

Elk Heavy

How elk-hunting
resolutions turn to sand.

Article & Photography by Terry Wieland

The outfitter

was clear, concise, and noncommittal:

Yeah, we'll be hunting on horse-back. Ride out in the morning, back after dark every night. There's a good chance of a five-by-five elk, but probably nothing bigger. Not down here.

What was I after? A good meat bull? We've got those. Should be no problem. Well, the ranch isn't that big by Montana standards. Maybe four miles by eight. Funny shape, though. Hemmed in by some private land, some state land. One end is flanked by BLM forest. The boundaries are all kind of zigzaggy. Yeah, there's a big resident herd. They move in and out, across the property.

Well, I don't want to say, exactly. And I'd rather you didn't either. We hunt a couple of ranches, and this one

hasn't been hit hard at all. Don't want all the locals crowding the fences.

Yeah, see you then.

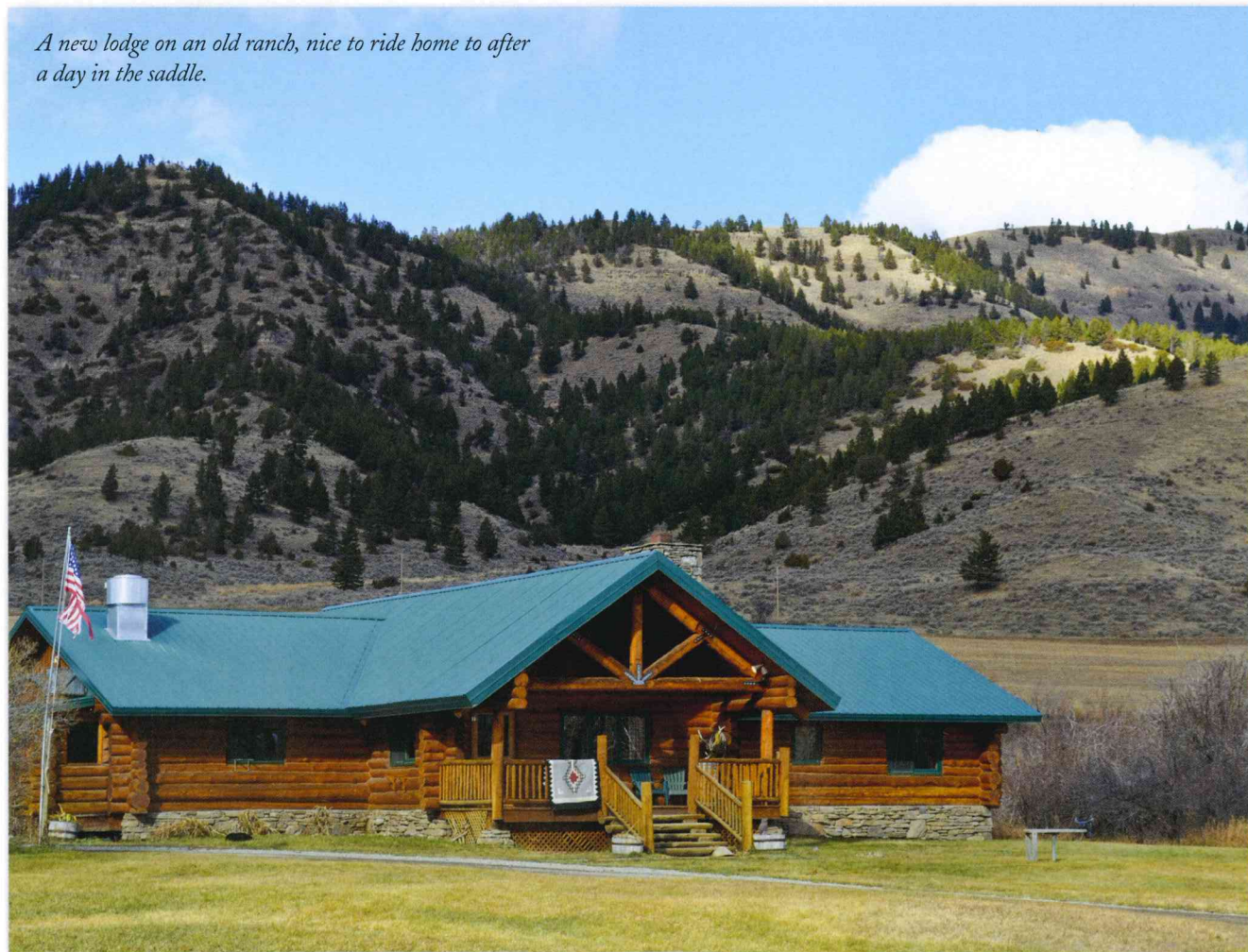
When I hunt elk, there is a certain image I can never get out of my mind. It's a painting in Jack O'Connor's *Big Game Animals of North America*. Full page, full color; a big bull, looking down a grassy mountainside with two hunters down below, tiny and insignificant. For almost 50 years, that image has taunted me, even though I know perfectly well you never see them that way. Or almost never.

