



NORTH AMERICA'S

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

SERENGETI

Alberta's storied Front Range
country may be the most game-rich
region on the continent.

By Ron Spomer



April, 1810. Beaver season on the Three Forks of the Missouri. Pelt prices were high, but not as high as the price George Drouillard and seven other men would pay trying to catch them. Drouillard and another Lewis & Clark Expedition veteran, John Colter, were with a party of trappers in Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company.

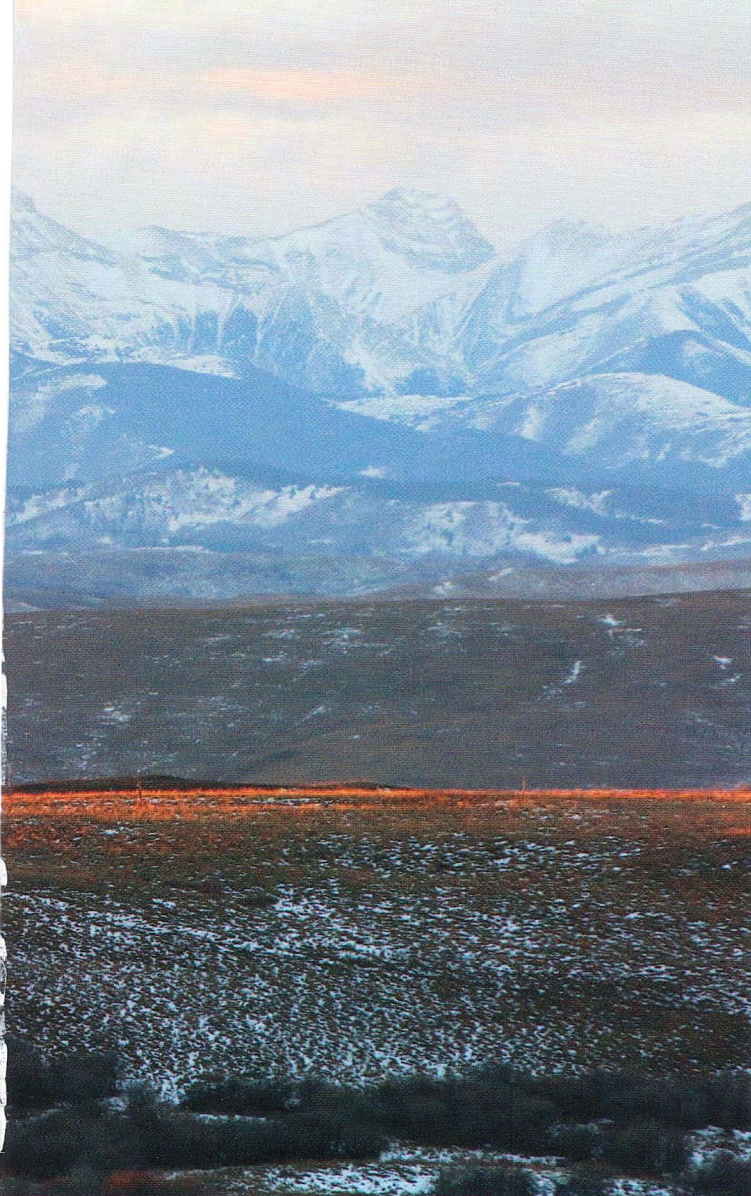
Colter knew the risks. Just one year earlier he'd narrowly escaped death here. A party of Blackfeet warriors had taken him prisoner, stripped him and told him to run for his life. He outdistanced all but one brave, turned and killed that one, then outpaced the rest before plunging into the Madison and hiding inside a beaver lodge. He emerged at dark, naked and unarmed, and began a 300-mile walk back to Lisa's fort at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn. The lure of this game-rich region was just too strong to resist.

I know the feeling. From the Missouri in Montana to the North Saskatchewan in Alberta, the Rocky Mountain Front Range remains North America's

Serengeti. Whitetails, mule deer, elk, moose, pronghorns, black bears and grizzlies crisscross the grassland foothills. Caribou, bighorns and mountain goats roam the mountains. Cougars pad silently through the aspen thickets while wolf packs periodically sweep down the valleys. Free-range bison are the only thing missing, but fenced herds take up some of the slack.

This amazing abundance of wild game was not lost on the Blackfeet, dominant tribe here circa 1810, and they had no desire to share it with Colter or anyone else. The Blackfeet traded beaver pelts for guns, iron pots and blankets at the Hudson's Bay fort in Edmonton. Those guns made them the most powerful tribe in the region, so, quite naturally, they attacked the white trappers, including five men in Colter's party.

