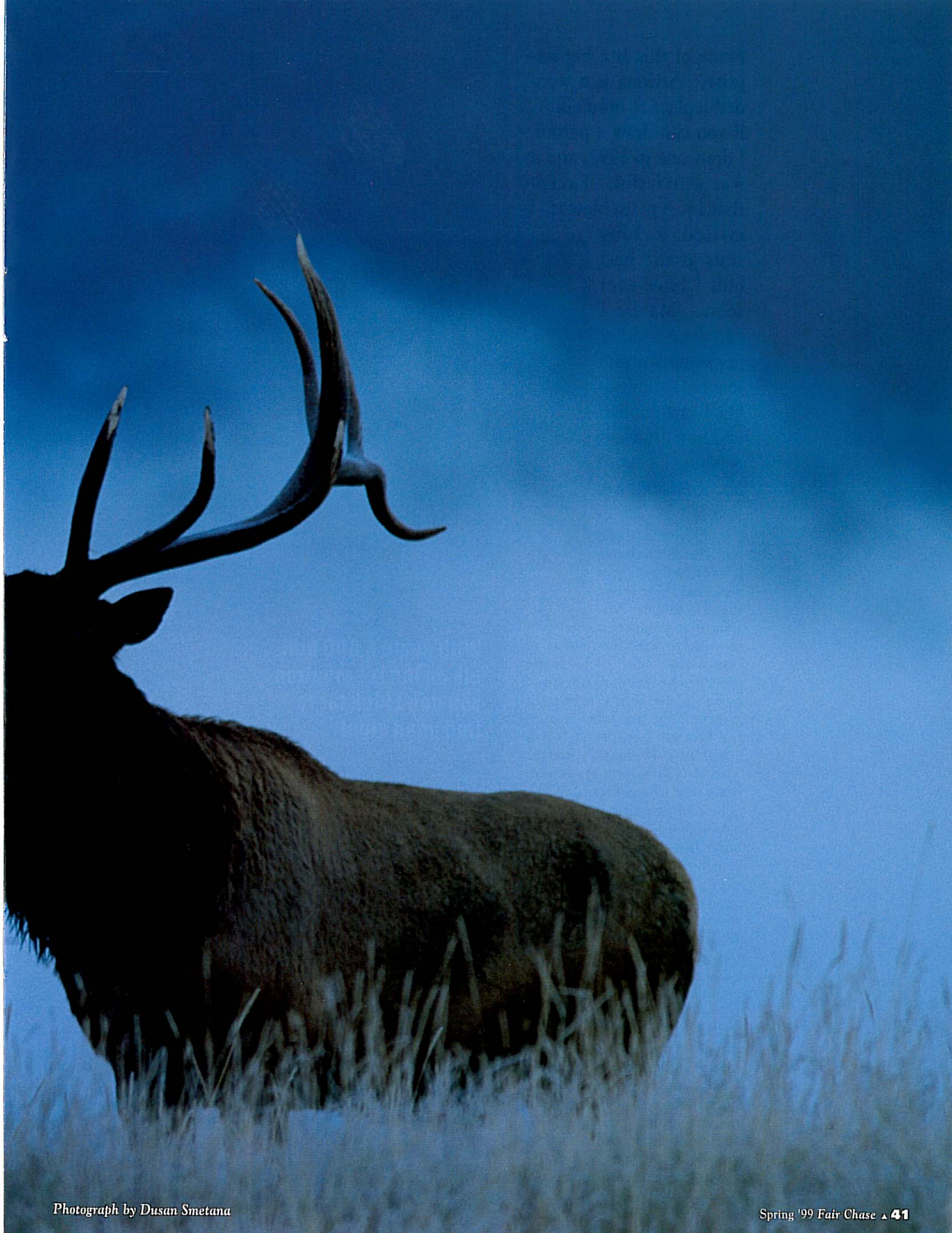


Apache Ghost Bulls

**The White Mountain Reservation
is America's most famous elk range.
It deserves its reputation!**

Records of North American Big Game is one the best reference tools for serious hunters. Darned few among us will ever achieve multiple listings in that prestigious and elusive book, but it's the first place you look to learn where the big ones are coming from. If you are interested in wapiti, the American elk, then you've already noticed that Arizona, with a healthy but modest-sized herd, seems to produce more than its share of huge elk. That they have a healthy herd with good genetics and antler-producing feed and minerals should be obvious. Not so obvious, but no big secret, is that Arizona suffers virtually no winterkill; her bulls have a chance to live longer, and grow bigger, than northern bulls. Less obvious, but still no secret, is that the Arizona Game and Fish Department is more conservative than most states in the number of elk permits they issue. Again, more bulls get a chance to live long enough to reach their full potential.

**By Col. Craig Boddington USMGR
Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club**



Photograph by Dusan Smetana

