

# CAMERASHOTS

## At American Big Game

By PRENTISS N. GRAY  
PHOTOS BY AUTHOR  
Circa December 1931, *The Sportsman*

*In the sharp cold of early fall you may hear the shrill whistle of a bull wapiti as he challenges all his rivals. From the timber he walks into sight with stately measured stride, his massive branching antlers, which appear almost too much for him to bear, sweeping back from his dark brown head and neck over his yellow shoulders. He is followed by his herd of cows, ever on the alert to warn him of danger, while he watches carefully to see that no youthful rival raids his harem. He pauses to raise his head again and utter that shrill "bugle" which starts as a bray and ends as a whistle. He stands there a magnificent picture of strength and grace.*

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“... I shall long retain in memory the sight of this splendid animal surrounded by his family as he stood in Faun Pass pawing the earth and throwing back his magnificent head to bugle.”

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No animal of the deer family offers so wide a difference in the difficulties of stalking at various seasons. Wapiti, commonly called elk, during the summer seek the shade of the thick forest and dense underbrush where the camera man has slight chance. About the first of September their horns begin to harden; and from then till the snows come they are to be found on the highest ridges where they begin to collect in herds and the bulls fight among themselves for their cows. This is the most sporting time of year in which to photograph wapiti, as then it requires endless patience and exceptional stalking ability.

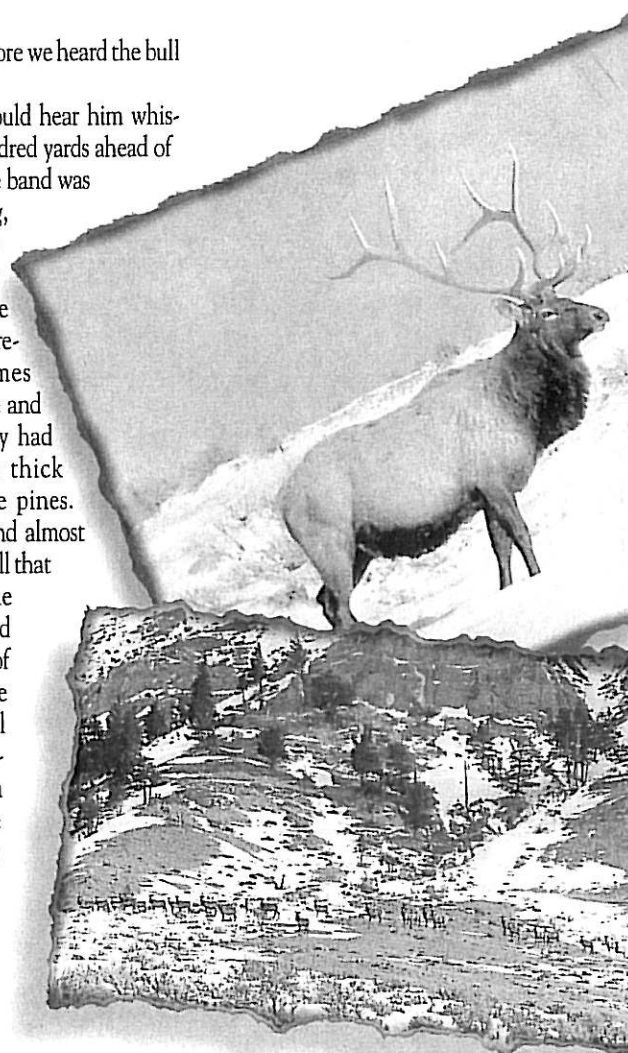
As soon as the rut is over, the small bands collect into larger herds sometimes numbering several hundred head. They wander about for awhile until they start for the winter feeding grounds, which are either at lower levels where the snow is not so deep, or on the open hills which are kept more or less clear by winds. In the heavy drifts of midwinter, the difficulties of stalking become less, as the wapiti are easily run down by a man on skis or webs, and in their fight to obtain food enough on which to exist they seem to lose their intense fear. The only difficulties in getting pictures at this time are the distance one must travel to reach the herds and the weather conditions which are experienced.

In 1925, I was assured by a rancher on the Gallatin River that in the northwest corner of Yellowstone Park he could show me ten bull wapiti each day and easily put me within photographic distance of them. Therefore, in the early days of September, our pack train started on an easy trail up Fan Creek, climbing slowly till we reached an elevation of nine thousand feet. From this point we dropped down to the headwaters of the Gallatin and made camp for the night. Early the next morning we located a bunch of twenty wapiti in which there was a big bull. However, they discovered us simultaneously, although we were half a mile away, and displayed signs of uneasiness. As it had started to rain we picketed the horses in the thick timber and ate our lunch to give the animals time to quiet down. After an hour we took up their trail, packing the cameras on our backs. Our wapiti had evidently been more frightened than we figured, for we followed their track over two miles

of rough country before we heard the bull bugle again.

