it in Russia!

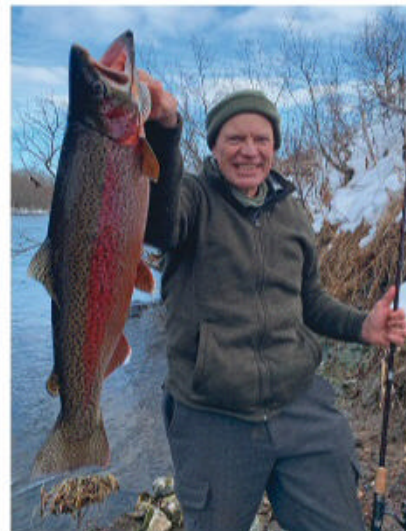
The weather, however, was flat-out cold, and the air held a bite we seldom feel in our Utah mountains. Even being properly dressed in great clothing, we could still feel its bite. Yet the Russians acted like it was nothing. Time to toughen up Kalan! I wasn't about to let any Russian view us Americans as weak. The country was covered in snow, but the one consolation was the amount of big bear tracks we saw. It blew my mind, so I decided to hunt bears as well as moose.

Over a nice dinner that night, we had a conversation with the locals. The main question on every Russian's mind was, "What do you think of President Biden?" Without answering, we redirected and asked them what they thought of him.

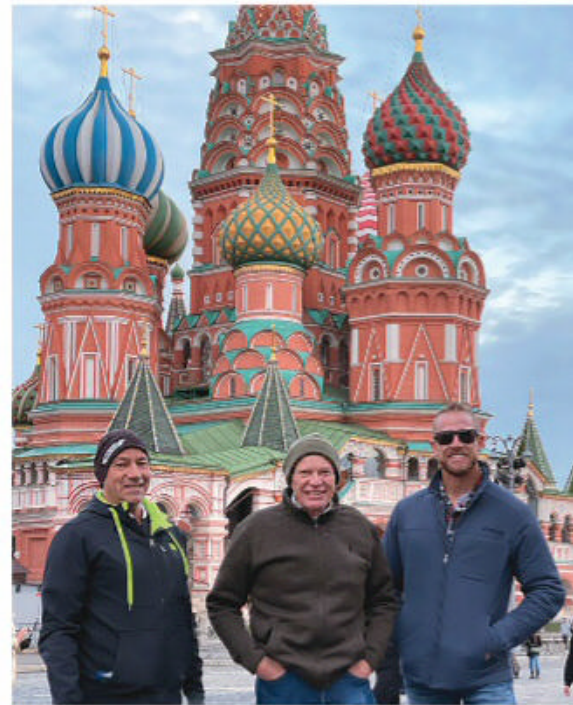
The answers were consistent: "He's weak, both physically and mentally." Power and strength are respected in Russian culture, reminding us to sit tall and never appear weak.

We then discussed game populations. By the amount of bear sign we saw, I was wondering how any moose or other game animals could survive. It was explained that the bears depend heavily on fish, and that the salmon runs and fishing in the area were second to none. We enjoyed wonderful dinners and conversation nightly, followed by relaxing hot saunas and Russian-style, cold-shock rolls in the snow.

We saw many great moose, as well as lots of other game, as we hunted along the remote mountains of Kamchatka. We eventually found a giant bull worthy of taking. Dad was up first, and I'll never forget walking up to that bull and pulling his antlers out of the snow. The size of this magnificent animal was like nothing I'd ever experienced.



My father, Wade, enjoyed some of the fantastic salmon fishing to be had on Kamchatka. My friend Reed Mellor, Dad, and I also toured the sights of Moscow.



This is quite the trophy photo: (Left to right) Reed Mellor with his moose and snow sheep; Artur; my father, Wade, with his moose and snow sheep; Mariusz; and me with my moose and brown bear.





My guides were dumbfounded by how quickly my massive Kamchatka Peninsula moose succumbed to a well-placed arrow. We saw countless giant bulls before I was convinced to take this world-class bull. Once this beast was down, the skinners and packers went to work while we did some salmon fishing.

Reed later took another amazing bull, and he and my dad both shot trophy snow sheep. But this story is about me, and now it's my turn!

I spent lots of time judging and passing on one big moose after another. In fact, when we first saw my bull, Mariusz told me, "Kalan, that is a giant moose. We must kill that one."

I studied the bull and replied, "I don't like his fronts. I'd like to keep looking for a bull with a big, palmated front end."

A few hours later I came to my senses, and we went back and luckily relocated the bull. He eventually presented a shot at just over 30 yards, and my arrow found its mark. When the bull quickly tipped over, the crew of veteran Russian hunters and outdoorsmen all turned and looked at me with puzzled expressions.

"What happened?" they asked.

"Well, guys, it's dead," I replied. We all laughed and celebrated quietly. I nocked another arrow as we approached the fallen giant with tightened nerves. The bull hadn't moved a muscle, but they told me later they expected it to jump up and take off. The first archery moose in Russia was down for good! The celebration got loud, and excitement filled the remote Russian air.



His size can't be explained without having your hands on him. The mass carried like baseball bats through every point... the thickness and width across the top of his paddles... all of it was mind-blowing. Mariusz grabbed me in a strong embrace and said, "The first moose in Russia with a bow, and he's an absolute monster!"

After a couple nightly Russian routines in the sauna, it was time to head to big-bear country. We had seen bears every day, including some impressive ones. One day, we watched a big bear trudging through waist-deep snow up the high peaks to



These two images are screenshots from video taken as we moved in on my bear. This area is so remote, the bear wasn't afraid of us. Despite having an entourage following me, I was able to get within bow range and make a great shot. It was an exhilarating experience.



find his winter den. Another bear lay on top of a stone ledge off the summit of a snowy, windswept peak. Bears were starting to hibernate, and most of them would soon be asleep for the winter. I wondered why we didn't pursue several of the big bears we saw, but Artur and Mariusz wanted a giant bear, so we headed over the mountain toward the coastal rivers.

We made it to the land of the big bears, and it was clear there were more active bears there. One of the first mature bears we found was a stud, and he had beautiful, light-colored coat!

This was a big bear, but I had a vision of a giant, 10-foot-plus bear that was nearly black. It was interpreted to the crew that I was passing on this bear, and the fact that they thought me a fool didn't require interpretation. Mariusz simply smiled and said, "Ok. Let's find that bear." We sorted through more and more animals before eventually finding a bear that immediately got Mariusz and the crew excited.

As we approached the giant bear, it continued to get bigger and bigger. Mariusz turned to me and explained that this bear was absolutely enormous and as old as they get, but he had short hair and a very poor coat. Another giant got a pass.

Just when it seemed the search would continue tomorrow,

everything changed. The valley was full of bears, and we were trying to sort through them when out of a big stream walked my bear. He stepped up on the bank and Artur, Mariusz, and the crew went silent. No words or interpretation was needed. It was go time!

The flat leading to the creek was wide open, so we quickly shuffled across to the creekbank. I expected the crew of Russian skinnners to stay back, but despite my signaling them to remain behind, they kept coming. Frustration grew and my entourage approached the creek just as the bear stepped out onto the wide-open flat. Seeing him up close, his heart-stopping size was clear. Swelled up like a bee-stung victim, his belly nearly dragged on the ground. He seemed to tower over everything in sight. He as truly an amazing animal.

Cleverly disguised as a bunch of armed Russians and an American hunting in a foreign land with a stick, we all approached the bear. I don't know whether I expected him to

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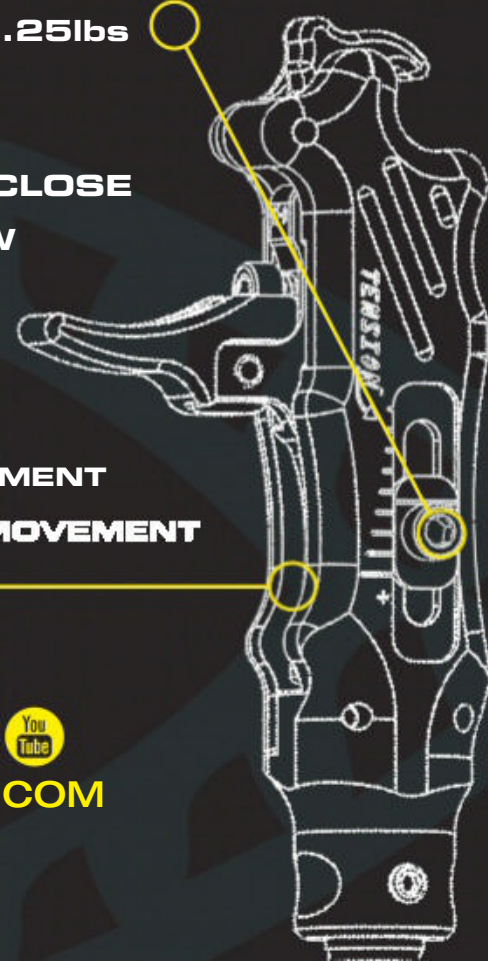
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BOWHUNTING THE KAMCHATKA

charge or to run away, but neither happened. He would occasionally turn and look at us, letting us know he was the boss, before moving off in an uncomfortable and unsure manner.

As we fell in behind the bear, it was obvious my convoy was not about to let me approach this bear alone and potentially miss the opportunity to see me get eaten by one of the largest land predators on Earth!

At 64 yards, the bear turned back again, and that was the moment I dialed

the yardage on my sight, settled my pin, held my Hoyt steady, and sent the arrow toward the giant bear.

Much like my moose, the arrow performed perfectly, and within a few steps the bear was down.

The bear was more than I could have dreamed of — the hair dark and long, the size unbelievable, and his teeth worn to the gums. The bear stunk of rotten fish. We took pictures, and then caught a bunch of fish out of the nearby river while the skinner went to work.

We knew my bear was big and gorgeous, but the size really sank in when



Of course, I had to take the traditional photo of my bear's paw. Compare it to the size of my head. That's a truly massive brown bear!

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Mariusz started converting the estimated weight from kilograms to pounds! Then the skull from centimeters to inches. In the field, Mariusz told us the skull would be 75 to 78 centimeters.

“Well, that’s great,” I said, knowing it was big but having no idea what it meant. At camp, the calipers measured his skull at 77 centimeters.

With my brown bear being green-scored well over 30 inches, it could best the current P&Y World Record. I won’t list preliminary measurements for my moose, but I’m told it could also exceed the P&Y’s current top spot. However, Pope and Young only recognizes animals taken in North America, so my bear and moose are not eligible. And at this writing, I haven’t received my trophies back yet.

Regardless, they are the first modern archery harvests in all of Russia, and I’m told likely the first accepted legal archery harvests ever from Russia. No matter what the tape eventually reads, they’re milestone accomplishments, and I’m hopeful that some day bowhunters will once again be able to plan hunting adventures in Russia.

Most of all, my advice to you is this: Don’t put off your dreams or wait for opportunities. Get ambitious, and create them! **BH**

The author is Utah-based guide/outfitter.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: My gear included a Hoyt RX-5 bow, 496-grain Black Eagle X-Impact arrows, 180-grain Valkyrie Jagger broadheads, Black Gold sight, and KUIU clothing.



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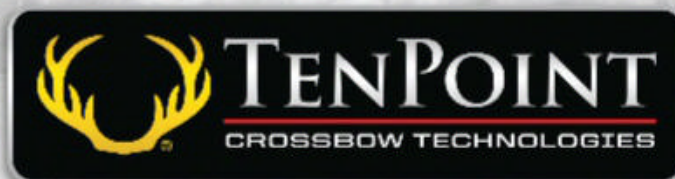
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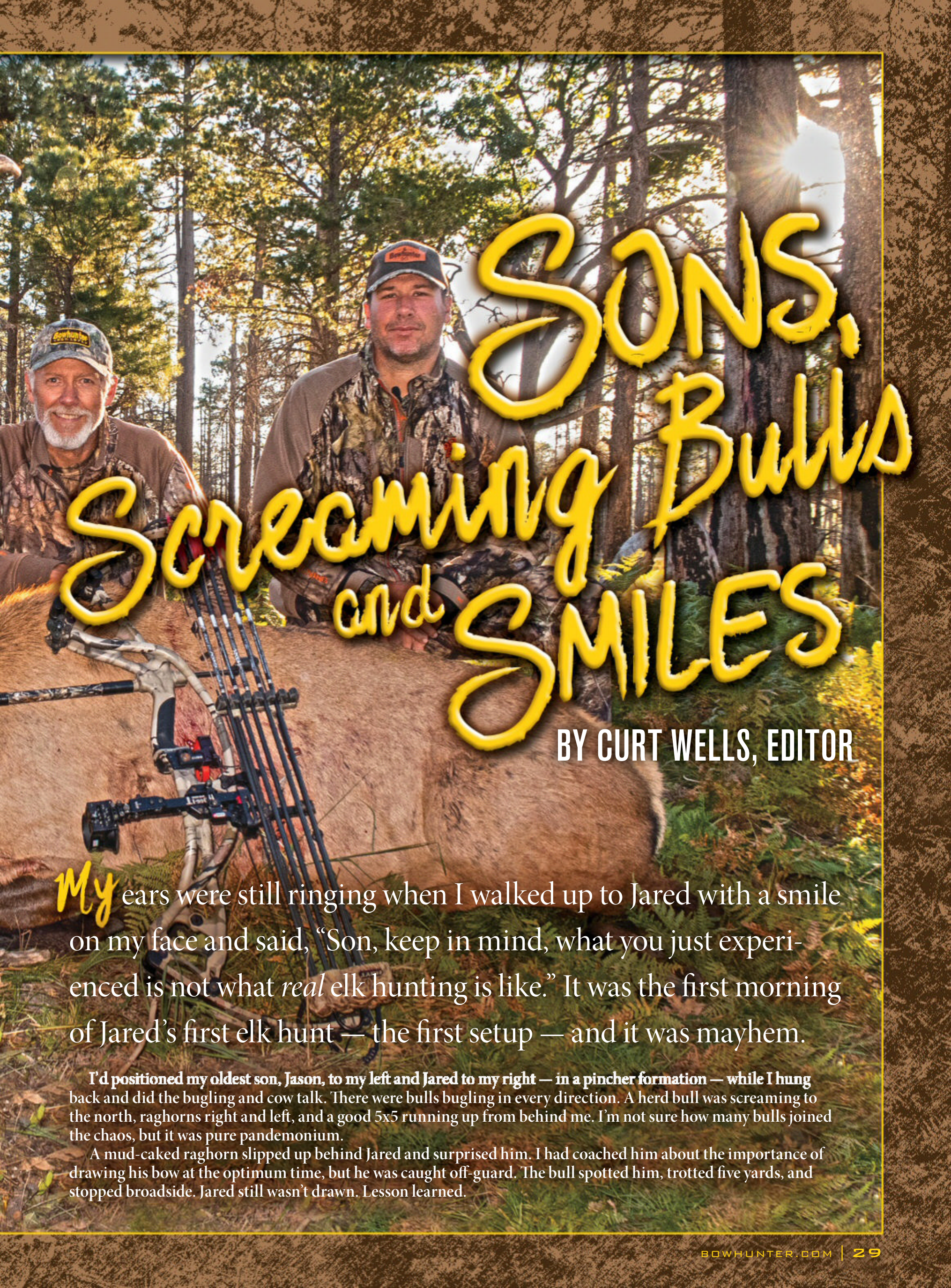
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A man with a beard, wearing a camouflage shirt and a baseball cap, is kneeling in a forest next to a large elk. He is holding the elk's antlers. The elk is lying on the ground, and its head is in the foreground. The background is a dense forest of tall trees.

A long-awaited Arizona elk hunt ended on a high note when my son, Jared, arrowed his first bull. My other son, Jason, and I were all smiles as well, after an action-packed hunt.

IT TOOK OVER A DECADE TO DRAW THE TAGS, BUT THIS IS ONE HUNT THAT EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS.



SONS, Screaming Bulls and SMILES

BY CURT WELLS, EDITOR

My ears were still ringing when I walked up to Jared with a smile on my face and said, “Son, keep in mind, what you just experienced is not what *real* elk hunting is like.” It was the first morning of Jared’s first elk hunt — the first setup — and it was mayhem.

I’d positioned my oldest son, Jason, to my left and Jared to my right — in a pincher formation — while I hung back and did the bugling and cow talk. There were bulls bugling in every direction. A herd bull was screaming to the north, raghorns right and left, and a good 5x5 running up from behind me. I’m not sure how many bulls joined the chaos, but it was pure pandemonium.

A mud-caked raghorn slipped up behind Jared and surprised him. I had coached him about the importance of drawing his bow at the optimum time, but he was caught off-guard. The bull spotted him, trotted five yards, and stopped broadside. Jared still wasn’t drawn. Lesson learned.

SONS, SCREAMING BULLS, AND SMILES

The elk-screaming competition continued, with me as a full participant, until the herd bull drifted away with his harem. In the semi-open timber of Arizona, any attempt to follow, or even try to keep up, would have been futile.

As the bugling faded, a huge smile grew on my face. After 12 years of applying as a party of three, we'd finally drawn Arizona elk tags. A year of preparation had just been rewarded. My goal to get my sons into some serious bugling action was realized. It was a dream sequence for me. And we were just getting started!

