

BOUNTY OF THE BLACKENED FOREST

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Back in the 1970's, I reached my elk camp late one September afternoon in Idaho's Lochsa River country, that vast expanse of wilderness where the infamous 1910 wildfires burned over millions of acres. The camp was tucked away in a grove of lodgepole pine where two crystal clear streams came together. Although I had never been at this site in September, I had carefully located the camp based upon several trips into the area studying the elk habitat and the logistical aspects related to a good campsite for an early fall elk hunt. The grass was waist-high in the meadows along the creek and those which ran up the hill behind the camp. The dead cedar and larch snags left by the fire years ago provided ample firewood for the wood stove, good water was plentiful, and there were sufficient lodgepole pine trees to make good tent poles. Finally, the elk population in the area was as high as any place I had found to date.


I had dreamed of hunting elk from a backcountry campsite since I was a boy and over the past two years had spent countless hours looking over the topographic maps of this area, studying records of the elk harvest in the area, exploring via backpacking into

the area during the spring and summer, and finally putting together the horses and equipment to do it on my own. As I unloaded the horses I was overcome by an almost romantic feeling as I was experiencing what I had dreamed about since I was a boy. There were smells of damp earth, wet leather, horse sweat, and smoke from the wood stove. What an elk hunter sees out here in the Idaho backcountry is a combination of a myriad of sights, sounds, smells and feelings. To take a pack string of horses into the backcountry is to perform a masterpiece in what to most people is a lost art. Carguing hundreds of pounds of food, camp gear, and horse feed and packing it on the stock so the packs are balanced, manties neatly folded over the panniers, topping it off with a tight, expertly tied diamond hitch and finally making one's way up the narrow trails and switchbacks cut out of the face of the mountain with the entire outfit functioning perfectly is indeed a work of art.

It grew chilly as evening approached and the wind that had been blowing the rain and sleet into our faces all day long began to subside. We had cut and peeled the poles for our tent the previous summer and had

stood them vertically alongside a large fir tree so they would be dry and out of the way. Thus, we were able to set up the wall tent and stow our gear inside with just enough time to walk up on a nearby point overlooking an enormous basin. The brush was wet and getting up to the point was not as easy as it looked from the campsite in the creek bottom, but the view was worth it. Soon after the rain had stopped late in the afternoon the fog lifted and as the sun settled in the west, the whole great basin below me became a rainbow of fall colors. This basin was typical of the large fire-disturbed areas in the Lochsa country. The area supported heavy stands of shrubs with north and east slopes beginning to return to tree cover. Many of the shrub stands included an abundance of redstem ceanothus, willow, mountain maple, and Oregon grape, among other lesser species of shrubs which constitute important winter food for deer and elk.

As I stood on the point admiring the early fall colors, elk began to bugle. First a shrill bugle came from the ridge behind me. Soon, the bugles of countless bulls were coming from points throughout the basin. I simply stood there in awe admiring the ba-



sin and listening to the elk as the last rays of the sun disappeared over the ridge behind me.

Inside the tent the warmth of the wood stove felt good as we prepared a simple supper and arranged our gear by lantern light. It had been a long day so we turned in early. Since this was my first experience with packing an elaborate hunting camp into the backcountry with horses, I was keenly aware of the sounds the horses made as they stood in their respective places along the picket line. A stomp of a foot was enough to awaken me and I slept lightly; anxious about the horses and thinking about what the hunting would be like. As the horses settled down I fell asleep. It was not even midnight when I was startled by the sound of running animals in the camp. I sprang out of my sleeping bag, thinking the horses were loose, when the bugle of a bull elk next to the tent startled me even more. Another bugle came from down by the creek and another from the lodgepole thicket behind the camp. Animals were running through the creek and more animals were coming through camp. Elk were everywhere. I could not believe what was happening. We had camped right

in the middle of where three major elk trails crossed in the creek bottom!

Soon the elk had cleared out of the camp, I had checked the horses, and I was back in my sleeping bag. The events of the day were exciting enough. This evening was beginning to be even more exciting. With this much excitement it was impossible to sleep. So as I lay there in my sleeping bag began thinking about how I found this place, all of the preparation we had gone through to get here and finally I reflected upon my readings from the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition which described their experiences in this very area. They managed to kill a few deer for food as they came down the Lochsa River into Idaho from Montana, but their only clue that there were elk present in the area came from the Indians who mentioned the existence of a small herd in the upper Lochsa drainage. Records were scarce about elk during the 19th century because of the remoteness of the elk ranges in northern Idaho; but by every indication there just weren't many elk in the area before the 1900's.

