

Silent Hunting Elk


When Bugles Don't Work...

By Wayne van Zwoll
B&C Professional Member

While much of what is written about elk hunting now has to do with calling elk during the rut, few elk seasons allow riflemen afield during that time. Most elk taken on public ground are killed when the bulls are silent, during hunts that typically occur in late October and early November. Though it's a difficult time to chase elk, this period between rut and migration is increasingly your only option. Special permits and landowner tags for early-season hunts are either expensive, heavily over-subscribed or both. A late damage-control hunt commonly puts you afield with many other hunters on winter range. The object here is to kill quickly and efficiently. You'll find little in the way of a traditional hunting experience or the chance to shoot a mature bull.

Not that six-point antlers define a successful hunt. Indeed, many elk units in the Pacific Northwest now carry a spikes-only rule, with branch-antlered tags allocated only by lottery. Such regulations have improved sex and age ratios in herds. Albeit they scuttle the ambitions of many hunters, they needn't drain the excitement from elk hunting.



A photograph showing a man in a tan cap and sunglasses, wearing a large green backpack, leaning over a white horse to check its pack. In the foreground, a brown horse and a dark horse are also heavily loaded with large, tan canvas packs secured with ropes. The scene is set in a wooded area with bare trees and a clear sky.

A wrangler checks packs on his way into elk camp. Getting to elk country can be half the fun!

Silent ^{Hunting} Elk

If, like me, you value process as much as product in hunting, the “dead season” for elk activity can be as rewarding as rut or migration. October hunts may bring capricious weather, but Indian summer colors and temperatures predominate. Most alpine country remains accessible, and aspen groves are losing their foliage, improving visibility. Nights cool enough to chill carcasses, and days yet long enough for hikes to remote basins give you flexibility denied hunters in mid-September and after Thanksgiving.

As for methods, you can wait at the edge of logging slashes or croplands to ambush elk, or motor along forest roads or perch on canyon rims hoping for a shot. In fact, please do. Encourage other hunters to join you. Steer clear of the woods where brush hides elk and deflects bullets, where you might get lost or skewer yourself on a lodgepole lance or run afoul of a grizzly.

Stay out of the thickets and you'll have a more comfortable, more predictable hunt. Coincidentally, you won't disturb me or the elk.

When elk grow silent and bulls leave their harems to sift into timber, I follow them. These animals have had their romp and now want only a quiet place with easy eating. They must pack in a winter's supply of calories. They must avoid hunters. They must do nothing else.

post-rut havens. In central Oregon bulls hide in mahogany thickets; in Colorado they vanish into oakbrush. Stands of pinyon and juniper in the desert Southwest hold elk, too. Such pockets of security don't always provide forage, but they're close to places that do. Look for trails to lush basins, where shade conserves moisture and delivers green grass late into the fall. Investigate burns, where a freshly opened canopy allows sunlight to coax new grass from the ashes.

But knowing where an elk likes to be isn't enough. You must choose from among many promising spots, then persevere when 90 percent of them turn up empty. Unlike whitetail deer, which live singly and congregate loosely in small places, elk travel in herds through vast territory. Productive whitetail cover can be counted on to hold bucks on any given day; habitat that's crawling with elk one day may be empty the next, as the animals move in response to hunting pressure or weather, or just amble over the ridge to find better forage. You cannot always know whether you are 200 yards from an elk, or two miles. You must cover dead ground fast and make good on places that harbor elk, slipping near enough to see and kill the bull before it vanishes.

route. You move one step, stop for two, listening always because elk are not truly silent. They're heavy animals that break twigs and bump logs and tear grass when they forage. You scrutinize nearby coverts with your binoculars, probing the shadows for a dab of color that doesn't belong, a horizontal line among verticals, the glint of a wet nose or an eye. Your job is not merely to find an elk, but to kill it before it takes flight. Detecting elk before elk detect you can be difficult. You'll need all the skills and focus you can muster, whatever help comes your way in the form of favorable wind, damp forest litter, lighting from behind. You'll need good fortune too.

Once, in a morning mist, I padded through wet conifers to where the ground dropped away into a deep canyon. I almost stepped on a bull, bedded, as is often the case, where he could see far, catch thermal drift from below and dive off the rims when threatened from above. Sunlight nurtured grass at forest's edge while the thick fringe



FROM LEFT: Tracking elk after fresh snow is often productive. Start early, walk fast and to the side, look ahead. ■ Camp should afford most comforts of home. If you're not warm and well fed, you can't hunt well. ■ The author shot this Wyoming bull with an iron-sighted .32 Special. You don't need a magnum.

