

THE MULE DEER OF

HELLS CANYON

There are often very special experiences which the hunter encounters while afield that become indelibly etched in his or her mind. For me it was the sight of seven huge mule deer bucks alternately getting up out of their beds in knee-deep grass on a steep mountain face in Hells Canyon during August 1972. It was my first trip to Idaho scouting for trophy mule deer with a student from our College of Veterinary Medicine. It was barely daylight as we eased around the grass-covered hillside several hundred yards below the ridge. As we approached a small bench in the hillside I noted movement about 50 yards in front of us.....one by one seven huge mule deer bucks raised their heads from the grass as they became aware of our presence. I froze in place while filming the deer with my super-8 movie camera. Through the camera's lens I did not even notice the two smaller bucks who were sparring with one another to the side of the bedded bucks. I was fixed on the big bucks. One by one the bucks rose out of their beds and bounded away across the side of the mountain. Since that day I have played that scene over and over in my mind and have often gone back to look at that clip of movie film.



BY GEORGE A. BETTAS
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EARLY SETTLERS LEFT A VARIETY OF RICH, HISTORICAL SIGHTS IN THE AREA. INCLUDING HOMESTEADS LIKE THE ONE IN THIS PHOTO OF ARNOLD TJOMSLAND PACKING OUT A DEER IN HELLS CANYON.

This was my introduction to Idaho's Hells Canyon and the great mule deer that inhabited the area. Over the course of the weekend we saw nearly 50 mule deer bucks, most of them mature bucks with 4 points on a side. I was awed by the mule deer and even more impressed with the terrain in which we found the deer. I immediately fell in love with the area and since that day I have annually trekked through hundreds of miles of side canyons, steep mountain faces, timber covered pockets, and vast rimrock lined grassy slopes from one end of Hells Canyon to the other in my search for trophy mule deer.

a closer look at one of our great mule deer areas.

Hells Canyon includes the Oregon and Idaho sides of the Snake River from the vicinity of Brownlee Dam and reservoir at the southern end of the canyon to Lewiston, Idaho, at the northern end of the canyon where the river is bordered by Washington to the west and Idaho to the east. The elevation of the river at the north end of Hells Canyon near Lewiston, Idaho, is 700 feet above sea level making it the lowest point in the state of Idaho. Near the upper reaches of the canyon at Brownlee dam the river elevation approaches 2,000 feet. Hat Point in

Oregon offers a view of the deepest gorge in North America from an elevation of 6,982 feet. It is slightly more than a mile down to the floor of the canyon. The elevation difference between the canyon bottom and the highest peaks in the Seven Devils Mountains on the Idaho side of the river is nearly 8,000 feet. While hunting the area one fall I met a cowboy riding his horse out on one of the steep, open faces of the mountain gathering cattle. He aptly described the hillside as being "steep as a cow's face." If you have ever been there you know what he meant. One slip of a foot could have sent him and his horse tum-



As I reflect upon the many great hunts of the past in this area and look to the future I have come to realize that I am one of those guys that Craig Boddington talks about who are in their 50's and who had the opportunity to participate in the "Golden Age" of mule deer hunting. Those days are gone and I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to have been a part of them. Now we face a new era for mule deer and mule deer hunting. Lets take

RIGHT: THIS BUCK WAS TAKEN IN HELLS CANYON IN THE LATE 1970'S AND SCORES 211-5/8 POINTS. IT IS ONE OF THE FINEST TROPHY BUCKS TAKEN IN THIS AREA AND ILLUSTRATES THE POTENTIAL FOR TROPHY BUCKS IN HELLS CANYON.

FAR RIGHT: SNOW IS ALWAYS A POSSIBILITY DURING THE DEER SEASON AT THE HIGHER ELEVATIONS AS DUANE SIDLER (LEFT) AND DR. RICHARD GOODING FOUND ON THEIR 1995 HUNT.



bling several hundred feet down the mountain.

