

**Elk
September 9-22, 2011 Arizona**

Facing the Giants: *“And if we win, we praise Him. And if we lose, we praise Him.”*



Double rainbow during one of many thundershowers



Amazing sunsets were displayed nearly every evening of the hunt

After 10-years of applying I was blessed in drawing an Arizona bull elk archery tag; however, it was somewhat bittersweet considering I was in the middle of my third and final season of working on a project away from home in Angel Fire, New Mexico and having very little spare time to scout in addition to having been away from my family far too much.

Nevertheless, we penciled in a family scouting weekend and another solo scouting weekend during the summer and I vowed to make the most of it and treat it as the nearly once-in-a-lifetime tag it was.

Soon thereafter I discovered that my partner Jason and I had drawn archery elk tags here in New Mexico with an overlapping season...after not drawing an elk tag in 2010, September 2011 had suddenly looking hectic!

My two scouting weekends were less than stellar; the ‘family’ trip was hampered by gale force 40+mph winds. My solo trip only revealed evidence of old ground blinds or treestands on every single waterhole I checked; despite my attempt to find sources as far off the beaten path as possible.



A good scouting assistant must have her priorities!

I did find elk sign in several areas and even spotted a couple of nice bulls and some cows. The main benefit was familiarizing myself with the unit and getting a sense of the roads and roadless parcels.



Good bull in velvet near a semi-remote spring in AZ; unfortunately another hunter had taken up residence at this water during hunting season

In between Arizona trips my partner Jason and I squeezed in a fruitful scouting trip here in NM and recorded the most species we'd ever seen on one trip: mule & Coues deer, bear, turkey, mice, frogs, toads, quail, javelina, squirrels, jack and cottontail rabbits, various songbirds, cow elk and several nice bull elk! We also managed to locate a fairly remote water source with promising elk sign in the vicinity.



Dandy Coues deer buck



Toad serenading at night



Good bull while scouting NM

By juggling work, family and limited vacation, I allotted 5-days to hunt NM and the entire 14-day season for AZ.

New Mexico Warm-Up

Seemingly before I knew it, elk season was upon me and it was time for Jason and me to head out for the extended Labor Day Weekend. Although our NM hunt, which included bivy packing several miles and several close encounters, is deserving of a story by itself, I've opted to provide only the Cliff notes.



NM Bivy camp

In brief, my follow-through on a big bull as he walked past our ground blind at a wallow resulted in me bringing home only memories and a trophy of wood; drat!



Had my arrow been an inch to the right I would have nailed a whopper bull

Jason fared better than I. On the evening of the second day he predicted that he'd kill an elk on the morning of the third day. Indeed Jason killed a beautiful, huge-bodied, unique trophy 6x6 bull that yielded 270-pounds of deboned meat at the meat locker (our previous bulls provided ~220-230-pounds). Another prediction regarding a certain third day over two thousand years ago comes to mind, but I digress.



Jason's trophy: check out that browline!



After ferrying the meat to our bivy camp, Jason negotiated a VERY reasonable deal with an outfitter we crossed paths with to haul it back to the truck. Heck Jason probably saved us double the fee in chiropractor bills alone!

Arizona Bound

All too soon, our NM hunt came to an end with tag soup for me and it was back to the salt mines for a week prior to shifting gears and focusing on Arizona.

As my departure loomed I received an unexpected call from a good friend from TX. Ward's schedule had suddenly freed up and he offered to fly up and tag along for a week to help call, glass and (hopefully) pack out my bull. In addition, because Jason had punched his tag earlier than anticipated, he too had some extra time to help me for a few days in AZ. I eagerly accepted their gracious offers and picked up Ward at the airport and brought him to AZ with me, while Jason was to follow separately and join us a few days later.

Ward and I hit the ground in my typical fashion by pulling into the unit at about 2AM. After a short snooze, we gobbled a hasty breakfast and began glassing from a knob I had identified during a previous scouting spree. Although we heard some sporadic bugling and spotted a few bulls that morning, it was apparent that they were not fired up and locating them would be no easy task.

We spent midday checking some semi-remote waterholes for tracks; however, we found hunters staked out at each one.

