

# Legends of the Hunt

By John Seerey-Lester

*Braving icy conditions on the treacherous mountain slopes, Theodore Roosevelt would ultimately kill eight elk on his expedition into the wilds of Wyoming.*

In order to research paintings and write this story about Theodore Roosevelt's elk hunt in Wyoming, my wife, Suzie, and I decided to retrace TR's footsteps.

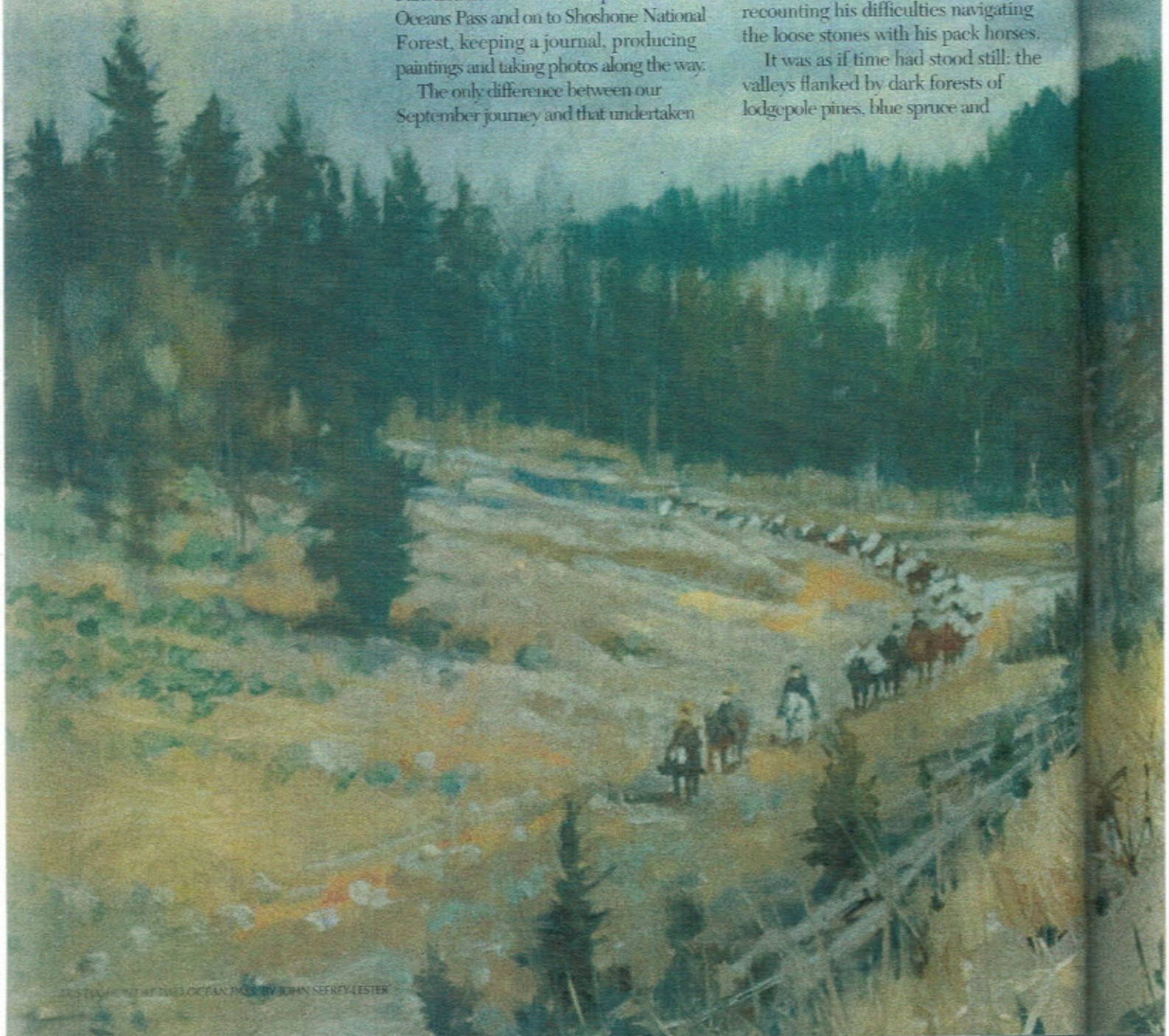
We began our journey, as did TR, at Heart Lake, now in Yellowstone National Park and headed southeast past Two-Oceans Pass and on to Shoshone National Forest, keeping a journal, producing paintings and taking photos along the way.

