

Anticosti Adventure

by Dr. James C. Kroll

The great North Woods of this Canadian island must be experienced to be appreciated fully — and so must its whitetail hunting. Here are a first-time visitor's impressions of this storied hunting land.

I could tell by the look on my wife's face as I entered the door that something big just had happened. "Gordon Whittington called, and he's got something important to ask you," she grinned.

In a few moments, Gordon's voice was beaming mysteriously from the office of *North American WHITETAIL* in Georgia. "Can you be on a plane to Quebec's Anticosti Island in two days?" he queried. "I've been invited to hunt whitetails on the island by Wilderness Adventures and Cerf-Sau Outfitters, but I won't be able to make it. You're welcome to go in my place if you can get there."

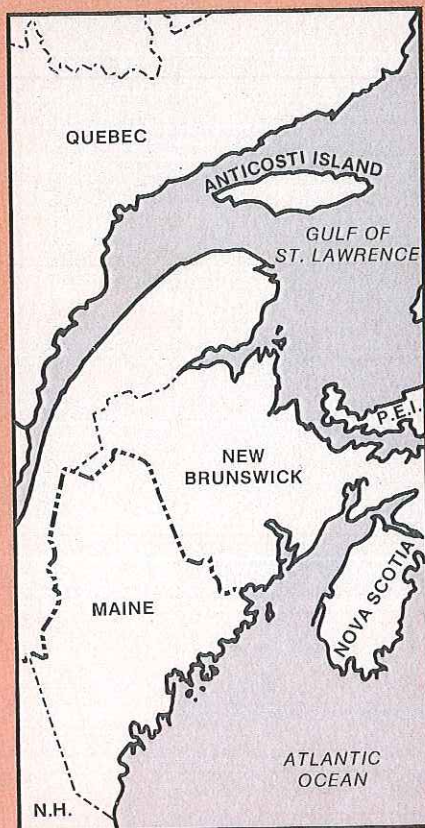
Now, it took me just about as long to say "yes" as it does one of my bird dogs to down a biscuit! For years, I had wanted to study whitetails at the extreme northern edge of their range. But, getting to Anticosti Island from Nacogdoches, Texas, is not that simple. It is roughly similar to going by yak train to Tibet. Several dozen phone calls to various airline companies, and back again to Gordon, finally netted me a workable scheme. It turns out that I could not get there in two days, but I could make it in three. The outfitter had no problem with that, so my adventure began.

The next two days were spent preparing for all possible needs on an island whose name I barely could pronounce. Anticosti Island, located in the Bay of St. Lawrence, is approximately 135 miles long and 30 miles wide, comprising thousands of square miles of wilderness territory. Discovered in 1534 by Jacques Cartier, Anticosti was considered an impediment to navigation until the turn of the last century. Its strategic location in the mouth of the Bay of St. Lawrence makes it very dangerous to shipping. Rising no more than 700 feet above sea level, the northern coast is littered with the carcasses of ships that ventured too close.

The most significant event in Anticosti's history occurred in 1895, when Henri Menier either purchased or leased (there is some disagreement) the island for his private use. Menier was a French chocolate millionaire who loved to hunt and fish. Because the Atlantic-salmon fishing along the Jupiter River of the island was (and still is) legendary, he made a seasonal mansion near what is now

Port Menier.

The name "Anticosti" is thought to be derived from the Indian word "naticousti," which translates to mean "where the bears are hunted." Oddly enough, today there are few if any bears remaining on the island. Menier imported several species of animals to the island. Included among these were moose, foxes and white-tailed deer. Elk also were



imported, but later exterminated, due to reported attacks on the local citizenry.

