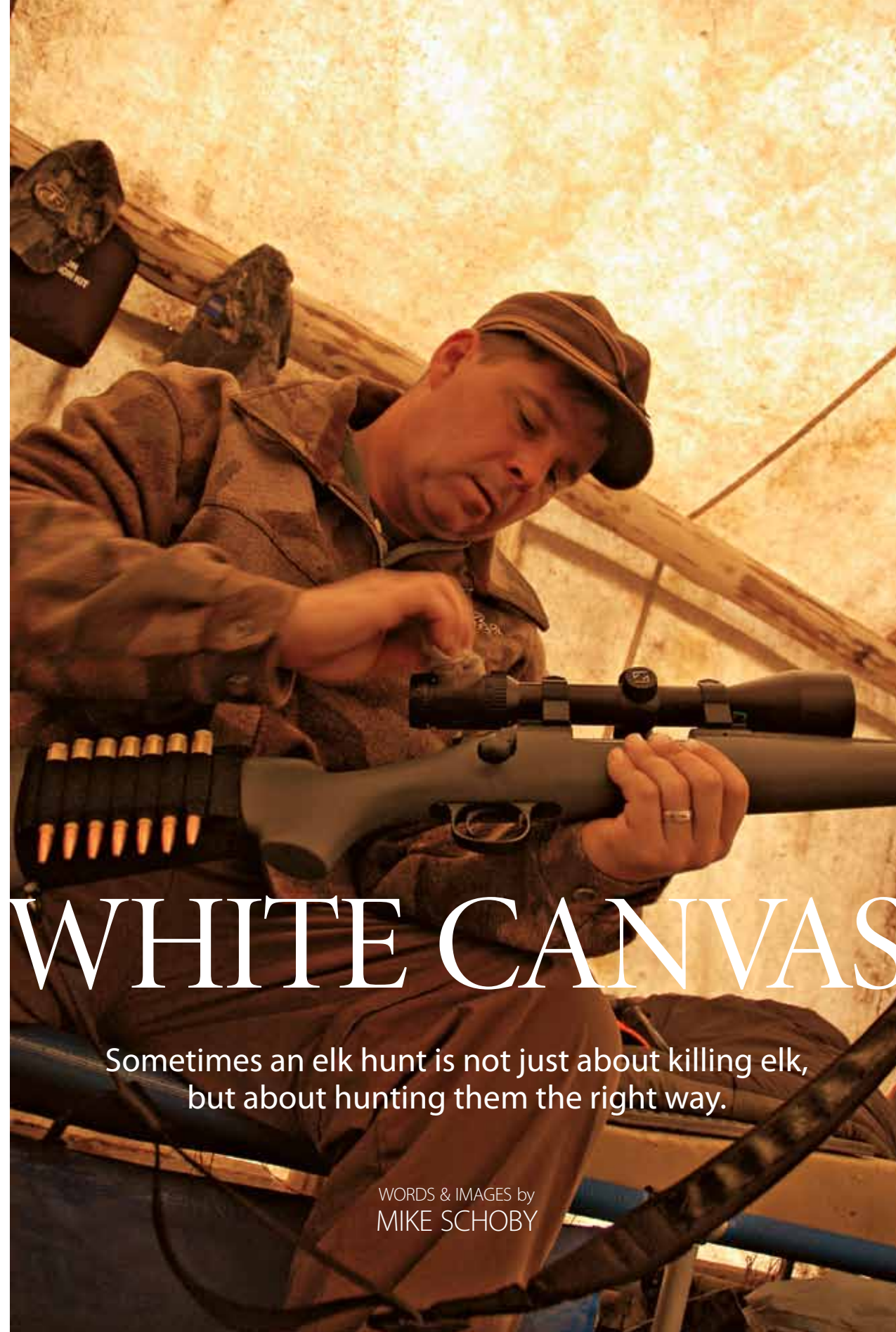


BIG MOUNTAINS



WHITE CANVAS

Sometimes an elk hunt is not just about killing elk,
but about hunting them the right way.

