



BUCKMASTERS

FREE WEEKLY TIPS

ONLINE MAGAZINE

Elk Hunting's Three Basic Rules

By George Mitchell

Having been a regular visitor to Yellowstone National Park over the last several years, I have fallen under the spell of the beauty that is our American West. During one such excursion, in late August, my wife and I had the pleasure of being serenaded by bull elk as we hiked up Mt. Washburn. The sound of their bugling echoing through the valleys below would send chills up your spine. At this point, I was hooked and knew it wouldn't be long until I would make the trek west to hunt one of these magnificent animals.

At age 48, I had to think long and hard about what I expected from this undertaking. Given I didn't possess much in the way elk hunting knowledge, my first consideration was to find a reputable outfitter. I talked with several of the outfitters who offered pack-in hunts from the Slough Creek area of the Yellowstone Park. A pack-in hunt would indeed be an experience of a lifetime. However, I wasn't sure that I was up to spending five hours on horseback getting to the hunting area. So I opted for a ranch hunt instead.

After almost a year of research, I booked a hunt with Wishbone Outfitters out of Edgemont, South Dakota. The hunt would take place in the controlled environment of the Wishbone Ranch. Edgemont is within a few minutes' drive of the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore. So, naturally, I asked my wife if she would be interested in going and possibly doing some sightseeing while I was hunting. She agreed and I began to make preparations for the 1,600-mile drive.

We arrived at the ranch on Sunday afternoon and were greeted by ranch owner Ken Cassens. After settling into one of the rooms in the rustic lodge, we had an opportunity to talk with Ken and find out some of the history about his ranch and the surrounding area. I was pleased when Ken told me he would be my guide for the hunt. After a little more conversation, I asked Ken if we could try to locate some elk that afternoon. He was obliging and I quickly changed into some camouflage and grabbed my gear.

We drove out to the area where we would be hunting, parked, and proceeded on foot. The plan was to work our way up to the ridge and do some glassing. The mountain itself was clustered in thick pine with several fingers and deep gullies which sloped down to the rolling prairie. Spotting elk in the timber would be difficult at best.

After several hours of walking and glassing, we spotted three bulls about a half-mile away. One of the bulls appeared to be a 7x7, but we were a little too far away to get a good look using just binoculars. By this time the sun was going down and we headed back to the lodge.

The next morning brought temperatures in the 20s with 15-mile-an-hour winds. After a hardy breakfast, we headed back to the mountain and began the hike in. The sunrise was absolutely beautiful, and I felt blessed to witness this splendor.

About an hour into the hunt, I spotted a bull on a rise at the edge of some timber. He was a nice bull, but his right beam was broken off about halfway up, which is common during late-season hunts. We circled wide and planned to cut across the top portion of a gully to reach a higher vantage point. To my amazement, some 20-plus elk were feeding in the gully; sheltered from the wind. We had managed to walk within 40-yards of these elk and had remained undetected.

I quickly looked over the animals, searching for a bull. While doing so, the wind swirled carrying our scent in the direction of the feeding elk. Heads popped up everywhere with eyes and ears focused in our direction. Within seconds the elk vanished into the pines toward the bottom of the gully.

We made our way to several different vantage points while continuing to glass. About mid-day, we spotted two bulls off in the distance. We worked our way closer to get a better look. The bulls were feeding in a direction that was taking them away from us, and they were still a little too far away for a good look using 10-power binoculars. I asked Ken what he thought about trying to circle around ahead of them to get a better look. He was against the idea but agreed. (Rule number one: Never guide the guide.)

After a half-mile double-time march, we worked our way through some drainage and crawled to a grass-covered rise. Naturally, the two bulls were nowhere to be found. I apologized, and we decided to head back to the lodge for some lunch and a little rest.

That afternoon, we decided to glass from a different area that overlooked one of three water holes. Ken said that we would be able to drive in fairly close and walk the remaining few hundred yards.

While in route, I asked Ken about the location of the third waterhole, as we had seen one of the three during our morning trek. Ken pointed to a large open area with several sloping grass covered hills. The waterhole was at the bottom where the hills came together. As we passed, I looked back to try and catch a glimpse. There in the drainage at the upper end of the waterhole clearly visible above the grass, was a huge set of antlers.

The truck came to an abrupt stop. I grabbed my binoculars and rangefinder and headed some 15 yards back for a quick look. (Rule number two: Never leave your rifle.) I put the binoculars on the bull and instantly "HUGE" registered in my brain. Immediately, I switched to the rangefinder and marked him at 288 yards. The bull stood up, looked in our direction and started moving away from us toward the pines. I ran back to the truck, grabbed my rifle and shooting sticks.

When I finally got into position, the bull was about to crest one of the rolling hills. I turned the scope to maximum magnification to take advantage of the Boone and Crockett reticle, and tracked the bull as he progressed. The bull topped the slope leading out of the drainage and stopped for a quick look back. He was slightly quartering toward me as I took a 300-yard hold and put pressure on the trigger. The .325 WSM roared and a cloud of dust arose from dirt in his fur. The bull surged toward the pines in a three-legged stagger and piled up after 30 steps. (Rule number 3: In the excitement that follows, never put your hand on a cactus!)