Of course, it is the deer that I was most interested in. Although reports are confusing, we do know they were imported from nearby New Brunswick. Estimates of the number released range from 40 to a little less than 200. Whatever the number, the fact that the deer herd had increased to several thousand animals in 80 years, plus the fact that these

deer were all descended from the same ancestry, was a lure I could not resist! The trip was a real bonus to me in two regards. First, I would be able to study deer that for all practical purposes should be inbred. Second, the extreme northern location of the island means the deer have to be existing under incredibly harsh conditions. Although whitetails are known to endure severe winter conditions, the species is predominately one of the temperate regions. Long ago, I became aware of the fact that deer in the two extremes of the range (Canada and Mexico) traditionally have larger antlers than those within the normal confines of the range. Consequently, areas of extremes are ideal places for the trophy hunter. This was adding up to be a year to remember. I would start the whitetail season in Canada in late October and end it in Mexico in early January.

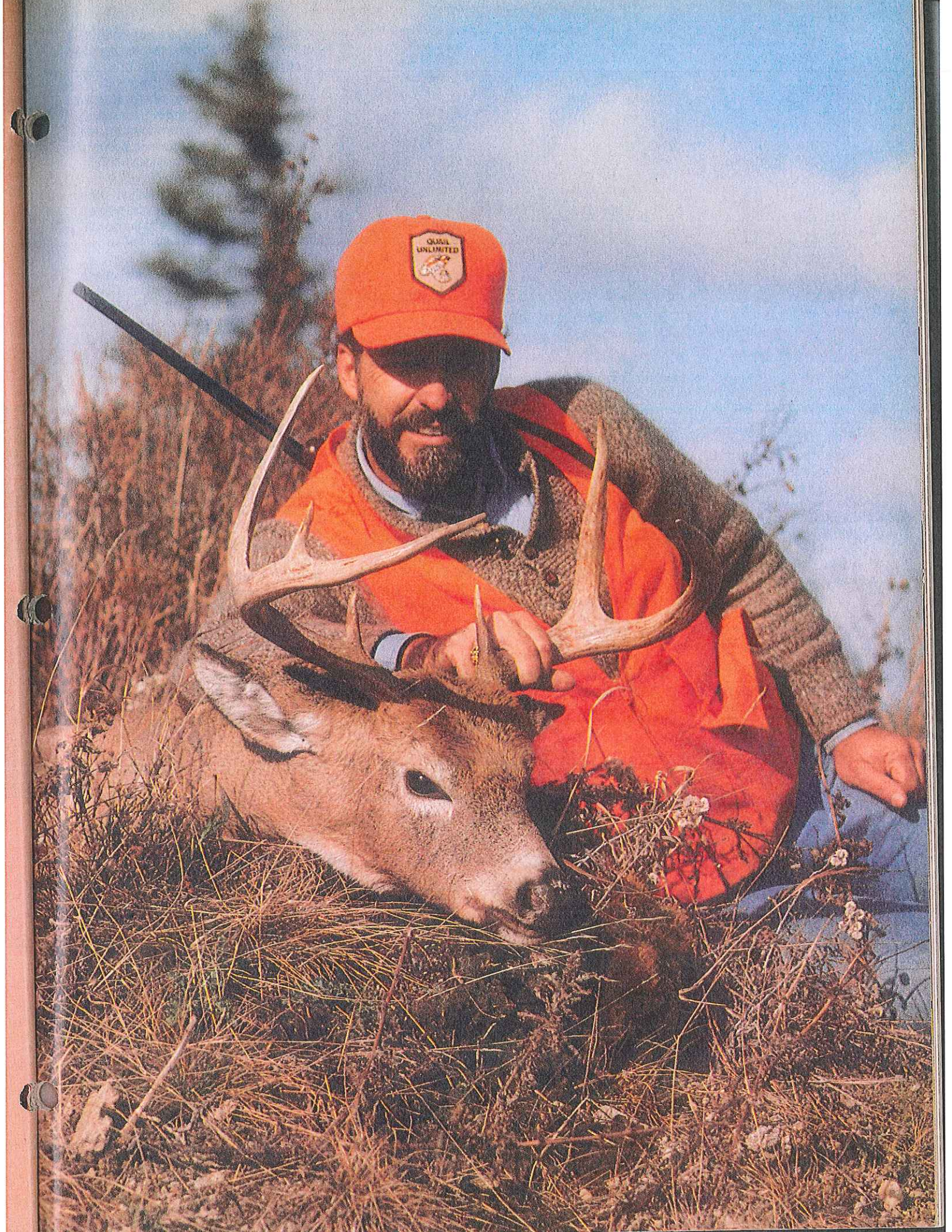
My flight to Montreal went smoothly, and a friendly soul named Henri helped me get my bags loaded and drove me to my hotel. It was late when I settled in that night, but there wouldn't be much time to rest. Henri was to pick me up at 5:30 a.m. for the drive to the small airport at St. Habert, from which our flight to Anticosti Island would depart.

