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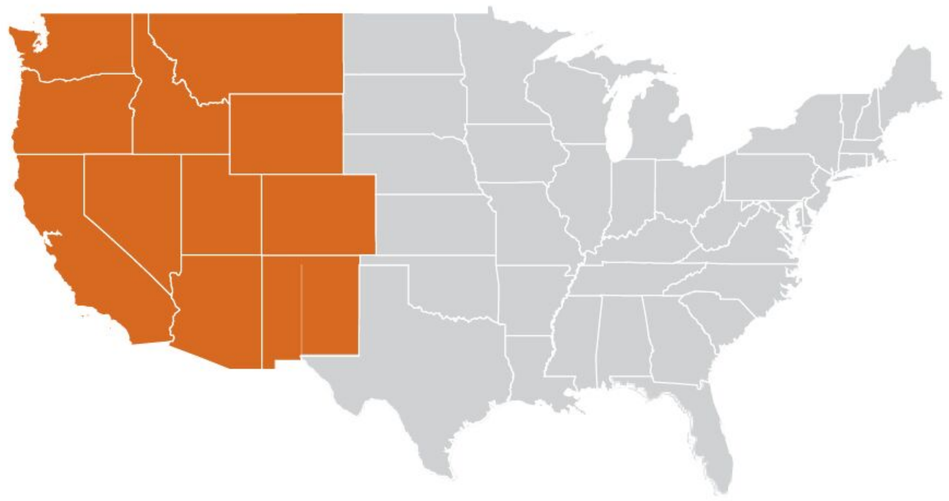
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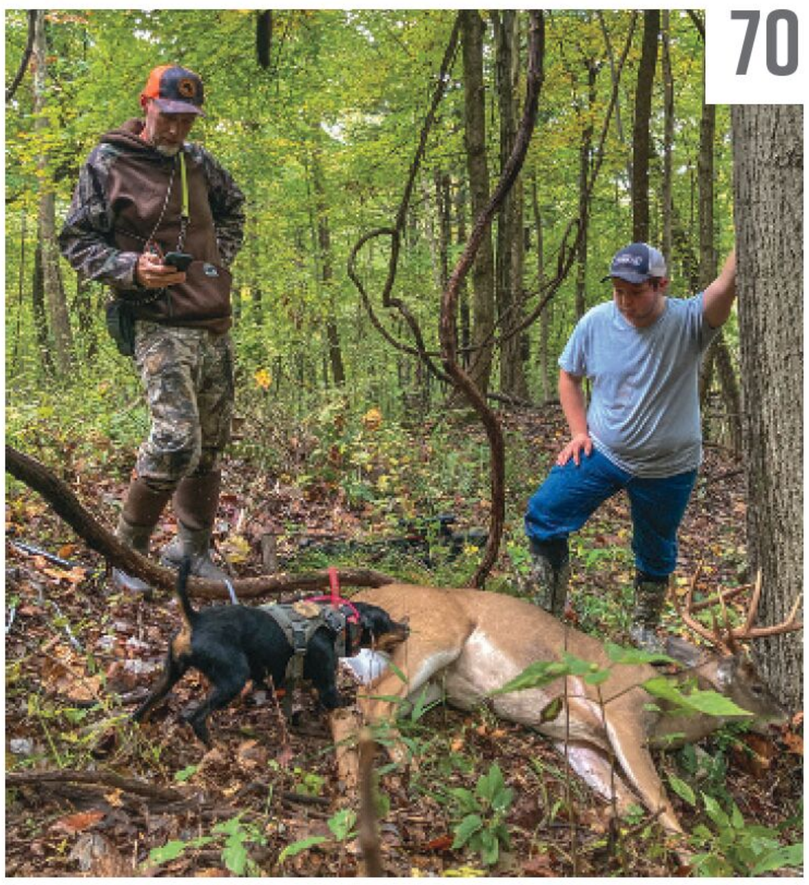
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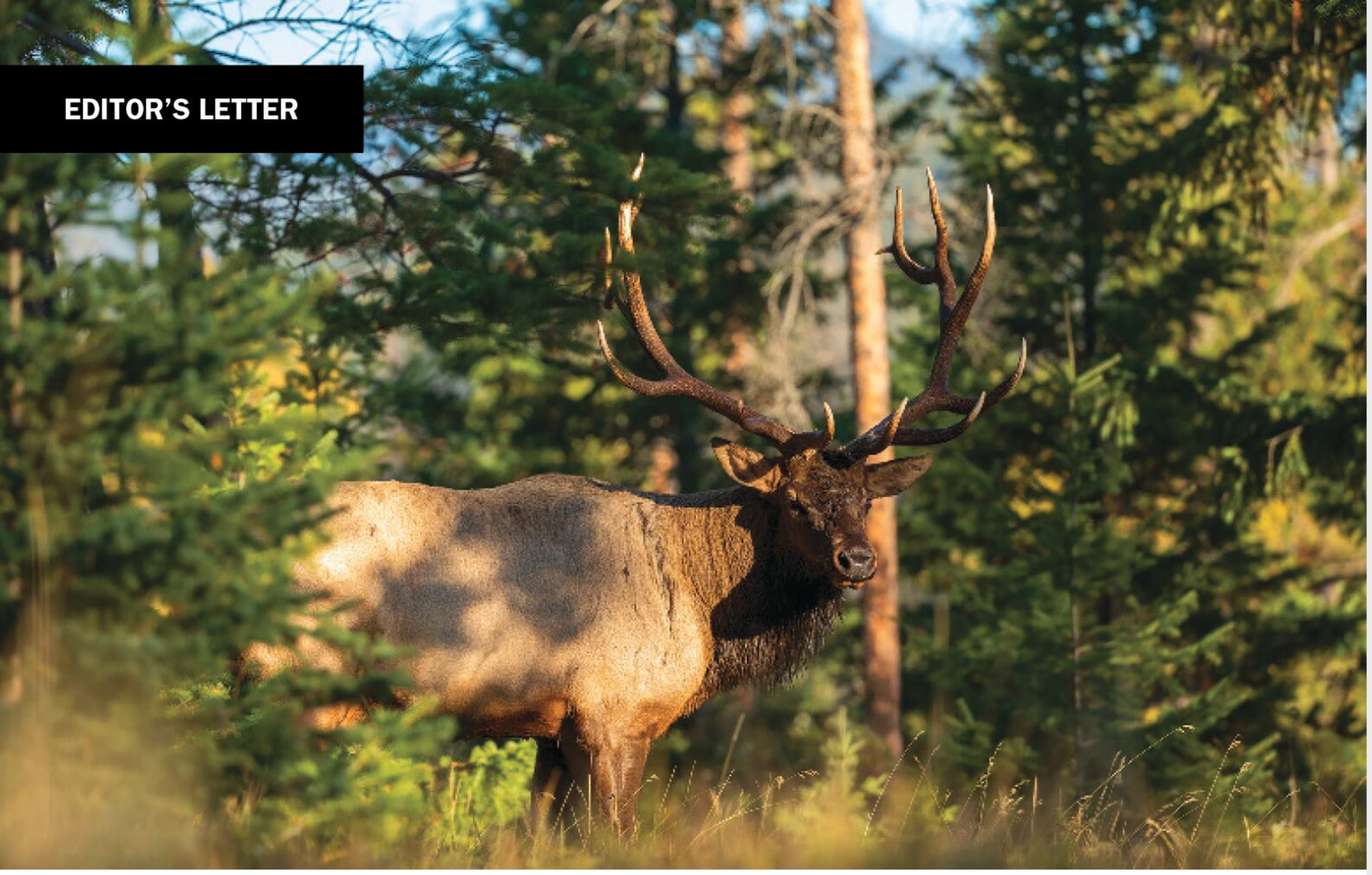
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SCOTT HAUGEN (TOP LEFT); RICHARD MANN (TOP CENTER); SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP RIGHT); DARREN CHOATE (CENTER); COURTESY OF LEUPOLD (BOTTOM)



MISTAKES ARE MADE

I still get chills when I remember my first encounter with a bugling bull elk at close range. Hunting northern New Mexico with a muzzleloader, I shadowed my guide, Troy, through the cedars as he occasionally blew a cow call. The day wasn't an hour old when a bull responded just down a low ridge, and we hustled, quietly with the wind quartering across our foreheads, to close the distance.

We had gone 300 yards or so and then stopped to listen. Hearing nothing, Troy hit the cow call again, and the bull screamed in our faces. The response was so loud that it seemed like the bull was standing on our toes. I had heard plenty of gobblers sound off within mere yards before, but this was something else. The bull bugled again, and I think my ears started ringing. Obscured by the thick cedars, though, the elk remained hidden.

I took a few steps forward to clear a bunch of low branches, but I still couldn't see anything. Seconds later I heard hooves on the ground and rocks rolling down the ridge. Had the bull spotted me? Half confused and half embarrassed, I slowly turned to my guide, who waved his hand behind his head. The wind had shifted, and the bull had smelled us. I was so amped up to be within range that I had forgotten about the wind. But elk never do, and that was the lesson of the day.

Failing to pay attention to wind direction is just one of many mistakes an elk hunter (or any big-game hunter, for that matter) can make. None of us are alone in screwing up. In fact, we're in pretty good company, as Scott Haugen exposes his goofs from decades of hunting bulls starting on page 22. The real takeaway, though, is that making mistakes is part of the game. Learning from them makes us better hunters. Recounting them helps others learn, too. If you hunt elk, or one day plan to hunt elk, there are hard-earned lessons to heed in Haugen's article.

As fall officially arrives and hunting seasons kick off across the country this month, I hope you manage to avoid making any big mistakes in the woods and fields. But when the inevitable does happen and you miss an opportunity at a shot, I hope the lesson that comes with it leads to success later on.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

SCOTT HAUGEN

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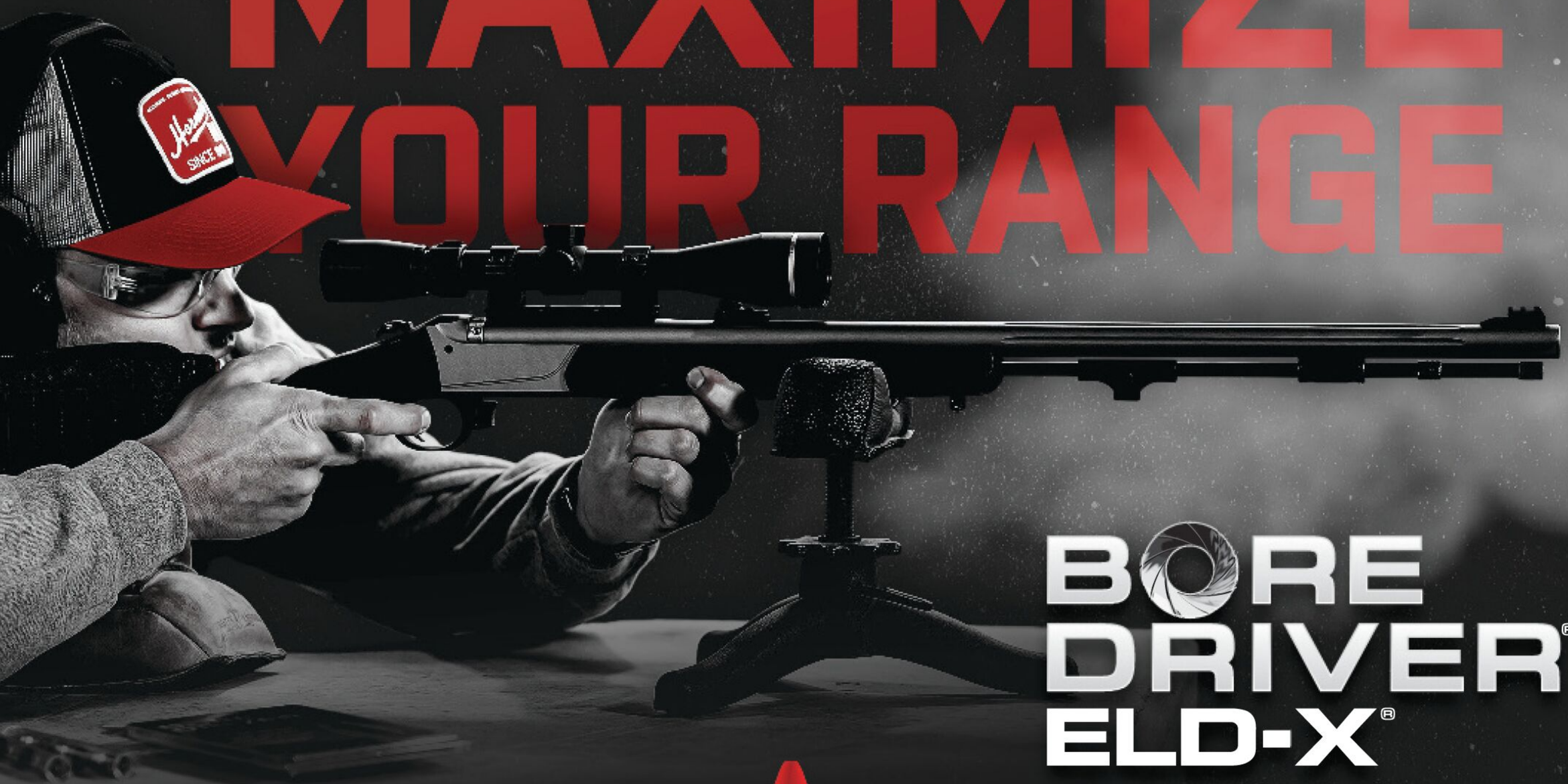
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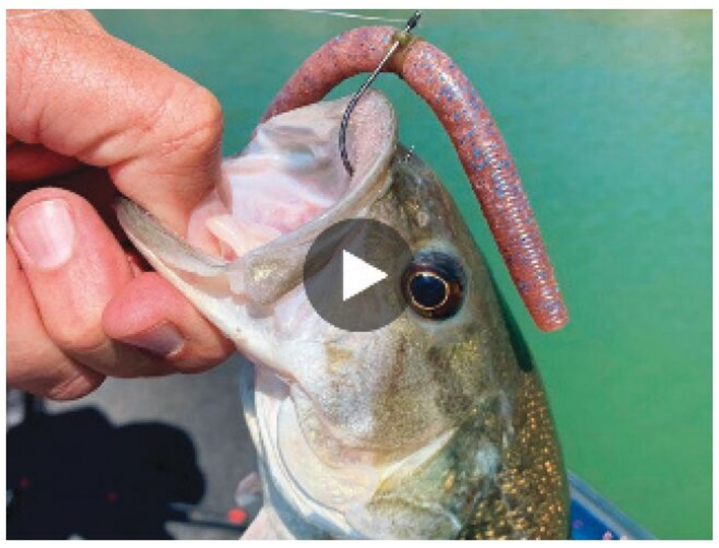
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ANOTHER CARTRIDGE LEGEND

A new straight-wall cartridge for hunters fills the gap between the .350 Legend and .450 Bushmaster. Learn about it at "First Look: Winchester .400 Legend."



THE HUNT IS ON

September brings hunting opportunities across the country from upland birds to archery bucks. Look under "Hunting" for expert info to get you started this season.



RECORD KEEPING

When a state record is caught, such as Pennsylvania's top flathead catfish (above), chances are we know about it. Get details in our "Records" section.



NO. 1 DEADHEAD?

An incredible whitetail find in April scored a hefty 277 3/8 net. Find out more at "Minnesota Monster: Found Deadhead Buck Could Be State's No. 1 All-Time."

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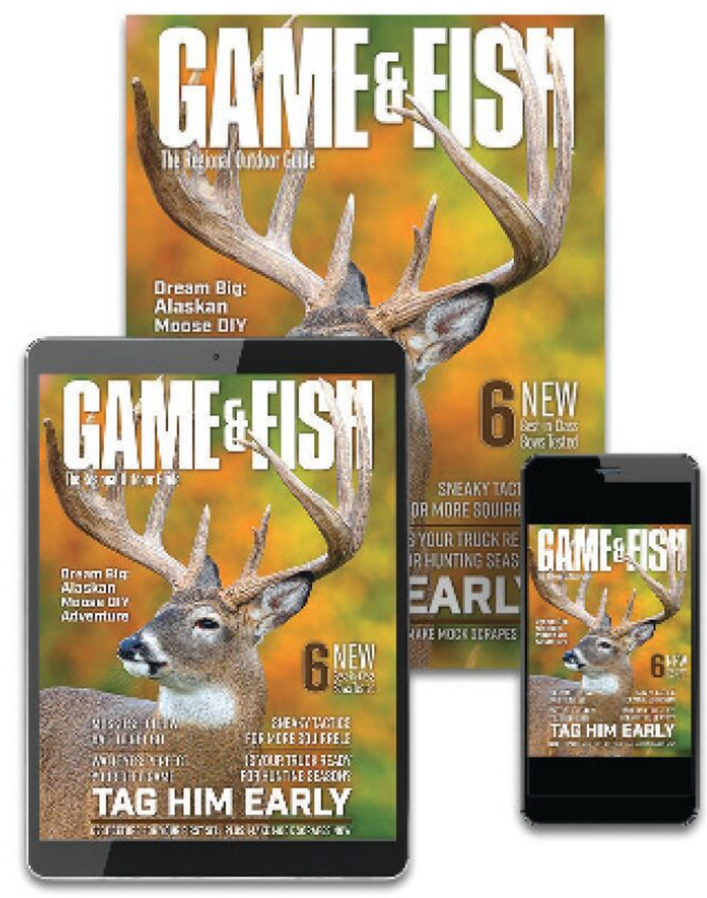
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20 am 2:54 to 4:54 / pm 3:18 to 5:18	21 am 3:42 to 5:42 / pm 4:06 to 6:06	22 am 4:30 to 6:30 / pm 4:54 to 6:54	23 FIRST Q am 5:18 to 7:18 / pm 5:42 to 7:42	24 am 6:06 to 8:06 / pm 6:30 to 8:30	25 am 6:54 to 8:54 / pm 7:18 to 9:18	26 am 7:42 to 9:42 / pm 8:06 to 10:06
27 am 8:30 to 10:30 / pm 8:54 to 10:54	28 am 9:18 to 11:18 / pm 9:42 to 11:42	29 am 10:06 to 12:06 / pm 10:30 to 12:30	30 FULL am — to — / pm 12:06 to 2:06	31 am 12:30 to 2:30 / pm 12:54 to 2:54		

SEPTEMBER 2023

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1 am 1:18 to 3:18 / pm 1:42 to 3:42	2 am 2:06 to 4:06 / pm 2:30 to 4:30
3 am 2:54 to 4:54 / pm 3:18 to 5:18	4 am 3:42 to 5:42 / pm 4:06 to 6:06	5 am 4:30 to 6:30 / pm 4:54 to 6:54	6 LAST Q am 5:18 to 7:18 / pm 5:42 to 7:42	7 am 6:06 to 8:06 / pm 6:30 to 8:30	8 am 6:54 to 8:54 / pm 7:18 to 9:18	9 am 7:42 to 9:42 / pm 8:06 to 10:06
10 am 8:30 to 10:30 / pm 8:54 to 10:54	11 am 9:18 to 11:18 / pm 9:42 to 11:42	12 am 10:06 to 12:06 / pm 10:30 to 12:30	13 am 10:54 to 12:54 / pm 11:18 to 1:18	14 NEW am — to — / pm 12:06 to 2:06	15 am 12:30 to 2:30 / pm 12:54 to 2:54	16 am 1:18 to 3:18 / pm 1:42 to 3:42
17 am 2:06 to 4:06 / pm 2:30 to 4:30	18 am 2:54 to 4:54 / pm 3:18 to 5:18	19 am 3:42 to 5:42 / pm 4:06 to 6:06	20 am 4:30 to 6:30 / pm 4:54 to 6:54	21 FIRST Q am 5:18 to 7:18 / pm 5:42 to 7:42	22 am 6:06 to 8:06 / pm 6:30 to 8:30	23 am 6:54 to 8:54 / pm 7:18 to 9:18
24 am 7:42 to 9:42 / pm 8:06 to 10:06	25 am 8:30 to 10:30 / pm 8:54 to 10:54	26 am 9:18 to 11:18 / pm 9:42 to 11:42	27 am 10:06 to 12:06 / pm 10:30 to 12:30	28 am 10:54 to 12:54 / pm 11:18 to 1:18	29 FULL am — to — / pm 12:06 to 2:06	30 am 12:30 to 2:30 / pm 4:54 to 6:54

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1 am 1:18 to 3:18 / pm 1:42 to 3:42	2 am 2:06 to 4:06 / pm 2:30 to 4:30	3 am 2:54 to 4:54 / pm 3:18 to 5:18	4 am 3:42 to 5:42 / pm 4:06 to 6:06	5 am 4:30 to 6:30 / pm 4:54 to 6:54	6 LAST Q am 5:18 to 7:18 / pm 5:42 to 7:42	7 am 6:06 to 8:06 / pm 6:30 to 8:30
8 am 6:54 to 8:54 / pm 7:18 to 9:18	9 am 7:42 to 9:42 / pm 8:06 to 10:06	10 am 8:30 to 10:30 / pm 8:54 to 10:54	11 am 9:18 to 11:18 / pm 9:42 to 11:42	12 am 10:06 to 12:06 / pm 10:30 to 12:30	13 am 10:54 to 12:54 / pm 11:18 to 1:18	14 NEW am — to — / pm 12:06 to 2:06

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Story and Photos by Richard Mann



The .308 Win. is a proven performer on most big game, aside from truly large or dangerous animals, at common hunting distances. It's the author's go-to option on most hunts.

I doubt we know who first uttered the words, "The .308 is great." I first heard them from outdoor writer John Barsness. We were in a hunting lodge near Uvalde, Texas, and he was advising a young man on what cartridge to have his first custom rifle chambered in. Since then, I've unapologetically stolen those words when offering similar advice. But I'm told the great gun writer John Wootters once wrote something similar in an article about the .308 Winchester. Regardless, those four words are a declaration that is undeniably true. I believe the .308 Win. is the best general-purpose big-game rifle cartridge.

You probably don't agree, and this is partly because cartridge selection is a very personal thing; it's how we all individualize our hunting tools. Often, relationships between hunters and rifle cartridges are also very emotional. You might like a cartridge because your father used it, or because you used it to take your best buck. And, finally, some might disagree simply because many hunters don't have enough hunting opportunities to garner enough experience, with enough different cartridges, to make valid comparisons.

Admittedly, the .308 Win. is not the fastest, flattest-shooting or hardest-hitting big-game cartridge. But for much of the big-game hunting most hunters do, and for most shots at big-game animals that should be taken, the .308 Win. is superbly sufficient. Most shooters can tolerate its recoil, there are usually more factory .308 Win. loads to choose from than with other cartridges, and you can find .308 Win. ammunition almost anywhere you go.

I've used it extensively in North America, Africa and Canada. In fact, I've taken more big-game animals with

the .308 Win. than any other cartridge. It's not my personal favorite—that's a toss-up between the .223 Rem. and .35 Rem.—but it is the cartridge I most often turn to because I know it works. I used it to take my best West Virginia whitetail at close range and my best elk out past 300 yards.

