





# Moving Meat

How to pack an elk, deer, or other big game animal out of the backcountry—without killing yourself in the process.

By Tim Christie

**NOW THE WORK BEGINS** Hunting and killing a big bull elk can be easy compared to hauling a quarter ton of meat and mount back to the vehicle. Tip number one: Don't shoot an animal in a place that will require mostly uphill transport.

Silver dollar-sized snowflakes floated down from opaque skies. With each step I expected to see a patch of buff that would indicate an antler. Despite the storm's intensity, the edge of each cloven hoof print in the fresh snow was razor sharp. I'd never killed an elk, but years of deer hunting told me these elk were real close.

The game of hide-and-seek had begun two hours earlier when I'd spotted the tracks from my truck. I grabbed my rifle, a small daypack, and an ancient wooden pack frame. The tracks meandered up a creek bottom then turned up a steep hill. Attempting to keep my footing, my focus slipped from hunting. Then something told me to look up. An elk faded in and out of my vision through surrealistic streams of cascading snow. Kneeling, I slipped off the scope covers and shouldered my rifle. All I could see was white. Had I been dreaming? Walking to where I'd seen the mirage, I saw tracks going off a ridge and falling precipitously into obscurity. I realized the game was lost.

Five years later, my elk hunting luck had yet to match my enthusiasm. Deer filled my meat needs, but dreams of tagging an elk were simply that. Late one afternoon, lured by bugles of a love-sick bull, I slipped quietly through dark timber shadows. There, in a small opening, he lay bedded, making for an easy shot. What had been elusive for so many years was over. Approaching him, I was struck by a simple fact: Elk are huge! How was I going to get him to my truck? Then another realization washed over me. Had I shot that snowstorm elk five years earlier, I'd never have gotten it out. Inadequate equipment, snowy conditions, and being alone all added up to not being anywhere near prepared for hauling several hundred pounds of meat from the backcountry. Since I was raised hunting mule deer and pronghorn in western sage plains, all I knew of retrieval was grabbing an antler and dragging the animal





**THE LONG HAUL** Pulling or packing a big game animal can strain a hunter's lower back, knees, and heart. The hardest way to move a deer or elk is by dragging it, bent over, across the ground (far right). A plastic sled or tarp can make the job much easier, especially when there's snow on the ground. Ideally, a pack train is standing by to do the work for you.

to the truck. Deer shot near fields were even simpler: Drive the truck to the buck. I'd been spoiled. Elk hunting, I realized, was different.

Since then, on hunts from Texas to Alaska, I've observed that most hunters spend far more time thinking about getting a perfect shot than on how they will retrieve what they shoot. Consider my friend Tom's nightmarish introduction to elk hunting. His hunting mentor was a consummate braggart. There was nothing this guy didn't know how to do. After dropping into a steep canyon, the pair hunted for several hours before encountering a small band of elk. Tom shot a cow. After quartering and hanging the elk, they struggled to get out of the canyon before nightfall. Mr. Modesty assured Tom his horse would pack out the whole elk. But when summoned to the canyon headwall, the horse smartly refused to go where no horse should go. Backpacking the elk out became the only

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option. Four days of missed work and brutal exertion got the hindquarters out. But that was all the meat they recovered; the rest spoiled. The moral: Many inhospitable places where game animals live are not good places to hunt game animals.

Getting a deer or elk out can be as simple as strapping it to the back of a horse, or as taxing as horsing it out on your back. Your choice requires prehunt preparation and planning, just like all elements of a hunt. Disaster awaits those who don't plan, something a friend discovered last fall. You'll never find a better-conditioned young man—one tough enough to survive being wounded in the Middle East. On their elk hunt, he and three buddies got lucky when one of them dropped a spike bull. But the elk ended up in a hellish snarl of downfallen timber 200 yards from a road. The young men didn't carry tools to quarter the gutted carcass. Their solution? Use testosterone-fueled brute strength to manhandle the elk to the road. A week later my friend was in a chiropractor's office getting his third spinal

adjustment. One of his buddies also sustained a potentially life-altering back injury. Thinking about how you will recover your game before you shoot can prevent more than wasted meat.

