

Backcountry Elk Advice

Follow these tips for a more successful wilderness hunt.

By Joe Bell

It was mid-morning when my hunting buddy, Craig, and I heard the bull. The scream shrieked through the alpine valley like violent thunder, quickly giving us goose bumps and a surge of adrenaline. We hustled uphill, huffing and puffing, taking in the thin Colorado air, hopeful of intercepting the throaty-voiced bull.

Eventually, we found ourselves on the same bench where we heard the bull. We knew the location intimately—a tucked-away draw with a park of aspens, dark pines and a well-used wallow neatly notched in a small meadow. We began still-hunting through the tall grass and downed timber, following known elk trails, eyes peeled for the mountain king. We heard cows mewing in the distance, and that's when we decided to split up.

Moments later, I heard a crash in the brush, then elk hooves pounding the earth. I swiftly crouched to my knees and noticed a cow and two calves filing through the grass, totally unaware of my presence. It appeared as if they were being chased. Then I saw it—dark-brown antlers distinctly wagging amongst tall ground cover.

I guessed the shot range quickly and came to full draw. Nearly a minute later, I was still holding the 40-yard pin on his side, waiting for that critical one more step. Before I knew it, the shot was off, and I caught a glint of the Muzzy-tipped arrow sailing right into the sweet spot.

Walking up to that bull was truly unforgettable. Not only was he a tremendous animal for the area, but he was my very first elk. Also, we were on a pack-in trip—a do-it-yourself wilderness hunt. And that simply brought more meaning to the kill.

It's been nearly a decade since I

shot that elk, and I've experienced many more elk hunts since then. Today, I recognize that my luck on the mountain that day wasn't all by chance. That great backcountry bull was the result of an effective plan and being in good elk country. We were eight miles deep in the Colorado wilderness, with not another soul around. The area was essentially unpressured, although we did hear a few gunshots (muzzleloaders were in season) over the course of the week, further down toward the trailhead.

However, thanks to our packer, we knew where to hunt. We were in a huge valley, but we wasted no time moving in on the elk. With only five and a half days to get it done, spending a of couple days figuring out the "lay of the land" and which side of the valley the elk were on would've proved devastating to our hunting time, cutting it in half. Trust me, this country all looks good, but you'll find out that elk are in pockets of country, not wandering everywhere. You've got to know where these pockets are right from the start. Otherwise, your hunt becomes a bit of a wash.

With five wilderness elk hunts now under my belt, I've learned some valuable lessons. In this article, I'd like to share a few tips and suggestions with the hope they'll benefit you and your success in the field.

FIND THE HOT SPOTS

Many hunters are under the impression that the more you penetrate the wilderness, the better the hunting, which just isn't true. Like I mentioned earlier, elk gravitate to certain pockets where they always seek out areas with the best food, water, and cover.

Research of probable hotspots must

begin well before the hunt. Get with a game biologist, your packer, or a local hunter and quiz them about productive hunting areas and how elk travel. It's important to truly grasp how elk shift around and what are their daily tendencies. Whether you hunt 3 or 12 miles in from the trailhead, you must hunt wisely, otherwise, you'll likely fail at killing an elk.

I like to begin my research or assessment of a new area by trying to identify elk bedding areas. These spots are usually high up on a ridge somewhere in dark timber or thick vegetation like scrub oak. Wilderness elk typically venture to lower ground in the evenings and during the night. However, by early morning, they are back en route moving to higher elevation and bedding areas.

Also, water holes and wallows are critical pieces of the puzzle. Bulls almost always like to water or wallow before resting for the day. Keep this in mind when analyzing travel routes. Wind direction, of course, is a major factor, and will determine how you'll make your ambush.

Another helpful tip is to use your topographical maps to identify transition locations (where two types of cover meet), especially along ridge areas. These locations draw elk like magnets. For example, in the Colorado wilderness areas I've hunted over the years, an abundant amount of elk were always found right near treeline where dark timber intercepted open hillsides.

High-mountain saddles are prime spots, too. These form natural funnels for bulls to travel through during the rut, allowing them to access additional basins for seeking out cows in estrus.

Look for natural benches along ridges. Elk like to stage in such locations



Research of top hunting areas is mandatory for effective wilderness hunting. Mytopo.com is the author's favorite source. Study these maps well before the hunt begins, quizzing packers, guides, or local hunters on elk habits and likely hotspots.



Bell, with his first wilderness elk, which he shot during a drop-camp hunt deep in the Colorado Flattops Wilderness.



Elk are "pocket" animals, and you must either cover a lot of ground finding such spots, or have prior knowledge of them so you can begin hunting from the get-go, instead of spending precious hunting time just searching.

prior to bedding or before venturing to lower ground in the evening. Benches with wallows can be goldmines.

When sorting through hunting spots, remember, you can never have too many. Weather, hunting pressure, the phase of the rut, and various other

factors can force elk to haphazardly move. When this happens, you must improvise and rise to the challenge. The more hunting plans you have, the greater your chance of success.

MASTER CALLING

Most backcountry elk regions are deeply forested. For this reason, spot and stalk is not an effective hunting tactic. Calling and aggressive setup tactics are what work best, with still-hunting and sitting on water effective when conditions are right.

