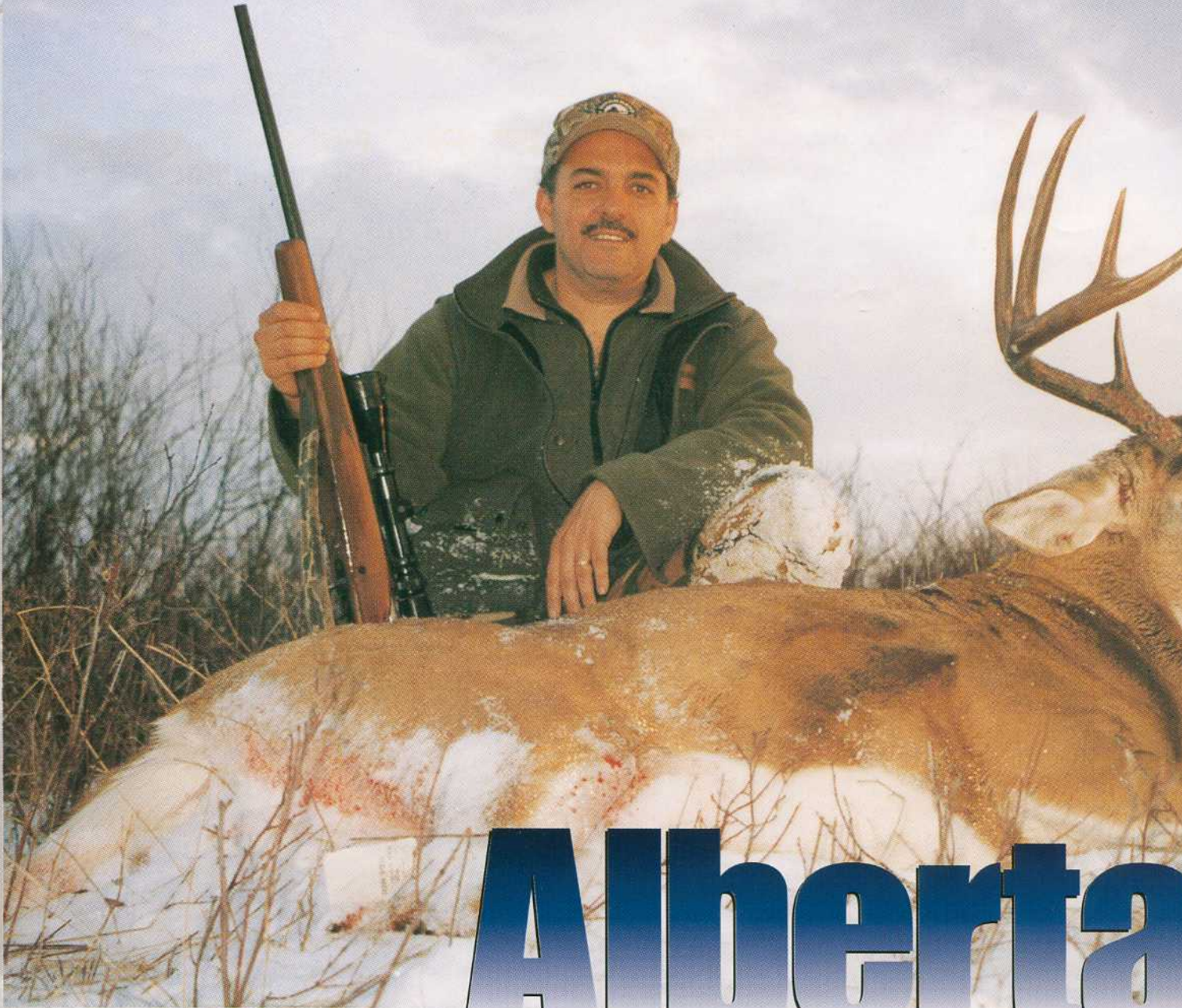


## Tony "Popsicle" Pizzata works himself up into a whitetail frenzy in the snows of Alberta's frozen hunting grounds.



**A**s the Canadian Pacific Air bus touched down at Edmonton, Alberta's international airport, my mind wandered back to a previous trip in the spring of 1995 when I'd managed to secure two nice black bear in the Peace River region of Alberta's north. This time I was hunting whitetail deer with Lloyd McMahon of *Great White Holdings*. In total contrast to my spring bear hunt, this trip was in November, where harsh climatic conditions could see temperatures drop to -35 degrees C.