This was always going to be a DIY hunt. I had all the gear, and my physical preparations for a mountain goat hunt in British Columbia the week prior had me in good shape. I drove to Arizona three days early to scout and decide on a camp spot. Then I spent an enchanting day alone setting up camp — a task I've always loved. I erected a 20-foot Alaknak tent for sleeping and a 12-footer for a kitchen, built a shower with a tall ground blind and a pump sprayer, and constructed a tarp-wrapped outhouse in the woods. Then, at precisely 2:14 p.m., on September 9, a bull elk bugled with a fair degree of passion less than 200 yards away. I smiled and settled into a camp chair to soak that in. It was a moment of bliss.

Cameraman Mike Emery drove into camp at 4 p.m. and helped me with the rest of my chores. I shot my bow, ate supper, and then crawled into my sleeping bag. To sleep fitfully while simultaneously listening to bull elk bugling all night long might seem impossible, but I did it with total contentment.

The next morning, Mike and I hiked right out of camp to the point of the ridge between two steep canyons and listened to bulls bugling in three directions. I did some calling, but this was a reconnaissance mission. We noted the location of the screamers, and once they went quiet, we hiked back to camp and had a big breakfast before driving to town for some serious supplies and to pick up Jason at the airport in Flagstaff. Jared was coming in the following day.

Jason got settled in, and once again the bulls bugled all night long. They were still bugling in the morning, so we

walked out of camp again and nearly got in front of a herd bull, but a five-point bull rushed in and caught us in the open. We followed the herd for a couple hours but couldn't close the distance in the open timber. After "brunch," I headed to town to pick up Jared and another cameraman, Jake Hanson, while Jason and Mike planned to hunt the evening below camp.

We pulled back into camp just before sundown, and there was a five-point bull standing 50 yards from our shower. As it ran off, Jason and Mike came walking up the mountain. Jason had called the bull to within 15 yards but passed on the shot. It was far too early to take such a bull. And I was smiling again. Jason had a close encounter and Jared got eyes on a bull before his gear was unloaded. The dream was coming together nicely for 'ol Dad.

That brings us back to that first morning with both my sons. The muddy raghorn that picked off Jared trotted over in front of Jason, but he passed again. That started a string of days with unparalleled elk bowhunting action. Over the next week, I heard more bugling than any hunt I've ever been on. Although there were five of us walking around in a group, I wanted us to stick together, with me doing the calling and my sons set up to cover two angles of approach. We had action every morning and evening, and I couldn't even begin to guess how many bulls I called to.

One morning, as the sun's rays cut through the pines, a bull with a prehistoric bugle sounded off from the other side of a very deep canyon. Jason and Jared were set up along the canyon rim, and I dropped back 75 yards and started off with a mix of cow calls and bugling. We had a contentious conversation for 20 minutes or so, and then the bull went silent. Either he lost interest and went off to bed, or he was coming.

I would have bet money that I wasn't going to pull that bull across that deep canyon, but I would have lost that bet. The mature bull dropped into the bottom and climbed up the canyon directly at Jason. Unaware, I directed a cow call toward Jared's position and the bull immediately turned and walked that way. When the bull stopped, he presented a poor, quartering-to shot angle at 30 yards — bad as it gets — and Jared passed, as he should have. We all felt the pain of that lost opportunity.

We made calls to home, and to the bull elk from Arizona's 200-mile-long Mogollan Rim.

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SONS, SCREAMING BULLS, AND SMILES

However, there was no time to snivel, as an aggressive bugle suddenly blasted through the timber directly behind us and straight downwind. We scrambled to get into position, but the heavy-beamed 6x6 was on us too quick. He got our wind and was gone. There were so many bulls in every direction, that this was a common scenario throughout our hunt.

I was frustrated by one thing: No matter how I directed the calling setup; no matter how I handled the calling; the bulls always seemed to drift toward Jared. Jason, who has taken two bulls on previous hunts, just couldn't catch a break; the magnetism of the rookie elk hunter was simply too strong. So, we decided to split up and cover more ground.

That next morning, Jason and Mike struck off on their own, and I took Jared and Jake to a spot that looked good during my scouting days. We hiked down a trail just as daylight broke, and when I stopped to bugle, a bull screamed over my call. He answered every bugle and was coming — fast!

Jared took a position along the trail, and I dropped down the ridge 40 yards to take advantage of the morning thermals. The bull strutted right into the open and was moving fast. Jared tried to stop the bull and ended up hurrying the shot — sending an arrow over the bull's back.

We returned to that same drainage for the afternoon hunt, while Jason went elsewhere. Within minutes of leaving the truck, the timber rattled with the screams of rutting bull elk. There is no more exhilarating sound in the wild, and it has stirred my soul for four decades.

One of the three vocal bulls in that canyon sounded like a beast. The resonance and grit in a bull's scream is not a reliable indicator of the maturity of the bull, but it is a characteristic that pulls at you. So off we went after the enraged bull.

I closed the distance and then started off with cow calls. The bull responded, but without malice. So, I squealed like a young bull and that set him off — our argument escalating to



The older I get, the more I appreciate time spent in camp with hunting partners. When they are my sons, it's even more special.

full-blown screams. I tried to get the wind, but the bull was having none of it. When I zigged, he zagged. He wouldn't let me get downwind without drifting off. At one point he seemed to be going away, so I quickly slipped into what I thought was his bedding area, got the wind in my favor, and then broke a long silence with a bugle from his bedroom. That was more than he could take. He was ready to rumble!

I positioned Jared out front, thinking the bull would try to circle me, and then I threw out some cow squeals. The bull got crazier and started screaming like he was possessed. The bedding area was thick, so I couldn't see him coming, but there was no doubt somebody was fixing to get hurt!

I had a Stalker Decoy attached to my bow and took refuge behind a large pine. Suddenly, I looked to my left and the bull was staring at me from 30 yards. I noticed some extra points crowning his antlers and thought, *I'd better shoot that bull!*

As I drew, the bull spun backwards about 10 yards and stopped broadside. This is a common scenario. If a bull spooks, you must continue to draw and be ready for this classic hesitation. I put my 40-yard pin low and let fly. It must have been 40 yards, because my arrow hit low in the vitals.



Early in our Arizona hunt, Jared (l), Jason (r), and I stop to pose for a father/sons photo. Such opportunities are too rare.



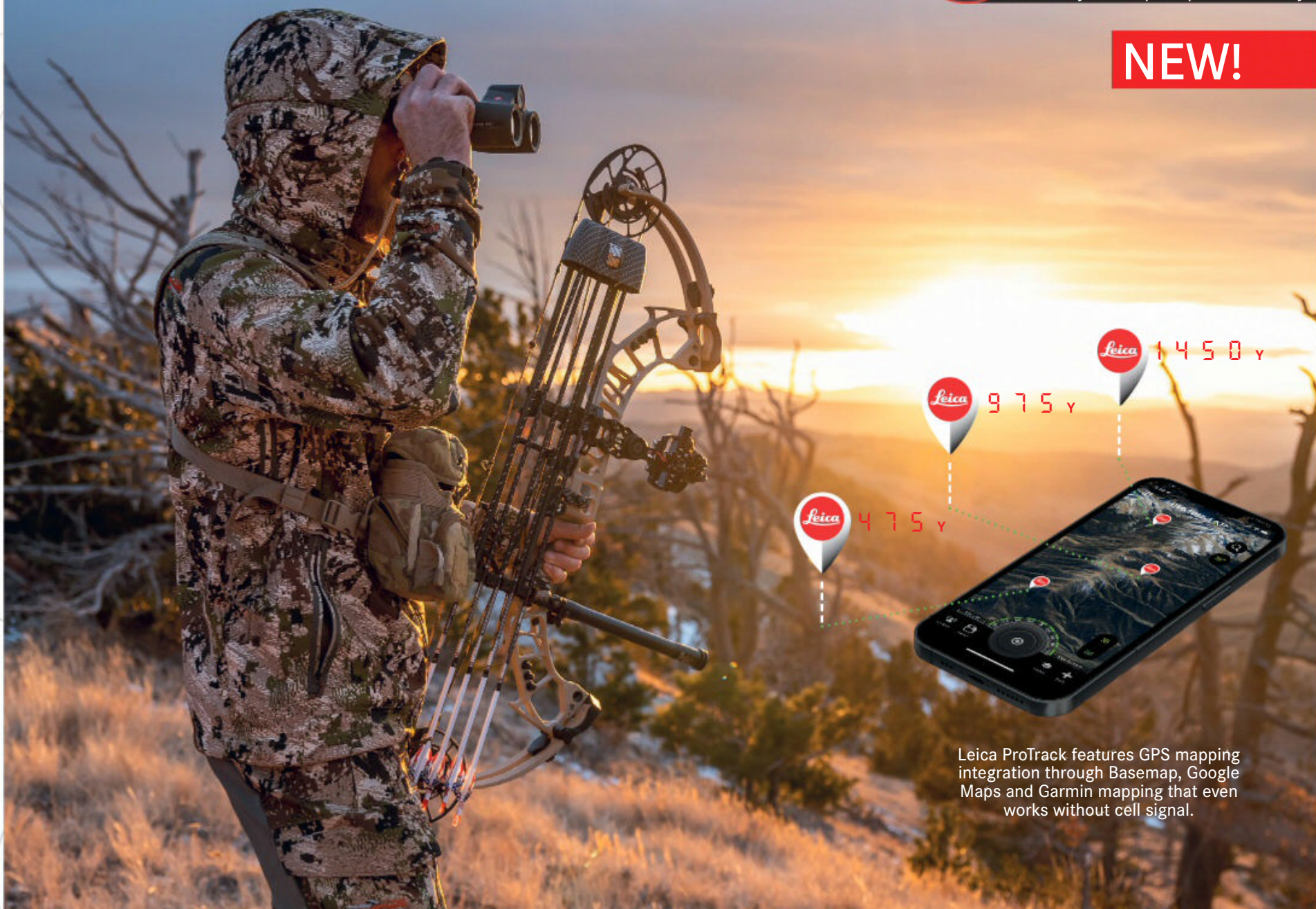
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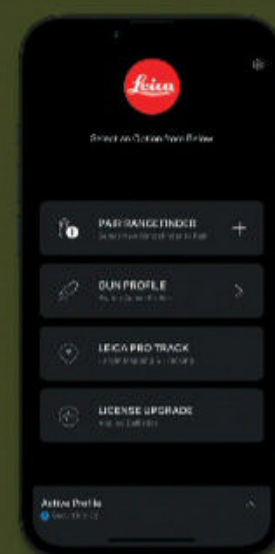
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That's when I suddenly went into a mild state of shock. "What did I just do?" I asked myself out loud. I wasn't supposed to be shooting an elk — I didn't have a cameraman behind me! I did everything I could to get the bull to go toward Jared, but when it came straight to me instead, I went on autopilot and took the shot.

I was still cussing myself for the screwup when Jake walked up to me. I embarrassingly told him about the sin I had just committed. He said, "Well, if it makes you feel better, I had the bull in frame when your arrow hit it."

That made me smile once more. I wanted to give Jake a hug right about then, but we had an elk to recover. I found my arrow after 20 feet, and there was blood on three-quarters of the shaft. The scant blood trail quickly turned into a lot of blood with bubbles and a steady trail, as if it was poured from a pitcher. I was sure it would be a short trail when Jared whispered, "There he is! He just got up and walked off."

Considering the blood sign, that surprised me. We backed out and circled around to the truck. The sun was set-



I told my sons on the first day of the hunt that my favorite time to hunt elk is three days either side of September 17. Of course, there are environmental influences, but I killed my Arizona bull on September 17, so I didn't lie. This is the 20th bull I've taken with a bow.

ting into the horizon as coyotes started howling their portentous song. My mind raced through the options. I couldn't stand the thought of losing the elk to the coyotes or to the warm night, so I made the call at 9:30 p.m. to follow the blood

into a deep canyon. The bull lay dead on the edge of a precipice just 385 yards from the truck. He was a beautiful 7x9 bull that I was extremely grateful for. I began the "Edward Scissorhands" process while my sons and two helpful cam-

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SONS, SCREAMING BULLS, & SMILES

eramen started hauling body parts up the mountain. We were all in the truck by midnight.

For the remaining six days, my Hoyt would stay in camp. I would carry only a grunt tube, and that made me smile.

Of course, that's also about the time the bugling action started getting sporadic. A summer of rains; lush, green grass; and ample watering holes had the bulls in a good mood and bugling more than I could have hoped for. It had been wild. But now, instead of four or

five bulls screaming in unison, we were down to one or two. Then we had a couple of those inexplicably silent days. I've never quite figured out why the timber can echo with screams one day and fall silent the next, even in nearby drainages, with no discernable change in weather conditions. It's baffling.

On the last morning of our hunt, we were cruising the Rim Road toward some fresh ground when I stopped the truck, walked into the timber, and ripped off a frustrated bugle. When a bull answered, the truck emptied out like a SEAL team bailing out of a chopper. We scrambled

for bows, packs, cameras, and tripods, and took off toward the bull.

We didn't go far, before I realized the bull was coming hard and we had to take cover. I sent Jason to my left, which I thought was the most likely approach for the bull, and sent Jared to my right. I stayed back 75 yards behind a pine in the open lodgepole and held a Stalker Decoy up as I cow-called to the bull.

Giant spears of the sun's rays sliced into the scattered timber as the bull walked directly at me, screaming his lust for the cow he'd heard and could now see. I watched as both my sons came to full draw — and I smiled. Both had ranged the bull at exactly 38 yards. When the bull stopped, there was a tree covering the bull's vitals from Jason's angle. He was aiming through his peep, waiting for the bull to take another step, when Jared's arrow blasted through the bull's chest.

The bull bolted toward Jared, then turned and ran full gallop straight at me — its lifeblood splashing into those columns of sunlight. At just three yards the bull saw me, turned left, slammed into a tree, and fell dead 10 yards from me. When I realized we were only 135 yards from the truck, I smiled yet again.

Jared was quivering and speechless. His first elk was down, and it couldn't have been a more exciting experience for him. Or me. Jason was happy for his brother, but not quite as excited as the rest of us. That's the way it goes.

I sent Jason off to hunt the rest of the morning while Jared and I broke down his bull. We hunted again that evening with no opportunities for Jason, who had passed on a couple bulls hoping to beat his personal best bull — an Arizona 6x6 taken in 2009. The only way this hunt could have gone better is if Jason would have filled his tag. I was one thankful father, to have two outstanding sons, and to have had the opportunity to share that incredible hunting experience with them.

I'm often asked which hunt is my favorite. I struggle to choose one, and I tell people it's like making me choose which son I like best. Now I have the answer to that question — the 2021 DIY Arizona elk hunt with both my sons — and I'll deliver it with a smile. No doubt. **BH**

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

On this hunt, we all used Hoyt carbon bows, Easton arrows, Rage Trypan broadheads, Spot Hogg sights, Rocky Mountain elk calls, and wore Browning clothing and Kenetrek boots. Watch for this hunt soon on *Bowhunter TV*.

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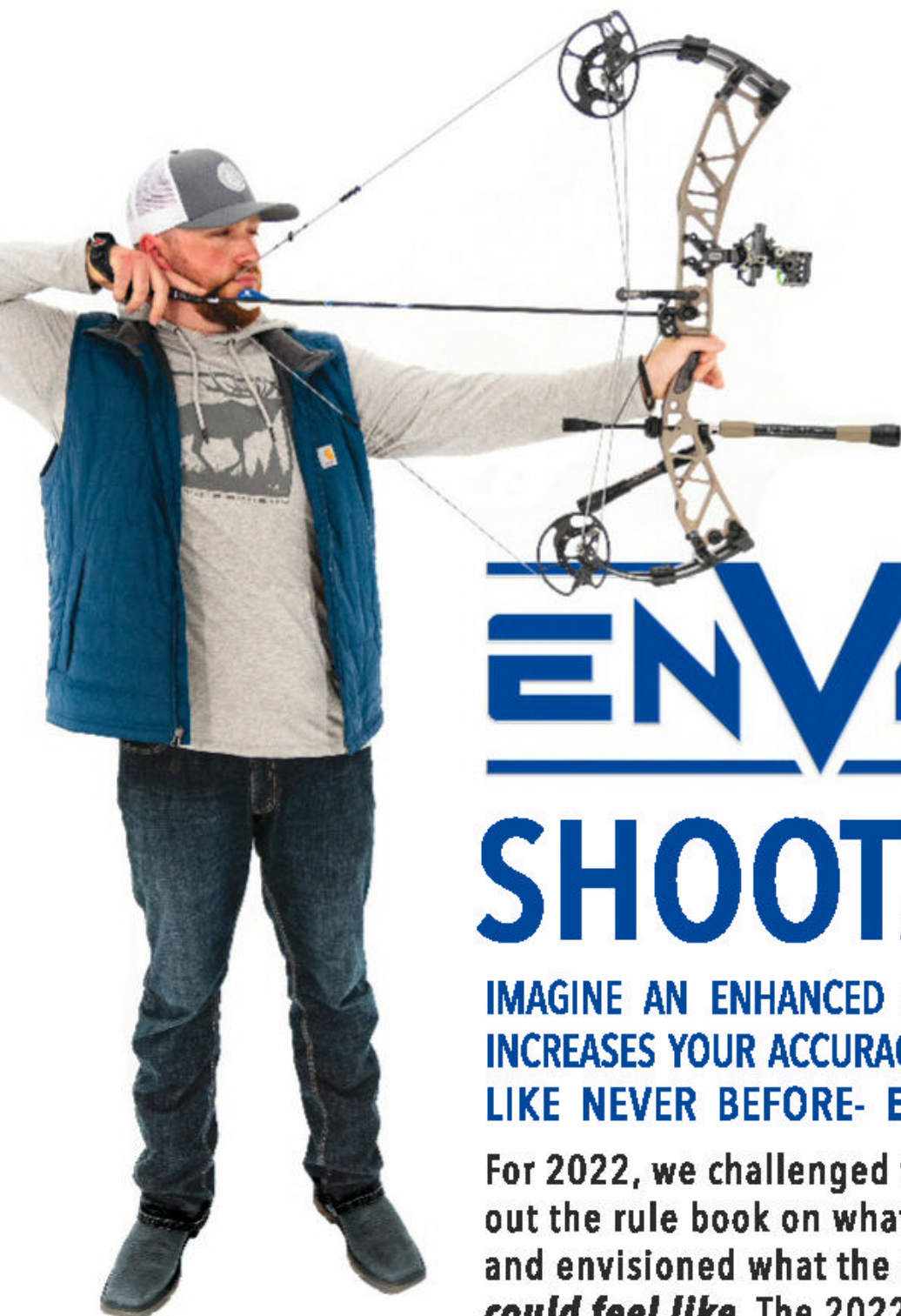
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IT SEEMS TO ME, that hunting is a constant search for greater perspective. Greater perspective of the terrain, the quarry, the world, and myself.

