

DAWN BULL By carrying their elk or deer camp with them, hunters can bed down at dusk where they last saw a bull or buck. That puts them in a prime spot to resume hunting at sunrise.

The Portable Elk Camp

How one hunter improved his backcountry hunting success by employing military reconnaissance tactics. **By Dave Stalling**

RON BOGGS

One October evening after chasing elk deep into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, I realized that the traditional elk camp had a major drawback. Several bulls, all bugling up a storm, had enticed and befuddled me the entire day. When legal shooting hours were over, I had to hike 10 steep, rugged miles on a rainy, moonless night back to the stove, food, and little dome tent that comprised my elk camp. A Stellar's jay could have winged the trip in minutes, but it took me five hours of slipping, falling, and cursing. I went to sleep late and woke late, then trekked all the way back to where I'd come from the evening before, hoping to catch another glimpse of those elk. I was spending enormous amounts of time and energy traveling to and from my camp each day that could be spent hunting. Then it occurred to me: Why not hunt as if I were on a reconnaissance patrol?

At the time I was fresh out of the Marines, where for several years I'd served in a Force Recon Company. Our job was to venture on lengthy four-man missions to gather information. "Travel Light, Freeze at Night," was our unofficial motto. When snooping around in places you're not welcome, you can't risk detection. You don't make noise, build fires, or cook food. You pack as little as possible, move carefully, and stay concealed. We would travel for days, even weeks, carrying only a rifle and a butt pack with ammo, a canteen, and a small supply of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). A rubber poncho with a thin, nylon liner served as bedding. When we rested, at least one person kept watch while the others huddled into a human ball covered with the liners and ponchos. It worked for military missions; why not elk hunting?

I set out on my next hunting trip wearing only a fanny pack containing a poncho, liner, and a few energy bars. I was determined to go wherever the elk took me and sleep wherever I ended up when darkness fell. With snow blowing in from the northwest, I spent the night on a treeless, windy ridge, where I learned a simple, harsh lesson: A solitary poncho and liner is not as warm as four and does little good without other warm bodies producing heat. I passed the night doing pushups, stomping my feet, and walking up and down the ridge to keep warm, all the while praying for the sun to rise. It wasn't fun, but I survived. And when I heard elk bugling early the next morning, I was into them by first light.

I liked the idea of carrying my camp on my back, with the freedom to follow elk anywhere and sleep anyplace. It was the "freeze at night" part that proved troublesome. Thus began my quest to develop the perfect Spartan, mobile elk camp.

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I ended up buying a narrow, fleece, Kevlar-frame backpack into which I pack a Gortex-shell down sleeping bag, rated to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit. The bag stuffs down smaller than a football and weighs just 3 pounds. I still carry the poncho—to keep me dry while hiking in rain, shelter me if needed, and, when I'm fortunate enough to bone out an elk, keep dirt off the meat. With the addition of a hunting knife, map, and compass, along with several energy bars, some jerky, a survival kit, and a fleece jacket, I've kept the pack to under 10 pounds. (For water I drink from springs.) The pack doesn't slow me down and allows me to draw and shoot a bow with no discomfort.

With my lightweight, portable elk camp I've been able to spend nights in remote places where I've had unforgettable experiences. One night I awoke to what sounded like a pack string of horses clambering up a rocky trail. I watched in the dark as a herd of elk passed only a few yards from where I lay, oblivious to my presence. Another time I woke to see a black bear, perhaps 30 yards away, looking at me curiously. Early one morning I found mountain lion tracks in fresh snow less than 50 feet from my bag. Another time I slept in a grassy avalanche chute, waking up several times to the symphony of bulls and seeing their dark silhouettes under the full moon.

I have been fortunate to take 22 elk using my Spartan camp method. When I kill one and work late into the evening boning it out, I can spend the night nearby (though a safe distance away in case of bears). Then I'm ready first thing in the morning to finish butchering, hang the meat under a spruce or alpine fir (to keep it cool, out of the sun, and away from scavengers), and take my first load out.

My portable elk camp isn't perfect. I'm often hungry and sometimes lonely. Occasionally bad weather has made me wish I carried more gear. There's a lot to be said for the camaraderie of other hunters and the warmth of a wood-heated wall tent.

But most nights I've been comfortable enough to get some decent rest. Those times when the temperature plummets or heavy snow rolls in, I've been able to retreat to the trailhead and my car. A few times when hunting far into the backcountry, I've set up an "emergency" tent with supplies in a central location I can reach if the weather turns especially nasty.

As for loneliness, it's worth being able to hunt where I want, when I want. I can roam the landscape without the nagging feeling that I have to be back at camp by a certain time.

With elk camp on my back, I feel as wild, free, and as close to a natural predator as a person can possibly feel. I'll take that experience over a cozy night's sleep any day. 🐾



DAVE STALLING

READY FOR FIRST LIGHT The author settles in for sleep not far from where he watched an elk herd feeding at dusk.