The large elk build-up in northern Idaho appears to be connected with the in-



famous 1910 wildfire that burned over millions of acres in the northern part of the state. Ironic as it may sound to some, this large destructive force which undoubtedly killed some animals that couldn't escape its path, created an abundance of nutritious elk forage in its aftermath. New grasses, shrubs and broad-leaved plants sprang up to occupy the sites formerly dominated by stately pines, firs, and other conifers. The most widespread fire occurred in 1919. Other fire years of influence were 1910, 1918, 1932, and 1934. Fires in 1932 and 1934 reburned much of the area previously burned by the 1919 fire. These fires dramatically increased the supplies of succulent edibles for the expanding elk herd. The elk populations in northern Idaho reached their highest levels between 1940 and 1960. By the 1970's when I began hunting the area the elk herds were still healthy even though few large wildfires had occurred since 1934 because of the technological advances in fire location and suppression.

The rains began shortly after midnight and had not let up by the time the alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. It was opening morning of the elk season and we were

NORTHERN IDAHO'S "GREAT BURN" AREA CONTINUES TO PROVIDE EXCELLENT ELK HUNTING MORE THAN 50 YEARS AFTER WILDFIRES BURNED MILLIONS OF ACRES IN THE EARLY 1900'S. GEORGE BETTAS AND HIS HUNTING PARTNER, DENNIS SIMPSON, PACK OUT THEIR BULLS ON AN OCTOBER AFTERNOON.



BELOW: THE AUTHOR AND HIS HUNTING PARTNERS EXPERIENCED SUPERB ELK HUNTING FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS IDAHO'S "GREAT BURN" AREA. HERE THE AUTHOR AND ROBERT F. SMITH PREPARE TO MANTIE AND DIAMOND HITCH THE FINAL LOAD OF ELK MEAT AND ANTLERS ON CHIEF, THEIR MOST RELIABLE PACKHORSE.



TOP: THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT IS CHARACTERIZED BY TOWERING LIMESTONE REEFS. HERE MULE DEER AND ELK MOVE FROM SUMMER RANGE HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS TO THE LOWLANDS WHERE THEY FIND THEIR WINTER FEED AND COVER IN THE PATCHY BURN LEFT BY THE FIRES OF 1988.

RIGHT: GEORGE BETTAS TOOK THIS MULE DEER TWO YEARS AFTER FIRE RAVAGED THE MONTANA ROCKIES.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: ▲ GEORGE BETTAS AND HIS HUNTING PARTNER, TROY HUCK ADMIRE TROY'S BULL TAKEN TWO YEARS AFTER FIRE BURNED THIS AREA EXTENSIVELY.

▲ TODD HUCK TOOK THIS BEAUTIFUL MULE DEER BUCK IN A RECENTLY BURNED AREA IN MONTANA.

▲ CHRIS SWAIN TOOK THIS BULL ELK ON MONTANA'S ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT AS IT MOVED FROM ITS BEDDING AREA IN AN UNBURNED PATCH OF TIMBER TO AN AREA WHERE IT HAD BEEN FEEDING ON ROUGH FESCUE WHOSE GROWTH HAD BEEN STIMULATED BY THE FIRES OF 1988.

▲ GEORGE BETTAS BUGLES FOR ELK IN MONTANA.

▲ MONTANA MULE DEER.

▲ TODD HUCK WALKS IN WITH THE HORSES IN MONTANA.

▲ DUANE SIDLER INSPECTS NEW CEANOTHUS PLANTS FIVE YEARS AFTER FIRE BURNED THIS AREA.

charged with excitement. While one of my partners fixed breakfast the rest of us fed the horses. We left camp in the dark, each of us going in the direction we had agreed upon the night before. As we moved along the trail out of camp which led to the respective points where we would split off the trail we could tell that it would be an interesting day. In addition to the rain, we were engulfed in thick fog which made hunting extremely difficult . . . as well as cold and wet.

