

A Hunt Where Shooting NEVER STOPS

By Wayne van Zwoll

B&C Professional Member

Photos courtesy of Author

The snow came suddenly, just as we slipped off the rim into the oaks. It was a stemwinder of a storm, icy wind barreling in from the Spanish Peaks, unloading snow by the bucket. As visibility dropped to a few feet, I eased up to a pinyon in the futile hope it would block the blast. The bull was below us, and not far. We should move, I knew. The gale would cover our push through the noisy oaks, and behind this white-out, we were invisible. But the elk was invisible too. To stay on track, we'd have to trust memory instead of landmarks.

The look of the canyon had changed since I'd spotted the bedded animal. It's easy, in rough country, to take the wrong draw or emerge from a copse of trees a few degrees off. As your perspective changes, you must re-orient. "There's no checking in this blizzard," I muttered.

Steve nodded. I liked his manner. A capable young man, he was uncharacteristically humble. It might have come from his tour as an Army Ranger. He'd had to figure out quickly what mattered and what didn't. He played classical piano. I liked that too. Steve Giordano was a multi-dimensional guy, deeper than he came across at first, a good companion on a hunt. The kind of guide anyone would appreciate.

But the storm had the best of both of us for the moment. We hunkered, backs to the blow.

I'd been to Raton before, teaching for the NRA at the Whittington Center a few miles from town. There, between 6000 and 7000 feet in the southern Rockies,

the weather had the feel of Denver, not Las Cruces. Hardly a haven for sun-seeking retirees. But it has been drought, not cold, that has diminished the quality and productivity of the forage base on Whittington's 33,300 acres. Mike Ballew, who manages the Center, is keen to keep trophy quality high, so there weren't many elk tags available in 2002. Chronically unlucky in draws, I'd never expected to get one of them.



Whittington Center Headquarters -- initially called the NRA Outdoor Center, got its present name after the death of George Whittington in 1983.

Like the adjacent Vermejo Ranch, the Whittington Center comprises a mix of summer and winter range, but much of the terrain is rocky and, partly as a result of fire suppression, overgrown with scrub oak. Native pinyon/juniper stands provide better hiding cover but not much more forage. Ditto for the high-elevation lodgepole thickets. In normal years, there's sufficient water to distribute the elk well, but you'll find none of the lush meadows characteristic of central Colorado mountains.

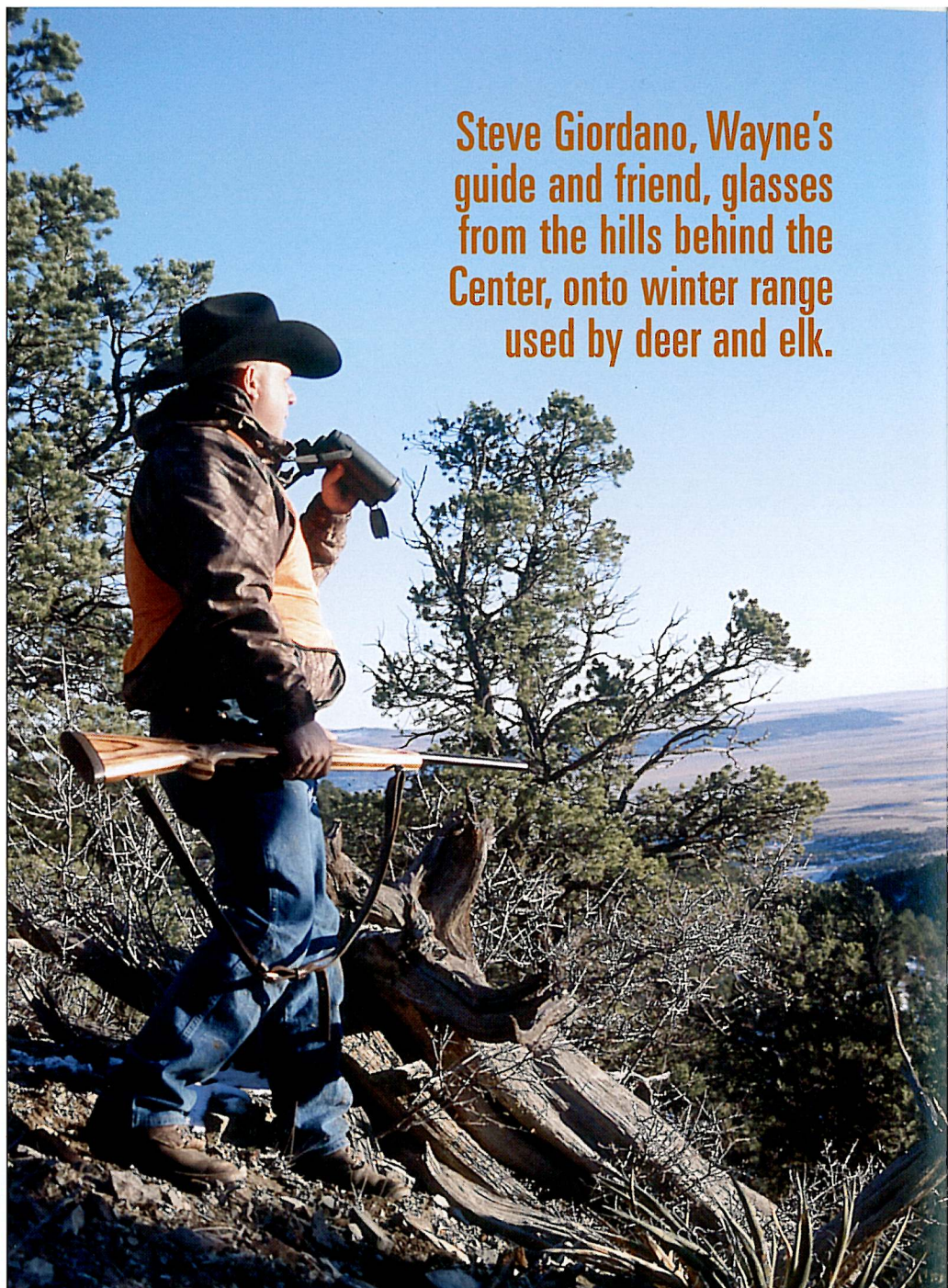
The Whittington Center's genesis had nothing to do with elk or any other big game. During the late 1960s, the National Rifle Association's Board of Directors sought a national shooting facility for its members. "Rifle ranges especially were dwindling," said Mike. "In the wake of assassinations during the sixties, and the resulting Gun Control Act of 1968, the future of shooting sports looked bleak. An NRA committee chaired by George Whittington visited Raton and liked the area. Kaiser Steel had listed a tract of property big enough to contain any stray shots. The lay of the land would put the firing ranges facing north – an ideal situation because shooters don't want to face the sun."

