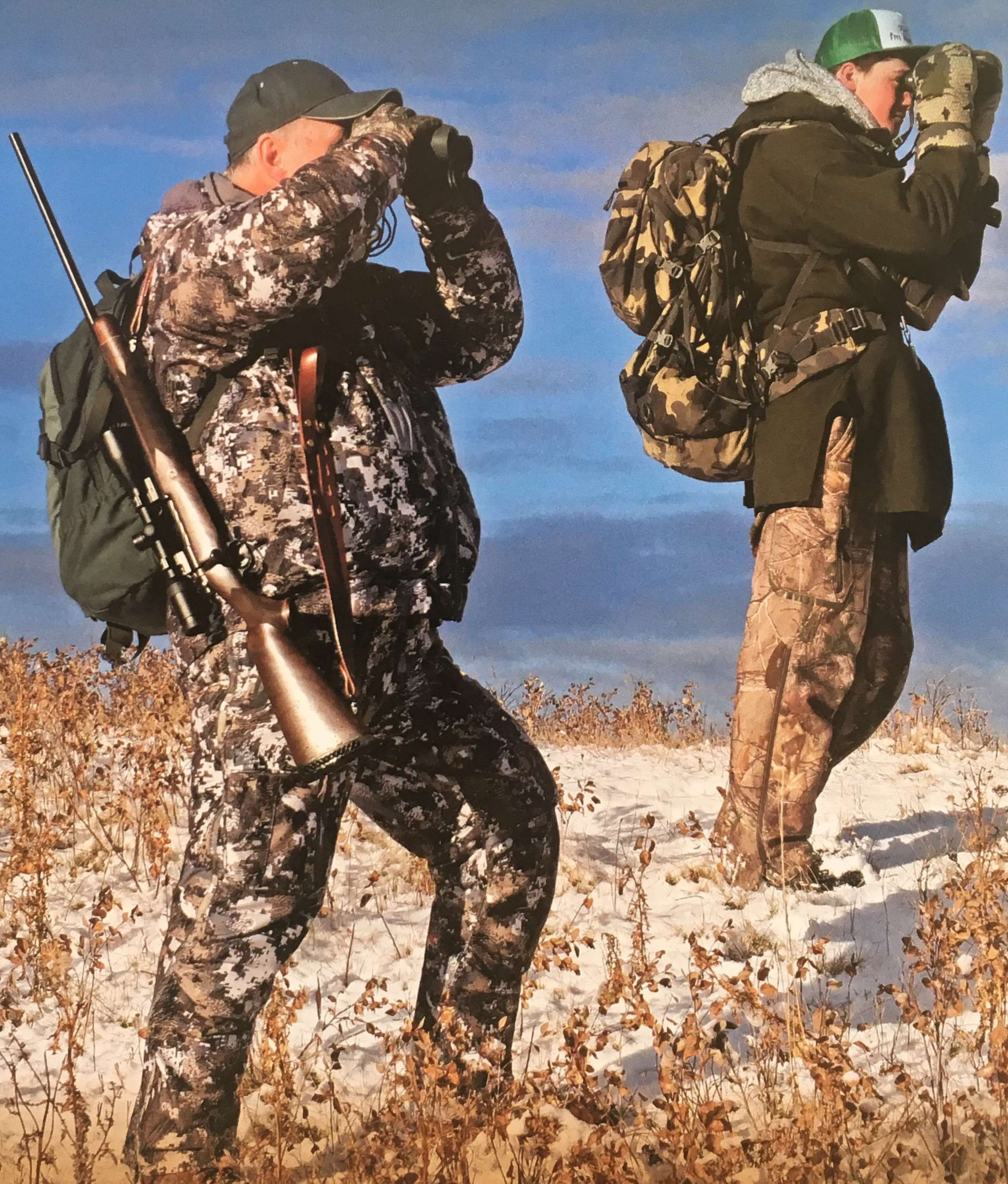
