

FROM THE EDITOR

You're on Our Rock



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A perfect spot to be at daylight, for in this country, elk would be feeding on the grassy southern slope of the ridge and moving across the saddle to the timbered north slope soon after daylight. I had been here before.

I WAS LOST IN THOUGHT AS MY friend, Marv, stopped for a moment to put the transfer case into low range. "We are the first ones up here this morning," he said in a matter-of-fact manner. "I've seen more people up here this year than ever before," Marv noted as he maneuvered the truck around a wash-out where the water running down the road had cut a three-foot ditch . . . a common occurrence on primitive roads in steep country with no water bars. "When I was a kid we used to have to walk these last two miles. Then about ten years ago, someone borrowed a cat from a logging outfit up here and pushed this road to the top. Since this is national forest ground, it is sort of a free-for-all up here now." As the pickup ground up the steep incline on the two-track road and snaked around the trees with the mirrors barely missing the branches I commented, "I think you're right . . ." and resumed my thinking about how easy the climb seemed this morning. We had done this many times before and this was one of the few times we were not "chained up on all four" and making the climb in a couple of feet of snow.

We climbed the final incline and emerged from the timber. There was nothing but the darkness of the night in the truck lights. We had reached our destination on a knife ridge at the very top of the mountain thousands of feet above the valley floor. Marv shut the engine off and we sat silently in the darkness. The ever-present wind gently rocked the truck this morning. Usually it is blowing much harder and often a blizzard is raging on this spot at this time of the year. This morning it was clear

but there was no moon. Miles away one could see the lights of farms and a small town.

"You are the only one of us left, other than me, who knows how to get out on the ridge in the dark. And it's just too tough for me to get out there anymore," he said. "Well, you had better get going because you are going to have company," he cautioned. With that, I stepped out of the truck, slung my day pack over my shoulder, turned on my head lamp and picked up my rifle before climbing down through the shale rock to pick up a game trail that I knew was in the trees just below the ridge.

It had been a couple of years since I had hunted here but the subtle landmarks soon became apparent as my headlamp cut through the darkness. The open ridge dropped steeply and soon I was engulfed in dark timber. There was a faint game trail here and the ridgetop was flat so the going was fairly easy. Soon I broke out into a small clearing. At this point I knew I had to drop off the ridge and pick up another game trail or scale down a 50-foot cliff in the dark. I had gone both ways before but chose the trail this morning. Now the ridgetop was less apparent and was sloped to the right. The slope of the ridge and the dark timber made this spot particularly confusing because if you did not consciously stay to the left, the contour of the ridge would take you off the south side into a steep shale-covered hillside. I had made that mistake once before.

By now I was more than a mile from the drop-off point. Oddly shaped trees were recognizable as I worked my way through the timber. Finally, I came to the lowest spot on the ridge in a very small opening. This was the spot where most people lost their way. If you had not been there before, you would not know how to work your way through the basalt cliffs to find yet another game trail that would eventually take you through the cliffs to the top of the ridge. I stopped for a moment knowing there was no hurry this morn-

ing. I was well ahead of anyone else. As I stood there in the darkness I recalled the morning five years ago when three of us were out here in two feet of snow. I had torn the ACL in my knee a month earlier and was content to let my two partners lead the way through the storm. I was slower than they were so they waited for me to catch up every quarter of a mile or so. The wind was blowing so hard that snow filled our tracks within minutes. Visibility was zero. At this saddle they opted to cut across the hillside instead of going through the rocks. A mile of steep hillside covered with shale rock, blow down, and ice made for an interesting trek that morning.

I picked my way through the cliffs and soon emerged on the top of the ridge. Another half-mile down the ridge put me exactly where I wanted to be. A flat rock overlooking a long open ridge with a game trail 200 yards below me in a saddle. A perfect spot to be at daylight, for in this country, elk would be feeding on the grassy southern slope of the ridge and moving across the saddle to the timbered north slope soon after daylight. I had been here before. I knew that if I was patient, I would have an opportunity to take a bull from this rock perch.

I loaded my rifle, set up my day pack for a shooting rest, and sat silently in the darkness. It was a beautiful morning. Clear skies, temperatures just above freezing, no moon and a weather forecast of sunshine for the day. A rolling rock in the distance broke the silence. Something was on the ridge behind me. I slowly turned to look and saw three flashlights coming through the darkness across the ridge. I was about to have company.

I sat silently in the darkness, waiting for the obvious. Soon I could hear the hunters talking as they noisily made their way across the ridge. I sat silently as they took off their backpacks and gear, unaware that I was there just a few feet away from them. "Hello," I said quietly. Startled, all three turned

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their flashlight beams in my direction. There was no reply for several minutes. By now it was getting just light enough to see and I could detect two guys in their late 30s or early 40s and another in his late teens. The one guy stepped forward assertively. "You been here before?" he inquired. "About four years ago," I replied. "On this rock?" he said. "In the area," I replied. The consternation of the two older hunters was obvious. The younger one fidgeted around nervously. I was on "their" rock. This is where they had sat before, every day for the full five days of the season. And they had always shot elk at this spot.

I had a choice. I could stay put and force an obvious confrontation or just move on. I chose to stay put, for a while. The hunters set their gear in the rocks behind me and began the conversation again. "So how long have you been hunting here?" inquired the spokesman. "Since the '80s," I replied. "We have been here since the '70s and we've never seen you before. Not many people hunt out here and we know most of them," he continued. His voice was becoming more aggressive as he spoke, then there was silence again as I stood my ground. Finally, the spokesman said, "I hope you like company, because we are not going one step farther."

I had made my point, so I replied, "Well, I don't like company so I think I will move on." As I picked up my daypack the conversation became more cordial. "You shooting a Weatherby?" the one guy inquired. "Yeah," I replied. "Awfully long barrel," the other guy observed. "Twenty-eight inches . . . you need that much barrel on a .30/378," I said as I slipped into the dark timber.

As I worked my way silently through the timber I thought about the encounter. So whose rock was it? These guys had hunted here every year for many years. They assumed it was "their" spot. It was public land and I was there first. It was my spot this year. The choice was easy for me. I hunt for memories. Good memories, not bad memories. ▲▲▲

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