

THE MAGNIFICENT

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FIREARMS BUGLING HUNTS ARE NOT VERY COMMON THESE DAYS, WHICH IS WHY MANY ELK HUNTERS ARE EXPANDING THEIR SEASONS WITH ARCHERY AND BLACKPOWDER.

My first elk came on a Thanksgiving day nearly 25 years ago. It was in the Pioneer Mountains of southwest Montana with the late John Ward—always good-humored, good company, and a great elk hunter. We picked up two bull tracks in the bottom and followed them clear to the top of the mountain—only to see two yellow rumps sail over a deadfall just as we reached the top. Those elk were gone—except that John knew a big clearcut covered the far slope. We ran like maniacs up to the top and down through the timber, dodging trees and leaping over obstacles. When we reached the edge of the timber both bulls were about 200 yards out into the

clearcut, and we shot them there.

John Ward loved hunting elk on those timbered Montana slopes. Over the course of several autumns I learned many things from him—one of which was that his was some of the most difficult hunting I've seen before or since! John's preference was to go into the black timber after them—following tracks if there was snow, still-hunting into the wind if there wasn't. He was a magician at getting into the middle of an elk herd—even without cow-talking, which was an unknown technique at the time. We—especially John—did pretty well with “any elk” tags, common in those days. We did much more poorly trying to sort out bulls!

Last year's elk came in country similar to that first one, high timbered ridges surrounded by sagebrush hills and a few clearcuts. Similarly, too, he was taken in a clearcut below black timber. Aside from those two similarities, though, the two bulls might have come from different species.

Randy Brooks, head of Barnes Bullets; Mike Henrickson, one of the owners of Slater

Creek Ranch in northwestern Colorado; and I left the truck in the black dark and walked a short distance up a dirt road, then stopped to listen. It was Colorado's second general season, mid-October when elk hunting should be at its most difficult—after the rut and before the snow, when there are no easy answers and the bulls must be dug out of the heaviest cover. There was no snow, true enough—but none was really needed. The rut was surely on the wane, but you'd hardly have known that had you been standing with us on that chilly October morning. Bulls bugled to the right, to the left, and straight ahead, challenging and answering in a lilting symphony that surrounded us.

We were in big sagebrush hills that led up to timber. Mike told us that the elk fed out into the open at night, then started working their way back to cover in the early morning. Of course he was right; we blundered into one big herd in the dark and I could just barely make out antlers on the bull as he trotted off behind his cows. After spooking that herd we waited until there was just a bit more light. Then, with several bulls bugling at the edge of the timber, we made for an open meadow above a couple of beaver ponds. Mike said that herds often held up there before moving into the timber—and of course he was right.



WITH NUMBERS REACHING ALL-TIME HIGHS THE GOLDEN AGE OF ELK HUNTING IS NOW!

We slipped out onto a brushy little knoll overlooking the meadow. The beaver dams and their ponds were right below us, and across was an open clearcut that rose gently to meet the timber. The opening was literally full of elk, a sea of yellow and tan. I don't know how many branch-antlered bulls were with the herd, but certainly several. We found a likely bull on the left-hand side and I shot him twice. It wasn't seven a.m. yet, and that was the end of my 1994 elk season!

Usually things aren't quite that easy, but you never know what you're getting yourself into with elk. Well, that's not true. You know you're going to see some big, beautiful country. That's part of the charm of elk hunting, for in years gone by, in most of the West, the chances for really seeing and shooting elk were fairly slim. This is not the case today; right now elk herds are exploding in the West. Failing a truly catastrophic winter, we're heading into an era of unprecedented elk hunting opportunity—at least



PHOTO BY DANIEL J. COX

INSET TOP: THE HIGHEST BASINS ARE GOOD PLACES TO LOOK FOR ELK -- OFTEN ABOVE GOATS AND BIGHORN SHEEP. HORSES ARE A REAL BLESSING BOTH FOR GETTING INTO ELK COUNTRY AND PACKING GAME OUT.

