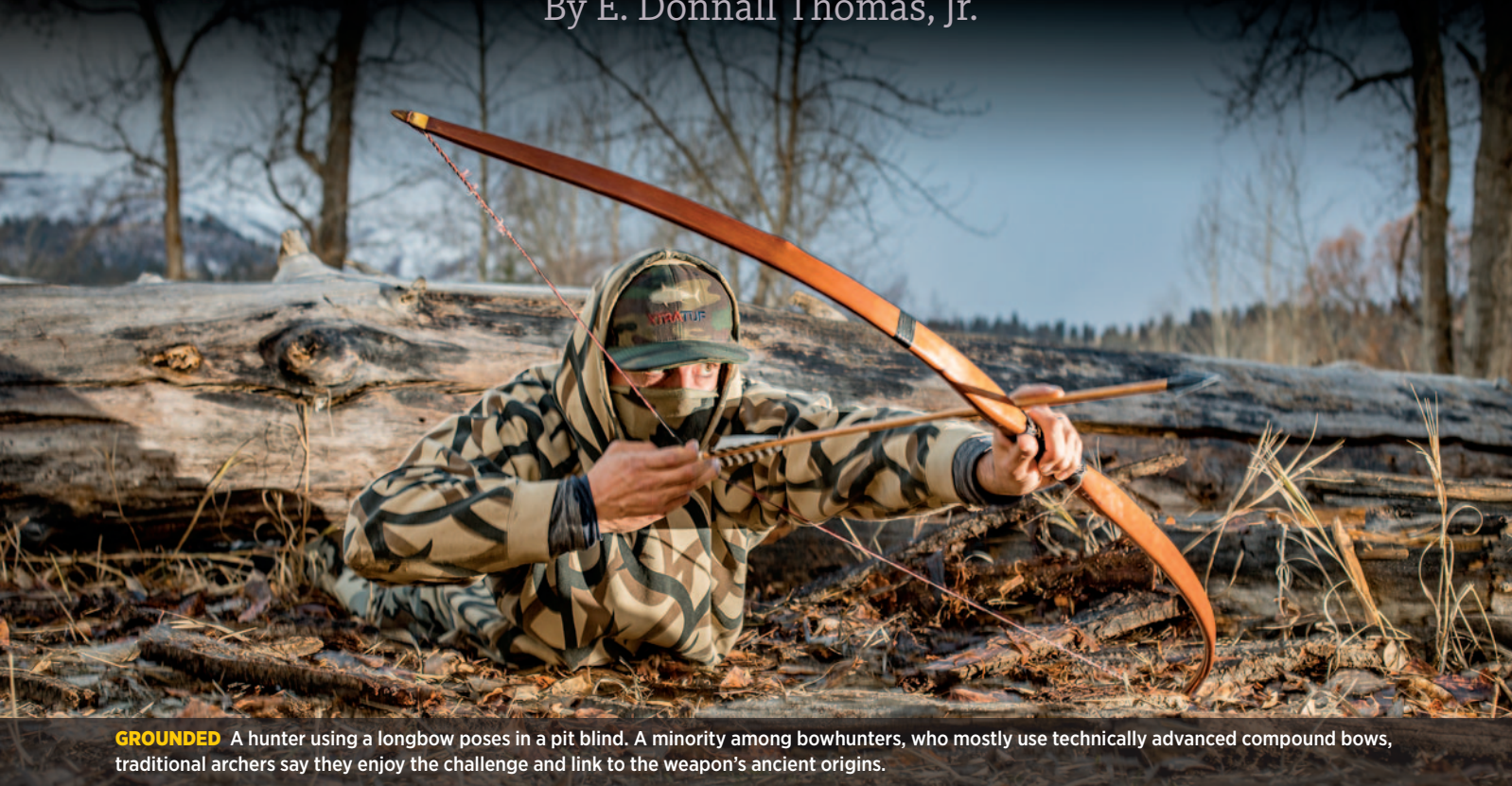


BACK TO BASICS: LONGBOWS

By using weapons that differ little from those used thousands of years ago, longbow archers make fair chase even fairer.

By E. Donnell Thomas, Jr.