The northernmost reaches of Hells Canyon include a checkerboard of public, state and federal lands making access for hunting restricted in some areas by private lands but more than anything access is restricted by the lack of roads into the area and the extremely steep, rugged mountains on both sides of the river and especially on the Idaho side.

In the heart of Hells Canyon the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area includes 652,000 acres of public land which straddles Hells Canyon of the Snake River, and includes the peaks of Idaho's Seven Devils Mountains to the east, to Oregon's vast grass-covered rimrock and mountain slopes to the west. The Hells Canyon NRA includes a

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Canyon. This area was recently purchased from wildlife mitigation funds related to the Bonneville Power Administration's dams in Idaho. This area is managed by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Near the southern end of Hells Canyon the Cecil D. Andrus Wildlife Recreation Area is a large public access area recently purchased by the Nature Conservancy and donated to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The remainder of the lands which comprise the Hells Canyon area on the Idaho side of the river are privately owned and comprise a series of large cattle ranches.

The Washington side of the Snake River at the northernmost end of the canyon includes The Joseph Creek Wildlife Area, a large piece of state-owned land administered by the Washington Department of Fish and Wild-

life. Although primarily known for its record book bighorn sheep, this area is also good mule deer habitat.

A side benefit to hunting trophy mule deer in this area is the opportunity to visit many out of the way interesting historic and prehistoric sites. Evidence of man's presence in Hells Canyon dates back 8,000 years. The Nez Perce Indians made their home in the Hells Canyon area until the U.S. Army forced them to leave in 1877. There are many historical sites related to the Nez Perce and the Nez Perce War. Early settlers also left a variety of rich historical sites in the area including homesteads, cow camps, sheep driveways, gold mines, copper mines, and the like. Histo-

ries of inhabitants of the canyon include accounts of fatal battles over gold, hardships of determined homesteaders and incredible journeys of giant steamboats piloting the untamed waterway. An especially fun aspect of hunting this area includes reading the numerous historical accounts of the area and then actually visiting these sites while hunting or scouting for mule deer.

Most of the Hells Canyon is generally undeveloped and remote. There are very few roads into the area and even fewer actually reach the Snake River. The rugged country in the heart of Hells Canyon precludes all but the most serious deer hunters. Most of the roads are not open due to the snow pack until July of most years. These same roads can be closed by snow as early as October at the higher elevations. Although this area includes more than 900 miles of trails, much of it is virtually inaccessible other than on foot. The wilderness is closed to mechanized vehicles although the river corridor above Hells Canyon Dam is not wilderness. During the fall hunting season a number of deer hunters access the area via jet boat and backpack into the more remote canyons leading into Oregon or Idaho.

