

BIG BUSH

Magick



PART I

— JON BEHUNIAK —

Jon Behuniak of Grande Prairie, Alberta, decided to hunt in a new area in 2009. Well, he certainly wasn't disappointed when he connected on this mega whitetail. Main beams both run over 26 inches with brow-tines that are dead even at 4 2/8 inches each. Longest G-2 is 11 3/8 and G-3 goes 11 inches. G-4s are 4 6/8 and 4 4/8 inches. This northern Alberta whitetail has a gross score of 173 4/8 inches. After 12 inches of deductions, it still nets 161 4/8 typical points. Photos by Riley Boyd.

It started three years ago. Riding a four-wheeler along an old road one spring day, I looked over and saw a monster whitetail antler on a sandy pine ridge. Needless to say, in about half of a second I had an 83-inch six-point shed in my hands. I searched hard for the match but came up one-sided.

A year later, I found myself in the same spot, and 70 yards away I located the chewed match of the six-point. I continued to shed hunt and found several other smaller antlers and a nice 160-inch 5x5 set. Lo and behold, this was now my new whitetail hunting spot.

The next fall I ventured back to my old spot, not the new one. Sure, I went out there once, my friend missed a nice buck, and I saw several others, but I didn't give it all I had. So the 2008 season ended with me having only taken an elk with my bow.

It was the season of 2009 when I decided to really hunt the new area hard. Off I would go down old cutlines with a pack on my back and rifle in hand. Walking, sitting, rattling. I found an area with lots of good scrapes and, in my opinion, MONSTER whitetail tracks. This spot was spectacular, with an old trail along the edge of a very deep and staircase-like creek bank. First time walking it was at around 1:00 p.m. After the morning hunt of watching a pipeline and not seeing anything, I opted to walk down the old trail that had caught my eye on the way in.

After a short lunch break and some needed hot coffee, I threw my pack on and headed down the path. Stopping and rattling a few times brought no success, but then I noticed a big old spruce overlooking the creek bank. I cleared a spot underneath and got cozy, 'cause that was now home.

The rattling began, and after some twisting, banging, smashing, grinding and clashing, I sat still. Ten minutes passed, nothing. Twenty minutes passed, still nothing. About 30 minutes after rattling, followed with some grunting and bleating, I could hear the unmistakable sound of a buck's hooves pounding the snow. Slowly, I turned to see a heavy 5x4, 40 yards away and closing. *Uh oh*, I thought as he came right at me. When he was about five feet away, he lowered his head and put his ears back. I didn't think he saw me, but off went the safety on my rifle and up came the deer's head in a hurry. That was my first time sitting under that tree. I sat there another two times and had a total of six bucks come in. Nothing huge, just two- or three-year-olds, but I knew one of these times . . .

Sunday, November 22, found me and a good friend of mine, Riley Boyd, with coffee in our hands and heading to the spot at 6:00 a.m. It was still an hour before daylight when we parked the truck. Riley headed off to a different cutline in hopes of finding a monster whitetail to top off his season. When he had harvested a 300-inch 6x6 elk in September, I was lucky enough to be the caller on that hunt! As I started the dark walk into my spot, thousands of thoughts ran through my head, thousands of scenarios. The thoughts of my friend Lincoln's 168-inch whitetail, shot three days ago in my old hunting spot, and me getting skunked last year were the most prevalent. Finally, still 25 minutes before

daybreak, I was under my spruce. *Well, I did my part*, I thought as I watched the sun bring life into a lifeless sky.

As legal shooting time approached, I started to rattle. This time I wasn't just rattling, I was making it sound like a war! Two short sessions and lots of chipped tines later, it was waiting time. Overlooking the creek was an awesome sight. Open aspen with birch saddles and dips made the hill seem like the perfect place for a cruising buck to try to catch the scent of a hot doe. However, every deer that had come in had been from the top, and close! I bleated and grunted every now and then, hoping to draw in a cruising buck.

Time slowly ticked by and the wind started to blow slightly. The sun was peeking over the horizon, making the fresh snow glimmer like gold. About half an hour had passed since rattling when I thought I heard that wonderful sound. I saw nothing, but I could still hear it. Soon I spotted the culprit: a mere 20 yards away stood a very wide 4x4 with a broken brow-tine. *A very nice buck but really young*, I thought as he lumbered with his head to the ground. He would stop and look around every couple steps, working his way along the trail I had come in on. Soon he turned and made his way to the bank of the creek where I was sitting. *Another medium-sized buck at bow range*, I mused as the rut-crazed buck looked for his foe. I should have brought my bow out.

