

ARCHERY ELK HUNTING ebook



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Elk Season Day by Day

Use a “controlled aggression” strategy to bag that bull elk.



*When you need to get closer to elk, it's time to get dirt on the front of your clothing.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

Elk hunting is a chess game requiring strategically deft moves and what I call “controlled aggression” – that is, an aggressive attitude that knows when to move hard and fast – but also, when to lay back and wait for the right opportunity.

I’ve developed this attitude over decades of elk hunting under a wide variety of conditions, from wilderness public land hunts to fair chase hunts on private land where a locked gate keeps other hunters out. The one thing these wildly varying conditions have in common is the fact that if you bump the elk too hard, they will run for miles. If that happens, you have to start all over again, beginning with finding another bunch to hunt. And that can take forever.

My Daily Routine When I Know Where Bulls Are

Let's assume you have done your pre-hunt scouting and know, in general terms, where a herd is located. During the early elk seasons I like to be in position hours before first light, listening for bugling bulls. Sometimes I leave camp at midnight, other times 3:00 A.M. – whatever it takes. (This is why that midday nap is so important!)

When I hear a bull, I assess the wind, get into position, and work my way as close as I can in the dark. I try to get on the same level with the herd, knowing that when it breaks light the morning thermals will typically carry my scent up the slope as the sun warms the air. The goal is to try and intercept the elk as they feed toward their bedding area.

If I do not get a shot – and early in the hunt, I will not push it too hard – I shadow the elk until they bed for the day. The plan is now to wiggle within 200-400 yards, depending on the wind and terrain, and wait. Sure, I will glass and sniff about, hoping an opening presents itself for a stalk on a bedded bull, but usually there are too many other elk to make that feasible.

A fresh rub means elk should be somewhere in the neighborhood.
(Photo by Bob Robb)



So, I nap when they do, and maybe even go over the hill and glass and call down into adjacent drainages. But 3 to 4 hours before sundown I am back in position, waiting. When the elk get up and start to feed again – and often bulls will bugle right from their beds just prior to getting up – I make my move, again using controlled aggression. I figure if I do not get them today and do not spook them, I can give it another go tomorrow with some added knowledge of their exact habits.

My Daily Routine When I Don't Know Where Bulls Are



If the elk have disappeared and you have to change plans, a topo map will be invaluable.

(Photo By Bob Robb)

If I do not have a bull to hunt, the plan is simple – cover as much ground as possible searching for elk. Elk herds follow what I call the “pocket principle,” meaning that in any given drainage all the elk will be bunched up into small pockets of country. That means it is my job to hike until I find them. If I have gone three days covering maximum ground without any action and without locating any red-hot sign, I move camp and start over. No reason spending all my time hunting elkless pockets when my pre-hunt research and scouting has told me they are somewhere in the neighborhood.

There are times when the bulls simply are not bugling much, if at all, not a rare occurrence on heavily-hunted public land tracts. In that case I spend a lot of time glassing meadows, parks, and semi-open forested areas at first and last light while listening. I also will consider employing blinds and/or tree stands over freshly-used wallows or water tanks, depending on circumstances, especially during midday hours in hot weather.

Two things will up your odds at getting a shot on these do-it-yourself hunts. First, commit to as many days as possible for the hunt. Elk hunting is very hard work and success rates are low in the best of circumstances, but never give up. The more time you spend in the woods, the better your odds.

And second, hunt hard, but hunt smart. That means do all the right things. Always respect the wind, and bide your time – but when an opening presents itself, controlled aggression means be ready to attack, hard and fast.



The Critical Work After Drawing an Elk Tag



*This is just one of the many big bulls I saw, and got close to, during my recent Arizona elk hunt.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

I had been down this road before, so I knew that having the tag is just the beginning of a long quest at getting a shot at a good bull. Despite what you might think, anyone who accrues bonus or preference points in several states each year doesn't just get drawn, show up, hunt on his own and arrow a big bull or buck. It's no cake walk.

The truth is, the competition out there is fierce. That's why, even though I have 40 years of serious on-my-own western hunting experience under my belt, without hesitation I called my friend Gary "Goose" Howell of Flagstaff, Arizona, and booked his services.
(www.howellwildlifeoutfitters.com; 928-606-3021)

Goose has outfitted in this region for more than 20 years. Both he and I know that's long enough to see the game change. He has adapted, and knows how to make his clients highly successful. So when he talks about what it takes to score on a trophy elk, I listen.

About Pre-Hunt Research...

What Goose Howell says: “It has become increasingly difficult to draw a top-quality, high-demand hunting permit on public land. It’s imperative to implement a plan and conduct your due diligence if you hope to be successful.”

What Bob Robb says: Either a hunter must do all of the research and his own pre-scouting, or hire a qualified, experienced guide/outfitter to do the work for him. This is critical! Skipping this will lead you to certain failure and disappointment.



*Either you or the outfitter/guide you hire must scout and scout hard! Guide Jon Vance, left, and outfitter Goose Howell are scouting, and making a game plan, prior to my Arizona elk hunt.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

About Outfitters...

What Howell says: “Even if you opt to hire an outfitter, you must make sure he knows and has successfully hunted that specific hunting unit, what class of trophies his clients have previously harvested there, and thus what you should expect the opportunity to harvest, given your goals, weapon proficiency and physical condition.”

