

The Trek for a Montana Elk 1998-2007

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Each year, mid-February brings the challenge of finding the perfect Valentine's gift and card for my wife of 40 years. Since 1998, it has also begun the litany of phone calls, forms, checks, and many more phone calls with Pat Sinclair, our Montana big game outfitter. So 2007 was my tenth annual attempt, through Pat, to obtain a successful lottery draw for a bull elk tag. Only a hunter

who has repeatedly tried to draw an elk tag really understands the process. I know too well how to deal with the agony of finding the word "unsuccessful" after "elk" beside my Automated Licensing System (ALS) number on the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) web site. Sure, another bonus point appears on the orange card which the FWP people mail every spring. But for a 60-plus-year-old man, the question is whether, in one more year, the legs and heart will be there, if by chance the tag finally arrives.

The good news is that Pat has done a superb job of acquiring access to some of the finest Montana hunting real estate in the eastern half of the state. He has learned, over his 35 years of hunting and guiding, how to manage big game animals. There are no longer any elk or mule deer left in Iowa, even though there were, according to the journals of Lewis and Clark, in the summer of 1804.

The long wait until August seems like an eternity. As always, the consolation prize with the purchase of an outfitter-sponsored big game combo license is the opportunity for a non-resident hunter to stalk a trophy mule deer buck during the rut. A November hunt may involve the first winter storm (once costing us a week in Miles City, waiting for the roads to clear). A perfect week should include some freezing weather with a good dusting of snow, falling just short of enough to stop the 4x4 from climbing the eastern Montana hills and rock piles.

The fall of 2007 was different from other years: "successful" in drawing a buck antelope tag for the second year in a row! What was going on? Finally, after those long years and empty applications for an elk tag, there it was on the computer screen: "successful"! I even logged off, waited a few seconds, and re-booted the Internet browser to make certain that the elusive elk tag was really matched to my name and ALS number. For the first time in my big game hunting career, I would hunt in Montana twice: once for a buck antelope and—finally—once for a bull elk!



Successful elk hunters claim the size of the elk isn't appreciated until sitting next to one.

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Living in Iowa offers many gun enthusiasts easy access to regular practice in the off-season. Pat tells us often about clients who brought fantastic weapons with great scopes to hunt in Montana, only to be disappointed by erratic shots. For that reason, we shoot year-round with handloads and recipes whose yields are predictable. No serious hunter would do anything else.

The year 2007 was different in yet another way. Starting in January, the custom .30-06 was ready to go. For a good-luck gift prior to the elk hunt, my long-time friend and mentor, Dean, gave me a green box of "his perfect loads." The instructions on the box read: "elk hunting only." He wanted me to kill the elk with one of his loads. Dean had worked on the .30-06 loads with me during June, after taking a box of my loads and the rifle to Montana. There he spent a week practicing long-range shooting with Pat.

Dean was the ultimate shooter/hunter and had been one of my mentors over the last 10 years. He had drawn a bull elk tag some years before and had killed a whopper (345 B&C points) with his perfect rifle and loads. I tucked the green box away in August just after I learned of my lucky draw. At the time, I did not know that Dean would never see the Boone and Crockett bull that eventually fell. He died unexpectedly in early August, leaving our hunting party with a wistful, empty feeling. We would miss our friend and council, teacher, and resource.

On October 19th, filled with anticipation of taking my first bull elk, I drove 1,400 miles to eastern Montana. We hunted on a cattle ranch of 45 sections with only one hunter for opening day of the season. Having guided and hunted this ranch in the past, Pat knew the land and the tendencies of the elk herd.

The ranch house of this working cattle operation was located about five miles off the highway, down a winding road that yields a beautiful view of the flats and hills of Eastern Montana. On every turn I saw the bright yellow leaves of the aspen and cottonwood trees. Unlike the western part of the state, eastern Montana is dotted with beautiful, red rimrock bluffs and thickly scattered ponderosa pines.

I stayed on this ranch several years before, on a mule deer hunt. The owner and sole resident is a lady in her late 70s, born on the site of the current ranch house. She is a traditional rancher—up at 4:00 a.m., working long hours, cooking great meals. Just before dusk on the night before the

opener, our white pickup pulled into the yard. Following an exchange of greetings, we did the required paperwork and a safety check of the weapon and ammunition in preparation for the hunt. With all in order, we sat down to a hearty evening meal.

