

Sometimes, being a loner and not heeding



the advice of others can be fatal.

A RECLUSE IN

FEATHERY SEEDS OF CANADA thistle shimmered in the sunlight, looking like swatches of silvery shag carpet strewn randomly across the Alberta prairie. In the middle of one of those swatches was a glint of another sort. A forked antler sparkled like a diamond, betraying the mule deer buck bedded in the weeds below.

We'd found him. The heavy-bodied, wide-antlered buck had been a phantom for outfitter André van Hilten and his previous clients. Three bowhunters had stalked this buck and all three had failed. It was now my turn.

I was in André's truck, focused on the buck through my Leupold spotting scope, but not as mentally focused as usual. Just days before I'd been asked to be Editor of *Bowhunter Magazine*. I didn't see it coming and, like a sudden thunderstorm, it rolled through my head, lightning and all. To be honest, I still hear the thunder.

My mind drifted, asking random questions. Was I worthy of such a position? Could I handle it? Would the bowhunting community accept me as the successor to two icons, M.R. James and Dwight Schuh? How was it possible a bowhunter from North Dakota just became only the third editor of *Bowhunter Magazine*? I felt pride, humility and, yes, trepidation.

Then the buck stood up.

He did what mule deer bucks typically do when they first arise — stand statue still and carefully scan the perimeter for danger. It's as if they're waiting for an unseen predator to make a move. Then, after agonizingly long minutes, they'll conclude there's no threat and lower their shields. This behavioral tendency is a weakness that can be exploited by a patient bowhunter. If you stay hunkered down and wait for him to relax and start browsing, your odds of drawing your bow undetected increase greatly.

The buck was up but the sun was going down. If we were going to make a move, it would have to be quick. We took off across a milo field and snuck to the edge of the draw to relocate the buck.

"He's still up, but we're running out of daylight," warned André. "I think we need to back out and relocate him tomorrow."

Wise advice, and another example of the patience a mule deer hunter must possess. Forcing a bad situation risks pushing the buck out of the area. So we quietly slipped back toward the setting sun, leaving the buck undisturbed.

It was my first hunt with André, who operates Willow Creek Outfitters out of Nanton, Alberta. Earlier that day we'd covered lots of ground looking for mule deer bucks. We drove the back roads, glassed the wide-open prairie, and hiked more than a mile back into parts unseen to look for hidden bucks. We scanned the brushy draws and visually picked through every nook and cranny with our spotting scopes looking for the glint of an antler, the flick of an ear,



Outfitter André van Hilten took this photo of the Recluse, a real Alberta heavyweight, just prior to my hunt.

Story and Images by

Curt Wells, Editor

THE THISTLES

A Recluse In The Thistles

and those whitish rocks that often turn out to be the rump patch of a mule deer.

I love the treasure hunt that is mule deer hunting. You search far and wide, hoping to find "the" buck. Not necessarily a 200-incher, but a buck worthy of a stalk that could consume many hours — or an entire day — and that valued tag tucked in your pocket.

Even then the situation has to be right. A buck surrounded by seven other bucks, bedded in the middle of a field of short grass, isn't the right situation. Many other factors come into play, such as location. If you can expect to see 180-class bucks in your area you may not want to burn an entire day stalking a 140-class buck, especially early in the hunt.

What are the weather conditions? An overcast day with 15 to 20 mph winds is perfect, because the breeze will cover your noise yet it's not so strong as to make a shot difficult. Also, your camouflage is more effective in overcast light. With a bright sun at your back you'll look like a dark blob regardless of camo pattern. A light drizzle is good, but a sunny, calm day is the worst of conditions.

Dawn found us glassing the same section where we'd left the buck the night before. He was still there and, shockingly, still alone!

