



# WHERE

## To Hunt Elk in Montana

By Jack Ballard

Newberg says he “made every rookie mistake in the book” in six years of trial-and-error hunting before killing his first elk. He still recalls what it was like to be a novice at the game, searching for prime elk hunting spots.

Thomas Baumeister, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Conservation Education Bureau chief, has killed two dozen elk across western Montana. He says hunters hoping to find a place to hunt and harvest an elk have to do their homework. “I can’t overemphasize the role of research,” Baumeister says.

But research on what part of Montana? Our state contains millions of acres of elk

**An insider’s guide for new hunters and nonresidents to locating the best spots this season**

**Most elk hunters** know exactly where they’ll hunt this fall. Good for them. There’s nothing better than having a place where you know you’ll find elk.

But a growing number of hunters, resident and nonresident, don’t know where to go. You might be among them.

Maybe your aging knees and heart require easier terrain than in the past. It could be you’ve just started hunting elk and don’t have friends and relatives to guide you to a good spot. Perhaps elk no longer use the timber you’ve hunted for years and instead are roaming irrigated private land off-limits to public hunting. Or maybe you’re a nonresident hunter coming here for the first time.

For those trying to figure out where to start hunting elk this fall, I can’t tell you *exactly* where to hunt. But as someone who

has hunted elk across western Montana and interviewed dozens of hunters and wildlife biologists, I can provide a method for deciding which of the state’s 148 elk management units to focus your attention on—and then how to decide where in those units to hunt.

For additional help, I consulted two elk hunting experts. Randy Newberg, a Bozeman resident and host of two popular TV shows, *Fresh Tracks* and *On Your Own Adventures*, moved to Montana from Minnesota in 1991. Though he was a competent deer hunter,

habitat on thousands of square miles of public land. How does anyone even begin choosing from all that real estate to locate a hunting spot?

Two words: national forests.

### STAY CLOSE TO HOME

Most elk on public land live in national forests. West of a line from Billings to Glacier National Park, every national forest in Montana holds elk. So which do you choose?

Consider how much time you have to hunt. I believe that anyone hoping for a reasonable chance of killing an elk needs at least five full days of hunting (excluding travel). If you live in Montana, focus on a national forest as close to home as possible. That way you can spend more time in the woods and less on the road.

If you’re driving here from another state, keep in mind the scale of Big Sky Country. For instance, elk hunting destinations in southwestern Montana are a full day’s drive from those in the northwest. Time spent behind the wheel to reach a mountain range on the far side of the state is better spent hunting. If you’re driving here from the West

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**PEACE AND QUIET** After picking a national forest as close to home as possible—to reduce driving time—examine the map for routes closed to motorized vehicles. That’s where the elk are.

Coast, consider hunting closer to the Idaho border. If you’re coming from the Midwest, consider national forests in Montana east of the Continental Divide.

Once you’ve picked a forest, take stock of your expectations. It might seem, based on magazine covers, that everyone in Montana kills a big bull. Not true. Most harvested elk are calves and cows, and most hunters are happy to take any elk, including those without antlers. “A cow starts to look really good on day three of the hunt,” Baumeister says.

Still, some hunters will be satisfied with nothing less than a 6x6 bull. They should know that each year only one in five elk hunters kills any elk—calf, cow, or bull—and only one in 25 bags a 6x6 or bigger bull. Because those figures include experienced hunters who take an elk nearly every year, the success rate of newbies is even lower.

After setting your expectations for public land hunting, it’s time to choose areas within the national forest. Baumeister offers a simple starting place: FWP elk hunting districts that allow either-sex (antlerless and antlered elk) hunting. “That’s a good indica-

tion of plenty of elk and decent access,” he says. “Districts with multiple restrictions usually mean difficulties in terms of access or other issues.” Find either-sex districts in

the most recent issue of the FWP elk hunting regulations.

Newberg advises hunters to also identify potential hunting areas by analyzing harvest data from the Hunt Planner on the FWP website ([fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov)). Click the “Hunting” tab and then click on “Hunt Planner” under the “Plan Your Hunt” heading. After launching “Hunt Planner Map,” click “Harvest Opportunities 2017 Season,” then “Elk General Season,” then “Elk General License.”

“Look for hunting districts with high

success rates, ideally ones next to each other,” Newberg says. Figure success rates by dividing the total harvest by the number of hunters and multiply by 100. For example, a total harvest of 156 elk divided by 896 hunters multiplied by 100 equals a 17.4 percent success rate. Hunters focused only on bulls can figure out antlered elk harvest success rates the same way.

Harvest rates vary considerably from year to year depending primarily on weather (deep snow pushes elk to lower elevations, where they are more accessible to more hunters). Analyzing the three or four most recent years of data provides the most accurate picture.

