

Elk Hunting Wisdom



***What You Need To Know To
Be A Successful Elk Hunter***

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Introduction & Dedication

I live in Colorado. I live in an old 1880s mining town named Crestone. It is in the mountains of South-Central Colorado, and it is located in elk country. There is a small mountain stream that runs behind my rural home. It is 150 yards from my back door. On the other side of the stream is an open meadow of about 80 acres in size. A small herd of about 20 elk live in the woods adjacent to the stream and graze in the meadow each evening. There are five bulls in this herd, including two 6x6 bulls with impressive racks. The herd has discovered that our rural neighborhood does not permit hunting, so they rarely leave the area. The occasional barking dog, and the local mountain lions are their only fears. It is wonderful having these elk live so close by. They are incredibly beautiful as they graze each evening. They are also wonderful teachers. As I observe them day-to-day I have learned a few things, and have confirmed many of my observations of elk living habits and patterns of movement.

So I am dedicating this book to them. May this elk herd live forever. May they teach me more.

Chapter 1 The Novice Hunter

Chuck, the owner of the local grocery store here in Crestone, tells a humorous story about one new elk hunter. This fellow stopped by the store to purchase a few things before departing on his first elk hunt. He introduced himself to the storeowner, asked a few questions about the local hunting situation, jotted down the telephone number of the grocery store, and then left to go hunting.

Two hours later Chuck got a frantic telephone call from the hunter. The novice hunter was calling from his cell phone. He was up on a nearby mountainside, and he had found a set of new elk tracks in the snow. He was very excited. He wanted to follow the tracks, and he was calling Chuck to ask which way he should go! He

did not know in which direction the tracks were going. Chuck patiently explained that each hoof print was in the shape of a roundish triangle, and that he should follow in the direction the roundish triangles pointed.

This illustration, humorous as it is, points out how unprepared many elk hunters are when they arrive for their first elk hunting trip. Personally, I admire people such as this new elk hunter. They have the desire and the spunk to plunge ahead, whether prepared or not. It is not their fault that they were not raised on a local ranch, or were not raised in a hunting culture. Now they have the desire to be elk hunters, and for this I take my hat off to them. One of the purposes of this short book is to help to educate such novice hunters, to give them valuable hints and advice which will better prepare them to eventually bring home that big dream bull.

The Colorado Department of Wildlife reports a five percent overall success rate among elk hunters. This is probably typical of the success rate in all states. This means that only one hunter in twenty is going to bag an elk. But these figures include all hunters, resident and non-resident. Consider that many of the local hunters, and many of the out-of-state hunters, are experienced, have intimate knowledge of local hunting areas and local elk herd habits, and have “contacts” among local ranchers which gives them special access to much private land. The success rate among them is going to be much higher than five percent. Among many of the local hunters I know, it is pretty much accepted that they are going to bring home elk meat each year. This means that the hunting success rate for all of those who are not blessed with the advantages I have mentioned above is going to be much less than one-in-twenty. One-in-a-hundred? Perhaps. Again, hopefully the advice in this book will greatly increase your chances of success.

It is reported that, during a press conference, Abraham Lincoln was asked an interesting question. Referring back to his youth as a “rail-splitter”, he was asked, “If you had five hours to cut down a large tree, how would you do it?” Abraham Lincoln paused, smiled, and replied, “I would spend four hours sharpening my axe.” A great answer. Preparation is always the key to success. Many out-of-state elk hunters arrive the evening before the hunting season starts, spend their season wandering around without a hunting plan, and then leave the morning after the season closes. Many of them never even leave their vehicle, simply driving around waiting to see an elk from the road. I always feel a certain sadness when I see this happen. Typically we see a four-wheel-drive SUV or pickup with from two to four Blaze Orange-clad hunters wandering aimlessly up and down the local roads, a desperate look on their faces. These guys have spent a small fortune getting there,

are using up their valuable vacation time, and now their dreams are slowly slipping away.

So, for those of you who can, I strongly encourage you to spend as much time as possible doing preparation and local scouting. As I think about this, I am reminded that this last year I spent several hours each day for the entire month before my hunting season doing scouting. As it turned out, I should have spent more time. There were some elk herd movement patterns in the area I scouted that I missed, resulting in several days of lost time as I struggled to adapt my hunting plan to these herd activities.

For some of you who cannot do this on-site preparation and scouting, and do not have access to private hunting land, I will make suggestions which will help you to better cope with your hunting situation. I will assume that you are an out-of-state hunter, not greatly experienced in hunting, and planning to hunt in the large portion of land that is designated as state and federal national forest or BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land and is open to public hunting.

First of all, let's talk about the elk and how he sees his world. Many hunters think of the elk as just a large deer. Not so. The elk has patterns and habits which are distinctly different than those of white-tailed and mule deer. He tends to live in herds more than does the deer, he is much more reclusive, and he is much more sensitive to the presence of humans. If you surprise a deer in the woods, there is a high likelihood that you will see the deer in the same spot the next day. If you surprise an elk in the woods, he will probably not return to that spot for weeks or months.

This does level the playing field a bit for the out-of-state hunter. Local hunters such as myself can observe the daily patterns of the local elk herds, confidently planning to "ambush" them on the first few days of the hunting season. But we find that upon hearing the distant opening shots of the first day of the hunting season, all elk have suddenly disappeared. Where do they go? Into hiding. It is as if they instinctively somehow know where they will be safe. Generally, the larger bulls will head up into the mountains, into deeper cover, to wait for things to return to normal. The herds of cows and younger bulls may head for private ranch land where there is no hunting. Or they may head deeper into the woods.

The owner of one local ranch has a large elk herd which spends much of its time on his ranch. Normally there are about 500 elk in his herd. He does not permit hunting on his ranch. So during the hunting season the size of his herd swells to

over 2,000 elk. It is an amazing sight to see, so many elk gathered together in one pasture. Then, after the hunting season is over, the herd returns to its normal size of 500 animals as the others return to their traditional grazing areas.

So if the normal patterns of elk movement are interrupted during the hunting season, the out-of-state hunter can take advantage of this fact. I will elaborate further on how to do this.

Where are the elk?

Elk are found where their four essential needs are located. These needs are:

1. Food
2. Water
3. Cover
4. Privacy

Let's discuss these needs.

1. Food. Elk are like the rest of us. They like to live as conveniently as possible. So they will, all other factors being equal, prefer to live as close as possible to the most favorable grazing areas. So watch for grassy open meadows, lush pastures, etc. which may be home grazing for the local elk herds.
2. Water. Likewise, elk will be located not too far from a source of water. Typically, they bed down in heavy cover during the day, emerge from the heavy cover late in the afternoon, head for a watering spot, and then go to the pasture or meadow they have designated as their grazing spot for the day. They usually emerge from the protection of the woods about an hour or so before dark to enter their grazing area. They will then graze and rest until dawn. Sometime after dawn they will leave their grazing area and return to their heavy cover to bed down. This knowledge of their daily habits is extremely valuable.
3. Cover. Elk need a heavily wooded area for their mid-day hideout. They have to know that they will be secluded and safe while they sleep and lounge about during the day. They especially seek areas that are so littered with

downfall, thick underbrush, etc. that no large predator or hunter can approach them without revealing its presence.