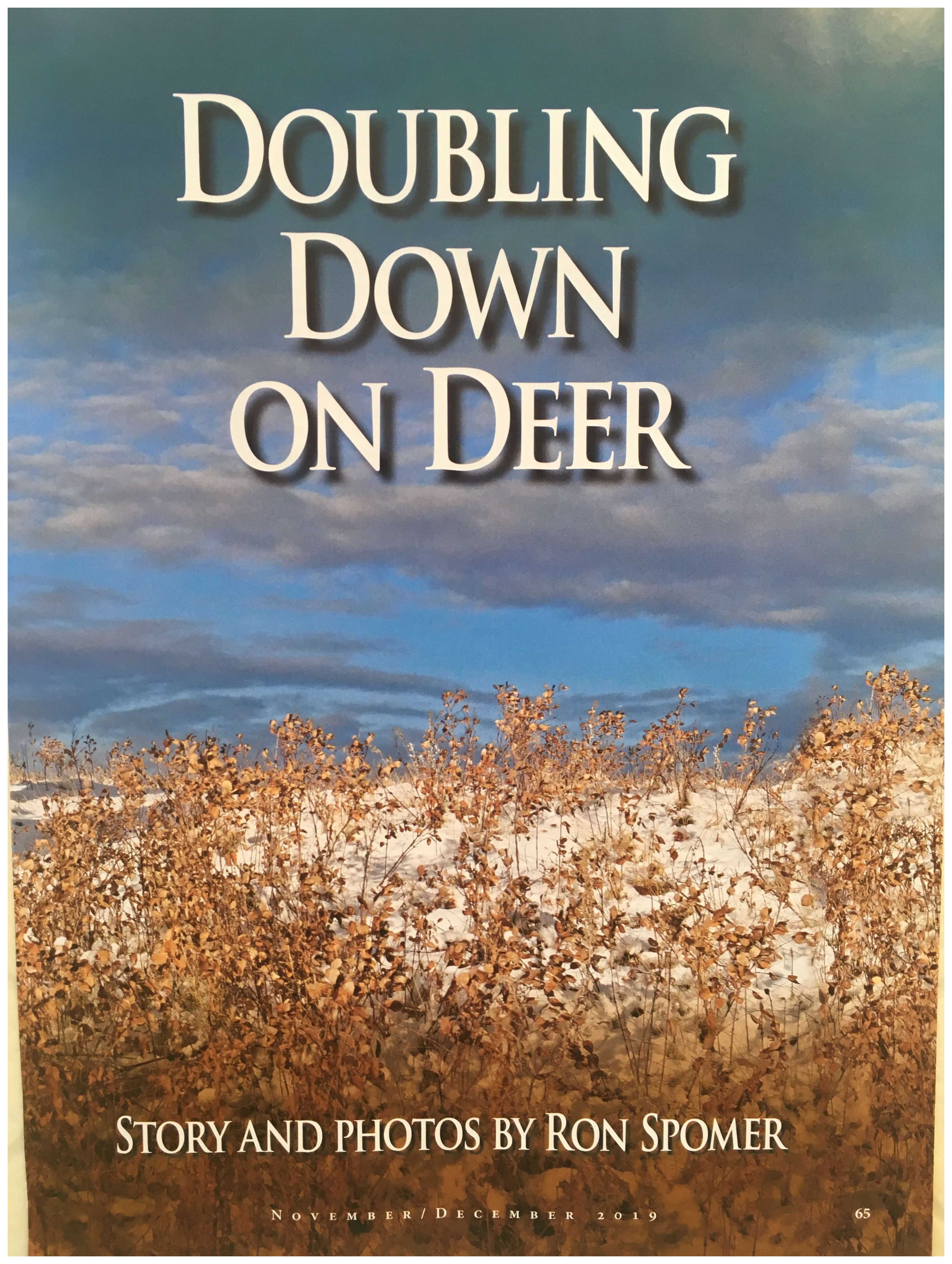