Over the years, I've had numerous opportunities to talk to fellow hunters packing out early and empty-handed, only a couple days after their arrival in the backcountry. Often, as we chat, they share their excitement in planning and preparing for the seven to 10-day hunt, and then they share their disappointment as they head home when their hunt has only just begun. Everyone's situation is unique, but I find that focusing on results or a specific outcome tends to diminish perspective of, and gratitude for, the opportunity we have to pursue big game. Finding gratitude for the daily adventures and appreciating all that surrounds us in the backcountry leads to success, no matter how you define it.

The adventure of the next hunt begins as soon as the last hunt ends. Reflecting on lessons learned, scouring maps and other resources, applying for hunts, repairing and upgrading gear, etc. It seems as if I blink and I'm on the trail again at midnight, two days before opening morning.

If I'm comfortable with the terrain, I prefer to be sleep-deprived and hike into my hunting camp via headlamp in the cool of the night, rather than get beat-down by the heat

of the sun. For the past several years, I have elected to rent llamas. I think the cool nighttime temps are also easier on the animals, while helping us all make it up the mountain a little quicker. Leaving the trailhead at midnight means I'll be setting up camp around 10 a.m., get a nap, and still catch the prime evening glassing hours.

I believe it is worth taking extra time in hunt preparation to ensure that your camp does not interfere with the movement patterns of deer and elk. That often means it probably won't be the most convenient spot to camp, but when in doubt, camp farther out. Most of my camping spots require up to an hour-long predawn hike each morning just to get to my glassing spots.

Arriving in the backcountry a couple of days before the opener gives me an opportunity to get up to speed on current animal locations in the pockets I hope to hunt. Prior to arrival, I use Google Earth to plan glassing locations that will enable me to efficiently scour as much terrain as possible during the hours of animal movement. Below, I recount a recent mule deer hunt that characterizes some of my hunting strategies...

MULE DEER WITH A BOW IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT. HERE'S HOW AN EXPERT DOES IT.

EFFECTIVE

BY JUSTIN GORDON



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A MULEY HUNTER'S PERSPECTIVE

The night before the archery opener, I find that a worst-case scenario has played out in one of my target areas. A group on horseback has dropped a hunting camp 50 yards from where a small bachelor group of muley bucks spent their summer. The wide 4x4 I'm interested in has disappeared, and based on who has moved into the neighborhood, I won't see that buck again during this hunt.

I run 45 minutes to another glassing spot before the sun goes down. I am now in search of a deer that I caught a glimpse of about a month earlier during a scouting trip. My glassing perch provides the only perspective from which to view the pocket of earth this deer finds comfortable. It is impossible to see or hunt this deer from the same side of the canyon that he dwells on. I am 1½ miles away from the deer as the crow flies, glassing across a large

drainage. The terrain around him blocks any view of the buck from anywhere else on my side of the canyon, and anywhere nearer his location.

The last hour of glassing before opening morning becomes increasingly tense as the light fades. With minutes left to glass, a "rock" on the edge of my binocular's field of view lifts its head and shows off an impressive antler frame. Now, watching it walk away from a stand of timber, I believe the buck has got to be big, given the distance and low-light conditions. By the time I pull my 12x50 binoculars off the tripod and get my spotting scope on the buck, I can't make out details until he turns his head just enough that I think I see an inline cheater on his back left side. *Was that him?* I wonder. That cheater was the distinguishing feature I'd picked out on the buck a month earlier.

No matter how old I get, sleep is still



Llamas have saved me a lot of work in recent years. The antlers on my back are those of the World Record nontypical velvet mule deer I arrowed in 2018. It scored 326⅞".

scarce the night before opening morning of an archery hunt. I check my watch — it's 1 a.m. Hours later, I've made the hike to my glassing perch, but the gray light of predawn is unproductive behind the binoculars. As light slowly increases, I have a short window of time before the sun peeks over the ridge. Still nothing. I am soon blinded by the sun shining directly into my binoculars. I have some hope that the morning is not lost, because the buck I seek inhabits a spot that stays in the shadows until late in the morning. By the time I can make out deer in the distance, the search is frantic.

After what feels like a full day of intense glassing, a miracle takes place at around 9 a.m., and I locate the buck with the inline cheater. He is on the move, traveling longer distances between brief moments of browsing. He acts like he has an appointment somewhere and isn't waiting around for the other bucks in his small group. If I take my eyes off of him, even for a moment, he may drop into a fold in the terrain or bed down in such a way that I won't be able to relocate him.

After about 40 minutes of my muscles cramping due to lack of movement, the deer walks into a stand of timber. Several minutes pass without seeing him emerge. Has he moved out through cover or a depression in the terrain that I can't see? A small buck walks into the same stand of timber and abruptly backs out, which likely means the inline buck didn't want to share the space. After the three other bucks bed down, I am more comfortable with the idea that my target buck is bedded in the timber. After I take a moment to relax, I realize that I am looking at the same stand of timber that



Successful mule deer hunting demands many hours behind quality binoculars and spotting scopes, even when the weather isn't cooperating.



the buck walked out of the night before. Will he stay put until evening?

I spend roughly 20 minutes taking photos and putting together a game plan. I review my notes of the weather and wind forecast. The wind forecasts today are amazingly accurate, so before I leave cell service on each hunt, I take screenshots of the hourly wind forecast for the drainages and mountainsides I plan to hunt.

It's a little after 10 a.m. when I drop from my glassing perch. In my trek to the buck's bedding area, I cross a fairly deep drainage. There is a quick elevation loss of nearly 1,000 feet before crossing the drainage and heading up the other side into position. To take advantage of the wind coming up the drainage, I need to circle well above the animal and descend into position. Using the photos as a guide, and taking the long way around, I finally arrive in position at around 3 p.m. There were no lunch breaks along the way. I've been on the move for the last five hours. When I arrive, I have no idea if the deer has long since gone. I can only hope that his pattern today is similar to what I witnessed the prior evening.

The hillside is much steeper than it looks from across the basin. I position myself on a small shelf completely out of sight from the buck, but I can range the top of the trees that surround his bed at 35 yards. Along with the cover in front of me, my outline is completely muted by the broken rock wall at my back, which allows me just enough room to come to full draw. Due to the rocks and the shelf in front of me, the deer will need to move several yards away from his bed before I can see him, but that is better than pressing my luck by peering over or around these features. It is enough to know that I am 35 yards from where I last saw the buck, and if he comes out the same way he did the night before, I should have a shot. I have a strong wind in my favor, and I set up with the intent to stay until dark and walk out via headlamp if necessary.

The sun is beating down. A cloud would be nice. That thought no sooner crosses my mind when a few clouds suddenly move over the sun to provide some relief.

It's past 4 p.m., and the bit of cloud cover has held for 15 minutes. Suddenly, there is movement below me. The tips of velvet-covered antlers dance out from behind the rock shelf that hides the buck's bed from my view. I range the antlers and freeze as the buck's head emerges from behind cover. He is 12 yards away, and I can't move. The sun

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Photo: Jay Beyer



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A MULEY HUNTER'S PERSPECTIVE



Taking a buck like this one requires serious effort before the hunt, during the hunt, and after when it's time to prepare the animal for extraction. Hanging the quarters helps keep them cool and safe from scavengers.

pops out from behind the clouds and the buck turns back to where he came from, while I remain frozen with the rangefinder to my eye.

With the buck out of sight, I begin moving to my left, keeping my back against the cliff. By the time I have moved far enough from cover that I can see him, he's 34 yards away — the steep cut calling for a 27-yard shot.

A quartering-away shot presents itself, and at the shot the buck spins to run back in my direction. He passes 15 yards below me and drops. Unfortunately, the terrain is so steep that he rolls until he goes off a 20-foot cliff. Below the cliff, thick vegetation halts his tumble.

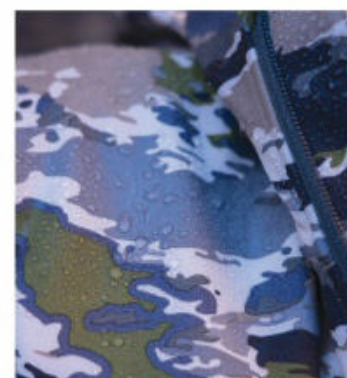
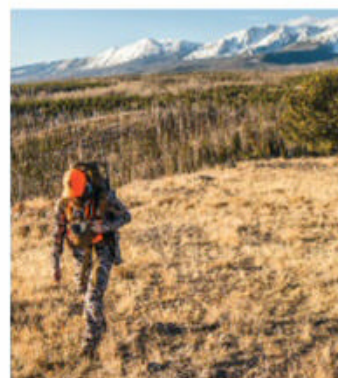
Shortly after dark, the animal is quartered and in game bags. I move the game bags from the steep terrain and hang them in trees for the night. I arrive back at my tent sometime around 1 a.m. and enjoyed some intensely deep sleep. By 8:30 a.m., I leave camp with empty llamas en route to the meat stash, which takes me farther away from my truck at the trailhead. Sometime around 10 p.m. that evening, I make it to the trailhead and unload the meat from tired llamas and load my truck.



There is something satisfying that comes with the perspective gained through great exertion. Every hunt is unique; every hunt is a true once-in-a-lifetime experience that will never be duplicated. May we all do what is within our power to defend and protect the freedoms that allow us to enjoy such pursuits on the public lands of this great country. God Bless America. **BH**

The author lives in Kamas, Utah, and he holds the current World Record for nontypical velvet mule deer.

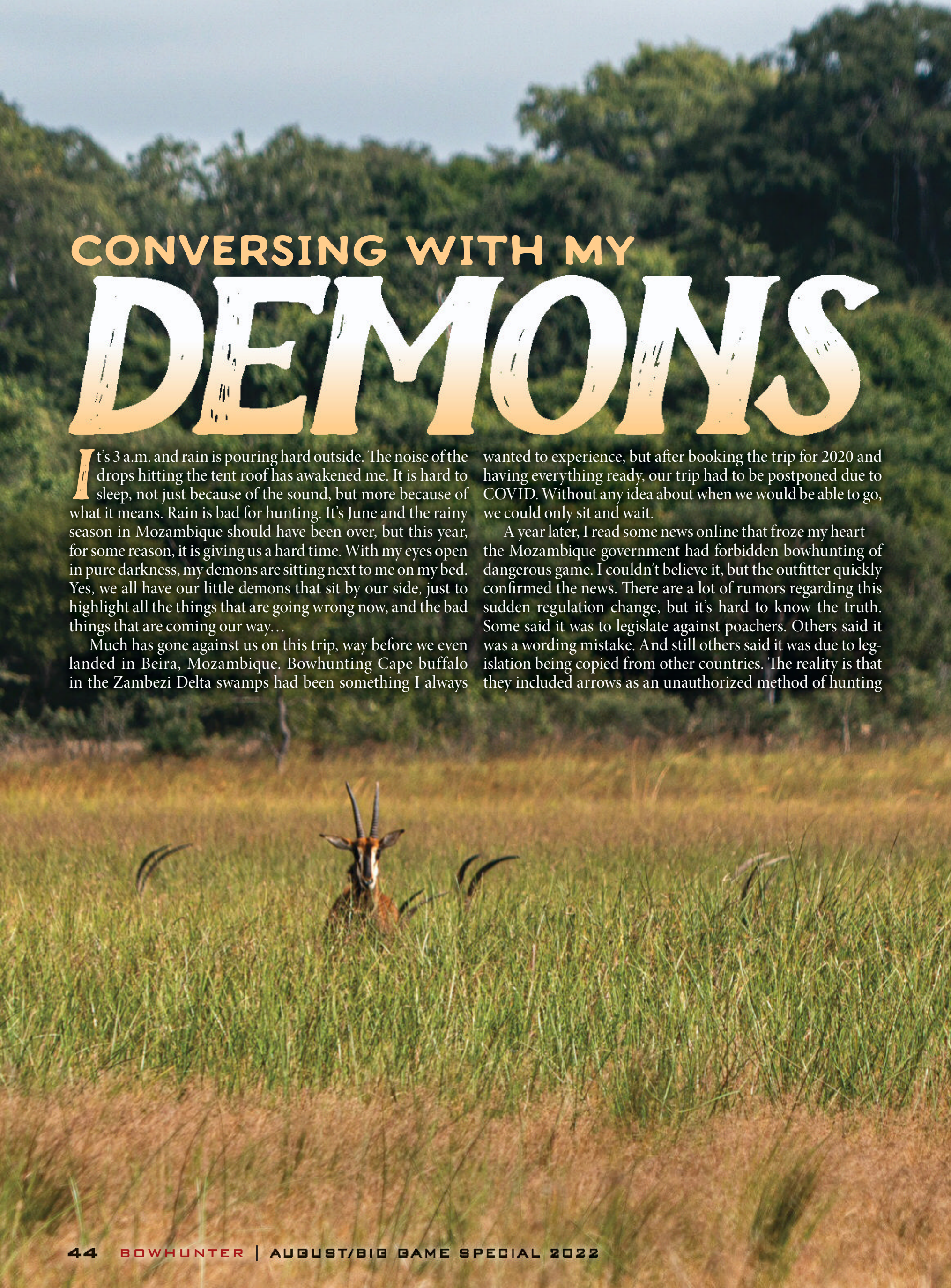
AUTHOR'S NOTE: On this hunt, my gear included a Hoyt RX-5 bow, Easton 4MM Long Range arrows, Grim Reaper broadheads, Hamskea Trinity rest, CBE Engage 5-pin sight, Swarovski 12x50 EL binos, Zeiss Diascope 65 spotting scope, Sitka clothing, and Crispi Attiva boots.



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CONVERSING WITH MY DEMONS

It's 3 a.m. and rain is pouring hard outside. The noise of the drops hitting the tent roof has awakened me. It is hard to sleep, not just because of the sound, but more because of what it means. Rain is bad for hunting. It's June and the rainy season in Mozambique should have been over, but this year, for some reason, it is giving us a hard time. With my eyes open in pure darkness, my demons are sitting next to me on my bed. Yes, we all have our little demons that sit by our side, just to highlight all the things that are going wrong now, and the bad things that are coming our way...

Much has gone against us on this trip, way before we even landed in Beira, Mozambique. Bowhunting Cape buffalo in the Zambezi Delta swamps had been something I always

wanted to experience, but after booking the trip for 2020 and having everything ready, our trip had to be postponed due to COVID. Without any idea about when we would be able to go, we could only sit and wait.

A year later, I read some news online that froze my heart — the Mozambique government had forbidden bowhunting of dangerous game. I couldn't believe it, but the outfitter quickly confirmed the news. There are a lot of rumors regarding this sudden regulation change, but it's hard to know the truth. Some said it was to legislate against poachers. Others said it was a wording mistake. And still others said it was due to legislation being copied from other countries. The reality is that they included arrows as an unauthorized method of hunting

NO MATTER HOW EXPERIENCED OR WELL-TRAVELED WE ARE, THERE ARE ALWAYS MIND GAMES TO DEAL WITH.

BY PEDRO AMPUERO

PHOTOS BY PEDRO AMPUERO AND BRANDON WINTERTON

elephant, buffalo, hippo, lion, leopard, and crocodile. Since the real purpose of the trip was to spend time hunting with my dad in Africa, we decided not to cancel the trip and to hunt the buffalo with our rifles. There are more important things than just the choice of weapon.

Tonight though, my demons aren't highlighting this purpose. More important topics are on the table. Apart from the buffalo, I came to Mozambique with a couple of other objectives — the nyala and the sable — two of the most beautiful antelope in the world. The nyala is an animal that lives in thick forest and is impossible to hunt, unless they cooperate and come out into open country. There is only one thing they hate more than the rain, and that's the cold raindrops inside the



THIS IMAGE SHOWS me belly-crawling toward a herd of sable that were bedded down in a "pan."



I REGAINED SOME of my confidence by making a great stalk on this big warthog and by executing a perfect 38-yard shot.

forest after a strong storm. They love coming out to catch some sun and dry out, but the sun had not been seen in several days — until yesterday afternoon.

