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Countless deer have already fallen across the country, but now the blaze-orange invasion will go into full swing in pursuit of venison and wall-hanger trophies. As you head to the fields and forests to chase whitetails and muleys—or any other deer species—bring a camera! From Oct. 15, 2013, to Jan. 1, 2013, go to HuntingClub.com/DeerPhotos and submit your favorite digital shots from deer season. Share as many photos as you'd like. Photos can include live animals, hunting camp, game cam images or even your favorite deer rifle—anything goes, so long as it's related to deer season! If you already have photos on hand from this fall, those count, too.

While sharing your deer season with fellow NAHC members is priceless, we've partnered with our friends from Rocky to further encourage participation. On Jan. 10, 2013, the NAH editors will get together and choose their overall favorite photo from the bunch. The person with the winning submission will receive a head-to-toe Rocky Athletic Mobility system worth \$545!



SUBMIT A SHOT

Upload a deer season photo right now for your chance to win a complete Rocky Athletic Mobility system. Scan this code or visit HuntingClub.com/DeerPhotos.



VIDEO: BACKCOUNTRY ELK

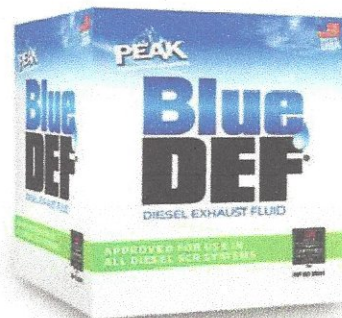
NAH Online Editor Josh Dahlke killed his first-ever elk in the wilderness of southwestern Montana last fall. You can read about the epic adventure in detail on page 42. But if you want to see the exciting hunt unfold on camera right now, scan the code below or visit HuntingClub.com/MontanaElk.



'YOU CALL THE SHOTS'— ONLINE

One of the most popular installments in NAH magazine and NAH-TV has always been "You Call the Shots." Did you know you can weigh-in on weekly YCTS scenarios at Facebook.com/HuntingClub? Visit the NAH Facebook page every week and post your comments under the extreme shooting scenarios.

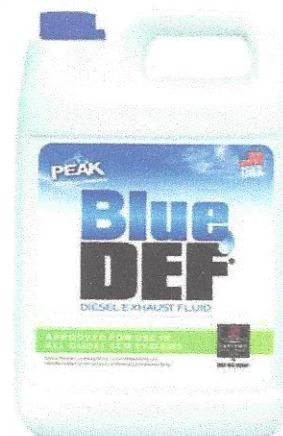
You can also view all the YCTS segments from the 2013 season of NAH-TV online. Scan the code below or visit HuntingClub.com/YCTS13 and begin watching today!



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ESCAPE TO ELK COUNTRY

I DEARLY ADMIRE A BEAST THAT MAKES ITS LIVING ON THE RUN. THAT'S THE ELK—A CREATURE THAT THRIVES SOCIALLY, YET REQUIRES A CERTAIN DEGREE OF SOLITUDE TO TAKE THE EDGE OFF. THOSE ARE TRAITS I CAN IDENTIFY WITH. MAYBE THAT'S WHY I BECAME INFATUATED WITH THE IDEA OF SHARING THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS WITH THIS GRAND ANIMAL.

BY NAH ONLINE EDITOR JOSH DAHLKE

If you grow up in a rural community, it's almost a given that the meat next to your potatoes will come from your backyard barn or back 40. If you're born and raised in the cement skeleton of suburbia, you might learn to envy such liberating details. That's me. The hustle and bustle has become a necessary evil, but sometimes I just have to get the hell out of town. If I'm lucky, I return home with a cooler full of reminders of what freedom truly tastes like.

And what better escape from civilization than the American West? It's captured the imaginations of men for centuries, somehow retaining its rugged purity and isolated expanses—not yet lost to an age of sprawling skylines choked with smog and clutter. So, when I was invited to join a group of like-minded guys to pursue bull elk in the wilderness of southwestern Montana, it required no consideration. For the next 6 months, mental, physical and equipment preparation became a priority. But despite my best efforts, when I arrived in the snow-covered Big Sky Country, I knew my



fate would be determined by seasoned guides and the mercy of the Rockies.

SHAKY START

"Josh: It's 3 a.m." My friend, John Bailey, offered the first wake-up call of our 5-day excursion. Still sedated, I cracked open the door of our comfortable wood-heated lodge and stepped out on the porch to test Mother Nature's mood. She howled at me with a stiff breeze, making it damn clear that "10 Degrees F" on the digital thermometer of our Chevy SUV was a

generous reading. Maybe it had frozen on that number before dropping to what really felt like minus 10?

