

**Elk
September 2014 Wyoming**

Exodus 20:12

**“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land
that the Lord your God is giving you.”**



Dad and I cashed in our combined points to bowhunt elk in WY this year. The script read something like this: dad shoots first elk that comes in; Carl shoots second elk. And truthfully, we came darn close!

Chasing bugling bulls above 8,000-feet isn't for the faint of heart. Dad turned 75 this spring and resides at a whopping 200-feet above sea level; there was no doubt in our minds that it would be a challenge to capitalize, and to top it off we would be in state and unit we that had never before set foot in.

On September 20 we pointed my trusty Tacoma northward for the 900-mile road trip, loaded to the gills. I wasn't exactly sure how we'd fit in two elk for the return trip, but envisioned a look something akin to the Beverly Hillbillies and figured we'd cross that bridge when we came to it.

This year required considerable maintenance on my Tacoma and at 260K miles I'm still weighing the pros and cons of holding onto it. I had to have the suspension redone, plus front end items like the steering rack and pinion, ball joints, tie rods and differential bearings. Some of it may have sufficed for jaunts closer to home, but I wanted everything in top shape prior to our WY adventure.

I was blessed with detailed information provided by a friend who had hunted the unit recently. Of course circles on a map are a far cry from what things look like on the ground, but I had scoured aerial photos and topography maps.

After an entertaining 13-hour drive, during which we caught up and chatted, pointed out wildlife, including pronghorn antelope, hawks, ducks and geese, and simply enjoyed spending time together, we arrived at our predetermined campsite, threw up the tent and hit the sack for an early morning start.



Hiking into a new area by headlamp in the pitch darkness the first morning was surreal. We trusted my GPS and simply followed the course, not knowing what lay beyond our artificially-lit bubble. Suddenly we heard our first bugle of the hunt, which was echoed by several more – bingo, we were in business!

Not knowing the lay of the land, we found ourselves behind a herd that was working their way from lower meadows up into the thick timber and we never laid eyes on them before daylight. Just like that our first morning's attempt seemed over, so we found a comfortable spot below a shady tree for what would become our daily routine of napping to catch up on sleep.

However, less than an hour later, we were jolted awake by a throaty bugle! We quickly assessed the situation and determined that the herd was moving through the deadfall timber across the valley. Several bulls were jostling for leadership and making quite a ruckus. We shouldered our packs, dropped elevation, and then began weaving our way uphill.

My legs are longer than dad's, so keeping up to me high-stepping it over the deadfall timber was no easy task, but dad managed to keep me in sight as we pushed to close the distance

Soon the bugles indicated we were within 100-yards of several bulls, so I pushed my dad ahead and belted out my best challenging bugle. Two bulls responded immediately and I tried to cut off and mimic their calls. It was about the first time I had been successful in interacting with bulls like this, and although we couldn't see them, it was obvious that we were very close.

We exchanged screams and kept dogging after them farther and farther uphill. Suddenly dad motioned that he saw something and I carefully studied in the direction he pointed. Sure enough, a small bull was slinking through the timber to check out the commotion on our part.



Dad nocked an arrow and looked for shooting lanes, while I sat tight and toned down my calling to just a couple of cow calls, recognizing that this bull would not come charging in for a challenge.

The bull hesitantly picked his way toward dad and I hoped that dad could sneak an arrow through the thick timber, but at 20-yards the bull paused and stared towards him. I subtly raked a tree to draw the bull's attention my way, hoping to lure him a step or two my way and offer dad a shot; however, despite several shooting lanes, the bull managed to turn and slowly walk away without offering a shot. Regardless, it was exciting action right off the bat on our first morning.

The hunt became a blur of encounters. Almost without exception we saw or heard elk every morning and evening. Additionally we saw Shiras moose, mule deer, hawks, various songbirds and a black bear track.

On the second day we tried to intercept the same herd in the valley where we had found them on day one; however, we found ourselves just a tad too late as they retreated into the timber right at first light.

We noted that they had entered the timber along a very heavily-used trail and immediately began planning an ambush for the evening. We quickly located some fallen trees that would serve as a hideout within range of the trailhead, enhanced it with some logs and branches, and cleared all of the noisy leaf litter and debris from the forest floor. A couple of branch stubs served as bow hangers. With our preparation complete, we considered the logistics for hunting from this hideout for morning hunts.



