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A Memorable Elk Hunt

By Steve Lamar

Thinking back, 1983 had been a long winter. Boyd Kessler kidded me every time he saw me. Every chance he got, he needled me, "You never pass up a good shot for a perfect shot". His banter started in the autumn at the end of the fall hunting season.

While up in the Frenchy Creek area in the Mission Mountains Wilderness I had passed up a good close shot at an elk thinking that shortly I would get a perfect shot when it stepped into a small clearing between the trees. But the elk had other ideas.

The elk stopped behind a thick, full spruce tree then darted off directly away from me using the tree to block my view. It turned out to be my only chance of putting elk meat in the freezer that hunting season. Boyd made sure I relived that fateful moment time and time again for the whole year leading up to the next season.

One day in the following summer of 1984, while working for the US Forest Service, Boyd and I were at the Owl Creek Packer Camp near Holland Lake. We were dropping off a couple of new picnic tables that we had constructed at the Condon Work Center.

As we started to drive out of the packer camp, Boyd stopped the truck, looked over at me, and asked, "Steve, do you really want to get an elk? Are you really willing to work for an elk?" I

quickly replied, "Yeah, I want to get an elk. You know me Boyd, I'm willing to hike to h___ and back if I can get an elk." He looked at me intently for a few seconds, then said, "Okay, then right up there is your elk." He pointed up almost due east to a high mountain basin on the Swan Range.

He proceeded to tell a long ago story of a doctor who hiked up there, sat next to an avalanche chute reading his book, and shot the first elk that came along. He then hiked down and persuaded a packer by the name of Peterson to take his horses up there to pack it out. The packer claimed each year that the country up there was too rough, that he would never again subject his stock to such torture and physical hardship. But each year when the doctor flashed a little extra money, the packer would relent and go pack out the elk.

Boyd told me that as far as he knew nobody hunted that area anymore, that he was sure I could get an elk up there. He said, "Hike up the day before season starts and camp out. If you shoot an elk, bone it out on the spot, put the meat in bags, strap as much as you can carry onto your pack and relay the loads down the mountain. Wherever you end up at night, camp close by. Then repeat the process until you get out."

Then he laughed and said, "But you might have to take your fork and knife with you and eat your way out." He reminded me that it was rough country. It would not be a quick or easy trip, especially if I had to pack the elk meat all the way out.

With fresh determination I set a goal of hunting the high basin and getting my first elk. In those days it was legal to shoot either a cow or bull elk the first week of hunting season, but only a bull elk after the first week. I planned to

hunt the first week every day in order to better my odds of taking an elk.

My seasonal job with the US Forest Service was coming to a close for the year. Finding work in the winter was sometimes a challenge, if not impossible. Before winter set in, I wanted to have a woodshed full of firewood, and a freezer full of vegetables from the garden, huckleberries and black-capped raspberries from the mountains, and wild meat from forest.

It had always been reasonably easy to get a deer, but putting elk meat in the freezer had not gone so well for me. Last season's misfortune had been my closest opportunity to date. I was determined that this year would be the turning point. I left no detail unplanned.

I pored over the map and studied the lay of the land. I target practiced with my rifle. I kept in great shape. I planned to go reasonably lightweight with only a thin tarp for my shelter, a lightweight pad and goose down bag for sleeping. I did not plan on building campfires or taking a cooking stove. For food I only took a chunk of salami, cheese, and some trail mix. Other than my wool clothing, rifle, ammo, knife, meat bags, water bottle, and emergency items, I had very little else in my aluminum-framed backpack.

As it turned out, I could not hunt on opening day, but on day two I woke early and spent the day working my way up into the high basin. I found the old packer trail at the foot of the Swan Range and followed it up. It was not a direct or easy route.

Sneaking through rocky, boulder-strewn areas as well as thick brush, the steep trail seemed to wind all over the western, forested mid-slope of the Swan Range. I went slowly and hunted my way up the trail reaching the bottom of

the basin in the late afternoon. There were eight inches of snow at that elevation. I found a level spot on a side bench that afforded a decent view of the open grassy lower basin as well as much of the steep side slopes.

I sat with my binoculars glassing the terrain before me. Four mule deer does wandered out across the open basin followed by a huge buck with a wide spreading rack of antlers adorning his head. Broadside at 80 yards I considered shooting him, but reminded myself that I did not come all this way to shoot a deer, even one that big. I watched as the five deer worked their way in a southerly direction up a steep avalanche chute and crossed the ridge.