Finding elk with such limited agendas shouldn't be difficult. These animals favor certain places, all of which you can learn to identify. They're chosen with an eye to slope, aspect, canopy, vegetation type, thermal protection, proximity to water, wind coverage, distance from trafficked trails and escape options. If you hunt elk long enough, you'll recognize likely pockets without mulling a checklist.

Elk like to be where you don't. In the northern Rockies, lodgepole thickets are

This hunting—pure still-hunting—is, in my view, the distillation of field sport. It requires physical effort, trail skills and a level of discipline uncommon among hunters these days.

Such an elk hunt pits you against the elk on its turf. You get no help from vehicles, guides, horses, or electronic contraptions, save what help you might enlist establishing camp near where elk live. Targeting the best coverts, you consider wind, light, aspect, trails and time of day to pick your

of Doug-fir gating the plateau offered shade and hiding cover. I could have walked more easily on the open rim, and seen more. But I'd not have seen this elk from outside—let alone get a 12-yard shot.

The mist helped me hunt that day, by confining my scent and softening the ground litter. Time in the woods also helped me. Without consciously assessing the attributes of the cover, I let my feet find the trails and take me through thickets that held the most promise. After you've logged

many hours looking for elk, you locate them the way you find a loaf of bread on a shelf in an aisle in a store in a mall on a street in an unfamiliar town. You don't think about the many clues that lead you to the bread, but if you didn't know them, you wouldn't find it. The same holds true for elk. Because we

When you don't know where to go....

Some years ago I still-hunted a new area in the Blue Mountains of southeastern Washington. I'd like to have scouted the unit but couldn't. While opening day was my first on the mountain, I had a good idea where to look for elk. Early that summer I'd

the place. From hunts in adjacent units, I knew that elk wouldn't like the open south-east ridge faces once the shooting started. Neither would they hang around trails in the canyon bottoms or stay on ridgetops where hunters climbed to glass. Barring deep snow, they'd be far up the main drainage, in thickets on the north sides of tributaries.



FROM LEFT: Sneaking close is better than shooting far. Bellying through grass to close, stop often to re-assess. ■ The author shot this Montana six-point late in the season, when bull elk are silent and shy. ■ If you're fit and go to the right places, you'll eventually find elk. Making the shot matters too!

don't look for elk every week, learning the clues just takes more effort.

bought topographic and U.S. Forest Service maps of the area and studied them well. I had talked with other hunters familiar with

Around mid-day, I slipped onto a timbered bench. A patch of yellow winked through the trees. A few heart-thumping moments later, my crosswire settled on the shoulder of a five-point bull. A 225-grain softpoint from my .35 Whelen Improved brought him down.

Hunting pressure can move elk to places they'd otherwise not frequent. But elk can also lie low and let hunters pass. Once, a friend walked into the woods after church on a warm Sunday afternoon and came out a couple of hours later with a big six-point bull. That timber had been open to hunting for weeks, but most hunters by-passed it to get higher on the mountain. The bull had descended to mid-elevation cover to avoid the pressure. As outfitters and riflemen with their own pack stock probe deep into wilderness areas and occupy campsites within range of almost every elk hide-hole, it's a good idea to focus on places those sportsmen pass en route. Specifically, scour the timber between a mile and two miles from a road. You'll find yourself well beyond reach of "road-runners" and casual hunters, but well short of camps far enough back to justify a mule string. Elk quickly figure out where the pockets of sanctuary are.

Some years back, I walked into a recent cut on a steep mountain face within sight of a major state highway. A few minutes after dawn, I shot a five-point bull from a herd of elk that numbered dozens. Next

FOR THE TRAIL LESS TRAVELED™

Kenetrek
Boots
OF MONTANA

A serious boot for rugged terrain, the new Mountain Extreme is made with thick 2.8 mm full grain leather uppers on top of stiff nylon midsoles with K-Talon™ high traction outsoles. Sure to become your favorite boot due to it's awesome support, what will really surprise you is just how incredibly comfortable they are.