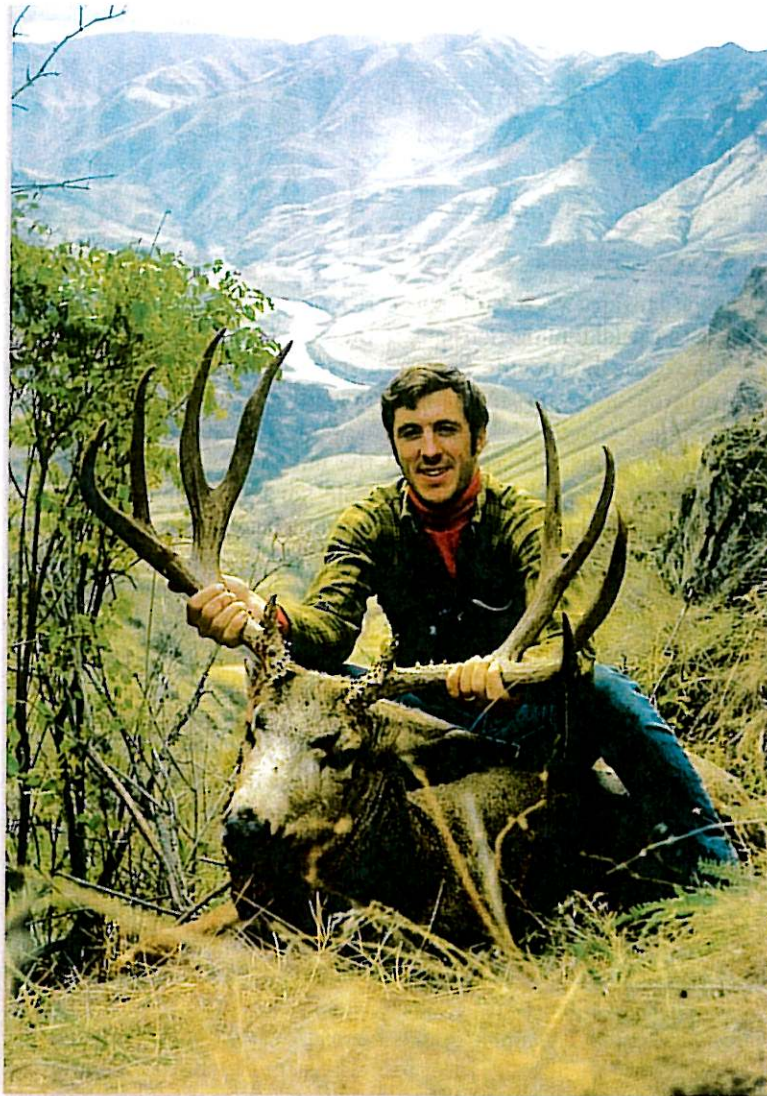
If you are planning on hunting Hells Canyon for trophy mule deer your best bet, in my opinion, is to hire an outfitter to take you up the river in a jet boat and drop you off with a base camp. Whether you hunt the Oregon or Idaho side of the river you will need to be familiar with the techniques of backpack hunting and have a lot of energy, persistence, hope and resolve to find a giant buck. Water is scarce in the area and the hills are as steep as any you will ever climb. If you are not up to a backpack hunt a small portion of the area can be accessed via 4-wheel drive vehicles and ATC's but areas near



total of 214,000 acres of wilderness. The Oregon portion of the Hells Canyon Wilderness is 127,000 acres including 3,000 acres of Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness. The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the Umatilla National Forest make up much of the remainder of the public land on the Oregon side.

The Idaho side includes about half of the 652,000 acres of the HCNRA including 84,800 acres of wilderness as well as the federal lands included in the Nez Perce and Payette National Forests. Also included on the Idaho side are two relatively large pieces of property owned by the state of Idaho. The Peter T. Johnson Wildlife Mitigation area is at the northern end of Hells

THE AUTHOR WITH HIS BEST HELLS CANYON MULE DEER. THIS BUCK WAS TAKEN IN 1976 AND SCORES 198+ GROSS AND 186+ NET.



the roads are heavily hunted and have very few mature bucks. Even though much of the area can be generally accessed with horses and mules much of the best trophy buck areas are out of reach of livestock due to the extreme rough, nasty terrain and the limited trail access to these areas. Water and livestock feed are also limiting factors when you have a string of horses to care for. If you take horses and/or mules into the

I used llamas on one of our trips into the area and I found them to be just the ticket for some of the most remote areas, although my horses would not agree to that! The area does have a few outfitters but most of them concentrate on elk and consequently do not spend much time with deer hunters.

If you plan to go it on your own, reservations and trip permits are required on the Snake River in

the most remote sections of Hells Canyon between Hells Canyon Dam and Rush Creek during the regulated season...Friday before Memorial Day through 15 September. A lottery system is used

for both jet boaters and rafters who wish to use this portion of the river. The deadline for this lottery is the end of January. Although this regulated period does not include the mule deer season in either Idaho or Oregon, summer is an ex-

cellent time for scouting and exploring the area.

