

**Elk**  
**September 1-18, 2009**

**Ecclesiastes 4:10** *“If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”*

**(Friends and an Unbelieva-bull Adventure)**



Whack! Dang my left hand hurt. Somehow on Father's Day I managed to slam a framing hammer directly onto my left index metacarpal – the knuckle just inside my hand. Instantly my thoughts turned to the possibility of being unable to hunt elk in September, just two short months away. Being hard-headed as well as wishfully thinking it may not have been broken, I nursed and iced it for a week before resigning myself to Xrays, which confirmed I would need surgery to install a plate and screws to hold things together.

I optimistically emailed Xray to friends with the caption “Setting up to be an epic fall elk hunting story already. I can read it now ‘Barely recovered from broken hand and shoots record-sized bull’.” Wishful thinking or prophetic: only time would tell.



You see, after years without drawing an elk tag in addition to years spent in a very poor unit with relatively-affordable landowner tags, I had been nearly speechless to discover my partner and I had drawn a coveted tag in southern NM. Then flabbergasted to find out that my dad from Alaska had drawn a non-resident tag for the same unit for the following hunt in the first year he applied!

Because my dad turned 70 this spring, the challenge was on for me to set things up to fulfill his dream of taking an elk with his bow, having never gotten one before.

As for me, with a whopping spike and a cow to my name, I had nowhere to go but up.

The first thing on my list was to discuss the hunts with my understanding wife and the very real possibility of me being away from home for 3-weeks straight. The second thing I had to do was to explain the same thing at my office and arrange for leave and a coworker friend to cover things for me while I would be out. Based on the dismal draw odds, I rightfully treated this hunting opportunity as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure and vowed to do all I could to ensure my dad had a memorable time. Taking an elk for myself would be sweet, but my real hopes were to learn enough during our first hunt to set my dad up for success.

My partner Jason & I immediately began scheming over maps and doing research on potential hunt areas. We felt that the combination of low-impact Spartan car camping and our backpacking bivy gear would afford us the most flexibility to change areas quickly and easily and allow us to maximize our hunting time.

Our busy work schedules only allowed for a couple of scouting trips during the summer, where we mainly focused on areas with water and kept our eyes peeled for last-year's sign. Elk seem to be found everywhere during the "off" season, but we felt that locating old rubs would help point us to where bulls might be found in September when the masses headed for the woods. While our scouting trips resulted in a few elk sightings, I admit questioning whether we were scouting the right way. I made my scouting trips with a splint securing my left hand (the plate negated the need for an actual cast), but our first trip had to be delayed since I was too wiped out from surgery on July 2 to attempt our planned 4<sup>th</sup> of July long weekend in the woods.

My surgeon finally gave me the go-ahead to get back to shooting my bow in early August, so I practiced diligently every day, rebuilding strength and muscle memory; feeling confident in my shooting and ready for elk by the time September approached and we were loading our trucks for the real thing.

Opening day found us choosing to sit near some water, hoping to get a feel for animals in the area before traipsing around and spreading our scent too much. While we did have a decent bull and a few cows approach that first evening, the wind was bad and the lead cow got enough of our scent to become suspicious, causing the bull to hang up just shy of our first shooting lane.



Since we elected to begin our hunt together, we needed to devise a method for who would be the shooter. Jason suggested that we trade turns every time any elk or group of elk came in. Since the area we started hunting had been identified by him, I insisted he have the first turn. Unfortunately that first opportunity didn't materialize and Jason didn't hesitate to graciously shrug and say "your turn". We did learn from the experience; however, and created a shooting "port" in our ground blind so that if a similar opportunity arose we might have a chance.

During the long stretches of inactivity, we took turns snoozing. I wasn't sure if Jason's snoring would scare animals or act as a grunt call attractant. A watering doe alleviated my fears that animals could hear him, although at close range it sure sounded loud!



Nothing but squirrels, the doe, birds and chipmunks visited the waterhole for the remainder of the day, but with one opportunity almost coming together, we opted to try again the next day.

