Hunting in the Rockies

The Wary Bull Wapiti Worthy Foe of Hunter's Skill

By John Joseph Mathews '20

The Rocky mountain regions of the United States and Canada are of importance to the big game hunter. The use of pack horses in order to get into the game country and the necessity of carrying all supplies and equipment in on these horses usually appeals to the sportsman. The importance and variety of the game to be hunted is also an attraction. One can, from one location, hunt bighorn sheep, wapiti, black and grizzly bears, mule deer, and if the location is in Montana or Canada, mountain goats. There is also the mountain moose, which is much smaller than the Canadian moose. There are possibilities of cougar, or mountain lion, but it is necessary to hunt these with trained hounds.

Of these animals the wapiti is the largest and most sought. He is known generally as the elk, but this is erroneous. He is the largest of the Cervidae or deer family, and is known as "Cervus canadensis." The stag of Scotland is his cousin, as is the stag of the Black Forest, who has afforded royal pleasure for the masters of Prussia through the centuries, the stag of Scotland having played the same role for the kings of England and the chieftains of Scotland. The name of elk was given to the wapiti by the early Europeans because he resembled the elk of Europe very remotely. The elk of Europe is the true elk, and is the European version of our moose.

My first hunt in the Rockies was ambitious in as much as I had set out to bag a bull wapiti, a bighorn ram, a mule deer, a black bear, and if the gods smiled indulgently, a grizzly, all in one season. We were to pack over the continental divide, find the wapiti herds before they started their migrations to the lower valleys, and while the bulls were rutting. From this location we were to hunt black and grizzly bears, then return across the divide before the heavy snows of the early mountain winter could trap us. I succeeded in getting my bull wapiti, the mule deer, and the black bear. The bighorn ram played hide and seek with me among the dizzy peaks and in the waist-deep snows for four days, and then disappeared completely; perhaps as Daphne disappeared by changing into a laurel bush. The grizzly bear, if he had a sense of humor, must have chuckled occasionally during his hibernation. But according to Kipling that is another story. I shall confine myself to the hunting of the bull wapiti.

We outfitted at a ranch fifty miles from Cody, Wyoming. We had thirteen pack horses, and three horses which we rode, making a cavalcade as we strung out over the trail leading to the divide. Bill the guide rode in front of the "string," slouched over a white Ute pony. Bill was a mountain philosopher. He could recite "Thanatopsis," and was ever dreaming of El Dorado in the form of auriferous gravels hidden away in some primeval canyon. Then came "Fannie," the lead mare, a wise quick-tempered little thing, with a natural instinct for leadership. Behind her the others in single file, packed with vari-

(Turn to page 278, please)
a university is not the transformation of undergraduates into fountains of information. It does not seek to make men expert in their life's career. Its business is the very different task of teaching the student how facts are converted into truth. The student cannot know until he has learned to doubt. He must learn that it is not necessarily right to be theist or agnostic, radical or conservative. A university has nothing to do with the dogmas comprised within these philosophies. It seeks only to confer habits of mind which enable the student to weigh the significance of facts from the angle of philosophy. Of the brief classroom paper in which short factual answers are sought, admirably satirized in Owen Wister's "Philosophy Four"—I can only say they seem to me sheer waste of time. They test nothing but the poorest sort of memory and that only in a fashion in no way indicative of mental quality. They do not compel the student to argue with himself, to build hypotheses, to defend his position. University teachers, like the members of other professions, are, for the most part, mediocrities striving to be sublime; our other professions, are, for the most part, pothoes, to defend his position. .. ..

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UDDENLY Bill pointed to the pine-fringed mountains: "Moon comin' up, ought to hear a bull party soon." I felt a warm thrill: "Yeh," I answered. The moon was just showing over the mountains; apparently arising from the core of the earth. It hung as though caught in the branches of a tall pine, and sent its rays across the canyon, making the snow patches startlingly white, and turning the water of a small mountain lake to silver. The shadows of the pines were flung like long bars of obsidian, their needles making a fine treacy whenever their shadows happened to fall on the snow. As the ghostlight spread the granite boulders lying by hazard on the slopes, seemed to float; weirdly detached from the earth. To accentuate the witchery of the scene, a screech-owl back in the shadows began a quavering petition to the moon.

Then from the dark fringe of pine across the silver flooded valley, it came; the challenge of the bull wapiti. It starts on a high note, not unlike the bawl of a domestic bull, but instead of a labored effort, it is sustained in crescendo, clear and bell-like, then breaks suddenly into a hoarse grunt almost comical; as though the challenger had used every ounce of his power and had fallen exhausted from the peak of emotional expression; like a violinist who has put his soul into the "G" string. The terminal grunt of the bull's bugle is the "Oh gosh you know what I mean" of one who has expressed himself beautifully to his hearers, but is dissatisfied with the interpretation of the emotions burning in him, and suddenly realizes the futility of words.

