

**Elk Carl**  
**December 13, 2014 New Mexico**

**Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

This year I was pretty much skunked in the hunting lottery, but I couldn't complain, as I was more than busy guiding Robin on her numerous adventures.

However, when an opportunity arose to pick up a late-season archery elk tag I couldn't resist, despite having chased these bulls three times prior and never even losing an arrow. Winter pursuit of bull elk with a bow is tough. Historically the success rate published by NM Game and Fish hovers around 3%. Compounding the challenge, bulls must have at least 6-points on one antler.

Bulls don't bugle this time of year and they don't move around much; conserving their energy during the winter months. Additionally, waterholes can be sporadic. I've seen them dry up a matter of weeks before season, and I've had 6-inches of snow fall the day before season: both make sitting water unproductive.

I squeezed in one scouting trip between Robin's hunts and set some game cameras at likely ambush points in hopes that the mild weather would hold. This year the weather was shaping up to be ideal. The fall had been extremely wet, filling waterholes to the brim. Yet the winter had been mild and dry, meaning elk would be thirsty, although I worried that the ponds might evaporate.



Primo ambush

My schedule wouldn't permit me to break free to monitor the game activity until the day before season. On that day I drove down first thing in the morning, planning to hike and check photos, set up base camp, and come up with a strategy for opening morning.

I arrived to mild temperatures and miles of hiking ahead of me. The first waterhole I checked had dried up a week before. Drat. I set off for the second tank and made it within a couple hundred yards right at dusk. A sound caught my ear; elk antlers clacking! I paused and listened carefully. I could hear elk at the waterhole! And not just any elk, but BULLS! I listened for several minutes, smiling to myself as the sky darkened and the stars began to twinkle.

I carefully backed out and left the area undisturbed. I arrived at camp and rustled up a fire, and then sat back to enjoy dinner. My good friend Dave and his son Mason arrived to join me. They planned to try their luck calling for predators while I hunted, and had offered to lend their backs in the off chance I defied the odds and skewered a bull.

Early opening morning I slammed a breakfast burrito and washed it down with a drink mixture of Hydration and Energy. I grabbed my bow and backpack with fuel for the day and navigated by headlamp toward the distant waterhole where the unseen bulls had been frolicking the evening before.

I made it to "my" waterhole and found it to be mainly mud. It still held a little water, and the entire area was covered with elk tracks! I quickly retrieved the game camera card and settled into the makeshift ground blind I had constructed out of logs and branches several weeks earlier.

The sky began to brighten to the east, but it was still too dark to see. I perused the photos on my camera and noted that elk arrived almost every evening. I had high hopes and debated whether to sit all day or to hike and glass for a few hours in the morning.

I glanced away from my camera and caught a shadow moving. I quickly shielded the view screen and willed my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I was certain that a piece of the blackness moved! I slowly raised my binoculars in hopes that the magnification would reveal what it was. A bull! Although it was evident that he was immature and not legal. He edged hesitantly toward the water, but then backed off. I suspect he had seen the light from my camera.

Since the photos suggested legal bulls didn't arrive until later in the afternoon, I decided to make a jaunt to another nearby waterhole to check for activity. In similar fashion to my previous evening, as I neared the area I again heard elk antlers cracking! I nocked an arrow and slowly crept forward while constantly scanning for elk. Soon I caught a flash of tan through the trees, and I carefully glassed for other animals. Sure enough, a bachelor group of 8 or more bulls was meandering toward the waterhole!

I tried to approach them but it seemed I was always exposed to one or more bulls and I couldn't get closer than about 80-yards. Some were definitely 6-point legal bulls. Gradually I lost track of the group, so detoured to check the water. It was dry, which confirmed I needed to be at the waterhole I had just vacated.

I hurriedly retraced my steps and glassed as I approached my original post. Sure enough, a spike bull, a cow and a calf were at the water. I carefully scanned for legal bulls, but none accompanied this threesome. I let them finish and move away before hustling to my ground blind and settling in.

