

MUST-HAVE DEER GEAR

15 Things Everyone Needs

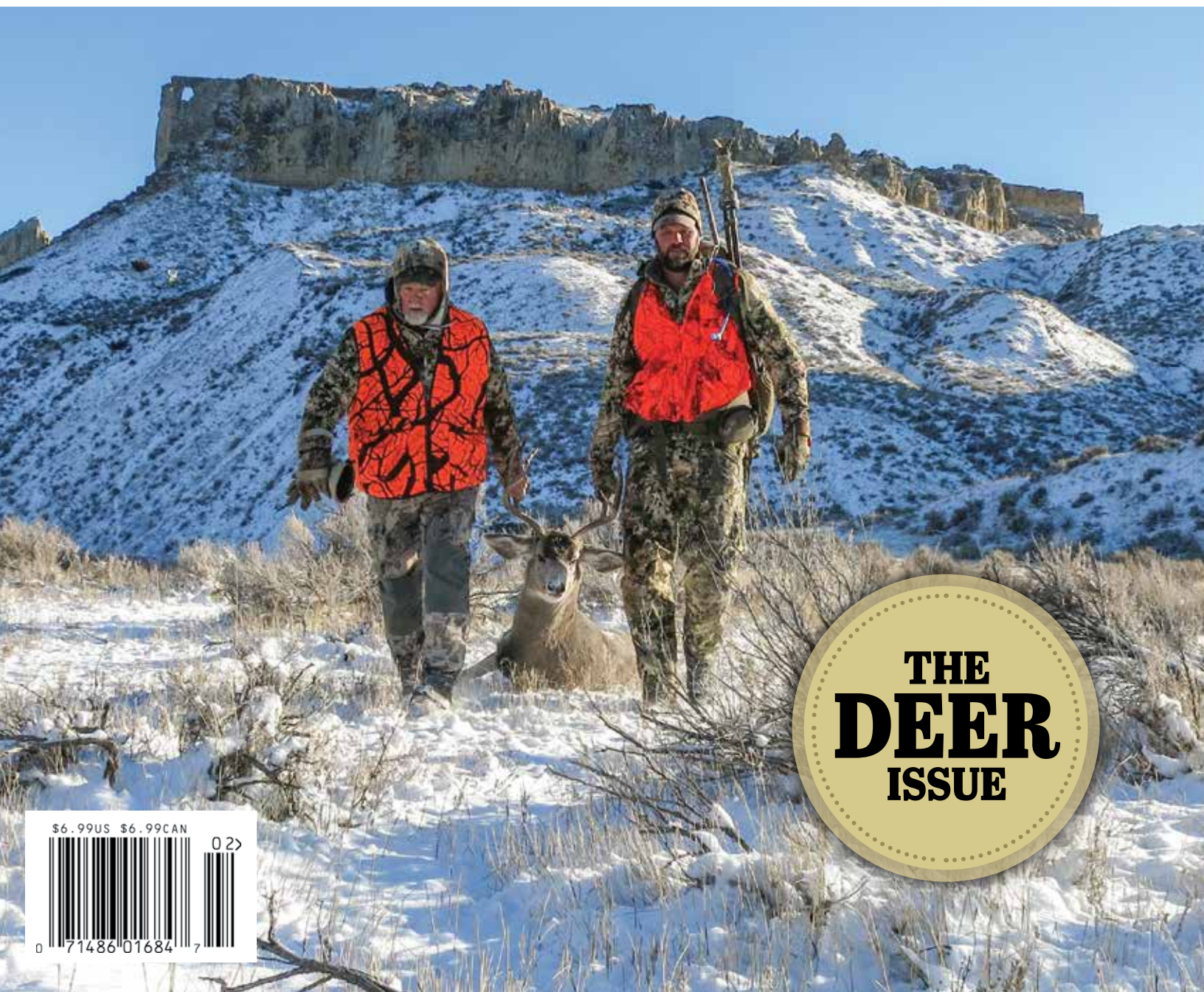
GEORGE COOK

17 States, 17 Mule Deer

SPRING TURKEY PRIMER

When Gobblers Don't Gobble

Western Hunting Journal



**THE
DEER
ISSUE**

\$6.99US \$6.99CAN

02>



0 71486 01684 7

Winds of Change

Mule deer hunting the Missouri River breaks of Eastern Montana. *Story and photos by Jason Brooks, WHJ Field Editor*

H heading east on Highway 200 out of Lewistown, Montana the Rocky Mountains gave way to rolling hills on our way to the small town of Jordan. Soon the hills turned to deep coulees and miles upon miles of barbed wire fences stretching along this lonesome highway. This is cattle country where Black Angus lazily graze on the prairies alongside antelope and the occasional mule deer.

