



The last few years have been kind to me in the whitetail woods, but knowing the odds, I didn't have unrealistic expectations for the upcoming 2022 season by any means. Come what may, I would once again be looking forward to spending time in the northern-Saskatchewan forest. It's where I grew up, and where I got my very first buck. For the past five

years or so I had put many hours of sitting in to one particular spot that I have enjoyed all kinds of deer activity at. However, I never crossed paths with a buck that I wanted to hang a tag on. It was a great set up, one that I hunted cautiously, and one that rewarded me with experiences that bring light to a hunter's soul.

The consensus in the central and northern parts of

Big Buck Editor, Rob Manley with the whitetail he called, "Shred Head". This buck's antlers exploded in size from the year before. Adding to that was the uncommon situation where much of the velvet was dried and still hanging from the rack. At nearly 195 inches, this character has it all!

THE EXPLOSION

by Rob Manley

the province was that many of the mature bucks making it through the '21-'22 winter took a step back in antler growth for 2022. The lingering winter and late April green up managed to burn the remaining energy bucks had left, as their gas tanks were already on fumes. Survivors seemed to channel their calories into rebuilding reserves instead of maximizing antler growth. There are always exceptions to any rule or trend. Little did I know, I would be someone who would discover an outlier; a buck who did not recede, but actually exploded in antler growth. I'm talking about gains that are rarely seen, even under the best circumstances and conditions....



Somehow, while other mature bucks struggled to maintain their stature after a tough winter, this deer managed to blow up, with a possible extra 40 inches grown from the previous year.

Earlier in the fall I made the trip to get things going in my annual location. I couldn't help but wonder how some of the bucks from previous years might look, especially considering some of the reports of poor antler growth from trusted sources in other parts of the province. To my surprise, after my first card pull, I found there were still some nice bucks cruising the big woods. I could tell a few of them had weathered the tough winter quite well, and although none of the bucks would entice me to send an arrow their way, I looked forward to seeing them on the hoof, doing their thing.

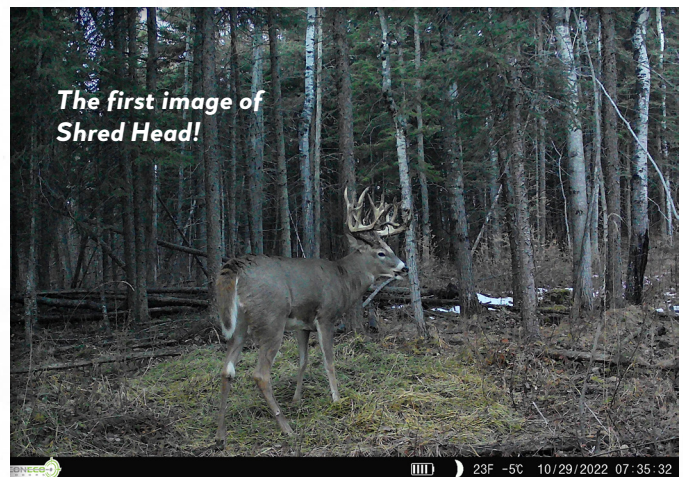
I was using the latest Reconoco cellular camera; the Kunuk HD and I was thrilled to be getting remote updates as the month of October progressed. The changes in the bucks' appearances were clearly evident. Necks were swelling and the bases of antlers were full of bark bits. What a time in deer country! Four decades of whitetail hunting, and I still get pumped for the later-autumn period. Adding to my enthusiasm was an image captured on October 23rd. A buck I couldn't place from the year before showed up on camera during the morning. He was special, pushing into the 170s with good mass and the beginnings of some stickers on a number of tines. I knew he would be tough to pass up if I was lucky enough to have him come by while I was lurking in my groundblind. But I also knew he possessed a tremendous upside should he survive another year. His body shape and demeanour suggested he was ascending the ranks, but not at the top. I couldn't wait to lay eyes on him.

Everything changed the day before I was to begin my dark-to-dark outdoor therapy in the timber. We had a big blizzard the previous day. I was wondering how it would affect the deer behavior, as in the past, I've seen that first snow of the year kind of shut the whitetails down for a day or two. What it may have done instead was steer a buck like I could never imagine, my way!

On October 29th, at 7:30 am, my Kunuk camera sent me an image I'll not soon forget. The early snowfall had been melted by an intense warm spell, creating a gloomy mist in the morning air. Centered in the picture was a buck that had dried velvet cascading from its thick beams and tines. My over-achieving imagination likened the scene to a mythical beast materializing from

some faraway medieval woodlot. If I had been excited for the start of my hunt before seeing this, I can say my nerve synapses were now completely buzzed upon viewing this particular trail cam capture! I was still a couple hours away from being ready to slip in to my blind. The wind would be serviceable for the rest of the day, so I just needed to get to the area and hunker down.

After finally arriving to where I had to hike from, I decided to check for any new images on the cell cam. The buck was in again at noon. He was looking even



more exotic in the clear light of day. I talked myself down a bit. This was too close for comfort. I needed to wait, letting the deer clear out. When no further images came through, I made my move. I cannot remember being more nervous or more anxious to get into a blind, get it zipped up and get myself settled.