Colter decided he'd pushed his luck far enough. With several other disheartened trappers, he swore off the mountains and retreated down the Missouri. Just in time. The Blackfeet attacked again. Drouillard's body was found beheaded and disemboweled. Two other trappers



Alberta's Front Range country stair-steps from grasslands through the brushy Porcupine Hills to the ramparts of the towering Canadian Rockies. Big mule deer can be found in all three tiers at different times of the year.

were killed. The rest of the brigade trudged south over the Continental Divide to safer, if less productive environs along today's Henry's Fork of the Snake.

Colter made it back to St. Louis and, wisely, retired to a Missouri farm. The Blackfeet, meanwhile, reigned supreme on the Front Range until the 1820s, enjoying the fat of the land.

Today, two centuries later, the Front Range still hosts some of the best big game hunting in North America. And you needn't risk your life to enjoy it. "Sounds like moose antlers whacking together, doesn't it?" The bone-on-bone thwack rose from the out of the brushy draws below us.

"Sure does."

I was sitting on frozen buffalo grass scuffed free of snow, my back against a granite boulder. So was Andre' van Hilten. I'd come willingly to suffer this, but had to pay Andre' to join me. He's an Alberta hunting guide, a modern-day John Colter, living off the wild fat of the land. Instead of skinning beavers, he skins the wallets of wanna-be mountain men.

"That makes me sound rather mercenary, don't you think?" the lanky Canadian complained when I referenced the wallet skinning during my third hunt with him in five years.

"Maybe. But we're both market hunters, don't you think? You make money by guiding, I hope to make some by selling a story or two. We'd both starve if not for all this game."

So we celebrated our mutual dependence on Alberta's Front Range wildlife and got down to business at eight-degrees Fahrenheit.

"It's moose all right," Andre' said a few minutes later, his eyes pasted and possibly frozen against his binocular. "Small bull coming out of the bottom there, in the poplars below the elk."

"Got him."

The young bull was easy to spot, nearly black against the white snow, noticeably darker than the dozen elk and five whitetails browsing on the hill above.

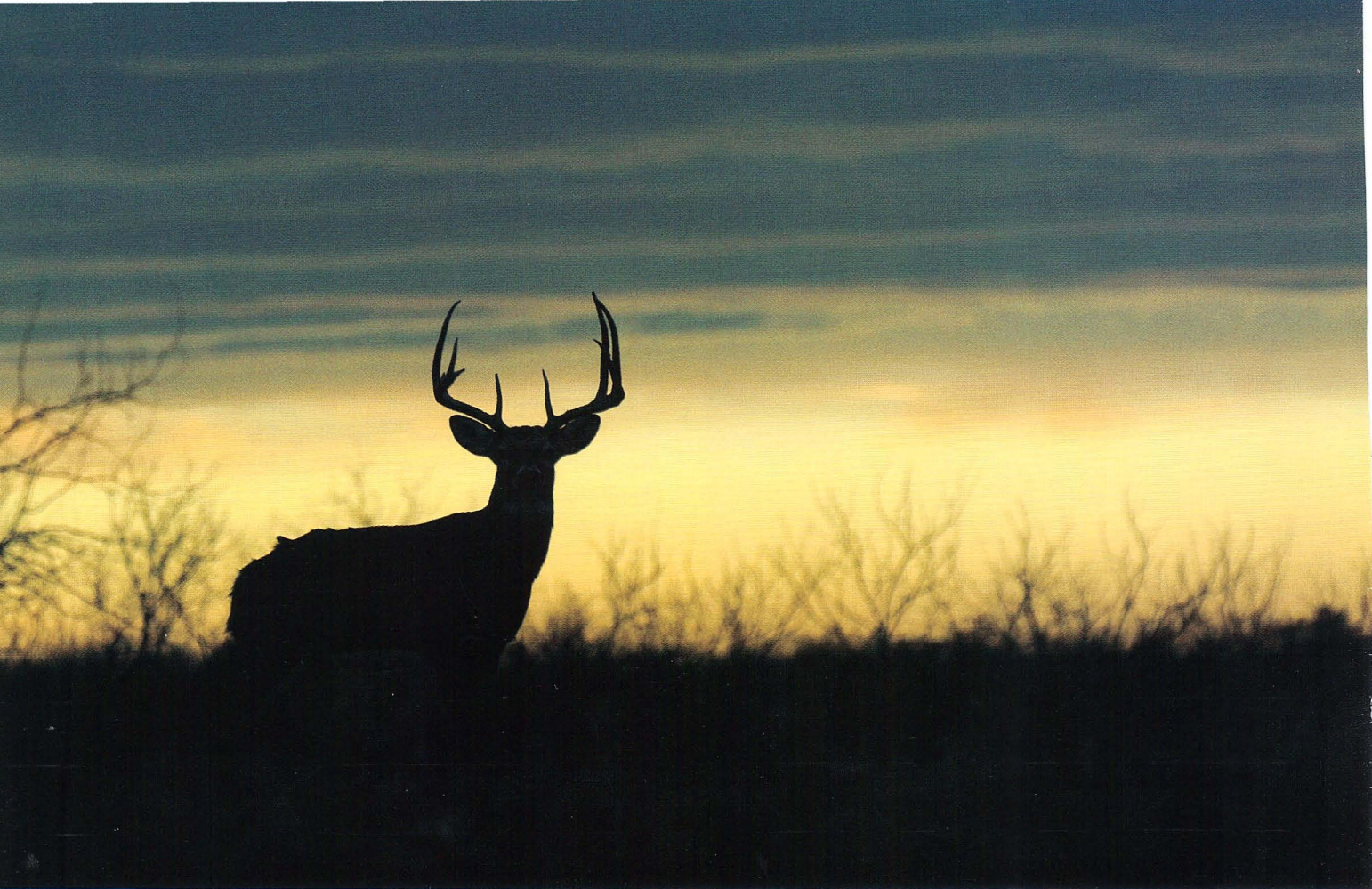
"Look how tiny those whitetails look compared to him," I said. "Hard to believe they're both deer."

