

Rocky Mountain High

By Scott Spencer

Is there anyone you wish to thank? Cameraman Danny Dodge asked me as Rob Amidon, my guide, and I sat atop the large rock I had just used as a shooting rest. Pausing for a brief moment the emotions of what I had just accomplished came rushing through. I had just taken my first Rocky Mountain elk after three days of hunting and to this day I still get chills just thinking about it all.

Like many hunters, I began hunting with my dad as a young child. My father was a registered forester with a paper company in south Alabama so we had access to thousands of acres of company land. Many afternoons after school he would pick me up and we would get in a couple of hours of squirrel hunting or duck hunting in the flooded beaver ponds of the area. I've always had a fascination with the west and hunting the "big game" of the region. I remember watching *The American Sportsman* with Curt Gowdy and I would read my father's books by Jack O'Connor and that only fueled the passion.

In October 2007, I sat down with my wife Kim, and we discussed the possibility of me finally getting a chance to go on an elk hunt out west. I was almost 47 years old and the largest animal I had ever taken was an Alabama whitetail, a 4x3 using western count, which might have scored 90 inches, way back in 1983. Kim didn't hesitate in letting me plan my hunt and put into action a life-long dream. Having never hunted out west, I suddenly realized what a daunting task it was going to be trying to decide where to go and which outfitter to select. After several weeks browsing the internet and contacting several outfitters I settled on Atkinson Expeditions located in Wellington, CO. This was a fair chase hunt on approximately 27,000 acres of private land. The draw was straight forward and didn't require years of points to draw the tag, which was another factor in my selection of Atkinson Expeditions.

By the summer of 2008 I had spent several months working on my shooting at longer ranges, developing my hunting load for my rifle, and walking the hills in my neighborhood trying to get myself in shape for some of the climbing and walking I would have to do in

Colorado. The altitude on the ranch we would be hunting ranged from about 6,000 to 8,000 feet, so it wasn't going to be quite as bad as it could have been.

The first week of October had finally arrived and I left Birmingham for a week of elk hunting on Thursday, October 9, 2008. The first rifle elk season would run from October 11 - 15. Arriving in Wellington, I met my guide Robert Amidon. Rob and I went out and did a little scouting that afternoon and checked my rifle for accuracy. Thankfully the airlines had not abused my rifle case and I was still dead on with no adjustments necessary.

On opening morning, I awoke to a dense fog and drizzle. I had mentioned to Rob that I wanted to try to film my hunt since I didn't know if I would ever get this opportunity again. To my surprise Rob had spoken with Danny Dodge, producer and videographer of the television show *Living The Wildlife*. Danny had filmed some of the hunts for Atkinson Expeditions during the archery and muzzleloader seasons and just happened to be available while I was there. Not only was I going on my first elk hunt but I was going to be filmed for a television program!

The drive to the area we would be hunting took about half an hour and it was still well before daylight when we arrived. A large portion of the morning was spent in the truck since the fog just wouldn't cooperate and we simply couldn't do much glassing. About mid-morning we came down off the mountain and stopped at a point that would allow us an opportunity to glass up the mountain and see if there was anything below in the valleys. Rob soon located a large herd of 200+ elk about a mile away. The elk were making their way up the side of the ridge in a long procession that looked like a train of ants moving across the landscape. I've heard a lot of elk bugle on television and on video but there is nothing like hearing one bugle in the wild for the first time. Watching the direction they were headed gave Rob an idea as to where they might be heading to bed down for the day. We decided to eat lunch and try to put a stalk on the herd that afternoon. Unfortunately for us, the elk were in a position that just would not allow us



The author with his 6X6 Elk taken with Atkinson Expeditions in Colorado.

to get within a comfortable shooting distance for me. I was just not comfortable taking a shot over 300 yards and we didn't want to take a chance and spook the herd.

Day two brought more fog, even more rain, and wind. The fog finally began to clear out and the rain stopped after daylight. It wasn't long before we found a smaller portion of the original large herd and we put together a game plan. Unfortunately, the elk were spread on either side and on top of a knob that just wouldn't allow a stalk to within rifle range. Getting hungry, we decided to head into town and grab a bite to eat.