True to his promise, Henri arrived at 5:30 to take me to the airport. The small waiting room there already was crowded with northeastern hunters as we arrived. Pennsylvania, New York and even New Hampshire accents were thick in that room. My hackles came up as I realized that this Southern boy was now in a room full of Yankee hunters. The hunting camps of the South echo with tall stories about Northern hunters, but I soon was to learn that these are some of the finest sportsmen to be found anywhere. Still, for the moment, I would remain at a distance.

The flight to Mont-Joli, our midway stopover on the way to Anticosti, was quite pleasant; the hunters talked enthusiastically

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The author admires his Anticosti 7-pointer, shot on the first day of his hunt with Cerf-Sau Outfitters. This buck responded to rattling antlers and a grunt call. Photo by Keith Benoist.





Rolling terrain, covered with evergreens and dotted with swamps, characterizes Anticosti Island whitetail habitat. Photo by Keith Benoist.

about the coming hunt. Some of these men were veterans of Anticosti, returning to the island season after season with the same hunting parties. In Mont-Joli the crew loaded gear from additional hunters. When we took off, the plane was loaded with hunters from all over the northeastern U.S. and Canada. The northern coniferous forest soon turned to water as we entered the Bay of St. Lawrence, and soon the shoreline of Anticosti appeared beneath the plane.

Once we were on the ground, I was somewhat apprehensive about making the connection with Cerf-Sau Outfitters. After all, my itinerary had been changed several times, and I had no way of knowing whether

or not the word had been passed along the line. But, my concerns were unfounded. "Mr. Kroll?" another French voice queried. I turned to meet what had to be one of the most congenial faces I ever have encountered under such circumstances. Michel Arsenault, manager of Cerf-Sau, came toward me and warmly shook my hand. "We are so pleased you could come, especially on such short notice," he confided. Over lunch at the airport, Michel explained the Cerf-Sau operation. It is owned and operated by three biologists, who manage the salmon fishing and deer hunting according to sound management principles. Although the owners were away at the time, I was to take part in

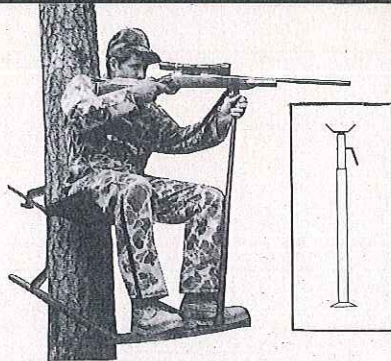
collection of blood samples and observation of the herd. Michel noted that the herd had experienced a dramatic decline of some 40 percent during the preceding winter. This winter kill was precisely what I was most interested in.

Deer herds on the extremes of the range experience regular reductions in population by factors which are independent of density — in this case, sub-zero weather. These constant reductions of population density make the herds ideal for trophy management. In fact, such herds seldom need the benefit of management, other than control of the age at which bucks are harvested.