Call for a Free Catalog or the location of a Kenetrek dealer near you.

(800) 232-6064 • kenetrek.com



Hunting Silent

Elk

Keep an eye to the sky. Mountain weather can change suddenly. Storms can affect your mobility.

season, I repeated that maneuver and came up with another bull. It fell a rifle-shot from where the first had dropped. No secret here; I simply climbed to a place other hunters didn't frequent. Elevation gain from the highway, a mile and a half away, was daunting. Mountain basins beyond, heavily trafficked by hunters on horseback, lay behind an inhospitable barrier of thick second-growth.

Elk like to be near water. They like to drink it, stand in it, splash in it, roll in it. Keeping cool can be hard for an elk, with its thick hide. A warm day can send elk to the water several times. Early afternoon is a good time to schedule a break in your still-hunt. Plan to be near a seep or pond then. Creeks seem not as attractive to elk, perhaps because they make noise elk know can drown the step of approaching hunters. (Rushing water also interferes with your hearing.) Waterholes that require elk to descend into steep-sided pockets are less inviting than shallow, open ponds, as elk do not like to go where they feel trapped.

One afternoon many moons ago I came upon a small stock pond on an open bench. It sat below gentle hills bristling with young larch and lodgepoles. Tired and hot, I sat in the lattice shade of a big Ponderosa about 60 yards from the muddy pool. Not 10 minutes later a cow and a calf

evening hunt. I didn't even notice the pond until a turn in the trail carried me abruptly to it. The elk, napping under a lodgepole at mud's edge, scrambled toward the forest. My shot was just in time.

While waterholes can reward you, they don't deserve full-time attention. Nor are wallows a sure bet. Rutting bulls visit wallows to goop up. Mud mixed with their own urine must be appealing to cows, as bulls don't seem to get as messy at other times. After rut, and as temperatures drop, there's less traffic at wallows. Like meadows pock-marked by elk hooves, pounded wallows may show you little game during daytime. Hunting pressure encourages night use. I've never shot an elk at a wallow.

Often, the main difference between successful still-hunters and those who only wish they were is outlook. Outlook includes optimism and self-assurance and, at times, a grim willingness to persevere. You lose often to the elk when still-hunting. If that makes you angry or discouraged you won't keep your focus, and you will almost certainly lose more often as a result. Accomplished still-hunters share a humility borne of experience. But they learn from failures, counting them valuable lessons and a necessary prelude to the thrill of a shot. If your enjoyment of the hunt hinges on a kill, still-hunting elk is bound to disappoint more often than it rewards.

'pole patch on the far side of yon mountain. Horses might get you close, but you can't still-hunt from a saddle. Your legs, lungs and heart must all work to bring you near the elk, then help you execute the shot. If you can't move as elk move—quickly in rough, precipitous country, then slowly in thickets that demand constant scrutiny—you're ill-prepared to still-hunt.

Like fly-fishing, still-hunting is simple in concept but tough to master. Much of that difficulty has to do with physical demands. Walking through a park taxes you not at all; walking in a park looking for a venomous snake that has escaped is ostensibly no harder but requires heightened awareness that eventually saps your strength. Looking for elk is like looking for the snake—except that in mountainous country you may be climbing over windfalls and through a foot of snow on a 40-degree slope at 9,000 feet. As you tire, you want more and more to see an elk, while you become less and less certain there are any elk around. So you speed up to cover more ground. As you accelerate, you get clumsy. Your concentration shifts from the world around you to a new mission: Finish this hunt as soon as possible so you can go home or to another place where you'll see game. Soon you're sweating, looking for elk only where you can see far. Your eye wanders to where it wants to find elk, not where elk are most likely to



FROM LEFT: Don't count on elk revisiting rubs. Most are made before active breeding. Look for fresh tracks. ■ Better to hunt where you get fast offhand shots than watch open slopes far away. Bulls like cover. ■ In the Southwest, elk live where you expect to see mule deer. Hunt cedar and juniper jungles.

elk emerged from a draw and warily stepped to water's edge. Soon the calf was frolicking, splashing mud on its mother as both cooled themselves. Shortly after they left, a bull appeared and followed their path to the pond. My hunt was over.

A couple of years later, at different water on the same ridge, I blundered onto a bull I might have spotted from a distance. Far from camp under a hot sun, I'd slung my rifle and resigned myself to a long walk to an

No shortcuts....