I think its uniqueness is the balance it offers the hunter. It shoots flat enough, hits hard enough and delivers sufficient terminal performance to deal with any big-game animal between 100 and 1,000 pounds, at least at distances most of us have any business shooting.

Given the connections to cartridges most hunters have, I may not convince you to trade your .270 or .30-06 for a .308. But maybe I'll convince a few of you to give it a closer look. And, for those who are already a fan of the .308 Win., perhaps I'll solidify your opinion of the cartridge.

In any case, I want to share my experiences with the .308 Win. over just the first three months of 2023, which started in Texas and ended in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. In only three months, there were 17 big-game animals taken with a Kimber Model 84 and three different .308 Win. loads. Here's a look at how the cartridge and these individual loads performed.

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The Terminal Ascent load was used to take a mule deer buck, three wart-

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A single 175-grain Federal Premium Terminal Ascent bullet fired from a .308 Win. dropped this 200-pound warthog in his tracks at about 200 yards.

hogs, a jackal and a kudu cow. Shot distances ranged from 35 to 360 yards. I held too high on the mule deer and hit him in the hollow area between the lungs and spine. After some tracking, a follow-up shot at 230 yards ended it. On the rest of the animals, I made good shots and none of them took a step after bullet impact. None of the bullets were recovered, as they passed through the animals.

REMINGTON 172-GRAIN SPEER IMPACT

Four big-game animals were taken with this load, which Remington calls Premier Long Range, and shot distances ranged from 78 to 285 yards. All the bullets passed through except for the first shot on a cull kudu bull. That shot at 285 yards was a frontal shot and the bullet hit a bit to the right, passing through the diaphragm and back into the paunch. As the bull turned to run, another shot at about 300 yards broke his front leg just below the shoulder, and he went about 60 yards before going down. I made better shots on the other three animals that included a kudu cow and two warthogs, and all these animals fell where they were standing.

This is a new load from Remington, featuring a new bullet from Speer. Though outwardly this bullet looks very different from the Terminal Ascent, construction wise they seem very similar. It, too, is a bonded bullet with a Slipstream polymer tip and is advertised to upset at speeds similar to those of the Terminal Ascent. The bullet recovered from the kudu bull hit at about 2,250 fps, had a recovered weight of 157 grains and a recovered diameter of 0.68 inch. Out of the Kimber, this load shot nearly identical to the 175-grain Terminal Ascent with an average muzzle velocity of 2,748 fps.

BUFFALO BORE 150-GRAIN BARNES TTSX

A variety of manufacturers use this bullet in their loads, but the Buffalo Bore version is special. Out of the 22-inch-barreled Kimber, it had a muzzle velocity of 2,944 fps. Even with the bullet's low 0.42 BC, at that velocity, this load's trajectory was very close to that of the Terminal Ascent and Speer Impact loads with bullets having higher BCs. Precision was similar as well. A reputation for deep penetration—typically 15 percent to 20 percent more than bonded bullets—explains why none of the seven fired were recovered. On the downside, due to the lack of material transfer, tissue damage was a bit less. Mono-metal bullets like this need to impact at about 2,000 fps for best results, limiting the load to about 450 yards, even with its high initial velocity.

Seven of the 16 animals taken with the .308 Win. in this three-month period were taken with this load, all with one shot each and at distances ranging from 65 to 280 yards. Animals taken included three warthogs, a gemsbok, a wildebeest, a lechwe and a zebra. In Triple-Shock fashion, all the bullets passed through. Even the zebra, which is notorious for stopping bullets and was hit with a quartering shot, could not stop the 150-grain TTSX. However, also consistent with mono-metal bullet performance, the larger-bodied animals ran farther after the shot.





REMINGTON PREMIER LONG RANGE .308 WIN. 172-GR. SPEER IMPACT

STILL GREAT

All three of these loads performed well on my various hunts. Their performance, combined with my extensive experience with the .308 using a variety of other loads, helps illustrate why the cartridge is one of the best available for general-purpose big-game hunting. I might like other cartridges better, but when it comes down to it, I'm more likely to select the .308 Win. for big game than any other cartridge. Indeed, the .308 is great!

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SADDLE UP

ARE THESE **LIGHTWEIGHT TREE-CLIMBERS** FOR YOU?

By Tony Hansen

Unless you've been under a rock for the past few years, odds are you've caught wind of the tree-saddle movement. If you believe even half of what you've likely heard about these odd contraptions, you've probably been led to believe they are the single-greatest invention since the digital trail camera.

Admittedly, I've used saddles for a while and, in fact, employed one long before the current saddle hoopla took root. After several seasons using a saddle setup in a handful of states, I definitely have an opinion based on experience. And? They're just OK.

Surprised? Well, I am quite certain my less-than-enthusiastic opinion on them will raise a few eyebrows from the die-hard proponents of saddles. However, that's just the way I feel about them.

In some situations, saddles are a great tool. Those situations, however, are limited and, in this bowhunter's opinion, the time-tested portable treestand is still the king of the woods. Personally, I use both each season and have developed a solid set of conditions under which I'll choose one or the other. Here's how I came to my conclusion.

SADDLE PROS AND CONS

The biggest benefit of a saddle—hands-down—is its portability. Even today's super-light, mobile-focused treestands simply can't compete with the weight savings and hassle-free hauling characteristics of a saddle. It's the undisputed winner in terms of mobility. It's for this reason, and only this reason, I would ever choose a saddle over a hang-on stand.

Beyond their portability, a tree saddle allows you to hunt in trees that aren't ideal for treestands. However, with that being said, I don't agree that a saddle is the "any-tree-will-work" miracle their die-hard fans tout them as.

I've found saddles to be of most use in those giant cottonwood trees commonly lining Western creek bottoms that are tough to make work for a hang-on stand. But leaning trees cause as many, if not more, issues with saddles than with climbers.

Why? Gravity. An angled tree means you must fight the effects of gravity as you move around the tree. When on the side of the lean, you have to work to stay off the tree's trunk. When away

WINDIGO IMAGES



Whether using a saddle or a hang-on stand, the author utilizes three moderately priced climbing sticks and a step-aider to gain extra height.

from the lean, it's a bit easier but you still must deal with a strange angle.

Saddles also offer some advantages in terms of shot options over a hang-on stand, namely the option of shooting 360 degrees around the tree. That said, again I find this advantage to be a bit overstated by many. Yes, it's true you can shoot nearly 360 degrees from a saddle. But … you can't do so at some angles as easily as you can from a hang-on stand. "Strong" side shots from a saddle are a cinch. "Weak" side shots, on the other hand, are not.

You certainly can get plenty good at weak-side shots from a saddle with practice but, in my experience, those off-side shots require more movement, position-planning and strength to perform than off-side shots from a hang-on treestand.

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As portable as saddles are, they do require a certain amount of prep prior to each hunt. Unless you leave your climbing sticks and platform in the tree at the end of a hunt, every outing requires you to deploy a climbing method, hang the platform and then attach your saddle's tether. And deal with any accessory hangers you need for your bow, pack, etc. Truth be told, I find that those steps take longer and are much more of a hassle than dealing with a pre-set stand and are a primary reason why I will opt for a hang-on stand whenever possible.

TREESTAND PROS AND CONS

As stated above, weight, or the lack thereof, is the biggest advantage a saddle has over a hang-on stand. That said, there are some featherweight stand options available now that have made the weight difference less noticeable. Of course, these ultra-light stands come at a cost—in more ways than one.

The first is literal cost; ultra-light models are crazy expensive. Think $500-plus for a single stand.

The second cost is one of physical size. These stands are light because they're smaller than other stands. Yes, they're made of weight-saving aluminum, but they also have diminished overall dimensions, too.

Consider this. The Lone Wolf Custom Gear .5 model weighs about 6 pounds and features a platform that measures 23 by 16 1/2 inches. Compare that to the Novix Helo, which boasts a platform that's 3 inches wider and weighs 9 pounds. Three inches of width may not seem like much, but it definitely is noticeable during long days in the stand, and the Helo is still what I would consider a "small" hang-on stand.

With that being said, even with smaller platforms, I simply find a hang-on stand easier to hunt from because I don't have to worry nearly as much about whether a buck is going to approach on my weak or strong side. Shots from either side of the stand are easy because I can simply adjust my feet and position my body on the platform.

When employing a hang-on with a standard platform size, however, there is nothing that can compare in terms of comfort and stability in my mind. When hunting a location with a pre-set stand, there is minimal noise, effort and disturbance required to get set up for hunting. I simply navigate to the tree, climb up, strap in and start hunting.

This is an advantage that should not be overlooked. I have spent far too many dark mornings messing around with trying to get climbing sticks in place, mounting a platform and then tethering to not consider the ease-of-use of a pre-set stand.

But even when pulling a run-and-gun setup, I don't find a hang-on stand to require more effort to get in place than a saddle. The difference, of course, is in the weight of the stand on my back as I travel to my chosen location.

CLIMBING CONSIDERATIONS

Regardless of whether I'm going with a saddle or a hang-on stand, I need a method for climbing the tree. And, trust me, I have tried just about every method, model and process available to get up a tree.

I've settled on a three-stick system that I trust. Personally, I don't have much interest in spending big money on climbing sticks, so I go with moderately priced options like the Tethrd Skeletors or the Heliums from Hawk.

I have a single-step aider I made from an extra saddle tether. I slip the aider over the bottom section of climbing stick to gain an additional 2 feet or so in height. Using the three sticks with the aider, I'm able to get up to around 15 or 16 feet, and I try to choose trees with cover that will allow me to be hidden at that height.

I don't carry the sticks on my pack like others likely do, however. Instead, I have a sling fashioned from paracord that I use to tote the sticks with. I make sure the sticks are stacked tight together and wrapped to prevent making noise. I then slip the sling over my shoulder and head. This leaves both hands free to carry my bow, and I can easily set the sticks down whenever I want to take a break as I'm walking in.

I understand the one-stick method can save a lot of weight, but I simply don't think it's as safe as using three dedicated sticks. I certainly could save some pounds by upgrading to some of the uber-light (and uber-pricey) sticks on the market, but, again, I just can't justify the cost for the weight savings. GAF



Saddles do afford you additional shot opportunities, but the author feels that weak-side shots often require more movement, planning and strength.

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Just DOVEY



Lots of doves create lots of opportunities for new hunters to learn shooting and gun-handling skills.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF DOVE HUNTING PROVIDE A USEFUL LENS INTO **THE WIDER CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF CREATING HUNTERS.**

By Andrew McKean

Pity the recent hunter education graduates this month, brand new hunting licenses in their pockets and gleaming new shotguns on their shoulders. They are over-ready to use both in the dove seasons that open in 41 states on Sept. 1.

Why should you pity these particular humans? Because the dove opener, the day that may send more American hunters into the field than any other day of the year, is so fraught with expectation and disappointment that few new hunters come out of it unaffected. For some, the fast action and communal spirit of wingshooting cements a lifelong passion for hunting. But for other beginners, it's just too chaotic for their liking, and they associate all other methods of hunting with the cacophony and undirected energy of a dove field.

In this way, doves are a good framework to examine how to introduce a hunter to the field, and to combine our euphoric celebration of the return of hunting seasons with the larger perspectives of how, and why, we hunt. Plus, it's just a really good opportunity to celebrate doves, those aerobatic little winged darts that we love to hate, when we miss, and love to eat, when we hit.

The dove opener, which is almost like a national holiday in states south of Interstate 40, is many things—county fair, homecoming, dog field-trial, shotgun test venue—but it's mainly a chance to hunt an abundant game species in shirtsleeve weather without making a big investment in access and gear. Maybe that's why some 750,000 hunters will hit the field during the opening weekend.

The first day of dove season conveniently falls on a Friday this year. To be sure, there are several reasons why it can be the single best moment to teach a new hunter.

Ample Shooting Opportunities: New hunters want to pull the trigger, and in a good dove field, they'll have plenty of opportunities. Make sure you have the lightest field loads available, and don't worry about the ratio of misses to hits. Missing, and then recognizing why it was a miss, is a necessary stage in the evolution of a hunter. But so is celebrating the hits.

Low Risk, High Reward: Where there are a few doves, there are usually lots of doves. That abundance means the missing that inevitably follows new hunters is simply an opportunity to work on the important details of wingshooting: mounting the gun, seeing lead, following through and recovering to make a follow-up shot. Unlike with some big-game hunts, a miss hardly ruins the season.

Predictable Situations: Where I live, in northeastern Montana, the upland season also opens in early September. Sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge are favorite game birds, but I wince as I prepare young hunters for this season. It's hot, and there's a lot of walking. But there are also rambunctious dogs, unpredictable footing, erratic birds and large parties of hunters. In short, it's a nightmare for young, tentative hunters, and it can be worse for young, overconfident hunters. Dove season, on the other hand, is much more manageable. You can sit on a bucket or chair at the end of a field, the birds come to you, and you don't really need a dog.

RUSSELL GRAVES

Food Value: Doves are delicious, especially when they're wrapped in bacon and grilled over open flame. Keep your bounty cool and clean, and dress the birds with care. There's nothing like honoring new hunters, and cementing their value, than thanking them for feeding the family.

Socialization: A good dove shoot is like a combination of a backyard barbecue and a school play. There are people around, they're having a good time, and while everyone should know their role and their stage directions, there's usually plenty of time for fun exchanges. You are obligated to make fun of your buddy for missing easy shots, but you know you'll get the same right back when you inevitably miss. There are few other hunts with this festive lightness.

You knew it was coming. Here's why the dove opener is the worst time to introduce hunting to a new shooter.

Distractions: If you're mentoring a new hunter who can't focus during range sessions, let alone among the myriad peripherals of a dove shoot, then maybe a full-on public dove field isn't the right venue. Find a place where you can control the variables, from other hunters to the general direction of incoming doves. Put down your own gun, and devote your full attention to your young hunter. There's plenty of time for you to shoot once you get the newbie focused.

Discomforts: It can be stiflingly hot, mosquitoes can be intense, and if you're wearing the wrong gear, it can be downright uncomfortable in a September dove field. Effective mentors will be prepared with extra water, sunscreen, bug dope and shade. And more than a few snacks.

Sloppy Gun Handling: As much as you try to control the variables, doves never get the memo. They come zigging over wood lines and zagging across open fields. The erratic flight of doves can delaminate beginning hunters who only have an abstract idea of zones of fire and safe shooting scenarios. It's not a bad idea to start hunters with a single-shot model or have them load just one shell in repeaters. Too often a new hunter will forget there's a round in the chamber and will point the muzzle around like it was a flashlight.

Recipe for Frustration: Doves simply don't act like clay targets, and even beginners who have gun safety rules nailed and are focused on the target can look like chumps. It's not their fault; doves make experienced hunters look like rank beginners. Unfortunately, the more a beginning hunter misses, the more that hunter keeps missing. This can be especially galling if a buddy is hitting every bird and celebrating each success. Be aware of this dynamic, and take frequent breaks. Set up in a spot with a different flight pattern or away from other hunters, especially that obnoxious crack shot.

If you do it right—and probably even if you do some of it wrong—doves are the perfect gateway to a lifetime of hunting. The worst thing you can do, whether you're a beginning or a veteran hunter, is to miss this best of all opening days. G&F



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ELK EDUCATION

IF YOU'RE NOT MAKING MISTAKES WHILE BOWHUNTING ELK, YOU MIGHT NOT BE HUNTING HARD ENOUGH.

Story and Photos by Scott Haugen



Shooting over branches or through openings in brush is a common scenario when bowhunting elk. Know your arrow's trajectory so you are prepared when a bull approaches.

I was two days into a seven-day archery elk hunt in the Montana backcountry. On the first morning I had found rubs running along one particular ridge, more than I'd ever seen before or since. The mid-September conditions were hot. By 8 a.m. the thermals were rising, forcing me to keep the high ground above the elk. All the rubs were below me, some more than 100 yards down the hillside. They were easy to see with a binocular in the sparse, young pine forest.

I'd hunted the entire length of the ridge, well over 2 miles of it, multiple times. With so many rubs, I moved slowly, calling when it felt right. I never heard a single bugle. After two days of this, I decided to drop down the ridge and look more closely at the rubs and for any other sign I could find. What I quickly discovered was, frankly, embarrassing.

From a distance the rubs looked fresh. They weren't. Every bit of shredded bark was dry and curling on the edges. The sap spilling from the scarred trees was dry. Droppings were everywhere, and they, too, were dry. I found two wallows in the bottom of the draw and neither had been used in a long time. I'd just wasted two days of valuable hunting time because I failed to look closely at the sign.

I didn't kill a bull that year as the elk had moved out of the drainage I hunted. The following year I drew the same tag. I returned on opening day—two weeks earlier than the previous year—to the same draw and called in a dandy 6-point. Within the first hour my tag was filled.

Ever since then I've made it a point to make sure any elk sign I see is fresh before hunting it. If it's not, I move on, sometimes to a different drainage or new place within the game management unit. It's just one lesson I've learned the hard way while hunting elk.

GET IN ELK SHAPE

Of all the big-game hunts I've been on over the years, elk hunting whips more people into submission faster than any other. I've seen grown men pass up shots at bulls because they didn't want to pack out the animals. Mind you, some of these were in extremely rugged country.

One year I hunted in rough terrain in north-central Idaho. There was a man in camp from Ohio. He'd dreamed of

hunting elk his whole life, and he'd just retired. Unfortunately, he was out of shape and couldn't make it up and down the mountains. He became so frustrated, or embarrassed, that he left camp in the middle of the night. Elk and elk country can break a hunter fast.

On an early-season archery hunt with my buddies who lived in Wyoming, we rode horses 18 miles high into the wilderness. We pitched camp at the 9,500-foot level. Doing simple chores at that elevation winded me. Hunting the next morning, it felt like I was going to implode. The air was so thin, and I was so out of breath, I couldn't keep up with my buddies. They went uphill to hunt and I went downhill, but not too far because I knew I'd have to climb back up to camp.

I walked more each morning and afternoon, drinking lots of water, pushing myself hard. After three days of work, my lungs finally felt good. That's when I really started my hunt. On day four I hiked up a ridge, down the backside and over another that was 10,000 feet



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in elevation. Four miles from camp, I called in a bull and killed it. I quartered it, hanging the meat in game bags in trees to keep it from the grizzlies I'd been seeing. The next day my buddies and I returned with horses to pack it out.

I'd worked out all summer for that hunt, but my training grounds were at my home, 500 feet above sea level. Strength-wise I felt great; I just had no lung capacity. Now, no matter where I'm hunting at high elevations, I devote training time to thin-air hikes with a heavy pack in the mountains during the summer.

During another season I had four elk hunts planned, all in big, rugged country. Beginning in early spring I worked out harder than ever in preparation for those and other hunts. I lifted a lot of weights and put on nearly 20 pounds of extra mass. I felt great, was shooting my bow with utmost confidence, and was ready to tackle the mountains.

The first hunt was on horseback. The moment my buddies and I loaded the pack string and I hopped on my horse

No matter where you hunt elk, the better shape you're in, the greater the odds of finding the animals and filling a tag.



at the trailhead, I knew I'd made a mistake. For the next 10 days we planned on hunting at the 8,500-foot mark, and that's when things got worse.

I was in top shape for strength, but my cardiovascular fitness and flexibility were pathetic. After a couple days of hard hiking and lots of stretching, my cardio improved. But I was so tight from the heavy lifting, I struggled walking up steep mountains, over hillsides covered in downed logs and in rocky ravines where footing was less than stable.

I ended up killing bulls on each hunt that season, along with a moose and a mountain goat, but I suffered. Never again did I lift to gain bulk in preparation for hunting season. I keep my lifting to building strength, not adding mass, and cardio and flexibility top the list of priorities. You don't have to bench-press 400 pounds and look like the Hulk to successfully bowhunt elk. In fact, if you're lean and flexible, like Gumby, and have stamina, you'll be way ahead of the game from the moment you start hunting.



Before the season, put on hunting clothes and even the pack you'll be hunting with, and shoot from various positions, angles and ranges.

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PREPARE FOR THE SHOT

One benefit from the season of heavy weightlifting, however, was my shooting accuracy. With the added muscle came a more stable base, and my upper-body strength made drawing, holding and steadying my bow easy. But even at that, knowing when to draw and let an arrow fly trumped the strength benefits. There's no substitute for learning and understanding animal behavior.

More strength means I can increase the draw weight of my bow. Pulling 83 pounds all season, my goal is to shoot fast arrows that travel with a flat trajectory. Most of my shots come in brush and thick cover, meaning an arrow often must be laced through small windows. The faster an arrow moves, the flatter its flight path and the more precisely I'm able to shoot through openings.

When shooting at targets, don't limit practice sessions to the backyard, standing on flat ground and shooting in the wide open. This is great for building strength and proper form, but it's not often you get such shots at elk in hunting





Elk may be bedded long before sunrise, and to beat them to the spot for a setup, you'll have to hike while it's still dark.

NIGHT MOVES

Scouting after dark can reveal a herd's secrets.

I rolled into a camp after midnight one season. I pitched a small tent next to my truck and tried getting some sleep as it had been a long drive. About 3 a.m. bugling bulls awoke me. I couldn't get back to sleep, anxiously awaiting sunrise. I hunted all day and didn't see or hear an elk. The same thing happened the following night, and again I hunted the area and didn't see an animal. On the third night I got up when I heard the elk. I followed them and could even see them in the glow of the full moon. I learned those elk were traveling 3 miles every night to feed, returning to their bedding area in the middle of the night.

Over the years I've scouted a lot at night for elk, usually when I was seeing fresh sign but finding no animals during the day. I discovered herds often travel between 1 to 7 miles per night, one way, from their feeding grounds to bed. Many times they're back in their beds two hours before sunrise.

When scouting at night I use a dim headlamp, rely on a navigation system—especially when there's no moonlight or it's cloudy—and do not call. I'm listening for cow and calf talk and bugling bulls. Sometimes elk move quietly and all you hear are footsteps on hard ground.

The goal is not to get close to elk, rather to get a line on where the herd is heading so you can set up ahead of them the next day. This might mean starting your hike in the middle of the night.

Because elk often move uphill to bed, be sure to monitor the thermals if you're on them at first light. Waiting until rising thermals stabilize before you move in from above is a must. I've called in and arrowed a number of bulls after 9 a.m. once air currents started rising.

When scouting at night, take naps during the hottest part of the day. Remain in the field all day, not returning to camp. If it's too hot to hunt, search for sign. You're there to kill an elk, not hang out in camp.

situations. Take those targets into the hills, placing them at known distances and shooting through holes and lanes in the brush. Learn your arrow's trajectory from 10 to 70 yards. Sometimes you'll get a close shot, and sometimes you may have to slip a follow-up arrow from a longer distance into an animal that was less than ideally hit with the first shot.

Practice shooting from various kneeling positions and at different angles and directions on hillsides. Of all the animals I've arrowed, I can count on one hand the number of times I was standing, using perfectly comfortable archery form.