When you're on a horse, riding up a strange trail as the sky turns gray, and there is absolutely nothing moving in the frost-covered landscape, you can

either fantasize about big elk or you can reflect on your horse's emerging idiosyncrasies and toy with how you might depict his equine personality in words. I chose the elk. There would be lots of time for horse analysis.

Primed by tales of a resident herd of a thousand elk, drifting hither and yon, I was unprepared for the icy emptiness that greeted us at every turn as we climbed, higher and higher, toward the peaks of the foothills. It was as if a painter had drawn and filled in his landscape, but forgotten the animals. By the time the sun was up and we tethered our horses on a promontory, the scene was almost exactly like the painting in O'Connor's book. There was the grassy hillside; there were the evergreens in clumps by the stream, far below. There were the snow-covered

A new lodge on an old ranch, nice to ride home to after a day in the saddle.



peaks in the distance. And here were we, the tiny, insignificant hunters. So where was the big bull?

Mike began to point out landmarks. There was the boundary fence. Over there was more private land. That was the state land, where the fence crosses over that hill. The BLM? All that forest, way over there. The pickup? Two hunters. They're on state land. We'll keep well clear.

We were off our horses, glassing this way and that, getting the feel of things.

"There's a couple," murmured Mike, and we followed the direction of his binocular. Crossing an open patch of grassy hillside, a couple of miles away, were two bulls, both six by sixes. One had black antlers that stood out starkly against the yellow grass, but his pal was bigger—bigger in body and bigger in headgear, with tawny antlers. Even at that distance they looked heavy. Real heavy.

"Where do you think they'll go?"

Mike shrugged. Predicting what a couple of lone bulls might or might not do, when they're two miles away and heading for timber, isn't very productive.

We mounted our horses and continued up the trail, keeping an eye on the two hunters skirting the boundary on state land, and the timber where the bulls disappeared. We were heading upward, ever upward, to a high point where we could settle in for the day and try to figure out where they all were.

Ln a proper hunting story, that distant bull and I would spend the next three days playing hide-and-seek, and I would finally catch sight of him, just at dusk on the last day. His head would be thrown back against the sunset, and the 300-yard shot—no, make that 400—would be a ballistic miracle and a triumph of moral fiber.


This is the kind of thing they should warn you about, when you first entertain the ludicrous idea of becoming a hunting writer.

One time, years ago, I was hunting in O'Connor's old stomping grounds in the Selway-Bitterroot area of Idaho,

where the mountainsides are straight up and down. It was just at sunset—that much came true—and the big bulls did indeed come out to browse in the last warm golden rays. I was meat-hunting that time, too, and there was this bull, almost a mile away but standing out like cut crystal in the sun. His antlers were heavy even at that distance. Of course, he might as well


have been on the moon. There was no chance of getting within range before darkness slammed down.

