

The Key to The Bob

Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness is a national treasure, but its secrets—and its game—are not easily accessed.

By Jeff Johnston, Managing Editor

Light drizzle pocked the surface of the slackwater pool, further masking the dolly varden's slide from sunken timber. I'd cast well ahead of my hovering target and let the streamer ride the current until it entered the eddy and began sinking. My pulse quickened when the fish surged from the shadows and a powerful swirl of water roiled from its reddish-orange tail. Suddenly the wavy silhouettes of my streamer and the giant bull trout became one. I yanked the rod up as if snatching a flaming pan off a hot stove, and an instant later the wooly streamer rocketed toward me. The dolly varden drifted back to its mate in the cover of its pine-shrouded nest. I could tempt neither fish again.

Sometimes, you only get one chance to strike.

In my zeal to augment dinner I'd hardly noticed the overcast October evening and the 9,000-foot-tall curtains of stone collaborating to swiftly turn day to gray. I clipped my tippet and turned to trace my tracks back along the creek, hoping to join my hunting partners for our first dinner in camp before it was served. While following the gravelly creek bank mindlessly and thinking about how lucky Americans are to still have such vast natural resources and pristine chunks of wilderness, I learned I wasn't the only one fishing for food. Intersecting my tracks were those of a giant bear. It had not been there an hour before. The imprint of its claws showed plainly: griz. The prints led up the creek bank and into the woods. I scanned and listened, trying to penetrate the dark pines that lined all sides of the creek mere

feet away. I looked over my shoulder more than once during that short hike back to camp. The thought of dinner after a long day's hunt is intriguing, but the thought of *being* dinner is exhilarating. Hunting for elk, black bears, mule deer, sheep, moose, lions and wolves, while potentially being hunted yourself, is what distinguishes Montana's wilderness from North Carolina's darkest forest. My feet were numb from the spring-fed creek by the time I rounded the last river bend and entered the homestretch.

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It was a classical Western hunting camp in every sense: Three canvas tents supported by lashed pine poles were pulled taut and staked in a meadow above a wide, shallow stream. White aspen smoke billowed from stovepipes jutting like periscopes from each,

Photo: DusanSmetana.com



with the drifting haze of smoke romantically backlit by the warm, orange glow of lantern light that radiated and danced on the translucent walls, revealing the silhouettes of everything inside. Work horses were corralled and fed up the hill near the tack tent where they whinnied occasionally upon whiff of oats or danger. A couple crazy-eyed cattle dogs hired for bear watch lay under foot and saddle, looking lazy as they snoozed anywhere warm and free of scorn while keeping an ear half-cocked and waiting for darkness—and mischief—to befall them. There was a fire ring with pink embers that cracked skyward like fireflies in the night; a mandatory though seldom used latrine and a wood pile/trophy depot that stood like a gargoyle at the rear entrance.



All these sights were encompassed by the sounds of work—soothing sounds such as Tiki, the gold-hearted camp cook talking and clanging pots as he toiled; guides tending to panniers and stock; and the din and occasional cackle of hunters doing what they always do before the hunt. Then there were the smells that accompany the aforementioned glories—of homemade biscuits, campfire smoke, sweet horse scent, sweaty leather, sappy pine and pungent sage. Mainly there was pure, pine-and-brook-muffled peace.

I entered the mess tent where the boys were talking bulls and bullets. This is the time and place where idiots expose themselves by speaking ignorantly or by bragging about past feats. This is where guides and clients bank first impressions.

Outfitter Shawn Little lounged in a camp chair opposite his hunters. He wore a white T-shirt, baggy blue jeans and dingy basketball sneakers. His dark hair was disheveled in the classic “no-time-to-care” style, and his hands were rough as rope. His voice did not boom, but was confident, self-deprecating. He was funny. He spoke more than most Western guides, which is good because most of them make a point of not saying a damn thing. He told short tales of crazy winters, tough hunts, client fiascos, elk rodeos, real rodeos, gold lore, bear run-ins and occasionally he slipped in tidbits of good bulls and bucks he’d seen recently to pique our optimism. I immediately liked him.

All listened intently as he told the legend of Slippery Bill and his penchant for stashing his loot during the gold rush days, and also of three outlaws who robbed a payroll train carrying gold, then holed up in a cave somewhere along the Middlefork River until winter delivered justice: Two of them shot each other and the third one went crazy. The cache was never recovered. Shawn pointed a hooked finger to the east and told us the mountainside was Slippery Bill’s last known camp, and it was rife with caves and stash spots. One of his guides, Logan Dresden, verified that he’d found some that warranted more exploration.

