



# WHEN BIG GAME WAS BIG

Short-faced bears standing 12 feet tall, massive dire wolves, mammoths weighing up to 10 tons—at one time hunting in Montana was a highly dangerous necessity.

BY HAL HERRING

ILLUSTRATION OF EARLY NORTH AMERICAN HUNTERS STALKING A WOUNDED MAMMOTH BY ROY ANDERSEN.

Mid-September, 12,000 years ago,  
20 miles east of Choteau, Montana...

The noon sun poured down hot and strong, burning away the last of the frost. Weather brewed above the ice-clad western mountains, the boiling gray clouds rising high and tumbling like waves above the plains. The hunters moved at a slow trot and held to the high ground, avoiding the brush-choked coulees where they would be easy prey for the huge lions that sheltered under the cutbanks waiting out the daylight. Five men, long-haired and sparsely bearded, were clad in stiff mammoth skin, woven mastodon-hair tunics, camel-hide leggings, and warm hats made of soft hare or dire wolf neck. They carried spears with shafts of bodock wood and foreshafts of mammoth ivory. The hand-sized spear points, flaked from northern Yellowstone chert to razor sharpness, were bound tightly to the ivory with sinews from mastodons or mammoths, and the spears were stained with red ochre and blood. Dried blood also clotted the men's beards, and it blackened their hands and forearms and the skin around their mouths. After they reached a low butte, all of them checked a different direction for danger before clambering up to a notch in the rimrock. The leader stopped to study the top of the butte for peril or game before committing himself to the last few feet of the climb.

High ground meant a moment of peace, where no great cheetah could run you down, no saber-tooth could leap from hiding upon you. The dire wolves—roughly 30 percent larger than today's gray wolves—saw no need to climb when there was prey aplenty on the flats. The hunters rested at the edge of the rimrock, sitting just back from the edge to avoid skylining themselves to whatever might be watching from below. They set their spears down but kept them close at hand. The three hunters who carried atlatls took the quivers off their shoulders, glad to be free of the beautiful but awkward-to-carry darts, 5-foot shafts of straight skunkbrush, fletched with crane feathers and tipped with thumb-sized points of obsidian black as a winter night's sky. From bags woven of beargrass, they took snack slabs of purple sloth meat, flicking off the grass seeds, specks of dirt, and fly eggs as they ate. Everything they carried was sturdy and well-crafted. Anyone who made shoddy weapons or clothes or cordage had died off hundreds of years before in the frozen wastes of Beringia—the ice age land bridge between Asia and North America—or elsewhere in the hostile, unforgiving landscape. Thousands of years earlier their counterparts, the mammoth hunters of Europe, had painted elaborate charcoal and red ochre frescoes of their prey and predators on walls of the caves where they lived. But these North American men had few dreamers among them; the relentless presence of predators—especially the giant short-faced bear—meant that only the hyperalert, the tricky, and the strong

could live long enough to sire children. Their clothes and weapons were barely adorned, the ivory marked with simple hatches or circles or stripes of ochre. They were nomads, with few havens, always on the move, constantly under siege from the bears that were relentlessly stealing their carcasses and attacking their camps. Their art was in their lives—intense, dangerous, often short, packed to bursting with the power of the hunt, the heat of blood, and the wealth of meat and fat.

Below them the brush, low trees, and tall grasses of the prairies yawned eastward, where immense columns of remnant ice glittered along the edge of a lake that seemed to have no end. A waving clump of serviceberry marked where a giant sloth was feeding only a quarter-mile distant, but it was in a blind swale too dangerous for the hunters to approach. A band of pronghorn passed, staying to open ground. The hunters ignored them—no use wasting effort on a wary animal that could outrun a cheetah.

They all saw the mammoth at the same time, a dark shape far out against the olive-colored plain, moving toward them. The men felt no need to hurry. Though the mammoth was capable of a fast run, it, like the other huge beasts of the era, grazed and moved slowly unless attacked. The hunters would kill in bold and carefully orchestrated attacks, the atlatl darts serving to drain and slow the massive prey animal, to set it up for the finish with spears. The long, slow killing, the blood trailing, the rush and thrust and battle were nothing compared to the challenge of trying to keep the kill. The butchering of a mammoth was a dance at the sharp edge of a predatory abyss, attended by dire wolves, saber-toothed cats, even huge wolverines. The short-faced bear trumped them all. The massive beast could smell blood on the wind from miles away and would come lumbering in like a tank to take it from the hunters, and try to kill them in the process. What meat the men could not haul back to camp in one trip was probably lost to the unstoppable carnivore, standing 12 feet tall and weighing half again as much as today's grizzly. For the luckiest and the strongest, though, there was the camp that every hunter of every epoch knows, where loved ones work and talk beside blazing fires, hoping for meat and safe return, where the laughter of children mingles with the sound of wind and water-fowl passing above... ■



Wherever we hunt this fall in Montana, we walk in the footsteps of ancient hunters very similar to ourselves. The Clovis people were named after the massive and beautifully flaked tools they used, first discovered in the 1930s near Clovis, New Mexico. The Clovis may have come from today's Siberia and Alaska during the waning years of the last ice age, venturing down to the United States by way of an ice-free corridor—a break between the Laurentide and Cordilleran ice sheets that ran east of the Rocky Mountain Front from Alberta south to what is now the Great Plains. According to a more recent theory, the Clovis came from Siberia by boat along the edges of the ice shelf that covered the Bering Sea, and then worked their way inland. Still other scientists claim evidence that the Clovis drifted north to the Great Plains from the forests of the southeast and Midwest. Nobody knows.