Does this area sound interesting? If the country sounds challenging so is the deer hunting. A quick check in the Boone & Crockett record books will tell you that some of the largest typical mule deer taken in Idaho, Oregon and Washington to date came from this area. Although this area is currently thought of as being at the northern most fringe of Idaho's mule deer habitat it has produced some fabulous hunting in the past and continues to produce very nice bucks. Over the past 30 years many fine bucks scoring between 170 and the low 200's have been taken in this area. As recently as the past three years record book bucks have been taken on the Idaho side of the river but bucks of this quality are becoming harder and harder to find here as they are elsewhere in North America. Why is this so? Nobody really has the answer. As Craig Boddington notes in his article (page 40) we simply do not know what is really causing the mule deer decline nationwide.

A historical look at mule deer populations and hunting regulations in the Hells Canyon area is quite interesting.

Mike Schlegel and Sam McNeil are two veteran Idaho wildlife biologists who have spent a lifetime studying the dynamics of the mule deer populations in this area. Both of them have spent countless hours doing annual deer population counts. In talking with them one thing is clear. We do not have anywhere near the total numbers of deer that we once had in the Hells Canyon area and we are not likely to have these numbers again in the future in spite of what we do with hunting seasons. Vic Coggins who is the Oregon wildlife biologist responsible for Oregon's side of Hells Canyon echoes the views of Idaho's biologists.

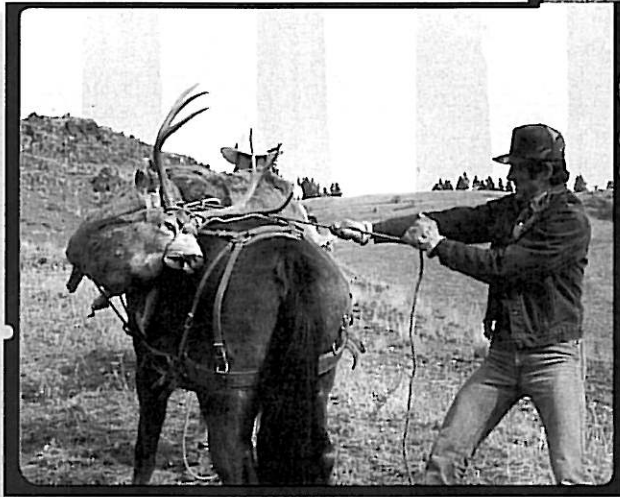
The Idaho mule deer season structure over the past 35 years has reflected the high deer populations of the 60's and the declining populations since then. During the 1960's the Idaho mule deer season

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area you will want to consider also taking a backpack outfit so you can spike out of a base camp. You may also want to bring along a pal who likes to care for the livestock while you are out on some dry ridge with your spike camp. Dwight Schuh and

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RIGHT: THE RUGGED TERRAIN OF HELLS CANYON HAS MANY PLACES WHERE HORSES ARE NOT PRACTICAL. ON THIS TRIP DWIGHT SCHUH USED HIS LLAMAS ON A SUMMER SCOUTING TRIP.



ABOVE: IN MUCH OF THE BACK COUNTRY HORSES ARE A DEFINITE PLUS FOR GETTING DEER BACK TO CAMP.

ran 31 days in some of the Hells Canyon units with 44 day either sex seasons in some units. Often these seasons ran late into November through the peak of the mule deer rut. Between 1967 and 1971 some units had a 51 day either sex season. The mule deer season was a 16 day hunt beginning in mid-November in some of the northernmost Hells Canyon units because of landowner-sportsman conflicts. In other units between 1963 and 1967 two mule deer could be harvested by using a regular tag and an extra tag.

The 1970's were when the first signs of population declines were reflected in the season structure. The mule deer season was shortened to 26 days with 12 days of either sex hunting in the middle of the season in some Hells Canyon units. In other units the season was shortened to 7 days while in other units the mule deer season was closed between 1974-79. By 1976 most units of the northernmost

units were limited to antlered deer only and were limited to one week in length. The southern units which had somewhat higher mule deer populations eventually went to buck only seasons in 1981. Throughout most of the 1980's buck only seasons were predominant with limited antlerless seasons being offered from time to time in various units. The 1990's have not been much different in season structure as most of the seasons are limited to antlered deer only and are about 14 days or less in length. Some units continue to have special "late" permits for bucks giving a few hunters a chance to hunt mule deer bucks during the rut.

