

NEW!

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

UP CLOSE IS GREAT!

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Photos courtesy of Author

I have always been a close-range kind of guy.

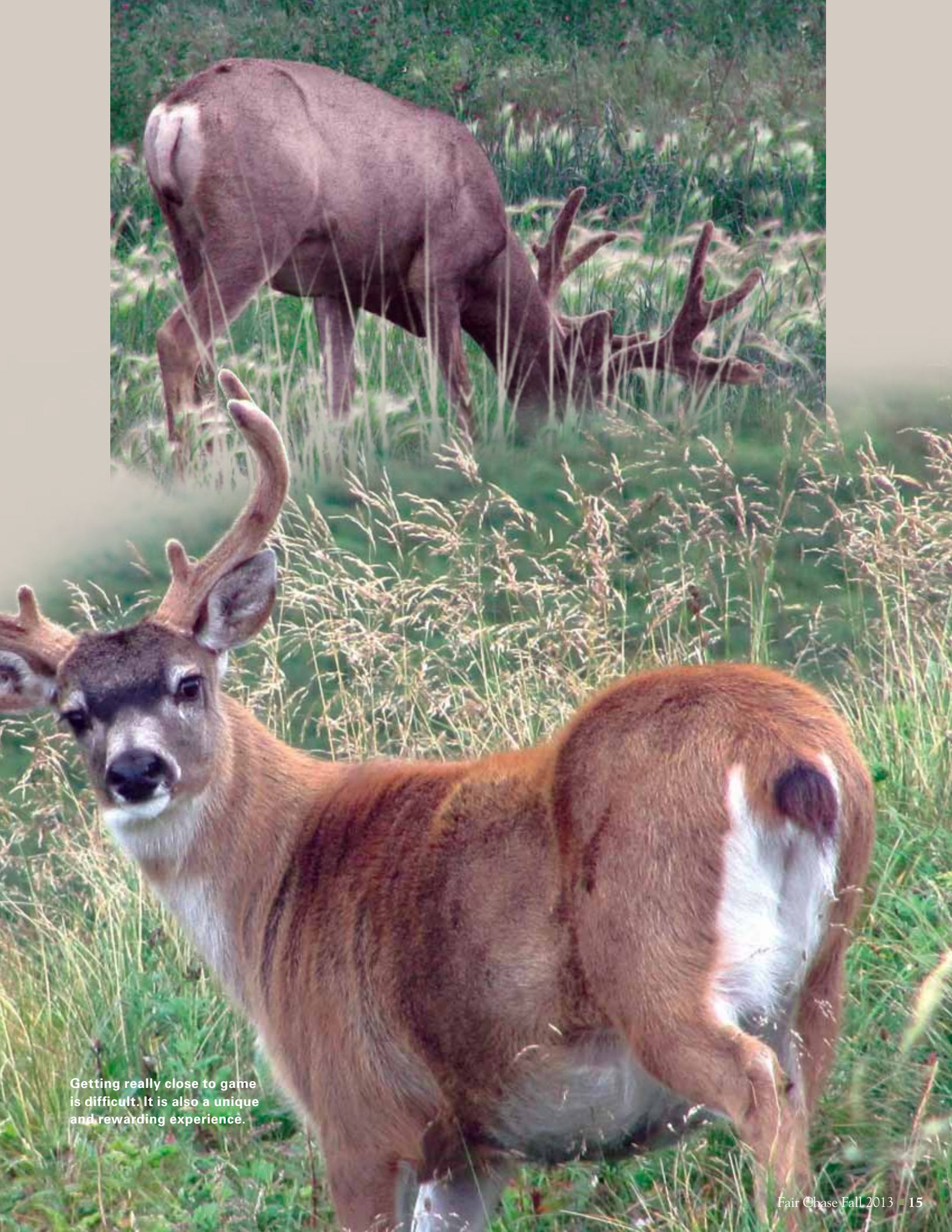
When my dad gave me a choice of loaner varmint rifles at the tender age of 9, I immediately grabbed his old Remington .22 Long Rifle bolt gun. I had no interest in the .222 Remington, .22-250 Winchester, .220 Swift, and other relatively hot calibers Pop pulled out of his gun closet.

Soon, we were spending pleasant Saturdays hunting ground squirrels in the almond orchards near our northern California home. Pop would sit back with a steady rest and blast the nut-chomping pests from 150 to 300 yards. I would sneak along or sit silently in wait and pop critters at less than 50 yards.

Pop and I both loved to hunt, but each of us did it our own special way. We both liked candy bars, too, but Pop preferred Mounds and I preferred Almond Joys. To each his own.