While turning to position myself to aim at the correct angle, the buck heard me and snapped his head in my direction. *Damn, busted . . .* but he didn't run. He looked back down the creek bank. Pretty soon I could hear what he had already heard or seen. That sound that I love and live for was back again. The 4x4 kept switching between me and the creek, with his view of me obstructed by a large aspen right in front of him.

I kept looking for what was making the sound, thinking it was going to be another smaller buck and I would see a fight. Needless to say, my heart was beating like a jackhammer. Soon I saw a deer at about 100 yards, moving quickly up the bank. Even without binoculars, I could tell he might be a shooter. I tried to slowly turn to get into shooting position, but that 4x4 kept catching me move. I thought about just scaring him away, but fearing he would go down the hill, I opted to keep inching along. With my eyes on the 4x4, I could hear *buurrrp buuurrrrrrp buurrrp buurrrp*. I turned to see the now definite shooter at 75 yards, grunting with every step.

The huge buck was almost at the last hill before he would reach my level, when he saw the 4x4 by me and stopped at 40 yards. Although the 4x4 was still looking at me, he had now had enough. As he flagged and ran off, my mind screamed *NO!* The big guy was 40 yards in front of me, and in front of him were some big aspens, and the only shot I had was face-on through a four-inch opening. I wasn't even lined up to shoot at him yet, and as I began to turn, he snapped his head and locked onto me. Then this buck did what all whitetail hunters fear and hate: he snorted twice and stomped his feet. As my heart made its way into my throat, my grunt

Big Bucks like this are rare indeed. Thousands of avid deer hunters hit the great outdoors every year in Alberta but only a very few end up with deer like this. That is the reality of hunting big mature bucks. Still, little did this avid whitetail hunter know that this was just the beginning of an amazing journey. The 2010 hunting season was next on Jon's list and that fateful year would produce not just another monster buck but a true-blue Boone and Crockett.



call found its way to my mouth, and at the same time I turned to put the scope on him. All I remember seeing through the scope was a four-inch patch of chest and the whitetail's face through two aspens 30 yards away.

When the crosshairs fell on that magic spot, I pulled the trigger. *WHABOOM!* I watched him buckle and begin to run down the hill. *WHABOOM!* The second shot wasn't needed (it didn't hit him) as I watched him pile into the ground less than 30 yards away. Then I steadied on his chest and put one final bullet into him.

I'm sure my feet only hit the ground twice in the 70 yards to my buck. When I lifted his head out of the snow, I knew this was a true trophy. I let out a few war cries and started walking back to the truck, which couldn't have been close enough.

Thirty minutes later, I could see the truck and Riley standing by it. "You shoot?" he asked.

"You know that thing called ground shrinkage?" I said to him.

"You shot a small one!" he answered.

"It never happened with this deer!" I exclaimed with a grin from ear to ear.

As we got our cameras and gear from our bags, we pondered why we had decided not to bring a quad. After a short but long walk back to my deer, the photo session began. Halfway through, we were interrupted by wolves howling a couple hundred yards away. As we finished field dressing the buck, we brainstormed about ways to get him out. After halving him, we at least got him to the top of the creek bank, but still had half a mile to go. Riley dug around in his

backpack, but with no rope in sight, off came his belt. He broke a log, we strapped the antlers to it, then hoisted it onto our shoulders.

A few stops and a sore shoulder later found us three-quarters of the way back with both halves and our gear. Within the last 200 yards, we could hear the purr of an approaching four-wheeler (we had texted a friend to bring a quad when we were at the truck). Soon Ty Kakoske came riding up with a smile on his face when he saw the deer. After a quick break and loading the buck's back half and our gear onto his quad, Riley and I finished packing my deer out to the truck. What an accomplishment – calling in a big buck and packing him out! This truly was a hunt of a lifetime and I'm very thankful for it.

With 13 scorable points, heavy sweeping 26 plus inch main beams, 26 6/8 greatest spread, and 11-inch G-2s and G-3s, the frame on my buck is world-class. He ended up with an official gross score of 173 4/8 inches.