*I shot my bull an hour before dark at 27 steps, after building a small blind on a trail leading from a thick bedding area to a water source.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*



What Robb says: The importance of this cannot be overemphasized! It is also imperative that the outfitter and his guides are available to pre-scout everything and do everything for you, so you may make the most of your hunting opportunity.



*My dream bull was estimated at 7-8 years old and scored 361 Pope & Young points.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

About Your Odds...

What Howell says: “It’s never been more difficult to draw a quality permit and actually harvest a trophy-class animal on the hunt. It is highly competitive out there.”

What Robb says: Even the experienced local hunter must put his time in to expect to have even a reasonable opportunity to see and harvest a trophy-class animal. For the nonresident tag holder it will be doubly difficult.

About the Demands of the Hunt...

What Howell says: “Never forget that public land hunts require dedication on many levels. You must be in the best physical condition possible. You must be mentally tough. You must stick with your goal to harvest the best trophy possible, win, lose or draw. You must be qualified and proficient with your hunting weapon, and commit the time necessary to get the most out of your top-quality, high-demand hunt!”

What Robb says: Just because you drew a great permit does not mean there’s anything automatic about harvesting a big trophy. To maximize your chances requires dedication and a well thought-out game plan.



*It was no surprise in elk camp that both my guide and the outfitter used [Havalon knives](#) for all their caping and skinning chores!
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

And so, I hired Goose and began preparing myself and my gear. I added to my regular physical fitness regimen so that by opening day I would be able to go hard all day, every day, for the entire 14-day season, if necessary. I tuned two bows to shoot medium-weight [Beman](#) ICS 340 shafts tipped with 125-grain [Thunderheads](#). By opening day I was dialed in. I juggled my work schedule so I had the whole season off.

The result? On day four, after being in the middle of several big bulls every day, I arrowed a 361" monster at 27 steps. I also watched several nonresidents who had the same tag struggle mightily trying to hunt on their own. Because we scouted the unit hard before the season, we knew where the bulls were, and we had a game plan. My guide, Jon Vance, and I used Jon's GPS to keep track of the ground we covered. In four days we hiked 48 miles. It was the best elk hunt of my life.



So, you can forget the mysteries and myths—the truth is that getting the tag is just the beginning. You must be willing to work harder and smarter than the other permit holders and their guides, or chances are the season will end and you'll wonder what the heck happened.

(Photo by Steve Sorensen)

Hunting Public Land: The West's Top Public Elk Hunts

Where can you hunt bugling bulls on public land with a decent chance of success – and not take out a second mortgage?



It's a good idea to stand back from the edge of the hill when bugling – a bull might be just below the crest of the hill.

(Photo by Bob Robb)

Here are some places where the elk hunting today, in terms of numbers of elk and the chances at getting in the middle of them, are as good as it gets on public land. And so you know, I'm realistic. That means I'm biased against places where non-resident tags are hard to get and cost more than a set of new tires for your truck. I also dismiss many popular areas known for the occasional monster bull but that require a decade or more of preference points for a reasonable chance at drawing a tag.

Hunting some places will be like taking a shot in the dark. The following aren't. But as I said, I'm realistic, so I'm also giving you the downside.

1) White River National Forest, Colorado: North of I-70, the White River elk herd is Colorado's largest, numbering over 50,000 animals. Also a good bet in Colorado is the 1.1 million acre Routt National Forest, in the state's northwestern corner. Not only do these two areas have lots of elk, but in Colorado you can buy tags over the counter for a reasonable amount of money.

The downside? Colorado annually hosts over 200,000 elk hunters. A lot of elk draw in a lot of elk hunters, but you'll do your research and get off the beaten path, right? If you don't do your homework and are not prepared to work at it, expect some company.

2) St. Joe National Forest, Idaho: Located in the southern panhandle region, those who work hard here can get into bugling bulls during archery season in numbers as good as any place on public land out West.

The downside? Wolves are becoming an issue. They eat lots of elk and send those that survive into nasty places. But elk tags and licenses are relatively easy to obtain and not overpriced.



*This big guy is giving you just what you want to hear.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

3) Siuslaw National Forest, Oregon: Want to kill a Roosevelt bull on public land? Talk about tough....but the Siuslaw National Forest in western Oregon might be the answer. Over-the-counter tags are usually available at reasonable cost.

The downside? Boy, can it rain here! And the best hunting is often in the middle of a jungle-like rainforest.

Two areas have been good bets for rut hunting the past couple of seasons – the Bridger-Teton National Forest, near Jackson, and the Beartooth Mountains in the Shoshone National Forest.



4) Western Wyoming: I like hunting elk in Wyoming for a couple of reasons. There are lots of elk in many places, especially the Yellowstone ecosystem. Also, tags are reasonably priced – and even though you have to draw them, in many good units you can usually draw a tag with just one or two preference points. Two areas have been good bets for rut hunting the past couple of seasons – the Bridger-Teton National Forest, near Jackson, and the Beartooth Mountains in the Shoshone National Forest.

The downside? Lord, the grizzly bears and a growing population of wolves can cause you fits. It has gotten so bad that some of my serious elk hunting friends have actually left areas they have hunted for a decade or more to try new places where these large predators have not made an impact yet. Hopefully recent wolf hunting seasons will help.

5) Southwestern Montana: Nearly 50 percent of Montana’s annual elk harvest comes from Region 3. That means the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest can be an excellent bet for those willing to get off the beaten path and invest some serious effort.

