Do It Yourself Elk Hunting

Fifth Edition

By Jim Deeming

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Why This Book?

If you’re a Do-It-Yourself Hunter, reliable and practical information can be hard to come by.

Search the internet for DIY hunting and you’ll get all kinds of results for outfitters and private ranches willing to take a big pile of your money for a horseback ride and/or a trespass fee.

I don’t know about you, but that’s not my idea of doing it myself. I’m talking about being 100 percent responsible for the whole hunt from start to finish, and doing it on public land -

*where it’s FREE!*

Elk hunting is hard work.

For years now the Colorado elk population has been at or above the Division Of Wildlife’s objective. Even though there are “too many elk”, the overall success rate typically runs about 23 percent across all seasons and methods.

Archery success overall is only about 14 percent. And since the fraction of successful hunters each year is largely made up of guys who score more often, that means there are a whole lot of hunters who go home year after year with nothing.

Elk hunting means traipsing over some of the roughest country there is, in all kinds of weather. You will work your tail off.

And statistically you will get an elk only *once every seven or eight years*.

Here’s another little statistic to ponder. In 2009 there were 47,543 elk harvested in all seasons and methods combined.

The “total recreation days” racked up by 208,529 hunters was 1,050,003 days.
That means that one elk was harvested for every 21 days of hunting!

Yeah, elk hunting is hard!

**Elk hunting is expensive.**

When you tally up your gear, travel expenses, licenses and time away from work and family, it’s probably the most expensive vacation you take every year – IF you’re lucky enough to go every year.

However, expensive as it is, a guided hunt will cost you far more. Numbers vary a lot depending on what you want, but elk hunts can run from $3,000 to $10,000 or more.

Hey, I like watching Ted Nugent whack an animal on TV from a Texas tree stand as much as the next guy. And I have nothing against guided hunts. I’ve been on them, worked for them, and hope everyone gets a chance to try it at least once.

But for those of us who aren’t rock stars, private land guided hunts are out of the question.

Or at least they’re not something we get to do every year.

**So most of us go it alone.**

I’ve been doing exactly that for over 25 years - in Colorado.

Like you, I spend all year focusing on a few precious days in the field and when I’m on the hunt, I don’t have time for mistakes, bogus information, unnecessary gear, or lack of elk.

It’s nice for outdoor sports writers to recommend several days of preseason scouting, but that’s hard for the most of us to do - me included - and I live here.
What about you guys driving from several states away?

This book is intended to provide you with no-nonsense strategies for success by knowing what to expect, what works, where to go, having fun and taking pride in the fact you didn’t drop a ton of money along the way.

I’m going to focus primarily on elk hunting, but there will be also be tips along the way if you’re a combo hunter watching for mule deer.

Much of this information will apply regardless if you’re a rifle, muzzleloader, or archery hunter, and where it differs – I’ll point that out.
Welcome To Camp

In addition to the DIY “School Of Hard Knocks”, putting countless miles on trucks, horseshoes and hunting boots, I’ve worked as a guide.

One of the most exciting parts of a guide’s job is the night before the opener when we sit our hunters down in the mess tent, tell stories, go over the rules and lay out the plans.

You and I are about to have that same conversation, only it’s not going to cost you thousands of dollars.

Some of my favorite memories are of hunters I guided who had successful hunts. It was always my experience that leading a hunter to his own first elk or mule deer is every bit as rewarding as if I’d pulled the trigger myself. In some ways, even more. I sincerely hope you write me back and tell me our pre-season “tent meeting” did the same thing for you.

Let’s hit the trail and get started. I’ll begin at the strategic level – “Where To Go?” Then we’ll gradually drill down to tactical details until we’re on our hands and knees following a blood trail.

Yup, I’ve got some tips for you there too.
Right Up Front

You know what they say about assumptions, right? Let’s make sure we’re on the same page before we start.

When you ordered this book from my website, you read my admittedly unscientific statistic -

10% of the hunters kill 90% of the elk.

So I’m writing this book for those of you in the 90% wanting to move into the 10%. That means:

- This is a book about percentages, and improving them. This is not a “guaranteed kill” book. Elk on public land are wild, free ranging animals. You will earn any success you achieve.

- There is a difference between facts and principles. Much of what you’re about to read is based on principles – from actual experience - aimed at moving you to the 10% group. There are exceptions to almost all of them, so don’t be surprised if I lay out a principal that you have seen or heard differently.

- This is not a book about trophy hunting. We will talk about bulls, and I hope you kill a big one, but let’s start filling your tag regularly before we worry about your antler score. I’m reasonably safe in figuring if you were on a die-hard Boone & Crocket quest, you wouldn’t be hunting on public land in Colorado. I will have more to say on this after we cover the basics.

- This book is not a substitution for a thorough reading and understanding of the rules and regulations where you hunt. I intend for this to be a very well rounded and complete elk hunting course, however it is critically important that you also study the big game hunting regulations brochure every year.
A Bit Of Philosophy

The cold hard facts are, if you pay several thousand dollars for a private land guided hunt, you are significantly more likely to kill an elk.

That cowboy who leads you around, tells you where to sit and what time the elk come through on their way to breakfast has an advantage you can’t buy anywhere else.

He has probably been on the back of a horse since he was ten years old, chasing cows around these same mountains year after year.

But let me tell you a guide’s little secret - one that he doesn’t put in the glossy color brochure you got at the Sportsmen’s Expo.

Those elk are still wild. They still have minds of their own and they come and go as they please.

Sure, they have patterns, habits, and preferences. Left alone, they would probably do the same thing every day every month, every year.

But, a guide can’t control the weather. He can’t control the United States Forest Service or the Bureau Of Land Management. He can’t control elk’s notions (and yes, they do have them sometimes).

And unless you’re on a bazillion-acre private ranch owned by the likes of Ted Turner, that cowboy can’t control public recreation (read, interference)

Yes, it happens. A guide puts a hunter out at the appointed time and place -

*and the elk don’t show up for the meeting!*
I don’t care if you’re on a guided hunt or not, it’s still called “hunting”. It usually isn’t easy. And it is not always predictable.

You’ve heard this one before, right? That’s why it’s called “hunting”, not “shopping”.

But your guide doesn’t worry, does he?

Why?

Because he already knows what he’s going to do when the elk don’t show up.

He’ll take you back to the tent, put a big dinner in you, accompanied by a rousing “don’t worry” pep talk, and tell you what the plan is for tomorrow.

And that plan won’t ever be the same, more than two or three days in a row.

Guaranteed!

Why not?

Because he is acutely aware you’re not paying him to go sit in the woods and stare at the same scenery for a week.

You might cut him some slack for a few days, but if you go home without seeing any elk, you’re not coming back.

One outfitter I worked for had a saying.

“You pays your money, and you takes your chances.”

Well, that might be technically true but believe me, Jerry expected all of us working on the crew to bust our tails,
sometimes around the clock, to give every client the best opportunity they could have.

And if the elk threw us a curve?

Jerry had a bag of tricks and backup plans as big as the cook tent.

This is a Do-It-Yourself book. You may be wondering why am I talking so much about guides and outfitters.

Because I believe one of the biggest boosts you can give to your own hunting success is to

**Start Thinking Like A Guide!**

Specifically, I want you to start thinking like a guide and treating yourself like the client.

I’m going to walk you through several strategies and tactics in this book. Some of them may be new to you, some may not.

The underlying theme though is not just to give you a long list of ideas to try.

I want you to learn to think about your hunting differently.

I can’t imagine anything worse than to have a customer hand me a few thousand dollars to give him a successful trip, and then not deliver.

I’m asking you to read the rest of this book (and any other books or magazines you ever read again), not with the attitude of:

“What tricks can I learn?”

but rather with the specific goal:
“What is the principal here I could use to successfully guide somebody to an elk if they had just handed me $5,000 to get it done?”

Use whatever mental imagery you have to, to get in that frame of mind.

I don’t care if you start talking out loud to yourself!

You start treating yourself and your hunt like a paying customer and things are going to change real fast!
Strategy

Let’s start with the big picture first. Then we’ll get down to details.

Before we even begin to discuss where to hunt, it is worth having a discussion about what kind of hunt you want to have. There are multiple options here, each of which may dictate certain attributes of your location choice.

Then we’ll start with a high-level look at where to go and then drill down.

What Kind Of Hunting Camp?

This is a potentially difficult and large question for you to make a decision on – or get consensus from your group. You may rethink your plan several times by the end of this book.

The point of this section is to give logical thought to your expectations so you can match your location to them. I recommend analyzing your intended camp in the following order.


2. What is your weapon and season choice?

3. How large is your hunting party?

4. What camping facilities do you have?

5. What transportation options do you have?

6. What expectations do you have about hunting pressure?

Let’s take a look at each one of these topics and how they impact your location choice.
1. What is your quarry?

If you just want to put an elk in the freezer and don’t care about antler size, it’s pretty obvious you’ll have the most flexible choices of hunting areas and the greatest chance of filling your tag.

Cows are several times more plentiful than bulls. There are more 5x5 bulls than 6x6s, etc. So in terms of meat-in-the-freezer hunts, your best bet is to focus on “animal density”. Find areas with the largest herds and highest success stats and start there.

As of the time of this writing, there are still opportunities in Colorado for a single rifle hunter to be carrying both a bull and a cow tag in certain game management units. For more on this, see the Colorado Big Game Hunting Brochure regarding license types.

If you want a shot at the bigger bulls, you will likely want to focus on areas that offer more challenging terrain, which both limits access by other hunters and provides refuge for the more mature (smarter) animals. (You should also begin racking up preference points as soon as possible).

We have a whole (new) section ahead on combo mule deer and elk hunting, but it deserves mention here that you will want to choose locations in proximity to habitat that suits both species. They do often overlap, but you can do better than hunting with an elk tag and just hoping to bump into a deer.

2. What is your weapon and season choice?

Usually hunters have chosen a weapon based on a personal preference. Primitive weapon hunters (archery and muzzleloader) have lower success rates overall and typically require longer hunts for success, but also enjoy milder weather because they are earlier in the fall. However, that same milder weather may also mean you need to hunt at higher altitudes.
Although not an absolute in every area, it is a typical pattern that the animals migrate down from high summer ranges to lower winter habitat from September to December.

A meat hunter will do well to pull cow tags for later seasons along migratory routes. A mature bull hunter would be best off to hunt high rugged country during the first rifle or primitive weapon seasons.

3. How large is your hunting party?

The number of hunters in your group will have some effect on the location you choose, if for no other reason than you may want to have room to spread out.

For example, one strategy for a group of four hunters hitting a new location for the first time would be to fan out early and cover as much terrain as possible to locate the animals. Then you can reconvene and put together plans for drives or stalks.

For example, during your map scouting exercises we’ll discuss, you may find some real honey holes that are worth checking out, but aren’t large enough to sustain group pressure. Don’t worry. There are plenty of locations for bigger groups.

The other extreme are the solo hunters. Elk hunting alone is absolutely possible, however I can not warn strongly enough about the risks. I do not recommend this for a first time elk hunter in most cases.

No offense to my friends in the east, but elk hunting is an effort unlike anything you have seen with whitetails or wild turkeys. Physical conditioning, orienteering skills, a solid game plan and a positive attitude are all necessary to pull the trigger. Then you have a 500-800 pound animal on the ground and you are in a race with the clock to keep from losing the meat. How lonely do you want to be at that moment? Please think it through carefully.
This is my personal preference, but I have found the most enjoyable hunts to be with two to four hunters during archery season and no more than five or six during rifle seasons, given room to spread out.

4. What camping facilities do you have?

By camping facilities I mean your base camp. Here are some things to consider.

If you are willing to rough it on a spike-in camp of several miles, then virtually the whole state is in your grasp. This option, especially in the earlier seasons, lets you explore the deeper portions of wilderness areas or inaccessible forest land and move away from other hunting pressure.

If, on the other hand, you need to sleep in a rented cabin in the nearest town with a daily shower and hot cup of coffee, then you will need to choose your locations within reasonable drives of nearby towns. I am not disparaging this idea at all – these are successful hunts too, but will limit where you do your map scouting.

A common scenario is to base out of a campground, where varying degrees of comfort are as limitless as what you can pull behind your truck. This may get you started with a good attitude every morning but you can also assume you’ll be marching out each morning with several others starting at the same point.

5. What transportation options do you have?

Foot-hunters are only limited by their physical ability. You can literally pull off the side of Interstate 70 on Vail Pass and head into the forest, hunting 50 yards from the truck or as much as five miles or more away.

Truth be told, at some point every hunter must depart his vehicle and do some amount of leg work before pulling the trigger. What varies with your vehicle is where that hike begins.
You may start out hiking right from a campground. If you have an ATV or smaller four-wheel-drive vehicle, there are many areas in National Forest or BLM public lands with maintained roads or trails. This allows you some creative launch points for your hike.

Keep in mind, however, that up until you put your boots on the ground, any road that’s accessible to you is accessible to any other lard-ass with enough money to buy an ATV. And there are lots of them.

Don’t expect to escape the crowds this way. Focus on my point above which is to use it to find launch points overlooked by others.

We’ll talk more about hunting with horses later, but in terms of choosing a place to hunt, horses open the door up wider than any other means. They are allowed in designated wilderness areas which means you can set up rather luxurious base camps in some extremely remote locations. However, there is overhead to this method too. Please read the chapter ahead on hunting with horses before you decide to do this.

6. What expectations do you have about hunting pressure?

Hunting pressure has probably ruined more hunts than any other factor. But not for the reason you might think.

Let’s get one thing straight. There hasn’t been true “wilderness” in the Rocky Mountains for more than a hundred years. The simple fact is, even our nationally designated wilderness areas are managed public resources. This means you can and will encounter other human beings, hunting or not, on any part of the map.

I get letters all the time from folks wanting to know how to avoid the crowds. And the answer they don’t seem to want to hear is, “Walk farther than the crowds do.” Probably no two hunters
agree on what a crowd is in the first place. But I bet a majority of hunters all wish there were fewer hunters in their spot.

And THAT is the reason hunting pressure ruins hunts. Not because they beat you to your elk, or chased them onto private land, but because they psyched you out. Don’t over-worry about this detail. Instead, plan to be flexible no matter what happens.

I do stand by the generality that the farther you get from a road, the number of other hunters will drop off exponentially. However, by the time you’re done reading this book I hope you have the confidence that – no matter what other hunters are doing – you will hunt better than they do.

If necessary, you will USE them to help you!
Sample Camps

Just to help illustrate these ideas, let me outline different hunting camp scenarios I’ve been in, and give you the pros and cons of each.

Campground near elk habitat on foot
Pros: Comfortable, safe facilities.
Cons: Easier access means more hunters.
Strategy: Archery hunters must get out farther on foot than the others. Rifle hunters should get out earlier and higher than the others – let them push the elk to you.

Campground with ATV access to elk habitat.
Pros: Comfortable, safe facilities; potential access to multiple spots over a wider area without moving camp.
Cons: Noise; same access is available to all others, regardless of their ethics or motivation. Road hunters can run you nuts.
Strategy: Use your ATV only as a means to open up more launch points on foot. Look for unexpected ones being passed over near the road, as well as access points to large sections of areas with no trails.

Campground with horses
Pros: Hunt farther on foot without worrying about meat packing logistics; excellent (silent) scouting vehicle that won’t run the elk out of an area.
Cons: Care, feeding, transporting, cost, safety issues.
Strategy: Consider renting horses from nearby stable if you’re not a year-round horse owner. Use them to scout or pack only. You still have to do the boot time!

