

A WILD HUNT IN “The Bob”

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*D*reams are funny things. Bad ones will wake you up at night but good ones can also. As a kid, the hardest night of the year to sleep was Christmas Eve. I'd start dreaming about what fun I was going to have with all those presents under the tree, my heart rate would go up, and I'd be awake, waiting for the first hint of dawn.

The first night in hunting camp is the hardest for me to sleep. After I've spent a few days getting up early and climbing hills or busting through jungle-thick woods, my fatigue will trump just about any thought in my head including all those fantasy dreams of big bugling bull elk standing broadside at 50 yards.

Last fall I awoke in a hunting camp deep in The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. I'd gone in with my friend Greg Gilchrist of the Lake Upsata Outfitters along with five other hunters. Two guides led the pack string of mules with our gear and supplies. The first morning I was up and dressed 30 minutes before the 0400 alarm went off, anxious to get back in the saddle that cradled my butt for the 18-mile ride in the day before.

With 2400 square miles of terrain in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, the views can seem endless.





With a belly full of coffee, pancakes, and eggs, Dale, one of the other hunters, and I mounted up under the glow of a lantern that hung at the corrals, and followed Greg off into the dark woods. I caught myself opening my eyes very wide trying to make out even the faintest of shapes, but all I could see was the faint outline of the horse under me. I could feel the gelding's powerful shoulders under my knees, blissfully plodding along after the lead horse. My hearing, dulled by years of shooting, suddenly became acute and I could trace Greg's route by the sound of hoofs ahead. I relaxed and loosened the reins trusting the horse knew the way.

The first hints of dawn seemed like stadium lights after riding in the dark and we were already climbing out of the valley of camp and into higher ground. Our voices dropped to muffled whispers as we shifted into hunting mode. The climb became very steep and I could hear the gelding breathing hard as steam rolled off his shoulders and drifted up over my chaps, backlit by the first rays of morning sun filtering through the thick conifers.

Through the steam, movement exploded in the trees ahead of us. The musky smell of elk filled my head and triggered my heart to race. Greg barked orders to Dale in loud staccato whispers. "Drop your reins. Trapper will get them. Get your gun." I dismounted, grabbing all three lead ropes. Dale got his rifle out of the scabbard in time to see a bunch of cow elk run off. Greg cow called and a bull answered with a long bugle ending in grunts, a song I never tire of hearing. The bull was close, very close in the thick trees. We'd gotten in between the bull and the cows and now we were waiting for the bull to follow the cows by passing right in front of us. He apparently didn't get the memo and slowly moved away from us, but continued to answer our cow calls for an hour or so.

With the horses tied up we set off on foot for the rest of the day, searching and hoping for the bull that had bested us at first light. We returned to camp that evening optimistic with visions of scattering elk and ear-piercing bugling still ringing in our heads.



An elk camp kitchen that is equipped to cook just about any meal imaginable.



Dale Wisniewski, with guide Brandon "Slim" Ice and a bull he took during a guided hunt in The Bob Marshall Wilderness.

SOME OPTIONS

Elk or deer hunting in The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex requires a great deal of planning and preparation. While just about any experienced hunter with backpacking and outdoor skills could load up a pack at one of the many trailheads and venture off into this 2400-square-mile roadless area, getting an elk out is going to present a huge challenge.

In my lifetime I've gotten elk out of the woods with mules, snowmobiles, and toboggans. Once a friend and I dragged an elk into a raft and floated it downstream to a takeout point. Another time I drove right up to the elk, dropped the tailgate, and with a lot of grunting and groaning hunting buddies,

muscled it into the truck bed. Most of the time I ended up quartering it and hauling it out on my back. This last solution was just something I saw as part of the hunt. It was great fun when I was in my 20s and 30s, not so much fun in my 50s.

There are other ways to make it happen; acquire your own horses and mules, get very friendly with someone who owns horses and mules, hunt close to the trailhead, join the Navy SEALs and invite your unit back home for a Montana big game hunt, or use the services of a licensed outfitter.

"Why use an outfitter?" an old friend asked me. "Why not just do it yourself?" It was a fair question and I answered it with one of my own. "The transmission was going out on your

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truck last year. You've worked on all kinds of vehicles. Why did you take it to a transmission shop?" He looked over at me and smiled. "Well, first I don't have all the nifty tools they have, but mostly, I just don't want to mess with all that stuff any more. I'd rather pay someone else to do it. But, I see your point."

There are a finite number of legal outfitters in The Bob. All have to be licensed by the Montana Board of Outfitters plus permitted by the U.S. Forest Service. Like transmission shops, there are good ones and bad ones, but mostly it's a matter of picking one that matches your hunting style. Some outfitters will put you on a horse at the trailhead and lead you into their camp. You won't mount up again until you leave camp at the end of the trip. The rest of the time you hunt on foot. Others like my friend Greg Gilchrist gets you mounted up every day. He doesn't have you hunting off horses, but you'll use them to get into areas that would be too far to walk from camp.

All outfitters I talked to use wall tents in their camps. Hunters sleep on cots in the tents and the outfitter takes care of all the

food and cooking. Ask the outfitter about the hunter/guide ratio and for references you can contact. If possible visit the outfitter to see just how he takes care of his tack and stock; it's a good indicator of how he'll take care of you.