Just seeing him, though, turned my pragmatic, self-righteously mature meat-hunting resolve to so much dry sand in a glass. I wanted him, and I wanted him bad. That big one, there. I mentally set aside my last remaining wall space just for him. And there it



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Wieland with his bull, one of four six-by-six elk they took in three days. The rifle is a custom .270 Weatherby.



still sits, years later, empty and waiting, and nothing but a big Rocky Mountain elk is going to fill it, literally or figuratively. Nothing.

We perched up there in the sunshine throughout the day. It was the only place on the ranch where we could get a signal, so while we munched our way through lunch, we all pulled out our iPhones and checked e-mails.

"They won't be moving now, anyway," Mike said absently, staring at the tiny screen. "The last hour before sunset, that's when we'll see something." And we did. Two cows, at the edge of the forest below. And six bulls, way, way down there, filing into the trees. None of them spectacular, but we weren't expecting spectacular.

Little did we know that John, one of the other three guys in our party, hunting the far side of the ranch, had connected on a six by six not far from that very spot at nine that morning. Like me, he insisted he was meat hunting, and would take the first legal bull. As it turned out, the first legal bull was a six by six. They could at least have sent us an e-mail.

On the long ride back down, Charlie's idiosyncrasies asserted themselves. He didn't like having to work some more. He was hungry. The barn was too far away. He yanked at his reins, chomped at any tuft of grass, hobbled on the uphill and lurched on the downhill. When we finally reached home, he planted his big Clydesdale hoof on my foot and ground it like a cigarette butt.

"How much for that horse?"

Mike looked at me. "Why? You want to shoot him?"

"It's a thought."

The horseback pack trip into the mountains is an enduring myth of North American hunting, and no animal fits into the legend like the Rocky Mountain elk. We rode horses that time in the Idaho Bitterroots, and again the following year. But, like this trip, it was all up and down in one day. No romantic campfires among the frosty peaks,

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no canvas wall tents with the smell of coffee brewing in the dawn.

Alas for us all, such trips are all but gone, and what's left is for the wealthy. The classic Rocky Mountain pack trip in the Alberta Rockies has been replaced by drilling rigs and four-wheel drives. Today, if you can find a four-by-four elk in Alberta, you're doing well, and they long ago closed grizzly hunting.

Such are the cheerful thoughts that crowd your mind as your steed splashes through icy streams in the pitch-black morning, beginning another long ride up into the hills, plotting how he can get you off his back for good.

Then there were the odds. We'd all been told not to expect a six by six, the classic trophy elk. Yet John had dropped one early the first morning. Logically, then, the odds against us even seeing another one were so long, I'd be better off going into town and buying a cow tag. My meat-hunting resolve returned. As well, there was Tim to consider. I had first refusal on any bull, which meant my companion couldn't really hunt until I had one. Courtesy alone dictated I should grab anything with antlers and leave him free to ride horses and glass elk and make long stalks to his young heart's content on this, his first elk hunt, his first horseback adventure.

By the time we tethered our horses and alighted, I was aglow with determination to do the right thing. And later, creeping along the edge of a ridge, we spooked a young bull out of his bed and he stood, half screened by a tree 90 yards away, and me without a rifle rest in sight. I panted, weaved the rifle around offhand, then jerked the trigger and missed him clean. I had now, officially, hit rock bottom. Overwhelmed by self-loathing, my horse hating me, Tim disappointed, Mike disgusted; even my rifle was embarrassed.

And on we slunk. That we were moving right into the timber where the two bulls—the one big guy—had disappeared the day before completely slipped my mind. But not Mike's.

His hand grabbed my arm and pulled

me down as he pointed down a veiled tunnel through the trees. And there they were, ambling away. Through the glass, I could see the black antlers in front, and the big one, close behind, was so wide and heavy you couldn't see the whole rack at any one time in the undergrowth.

You can tell when an elk is really heavy even at long distance. The antlers sway in slow motion, moving the bull's head as he walks, rather than the head moving them. As O'Connor once wrote, on a real trophy game animal, trophy estimation becomes academic. One look and you know.

And then they were gone. Mike and Tim and I turned and trotted at an angle, hoping to cut them off as they came out of the timber on the other side, but when we reached the edge, they were nowhere to be seen.