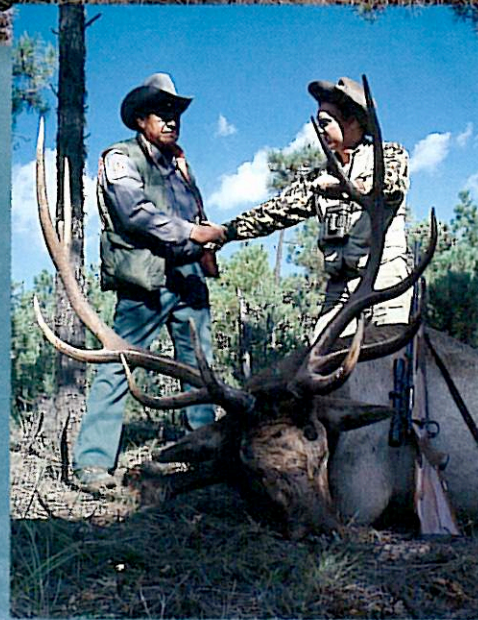
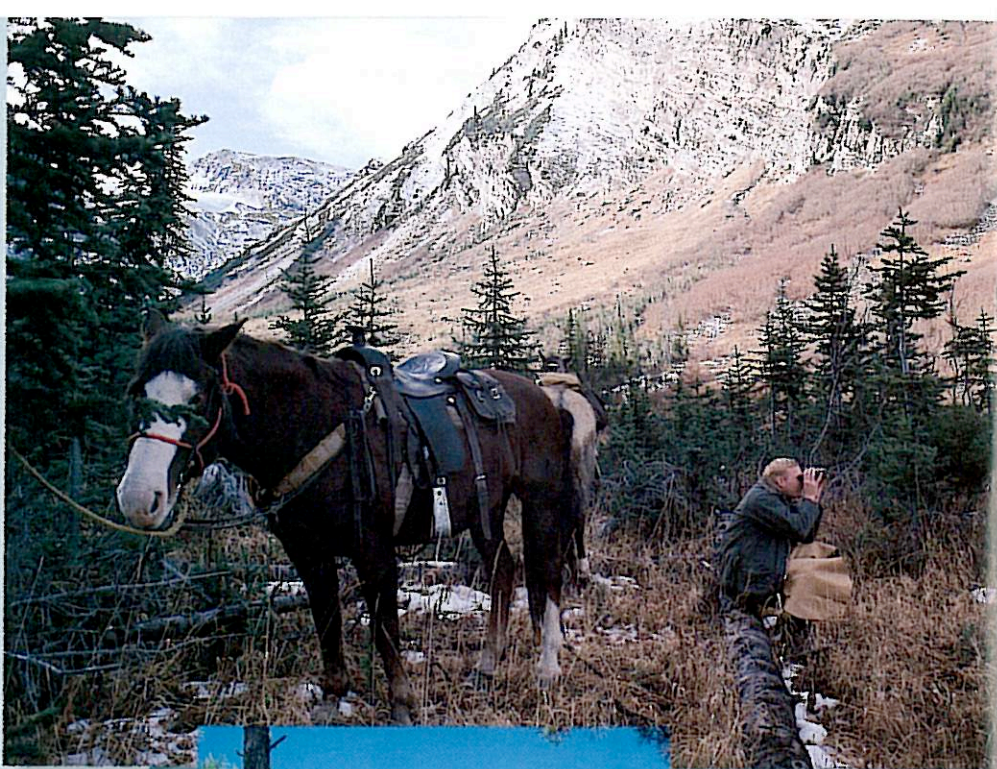
INSET BOTTOM: THE AUTHOR'S BEST BULL WAS TAKEN ON A BUGLING HUNT ON THE MESCALERO RESERVATION. WELL-MANAGED HERDS LIKE SOME OF THE RESERVATIONS HOLD SOME OF THE BEST ODDS FOR BIG BULLS TODAY.

since the West was won.

Before the Civil War the American elk existed in untold millions all across the West from the Great Plains on through the mountains and valleys to the Pacific. By the turn of the century the few survivors had been pushed into the most remote mountains, and the newly-created Yellowstone National Park held some of the last big herds. Numerous populations were wiped out altogether during the excesses of the last century, including, regrettably, the Merriam's subspecies of the Southwest. California's tule elk were barely saved.

