

WAYNE C. VAN ZWOLL

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
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Rifles for Head Hunters

*Record-book game
falls to people of
varied means
and motives.
And sometimes
it just dies.*

Animals old enough to grow big antlers avoid people.
Reaching them can be a physical challenge.

A 320-inch elk rack delights most hunters, few of whom will see a bull meeting B&C's 360 minimum.

Early on, from books or black-and-white films, I'd thought of head hunters as painted primitives prowling dark jungles. New Guinea and Africa came to mind. Had such savages been a problem in India, they'd have drawn more attention from Kipling. When old enough to mow lawns, I read more widely and discovered hunting. "Good heads" gave me pause. But the notion of comparing human skulls on stakes 'round a fire ring was dispelled by photos of hunters with big game who looked like pharmacists, grocers, electricians and gas station attendants.

In his 1957 book, *North American Head Hunting*, Grancel Fitz explained that activity well. He gave little text to rifle and loads. In fact, you must read most of that book and study its few photos to learn he used a Griffin & Howe-built Remington Model 30. Besides iron sights, this .30-06 wore a G&H mount clutching a 2-3/4x Hensoldt with "picket" or post reticle. The lenses had been coated—with what he did not say. Magnesium fluoride wasn't widely used to brighten images in rifle scopes until after WWII, but Zeiss (at Hensoldt) had discovered that magic in the early '30s. And anyone who packed a G&H sporter had the pockets to get lenses coated on special order.

Fitz evidently used factory loads. In 1935, after

scrambling among pinnacles and along precipices of Sonoran mountains "nobody ever climbs," he toppled a desert ram with a 180-grain bullet. On Arctic ice a 220-grain bullet failed to anchor a polar bear, which he and his guide trailed by airplane and finished with another approach on foot. Eighteen years later on British Columbia's Klina Klini River, from about 270 yards, he sent another 220 into a fine grizzly. It "knocked him flat." But again Fitz was compelled to fire more shots to claim his bear. Its skull taped 25-9/16 inches, same as that of the world's record grizzly, shot by E.S. Cameron in Montana's Missouri breaks in April, 1890.

Oddly enough, an even more impressive bear had



fallen just four months earlier than Fitz's. On May 10, 1953, about seven miles south of Alberta's Slave Lake, a diminutive 63-year-old Cree woman name Bella Twin was hunting small game with her partner, Dave Auger. They were easing along an oil cutline when they spied a big grizzly ambling their way. Quickly they ducked into the bush. Strong wind that morning may have kept their scent from the animal and rattled the trees enough that their dodge went undetected. But the bear walked ever closer. As the story goes, it stopped very near the hidden hunters. Woods-wise, Bella weighed the risk of firing. If the grizzly discovered them, it might run off. Or not.

Carefully she aimed her iron-sighted rifle at a spot halfway between eye and ear. The beast fell heavily to the shot and didn't move. Reloading methodically, Bella sent her six or seven remaining bullets after the first. Later, that massive, perforated skull would measure 26-5/16, setting a new world's record.

While Bella Twin's bear out-scored Grancel Fitz's by only 3/4 inch, the two would drift apart in the records as years passed and more grizzlies were shot.

Fifty years on, the Fitz bruin would share 108th spot in the listings. The animal Bella Twin took down would tie for 28th.

If you don't count their similar ages (Fitz was four years younger), grizzly kills in '53 were about all Grancel Fitz had in common with Bella Twin. In fact the two could hardly have been more different. A successful New York illustrator and photographer, Fitz had set out to collect representative specimens of all 25 animals then recognized as North American big game. That tally has changed, depending on who's taking it, and on hunting regulations; but he accomplished his task.

Bella Twin had grown up in the northern bush, denied almost every privilege and opportunity Fitz enjoyed. By all accounts, she was an experienced trapper and a fine shot. But "head hunting" was surely foreign to her. Travel spanning the continent to hunt would have seemed outlandish to Bella Twin.