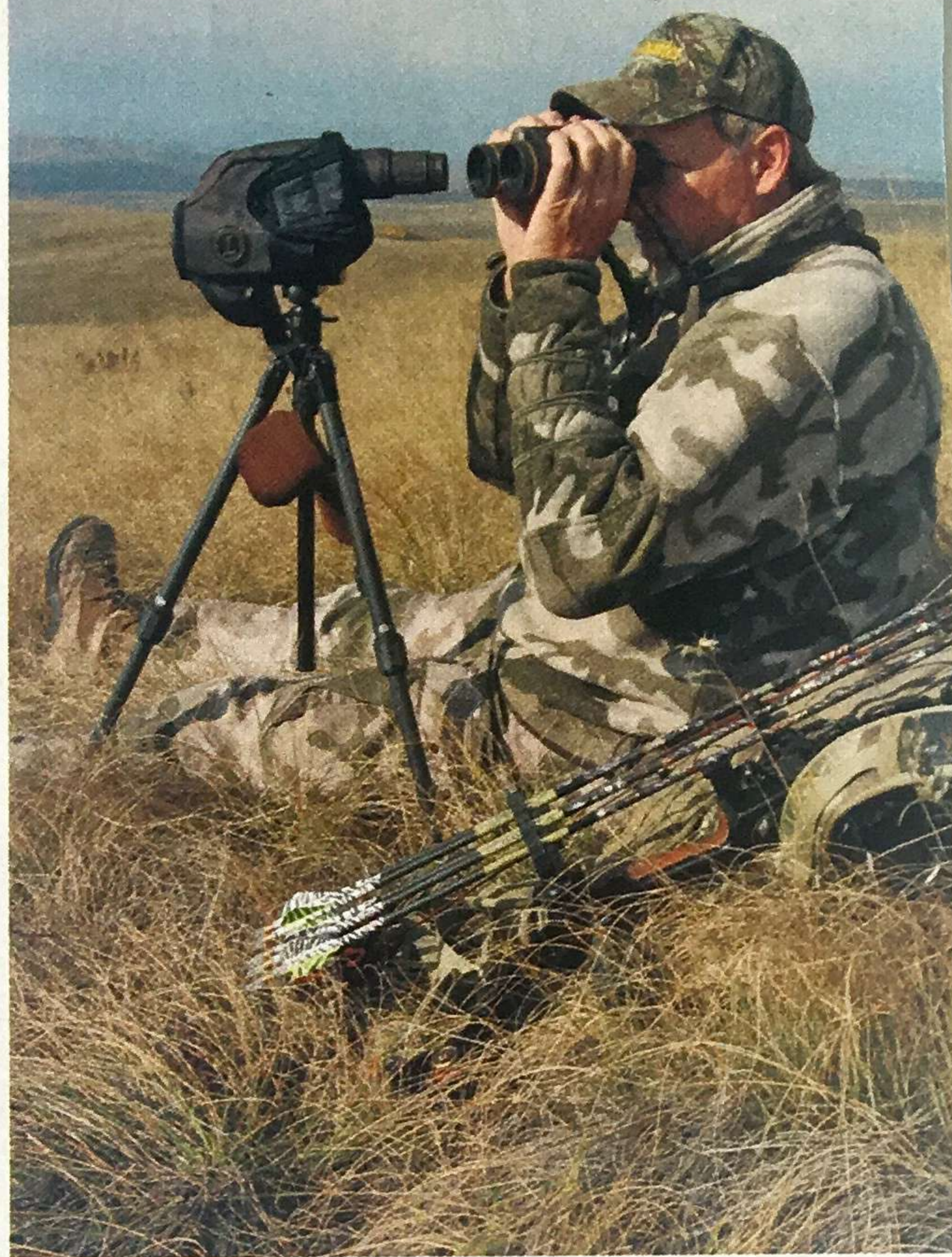
Here again, patience plays a huge role. It was 7:30 a.m. when we decided to camp out on the buck. We watched his every move in the spotting scope and kept him in sight until he finally plopped down in a thick patch of thistles at 9 a.m.

Unfortunately, the buck wasn't visible, even a little bit. The air was dead calm. The thistles were dry and crunchy. The situation wasn't right. We reached deep into our well of patience and settled in for the long wait. Sooner or later the buck would get up.

The next two-plus hours involved more daydreaming about my new job, sipping water, snacking, and swapping hunting stories with André.

At 11:30 the buck rose from the weeds. We watched as he nipped buds and wandered around in the silvery thistles as if bored. More likely he was stretching his legs and looking for a fresh bed. When he found it he submerged himself along the edge of some taller thistles, but this time his left antler protruded from the weeds like a gnarly branch. As long as

Experienced mule deer hunters live behind their glass. It's one thing to locate a whole deer with binoculars but a spotting scope will help you pick out "parts" of deer.



nothing bumped him, he'd be there for a while.