The bigger the animal, the more time you should spend on planning how you'll retrieve it. A common joke among state biologists in Wyoming, where I often hunt, is that the reason successful hunters must wait five years to apply for another moose permit is because that's how long it takes to forget the pain endured from retrieving a moose. Elk aren't much smaller. One of my hunting partners figures that backpacking elk meat out is the closest thing to childbirth that a male can experience. And the longer the pack, the harder the labor. Recalling his ordeal of the previous fall, he once wrote me, "We backpacked the bull a mile to the rig. When you stand up with a 118-pound hindquarter strapped to your backpack, it spreads pain evenly throughout your entire body. Legs turn to rubber, toes go black from being beaten into the front of your boots with every step



downhill, and your back can't comprehend that your shoulders and hips are separated, because they aren't after a mile of packing such loads. Packing uphill quadruples the pain."

### Horses make sense

For packing game long distances, horses are my top choice. Mules, llamas, and even goats fall into the same category of beasts packing the burden, and each animal has its fan club. Of course, pack animals have their downsides. You must feed them year-round just so they can provide a week or two of work. And you need to add the costs of a trailer and the saddles, panniers, and other tack. But it's worth the effort and expense. Nothing is sweeter than putting elk quarters on the back of a horse and leading it to camp. It's only better if you're riding another horse.

Both dragging and backpacking big game animals share one common element: sweat. Backpacking, while strenuous, offers the significant plus of cleaner meat. I've never dragged an animal any distance without getting brush, sage, or dirt imbedded in the animal's meat and chest cavity. It's a messy affair. Last fall I killed a big mule deer



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buck in Montana over a mile from the truck. Since it was all downhill, my partner and I considered dragging the deer to the vehicle. But because we wanted to keep the meat clean, we instead skinned, quartered, and packed it out. That took more time but produced much better table fare.

ness over your shoulders and then walk straight ahead, pulling the animal directly behind you with the weight distributed evenly between your shoulders. No twisting or bending required. Some harnesses also have a hip belt, which makes the hauling even less grueling.

## NO BONES ABOUT IT

Most hunters could not pack out a deer on their back in one trip. But they likely could if it was just the meat, without the bones and hide. That's the logic behind what's called gutless field dressing or in-the-field boning. With this butchering method, you don't gut out your deer, pronghorn, or elk but rather peel back the hide and fillet the meat off the bone. You can even get the tenders this way by reaching in behind the stomach and pulling them away from the inner vertebrae with your fingers. Some hunters don't like this method because they say it increases the temptation to leave good meat behind, such as in the neck and between the ribs. Others warn that unless it's tightly

bound to the frame, loose meat shifts in a pack much more than when the muscle is attached to the bone.

Whenever transporting big game, state law requires that you attach the validated possession tag to the largest part of the animal "in a secure and visible manner," retain evidence of the animal's sex, and take all usable meat.

"You must make sure that a warden will be able to identify the animal in the 'package' of any boned-out animal you are transporting," says Mike Korn, assistant chief of the FWP Enforcement Division.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has produced an excellent video on gutless field dress-



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ing called *Field Care of Big Game*. It's available for \$15 by calling (907) 267-2187. To view a slide show demonstrating how to bone out an elk in the field, go to: <http://home.att.net/~sajackson/gutless1.html>.

—Tom Dickson





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**WHY DIDN'T I THINK OF THAT?** Ever since the first cave men figured out that pulling a dead mastadon was easier than pushing it, hunters have been devising new ways to transport game animals. Clockwise from top left: Canoes and other watercraft can carry heavy loads long distances; when used responsibly, an ATV is a sensible way to pack out a deer or elk; commercial and homemade devices such as carts and caddies are lightweight and easily transported; sometimes all you need is rope and a log to haul two heavy elk quarters overland. Facing page, upper right: the final destination.

Pulling a deer or an elk quarter is even easier if there's a skiff of snow on the ground. Snow allows you to use a plastic sled or tarp. A tarp is especially handy because you can easily stow it along with a length of rope in your daypack. After cleaning the deer, wrap it in the tarp, loop the end of the rope around your waist, and glide the carcass across the

snow. The tarp also keeps sage, dirt, and other debris from getting into the meat.

