





THE
GHOST
BUCK

THE SALERNO FAMILY IS FAMOUS
FOR HIGH-COUNTRY HUNTING PROWESS.
BUT ONE MASSIVE WHITETAIL HAS
BECOME A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

BY JOE CONNELLY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHIL SUAREZ

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It was 2011, the best year of his life, when the snow never rose over his fetlocks, and was gone by the end of March, bright white buds bursting around his winter stand. He gained 40 pounds that summer, raspberries everywhere, acorns piled two and three deep, more than he could eat. He was bigger already than any buck he'd seen before, but with the weight on him that fall he felt it, his neck strong enough to tear small trees out of the ground, and a rack of antlers that could rub off four feet of bark. Most bucks avoided him, and those that didn't wished they had. One night he came down the hill and beat off two big bucks, then mounted a string of does. One of them, following him back to his stand, tried to get in his bed. He took chances that fall he never had before, taking does in the day. And in that moment that he and the hunter stared at one another, before he leapt in the woods, he even considered charging the man, knowing that if he got his antlers into him, he could have tossed the man over his shoulder, walked away as slowly as he pleased.

But two years are a long time in a buck's life, two brutal winters, the last one the worst, in which he nearly gave up, and though he recovered a lot of his weight, he didn't carry it the same way, loose at his neck, hanging on his legs. That fall a hunter got behind him and followed him for eight straight days. The man's smell was everywhere, rising with the sun and following it down, and the trick the buck had always used before, backtracking to his bed, didn't fool the man at all. He didn't sleep, and the one time the buck tried to lie down the man was there, three shots, the last one shaving his ear. Another day and he would have been killed, if it wasn't for the wind that came, that took down trees and took away the leaves, and blew the man away.





The "Madman of November," Pat Salerno Jr., on the hunt. Facing page: A trail camera shot of the elusive Adirondack ghost buck. Pages 30-31: Salerno has taken more monster deer out of the High Peaks than anyone else. A loner-buck bed like this one deep in the backcountry is often the sign of a giant animal.

PAT SALERNO JR. GOT HIS FIRST LOOK at the great buck at the start of the 2013 season, from a trail camera he'd posted high up in the Adirondacks, one of 20 cameras he keeps track of. In the photo the buck stands just a few feet away, his head and antlers eerily lit by the flash. The picture is poor quality, the bulk of the animal submerged in the grainy darkness behind, but there's no mistaking the size of his antlers, and the great neck holding them up. "He's a ghost buck," Pat says. "A true monster, maybe the biggest I've ever seen."

He calls them monsters because of their weight, well over 200 pounds, with a neck most men could hardly get their arms around, and he calls them ghosts because they're so hard to find. There's a reason they get to be that big, he says. They're smart and skittish and they know how to stay away from men, roaming the ridgetops at night, deep inside the largest park south of Alaska, an area that Pat Salerno claims is some of the toughest hunting in the country. To track and kill a ghost buck in the Adirondacks, he says, takes every skill a hunter has—that and a willingness to bushwhack three to 10 miles a day, every day, from the dark of morning to dark of night.

Some call him the Madman of November for his obsession, and by his own reckoning Pat Jr., age 55, has taken more of these monsters out of the High Peaks than anyone else.

More even than his brothers, Tim, Randy and Tony (44, 52 and 56, respectively), who together make up the Salernos, the most successful whitetail hunting family in the North Country. They've been the subject of hunting shows and in magazines like *North American Whitetail* and *Northeast Big Buck News* and throughout the year Pat and Tony display their skills at sportsmen's shows. But the one technique they all share, the one most responsible for their success, is the one that can't be taught: their relentless pursuit of their goal, and their willingness to hunt deeper, longer and harder than anyone else. It's the hunting season as marathon race, and no one pushes harder than Pat Salerno Jr.

THEY LEARNED FROM THEIR FATHER. Pat Sr., following him into the woods west of Moriah, the brothers in a line behind, carrying sticks they'd cut to look like guns. The father would tell them stories of a time when meat was scarce and money scarcer, of when he couldn't afford to buy more bul-



lets and only had two for each of his guns, so he'd carry them both. He taught his sons the tricks he'd learned himself, how to navigate deep in the woods without a compass, how to find a whitetail's trail and stick to it. Pat Sr. brought the same dedication to hunting as he did to the other great sport in his life, baseball.

For four years he was a shortstop with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization, playing for a time with another local prodigy, Johnny Podres, the MVP of the '55 World Series. Pat Sr. walked the woods in November with the same focus he gave on the infield grass, as ready for a hot grounder as he was for a great buck leaping out of its bed.

For the Salerno brothers there was baseball in the spring and whitetail in the fall, and as they grew up together, hunting together, they learned to work the woods as a team. When one gets on a track another will join his flank, first the right, then the left, another one getting ahead. Often it's not just brothers, but cousins and nephews too. "When we're moving together we know who's next to us. We know how they move," says cousin Paul Salerno Jr. "I know that Randy is going to work behind me, not miss anything. Tim's always pressing ahead."


Each brings special skills to the pack. Tony knows where the bucks are and Tim knows how to bring them down. Pat's

The Salernos, from left to right (with friend, Landon Cross, second from left): Paul Jr., Dustin, Tony, Pat Jr., Tim and Randy. Facing page: Antler rubs on a tree offer clues to buck size and location.

the great tracker, and Randy never gives up. When the hunt is done they get together to talk about what they saw, the tracks and runways they followed, the scrapes and rubs they passed. They'll discuss the amount of food available in the area, the coming weather, the big decision—to stay another day or move on. If they move into a new area it's often based on the 40 trail cameras they have collectively scattered around the High Peaks, or it's on Pat Jr.'s counsel, antlers he's found on one of his summer scouting trips. They'll gather around the map in the morning dark, Pat Jr. marking out grids for each relative to explore: "Go up high, get on top of a ridge, a finger or a tongue, and push them down. Only shoot the big ones."