All was quiet until about noon, when another cow and calf appeared. I watched, took photos, and recorded video as they milled around for nearly 20-minutes.



Cow and calf drinking

I was surprised at how efficiently they could slurp drinking water from the mud hole. I was also pleased that they had no clue I was nearby: the wind was perfect, as was my hideout. I was confident that something would come together.





Cow and calf leaving

No sooner had the cow and calf meandered away than a dandy mule deer buck appeared on the scene! He seemed hesitant to get his feet muddy and instead of wading right in like the elk, he tentatively crept to the edge of the mud, and then backtracked whenever he began to sink. He did this several times until he finally found a firm spot where he could sip water and keep his feet dry.





Again this buck had no clue I was nearby and it was fun to observe him and take photos and video clips. It further boosted my confidence in my location. Suddenly the buck stiffened and stared into the woods. I scanned for activity and soon some turkeys came into view. Oddly, the buck became very nervous and hurried away as the flock arrived.

I was blessed with a front row seat of the birds' funny antics. I thought I might end up with turkey for dinner, because it reminded me of the famed La Brea tar pits where ancient animals were trapped and preserved in the quagmire. Despite their large feet and relatively light weight, the birds would repeatedly sink up to their knees in mud and resort to vigorous flapping to extract their feet! After nearly half an hour, some of the flock began to peck their way into the woods.



One of many turkeys – note his muddy feet!

As I was engrossed in videoing the birds, a bull suddenly charged into the pond – and he was legal!

Two smaller bulls followed and since I already had the camera running on the tripod, I shifted to the legal bull and began to film him.



Legal bull!

I ranged the 6x6 at 36-yards and prepared for a shot. Just as I was ready to shoot, the bull turned his rump to me as he searched for water. I waited patiently and let fly when he turned broadside.

To my dismay my arrow flew low and skimmed his brisket, clearly shaving only hair, and captured on film to boot. The bull leaped, but had no idea what had happened. He slowly walked out of the water and stood at the far side of the pond. In hindsight, the bull had moved 3-4 yards farther away and when I aimed for 35-yards my arrow was a tad low. I re-ranged the bull at 45-yards, but angling severely. I was hesitant to take the shot and hoped that he would turn fully broadside. The smaller bulls remained in the mud and although they looked around for danger, my quiet bow hadn't overly alarmed them. I was confident that they would settle down and I'd get another shot opportunity.

I focused on the shot angle presented to me and recognized that in order to hit the vitals I would need to aim a lot farther toward the rear than normal, as the arrow would angle forward into the lungs.

At the time I was worried that my arrow might be hitting low, so I consciously planned to aim a tad high if the bull presented a shot. Suddenly one of the smaller bulls kicked up his heels and splashed in the mud. That distraction caused "my" bull to turn broadside and eye the younger bull's antics.

I took a deep breath, drew and squeezed my release. My arrow flew well, but hit the bull higher and farther back than I would have hoped. He rocketed off into the brush with his smaller comrades in tow. I reviewed the video footage and

quickly realized what had happened. I had hit high simply because I had intentionally aimed high. And I had hit farther back because I had been so focused on that aiming point when the bull had been angling away that in the heat of the moment I hadn't mentally readjusted my aim.

I was pretty sure that I had at least lethally hit the bull in the liver, with hopes that the arrow's trajectory might have nicked the back of the lungs. I waited 30-minutes and then carefully scoured the area where the bull had been standing to look for my arrow and any clues as to the lethality of the hit.

For some reason I couldn't find my arrow. I walked a short distance in the direction the bulls had run, but found no blood, which came as no surprise given the high hit; any bleeding would be mainly internal. I attempted to follow their tracks, but the entire area was littered with elk sign and I am not a good enough tracker to pick out a single bull track among dozens.

