

Teo Biele hunts
by bike in New
Mexico's Gila
National Forest.

HE'S A
MASSAGE THERAPIST,
A FORMER
OLYMPIAN, AND WAS ONCE
A VEGETARIAN.
WHY THIS NATURE-LOVING,
POETRY-WRITING,
FATHER OF TWO PEDALS
THE WILDERNESS ON
A QUEST FOR
THE PERFECT ELK.

BY AARON GULLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

AN IMPROBABLE CONVERGENCE

“Hunting, for me, is about melding with the environment, not struggling against it,” says Teo (with author Aaron Gulley, right). “It’s my refuge, my relief.”



THE BULL ELK APPEARS ON THE RIDGELINE like a prehistoric apparition and grazes the hillside, lean muscles rippling under tawny skin. He’s as tall at the shoulder as many adult humans, and absurd with antlers.

Teo Biele crouches under a piñon pine 273 yards away, compound bow ready but not drawn. He’s a tower of man with a fluff of ponytail pulled through the rear of his hunting cap, a full suit of camouflage, and one pant leg tucked into a grease-smudged, bright white tube sock. At his side is Crystal, the miniature gray poodle

he has trained as a hunting dog. His bike is stashed in waist-high yellow grass a little to the south.

In the rising warmth of this September morning in New Mexico’s Gila National Forest, Teo plucks an arrow from the quiver, nocks it so the front balances in the rest, clips the release to the button-sized loop on the bowstring. The only other sound is the rustle of a slight breeze through the pine needles.

The elk isn’t the noisy one Teo has been chasing since dawn. That herd is over a roll

to the south, but he turned his back on them when this bull lumbered up. The other, talkative bull was massive and would have fed Teo’s family through winter, but this one should yield almost as much meat—and he’s right here. An opportunivore, that’s how Teo often describes himself.

The bull is still at 170 yards, and though he’s contouring around the hillside closer to a reasonable shot, he’s also begun looking at Teo’s piñon. Perhaps the animal heard Crystal’s faint whimper, which Teo silenced with a flick of his index finger toward the

ground and a menacing look. The poodle is still, and the air crackles with anticipation.

Only 137 yards now separate Teo from the elk. Teo could close that distance in seconds with his powerful strides. But he waits.

Time slows. The bull freezes and stares. Teo holds. Crystal trembles. Then the bull turns and ambles the way he came, over the ridge and out of sight.

It’s a luckless morning for Teo, but he laughs. “It doesn’t matter. He wasn’t my elk,” he says, eyes flashing. “Your elk will always be out there waiting for you.”



TEO IS NO TYPICAL HUNTER, AND not only because he rides a bike instead of a clattering, petroleum-stink ATV. A former vegetarian, former moviemaker, former chef, former New Mexico state tennis champion, and former Olympic rower, he writes poetry while he’s hunting, dictating in whispers into his phone, and earns his living as a massage therapist. In his office there’s a low-budget stereo system that alternates between Dido and Tibetan chanting, a painting of a peyote bird rising spirit-like from a sleeping human figure toward the morning star, and bullets in 16 different calibers on the windowsill.

After he began hunting 25 years ago, Teo rigged up his old Stumpjumper hardtail with a BOB trailer to haul meat. On a bike, Teo can slip into places that other hunters can’t and can get close to animals that would have evaporated into the woods at the whisper of an engine. “Most hunters don’t walk that far and they push the animals deeper into the woods,” Teo says. “I started riding because it’s easier to get to the wildlife. And, with fewer hunters back there, the animals are more relaxed.”

A hunter on a bike might seem as unlikely as a Texan in a Prius—or a crystal-toting massage therapist with weapons, for that matter—but they’re out there. Sitka Gear, the hunting apparel brand owned by Gore, started picturing camo-clad mountain bikers in its catalogs about two years ago. Cofounder Jason Hairston, who left Sitka and started the brand Kuiu, underscores the point. “It’s the evolution of hunting,” he says. “With people’s camping and skiing and cycling backgrounds, it’s becoming about going places other people aren’t and being fit and self-reliant enough to get your meat and get yourself out.”

