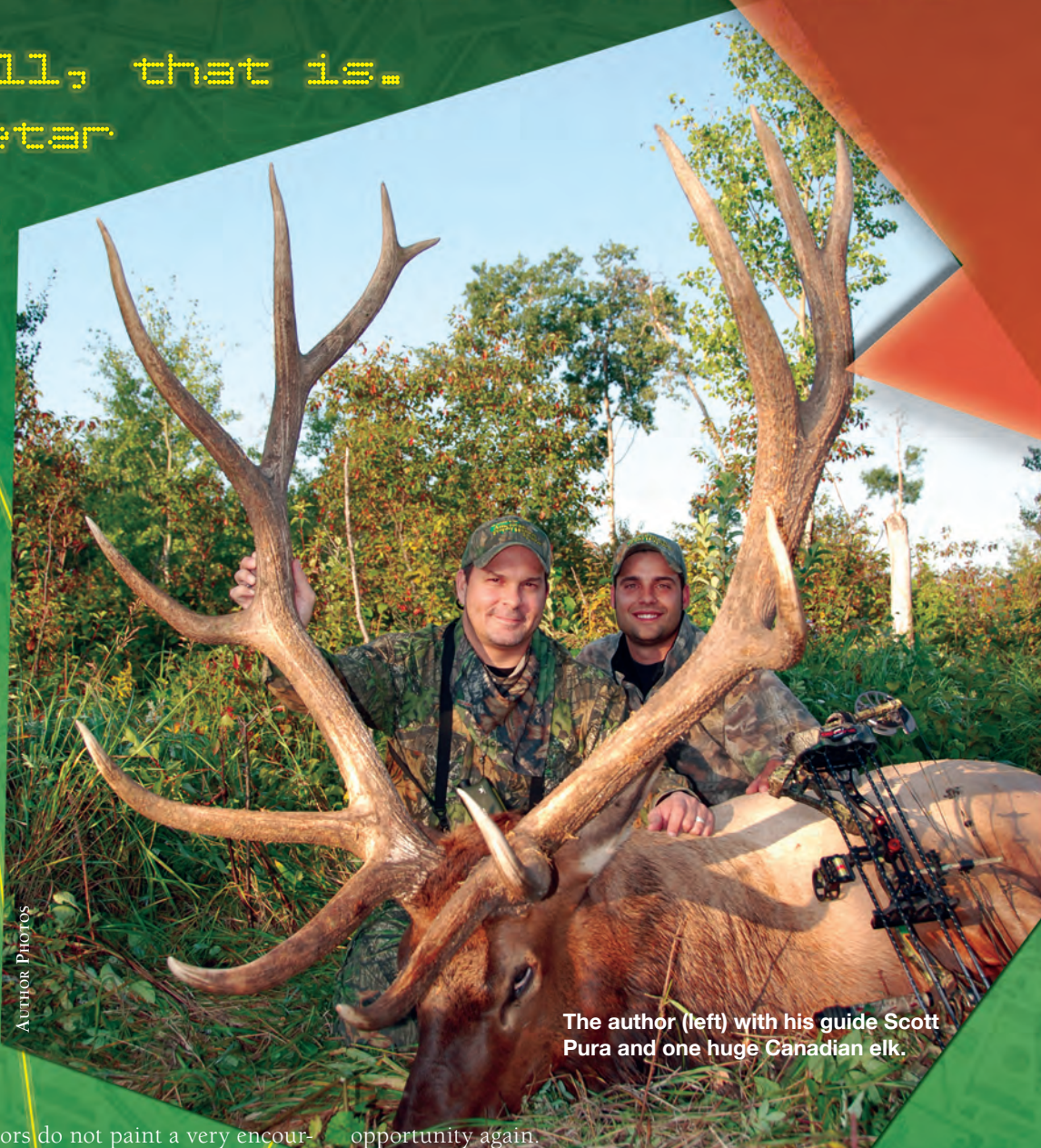


It's A Bull Market

▲ Elk bull, that is.
By Joe Betar



AUTHOR PHOTOS

The author (left) with his guide Scott Pura and one huge Canadian elk.

The economic indicators do not paint a very encouraging picture. Markets are down. Companies that have been institutions in this country are struggling. The unemployment rate continues to rise. Sometimes enough is enough and you have to leave the bad news from television and newspapers behind and escape to the woods and water. It helps to seek peace and silence.

Late summer found us drifting north to Canada. We had another chance to hunt with our friend Scott Pura of Black Horn Trophy Hunts. I say *another* chance because the year before, I admittedly made a poor shot on a bull elk. Elk fever. Bull fever.