Raton, a conservative ranching community of about 12,000 welcomed the NRA, which bought the Kaiser property in 1973. But after fencing and a few improvements, the NRA had second thoughts about its mission. In 1977 the Board decided to re-define itself in the political arena. Funding for membership programs was redirected. The NRA Outdoor Center, as it was then known, became a separate entity, with its own board of directors. It was to raise its own operating money, but if open to the public, it could seek 501 C-3 (non-profit) status.

In 1983 George Whittington died, and the NRA Outdoor Center became the Whittington Center in his honor. Mike Ballew's tenure as Executive Director began in 1986. Mike has since worked hard – and successfully – soliciting support from shooters and the shooting industry. The result is unequivocally the most complete shooting facili-

Ranges — big game and shooting — make the Whittington Center a mecca for hunters and shooters.

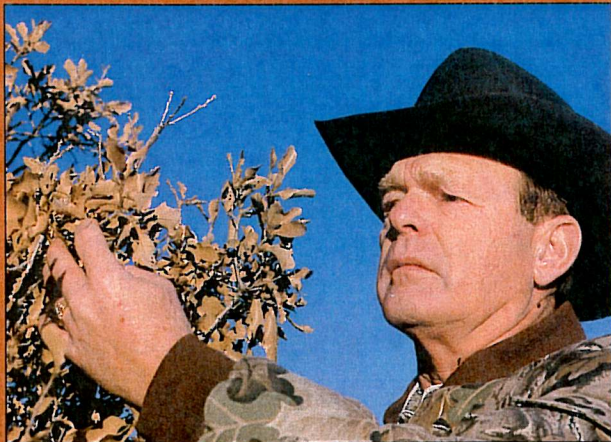
Steve Giordano, Wayne's guide and friend, glasses from the hills behind the Center, onto winter range used by deer and elk.



Deer On A GRAND SCALE

"Whittington Center elk have fared better than the deer," Mike Ballew told me in his office. "We collared 40 does last fall and lost 19 of them in May and June. Every one of the 26 fawns we marked were dead within 2 weeks of birth." He nodded. "Every one. And birth weights are down 30 percent."

This was hard news for Mike, a veteran deer hunter. Forgetting elk for the moment, he launched into a monologue on STAMP, a mule deer research project that he helped initiate. "It's the Santa Fe Trail Adaptive Deer Management Program, a cooperative effort funded by the Mule Deer Foundation and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the NRA, New Mexico Game and Fish Department, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Lou Bender at New Mexico State University and Terry Messmer at Utah State are the principal investigators. In fact, Lou was out here last evening with a helicopter crew." He explained that the study originated just three years ago when representatives from the Mule Deer Foundation came to visit. "They wanted a flagship project, a large-scale effort to find out how ailing deer herds would respond to various management schemes."



