

A Trophy Buck Tale

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It was the early morning hours of September 29, 1992. A hike up the mountainside in the dark, into an area I had never hunted before, started the fifth and final day of a combination mule deer/bull elk hunt in the spectacular mountain country near Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

I had prayed very specifically a few days earlier before driving west from my home in northeastern Wyoming. I had asked for the biggest mule deer buck of my life, and the biggest bull elk of my life. No small prayer request in any body's book. It was not your ordinary, everyday, every-hunting season type of prayer. Who can explain a moment of unusual faith?

The dawn was barely awakening on the eastern horizon as I eased up the trail on the dry south end of the mountain ridge. I had located and glassed the ridge the previous day from the Gros Ventre River highway below. My brother and hunting partner, Tom Coy, a Jackson fishing outfitter, was scheduled to float the Snake River. The reality of hunting the mountain alone loomed very real before me in the ghostly half-light of pre-dawn.

My intent was to find an area to effectively solo hunt by glassing for deer and elk while bugling and listening for a bull to

reveal himself. As it turned out, my sense of hearing was not going to be the key to success. It was the sense of sight that would uncover a trophy.

There are different ways to hunt big game. Sometimes expe-

riencing the great outdoors with a close friend - one who loves the hunt and the experience as much as you - is very rewarding and memorable. Sometimes having three or four hunters pays off; drives can be successful, several

THE VAST TETON WILDERNESS NEAR JACKSON HOLE, WYOMING, WAS A BEAUTIFUL BACKDROP FOR STEVEN COY'S SOLO HUNT FOR A TROPHY.



sets of eyes often see more game than one or two sets, the camaraderie, the jokes and the kidding... The tactics and methodology of a big game hunt can be diverse.

But sometimes there's nothing quite like being on top of a mountain alone. And being on top of a mountain with a very clearly defined goal is even more exciting. To match wits with a magnificent bull elk, or to outsmart an aged mule deer buck that has survived more hunting seasons than most and has already beaten many a Nimrod at their hand is the ultimate challenge. The name of the game is focus.

One opponent in this age-old game is focused on sheer survival. For him, he either wins or he dies. There are never disappointments, and there is rarely a second chance. He gets good at the game by winning at an early age, then keeps on winning until he retires at the hands of natural elements, disease, a predator, or

sometimes old-age. Age inevitably catches up to even the best of every species.

For the other opponent in this game of focus it's also a case of survival - survival of the natu-

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ral elements which are foreign to his existence most days of the year. To survive and conquer - that's the challenge for this two-legged creature. It's something

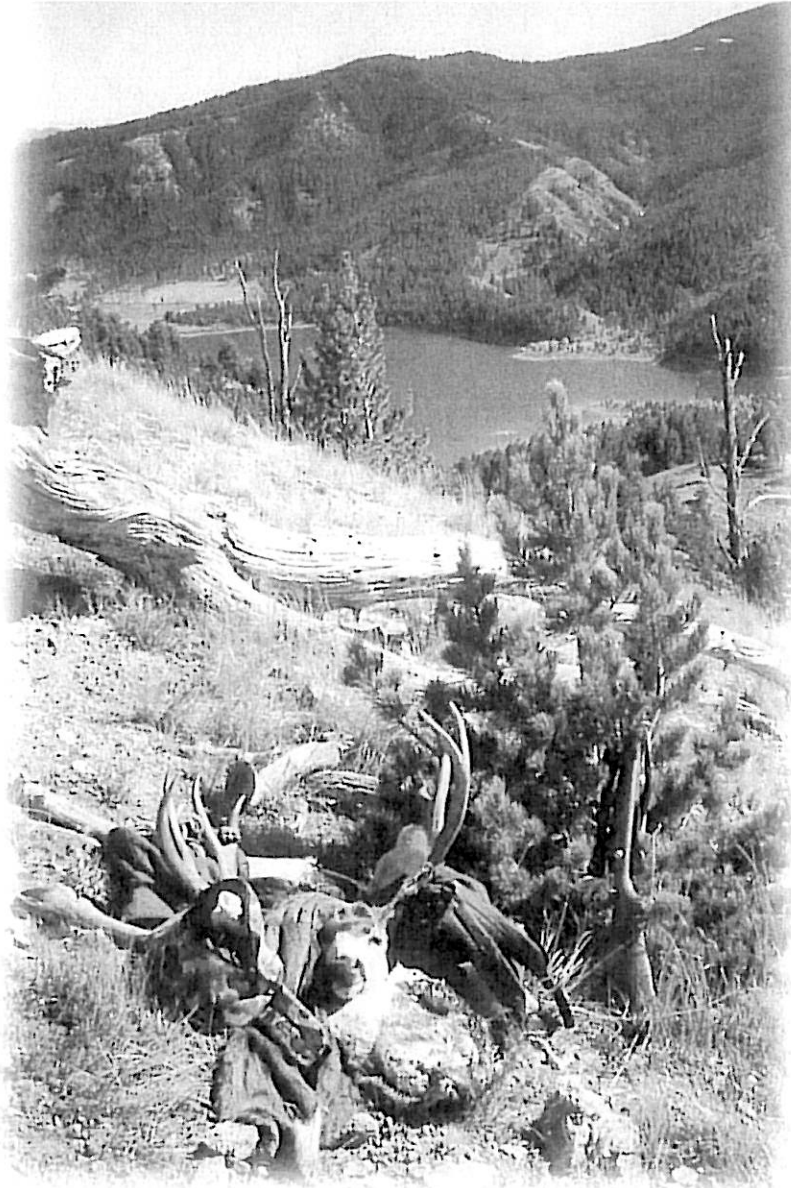
primeval, something in the blood, something that stirs deep within the soul at the approach of the autumn season.