Pay attention to your bubble level—especially on steep hillsides—and never take a shot unless you know the range. Most of the elk I've killed have come while I was hunting alone, doing my own calling and wind monitoring. When I find a place to set up and call, the next thing I do—even before nocking an arrow—is get multiple distance readings with my rangefinder. I scan the ground from left to right, picking any tree, rock, grass clump, stump or other mark that allows me to get a distance. Ideally, they're all within 40 yards; this is where shooting a fast bow greatly aids in accuracy. Anticipate where you might have to thread an arrow through narrow lanes, or over or under horizontal tree limbs.

A shot should come naturally, without thinking about your anchor point, breathing, grip or release as a bull approaches. By the time of the hunt, this should all be second nature, almost like a reaction. Practice builds muscle memory, so when it comes time for a shot, all you have to do is focus on the bull's behavior and monitor the wind.

PLAY THE WIND

I used to host TV shows for a living, thus the high number of elk hunts I was fortunate to go on for many years. More than once, scent-elimination companies approached me to sponsor a show. I gracefully declined the offers, and here's why. Elk live in big country, and within minutes of leaving camp, you're sweating. Layers of sweat build up throughout the day, and much of our body odors are emitted from our hands, mouth and head—places that aren't usually covered by scent-blocking sprays or clothes. Elk have some of the most sensitive noses on the planet, and unless you're wrapped in multiple plastic

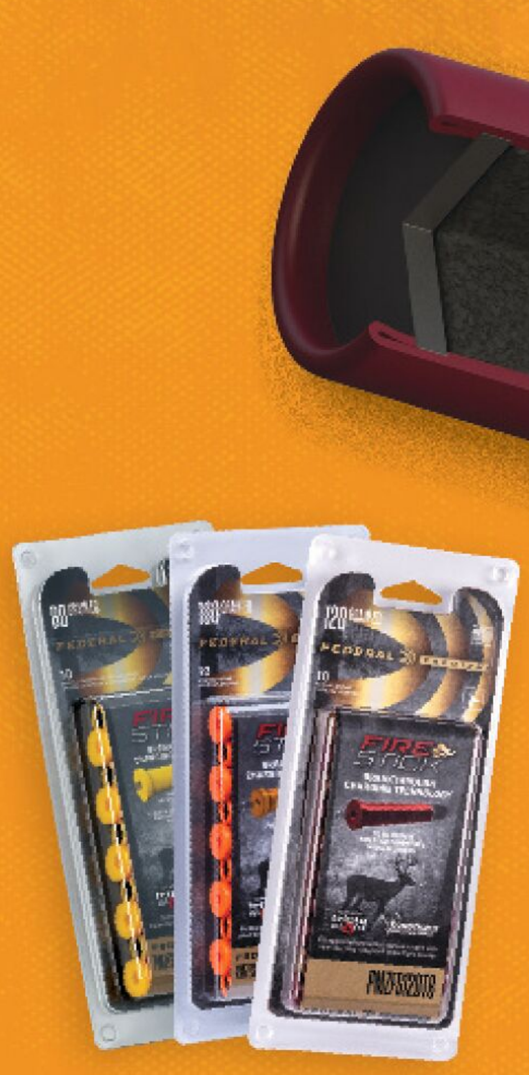


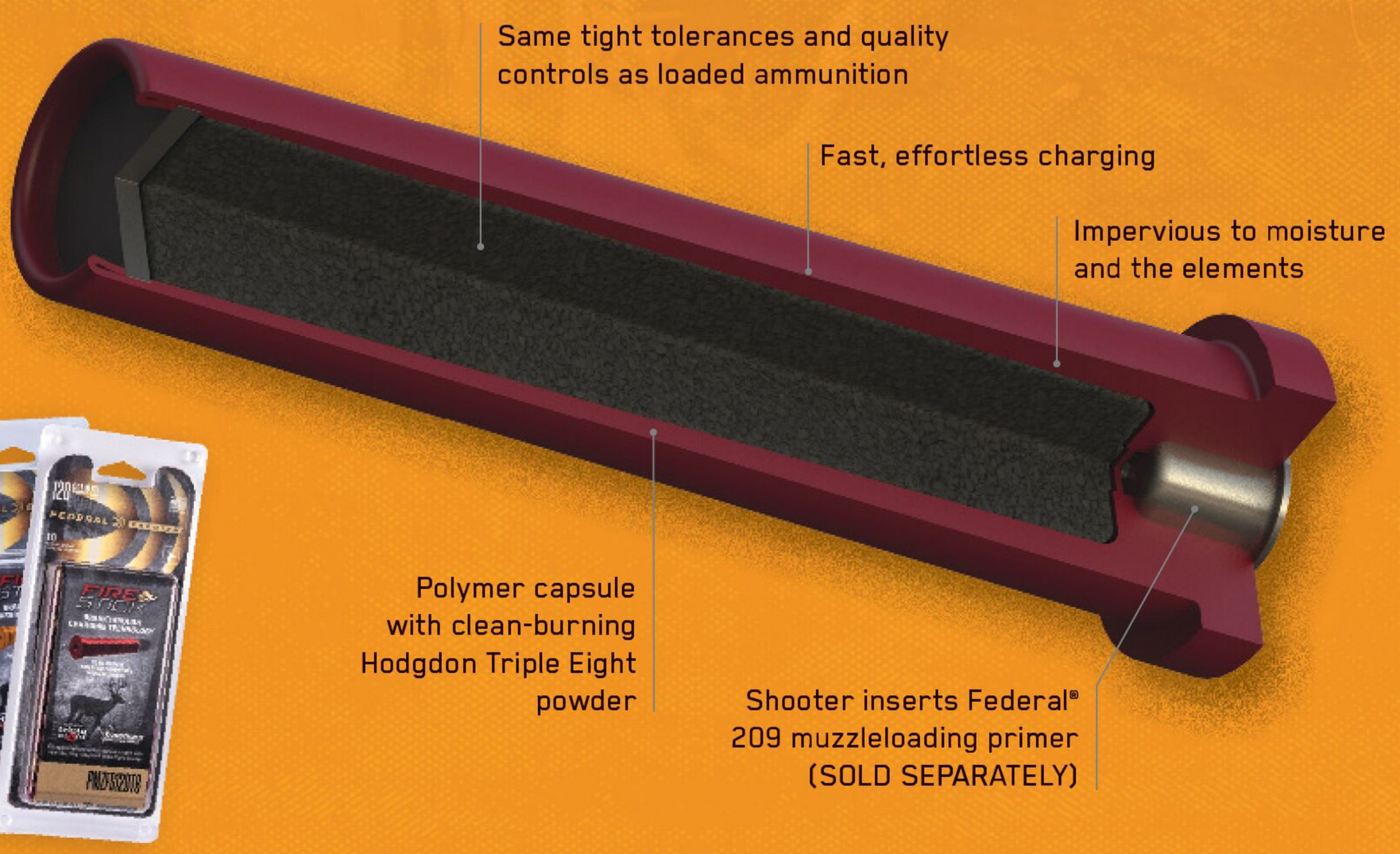
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bags that lock in every hint of odor, an elk will smell you if the wind is wrong.

Many hunters won't believe me, and scent companies won't appreciate me, but that's fine. I'm just sharing from my experiences, and not just from 40 years of elk hunting, but from decades of going on hundreds of big-game hunts around the world. I don't care if an elk sees me moving in the shadows or hears me, but if it smells me, the gig is up—always.

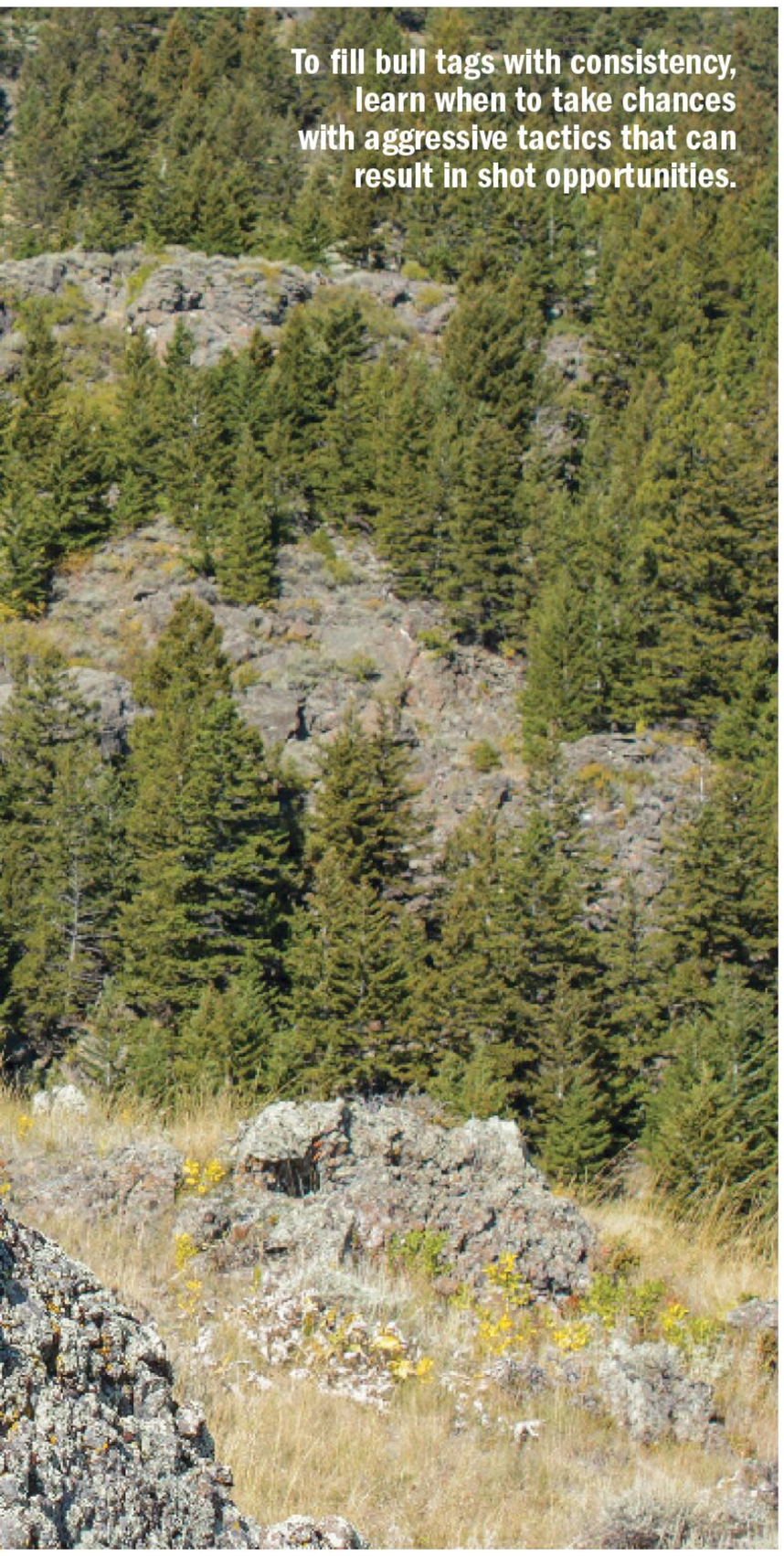
Scent-blocking sprays, even specialized clothing, give many hunters a false sense of confidence that they can hunt with the wind or keep closing the gap on a bull when the wind changes direction. It won't work. For hunters who claim they have done it, I'd like to know exactly what the wind was doing where the elk was standing at the time. Wind currents and directions shift, even within a few feet.

However, I have found scent-blocking spray to work when applying it on a trail I've walked to get into a ground blind or treestand. If we had noses as powerful as big game, especially elk, we'd hate life because so many of the daily odors we can't smell would be overpowering. We can't begin to comprehend the power of an elk's nose. I just know their sense of smell is so good that I never approach them when the wind is at my back or swirling in a draw.





Playing the wind is the author's top priority when bowhunting elk. Regularly checking wind direction is vital to getting within range for a shot, as it can shift in a moment.



FAIL AND LEARN

I like hunting on my own, as that's when I learn so much, mostly through making mistakes. Learning to hunt elk—or any big game—is a never-ending process. The more hunts you can go on, the more you'll learn, and this is largely achieved through recognizing errors. If you're not making mistakes, you're not pushing hard enough, and if you're not pushing hard, you have no idea what you can and can't get away with.

After I finished delivering an elk hunting seminar, a man in the front row waited for the room of more than 300 people to clear, then asked me, "I've been bowhunting elk for 12 years and I get close every year, but I've yet to take a shot. What should I do?" After chatting more with the man, my advice was to hunt more aggressively. He needed to position himself more in the open so he had clear shooting lanes, and he needed to call and move more in order to close the deal.

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Bowhunters yearn for a close encounter with a bull. Once it happens, evaluate what you did to find yourself in this position, and then do it again.

"But what if I spook them?" the man asked in response.

"You've hunted 12 years and never shot at a bull; spooking them would be the least of my worries," I said. "Getting close does no good if your final moves are made with hesitation and doubt, and you don't have openings to shoot through."

Many times I've had bulls hang up, and many times I've made aggressive moves to try to close the deal. Calling louder and more frequently, moving closer to the herd before calling, or trying to get closer with a decoy, I've spooked a lot of bulls, even entire herds. That's OK, because in these situations I knew I had to make a move to get a shot opportunity.

Sometimes I could feel the wind changing so I moved closer, trying to beat the shifting currents because I knew I was too far in to back out. Sometimes I cut off bulls with reply bugles that resulted in them gathering their harems and bolting. Sometimes I've been so focused on stalking to within range of a bedded bull, I failed to see the cows



Things can escalate quickly when elk are in the rut. This is the perfect window to move in fast and close the deal on an unsuspecting bull.





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between us. Mistakes, all of them, result in learning.

In elk hunting, if you do what you've always done and you're not routinely filling tags, you may never find success. Don't get frustrated. Make changes. Many of the elk I've spooked heard me or saw me—not smelled me—but weren't sure what I was. I was able to get back on many of those bulls later in the day, or in following days, and close the deal.

Because of the number of hunts I used to go on every fall, I didn't have the luxury of taking my time. Our filming and production schedule was tight. Once I found a good bull, I was moving aggressively, doing all I could to kill it. The No. 1 thing I learned was, as long as the wind was in my favor, I had a shot at killing a bull. I got out of TV nearly a decade ago, but I still hunt aggressively. Elk are wild animals, and when bulls are rutting, common sense is often overshadowed by the urge to breed. Catch a bull in the right frame of mind, and you'll be amazed at what you can get away with.

When bowhunting elk, you'll make mistakes, just like in life. But never give up, never quit. Learn from mishaps and keep pushing. Minutes later, just over the next ridge or a few hundred yards farther up the draw, a bad hunt can quickly turn into one you'll never forget. G&F

Learning from mistakes results in greater knowledge, and that breeds success. Knowing what you can, and can't, get away with when bowhunting elk only comes through experience.



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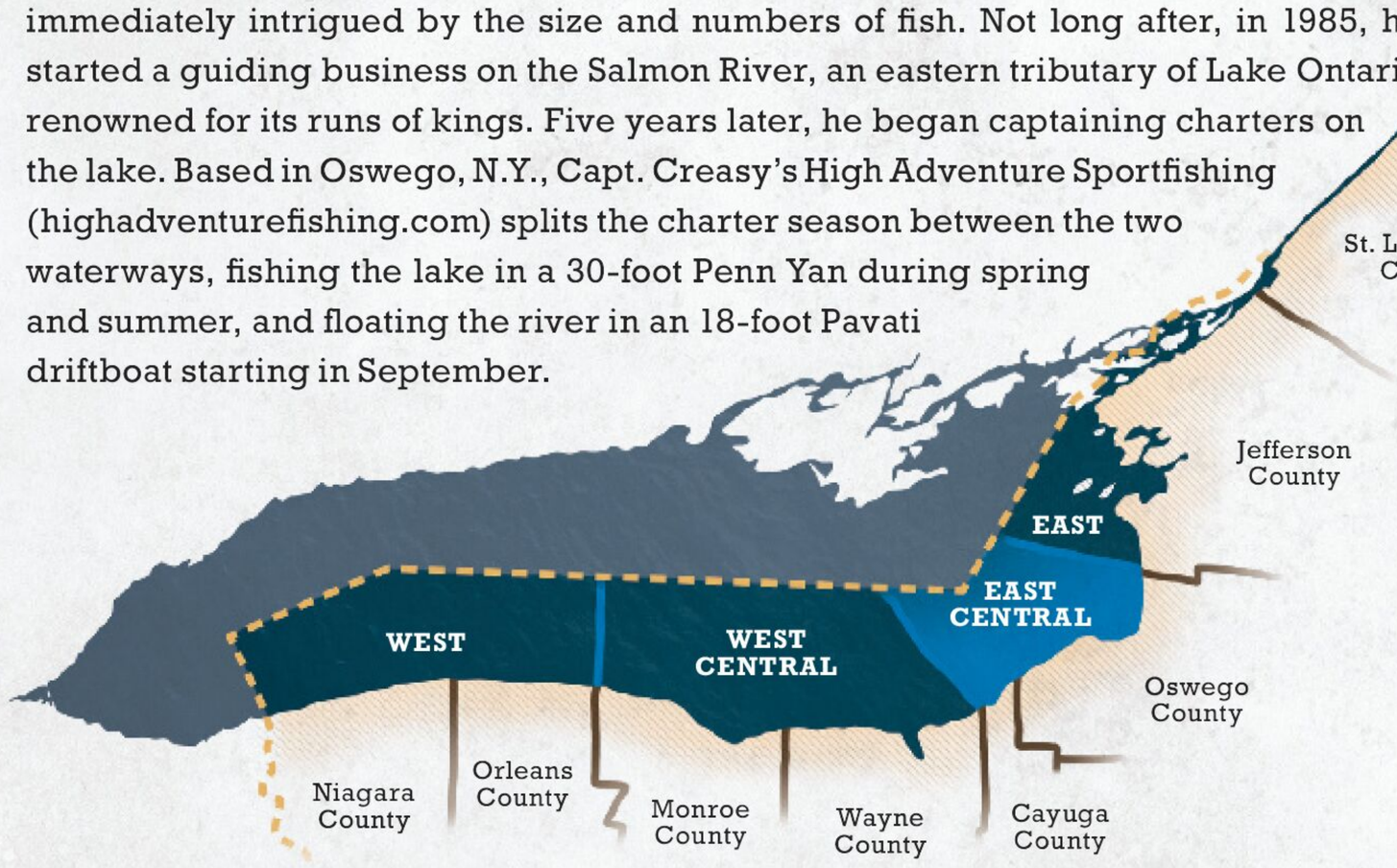
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Although Capt. Troy Creasy began fishing for trout when he was "old enough to walk," it wasn't until later in life that he got a taste of what Lake Ontario offers. He booked his first lake charter with friends in the late 1970s and was immediately intrigued by the size and numbers of fish. Not long after, in 1985, he started a guiding business on the Salmon River, an eastern tributary of Lake Ontario renowned for its runs of kings. Five years later, he began captaining charters on the lake. Based in Oswego, N.Y., Capt. Creasy's High Adventure Sportfishing (highadventurefishing.com) splits the charter season between the two waterways, fishing the lake in a 30-foot Penn Yan during spring and summer, and floating the river in an 18-foot Pavati driftboat starting in September.



ON THE WATER

with **Capt. Troy Creasy** of High Adventure Sportfishing

What makes September a great time to book a trip?

Salmon start to enter the river then, and on a good day, we can have 50 to 100 hookups. We won't land that many, kings being kings and fighting like they do, but on most days we'll land at least a handful. Some days we'll lose count. Some days we'll fight so many that we're whipped and will quit early.

How do you fish for kings in the river?

We predominately fly fish for salmon in September by drifting egg-pattern flies on 8- or 9-weight rods. Fly color is dictated by factors like water clarity and the amount of light. If I had one color for salmon in the fall, though, it would be a pink. Chartreuse can be good when the water has some color. Bright colors seem to irritate the fish and make them want to bite.

Describe what it's like to fight a salmon in the river.

Kings make really long, hard runs. You hardly ever land a fish where you hook it. You have to go after it. You're not going to pull one back up through a riffle. Kings are averaging about 18 pounds right now, and a lot of times they will be the largest fish an angler has fought on a fly rod.

How is the salmon population trending this year?

We have a good year-class of fish, and the baitfish population is in good shape. There's a ton of nice fish. The fishing is incredible. It's as good now as it's ever been at this end of the lake.

What opportunities come after the salmon run?

By mid- to late October we're fishing for trout, predominately steelhead, but we catch browns, too. Steelhead are my favorite. Pound for pound, they are a little faster and more acrobatic than salmon. When you hook one, it's out of the water as much as it's in.





PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAPT. TROY CREASY

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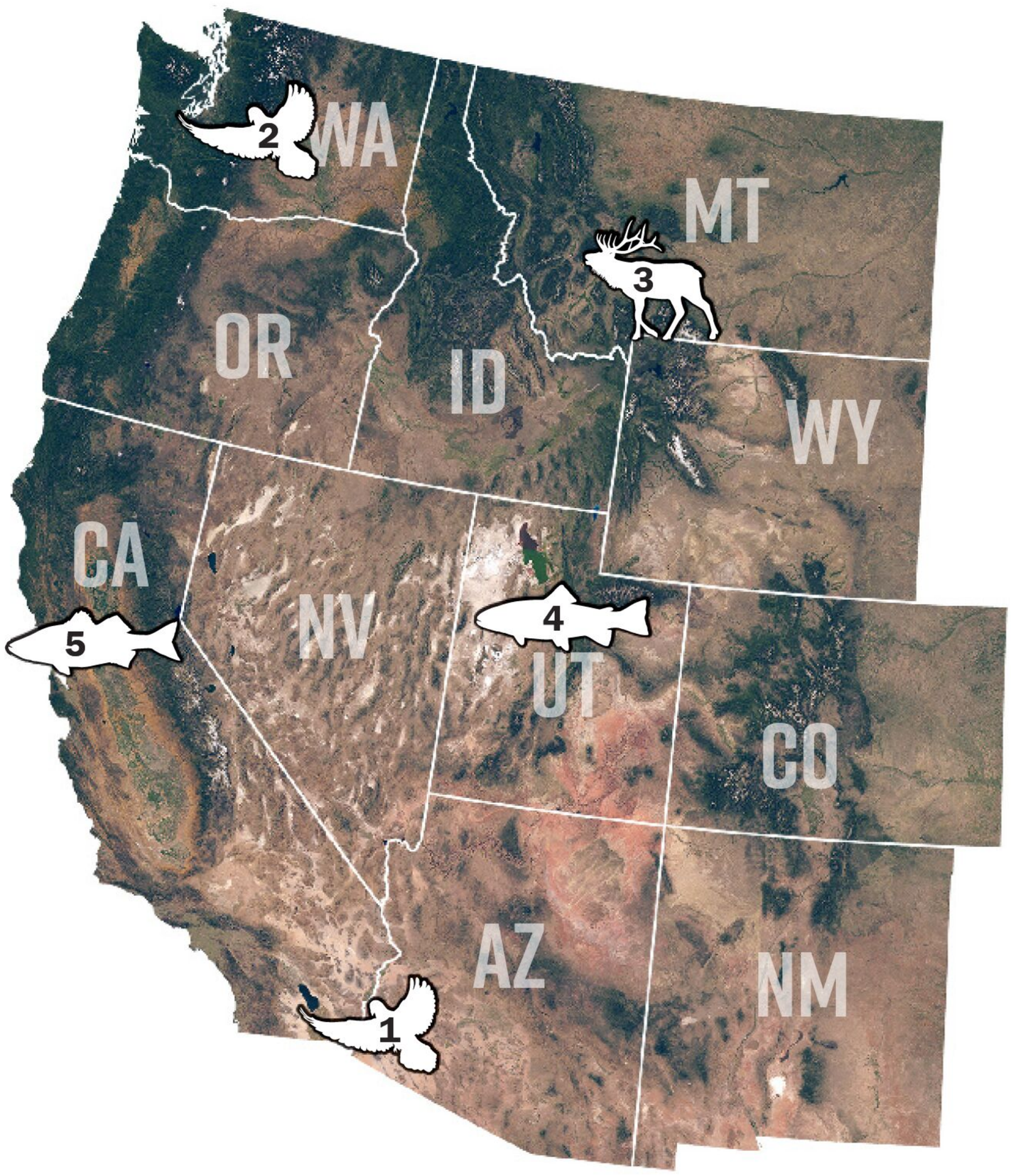
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AROUND THE WEST

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THIS MONTH

By Andrew McKean



If you're a native outdoorsman of the West, you know all about the Labor Day Curse. It's a sweeping cold-pressure system that drops out of the Canadian provinces to drench the region in a cold, wet, snowy announcement that summer is over. It sends doves south, shuts down elk bugling and makes prairie and mountain roads suddenly impassable.