The two mornings we observed elk in the area suggested that they were active and moving through the meadow and valley before first light. In order to get ourselves in front of them, we would need to get into place quietly, while keeping out of sight. I suggested we clear a trail just inside the treeline that would allow us to get in place stealthily. It took a little effort, but in surprisingly short order we had cleared a quarter mile of clear trail that would allow us to keep tabs on the elk as we sneaked above them.

Work accomplished, we settled in for a midday nap with high hopes that some of the elk would come down from the trail they had taken into the timber.

Alas, evening came and no elk appeared. Instead, it sounded like they stayed high in the timber and would not make an appearance to feed in the lower meadows until well after dark.

The next morning we put our plan into play and silently sneaked along our trail in the dark. Laying debris, logs and branches that we had moved out of our way parallel to the trail paid off because even without headlights we could easily navigate right to our hideout.



Bulls bugled just out of sight and it sounded like we had made it into position before the herd! We silently nocked arrows, hung our bows and anxiously glassed toward a thin bank of trees that obscured the elk from our position.

Proving that bowhunting for elk can be both exciting and frustrating, the bugles continued up the main drainage and it became apparent that the elk would not use the exit trail we had set up. Knowing we could not catch them, all we could do was wait and hope that some others might come our way.



After 30-minutes we spotted a cow and yearling calf on the far hillside. I made a few cow calls and they perked up their ears and stared our way. After a short time they veered our direction, indicating that they would come to my calls. My dad decided that taking any elk with a bow was challenging enough, so if they came within range he would take the shot.

The two elk angled down the sideslope of the valley and entered the thin strip of trees toward our ambush trail. We waited...and waited. Suddenly I heard a twig snap directly behind us and slowly turned to see the two emerging into a small meadow behind our blind less than 30-yards away. I was too far from dad to nudge him and dared not move. I hoped he would turn and see them, but he was focused on where we expected them to show up. The morning thermals were carrying our scent their way and I knew they would soon smell us if they continued along their path. With nothing to lose I let out a soft cow call in hopes of getting dad's attention or even steering the elk onto the path in front of our blind. Immediately the cow locked onto our location and then suspiciously continued onward, catching our scent and trotting off. My dad later said that when I cow called it only served to keep him focused ahead and he hadn't seen the elk within range behind us. Chalk up another close call.



We initially thought our morning action was over, but a few minutes later we noted a solid 5x5 bull and his harem pop into view at the crest of the far ridge. They immediately angled down toward us and we stood alert as they approached. Once again the elk surprised us and rather than taking our trail, they angled up a muddy slide directly in front of us and just outside of range. All we could do was watch as they meandered uphill and out of our view.

Afterward we evaluated the routes all of the elk had taken and realized we had missed a couple of other trails that our blind wouldn't allow us to cover. We found a tangle of deadfall that had been washed into a pile by previous flooding and carved out a new hideout. We strategically placed some upright logs for additional cover and planned yet another early morning ambush. Then we explored the timber above us where we had the bugling action on our first day.

Elk trails were everywhere. To the point that selecting any single trail for an ambush would be a gamble since so many looked great. We found a muddy wallow in the dark timber that evidenced use by wet mud splattered on some trees; however, the water was clear, suggesting it may have been a day or more since a bull had wallowed. Never the less, it was a great location for our midday nap, so we settled in for a snooze. By early afternoon nothing had shown up, so we moved in hopes of finding elk as they began to rouse and feed.

We came across another heavy trail down the middle of a narrow drainage that looked like a promising evening route from the timber to the grassy valley below, so set up and watched for elk. We saw a mule deer doe and two fawns and soon after were surprised by a loud crack and the sound of something moving through the brush behind us. Dad turned with an arrow nocked and then began making odd motions to me. It turned out to be a cow and calf moose picking their way through the deadfall.

As dusk drew near we began to hear bugling below us: it was time to dive for the valley. On our way down we heard a quiet bugle and cow calls from nearby in

the timber. We nocked arrows and eased ahead. Suddenly I caught a flash of tan and my binos revealed a small bull working his way downhill. I was surprised to observe that he was making the cow calls too! We expected him to step into a shooting lane, but he veered and we lost sight of him. A few minutes later we heard his bugle far below, so continued our descent. By the time we reached the meadow, what appeared to be the same bull was feeding and bugling much too far from the timber for us to approach.