We got into a couple good opportunities at the beginning of the trip, but the fear of missing froze me more than ever before. Both opportunities could have been enough, but they weren't 100-percent right, so I didn't risk the shot. I didn't want to screw up. Bowhunting opportunities are never 100-percent right, but for some reason I was missing my usual self-confidence and optimism. Both had helped me resolve many hunting situations before, but the demons were digging in the open wound. Something was wrong in me...and I felt like I was running out of time.

These thoughts were digging deeper and getting louder. I was able to quiet them down by making a great 38-yard shot on a huge warthog after a beautiful stalk. The arrow completely passed through and double-lunged him. The old boar dropped in sight after a short run. Actually, my first African animal with a bow was a warthog in Mozambique back in 2007, so I'll call it destiny. I was back on track.

The rain finally stopped for an afternoon, and we went to do some stalking inside what is called "The Gardens." These were old sections of forest cut for cropping purposes, which had been restored, and where new, shorter and thicker forest was growing up. Nyala love these thick places, and after heavy storms, especially when the sun comes out, the striking antelope like to come out in the open, which is mostly the roads. It doesn't take long for us to spot an old bull, and the stalk is on. Step by step, we sneak into range and wait for the bull to give us a clear shot. The bush is thick, and it isn't easy to find a good shooting lane.

We finally get inside 50 yards, and the bull slowly heads toward an opening. It has a feeling something is wrong and is looking toward us and trying to figure out what we are. I am already at full draw while Rye, my professional hunter, tries to give me a range. For some reason, he struggles to range the nyala through the bushes. As the bull keeps coming toward the opening, my heart beats hard while I whisper at full draw, "Rye, the range. The freaking range!"

Rye replies, "It isn't working, I can't..."

I am about to have a nervous breakdown when Rye says, "Wait...45 yards!"

I put the pin behind the shoulder and release the arrow. It was a bowhunter's worst nightmare — a shoulder-blade hit. The nyala jumps the string and the arrow hits high in the mid-

dle of the scapula. The penetration is poor, and the nyala disappears, never to be seen again. There I stood, going through all that had happened and why it had happened, and how I would make sure it never happened again.

Here are some details that tilted the balance. African animals have the vitals far more forward than our deer. You need to shoot them straight above the leg, following the leg line. The nyala was slightly quartering-to, so I had to tighten that shot to the leg even more, and risk hitting major bones. My plan was to use a small mechanical broadhead with a 1¼-inch cut, but I was persuaded in camp to shoot a larger diameter head as I was told nyala weren't "strong." Making this change after I'd already built confidence in my setup, only made me more nervous. And relying on another's range estimation pulled me out of my shooting sequence and created self-doubt. Finally, according to the staff, nyala aren't supposed to jump the string unless they're looking at you — something I honestly didn't consider, given the stress of the situation.

Under high stress, your inner demons and bad thoughts come back quickly, and you second-guess everything. Who hasn't ranged the same tree three or four times when we know trees don't tend to move? In those situations, you also look for external confirmation of your beliefs. My experience is that you should really believe in yourself. I'm not trying to blame external factors. My mistake was not believing in myself. When you draw the bow back and the word "miss" crosses your mind, you're in trouble. That should not be a possible outcome.

These thoughts were all deeply stuck in me as I crawled toward a group of bedded sable. After a couple hundred yards,



PHOTO BY WWW.AFRICAHUNTING.COM

THE ABOVE FRAME grab, with an nyala anatomy graphic overlay, shows my point of aim. Below shows my arrow's point of impact.



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I'M SMILING HERE but had mixed feelings about how my hunt ended for this amazing sable bull.

we finally closed the gap. I only needed five more yards to reach a little bush located 50 yards from the herd bull. The stalk felt impossible, but we took our time and it looked like it was going to work. Suddenly, I heard a car coming toward the "pan" (a large grass opening inside the forest). My dad and his PH were starting across the opening with their vehicle! What were the chances of that?

As the car approached, the whole herd stood up to leave. I needed to act quickly, so without a second thought I drew my bow back and aimed at the bull, which was already at 68 yards. The shot execution was feeling great, but as I was pulling through the shot I saw the bull starting to walk away with the herd. It was too late for me to stop the shot cycle, and the arrow was gone. It was far back. By the time the arrow ar-

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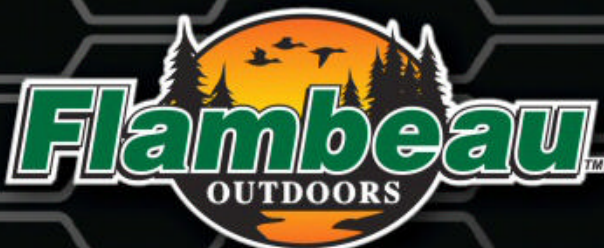


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rived, the sable had made a solid full step. I couldn't believe this was happening!

We started tracking the sable after giving it some time, as it was clearly a gut shot. We had some good blood in spots, which would confirm the tracks we were following were made by my bull. We bumped the sable from its first bed, with no chance of a follow-up arrow. In this situation, I decided to eat my pride and finish the animal as quickly as possible. It's not the animal's fault I made a poor shot, so after jumping it out of its bed several times, I saw a gap and used a rifle to end this horror movie.

After many years of hunting in Africa, it was my first time wounding an animal with my compound. And not one, but two. My stomach has been hurting since, but I know I'll be a different bowhunter from now on — a better one. These mistakes chased me so hard that it actually pulled me out of the hunt and made me miss the most important thing of all — enjoying quality time with my dad.

It's easy to publicly share the successes, but this wasn't an easy story to share. As embarrassed as I feel about myself, I have learned more from this experience than from any other hunt when everything went right. I was way too confident with my bow, and myself. The forest showed me once again that I must stay humble and keep working and training every single day. I'll come back stronger, more committed, and more dedicated. It's time to start building everything from the ground up and to start burying those demons once and for all. **BH**

The author is an international bowhunter who lives in Spain.



CONVERSING WITH MY inner demons had me off my shooting game.

Author's Note: On this hunt, I used a PSE EVO EVL bow, Spot-Hogg Hogg Father sight, QAD Ultrarest, Doinker stabilizer, a Total Peep, and Carter Wise Choice release. My arrows were Carbon Express Maxima Reds tipped with Grim Reaper Fatal Steel broadheads. My binoculars were Leupold 10x50 BX-5 Santiam HD, and my rangefinder was a Leupold FullDraw 5. My clothing was a KUIU Gila shirt and Tiburon pants, and my pack was a KUIU Stalker 500.

A large advertisement for Tink's 50th anniversary. The background is a solid red color. In the upper left, there is a faint silhouette of a hunter in a hat and jacket. In the upper right, a bottle of beer is shown pouring a golden liquid. A circular seal with the text "CELEBRATING Tink's 50th ANNIVERSARY" is positioned near the bottle. The main text "America's LIQUID LOVE FOR 50 YEARS" is prominently displayed in the center. At the bottom, the Tink's logo and website "TINK.COM" are visible. On the right side, there is a silhouette of a deer with large antlers.

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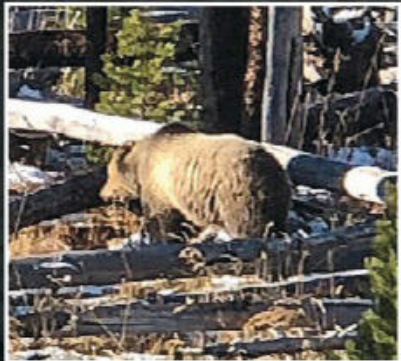
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STRAIGHT THROUGH IT.



THE CLOAK of darkness descended upon us. We knew the grizzlies would soon follow. Never before had we experienced this level of grizzly activity. Each day they followed us, at times coming to our elk calls, other times leaving tracks on top of ours as evidence of their presence. Just yesterday, we had pistols in hand after calling in a big bruin.

With the photographs of Randy's bull taken, we began the task of breaking the bull down for the arduous pack out. One of us worked on skinning and cutting. The other held legs and remained vigilant, painting the surroundings relentlessly with a headlamp, praying not to see eyes. If bears got that close, not much would stop them from claiming the elk. As we finished moving meat bags to a safer location, a bear arrived, announcing his presence by snapping limbs and popping teeth. Unable to return to the site, the skull and antlers would have to wait a week or two for salvage. We left. The carcass now belonged to the bear.

The pack out that night was long but uneventful, covering seven miles. We walked in silence, listening for bugles, rewarded only with wolves howling in a high alpine basin. During our frequent breaks, with headlamps switched off, the stars and sliver of moon greeted us as we reclined against our packs. I insisted that Randy now owed me a huge favor. He agreed. This pack out would be the farthest we'd ever attempted. Too exhausted to eat when we eventually reached camp, we transferred meat from packs into coolers. We didn't even clean up, but crawled into sleeping bags and soon snored like growling bears.

As night was chased off by rays of sun, we rolled out of our bags, stretching sore muscles and aching backs. My nephew and hunting buddy, Sam, had arrived in camp, ready to hear the story and offer his help. This was our

lucky day, but unlucky for Sam, as he would soon learn.

The seven-mile trek to the meat cache was slow; the constant gain of elevation stealing energy from tired legs. Initially, we walked on a horse trail, switching to game trails, and then through a tumbled mess of blowdown for the last mile. Here we walked on logs whenever possible, snaking a course in the necessary direction. The closer we got, the quieter we became. Cautiously, we scanned the scene. The bags of meat were not disturbed, but beyond them, the carcass was buried with forest duff. A large grizzly lay on top of it all. The sun shined on his hair, giving it the telltale silver-tip appearance. A magpie perched on an antler and scolded him. He rose occasionally to swipe at magpies and gray jays. They pestered him in their efforts to score some chunks of fat. Higher still, several ravens squawked. Undoubtedly bringing other bears closer. Other than a sow with cubs, a bear guarding a kill site is the most dangerous scenario to encounter. Quietly, we snuck in, loaded our packs, and snuck back out, stealing glances behind us. A long, painful day ensued, but we got the last of the meat out and on ice.

Early the following morning, I followed Sam up a faint trail into a secluded basin, one of our favorite places. I was struggling to keep up, something I'd never dealt with before. The physical exertion of recent days and the 1,500-foot climb had taken its toll. My old

YEAR OF THE

GRIZZLY

**WHEN YOU CARRY A BOW, THE LINE THAT DEFINES
WHO THE ALPHA PREDATOR IS BECOMES BLURRED.**

BY RON NIZIOLEK

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

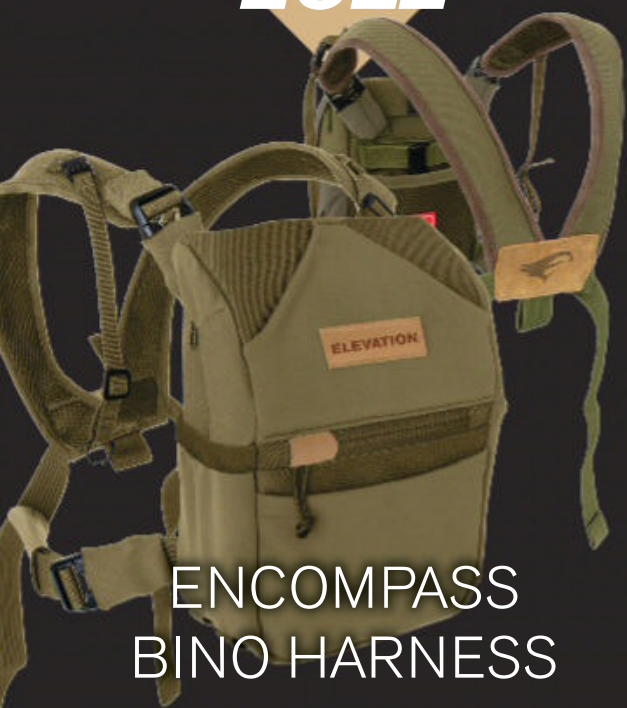
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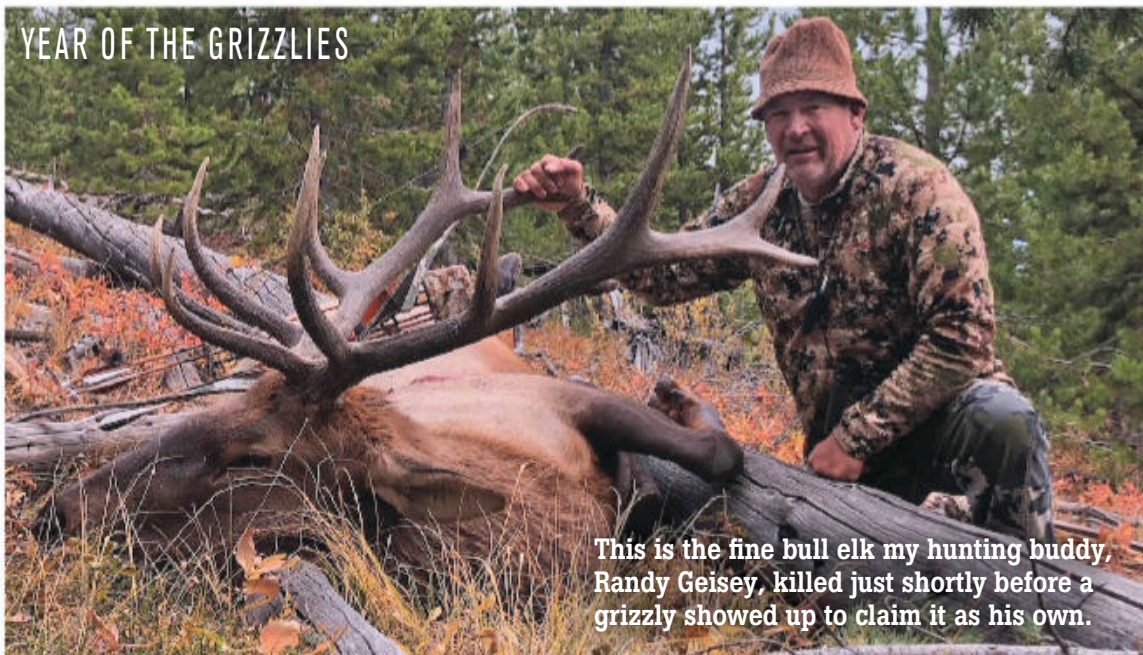
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YEAR OF THE GRIZZLIES



This is the fine bull elk my hunting buddy, Randy Geisey, killed just shortly before a grizzly showed up to claim it as his own.

age didn't help either. This basin was ravaged by fire years ago, and elk love it. Faint bugles reached us as we climbed higher into the basin. Sam was fired up and ready, so I encouraged him to go, as I didn't want to slow him down. I rested a bit, and then I climbed up to an often-used vantage point.

I watched a couple of bulls across the canyon and soon located Sam angling toward the closer one. As Sam crossed the creek, I caught movement above him. A black wolf trotted by at 30 yards. Sam had neglected to purchase a wolf tag before coming to camp, a mistake he will forever regret. As he continued climbing toward the bull, the canyon erupted with a chorus of howling wolves. I glassed five, an adult gray with a collar and bloody face and four black, six-month-old pups. I had a tag, but despite my best howling efforts, I could not pull them over to my side.

Sam disappeared into the new growth, close behind the bull. The bull continued to bugle, with a wolf pack only 300 yards away. I swear, a few times the bull bugled

in response to them. A short time later, I heard hooves smacking logs, and immediately some excited cow calls. Soon after there was more crashing, followed by our agreed-upon signal of three bugles. Sam had gotten it done. Bull down.

It took me 30 minutes to make the trip across. This place is littered with downfall, the nastiest place we've ever hunted; it's also one of the best. We located each other with cow calls. Sam was as jacked-up as I've ever seen him. He'd crept close and challenged the bull. The bull ran downhill and paused in a shooting lane for the 30-yard shot. Sam had then stopped him with those excited cow calls and arrowed him again at 45 yards. The wolves were now quiet, so we had a snack before taking up the trail. A hundred yards later we were admiring Sam's best bull.

With the photo session complete, the work began. Sam cut while I held legs and stood guard. When we finished breaking down the bull, Sam carried the head about 80 yards where I could



This is what was left of Randy's elk after it was claimed and partially buried by a grizzly.