Those surviving Yellowstone elk are the ancestors of the vast majority of elk alive today. Live-trapped Yellowstone elk were reintroduced literally all over the continent—from Pennsylvania to Michigan to Oklahoma to Nebraska, and of course to Arizona and New Mexico—and old Mexico, too. This restocking actually began even before the wanton slaughter ended, but in most areas it took many years for the elk to rebuild. Except in the most remote wilderness areas of western Canada and along the spine of the Rockies, there was very little elk hunting from the 1920's until after World War II. Slowly, though, areas long-closed filled up with elk and hunting seasons were reopened. My uncle, Art Popham, a longtime B&C member, drew an Arizona elk tag in the late Thirties when elk hunting was first reopened on the Mogollon Rim. He and his English professor and his wife—Jack and Eleanor O'Connor—applied together, drew together, and took superb elk out of that un hunted herd.

By the 1950's most traditional elk hunting areas had reopened. Herds were stable or increasing







THIS BULL WAS TAKEN ON PUBLIC LAND IN COLORADO AT 12,000 FEET ELEVATION. THIS IS A LIMITED ENTRY AREA, REQUIRING A COUPLE OF PREFERENCE POINTS -- BUT WELL WORTH THE WAIT.

slightly, and the elk hunting status quo changed very little up until just a few years ago. Oh, there were some changes. Utah opened elk hunting, and more recently Nevada did as well. After decades of careful nurturing California was able to re-open tule elk hunting on a limited basis. There were even limited elk hunts held in such unlikely places as Kansas and Nebraska, not to mention Michigan and Oklahoma. The demand for tags grew until license quotas, first-come-first-served, were established in some key elk states like Montana and Idaho, while other states—Arizona, Wyoming, now Utah—went to drawings for tags. Basically, though, elk hunting has changed relatively little in the last 40 years. Until now.

Right now, thanks to a series of mild winters and reasons most biologists don't quite understand, elk populations are exploding. This is a relative thing; if the herds in Kan-

sas or Nebraska exploded it wouldn't be much of a conflagration. But the herds in Colorado, western Wyoming, and western Montana have exploded. Jack Atcheson, the Butte, Montana booking agent, is probably the most avid and possibly the most experienced elk hunter in North America. Jack tells me he's seeing more elk than he remembers as a kid—elk literally all over the place in his native Montana and adjacent Idaho. This is not without a price, by the way; Atcheson also reports that he no longer sees mule deer at all.

Colorado, where I've lived the last couple of years, used to be the court of last resort for elk hunters. When you missed the Wyoming and Arizona draws, got aced out in Idaho and Montana, and couldn't afford New Mexico's private land tags, you could always buy a Colorado elk tag right over the counter and go elk hunting. But in Colorado that's all

you really expected—to go elk hunting. Sometimes you could see elk there . . . but nobody really got elk, did they?

Look again. Colorado now has over 200,000 elk, with bull/cow ratios on the rise. Another warm fall (which reduces the harvest) and mild winter, and 300,000 elk could be possible. Right now Colorado's general season areas are not particularly good places for big bulls, but you'll see plenty of elk and there are usually good numbers of branch-antlered bulls. Limited-entry units, the ones that require you to save up your preference points, are as good as any elk units anywhere. Again, this is not without a price.



Mule deer herds have nosedived in most areas, especially in the west where elk densities are highest. Colorado used to have a stable elk herd of 100,000 or less—and back then we had a half-million deer. We can't support over 200,000 elk and a half-million deer, and right now the elk are winning big-time.

Why, after literally decades of stable conditions, is the explosion happening now? I simply don't know, but it appears that we can look forward to quite a few years of really fine elk hunting. However, we do have a real problem with most elk herds on public lands, and that problem is a genuine scarcity of mature bulls. Sometimes of bulls, period. We in the magazines, me included, have talked about monster six-point bulls for so long that elk hunters have come to believe their manhood is in question if they go home with less.

The truth is there aren't enough six-point bulls to go around. Right now, as elk populations explode and, quite literally, threaten the very existence of our mule deer, we need cow elk hunters and we need "any legal bull" elk hunters. And there's nothing wrong with that. Elk may be plentiful right now, but they're still extremely wary and gifted with supernatural senses. Any elk taken in fair chase—especially on public land—is a fine trophy. Any bull so taken is a great trophy. They're not all going to be six-pointers—and we as elk hunters can't afford for them to be.