The downside? Non-resident elk tags in this state can set you back more than a grand. And, here’s another place where the grizzly/wolf problem is rampant. These are the best bets for the self-guided elk hunter on public land. Wherever you choose to go, doing your research before the hunt is every bit as important as what you do on the hunt. Success is up to the same person as always – you!

For More Information	
Arizona Game & Fish Dept. (602) 942-3000 www.gf.state.az.us	Colorado Division of Wildlife (303) 297-1192 www.wildlife.state.co.us
Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game (208) 334-3700 www.fishandgame.idaho.gov	Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (406) 444-2535 www.fwp.state.mt.us
Nevada Dept. of Wildlife (775) 688-1207 www.ndow.org	New Mexico Game & Fish Dept. (505) 476-8000 www.wildlife.state.nm.us
Oregon Dept. of Fish & Wildlife (503) 947-6000 www.dfw.state.or.us	Utah Wildlife Division (801) 538-4700 wildlife.utah.gov
Washington Dept. of Wildlife (360) 902-2515 www.wdfw.wa.gov	Wyoming Game & Fish Dept. (307) 777-4600 www.gf.state.wy.us

10 Reason's You'll Never Arrow An Elk

*Mistakes made when hunting elk fall into two categories
– skills, and attitudes*



No critter I have bowhunted has been more humbling than hunting wilderness elk on my own. I am not talking about places where elk are thick and killing one is more a matter of being a competent archer than a skilled woodsman – high-dollar private ranch hunts in places like New Mexico, for example, or one of the many game ranches that are springing up like weeds these days.

I'm talking about elk that live wild and free across the mountains and badlands, where steep terrain and high elevation strain even a young man's body, the winds are always squirrely, and the brush thick as the summer air over L.A.

I mean, look at the statistics. Even on a guided hunt with an honest outfit staffed with skilled guides, success rates on wilderness fair chase elk hunts are rarely more than 40 percent on any bull. State statistics show that archery elk hunters rarely punch 20 percent of their tags. Despite what you read in the magazines and see on hunting videos and TV shows, taking a mature bull on a fair chase do-it-yourself elk hunt is about as easy as finding a truthful politician in an election year.

Most articles you read on elk hunting tell you how to get a shot. That's great. Here, however, are the 10 reasons most people will never arrow an elk:

1. You Don't Have A Plan:

The best way to hunt elk is to begin with a game plan built around basic hunting strategy designed around the terrain, season, current weather conditions, and prevalent hunting pressure, then be ready to adapt to the activity patterns of the elk themselves. Staying flexible is critical – but the key is to do your homework and research the area months in advance. You won't succeed if you just wander around the woods willy-nilly, hoping to find some elk.

2. You're Not A Wind-Doping Fanatic:

You can take this to the bank – elk have incredible noses, and the smell of humans will send them into a panic, every time. When the wind is wrong, do whatever it takes to make it right before moving closer. In mountain country, the wind is almost always swirling or blowing crossways, not perfectly from the elk to you. Heck, if you waited for a perfect wind, you'd never move closer! You must be constantly monitoring the wind, making your move when it lets you and backing the heck out of there when it is wrong.



Don't let a shot from an awkward position make you forget about what the wind is doing. (Photo by Bob Robb)

3. Ants in Your Pants:

Elk have incredible eyesight. When you are calling a bull in, they will know the exact tree or bush you've just called from, and they'll be looking for you. Sometimes they come in slow, but if you get impatient and move you can be sure the bull is right there and will see you. When he does, it's *adios, amigo*. That's why having two hunters working together, one calling and the other set up out front 50 yards or so, is so deadly. The bull comes in looking for the caller, hangs up 50-100 yards away when he can't find that other elk, and whack!



Shooting ability is another skill that needs constant polishing.
(Photo by Bob Robb)

4. You Call Just Fine: If you are going to call elk, you have to become the very best bugler and cow caller you can be, proficient with as many types of calls as you can. The time to learn is before your hunt, not when you get to camp. Most callers need to improve. Most likely, you're one of them.

5. You Call Too Much:

Many experienced bow hunters have learned that calling at mature bulls is a great way to ruin everything. Instead, they call rarely, if at all. Often the very best technique is to locate the elk, get in front of the herd as it moves to and from bedding areas and food sources, and set up a silent ambush, or set a tree stand over a wallow or water hole.

*To avoid these second five mistakes,
think about what attitudes need adjusting.*

Just who do you think you are? It matters – and can mean the difference between success and failure on an elk hunt.



*Here's the result of hunting elk with the
best in both skills and attitude.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

6. You Think You're Plenty Tough:

A guide I hunted with two years ago said it all. "A lot of the clients can only hike around for a day or two, then they're shot," he said. "So when we get a bull bugling, I try and assess whether or not they can physically go get that elk without scaring him off. A lot of the time that answer is 'nope,' so we don't even try. Or I won't take them into a place where I know they can't handle it. Or when the wind is swirling, if they can't move quickly so we can keep it right, we won't try it." To give yourself the best possible chance, start getting in shape months before your hunt. Being in better shape than you think you need to be will pay big dividends.

