

FROM THE EDITOR

Huntin' Bad... Shootin' Bad



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Lobbing "pot shots" at elk at extreme ranges was a practice I often witnessed 25 years ago in Washington's Blue Mountains. If you could see 'em you shot at them.

The hillside was so steep that most of the elk were bedded on the small flat spots that occur on the uphill sides of the white bark pines. As I lay on the granite outcropping my hunting partner, Larry Lathen, whispered, "Three hundred and ninety yards," as he used his range finder to determine the distance to the bull in the herd. We had been hunting hard for three days and this was the nineteenth bull we had seen on our elk hunt at the top of Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains.

After several minutes of observing the elk that were bedded just below the ridge in front of us,

I decided to take the bull. Although I have shot many bull elk at this distance, this was the first time I had ever known for sure the exact distance. Previously I have always used the duplex cross hairs in my scope to judge the distance to a big game animal. My .300 Weatherby was loaded with 180 grain Hornady bullets and I knew the bullet

would strike 9 inches low at 400 yards as I had shot that load in this rifle for years. The sun was hitting the mountaintops and the air was still. A careful, steady hold and a slow squeeze of the trigger sent the bullet through the bull's chest. He died quickly and humanely. As we walked across the granite boulders at the top of the cirque to get to the downed bull my thoughts continued about long-range shooting and just how far one can ethically shoot at a big game animal such as an elk. With a properly sighted .300 Weatherby taking an elk at 400 yards is not a particularly difficult feat for a good hunter who is also a good rifleman. When I related the story of the hunt to my friend Steve Mealey at camp that night his response was short and simple. "George, that's what I call huntin' good and shootin' good."

That same day another group of hunters moved into a campsite just over the ridge from ours. The next day was Sunday and this group of hunters chose not to hunt in honor of the Lord. They scouted for elk and finished setting up camp. These were experienced hunters. They had been here before - every year for five years. They knew the country and they knew where to find the elk.

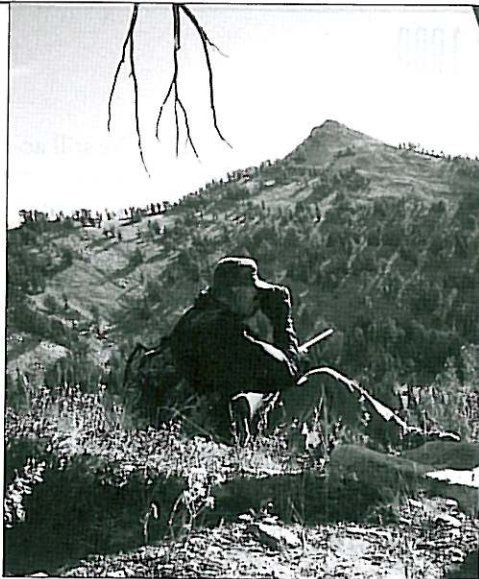
As darkness approached on Sunday night I observed two of

these hunters coming off a ridge across from our camp. I suspected they had spotted the same small herd of elk that my partner, Duane Sidler, had been watching for two days as the group of elk, including three bulls, worked their way up the valley that culminated in a cirque at nearly 8,000 feet in elevation. Duane is an expert rifleman and a patient hunter. He knew if he waited long enough the elk, if undisturbed, would be in a spot where he could make a clean, humane kill at between 400 and 500 yards. A definite long-range shot, but Duane shoots a very accurate .300 Weatherby and practices shooting at these ranges regularly. If such a shot presented itself in the morning it would definitely be within Duane's "comfort zone" providing that the wind and the elk cooperated.

The next morning I saw the flashlights of four or five hunters flickering in the darkness as they made their way across the ridge above us as Duane and I dropped into the head end of the cirque to begin the day's hunt. I planned to help Duane spot for elk in the morning and perhaps even see a big mule deer buck for which I had a tag. Duane and I agreed that we would have competition from the hunters on the ridge above us if the elk were where we thought they would be. Thus, we hastened our pace as we moved into position along the hillside near the valley floor.

It was just light enough to see and we were almost to the point along the canyon where we planned to be when two quick shots echoed through the cirque. Within a few moments I spotted elk across the cirque from us. I whispered to Duane that they were 656 yards from us as I viewed them through my range finder. Too far to shoot, Duane replied. The lead

PATIENCE, GOOD EQUIPMENT AND PRACTICE ARE REQUIRED IF A HUNTER IS TO CONSISTENTLY MAKE ETHICAL LONG RANGE SHOTS AT BIG GAME. DUANE SIDLER OBSERVES A HERD OF ELK IN IDAHO'S SAWTOOTH RANGE.



IDAHO'S SAWTOOTH RANGE OFFERS SPECTACULAR VISTA FOR THE HUNTER.

cow had her head up and the other elk were milling around her in a small meadow as we watched. There were about 15 elk including a spike and a rag horn bull. The lead cow made up her mind on which way to go and the others followed as they lined out on the same trail I had used the day before to pack my bull back to camp. I watched as the elk made their way through the brush and trees at the bottom of a granite rock slide which had its origin high on the canyon wall across from us. As the last cow disappeared, a lone spike came into the meadow and followed the herd.

Having been on that trail the day before I knew the elk would have to go through two openings making them vulnerable to the hunters above us if they chose to shoot at the elk. Within a few minutes the hunters began shooting. There were many shots. Shots fired by four or five hunters. So many shots that one could not count them...more than 20 and perhaps 30. As I listened to the bullets popping overhead across the canyon I simply stood there in disbelief. These so called hunters were shooting at between 600 and 800 yards at these elk as the elk milled about in the light timber and open sagebrush covered hillside with bullets striking all around them. Among the first volley I heard three defi-

nite sound of bullets either striking elk or rock. After the first volley there were more shots fired as the elk became visible among the timber in a second opening. How many elk these hunters killed, I do not know because I was so angry that I knew there would be a confrontation if I were to cross the canyon. How many elk were shot and wounded not even the hunters themselves know. As Duane and I left the cirque to

hunt in a different area we could hear sporadic gunfire up to a half hour later as these hunters chased down cripples. I had a sick feeling in my stomach as I climbed over the lip of the cirque and commented to Duane. "I cannot believe how these men who profess to respect the Lord by not hunting on Sunday have literally no respect for the animals they are hunting." Lobbing "pot shots" at elk at extreme ranges was a practice I often witnessed 25 years ago in Washington's Blue Mountains. If you could see 'em you shot at them. I could have believed that these were ignorant hunters of the 1990s, but they were not. Included among these hunters were a physician and a member of the fish and wildlife commission of a western state.

Over the campfire that evening we reflected upon the events of the day. "Huntin' good and shootin' bad," was Steve's comment. "No, wait a minute. Good hunters don't take bad shots. Huntin' bad and shootin' bad was more like it." I would like to think that these unethical hunting practices are a thing of the past, but I'm afraid that "pot shots" at elk and other big game at extreme range by hunters who are neither good riflemen nor good hunters are more common today than any of us would like to believe. ▲▲▲

FROM THE ASSOCIATES

Did you have a successful 1998 hunting season?

Would you like to share it with your fellow Associates?

Send your field photos to B&C Club, Fair Chase, 250 Station Drive, Missoula, MT 59801. Subject to approval.

Associate, Robert D. Mattie of Missoula, Montana, took this Rocky Mountain goat in September of 1998 near Big Hole, Montana.



Associate, Daniel T. Morgan, of Missoula, Montana, gave us this photo of his son, Zach Morgan, and the Wyoming moose they took in the Gallatin River area of Montana this November.