

Wait 'til Your FATHER Gets Home

Proud moments for two hunters... one in Wyoming, the other in Alaska.

By Peter R. Schoonmaker
Elk photo by author
Field photos courtesy of Mike Henry



The first thought that crossed Mike Henry's mind as he approached his Alaska-Yukon bull was this is a North American elephant!

On a crisp November day, two Wyoming youngsters headed to the north end of their family ranch in Wyoming. Fourteen-year-old Garrett Henry and his 12-year-old brother Blake carried fishing poles with the intention of fishing for the steelhead/rainbow cross their father had stocked in a large pond, but the pond was frozen over. So, the boys decided to do the next best thing, search for shed deer and elk antlers in the nearby pine ridges. Much to their pleasure, the boys' search turned up a pair of 6x6 elk antlers. The fifth tine on one antler was broken off from fighting, and the sixth tine was broken off on the other. One thought coursed through the mind of Garrett Henry. If he could only get a shot at a bull like this next fall when he could legally hunt alone.

In the following months Garrett applied for a Wyoming elk tag and drew one in June of 1999. Garrett had shown an interest in archery. His father Mike figured that if he was going to start hunting the big game of Wyoming, Garrett needed the adequate equipment and instruction to do the job. Elk are tough animals, but a well-placed arrow will dispatch a bull quickly and humanely. A visit to Little Creek Archery in Casper got Garrett headed in the right direction with a new Mathews Feathermax bow shooting Beman ICS 340s with 100-grain Thunderheads. The shop pro instructed Garrett in proper shooting form and the use of a T.R.U. Ball release. The newly outfitted archer headed home eager to practice. As in every form of hunting, practice is required to be a skillful and accurate shooter. And practice he did. His father Mike would later say, "Garrett shot that bow a lot. He practiced all summer long."

THE BUGLING SEASON

The Wyoming bow season runs from September 1 to 30. Its timing coincides with one of nature's most animated and unique occurrences, the bugling period of the elk rut. Elk bugling is one of the most ear-catching and stirring sounds in nature. The sound can vary from bull to bull, but usually starts with a low, hoarse bellow and builds to a high-pitched squeal, and ends in a series of grunts. The elk rut finds bulls setting boundaries, gathering harems, and aggressively approaching all intruders. For even the biggest, baddest bull, this is a full time occupation as interested young bulls, and rival adult bulls constantly circle

the harem in hopes that the herd bull lets down his guard. It is because of this bugling, challenging, and cow chasing frenzy, that calling bulls is an effective hunting tactic to get one of these antlered elk into bow range.

Garrett Henry knew if he was going to be successful he would have to learn to call a bull in like they do on the hunting shows on TV. The 14-year-old began to duplicate the bugles he heard the successful hunters use with a diaphragm and a grunt tube. Garrett then began to use instructional tapes and elk hunting videos to help his calling technique. As exciting as the prospects of bugling a bull in were, Garrett began seeing how effective the less used cow call seemed to work. The squealing and mewling sounds of cows and herd talk seemed to get a stronger response from a bull than bugling itself. Garrett soon owned a Sceery cow call and practiced his technique in hopes of stirring up a bull come September.

PLANNING AHEAD

As summer progressed, Garrett began making a few scouting trips to the area of the trout pond and the pine covered hills. Summers are busy for this ranch family as the Henrys actively compete in regional rodeo competition. However, during one such scouting trip Garrett was able to observe a few bulls and several bands of cows. Being a dry year in 1999, the area around the pond was churned with the tracks of elk coming to water. As bow season approached, Garrett began to rethink his hunting strategy. A top pronghorn bow tactic is to hunt from a ground blind near a waterhole, so why not try it on elk. Garrett located where the traffic seemed the heaviest and picked a location to conceal himself for a 20-yard bow shot. If only a procession of thirsty elk could lead a bull right past him.

THE BIG DAY

Like many ranch children, Garrett stays in Casper with family during the school week and comes home for the weekends. Such was the case with the opening few days of bow season, so Garrett couldn't get to his long awaited bow hunt until the morning of September 4th. On the morning of the big day, Garrett awoke to the sounds of a hard, steady rain, but this didn't hinder the young hunter as he was in his preplanned ground blind an hour before daylight. The 14-year-old sat in the rain and fog for four hours. Due to the abundant moisture, the elk had little need for a drink on this day, so Garrett left his ground blind and headed



out of the bottomland. About a half mile up a deep, wide drainage, Garrett saw a big patch of waist high juniper. Except for the pine stands on the ridges, this was the only available cover around. The young hunter knelt in the juniper, got out his cow call, and let fly with a few of the female mews and squeals.

