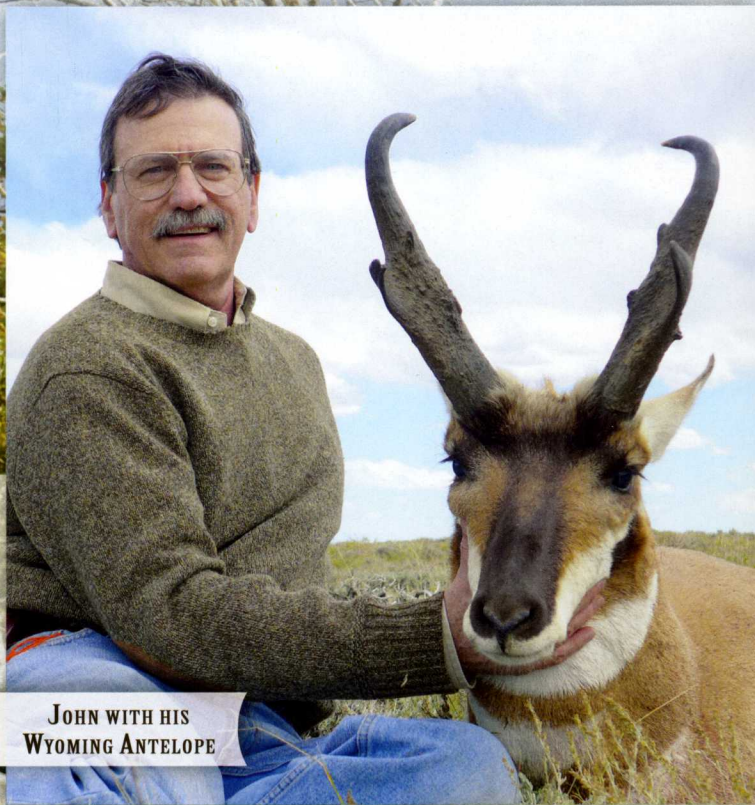


# Year OF THE Antelope

## A HUNTER'S PERSPECTIVE



JOHN WITH HIS  
WYOMING ANTELOPE

### JOHN VANKO • 84 6/8" • ANTELOPE • WYOMING

Most families serve turkey for Thanksgiving dinner, but I served antelope, a very special meal of antelope. It made an exquisite dinner, and I never served it to anyone who didn't like it. Come Christmas I served antelope again, this time medallions. These two great feast days were made more special by the food I prepared, but before I served such victuals I had to catch an antelope. Therein begins my tale.

After Christmas I was thinking of what units to apply for in the upcoming antelope draw. Figuring out which unit to apply for turned out to be difficult. There were so many factors to consider — likelihood of drawing, public to private land ratio, length of season, time of year, chance of snow, trophy potential. It has always been complicated and has never been simple or precise.

After months of calculations I made my application, and I drew a tag. With my tag awarded, it was now a matter of planning for driving or plane reservations. In my case, it was both. I lived too far away to drive, so I flew part way

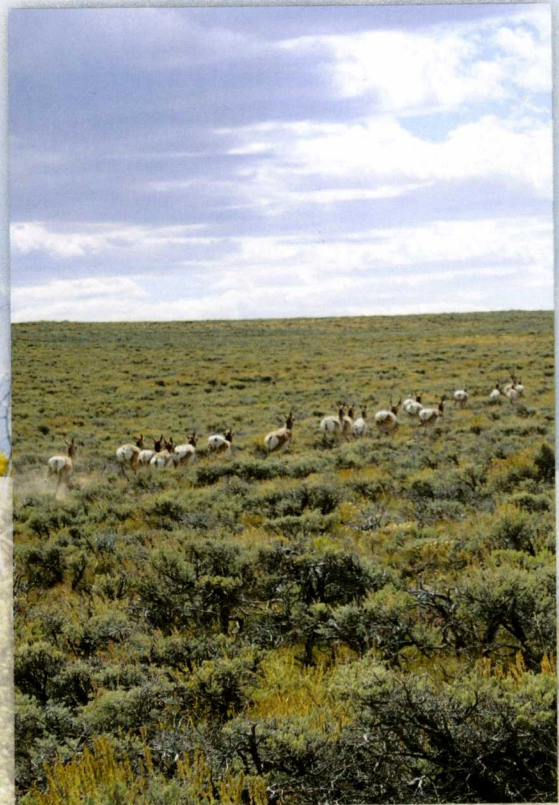
and drove the rest. I had friends who offered their ranch as a base of operations where I stored guns and gear, handloaded, and butchered when I returned from my hunt.