None of this is a big surprise. Arizona is a wonderful place to hunt elk . . . if you can draw a permit. I drew one in 1997, and it was wonderful. Except that I just plain blew it. I missed a long shot at the best bull I have ever seen. Maybe I can draw another tag someday, and maybe I can't—but I saw enough to know that everything I'd heard about Arizona elk is true.

Of course, if you take the research just bit farther, you will note that there is one specific spot in Arizona that produces a seemingly incredible number of record-class bulls. This is the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, home to the White Mountain Apache Tribe, and home, too, to the best elk hunting in North America. It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not; it's a matter of record. The White Mountain has produced more record-class elk than any other like-sized piece of real estate in North America. Accepting that truth probably isn't great news to many of you, nor was it to me. The big bulls of the White Mountain are real, but they have seemed even more inaccessible than Arizona's elusive public-land permits. The place is equally legendary for being frightfully expensive . . . and, even if it is affordable, the waiting list is rumored to be endless. I didn't figure I could afford to hunt there even if I get a booking, so I've always considered the White Mountain with a healthy dose of "sour grapes." Heck, if I could afford it, and if I could



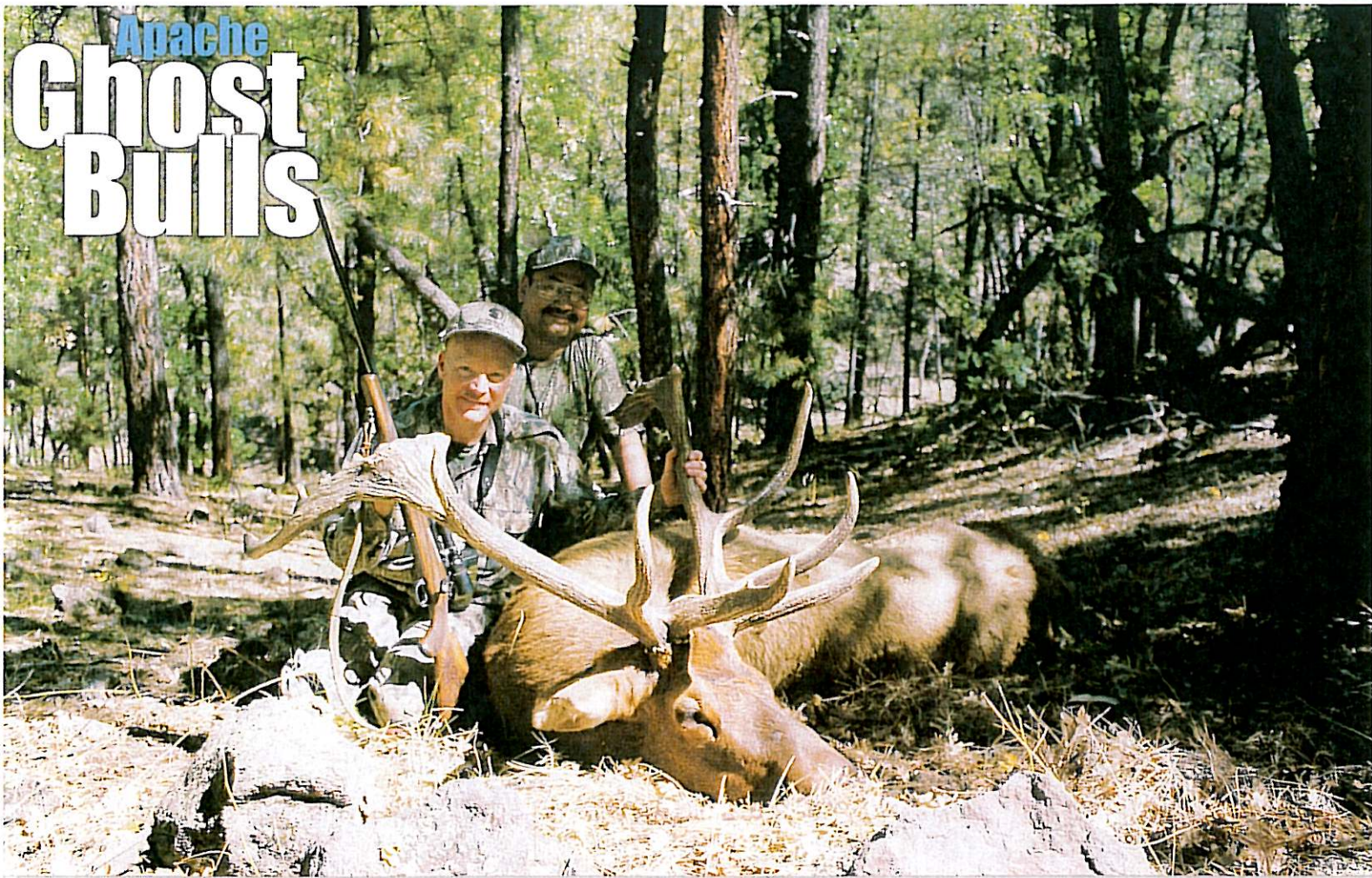
With some 6,000 bull elk on the reservation, you don't look far to find good sign!