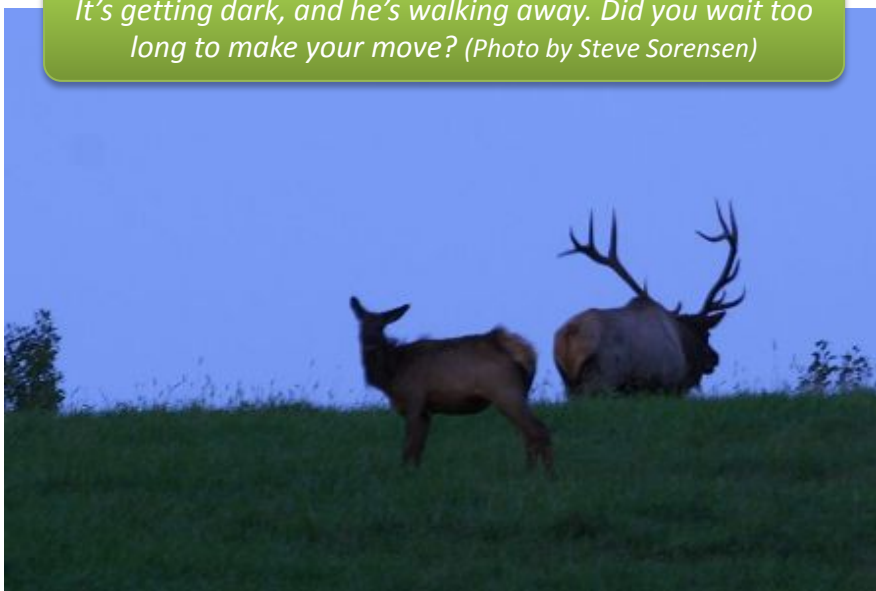
7. You Think You're Robin Hood:

When the heavens smile and present a shot opportunity, you have to take advantage of it. And that usually isn't a broadside bull standing in the middle of a meadow at close range waiting for you to get it together. The bulls are often moving through the thick stuff and you may have only a few precious seconds to make it happen. Bow hunters dream of calling a big bull to within spitting distance, where it turns broadside and there is no brush in the way. That rarely happens. Often the elk is out there 40 or 50 yards with just a small shot window through thick brush and tree limbs, often at a steep downhill angle, and you don't have time to use the rangefinder. Stay within your own personal limitations, but prior to the season spend a lot of time pushing those limits to become a better shot at distance. You'll never regret it.

8. You Can't Take Enough Time:

A quick elk hunt doesn't exist. Elk live in big country, and it can take days just to find a bull to hunt. Once you find a bull, the things that can go wrong are endless. If you have to travel any distance to hunt elk, taking less than a full week makes no sense. Ten days is better, and if you can pull it off, allowing two weeks is primo. Bottom line: when your goal is a mature bull elk, factor in plenty of time.

It's getting dark, and he's walking away. Did you wait too long to make your move? (Photo by Steve Sorensen)



9. You're Afraid to Spook Them:

Too many people hunt elk too passively. That is, when they finally locate a good bull, they spend too much time trying to figure out what to do, then watch as the bull walks off. The best way to get it done is find a bull, assess the situation – wind direction and speed, terrain, the number of other elk (and deer) in the immediate area, the elk's attitude, their speed and direction of travel – and when you see a window of opportunity, go for it! When I locate a bull, I try and close the gap as quickly as possible, wait for an opening, then aggressively make my move while continuing to monitor the external variables, adjusting accordingly. Sure, I've blown it. But I've blown it more often by not making a move.

10. You're A Trophy Hunter:

Watch the videos and TV shows and read the hunting magazines, and you'll think that a bull that's not a huge 5x5 or big 6x6 is a dink, not worthy of a serious elk hunter's broadhead. Horse poop! In the real world of elk hunting, there's no such thing as a bad bull elk. Heck, even a cow elk can be tough to tag at times. If you're a public land hunter and want to hold out for a bull with lots of bone on his head, that's great – just be prepared to eat some tag soup.

If you never arrow an elk, there's a good chance these 10 reasons, or some combination, will play a major role in failure. But now that you know them, I'm betting on you.



To Field Dress or Quarter Your Elk?

After Your Elk is Down

I'll never forget the day I shot my first bull elk.

Just out of college, my old roommate and I traveled 21 miles on horseback into the rugged [Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area](#) of Idaho on a semi-guided elk hunt. The crusty old cowboy who took us in would have rather been drinking than hunting, but we didn't care. We had shot a lot of mule deer already in our young lives, and even though we'd never hunted elk, how tough could it be?

Back in those days you could hunt during the rut with rifles, and on day two of our September adventure that old cowboy whistled in a big 6x6 bull that I killed with one shot from a 7mm Rem. Mag. at about 100 yards, inside some dark timber on a steep mountainside. As luck would have it, a 2 1/2-year old satellite 5x5 bull also came in, and my buddy killed him. Just like that, our elk tags were filled! We thought we were pretty hot stuff, too.

We had shot a lot of mule deer already in our young lives, and even though we'd never hunted elk, how tough could it be?

That is, until we walked over to those two bulls. Holy buckets, they were as big as horses! The thought of field dressing those two bulls on that 60-degree slope suddenly became overwhelming. This was not going to be like taking care of even the biggest-bodied deer we'd ever seen. I thought my bull weighed at least a ton! Looking back, after 35 years of elk hunting and nearly three dozen bulls killed, he probably weighed 750 lbs. Still, that's a lot of bull — and we had two of them to butcher, then backpack three miles to a horse trail where a cowboy could come get the meat.