We settled in well before daylight to see what the day would bring. By 6PM with a whopping zero elk, we found ourselves discussing other options for the morning.

Suddenly a big-sounding bugle ripped the air and it sounded close! Being the designated shooter, I quickly faced the direction of the call, thankfully noting that the wind was perfect for us on this evening.

Less than 5-minutes later Jason whispered from his standing position that afforded better visibility "he's coming straight in, fifty-yards...draw your bow". I immediately thought "I can't hold my draw for that long, he could hold up or feed or whatever and I better wait". My next thought was "aye caramba...antlers!" (It turns out Jason had whispered **fifteen**-yards). Always trust your partner.

As I began my draw some sound or movement must have caught the bull's eye, for he turned and stared before I had done much more than dent the bowstring. I froze and some timely squirrel chatter behind us eased the bull's mind; thank you Lord! As the bull's gaze turned away, I came to full draw, took note of my pins, bubble level and anchor point, then released.

At the arrow's impact, the bull sprinted a dozen yards, snapping my protruding arrow off as it hung from his side. Almost immediately he slowed and then walked out of our sight into trees and brush.

Jason was nearly jumping up and down, excitedly pounding me on the back and confidently spouting that I had just nailed a huge bull. In all honesty, all I saw was enough antler to make me more than happy and didn't have any idea how big he was. I was a bit worried about the apparent lack of penetration and restrained my excitement until we could look at the blood trail.

After calming down a little, we sneaked over to see my arrow and look for blood. Although the trail began with only scattered drops, within 50-yards there was a solid line on the ground leading to my bull stone dead about 150-yards away. As we walked up to him his antlers seemed to grow bigger; way more than I could have hoped for. Improving on my previous elk had been no problem; topping this guy will be a very tough act to follow. I guess my optimistic prediction of a record-sized elk shortly after recovering from hand surgery had turned out to be prophetic after all!



We took trophy photos at dusk and butchered my bull by headlight. After bagging all the meat, we packed all of it a reasonable distance from the carcass to help reduce the chance of it being bothered by bears and lugged out the first load. A hunt like this would be nearly impossible without a good partner to share in the work. And believe me, an elk is a LOT of work!

When we finally shoveled down “dinner” my 4AM alarm chimed, indicating it was time to wake up and hunt elk: we had been going steady for 24-hours with a lot more work ahead of us. Regardless, we needed rest, so crashed for a few hours before heading back to retrieve the rest of the meat and put it on ice in the coolers.

Between the multiple trips needed to bring the meat, cape & antlers to the truck I think it was something like a total of 8-hours of actual packing, not counting the empty return trips. Whew, this hunt was not for the faint of heart...or legs!



By the time we were ready to work together to try and get Jason a bull, it was the 5<sup>th</sup>. Although it had been fairly rainy, we were tired enough from hauling meat that resting up for the day near water sounded like a pretty good idea.

Although the recovery part worked fine, only a thirsty cow and calf broke the monotony of the damp day. Jason admitted being tempted by the cow, but refrained from the easy shot opportunity. Dragging ourselves back to camp, it was hard to not be a little bit glum, finding most of our clothing still damp; the daily showers not allowing our gear to dry even when hung under tarps. A heated pop-up trailer sure seemed like a good idea about now. Never the less, we dozed off with hopes of better things to come in the morning.

It drizzled off and on throughout the night and we awoke to fog, making it hard to pull out of camp. I considered leaving Jason on his own and hauling my elk to the butcher in Albuquerque; however, with everything safely on ice and the weather cool and damp I felt that providing Jason with encouragement and assistance would be a wiser use of my time. *If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up.*

Thankfully my wife had given her blessing during a static-filled “can you hear me now?” cell phone call the day before, despite knowing that my staying with Jason would likely

eliminate all chances of making it home to see her and Robin before transitioning directly into my dad's hunt the following week.

With the late start from camp, we just hiked slowly, hoping to hear a bugle to help provide direction for the day. Not hearing anything, we found ourselves heading toward an area we had frequented before. The day was slow and a mid-day siesta was in order during a dry break in the weather.