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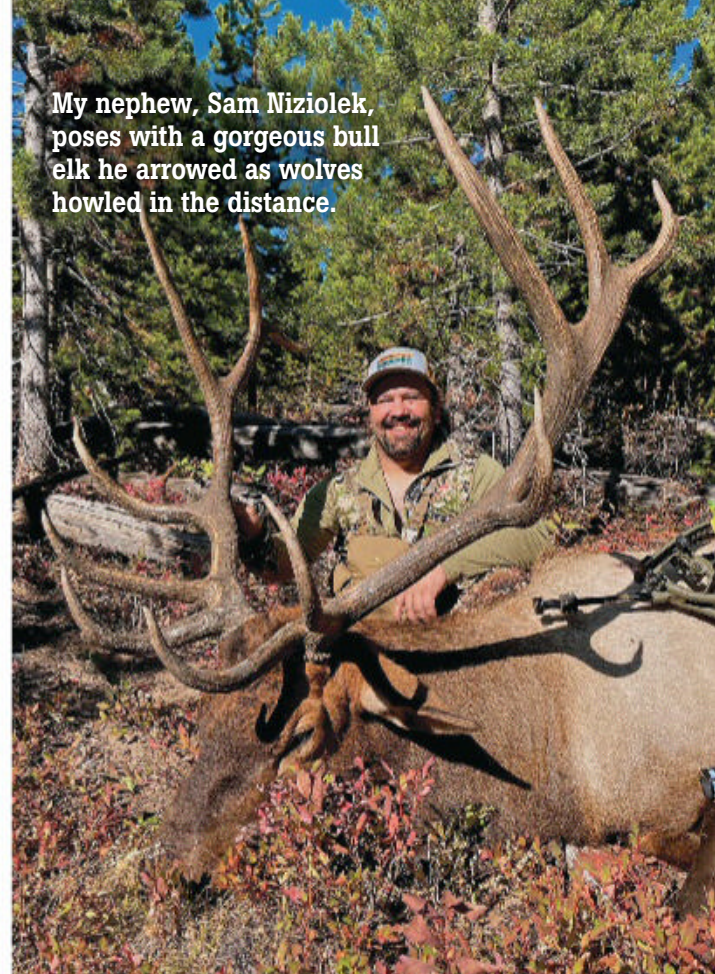
YEAR OF THE GRIZZLIES

start skinning but still see the carcass. He then went and retrieved the bag of loose meat, (straps, tenders, brisket, and neck). On the third trip he was dragging a hindquarter when I looked up and saw the grizzly. I yelled "Bear!" while jumping up, pulling my pistol, and hurrying toward Sam. The bear was only 20 yards behind him, just getting to the carcass. Sam dropped the hindquarter and pulled his own pistol.

We fired a couple of warning shots, attempting to scare the bear off, but we were met with a bluff charge in return. The bear paced back and forth, growling, and popping teeth. We retreated, yelling at the bear and discussing our options. There were only two. Back out of there taking what we could salvage, or push the issue, potentially getting mauled or having to shoot the bear. Since it's a violation of Wyoming law to battle a bear in these circumstances, we backed out, stopping to grab the head and bag of meat. We went several hundred yards before stopping to skin the head to make for a lighter load.

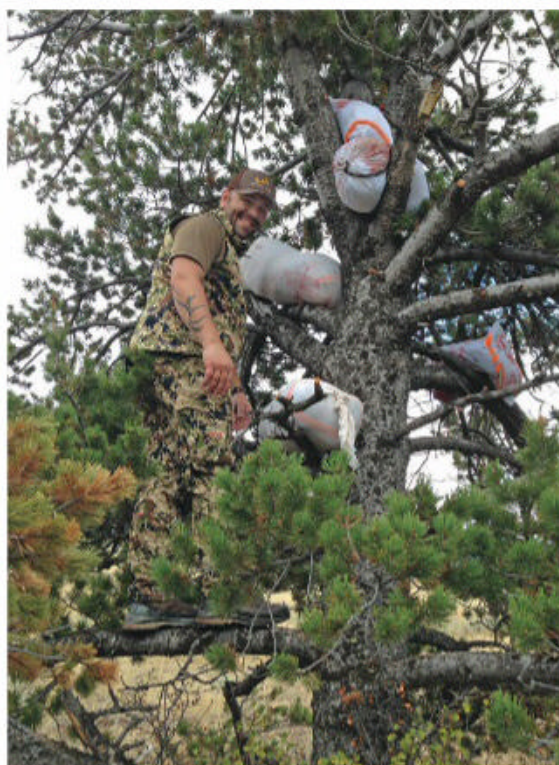
I then spent a quiet week resting and hunting solo. Sam arrived for the weekend, eager to help me out. That afternoon, we tackled the same drainage

My nephew, Sam Niziolek, poses with a gorgeous bull elk he arrowed as wolves howled in the distance.

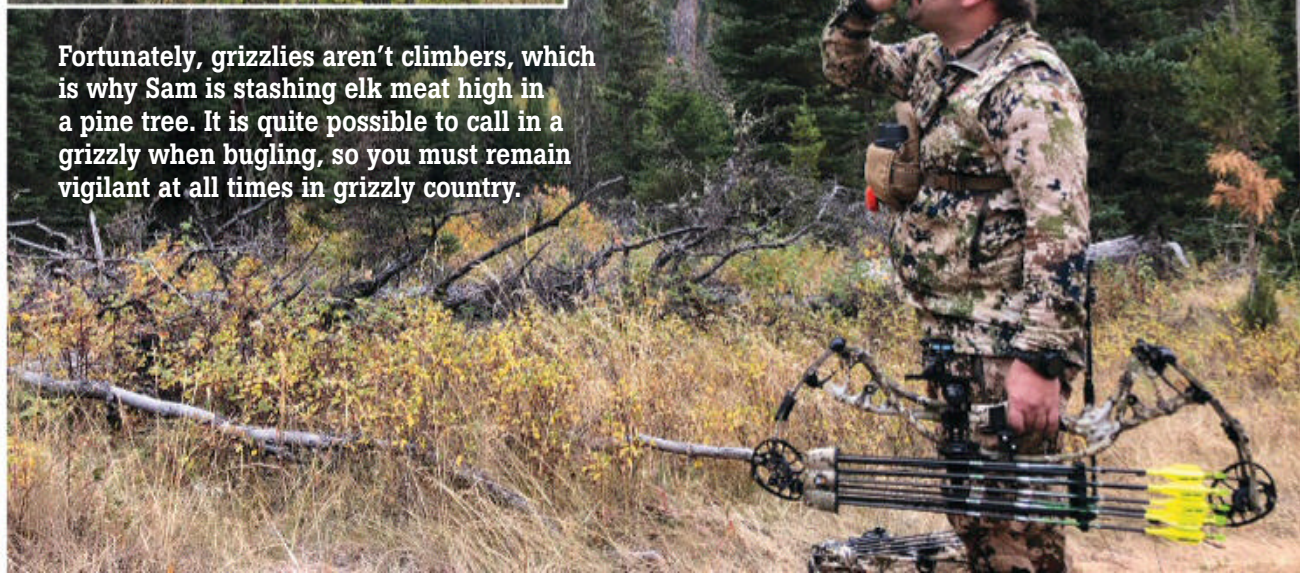


where Sam had shot his bull. Two hours before dark we heard the first bugle and soon spotted a good bull tending a herd a half-mile up the creek. We dropped our packs where we were, opting to go light and fast. My pistol stayed with my pack, but I put bear spray on my belt. We each stuffed a headlamp in our pocket and hustled toward the bull.

The blowdown was brutal; we quickly lost count of logs crossed. We stayed high on the east side of the valley to monitor the herd's movements. At last, we mapped a way to cross the creek and put a stalk on. We scrambled up the far side, fighting for every hand and foothold. As we side-hilled and approached the clearing, I spotted a bear 40 yards below in the creek. Grizzly. He hadn't seen us, so we crept past, keeping a watchful eye, comforted he couldn't climb the cliff between us.



Fortunately, grizzlies aren't climbers, which is why Sam is stashing elk meat high in a pine tree. It is quite possible to call in a grizzly when bugling, so you must remain vigilant at all times in grizzly country.



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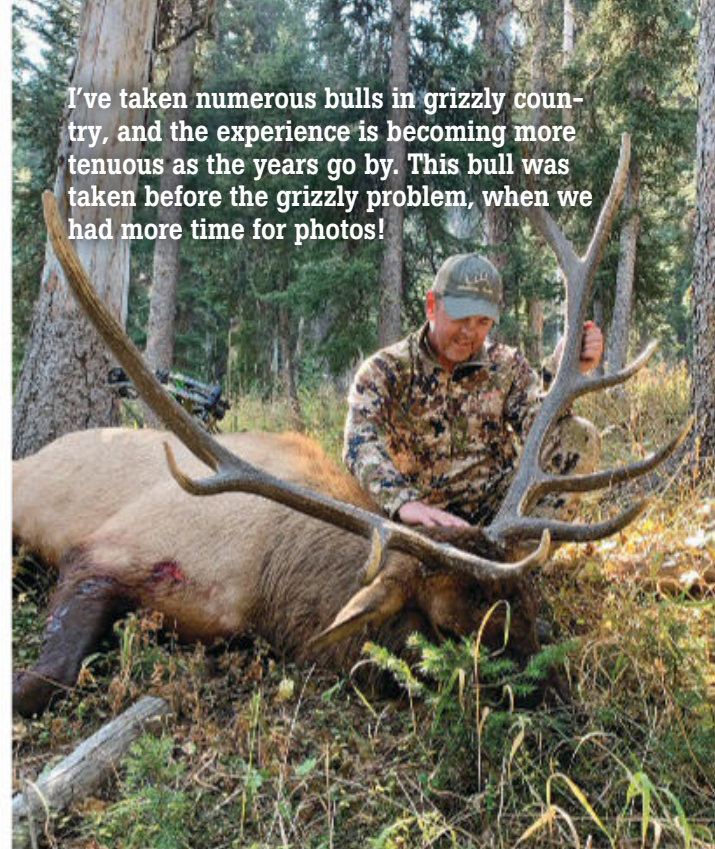
YEAR OF THE GRIZZLIES

As we reached the clearing, the wind swirled toward the grizzly and he took off, crashing through deadfall and brush. After grabbing a little video of him, we continued and reached the meadow. The elk were exiting the upper end of the meadow, the bugling bull pushing them along. We followed, using the brush and downfall as cover should they return. We hesitated along the clearing edge, bugling and trying to pinpoint their position. Then Sam spotted another grizzly where the elk had been only a moment before, 55 yards, head down, grubbing for food.

We quickly evaluated our options. Not good was the determination. The bear was facing us, feeding in our direction. We had a massive logjam and dropoff at our back, making a retreat in that direction impossible. Lateral movement was dicey, every step a possible ankle breaker if we weren't paying attention. That made it hard to keep our eyes on the bear. Good or bad idea, we decided our safest option would be to get his attention, hoping like many bears do, he'd make an exit. That would allow us to continue elk hunting. The bugles weren't far away, and darkness was closing in once more.

I began making noise to get his attention. During the next few minutes, the grizzly grubbed his way closer, ignoring my attempts to gain his attention. I joked to Sam that this bear must be deaf. Finally, at 40 yards, Sam handed me his phone to continue the video. Then he tossed a log in the bear's direction. That did it. He looked up, saw us, and charged! We already had bear spray in hand at this point, and safeties were clicked off. We yelled at him several times as he closed the distance. Sam stepped up to be

I've taken numerous bulls in grizzly country, and the experience is becoming more tenuous as the years go by. This bull was taken before the grizzly problem, when we had more time for photos!



even with me. At that point, the grizzly veered to our right and passed us at only 8 yards. Neither of us sprayed, though we both had pressure on the triggers. We'd hesitated only because we knew that we'd get back spray and wanted the grizzly to take it fully in the face. Sam and I have extensive bear-encounter experience and this time we were sure that we'd be mauled.

As the adrenaline faded, we laughed the charge off, but I'm convinced if either of us were solo, that would have rattled us for some time. We had a half-hour before dark and discussed pushing after the elk, but with both bears around, we decided to hike out of there, using the waning daylight to help find our packs and pistols. We killed some good bulls last year, but overall, 2021 will be remembered as the year of the grizzlies. **BH**

The author is a highly experienced bowhunter from Wyoming, where the grizzly population is obviously out of control.



Randy, Sam, and I waste no time packing an elk out in grizzly country. Having all that meat on your back can make you nervous.

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Tri-State TRIPLE

HE TRAVELED TO THREE STATES TO REVIVE THE
MEMORIES OF HIS DAYS AS A NOVICE BOWHUNTER.

BY FRANK NOSKA, CONTRIBUTOR

The very first Pope and Young animal I ever harvested was a pronghorn antelope in Wyoming, in 1994. After that, I bowhunted pronghorns somewhere in the Southwest nearly every year. It became a “starter-type” hunt, prior to longer elk and mule deer hunts.

When I moved to Alaska in 2001, I had arrowed 11 P&Y pronghorn bucks. Alaska would keep me immersed and busy, researching and learning all the difficult logistics necessary to bowhunt there, and many seasons would pass before I would get back to the sagebrush country that the pronghorn calls home.

In 2021, I managed to put three pronghorn tags in my pocket: One for Oregon, one for Colorado, and a third for Wyoming. I planned to hunt the farthest destination first, and then hunt my way back eastward. Leaving Kansas City, in the F-250 truck I use for my Midwest Kansas whitetail hunting, I headed to Oregon first. On that long drive to my Oregon unit, I could not help but be excited about all the pronghorn hunting I had ahead of me.

Oregon

There was a particularly large buck I was after in Oregon. A local farmer there had told me about this buck and had committed to helping me find him. This was Plan A for my Oregon hunt. The farmer and I spent more than a week together covering all of the big buck’s range, trying to find him. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful. Before the search for this phantom buck had begun, I had set up a pop-up blind on a waterhole in another part of the unit as a backup plan. This watering source was being heavily used by several antelope, so after not finding the big buck, I switched to Plan B.

As I walked to the blind for the first time, just after daylight, I could see several antelope off in the distance. I had barely settled into the blind when the first antelope started coming in to drink. The action continued throughout the day, and I eventually lost count of the number of pronghorns that came in to drink from the waterhole. A couple of good bucks came in, but as luck would have it, they watered at the farthest spot from the blind. I knew that it would be only a matter of time before a mature buck would show up and present me with a good shot opportunity.



TRI-STATE TRIPLE

Finally, a buck came into view that got my heart rate up, and he was headed in my direction. Instead of watering at the close spot I had hoped he would, he continued walking and chose to drink a bit farther away. The buck was still well within my effective bow range...or so I thought.

I don't really know what happened when my arrow left the blind. Either the antelope moved, or I made a bad shot. I suspect it was the latter — "operator error," as I like to call it. When that big buck ran off unscathed, I couldn't help but have a case of the bowhunter blues. However, as I walked away from the blind that evening, the number of antelope I'd seen over the course of the day gave me high hopes for what the next day would bring.

On Day Two, it wasn't long before the antelope action started. It was the kind of action I experienced during my first pronghorn hunting days back in the mid-90s. Watching multiple antelope coming in and out of bow range throughout the day is a total blast!

Around midday, a mature buck with beautiful heart-shaped horns materialized. By the time I got myself positioned

with my bow in the blind, he was watering directly in front of me, broadside. I already knew the exact yardage from using my rangefinder on prominent markings around the waterhole.

Settling my sight pin behind the buck's shoulder, all I had to do was execute a good shot. As I focused at full draw, my arrow left the shooting hole of

the blind in a flash. When the pronghorn moved to start running away, I could see my arrow buried in the mud of the pond. It had been a good shot with a complete pass-through. The buck only went about 150 yards before piling up dead. I had my first Oregon pronghorn, and the first leg of my three-legged adventure was complete. After taking care of the meat,

I KICKED OFF my 2021 antelope season in Oregon with this buck. I love his heart-shaped horns!



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TRI-STATE TRIPLE

taking down the blind, and packing my truck, I was ready to start driving east to Colorado. It was August 11, 2021.

Colorado

While driving to Colorado, so many bowhunting memories came to mind. It

was exactly what I used to do every year when I lived in Texas — take off with a loaded truck, a pocket full of licenses and tags, to bowhunt multiple states and species. As the miles rolled by, I reminisced about past bowhunts...but I also was thinking about how and where I would hunt pronghorns in Colorado. Based on previous scouting and past hunts in

this same unit, I had a good idea where I wanted to start.

Once I got settled into my camp, I quickly went to the best waterhole I knew and set up a blind. I wanted to put it up as early as I could, so the antelope could start acclimating to it.

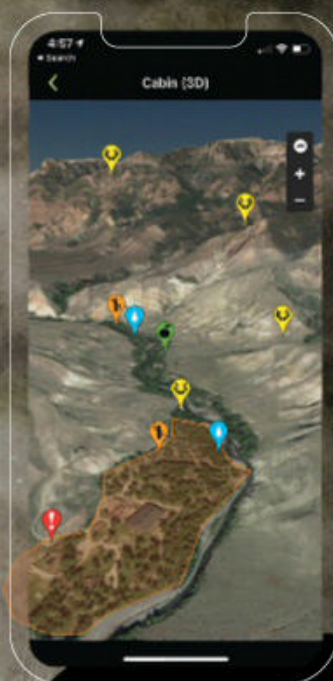
Next I went to explore and look for other waterholes I had identified from looking at maps at home. The first couple of waterholes I went to either already had a blind on them or were dry. Then I navigated down a small two-track road that I had never been down before and discovered a great spot. It was a small waterhole that would present a close-range shot, no matter where the antelope watered, and it had plenty of antelope tracks around it. As a bonus, it also had some trees and brush that would provide a little shade for my blind.

I got another blind out of my truck and staked it down under some overhanging tree branches. While driving out, I spotted a herd of antelope in the sagebrush, not too far away. Stopping my truck and focusing my binoculars on them, I could see that there was a mature buck in this group of about 10 antelope. The waterhole where I'd just put my blind was the only water around for miles, so I knew that



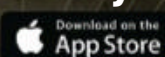
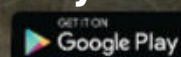
LIKE OREGON, COLORADO was also good to me and blessed me with this mature buck.

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there was a pretty good chance that this herd of antelope would eventually show up there to drink.

I prefer to set up my blinds a few days before I intend to hunt them, but with the way that this last blind tucked nicely into the shadow of trees and brush, I figured the antelope wouldn't notice the blind. That evening, I finished out the day shooting a few practice arrows at camp while anticipating the first hunting day in Colorado.