After satisfying myself that nothing else was nearby I quickly set up my shelter tarp and placed my pad and sleeping bag underneath. I then worked my way up into the upper basin that is essentially hidden from view down in the valley.

Here I found the tracks of six elk that had recently crossed into this upper basin from the Bob Marshall Wilderness. I tracked the elk for some time, but I could see their tracks in the snow up high leading along the rim of a cliff area below the top of a nearby peak heading out of the drainage.

By then the sun had set behind the Mission Mountains Range to the west. I figured that they had left the area. I resigned myself that this would not be the day I got my first elk. I walked back to my campsite in the gathering darkness, stopping to glass the area from time to time. After a cold meal of cheese and salami, I crawled into the warmth of my sleeping bag for a long night's sleep. I was tired and sleep came easy.

The next morning, as I lay in the warmth of my sleeping bag in the early predawn darkness, I heard a bull elk bugle up high on a side ridge to the north of my camp. Apparently, the elk that I had been tracking the day before had not left the area. I quickly crawled out of my sleeping bag, heading slowly up toward the elk.

The wind was in my favor as the early morning draft flowed down into the valley. As I worked my way up the ridge the snow crunched noisily with every step I took. It was getting light as I proceeded upward. I jumped three mule deer that made all kinds of noise as they bounded off. I had not gone another hundred yards when I jumped two more mule deer.

At that point I thought that I would never get close to the elk, with the spooked mule deer tipping off my presence. With the arrival of daylight, I felt exposed as I walked up through an open area.

Suddenly, the bull elk bugled close by. I strained searching to find its location. He was on the other side of a thicket of subalpine fir trees about a hundred yards uphill and off to the west. Just as I started to take my next step, I spotted the lead cow about 70 yards away, standing broadside looking straight at me. As much as I wanted to go for the bull elk, I knew that the lead cow would shortly sound the alarm and take the small herd out of the area.

I could hear Boyd reminding me, "Never pass up a good shot for a perfect shot." With that thought I slowly raised my rifle, put the crosshairs on her neck near her skull and pulled the trigger. The shot hit its mark. The elk rolled down the steep slope, wedging tightly between two subalpine fir trees. I was excited that I finally had harvested

an elk! When I got to the elk, I said a little prayer of thanks.

The elk was huge. I had to use my small meat saw to cut down one of the five inch diameter trees before I could budge the carcass into position in order to field dress it. I had to tie back the legs in order to work on an animal that large.

After field dressing the animal, I skinned one side, cut the meat off, stored it in the meat bags, then flipped the carcass over and repeated the process. It was my first experience boning out an animal, so I took my time. The whole process took me several hours.

Interestingly, as I boned out the elk, seven mule deer paraded past within 50 feet of me. I was tempted to shoot one of the two young bucks in the group, but wisely realized it was neither the time nor place.

As I was loading my backpack with elk meat, the bull elk bugled off in the distance. I was surprised that he was still nearby. I thought that after I shot the lead cow, the rest of the elk would leave the area. But apparently that was not the case.

I thought of going toward him to see just how big he was, but didn't. I had my hands full trying to get the elk meat home. I relayed three loads of meat to my camp, took a short break to eat some food, and then packed up my tarp, pad, and sleeping bag.

I spent the rest of the day relaying meat and gear down the trail. The loads were heavy and by dusk I was tired. I still had a long way to go to get down to my truck so I secured the elk meat in a tree, moved off a safe distance and quickly set up my tarp. It started to snow as I crawled into the comfort of my sleeping bag.

As I was lying there happily recounting the events of the day, a bull elk started bugling high above me. It sent shivers down my spine. The bugling of an elk has to be one of the most tremendous sounds in nature.

What had started as a light snow that first night after I shot the elk turned into a full-blown winter storm. It took me two more strenuous days to get all the elk meat and gear out of the mountains. There were 16 inches of snow at our house in Swan Valley by the time I finally got home. I felt fortunate to get out when I did.

It felt good to be home again with my family as we busily cut up the elk meat. Our woodshed was full of firewood, and now our freezer would be full of vegetables, fruit, and wild meat. It was a good and satisfying feeling.

And by the way, I could not wait to tell Boyd about my hunt.