

Short Magnums IN THE LAND OF LONG SHOTS

By Wayne van Zwoll
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In the mountains northwest of Ruidoso, New Mexico, I will find big elk. I believe this because I am an elk hunter with a Unit 36 tag. Hunting here is a grand opportunity, the chance to kill an elk with antlers as thick as tractor axles and long enough to envelop horse hips from a pack saddle.

I'm so pleased to be here that I hike from trailhead to camp, a 3,000-foot climb that takes me two miles above sea level. I arrive before the horses, the guides, and the other hunters. Under a warm blue sky, I see long sweeps of oakbrush lining canyons with deep, hazy bottoms. Dark conifers bristle near ridgeline, and gray cliffs poke through the oaks. Steep hunting, I think. Long shooting across those canyons.

The pack train arrives. Many hands strip the mules of supplies and saddles. Johnny takes Scott, John, Peter, and me to mountain tents a hundred yards down the trail.

Dawn comes dark and cold. "Storm's on the way," says Johnny. We wolf eggs, snug pack belts and leave. "It's a walk," Johnny tells me. "You like to walk." Scott does too, so we three head for Goat. "It's a refuge for bulls," Johnny explains. "Not every hunter wants to lose 2,500 feet on foot."

Goat proves easy to reach, a fast hour on the trail. Land sakes, I think, we're dropping half a mile! The return hike will test our fitness.



A red sun slides up above the desert floor, now visible. Elk pipe from the gorges. Shadows recede, and bright yellow rumps dot the slopes. "They're well off the tops," says Johnny, eyes to his glass. "We got a fine bull here last week. Muzzleloader. The bull came to a call. Tough to go after 'em in the gut."

It is a lovely morning. I volunteer to stalk down on a bull we saw at sunup. Johnny and Scott sit as I drop into thick oaks. It's steep going, over rock knobs carpeted with cactus. The elk bugles from a pocket of brush I cannot approach unseen. Across the canyon I spot another bull, in his bed. He is not big enough. I climb back out, join the others, endure the long climb back to camp.

There are elk antlers strapped to a mule outside the cook tent. Pete wears a wide grin. "I got him at first light just behind camp. One shot!" It is his first elk, a six-point. "He looked huge!"

The rack is upside down on the mule. "What do you think he'll score?" asks Johnny.

You can't measure a hunt in inches; but I score antlers too and take the bait. "About 298," I say.

He laughs. "It'll gross much better. Look at those fronts! He's 325 for sure."

I look again. "Maybe 312," I hazard.

We tape the antlers and come up with 295 inches. Johnny grins sheepishly. So do I. Is it better to be too optimistic or too impressionable? "A fine bull," we tell Pete. And it is.

The storm comes that night, shaking the tent and howling through the firs. Sleet rattles like shot on the nylon. I shiver in my summer bag. In the dark before dawn Scott and I struggle through tree-bending gusts toward the cook tent. Sleet has turned to snow, and it's piling up. Flashlight beams die in cloud only an arrow-shot in front of the bulb.

The wood stove is not yet warm. I dish oatmeal by lantern light and listen to tent flaps pop in the wind. No one wants to go



FROM THE TOP: Early October near the Mexican border doesn't always deliver the weather you expect. New Mexico at 10,000 feet gives you long looks; some elk you just have to pass up!

BELOW: Mules pack camp into the wilderness and help pack elk out. They're more sure-footed than horses.



