

MY MOUNTAIN, MY SELF

Finding more
than elk in a
backcountry
wilderness.

BY BEN LONG

If you are what you eat, part of me is the Kootenai National Forest.

In particular, some of my atoms and isotopes come from a single mountain on this two-million-acre national forest in northwestern Montana. It's a place the U.S. Forest Service designates a "roadless area."

Kootenai elk are not frequently featured in "hot spot" hunting magazine articles. The Kootenai forest is thick, steep, and cold. You can hunt entire seasons without laying eyes on an elk. Yet somehow, this mountain holds my imagination in its grip.

Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset could have been describing a hunt in these rugged mountains when he wrote that "the beauty of the hunt lies in the fact that it is problematic." Hunting here poses problems and beauty in equal shares—sometimes all I can stand of both.

Predawn on opening day I was leading my 15-year-old friend Jeremiah through the woods by headlamp. With young knees and contagious enthusiasm, he's a fine hunting partner. More practically, while I was limited in this hunting district to a brow-tined bull, as a youth hunter he was allowed to shoot either a cow or a bull. That upped our odds substantially.

I discovered this mountain the same year Jeremiah was born. I was drawn to the fact that it's a lone, undeveloped drainage in a sea of what the Forest Service euphemistically calls "intensively managed" forest. Getting away from roads and clearcuts is what I love about elk hunting. The mountain is steep enough to keep out all but the most dedicated.

Sun-up here looks like the dawn of time. That first summer I explored this mountain, my girlfriend and I hiked to an open ridge and spread our sleeping bags under August meteor showers. In the morning, we picked huckleberries for our breakfast pancakes. A few years later we got married.

The mountain has provided us since with meat every winter and enough antlers to clutter my office and garage: a 27-inch mule deer buck lured to a cow elk call; a 20-inch white-tail that walked past a trailhead where I stood waiting for more daylight to begin hiking; my two biggest bull elk, as

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well as others more suited for the freezer. Not to mention grouse, trout, and more huckleberries.

Moreover, this mountain feeds my soul. Some hunters cast a wide net, wearing out pickup tires and applying for far-flung permits. I keep returning to this mountain 60 miles from my front door. By learning what makes an elk herd tick, you begin to learn what makes a mountain tick. And what makes you tick.

Fifteen years is a sizable chunk of a person's life. I started hunting this mountain as a bachelor in my late 20s and now am in my early 40s. My pack full of responsibilities has grown heavier as the mountain has grown steeper. Boys I hunted with here years ago are now men with children of their own, and other men I've shared this mountain with are now gone forever.

I feel I am finally learning this mountain's secrets—like my investments are only now paying dividends. I have a fair sense of where game animals water and feed, how they run under pressure, and where they retreat until that pressure passes. I know the mountain is vast enough to hide the mature bulls and big enough that I can still get lost in its cliffs, crannies, and blizzards. Some days I feel like the mountain might kill me, and on others it has made me feel my most alive.

Every year the mountain asks me: Are you tough enough to hunt here? Every year I answer: So far.

The Great Burn of 1910 scoured the mountain. Giant snags stand like the masts of sailing ships over a sea of second-growth lodgepole pine and western larch. The slopes are scabbed with brush fields and bunchgrass pastures, opened up by that historic fire and renewed by smaller ones since.

Some of my best hunts here I never fired a shot. One day with perfect tracking snow, I followed the fresh trails of seven big game species: elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, black bear, mountain lion, and wolf. And above me I could see the crags where bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and grizzlies live. The only human tracks I saw that day were from my hunting partner. It's a very healthy place—in large part because people must arrive on their own power, and the wildlife is spared the disturbance that comes with motor traffic.

The mountain is mapped with names of my own making: Crookedhorn Saddle, where a friend shot a bull with an ingrown antler; the North Fortress and the East Fortress, dark timber where elk hide when pressure heats up; the Savannah, a gentle slope of bunchgrass and giant Douglas fir where elk loaf on sunny winter afternoons.

Jeremiah and I have our own stories. He shot his first cow elk here exactly one year ago, and his older brother, Colin, took his first whitetail buck on this mountain a few years before that. I was eager for another day for the memory books.