Continuing down the two-lane highway, Chris Ledoux's "You Just Can't See Him From The Road" is playing on the radio. Fitting for this arid land where ranches the size of some eastern states still exist and every truck we passed had a cowboy wearing a Stetson. With the Rocky Mountains nearly 300 miles in the rear view mirror my hunting partner Jeff Martin and I were getting closer to badlands along the famed Missouri River breaks. It would be the first time either of





Wide open and rugged, the Missouri River breaks in eastern Montana offer plenty of ground to glass.



us hunted here, but after a year's-worth of research we felt confident about our upcoming mule deer hunt.

When we arrived in the middle of the day we checked in with our host and learned that other hunters haven't been too successful. The drought that hit the West this past summer took its toll on the deer, along with an Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) outbreak that killed deer from North Dakota across the plains of Montana and northern Idaho into the far-reaching eastern part of our home state of Washington. Here in eastern Montana the dry summers aren't new, but the past year's unseasonably high temperatures meant less water and more bugs, which carry and transmit EHD. But it wasn't just the disease that affected the deer population. The native prairie grass is shared by cattle, deer and antelope and the drought meant more competition for food. Just about everyone we talked to said bucks' antlers were small and deer

were malnourished. The lack of calories in the dried grass and the first measurable rain fall in September meant smaller deer with little antler growth.

Our perspective is different than most Montanans, or someone who hunts where big mule deer are the norm. We live in Washington where the mule deer season is short (11 days) and finding any legal 3-point buck is an accomplishment. Despite the reports of the deer population in eastern Montana I was hoping for a mature buck.

A tumbleweed rolled across the road as we headed out on our first evening of the hunt and we watched it wedge up against a barbed wire fence. The fence itself was hidden by the hundreds of tumbleweeds stuck in the wire fencing. The deer population suddenly became a lesser concern. A wind storm that would last throughout our entire hunt suddenly became our biggest worry.

That first evening was spent mostly driving around and learning the Type I



Block Management Access lands. Montana does a great job of partnering with landowners allowing access to private land. The BMA program requires hunters to sign in before hunting large expanses of land that would otherwise be closed to hunters. After we got familiar

with the area we saw a few deer before we headed back to the cabin, which gave us a small boost of optimism. We woke the next morning to 18 degrees and a slight breeze making it near zero. The brisk morning of our first full day in Montana we spotted a group of mule



deer across a fence lit up by the truck's headlights. Two decent bucks were in the group of does and we both joked how they would be "shooters" back home in Washington. We sat in the warm truck until the painted sky of eastern Montana was light enough for us to

see without the need of a headlamp.

As we loaded our packs we made our way down the first finger ridge where we jumped some deer in a small ravine. The timber-lined ridges and small coulees were full of brush and frost free and a small

buck raked a tree below while another buck stood nearby. The draw was full of deer and in the first hour of our hunt we had passed on seven bucks, all of which we would have been happy to tag in Washington. The rut was starting and the bucks took the does with them

into the shadows. This shot of good news abated quickly. As the sun rose clouds moved in and the forecast called for highs in the mid-40s and rain the next day. For the rest of the day we only saw a handful of deer at last light.

The next morning Jeff



and I found ourselves right back at the same spot. No frost this morning and warmer weather as it was well above freezing as a light rain fell. Two more

from our hunting party, Chad and Kyle Hurst, were to arrive that afternoon. Jeff and I hoped to be tagged out by then so we could help them on their hunt.

As it turned out, later that day we ended up helping a hunter from North Dakota and his partner pack out a cow elk he shot. The guys couldn't believe their luck.

Not only did they drive a mere six hours to get here for a weekend hunt but then to get an elk and have two guys offer to help pack it the six miles round trip to



the truck. Jeff and I figured we could use the “karma.”