I've used interchangeably the two most common terms for the American version of *Cervus elaphus*: wapiti and elk. "Wapiti" is probably

the most proper name, since it comes down to us from the Indians (Algonquin, I believe). "Elk," though more commonly used, is really a total misnomer since it comes from the Swedish word for the Scandinavian moose, elg. To this day, when you speak to a European about "elk" you must be very careful to determine whether you're conversing about moose or wapiti!

By either name, our elk is a very large and very strong deer. As part of the *Cervus elaphus* species, our various races of elk are subspecies of a group that ranges all the way around the world in the northern hemisphere. The red deer of Europe, from the Scottish moors and the Spanish highlands eastward to the Caucasus Mountains are also *Cervus elaphus*. So are the maral stags of Siberia and Mongolia. These days it's become more fashionable to call the marals "Asian wapiti"—and indeed these animals are indistinguishable from our elk. The red deer are a bit different in that they're smaller, darker in color, and tend to have "crown points," meaning a tight cluster of three or more points at the end of the main beam. Regional differences notwithstanding, all the red deer—maral—wapiti are of the same

species. However, the animals seem to grow steadily larger as one moves west to east across Europe and Asia. Our elk almost certainly crossed from Asia across the Bering Strait land bridge, along with much of our present and past wildlife. One could surmise that only the biggest and strongest survived the trek—and our elk have not gotten smaller with the passing millennia.

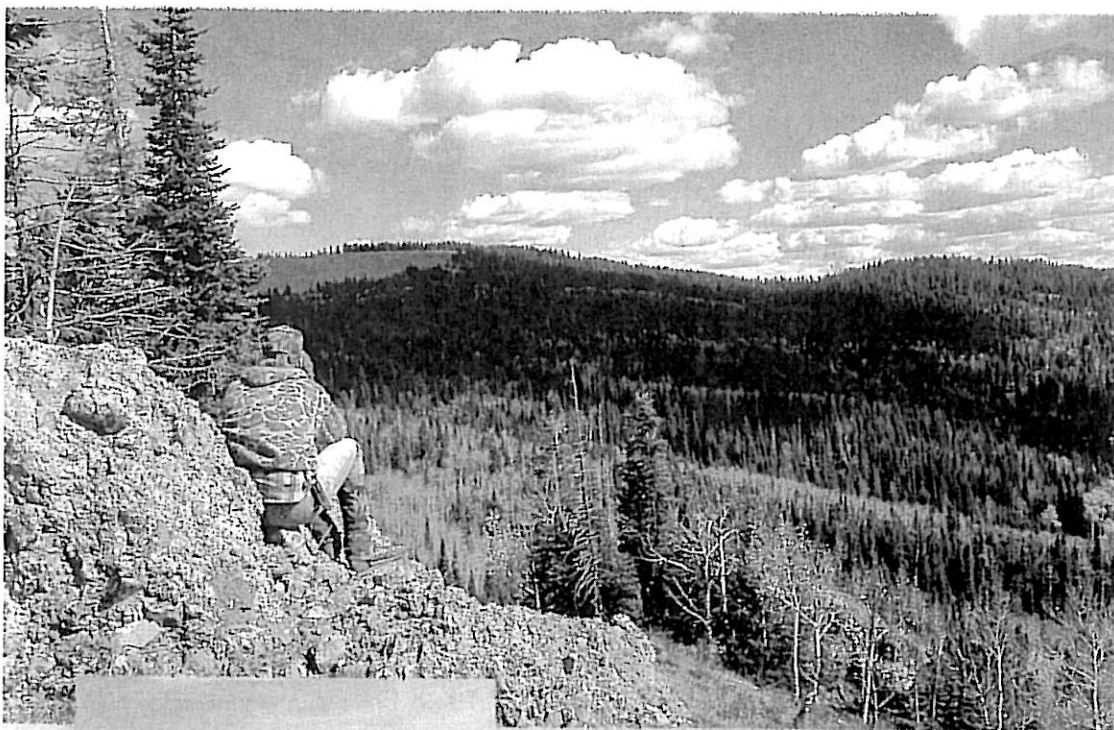
American elk may be the same species as red deer, but by comparison ours are giants. We actually have several subspecies of elk. The largest in body (though not in antler) is the Roosevelt elk of the Pacific Northwest, with bulls often ranging from 800 to 1,000 pounds and more. Our most common elk, the Rocky Mountain subspecies, can get that large; I saw a New Mexico bull peg an accurate scale at 800 pounds—field-dressed. But that's most unusual. Six hundred to 750 pounds is a good average range for mature Rocky Mountain bulls; elk of the Manitoba subspecies are about the same size. Tule elk are much smaller, the dwarfs of the

