



Train Wreck of an Idaho Elk Hunt

**By Steven Bridges
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It all started with a flood in Southwest Wisconsin.

I had a work conference in Chicago last fall. I decided to tack on a fly fishing foray to Southwest Wisconsin after the conference. I rented a car and booked a small cabin on a trout stream where I used to fish years ago.

The week before the conference the cabin's owner called and said "I guess you won't be staying with us."

When I asked why, she told me that a flood had ripped through the valley taking the cabin with it. So the cabin was gone and the trout stream was ruined for fly fishing. What a train wreck. I needed an alternate plan.

Since I had already rented the car, I decided I would travel around and visit old friends from my college days at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

I visited many old friends including Doug Ulrich of Eureka, Illinois. During our dinner conversation, I mentioned that the family and I had visited Stanley, Idaho the previous summer. Doug put down his fork and perked up. I realized I had his attention, so I continued my story.

I mentioned that we had a great time hiking, riding ATVs, floating the Salmon River, and especially going on horseback rides out of Red Fish Lake with Mystic Saddle Ranch. He stared at me wide-eyed.

I didn't understand why he was getting so excited. When he finally couldn't stand it anymore Doug blurted, "That's where I used to work! I used to work for Mystic Saddle Ranch."

Doug told me of how he moved to Stanley, Idaho right out of high school to work at Mystic Saddle Ranch. He took people on trail rides,

set up hunting camps, and held many other jobs for the company. "I had a great time," said Doug. "I worked hard and learned a lot during the year I worked there. I still keep up with the people there."

He mentioned that he still hunts with Mystic Saddle Ranch every fall for elk during archery season. We laughed at the coincidence. From there our conversation moved on to more normal topics. I didn't think any more about it.

Later that year around Christmas, my phone rang. It was Doug Ulrich. He mentioned our conversation about Mystic Saddle Ranch. He asked if I would like to go archery hunting for elk with Mystic Saddle Ranch in the fall. Of course, I jumped at the chance.

My wife is a hunter and it doesn't hurt that she loves elk meat. She agreed to my hunt right away. She only complained that she couldn't wrap it up and put it under the tree for me. "I'd like to get a little credit for it," she said. What a girl. I sure married well. Then she added as she kissed me on the cheek, "Merry Elk Christmas!"

I had been hunting in Colorado for elk in the past. But all of my hunts had been self-guided. In all my previous hunts I had only killed a single elk, a cow 15 years ago. I made up my mind to do this hunt right... no cutting corners this time.

I immediately started preparations for the September hunt. I began assembling archery equipment, because my archery gear was years old. I purchased a used Mathews Zero Cam Bow from a friend. I got the bow tuned up and accessorized at Huffy's Archery Shop in Lompasas. Aaron, the manager, was a great help setting up my bow. He also helped get my shooting form back into shape.



Steve Bridges with hunting buddy Doug Ulrich and Steve's Idaho bull.

I live in Central Texas where any temperature below 32 degrees shuts down school. I didn't own any real mountain hunting clothes and gear. I was going to have to gear up for a week in the mountains. Luckily, Mystic Saddle Ranch sent me a packing list to guide me. And I started buying gear.

A few weeks later, my wife pointed at the piles of equipment growing in our garage and commented, "I said you could go hunting, not

start up an outdoor store!" We both laughed, but for different reasons. What can I say, I married well.

But buying gear was only part of my preparations. I would be one month shy of 50 years old at the time of our hunt. We were to be guided by the owner of Mystic Saddle Ranch, Mat Cain. Doug told me Mat's nickname given to him by the young guides is "The Mountain Goat".

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