But it's as brief as it is unwelcome, and the dazzling Indian Summer days on its backside bring the best hunting and fishing of the year. Doves will be concentrated in areas with grain, water and trees. Elk will come out of the drizzle ready to rumble. Warmwater fish will go on a feeding binge to prepare for lean times ahead, and brown and brook trout will start to move to spawning shoals. In short, this is the best month to have it all.

1

YUMA DOVE ACTION

A shot of cool, wet weather early in September doesn't necessarily move mourning doves out of the region, but it will concentrate them in areas with available groceries. Happily, state agencies have realized the joy and action they can provide constituents when they manage wildlife areas both to hold birds and provide access.

The most vaunted destination for dove hunters in the region is Yuma, Ariz., which has magnitudes more opportunities and birds than anywhere else. The Quigley Achee Wildlife Area, 40 miles east of Yuma off Interstate 8, offers more than 600 acres. Closer to town, the entire Yuma Valley has managed dove-hunting opportunities on private farmland. The best hunting will be along the brushy "drains" that collect irrigation runoff from fields.



2

EVERGREEN STATE DOVES

The irrigated croplands north and west of eastern Washington's Potholes Reservoir are full of doves this month, and while access can take some work, the nearby Desert Habitat Management Area is a good spot to intercept cycling doves. The eastern side of Winchester Lake—itself just north of Interstate 90—is a good spot, and the Desert Unit of the Columbia Basin Wildlife Management Area will produce limits of birds for afternoon pass-shooters.

3

PUBLIC-LAND ELK

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks researchers have concluded that the height of breeding activity for Treasure State elk is about Sept. 25. But bugling activity will be peaking a good week before that, as bulls gather harems and each declares to the world that he is king of the mountain. Add growing research that shows elk bugling activity is highest during atmospheric high pressure, and you can pretty much time your archery elk trip: A block of fair weather in the third week of September.

In Montana, the places to be are the remote drainages of the Little Belt Mountains southeast of Great Falls, the mid-elevation parks of the Gravelly Range west of Ennis and the Gallatin Range south of Bozeman. Although all these spots are gems, none are hidden, and you can expect lots of company at the trailheads. Plan to hike earlier and farther than your neighbors, and be in secluded bowls as the sun warms the mountain. As it gets even warmer, hunt around water and wallows.

That same prescription will work on lots of other elk-rich areas of the West. In Idaho, it's hard to beat the Payette River headwaters above the extensive burns. Or work the wilderness boundary east of McCall. Northwest Colorado's Unit 11 has an exceptional combination of public land and high archery success.



4

PROVO RIVER TROUT

Caddisflies, Yellow Sallies and even smaller grasshoppers will be taking surface-oriented trout all around the West, but let's focus on the region's newest river: the reconstructed Provo River of central Utah. The lower section has been reconnected with Utah Lake, and trout are responding to more structure and consistent flows out of upstream Jordanelle Reservoir. Spunky brown trout can be taken with size-16 caddis patterns. On overcast days, drift a Sow Bug or small stonefly nymph for bigger browns.

5

LOWER SAC STRIPERS

This entire column could've be devoted to hawg bass, from Dworshak Reservoir's slab Idaho smallmouths to New Mexico's trophy factory, Conchas Lake. But for the best September bass bite, join the crowds on California's lower Sacramento River for a mix of striped bass, spotted bass and smallmouths mixed in with some excellent salmon action. The Delta, as this lower river is known, has something like 1,000 miles of waterways, islands and shoreline breaks. Stripers enter the Delta in mid-September, with the best fishing around Pittsburgh and Antioch. Pitch everything from swimbaits to spinnerbaits near cover for savage strikes by stripers up to 40 pounds.

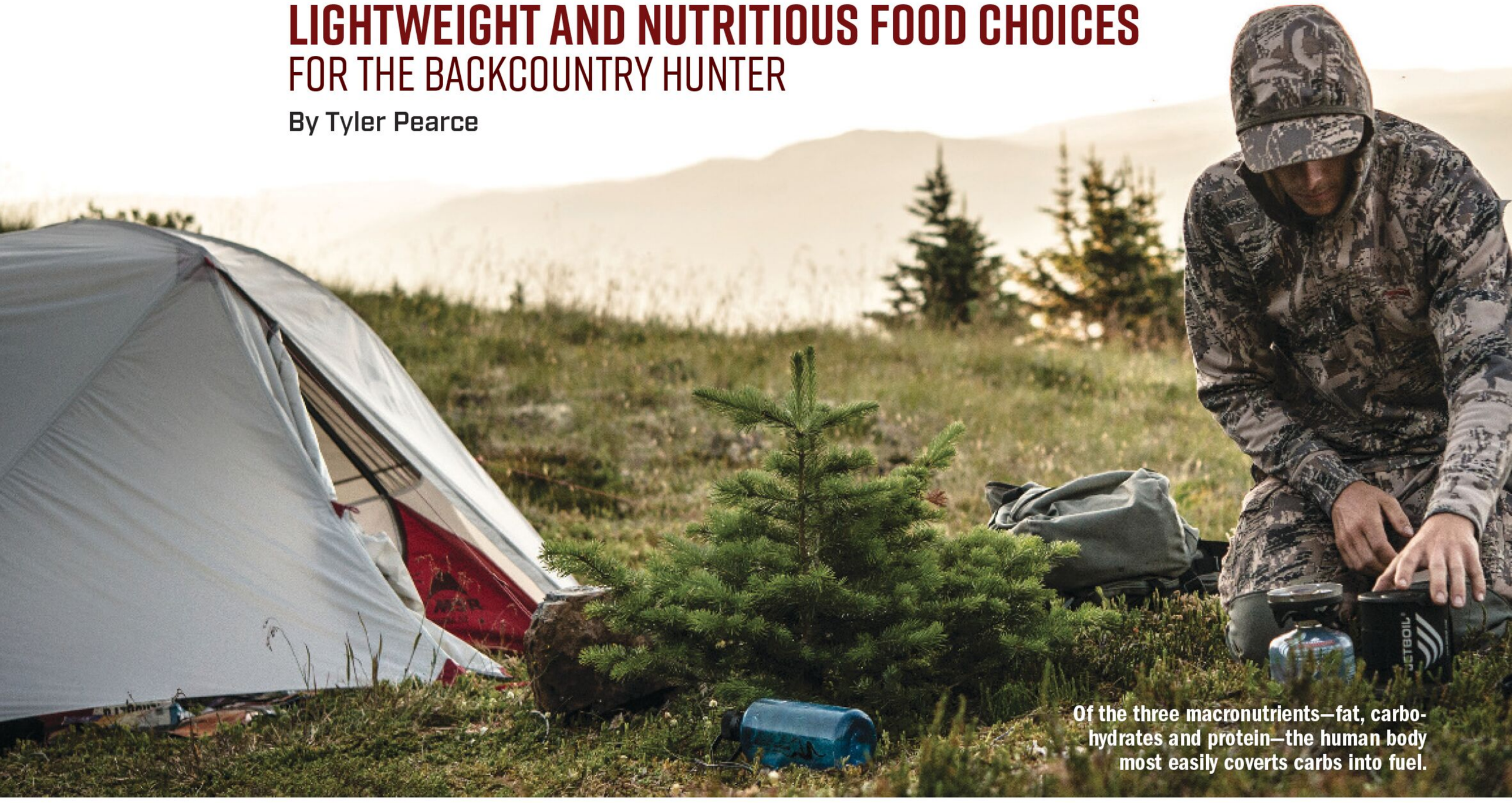


WINDIGO IMAGES (LEFT); JOHN HAFNER PHOTOGRAPHY (CENTER); SHUTTERSTOCK (RIGHT)

FUEL UP

LIGHTWEIGHT AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD CHOICES FOR THE BACKCOUNTRY HUNTER

By Tyler Pearce



Of the three macronutrients—fat, carbohydrates and protein—the human body most easily coverts carbs into fuel.

Few things impact your performance and how you feel on a backcountry hunt as your nutrition. Most hunters I talk to and interact with in online forums—everyone from noobs to die-hards—seem to think there is one universally standard meal plan for the backcountry: Plain oatmeal packets for breakfast, granola bars and gas station snacks for lunch and a freeze-dried salt bomb in a bag for dinner. Does such a grub regimen get it done? Technically, yes. You'll survive. But, it's nowhere near optimal nutrition for fueling those days of high physical output and overnight recovery.

So, what does your body really want and need? The short answer is adequate calories and proper macronutrients. Start by determining what your individual caloric needs are. Calories equal energy. Each person's body consumes a varying daily number of calories depending on his or her body size, composition, physical output and myriad individual metabolic factors like gender and age. To see what your daily maintenance needs are, search for an online "calorie calculator" and enter your stats. I suggest using the highest physical activity setting the model allows. It's a great baseline for how much food, in terms of calories, you should plan to bring on your hunt. For me—41 years old, male, 6 feet tall, 180 pounds— it's about 3,300 calories per day.

CALORIES PER OUNCE

Once you have a daily calorie target, you can back into fulfilling your vittles requirements. It is widely accepted among backpackers and mountaineers to pack only foods that meet a minimum calorie-to-weight benchmark of 100 calories per ounce. I've found you can easily improve on this standard with carbohydrates and fat, but it's more difficult to achieve the target calorie-to-weight ratio with protein.

Overall, it is good to adhere to the 100-calorie-per-ounce rule as applied to the average of all of your food combined. For me, at an output 3,300 calories per day, my target is 33 ounces of food. However, I can usually get that down to 26 to 28 ounces with more scrupulous choices. My daily exertion is high, generally covering between 8 to 12 miles if I'm running and gunning for elk or making long treks above timberline to peer into multiple basins in search of



NICK TREHEARNE PHOTOGRAPHY (ABOVE); TYLER PEARCE (RIGHT)

bucks. Adjust for your hunting style, terrain type and mileage accordingly. In my experience, you can run on a hefty calorie deficit for a day or two and feel fine, but after that it starts to significantly impact performance.

MACRONUTRIENTS AND TIMING

There are three main macronutrients: carbohydrates, fat and protein. During periods of intense exercise, your body burns glucose in the bloodstream and stored glycogen in muscle tissue. Of the three macros, carbohydrates are most easily converted to glucose and glycogen by the body.

Generally, most Western hunters' greatest periods of physical exertion are in the mornings and afternoons. That's hiking to glassing points, traversing high ridgelines to check basins, covering country dogging elk or trying to solicit a bugle. Therefore, for breakfast and early afternoons (post mid-day snooze), I'm mostly consuming carbohydrates as I prepare to work.

Fat is the second easiest macro for your body to convert into energy, it makes you feel full and it has the highest calorie-to-weight ratio of the macros. I consume fats primarily in the form of nuts, nut butters, seeds and oils in conjunction with most snacks and meals throughout the day.

Protein, generally the heaviest macronutrient by volume, is mostly reserved for dinner time. Protein synthesis is essential for muscle recovery and repair. The most beneficial time for that is while you sleep. Instead of burning protein inefficiently for fuel during the day, let it "soak in" overnight.

DAILY MEAL PLAN

For breakfast, make your own super oatmeal, pre-portioned per day into zip-top snack bags. Add dried fruit, nuts, ground flaxseed, chia seeds, coconut flakes, 1 or 2 powdered eggs and a tablespoon or two of oil (at camp). One of the biggest game-changers for me has been the utilization of oils—olive, avocado, walnut and almond to be specific. Oils' calorie-to-weight ratios are best in class; try incorporating them into most of your meals. Nalgene makes small containers conducive to oil transport, or you can find single-serving packets, like Marconi olive oil, at natural grocery stores or online. Take an electrolyte drink mix (like those by Skratch Labs or Hammer Nutrition), powdered BCAA supplement and a multi-vitamin to top it off before heading out for the day.

For midday trail food, try making your own fruit leathers. Ryan Lampers' "Mountain Candy" recipe is hard to beat. Homemade wild game jerky, nut butter packets, calorie-dense energy bars, Packaroons, endurance gels and honey packets are all excellent choices. Leave the candy, Cheetos and Slim Jims on the shelf.

For dinner, freeze-dried meals like those made by Heather's Choice, Outdoor Herbivore, Good-to-Go and others are good choices. With a fraction of the salt and higher quality ingredients than other offerings, you'll feel better in the long run. Don't forget to add a couple tablespoons of oil. Some of my favorite protein additions to freeze-dried dinners are Patagonia Provisions' smoked salmon filet pouches, tuna packets, protein bars and a powdered BCAA supplement. It really provides an overnight boost in recovery I can feel.

One final nugget of wisdom: Test all of your food before you go. If you plan to eat freeze-dried meals with 2,000 mg of sodium minutes before going to bed on your hunts, try that at home a few times to see how your body responds. You'll thank yourself on the mountain. GAF



To maintain the ideal energy-to-weight ratio, choose foods that contain a minimum of 100 calories per ounce.

Trophy trout might indulge on an particularly robust insect hatch, but they'll never turn down a chance at a more substantial meal.

STICK IT TO 'EM

WHEN HUNTING TROPHY TROUT, IT PAYS TO THINK BIG.

Story and Photos by Mike Gnatkowski

Trout are perfectly happy to feed on myriad tiny insects until they reach about 16 inches in length. Then they become carnivores. Perhaps they realize that they're not going to get much bigger sipping tiny bugs and decode to seek out more meaty morsels like minnows, creek chubs, gobies, crawfish, rodents, frogs and even their own kind. My dad once caught a 17-inch brown that had a 7-inch trout in its stomach.

Trophy trout will still sip on insects when a prolific hatch is taking place, but they won't pass up a bigger meal. They often wait patiently beneath stockers that rise spastically to fill up on bugs … only to gulp down one of the hatchery fish. When it comes to trophy trout, there's a big-lure/big-fish relationship to exploit.

A REVELATORY EVENING

Colorado's South Delaney Butte Lake is one of the state's best trout lakes, and my expectations were high on a calm, surreal summer evening. Just about the time the sun started to set, *Callibaetis* mayflies began to hatch. I noticed the emerging mayflies fluttering on the surface and soon the trout took note, too. In a few minutes I was surrounded by splashy rises along with the occasional slurp that belied a bigger trout. Problem was, I didn't have my fly rod.

I resigned myself to casting stick baits, and it proved to be just the ticket. I'd cast beyond a rise and then work the bait back in a series of twitches and jerks. Often the retrieve would be interrupted by a solid thump, followed by a chunky trout peeling drag off the reel. I'd handled more than a dozen trout before I realized the rises had stopped. I looked skyward and took in a breath-taking array of stars and the Milky Way shimmering in the night sky, afforded by the fact there wasn't an incandescent light for miles. In that moment, time stood still. Most of the trout were within the 18- to 22-inch slot size limit, but several were much bigger. One 26-inch cutthroat swallowed the stick bait and was beyond revival. When I cleaned it the next morning, the trout had 10 crawfish in it. So much for tiny bugs.



Consider removing the front hook from three-treble lures, especially if you plan on releasing the fish. It won't affect the way the bait runs, and it'll protect trout from being foul-hooked.

PICK THE RIGHT STICK

A 4- or 5-inch stick bait, or "body bait," might seem out of place on a relatively small stream or river, but it's sure to get the interest of the biggest trout. In moving water, the idea is to cast across current and work the bait with a series of short, darting jerks or twitches as it swings. Many takes typically occur as the bait reaches the end of the retrieve and turns to head upstream. Other times, the first twitch that imitates a struggling minnow elicits a smashing strike.

Match the bill on the lure with the depth of water you're targeting. On shallow rivers and streams, a short bill that only allows the lure to dive a couple of feet is perfect. Baits like the classic Original Floating Rapala fit this category. For some reason, the straight versions seem to outfish the jointed style. Trout seem to like the tighter shimmy versus the wider wobble. No. 9 or 11 Rapalas are not too big, and a number 13 will get the attention of the stream's biggest trout.

With body baits that have three treble hooks, it's best to remove the front hook. It doesn't alter the action of the lure, but removing the front hook prevents foul-hooking trout. Trout typically strike from behind or from the side and get hooked by the back or middle treble. The front hook often gets struck in a gill plate or eye. Pulling from the side instead of straight ahead makes it difficult to control the trout and will tire a lunker out, especially in the current. If you're planning on releasing the fish, an injury to the trout's eye may limit its chances for survival.

Some stick baits come with relatively small treble hooks, so an upgrade might be in order. Replace the trebles with hooks a size or two larger and upgrade to something like VMC's 2X Barbarian Outbarb or Mustad's Triple Grip.

Use a round-bend snap or a loop knot to allow maximum movement of the lure. Good choices are the crankbait snaps from Lindy and VMC. A snap allows the stick bait to move freely. There's no need for a snap swivel because stick baits don't spin. If the lure is spinning, you'd better take it off or tune it. Give the lure a few strong rips to make sure it is tracking perfectly.

Lure choice depends largely on the depth of water you're fishing and the

orientation of the trout. Many western reservoirs where trout thrive are relatively shallow bodies of water. Trout retreat to the security of deep water during daylight hours and then move into the shallows to chase minnows or root out crayfish under the cover of darkness. Trout can be heard cavorting in as little as a couple of feet of water, so baits with a shallow lip perform best then.

Shallow divers like Rapala's Husky Jerk, Scatter Rap Minnow and X-Rap; Storm's Thunderstick; and Smithwick's Rattlin' Rogue have a short lip and excel in the shallows when twitched and darted under the cover of darkness. Many of these baits have rattles in them, which help trout home in on them. Some, like the Rattlin' Rogue, have lots of small BBs in them that create an audible siren song. Others have one big knocker chamber, and while others still may have no rattle at all. Let the trout decide what you use.

SOLVE SUSPENDING FISH

Trout are often difficult to catch because they suspend in the water column and can be found from top to bottom depending on the time of day. A good way to target suspended fish is to add Storm SuspenDots or SuspenStrips to the underside of the lures to make them neutrally buoyant. Smithwick and others also make suspending versions of their lures. Once you determine the depth at which trout are cruising, you can count down the slowly sinking lure until it hovers in the strike zone before manipulating it in short jerks and pauses.

Trolling is an ideal way to present multiple stick baits at once. Trout often move up and down contours depending on the time of day, bait movement or wave action. A great way to target multiple depths is to run a shallow diver on the outside on top of the contour, a medium-diving stick bait along the drop and a deeper diving lure along the base. That way you're covering everything from 5 to 20 feet or more.

This can be easily accomplished by using small in-line planers like those from Big Jon. The Otter In-Line Planer and the even smaller Mini-Otter In-Line Planer are other options.

If you go this route, you'll need sturdy rod holders, trolling rods and line-counter reels. Line counters help you determine exactly how far the lure is behind the board. Run shorter leads for shallow divers and long leads for deep-diving baits. If one or the other produces, change up accordingly.

Lure color should match the most predominant forage in any given lake. That could be shiner minnows, crayfish or small trout. Natural colors are a good choice, but rainbows and cutthroats are known for their affinity for hot colors, like pink and orange, and will jump on a gaudy stick bait that doesn't resemble anything they've ever seen.



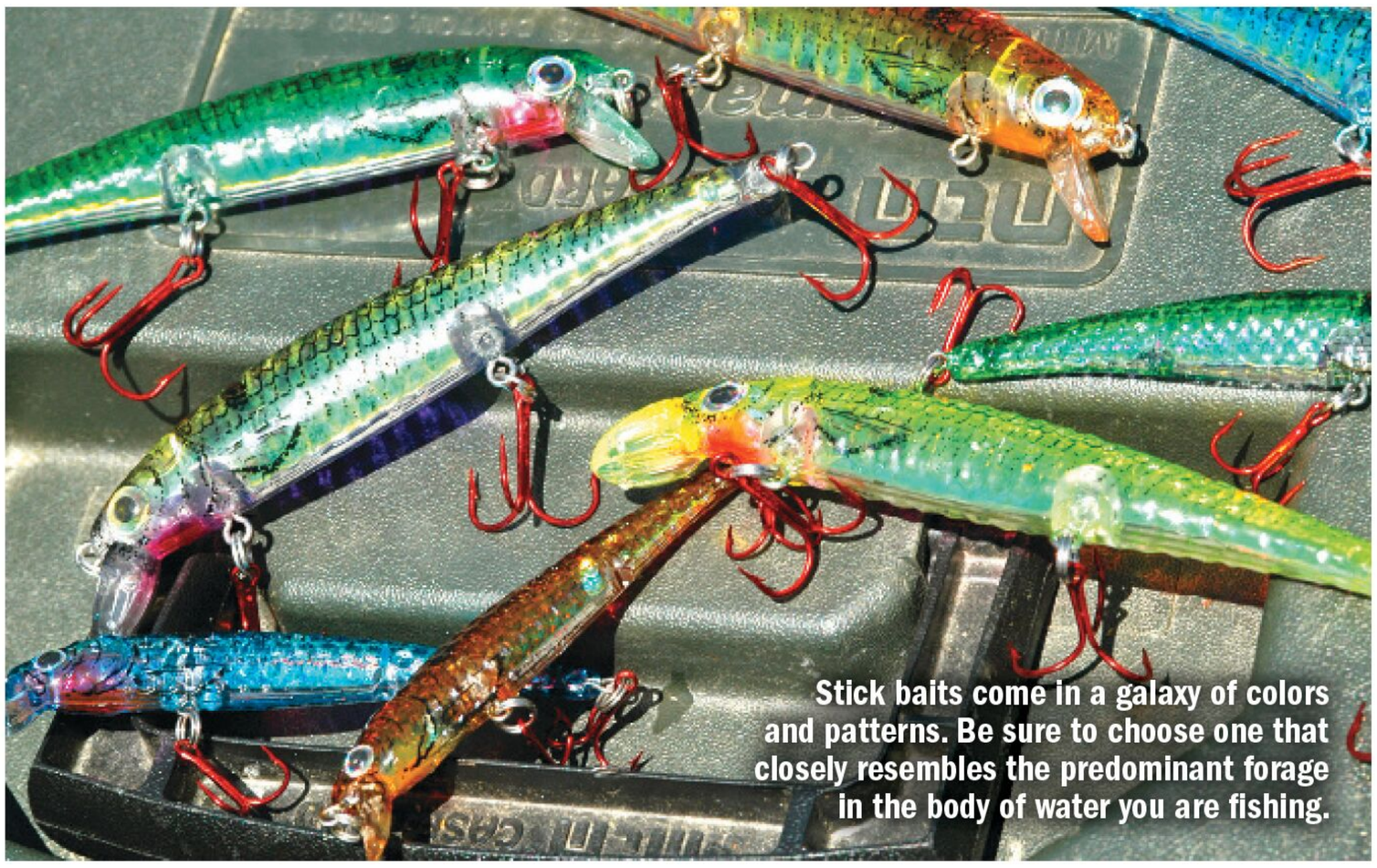
Trolling is a great way to target suspending fish. Troll three stickbaits that dive to different depths to determine where the fish are holding.