Having sat in lots of antelope blinds in my life, I have to say that this one was a dandy. The closest water was only 10 yards, and the farthest was 28 yards. The shade and concealment provided by the trees was ideal, and there was no other water close by.

After getting in the blind that next morning, I arranged my bow and gear the way that I always do, and the wait began. At least a dozen antelope came to water, but no shooter bucks.

The second day was much the same, but I could see dark clouds forming off in the distance. Next came the thunder, and shortly after, heavy rain was falling in the desert — exactly what you do not want on a waterhole hunt for pronghorns! I just barely made it to the asphalt

road without getting my F-250 stuck in the mud. With standing water all over the ground, waterhole hunting was over for at least a few days.

So for the next two days I traveled the asphalt roads in the unit, looking for bucks to stalk. It is amazing how fast the sun can dry up the desert. Just three days after that heavy thunderstorm,

the roads were dry and dusty again. It was time to go back and hunt my shady blind setup.

I was reading a book when I was suddenly startled by the sound of hooves on ground. Looking out of the blind, I saw antelope running in from every direction to drink. Quickly grabbing my bow and scanning the waterhole, I could see



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TRI-STATE TRIPLE

that the mature buck that I had seen the first day was in the herd. There was no mistaking his long, black horns.

The antelope were moving around so much, that it was difficult to keep them all straight. Finally, my target buck stopped to drink. Antelope were standing all around him, so there was no way to shoot. Once antelope drink, they often exit the area in an instant. Everything happens fast on these waterholes, so I knew my window of opportunity would be narrow.

At full draw now, I concentrated on the mature buck's vitals, while also watching and waiting for the other antelope to move and give me a clear shot. They finally moved just enough to give me the small opening I needed.

I promptly released a good arrow, which entered the buck and lodged in his offside shoulder. When the buck ran over the dam of the pond at 30 yards, I could no longer see him, so I quietly got out of the blind and slowly stalked up the rising terrain of the dam. It was there that I quickly spotted the buck lying dead, only 30 yards away. My Colorado

pronghorn tag was filled with an action-packed ending on August 18, 2021.

Wyoming

While success is usually high on pronghorn bowhunts, there are definitely no guarantees. Driving into Wyoming, I wondered if my luck would continue. This part of Wyoming, around Casper, had experienced some above-average rainfall, so the waterholes were not being used as much as normal. Some antelope were still coming to drink, but not as consistently as they would have been in a dry year.

As I approached my hunting area, I saw several antelope from my truck, which was comforting.

Throughout the first day of my Wyoming hunt, the antelope moved across the landscape, in and out of sight. From one direction, a single pronghorn buck appeared and was keenly interested in the water where I was sitting. Closer and closer he came. I studied him through my binoculars and decided if he came in and gave me a good shot, I was going to take him.

The buck slowly fed closer to my position. It took a while, but eventually he was drinking in front of me at less than 20 yards. When I released my arrow, I had no doubts that I'd just taken my third and final pronghorn buck of the 2021 season.

Spending time in the sagebrush, in three states, was a lot of fun. It was good to get back to my roots in the high desert and bowhunt pronghorns again. It brought back pleasant memories, and I fulfilled my goal of completing a "tri-state triple" in one year. **BH**

The author is one of the most accomplished bowhunters in North America, having completed two full archery Super Slams, and he's working on his third.

Author's Notes: I am accustomed to bowhunting a lot out of pop-up blinds and enjoy it. I did it early in my bowhunting career and continue to do it to this day. While it is an extremely effective method for pronghorns and other big game, I also know that it is not for everyone. Just this past season, I spent 26 full days hunting from a blind for Coues deer in Mexico, which I'll admit is a bit excessive, even for me.

On these hunts I used a Mathews bow, Victory arrows, Rage broadheads, Schaffer sight, B3 Archery release, Primos Double Bull blinds, KUIU clothing, and Kenetrek boots.



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THE TWILIGHT ILLUMINATED what is probably my favorite place. Heaven on Earth. The palace of old-growth Douglas fir gleamed with a vibrant, chilling frost. Whenever I've hunted here, I've always marveled at the natural beauty of the towering trees that seem to hold memories of times gone by. In many ways, the best part of hunting here now is remembering the extraordinary experiences I've been blessed with in exceptional places like it. These memories are etched into my mind, like the passing of rock against stone, carving a mental petroglyph.

It was November 21 — opening day of the late archery blacktail deer season in Oregon. I was sneaking along slowly, carefully guiding each footstep, when my silent precision was interrupted by my wife, Sami, who asked, "Did you hear that?"

Let's pause here... The first rule in hunting is never to talk about hunting spots. The second rule is never to speak out loud when hunting in said spots. After a gentle glare, I turned around just in time to glimpse a magnificent blacktail buck running away. Watching that beautiful deer make his escape was nothing short of a dream. Some may argue that spooking a deer isn't the goal in bow-hunting, but in this instance it was. Let me explain.



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I've been fortunate
to harvest numerous
blacktail deer, includ-
ing this mature buck,
by still-hunting old-
growth timber.

By NATHAN ENDICOTT

HUNTER

THE INSIDIOUS HUNTER

One of my favorite activities, other than hunting blacktails, is photographing them.

home to some pretty great high-country blacktails.

These mountain deer are incredibly diverse in appearance due to their migratory pattern, high-elevation feed, and extensive home range. The genetic diversity tends to produce exceptionally large-bodied and occasionally massive-antlered deer. In addition, these deer take on a thickened coat that's sandy in appearance, along with a white muzzle and double white throat patch. They're fascinating animals, and I have immense respect for them.

I have been very fortunate to harvest a number of mature blacktail bucks over the years. However, in all my time pursuing them, I've only been privy to the truly magnificent ones vanishing like ghosts into the mist, never to be seen again.

Those past experiences have taught me a valuable lesson in bowhunting: Never give up, and never assume the buck is gone, or that he knew what he saw. Also, my success in still-hunting has been to focus my efforts on the “right place at the right time.” To fully explain these lessons, I’ll share my still-hunting method, so that you can better appreciate what happened to that aforementioned magnificent buck.

Have you ever been hiking in a remote wilderness area and wondered how many folks have ever been to that exact spot? Those places are best described as “off the beaten path,” “in way too deep,”

etc. I have those thoughts quite often, especially in my favorite hunting spots. This particular area is remote, and just beyond the pillars of old-growth timber is a vast wilderness landscape that's



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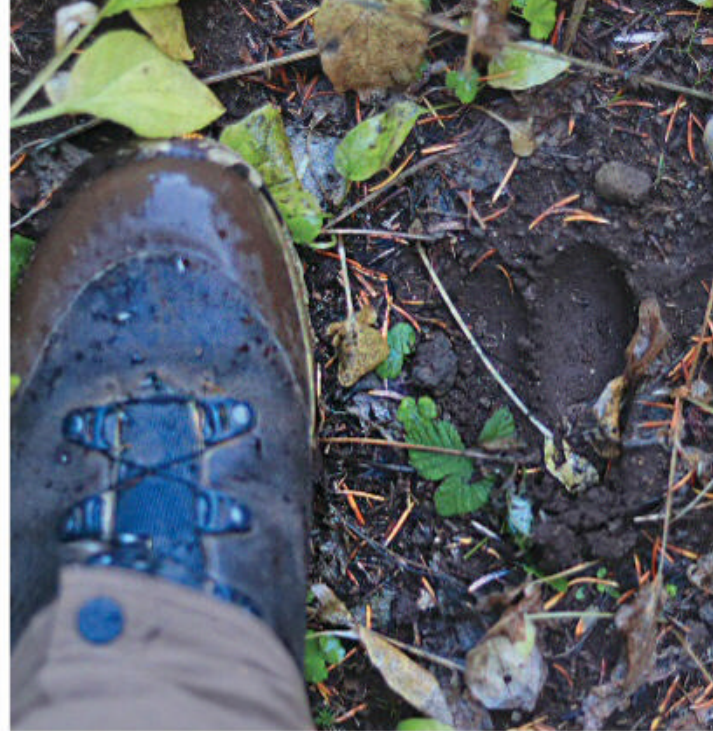
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THE INSIDIOUS HUNTER

How do you feel about still-hunting? Contrary to the English definition of “still,” the absence of sound or movement, my still-hunting method is a demanding activity that could more appropriately be classified as “insidious,” which means moving slowly with harmful effects. Semantics aside, I use the still-hunting method on public land and have been successful each year since 2011. Other effective methods include stands, blinds, calling, rattling, etc., but after my first time experiencing the suc-

cess of still-hunting, there would be no other way for me. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation for that initial success. The mountain blacktail hunt requires perseverance through exhaustion, hypothermia, isolation, and repeated failure. However, when it all works out and ends with a tagged deer, words cannot describe the emotions.

There is so much more to still-hunting than just moving slowly through the woods; there are endless possibilities and strategies to consider. The two most critical variables in still-hunting are “when” and “where” to apply the method. First,



I use my technique in locations where I have the highest probability of seeing active deer during daylight hours. The late-archery hunt occurs during the blacktail rut, when deer are generally more active. Still, a mature buck prefers to move in the mornings, evenings, and whenever there is a sudden drop in temperature. If a buck is moving during the daylight hours, then I assume he's either feeding or searching for a doe in heat.

Mountain blacktails feed on lichen that falls from the old-growth trees, plus a variety of plants and shrubs that occupy the timber glades. This habitat is most prevalent along the steep southern slopes of the Cascade Range. Also, as the late-archery hunt progresses into winter, the higher elevations will pile deep with snow, eventually pushing the deer toward the southern exposures, where they'll take refuge for the winter. The bedding and breeding areas are typically a terrain feature that is flat and open, such as ridgetops, benches, and meadows. The deer use these openings because the increased visibility helps them elude the prolific mountain lion. To summarize, I hunt the edges of feeding, breeding, and wintering areas during the mornings and evenings. While I could write a book on when and where to pursue mountain blacktails, for brevity, I will say that I focus my efforts early in the rut cycle and on either side of a significant storm.

Now that you know when and where to apply still-hunting techniques, let me clarify my insidious tactics. As the name implies, I move slowly while carefully looking and listening for deer. To many, it may seem counterintuitive, but my primary strategy is to cover as much ground as possible at a rate that will not jeopardize an opportunity. On an average day, I may hike three miles in the dark, hunt five miles during daylight,

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THE INSIDIOUS HUNTER



I was fortunate enough to share the experience of taking this magnificent buck with my wife, Sami, whose sharp hearing put us on alert.

and hike four miles back to the truck in the dark. However, when conditions are perfect, I may spend half a day in a single patch of timber. Therefore, the conditions heavily impact my rate of travel. The conditions that influence my travel speed are ground cover, weather, visibility, and deer sign. For example, I have taken a couple of bucks in crunchy snow when my pace is literally a step a minute. If the weather is calm and the deer sign is abundant, I may stand in high-visibility, old-growth forest for several minutes at a time, carefully scanning and listening before proceeding.

When the sky is pouring rain, I will travel as fast as I am able to scan my surroundings. Blacktails don't mind a little movement and sound; after all, these bucks are looking for other deer. When the high-country winds are bending the trees, I will retreat to the outskirts of the timber glades. Since my rate of travel can unexpectedly vary depending on the conditions, I prepare for comfort and stability. For example, quiet clothing is important, but staying warm and dry is crucial. I wear lightweight, moisture-wicking clothing while hiking in the dark, and when I reach my hunting spot, I change out my entire outfit to a Merino wool base layer and a down jacket. A complete change of clothing helps reduce scent and is essential to maintaining warmth and comfort throughout the day. Footwear designed specifically for a late-season hunt is critical as well. Wet feet and cold hands are a sure way to end a hunt early.

My last bit of advice is to have faith in your ability to overcome challenging circumstances, and to have faith that when a deer does suddenly appear, that it will be a shooter. Where I hunt, the deer density is low, the mountains are unforgiving, and nothing less than extraordinary effort is required. Nevertheless, overcoming those challenges is exactly what defines my greatest joy in hunting — the experience.

Wondering what happened to that magnificent buck from the beginning of this story? Well, I wasn't totally convinced that the buck knew what had happened. Consequently, Sami and I ventured up to where we'd seen the buck disappear over the crest of a small ridge. The viny maple grew dense along the backside of the hill, which seemed to dissolve into a rocky knoll that was sprinkled with large boulders and surrounded by a coliseum of Douglas fir — some of the largest Douglas firs I have ever stood beneath.

Sami and I were ready for a rest stop after the strenuous morning hike. We had already hiked a few hours in the dark to hunt this spot, ascending over 2,500-feet before daylight. In other words, those large boulders were extremely inviting and practically looked like La-Z-Boy recliners.

With the viny maple thicket to our backs, I had excellent visibility in front of me. The morning twilight had transitioned to the late-morning rays, but the sun was not yet high enough to reach our chilled bodies. With the temperature in



I never would have imagined that on opening day of the late hunt, I'd be punching my tag on a deer like this. One of the rewards of a successful blacktail hunt is taking on the difficult task of packing the deer out of some very remote places.

the mid-20s, I offered Sami a sleeping bag I had in my pack. As soon as I mentioned the sleeping bag, she was all in up to her ears. Next came the excessively loud plastic snack wrappers and munching sounds... Amid the chewing is when Sami again asked, "Did you hear that?"

I turned my head around this time and said, "Don't move!"

I slowly eased back around to see the floppy ears of a doe looking over the top of a downed old-growth tree. Just beyond that doe, I could see the silhouette of another deer. Just then, the magnificent buck lifted his heavy rack up from behind the decaying tree. The buck and the doe rapidly dropped their heads as I slowly loaded an arrow and got ready. Suddenly, the deer were up and over the downed tree and headed directly at me! At just 15 yards, the doe turned sharply away with the buck in tow, trotted off to 30 yards and turned, quartering away. I stood, drew my bow in one fluid motion, and settled my 30-yard pin tight to the back rib of the magnificent buck, just as he began to turn. A lifetime of archery practice came to fruition through the instinctual release of a perfectly placed arrow. The buck piled up instantly!

There's nothing quite like a shared adventure when bowhunting the backcountry in hopes of taking a trophy animal. I

am grateful for those opportunities and beautiful experiences with my wife, as well as my relationship with the mountains and the wildlife that live there.

After a grueling meat haul alongside my wife, I was further blessed to share the excitement of the hunt with my dad, and to be able to share the meat with many others. I hope my experiences encourage you to hunt on your feet during prime-time, for as long as possible. Do whatever it takes to be in the right place at the right time. Never give up, because your public-land hunting adventure could end with a beautiful blacktail buck! **BH**

The author is a 34-year-old, married, father of three children. He is a licensed civil engineer and dedicated bowhunter.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I killed the buck mentioned in this story on a DIY public-land hunt in Oregon. My tag was purchased over the counter.

My equipment on this hunt included a Mathews Vertix bow, Easton Axis 300 arrows, Muzzy Trocar broadheads, Trophy Taker sight and rest, B3 Hawk release aid, Vortex Fury binoculars and range-finder, First Lite clothing, Crispi boots, Mystery Ranch Selway 60 backpack, Havalon knives, Garmin GPS, Easton Kilo tent, and a Marmot sleeping bag.

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SUPER TAG, SUPER FRIENDS

**AS THE OLD SAYING GOES, IT'S BETTER
TO BE LUCKY THAN GOOD.**

BY ADAM FLOD

“Hi, Adam, this is Glenn from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. You won the raffle...”

Several months earlier, while applying for my annual Wyoming mule deer tag, I had purchased a couple of chances for the state's Super Tag raffle and put them all into the drawing for Shiras moose. I had been applying for a Shiras moose tag in Wyoming for 23 years, with no luck. I remember thinking as I clicked the “Pay

Now” button on my laptop that buying Super Tag raffle tickets was good karma, since all the money raised goes toward conservation in Wyoming.

...Glenn ended our conversation by saying, “The best part of winning this tag is you won't lose your 23 preference points and there is no waiting period, so you can still apply for a Shiras tag and possibly draw that tag next season.”

I was in disbelief! As the shock of winning started to wear off, I began to panic,

because the archery season opener was only six short weeks away.

I immediately called my friends Calvin Taylor and Doug Miller. Both Calvin and Doug are archery antelope outfitters in Gillette, Wyoming, and very knowledgeable when it comes to hunting opportunities in their home state. They were both very excited for me, but they had hunters booked for early September.

I had been trying to draw the Shiras tag for many years in the southeast units



PHOTO BY MARK RAYCROFT

near Laramie, as that was considered the coveted area to hunt Shiras moose, so I decided on those units as my target area. And even though Calvin and Doug couldn't join me on my hunt, that didn't stop them from working hard to help me create the best opportunity for success on a trophy bull.

The morning after I won the tag, Calvin texted and said, "Call me, I made some calls and found the guy you need to talk with." After a short conver-

sation with Calvin, I called his friend Jim, who lived in the Laramie area and had drawn a resident moose tag in this area two years prior. Jim was a retired outfitter who loves to hunt and especially enjoys scouting and watching the local Shiras moose.

Jim and I hit it off, and he agreed to help me. Early on in our conversation when I offered to cover his expenses, he immediately said, "No," and explained that since he was not a licensed outfitter,

he couldn't even accept a candy bar from me or he could be considered an illegal guide. I spoke with Calvin and told him I felt bad about the expenses Jim would have scouting. "Let me see what I can work out," Calvin said.