At last we could hear him whistling only a few hundred yards ahead of us and, although the band was evidently traveling, we were urged to greater effort by their proximity. Finally the sound seemed to be repeated several times from the same place and we judged that they had settled down in a thick clump of lodgepole pines. We crept forward and almost stepped on a small bull that was hanging on the outskirts of the herd trying to steal one of the cows. In this case he served the old bull well, for the youngster went off with a crash, warning the band and taking them all with him.

We moved our camp up to Faun Pass, two hundred feet higher, and the next day located a band of wapiti feeding in a little gully. Through our glasses we could see that the bull was a magnificent animal with seven points. He was standing in the center of his herd, bugling at times, and keeping a watchful eye on the cows contentedly feeding about him. We had two choices of approach, both bad. One had cover but was up wind; the other was barren hillside with only such protection as we could get by crawling on our stomachs through the grass. As the wind was fitful and not strong, we chose the first approach. Reaching a point within fifty yards of the old bull, we set up the camera. While I was adjusting the focus, suddenly one of the cows caught a taint in the air and trotted up the hill followed by the whole herd with the bull in the rear. We missed the picture on the film, but I shall long retain in memory the sight of this splendid animal surrounded by his family as he stood in Faun Pass pawing the earth and throwing back his magnificent head to bugle. In the still air his exhalation turned to mist and the sound reverberated against the rocky slopes above.



So it went throughout the season. Time after time we met with disappointment, and our first year on wapiti was a complete failure, so far as picture-taking went. We had seen almost ten bulls a day, but had hardly a foot of film to prove it. However, we had learned a lot about their habits and the following year we again took up the trail. This time we timed our trip a little later and on the first of October we built a blind in a clump of spruces on the Upper Gallatin River in a crossing much frequented by the herds. At daybreak the next morning we were settled in our blind, and it was not a moment too soon, for before we had finished mounting the camera and making our hiding places tighter we heard a bugle. It was rather late in the year for the bulls to be, but this old bull was very noisy. He was just over the hill from us with his herd, working our way.

First a cow, calf, and two heifers appeared and trotted to a little pool within forty yards of us. We let them come, but as they finished drinking and the rest of the herd had not appeared



over the ridge we took a few feet of film of them and after a moment's hesitation they made off. This was most unfortunate, for just at that moment the rest of the herd of about twenty-five with a fine old bull in the middle appeared and took alarm at the flight of these four. We got some footage, as they strung out along the side hill, however, and, with a shot on the skyline as they topped the ridge, we completed two hundred feet of film.

After several days of fruitless hunting we were beginning to feel that our poor luck of the previous year still held. We rode along scanning the hills for wapiti. Suddenly to the south we saw a herd of more than a hundred cross the sky line. They were traveling, but we decided to cut across ahead of them.

We raced up the hill, as fast as our seventy-five pound packs of cameras, tripods, and lenses would allow, and came out onto a high plateau. Along the south edge of this was a deep coulee partly timbered and we crawled to the edge and

looked over. Here and there among the trees in the ravine we could see elk and, to our intense satisfaction, they were not over a hundred and twenty-five yards away. We set up the camera low down, to get the only cover offered, which was sagebrush, and as the herd worked out of the timber onto the opposite rim of the coulee we stood ready to grind. I glanced at the register and, to my dismay, noticed that there were only forty feet of film left in the magazine. In our hurry we had come off without an extra film magazine. I whispered to one of the guides to go back to the horses - a mile away - for another reel of film. He started to crawl back out of sight, while we lay still and prayed fervently that the herd would neither see us nor feed off before he returned. In a remarkably short time, which seemed hours to us, we saw the guide crawling toward us on his stomach through the sagebrush. With the extra film near at hand I started to crank and he reached us just as the film ran out. Either the whirl of the machine or

the movement of my hand, cranking startled the herd, but they tarried long enough to give us the forty feet and allow me to change film and get fifty feet more before the last of them straggled over the ridge.

We had seen a very large herd, probably over two hundred head, back about a mile from our position. After lunch we decided to work this bunch for close-ups, even though it meant a long pack with the cameras. We had come up with them about three o'clock and, keeping well to leeward and working very slowly and carefully on separated groups of the larger herd that could be stalked, we succeeded in getting considerable footage on cows and calves and herd pictures during the next two hours.

Just at five o'clock we found a bunch of over sixty head feeding along the sky line. It was a wonderful picture - one that no camera could ever reproduce - those splendid wapiti silhouetted against a sky of flaming red; and our last foot of film went in the effort to record some idea of its grandeur.