The only difference between our September journey and that undertaken

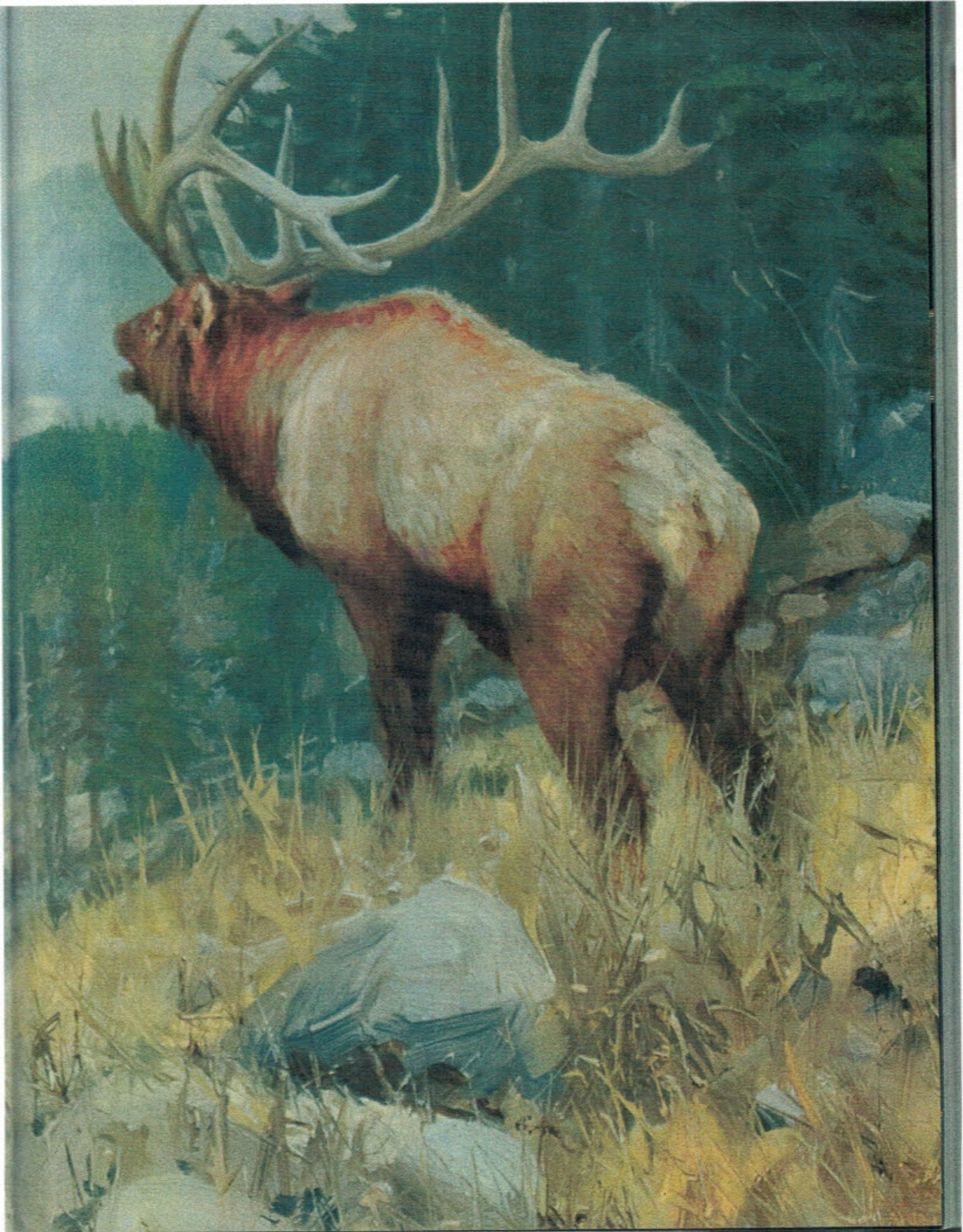
by TR 120 years earlier, besides our mode of travel, was the weather. He had rain and sleet; we had clear blue skies and 80-degree temperatures.

We kept as close as possible to TR's known route and remembered what he'd written as we stared breathlessly into seemingly bottomless ravines while recounting his difficulties navigating the loose stones with his pack horses.

It was as if time had stood still: the valleys flanked by dark forests of lodgepole pines, blue spruce and



ELK HUNT AT TWO OCEAN PASS BY JOHN SEEREY-LESTER



Douglas fir; rock-strewn hillsides scattered with deadfalls, the aftermath of a century of wildfires.

Traveling through what is now Bridger-Teton National Forest, we crossed the same creeks running through meadows and gullies forded by TR all those years ago. At one point two creeks came together then rushed off, one westward into the Snake River, the other eastward into the Yellowstone.

We had unseasonably warm weather, so the elk herds were still high on the mountain meadows, fringed with small

pinions and ancient, gray-green junipers. Farther up we watched a grizzly and her cubs foraging in the bear grass, lupines and thistle of a secluded meadow. Occasionally a distant bugle reminded us of what TR must have experienced more than a century ago.

