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PETERSEN'S **BOWHUNTING**

The Official Bowhunting Authority

September 2022

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BLOW YOU AWAY**

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By **CHRISTIAN BERG**

FIRST SHOT

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A SCORE TO SETTLE

I WANTED TO VOMIT.

I was still in the first hour of a 2020 elk hunt with J&J Guide Service in Montana, and I had just let my “bull of a lifetime” slip through my fingers.

An unexpected encounter led to a fleeting — but perfect — 52-yard, quartering-away shot opportunity. I came to full draw and stared through my peep sight as the monster bull posed perfectly for several seconds. But as I struggled to control my breathing and my nerves and settle my pin on its chest, the clock ran out and the bull stepped back into the pines.

You idiot! I thought to myself. *How in the world could you not get that shot off?!?!?*

The look on my face, captured forever on video, said it all. I wanted to curse. I wanted to cry. I wanted to curl up in the fetal position right there on the side of the mountain and call my mommy. Then I remembered outfitter Rich Schneider and cameraman Jim Thompson were watching, so I decided to hold it together as best as I could in an effort to salvage a shred of dignity.

It has now been nearly two years

since that bull walked out of my life, and my failure to send an arrow still torments me each time the memory invades my brain. Much like a 50-pound salmon that spits the hook at the side of the boat or a game-winning field goal attempt that clangs off the upright, this bull will forever remain a trophy that was so close, yet so far away from my grasp. And I have no one else to blame.

Thankfully, we aren't defined as bowhunters, or people, by our failures. In fact, we often learn our most important lessons from them, and sometimes, we even get second chances to take what was wrong and make it right.

I was blessed with just such a chance this spring when I drew a limited-entry elk permit for the same eastern Montana unit where my heart was broken two years ago. Upon learning the draw results, a brief celebration ensued, quickly followed by the realization it was time to get to work.

A brand new Hoyt REDWRX Carbon RX-7 bow was soon set up for the hunt, along with a dozen Easton 4MM FMJ arrows tipped with Muzzy broadheads. Countless shots have been launched at the Rinehart 1/3 Scale Elk target in my yard, and I've cleaned up my diet and made dozens of trips to the gym prepping body and mind to go back and be better than before.

Just a few short weeks from now, I'll be in Big Sky Country, hunting hard in search of a happier ending than the one I experienced last time. Who knows, maybe the very bull that haunts my dreams is still alive? If not, I'm sure there will be plenty of others to pursue.

Either way, I've got a serious score to settle — with myself. **B**

This is the look of a bowhunter who has just let a golden opportunity slip away. It ain't pretty!



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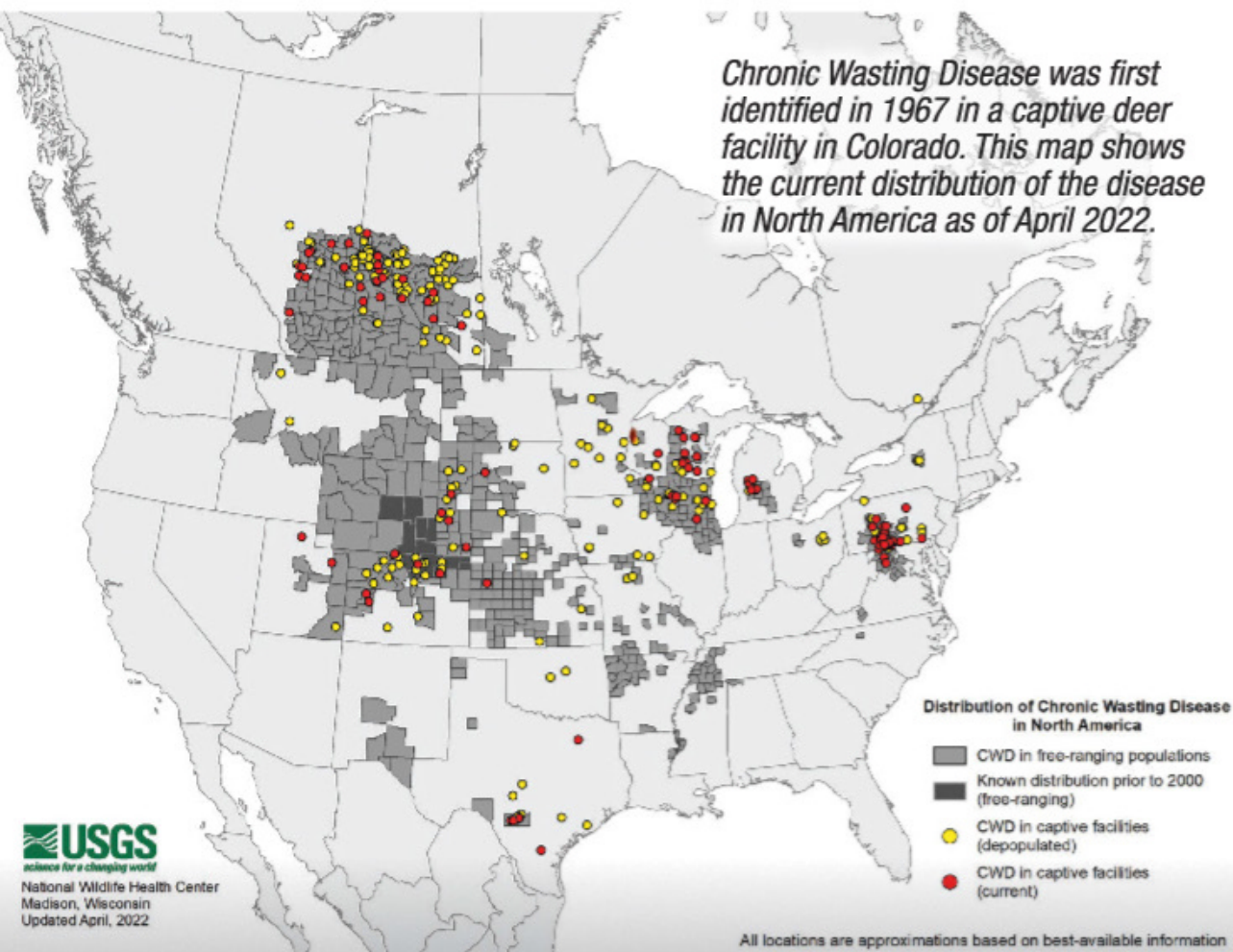


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By **JASON SNAVELY**

WHITETAILS



PART 1 OF 3

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE: THE SAGA CONTINUES

Five Decades In, Many Questions Remain Unanswered

IT HAS NOW been 55 years since the scientific community first identified Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) — though no one really knows how long it existed before that.

Over the past five-plus decades, CWD has spread throughout much of North America, causing major concern among government wildlife agencies, conservation organizations and hunters as we continue searching for answers about how to effectively deal

with a disease that threatens not only whitetails but all cervids (mule deer, elk, moose and caribou).

As I follow the CWD saga, I see a promising area of research that sheds some light on how nature may “manage” this disease: beneficial genetic mutation, through disease-driven natural selection. Perhaps, just as nature intended, these population-level genetic alterations are lowering the number of CWD positives and slowing the progression of CWD’s work in deer populations where the disease has been present the longest.

Given that, this seemed like the right time for a three-part series summarizing the highlights of the CWD

saga. I’ll start this month with the basics of CWD. Part two will cover the latest CWD research, and the final installment will discuss how wildlife managers should develop CWD policy and best-management practices, based on the data we have.

What is CWD?

Explaining exactly what CWD is and how it ultimately kills whitetails has always been challenging, even for the “experts” who study the disease for a living! It is my goal to present a basic, but thorough, understanding of how CWD causes progressive neurological degeneration in whitetails. It’s also important to remember that even the experts acknowledge there is much about CWD we simply do not know.

CWD is in a family of rare diseases known as *transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs)*. Simplifying the long name, transmissible simply means the disease can be passed from one animal to another. Spongiform refers to the work done by disease-associated prion proteins (more on this later) that accumulate in the brain, where they kill neurons and leave microscopic, “spongy” holes. Encephalopathy is simply a disease of the brain. Therefore, putting it all together the name describes a disease that spreads from animal to animal and causes spongy holes in the brain. The hallmark of all TSEs is progressive neurological degeneration, with infected individuals slowly losing the ability to function and ultimately dying.

CWD affect cervids (deer family). Other TSEs affect different species but are related to CWD. They include bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle, aka “mad cow disease,” scrapie in sheep and goats and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) in humans.

Transmission and Incubation

CWD is contagious and can be transmitted orally from individual to individual through saliva, urine and feces, though much more needs to be



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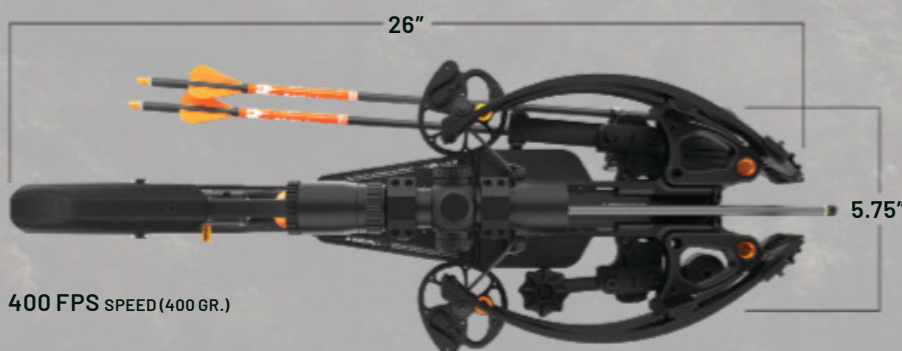
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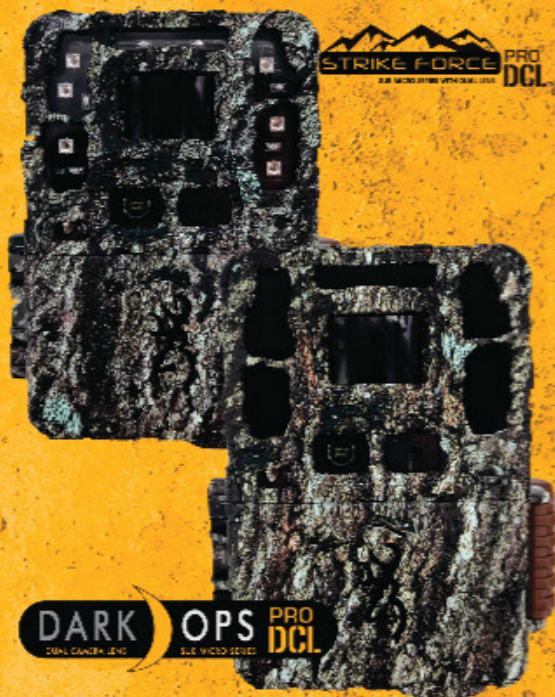


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WHITETAILS

discovered about the various mechanisms of transmission. Anyone who spends time in the woods knows whitetails are highly social, often grooming one another and sparring. It is hard to believe a highly transmissible disease wouldn't wreak havoc at the population level unless the mere exposure of animals to the disease results in population-level genetic effects that ensure for the proliferation of the species (more on this later). Transmission can occur laterally, from animal to animal, or vertically, from mother to fetus. Animals can also become infected by acquiring the infectious agent from the environment, where disease-associated prions can persist for decades.

Unlike a living bacteria, fungus or virus, CWD is caused by a *non-living prion protein* that has, for reasons yet unknown to scientists, gone rogue and "misfolded." A portmanteau (a word blending two words, like breakfast + lunch = brunch), the word *prion* is a combination of two words: *protein* and *infection*. The term prion is also short for proteinaceous infectious particle, a reference to a prion protein's ability to *self-propagate* and transmit its shape to other prion proteins. The fact that a protein, and not a virus or bacteria, appears to cause CWD is, in my experience, what causes so much confusion and misinformation.

All mammals produce normal prion proteins, which are nothing more than a chain of amino acids that fold into a three-dimensional shape. Scientists are not sure what role they

perform in the body, but it is clear that normal prion proteins perform their duty and then break down and are recycled in the body within 4-6 hours.

Disease-associated prions, on the other hand, are extremely resilient and have proven to persist in the environment for decades. In fact, state agencies have killed and removed CWD-infected deer from high-fenced enclosures and reintroduced healthy deer many years later only to realize the introduced, CWD-free animals become infected with CWD through environmental transmission.

Scientists recognize that *disease-associated prion proteins* have the same sequence of amino acids as normal prion proteins but are folded into *different shapes*, with radically different properties. These misfolded prions bind to the normal prions in the body and cause them to misfold too; a process scientists don't fully understand. Eventually, the misfolded, disease-associated prion proteins accumulate in the brain and central nervous system, causing neuronal death. Once a critical threshold is reached in the body, neurological degeneration appears to proceed rather quickly and is followed by death.

One troubling aspect of CWD is how long it takes between infection and the development of clinical symptoms such as weight loss, lack of coordination, excessive thirst, walking in circles, drooling, etc. Research has shown that this gap, known as the incubation period, can last up to four years. This is significant, since we know that many of the deer in hunt-able whitetail populations never even live to 3 or 4 years of age! **B**



A whitetail doe exhibiting clinical symptoms of Chronic Wasting Disease.

WYOMING GAME AND FISH/CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE ALLIANCE PHOTO

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By **BILL WINKE**

BOWHUNTING WISDOM



Thanks to trail-camera technology, you can take the process of patterning bucks as far as you wish, from simply identifying areas where good bucks spend part of their time to knowing what is happening in various parts of your hunting area every day.

THREE LEVELS OF PATTERNING WHITETAILS

Trail Cameras Can Take You as Far as You Want to Go

YOU CAN'T REALLY KNOW where a buck will be on any given day. All you can do is make assumptions, based on trends you see in his behavior. The more you know about the deer, the better your assumptions and the more often you will find yourself one step ahead of him.

So, unless you have a good bit of information about the buck you are hunting, you will be wrong most of the time. That's OK; it is still part of the fun, because *sometimes* you will be right. And all you need is to be right once per season!

Gathering Info

Before I used trail cameras, I had to base my hunting decisions purely on sign and sightings. I learned the hard way that the sign was not nearly as useful as I had hoped. How can you say which buck made a certain scrape, track or rub? Some people could, or at least said they could, but I never had any success with that.

Sightings were equally problematic. Some bucks I have hunted over

the years offered very few actual sightings — certainly not enough that I could learn much from them. Had I based my strategies on just what I saw, I never even would have known some of those bucks existed.

But all that changed with the advent of trail cameras. Not only do the photos tell me which part of my hunting area has a shooter (which makes me much more efficient in the use of my precious hunting time), but the cameras also give some clues about each buck's behavior. Once I know something of his behavior, I can start to make educated decisions about where to hunt.

In this column, I am going to lay out three levels of patterning and what you can expect from each. Not

surprisingly, the further you take your efforts, the greater your odds for success.

Simple Patterning

Trail-cam photos will tell you where a possible target buck is sometimes spending his time. Even if you stop right there and don't use your cameras to gain further information, you have learned enough to make a difference. This is a good starting point; one even deer hunters with limited time and budget can employ. In fact, my own trail-camera strategy goes only slightly beyond this point.

If all you know is where a shooter is sometimes living, you can focus all your hunting time on places where there is a chance. I think back on all the seasons when I hunted good-looking spots with lots of sign without ever knowing if there was a buck living there that I wanted to shoot. There was no way to know. I just assumed there was. The more I learn, the more I realize there probably wasn't!

Intermediate Patterning

This is a good compromise that respects your time and budget but still produces enough information to give you a really good chance of at least seeing the bucks you are hunting.

Take the simple patterning process one step farther by studying the photos and making additional moves with the camera, based on what you see. Here's how it works:

The first thing to look for (beyond just where the bucks live) is whether they are moving in daylight. If they are, your job is mostly done. He's killable. If they aren't, but the movement is *close* to daylight, you are likely not far from the buck's core area — where he spends most of his time, day or night. If the photos are well after dark in the evening, and well before daylight in the morning, you aren't really in the game yet. That means you can either write that buck off and focus on other ones, or you can move the camera to see if you can find his core area.