After lunch, Michel and I picked up some supplies and headed toward the Cerf-Sau camp, located at the extreme eastern end of the island. The drive to the lodge was breathtaking, as the pickup moved along the higher elevations on the north coast of the island. Whales and seals played in the surf along the shore, often darting around wrecks of old ships. During the three-hour drive, I learned much about the island, its deer herd and my host. Michel is a fascinating man with much experience in the management of hunting operations. His enthusiasm is contagious, and by the time we reached the lodge, I was more than ready for the adventure that lay ahead.

The lights of the chalet-style lodge were a welcome sight after the long ride along the coast. Michel pulled up to the lodge, helped me unload my things and excused himself. I entered the lodge to find a blazing fire in the stove and snacks on the coffee table. The other hunters had not yet arrived back in

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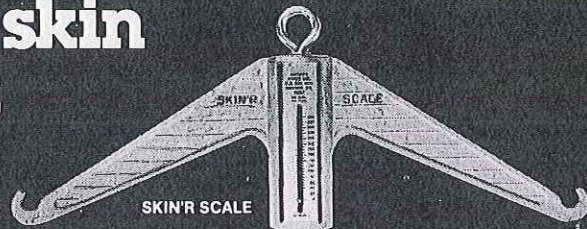
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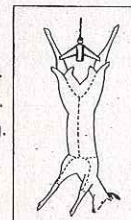
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camp from the day's hunt. I unpacked my things, poured myself a drink and settled down to await my fellow hunters. Among them was Keith Benoist, *North American WHITETAIL'S* photo editor, who had flown up a day earlier to get our hunt on film — and maybe even shoot a buck.

I had a short wait, as the door burst open around 5 p.m., and a bespectacled, blonde-haired fellow, covered with very wet hunting clothes, came into the room. He introduced himself as Bob Smith, from New York. (By this time, I only bristled a little at that thought.) He quickly was followed by several other guys, who warmly introduced themselves. George and Chris Schott and Larry Torrey also were from New York, while Tom and Bill Lewis, Barry McNeill and Pete Jozwiak were from Pennsylvania. "So this is our famous deer expert," George chortled. I already was beginning to like these guys. Apparently, someone (probably Keith) already had filled them in about me being a whitetail biologist and hunting writer. About that time, the door opened again, and in walked a tall, bearded fellow. It was Keith, and he was wet from head to toe. "Glad you could make it," he said as he shook my hand. "You're gonna love hunting this place!"

The hunters retired to their rooms to get cleaned up for dinner. Cerf-Sau employs a host of specialized employees, among them a French chef. Soon, we were being treated to some of the finest French cuisine to be had anywhere. Talk turned to the day's hunt. Bob had bagged a fine 10-pointer, and after dinner, we all walked to the game house to inspect the buck. I was amazed by the size of these deer! His buck easily dressed out at 200 pounds and extended from the ceiling to the floor of the game house, a distance of eight or so feet. Clearly, everything I had heard about Canadian deer being big was true.

The alarm rang much sooner than I had intended. I quickly dressed for cold weather and headed downstairs for a breakfast of crepes, eggs and ham. Bob's buck had stirred up the fellows, and hopes were high for a successful second day. I huddled with our guide, Francois O'Neill (that's right, O'Neill), who tactfully suggested that I hunt on my own for the first few days. Francois was a stocky, dark-bearded fellow who was everything you expect in a French-Canadian guide. He kidded with us, the humor producing huge belly laughs. He announced in a good-natured way that he was "the greatest guide north of the Rio Grande!" At that time I certainly was not going to argue the point.

There is but a single road leading through the Cerf-Sau hunting territory. To each side lie thousands of acres of some of the finest whitetail hunting to be had anywhere. Balsam, spruce and pine are the predominant tree species, with occasional expanses of muskeg. A large portion of the range had been burned by a wildfire a few years back, producing a interesting patchwork of burned and green woods. The green woods occurred primarily along the many "rivers" permeating the hunting territory. The terrain was rough

and strewn with rocks and dead trees, making the going difficult.