Spike camp with horses:
Same pros and cons as horses from campground, except now you have primitive facilities for the horses as well as yourself.
Strategy: Use this option only for extreme penetration into roadless areas – five or more miles in, and only if you have the temperament and interest in spending hunting time wrangling horses.
Spike camp on foot:
Pros: foot access to spots farther in without long round trips every day.
Cons: Primitive camping conditions may wear you down faster; still on foot for the successful elk packout, only now you’re farther away from the truck than ever!
Strategy: Use a spike camp two or three miles in and hunt from there. Expect to come down every third day or so to clean up and replenish supplies. Factor in your potential meat packing distance when deciding how much farther in to hunt.
Where To Go?

Ok, you bought a 100-page Colorado topographic atlas, have a week off from work and a burning desire to sit by a campfire looking up at an elk hanging from your meat pole.

But you’ve got no idea where to go and unless your relatives own a Western Colorado mega-ranch, chances are you’re relying on a lot of magazine articles, national forest maps and word-of-mouth information.

Take heart! You can do this and I can start you off in the right direction.

First, congratulations on your choice of hunting in Colorado. For decades now we’ve had more elk than any other Rocky Mountain state – by the thousands!

Elk herds in most areas of the state have been at or above DOW objectives for several years running.

In fact right now in Colorado licenses are being aggressively allocated and there are several opportunities to legally take home TWO elk!! *

However, before you go buying a big chest freezer and rearranging your food budget, keep in mind the elk aren’t all standing around tied to trees out here.

Someone has summed up hunting in Colorado this way:

“Colorado – lots of elk, lots of people.”

The first part is definitely true. There are lots of elk.

The second part can be true too, but it need not be as discouraging as it sounds.

* For more information, see the Colorado Big Game Brochure. Look for the list of license types under “Number of allowable licenses”.

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Yes there are lots of elk hunters, but that’s a variable you have at least a little control over, either by leveraging them to help you or working a little harder than the crowd to seek solitude.

We’ll discuss both in the **Tactics** section ahead.

First, let’s work on getting your camp set up in a reasonable proximity to a hunt-able number of elk.

We’ll begin by dividing Colorado hunting in three major sections:

1) **The Front Range** - that is, all elk units east of the Continental Divide;

2) **Northwest** - units west of the Divide and north of Interstate 70;

3) **Southwest** - units west of the Divide and south of Interstate 70.

For this book, I’m going to focus on the Northwest and Southwest regions.

Yes, there absolutely are elk on the Front Range but due to the higher density of private property, I’m going to recommend that you drive an extra two or three hours and go for the “western slope”.

There are enough things to try to get right without worrying if you’re trespassing every hundred yards. *

I’m going to lay out some sample locations for you in both the Northwest and Southwest regions.

* In Colorado, you are 100% responsible to ensure you are not trespassing. The landowner is not required to post boundaries. Thorough understanding of detailed maps in your area is absolutely critical, regardless where you are hunting.
You can use some of these to plan your next trip if you want but that’s not my primary goal.

What I want you to watch and learn is the process by which a viable hunting destination can be chosen.

**NOTE:** The following are recommended starting points for those who are relatively unfamiliar with elk areas of Colorado.

- These are not secret places.
- This is not an exclusive list.
- It is not even a Top Ten list.

It will however give you a place to start your map exploration from and several places from which you can apply the rest of the principles in this book.

I absolutely expect that you will go on to discover your own wildly successful elk honey-holes. By the time you finish this book, you will be able to do that in Colorado or any other state.
Northwest Region

This is truly the “Elk Factory Of The West”.

The Colorado Division Of Wildlife says an astounding two-thirds of all elk harvested in Colorado come from this corner of the state.

Here’s a high-level breakdown of the opportunities.

Let’s begin with ground zero – the Flattops Wilderness, surrounded by the White River National Forrest, and work out from there.

For sheer numbers, animal density, and seemingly endless public land, the Flattops simply cannot be beat.

*I’ll even confess to you that after a few years of enjoying several other areas, I’m returning there for my own DIY hunt this year.*

*And the reason I don’t mind telling you my secret is there’s plenty of room and plenty of animals to go around.*

*When I’m taking youth hunters out on their first hunt and I’m looking for maximum opportunity – maximum animal density - this is it!*  

Depending on whether you are hunting on foot or horseback, penetrating deep into the Flattops Wilderness Area may or may not be in your cards.

But even if not, the surrounding areas of the White River National Forrest are still readily accessible by maintained Forest Service roads.

Spend some time pouring over topo maps of the following landmarks.

In the next section called “Find Your Elk On A Map” you will learn how to drill down from these starting points and find elk habitat.
Remember, these are starting points only – branch out from these to find the right kinds of terrain accessible to your abilities and equipment.

- Yellowjacket Pass, northeast of the town of Meeker
- Sleepycat Peak, east of Yellowjacket Pass
- Beaver Flattops, northeast of Sleepycat
- Burro Mountain, south of Buford
- Deep Lake, north of Glenwood Springs

Now, working outward from the flattroops in concentric circles, consider these possibilities:

- Piceance Creek Basin, northwest of Rifle – this is a big area. If you are an “open country” hunter who likes spot-and-stalk hunting, this is for you. Long known for it’s spectacular mule deer hunting, the elk herds are now at a level to justify this as a destination for a combo hunt. Reference a BLM map to find public land boundaries.

- Hahns Peak, north of Steamboat Springs. This is an area LOADED with elk – perennially way over the DOWs objectives! 95% of Game Management Unit 14 is public land with a broad range of habitat from timber to scrub, making it a good candidate for elk/deer combo hunts as well.

- Headwaters of the Encampment River, northwest of Walden.

- Rabbit Ears range, south of Rand

- Sheephorn Creek, Gore Range, southwest of Kremmling

- Headwaters of the Williams Fork River, northwest of Silverthorne
If you are relatively new to elk hunting in Colorado, chances are you have not accumulated many preference points for drawing premium tags. The four Game Management Units that comprise the Green River herd (1, 2, 201, 10) require many years to draw, so there's no point in buying maps or spending a lot of time scouring those for now.
Southwest Region

Ground Zero for this region will be the town of Gunnison.

You will find some spectacular country down here, including endless forests of giant aspen, carved up by deep dark canyons – often loaded with fabulous trout fishing.

Cowboy John Plute shot a bull elk in the Anthracite Basin near Crested Butte in 1899 that held the world record until 1998.

Begin your topographic hunt with these landmarks:

- Raggeds Wilderness, access due east of Paonia
- Ohio Peak, southwest of Crested Butte. Hunt either side of the road from Ohio Pass.
- Lost Lake Campground, west of Kebler Pass – hunt the north-facing slopes of East Beckwith Mountain
- Storm King Mountain/Buckhorn Lakes northeast of Ridgeway
- Uncompaghere Plateau, southwest of Montrose.
- McClure Pass, south of Carbondale. From the top of the pass, hunt north along Huntsman Ridge or access it from underneath via the creek drainages down the west side.
- La Garita Mountains, north of Creede.

There are of course many, many others.
More Resources For Choosing A Hunting Area

Call For Help

There’s no substitute for on-the-ground intel.

Good as the map research can be, it’s tough to forecast some variables from hundreds of miles away.

Road closures, fires, weather conditions, and hunting pressure are examples of things that obviously won’t turn up on even the best topo map.

This is where you need to make some calls.

The single most important person you need to talk to is the Colorado Division Of Wildlife officer who works in the field where you plan to hunt – aka “The Game Warden”.

Unfortunately, this may also be the hardest person to get ahold of. They are out and about, of course. Many of them only check in for messages every few days in their home office.

Bottom line is, you should get this line in the water early, not the day before your hunt.

Try and have a list of questions ready and carry it in your pocket for when you get the return call.

A field officer can help you assess:

- Animal Density
- Hunting Pressure
- Road Closures
- Recent Fires or Logging Activity
- Camping Options
- Current Hunter Success
- Weather and Moisture Conditions
Be sure to get the name of the officer you talk to, write it down, and given the opportunity to meet him or her in the field. Shake hands, remind them of your call, and start to build a relationship.

There is no better resource in the field than a field officer who begins to recognize you from one year to the next, and knows you as a courteous, law-abiding, hard working hunter.

And here’s a personal observation.

Whenever I recommend this, I frequently hear words like, “Why do I want to do that? Most game wardens are jerks and won’t help anyway.”

Field officers you meet are from a variety of backgrounds but the two key ingredients are wildlife management and law enforcement.

By definition, people in the law enforcement career do not get to pick and choose who they deal with all day long.

If you meet a game warden after a long day of writing up a bunch of lazy, beer-swilling, law-breaking so-called hunters, chances are you’re not getting to see them at their chipper best.

Try to cut them some slack.

And try to earn their respect and make a little small talk with them before you hit them with, “Where are all the elk?”

If you’ve already made a call to them, this process will go a little faster.

If you meet one that seems cold, mechanical, and uninformative, don’t give up.
Back off, wait for another day, another time. As I said, when they start recognizing you, and you’re a bright spot in their day rather than another whiner or troublemaker, they’ll come around.

Start by calling the regional office closest to your hunting area and they will be able to give you the number of the field officer you need. (See the resource page at the end of the book for numbers).

Also never miss an opportunity to strike up a conversation with anyone else in the area.

If you know names to call in advance, or are willing to let your fingers do the walking. One slam-dunk obvious place to call is the local sporting goods store in the nearest town to your area.

Tell them you’ll be stopping by for supplies, and get their name.

When you go, spend a little money, remind them of your call, and see what happens.

Remember, you are probably this person’s livelihood. They will usually be as helpful as they possibly can.
Statistics

I am a little fanatical about statistics. It is where I always start when analyzing a new area. I also like to watch trends for certain areas over multiple years.

Frequent checks of the DOW website will often have at least the previous year’s information online and available for free.

Most of the information is broke down by season, weapon, and private/public land hunts.

You can find out:
- Success Percentages
- Hunting Pressure
- Herd Populations
- Preference Point Requirements

Having said that, let me caution you not to go overboard with this.

I know of a game management unit not far from where I live that showed a zero percent success rate for archery last year.

I have hunted that unit more than once and know for a fact the habitat and hunting pressure should add up to better than that.

So, following my advice in the previous section, I made the call.

I talked to the main regional office as well as the officer in the field.

What I learned is that first of all, the statistics are not from a 100% sample. They are actually modeled from a telephone sample of about 25% of the hunters for that unit.

So then I talked to the field officer and learned that although the harvest was unusually low, there were at least some animals taken, including some very nice bulls.
But the officer was also able to tell me that from his up close observation and interviews the unusually dry, hot, windy weather that had prevailed last year had completely discouraged all but the most determined hunters.

Someone assessing that unit from statistics only would be inclined to skip it.

Someone who called the DOW officer would know what I know now. I just talked to him, and the weather this year is fantastic, and in the less-than-week-old archery season, he has already inspected over a dozen elk kills.

Yes, check the statistics, and do the map exercise. But don’t neglect to talk to your friendly local game warden, storekeeper, rancher, and barkeep.

Once you’ve selected an area to explore, it’s time to get down to details. We’ll do that by looking for certain terrain features and find places worth making boot tracks in.
Find Your Elk On A Map!

No kidding!

If you follow these basic directions, you are going to be able to pinpoint likely elk habitat by looking at a topographical map.

Let’s be realistic – west of Interstate I-25 there are elk scattered over most of Colorado at some point during the year.

What we are looking for is dense concentrations of them that you can quickly locate within your first two days in the field – three days max.

Let’s do a map exercise together. To do this, you need two kinds of maps.

First, in the general area of your choice, get a National Forrest map or BLM map of the area.

This will give you an idea of general road access, but more importantly, it’s your first tool in distinguishing public versus private land, usually down to the square mile if not better.
BLM Map

A BLM or national forest map with “land use” information shows several important features for starting your plan.

Above, you can see roads, private land (white), BLM land (yellow), State Land (blue), national forest (light green) and wilderness area (dark green).

There are also contour lines with enough detail to at least give you an idea of major mountain peaks, ranges and river drainages.

Second, you need a corresponding topographical map of the area for more detail - preferably a USGS Topographic Map or something similar.
Topo Map

USGS Topo maps like the sample above will show you more contour detail, water, and forested areas.

Topo maps also typically show several other details including pack trails and jeep trails.

There are other topo maps available besides USGS. Which one you choose is not as important as long as it has the detail you need.

Regardless which one you use, there are some important things to remember when looking at these maps.
Take a look at this side-by-side comparison between the BLM and topo maps for the same area around Horse Mountain.
Notice that there’s more than just a difference in contour detail.

On the topo map there is no indication of private land.

From the BLM map you can clearly see that you would need to be very aware of your location when hunting your way around Horse Mountain to avoid private property – the area in white on the BLM map.

White on a topo map indicates no trees.

White on a BLM map indicates no trespassing!

You can see from this example it’s a good idea to do your planning from both kinds of maps.

Also be aware that trails and jeep roads are not necessarily open to travel just because they are on the map. Road closures are something you can best determine from some advance telephone scouting.

Depending on what kinds of land you are hunting on, your best resource may be the U.S. Forest Service, BLM office, Division of Wildlife or State Parks where appropriate.

For contact information, see the Resource Page at the end of this book.

Now let’s get started with some detailed scouting work!
Identifying Elk Habitat

Get a topo map out on the table while we do this. If you don’t have one yet, open another window on your computer and pull up a free map such as the ones available here:

http://libremap.org/data/state/colorado/drg/

If you’ve already got a place in mind, great! If not, start with one of the places I mentioned above. But look at a map while we do this.

Begin with where your camp will be, or at the trailhead from which you’ll set out on foot.

Mentally (or in pencil) draw a two mile radius circle around your starting point.

Congratulations! You’ve probably just corralled several dozen elk!

Fat lot of good that’s done us, eh? OK, stick with me.

Chances are, there’s a portion of the circled area you can discard, such as campgrounds, private property or a major road.

Now, look inside your circle. How many of these features does it have?
1. North facing slopes.

North facing slopes are one of your best bets for finding thick, dark timber where elk hide and stay cool.

Chances are these are where elk spend the middle of hot days, and where they retreat to under hunting pressure.

When you see north facing slopes with extremely tight contour lines, very often these are thick dark lodgepole or spruce stands that you will want to check out.
**Tip:** This does not necessarily have to be the steep north slope of a cone-shaped peak. You should examine any north facing slope within your reach.

These can occur along the slopes of east/west creeks and drainages too, which also puts you nice and close to item number two...

Water!

Check out this nice pair of parallel creeks, each with an enticing north-facing slope to be explored.

Someone even thought to provide a pack trail from the west to approach it on!
2. **Water.**

Obvious, but important. If you are trying to plan a hunt sight- unseen, make sure the *major* water source you count on is not a dotted blue line, which can be seasonal runoff.

Look for solid blue creek line, or standing water such as small ponds or lakes. I prefer to find both.

Elk can drink wherever water flows, but there is something they really like about a night time drink from a quiet beaver pond.
Tip: Dotted blue lines ARE worth exploring when you’re scouting the headwaters of creek drainages. Many times you will find a spring at the top of these, accompanied by a nice muddy wallow. These are where bulls throw their mud-slinging rut parties!

I like the spot shown at right because it has three headwaters within close proximity of each other.

It’s actually possible to sit on the hump between two of them and glass the spring-fed wallows.