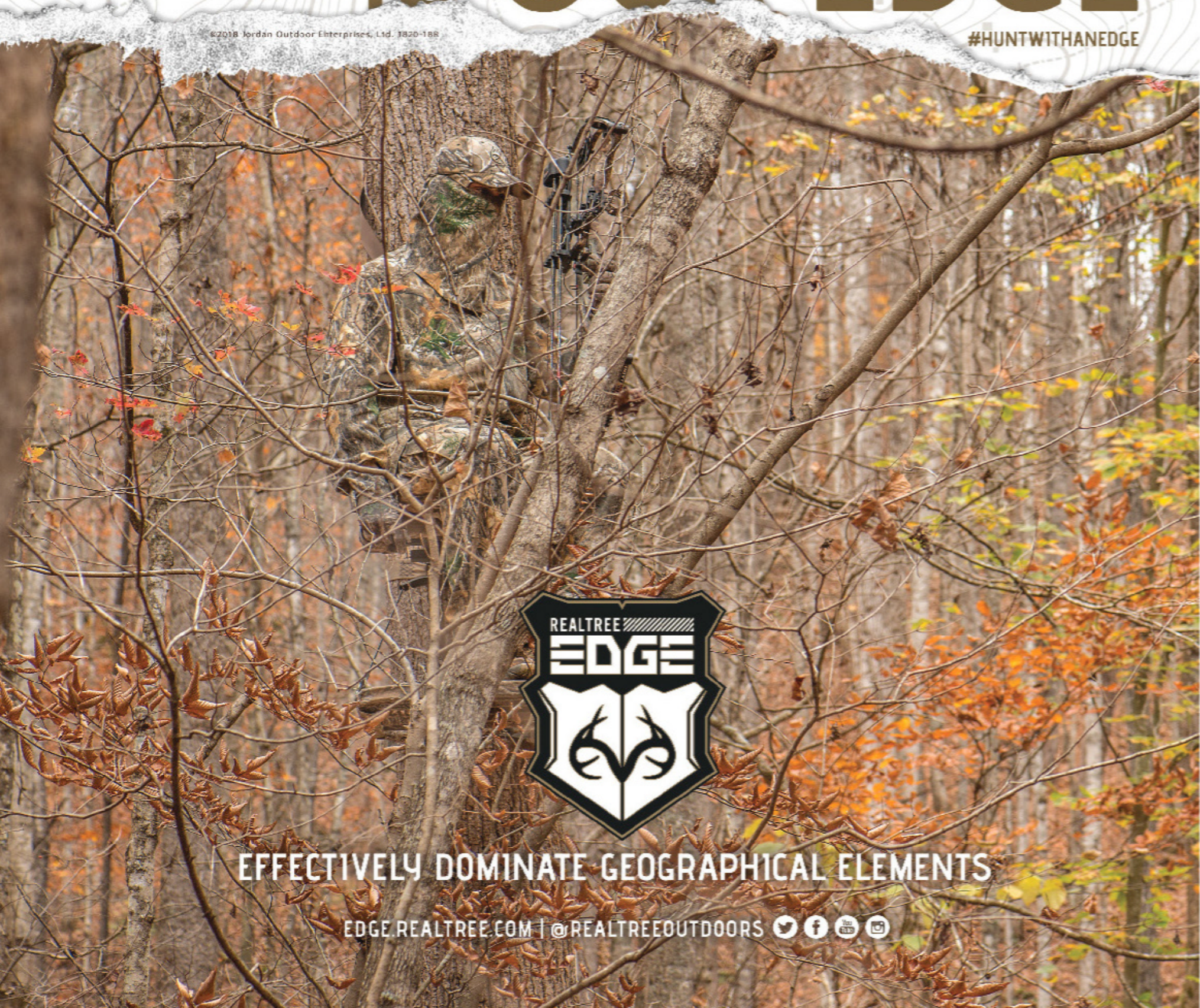
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If you choose to move the camera, look at the first photo of the buck you get in the evening and move a few hundred yards in the direction from which he is coming. While this is not foolproof, as he could have laid down a winding course in getting to your camera, it is at least a starting point.

Keep moving the camera this way until you either get the buck closer to daylight or give up trying. That's why it is always good to have a couple bucks you'd be happy to shoot if given the chance.

Of course, when the time comes to hunt the buck, you want to hunt him as close to his core area as you can without bumping him or other deer. That is the heart of intermediate patterning, and it is as far as I ever go. Once I know, or can guess, where a buck is likely moving in daylight, it's time to start hunting. Most years, this process takes me until mid-October before I gain the necessary level of confidence.

Advanced Patterning

Some people just love getting as

many photos of the bucks they are hunting as possible. These also tend to be the guys who use cellular trail cameras. By no means do you need a cellular camera to be successful; I have never owned one and feel that I am in the game every season.

The goal of advanced patterning is to know what is happening every day. This allows a hunter to adjust based on what the cameras reveal. During the rut, this kind of "most recent information" is valuable, because the bucks are out of their core areas a lot more. During this time, knowing where he was last night (or even this morning) will tell you where to hunt him this evening.

This is too much information for me. I don't want to know precisely where the buck is every day. I want to hunt him. I want to be surprised when I see him. This is just my own choice, and I have a lot of time to hunt so it still tends to pay off. There is no question this advanced method is the most productive, and I don't feel it is wrong. It just isn't for me.



If you are getting photos of a good buck on your trail camera only at night, pay attention to the direction he is coming from and move your camera in that direction several hundred yards at a time until you begin to get photos of the buck in daylight, or close to daylight. Once that happens, you have probably found the buck's core area.

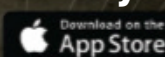
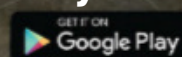
You can take the patterning process as far as your time, budget and personal choices will allow. There is no doubt that with today's trail-cam technology, you can absolutely gather enough information to know you are hunting in an area where a killable, shooter buck lives. That alone is a huge step toward consistent success and also goes a long way toward keeping your confidence high during this wonderful, whitetail-hunting quest. **B**

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By **RANDY ULMER**

BETTER BOWHUNTING



PART 5

STRING JUMPING

Determining whether to go with a faster or quieter bow depends on many variables.

ONE OF THE MOST difficult phenomena bowhunters face when shooting at game is the animal's ability to jump the string. At distances past 20 yards, deer can move a significant distance between the sound of the shot and the arrow's arrival.

The distance the animal moves depends on many variables including the volume and tone of the sound your bow produces, the arrow's speed, the distance the arrow must travel to the deer and the attitude (spookiness) of the animal.

The bottom line is this: If the animal is not there when the arrow ar-

rives, it doesn't matter how accurate your shot is — you will miss the mark.

In the last column, we discussed whether making your bow shoot faster will help in dealing with the issue of string jumping. Obviously, the faster the arrow, the less time these quick critters have to react. However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether mak-

It's important to pay attention to an animal's attitude and behavior. If a deer is already on alert, it is obviously much more likely to react to the sound of your shot and jump the string.

ing the bow faster is a good tradeoff on string-jumping animals because the faster the bow, the noisier it tends to be.

I previously mentioned that white-tail guru Bill Winke estimates that at 20 yards, you need to aim about 6 inches lower than you want to hit on a tightly-wound, string-jumping deer when shooting a 230-fps arrow. When shooting a 280-fps arrow you need to aim only about 3 inches low. These fudge factors become much larger at 30 yards. At that distance, you need to aim 17 inches low with a 230-fps arrow and 10 inches low for the 280-fps arrow.

These findings seem like an obvious endorsement for shooting a faster bow versus a quieter bow, and, indeed, this might be the case at close quarters and on obviously spooky deer. However, I believe twitchy deer at close range will almost always react violently to the sound of any bow, no matter how quiet that bow happens to be. The noise is just too close for a deer to miss or to ignore.

Test It Yourself

Earlier in this series, I suggested you try an experiment: Sneak up behind an unsuspecting person and while standing directly behind them, clap your hands loudly just in back of their head and watch their reaction. Most likely, they will have an instant and powerful physical reaction.

Now, stand 20 yards behind the person and do the same thing. More than likely, they will casually turn around to see who clapped.

The same phenomenon happens with deer. If a noise is close, they will react much more violently than if the noise is far away.

Historically (before man perfected the bow and arrow), all predators that wanted to eat a deer had to attack from a relatively close distance in order to have a decent chance of catching their

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prey. So, deer have been selected to instinctually react to close sounds quickly; those that failed to do so didn't live long enough to reproduce.

A Fast or Quiet Bow?

When shooting at relatively close distances, I believe a fast bow may be more important than a quiet bow. At longer distances, however, I believe it is not as clear cut. Assuming a deer reacts instantly to the sound of the bow, it has plenty of time to get out of the way of the arrow at longer distances. So, at these distances, no matter how fast your bow shoots, whether 200 fps or 320 fps, a reactive deer will not be there when the arrow arrives. You really need the deer to just stand there and not react at all at these longer distances. But, in order for the animal not to move at all, the sound needs to be as unalarming as possible.

There are far too many variables involved in all the possible scenarios to allow us to scientifically determine which is better, a fast bow or a quiet bow. Ideally, we want a fast bow that is also qui-

et, but where do you draw the line when choosing and adjusting your setup?

Dealing with the tradeoff is more an art than a science. Again, I can only tell you what I believe to be true from my own experience and observations. Just for full disclosure, most of my personal experience has been derived from shots on mature mule deer bucks at distances between 20 and 60 yards. I have also studied many slow-motion videos of shots at whitetails, pronghorns and mule deer at all reasonable shot distances.

Whitetail deer are quick on their hooves, and none are quicker than the Coues whitetails that I hunt in my home state of Arizona. This is our miniature version of the eastern whitetail, so I am well aware of a deer's ability to get out of the way of an oncoming arrow.

I always try to get a read on an animal's attitude before taking a shot. If a buck at a relatively close distance seems nervous, and I know from experience that deer in the area I am hunting tend to jump the string, I will aim a little low of where I want the arrow

to strike. I always try to keep my pin in the vitals, so that if the animal doesn't drop, I'll still make a lethal shot.

The 'Slot Distance'

Some very experienced western hunters I know argue that there is a 'slot distance' inside of which an animal is most likely to jump the string successfully. They assert that you should not shoot at a wired animal such as an antelope or a Coues deer between approximately 25 and 60 yards. If the animal is less than 25 yards away, you can aim at the bottom of the kill zone and still make a clean kill even if it drops. If the animal is more than 60 yards from the sound source (you), the volume of the bow's sound reaching its ears will be dramatically diminished, making it much less likely the animal will react.

Please don't take this as an endorsement from me to shoot extremely long distances at animals. These fellows I know are extremely good shooters. Their argument is that they are less likely to wound an unmoving animal when shooting at 80 yards than they are shooting at a ducking and running target at 40 yards. **B**

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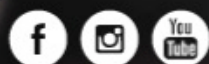
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By **BRAD FENSON**

CROSSBOWS



GEARING UP FOR ELK

Bowhunting Wapiti Requires Special Preparation

AS I PLANNED for my 2021 Alberta elk hunt, I laid my hunting gear out carefully on a table to assess each item's overall weight and need. The following week would be a grind, but I knew I would love every minute!

Bowhunting elk can be physically demanding, so having the right gear allows you to stay mobile to chase elk or get into position ahead of them. It all starts with your crossbow, where weight, size and other factors must be considered.

The Crossbow

Several compact crossbows on the market are easier to carry and maneuver through the rough country that elk call home. Speed, of course, always plays into the equation, as meadows and field edges can present longer shots of 40 to 50 yards.

Some speed can be converted to

increased penetration by shooting a heavier projectile, whether through the bolt, the broadhead or a combination of both. I opted to take a TenPoint Havoc RS440 on my hunt because the reverse-draw limbs help to generate more speed with a longer power stroke. With a total length of 26.5 inches, the compact design makes a big difference when fighting through dense brush and marching up and down steep hills.

Broadheads

There are many options when it comes to broadheads. Converting speed to penetration means using a 125- or even a 150-grain broadhead. Elk have heavy, dense bones, and knowing you have bone-breaking penetration equates to confidence. Another way to gain an advantage is shooting a head with a smaller cutting diameter. Less cutting surface takes less energy to penetrate further, especially on big animals. Shooting a SEVR broadhead showed an increased advantage, and it added confidence by shooting each head with a lockscrew to confirm the point of impact and accuracy before heading afield. Practicing and hunting

with the same head after removing the lockscrew is a significant advantage.

Carrying the Bow

With everything else you need to think about getting ready for the hunt, it's important that you don't overlook the sling. Having the proper sling will help you keep balance while hiking and reduce fatigue from fighting with a shifting bow or having to carry it with one hand. A sling with a good grip will stay where you place it so that the crossbow is not swaying or sliding. A neoprene or rubber-coated sling is an essential piece of equipment since leather, nylon and other synthetic slings are slippery and do not stay on your shoulder well.

Make sure you always have your cocking/de-cocking device as it can be a game saver. Carrying a cocked crossbow can allow grass, twigs and other debris to get caught under the string and in the edges of the cams or rail, and shooting a crossbow with an incumbrance to the string might lead to catastrophic failure or cause the string to break. Being able to de-cock the bow, remove the debris and continue on can mean the difference between success and going home empty-handed.

Never carry a crossbow with a bolt on the rail when it's cocked. The bolt can get caught and pulled from the seated position or tangled in something and discharged. There are, in fact, many things that could go wrong, including the broadhead cutting the string and blowing up the limbs. Of course, having a broadhead inches from your head while carrying a loaded crossbow is always a bad decision.

Gloves

Thornbushes and other nasty terrain can be tough on hunters and equipment, and wearing leather gloves allows you to move limbs and other tangles out of the way without harm. If you practice shooting with gloves on, you will quickly adapt to proper finger placement and trigger pull. Not having thorns in your

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fingers and hands makes the hunt more enjoyable and productive.

Shooting Sticks

Action in the elk woods can happen fast, and there can be lots of eyes and ears focused on hunters using calls. Therefore, it's a good exercise to practice shouldering your crossbow, looking through the scope and seeing how long you can hold it steady on a target at 20 yards. The weight of a crossbow makes it difficult to stay in the ready and shooting position. You never know when elk are watching, so be prepared and ensure you stay still.

It's good practice to carry a set of lightweight shooting sticks. Every time you set up to call, make sure the sticks are extended and the crossbow is against your shoulder and ready to shoot. You can then stand at the ready for half an hour without fatigue. Getting caught off guard and having to lift your bow to your shoulder and swing to get on target will always spook elk sneaking in to check out the competition.

As you prepare for your hunt,



Determining shooting distances in elk country can be challenging, so having a quality rangefinder is essential.

remember that aluminum shooting sticks can tingle and clang, making enough noise to alert animals, so wrap them with hockey tape or another wrap that makes them quieter. You can get away with only covering the portions of the sticks that remain visible when collapsed or folded, but make sure to put them away before heading out. A pair of socks taped over the central leg can be helpful, and an elk cover scent can even be applied to the socks or covering to help fool the nose of an old bull and draw it to your location.

Bolts and Quiver

A quiver should always be full of bolts at the hunt's start. Over the years,

I have witnessed torn fletching, damaged nocks and bolts missing from a quiver after miles of hiking, so you need to ensure you have a full allotment of bolts at hand when you're miles from the vehicle or lodge. To prevent bolts from dislodging or falling out of a quiver, use rubber bands to reinforce the hold, and stay away from Velcro and other noisy options to eliminate the potential of spooking game.

Packs and Rangefinder

Packs are always a difficult choice. Whenever possible, use a pack that can carry your crossbow on those long hikes in and out of elk country. Heading deep into the backcountry means taking a pack large enough to haul antlers and meat, while daytrips or short jaunts can allow you to downsize and be more mobile. If you can make it work, a fanny pack can help you stay mobile and reduce bulk and weight.

It's also important to remember your rangefinder as elk country terrain can make it hard to judge distance. Practice as you hunt, so that if you get in a situation where you have to make a judgment call on the distance, you have higher odds of success. **B**

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By **CABE JOHNSON**

SPOT-ON

ULTIMATE SHOULDER ALIGNMENT

MOST ARCHERS don't really think about how their shoulders are positioned, or how they align.