GROUND A hunter using a longbow poses in a pit blind. A minority among bowhunters, who mostly use technically advanced compound bows, traditional archers say they enjoy the challenge and link to the weapon's ancient origins.

Having lived in Alaska for years, I was more than familiar with moose. I'd successfully hunted them in habitats ranging from alpine tundra to boggy spruce forest to my own backyard hayfield. But never had I pursued these largest members of the deer family in anything like what I found north of Cooke City, Montana, the year after the great Yellowstone fire of 1988—a desolate landscape of dead pines and charred stumps. Yet somehow, through a combination of luck and perseverance, I'd managed to locate a herd of a half-dozen cows, a young spike, and a mature bull all feeding together on shrubs leafed out after

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the previous year's conflagration.

In Alaska, mid-September marks the beginning of the annual moose rut, when hunters make various "moosey" sounds to lure territorial bulls into close range. But in Montana, the rut comes a few weeks later, and because the old bull was tolerating the youngster's presence, I knew mating season hadn't begun and calling wasn't the correct strategy. Instead, I decided to slowly stalk my quarry.

After two hours, I was able to sneak to within 20 yards of the big bull without him or the others spotting or smelling me. As he stood broadside, I drew back my longbow and fired a handmade cedar arrow deep behind his shoulder.

As the bull bolted downhill, I could see the

arrow's bright feather fletches right where I'd aimed, leaving me confident that I'd made a killing shot. Because such an impression can sometimes be inaccurate, I waited an hour before taking up the trail. Even a mortally wounded animal may lie down after being hit, and bumping it from its bed can make recovery difficult. Roughly 100 yards over the crest of a hill where I'd last seen him running, I found the dead bull and began the long process of field dressing the carcass and hauling out the meat.

Humans and moose, along with elk, grizzlies, and wild sheep, crossed the Bering Sea land bridge to North America roughly 15,000 years ago. Those early immigrants hunted with Neolithic weapons that did not differ much from what I'd used to kill that

bull. Thankful as I was for the mountain of venison before me, I derived even greater satisfaction knowing I had taken the moose without benefit of modern technology.

COPPER AGE ORIGINS

No one knows exactly when or where some Indigenous innovator first attached a string to a stick, whittled a shaft, knapped a stone point, and invented the bow and arrow, but that event clearly preceded the dawn of recorded history. In 1991, two tourists hiking the Italian-Austrian Alps stumbled across mummified human remains preserved in a layer of ice. Subsequent laboratory dating placed his time of death around 3,000 years BCE. The find included a well-preserved trove of Copper Age artifacts, including a quiver containing a dozen arrows. Other items suggested that Ötzi, as he became known, had been hunting at the time of his death, but the corpse also included an arrowhead buried in his shoulder. These findings defined the dual purposes that the bow and arrow would serve during the next 4,000 years: killing food and killing people.

After the invention and steady improvement of firearms, the use of bows for hunting and warfare all but disappeared from most of Europe and North America. That began to change in the late 19th century when Florida brothers Will and Maurice Thompson, who as Confederate veterans were banned from possessing guns, began to study Native archery, make their own traditional bows, and hunt with the devices. Maurice's book *The Witchery of Archery*, published in 1878, reached a

wide American audience and stirred some general interest in bowhunting.

A second milestone occurred in 1911 when a starving Native American named Ishi, the last surviving member of the Yana Tribe, wandered into a northern California town near death. He eventually wound up at the University of California in Berkeley, where he was befriended and cared for by academic surgeon Saxton Pope. Ishi taught Pope and his hunting partner Art Young his tribe's traditional bow building and hunting methods. Pope and Young began to write about and lecture on their worldwide bowhunting experiences, creating wide interest throughout the United States.

Returning American WWII and Korean War veterans who had witnessed sport archery in Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries further popularized the activities in this country. Legendary longbow master Howard Hill introduced bowhunting to Hollywood, while entrepreneurs (and accomplished bowhunters) like Fred Bear and Ben Pearson turned bowhunting into successful businesses.