Photograph by Brad Garfield

Apache Ghost Bulls



Apache Ghost Bulls



We called this bull "Warchief" for obvious reasons. I liked him the first time I saw him, but we shot him the third time we encountered him. They call him a management bull; I call him a wonderful old elk! Author left with guide Roland Ethelban.

book a hunt, it would probably be just a matter of driving around and shooting a big bull, and what fun would that be? My thinking was wrong, and in all ways. The White Mountain is expensive. It's also worth it. At \$12,000 for an all-inclusive trophy hunt, the White Mountain is about twice as much as many "good" private-land elk hunts, and three times as much as many "good" public-land elk hunts. I've hunted elk for 25 years, and in some very good places. The White Mountain is at least twice as good as anything I've ever seen. Even so, that's a lot of money. In 1998, recognizing that the bull herd is too large, for the first time the White Mountain Tribe started offering all-inclusive "management bull" hunts for \$6,000. I'll say

more about that later. For now, I'll just say it's a bargain in the world of outfitted elk hunts.

It is true there is a waiting list for the trophy hunts. There are only so many trophy bull permits, and many of the White Mountain hunters return year after year. Still and all, openings do occur—and they won't call you if your name isn't on the list. On the other hand, at least at this writing there is no waiting list at all for the new management hunts.

It is not true that elk hunting on the White Mountain is simply a matter of driving around and shooting a huge bull. It might happen, but don't bet on it. There is a large population of elk, but the White Mountain's primary elk habitat is timbered ridges with relatively few *cieneegas*, or open alpine meadows. You will find elk, but you must go looking for them. As elk hunting goes it is not especially arduous; the terrain is more rolling than straight up-and-down, and the elevation isn't extreme.

But the hunting is not especially easy . . . and the corollary to that is that those who hunt longest and hardest get the best bulls.