That took us all of two days of back-breaking work. It was also the beginning of my love affair with elk hunting, one of North America's most difficult, yet rewarding, big game hunting adventures.

Elk Hunting is Hard Work!

We've all heard the saying, "The fun's over when you pull the trigger!" It is never truer than with elk hunting.

Basically, elk hunting is hard work. But if you think it's been tough covering mile after mile of rugged mountain terrain for days on end trying to find an elk to shoot, just wait until you shoot an elk in rough country miles from the nearest road. Throw in some nasty weather, like a snow storm, or thunder and a little lightning. Stir in a pinch of thick brush and a steep mountain between you and civilization, and for good measure, add a dash of slippery-as-snot trail — if there's any trail at all — and you begin to get the picture.

Getting your elk off the mountain to the butcher shop in prime condition is no easy task. Every year hunters lose tons of meat to spoilage or the butcher's trim knife because they were not prepared to handle the task. Don't let this happen to you.

The Right Skinning and Butchering Tools



Meat care begins with the right tools. For elk hunting, you're going to need at least one, and preferably two, hunting knives with strong blades so sharp they scare you. I really have come to like the [Havalon Piranta-Z Black Pro Skinning Knife](#) and [Piranta Tracer-22 Skinning and Caping Knife](#) for this type of job. With the weigh-nothing extra blades, no sharpening steel or stone is needed, a big plus!

The only other tool you'll need, a lightweight saw or hatchet for splitting the brisket, slicing through rib bones to reach the tenderloins, and cutting off the antlers, 50 feet of nylon parachute cord or thin-diameter rope, and four or five elk-sized cotton meat sacks. Don't get the cheapo cheesecloth bags, but buy the ones that are heavy enough to be washed and re-used. They're the only ones strong enough for this job. Be sure to have at least one roll of fluorescent flagging and/or your GPS, so you can mark the spot when you have to come back for subsequent trips. A headlamp is cheap, even at twice the price, when you have to butcher and/or pack elk meat after dark.

Your goal is to prevent meat spoilage. You do that by cooling the meat, remembering that on big-bodied animals like elk, meat can spoil both from the inside and outside. You also must strive to keep the meat as clean as possible, free from dirt and its inherent bacteria.

If you elk hunt on public land, you must be prepared to work hard, cover lots of country, and then if Lady Luck smiles on you, be able to take care of all that meat yourself in the field.



Secure the Elk

Before any cutting begins, you have to secure the elk, which often has expired on a steep sidehill. That's where the cord or rope comes in, used to tie antlers or legs to a tree or bush to hold the animal in place as you work. Point the butt downhill if you can. It should be said that butchering an elk is much easier with two people, so if you can get some help, you're advised to do so.

To Field Dress or Quarter Your Elk?

There are two ways to clean any big game animal, including elk. You can do the basic field-dressing routine, which means first gutting the animal. Or you can take the quarters, backstrap, and neck off without gutting. I do both, depending on circumstances.



Only the very best knives, like the [Havalon Piranta](#) series will do when butchering a big bull elk.

The basic field dressing procedure is the same as it is with deer and other big game, so we won't detail it here. You remove the innards, including the anus, taking care not to puncture the bladder or stomach and spilling their contents onto the meat. Suffice it to say, this is not a good idea. Make sure you remove the heart, lungs, and esophagus.

I field dress an elk when I am not going to be able to finish the job right away, as when I might have to leave the carcass to cool overnight before packing it out. When I do this I lay the animal on its back, then cut the front shoulders so they lay out away from the carcass, and cut the hams to the ball joint so they too, are opened up enough to cool down.

However, these days I prefer to simply quarter the animal without exposing his guts. It's less messy and smelly, and you don't lose any meat.

To do that, roll the elk on one side and use your knife to remove the hind quarter through the ball joint, and front shoulder by cutting behind the scapula, leaving the hide on until the quarter is either hung or ready for boning and insertion into the meat sacks. That helps keep dirt and crud off the meat itself. Next remove the backstrap, half the neck meat, and the meat off the outside of the rib cage or, if you like, use your saw to cut the ribs completely off. I rarely do this, though. You then roll the elk over and repeat.

To get the tenderloins out — they're located inside the carcass, on each side of the backbone — use the lightweight saw to cut through the tops of the rib cage and remove them this way. When ready for bagging, skin the quarters out. *Voila!* One butchered elk, without the big mess of field dressing it first.

I almost always bone my elk meat out, for two reasons. One, it gets rid of excess weight that I don't have to pack down the mountain. And two, removing the bone opens the meat up and facilitates cooling. Thick chunks of elk meat, like those found on the hams and neck, will spoil quickly near the bone unless they are cooled properly. Boning helps this process. Hunters with the luxury of pack horses often like to keep the bone in, as it can make loading quarters into pack boxes easier.

Some hunters like to take the liver, heart, and tongue, all of which make some fine eatin'. An elk liver is about the size of a football, the heart like an elongated softball, so you'll have plenty of extra packing if you want them. I often do.



Dreams Do Come True... But Don't Count On it!