When they get in the woods they talk to each other with handheld radios, and throughout the day Pat Jr.'s voice will come over regularly, sounding like a colonel in charge of infantry, telling one brother to go up a hill, another to charge into a valley. But as organized as he'd like his team to be, in the end it's a sport that will come down to one man and his prey, one moment he's been waiting for all year.

The Salernos practice a style of hunting called still-hunting. It's a misleading name, bringing images of men waiting behind blinds or in a tree stand with a case of beer. A good



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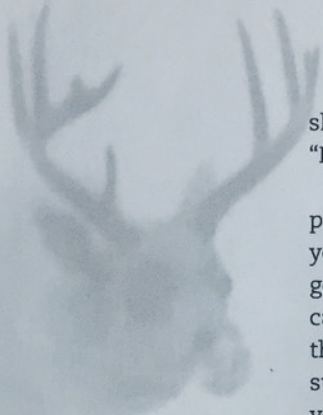
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Top: Pat Jr. attracts a buck by mimicking a doe call on a grunt tube. Bottom: Pat Salerno Sr., a former shortstop with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization, in his Port Henry home with Pat Jr. The Salernos spend thousands of dollars on taxidermy. Pat Jr. says, "You have to be married to a special woman to allow all those deer heads in the house."



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in that keeps the majority of hunters close to their trucks, it's the distance out. The brothers tell stories of exhausting ordeals, dragging a 200-pound dead animal by flashlight, three or more miles over rocks and logs, through brush and freezing water, five feet and stop, five feet and stop.

When one of them kills a big buck the family comes together to drag it out. Last fall their nephew Dustin shot a buck that took two days to get out. Tim Salerno shot one last fall they had to drag three and a half miles, a 10-pointer, weighing 194 pounds. He tracked that buck for three days, never seeing him until the moment before he shot him. "By the second day," Tim says, "the buck was doing everything he could to elude me. He took me up steep hills and over rock ledges and through brush so thick I had to hold my rifle to my chest and bull through. In the middle of the third day I saw he was backtracking and I knew he was going to bed. The smart ones will backtrack to their beds, better their chances of hearing the hunter behind them. If I followed the tracks I was sure he'd jump and lose me so I climbed up a hill above where I guessed he'd be and then slid on my back 125 feet down onto a ledge. He was just below me. I shot him in his bed."

"When you take down a really big buck there's no other feeling like it in the world," Randy says. "You've won, you've beaten the best, beaten him at his own game, in his own habitat."

PAT SALERNO JR. KILLED his first whitetail buck when he was 12, the first year he was allowed to carry a rifle. He broke off his father's trail that day. "I'm going up there," he said, pointing to a nearby peak, a place his father had mentioned might be good for big bucks. His father told him to fire two

shots if he got one. An hour later his father heard the shots. "It was an eight-pointer," Pat Jr. says. "I got him in the eye."

He was 22 years old when he stopped shooting those eight-pointers, letting them go. "I wanted them to survive another year, to get bigger and smarter. I found out it produces better genes in the area, better antlers, better hunting. My brothers caught on and started doing the same, and over the years that's what the Salernos have become known for. We hunt state lands, we're real hunters in the real woods, and every year we bring in monster bucks."

Pat Jr. has built the family reputation into a business, selling DVDs of their tactics on their website, adkhunter.com, and at the many shows they go to every year. At the Schroon Lake Sportsmen's Dinner last March, he and his brother Tony gave a seminar in a church, showing the rapt following how to make a block-and-tackle from a piece of rope and raise a dead 200-pound buck into a tree for the night to keep the coyotes from getting it. Last year the Discovery Channel came calling, and this November the nationally syndicated show *Living the Wild Life* will spend a week with the brothers.

Pat Jr. describes the pressure he puts on himself once hunting season starts. "Every day I feel it build, this huge weight on my shoulders, until I finally get him. I watch him fall and it's like all that weight is gone and I get down on my knees and I hug that buck and thank him."

Last season he let nine eight-pointers go past, bucks that any other hunter would have taken. He might have shot them too, he says, if it wasn't for the pictures of that ghost in his head. "Once I knew that he was out there, I couldn't stop thinking about him. He's big and he's old, you can see the age around his eyes. He's cautious, nocturnal and smarter than any other buck. He's the one I wanted, and I never even saw him."

Pat Jr. went the whole season without firing a shot. He can't remember the last time that happened. All the more pressure he'll put on himself this October, to work harder, think smarter, go deeper, only it won't be that ghost buck he'll be after. "He's dead," Pat says. "A kid was out in the woods looking for antler sheds and found him. I heard the story and the way he described him and knew it was him."

The Ghost Buck lived to be seven and a half, a great age for a buck in the harsh conditions of the Adirondacks. Every winter he went hungry and every fall he was on the run. But in spring the wildflowers always returned and every summer so did the raspberries he liked best, the ones that he'd walk all night to find, knowing there would be does nearby. And when he died he did it his own way, in his bed. He fathered 10 sons, all of them killed except one, a ghost buck like himself, a 12-pointer, peering eerily into one of Pat Salerno Jr.'s cameras, deep in the High Peaks, saying, Come and get me. #5

Joe Connelly is the author of *Bringing Out the Dead* and *Crumbtown*. His forthcoming novel, *The Awful Grace*, was excerpted in this magazine (February 2013). He lives in North Creek.