I sent my dad uphill along the fringe of trees and pulled out my cow elk decoy. I cow called and slowly flashed the decoy in hopes of enticing the bull toward dad, but he was content to stare our way and bugle. Just before last shooting light a larger bull popped into the drainage upstream of dad and I thought he might swing down to check out the "cow" but instead he angled to the smaller bull, bugled and postured, and then hustled down canyon where real cows began to mew. Impressive to watch, but well outside of range; all we could do was enjoy the show. On our hike out the bulls screamed at each other, making music to our ears and motivation for the next day.

Another day we explored closer to camp, as my buddy suggested we should be able to get into elk there too. We began hiking in the dark and were rewarded with a faint bugle far ahead. We weaved through timber and deadfall in the dark as we closed toward the song of the siren. We broke out of the timber into a large meadow and although it was too dark to see anything with the naked eye, I paused to glass carefully. I could just barely make out two elk entering the far timber. I couldn't be sure, but they looked like cows. The bull bugled from farther in the woods.

Seeing no other elk, we hurried across the open area and into the dark timber. The wind direction felt perfect as we dropped toward the bugling bull. But after half a dozen bugles and another 50-yard gain, I felt the wind at the back of my neck. Drat. Sure enough that was all it took to silence the bull. We never laid eyes on him and didn't hear him again.

We continued in hopes of crossing paths with other elk and in the next meadow I glassed a dark shape too tall to be a moo cow. It wasn't an elk, but instead a small paddle bull moose!



Suddenly from below us 3 raghorn bulls popped into view. They kept staring down canyon as if something had them concerned. I tried backing a short distance into the timber and cow calling, but they moved off. Shortly thereafter we saw two hunters hiking farther down the canyon.

Although we heard another bull bugling and followed him for nearly an hour, ultimately we had to break off our chase when we reached the edge of a tall cliff and heard the bull continue to bugle far below.

We found a sunny spot, ate a short snack and took a catnap. There is something about snoozing on soft ground in the warm morning sun that just can't be beat. Just prior to our trip I had bought a couple of bags of apples from a friend whose family owns an orchard and they became a treat we looked forward to every day: nothing tops a fresh, juicy apple while enjoying the outdoors.



We eventually made our way back to camp for sun showers, lunch, and a long nap in the tent prior to setting out for the evening in hopes of locating the bull that had been bugling that morning.



Early in the evening we heard a faint bugle from a deep canyon behind camp. We spotted an impressive bull chasing cows and going wild fully 2-hours before sunset. However, it would be impossible to get to him nearly 1,500 vertical feet below us and on the other side of a rocky chasm. It was neat to see and I secretly wondered if we could figure out a way to get down there on another day.

We continued sleuthing, with me throwing in an occasional locator bugle, but for some reason we didn't hear a peep from elk that evening. Perhaps they were just being quiet or the hunters we had seen earlier had pushed them out.





The next morning we headed to the new morning ambush location and managed to get into position when it was barely light enough to see with binoculars. A large herd bull let loose bugle after bugle as he mingled with a group of cows and moved upstream. He was already past our position and it was obvious that he would not be coming our way. I shot some video as we watched him disappear.



A cow and calf straggled from the herd and stopped to feed as the remainder retreated around the corner out of our sight.

I gave a couple of cow calls and each time drew their attention. Their body language revealed an intent to come our way, so each time they went back to feeding I would call softly. The next thing we knew, they made a beeline toward us and dad prepared for a shot. Just before coming into range, the elk had to cross a steep drainage. I told dad to draw at that time and like a script the cow stepped in front of us at 20-yards. My dad was shaking with excitement and struggling to hold steady. She paused and he released! But his arrow flew low, nicking her foreleg. I attributed it to "buck fever" or perhaps dad's lower bow limb contacting one of the logs of our blind. I glassed the cow through the trees, but

she didn't even limp and it appeared that dad's broadhead had only caused a small scratch near her elbow. The two moved into the timber and I was confident that she would be fine. Definitely not a fatal or even debilitating hit.