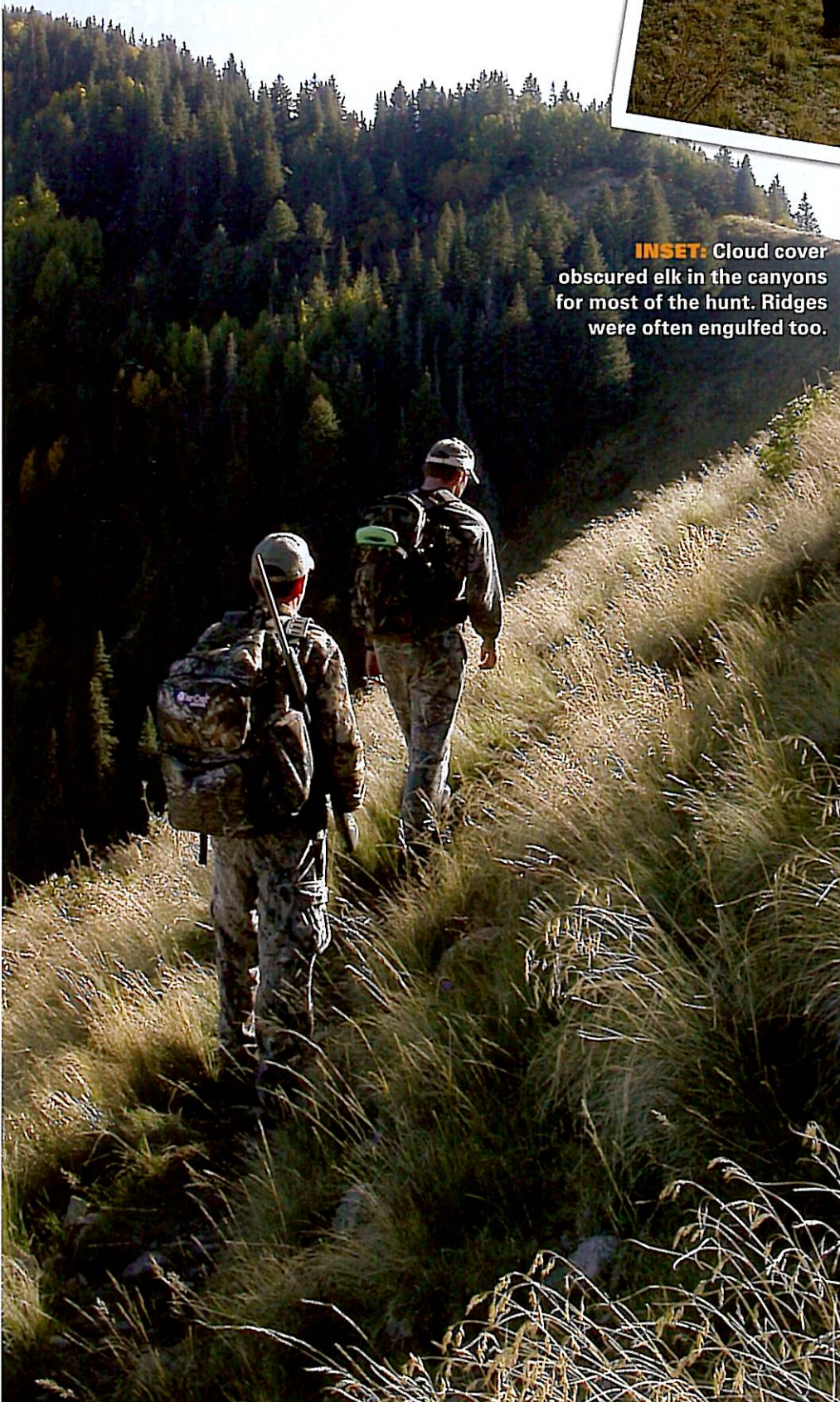
"Maybe we can eke out a couple hundred," Johnny says. "That's a powerful rifle," he nods at my lever-action Browning. "I'm not shooting past 400 yards," I say. It's non-negotiable.



Johnny and Scott hike to an afternoon "sit" at the head of a canyon, where timber meets shadow.



INSET: Cloud cover obscured elk in the canyons for most of the hunt. Ridges were often engulfed too.



out. I tell Johnny I'm willing. He smiles weakly but puts a sandwich in his pack.

Below camp's rocky knob the trail is black mud overhung with snow-laden grass. The wind keens across ridgetops, wrestles with the conifers, rakes the patches of oak, now white in Johnny's headlamp. It's hard to imagine we're just a burro-ride from Mexico in early October.

We drop to Goat and huddle against the wind behind a stunted pine. Clouds hide the canyons. If elk are bugling, we can't hear them through the gale. Last year, it was different....

Last October I was toting a new rifle into Colorado elk country. It was a Winchester 70 in .325 WSM. The idea was to shoot a bull, proving that elk can be killed with a 200-grain bullet traveling 2,950 fps. A century earlier, hunters piled up elk with the .30-30, .303 Savage and .30-40 Krag, so the question was not really about the cartridge. It was about finding elk to shoot with it.

We'd done well. My two partners had dropped bulls with a bullet apiece at just shy of 200 yards. Then, late the second afternoon, I spied another bull. Two, in fact. An hour's sneak later, with both bulls in sight, I belied across a plateau above a copse of oaks. In brush at the plateau's lip I snugged my sling and settled the crosswire on the five-point, now 180 yards off. He leaped from his bed, then tumbled dead.

After the .300 Winchester Short Magnum appeared in 2000, consensus was that Winchester would next field a .270 and a .338. But a year later we got .270 and 7mm WSMs. Despite the redundancy,



hunters took to both — especially the .270. The .300 gained steam.