There’s even a dedicated brand, Cogburn, that sells camouflage fat bikes along with accessories like bow-and-rifle carriers. A few seasons back on an elk hunt in northern New Mexico, Teo’s progress ground to a halt when the axle mount on his trailer failed, scattering game bags of meat in the forest. This season Teo upgraded to a Cogburn. “The fat tires are a legitimate alternative to an ATV,” he says. “I’ve made my gear work for years, but the refinements are welcome.”

Many hunters who drive big trucks and drag an arsenal of motos and all-terrain vehicles would likely disagree. Teo recalls the evening before opening day of this elk



Teo and his poodle, Crystal, began hunting together nine years ago. Since then, they haven't gone a year without a harvest.

season. He had coasted into camp on his bike at dusk, following an afternoon of scouting. Nearby, a small caravan of families idled a pair of Ford F250s pulling fifth-wheel trailers.

"You know it's hunting season?" one of the men said after sizing up the bike. "Lots of hunters are going to be looking for camps tonight." He didn't seem to notice Teo's camo and binoculars.

"Yeah, I just saw a couple of good elk up the road," Teo said, motioning ahead and to the right. He laughed as the men rumbled away, then said to himself, "But they're nowhere near as big as the one I'm going to get."

Companies like Kuui and Cogburn may be taking the stereotype out of hunting, but it's almost impossible to lose the machismo. To go after the big bull is to test oneself. The bigger the rack, the bigger the elk, and the better your family will eat through winter—there's no cleaving those relationships. What those who have never stalked elk may not grasp is that the biggest, most magnificent animals got that way through wiliness. They come out only at dark, amass a harem of cows to stand watch, and can run like the possessed.

The best way to learn about animals is to be among them, and that ends once you harvest. Teo tells the story of a hunt a few years back when he decided to pursue an elk only if it was bigger than any he'd ever taken. During one week in the field, he passed up 35 six-by-six bulls—big, mature animals with six points on each side of their racks—and eventually went home empty-handed. "Being in the woods lets you sink into the quiet and real life," Teo says. He describes the elk and deer trips as his annual reboot. "Hunting, for me, is about melding with the environment, not struggling against it. It's my refuge, my relief."

It's not just back-to-nature idealism. Supporters point out that one of the hallmarks of American conservation is species management, which costs taxpayers millions when undertaken by the government, but also raises money—while controlling populations—when hunters pay for the



opportunity. Hunters contribute in other ways too, including an 11 percent excise tax on equipment that raised more than \$800 million in 2015 alone, all of which goes back to wildlife conservation. And relative to factory-farmed meat, wild game has a light footprint, with no costs for supplemental feed, antibiotics to treat sickness, or habitat destruction. "The outdoors is the playground we depend on to do what we love," says Kenton Carruth, who came to hunting after years as a cyclist and snowboarder and later cofounded the apparel company, First Lite, which has won awards for public-land advocacy. "Hunters are more invested in conservation than most people believe."

High-mindedness aside, maybe the most compelling reason to hunt is to go for a nice bike ride that ends in a full freezer.

“IT'S ONE THING TO BE AMONG THE ANIMALS WITHOUT SUCCESS, ANOTHER SORT OF BLEAKNESS TO FIND NONE.”



T STARTED LIKE THIS. IN 1966, TEO'S father, Ted Bielefeld, planned to move his family from Berkeley, California, to St. Lucia. Ted, a creative but troubled abstract impressionist potter who had worked with famed photographer Alfred Stieglitz and painter Robert Motherwell, sent his wife, Deirdre, ahead with Teo and daughter, Zibby, promising to follow once he'd wrapped his affairs. Before he made it, he overdosed on heroin. Ruined with grief and debt, the 31-year-old Deirdre begged and borrowed enough to get her family home, where they hopped from place to place before landing in a hippie commune in Santa Fe that Teo describes as "a coalition of mothers." He adds, "I was raised by women. I never learned the 'man' thing."