Shortly thereafter a small 5x5 bull appeared high on the far hillside along with a few cows. I quickly cow called to him and he stared down toward us. The cows meandered away from him as he locked onto our location. Each time he put his head down I'd cow call and draw his interest. After a little while he made his way to some trees and flopped down. Through my binos it appeared that he was wallowing. We took note of the location for a possible ambush spot and watched. After 10-15 minutes he stood up and I cow called again.

Immediately he began to trot downhill toward us! Dad readied again as the bull followed the same path as the cow and calf had earlier. This time dad got a little too excited and began drawing before the bull dropped out of sight and he locked onto the slight movement. Dad completed his draw, but the bull was staring head on and out of range. After a few minutes dad began to shake and had to let down. The bull knew something was amiss and turned tail back up the hill.

However, in a fortuitous turn of events a larger 5x5 we hadn't seen charged out of the woods toward the smaller bull. It was as if the larger bull wanted to drive him away and then come check out the cow he had heard calling. The smaller bull lent realism to the scenario and the big bull began to trace the same path toward us! This time dad waited and drew at the right time. The bull paced by at 20-yards and dad released! With a loud thump his arrow again went low and drove into a log below the bull's chest. The bull trotted off, bugling. We were in disbelief and realized something must be wrong. Sure enough, when dad took a practice shot at a leaf I placed in a soft patch of earth, his arrow hit a foot low at 20-yards. We have no idea what had happened, but somehow his sight had gotten knocked out of alignment. Perhaps it had happened when he fell a couple of times high-stepping it through the deadfall as we chased bulls on our first day. We were sickened; knowing that if not for his sight dad would have had an elk. Maybe me too! Despite the untimely mechanical issue, we agreed it had been the most exciting hunting action we had ever had and my dad kept things light hearted by remarking it had been sort of like catch and release elk hunting.

The smaller of two bulls that might have been was a modest 5x5 but would have been tasty and taking any elk with a bow is a challenge; I didn't get a photo of the bigger bull, but he was a heavy, solid 5x5.



Unique rock formations were a stunning backdrop in most directions.



With the morning action having wound down, we decided to check out the wallow where the smaller bull had been on the far hillside. The slope was deceptively steep and at one point dad commented that he could reach out with his hand and touch the ground in front of him for stability. Ouch: it was more like sheep hunting. The wallow turned out to be a small seep that had been rolled in by the bull we saw, but didn't appear to have had much more activity than that. We opted to nap nearby on the off chance a bull might wander past, but didn't hold much hope as a worthwhile ambush location.

As the afternoon sun began its descent, we glassed up canyon and across the valley. We spotted some smaller bulls feeding in an open slide. They didn't bugle, which explained why on previous days from below we didn't think the elk became active until nearly dark.



We were entertained by one of many raucous Clark's nutcrackers picking for insects or pinecone seeds in a nearby tree.



Later in the evening we watched a small herd exit the timber to feed far upstream of our location. In similar fashion the bull didn't bugle. They were neat to see but beyond striking distance. Throughout our glassing we were able to reminisce about past hunts and exchange stories and memories of my years at home when my sister and I were growing up. It had been years since we had made such a long outing and the opportunity to spend so much time together was soothing to my soul; I made conscious effort to savor every moment.

Just before dark we heard a few bugles high in the timber and glimpsed a good bull with cows skylined on the far horizon, but the grassy valley below us was silent. We headed to the camp to adjustment dad's sight and for a brief night of sleep before the new day.



Fall colors were brilliant and the weather was wonderful with just a little chill in the air each morning and mild temperatures all day long.



The next morning we decided to try one more morning ambush, but as we expected, the activity was stagnant after the day before.

I hesitantly asked whether my dad was open to dropping into the deep canyon where we had seen the big bull carrying on. We later heard that some locals referred to it as Skillet's Hole (because if you shoot an elk there, you better bring a pan and plan on eating it, as packing one out would be next to impossible). Dad questioned our sanity and wasn't sure how much weight he could pack uphill, but was willing to try! Having dad even consider it made my day!

On our hike out we crossed paths with a blue grouse, but I wasn't sure of the season or tag requirements and didn't have any blunts, so photos sufficed.

Dad enjoyed seeing the variety of wildlife as much as I did. I am blessed that my parents shared their love of nature with my sister and I, and in turn I'm able to share that with my own family.



We took our time and noted odd rock formations that we had missed in the dark.