4. Privacy. Elk are reclusive and very sensitive to outside disturbances. Any out-of-the-ordinary activity will spook them. I know of instances where a barking dog located two miles away caused an elk herd to move away, or where one solitary hiker caused a herd to permanently move out of an area.

So how do you use this information? When you scout an area, keep these four needs in mind. Mentally review each area to see how the four needs check out. You will encounter situations where the four needs are all available, and still there are no elk around. But it is important to remember that where one or more of these needs are missing, you will for certain not find elk. This will allow you to quickly assess an area as to its potential for holding elk. You can quickly disqualify the areas that lack one or more of the above elk needs so that you do not waste your valuable hunting time.

Chapter 2.

A Day in the Life of an Elk

Once an elk has found his “four needs” as elaborated above, he will establish a daily routine in his area, and will not deviate much from this daily routine. Basically, he will spend his day hidden in heavy cover. He will get up from his daytime sleep around mid-afternoon, preen and lounge about for an hour or so, then head out to seek food and water. Arriving at the grazing area, the first adventurous elk (always cows and smaller bulls) will wander out of the woods an hour or so before dark, and cautiously begin grazing along the fringes of the woods, ever ready to fade back into the woods at the first sign of danger. The bigger bulls will wait in hiding, letting the cows and the smaller bulls take all of the risk. This is how they got to be big bulls! Being cautious and more wary than the others has led them to survive. They will not venture out to join the rest of the herd until it is almost dark. This is why the last few minutes of the day are often the most productive. We will discuss this fact in detail later. Let it suffice here to say that a good light-gathering scope can make the difference between success and failure. One fine bull fell to my friend when the bull, thinking that it had become

dark enough to hide his movements, slipped from the woods to join his herd. But my friend's large light-gathering 50mm aperture rifle scope gave him enough shooting light to make a fine chest shot that dropped the bull in his tracks.

Then the elk will graze, rest, and lounge about until morning. Anywhere from just before dawn until several hours after sunrise they will leave the grazing area, enter the cover of woods, and head to the area of heavy cover that they have designated as their daytime sleeping area. The time they choose to leave the open pasture or meadow grazing area seems to depend on unknown factors. I personally believe that it has a lot to do with how secure and safe they feel. If they feel that they will be safe in this grazing area during daylight hours, they will linger there long after daylight. During the summer I have seen elk stay in their open meadows and pastures until 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. During the hunting seasons, these same elk will leave the same grazing area right about dawn (first shooting light).

They will then travel to their daytime bedding area. It is always located in the heaviest wooded area that is accessible to them. The manner in which they "convoy" the herd is interesting. When traveling across open fields, they will travel in a single file, one elk behind the other. The oldest cows (the wisest) take the lead. The bulls travel last in line, and the last bull in the convoy is always the biggest. They have their "pecking order" well established, and the bigger bulls are not into taking unnecessary chances. It is an interesting experience to be lying in wait to ambush one of these convoys. First, here come the bigger cows, testing the wind, "talking to each other" in cow elk talk, always alert to any sign of danger. It is their job to keep the herd from danger. Then follow the other cows, the yearlings, then young bulls. The excitement



Getting ready for a late afternoon hunt. The elk graze in the valley meadow behind us each evening. They sleep in the dense woods in the valley behind the ridge in our background, coming over the ridge behind us about an hour before dark. A lot of scouting was necessary for us to learn of these movement patterns.

builds, the tension mounts, as you wait for the bulls to appear. Here they come, first the four pointers, then the five pointers (five points on each antler). At this point the hunter is seized with the temptation to take one of the five pointers, to claim victory now, thinking, “a bird in the hand is better than two birds in the bush.” He thinks, “What if there are no bigger bulls in this herd?” He thinks, “I can end my season now, go home with meat and a respectable rack.” What a tantalizing dilemma. And sure enough, if he succumbs to temptation and nails that five pointer, the sound of his shot is sure to send that magnificent six or seven pointer which was bringing up the rear of the convoy bounding past him and out of sight. And he will spend years dreaming and fretting about this lost chance at a trophy rack. But if he decides to “tough it out” and let those five pointers pass by, often the result is that there was no six pointer in that herd. And the hunter goes home empty handed. Such are the joys and challenges of elk hunting.

An interesting observation I have made is that when a traveling herd of elk enters a dense section of forest, they will abandon the single-file column and fan out, walking in a more side-by-side pattern. Then, reaching another open area, they resume the single file pattern. It is my belief that these patterns of movement are the result of many generations of conditioning and experience. I think that they have learned that mountain lions are more likely to try to ambush from an overhead tree limb in the heavy forest. Therefore the elk have learned not to travel single-file through the woods along an established trail. Better to fan out, using no designated trail, and to not give the mountain lion any established trail from which he could launch an attack.

Here I am trying to give you an idea of how elk think. They are practical. They use common sense. They are very cautious. When you are a wild animal that is as big as a cow, and not too much faster, you have to be smart and cautious. And you can't make many mistakes. Those that survive don't.

Anyway, the elk herd will proceed to their bedding area. They especially love sections of heavy brush with lots of downfall (fallen trees), and places where it is almost impossible to sneak up on them undetected. They like it that way. There they will spend most of the day, sleeping while one or two lookouts take turns alertly watching for danger. Sometime during mid-afternoon the herd will awaken, preen about, and prepare to set out again on their daily routine.

Again, please remember that the herd needs a safe place to sleep, a safe place to water, and a safe place to eat. And they will take the safest and easiest route that allows them to get these basic needs. So when scouting an area, THINK LIKE AN

ELK! Where would you bed down, where is the safest and easiest place to get water, and where is the safest and easiest place to get good food? Then be there with your binoculars late in the afternoon and at first dawn to check out any elk movements. If you have guessed right, and there are elk where you guessed, watch their movements carefully. Then be there a half-hour before dawn, or an hour or so before dark, well hidden, and down wind, with a good sighted-in rifle, and bag your elk!

Chapter 3.

Hunting Seasons and Regulations

I live in Colorado, so my experience with hunting seasons and regulations is limited to Colorado. But our situation here is probably informative to elk hunters in all states.

By the year 1900 there were no elk left in Colorado. They had been hunted to extinction by the miners, settlers, and traveling adventurers who had flocked to the state in large numbers during the late 1800s. The elk and deer herds, much like the buffalo before them, had been considered a year-round supply of fresh meat that was inexhaustible. Too late was it discovered how fragile the environment and wildlife of Colorado really are. Wildlife protection regulations were put into place, and hunting seasons and bag limits were established. Then elk captured in Montana and Wyoming were transported in boxcars to remoter areas of Colorado and released into the wild. It did not take the elk too many years to reestablish themselves in healthy numbers. I mention this history to you, because it helps to explain the complicated hunting laws and the protective attitude the Colorado Department of Wildlife takes toward its wildlife populations. No one wants to ever endanger our precious wildlife again.