The basics of the White Mountain elk hunt are simple. A herd of about 17,000 elk range over something like 1.6 million acres. The bull:cow ratio is about 60 bulls per 100 cows, meaning that the bull herd exceeds 6,000. Ever since the White Mountain tribe instituted their trophy hunt for non-tribal members some 20 years ago the harvest has been extremely conservative—even by Arizona standards. These days the annual trophy bull harvest is around 100, 80 for non-tribal members and 20 (by drawing) for tribal members. The bulls get a chance to grow up . . . and some undoubtedly die of old age without ever knowing hunting pressure.

There's also something that I missed in my thinking about the White Mountain. Since it's an autonomous Indian Reservation, they can set their own seasons. They set them during the bugling

season. There is no separate archery, blackpowder, or rifle season. The Tribe's theory is that there is plenty of room and plenty of elk, and their goal is to offer the best hunt possible. They have three camps: Maverick, Paradise, and West End. Starting in mid-September, they have three seven-day trophy hunts back-to-back, followed by a management bull hunt. Cow hunts follow later in the fall.

It's probably time to talk about the distinction between trophy bulls and management bulls. Although the White Mountain Tribe leads the world in producing Boone and Crockett-class bulls, elk that score over 375 points don't lurk behind every tree. They exist, and due to the opportunity to hunt the bugling season with a rifle, they are probably more accessible than anyplace else . . . but it's more wrong thinking to believe that you or I or anyone else can show up at the White Mountain and be assured of a record-class bull. There were two taken the week I spent in Maverick Camp, and several others during the course of the '98 season. But not every hunter will see one, and not every camp in every hunt will produce one.

As always, a "trophy" is in the eye of the beholder. It is relatively easy for the wildlife division to define a "management bull," but a trophy bull is much more difficult. Most of the hunters I shared Maverick Camp with have hunted the White Mountain for many years. They know what is there, they've taken big bulls in the past, and most were perfectly willing to hold out for a monster . . . knowing all the while that they may not see him. Others "settled" for very good bulls in the last couple of days. Some kicked themselves for passing very good bulls early in the hunt, only to wind up empty-handed. There were 12 hunters in camp, and I suppose collectively we saw four or five bulls that should top the magical 375-inch mark. Which means most of us didn't see such a bull . . . but all of us saw bulls that could not be passed anywhere else in the West.

A "management bull" is easier to define. The bottom line there is that the guide's word is law, but what they're talking about is any five-by-five regardless of score. Or a six-by-six (or better) that the guide judges to be 5-years old (or older) and does not exceed a rough gross score of 330 inches. Folks, that ain't a bad bull . . . and would not be called a "management bull" anyplace else!

I got to the White Mountain by a roundabout sort of way. My good friend Terry Hickson has hunted there for several years . . . and told stories about the place until I was sick of hearing them. That is, until he invited me to join him. Then I wanted to hear more. Terry's hunt was the second hunt in Maverick Camp, and the camp was full. I could not have a trophy permit for love nor money, but I could have a management tag, and I could accompany Terry while he tried to fill his trophy tag. In retrospect, I'm glad it worked out that way. I had the rare opportunity to really see the elk and the hunting, without the pressure of a trophy tag burning a hole in my pocket.

Actually, Terry and I were a fine match. Despite a trophy tag weighing heavily in his pocket, he had absolutely no pressure on his shoulders, either. The year before, in 1997, he took a monstrous bull that earned him Boone and Crockett's "best typical elk" trophy during the '95-'97 Big Game Awards period. He knew he wouldn't beat it . . . but he didn't mind trying.

We met up at the White Mountain Tribe's Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Division office in Whiteriver, Arizona, on a warm September morning, stashed my truck, and drove up out to Maverick Camp. Sited among endless tall-timber ridges, at about 7,500 feet Maverick is (I believe) the highest of the three elk camps. It is exceptional and exceptionally beautiful. A cluster of very nice cabins sit in the shade of big pines—fireplaces, running water, indoor plumbing, wow! There is a common kitchen and dining facility, and the food matched the cab-

ins in quality. Gary Darling, proprietor of a restaurant in Winslow (Senor D's) brought himself and his staff in to cater the camp . . . and cater they did. It's the only elk hunt in my life that I've gained weight on, and it wasn't for lack of hard hunting!