A WHITETAIL/MULE DEER COMBO HUNT ON THE HIGH PLAINS OF ALBERTA.





DOUBLING DOWN ON DEER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RON SPOMER

The high plains beneath the snowy rampart of Alberta's Rockies were dusted white. The landscape was cold, but not lifeless. Sharp-tailed grouse sparkled atop naked cottonwoods, wings flickering as they plucked fat buds. Elk filed over a fir-rimmed ridge like a line of humpless camels. Moose browsed languidly amid the willows as if they had all winter to fill up.

We spotted a whitetail buck, nose to the ground, trotting across a side hill on his annual mating mission. A coyote howled and yapped unseen between us, ending our stalk. But the mule deer were still there. They were the magnet that had drawn my hunting partner, Tom Hogan, to western Alberta. After a lifetime of hunting whitetails in his forested Northeast homeland, Tom was practically quivering at the chance to hunt his first mule deer.

"Look at them all! Right out in the open," he exclaimed in his thick New England accent. "There's a buck! A big buck. I don't know, I think it's a big buck. They told me they'd all look big, but this one's big, isn't he?"

"Kind of average, actually," Willow Creek Outfitters guide Quinn Chattaway said as we glassed the broad valley.

"How 'bout that one? That, to me, looks like a monster." Monster came out as *maunstah*. I could tell that classic New England accent combined with Tom's infectious enthusiasm was going to make this an entertaining hunt.

"We can circle north and come at them through the trees on that side hill," Quinn suggested as we watched two good bucks and several also-rans cautiously court two dozen does along a brushy valley bottom on his family ranch. "We'd have to hunt pretty long to find any bigger than that one."

"Is that the one we're after?" Tom asked. "That big one behind that doe? He looks like the biggest to me. You go after him, Ron. You go first."

This outburst required a short meeting of the board, me presiding as chairman. "Tom, I've hunted mule deer since 1972. I've shot dozens. You will take the first one and I will enjoy watching you more than I could ever enjoy shooting it myself. Case closed. Now let's move on to new business—stalking that buck."

Easier said than done. Our first approach through the snow, willows, and aspens found us spooking sharptail after sharptail, each burst of wings making us jump, cringe, and wish it were bird season. Then the cruising whitetail we'd seen earlier swung by, passing within easy rifle range.

"You wanna take him, Ron? Golly, he's bigger than most we get in Maine or anywhere. Is he good for here, Quinn?"

"Not really. Could use another year or two," the young man said. Having lived his entire nineteen years on this sprawling foothills ranch, hunting with his brothers, uncles, and father, Quinn knew.



Tom Hogan with his first mule deer buck.

"We're just going to pass him up?" Tom resumed. "Not gonna take him? I can't believe it." And then a second, larger whitetail sauntered in, flickering between aspen limbs above us. I grunted and he changed course. "Here he comes, Tom."

"My gawd, this one's bigger yet. You're gonna shoot this one, aren't you?" Tom didn't have a whitetail tag. I'd have bequeathed him mine if I could have.

"Don't think so," I said, although I was tempted. It's always fun tagging a buck you've called in close. But I hate to notch my tag the first hour of a hunt, especially when you're about to explore thousands of acres of mysterious, rolling foothills thick with grasses, shrubs, and scattered coverts of aspen and fir, woods that could harbor your wildest antlered dreams. "We don't want to spook your muley," I said by way of a convenient excuse. And then we resumed our stalk.

Our grouse and whitetail delays had given the big-eared deer time to drift up a wide, grassy draw toward the morning sun. We crouched, duck-walked, then crawled until we had a clear shot, but the rangefinding binocular read 465 yards.

"I don't want to risk that shot," Tom said. "That's more than twice as far as we ever shoot back home and they're not spooked. We can get closer, right?"

