



# Just One Bugle

We listen to screams all right, but they're not from elk.

By Amy Engbretson

It's September, when the sweet corn's ripe and the tomatoes are ready to can and the kids wear shoes to play outside. We've gone swimming in the river for the last time.

Somewhere, the aspens are yellow and the bulls are screaming. Somewhere. Not here on our five acres. And we're not elk hunting this September. In November Josh will hunt cows, with a muzzleloader, but that's it.

If we could hear just one bugle. One bugle to remind us the elk are still out there. One bugle to bring us what the second week in September used to mean: horses and guns and trails and late nights and early mornings and fires and clear rivers and wilderness and elk.

One bugle to remember.

We've got a two-year-old and a one-year-old and debts and a new business in a new state. Diapers and car seats. A minivan. We listen to screams all right, but they're not from elk. And they don't stop when September's over. Josh goes hunting a few days here and there. He didn't get an elk last year. (New area, brand-new baby: not a good combination.) We now live hours from our old hunting camp in Montana's Scapegoat Wilderness. And while our children are the lights of our lives and we'll love them forever, come September we're thinking about the bulls.

Like Josh was, tonight. A neighbor told us about a place with bulls, a non-archery unit

up in the mountains. First we said we'd go, then we decided not to. But Josh's brothers, Dan and Caleb, were going, so that decided us: We'd go and take the babies, Asher and Claire. We drove, and the babies cried because it was their bedtime and I got carsick because I was trying to read and I wondered if it was worth it. We got there and got out, and we stood and saw nothing but mountains and dark. Caleb bugled. I was still extracting Claire from her car seat and she was crying so I almost missed it.

A bugle. Josh and the boys didn't hear it, so I ran and told them and they wouldn't believe me. It was probably just an Angus cow, they said. There's always cows up here grazing on leased national forest land. Caleb

bugled again, and this time no one said anything about an Angus or any other kind of cow. This was a bull elk in the rut, and he was coming our way.

We walked down the trail and crouched there, the wind in our faces, the stars shining down, and listened as Caleb bugled him in. Asher cried a little, frightened at the dark and the scary sounds and our excited whispering. It's an elk bugling, Josh kept telling him, and he fell silent, not a word or a sound for 45 minutes. (This is a two-year-old who normally can't stop talking—about anything and everything, at any time of day.) After calling back and

forth, back and forth—the sound an invisible string pulling the bull closer and closer—he was just 20 yards away, thrashing and bugling and spoiling for a fight. He was right there, and it seemed impossible that we couldn't see movement, an antler, a swaying in the trees. But it was too dark. We heard him licking his lips and whipping the brush with his antlers, stomping over logs, and the sound of antler on wood. He was 20 yards away in the trees, but he wasn't coming out. Asher started whispering happily about the elk, the night, the bugles. Once he forgot to whisper, and Caleb quickly bugled to cover up the sound. But

the bull either didn't hear or didn't care.

I stood there with my daughter, next to my husband and son, and I thought of a sunny grassy hill where we slept once while hunting, of the creek that ran through our elk camp. I thought of hiking all those miles, of packing up camp, of the yellow aspens and the burned hillsides, of the smell of dry grass and the smell of soup made over a fire and the smell of an elk. I thought of sitting under a tree in the rain, watching for rainbows and elk, and the feeling of getting away, of solitude and silence under the great sky and the stars and a silver moon. Of the mule strings and moose in the creek and following the trail home beside the river. Of the bears we saw and the things we talked about and the elk we shot. (I use "we" loosely. I have never shot an elk and probably never will, but I love hunting with my husband, I love elk, and I love elk country.)

I looked at Claire, my small daughter, my friend. It's a bull elk, Claire, I whispered. He's bugling; can you hear him? She looked at me with wide, surprised eyes and didn't make a sound. She tried to peer into the darkness and, seeing nothing, fell asleep, with Caleb bugling right behind her and the bull screaming in front. We waited and then there was another bull, a deeper, chuckling bugle. He came in and, suspicious, circled and smelled us and was off.

We got cold and cramped and it was time to leave. Caleb bugled one more time, and the bull, moving off, bugled back. One more time.

It was back to the diapers. There's a time for everything, and in this time there's not a lot of room for elk hunting in our lives, Josh's and mine. Someday, one that will come sooner than I'll be expecting, these babies will be teens holding rifles and shooting their first elk. I want to be there, silently cheering. I want to listen to their dad teaching them about hunting elk, about respecting life, about blood and ethics. I want to watch them stagger under the weight of meat, watch them learn how to keep going when they want to quit, watch them stand facing the wind, listening for the faraway bugle of an elk.

It's a blue September day and I'm folding laundry and canning tomatoes.

Somewhere, the bulls are screaming. 🐃

Amy Engbretson is a writer in Grangeville, Idaho. This essay originally appeared in Bugle.