

Marathon Muleys

Tall, dark and
horn-some,
Alberta mule
deer are what
spot-and-stalk
dreams are
made of.

Text and photos
by *NAH* Editor
Gordy Krahn



"KEEP YOUR STICK ON THE ICE, EH?" Kelly Wiebe signed off and stashed his cell phone back in its cubby hole. He turned and raised his eyebrows as he dropped the pickup in gear and continued down the gravel road. "That was Andre," he said. "A local shot that big muley with double drop-tines. He saw it in the back of a pickup at the gas station in town."

Kelly, my guide for an 8-day Alberta mule deer/whitetail combo rifle hunt, had told me about the buck he and Andre, his boss, had seen several times that summer and during bow season—a non-typical 180-class bruiser on property where we had permission to hunt. I could feel Kelly's disappointment, but having hunted with him before, I was pretty sure he had a Plan B. Actually, we were lucky Andre had spotted the buck or else we might have wasted valuable time chasing its ghost.

Plan B turned out to be a heck of a hike. "It's about 7 miles from here to the next road over, and there's no motorized traffic allowed on this block of land," Kelly said as we exited the truck at first light. Remington's Linda Powell was my hunting partner, and we got our gear together while Kelly pumped us up for the climb. "It's a pretty good haul for the first mile or so, but then it levels off on top where we can do some glassing," Kelly hoisted his frame pack, and Linda and I fell in line.

It had the makings of a perfect day, with temps in the 40s and a stiff, cool wind—ideal for spot-and-stalk hunting. The pockmarked foothills of the southwestern Alberta landscape provided those hidey-holes mature mule deer crave ... and sneak-and-peek hunters drool over. The rugged snow-capped Rockies provided a breathtaking backdrop that continually drew my eye westward.

By 3 p.m., with less than 2 hours of daylight remaining, we'd zig-zagged across miles of the rolling landscape, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking about the truck ... which was, by my best dead-reckoning, about 3 miles to the east. That's why I shot Linda a puzzled look when Kelly took a western tact toward the waning sun. He must have

noticed my hesitation. "There's a deep bowl I want to check out before we call it a day," he said without breaking stride. "There have been a couple of good bucks hanging out back there, and we have just enough time to check it out."

It's funny. You can glass bucks all day, sizing them up, trying to grow inches on the close ones. But when you finally see a mature, shooter buck there's no hesitation, and a course of action is quickly, if not frantically, taken.

"We need to shoot that buck!" Kelly voiced precisely what I was thinking. There were a half-dozen deer milling around in the bottom of the bowl 600 yards away. A beast of a buck was pestering an uncooperative doe, and all of them were oblivious to the fact they were being watched. The sun was just clipping the tip of a snow-capped peak. It was time to get moving.

This Country Screams Mule Deer!

Southwestern Alberta, as it morphs from rolling agriculture fields and pastureland to the Rocky Mountain foothills, provides the quintessential Western spot-and-stalk backdrop. The terrain actually screams *mule deer!* Linda and I were hunting with Willow Creek Outfitters, where Kelly's been a guide for 5 years. I'd hunted coyotes with Kelly 2 years ago, and as good as it was for coyotes, I knew I had to come back for the mule deer. And you want to talk bonus? I also had a whitetail tag in my wallet. Alberta allows non-resident hunters to shoot a buck of each species.

Kelly grew up in the region and says what stands out in contrast to a lot of other areas he's hunted is the terrain. "You don't have grid roads every mile, which means there are large blocks of land accessible only on foot," he said. "You have to lace up your boots and be an extreme rifleman."

While we spent some of our time glassing winter wheat and CRP fields, Kelly warned that many hunters often become too focused on agricultural land. "Sure, the crops affect deer concentrations and their movement to a degree, but probably not as much as some

USING REFERENCE POINTS FOR GLASSING

EFFECTIVELY HUNTING BIG SKY COUNTRY REQUIRES good optics, pure and simple. By letting your eyes do the lion's share of the "walking," you can conserve precious energy by saving your stalking efforts for when it counts. Good optics provide a one-two-three punch: high-quality binoculars for locating game; a powerful spotting scope to size up trophy potential; and a reliable riflescope for the moment of truth.

