

Hunting Elk Internet Style

I thought I had found a sweet deal in which I would continue to take advantage of in years to come. I agreed to pay a guy a lease fee to use his cabin in Colorado. He had private land that bordered several thousand acres of National Forest. The only access to that side of the mountain was across his land through 3 locked gates. I flew out to the ranch in June to do some scouting. His cabin was at 8,000 ft elevation, the top of the mountain was 10,383 ft. When I got to the cabin, it was about 1 hour before dark and there were 23 elk in the lake that was in front of the cabin. This was a good sign even though they were only cows and young spike bulls. The next morning, I put enough provisions for 1 day in my backpack and headed to the top of the mountain. I took my GPS and marked various water holes, meadows and wollers as I scaled up the mountain. It took 5 hours to get to the top. I didn't see any Elk during my climb but, I was climbing at a fast pace and it was very steep. When I got to the top, I ate a snack and took a 30 minute nap. It only took 3 hours to get back to the cabin going down hill the entire way. About an hour and a half after I got back to the cabin, the same herd of elk waded out into the lake. All day without seeing an elk sure made those elk a welcome site. The next day, I met with the land owner, Jim, and told him where I had climbed. He said where I had gone "wasn't too far" from a lean-to he had built years ago and it was in an excellent hunting area. Since it was a 5 hour hike to the top, I decided to camp at the lean-to when I came back to hunt in September. In retrospect, I wish I had gotten Jim to clarify the term "wasn't too far."

Greg Griffith agreed to be my cameraman on the Colorado Elk hunt. I was trying to film a TV show. I didn't think September would ever get here. I couldn't wait. Finally the day arrived and Greg and I were on our way to Glenwood Springs, Colorado. When we finally got to the cabin, it was dark. We were both dead tired. We decided to wait to get organized the next day, so we hit the sack. The next day we finished unpacking and began to get organized. It had taken me 5 hours to get to the top of the mountain back in June, but at that time, I only had to carry a day-pack. We each had packs that we had never used before and they were purposely huge. In our packs we each had 2 gallons of water, food for several days, an extra change of clothes, a sleeping bag, tarps, an air mattress and all of our hunting gear: bow, arrows, GPS, range finder, binocholures, release, etc... We didn't have any scales, but I know our packs weighed between 50 to 70 pounds each. Knowing we had a lot more weight than I did back in June, I figured it

would take us 7 hours to reach the top of the mountain. We left the cabin at 10:30 a.m. which gave us 9 hours to climb to the top and set up camp in the Lean-to. Half way up the mountain, it started raining. Have you ever heard thunder at 10,000 feet elevation? It's a whole lot louder when you're 2 miles closer to it. I have never heard thunder so loud. And of course, the bottom fell out of the sky. It rained buckets. As the day turned to evening, the rain turned to hail, we still kept climbing. About 2 ½ hours from dark the hail turned to sleet and you guessed it, we were not at the top yet! Around 30 minutes before dark, we were 300 feet elevation away from the top of the mountain. The sleet had turned to snow and we were both dringed and freezing. The temperature was below freezing and dropping. I knew it was hopeless to think we could get to the top of the mountain and find a lean-to that we had never been to before, in less than 30 minutes. I suggested that we open our packs, get out our tarps, put up a canopy and put on some dry clothes for the night. When I opened my pack, I discovered that it wasn't waterproof. Everything in my pack was soaking wet including my spare clothes and sleeping bag. To make matters worse, the snow was still falling and had turned into slush. We had never opened our Tarps from their original packing and were surprised to find them to be 6 foot by 6 foot. I'm only 5 foot 10 inches but Greg is 6 foot 4 inches. We used our ropes and hung 1 tarp vertical to block the wind and hung the other tarp horizontal to keep as much of the moisture off of us as possible. The air mattress we took was one with a built in battery operated blower to pump it up. Unfortunately, when we tried to pump it up, we discovered that the airlines had broken the plastic fan housing which caused a huge opening in the mattress. Yes, we had carried that heavy air mattress for over 9 hours to 10,383 feet elevation all for nothing. I took another rope and made a clothes line. I hung all my clothes on it including the ones I had on and climbed into my wet sleeping bag.