This wasn't the only highlight of the year. As rifle season opened, Riley, Ty, and I found ourselves on our yearly elk hunt. Action was slow until we peeked 300 yards down the riverbank, where I called in a nice 300-class 6x6 bull that Riley laid the hammer on! The next morning was windy, and a short hike and funny hunt later, Ty got his first elk, a nice young 5x5. And three days before I shot my deer, I was on some of my uncle's land with Lincoln Bozarth and Stuart Wiebe, looking for some big bucks. Well, less than an hour into the hunt, Lincoln rattled in a really nice 6x5 with 25- and 26-inch main beams that grossed 168 Boone and Crockett. What an unbelievable and unforgettable year! 🍀



It Just Happens

PART II

— JON BEHUNIAK —

Jon Behuniak, who lives in Grande Prairie, Alberta, shows us the huge Boone and Crockett whitetail he took on November 22, 2010. After harvesting a colossal whitetail in 2009, he sure didn't think he would put another true monster on the ground only one year later. Here are some numbers from the official score sheet he supplied. Main beams reach way out there at 28 6/8 and 29 whopping inches. Brow-tines are 6 3/8 and 6 7/8, with G-2s reaching for the sky at 13 1/8 and 12 inches even. Longest G-3 is 10 6/8 and G-4 runs 4 6/8 inches. This Alberta whitetail has a gross typical score of 182 5/8 and nets 174 6/8 typical points. Jon Behuniak photos.



Jon's 2010 whitetail has a greatest spread of 23 inches and also grew two extra sticker points that add up to 3 1/8 inches. The final score would have been 177 7/8 if it hadn't grown them, but looking on the bright side, it certainly gives a lot more character to the big brute.

Is it more likely for lightning to strike twice in the same spot, or for two monster whitetails to get harvested exactly one year apart, within 100 yards of each other?

As the elk bugles stop ringing through the trees and the golden aspen and poplar leaves carpet the forest floor, daylight begins to lose its battle with the nighttime darkness. This is the time that big elusive mature whitetails roam the forests and the prairies, beginning their search for one thing.

November of 2010 started off slow. With warm weather and lots of time spent working, big whitetails were on my mind nevertheless. I would work 10 days and get four off, so I did have time to hunt and go out to my special place where I got my big whitetail in 2009. I logged lots of miles and hours, sitting and waiting. I knew they were there, they just didn't want to show their hides.

During the eight or nine full days I spent out in the bush in that spot, I only saw one doe and four bucks. In the first week of November, as I was walking through some thick overgrown cutlines, grunting every 10 minutes or so, I came to a small swampy clearing maybe 50 yards across. One step further and a big dark-antlered whitetail jumped up on the other side of the swamp. I didn't have time to make an ethical shot, so I let him

go. This happened about a mile from where I normally hunt. A repeat of a pretty much identical situation previously and I was feeling fed up with hunting that area to say the least.

Warm weather was the story till the 16 of November. Then the lovely north winds blew and temperatures finally fell to the -20°C range. Snow was soon to follow, and a nice blanket of the white stuff was sure to get some bucks moving. My good friend Stuart Wiebe and I headed north of town to try our luck at putting a buck or bull elk down where the farmland meets the forest. We sat for a few days, well, tried to sit, but temperatures now around -30°C made it really hard to stay still for more than an hour.

We saw lots of animals on those days. Some days we would catch the herds of elk crossing the roads or pipelines and see more than 20 elk. Never any good bulls, though, just spikers and cows. The whitetails appeared to be kicking it into high gear. We saw bucks cruising around all day, nose to the ground or running does, but no big ones wanted to cross when we were looking.

On Sunday, the 21 of November, Stuart and I again hit the road. The glow of the full moon lit up the white snow-covered fields like the light of day. It was obvious that the whitetails

and mule deer were dumbstruck with love. We must have seen over 40 deer that morning in the moonlight while heading to our hunting area. The morning brought only five bull elk sightings, spikers unfortunately.

After a quick bite to eat, we headed back into the bush. The wind started to pick up late in the evening and hoarfrost was blowing off the trees and making the air seem to sparkle. As the hours slipped by, I passed on a small 120-class buck following a doe. I heard a gunshot, but it didn't sound as if it was Stuart shooting.