THE HUNT REVISITED

Each day seemed to get a bit warmer; too warm for a late September rifle hunt, but then a system moved in and everything changed. The elk seemed to be moving more and getting more vocal. Two elk were taken, hauled into camp on mules, and were hanging off the meat pole, but the trip was nearing an end. Dale and I had worked hard all week, as did our guides. Dale was from Wisconsin and had never even seen a live elk before, and I really wanted to see him get his chance but we were running out of time.

We mounted up and rode off into the dark just like every other morning with our guide Brandon Ice. I'd known Brandon for a few years and always called him Slim. At 6'6" and 180 pounds he could go goose hunting with a net and "slim" seemed to fit him. We stopped to water the horses in Young's Creek and while I couldn't put my finger on it, something felt different. I tried to dismiss it, but it stuck with me like a buzzing yellowjacket on an Indian summer day. It was still flying around my head as we rode in and tied up the horses; it came alive as we heard two different bulls answering our cow calls. It faded away as the sun rose high in the sky and the bugling stopped.



Lake Upsata Outfitter Greg Gilchrist leads the mules back to camp.

Later in the day we were on our way back to the horses and my hopes for a nice bull were dimming with the afternoon light. Slim led Dale and I down a steep slope stopping frequently to cow call. We'd covered a fair amount of ground that morning and my legs were feeling it. When Slim stopped and sat down, I found a tree to lean against. I drank the last of my water and found myself nodding off in the afternoon sun. Pulling my hat over my face to shield my eyes, I was off to slumberland interrupted only by Slim's occasional calls. A light tap on my shoulder told me it was time to

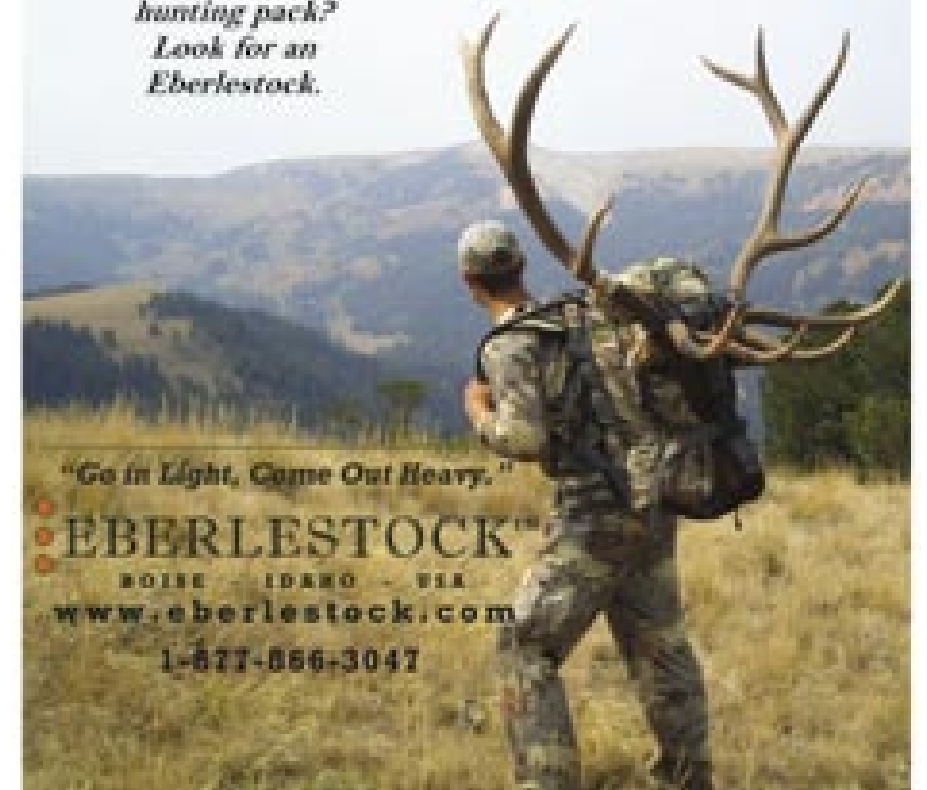
get back to the horses and camp and we slowly made our way down the hill, stopping occasionally to look, call, and listen.

The bull's bark was distinct and close, coming from down the hill with the breeze in our faces. Dale's face lit up and he made a large "O" with his mouth. Slim leaned into Dale whispering in his ear and pointing. Dale moved with the stealth of a heron slightly down the hill and stopped at a fir tree, using it for cover and to steady shaking hands.

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A long bugle answered the next cow call and the bull was moving at us at a fast pace up the steep hill. By the time he answered again I couldn't believe I couldn't see him as the sound was making my ears ring. I heard a hoof scuff wood just as his antlers appeared and he was screaming for his new girlfriend and moving closer and closer. The bull was 20 feet away and broadside when Dale put the crosshairs on him and his big bore Winchester filled the air with thunder. The bull quickly turned, heading back down the hill. Slim chirped one last call and the bull froze. Dale finished

him with a second round to the base of the neck. It was an amazing bull and another great memory was burned into the part of my brain that stores all that good stuff.

Wilderness elk hunting is like no other hunting experience. The sheer isolation of it always puts me back in time a hundred years or so. No roads, no cars, no cell phones, just the companionship of other like-minded hunters, good horses, and the memories of a lifetime. 