There are way more important things to think about during the shot, so they usually let the shoulders settle in wherever they want to be. We did the same thing — until one of us accidentally stumbled onto where our shoulders *should* be.

It all started when one of us was practicing and shooting horribly. In frustration, he decided to push his bow arm shoulder in toward the string and more in line with his bow hand at full draw (changing his shoulder alignment). Suddenly, his steadiness at full draw and shooting accuracy improved drastically. Had he found a magic recipe for holding steady?

He started consciously pushing that shoulder in (it naturally rotated up as well) and from practice session to practice session, he was able to find consistent steadiness. This was something that had eluded him before. He used to have good days and bad days. Now, he was stringing together a lot of great practice sessions.

This newfound form worked well, and he used it for many years. There was only one problem; his shoulder didn't naturally like that position. So, as soon as he got tired or distracted, his bow shoulder would slowly creep down and away from the string. He would have to constantly force his shoulder into that position. It seemed to fail him in long tournaments and at the moment of truth during a hunt.

He eventually tried to find a more natural position for his shoulder, a position he didn't have to constantly fight. So, he worked long and hard to find a position his shoulder naturally



The author believes the steadiest, most comfortable and repeatable bow arm position at full draw is to push the shoulder out and down as far as your natural range of motion will allow.

wanted to be in. The problem was there are many positions his shoulder felt comfortable in, but they weren't repeatable day to day or shot to shot.

He was ready to give up when he decided to push his bow shoulder out (away from the string) as far as he could. His shoulder hit a wall (limit of his mobility) and locked in place. It felt good and seemed repeatable. He found that if he pushed his shoulder out and down, he could find the same location every time. And with a little practice he found it was very repeatable and natural.

There was only one problem with his shoulder pushed out; his draw length was now a little long and he didn't want to lose draw length (speed). He was about to go back to the high and in shoulder position when he noticed a top shooter had his shoulder low and out. As he watched other top shooters, he noticed none of them had their shoulder high like he had been shooting. Only the newbies seemed to have their bow shoulder high and in.

He decided to sacrifice 5 fps, shorten his draw length and try the new shoulder position. It was a game changer. Before long, he had a repeatable shoulder position that he didn't have to constantly police during his shooting. It felt natural and he held as steady as ever.

Almost all of us have since gravitated towards pushing that bow shoulder out and down. Yes, it felt weird at first and we lost a few feet per second in arrow speed, but our shooting improved substantially! **B**

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

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By **JON E. SILKS**

BOW TEST

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ELITE MAY NOT be among the “old guard” in the bow-making business, but the company’s consistent track record of success — on tournament podiums and in the field — makes it a force to be reckoned with.

One of the keys to Elite’s success since its inception in 2005 is an unwavering focus on delivering the most shootable bows in the game! In fact, Elite claims “shootability” as its hallmark trait, defined by the collective experience of a pleasing draw cycle, excellent overall bow balance and an overall feel that ultimately increases the archer’s enjoyment and accuracy when it matters most.

Elite’s new Terrain puts the spotlight on shootability at an affordable price. Hybrid cams, outfitted with Winner’s Choice bowstring and cables, work with the past-parallel split limbs to generate advertised IBO speeds of 325 fps in tandem with an exceptionally smooth draw. The Single-Cage riser, cast and machined from lightweight aluminum, creates strength and stiffness while keeping overall bow weight under 4 pounds.

Silky Smooth

Elite focuses on shootability and shooter experience with its cam design, as you will see in the included draw-force curve and our range testing. The hybrid system features a

Elite’s new Terrain is an impressive hunting bow that combines a very enjoyable shooting experience with good arrow speed and an affordable price tag.

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: Elite Archery, 877-503-5483; elitearchery.com

Model: Terrain

Riser: Cast and machined aluminum, reflex

Grip: Flat back, molded side plates

Limbs: Past Parallel, Split

Draw Weights: 45-60 or 55-70 pounds

Draw Lengths: 25.5-31.5 inches, in half-inch increments; rotating module

Cam System: Hybrid, aluminum

Letoff: Up to 85 percent (advertised); 83.6 percent (as tested)

String: Winner’s Choice, BCY 452X, 61.25 inches

Cables (x2): Winner’s Choice, BCY 452X, 33.81 and 33.69 inches

Brace Height: 7 inches

Axle-to-Axle Length: 32.5 inches

Weight: 3.9 pounds (advertised); 3.95 pounds (as tested)

Finish: Black, Mountain Tan, Brown Sienna and OD Green

Advertised IBO Speed: 325 fps

MSRP: \$699.99

Comments: Smooth, easy to draw and a pleasure to shoot!



SHOWN IN BROWN SIENNA

pair of asymmetrical elliptical cams, with the lower cam employing three tracks (for the string and both cables), while the upper cam uses just two tracks (for the string and control cable). The buss cable splits into a yoke and anchors on the outside of the top limbs. String and cables are all Winner’s Choice. Hybrid cams generally require minimal maintenance once

dialed in. They also allow for easy timing and synchronization adjustments if you have a bow press and know which cables to twist/untwist and how to maintain balance.

A clearly marked, rotating module is easily adjusted across the 25.5-31.5-inch draw-length range, in half-inch increments. The cable stop is placed into the location corresponding to the

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BOW TEST

selected draw length and is designed to produce a solid back wall.

Power Quad

Much is expected of Elite's machined split limbs. Measuring 11.5 inches long, the limb pieces are matched into sets based on deflection values for one of two 15-pound draw-weight ranges — 45-60 pounds or 55-70 pounds. Each limb is machined from a solid billet of Gordon Composites fiberglass, an industry standard.

Elite designs its limbs to safely store more energy by optimizing the stress distribution. Positioning the limbs to move past parallel at full draw is key to taking advantage of the inherent reduction in shock, vibration and noise attributed to such configurations. The Terrain is outfitted with single-piece, cast-aluminum limb pockets that support limbs on all sides and rotate during the draw adjustment process. A molded limb pad and lock screws complete the package.

Riser Cage

Elite outfits the Terrain with an aluminum riser that is first cast and then machined into its final reflex form. Generous cutouts along with the lightweight aluminum are significant contributors to keeping the overall weight of the bow below 4 pounds. An upper Riser Cage is strategically positioned to enhance strength and stiffness, while two rest-mounting holes improve lockdown power and two sets of sight-mounting holes offer a wider sighting range.

Elite has gained a reputation for producing some of the most popular grips on the market, thanks to their size, shape and angle. The flat back Terrain grip is a combination of the riser handle and two textured, over-molded side plates and is built to position the wrist neutrally. A straight carbon rod outfitted with a Delrin slide manages cables, while two holes drilled directly into the riser serve as front and rear stabilizer-mounting positions. These, along with two quiver-mounting holes, round out the riser.

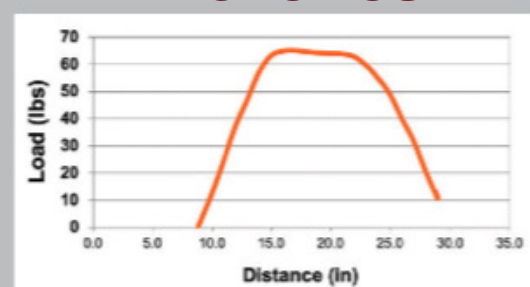
Silence & Security

Elite attacks shot noise and vibration via a String Stop with LimbSaver rod dampener and set of VibX Blocks positioned between each set of split limbs.

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ARROW SPEED	284 fps	268 fps
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DYNAMIC EFFICIENCY	84.5%	85.3%
SHOT NOISE	89.7 dBA	88.5 dBA

DRAW-FORCE CURVE



EDITOR'S NOTE:

All of our Bow Tests are conducted using the same standardized procedures and professionally calibrated testing equipment. Bows are tested with a draw length of 29 inches and a draw weight of 65 pounds, unless otherwise noted.

Another unique Elite offering is the company's Hunt Guarantee, which in the event of an equipment failure ensures you can finish your hunt, no matter where you are by shipping a fully tuned and sighted-in backup bow the next day at no charge!

At the Range

The Terrain is a pleasure to shoot, thanks to a comfortable grip, super smooth draw cycle, light mass weight, high letoff and steady hold on target. At the shot, I felt a medium jump and some low-level vibration in the handle, both of which were significantly reduced with a simple rubber band tied to the string and the addition of a quality stabilizer. Likewise, shot noise, which was mostly string related, faded to stealth levels with the stabilizer and rubber band.

The Terrain is not a lightning fast rig, but it was not designed to be. Elite created the Terrain to be a "shooter's bow" that offers great shooting enjoyment and good arrow speeds at an affordable price. I'd say that mission was accomplished! **B**



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BREATH TAKING BULLS

By MARK DEMKO

P
B
FEATURES

**TWO STATE RECORDS AND A
428-INCH NON-TYPICAL TAKEN
BY A 16-YEAR-OLD ARE AMONG
2021'S MOST IMPRESSIVE
BOW-KILLED ELK**

Sixteen-year-old Cody Vine of Arizona (left) took this 7x6 bull elk scoring 428 inches last fall while bowhunting the Kaibab National Forest. His father, James (right), who's also a professional guide, called the big bull in for him.



WHEN IT COMES TO BIG-GAME HUNTING, big whitetails are seemingly everywhere, with photos of giant typicals and impressive non-typicals all over magazines, websites and social media. Big bull elk, on the other hand, seem a bit harder to find. Part of that is due to the fact that wapiti are found over a much more limited range than whitetails, plus most states restrict, either in part or full, the number of permits issued to hunters each year.

That said, many majestic bulls are harvested annually, from the northern reaches of Alberta and British Columbia to the southern Rockies in New Mexico and Arizona. Of course, every giant elk has a story behind it — primarily due to all the hard work and effort that goes into finding and hunting big bulls with bow. Here are the tales behind four truly impressive elk harvested last fall. We hope you enjoy reading about them as much as we enjoyed putting them together.

PATIENCE PAYS OFF

CODY VINE – Arizona

Most hunters only dream of taking a 400-inch-plus bull, but if you happen to live and hunt in the right area, those dreams might actually come true more than once.

Although he's only 16, Cody Vine of Greenhaven, Ariz., already has a monster bull to his credit, having tagged a 9x8 that scored 448 while hunting his state's late rifle season a few years ago. The next step? Try and take a trophy-caliber elk with his bow.

In only his fifth year of applying, Vine drew a coveted Unit 9 archery elk tag, a permit that sometimes takes much longer to pull.

"That particular archery tag takes residents usually 16 to 20 years to draw," he said. "I just got lucky."

Prior to the hunt, which would take place in the Kaibab National Forest, Vine set a goal of trying to harvest a bull in the 375-inch range. Fortunately, his hunting partner would be his dad, James, one of the partners in and a guide for Shadow Valley Outfitters, an Arizona-based guiding service known for leading hunters to big bulls.

"He hunted up there for about 20 years," Cody said. "We spent almost every single weekend all summer long up there looking at bulls."

Once the hunt began in September, the Vines hit the ground running, getting into good bulls right from the start. After pursuing one particularly large specimen that they could never catch up with, they ended up covering a good portion of the 1,600-square-mile unit while looking for another trophy-caliber bull.

"I think I passed on probably 80 or 90 bulls in seven days of hunting," Vine said.

On the morning of Sept. 17, the Vines heard elk bugging in the distance and decided to close the gap on one particular bull that was relatively close and sounded promising. Responding to James' cow calls was a massive 7x6 that came into 12 yards, presenting Cody with a good, close shot. At approximately 7:10 a.m., Vine let loose an Easton Axis 4MM Long Range arrow from his Mathews V3X, with the Rage Hypodermic Trypan NC broadhead sealing the deal.

"He ran probably 35 or 40 yards and we could hear him crash and then we walked up to where he ran and we could see him instantly," Cody said. "He didn't go anywhere."

Amazingly, as they approached the downed animal, it was the first time Cody had an opportunity to see how large it truly was.



BREATHTAKING BULLS

"I didn't even get to see it really good when it came in," Vine recalled. "My dad just said, 'Draw your bow.' So, I did. He said, 'Put your 20-[yard] pin right on the center of its chest and let it go.'"

"So, I shot and I never got to see the points or anything. And, when I walked up to it, it was crazy — it was so big. It was way bigger than I could have imagined."

Looking back, Vine said the hunt was an incredibly cool experience, especially since he was with his father.

"We do it every year, me and my dad," he said. "I hunted with him on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. We (also) hunt on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon for deer a lot. I killed like a 212-inch buck up there with my bow."

Vine said one of the keys to their success was going hard all day long. While he noticed some bowhunters were returning to camp by 9 or 10 a.m., he and his dad continued to cover ground from sunup to the last rays of light.

"We were out all day, every day, and we were always on bulls, and they were always bugling," he said. "You just had to get in pretty close to them and then start talking to them."



Cody Vine

According to Vine, his bull officially measured 428 inches (406 $\frac{6}{8}$ net) non-typical, with 55- and 56-inch beams and a 45-inch spread. Not bad for a first-ever archery elk!

"I was hoping for something like a 380 bull," he said. "I passed four bulls on that hunt that were like 360 to 370. I just wanted one that was one step bigger, but this one is quite a few steps bigger."

KENTUCKY'S NO. 1 BULL!

TODD AYERS – Kentucky

It's not at all uncommon for hunters to give specific bucks they are after nicknames such as "The Legend" or "The Great 8," but you rarely hear of this when it comes to big elk. Deep in the hills of eastern Kentucky, however, there was a bull named "Lucky" that eluded hunters for a couple of years before his luck ran out last fall.

In 2020, Todd Ayers of Alabama contacted Hurley Combs of Lost Mountain Outfitters because he wanted to hunt elk in the state. Combs came highly recommended by one of



Todd Ayers poses with the 7x7 Kentucky bull he took while hunting with Hurley Combs of Lost Mountain Outfitters.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOST MOUNTAIN OUTFITTERS

Ayers' friends who had hunted with him the previous year. After securing an elk permit through Combs, Ayers was looking forward to his September 2021 hunt. The only problem was that he already had a Yukon moose hunt planned at the same time Kentucky's archery elk season opened. Fortunately — yes, fortunately — for Ayers, the weather was a bit too warm in the Yukon in mid-September, so the moose rut wasn't in yet and he decided to cut his trip short a few days.

"When I got to the airport [in Whitehorse], I called Hurley and he said, 'Get here as quick as you can.' So, I flew back to Alabama, practiced with my crossbow some more and headed straight up there with the intention of staying until the season was over or Lucky was dead."

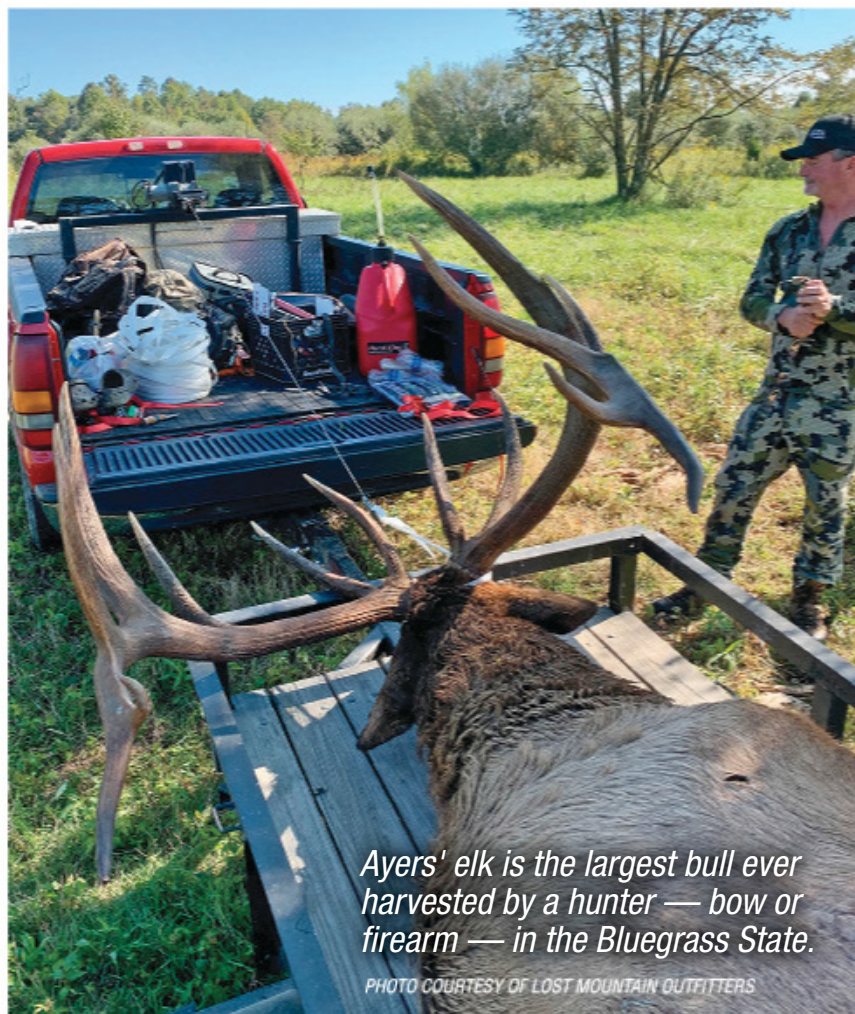
Now, for perspective, Lucky was a big bull that Combs had his sights on for a few years after first finding its shed antlers in 2019. Prior to 2019, the area Lucky lived in, Pike County, had been closed to elk hunting because it was an elk restoration area. Although Combs didn't hunt in that area that year, he was fairly certain the big bull would be there the following year.

