

Train Wreck Elk Hunt, From Page 10

I talked with Doug about what sort of shape I needed to be in to hunt effectively in the mountains. He told me of his five mile, incline treadmill hikes loaded down with a full backpack. Yikes! I resolved right there to get in shape for this mountain hunting experience.

So for the next nine months, I biked, hiked, and spent many hours on a stair climber machine in our garage. I'd stare at my hunting stuff piled in the garage while plugging away on the stair climber envisioning the Sawtooth Mountains full of elk. I was motivated by excitement, but also a little by fear. I didn't want to be the weak link.

The long, hot Texas summer seemed to drag on forever. I marked days off the calendar like a kid waiting for Christmas. But the day finally came to make the long drive from Texas to Idaho. My excitement made the trip seem a lot shorter than the 24 hours it took to drive to Stanley. Listening to elk hunting podcasts kept my eyes open on the road.

When I arrived, Doug and I set up our camp by a set of corrals owned by Mystic Saddle Ranch right on the Salmon River near Stanley. It was a comfortable camp, but we would not be there much during the hunt. We would be putting in long hours hunting, only returning to camp to sleep.

Our plan was for Mat to lead us into the wilderness well before light each morning on horseback. We would arrive in the backcountry just as it was getting light enough to hunt. From there, we'd park the horses and hunt on foot for the day.

According to Mat, staying mobile is key to locating elk in this area. "Wolves and hunting pressure can push our elk around a lot," said Mat. "The elk can be here today and gone tomorrow. So it helps to be mobile

and hunt large areas in search of bugling bulls."

Unfortunately for us, the weather did not cooperate early in the hunt. Stanley set heat record after heat record during our first few days there. Ninety degree afternoon temperatures made the elk sluggish. They stayed bedded in the shade of the deep pine trees and the bulls refused to bugle.

Despite these tough hunting conditions, Mat kept us near elk. His bugling and cow calling were so realistic that I often had to double check to make sure Mat wasn't a real elk. Every time he bugled, the hair stood up on the back of my neck and my pulse quickened.

On the third evening of the heat wave, Mat was able to call in a spike using cow calls. Doug had previously mentioned that he would take a shot at his first opportunity to bag an elk, no matter the size. "With these conditions, we might not get many chances," said Doug. "Plus, I'd like to focus on helping Steve bag a big bull."

Not only did I marry well, I evidently have a knack for picking a good hunting partner.

The spike came in toward Mat's calling and ran right into Doug. Doug made a great shot on the spike at around 35 yards. The small bull left a wide blood trail for us to follow. We could see the trail of blood head down the slope into the trees.

But as is protocol, we left the elk to expire and quietly left the area to have dinner. We returned a few hours later with knives sharpened and frame packs on our backs. We found Doug's spike piled up just a few hundred yards away.

After processing and packing out Doug's bull, Doug told me, "Now it is your turn, Steve."

The next day brought more high temperatures and very few elk sightings. But help was on the way in the form of a forecasted overnight cold snap.

The fifth morning of our hunt ushered in much cooler temperatures. Instead of lows in the 40s and highs in the 90s, the fifth morning low was twelve degrees at our tent, and it would be much colder up high.

As we rode up into the mountains, I was glad to be using my expensive cold weather clothes. But I was really excited that the cold temperatures might get the bulls bugling.

It was not easy riding a horse while wearing a backpack and carrying a bow. This morning was made even more difficult because of all the cold weather clothing. I asked Mat if he ever had trouble with clients and horses on guided hunting trips. He gave me a knowing look and said, "Let's just say that I have seen more than my fair share of train wrecks over the years. I don't want to see any more, so be careful!"

After parking the horses near the top of the mountain range, we hiked just under the crest of the ridge. We slowly hiked across the mountain searching for elk below. Mat bugled and cow called into each drainage we came across. But try as we might, we had no answering bugles.

We eventually came to a deep drainage with a bowl on the upper end. Mat let out a long bugle from the top of the ridge. Three bulls responded this time. We all looked at each other with wide eyes. Finally!

The closest bull was straight down the slope from us way in the bottom of the drainage. The other bulls were midway up the slope to our right and left. After a little excited discussion, we snuck down into the drainage toward the closest bull, the one straight down in the

bottom.

Mat and Doug set up to call part-way down the slope. They sent me 75 yards down past them toward the bull. I found a spot in the shade of a limber pine tree with a good view downhill.

As soon as Mat and Doug began cow calling, the bull below bugled. His bugle was more of a growl than a classic bugle. After so long without hearing a bull bugle, I got really excited and my hands started shaking.

A few seconds after the growler bugled, the bull to our left bugled. The left hand bull was closer now. I looked up the hill and saw the guys were excitedly waving me up toward them.

I ran up the slope, my legs burning with each step. I was out of breath when I finally reached them. Excitement and the up hill sprint taxed my lungs. I was sure glad I put in the time on my stairclimber... I'd have passed out otherwise.

I was glad they didn't ask me any questions when I got to there, because I was breathing so hard that I could not have spoken. Mat and Doug simply pointed across the slope in the direction of the incoming bull. I nodded and slid across the slope as silent as possible while trying to get my breath back under control.

I kneeled down 100 yards later, positioned to shoot across the slope. The guys started softly calling again. The bull bugled, but now he was now much farther away across the slope. In the time it took me to reposition, he had moved away. My heart sank.

Then from below came that distinctive gravelly growl. This time however, the bull was higher up the