As far as elk hunting, the seasons in most states go like this:

The Archery Season: First there is the archery season. It usually runs during August and into September. The weather is usually still pretty warm. The rut will probably begin during this season. This means that archery hunters who know how to use an elk bugle may be able to call their bull into close archery range (30 yds.

or closer). This ability to “bugle up” a bull gives them a good advantage, and these purist hunters deserve it! The bigger bulls will be very aggressive, and will respond readily to the challenge presented by a nearby bugling hunter.

The Muzzle-loader Season: Next comes the muzzleloading (black powder) season. The short season will probably be in September. These guys have to lure their bull to within a hundred yards or closer. Again, the bulls may be in rut, and bugling can bring them into the close range required by the muzzle-loader.

The Rifle Seasons: After the “purist” guys (bow and muzzle loading hunters) have had their chance, then the rest of us are in line to hunt. So the general rifle season runs around October and November. Each season may be an “over the counter” season, in that for most hunting areas, anyone with the necessary qualifications could purchase an elk hunting tag at any of the many designated sales locations such as sporting goods stores, Wal-Mart, K-Mart, convenience stores, etc. Or a special draw permit may be required. In this regard, you need to do a bit of pre-planning by checking out each state’s elk hunting situation. I will provide a list of the address and phone numbers of those states wildlife departments where elk hunting is allowed.

Many states have special “draw only” seasons. It is important that you understand the importance of this **AND THAT IT AFFORDS YOU A GREAT OPPORTUNITY! THIS IS IMPORTANT** as it creates a desirable situation for astute hunters who hunt the state and federal lands..

I hunted a national forest area in 2001, the first year of Colorado’s new policy of a special early season hunt by draw only. **THIS IS IMPORTANT. There were very few hunters in the woods during the first (special application and draw) season.** Then, during the second, third, and fourth seasons, which were over-the-counter license seasons, the woods were crowded with hunters. The net result was that the first season (special draw application) hunters had an incredible hunting advantage. During this special draw season, the woods were still peaceful, the elk were still following their normal daily habits, and were still moving about freely. But when the second season (over-the-counter license season) started, the woods were suddenly full of hunters, you could hear shooting in the distance, and most of the elk panicked and went into hiding.

Does the first season (special draw) tag cost more? Not in Colorado. If not, why didn’t more hunters take advantage of it? Because it takes pre-commitment and pre-planning. The special application must be submitted well in advance during the

first week in April. Few of us are thinking elk hunting in April. And it is a human tendency to procrastinate. BUT THOSE GUYS WHO PLANNED AHEAD HAD A GREAT ADVANTAGE COME HUNTING SEASON! So my advice to you and your hunting buddies is to get a group application submitted for the first special draw elk season, if such a season is available in your state.

How To Submit a First Season Application in Colorado

The Colorado Department of Wildlife (DOW) sends out the yearly elk hunting instructions and brochure in February. If you live in Colorado, you can easily pick one up at any of the locations that sell hunting licenses. If you have a buddy who lives in Colorado, you can ask him to pick up copies and send them to you and your hunting partners. Or you can write to the Colorado DOW and ask them to send you a copy. Their address is: Colorado Dept. of Wildlife, 6060 Broadway, Denver CO 80216, Tel: 303-297-1192.

The hunting brochure looks complicated. It is. Study it.

There are several tips I can give you to help you in this process. First of all, if you are planning to hunt as part of a group (please, never hunt alone. It is too dangerous), you will all have to submit individual first-season applications. But you do not want to be in the situation where some of you get a first-season tag, and the others don't. This would break up your hunting group. So you want to apply for a group license. The procedure is the same, except that one of you is designated as the group leader, and his Conservation Certificate Number is placed in the appropriate place on each application. This tells the DOW computer that you are all part of a group and that you should all be issued a first-season tag, or none of you should receive a tag (all or nothing). This procedure is good. However, if for any reason any one of you makes a mistake on your application that causes that person to be disqualified, ALL of you will be disqualified. An example of an application for a group application is provided below.

Chapter 4

Common Mistakes

My friend Gerald hunted elk for three seasons before he finally got a shot at a good bull. The bull was running, and it was a four-hundred yard shot, not an easy shot to make. But when Gerald told me that his shot, made with his scoped .270, had passed three feet over the back of his target, I knew that something was wrong. I asked Gerald if he had ever sighted-in his rifle. He said, “No, but the man who sold it to me had sighted it in.” I smiled, and invited him to bring his rifle to the local rifle range, where I was a member.

As I always do with a rifle to be sighted in, I had Gerald shoot twice at a target I had set up at a range of 25 yards. His shots were grouped nicely, but were eight inches high! For three years he had been wasting his time hunting, because he could not possibly have hit an elk with a rifle whose sighting was so badly off. At 200 yards he would have shot two feet high, and at four hundred yards, three feet or more (as he had described). So my advice is simple: sight your rifle in each year before you go hunting. Don't waste your season, and some poor elk's life, by shooting at as precious an animal as the majestic elk with a rifle that is not properly sighted-in. Remember that the knocking-about that the average high-power rifle takes during a normal hunting season can cause it get out-of-sight. So perform this ritual yearly. I like to use my Ruger 300 Win. Mag. for elk hunting. I started out this last season with a perfectly sighted-in rifle. I hunted hard. After the season was over, I took my rifle to the range and checked it. My sighting had moved six clicks to the right.

You don't have to have access to a rifle range to sight-in your rifle. For years I did not belong to a rifle range. So I threw an old pallet into the back of my pickup, and drove out to some BLM land. I propped up the pallet a hundred yards from my truck, and blazed away. I used a roll of kitchen paper towels



laid on the hood of my truck as a bench rest. I was using a 30-06 at the time with a 3x9 50mm scope. My sight-in was perfect, with the final result being a three-shot group with all of the holes in the paper target touching each other. It doesn't get any better than that. So you do not need to have the use of a rifle range to do your sighting-in. In this particular case, I wanted my zero to be at 200 yards, so I placed my three-shot group so that it was one and a half inches low at 100 yards. We will discuss this below.

Another point worth mentioning is to be sure to use binoculars. My suggestion is to get good binoculars. This can make a real difference in your ability to spot an elk that is moving through the underbrush several miles away. I have a pair of Steiner binoculars that I cherish. I cannot tell you the number of times I have, while standing along some mountain perch, spotted elk that my hunting partners missed. This particular pair of binoculars sells for \$700, but I got them at an estate sale for \$100. Boy was this a great bargain for me.

Many local hunters depend greatly on their binoculars to bag their elk. They travel the local farm roads late in the evening and use their binoculars to scan the mountain meadows that are above them, and are several miles in the distance. When they spot a good bull grazing in one of the meadows, they mark the location, and return the next day to that meadow. Then they wait for the bull to return.

Another point to be mentioned is bugling. As I have mentioned, the rutting season is usually over by the time the elk rifle season starts. Don't waste your time bugling to attract a bull to you. The bulls are no longer interested in answering challenges. But they will still bugle, but for another reason. They will bugle to mark their territory. So when you hear a bull bugling in the distance, don't bother to try to attract him to you. But do know that he is there. If he sounds fairly close, you might even try to stalk him. But watch your wind and be cautious.

