

# MONTANA MULEY

**“With his great sensitive ears—probably the best of any American game animal—warn him of the approach of lion or man, he slips off as soundly as a gray ghost.”**

Jack O'Connor, *Game In The Desert* 1939

The first time I saw a massive-racked muley with its enormous body bounding over a hillside, I knew it was something I had to hunt. Born into whitetail country where I was lucky to see a spike buck, I couldn't get over that sight. I started filing through my pile of magazines for overlooked articles thinking that if I was going to hunt them one day, I better start reading up.

Life got in the way and 20 years passed. I knew I was going to need to do my research, especially for a guy who had never seen anything west of the Mississippi. If I was going to do this right, hours of research was the only way to get there. I would learn that finding a place where a true trophy animal lives is almost as hard as finding the animal itself.

I started my research with the Boone and Crockett record book looking

for historical data on places I might find a trophy. Having the means to hunt in any state, I chose Montana.

I sought advice from outfitters and found a reputable, third-generation rancher and outfitter named Eric Albus. From my first impression of our call, he seemed honest and straightforward about my prospects and the hunt. He offered advice on the best way to submit my application for a tag. At the end of that hour-long conversation, he convinced me he was the right guy for the job. His advice on how to apply for a tag was right on the money, and I pulled a tag for the November rut rifle season.

When I arrived at Eric's camp, those Canadian winds were howling. There was only one tree within 100 miles. I met the family, and they were quite welcoming, putting me right at ease. The family was exactly what you'd imagine a cattle ranching family's life to be.

Over a cup of coffee, Eric explained his daily hunt routine. It was simple but practical. Our days consisted of driving ranch roads and picking apart every piece of brush and rock in search of a deer to stalk. In five days, we covered more than 100 miles by truck and spent countless hours hiking deep ravines through some of the most awe-inspiring country that I could have ever imagined.

On one occasion, we climbed to the top of a butte for a better vantage point. As we came over the top, there

were stones arranged in a 10-foot circle. We were right on top of an old Native American camp. I was so caught up with finding a deer, I almost missed out on an amazing piece of our heritage.

As we moved on, we came across deserted one-room schoolhouses in the middle of nowhere. We covered miles of rolling high plains plastered against a never-ending yellow-gold autumn skyline. I was so mesmerized by its beauty that I couldn't help just staring at the horizon to make sure I drank it all in.

At dinner one evening, Eric spoke of his bygone days of hunting mule deer on horseback. That's what I wanted to do. The following morning, we set out on some of the best open-country horses I ever rode. It was the quintessential western hunting experience and a gift I greatly appreciated.

We weren't successful that morning, but one of the memories I took with me was sneaking up “cowboy style” on a herd of grazing deer while walking behind the horses as cover. I never would have tried that, but Eric laughingly assured me that deer couldn't count horse legs as we walked within 100 yards of them.

The last day of my hunt was unseasonably cold and quiet. While cruising the last canyon before we returned to camp, I finally got my moment with 10 minutes of light left.

In the dull reflection of the setting sun, Eric sat up straining his eyes in the

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

## BEYOND THE SCORE

Angelo Baio

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR



Angelo spent five days hiking, glassing, and exploring the beautiful Montana countryside on the hunt for mule deer. He even had an authentic "cowboy" experience hunting on horseback.

binoculars, and picked out the yellow-white rump of a beautiful barrel-chested buck with antlers as dark as chocolate. "I've been seeing this deer on and off for months," Eric said. "He would disappear for days and miraculously pop up miles away."

We bailed out of the truck and hustled about 300 yards down a deep ravine in a race against sunlight. About 400 yards away was the unsuspecting buck. There was no cover left, and we had to take a position for a shot.

I was prone facing downhill with Eric on the glass behind me. I tried to control my excited breathing and eased off a shot.

The recoil from the .300 magnum and the awkward angle knocked me off my sight plane, and I lost the buck in the scope. At almost the same instance, I heard, "You rolled him!"

We ran down that ravine in an all-out sprint like a bunch of school

kids. When I ran up to the deer, I couldn't believe his massive body. His back was as thick as a horse, and when I picked up his head I couldn't believe my eyes. He had trash growing from his brows and every bit of 13 or more points. It was an awesome sight and felt even better to have those antlers in my hands. It took a minute but I finally allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. ■

Angelo with his Montana muley.



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