An antelope hunter can plan a self-guided hunt, go with buddies, or hire an outfitter. All of these have worked for me, but nowadays camping alone takes too much out of me, so I opted for a guide and an outfitter. That way I made the most of my hunt and brought home the bacon and a good trophy.

Finally the time arrived. I flew west, picked up my gear, sighted my rifle, practiced my trigger pull one last time, and packed the vehicle. The next day I drove to meet my guide. We talked about what the other hunters had killed and what the guides had seen in every area. With good weather we hoped to set out the next morning, mostly for scouting. If we saw a monster, I would shoot it. More realistically, we would discover what kind of bucks were found in my unit.

The first day we saw three bucks of interest. All looked big enough, but none were the buck my guide had seen and





photographed a couple weeks earlier. Had this special buck been shot? Perhaps. This was the third day of the season, and the greatest number of hunters were present opening day. A few were seen the second day, but by the third day we had the place to ourselves. In Tony's photographs this buck had large, gently sweeping curves at the top of his horns that hooked in and downward. I called him "Hooks." We couldn't find him.

Of the three first day bucks, the one that gave us the closest look had tremendous width at his bases, and when viewed from the front they looked 2" wide, so he became "Two-Inch-Wide." This buck appeared tame. He walked toward the truck and stopped at 150 yards. He just stood there and let us photograph and glass. I don't think he had seen a hunter all season. We decided to keep looking for Hooks.

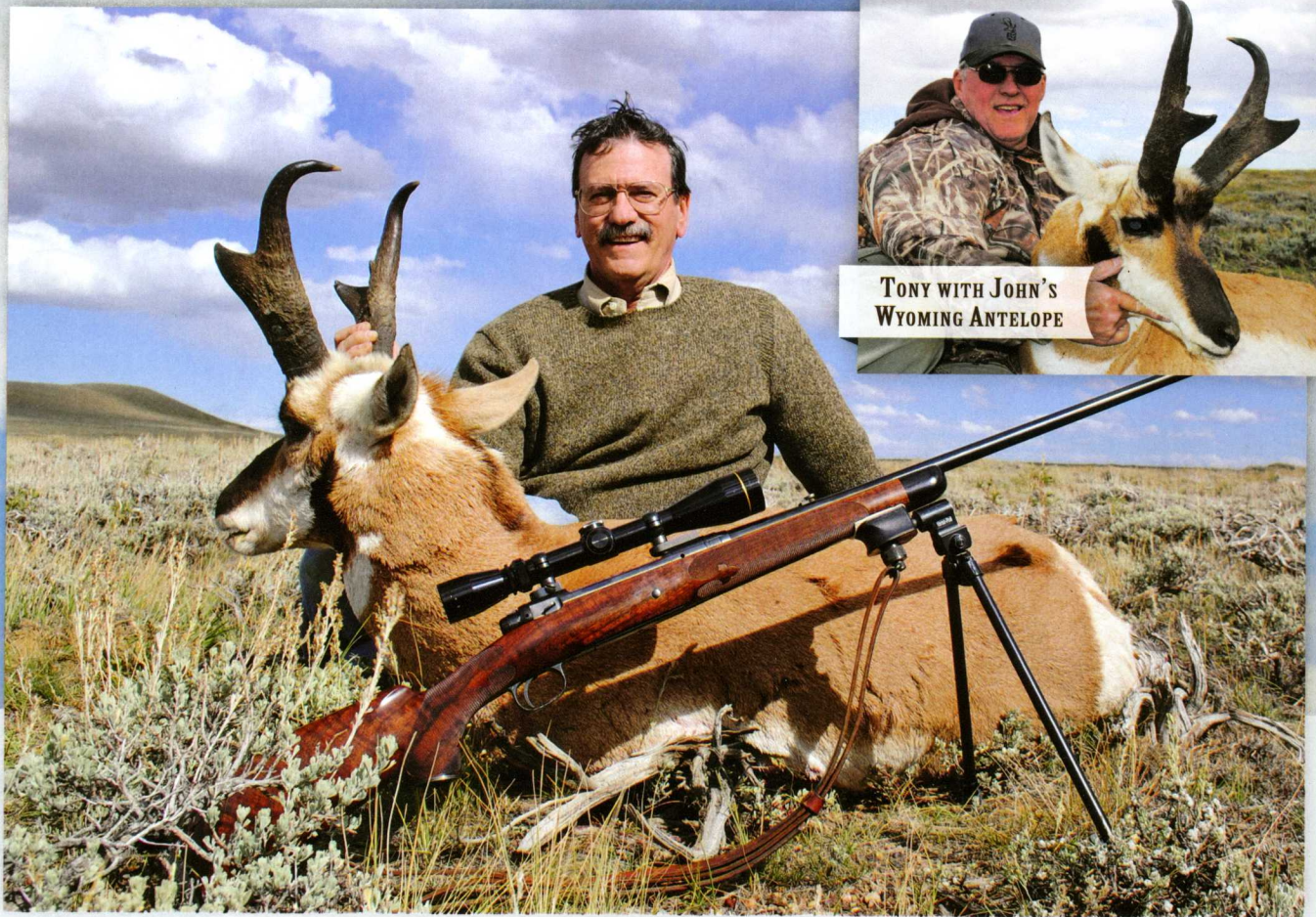
Unfortunately most hunting grounds are neither all public nor all private. In my case, I've almost always hunted a patchwork of public and private land. My guide's GPS with a BLM map overlay was invaluable. Finding the buck we wanted on public land was no small task, and getting close