Despite the lack of wind and having cameraman David Drew tagging along behind me, I decided to "give it a



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A Recluse In The Thistles

go,” as my Canadian friends would say. The odds were against me, but the tipping point was the fact this buck was still alone. That’s rare in early October. With only one pair of eyes, ears and nostrils to conquer, I had to try.

We struck out in a wide loop to get the wind in our favor and take advantage of a draw that would keep us off the skyline. With each step I questioned my decision. The thistles sounded like they

were made of glass. *Maybe I should back off*, I thought.

Then I got a break. Through binoculars, I finally spotted that gnarly branch in the sea of thistles. Relocating an animal after approaching from a different angle is always a challenge. Prior to the stalk I’d carefully noted several landmarks, slight as they may be on the prairie, and they helped me find that antler.

With the air deathly still, it was obvious I had to ditch my cameraman. When my rangefinder read 101 yards to the antler, I told David to set up on the

slope of the hill and videotape the action from there. If I could crawl through the thistles alone, I might have a chance.

As I crawled away on a beeline for the gnarly branch, I picked up movement in the bottom of the draw 200 yards to the east. Several unseen does were up and moving, and they were trouble. It was a matter of time before they picked me off.

Through my binoculars I could see the buck’s antler bobbing as he chewed his cud, completely oblivious to the predator in the grass, who was now 75 yards away. When one of the distant does spotted me I took my hat off and waved it, hoping to startle them enough that they’d run out of the draw without alerting the buck.

Well, if you’ve ever tried to push pronghorns in a specific direction, you know what happened next. The deer did just the opposite of what I wanted them to do. They trotted toward us and actually ran around behind David, snorting at both of us. The buck got up, but he was unconcerned with the commotion and started browsing again.

When the does saw the buck, they ran right down to him, got in his face, and seemed to say, “Hey, dummy! Get out of here! There’s a two-legged predator in the grass right over there!” I thought I saw one of the does point at me with a hoof. Or maybe not.

The buck simply blew them off, barely lifting his head to acknowledge their presence. This boy was a recluse.

Frustrated, the gaggle of seven does and fawns left the buck to his peril, sauntered over for one last snort at my head sticking out of the thistles, and then trotted over the horizon, much to my relief.

We were back to a game of one-on-one.

If you’re not aware, Canada thistle is a noxious weed that’s also obnoxious if you’re trying to crawl through it. Tiny thorns penetrate clothing and skin with ease and it’s noisy when dry. Crawling through it is not at all fun.

Just one large patch of thistle stood between the buck and me, but he was feeding away and I couldn’t keep up. Then, inexplicably, he turned 180 degrees and started browsing back toward me!

Watching those wide, heavy antlers glide above the thistles straight at me was thrilling, and I loved it. But the predator in me was analyzing the situation. I had to somehow range the beast while keeping my head down, adjust my position to his line of travel, nock an arrow, and decide when to draw.