WORDS & IMAGES by
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THE cow elk slowly fed through the thick underbrush, alternately grazing on green shoots and browsing on salmon berry leaves. She paused with her head down, and I raised the .50 Thompson/Center Hawkins muzzleloader. The click of the hammer alerted her, and her head shot skyward. It was too late. The 370-grain lead slug was already on its way and caught her full in the shoulder. She dropped at the shot; she was my first elk. Elated, I looked over my shoulder and waved at my dad, who was watching through the kitchen window. That was the first of several elk to get shot in our rural garden, and from that point on, I was enamored with hunting them. However, even as young as I was, I knew it wasn't a true elk hunt.

There were no horses, no wall tents, no pack strings leading into the mountains, grizzly bears or mystery—just elk, sometimes lots of elk and occasionally big elk, which was enough. I tried to convince myself that elk had

changed in modern times and wilderness hunts were a thing of the past, and to a degree they are. Like many other game species, elk have learned to adapt to man. Since that first garden elk, I've killed more elk within sight of a road, house or, in one isolated incident, a subdivision, than I ever have in true wilderness. However, true wilderness hunts do still exist, and they called to me.

The dream of a classic wilderness elk hunt on horseback never really went away; it just lay dormant, festering, waiting to resurface. A wilderness hunt is more than about just hunting off horses; it is *having* to hunt off horses that makes it different. It's like my good friend Dwight Van Brunt says about elephant culling belts: There is a big difference between *owning* an elephant culling belt and *needing* an elephant culling belt. The difference is in semantics, but there is a difference. There are many places through the West where elk are pursued atop a mount, but in most cases it isn't necessary.

Even in big woods areas, many hunters go after elk from trailheads, making long day hunts, but returning to the comfort of a campground or RV at day's end. For the few who do get into the backcountry, more often than not it is by four-wheeler. To get the true elk experience I always

dreamed of, I needed to head into a designated wilderness area in a manner that was employed generations ago.

My buddy Bob Kaleta has a pretty good life. When he isn't developing new products for Zeiss, he is usually at a trade show showing them off. At the shows he gets to spend a few days to a week, which he often spends talking to the hunting outfitter next to him. Year after year he sees which ones stay in business and which ones quietly disappear. Over the years, he has developed a pretty good nose for sniffing out who's legit and who's all hat with no horse.

So it was with no surprise that last year Bob called and said, "Hey, I am at the Harrisburg trade show visiting with a Montana outfitter. I think I am going to book an elk hunt with him. What do you think?"

"Where does he outfit out of?" I replied. "The Bob Marshall Wilderness."

With my heart missing a beat, I said, "Not only would I encourage you to go, ask if he has two spots. I want in." He did, and we booked.

That September our trip started off in Snowslip, Montana, a wide spot in the road between Kalispell and the entrance to Glacier National Park. While a dying place now, 100 years ago this burg was home to gamblers, sporting gals, lawmen, railroad workers and murderers. Now, next to the one bar/restaurant, it is not home to much other than Snowy Springs Outfitters—and I'm guessing that's the way the owner, Shawn Little, likes it.

Snowy Springs base camp is surrounded by classic elk country, and as a



The best elk hunts involve sleeping in a remote wall tent, rising to a morning of mountains and enough campfire coffee to fuel an army.

testament to it we watched a bull with a herd of cows feeding quietly on the hillside above the ranch house as we prepared panniers with gear and food for the backcountry. The following morning we departed for Shawn's camp in the middle of the Great Bear Wilderness, a wilderness area adjacent to the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex. Situated along the banks of a small tributary creek to the Middle Fork of the Flathead, the wall tent camp was 22 miles from the nearest trailhead—one long day's ride.

The camp itself spoke volumes of the operation. It was neat, orderly and in good condition, expectations we discovered Shawn kept not only for camp, but for his entire operation. The three-man crew knew their stuff. Part

guide, part horse wrangler, part packer and part entertainer, Shawn's younger brother, Scott, managed horses and people with equal ease. In the cook tent, Tiki, who looked like a modern-day mountain man, made camp fare a work of art. From griddle cakes cooked over the woodstove to gourmet Dutch oven dinners, Tiki was an old hand in the kitchen. In fact, they were all technically old hands.