Let me tell you about a fantasy that actually came true on the 21st bull elk I killed. After years of packing meat either on my back or atop pack horses, I was invited to hunt a private New Mexico ranch. The nice 6×6 I shot was a big-bodied critter, but it didn't matter — the guide drove the truck right up to him, winched him into the bed — whole — and drove back to the barn, where the elk was hung, his innards removed, and the butchering took place indoors in a clean, sterile environment.

Now that's heaven on earth! But don't count on it. On an on-your-own elk hunt, you're going to have to handle the butchering and packing chores yourself. And while it's hard work, I look upon it as a labor of love. It means both that I've been successful, and that my family can look forward to a year's worth of some of the most delicious and nutritious meat in all the world.



Essential Elk Gear

Smart elk hunters pack light – which means they need to bring only the essentials

In wilderness elk hunting, where you hike several miles a day over a week's time, ounces are heavy. The less of them you carry, the more efficient you'll be. Still, you gotta bring everything you need to get it done.

If I'm hunting solo, I choose gear differently than when buddy hunting. That's because two of us can share some stuff between us. And gear needs to be selected based on the type of hunt you are doing. A backpack hunter doesn't necessarily take the same stuff as someone doing day hunts out of his truck or off the back of a horse. Also, let's not discuss the obvious – bow, arrows, etc. Instead, let's talk about those little things that can make a big difference in your daypack.



Bushnell Backtrack

GPS: I'm not talking about a large, heavy GPS unit. Get one of the compact units that only records a handful of waypoints – the [Brunton Get-Back](#) or [Bushnell Backtrack](#). They weigh next to nothing and record 3 to 6 waypoints. I only need three – camp, truck, and the elk I kill. Once I used the Get-Back to record a hidden wallow I stumbled upon. I killed a nice bull there, and the GPS was what made hunting it possible.

- 1) **Walker's Game Ear:** I'm older now and do not hear well. In fact, few of us have pristine hearing. A simple behind-the-ear [Walker's Game Ear](#) has made it possible for me to hear faint bugles and the approach of a sneaking bull again. It's invaluable.
- 2) **Judo Point:** My quiver is never without a judo point-tipped shaft. Why? Because staying sharp with my shooting is critical, and the judo allows me to stump-shoot all day, every day, as I am hiking along. It lets me incorporate real-world target practice into my hunt.
- 3) **Rangefinder:** My [Nikon Archer's Choice](#) laser rangefinder is with me every day. I've yet to be able to take a reading off a bull, but it does permit me to range objects around me after I set-up and try and call a bull in. I also use it in conjunction with my judo point practice and as I hike along. Why? Because it helps me get a feel for what specific distances actually look like in the woods, which makes it more likely that I'll pick the right pin when I have to shoot a bull that doesn't allow me to take a reading off him first.



*Nikon
Archers
Choice*

4) Scent Killer Field Wipes: I firmly believe you must always have the wind right or elk will bust you. Still, as a precaution, I pack along [Scent Killer Field Wipes](#). I wipe down everything – my body, my clothes, my gear – on a regular basis. It's cheap insurance.

5) Elk Fire: A little bottle of this cow-in-heat scent and a couple of wicks is employed whenever possible on the downwind side of all my calling set-ups. You know why.

6) Flagging: A half roll of fluorescent flagging tape makes marking whatever needs marking in the woods quick and easy. A trail to a downed bull, a stand site, whatever. In grizzly and wolf country, if I have to come back later to pack meat – which is most of the time – I tie a lot of flagging onto a tall pole and place it in the center of the gut pile. When I come back I glass this from afar. If it has been knocked down, I know a bear is around and I need to be extra-careful.



Elk Fire

7) Fuel: The smartest thing I started doing years ago was packing along powdered energy supplements that need to be mixed with water. You need to drink lots of water on a mountain hunt anyway, and adding these supplements boosts your energy level measurably. You can find them in a nutrition store – I like the stuff endurance athletes use. [Wilderness Athlete](#) sells some great stuff designed specifically for hunters. I packaged quart-sized amounts in [Stretch-Tite food wrap](#), store them in a plastic baggie, and when it's time simply mix one up in my quart water bottle.

8) Lightweight Skinning Knife: As I mentioned before, to skin a few ounces off and keep your pack light, the [Havalon Piranta is by far the best skinning knife for elk hunting](#). Each knife weighs less than 3 ounces, and you only need to take few extra blades along. They'll get the job done fast and get you back home.

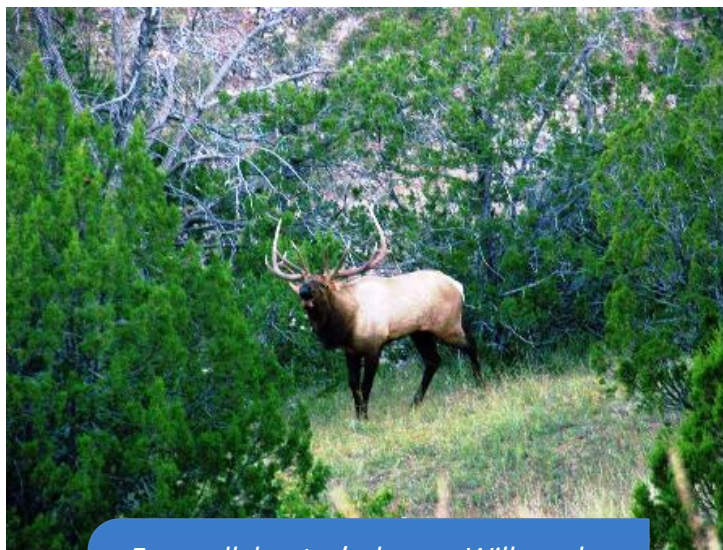
You may have your own essentials, but based on experience, I advise you not to forget any of these.