A glance at their rifles would have told you much about the backgrounds of these hunters, and their station in life. Fitz's .30-06 featured an action of ordinary design, a barrel bored for the most popular bolt-rifle

cartridge of its day. Still, it showed above-average workmanship and wore a scope—an unusual sight option then. It was a working rifle, but finely built and nicely appointed.

“From all these expeditions and trophies,” he was later quoted as saying, “I feel that I’ve learned something about what the .30-06 can do. One of the most important things it has taught me is that there is too much theorizing about calibers and ballistics, and too little appreciation of big-game shooting and its practical problems.”

Bella Twin would not have theorized much. Her rifle was a Coe Ace 1, a simple single-shot .22 produced from 1929 to ’34. Hers was not new when she shot the bear. Its action and barrel were corroded, the stock cracked and missing a chunk of wood. Hockey tape held the barrel to its channel, in lieu of the absent forend screw. Reportedly, Bella carried .22 Long cartridges. The Long had the bullet of a .22 Short in a .22 Long Rifle case. An odd choice, in my view. In 1954 Remington, Peters, Winchester and Western listed high-speed Shorts at 44 cents a box, Longs at 61 cents, Long Rifles at 67 cents—all down slightly from ’52 prices. Hunters saved money with Shorts. Even high-speed Short hollowpoints cost 10 cents less than Long solids. For a small premium, Long Rifle loads, with their heavier bullets, were noticeably more effective on game than Longs, which had little, ballistically, on Shorts.

Perhaps CIL, the ammunition brand most common in Canada, priced the Long closer to the Short than did U.S. firms. Or in that remote area, suppliers had no Short or Long Rifle ammo to sell Bella Twin. Then too, people unfamiliar with options in rimfire loads have said and written “Long” when they meant “Long Rifle”—an

error compounded by the fading fortunes of the .22 Long. It’s about dead now.

Whatever Bella Twin had up the spout May 10, 1953, it wasn’t a grizzly load. The .22 Long’s 29-grain bullet left at 1,240 fps, with 99 ft-lbs of energy. In comparison, a factory load from Grancel Fitz’s .30-06 sent 220-grain bullets at 2,410 fps. At 270 yards, Fitz’s bullet still packed half its muzzle energy of 2,830 ft-lbs.

One bullet of Bella Twin’s volley exited her bear’s skull. Enough theorizing about calibers and ballistics.

Grancel Fitz cast a long shadow. Seventy years on, head hunting, or trophy hunting, has brought hordes of the well-heeled afield to put animals “in the book.” The sums they’ve paid for hunting services and permits have funded wildlife conservation and habitat restoration, also anti-poaching work. So wrote Fitz, noting that during the fiscal year ending in 1954, more than 32,654,000 U.S. hunters and anglers had ponied up \$84,975,516 in license fees alone.

Head hunters pay more to be afield than do hunters out only for meat. Even an elk shot on a DIY hunt and butchered at home is expensive, given time and travel costs and a non-resident license—to say nothing of rifle, optics and camp gear, and the pickup to bring camp in, the elk out. Sharpen your pencil, and beef is a bargain.

Boone and Crockett records show that despite ever-steeper costs and more competition in license lotteries, ordinary hunters keep taking extraordinary animals. How come?

Well, luck does play a hand. Some hunters prowl a family farm where deer are genetically gifted. Others, against odds of 1 to 5,692, draw the bighorn tag for a unit rifle with huge rams.

But these blessed are few. For the rest of us, the



TOP: In Fitz’s day and later, accessing game (here caribou, in the Arctic) could take considerable resolve! INSET: Bella Twin and partner Dave Auger saw the bear come. It paused at 30 feet and fell to Bella’s .22 rifle.

odds of taking a record-book animal are dismal indeed. Some places where whitetail deer abound have yet to produce antlers that qualify. On the other hand, anyone can choose to be a selective hunter. “You can’t shoot big ones if you shoot little ones,” goes the logic. It’s unassailable. Holding out for an old or even a mature animal where they’re scarce, or where the environment gives the game an overwhelming advantage, you’ll collect fat wads of unpunched tags. You get a part in the drama only when good fortune brings you within the orbit of a record-book beast. Until then, hunting and shooting skills don’t apply. Seldom, where many of us hunt, will you be anywhere near such an animal. I’ve seen three record-class elk drop, because I was favored to guide hunters where big bulls abounded. For reasons that had nothing to do with their eye-popping bone, I’ve let two “book” mule deer leave without a shot. I’ve not yet crossed paths with a whitetail deer that met the minimum score.