"I took the off-season going into 2020 and spent several weeks just roaming and scouting, talking to people and kind of looking at things," Combs said, "and I landed this [particular hunting] property just weeks prior to the 2020 season."

That fall, three hunters had close encounters with the bull, then called "Casper," but none were able to seal the deal. During his hunt, Rick Pflanz of Indiana saw the big elk but couldn't get a crack at him, although Pflanz did end up taking a 350 $\frac{4}{8}$ incher that became the state-record typical archery elk. Later, a young man from Pennsylvania saw the bull, but ended up harvesting the 386-inch herd bull with his crossbow instead. Then, a third hunter got on the big elk but ended up inadvertently shooting a different but

still impressive bull. After that, Combs renamed Casper Lucky and took him off the target list until 2021.

Combs was fairly certain Lucky would be the new state-record bull if ever harvested, so in an effort to keep tabs on him, he rented a house near the Pike County property, primarily because it was four hours from his home in Somerset, Ky. He then stayed there off and on throughout the year, exploring almost every acre of the lease.



Ayers' elk is the largest bull ever harvested by a hunter — bow or firearm — in the Bluegrass State.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOST MOUNTAIN OUTFITTERS

"I wanted to learn every nook and cranny of it, so if I had to make a move on it, I knew what I was doing," he said. "If you end up making a move, knowing the landscape a lot of times is the closer on things."

While Ayers was in the Yukon, the big bull elk showed up and Combs sent videos to Ayers, telling him to get to Kentucky as soon as possible. The day after Ayers' arrival in the Bluegrass State, the pair hit the woods running.

"The first day, we were up on a high point on a mountain," Ayers said. "It was close to a lake so fog was an issue...we heard some bugling but were fogged in. I did see a nice elk, but not *that* elk."

The next day they got their first glimpse of Lucky, but he was about 75 yards away, outside Ayers' comfort zone with the crossbow.

"We were really careful not to bump him...we backed out and we came back the next morning and it was a 65-yard shot," Ayers recalled. "It was standing there bugling in a field. It was pretty awesome!"

Ayers said when he shot the bull with his Ravin crossbow, the elk only ran about 50 yards before collapsing, thanks to the lethal work of the QAD Exodus broadhead. At first, he was in shock at the enormity of the bull. But what he remembers most about the experience now is the seconds right before the shot.

"I was looking at this big, 400-inch bull standing broadside bugling and the wind was blowing that scent (of that rutting bull) in my face. That was the high spot, right before I pulled the trigger."

Ayers' enormous 7x7 ended up grossing just over 403 inches in the Boone and Crockett scoring system, with a net score of 392 $\frac{3}{4}$, making it the largest elk — typical or non-typical — ever killed by a hunter in Kentucky. It also happens to be the second-largest typical bull taken anywhere in North America last year, according to Boone and Crockett.

For Combs, the end of the hunt was a bittersweet moment, a flood of emotions after seeing the animal numerous times over the past few years.

"We kind of took a gamble on him in 2020 with those three hunters," Combs said. "He didn't live on the property, but he rutted on the property, so he would come and go. He showed up during the rut, just like he did the previous year, and it kind of all just worked out. It's a hunt I'll never forget."

THE 19-YEAR BULL

DALE THORP — Oregon

Dale Thorp's 2021 archery elk hunt actually began nearly two decades ago, when he set a goal of taking a 350-inch, public-land bull in his home state of Oregon, a state that's home to good numbers of elk but isn't necessarily as well-known as other western states when it comes to trophy potential. Nineteen years ago, he started applying for a limited-entry archery elk tag for one of the Mount Emily units, finally drawing the coveted permit last summer.

From the start, nothing about Thorp's hunt would be easy. For starters, his Roseburg, Ore., home was seven-plus hours away from where he'd be hunting in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. Starting in July, he and his son, Carter, made several trips — 460 miles one way — to familiarize themselves with the land and the local elk herd. Then, he set aside three weeks of vacation for his September hunt, with the plan that his 19-year-old daughter, Shalynn, would join him for the first eight days of the trip.

Early on in the hunt, father and daughter flirted with some decent bulls, including a 330-class that Thorp passed on and a much bigger bull he simply couldn't get close enough to for a shot.

"We spent the next several days in pursuit of that guy (and) never could push in on him," Thorp said. "The bulls in our area are super squirrely. The bull-to-cow ratio is really high and so they've played the game a lot."

"They'll play with you, but they won't come in for the most part. They just like to keep a location on you and I didn't learn that until the second week, unfortunately. So, this guy just really handed us our lunch for a few days."

As the week wore on, the miles started to pile up, with the hunting growing harder and the mountains getting

Dale Thorp (right) spent the first eight days of his 2021 elk hunt with his 19-year-old daughter, Shalynn.





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BREATHTAKING BULLS



Oregon's Dale Thorp spent 19 years applying before finally drawing a limited-entry archery tag in his home state, allowing him to fulfill a longtime dream of tagging a 350-inch bull on public land.

steeper. To her credit, Shalynn refused to quit, despite having traveled more than 55 miles on foot.

"She had five different blisters on her feet," Thorp said. "[One] day, when she stood up out of bed, one of the blisters split and blood started running down her heel. I asked, 'What do you want to do?' She said, 'This is your tag, let's go.'"

But, the very next day, more adversity set in. After hearing two bulls bugling, the Thorps decided to move in on the closer one.

"That bull comes in at about 60 yards — well within my effective range — and as I go to full draw, I feel a really big tremor or shake in my left arm and come to find out (later) that I have a bulging disk in my neck after previously having three surgeries..." Thorp said. "I can't hold my pin on the animal and he ended up walking away, which probably was one of the hardest things I've ever dealt with."

Fortunately, Thorp was able to drive to a nearby town to grab plenty of ibuprofen and Icy Hot, allowing him to manage the pain for the rest of the hunt. But, a few days later, he under-shot a good bull, leading him to wonder if he'd blown his opportunities.

"I was pretty much emotionally drained; I had four more days of hunting before I had to go home, so the pressure was kind of starting to build," he said.

Then, everything turned around. As he was driving down a logging road, he looked out his truck's pas-

senger window and saw a cow and respectable bull watching him. Continuing on, Thorp stopped and parked a quarter-mile down the road. He then grabbed his bow and sneaked back to where he saw the elk, keeping the wind in his favor the entire way.

When he arrived, the first bull he saw was a smaller one he estimates was about 300 inches. He let that elk walk with the hope that the bigger one, a 6x7, would emerge into the clearing for a shot.

"After about 20 or 25 minutes, he came out to check on a cow and he gave me a good quartering-away/broadside shot," Thorp said. "As I shot, the nearest I can figure out is he took a little step, because he was pushing cows around and stuff. I didn't cow call at him; I was just letting him go natural. As I shot, he took a little bit of a step. With that angle and at that distance, it didn't take much. I thought I had missed."

Although he believed he'd under-shot the bull, when Thorp went to look for his arrow he was shocked. There, laying only 35 yards away, was the elk he had long dreamt of. The shot from his Hoyt REDWRX Carbon RX-4 had hit the mark, with the Easton arrow and G5 Striker taking care of business. After 16 days of hard hunting, pain and missed chances, he'd taken a 352 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch (gross green score), DIY, public-land bull in his home state.

"It was just a flood of emotions and tears," he said. "I was blubbering like an idiot."



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BREATHTAKING BULLS

STATE-RECORD BULL

IAN CRAIG – Pennsylvania

As someone who only started bow-hunting three years ago, the story of Ian Craig and his 2021 Pennsylvania archery elk hunt is as improbable as it is unlikely. First off, the Grove City, Pa., resident drew an archery elk tag in only his second year of applying, something that's akin to winning the lottery. In 2021, only 29 archery elk permits were available in the state, and more than 25,700 people applied for them.

"I wasn't even going to apply, because I was thinking there's no chance of me drawing a bull tag," Craig said. "My fiancée said, 'For the money, you should just apply. It's worth a shot.'"

Craig said the Pennsylvania Game Commission called him on the drawing day, Aug. 21, to let him know he'd been awarded a permit and soon after, his phone started ringing with people calling to congratulate him and outfitters reaching out to offer their services. Craig opted to hunt with Elk County Outfitters because of its reputation, success on bulls and how comfortable he felt after meeting them.

Craig's hunt started on Sept. 13 and he was paired with guides John Kovatch and Eric Stafford. The plan was to hunt up to two weeks if necessary, essentially the length of the state's archery elk season.

"It was really hot that first week," Craig said. "It was in the upper 80s, so the elk really weren't moving. We were really [only] hunting in the mornings and the evenings."

That first night, the trio saw a group of 10 bulls crossing the road af-

ter they'd left the clover field they were hunting. The next day, Craig passed on a 20-yard shot on a 6x6 knowing there was still plenty of time left to hunt. Then, a few days later, an 8x8 approached to within in 60 yards of their setup right before dark.

"John said, 'What do you want to do here. Do you want to take a poke at it?'" Craig recalled. "I said, 'What are the odds that it ducks my arrow?' He said, 'I've never seen an animal that big duck an arrow.'"

"So, I drew on him. I let my arrow fly and he ducked my arrow; his back went to his stomach (area). He went out about five more yards and started bugling...and just kind of hung out there."

Although disappointed in his miss, Craig was fairly confident he'd get another opportunity. And, although they spent time chasing a big 9x7, the first week ended without another shot. After returning home on Sunday to see his fiancée and recharge his batteries, Craig resumed hunting Sept. 20, encountering six decent bulls in a field that evening.

"Seeing all those nice bulls, I kind of felt like no matter what it is — 5x5 or 6x6 — the first decent bull I see in range, I'm shooting."

The following day, his dad, Tom, joined them in the field. Although they didn't see much that morning, Tom suggested they go back to the clover field where they'd seen all the bulls on the first day of the hunt. Upon arrival that afternoon, they encountered a cow elk, so they backed off for fear of spooking her and ruining the hunt for the evening. Once she left, however, they set up in the corner of the woods overlooking the field. Shortly thereaf-

After only two years of applying, Ian Craig of Pennsylvania beat the odds and drew a coveted archery elk tag in his home state, ultimately taking down the new state-record, non-typical archery elk while hunting with Elk County Outfitters.

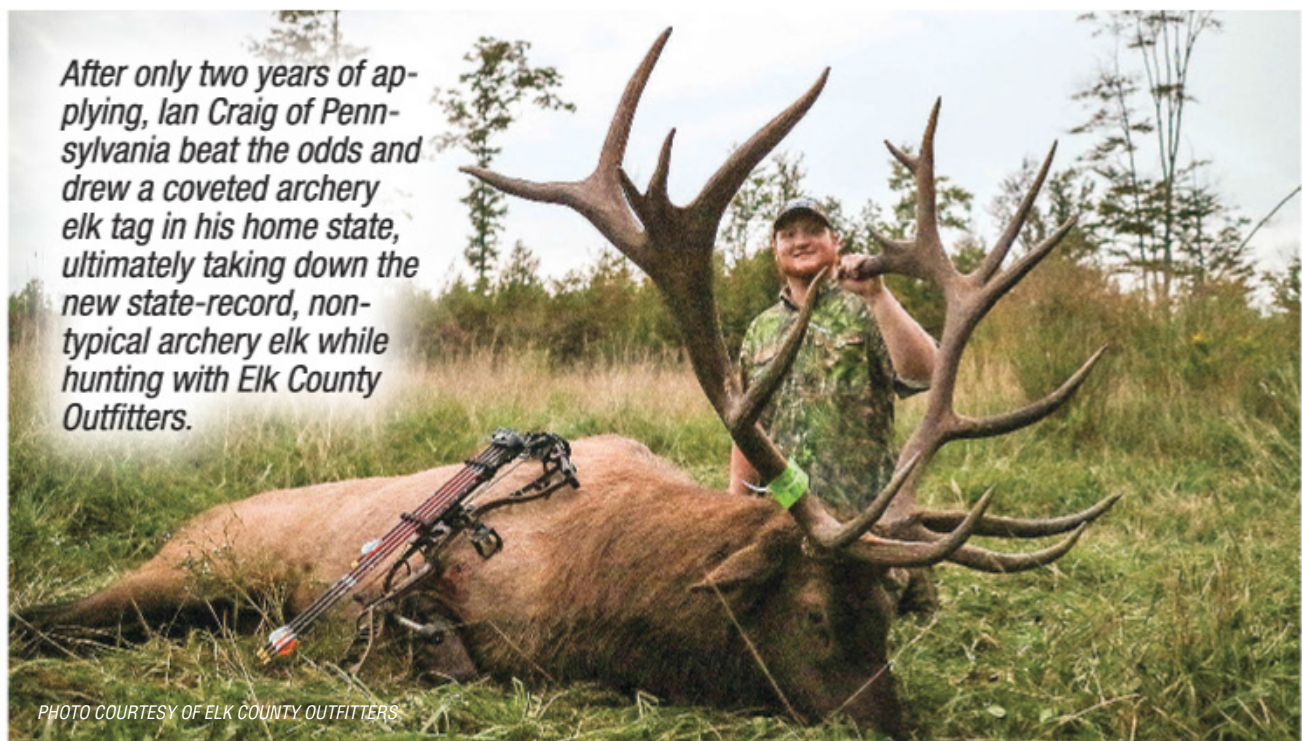


PHOTO COURTESY OF ELK COUNTY OUTFITTERS



*Craig was joined
afield by his
father, Tom (left),
on the day he
took the bull.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELK COUNTY OUTFITTERS

ter, a couple of bulls started bugling and the action heated up.

"My bull came out of the woods at 300 yards," Craig said. "I saw its rack and I was just like, holy moly, we can't screw this one up."

With Stafford calling and the other, closer bull bugling regularly, the big elk simply couldn't help itself. In a matter of minutes, it closed the distance between them to less than 30 yards. Drawing back his Hoyt Nitrum Turbo, Craig let his Carbon Express arrow and G5 broadhead fly.

"His right (leg) was back and he was looking at me and I was able I put one right in his heart," Craig said. "He ran about 50 yards and went down."

The big 8x10 ended up scoring 400 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, making it the largest non-typical archery bull ever taken in Pennsylvania. The animal had a nearly 48-inch inside spread, 48-inch main beams and 20-inch G2s, with nearly 39 inches of abnormal points.

Craig said the day was very special because his father was only 10 yards behind him when he shot. But, what made the hunt especially sweet was the fact that the big bull was the first animal he'd ever harvested with a bow.

"All of the guides were poking fun at me [saying] anything you kill the rest of your life, it's just never going to amount to what this was," Craig said. "You got your first kill with your bow and [it's] a state-record bull."

After only picking up a bow a few years ago, the then 24-year-old had indeed done the improbable. Not only had he drawn an elk tag against long odds and shot a 400-inch bull, it also ended up being a new state record.