The captain's voice over the loud speaker quickly brought me back to reality. Overcast and only -20 degrees was the day's forecast and I was only in a T-shirt and jeans, after having departed the +30 degree heat wave of

Sydney. Needless to say my bags were unpacked before I left the airport. Lloyd had given me a rendezvous point and had mentioned he'd have a guide pick me up from the airport. His plan was to have me in camp that evening, ready to start hunting the next day.

As the whitetail hunting season for rifle in this province extends through the month of November only, it seemed nearly every second person I saw in the terminal carried an aluminium case and wore camo. Alberta and the province of Saskatchewan boast arguably the best Whitetail hunting in the world and

most certainly the biggest racks. That's why so many Americans travel north to this part of Canada to hunt whitetail.

A Canadian whitetail can exceed 135kg on the hoof and sport the biggest, meanest, heaviest, widest set of antlers most hunters could only ever dream of, and I was here to give it a go. Shortly after a big, burley, lump of a man wearing a cowboy hat, jeans and cowboy boots, approached me and introduced himself as "Hammer", Lloyd's brother.

Arriving in camp about two hours later, Hammer introduced me to several of their

The author with his 5x5 typical whitetail buck.



The author and his guide outside an old trapper's cabin.

checking on the other two camps he had set up and introduced me to Steve Schmidt, my guide for the week. Steve had his own outfitting business in British Columbia for moose, bear, goat, caribou and sheep, but in November guides whitetail for Lloyd. He was also a rodeo rider, so most of his friends called him "Bull Rider". It seemed everyone up here had some sort of nickname and as I'd later find out, they'd even thought one up for me.

The following morning about an hour before light, Steve and I headed for our hunting area. He'd noticed a number of scrapes along a deer trail leading to an alfalfa field and had seen a big buck feeding out on it several times now. The temperature was about -25 degrees with knee deep snow on the ground. "It's an excellent spot to sit for the morning," Steve said, "but do ya think ya can manage the cold?" Sure I could, I was dressed in polarfleece from head to toe.

Steve led me in along the timber edge which surrounded the 20 or so acres of

gone, but no buck. Steve suggested we head back to the vehicle as the rest of the crew were organizing a deer drive around lunch time and needed some more participants.

Returning to the pick up, we immediately pulled out the thermos for a welcome hot brew and radioed the boys for any news of success for the morning. Two had already been successful and were on their way back to camp. Both had taken respectable bucks and were pleased with their results. Lloyd had seen two bucks head into a patch of scrub and asked all hunting teams who wanted to participate in the deer drive to get over there quick. In no time we arrived on the spot and after a quick assessment of the situation, each guide got his hunter into a position for a shot and then proceeded to help with the drive.

This outfitter was switched on and didn't leave getting each of his clients a good buck to chance. A host of different methods were always at hand in any situation, offering each hunter as many opportunities as possible at a

# S big bucks

guides and a number of American hunters who were there for the week. All hunts with this outfitter were on a one-to-one basis, so having a large camp such as this with up to 10 hunters didn't bother me. Each hunter has his own deer tag allocated to a specific area number, known as a W.M.U. (Wildlife Management Unit). This area may cover up to 30-40 square miles, giving you exclusive use of that location. Each of Lloyd's guides are allocated areas and pre-season scout for big bucks in preparation for their clients.

Later Lloyd arrived, who had been away

pasture improvement. Deer sign was plentiful, which included several scrapes obviously made by the dominant buck. About 600m in along the trail Steve pointed to a fallen spruce tree and whispered to get in behind it. Getting comfortable was easy enough but trying to keep perfectly still for the next three or four hours would take some doing. About 30 minutes passed and all was silent when suddenly out of nowhere a doe appeared directly opposite on the edge of the bush. Shortly after another appeared and also fed out into the center of the field. By mid morning they were

whitetail. The deer drives, referred to as "pushing bush", was similar to how we would conduct a fox drive and in no time the action had begun. Without warning, a coyote broke cover no more than 60m in front of me. I held off, as a big buck could be following. A shot from the other side broke the stillness, then another and all went quiet again. Shortly after, our guides appeared from the bush and the two-way radio silence was broken by one of the guides who informed us that young Gary from Michigan had scored a nice buck. That was three bucks for the morning! If our



Hammer (right) and his son, Tyler, with evidence of what a pack of coyotes can do to a 130kg whitetail buck overnight.

guides kept this up we would all be heading home within a day or two.