No matter the name, the effects are the same—a grown man with a stick and a string, staring at a 1,200 pound animal, shaking hard enough that when the arrow took flight, the angle was awkward enough for a physics professor to have shaken his head in disbelief. I won't bore you with the details. Let's just leave it at that. That year, I headed home, with my tail between my legs, thinking I may never have that

opportunity again.

That feeling hung around my neck like an albatross for quite some time. That is, until Scott called and asked if I would be able to come back. A-ha! Redemption. I discussed the possibility of another trip north with my wife that evening. Of course she said yes; I think more so because she was tired of hearing my sad story about “the one that got away.” It was all I could do to put the hunt out of my mind for a few months until elk season returned again.

Eventually, June rolled around and I tuned up my bow and increased the number of backyard “spot and stalks” in preparation for the hunt. My neighbors probably thought I was crazy, but I did notice that they didn't leave their yipping dogs in the yard as much. I think I'm on to something here.

Anyway, once the TTHA Hunters Extravanzas wrapped up, my neck was starting to get real thick with the approaching season. We decided on a late August hunt because the bulls would be bugling and hopefully their horns were starting to turn black. There was some skepticism because the

area was still experiencing 80-degree temperatures and the first cold front was not expected to hit the area until two weeks after our hunt. Regardless, I headed north with great hopes.

Our first trip out was an evening hunt. We spent most of that afternoon locating bulls. It was an unusually hot day for this time of year, somewhere in the mid to upper 80s. Combine that heat while hunting in swampy bottoms and you get flies and mosquitoes by the thousands. It's a little difficult to be quiet or hear distance elk calls when you're slapping yourself silly chasing off bugs. We were able to sneak up on a few small bulls but they were more interested in the cooling protection of mud wallows and shade than barking back at a call.

Almost at dark, we walked right up on two bulls. They would not respond to the call, so we decided to try and sneak towards them to get a shot. One of the elk was a big mature bull with a palmated top on one antler. He was unique and I probably would have taken a shot if presented the opportunity. They never gave us a chance though, bursting into the brush as we closed in on them.

The next morning, we headed out early to find the ground was wet and the temperature had fallen about 20 degrees. Before the sun began to illuminate the early morning sky, the bulls began to wind up. Scott hit them with a few lovesick cow calls and we had a fair response. When he turned on the "you want a piece of me?" bull call, it was a different story.

We found ourselves surrounded by several bulls. None of them presented a bowshot that afforded me the confidence of a certain kill. Either they were too far or the shot was obstructed. I wanted a perfect situation. The day quickly warmed. By 10 a.m., the bugs were back and the bulls had once again headed for the cool shadows of the swamp. Back to camp. We would try again in the evening.

We decided to make an early afternoon venture to see if we could intercept a bull moving out of the swamps on its way to a watering hole. There was some activity but no call response. We decided to head to a higher elevation where bulls had been responding

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to calls while hunkered down in dense feeding areas.

Once we were settled, Scott laid down an angry bull bugle. About 40 yards uphill from our position, a challenger responded. We carefully made our way closer and peaked over the hill to find a 320-class bull aggressively raking his antlers over the brush. There's nothing like that sound of an elk clearing out brush. You would think that he was going to tear down the entire forest. Scott looked at me and whispered, "Hey, he's a nice bull. What do you think?" I was unsure. I could not see all of his antlers and he wasn't moving out of the brush any time soon. So, we waited.

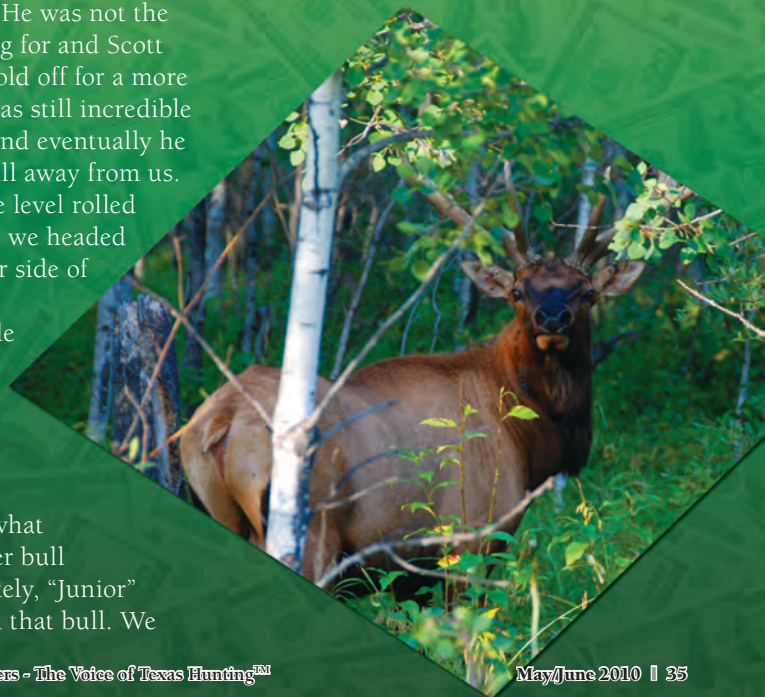
After about 20 minutes he began to move into a clearing towards us and I went to full draw. When he cleared the brush line, he was at 35 yards. I let down my bow. He was not the bull we were looking for and Scott agreed we should hold off for a more mature animal. It was still incredible just watching him and eventually he headed down the hill away from us. Once the adrenaline level rolled back a few decibels, we headed west down the other side of the hill.