The next several days were a blur of activity: we flitted from one area to another in an attempt to locate worthy bulls. We had several close encounters that left me all but tasting success; the skies dumped rain, rain and dare I say more rain. Jason arrived a few days later at 3:30AM. I relished the camaraderie of the finest hunting partners coupled with a few sightings of the whopper bulls Arizona is known for.

Some of the more noteworthy encounters included:

- Stalking to within 20-yards of a fine bedded bull only to have an errant swirl of wind send he and his band of cows thundering off before I could even see them.
- Spectacular rock formations and stunning views of God's country

- One exciting morning we dogged a boisterous herd that contained at least 4-bugling bulls and their loosely-gathered harems of cows – I managed to get within 60 to 80-yards of several good bulls no less than three different times, only to be foiled by scads of other hunters after the same group
- Nearly daily deluges, some of which left almost an inch of rain in our breakfast bowls on the hood of my truck
- Another afternoon when I stalked within 100-yards of a bedded monster while Jason & Ward provided hand signals from high atop a hill, only to have the bull rise and stroll off for no apparent reason
- One rain squall that generated a phenomenal double rainbow
- Finding a bunch of sheds, including a dandy 6x6 elk skull
- Spectacular sunrises and sunsets, along with Jupiter aligned with the full moon
- Glassing a good bull bedded in his dry wallow and building an ambush hide nearby in case he returned; the planning and dreaming is often as much fun as the action
- Finding pottery shards and even a couple of arrowheads



Majestic views



Unique Rock Formations



Where was this cave during the numerous rainstorms? It was also possible to glass elk below from this cozy overhang.



Comrades



Incredible sunset in God's country



Did you see the size of that bull wallowing?!



Typical glassing terrain



We got within 60-yards of this nice bull before he was bugged by other hunters



I managed to stalk within 20-yards of this snoozing bull, but errant gust of wind spoiled my opportunity



Whopper 6x6 skull from a deep ravine when I stalked the equally impressive 5x6 above



Ward's view from across the canyon: despite being with 20-yards, an obstruction prevented me from seeing the bull



What a blessing to have friends that can be counted on. Few partners would make an all-night Red Bull Express across the state line for little more than the possibility of packing out a heavy load of meat!



Ward during a midday nap...before the rain began



Jason during a midday nap...during the rain



Some of our time was spent in country that resembled ibex terrain



Snoozing bull of the caliber Arizona is known for; sadly he strolled away about the time I got within 100-yards of him



Rain squalls were a near-daily occurrence the first week



Extra eyes and optics helped spot the elk; some as far away as 4-miles



We saw this whopper 5x6 in the same vicinity on two occasions, but couldn't quite close the distance or call him to us



Ward & Jason nearly called this bruiser to me; just a few more yards and he would have been within range

One afternoon late in the first week we spotted a good bull wallowing in a water pond far out in the flats as we glassed from a knob. We made note of the location, set out for the pond after dark, and set my popup blind in hopes of him returning the following evening. Alas, the only thirsty critters the next afternoon were pronghorns and horses.



One of several pronghorns that approached our waterhole

Despite lots of action and some very, very close calls, I was unable to loose an arrow or take advantage of my pack mule buddies during that first week.

My season lasted 14-days, but I chose to return home on the middle weekend in order to spend time with my lovely wife and daughter. I'd already been away from home far too much on to an out-of-town project for work, and despite being passionate about hunting, my family comes first, so I felt the time with family would be well spent and trusted that it wouldn't affect the overall outcome of my hunt.

While at home we caught the tail end of *Facing the Giants*; an awesome movie we'd seen before. It's an inspiring story about a football coach who turns around not only his

team, but the entire school simply by living out the Bible verse Matthew 6:33 *"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

The meaning is not to say that by seeking the Lord, one will gain riches or wealth or win, but rather that by getting one's eternal life in order, everything else will fall into place. As I pointed the truck west on Sunday evening for a solo final 4-day effort, the movie theme played through my mind.