I climbed in the dark to a point well above the campsite and by daylight had reached the ridge overlooking a basin which had been burned extensively years before. The basin was covered with ceanothus and other small shrubs mixed with a variety of conifers about four to five feet tall. It had looked like a wonderful area to find elk when I had scouted it the summer before. Now as I reached a point on the ridge where I could see the basin all that I could see was fog. Thick fog. There was nothing to do but sit and wait out the rain and fog. Because of the dense fog and my haste to find a spot to sit and wait I had not paid a lot of attention to the fact that I had picked a well used game trail as a place to sit. My rifle was leaning against a bush in front of me and the rest of me was covered with the poncho. My mind wandered as I sat there trying to see into the basin below me. I was ever mindful of the sound of the rain drops falling everywhere. Thump . . . From behind me came the distinct sound of an animal's hoof striking the damp earth. Carefully, I turned my head. It was a toss

up as to who was the most surprised, me or the elk, for there not three yards behind me was a huge 7 x 7 bull elk, his nose only a foot off the ground, staring at the green "bump" in the trail in front of him. I grabbed my rifle and the chase was on. The bull jumped off the trail and charged through the brush around me and down into the basin. In a moment he was gone. Fortunately for me, the fog had cleared enough to give me about a quarter mile of visibility. With this visibility I was able to catch sight of the bull as he crossed through the creek below me and followed a trail up a small finger ridge. Without hesitation I lay down over my pack and waited for him to reach the crest of the small ridge. As he stopped momentarily on the ridge my .340 Weatherby found its mark.

From this interesting beginning, my three hunting partners and I experienced superb elk hunting for nearly 20 years in Idaho's "great burn" area. As time passed, the lack of fire allowed the brush to get higher and higher and we noted an increase in conifer reproduction throughout the area. As the habitat changed, the numbers of deer and elk declined until recently when new forest management techniques have allowed the more extensive use of burns in areas which are managed with a priority for elk and other wildlife over timber. Now less aggressive fire suppression policies in these areas have allowed for some fires to burn without suppression or with minimal suppression. These forest management practices, coupled with bold new elk hunting regulations imposed by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, have resulted in quality elk herds in much of this area again.

In another place and at another time, on September 10, 1988, it began to rain on Montana's East Front of the Rocky Mountains. Soon the rain turned to snow. The weather front knocked down the fire for good. In total, the fires of the summer of

1988 on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District burned an area of 240,600 acres. The burn intensity varied greatly inside this perimeter acreage leaving large blocks of unburned islands throughout the fire area while burning other areas completely.

We arrived at the trailhead which would lead us to our hunting area in November of 1990, two years after the fire. Snow covered some of the area leaving the blackened trees as stark reminders of what had taken place in this area two summers prior. As we packed our stock at the trailhead I wondered about just what we would find once we reached the area we planned to hunt some 15 miles distance from the trailhead.

I selected this area to hunt because of my interest in learning what effects fire had on big game populations and because of my experiences hunting in Idaho's great burn area during previous years. This hunt was so recent after the burn that I was anxious to see what we would find.

The elk remained at the higher elevations all winter in the area we had hunted in Idaho, feeding on the redstemmed ceanothus which blanketed thousands of acres with tons of outstanding elk forage in the great burn area. The Rocky Mountain front is characterized by towering limestone reefs, stands of limber pine, and scenic rough fescue grasslands enhanced by aspen thickets and a wide array of other plants and shrubs. Here, the mule deer and elk move from the mountains where the snow is deep in winter to the foothills where they find their winter feed. This recently burned area was characterized by the earliest stages of plant succession. The increased nutritional quality of the burned areas should provide good summer range capable of carrying deer and elk in good condition through the breeding season, a necessary requirement for maximum herd productivity.

As our pack string threaded its way up the mountain from the canyon floor I continued to wonder about what we would find in this new area we had chosen to hunt. It was not long after we left the trailhead that we entered a particularly large burned area. I was surprised at what I saw as the grass was nearly as high as my head along the trail and the mosaic burn pattern was quite evident. Soon we began to see mule deer feeding among the burned trees. As we progressed further back into the wilderness this pattern became even more evident.

