

Eight-Day ADRENALINE RUSH

Prolonged Wet Season Yields Alberta Farmer World-Class Elk

My hunting season for elk in fall of 2004 was an intense one, to say the least. Never before had I been in the middle of so much action.

I had been lying on a poplar ridge for 20 minutes watching a big bull elk fight off 3 other bulls in a willow slough 70 yards in front of me. He had three cows in the willows, and one was apparently in heat. The three challenging bulls were driving him mad. One bull was bugling behind me, closing in at 70 yards; another bull had just retreated from the willows 60 yards to my right; and the third bull was starting to turn as the large herd bull began his charge back through the willows at him on my left.

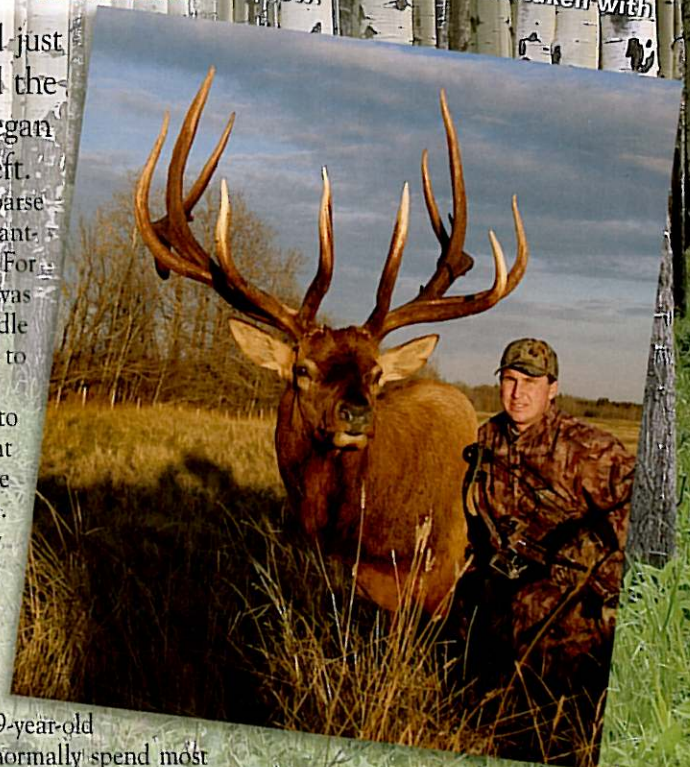
His once clear, clean, crisp bugles were now a growling, hoarse scream. This bull was mad, and he was charging at anything with antlers that moved. He stopped, turned, and looked directly at me. For a second, I thought he had spotted me, but then I realized he was looking past me at the bull closing in behind me. I was in the middle of a fight, and all I could do is lie there and watch, hoping for him to come within range.

He then saw the smaller bull on my right sneaking back into the willows. He charged back, crashing through the willows in front of me toward the smaller bull. The smaller bull retreated out of the willows instantly, running up the poplar ridge directly toward me. I closed my eyes and braced for impact. At the last second he saw me, and skidded to a stop three yards away. He then jumped past, spraying me with leaves. It had taken me an hour and a half to get this close, and I wasn't about to give up ground—even if it meant getting run over by an elk.

Actually, it had taken me eight days to get this close, and it was only because of a wet fall that I had this opportunity. As a 39-year-old farmer with a cow/calf and grain operation in central Alberta, I normally spend most

By **William J. Huppertz**
B&C Associate

William J. Huppertz is pictured below with his bull, which scores 402-5/8 points, and is the number 3 typical American elk taken with a bow.



of the fall driving either a combine or swather. But, a wet September put the harvest on hold, and gave me a few extra days for hunting. I enjoy hunting, especially the challenge that comes from hunting with a bow. Bowhunting, through trial and error, has taught me a great deal about animals, and how to get close to them.

This particular hunt had started nine days earlier when my hunting partner Lester and I had sat on the edge of a meadow one evening videotaping two young bulls sparring. When an elk bugled in the poplars behind them, the two bulls stopped and stared intently at the tree line. They then quickly trotted away.

"That's a mature bull," I told Lester. "Those younger bulls want nothing to do with him."

We continued watching until dark, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. We finally gave up at dark; he was just too shy to show himself that day.

The next evening, we were again sitting on the poplar ridge, shooting video of three cows grazing 200 yards in front of us. Suddenly an elk bugle disrupted the calm. Looking in the direction of the bugle, we saw a massive bull elk trotting toward the cows. "Look at the size of that bull!" Lester said.

I turned the camera to the bull and followed him as he trotted toward the cows. He tilted his rack back and smelled the air as he circled them. There wasn't a lot of cover between us,

so we started calling to him from where we were sitting. The bull jerked his head up as soon as I bugled. Lester followed up with a couple of cow calls. The bull answered back immediately, but would not leave his cows. We called back and forth for 30 minutes, angering the bull to the point that he started tearing up the sod with his rack and urinating all over himself. He then turned and disappeared with his cows into the poplars.

For the next seven mornings, my alarm clock woke me at 5 a.m. It was an hour drive, then another two-mile walk in the dark to the area where we'd seen the elk. Lester returned to work, so I was hunting the bull by myself.