### Wheel 'em out

Hunters have invented all types of wheeled carts and carriers for retrieving game. On a mountain goat hunt, my partner and I backpacked 5 miles into a high country lake, where

we set up a base camp. The trail was relatively flat, so we wheeled our gear in on a cart. The homemade device had a motorcycle wheel in the center and two handles in front and two in back. On the third day of the hunt I shot a goat, and we backpacked the quarters, cape, and head down to our base camp, about 2 miles away. The next day we merrily wheeled



the goat and our camp gear the 5 miles back to the trailhead in one trip. I didn't weigh the load, but I suspect it exceeded 350 pounds. Similar carts are available commercially, both in one- and two-wheel versions. Some hunters improvise and strap their deer or pronghorn to a bicycle and wheel it across the prairie or down a logging road. One friend even used a wheelbarrow to haul out a moose, one quarter at a time.

ATVs offer an efficient way to retrieve game, but they should be used responsibly. Unfortunately, too many hunters tear up the terrain with their vehicles. Last fall I transported a whitetail buck to camp on my ATV, but only after dragging him to an old logging road. I could have driven my pickup to the deer, but the road was narrow and overgrown. The ATV allowed me to reach the deer without driving in with my truck, which would have widened the road, inviting even more vehicles to drive in.

On a guided sheep hunt years ago, I made a good shot on a ram. After three hours of boning the meat and capping the trophy, my guide and I hoisted heavy, leg-numbing packs and toiled back to our spike camp,



arriving long after dark. The next day, as we were packing the ram to our vehicle, 4 miles away, I was worried that a grizzly might surprise us, attracted by our blood-soaked packs. It wasn't long before I wished the ordeal over—no matter how it ended. Three days and as many round trips later, we dropped our packs into the truck. Exhausted, sitting

on the tailgate, I tried to drink a cold beer. My arm refused to lift the bottle to my mouth, it hurt that much.

It's been ten years since that hunt. When I look at the ram on my office wall, rich memories of my adventure in that faraway place filled with mountain cirques flood back. My most vivid memory is not of the kill; it's of that moment I knew my guide and I had gotten the sheep and camp safely out of the mountains. Good hunts test both body and mind. Getting the game out is a test of the kind of hunter you are. One of my hunting partners said it best: "The more you invest yourself in getting your meat, the sweeter it is. There is a true difference between sitting down to an elk steak that you've carried out on your back and dining on a beef steak some anonymous person butchered for you." I suspect that's just one more reason we hunt. 🐻

*Do you have a tip for safely and quickly hauling big game out from the backcountry? Send us your suggestion and we'll print it in a future issue of Montana Outdoors. The best tip receives a free Montana Outdoors T-shirt.*

