Blood Relations

You can go farther. You can go higher. But nothing will get you deeper into the mountains than elk hunting.

By Hal Herring
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Under a dust-crusted lightbulb in the barn, the backstrap peels away from the ridges of the elk's spine, helped by careful cuts of a boning knife that's been sharpened so many times the blade has thinned to only an eighth-inch or so wide. There's a clean piece of muslin draped over the bottom of the old Coleman canoe, and the other backstrap lies there, rich and purple-black against the white cloth. Deep into November, muted sunlight gently nudges through the barn door, clouds building in the north, a wind rustling the dry leaves on the cottonwoods.

This time tomorrow it could be 20 below. The elk carcass, now so pliable, will be hanging here frozen hard as marble. Fingers will ache, feet will be numb, a crude meat saw will replace the precise old knife. There is a perfect day almost every fall when the season's elk and deer have been hanging long enough to age the meat perfectly, just before the gavel of winter falls. Today is it. Clear off the kitchen table and the counters, turn the satellite radio up high, stock the wood stove. Knife sharpener, freezer paper and tape, a Sharpie to write on the packages: "ham steaks, grade B," "shoulder meat, stew," "back-strap steaks, butterflied, A." Clean buckets for grinder meat and soup bones, a box for dog scraps. The job will go on into the night, and then some. Do not hurry, do not rest. Cut straight. Don't mess up the gift of this mighty creature.

In late October of 1990, I was living with my wife in a cabin on the west side of the Bitterroot Valley near Stevensville, caretaking a small ranch owned by an heir to the Pepperidge Farm fortune. The aluminum irrigation pipes that ruled over every hour of every summer day were stacked in racks beside the equipment shop. The trucks and tractors had been winterized, the snowplow jerked from the waist-high tangle of weeds and made ready. We'd been in Montana a little over a year, and I had my first resident big game license, a piece of paper that seemed to glow like radium, a passport to the great yawning freedom that lay beyond the hayfields, where the Bitterroots rose like the wall of a mysterious kingdom. I grabbed a butt pack with some water and ammo for my battered old .308 lever gun, and set off walking, stopping to take the last of the Wolf River apples from a tree that had been nearly destroyed by the nightly visits of black bears.

The ranch wintered a herd of about 80 elk, but we had moved in at the beginning of haying, so I had never seen them. In fact, I had seen only one elk in my life, a young bull, horns still in velvet, leaping across the trail on St. Mary's Peak. I knew that somewhere, high above me, some of those elk that wintered on the ranch must be gathering. A worn game trail with no fresh tracks took me up, and up, through stately groves of Ponderosa, across marshy little creek bottoms thick with chokecherry and spruce and up again to a long ridge. A gentle thudding came from above, a sound I'd never heard before. I stopped and leaned against a tree to break my outline, as I'd learned as a child hunting squirrels in Alabama. The thudding got louder. I stared upward, almost in disbelief. A huge creature the color of sunburnt grass appeared, horns towering, a kind of shaggy mane, almost black. I slowly realized this was what had drawn me up the mountain. This was a bull elk.

I raised my rifle and shot him, and to my utter amazement he slammed to the ground, careening downhill in a dramatic power slide that carried him past me and into a small patch of young Doug fir and spruce, where he thrashed and then went still. I remained rooted to the earth, hands shaking, as a sense of growing horror at what I had done began to creep over me. It had all happened so fast there had been no time for contemplation. Now, the great beast lay dead.

Around me, the mountain seemed dreadfully empty, the autumn light morose. I went to him and took out my knife, slack-jawed at the immensity of the task before me. I tapped his eyeball to make sure he was dead, jammed one of his giant back hooves behind an uphill sapling, and poked tentatively at his Rocky Mountain-sized belly with the blade, imagining the monstrous coils and organs bound within. Something exploded in my head, a thunderous, white flash. When I opened my eyes, I was face down, tangled in the Doug firs, the smell of the bull heavy in my nose. The hoof that I had stuck behind the sapling had come loose and cut me down like a bolt from Zeus.

It took until late the next afternoon to

get him out of the woods, taking him apart and lashing the quarters—the shoulders and hams—to an old pack frame I'd found in our cabin that must have once belonged to the Marquis de Sade. The hams were so heavy that I had to prop the pack against a tree, sit down in front of it, jam my arms through the unpadded straps, heave forward to all fours, and then endeavor to stand. I could only stagger downhill, 50 yards or so at a time, the de Sade pack frame sanding away the flesh of my hips and the straps biting into my shoulders like a two-headed snapping turtle—a scene repeated for a couple hours until the dull sheen of the tarpaper roof of our cabin appeared through the pines.

