

**Elk
September 2016 New Mexico**

**Hebrews 11:1 “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance
about what we do not see.”**

My partner and I were finally rewarded with an elk tag for a coveted unit we hadn't set foot in for years, and we had been daydreaming about the hunt since draw results were posted. The summer seemed to fly by with little spare time to practice shooting or scout. To compound things, I had been dragging for months with adrenal fatigue-like symptoms seemingly brought on by the long-term infection in my hand, surgery, and antibiotics (see Javelina 2016), compounded by extra stress in other areas of life, and overloading my system. It wasn't until June that I began to feel a hint of recovery and I hadn't exercised in months.

We scheduled a scouting trip to explore the unit and identified several promising areas. We set a couple of game cameras, hoping to monitor elk activity. Our weekend foray wore me out and I secretly worried about holding up to the rigors of a backcountry bivy hunt, and (hopefully) the effort associated with packing out loads of meat, but I figured to cross that bridge when I came to it.

I fit in shooting practice when I could, mostly in my backyard at shorter distances, but a few times at the local indoor 40-yard range while helping a coworker get his start into bowhunting. A month before season I ended a practice round by strapping my release around my bow limb, as I typically do to avoid misplacing it, and to my horror I discovered a huge delamination in one of my limbs!



This is not good...

After some initial panic, reduced by the fact that I have an older, but dependable backup bow, I tracked down some replacement limbs. Surprisingly, I had my bow put back together and retuned in less than a week. In fact, with the new set of limbs, I was seemingly shooting better than ever!

As we planned for the season, Jason was fired up to camp and scout for several days prior to opening day. Although I'm miserly with vacation days, I agreed to his plan: check game cameras Saturday, finalize our preferred hunting location in the unit based on this information, and haul our bivy camping gear in on Sunday. This would leave us 3 days of scouting (and bear hunting) prior to opening day on Thursday. It sounded like a fine, relaxing, plan.

Until reality struck. With no way to squirm out of it, I found myself roped into two work meetings early in the week: one in Angel Fire on Monday evening, and another in Hobbs on Tuesday evening. I grimly charted out my pre-season schedule. Friday evening I'd caravan with Jason to our unit. Saturday we'd split up to check game cameras, and then reconvene to compare notes that evening at a central location. Sunday we'd pack our bivy gear into the backcountry and set up spike camp. That night I'd leave Jason to enjoy peace and quiet in the mountains for three days, while I returned to Albuquerque. Monday I'd make a road trip to Angel Fire; Tuesday I'd make a road trip to the opposite end of the state to Hobbs; Wednesday I'd return to Albuquerque and then hastily hit the road in my own pre-packed rig to drive to our unit and hike in the dark to meet Jason at bivy camp. Ouch. Great way to recover from bodily fatigue. But missing opening day was not an option. At least I would have coworkers to share driving duties for both of my work-related mileage.

Jason and I caravanned for our pre-season scouting weekend as planned, and were greeted with low clouds, damp weather, and muddy road conditions. We split up and agreed to rendezvous later. On the way to my destination I encountered heavy rain, the largest hailstones I had ever seen, and a normally dry arroyo that raged over the road. Thankfully, I had avoided the potentially truck-damaging hail, but the ground was white as winter and the river crossing delayed me for over an hour waiting for the flow to subside enough to drive through. At least during my downtime I was able to multi-task and redline a final design plan set for work that I was frantically trying to complete before elk season!



These stones would pack a wallop



The roar from this normally dry arroyo was imposing and I dared not drive across

When I finally braved the crossing, I was happy I had waited – the rushing water was still up to my doors! I made it to the other side without any issues, my trusty Tacoma performing yet again.

As I continued toward my destination, the sun burst out and the temperature went from cool and wet to warm and humid like the flick of a switch. Only in New Mexico!



Rain stopped

As I spun along mud bogging in 4WD I kept one eye on the road for obstacles and the other for critters, believing them likely to be up and moving after the severe storm. I must not have kept enough attention on the road, because after a particularly bumpy section I heard an odd metallic “twang” from the undercarriage and discovered that I had broken the sway bar on my front suspension. No doubt the final straw after years of beating I’ve doled out to my poor truck. I could still drive, but oscillations at highway speed later on were a little hairy.



Crazy bull

Suddenly a tan body caught my eye and I stomped on the brakes. A unique, but respectable bull with a couple of cows stared at me from the other side of a small valley. I glassed the small group and snapped a couple of photos. I reckoned it unlikely that these elk would remain so visible near a road when bowhunters began arriving later in the week, but the sighting was welcome.