Some people are intimidated by the idea of using an elk bugle. But it is actually quite easy to learn. I went to a Wal-Mart, bought an elk bugle in the sporting goods section for about \$15, and also bought an instructional video on elk bugling for about \$10. I watched the video, and then practiced in the back yard. In no time at all I was a pretty good elk caller. I also bought a cow elk call. I actually get more benefit from the cow elk call. The cow call is not threatening to other elk, and they seem to associate the calling of a cow with safety. So when I spot a herd of elk approaching, I will give a few calls from the cow call to assure them that other elk are safely using the area, and that they can safely approach. It usually works.

Chapter 5

The Elk Rifle

In 1906 the US Army adopted a 30 caliber (.30 inch) diameter rifle cartridge as their standard. It thus became known as the 30-06. It was, and is, a great hunting cartridge. Grizzlies, Cape Buffalo, African Lions, all have been taken with the venerable 30-06. It is a sentimental favorite of mine, in part due to the fact that I carried an M-1 rifle during my Army experience.

Now let's talk about muzzle velocity and shooting distances. This can be a complicated subject. But we will make it simple. The faster the bullet leaves the barrel of your rifle, the further it will go before it hits the ground, or to put it more importantly, the flatter the rifle will shoot. The flatter the trajectory of your bullet, the easier it is to hit a target that is some distance away. The below graph shows it all.

In the 1950s a man by the name of Jack O'Connor who was the shooting editor of Outdoor Life magazine came up with an idea to make the 30-06 shoot flatter. He took a 30-06 brass cartridge and reduced the diameter of the opening slightly, to .27 inches. The slight reduction in bullet size did not have much of a negative effect on impact performance, but it did increase the muzzle velocity to 3200 ft/sec for a 110 grain bullet. This made the .270 the flattest shooting off-the-shelf rifle of its time. It was a great rifle for antelope and deer.

In the 1980s a further refinement was achieved. New developments in powder performance led to the introduction of the Remington 7mm Magnum. This new cartridge had a .280 bullet (slightly larger than the .270 and slightly smaller than the .30 caliber) mated to a much larger brass cartridge, which was packed with a faster burning powder propellant. This rifle gave even better down-range performance than the .270. Its muzzle velocity for a 150 gram bullet was approximately 3100 ft/sec.

Then in the 1990s the Winchester 300 Magnum was introduced. It featured even faster burning powder, a much larger brass casing to accommodate the extra powder required, had the standard 30-06 thirty caliber bullet. This rifle achieved

the best flat shooting characteristics of all, but at a cost: it kicks like a mule. As I mentioned previously, I shoot a Win. 300 Mag. I wear a good padded jacket when I sight it in at the range. I also place a rubber recoil pad on the butt of the stock. It also helps me to endure the painful recoil to remind myself that, once range sighted-in, I will only have to fire it once or twice during the hunting season (one shot, one kill!).

Why do I endure the pain? The answer is simple. At a range of 500 yards, the average 150 grain 30-06 bullet will drop almost four feet. The Winchester 300 Mag. 150 grain bullet will drop about 38 inches. Thus, for that occasional extreme long-range shot, the extra oomph of my Win. 300 Mag. will give me a bit of an advantage.

Having said this, most kill shots at elk are at much shorter distances. The last elk killed by my hunting group was shot at 75 yards. So the 30-06, and the .270 and the Remington 7mm Mag. are all fine elk rifles. And they too will reach out to 500 yards. The main factor here is your ability to properly guess the distance to your quarry. This is one of my biggest problems. Last year I really goofed; while hunting cow elk, I confidently guessed the distance to a grazing herd of 25 cows as approximately 250 yards. So, we used the below chart to adjust our scope sight pictures to shoot at targets 250 yards away. But when my hunting party, mostly shooting 30-06s and .270s, fired away, most of our shots went low, under the bellies of the grazing elk. I later paced off the distance from our blind to where they stood; it was 350 yards. My error in judging the range properly caused many of us to miss our elk. Please study this chart:

Note that we have sighted in at 200 yds. This is the distance that I recommend you sight in your rifle.

<i>Rifle</i>	Muzzle velocity	Drop at 100 yds.	200 yds.	300 yds.	400 yds.	500 yds.
.270	2930 ft/sec	+1.7 in.	0 in.	-7.4 in.	-21.6 in.	-44 in.
30-06	2960 ft/sec	+1.6 in.	0 in.	-7.4 in.	-21.7 in.	-44 in.
Rem. 7mm Mag.	3130 ft/sec	+1.4 in.	0 in.	-6.6 in.	-20 in.	-40 in.
Win. 300 Mag.	3070 ft/sec	+1.4 in.	0 in.	-6.4 in.	-18 in.	-38 in.

Note: + indicates that the bullet path is above the line of sight, while – indicates that the bullet path is below the line of sight. See the bullet path picture below.

There are several observations we can make from this chart. First, when the .270 is loaded with the heavier 150 grain bullet, its ballistics performance is not any better

than that of the 30-06. Never hunt elk with a bullet weight less than 150 grains. Also, all of these rifles perform basically the same, their trajectories all being within a few inches of each other at 400 yards. These above figures will vary slightly, depending upon cartridge manufacturer and bullet weight. Many hunters prefer a heavier bullet for elk, using the 180 or 220 grain bullet. That is fine, but understand that the bullet drop over these longer distances will be greater. I prefer the lighter, but more flat-shooting 150 grain bullet.

I take this information for each rifle round and emboss it in a credit-card sized plastic card. Then I carry it in my wallet, try to memorize it, and have it for ready-reference during the hunting season. Then, depending on the distance to my target, I know how much to raise my sights. As an example, if I am using my trusty 30-06 rifle, and my target elk is at 400 yards, my chart tell me to shoot 22 inches high. So I will place the crosshairs if my scope about 22 inches above the killing spot. In this case I will aim about four to six inches above the top of the elk's shoulder. If I am shooting my Win. 300 Mag., I will aim 18 inches above the kill spot, in this case aiming at the top of the elk's shoulder. If you will study this chart a bit, you will come to realize that the flatter the trajectory of your rifle, the more forgiving it will be if you misjudge the distance.

My suggestion to you is to practice judging distances. Go out to a golf practice range, or other open area, guess the range to an object, and then pace it off. Keep practicing until you are pretty good at guessing distances. This can really make a positive difference in your hunting effectiveness.