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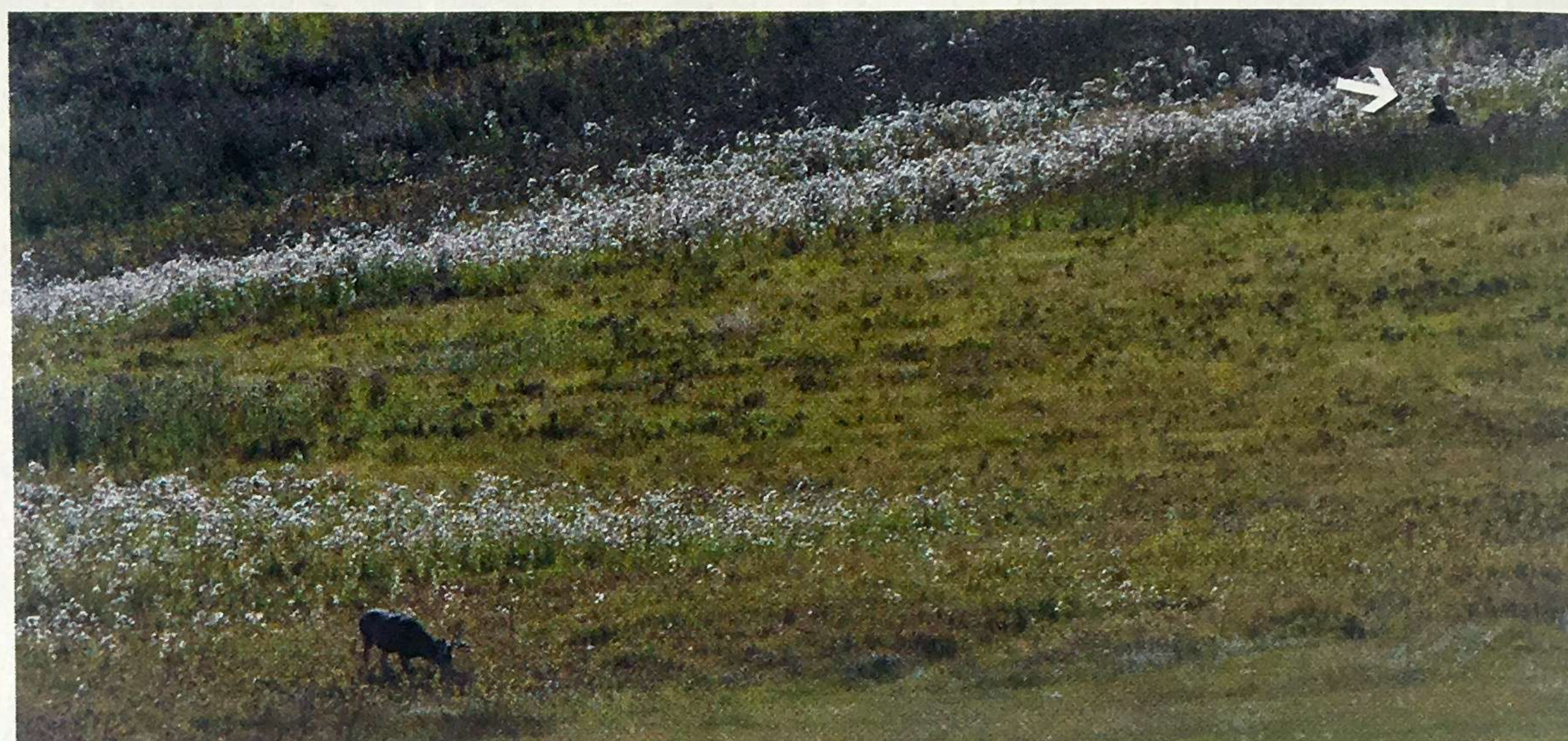
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Using my camera and telephoto lens, my guide, André van Hilten, snapped these photos during my stalk. Above, the buck is nestled in the thistles while I am lurking just 75 yards uphill. When the rambunctious does started snorting at my cameraman and me the buck stood up but seemed utterly unconcerned with the commotion.

At one point the buck put his head down. So I seized the opportunity, rose up on my knees, and ranged his back. Twenty-one yards. One problem solved.

I had already turned 90 degrees to the buck so my left side faced him, and an arrow lay on the rest ready for launch. Anticipating his direction of travel, I could see a narrow lane where the thistles thinned out. It was my only chance for a clear shot.

Just when I thought everything was going smoothly, the buck picked out the top of my head. I could only see his antlers, but I could tell he was looking at me and getting nervous. Our non-eye-con-

tact stare down lasted long enough that I was pretty sure both our temples were now pounding with every heartbeat.

When the buck turned his antlers to the left I started to draw, but he snapped his head around and I froze. He was baiting me.

The next time he turned his head I got to full draw. His stiff-legged gait would take him quickly through my lane. So before he could turn nervousness into

This photo (r) shows how the does did their best to warn the buck of the danger but he kept feeding. Finally the does gave up trying to save the buck's life, and after trotting by to snort at me one last time they left us to a game of one-on-one.





The Recluse had a 30" outside spread and was right in the 170 range. My guide, André van Hilten, a man who knows his mule deer, estimated the buck's live weight at 275 lbs. We felt every pound as we dragged him away from the refuge of the thistles.

flight, I settled my pin and touched off the release. I don't know if I pulled the shot high or if he dropped, but my arrow severed his spine. A finishing arrow put an end to one of the most exhilarating and rewarding stalks I've ever experienced.