It’s a nice setup to catch a bull sneaking in for a midday cool-off in the mud.

Perfect!
3. Meadows.

White areas on flat ground or relatively mild slopes can indicate grassy meadows. Surrounding timber provides quick access to cover or shade.

Elk under pressure can browse for a long time while hiding in thick dark timber, but they much prefer grazing.
You aren’t likely to catch them out in an open meadow midday, but having these in close proximity means less travel to food.

Up until you pressure them, elk would rather be lazy and graze in meadows like these.

Shelves on the side of steep slopes are some of the best honey-holes you can find. They provide a resting place with a view, and emergency exits.

Often times the additional benefit of grass – even a small meadow – can sweeten the pot.

It is not strictly necessary but finding these kinds of shelves or benches right above steep, nasty north-facing slopes has the added benefit of a nearby escape route.

Rest assured, elk are always keenly aware of their nearest exit when you show up!
Tip: As stated above, north facing slopes are usually your best bet for thick timber.

There are exceptions.

One of the busiest elk spots I’ve ever found is this little bench on a south facing slope. And it’s not very big, either.

Location A in this map wasn’t bad, but the sweet spot turned out to be that little bump at B.

You can see this is a seriously steep mountain. The bench makes a rare and welcome resting place.

I found the elk tend to “park” on that shelf at B during their steep descent to the flat park and water below. They would wait there until dark to make the final approach.

Game trails cross through this bench from three different directions! Also, a solid year-round creek flows just a hundred yards below.

These kinds of anomalies on steep slopes are worth checking out!
5. Saddles.

Anywhere you can find a “dip” between two higher points forms a saddle.

How many saddles can you find to investigate in this area?

I like these formations for several reasons.

They frequently are used by elk as a travel path between different areas. For example, crossing from one grazing area to another, or from one river drainage to another. Often they are escape routes when the elk start getting pressured.

Saddles also provide excellent glassing opportunities.
If you find a good saddle, sit on whichever peak is downwind, and glass the low spot and opposing slope.

Saddles also tend to funnel elk into concentrated travel paths when they are moving from one area to another.

I’ve watched one such saddle produce an elk for the same hunter for four years running now, three cows and one 5 point bull.

He sets up a tree stand above two game trails that cross through the saddle.

The elk aren’t staying in there, but they sure go through it on their way to somewhere else!
The saddle between these two humps has a couple of added bonuses.

First, lots of open meadow area for grazing.

Second, the steep dropoff to the north provides the bench effect.

Unharassed, elk will bed on the edge during the day, and feed in the meadow at night.

The standing water at the small lakes to the southeast sweetens the pot even more.

**Saddle Tactic:** (see map above)

The early morning approach is from the left (west) on the marked trail. Before sun-up, be on top of the right peak. This allows you to approach from the west without being caught in the breezes that typically run that direction later in the day.

From the higher vantage point on the right, there is clear glassing opportunity down into the meadows and the west peak.

If you bed one down, stalk him upwind – *and shoot him!*
Did you notice that the area between these two peaks forms a bench overlooking a north-facing slope?

If you don’t see anything by the time the sun is high and the day is warm, sneak down to the bench level and still-hunt the rim, working whichever direction the wind dictates.

You very well could sneak up behind one bedded down looking off that steep slope.

This is a killer elk hole, up in the Encampment River drainage!
6. **Squeeze Spots – or Natural Funnels**

Other features besides saddles can have the effect of concentrating elk travel to a single trail.

Any time you identify radically steep contour on a map that is white – i.e. no timber – check it out. A steep cliff or large rockslide might be impassible for elk.

Wherever that happens, you almost always find a well-traveled game trail along the border.

**Tip:** This does not necessarily have to be a large area to be effective.

The white steep slope underneath the peak shown at right is an impassible rockslide. Animals approaching from the southwest on their way to the large grazing meadows to the north are concentrated along the base of the rockslide and then through the small saddle.

The game trail along this route is heavily traveled.

Working along the rim of a steep canyon can give you a long line which you know the elk have to work around, thereby identifying concentration spots.
7. South-Facing Slopes

North-facing slopes seem obvious. But that does not mean you should ignore or overlook south-facing slopes. They have a place in your hunt plan too.

Generally the rule of thumb is that north-facing slopes are your best bet for thick, dark, cool timber for refuge.

South-facing slopes are frequently covered with aspen, allowing for some very productive early morning glassing.

However, there are certain circumstances when south-facing slopes also provide cool, safe bedding areas. Look at this map:

The south-facing “bowls” above this creek are serious hideouts for bulls.

What you can’t see from the map is that they are covered in thick, six to ten foot high scrub oak.

Throughout this cover are game trails that are like tunnels through a thick jungle.

Although difficult to hunt directly, ambushing elk heading in and out of this cover is a good tactic.

An elk bedded down in this area during the day might give himself up with a bark once in awhile.

Until you lay eyes on this slope (such as glassing from the knob on the south side) you wouldn’t know this is a scrub oak-covered elk hideout!
Now that we’ve covered several key elk indicators you can find on a map, it’s time to try your own map exercise.

Spend some time looking over several topo maps. Start getting a feel for spotting areas with these features.

Talk yourself through why you think they are good areas or not.

It will likely occur to you that the more of these terrain features you can locate within a concentrated area the better. And that is exactly the goal.
Analyzing A **Wildly Successful** Elk Area

OK. Let’s put it all together. I am going to show you what a truly productive elk area looks like.

Take a look at this map.

Steep, timbered areas (1) provide shade and refuge.

An abundance of meadows (2) for grazing, mixed with standing and flowing water sources.

Relatively flat bench area above a steep slope (3) provides mid day rest with ready escape routes.

Saddle (4) is the route of travel or escape to an entirely different area to the south.

Highest point of this entire north-facing sloped area (5) and the beginning point for a good days hunt!

A World Class Elk Area
*All on Public Land!*

So how good is the Burro Mountain area above?

I’ll tell you.
Remember this picture from my website?

This six point bull was killed at the west edge of a meadow, just a few yards above the beginning of a creek drainage.

It was on the opening morning of first rifle season.

My brother and I were hunting by ourselves but four other bulls were killed within the area shown on this map – all on that same morning!

We know about those other bulls because they were all from the same outfitter’s camp about 500 yards from ours.

Need more detail than that? How about the coordinates?

40° 11.21'N, 107° 22.16'W

In my GPS, that waypoint is labeled, “Dead Bull”!

Five bulls
Three hours
One morning!
How Did You Do?

So look at your two mile circle. How many of these features does it have? All of them? Most of them?

If you’ve got most of them, mark that as a place to go see.

But you’re not done!

As your guide, I wouldn’t let you bet your whole trip on just one spot, even if it’s the best one in the area.

Do yourself a favor, and layer your hunt with multiple backup plans.

We’re going to talk about how to do that next.
Backup Plans

Let’s say you did the map exercise above, and the spot you selected passes muster. It has all the features needed to support elk.

Now you load all your gear, drive a thousand miles to get to camp and arrive all fired up to hunt.

Unfortunately, your “spot” seems to have also been selected by a large herd of free-range cattle. (Yes, we still have those here)

Every time you bugle, an old humpbacked Brahma bull screams back and comes looking for you.

It’s not a fun way to hunt elk, having to dodge cranky bulls and sloppy cow pies the size of truck tires. That doesn’t mean the elk evaporate but they may feel uncomfortable enough to move on.

Of course there was no way you could see this coming from looking at a map and now you’re stuck with it.

The answer, of course, is as plain as the nose on your face. Have another location already picked out.

In fact, have two more.

Remember the two mile radius circle you drew? What was the center of your circle – camp? A trailhead? The end of a gravel road?

Here are a couple of things you can do.

First, if you are in good shape, consider adding another mile or two to the radius of that circle.

Does that open up any new possibilities?
New creek drainages, major food sources, or access to a different set of north facing slopes and benches are worth considering.

This might do the trick, but be careful, and be realistic!

I will always encourage you to hunt hard.

But it’s no use if you blow yourself out physically and are unable to execute the rest of your plan.

If you are hunting on foot and are in good shape, you can consider terrain within 3-5 miles.

Just don’t forget that packing out a downed elk is a Round Trip Ticket, and if you are doing it on your back, you need at least three trips for a boned-out cow, four for a bull.

That’s a lot of miles if you don’t have help. Got a partner? Great. A horse? Even better.

Just remember in the midst of all this planning to **plan for success**!

Second, get out that BLM or National Forrest Map again.

Look at the road you are driving in on, or other open roads nearby. Often, a short 5 or 10 minute drive can get you within walking distance of entirely new areas to explore.

Try hopping over a ridge into a new drainage system.

Also, if possible, consider a location at a significantly different altitude than what your primary spot is.

I’ll say more about this in the **Troubleshooting** chapter, but one reason your good looking map spot may surprise you with no elk is because they are hanging either higher or lower for a variety of reasons.
How Many Backup Plans Should You Have?

I would recommend two locations minimum and an additional one for every three days of your hunt, per pair of hunters in your group.

In other words, if you have a group of four hunters and you are hunting six days, you should have four spots you've chosen from the map exercise above.

**WARNING:** Jumping to your backup plan too easily or too soon can make your chances of success worse, not better!!

I am deliberately putting off the discussion of *implementing* your backup plan until after we talk about two more critical ingredients:

1. Daily Routine and Tactics
2. Mental Attitude And Toughness

DO NOT SKIP AHEAD AT THIS POINT!
Daily Routine and Tactics

At 4:30 AM your watch alarm starts beeping.

It’s instinctive. You don’t even have to come out of REM sleep to kill that baby.

But at 4:35, your buddies Big Ben Traveler Alarm Clock blows the tent flaps out, and you’re on your feet.

It’s still dark when you and your partner start stumbling up the trail, waiting for the coffee you scalded your tongue on this morning to start working.

Where are you going?

What are you going to do when you get there?

A hunter who hasn’t answered those questions – before he walks out of the tent – is basing any chance of getting an elk on pure luck.

We can do way better than that.

Your guide certainly wouldn’t feed you breakfast, kick you out and say,

“Go walk around in the woods and shoot something”.

So don’t do it to yourself!

A Day Plan

Remember the map exercise we did earlier? Get the topo map back out, and pick one of those two mile circles you drew.

Now remind yourself why you chose that spot. Review again your:
• Water Sources
• North Facing Slopes
• Meadows
• Benches
• Saddles
• Squeeze Spots

Now, take into consideration your approach to the area.

This may or may not be a trail, but when you are bumbling through in the dark at 4:30, you’re probably going to choose the easiest travel you can.

That’s fine – with one major caveat –

**Wind**

Allow me to climb on a soapbox for a minute.

Never, ever, EVER approach a good hunting area without the wind in your face.

I don’t care if you own stock in the largest scent mask company there is! If you don’t hunt the wind, you lose.

Period.

I’ll talk more about scent shields and scent covers in the section on **Gear And Accessories**.

The bottom line for planning your daily routine is whether you use them or not,

**Always Hunt The Wind!**

So back to your approach.
You’re planning a day in an area you don’t know well yet. How do you know what the wind is going to do?

You don’t.

That doesn’t sound like much help, but it does dictate what you do – plan a flexible approach.

**Example:**

Let’s say the feature you want to hunt is a bench on the north face of a mountain.

You have a theory that because it has a small meadow in it, a bull who sleeps there for cover and seclusion can also graze there.

So you want to see it very early in the morning and try to spot him before he beds down.

How can you plan your attack?

I generally plan on the prevailing breezes to be from west to east, with two major exceptions.

One exception is in the early morning. Much of the time, you can count on morning breezes to be traveling downhill off of mountainsides.

Once the sunlight starts hitting lower in the valleys and warming the air, it will reverse for awhile, until it adjusts back into the west-to-east pattern for the rest of the day.

Another exception is any time a storm is approaching and there are significant pressure swings going on.

This is the most maddening kind of thing, because the wind can be changing directions almost constantly.
Two well known expert elk hunters recommend staying in camp when that is going on, for fear of stinking up the entire area with man-smell and driving off any elk in the county.

That’s okay advice – sometimes.

If you have located the elk, you are consistently getting on them in a known location, then by all means back off to avoid blowing the deal.

However, if you’re on day two or three of not finding elk, and are seriously considering whether you should fall back to a second location, quitting for any excuse – wind or otherwise – could cause you to misjudge an area.

It’s a delicate balance, and you have to go with your gut, but only sit in camp for the right reasons!

So back to our example, the bench meadow on the north slope of a mountain.

1. Climb the back (south) of the hill, until you are nearing the same altitude as the bench.

2. If the wind is flowing downhill, as it often is in the morning, stay below the bench and start working your way around the side. If it’s a rare morning where there’s no breeze at all, you may want to top out on the peak and glass down on the bench.

3. If there’s a clear indicator of a lateral wind direction, go with that. But if it’s not definitive, or if it’s just simply downhill wherever you are (often the case), then bet on approaching the bench from the east. This sets you up for later in the day when the wind starts to consistently come from the westerly direction. You’ll be on the downwind end of the bench.
This is an example of course. I’m trying to convey a way of thinking, not necessarily absolute wind predictions.

Let’s look at this from a bigger view.

Maybe you are going into your two mile circle for the first time, on the first day, and you just simply want to “scout” the entire area as quickly as possible to determine if the elk are even in your vicinity.

This is at least an all day project, if not two days, when done slow and careful.

Consider starting at first light on the eastern-most point of your circle, somewhere with a good binocular-view of as much as possible – especially any open areas like southern slopes or meadows.

Spend the first morning glassing, while the elk are most likely to be moving and visible. Keep this up until the day warms and they fade back into the thicker cover.

By now, the wind should start settling into the more predictable approach from the west, and you can start threading your way through the other features, working upwind as you go.

This kind of plan sets you up to be glassing at the right time of day, and approaching the best spots with the wind in your face.

**Daily Routine For Success**

Let’s get one little secret right out in the open.

The elk are not in camp!

I know once in awhile your sore feet and aching muscles are going to need a break, but understand this – every minute you are in camp, you are not finding elk, and you are not killing elk.
The only reason to hunt as if there are better or worse times of the day is if you somehow believe there are less elk in the woods at some times of the day than others.

It’s not the elk who disappear midday – it’s the hunters who do.

Mark it down. Guys who stay in the field all day long from dawn to dusk kill more elk than guys who don’t.

Many, many elk, including big bulls, get killed after 11:00AM and before 3:00PM.

When you plan your day, a simple way to look at it goes like this:

1. From first light to mid morning – two or three hours.

   Elk are most likely up and around, grazing in meadows, or leisurely grazing their way toward midday cover.

   If you already know where they are, you should be working the edges of those feeding areas.

   If you don’t know where the elk are, you should be up higher and glassing exactly these kinds of areas to locate them.

   Elk under moderate pressure will still follow this pattern, but move to cover earlier in the day.

2. Midday – from mid morning to late afternoon. Probably the most misunderstood and under-hunted part of the day.

   Elk don’t like to be hot, and they don’t like to be bothered.

   Mid day they solve both by heading for cover and bedding down where they can stay cool, and where they can best observe any approaching threats.
Other than a hot and heavy rut-party where bulls come on the run to every bugle, my favorite hunting tactic is a slow still hunt along the edge of a bench, trying to catch them in bed.

If the terrain and timber are right, this is also a decent time of day to spend behind binoculars.

If you know from a topo map where there are several north-facing benches you can glass from an opposite slope higher up, this is a good time to spot them.