Next to him sat the other two guides,

Though trophy game isn’t behind every tree in The Bob, it’s tough to feel unlucky when the view reveals wild beauty.

Photos: Author



A wilderness hunt is long days and short nights; it’s celebrating the success of campmates; it’s resting sore legs atop scenic views; it’s learning to adapt to the personality of your horse and guide; it’s making the shot if given an opportunity; it’s mild danger and great adventure.

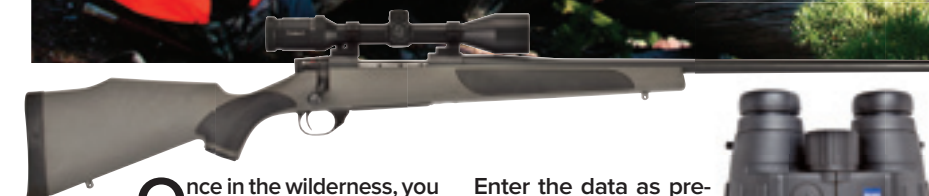
Adam Grogan and Greg Wonders. These were the guys who’d work their tails off for the next week, game killed or not, to see that we had a good time and didn’t die trying and maybe even bag and animal. On the other side of the tent at the dinner table was Bob Kaleta, of Virginia. Bob’s a friend and was responsible for assembling the hunt. He’s got a thing for big bears, and that was fine with me because I’ve got a thing for elk. There was Joseph von Benedikt, a wiry Western gun writer who wore a felt cowboy hat and looked more at ease in this country than others; and there was Luke Berger, a flatlander like myself from Oklahoma—a good dude who packed a sleeping bag the size of a commercial cookie oven.

“Catch anything?” asked Shawn, as I sat down and rummaged for a drink.

“Naw,” I said, “but I saw a couple of huge trout in the stream ... just couldn’t make ‘em bite.”

“Yeah?” he said, perking up. “What were they?”

“Looked like brown trout to me,” I said,



Once in the wilderness, you must be confident in your gear and your shooting. Shots beyond 300 yards are not uncommon.

Sure, your .270 or .308 deer rifle will work, but there are better calibers for elk. I believe a Weatherby Vanguard S2 chambered in .300 Wby. Mag. like I carried is ideal. The caliber is rivaled only by the newer .300 RUM and eclipsed only by the .30-378 Wby. in terms of .30-caliber performance. (weatherby.com)

I fired Weatherby ammo loaded with 180-grain Barnes TSX bullets. With a muzzle velocity of 3250 fps (2609 at 300 yards, and 1,987 ft.-lbs. energy at 500 yards), the rifle printed sub-inch groups. With this rig I feel I can kill anything on this planet at 500 yards or less. (barnesbullets.com)

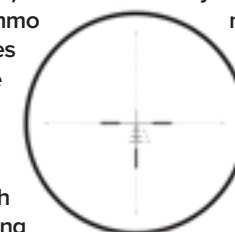
I topped the rifle with a Zeiss Conquest 3.5x-10x-44mm MC with the Rapid Z reticle system. Combined with Zeiss’ online ballistic calculator, the Rapid Z reticle is one of the most precise ballistic compensation systems available. It isn’t a substitute for actual long-range practice, but it will get you mighty close. For best results, you should actually chronograph your load, but manufacturer data can be entered automatically from the Rapid Z website. Call your outfitter or use a map to get a good estimate of the altitude and average temperature where you will hunt. Then actually measure the height from the bore to the center of your scope.

Enter the data as precisely as you can. Then click “calculate.”

For my setup, I found that with a 200-yard zero at 10x, bar No. 3 is on at 315 yards; bar No. 4 at 426; bar 5 at 546; and bar 6 at 663. (It also revealed that at 100 yards, the bullet would be 1.14 inches high.) But I want my system to be as simple as possible, so by manipulating the sight-in range, I

manually optimized the ranges to coordinate most closely with the bar number. The calculator also has an “optimize” function that does this for you, if you desire a certain bar to be zeroed at a certain distance. It sounds complicated, but actually it’s simple and in fact fun. What’s more, the Conquest scope line from this noted German optical juggernaut is surprisingly affordable.

