

# The Self-Guided Hunter...

## Do-It-Yourself Elk

Close enough to impossible to be interesting

Twelfth in a series...

By  
Wayne van Zwoll  
B&C Professional Member

Short  
magnums, like  
the .300  
Remington SUM  
at left, are  
the rage.

The author has  
used them on elk.

"Elk hunting isn't like whitetail hunting," a veteran of both once told me. "You can't just walk into a local woodlot and start looking. Elk live far into the hills. That's why outfitters sell hunts. Elk are heavy too. That's why outfitters have pack horses." All this is still true. Getting to elk and getting elk out can be tough. That's why the rewards are so great when you do it yourself.

Getting an elk on your own is just close enough to impossible to be interesting, but not

nearly as hard as some hunters tell. In fact, shooting an elk without help can be absurdly easy. A friend lives on a quarter-section where mountaintop elk funnel down in November. His family has often shot them from the porch. One memorable bull (score: 391) fell to Colorado rancher John Holzwarth, who killed the animal in 1949 while it ate at a haystack. Many elk have died within rifleshoot of roads north of Yellowstone Park, and in alfalfa and wheat stubble from the Rockies to the Pacific Coast.

You don't have a ranch? Neither do I. But last year I shot two bulls on public land far from home without the help of an outfitter. It's my favorite hunting. Here's what it takes to shoot an elk on your own:

The first thing to do is write for game regulations. Write every state you'd consider hunting, and do it a year in advance of your hunt. You may have to apply for licenses in winter. Commonly, regulations for the year you want to hunt aren't available before tag application time, so ask for a copy of the previous year's pamphlet. You'll get an overview of open areas, seasons, antlerless permits, and "trophy" hunts. Request drawing odds for limited-entry tags. Most elk states have regulations, controlled hunt information, drawing odds, and the like on their internet sites. You can save the regulations on your computer and print what you need. The Boone and Crockett Club's web site has Hunting Reports about big game in Colorado, Idaho, and Montana. More states

are in the queue to be added soon. (visit [www.boone-crockett.org](http://www.boone-crockett.org).)

You may have the option of paying a premium for better odds in the draw. Wyoming started this program several years ago. Early on, so many sportsmen opted for expensive licenses that in some units hunters specifying the standard price had an equal or even better chance than those applying in the higher price category! Now I expect the premium gives you an edge, but ask to see which way this trend has shifted where you plan to apply. Wildlife agencies are much better equipped to answer such questions since computers were given all the number crunching.

When you apply for a general license, you may be limited to antlered elk, spike bulls, or bulls with a brow tine or minimum number of points. I've hunted where bulls could be shot opening week, after which time cows became the only legal game. Read the regulations carefully. If you want an elk for meat and don't care about antlers, apply for a cow permit. Eligibility may require that you buy or draw a general hunting license first. In some cases, a special permit voids your option to hunt other places or times, or for animals other than are specified on the permit. Again, study the big game pamphlet before you apply for limited-quota tags. Define your hunting area right away, even if you don't have to specify the unit on a tag application.

Most elk hunters would rather shoot a big bull than a little bull or a cow. A few (usually residents) opt for cows because the meat is ordinarily better. Most cows are shot by hunters who apply for the permit to boost the odds for a kill. As has often been parroted, "any elk is a good elk," and "you can't eat antlers." Still, a six-point bull is the siren icon, the reason hunters get excited about hunting elk. Even when



★ The author shot this Oregon bull in timber just above farmland, after hunting hard at timberline.



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Rest where you can ambush elk over water or at a trail crossing. Still-hunting, broken by intermittent stops is a good way to hunt elk.

chances of killing a branch-antlered bull (let alone a mature six-point) are slim, hunters dream. Not long ago, an area that had been open to "any bull" hunting went to "spikes only" — a wildlife department effort to add mature bulls to the herd. Hunters left this area for places without the restriction, though before the change only one of every seven hunters had been successful, and

dian reservations where low hunter quotas allow bulls to grow old. Figure on paying from \$3,500 to \$5,500 for a guided backcountry trip into prime elk habitat — much of which, incidentally, will be on public land used by other hunters. You'll pay \$9,000 to \$13,000 to hunt private land with more restricted access and, presumably, greater concentrations of big bulls.