But even the best equipment will take you only so far. After that, it comes down to technique, and effective glassing often sets the tone for a successful hunt. And glassing big country requires a partnership between hunter and guide. Using my Alberta hunt as an example, I have a good eye for spotting mule deer at a distance, but lack the experience to definitively field judge them from a half-mile away. Kelly, on the other hand, can pick apart antlers from that distance and beyond. So, it's critical that I'm able to share information about what I see with my guide.

When I'm glassing a large area, I pick orientation objects on the horizon and glass in quadrants from those references. If I spot a deer, or something that looks like a deer, I scan back up to the horizon and find my reference. From there I can readily find the deer again, and, more importantly, I can relay that information to my guide.

In Alberta it generally went something like this: "Kelly, do you see that lone pine, the tallest one on the horizon, to the left of that rock outcropping? Drop down about 100 yards to the left where that yellow grass meets those bushes. Is that a good buck?"

"You mean that little forkhorn? I can break out the spotting scope if you like."

"Never mind."—GORDY KRAHN

ALBERTA OPTICS BAG: BY SWAROVSKI

BINOS: EL 10X32mm

SPOTTING SCOPE: ATS 65

RIFLESCOPE: Z6 1.7-10X42mm



CLICK WEB EXTRAS AT
HUNTINGCLUB.COM
for information on Swarovski optics.

‘We need to get moving before he drifts out of sight!’ Kelly grabbed my elbow and pulled me forward. Wow! I didn’t know it was possible to shout and whisper simultaneously. Kelly dropped to his butt and began sliding down the face of the hill and I followed suit, never taking my eyes off the buck.

people think,” he said. “A lot of the deer happily survive on natural browse, and a big buck is going to be wherever he is.” And that, Kelly says, means hiking back into huge tracts of road-less land where deer can go about their dawn-to-dusk business undisturbed.

And that’s where physical fitness can make or break your hunt. “Physical conditioning is important,” Kelly said. “You don’t have to be the fastest horse on the track as long as you get to the finish line, and that requires a combination of physical fitness and mental toughness.”

The physical part you can train for, by hiking and climbing ... preparing for the conditions in the field. The

mental part you might have to dig deep for. Being physically fit will go a long way toward giving you confidence in tackling arduous cross-country treks. I found that slow and steady was a good approach. The beauty of spot-and-stalk hunting is that while you put in a lot of foot-miles, you also take extended breaks to glass for deer. Be sure to carry enough water to stay hydrated. High-calorie snacks will keep your engine purring.

And this is open country so become intimate with your rifle. Be prepared to shoot 300 yards or more; knowing where your bullets will hit at extended ranges is a must. This should be accomplished at the range prior to the hunt,

but don’t spend all of your time taking those feel-good shots from the bench. Get down on your shooting sticks or prone on a daypack for a more realistic test of what you’ll face in the field.

Kelly summed it up: “It’s really a combination of being able to shoot well, physical and mental conditioning ... and a bit of luck. You put a good guide together with a prepared hunter, and good things are going to happen.”

Butt-slide Buck

“We need to get moving before he drifts out of sight!” Kelly grabbed my elbow and pulled me forward. Wow! I didn’t know it was possible to shout and whisper simultaneously. Kelly dropped to his butt and began sliding down the face of the hill and I followed suit, never taking my eyes off the buck. Kelly called out the yardage as we closed ground, trying to keep scant patches of cover between us and the deer.

“How far, Kelly?”

“He’s at 430 yards,” Kelly ranged the buck. “How close do you need to get to be comfortable?”

“In this wind, 300 yards,” I returned, knowing he probably wouldn’t like my answer.

“We’d better keep moving,” he said, and we continued our butt-walk down the hill. The buck and doe were now splitting away from the other deer and picking up the pace. We did the same.

“Three-hundred-eighty yards, can you take the shot?”

“If we can get down to that bench,” I pointed 40 or 50 yards downhill. Kelly didn’t respond, he just slid down to the shelf and threw his frame pack out in front of him. I slipped by him, pushed my rifle forward and settled in. “How far?”

“Three-thirty-six.”

I found an opening in the grass, just as the doe passed through, and then slid the rifle safety forward. The buck followed

TAKING IT TO THE EXTREME

EXTREME CONDITIONS CALL FOR EXTREME equipment, and Remington’s latest addition to its Model 700 lineup, the XHR (Xtreme Hunting Rifle) is tailor-made for the rifleman (or woman) who has a passion for hunting the backcountry.