Deirdre, too, used drugs—mushrooms, peyote, acid, all the hallmarks of the '60s and '70s. Later in life she turned to alcohol and cocaine, and at age 72, she died of complications from needle use. "She had an addictive personality," Teo says. "I vowed I'd be different." He ate vegetarian, as he had learned on the commune, shortened his name to Biele,



“ THERE ARE TIMES YOU COME HOME FROM A HUNT AND WEEP BECAUSE YOUR EXISTENCE IS SO FLAT AND INCONGRUENT WITH LIFE OUT HERE.



The bike brings Teo closer to the animals, but he's also learned to sense and feel them. "To be a good hunter," he says, "you have to be the ultimate empath."

spurned drugs, and strived to live clean. He wasn't much for organized sports, but was a talented downhill skier who burned off his friends any time they went out. He applied for college in 1985 and ended up at University of California, Los Angeles, where he studied film and joined the rowing squad. His hulking physique and determination eventually landed him a spot on the U.S. National Team.

Teo could propel a scull like an outboard motor, but his coach told him that if he wanted to compete at the highest level, he needed to eat meat. "I was so lean, I was cramping all the time," Teo says. "When he told me I needed protein, I went out to dinner, by myself, and I ordered a prime rib."

Meat changed everything. His performances skyrocketed, and he earned a place at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, where his team finished fourth. After that, he resolved that if he had to eat animals, he'd do it ethically. "I felt strongly that if you are going to eat

meat, you should know what that means."

That's what drew him to bow hunting. Whereas a rifle allows a hunter to shoot an animal from 300 yards and beyond, a bow demands closer proximity, usually no more than 30 or 40 yards, which means it takes work and skill just to get in range. "You have to get up close to these huge, powerful animals," Teo says, "and that forces you to engage and honor the life you're taking." The flip side is that arrows, because they travel more slowly and inflict less trauma than bullets, can be less effective. Teo practices on a bag every day in the months leading up to a hunt, and he says he shoots only if the animal is well within his range and he has a completely clean shot. "Most boys have fathers to teach them to hunt, but I taught myself," he says. "When I found it, it felt like such a relief. And I loved it immediately. I loved being out alone in the wild and knowing I was providing for myself and my family."

About the time Teo discovered hunting, he also met Ana Gonzales, whom he went on to marry in 1997. Gonzales grew up in a family with four brothers and a father who hunted (and took her at age 12 "when he ran out of brothers to take," Ana says). So she was

bemused—but piqued—when this hippie vegetarian that her brothers called Tofu Teo told her that he planned to get an elk. On their second date, Teo invited Ana on a scouting trip in New Mexico Game Management Unit 53, along the Colorado-New Mexico border. "He thought he was taking me," Ana says. "But really I wanted to see how he was in the mountains." She remembers sitting on a ridgeline and looking out to discover a herd of elk sleeping on an adjacent hillside. "Teo was like, 'What's that?'" she recalls. He had never even seen an elk, much less snuck up on one. "As soon as he spoke, the whole bedding area exploded to life."

But Teo would prove to be an exceptional hunter. On his first hunt, he took a bull with his bow. He's harvested an animal every year in the 25 since he began. He started hunting with Crystal after the family got her nine years ago. Teo had wanted "a hunting machine" like a pointer or a bloodhound, but when Ana insisted on "a proper family dog," he acquiesced, then proceeded to teach Crystal to blood trail and retrieve. She proved herself the first year when she tracked a deer that Teo shot to a shadowy creek bed where it died. The duo has hunted together ever since and has

never gone a year without success.