Our journey ended, as did TR's, within sight of the distant baron peaks of the Washakie Needles in the Shoshones.

It's important when depicting a historic event in paint and words to get as close as possible to the events that took place. We were able to

achieve our goal, because we are blessed with many wilderness areas that remain virtually unchanged, thanks to the foresight of people like Theodore Roosevelt. They enabled us to enjoy what they first cherished. —  
*John Seerey-Lester*

Clad in a buckskin hunting shirt, moccasins and leggings, the hunter crept silently toward the huge bull. As he cautiously peered round the tree, he could feel the chill breeze on his face and knew he was still downwind.

There, before him on a hillside meadow was a magnificent bull elk surrounded by his harem of cows. The hunter raised his gun and took aim.

It was late September 1891, and the young hunter was Theodore Roosevelt.

TR's party, including his ranch partner Bob Ferguson along with hunters Tazewell Woody and Edward Hofer, the latter who doubled as cook and packer, was making for Two-Ocean Pass to hunt elk. TR had managed to squeeze in the trip between the increasing pressures of public life and the red tape of politics. Years later he would describe the experience as one of the most pleasant hunts he ever made.

The party was riding 6 horses with 14 others carrying packs. This was a large outfit for such a hunt, even for TR. Although many of the ponies had seen better days, they were hardy animals, and despite the usual problems of occasionally straying off, they served the hunters well on the long trip.

The hunters started out at Heart Lake in northwest Wyoming, an area now within the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. From there they headed southeast to Two-Oceans Pass where they stayed for about a week.

Day after day they rode through the rugged landscape, struggling up and down slippery hillsides. Occasionally they would dismount and go by foot, leading the packhorses over the difficult terrain. They travelled in single file with the tall, silent Woody leading the way.

They set up tepee-style tents at their camps along the way, two for sleeping and one that served as the dining tent

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The men had to endure foul weather throughout their expedition. Most days there was driving rain, which at higher altitudes, turned to sleet.

Every now and then the hunters would hear the strident bugling of bull elk, then venture on foot into the dense forests to stalk the animals.

After one such halt, Woody led TR and the other hunters toward a big bull that was calling incessantly from across a deep valley. As the group edged closer, a second elk broke from cover only 50 yards away, and swaying its handsome 12-point rack from side to side, came racing toward the men.

TR fired, hitting the bull squarely in the chest, then ran forward and shot again just as the elk turned. The mortally wounded animal fell after moving only a few yards.

Roosevelt was pleased with his trophy, the first of eight elk he would kill on the trip, including one bull with an even bigger set of massive antlers.

Several days later TR and Woody headed out on a cold morning under a clear blue sky. The two friends rode over the tableland and began following elk trails up and down the mountainsides. The going was steep and occasionally the men had to climb like mountain goats. Many of the trails led out to open meadows or cliff edges that commanded spectacular views.

At the end of one of these trails, they stopped at the edge of a sheer cliff overlooking a plateau and spotted a large herd of cows and calves. Almost instantly they heard the ringing bugle of a bull. Following the sound, they rode until they were within 200 yards of the elk.

TR suddenly pulled up his horse when he saw a huge bull walk into a clearing. The bull's pungent scent drifted toward the hunters as they waited for the animal to move out of sight. Quickly they tethered their horse and started their stalk on foot, moving as fast as they could toward the bull. Rounding a clump of pines, they came upon two cows, and the men crouched low to avoid spooking the animals that

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were staring directly at Woody.

With the cows' attention on Woody, TR managed to dash off unobserved, and with the advantage of his buckskin outfit was able to crawl up a slope to within 30 yards of the bull. From his position behind some trees, he could see the bull and several cows. With his head thrown back, the mighty elk strode among his subjects with a royal demeanor.

The slight breeze on his face told TR that he was still downwind. Despite this, as he moved closer one of the cows saw him, but it was too late. TR raised his rifle and fired.

Although he had inflicted a mortal wound, TR chased after the great elk firing two more shots into its flanks and finally a fourth shot that broke the bull's neck.

TR marveled at his Two-Oceans trophy as it lay in the mountain meadow its huge body sporting massive antlers.

The men spent several more days hunting as they rode into Shoshone Territory, where TR had to cut short his adventure due to pressing business. Roosevelt and Hofer saddled up two ponies and travelled rapidly to the Upper Geyser Basin and eventually through deep snow to Mammoth Springs, from where TR would head home. Hofer, meanwhile, returned to Ferguson's camp where the men finished out their hunt.



### LEGENDS OF THE HUNT

This story will appear in John Seerey-Lester's next book, *Legends of the Hunt - Campfire Tales*, scheduled for release later this year. The new book will be a beautiful sequel to his immensely popular *Legends of the Hunt*, which features some 80 stories and more than 100 paintings. The big 11x12½-inch, 200-page book is still available in three editions:

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