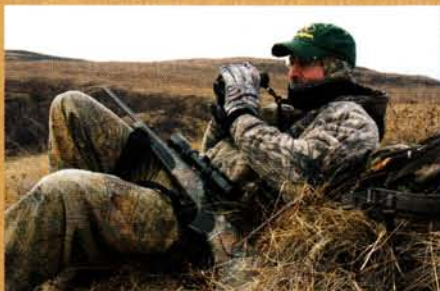
Linda Powell, senior public relations manager for Remington Arms, gave me the conceptual lowdown on the new rifle during

one of our lengthy glassing sessions in Alberta. “What we’re doing is segmenting part the Model 700 line to target hard-core hunters by adding features that will provide an advantage in the varied conditions they might face in the field,” she said. The XHR, Linda says, is geared toward big game hunters who typically put in a lot of foot-miles and want a low-maintenance rifle that can handle tough in-the-field conditions.

But what really hits you when you pick up this rifle is the “cool factor”—the Realtree AP HD finish, rubberized grip panels and the unusual barrel. “The first thing everyone notices is the triangular barrel,” Linda said, “which is actually a new style of fluting designed by Remington. This allows us to start with a heavier barrel, which is inherently more accurate, and then remove weight from three sides to reduce the overall weight of the rifle. So what you end up is a rigid, fluted barrel that’s more accurate than a standard barrel of equal weight.”

The Model 700 XHR features a durable, weather-resistant synthetic stock, and Remington’s patented SuperCell recoil pad, which is composed of millions of polymer cells that work to displace recoil over a longer period of time. For 2009, the XHR is available in nine popular cartridges ranging from .243 Win. to .300 Rem. Ultra Mag—24-inch barrel on standard and belted magnums, and 26-inch barrel on the Rem. Ultra Mag.

All 2009 Model 700s and Model Sevens, including the XHR, will be shipped with Remington’s new externally adjustable trigger, set to 3½ pounds at the factory. It can be easily adjusted down to 2½ pounds by the consumer. For more information on Remington’s new XHR, visit HuntingClub.com and click “Web Extras.”—GORDY KRAHN



Remington’s new Model 700 Xtreme Hunting Rifle is tailor-made for backcountry hunting.



Guide Kelly Wiebe was quick to congratulate Remington's Linda Powell on her fine Alberta mule deer, but not as eager to embrace the moment with the author.

close behind, pausing momentarily in my shooting lane. The math was a wash: The bullet would drop several inches, but the sharp decline would cancel most of it. I held dead on and pulled the trigger.

The buck lurched at the shot and spun around in a circle, clearly hit. The bullet had drifted a bit to the right (oops, forgot to figure in windage), punching the buck's front shoulder midway up the body. I sent a follow-up shot for good measure and put him down for the count. Butt sore, I stood up and shook off the adrenaline. Kelly slapped me on the back and we started down the hill.

It was 4 p.m. and we had just enough light to take pictures and butcher the buck. We packed the meat into Kelly's frame pack, and I hoisted the head and cape up onto my shoulders for the long hike in the dark back to the truck. It was 7 p.m. when we got there, dog tired but happy as clams.

The author with his backcountry Alberta buck. He's still pulling cactus spines from his backside, the result of a 300-yard butt-crawl to get into range.

Tough Buck

I still had a whitetail tag—so did Linda for that matter—but we decided to remain focused on muleys. We had 7 days left to hunt, which felt like all the time in the world. The whitetails could wait.

During the next 5 days, we experienced three distinctly different weather

patterns. Chinook winds, snow, warm temps, cold temps, heavy fog and a dash of bad luck all conspired to keep Linda buck-less. Even so, we sized up several decent bucks, but Linda held her ground. We had plenty of time.

When I got up on the morning of Day No. 6, I thought to myself, *This is it, Linda's going to shoot a buck today.* There was a skiff of snow on the ground and it was windless, with temps in the low 20s. Kelly decided we'd try a new area, and it immediately turned out to be a good call. Less than an hour from the truck we spotted a shooter buck, and I fell back while Linda and Kelly slipped into a deep ravine to try to sneak closer.

Four hours later, we were still trying to get into position. The buck was with a group of does, and they were constantly on the move. Finally, the deer held up in a small woodlot, and our long stalk ended with a suspenseful 260-yard shot after a 30-minute standoff. Linda was all smiles when we climbed out of our hidey-hole and hiked over to her well-earned buck. The 2½-hour hike out with her deer was a fitting end to the cross-country pursuit. 🐾