Chapter 6

How to Properly Sight In Your Rifle

Please take a close look at this picture of the flight path of a fired bullet. Note that the bullet, during it's first flight, is actually under the line-of-sight of the



marksman. Then after it crosses the line-of-sight, the bullet is above the line-of-sight until much further down range, when the bullet again crosses the line-of-sight. At this point the bullet is striking exactly where you are aiming. Well, very conveniently for the 30-06, the distance to the point where the bullet first crosses the line-of-sight (the near-zero) is 25 yards, and the distance that the bullet crosses the line-of-sight down range (the far-zero) is approximately 225 yards. So if you sight in your 30-06 rifle at 25 yards, it will also be sighted in for 225 yards. **THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT TO DO:** sight your rifle in at 25 yards. Do this because it is much easier to find a place where you can shoot at 25 yards, the disturbance of cross winds are much less likely to affect your sight-in, and it is much easier to check your target. This 25 yard sight-in rule applies to the .270, the Rem. 7mm Mag., and the Win. 300 Mag. also. Remember my friend Gerald whose .270 needed sighting-in? Using this 25 yards sight-in method, it took only 6 rounds to sight-in his rifle. Then when we later shot his rifle at a target 200 yards out, he was right in the bullseye. This 25 yard sight-in method can be used for any caliber of rifle; simply adjust your expected point-of-impact as follows:

- A. At the 25 yd. distance, aim at the center of the bullseye, and adjust your sights so that the bullets strike the center of the bullseye.
- B. At the 100 yd. distance, aim at the center of the bullseye, but adjust your sights so that your bullets strike the target approximately 1 _ inches below the center of the bullseye. This should give you a good approximate zero-in for 200 yards.
- C. Take a few shots at 200 yards to verify your sight-in, and make any minor adjustments as are necessary. Your windage (left-right) should be perfect; your elevation (up-down) may need a few clicks adjustment. Remember that at 100 and 200 yards any winds that are blowing will begin to affect your windage settings.

Keep in mind that I have attempted to keep these instructions as simple as possible, for a subject that can be very complicated. I have only discussed using 150 grain bullets, for example. But hopefully you get the idea.

One thing that you can do to maintain consistent accuracy with your rifle is to be sure to use the same ammunition for hunting that you used to sight-in your rifle. For example, if you used Winchester SuperX 150 grain bullets to sight in, be sure to use the same cartridges when you hunt. A lot of people will tell you that you must use a heavier bullet for elk, i.e., 220 grain, etc. I personally believe that bullet placement is more important than bullet weight. In other words, a 150 grain bullet placed in the heart cavity is better than a 220 grain bullet in the lungs. So I go for accuracy. If you do choose to use a heavier bullet, be sure to sight-in your rifle using it. But remember that it will not shoot as “flat” as the lighter bullet.

Chapter 7

Learn to Track

I remember last season when I spent a lot of time doing pre-season scouting in a certain public hunting area. I had located a nice herd of about 40 elk. I knew the general area of heavy timber where they bedded down, and I knew where they grazed and watered. Their grazing and watering spots were located in a nearby private ranch (no hunting allowed); their bedding area was located in a national forest (public hunting area). So my plan was to “ambush” the herd as it traveled in the late afternoon from its bedding area to the watering and grazing area, and to nail them while they were still on public hunting land. A herd of 40 elk leaves a very clearly defined path through the woods. I found the spot where they crossed a dirt road every afternoon. Their tracks were everywhere, and they were kicking up a lot of dirt from the roadside as they scrambled up an embankment on one side of the road. A small child could have spotted these tracks. I was actually pretty excited about locating this herd, and doing all of the proper scouting. I was confident of success this season.

The afternoon before the season opened, my high-school buddy Dan arrived to join me in the hunt, as he does each year. I took him out to “show-off” the great hunting spot I had located. It was about 4:00 in the afternoon. As we stood in the edge of the wooded area, I was showing him my suggested ambush spot. He turned to me and said, “What is that?” I too heard it. It sounded as if a small herd of cattle were running through the woods toward us. They were making a loud racket as they

broke through the underbrush and fallen timber. I started to say, “It sounds like a herd of cattle,” but before I could speak, the herd of 40 elk broke out of the woods right in front of us. Something had spooked them as they were making their afternoon trek from their bedding area to their grazing/watering area. They were racing pell mell, and we were standing right in their path. I suddenly realized that we were about to be run over by a herd of elk! What a way to go!

They were so close that I could see the look of fear and panic in the eyes of the lead cow elk. I could actually smell them. Dan and I started frantically waving our arms and shouting. At the last moment, when the lead elk were within 8 or 10 feet of us, they swerved off to their left and thundered by us. Dan and I stood there dumbfounded and counted the number of bulls in the herd as they ran by. Then we stood there in shocked silence as we listened to them crash through the woods off in the distance. Dan turned to me and said, “That is the most magnificent sight that I have ever seen.” I replied, “Just wait until tomorrow when the season has begun. We’ll be waiting for them, this time with our rifles.” We then walked 20 feet or so into the woods to observe the wide swath of destruction the herd had left behind as they had stampeded through the woods. Broken branches littered the floor of the forest and their racing hooves had badly churned up the ground.

I was confident that the same herd would be using this road crossing area the next morning as they returned to their bedding area. So early the next morning, the starting morning of the elk season, Dan and I left our cabin and headed back to this same spot. We got there about a half hour before first daylight. To our amazement and dismay, there were 3 pickups and travel trailers parked right next to where Dan and I had been standing the afternoon before. Six hunters had moved in during the night, and were camping right in the middle of my carefully planned hunting spot. You can imagine how I felt. I was bummed!

There is a good reason I am telling you this story. We had to move to another hunting spot that was not too far away. But I continued to watch the area of the “stampede” closely. Here is what I observed: Because of the lay of the land, the elk herd continued to pass close by the camped hunters twice each day. Their tracks came within 80 feet of the encampment. But the hunters never bothered to look for elk tracks. Thus they never realized that they were camped right in the middle of elk herd movement. Early each morning they piled into their pickups to drive several miles to hunt elk, to an area that probably was not as good for hunting as was their own campground. I was amazed, but not enough so to say anything to the hunters, because next year I plan to be there for the first elk season, and I plan to get the large bull that I know follows in the rear of this elk herd.

My point of this story is to remind you to watch for elk tracks and other signs of movement. Even as you travel the dirt roads in your hunting area, watch the sides of the road for elk crossings. Once you start to do this, you will be amazed how easy it is to spot these crossings.

Chapter 8

The Kill

A big bull elk can weigh over a thousand pounds. A large cow elk weighs over seven hundred pounds. This is a lot of fresh meat to deal with, especially if you bagged your elk far away from the nearest road. The first thing to do is to quickly field dress the animal. This involves slitting open the abdomen from the beginning of the chest cage to the anus. Be careful not to pierce any intestines as you do this, as the contents of the intestines may spoil any meat it touches. Then pull out all of the intestines, laying them away from the body. Also reach up into the throat area and remove the esophagus (wind pipe). All of this should be sufficient to cause the animal to bleed properly. Next, take several short branches and prop open the chest and stomach cavity areas so that the meat will cool off quickly. **THIS IS IMPORTANT.** I have seen elk spoil, even when the outside temperatures were in the thirties, when the body cavity was not propped open. Cooling the meat off quickly is probably the most important thing to accomplish in field dressing the carcass.

If you bag your elk near a road, and you can round up four or five sturdy fellows, you may be able to drive your vehicle up to the kill site, and heave the kill into the back of the vehicle. Then it is simply a drive home or to the game processor. But if your kill is in the boondocks, now your work really begins. Hopefully you have brought along in your pack a hand axe or a small folding saw. These tools are of incredible value if you have to quarter the animal, or have to cut it into smaller pieces to back-pack out. I am no longer a young man, so the thought of

backpacking 800 pounds of meat down six or seven miles of mountain trails no longer appeals to me. So I deliberately only hunt in areas where I know that I will be able to haul my elk out. But some of my younger friends do hike way back six or seven miles into the mountains to get their bulls. “The hunting is easier, and the bulls are bigger,” they say. Good luck to them.