As evening approached we began to hear occasional faint bugles. Thinking we were where the elk would be headed, we sat tight and were welcomed by a few closer bugles. Smiling and nodding, we anticipated elk feeding our way, but for reasons known only to the elk, the bugles faded again as they retreated toward where they had started.

With nothing to lose, we packed up and headed toward the now distant bugle. In time we closed to a reasonable distance and Jason positioned himself in front of me while I began to rake a tree, roll rocks around and throw in occasional bugles and cow calls. The bull answered frequently, but after 15-minutes it was obvious that he was not budging in our direction.

Suddenly we heard another bugle to our left, so we scampered to an intercept course, slowing when we thought we were close to where the bull had been. We froze as I glimpsed a cow & a spike off to our right, knowing we were right in the thick of things.

As they ambled off, we crept forward a few more yards to position ourselves behind a large deadfall. Almost immediately I spotted the bull feeding toward us from the right; "Bull, 25-yards, nock an arrow" I whispered in Jason's ear. Jason didn't make any attempt to nock an arrow and I was unsure what to think. As the bull moved closer, fearing to make any further sound, I grabbed Jason's head and physically twisted his neck toward the bull (turns out Jason was focused on another bull at ~80-yards and didn't feel the need to nock an arrow quite yet). Always trust your partner. Once Jason's attention was locked onto the now-closing bull, he quickly and quietly nocked an arrow.

Jason drew his bow as the bull's head passed behind some sparse branches, but lesson learned, the bull stopped and stared at us. I thought the jig was up, but Jason held his draw for a long, long time. Finally, unable to keep holding, he sloooowly let down. With the bull at only 15-yards, I was amazed that Jason pulled it off, but thanks to great camouflage, the sparse branches and a healthy dose of help from above, the bull finally relaxed and continued angling toward us.

Jason drew again as the bull stepped into a clear shooting lane, but this time the bull didn't notice and at ~12-yards Jason's arrow zipped through him like a hot knife through butter. The bull jumped a couple of yards, looked around in confusion, got wobbly-legged, and tipped over right in front of our eyes. Now **that's** the way to do it!

Jason and I turned to each other in disbelief at how quickly things had come together.

us.



Having just performed the same drill a few days earlier, we efficiently butchered the bull by headlamps, moved the meat away from the carcass and hauled one load to camp. Night time packing by moonlight was becoming a routine we could get used to!





In keeping to our “typical” schedule, my watch alarm beeped “wake-up” shortly after wolfing down dinner and sliding into our sleeping bags: another 24-hour day just a few short days after my practice run.



It took a couple of days to haul meat, antlers and gear to the trucks. Long hours of packing (and the associated rest stops!) afforded us the pleasant luxury of plenty of time to talk about important things, including: our families and kids, life, death, religion, health, and numerous other topics, which we don't seem to find the time for in the hectic hustle and bustle of daily life. We headed for home with enough time for me to drop meat at the butcher, meet dad at the airport, drop the cape at the taxidermist and get dad's gear organized and loaded into my truck for the return trip south.

Although dad was thrilled to hear about our successes, we questioned whether it could be possible to shatter the odds and pull off a bull three-peat.

My close friend Bruce volunteered to help me and my dad, so he joined us with an open-ended offer to assist around camp, help call and most importantly, help pack meat. We could only hope his last service would be needed. We all drove down the day before season to set up camp and help dad get a jump-start the process of acclimating from his home elevation of ~300-feet above sea level to well over a mile higher!

Dad is an old sheep hunter, so despite the thinner air (he accused me of leading up the hills and sucking up all the oxygen ahead of him) he pressed on like a trooper and managed to keep up with me; no small feat. Perhaps visions of whopper bulls made his feet just a tad bit lighter.

Opening morning found us hiking in the dark toward the siren-song of a bugling bull that seemed to stay just ahead of us, no matter our pace. We tried calling set-ups a couple of times, but despite regular responses, the bull kept ambling away; we suspected he had cows.