A do-it-yourself hunt offers more than savings. If you're a hunter, not a collector of big game, a hunt that you plan and execute yourself delivers a level of excitement and a sense of satisfaction you can't get when others do the work. It's important to keep that in mind. Often first-time elk hunters come back disappointed, as if failing to kill an elk proves they did something wrong. It isn't. I've often failed. Very capable hunters have failed. Hunters with outfitters fail too. An elk hunt on your own is a tough, low-odds proposition — more so if you're looking for a

branch-antlered bull. My advice: If you've not hunted this way before, certainly if you've not hunted elk before, try to get a cow tag. If you're hunting bulls only, being too selective could cost you your bull. Hold out for a big bull only if you're comfortable going home without meat. Whatever your standard, enjoy the hunt. If you think only about the product (the animal), you'll miss out on the process (the hunt). Remember, beef is cheaper; and because luck figures heavily in hunting, you don't want to put your ego on the line.

With tag in hand, call the U.S. Geological Survey (1-800-USA-MAPS) for topographic maps of your chosen area. The most useful U.S.G.S. maps are of 7.5-minute scale, the number indicating angular coverage on the earth's surfaces. Sixty minutes of angle equal one degree of longitude and latitude. One of my maps, for example, spans from 110 degrees, 37 minutes and 30 seconds longitude to 110 degrees and 45 minutes. Latitude ranges from 42-52-30 to 43 degrees. (These figures appear in

map corners). A 7.5-minute map has a scale of 1:24,000, meaning each map inch represents 24,000 inches, or 2,000 feet. You'll see approximately 71 square miles on such a map or "quadrangle," named, usually after a local feature.

Topographic mapping software by National Geographic, MapTech, DeLorme, iGage, and Seamless Digital Topographic Maps (DRGs) that allow for seamless viewing in all mapping applications are available as well. A number of sources for such maps are listed on the internet. Search with the key word: topographic maps. Although the initial cost can be up to \$100 per state for maps on CD, a full set of paper maps for a state would cost more. You can make notes on the CD maps, view elevation changes in specific routes, and mark GPS waypoints, which may be transferred electronically to a GPS. High tech but useful if you are so inclined.

Maps can help you find elk. Think they're using a lodgepole bench on a north slope away from pack-trail traffic? Widely-spaced contour lines on a green background just below ridgeline mark the spot. Blue lines are a bonus, because elk like to be near water.

To get where you think elk will be, you're best off following trails, because most trails are made by animals conserving energy. I'm told most of the roads in East Africa have been built on elephant tracks, because engineers found that the beasts had an uncanny ability to detect grade and to find the most efficient route from one place to the next. But sometimes you'll want to navigate by compass. And certainly you'll take compass readings if you're in unfamiliar territory, especially on cloudy days and when in timber.

Magnetic north and true north coincide along a line from the center of Wisconsin to the tip of the Florida panhandle. East and west of that line, declination (the difference between true north and magnetic north) increases as you travel toward the coasts and north. Isogonic charts show declination as high as 20 degrees in northern Maine and in upper Puget Sound in my home state of Washington. On U.S.G.S. maps, find the declination as an angular measure on the bottom border. Because the physical relationship of magnetic

one in five of those had shot a branch-antlered bull. The chances of killing a big six-point bull before the spikes-only rule were akin to finding your third cousin had left you a 20 percent share of Microsoft and a couple of Montana townships bordering the Bob Marshall Wilderness. On private land managed for trophy-class bulls, the biggest antlers come from elk between the ages of seven and nine. On public land open to any-bull hunting, few antlered elk reach their third year.