TACKLE FOR TAMING TROUT

The ideal rod for casting and fishing stick baits is kind of a hybrid. It's a little stiffer and longer than your average walleye rod used for bait fishing but not in the ultralight panfish category. One of my favorite rods for using stick baits is a Yampa River spinning rod by Favorite USA. The Yampa River rod (YMR-701-M) is a 7-foot, one-piece rod that has some backbone, yet is lightweight and has a sensitive tip to manipulate stick baits.

The Bass Pro Shop Panfish Elite rod (PFE72MLS) is marketed as a panfish rod but has just the right action for chucking body baits. The two-piece rod measures 7 feet 2 inches when assembled and has just the right combination of power and sensitivity to muscle brawny trout and make a stick bait dance.

I've had good luck with both monofilament and fluorocarbon when casting stick baits. With today's premium small-diameter lines, you can use 6- or 8-pound test and have the confidence to land the biggest trout. In a nutshell, monofilament floats and fluorocarbon sinks. If you want to keep your lure near the surface in shallow water, mono is the right choice. If you're looking to get a little more depth out of your stick bait, fluorocarbon would be a better choice. Using a clear line is wise for the environs where you typically encounter trout. Being that fluorocarbon is a little tougher than mono, it might be a better choice if you encounter a lot of snags where you fish. Either way, having fresh line is perhaps the most important consideration. Peel off 50 yards every other trip and replace it with fresh line.



Stick baits come in a galaxy of colors and patterns. Be sure to choose one that closely resembles the predominant forage in the body of water you are fishing.

Reels need to be smooth, with a dependable drag that will be put to the test when you hook a trophy trout. Get in the habit of closing the bail manually to extend the life of bail springs. The Pflueger Supreme XT spinning reel is a great choice, with its superior carbon drag, machined aluminum gears, 11 ball bearings, lightweight frame, 5.2:1 gear ratio and carbon rotor. The 30-size Pflueger Supreme XT spinning reel has plenty of line capacity and the ability to bulldog trout.

I love to see a trout rise up and suck in a properly presented dry fly as much as the next guy, but if I'm targeting trophy trout I know it's time to break out the outsized stick baits. G&F



Opt for monofilament line when fish are in the shallows; go with fluorocarbon when they're deep. Typically, 6- or 8-pound test is sufficient.

MULEYS ON YOUR OWN

SEVEN TIPS FOR SCORING BIG ON DIY PUBLIC-LAND BUCKS

By Bob Robb

A successful venture into mule deer country starts with pre-hunt planning. It should include not just scouting, but also calls to biologists to learn about the animals you'll be hunting.

WINDIGO IMAGES

My first out-of-state DIY mule deer hunting road trip, back in the late 1970s, was a complete bust. In my defense, I didn't have the advantages of Google Earth, mapping apps, a scouting camera or looking up the weather on my smartphone. I basically went in blind, and my results showed it. Though I hunted hard and used some off-beat tactics, I only saw some does and small bucks. While I don't remember all the specifics, I do recall that I had no idea what I was doing. Today, however, I have a system that works. Here are the seven principles I use to find consistent success on public lands.

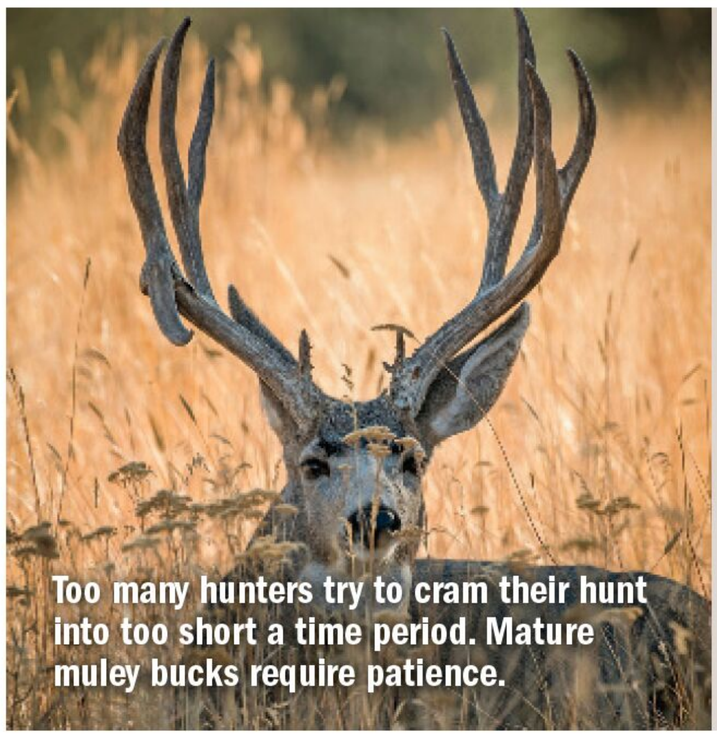

Smartphone apps are excellent tools for both scouting and navigating the terrain while hunting.

1
GATHER KNOWLEDGE

The foundation for any hunt is pre-hunt research and diligent scouting. Your goal is to "shrink your focus." By that I mean you must shrink the general area of the hunt from a large, unmanageable piece (the entire game management unit) down to a specific mountain range, then down to a drainage or two. Break those drainages into smaller chunks that can be thoroughly hunted in the amount of time available to you.

You start this process at home, long before the truck is gassed up. Game departments have all the statistics you need about recent deer harvests, buck-to-doe ratios, winter kill statistics and even hunter numbers and pressure. Use Google Earth, HuntStand, onX Maps and other mapping and hunting apps to give you a clear picture of the ground. Use this information to form a basic plan built around a scouting list. Then, once on the ground, you'll have more time to hike and glass, making it easy to stay mentally focused instead of wondering what to do next.

Whenever possible, you should scout prior to opening day. Making a summertime trip to the area is great if you can do it. There are many reasons for this, but two stand out. First, while hunting apps are great, there is no substitute for boots-on-the-ground knowledge about the hunt area. Second, only by putting eyes on the area can you learn some of the small things that can make a big difference. Is a road washed out, a trail closed or a traditional water source dried up? Are there roads that are not shown on your maps (this happens more often than you might think)? What crops are area farmers growing? Are the oaks loaded with acorns this year? Little things can have big impacts on a hunt.


Too many hunters try to cram their hunt into too short a time period. Mature muley bucks require patience.

BOB ROBB (TOP); JOHN HAFNER (BOTTOM)

2
BUDGET ENOUGH TIME

No matter the game you're pursuing, this basic fact remains: The more time you can be in the field, the better your chances. A weekend is great if that's all you have and you're hunting locally. When traveling, my basic program has always been at least two weekends and the week in between, including travel days. That's seven full days afield, which is my minimum. Also, the amount of time budgeted often depends on the kind of tag I am hunting. If it's a general tag that's relatively easy to obtain, I hunt hard. If it's a once-in-a-lifetime special draw tag, I may burn all my vacation days and hunt for weeks at a time. When it comes to time in the field, there's no such thing as too much.

3

HAVE A VISION

When I was young and much dumber, I thought the key to mule deer hunting was to get out before dawn and hike as many miles as possible each day, hoping and praying with every step. All I did was spook huge numbers of deer, and I never did kill any good bucks. Then an old man showed me the error of my ways.

"Let your eyes do the walking," he told me, loaning me his battered 7x35 World War II binoculars. Then he helped me glass up and shoot my first really good buck, and I was sold.

In the 1980s, a good friend, Arizona hunting guide DuWane Adams, pioneered putting the then-cutting-edge 15x60 Zeiss binocular on a tripod, and we started finding bucks nearly a mile away without any chance of spooking them. Glassing is the foundation of spot-and-stalk hunting.

Modern-day mule deer hunting is an optics-driven game. It is hard to hunt public ground today without running into other hunters who mount 15X binos atop lightweight tripods (accompanied by a buddy packing a spotting scope) and hunt with sniper-accurate rifles topped with riflescopes having a top-end magnification of 14X or more. They hunt with a high-volume pack that allows them to easily transport their optics, bow or gun, and other essentials.



Glassing to the rising morning sun allows you to focus on the north- and west-facing slopes where mule deer prefer to bed for the day.

JOHN HAFNER

4

GLASS PROPERLY

The old man who showed me the importance of glassing had another important rule.

"Don't be afraid of the dark," he told me. "You have to be set up and ready to glass before first light and stay until you cannot see anymore. That means hiking in the dark."

Simple advice, but I've met a lot of hunters who don't like the dark, and therefore miss out on the most productive few minutes of each day.

Step one is to pick a vantage point that allows you to see a lot of country. Glass every inch, but always remember that mule deer—especially older bucks—favor the shade. The old rule of thumb was to never glass to the east in the morning, but mule deer like to bed on north- and west-facing slopes where the shade is deep, the temperatures cool and the browse lush. To glass them, you have to face south and east at first light. Also, be ready to glass all day. Serious glassers pack along a foam pad to sit on, and/or use a tripod that allows them to stand up and glass from time to time.

Many hunters only hunt and/or glass in the early mornings and evenings, which of course is "prime time" for mule deer movement. However, deer move throughout the day, typically to change beds as shady areas change. In the evening, glass until it's too dark to see. If I find a good buck at last light, I know where he lives and can concentrate my efforts there in subsequent days.

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Never forget how well a mature buck can see, hear and smell, especially when stalking one across wide-open terrain.

5
MAKE YOUR MOVE

Once you've located a buck at distance, you have to move in for a shot, and you must be methodical. If hunting with a buddy, leave him behind to monitor the buck as you close the gap. Communicating via hand signals keeps you in the loop if the stalk causes you to lose sight of the buck for some time.

In the morning, you can often watch a buck bed for the day before making your move. Sometimes you can see him lie down; other times he'll go into a cut, canyon or brushy hole and not come out, so you generally know his location. That's when you move into range, set up and wait him out.

I've witnessed many successful hunts proceed thusly: A good buck is glassed a mile away first thing in the morning as he disappears into a dark canyon. The hunter takes his time to sneak into position before shooting the deer at last light as it emerges for its evening food run. A big advantage to this "controlled aggression" type of hunting is that even if you don't get a shot, you typically don't spook the deer and have a great chance of making it happen the following day.

6
RESPECT THEIR SENSES

As a hardcore bowhunter, it's ingrained in my DNA to always respect an ungulate's eyes, ears and nose—and I don't forget it when packing a rifle either. This applies not just to my target buck, but also any lesser bucks, does and yearlings that might be in the area.

Always use whatever terrain you have to your advantage, whether it be a ridge, bluff, gully or tree line. Get out of sight and allow yourself to move quickly without fear of being seen, heard or smelled. Never underestimate a mule deer's hearing, and constantly monitor the wind as you make your way to the deer.

Remember that mature muley bucks bed with a great deal of care. They like beds in the shade, looking downslope on the lee side of some structure such as rimrock, a clump of trees or a ridge. Winds often swirl when flowing around this structure, which allows them to smell everything behind them while they are looking forward. That's one big reason why, once a buck has bedded for the day and has committed to a general bedding area, he will rarely move far until evening.

7
PICK YOUR POCKETS

Public ground gets pounded these days. Mature bucks have survived by avoiding lazy, careless hunters who hate leaving easy access or the comfort of a truck cab. Part of my pre-hunt research and scouting program is trying to locate little out-of-the-way pockets of isolated cover where deer can bed without being spotted from a road or major hiking trail. By budgeting lots of time, I can seek out these pockets and hunt them thoroughly. You should, too, even if they require a long hike. G&F

BOB ROBB

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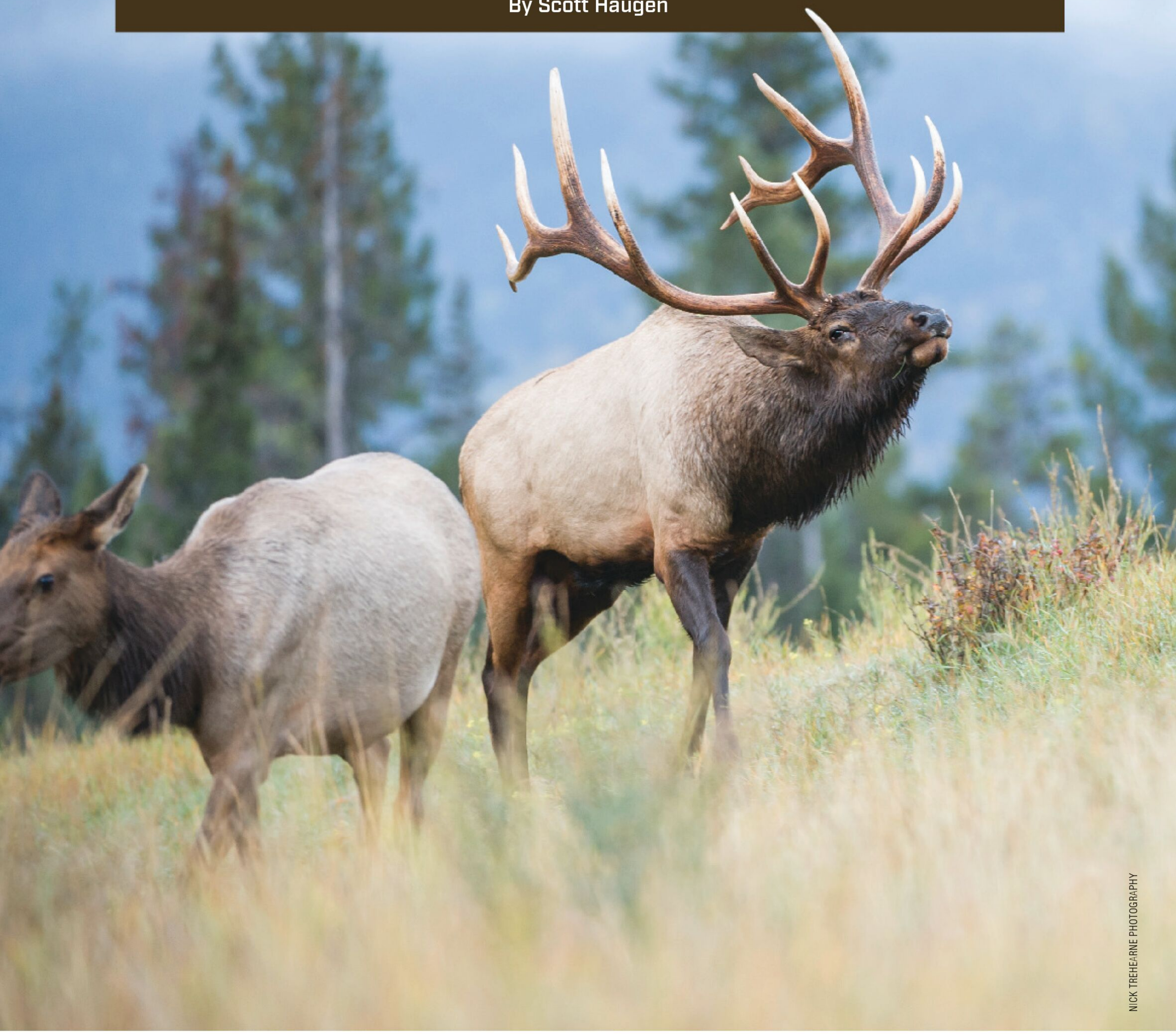
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MOMENTUM ELITE

GO WILD!

DON'T BE AFRAID TO **MAKE SOME NOISE—AND MOVES—WHEN HUNTING ELK** THIS FALL.

By Scott Haugen



NICK TREHEARNE PHOTOGRAPHY



As bulls grow their harems, they become harder and harder to pull away—unless you employ an aggressive calling tactic.

Grabbing a decoy, I headed into thick timber with a buddy. I'd already filled my tag on this public-land hunt in Montana. The bulls were fired up, but my friend was reluctant to call. We hiked up a ridge thick with Ponderosa pines and set up. Below us at about 200 yards were two wallows. The trails connecting the wallows to the bedding areas ran straight up and down the mountain. Fresh sign was thick.

My buddy was new to bowhunting and had never arrowed an elk. This was his third season, and the first time we'd hunted elk together. He got set up against two fat trees. In front of him was a small meadow, 30 yards long and 10 yards wide. If a bull approached, it would be a close shot. I moved behind him, held the Montana Decoy, then began cow calling. Before I ended my first series, a bull bugled. I hit the open-reed call again, and again the bull responed.

Less than two minutes later, a cow appeared. She was locked on the decoy and wouldn't budge. Holding the decoy, I backed down the hill and called, and she came right at me. She passed 7 yards from my buddy, who was at full draw. The bull came right behind and was met with an arrow at 12 yards.

When it comes to calling elk, sometimes aggressive moves pay off.

THE DECOY BONUS

On that hunt I used the Back Country Elk decoy, a photo-realistic 2D decoy that shows the hind end of a cow facing away. I had other Montana Decoys with me, but chose this one for three reasons. First, there were a lot of cows in the area. Second, it was the third week of September and the bulls were hot, but reluctant to leave their cows. And, third, I knew it would allow me to make the move that drew the elk within spitting distance of my friend. In this situation, the combination of moving and calling did the trick. The bull came in, thinking it could add the lone cow to his harem.

Decoys are a very valuable tool, but still overlooked by a lot of archery hunters. I've had good success with them when bulls won't leave their harems and when hunting pressured elk on public land. If hunting alone, I like setting up the decoy behind me and off to the side. Calling brings the bull in for a look; once

SLAYER ELK CALLS

Powerful tools for chatting up big bulls

I've used a lot of elk calls over the decades and recently have been impressed with offerings from the folks at Slayer Calls. The new **ArchAngel** ($89; slayercalls.com) is an acrylic bugle that delivers crisp sounds, and the volume is easy to control. The first time I used this bugle last September, three different bulls responded, and a big 6-point came charging in for a fight.

In addition to a comprehensive line of great-sounding diaphragms, Slayer also has two external-reed cow calls. I love external-reed calls for the range of sounds they quickly produce and their ease of use. With these, it's simple to mimic calf-and-cow communication.

The **Enchantress** push-button call ($75) also achieves a range of sounds. It's a versatile, easy-to-use call that not only produces perfect cow and calf sounds, but also crisp bugles and even lip bawl bugles when used with the Swagger tube. These calls sound realistic and are made in the United States.





A decoy is an effective, yet overlooked, tool when it comes to hunting elk. This bull came in on a string to check out the Montana Decoy Back Country Elk.

he spots the cow decoy, the hope is he'll move in close and give me a shot opportunity. Decoys also work when hunting from treestands, but place the decoy to the side, not in front of you, so an approaching bull must pass by your stand.

IT'S ALL ABOUT POSITION

Over the decades I've delivered hundreds of elk hunting seminars around the country and talked with many fellow hunters. One of the biggest takeaways from these conversations is that hunters often struggle to fill archery elk tags because they're afraid to make a move.

This is where knowing the animals and the land is important. Always know which direction the wind is blowing. Anticipate wind shifts throughout the day and hunt accordingly.

Moving in the shadows, I could care less if an elk sees me. If they spot me, I freeze. Once they're relaxed, I continue moving. If they hear me, I stop and wait for them to calm down, then proceed. If they smell me, the gig is up. I've never killed a bull that's smelled me.

Elk have some of the best noses in the animal kingdom. I use no scent-blocking agents and don't wash my clothes in special detergent. When elk hunting, you're usually sweating and smelly before you even get to where you'll be hunting. Play the wind when trying to reach a spot to call; if it shifts, leave. You will never fool the nose of an elk. Ever.

COMBO CALLING

You don't have to be a world-class caller to bring in elk, but you do need to know what the sounds you're delivering mean. Early in the archery season, cows and calves stick close together. They communicate a lot with one another, but their sounds are subtle. This is also a time when young bulls start bugling. Some of the worst sounding bugles I've heard—from man or elk—have come from bulls in early September. Remember, these bulls have not bugled since the previous fall, and it takes a bit of time to get those vocal cords tuned up. Don't use this as an excuse to get sloppy with your bugles—just know you don't have to be perfect. If you make a mistake, call through it. Don't stop and restart the sequence if you miss a note. Elk sure don't.

Early in the season I like using a combination of cow mews and young-bull bugles. The goal is to let big bulls know cows are around and an insubordinate bull is interested.

As the season progresses, the rut ramps up. The peak of the rut is driven by photoperiodism and usually happens in the third week of September. With the onset of the rut, calves will start venturing farther from their moms to feed and explore their new world. When this happens, cows and calves become more vocal to maintain contact. This is especially true in brushy, densely forested habitat where they can't see one

SCOTT HAUGEN (ABOVE, LEFT); JOHN HAFNER PHOTOGRAPHY (RIGHT)



High-pitched bugles will sometimes pull a herd bull away from his harem as he looks to challenge the supposed intruder.



The author used a mix of cow and calf calls, along with aggressive bugles, to pull this bull within bow range.

another. Cow and calf communication is highest early in the morning and at dusk. This is when I mix up my calling to emulate the cow and calf sounds I'm hearing in the woods.

Calf sounds are high-pitched and can be drawn out and frequent. Sometimes they're pleading if the calf has lost contact with mom. For making these sounds, I like an open-reed mouth call as it allows me to hit a range of notes.