"We have been at this awhile, going on 25 years together," Shawn confided in me one night when I voiced my amazement at how effortlessly things ran. With a chuckle he continued, "Oh, we had our times, didn't we, Tiki? Remember that time up in the north fork drainage when we had the biggest horse string pile-up of all time?"

With a wink and a laugh, Teak nodded his head. "Yup, we had horses tangled around every tree and gear thrown from there til Kalispell. We were pretty green when we started. It's amazing we survived the first few seasons." *Humility and age*, I thought to myself, the two things that make for a great outfitter.

The night grew long, stories were told around the fire, and I saw the bottom of my tin cup more than once. Staring up

at Montana's famous stars, I counted the minutes until the morning.

Predawn in a Rocky Mountain elk camp is something special. It is the glow of a lantern burning in the cook tent, the smell of coffee percolating and the wood smoke of the cook stove. It is

the sounds of horses being saddled and men getting ready for the day ahead. A quick bite of smoked bacon, buckwheat pancakes coated in butter and real Vermont maple syrup, a pile of eggs on toast (calories are forgotten with the knowledge that they will be more than expended).

Saddling up in the dark, we gave the horses their head and let them climb. The trail was steep and

rough, going straight up the ridgeback in front of the camp. For the first of many times, I was thankful for the strength of the horses. Accessing this country would be extremely difficult without them. Old-growth timber gave way to aspen groves, which gave way to

Even in **BIG WOODS** areas, many hunters go after elk from trail- heads, making long day hunts.



granite as we approached timberline and crested over to the next valley.

The horses were winded as we let them water, then tied them up to stunted trees. Grabbing a rifle and an elk bugle, we snuck into a draw. Once in place, Shawn let out a long, drawn-out bugle, and somewhere way down in the valley a bull answered, then another, then another—the last much closer.

We slipped deeper into the dark timber with the bull still bugling. Bob and I set up facing opposite draws, confident the bull would show himself. Shawn bugled and cow-called. We got responses, but they were farther away. As the cool went out of the morning air, the bulls went silent. We patiently waited for one to sneak in, but none ever showed. Hiking out of the canyon took most of the afternoon. Back in the saddle, we rode to camp, arriving just after dark.

Days rolled together much in the same vein. On day four Shawn pulled me aside and said, “Would you like to hunt by yourself?”

“Would I? It would make the trip,” I said.

While I liked Shawn’s company, there is nothing more enjoyable than hunting elk by yourself. He continued, “You’ve got an idea of the country and can handle a horse. Pack your GPS, but more important, stay in this valley. If you follow the river, it’s impossible to get lost. Work up to its head, five to six miles from here.

Traditionally, there has always been a good herd of elk up there, and we haven’t disturbed them this season.”

The next morning I saddled my horse and rode up and over the steep ridge that would put me into the river valley. Upon reaching the valley, I tied my horse and moved off on foot still-hunting, slowly glassing for elk in open burns in the early-morning light.

I heard the bull before I caught sight of him. A thin, wavering bugle, almost lost on the wind, echoed through the valley once, then again. Through my binocular I made out his tawny yellow hide and heavy rack just as he ghosted from an open meadow to the dark timber, head thrown back, doggedly following a cow.

A dozen cows milled in the opening, feeding in the early-morning shadows. Being more than 1,000 yards away, I had to cover some country to even think about a shot. The country ahead of me was steep and tough going. It was an old burn with plenty of blow-downs and shin-tangle to make it tough going. With little cover, I

got as low as possible and started sneaking to the group of feeding cows. The bull was no longer in sight, but I knew he wouldn’t be far away. After cutting the distance to 400 yards, I was caught out in the open when the cows quit feeding and started to mill around. I took off my pack, hunkered down prone and got ready.