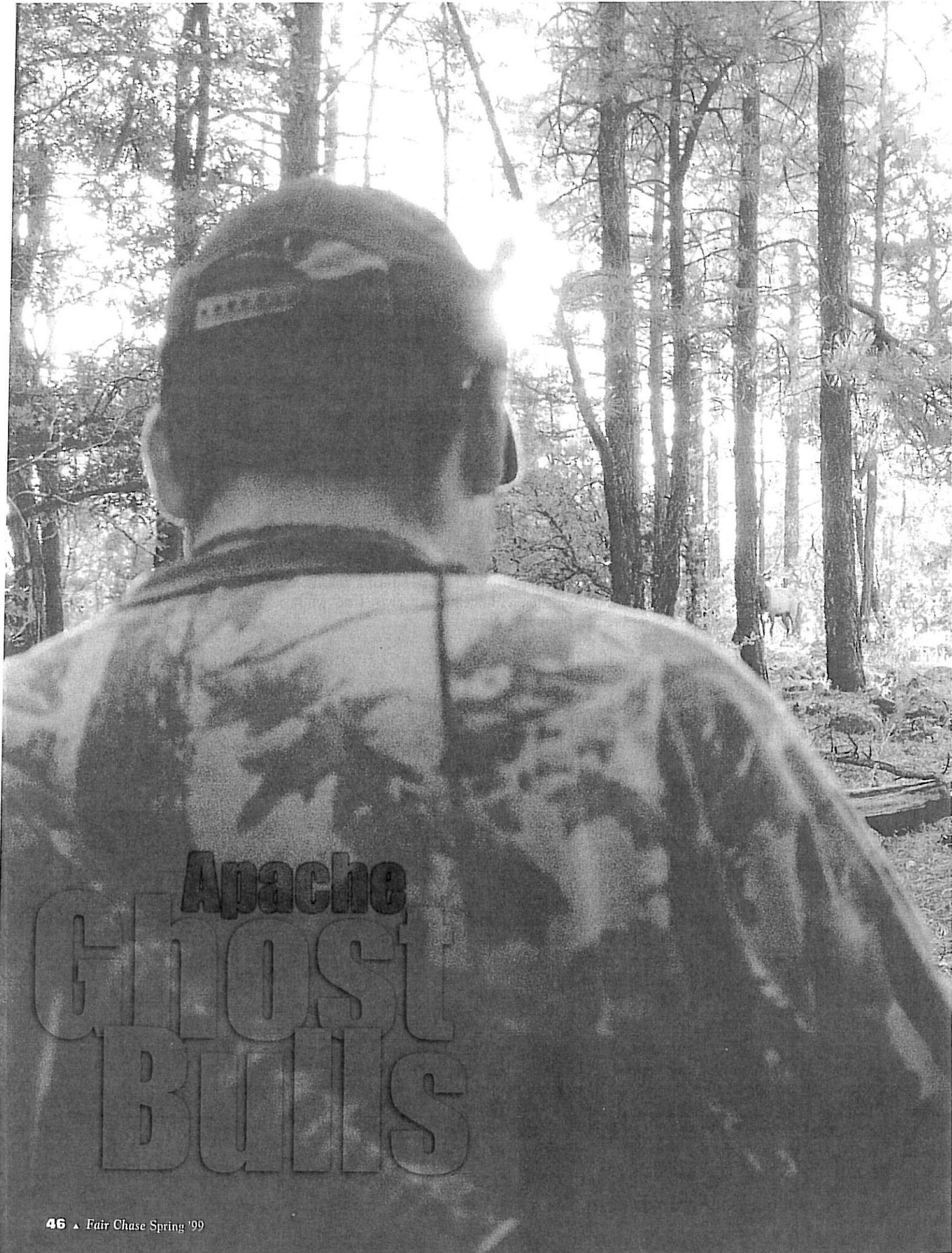
Camp Manager Jeff Cheney was on hand to greet us, and as the afternoon wore on the rest of the hunters and guides drifted in. Terry's guide (and by default my guide as well) was Roland Ethelbah, himself an elk hunting legend. Terry's huge bull of the previous year is just one of many huge elk Roland has guided hunters to. I'd heard stories about him for years, and was anxious to meet him. He didn't disappoint me. During the next seven days I learned more about elk hunting than I had learned in the previous 25 years!