What are “good” harvest numbers? I’d say any district with a 20 percent or higher overall hunter-success rate has good potential for either-sex hunting. Units with a 10 percent or higher success rate on antlered elk are worthy of a bull hunter’s effort.

Once you’ve selected a few hunting districts, start looking at detailed maps to determine access. “Places with multiple access points are an advantage for both hunting and game retrieval,” Baumeister says. Those areas may be crowded, though. Lots of access often means lots of hunters.

Those planning to stay in a motel need to figure out how long it will take to reach the hunting grounds. Estimate 30 miles per hour on most county roads and 5 miles per

**Set your expectations: Only one in five elk hunters kills any elk—calf, cow, or bull—and only one in 25 kills a 6x6 or bigger bull.**

hour on U.S. Forest Service roads. Hunters camping in a topper or travel trailer will want to park next to a county road. Tent-based hunters with a suitable back-road rig have the flexibility to camp close to a trailhead or other access point.

**ASSESS YOUR TRAVEL ASSETS**

Once you’ve identified potential hunting spots in a few hunting districts, assess your physical fitness and ability to travel back roads.

There’s no getting around the fact that you



**GET REAL** Hunters new to the game need to set reasonable expectations. Killing a bull your first season is highly unlikely. If you have a chance at a cow, take it.

LEFT TO RIGHT: DONALD M. JONES; JOHN CARLSON

“**K**yle” is a 34-year-old hunter from Pasco, in southern Washington. He and a buddy, “Shawn,” have purchased Montana nonresident elk combination licenses. Both have hunted deer since they were teenagers, and both see themselves as reasonably fit (though not as fit as they were 10 years ago). Shawn has a midsize 4x4 pickup with a pop-up camper and is comfortable driving rough mountain roads. The camper will provide sleeping quarters for the Montana hunt and allow them to easily move camp if necessary.

They both want to kill a bull elk, but have chosen a hunting area that provides a back-up plan for a cow. Because the pickup will also be transportation to and from Washington, they agree on a roughly 500-mile maximum distance (about eight hours) from home. Each can take a week off from work. They plan to make a marathon overnight drive on Friday after quitting time to arrive for Montana’s opening day. They’ll hunt for bulls until Wednesday, then look for cows during the next three days.

## Two (fictitious) Washington hunters come to Montana...

Looking at elk hunting districts in western Montana’s Bitterroot Mountains via the FWP Hunt Planner, Kyle and Shawn find many areas open to bull hunting. But they are discouraged by fairly low hunter success rates, especially for nonresidents, and few opportunities to harvest a cow. They turn their attention farther south, where they notice that HD329 is open to antlerless harvest during the regular season. Next door, HD332 offers “brow-tined bulls only” with a general license (no permit required)

have to hike, often for hours, up hilly and often steep terrain if you hope to kill an elk. “You don’t need to be a gym rat,” Newberg says. “But you need to be fit. Just adapting to exercise at high elevation can be tough.”

Hiking in snow and carrying a pack are normal parts of elk hunting. Because elk generally stay at least a mile or two from roads—and road hunters—the farther you can get from traffic, the more likely it is that you’ll see animals. That means hiking at least four miles per day carrying a rifle and daypack. And remember, downing an elk two miles from a road can mean several trips hauling 60 to 85 pounds of meat the same distance, a task even tougher than the hiking itself.

Elevation is another consideration. Even Montanans and others accustomed to mountain hikes start sucking air above about 8,000 feet. For hunters from the Midwest and other low-lying areas, hunting at even 4,000 feet requires extra exertion. That’s yet another reason why training is essential. Some advance hiking at the elevation you plan to hunt will allow you to hunt

longer and farther.

Elk aren’t always up in the stratosphere. Herds found at 10,000 feet in September and October may be down to 5,000 feet or lower in November. That’s a mixed blessing.

## By returning to the same area year after year, you gain invaluable knowledge of the landscape and elk behavior that ups your odds of success.

Severe winter weather is what pushes elk down from the high country, so you’ll have to hike through snow even if you don’t need to trudge as far uphill.

Slope, or steepness, also influences hunter mobility. For most hunters, a 10-degree slope (gaining 900 feet in elevation per mile) feels like a significant climb. Going up or down a 20-degree slope (an 1,800-foot elevation gain per mile) for more than a

mile can be brutal even for fit hunters. Estimate slope by analyzing contour lines on a topographical map against the scale of miles. Some mapping software calculates elevation gain against mileage for a user-

and shows decent hunter-success rates. Research with various online mapping resources shows the distance from Pasco to the hamlet of Jackson, Montana (close to both hunt areas), at 470 miles. So far, so good. They home in on the southern Pioneer Mountains west of Wise River Road (HD332), a major artery into the mountains. The terrain doesn’t look too steep, elevations are reasonable, and lots of hunting country sits between 7,000 and 8,000 feet. They note numerous trails and seasonally closed roads in the area, along with a few campgrounds. Bingo. The southern end of the Pioneers it is.