No wonder I love hunting with Tom. But he paid for his ethics. The vast, open country, coupled with the large deer herd spread broadly across it, forced us on a long, roundabout

detour to get downwind and behind a ridge that climbed above them. As we went, other mule deer and two more coyotes gave us pause, a couple of bucks coming within .22 rim-fire range to satisfy their curiosity. During the rut bucks will check out any potential doe, even homely, two-legged ones on the back side of their prime.

"Gosh, they're curious!" Tom hissed. "I can't believe it. This is incredible."

More incredible was Tom's heart and stamina. Carrying a couple of pounds more than absolutely required, he looked no more fit to storm an Alberta hilltop than I, a desk jockey who'd spent the preceding months pumping a keyboard. Quinn, on the other hand, was still running away from his youth, and we sweated to keep up.

"Don't kill yourself," I gasped during one of our breathers. "Quinn'll wait for us. I think he just wants to get up where he can keep track of them so we don't lose them." And that's just what he did.

"The two biggest bucks have gone higher," Quinn said when we reached him. "Up there." He pointed east. We saw antlers above the grass, etched tantalizingly against the sky.

"That's that big one, isn't it?" Tom whispered.

"That's him," Quinn confirmed. Tom shot a reading with his rangefinding binocular. "Almost four hundred. And I'm not taking a skyline shot anyway. Can we get closer?"



Ron Spomer with his mule deer buck.



Guide Quinn Chattaway contemplates the end of the hunt once the buck is loaded in the pickup.



This is the type of hard work that no one seems to mind.

"Follow me. Step where I step," Quinn instructed. We hunched behind a wall of willow brush and pressed triplicate boot marks in the snow, slipping along furtively like out-of-shape house cats. The antler tips bobbed and disappeared, swiveled and disappeared again. "They've bedded. Let's get to that biggest bush and set up. When they stand . . ."

I was well into my last bag of trail mix when Tom poked me. The bucks were up. Or at least the biggest was. But Tom had to shoot over intervening brush. His rifle wobbled. He got up on his knees and swayed even more.

"Try these," I mouthed, poking him with my old Quik-Shot shooting sticks. They wobbled too. Quinn put two packs under the bipod to raise it. Tom again lifted high on his knees to clear the brush. The buck was foraging closer, now under the ridge top, entering thicker brush. He was still 280 yards away. From his compromised position, I was sure Tom was not going to make this shot. But he did. His .270 Winchester barked. The buck collapsed. And so did Tom.

"I couldn't get steady," he explained after he recovered from the stress. "I couldn't find a solid position. But I wasn't going to miss that shot. Not on that buck. Not my first mule deer."

"So how'd you do it? You looked terrible. Worst shooting form I've ever seen."

"Willpowah! I willed myself to not miss. I don't know. I can't explain it any better than that. I just didn't let myself miss."

I, on the other hand, the veteran of dozens of mule deer hunts and an experienced open plains hunter, blew it. Once Tom's shot had faded away, a second set of antlers appeared. This was the second-biggest buck of the morning and I'd already decided to not shoot it. But, as it minced toward Tom's fallen buck and I contemplated the likelihood of finding a bigger buck weighed against the opportunity to tag a double with my friend . . . suddenly that 4x4 was looking pretty special. I steadied the reticle on its shoulder, mid-high, and sent a 140-grain bullet to do the heavy lifting. At the impact the buck hunched, staggered over the

skyline, and fell. Tom's buck was stone dead, but mine rose on our approach and staggered off. It took two more shots to end it. The fault, of course, was mine. Despite my age and experience, I'd decided to shoot a match bullet to test the reports I'd been hearing about how explosively deadly one could be. Now I know.

Dusk dropped gloom over the plains before Quinn got back with the truck, ending what had been an almost perfect day. Two deer for two friends. Tom had made a long, hard, perfect stalk. He'd seen more game in more variety than he'd ever discovered in his home coverts. It seemed a shame to have done it all in just one day, but we had an ace up our sleeves: I also had a whitetail tag.