Our crew suited up—layer upon layer—after unabashedly feasting on a hearty breakfast fit for cowboys. We rolled out of camp, quickly realizing that 4-wheel-drive wasn't just a luxury option as we slid around an icy corner, barely coming to a stop before busting through a snowbank and plummeting into a creek. *Is this what we're in for?* It was a hairy way to start the morning,

PHOTOS: JOSH DAHLKE

but my eyes lit up with anticipation as I giggled and grinned.

A series of twists and turns through a small canyon led us to a dimly lit wooden building, the shadows of our guides bouncing among antsy horses. I tucked my Ruger into a scabbard, mounted up and had a conversation with my backcountry companion, Diesel. The horse tested my authority, so I respectfully grunted and pulled on his reigns to make my intentions crystal clear. It was my first time riding horseback, but he didn't need to know that my anxiety was running rampant.

Headlamps danced in the darkness as our string of eager elk hunters departed from the barn and immediately ascended into no-man's land. Tim Beardsley, owner of Adventures Outfitting, led the way in his yellow rain slicker, kindly swiping overhanging pine boughs to save the rest of us from unnecessary white showers. However, Diesel would often venture a step too close ... just to make sure I was awake.

We bobbed and weaved up the steep switchbacks. Diesel occasionally lost his

wide-open slope known plainly as "The Saddle." Tim steered his horse alongside his outfitting partner, John Way, and they casually whispered for a moment before John led half of the crew straight uphill. A plan was in motion—undoubtedly a thoughtfully conceived plan hatched on months of scouting and decades of elk hunting experience. Tim waved at the rest of us to follow him in the opposite direction, downhill. The expansive mountain landscape began to appear and blaze-orange started to glow from our human figures as darkness melted away. We descended into the forest.

RIDING THE HIGH

Ride. Glass. Ride. Glass. The curtain was lifted on the Madison Range at daybreak, revealing an endless stage that extended far beyond the limits of my 10X42mm Swarovski. *So, this is where the elk dance.* Tim stood and glassed from a snow-covered ledge, just steps from a drop that would deliver certain death. I was immediately absorbed by the infinite glory of my surroundings and drifted into a content blur. "We need to keep going, guys." Tim's deep, authoritative voice pulled me out of the clouds and back into the game.

Upon reaching one of Tim's favorite secluded lookouts, we bailed from our horses. Fellow hunter Scott Padgett and guide Blake Amberson built a fire. They would settle in and scan the endless stretches of elk territory with their optics. Tim, Ed Schoppman and I would venture across two ridges on foot. Tim urged me to ditch my pack, and after only a few steps through the knee-deep snow, I was glad I took his advice. The preceding weeks of low-country jogging exercises in Minnesota proved to be almost worthless; my burning lungs struggled to rob any hint of soothing oxygen from the mountain air.

We stumbled upon an elk bedding area where a herd had rested the night before. Shortly after, Tim spotted a small group of cows lumbering beyond our reach. Our muscle-melting stalks put us on cougar and wolf tracks, and we witnessed several trees ripe with bear scratchings. We eventually met the other guys back at The Saddle—

moments earlier, they'd seen a pack of wolves frantically feeding on an elk carcass. At a full mile away, the wolves scattered instantly without an ounce of curiosity. Smart choice, because everyone carried wolf tags, and we all hungered for canine pelts on our walls.

No rifles were raised on the first or second days of our hunt, but these wild experiences were already enough to fill a trophy room with fond memories of Montana. Antlers and flesh would be extra gifts from the elk gods. A foreshadowing of such blessings struck us during our second evening as we rode out of the Rockies—several bulls surfaced in distant haunts. Spirits were high in camp that night as we sipped spirits and planned for the following day's pursuits.

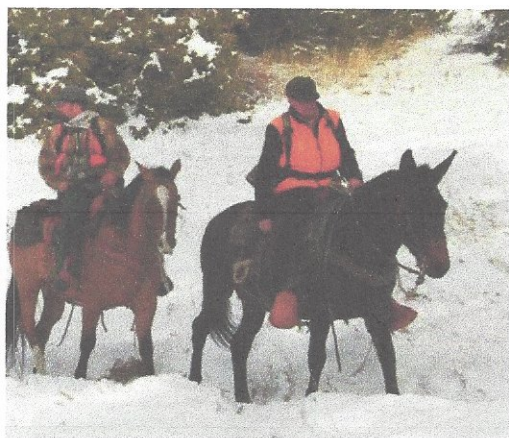
SADDLE UP

My legs ached at first, and then suddenly it felt as if my knee caps were being slowly torn apart from my thighs. This hunter was feeling the cruel, foreign pains of being a horseback rookie. Call it masochistic, but it was sort of like the addicting pain of getting tattooed—strangely therapeutic. Our horses reached The Saddle in the dark, but this time we mixed up our routine and I joined John Way, John Bailey and Mike Schoby. We headed uphill instead of down.