I hunt with my 4x4 GMC pickup. In it I carry a 2 ton come-along winch, lots of sturdy rope, and a 3 ft. by 8 ft. piece of sturdy in. plywood. I use the plywood as a ramp, and with the come-along I am able to winch any bull I get into the back of my truck. I have tried it the other ways. Easier is better. If I can't get my pickup truck close to where I see an elk, I won't shoot it.

Leave the skin on the animal as long as possible, as it helps to keep dirt and waste off of the meat. Most people throw the skin away anyway. I used to think that this was a waste, until the year I decided to tan two elk skins. Boy are they heavy and cumbersome. It was so much work that I now throw my skins away also!

Chapter 9

How about an Outfitter?

The Colorado DOW reports that the out-of-state elk hunter spends an average of \$3,500 on his/her hunt. This is a lot of money. The elk tag alone costs over \$500. So even those of us who live on a beer budget should be aware of the advantages and cost of using an outfitter.

I have found that the “Drop Camp” type of outfitter service is more affordable than many people realize. Generally, there are reputable and dedicated Colorado elk hunt outfitters who provide a drop camp hunt for approximately \$1200 to \$1500. Given the other high costs of coming to Colorado to hunt elk, this drop camp cost may be a bargain. It can dramatically increase your chances of getting an elk.

First of all, what is a drop camp hunt? The outfitter will pick you up the day before the hunt, and his string of horses will haul you and your gear up into the mountains to an area that the DOW has assigned to him exclusively. This means that no other outfitters can use the area. Since you will have spent several hours on horseback getting up to your camping and hunting site, it is unlikely that you will see



Our hunting cabin; private and secluded.

any other regular hunters up there. So you will have your own private hunting area. The scenic horseback ride up to your hunting camp will be an unforgettable experience in itself. The outfitter prior to your arrival will have set up the camp. A spacious wall tent will be set up, complete with camp stove. Firewood is cut and stacked for your use. Cooking utensils, cots, an axe, and water are provided. You bring the food, your sleeping bag, and your hunting gear. The outfitter will brief you on the hunting area, give you tips on how to best hunt the area, and he then leaves. He, or one of his wranglers, will then come to visit you each day to check on you. If you have bagged elk, he will haul them back to his base camp for you.

I have found outfitters to be wonderful people. It is definitely a labor of love. These guys love the outdoors, and they love hunting. It is fun to be around them and to talk to them. They work long hours, and they work hard. Considering that their work season is only a few months long (archery, muzzleloader, and rifle hunt seasons), they do not have a get-rich scheme going.

Should you ever decide to use an outfitter, do not wait until the last minute to book your trip. Most good outfitters are booked up at least a year in advance. Don't wait until a month or two before the season begins to begin to look for an outfitter. You will probably be disappointed. There are a good number of outfitters with websites on the Internet. Go to any good search engine, type in "Colorado elk hunt" and start surfing. It is an interesting experience.

I asked my friend Alan Palmer, who is a local Colorado rancher and outfitter, for suggestions about this chapter. He said to be sure to ask for references from the outfitter before you book a hunt. Then, he said, "Spend twenty dollars making some phone calls. Call the hunters who used the outfitter. Ask if they got game,

and if they were satisfied with the services provided by the outfitter. You can save yourself a lot of grief that way.” Alan, who is an avid hunter and outdoorsman, charges \$1100 for a rifle season drop camp. He is very dedicated and conscientious. His phone number is 719-256-4817.

Once you get to your drop camp, the success of the hunt is up to you. But getting away from the hordes of hunters that roam the lower mountain slopes will give you a good advantage. Then remember that the biggest bulls tend to live higher up in the mountains where you will be hunting. So next year, when Aunt Ethel leaves part of her inheritance to you, you may wish to consider an outfitter drop camp hunt.

Chapter 10

The Rut

The annual fall mating season for elk is known as The Rut. The bulls, many who have been living solitary lives deeper in the woods and mountainous areas, all come out of hiding. It is an interesting time. These magnificent animals, usually so reclusive and cautious, react boldly to the flow of hormones that affects both sexes at this time. They throw caution to the wind. The urge to mate overcomes much of their innate fear and natural inclinations toward reclusivity. They boldly sail forth to find mates.

The cows meanwhile have been living together with other cows, yearlings and small bulls in herds, some herds small, some larger. The big bulls show up to claim the herd, or part of the herd, as their harem. At this point the smaller bulls and yearling bulls take one look at the monster bull which has arrived to take over, see the aggressive gleam in his eyes, and they beat a hasty retreat.

Now the big bull has his harem. But it is not that simple. As with his human counterparts, after you “get the girl” is where the trouble starts. There are not enough cow elk harems to go around. So the bulls fight to see who “gets the girls.” This is where the famous scenes of monster bulls fighting it out in open meadows come in. The fights rarely injure bulls. Most of the time the bulls will simply try to psych each other out. They will bellow, roar, shake their antlers, thrash small trees into oblivion, and in general try to present such an awesome image to their rival

that the rivals will give up. This often works. Other times actual combat ensues, with much pushing and slashing about of antlers until one bull concedes. Usually it is the heaviest bull that wins.

Many hunters think that it ends here, that the neighborhood's biggest bull will be with the harem, with all of the lesser bulls milling about the countryside, oozing resentment and frustration. But this is not exactly true. Most of the time no one male elk is strong enough to keep up with all of the demands of the mating season. Think of it. He has won. Now he has to service all of those cows (12, 18, 24?), and he has to interrupt this duty to fight off all of the challenger bulls that show up, and then has to find time to eat and get some rest. So in not too many days he is exhausted. So exhausted that he now cannot defeat all of the challenger bulls. So he wearily steps aside, and the next-largest and toughest bull takes over. This "change-of-command" may occur four or five times during the rut.

Many hunters mistakenly believe that any bull they "bugle up" during the rut will be an inferior bull, and that the biggest bull is with the herd. Not so. They just may be staring at the biggest bull within 50 miles.

If you are lucky enough to be hunting during the rut, knowing the art of using an elk bugle can really help you. It is not too difficult at this special time of year to "call up" a bull elk and get him to come trotting over to your area to check out this "rival". And he is usually so full of flowing hormones that he will be much less cautious than normal. It is an excellent hunting situation to be in. As I mention elsewhere in this book, learning to use an elk bugle is not difficult. Go to your sporting goods store and buy a bugle and an instructional video, and then practice a bit. My bugle cost \$15 at Wal-Mart, the instructional video cost about \$10. I cannot tell you how thrilling and satisfying it is to get the bull in the next valley so worked up that he comes charging over the ridge to visit.

One point here. Do not expect to be able to bugle up the herd bull. He has his hands full fighting off the bulls which come to him looking for a fight. He has absolutely no interest in going to look for trouble. So he will hear you, and ignore you. Fights come to him; he does not go looking for fights! It is the challenger bulls that are "looking for a fight" and they are the ones that answer your bugle.