Not one, but four different bulls answered with bugles from four different directions. One bull appeared 400 yards away on the other side of the draw below Garrett. During the next 10 minutes, the bull honed in on the cow calls coming from the junipers. At 80 yards the big antlered elk passed behind a lone Ponderosa pine. The young hunter instinctively took the opportunity to draw his bow. Garrett held tight as the bull cruised right up the draw and stopped in front of him at 15 yards. A 10 second stare-down ensued. The young hunter, displaying composure beyond his years, waited until the bull began to turn away before releasing his arrow. The pass through shot had angled through the vitals and done its damage.

A FAMILIAR SET OF ANTLERS

The antlers of the bull disappeared over the rise above Garrett. The anxious bow hunter waited as long as he possibly could. Garrett eased up the draw and followed the blood sign over the rise. There, uphill from him was the downed bull that instinctively jumped to its feet. However, the approaching hunter, who had an arrow at full draw, double-lunged the broadside elk at 20 yards. The bull dropped over dead and rolled down the hill directly at Garrett, who had to run to prevent being speared by the antlers. The shape and the tines of the tumbling elk's rack looked very familiar. Last year's sheds were this bull's antlers. Not only had Garrett seen a bull with antlers that good, he had arrowed that exact bull.

NOT BAD FOR THE FIRST FLING

The young hunter field dressed, caped, and skinned the bull just like his father had shown him on pronghorn, mule deer, whitetails and elk. Garrett would have to come back the next day with his mother Sue and a ranch hand to get the bull. After the drying period, Garrett Henry's Wyoming bull elk well exceeded the Pope

& Young 260 entry measurement with a net score of 340. Garrett had done his archery hunting homework. He learned the limitations of the bow and honed his shooting ability. He learned to call effectively, scout his hunting area, and have a hunting plan for opening day, and when foul weather threatened to wreck opening day, Garrett adapted to the conditions at hand. He called in a magnificent bull, held his composure, and arrowed his first big game with a bow, a record book elk.

DAD WAS OUT OF TOWN
Garrett wanted to tell his father about the



Garrett Henry and his magnificent elk taken during his first bow season.

bow elk in the worse way, but Mike Henry was on a long planned moose hunt in Alaska. Mike would be hunting the largest member of the deer family, the Alaska-Yukon moose. Mike has seen Canada moose, and the Shiras moose in his home state of Wyoming, but the first Alaska-Yukon bull you see does leave a lasting impression as they are a large, hulking, imposing figure. The Alaska-Yukon moose is the largest of all four North American species. This most northern moose can weigh in excess of 1,400 pounds in body weight and measure more than seven feet tall at the shoulder. Their massive head and neck can carry a set of antlers that can exceed six feet in tip-to-tip width and weigh up to 85 pounds. These moose can grow as

much pure bone in its antlers in just three months as a human skeleton grows to reach its maximum size over a period of 18 years. Bulls can grow an inch of antler a day.

Big moose have big antlers, and like the different subspecies of caribou, they have distinct features. Palmation is the feature that sets moose antlers apart from other antlered game. The difference in moose is that the palmated antlers of forest-dwelling bulls tend to curve upward and higher above the skull to make travel through timber easier. The antlers on the Alaska-Yukon bulls, on the other extreme, have evolved to grow straight out from the skull for easier carriage in more windy, open habitat. If you have ever watched a determined moose cover ground, clumsy is the farthest impression from your mind. In swamps, bogs, belly deep snow and deadfalls, their long powerful legs either float them over it, or plow them through any terrain in an effortless manner. They can crash through the woods with wild abandon, or slip away as silently as a ghost.

RUTTING BULLS OF AUTUMN

Moose is a Native American word for "twig eater." These moose can eat a tenth of their body weight a day whether it is stripping a willow from the ground to ten feet in the air, grazing on grasses, or wading in the water to reach aquatic plants. Like other members of the deer family, the Alaska-Yukon moose depends on its eyesight, hearing, and scenting ability to detect danger. It takes a lot to scare an animal whose senses are tuned to Alaska's large predators, the grizzly bear and the wolf. The rutting bulls of autumn are imposing, often belligerent creatures during the moose mating season. Bulls wander Alaska's wilderness in search of cows in heat, grunting along the way to announce their presence. The bulls rub and slash trees with their enormous antlers as they travel the willow bottom drainages. The sound of two bulls in a dispute over mating rights can be heard over great distances as the big slabs of bone clash together. A wild stare with red-rimmed eyes is the business glare of a fighting bull that has won breeding rights. This period of time, with so many bulls on the move, is prime time to be in Alaska's moose country.