By mid day we lost track of the elk and sat for a lunch break. Musing over my GPS I noted that there was a water tank "only"  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from our location. Never mind the

distance was “as the crow flies”, and getting there would entail nearly double that distance with hills, valleys, deadfall and the ever-present lack of oxygen at our higher elevation. My dad indicated he was game, so we headed for it as a likely place to rest up for the afternoon.

As we eased toward the water, we inadvertently spooked a couple of bedded cows: doh! Then making a rookie mistake just minutes later, we bumped a bedded shooter bull and another cow: double doh!

Although the tank was nearly dried up, with elk nearby it seemed reasonable to expect more in the area. We hastily spruced up a dilapidated ground blind and settled in for a well-needed rest. To reduce the number of people and scent, Bruce elected to sit in some brush farther away, at a location where we could still see each other for hand signals. His location also afforded a potential calling location should Bruce need to distract a bull's attention from my dad and me.



Later that afternoon my dad glimpsed a cow moving through the brush, but she didn't come to water. Shortly thereafter I too glimpsed a small bull moving past our location but apparently he wasn't thirsty either.

As was typical this year, a light sprinkle began in the early evening, increasing to the point of warranting raingear. As we hurriedly (and noisily) pulled raingear from our backpacks, a decent 5x5 trotted away from the water. He had sneaked in from a direction hidden from our view and managed to sip water from a corner of the pond that was screened from our seated position by a tree trunk: doh 3!!!

Later Bruce relayed that he had watched the bull walk right past his position and begin drinking. Bruce had been thinking “nice bull, why aren't we shooting?!” Oh well, the bull hadn't really been all that big. At least that's what how we consoled ourselves.

The heavy rain turned to hail and by the time it finally quit we were cold and didn't think any elk in his right mind would come to the waterhole, so we packed up and slowly worked our way toward camp. Shortly thereafter, we heard a bugle in the direction we were headed, so we continued toward, hoping to have time for a calling setup before sundown.

We were able to locate the bull and he would scream back at every call we could throw at him, but he just wasn't willing to come closer. Although my dad and I kept trying to move in on him while Bruce called behind us, we eventually had to retreat as we'd lost shooting light, further compounded by the overcast skies.

The damp hike back to camp over rocky terrain left us tuckered by the time we were ready to hit the sack. Bruce's knee was bothering him, having injured it a few weeks prior and he would be unable to join us in the field for the next day's hunt.

The next morning I suggested heading in another direction to an area I where had seen a small herd a few days earlier. Rough terrain, difficult hiking conditions, what, did dad think I was going to baby him on this hunt?!

We never did catch up to the bull we heard moving away from us, but my dad was afforded some exciting memories. By late morning, we conferred regarding a plan for the rest of the day. Feeling like some exploration was in order, I suggested my dad sit along what we believed was a travel corridor while I did a little reconnaissance. While I was gone, dad heard a bull bugle very close to his position, but his call was tucked away in his pack and he was afraid to make any noise retrieving it, given the close proximity of the bull. He never did see it and it didn't bugle again. Who knows, maybe it was another hunter strolling by?

By the time I returned from my "just a 15-minute hike" over an hour had passed and it was midday. I had found a promising looking area with heavy trails apparently coming from a bedding area and quite a few fresh tracks and droppings. Since I had dragged my dad over many rough miles already that morning, not to mention the previous day, I suggested that we find a likely spot and sit for a few hours, then get up and move in the evening if nothing was stirring nearby.

We pulled a few logs and branches around us for some cover and lay down for some nap time. Birds, squirrels and chipmunks provided constant entertainment during our sit. At one point a squirrel dropped a large green pine cone from high in the tree above us, making me dodge as it rattled down toward me. "That could hurt, I commented". Dad concurred and looked skyward just in time to take a glancing blow to the chest from another cone! From then on we reflexively covered our heads every time a cone was heard bouncing its way down through the branches. At one point a small hawk swooped low and buzzed my dad's hat and later on a small weasel jumped around in front of us. Finally a doe and twin fawns slowly meandered by our hideout for further entertainment. Creation can certainly be more entertaining than TV.