"When I killed it, we knew we had something special," Craig said. "We knew it was over 400 — the guides knew it by looking at it. But never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I'd be taking a state-record bull." **B**

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PATIENCE IS THE KEY TO THIS PROVEN STRATEGY

The stage was set! I had positioned myself in a great spot, tucked into the shadows amongst a bunch of aspens. With the wind in my face and the herd moving my way, all that was left to do was be patient and wait on the opportunity I had worked so hard to earn over the previous eight days.

As the herd meticulously worked its way up the draw, with the herd bull bringing up the rear, I couldn't help but reflect on how I had *FINALLY* gotten to this moment. I had watched this herd make this move a few days prior and knew my opportunity was coming. Many long days and sleepless

nights of dogging the herd, learning its habits and not letting the elk know I was tagging along for the ride was about to pay off in a BIG way!

Method to the Madness

Calling and decoying is all the rage in today's elk-hunting world. I can cer-

THE HERD

By CLINT CASPER



One of the best strategies for filling an archery elk tag is to find a herd and follow it for several days, studying its behavior and travel patterns until an opportunity presents itself.

PHOTO BY VIC SCHENDEL

tainly understand why; after all, who doesn't love to hear a bull scream his head off and roar like a dinosaur for minutes on end? Aside from the awesome antlers atop their heads, that's the main reason bull elk are so sought after during their rut. Their aggressive behavior and responsiveness to calling

makes hunting them extremely fun and highly addictive!

Decoying is another fabulous tactic. To see a bull foaming at the mouth and charging into your cow or satellite bull decoy is probably about as much of an adrenaline rush as you can legally find in the forest!

But what happens if we don't punch our tag when one of these scenarios presents itself? What happens if we lose the herd or can't find elk? The answer is simple; we have to go find more elk! Correct, but let's not forget how nomadic elk are in the first place. Now throw the rut and pressure from other

MOVE WITH THE HERD



Most elk hunters love calling, since interacting with a bull is extremely exciting. However, calling should not be your only, or even primary, method for locating elk in the field.

bowhunters into the mix and you have the perfect recipe for disaster when it comes to knowing where a bull or herd will be from one day to the next.

This is where my strategy of moving with the herd becomes so productive and deadly. The plan is to find a herd and stay with it until a shot opportunity presents itself. In order to pull this off, you must travel extremely

light and be nimble with your camping equipment and daily habits. In a nutshell, you're going to be constantly on the move, carrying camp on your back and likely sleeping in a different location each night. Your "days" will typically begin well before sunrise and won't end until well after dark as you learn the herd's travel patterns and study its habits. It certainly isn't an

easy way to fill a tag, but I will share some tips on making your life easier while putting this tactic to good use.

Set for Success

Committing to this strategy requires you to become a nomadic bowhunter. Mobility is everything, which requires you to whittle your gear to the bare minimum. Remember, you are basically going to be living in the shadow of the herd night and day. As any experienced elk hunter knows, these animals are very nomadic themselves, and they can cover many miles each day even without hunting pressure. This is just what elk do on a daily basis as they travel to eat, drink and bed in secure locations where cover and winds help them elude predators. Keeping up with the elk is no easy task, but the reward is that you never have to stand there scratching your head, wondering where the elk are.

A great backpack is essential for employing this strategy, and I recommend giving yourself at least a few days to as much as a week since it will take you some time to find elk, learn their habits and figure out how you can set up an effective ambush.

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Moving with the herd requires you to be as mobile as possible, which means keeping gear to a minimum. The author's preferred shelter is a small, one-person tent that weighs less than two pounds.

I find that a 4,000-cubic-inch pack is just the right size for my needs, and I personally prefer packs from Kifaru due to the simple design and bomb-proof engineering.

Next comes my shelter and sleep system. These items are extremely important, because the weight can really add up if you don't choose wisely here. I prefer a small, one-person tent rather than a bivy sack because it offers better protection from the elements. However, I "customize" my tent by cutting off extra materials I

don't need, such as pockets on the inside and extra loops. I also use one bag to hold all my tent supplies to shave off ounces. Currently, my shelter setup weighs less than 2 pounds, and I can set it up in about 5 minutes. This shelter system packs up extremely small inside my pack, and I honestly don't even know it's inside my pack during the day! I also urge you to practice setting up and packing your tent at home before your trip, since you'll be doing it repeatedly on your hunt, and usually in the dark.

As for my sleeping bag, I prefer a "three-season" model. Granted, this bag weighs a bit more than a "two-season" bag, but it offers better insulation and puts a little more cushion between me and the ground after a hard day on the mountain. A little extra warmth and a little extra comfort equal a better night's sleep, and it's hard to overestimate the value of that when hunting the backcountry! My bag of choice is down-filled and rated for temperatures as low as 10 degrees. This keeps me prepared even in the event of an early-season snowstorm, while remaining very light and packable. As for a pillow, I use my puffy



The author lightens his food load by relying on dehydrated meals as his main source of sustenance in the field. He can cook them with a lightweight camp stove using water he purifies in the field.



jacket to pull double duty there, and I can pack my bag and my jacket into my pack in less than 3 minutes.

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MOVE WITH THE HERD

Finally, for food and water, I also keep things as light as possible. I use a small MSR camping stove to boil water and carry a Nalgene bottle and LifeStraw bottle to store water. I like to keep about 50 ounces of water on hand and replenish whenever possible. I also carry a Steripen water purifier that kills bacteria via UV rays. All told, this is an extremely effective and lightweight hydration system. For food, I usually try to consume around 3,000 calories per day, so a main, freeze-dried meal (Mountain House, Heather's Choice, etc.) is very important, along with a handful of high-fat, high-protein snacks. I like to organize my food by the day, with a separate Ziploc bag for each day. This keeps things organized and ready to go.

One other note regarding food involves *when* to eat. Most of the time, I eat my main meal in the middle of the day. This is the easiest time to take an hour (while the elk herd is bedded down resting) to boil water, enjoy a meal and rest a bit. Not only is it a good use of the down time, but it avoids having to cook late at night when I'm dog tired and just want to go to sleep.

As for the rest of the gear you carry on your hunt, just remember that unless you deem an item "essential," it will not be your friend. Every extra ounce of weight you add only makes the task of keeping up with the herd

harder. So, think long and hard about what makes it into your pack and choose wisely.

Stick with the Plan

Now that we've covered the gear, let's cover the gameplan for finding and staying with elk. My strategy, as soon as I leave the truck on day one, is to find a herd of elk and see where it takes me! Before the hunt, I do a lot of scouting via Google Earth and onX Hunt. I like to mark spots such as patches of dark timber, secluded meadows and northern slopes — typical areas where elk love to hang out.

I will generally start searching for elk and elk sign in these places and let what I'm seeing, or not seeing, be my guide. I typically do all my elk hunting during their rut, so calling can be an effective way to find a bull, too. Sometimes I will blind call during the day in hopes a cow or bull answers. But beware; overcalling is common among elk hunters and should not be your only, or even your main, tool for finding elk. I have better luck with calling at night, because bulls are more apt to respond in the darkness. So, if you don't find elk by day, don't be afraid to stay on the move at night and hook up with a herd that way.

Once I find elk (which can be a daunting task that sometimes takes several days), I then pick apart the herd and study individual members. I want to learn everything I can about the herd and its habits. I will mark down



After shadowing this bull and his harem of cows for several days, the author used the intelligence he gathered to set up an ambush and ended his hunt with a perfect shot.



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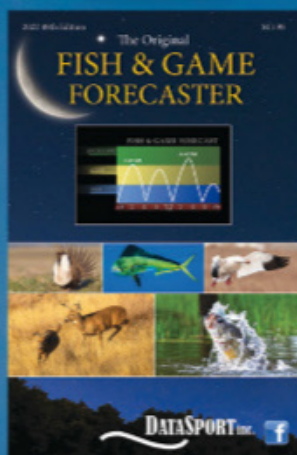
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MOVE WITH THE HERD

daily, via onX, where they were, where they went and the direction of travel. This is very important because it allows me to figure out preferred bedding, watering and feeding locations. Putting these puzzle pieces together is critical to making a successful stalk or ambush on a good bull!

I will stay with the herd, always keeping the wind in my favor and staying out of sight as much as possible. My goal is to "coyote" the herd long enough that a bull puts itself in a "killable" position. Until then, I move with the herd all day, every day, studying as I go.

Once darkness falls, my goal is always to be a few hundred yards from where I last saw the herd, but in the direction they were heading. I want to camp out in front of them, but also in a spot where chances are they won't be. Rock bands, cliffs and small patches of timber are where I like to camp. I certainly stay away from dark timber and meadows, as elk frequent these spots a lot, and I do not want them stumbling into my camp at night, revealing my presence.

Bulls are very vocal at night! A lot of bugling takes place, so my plan is to be up hours before the sun, pack up camp and be listening for my herd to start talking. Once I locate them again, which usually is from a bugle in the darkness, I will head in their direction, with the wind in my face as stated previously. This is a repeat pattern every day, in hopes of learning their habits and finding a spot where a bull puts himself into a vulnerable spot where I can slip an arrow into him!

Most of my shots come from either stalking a bull that is feeding, or bedded midday. The other good bet is by cutting off the herd and setting myself up in an ambush spot. The story at the beginning of this article is a prime example of studying the herd, knowing their habits and getting out in front of them. I cut that herd off as they headed to some dark timber where I knew they loved to bed. As the bull strolled past at 76 yards, I made a perfect shot!

Moving with the herd is a great strategy to not only bowhunt bugling bull elk, but also to learn a ton about elk behavior. This style of bowhunting is not for everyone, but it can be an extremely effective way to arrow your next big bull! **B**

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It was the third day of a five-day elk hunt with R&K Hunting Company at the Queen Mountain Guest Ranch in Wyoming. We had been hitting it hard every day and enjoying nearly non-stop action, with elk all around us. We couldn't have asked for better conditions; the weather was absolutely perfect!

Back on day one, my wife Vicki, son RJ and I each ventured out in a different direction with our guides and cameramen. It wasn't long after getting into the woods before I got a text message from RJ saying, "Hey Dad, I got a good bull down!" The message sent chills down my spine and adrenaline through my veins! I was beyond pumped for RJ to get his second bull elk with a Hoyt in his hand! As any parent knows, the proudest moments come when you least expect them, and I definitely did not expect a text like that first thing on the first morning.

Then again, RJ's success only reinforced what we already knew; this was one of the best elk-hunting locations in America, and we were fortunate to be there. As the morning progressed, my companions and I hiked for a good while, listening to elk bugle all around us. Although we saw several good bulls, none of them wanted to play with us. That was honestly OK with me — I just love being in elk country in September!

We were following a herd of elk that bedded down for the day and we decided to wait them out on the mountain. Later in the afternoon, the elk finally started to talk again, so Rick, our guide, Eddie, our cameraman, and I began slowly weaving our way toward the elk through some patches of aspens. All of a sudden, a bull bugled right in front of us! We quickly checked the wind and ran — well, I should say more like trotted — across a sage flat in an effort to reach the best cover and get downwind of



The author's son, RJ Cianciarulo, got the family's Wyoming elk hunt off to a fast start by taking this nice bull on the very first morning.

the bull. We very hastily set up, all while listening to two bulls screaming challenges to one another. Rick headed down the mountain to try and call the bulls past us, while

HERO TO ZERO —AND BACK AGAIN!

By RALPH CIANCARULO

All's Well That Ends Well in Elk Country

"THIS BULL WAS TRULY A GIFT,
A REWARD FOR OUR EFFORTS AND A LESSON
ABOUT THE VALUE OF PERSEVERANCE
IN THE FACE OF FAILURE."



Southwest Wyoming's Queen Mountain Guest Ranch is home to some of America's finest elk habitat and elk hunting. Ralph Cianciarulo hit this bull on day three of his hunt, miraculously recovering it two days later after his arrow had deflected off a branch en route to the animal.

HERO TO ZERO — AND BACK AGAIN!



It is always encouraging to find fresh elk sign — such as this fresh rub and heavily used wallow — in your hunting area.



Eddie settled in with his camera gear and I nestled in front of a deadfall to help break up my silhouette.

The first bull came out and walked directly to the middle of the sage flat, right where we had just trotted across, and stood out there just bugling away!

Meanwhile, the second bull made its way toward us through the timber, bugling and grunting the whole way. This was it; I had already checked the distance, and I could see the bull heading our way through the trees. I drew my Hoyt, going through the motions by muscle memory, and prepared to take the shot.

Deflected & Dejected

At 32 yards, I grunted at the bull and stopped it in its tracks. I settled

my sight pin on the crease behind its shoulder and released the string. But instead of watching my nock enter the honey hole, I watched my fletching dip, tail down, and as if in slow motion, my Easton Axis 4MM arrow hit the bull high in the back. My heart sank, and in a fraction of a second, I went from a hero to a zero.

Somehow, in all the excitement, I had hit a branch my old eyes never even saw. The bull spun around, and as it vacated the area, I could see my

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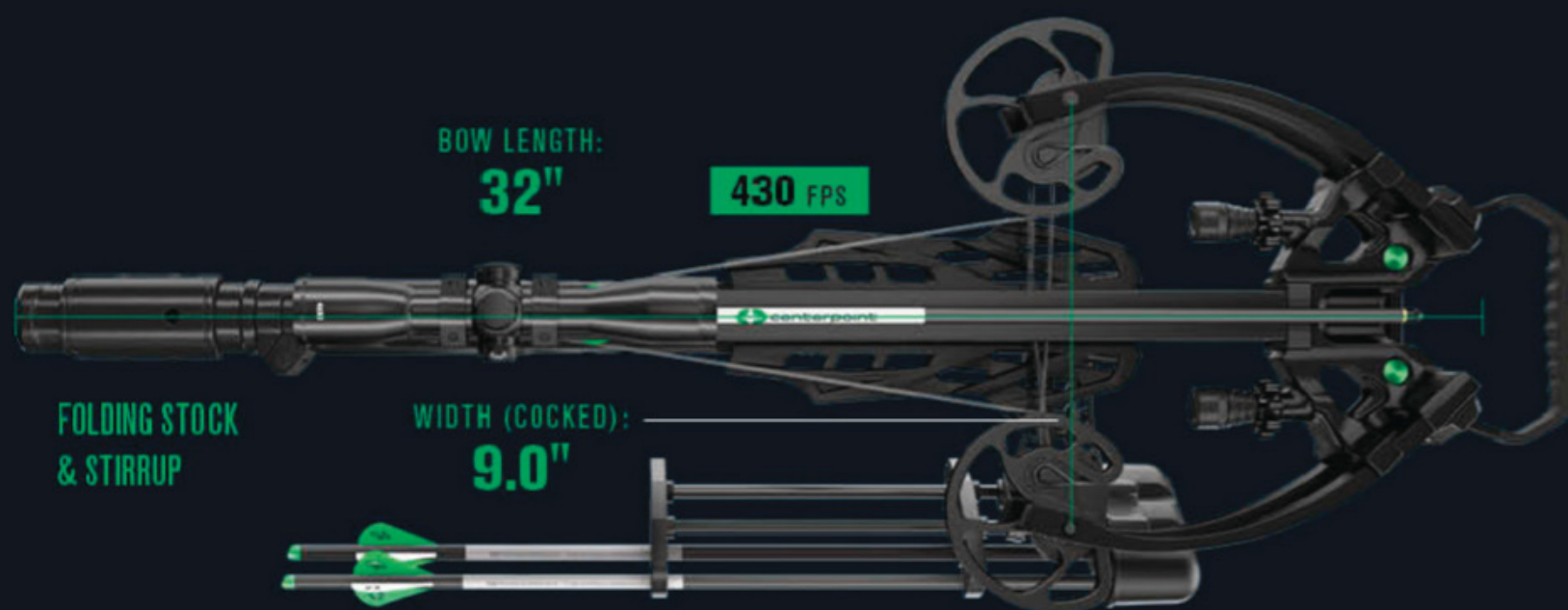
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HERO TO ZERO — AND BACK AGAIN!

arrow protruding high on the elk's side. I believe there were a few adjectives spoken, and my spirit sank because I knew what this meant.

In most outfitted hunting camps these days, the rule is that if you draw blood on animal, that's your animal whether you recover it or not. In other words, one way or the other your hunt is effectively over. R&K Hunting Company is no exception, and I knew the rule well in advance of the hunt. Having the possibility of something like this going wrong just adds that much more stress to the moment of truth and makes me all the more determined to perform to the best of my abilities.