Mike Ballew has managed the Whittington Center for 15 years. Under his leadership, the facility has become a big game hunting destination and research site, as well as a premier shooting range.

Colorado border 40 miles south. On it, we have management options that just aren't possible on smaller holdings or on public ground. And we'll likely multiply our project funding with grants from the Landowner Incentive Program just passed by Congress." According to Mike, New Mexico's share of that \$36 million pot amounts to \$1.56 million, to be awarded landowners willing to contribute 25 percent in projects they present for approval. "Projects must focus on habitat manipulation and benefit local wildlife," explained Mike. "But the 25-percent start-up can be in-kind payment—that is, equipment, labor, and other on-the-ground capital." He grinned. "Even Philmont Scout Ranch is involved. We have a chance here to do something of real value for mule deer, write a prescription that can be followed on other large ranches and even on public land."

Updates on STAMP will be posted in *Mule Deer*, a publication of the Mule Deer Foundation, 888/375-3337.

Mike, who had made a career of husbanding game on private land, took to the idea and quickly snared the support of 13 neighboring—and contiguous—ranches, including the 640,000-acre Vermejo Park holding that embraces the Whittington Center on the north and west. "We put together a 1.3-million-acre land base stretching 30 miles east of Raton and 60 miles west, from the

We decided it was worth a closer look.

A half-hour later, we were hoofing our way up-country, through oak as thick as steel wool. We'd sweep wide in this noisy brush, come in from above, and hope the elk would still be visible. We climbed and fought the oak for nearly three hours. When at last we slipped onto the ridge above where we'd seen the bulls, they were gone. But not long thereafter, easing south just below ridgeline, I spied one old bull bedded with a raghorn companion.

The snow stopped as suddenly as it had started. The sun bored a hole through the cotton candy of spent clouds. To our front lay the ridge, pines and oaks thicker than they'd appeared from above. I eased out onto a rock ledge, sure we'd be able to see the elk from here if they hadn't left during the storm. After a systematic search of the slope with my 8x32 Pentax, I started picking apart the thickets.

"He's getting up!" Steve hissed in my ear. He'd seen the bull's antlers move behind a screen of brush. I eased to a sit as ear and antler again became motionless. The storm had carried a quartering wind, but so violent that I doubted the elk had smelled us at all. Now a tentative breeze two-stepped across our front. If the bull pegged us, he could exit south without showing us any more than we were looking at now.

But when he moved again it was to the right, into a gap between two big ponderosas. His beams weren't long, but they had the beefy look I like. A mature bull, this one, and as handsome as any we'd seen today. I nudged the safety forward on the Remington, a Model 673 prototype in .350 Remington Magnum. A couple of weeks at the range and in the woods had given me confidence in this distinctive carbine, after I'd lavished enough time on the trigger to give it a toothpick-light pull.

The crosswire settled easily in the crease. He was quartering off just a little when the rifle spat a 200-grain Core-Lokt. The bull jumped, came down hard in front, bounded twice across-slope away from us and collapsed behind some oak. Good, I thought, but then the elk was up and climbing, giving me no look to the ribs. He stood. Then he moved again. There was a loud snapping of limbs, then silence.

The younger bull stood up as his companion vanished. We stayed motionless, hoping this second animal wouldn't bolt. We waited for 30 minutes after it walked slowly into the timber. If my shot had been good, we had lots of time. If it hadn't been, we had no business charging in and pushing the strick-

ty in the U.S. You'll see a range here for every recognized target-shooting discipline, including trap, skeet, sporting clays and five-stand shotgun games, paper and steel-target pistol events, traditional rimfire and centerfire courses, plus Cowboy Action and Metallic Silhouette. Shoot rifles to 1000 yards or practice with Hunter Pistol or black powder. Except perhaps during a world championship competition, you'll always find an empty bench on firing lines that comprise dozens of stations. There are air-gun ranges for youth, a primary focus at the Center, with its own four-week youth adventure program.

Though the shooting facilities cover less than eight percent of the Whittington Center, they account for about \$12 million in assets and have prompted a huge increase in visitation. "The year I arrived," recalled Mike, "we tallied 7,460 people, mostly shooters. This past year, the count exceeded 120,000. They're still mostly shooters, but we also welcome people who want to see wildlife or learn about the area's history. The Santa Fe Trail runs right past our shop. Last season we hosted two endurance runs." Besides deer and elk, you'll find black bears, mountain lions, and Merriam's turkeys on the property. Mike maintains a nearby lease to give a few lucky applicants guided hunts for records-book pronghorn. There's housing on site for 250 people, as well as a cafeteria. Some visitors trailer-camp at the Center's RV park, which has 125 hookups.

