

# A "HAIL MARY" ELK

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I began thinking back over more than 50 years of hunting. Those targeting elk had been marked by futility, featuring moons too full; hundreds of midday snoozes along the edges of summer-fatigued meadows; wild, late-evening horseback rides back to camp that reinforced my faith in these companions; trophy elk spotted with no possibility of approach; good elk passed up in the belief that "The One" was but a ridge beyond; countless hours of glassing; the treasure of campfires surrounded by friends and hard-working guides; the bitter taste of memories of unscrupulous outfitters; of mud, winches, and snow storms; and of course, the trips home, for the most part reflecting on the joys of the days afield and the passing thought, "Will I ever be blessed with an elk?"

My late wife had once remarked, "Norden, you don't hunt, you shop!"

She was right, and now it was time to turn the tables on the wily wapiti. It was early May 2009, and I had just learned that I, along with my good friend Carmel, had drawn an early-season rifle elk tag in Arizona's Unit 10, arguably the most sought-after public land trophy-elk permit to be had, with less than a 1 percent draw/success ratio. Planning began immediately (but not before the vision of a B&C qualifying elk was firmly emblazoned on my mind).

Taxidermists and guides were researched. Interviews and calls were set up. Maps were obtained. There were a number of us, both in the office and close friends who for years had applied for most all of Arizona's permits for available species. If one or more drew permits, the rest who could, joined in on the hunt. This we had done several times over the years. Now we had two permits for the hunt, and as it turned

out, five more joined the hunt together with my son and a grandson.

Logistics were programmed and the division of labor arranged. Between us we had multiple tents including porta-potty and shower, chairs, ovens and grills for the kitchen, propane, generator, lights, saws, gasoline and water cans, and an array of vehicles, one with a flatbed trailer. We had a designated chef, a sous-chef, a cocktail-hour specialist (me), firewood gatherers, glassers, skimmers and porters, with everyone, hunters included, pitching in as required. By July we had secured the services of our guides, Lance and Jon who would be taking bowhunters into the area for that season which immediately preceded ours. We spent a day in the area with Lance, getting to know each other and familiarizing ourselves with the country. He would be doing intense scouting later in the summer before the bowhunting season.

Unit 10 is the largest game unit in the state, beginning 30 miles west of Flagstaff on Interstate 40, and extending another 40 miles to the west and then north to the southern edge of the Grand Canyon with a general elevation of 6,000 feet. While there is a wide range of physical features in the unit, we would concentrate on the high, rolling cedar-covered terrain in the middle. I was assured that despite some physical limitations that would limit me to a practical range of about a mile over moderate terrain, we should be just fine.

The weeks had passed quickly. Ammunition was selected (Arizona Game & Fish recommends, but does not require the use of non-lead bullets in Unit 10). After three trips to the range, I decided to go along with the recommendation.

The week before the season began, Lance gave us directions to the planned campsite, and as evening fell two days before



the opening, we were set up in time for campfire cocktails under a waning sliver of a late-September moon. Lance and Jon worked out strategies; Jon would be guiding me along with my son and grandson. We would be getting up at 3 a.m. and after a full-course breakfast, into the vehicles at 4 a.m. for the long ride into a section they had targeted. Lance and Jon told us about several "toads" (elk you would shoot without a second thought) that they had located during their summer scouting. I recalled the old refrain, "Behold the hunter. He ariseth early and goeth forth full of hope!" which is quite my natural state of being on the first morning of any hunt.

The roads were narrow, and dust engulfed all who followed the lead car over roads, trails, and terrain for almost two hours, averaging less than 15 miles per hour. The area had not seen rain in weeks and most of the waterholes in this vast cattle grazing country had dried up. Splitting into two groups, we began walking in the pre-dawn dark through slivers of meadows, patches of sparse land covered with scrub brush and small, unstable volcanic rock, and through country choked with cedar.

Stopping frequently to listen for bugling squeals or any sounds of moving elk, Jon began artful bugling periodically with no answers. We stopped at a predetermined point where two long meadows converged and waited, watched, and bugled. We got a few faint, distant replies and heard one deep and closer grunt. Efforts to work our way closer failed. We then rendezvoused with Carmel and his group. They had had no better success. One of our spotters had seen

two herds from a hilltop vantage a mile or so away, but no trophy bulls.