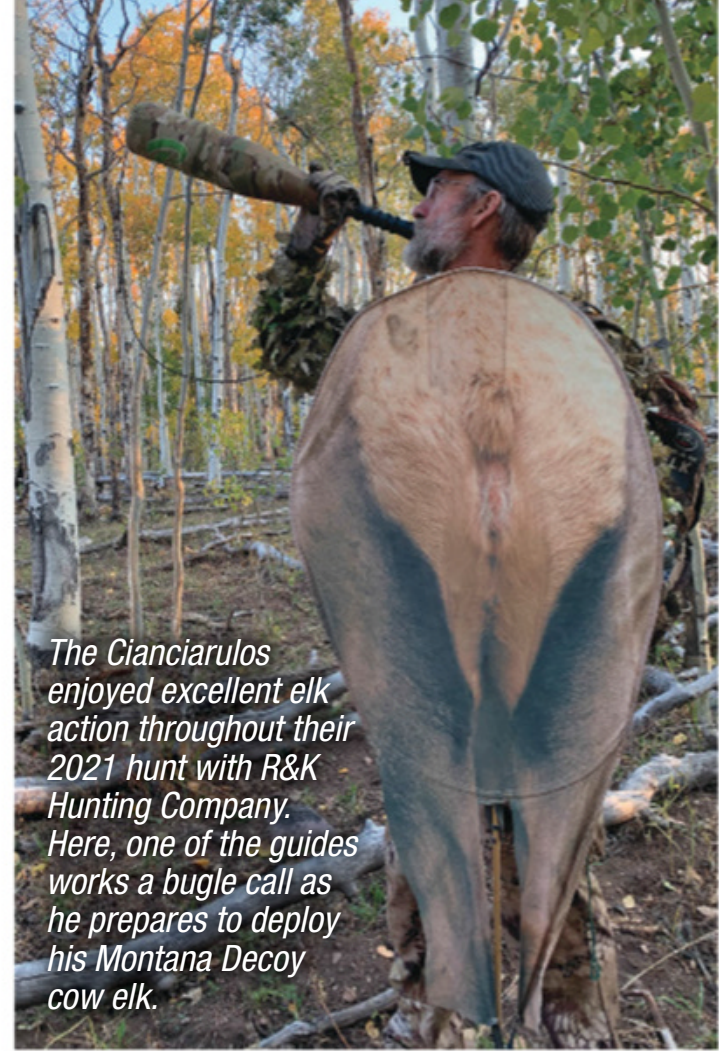
In this particular case, I knew I had prepared properly with my equipment and practice time. I knew the range to the bull and executed what felt like a great shot. But I hadn't seen that darn branch! And now I had drawn blood, and it was no one's fault but mine. I was humbled, and my mind was soon flooded with nagging questions. Are my aging eyes failing me? Would a younger me have seen the branch and made an adjustment before releasing the arrow?

Rick, Eddie and I did our due diligence, spending hours searching for blood, my arrow or any other sign of my bull with no luck whatsoever. After watching the video footage of the shot numerous times, we headed back to camp and, after discussing the situation with everyone, decided not to give up. With two days left, we would work our butts off to try to get back on this herd and get back on my bull.

Miraculous Discovery

We were back in the area early the next morning, well before sunrise. Although we couldn't see much in the darkness, we heard the bulls and cows talking back and forth. We worked our way into the herd as daylight arrived and glassed all the elk, trying to locate a blood spot high on the back of a bull. We stayed on them and followed them to bed, waiting for the afternoon to get them going, and sure enough they did! However, it was getting dark and we couldn't push after them due to an unfavorable wind.

That night back at camp, other hunters who had found success were bringing in their bulls. Vicki had seen lots of action but still had not gotten a



The Cianciarulos enjoyed excellent elk action throughout their 2021 hunt with R&K Hunting Company. Here, one of the guides works a bugle call as he prepares to deploy his Montana Decoy cow elk.

shot. And Rick, Eddie and I were still not giving up hope! Dinner was filled with exciting stories, and everyone was wondering whether we would find my bull. Needless to say, it was another sleepless night for me.

The last morning of our hunt started

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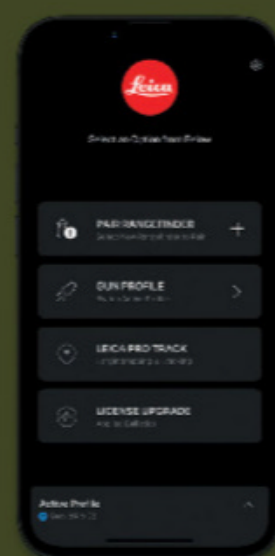
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HERO TO ZERO — AND BACK AGAIN!

out the same as the day before. We heard the elk up on the sage flat and quickly climbed to a better vantage point. We heard one heck of a fight, with two bulls going at it for quite a while and then silence. We made the decision to stay out all day and wait for the elk to get going for the last afternoon. As we sat there, I began to realize I could easily have given up after the shot and failing to find any sign, but we didn't! We all worked as a team, trying to get back on my bull.

A few hours later, the elk started to move and feed above us, and we quietly watched them. As they moved down a creek and the sun began setting, we spotted what looked like a deadhead elk lying in the trees. Rick went over to investigate. When he returned, he said it wasn't a deadhead but rather a recently expired bull. From where we stood, it definitely looked like a skull, so I had to go see for myself.

To my surprise, there lay a freshly downed bull, and he looked somewhat familiar. I dropped to my knees and quickly ran my hands down his back and there it was, the wound from



This is what the author's downed bull looked like when viewed from distance. At first, the group thought it was just an old skull with antlers attached.

my Thunderhead! Now, I know what you're thinking, but as God is my witness (and this is all on camera) there laid MY bull!

Rick, Eddie and I couldn't believe it. We checked again and again to confirm the location of the wound from my arrow. Even more amazing was the fact the bull — which was more than a mile from where I had shot him — had only

recently died and there was no spoilage of the meat. It even appeared that sometime in the two days since our encounter, the bull had been in one heck of a fight, as there were tine marks embedded in his rear thighs and a broken tine stuck in his skull plate.

The fact that we had been able to somehow walk up on the bull was nothing short of miraculous. I did the

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This is the author's bull as it laid when discovered. Finding the bull at all was amazing, but discovering it only shortly after it expired and being able to salvage all the meat was nothing short of incredible! Here, Vicki, Rob, Rick and Ralph share in the excitement. Below, Ralph starts skinning.

only thing I could think to do; I fell to my knees and thanked God for giving us the strength to not give up and for helping guide us to this spot. This bull was truly a gift, a reward for our efforts and a lesson about the value of perseverance in the face of failure.

We wasted no time letting Vicki, Rob and Kenneth know I found my bull, and they willingly gave up the



last few hours of their hunt to come and share in our good fortune. Together, we broke out our knives and meat bags and processed my bull. I guess going from hero to zero — and back again — truly keeps you a humble hero. All's well that ends well! **B**

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FROM BAD TO GOOD

A TOUGH ELK TRIP IN MONTANA'S BADLANDS LEADS TO A GREAT DEER HUNT

BY EDDIE CLAYPOOL

When the Claypool Clan headed for Montana in September 2021, new horizons lay dead-ahead. Rather than heading for high, rugged, wild country, I was about to stick my nose into a type of elk country of which I was totally unfamiliar: badlands.

Having always heard of the infamous Missouri River Breaks country, I'd finally decided to see what all the talk was about. I certainly knew that there were mature bulls there, but I'd always been slightly apprehensive about the makeup of the terrain. Would it be scenic? Would it be intriguing? Would there be respite from humanity? Would I fall in love with the place? Only time would tell, and

we were on a collision course with the answers to those very questions.

After applying for and drawing a limited elk tag, I was now in possession of one of only 10 non-resident elk archery permits for the easternmost elk unit on the north side of the Missouri River. Actually, my southern boundary consisted of a lake, not the mighty Missouri. And, having simply stabbed in the dark at my unit choice, I knew I was in for a learning experience. Could I pull a good bull out of this country? Would the hunt be an enjoyable experience? Once again, the answers lay ahead.

Toward the evening of our second day on the lone highway, Peg,

Lulu and I rolled across the dam of Fort Peck Reservoir. Wheeling onto a sandy spit of land, we soon had a nice camp set up. As the sun set across the massive waters below us, a warm September evening invited us to hike down to the shoreline for some relaxation. Grabbing some driftwood, I soon had a small fire flickering as the coolness settled into the cove where we loitered. Plopping down in some camping chairs beside the calm waters, Peg and I became lost in our thoughts. Lulu, on the other hand, napped on the sandy beach as the stars slowly filled a clear sky. I'd soon find out what I'd gotten myself into, but right now it was time to put



MARK RAYCROFT PHOTOGRAPHY

hunting thoughts aside and simply focus on the perfection of the moment. Surrounded by my girls, solitude and an Indian summer night, I dozed off. However, it wasn't long before I found myself awakened by Peg — time to head for bed, a good night's sleep and a bunch of exploration the next day.

Ready for Adventure

After a good breakfast in the morning, we packed lunch and embarked on a road trip. My hunting unit was a vast area, and a full day spent exploring the primitive road system was in order. Heading for the hills, it wasn't long before I began to feel a strong sense of apprehension coming over

me — this country was simply *ugly*. Barren and dry, the rough, rocky and dusty roads wore thin on my patience. Bouncing and banging over the endless miles of broken terrain soon began to take a toll on everyone.

Pulling onto a high point, I soon looked out over the lion's share of my hunting unit. The canyons and mesas of the breaks flowed downhill for many miles toward the distant lake. Pockets of scrubby trees and the occasional dirt tank dotted the otherwise barren landscape that didn't resemble anything I'd ever considered elk country. How could elk thrive in this malarkey? What had I gotten myself into? Could I find and harvest a good

bull here? Oh well, at least it wasn't going to be gut-wrenching to put boots to this terrain!

After nearly 10 hours of beating our brains out — and attempting to tear up my Ford — my loyal followers were near mutiny, so I quickly headed for camp. Sitting around the lakeshore at sunset, on the close of our first full day in my hunting unit, we said little. The mutual consensus was that this was 'crappy country.' So, now what? With a \$1,000 hunting permit in my pocket, I felt hemmed in. As I was looking for a way out, I felt ashamed of my lack of dedication. I knew I was in trouble since serious focus simply wasn't possible anymore.

FROM BAD TO GOOD

For the next few days, I set out alone, well before daylight, to scout my hunting area. Peg and Lulu simply wouldn't go near the truck anymore. And, as the days slid by, I slowly found myself becoming less and less intrigued with the challenge that lay before me.

As the reality of the resource became starkly apparent to me, my heart sank. Though there were a few elk in this country, and I was certain there were some mature bulls available, I simply had developed a disdain for the habitat — the undertaking had become more of an endurance test than an enjoyable hunt. Forlorn, I plodded forward.

The Hunt Begins

Opening morning of the season found me roaming around the best-looking habitat that my unit had to offer. After getting into a timbered canyon well before daylight, I began a snail's-pace advance through the area. As sunrise spilled on the scene, I scanned the area carefully, soon spotting a small 5x5 bull nearby. Already desperate for a way out, I found myself contemplating killing this hapless, lone adolescent. Turning my head in a different direction, however, I vowed to give the unit and hunt a better chance.

A couple hours after daylight, and a mile into my hunt, a distant sound

— the drone of an ATV — reached my ears. *Great*, I thought, *what an uplifting interjection*.

Glancing to my left, some yellowish color caught my eye. Grabbing my binos, I realized that three cows were standing motionless about 100 yards away. Clearly homed in on the sound of the approaching ATV, they quickly bolted away. A few minutes later, the machine had approached to within a short distance of my position, so I slowly made my way over to where the sound had terminated. Spotting a couple of bowhunters dismounting their ride and heading in my direction, I darted out of sight and headed back in the direction from which I'd come. *Was I having fun yet?*

The rest of the day was spent exploring new pockets of cover and canyons that couldn't be accessed without a little bit of walking. Yet, in all the places I hiked, human tracks already littered the landscape. This was only the first day of the season and the prime areas were already hammered. For the remainder of my day, no more elk were encountered, only more ATVs and people. So, as I bounced along in my Ford that evening headed for camp, I was mentally in a bad place; my outlook was in the gutter. And, as I lay down to rest that night, I was once again looking for a way out. I realized that even if I were to kill a Boone and Crockett-caliber bull on this hunt, the hunt would still not be a good memory. I closed my eyes and prayed for a positive change.

Time for Plan B

Unable to convince myself to bail on the outing, the next morning found me plodding forward. Over the next week, my tally for 'sightings' went something like this: hundreds of cattle, dozens of people and three elk. I didn't hear a bugle and didn't see a mature bull — just more rocks, more dirt, more dust and more cacti.



With a Montana license that also allowed him to hunt deer, Claypool shifted gears to pursuing whitetails along the Milk River. A perfect setup on an oxbow put him near several well-worn trails and left him feeling good about his prospects for harvesting a buck.

As the second week of the season arrived, I finally decided I'd had it. After informing Peg that I was shifting gears for week two and would hunt deer, it felt like a heavy load had been lifted from my spirit. And since my tag already included an either-sex deer permit, it was now 'game on.' Let the fun begin; after all, I could always come back to elk later.

For the next couple of days, I explored the country along the Milk River and soon realized the area was stocked full of whitetails. I was having fun now — goofing around, exploring some here, hunting a little over there. With some public land available, along with an ample smattering of walk-in private ground, I was now enjoying myself. Soon, a potentially good spot to fill my deer tag became apparent, so I erected a treestand and prepared to make my play. The location was a narrow spit of land where two bends in the river came within 50 yards of each other, and the oxbow formed from the almost 360-degree turn of the river was choked with brush, creating a great bedding area. The deer were entering and exiting their sanctuary morning and evening on their way to and from a nearby alfalfa field. This ideal setup gave me a lot of confidence in success, so I held back and waited for the perfect wind direction.



After a week of hard hunting in Montana's Missouri River Breaks, this was as close to a bull as Claypool got. He saw only three elk during his outing, more frequently encountering cattle, other hunters and ATVs.



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FROM BAD
TO GOOD



Claypool, along with his wife, Peg, poses with the nice whitetail buck he took after only one sit. After struggling to find elk during his first week of bowhunting, switching to Plan B really paid off, with sightings of more than 50 deer in one day.

A Happy Ending

As I slowly made my way along the deeply recessed shoreline of the Milk River in the early evening, I felt a sense of excitement; this was fun, and I liked that. After making my way to a spot below my treestand, I climbed the steep bank slowly, careful to not alert the nearby bedded whitetails to my intrusion. When I was settled into

my perch, everything felt right. This evening was going to be a hoot!

Conditions were perfect, and I knew deep inside that a pleasant experience was in the making. As evening progressed, the parade began. Dozens of does, and many sizes and shapes of antlered males, strode by my location in a seemingly endless show. By sunset, I'd counted 57 deer going past my hide.

Figuring that the better bucks might not show until late, I sat patiently. Soon after, a group of five decent bucks appeared, headed my way. Glassing their headgear, I fixated on one particular specimen — he'd do just fine! Rising slowly, I assumed the position, ready to consummate the deal. As my desired target walked past, a well-placed arrow soon provided me with meat and a nice set of bone.

The next morning, as I basked in the afterglow of a good bowhunt, I questioned my desire to go back to the badlands after elk. Did I really want to do that? Could I willingly eat an elk tag? The answers were 'no' and 'yes,' respectively.

After 40-plus years of hardcore elk effort, with an average success rate of 90-plus percent, I sure felt I could now willingly embrace defeat with my head up. Inside, I knew my fanatical, passionate elk-hunting years were over. Going forward, my elk hunts were probably going to be few and far between, and they'd be more about fun than success.

Oh well, it'd been a good run. Anyone know where there are any easy elk? Ha ha ha! **B**

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As bowhunters, we are tempted to move right to the action — the search for hot sign and a stand site overlooking it. For many years, that is what I did too. I focused on the obvious stuff. I wanted to know which scrapes a buck was going to come back to and freshen, which trails he was most likely to walk, what food sources had the biggest tracks and droppings. I was locked in on sign, focused blindly on what the deer was likely to do. But I never gave much thought to what I was going to do, short of where I planned to hang my stand.