Steve had brought a packed lunch for each of us and after a quick bite to eat, we headed out to an area where he wanted to try *rattling*. The idea with rattling antlers is to try and lure the buck to you, imitating two bucks fighting

over a doe for supremacy. As this was the peak of the rut and big bucks were on the move, we had every chance of success and besides, I wanted to experience as many methods as possible of hunting these critters. But the rest of the day was spent rattling without success, save the odd coyote.

Come day two, Steve asked me what my preferred hunting method was. I wanted to be dropped off at the alfalfa field where he had seen that big buck and give it another go. "I was hoping you'd say that," Steve smiled. "He really is an excellent buck if you can get him, record book material!" The temperature was

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Tony's guide, Steve, doing his best to rattle in a buck.

## FACT FILE

### Alberta, Canada

**Location:** Western Canada; bordered by British Columbia, north by Northwest Territories, east by Saskatchewan, south by Montana.

**Area:** 661,189 sq. km

**Highest Peak:** Mt Columbia (3747m)

**Population:** 2.55 million; inhabitants (Albertans) mostly European descent of British Isles, French, German, Dutch, Scandinavian and Ukrainian stock.

**Capital:** Edmonton

**Climate:** Brief, pleasant summers; cold winters with heavy snows often relieved by chinooks (warm winds). Mean January (winter) temperature (Edmonton) is -13.5 degrees C. Mean July (summer) temperature (Edmonton) is 17 degrees C.

**Geography:** Most of Alberta is an extension of the great central plains of North America. Much of the province consists of plains and prairie interspersed with jagged mountain ranges, deep valleys, rolling forested hills and large lakes.

**Game:** Deer, elk, moose and caribou roam the forested areas and some prairies. Bear and coyote are the two principal carnivores, inhabiting forested/mountainous regions and prairies respectively. Hunting season for whitetail deer in Alberta (rifle only) is during month of November (rut during last two weeks). Known habitat includes boreal forests, farmlands and foothills.

still around -20 and bitterly cold at first light, but determined to get this fellow, I got Steve to drop me off as planned. He would scout for more bucks while I was on my stand, giving me other options should the need arise.

Slowly working my way along the bush edge just before legal hunting light, I topped the crest of the first hill, looking down to the open field I would be hunting. Suddenly the alarm bells rang, three deer were feeding dead center of the field. Dropping my pack I quickly lifted the 10-power Swarovski binos for a look. It was a buck and two does. A closer, more earnest look revealed this buck had a huge rack and was very likely the one Steve was talking about. The antlers looked like a big, heavy, black mass of entangled points which protruded forward about three quarters the length of his head. I watched the buck chase one of the does around the field in a circle for what seemed an eternity. There was nothing I could do, as the breeze had changed direction and wasn't in my favour. The buck was still unaware of my presence, as I positioned the Winchester Model 70 over my daypack for a steady rest and held the cross-hairs of the Leupold 3.5-10x40 high on the buck's shoulder. The distance was about 600m. The cross-hairs seemed to cover the bucks body. Should I shoot? Is he too far? Well, I decided that rather than shoot and risk

a miss, even with a steady rest, I would hold off and return to the stand until I get him, as I knew first hand who I was chasing now. As both does ran for cover the big buck followed and a short time later all was silent again. This had all happened within 10 minutes of legal hunting light.

I eventually got to my stand and spent three hours waiting for the buck to show again as I hadn't disturbed him, but it never eventuated. At midday I called Steve to come and pick me up.

Between deer drives and rattling for bucks the next three days produced several younger stags and a clean miss on a good stag at no more than 100m on the run. During this time I had chosen to spend every morning and evening on my stand trying to outsmart the old timer and eventually worked out he was feeding at night only, but had probably slipped up the morning I'd seen him by staying out until just before light.

Later that evening the two does fed out again into the open field, which had me at the ready for more than an hour thinking the big

buck would follow out at any time. At one stage a doe fed in so close to me, I could have reached out and grabbed her. Everything was perfect, the breeze was in my favour and I had so many layers of polarfleece on, I wasn't at all cold. As patient as I was however, the buck never showed and a little dejected, I packed up and walked out just after dark. Steve was waiting at the usual spot and could tell I hadn't scored, he was as upset as I was, as he really wanted to see me get this buck. "Never mind, I got a new spot I want you to see tomorrow morning. It's where I saw that ten pointer the other day — he's still there."