Just before reaching an elk-killing shrine known as JM's Rock, we stealthily tied up our horses and John Way uttered just two words with his raspy voice: "Come on." Soon, we came to an opening and John gave us the signal to stay back as he hunched over and sneaked up to a deadfall. He peeked above the hearty wooden trunk and motioned for us to join him.

"There are a bunch of elk on the slope across from us—probably 350 yards," John said with a sharp seriousness between heavy breaths. "I didn't see any bulls, but there has to be a herd bull with the group. Let's drop down behind the rock. Josh will come with me and we'll sneak into position around the edge of the rock. You two guys stay back and keep an eye on the opposite slope."

The story of my first elk hunt unfolded as if it had been scripted. I choked on my heart as we rounded the corner of



footing, stumbling on loose rocks. He hardly skipped a beat, but each time a surge of panic struck my thumper as I gripped the reigns for dear life. We approached a snow-camouflaged creek crossing and some of our horses nervously hesitated as their hooves busted through a thin shield of ice, while others calmly paused to lap up a quick drink. My appreciation for these well-bred "vehicles" grew by the second; we'd never make it on foot to where the bulls were hiding.

Our silent pack string approached a

JM's Rock on our knees and more than 30 elk materialized. It didn't take long for a 6x6 bull—the bull John knew was there—to show up at 249 yards. The bull fed, facing us, as I rested my rifle on my pack and studied the marvelous animal through the glass window of my EOTech holographic sight. He momentarily presented a decent quartering-away shot, but I stalled. "I'm not going to rush this," I explained. "I want to wait for the per-

fect shot." John responded, "OK. That's fine." No need for haste—the air was calm and the herd was happily grazing through the snow for groceries.

Then, a subtle wind whispered "trouble" as it slinked across my neck hairs from behind. In an instant, every single elk was staring directly at us. "This gig is up, dude," John said. Before he could say another word, the bull blazed across the mountain with the herd in

lockstep. For a minute-long eternity, I buried my face in my arms and fought an onslaught of conflicting emotions.

After a full afternoon of chasing elk, including a close encounter with another (larger) bull, our crew reconnected and rode back to the barn. I slept well that night, knowing that self control and respect for my quarry had prevailed on the mountain that morning. Perhaps I'd be rewarded the next day.

TRUSTED TOOLS FOR BATTLING BULLS

BY JOSH DAHLKE

Aside from escaping the daily grind, part of my mission during this elk adventure was to test **EOTech's** XPS-2.

As a military-proven combat sight, I was confident its rock-solid design could withstand unforeseen Rocky Mountain punishment and help me get on target in the moment of truth. However, elk hunting with a rifle is commonly a distance game, so it wasn't until I spent some quality time at the range with this sight that I trusted in its long-range capabilities.

I seated my EOTech on an XS Sight Systems custom Picatinny rail atop a **Ruger** Gunsite Scout rifle chambered in .308 Win. Yes,

EOTech sights are primarily known to accompany ARs. But for nostalgic reasons, I personally wanted to take my first elk with a bolt rifle. The moment I shouldered the compact Ruger and squeezed its crisp factory trigger, I knew I had found my scabbard companion. An EOTech sits higher than most traditional riflescopes, so I ensured a consistent cheek weld by attaching a sleek **Blackhawk** cheek pad.

After testing five popular brands of big game ammo—all tipped with high-weight-retention bullets—I selected **Federal's** 165-grain Trophy Bonded Tip. This round is known for

reliable expansion and deep penetration, which are all key characteristics of a legit elk cartridge.

At 100 yards, I was punching consistent 1-inch groups from a bench with my rifle resting on sandbags. I had never considered shooting beyond 50 yards without magnification, but the tiny 1 MOA center aiming dot in EOTech's A65 reticle makes it a cinch. When I extended my range to 200 yards, that's where EOTech's G33 3X magnifier came in handy. If you can't believe I was able to put bullets within 2 inches of each other, I won't blame you—but I have the paper to prove it.

The question remains: Is the EOTech an ideal rifle sight for big game hunting? I'd argue it's a great fit if you're planning to shoot 150 yards or less; add the magnifier and it's a 250-yard sight. Most hunters never exceed those ranges in the field, and ethically, most shouldn't without extensive practice and training. If you're a spot-and-stalk hunter who often faces quick shot opportunities at closer ranges, the rapid target acquisition of an EOTech is unmatched. The more time you have to focus on a critter's kill zone, rather than searching for the animal through a scope, the better chance you'll have of making a sure shot.

Huntworth's compression fleece-lined balaclava and matching pop-top gloves proved to be warm and functional.

S4Gear's LockDownX binocular harness kept my binos secure, yet readily available.