Calvin reached out to the outfitter board and completed paperwork allowing him to legally be the outfitter of record for me to hunt with in our chosen area, and Jim would be my official guide. With Jim now being my guide, I could

SUPER TAG, SUPER FRIENDS

pay Calvin for his expenses, and Jim could be reimbursed through Calvin's outfitting business, which now also allowed us to hunt National Forest.

Early in our planning, Jim said he had spoken with Bryon Stinson from Base Camp Hunts. Bryon is an outfitter in the area who had helped Jim a bit when he drew his tag. Jim wanted to let Bryon know what we were doing and that we would also be in the area moose hunting during archery season. Jim suggested I give Bryon a call just to introduce myself and talk moose hunting.

"I have never met anyone who won the Super Tag. You are one lucky guy," Bryon said during our first conversation. Bryon and his Base Camp Outfitters business guide most of the hunters who buy the Wyoming Shiras Moose Auction tags. He also mentioned several times how important the revenue raised by the Super Tag Raffle is for conservation in Wyoming.

Bryon told me the hunting may be different that year due to a huge fire in the unit that burned almost 177,000 acres. He felt the burn area may concentrate the bulls or push them farther

away from access areas. At the end of our conversation Bryon said, "I have a hunter the first week while you're here. I am sure you and Jim will do well, but I'll check in and see how you guys are doing and maybe come help a day or so if my hunter tags-out early."

When I hung up the phone, I was again humbled with how willing everyone was to help with this hunt. I felt blessed to have friends who love to hunt and for their friends who all understood the significance of this dream tag.

The next few weeks I made sure my gear was "moose-ready" and practiced shooting every day. I booked the cabin Jim suggested near the trailhead, which would be my home when the season opened on September 1. I booked my flight to Gillette, where I would use one of Doug's trucks for the hunt. I had also drawn a mule deer tag for the area around Gillette, so the plan was if I was successful with moose early, I'd drive back to Gillette and spend a couple days hunting muleys.

A couple days prior to the trip, Jim called. I was excited to hear if he had located any nice bulls. Jim spoke quietly on the phone as he told me had been sick with COVID. He said he was feeling bet-



THIS IS A rare document that is difficult to obtain. It's my actual "Super Tag" that I won in the Super Tag raffle. It allowed me to hunt Shiras moose in Wyoming.

ter, but he had not been able to do any scouting. His main concern was that he was supposed to quarantine through September 1 — the opener. Since I would be in Gillette with a mule deer tag on opening day, the new plan was for me to hunt September 1 for deer and then drive to the cabin after the morning hunt and meet Jim.

While checking into my cabin, the guy at the front desk asked if I had an ATV or a trailer to park. When I responded that I was hunting, he looked at me and said, "I hope you get a moose early, because this coming weekend is Labor Day weekend and campers and ATVs are jammed tight up here, which may affect your hunting for a few days."

I unloaded my gear and waited at a restaurant for Jim to arrive. When Jim walked in, he said that even though he didn't have many moose spotted, he was **confident we'd find some good bulls.**



THE PHOTO ABOVE shows the 2020 fire as it burned in the area where I planned to hunt moose. The image to the left is the aftermath of the fire and an example of the kind of terrain we were dealing with on my moose hunt.

I asked him about the ATV traffic for the upcoming weekend. He laughed and said, "It gets crazy up here, with so many campers and ATVs, but don't worry, we will have a good plan by then."

As we finished dinner, my phone rang. It was Bryon. His Governor's Tag bowhunter had been successful on a Boone and Crockett-class bull that morning. He said the burn areas made the moose a little more difficult to find, but there were lots of big bulls around.

The words he spoke next floored me. "We've located another B&C-class bull and I'm texting you a picture of him," Bryon told me. "The bull started shedding his velvet this morning and will probably start searching for cows tomorrow. If you and Jim are up for it, we can give it a try in the morning. Meet you at your cabin at 5 a.m."

Jim was ecstatic and told me that Bryon and his crew are the best in the state when it comes to big Shiras moose. I couldn't believe my luck!

I was up early the next morning and had my gear on the porch ready to go as four trucks pulled up and six guys jumped out. After a quick introduction, one of Bryon's guides, James, showed me more photos and video of the bull we would be targeting that morning...and he was big!

The plan was for us to go to where the bull had been hanging out for the past couple of days. There we would set up and glass at first light. If we spotted him and he was in a good spot, we'd try to stalk him.

After a 30-minute truck ride, we pulled off the road. The guys all set up to glass, some using binoculars and others with spotting scopes.

It was still grey light and limited visibility when someone said, "There he is, and he has two cows and another bull with him already."

We jumped back into the trucks and drove to the access point closest to where the bull was still bedded. We entered the area along a clearcut the Forest Service made during the fire. The moose were bedded in a swampy area with standing water. The plan was for three of us to slip along the edge of the clearcut, where our approach would be quieter. One of the guys was there as an extra set of eyes, and the other carried a cow moose decoy in case we got spotted.

We slowly approached, scanning the area where we'd spotted the moose at first light, when we realized they'd already entered the clearcut and were on the move.

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SUPER TAG, SUPER FRIENDS



AFTER BUILDING 23 points for Shiras moose in Wyoming, I actually ended up winning a tag in Wyoming's Super Tag raffle. I couldn't believe my good fortune, and I was able to tag this beautiful bull.

So we backed out and went to the other side of the clearcut to intercept them where we figured they would exit the burn area. We moved quickly, as we could see them in the burn. The bull I was after was nosing the cows and posturing toward the other bull, which gave us time to get ahead of them.

Now there was just two of us, which reduced our noise and scent. As we got into position, we caught a glimpse of the bull. He was in the lead and coming right toward us!

We were set up about 50 yards into the unburned timber where we had good cover. After 15 minutes of wait-

ing, with no sign of the moose, we slowly moved closer to the burn, scanning with each step. Still no sign of them. Where did they go? I wondered how four animals the size of a moose could slip by us undetected.

When we got back to the truck, Bryon said, "He was coming right to you guys,

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MY SHIRAS MOOSE hunt came together quickly because of some amazing help from my friends, Jim, Bryon Stinson, and all the guys at Base Camp Hunts in Laramie, WY.

and then he turned and followed the cows out of the cut.”

We all figured that the way the moose exited the area could only mean they were headed to the swamp on the other side of the timber. So, we jumped into the truck and headed toward the swamp. When we got close, Bryon suggested that we set up where the remaining heavy timber met the burn, because he felt the moose would most likely choose to travel that edge.

We set up about 40 yards from the timber and were only there a few minutes when I spotted a large cow on the timber’s edge. I ranged her at 42 yards, and she was soon followed by a second cow and a velvet bull. I remember saying, “That velvet bull is big!”

The response was, “Shoot the hard-horned bull!”

Suddenly, there he was — 42 yards away. I had an arrow nocked and was ready.

I took a half-step to my right, which opened up a large shooting lane. I assume the bull saw my movement, because he turned toward me and didn’t present a shot. I watched him through my rangefinder as he walked toward me. When he got to 30 yards, I stopped ranging him and quickly dialed my Spot Hogg sight to 20 yards. The bull stood there at approximately 22 yards. My release was clipped on my D-loop, and I was mentally focused.

I slowly drew my bow as the bull turned to move toward his cows, and then I settled my pin midbody in the shoulder crease. When the release went off, I watched my arrow hit the bull exactly where I was aiming.

The bull ran about 50 yards and stopped. I could see my arrow buried to the fletching. As he stood there with

his head low, I ranged him at 57 yards, and then watched as my second arrow also hit him perfect! He took two steps, stumbled, and fell dead.

We stood there in disbelief at what had just happened. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. I had won this tag after more than two decades of applying unsuccessfully in the general draw, and I had some pretty amazing friends who helped me more than I ever could have imagined, standing by my side when I finally killed my first Shiras bull.

When Jim, Bryon, and the rest of the crew all arrived, we celebrated with handshakes, hugs, and high-fives. Then we took pictures and got the bull loaded up.

After the hard but necessary work of caring for my bull’s hide, antlers, and meat, we all had breakfast at the restaurant where we’d hatched the hunting plan the night before. And we relived the hunt and talked about how lucky I’d been. But most importantly, we made plans to do it all again as soon as I get a tag in the general draw! **BH**

The author is an accomplished bowhunter and friend of the magazine who lives with his wife and kids in Harrisburg, PA.

Author’s Notes: Equipment on this hunt included a Prime Nexus 4 bow, Black Eagle Deep Impact arrows, G5 broadheads, Kenetrek boots, and Badlands apparel and pack.

Special thanks goes to Calvin Taylor, Doug Miller, Jim Blocker, Bryon Stinson and his crew at Base Camp Hunts (basecamp Hunts.com), as well as to Wyoming Game and Fish for offering this tag through the Super Tag raffle (<https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Hunting/Super-Tag/Ultimate-Hunting-Adventure>).

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I was really sweating now. And out of breath. But I felt pretty sure this was right where I wanted to be. The ridge I was on looked down over a grassy meadow. There were a few tight clusters of pine trees, as well as a few stand-alone pines I could range from my position. The closest pine stood at 40 yards, the farthest at 60. Kneeling, I nocked an arrow and let out one more cow call.

The total stillness was suddenly broken by what sounded like an elephant crashing through the forest, just as another shrill bugle simultaneously rattled the limbs around me and reverberated off the cliffs behind. The crashing grew louder. Then, out into the open he ran — on a mission as old as time. This was the bull I had always dreamed of, and he was literally running right past me at 50 yards!

Quickly, I let out a short cow chirp, which stopped him instantly in his tracks. As I stared at the size of this magnificent animal, I felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of adrenaline on top of me.

The bull stopped in a small group of pines below me, where he began to demolish a helpless sapling with his antlers. Branches were flying everywhere as



A FIRST ELK

**WHEN YOU
DECIDE TO
BOWHUNT ELK,
YOU'LL LEARN
THAT THE MOST
PRIZED BULL
OF THEM ALL IS
THE FIRST ONE.**

BY JEREMY BAKER

I watched in amazement. I began to try to figure out how I could lure the bull back uphill toward the only opening I had to shoot through. Ever so slowly, I turned my head to the left and emitted a single cow call into the cup of my hand to direct the sound upwards. The immediate result was another angry bugle. Indeed, the high-pitched scream was almost deafening. He was coming!

Before I continue with how this drama played out, I owe the readers some context — and an explanation of where and when my first-ever bowhunt for elk took place.

It was September 10, 2021, high in the mountains of Idaho. The archery elk season had opened nine days earlier, but my long-laid plans called for starting the hunt a bit further into the rut.

I had bought a new Hoyt bow at the beginning of the year and practiced all summer to get my skills dialed-in for the upcoming archery elk season. Not only was I shooting a number of arrows each day, I was also training with a reed mouth-call to mimic many of the sounds cow and bull elk make. Every spare minute I had was spent honing my archery techniques and practicing my elk calls.

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A FIRST ELK

When the appointed day finally arrived, I awoke at 3 a.m., hoisted my backpack into my truck, and drove an hour north of my house to stake claim to an area I'd never hunted before but had strategized about for weeks.

The stars were still in the sky when I started my climb over the first steep hill, en route to where I expected to find elk. My pack was fully loaded with everything I might need for several days in elk country.

During the morning, I hiked many miles up and down several long ridges, and just when I thought I'd missed the opportunity to spot elk before they bedded down for the afternoon, I heard a distant bugle. Immediately, my spirits began to soar!

I quickly turned around to see a herd of over two dozen elk at the top of the long mountain finger I was sitting on. The elk were so far away, I was unable to make out any antlers through my binos. But as I sat there, I could hear what sounded like at least one mature bull. "Is this the bull I've set out to kill?" I asked myself, as I watched the herd move farther up the mountain toward timberline.



MY PRESEASON GOAL was to shoot at least 50 arrows a day. These arrows were shot from 60 yards. While I can shoot out to 110 yards, most of my practice is at 40 to 80 yards.

They were at least a mile away, and I realized my challenge now was to get much closer without them getting my scent or catching me out in the open. I kept thinking about how easy it would be for the elk to disappear before I got to where I hoped to see them again. All I could do was trust that the wind would not betray me and keep moving uphill as fast as I could — guided only by their bugles.

Then, as if someone had pressed a mute button, the elk went silent. My curiosity got the best of me, so I hiked to where they should have been, but they were gone. Vanished! Only the pungent smell of elk remained in the air.

I made it to a nearby ridge, where I directed a few cow calls down the canyon. There was no response. I repeated the sequence a few more times, with the same results.

Even though I was near the top of the ridgeline and there wasn't much behind me besides a rocky cliff, I decided to send a few more calls up the ridge. I let out four or five, with different tones to sound like more than one cow. Much to my surprise, I was eventually greeted by a distant, raspy bugle like the one I'd heard earlier that morning. *This has to be the very same bull!* I thought to myself.

I quickly summoned up a new game plan. The only way to get to the next ridge was to go down and then climb up a steep draw. I tried to be quiet as I slid down the shale rocks to the dry creekbed below. I knew I had to hurry, because the bull was likely to get up and search for the cows I was imitating. I climbed my way up the other side and onto the ridge.

The faint bugles started to become more pronounced, and as their volume increased, so did my excitement. I was

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now about 200 yards from timberline, and the bugles started sounding as if the elk were in my back pocket. I just didn't know which back pocket!

I could hear three bulls bugling now, and it sounded like two younger satellite bulls and one mature herd bull. The herd bull had a very different bugle that was much deeper, with a raspy, guttural tone that gave me chills every time he let the herd know he was in command.

My months of practice calling were about to be put to the test; to fool a wild elk — a whole herd for that matter — in their own language! Never before had I even had a chance to attempt it. As I let out a new series of cow calls, the mature bull lit up. He let out three full bugles, while I teased him with silence.

As I mentioned earlier, he was coming! And I was waiting for him — already at full draw — not even remembering that I had just pulled effortlessly through the 75-pound draw weight of my bow.

Then, there he was...standing perfectly broadside in front of the pine I had ranged earlier at 40 yards. I centered my sight pin just behind his front shoulder, relaxed my release hand, and pulled through the shot. I watched the cast of my arrow through the strings of my bow as it disappeared into the exact spot I was aiming for. It powered through him and stuck in the ground.

He was huge — and he was the herd bull — now essentially dead on his feet. I could see blood pumping from the entry wound. He didn't run but simply stood there, clearly clueless as to what had just happened. Finally he turned downhill and started walking, his steps unsteady, and he managed only 40 yards before collapsing.

I could scarcely believe what my eyes had just witnessed! The whole experience seemed surreal. The gorgeous bull possessed six points on one side and seven on the other, with mature length and mass.

I offered up a prayer of thanks to the Almighty, and then my thoughts turned abruptly to my late stepfather, whom I considered to be my dad. Henry Royce McGraw loved to hunt elk, and I knew he was watching what had just transpired from above. I also knew he would be proud of my accomplishment, and I could almost feel his presence as I began to sharpen my knife for the hard work that awaited me.

The magnitude of the challenge ahead was going to be more brutal than anything I could have imagined. How-

ever, the Lord had one great surprise in store for me first.

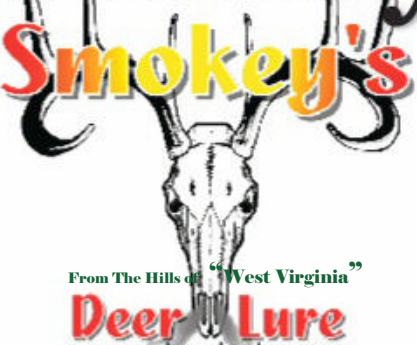
As I began to skin the cape off my bull, I heard a few loud cracks of dead limbs breaking. I looked up to see the entire herd that had been under the protection of the bull I'd just killed, form a perfect circle around me and their fallen monarch. What a moving and amazing sight! It was as if they had all come to pay a final tribute to their leader. The herd stood in a circle of silence for a few moments, staring at the two of us, before slowing marching back into the high-mountain forest.

Once the processing of my elk was finished, I placed the cuts of meat into cloth bags and laid them on a high rock. My plan was to hike back the next day with help and pack out the meat.

I lashed the head, antlers, and cape onto my backpack and struggled to get the heavy load up onto my shoulders. The reality of the 3½-mile hike back to the truck suddenly set in, as my pack had to weigh more than 120 pounds.

No sooner had I started hiking up the first hill, when I found myself surrounded by dense, dark clouds. Suddenly, lightning and a thunderclap broke the

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A FIRST ELK

silence, quickly followed by heavy rain. Before long, I was soaked to the bone by a mixture of blood and rainwater. My pack out consisted of numerous large, rolling hills, and finally, steep downgrades to a river I needed to ford on foot to get back to my rig.

I must have stopped a half-dozen times to drop to my hands and knees, so that the tips of the antlers strapped to my pack could dig into the soil in front of me and force Mother Earth to bear half the weight of my load. This bizarre technique proved to be the only way I was able to give my body any rest on the way out.

I was beyond exhaustion as I struggled the last half-mile down to the river, then up the far bank. The antler tines seemed to grab every sagebrush and tree limb along the way. So badly were my thighs cramping toward the end, that my last thousand steps had to be only six inches at a time.

When the torturous ordeal finally came to an end at the tailgate of my truck, I fell to the ground — completely done in. After lying flat for a while, panting in recovery, I realized that every muscle in my body was in full-scale revolt. Not one of them seemed willing to help me stand up! It must have been sheer will-power alone that got me back on my feet and behind the wheel for the triumphant



I'VE NEVER BEEN so happy to see my truck as I was after packing out my bull. I barely had the energy to get behind the wheel.

drive home. I couldn't wait to show my family what I'd accomplished — with the indispensable help of a Friend far more powerful than me.