Oregon's mule deer seasons in Hells Canyon mirrored Idaho's during the 1960's with two buck limits throughout much of this time. In the Hells Canyon units buck harvests averaged 1400 bucks annually. Oregon's mule deer populations in Hells Canyon began to decline in the 1970's paralleling Idaho's decline. Today there are 1/10th of the total mule deer that were on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon in the 1960's.

During this period of time total numbers of mule deer have declined dramatically in all of the Hells Canyon units in Idaho as they have in Oregon. The high mule deer

populations of the 1960's and early 1970's included good recruitment of fawns into the herds as well as good numbers of mature bucks. As overall population numbers declined buck ratios were maintained through the manipulation of hunting seasons and buck/doe regulations.

The 1990's have been a somewhat different story in most of these Idaho units as the mule deer harvest has declined substantially over the past 5 to 10 years with the exception of the limited entry "drawing" areas. The estimated mule deer harvest in the northern units of Hell's Canyon has decreased by more than 80% during the past several years. The winter aerial count of fawn/doe/buck ratios in these units has declined to 46/100/9 from a previous five year average of 62/100/18.

The one thing that both Oregon and Idaho wildlife biologists agreed upon is the fact that low fawn survival in a mule deer herd with a very low overall population makes it exceedingly difficult for that population to grow. The drought conditions that have prevailed in the Hells Canyon area over the past 7 years have had a significant impact upon mule deer survival, especially fawn survival. On years of normal weather patterns with September and October rains the hillsides in the canyon "green up" and provide high quality forage in good quantities. As a result, mule deer pregnancy rates go up resulting in a good fawn drop in the spring. On years when we have a dry summer and fall there is less forage and the quality is poor. This results in the mule deer going into the winter in much poorer overall body condition resulting in higher winter mortality. Necropsy studies which have been done in Idaho showed that during years of drought the body condition index of mule deer in early January was similar to that of mule deer in March and April of more normal years. When we get arctic cold fronts in the area

the winter mortality on mule deer is even more dramatic.

Predation is another factor in fawn survival. The banning of 10-80 and the overall reduction in predator control by the federal government beginning in the 1970's has paralleled the decline of mule deer in Hells Canyon. When mule deer populations are high, herds of mule deer can sustain predator losses and predation is generally not a factor in population declines. However, when the base population drops, mortality from predation becomes much more significant. Annual counts of mule deer conducted on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon during the spring over a 15 year period from 1981 to 1996 show a consistent average of about 20 fawns per adult mule deer. With such low recruitment it is nearly impossible for any substantial increases to occur in these herds. If one compares these counts with nearby Oregon game management units which have much more intense predator control due to the presence of livestock and ranches the influence of predation becomes apparent. The spring counts in these units have been as high as 61 fawns per 100 adult mule deer.

So what does the future hold for Hells Canyon mule deer?