By now, moisture had stopped falling, but the temperature hadn't. Even though I was freezing in my wet bag, it didn't take long for me to fall asleep, despite the huge rock under my back. You see soft ground wasn't a consideration when we selected where to construct our tarps since we had a huge king size, inflatable, air mattress, that didn't work. It did sleet again during the night, but I was oblivious to the fact. My right big toe got a minor case of frostbite that night and is still numb even today. It was so cold the next morning, we decided to head down the mountain back to the cabin to thaw, eat, get dry clothes, and rest before we tried it again. When I got out of my sleeping bag, I found all my clothes to be frozen stiff. Have you

ever put on socks that you got out of the freezer that were stiffer than cardboard? Try it, you won't like it. Not to mention my pants and shirt being the same way. Everything was covered in 2 inches of ice, so there was no way to make a fire. I wasn't about to climb down the mountain naked, so I gritted my teeth and put them on. By the time we had gotten to the cabin some 3 to 4 hours later, my clothes were thawed, but I wasn't! We started a fire in the stove and put on dry clothes. Warmth never felt better. We found out from the radio that it had gotten down to 18 degrees last night and was expected to do the same tonight. We decided to get something to eat and hit the sack. We would give it a new try tomorrow. The next day was a beautiful day and temperatures wouldn't fall below freezing again while on this hunt. Nor would it rain again. We worked our way to the top of the mountain determined to find the lean-to. This time we headed out just before daylight and with just a light daypack. At the top of the mountain we found the Colorado term "wasn't too far" to mean something totally different from the Alabama term. Hey, but we did find the lean-to. This was a major victory after all we had been through trying to locate it. We were not going to be defeated. We hunted Elk all the while looking, but by the time we did find it, we knew that after we ate a snack lunch we would need to start back down the mountain in order to get to the cabin shortly after dark. We marked the lean-to on our GPS and headed to the cabin, bugling and hunting the entire way. We decided we had hunted this part of the mountain enough without hearing the first bugle. The next morning, we took off before daylight, to the east side of the cabin. At about 2:00 p.m., we heard our first bugle. We weren't sure if it was an elk or another hunter. We had seen plenty of other hunters. We found out they could drive to the top of the mountain from the south side and work their way down. We were walking 4 or more hours just to get to where the elk signs were $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up. Anyway, we had finally heard a bugle and decided that we had to treat every bugle we heard as though it were an elk by bugling at him aggressively. We could tell that this was a bull elk with cows by the way he was responding. He would bugle back, thrash some trees, round up his cows and run the other way. Although we hadn't seen him yet, after 2 hours of working him, we had figured it out. Once we figured out the scenario, we changed tactics. I bugled to locate the bull. He bugled back. We didn't make a sound until he bugled again letting us know the direction he was headed. Once we determined that, we checked the wind direction and circled to get in front of the bull. I never bugled at him again. He would bugle every 15 minutes or so, which let us know where he was and where he was headed.

We kept circling and circling until finally we were in the right position. I began a cow call. He bugled. I cow called again, he bugled again then again. We were in thick dark timber. He bugled again. He couldn't have been more than 40 yards as he thundered another bugle. Where was he? It was so thick, I couldn't see him. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I could see movement. I could make out a cow, feeding to my left about 30 yards. Then I could see another, then another, then one more. There were 4 cows feeding to my left from 20 to 40 yards away. Then a thundering bugle again. I could see the antler of the bull, no more than 40 yards away headed straight at me. I was on my knees and Greg was right behind me with the camera. The bull walked closer, 30 yards, then closer, 20 yards. He stopped. Facing straight head on, he looked me square in the eyes and bugled right at me. I didn't have a good shot because he was facing right at me. His cows were still to my left and were working further away. I knew if I was patient, he would also head in their direction, giving me a broad side shot. He took 2 more steps straight at me and bulged right at me again. The hair on my neck is standing on end and my right knee began to shake. Actually, quiver is a better description of what it was doing. One of the cows made a call. The bull looked over at her. I thought, now is my chance to draw, but I still don't have a shot. The cow called again and began to trot off. The bull shot off after her running broadside from my right to my left in thick dark timber. Now was my only hope. I drew my bow, estimated the yardage to be 40 yards, found the shoulder, lead the bull and released the arrow. Smack! I center punched it, a tree that is. I couldn't have centered it any better if I had tried too. I thought quick and bugled at the bull. He bugled, but never looked back. In 5 seconds, he and his cows were in the next county.