I was able to find the bull and his cows every day, but could never get closer than 100 yards. If the wind wasn't wrong, the cows would foil the stalk.

After day four, I called Kurt, a good friend of mine and an experienced elk hunter for some advice. I described the size of the bull and how I was hunting him. Kurt suggested I change my strategy and gave me some advice on how to get closer to the bull.

At the end of our conversation Kurt suggested, "If he's as big as you say he is, the only way to get him will be to get between him and his cows."

Great advice! The bull had seven cows, a few calves, and three or four satellite bulls around him. I decided to try Kurt's advice. But how do you get past all those eyes and noses? I wondered. And even if you do, how do you get close enough to him for a shot?

Despite my skepticism, I came close to getting him the next morning. I had followed the bull and his cows to a meadow where they grazed for half an hour. When they left, I crawled to the edge of the tree line where they had disappeared, set up inside the tree line for a 20-yard downwind shot, and called. The bull responded immediately and came charging back to the meadow.

To my disappointment, though, I heard his footsteps crunching in the leaves as he passed upwind, 40 yards behind me. He then bugled as he neared the edge of the tree line. Having no shot, I called to him again.

EDITOR'S NOTE: William J. Huppertz's great typical American elk, taken on public land during a general season, is tied for the third largest ever recorded in Alberta. It also currently ranks as the third largest ever taken with a bow. Congratulations to Will on taking the trophy of a lifetime.



The bull looked back in my direction for a minute and then walked off, leaving his cows behind. This was the only time I had seen him walk away from his cows. I think the bull knew he had been fooled, because he stopped responding to my calls after that morning.

The seventh day was windy and rainy. By now I had pretty much figured out the herd's routine. They would leave their feeding area every morning right at daybreak, then cross a 200-yard-wide poplar ridge on their way to a bedding area. If I could get to the ridge ahead of them before they crossed, I might have a chance to ambush the bull.

Arriving at the ridge an hour before daylight, I sat down next to a large poplar and waited in the rain for two hours. Shadows gave way to daylight, but no elk crossed. I then backtracked to the meadow where they usually fed and spotted two elk feeding. I crawled to within 60 yards of the yearling cows and waited there for three and a half hours for the bull to show. He never did.

It was then that I started to doubt if it was possible to outsmart him. I had followed that bull for seven days, and still hadn't had a quality shooting opportunity. I went home tired, cold, wet, and almost ready to give up.

Which brings us back to day eight. I heard the bull bugling several hundred yards ahead of me. The sun would be up soon, and the herd would be on the move. I had to get close to the bull before the elk got to their bedding area; he would be nearly impossible to hunt otherwise.

As I approached the willow slough from the north, I could hear a lot of commotion. Something big was smashing through the trees. The elk would be downwind of me if I continued toward them, so I backtracked 300 yards and circled downwind to the south side of the willows. That's where a younger bull almost ran over me.

As I poked my head out of the grass to scan for elk, my biggest concern was that a smaller bull and cows downwind would smell me.

Just then a mature cow walked out of the willows, 60 yards to my left. She had noticed my head moving. This meant trouble! One bark out of her would end this hunt. Slowly I lowered my head and lay flat on the ground, barely able to see the action unfolding around me. The herd was slowly closing in around me; I could hear elk foot steps in the leaves as the smaller bull and cows mingled close behind.

The big bull then came out of the willows and headed up the poplar ridge toward the mature cow. He stood broadside between the cow and me, 55 yards away, presenting the best shot I'd had in eight days. For 30 seconds I deliberated shooting, but a couple of saplings covered his chest, and I held off. I didn't want to risk hitting a branch and wounding him. He then turned and walked back toward the willows.

For ten more minutes, the cow stared my way. Suddenly the big bull charged back through the willows after a young bull. He then stopped, turned, and walked back toward the mature cow and almost in position for a shot. As I rose to one knee, I could see his antlers turn as he looked in my direction. Trees blocked his field of view to me, but his chest was open. I drew my bow and looked for my 40-yard pin, but my peep sight had not turned right, so I could not see it!

In desperation, I rubbed the bowstring with my nose. After a couple of tries the peep turned a little, and I could finally see my pins. Holding the pin in the middle of his chest and behind the front leg, I slowly squeezed the release. I lost sight of the arrow in the air, but the sound told me it was a solid hit.

The bull wheeled and ran directly away, and as the mature cow followed him, the brush around me came alive. From behind me, a bull and two cows thundered my way, and two more cows and a calf joined them on my left. Branches and trees were breaking everywhere.

As the crashing of the herd faded into the distance, I quickly retraced the shot in my mind. I had picked my spot on his chest, carefully aimed, and slowly squeezed, there was nothing else I could do but sit there and wait. Then I heard a cough and saw the big bull coming directly back toward the willow slough. He stopped, looked around, and collapsed 20 yards from where the arrow had passed through him. Feeling almost numb, I continued to kneel and watch. After eight days of stalking, crawling, waiting, and listening, it was finally over.

In the entire eight days, I had never spooked the herd, nor had the bull ever seen me. I knew that pressing the elk too hard would push them out of the area, and the bull would disappear like a ghost. In those eight intense days, I had learned more about elk hunting than in the previous eight years. Approaching the bull, I realized he was quite a bit bigger than I had originally thought. His B&C score is 402.5/8 points. ■

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