These days, when Teo brings meat to be processed, his butcher, Mike Padilla, slaps him on the back and calls his nieces and nephews to come shake hands with "the great white hunter." Some of Teo's friends refer to him as "the elk whisperer." That moniker references *The Great Dance*, a documentary film Teo helped shoot in 1999 about the bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa. It's the story of a small group of hunters running down kudu antelope in one of the planet's harshest environments, and their inextricable connection to the land, plants, and animals. The bushmen, according to the film, don't just watch and follow their quarry, they feel them. "Their hunters are the first shamans. They can transplant their consciousness into the animal," Teo says. "It's considered magic, but all of us can do it. I learned that to be a good hunter, you have to be the ultimate empath."

Following the Kalahari hunters solidified Teo's approach to hunting. He says he's learned to sense and feel the animals, which helps him anticipate their patterns and movements. It sounds kooky, but it's hard to argue with his results. Ana says her brothers now

admire her husband. "It's hard to go out on public land, which is vast and random and full of people doing crazy things, and get the kind of successes Teo does," she says. Her brothers now call him Paleo Teo.



BLACK CLOUDS GATHER ON THE horizon and ripple across the sky from the west. Monsoon season in New Mexico typically dries up by the end of September, but every night has brought drubbing rains that turn the land impassable. The first three days of the hunt have seen a few more close calls, none as close as the elk on the ridge, and not nearly enough. The wet weather is dispiriting both Teo and the animals. Crystal, who ordinarily would spend middays back at camp, perhaps nabbing the odd rabbit or squirrel, has instead huddled inside the shelter. This is the beginning of the rut, the few weeks of the year when elk breed, and the bulls should be smashing their antlers together and screaming to the cows. Normally, the bugling also makes stalking easier. But the rains dilute the scent of the cows in heat,

and the herds remain quiet until late into the night, after the storms.

A sharp, damp wind blows from the west, promising squalls again on night three, but Teo is irrepressible. "Tonight's the night," he says. "I have a feeling." (He's said that every hunt. He believes that positivity begets results.)

It's after 4 p.m. by the time he reaches the Continental Divide Trail, where he'll put in. The sky has turned to soup and the air echoes with rolling thunder. A white Ford F150 crawls by as he unloads the bike, and Teo, as he always does, flags them down. He likes talking with people, and besides, they might have intel.

The hunter is a 16-year-old Navajo girl traveling with her grandfather and cousin. She admires Teo's bow, and he hers, and she seems unfazed that her bow is tuned to only 35 pounds while he pulls over 70. She's hunting the adjacent unit, and Teo mentions a few good spots to try. The whole time, the grandfather studies Teo. "That's a good-looking bike. It as good as a horse?" he asks. He answers himself, "I bet it is." He doesn't seem to know whether to admire Teo or shrug him off. Before the truck rolls away, the old man shakes his head. "Good luck, hombre."

Drizzle spits from the sky, but Teo is determined. He should be able to feel the animals, even if they're not bugling. As he rolls onto the trail, tendrils of low cloud sit on the black ridges to the north, and new-growth ponderosas become four-legged apparitions. Tall wet grass slaps at his knees and soaks his pants. Crystal shivers and mewls occasionally as she trails the bike, and eventually Teo scoops her up to nestle inside his coat. From time to time, he stops to murmur into his phone. He's starting a poem called *Tropical Depression*.

Night is coming up, but Teo pushes on, chasing spirits and his idealism. The rain stabs harder, bringing doubts with it. It's one thing to be among the animals without success, another sort of bleakness to find none.

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FOR TEO'S 50TH, A MONTH EARLIER, he and Ana threw a *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* drag party at their Santa Fe home. His actual birthday would fall during the hunt, so he was celebrating early. Almost 120 costumed friends showed up, and Teo was resplendent in a black leather G-string and a gold-sequined vest.

Under the portales on the south side of his house, tables heaved beneath trays of elk and green chile stew and venison adovada that he'd made from last year's harvest. Teo, who worked in restaurants in Chicago and trained to be a saucier, isn't just the provider in his household, he's the designated cook. During a slight lull in the party, he launched into a toast. "It's beautiful for me to feed you. I'm a Virgo. I'm in service," he said at the end of the rambling, good-hearted salute.