At our backs stood a baker's dozen mule deer recently roused from their beds by a pair of slinking coyotes. Beyond them towered the snow-capped spires and peaks of the Rocky Mountains where bighorn sheep and mountain goats scuffed through snow in search of cured grass.

"There's the other bull," I said.

Andre' dropped his binocular and looked where I was pointing. "He'll come out from behind that clump





of firs. Looked like decent paddles.”

“Oh yeah. He’ll be a heck of a bull next year.”

So there we sat, literally surrounded by four species of deer. You expect this when hunting the Front Range with Andre’. The man evolved in British Columbia as a cowboy, angler and hunter, but when he decided he wanted to be an outfitter, he moved to Alberta.

“Alberta’s really got it all, eh?” he explained. “I can guide for bears in the spring, whitetails and mule deer all fall. We’ve got antelope, bighorns in the mountains and elk and moose pretty much anywhere. We see a



Whitetails (above), mule deer, pronghorns and elk – all roam the Front Range wilderness. Opposite: Guide Andre’ Van Hilten sleds the author’s 170-class mule deer back to camp.

cougar or two every year. Even grizzlies are feeding in these foothills.”

But seeing isn’t getting. You have to invest a bit of hiking to pull that off. Make that a lot of hiking, preceded by even more glassing because Andre’ is married to optics.

“See those mule deer on the side hill about two miles out?” he asked late in the afternoon on one of our early November hunts. He’d been studying the land through his 20x60 Swarovski. “I think there’s a good whitetail buck running a doe through the wolf willows just below them. I saw big antlers. You ready to go?”

He straps on his pack, tightens his belt and proceeds to eat up three-feet of frozen Alberta with each stride. And those strides come quickly. Over a grassy rise and down a snowy drift. Through a field of short, rusty sedges. Around a high cutback at the bend of a creek.

Hunting partner Rob Lancellotti and I are sweating to keep up. Leaping rock-to-rock through a riffle, weaving through whipping willow saplings, powering over a low ridge. When we stop to glass, Andre’ doffs his wool Stormy Kromer cap to release the steam.



We've come a mile and a half in 20 minutes. On the way we bumped six whitetails and two bands of mule deer, unconcerned with their flight because it was away from the buck we wanted.

Despite our speed, we just missed the big buck. He broke from the far side of the wolf willows, chasing his flighty paramour as she attempted to escape his ardor. She raced toward aspen stands high on the eastern ridge.

"We'll never catch them now," I moaned.

"Unless she circles back," Rob said. She didn't.

"But it was a good chase, eh?" Andre' said, slapping Rob on the back, his toothy grin glowing in the dusk. "I thought we had him 'till she broke out on the far side."

That enthusiasm, coupled with the chance to hunt whitetails and mule deer at the same time, keeps me rebooking with Willow Creek Outfitters. Two-species hunts are a rarity in North America these days but a tradition going clear back to the mountain men. If you've ever felt the frustration of sneaking within easy range of a massive whitetail while hunting mule deer, or vice versa, you'll appreciate a dual-tag hunt in Alberta.

Rob and I saw our first big mule deer buck at last light of our first day with Andre'. Tines and points emerged like thorns from thick main beams. The rut-besotted buck stood dumbly at the side of the road with a band of does.

