

NEW MEXICO SOLO ELK HUNT

BEYOND THE
SCORE

Tammy Bredy
B&C TROPHY OWNER
Photos Courtesy of Author

Twelve days before my Gila Wilderness elk hunt last September my husband stated he could not draw his bow, and was both canceling his hunt and scheduling a shoulder replacement—unexpected news on both subjects.

I thought about it for a bit, then told him: “I understand you can’t hunt this year because I know it is something you love, but I am unwilling to give up my hunt.” I have been hunting all my life, but this would be the first time I would be calling the shots, putting all my years of experience and skill on the line.

“Okay,” he said, “just because I can’t go doesn’t mean you can’t go get us some elk meat.” He made arrangements for a packer to assist me. I was happy to have the help and not be alone. I also chose to save money by walking rather than taking an extra horse the four miles to our camp.

A week later, when I pulled my camper up to the trail head, the excitement and anticipation of hunting settled into my heart and soul, taking over my entire consciousness. All the preparations were in place and I could let go of civilization to interact with the wilderness, enjoying all its beauty and unexpected events.

Tammy A. Bredy took this typical American elk in Catron County, New Mexico, while on a hunt in September, 2014. This bull scores 366-6/8 points.

The sound of elk bugling in the early morning hours was the topic of conversation at breakfast. Our friend and the packer loaded up the mules and horses for the trek to the upper camp. But just before we departed, a yellow jacket nailed me, sending a painful welt across my neck. Ice and after-bite from the first aid kit helped some, but the burning was irritating and painful for several days—a sharp reminder of being in the wilderness.

Rains had left the ground soft and the mesas rolling with high green grass. With our backs to the comforts of civilization and our faces toward the mountain

peaks, I wondered what was in store in the days to come. I am nearly 60 years old and was heading into the wilderness with a packer I had just met. My first impressions were that he was capable, hard-working, and respectful; but for a brief moment I thought, “What am I doing!?” That quickly faded and I embraced how fortunate I was to be having this experience.

After reaching camp we set up the larger tent and put the gear inside. I had intended to place a tree stand three ridges over for an extra place to hunt, but lunch and talking went on too long, and with rain moving in we headed back to the trailhead.

Part way back my friend asked if we had seen his heeler, Jack. We had not. The packer and I offered to go back and see if Jack was at camp but my friend said no, he would be fine.

After a rainy day off to resupply, we loaded up again. I walked the four miles in, leading the packhorse. I drank in the mountain views, enjoying the walk even though it was difficult through the mud and uneven ground. The packer made it to camp first and then came back to the river (with Jack at his side!) to make sure I was crossing safely, Jack had gotten zipped up in the main tent two days earlier. Luckily, a metal bowl



This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

I had left in the tent was directly below a leak in the rain fly, so Jack had water to drink, and he found some granola bars to eat, but had not messed in the tent or chewed anything up. Good Jack!

I knew we needed water but didn't feel like kneeling beside the river in the rain to use the filter pump. Instead I went for a walk, and wandered over to another camp from the previous hunt. At the base of a tree was a pile of water bottles! Smiling to myself I filled my arms—a fortunate event at just the perfect time.

With camp established we took the mule, loaded with the tree stand, over one ridge and down a canyon, then back up the other side. I was getting uncomfortable with how late it was, not wanting to walk into this area during “prime time.” I decided to unload the stand in a patch of high grass to retrieve it later.

As we started back to camp the rain came again. My legs were exhausted. It was a challenge to walk these ridges and canyons on dry ground, let alone when it was muddy goo. That night as I lay in my sleeping bag, I finally felt like I was at elk camp. I had felt rushed to get everything ready. Now there was just one more day till my hunt started. I was a bit uneasy and felt somewhat unprepared as I normally scout several days before a hunt, but I had to trust that all was as it should be. I fell asleep to the sound of the running river.

The aroma of fresh rain in the morning mountain air always heightens your senses.

