

MISSING THE MARK

As the night sky gave way to first light, familiar silhouettes took shape in the Pacific Northwest woods that had become home over the years. Perched 20 feet above the forest floor in my treestand, I anticipated a chorus of yappy coyotes or a bugling bull ringing through the brushy mixed conifer. Then it happened; the single shrill note of a distant bull sounded off below my location.

Even though this screamer was several hundred yards out, my enthusiasm leveled up immediately. It wasn't hard to get excited because elk activity had been slow the last couple of seasons. I was slightly on edge with the eerie quiet of opening day and a trail camera full of nothing. However, the 2022 Washington archery elk season was showing some potential.

I have hunted elk in the Cascade rain shadow for years, and this was day two of my 14-year odyssey. I looked forward to filling the freezer with a big-bodied Roosevelt's elk. I hoped they would cooperate.

BRING THE ACTION


The early morning bull bugled once more, then things went quiet. After stepping up my calling a few hours later, some engaging "herd talk" unexpectedly brought in elk. What sounded like a head of 50 stampeding through the Douglas fir and western hemlock turned out to be a couple of cows and an uber-hyper spike. They were working toward me from below when

the "lady-in-charge" stopped about 20 yards away.

Obscured by dead tree branches to my left, the cow carefully scanned the area. Sensing something was amiss, she started getting uneasy after a few minutes. Finally, she whipped around and bailed deeper into the forest, taking the spike and other cow with her.

Strike one. I slumped back into my seat, hoping that wouldn't be the only action for the week. Of course, getting busted was a bummer. But through that encounter, I'd caught a problematic glimpse of my new treestand setup. I had switched out my "lucky tree" for one that concealed better in the edge of this small, partial clearing. Sure, I was better hidden, but the switch brought another problem—too many trees in a major shooting lane.

If an elk came from below as these three did, I'd have a clear shot once it got within ten yards. But an elk could also come from above and move along the trail perpendicular to my location. That would be a perfect



New stand location. A move 20 yards to the right of the "good luck tree" offered better concealment, but at the cost of a good clear shot in a major shooting lane.

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.

Shawn Lentz

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR

broadside shot with my top pin but with the added complication of snaking a well-timed arrow between small-diameter hardwoods.

It might be a tricky shot, depending on how an encounter unfolded. The potential shot was within my ability, but deep down, I hoped it wouldn't be the one that presented itself.

ANTLERS AND ADRENALINE

Six days later, while calling from my stand, the snapping of branches about 50 yards to the west startled me. When one crunch was followed by another, I knew an elk was coming. The close proximity and immediacy of the footfalls was jarring. Was it a bull? Was it a cow? I didn't know and didn't care. Either way, it was going in the freezer. I barely had a second to think about it when a young 5x5 bull swiftly emerged out of the tree line.

The above-average satellite hopped onto the main trail above me, cut right, and began moving my direction, feeding along the way. He was relaxed and moving with a calm stride—in stark contrast to my racing pulse and short, choppy breaths that verged on hyperventilation. I attempted to draw three times, but the swaggering bull lifted his head when he caught my movement. Freezing in place, I averted detection.

This boy was in no hurry, not even for love. But with an elk's gait, he was quickly closing the distance, and my shooting window was disappearing. Great, and here's the shot I didn't want to take, I lamented to myself. Reduced to a ten-inch space between two alders, any chance of sending an arrow at that bull would soon be gone.

Yanking my bow string back with an uncharacteristic fierceness, everything about this shot setup felt off. With little time to anchor and a hasty line-up, I punched the trigger sending the

arrow zipping from my bow. At the moment of release, I knew it was a lousy shot. This isn't going to be good, I thought.

It wasn't.

Watching the impact of my arrow, I stared in horror as it hit the young bull nearly a foot behind his shoulder. My stomach turned, and expletives rang out under my breath as the bull hunched up and tore out. I immediately began cow calling, which brought him to an abrupt stop about 30 yards across the trail from me. Looking unstable, I became confident the bull would drop within minutes. I was already envisioning backstrap steaks on the grill.

But elk are tough, and this bull had other plans. He'd taken up residence in a small area darkened and obscured by overhanging branches and vegetation. My arrow, capped with a lightednock, was the only sure giveaway he was still there. The 5x5 was only a short distance from me, but a follow-up shot was impossible. I couldn't shoot. I couldn't climb out of my stand. I was stuck. Even worse, the lightednock had become a beacon of despair, making me feel like a bigger idiot the longer this went on.