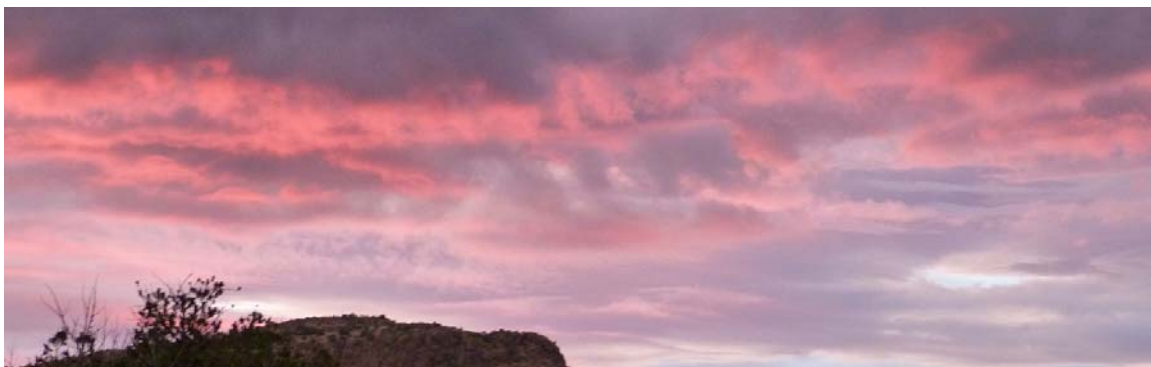
Just a few hundred yards farther down the road a bachelor herd of mule deer crossed in front of me. Robin held a deer tag for the same area later in the fall, so I snapped a photo of the biggest buck and noted their location before continuing.



Respectable buck!

I finally reached my destination, jettisoned myself and minimal gear and quickly began the 2-hour speed hike to check the game camera. The trek was relatively uneventful, but I did cross fresh elk tracks here and there, many of them large, and certainly made by bulls. At one point I received an alarming text message from Jason announcing that he had been overtaken by the deluge I could see to the west and had donned raingear to hunker down. His text went on to explain that the lighting was so fierce and so close that he wanted to let me know his location in case I needed to retrieve his charred remains. Thankfully a follow-up message reported that the storm had passed and he was still alive and well.

By the time I returned to my rig evening was approaching and it would be impossible to meet Jason until well after dark. I fired up my steed and once again churned through the mud towards our prearranged meeting place, slop slinging up both sides, over the hood and onto my windshield. Without rain to help wash my view clear, I burned through washer fluid at a rapid pace. I spotted a few more elk before dark, still a couple of hours away from Jason.



Sunsets in New Mexico are truly world class



Meat on the hoof

Just minutes after pulling up to Jason's truck I spotted his headlamp float out of the forest, perfectly timing my arrival with the completion of his final recon mission. We quickly pulled out snacks and cold water to peruse photos and decide which of three areas in which to begin our hunt later in the week.

The camera from the area I had checked revealed some respectable bulls plus deer along a travel corridor. Nearby feeding and bedding areas, along with its remote location, had given us confidence during our scouting, and the photos further cemented our plan to focus there. We hit the sack, intending to pack into the backcountry the following day and set up camp, prior to me returning to work for a couple of days.

The morning dawned gray and damp. Jason wanted to shoot his bow a few times before leaving, but it started to drizzle even before we had all of our camping gear stowed. We hastily piled everything inside our trucks and caravanned across the unit. Waves of rain came and went; alternately giving us hope that the weather might break, then dashing them. We arrived at the pull-off where I had been half a day prior with rain pelting our trucks, neither of us looking forward to a wet hike and setting up bivy camp in the rain.

We decided to hold off in hopes the rain would cease. As the hours ticked by, I resigned myself to a wet hike, since that I had to leave by the end of the day no matter what. Jason opted to hold tight and pack in the following day since he had a few days prior to season to get settled.

I stretched a waterproof cover over my backpack, shouldered my load and began hiking through the drizzle. Thankfully the rain died soon into my hike, but with wet grass and brush, I wore my rain pants for the duration. Reaching the area we planned to camp, I erected my solo tent, hoisted a bag of food out of reach of bears, marked the location for Jason, and started for the trucks. With the luxury of an empty pack, I decided to take a different route on the return trip in hopes of

discovering something new. Plus I had a bear tag, and with season underway, I had my bow “just in case”.

