





# *The Tracks in* TACKETT CANYON

*They thought the storm had beaten them and their hunt was over. And then they found the tracks.*

*by Michael Altizer*

They were large, *fresh* tracks.

A lone, lonely line of heart-shaped big-buck tracks that Pat Carpenter had discovered at the upper end of Tackett Canyon in a sun-dazzled snowbank whose first fresh flakes had begun falling seven evenings earlier. And now everything had changed – the wind, the weather, the timing, the trip and especially the *Hunting*.

But that's how hunting can be. And from the beginning, this hunt had assumed a life of her own, like an independent and immodest self-willed wench with deep personal desires insisting I leave home much sooner than originally planned, propelled by a mid-October blizzard bearing down from the north, drawing me in and having her way with me and not letting go until she was darn well finished.

When the call came from the ranch, it came unexpectedly . . . *How soon could I get there?*

Four hours later I was on the road west from Tennessee to New Mexico with the sunset in my eyes, my rifle cased behind me, my little journal and old bullet-and-bone pen in my shirt pocket, and the pale road spread long and unapologetic before me for the next 1700 miles.

It had originally been planned as a relaxing, rejuvenating late-October mule deer hunt with my long-time accomplices Frank Simms and Pat Carpenter, the last warm shades of autumn still garnishing the cottonwoods along the valley floor, and the aspen stands on the lower ridges and in the upper canyons still holding some latent quaking flakes of gold before

the first heavy snow hit the high country. I hadn't planned on leaving home for at least another week on the four-day run into the soaring southern Rockies, but now the early season blizzard was bearing down on Chama, and we knew that when it hit it would most likely push the deer out of the mountains and across the ranch into the broad valley below.

It blew in as I crossed from Arkansas into the 'Nations, and by the time I hit west Texas and made the New Mexico border, everything was white. I plowed into Santa Fe at dusk on the third day and slept warm and snug inside the adobe walls of Frank's home, then we left at dawn for the two-hour run north to the ranch. Frank is president and general manager of the Lodge and Ranch at Chama, a place of monumental scale and exquisite beauty, owned by the Jicarilla Apache Nation and situated high in the San Juan Mountains. For all its reputation as a world-class big game hunting, fly fishing and photographic destination, Chama is a far more personal and spiritual place for me, where God does some of His best work, and dialogue with Him is always rich and free-flowing and I never say "Amen."

By 8:30 that morning, He and Frank and I were hunting.

We headed north through the deep snow to the base of Baldy, seeking any sign the deer might still be there, then over and down through Sawmill Canyon before circling back along Willow Creek and then up to the Overlook. Peering south I could see *Pedernal*, Georgia O'Keeffe's legendary tabletop mountain that now bears her ashes, posing there along the horizon 60 miles distant as I tilted



my binoculars up from the elk filtering through the oak brush and out into the open meadow 800 yards below us.

With dusk approaching we made our way south to Cañones. But all we found were a couple of coyotes and a few more elk and a lone trespassing photographer, only one of whom we bothered shooting, and we knew we were in trouble. For the only deer sign we saw was at least three days old and tracking west, out into the Chama valley. At dark we headed back to the lodge and a sumptuous five-course dinner with fine wines and even finer conversation, then drifted off to our respective suites and a hopeful night's sleep.

We reconvened in the greatroom two hours before first light where Pat Carpenter, Chama's head guide, was waiting for us, then made our way up to a high ridge to glass for deer at sunrise.

We spotted them three miles across the valley, high above Book Out Lake – not mule deer but *elk*, a dozen or so cows and calves with at least one good bull moving like wraiths up the mountain through the dark timber just east of Poison Springs. But we were not out for elk, and so we invested the next two hours glassing the broad valley and lofty ridges for deer, but with no success. Finally we made our way north where we spent the

remainder of the day searching for any sign of at least one big mulie that was getting a late start on his winter sojourn. But by now it was painfully evident that the storm had likely driven most, if not *all*, the deer down to their wintering grounds and that our chances of finding them here had been seriously impacted.