Actually, because the Colorado rifle elk seasons usually occur after the rut, I get more use out of my cow call than I do my bugle call. I use my cow call to make bulls curious. Many times they will trot over to check out this cow that is making so much noise. At other times, when I am trying to get a group of elk to move

toward me, I will use the cow call to give them the impression that there already are cow elk here, and that it therefore must be safe to venture over my way. For example, if I see elk at the far end of a meadow, well out of shooting range, I may use my cow call to try to get them to move toward me and into shootable rifle range.

Where I do get good use from my bull bugle call is when I am hunting after the rut, and I hear a bull bugle in the distance. In this case, his bugle is doing nothing more than telling the other elk where he is. He is marking his territory. So, if he sounds fairly close, and I wish to go after him, I will bugle back at him. He will usually answer. Then, as I move through the woods toward him, I will occasionally bugle again, and his answer will tell me where he is. In this way I can work my way toward him.

Chapter 11

The Hunting Plan for The “Worst-Case-Scenario”

What is the “Worst-Case-Scenario”? It is the out-of-state hunter who has never been to Colorado before, doesn’t know anyone in Colorado, has never hunted elk before, and doesn’t have a clue where to hunt. This is “worst-case-scenario!”

Sounds bad doesn’t it? Well, everyone has to start sometime. It pretty much describes my situation when I went hunting elk the first time, so I am definitely not making fun of this type of hunter. I learned much from my first season, as I hope all first-season hunters do. One of my goals in writing this book is to give the first-season hunter a better shot at taking home a trophy.

The first thing this hunter should do is develop a plan. This plan may not be the best plan in the world, because of his lack of knowledge, as elaborated above. But

without a plan, he and his hunting friends will probably just wander around the hunting countryside and not accomplish much of anything.

The Plan

Pick a hunting area. Get out a good map of your state, one that shows mountainous area. Most mountainous areas have elk populations. Now look for a mountainous area that has a sizeable amount of public hunting; look for a large expanse marked as national forest and/or BLM land. Almost all of this is open to public hunting. Now look for a small town near this public hunting area. Have someone get on the Internet, put the name of the small town, plus the word “motel” in a search engine such as .www.google.com, and locate a motel with affordable rates. You can telephone them and make reservations. Hey, it can get crowded in elk hunting areas during elk hunting season, so don’t just plan to show up and grab a room anywhere. While you are on the phone, ask to speak to the manager and ask him about the local elk hunting situation. Now you have started your plan.

Now you and your buddies are driving to your selected hunting state. Every time you stop for gas, or a meal, or coffee, listen to the talk around you. Chances are there will be other hunters there who are also on their way to your state. Listen to their talk (eavesdrop!). Strike up conversations with them. Ask them questions. Some of them, protective of their favorite hunting areas and hunting techniques, will shut up like a clam. But then again, others will talk, and will freely give you valuable information. Remember, at this point you don’t know a whole lot, so every bit of information will help. When you get fairly close to the town where your motel is located, deliberately stop as often as possible at cafes and restaurants, and gas stations. Again, listen and ask questions. Be creative; put your thinking cap on. Keep an eye out for other likely sources of information. See a policeman or deputy sheriff parked in his car? Talk to him. Places such as feed stores, convenience stores, the local police station or sheriff’s office, etc. can pay off. Ask where the best elk hunting is located. Ask where the elk are this time of year. Ask the best method of hunting, best times to hunt. Remembering the four elk needs (food, water, cover and privacy), ask where this type of terrain is located. You may be surprised at the information you can get this way.

I am shy, and this stuff is not easy for me. But several of my hunting buddies are great at this. They can suck the most amazing information out of strangers. Being naturally friendly and outgoing really helps here. I pestered one local cowboy for information once. He was very reticent. He wasn’t about to share his local elk

hunting secrets with me. But finally he blurted out the name and location of a local rancher who hated elk because the elk damaged his haystacks every winter. Now I am sure that this rancher's location wasn't the best spot that he knew of, but it was still a great lead.

Now you have arrived at your destination. Begin by driving around the area you have picked out to hunt. Look for areas that have the four elk needs: food, water, cover, and privacy. Watch for elk. You never know when they will be seen crossing a road or grazing in the distance. Look for tracks along the side of the road where they may have crossed the road. A herd can leave very clear sign that they have passed; churned up dirt, big tracks, trampled grass. Especially check the sides of the road for tracks adjacent to where old logging roads, trails, farm roads, etc, cross your road. Elk are not above using man-made roads and trails, especially when no-one is around. They, like us, all things being equal, will take the easiest path to get somewhere. Remember that elk tracks look like small cow tracks. If you need to educate yourself on this find some cows and look at their tracks. The quarry you seek will make the same type of track, only smaller. And you will eventually learn to distinguish cow elk tracks from bull elk tracks. It is easy. The bulls make larger tracks than do the cows (ain't I smart?).

Be ready to get off the road. Be ready to get out of your vehicle. Please don't be one of those hunters that just drive around looking for an elk to shoot. You most likely won't ever see one, and you will be missing out on one of the real pleasures of the sport; getting out in the woods, among the trees, just you, your rifle, and mother nature.

Good physical conditioning helps here. If you are a young whippersnapper, this probably won't be a problem. But those of us who have a lot of runway behind us may be out of shape. Many dedicated elk hunters start walking exercise several months before the season arrives. They know from experience that the higher mountain altitudes, plus the steeper slopes, can really take it out of you. Me? I can still get up those steep slopes; it just takes me longer than it used to. But then again, I'm not in as much of a hurry as those younger hunters. If anyone says anything to me about it, I just give them my standard quip, "It is just one majestic old bull out chasing another majestic old bull." This usually shuts them up.

Locate the four needs (food, water, cover, privacy). Use your binoculars to search the countryside. Figure out where, if you were an elk, you would go to get from cover to water or food, and walk this area. Look for sign. Look for tracks, broken branches, trampled grass, anything that would indicate that elk have been passing

this way. When you do begin to find such signs, you will be amazed at how big a swath of destruction a herd of elk can make as they pass through an area twice each day (once in the morning, once in the afternoon). You will also be amazed at how many other hunters can walk right by such signs and not see anything. At such a time it will begin to dawn on you that you are becoming an experienced elk hunter. It is a great moment!

After you have found several locations where the elk have been passing, select the one site for your ambush. Place yourself downwind. A cheap, throwaway cigarette lighter makes a good wind direction detector. Simply light it, and observe which way the flame blows. Do not get too close to where the elk pass. They have incredible sight and hearing, and may spot you. I prefer to be about 150 or 200 yards away.

Be at this ambush site at least 30 minutes before first light in the morning, or 1 hour before dusk in the afternoon. Do not get to your ambush location by walking the same path the elk will be traveling. Travel through the brush if you have to. Wait quietly and patiently. This may not be easy for the more impatient types. You guys should practice your Zen Buddhism, relax and enjoy the wonderment of your experience. Become one with nature. Merge with the ant or fly that is pestering you. Resist the temptation to blast away at the mountain squirrel or jay that has decided to chatter at you.

And be open to receive new information. Observe everything. Even if elk don't show up that morning or afternoon, try to learn from the experience. Why didn't they show? Where might they be tomorrow? What mistake, if any, did you make to keep them away? It is all a learning experience. If you run into other hunters, chat with them, ask questions.

