

Through the Timber of the TETONS

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THERE ARE FEW EXPERIENCES THAT COMPARE WITH HUNTING IN THE HIGH COUNTRY OF WYOMING WITH THE GLOWING FALL ASPENS IN THE CRISP MORNINGS AND CLEAR AIR OF THE HIGH ALTITUDES WHERE YOU HUNT ONE OF EARTH'S MOST MAGNIFICENT AND CHALLENGING BEASTS, THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK. THEY ARE SMART, STRONG AND STATELY. ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT EXPERIENCES.

My hunting partner, Jim Stafford, and I had chosen a particular area to hunt for 1992 after a lot of pre-season research and scouting. We had looked at the survey maps, discussed our mental notes of previous hunts and, Jim had generously scouted the area with attention to the topography, vegetation, water and elk habitat. Jim knew the area well and is a fine woodsman. We had done our research and were both convinced the area we were hunting had some big elk.

The ground was dry and every step mashed dry leaves that crackled out an advance signal to every living thing that might be near. And no bugling. As hard as we listened, we couldn't hear any of the hair-raising bull bugling that we had usually experienced on prior hunts. A sound that I looked forward to as part of a fall elk hunt. We hunted hard that day. We had hiked in about two miles, it felt like five, from a logging road. We had no horses with us. Jim has always believed that elk can smell and hear horses and they instinctively know that horses carry hunters. At least the older bulls know it. My last elk hunt prior to this one was in 1989 when I took

a fine six-pointer within an hour of when the Loma Prieta earthquake was striking back home in the San Francisco Bay Area. At that time I had sworn I would not pack out another elk. But, here I was again on foot with Jim with the solemn promise that I would pass on any elk that was not larger than the "Loma Prieta elk."

"...Out there
listening for us
and ready to fade
into the timber
in a flash."

Jim was the first to pick something up; tracks and then a fresh antler scrape on one of the trees. Jim whispered to me that he sensed we were on to a big bull. We followed the tracks which appeared fresh and about an hour later came up on a cavern of mud where the elk had been rolling. I looked at the sign and had a brain flash of a big, barrel chested, rack-heavy lone bull elk that was somewhere near, out there listening for us and ready to fade into the timber in a flash. The adrenaline was pumping and I could feel the alertness of the senses that accompanies the stalk. We stashed our packs and then headed out abreast at about ten yards from each other. Jim took my

7x42 Zeiss binoculars with him and was looking hard for the bull. The timber was thick and any kind of shot was going to be a challenge if we found our quarry. The wind had picked up and we were headed into it but, I still could hear every dry leaf under my feet. It was like walking on cornflakes.

I could see Jim out of the corner of my eye as I forced my eyes to look for something big. All the signs said the bull was close but the wind brought us no sound or smell of what we were looking for. My heart was beating and I was tired. Being only the second day at altitude, my respiratory system was not my friend today. We had been at it since daybreak and my motor was running down.

I glanced over at Jim and I saw him going to a crouch at about the same time I saw something move about fifty or sixty yards out. It looked like a tree limb at first and then, my eyes froze on the sight before us. A monster rack was moving ahead of us and it was obviously attached to a very big animal, a very big elk. Jim was motioning with his hands for me to get down.

I delicately worked a shell into the chamber of the .35 Whelen Remington 700 which I was carrying and put the safety on. The light was fading fast and things were getting harder to see. The forest takes on a certain eariness as the light fades and your atavistic senses move to a new level of sharpness. You hear and smell everything. The pungent musk smell of elk was finally in my

nostrils. My muscles were tensing up as I strained to keep the bull in sight and to work out a strategy to finish the stalk.

There was no chance of a killing shot from where I stood. The only way I could get into a position for a shot was to somehow move several yards to my right, without tipping the brute off, to what looked like a small clearing through the trees. With the low light, I worried about a wounding shot that would offer little chance of recovering the animal. While I was confident in my equipment and shooting ability, anything but a relatively close shot seemed out of the question. I started a very low and slow stalk into the wind with my eyes glued in the direction of the bull. I could see part of him a little better now, even in the fading light, and he was looking away from me. I then saw him lay down, still looking away from me. I thanked Lady Luck for that gift.

I moved a few more feet and then it sounded like I had tripped an alarm system that would wake the dead. A magpie practically at shoulder level let loose with a cacophony that almost shocked me out of my boots. His beady eyes drilling into mine like the devil himself. I looked back over to where the big bull was and his head was bobbing around in a nervous sort of way. I had visions of his muscles tensing for a fast bolt in a direction of no return. The bird wasn't giving up and I decided that I had only one chance to anchor this bull and that was an offhand shoulder shot from a full standing position through a break in the timber. Then, the bull suddenly stood up looking in my direction and for the first time I could see all of him. He was immense.

I slid back the safety, counted to three, stood up and stared through the 4X Zeiss scope. The optics were clear and bright. As

soon as the cross hairs were on the front part of the bull's shoulder, I squeezed the trigger. The 250 grain Core-Lokt bullet hit him in the front part of the shoulder and he stumbled. Just as he gathered his strength and sprang back up, the second bullet found its mark and he went down within ten yards.

Jim and I covered the distance to the downed bull in record time, timber or no timber. We both gasped at the form that lay before us. The rack was massive. I remember Jim putting his hands around the circumference of one of the antler bases and having a look of disbelief on his face. After a few photos, we set about the major task of field dressing the bull. No horses, we were to do it the old fashioned way. This was to be the longest day of my life.

A couple of days later, Jim rough scored the bull using his only copy of a Boone & Crockett Records Book. Guess what, no non-typical

category. We let it ride. Jim shipped the rack to me about a year later at about the same time that Jim discovered that the latest Records Book had a non-typical elk category. His arithmetic had come up with a number well over the minimum. I contacted the Boone & Crockett Club's office for a list of Official Measurers which led me to Pat Gilligan in nearby Hillsborough. Pat went into overdrive and spent part of a weekend scoring the rack for me. Pat's meticulous measurements combined with some consultations with the folks in Missoula arrived at a score of 401-4/8 points.

Elk hunting has its memorable moments and they have a way of staying with you the rest of your life. I don't expect to ever get a chance at a bull like this again, but I hope that there will be a few more elk hunts up there high in the Tetons where the aspens glow, the air is clear and the elk are calling.

B&C ASSOCIATE, DOUGLAS G. DeVivo WITH HIS NON-TYPICAL AMERICAN ELK THAT SCORES 401-4/8 POINTS TAKEN IN THE FALL OF 1992.