During the long drive I had plenty of time to contemplate dozens of related ideas and their spin-offs:

- I had applied in Arizona for 10-years in order to draw this tag; was the financial aspect and time away from my family worth it?
- What if I came home empty handed?
- How could I expect to bag a bull on my own in 4-days when my previous 7-days with helpers hadn't panned out?
- Was spending time hunting a worthwhile endeavor?
- Despite we hunters facing the reality of life and death literally every time we put our sights on an animal, how much time do we spend contemplating our own mortality? After all, the odds are pretty stark at pretty much 100% that each of us will die; ever spend time contemplating if anything lies beyond?
- I recently read Roger Ebert's (the movie reviewer) view on death: *"I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear...I have no desire to live forever. What I expect to happen is that my body will fail, my mind will cease to function and that will be that."* Although I once too believed this general viewpoint, I am now positive that it is incorrect.
- Perhaps if I devoted as much time & energy toward my friends' eternal condition as I did toward hunting it would be a better thing
- Was it really feasible that the incredible display of stars painted across night sky above me had come about randomly?
- In that same vein, it seemed long odds that a random mutation of some ancient swamp rat had resulted in the mighty wapiti of my pursuit?
- Did it really make sense that we are simply the top critter in the food chain, or aren't we instead unique and vastly superior to every other life form out there?
- How would this elk hunt story end up?
- Dang, this is a long drive and I'm tired...time for another Red Bull ;o)

As I approached the unit my thoughts shifted gears: my initial plan was to assess the waterhole housing my popup blind, and then alternatively determine if the bull had been revisiting his dry wallow bed in another area. I arrived at said waterhole about 2AM. My game cam revealed no daylight visits, so I drove another half-hour to where I'd hike first thing in the morning to check in on the dry wallow bed. I fell into my sleeping bag with faint bugles ringing in my ears from the direction I planned on heading in the morning.

With a few hours' sleep under my belt, I groggily ascended en route for the brush blind we had assembled near a good bulls bed/wallow. As I settled into it, I could make out a few elk feeding within a half mile of me and hear sporadic bugling from various directions. The area was fairly open, so it would be difficult to stalk, but I felt good about a bull visiting the pungent wallow pit just 30-yards from my location.

Eventually a large bull popped out of a nearby ravine rather unexpectedly and it appeared that he would swing right past me. However, after he belted out a few raspy

bugles, a cow accompanying a different bull farther up the hillside made a beeline to him and then escorted him past my hideout at about 60-yards; farther than I wanted to shoot. I considered calling in an attempt to lure him closer, but with the open environment I was certain that being unable to see any cow in the direction of my calls he'd be wary, so I kept quiet in hopes that the other bull would descend and try to rein in his departing cow.



Big bull passed by just beyond range after coaxing a cow away from another good bull with just a couple of throaty bugles

Although the bull from uphill came partway toward his departing cow, he apparently didn't have the gumption to challenge the bigger bull, so strutted and screamed his angry frustration about 100-yards away from my location. He eventually retreated toward his remaining cows, and as I had suspected, my cow calls were met with only suspicious stares as he departed.



Frustrated bull from uphill after losing one of his cow

After all the elk had filtered away toward their midday beds in the timber, I headed back toward the truck, but realized a catnap was in order along the way. I found a shady spot underneath an ancient juniper and quickly fell into slumber. Sometime later I felt something hit my leg, then stomach. Disorientated, I sat up to glimpse a squirrel clear my face at VERY close range on his third jump! Wow, talk about a wakeup call! But I must have been tired, because even after that adrenaline spurt I was able to lean back and sleep soundly for 30-minutes more!

After my refreshing siesta (believe me, if you've never napped under a warm tree in the woods, you've missed out on the most refreshing sleep you'll ever get) I returned to my truck and loaded by pack with lightweight bivy gear that would enable me to reach higher up the mountain in hopes of intercepting some bugling bulls when they became active later that evening. With only a few days remaining, I opted to go as light as possible and only packed enough food and water to get me through that evening and the next morning. I reasoned that if the action was really hot I could probably stretch it and survive through the following evening and morning if need be.

I arrived at a high point where Ward and I had previously found an incredible amount of sign and had some close calls the week before and set up my solo tent prior to the evening action.