So be realistic. Dreaming of Brutus is fine; but failing to see a mature bull shouldn't color your trip. If you do your homework and hunt hard, you should see elk. Your odds of seeing antlered bulls vary but should be good enough to sustain hope. Limit yourself to six-points, and you won't often bloody your hands. The craving for high-scoring antlers is what keeps outfitters in business and drives up the cost of hunts on private land and In-



USGS or "topo" maps not  
only help you find your  
way out; they can point  
you to elk.



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north to true north is shifting, old maps may show a different declination than newer maps of the same area.

To set your compass for the proper declination, turn the housing inside the face ring so the shadow needle (not the floating needle) points to the proper read. In the West, use east declination. For instance, in western Wyoming I set my compass for 15 1/2 degrees east declination with the fixed needle pointed at 15 1/2 degrees. To program the 15 1/2-degree correction necessary in Rhode Island, you'd subtract that measure on your dial. So the fixed needle would point to 344 1/2 degrees.

You might prefer the Global Positioning System to a compass. A GPS unit can help you in ways a compass can't, but I still prefer the compass. It's lighter and doesn't take batteries, which can fail in cold weather. You don't need an expensive compass; but carry two, in case you don't believe the first.

Elk hunting is not orienteering, but if you lack confidence to move freely through new terrain, you won't succeed as an elk hunter. You won't range as far, and you'll be focused more on your travel than on the hunt. Elk cross drainages as easily as we cross streets. Unless you're proficient with a compass, you'll be reluctant to move fast enough and far enough to find elk, or into areas that force you to take a different route back. You can usually find a road by losing elevation, but you can be a long time finding camp. Once, not minding my compass, I walked an extra piece of Montana before discovering that the mountain over my camp was not up ahead but behind me. It became a long day.

Not that elk are always far away. I recall hunting a high ridge in eastern Oregon without success, then stumbling upon a herd of elk on the way down. I tagged one of the bulls. These animals were bedded within 200 yards of a wheat field. I'd been well above them.

Many hunters assume that since elk inhabit wilderness that day trips are futile. Hardly! One of the bulls I shot this past season hit the ground at about 9 a.m. I'd left my vehicle at 6:30, just before dawn. Obviously, this bull was close by. You can stay

in motels and hunt elk. Though they lack the ambience of white wall tents, motels are cheap lodging. They have showers and you'll find cafés nearby.

Another false assumption is that elk stay high until snow pushes them down. Truly, elk can thrive in snow too deep for effective hunting. In many areas, they drift downhill at about the same time each year regardless of snow conditions. Frost at high elevations can make forage less palatable, and fall greenup in lower meadows offers better eating. In one place I've come to know well, the bulls move down before the cows, dashing yet another myth. Elk that stay high during late fall do so mainly to avoid hunters. In the place with the early bull migration, antlerless hunts follow the general season. Sexes are neatly segregated in November, the cows high where hunters don't like to go.

Elk hunting can get markedly better the farther you get from the road. That, again, is because elk don't like to be shot at or disturbed by vehicles. A private hunting unit I once visited was billed as a great place to shoot a trophy-class bull. After a day in the field, I was ready to shoot the first legal elk. While the area had good forage, it was short on security cover. Its substantial road system had been heavily used by my hosts, scouting on ATVs before the hunt. At 8,000 acres, the area was too small to hold elk early in the season. No one, in fact, shot an elk during that week.

Without horses, you won't be able to hunt as far back as the cavalry. But you don't have to. Each morning, some elk listen to the creak of saddles passing in the dark. You can find those elk by looking in off-trail places with hiding cover, forage, water, and escape routes. Specifically, look to lodgepole thickets with jackstraw boles that make walking hard. Elk lie up here because they know hunters prefer to go where they can see, and where movement is easy. Elk also like lodgepoles for their brittle limbs, which warn of the odd hunter who tries to penetrate the jungle.