What is certain is that at one time the Clovis people were here in Montana. These were not cavemen or Neanderthals; they were not vastly different in appearance from us. “Montana is the special place,” says Doug Peacock, who lives in Livingston. His new book, *In the Shadow of the Sabertooth*, offers a deep look at the first peoples of North America, the incredibly diverse megafauna that sustained (and often killed) them, and what happened to man and beast alike as the climate warmed after the last ice age. “There is evidence that people were here as early as 13,000 years ago, a scattering of pilgrims, perhaps, who would have run into the mammoths in southern Alberta and hunted camels and sloths and horses,” Peacock told me. “But it’s not until the giant invasion that we call the Clovis—who discovered and quarried the flint and chert south of the Missouri River, and flaked the huge tools—that we see the obvious mammoth hunters.”

In 1968, a heavy equipment operator in the Shields Valley near Wilsall uncovered, at the base of a cliff, a Clovis burial site that would yield some of the most spec-

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tacular ancient tools ever seen. Huge spear points of carefully selected multicolored stone suggest that the lack of wall paintings and other artwork left behind by these hunters was not because they did not recognize beauty. Finely wrought tools of bone and antler accompanied the points, along with the skeleton of a child. The burial, known as the Anzick site, is one of the most significant Clovis finds in North America.

From the Anzick site to the ancient chert quarries of Montana City, to the mammoths buried in the Doeden Gravels near Miles City, to the giant sloth and dire wolf remains in Blacktail Cave on the Dearborn River, the evidence confirms that there has never been, before or since, a wilder place or time to be a hunter on this planet than in Montana during the Clovis period.

But this fierce and diverse era did not

last long. At some point around 10,000 years ago, the last mammoths died out. The climate warmed and became much drier. Gone were the giant sloths, the beavers big as ponies, the horses and camels, along with

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most of the predators that followed them, the dire wolves and saber-toothed cats, the cheetahs and lions. Without the mighty grazing beasts, the mixed shrublands grew so thick that fire became a more regular part of the environment, favoring the prairie

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION OF HUNTERS FENDING OFF A SHORT-FACED BEAR BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; CLOVIS SPEAR POINTS BY CHIP CLARK/SMITHSONIAN

grasses that dominate today.

The Clovis people disappeared, too. Or, like the landscape around them, they morphed into something else, adapting to changes in climate, vegetation, and prey, driven and altered by their own restless searching for better weapons, better technology. Within three millennia, Montana began to look much more like we know it, or at least as the Lewis and Clark Expedition recorded it. The antique bison and the giant long-horned bison were gone, but *Bison bison*, the ones we know today, were beginning their heyday. The speedy pronghorn never left; their populations exploded in the empty niches left behind by the extinctions. Mule deer and elk, adapted to grasslands, thrived. Gray wolves, no longer held in check by the more powerful dire wolves, came back strong, as did coyotes. The trend was to the smaller, the faster, the wiler.

**F**or Montana's human hunters, too, it was a time of forced adaptation. The Folsom people (named after spear points first found near Folsom, New Mexico) that appeared around 10,000 years ago had abandoned the finely flaked and massive spear points of the Clovis. Instead they developed smaller, more efficient weapons, more suited to the new dominant prey animals of the plains, especially the bison. The

Folsom made more knives, more hide scrapers, more atlatls. There was a wealth of prey in the species that had survived the great transition with them, but no human hunter could run as fast as a bison, much less a pronghorn. No man was strong enough to leap like a mountain lion and kill an elk. Physically outclassed in every way, our ancestors made the classic human decision to employ brain over brawn. Weapons technology and the mechanics of obtaining meat went through rapid change.

The great drawback of the atlatl is that, to use it effectively, a hunter must be standing up, in the open. It is not a weapon of stealth or ambush. Even the sound of the throw—the “whoosh”—can be enough to startle a deer or antelope and allow it to escape. Use of the bison jump—dating to around 12,000 years ago, and of which Montana alone contains more than 300 sites—likely became more common during the Folsom period. So did driving pronghorn and other game into “pounds,” or rock enclosures, that would slow or entrap them. Since horses did not arrive here until the mid-18th century, early hunters built cairns at strategic points for miles at a stretch, where hunters could conceal themselves and leap up, perhaps waving

a hide or other object, to stampede their prey in the direction of the jump or pound. At a Madison Valley site, pronghorn were driven over what is no more than a steep embankment into a creek bottom. It did not matter whether the jump killed the prey; injury was sufficient, anything to slow the animals down

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and give the human hunters a fighting chance to feed themselves and their families.

Like killing a mammoth or mastodon, using jumps and pounds for hunting was a communal effort. Until the appearance of the bow, about 2,000 years ago in North America, the idea of the lone hunter—so much a part of our recent history of mountain men and trappers and adventurers—was probably alien to human cultures.

**A**s we venture forth this fall, hunting alone or with friends and family, we might take a few minutes to imagine a time when we were as often the prey as the predator. Instead of the smooth bolt of the Remington 700, we worked the rough wood of a spear handle. Instead of a tiny .30-caliber copper-jacketed missile propelled by a burning mixture of the earth's chemicals discovered by 7th-century Chinese alchemists, we used raw muscle to force a hand-sized chunk of flaked stone between giant ribs. Hunting has changed in substantial ways—most importantly that failure no longer means death—but the goals are not so different from thousands of years ago: meat and hides to share, the taking of an animal's life with skill and honor, the fierce freedom of our wild spaces and all that inhabits them. There is an echo, from the Pleistocene, that only a hunter can hear. 🐾



ILLUSTRATION OF HUNTING BISON WITH ATLATL BY DANIEL ESKRIDGE