We reached our campsite about midday full of anticipation of what our hunting would be like in this area. We had seen numerous mule deer on the way in and elk tracks could be seen crossing the pack trail from time to time. Teamwork contributed to getting the camp set up and the horses settled. In fact, we had a couple hours before dark to make a short hunt up the ridge

behind our camp. We spread out across the face of the ridge and began still hunting up from the canyon floor. It soon became apparent that the deer and elk were using this area heavily. There were significant dense areas of conifers which provided hiding and thermal cover while the areas which had been burned were lush with feed even though we were hunting just two years after the fire had burned the area.

I was about a thousand feet in elevation above the creek bottom where we had camped when the sun disappeared in the west. Since it was late November the temperature was already below freezing and it dropped noticeably when the sun disappeared. I was aware of the temperature but was more intent upon studying the deer tracks in the snow in front of me. As I came around a short ridge off the main ridge I felt a sense of stillness . . . for I was suddenly out of the wind which blows constantly on the East Front of the Rockies. I was standing in a small basin which had been thickly covered with conifers. Now the blackened snags of countless trees stood as a stark reminder of what once was. Now the lush grass and browse plants which covered the forest floor protruded through the snow in abundance. The place seemed so still and quiet that I could not help but notice the difference from the other side of the short ridge. I was surrounded by mule deer, feeding among in the blackened timber. I was overcome by this place. I marveled at what I was observing.

My wandering thoughts were abruptly interrupted and deer began moving quickly above me. There among the blackened trees stood a monstrous mule deer buck, intent upon the does who were feeding in front of him. He disappeared among the trees as fast as he had appeared. Then, another buck with wide, tall antlers appeared in the alleyway between the trees where the big buck had been. Although not as big, the second buck was one that any mule deer aficionado would love to have on this wall. I pondered the situation. Five maybe ten or maybe even fifteen long minutes went by as I watched these two bucks chasing the does among the trees above me while some 25 or more smaller bucks and does quietly fed in the little basin. I raised my rifle and waited in anticipation of the big buck presenting a shot in the alleyway. He kept pacing and running after the does, never giving me a clear shot. He went through the alleyway three or four times and I observed that each time the does would quit feeding and begin milling around just before he appeared. I was ready the next time he appeared for when the does began milling around I knew he was coming. First came the doe and then the buck with his neck outstretched trotting behind the doe. My shot found its mark and I had taken the

biggest buck I had ever seen afield. His outside spread measured 35 1/2" and his basic frame scored in the 190's but a 9" drop tine and some other "kicker" points put him just out of "the book." This buck had the biggest body of any mule deer I have ever seen and I have been hunting mule deer throughout the Rocky Mountain west for nearly 25 years. Since we boned him out and backpacked him off the mountain I really don't know what he weighed. The buck's teeth indicated that he was six or seven years old. He was fat and in top shape. What else would one expect from an animal such as this living in such a forage-rich habitat with good hiding cover and all the other attributes which contribute to the growth of big bucks?

We continued our hunt throughout the week taking two more excellent mule deer bucks and two nice bull elk. Since that great hunt during November 1990 we have been fortunate to draw Montana combination licenses several times. On each of our successive hunts in this area we have taken some outstanding mule deer and elk and have noted some interesting points about hunting recently burned areas.

Deer and elk tend to use recently burned areas just as they did before the fire. During the early season the elk frequent the same wallows although they may travel farther to find suitable hiding cover in which to bed during the day. In many cases both mule deer and elk will bed on the same ridges where they did before the fire. Often they will bed in the burned timber out of the wind but exposed to the hunter who can now see into the timber because the forest canopy is burned off. This significantly increases the vulnerability of these animals to hunters. Animals which grew to trophy size due to the large expanses of hiding cover before the fire are now much more vulnerable and are subject to over harvest by hunters unless hunting regulations in the area are modified. The availability of large amounts of new forage plants contributes to an expanding population of both mule deer and elk. Large burned areas may create winter range problems and displace both mule deer and elk long distances from their "normal" winter ranges until suitable thermal and hiding cover become established again.

Forest fires have both positive and negative effects upon big game. In the short run, recently burned areas can be great places to seek trophy quality animals while in the long run the regrowth of the area can contribute to tremendous population growth among big game animals. Finally, as the plant and forest succession reaches its zenith, habitat becomes less desirable for big game. And so goes the cycle and the challenges to hunters, land managers, and big game alike.