Cow sounds are lower pitched than those of calves, and the notes are often shorter. I use the same open-reed call to produce cow elk sounds, but I also use diaphragm calls and Slayer Call's new Enchantress, which is a push-button call (see sidebar, page 54). If you don't like using diaphragms, give it a look.

BUGLE PLOYS

As for bugling sounds, I get raspier and more aggressive later in the season. I still use some insubordinate bugles to get the attention of a big bull, letting it know there's an intruder on the outskirts looking to steal a cow. Here, I like mixing up cow and calf calls, then interjecting a young, high-pitched bugle. It's a lot of calling, but it creates realism and has worked for me in multiple states.

If I'm calling to a big bull and it's responding but not budging, I'll get aggressive. This is when I go to pleading cow mews—what some folks call estrus calls—and follow those up with raspy, hard bugles. If a bull starts bugling back, I'll cut him off, trying to mimic the same notes and cadence he's delivering. The goal is to challenge him so he comes looking for a fight. That bull already has what he wants. You're the intruder and have to convince him to come to you.

If the bull still won't budge, try raking trees and stomping on the ground. If you've ever seen a bull thrash a tree, or witnessed two bulls fighting, you know there's nothing you can do to reach that level of energy. But you can try. Using a combination of cow calls, loud, aggressive bugles and tree raking, I've brought in a lot of bulls I'm certain never would have responded otherwise.

This season, play the wind and mix up your calls. If you've struggled to fill elk tags in the past, make a point to be aggressive and try something new this fall. You might end up with a freezer full of meat. G&F

SCOTT HAUGEN

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ALL HAIL THE GOAT

A CASE CAN BE MADE THAT THE PRONGHORN IS PERHAPS NORTH AMERICA'S **MOST CHALLENGING BIG-GAME SPECIES.**

By Scott Haugen



When I informed my buddy that all three pronghorns browsing 600 yards away were shooters, he quickly took off his pack, nestled his gun on it and attempted to find them in his scope. Frazzled by some brush in the way, he stripped off his jacket, wadded it up and put it on top of the pack. Finally, he could see the bucks, but his rest was far from steady. I looked at him and shook my head.

"What?" Shawn asked incredulously.

"First of all, you're not going to shoot a buck from this far away. Second, you're certainly not shooting off that wobbly pack. That's why I brought these," I said, motioning to the tripod shooting sticks I was using to steady my binocular.

It was Shawn's first antelope hunt and his first time seeing the expansive high desert of the American West. We were five minutes into the hunt. He was excited.

"We're going to wait for them to feed into that gully," I said. "Then, when they're out of sight, we'll move to that knob. When they come out of that little swale, you'll have a 250-yard shot, max, and be rock solid in the sticks."

TOSH BROWN



Possessing incredible eyesight and unrivaled speed, a mature pronghorn buck will test even the most accomplished big-game hunter.

Shawn caught his breath and finally started to enjoy the hunt. For 45 minutes we watched the bucks feed before dropping out of sight.

Our plan came together, and just like that Shawn's season was over. Though it was brief, Shawn learned a lot, just has I have through years of trial and error while hunting pronghorns throughout the West.

BE PATIENT

The first lesson Shawn learned was to stay calm and not be in a rush. Pronghorns have incredible eyesight, so one errant move and the gig is up.

Of all the pronghorn hunts I've been on over the years, I can count on one hand the number of times we've located a buck and shot it without moving closer. Typically, they're spotted at a distance and a stalk is made to get within shooting range. That's one of the fun parts of pronghorn hunting.

When watching bucks and commencing a stalk, be patient. If you're hunting during the rut, these bucks aren't going anywhere. They began establishing their territories in May, and now await does to enter their domain. Take your time, enjoy the process and don't hurry the hunt, as that only leads to frustration and blown opportunities.

STEADY DOES IT

When you take your time, you also give yourself a chance to make a better shot. An extendable bipod mounted on your rifle is wise, for there's no better shooting position than prone. I'd also suggest tripod shooting sticks because the brush is sometimes too tall to shoot through. I'm a big fan of Bog's Deathgrip, which is bulky but rock solid. The more solid your rest, the more accurate your shot placement will be.

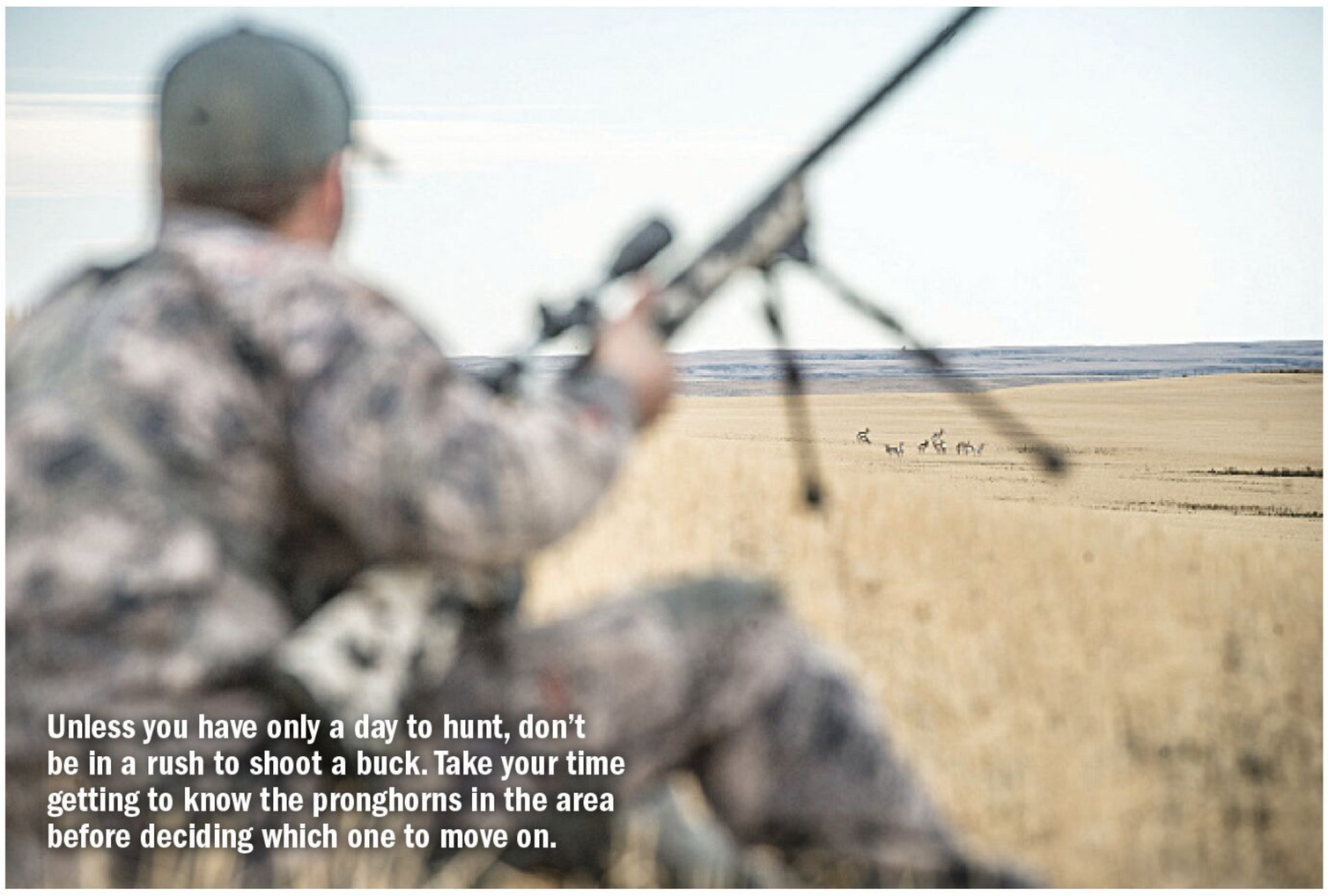
Shots at pronghorns can be long, so know exactly what your shooting capability is. These aren't big animals, so a flat-shooting rifle in a small caliber topped with a powerful scope can aide in shot accuracy. The farther you can shoot, the better, too. Being able to reach out to 300 yards will help increase the odds of success. A bit further than that is even better.

Be sure to range a pronghorn before taking a shot. Due to their small size and contrasting colors, many shots are missed high. When you walk up on your first downed pronghorn, you'll be surprised at how petite of body they are.

GET OUT OF THE TRUCK

I'm always amazed by the number of road-based pronghorn hunters. It's a common theme throughout the West: Cover as much ground as you can by driving until you find a buck you want.

But if it's a big pronghorn you desire, and you really want to know how many animals are out there, park the truck and walk. Pronghorn country is simple to negotiate, and it's fun. Given the small stature of these animals, it takes very little cover or breaks in the terrain to hide them. Look over shallow swales, onto the backsides of knolls and into any small depression that can't be seen from the road.



Unless you have only a day to hunt, don't be in a rush to shoot a buck. Take your time getting to know the pronghorns in the area before deciding which one to move on.



Hunters who spend time glassing depressions in the land and places away from roads increase their odds of finding a mature buck.

A mature pronghorn is smart and knows exactly when opening day of hunting season has arrived. That's when they go into hiding places obscured from roads. Walking, glassing and walking some more will help you find more bucks. It's a gratifying end when it all comes together.

Take plenty of water and a spotting scope. I like a small backpack with a hydration bladder and straw that hangs by my mouth. I'm much more likely to drink water with that setup, versus having to take off my pack and grab a water bottle. You don't need a lot of gear when pronghorn hunting. My pack is mostly filled with water, snacks and optics.

Glassing for pronghorns does not mean walking down into where they're hiding. It means looking at them from a distance, and this is best done with a quality spotting scope and binocular. Cover ground with your feet but cover more of it with your eyes. The objective is to spot animals without them knowing you are near.

ALL DAY LONG

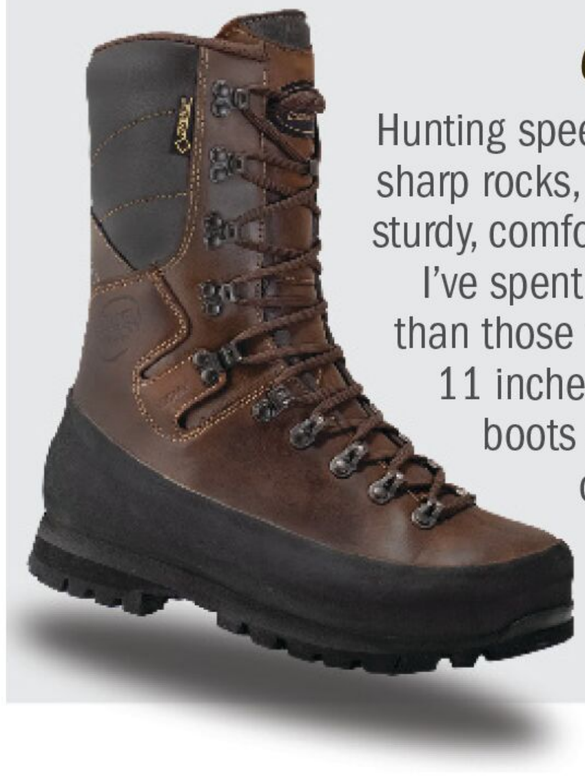
Don't be opposed to glassing all day for pronghorns. Find shaded spots and search from those. Heat waves will squelch glassing efforts; when this happens, relocate or take a nap.

Pronghorns will often get up from their beds multiple times during the day. If hunting in 100-degree heat, be prepared for it and know such temperatures are nothing for pronghorns.

Many hunters get hung up on waterholes. I've bowhunted over waterholes for days on end and never had the bucks

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Hunting speed goats on private-land pastures is far different than pursuing them on public lands. Due to the sharp rocks, jagged habitat, thorns and rough, woody brush that makes up most pronghorn habitat, you want a sturdy, comfortable boot that allows you to be afield from daylight to dark every day.

I've spent many years tromping the deserts around the West and have logged more miles in Meindl boots than those from any other brand. The **Comfort Fit Extreme** boot ($400; meindlusa.com) is nice because it's 11 inches tall, which keeps out debris and protects my lower legs while optimizing ankle support. These boots are not insulated, so my feet don't overheat, but they are waterproof, which is nice if there's dew on the ground. The outsoles are sticky and tough, and the inside is extremely comfortable.

Log 10 miles on the first day in the wrong boots, and you might be relegated to road hunting due to blisters and sore feet. Invest in quality boots, put some miles on them before the hunt, and you might tag the buck of a lifetime.

NICK TREHEARNE PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP); SCOTT HAUGEN (MIDDLE)

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I was targeting come in. Pronghorns don't drink water for as long or as often as you'd think. Trail cameras taught me that. A quick sip will get them by, and wise bucks often do this in the middle of the night.

Make sure you have moisture-wicking clothes that allow you to hunt in the heat. Today's clothing options are many, and having breathable pants and tops that also protect you from the sun will greatly increase your comfort level and safety when hunting in extreme heat.

ON THE HUNT

Most pronghorn hunts take place on public land, and learning as much as you can about the terrain and the animals is key. The best way to achieve this is through physical scouting, but if you've not been able to do that, consider setting up a spike camp.

Operating from a base camp—or worse, a motel—ties you down and greatly limits access. The more mobile you can be, the better. Come nightfall, it's a lot nicer to pitch a small tent on the spot than have to drive back to town and then get up at 3:00 a.m. to do it all over again.

Make sure the vehicle you'll be hunting from is in good condition and the tires have proper tread for rugged, rocky terrain. Carry extra water and gas, a cooler with food and plenty of ice, and two spare tires.

One of the biggest sources of regret for pronghorn hunters is pulling the trigger on the first buck they spot. Size up your buck and don't be in a rush. If you've waited 20 years to draw a tag in a prime unit, don't settle for a 14-incher when you know there are 17-inch bucks running around. Pronghorns are one of the most difficult big-game animals to field judge, so study up if you want to be able to identify a monster.

Pronghorn hunting truly is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding hunts in all of North America. Once you experience what it's all about, you'll crave more of the adventures that make chasing this true icon of the American West so special. G&F



The author covered a lot of ground to find this lone buck feeding on sage on a secluded hillside in Wyoming.

SCOTT HAUGEN

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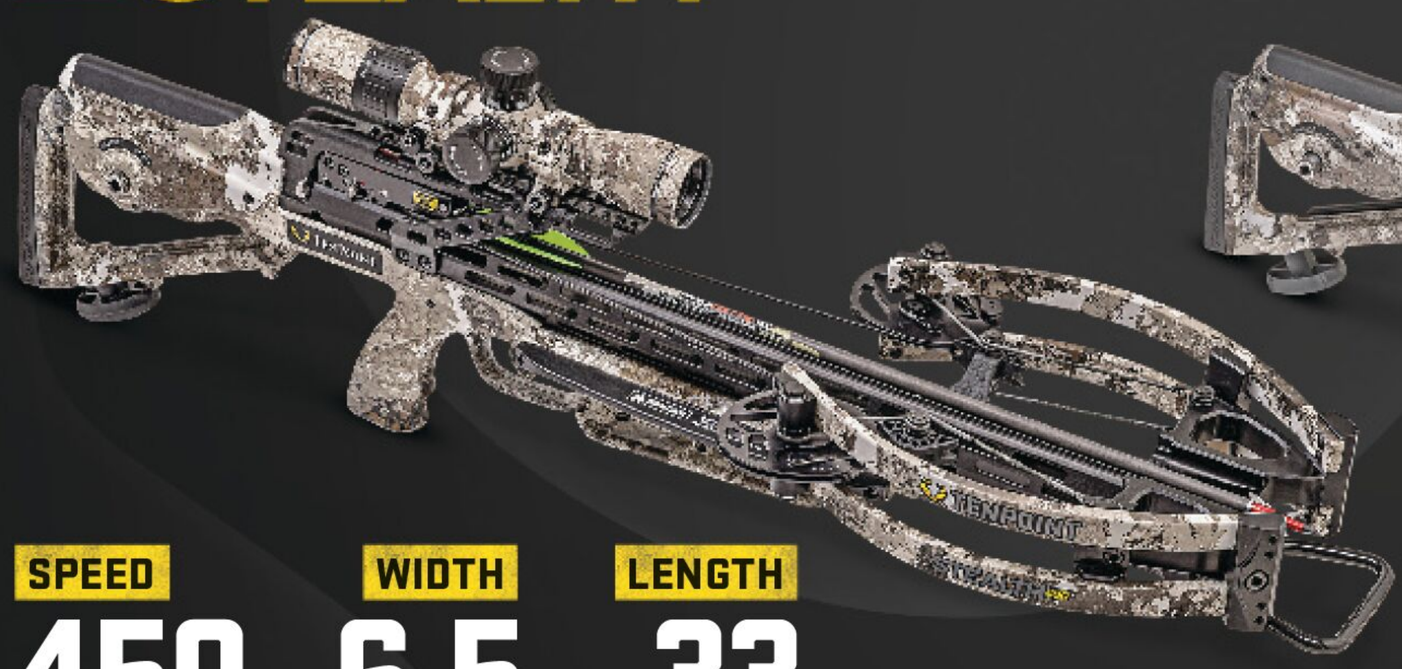
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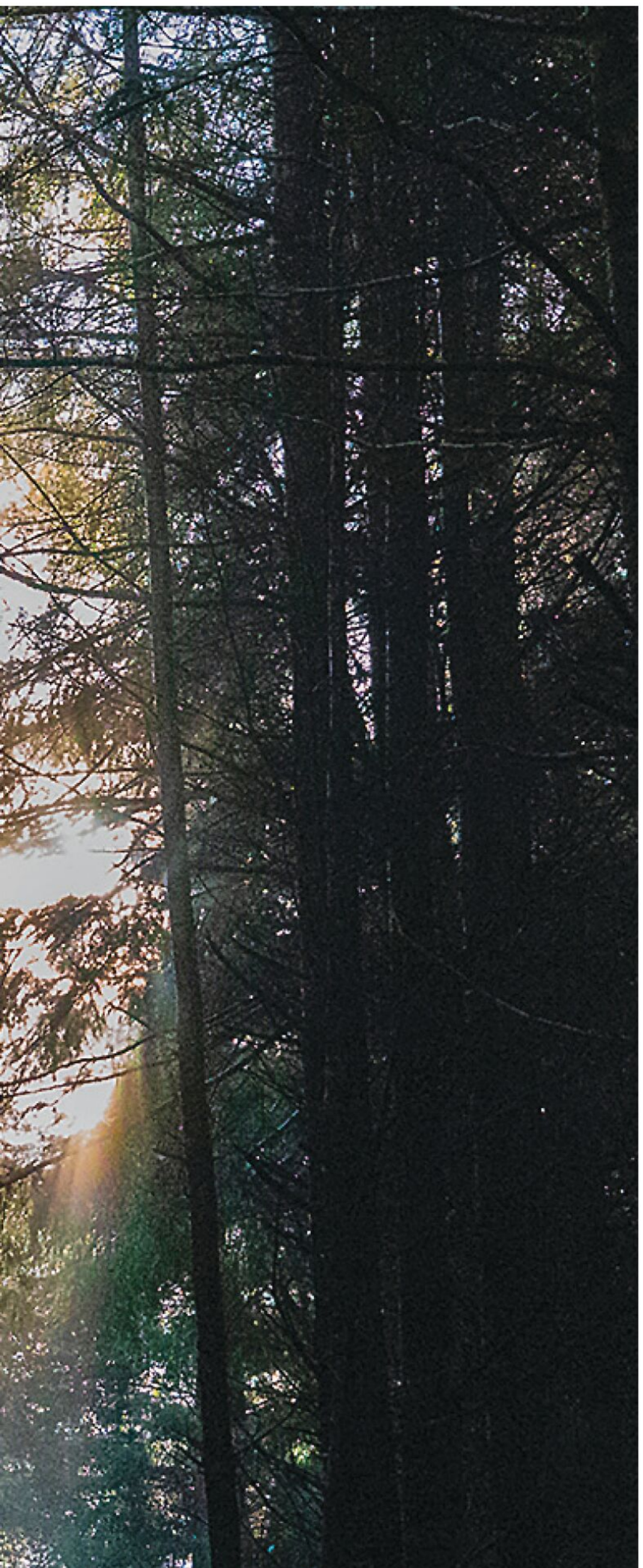
GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

CALIFORNIA'S BLACKTAIL DEER INHABIT MANY DIFFERENT HABITATS AND ELEVATIONS. **THESE THREE AREAS ARE AMONG THE BEST IN THE STATE IN WHICH TO HUNT THEM.**

By Art Isberg

The density of coastal forests require hunters to find a well-worn deer trail and set up an ambush for a close-range shot opportunity.

SCOTT HAUGEN (MAIN); GARY KRAMER (RIGHT)



Coastal fog dimmed the trail ahead as I slipped quietly through thick spruce timber, following a narrow trail heavily marked with the dainty, heart-shaped prints of Columbia blacktail deer. These lush, coastal mountains in **Six Rivers National Forest,** fronting the mighty Pacific Ocean, are where a rifleman can set up ambushes for deer by waiting alongside trails they use regularly twice each day. I've hunted blacktail deer for many decades, from high-tide lines all the way up to sky-high peaks that see deep winter snows. In this spot, a lone ambush works best.

Six Rivers National Forest (fs.usda.gov/srnf) is an enormous chain of mountains in the northwestern part of California that begins at the Oregon border and runs south a full 140 miles to Mendocino County. It encompasses one of the largest public-hunting lands in the state at nearly 1 million acres. The blacktail's range actually begins in southern California and runs north the entire length of the state on a swath about 200 miles wide inland. It continues up through Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and into southern Alaska.

Hunting them in coastal mountains like at Six Rivers turns on one thing: timing. As mentioned, the deer's daily travel is a two-way affair. Late in the day they'll move down from thick cover to feed in small, grassy parks and flats during the night. Then, the next morning, when sun begins to penetrate the fog, they'll head back up into timber to spend the day resting in safety and shade.

Deer on the move in thick cover generally do not look up. Set up above a trail, even if it's just a little bit of elevation difference. It's most important that your movement does not give you away and blow a perfect setup at close range. Elevation gives you that edge.

Because of the limited shooting range typical with this style of hunting, iron sights sometimes make the most sense. For many years I carried a light, fast Savage lever gun in .243, shooting 100-grain spitzer bullets. A lever-action is quick to aim and shoot, not to mention fast for follow up shots.

The northern-most zone in Six Rivers National Forest is just above the small town of Gasquet, 18 miles south of the Oregon border. Two campgrounds near here—Patrick Creek and Grassy Flat—are great to hunt out of.

If lying in wait in a coastal forest isn't the hunt you had in mind, consider one of these other blacktail regions.



Deer in Six Rivers National Forest move twice a day. In the evening they emerge from thick cover to feed in grassy parks. At dawn, they head back to the timber to bed.

INLAND HEAT

Over the coastal mountains, 50 miles inland, blacktail hunting comes with a new and different challenge: intense heat. Blacktail season opens during in August amidst the hottest temperatures of the year—daytime temps typically hit 100 degrees for several days in a row. This kind of blistering heat affects a deer's lifestyle and daily timetable. Therefore, it must also affect the hunter's.