"Mike," I said, "I want him. I want that one."

Meat hunting be damned. I've got wall space to fill.

The chances of seeing such a bull once are small enough; the chances of encountering him two days in a row are almost nil. He and his pal had plunged down into the thick timber that extended all the way across the northwest corner of the ranch onto the BLM land.

But those swaying antlers had done their work. Morale was restored, the botched shot forgotten. In fact, I was rather thankful. I don't need another five by five.

We returned to the horses, checked e-mails, returned calls—the usual office work you can do on a mountaintop. Then, as the shadows lengthened, we ambled down the dirt road into the trees, moving slowly and cautiously, the horses' hooves clipping and clapping in a gentle tattoo.

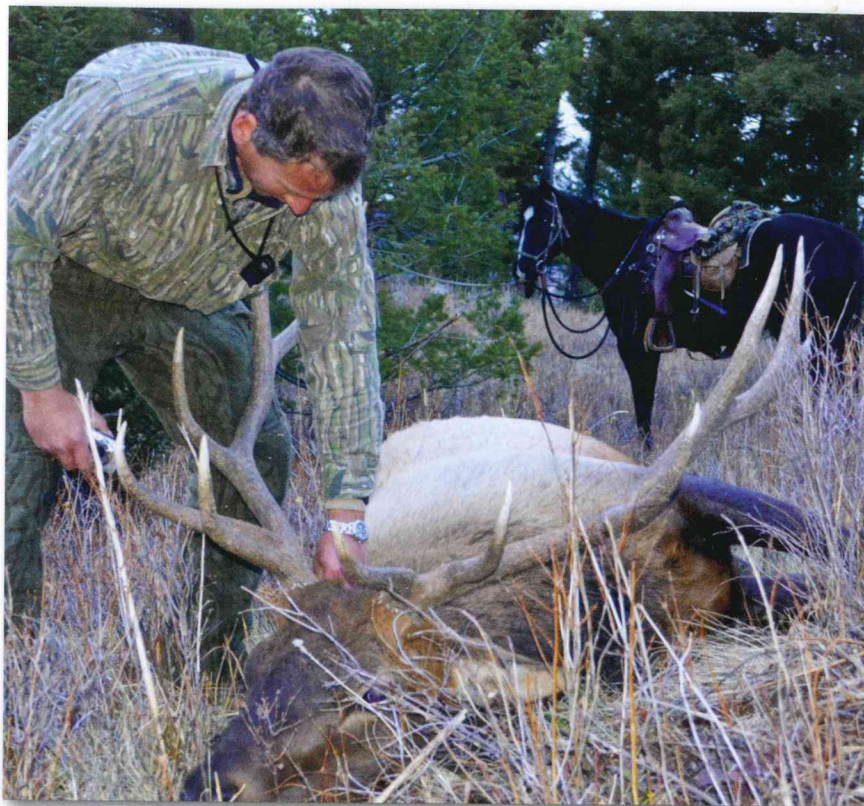
Once again, Mike picked it up before Tim and I had any idea. The horses halted as Mike listened, then motioned us down.

"I hear a couple of bulls sparring," he

whispered. "Up ahead." We looped the reins around some branches and crept forward, craning our necks to see down the road, flanked as it was by wooded hillsides. We could see where it butted up against a steep slope and made a hard right turn, and inch by inch that slope came into view.

There, near the bottom, was a six-by-six bull, all alone in possession of the battlefield. Mike looked at me and nodded. There was no rest here, either, but it was a perfect prone shot. I dropped to the ground and Mike shoved his leg under the forend of my rifle. No sharpshooter ever had a firmer rest, and the bull was only 225 yards off, maybe 250. The bullet caught him behind the foreleg, and he pirouetted, came back, caught a second bullet, and went down.

Guide Mike Myer of Adventures Outfitting heard this bull sparring, off in the distance, and that was pretty much that.



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And now, perhaps, the strangest part of this strange tale of ups and downs.