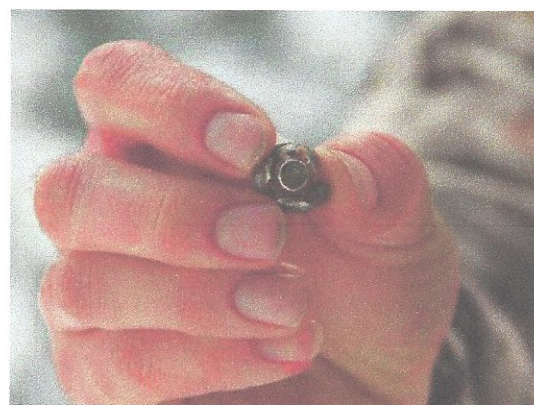
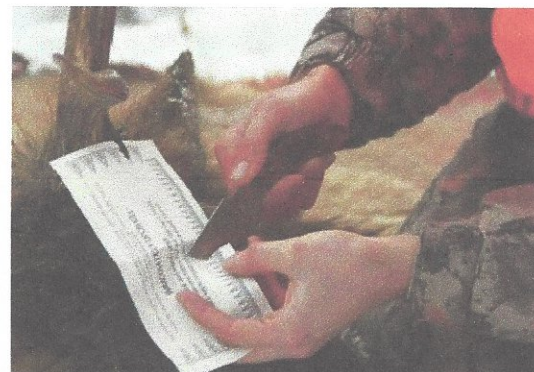
Swarovski's EL 10X42mm binocular provided impeccable optical clarity for endless glassing.

Cabela's durable Outfitter pack was filled with survival essentials and extra ammo. A blaze-orange vest kept me safe and legal.

Rocky's Athletic Mobility Level 2 boots offered supreme traction and all-day foot support. The Level 3 jacket and pants offered quiet comfort for long stalks.

PHOTO: CARRIE LAPA

At 9,000 feet, the author tagged his first-ever elk in the rugged wilderness of the Madison Range.



set my eyes on a broadside bull. Blake raised his binocular and I shouldered my rifle. "It's a legal bull," he said. "Sixty-six yards. Kill him."

I steadied my feet, centered the fine red dot of my reticle just behind the bull's shoulder and sent 165 grains of metal into his lungs. Upon impact, the noble beast's knees buckled. As the bull calmly cycled his final breaths, I flipped down the sight magnifier on my rifle rail. I carefully slipped in one more round between the tangle of brush in which he lay, and ethically ended the bull's agony.

BRING IT HOME

Here I am, hovering over the burning embers of a charcoal grill. Blood begins to rise from the exposed side of a sirloin and I flip the precious cut of meat. The sound of traffic hums from nearby and my cell phone chimes with the sound of an e-mail notification. I ignore everything except the pleasant aroma of sizzling elk steak. I close my eyes and retreat to the Rockies. ■■

PHOTOS: JOSH DAHLKE

See video footage from the author's high-elevation elk hunt, including the tense moments surrounding the death of his bull. Scan this code or visit HuntingClub.com/MontanaElk.



WALK IN THE PARK

Blake's old pickup truck paused ahead of us, and then he gunned it through a ghostly snow drift. His tail lights disappeared for a few seconds in the powdery poof. *There he is—and he's not in the ditch.* A family in a compact car we'd passed minutes earlier wasn't so lucky. Tim shifted our truck into gear, a heavy horse trailer in tow, and we barely ripped through the drift by following Blake's tracks. In minutes, the wind would erase evidence of our desperate maneuvers.

"I guess this is it, boys," Tim said nonchalantly as our truck tires spun. Thankfully, we weren't far from our intended parking spot. The horses would help us make up the difference.

What followed was a series of sketchy switchbacks as we headed into a new wilderness honey-hole. Tim was confident that if we could physically make it to where he wanted to go, a bull would be there for the taking. At points along the treacherous trail, proceeding was questionable. We passed the last set of remnant boot tracks where an on-foot hunter had obviously thrown in the towel during their climb. Eventually, I began to wonder when we would give

up. But we rode, and rode some more—along sheer cliffs and gnarly stretches of choked timber. Even the horses often hesitated. I pondered what Tim's strategy might be, and then it came to me: *We'll ride until we reach a place where elk have never felt the threat of man. That will even our odds.*

Finally, we stopped and dismounted from our horses. Elk tracks littered the ground—small grains of snow scattered across their surface proved the sign was fresh. The promising hoof highway pointed to an open park not far uphill from us. I worked the bolt of my Ruger and guided a cartridge into its chamber—the silver casing winked at me as it slid by. Tim led his soldiers in a single-file line.

We halted at "The Killing Tree"—a spot known for producing elk if a hunter's patience is up to the task. John Bailey and Ed Schoppman paired up to maintain a post at this charming stand. I proceeded with Tim and Blake into the park.

Not long after our hike began, we reached the base of a small earthen upheaval. There sat an oval-shaped bed—still soft from a recently resting elk. The animal couldn't be far away.

I crested the mound and suddenly