My treasure hunt had spanned nearly

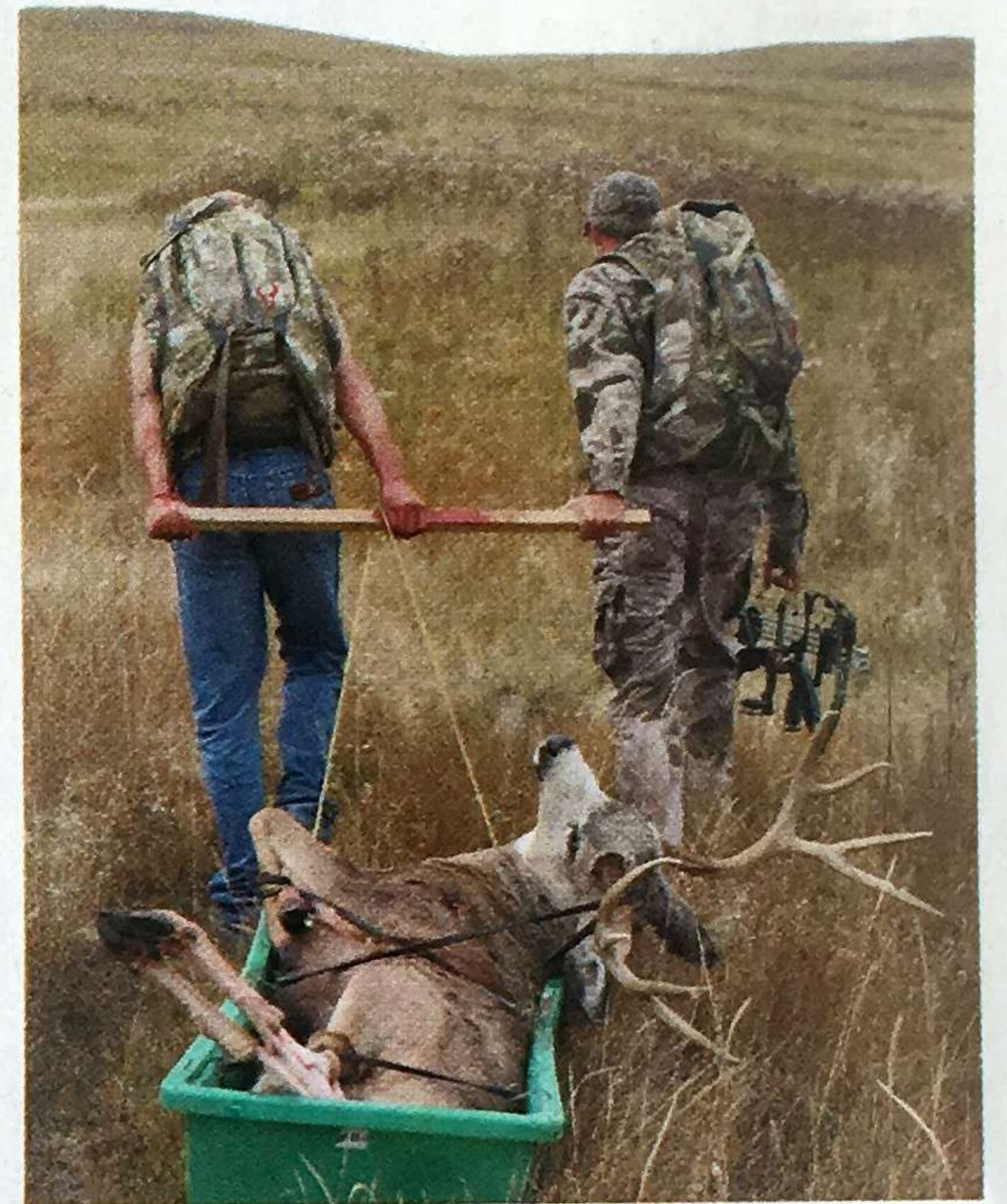
seven hours and taken me deep into the silvery thistles where I found a recluse whose failure to heed a warning cost him his life.

I had a new career and now a gorgeous muley buck.

At that moment, greater riches were unimaginable. ««

AUTHOR'S NOTES: On this hunt I used a Mathews Z7 at 70 lbs., Carbon Express arrows, Spot-Hogg sight, Rage Two-Blade Titanium broadheads, and Leupold optics. My clothing consisted of Cabela's Microtex in Outfitter Camo, Under Armour base layers, and Danner Pronghorn boots.

