

# Wilderness<sup>A</sup> Connection

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Photos courtesy of Author

It was the stuff dreams are made of. We rode horseback into a valley, where a hundred elk fed on what little frozen, yellow grass they could find in the deep snow. However, we had blundered too far into the open. The elk spotted us and milled about nervously. Besides me, there were four other hunters and four guides. The next couple minutes can only be defined as Murphy's Law at its best.

Paul Pike, my guide, quickly slid out of the saddle. I was right behind him, jerking my Browning 7MM Remington Mag out of the scabbard. We ran through deep snow, expecting the other hunters to be right behind us, but they were instead trying to take positions on a small ridge. The elk were bunched tightly together, at least 11 of them bulls and one a right nice animal.

The elk started to move and headed away from us toward the safety of the timber. They were 300 yards from Paul and I and another 100 yards farther from the other hunters.

I was wearing a ton of wool and immediately started sweating hard as we busted through snow almost to our thighs. I knew I was in trouble, because when I sweat, a very nasty thing happens. My eyeglasses fog, and when that happens, I can't see.

"We gotta make it to the rim," Paul exclaimed. I agreed. There was a small bunch of fir trees between us and the elk that blocked our view. As we ran, we blew on our cow calls, hoping to confuse the elk. It worked, since the animals suddenly hesitated and couldn't seem to decide whether to run to the safety of the timber or mince around and stare in our direction.

When we finally made it to the edge of the trees I was already wiping the perspiration off my forehead and cleaning my glasses with a hanky. The elk were still in the valley, seemingly confused and unsure what to do. The biggest bull was in the midst of a bunch of other animals, and I had no clear shot. He was about 250 yards away. I looked for the other hunters, hoping they'd show up so we could coordinate our efforts and put down several bulls. But the hunters were nowhere in sight.

Suddenly a big cow had had enough and ran for the timber. The rest of the herd strung out and began to follow. I cleaned my eyeglasses for the fifth time and was ready when the big bull was in the clear. Another series of cow calling stopped most of the elk momentarily, and those two seconds offered me a good shot at the biggest bull. Resting my rifle on a tree branch, I put the bullet just at the crease of his shoulder. The bull went down in a heap.

He wore five points on each side. The main beams were long, and he had good mass and decent tines. The other hunters showed up long after the elk had disappeared.



The author and his guide Paul Pike with the 5x5 bull elk taken in Colorado during his first hunt with Tenderfoot Outfitters.

Evidently they assumed the elk would immediately take off, and had not attempted to run up with Paul and I. Had they done so, the outcome would have undoubtedly been different.

I was hunting in Colorado's West Elk Wilderness area with Paul and his brother, Steve, who ran Tenderfoot Outfitters. We hit it off immediately, and continued the friendship, often getting together when I was in Colorado. I knew that at some point I'd hunt elk with them again.

That opportunity came about six years later, when I went back to their camp with my boss, Todd Smith, who is editor-in-chief of *Outdoor Life* magazine. Todd wanted to do a pictorial piece with plenty of quality photos. To achieve that goal, Cherie Cincilla, our Photo Editor, accompanied us. She would take pictures of every aspect of the hunt, including camp life, horse care, scenery, and the hunt itself.

After my first hunt, Paul and Steve had sold the outfit to Tom Evans and Mark Nichols, two tough cowboys who decided they wanted to go into the hunting business. Both were skilled horsemen and expert elk hunters, but had little dealings with people. It was agreed that Paul and Steve would guide for a few years and help manage camp.

Cherie accompanied Paul and I on the first day. We rode out of camp long before the first trace of dawn in the eastern skies, and I wondered what Cherie was feeling. This was her first ride on a horse in the dark. Prior to that, her only other experience was the six-mile ride to camp from the trailhead the day before.

As luck would have it, we heard several bulls bugle after having ridden about an hour from camp. It was just breaking light; our timing was perfect. After tying the horses, we slipped through the timber to the meadow where the elk were carrying on. We eased to the edge of the trees and saw a couple dozen elk, including three or four bulls. I had already decided to take any representative bull, because that would free up Cherie to concentrate on other aspects of the hunt.

