

ARIZONA BLACK POWDER ELK HUNT

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By
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One morning my oldest son called me and excitedly said I had drawn a great tag. After a dozen years and 14 points I finally drew a coveted Arizona muzzleloader elk tag. The initial excitement quickly turned into a focus on research of the unit and contacting as many people as I could to help find the right places to hunt. I obtained the correct maps and began to memorize them. I found a great amount of satisfaction in the research of this elk hunt as I spoke

to many good men in the hunting world. Most were very generous with their information and a willingness to help. My mind conjured up images of great bulls and hunting experiences.

Although a 14 hour drive from my home state I spent a week scouting in August and returned a week before the hunt by myself to get ready for the opening day on Sept 26th.

Several days before the hunt I saw a number of good bulls in one canyon. One bull in particular really impressed me.¹ This bull had a mature bugle which ended in a double chuckle. Very different from the other bulls in the canyon. He was also the owner of eight or ten cows and calves. Most of the bulls that I saw with harems only had one, two or three cows. I called my wife that night and told her that I had seen the most beautiful elk I had ever seen in my life.

I decided to leave that bull alone and search out more of the hunting unit that I had memorized from the maps. As I explored different areas the next four days I developed a great love for Arizona. From the cooler mountainous terrain on top to the desert-like habitat in the lower elevations it was unique and beautiful. I also met many other hunters that made this hunt more enjoyable.

The day before the hunt started three of my sons came down to hunt for a few days. It was good to have them there and opening morning found us in the canyon where I had seen the big bull four days earlier. In the dark we could hear many different bulls and down the canyon we could hear the double chuckle bull. So I set off in that direction leaving my sons and their spotting scopes high on the ridge.

As it got light I slowly worked my way toward the bugling sounds of the big bull. When I was within 50 yards one of the cows came out into the open and saw me. After looking at me for a second she whirled around to run off. I immediately cow called to her. When I did that the big bull came straight toward me. I couldn't see him because of all the brush but at about 20 feet he bugled at me. He screamed at me through the heavy brush. That experience will never leave me. He then turned back to his cows as they were starting up the hillside from the river bottom of the canyon. The cows were passing through an opening at about 30 yards. I put up my gun and waited to see horn as I knew the bull would soon follow. When he did I put the crosshairs on his chest in the

¹ The first time I saw this critter he was in a ranch corral. The ranch owners are there on weekends only and had fed their horses. The elk were in the corral eating the horse feed. I could hear the bull bugle but I couldn't find him on the mountain. Then I looked around the ranch and saw all these elk in the corral. I was about a half mile from them. This big boy was bugling and then would put his head down and with his rack was pushing the cows around. He finally got all the cows out and only two little calves remained. I thought for sure he would leave them there but he didn't. He gathered up the two little calves and pushed them up against the corral fence. It was almost five feet high but they didn't have any trouble going over it. Then the big bull went up and down the fence a couple times looking for a place to jump, which he did with ease. They went up the canyon behind the ranch for a half mile and bedded down for the day. I can still see in my mind this bull bugling with his head cocked back. The tips of his antlers touched his rump patch.

middle and fired. There was so much smoke that I couldn't see anything. I got on my radio and my sons said that the cows had run off and the bull was slowly walking up the mountain. I had hit him a little high on the chest. The bull kept going until he went over the top of the ridge and into the shady side of the mountain.

After an hour and a half we got on the blood trail. There was not much blood. We looked for this bull until 3:00 that afternoon and were just sick at not being able to find him. I can only think that with the rifle sighted in for 150 yards, it would be hitting high at 30 yards. I had wounded him just above the shoulder and below the backbone in a non-vital area.

We came back the next day and looked again with no luck. Then we hunted in other areas. Two of my sons had to go back home with that empty feeling of wounding an animal and leaving it on the mountain. My other son stayed to enjoy the remainder of the hunt.

We looked at many different locations and called in a few bulls but nothing like the big bull I had scouted out and wounded the first morning. With two days left to go we decided to spend the last of the hunt in the same canyon we had started the hunt in. We just had a premonition that was what we were supposed to do. One of those feelings you get once in a while when hunting. As we went back to the original canyon we decide to stop at a campsite of another hunter. A friend we had made during our scouting. He had taken a great bull the day before and we looked at his antlers with great envy. Then he said that when he was packing out his bull he saw my bull--the one I had wounded. He knew it because of the cheater coming off the royal point. We couldn't believe what we were hearing as hope once more came to us that we might find this great animal.

At daylight we were in the canyon but this time no bugle with the double chuckle. We saw the bull with a single cow and bugling up a storm but he had lost his chuckle at the end. I tried to get within range for a shot but couldn't as he went onto the North side of the ridge into his bedding area for the day. One thing was certain, when he came out for the evening I would be there waiting. As the shadows lengthened and about the time I was wondering if anything would show up for the evening hunt the big bull appeared but a canyon away. He was going to water in the canyon bottom. I had to run to get closer to him. When I knew I was close I slowed way down and walked quietly down the creek bottom but up on the stream bank which was about 10 feet above creek channel. I was looking at some longhorn cattle eighty yards down the creek bottom when below me about ten yards the bull jumped from the edge of the stream. He had been getting a drink. He ran into the stream and stopped and looked at me. I was so flustered by the surprise that I could hardly hold my rifle. I quickly told myself to calm down, put the safety off and when the crosshairs finally quit jumping all over the place I put them on the middle of his chest and following a mental note lowered them about six inches. When the smoke cleared a little I could see the bull running up the opposite bank of the

river and onto the flat on the other side. He went about forty yards and fell down. The hunt was over. But as I approached this magnificent animal I had the saddest feeling come over me. This beautiful bull was in the prime of his life and his life was over. I felt that a little quiet time was in order so I held off the hooping and hollering and said a prayer thanking God for the experience. After about five minutes I got on the radio to my son who was anxiously waiting as he had heard the shot. I told him the hunt was over. He was jubilant and then asked if it was the same bull I had wounded on opening morning. I reached up to touch the bulls shoulder as it was almost dark. I could feel the scab of a healing wound and replied "yes it is the same bull, can you believe it?"

I have been on many hunts from the North West territories to the Mexican border. I love them all but the feelings of the Arizona hunt will be in me forever. It doesn't get any better than being in Arizona looking for elk.