The development and marketing of the pulley-equipped compound bow in the 1960s revolutionized archery. By this time, most states had created special archery-only seasons, during which bowhunters used either longbows or laminated recurve bows. The new compound bows are more accurate than traditional bows at greater ranges and require less practice to shoot accurately. The pulley system also allows the archer to hold the bow longer at full draw. This enables a hunter to wait with arrow drawn while a deer, elk, or other prey moves into a shooting lane. As compounds became legal in state after state for bow seasons, they quickly replaced traditional versions among all but a handful of archers.

MONTANA CONNECTIONS

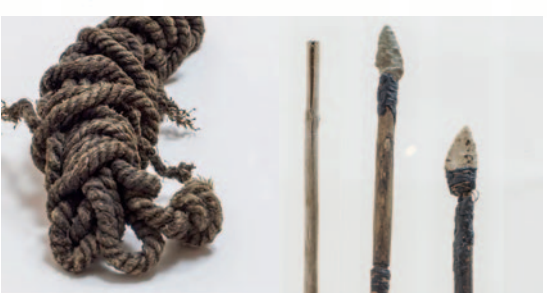
Bowhunting in today's Montana began with the Plains Indians, who mastered the skill



INSTRUCTOR In this 1912 photo, Ishi, the surviving member of the Yana Tribe, demonstrates how to shoot a bow made of yew with a thin backing of rawhide. He taught Saxton Pope and Art Young the art of bowhunting. Pope and Young later widely wrote and lectured about their worldwide bow hunts.

long before first European contact. Among the oldest pre-historic North American artifacts are spear heads and arrowheads commonly known as Clovis points dating back 13,000 years. The Anzick site, near Wilsall in Montana's Park County, yielded a particularly significant trove. Montana played another interesting role in archery history when, as historian Vic Hurley notes, the Battle of the Little Bighorn "marked the last appearance of the bow in formal war."

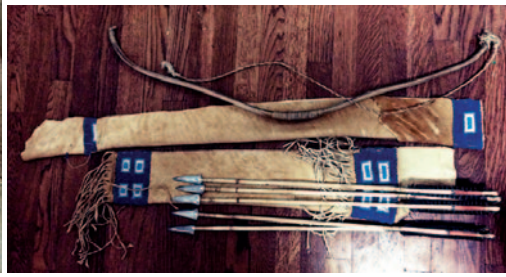
Horses introduced to the Americas by Spaniards in the 1500s allowed Plains tribes to reproduce the mounted cavalry tactics that allowed Genghis Khan to nearly overrun Western civilization. Surviving bows from the Blackfeet, Crow, and Sioux reflect this specialization. Native bows were short, usually between 40 and 50 inches long, so they could be shot from horseback. Most were "self-bows," carved from a single piece of ash, juniper, or yew and backed with sinew for greater strength and durability. An exception were the Turudika (or Sheep Eater Shoshone) of the Yellowstone plateau, who built



Quiver, bowstring, and arrows found with Ötzi, the name given a mummy found on a glacier in the Italian-Austrian Alps in 1991.

FROM TOP: UC BERKELEY; PHOEBE A. HEARST MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY; SOUTH TYROL MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY

ABOVE: BILL McDAVID



CUSTOM-MADE ARCHERY EQUIPMENT Top row: A successful bison hunt using a Shoshone-style composite bow handmade from legally taken bighorn sheep horns. The Turudika (or Sheep Eater Shoshone) of the Yellowstone plateau were among the few North American tribes not to use ash, juniper, or yew trees for bow construction. Left: Handmade recurves and longbows built in Forest Grove, Montana. Right and below: Constructing a laminated recurve bow. Bottom row left to right: Practicing with a longbow; successful deer hunt; detail of a traditional arrow and fletching, made of wild turkey feather.



complex laminated bows of sheep horn.

Bison, the Plains tribes' principal quarry, were crucial not just as a food source but also for shelter, utensils, and clothing. Killing them from horseback required remarkable skill. The combination of bow and horse allowed Indigenous people to move with roaming bison herds, helping the already nomadic culture to flourish as never before.

Function dictated design in arrows as well as bows. Usually made from chokecherry or serviceberry, shafts were often as short as 20 inches and heavily fletched for stability at close range. Traditional points were made of chert, flint, and obsidian, with the latter largely obtained through trade with tribes farther west. Common in Montana, the small stone heads commonly known as "bird-points" weren't meant for winged wildlife at all. They flew accurately when shot from horseback, and Native tracking and horsemanship skills allowed hunters to recover superficially wounded big game animals to make additional, killing shots.