The weather was forecast to be well below freezing that night and I reluctantly decided that the best course of action would be to return to camp and look for the bull in the morning. A marginal liver hit would not be immediately fatal and I feared bumping the bull and being unable to trail him without a blood trail.

I reached camp, relayed the details to my friends and replayed the video in slow motion. Dave concurred the shot was likely fatal but it was wise to give the bull time and resume the search in the morning. The predator-calling duo had gotten one pretty fox, but no coyotes or mountain lions.

We ate dinner and settled in for a restless night. I was awakened around midnight by a pitter patter on the roof. I peeked out to find icy snow pelting the tent and lamented that whatever sign the bull had left would be doubly-hard to find with the precipitation. Thankfully, by morning the storm only dropped a dusting of snow.

We awoke and headed to look for my bull and I welcomed the extra sets of eyes. As we approached the waterhole I crept slowly in the lead. Sure enough, a spike bull was nearby and I pointed him out and snapped some photos. I thoroughly enjoy seeing wildlife, whether big or small.





Spike bull at the waterhole

The young bull was curious and he watched us for quite some time before finally deciding to move off with a stiff legged walk.

I led the way to the spot where my bull had been standing and we combed the area for my arrow. At first we couldn't find it, but after reviewing the video footage I plotted the arrow trajectory based on trees and branches in the background and we then found the arrow in relatively short order. It evidenced a solid hit and I felt better about things. If only I had found it the prior evening.



Evidence of a solid hit



Unfortunately the light snow obscured any further sign on the ground and we had to immediately begin radiating out along likely travel routes hoping to stumble across the bull. Mason had never been on a blood trail before and initially pointed out all sorts of red things: fall colors on leaves and grass, red mud spatters, red pebbles, etc. Each time he excitedly called us to check out the suspected evidence, I had to patiently explain to him why the particular splotch he was looking at was only a natural color, as well as encourage him to keep looking and not squelch his youthful enthusiasm for trying his best. Time and again we had to retracing our steps and then move over a few dozen yards to parallel our previous search.

I knew of one trail that lead down into a secluded valley in the direction the bull had headed, so I suggested that they keep looking in the immediate area while I make a quick jaunt down the trail in case he had covered more distance along that path of least resistance than we initially believed.

I had no sooner started down the trail when Dave whistled me back. Mason had found another suspicious red spot on a stem of grass. It was tiny; smaller than the head of a pin, but it had potential. I quickly taught them the technique of turning binoculars backward and then studying the spot from very close, which effectively acts like a magnifying glass. I was stunned, as the close-up view confirmed it was blood! However, it was so small and in such a random location I honestly thought it was simply a fleck from a coyote or fox's meal. We studied the surrounding area and finally found one more speck, but nothing more.

It was little to go by, but renewed our hope and we marked the location and began fanning out. I had no sooner glanced up to wonder about a pair of ravens flying overhead, when Dave let out a shout: my bull was laying just fifty yards from him! Thanks to Mason's keen eyes and never-give-up attitude, we had found him. He was sprinkled with snow and dead as a stone; it was apparent that he had expired in mid stride the night before, within 150-yards from where I had shot him. What a relief! We gave thanks, snapped trophy photos, and began butchering the beast.



I finally joined the 3% Club!

We autopsied the vitals and confirmed that my arrow had clipped the upper rear corner of one lung and the Viper Trick had done its job well. We also discovered that one of his front hooves was very unique. Had I known this earlier, it might actually have been possible to identify the individual tracks from this unique bull.



Unique hoof



As we loaded each cut of meat into game bags, the mountain of weight to be carried out on our backs grew. Dave queried whether I thought we could do it in one trip. My taxidermist friend wanted the entire hide for a project, and I told them that this addition to the meat would make a single trip impossible.

Mason proclaimed with youthful enthusiasm “Well, if we break our backs, I think we can get all of the meat out in one trip.” I was dubious, but we attempted it by loading our backpacks with bags of meat. At least it all fit. With a sigh, we shouldered our burdens and began hiking. It was tough, but not impossible, and we made steady progress with regular rest breaks.