In the early 1990s I'd visited the Whittington Center as marksmanship coach in the NRA's Big Game Hunting Program – an event Mike and I and then-program coordinator Phil Johnston would like to see revived. Since then, other programs have proliferated. Mike, with help from Robbie Robinson and Steve Giordano have crammed the Center's activity slate. Now Mike is planning a conference center that will draw corporate boards and accommodate product seminars for the shooting industry. Like the other Whittington facilities, it will come about when there's money to pay for it. About two-thirds of the annual budget is generated on site. The rest comes almost entirely from direct-mail solicitation.

Mike has insisted that the Center be as self-sufficient as possible. Lodgepole pine in the high reaches of the ranch have been cut and milled on site to provide logs and lumber for building. The Center is a licensed contractor. Of the 30 people who work here, "there are no specialists," according to Mike. "Everyone must bring many talents. All construction and road

work is done by the same crews that service the roads, run the shooting ranges, guide hunters and help with fundraising efforts." Many volunteers have pitched in.

Before Steve and I had started hunting, we'd driven to a vantage point near the 1000-yard range to glass the hem of pinyon-juniper skirting a butte to the west. The sun wasn't yet up when against the distant trees we spied a bull elk. Then another. By the time we left, we'd spotted 10 bulls in 2 groups. All had branched antlers, and there was one particularly handsome six-pointer. But I didn't want to shoot a bull in the low country, at the edge of prairie. Only a small part of elk hunting is what you possess in the end. Most of a hunt – at least for me – is new country traveled, hills climbed and stalking skills brought to bear. If I work hard and make good decisions and learn a little about elk that I didn't know before, the hunt is successful, whether or not I get a shot. Or take one.

Steve seemed empathetic, so we headed up Van Houten canyon, where a century ago miners dug coal from the earth. "A seam is still on fire down one of those shafts," Steve said. We talked about elk too – how productivity had slipped to 20 percent in some herds near my home in the Pacific Northwest and how, curiously, elk on the Whittington Center were still cranking out 60 calves per 100 cows. Steve noted that the drought had affected antler growth. The biggest bull taken during October and November had scored 330 and that most main beams were short.

The sun hit the peaks as the Chevy climbed out of Van Houten. We wound through gnarly orange Ponderosas, a dark sea of lodgepoles falling off steeply to the west as we wheeled easily through the light carpet of snow on the road. Here on top, the wind was fierce, and when we stopped at the "elk cabin," it bit through my clothes. The cabin was locked; dressed to walk, I'd like to have had a key!

"This is a great glassing spot," said Steve, pointing west. "The sun doesn't hit that ridge until late, and we're looking at the lee side."

Almost immediately, I spotted a bull, feeding on an open finger just above shadow. Steve locked onto another, farther to the south, with his Leica spotting scope. We found several more – three groups comprising nine animals. One had wide, heavy antlers but only five points. Another showed us unusually long beams with six points to a side, but the set was light and narrow. Four bulls made up that group, far to the north.

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Wayne killed this bull with one shot at about 90 yards, after a long stalk in a snow squall.

INSET: Wayne found that Remington's new 673 rifle would shoot most bullets inside a minute and a half. Factory-loaded 200-grain Core-Lokts often delivered one-inch groups.

en elk. It did not know about us yet.

But the long silence was heartening, and eventually we decided to circle above the thicket. On the ridge, we could see no tracks. I slipped downhill as quietly as I could, found one set of prints and followed them straight south. No blood. Coming back to the thicket, I angled downhill and almost immediately found the dead elk. The bullet had smashed through the fifth rib and splintered the sixth with shrapnel. It had sped through both lungs above the heart and lodged in the off-shoulder. Elk, Steve and I agreed, are very tough.

A warm afternoon sun gave us fine photos. Then we skinned, caped, field-

dressed and quartered the elk. Not far above a canyon road, we backpacked the meat out that evening.

"A good hunt," Steve said, in characteristic understatement.

"No, a great hunt," I replied. "In a great place. Good of you to share it."

He grinned. Steve, I suspected, had a pretty good idea of what mattered in elk hunting.

We drove in after dark, under a headlight moon. The wind had settled; there was frost in the stars.

"Don't be a stranger," Steve said.

I imagine if the Whittington Center can handle 120,000 visitors, I owe it an occasional pilgrimage. ■