Another requisite for successful still-hunting is physical fitness. Being in good physical shape is a lot of fun. Getting there and staying there are not fun at all. So many hunters look for alternatives: powerful cartridges, big scopes, rifles guaranteed to send every bullet into the lid of a saltshaker at 600 yards. Alas, none of these will earn you a shot at an elk chewing its cud in a

be. You don't use your binoculars or mind the wind. Soon you're pushing ahead like an automaton. Result: you satisfy yourself that no elk live in these coverts! Most still-hunting opportunities I've lost have been to impatience.

When you still-hunt, you're looking for elk, not just a place elk are likely to visit. This distinction is important, because you needn't move with stealth if you're engineering an ambush to be accomplished

Silent ^{Hunting} Elk

later. One way to think of still-hunting is to consider yourself a pick-pocket. A lot of hunters take pains to find out where elk are apt to be, but they hunt as if they don't expect to find the elk home. To succeed as a pick-pocket, you must not only go to the right place but get there without sending the animal off.

Still hunting has a rhythm, and you must catch the rhythm to be successful. Some days you just don't. The pulse of the woods eludes you. Your pace and your mind are out of synch with what's going on around you. This isn't New Age doctrine adapted to the game trail, but a problem recreational hunters have had for a long time. Some woodsmen have told of songbirds alighting on their rifle barrel or hat during a still-hunt. Alas, this has seldom happened to me. Most hunters act out of place, and to animals keenly in tune with their surroundings they stand out like moose on a baseball diamond. Given time and discipline, however, you can shed the behavior and mental distractions that keep you out of step with the woods.

One evening in memory was so still that moving at all seemed wrong. I stopped often because the slightest sounds were audible, and I wanted to hear them. Subconsciously, I'd shifted attention from myself and my mission to the forest. Presently I heard a faint shuffle. Then, again. This time I stepped carefully off the game trail, picking my way through up-slope toward the noise. There it was once more, though fainter now. I crossed an opening, then knelt at the edge of a thicket to peer under the pine boughs. I found myself staring up at the paunch of a bull elk egg-walking away. There was no way to thread an arrow to his vitals. That elk moved on dry pine needles as quietly as a snake on satin. He too felt the rhythm of the woods. At 20 yards he slid behind a wall of lodgepole. Forever.

Moving off-trail, as that bull did, is for post-graduate hunters. You're almost always better off on established paths, however faint. Game trails enable you to walk more quietly and with less effort. They also help you mask your identity. Elk expect some disturbance on trails, just as we expect trucks to travel on streets. The rumble of a Peterbilt in your garden would get your attention right away. If you make noise in elk places, you'll be less likely to alarm elk than if you blazed your own paths. Among the benefits of knowing your hunting area well is the efficiency you gain by planning your hunt to take advantage of trails. In my favorite haunts, I've mapped trails. I don't use the maps when hunting, but just drawing

and ground-truthing the paths help me remember where they lead.

The rhythm of the woods takes you out of yourself. Don't fight it! Whether this condition puts you on some primordial path lost to evolution, or whether it simply taps latent instincts, you'll benefit. Last fall as I write this, I botched a shot at a bull after a long stalk. For some time, I marched as if with a bayonet to my back, castigating myself for the blunder. At last I slowed and opened myself to the messages beaming from surrounding cover. I spied a group of elk sneaking from their beds during a shift in the wind. Then, fully alert and moving at a glacial

pace, I came to a bench with a confluence of game trails. Something told me to stop. I eased to a sit, lifting my binocular slowly. A quick sweep revealed nothing; but a second look into burned timber showed a branch at a strange angle. Focusing, I made out the antler of an elk. The front bead of the Marlin settled, and I crushed the trigger.

When elk become silent, they're still visible. ■

In hunting, you make your own luck.

Zenith 1.5-6 x 42 Flash Dot



Sure, every hunter needs a bit of luck. But when the trophy you've been after for a lifetime shows up at very last light, and you can't see well enough for a shot, that has nothing to do with luck. It has to do with your optics. With some of the highest light transmission values ever achieved in riflescopes, Schmidt & Bender has been

helping hunters get lucky for 50 years.
800.468.3450 • info@schmidt-bender.com
www.schmidt-bender.com

SCHMIDT & BENDER

See it our way.