Meanwhile, Remington had unveiled its Short-Action Ultra Mag cartridges, a tad shorter than the WSMs but ballistically equal. Remington had been late to the game after choosing to extend promotion of its full-length Ultra Mags. Winchester's early momentum gave it an edge at market. There's no practical difference between the .300 WSM and .300 SAUM. None between the 7mm WSM, .270 WSM, and 7mm SAUM. I probably shot the first elk killed with the .270 WSM, the first with the .300 SAUM.

Certainly the short .30s are adequate for any North American game. Still, some elk hunters pined for a medium-bore short magnum. Most shooters were sure Winchester would offer a .338.

The company opted instead for an 8mm (.323) bullet. The .325's first trip afield, in early autumn 2004, was to Alaska. It killed caribou. The Colorado hunt later that fall happened in a migration corridor managed by Dick Dodds at Elkhorn Outfitters. Dodds has two 60,000-acre leases under the state's Ranching For Wildlife program. By week's end, five of us had downed five elk with as many 200-grain AccuBond bullets. The .325's lethality should have been obvious to any beginning student of ballistics. Its reach and authority on that hunt made turn-of-the-century elk rounds appear weak indeed.

Johnny tugs at my arm. Wind still bites through my coat, but clouds are sifting apart, showing us wet rock and dreary copper thickets of oak. We

hear an elk bugle, then spot the bull far below. "He looks good," says Johnny, with more hope than conviction. But we've no other option, save to shiver in the lee of this tired pine.

We race down the ridge through thickets, cling finger and toe to vertical rock. We stop on a bald place, uncertain as to which brushy defile will bring us to the bull. Johnny glasses north across Goat; I set up on Rattlesnake, looking south. Almost immediately, I see him.

He is not the same elk. He is with 20 cows and three outriders in a basin. He is a truck-shouldered bull with loin-length beams and great, curved, white-tipped tines. I mark the herd and slip over the ridge to Johnny. He is lying on one side, eye into his spotting scope, propped on a rock.

JUST IN CASE

The .325 WSM has great reach, and its 200-grain Nosler bucks wind as well as any elk bullet. But a risky shot is no more justifiable the last day than the first, no more excusable on a big bull than on a small one. A shot must be judged independent of time and target. Johnny understood that, but he was also used to hunters shooting long. Many hunters do — especially in canyon country like this. A survey I just completed for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation brought claims of elk kills as far as 925 yards. Of the 330 hunters responding, 15 claimed kills beyond 600 yards, six of those telling of elk shot beyond 800.

I'd no sooner shoot game that far than drive 100 mph though a school zone. But for long shots that still fall within the realm of reason, the .325 has much to recommend it. Besides the AccuBond CT bullet in my rifle, initial loadings included a 180-grain Ballistic Silvertip and a 220-grain Power Point.

Here's data:

.325 WSM VELOCITIES		100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS
BULLET WEIGHT/STYLE	MUZZLE				
180-gr. Ballistic Silvertip	3060 fps	2817 fps	2586 fps	2367 fps	2158 fps
200-gr. AccuBond CT	2950 fps	2736 fps	2532 fps	2338 fps	2151 fps
220-gr. Power Point	2840 fps	2657 fps	2481 fps	2313 fps	2150 fps
.325 WSM ENERGY		100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS
BULLET WEIGHT/STYLE	MUZZLE				
180-gr. Ballistic Silvertip	3742 ft.-lbs.	3170 ft.-lbs.	2673 ft.-lbs.	2239 ft.-lbs.	1862 ft.-lbs.
200-gr. AccuBond CT	3864 ft.-lbs.	3324 ft.-lbs.	2848 ft.-lbs.	2426 ft.-lbs.	2055 ft.-lbs.
220-gr. Power Point	3939 ft.-lbs.	3448 ft.-lbs.	3007 ft.-lbs.	2612 ft.-lbs.	2258 ft.-lbs.
.325 WSM ARC		100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS
BULLET WEIGHT/STYLE	MUZZLE				
180-gr. Ballistic Silvertip	-0.9 in.	+1.70 in.	0	-7.0 in.	-20.1 in.
200-gr. AccuBond CT	-0.9 in.	+1.90 in.	0	-7.3 in.	-21.0 in.
220-gr. Power Point	-0.9 in.	+2.00 in.	0	-7.7 in.	-21.8 in.

BELOW LEFT: This bull, taken in northwestern Colorado, was one of the first elk shot with a .325 WSM.

BELOW: The .325 WSM arrived in 2004, four years after its parent, the .300 WSM. Ballistically, it's a .338.

In its first year, the .325 WSM has proven more popular than predicted. Having used it in Africa and Alaska as well as in elk country, I've found it ideal for tough thin-skinned game.