The idea of eating well is driving interest in hunting. "In the past decade we've witnessed a revolution in the way Americans think about food," says Jonathan Miles, author of *The Wild Chef*, a cookbook for people who harvest their own food. From the profusion of farmer's markets to fair trade coffee and chocolate, Americans have become more concerned about what they eat and where it comes from. Says Miles, "Those of us who hunt and fish can boast that we've been eating free-range, organic, and local since the very beginning." Teo can talk

ad nauseam about wild game's low levels of saturated fats, its healthy ratio of omega-3 and -6 fatty acids, and all manner of nutrition esoterica.

He prefers to hunt alone, but when he goes out with a group Teo always cooks. He can whip up elk curry or an elk tenderloin with chateaufort and pine nuts, never glancing at a recipe. Andy Chavez, the patriarch of a local hunting clan that introduced Teo to this game unit, impressed on him the need for hearty meals. At camp before a hunt, Chavez always has coffee and breakfast burritos waiting by 4:30 a.m.

Teo met the Chavez family on a deer hunt a few years back after he and the youngest son stalked the same buck. Enrique, 26, and Jerome, 29, are young enough to be Teo's sons, but the three still bonded. They call him "the doctor" (their interpretation of Teo's eclectic healing skills), and after a hard day's hunt he'll sometimes crack their backs. "They said, 'Come hunt with us,'" Teo remembers. "That was enormous. I never had a family that could take me hunting and teach me."

Teo tries to share hunting with his family too. Ana sometimes comes, but she's mostly happy to putter around camp. Teo's 18-year-old son, Cole, harvested his first bull three years ago. But he's been ambivalent about doing it again. "I'm just not sure about killing things," he told his father. Teo's 15-year-old daughter, Zaire, on the other hand, has taken to it. A few months after Teo's September hunt, Zai shot her first buck. Crystal was there and raced out to the animal once it was down. While the deer was still warm, Zai smeared its blood on her cheeks and recited a poem she'd written, a sign of contrition and respect. "Raising empowered women in this world is challenging, so it's impossible to express how much gratitude I felt," Teo said later. "It's about what carries forward when I'm not able to carry any longer."

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ON A MURKY MORNING EIGHT DAYS after opening day, Teo pedals two miles on a disused forest road. After propping the bike against a tree, he creeps through ponderosa and dense deadfall on a side-sloping, 9,100-foot ridgeline.

The air quivers with sporadic bugling. It's a disconcerting sound that starts with a baritone grumble and rises to a reedy, metallic whistle. There are more elk around than in the first eight days of hunting, though they cling to the shadows in the trees. Teo picks his way along the mountainside, listening for the cries. He slips from tree trunk to tree trunk as he draws closer to the sounds.

Then silently, a hulking creature materializes. It's a near perfect setup: soaring antlers, huge haunches, broadside at 48 feet along a fence line, and unaware that it's being hunted. Teo nocks an arrow, draws, breathes, and releases. The movements are so ingrained that the whole routine takes just a few seconds. There's no jittery anticipation. Carbon fiber and surgical steel hiss. The animal snaps and bucks, then crashes into the dark timber.

Bows, even the modern variety, are primitive. A bullet from a rifle can travel up to 4,000 feet per second; an arrow less than a 10th that fast. Everything can go wrong. The elk stepped just as Teo released. He was hit, but not well.

Since he began hunting, Teo says he has lost only a few animals. He's determined not to let it become more. He spends the day tracking the bull by bike and on foot, doing everything he knows—he follows its blood through the thick woods, he tracks hoof prints and broken twigs once the blood trail evaporates, he spirals out in expanding circles over the hillside. But it won't be found. Even Crystal can't stay on the trail. "It's the worst thing as a hunter. Worse than missing," Teo says. "You hunt to escape the excess and waste of industrial meat. The last thing you ever want is to waste a life."

