

Potential Sunday's New World's Record Best Roosevelt's Elk

By Scott Ballard
Hunter and Trophy Owner
Photos courtesy of author



View of the country where the author was hunting in Benton County, Oregon. The bull was in one of the farm fields in the distance surrounded by forest on three sides.

It was spring break, 1988, and I was getting a vacation from my college classes by helping fertilize the grass seed fields on the farm that had employed me since childhood. The old Chevy truck—heavily laden with fertilizer power bins—whined and groaned its way up the very steep stretch of road just past the old Feichter house. There were only nine elk; a rag-horn four-point, two massive cows, and an assortment of yearlings and calves. Quickly, I radioed Frank and Brad and they caught up just in time to see the tan rumps bounce over the hill to the west of us. I knew then that I would hunt Roosevelt's elk in earnest when my education was completed and time would allow it.

There is an old cliché that time has a way of getting away from us—and we know it does. The past 12 years have been good to the elk in the Willamette Valley of Western Oregon, with the herd approaching 200 animals. The original nine probably stumbled into the valley by accident. They soon learned that the valley floor offers thousands of acres of ryegrass, fescue, corn, and millet, while oak and ash forests along the Muddy Creek ensuring ample cover for these noble creatures. Safety from hunters is also available when the animals retreat to the local wildlife refuge. Working as a high school shop teacher offers many great perks, but ample time to hunt in the fall is not one of them. Deer hunting from my home has always been a blessing for me. A few hours here and there yields a buck during most years, but elk are different. They demand more time and effort.

It was summer break, 2002, and I was back on the farm working as a maintenance mechanic during harvest. I had drawn a Willamette Unit elk tag and was planning to hunt during the last of summer break. The area that I could hunt was limited to a few hundred acres, but the hunt was long and it was just a matter of time before some animals ventured into my path. While I was hoping for a nice bull, I knew in my heart that it would be difficult to pass on a spike or a big cow—just like those first ones I'd spotted 12 years before.

Frank drove up to my service rig just after 6:00 a.m. to tell me my dad had

spotted five bulls in an unthrashed ryegrass field, which was less than a mile from where I was working. We hopped in his pickup and drove down to get a look, but they had vanished into heavy cover before we arrived. My hunt was to start the next week and it was exciting to have five branch-antlered bulls right where I was planning to hunt. Further scouting showed that these animals were frequenting an old fruit orchard and by the varying sign, it appeared as though they had visited multiple times in the past few weeks. Poor wind conditions, large expanses of open fields, and nocturnally feeding bulls would prove to make my hunt a challenge. I set out to capitalize on any opportunities that should arise.

It became clear that the bulls were crossing into the orchard and surrounding ash grove through open fields at night, and retreating back to heavy brush and timber before first light . . . except for that one morning when my dad spotted them.

In the days before the hunt, I agonized over the best approach to get at one of these nighttime monsters. I decided to revert back to my archery hunting tactics, minimizing scent and visibility, and created a situation where I would be shooting unseen from known distances. A dip in the landscape next to a small creek on the downwind side of the elk crossing offered an ideal location for a ground blind. Berry vines were trimmed, and yardages were marked from the blind in 100-yard increments out to 500 yards. Barnes X-bullets were loaded for my .30-06 and test fired at 100, 200, 300, and 400 yards to ensure exact shooting precision at known ranges.

The first few days of the hunt yielded a close encounter with a large three-point blacktail, a family of raccoons, a coyote, and a beaver. Both my seven-year-old and five-year-old boys had accompanied me on these first outings, but no elk were spotted.

On the ninth day of the hunt, Benjamin, my older son, spotted what he described as "hay bales" moving at about 400 yards to the north of us. Like any good dad, I scolded him for talking while we were sneaking into our ground blind and told him to stop being ridiculous. Upon closer inspection, we discovered that the big "hay bales" were four massive bulls heading for the heavy brush, but it was about eight minutes before legal shooting hours. I attempted a makeshift stalk with nothing between the bulls and me but clear morning air. By the time legal light arrived, the four big boys were 600-plus yards

away, trotting into the brush. The two largest bulls were immense, and the bigger of the two (I just had to name, Brutus) was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Never before had my cross hairs been on an elk like this one and I was amazed at the sheer mass of this creature. It was time to reassess the game plan.

After second-guessing my blind location, I decided to stick with the original strategy as there was no way I could cover the entire area. I had to bank on what seemed most probable, which was that the bulls would use their preferred path of travel again. They did.

Most Sundays are a day of praise and worship for our family. Church service was in the park on that August morning, and I looked forward to attending when I returned from my morning hunt. As it turned out, my morning plans were radically changed.

It was 12 minutes before shooting hours when two 6-points and a massive bull stepped out of the ash grove into the field, followed a few minutes later by a massive 8x9-point Roosevelt's bull. My cousin Randy had come along for the morning hunt, and he spotted the first bull at about 450 yards. When the third bull appeared we were certain he was the one we wanted, as he appeared, to be half again bigger than the nice 6-point bulls. I knew there was another one to come, but was shocked to see he was even bigger than the previous bull!

It quickly became apparent that these bulls would be out of the area in less than 10 minutes. I do believe that God's grace was upon me this crisp August morning. For some reason, the two 6-points locked antlers and began to fight. They pushed, shoved, rattled, and clanked antlers for the next 12 to 14 minutes, and the big bulls stopped to watch, thus buying precious time. The fighting bulls shoved each other nearly 200 yards across the field, and while they were still sparring, I had decided to shoot the No. 2 bull since Brutus was in the brush at 500-plus yards shredding trees in an effort to shine up his impressive rack. All of the elk were within 100 yards of my hunt boundary and I dare not wait too long because

everyone knows that a bull in the hand is worth more than a monster bull in the bush . . .

As the fighting went on, bull No. 2 offered a constant full broadside shot at slightly less than 400 yards, and Brutus was still out of range shredding trees. The time was now. I eased the safety off, adjusted myself in the prone shooting rest built from straw and topped with an old wool army blanket. As I began to squeeze the trigger, No. 2 whirled and faced us. He was staring right at us; I could feel his burning glare. "Safety back on. Breathe deep, and wait . . . I cannot take this long of a shot with a mere .30-06 unless he's standing broadside," I said to myself.

The fighting continued. Big bull No. 2 was still staring intently at us, when Brutus stepped into my field of view. He stopped broadside at 450 yards. I took the safety off, took a deep breath, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The shot clipped the edge of the shoulder blade and the bullet lodged in the spine, and Brutus dropped.

As we slowly walked up on Brutus, we realized that we were looking at a once-in-a-lifetime, world-class Roosevelt's elk bull. The work started soon thereafter, but all in all it was a good Sunday, and I remembered to give thanks to the Creator of this magnificent animal, even if I wasn't wearing my Sunday's best. ■

Scott Ballard with his potential new World's Record Roosevelt's elk. The bull's entry score of 404-6/8 points will be verified by a Special Judges' Panel before being declared an official World's Record.