Wapiti

BOTTOM LEFT: "URBAN ELK" ARE A RELATIVELY NEW PHENOMENON IN THE WEST, WITH MORE AND MORE ELK MOVING INTO THE SUBURBS -- AND MORE PEOPLE MOVING INTO ELK COUNTRY. THIS IS A GROWING PROBLEM ELK MANAGERS ARE GRAPPLING WITH.

BOTTOM RIGHT: MANY EXPERIENCED ELK HUNTERS FEEL LATE IN THE SEASON, AFTER THE SNOW FLIES, IS THE BEST TIME FOR ELK. MOVEMENT IS MORE RELIABLE AND A TRACKING SNOW IS A GREAT HELP -- BUT YOU STILL HAVE TO GO HIGH.

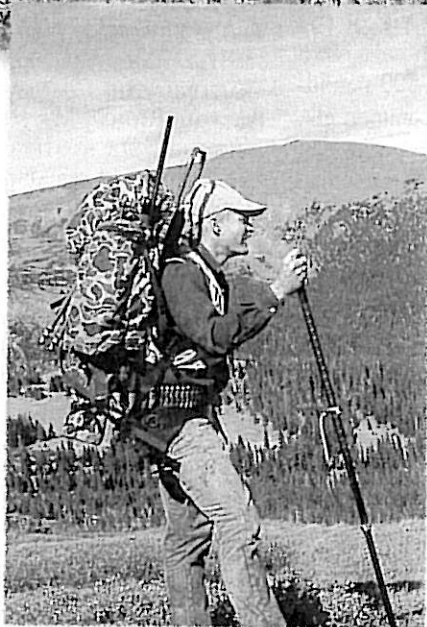




with 225 or 250-grain bullets. For fairly close-range work the .35 Whelen is a wonderful choice, and the .338-06 (a popular wildcat cartridge) would be equally good. At closer ranges both of these cartridges offer magnum performance with very modest recoil. I've also shot several elk with the .375 H&H, and there's nothing wrong at all with choosing such a cannon. In fact, I've got enough respect for elk that there's plenty of reason to choose such a gun. The only problem with the .375 is that it doesn't shoot all that flat. So I'd rate the .338 Winchester Magnum as the best all-around elk gun, an opinion shared by a whole lot of top elk hunters with far more experience than I'll ever have.

To some extent, though, the ideal elk rifle is determined by the hunting conditions. And unlike much big-game hunting, there are really three very distinct periods of elk hunting. The first is the rut, the bugling season.

The bugling season is far and away the most exciting way to hunt elk. Also one of the most successful. It is not as foolproof as it used to be;



TOP: ELK HUNTING TENDS TO BE AN EXTREMELY PHYSICAL SPORT -- THE MOUNTAINS ARE BEAUTIFUL AND YOU'LL SEE THEM UP CLOSE!

BOTTOM LEFT: MUCH GREAT ELK COUNTRY CAN BE REACHED BY BACKPACK HUNTING -- BUT MAKE SURE YOU'RE IN SHAPE. PACKING OUT AN ELK IS VERY SERIOUS BUSINESS, ESPECIALLY AT HIGH ALTITUDE.

BOTTOM RIGHT: THIS LATE-SEASON NEW MEXICO BULL WAS TAKEN IN OAKBRUSH AT ABOUT 8,000 FEET ELEVATION.



wapiti tribe. Big bulls seem to weigh about 500 pounds, perhaps a bit less.

It should be noted that these weights are for mature bulls. Cows and spike bulls are at least a third smaller, and younger bulls—the 2-1/2 and 3-1/2-year-old four and five-point bulls that make up most of the bull harvest—are at least 25 percent smaller. Mature bull elk—maybe five years old, maybe 15 years old—make up a very small percentage of most herds, and an even tinier percentage of the harvest. However, they need to be discussed because they are almost a different class of animal than the rest of the herd. All elk are strong and tough—but a really large bull elk is, in my opinion, one of the hardest game animals in the world. Anyone who ever said African game is tougher

than North American game simply didn't do much elk hunting!