They devise a scouting trip over Labor Day weekend to check out the area and take a quick look at the country south of Jackson (HD329), where they can also hunt for cows. A reasonable plan in place, the duo agree to monitor events that might change their plans (such as forest fires) and scout the area more thoroughly before Labor Day via Google maps.

And that’s how you plan your first Montana elk hunting trip. ■

chosen route. I recommend that moderately fit hunters stick to elk habitat at 8,000 feet or lower and with an average slope of less than 10 degrees. Trying to go higher or steeper means you’ll spend most of your day huffing and puffing instead of hunting.

In Montana elk country, what you drive matters. Sure, ultimately it’s your two legs that provide the most essential transporta-

tion, but you still need a rig that can take you to the trailhead. Four-wheel drive is essential. On most unpaved county roads you can get by with fairly low clearance, but venturing onto national forest roads often requires a high-clearance backcountry rig.

For example, the “road” to my family’s elk camp in the Snowcrest Mountains is just a few miles long. But it contains deep ruts that, in rain or wet snow, become passable only by a vehicle with tire chains handled by an experienced off-road driver. In most cases, a rental sedan or weekday commuter car won’t take you far enough up mountain roads to get within reasonable hiking distance of where elk live.

To figure out terrain characteristics in the hunting district(s) you plan to hunt, return to the FWP Hunt Planner. (The following instructions may seem complicated on paper, but they make sense once you get into the program.) After launching the “Hunt Planner Map,” use “Map Tools” to examine a topographical map to assess terrain near roads in terms of slope and available trails. Use various “Base-maps” to look at hunting district boundaries (“Ownership



**FOUND IT** Bowhunters field-dress a bull in September. Finding a place to bag an elk is easy. Pick a nearby national forest, look for hunting districts with either-sex hunting and good success rates, identify roads closed to vehicles, then get out there and start hunting.

Hybrid—MT”) and terrain features (“USA Topo” or “Ownership Topo—MT”). The “Draw Tool” under “Map Tools” allows free-hand drawing on the topo maps and calculates distance. Distance and elevation gain (calculated from contour lines) give a quick estimate of slope. Along with topography, the “USA Topo” basemap identifies trails.

Another tip, Newberg says, is to look at a Forest Service map of the area you plan to hunt and draw a corridor two miles on either side of any road that allows motorized vehicles. “You want to hunt outside of those corridors, because elk don’t want to be anywhere near motorized vehicles or even the sound of four-wheelers,” he says.

### WARM OR CLOSE?

An essential consideration for any elk hunt is where to sleep. During my 35-plus years hunting elk, I’ve stayed in motels, RVs, tents (wall and backpack), and even the cargo area of an SUV. All have their pros and cons. If your goal is to maximize hunting time, I’d advise camping, and doing it as close as possible to where you plan to start hunting each morning.

Yes, it’s nice to sleep in a warm bed and eat in a café, but think twice about hunting

from a motel. Let’s say the closest one to your hunting area is 20 miles away via a county road and another two miles on a Forest Service route. That’s an hour of driving each way, which means having to wake up an hour earlier than if you camped and getting back an hour later. Or it means spending two extra hours driving when you could be hunting.

As one final piece of advice, Newberg highly recommends first-time elk hunters arrive “at least two days before hunting to acclimatize and adjust plans if necessary.” He also reminds all hunters of a proven aspect of elk hunting: By returning to the same area year after year, you gain invaluable knowledge of the landscape and elk behavior that ups your odds of success.

In many states, the challenge of finding a place to hunt elk comes from too little habitat or too many access restrictions. In Montana, it’s just the opposite. There’s almost too much elk country for a newcomer to take in. “We have something here with our public lands that is unique to the entire world,” Baumeister says. “The scope of public elk hunting in Montana can be daunting. But be delighted you have such a challenge.” 🐾

## 5 Steps to Finding an Elk Hunting Spot



Locate a **national forest** closest to where you live or are driving from.



Use the FWP Hunt Planner to find hunting districts in that NF with **either-sex hunting** and **high hunter-success rates**.



Assess your **physical fitness, hunting rig, and accommodation** options.



Use the Hunt Planner to **find trails** near roads and **assess terrain steepness**.



Stick with it. **Return to the same area year after year** to increase your knowledge and success.

LEFT TO RIGHT: RICK CLARK/DARKLINE TROUTWINE