Whitetail Weather

Anyone seeking a unique double should look for a High Plains mule deer/whitetail gig. I don't know all the places where this can still be legally done, but it used to be possible in several states and provinces from South Dakota to Washington and B.C. I do know it's still legal in Alberta if you can get the tags. Thanks to guidance and encouragement from Andre van Hilten of Willow Creek Outfitters, I'd procured both tags. And I wasn't going to spend this one too quickly.

"That's a pretty good buck for here," Quinn said early the next day as Tom watched me aim at a big 4x5. At 220 yards it was a chip shot.

"Why didn't you shoot?" my partner asked as we walked back toward the truck.

"It's our last tag and Quinn said there's always a big buck no one's ever seen before that comes out of those highest hills during the rut." I nodded toward some country to our south. And that's where we went, hitching up our belts and climbing, hiking, spotting deer after deer, elk after coyote, moose after sharptail, day after day. The terrain was richly furred prairie that rolled and dipped to expose hidden draws and secret valleys promising the kind of dream bucks sure to haunt such coverts.



Spomer and his guide approach Spomer's whitetail buck.

Gear for Deer

We had the pleasure of testing Mossberg's Patriot Revere rifles, a version of Mossberg's bolt-action in a nicely figured, classically shaped walnut stock with rosewood tip and grip cap. The Revere's 24-inch barrel helps wring a few more fps from any load, my 6.5 Creedmoor and Tom's .270 Winchester no exception. As a bonus, mine was keeping three consecutive shots inside MOA. Tom's was obviously printing "minute of buck." While not lightweights, both rifles balanced nicely and carried smoothly with just a hint of muzzle heaviness that encouraged staying on target.

Our scopes were the brand new Z5 2.4-2x50mm, a size Swarovski engineers hope lands right in the wheelhouse of most typical American deer and elk hunters. While I'm no fan of 50mm objective scopes, I found this 16-ounce model surprisingly light and, at just under 14 inches long, reasonably compact. With light transmission at 92 percent, this is the brightest 1-inch tube scope in Swarovski's line. It also has the widest field of view—45.9 feet at 100 yards—yet eye relief was a generous 3¾ inches. As for optical performance, need we even ask? There isn't much hunting this scope couldn't handle.—R.S.