I could only watch the wounded satellite take a few lethargic steps every ten minutes, amber light beaming from his midsection. As he did, guilt surged through me like a white-hot inferno. Why didn't I stop him before shooting? Why didn't I listen to my gut about this new setup? Would he live, or was he mortally wounded?

WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

Forty-five agonizing minutes wore on when local thermals started getting shiftier. I was now feeling the light breeze blowing into the left side of my face. Because of the change in wind direction, the injured 5x5 got his first whiff of the



Nothing on the trail camera, but elk are obviously around.



After a few days in the stand, hitting the ground with cold call set-ups is great for your mindset. If you're lucky, it also allows elk to move in and bed down near your stand site while you're away.

jerk sitting in the tree across the trail from him.

Deciding it was time to move along, there was a sudden urgency in the listless bull's step, and he started up the hill in the opposite direction. Guilt turned to disbelief as I mouthed, "No, no!"

To try and avoid pushing the bull farther, I climbed down from my stand once he was in the thick understory. As I inched up to the trail, I heard the bull start moving again. Making one last note about his location, I turned the opposite way and high-tailed it back to camp.

On the way, I crossed paths with a local horse guide who offered to give me a hand, and I took him up on the offer. Two sets of eyes would be better than one for this tracking job. A few drops of blood had leaked to the ground where the elk had taken my arrow, but beyond that, it appeared very minimal. There was no guarantee we'd find an elk to pack out. Still, the guide was all in. Ten hours later, we were back at the location where I shot the bull.

Around midnight I found the initial blood, and

we went to work. To my dismay, it was even worse than I thought. The blood was so sparse we only covered about 40 yards in three hours. At one point, the trail picked up with significant-sized splatters—a brief moment of excitement, only to peter out to a few drops. Then, that was it. The blood trail ended altogether.

Suddenly, my headlamp flickered three times, letting me know my batteries would soon die. Fifteen minutes later, the "fourth horseman" arrived with heavy rain. It was the last straw. Incredulous, I called off the search around 3 a.m. I thanked the guide for all his help, and we parted ways.

ONE FINAL PUSH

After two hours of sleep, I returned to make a last-ditch effort to find my bull. Fortunately, the rain had stopped. But the clock was ticking because temps were forecasted to soar into the 80s.

Most of the blood had washed away, and only flagging tape remained. Any chance of picking up the blood trail was gone. Walking in the direction I'd last heard

the bull, I looked for fresh tracks, torn-up ground, and other clues. Elk tracks blended into one another in the pulverized soil. Finding a new track wasn't just the proverbial needle in a haystack—it was a needle among other needles in a pile of haystacks.

For five hours, I searched every nasty, swampy devil's club-laden hole that made sense. There was no sign of my would-be bull. Finally, I sat in the middle of an old logging road, head in my hands.

A call to my wife provided some much-needed encouragement, and she reminded me of some places to check. But after another hour of searching, the clock had finally run out. I had to break camp, cart out a bunch of gear, and then drive four hours home.

None of this sat well with me. Hiking back to camp one last time, I felt exceedingly heavy. Raw and unrelenting waves of regret pounded me as I reflected on wounding a

bull and not recovering him. It was my first time losing an elk. I was now a card-carrying life member of a club that no bowhunter wants to be a member of. I spent weeks obsessing about everything I should have done differently.

As someone who often speaks to the importance of ethical hunting and clean kills, I feel like a hypocrite. However, such moments expose an essential truth: preaching values is easy until we miss the mark ourselves. What seem like reasonable choices can lead to bigger consequences than anticipated. The best we can do in these instances is learn and grow from painful mistakes. Hopefully, it will develop us into more mindful hunters when we do. The animals we pursue deserve it. ■

In big elk country, there's an infinite number of directions a wounded bull could go.



Decent blood at the start doesn't always guarantee a solid path to your quarry. The blood trail quickly diminished after this.

Getting creative while hiking out ten days worth of camp gear. After a long search, with not much sleep, I'm thankful it's mostly a downhill cruise. The meat cooler doubles as a gear tote when coming in or going out on unsuccessful trips.