As we bounced and pounded along the rocky, rutted, primitive road back to camp my dad chuckled "You need to mount a camera underneath your truck and send a video to Toyota. Dear Toyota, I can't understand why I had to replace suspension and steering components; my Tacoma only has 260,000 miles. Please consider improving the durability of your rigs." From then on every time we hit a nasty stretch of road dad would snicker.

We took a long midday recovery nap at camp and evaluated maps for the best point to access "Skillet's Hole". It appeared that a pack trail wound down the

canyon, and a low saddle offered a place to park the truck; however, it would require dropping 1,200 vertical feet to where we had seen the bull and his harem.



The views on the way down were magnificent. We kicked up a couple of large birds that we assumed to be sage grouse. The trail turned out to be non-existent, but between elk trails and the generally open terrain the hike seemed fairly mild compared to what the topo map suggested. On our way down we crossed some lichen covered rocks with stunning orange coloration.



We also spotted a doe mule deer with two fawns. They didn't display much concern for us, so we hoped that meant few souls ventured this way and that animals would be less skittish of humans. We didn't see any boot tracks at the trailhead, which suggested we were either genius or insane.



The valley was beautiful, but seemingly devoid of elk on this particular afternoon. We slunk along the edges of trees and glassed meadow after meadow, but each new vista was empty when it came to four legged steaks with antlers.

We found the bench where we had seen the big bull, but it was empty, although a wallow was prominent at the center. It would have been a good place to sit, but we didn't have bivy gear with us this time and given the lack of elk it didn't seem worth returning to the hit-or-miss area.

At one point a curious red squirrel tried to figure out what we were only inches from us. He was entertaining and we enjoyed his antics.



A friend texted me inquiring how things were going. My response pretty much summed it up: "Into elk & having a blast! Dad has shorter legs so can't rip the deadfall like I can. Plus he's 75. And lives at sea level. But he's kicking ass! Seriously! Hiking 3-6+ miles every day with elevation gain too."

During one of our glassing sessions I commented to my dad “Not many 75 year-olds - heck 40-year olds - could handle our pace on this hunt.” I couldn’t be more proud of him. I hope I’m able to push as hard chasing critters when I’m his age!



Despite no action that evening, we had a wonderful hike, flushed another couple of sage grouse, didn’t see any other hunters and had calm, balmy weather. To top it off, the sunset was awesome. How could we complain?!



Reluctantly, we turned uphill and began the long march to my trusty Tacoma, arriving just before dark and in time to see a small herd of mule deer feeding on the horizon.



We decided that a change of scenery was in order, so pulled up roots and struck out for another portion of the unit that my friend had recommended. We were a little disheartened to see a wall tent erected at the area trailhead, but after spending over an hour driving to the area we had to give it a shot.

We hiked down a closed road just after noon and discovered that this new area was, if anything, steeper than where we had spent the past several days. Never the less we pushed on with our exploration via boot leather.

The day was warm and we stopped to take a breather in the shade for a few minutes. A stiff breeze made it difficult to hear, but for a moment I thought my ears may have been playing tricks on me as I pondered whether I had actually heard an elk bugle. Dad didn't hear it and I wasn't positive.