Modern technology first changed traditional archery when early trappers and mountain men introduced crude iron "trade points," which rapidly replaced stone, a sad (to me) triumph of practicality over aesthetics.

TRADITIONAL BOWHUNTING TODAY

Today, the term "traditional bow" includes both longbows and recurves, a distinction that doesn't matter much to those who hunt with them and serves primarily to distinguish the devices from modern compounds. In simple terms, recurves are bent at both ends and longbows aren't. If the bowstring touches the belly of the limb between the limb tip and the riser (handle), it's a recurve. Recurves have ancient origins nearly or as old as longbows, dating back thousands of years. I've hunted successfully with both and consider them equally traditional.

While most bows used by Neolithic hunter-gatherer societies meet the above definition of a longbow, they are perhaps better classified—with no derogatory implications—as "primitive." In this tradition, a subset of today's traditional archery community eschews all modern bow components, such as fiberglass limb backing and synthetic strings.

The prototype of what we think of as a



NO GIZMOS Recurves, like the one shown here, and longbows are considered "traditional" bows because they don't use pulleys to aid in drawing or holding the drawstring.

longbow today was actually developed for military purposes in medieval England. These 6-foot-long weapons had "draw weights" (the energy required to pull the bowstring back to the shooter's cheek) exceeding 100 pounds (today's hunting bows usually draw at 45 to 65 pounds) and shot heavy arrows capable of penetrating chainmail.

Both forms of traditional bows are qualitatively different from the modern compound, which is often equipped with sights, release aids, and other technical innovations. My purpose here is not to disparage compounds or those who hunt with them but to explain how they differ from their traditional counterparts and why that matters to hunters like me.

Just as bowhunting in general underwent a growth spurt two generations ago, interest in hunting with traditional equipment has experienced a sharp rise in popularity during my own tenure as a bowhunter. The Northwest in general and Montana in particular became prominent in the traditional bowhunting revival that began in the 1970s, as indicated by longbow and recurve sales, subscriptions to new magazines such as *Traditional Bowhunter* (which I co-edited for over 20 years), attendance at bowhunting events, and the formation of organizations dedicated to traditional bows. The Traditional Bowhunters of Montana (TBM), formed as an offshoot of the Montana Bowhunters Association (MBA) in 1987, currently has nearly 200 members.

What makes the Treasure State a traditional bowhunting mecca? One reason may be that Montana's six-week archery season is one of the nation's longest, providing the

many days afield needed to hunt successfully with traditional weapons. Also, many of country's most highly regarded bowyers live here, including Dick Robertson in Lewistown and Dan Toelke in Ronan. It also may be that Montana's ruggedness and rural character attract many of the same people who enjoy the challenge of mastering this difficult form of hunting.

In 2021, FWP sold 218,000 hunting licenses, including 58,000 archery permits, a dramatic increase over the previous decade. Approximately 10 percent of deer and elk shot in Montana were taken with bows, although FWP data do not distinguish among various types. Because bowhunting requires hunters to stalk much closer to their prey—20 to 60 yards depending on the bow type, compared to 200 yards or farther for a rifle—archers on average have lower hunting success rates.

Though compound bows shoot farther than traditional bows and are easier to master, the older styles offer some practical advantages of their own. They are light and easy to carry. Shot quickly and instinctively, they do not depend on sights, release aids, or rangefinders for accuracy. They require little maintenance, and almost nothing can go wrong with them in the field. They also encourage hunters to develop skills like tracking and close-range stalking, providing intimate views of their prey and insights into animal behavior.

Still, traditional bows are not for everyone. Hunting with a longbow or recurve requires time, patience, and, above all, willingness to return from the field empty-handed. The rewards lie elsewhere. 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JEFF REED; JEFF REED; LORI THOMAS; LORI THOMAS; PAT MUNDAY; LORI THOMAS; JEFF REED; LORI THOMAS; ABOVE RIGHT: DONALD M. JONES