Knoxville State Wildlife Area, in central California south of Clear Lake, is a favorite of mine. Its 21,500 acres of rugged, interior valleys do not have the cool, lush, well-watered forests of the coast. Instead, rough, rocky foothills and low mountains bake in tough stands of sagebrush, madrone, red bud and twisted digger pines.

The seasonal heat means water should be part of your hunting strategy. Wherever you find it, blacktails will be nearby. Concentrate your hunts down deep, brushy canyons where even the tiniest seep of water pools in bone-dry creek beds. Deer will come to these and small natural springs each night to drink. They also bed down not far away from them during daylight hours.

Hunters who penetrate these areas will do well to slowly sidehill above any water or areas of heavy brush or timber near bottoms. If you hunt with a pal, he should be on the opposite canyon wall at the same elevation, keeping pace and moving as you do. That way, if a buck breaks out of cover, one of you should get a shot.

Another proven method for hunting thick cover is the venerable deer drive. The size of the drive depends on the amount of ground to be covered. Large deer drives see standers placed along possible deer escape routes, like saddles and notches along the tops. Any side canyon that breaks off from the main drive line is another such spot. A stander or two should also be placed where the drive will end, in case any bucks stay in the bottom. Just two or three shooters can also make successful drives, though you must choose smaller areas that can be covered by fewer rifles.

Knoxville is managed under the authority of the Bureau of Land Management. There is one developed campground (Lower Hunting Creek) with five sites, shade structures and a vault toilet, and three primitive camps with no facilities (Cedar Creek, Cement Creek and Pocock Creek).



The hot, dry conditions typical of the start of blacktail season in California's interior call for lots of glassing into shaded areas and around water sources.

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The Marble Mountain Wilderness comprises some 225,000 acres. Many peaks exceed 6,000 feet in elevation, with the highest, Boulder Peak, topping out at nearly 8,300 feet.

HIGH COUNTRY

A third stronghold of blacktails exists in the highest mountains of northwestern California. The **Marble Mountain Wilderness** encompasses 225,000 acres and is a longtime favorite of mine. It's a land of towering peaks and enormous natural forests, and it produces the largest bucks both in body and antler size.

Because of this land's location at the top of the world, methods of taking deer discussed previously do not work here. Concentrate your hunts along the topmost peaks and in open parks, basins and postage-stamp meadows that are green with luscious feed. Bucks head for these place each night and can be found in them come dawn. Position yourself above a spot like this at first shooting light and get comfortable.

If you do not connect early on top, a second chance comes soon after. As the sun brightens the land, bucks will move down off feeding areas and head for the shade of timber where they'll spend the day resting in cool safety. Riflemen side-hilling in the first timber below open basins can catch glimpses of antlers moving down. I have, and it's always a heart-pounding thrill.

Side-hilling in shaded timber gives you a decided edge. Bucks leaving lighted areas don't expect to walk into trouble heading down into cover. Remember to move slowly, stop often and wait a minute or two before moving ahead. Sky-high blacktails have great eyes for movement in the open. In shadowed cover, things even out a bit.

Backpack hunters can choose wilderness camps wherever they want. A campfire permit, free at any U.S. Forest Service or California Fish & Wildlife office, is required. Outfitter and guide services are also available for horse hunts deep into the mountains. G&F



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Trail to RECOVERY

MAKE A POOR SHOT ON A DEER? TIME TO CALL IN A TRACKING DOG.

Story and Photos by Richard Mann

Longspur Tracking, based in central West Virginia, uses jagdterriers for blood-trailing work to help hunters recover wounded deer.



The greatest game dog I've known was Nimrod of the Limpopo. His exploits recovering game and fighting with leopards and baboons made him a legend in South Africa's Limpopo province. I was fortunate to share the field with Nimrod on three safaris. He was a big dog, a crossbreed with some bulldog, some pointer and probably a little Rhodesian ridgeback mixed in. He was relentless on a blood trail and could bring down wounded game as large as wildebeest. Though I didn't need his services, I never knew of him to fail when supporting other hunters. Nimrod was a one-in-a-million dog, and I doubt another like him will ever follow a trail.

Game dogs the likes of Nimrod are not used very often nowadays, especially here in the states. Even in Africa, where this type of dog originated and where the Rhodesian ridgeback breed was established, they're falling out of favor to smaller, easier-to-handle blood-trailing dogs like Jack Russell terriers. Hennie Badenhorst, the professional hunter who trained Nimrod, is not a fan of the smaller dogs for game recovery. They're great at finding dead critters, but if released on the trail of a wounded animal, they can push it beyond their ability to keep up with it. Badenhorst prefers larger, more aggressive dogs that can run with, hold and even take down large, wounded beasts. His current game dog is a Rhodesian ridgeback and German shorthair pointer mix named Steyr.

For the type of work Badenhorst likes a game dog to do, this is a perfect cross. The dog has the nose and game instincts of the German shorthair, as well as the aggressiveness and unmatched cat-like agility of the ridgeback. (It's the ridgeback that makes the difference. My ridgeback is 8 years old and 20 pounds overweight, but if a rabbit comes in our yard, she eats it. It's also not uncommon for her to bring me mice she's killed in the house.) But here in the states, smaller blood-trailing dogs are more popular. Not only are they favored, but they're also changing hunters' lives and legislation.

THE DEER TRACKER

The dean of blood-trailing dogs in West Virginia, and maybe on the entire east coast, is Shon Butler with Longspur Tracking. He is the most active deer-recovery man in the state, and along with his dogs, he has been instrumental in changing state law. Butler primarily relies on jagdterriers and now raises his own line, which originated in Serbia and Croatia, where they're used to hunt wild boar. He has a waiting list 10 deep for his pups, which sell for $1,200 each, and says without hesitation that their dam is worth "$25,000 plus." Butler fielded 2,500 calls requesting recovery service last year, and he has 39 trackers working for him in nine states. He trained 36 tracking dogs last year. When it comes to the modern blood-trailing dog, Butler is the man.



Wire-haired dachshunds are popular blood-trailing dogs because their small size makes them easy to control while on a track.

Butler, who's 51, has been hunting for more than 40 years. He grew up in West Virginia and established an early love for bird dogs during the heyday of grouse hunting in the state. That's also when he discovered bird dogs can find dead or wounded deer, but he learned it was illegal. Butler helped get that law changed, and when he lost his employment during the COVID pandemic, he started Longspur Tracking. During his first year he received about 500 calls for recovery assistance. Last year he had five times that many, and this year he expects to receive more than 5,000. He's also started the National Tracking and Shed Dog Registry that permits pedigree recognition.

In West Virginia and most other states, blood-trailing recovery dogs must remain on the leash. This means the handler and hunter work closely with the dog. If the deer is located and needs a finishing shot, the hunter is there to make that happen. (In West Virginia the dog handler cannot finish the deer.) Ironically, though, Butler notes that in all his tracking experiences, he's never had a hunter who was capable of getting a shot at a located deer. He says they're often not experienced enough or too excited. In some cases, they're unable to keep up with him and his dog. He has also observed that most hunters—he says about 80 percent—have no clue where they hit a deer and a large percentage of them cannot even show him the spot where the deer was standing when it was hit.


Bloodhounds are sometimes used for trailing wounded deer, but they are more difficult to work with on a leash than smaller dogs.

Butler says his recovery rate is 49 percent. That might not sound all that great, but understand that a lot of the deer he has tracked were not lethally hit, even though the hunter swore the shot was perfect. Butler notes that when the recovery rate is adjusted for deer that were accounted for later, it goes up to 74 percent. By accounted for he means, for example, a buck wounded in bow season that shows up in a trail camera photo later that fall. Or a deer that survives a known arrow wound and is taken later in gun season. The reality is that with a lethal hit, the chance of Butler finding the deer is probably closer to 80 percent or 90 percent!


The author thanks Gilbert, the wire-haired dachshund that helped him track a wounded West Texas mule deer nearly a mile.

ADVICE FOR HUNTERS

Butler has some good advice for hunters when it comes to dealing with wounded deer. He suggests that they reach out to a local tracker before deer season begins. Hunters need to have a tracker's contact information in their cell phones so that when they make bad shots, they can call immediately. And, since they've made prior contact, they're not calling blind. In fact, it's a great idea to talk to an experienced tracker before hunting because of the information the tracker can share about the recovery process.

When you shoot a deer, Butler says the first thing you should do is mark the spot where the deer was standing when it was hit. If you follow the trail, be sure to mark the last spot where you find blood. This is best done with survey ribbon, which is cheap and easy to carry in your pack. Butler advises against using toilet paper because rain and snow can make it useless.

If you think you've made a bad hit, take a moment, calm down, and call a tracker to discuss the hit and seek advice. Butler states that while he makes no money if he helps you find your deer over the phone, he's still doing his job and he has created a relationship with a potential future customer.

This might be the best advice Butler offers. When hunters make a bad shot, they often call their hunting buddies to discuss the situation. But here's the thing: Even those of us who hunt a lot will only track or blood trail, at most, a few deer each year. A guy like Butler will track hundreds. Failing to take advantage of that knowledge before you muck things up is not wise. Butler says he's helped direct lots of hunters to a recovery and never even put a leash on a dog.

Butler encourages hunters to track their own deer. After all, recovery is a skill all hunters need to develop. He's not worried about them screwing up the trail by walking on it, he says, because if a tracker has a good dog, it does not matter. But he also suggests that hunters be more patient; most of them do not wait long enough before they begin following up a wounded deer.

Butler also has some observations regarding fixed-blade verses mechanical broadheads. In his opinion, if a hunter makes a good shot, the style of broadhead does not matter. However, if heavy bone is hit, cut-on-contact, fixed-blade broadheads tend to penetrate about twice as deep and usually deep enough to penetrate one lung.

Many of Butler's calls for tracking assistance are the result of crossbow shots, he reports. It's not that the crossbow is less lethal, he notes, but instead because hunters tend to treat them like rifles. They take shots outside the limits of the equipment, including high shoulder shots. Since Butler does a lot of recovery work in Ohio where straight-wall cartridges are popular, he's found that



Shon Butler (right) and Longspur Tracking received nearly 2,500 calls last year from hunters seeking assistance in recovering deer.



Butler and his jagdterriers boast a recovery rate of almost 75 percent on lethally hit deer.

due to extensive bullet upset, few of those cartridges produce exit wounds. This means deer leave less of a blood trail and are harder to track. If you're a hunter who uses a crossbow or a rifle chambered for a straight-wall cartridge, keep Butler's observations in mind.

WORTH THE MONEY?

You might be wondering what it costs to enlist the services of an experienced tracker, with an experienced dog, to help you find a wounded deer. Well, it varies. In West Virginia Butler says the price runs about $200—with some adjustment for mileage—which gets most hunters about two hours of effort. But Longspur also has a cadre of good apprentice trackers that will work for gas money and tips. In Ohio it will cost a little bit more, but considering the cost of raising and training the dogs and the time involved, it's still a very reasonable price. However, Butler says some trackers can charge as much as twice that, and he knows one that gets more than a grand to put a leash on his dog. This, of course, is even more reason to find your tracker before you need one.

There's no doubt Butler helps hunters become better and more successful. If you've never tracked a wounded animal, there's a wealth of information you can gain from one attempt, especially if it's with a guy like Butler who knows what he's doing. That information may very well help you down the road when you must do it on your own. And, of course, the elation associated with finding an animal you hit puts the exclamation mark on every hunt.

I grew up with hounds, and three game dogs currently live in my house. I've also experienced the services of the modern, American, blood-trailing dog. A wire-haired dachshund named Gilbert helped me, on a near mile-long recovery, collect a mule deer buck I wounded in West Texas. But my first exposure to a dog that tracked wounded game was in Africa. He was a might larger than American blood-trailing dogs like Butler's and quite a bit more violent. But I'd pay well more than $200 if I could just once again see him in action. Nimrod of the Limpopo was the greatest game dog I've ever seen. His kind might be a dying breed, but today game-recovery dogs of a different ilk continue to save the hunt. G&F

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BIGGER GUNS FOR BIGGER BUCKS

CARTRIDGES ARE NOT EQUAL, AND NEITHER ARE DEER. DO TODAY'S DEER HUNTERS USE ENOUGH GUN?

By Craig Boddington

Terry Moore and I were working a brushy pocket in western South Dakota. There were tracks going in, and the wind was into the cover. Something was bound to happen. Yep, sure did. I was on the downhill side when the buck exploded. A gorgeous four-by-four headed for the skyline but didn't make it. I dropped him on the open hillside.

An hour later, Terry shot a big-bodied, heavy-antlered three-by-three. We both used familiar rifles built by mutual friend Lex Webernick at Rifles, Inc. Terry's was in .280 Rem.; mine in .300 Wby. Mag.

Neither shot was far. You could say that Terry's choice was better than mine. I wouldn't argue, but regardless of chambering, there is never anything wrong with using a favorite rifle that gives you confidence. I knew that rifle and its cartridge; it gave me confidence. In various rifles, I've taken some big deer with Roy Weatherby's .300.

Over-gunned, you bet. Seems to me that's a lesser sin than not enough gun. I had a gorgeous custom rifle in 7 mm Rem. Mag. Although effective and versatile, I never warmed up to the Big Seven …



While a magnum may not be necessary for deer, a heavy bullet at a fast velocity provides extra assurance if it is properly placed.

COURTESY OF LEUPOLD

but I loved that rifle. I used it extensively, and it accounted for some fine bucks.

I know what you're thinking: Oh, boy, now Boddington's going to tell us we need fast magnums for deer hunting. Not at all. There are numerous 7 mm and .30-caliber "magnums." Others, such as the Hornady PRC family and Nosler's namesake line, are not dubbed magnums, but in power and velocity, they certainly are. If you want to use any of them to hunt deer, you'll take no ribbing from me. They work just fine.

I shot my first deer with a .243 Win. However, I started hunting in the 1960s, when every new cartridge wore a belt and carried the magnum suffix. I soon had a .264 Win. Mag. and thought it was magic. Today, I know that I don't need a magnum for any of my deer hunting.

Almost nobody needs a magnum for North American deer. Almost, because there is an exception. For me, a long shot is a quarter mile. I'm done long before we get to a half mile. I love to ring steel at distance, but steel targets don't care how much energy makes them ring. It's no big deal if a puff of wind blows the bullet to the edge. On game, residual energy and wind drift are big deals.

Many folks are working hard to extend their range envelopes on both targets and game. With the equipment we have today, practical shooting distances have increased. On game, where I set my limit is my business; yours is up to you. Way out there, you want velocity and bullet aerodynamics to overcome wind. And you need enough bullet weight and energy to cleanly take your game. So, in the context of the distances some of us are now shooting, fast magnums have a place for deer. If you want to use them, be my guest. All that matters is to take your deer efficiently.

DEFINING BIGGER

No one can say how much energy is required to cleanly kill a deer. Col. Townsend Whelen theorized that we want 1,000 foot-pounds of energy at the animal. Good rule of thumb, but if his rule was absolute, then the .44-40 would never have killed a deer. My belief is "enough gun" is a subtle blend of bullet energy, weight, diameter (frontal area) and performance.

"Minimum" is almost undefinable for three reasons. First, shot placement is everything. Second, no two animals react the same upon receiving a bullet. If a buck is already amped up on adrenaline, surprising things can happen. A heart or central lung shot is always fatal. Some bucks drop to either shot. Most run a few dozen yards. Sometimes, you track past 100 yards and wonder what you did wrong. Probably nothing.

Third, deer are not created equal. Mule deer have a larger average size than whitetails, but I believe whitetails are tougher and more tenacious. Both species have multiple subspecies varying in size. Columbian blacktails don't get as big as Rocky Mountain mule deer. Texas whitetails don't have the



Though not a good choice for extreme ranges, the .270 Win. is adequate for any deer—including monster muleys—out to significant distances.

CRAIG BODDINGTON

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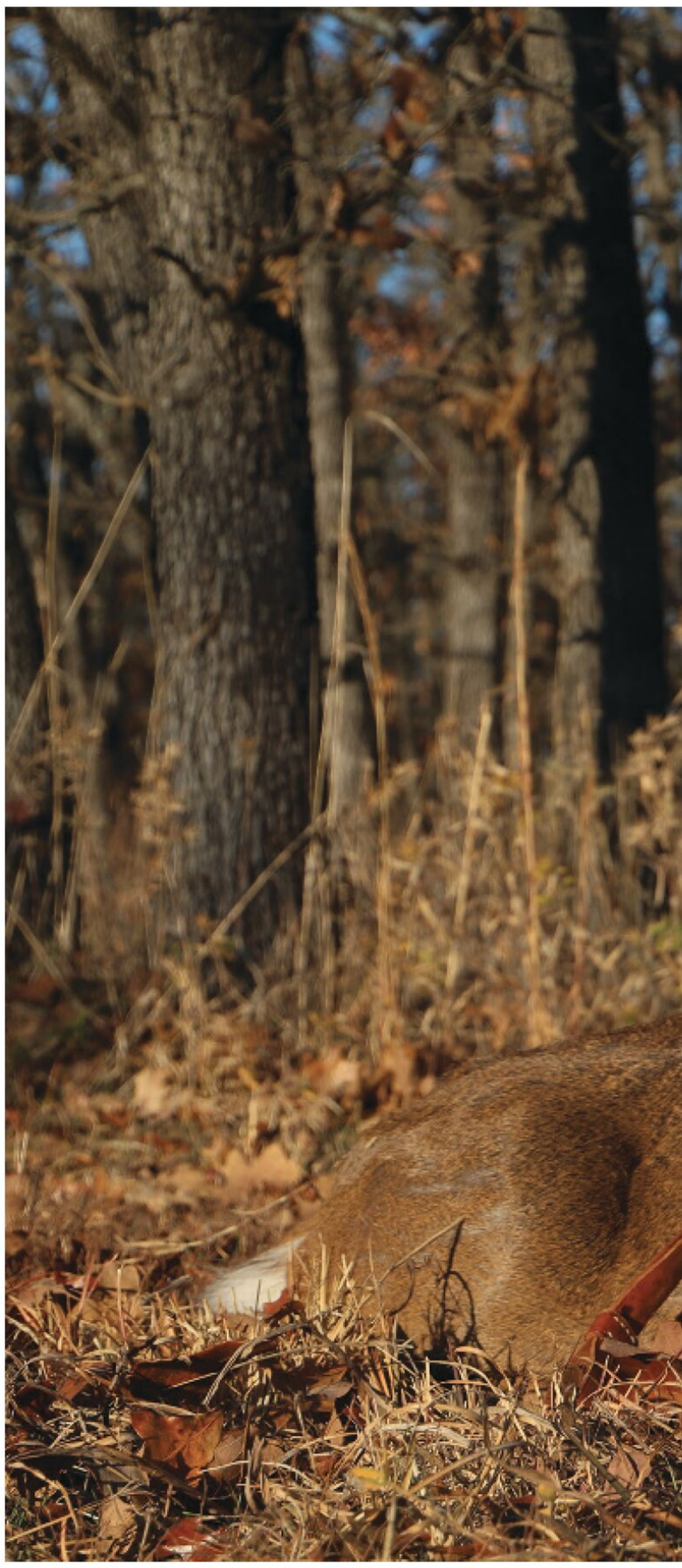
body size of Kansas deer, and the deer on my Kansas farm aren't as big as the northernmost whitetails.

A Coues deer buck in Arizona weighs about 100 pounds; a big Saskatchewan buck could exceed 300 pounds. The perfect rifle for a 100-pound animal isn't the same as for an animal three times larger.

Maybe you hunt deer in your area only. OK, but what kind of deer are you looking for? Venison for the freezer? Monster buck? There are extra-large does but, on average, mature does and young bucks are similar in size (whatever size that is locally). From 3 1/2 years and onward until decline, bucks increase in body mass.

A grown-up buck is probably twice as heavy as the average doe. Let's say 200 pounds versus 100 pounds. Is this enough difference to alter your cartridge selection? Maybe not, but there's more. Bucks fight for breeding rights. They are athletes, strong and powerful … and always keyed up.

To me, "bigger deer," means bigger bucks. Buck hunting takes a different mindset. When I want a doe on my Kansas farm, I can take my time and pick my shot; I get that opportunity almost any morning or evening. We get just one buck. Those chances don't come every day. And what if that one buck is the buck of a lifetime? Big antlers get us excited, and the opportunity is fleeting. You take the best shot you have, try to place it well, and trust that you have that correct subtle mix of energy, bullet weight, frontal area and bullet performance to do the job.





The .270 Win. has often been criticized for a lack of accuracy, but well-made .270 rifles shoot just fine.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Early on, I was brainwashed by the First Magnum Craze. Loved my .264. By 1970, friends had gone to 7 mm or .300 magnums. We were all over-gunned. In his later years, Professor Jack O'Connor was a lone voice in the wilderness, insisting his beloved .270 was all he needed.

By the '90s, I'd matured. O'Connor's old .270 was my go-to for deer. Then it happened all over again with the Second Magnum Craze, 1998 to 2007. In that decade, we took off our belts as we were shown 15 unbelted magnums: RUMs, WSMs, RSAUMs, WSSMs, RCMs. All did what they were supposed to do, but this was too many, too fast. Only the .300 WSM achieved significant popularity.



Ruger collector Lee Newton took this Kansas buck with a Ruger No. 1 chambered for .280 Ackley Improved.

CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)

By 2010 the dust had settled, and other dynamics were in play. Historically, .22 centerfires were illegal for deer in most jurisdictions. The widespread popularity of the AR platform changed this. Today, .22 centerfires are generally legal for deer. So, if a .223 Rem. is adequate, then anything bigger must be plenty big.

A second dynamic is long-range shooting. It's much more pleasant to shoot prone without getting kicked into next week. We can't escape recoil, but we can cheat a bit with bullet aerodynamics. Enter today's low-drag bullets with ballistic coefficients once thought impossible.

In the 1890s, 6.5 mm cartridges were developed for military use, with long, heavy-for-caliber bullets. Although low-drag bullets didn't exist, this 6.5 mm advantage has always been present. Consistently popular in Europe, only recently have Americans accepted the 6.5 mm. Winchester's .264 eventually flopped. The 6.5 mm Rem. Mag. never left the starting gate.

In 1998 Remington introduced the .260 Rem., essentially a .308 Win. case necked down for a .264 bullet. Good cartridge, but it didn't burn up the world. Both my daughters took their first game with .260s. I gave up on it because in the rifles I was messing with, I wasn't getting the accuracy I wanted.

A decade later, Hornady introduced the 6.5 Creedmoor. Shorter case, but ballistically identical to the .260, which is ballistically identical to 1894's 6.5x55 mm Swedish Mauser. The Creedmoor was designed as a target cartridge, enabling effective long-range performance with minimal recoil. At first, and as expected, sales were modest.