As Jeremiah and I walked through the inky dark forest, we were startled to see ten sets of eyes reflecting the glow of my headlamp light. My first thought was that we'd stumbled into

the local wolf pack. Then what turned out to be several white-tail does and fawns snorted and were gone.

We climbed through the morning. Mid-slope, we surprised something big nearby in dark timber. It made a crash so loud we both jumped in our boots. Then we caught a glimpse of the noisy beasts: two moose.

Jeremiah and I found the top third of the mountain under an inch of fresh snow. Good for tracking and stalking, but wet and likely to melt soon.

We ate lunch under the lookout and reconnoitered with Jeremiah's brother and dad. They bore long faces and sad tales. They had found elk at dawn just as planned, a bugling bull and a dozen cows. Colin fired two shots but missed clean.

I suspected the herd might go to a saddle at the foot of the Savannah, a notch that leads to the North Fortress. Jeremiah and I set off to see if we could find them.

Sure enough, tracks told us the elk had passed through the saddle at a walk. They would go into the North Fortress and bed down for the day.

Jeremiah and I followed, slow and quiet in the snow. He led the way, holding his grandfather's .300 Savage 99 at quarter arms.

We followed the trail into the afternoon. It was tough going to start with and got worse. From what I could tell, the elk could have been 100 yards deeper in the timber or all the way to Canada. After an hour in the deadfall jungle, we reached our personal point of diminishing returns. The odds of sneaking up on anything were slim. It was hard enough just to stand upright.

We returned to the saddle and crossed the pack trail that led back to the truck.

"We have a choice," I told Jeremiah. "We can take this trail, which is pretty easy, or we can bushwhack down the face of the mountain to Telegraph Ridge, which is pretty hard. It's steep and dense. It's going to be slick with this wet snow."

"Where do we stand to find more elk?" Jeremiah asked.

"Down the face."

"Then let's go down the face."

Good lad, I thought.

We delved back into the timber. Bull sign was thick, with one rubbed tree after another. But the trees could have been shredded a month ago.

After another quarter mile, we made game, this time a herd of young mule deer bucks. They were legal, but we were a long way from the truck, and it was only opening day. We'd have other chances at deer.

"They're bucks, but not worth shooting way back here," I whispered to Jeremiah. "Why don't you sneak up on one and put your crosshairs on it. Count coup, but don't shoot. Leave your safety on."

We stalked on. I showed him how to lean the rifle against a tree trunk for support. He took aim, exhaled, and whispered "bang."

By moving slowly, we crept past one deer after another with-

out spooking them.

"That's a pretty good one," Jeremiah said of the fourth buck, hoping I would give him the okay.

"Sorry," I said. "We're hunting elk."

We kept going. A few more yards and I saw another bull rub. I pointed it out.

"Look," Jeremiah hissed. "There's another buck standing behind the rub."

Jeremiah crept toward the buck and squinted through his scope. For some reason, I glanced over my off shoulder and, to my shock, saw an elk standing broadside, about 30 yards downslope. Bull!

I would like to say that I gallantly offered the shot to Jeremiah. But there was no time. In an instant I found the bull's shoulder in the crosshairs of the scope of my .308 and pulled the trigger.

Jeremiah was stunned at the gunshot. He rushed over to me. "What was that?"

As if to answer, we heard the crash of a large animal hitting the ground.

"I just shot a bull elk," I said. Our elk hunt had gone from zero to a bull down in all of five seconds. Hunting dark timber is like that.

We knelt down and I let my case of the shakes run its course. Then Jeremiah stood at the spot where I'd taken my shot as I eased my way downhill to where the bull had stood. There was no tracking necessary. The five-point was crammed under a downed log. He fell so hard he broke a brow tine.

"Come on down," I said. "We've got a lot of work to do."

As I knelt down by the bull, before the drudgery of butchering and packing began, I briefly savored the moment. We would have prime meat for the winter and another adventure story to share for years to come. I gave silent thanks for my luck, my friends, and most of all, this mountain. 🐻



The author atop Barren Peak, Kootenai National Forest

COURTESY OF BEN LONG