While understanding deer behavior is important, it is far less important than understanding the most basic fundamental of deer hunting. This one has to do with your behavior, not the deer's. It is simple; you will have a really hard time killing a buck that knows he is being hunted. The longer you can keep all the deer from knowing you are hunting them, the more successful you will be.

There is a huge gap between the average bowhunter and those who do it well. After decades of doing this, I am now convinced the gap is directly correlated with how effectively each person manages his or her impact in the field. If our No. 1 job is to keep the deer from knowing we are

hunting them, then let's take this to the extreme and see where it leads.

My 2021 Season

The most important thing about last season, as relates to this article, is the fact that the farm I was hunting is just a big valley with ridges looming over the bottom cornfield on both sides. I didn't have access to the ridges from above, because you can only reach those from another farmer's land. So, if I was going to hunt those ridges, I had to approach them from the fields below.

Getting up to the ridges in the middle of the day was not too much of a challenge. But getting back down and to my truck after sunset without alerting every deer on the farm presented a real problem. I couldn't risk just mashing through, or I'd have no chance of killing the buck I was after. I needed a better plan.

By the same argument, I couldn't just walk across the bottom fields and climb up to the ridges to hunt mornings either. Again, way too many deer would know I was passing through. Within a couple of days, my season would be in big trouble.

Going to **EXTREMES** *Sacrifice Creature Comforts for More Whitetail Success*

BY BILL WINKE

The Iowa farm where Field Editor Bill Winke hunted whitetails last fall consisted of a single valley filled with cornfields and surrounded by ridges where deer bedded. This layout presented some difficult challenges when it came to effectively hunting the property.

The buck I was hunting was one I had seen and passed in 2020. I had a lot of photos of the buck that fall too, and everything I knew about him suggested he lived on a ridge in the middle of the farm. Assuming he lived in roughly the same area in 2021, I was facing this tough access challenge. How could I hope to hunt that ridge often enough to kill him if I had to educate so many deer (possibly him included) just to get to and from the spot?

Finally, it struck me: if you can't get in and out without bumping deer, then either you can't hunt the spot or you can't leave. That was the only strategy that made sense. I felt I had to hunt the ridge, so my only option was to stay overnight. I could get to the ridge at midday and then just sleep there after my evening hunt. Now, exactly how was I going to pull this off without losing my sanity or freezing to death?

Gearing Up

Saying, "I'm going to sleep on that ridge," and then actually doing it are two different things. I knew I was going to need a warm sleeping bag and a foam pad; that much was obvious. I also knew I couldn't just roll them out on the ground and go to sleep. By morning, I would be covered in

dew. And what if it rained? I needed some kind of shelter.

My first thought was a tent, but tents are heavy when you also have to carry a stand, steps, bow and other gear. And tents take a lot of time to set up and take down. They are also easy for passing deer to see, even at night.

I wanted to sleep up there without the deer knowing it, and then I wanted to be able to get up at first light and quickly get back into my treestand without having to take down a tent, potentially alerting nearby deer in the process.

That's when I thought of using a bivy sack. Bivy sacks are nothing more than what the name implies — a sack. You slide your sleeping bag into it and the sack keeps you dry all night. A quick online search showed several affordable options that weighed less than a pound and rolled up much smaller than a loaf of bread. I think the one I bought was sold under the REI brand.

The bag I selected was also affordable; around \$170. I know that doesn't sound affordable, but compared to other -20 degree bags, that was the best deal I could find. I also bought that from REI. It was called the Mountainsmith Berthoud. It wasn't exactly compact or lightweight, but it wasn't \$600 either.

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GOING TO EXTREMES

My pad was one I had left over from canoe camping. It was made by Cabela's, and if you had to buy it today would probably be around \$100. I didn't want a purely inflatable pad, because I wanted something I could set up very quickly. This pad is a hybrid, with a foam core inside an inflatable shell. I could open the valve, roll it out and blow a few puffs of air into it and be in business.

The Process

I needed a wind that was blowing at least 7-8 mph. Ridges are where the deer bed in this kind of terrain, so I would have to sneak past them. It would be nearly impossible to do that without some wind to cover my noise and blend my movement. Fortunately, during the fall, there is usually a good bit of daytime wind.

I also needed the wind to be favorable not only for that afternoon, but also for the next morning. That way I could hunt the same stand both days and slip out at midday to go elsewhere for the next afternoon.

I would sneak in, knowing more

or less where I planned to hang my stand. As I neared the potential stand site, I started looking for places for my "camp." Mostly, I wanted to be within 30 yards of the tree, on the downwind and downhill side, in a spot where I could easily hide the bivy sack while I was hunting.

Generally, that meant I had to be on the uphill side of a fallen tree or some other structure that served not only to break up my minimal outline but also to keep me from gradually sliding down the slope during the night!

Once I found the spot, I would roll out the pad and sleeping bag and slide them into the bivy sack and then cover it with branches and leaves. That way, all I had to do at the end of legal shooting time was to uncover the sack, strip down to my skivvies and climb in. I was surprised to find I was much warmer in very thin base layers inside my bag than when wearing thicker layers. So, with temperatures in the low-to-mid 20s most nights in late October and early November in Iowa, I was very comfortable in the -20-degree bag wearing just a thin layer. It was surprisingly cozy.

Back to the hunt. After covering my



Winke's overnight shelter setup, from left, consisted of a -20-degree sleeping bag, foam sleeping pad and bivy sack. After setting up camp, Winke covered his gear with sticks and leaves and was amazed at how difficult it was to see from his stand, even when only 30 yards away.



This is the coolest spot Winke camped in. He stayed here two nights and hunted the ridge to the left of this valley. He saw the buck he was hunting twice those two days, both times out of bow range.



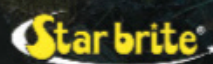
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GOING TO EXTREMES

camp with sticks and leaves, I would then go up the ridge a short way to the spot where I would hang my stand. It was amazing how hard it was to see the “camp” after I had covered it with leaves. It disappeared. In fact, all season, I never once had a deer spot my camp while I was in the tree nearby, even when they were passing at close range.

Did It Work?

I killed my target buck Nov. 12, after two weeks of steady hunting. It was an afternoon, up on the same ridge where I hunted him all season. It was the fifth time I saw him, and the second time within bow range.

I really believe my extreme approach to accessing the ridge played a huge role in my success. I never really saw much drop-off in deer activity on that ridge, even though I hunted it many times.

So yes, it worked. That’s not really the question; the real question is whether I would do it again. Frankly, I would have to want a certain buck pretty badly to go through that again.

The Worst Part

Sleeping on the ridge was really cool in many ways. It was a good adventure and at times very thrilling when something ran within a few yards of my exposed face in the middle of the night. But overall, it was painfully boring.

Think about it; in early November, the sun goes down before 5 p.m. Legal shooting time ends before 5:30, and then you have until roughly 6:30 the next morning before you can go back to hunting. That’s 13 hours. Normally, you would head to your vehicle, drive home, grab a bite to eat, maybe watch a football game on TV, talk to family and friends, etc.

Instead, I would climb down from my stand, strip off my clothing and put it into a rubber canoe bag and climb into my sleeping bag, maybe with a beef stick and 12 ounces of water. Usually, I could fall asleep fairly quickly, but then I would wake up in the middle of the night when the air was still and cold and listen to coyotes cutting up 100 yards away and all the crunching sounds near my camp.

Sometimes I would stay on the ridge two days in a row without coming out. That’s when I really suffered, because

I didn’t carry enough food for back-to-back cold-weather sits. I spent a lot of time shivering. Sure, I could have taken more calories, but I was carrying plenty up and down those bluffs the way it was. I would probably do a better job of bringing the right foods if I do it again.

This is not something you do because you *want* to. It is something you do because you *have* to — because there is no other way to hunt a key spot without educating deer.

What I Learned

I learned a ton I would not have learned otherwise, but the main lessons revolved around how the deer related to their bedding areas at various times of the day and night and how alert (or not alert) they were depending on conditions. Suffice it say that if you do it carefully, with some wind to cover your movements, you can sneak past bedded deer.

I also learned that deer start coming back to their bedding areas during the middle of the night, not first thing in the morning as I used to believe. They are most active after daylight in the morning, but many of them got there hours earlier.

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Winke with the big Iowa buck he killed on Nov. 12, 2021. In hindsight, the extreme effort he invested into the hunt was worth it.



The key takeaway here should not be so much exactly *what* I did, but *why* I did it. Again, you have to go to extremes when it comes to applying the fundamentals of good deer hunting. Don't just go through the motions.

The older I get, the more I realize how many corners I have cut over the years to save a few hundred yards of walking, a few minutes more in a warm bed or some other aspect of personal comfort. What would happen

if you didn't bow to those temptations? How much more successful could you be? That's the main thing I learned last season. I was rewarded with a gorgeous buck I don't think I would have gotten otherwise. **B**

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By **JON E. SILKS**

CROSSBOW TEST



Wicked Ridge's Raider 400 De-Cock is advertised to shoot bolts up to 400 fps and features silent and safe cocking and de-cocking through the ACUdraw De-Cock crank system, complete with Auto-Brake technology.

WICKED RIDGE RAIDER 400 DE-COCK

Safe cocking and de-cocking
at an excellent price!

AS A SISTER to TenPoint — one of the top crossbow makers in the world — Wicked Ridge is in the unique position of being able to take advantage of a solid stream of innovation and technology coming from the industry icon and incorporating it into its budget-friendly crossbow line, providing an excellent performance-to-price ratio to customers.

For 2022, the company brings its A game with the Raider 400 De-Cock. This rig features a best-in-class cocking/de-cocking device called the ACUdraw De-Cock that uses Auto-Brake technology. Other components include a two-stage D-1 Trigger, new Dry-Fire-Prohibitor, TACTical X stock, S5 Cams and WRX limbs. Let's dig in!

Name Says It All

You know a feature is important when a company puts it right in the name of its product, and that's certainly the case with the Raider 400 De-Cock. Wicked Ridge wanted to bring the ultimate in control and safe cocking and de-cocking to its budget-friendly bows, and it did this by outfitting its new rig with the ACUdraw De-Cock. With the Auto-Brake Gear system, there is no chance of losing control regardless of where you are in the cocking or de-cocking process; whether you accidentally or intentionally let go of the handle, it remains in place. This silent system also reduces the effort needed to fully cock the Raider to only 5 pounds.

Handling the bull work with the ACUdraw De-Cock is a 1,000-pound strength nylon strap. Once cocked, a simple push of a button releases the dock lock and moves the trigger to de-cock mode, allowing the shooter to safely de-cock the crossbow with the built-in ACUdraw crank cocking device (You can also manually de-cock with a traditional rope cocker). The bottom line is there is no chance of a freewheeling crank and no need to shoot a bolt into a target when you are done hunting for the day — just push the button and back the string down safely.

Power Generation

The Raider is advertised to reach an impressive 400 fps with a 370-grain bolt. The "bow" assembly of the rig generates the power, and it starts with a super compact, lightweight, cast alumi-

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: Wicked Ridge Crossbows, 330-628-9245; wickedridgecrossbows.com

Model: Raider 400 De-Cock

Safety Features: Dry-Fire-Prohibitor, safe de-cocker, auto trigger safety, safety wings

Cam System: 5S Dual Cams

Riser: Cast A380 aluminum, black anodized, compact

Overall Length: 33.75 inches (with stirrup); 31.5 inches (without)

Axle-to-Axle Width: 19 inches (at rest); 15 inches (cocked)

Weight (bow only): 6.5 pounds

String: D97, 36.125 inches

Cables: D97, 20.3125 inches

Limbs: WRX Double Laminated, split

Draw Weight: 185-pound limbs; 5-pound cocking force with ACUdraw

Power Stroke: 13.5 inches

Stock: Fusion RX, raised comb, ACUdraw De-Cock, contoured pistol grip

Forearm: Molded pass-through, integrated safety wings

Finish: Peak XT Camo

Advertised Speed: 400 fps with 370-grain bolt

MSRP: \$849.99

Comments: A tack driver; wallet friendly; fully controlled cocking/de-cocking.

num riser that features a large, dished-out area for broadhead clearance. A portion of the riser and limb caps are paired to create the limb pockets and align the Raider's 11-inch WRX, double laminated, 185-pound limbs to the riser.

Finally, a set of stout, dual S5 Cams outfitted with DynaFLIGHT 97 string and cables introduces the kick needed to propel bolts downrange.

Connection Collection

The shooter's interface with the rig is a collection of connection points focused mostly on the stock and trigger. Wicked Ridge's Fusion RX stock is molded from glass-filled polypropylene material and features a raised comb for proper eye alignment, along with a pistol grip and add-on, pass-through foregrip for enhanced control. Safety wings are mounted between the foregrip and shooting rail to keep the shooter's fingers below the flight deck and out of harm's way; the uni-body forms the rail as well.

Sitting at the rear of the rail is the trigger housing, which is home to the company's two-stage D-1 Trigger that is designed to eliminate creep and produce a crisp break at 3.5 pounds. A new Dry-Fire-Prohibitor (DFP) system will not allow the Raider to release the string without an appropriate bolt loaded, while the auto-engaging trigger safety provides an additional safeguard. Finished in Peak XT Camo, the

SPEED & ENERGY		
	BOLT SPEED	KINETIC ENERGY
420-GRAIN BOLT	366.67 fps	125.42 ft./lbs.
500-GRAIN BOLT	339.33 fps	127.87 ft./lbs.
400-GRAIN MFR. BOLT	374.33 fps	124.36 ft./lbs.

Raider 400 De-Cock is factory sighted and comes with an easy-to-take price tag of only \$849.

What's in the Box?

The Wicked Ridge Raider 400 De-Cock comes with TenPoint's 3X Multi-Line Scope, 3-bolt quiver and mounting brackets, three Match 400 Carbon Bolts (± 0.004 -inch straightness) and removable crank handle.

At the Range

Wicked Ridge's ACUdraw is hard

BOWHUNTING Test Measurements:

Maximum Width: 21.2 inches (at rest); 18.9 inches (cocked)
Overall Length: 33.1875 inches
Mass Weight: 7.71 pounds (crossbow only); 9.19 pounds (with accessories)
Average Trigger Pull: 2.14 pounds
Length of Pull: 13.69 inches
Average Shot Noise: 104.9 dBA with 420-grain bolt; 103.5 dBA with 500-grain bolt
Maximum Shot Deviation at 35 Yards: .44 inch

to beat for ease of operation and safety — it's silent and you can literally let go at any time and it will remain at that position. This crossbow nearly put three bolts in the same hole at 35 yards — the .44-inch group was one of the best we've tested all year. Shot noise was relatively low for the 420- and 500-grain bolts, and the hunting weight with accessories on was barely more than 9 pounds. Of course, when testing this crossbow, the performance markers are even more impressive when you consider the price tag! **B**



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A portable ground blind is a tool every serious bowhunter needs in his or her arsenal. Let's face it; there are many great ambush locations — open fields, food plots, fence crossings, pond berms and the like — where treestands and saddles simply won't work. A blind is tailor-made for such scenarios, keeping you comfortable, concealed and protected from the elements as you wait for game to pass within bow range.

Even on hunts where spot-and-stalk is your preferred tactic, keeping a portable ground blind handy is a wise move that has saved many hunts. For example, if you run into an unseasonably warm week for your elk hunt, setting a blind on a well-used wallow or waterhole could be just the ticket for filling your tag.

Portable blinds have been around for many years, though recent innovations make new offerings such as the Rhino Blinds 180 See Through far superior to the old blind that may have been knocking around your garage for the past decade. As the name implies, the big deal about the 180 See Through is the fact that two of the blind's four wall panels are made from a unique, two-way mesh that allows you to look out with a panoramic view of your surroundings while preventing deer, elk, antelope and other game from seeing you inside. This is a huge



\$249.99 / Rhino Blinds
888-507-2021; rhinoblinds.com

upgrade over conventional blinds that are often criticized for an overall lack of visibility. I assure you that won't be the case in the 180 See Through, which makes you feel as though you are looking through a pair of large, pane-glass windows.