For this reason, know when and how to call. I've learned that it can make or break your hunt, so don't take it lightly.

In states like Colorado and Idaho, elk densities are usually quite thick. With so many bulls running around, there's major competition, so don't be scared to bugle often. Use common-sense, of course, but a well-blown bugle will help locate distant bulls (so you can aggressively move in) and bring in younger bulls on a string.

If you're hunting with a buddy, set up well ahead of the caller—about 75 yards or so. This will prevent bulls from "hanging up" just out of shooting range. If you're alone, try to be more proactive. Call and constantly try to get in closer. Learn to "dog" bulls so they can no longer take it. Make them mad, and they'll charge, demonstrating their dominance and coming closer, eventually giving you the shot you need. Be careful as you do this, always playing it smart so you don't nudge a bull, blowing the deal entirely.

Also, raspy cow calling can work like magic. This means using pitchy, squeally, ultra-enticing, seductive cows sounds that tend to make bulls come out of their skin. Typical bite-and-blow or push-button calls won't work for this. Only open-reed calls like the Carlton Fightn Cow Call or Estrus Whine, or Primos Hyper Lip allow you to vary pitch and volume this way. They are the cat's meow for wilderness elk. The only downside is that these are difficult to master; you must work at it. Practice long and hard till you get it right, and you'll be thanked with some tasty back straps.

If you're hunting the pre-rut, blind

call as frequently as you can. Although bulls aren't very vocal at this time, this doesn't mean they aren't curious or willing to seek out action. Set up in areas with lots of fresh droppings and start calling—mainly with your raspy cow calls. Then, be on the lookout for bulls coming in silently. In those cases, where a bull happens to respond with a strong bugle, respond back with a spike-like shrill, monitoring your pitch, volume and intensity as you see fit.

SIT WATER

Make water hole hunting or sitting natural funnels a part of your game plan. Portable blinds are too heavy for packing via backpack or horses, so you must use natural makeshift blinds. Or, you can do what I do and bring in a lightweight Ambush Tree Saddle. At only 5 pounds and compact (the size of a loaf of bread), a Tree Saddle packs easily and allows a heightened view of hunting spots, keeping your scent off the ground and opening up shooting lanes.

Late afternoon/evening is best for hunting water or wallows. But morning or all-day sits can prove worthwhile as well. It just all depends on what type of sign you're seeing and how confident you are in the spot.

STAY OUT LATE/GET UP EARLY

I see it all the time—guys start heading back to camp during the last hour of shooting light, which is a big mistake. Elk, and especially larger bulls, feel more secure coming into calls during approaching darkness. Consequently, the last 30 minutes of shooting light makes for prime-time hunting action. Be brave and get used to walking back to camp using a flashlight.

The same goes for the morning. Get up two to three hours before daylight if that's what's needed to be where the elk are. Try not to exhaust energy going back and forth to base camp. Pack a lunch and stay out all day if you can handle it, especially when weather is cooler.

DON'T GET LOST

Wilderness hunting demands safety and communication. Aggressive hunting

will take you over one hill and the next, making it easy to get turned around. Buy a good GPS and know how to operate it like your home computer. A compass and map are mandatory as well, as foul weather can make your GPS practically worthless. Plus, electronics can fail generally speaking; so don't stake your life on them.

When hunting with friends, use two-way radios to stay in touch. Purchase models with maximum talk range. So-called "20-Mile Range" radios are good for about 4 or 5 miles in mountainous country. If you're alone on the trip (definitely not recommended), then have a satellite phone and a secondary battery with you at all times. Also, carry a PLB (personal locator beacon). If you break a leg and your phone won't connect, the PLB will eventually bring help.

BIVY OPTION

Elk are big travelers, and you'll eventually find yourself wondering how to get to a herd that's far from

base camp. The need here is being closer to them at first light, but how?

Well, that's simple. Have bivouac gear on hand and be willing to spike camp with the elk. Set camp just close enough to hear the elk as you fall asleep, but far enough away to prevent detection. At the first hint of daybreak, make your strike.

It's difficult spending a night or two away from a comfortable base camp, but if you want to kill an elk badly, then you'll do what's required. Mentally prepare yourself for the bivy option and bring a good overnight pack (Badlands 2200/2800/4500), one-man tent or bivy sack, sleeping bag, and some easy meals so you can rise to the challenge.

Just so you know, I've never been on a wilderness hunt where the need for a bivy camp was ruled out. That should tell you just how important this tactic could become.

GEAR UP EFFECTIVELY

Your choice in hunting gear and

clothing must be made up of old standbys. Don't bring new gear on a backcountry elk hunt. Every ounce counts, and only bring what you know works best. Choose quiet, quick-drying garments that are comfortable and durable. My favorite for September hunting is Cabela's MicroTex Light, or regular MicroTex if temperatures are expected to be cooler. Sitka's 90% Series is another excellent choice. Good thermal underwear is a must. I favor Smartwool Micro Weight or Sitka Core Base Layers. Cabela's MTP Extreme Hunt Series or Thermastat is an excellent choice as well.