Another good use of midday for rifle hunters is to organize drives through suspected bedding or thick cover areas.

Three hunters cresting over a ridge above a north facing slope at hundred yard intervals can sure put on a party for the designated shooters above and below the expected escape routes!

3. Evening – the last two hours of shooting light. Elk start rousing from their mid day beds, and head down hill.

Frequently you can catch them ambling down toward areas of open meadows and major water sources for the night.

Even if elk have water and browse up in their high, timbered bedding areas, they really like coming down to graze and drink in lower meadows at night.

If you are observing actively used game trails, set yourself up to ambush them on this nightly downhill run.

Most hunters understand evening is a critical time of day for catching elk on the move.

Unfortunately, most hunters don’t like walking back to camp in the dark and quit too early.
Something happens when that sun goes down, the temperature drops, and thoughts of a hot dinner weigh on our minds.

Lonely, cold, and tired, we act like barn-running horses and head back at a lope.

Ahhhhhhhhhh!

Don’t be that guy!

Stick it out. Take a flashlight. Take an extra snack. Make up your mind getting back to camp an hour or two after sundown is not only okay, it’s The Plan.

Want a good reason to stay put until dark?

Elk are no dummies.

It doesn’t take them long to realize that when they come running to a bugle, there’s a little green man at the other end of the journey trying to throw a stick at them.

Some times they flat shut up during the day.

But they aren’t as worried about you in the dark. And elk love ripping off big bugles in the night!

What if you hike in two miles, hunt all day and see and hear nothing. Discouraged and convinced it’s a dry hole, you head for camp at sundown.

What will you do tomorrow with that information?

Or?

What if instead, you stay put for an hour after dark, and a bull lights up with a bugle in a ravine underneath you, well…
Where are YOU going to be at first light the next morning?

Can you wait an extra hour for dinner in exchange for that kind of information?

I can!

**An Example Day Plan**

Let me describe a terrain feature to you, and how I hunt it.

This is a neat little idea that is completely adjustable to your physical conditioning.

You can go as far and hard as you want, or dial it down if necessary.

I also want you to notice *how* I describe it to you.

If I were your guide, sending you out for the day, this is exactly what I would tell you to do.

This example is from a real place and I hunt it exactly the same whether during an archery or rifle season, whether during the rut or not.

From camp, there is a creek drainage that climbs up for about three miles, generally to the south but also has a slight curvature to the east.

That means that the west side of the creek has the features of a north-facing slope – i.e. thick, dark timber. It is a steep, rugged slope, typically 500 feet high and running the long length of the creek.
I have found that elk really like to spend the warm part of the day bedded down on the crest of that ridge or on the occasional bench just under the ridge, and look down toward the creek.

West of the ridge line, the terrain has a wide flat section, climbing at about the rate as the creek below.

It is easy walking and intermittently has meadows, aspen stands, and some pine.

Here is how I hunt it. I call it the “buttonhook”.

I head out from camp before first light, but not ridiculously early because I'll be in hunting mode a half mile from camp. No sense being there before shooting light.

I head due west, crossing the creek and climbing that bear of a slope to get up on the flat top to the west.

I continue west about a quarter of a mile away from the creek and then turn south, up the gentle incline of the flat top area.

Now it’s easy travel, so I can dictate the pace by any number of variables.

Since it’s early morning and I’m heading somewhat uphill, the breeze is almost always in my face.

If at any time I need to adjust to random breeze changes, I always adjust to the west, always farther way from that creek and the ridge above it.

I don’t want to pollute it for the second half of the strategy.

If the rut is on, I don’t mind bugling in here, but being this close to camp, the elk are usually too smart for that and I rarely call.

The still-hunting in this area is good enough anyway.
I tend to work it in spurts, moving from one meadow to the next, pausing in the trees between to spend time glassing as far as I can see.

I’ll continue this pattern heading generally up and to the south for the first three or four hours of the morning.

If it is early in the season and hot, I’ll go farther just to gain the altitude.

If it is a later season, I don’t need to go as far. Besides, the days are shorter and there’s less time to cover the distance.

If the elk present themselves during this phase, I work them where I find them.

But even if I don’t see a single animal, I am still in a positive frame of mind because for me, this has all just been the setup for the best part anyway…

At some point mid to late morning, I will stop and turn back east, working my way over to the ridgeline above the creek below.

This is usually the highest risk point of the plan, because occasionally the wind has moved into it’s west-to-east pattern and I have about a half mile to cover with the wind sometimes at my back.

If that’s the case, I try to get that part over with quickly.

Then, just because there is something in me that always wants to go up, I will continue upward along that ridgeline until I find a spot that “feels right” - maybe only a hundred yards or so.

Now it is time to sit, glass, listen, and eat lunch.

When it gets warm and I start to feel sleepy sitting there, I know it’s time to move.
Hugging the top of the ridgeline, I work the slowest, most careful still hunt I can, back down the ridgeline toward camp (hence the name “buttonhook”).

I return on a route parallel to the morning ascent, but about a half mile to the east.

Since I have seen it before, I expect to find elk bedded down on the ridge, looking downhill. This usually brings me in on their blind side.

That is especially true when there is a bull by himself.

When I find a group of cows or lonely satellite bulls together, it’s a lot harder to sneak in on them in bed, but it sure is exciting!

It is typical to have the wind either in my face or hitting my left side from the northwest on this descent, so usually the wind is not hard to manage.

Once in awhile though it may start to pressure me from about my seven or eight o’clock position and I have to take care not to get blown from behind.

Whenever possible, I do this by dropping off the rim and down into the ravine just a bit.

When there’s a game trail to do this on, it’s great. When I’m side-hilling through trees, it is rough.

Occasionally there are small benches just down under that rim, in the thick timber.

There’s almost always a game trail leading in and out of these, and they are hands-down my favorite elk spots anywhere!

If I time it right, I can spend most of the afternoon hours snooping down this ridgeline.
At about the time I expect the elk to be on the move, I will stop and set up on an intersection of at least two game trails.

It is here I will sit for an hour past shooting light. If the rut is on, I wait longer - and listen!

You never know when a night bull will give himself up, letting you know exactly where to be in the morning.

I hope this gives you an idea of how to work out a day plan, factoring in the types of terrain, the times of day, and the wind.

Strive to have this level of detail but also flexibility to accommodate running into weather, other hunters, or – even better - elk!

With practice, you will be able to guide yourself on an endless array of game plans that should keep you in the field all day, every day.

Hopefully, the guys who spent the afternoon in camp complaining will at least have the courtesy to have dinner ready for you when you arrive!
Bugling Tactics

There is a wealth of information published in books and magazines about bugling.

Many very good tapes and videos can instruct you in how to sound like an elk, what those sounds mean, and so on.

My intent here is not to teach a bugling course, but rather to tell you what I have seen work in the field, in terms of incorporating bugling into your daily routine.

There are some really exciting TV shows depicting bugled elk coming on the run to a call and getting arrowed by a hunter placed 50 yards out in front of the caller –

and conveniently right in front of the camera!

It shouldn’t come as any surprise that the best of those videos, with bull after raging bull coming in, are filmed by folks who want to sell you calls or guided hunts.

I’m not saying they’re staged or illegitimate. I’m just making an observation.

I’ll bet you’ve noticed the same thing.

Also, if you’ve spent any time blowing a call in the woods, it’s not normally like the TV shows – especially hunting public land.

I can tell you from experience, if you are in the right area, at the right time, with the right weather and the right setup, you absolutely can bring a screaming bull in on the run.

And it will rock your world!

However, if you have to schedule your hunt months in advance, from a thousand miles away, you may not get to pick the weather you hunt in.
You might not have any idea what kind of hunting pressure you’ll be competing with when you arrive.

Chances are, most of your hunts aren’t going to play out like a Primos “Truth” video.

Do the bulls still bugle during the rut in crowded Colorado areas?

Yes, they do.

But it is observably true that the increase in the number of skilled callers, combined with better bugle technology (easier to operate!) has changed the behavior of rutting bulls.

Look. Twenty five years ago, my college buddy and I waltzed into the Anthracite Creek basin, armed with little more information than a bugling tape and the knowledge that the world record was still held by a bull from that area.

We were so broke, my buddy Todd was using an old Volkswagen heater hose for a bugle tube.

We walked into an area for the first time in the dark, based on my idea of map scouting at the time, waited for shooting light, and cut loose with our bugles.

Frankly, we didn’t sound all that great.

But we got answers immediately, both uphill and downhill from our location!

After our hearts slowed down to 5,000 rpm, we remembered the crowded parking lot at the trail head and automatically assumed we were in a nest of other hunters.

We laid our bows down in the waist-high ferns and settled in to have a little fun at the other guy’s expense.
Todd honked his VW again and I followed it with my plastic reed bugle that sounded more like a screaming elephant than anything in the elk family.

Sixty seconds later, a four point bull walked in on us and stared from twenty yards away!

Our bows were lying helplessly on the ground and we stood there like a couple of idiots, wondering what to do next.

What we did do next was listen to the crash of the fleeing second bull that came up from behind us!

He either saw or winded us, and fled before we turned around. That inspired the bull in front of us to do the same.

We laid down in the ferns to wait for our knees to stop shaking.

Back at the trailhead, comparing notes with other hunters, we found out that nearly everyone was having that kind of success.

It was just crazy!

Over a period of time we learned that area well enough to know I had been right about that spot on the map, but it was not every day that kind of bugling action happened.

Once in awhile, every two or three years, we still time it right and run into bulls that are fired up like that, but it usually only lasts a day or two before they either get killed or the pressure shuts them up.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to discourage you from bugling.

Bring your tubes and reeds and hopefully you find bulls all charged up for a showdown. You know how to hunt them if they are.
I want to tell you what to try when they aren’t.

First, keep in mind that it isn’t the change in weather that causes the rut to begin.

Wildlife biologists tell us it is actually triggered by the shortening of the days in the fall.

So, that means even in the hottest, driest fall with hunters crawling all over the place blowing bad bugles and scaring them to death, the bulls are still “in the rut” — biologically speaking.

But their behavior is not the same.

Maybe you’ve seen this — you bugle all day all through the woods and get not a single response.

But lying in your tent at night, when you can’t possibly hunt them, the hills are alive with the sound of music!

It’s frustrating, I know.

But let me share with you a little trick to keep in mind about bulls like this.

Even if the weather is hot, even if the bulls are under pressure and call shy, even if they howl at the moon all night and snub you during the day, they are in the rut.

That means they still have the “urge”, if you know what I mean. They just aren’t vocal about it.

Or I should say, they aren’t as vocal about it.

But they will still give themselves up if you know what you are listening for.

My hunting buddy Troy and I came up with a name for this phenomenon. We call it the
“I-Can’t-Help-Myself Bugle”

And that’s exactly what it is.

That poor bull is sitting out there all day, trying his level best to be quiet because of all the little green men sneaking around in the forest.

But the urge is strong and, try as he might to suppress it, sometimes it just bursts out - like Tom Sawyer trying to stifle a giggle in church!

If, as I advised above, you are not wasting the mid day hunt sitting in camp, you might hear the ICHM bugle - especially if you are perched above a nice cool thick stand of timber.

What does it sound like?

The best way I know to describe it is a meek version of the warning bark you’ve learned about on the bugling instruction tapes.

But, because he’s trying to suppress it, there are many varieties.

I even heard one bull fart, he was trying so hard to hold it in!

Now, if you locate a bull by the ICHM bugle, or you hear a “normal” bugle, what you do next is absolutely critical.

First, resist the urge to start calling at him. I know that’s the exciting way it happens in the movies. But let me warn you, it’s a rare bull that will tolerate more than one mistake at this point.

You’ve got to get it right.

Second, make your best attempt to figure out approximately where he is. This is hard to do, because sound is a deceiving way to judge distance and direction sometimes.
But you have to try.

Third, assess the wind immediately. The last thing you want to do is charge in on him with the wind at your back.

Fourth, while you are waiting for him to make another noise, circle around to get downwind from him.

This is a hard part to get right. You can’t dilly dally around making too long of a trip out of it, but you don’t want to get spotted either.

By the way, being seen or smelled is worse than being heard at this point. All kinds of critters make noise in the woods, including elk.

But you’re the only one who smells like you, covered in scent shield, burping last night’s chili dinner.

Better to swing a wide circle and travel fast, rather than trying to be close and move slow.

Fifth, begin to approach the bull once you are certain of being downwind. How fast you do this part depends on how vocal he’s being.

If he’s just a happy fellow talking to himself, he might make noises every few minutes.

If he’s a pressured bull, trying to hold it in until he bursts, you might not hear the ICHM bugle but once every half hour or more, and you’ll have to move very carefully.

Most important of all, you are not to do any bugling or calling of any kind until you absolutely know you are less than 100 yards from him.

Less is even better.
Let me explain that.

In the early part of the rut, lone bulls who start feeling pressured by hunters will casually start walking away from any bugle that is out at a distance and closing in.

Again, they are not stupid and learn quickly from experience.

In the later part of the rut, bulls who have built the beginnings of their harem have a double incentive not to wait around to meet you.

They’ve learned that some of the bugles are little green men, but even if it’s truly another bull calling, now they have something to lose.

It’s an amazing sight to watch a frantic bull round up and push a group of cows out of an area. They are as good as any cowboy’s favorite cutting horse and they don’t like to leave any girls behind.

You don’t want to trigger that rodeo from 200 yards away and then try to keep up with him.

Even if that bull takes the time to stop and answer you now and then (so as to not lose face with the girls) you are in for an ugly kind of marathon that he will win.

But, if you get inside that magic 100-yard zone before you cut loose with a bugle, he will react totally differently.

And usually it looks like this: He will come up out of his bed, scream, and head right for you!

I guess it’s not necessary to point out that is the reaction we are all looking for!

You may have read this tidbit casually mentioned in a magazine article, or discussed on a bugling video.
But I am here to tell you that in today’s world of bugle-smart bulls, this is the difference between success or failure.

**Cow Calling**

Again, in the interest of not repeating information readily available everywhere, I won’t go into details of how to cow call.

You absolutely should learn to operate a mouth-diaphragm cow call, no matter what season or weapon you hunt with.

I’ll explain why in a minute.

First, let me give a shameless (and unpaid) plug for the push-button cow call sold by Primos.

As my Dad used to say, “*That’s the best thing since the hogs ate my little brother!*”

It is almost completely idiot-proof and sounds fantastic.

Because it occupies one hand though, it doesn’t serve *every* situation.

One thing I like to do is set up a ladies gossip session.

With me and a partner each operating both a mouth call and a push-button call, we have ourselves a regular cow-party!

If you can operate a mouth call, put that thing in and get it ready any time you are closing in on a shooting opportunity.

You may or may not seduce a hot and bothered bull to come to your call.

That’s great if you can. But it serves at least four other important purposes.
• One, if you have an elk, either bull or cow, crossing through your shooting lanes but not stopping, you can chirp a cow call at it and many times you can stop them dead in their tracks.

If you’re a bow hunter, you had better be at full draw or have good cover before you pull this stunt because they will look right at you!

• Two, use it for cover if you are either walking fast or completely blow a stalk by stepping on a branch – or even falling down. (Yeah, there’s a story there – I’m just not gonna share it right now.)

I will share this story though –

One time my buddy and I had given up on an area for the day and we were carelessly marching out toward camp to go regroup over a map.

Almost as a challenge, we sort of got into a cow calling contest and were hooting back and forth at each other like a couple of fools.