About 2013 the Creedmoor took off like a rocket. It's still ascending, the most amazing cartridge phenomenon I've seen. Super popular, over time it has become imbued with near-magical powers. No longer is the Creedmoor just a long-range target cartridge; many consider it a long-range hunting cartridge, effective on deer and larger game. Remember today's new dynamic: If the .223 with a 60-grain bullet is adequate, then a 6.5x55, .260 Rem., or 6.5 Creedmoor with 140-grain bullet must be a cannon, right?

WHAT'S ENOUGH GUN?

Again, in my lexicon, bigger deer equals bigger bucks. Heavy bullets aren't necessary to head-shoot meat deer with an accurate .22 centerfire, but we don't head-shoot big bucks. That changes the game.

The deer in my area of Kansas are medium-sized as whitetails go. On body shots, I am unimpressed by .22 centerfires, even with heavy bullets. With good chest hits, I typically see minimal reaction. Dead is dead, but the problem is finding dead deer. The entrance wound is tiny; exit wounds are rare. If the shot is good, deer don't go far, but we fumble around in thick woods with little blood to follow. Velocity matters, because it brings more energy. The .22-250 Rem. is more impressive than the .223, but it brings the issue of ensuring penetration at its higher speed.

In my day, the .243 Win. was the standard starter rifle, and it's still a good one. My first bucks were modest mule deer, effectively dropped with a .243. Since then, I've had little experience observing big deer taken with 6 mms. Of the 100-plus buck hunters we've hosted in Kansas, none have brought 6 mms (or .22s). Majority opinion has value: For the size of deer that folks come to Kansas hoping for, larger cartridges are near universal.

Tastes in deer rifles are somewhat regional. On the California coast, the .243 is easily the most common choice, and it's perfect for the area's small-bodied blacktails. In Texas, the .25-06 Rem. is the hot gun and plenty powerful for modest-sized Texas whitetails. Fast and flat-shooting, it's also ideal for the long *senderos* (cutlines) so common in Texas deer country.

We have seen various .25s in Kansas. The fastest I've seen a Kansas buck drop was with a .257 Roberts, firing a 117-grain Hornady SST, at 90 yards. Quartering slightly away, the buck dropped so fast it seemed to bounce. I have no experience with using .25s on larger deer. Wyoming gunwriter Bob Milek swore by both the .257 Roberts and .25-06. I agree: Faster .25s are adequate.

"Faster" is an operative word, and that's where I start having trouble with the 6.5 mm cartridges. Bullet speed brings energy, because the equation for deriving foot-pounds squares velocity. Despite mystical properties, the 6.5 Creedmoor is not fast, its 140-grain bullet impacting at no more than 2,700 fps. It is a great deer cartridge—at moderate distances. Because of its popularity, the Creedmoor is almost inescapable. I have one. I haven't seen it drop deer like lightning but, with good shot placement, they usually don't go far.

On the other hand, I've seen anomalies. A buddy of mine shot a nice 8-point on my farm. I wasn't far away and heard him shoot, twice. David was on the Creek Stand, shooting south across the creek, at a range of 60 yards. He felt good about both shots but told us the buck "walked away." John Sonne and I arrived with an hour of light. We could find no blood, and it got dark. Shame on us, we questioned the shots and came back in the morning. We found the deer easily. One shot was on the right shoulder, the other was behind the right shoulder. Both were good, but no exits and not a drop of blood.

That's one of those weird exceptions. A cartridge or bullet can't be judged from a small sampling, but, after a decade of popularity, many are questioning the Creedmoor on bigger deer. At one of the She Hunts camps run by my daughter Brittany, I met a lady from Colorado who had property in Nebraska. She and her husband were both shooting the Creedmoor, and they sold the rifles because they weren't happy with killing power on either Colorado mule deer or Nebraska whitetails.

If you want to use a 6.5 mm, consider a faster cartridge. I'm still happy with the .264 Win. Mag. and its 140-grain bullet at nearly 3,000 fps, which is a significant increase in energy over the Creedmoor. The .264 is pretty much a dead duck, but the 6.5 PRC is identical, the 6.5-.284 Norma almost as fast. For performance on bigger deer, I believe 3,000 fps is the sweet spot, and recoil is tolerable.

I also believe in frontal area. Larger wound channel, more energy transferred on impact … but it's impossible to say how much more is needed for a noticeable difference. After I gave up on the .260 Rem with my daughters, I shifted them to the 7 mm-08. Still a 140-grain bullet at about 2,800 fps, so no increase in recoil or bullet energy. With better bullet aerodynamics, the mild 6.5s are better

Although the 6.5 Creedmoor (left) is wildly popular, the author believes it is on the edge for big deer. Other 6.5 mm cartridges that produce 250 to 300 fps more velocity and yield more energy, such as the 6.5-284 Norma (second from left), .264 Win. Mag. and 6.5 PRC give him more confidence.



CRAIG BODDINGTON (3)

WHERE TO GO

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long-range target cartridges. However, I'm convinced the 7 mm-08 hits harder than the mild 6.5s. The only significant difference is frontal area: .264 inch to .284 inch. It's only .020 inch, but I'm certain it makes a difference. Both my daughters have taken piles of game, some animals larger than deer, with their 7 mm-08 rifles.

Being a bit old-fashioned, I prefer the old 7x57 mm, which has the same ballistics as the 7 mm-08. Neither are fast, so I don't use them in open country. Instead, for general-purpose use on bigger deer, I circle right back to Professor O'Connor and use his tired, old .270. Maybe the greater frontal area (.264 to .277) makes a difference. Maybe not, but the .270 Win. is much faster, pushing a 130-grain bullet at nearly 3,100 fps and a 140-grain



Five excellent deer cartridges include (left to right): the 7 mm-08, 7x57 mm, .270 Win., .280 Rem. and .280 Ackley Improved. All are powerful enough for the biggest whitetail, blacktail and mule deer, although effective ranges vary among them.

The author took this Georgia whitetail with the .264 Win. Mag., an effective 6.5 mm cartridge that is nearing obsolence. Nonetheless, it can exceed 3,000 fps with 140-grain bullets.

The author used a Springfield Armory Waypoint in 6.5 PRC to drop this buck. He believes the higher velocity and greater energy of the PRC make it a better choice for big deer.



For big-bodied bucks at extended ranges, turn to cartridges that offer magnum performance. Good choices include (left to right): the 6.8 Western, .270 WSM, .270 Wby. Mag., .27 Nosler, 7 mm Rem. Mag., 7 mm PRC and .28 Nosler.

bullet up to 3,000. On deer, take your pick. Much more energy delivered. The largest-bodied deer I ever shot was an Alberta monster. It was quartering away, and after one 130-grain Barnes from a Kimber .270 hit it behind the shoulder, the deer took two faltering steps and went down.

As with the 7 mm-08, the .270 Win is not a long-range target cartridge, nor is it an extreme-range cartridge for any purpose. Because of its traditional 1:10-inch rifling twist, the .270 is denied the long, heavy-for-caliber bullets that make 6.5s and 7 mms sing. It is a hunting cartridge, but a good one for the largest deer. My wife Donna uses the .270 almost exclusively. It has more recoil than a Creedmoor, but it's sustainable.

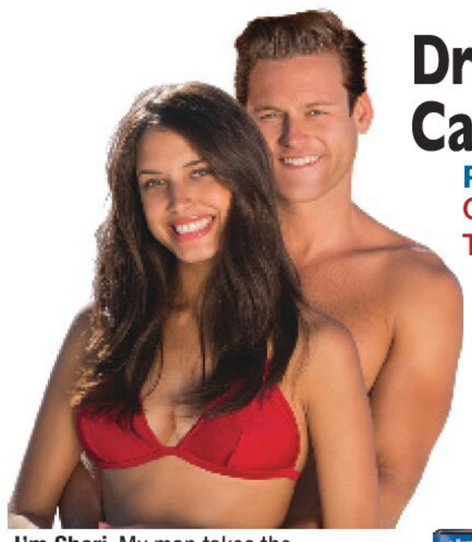
CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)

I have taken deer with the .270 well beyond 400 yards with no problems. Traditional .270s (.270 Win., Wby. Mag., WSM, all with 1:10 twists) cannot digest longer bullets that are clearly superior at extreme ranges. Thing is, I don't shoot game past the .270 Win.'s capability, so for me it's a moot point. The last buck I took with a .270 was a desert mule deer, facing me at 300 yards, tough shot. One 136-grain Terminal Ascent hit the buck in the center of its chest, and four bounds later it was down.

For deer of any size, the old .270 is hard to beat, and it's still one of our best non-magnum choices. It is not alone. Although not as popular, the .280 Rem. is a wonderful deer cartridge. Propelling a 140-grain bullet to 3,000 fps, the .280 is much faster than my beloved 7x57 or the 7 mm-08. Coming on as a new "cult cartridge," the .280 Ackley Improved is awesome, beating its parent .280 by 100 fps and treading into magnum territory.

As with magnums, .30-caliber bullet weight and recoil are not truly essential for even the largest deer. However, it's tough to leave out the .308 Win. and .30-06. Both are strong medicine for the biggest bucks. Not fast, the .308 is accurate and hits hard, awesome to at least medium range. There's never anything wrong with hunting deer with the all-American .30-06. Faster, it offers a bit more practical range than the .308, and it's a thumper on both ends. My first big mule deer was taken with a .30-06 well past 400 yards. It's a cartridge I've circled back to many times. The .30-06 is effective, but it's needlessly powerful for deer.

Now, if you're among the many hunters today who have the rage for range, let's be honest. You can't shoot way out there without some pain. Classic belted magnums from Remington, Weatherby and Winchester will give you the reach you seek. And so will the new class of magnums that aren't called magnums: the PRCs, Nosler cartridges and 6.8 Western, all with fast-twist barrels that support bullets that offer maximum range. There's no shame in hunting big deer with any cartridge that offers enough reach and power for your shooting distances, provided the rifle gives you the confidence to place your shots where they belong. G&F



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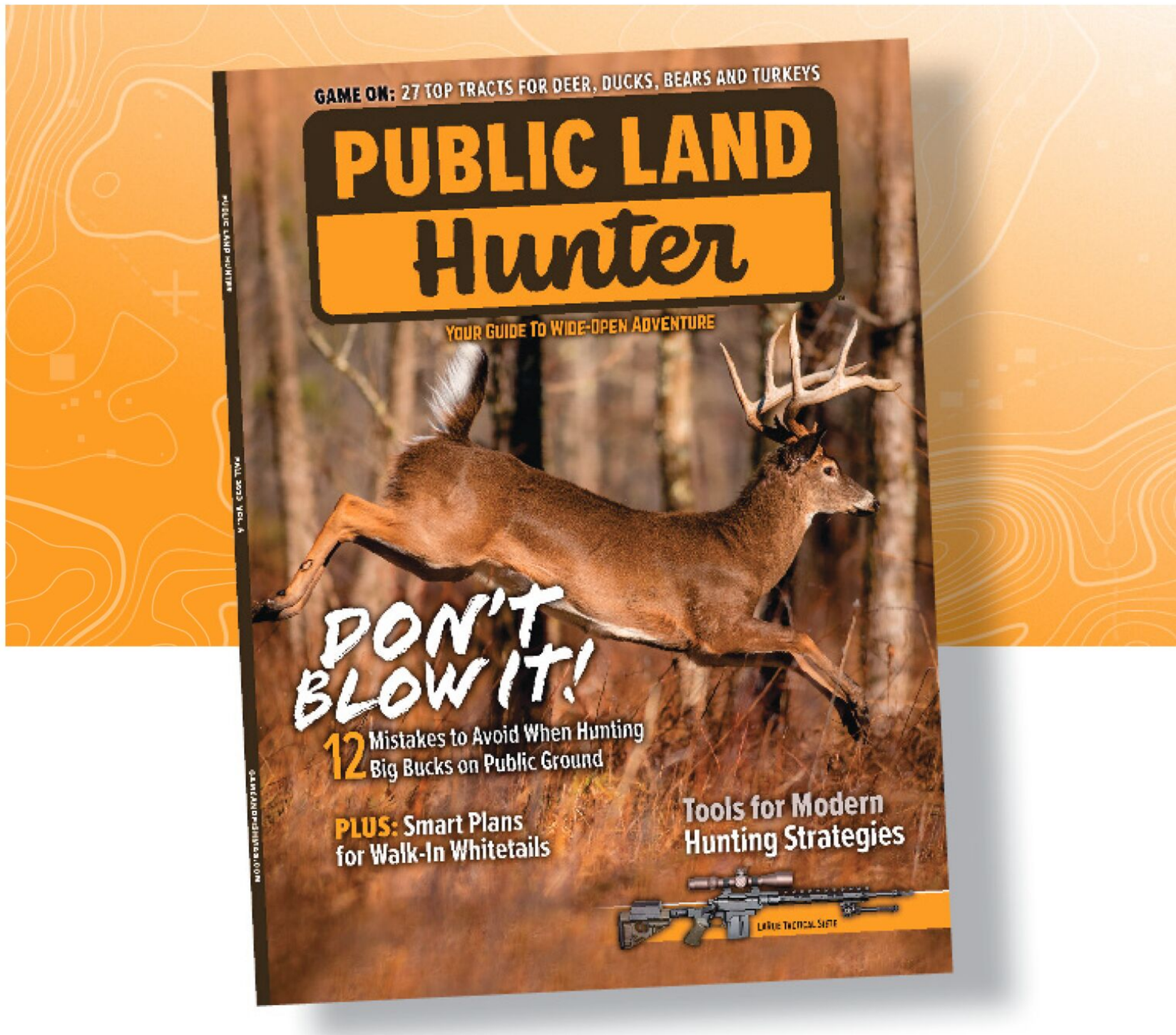
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Christensen Arms MHR

THIS BOLT GUN PROVIDES THE ACCURACY OF A CHASSIS RIFLE AND THE ERGONOMICS OF A HUNTING RIFLE IN A CUSTOMIZABLE, MODULAR PLATFORM.

By Darren Choate



Christensen Arms was founded in 1995 by Dr. Roland Christensen, an aerospace scientist, and initially focused on utilizing carbon-fiber materials to create lightweight, high-strength components for the aerospace and medical industries. Driven by his passion for firearms and a desire to revolutionize the industry, Dr. Christensen turned his attention to applying carbon-fiber technology to rifle barrels. In 1997, Christensen Arms introduced its first carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel, setting a new standard for accuracy, weight reduction and heat dissipation. This break-through technology quickly gained recognition and established the company as a pioneer in the field.

Eventually, Christensen Arms expanded its product line to include complete rifles based on its success with barrels. These rifles featured state-of-the-art stocks and precision components to offer shooters outstanding performance and accuracy. The combination of aerospace-grade materials and advanced manufacturing techniques solidified Christensen Arms' reputation for producing premium firearms. Based in Gunnison, Utah, Christensen Arms continues to develop a diverse range of rifles, including hunting rifles, precision rifles and modern sporting rifles.

This year, Christensen Arms introduces the Modern Hunting Rifle (MHR), which includes even more cutting-edge technology. Standout features of the MHR are its Flash Forged Technology (FFT) components, which combine aerospace-grade materials and advanced manufacturing techniques to result in lightweight, durable construction that achieves a high level of precision.

Built on an aluminum mini chassis with V-block bedding, the MHR offers shooters accuracy, ergonomics and modularity. The MHR's receiver and action assembly are custom-machined, and a Picatinny

SPECIFICATIONS

CHRISTENSEN ARMS MHR

christensenarms.com

TYPE: bolt-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: 6.5 PRC (tested)

BARREL: 22"; carbon-fiber-wrapped 416R stainless steel; muzzle brake

TRIGGER: adjustable single-stage TriggerTech

SAFETY: two-position toggle

MAGAZINE: internal with floorplate; 3-round capacity; convertible to AICS detachable box

SIGHTS: none; Picatinny base included

STOCK: aluminum mini chassis with FFT carbon fiber; adjustable length of pull, comb height, grip

FINISH: desert brown Cerakote

OVERALL LENGTH: 43 1/2"

WEIGHT: 7.4 lbs.

MSRP: $3,499.99



With an adjustable comb height and length of pull, the MHR stock allows hunters to achieve a perfect fit.

SHOOTING RESULTS

LOAD: Nosler Trophy Grade ABLR

BULLET WEIGHT: 142 grs.

MUZZLE VELOCITY: 2,779 fps

AVERAGE GROUP: 0.41"

LOAD: Hornady Precision Hunter ELD-X

BULLET WEIGHT: 143 grs.

MUZZLE VELOCITY: 2,908 fps

AVERAGE GROUP: 0.99"

Muzzle velocity is the average of three consecutive shots fired through a Caldwell G2 chronograph at 10 feet. Accuracy is the result of three consecutive, three-shot groups fired from a sandbag rest at 100 yards.

rail is included for mounting optics. The bolt has a black nitride finish with a skeletonized handle and carbon-fiber knob. Utilizing a heavier firing pin spring, the MHR's proprietary TriggerTech trigger breaks cleanly and consistently, ensuring minimal disturbance to the shooters' aim. The single-stage trigger is adjustable to suit individual preferences.

Christensen Arms is renowned for its expertise in carbon-fiber barrel technology. The MHR features a match-grade, hand-lapped 416R stainless steel barrel wrapped in a carbon-fiber sleeve. Its design significantly reduces barrel weight while enhancing stiffness and improving heat dissipation. The result is exceptional accuracy and consistency shot after shot, even under demanding hunting and shooting conditions. The barrel of the MHR features a 5/8x24 threaded muzzle and ships with a removable stainless steel side-baffle muzzle brake installed.

The MHR incorporates advanced ergonomics for enhanced comfort and function. The stock is thoughtfully designed with a palm swell and contoured grip, promoting a natural and secure hold. Length of pull and the height of the FFT cheekpiece are adjustable to enable a perfect fit for shooters of all sizes. Additionally, the grip, buttstock and forearm can be replaced with other options.

For testing and evaluation, I received an MHR chambered in 6.5 PRC. My first impression of the gun was that it was more futuristic than modern. I noted the rifle's modular design; each element stood out on its own. After handling the rifle for a short period, it became easier to understand the functionality and modularity of the rifle as a single unit. Fit and finish were superb. Even better, the action functioned effortlessly, and the trigger was as crisp and clean as that of any factory rifle I have tested.

I selected the Burris Veracity PH 4-20x50 mm scope as the perfect complement to the MHR. After sighting in the rifle at 100 yards, I used the Burris Connect app to finalize a ballistic profile, set a digital zero and upload the data to the scope. For accuracy testing, I fired three, three-shot groups of Nosler Trophy Grade and Hornady Precision Hunter ammo. During my evaluation, the rifle performed flawlessly and both loads were impressively accurate, with all three-shot groups within Christensen Arms' sub-MOA guarantee.

After testing the rifle at 100 yards, I wanted to evaluate its long-range effectiveness as well as the features of the Veracity PH scope. I reset the scope's zero in the Burris Connect app for my chosen load and sent the update to the scope via Bluetooth. Then I ranged a rock that was approximately 6 inches in diameter at 421 yards, set the heads-up display in the scope to that range, aimed and fired. The shot fractured the small rock into gravel.

Any hunting rifle is greatly enhanced by a quality trigger, and the MHR's trigger is stellar. The trigger was partly responsible for multiple sub-MOA groups, including an average 0.41-inch group size with the Nosler Trophy Grade ammo.

Although it's a minimal factor in most hunting situations, the composite barrel dissipated heat quickly, which I'm sure also contributed to accuracy. I wouldn't describe the MHR as a super-lightweight mountain rifle, but its weight was not overwhelming at 9.8 pounds with the Burris scope mounted.

The MHR's look and feel grew on me. Its combination of chiseled modern lines, shapes and textures gives the rifle a unique, edgy look and feel. Still, its design is pragmatic. The shapes provide a natural fit for any shooter, and the gun shoulders and maneuvers cleanly and efficiently. Available in several chamberings from 6.5 Creedmoor to .300 PRC, the MHR is a great choice for big-game hunters looking to take advantage of the latest manufacturing technology. G&F

BY JEFF JOHNSTON

THE GREATEST GIFT

NONE OF THE REWARDS FROM A FIRST SQUIRREL HUNT COME WITHOUT QUESTIONS.



When Shane turned 8 and had proven he could be trusted with a gun, his father gave him a 20-gauge Stevens single-shot and proclaimed they'd go squirrel hunting. The white oak bottom in which Shane found himself the next Saturday as the sun came up was a wonderland with creeks and towering trees, thorny plants, bugs, animal tracks, bird calls and the promise of adventure—all somehow amplified by the loaded shotgun in his hands. Each new sight, smell, feel and sound prompted another question for his father to answer.

While standing on a high creek bank overlooking the forest below, Shane's father knelt to whisper in his son's ear. "Squirrels see everything from their perches in those trees," he said while pointing to the oak canopy ahead. "We must be absolutely still and quiet. Remember your questions and save them for me later."

Shane nodded.

"When we move, we'll move when the wind blows. We'll look for movement, and we'll pay attention to every sound. Mainly we'll be patient as we sit right here for a while and let the woods resume its chatter."

Shane nodded.

Shane's father sat down with his back against the base of an oak, then motioned his son to sit between his legs and lean back against him so they could share the same view. When both were comfortable, Shane's father tapped Shane on the shoulder, prompting his son to look at him. He used two fingers to point to his own eyes before slowly turning them toward the tangle of trees ahead.

Shane knew what he meant.

To the boy, five minutes of sitting silent and still seemed like 50. But then something startled him as it popped the ground nearby. Shane glanced down to see an acorn roll to a stop against his father's boot. He felt a light squeeze on his shoulder and barely heard the word "squir-rel" whispered in his ear. His heart started pounding.

"Get ready," Shane's father said softly, and Shane felt his body tighten.

Suddenly a squirrel ran onto a limb above them, and as Shane cocked the gun's hammer, the animal paused.

Boom! The shot echoed through the bottom, and for a few seconds it seemed to the boy that the whole universe stopped. He'd felt no recoil and could hear nothing as he watched the squirrel fall to the earth in a motion that was more like a movie than real life. The movie was shattered by a morbid *thud* upon the ground and then a solid slap on his back.

With smoke still curling from the gun's muzzle, Shane turned toward his father, who was smiling bigger than Shane had ever seen him smile.

"Great shot, buddy!" he wailed. "Now go get him!"

Shane walked a few steps to retrieve his first game animal. He immediately noticed the blood in the squirrel's ears—the brightest red he'd ever seen—and the striking dullness in its eyes. When he picked it up and felt its warm, limp body a strange feeling overtook him. Shane suddenly recognized the power of his own hands. As he walked back to his father, he felt excited, happy, proud, bewildered and sad all at once.

"It's a beautiful gray squirrel," said Shane's father. "He has given you his life, and for this sacred gift you must be thankful."

Shane nodded as he stroked the squirrel, admiring its sharp claws and coarse fur before handing it to his father, who instructed him to turn around. When Shane did, he felt the weight of the animal as it came to rest in his game bag.

"What now?" asked the boy.

"We'll be quiet again and get another one, because it takes several for momma to make gravy."

"OK!" said Shane, even though he very much doubted he could be quiet for another five minutes, what with a squirrel in his vest and so many questions on his mind.

DAVID HOUSTON

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