We took the mule back to where the tree stand had spent the night, loaded it up, and then continued our trek. My legs were refreshed by a good night's sleep, and I was thankful for the hiking I had done during the summer.

As we worked our way to the top of the final ridge I found a nice five-point shed, which is always fun! We also found a wallow with large elk tracks around it, and four tree rubs nearby. A dry wallow had been tracked and scraped up. I could tell there was a very large bull on this ridge. The excitement stirred inside me. This was three miles from camp, but when it comes to elk, distance doesn't matter.

As we walked back to camp all I could think about was what I would choose to do opening day. It was my call. I was the only hunter there. This was MY hunt—the first time I had the choice to hunt anywhere I wanted or to change my mind as I pleased. It was fun thinking about which direction I would go, especially knowing there was a big bull on that high ridge.

The next morning was rainy, and I did not want to hunt early. After breakfast I headed up the ridge to the east to check out an area where I had shot a bull before. With my backpack on and bow in hand, I set off on another demanding hike. Up, up, and up I went. All along the ridge I saw fresh tracks and rubs. At 1:30 p.m. I knew I did not have time to get off this ridge and back up to the other before the elk started moving. I decided to hang right where I was.

As I sat down to rest, I

realized I had left my camo face mask in camp. But I did have black powder makeup! I chuckled to myself as I put it on without a mirror. “Good enough,” I thought, “the elk won't care what my face looks like!” At 3:30 I moved to a different tree with a clear shooting lane to the wallow.

The next few hours seemed to go by fairly fast as I enjoyed the trees, the green grass, and the white clouds against the deep blue sky. It was nice to just be still, and it's always fun to watch birds and squirrels flit around. I dozed off.

As the air got cooler in the late afternoon I heard four different bulls bugling and I was right in the middle. Nature's symphony at its best! I wished I could freeze time.

One bull screaming behind me was coming closer and closer with each bugle as he answered other bulls. I nocked an arrow. My stomach had that light, exciting feeling and I got very still, straining to hear any noise. The screams got closer and the sound of hooves walking was all around me. My heart started beating faster as the excitement grew.

Would I actually get a shot at an elk on my first night? “Stay calm,” I told myself. “No mistakes!”

Cows came into view in every direction. One large cow put her nose in the air to sniff around. I thought, “Oh please, don't bust me!”

Luckily the wind was in my favor. I sat motionless, taking in every detail: clouds in the sky, green trees, the smell of elk and wallow mud, the cows twitching their ears

as they drank and grazed, and the sound of bulls screaming. I wanted to freeze time, to capture the sounds and sights of those moments.

At that moment the bull I had been hearing came in and caught Boss Ma's attention. Then the bull put on the best elk encounter I have ever seen. He did it all—scraped his antlers in the mud, pawed with his hooves, rolled in the wallow, and splashed water all around. His show was both deliberate and playful. Then he lay in the middle of the wallow, screamed some more, leaned his antlers back, and thrashed and rubbed his neck in the mud. He changed the wallow's shape from an oval to a heart.

All this time the cows were moving farther and farther away. It was the bull and I. No other eyes were around. “It doesn't get any better than this,” I told myself.

Moving ever so slowly, I placed my release on the D loop, then checked it twice to make sure it was set right. “No mistakes. NO MISTAKES!”

The bull stood up, presenting a broadside shot. I drew, telling myself again, “No mistakes! Stay calm!” He let out another loud scream as I looked through my peep and placed the pin on his heart, confident that my yardage was correct. Almost automatically my arrow flew. I hardly remember making the shot.

It was a good hit, right through the heart. Usually elk run the opposite direction after an arrow hits. This magnificent bull stood still, as if looking for another bull that had come to fight. I quickly

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In addition to being a superb bowhunter, Tammy is also an accomplished archery target shooter, youth archery instructor, a mother, and a grandmother.



nocked a second arrow (the only time I have ever shot twice), drew, aimed at his lungs, and released. The arrow went through both lungs and part-way out the far side. He walked 10 yards toward me. I nocked a third arrow, but as I was about to draw he dropped onto his belly. He looked around and let out a weak screech, then lay over and expired in about 30 seconds—just the way you want any harvest to be.