All of a sudden we heard running hooves bearing down on us from behind.

We were overtaken by a group of a half dozen cows going at a dead run!

When they saw us, they kept right on going before we could unquiver an arrow, but it was real exciting!
And it was a valuable lesson.

• Three – after you shoot, blow that cow call a couple of times.
Frequently you can stop a fleeing elk that way, or at least confuse them enough to slow them down.

• Four – You can also use a cow call to trigger the ICHM bugle mentioned above.

If you are hunting severely over-bugged bulls, this is the way to go.

**Still-Hunting Tactics**

By still-hunting, I am referring to the method of sneaking along on foot, slowly and quietly enough that you can approach an elk without spooking it.

Some elk experts say you should move about freely, not worrying about making noise, because elk are noisy.

I agree elk are noisy, and cracking a branch or twig under feet *may* not be a major error.

But, hunting sloppy WILL get you busted more often than not.

The general idea of still-hunting is that you are looking for elk and need to cover ground, but you don’t want to push them.

Here are some tactics you can choose from and fine tune, depending on your area and proximity to elk.

• **High Speed Ridge-Running**

  If you are really in a hurry to locate the elk, you can try this.

  It is effective if you are lucky enough to be hunting the heat of the rut and bulls are giving themselves up.
Simply put, you are cruising a ridgeline or high ground of some kind and casting your bugle down into ravines to try to locate a bull.

It is extremely fun when you are in that narrow window of time when it can work.

You can also travel this way to glass a large amount of country.

This is most effective in mornings and evenings of course when the elk are also up and around, skirting open areas where you can see them.

**Fast Sneak**

Probably the most misused tactic, and the source of many a blown situation. Simply put, you are covering ground as fast as possible without being seen, winded, or creating unreasonable noise.

This is the mode to be in when you are cruising your map features for the first time and trying to locate elk in your two-mile circle.

A common pitfall is to “zone out” and turn into a walking zombie with your awareness level way down. All of us have pushed elk this way at one time or another.

Keep your wits sharp by developing a routine that breaks up the monotony.

A pilot once told me he was trained to develop a schedule with his eyes.

His primary focus was looking out the window at the horizon.
Every 10 or 15 seconds he would glance down at a particular set of gauges. Then back at the horizon.

15 seconds later he would check gauges again.

You can develop a similar regimen. If you think of looking at the ground for scat, tracks, or noisemaking objects as being your “gauges”, remember check your horizon too!

You will find this slows you down considerably. It will reduce the number of times you bumble into elk because you were busy looking at poop.

Another idea, and the one I actually prefer, is to spot a certain destination, perhaps 20, 40, or 60 yards away, cover it at a careful but deliberate pace, and then stop.

How far you go depends on the thickness of the cover and the freshness of the sign you’ve been seeing.

Another kind of terrain to use this stop-and-go method is areas that contain scattered meadows with bands of trees in between.

You can’t cross a meadow unseen anyway, so cover that quickly.

But then stop in the trees and carefully check the tree-line around the next meadow before exposing yourself again.

Whenever you do stop, take the time to look and listen for several seconds.

Give the elk time to move or sound off before you do.

Also take this opportunity to glass through the trees with your binoculars. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking binoculars are only a big open-country tool.
It almost always surprises new hunters how far you can see with this technique, and how often you will see an ear, a brown leg, or part of a tan rump.

Glassing through trees is extremely effective through aspen covered areas.

It is easy to allow your circle of awareness to close in to the nearest trees. Try looking as far as you can through aspen.

Frequently an area that feels like an aspen “forest” will have lanes of visibility over a hundred yards or more.

For you hunters in the rifle seasons when the aspen have shed their leaves, that visibility doubles again!

Keep in mind that while you are moving, you can be seen by any elk within that same distance you can glass.

And while you are moving, you aren’t glassing.

If that doesn’t slow you down to look, listen, think and observe frequently, I don’t know what will!

- **Slow Sneak**

  There are times when you just get a feeling in your gut that the elk are close and it’s time to slow down.

  Or maybe the evidence is right there at your feet – a nice steaming green mushy elk dookie.

  The most frequent mistake made in this mode is deluding yourself into thinking if you move really slow, they can’t see you.

  Wrong.
If you move – PERIOD – they can see you.

You have to break this up into tiny segments and move only when you know you are clear.

If you don’t know, don’t move.

This is when you have to take observation to the extreme.

You will probably need to move slow enough to clear every lane of observation before taking more than one or two steps.

Decide what your interval of movement will be, and then FORCE yourself to stop and observe.

If I’m in an area that deserves this kind of attention, I will stop every two steps – four at the most, but always an even number of steps.

The reason for this is a painfully learned bow hunting lesson. If you stop with your right foot forward, and you’re a right-handed shooter, you can’t shoot worth beans!

• **The Stalk**

If you are in the happy situation of having located an elk and you have the wind in your face, it’s time to stalk.

The basic rule of thumb here is, continue as you would in the slow sneak mode.

The reason it get’s separate mention is only to make a huge point of one major mistake you must not make:

**Don’t get tunnel vision!**
Never assume you are only approaching the elk you can see.

Elk are extremely adept at grouping themselves in such a way that sentries are observing every direction.

This is even more true when bulls are accumulating their harems.

In fact, for every story you hear of a bull rounding up his cows to flee, you will hear a story of cows surrounding a bull during flight, seemingly to protect him!

If you zone in on a single animal, to the neglect of other pairs of eyes, you will get busted.

As you approach, continue checking visibility lanes on both sides of your approach path.

A tactic you can use during your stalk is to use “cover sounds” to mask your movement.

These can come from surprising sources.

I have used this up in the headwaters of the Williams Fork River where the train comes out of the tunnel on it’s run between the Henderson mine and mill.

It is on a fairly regular schedule and the noise echoes up through the hills.

I know that doesn’t make for a pristine, secluded sort of environment, but believe me, the elk are in there and they are used to the train.

It’s a handy trick!

On my closest ever stalk up behind a bedded bull, I was able to close to within 10 yards, due in large part to the
overhead squirrel who raged at me for the last 60 yards of the stalk.

His tirade provided me with many opportunities for less than perfect footsteps on dry, brittle ground.

I used to get really ticked when a squirrel ratted me out in the woods. Now they’re my friends!

- Ridge-Hopping

This is a tactic I really like. It can be adjusted to faster or slower speeds, depending on your situation.

Many times you find yourself in terrain where there are ravines separated by shoulders or ridges.

Often the shoulders draping down off the side of a high mountain have busy game trails running their crest.

These are frequently the path of travel for elk on their evening run down to lower water and grazing areas.

Because there are usually game trails, the temptation is to travel on top of them because it’s quieter and easier going.

The problem is, climbing or descending a mountain on these ridge-top paths causes you to be sky-lined – broadcasting your location to any animals on either side of you.

Instead, move down into the ravine on either side.

How far down off the shoulder you go is up to you, (often time dictated by trees, brush or rocks) but at least get low enough that an elk on the other side of the shoulder won’t see your head bobbing up and down as you travel.
Now, look in your direction of travel and pick a destination that is about as far as you can see through the trees. Mark that spot and head toward it. Maybe 30 to 50 yards.

When you get there, stop. Now S-L-O-W-L-Y creep up over the shoulder, with your eyes wide open and scanning every lane you can see, both up and downhill from you.

Ease up higher and higher until you can see all of the newly visible area on the other side of the shoulder.

Now you have a choice.

You can move to the other side of the ravine and work the next section from that side, or back off and continue from the same side.

Choose whichever one seems best, but I almost always make this decision based on wind direction.

Traveling down low in ravines like this is a very effective wind-management tool – another reason why it’s one of my favorites.

This same idea can be applied to working either the top or side of a long bench.

You either travel the top, peaking over the sides at intervals, or travel the sidehill and check the top.

- **UFO**

This is a horse tactic I call “Unidentified Four-legged Object”, or UFO.

You’ll think this is crazy until the first time you see it work.

Elk have a very firm idea they don’t like upright, two-legged hominoids.
But for some reason, if you fork those two legs over a horse, elk become surprisingly tolerant of you.

Now what you do with this information is up to you, but I have used it as a drive-by tactic.

Consider taking your horse off the beaten path and riding cross country through some good elk habitat.

The good news is you can take the focus you would otherwise apply to watching where you step and apply it to scanning the horizon for tan butts.

Just don’t forget to pay attention to head-high tree branches.

I don’t know how good your horse is, but mine leaves that job to me and travels wherever the footing suits him. I’m responsible for my own head and knees.

When you pass by an elk, or herd of elk, keep going.

Make every effort to appear uninterested and continue on in your direction of travel.

Don’t buttonhook or stop until you are out of sight and earshot.

THEN you can park your horse, sneak back around from their downwind side and have at them.

I know just as surely as I’m writing this, somebody’s gonna get the big idea to unlimber their .338 magnum and cap one off from the back of their horse.

Please write me back and let me know how that works out for you.
I expect you’ll be dictating that letter from a hospital bed.

If not, mister, I’ll buy that horse.

**Stand-Hunting Tactics**

By stand-hunting, I am referring to the method of sitting in one place, either in a tree stand or concealed on the ground, waiting for elk to come by within range.

By and large, the people who can do this kind of hunting are very successful.

There are certain aspects of this kind of hunting though that are roughly equivalent to Chinese water torture.

Confidently deciding where, in all of millions of acres of elk habitat to set up with the certainty of seeing elk within range and knowing you’ll be downwind when they show up is hard to do.

It’s especially hard when your effective range is a 30 yard bow shot.

Whitetail deer tend to live and die within a very small area – sometimes within one or two square miles.

Elk may wander five miles *in a day* while grazing. That’s if they’re not under pressure.

It is possible, but not common, to find a single game trail that is traveled by the same elk at the same time every day.

Instead, when looking for a stand location, base it on terrain and habitat that makes it a likely direction of travel. If you have the bonus of fresh sign on the trail, so much the better.

Remember what I said in the map exercises about things that concentrate elk travel, such as saddles and squeeze spots.
The steep-cliffed canyons of the Gunnison area are legendary.

The rims of those cliffs make very effective squeeze spots for setting up stands.

The most effective tree-stand elk hunter I know sets up where game trails converge to travel through a saddle.

Not many guys want to haul a tree stand very far through elk country though.

Most of the time, “stand hunting” in elk country is done sitting on the ground.

During rifle seasons, this is the most productive hunting of all.

You can sit at the edge of a 250 yard clearing and cover an amazing amount of area.

It is even more effective if you can outlast everyone else who is doing it.

Most rifle hunters will know where they want to be at first light.

But also, most rifle hunters will get bored pretty quickly in about an hour and either start to fidget, or get up and start marching.

Don’t be one of those guys. But remember those guys who do are your friends.

Rifle season is a whole different ballgame on public land, and you must be prepared to hunt pressured elk.

 Hunters who quit their seats at eight or nine o’clock and start kicking around are a big help to you if you can make yourself stay put.
As a guide, it amazed me how many people would pay thousands of dollars for us to put them in a good spot, tell them to sit still until noon, only to have them blow it by getting up and wandering around after less than an hour.

For me, sitting still – I mean really still, without a lot of scratching, fidgeting, stretching, etc - for four hours is extremely difficult to do.

Stand-hunting is rarely my first choice during an archery or muzzleloader season.

It is always my first choice during rifle seasons.

**Thoughts On Scent Masks and Covers**

I want to offer you my observations on scent mask and covers.

I’ll never forget when they started selling a scent mask at the first pro shop I frequented.

The guy behind the counter handed me a shoe and said, “Smell that”. I sniffed and of course was just about bowled over.

Then he sprayed it with the snake oil – er, scent mask.

Wah-lah!

The smell was gone.

I was convinced, and was thusly addicted to a $50 per year habit for the remainder of my hunting years.

I cannot argue that they appear to do what they claim.

However, common sense dictates - and experience proves - if you hunt with the wind at your back, you will get busted.
Period.

I don’t care how good the scent mask is, or how many layers of scent-proof clothing you wear.

Unless you literally swam in the stuff, washed your mouth out with the stuff, never farted or sweated, and quit breathing, you simply can not eliminate your odor to the point an elk won’t smell you if the wind is wrong.

Do I use them?

Yes I do.

But my purpose is to minimize my smell, not eliminate it and rely on the stuff to let me hunt sloppy.

I wash my clothes in no-scent, UV blocking soap. I use no-scent body soap and deodorant, and I carry a small bottle of the scent mask with me in my day pack.

But the reality is that when I hike up 1500 feet in the pre-dawn morning to get to a spot, I sweat like a horse.

There ain’t no amount of potion that’s going to cover me up.

I hunt the wind.

And if the wind goes into one of those ridiculous pre-storm swirling crazy-makers, I lie low in a gully and spray the heck out of myself with scent mask.

I figure that’s about the best this stinky guy can do.

As for cover scents, I am very skeptical.

I’ve never forgotten a lecture given by a cagey old archery elk hunter and caller. He said,
“If somebody walked through your living room and moved your coffee table, or threw a couch pillow on the floor, or left a stinky sock in the recliner, would you notice they had been there?

You bet you would!

Well, when you tromp through the forest, you’re walking through Mr. Wapiti’s living room.”

If you walk through that elk’s living room smelling like Dr. Dave’s Fox Pee Cover Scent, or Johnson’s Hot Momma Estrus Farm-Raised, Corn-Fed Cow Elk Pee, he’s probably going to notice – “Hey, that doesn’t belong here!”

Minimize your scent as best you can.

But don’t try to put lipstick on a pig and add artificial stuff that doesn’t belong in the elk’s living room!

If you use scent mask, maybe you’ll only smell like 10% of a man.

That would be pretty good. If you only smelled like 2% of a man, that would be even better.

Do you really think it’s going to be sexy to a rutting bull if you smell like 49% estrus cow pee, 49% fake pine smell, and 2% man?

I don’t think so.

But do what you want. It’s your money, and you get to carry it around in your day pack.

Hey, I’ve done it too. I’m just sayin...
Attitude - The Deal Breaker

For the average hunter, elk hunting is a brutal shock to the system.

Full of anticipation, we pack up our gear and strike out for the hills, dreaming of the camaraderie of camp, the game bags hanging from meat poles, and the smell of coffee on the fire.

On the first morning’s hike we are made painfully aware of the altitude change.

On the second morning, we wake up with sore muscles and maybe a couple blisters to remind us of the previous day’s hike. And we go do it again.

By the third day, severe boredom can be setting in, and there’s a real temptation to just spend the day in camp.

Past that, if no one in camp has put down an elk, the party goes into a tailspin and most hunters start thinking about - if not actually heading towards - home.

It’s important to be a good shot, bring the right gear, choose a good location, and have a plan.

But if you don’t win the battle with discouragement – and you will have it at some point – you will not be a successful elk hunter.

I can not state it strongly enough.

As goes your attitude, so goes the hunt.

It’s hard to describe the degree to which elk hunting can beat you down sometimes, physically, mentally and emotionally.

In a series of hunting “train-wreck” stories I wrote, I coined the phrase, “Elk hunting is the most miserable kind of fun there is”.

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The best preparation for this is to expect it.

When discouragement starts to set in, recognize it for what it is, and deal with it directly.

Again, I want to bring you back to thinking, “What would a guide do in this situation?”

A guide wants you to kill an elk.

He knows better than to repeatedly send you into an area you’re not seeing animals in day after day.