After the sun slipped behind the horizon and the cold had numbed me to the bone, it was time to make my way back to the truck. When I got to the road, I looked up and saw Stuart walking towards me . . . he looked happy. Well, as luck and fortune had it, the gunshot I had heard was Stuart! He had shot his first deer in three years and his biggest to date. A 140" 5x6 was on the ground and we couldn't have been happier! After so many hours of sitting, so many miles of walking, this deer was well deserved. It was the icebreaker I had been waiting for.

Once back in town and all the work of hanging and skinning was done, I was undecided where to hunt the next day. I would be alone and it was going to be cold, with -35°C wind chill. I asked Stuart where I should go. After a quick conversation, we agreed that I should go south to the same spot where I had gotten my big whitetail the previous year. It was going to be exactly one year tomorrow, so why not? The only thing holding me back was work. If the temperature managed to float above -25°C, I would be working.

November 22 was the day I had gotten my big buck in 2009. Work starts at 7:00 a.m., and I called in at 6:40 and got the no-work signal. I had already been waiting at Tim Horton's with my hunting gear, so I was on the road in a hurry. The road was busy with logging trucks and it took a little longer than I had hoped to get in there. As I parked my truck on the abandoned lease site, the sun was just starting to peak above the horizon. The treetops glimmered like gold in the frigid air.

I was busy getting my hunting gear together and drinking coffee, too busy in fact to notice the 140-class 4x4 coming out of the trees 40 yards from my truck! I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and noticed him as he walked in a semi-circle around my vehicle and vanished into the bush. This deer looked badly beaten up, with blood on his face, his hide all tufted up, and limping.

After he disappeared into the bushes, I quickly got the rest of my stuff together. I grunted twice and waited for 15 minutes before heading down the same old trail I had found last year. It was obvious there was a hot doe in the area, with buck and doe tracks crisscrossing the old lease site and cutline. I just crept along, listening to the trees popping and cracking around me.

Upon reaching an area of high activity on the trail, I stopped to assess the situation and put some Doe in Heat scent on my boots and

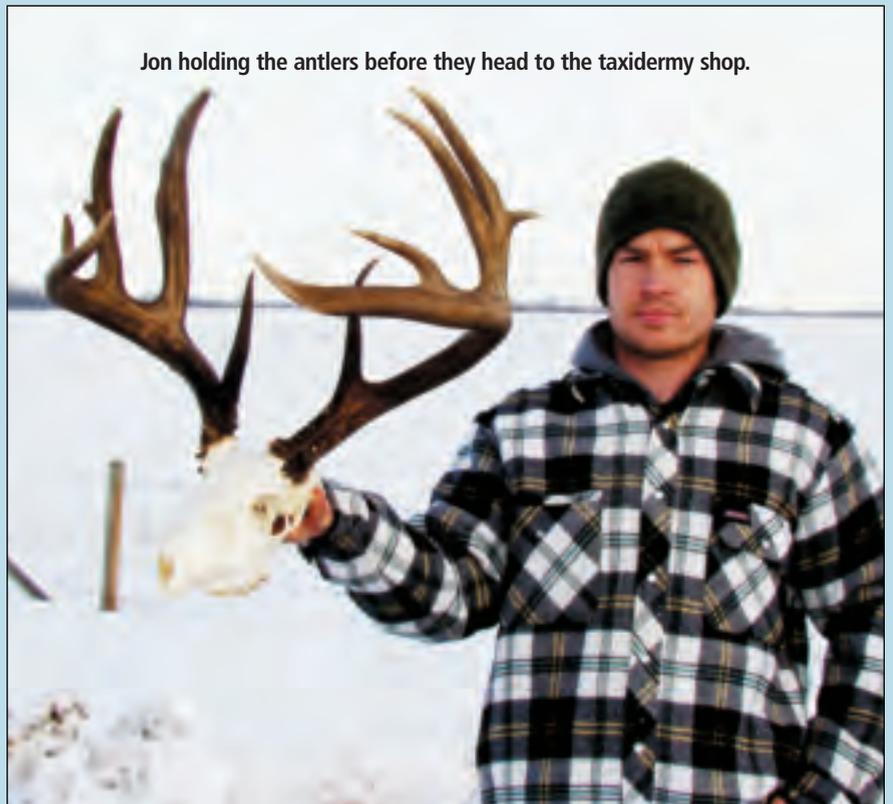
on a fresh scrape. I pulled the bottle out and opened it . . . frozen. I managed to get some out with a stick and put it on the scrape and on my hands! Oh well. After a short wait and a couple of tending grunts and a bleat, I moved on.