Later, another guide, Alan, came driving into the lane, announcing he wanted to help with the hunt. Alan had guided me on my first Montana hunt. I will never forget him asking: "Now let me get this straight; you have never killed a deer with a rifle?" At that time, ten years ago, the answer was yes. I had never killed anything larger than a rabbit with anything larger than a .22. I was shocked that Alan came all this way from his home and away from his job to help with this elk hunt. I will be forever in his debt for his help.

On this, the night before my first Montana hunt, sleep didn't come easy, and 4:30 a.m. came too early on Sunday morning. When I awoke, I quickly discovered that the only heat available from the stove in the front room hadn't filtered through my closed bedroom door. Burrr!

Finally, after those long years and empty applications for an elk tag, there it was on the computer screen: "successful"!

The weatherman's prediction was correct—clear and cold with light winds less than 5 m.p.h. As we pulled out of the lane and drove our 4x4s to the north pasture, it was 6:45 a.m., and 27 degrees.

When I got out of the truck, I was wearing my ball cap but it took me mere seconds to trade it for a stocking hat. With packs and blaze orange in place, a check of the weapon revealed three of Dean's finest in the magazine and an empty chamber with the safety on. A quick and quiet adjustment of the Montana sling on the .30-06 and we were off to find those shooter bulls. Although I had hunted my entire life and we had seen or heard nothing at that point, I could hear my heart beating. Above-average rainfall still nourished the rivers and creeks, and Pat had predicted a great year for trophy animals due to the large amount of available forage. As it turned out, he was correct.

After a short walk, we scaled a rock pile, sat on top, and listened while we glassed the north ranch. Our field of vision covered 185 degrees, with more on the right

than left. Straight ahead on the north side of a second hill was a fence line that formed the northwest boundary of the ranch where the elk herd frequented.

There was a slight cold breeze on the top of the rock pile. Otherwise, all was still. Since the top was flat, we sat in the long-sitting position. This was starting out unlike any other hunt I had experienced since we usually sat on, or slightly in front of, the crest of the hill to allow for a downward shot. I never practiced shooting from this new position and was unclear about how accurately I would shoot if given the chance.

As we continued to glass the area, Alan came running, telling us that we needed to move onto the next rock pile to our left. We quickly picked up and took off on the run down the first rock pile and up the second. Needless to say, I was the last to the top as my 60-plus-year-old football knees were no match for the younger, better-conditioned guides.

The new position allowed a closer look at the fence line. Still no movement. I whispered to Pat, inquiring if it was common to hear bulls bugling. Usually, bugling was more common during the rut, he said, which was past. We continued to glass. Not two minutes later we heard a sound! It sounded like a bugle! Then another, and another. There must be a herd of elk on the far side of that second hill. Although they were still not in sight, their sounds were getting closer.

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, in the yellow grass at the corner of two fences, facing west was a gigantic bull. The binoculars confirmed it to be a trophy 6x6. Having never seen an elk like this in the wild, I didn't comprehend its size or quality at the time, but was quite willing to take Pat's evaluation.

After hearing three or four bugles prior to the sighting of the big bull, we wondered how many other elk remained out of our sight behind the second hill. We couldn't imagine another bull like the one

in front of us so our thoughts turned to getting in position to make a play on this one.

While Pat and I whispered quietly about a plan, two orange-vested hunters approached the corner of the fence line and the elk from a coulee to our left. We could see that they were deep in the coulee, below the level of the bull. But a light wind was blowing from west to east, which made real the chance of the elk catching wind of them. We were certain that these hunters did not know of our presence or location and there was no way at this point we could communicate. My hope was that the hunters would stop and lay down until the animal made his decision. After all, he was on our side of the fence and on the ranch that we had permission to hunt. As we watched, the hunters tucked themselves into the bank of the coulee and proceeded no further east. To this day, I do not know if they knew the big boy was just ahead of them!

Suddenly the elk dropped out of sight as amazingly as he had appeared. We continued to glass. There was no more motion from the two other hunters. Just when I thought the elk had gone, Pat whispered, "Don't even blink!" I froze in my long-sitting position on my bottom, with the .06 pointed skyward between my knees. "He is right below us." I could not see below because I was sitting slightly behind Pat, out of sight and unable to look over the front edge of the rock pile. We waited.

