



Every hunting season for nearly four decades, this West Yellowstone hunter has taken a bull elk on public land.

How does he do it?

By Craig Mathews

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At 6 a.m., my friend Tim Bozorth and I leave our trucks to begin hunting. It's a relatively warm morning for early November, already 32 degrees F. when we split up and begin ascending the mountain. Tim heads south while I climb east, both of us working up into the Taylor-Hilgard Unit of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area in the Madison Range, about 30 miles north of West Yellowstone. I've scouted this route four times this season and expect to see elk this morning, as has been the case on two previous visits.

I hike straight uphill, climbing quickly into the black timber, where elk go at daylight. I have taken bulls here before, on the north side of the mountain, after they'd grazed on a south-facing slope during the night.

At 8 a.m. I move slowly into the area where, each morning after feeding, the elk spend the day loafing in the security of thick forest. As I move upwind, the soft breeze fills my nostrils with the smell of elk. I know they are close. I freeze, look into the dense timber, then inch my way forward. I stop every few yards to scan, looking for a moving antler, a patch of brown hide, or a white butt. Fifty yards uphill I pause and peer into the forest. I see an antler move, and I freeze again. There, 75 yards away, is a bedded bull.

A minute later I take my 38th bull in as many hunting seasons, all on public land. I sit next to the downed 6x6 bull for a few moments, quietly thanking the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, the mountain I hunted, and the elk itself. I think back over the many bulls I've been lucky enough to harvest during Montana's rifle season and what I learned about elk, elk hunting, and myself.

WHERE TO GO

I am one of the luckiest guys in the world because I live and work in elk country.

My wife, Jackie, and I moved to Montana in 1979. I was police chief in West Yellowstone for a few years before starting a fly-fishing business. I've hunted on public land in southern Madison and Gallatin Counties every fall since we moved here.

It's no secret that all of the hunting districts in this part of southwestern Montana harbor elk. The trick is to learn where in those areas to find bulls during the five-week season.

What I do is look on topo maps for level, grassy areas high in the mountains next to steep areas. These "parks" are where elk feed at dawn and dusk. Then I look for nearby north-facing "black timber"—the thick, cool, secure forest where they hang out for the rest of the day. After I locate these areas, I hunt them to confirm that elk are indeed there. Then I keep going back.

I've learned never to hopscotch from one drainage to another from day to day. When you don't see elk, it's tempting to move to a completely new area. Don't. Elk might be in one canyon one day and a different canyon the next, but they will soon return. If I hunt an area that has forage and security, I am confident I will run into elk within a few days.

I know many hunters who drive around or sit in their trucks glassing the flats along the roads and highways for "ranch elk." These cows and bulls have been pushed down off the mountains by human hunters or predators onto mostly private land. If you can obtain permission, and enjoy hunting this way, it's certainly an option. But it's not my preference. The key to my success has always been getting up into the mountains.

WHEN TO HUNT

I consider elk hunting a privilege, so I go whenever I get the chance. Every day spent afield in elk country, especially during hunting season, is a day I learn about elk behavior and movement. One season I killed a bull on opening day and then spent the next 34 days in the woods, either hunting deer or accompanying a buddy who was hunting elk.

Though I don't bowhunt, I chase ruffed and dusky (blue) grouse in the mountains with my bird dogs in September and October. Bull elk often bugle at the sound of the locator bells on my dogs' collars, providing me with information I might use a few weeks later when the rifle season opens.

Many elk hunting friends spend the



UNBROKEN STREAK The author with four of his 38 bulls. Clockwise from above: 2008, 2013, 2016, and 2015. Note the surrounding heavy timber, where he has his best success sneaking up on bedded elk during midday.



season waiting for snow to bring elk down to the valley floor. That approach can work, but it requires snow—something that's been in increasingly short supply lately due to climate change. Many hunters spent the entire 2016 elk season waiting for snow that never came. While they were waiting, I was out hunting. As is often the case, I shot a bull last year with no snow on the ground.

As for time of day, I've taken most of my elk at midday, sneaking slowly through known bedding and security areas. I've taken more than half my bulls between noon and 3 p.m. Having learned over the years where bulls loaf and hide, I can slowly move through the timber with a good chance of spotting an elk before it sees me.

I've shot 14 bulls at first light, the next most successful time for me. Sometimes elk are still feeding during that first hour of legal shooting. But usually by then they've finished and are safe within their daytime security areas of black timber, where they loaf and chew their cud.

Dawn, midday, dusk—hunters take bulls every hour of the day. But only if they are out

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hunting. If there's one certainty about elk hunting, it's that you never kill a bull indoors. I remember a particularly nasty morning in 1996 when I woke to hunt at 4 a.m. It was 12 degrees F. and blowing snow. I wanted to stay in bed, especially because I had an appointment at 10 a.m., giving me only a few hours to hunt. I went anyway and ended up shooting a near-perfect 6-pointer. I even made it to my meeting on time and returned later that day to haul the meat off the mountain.

Sleep? There's plenty of time for that during the other 47 weeks of the year.

HOW TO HUNT

It's critical when hunting to have a plan. Just wandering around aimlessly, hoping you might stumble upon an elk, is not a strategy. Each morning you need to decide where you're going and why. That gets easier the more you hunt and learn terrain and elk behavior, but even beginners should have some sort of basic plan. As noted earlier, I recommend hiking up to open parks before first light and looking for elk feeding along the edges. Then, once the sun breaks over the hill, hunt the thick stuff where you have a chance to ambush a bull while it's bedded down.