Speaking of other hunters, running into them is usually unavoidable. But do try to stay away from them. Remember that the elk are trying their darnest to stay away from them too. So seek out areas where the other hunters aren't. This will usually involve walking. As you will too painfully observe, most hunters are road bound. Get away from them by walking.

However there are times when you can use the presence of other hunters to your advantage. During the middle of the day, when the elk have bedded down, you will often times see other hunters walking around in the woods. Use them as your "beaters". Remember those old jungle movies where the Bwana has a large group of natives walk through the jungle, shouting and beating on pans to drive the lion

or tiger toward his hunting blind? Well the procedure can be the same. Position yourself along a good game trail that has elk sign along it, hide and wait. Let those other hunters stir the elk up, rouse them from their beds, and drive them past you. It works!

You may, being in excellent shape, wish to try yourself to locate the elk in their daytime sleeping places. Head for the most miserable, despicable, impossible-to-access spot in the woods. This is where the elk will be hiding. When you get there, know that you haven't surprised them. They will know exactly where you are, but you will only be guessing where they are. Look for sign, especially a lot of elk poop. They will probably have used this bedding area quite a bit, and the mounds of elk dung will have built up. Elk dung is considerably larger than deer poop, is dark, about the size of large marbles (as big as a quarter coin), and tastes rather bitter. Hey, I am only joking about tasting it!

If you are lucky, the elk won't spook, but will try to wait you out. They may just let you get quite close to them. The brush and undergrowth will be so thick that they will feel confident that you can't see them from any distance. At this point, when your inner senses tell you that you are getting close, kneel down every so often and look around through the thick underbrush. You may just spot the legs of a standing elk, or the antlers of a laying-down bull. The coloring of the elk's coat gives him wonderful camouflage in such situations. And he knows how to stand still to avoid detection. But every so often an ear will twitch. So be on your toes. Hey this is real hunting. Just you, and your skills, versus the elk and his skills. This is what it is all about. This is sport!

Chapter 12

About Shooting a Cow Elk

When I first began hunting elk, I was totally focused on getting a big trophy bull. Totally focused. Shooting cow elk was for wimps.

But I did begin to have a lot of people tell me how much better cow elk meats tastes, and how it is so much more tender than bull elk. Well, the season finally came along when Colorado offered special cow hunting tags because of a drought

and resulting over-population of elk. I dutifully got my special tag, and was lucky enough to bag a nice cow elk. She was the lead cow for a pretty good-sized herd (50 elk), so she was probably up there in age. Usually the most experienced cows (as in “older”) lead the herd. So I was tremendously elated and surprised at how tender the meat was. To make a longer story short, I have gotten to the point where I now would just as soon shoot a cow elk as a five-by-five bull. Boy is their meat delicious!

I still lust for that trophy bull that occasionally will come along. But in the meantime, I sure get a thrill of filling the freezer with tender and tasty cow elk steaks and burger.

Chapter 13

The Spiritual Elk Hunting Journey

There is a great scene in the beginning of the movie “The Last of the Mohicans.” The three hunters have just bagged a mountain elk. Then they pause before the fallen animal and say a prayer to its spirit. This scene often sticks in my mind when I think of the wonderment of elk hunting.

I am saving this chapter for the last because many of you will not understand it. Those of you who think that elk hunting is all about bagging meat and antlers will not get the point. Many of my most memorable elk hunting seasons were in years when I did not get an elk. But the fellowship with my hunting buddies, the contentment found around a camp fire, the smell and taste of fried eggs and greasy bacon at 4:30 in the morning when it is zero degrees outside the cabin, and the incredible “oneness” that slowly sinks into your being as you spend an entire week poking around in the natural beauty of the mountain wilderness, all this is what elk hunting is all about.

One of my more mystical acquaintances quotes to me this rule of the universe: “What you seek evades you, but what you desire comes to you.” I find this quote

hard to understand until I think of elk hunting. Then I understand it. For you see, in elk hunting if you concentrate only on killing the animal, you are missing the point of the hunt. And you will then miss the really important reasons for the hunt, as I have elaborated on above. I have also observed that if you only focus on getting the meat and antlers, you will probably fail. But if you will surrender to the entire process of the hunt, then you will enjoy your experience more. And you may be more successful in bagging the animal too. What I have learned to do is to not place too much emphasis on making the kill, but to instead concentrate my energies on being the best elk hunter I can be. Then everything else falls into place. I also get to maximize my enjoyment of this annual ritual of pursuing “oneness” with the wilderness.

If someone were to tell me that I would never again bag an elk, I would still be out there each fall. In have learned that bagging the elk is only a small part of what the elk hunt is all about.

Summary and Conclusion

At the end of each season you will be a smarter and better elk hunter than you were the year before. You will have acquired some knowledge and hunting skill that you can use next year. You will bask in the knowledge that you are on the way to becoming a great elk hunter.

Does this mean that you will get an elk each year? Probably not. But if you are on the way to becoming a great elk hunter, you will know that this is not important. What is important is that you are a good hunter, a master at the sport. And you will learn to love the elk as I do. This magnificent animal was



perhaps placed here by the Creator to challenge us, to get us out there in the wilderness every so often, to give us a chance to discover things about ourselves that we would not otherwise discover.

If it was easy to bag an elk each year, many of us wouldn't bother.

Enjoy the outdoors. Enjoy the total experience. Realize that your hunting journey may be more about getting out in the woods, may be more of just an excuse to commune with nature. The warmth of a mid-morning sun on a snow covered mountain slope, the awesome beauty of hidden forest meadows, rushing mountain streams, the stillness of deep forests, all of this will affect you. For thousands of years our ancestors lived in the forest. Maybe there is still something in us which yearns for this return to nature, as brief as our one week hunting season may be. The mountains of the West are a wondrous place, full of history and lore. Now you will have become part of all of it. When you leave the mountains each year, you will take part of them back home with you. You will be a better person for the experience.

The best of luck to you. You will return home with a trophy each year, whether or not you get an elk. And remember, in elk hunting it is the journey, not the destination, that is important.

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Locations of Some State Wildlife Agencies

Colorado: Colorado Dept. of Wildlife, 6060 Broadway, Denver CO 80216,
Tel: 303-297-1192.

Montana: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; <http://www.fwp.state.mt.us>

Arizona: Arizona Game & Fish; <http://gf.state.az.us> Tel: 1-866-462-0433
(License information) or Tel: 602-942-3000 (General information).

New Mexico: New Mexico Game & Fish; <http://gmfsh.state.nm.us>

Wyoming: Wyoming Game & Fish; <http://gf.state.wy.us>
Tel: 307-777-4600 (General information)

Nevada: Nevada Department of Wildlife; 1100 Valley Rd., Reno NV 89512
<http://www.nevadadepartmentofwildlife.org> Tel: 775-688-1500 (General
information), Tel: 775-688-1512 or 1507 (Licensing information)

Utah: Utah Department of Agriculture & Food, Division of Wildlife, Box 26976,
Salt Lake City UT 84126. Tel: 801-975-3315 <http://www.ag.utah.gov>