Partly this was because, during the next seven days, I saw more

Roland Ethelbah, left, and Terry Hickson. The timber is too thick for much game to be spotted from any road, but stops can be saved by cruising timber roads and bugling occasionally.



good bulls than I had seen in the previous 25 years! It is impossible to give you a blow-by-blow description. We had some slow mornings and slow evenings, but I know we saw more than 20 bulls each and every day. Mind you, this was in country where there was very little opportunity for glassing. We saw a few elk crossing a road here and there, and a few more on the far side of one cienea or an



Apache
**GHOST
BULLS**

other—but the vast majority were worked within sight by bugling and cow calling. Allowing for some repeat sightings, I suppose I saw 100 different bulls in seven days. Of them, I never saw a spike bull. Obviously they exist, but probably lower down with the big cow herds—definitely not on the high ridges. I saw one—only one—“raghorn” three-by-three. There was small scattering of five-by-fives. The vast majority of those 100-plus bulls were six-by-sixes of varying size and age . . . and a few genuine 7x6's and 7x7's thrown in.

The wonderful thing was they behaved like elk. Well, no, I've never been around elk that behaved this way. They behaved like unhunted elk. No, they wouldn't always come to the bugle. Sometimes they would take their cows and move away, as bulls will do. But the herd dynamics are such that competition for cows is fierce. More often than not they would come to a bugle or a seductive cow note—swaggering, wild-eyed, bugling every few steps. On several occasions bulls came close enough to scare me, and Roland had to stop them with a gentle wave of his hand. It was the most intensive elk hunting experience I have ever had . . . and I doubt any other elk hunt will seem quite the same.

We did not see Boone and Crockett elk behind every bush. In fact, Terry did not take an elk . . . but remember the kind of elk he already has. Every single day I saw elk larger than any I have personally taken. And I did take a great bull—and had a great hunt taking him.

On about the second or third morning we followed a guttural bugle down into a little valley and set up to bring him in. He sounded wonderful, deep and harsh, but he wasn't Terry's bull. He had great brows, sec-