My elk season actually begins weeks before the season opener. By that time, I've

spent several days afield in elk country, narrowing my focus to the two or three hunting spots where I expect to see elk. On opening day I feel confident that I will see elk and bag a bull. No matter what happens, I keep that flame of confidence alive all season. It might take a few trips up the mountain, I say to myself, but I'll get my bull by sticking with whatever strategy I've worked out for that season.

Each night, before I set my alarm to get up at 4 or 5 a.m., I check weather conditions to determine which of the two or three routes I'll take to reach the hunting spot I think will offer my best chances.

Usually I try to reach feeding areas a half hour before legal shooting time (an hour before sunrise). Often I hike the same route before the season to clear deadfall and debris so I can quietly and quickly get to the park on schedule. A few hundred yards before I reach the spot where I expect elk to be feeding, I stop. I catch my breath, and, if it's cold, put on an additional layer of clothing. Most important, I concentrate on my hunt. I take a few deep breaths and remind myself to be patient, slow my pace, and think like an elk. If I were an elk, what would I be doing right now and where would I be?

I'd never been a patient person until I began elk hunting. And even during those

first few years, I took a hasty run-and-gun approach. I still was able to kill bulls, but it was often by happenstance. Now patience is the key to my strategy.

One day in late November 1985, I ran into an old elk hunter in the forest. He stopped me and asked if I had seen any elk that day. From his rocky perch overlooking the area I hunted, he had watched my early morning route. Back then, I'd walk through security areas and frequently bump bedded elk, sending them running past his perch. I commented to the old hunter that I had "kicked up several in the black timber." He replied, "You have to slow down to a snail's pace, become patient, and by that you will make your own elk luck." I took his advice, and two days later I shot a nice bull. We became good friends after that. A few years back, I scattered his ashes at his perch.

Elk country is big country, and it's tempting to try to cover as much as possible each day. You never know what's over that next ridge, right? But you have to resist. Remember: a snail's pace. Once you get to a place you know has elk, slow down and walk a few paces, then stop for a few minutes, then walk a few more paces, and so on, watching and

within just five yards of where he lay before I took my shot. He never woke up.

Just as important as having a plan is knowing when to adjust it to changing conditions. I know hunters who develop a rigid plan for the day and stick with it no matter what. They start at point A, plan to have lunch at point B, hunt the afternoon along points C and D, then return to their truck when it gets dark. They'll stick to this route and schedule even if they find tracks, droppings, day beds, or other elk sign that would cause me to abandon my existing strategy and work up a new one based on the new information. One year, a friend actually walked away from elk sign in order to get to his traditional lunch spot by noon.

OTHER TIPS

In addition to patience and confidence, the two other traits successful elk hunters have are perseverance and the ability to concentrate. I do not quit hunting until I take a bull. Sometimes that has required many days in the field. In 1981 I hunted 18 days before I even saw a bull. On that day, I took bull number 3 at the end of legal shooting time in a raging snowstorm. Since then, the longest it's taken me is 11 days on the mountain. During the past four seasons, on average I've bagged bulls during my first five days of hunting.

Use all your senses to notice everything around you. I located bulls numbers 9, 16, 25, and 31 by hearing pine (red) squirrels and gray jays barking at the bedded elk. I was able to sneak in on bulls numbers 4, 11, 22, and 38 when the wind brought their scent to me, before I saw them.

Of course, I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that sometimes luck plays a role in my success. Two years ago, I thought I saw the side of an elk that turned out to be a tree stump. Then, before I could move, I saw another stump that turned out to be a 5-point bull just 75 yards from where I stood. Finding a bull there wasn't part of my plan. But elk hunting is hard enough as it is. The few times when fortune smiles, I'd be a fool not to smile back. 🐻

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PHOTOS COURTESY CRAIG MATHEWS

listening all the time. Whitetail hunters call it "still hunting," and it works great for elk in thick timber.

By moving slowly, I usually see elk before they see me, allowing me to get remarkably close. Of the 38 bulls I've killed, not one shot has been over 85 yards. I spotted bull number 14 snoozing in a jungle of thick timber. Scooting on my butt in the snow, I crept to



5 Essential Tips

I realize that most hunters don't work and live surrounded by some of the best elk hunting areas in the United States. I know I'm lucky to have the time and opportunity to scout beforehand and hunt several days during the season. If you don't have those luxuries, here are the five most important things you can do to increase your odds of harvesting a bull:

1 Learn from experienced hunters.

Talk to veteran hunters. Read *Bugle, Elk Hunting*, and other elk hunting magazines. Study elk hunting DVDs and Vimeo and YouTube videos.

2 Figure out where elk eat and hide.

Locate feeding and security areas and the elk trails to and from these sites.

3 Learn to read elk sign.

Learn to identify elk smell, elk tracks, fresh elk scrapes on trees, and the difference between bull and cow droppings.

4 Look for elk "portions."

I never see a whole elk in deep timber. Instead, I look for a moving antler, a twitching ear, a white butt, or a patch of brown elk hair.

5 Hunt, don't sit.

Spend every minute of your hunt time in the forest, not sitting in your truck looking through binoculars.