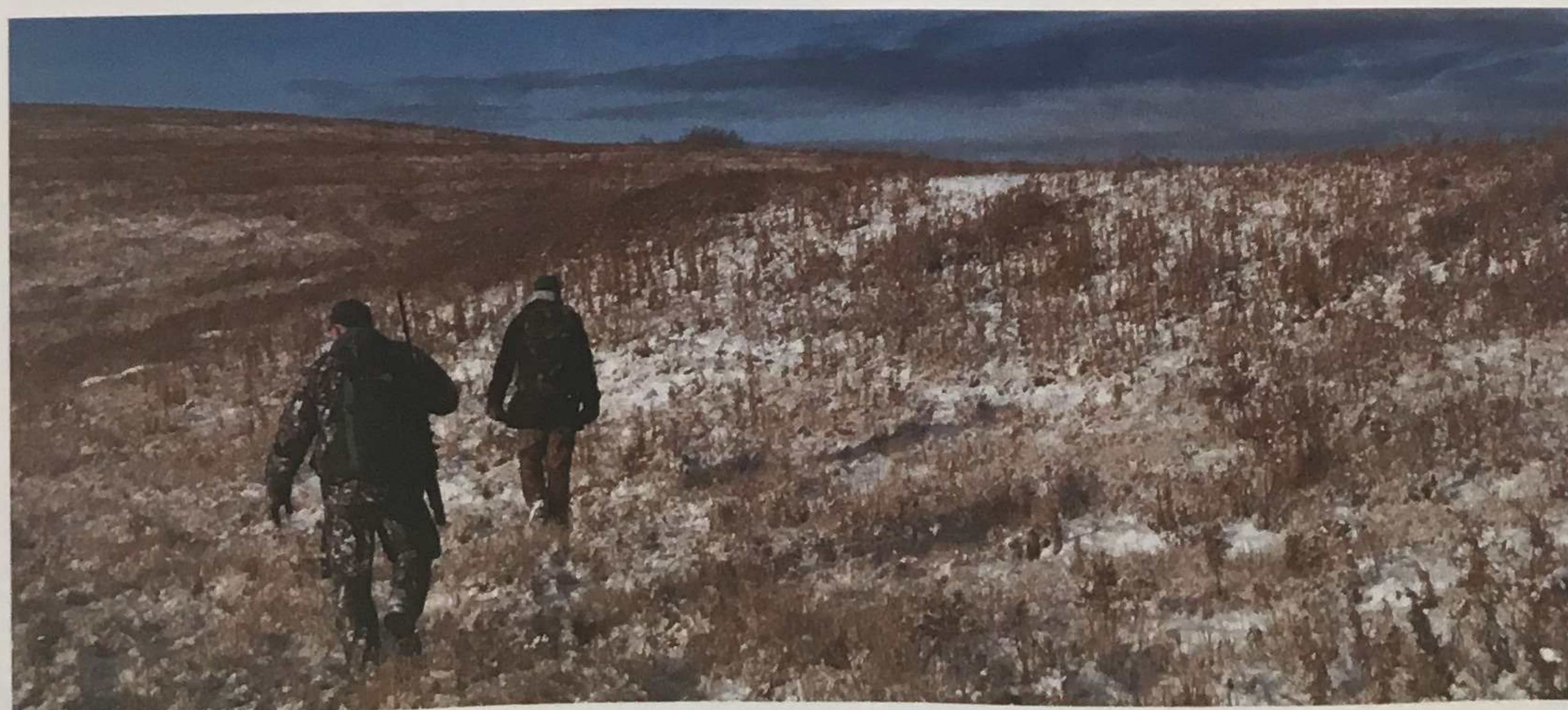
Mossberg Patriot Revere in 6.5 Creedmoor topped with a Swarovski Z5 2.4-12x50mm scope.



A nice whitetail spotted during the hunt.



Shooting sticks are a big help for making accurate shots in this open country.



Stalking deer on the Alberta prairie requires patience and careful use of the terrain.

"That's not a deer," Tom said one morning when he glimpsed something dark moving on a distant slope.

"It's a brown bear," I said after getting my binocular focused. "A brown-phase black bear, I mean."

"All our bears are black black bears," Tom said. "And we never spot them digging dens!"

Our fourth morning broke gray and damp, snow falling. Perfect white-tail weather. At midday does were still foraging, looking like a Christmas card scene under dusted fir boughs. Bucks were roaming and sniffing.


"Where's that big guy?" Tom was asking. Quinn was quiet, patient, exuding confidence. Justifiably.

"There he is!"

We'd crested a low ridge just below a stand of aspen and fir. A doe jumped from the valley below, a steaming buck on her tail. The combination of a rut chase and the sudden appearance of hunters confused the issue enough that the doe stopped halfway up the far hillside. And of course the buck stopped behind her. By then I had my butt on the ground, the rifle's butt in my shoulder pocket, its fore-end in the sticks, a round in the chamber, and the reticle scribing a tight circle over the buck's shoulder.

"He ran like you missed, but I could tell by his tail you'd hit him good," Tom said as we hiked up to the fallen buck. Snow was already softening the gray of its coat.

"The way he ran I thought I had missed. But I saw the twisting tail, too. Funny he went uphill instead of down. Guess it was because of the doe."

We spent more time than really required taking pictures, pausing to watch the snow fall, scanning the roll of big country blurring into an indistinct gray haze that only confirmed what we knew in our hunters' hearts: This was what deer country was supposed to look like. What deer hunting was supposed to feel like. 

For information on this hunt, contact Andre van Hilten at Willow Creek Outfitters near Calgary, Alberta: willow-creekoutfitters.com.