Another place to look: pockets of thick second-growth Douglas-fir. On a rainy day long ago, with mist swirling around me, I padded silently into such a pocket. Suddenly a bull elk

stood up close enough to touch with a fly rod. He seemed as surprised as I and hesitated a second too long.

Yet another good bet for elk is a recent burn. Even before you can see green, elk will poke around in the ashes. Indeed, two of the elk I shot last season were in burns too young to show color from afar.

Tall timber is less inviting to elk because the mature canopy drains sunlight so grasses, forbs, and young conifers can't grow. But pay attention to forests with intermittent second-growth on the edges and where windfall and fire open the canopy. Last fall, I all but gave up on one north slope because hunters had patrolled it regularly from the



ridge above and traipsed through the canyon below. The tall timber at its fringe showed, predictably, the tracks of elk on the move. I expected no elk were living there and decided the last day to hunt farther down-canyon. Emerging below, I looked up and concluded that I had missed some likely cover. As if on cue, a shot echoed from above. My partner had shot a bull right where he'd thought the elk would be: where other hunters — including me — had passed by. It wasn't a big place. But where hunting pressure is heavy, elk will stay in small pieces of timber if they're not violated.

You may prefer to hunt meadows — such nice walking. Elk like to eat grass. And you've

seen lots of beds. Besides, your supershort-ultrakiller magnum with its gutter-size scope excels on meadow shots.

Trouble is, everybody else likes to hunt meadows for the same reasons. So you'll have lots of company. Only occasionally will you see an elk. The beds are likely night beds, used by elk long after you have left the field and vacated long before you return. The reach of your rifle does not impress elk, which have no interest in ballistics. Meadows are fine places to look on

### The best elk rifle?

The one that's carefully zeroed and easy for you to shoot well.



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opening morning and after storms nudge new animals into the area. (There's also good hunting in cover after bad weather moves through.) Remote meadows can remain productive far into the season — but only for outfitters with backcountry camps. Your best bet as a do-it-yourselfer is to seek out elk in timber at low and mid elevations, hunting the edges early and late, and going where you don't see boot tracks.

Often, finding elk is a matter of spending time in the woods. But don't just warm a stump. Elk are less predictable in their travels than are whitetails, their home range larger. If,

When elk can't track scent, they may move to where visibility is better. I once encountered a group of bulls lying out in a snowy meadow high on a rim, exposed to a brutal Wyoming wind. I crept to within 100 yards and could have shot a six-point.

Snow enables you to track elk, but don't expect to catch up with every one. I followed a couple of big bulls across several mountain basins once, ending up far from camp at nightfall. Though the snow on top was thigh-deep, the elk hadn't slowed from their trot. Another time, I tracked a fine bull into a canyon, convinced that he'd double back to where I could still-hunt him.

He fooled me by scooting across. He was still moving fast when I lost his tracks. Our perspective on distance is not shared by the elk.

However you choose to hunt elk, you'll find this a physical game. Stay in shape. Run, walk, ski, use a treadmill — whatever it takes in the off-season to maintain your ability to hike in elk country all day. Bear in mind that the easy places will be crowded, and that the hard places will hold more elk. You may find an elk in a low place — but in the Rockies, low is any place under 5,000 feet. The air

isn't particularly thin at mid-elevation, but you may think so if you live near sea level and haven't challenged your lungs and heart. When you're short of breath, you can't hunt well.

To stay mobile longer, think carefully about what you'll carry. Here's what goes in my daypack:

1. Camera (with extra batteries) and three rolls of film
2. Canteen, full of water
3. Compasses (two simple, lightweight Bruntons)
4. Flashlight with fresh batteries
5. Folding knife and sharpening steel
6. Lunch, typically raisins, cheese, bagels and apples.
7. Maps: USGS, USFS, County.
8. Raincoat and pants (camouflage, of soft material)

9. Socks (a fresh pair can rejuvenate you after lunch)
10. Surveyor's tape to mark a kill and trail
11. Survival kit (matches, fire-starting materials, whistle, signal mirror)

I used to carry only a fanny pack, but eventually found it too cramped. My daypack is an ordinary model by Fieldline, of soft cloth so it's quiet in brush. Among the best daypacks are lumbar and shoulder versions by Rocky Mountain Pack Systems. The Yukon and Ridge Runner day packs are offered by the Boone and Crockett Club to its associates and others. The Yukon pack is a mid-torso pack, the Ridge Runner a fanny pack. The Rhino take-down frame is compliments the Yukon and stows in its the lower compartment. The Rhino frame is quick to assemble and will easily carry up to 100 pounds — more than you'll likely want to carry.