Sometime after the standard afternoon shower and raincoat shuffle, we heard a bugle to our left. I waited a few minutes and chirped a simple cow call. A bugle drifted back from our right! My dad readied an arrow and I began scanning with binoculars. Soon I glimpsed a cow trotting our way and nudged my dad. More quickly than we expected, four cows and a bull came trotting our way. The bull was obviously dogging the cows as they darted and danced toward us. As they approached, dad drew his bow in

anticipation of a slam dunk shot, but of course, the bull seemed to always have some branches covering his vitals. One cow took note of us and began a stare-down, making my dad hold his draw for long minutes: longer than I thought possible! With the commotion and excitement caused by the bull, the other elk didn't take notice and kept cavorting with no shot opportunities. Just as the cow finally relaxed, the elk wheeled and angled away from us and my dad let down. As the bull stepped into a shooting lane at 30-yards, I chirped and he froze in textbook fashion. My dad drew, aimed and released his arrow and the bull charged off. I had been unable to witness the hit, but my dad was sure he saw his arrow in the bull's side.

Initially my dad thought he hit the bull a tad too far back, but I reminded him that the bull had been quartering away and a rearward hit should have angled forward into both lungs. We collected our wits, gave thanks for the opportunity and offered a prayer to find the bull cleanly killed.

With darkness coming on and the constant threat of rain, we begin trailing the bull sooner than we would normally have. A couple drops of bright blood confirmed the hit, but due to the shot angle and my dad's relatively low-poundage bow, the arrow didn't pass through and the drops were very sparse. Thankfully after the recent rain the bull's hoof prints were fairly obvious and allowed us to trail him fairly well.

We crept quietly in case the bull hadn't expired and at one point my dad pointed to his nose, indicating that he smelled an elk, but we didn't see anything. We continued another dozen yards and the tracks seemed to peter out and we had difficulty sorting out their direction. While my dad tried to decipher the tracks, I backtracked to where he had smelled elk and I too caught the distinctive musky aroma. Using my wind-checking powder I quickly ascertained the direction the smell was coming from and headed that way, excitedly finding dad's bull piled up in some brush. We were barely able to drag the heavy bull into the open for photos and then began the familiar task of trophy photos, butchering the bull by headlamp and hauling the first load to camp.

Bruce groggily rolled out and wanted to hear the full story, so over dinner we recounted the adventure and thankfully accepted his offer to help pack out the remainder later that day (since it was already well past midnight).

Dad managed to improve a little over Jason's and my schedule by hitting the sack at about 3AM, but it had again been another long day. But we certainly couldn't complain!



After a short sleep, the three of us headed out to retrieve the rest of dad's bull and get it on ice in the truck. Thanks to Bruce's help, it only took one (heavy) trip!

These hunts vastly exceeded all expectations and it was truly a once in a lifetime adventure.

It was indescribable to be able to help my dad fulfill one of his long-time dreams and a memory that will be with me forever.



The butcher recorded 218, 225 and 220-pounds of deboned meat for my, Jason's and dad's bulls, respectively. That plus horns and capes meant we literally approached packing a ton of elk. Thank God for our quads (and our backs, hamstrings, calves, etc.) What, were you thinking ATVs?!

I had to buy another freezer with all the meat. Despite my dad leaving all his gear for me to ship home slow and cheap, with today's costs and weight restrictions on checked and carry-on baggage, my dad was only able to take about half of his elk meat home, meaning I had to store the remainder while we wait for friends and relatives with extra baggage space to get the remainder up north (anybody going that way soon?)

Very rough gross green scores were 340, 295 and 255 for my, Jason's and dad's bulls, respectively. We had beaten all odds and taken mature bulls on public land do-it-yourself hunts. Despite losing 10-pounds and just now recovering from the grueling loads of meat, I'd do it again in a second!

Without good friends a hunt like this would be nearly impossible: *If one falls down, his friend can help him up...or carry a load of meat...*

As Jason noted, only one word can describe the adventure: **amazing**.