Getting in and out of the 180 See Through is quick and quiet thanks to a large, zipperless door on the back wall. Another key feature is a set of top and bottom brush loops so you can add native vegetation to better conceal your setup.

As for shooting from the blind, the 180 See Through features large triangular windows in the center of three walls — all except the back — that can be quietly adjusted to your desired size via a series of "silent-slide" height adjusters and some hook-and-loop closures. The back panel features a single, rectangular window to help you capitalize on shot opportunities behind the blind.

Another important consideration when choosing a ground blind is durability and longevity. Rhino addresses that by adding extra, reinforced stitching at all stress

points around the corners and hubs and building the blind with Triplebond Fabric that has a DWR (durable water-repellent) treatment to keep you dry in the rain along with UV and anti-microbial treatments to prevent fading, dry rot and mold.

Setting up the 180 See Through is a cinch. Like all hub-style blinds, all you have to do is pop the walls into place by pulling on each hub during setup and collapse them by pushing on each hub during takedown. The 180 See Through weighs about 16 pounds and measures 58 inches square at the base, 75 inches square at the center hubs and stands 66 inches tall in the center. Rhino advertises the blind at a three-person capacity, but if you want ample room to maneuver during your hunt, I'd limit it to two hunters and their gear.

The 180 See Through is available in your choice of Mossy Oak Break-Up Country (pictured), Mossy Oak Bottomland, Real-tree Edge or Predator Deception camo and comes with a backpack-style carry bag, ground stakes and tie-down ropes. **B**

— Editor **Christian Berg**





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AXCEL ARMORTECH LITE SIGHT:

LIGHTWEIGHT, COMPACT & MICRO- ADJUSTABLE

AS I WAS PREPARING for my June bear hunt in Quebec, I was pressed for time, trying to get a new bow ready only weeks before the trip. Hence, I was looking for a bow sight that was well built and dependable, plus easy to set up and adjust, since I literally only had days to practice before my departure.

My choice for the task at hand was the Armortech Lite, a new, fixed-pin sight from Axcel Archery. Designed to fit either right- or left-handed bows, it comes in 3-, 4- and 5-pin configurations (I opted for the 5-pin model), with either .019-inch or .010-inch fiber pins, offering numerous options for bowhunters.

One of the highlights of the sight is its lightweight, compact size, which begins with a lighter mounting bracket that also features several mounting holes, providing flexibility when it comes to setting up the sight on your bow. Like many of today's sights, the Armortech Lite offers complete leveling capability, with true second- and third-axis adjustments, the latter of which is important to set properly if you plan on taking steeply angled shots at longer distances, such as those you might encounter out West. Each axis has a two-screw locking system to secure your settings, and a bubble level is built into the housing.

Once the Armortech Lite is set up on your bow, making adjustments to windage and/or elevation is a quick and pain-free



\$329.99-\$359.99 / Axcel Archery
434-929-2800; axcelsights.com

process thanks to the adjustment knobs on the housing. Each click of the respective knob moves the sight .0156 (roughly one sixty-fourth) of an inch, allowing for easy tweaking of the sight's position. One thing I love about the Armortech Lite is that loosening the sight is done by simply unlocking the thumb levers that secure the windage and elevation settings in place and then re-locking them once the adjustment is made — there isn't any fumbling with hex screws or tools.

Setting the pins on the Armortech Lite is also a very simple process, with each pin in the Accustat II Scope (the housing) independently adjustable for dead-on aim at your preferred shooting distances. If you need to adjust a specific pin (or more than one pin), you just loosen the pin a couple of turns using the included 5/64-inch hex wrench and turn the micro-adjust knob on the top of the pin housing to move the pin(s) up or down. Remaining pins remain firmly locked in place.

At only 7.9 ounces, the Armortech Lite won't add a ton of weight to your setup, something that can be an important consideration if you're carrying your bow long distances on western hunts or mountain treks. As noted, it's also fairly compact, with a length of 6.5 inches and pin housing that's less than 2.5 inches in diameter.

As far as use in the field, I was amazed at how well the fiber optics were able to gather even the faintest rays of light, with each pin having 24 inches of ultra-flex, durable fiber. As a result, I only had to

turn my sight light on once, on a cloudy, drizzly evening when there were only 15 or so minutes of light left; that's impressive when you consider I was in the middle of the Canadian bush in early summer. It's also worth noting the sight has an adjustable rheostat cover so that you can tone down the brightness and reduce star burst or flaring, helping ensure you have a clear look at your pin and target.

As my first new bow sight in nearly a decade, I was more than pleased with how easy the Armortech Lite is to set up, adjust and how well it functions afield. This sight combines quality, ease of use and exceptional fine-tuning together in one package, making it an excellent choice for almost any bowhunter. **B**

— Associate Editor Mark Demko



The Armortech Lite comes in 3-, 4- and 5-pin (shown) options.



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By **MARK DEMKO**

NEW GEAR



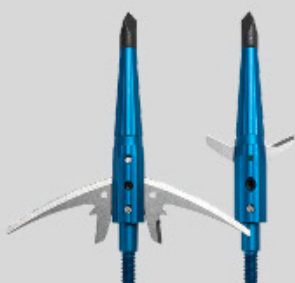
LASER-FAST & ACCURATE

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Leupold & Stevens; leupold.com

The new RX-FullDraw 5 combines Leupold's DNA engine and Archer's Advantage software to provide fast, accurate readings based on your bow setup. The rangefinder factors in personal ballistics such as arrow weight, arrow velocity and peep height, along with the shot distance and angle compensation, to provide exceptionally accurate readings (± 0.5 -yard to 125 yards). Flightpath Technology also aids in shot calculations by determining whether the arrow will clear obstructions between you and your target, helping you set up for the proper shot every time.

The RX-FullDraw 5 features 6X magnification, exceptional brightness and clarity and can range trees up to 1,100 yards away. The new, 20-yard pin solution helps bowhunters prepare for a clear shot at close range, where thick brush and cover might have an impact, while the Last Target Mode returns the last distance the unit read to help you get an accurate distance in rainy, snowy or foggy conditions.



TOP-FLIGHT BROADHEADS

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Swhacker; swhacker.com

The Levi Morgan Signature Series #269 is a 2-blade, 125-grain mechanical that features a 2.5-inch cutting diameter and hard-hitting impact. The arced blade design of the .032-inch-thick blades reduces resistance after entry, enhancing pass-through performance. The ribbed ferrule, built from anodized aircraft aluminum, provides a strong foundation, while the head's blade-lock technology allows you to lock the expandable blades closed for practice.



STALK CLOSE TO CARIBOU

\$119.95

Ultimate Predator Gear; ultimatepredatorgear.com

Anyone who has hunted caribou knows good cover is often hard to find in the north country. Now, there's a solution to this challenge — the Caribou Stalker Decoy. Weighing only 8.85 ounces, this decoy mounts directly to your bow and features a built-in shooting window to capitalize on shot opportunities. It's constructed of durable, micro-suede fabric that dries quickly, and it collapses into a 10-inch disk, making it easy to transport in your pack.



PERFECT FOR TWO

\$438.99

Millennium; millenniumstands.com

The 18-foot-tall L220 Double Ladder Stand holds two hunters, with a 39.5-inch wide by 32.5-inch-long platform and 39.5-inch wide by 16.5-inch-deep seat that folds up for standing shots. The stand sets up quickly and easily, with a double-rail ladder construction that means no brace is required. Features include a contoured, tight-sling seat; folding footrest; and adjustable, padded shooting rail and armrests. The stand has a 500-pound weight limit.



RANGEFINDING BINOS

\$699.99

Bushnell; bushnell.com

Scan and range for game at the same time with the Fusion X Rangefinding binoculars. These 10x42s feature ACTIVSYNC display that morphs from black to red, making it easy to see in any conditions. They can range objects up to one mile away with exceptional accuracy (± 1 yard). Other highlights include excellent clarity and low-light performance, ballistics modes for providing the right data for bow and firearm shots, and a mode to determine the height of objects in the field.



ACCURATE & LETHAL

\$49.99 PER 3

Slick Trick; slicktrick.net

The Torch is a rear-deploying mechanical broadhead that's crafted from high-quality materials and features an innovative, aerodynamic design, resulting in fieldpoint accuracy and a devastating cut. The slim ferrule and titanium tip are designed to produce a precision flight pattern and hard-hitting impact, while the surgical-grade expandable blades create a 2-inch wound channel. Slick Trick's Deadbolt Deployment mechanism keeps the blades closed in flight, yet unleashes them upon impact.



WARM & COMFY

\$54.99

Realtree; store.realtree.com

Get comfortable after the hunt, around camp or while you are out and about town with Crocs Classic Clogs, now available lined and in Realtree Edge. These lightweight clogs feature fuzzy, soft linings for comfort and warmth, pivoting heel strap for a more secure fit and the dual support Crocs are well known for. They are available in men's sizes 4-10 and women's sizes 6-12. Other adult and youth styles of Crocs in Realtree patterns are also available via the Realtree website.



SUPER SCOUTER

\$129.99

Covert Scouting Cameras; feradyne.com

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Rocky; rockyboots.com

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By **EDDIE CLAYPOOL**

THE DIY GUY

ALASKAN SAFARI

Going solo in the land of salmon and caribou!

IN THE MID-90s, I was afforded the opportunity to travel to Alaska with an acquaintance of mine — Lance Frazier — to hunt caribou.



Lance had been on a guided hunt the previous year and befriended some natives doing subsistence hunting along the mighty Mulchatna River. After much talk and bartering, Lance worked out a deal to come back each year and spend time with the locals.

When asked to participate in this venture, I was apprehensive, as everyone else would be hunting with firearms. I just didn't see how a lowly bowhunter could fit into such a free-for-all. Lance assured me they would transport me up the river to good caribou country and deposit my scrawny hide on the bank of the rolling, powerful torrent. I would be able to go solo for days on end and then be picked up to make my way back to the local village. So, I stepped out of my comfort zone and decided to go for it. Here is the tale of my "Alaskan Safari."

By the time we arrived in Dillingham, late evening was on the scene. Yet about 100 miles from our destination of the village of Stuyahok, Lance and I boarded a small plane and made the jump over to the banks of the mighty Mulchatna River. Lining the river were a couple rows of houses, where most of the local, native population resided. Our provider for the outing was a jovial fellow named Evan, the local mayor. After a short night at Evan's house, Evan loaded us and our gear into a

large aluminum boat that had a 55-gallon container of fuel aboard, and we headed upstream. After eight hours of slow progress, the mighty Mulchatna had decreased in size significantly, yet remained an extremely intimidating adversary. A band of trees and brush lined its flanks for about a quarter mile along each bank, and beyond that the massive tundra stretched to the horizon. We'd traveled to the summering grounds of the largest herd of barren-ground caribou in the state and were now ready to experience "wild" at its finest. Dropping me at the back of a large slough, Lance and Evan headed back downriver, scheduled to come back in a week. As I watched the boat fade into the distance, I was stoked for adventure.

For the first few days, it was all I could do to make myself go hunting, as the fishing right in front of camp was astounding. Arctic char, Chinook salmon, grayling and rainbow trout abounded. Every cast was a hook-up; you never knew what was on the other end of the line. Exploring the riparian zone along the river, I soon realized all the caribou lived out on the tundra, only coming to the river when they intended to swim to the other side. Clearly, they were open-country animals, and I was going to have to get out there if I wanted to make something happen.

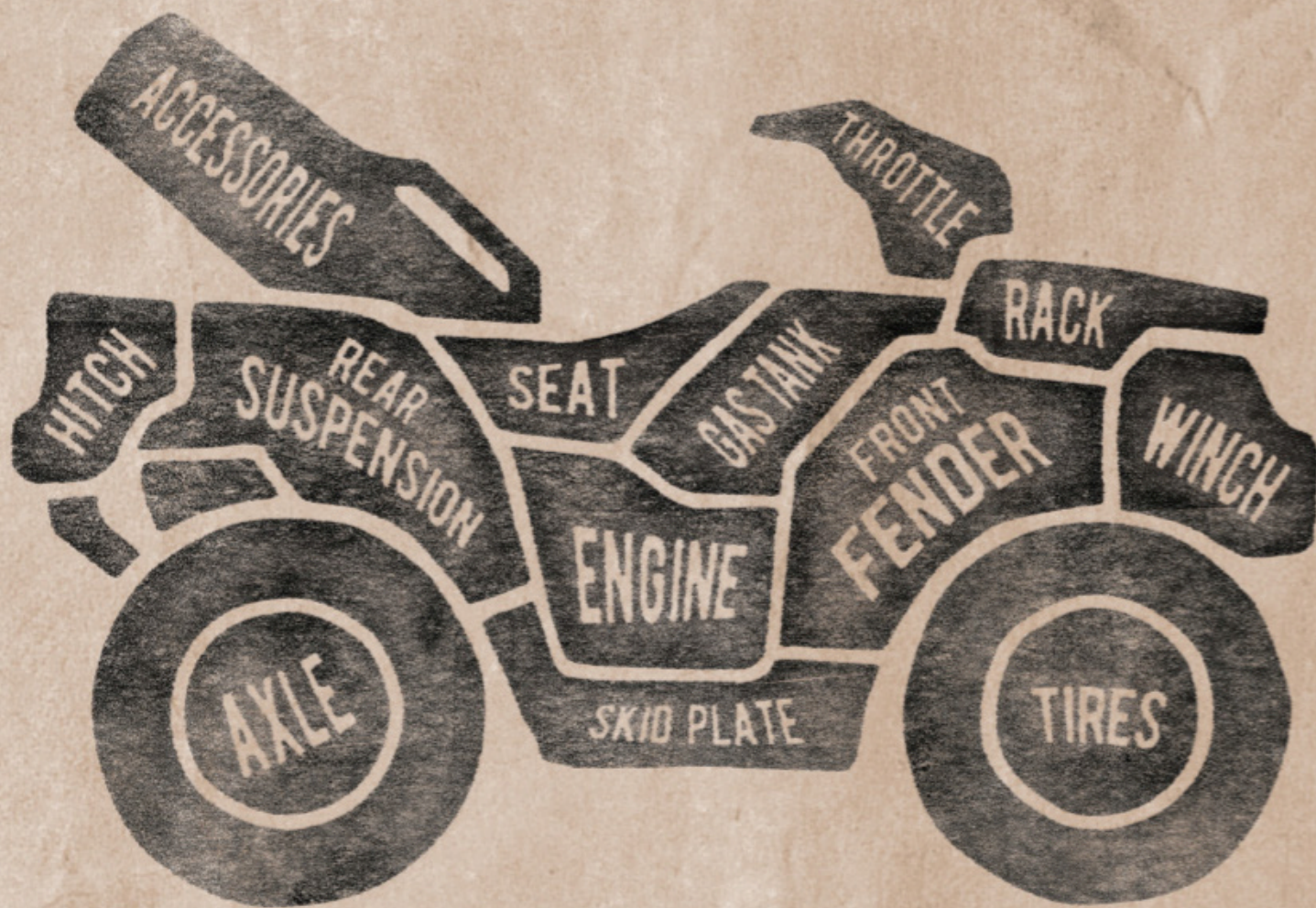
Midday, on my fourth day alone, I spotted a herd of caribou making its way toward a small hill far out on the tundra. Taking a circuitous route to the hill, I soon found myself watching the herd of about 100 animals headed directly toward my location. Crawling through blueberry bushes, I soon had myself positioned shortly downwind of a deeply rutted trail that was clearly the caribou's chosen route for moving through this spot. As cows and calves began to stride past my hide, I peered for large antlers that soon appeared! Pulling my bowstring back to my face, an arrow was quickly on its way. A few minutes later, I stood over one of the most beautiful animals I'd ever seen. With a white mane that blended into a mottled pattern of grays and browns along his side, this bull caribou was everything I'd ever dreamed about.

Later that evening, after a long day of meat packing, I found myself cranking on my fishing pole again as a grizzly made its way along a sandbar about 600 yards downstream. I was living large; Alaska truly was everything I'd imagined, and I longed to be a regular part of this landscape. Despite that, in my heart I knew this was probably a once-in-a-lifetime outing for a poor boy from Oklahoma.

It was. **B**

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