The bull suddenly emerged, drifting through the timber like a ghost. My Zeiss rangefinder spit out a distance of 467 yards. I was shooting a Kimber 8400 in .300 Win. Mag. topped with a Zeiss Rapid-Z Ballistic reticle scope, but I didn’t feel good about the shot. The animal was moving, there was a crosswind, and the range was long. About then the bull disappeared back into the dark timber, making my decision for me. One sentry cow stayed in the fringe of the timber and bedded down in the shadow of a large shrub overlooking the opening. The rest of the herd was out of sight in the timber, I assumed bedding down for the day.

I had the wind in my favor, but it was changing rapidly as the sun heated the surrounding mountains. Sneaking back the way I came, I quickly got out of sight from the lone cow and circled downwind, dropping elevation and getting closer all the time. Within an hour I was peering into the heavy timber. The herd must be close. Occasionally, I would get a whiff of their musky smell. Quietly entering the timber with them, I knew the odds



A heavy wilderness mule deer, and a great bull elk made the Montana hunt special. The grizzly on the elk carcass made the hunt complete.

of success would be low. One false move, one errant gust of wind and it was over. It was a game of inches—one slow step at a time, freeze, slowly place a foot, feel for twigs that may break, repeat.

With every step I lifted my binocular and scanned every scrap of new property. Then it happened—an ear flicked. In timber, you seldom see the whole elk or even a recognizable portion; it is always just something that doesn’t look right. Something that is out of place. It was a bedded cow 80 yards away chewing her cud; just her head could be seen. Behind her a rear leg was sticking out of a different bed. *The bull has to be here somewhere*, I thought. I picked the timber apart branch by branch, shadow by shadow.

Then a branch moved. As if by magic, the branch morphed into a main beam.

The bull was bedded 90 yards in front of me. One main beam with its collection of points could be seen, the body and other beam were hidden behind the trunk of a tree. I waited, and after several minutes, which passed like hours, he turned, and it was easy to see his matched other side. However, there was still no shot. The wind started to swirl, and I knew with one errant whiff there wouldn’t be a shot at all, just assholes and elbows exploding out of the timber. Deciding to manufacture fate, a squeaky single-note whistle softly escaped my lips.

The reaction was as violent as it was immediate.

Thinking a spike had worked into

his herd, the bull jumped from his bed and screamed his rage for the entire forest to hear. At the moment his chest came clear of the large tree, the safety clicked off and a 165-grain Hornady GMX bullet slammed into his shoulder. The bolt cycled as if on autopilot, another bullet found the staggering bull, and he went down hard.

Walking up to the bull, I felt nothing but pride. He was a good bull. Hunted honestly. Hunted hard. Hunted by my-

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self. I wouldn’t change a thing about it. The woods were still and quiet as only autumn woods can be. The sun dotted the moss-covered logs, and it was warm enough for me to remove my jacket. Before I started quartering the bull, I sat down next to him. Lighting a cigar, I admired his ivory points and patted his muscular bulk in rapt silence. Before long it would be work—wet, bloody work. But right now it was clean and pure, no blood, just beauty. Now was the time for reflection. Time to savor a dream I had held since my youth.

Eventually, I removed the quarters and hung them a distance away from the carcass. Shouldering my rifle, I walked back out to my horse and enjoyed the long ride to camp, where I would spread

the news. The next day Shawn and I lashed panniers to sawbucks on a couple of mules and brought them into the site. Approaching the site, Shawn turned in the saddle and said, “Grab your rifle; there’s a grizzly on the carcass!” At the

same time, I saw the bear, sitting on top of a dirt pile that used to be the carcass. He woofed once and crashed off into the brush. Luckily, the quarters and cape were fine—being removed from the immediate site. Rifle at

the ready, I watched for the grizzly while Shawn loaded the quarters into the panniers. Within minutes we were back down the trail, allowing the bear his meal—a wilderness compromise, if you will.

With better than a week left in camp, my life turned to one of complete relaxation. I ended up hiking, exploring many of the old trapper’s cabin sites in the area (the Great Bear Wilderness was a trapping stronghold into the 20th century), strung a fly rod and chased the area’s many trout, even managing to shoot a good mule deer high above tree line, but that’s a story for another time.

Sometimes sitting astride a good horse, riding through the wilderness and realizing just one childhood dream is more than enough. —snowysprings.com 