One of America's most classic campfire arguments seems to revolve around suitable elk rifles. Most will agree that the .30-06 is fine, but the real controversy settles around whether or not the .270 Winchester is suitable or not. It will do the job, but I think it's marginal. Again, there's a big difference between big bulls and the kind of elk normally harvested. The .270 is unquestionably adequate for "meat" elk—but it becomes more and more marginal as you move up the scale to really big bulls.

Rifles and cartridges for elk can be argued endlessly, but my personal minimum is a .30-06 with a good 180-grain bullet. Better is a .300 magnum with 180 or 200-grain bullet; and better still is a .338 Winchester or .340 Weatherby Magnum

elk have gotten call-shy in many hard-hunted ranges, and they've also gotten real quiet in some areas. Like all rutting periods, the timing isn't exactly consistent from year to year, so it's easy to plan perfectly and still miss it. Even so, the bugling season offers enough of an advantage that there are very, very few seasons left that allow centerfire firearms. But sometimes you get lucky; in 1992 I shot a pretty good six-by-six on public land in Colorado. He was bugling his head off on the first day of the first general season. But you can't count on that.

To plan for a bugling hunt you need to think about limited entry areas, permit drawings, guided hunts in Canada—or perhaps an archery or muzzleloader tag. In several good elk states the season structure is so favorable toward archery or blackpowder hunters that serious elk

hunters are just plain crazy if they don't get involved. Just hearing a bull bugle—especially at close range—has to be one of the greatest thrills the outdoors has to offer. It's a wonderful sound that speaks of pure wilderness—and yes, even I have learned to shoot a bow just so I can hear that sound more frequently.

The next-best time to hunt elk is probably the late season, after the snow flies. Some experienced hunters actually think the late hunt is the very best of all, since the exact timing of the bugling is so fickle, and especially since rifle hunters are banned from so much of it.

In the late season the rut is long since over. The bulls have recovered from their exertions and are starting to move and feed normally again. With winter coming on the elk are starting to get together in herds of increasing size, and of course they're feeding a lot because of the growing cold. Depending on the area and how late the season runs the elk may be shifting from summer to winter pasture, which usually means they're coming down out of the high

country. However, unless the season is unusually late or the weather unusually bad, don't be fooled. It takes real weather and serious snow to move elk, and the larger the bull the harder he is to move. Most hunting seasons are long since closed before elk really start to move into winter pasture, obvious exceptions being limit-draw hunts such as the famous elk migration hunt at Gardner, Montana.

The real advantage to late season hunting isn't that the elk have come out of the mountains, but simply that there's snow. Tracking snow makes all the difference in the world, especially if the elk are in the timber and you have to dig them out.

The third type of elk hunting is everything else! The bugling season isn't on and it isn't late enough for reliable snow—and that often means things are real, real tough. Sometimes you get lucky; you get a freak snowstorm during that "in-between" period, or a late-bugling elk gives himself away. Generally, though, you have to earn your elk (not that you don't even when conditions are perfect!) You can glass

me a d o w s early and late, and you can dive into the timber and start digging around. The relatively new technique of cow talk helps immensely with timber hunting. You may not call in a big bull. In fact, you probably won't—but you can calm cows you may encounter and keep them from blowing out the whole world.

Another relatively new thing that helps all types of elk hunting is simply this: A lot more elk. Elk hunting is far more successful than it used to be because we have more elk. We don't necessarily have lots more big bulls, but we have many, many more elk than I was trying to hunt 25 years ago. Sure, we have more elk hunters, too, and that means the licenses aren't going to get easier to come by. But we're coming into the golden age of elk hunting right now, and you don't want to miss these next few seasons. It's good right now . . . and at least for the near future, it's going to get even better!

Wapiti

RANDY BROOKS OF BARNES BULLETS AND THE AUTHOR WITH A FOUR-BY-FIVE "FREEZER BULL" TAKEN IN NORTHWESTERN COLORADO. ALTHOUGH ELK NUMBERS ARE HIGH, "TROPHY" BULL DENSITIES ARE LOW. THERE AREN'T SIX-POINT BULLS FOR EVERYONE, SO THESE DAYS HUNTING GOALS MUST BE REALISTIC.