This stirring is conceived by a subtle change in the smell of the August air, accompanied by an almost imperceptible decrease in the length of the days. Trees perceive this decrease and respond with outward changes in appearance.

Soon the process births full-blown in the inward parts of this wanna-be conquistador. It's something some wives call “the rut.” It's the time of year when a man reaches for a weapon and begins to make plans to escape the humdrum of everyday life, and focuses his contemporary human faculties on a conquest of an age-old and primitive nature.

There is something invigorating and exciting about entering a new hunt area for the first time. With each new appearance of virgin territory the realization that





TRANSPORTING THE DEER DOWN THE MOUNTAIN PROVED TO BE AN ARDUOUS TASK.

your trophy could suddenly materialize before your eyes has a tendency to keep the adrenaline flowing full force.

With each step, pause, and listen, things sound right, look good, and the epitome of wilderness hunting is taking place. It's the stuff that makes the experience rewarding regardless of whether a game tag is filled, and in spite of the laborious physical demands that sometimes make the body scream.

The smell of autumn with its damp, golden aspen leaves and crystal crisp air confirms it really is hunting season, and you really are where you want to be. This could be the day you've worked for, waited for, and dreamed of for many years - the day you bag and claim for your own a trophy bull

or muley buck that beats all others you've ever harvested; a trophy that will find its rightful place above the mantle where you've envisioned it for many seasons.

The area had every niche necessary for good mule deer and elk habitat. There were pockets of aspen trailing up out of draws, there were mountain meadows filled with abundant forbes and grasses as well as patches of sagebrush, and there was more than enough dark coniferous timber where bulls and bucks seem to easily disappear after the intrusive sounds of opening day.

Maybe, you speculate in dreamy anticipation, just maybe

no one has yet been here this season before you. Maybe you're the first, and the game will be relatively unspooked...

As I slowly approached a new panorama of scenery, my eyes would rapidly scan the immediate area where an animal would be quick to react to my presence. If the approach is right, if the wind is right, and your stealth has been successful, it can happen that way. You see the animal before it sees, smells, or hears you. More often than not game is first sighted in the distance with the help of optical equipment.

Using my binoculars, I quickly scanned the far reaches of my field of vision dissecting the edges of timber on the far slopes, then scanning the open drainages for animals still trying to grab

their last bits of forage before bedding down. Mature animals seem to retire very early into shaded areas for rest and concealment.

It was 7:30 in the morning. I had been still-hunting for well over an hour. It was the kind of country where you expected to spot game at any moment, yet with daybreak quickly slipping away the desire to see as much grazing habitat as possible kept me moving. It's a trade-off. Moving at this early hour allows you to see and glass more terrain, but the chance of being detected is increased dramatically with sporadic though stealthful movement.

I had just slowly, ever so slowly, topped a knoll dotted with scrub pine and ground juniper which sloped to the west. Below me was an open grassy hillside that dropped a hundred yards to an aspen grove, then curled around to the north and dropped another hundred yards into more aspen. To my left less than 150 yards away was dark timber that stretched from the ridge that I was on down into and south of the aspen pocket. I would allow my head and eyes to rise only enough to glass everything in view before slowly taking another half step forward.

Suddenly to my left and below me three sets of antlers seemed to rise out of tall grass adjacent to the dark timber. My first reaction was, "Three bucks!" I slowly lowered my body and retreated out of the line of sight. The thought flashed through my mind, "Maybe just some kind of dried weeds or thistle sticking up out of the grass.