Not many flat spots, but abundant elk sign made it well worth the lack of creature comforts

As I eased up toward the timber bedding area I was treated to the siren song of bulls stirring and made a beeline toward the nearest notes. Although I kept pushing toward the bugles, much like trying to sneak up on crickets or frogs, they always seemed to be farther ahead. I finally made it within 40-yards of a good bull, but could not take a shot in the thick jungle. Before long it sounded like most of the bulls were dropping into a big canyon, so I reluctantly shucked hard-earned elevation in a futile attempt to get in front of them. I finally managed to get between several screaming bulls, but couldn't close within archery range until after it was too dark to shoot.

Because I had several bulls around within 60-yards, I simply lay down on a large boulder, stared up at the myriad of stars above, and dozed a little as they sang and screamed to one another. One bull in particular sounded big; he basically just groaned or growled, sounding more like a Brahma bull than an elk!

After they disbursed, I switched on my headlight and trudged back up the hill to my bivy with plans to push the limits and stay up high the next day by rationing my food and water. From my tent I could hear bulls below me on both sides of the divide and I drifted off with big plans for the morning.

I awoke before dawn and moved into the timber to intercept a bull as he came back to bed. One particular bull bugled frequently as he ascended, so I was able to keep tabs on him and constantly monitor the downhill thermals and his uphill path to keep as close to his approach route as possible. At the last minute I lost tabs on him and found myself below his throaty rumble. I quickly sidehilled and glimpsed him above me at about 30-yards, but he had already made it into the thick growth with no available shot. I dogged him for a while, but was eventually busted by one of his cows and they thundered off.

I spent the rest of the morning stalking bulls as they bugled from their beds in the timber, but time and time again I was picked off by them or their cows and each stalk ended in frustration as they crashed off through the deadfall from within 25-45-yards.

Knowing where the bulls had been the evening before, I packed up my bivy gear and dropped into their valley. My GPS indicated another trail out, so I hoped it would be passable as there was simply no way to pack a bull back up the way I had come from.

After erecting my tent and tossing all my gear inside in case of rain, I headed toward the area where the bulls had congregated the night before. Before long I heard the first bugles of the evening and quickly veered toward the one that sounded biggest; it was the groaning "Brahma bull" I had yet to lay eyes on. He had at least one challenger nearby and they exchanged insults regularly, which allowed me to creep within 100-yards relatively quickly.

I dogged behind them for nearly an hour, but instead of dropping downhill toward me and the location where they had been the evening before, they kept climbing into steeper and rougher terrain, littered with deadfall. Hampered by the obstacles, I was unable to close the distance, so with the sun dropping, I opted to cut my losses and drop to terrain more suitable for stalking. My brief text message to friends and family pretty much sums it up *"Burned all PM daylight chasing 3+ bugling bulls...that went uphill. Gave up; too steep & lots of deadfall."*

Soon I heard bugling below me and sneaked up on a 5x5. Despite being presented with a broadside 42-yard shot and only two days of season remaining, I resolved that he wasn't the caliber I had waited 10-years for and did not take the shot. I could hear another bull thrashing his antlers on a sapling, so continued, pressed for time with daylight fading rapidly. I never laid eyes on the other bull, but stumbled across a small pond and wallow that held plenty of bull sign; tracks, sprayed mud and the heady smell of rutting bulls. Thinking that this might be the honeyhole I had been looking for, I threw up some logs, brush and branches 20-yards away alongside a huge fallen tree and tall stump and headed back to my bivy for the night. On the way I took a slurp of water from my hydration bladder. Thinking my drinking hose was kinked, I stopped to rearrange

things only to discover that I'd inadvertently just sucked down the last of my water; it was going to be a rough night.

I awoke the next morning feeling a little parched, knowing that I would have to return to my truck for food and water, since I had finished my food at dinner the night before and hadn't brought along my water filter. I slurped my only remaining energy gel for breakfast and felt good enough to hunt the remote waterhole in the morning before heading out to refuel, so I sneaked down to my hideout at first light. Bulls were bugling below me and I had high hopes one would swing by the water on his way uphill to bed.