In my humble opinion, a snow leopard couldn't have been stealthier. I was in. I also couldn't have been more confident. Here I had a buck new to the program,



A midday showing.

he had been in twice during daylight already, and I felt I had not disturbed any bedding or travel areas as I was only 20 paces in from a large open area. I'm a huge realist, but my anticipation, under these circumstances was way out beyond normal parameters.

A small buck came in right away, which made me think I had not ruffled any of the forest's feathers with my entry. A few more visitors came and went. Each time any one of them pricked their ears or directed their attention back into the cover, I reached for my bow. As the afternoon wound down, deer traffic increased. Each new brown body coming through the trees represented an opportunity for my heart to push blood right through my ear drums. And then it got dark...No, I didn't pass out from hyperventilation; the sun simply set. It caught me by surprise. I had been concentrating so hard I didn't notice my day had ended. No mythical beast for me. Back to being a realist.

I did get another image from the camera that night, showing the buck had returned at around 8:30 pm. That night time picture got him branded, "Shred Head". And I was hoping the next day we would meet in person.



A few hours after the end of Rob's first sit, the buck returned.

Securely nestled into my Cocoon bag as day broke on October 30th, I was ready for whatever mother nature would offer up. Not long after first light the solid 170 class buck gave me a show that continued for an hour. I sat there, incredulous at how I could be a mere 30 paces away from a whitetail of this stature without detection. His interactions with other bucks would have made great



The buck only came in once over night. Was there cause for worry?

footage, but I was far too cautious to reach into my pack for the camera. I was on a mission. Again, day's end snuck up on me. Shred Head would remain an image on a device.

When I awoke the next morning, I quickly checked my phone for pictures. (now I understand the cell cam addiction!) The buck had been in at 2:30 am. I tried not to let the idea he was going nocturnal sneak into my mind. I was hoping another daylight visit was in the cards at some point. Winds had continued to be favorable so I was resolute that it wasn't my presence that was changing his patterns. Another all-day vigil in my well-concealed blind allowed me to remain undetected again, but Shred Head was not gracious enough to bless me with his presence. And I would come to find out there would be no more pictures of him for the next two days. The rut does strange things to a buck's routine. I feared he had begun patrolling greener pastures, and left me a mere shell of my former self.

All the hand-wringing was for naught as my trusty Kunuk delivered a beautiful image of Shred Head at 7:00 pm, November 2nd.



After a few days away, Shred Head was back!

Optimism was once again my ally. I would be ready when the next day dawned. I was becoming a part of the environment surrounding my little pop-up tent. It felt like I belonged in that landscape. But I really wanted to share it with that unusual buck. I mostly just wanted to see him with my own eyes. Fate would determine how the rest would go.

The morning light of November 3rd revealed a familiar scene, with familiar occupants. I watched a few of the deer walk off to the right of my window. They would disappear into thicker cover about 100 yards out. I would always watch that way with my binoculars as many deer would come in from that direction also. About 8:30 I noticed movement up ahead, to my right. I assumed it was one of the bucks that had been coming and going since daybreak as he hassled the does. When I raised my bins to confirm his identity I spotted a heavy, forked tine. I immediately knew who this was. Shred Head had finally made an appearance. All I could think about was getting my bow upright and on my knee, my broadhead out the window, and my release on the string. All the while, a behemoth of a whitetail casually sauntered towards a small buck already in the hay. That little deer was a mixed blessing. He was a diversion for Shred Head, but also another set of eyes and ears to catch me drawing. As the big buck approached, the young guy back pedaled. A broadside shot quickly presented, and I took it. The whole action of drawing and aiming was subconscious, something those of us who have released thousands of arrows can attest to. The lighted nock disappeared exactly where I wanted it, my lethal broadhead sent to do its grisly business. The huge whitetail tore off, leaving the forest to regain its tranquility once more....

I was so sure of my shot, I fired off a text to my son, Jay who was working not far away, "I smoked Shred Head!"

I was thrilled to hear back that Jay would join me shortly. I really wanted to share this experience with him. I also messaged my good friend, Tom who happened to be working in the area as well. He could come too, and I knew I could count on him being as pumped as I was. Usually, I'm alone for the recovery so this was going to be a treat. About then I realized



This amazing buck is entrusted to Kent Ringheim of Wilderness Taxidermy, who will surely capture the essence of such a unique whitetail.

that I never even looked at the buck's antlers when he came in, as I had been so focussed on the shot opportunity. In essence I still hadn't really seen his rack with my own eyes. It was time to get on the track anyway. I wanted the discovery to get wrapped up before my guys arrived.

About 70 yards back in the forest, a very real beast, lay dead on a bed of pine needles and snow. He had likely only lasted three or four seconds. The bridge between elation and sorrow is a short one in these moments. I've been lucky enough to take some amazing bucks in my day, but after 40 years of chasing whitetails, over some of the best ground on the planet, I laid a hand respectfully on the rarest specimen I could hope to make a memory with. This whitetail represented the culmination of many hard lessons I learned over so many years in the woods with his predecessors. I was glad for my quiet reflection with the mighty buck in his final resting spot, but when I heard company coming, I knew it was time to transition back to elation! 🍄