Chad and Kyle made it to the cabin that afternoon and though Jeff and I were tired from packing elk meat

we were excited for a new day. I wanted to hunt with the Hurst brothers in a new area along the breaks and Jeff decided to head back to where we had seen deer the

In November there’s signs of bucks starting to rut. Below, the result of several days of sustained winds.



previous day. That morning the wind blew and I thought back to that tumbleweed fence and lack of animals realizing that nothing moves in sustained, 35- to 40-mph winds with gusts to 65 mph. Chad did find a mature buck down in the bottom of a steep ravine but the deer was holding tight and jumped up and ran before he could raise his rifle. Kyle and I didn’t see a single deer. When we got back to the truck and hit a cell tower the phone dinged with a text message from Jeff. “Got a Washington shooter.”

When we pulled into the cabin that evening Jeff told

how he had hiked down into the deep coulees to get out of the wind and saw one doe and an hour later one buck. The buck was a 3X3 and because it was the only buck he’d seen Jeff figured it was worth taking home. After three days of hunting the famed Missouri River Breaks I hadn’t seen a buck since the first morning. To say I was worried and anxious is an understatement.

With two days remaining my hope of shooting a mature buck was all but a tumbleweed blowing in the wind. Given three consecutive days of howling winds



With a break in the wind, and time running out on his hunt, the author filled his tag with this 3x2 buck.

my goal needed adjusting. I would shoot a 3-point but told myself nothing smaller. Hiking down a ridge we spotted a doe with a yearling feeding on a far hillside. A bit farther down we saw another doe and yearling. Excited that the deer were up feeding for the first time in three days, we hiked back up and over to a closer ridge. Spotting a doe first, and then a white patch right below me at 75 yards, I thought it was the rump of a mule deer. I picked it apart through the trees with my binoculars and realized it was a buck looking right at me. Before I could do anything, it turned and disappeared in the trees. Just then Jeff whispered to me that the buck had gone up the far side of the coulee to the far ridge and met up with a doe and it had three points on one side. I took

a few steps to the right and could see the deer, now across the coulee from me on the distant ridge.

I had been practicing for this shot all summer while testing the AllTerra Arms Steel model in .300PRC. The rifle was topped with the Vortex HD LHT 4.5-22x50 and a MOA dial. Looking across the canyon now and confirming the buck did sport three points on one side, as well as eye guards, I was still hesitant. It was not the buck I hoped for, nor was it the buck that I had driven 17 hours for. But more high winds were in the forecast for several more days and knowing I only had one day left to hunt and this was the first buck seen in the three days, I decided to shoot it. Dialing in the range and settling the crosshairs on the point of the front shoulder, the

bullet hit its mark and the buck flipped over dead.

I was glad to have a custom rifle made to shoot extremely accurate. AllTerra guarantees a half-inch accuracy at 100 yards with quality factory ammunition and if you use their loads they guarantee a quarter-inch group. The fore end sports a rail that easily connects to a tripod and the 26-inch barrel maximizes the ballistics of the .300PRC that I was shooting. Topped with a quality Vortex 4.5-22x50mm HD LHT scope that has an illuminated reticle and a MOA zero stop dial made it easy to adjust for yardage and windage. The .300PRC ammo that AllTerra loaded included the Hornady ELD-X bullet that has a .663 ballistic coefficient for the 212-grain bullet. It cuts through the air with very little drag and fights cross-

winds well. Using the combination of a custom-built rifle, a quality scope and superior ammunition, the winds and distance became less of an issue while making the cross-canyon shot. Anyone in the market for a custom-built rifle should look seriously at AllTerra Arms. Their rifles are incredibly accurate, masterfully designed and built for long range shooting. I was happy to have had the opportunity to hunt with it.

After we packed up our gear we left early the next morning. Driving along Highway 200 winds gusted 65 miles per hour. I gripped the steering wheel hard to keep the truck on the road. When the Rocky Mountains came into sight just west of Great Falls, a sense of relief came over me. I was anxious for the winds to change. **WHJ**

OUR LAWYER SAID WE SHOULDN'T
GUARANTEE
EVERY SINGLE THING ABOUT OUR RIFLES



WE GUARANTEE YOUR ALLTERRA RIFLE WILL

- SHOOT SUB .25" 3-SHOT GROUPS WITH OUR HANDLOADS
- SHOOT SUB .5" 3-SHOT GROUPS WITH PREMIUM FACTORY AMMUNITION
- SHOOT DIFFERENT WEIGHT BULLETS AND MAINTAIN ACCURACY
- CYCLE IN ALL FIELD CONDITIONS

HE NO LONGER REPRESENTS US.



ALLTERRA
A R M S[™]
BUILT FOR YOU

ALLTERRAARMS.COM | 208-608-5179