Soon enough I heard the distinctive 'clunk' of elk hooves on deadfall and twisted in time to see large antlers floating toward me. I prepared mentally and physically as the bull approached, but for some reason I didn't hear him alongside the huge fallen log serving as one wall of my blind.

Suddenly he popped into view at merely 4-yards! Because I had hastily erected the hide, it was pretty open; I was relying heavily on my camouflage to conceal me – but at 4-yards I was feeling pretty exposed and didn't dare move a muscle as the large bull stared me down. He relaxed a little and continued angling toward the water in front of me and immediately began slurping thirstily.

However, he had stopped with his vitals behind a small bush and I had no shot, despite him unaware of my presence and broadside at only 20-yards. After drinking sporadically for the longest 5-minutes of my life, instead of stepping forward and providing me with a clean shot, the bull swapped ends and retraced his steps past me again, nervously eyeballing me the entire time. And just like that I went from the high of having a good bull from 3-20-yards of me for nearly 10-minutes to the low of realizing that even with an opportunity in my lap I had been unable to capitalize. I was bummed.

I shook off defeat as best I could by hurriedly tearing down the dastardly bush beside the water and using its branches to supplement my meager hideaway.

As the morning warmed it was apparent by the retreating bugles that all of the bulls in the vicinity had moved higher into the timber to bed and I anticipated little action until late afternoon or evening.

I evaluated my options and elected to hike out, drive to the other pond and retrieve my popup blind in anticipation of getting ready to pack up and head home the next and final evening of season.

Although I was only about 1.5 miles from the nearest road, in order to reach my parked truck I had to hike about 3-miles and I wasn't looking forward to the walk sans drinking water. As I began I noticed some rose bushes loaded with rose hips (the 'fruit' generated by each flower). Although I have eaten them before, they are typically pretty bitter and full of seeds. However, given my circumstances I decided a little fluid was better than nothing and ate a few. I was pleasantly surprised at the volume of juicy pulp provided by an entire mouthful, so after sucking out all the juice and spitting out the seedy remainder, I ate a few more handfuls. For the remainder of the hike to the truck I eagerly gobbled rose hips at every opportunity!



No wonder all the bear scat I saw was bright red/orange – the rose hips were fairly tasty!

Despite the much-appreciated natural sustenance, I was never the less happy to reach my truck and replenish. I must have drunk a gallon of water, not to mention Wilderness Athlete drink, canned fruit, a sandwich, energy bar, cookies and Red Bull!

Invigorated, I drove across the unit to retrieve my popup blind. Before tearing it down, I checked the game camera for photos; aye caramba! a whopper bull had wallowed two nights prior, and a bull that was difficult to make out had wallowed the previous night!

With action two nights in a row, daylight photos of a unique bull worthy of trying for, and already being a bit worn out, I elected to sit tight and see what might show up that evening. Alas, no elk watered at this pond on my second-to-last evening of season.



This game cam photo of a unique bull lured me into sitting this waterhole the second to last afternoon of season; alas, he did not return

Feeling that my odds were better spending the last day in the remote area I had been in the previous two days, I yanked down my popup after dark, loaded up the truck and then headed across the unit yet again. I hiked into my bivy camp by headlight, my spirits buoyed by the sweet music of bugling bulls the entire way.

As I snuggled into my sleeping bag with only one day of season remaining, the reality began to sink in that getting a bull in Arizona was unlikely. I had hunted longer and harder than ever before and 'tag soup' was looming. The reality is that I might never draw another tag in Arizona. Some of my initial thoughts included "wasted tag"; "wasted time"; "failure"; "defeat" and similar gloomy views.

But as I listened to bulls bugling all around me and looked up to the night sky adorned with countless stars, I replayed the last 10-days spent in the outdoors. I had seen dozens of good bulls; heard hundreds of bugles; seen beautiful wildflowers and sunsets; enjoyed the camaraderie of good friends; and been within bow range of several bulls. I realized that the entire experience had been everything I could have wished for. I found myself unable to entertain any negative thoughts and instead recognized how truly blessed I had been. In my heart that I truly could say "If I shoot an elk, I praise Him. And if I don't shoot an elk, I praise Him."