The Number One Mistake Elk Hunter's Make

How to ruin your chances in March for the elk you want to bag in September.

Decades ago, an old mentor explained why most out-of-state elk hunters never saw a bull, much less got a shot at one. "The mountains don't care that you've gotten older, had an injury, or are too busy with work and the family to train for the hunt," he said. "They're still steep and rough, and the elk can prance about like ballerinas at higher elevations. Unless you prepare, you don't stand a chance." Sage advice, even today.



Every elk hunter's dream. Will you be physically able to do what it takes to put yourself in this picture?

(Photo by Bob Robb)

This is why, six to eight months before opening day, you must start training for your elk hunt. You can't put it off because physical fitness is not something that occurs overnight, or by osmosis. It's a slow-but-steady progression that you must participate in several times a week to achieve measurable results.

If you're serious about elk hunting, begin your training program now. If you're not, the mountains will beat you. Here are six ways to fail long before the hunt.

- 1. If you don't have a medical exam,** you might begin your physical training only to find out you're in over your head. You can't afford a training injury, and you need to know if getting in shape is doable in the time you have. Once your doctor gives the OK, you're ready to start.
- 2. If you don't change your evil ways,** your training will be worth little. It's time to address that improper diet, poor discipline, and your other bad habits (you know what they are). At your medical exam be honest with your doctor. Consider him part of your team. Seek his diet and exercise suggestions, and ask him if your target weight is realistic. Yes – diet and exercise are hard, but if they can do it on “The Biggest Loser” TV show, why can't you?



*Six to eight months
before opening day,
you must start training
for your elk hunt.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

- 3. If you don't start out walking,** you'll stop far short of your goal. You literally have to walk before you run. Commit to taking a brisk walk every day. Put in 30 minutes to begin with, and work your way up to an hour. Weather's the problem? Head for the mall or walk on a treadmill.

After 10 years of applying, I finally drew a coveted Arizona archery elk tag this past year. Thankfully, I did the physical training work for months before the season began. The bull scored a Pope & Young Club score of 361 points.
(Photo by Bob Robb)



4. **If you don't do aerobic exercise**, you might be strong but not fit. Some guys think aerobics is just for women. Don't be one of those guys. Use aerobic exercises to get your heart pumping at your target heart rate, or THR. Choose a combination of aerobic activities that interest you enough so you'll stick with it over time. Jogging, swimming, bicycling, walking, jumping rope, and fast walking are good examples. The aerobics classes so popular these days are an excellent way to both improve your overall aerobic capacity and tone your muscles.
5. **If you don't get stronger**, you'll feel fatigued by mid-day. Build some muscle through weight training or calisthenics like push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, and stretching. When using weights, concentrate on the main muscle groups – legs, back, shoulders, arms, chest, and stomach. However, keep in mind that the most important muscle in your body is your heart – it is best strengthened through the aerobic activities mentioned above.
6. **If you don't get specific**, the hunt will be torture. Once you reach your general fitness goals, you need to focus on training your body specifically for the mountains. Exercise physiologists call it "specificity training" – designed to improve the performance of a specific task. A mountain hunter is basically a mountain hiker who carries a daypack weighing 10-15 pounds. Therefore, incorporate exercises that simulate this activity. On your walks, start wearing a loaded day pack. Avoid flat ground. Make stadium steps and hills part of your route.

If you need help, don't be embarrassed to ask for it. The truth is that not asking for help is more likely to cause embarrassment. Receiving professional advice and guidance to achieve a fitness goal is as easy as joining a local health club, YMCA, or signing up for a class at the local college or other accredited institution specializing in physical fitness. Most have a staff of trained professionals who can help design an exercise program to meet your specific goals. They'll help keep you motivated, too.

You have other things to do – scouting through aerial photos and topo maps, researching internet sites for information about the area, deciding what gear you'll need, and more. But if you don't get your body ready, none of that will matter.



*Dreams of a whopper bull like this one from Arizona ought to be plenty of motivation to get in shape.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

Last year, after 10 years of applying, I finally drew a coveted Arizona archery elk tag. Thankfully, I did the physical training work for months before the season began. One day, according to the GPS my friend Jon Vance carried, we hiked 16 miles chasing bulls. In four days the total was 47 miles. I was prepared to go like this for the entire two-week season, but thankfully Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt, smiled on day four when I arrowed a bull scoring 361 Pope & Young points.

Take it from me – not starting your training for elk season now is a bad mistake, and bad things will happen. But if you do start now, Artemis is more likely to smile on you, too, and make all those hours on the track, in the gym, and in your hiking boots worth it.



*Proper fitness helps you be ready to shoot from any position.
(Photo by Bob Robb)*

How To Find Your “Target Heart Rate” (THR)

Everyone needs to exercise at the correct heart rate to get the maximum cardiovascular benefit and stay safe. That’s what your target heart rate and training zone are. During exercise, most experts agree that you should exercise with a heart rate between 55-85 percent of your maximum heart rate. You can find lots of information about this online, but basically, here’s all you do.