It was time to start heading back to the cabin. As we hunted our way back, a grouse crossed our path. It was a forty-five hard shot. I swapped arrows to one that had a blunt head. I drew, took aim and released. A head shot and Greg got it all on film. When we got back to the cabin, we had roasted grouse. The best meal we had had since we left home.

Two more days of hunting produced nothing but more encounters with more hunters. I decided we needed to move to another area. I went to town and called a friend of mine who lives in Colorado. I asked him to get on the internet and find out what unit in Colorado had over the counter license hunting with the highest bow success rate for the last 5 years. Some units in Colorado you have to get drawn to hunt even with a bow and some you can

buy over the counter license. I hadn't been drawn, so was forced to hunt over the counter areas. After checking the Colorado Game and Fish web site he called me back. He told me that unit 13 had the highest archery success rate of all the over the counter areas. For the last 5 years it had averaged 27% archery success rate. I went to Wal-Mart and bought a Colorado Atlas map. Unit 13 was a little over 100 miles from where I was and had lots of state and national public lands. We drove to the biggest town in unit 13 and checked into a motel. I got the yellow pages out and found a taxidermist and a butcher. We visited the taxidermist first, then the butcher. After quizzing the owners and the customers who had brought their elk there, we determined that the Rhoutt National Forest seemed to be the most productive. We looked at the atlas and found the forest to be huge and ranged across 3 to 4 different units. All units, except unit 13, are draw only. I called my buddy back and asked him to find out what he could about the Rhoutt National Forest in unit 13, and try to logically get me started in the right direction. He got back on the internet and went to a web site called publichuntingland.com. Coincidentally they had the GPS co-ordinates of a hot spot with a picture of a trophy elk in the Rhoutt National Forest in unit 13. It also listed all kinds of local information that was useful. We got our GPS out and began to search for the spot. After about 3 hours of searching, we determined that the spot was surrounded by private land with no way to access it from the main roads. So back to the yellow pages I went. I found the nearest US Geological survey office and went there. I bought all the pertinent topomaps, near and around the GPS location we had. It totaled 5 maps in all. That night in the motel, we taped the maps together and began to study them. We found a horse trail that lead within a mile of where we wanted to be. The horse trail eventually lead to a logging road that lead to a gravel road. You could drive a motorized vehicle on the gravel road. You have to be careful about roads in a National Forest, some if not most do not allow motorized vehicle travel. We figured the hike from the nearest point of the gravel road to the place we wanted to be was about 5 miles. The next morning we ate a good breakfast for a change and bought some more provisions and headed out. It took a while to get to and find the right gravel road but, by 6:00 p.m. we were at the GPS hot spot. The first bugle I made sent 3 different bulls into a contest. A contest to see who could bugle the loudest. I being the self appointed judge quickly determined the winner and Greg and I took off in that direction. The bull to our left wasn't excepting defeat so easily and came charging toward us. Within 10 minutes he stood broadside at 20 yards, unfortunately, he was a spike. We continued pursuit after the contest winner to find a huge bull about 200 yards due north of us