"That's what we're looking for!" I hissed. "Big and drugged out on testosterone."

"Yeah, and three miles from land I have permission to hunt. He might drift over there before the week's out, though."

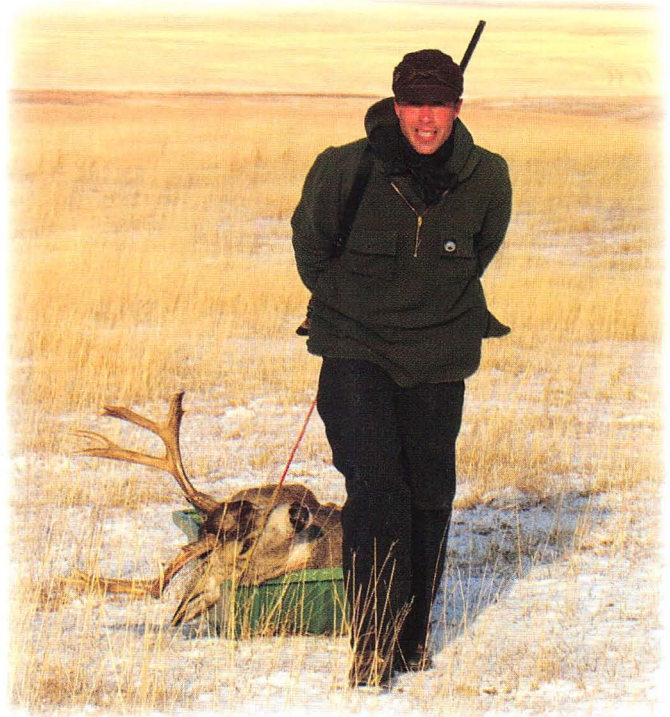
Andre' must have been an Old Testament prophet in a former life. Five days

later we spotted that buck in a basin we had permission to hunt. He was with another big buck plus 36 other deer in one big, grassy bowl. We had a half-hour left in our hunt.

"Let's go, let's go!" Andre' hissed, throwing his pack on his back and caution to the wind. This was no time for a mincing stalk. Just grab your gun and run, hoping dusk and the confusion of the rut would provide cover. Deer were feeding, walking and chasing everywhere. The three of us dashed into the basin, crossed erosion channels, hugged what cover we could. Does and fawns leaped and ran.

"There they are!" Andre dropped to his knees and pulled out his rangefinder as both of the big bucks walked out of a shallow draw.

"How far?" I asked as I sat, spread the shooting



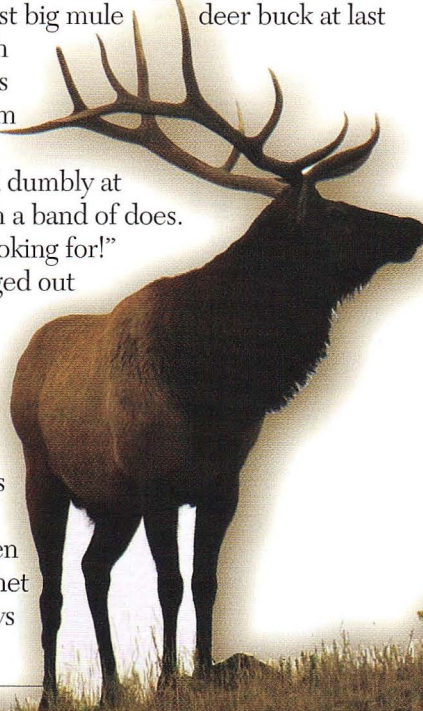
sticks under the rifle and rammed a 30-06 round into the cold chamber.

"Two hundred eighty-seven yards."

The instant the Swarovski Plex reticle hovered on the biggest buck's massive shoulder, I held my breath and squeezed. The Remington bucked and the 150-grain Scirocco landed with a resonating whop. The buck collapsed in a heap. His partner bounced a few yards, stopped and looked at his fallen comrade.

"Use my sticks!" I handed my tripod rest to Rob. He was just getting settled when Andre' sounded a warning.

"Your buck's getting up. Ron! Shoot him again!" Rob tossed the





sticks back to me. By the time I was reloaded and ready, my “dead” deer was at 300 yards and lumbering down a low ridge, shading slightly to the right. Half his blocky body was already out of view when I held just off his right flank and fired.

In my mind’s eye I saw the bullet arc over the intervening ridgetop. But that’s all I saw. The buck had disappeared. A reassuring whop was the only suggestion I’d hit him again.