About a half a mile down the hill, we came across the same bull. He was engaged in a back and forth vocal challenge with what sounded like a better bull than he. Unfortunately, "Junior" was between us and that bull. We

eased our way towards him, hoping he would leave the trail but not spook the other bull. We made our way another 400 yards or so as the young bull moved away from us. We spotted his adversary and determined him to be a shooter, at least a 370- to 380-class bull.

Our young friend however, decided to hang around and issue a series of alert calls that told every bull in the area that we were there. As our bull began to move north from our position, we eased down the hill, parallel to his path. Once we reached the bottom, he must have winded us because he headed straight back up that hill. We were soaking wet, fighting mosquitoes the entire time.

As we eased back up the hill to try an intercepting shot, we came



upon another bull that had just moved into the area. He was at the very top of the hill, tearing up the young brush with his antlers. The bull was thrashing left and right, throwing brush and grass into the air as if he had a sickle attached to his head. We could only see his antler tops but immediately knew he was a shooter. We moved to his right about 40 yards away. He threw his head back and shot a wild-eyed glance in our direction, glaring straight at us over his left shoulder. We were busted. I could not draw.

Then, he did the strangest thing. Usually, a big bull will bolt through any brush to escape danger. This bull acted as if he were trapped and could not get through the short brush line he was destroying only moments before. He looked at us and bolted left along the brush line. Then, like a penned stallion, he reared up and reversed course to the right. The bull then repeated this path once again until he finally leapt over a small bush and stood before us at 40 yards, his rear directly pointing to our position.

That was the point where I fully expected him to bolt away from us into the sunset. He began to move off to our right and I ranged him at 50 yards. Scott was about 10 yards to my left and in front of me. In the heat of the moment, we never had the chance to send a signal or speak to each other. It was like we were instinctively working in tandem in a pressure-filled situation.

He chirped the cow call. It was just

enough to stop the bull. Scott wondered if I was going to take the shot. (He later told me he was wondering about this right up until he heard me draw). Scott never turned around, keeping his eyes focused on the big bull.

On the call, the bull froze, turned broadside and stared at me with the sun silhouetting his body, causing his antlers to glow as he eclipsed the sun. In the few seconds that lapsed between the draw and release, I flashed back to last year's miss while at the same time seeing my rangefinder's "50 yards" display repeatedly stamped on my brain. "Please be a good shot. Please be a good shot," I told myself.

Breathe, release, *smack*. The arrow found its mark and the bull disappeared in a mad charge down the hill into the brush. Scott and I both knew it was a good hit. We were pumped and almost pushed each other down as we celebrated. The release of energy right after the shot is always incredible-elation, exhaustion and relief. You feel like your heart is going to leap out of your chest.

We recovered the bull later

that evening. It was the bull we hoped for—scoring $40\frac{3}{8}$ B&C. We prepped him and covered him to protect against ravens and predators. First thing the next morning we made our way back to recover this beautiful animal. We must have taken over 100 photos. I still look at those photos and marvel at the mass of the antlers, the size and beauty of the elk and the total experience. There was victory and redemption in this hunt. I guess you could say that even in these difficult economic times, it's possible to find a "bull market"—elk bull, that is.



Gear List

- Nikon EDGe binocular
- Nikon Archers Choice Rangefinder
- Mossy Oak Break Up camouflage
- BowTech Allegiance Bow; 70-pound draw weight
- Muzzy Phantom MX 100-grain broadheads
- Easton Axis Full Metal Jacket 340 arrows
- Carter Quickie release

A special thanks goes to Scott Pura of Black Horn Trophy Hunts for his expertise, professionalism, attention to detail, and patience. To book a trophy whitetail or elk hunt with Black Horn Trophy Hunts of Saskatchewan, contact Scott Pura at scott@blackhorn.ca or call 1-780-689-7104 (ranch) or 1-780-689-9704 (cell); Web site: <http://www.blackhorn.ca/>—Joe Betar