High standards and persistence, not line-item mention, define a head hunter. I take comfort, after seasons notable for their dearth of big antlers, remembering that we value most what is most rare. Failure to find an exceedingly rare beast is no smudge on hunting credentials. In fact, time spent searching is time honing field skills. Another cheerful thought: Some record-book game was not shot at all. The top non-typical whitetails at this writing were found dead. In 1981, along a St. Louis County, Missouri road inside a fence, someone spotted the carcass of a buck whose 11-pound rack would tape 333-7/8 inches. It beat by 5-5/8 inches a Portage County, Ohio deer hit by a train in 1940.

The next three deer on that list are inspirational—partly because they’re recent, also because they were killed by hunters willing to invest the effort for a chance at top-tier antlers. In 2018 Luke Brewster, who lived in Virginia, arrowed what’s currently ranked as the highest-scoring free-range

whitetail shot by any hunter. Taken in Edgar County, Illinois, and scoring 327-7/8, it has 6-1/2 inches on another bow kill, this in 2019 by Brian Butcher, hunting in Chase County, Kansas. In 2016, Stephen Tucker's whopping Sumner County, Tennessee buck fell to his muzzle-loader—after he'd muffed a chance at the same buck from 30 yards when his rifle misfired. At 315-1/8, this buck topped the roster of hunter-killed whitetails for two years—until Brewster's unseated it.

Scoring is relatively recent, but selective hunting dates back centuries in Europe. During the late 1800s in our frontier West, meat got due priority on pack-saddles. (In 1899 John Plute was apparently urged by towns-people to ride back for the antlers of a Colorado bull elk he'd shot for meat—to prove they were as big as he claimed. Measured later, they became the new world's record). But hunters who craved more than meat from their time afield were already taking note of exceptional heads. Sir Edgar Dewdney, lieutenant governor of British Columbia in the mid 1890s, came into a

set of tall, thick, non-typical mule deer antlers from a buck reportedly arrowed by a native in the Okanogan Valley. Intrigued by its size and unusual conformation, he sent the rack off for display at the 1910 International Hunting Exposition in Vienna. The family peddled it in 1993. Two years later, the Boone and Crockett Club x-rayed the cracked skull, concluded it was sound and came up with an antler score of 339-2/8. Today it's still second in the rankings, trumped only by Edwin Broder's mule deer, a 355-2/8 non-typical Alberta buck taken in 1926.

Doc would have shared Dewdney's interest in strange antlers. Our country had yet to drop off the cliff into Depression when he decided to hunt a big moose in Alaska's Susitna drainage. Russell Annabel joined him, and wrote up the trip in *Hunting and Fishing in Alaska*. As the Alaska Railroad pushed through that area in 1920, fires had leveled vast blocks of timber. In the six years following, nurse crops of birch and aspen had risen in their wake. When this forage grew above snow-line, moose came and multiplied.



The outfitter couldn't pass up this outstanding Alaska moose, which appeared days before a client!

"Gosh, how long has this been going on?" Doc had his nose pressed to the window. The charter pilot had kept the plane low. An hour's flight had turned up moose almost without pause. Minutes after set-down, slogging toward a camp-site between gravel bar and thicket, the two hunters spotted a moose.

"Antler spread was considerably greater than half the length of its body," wrote Annabel. Given an average torso of 110 inches, spread exceeded 60 inches, with broad palms and long, thick points. But a distinguishing feature was a wave in the bone, high on each palm. A stunning bull, if not record-book.