I settled into a comfortable position and rested my rifle on my shooting sticks. The gun was the same Browning I had used on the prior hunt. Legal shooting light arrived, and I guided my crosshairs on the chest of the bull that appeared to be the biggest. I hesitated, because there was some brush in the meadow and the bulls weren't all visible at the same time. Then I saw what appeared to be a modest six-pointer,

and then I was really confused. All the while the bulls were bugling, sparring, and moving about among the cows.

The six-pointer immediately vanished in the sea of bodies, and I selected a bull that was partially obscured by vegetation, but offered a clean chest shot. I could see that he was a mature branch-antlered bull meeting the legal minimum four-point requirement. When I fired, the herd immediately took off, and I lost track of the bull I shot at. It appeared that he was swallowed up in the herd. In no time the clearing was empty, and we heard elk crashing through the timber.

We walked up to the area and found no dead elk or a trace of a hit. The range was about 200 yards, and I was certain of a good sight picture when I squeezed the trigger.

I headed off into the timber to begin the search, and Paul walked down the clearing. A couple minutes later he whistled, and I knew he'd either found a blood trail or the elk.

When I approached Paul, he had a grim look on his face.

"I found your elk," he said, "but man, we're in trouble."

"What's wrong," I asked, totally baffled by his comment.

"You shot the wrong bull," he responded. "Spikes aren't legal. It's gotta be at least a four-point, remember?"

Deeply concerned, and seeing my career as a hunting writer evaporate before my eyes, I walked up to the gully to where the elk had fallen. There lay a perfectly legal bull, a small five-point, but nonetheless a pretty sight. I can't repeat in writing what I said to Paul, but I promised him I'd get even.

We had a jolly time in camp that night, mostly at my expense, but I was loving it. This was sort of like family, especially since Jim Pike, Paul, and Steve's dad were in camp for a few days. Tom and Mark, the new outfitters, were good-natured and great fun, as were the guides. Cherie told us that her horseback ride was one of the thrills of her life, and we all shared and understood her new fascination for the wilderness and the Rockies. This was a major departure from her office in New York and home in Philadelphia.

Todd claimed a dandy six-point bull the next afternoon just a short hike from camp. Todd was sitting at a small clearing where there had been elk activity the evening before, and watched the bull exit the timber about 10 minutes before shooting light was over.



Cherie took almost 2,000 photos by the time we climbed into the pickup trucks at the trailhead, and told all within earshot that she'd be back in the Rockies soon, this time bringing her husband with her.

We gathered together that evening at a restaurant. All of us—the outfitters, guides, camp cook, and the other hunters who were in camp—recounted the events of the week. It had been a superb experience, and once again I knew I'd be back. I was bonded to the camp, the people, and that incredibly beautiful wilderness. I'd hunted many wilderness areas before, but this one somehow seemed special.

Later that fall, Paul, Steve, and Jim Pike joined me on my annual pheasant hunt in South Dakota. Again, old friendships were rekindled, and we had more fun than humans should be allowed to have.

A few years later, I was back again in their camp. The trip was with Linda Powell, senior press manager for Remington Arms.

This was Linda's first elk hunt, and like Cherie, her first trip into a wilderness.

**BELOW:** Linda Powell of Remington Arms glassing for elk with guide Paul Pike.

**INSET:** Linda with her first elk, a 4x4 taken with a Remington Model 7 in .300 short-action caliber.



She'd done some casual horseback riding before, but nothing as intense as this would be.

Seeing the Pikes, Tom, Mark, and the other guides was sort of like a homecoming for me. We rekindled the old friendship, and I knew this would be a great trip, elk or no elk.

Riding in from the trailhead on a glorious morning, we left the guides to pack our gear and meet us in camp later. The weather was too nice for elk hunting—warm, dry, with no snow in the forecast. I wasn't concerned, because there would be plenty of elk around.

As usual, Mark made a definite impression on our party. He is the consummate cowboy, perennially wearing a red bandanna, faded jeans, and leather chaps that looked like they were from the Roy Rogers' era. A swarthy man with a rugged, handsome face, he was always cheerful and positive, and was the kind of guy that you took an immediate liking to. Tom was 180 degrees different—shy, quiet, but with a great sense of humor.