Shortly thereafter, I kicked up a dandy Coues deer and noted its location after snapping a photo for Robin.



Hopefully Robin can find this bruiser Coues later in October!

Later I crossed a fresh bear track and instantly went into “hunt” mode. I had barely paused to ready my bow when I heard a guttural moan nearby. Certain it was a bear, I eased to the lip of the adjacent gully, thinking I could use a predator call to entice a hungry bruin within range. I pinpointed the sounds and quickly identified a sow with a cub feeding on acorns on the far side of the valley; however, sows with cubs are not legal quarry. I relaxed and studied them for a short time, hoping for a photo opportunity. They meandered in thick trees and brush, offering only occasional glimpses through my Vortex binoculars. I finally snapped one photo that could at least be identified as a bear, and continued on my way.



A bear, during bear season, with a tag in my pocket...but not legal since this sow was accompanied by a cub...drat!

As I gained elevation, the terrain began to flatten and more openings appeared, filled with lush green grass. The area looked perfect for elk! I eased through scattered pinon & juniper bushes and spied a huge meadow. As I slipped along the edge I came across the equivalent of an elk gold mine: a beautiful wallow

ringed with huge bull elk tracks. In all my years of elk hunting I have never seen such a likely ambush location! In my gut I knew we had to hunt there.

I quickly scoured the area to identify a potential stand location. A nearby ancient alligator juniper was the likely choice, although lugging a treestand in this deep would be a chore. A cluster of smaller trees looked like another possibility. With visions of wallowing bulls in my head, I pushed on toward the truck.



Elk goldmine...

A half mile away I found another, equally promising wallow – this area really had my attention now! The only problem was I had just jettisoned my bivy camp over a mile away and nearly 500 vertical feet lower in elevation. That may not sound like much, but we're talking about mountain miles here: it's a lot different than strolling along your local hiking trail.

Despite the difficulty of my alternate route, the scenery was breathtaking. Wildflowers were abundant and I even stumbled across a couple of weathered, shed antlers: both deer and elk.



God's splendor



Amazing colors

My return route was substantially more rugged than my entry had been, so I didn't reach our parking area to fill Jason in on my findings until nearly dark. "Jason, I have good news, and bad news: the good news is the rain quit before I set my bivy camp. The bad news is I discovered an area that suggests I placed bivy camp in the wrong place."

After hastily showing Jason photos of both wallows and the thick grass, we had a decision to make: stick with our original plan and hunt the area where I had dropped my bivy gear and we had hard data (game cam photos); or gamble on evidence unseen and hit the unknown area with the enticing wallows.

Having been there in person, I was convinced enough to gamble on the new area. After hunting together for years, Jason trusted my judgment and was also willing to put faith in the unseen. That left the dilemma of my bivy gear. My initial thought was to leave it and retrieve it at some later point. I could bring in a different setup to meet Jason when I packed in after my stint back at work.

Instead, Jason graciously offered to move my gear after he had packed his own, since he'd have three days afield before my return. After scouring maps, we decided we couldn't count on water in the new area (our original area had an intermittent stream nearby from which to filter water). Jason would haul in enough water for us to survive for several days, and I'd bring a couple of extra gallons later.

Not knowing the best place to camp, Jason would explore the new area and text camp and route coordinates so I find him by headlamp the next Wednesday night. With the new plan solidified, I pointed my steed towards home (and the office, grrr) and skidded off into the night.

Jason kept me apprised of his progress and location while I covered most of the state in a whirlwind working tour, arriving at Jason's camp location at 11:30pm the night before opener. Jason had decided to hunt the wallow closer to camp and had constructed a brush hide, while I had brought a safety harness and rope so I could hunt the other wallow where I believed a tree ambush offered the best option.

It had taken Jason three trips to shuttle gear to our camp: one with his own gear, one to retrieve my gear, and a third to haul water. He grouched at me for lugging my tripod, asking what in the world could justify its weight. I retorted it was to film one of us nailing a big ol' bull, but he remained dubious. Little did we know.

During Jason's pack trips he had crossed paths with an older gentleman with two pack mules and had struck up a conversation. The man was helping friends and family, but didn't have a tag himself. After chatting for a while, he promised that when the time came he'd be willing to pack out a bull for us. He described where they were camped and Jason vowed to find him if we had need of his mules.

Jason had been camped for the past two days, so his hammock was already up. After erecting my tent and rearranging gear for the morning, it was time to hit the sack with visions of bulls dancing in our heads. Jason had heard a couple bugles nearby the night before, but all was quiet.