Probably after two days of tough hunting, your guide will uproot you and put you into a pre-selected backup location.

You will have a new set of instructions, a pep talk, and a fresh new outlook.

But let me tell you what a top-flight guide won’t do.

He won’t allow excessive complaining in camp or negative talk about how there aren’t any elk and “we are in the wrong place”.

I’m not saying he’ll tell you to shut up, although that can and does happen.

But he probably will have a bag of tricks, stories and backup plans to keep you occupied for weeks if it were necessary.

Let me tell you a true story from one of our outfitter camps.

We had two groups of hunters in the same base camp.

One was a bunch of farmers who had returned to this same outfitter for eight years in a row.

The second group was two brothers and two sons.
They were first time customers for us, but they made it clear right off they had been burned by a lousy outfitter the year before.

They had negative attitudes right from the start.

Well right out of the chute, Day 1, wouldn’t you know it? Nobody out of ten hunters saw a single elk. (See? I told you guides don’t have a corner on the market or a crystal ball)

Boy I wasn’t looking forward to dinner in the cook tent that night.

Now the farmers, who had been here before, weren’t worried.

They’d seen what this camp could do and they were willing to wait.

But the boys from the city?

They were having flashbacks already, and they let their displeasure be known.

They complained all through dinner and no amount of optimistic talk and planning could stop their negative yammering.

The boss pulled me and one other guide outside.

He instructed us to set up the spare wall tent on the opposite side of camp from the main sleeping tent.

It wasn’t fun doing that in the dark but we got it ready.

Then the boss asked the farmers to head to bed so he could have a chat with the rest of the group.

He told them they would be sleeping in their own tent, away from the other group.
He also informed them if they brought their same (manure-adjective deleted) attitudes to breakfast with them in the morning, they would be handed their refunds.

Moreover, the boss would have his wife drive them all the way back up to Grand Junction where they could put up in a hotel until their flight home.

When they picked their jaws up off the picnic tables, they shuffled off to bed in the spare tent.

I couldn’t believe my ears.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought to talk to a paying customer that way.

But do you know what happened?

Next morning those city boys were, quiet, respectful, and hunted their tails off.

And by cracky, one of ‘em bagged a 5X5 bull elk that very day.

Bet I don’t need to describe the mood around the dinner table that night! It was a blast!

And it lasted the rest of the week.

My point is this. It only takes one bad apple in the bunch to spoil the whole bushel, and nowhere is this more true than in hunting camp.

There’s nothing wrong with an honest evaluation of the hunt, and making adjustments accordingly.

We’re going to talk through that kind of thing in the Troubleshooting section next.
But when that talk turns to complaining and despair, without positive thinking and solutions, **knock it off!**

Don’t be afraid to step into a leadership role in your camp and turn those kind of things around.

Your buddies may think you’re crazy, but the hunt you save may be your own!

One of the main reasons I have encouraged you to think like a guide is because it makes it your **job** to be positive, confident, and keep your head on.

This need not be an act, but it is an **act of the will.**

Remind yourself you have stacked the deck in your favor.

1. You chose a region that has a good population of elk
2. You chose specific elk terrain features to focus on.
3. You hunt those features with deliberate tactics
4. You have at least one backup spot to fall back on.

Now let’s talk through when and why you should switch to your backup spots.
Troubleshooting A Hunt – When To Go To Your Backup

I intentionally saved this part until after the discussion about attitude for the simple reason that it’s a lot easier to quit than to solve a problem.

In fact, I would rank discouragement highest on the list of things that can “go wrong” with a hunt.

I like to remind myself that when the hunting gets tough, there’s no more welcome friend than a good excuse.

Don’t fall into the trap of working on your excuses. Work on reasoning through why you’re not seeing elk and what you plan to do about it.

Let’s start by looking at possible reasons why you might be hunting good elk habitat and not seeing animals.

If you’ve spent two solid days covering all the best features of your two mile circle and are not seeing elk, it’s time to move to your backup spot.

But before you do, analyze what you’ve found.
No-Elk Scenarios And What To Do.

1. You are not seeing elk, but there is lots of sign that is obviously several days or even weeks old.

Elk who were happy enough in an area to litter it with sign might have left for a couple main reasons:

- Too much hunting pressure

  If this is the case, look another mile or more outside your primary circle. Usually hunting pressure will drive elk farther away and up.

  Evaluate the map outside of your two-mile circle. Are there some steep north facing slopes that might provide refuge to pressured elk?

  Before you completely leave a spot, consider taking a half day to go a little deeper and check cover places. Maybe it’s a bench on a north facing slope.

  If you find fresh sign, game on! If you come up dry again, move to one of your backup two-mile circles.

- Migrating to new grazing

  If elk recently left an otherwise good area because either they, or some free range sheep or cattle overgrazed it, there’s a chance they won’t go far.

  Look outside your two mile circle and find the nearest significant batch of meadow(s). If those are in reach, go check them out.

  If you find fresh sign, then you need to study where they go for shelter and shade, and move your efforts to that area.
2. There is fresh sign, but very little and it is scattered.

You’re probably in an area that elk travel through but don’t stay.

Expand your circle a ways and see if you can identify a different pair of shelter and food features they might be traveling between.

3. There is lots of fresh sign, but the elk just can’t be found.

This is the best kind of problem to have! If you are finding green, day-old sign in good quantities, chances are the problem is you!

There are two possible causes for this:

First (and worst!) – you may be hunting the area incorrectly and getting busted. Make sure you are paying attention to the wind – even the most subtle of breezes, and approaching from the correct direction.

Second, it may be you are getting to the right place at the wrong time of day. Change your routine and see what happens.

4. There are elk, but only a few cows and you are looking for bulls.

This depends on the season of your hunt, more than anything else.

- If you are hunting the early part of the rut, bulls are still hanging in their “bachelor” groups, bragging about girls but not actually doing anything about it.

  If you’re not seeing bulls, and they aren’t vocal during the day time, do some after-dark scouting (listening)
in the vicinity of the cows and see if you can locate the bulls by bugling then.

• In the middle of the rut, if you find cows, even a few of them, you might be best to stay right where you’re at and see who comes to get them. They won’t be alone long.

• In the late rut, when most of the breeding is finished and the bulls are losing interest, cows will start to provide you with less and less bull-locating clues.

This is the time to head back to the rougher terrain and look for thick cover where bulls are recovering from the exertion of the rut.

They are very reclusive at this time, but knowing to take advantage of that makes it a strategy, not a problem.
Implementing Backup Plans

So you’ve thoroughly examined every meadow, water hole, north facing slope, bench, and saddle in your two-mile circle and there’s just no elk.

Time To Move.

That’s fine. That’s what your guide would do.

And, like you’re guide, you’ve already pre-selected another spot with just as many promising features so and you’re ready to go hit it hard.

Talk this through with your hunting partners and remember to attack this new two-mile circle with the same careful planning you put into the first.

An easy mistake is to get desperate and go busting through a new area, pushing the elk out before you get set up.

This is also when I recommend doing a little different kind of scouting.

Now is the time to get out for a little meet-and-greet.

Talk To Your Neighbors

During your transition from one area to another is a good time to find out how everyone else is doing.

By now, the season is two days old. How can you beat leveraging the information gathered by most of the hunters in the area?

Now there are a couple of things you have to keep in mind.
You are the competition.

Even though people will usually be friendly, or at least courteous to you, you are almost always going to be regarded as a competitor when you walk into someone’s camp and ask them how things are going.

People handle this in different ways.

Some will tell you everything they know, hoping you will do the same for them. Others will only drop little tidbits, but not really want to be too helpful.

A few might even out and out lie to throw you off.

I won’t tell somebody right where to go find a bull I’m working, but I am pretty open and forthright with other hunters during the season.

It tends to pay back down the road.

Why Are They In Camp?

If someone is in camp because they’ve killed an elk and been promoted to camp cook, that’s great!

If someone is in camp because they went on a morning hike, saw nothing, and came back to cry in their beer, be careful putting too much credence in their report.

You do have to read people a little to do this right, but I think it’s worth the time.

Even if they don’t want to tip their hand completely, you can get clues. And very few hunters can resist bragging about killing an elk.
Unless they’ve already run to the local meat locker, the most obvious way to see how they’re doing is looking at their meat poles and see what’s hanging.

The people I listen to the most are the ones who have hunted an area for several years.

For starters, there’s probably a good reason they keep coming back.

Also, they tend to be more aware of general elk patterns and tendencies in the area.

You might find out, for example, that even though they haven’t been in your two-mile circle for the last two days, it is on a grazing migration pattern that brings them around every once in awhile.

It might be worth going back to check in a couple of days.

Even without stopping and talking to folks, you can learn a bit by driving around.

Let me give you an example.

My brother-in-law and I were bow-hunting the second week of September one year.

As is usually my first preference, we were hunting as high as we could feasibly go from the edge of the wilderness boundary on foot.

Much of our focus was right at or just below timberline.

We kicked around up there for a couple of days and I was completely stumped by the lack of animals, and there was very little sign.

So we got in the truck and went on a little hunter surveillance trip.
As it turned out, the *lower* we drove down into the valley, the more camps we started seeing with full gamebags hanging.

It was not at all what I expected, but the evidence was too overwhelming to ignore.

So we picked a two-mile circle down at a lower elevation in an area primarily comprised of aspen and grassy meadows, and we found elk everywhere.

If we hadn’t taken that little drive, we probably would have got nothing but exercise and a lot of pretty flowers the rest of that week.
Thoughts On DIY Hunting With Horses

You won’t have to hike in elk country very long before you start having thoughts about how nice it would be to have somebody else doing the walking for you.

The first time you pick up a pack frame with a hind quarter strapped on it, and your buddy says, “Thanks for killing this thing way up here” you’re really going to think about horses.

The DIY hunter has three options:

1. Rent them locally for elk retrieval only.

   If you are hunting in an area with outfitters nearby, chances are they will pack out an elk for you, time permitting.

   You can reasonably expect to pay $150 to $200 for this service.

   This is not a bad idea, but there are risks.

   You will be the lowest priority of an outfitter who may be taking care of several paying clients.

   Also, there are plenty of stories about the price going up after your elk is down and you need them most.

   Talk to other hunters in the area and find out who they know.

2. Rent them locally for the duration of your trip.

   I know a group of hunters from Minnesota who have come to the same spot for more than ten years.

   They have horses delivered to the trailhead when they arrive.
These guys ride in about five miles and set up a spike camp, from which they have consistently scored elk every year. This is a great way to go to get away from the camper crowd.

But you are responsible for the care of the animals and you have to factor that time and effort into your hunt.

It will cost about $350 per animal.

Usually the outfitter will provide the tack you need, but the feed and care is up to you.


If you have horses already, this is a fine idea.

If you don’t, a once a year hunting trip is not a good justification for the expense and time you’ll put into them the rest of the year.

Be sure you pay attention to the rules about inter-state travel with horses before attempting this.

It’s a lot of work, and you need to know what you’re doing, but I’ve watched several people run successful elk camps having brought horses a couple thousand miles.

In either of options 2 or 3 above, where you are planning on living with these creatures for several days, you are in for a lot of work.

You have to make your own judgment whether it is worth the effort.

Do not forget to consider things like:
- Proper gear and knowledge of its use
- Feeding daily, watering twice a day.
- Logistics of picketing or tying up. You can be fined if you overgraze a highline area or damage trees.

You can have a really lousy time if your horses escape and get lost. (Yes, there’s a story behind this tidbit too…)

- Logistics of bringing certified weed free hay, or carrying bags of pellets/cubes.
- Will the horse you brought tolerate a bloody carcass on his back?
- Are you really a horse person?

This kind of trip can be a blast, or it can test your horsemanship and temperament to their limits.

It should not be lost on you the number of places you will hunt that have at least one drainage called “Deadhorse Creek”.

My own theory is there’s a lot of would-be packers throughout history who got pushed to their limits and quit the horse hobby right during elk season…

Having tried to discourage you as much as I can, let me conclude by saying there are few things I have enjoyed more in life than spending time looking over elk country from the back of a horse.

It is a fantastic way to go –

_if you can stand the stubborn, trouble-making brutes._
Thoughts On ATVs

I may not make any friends here but to be honest, ATVs really rub me the wrong way.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with them and frankly, I’m probably just a bit jealous for not having one.

But they are frequently misused and the frustrating part is that lots of people are affected besides the person being thoughtless.

Used properly, an ATV is an incredibly handy vehicle.

And as my hunting partner likes to point out, unlike horses, you only have to feed ‘em when you ride ‘em.

But unfortunately, the stereotype of a fat, lazy hunter ripping up and down logging roads with a rifle across the handlebars looking for an elk has become the poster-boy for people who want to trash the image of hunting.

Don’t be that guy!

And for your own sake – and success – don’t overuse them.

By all means, get out on your ATV and scout the area, do a ton of glassing and talking to other hunters.

But then shut that noisy thing off and get your butt out in the woods where the elk are!

As we discussed early in the book, an ATV or small four-wheel-drive vehicle makes a very handy way to access different spots. But don’t abuse or over-use it. Also don’t forget to read and thoroughly understand the laws regarding how you can legally carry bows and firearms in or on motor vehicles. The rules are not the same for an ATV as they are for a licensed highway vehicle.
Thoughts On Elk Herding

If you conduct a DIY elk hunt anywhere in the vicinity of private land, eventually this is going to happen to you.

You’re hunting your favorite spot high up in a ravine.

Normally this is a productive area but for a couple of days now it seems like the elk have just vanished. They were here last year, you tell yourself.

What’s going on?

As you glass down toward a neighboring ranch, you see a cowboy riding the inside of the fence line.

At the edge of a small clearing he stops.

This is the middle of bow season, but you watch in horror as he unlimbers a lever action rifle from the scabbard and points downhill.

He doesn’t seem to be aiming at anything particular when the gun roars!

You can’t tell for sure, but in the returning echo, it sounds like there’s a rattle of hooves scattering through the ravine and fading away down into the ranch.

If you’ve ever hunted along the public side of a private fence, you know what I’m getting at.

How many times have you heard somebody say they heard a rancher was “rounding up” elk and pushing them back on private property?
Or maybe you’ve seen something like I described above and wondered if those were just cattle running through the trees, or your herd of elk.

Here in Colorado, the Division Of Wildlife gets a ton of complaints every year about "animal herding".

It comes in two versions: landowners either preventing elk from leaving private property or actively pushing them from public to private property.

As someone who has hunted and guided on both public and private lands, this is an issue I've dealt with a lot - from BOTH sides of the fence.

First of all, the Division Of Wildlife is in a no-win situation.

They are already stretched to the limit during hunting seasons.

Most of the complaints they get like this don’t have enough evidence to prosecute successfully.

Second, there is nothing on the law books that specifically addresses herding.

Generally it falls under the prohibition of “harassing wildlife”.

However, there is no law against a landowner patrolling his fence or property line.

If he happens to pass by a herd of elk in the process, that simply does not constitute harassment.

You’re going to have a tough time proving somebody was herding elk and not just shooting at a grouse.

Third, every public land hunter – me included – has gazed longingly over a fence, either seeing or imagining a thousand elk on the other side.
And of course you just know they’re standing there immovable, waiting to be shot like fish in a barrel by hunters who paid $3,000 a head.

Now I’m not saying that can’t or doesn’t happen.

But let’s just say you do stumble across an incident like I described above.

It sticks in your craw and must be the reason you’re not seeing elk.

What are your options?

I hope you’re smart enough not to take matters in your own hands.