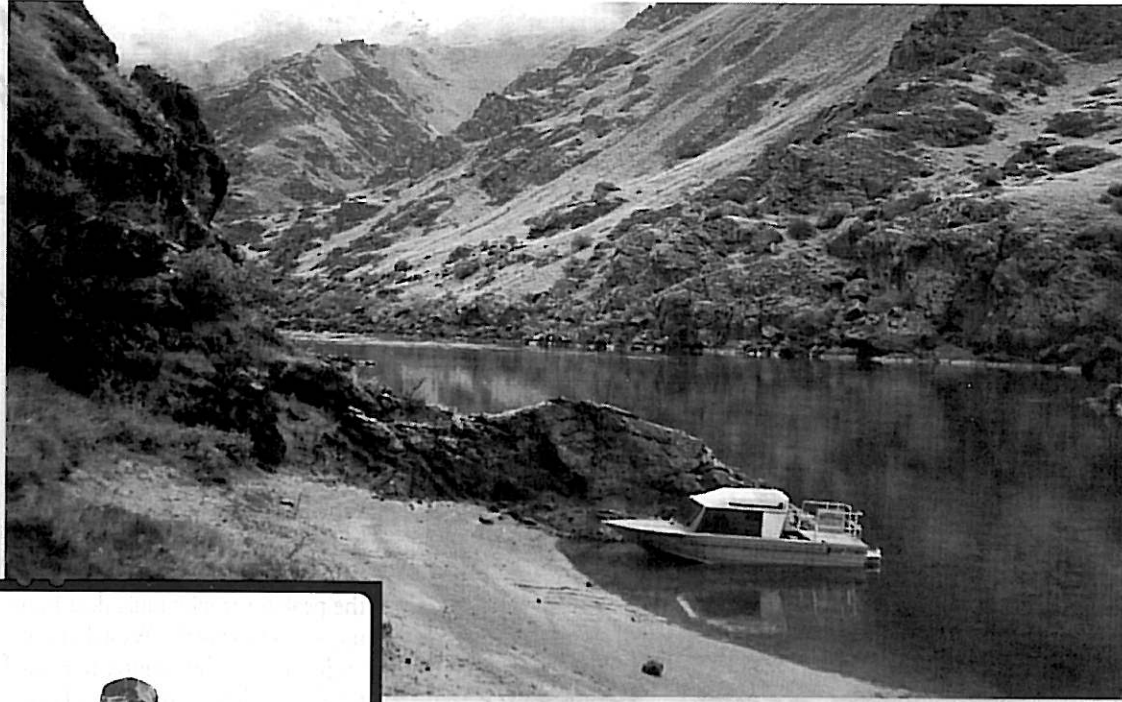
The Oregon and Idaho biologists who have spent nearly 30 years studying the mule deer of Hells Canyon all agree that in a mule deer herd with low fawn recruitment like we have in most of the Hells Canyon units on both sides of the Snake River restricted hunting regulations will not bring back the mule deer numbers we once had in these areas. At best, restriction of hunting to limited entry buck seasons will at best maintain the buck ratios in the deer herd. With these regulations we can still provide buck hunting opportunities for some mule deer hunters.

Oregon has more than 150,000 acres of mule deer habitat on its side of the Snake River in Hells

Canyon. With its Hells Canyon mule deer numbers at an all-time low Oregon took the bold move several years ago to a limited entry mule deer season structure which annually provides 250 buck permits in its Hells Canyon units in order to provide some mule deer hunting while maintaining buck ratios.

Idaho is currently at a crossroads in what to do with its Hells

in a tradition-bound political environment. In the more remote areas where the decline in total mule deer numbers has been even more dramatic more limited entry tag drawings are an easier change to implement. The question is whether the Idaho Department of Fish and Game will have the courage to move in this direction and whether the hunters, guides and



landowners of Idaho will tolerate these changes. The choice is obvious and well documented in states such as Arizona, Nevada, and Oregon. The reins need to be tightened and limited entry tag drawings for mule deer need to be implemented in more of Idaho's Hells Canyon units.

Thoughtful management of our mule deer in this stunningly beautiful area can result in a "New Age" of mule deer hunting for Hells Canyon. This new age of mule deer hunting will require that we impose more and more limitations on ourselves as hunters in order that we can conserve this great deer and provide hunting opportunities, however limited they may be, for ourselves and our children. If we make these choices now the future will provide the opportunity for at least some of us to encounter a monster mulie somewhere among the rimrocks in Hells Canyon.

DURING THE FALL HUNTING SEASON A NUMBER OF DEER HUNTERS ACCESS THE AREA VIA JET BOAT AND BACKPACK INTO THE MORE REMOTE CANYONS LEADING INTO OREGON OR IDAHO.

INSET: THE AUTHOR WITH A HELLS CANYON BUCK TAKEN IN 1993 WHICH SCORES IN THE MID-180'S.