rounding up cows. I immediately quit bugling and began cow calling. The bull rounded his cows and began pushing them to our right. We checked the wind and began circling to get in front of him, periodically cow calling. We hadn't gone more than 100 yards when the largest cow I have ever seen appeared right in front of us. I cow called 2 or 3 times and the bull bugled, and the cow trotted off in the direction of the bull. I cow called 3 more times and the 3rd bull bugled in the back ground behind us. The contestant winning bull couldn't stand it. He thought we were 1 of his cows stuck between him and another bull. He came barreling right toward us. I cow called again and bull came within 35 yards and stopped. There was too much brush between us and him to get a shot. The bull circled and we did also, being wind conscience the entire time. I cow called again and he thundered a bugle and ran within 35 yards of us again. But, again it was too thick to get a shot. Then, to our right, but slightly behind us, the 3rd bull bugled again. It appeared as though he was a satellite bull timidly looking to steal some of the contest winner's cows. Well the winner wasn't going to allow that and went storming off to his cows. We heard him bugle about 5 minutes later, at least a mile away. But, the 3rd bull answered back and he was no more than 200 yards away. We check the wind and got between the 2 bulls. I bugled and the 3rd bull screamed back at me. I bugled again and he came running toward us, bugling the whole way. Finally, we spotted him. I had a bushy cedar tree blocking my view and all I could see was his antlers. He wasn't as big as the contestant winner but, he was still a shooter. I tried to shoot him with my range finder but there was too much brush. I spotted an Aspen tree behind the bull that appeared to be only 5 yards behind him. I was able to range the tree above the brush and found it to be 80 yards. I figured the bull to be 75. Depth perception is difficult at that distance. The tree was actually 22 yards behind the bull as I later found out. Greg was to my right filming the whole time and had a perfect view of the bull. He told me to ease over to him. I was able to do so without being detected. Finally, I had a clean shot. I drew my bow and gapped my 70 and 80 yard pins right behind the bulls shoulder. I took a deep breath and released my arrow. The arrow flew like a perfectly thrown spiraling football, right over the top of the bulls back and centered the Aspen tree. The score was now trees 2, elk zero. The bull bolted out of sight. I quickly bugled at him and to my surprise he bugled back. We checked the wind and circled right, about 500 to 600 yards. I bugled again and he bugled back. We had the wind perfect and began to close the gap. I bugled again and you could hear the dead fall crackling as he ran toward us. He stopped short of sight and bugled at us. I bugled back. We could hear that he had started

thrashing a tree. I bugled again and he bugled back. Now, he is tearing that tree up! We quickly headed toward him, almost at a trot. Finally we could see the bushy cedar he was thrashing and limbs were being peeled off as if it were a banana. The bull was on the other side of the tree and we couldn't see him, but, from the flying limbs and cracking sounds, there was no question where he was. I shot the cedar with my range finder and found it to be 100 yards. It was pretty open where we were so I didn't want to risk getting busted trying to get closer. I got ready, clipped my release on the bow string and bugled. He stopped wrestling with the tree and bugled back. Stiff legged and ears cocked back, he came out from around the cedar. He was coming toward us but angling to our right. He had traveled about 25 yards and stopped. I had a wide-open broadside shot. I picked up my range finder and found him to be 79 yards. I shot the bull one more time with the range finder just to make sure and again it confirmed the yardage to be 79 yards. The elk was broadside facing left to right with a slight quartering away shot. I drew my bow, took a deep breathe, and held the 80 yard pin on the second rib behind the shoulder. The moment I touched off the release, I knew it was a perfect shot. The arrow disappeared right at the second rib behind the shoulder. The bull did a 180 and ran off in the direction he had come from. He stumbled over a log after only running 30 yards and crashed down a hill for about another 20 yards, as he disappeared over the embankment. Greg and I waited about 15 minutes, then went to where the bull had been standing when I shot. Not far from there we found blood and begin to follow it. There wasn't much, but there didn't need to be. The bull had only gone about 60-70 yards total. He had fallen and rolled down the hill just out of our sight. It was a magnificent animal, I was ecstatic. It was now 7:30 p.m. After only 1½ hours of hunting we had called in 3 bulls and had 1 on the ground. After taking plenty of pictures, the work began. We capped him out and sawed off the top of his skull keeping the antlers in tacked. We then de-boned the meat. It took most of the night to pack him out. When we finally got back to the motel, we took a quick nap. When we woke up we decided to pack in and camp, rather than hike back and forth while hunting for a bull for Greg. We bought a tent and some other previsions and packed back in within a mile of where I had shot my bull. By the time we got camp set up it was dark. We ate super and hit the sack. We got up at 4:00 am, ate some oatmeal, and took off. By 5:45 am, we had traveled about 2 miles. We were hoofing it. We laid down to wait for daybreak. At 6:10 am we heard 3 different bulls bugling. It was still too dark to shoot, but we headed in their direction. By 7:00 am we had homed in on one and were in hot pursuit. By this time, we had heard 2 additional