I may be a bowhunter, but I am no stranger to gun hunting—past and present. Both my grandfathers were deer enthusiasts. Unlike my dad and my boyhood hero Jack O'Connor, who went after bucks with calibers ranging from .270 Winchester to .300 H&H Magnum, both my grandparents hunted with slow, open-sight rifles. One liked his .30-40 Krag, the other a Winchester Model 94 .30-30 lever gun.

Like bowhunters, my granddads knew the limitations and exact trajectories of bullets traveling around 2,000 feet per second. Both were deadly on deer out to 150 yards, looping 180-grain .30-caliber slugs into bucks as they watched the animals twitch their ears and flick their tails at flies.



Getting really close to game is difficult. It is also a unique and rewarding experience.

Being a gun nut, my dad was like many modern hunters I know. He loved to hand-load ammo and shoot minute-of-angle groups through a precisely adjusted crosshair scope. Compared to deer shooters today, Pop's rifles were fairly simple and short-range. But he had the same passion for a pinpoint shot on a tiny dot of an animal in the distance.

I know there is presently a raging controversy among hunters about short-range versus long-range weapons, and each style of shooting offers pluses and minuses worth considering. For me, it is all good. If you are legally having fun, I do not care if you drop a buck or bull at 750 yards or smash one with a bullet at 75. I do not care if you shoot a deer at 15 yards with an arrow from a longbow traveling 180 feet per second, or drop a buck at 60 yards with a shaft from a compound bow sizzling 320 feet per second. But I must tell you there is something extra-special about getting up-close and personal before you shoot. You learn more about the target animal and develop a closer bond with your quarry than you ever will at long distance. The knowledge derived and intimacy achieved at really close range must be experienced to be appreciated.

Take my brother-in-law as an example. Grant is a modern, super-long-range rifleman with all the gear and gadgets for dropping elk and deer beyond 800 yards. He can dope the wind, shooting angle, and even humidity with an expensive laser rangefinder. Armed with such knowledge and his custom .300 Weatherby Magnum topped by an adjustable-reticule Swarovski scope, my wife's brother can explode a milk jug almost every time at 1,000 yards if he has a steady rest and weather is calm. He routinely harvests elk in his home state of Montana at ranges beyond 600 or 700, and absolutely dotes on the high-tech challenge. I admire his hand/eye coordination and his ability to master complicated equipment.

But consider this. Four years ago, Grant spotted a herd of elk with a bull he wanted to shoot. The animals were over one mile away, bedded beneath a bluff with no way to shoot from long rifle range. My brother-in-law circled to get the wind right, sneaked down on the elk, and crawled the final 20 yards to the edge.

"I could actually hear those animals breathing," Grant told me later. "I could have dropped a rock on the closest cow. The females were chirping

to their calves, and that bull was grunting softly from time to time. It was one of the coolest elk experiences I have ever had!"

Grant shot the bull at 20 yards with his big rifle, but he went bowhunting the next year because he loved the close-range thrill. He still sometimes shoots elk at half a mile, but he's learned that getting up close and personal is challenging and rewarding in its own special way.

The average deer is taken by a bowhunter at slightly less than 20 yards. The average elk is shot at slightly over 30. Getting that close requires superlative stalking skills or extreme patience on stand. But some high-tech archers can double such shooting distances with laser rangefinders, adjustable bow sights, flat-shooting compound cam-bows, and ultra-light carbon-fiber arrows. As a result, I sometimes hear short-range archers sneer at longer-range techies, and techies make fun of those who try to get really, really close. This same sort of baloney occurs within the muzzleloader and center-fire rifle fraternities.

In the long run, all the snootiness and muscle-flexing does not matter. Wildlife officials in various states and provinces monitor

game populations, set seasons and bag limits, and make sure that animal resources continue to thrive.

How you fill your freezer is up to you, as long as you obey the law. Why should I care if you use an in-line black powder rifle complete with scope that destroys the bull's-eye at 250 yards, or a traditional flintlock with open sights that is hard pressed to hit a pie plate at 50 yards? Why should I care if you use a 30-inch, 70-pound compound bow with cams as big as dinner plates and arrow speeds 1/3 the speed of sound, or a hand-laminated, 72-inch longbow with a trajectory that makes a rainbow look flat? Why should I care if you shoot a heavy, fluted-barrel super-magnum with a range-compensating scope, or a simple John Wayne rifle with iron sights and a bullet you can almost see as it leaves the barrel? I do not.

But that being said, this new "Up Close and Personal" column is designed to celebrate the art of taking animals at eyelash-batting distance. Take it from me. There is nothing more challenging or satisfying than fooling a buck, bull, or bruin at point-blank range. As future columns appear, I am sure you will realize what I mean. ■

Chuck took this impressive non-typical mule deer in 2012 with a close shot after a long stalk.