My plan was to slowly move to the spruce tree I sit under that overlooks the creek bank. Its wide open, rolling aspen banks make for the perfect spot to sit and rattle. I just couldn't believe how many fresh tracks crossed the trail on the way in, and my senses came to a peak as I approached the creek. I was still about 100 yards from where I had taken my buck last year and where I planned on sitting and spending the day.

As I came to a turn in the cutline, where it turns and skirts the creek bank, I opted to walk the 10 yards to the edge to see if I could spot a buck cruising the bank below. I was just standing there, glassing the aspen hillside with my binoculars. The sun's rays etched golden light onto the bark of the aspens, making glassing a pleasure. I let my binoculars down and tipped my estrus can a few times. Then I let out some barking aggressive grunts before I resumed glassing the bank and just watching the many openings in the trees. Soon I heard a distinctive "SNAP." The trees had been popping all morning in the -30°C temperature, but this sounded different.

The snap had come from the direction I wanted to continue going. Knowing very well that a buck closing in on me from the cutline was a good possibility, I let out a few more grunts and waited. Time seemed to stand still as I listened to my heart beating and the trees groaning and popping. I was almost certain it was just a tree popping, when I heard that familiar noise – the "pat pat, pat pat" of a front heavy buck on a steady trot in the fresh snow! He was coming down the cutline, and though I couldn't see him yet, I turned to face that direction. I looked down to make sure my scope was on 3X and I was ready to rock.

Jon holding the antlers before they head to the taxidermy shop.



It all happened so quickly, just mere seconds in time. When finally I caught movement through the trees, he was about 50 yards away. I squatted down as quickly as possible, with both feet directly under me. The first thing I saw was antlers, tall antlers. *Looks good*, I thought as he quartered towards me, although the bush was very thick and prevented me from getting a good look. He was closing fast and about to enter a small opening where I could get a better look at his rack.

When that deer stepped into that opening at 10 yards and I saw that he was over 160" with a sticker and at least a 5x4 main frame, I instantly let out a "muuurrrp" with my mouth. At the same time, I got my gun up and put the crosshairs on him. But, unfortunately, he stopped, with a big poplar tree covering most of his vitals. As he stared at me like a hawk, I very quickly picked a hole and eased that trigger back. My weapon of choice is a .325 WSM, shooting 200-grain Accubonds. Yes, I know, it's a heavy hitter! Although perched solidly on my two feet while squatting at the shot, the recoil bowled me over backwards and left me with my feet over my head. I quickly jumped back up to see the buck running full tilt away from me! At 70 yards, he took a hard right and I lost sight of him. Seconds later I heard a loud crash, then silence . . .

I waited maybe a minute before taking up the trail. I was very confident in my shot, as it was only 10 yards. When I got

to the point of impact, I noticed only hair and a trace of blood. Another few yards revealed just a few specks of blood. A cold sweat ran over my body, even though I was certain I had made a perfect shot. Finding only the odd spray of blood, I was getting worried . . . until I took those last few steps over a small knoll. Antlers! And a deer! A dead deer! A HUGE dead deer! I sat down beside him for a few minutes and just took it all in. This deer, just like my previous one, had some serious ground growage. I had judged him to be a low 160s 5x4 on the hoof, but now it was easy to see he would smash the 170 mark.

After walking back to my truck and getting my camera, I began the process of field photos by myself, which was not the easiest task without a tripod, but I came out with a couple of keepers. I took over 65 photos and spent a few hours in the sun, drinking coffee and admiring that deer. He was a gorgeous 5x5 main frame with a small sticker on his left G-2 and another one on his right base.

The love of the outdoors has been engraved in my mind and heart by many people, my father, uncles and friends. But no other people have had such a positive impact as my two grandpas, Cyril Sandboe and William (Bill) Behuniak. Without the wisdom and help of these two great men, I would never know or respect nature the way I do. 🍄