I dropped to my belly and slid about twelve feet forward behind a double-trunked fir tree. Easing to my elbows I quickly focused my binoculars on the "weeds." Yes! Three mature bucks were bedded contentedly in shaded tall grass chewing their cud.

The distance was about 140 yards. It took me no time to make a decision. Though it would be a long haul out, bringing home a good buck would be well worth

the effort, and there was still plenty of day left to continue hunting for elk.

During that split second moment of thought the deer on the right began to rise. It was time to quickly assess the choices and make a shot. My cool collectedness quickly disappeared as the animal raised to its feet, only a bound away from heavy cover. When the buck looked my way, still seemingly unaware of its stalker, I realized it was more than just a buck. It was the buck I had prayed for...

My .308 Remington was at my shoulder. The 3X9 Leopold quickly found its target. I had a solid rest front and back, but the cross hairs settled slightly high. Rather than risk the time or movement of sliding a few inches forward, I cocked the butt of the rifle higher on my shoulder. The cross hairs settled behind the shoulder of the buck and I squeezed the trigger.

Ka-boom!

At the sound and recoil of the rifle, I feared I had squeezed too quickly in my haste to fire before the animals winded me and spooked. My fear was quickly alleviated when I saw the animal collapse and unsuccessfully try to regain its feet. His two companions rose and stood gazing at their fallen comrade. Not moving or fleeing, both were good bucks, one appearing to be taller with more points than the downed buck, but not nearly as wide.

I waited what seemed like several minutes, relishing the moment and watching the bucks which didn't seem to want to leave their comrade. Nor did I particularly want to run them off. They at last slowly sauntered away, disappearing into the darkness of the woods.

When I reached the deer I realized he was a very good, symmetrical 5x5 buck. I conservatively estimated him to score 175 B&C points, with heavy tines and probably five inch bases. After several pictures and self-portraits with my Olympus XA2

35mm camera, I field-dressed the buck and estimated live weight at perhaps 250 pounds.

Amazingly, I was absolutely calm and unexcited during the whole process. If I had known what the buck was going to score, my emotions would not have been quite so stable. As it was, my mind was still concentrated on the second half of my prayer request.

I hunted for the next two-and-a-half hours without seeing or hearing an elk. I saw one cow track on a trail through some aspen. It seemed the second half of my prayer request was not to come to pass. However, in retrospect, my utter lack of disappointment is not hard to understand considering the trophy I brought home.

I returned to my buck and spent the next hour caping and deboning. I was able to stuff the boneless venison into my backpack, which included portions from the front half and the backstraps from the rear half. The two hind legs were tied together at the hocks for strapping over my shoulder. With my belly bag (AKA fanny pack), my rifle, a backpack weighing who-knows-what, two huge deer hams, a heavy two-and-a-half foot rack with head and cap attached, and other miscellaneous gear, I had my hands full to say the least.

Though I could transport the entire load, I could not move very far, perhaps 30 yards at a time. I found the most efficient transport method to be hauling one half of the load 50 yards down the trail, then returning for the second half to haul one hundred yards down the trail. In this seesaw fashion, I more or less traveled non-stop down the mountain for the next four hours.

I arrived back at my vehicle at 4:30 in the afternoon with my trophy on my back and a smile in my heart. I felt amazingly intact,

though understandably exhausted, after five grueling days of mountain hunting and four grueling hours of packing out a trophy buck. It is amazing what the human body can do, even after 45 years of age.

The buck eventually dry-scored 195-3/8 gross with a final Boone and Crockett net score of 192 points. The width was 28-3/4 inches. It will easily make the next edition of Boone and Crockett's *Records of North American Big Game*. The trophy was also honored by the North American Hunting Club as the largest typical mule deer taken by rifle in 1992.

I've often wondered what makes us trophy hunters tick. The answer is not particularly obvious to us or to observers. I suppose it has to do with the challenge, the setting of the goal, and the pursuit of that goal. Perhaps it's the satisfaction of attainment or achievement.



But I believe what really motivates us is this: the stuff a Trophy Buck Tale is made of lasts a long, long time...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DR. COY IS A FORMER FEDERAL WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST WHO NOW RESIDES IN STAR VALLEY, WYOMING, WITH HIS WIFE AND TWO SONS.

THE AUTHOR WITH HIS TYPICAL MULE DEER THAT SCORED 192 POINTS. IT WAS TAKEN IN TETON COUNTY, WYOMING.