bulls bringing the total to 5. After chasing this bull for over an hour, we knew he had cows and we had changed our calling to strictly cow calling. He still wouldn't come to us. Finally, we came to an open area with a steep grassy hill. We could see the bull and his herd of cows, feeding on the grass as they made their way up the steep incline. They were about 300 yards away. We got into position and when everything was right, I began to cow call. The bull lifted his head, flexed his ears, and went back to grazing. Each time I called, he did the same, until finally he paid no attention to my calls at all. They were slowly getting farther and farther away as they grazed toward the top of the hill. They were now about 400 yards away with about 100 yards more before reaching the top. I had nothing else to lose. I pointed the tube of my bugle directly at the bull and made a wimpy but firm bugle call right at him, and he bugled right back. Then he took the all too familiar posture of stiff legs and ears laid back as he came trotting down the mountain straight at us. When he got about 150 yards away, he stopped and looked back at his cows. I knew he was about to bolt back up the hill to push them over the top. I pointed the tube directly at him again and gave another immature bugle. The bull bugled right back and trotted another 90 yards directly at us. He turned broadside and Greg shot him with his range finder, 62 yards was the reading. Greg's longest pin was 50 yards. I whispered, "How far is he?", when Greg told me I asked, "Can you make that shot?" Greg said, "I only have a 50 yard pin but I believe I can make it." The bull was looking at us and then his cows, then us, then his cows. From his body language I knew he had had enough. I whispered, "If you're going to take him, you better do it now," The bull flinched and took a step toward the cows and stopped. Greg drew his bow. Using his 50 yard pin and compensating for the difference he let one fly. It looked to me like he had hit the bull. He took off up the hill. I bugled at him and he stopped about 150 yards away. I put my binoculars on him as he stood there broadside. I couldn't see any blood and there was no evidence in his body language that he had been hit. Greg whispered, "I shot just over his back." I nodded and bugled at the bull. There was nothing doing this time. Over the hill he ran pushing the cows in front of him. We went up the hill after him but at a much slower pace. When we finally got to the top, I bugled. We heard him bugle back, but it sounded like he was 2 miles and 1 mountain away. Then we heard 3 different bulls bugling to our right, much closer than the one we had been chasing. We checked the wind and made our approach. We went down the side of that mountain, down into a valley, up a steep hill, down the other side and into the next valley. All the while these bulls were bugling at each other. By this time, we had determined there to be at least 5 different