Mike went back for the horses while Tim and I began the long and lovely walk to where I knew the bull was lying. We were almost to the hillside, where the road turned right, when the upper part of the slope came alive with elk. First one, then a couple more, then a dozen. They were streaming across the upper slope, many with antlers, so many we couldn't begin to pick one out.

How they could have stayed there quietly in spite of two bellowing shots from a .270 Weatherby, we had no idea. You don't expect to walk up on a dead bull and spook a herd. And then Tim glanced down the road to the right and there, walking away, a couple of hundred yards down, was another set of those big swaying antlers with a tawny body attached, slowly disappearing over a rise like a ship going hull down on the horizon. The last we saw was the swaying, glinty ivory of the tips, plunging from sight.

Tim tore off down the road, maybe to get a shot, maybe to intercept a straggler. It was worth a try. By the time he came back in the falling darkness, Mike and I had my bull almost dressed out, covered in branches, and there were wolves howling in the distance.

Maybe half an hour later that evening, Rob, in the other party, took a big six by six about a mile away from where we were, over the hill toward the ranch house. One shot from his .30-06 at 365 yards. And the next day, Tim rode out from the ranch alone with Mike and gathered in the biggest bull of the four.

In less than 72 hours, we collected four six-by-six bull elk, and that is not something that happens every day in the real world of elk hunting.

But for me, the question remains: Was that the big big bull Tim and I saw swaying down the road? Did I

shoot the smaller one? Those are questions that will never be answered, but I can tell you this: My bull is wonderful eating, and his antlers will look pretty good up there, in that space on the wall I've been saving for all these years. ■

Since returning home with 200 pounds of prime elk meat, Wieland has discovered friends he never knew he had.

If You Go

Our outfitter, who promised little and delivered a great deal, was Adventures Outfitting, Mike Myer and Tim Beardsley, Props., out of Ennis, Montana. They hunt on a number of ranches where they have the hunting rights, as well as some wilderness areas, all on horseback. Tim and Mike can be reached at www.adventuresoutfitting.com, or P.O. Box 360, Ennis, MT 59729.

Elk hunting in Montana is a draw

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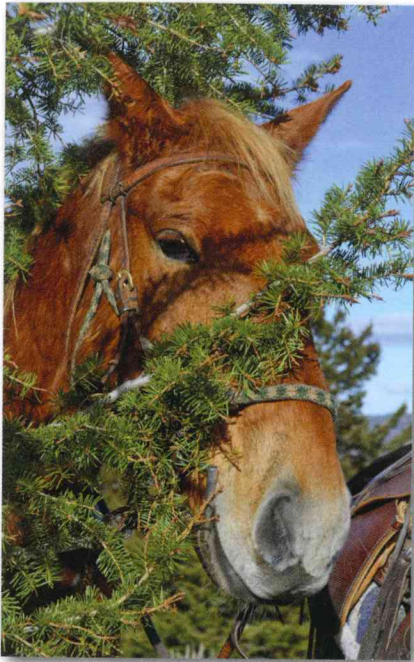
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My trusty steed, Charlie, looking his deceptively friendly best.

system. The deadline for entries is March 15, and the details for a particular area should be obtained from the outfitter.

We hunted in November, when the mornings were frosty, but the usual combination of Filson wool, Eddie Bauer goose down, and Wintersilks handled the range of temperatures admirably. Two things to remember when hunting on horseback: Your boots need to fit the stirrups, and your rifle needs to fit in the scabbard. At the same time, you need to be able to climb, side-hill, and run in whatever footwear you choose.

The modern trend to riflescopes with outsized objective bells don't go into scabbards well, and if you want to annoy your horse, have your rifle dig into his side at every step. Horses are bad enough without aggravating the situation.

For rifles, go prepared for shots out to 400 yards, but you're more likely to get a shot at 200 than 400. John, Tim, and I all carried Weatherby calibers, while Rob had a .30-06. Tim's .257 Weatherby, the smallest caliber, collected the biggest bull; Rob's .30-06, the one with the least range, had the longest kill. With everything else that happened that trip, we shouldn't be surprised.



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