Returning to camp, old Gibby Lewis from Texas whom I had become mates with was on the lounge sipping whisky after a hard day in the bush. "How did ya get on today, Popsicle?" Apparently, as I was the only one in camp prepared to sit out in the snow all day they decided to call me "Popsicle". Fair enough, I thought.

The following morning, and still within my W.M.U., we crested a rise and entered the area here Steve had seen a particular buck on



**A heavy non-typical taken on the third day that scored big points.**

# Alberta's big bucks

two separate occasions, and now wanted to do some serious scouting. Shortly after, we cut it's tracks, another reason why hunting in fresh snow can help. Propped on the edge of a small rise we both continued glassing for a few moments and lowered our binoculars for a brief chat. Steve continued to explain various aspects of whitetail traits and habitat,

while continuing to eyeball his surrounds for any movement, when all of a sudden a dark object slowly materialised from a clump of scattered spruce trees about 400m away. "Quick, load up," was Steve's command, as he lifted his bins for a better look. I quickly asked if it was a doe or a buck, as it was too far for me to see. "It's a buck, he's got his



nose to the ground, he's chasing a doe on heat. He's at least a 10-pointer, he's a taker."

All this seemed to happen very quickly, as the doe he was chasing showed herself on the open flat and stopped on the edge of a patch of willow bush. By this time I had the buck in my scope and could clearly see nice long tops on both sides of his rack. "He's a nice 5x5 rack, it's your choice, buddy," Steve whispered. "How far?", I asked.

"Just hold the height of his back." The buck slowly moved forward with decisive steps and nose still to the ground. Holding the cross-hairs of the Leupold along the horizontal line of the buck's back, he continued to slowly move across as I touched off the first shot.

The Winchester Model 70 bucked, sending a 130gn Winchester Supreme Ballistic Silvertip to do its job. Almost immediately the report of a solid strike echoed back. Nonetheless, the fatally hit buck managed to run 50m to the patch of willow the doe was in. But not before I managed to get another shot away. Steve and I scrambled over to where I had first fired at the buck and soon cut his tracks. About twenty meters further on, the blood trail began and became heavier and more intense as we followed. Reaching the edge of the bush my buck was nowhere to be seen. Rather than follow, Steve decided he

**Ken "Bubba" Jackson (right) and his guide with an 18-point 205 1/8 Boon and Crocket whitetail head.**

# Alberta's big bucks

would circle the patch of bush to see if the buck had exited and at the same time give the buck time to lay down if fatally hit.

Heading off along the scrub line in opposite directions to each other, we scouted the circumference of the small stand of bush, but thankfully didn't cross his blood trail nor his fresh tracks. This only meant one thing, he had to be still in there. Carefully, we both entered where the buck had last been seen

and followed its tracks and blood trail, Steve spotted him first. "He's over here and he's down." Rushing over to where the buck lay, I could hardly tell who was more excited, me or Steve. A close look revealed my first shot had actually entered the chest and the second had broken both back legs.

After dragging the animal out of the timber and into open country for some photos, I asked Steve to go back for the truck. It was



our turn to radio the boys this time, who were still out hunting and tell them of our good fortune. "Popsicle's just scored a nice buck, probably 155-160 Boon & Crocket," shouted Steve. As it turned out, my buck scored 159 B&C.

It's not hard to understand why Lloyd McMahon has such a high success rate with his operation. His guides are either local hunters who live where the deer are, or guides, who at other times of the year, run their own operations and know exactly what's required to ensure a successful hunt.

Lloyd's hunting area is arguably the best in Alberta and extends east of Edmonton to the Saskatchewan border with very high densities of mature whitetail bucks. It's not just genetics that makes these bucks big, it's the country they live in, the food source and the cover that allows them to grow old and big without being outsmarted by hunters.

I'm already considering a mule deer hunt with him next year and perhaps a crack at another big whitetail. To find out more about Great White Holdings, contact Lloyd McMahon, PO Box 2065, Lloydminster, Alberta, S9V 1R5, Canada. Tel/fax: 0011 1 403 875 0488 or call Rick Nagle of World Wide Hunts on (07) 4939 6437 or fax (07) 4939 3888. ●

**A line-up of some of the heads in camp. There's a few whitetail deer trophies in the photo, too.**