Day after day we put in miles, miles and more miles, searching for any indication, any *trace* of that one good buck. The storm had long since had its say, and afternoon temperatures were edging into the 30s. The snow had begun melting slightly, and it was starting to get muddy in places. And now to complicate matters even more, the time was fast approaching for Frank to return to Santa Fe for a meeting he had scheduled months earlier.

**O**ur final morning together dawned bitter cold and clear, and we were all three out again before first light. Frank and I headed south toward Cañones, while Pat made his way up into the high canyons to the north. At eight degrees, the air was alive on our faces, and the deep crunchy snow was just beginning to transition from a subtle cobalt blue to a pale pre-dawn salmon pink when the crown of the rising sun rimmed the icy mountaintop in a blaze of diamonds. It



was at that moment that Frank's radio crackled to life.

"Two to One."

"Go ahead Pat."

"I just found a line of fresh tracks. Looks like a pretty good buck."

"10-4 . . . That's great. We'll start working toward you."

You must understand, among all the friends and guides with whom I have ever hunted and fished, Pat Carpenter is simply the best, and we have shared miles and memories and rifles for years. And now against all odds, he had found evidence that there might indeed be at least *one* buck still here.

For the rest of the morning Frank and I kept combing the meadows and canyons to the south while Pat continued searching the high country to the north. We finally met on the ridge overlooking Book Out Draw to compare notes. The day was growing long, and soon Frank had to be on the road back to Santa Fe, so we slowly began moving west together toward the lodge. But now with Pat's discovery of the tracks, everything had changed, and again there was *Hope* in the Hunting.



*The author and his late-season buck, a handsome five-by-five with gnarly bases and plenty of sticker points for even greater character.*

**I**t is a compelling thing, *Hunting*.

You lace your boots up tight in the morning, and you don't know where they'll take you by day's end. Your mind is progressively clearer as you approach 10,000 feet, and there is a wistful lightness in your step as you move silently and effortlessly through

the dark timber and across the snow and rock, like you did 40 years ago when you were still in your teens. You spend your days with the wind in your face and knives on your belt, your rifle as much a part of your apparel as your vest and shoulder pouch, with a single spare cartridge properly positioned and oriented forward in each pocket of your warm wool coat. And you know that someday you will *ache* for this time, back home in the more threatening and

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# Tackett Canyon

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treacherous lowland wilderness of meetings and board rooms and cell phones as you longingly reflect on the moment you are living right here, right *now*. But now it is real, and you *know* it is real, as real as anything you've ever experienced, and you can't bear the thought of it being past, as surely it must be in a few days' time, just as you can't wait to travel the hundreds – no, *thousands* – of miles it will take to get back to where you are currently standing or sitting or sleeping or dreaming, alone in present tense with the places and the people and the animals and, of course, the *land* you dearly love.

And now Pat had found the tracks, and this hunt that had so abruptly torn me from my life in east Tennessee and drawn me west across the country and into the deep snows of New Mexico was again in full song and ready to expose herself and reveal to us where she was about to lead.

Inexorably, the time came for Frank to leave. And so with barely two hours of daylight remaining, Pat and I reluctantly returned him to the lodge and his vehicle and circled back into the high country, bearing north into the lower end of Tackett Canyon a mile below where Pat had found the tracks that morning. By now, time and wind and sun had taken most of the snow; gone too was the lighthearted banter of the early hunt, replaced by an expressive silence and a dogged determination born of our years hunting together as higher we climbed.

And now it all began falling into place.

They were here. Or at least they had *been* here. There were antler rubs everywhere, some large, some not so large, but all mute testimony to the fact that this was the place where the big bucks had come to polish their racks and their fighting

skills in preparation for the rut. There were fresh droppings, fresh tracks, fresh optimism, and we were keen for the turn of an ear or the flick of a tail or the angular backlit edge of a leg or the telltale glint of a tine.

And then he was there.

**Y**ou simply do not realize how empty the woods have become until suddenly they are occupied by the one creature you have come so far to find. There had been snow and rocks and trees and leaves. There had been elk and turkey and bear and red fox and coyotes and scurrying little ground squirrels, and even mule deer does and half-grown fawns. But until now, there had been no *buck*.