Bivy camp

My watch chimed all too early, and I chortled to Jason “Wake up, it’s time to kill a bull!” We hastily prepared for the day, which included retrieving food from our hanging bags, stowing raingear in our packs and hefting our bows. We hiked for a few hundred yards before parting ways, intending to keep in touch regularly with our Delorme text messengers.

Not knowing whether elk might be in or near the meadow containing my wallow, I was reluctant to approach in the dark, so I held back on a nearby rise in order to scan the area as the day dawned. I didn’t see or hear anything, so eased over to set up. After evaluating the area further I deemed it possible to hunker down next to some trees about 30-yards from the wallow, enhancing my hide with a swath of leafy camouflage fabric. To remain silent, I didn’t drag any logs or branches, as we typically would for maximum concealment.

Due to the tall grass, I had to stand to see anything, so I stretched the fabric at chest level between two trees, concealing the majority of my body, but allowing clearance for my arrow. I was able to hang my bow from a broken limb, with arrow nocked. My thinking was that setting up on the ground would be more comfortable (and safe) than balancing in a tree, even with a safety harness. Boy was I happy with that decision! Not long after I settled in, it began to drizzle.

At first I huddled against the trunk of the largest tree, which blocked most of it, but soon I had to put on raingear. The rain fell off and on all day, with the bulk being “on” and “heavy”. I didn’t like my chances for a hot, thirsty bull coming to water, but I hadn’t heard any bugles and didn’t have any better plan than to sit tight and stay as dry as possible. During lulls in the storm I laid down to catch a few winks.

By midafternoon the rain tapered enough to remove my raingear, although the sky continued to look threatening and the temperature remained relatively cool. I caught movement on the far side of the meadow and a flock of turkeys paraded in, pecking at seeds and bugs. Since turkey season was open, I studied them intently,

willing them to come my way. They remained along the far edge of the meadow, well out of range, so I tried to sneak parallel to them in hopes of cutting them off at the far end of the meadow. I'm not sure what happened, but I lost sight of them and the next thing I knew they were trotting up the far hillside. They must have sighted of me. Not wanting to risk my chance at an elk by chasing turkeys, I crept back to my blind.



One of these birds would have tasted great roasted over an open fire...

By late afternoon a wave of rain returned and it was back to raingear. The turkeys reappeared, but this time they were sodden. They huddled in the middle of the meadow for nearly an hour as the rain pounded down. All I could figure is that they were at a hearing disadvantage with the rain, so stayed in the open where they could see predators approach. Every so often they would shake and fluff their feathers, but it didn't seem to do much good – they were soaked!

I huddled in a ball, more comfortable than the turkeys appeared: thanks to my Sitka gear I was warm and dry. I was beginning to wonder if the day would be a bust, given the weather, but held faith in the evidence left by bulls, and would stick it out until dark unless I heard bugling elsewhere.

The rain finally let up for good about 6pm, leaving me two prime hours before nightfall. The ground, vegetation and all dead detritus on the forest floor was soggy and the air was still. It was dead quiet: even the birds and insects seemed to be recovering after the storm. Despite my anticipation of bulls lighting up with bugles, it remained quiet.

After an hour I decided my bladder wouldn't last until dark, so began to slip behind the trees of my blind. I had no sooner taken a step away from my bow when I spotted antlers approaching fast! From the first glimpse I knew this bull fell into my "shooter" category, and I focused on getting a shot.

I eased toward my bow, but the bull trotted in fast and immediately splashed into the wallow before I could even lift my bow. The tall grass, coupled with the muddy depression, hid his entire body from view and I could only see his antlers. After grabbing my bow, it was easy to just push "record" on my camera, which was already mounted on my tripod. I had faithfully taken it down and set it back up a dozen times throughout the day each time the rain came and went.



His antlers swayed and rolled 30-yards away, but his body was hidden

The bull rolled and splashed, churning up mud with his antlers. Suddenly he paused and stared – had he caught my scent? No: he was just extremely cautious and went back to frolicking, rolling onto his back with hooves flailing in the air!



Oh no, did he smell me?!

Thanks to my tripod, I captured the entire event in an amazing video sequence.



Back to splashing!

Several times he paused and began to stand. Each time I tensed and dented the bowstring, ready to draw, but then he'd relax and sink down out of sight. At first my heart was pounding, but after him carrying on for several minutes I had calmed down and was cool as the proverbial cucumber. It was just a matter of biding my time and executing (no pun intended) the shot.