Wildflowers were abundant

With this calming realization, I slipped into a relaxing slumber, punctuated by the occasional scream from fervent bulls, until my watch alarm chimed.

Because this would be my last opportunity, I awoke earlier than normal and made my way down to my ambush point while it was still pitch black in order to get fully settled in prior to sunrise.

As I lay in my hideout listening to distant bugles, I suddenly heard hoof beats from the same direction as the previous morning. The only problem was it was nearly an hour before sunrise, with only the stars and a sliver of moon providing barely enough light for my attuned eyes to make out the shapes of trees and shadows around me.

As I strained to see, a bull followed an identical route past me to the waterhole to drink. I could make out the lighter color of his body and distinguish antlers, but could not see my sight pins, so a shot was impossible. I silently willed him to stick around until the sky to lightened, but knew it was too much to ask; he walked back past me after just a few minutes. It crossed my mind that much like the event the morning before, if I had drawn my bow as the bull paralleled the log wall of my hideout I might have had a chance to shoot at close range despite the dim light; lesson learned. Despite another encounter with a nice bull within spitting distance, I was still elk-less. Yet I couldn't help but smile; the episode had been amazing! How could I not resonate with praise after being treated to action like this?!

Although I waited throughout the rest of the morning, no other bulls came by and gradually all the bugles grew fainter and then silent; after frolicking all night, the tired bulls had bedded down in the shade somewhere to sleep away the heat of the day.

I had initially planned on staying put all day, but my feet were restless. I decided that the odds of action during midday were slim and if I actually shot a bull my bivy gear represented one load that needed to get to the truck one way or another and it would be easier during daylight hours. So I made a quick round trip to the truck; leaving behind only the items necessary to hunt the evening and break down and pack out a bull. I returned by two o'clock and was relieved to find was no sign of any bulls wallowing in the mud during my absence. As I settled in for forty winks, once again I evaluated my odds and recognized it would take a miracle to pull a bull out of the unit. Never the less, I was at peace whatever the outcome.

By late afternoon sporadic bugles began to drift my way, so I perked up in hopes of a parched bull swinging by for a drink. After an hour I pulled out my pocket New Testament to help keep my mind occupied. I couldn't fully focus, so kind of bounced around with a little from Luke and a little from Matthew; yet it was a most enjoyable way to spend the afternoon.

As the evening approached bugles rang out from relatively nearby in several different directions and I felt confident in my chances; however, the sun descended, my precious minutes ticked away and the once-close bugles filtered past me one by one. I began second-guessing myself as to whether to abandon my post and chase the receding calls, but my partner Jason's advice echoed in my brain "If I were you I'd sit that remote waterhole every minute of the last day..." I'd already disregarded that advice by packing out my bivy gear during the middle of the day. By all evidence I'd gotten away without missing a bull then, but considering I'd already spent many days trying to close the distance on elusive bugles with nothing to show for it, perhaps my odds were better sitting...doing...nothing.

Psalms 46:10 says "Be still and know that I am God". I trusted in that verse and forced myself to sit tight as each minute of season slipped away on my watch. Shooting light would be pretty much gone by 7PM. By 6:40 I began to lose hope and started loading my non-essentials into my backpack in expectation of hustling out after shooting light was gone. By 6:45 I was considering a jump start on the hike out, so stood up to scan the surrounding area before moving.

Suddenly at 6:46 I heard a bugle...close! A minute later the bull bugled again, even closer! My brain screamed "this is impossible; only storybooks end up this way", but I swiftly sat down and readied my bow in anticipation of the inconceivable.

Almost immediately I caught antlers floating above the large log beside me; the bull was taking the exact same path as I had observed twice previously. With two trial runs under my belt I knew exactly what to do: I drew my bow in advance. The bull paused momentarily, perhaps due to some slight noise on my part or the slight movement of my upper bow limb protruding above the log as I drew. Regardless, he quickly relaxed and stepped out at a scant 4-yards.