Tangling with a pistol-packing cowhand equipped with a horse, a coil of rope, and a head full of Louis L’Amour stories is a bad idea!

You could get mad, drive to town, call the DOW and fill out a report.

If you witness a flagrant violation, by all means go ahead.

It’s even better if you had the presence of mind to fish out your camera and take a picture or video.

But look at your hole card.

How much time have you got? Are the elk really all inside that fence?

If you’re not finding elk, you’ve got a lot of work to do and very little time to do it.
Choose your priorities carefully.

Let me tell you, discouragement is your worst enemy on an elk hunt!

Remember - when things aren’t going your way, there’s no more welcome friend than a good excuse. But excuses don’t put meat in the freezer – EVER.

Elk hunting is hard enough without fighting battles you probably won’t win.

Hunting season is too short to spend time doing anything besides making boot tracks through the woods where the elk are.

You don’t have time trying to fix the reasons why elk aren’t where you want them to be.

My advice?

Let it go.

I promise you, the elk are not all on private land.

Put your backup plan in action and get on with your hunt.

Having said all that, you may be wondering if you should avoid private property boundaries altogether.

Not necessarily.

Remember, private land hunts are a gold mine for landowners. Rare is the western ranch of any size that does not run guided hunting.

That means that inside the ranch is not always a completely safe haven.
If you skirt the perimeter of a private ranch, you might learn a lot. For example, you might find a section of fence that is down and used for an escape route.

You may find significant sign traveling along such a fence.

I suggest treating it as an information-gathering opportunity.

I would caution that deliberately hunting such a boundary carries the risk of a real heartbreak.

Understand that if you shoot an elk and it travels into private property, you absolutely must obtain permission to pursue the elk.

It’s the law.

That, in and of itself is time consuming and possibly difficult to achieve.

The ugly truth that is not widely known, is that the landowner is under absolutely no obligation whatsoever (other than his conscience) to grant you that permission.

Is it worth the risk?

Only you can decide.

As for me, I would only hunt a property boundary if I had met, shook hands with, and looked in the eyes of the owner or foreman.
Thoughts On Combo Deer and Elk Hunting

There’s probably no bigger ambition than the prospect of coming home from a Rocky Mountain hunting trip with both an elk and mule deer in your meat wagon.

Many hunters carry both tags just out of hopes that they’ll increase their chances of bumping into either one and being able to bring home an animal.

There’s nothing wrong with that thought process, but it sure is an expensive proposition for the non-resident hunter.

First let’s talk about the main things deer and elk do and don’t have in common.

If you look at a map showing the total range of both species, it’s not much help because mule deer range is virtually the entire state of Colorado. One would conclude from that there will be mule deer everywhere there are elk.

Technically true, yes. The “hunting for elk but hope I see a deer too” method can work. But again our goal is to increase your odds beyond hoping!

While hunting the terrain features we talked about in the map scouting chapter, you certainly can and will find mule deer. How many varies greatly in many areas, for different reasons.

I have not seen research or statistics that backs up the idea that food competition between deer and elk will result in one species dominating the other.

I have, however, seen areas change over the course of several years. For example, I know a place high in the Flat Tops Wilderness that 20 years ago was a fantastic combo area during archery season. Now, although the deer are not gone from the area, they are sparse enough that I wouldn’t buy a tag there.
That is not to say you couldn’t do a combo hunt there though, because I know where they went. They have migrated in significant numbers farther down the creek and river drainages. This means to some extent they are near or on private property, but they still can be accessed.

In that case, I would hunt high for elk and plan separate, deer-only forays down into the lower country.

There is another example of Colorado terrain that used to be thought of as mule deer country that has increasingly come on as viable elk as well. The area of Piceance Creek that I mentioned earlier is one such.

That wide open sage, pinion, cedar, juniper country is fantastic spot-and-stalk mule deer hunting. However the elk are there too.

There is no substitute for 100% focus on the animal you are hunting, so in my opinion attempting to do both is necessarily a compromise to some extent.

However, if you intend to buy both tags, I would propose a strategy like this.

Focus on one or the other first. Most people I know would make the elk a priority, since it is the larger and more expensive of the two. Follow the strategies and tactics we’ve gone over above and make best effort to fill your elk tag.

Along the way, if you have seen decent numbers of mule deer, or their sign, then you may wish to continue hunting right where you are.

If not, consider heading down to lower country. The ideal terrain to look for is near drainages or water surrounded by cover, but not necessarily forests. Mule deer love scrub oak, sage, or other brush covered hillsides where they can bed down and disappear, yet see all around them.
Many of the access roads you will drive on your way to elk country will pass through exactly this kind of habitat. The task then is to study the kind of map that shows land ownership (such as BLM or National Forest maps) so that you know where you can do this.

Then, and I recommend this whether you are rifle or bow hunting, the all around best method for mule deer is spot-and-stalk. One of the biggest challenges is finding a vantage point that lets you thoroughly scour the deer terrain without being close enough to scare them.

Many times you have to do this from such a distance that binoculars won’t cut it and you need the power and stability of a mounted spotting scope.

If you have the patience for this, there is a great deal of fun to be had learning to recognize a set of antlers protruding from an otherwise bland-looking brushy hillside.

When you’ve spotted one, look for and get a bearing on anything possible to relocate the deer from a different view – presumably the direction from which you’ll be sneaking in on him.

This requires supreme care and patience because the deer, like elk, has excellent eyesight, hearing and sense of smell. However, so long as you haven’t alerted him, you have time on your side to plan your route.

This takes practice and experience but you can learn that a seemingly simple brush-covered hillside can still offer a covered approach. Look for contours such as ravines to help.

Also take care not to get tunnel vision. Frequently you will find a lone buck bedded out on a hillside, but just as often he’ll have company. More pairs of eyes means more chances to get busted. Watch for more than one!
The second technique I’d recommend is again true for both archery or rifle hunters. In the same lower country we just talked about, try to set up an ambush on approaches to water.

Any where you find a pond or slow moving section of creek is good, especially if the surrounding cover is thick enough to “funnel” the approaches.

Also pay attention to trails that tend to follow ravines up and down – these too tend to concentrate the travel routes enough to be worth your time.

For early season hunters, I don’t think there is any more fun way to hunt mulies than at timberline. This too lends itself to spot-and-stalk and has good overlap prospects with elk. However as you can guess, the physical demands are severe.

Once you’ve spotted an animal you may need to move quickly to put an ambush into effect. “Timberline” and “move quickly” are not easily put in the same sentence. Or the same day.

A mule deer is a fine trophy and is worth your effort. If you haven’t bumped into one by the time your elk is down, I strongly recommend a location change.
Now Go Get ‘Em!

I sincerely hope this book changes your hunting for the better.

What I have laid out for you here is the result of two dozen years experience as a hunter, a guide, and as a client.

I’ve tried my best to lay out for you the things that I have seen work time and again, and the things that don’t.

Our pre-hunt tent meeting is done. Before I send you out on the trail, I want to close with these final thoughts.

Out of all the strategies, tactics, and ideas I have shared with you, it is my strongest belief that the single most important weapon you can carry into the field is a confident, positive attitude.

And as much as possible, try to hunt with partners who share the same values and attitudes you have.

You will hunt better and enjoy it more.

I want to share a passion with you that I have.

When I have guided other hunters, their success has always meant at least as much to me as my own, and in some ways even more. I sincerely hope that we meet down the trail somewhere, or that you send me an email to say that something we talked about here made a real difference, and maybe even filled your meat pole.

Please do that. You can reach me at:

jim@diyhunting.com

Thanks, and may you have a great season this year!

Jim Deeming
Resources

Colorado Division Of Wildlife Numbers

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<td>(970) 461-4000</td>
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Useful Web Links

Colorado Division Of Wildlife

Main page:  http://wildlife.state.co.us

Licensing System:  https://www4.wildlifelicense.com/co/start.php

Statistics Page:  http://wildlife.state.co.us/Hunting/BigGame/Statistics/

Colorado Shooting Ranges:
http://wildlife.state.co.us/Hunting/PlanYourHunt/ShootingRanges/

Helpful NW and SW Region Hunting Guides
http://wildlife.state.co.us/Hunting/BigGame/HuntingGuide/

Mapping Resources

Free USGS Topo Maps: http://libremap.org/data/state/colorado/drg/

Natural Diversity Information Source Game Distribution Map System
http://ndis.nrel.colostate.edu/index.html
Bonus Report 1 - Blood Trail

I hope we’ve put enough tricks in your bag to substantially increase your chances of finding an elk, and getting you a shot.

But there’s an unfortunate reason why the success rates are not higher than they are.

Far too many elk are killed that are not retrieved.

If you pull the trigger or release the string on an animal, you owe it to yourself, the elk, and every other hunter in the woods to give it your all to follow up and find it.

I have been a part of many successful recoveries.

They are some of my favorite hunting memories.

To go all out, to pick up a lost blood trail you were about to give up on is a fantastic feeling.

I’ve also helped a guy on an eleven mile track of a muzzleloader-shot bull that still haunts us both, twelve years later.

Shot Placement

Regardless of your weapon – be it bow, smoke cannon, or high powered rifle – the hands down most effective kill shot with the least amount of meat damage and least risk of error is the broadside double-lung hit.

Many years ago we had a wildlife biologist as a guest speaker at a Colorado Bowhunters Association meeting.

She said something amazing about shot placement.

“Allways choose a double lung shot first for elk, no matter what weapon you hunt with. When both lungs have
“
collapsed, it is physically impossible for an elk to continue
to run – even if they are frightened and full of adrenaline.”

I don’t pretend to understand why that is true, or if there are exceptions to that statement.

But I do know from tracking and field dressing a ton of deer, elk and antelope that it is your first and best choice.

For bowhunters it should be your only choice.

In my humble opinion, it should also be the only choice for muzzleloaders too.

A muzzleloader slug travels too slow to do the kind of kinetic damage a rifle can, and it lacks the cutting/bleeding aspect of a broadhead.

It just simply drills a great big hole.

Your best bet is to drill that hole through both lungs.

**Tracking**

I’ve never had a problem with “buck fever”.

From the time I spot an animal until I let the arrow or bullet fly, I am all business.

No, I have a different problem.

**After** the shot, the thrill of making a good hit and knowing the whole previous year’s anticipation has just been realized just pumps me with the biggest adrenaline rush of all!

You might ask why that’s a “problem” if I stay under control for the shot.
It’s because what you do in the seconds and minutes after you squeeze the trigger can turn your hunt into a heartbreak in no time flat.

I’m probably not telling you anything you haven’t read in a magazine, but it is true and worth repeating.

If the elk you shoot does not go down hard while still in your view,

**STOP!**

**Do not immediately pursue the elk, even if you think you’ve made a perfect shot.**

Even a lethally wounded elk will run farther and faster if he knows he’s pursued.

While we’re on this topic, allow me to bust a commonly held misconception about wounded animals.

*There is a saying that a lethally wounded elk will always run downhill. Therefore, if it runs uphill, the shot was either a miss or not fatal.*

That is pure horsepucky.

Don’t *ever* quit a blood trail or not follow up on a shot based on that kind of logic!

I have seen that proved false over and over.

I have a theory that elk always have an intended direction of escape, even when they are un-pressured.

I believe at any given moment of an elk’s day, it wouldn’t matter whether you shot him with a thundering rifle, stuck him with a twanging bow, or just shouted “BOO!”, the first 100 yards of his flight would be the same.
Having said that, I think you can get a huge leg up on your post-shot tracking job by paying attention to the general direction of an elk’s initial run.

Yes, they can and do change directions for a variety of reasons, but that is where you start.

Another reason to sit still and be very quiet after a shot is for several seconds or even minutes after a shot, you may hear the animal again.

The best thing to hear, of course, is a loud crash as he falls down.

But he may also lie down quietly for awhile and then make more noise a few minutes later, either by thrashing while dying, or getting up to travel more.

They definitely will get up to travel if you walk in and push them.

But there's another reason they might get up, and I've seen it happen more than once.

An elk that is bleeding substantially will quickly begin to want water.

More than once I have seen an elk hit in the liver make a beeline for the nearest water.

One hunting partner of mine thought he had made a bad shot on an elk.

He had been sitting on his butt, not particularly thinking any elk were in the area.

At about 10:30, on an already hot day, he cut loose with a bugle.
What he hadn’t known was that a bull was bedded down a mere 70 yards away.

This brought the bull up out of his bed, furious, and stomping right over to my butt-bound friend.

He couldn’t do anything but draw his bow from the seated position.

The bull turned broadside at 20 yards and offered him a perfect shot, except he had to release the bow while twisting from left to right.

It pulled his shot a tad behind the double-lunger he was trying for.

My friend called me on the radio and gave me the GPS coordinates.

I came on the run, excited, but also concerned by the tone in my partner’s voice.

He didn’t feel good about the hit.

We sat and waited an hour before doing anything else.

To kill the time, we talked over and over what happened.

He was growing agitated with the thought he might have made a bad shot and desperately needed encouragement.

I said it sounded to me like there was a good chance he could have hit it in the liver.

“That means he’ll go to water”, I said. “He’s probably lying in a creek somewhere, dead and drawing flies already”.

Fortunately, I was more right than I knew, but it took a fair amount of detective work to find it.
It’s been my experience that most liver hits, including this one, do their massive amount of bleeding internally.

It doesn’t make for a very good blood trail.

The hard dry ground didn’t give much for tracks.

Other than one spot of blood I found on a white rock, the only way we found this bull was by fanning out and going on instinct.

My instinct was to head to water.

We found his bull in Indian Creek, exactly as I had forecasted.

Unfortunately, I was right about the flies too.

I don’t think two guys on foot ever got a 5X5 bull elk moved faster than we did that warm Labor Day.

The most important thing you can have on your side in following a blood trail is a good, positive-thinking, die-hard partner.

First of all, it’s good to just have someone to bounce ideas off of and encourage each other.

But second of all, two pair of eyes are way better than one.

The most productive way to go is to straddle either side of the blood trail.

Keep an awareness of the general direction of travel as you try to locate each spot of blood, or hoof print.

When you lose the trail, and you will, go back to the last known spot and mark it.

Now the two of you can spread farther apart by five or ten yards and continue in the direction the elk was last headed.
This will help you find where he changed directions, if he did.

Also, when tracking an elk, whether wounded or not, don’t fall into the rut of only staring down at your feet and studying close.

Take frequent opportunities to look ahead in the direction of travel, and look at the ground ten or twenty yards out.

Also check the trees out to that distance as well.

You will be surprised how many times, even in somewhat dry ground, you can spot a footprint or broken twig that seems “out of place”.

The best school for tracking elk is experience.

The best way to get that experience is to be looking at real tracks from real elk, not pictures in a book.

I am surprised how many hunters quit on elk if they spook them.

They hunt with the idea that it’s a one-shot deal and if you blow it, the elk somehow leave the planet.

Let’s say you’ve been trundling along at a careless fast-sneak pace and push up three or four tan rumps that disappear through the trees.

For a long time – too long – you hear hooves snapping twigs off into the distance.

Congratulations!

You’ve just been handed a scholarship to the best tracking school there is.

Don’t quit now!
Make a point to study how their tracks look in different types of ground cover.

Anybody would recognize a clear hoof print in damp mud.

But what else can you see?

How about a spot where the aspen leaf mulch gets ruffled?

Or trampled grass that seems out of place?

Are they holding to a specific direction of travel or jinking left and right?