For a bino I went top-shelf with the Victory 10x45 T RF (rangefinding) model because glassing is about 70 percent of this hunt. The downside? After using this unit for a week, I really don’t want to use anything else. It is expensive to be sure, but it is also the best: Its built-in rangefinder saves you from buying and packing yet more gear, and can help you kill game when seconds of fumbling between separate bino, rangefinder and rifle can cost you. It’s unbelievably accurate to nearly 2,000 yards. Optically, it’s a Zeiss. Enough said. (zeiss.com/sports)





Public land bulls don't often charge into the open, but if they do, you must strike quickly and admire the animal later.

more stars, all of which seem brighter, but it seems that there's more to it. In these secret places it's also quieter—so quiet that at times you can almost hear them squishing around in the dark matter. The night is so crisp and the air so thin and clear that a gin description does it no justice. The sky is brilliant with layer upon cosmic, milky layer: For once the thought of infinity becomes plausible. I don't believe I am particularly superstitious, but on the eve of a hunt when I see Orion standing over me, magnificently pointing the way with his sword of lights, I get a good feeling. To sleep in a warm canvas tent in the middle of true wilderness under mighty Orion while anticipating morning's hunt is up there on my top-10 list of the most pleasant things a man can do.

Adam was up before me—just how long I wouldn't know—and had my horse, Bunny, tethered and waiting for me. Adam is the type of guy most of us like and wish we were more like. He's young, tough, doesn't overly yap except when wanted, and he's optimistic and enthusiastic for a good hunt. He's honest in his

trophy evaluation, and he'll back you up if you shoot or decide not to. And unlike me, he'll kick a mule's butt if it needs it. I slid the .300 Weatherby in the scabbard, mindful of my prized Zeiss scope, and clambered on the little horse's back.

Bunny was a good horse, but sometimes she did things good horses shouldn't do. Of course it didn't help that I gave her snacks and pet her incessantly behind the ears and let her walk all over me. Her legs were shorter than most—no doubt this is why they put me on her—and she spent most of her time falling behind, nipping green shoots with the side of her mouth as she passed them and then running to catch up. Running sounds fun, but not while in heavy timber in total blackness. She was semi-retarded, having been nearly kicked to death by another horse when she was a whelp, and she was still cross-eyed, but I have a soft spot for cast-off ponies, and I am ashamed to say that I fell for her immediately and therefore had a tough time kicking her precious little ribs.

We set off into the dark wild and after two and a half hours of running, stopping, side-hilling, switch-backing, creek-crossing and limb-ducking later, Adam signaled

we'd arrived. The sun was not yet up, but we were high on a ridge overlooking one of The Bob's many bowls to wait for a big buck, bull or bear to show itself. None did. So I suppose it's as good a time as any to tell you about our wild friend Bob.

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The Bob Marshall Wilderness is open to anyone, but those who know it best just call it The Bob. Named after an early forester and conservationist, The Bob lies in northwestern Montana, east of Kalispell and bordered by Glacier Park to the north. It runs for 60 miles along the Continental Divide, mainly in the Flathead National Forest; it was set aside in 1940 and designated as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964. Due to its ruggedness and lack of access, it's commonly regarded as some of the most remote land south of Canada, and it boasts the highest concentration of grizzlies in the Lower 48. Because of its vast size, unpredictable weather and the total absence of roads, most of us are not prepared to tackle The Bob alone. Vehicles are forbidden. To the chagrin of rangers an airstrip remains that can accommodate

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Elk Gear

Schnee's Beartooth Boots

I've long been a fan of lightweight, flexible boots for hunting, but in the steep mountains where I often must side-hill on rocks, a top-end, rigid-soled boot that braces my ankle is a necessity. I ordered Schnee's Beartooth boots and wore them only for a few days before my trip. They are Italian-made with top-grain leather, the kind I actually look forward to sinking my feet into each morning. They molded to my feet and felt like cotton candy. But, more importantly, they protected my ankles and gave me solid purchase when side-hilling rocks and shale. (\$339; schnees.com)

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bob elk *continued from p. 71*

a small plane or helicopter, and while you might scoff at the idea of a chopper as I naively did when romantic notions are not clouded by a sore rear, my opinion changed when I learned that eight hours could be cut from the dreadful horse ride with two measly hundred dollar bills. At any rate, rest assured you'll do all the riding and walking you want.

Most of The Bob is shrouded by deep, dark timber mountainsides cut by deep gorges and narrow creeks. It's illegal to cut trees for fire or to cache supplies, which makes non-horse hunting and outfitting that much harder.