On early hunts, I often wear jogging shoes instead of boots. They're comfortable and grip rocks well, wrapping themselves over the surface. They don't offer much ankle support or protection, but their light weight adds up to more miles during the day. Later I switch to uninsulated leather boots: Redwings with aggressive Vibram soles that afford traction in snow and on wet hillsides.

Binoculars are important for elk hunting, even in the thickets. Most of the elk I spot these days are with binoculars. Big binoculars (with 50mm objectives) offer a bright image in dim light, but for me they are much too cumbersome. Lately I've used 8x Pentax glasses with 32mm objectives. Leica, Zeiss, and Swarovski probably offer the best binoculars in this size. But Leupold, Nikon, Bushnell, and other makers may give you the best value. Shop around, but buy the best you can afford.

Rifles and scopes get lots of attention from elk hunters, but you don't need a rocket gun that spits bullets into a watch face at 500 steps. What does matter is that you can shoot well. An ordinary .30-06 with a 4x scope would have taken all the elk I've shot, and all the elk I've seen killed by other hunters. Figure a total of nearly 90 elk. While I've shot elk with cartridges ranging in power from the 6mm Remington and .250 Savage to Weatherby's .340 and



Rubs like this tell you elk were here early.

They may move after the rut. Don't waste time in country that doesn't produce sightings within two days.

like me, you prefer to move, walk fast through places that don't look promising. Slow down in heavy cover. Pace yourself to conditions. On crusty snow, I move briskly, because there's no chance of keeping quiet, and a slow pace gives elk more time to plan an escape. In fact, you'll often catch elk milling if you dash into their midst.

Use the noise of wind in the trees to cover your own. Elk don't like wind. Windy days make 'em edgy — partly, perhaps, because moving air is like running water. It splashes, sending scent all over. Wind blasting through the treetops can be dragged down to a reverse course below. Sources of scent then become hard to locate.

the .375 H&H, I'm comfortable with '06-class artillery. A friend routinely hunts with a .25-06. Another amigo prefers a .243. Mostly, hunters who use more potent rifles seldom shoot them enough to get good with them.

This past season I used three new rounds: a .270 Winchester Short Magnum, a .300 Remington Short Ultramag and an 8.59 (.338) Lazzeroni Galaxy. All three bulls could have been taken with a .30-30. The cartridges with flat arcs and lots of smash delivered more options, but also more recoil.

Other notes on shooting: Keep cycling that bolt until the elk is down! Stay in position until you're sure it's dead. If you think you missed, check anyway. If you make a bad shot and the elk vanishes, mark where it stood, and where you shot. Weather and time permitting, wait before following. If you push even a fatally hit elk, it may go far enough before dropping or bedding to lose you. Once you take the trail, stay with the task even if it looks hopeless. I once spent a morning on hands and knees looking

for blood from a bull I'd hit the evening before. When blood sign ran out, I made progressively larger circles. As a last effort, I struck out in the direction the elk had been moving. A flock of noisy magpies alerted me to the carcass.

Hunting on your own may

be easier for backyard game like whitetail deer, but it's a good way to get an elk too. You'll save money, learn more about elk and elk country, and plumb your own physical limits. You'll probably find there's quite a difference between hunting elk and collecting them. ▲▲▲

Snow enables you to track. It will not necessarily drive elk down from ridges.



The author shot this elk on public land from a remote camp.