We followed our early lunch with a nap in the shade of cedars to avoid the sun in the 80-degree temperatures before splitting up again for the late afternoon foray which yielded only more of the same. Reaching camp at almost 9 p.m., the cocktail hour was all but abandoned in favor of a quick meal and getting into the sack before 10.

Thus ended the first of our seven days, which was to be replicated day after day, punctuated with midday temperatures into the 90s, coupled with some gale-force winds. The elk were staying put, coming out only well after dark. The rut had been a non-event. Some of the elk had twittered and tweeted, but bugled not. The few elk we saw had, for the most part, not been worthy targets. Carmel got one quick, fast-frame shot at a trophy quality bull crossing a narrow shooting lane between some cedars one early evening, but to no effect.

Lance and Jon plotted new strategies. They took us to different terrain, and on two evenings I watched over the only filled tank (water hole) in the area where a nice five-point bull came out and playfully splashed about for our amusement.

In the later afternoon of the sixth day, Carmel shot a good six-point bull in a northern portion of Unit 10 closer to the Grand Canyon in virtually treeless country featuring arid plateaus and shallow canyons. Taking vehicles to retrieve game in that area was not allowed. Fortunately there were three others with him to help with the two-mile trek back and forth to the vehicle.

It was now 3 a.m. on the last day of the season. I had gone to bed before Carmel had made it back to camp. Having not gotten more than five hours' sleep a night, I was really bushed. My usual cup of optimism before heading afield was now only half full, if that. Camp was to be broken down that morning. Jon and I alone would be venturing forth to yet a new patch of the unit, some 20 miles to the west that he had scouted before. My son and grandson had returned to Phoenix earlier.

This was going to be one Hell of a Hail-Mary hunt!

Getting to the area, we pulled off a main northbound road, still in total darkness. Jon got out of the truck and began bugling. Nothing. Another mile or so later this was repeated, and he reported that we did, in fact, get a deep but distant responding bugle from the hills to the east. With only

one reasonably good ear, I could either accept that or admit that Jon was humoring me. I almost didn't care. Jon said we would find a road heading east and try to work into the area. Ten minutes later, we pulled off a secondary road a short way and again bugled. Even I heard the bull this time. We quickly got out of the vehicle as quietly as possible, and after chambering a round, we began making our way through scrub brush and toward a thick line of cedars. In the now-predawn light, Jon put away his flashlight. Our eyes adjusted as we pushed on for another 50 yards or so before I felt a firm grasp on my arm.

Jon whispered, "Look over there to the right, about 200 yards, coming out between those cedars—two cows!" That was all well and good for Jon to say, but with only one reasonably good eye to work with, I struggled with my binoculars to pick up the scene. Movement, then shapes congealed in the gloom.

"To the right—the bull!" I heard. I made out the larger bulk of the bull walking slowly to my left, antlers still indistinct. I lowered the glasses and shouldered my 7mm Magnum, again trying to pick up what I had seen seconds before. "This is the one you want Norden!" Jon said. Being in an open patch of ground; an off-hand shot was the only option; definitely not my strong suit. I found the bull and shot. The report surprised me and was I delighted to get a solid "whump!" echo.

"He's still moving, shoot again."

Swinging to the left and taking a second or two to be sure the cows were not in the mix, I shot. This time the echo was different, more like a "crack." Then only quiet and the thinning darkness of the landscape.

Checking the scene, we picked up the start of a thin, sparse blood trail and decided to hunker down. Jon called camp and requested reinforcements.

Lance soon arrived and we began tracking. His ability was uncanny and we soon came upon the bull's first resting place. Following uphill as quietly as possible,

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surprisingly we found a second bed. Minutes later Lance whispered, "I just heard him moving ahead." Less than 100 yards later we saw him, and this time he was down. An anchoring shot quickly followed.

I quietly sat down next to the head of a beautifully symmetrical, strong 6x7 elk and thought about him, about having first wounded him and about hunting.

I thought about the untiring efforts of Jon and Lance; the companionship and support of good friends; the joy of having been in the field with my son and grandson. I could smell the clean fresh morning air, and looking out in the far distance under a pure blue sky I could see a long freight train pulling its way through the wide-open Arizona landscape from somewhere to wherever. Yes, this indeed had been a good day. ■



**OPPOSITE:** Norden with his "Hail Mary" elk. **ABOVE:** Norden with his good friend Carmel, who both drew the same elk tag. **LEFT:** The hunting crew taking an afternoon nap to avoid the heat.