enough for photographs and for a careful evaluation of trophy potential was especially difficult.

The weather was forecast to move into my area in 2 days, and we were hunting on the Continental Divide. With only 3 days allotted for my hunt, we decided that I should probably pick the best buck we'd seen and take him the following day. On the next day we began by looking for the three biggest ones again, and we found them all but not all on public land. Two-Inch-Wide was in the same place but spooked like he had been shot at for 4 days, the complete opposite of his behavior the day before. Why this sudden change, I could not imagine. We lost sight of him when he left the country. Looking farther, we found the buck Tony had spotted 2 weeks earlier. Hooks was right on the boundary of public and private land.

Now the serious estimation of size began. In the final analysis it was Hooks or Two-Inch-Wide. Tony judged Hooks about 1/2" larger in his final score, but he was on private land when we last saw him and out of bounds. It was then that I decided Two-Inch-Wide was my buck. We would find him again tomorrow, maybe sooner.





Looping back just in case he returned, we approached Two-Inch-Wide's pasture very slowly and carefully. Barely cresting the rise, there he was, right back where we'd seen him hours earlier. Based on our previous encounter, I didn't have long. I jumped out of the truck, chambered a round, got the range from Tony, 305 yards, and set up for the shot. The wind howled and gusted to 30 or 35 mph from left to right. My Savage 110L in 7mm Remington Magnum was sighted in to be about 2" high at 100 yards, 3-4" high at 200 yards, and a few inches low at 300 yards. I held dead on, no adjustment for wind or range. I had practiced my trigger pull for weeks, and it paid off. The buck was hit fatally but a little low. I finished him with a second shot at close range. The 168 grain Berger VLD in Gunwerks custom ammo at 3,025 fps in my Savage 110L with a custom stock of Claro walnut by Mark Moon of Grand Junction, Colorado had done everything I had expected of it. I had my buck, and what a trophy he was. His horns were massive with ivory at the tips. He was the biggest buck I'd ever shot at this high altitude on the Continental Divide. Since I had first hunted there in 1981, I had never killed one like this — 84 6/8" B&C, 85 3/8" SCI. Mass was his strength, and it made him a buck for the record books.

After a lot of photographs Tony caped and field butchered the buck. Then it was back to town to meet Eli and see what he had found while scouting another area. With a

few hours of daylight left, we all went scouting together. As dark approached we returned to town for a celebratory dinner of exquisite oriental food.

The next day it was time to say goodbye followed by a lazy drive home to base camp in Colorado. Along the way I couldn't pass up a stop at the hot spring in Saratoga for a dip in its soothing waters on a beautiful, sunny fall day. As I floated, breathing the therapeutic steam, I thought of all the ancient hunters who had soaked their old bones in this pool after successful hunts. I felt kinship with their spirits, and I honored them.

Back at base camp I cleaned my gun, stowed it away, and butchered. I consider the meat a great boon, a trophy in its own right. I placed it inside an Igloo cooler without its top inside a freezer. That way the meat took the shape of the cooler and packed more densely. I filled any leftover space with clothing, knives, or anything else I wanted to take home. My guns and gear remained at the ranch; I travel light.

When I arrived home I transferred the still frozen meat to my home freezer, and the cycle was complete, almost. As I prepared my first meal of antelope tenderloin medallions I thought about how to write the story of another wonderful hunt. Now that that's finished, the cycle is complete and ready to begin again.