

Why on the wall?

BY TOM DICKSON

The other day I walked into a store displaying the mounts of six massive bull elk that the proprietor had killed over the years. Someone who didn't hunt big game might surely wonder what those stag heads signified. Even I, a hunter, had to stop and puzzle over why so many of us desire to obtain and then show off trophy-sized antlers.

Obsession with trophy deer and elk began in Middle Ages Europe, according to Valerius Geist, a University of Calgary professor emeritus and world-renowned expert on wild ungulate hunting. Geist once told me that European nobles lined their manor halls with mounts of huge fallow deer and red deer as a way of bragging about their estates. Abundant trophy racks signified the fertile, productive land so highly valued among the era's dukes, barons, and viscounts.

These days, a trophy elk or deer on a store or living room wall can signify many things, but it's definitely not soil fecundity. It could mean the hunter is exceptionally skilled and bagged an animal that for years eluded other, lesser hunters. It could mean the owner hired a skilled outfitter who actually did most of the hunting, leaving the client to do little more than pull the trigger. It could mean the hunter has a relative who owns prime elk property off limits to everyone except family members.

Or it could mean a mediocre hunter got lucky.

I've asked dozens of fellow hunters over the years why they want to kill a large-antlered bull or buck and hang the head on a wall. Most can't articulate a reason. Some say they chase the biggest of big game as a

challenge, to test their skill. Others enjoy the extra planning, research, training, and scouting that trophy hunting requires. For some, pursuing trophy deer and elk extends time afield; if they shot the first buck or bull they saw, the season would end too soon.

Hunters aren't the only ones oohing and aahing over big antlers: Just look where the telephoto lenses point in Yellowstone National Park when vehicles pull over next to an elk herd. Most people, even those opposed to hunting, appreciate the intrinsic beauty and symmetry of antlers or the vitality and strength conveyed by a large rack.

Yet it's one thing to admire the gleaming antlers of a big buck or bull; it's something else altogether to want to kill that animal and then show it off. Or maybe not.

Everyone wants to display what makes them proud—blue ribbons, diplomas, children's artwork, handmade quilts. Antlers are no different. For some hunters, the racks are reminders of all the work and time—sometimes years—that went into a hunt. For others, the trophy is a way to pay tribute to the animal itself. In places like Montana, where hunting skill is still admired and valued, a big rack on display is a potent status symbol.

I've always been puzzled by the whole business. Though ordinarily a meat hunter who usually shoots a doe or two each season, I've also wanted to take, at least once in my life, a big whitetail buck (oddly, elk and mule deer antlers hold no interest). Too lazy to do the requisite scouting, and too unskilled in all but the most basic woodsman-

ship, I figured reaching that goal was highly unlikely.

Then, last year while deer hunting, I saw a big whitetail buck wander across a field of public land, within range.

Every morning since, as I look up at the deer's skull and antlers mounted on the living room wall, I experience conflicting feelings of unworthiness and accomplishment.

It's not like I did anything extraordinary to earn the trophy. I simply shot a big deer so distracted by the rut that it didn't notice my presence. Yet still I'm pleased—proud even—to have taken that buck. Weird.

My admiration for its rack may have something to do with a longing to possess a great stag's power and grace. A foolish desire, perhaps. Killing that deer didn't bestow me with its grandeur. Outdoors, I'm still the puny human I've always been, a noisy nimrod stumbling through the forest. But each time I see those antlers, I'm reminded of a moment when I felt otherwise.

I could never be that majestic buck. But—and I know this sounds silly—at least I can possess his most marvelous features. Not to mention own, for once in a long life of hunting, some bragging rights.

And that's probably as close as I will ever come to explaining why I wanted to hang a trophy deer on the wall. 🐻



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