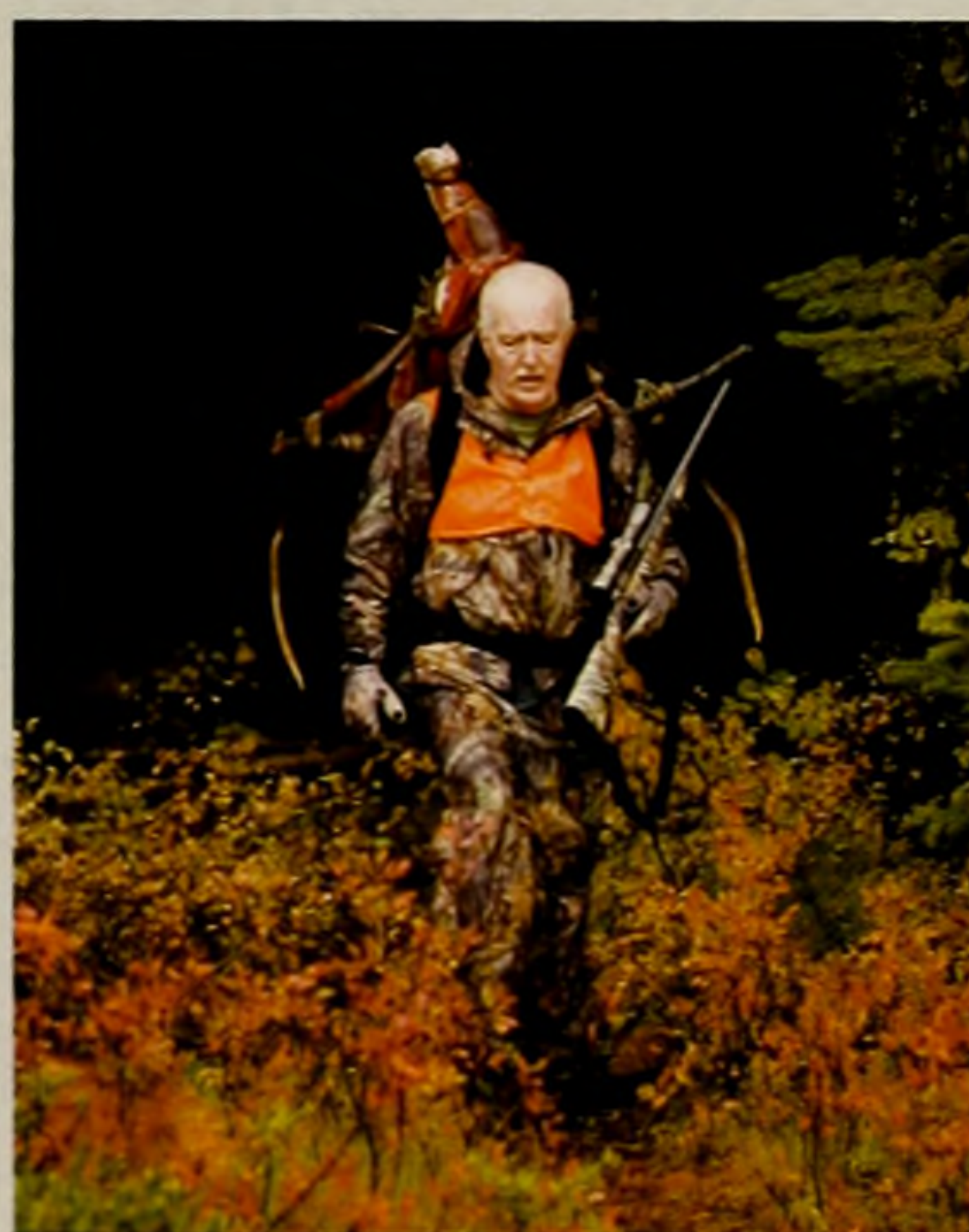
## THE HEART OF THE HUNT

Blowing out your back or knee while hauling an elk or deer from the backcountry isn't the only health danger facing hunters. Crystelle Fogle, head of the Montana Cardiovascular Health Program, says that gutting and dragging out the animal can stress the cardiovascular system and lead to a heart attack in the field. "Even the excitement of just seeing or shooting a big game animal can trigger a heart attack in some high-risk individuals," she says.

Fogle says most hunters are healthy enough to handle the added stress of hunting and moving downed game without problems. "But those with existing heart disease, high blood pressure, or sedentary lifestyles should take extra precautions while hunting," she adds.

Some tips for staying heart healthy when afield:

- **Learn to recognize symptoms** of a heart attack or stroke in yourself and your



**SIGNS OF THE TIME** As hunters age, even those in exceptionally good physical condition face an increased risk of heart attack or stroke when afield. Learn the signs.

hunting partners. Heart attack: chest pain or discomfort, pain in the neck or jaw or shoulder, prolonged shortness of breath, dizziness, or heart palpitations. Stroke: suddenly having difficulty walking, speaking, understanding, or seeing, as well as numbness or weakness on one side of the body. If any of these occur when you're hunting, sit down and take a breather. If the symptoms don't go away after a few minutes, you may be having a heart attack or stroke and should immediately seek emergency help.

- **Carry a cell phone and GPS.** If you notice any of the above symptoms in yourself or others in your hunting party, call 911.
- **Those who have been diagnosed with heart disease should see their physician for a preseason checkup.** They should also bring rescue medications such as nitroglycerin. (This drug has a poor shelf life, so make sure it hasn't expired.)
- **At least six weeks before hunting season, begin increasing aerobic activity** such as walking or hiking.
- **Eating fatty foods, drinking alcohol, smoking, and sudden exertion or excitement can increase the risk of a heart attack or stroke.**
- **Wear layers of clothing to stay warm. To reduce the chance of overheating, remove layers as needed while hunting.**
- **Stay hydrated** by drinking water or sports drinks.
- **Activity at increased elevation, especially at altitudes higher than 5,000 feet, puts extra strain on the cardiovascular system.** This is especially true for people who have been diagnosed with heart disease.

—Tom Dickson