The Bob harbors many secrets—like gold mines, the 40-mile-long Chinese Wall, virgin streams and copious amounts of big game, but not often does it unlock them easily. I assumed that once a hunter made it 25 miles in there would be game everywhere, but this is not true. After a few days of incessant glassing, miles of riding and hard hunting, animals will begin to show themselves, but it's not like game parades in every meadow. The animals are hardy mountain creatures that

do not survive by being soft or dumb. The winters, predators, altitude and the terrain—all are brutal. It's the sheer amount of dark places to hide that keeps them alive. For horseless hunters, the key to The Bob is toughness and a good outfitter.

The fortunate part of hunting The Bob and a big reason why Shawn's campers often leave happy is the mixed-bag possibility. Most of us had bear, deer (white-tail and mule), elk and wolf tags in our pockets. This ups the odds of success tremendously, provided a hunter doesn't count on filling all his tags. On this, my first day, I'd spent about 13 hours glassing pine bluffs and six hours riding.

As we wearily re-entered camp, I spotted the woodpile that was now bejeweled with a wet bear hide and a set of 180-inch mule deer antlers. After wolfing down dinner and hearing the story from von Benedikt, we extinguished the fires

Snowy Springs Outfitters

Guided elk hunts are expensive. In places like Arizona you pay for access to private land holding huge elk. In backcountry hunts like this one offered by Shawn Little, you pay for logistics. Tents, horses, tack, food, hunters and gear don't magically appear in camp 30 miles into a wilderness. Little is one of the best, and for around \$5,500 you can hunt bulls, bucks and bears in one of the wildest places in the Lower 48. (snowysprings.com)

around midnight. I woke at 4 a.m. ready to do it all again. The routine was set.

As the sun peeked over the mountaintop and dried the elk rack that had joined the bear skin and mule deer skull on the woodpile, Adam and I were high on a ridge, overlooking a huge timbered basin from which we had just heard a bugle emanate. It was electric and siren-like, and it was the first we'd heard. Adam pointed down to the basin and gave a sharp mew on his cow call. The bull answered. We were high above a meadow; I needed to find a place from which to shoot if a bull showed itself. My rangefinding binocular clearly revealed a wallow in the clearing, and a touch of this powerful tool's button put it a shade less than 600 yards. We scrambled down the bowl's face until we came to a downed log that would serve as a rest and an anchor against plummeting down the steep face.

The bull shrieked again, obviously closer. The Zeiss read 300 yards exactly to the wallow. With a 10x scope, a Weatherby rifle and this supreme vantage, I felt the key was beginning to turn in the Bob's lock. Still, a wild elk always has outs.

Adam tempted him with another call, and I saw a flash of tawny hide ripple through the shadowy timber below. Suddenly, regally, it emerged and called again for its mate. Like on TV shows, I could clearly see its stomach contract and the steam pour from its mouth in high definition as it unleashed another hellacious bugle. The Zeiss read 415, and although I had confidence in the Rapid Z reticle to 500 yards, pending wind, I waited. As predicted the 6x5 bull stomped directly to the wallow and dug his points in the mud, slinging it and caking his golden cape. I watched through my scope, third bar of the reticle on his chest, as earth flew in every direction.

Because of the distance—and I'll admit, the adrenaline—I looked back at Adam. "Should I take this bull?"

He looked at me incredulously: "It's a mature 5x6 on public land—hell yes!" he said.

The safety was already off as the bull pivoted broadside with his antlers still fighting mud. It was as beautiful as scenes come, and perhaps a touch mournful at the same time. The report of the big .300 shattered the crisp mountain air like a cannon at a funeral. We heard the solid whack of the RSX strike shoulder as he and metal became one. He went down in the mud before the echo of the sonic boom reached us. Despite a bullet through his heart, he tried to get up. I placed another into him to hasten his passing, and then the mighty bull lay still. I took a breath and looked to Montana's famous blue sky.

It was another full day before we provided the mess table with fresh elk meat. When we returned with Ichabod, the strongest pack mule, I learned that we hadn't been the only ones hunting elk; we had to gather the scattered quarters that were laced with bear slashes and gnaw marks. Finally we entered camp and ceremoniously set my elk's headgear on the woodpile that had swelled with my party's success.

It was a day later—my last day in The Bob, moments after I'd placed the cross-hair on a good mule deer buck at last light but opted to let him grow—when the thought hit me: Indeed I had struck gold in The Bob, and for all of it—the animals, the wild country, the friends and the adventure—I was thankful. *ah*

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