bulls. We climbed to the top of the next hill, being constantly cognizant of wind direction. Once at the top we listened intently as we formed our strategy. We could now determine that there were at least 6 different bulls, maybe 7. As we looked at the valley below, we surmised that they were all between the valley and the top of the next mountain that towered in front of us. We wanted to go after a satellite bull because we knew he would be the easiest to call in and would not have all those extra eyes and noses to bust us. We also needed an approachable bull, one that when we spooked any of the other bulls during our approach, which was inevitable, they would spook in the opposite direction of the bull we were stalking. After considering the terrain, the wind, and the way each of the bulls were bugling. We decided to go after the 3rd most aggressive bugler. After checking the wind one more time, we started our stalk. Down into the valley and halfway up the other mountain. We found ourselves in the middle of 7 bugling bulls. They were calling each other for us. Our bull was the closest and as we continued our stalk, we could see him in the middle of a green meadow, 200 yards away. We had guessed right. He was a loner. Even though he was a satellite bull, he was a **NICE** one! I bugled at him. He bugled back and began to circle from our right to our left getting closer as he walked. We circled left and got slightly ahead of the bull and waited in silence. In an effort to circle around where he had last heard me bugle, the bull made a hard left and began to walk right to us. He stopped at 50 yards and stared in our direction. For the most part, the forest was pretty open, but as fate would have it, there was thick brush between him and us. He bugled right at us. I pointed my bugle back in the direction where I had last bugled and I answered him with a bugle of my own. He bugled right back but, to my surprise, he turned right and began to walk away from us. When he dropped out of sight into the ravine to our left, we circled left and stalked right to the edge of it just in time to see him emerge up the other side about 100 yards to our right. Where the bull had crossed the ravine was deep, but it was nothing more than a ditch where we were. It was about 15-20 yards wide. I pointed my bugle tube to my left and let one roar. Just like reeling in a fish with a rod and reel, the bull turned left and began walking in our direction, parallel to the ravine. As he got closer, the ravine was quickly turning into a ditch. Directly across the ditch from us was a bushy cedar tree. The question was, is he going to walk in front of or behind the tree? You guessed it; he walked on the other side of the tree. He stopped and began to rub the tree. Greg shot the tree with his range finder and found it to be 32 yards on the other side of the ditch. The tree was probably 2 to 3 yards thick. The way the bull was acting, I did a risky thing. In retrospect, we could have been more

patient and he probably would have emerged on the left side of the tree. I made a wind check and found there to be a very slight breeze. The problem was, it was at our backs and slightly left. I was afraid that with just a minor shift or swirl, the bull would bust us. I took my bugle tube, pointed directly at the cedar tree and bugled. The bull stopped rubbing the tree and bugled right back at me. He slowly emerged on the left side of the tree. There he stood, broadside. There was a tree, slightly blocking the front part of his left shoulder, but the rest of the shoulder and all of the vitals were clearly exposed. Greg shot the bull with his range finder and found the reading to be 38 yards. He drew his bow, put his 40 yard pin just a grunt low, and squeezed his release. The elk was looking right at us. The strum of the bow caused the bull to drop a little and to lunge forward. The arrow struck the bull with a smack and disappeared. It hit about 3 to 4 ribs back from the left shoulder. It was a fatal hit. I'm sure the fact that the bull jumped string, caused Greg to shoot slightly high and a little back, but it was still a deadly shot. The bull ran to our left and was out of sight. I immediately bugled and heard nothing while Greg was running across the ditch to the other side. I bugled again and still nothing. Once Greg reached the other side of the ditch, I saw him pull another arrow from his quiver. He knocked it and raised his range finder. He dropped his range finder and drew his bow. I kept the video camera rolling even though I couldn't see the elk. He released the arrow and I heard it smack. He gave me the thumbs up sign as I ran across the ditch. When I got to Greg, he told me that my 2nd bugle had stopped the bull in his tracks. He said the range finder showed him to be 38 yards again so he duplicated his first shot. The bull ran into a half-fallen tree, slid under it and expired. What a magnificent 6x6. He had plenty of mass and extra long tine length. The time was now 9:10 a.m. In three hours we had a trophy bull and had heard between 15 and 20 others. Boy had we discovered a hot spot. It took us the rest of the day to pack him out, so we checked back into the motel for a good night's sleep. The next day we got up at our leisure and hiked into the forest for the last time to break down camp and pack it out. As we were flying out from Denver to Atlanta, I found myself day-dreaming about the events of the past week. Recounting the events that lead to such a successful hunt, I couldn't help thinking that soon, very soon, a lap top computer will be a vital part of the necessary equipment for the avid public land hunter.