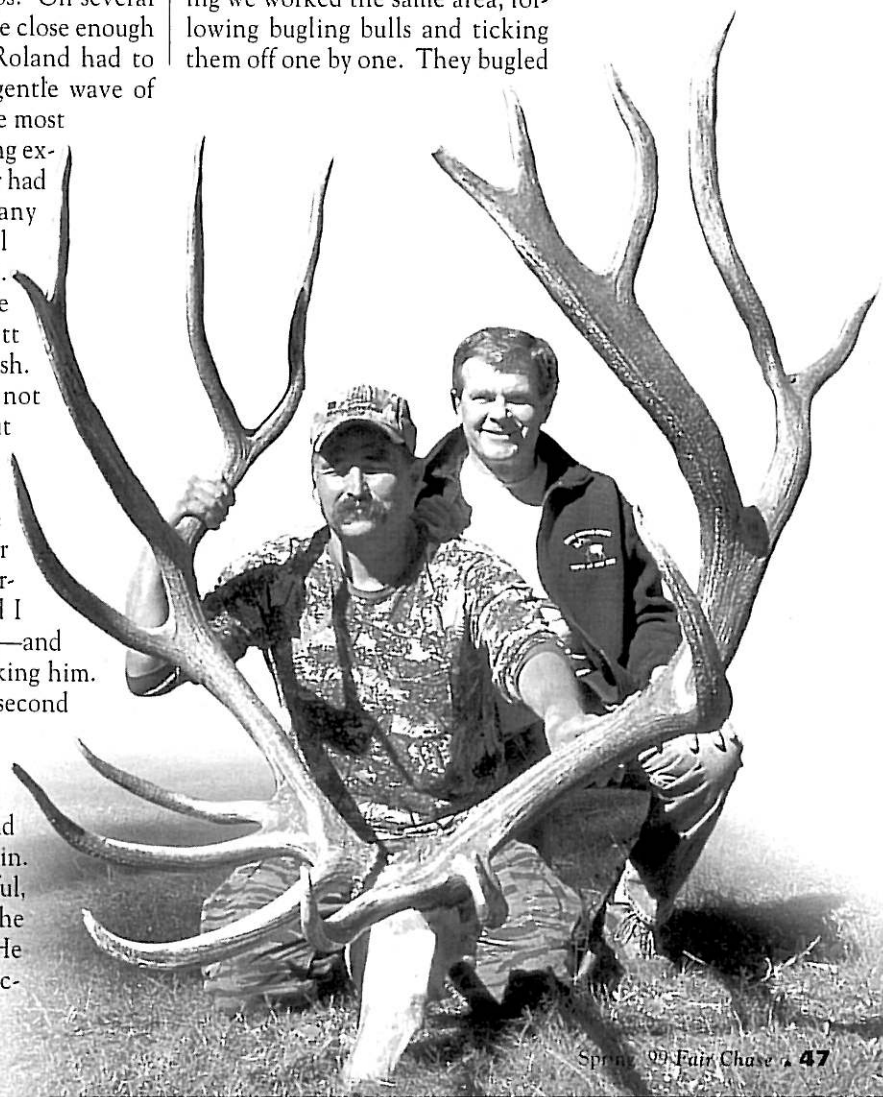
onds, and third points—and then his rack jugged back in jagged, palmated “Indian warclubs.” I would have shot him instantly, but there were other bulls bugling around us, so we held off. That is one of the great dangers at the White Mountain; there are so many bulls bugling that you keep thinking “the next one” instead of worrying about the one in front of you!

A day or so later Roland took us to a known crossing in the late afternoon. Almost on cue elk started bugling everywhere. We were working our way toward the sound when “Warclub” (as Terry named him) appeared on the ridge above us. No. Too many elk around, and one of them might be Terry's next monster.

The next morning we worked the same area, following bugling bulls and ticking them off one by one. They bugled

Guido Ralph Thomas and hunter Alan Hamberlin with Hamberlin's wonderful non-typical bull, taken on the last night of the hunt. This was a real ghost bull. Hunter and guide weighed their odds, and passed up innumerable bulls in search of this fabulous trophy.

A bull approaches just over Roland's right shoulder. The White Mountain elk receive almost no hunting pressure by modern standards and respond extremely well to both bugling and cow talk.



late that day, and midmorning saw us pinned down with bulls all around us, two bugling not 80 yards away. We lay down on a bed of pine needles and waited them out. I was wondering if we had seen them all, but Roland knew. We had seen all but one. A bull bugled a couple hundred yards up in the trees. "I wonder if that's Warclub," he mused. I think he knew the answer.

After an hour or so the close bulls drifted away and we worked on up the ridge. We came in above Warclub and found him lying in his bed at about 60 yards. He stood, and I whacked him on the shoulder with the 8mm Remington. I was sure the 220-grain Swift had done its job, but the old

bull ran as elk will, so I hit him again just as he went out of sight over a little bank. That's always a bad moment when you lose sight of a hit elk. It can mean a very long day, but not this time. He lay just over the bank, and he really was a neat old bull . . . "management" or not, a real trophy in my book!

Of course, the main goal was to find Terry a "White Mountain trophy bull." We tried, and came so close. Roland had taken a 380-class bull the week before, and thought he knew the general whereabouts of two or three other very big bulls. He calls them "ghost bulls," because even in country he knows like the back of his hand you see such bulls just once and maybe never again. It was the second evening that we saw our ghost bull.