Not long after finishing our lunch, Rob received an urgent phone call from Wes Atkinson, owner of Atkinson Expeditions, and he told us to get to the ranch as they had just taken two 6x6 elk and there was a very nice 6x6 remaining. We were hoping to do the unthinkable and harvest three mature elk from the same herd in one day. Again, these are free ranging elk and to take three would have been unreal. When we arrived we met up with Wes to discuss the situation and plan a stalk on the herd. The other two hunters in camp that week, who I had the great fortune of meeting and spending time with, were Stu and Kim Utgaard of Sportsman's Warehouse. Stu and Kim had both taken a super 6x6 elk each. [See video of Stu and Kim's Hunt at www.SportsmansNews.com]

Rob and I worked our way south along the slope towards the herd as they were heading away from us. About 400 yards out we spotted the first cows on the perimeter of the herd. Rob told me to drop my pack and the stalk was on. Finally making our way to about the middle of the herd, they were now west of us and up the slope. I positioned myself next to a pine with my shooting sticks getting ready for a shot. The bull we were after was bedded down and was surrounded by about 15 other smaller bulls and cows. When he finally stood up he got moving quicker than I expected and immediately got in among the cows. No shot. He finally came clear but wouldn't you know it, I had a large clump of mahogany brush right through the middle of my cross hairs and I simply didn't have an ethical shot. By the time we realized there was just no way to shoot sitting down, and I was going to have to stand up to get a shot, the bull proceeded down a drainage ditch and out of sight.

Rob suggested we swing around hard to our left and try to cut off the herd as they were making their way south. When we found them again, the elk had begun to bunch up, almost 200 of them altogether, and the weather began to change in a matter of seconds. What was just an overcast afternoon quickly

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became a heavy sleet and snow mix that was blowing sideways. It was so bad the sleet was pelting me in the eyes, blurring my vision, and clouding my scope. In fact, it got so hard that I really couldn't pick out my elk in the herd that was only 200 yards away. I don't think I've felt as badly as I did at that moment when I realized that my perfect opportunity earlier was just a matter of rotten luck with the brush obstructing my shooting lane. Here was almost a 300" class elk and I have no way to take him. What a way to end day two.

Day three broke on Monday morning with a clear blue sky and cold temperatures. Rob and I headed out to the ranch and began looking for the large herd from the night before. We could only hope that they had not moved off the ranch onto other private land during the night but from their actions and direction of travel that previous evening, we weren't too confident they would still be there.

At first light, we decided to set up the spotting scope and begin glassing the surrounding hills while parked next to one of the alfalfa fields the elk had been feeding in the past few nights. About an hour later, Rob finally located the smaller herd from our Saturday hunt. It was the smaller herd that we couldn't put a stalk on due to the wind and their location. This herd of about 50-75 elk had made their way up a small mountain so we quickly decided we would go after them as it contained a nice 5x5 from a mass standpoint and a really pretty 6x6 in the 270" range. While not the 300"+ bull we were after, this was a really nice elk with a symmetrical rack.

Rob and I began making our way up the 1,500 foot incline, stopping occasionally to check the wind and to allow me a moment to rest my legs. I never proclaimed to be the most fit hunter. As we neared the location where Rob felt the elk would be, I stayed back as Rob moved up to get a better look and size up what the elk were doing. It was now almost 9:00 a.m. and the elk had bedded down in a grass bowl area on the top of the mountain. Rob motioned for me to



Trying to approach a herd of elk that are scattered along the ridge top and on both sides

come and take a look so I could get an idea of the situation and allow me to eyeball the elk we were after. The bull was directly in front of me and bedded down. Rob ranged him at 119 yards and told me to take him. I placed my rifle, a Winchester model 70 .30-06, on my pack and used it as a solid shooting platform. Once settled in, it didn't take long to gather my composure. As I placed my cross hairs on his front shoulder I

whispered to Rob, "here we go."

The shot hit exactly where I aimed but the elk stood up. At first I thought I had missed as he trotted a few steps when the herd began to run from the sound of the shot. As the herd stopped for a brief moment, wondering what had just happened, my bull stopped and staggered a bit. I thought he was about to go down when Rob then told me to "put another one in him."

The second shot rang out and Rob turned to me and said, "Congratulations, Scott. You just killed your first elk!" It was at that moment that I realized a dream of a lifetime had come true and the emotion of it all got the best of me. This was a hunt made 100 percent possible by my wife and my family; for without them, and their loving support, I would have never had the opportunity to take my first Rocky Mountain elk. My hope is that this will not be my last. 🐾