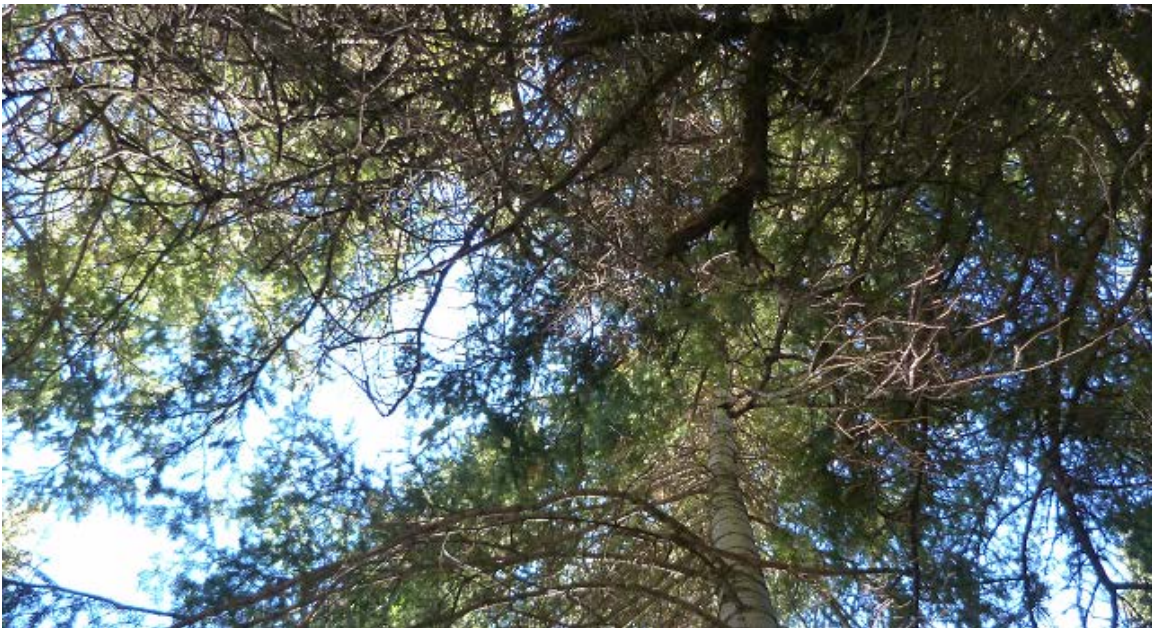
I cupped my hands around my ears and strained to hear, finally convinced I had picked up another bugle somewhere ahead of us.

We marched onward with renewed vigor and soon were certain another bugle had drifted over on the breeze. Bugling at 3pm gave us hours to make a move. In contrast, the other areas we had hunted typically were silent until after sunset, leaving us less than 30 minutes to make something happen.

We eased along the edge of timber and closed in on what sounded like 2 bulls screaming at each other in the thick timber on the other side of a narrow meadow. I glassed, but couldn't make out anything in the solid wall of trees. I

crept over to see if a patch of timber in the middle of the valley would provide cover to position us within shooting distance of the timber that held the bulls, but from somewhere below a cow barked. Drat; the wind was going down canyon and I dared not push farther for fear of blowing out the cows. I barked back and retreated to dad. He asked if I had heard the cows barking and I laughed when I told him one of them was me. We didn't hear anything else and hoped the cows would stay put.

The wind kept blowing down canyon and we expected that the elk would drop out of the timber in the evening to feed in the grass, but with cows below us we dared not make any move that would put us upwind of them, so we sat tight and snoozed as we kept tabs on the bulls via their periodic challenge bugles. A soft bed of pine needles, breeze blowing through the trees and elk bugling made for an enjoyable afternoon. The view upwards from flat on our backs napping is one of the best: if you've never napped in the woods, you're missing out.



I was surprised at how far the bulls moved in the timber, as one bugle would be up canyon, and then minutes later the next would be several hundred yards down canyon. At one point I thought a hunter had spooked them, because one bull crashed away in the timber with his antlers pounding against trees, but soon he was back to bugling.

In hindsight we should have risked blowing out the cows that were down canyon and sneaked into the timber when the bugling bugles drifted away, and then waited for them to return, but hey, that's why it's called hindsight. At the time we expected to hunt this group for the next several days and wanted to keep a low impact approach, rather than risk pushing them out of the area.

As evening approached the wind began to die, but continued flowing downhill. We eased towards the screen of trees in mid valley only to find that the herd was

already on the move and going exactly opposite of elk we had seen in other areas and heading up canyon. We gave chase, but ran out of tree cover at 100-yards. With nothing to lose and no other options, I mustered a hearty bugle and raked a tree. The bull responded immediately and we exchanged screams, but as no real surprise, he didn't venture away from the cows. As a bonus, two other bulls joined the chorus from inside the timber but never showed themselves. We watched helplessly, but in wonder as the herd continued to feed uphill, then angled into a cut in the timber and out of view. Dad remarked that I must have made the bull mad because he screamed angrily over and over again long I had given up and remained silent.