I warned our bunch that there was a good chance we'd be listening to the Broncos football game. The Pikes are rabid fans, and I knew Paul and Steve would beg and plead for their hunters to take a break and listen to the game on their portable radios. That would be our only contact with the outside world in the wilderness, but it was one of those things you just accepted. To the Pike boys, many of the guides (and me), the Broncos walked on water.

We were in the saddles long before daybreak, paired up with our guides. Paul would guide me and Linda, and his plan was to head for the place where I'd killed my elk on the previous trip. The corral was a busy place, with people adjusting saddles, packing gear, all in the hissing light of lanterns that hung on trees. Being a wilderness area, generators weren't allowed. Neither were chainsaws, which required the guides to cut firewood by hand.

As we left the ridge at camp and dropped into the timber, the little starlight that offered limited visibility was completely shut out by the foliage. It suddenly became slap-up dark, where you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I'd warned Linda about this necessary aspect of wilderness elk hunting, and wondered if she was faring as well as Cherie. Linda was riding Easy, a palomino mare. Though she was riding between me and Paul and I was taking up the rear, I couldn't see the blond tail of her horse a few feet in front of me.

"How you doing?" I whispered.

"I'm totally freaking out," she said,

"but I'm fine."

As we rode in the dark, we continually heard elk in the timber. The animals were already moving to bedding areas, having fed in the numerous meadows all night.

When it broke light, we dismounted and slipped along, checking likely places for feeding elk. All the usual spots were empty, so we hiked a couple miles up a trail, searching for elk in a canyon that usually held plenty of animals. We saw some, but they were between a half-mile to a mile away.

The rest of the day was more of the same. The warm weather had the elk "jungled up." They were sucked into the timber, and weren't coming out until after dark. I'd seen this behavior many times before and I knew we were in for a tough hunt.

The next morning dawned clear with no hint of snow. Once again we struck out, but late in the afternoon we spotted several bulls and a bunch of cows far up in an avalanche chute. It would have been foolhardy to make a stalk in the dry woods, so we opted to ambush them when they drifted out of the timber to feed. The plan was sound, but it didn't work. The elk never showed, and we rode to camp in the dark. Linda was absorbing a dose of reality in the elk woods. She was quickly learning the two F's—failure and frustration.

I made a delightful discovery when I opened my tent flaps in the morning. It was snowing, and we knew what that meant. Maybe our luck would turn on day three.

We left camp a half-hour earlier and tied our horses about two miles away. Paul and Linda hiked up on a mountain where he knew of a good elk crossing, and I'd watch another crossing about a half-mile away. I told them if I heard a shot I'd come over, following their tracks in the snow. I was hoping for some photos of Linda smiling with a deceased elk.

Her shot came at about 8:15, and I wasn't surprised. I had a strong hunch that someone in our party would take a bull this day. I followed their tracks up a steep, snowy trail, and through firs and aspens. When I caught up with them, they wore ear-to-ear grins. Linda had taken her first bull, a four-pointer that I'm sure looked like Godzilla to her. It did to us, too, knowing that a trophy is in the eyes of the beholder. We were, at that moment, all happy campers.

The bull was likely the first one ever taken with a Remington Model 7 in the brand new .300 short-action caliber.

As we took pictures, we heard a shot in the distance. Paul thought it was from the direction of one of his guides, and we

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hoped for the best. With the animal field-dressed, we headed for the horses and rode to camp. The shot we heard was indeed from one of our group. Dave Henderson, a hunter from New York, had scored on a five-point bull.

To our dismay, the snow was short-lived. It turned warm, and the elk remained glued in the timber. One of the hunters in our party missed a bull, and another hunter and I never had a bull within range. Three shooting opportunities out of five wasn't bad, considering the weather. No one was complaining. Moreover, everyone agreed it had been a hunt to remember. Camp camaraderie was outstanding, and plenty of new bonds were forged. I knew for sure I'd be back. ■