At dusk, Teo builds a shrine of rocks and lays out an offering of flowers, nuts, and a slosh of bourbon. He prays first and foremost that the animal is still alive—elk are powerful beasts that frequently survive such ordeals. He also prays for the animal's speedy passage to the spirit world. Eyes glassy and wet, he begs for the elk's forgiveness. That evening he starts composing a poem to the animal. He calls it *Black Heart*, and passages of it read like a eulogy:

*Leaning back into the night sky,
Offering my bow to Orion
As if to return his arrow, loosed and lost,
Scattering stars of his belt aside instead.*

The next morning, he doesn't hunt. At camp, he shoots arrow after arrow into his target bag. He fires from 60 yards, then 70, 80, 90, and farther. Over and over he strikes the bull's-eye. Afterward, he takes apart each arrow, inspects the wicked steel broadheads. "The only redeeming thing about an

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“ YOU HUNT TO ESCAPE THE EXCESS AND WASTE OF INDUSTRIAL MEAT. THE LAST THING YOU EVER WANT IS TO WASTE A LIFE.



Using a bow to hunt requires effort and skill. "It forces you to engage and honor the life you're taking," Teo says.

AN IMPROBABLE CONVERGENCE

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experience like this is it makes you appreciate what you eat,” he says. “It isn’t easy. Meat doesn’t come from the grocery store in neat packets. It’s hard. Killing is hard and messy.”

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THE MOON HANGS IN A BLACK SKY when Teo spins up the faint game trail. It’s so early that all he can see of the mountains to the south is a vague, barbed contour on the horizon. He picks his way up the narrowing canyon, stopping to listen each time he hears the rasp of a bull bugling in the distance. He doesn’t know exactly where it’s coming from, but he trusts his instincts and moves forward without hesitation each time the trail splits. By first light, he’s five miles deep. By dawn, he’s stashed the bike in the fluttering grass and climbed up on a ridge.

It’s day 12 of the 15-day hunt, and prospects have remained bleak. He even phoned the Chavez clan, and Jerome showed up the night before. But Teo’s not thinking about that—he has a feeling.

From the crest of the hill, Teo sights a herd of around 30 elk a half mile to the east, three bulls

among them. A less experienced hunter might beeline for the animals, but Teo bolts straight west on foot, into a canyon, over a ridge, and into a second, shallower valley. He sprints up the sandy wash for a quarter mile then dives into a stand of thick piñon pine. There are no animals anywhere. Nothing happens. Teo waits.

Then, without warning, a few cow elk filter over the horizon and down the hillside, followed by a bull. The elk are feeding, moving across his path to the south. A massive bull crosses the drainage, but he’s behind thick cover. Then comes a second bull, broadside at 28 yards. Teo breathes, draws, releases. The arrow strikes like a slap. The bull spasms as if electrified, takes a step, and collapses. It’s over. The herd sifts off to the west.

Teo approaches the animal, and sits down next to it with his hand on the sweaty haunch. “People talk about men’s retreats and getting in touch with your feelings,” he says later. “I’d rather go hunting. This is my church.”

Cleaning the animal is a two-hour process. It’s 11 a.m. and normally ferrying 350 pounds of meat six miles back to the truck would take until dark, even with a bike. But Jerome is in the vicinity, and Teo walks two miles to find him. Jerome slaps him

on the back and asks Teo to recount the events, which he does with dramatic crescendo.

The thrill will eventually subside and be replaced with the melancholy of leaving the wilderness. “There are times you come home from a hunt and weep because your existence is so flat and incongruent with life out here,” he says.

Tomorrow Teo will return to his family in Santa Fe, and they’ll eat well through the winter. But now—before he quarters the elk, before he lashes the skull to the outside of his pack that he’ll fill with the tenderloins and backstraps, before he pedals fully loaded back to his truck—he pours some bourbon from his flask and offers it to the elk, reciting a prayer of gratitude and bidding the animal well in the spirit world. **B**

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