It was dark by the time I reached the house. As I limped my way out of the truck and up to the front door, I thought to myself, This was absolutely the most amazing — yet physically awful — thing I've ever done! Yet, I can't wait to do it again next year! **BH**

The author is a Sheriff Deputy in Idaho, a flyfishing outfitter, and a competitive handgun shooter. In November, he was diagnosed with a severely dilated aortic aneurysm that required heart surgery. He most likely had that condition during his grueling elk recovery.

Author's Note: On this hunt, I used a Hoyt Ventum 33 bow, Easton Axis arrows, Muzzy Trocar broadheads, Spot Hogg Fast Eddie sight, Rocky Mountain calls, Sitka clothing, and Crispi boots.

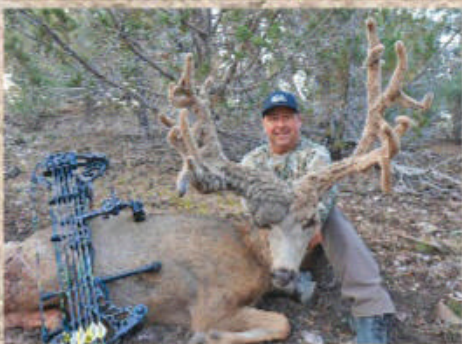
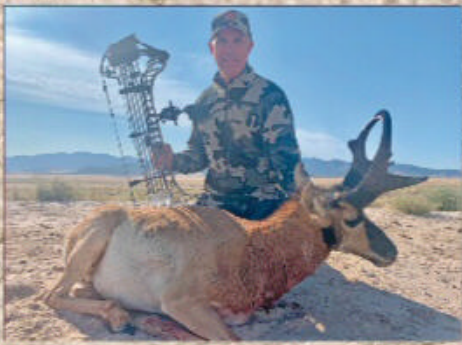


I COULDN'T HAVE completed the pack out without the help of my wife, Tamara, and my mother, Elizabeth McGraw, who has always dreamt of helping her son pack out an elk.

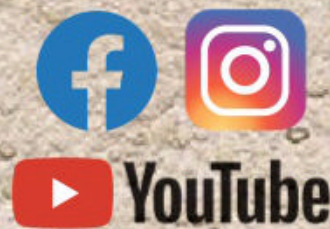
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AS HUNTERS, there are many things we look forward to as a new season approaches. It's as if a blank canvas is laid before us and we hold the brush in hand, just waiting for the story to unfold. But for me, it seemed as if my story never started before November.

I had little hopes for early season success as I climbed the tree on Maryland's opening day. I had my camera in hand, enjoying nature's show, when I caught a glimpse of movement along the treeline. Was I seeing things? Could those really be velvet antlers moving through the brush? My heart all but stopped as reality hit me, and a beautiful velvet eight-point entered the field.

Late summer in Maryland is not for the faint of heart. It's sticky, humid, and the flies and mosquitoes are always hungry. I pushed through and put in the work, but the to-do list seemed to grow as opening day arrived. I spent the day finalizing a few setups, and I was pleasantly surprised when a friend invited me to hunt with him. With very little showing up at my spots, I jumped at the opportunity. The temperature was unseasonably cool, rain had moved off the day before, and the wind was right...it seemed like a perfect afternoon to be in a tree.

I went through the frantic opening-day checklist. I just knew I'd forget something, but I had my Blacktail recurve and arrows in hand, so nothing else really mattered.

There were two hedgerows that ran through the field. I was directed to a stand on the very end of one of the hedgerows, right about where it met the woods. Thick brush along a ditch provided me with cover for entering and exiting the stand undetected.

I followed the ditch right to the base of the ladder and looked up with a grin on my face. Every step took me higher into the heavens and filled me with more excitement.

But this year was a bit different. I'd lost my grandfather a few weeks before this day, and sadness tugged at my heart. This would be the first opening day I wouldn't be rushing back to tell him my stories. On top of that, I also lost a bowhunting friend and local traditional archery legend that very morning.

I settled in and sat back against the giant pine. I knew I was right where my grandfather and my friend would have wanted me to be.

Before long, I saw a bit of movement across the clover. It was a little doe, and she took a few tentative steps before suddenly running in my direction.

As she got closer, it looked as if she didn't have any eyes! I pulled my binoculars up and was met with a strange sight — I was looking into the crystal-clear blue eyes of an otherwise normal-looking doe. I reached for my camera and began taking pictures of her.

I was lost in my camera lens when I noticed two deer moving through the brush. I thought I saw antlers but knew I must be losing my mind.

With a leap he jumped the ditch and entered the field. I knew instantly who it was. This was a deer we had watched since 2018. He started out as a narrow nine-pointer, then went to an eight, and in 2020 had beautiful kickers coming off his rack. He was always by himself on camera, so it was hard to gauge how big he was this year. But as he stood there, with the last bits of sun shining on his velvet antlers, I realized just how amazing he was.

The mature buck wanted to come my way, but his gut was telling him something was off. I knew my wind was ok. I knew he couldn't see me. But could he hear my racing heart?

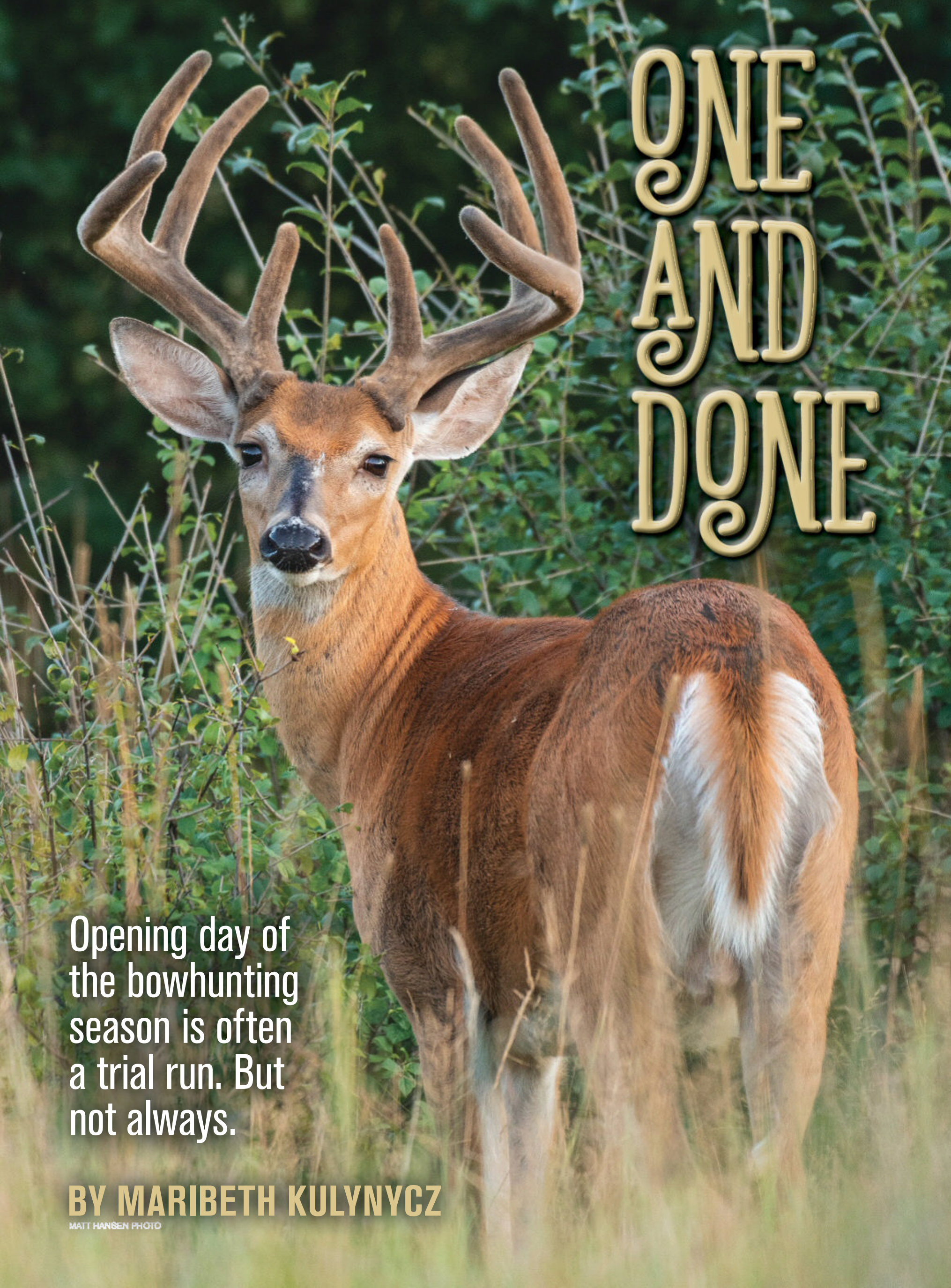
The buck warily headed my way, stopping every few steps to look around. He stayed behind a branch and inched closer. He was no more than 15 yards away when he stopped dead, facing me. He stood there, looking up at me, and then all around, as he licked his nose and stuck it high in the air. I closed my eyes, praying he would give me a shot.

I was starting to shake as the buck continued to grow more nervous. I tried to hold myself together, but I just knew he was going to blow out of there at any moment.

The standoff was unbearable; it could have been five minutes or five hours for all I knew. He finally made a move, away from my shooting lane and in the direction of my wind. I scrambled to adjust my bow, so I could try to get a shot off before he bolted.

Just when I thought all hope was gone, I got a little help: The blue-eyed doe whipped her head up and noticed the buck standing there. Then she ran in his direction.

The buck's posture suddenly changed, and I watched his eyes leave the canopy that hid me and fixate on her. She walked right under me, flicking her tail the whole time. He took one last look my way and then turned to follow her. It was just the mistake I needed him to make.

A photograph of a buck with large velvet antlers standing in a field of tall grass and brush. The buck is facing the camera, and its antlers are prominent. The background is a dense thicket of green foliage.

ONE AND DONE

Opening day of the bowhunting season is often a trial run. But not always.

BY MARIBETH KULYNYCZ

MATT HANSEN PHOTO

ONE AND DONE

I've never seen a blue-eyed doe before, but this one proved a well-timed distraction for the nervous buck I was trying to shoot.

He walked just about to the base of my tree, licked his nose, and took one more glance around before continuing on the path of the blue-eyed doe. Then he turned just enough to give me a quartering-away shot.

Without thinking, I drew the arrow to my eye and let it go. My arrow hit with a dull thud, and the buck took off across the field.

I watched on shaking legs as his rack disappeared into the tall grass. Only one deer remained in the field — the blue-eyed doe.

She went right to the trail he had taken, stopped, and looked around one last time before vanishing down the same path. And the world around me fell silent.

It was like a dream come true, except for one fact: I'd hit

him a touch farther back than I wanted. But as he ran away, I saw the exit hole and knew the shot was lethal.

I also knew that recovering him would require a little strategy and help, so I sent texts to friends and family and then headed back to camp to formulate a game plan.

The evening was going to be cool, so we made the gut-wrenching call to leave him overnight. Oh, that hunter's night, with the sleepless tossing and turning over the fear of the unknown. The few times I did drift off, I was plagued with dreams — I found him, I didn't find him. The scenarios played out all night long.

The next morning I led my dad and brother to the shot site. Admittedly, it didn't look good.

We cautiously followed the trail, finding only sparse sign along the way. I had been clinging to the hope that the buck had fallen and died just out of sight. But as I reached that location, I was met with nothing, and panic took over.

Over the next few hours, we pulled out all the stops in an attempt to recover my buck. But every time I emerged from those woods empty-handed, the buck seemed to be further and further from my grasp.

The search team dwindled down to me and my brother. I fought back tears as I begged him to make a few more loops with me. What a horrible feeling, the desperation of scanning the forest floor, just praying to catch a glimpse of him. Every tree looked like a deer, every branch an antler, and every time it wasn't him my heart broke a little more.

We walked a good distance before I made the sad decision to head back. We split up at that point; the last leg of the walk I felt the weight of it all hit me as I heard the car door close in the distance and knew my brother had made it out.

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ONE AND DONE

I was the only one left to keep looking for my buck. I decided to pop into the woods about 50 yards and cover the rest of the way to the vehicle in defeat.

Tears clouded my vision, my feet dragged under me, and my head hung low. I knew I had to accept it — I had lost him.

As tears dripped down my face, something caught my eye. No...could it be...was it really him?

Rays of sunlight streamed through the canopy and danced around him as the breeze blew. I crept up with an arrow nocked just in case, but there was no need. He had been there the whole time, waiting for me.

I walked up on him to see the most perfect golden leaf lying on his neck. I let out some sort of unhuman sound as I fell to my knees next to him sobbing.

Although I was the only one in those woods with him, I felt far from alone. I couldn't help but feel like my grandfather and my recently departed friend had their arms wrapped around my shoulders, celebrating right alongside me.

When you put your heart and soul into a hunt, it becomes about so much more than the actual harvest. But what relief it is to get your hands on an animal you thought was lost.

The memories of that hunt, and the lessons learned, will be with me for the rest of my days. I have never taken a buck before November. Slow and steady has always been my motto, but perhaps the fact that I didn't expect it made it that much sweeter.

Hard work, persistence, and perhaps a little luck all came together to make this dream come true. I went through every emotion a hunter can possibly experience in those few hours. It was an absolute rollercoaster ride, but one I'd happily go on again to get my hands on my first velvet buck. **BH**

The author was born and raised on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, works as a cosmetologist, and is the Executive Secretary of the Maryland Bowhunters Society.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author shot a Blacktail recurve and Gold Tip Traditional arrows tipped with Rayzor-VPA broadheads.



Something told me to take one last look, and that's when I found my first velvet buck, complete with a perfect gold leaf on his neck.

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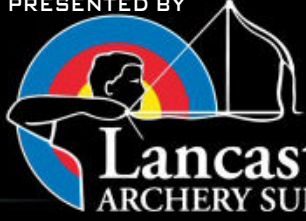
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WITH CURT WELLS | EDITOR



When packing, I remove my bowsight, pack my bow in a soft case, then in a rolling duffel with camo clothing as padding. My pack, containing my valuables, is my carry-on.

your bow in a soft case, and leave the hard cases behind.

I have quit using a hard bow case because it was prone to getting lost. I now pack my bow in a soft case inside a large rolling duffel (Sitka Nomad) with lots of clothing around it. If I need a backup bow, I put it in a second duffel, along with half my arrows, broadheads, a release, boots, and camo clothing. If one bag doesn't show, I can hunt until it does.

I always remove my sight when packing because it's the most vulnerable accessory. A dovetail mount makes it easier, but it works with any mount. Just be sure to reattach it exactly as it was. I have a habit of attaching my release to my bow, whether in hunting camp or traveling, so I always know where it is. Don't put your spare release in your carry-on bag as the stem can look like a barrel. Do not travel with broadheads attached to your arrows. I don't use an arrow tube anymore because carbon arrows with today's stiff plastic vanes are virtually indestructible when stashed in a duffel bag.

My carry-on bag is my daypack, which isn't camouflaged, and that is where I keep my valuables like binoculars, rangefinder, and camera, along with passport, licenses, tags, and medication.

Most of us tend to bring too many clothes. Save weight by packing enough layers to handle the weather but avoid duplication. One pair of hunting pants is usually sufficient as long as you have baselayers to layer-up if necessary. A puffy jacket is almost weightless but extremely valuable, especially if you're on water, or in the high country. Save weight before your final flight by stashing your "civilian" clothes in your hard cases and simply wear your camouflage and hunting boots on that last leg. Be sure to pack some camp shoes, such as Crocs, which are virtually weightless.

Traveling, especially since the pandemic, has become more and more stressful, but if you're prepared, the trip to your destination can be an enjoyable part of the adventure. **BH**

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

Q I'M STARTING to travel for my bowhunting adventures. What tips do you have for me? *Walker Innerst, via e-mail*

A MY FIRST ADVICE — if you can drive to your bowhunting destination, do it. You'll save money, you can bring everything you *might* need, and there's no need to worry about missed/delayed flights, lost baggage, or getting your animal home. Your schedule is yours.

Obviously, we're forced to fly to some adventures, so here are some more tips. First, I recommend adding a day on both ends of your trip, especially the front end. If your bags don't show, you have a day to get that resolved. This could be critical if you have a bush flight waiting for you.

When flying into Canada, book flights with at least a 90-minute layover at the airport where you'll go through customs, so you have plenty of time to catch your next flight. Make sure you have a passport that isn't close to expiring. Also, download Canada's ArriveCan app to your

phone and fill in the information until you have a receipt to show the customs officer. It's a good idea to use your phone to take photos of your passport, driver's license, Hunter Education card, vaccination record, insurance cards, and any other important documentation, just in case you lose something.

My advice is to avoid Vancouver and Toronto if possible. These two busy locations are notorious for losing/delaying baggage, especially if it appears to be hunting gear. To that end, avoid camouflage bags or any luggage that might tip someone off that you're a hunter. It's not right; but it's reality.

If an outfitter gives you a weight limit, 75 pounds for example, stick to it. Pack lightweight duffels (preferably dry bags) in your hard luggage/cases and when you get to the location of your final flight you can repack gear into the duffels, put

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