Ready to stand up...psyche, back down out of sight

At one point the bull stood up facing me, not offering a reliable shot. After several false attempts, I was slow to react when he did finally stand broadside, but with two quick steps he splashed into the second wallow and went at it again.

After what had seemed forever, the bull rose and began to shake like a dog, with his head conveniently obscured by a tree. Recognizing my opportunity, I drew, focused and released my arrow. I watched it sizzle through him right where I had aimed and immediately knew he was dead on his feet.



Lighted arrow landing right in the boiler room

Instantly the bull stiffened. He didn't move, but coughed and attempted to suck air into his perforated lungs. Seeing a bonus opportunity since he was still standing, I hastily nocked a second arrow and hurriedly launched it through him for a double-whammy. At the second hit, the big bull took one last gasp and keeled over. KERSPLASH! My first thought was "I can't believe it", followed by "Maybe I should have skipped the second arrow and shoed him out of the water".



Splashdown – what a mess!

I had a 900+ pound animal lying dead in a foot and a half of water and sloppy mud. What had I been thinking?! This was going to be a very late night and a royally muddy mess. I texted Jason that I had just killed a big bull. He responded "Good! I'm soaked and ready to leave my blind."



View of fallen monarch from my blind

I snapped some photos and tugged on the bull's antlers to determine if we had any hope of moving him. The wet ground and slimy mud provided almost no traction, and I could barely budge him. Jason showed up a few minutes later and just stared, shaking his head. "Dude, we're going to have to take off our boots and wade in to butcher him", he lamented.

"Well, my mom once shot a cow moose and moved it off the railroad tracks all by herself," I responded, "surely two of us can move this bugger?!"

"You're mom isn't a normal mom" he replied dryly.



This is going to be a whole lot of work...

We both tugged vainly on his antlers. I rooted around in my backpack for some paracord, donned my safety harness and lashed one cord to it. I gave Jason a second loop, and by working together from the grass, which afforded better footing, the bull shifted a little. With much grunting and sweating, we managed to slide the bull above waterline. He remained in the mud, but at least we wouldn't have to wade barefoot into the mire.

In awe of the sheer body size, I announced that my taxidermist friend would trade dearly for the intact hide, having dreamt of creating an elk herd diorama for one of the big sporting goods stores. I recognized that the odds of me getting another animal of this size were slim at best, and to salvage the hide might possibly be quite literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This method made the butchering more difficult, because it entailed peeling the hide off the bull with only a single slit from the base of the skull to the base of the tail. It would be more work on our part, but worth it if we could salvage the hide. With mules potentially available to lug the heavy hide out in one piece, it was theoretically possible.

As we removed huge cuts of lean, organic meat and carefully placed them aside in game bags on the damp grass to cool, the mass of this bull became apparent. Every single muscle yielded a magnitude increase over any of our prior bulls. As we filled bag after bag, I realized this bull was something special. We needed all of Jason's bags and nearly all of mine too! In the past we've been able to fit all of the deboned meat from one bull into a single set of bags. We kept shaking our heads in amazement as the pile of meat continued to grow. Later it was verified, as the most meat (deboned) we had ever dropped to the butcher was 225-pounds: this bull produced 315-pounds!!!

The monarch was head and shoulders above any bull we had taken before, which likely explains why he trotted into the wallow without a care – few other bulls would challenge his dominance. As his body seemed to shrink with butchering, his antlers seemed to grow – I originally surmised he was simply a solid shooter, but his body was so big that his antlers appeared to be only average. In reality, his antlers were massive: so thick we couldn't wrap our hands around them until very near the tips, and amazingly stout. Definitely my biggest and best bull to date. Jason alluded to "bull of a lifetime", but I still hold faith that there's an even larger one out there somewhere with my name on it.

We finished removing meat from one side of his carcass and stepped back for a breather. "With half the meat gone it should be easy to haul him onto the grass" I joked. "Yeah, right" came Jason's reply.

It was all we could do, heaving in tandem like a pair of yoked oxen, to slide the bull out of the mud and up onto the grass even after removing something like 150-pounds of meat from the skeleton!