I just sat for a bit, thankful my Bear Anarchy HC had done its job.

When I counted, I was surprised to see he was an 8x7. When you see a bull in the forest, he doesn't look as big as he does when you get right up by him. This one was healthy and long, with lots of good meat.

Those 20 minutes will be burned in my memory the rest of my life—a majestic part of nature I was so fortunate to experience! My thoughts went to my husband, who normally is by my side on a hunt, and I quietly wished he was there to share the moment. But now my hunt was over. You spend so much time planning, preparing, practicing, anticipating, and wondering. And then it happens; you experience everything in about 30 minutes. Executing the shot and watching your arrow fly to hit its mark is but a few seconds of the whole experience. The realization that it all just happened is overwhelming with emotion and thankfulness.

I always have a few tears when I put down any game; a culmination of excitement, sorrow, and the climax of the kill. My body felt weak as I walked slowly toward my bull. Placing my hand on him, I gave a prayer of thanksgiving of his life. Respect given for what he was. After a time of quiet I stood

and shifted into what I needed to do now, and that was to take care of this magnificent animal. I knew it was going to be a long night, as any time you take an animal this large in the evening, your next 24 hours are a given. I called the packer with my walkie.

By the time he arrived darkness had fallen. “Wow, nice bull,” he said. “He didn't go very far, did he? I somehow knew you were going to get your elk today.” In addition to his kind words, he showed up with everything I had asked him to bring, including a sandwich.

In four hours we were loading the panniers with quarters and meat. We bagged the hindquarters and put them in a tree with the head and antlers. Making our way back across the top of the ridge and down the canyon to camp in the dark seemed to take forever. Totally exhausted after camp chores, feeling most every muscle in my body ache, my mind was numb as I slid into my sleeping bag. Last time I looked it was 3 a.m.

We slept for three hours, ate, and then set out to retrieve the rest of my bull. We loaded the remaining quarters on the packhorse. But when we tried to put the head and antlers on the mule, it didn't work so well. The mule bolted and the antlers took a tumble. We tried tying everything on top, which worked better for a while. Heading back we came across another stash of water bottles—yet another perfectly timed gift.

There were more such gifts yet to come. Our friend's stepson and his friend showed up just in time to help get the antlers back to camp. The boys needed water, and I just happened to have some! After packing the bull to the trail head, our livestock escaped from the corral in a lightning

storm, but the packer retrieved them later in the week, safe and sound.

We drove to town for extra ice and I texted my husband. “Did you get an elk already,” he asked. I wrote back: “I shot the first elk I had a good shot at so we have winter meat!” At this he called me.

“That's great,” he said. “So glad we have elk meat. What did you shoot?” I said I had shot a bull. “How big,” he asked. “An 8x7.” He got quiet and then I lost reception. I chuckled to think what was going through his head.

But my hunt wasn't over quite yet. I wasn't going to let the packer take down camp by himself. We drove back to the trailhead for yet another four-mile hike to camp. I was getting used to this walk by now. The river had risen from hard rains and was moving fast, however, and we decided it was not safe to take the mule across. The packer crossed by himself, going underwater twice before he reached the other side. We ended up tossing a line over and pulling our gear across one bag at a time, then loaded the gear and walked back once again.

I was happy to reach home. When the packer opened the horse trailer door and my husband's eyes fell on my antlers he smiled. “Wow, you did good,” he said, and gave me a big hug. “Nice bull!”

At home, my thoughts often return to my amazing hunt with all the beauty, elk activity, weather, discomfort, the unplanned but perfectly timed gifts, the boys, the horses, and Jack. Time to settle into normal life until the wilderness calls again and I return once more to listen to the elk bugle in the rugged high country. ■

This story was originally written for the Outdoor Reporter.