So, this was the world, and a strange one at that, I encountered as Francois gave me my wish and dropped me off near a river. He handed me a topographical map, a small bag containing two sandwiches, some cookies and a can of juice. With a smile and a wink, he told me that the river ran north and south and the road ran east and west. He advised that I hunt the green woods along the way. He also noted that the farther I traveled, the more likely it would be that I would encounter deer that never had seen a human. He had been quite intrigued with my rattling horns and grunt call, and the last thing he said was, "I think maybe you try them — they may work on these deer."

The truck disappeared into the darkness. Suddenly, there I was in the midst of the great North Woods, holding my rifle, lunch, horns call and map. It was a sobering experience. I was reminded of a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy said, "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more!" It certainly was different from the Southern pineywoods. But, this was a chance not only to study deer, but to also prove some of my assertions that whitetails behave pretty much the same wherever you find them. They are streamside animals, using these features as travel corridors and feeding areas. I climbed up on a rock and waited for daylight. There is nothing like the silence of a wilderness.

Before me lay hundreds of square miles of

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on the weasel, we headed back for the road. Occasionally, we had to use the river as a highway, and that is where disaster struck! The weasel stalled in the middle of the river, and try as he might, Francois could not get it started again. Darkness was approaching rapidly, so we decided to leave the vehicle and the deer and walk out. Francois would return the following day to retrieve the two. We struck out into the approaching darkness, Francois in the lead and me following. My biology students accuse me of walking too fast on field trips, but they never followed Francois!

To my satisfaction, I concluded that my theories were correct. These deer behave in every aspect as Southern whitetails do.

It long since had become dark when we found the road. The other hunters were becoming concerned for our safety and were relieved to see us. Keith had killed a mighty fine 10-pointer, but like me, had had to leave him in the woods until the next day. The guides would have a busy day retrieving two bucks and a vehicle. We returned to camp, eager for a bath and another great French meal.

We were not disappointed. Returning, we discovered that Bob had killed yet another buck. We sat around that evening, telling stories and discussing deer management. By then I really had decided that I liked these guys, and that they were as good as or better hunters than my Southern comrades.

The next several days were spent in similar fashion. Although I had the opportunity to harvest another buck on several occasions, I passed up the chances. I had my fun, and now it was time to study the herd. Every bone pile, deer trail and scrape line received careful attention. To my satisfaction, I concluded that my theories were correct. These deer behave in every aspect as Southern whitetails do. They have sanctuaries, even though receiving light hunting pressure, and they use streams as travel corridors. In no time at all I patterned several good bucks, each time having the opportunity to make the kill. I left the bucks to some other lucky visitor to Anticosti.

Time to depart came all too soon. We toasted our new friendships. And the next morning we loaded our gear and bucks into a large bus and headed for Port Menier. It was one of the saddest times of any hunt I've ever taken. There is a respect among sportsmen that is unequalled in any other endeavor. Arriving at the airport, there was the same old plane waiting to take us back to our respective territories. The fellows from New York and Pennsylvania left us at our stop in Mont-Joli, and we had grown so close I hated to see them leave. Perhaps we would hunt again in the Great North Woods. But, for me, adventures in Texas and Mexico lay ahead. Little did I know what lay in store. But, that is another story.

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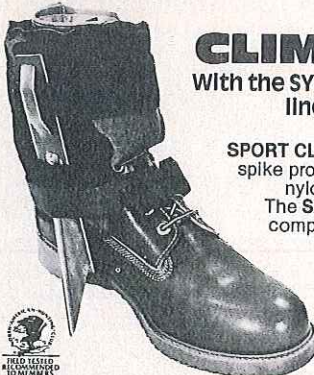
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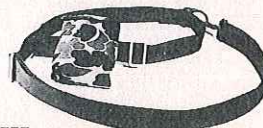
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