The second half of butchering went a little easier once we were out of the mud, but it was late (early?!) and we were running low on steam. We piled the last of the meat into game bags at about 3am and buttoned up things before retreating to our

bivies for sleep. First we dragged all of the meat about 100-yards away from the carcass in hopes that any bears or scavengers that might happen along would gnaw the bones and entrails rather than disturb our prize. Next we attempted to drag the hide and head, but the size and thickness of the hide coupled with the extra water and mud in the hair proved too to be too heavy – another testament to how massive this bull was. I fleshed out the skull and carried it and the antlers separately. I can't describe our awe: it was all we could do to drag the hide alone – and this was on flat ground, with wet grass reducing friction! We manhandled the hide over some low branches and logs to allow air to circulate, help it cool and drain some water, and then shouldered our empty packs and headed for bivy camp. We crashed into our sleeping bags at 5am: 30-minutes after my alarm chimed "Time to wake up and hunt elk!"

We slept until 10am, but couldn't afford to recover long: we had to get the meat (and hide) out of the backcountry and fully cooled quickly to ensure quality table fare. Knowing our best bet would be to call in the mules, we hustled out of camp with faith that we could find the packer whom Jason had conversed days earlier.

We marched into his camp 2-hours later and he agreed to saddle up and haul out the meat. I explained the crazy plan I had to save the hide in one piece and that it weighed a ton. He just nodded and said his mules were pretty tough.

I was chagrined by the mountain of weight we led him to. Realizing that I wasn't full-strength and might not be up for packing it out like we had historically been able to, it was a blessing to have been provided with a packer in my time of need!

The gent instructed us to load the meat into the mules' panniers simultaneously from each side so as to balance the load and keep them from injury. Jason and I each strained to lift bags solo that we had previously dragged together. Once we had both mules fully loaded with meat I asked if he might be able to return for the hide. "I have plenty of rope, just wrap it up into a bundle and we'll balance it right here on top of my brown mule" was his reply. "Are you serious? It has to weigh 150-pounds or more" was my incredulous response.

Jason and I wrestled the hide into a soggy bale and hesitantly dragged it to the already laden mule. It was all we could do to lift the burden on top of the panniers and I was astounded when the mule didn't bat an eyelash. We lashed it in place and stepped back in awe: it would have been impossible for us to carry the hide out. I lashed the antlers to my backpack and we led the pack animals to our trucks.



The antlers alone made for a pretty good load

A few hours later we strolled up to our parking area trucks, knowing full well it would have taken us the better part of two days to pack the meat out on our backs. That blessing saved a lot of energy, plus enabled us to quickly get the meat and hide into local cold storage, and get back out to give Jason a crack at filling his tag!

It was nearly 11pm by the time we returned to bivy camp, and we fell asleep with the comfort of knowing the meat was in good keeping.

We spent the next five days trying to get Jason on a bull. We were hampered by buckets of rain, which greatly reduced the effectiveness of ambushing at water, and heard very few bugles, which made it tough to locate bulls.

Still, we crossed paths with bulls on a few occasions, but for various reasons ended up being just out of range for Jason to get a shot. Among others, he passed on a spike bull that wallowed for so long that he didn't even look like an elk, and we had a close call with a monster bull that caught our scent just a few steps from Jason's shooting lane that still haunts us.



Just out of range, but what a sight!



Another close call



Another “shooter” bull, but we couldn’t get Jason in range to seal the deal



Talk about a mudpack spa treatment!

I checked the remains of my bull every day in hopes that a bear would settle in (we both had bear tags), but surprisingly it wasn’t touched by any scavengers. I can

only surmise that the heavy rain kept the scent down and no bears happened by close enough to catch wind of the bones and decaying entrails.

We spent hours huddled under a sil-nylon tarp that my mom made me several years ago, and it was a blessing to have a dry place to hunker down. At times the rain poured off the corners of the tarp in such quantity that we each took turns filling our water bottles. Despite drinking to the point of bursting we couldn't keep up to the rainfall.



Thanks for the tarp, mom!



During one nighttime hike in a drizzle we crossed paths with a tiger salamander, the first I'd ever seen.



Despite vultures advertising my elk carcass, no bears showed up

We wrapped up our hunt when I had to return home for Laurie's half Ironman in Dillon, Colorado. I implored Jason to play hooky from work for one more attempt the last few days of season, but he wasn't able to break free due to traveling.

Jason and I have become a solid team over the years. We spent a couple of seasons together early on without success, but more recently we had one year where we each killed an elk, a couple when he killed one, and I've killed one the past two years in a row. I guess it's his turn next time. I wouldn't have it any other way, and can't wait to hit the backcountry with Jason again.



The elk sign had provided some assurance even though no elk were spotted during my scouting, but my faith in the area was certainly rewarded!

God bless, Carl