I felt amazingly relaxed; I had time to focus, aim and let the bowstring slip from my fingers. At the shot the bull jumped forward, took a few shaky steps and reeled. At first I thought he'd topple within sight, but then he began walking. I quickly knocked another

arrow, but was unsure as to my shot. It had happened so quickly and been so close I actually hadn't even seen my arrow. My mind nagged that somehow I had missed the bull entirely and I wouldn't have a storybook ending after all. I had already packed up all my elk calls, so didn't have one handy to try to stop him for a clean follow-up shot and I was hesitant to take a marginal moving shot, since for all I knew he wasn't even hit. It felt like a living nightmare as he moved out of view.

Since I was unsure of the hit I employed everything I had learned and waited for 15-minutes before quietly exiting the blind to look for blood immediately in front of me. I found a reasonable amount of blood within the first 10-yards, evidencing a solid hit, but not being certain, I forced myself to wait a full hour before taking up the trail.



View from bull's perspective

I followed the bull's trail for a couple hundred yards by headlight over deadfall timber, but eventually got baffled where he zigzagged back and forth in a meadow. I made a quick call to Ward for some counsel and decided to back out and pick up the trail first thing in the morning under daylight conditions. Ironically, the point where I called it quits was only 80-yards from where my bivy camp had originally been, but I had packed it all out to the truck; I guess that's what I deserved for over analyzing things! Although I was a little worried about finding my bull, the ample blood trail suggested that the shot was lethal. Despite my apprehension, my hike back to the truck was wonderful; I've always enjoyed hiking by headlamp and I was serenaded by bulls bugling to one another from all directions for the entire trip to my truck.

The next morning I awoke early. It took me a little while to pick up the trail where I had left off the night before, but once found, it was very obvious. I had another period of doubt where the bull had bedded and the blood trail disappeared. After a lot of praying and searching, I stumbled across his trail; he had backtracked about 60-yards and branched off – the trail was obvious; I had simply missed it as I originally passed.

Thankfully I recovered my bull just a few minutes later! Although it seemed like I had tracked him a long distance, it turned out to be less than ¼-mile by GPS. Considering an elk can cover 400-yards in a matter of seconds, he hadn't gone far.

After sending a prayer of thanksgiving, I assessed the situation. The bull was laying in direct sunlight and it was already getting warm; I was 2-miles from the truck and had 250-pounds of boned out meat and 30-pounds of antlers, plus my bow, camera & tripod to haul to the truck as quickly as possible!

After recording several trophy photos, I quickly dove into the task of breaking down the bull, deboning the meat, and loading it into bags. As I filled each one I placed it into the cool shade of a large boulder, and once everything was bagged, I ferried everything downhill into the cooler shade of the dark timber.

From that point it was all over but the hard work; 3-loads to the truck at about an hour each, with recovery, arranging the meat on ice, refueling and returning resulting in about a 2-hour round trip. By the time I began my last load of meat and antlers it was time to break out my headlamp again. But the constant melody of ornery bulls coupled with the knowledge that was on my last load coaxed me to the truck without any rest breaks...plus the fact that I had strapped the antlers to my pack in such a way that it was impossible to sit down without the browtines digging into my neck and I was too stubborn to stop and readjust things.



Miracle 6x6 bull 2011

Thanks to all of you that made it to the end of my story. Many of you provided support and encouragement, along with much-appreciated prayers to help make my hunt a resounding success, not to mention the icing on the cake of tagging a trophy bull.

Those of you who know me recognize I'm not a hunter that puts a lot of emphasis on antler score. As a good friend said to me "often the circumstances of the hunt dictate the measure of the trophy". In conjunction with an epic cliff-hanger like this, I reckon my Miracle Bull a behemoth and a true trophy of a lifetime!

None the less, photos can be deceiving, and I'm sure many of you are as curious as me, so I've since taken some quick measurements to establish a ballpark frame of reference

for size. I should point out what may not be obvious at first glance; this bull's antlers aren't symmetrical. His right antler grows forward slightly and the first two points are stunted, as is the entire right antler in comparison to his left. He must have suffered an injury at some point that affected his right antler. Regardless, his teeth were well worn, indicating an older bull. I tallied a rough gross score of ~335". Had his right antler matched the left (simply doubling the score of the left) he would have pushed over 350"!