"That's for me!" said Doc, slipping off his 90-pound

pack to ready his Springfield. When a pack-strap caught his belt knife, Doc's fortunes changed. The pack hit the earth as he was mid-way through a back-flip. Noisily, he landed in a patch of devil's club. The moose left.

Most of a week and several moose later, Doc hadn't fired a shot. He was bent on bagging what they'd come to call the "marceled" bull. Then, one windy day, they hunted into a gaggle of moose hunkered from the blow in heavy timber. "For 200 yards you could see antler blades gleaming among the gray tree trunks." A great, crenulated palm jutted from tall grass. It was him! Doc stepped up on a windfall to get a better view. The tree creaked as it settled. A moose



The Butcher Buck was honored at the 31st Big Game Awards. See all the details on page 44.



Most record-book whitetails are now killed from stands. Still-hunting is graduate-level head hunting!

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stampede ensued. The bull was quartering off as Doc fired and cycled—then, taking another step forward, crashed through the windfall as his next bullet sped into the treetops. Sprawled in jackstraw trash, Doc wailed, “Oh no! I’ve lost him again!”

Then he struggled from the deadfall and hurried through hoof-lashed grass marking the herd’s exit. There was no blood. Then, short yards away, movement!

It was the bull’s hind leg. Lung-shot, the animal had fallen into a hole and lay on its back.

“I have seen some happy hunters,” recalled Annabel, “but I think Doc was the happiest. He had a right to be. He was a pioneer trophy hunter in a new game range, and he had accomplished the thing that sets the head-hunter apart—he had held his fire and waited, withstanding the temptation of lesser

heads, undismayed by difficulties, until he got the animal he wanted.”

The value of exceptional heads has led outfitters to charge by the inch of horn and antler, and to market “management” animals that dilute the genetic pool and compete for resources with “trophy” game. Such restrictions would have seemed constraining, if defensible, to Grancel Fitz, who died in 1979. Bella Twin would have found them odd.

Padding after trackers on the trail of Cape buffalo in Namibia not long ago, my PH and I pulled up short when the scabrous black boss of a bull rose above the thorn just eight steps away. Still as a stone, he

stared. We moved not a muscle. My license wouldn’t cover so grand a beast.

The breeze looped. The immense neck stiffened; ragged ears cocked our way. The 9.3 felt small in my palms. With no sound, no gathering of muscles, the bull whirled and cannoned off into the thickets. Hooves drummed, limbs splintered. Then, slowly, the bush and I exhaled.

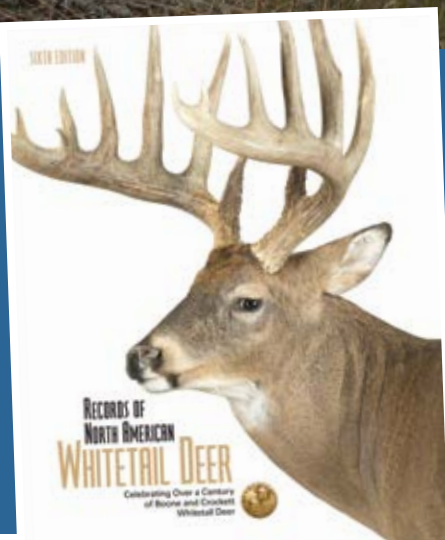
That day, I had hunted, had tracked buffalo, had chanced upon what may be the most magnificent bull I’ll ever see. A shot would have sealed that moment no better than the silence hanging in the dust.

A finish any head-hunter would understand. ■



Just after he was spotted at dawn, this buck bedded in a pocket of sage. He became instantly invisible.

What comes out of that mist may be a six-point. Odds that he’ll score above 375 are extremely low!



For more on the best whitetails ever taken check out the sixth edition of *Records of North American Whitetail Deer*. This hard-cover tome has 300 full-color field photos in its nearly 700 pages. A must-have for anyone who can’t get enough of big whitetails, past and present!

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