I always enjoy hunting with a guide that knows exactly what he's doing, and André van Hilten qualifies. If you'd like to book a mule deer hunt with André, contact him at (403) 646-3228 or visit www.willowcreek-outfitters.com.



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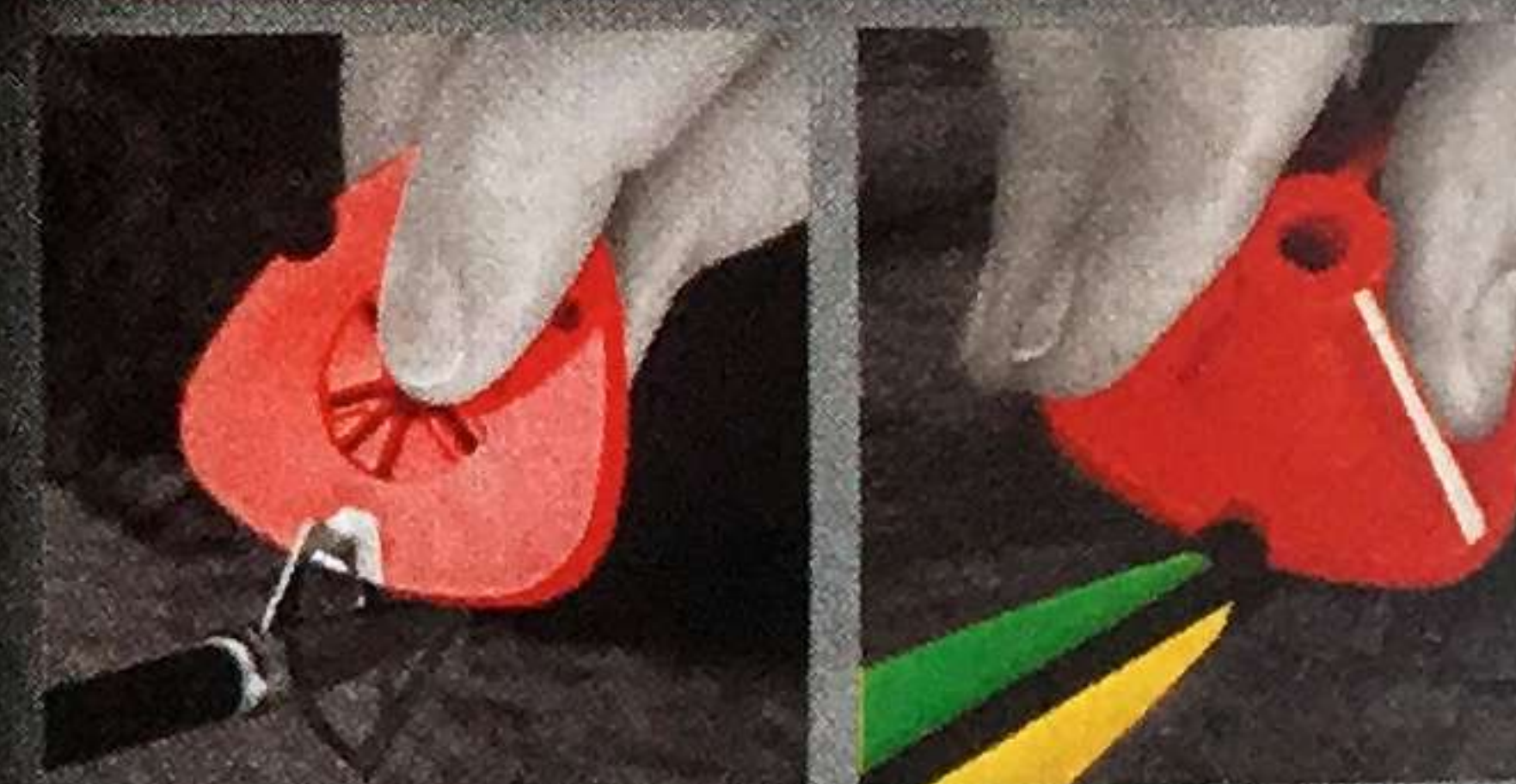
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