Next came a tugging on my pant leg and Pat murmuring that the bull had gone behind the closer hill. "Get a shell in the chamber and get ready," Pat whispered. Slowly and quietly, I chambered one of Dean's rounds, and gently closed and locked the bolt. Dean's round was ready. We waited.

Pat pointed where the bull had gone out of sight and told me that if he scented the others, his escape route would be away to the east/southeast on a small ledge near some very large boulders. From my native Illinois upland hunting days, I recognized the small bird escape that often preceded a fleeting rooster. On the heels of this small bird flight, a group of five mule deer yearlings came rushing out from behind the east-most boulder and scattered in all directions like quail. "Heads up," Pat warned. "He may be coming out following the deer."

Again, Pat's instincts were correct. Up on the ledge beyond the rocks he came,

and once clear of the rocks and small pines, laid that trophy rack down, nearly touching the top of his enormous back. He began in a trot and then sped up into a moderate, quick run.

"You are going to have to hit him on the run if you want a shot 'cause he isn't going to stop," Pat said, this time in full voice.

I raised up the .06 with my left hand on the forearm and the back of my hand on the top of my knees. I had never practiced shooting from the long sitting position in my life, not even with my old single shot .22. I quickly found the big body in my scope. The tan color was in sharp contrast to the trees and rocks behind the moving outline. I followed the bull to my right, never knowing how much room I had or whether I would run out of room and sight of the animal before I decided to shoot. I remember thinking that the 2,800 feet-per-second loads of Dean's would not require any lead on the thorax, since he was about 125 to

had done on previous hunts. But, this time it felt different. Although I was certain the critter was all Pat had advised, I wanted to get up close to confirm what these beautiful enormous animals looked like.

I followed my two guides down the rock pile and walked slowly to the east along the ledge into some open grass. As we continued from the peak of this patch, I saw him. There, at the bottom of the slope near a drop-off, lay the gigantic bull elk on his back with the G-5 points and beam tips stuck in the mud.

That is an understatement! We walked around and around the fallen animal. No one said much. As we moved around, the appreciation for the beauty and size of the elk became more apparent. We continued to say little and marveled at the size of both the body and the rack.

After some time, I remember hearing the words "whopper," "pig," and "trophy." To evaluate the size of the rack, we turned the bull over onto its belly, unveiling the long,

symmetrical lines of the G-5s and beam tips once they were out of the mud. From the rear, we saw the width of the rack from inside beam to inside beam, and from a side view, the length of the main beam from the burr to the beam tip said trophy. Judging by the quiet but consistent comments and numerous grins from my two experienced guides, I was certain that this was a trophy bull of a lifetime.

A quick, but accurate raw score indicated a 375-point bull. No one had a pencil or paper, so we recorded the score on a convenient piece of sandstone.

The rack was a near-perfect 6x6 with one small cheater point at the bifurcation of the left G-5 and beam tip. Where the bull lay, the top of its back was four feet from a drop-off, which fell 30 feet straight down. With a nearly 40-degree uphill slope, retrieving the carcass without damaging the rack or hide was challenge enough. I hate to think what would have happened, had the animal rolled over that edge.

For this trophy animal to be entered in the Boone and Crockett Club's Records program, a Boone and Crockett Official Measurer had to take the measurements no sooner than 60 days after the animal was killed. The official score was 364-2/8, making it into the Boone and Crockett Club's 27th Awards Program.

I was proud. Dean would have been proud, too. ■



A beautiful view of the flats and hills of Eastern Montana.

150 yards away. I squeezed the light trigger with the reticle center on the lungs. I do not remember the noise from the discharge but I certainly do remember that sucking sound that I learned to listen for on previous mule deer and antelope hunts. "Thoop!"

Alan reappeared soon after the shot. From behind, I remember hearing that he saw the shot and also heard the sucking sound. He spoke of a spot of red on the upper thorax just above the front right shoulder joint.

In a little over an hour since we heard the multiple bugling, the hunt and the culmination of the trek of the last ten years was over. As so often had been the case with other big game hunts, a sense of relief and excitement started the old knees quivering. Pat pounded me on the back, shook my hand, and congratulated me as he



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ITS HABITAT
CANNOT SPEAK,
SO WE MUST,
AND WE WILL."

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 1905

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