Say you are a 40 year old man. Subtract your age from 220. Take that number and multiply it by .55, then multiply the same number by .85. In this case, $220 - 40 = 180$. $180 \times .55 = 99$. $180 \times .85 = 157$. This means that during exercise your heart needs to beat above 99 beats per minute to provide tangible aerobic benefit. In this example, 157 is 85 percent of the maximum heart rate; to stay safe, don’t exceed that. In my own training program, I try to get my heart beating at between 75-85 percent of my maximum.

You must also keep your heart rate in the training zone for a minimum of 20 minutes – but the longer you are “in the zone”, the faster your fitness level will improve. The exception is when doing interval training, in which you go all-out until you can go no more, then walk until the heart rate goes below the 55 percent of maximum level, then repeat a few more times.

It is important to note that achieving the minimum training effect – 20 minutes at or above your THR four times/week – is just that, the minimum. The longer and harder you train, within reason, the better shape you’ll be in. Just remember to start slowly and work your way up. In physical fitness, as in all good things in life, there are no short cuts. Only a sustained effort over time will produce the results you seek.

A Basic Fitness Program for Elk Hunters

Fitness is a numbers game – keeping track of the numbers will surprise you with the progress you're making, and encourage you to keep reaching your goals.

While each individual will have unique needs and abilities, likes and dislikes, here is a basic jogging program that will markedly improve your aerobic capacity in just 12 weeks. The first chart on the next page, is designed for both men and women 30-49 years of age who have not been regularly exercising, but have been cleared by their physician to begin an exercise program.

The time goals are designed to be met at the end, not the beginning, of the week. A walk is defined as covering a mile in longer than 14:00 minutes; walk/jog 12:01-14:00 minutes/mile; and jog 9:00-12:00 minutes/mile.

It is best if you run or jog on non-consecutive days. On the days in between aerobic work-outs, you can incorporate your calisthenics and/or weight training regimen. And while you never want to go too many days between work-outs, taking a day off once a week will help your body recover fully, plus it will actually enhance the training effect of your program.

Looking at mountains like this will discourage an out of shape hunter, but invigorate a hunter who comes prepared.
(Photo by Bob Robb)



Walking to Jogging—a 12-Week Program

Week	Activity	Distance (Miles)	Time Goal (Minutes)	Frequency/Week
1	Walk	2.0	34	3
2	Walk	2.5	42	3
3	Walk	3.0	50	3
4	Walk/jog	2.0	25	4
5	Walk/jog	2.0	24	4
6	Jog	2.0	22	4
7	Jog	2.0	20	4
8	Jog	2.5	26	4
9	Jog	2.5	25	4
10	Jog	3.0	31	4
11	Jog	3.0	29	4
12	Jog	3.0	27	4

Calories Burned from Physical Activity

Activity	Calories Burned Per Hour	Time to Burn 250 Calories
Walkging (4.5mph)	400	45 min.
Roller Skating, Blading (moderate)	354	45 min.
Swimming (crawl, 45 yards/min.)	530	30 min.
Handball, Racquetball	600	25 min.
Tennis (moderate)	425	35 min.
Tennis (vigorous)	600	25 min.
Jogging (5.5 mph)	650	25 min.
Biking (13 mph)	850	18 min.

Comparing Exercise Types

Activity	Aerobic Capacity	Strength
Weight Training Only	No Change, Possible Decrease	Over 30% Increase
Aerobic Training Only	15-25% Increase	0-12% Increase
Circuit Weight Training (30 sec. of rest between exercises)	5% Increase	18% Increase
Supercircuit Training (jog in place, skip rope, use stair-step or X-country ski machine, rest for 30 sec. between exercises)	12% Increase	23% Increase

(Statistics in all three charts are from "The Aerobics Program For Total Well-Being", by Dr. Kenneth Cooper, MD., M.P.H., M. Evans & Co., New York, 1982.)

What Are You Waiting For?

Today receiving professional advice and guidance to achieve a fitness goal is as easy as joining a local health club, YMCA, or signing up for a class at the local college or other accredited institution specializing in physical fitness. Most employ trained professionals who can help you design an exercise program to meet your specific goals, as well as help keep you motivated.

Finally, the easiest approach to hunting season fitness is to maintain a year-round program – especially as you get older. Sure, there are days I don't want to drag myself to the gym or go out for a run. When that happens, I dream about that big bull I'm going to find this fall, living in some out-of-the-way backcountry hellhole.

Unless I stick with the program, hauling my body to where he lives will be out of the question, and that's simply not acceptable to me. How important is it to you?

Hunt smart and good luck out there!



About the Author



For over two decades, Bob's articles and photographs have appeared in most major outdoor magazines. Currently he is editor of *Whitetail Journal* and *Predator Xtreme* magazines. Bob was founding editor of Petersen's Bowhunting magazines, and the author of many books, including [*The Field & Stream Bowhunting Handbook*](#), and [*The Ultimate Guide to Elk Hunting*](#). Bob sees the value of super-sharp, [lightweight Havalon knives](#).

Look for Other Books by Bob Robb available on Amazon:

[**The Ultimate Guide to Elk Hunting**](#)

by Bob Robb and Gerald Bethge

[**Bowhunting Essentials \(Hunting Wisdom Library\)**](#)

by Bob Robb

[**The Field & Stream Bowhunting Handbook, New and Revised**](#)

by Bob Robb

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