Johnny asked why I carried a rifle capable of long shooting when "you don't shoot long." I replied that I'd last hunted elk with a .30-30. "The .325 is just in case I want to shoot an elk farther than the .30-30 will reach." I added that the .325 won't put a bullet in the vitals if the shooter can't.

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"He's a five," he tells me. "A big five."
"I found one to shoot," I say.

He looks up sharply. We grab his gear and cross the ridge. The herd is still there, but with only the satellite bulls in evidence. We wait. Presently the big, cream-colored animal strides into the open.

"Oh, my," says Johnny.

We drop off ridgeline into oak and pines that cloak a slope steep enough to roll cinder blocks. Up toward the head of Rattlesnake we scramble. Just shy of the herd, with an east wind still roaring up the canyon, we stop beneath a creaking pine to glass once more. Johnny gets out his range-finder, but I tell him it's no use. The elk are too far.

"We should be about 500 yards, and we can close another hundred," he says with optimism.

But the range-finder reads nearly 750. Which means...

"Maybe we can eke out a couple hundred," Johnny says. "That's a powerful rifle," he nods at my lever-action Browning.

"I'm not shooting past 400 yards," I say. It's non-negotiable. "How about we go to the bottom and back up and ambush him in that basin."

Johnny doesn't like it. I don't blame him. Getting close to elk is hard. Getting close to one bull in a group of 20 elk scattered about a brushy basin is harder. Wind that shuts down your hearing and splashes scent further reduces odds. But we can't get to 400 from this side, so down we go.

Rattlesnake is very deep, the cactus-studded south slope heavy with oak. We struggle back to the elks' level and peek over a spine into the basin. It is empty. The wind has done us in. "It was a long shot," says Johnny charitably. He manages a smile.

"Thanks for the try," I say.

"You're now a member of an exclusive club. Few hunters have been in the belly of Rattlesnake."

We hike out. At ridgeline the wind is still brutal. Clouds still obscure the peak where the tents are.

We pass a five-point bull with a dozen cows. As light fades, we reach shelter, soup, and dry socks. Nobody else has spent more than a couple of hours afield, but John has a bull. "The clouds parted just as we came to where Pete killed his elk. There stood another!" John's first shot missed, but the elk stood for a second try.

Next morning, we're bound again for the canyons. Johnny and I walk silently in the dark, slipping on icy rocks and frozen grass. The wind has throttled back. Near the head of Goat, in thick fog, we hear elk. There! The animals mill in a meadow just

above the trail. A cow eyes us from 40 feet, then vanishes. A set of antlers appear, a ghostly chevron in the mist. But the torso stays hidden. My crosswire bounces about the animal's head, just 50 steps away. It's not a sure shot. Other forms ghost in and out of the scope field. Then a cow barks and the fog empties.

We repeat the last day's hunt, finding small bulls and two with promise but impregnable bed-sites. We hike back, Johnny with a huge shed antler on his back. "You're a member of a still more elite group," he gasps as we claw our way through oak tangles. "Nobody's been to the gut of Rattlesnake twice."

At camp we learn that Kevin and Layne have shot bulls far below us, where they're hunting from a comfortable cabin. They are good bulls. Scott and I agree to pack out with John and Pete in the morning.

Dawn finds Johnny and me atop a snowy ridge. The wind is up again, and in its rush we hear the mewing of cow elk. We make our way in the half-light to an open face that pitches into aspens fringing a broad canyon. This is my last day, and when we spot the five-point, he looks big enough to both of us. He is 400 yards away, but the reticle jumps in the wind. "Can't make it," I say.

"You sure?" Johnny eyes me critically. "Hard to sneak in this blow."

"We'll have to try."

The wind swings on its hinges, scattering the elk seconds before I earn a shot.

In the low country, this hunt will reward Scott with a fine six-point at the last minute. My lot? A long look at a bull with thick beams and great, scooping tines that I guess will score 350. He is magnificent. He is also half a mile distant, across two canyons, with the sun 20 minutes from gone.

I ride a tall mule toward cabin's corral to finish a hunt conducted almost entirely on foot in places too steep for shod hooves. It is dark, and another mule spooks. Mine bolts from under me. My boot catches in a stirrup, and the rifle flies off into the night as I bounce along on my back behind the beast. It kicks hard and I feel the hoof bite my calf. The boot jerks free. I remember when such rodeos didn't hurt.

This has been a good hunt. I have worked hard and cheerfully in tough country and bitter weather, held out for a mature bull and hewed to strict standards in shot selection. I have not missed or crippled an elk. I have been good company to my guide, charitable to hunters with better luck.

I have not killed a tall mule.

Yes, it has been a good hunt. ■