When the elk disappeared, we hustled to where we had seen them disappear and pondered our options. Bugles drifted from far uphill in the timber. It would be extremely difficult to catch them given their headstart and the limited time before end of shooting light. I glanced left and saw a cow, calf and spike bull feeding several hundred yards away. It was a long shot, but I thought we might be able to creep within range if they stayed close to a strand of trees. We had had nothing to lose, so dropped elevation to get out of their sight, crossed the valley, and then climbed back toward the shelter of trees. Suddenly a couple of mule deer does stepped into view just 80-yards away, forcing us to freeze. Each time they dropped their heads to graze, I crept forward with dad in tow.

Soon we reached the edge of our tree cover and again found ourselves just out of range for the spike bull and calf: the cow had disappeared. I gave a couple soft cow calls and the calf mewed back incessantly. The spike bull completely ignored both me and the calf and continued to feed. Once again, so, so close.

With shooting light gone, we eased back toward the truck and spotted another handful of mule deer does at dusk. As we descended I caught a reflection of water in the meadow below us, so I pointed dad toward a particular spot we had rested at earlier and I detoured to check out the potential water source. Shortly after separating I caught the movement of a doe and fawn mule deer moving on an intercept course with dad. I gave a soft cow call and pointed to them, but dad couldn't see what I was trying to call his attention to. However, he got a good view of them when he passed within 25-yards as they ambled along. They showed no worry toward him and he chalked up yet another close encounter with wildlife on our adventure.

The reflection I had seen turned out to be water, but held no elk sign, so I hustled to meet dad.



We arrived at the truck and sought a flat place to camp. Thankfully, we found a wonderful campsite just a short distance from the trailhead, which was sheltered from the increasing wind. We quickly set up the tent, cooked dinner, reloaded our packs with snacks and water for the following day, and hit the sack. As I drifted off I gave thanks and prayed for one more crack at a bull, hoping to make something happen in the next few days as season wound down.

The next morning was much cooler and very blustery, which would make it tough to locate elk by sound. We returned to the area where we had found so much activity the evening before. As we neared the vicinity we turned off our headlamps and eased ahead. I glassed and could barely make out the form of a lone elk feeding near where we had closed the distance on the spike at last light the night before. As we wondered whether it was a bull or cow, it let out a bugle!

We quickly shifted our position along the treeline and nocked arrows. It was still too dark to shoot, so I waited a little while before cow calling softly. The bull immediately responded and began to angle down toward us. I'm sure it helped that I was calling from exactly where the herd had bedded the prior afternoon, but he came to us as if on a string. As he approached, he swung downwind and I quietly slipped downhill to intercept him. I drew my bow as he came alongside a fallen pine tree. He paused and I could just make out branches from the tree blocking his body. I inched sideways a few yards to where it appeared he was in the clear and with both my 20 and 30-yard pins on his vitals, released my arrow.

I immediately heard a loud "CRACK" and he jumped back. I didn't know what had happened, and with him now out of range I threw up my binos to look for any indication of a hit. Instead all I could make out in the dim light of pre-dawn was my fluorescent yellow fletching moving in tandem with his antlers each time he moved his head. Somehow my arrow must have deflected from an unseen branch along the fallen tree. I let out a challenge bugle in hopes that he might think that an unseen foe had lashed out at him. He screamed back and paced back and forth but understandably did not want to confront his invisible rival. We were positive that the arrow had stuck into one of his antlers, rather than his head, because he acted normally and bugled frequently as he cautiously retreated across the meadow. A later cursory search revealed no blood and no dead elk from something like a freak skull/brain hit. I guess I was a little too

literal when I asked for another crack at a bull; oh well, nothing to do but carry on. I hadn't even been able to tell whether he was a 5x5 or 6x6, but at this point in the hunt he was plenty big enough for me to categorize as a shooter.

We continued up the ridge hoping to intercept yesterday's herd as they made their way back down into the timber to bed. Even with our exertion from climbing it was chilly. Sometimes dad lagged a little on the climb, but not enough for concern and he wisely knows when to ease up and when to pour on the coal.



As we neared the top of the ridge I left dad to sit tight while I crept ahead to see what I could see. Almost immediately I spotted a bull and a lone cow angling our way in the rolling, grassy terrain, so hustled back to dad and directed him on an intercept course. By our next sighting those two had swelled into a herd numbering over a dozen. We paralled them along the treeline as they continued to feed. The bull pranced among the cows as they worked their way downhill. The closest we could approach was 90-yards, so I couldn't do much more than snap some photos and wish they would turn our way.