We had bugled up a half-dozen young bulls and one very nice 6x6, and the light was going fast. A bull bugled far up the ridge we were working, and we moved on him quickly, hoping to see just one more set of antlers. Near the top the ground rolled in little folds; we were on one fold, and the bull was bugling just on the far side of the next fold. He might appear, but only minutes of light remained. Roland made the only sensible decision; we dropped down into the fold and started up the far side.

A cow came over the top, hardly 30 yards from us. She made us and squealed, and we froze. Long seconds passed, and then the bull came over the top. He was a very big six-by-six . . . and then a second bull bugled to his right. We froze some more, absolutely caught.

Guido Donald Deelay and Dr. Johnny Bilznak with Bilznak's '98 White Mountain bull. This was young Donald's first record-class bull — but certainly not his last!



The second bull came in from the right and the small herd crashed off. There was no shot, not even time to be absolutely certain if there should have been a shot. But that second bull's antlers floated across the top of the skyline about 40 yards from us, and I have never seen such a bull. The beams were impossibly long, and points jugged up like a picket fence. He was a good seven on the near side . . . but even Roland, who judges elk better and faster than any man I have ever seen, wasn't certain of him. That was a ghost bull, and we never saw him again.

A couple of days later we followed a number of elk across a brushy clearcut on top of the mountain. It was late in the morning and they were heading to their beds, bugling and moving. We stayed with them and eventually saw all that we heard, but by then it was late and hot and the truck was quite a distance away. Terry had a bum knee that was hurting, so he elected to stay in the shade while Roland went for the truck. I elected to go with Roland. We saw three bulls, none of them "management bulls." Two were young, promising 6x6's. The third was another ghost bull. We didn't see him long, and we never saw him again, but he was a wide, heavy 6x6 with exceptionally long, heavy points. Roland and I saw him at 30 yards, and all we could do was wish Terry was with us!

Sometimes ghost bulls make mistakes. Very few White Mountain hunters . . . and no experienced White Mountain hunters shoot early in the hunt. Not unless they are very, very sure. Terry had assured me that the meat pole would be empty until at least the third day. I didn't believe him, but he was almost right. On the second day, just at dawn, Johnny Bliznak and his young guide, Derald Deelay, set up overlooking a clearing. A big bull came out, was screened by cows, and Johnny shot him just as he turned to go. We figured his rough score at 398 inches, with deducts that should take him down to about 379. That's a second-day (or any day!) bull on the White Mountain.

Other guides knew of other ghost bulls, but finding them is another story. Veteran guide Ralph

Thomas knew of a huge nontypical bull—and believed, given time and luck, they might find him. His hunter, Alan Hamberlin, also a White Mountain veteran, was willing to go for broke. They could have gone broke, but they found greatness instead. On the last evening of the hunt they found the most magnificent North American game animal I have personally ever seen. It will not break the World's Record for non-typical elk, but it will come close – and it is beautiful as well as huge. Ralph Thomas, by the way, was not the only guide searching for

Apache Ghost Bulls



this particular ghost bull. He had been seen a couple of times and apparently ranged over a large area. It took a bit of luck to get him . . . but it took much more skill and hunting intuition, and also much faith and persistence on Alan's part.

That's what serious trophy hunting on the White Mountain is all about: Believing a ghost bull is there, and forsaking all the rest until he appears, or until the final bell sounds. On the other hand, the White Mountain experience doesn't have to be a soul-burning search for the biggest bull on the mountain. You may not find a ghost bull, and unless you are willing to keep trying until you do, perhaps you shouldn't

look for one. For most of us with more moderate expectations, seeing the bull of a lifetime is a daily experience on the White Mountain. It isn't even necessary to take bulls like that to appreciate them . . . or the quality of the hunting experience. I must beg forgiveness for all the bad thoughts I've ever harbored about the place. Whether a management hunt or a trophy hunt, it is without question the finest elk hunting in the world. ▲▲▲

Terry Nickson and Roland Ethelbah with Nickson's fabulous 1997 bull, the best typical elk in North America during the last Big Game Awards Period. They saw this bull early in the hunt, then took him on the next-to-last day.