It was Pat who saw him first and whispered him to me.

He was ghosting through the timber barely 80 yards distant, silently quartering up and away just a few feet below the high saddle where two ridges converge. Even in the dimming shadows I could see that he was tall and mature, and that the width of his antlers was greater than the spread of those broad ears that give mule deer their name. I eased the safety forward as I raised the rifle to my shoulder.

And to his.

He must have caught the movement, for he stopped and turned to look down on us through a narrow opening in the trees, the riflescope framing his fore-quarter as I slowly exhaled and settled the crosshairs firmly into the crease between his chest and shoulder and gently crushed the trigger and sent the 200-grain bullet up the mountain to him.

He barely made the saddle before his spirit took its leave.

He had gone less than 30 yards, lying on his side in the burnished rays of the sun setting low through the trees as together Pat and I climbed the ridge and knelt to touch him. He lay in an undulating

dapple of sunlight that cast long lingering shadows across his chest and antlers and into the blood-stained snow and leaves beside him. He was a classic mule deer buck, not too large, not too small, fat and firm and finely proportioned, his antlers wide and well-formed, five-to-a-side with beautifully gnarled bases and lots of little sticker points for even greater character.

We photographed him quietly and with deep respect and then tarried there for a few moments in the fading light before heading off the mountain. The broad meadow was draped in darkness by the time we got him to the valley floor 2,000 feet below, but the little brook trout stream cutting through its lower reaches still mirrored the last lingering hues of the winter sunset, and I knew there was no other place on the continent I would rather be.

The only thing missing was Frank.

**I**t has now been four days since we killed him, and I am again alone and on the road back east across New Mexico, bound for Tennessee with an ice chest full of the finest venison imaginable. My little pocket journal sits open and waiting in my lap with the old bone pen resting lightly in my fingers across the steering wheel, and I just realized that my knives are still on my belt.

The buck's cape and antlers have been salted and tagged and are at this moment on their way north from Chama to Jonas Brothers Taxidermy in Louisville, Colorado and will soon be gracing my wall. But for now, I can still see him moving there in the cool blue shadows below the saddle, the quaking aspen and white fir and ponderosa pine all aglow in royal sunset shades of emerald and purple and gold, and I pray that his spirit still roams free and vital somewhere up between Tackett Canyon and the Great Hereafter.

And now the hunt is done, with

the *good* part about to come, the part where I get to remember it and relive it and write about all that has happened in the last 13 days – about the snow in the high country and about Frank and Pat and me interlacing our trails through the low meadows and the high mountains. Again I will watch the elk filter through the oaks and spread out across the valley floor at dusk and see the warm sunset sky reflected in the icy meadow stream. Once more I will embrace the dawn and listen to the whispering roar of the wind among the ridges a mile above us and then feel the frost in my lungs and the fire in our hearts as we watch the elk weaving in and out of the dark timber above Book Out Lake. Again I get to see *Pedernal* and hear the resonant crunch of my boots in the deep crusty snow a mile beyond Bear Crossing where Frank and I finally turned back. I will remember the ivory aspen glowing warm in the cold blue pre-dawn light and the coyote chasing the cow elk and her calf before pausing for one last moment to glance back across his shoulder at me through my rifle scope.

And I will see again the broad grin on Pat Carpenter's face as we top the ridge and find our deer lying there in the sunset glow of Tackett Canyon, and hear the sheer, unadulterated happiness in Frank Simms' voice when at last we got through to him on his mobile.

And as for the hunt herself?

I believe she is nearly finished with me, and all I have left to do is get the meat back across the country and safely into our freezer in Watauga.

Perhaps *then* she'll let go of me.

Perhaps not.\*

## IF YOU WANT TO GO

The Lodge and Ranch at Chama offers some of the finest big game hunting, fly fishing and accommodations in North America. Call 575-756-2133, or visit [www.lodgeatchama.com](http://www.lodgeatchama.com).