Often times you will have a good idea where to start by looking 50 or 100 yards through the trees and asking yourself which direction you would run.

When looking for an elk you shot at, if at all possible, use or enlist the help of someone on horses.

The difference in perspective from the top of a horse is significant, especially when looking for an elk lying down in grass or brush.

Most of all, keep a positive attitude and remember – this is as much a part of the hunting experience as pulling the trigger.

After a dozen years, my friend still apologizes for the day and a half we spent tracking his muzzleloader-shot bull for eleven miles.

I have never been able to make him understand that for me it was one of the most important days I ever spent in the field.

Yeah, it was hard, discouraging, and kept me from hunting an animal of my own.

But I wouldn’t trade what I learned that day for anything.
Bonus Report #2 - After The Kill

If you haven't seen it before, trust me when I tell you that a downed elk, especially below timberline, is a supercharged magnet for flies, ants, and yellowjackets - AKA "meat bees".

Believe me, they are aptly named.

Case in point.

My brother knocked over a nice six point bull during an early October rifle season.

We correctly forecasted that flies would not be an issue at the high, cold altitude we hunted at.

We mistakenly did not have stout game bags in our day packs when his bull went down.

After field dressing and quartering, we had the bull ready to move to our spike camp, about a mile away.

We each took down a front quarter over our shoulders and returned with pack frames for the rest.

Much to our surprise and dismay, the dreaded "meat bees" had found us out.

So had the "camp robber jays". Maybe you know them as "whiskey jacks" or their proper name, gray jays.

Between the two, the remaining carcass was being pecked and gnawed full of marble-sized holes.

We fought our way through and won the day, but all of this could have been prevented with simple, cheap, lightweight items in our day packs, plus some natural resources available at the kill site.

First, field dress your elk. I won’t repeat here how to do this.
That information is available all over the place. If you are a first
timer and need the help, there’s a nice version on the Colorado
Division Of Wildlife website at:

http://wildlife.state.co.us/Hunting/ResourcesTips/FieldDress.htm

Everyone has opinions on this, so I'll offer mine – the ones I've
seen work first hand.

I've never had a bad-tasting or spoiled elk yet.

Unless you are hunting a very late, very cold season with
temperatures below freezing, *always gut, skin and quarter your
elk immediately.*

I cannot advocate leaving the hide on for any reason.

The idea that it keeps off dirt and flies does not make up for the
risk of the meat not cooling as quickly as possible.

While quartering, try to take the hindquarters off without cutting
through any major muscles.

It can be done, and it’s worth it.

Any meat you cut before it has cooled will tend to be tough near
the cuts. No sense making hamburger out of two inches of that
backstrap!

In fact, I remove the entire length of the backstrap first, before
whittling the hind quarters off just to avoid the need to cross-cut
them.

If you have a long way to go with this critter on your back, it is
worth de-boning as well.

Again, if you’re working on the animal while still warm, try to do
this job cutting the least amount of meat possible.
When your elk is field dressed, skinned, quartered and/or de-boned, you should immediately bag it.

DON'T buy those thin, whimpy cheesecloth gamebags at Wal Mart.

Get stout, tight-woven cloth game bags that you can fill with rocks and whomp a bear with.

They are washable and reuseable.

Cheese cloth tears if you look at it wrong. Our flies out here LAUGH at cheesecloth. They find holes in cheesecloth to crawl through.

*They can lay eggs through the holes in cheesecloth.*

Get the good stuff. It’s worth the extra fifteen bucks.

Also, if you choose to leave the leg bones in, you absolutely must get them completely inside the bag.

Tying the game bags around the leg shanks with the bone exposed will not cut it.

Flies will use that exposure to lay eggs or breach your game bag at an amazing speed.

Next, find a shady spot and lay down three or four pine or aspen branches parallel to each other in about a four or five foot square.

Now put another layer down perpendicular to that, in a cross-hatch pattern.

Place your bagged quarters in a single layer on top of those branches, so air can circulate underneath.
It also slows the progress of the ants from the bottom.

Shake a generous dusting of black pepper over the top of the whole pile.

This cheap, simple, old-time recipe really does work and is worth the couple of ounces in your day pack.

I actually prefer to mix up a ziplock bag about half and half with black pepper and cayenne pepper.

I don't have scientific proof one way or the other, but if this helps keep bears or coyotes off the meat, I'm glad.

It's worked so far.

Now take your hunting knife or pocket saw and harvest a big pile of young, thin pine boughs from under some nearby trees.

Stack them a foot deep over the top of the meat bags.

These serve the dual purpose of further shading the meat from the sun, and also keep the Camp Robber Jays away, since they don't seem care one way or another about pepper.

Now your animal is stable until you can get it packed down to camp.

Am I making a big deal out of this?

Yes I am. And you should too.
Bonus Report #3 – Gear And Accessories

Do-It-Yourself hunters are especially vulnerable to the latest hunting gadgets that show up on Outdoor TV.

After all, when success or failure rests entirely on you, why wouldn’t you want to cover every bet and buy all the hole-cards you can?

The longer I hunt elk, the shorter my list of “necessaries” gets, and the lighter my day pack.

Trust me when I tell you, in elk country you will be far more grateful for a lighter day pack than you will be to have cool toys and gadgets.

I’m going to give you some thoughts on some items, and I’ll follow it up with my do-or-die Daypack List.

First, let’s be honest.

The bottom line is you need to stay alive, kill an elk, and get you and him home – you in one piece and the elk in bags.

Long before modern hunting, man was able to hunt just fine without an annual $500 dump at Cabela’s.

For your day pack, let’s think of your pack list in these four categories:

1. Clothing
2. Survival
3. Hunting
4. Accessories
Clothing

Clothing is adjustable to your tastes, but the adage to dress in layers is very true.

You can expect to be hiking up hill in the dark, busting a sweat to get to your spot, then slowing down or sitting for awhile.

Storms can come over a ridge and surprise you in minutes.

I don’t think you need me to tell you how to dress, but take some time to think it through.

And give any of your outer layer items the old “fingernail test”.

Make sure the clothing you take is quiet.

There’s a surprising amount of army green camo clothing on the shelves that flat screams when raked by a scrub oak branch.

And a word on boots.

You will probably spend a lot of time on slopes and rugged terrain.

Blisters are a big problem.

Make sure your shoes fit (don’t break them in on the trip!) and wear two socks.

The thin liner sock underneath a thicker cushion and warmth sock is an excellent idea.

If you can afford it, bring two pair of field-worthy boots, both broke in.

Trading off every other day so they have a chance to dry out well is a very good plan.
As for camo, and what pattern, and face paint, and all that, don’t sweat the small stuff.

A decent broken up pattern will do.

Remember, if you’re moving, you’re busted – I don’t care what kind of pattern you’re wearing.

If I’m hunting in a particularly bug-infested area, I’ll use a face net.

But I get hot in those and prefer to just dull the high points of my face with dark paint.

To be honest, a flannel shirt can do you as much good as a brand-name mossy oak pattern, but they don’t look as cool.

The handy advantage with most camo hunting pants is they have a ton of pockets.

Remember, if you’re rifle or muzzleloader hunting in Colorado, as of the time of this writing camouflage orange clothing does not count for your safety requirements.

**Survival**

You need water much more than food.

If you like the stuff, Gatorade provides electrolytes and minerals lost while sweating or exposed in the dry, high altitude climate.

**Do Not Underestimate Your Water Needs!!!**

The combination of exertion on steep slopes, at high altitude, in a very dry climate can ruin your hunt for days if you get sick.

If you’ve never had one of the headaches this can cause, it’s hard to understand how awful it is – easily on par with the worst migraine.
Drink more than you think you need, and carry more than you can drink.

Food is less critical, but still important.

I personally eat a light breakfast at the truck and hunt all day on nothing more than a large camel-back bag of Gatorade, a couple of Power Bars, and a few ounces of elk jerky.

For light and fire starting, I always like to have backup.

I carry a cigarette lighter and a little Boy scout fire starter kit which comprises a flint and cottonballs coated in petroleum jelly.

The lighter is handy, but the cottonballs will start a fire better than anything else.

The lighter can make a useful wind indicator by the way.

I carry two flashlights.

My primary one is a head lamp, which is really handy for hiking or field dressing hands-free.

But for a backup, I have a little Mag Lite in the pack, and extra batteries for both.

GPS receivers are the greatest thing since sliced bread.

However, I cannot tell you the number of times I have had to give directions to people who are looking at their GPS and genuinely lost.

Don’t forget, these DO NOT replace a compass.

You absolutely need one of those.
First aid should include any special needs you have (such as asthma meds or severe allergies to insect bites) plus pain killers, blister repair kits, and bandages.

One thought on painkillers – diversify with regular aspirin based ones for headaches and stuff, but also include ibuprofen based ones for swelling and sore joints and muscles.

**Hunting**

Other than your weapon, the most important stuff to carry is for dealing with your elk after the kill.

Even though I want my daypack as light as possible, I do carry my field dressing items on every outing.

Flies are viciously persistent and you need to be prepared.

I also carry ziplock bags and latex rubber gloves for a different reason.

During archery season, I absolutely cannot pass up a blue grouse.

Most good elk country has blue grouse, so that happens a lot.

If I get one, I will put on the gloves, breast it (saving one wing for id) and put it in a one gallon ziplock bag.

This way my hands stay clean and I’m not walking around smelling like a butcher.

You already read my opinion of scent masks and cover scents.

I do carry around a small bottle to help me out in a pinch when the wind is going crazy.

Some thoughts on hunting knives:
Every knife manufacturer and a lot of knife owners have some spectacular claims about how they can field dress an entire elk and still shave afterwards.

I don’t really care if you can do that or not.

For three bucks you can carry a lightweight, plastic handled, dummy-proof knife sharpener and use it two or three times during the job if you need to.

You also don’t really need a huge knife for a huge animal.

Due to some logistical mishaps one time, I ended up alone with a cow elk to field dress, having nothing more than a Swiss army knife.

It was no big deal.

I have a very beautiful handmade hunting knife my wife gave me, and I carry it and use it all the time.

The blade is about eight inches long and it is plenty for even the largest of bulls.

There are as many field dressing methods as there are hunters.

I personally do not worry about carrying any kind of bone saw.

You can absolutely take an elk apart to the point of being ready to move with nothing more than a two or three inch blade and a means to sharpen it.

**Accessories**

**Bugles and cow calls?** Yes, absolutely.

One note about bugles though.
When you are in a thick, nasty, north facing slope trying to sneak your way over, under, around and through a rats nest, there is nothing as unnatural as the clank of a branch on a plastic tube.

Make sure you have a cover fabric on it, and give serious thought to how you’ll carry it.

By the way, the shoestring most of them come with to wear over your shoulder can really start to cut into your neck by the end of a long day.

Consider a wider, ribbon-style strap, or just folding the tube in half and tucking it in your pack during travel through brush.

**What about decoys?**

The *idea* of a decoy makes a world of sense to me.

You only need to go through two or three (or twenty) blown situations where you called a bull in to 50 yards and then he hangs up, saying, “Show me yours first”, before you start to think there’s merit to this decoy idea.

But by definition, they limit your mobility, and it’s a rare hunting situation that I don’t need to be ready to move at a moments notice.

I’m still experimenting, and I haven’t made up my mind yet.

I like the idea, and when I get enough evidence one way or the other, I’ll either quit carrying the dumb thing around or I will make my own and sell the heck out of them.

**Radios**

I use them. But I don’t have them on all the time.
You can imagine how awful it would be to draw a bead on an elk, only to have your buddy split the morning air with a loud, “Breaker One Nine! – How’s the huntin’ so far?”

My partners and I arrange a schedule, usually checking in with each other at the top of every even-numbered hour.

We don’t have a lot to yap about.

It’s mostly just to check and make sure everyone’s ok.

I have to say though, that I think a disproportionate number of times lately, I’ve been the one writing down GPS coordinates and running to the truck for pack frames!

It’s enough to make a guy not want to answer…

**Binoculars**

Yes, absolutely. Even on a still hunt through forested areas. There are some surprisingly good ones in small packages that you won’t mind carrying around all day.

One accessory that is worth it’s weight in gold is the binocular harness, such as the ones sold by Cabela’s. It puts the weight of the binoculars on your shoulders rather than your neck. Plus, it doesn’t require you to hang on to them to keep them from swinging around.

**Spotting Scope**

For your day pack? No. Use binoculars instead.

But if you are cruising high ridges in your truck or on an ATV, a spotting scope is a nifty way to check for elk a long way out.

**Range Finders**

Yeah, maybe.
These are a high-dollar item that really seem cool.

For archery, I’d say no.

Today’s faster, flatter shooting bows are reducing the need to know the difference between 20 and 25 yards.

Besides which, when I think of every shooting situation I’ve been in, there’s not a lot of time to get a gadget out and range the distance.

If you’re stand hunting, and have time to fidget around ranging different trees or obstacles to prepare for an elk, then that makes sense.

For rifle hunters who are willing to chance 300 yard or longer shots, I guess they better use something to figure it out.

I’m not real big on that idea.

I bow hunted several years before I ever rifle hunted.

I have never taken any big game animal at over 200 yards with a rifle (and that was an antelope), and most of them have been at less than 100.

My politically-incorrect opinion is that shooting elk at 300 yards or more is pure laziness.

And a properly sighted rifle should not need range-finding assistance at two hundred yards or less anyway.

I think the thousand-yard laser range finders are really cool.

I just can’t justify the $400. I need another dozen arrows and a pair of boots, myself.

So now, the day pack checklist:
Day Pack Checklist

The clothing on your back, your weapon, plus:

- Water or Gatorade – as much as you can carry or need
- Flashlights - one headlamp and one spare
- Spare batteries
- Compass
- Topo map of the area
- First Aid – minimal for blisters, cuts, painkillers
- Water purifier tablets
- Trail Marking Tape
- Space Blanket
- Rain Gear
- Fire starters – lighter plus flint/cotton ball kit
- License, ID, and Pen for signing license
- Knife and knife sharpener
- Small rope for assisting with field dressing
- Game bags
- Black Pepper (fly repellant)
- Ziplock Bags and latex gloves
- Bugle tube, cow calls
- Food/snacks

Nice To Have

- GPS
- Radio or cell phone for emergencies
- Extra Scent Mask
- Portable TV for Bronco Games
7 Mistakes A Successful Elk Hunter Must Avoid

1. Do not come to camp out of shape. Your hunt will be short. It will not be sweet.

2. Do not participate in negative talk in camp without focusing on solutions.

3. Do not cruise around in the truck or on an ATV thinking you’re going to get a shot.

4. Do not go into the woods without a specific plan for the day.

5. Do not “zone out” while still-hunting and spend all day walking around looking at your feet.

6. Do not be the first guy out of your stand during a high-pressure rifle season.

7. Do not spend mid-day in camp.
7 Things A Successful Elk Hunter Does Right

1. Always close to less than 100 yards before attempting to bugle in a bull.

2. Always hunt the wind, no matter how slight.

3. Always hunt until last light, and stay out longer to locate call-shy bulls.

4. Always follow up on a shot to the best of your ability, even if you are unsure of a hit.

5. Always set out each day with a flexible but deliberate plan.

6. Always have a backup location to hunt that you can switch to after two days.

7. Finally, a top-flight guide works his tail off, never gives up, always has a positive attitude and a backup plan.
As a DIY Hunter,

You Are Your Own Guide

Your client paid good money for this hunt.

Give him nothing but your best!