

FAMILY IN THE FIELD

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Drawing an either-sex elk permit for 2018 was a thrill in itself, but harvesting a mature bull is a once-in-a-lifetime event. I'm 66 years old, so drawing the permit was very exciting. And because I am retired, I had plenty of time to plan, worry, and lose sleep over the chance of harvesting a bull elk.

Opening weekend, October 20, my two sons, Jeff (39) and Kruse (31) joined me in Phillips County, Montana for a four-day hunt. It was 30 degrees in the morning and 55 degrees in the afternoon. The elk definitely had the advantage that weekend.

I got to the area East of Slipperyann Ridge on Thursday night by myself and set up my spotting scope to view as much of the countryside that I could. Sure enough, when I saw four bull elk grazing in the open late in the afternoon, it was looking like I picked out the right area! Early the next morning, they showed up again. I only have to wait two days—till Saturday—and it seemed like they wanted to graze in the same spot.

On the morning of opening day my sons and I glassed, then walked into a few drainages—no tracks or sign. That afternoon, with 20 minutes of shooting time left, we spotted a lone elk about a mile to a mile-and-a-half away, grazing. With little time left, we took off to get close, but not having the time to sneak up on him, it was more of a direct charge, and of course, he took off well before we got close.

Sunday morning we were again glassing an area and saw two bulls and four cows grazing about two to three miles away. As we were making our plan and watching their movements, two hunters on horseback

who had a cow tag came up on us, so we included them in our plan. We agreed that they would go along and look for the cows to come out of the timber, while we would walk the hills to try and estimate where the bulls were and catch them bedded down or fleeing the timber. Off we went, just to get stopped by a rattlesnake on the trail. We got a LONG stick and flipped him over edge of the hill. We only did that because there was another guy from Oklahoma with his two girls 100 yards behind us going to our spotting location where the snake was.

When we got to the timber, my son Jeff heard the elk exit out of the timber, never to see them again; the two hunters on horseback also saw nothing. The 50-degree bluebird weather certainly favored the elk on those days.

Monday and Tuesday we got skunked again, so we decided to call it a day and head home. I'm glad we came in early. My battery was dead on the camper, and we had to take apart the couch and cabinet to manually crank in the slide-out and then put it back together. Still, it was a great time for a father and two sons hiking and camping and hunting together.

Two weeks later, I asked my brother-in-law who is 74 years old to go hunting with me again north of the Missouri River in Phillips County. We left Billings, Montana, in early morning snow/rain conditions—not bad enough to cancel traveling at that point, but definitely concerning. I have hunted Phillips County enough to know that when it's wet, one should stay home. That Saturday, my brother-in-law and I road-hunted; he couldn't walk the hills, but I was so antsy to be out glassing—I knew we were in scout mode. We stopped to talk to everyone who was hunting, including two young men from Missoula packing out their bulls. The main point was, the young men said the elk were grazing at 8:30 a.m.; that was a little more than two weeks early, and it was getting colder every week, meaning

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Photos Courtesy of Author

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.

more feed time. Though we saw lots of deer, we didn't see elk. Still, my brother-in-law had a good time visiting with everyone while hunting.

On November 8, I called my son and asked if he would hunt again in the Breaks with me. He said sure, and he'd bring Brayden (age 7). He said they would meet me after school and work at the Zortman Hotel that evening. I said I would go up early to scout out an area, and we both agreed that I should take one if I had the chance.

I got to the spotting area we had used before, and sure enough, there were five bulls grazing about three-quarters of a mile away in the creek bottom below. The closest one really caught my eye, and after glassing him for about 10 minutes, I proceeded down into the valley. I stayed behind every bush, aligned every tree between him and me. I crossed the creek three times (once coming back) to keep him from watching me. After the last creek crossing which made a lot of noise (it was about 20 degrees with ice forming around the edges of the water), I crawled up the bank to peer over the buck brush to see him looking at me. I ducked down and rose up three or four times as he was trying to figure me out. On the last glimpse, I saw him look away, and he was broadside. I crawled as fast as possible to a tree about 30 yards ahead, and I propped my rifle on the right side to keep my body behind the tree. I had him in my sights at about 400 yards, but I couldn't calm my breathing. I was nervous and a little winded from the crawl, so I held on him for what felt like about 10 minutes. I was still shaking and breathing hard but decided it was time to take my shot.

I squeezed the trigger, aiming right behind his right shoulder. After the shot, I looked up and didn't see him. The other bulls were running and then stopped about 300 yards from where my bull was. Then I saw him come out of a small ditch only 50 yards from where I shot him. He stopped, and then his hooves went up in the air. I still couldn't see him, so I walked about 200 yards and I saw his antlers rock back. I knew I got him, but was he finished? There was a six-foot-high



John's elk was taken in Phillips County, Montana in 2018. It scores 410-4/8 points.

dirt mound 50 yards away, so I reloaded and headed to that spot to check if I needed to finish him. No need; he was gone when I saw him. Now I had to settle down.

I knew his antlers were dark and thick, but boy was I surprised how thick they were when I cut out my tag and

taped it to the antlers. After water and some release of pent-up excitement, I started working on him. I had watched Randy Newberg videos of gutless butchering an elk, and since I was by myself I thought this was the right time to try.

I had left my spotting scope, tripod, and binoculars

on the hill, but I had my water, sharpening stone, extra knife, backpack (day pack), and five game bags. I quartered the bull and removed the tenderloins and backstraps along with some neck meat and put that in a game bag. I decided it was time to go to the truck—about three-quarters of a mile

away as the crow flies. I packed the game bag, backpack, and rifle and headed out, stopping on the hill only to retrieve my spotting scope and binoculars. I got to the truck, ate lunch at noon and decided to go back, bone him out and bring what I could back to the truck.

I filled four game bags (about 40lbs each) and along with the head moved them next to a fence post about 100 yards away. I guess I always thought that to keep coyotes away, I should urinate in a large circle around the elk head and meat, so I did. I then took two of the game bags out to the base of the hill and took them up one at a time to the truck. My three trips in and out totaled 4.5 miles, and I headed back to Zortman at 3:00 pm.

My son Jeff and grandson Brayden met me in Zortman that evening, and although they weren't there when I shot, they were extremely excited by the first pictures.

The three of us got out there at 8 o'clock the next morning to retrieve the rest of my elk. We took Brayden's plastic sleds down to the elk, where we took more pictures and got even more excited on how big he was. After tying the head to one sled and then tying the last two game bags on another sled, we pulled my elk to the bottom of the hill and then out, one sled at a time with several lengths of rope. I was so proud of my grandson and son walking up and down that terrain twice to help Grandpa get this elk out. Also, I was so grateful for the hunting support from my sons Kruse and Jeff, grandson Brayden, brother-in-law Larry, and most of all, for my loving wife Marie, who is going through a lot right now but supports her family in whatever they do. ■

John's son Jeff took photos of John and his grandson Brayden while they helped pack out his elk using Brayden's plastic sled.

