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Photos Courtesy of Author



I don't really know where the passion came from, but it has always burned deep within me. I was fortunate enough at a young age to be exposed to hunting and the outdoors, but it was never a rite of passage or a desire of approval from the men in the family that drove me to hunt harder. By the time I was 14, I was hunting more than anyone in my family ever had. Ducks, blacktail deer, Roosevelt's elk, black bear, quail, grouse. I played numerous sports in high school and even into college, though they were time fillers. At 6 foot 1 and 235 pounds, people assumed I would play high school football. But when the soccer coach let me know we wouldn't be doing daily doubles going into fall season to allow more time with family and to enjoy the summer, it translated into time to hunt bear and scout for archery elk—my decision to play soccer was solidified.

While I wasn't a top recruit by any means, I had the opportunity to play soccer at schools across the country. My visits to these schools were all somewhat similar: they would room me with a current player, and we would check out the scene of the school. The one that stuck out was in Northern Wisconsin, and it wasn't the academics or the facilities that hooked me. It was the fact that the school lay less than a mile from Lake Superior. Chequamegon National Forest was just beyond a bike ride away, and the edges of the roads were literally covered with whitetails pushed by a recent snowfall. I don't remember the actual numbers we saw, but the totals were well into the triple digits. They had a solid wildlife program and obviously an abundance of wildlife in close proximity.

I started college in the fall of 2001, and for the first time I was thrust into a faction of hunting with no clue how to find success. Spotting and stalking whitetail does with tactics I had used in Oregon for mule deer quickly proved fruitless. When a friend invited me to hunt a shotgun-only area with him at Thanksgiving



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in the southern part of the state, I quickly learned that a slug requires far more lead than a rifle to dispatch a wounded deer on the move. This was just one of many lessons I would file away for future years.

It took some time and some assistance from folks to figure out the northern white-tail woods, but by the time I graduated, we regularly found success. We were, in fact, supplying a large number of students with venison, thanks to a program where local farmers received damage tags to alleviate crop issues. And the harvest levels the state required were very generous.

The same type of situation occurred when I moved to Montana in 2008 to take a job with Boone and Crockett Club. The first year I was eligible to apply for elk, I was fortunate enough to draw one of the most coveted elk tags in the state. I spent every weekend and my limited vacation all through archery and then rifle season trying to hunt Montana's American elk with the tactics I had used my entire childhood in Oregon for Roosevelt's. Finally in last few days of the season, my

now-wife and I got on a herd of bulls bedded in sparse pines on a north-facing slope. As I sprawled out across the snow and mud covered elk trail we had been following and adjusted the contents of my pack to perfect its height for the 200-yard cross-canyon shot, my wife said that there was a good bull beaded. His left side was a solid heavy 6 point but she couldn't see what he had on the right. We were both burned out from the season and the day, tired, and in fact, had almost turned back to the truck before finding a quarter Nalgene bottle of water in the bottom of a pack. I am not sure what was in the water, but whatever it was combined with the air from the 10-minute break we took that afternoon and pushed us over the next ridge. This was our last effort before the season ended, and the elk sign we were on was fresh.

As soon as she confirmed he was a solid, mature bull, I shifted slightly to the right and took in half a breath heavy with the smell of elk. As my chest rose, the

crosshairs lifted, and when the reticle climbed to the center of the bull's vitals, I stopped the inhale and began squeezing.

At the crack of the rifle, the hillside erupted with bulls. I racked another round, but the mayhem was far too intense to contemplate a follow-up. All the bulls got on a single trail, and one by

ABOVE: The author spotted this elk shed while glassing for bears in Oregon's Wallowa-Whitman National Forest in the spring of 2017.

BELOW: The author's 2009 first Montana bull taken in Helena National Forest.

OPPOSITE: A Thanksgiving Day whitetail taken by the author and his wife during the 2017 season on Lolo National Forest.



one I started inspecting each in the scope, looking for any sign of a hit to indicate which of these bulls I had shot at. It seemed like an eternity, but in maybe 20 seconds I found a large mature bull that now clearly revealed a right antler broken off at the junction of his G4. Judging by his size amongst the other bulls and quickly surmising why my wife couldn't see his right side, I focused in on his shoulder to look for any indication of shot placement—certain this must be my bull just as he began to stumble.

While this bull's score is nowhere near minimum, or even that impressive

to experienced elk hunters, he is my best trophy to date. The wedding ring my wife wears proudly is made from one of the worn ivories from this 8-year-old bull. The two of us broke him down and in two trips had the bull of my dreams in the back of the truck—racing to make it back to the small town we were staying and praying the only gas station was still open on this Thanksgiving night. It fortunately was, and a dinner of toquitos, Chex Mix, and a couple tall boys of Hamm's rounded out what is one of the most significant days in my hunting career.

In today's world, everybody says "score doesn't matter," to which we agree, partially. Score has a piece of the history that facilitated these experiences being around today. The system was never intended to place all the emphasis on a number, but rather use this

information as a tool to gauge conservation successes and failures. It is part of a system that has worked flawlessly and is the reason I can write/edit this series of articles for which this column introduces.

North Americans are beyond fortunate in our ability to experience native wildlife and wild places that no other countries in the world provide for the public. Our forefathers in conservation stepped up in creating publically-held national forests, creating a system of scientific wildlife management, and developing a system where this magnificent conservation success story is built on the dollars of hunters.

To this end, in the United States we can hunt five species of deer, three species of moose, two species of elk, pronghorn, black bear, barren ground caribou, and mountain lion on public land, unguided, with a relatively small

amount of luck in the draws. When you add in the harder draws of Rocky Mountain goat, desert sheep, and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, that totals 17 public lands hunts that you can do on your own, for minimal cost, and the majority of those costs go back into the conservation system that allows you the opportunity to apply.

In upcoming issues of *Fair Chase* magazine, we will break down the following list of different hunts and give you an actual set of costs, research, applications, logistics, and an overview of these publicly accessible areas to show anyone that with a little patience and perseverance, one can have a successful hunt. Each article will profile the species, specifics of access, necessary or unique tactics to hunting the species, and how someone who has actually done this on their own has found success. ■



LEFT: Passing on the tradition. The author and his son Gage just before his second birthday preparing for his first pack out in Idaho's Payette National Forest **BOTTOM:** On a northern Montana pronghorn hunt the author tests out a recipe on state-land-taken pronghorn that ended up appearing in Boone and Crockett's *Wild Gourmet* cookbook.

NEXT UP: ARIZONA COUES' DEER