In desperation I belted out a challenge bugle, thinking that if I could just convince the bull to swing half the distance toward us to protect his cows we might have a shot, but even though he screamed back lustily, he didn't approach.



I backed out, grabbed dad and hustled downward along the fringe of timber in hopes of getting closer without being seen. Soon we hit a low swale that provided cover, so we worked our way toward another group of trees. As we eased along I scanned furiously to locate the elk before they could pick us off.

Suddenly I spotted the back of a cow just 30-40 yards away. I sank to the ground and nocked an arrow. Instead of continuing its downhill course, which would have presented a perfect broadside shot, the cow angled toward us. I couldn't see the bull, but assumed he would be following. One by one the cows fed past us at a mere dozen yards! I dared not move or even breathe. I couldn't see dad, but knew he was just beside and behind me. As each cow meandered past I expected the bull. However, after a half dozen cows and a spike bull moved by the bull still hadn't showed. I was certain that I would have been able to see his antlers extending above the terrain no matter where he was; he simply was not there. Second guessing myself, I wondered if I should try for one of the cows, but with Robin's own cow elk hunt just a week away I didn't think our family was in need of meat at that point.

I slowly glanced toward dad to find that he had sunk nearly flat to the ground during our cramped wait. I whispered for him to slooowly prepare to shoot if he could. Unfortunately the nearest cow was outside of his peripheral vision, which he didn't realize, and he moved a tad too quickly and drew her attention. Once she was locked onto us it was all over: she took the group and skedaddled. We never saw the bull and couldn't be sure whether the herd had split or this was an entirely different group. Whew, add another close call to the list!

It was still early so we decided to drop lower in hopes of getting out of the cold wind that had continued to increase. As we closed in on a secluded meadow near the upper edge of thick trees, we both thought a faint bugle had rung out! We slipped to the top of the meadow and sat down to reconnoiter. We didn't confirm the bugle, but extremely heavy elk trails littered with fresh tracks suggested that this would be a great place to wait for evening activity.

We found a secure place inside a pile of deadfall and like two kids playing in the woods, rearranged logs and debris to create a fortress from which we could cover four heavy elk trails plus the majority of the meadow. Without a sound we could slip back and forth inside the trees for 10-yards in either direction and access numerous shooting lanes, depending on where elk might appear. With our preparation accomplished, we huddled out of the wind below a huge tree trunk and snoozed.



The cooler temperature wasn't quite as pleasant as previous days, but we had enough layers to be comfortable. We ate lunch and chatted quietly as we waited for evening. As sunset approached we became more and more antsy, anxiously peering this way and that, hoping to spot an elk. The wind was blowing fairly hard, but should have been carrying our scent well below all of the elk trails. We were disappointed to hear no bugles and have nothing appear. At dark we packed up and dropped to the abandoned logging road that would take us back to the trailhead. The wind made it hard to hear, but we didn't hear a single bugle during our nighttime hike.

The wind howled throughout most of the night, but died down as morning approached, so we hoped for a better day as my alarm chimed out our wake up call. After a quick breakfast we began our pre-dawn march by headlamps, planning to retrace our same general route as the day before. Except on this day we were greeted with cold, wet clouds drifting past like fog. We made our loop but didn't see or hear any elk. Texts back home indicated a high chance of rain for the remainder of the day and again the next, which was the next to last day of our elk season.

We pushed on all morning until I voiced the question to my dad: should we stick it out tomorrow, which would likely be a bust due to rain, in hopes of one more chance on the following final day of season, or pick up and head for home? He echoed my opinion: it had been a wonderful hunt; we each had chances at elk

and had heard literally hundreds of bugles; it had been a grand adventure and everything we had hoped for. Staying couldn't add anything at this point.



Dad was still smiling after over a week of hard hunting, despite the damper of weather!



So we wouldn't bring an elk home this time: big deal. We left with no regrets and fully satisfied.

Even though this story doesn't end with trophy photos, I felt the need to record this adventure in an attempt to share the joy and excitement of hunting with dad.

Oftentimes the success of a hunt isn't measured by inches of antler or pounds of meat. This adventure burned fond memories into my brain forever and I will always remember it. The hunt had been everything we could have hoped for and more. Cherish every moment you are able to spend with friends and family in the out of doors.

God Bless,
Carl