A couple of weeks later, after a spell of weather warm enough to allow for one last rock climbing trip in Blodgett Canyon, my climbing buddies and I drank beer and grilled backstrap steaks on the front deck of the cabin, the corrals of the ranch spread out below us. The Sapphire Range, with all of its own wild elk country, rose black and tumbled at the far edge of the valley. The steaks were perfect, served with grated horseradish root dug from the unkillable specimen by the steps.

"Yeah," I said, "I just walked up the trail until I ran into him." Beer in hand, I gestured at the mountains and told them maybe I could show them how to get an elk for themselves some day.

It would be some long years before I saw another bull elk in the woods. I hunted hard, climbing high to the bony ridges of the Bitterroots, exploring lost cirques and plateaus, driving the maze of logging roads from the East Fork through to the Big Hole. I obsessed over maps and made long trips into roadless drainages, the Blue Joint, the Overwhich, Two Bear, Jew Mountain, Sleeping Child. Always, there were elk. You could smell them on the wind, hear them crashing away in the lodgepoles, track them through hot afternoons and howling blizzard mornings. I learned something: elk hunting takes its strongest grip on people like me, the wanderers, the climbers, the true outdoor freaks who are desperate not just to kill elk but also to see what's over the next ridge, and the next one after that.

But just burning up gas or boot leather or, as some call it, "rifle hiking," is not really the way to put elk in the freezer. The trick is to take that hunger for big country and high places and tweak it from macro to micro. In short, you find a spot where there are some elk, and you stay there, or keep going back there, until you know every inch of the place: where the trails go to water, to grass, to the black timber where you'll never be able to follow them. What kind of weather makes them move, or causes them to hole up, or leave for higher or lower ground? Where do the mountain lions lie and watch them, leaving their weird, melted-out snow angels behind? Where are the old trails, used when the real snows come, when the danger of predators, like the wolves and the lions and you, are outweighed by the need to move to winter range, and the herds move, in knots and bands, all day long? It is a deep apprenticeship to a landscape. It sounds simple, and it is, just like navigating by the stars, climbing an A4 pitch, or throwing a perfect diamond hitch on a balky pack mule.

For me, a person who loves to ski the backcountry, to climb rock and ice, to fish and wander, there is no relationship to landscape that is as profound as elk hunting. And because there are other sentient beings involved—the elk themselves, the other nations of creatures and birds that share the place with us both—the relationship bores deeper yet. Skiing and climbing, like hunting, are also deep studies of landscape, weather and risk. But a good hunter becomes something that only a few climbers or skiers ever become or even desire to be: an inhabitant. And that is never truer than later, in the relative safety of home or camp, when he or she eats an animal honorably pursued, killed in a place well-loved and well-known. I still love to ski and climb, but to go out every fall and try to kill an elk to feed my family and myself has become one of the most important pursuits of my life.

My new country lies at the southern end of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. I've only been learning it for five years; most of it still speaks a language I don't yet understand. The elk here live with the entire spectrum of predators in place: resident and traveling packs of wolves, mountain lions, grizzlies, and a lot of human hunters on horses who reach deep into the backcountry and haunt the choke points of the migration routes to winter range. Even with all those dangers, the herds remain too big for the winter range, so cow tags are readily available, and I try to get one every year. My hunting partners and I all kill for meat now. If we ever dreamed of massive bulls, the dream evaporated with the need to feed our children at a time when America's commercial food system has become diseased. Even grass-fed and organic cattle are still cattle—slow witted, slow moving, shit-smeared and oblivious. Nothing against cows, really. Perhaps they are just too apt a metaphor for what worries us most about our own species.

The hikes here are long, the early season hot. I've killed some elk here, but I'm still looking for the best place to serve my apprenticeship. Easing down a steep chute on a limestone ridge, I come upon a patch of serviceberry that has been ravaged. All of the rocks, some of them big as coffee tables, have been flipped over, and an ant nest has been dug up. There's a grizzly somewhere close, and I check the bear spray hanging on the strap of my backpack, bracing my thumb on the safety, breathing deep to see if I can smell him. Nothing, just evergreen needles in hot sun, and yarrow crushed underfoot. From somewhere below I can hear the creek,

just barely. From an opening on the mountainside, I can see far into the next drainage, where a mix of grasslands, aspen groves and giant Doug fir looks like an elk hunter's paradise. Even with a good pack frame it would be God's own travail to pack an elk from that distance, even a calf. There are fingers of talus, a patchwork of thickets to hide bears—complex, risky country, a long way from anywhere. More to the point, it looks like a hard place to get into on horseback. Perfect. I tighten the strap on my rifle, check my bear spray one last time, and start walking.