THE HUNT THAT ALMOST WASN'T

Wyoming rancher Mike Henry looked down from his outfitter's plane at the west/central Alaskan terrain below. It was September 5th and the sighting of three bulls in route to camp confirmed that the bulls were on the move. Mike's 10-day hunt had been a long awaited adventure that almost didn't happen. Mike and his family actively compete in state rodeos. Mike's rodeo event is steer-roping. On July 29, Mike's horse took a tumble that hammered the big Wyoming wrangler into the ground breaking his left collarbone and fracturing his lower left leg. On the mend by September, Mike was determined to have a successful hunt.

Since flying and hunting on the same day are not allowed in Alaska, Mike, his hunting partner Bud Ray, and guide and outfitter Rob Wagner, scouted the terrain around camp and only saw a lone cow. However, find a lone cow during the rut and there is a chance she won't be alone for long. The plan for the first day of hunting was to leave camp at first light and backpack to the high ground bordering a drainage of the Mulchatna River. Once there they would use a spotting scope to look for Alaska's biggest game that is proportionately right at home in Alaska's big country.

"IF I HAD A LICENSE I WOULD!"
A three-hour walk put Wagner and his hunters on a vantage point to glass the river basin with its gravel bars and vast willow thickets. At 8:30 a.m. Wagner spotted three cows and a bull a mile down the river. Without hesitation he said, "That's at least a 62-inch bull!" Further inspection revealed four great brow tines on each side, many points and deep palms. Wagner stammered, "He may even be a 65-inch bull!" Since it was only the first morning of the hunt, Mike Henry inquired just how big was big? Without hesitation Wagner answered, "If I had a license, I would shoot him!"

Steve Wagner plotted a course along the river to the bull. Bud would stay and watch the action from above. Mike and Steve worked down a steep caribou trail on the gravel bank and then crossed the knee to hip deep river. Guide and hunter then sneaked along the waterway through waist to chest high willows. When they reached the last known location of the moose, they were gone. A little farther on they spotted a cow, then another cow grazing at 150 yards. At 125 yards their eyes locked on the huge bull as

it stood up in a small cluster of trees. Steve instantly said, "Shoot!"

In Chapter VI on moose, in Elmer Keith's **Big Game Hunting**, he stated, "Even an elephant rifle is not too large if you can handle it quickly and accurately." Mike Henry was packing a custom .358 magnum shooting 225-grain bullets. Mike quickly knelt to get a steady rest. Bud watched down the river bottom as Mike's big gun rolled the bull with one shot and put him down for keeps with another. Mike and Steve cautiously approached the giant of the moose species. On closer inspection, Wagner knew this was an exceptional animal. The tale of the tape verified his suspicions. The bull was seven foot four inches tall at the hump and the antlers were 67-6/8 inches wide. One palm measured 20-4/8 inches and the other 13-5/8 inches wide. The rack had 26 points including the four big brow tines on each antler. "A North American elephant" was the first thing that popped into Mike Henry's mind after absorbing the size of the magnificent moose.

A CALL HOME

After photos and congratulations, the reality of moving all that moose set in. Four days and a bottle of Advil later, the meat, hide

and antlers were back in camp. During the days of retrieving the moose they saw 11 other bulls ranging from 50 to 60 inches. At first light on the last day of the trip, Bud shot a 62-1/2-inch bull half a mile from camp. Hunters and guide were very busy the last day of the trip getting that bull back to camp. Exhausted, these hunters and outfitter were well aware of the great hunt they had. Mike Henry's Alaska-Yukon moose ended up with a net score of 224-6/8 B&C points.

Mike had promised he would phone home as soon as he returned from the wilderness moose camp. It was 1 a.m. when the phone rang at the Henry Ranch in Douglas, Wyoming. Mike's sleepy wife Suzie answered the phone. Mike hadn't gotten very far into asking about Sue, Garrett, and Blake, when Sue told him about their bowhunter's six-point bull. An overwhelming sensation of pride came over Mike as Sue got Garrett up and put him on the phone. A groggy Garrett explained how he shot the bull, field dressed it, and came back to the house where nobody believed him. "They sure were surprised when they saw the elk!" Mike was so proud of his son that he couldn't wait to be back in Wyoming. Telling about the records-book moose was anti-climatic after the phone call home. ■

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