As far as raingear goes, bring only the lightest and the quietest. My go-to gear is the Cabela's Space Rain Ultra Pack Rainwear. It's so light, packable, and effective, it's truly amazing.

Your footwear is perhaps the most important. Bring aggressive-soled boots that offer good support and extreme walking comfort. I favor Danner, Lowa, and Meindl brands. The



Don't make the mistake of being unable to reach elk that are far from your base camp. Bring your bivy gear so you can effectively hunt such animals and be ready to strike at first light.



The author with another wilderness bull he shot late evening. He cow called the bull in while day hunting a remote "transition" location far from base camp. He returned to camp well into the night.



Good hunting gear is essential in the mountains. Inclement weather is par for the course. Lightweight, packable raingear must ride in your pack all the time, since freak storms do, and will, happen.

Danner Talus is an all-time favorite boot.

To prevent blisters and hot spots, be sure your boots are well broken in and use an extra-thick wool sock and liner combo. I prefer Smart Wool Hunting Socks (midweight or heavy) along with a micro-thin Cabela's Thermax extra-tall liner sock. Change socks immediately when they become soaked with sweat.

Bring a tough and comfortable daypack that will hold your lunch, survival gear, and so on. I believe Badlands makes excellent packs, with the 2200 or Super Day being an ideal choice.

Other must-have gear includes high-quality 7-10X mid-size binocular (Nikon, Swarovski, Zeiss, etc.), Cabela's Outfitter Fleece Vest and Legacy Fleece Pullover, or Outfitter's Microfleece Pullover, Petzl Tikka XP headlamp, Alaska Game Bags, drop-point skinning

knife, small caping knife, and sharpener. A small saw or hatchet (Gerber makes good ones) is a must for detaching horns from skull to reduce weight.

GET IN SHAPE & EAT RIGHT

The mountains are steep, the air is thin, and walking through blow-downs can cause you much strain and soreness at the end of the day. All in all, you must be in decent shape on a wilderness hunt.

To do this, change your lifestyle now—not a couple months before the hunt. Start incorporating a good cardio workout into your weekly regimen. Cycling, jogging, hiking with your family or friends—any endeavor—will prove a Godsend come hunting day. Lift weights on occasion and do some abdominal exercises (sit-ups, crunches, etc.) to strengthen your torso area so you can carry a heavy backpack without feeling major strain.

Most importantly, start eating wisely. Begin each day with a very large, nutritious breakfast, followed by a balanced lunch and dinner with adequate lean portions of protein and vegetables. Eat lots of oats, nuts, and other natural foods. Say no to greasy foods and super-high-calorie desserts and treats, cheating only occasionally. Also, keep your intake of carbonated drinks to a minimum, drinking generous amounts of water instead. This will increase your propensity to avoid altitude sickness.

A healthy eater doesn't crave at-home meals as frequently as one who consumes more fatty foods. This effectively alters your taste buds so you can hunt harder and longer, day after day. This benefit is huge.

AVOID BIG-BULL SYNDROME

Some macho bowhunters don't consider smallish elk a worthy trophy—it's a 6x6 herd master or nothing. Well, on a typical wilderness hunt, with an over-the-counter tag in pocket, any elk is a good elk, I say.

Examine why you are hunting the backcountry. If you're doing it for the challenge, the mystique, and the overall experience, then any elk should be a grand trophy. If you happen to be a highly experienced wilderness hunter with many bulls to your credit and don't

feel the itch to just put one down, then I say good for you. In this case, you should probably stick it out and wait for a larger more mature animal. Of course, this means you must be willing to go home empty-handed, too. Are you?

My advice for beginning wilderness elk hunters is simple: shoot the first legal bull you see. Otherwise you'll probably regret it. Besides, all elk hunting, big horns or small, cow or bull, will prove extremely exciting and rewarding, particularly to those that have never done it before.

AFTER THE KILL

Elk meat is delicious and is an important part of the reward, but you must care for it properly or risk spoiling it. When hunting alone, use parachute cord to hold legs out of the way for the field dressing and/or quartering chore. If you shoot the animal at late dusk, field-dress the animal immediately and gather some tree limbs or small logs and do your best to get the animal's back up off the ground to prevent spoilage. Try to prop the legs so they are facing straight up, allowing the hindquarters to cool more efficiently. Also, throw your shirt over its chest as well, as added prevention to ward off predators through the night.

With morning kills, quarter or remove boneless portions of meat and place in game bags in the shade. Backpack meat out as soon as possible to a rendezvous point so your wrangler can pack out using horses. Or a buddy can help backpack all 175-pounds of boneless meat back to the trailhead (pretty tough) and to the locker.

Embarking on a wilderness elk hunt, especially for the first time, is a major ordeal. Many first-time bowhunters are under the false impression that elk are literally everywhere in the deep backcountry, which is the real benefit of doing it this way. However, this just isn't always the case. Much research and the use of smart hunting tactics still apply. If anything, you must be more prepared on a wilderness hunt than on any other. After all, it's only you and the game, and what you bring with you is all you've got. However, in the end, I believe there is no greater way to bowhunt. <<