I was filled with a warm ecstasy. I was glad to be alive. I felt proud of my manhood. My finger tips tingled. In this bugle there seemed to be virility, passion, power, courage, a primitive freedom, the will to survive, and a plaintive insatiable yearning. It seemed to be an expression of this life in the great expanse of primordial wilderness; of damp pine glooms; of forests a'thrill in the sun when the buzz of life is an almost inaudible chorus; of gurgling streams; of lakes reflecting clouds and sky; of soaring eagles and sinking shadowy forms; of the wild, savage, nocturnal cry of the hunting wolf; of thunder reverberating among the peaks; of large hissing snow-flakes; of snow-locked valleys; of fairy moonlight; of bloody disturbed snow and a maze of tracks; a flaming birch against a wall of green pines; and the wind sighing in the pine tops. I shall never forget the cold moon-bewitched night when that challenge burst upon the stillness.

The next day Bill and I were out before day-break and walked all day without finding anything more interesting than the trails of cows and yearlings. Once we saw a band of five cows accompanied by a flirtations "spike." (A "spike" is a young bull who is not old enough to have produced antlers but has two spike-like horns as a promise of future magnificence.) We were lying down wind from them, and from a distance of fifty yards watched them grazing as they moved leisurely among the pines. The "spike" tried continually to attract the attention of the cows, but they ignored him completely except when he became too obstreperous in his desire to be noticed, then one of them would rush him savagely. He always danced lightly away out of reach of her antlerless head.

We had been out for three days walking from 4 a. m. until dark but had found the tracks of small bulls only. Nothing worthy of our rifle. We had heard desultory challenging in the late afternoons, but the challenger was usually far across the canyon from us. Each night we would come back to Jim's steaming supper, and having filled our stomachs to capacity, would stretch out on our blankets and smoke in silence. Silence as far as we were concerned but Jim always had the details of the day at camp at his tongue's end, and we could listen if we chose. We could tune in on Jim, or tune off at will. He would get our full attention at times by such unusual happenings as killing a chipmunk with a silver dollar, and producing the limping animal in proof. Once he held us by the story of a whisky-jack, who in his eternal search for novelties, had flown into the tent and had alighted on the hot stove. Jim hated these vulgar, thieving members of the jay family, and took keen delight in the discomfiture of this particular one. He compared the retreat of the bird to the classical get away of the bat out of hell and called the Omnipotent to witness that the bird would never stop flying.

The next morning we found a white world, and Bill's comment was; "Fine; we can find the tracks now, and the big boys have just about got control of the bands now. We better work out the cow trails today, and we will be sure to find some big bull that has whipped all the other away and is the big boss with the harem." We were crossing a narrow valley some hours later, when Bill stopped and pointed to the snow. There was a broad trail and among the tracks we could make out the track of a great bull. We trailed that bull for three days. Much of his passion of early season must have cooled, as he seemed to feel fear when he was...
aware that he was being trailed. He left the band of cows and headed for the higher valleys. He kept just ahead of us; he could do this without being seen as the undergrowth was heavy where he chose to lead us. We followed that big track constantly expecting to see the magnificent beast just ahead, but we returned to camp each night fatigued but hopeful. On our return each night Jim would stand smiling in the tent entrance and shout “show liver.” When he saw no signs of the kill he would go on in mock seriousness: “I shore am wantin’ bull meat, but I guess I’ll have to go out and kill me a cow.”

Late one afternoon the trail came to an end. I was searching the underbrush ahead when I made out a dark mass, but it held my interest because it had vague outline. One moment I felt sure that the bull had stopped and was looking back over his trail to study the movements of his persistent trailers. The next moment I was sure that the dark mass was just a solid mass of underbrush and second-growth pine. As I was pondering the nature of this thing I looked up the side of the mountain where Bill had been paralleling my course all afternoon. I saw that usually placid fellow gesticulating. He was kneeling and placed his thumbs on each side of his head above his ears; then made with his arms a basket. The message was clear; he had full view of the animal from his position, and was telling me that he was a great bull with worthy antlers. It was a few moments before I could get into a position for firing without making an awkward movement. I finally succeeded by lying flat on my back and firing over my toes. At the report of the 45-90 Winchester, the mass disappeared and I heard the thundering hooves as he ran down the mountain side. Bill joined me, and smilingly assured me that he was mortally wounded or he would not have run down hill. We found him a hundred yards farther on, lying in the snow, his head toward his trailers. The defiance in his eyes did not die out until I had given the coup de grace.

It was dark by the time we had the meat ready to be brought to camp on the morrow. I insisted on carrying the great head back to camp that night. I could visualize the grizzlies mauling and tearing it to shreds, and Bill’s sane arguments were futile. It is not an easy thing to carry such a great antlered head five miles over hills and valleys; over ice covered logs spanning icy streams, and had I not been buoyed up over the success of the day’s hunt I couldn’t have done it. Several times I fell down the snowy slopes and the head and I rolled several yards. I examined it lovingly and then proceeded on the way, refusing to let Bill help.

The next day Jim and I took two horses up the mountain on which to pack the meat. The snows had set in and we had begun to worry about getting over the pass. We packed up next day in a snow storm and left. We managed the pass without mishap, and after resting a day we set out for the bighorn country two days distant.

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