I trust my joy and enthusiasm for bowhunting has rubbed off on all of you in the telling of my epic account. I pray you were also challenged to put some thought toward your own eternity. The Bible verse Jeremiah 29:13 states "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

In short, the Lord promises to reveal Himself to those who earnestly seek Him. This is not to expect that something like "Lord, if you're there, make the slots turn up triple 7s" is going to be very effective; however, I guarantee that even if you are doubtful, if you offered up something akin to "Lord, if you're there, please reveal yourself to me" you will be provided proof. Perhaps it might be "coincidences" that are impossible to be explained by natural odds; perhaps it might be insight offered by an acquaintance out of the blue; perhaps something else that only you would recognize. But based on my personal experience, I am confident that one can be assured of one's eternity, even if the process takes a while, as in my skeptical case.

Most of us have felt at one time or another that there must be something more than just our daily grind of work, eat, sleep, go-hunting-if-we're-lucky-enough-to-get-drawn, repeat. It was a long journey for me, but many years ago I was brought to the realization that I was created with a longing to know the Lord and no amount of success, happiness, trophies, or "things" could satisfy.

I encourage you to take the time to do your own research; I'm certainly not talking about blindly accepting some whacky hocus pocus, but rather objectively examining the evidence and devoting as much time and effort toward this endeavor as you would to researching a trophy hunting area.

Below is just the tip of the evidence iceberg that helped me in my own journey. I pray that it would be enough to pique your interest and entice you to scout further:

Manuscript Evidence:

- Seven copies of the writings of Plato have been discovered; 643 writings of Homer. None are original manuscripts and all are much more recent than when these men lived. For example the oldest writing from Aristotle is 1,450 years later than when he actually penned it.
- As for the Bible, Old Testament manuscripts had been found that were written 1,500 years after the originals; but with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, that timeframe was reduced to 600-years...and the manuscripts matched identically despite being copied 900-years apart; all the words, letters and even punctuation!
- We've found copies of the New Testament that date to within 25-years of the original writings; well within the span of witnesses still being alive and able to refute the documents, had they disagreed about the facts.
- In support of the Bible we've discovered about 24,000 ancient manuscripts; WAY more than any other document, yet nobody doubts the writings of Plato, Homer or Aristotle. Why then cast doubt on the accuracy of Biblical texts?

Archaeological Evidence:

- Of all the archaeological evidence that has been discovered, none disproves the Bible; many findings verify specific Biblical records, even though archaeologists originally doubted the Biblical text.

Scientific Accuracy:

- Even though the Bible does not claim to be a science book, items described in it are scientifically accurate, despite being written long before we had the capability of verifying the information. For example the Bible describes the earth as round (not flat); identifies billions of stars (as opposed to a finite amount as believed by early scientists); blood as the source of life & healing (as opposed to early doctors incorrectly believing that sick people needed to be bled for healing), etc.

Prophetic Evidence:

- The Bible includes hundreds of prophecies recorded years, decades, and even centuries before they came to pass. In fact it contains over 330 prophecies regarding Jesus alone, and He fulfilled every one of them. The Book of Isaiah was written 750-years before Jesus was born, yet describes in great detail the method and events surrounding His crucifixion and death. Remember that prediction about the Third Day I referred to earlier?

In this day and age, much like researching information about a new hunting area, one can perform Google searches and obtain loads of information. I encourage you to do a little surfing with questions like “is the Bible true” or “evidence for existence of Jesus” and then see what turns up!

If you're ready do some scouting in the Bible I'd recommend either the NIV or NLV translations, as opposed to the venerable but difficult-to-read King James Version (who doth, thence let's goest; all that Shakespearean text we hated in Junior High). Both the NIV and NLV are in modern English and much easier to read. I'd also recommend beginning in the New Testament (birth and life of Jesus) and specifically in the Book of Luke.

Although I'm no expert in either arena, let me know if you want to chat about bowhunting, or infinitely more-important spiritual topics. I'd be glad to share my personal testimony with you; call it the Book of Carl.

Or if you'd rather try a movie, I recommend these recent releases:

- The Passion of the Christ
- Soul Surfer
- Facing the Giants
- Fireproof
- Courageous (currently playing)

God Bless your pursuits...both for critters and an investigation into your own eternity.