Thank God for two extra packers!

Mason made all the difference. There was no way Dave and I could have added half of his burden to each of our packs, but with 30-40 pounds on Mason’s back our own loads were doable.

It took a couple of hours, but we made it to camp and thankfully dropped our packs. It feels like one can fly after dropping 2/3 of ones body weight. It was the first time Mason had experienced such relief and it was funny to watch him bounce around. I’m always reminded of a song from Peter Pan at such times: “I can fly, I can fly, I can fly!”

But the work wasn’t over; the hide and antlers waited for me back in the woods. Given the late hour and Mason having school the following day, I suggested they head for home while I hurried to retrieve the final load.

I had left a long sleeved shirt and my headlamp at the kill site, thereby reducing the gear I needed to carry back and forth. Daylight was fading, but I had a backup light on both my cell phone and GPS, so after bidding my partners adieu,

I began jogging from camp with my empty pack cinched tightly. I wondered if I could hold my initial pace for the duration, so challenged myself to keep jogging. After an hour I reached my trophy with barely enough light in the sky to avoid resorting to my backup lighting options. Good thing I had pushed the pace!

I quickly donned my long sleeved shirt and loaded the hide into a contractor's garbage bag and then into my pack. The head and antlers protruded from the top and I lashed them secure with various straps before hoisting my load and retracing my path to the truck by headlamp. I was pleasantly surprised that this load felt substantially lighter than the first load of meat and I was able to cover substantially more ground between rest breaks. I later weighed the hide and antlers to be 80-pounds: I'm not sure if it's a testament to stamina and mental fortitude or foolishness, when an 80-pound load seems like a cakewalk!

I made it to camp without incident and quickly loaded all of my camping gear into the truck. It was a long night and I pulled up to my house just before 2am, but at least I didn't have to burn a day of vacation!

By all measures my hunt had been a success; however, it was all but lost in the shuffle of Robin's numerous hunting adventures this season. This got me to pondering things further. I had certainly had fun, and it was satisfying to finally put the pieces together and arrow a bull after several previous attempts. But when it was all said and done, our interior wall space is pretty much full and this trophy skull was relegated to hang forlornly in the garage. At some point, whether it's 3, 15, or 50, one can only fit so many trophies on the wall without adding a trophy room or museum. And when we pass from this world, all of our trophies will become just so much clutter that our remaining loved ones will have to figure out what to do with. It's a sobering thought: where do we spend our time and energy? And to what end?

Luke 12:17 of the Bible tells a story about a man referred to as the rich fool. This guy has such an abundance of crops that he runs out of space to store everything. It goes on to say "...And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.' And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

In the time it has taken me to document this story one friend's father passed away unexpectedly; another friend's dad went to the hospital with pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lungs); tests revealed anomalies on a family member's organs; cancer reappeared in another friend's organs; one of my dad's bush pilot friends crashed and is fighting for his life; and a coworker is undergoing tests for kidney stones or perhaps worse. The only guarantee is that there are no guarantees in life. Or as they say: Death and Taxes.



I was blessed to beat the statistics and tag a bull on this outing, but there is one statistic that none of us will beat, though we do not know the day or the hour. I urge you to dedicate some time reflecting on what is important in this life and where you are storing away your trophies.

We invest countless hours researching hunting units, the odds of drawing tags and all manner of associated minutiae: I implore you to invest some time researching more important matters.

Consider this an open invitation to join me and my family at church. There is no reason to be nervous; it's casual – heck, I even wear shorts to service during mild weather! And if you don't live in Albuquerque, let me help steer you to a Godly church. Just like there are trustworthy doctors and quacks; areas that hold good bulls and areas with nary an elk; there are solid bible-teaching churches and then there are religious institutions where they'll ask you to shave your head or kiss snakes – let me help guide you to a church where you can pursue a worthy trophy.

God Bless,  
Carl