We found him lying in rank grass on the back side of the low ridge, massive, stinking of rut, his neck as big around as his chest. The first bullet had penetrated just under the spine, a temporary knockout punch.

The whitetail I took on that hunt was similarly hefty. Once these northern Dakota subspecies whitetails reach maturity, they bulk up like bulls. Andre’, again behind the spotting scope, spotted the five-by-five with a cluster of does. They walked behind a copse of deciduous brush about two miles back in the foothills. They didn’t emerge.

Rob Lancelotti (left) of Swarovski Optik hosted the author five years ago when he took this huge-bodied Alberta whitetail. Below: Spomer with Van Hilten on their successful deer hunt in 2013. This adventure will air on Spomer’s Winchester World of Whitetail television show.



"I almost think he laid down," Andre' mused. "Right time of day for it. Might be worth a walk out." It was.

We pushed out a pair of coyotes, then looped around a herd of angus cattle. When a doe and fawn walked out of a block of brush, we sank in the snow.

"He might be with them."

A small buck came out sniffing the does, and then a decent four-by-four that laid back his ears, raised his hair and walked the youngster away.

"That's not him. He was bigger. This doe must not be ready or he'd be here."

We waited until the band walked over a rise, then we skittered into a shallow draw bordered by tangled alders. Good cover. We pushed upward, glassing, moving and glassing again. Slowly. Methodically.

Finally: "I think I see him. Over there . . . in that highest pocket of brush."

I focused my binocular, saw a gleam of antler, a dark back line. "Oh yeah. It's a buck."

"I've got the doe. She's below him. He's just waiting on her."

We ranged the thicket they were in and I was surprised that it was just 400 yards away.

"I can shoot from here, but if we can get to the other side of the creek we'll knock off at least 50 yards."

We did, and before I could even pull up a seat to wait out the bedded buck, the four-by-four came walking back over the hill.

"Uh oh. Get ready! If he gets close to that doe . . ."

The bigger buck was way ahead of us. He rose, shook snow from his back like a wet dog and strode out to discourage the competition, exiting the downhill side of the brush. He was a clean ten-pointer, heavy with that cocky, stiff-legged walk of a mature buck. King of the hill, a northern whitetail in its prime, fat and ready for two weeks of hard rutting.

I had a clear shot at 350 yards. The 150-grain Swift Scirocco would drop just eight inches at that range, and my Remington M700 was consistently putting those sleek bullets within a half-inch of where I pointed them at 100 yards. I cranked the Z6 Swarovski to 8X, nestled the forend in the fork of my Bogpod tripod, steadied my elbows inside my knees and waited for the buck to stop walking.

The shot was a muffled pop over the snowy grassland, instantly dissipating into the vast Alberta sky, hardly enough to frighten the juncos from the brush. Hard hit, the buck rushed forward about 30 yards and crashed in a spray of snow.

The smaller buck stood transfixed, astonished, I imagined, at his unexpected power. Without even bothering to check his fallen adversary, he trotted after the doe, ready to do his part to maintain big game abundance on Alberta's spectacular Front Range. 🦌



IF YOU WANT TO GO

Contact Andre' van Hilten at (403) 549-0111 or www.willowcreekoutfitters.com for details on mixed-bag hunting in Alberta's foothills. In addition to whitetails and mule deer, Willow Creek guides for black bear, waterfowl and coyote hunting.

GEAR REVIEW

Over the years Swarovski EL 10x42 binoculars and Bushnell Elite 8x32 binoculars have helped me spot and study many animals. The 8X is handier in woods and brush, but it turns out we do 90 percent of our looking and hunting in the open grasslands where 10X is the better choice.

Because he glasses so extensively at vast distances, Andre' uses a Swarovski's 20-60X STA 65mm scope. Saves a lot of fruitless walking. Swarovski's Z6 2-12X50mm scope provided the kind of clarity, brightness and magnification I needed for that low-light, long-range mule deer. I've also had great success here with Bushnell's Elite 6500 2.5-16x42mm.

Remington's M700 SPS in 30-06 carried easily, punched 150-grain Scirocco loads into tight groups and shot more than flat enough for this open country. I used a Mossberg 4x4 bolt-action with a Winchester 130-gr. Ballistic Silvertip in 270 Win. last season to take my biggest whitetail with Andre'. Hard to top the old 270 Win. for an open-country deer cartridge.

Andre' doesn't hike a lot of steep country – just a lot of country. I found LOWA Creek II GRX boots with light insulation and Gore-Tex bootie to be "running-shoe" comfortable – dry, warm and just the right height to keep sticks and debris out. The toe rand protects nicely against abrasion, and the inset lacing hooks reinforce ankle protection.