

*Here's to wild public land and good friends who are
there when the bull is down and the heat is up!*

PAUL OJENAU/PQPHOTO.NET

FIVE MOUNTAIN RANGES ... one bull

by Mark Seacat

Dropping our packs after the long climb, we shed sweat-soaked base layers in silence, urgently tugging on dry clothes, shooting light coming fast. The wind swirled around us. We hoped it would cover the rustle of fabric and murmur of zippers and, more importantly, not eddy our scent into the timbered ridges above. As dawn came on, my friend Chris Awe spotted a herd of elk on the adjacent mountaintop. They were already on the move. We'd have to try to catch them in the timber. But an awful lot of rugged southwestern Montana country separated us from the elk.

We chose a nearby ridge and began picking our way upwind through massive old firs and over the gnarled skeletons of trees that stood tall long before Montana became a state. Rounding a head-high boulder, I spotted several cows in an opening 120 yards up the ridge. Ducking back, I signaled to Chris that we had elk ahead. I leaned my bow against the rock and slowly eased out to peek around the boulder. This high on the mountain the timber was wind-scoured, and I noticed an

alley any elk coming from below would likely use to reach where the cows were currently feeding. I ranged the corridor at 77 yards and glanced at my bow propped against the backside of the rock, five yards away. When I looked back a six-point bull filled the corridor. And there was my bow, five steps out of reach, leaving me pinned down with no way to close the gap.

The bull went on and I slunk back to my bow, exchanged a *That was pretty stupid, huh?* glance with Chris, then headed in on a stalk. The wind was right, the cover was good and it was all coming together. Redemption was at hand. I was at full draw with the 6x6 for a long minute ... 60 yards, 40, 30, 20 ... and never an angle that I felt good about. He never showed any sign he knew I was there, but he was constantly quartering toward me or dead on. Finally, I let down and he walked on into the timber and over the ridgeline.

Chris and I quickly did the same, stalking as silently as we could toward an adjacent ridge, trying to parallel the bull, hoping we might be able to outflank him.

The area reeked of elk. Stopping in the shadowed edge of a small opening, we sipped from our hydration tubes and looked down into the country to which he'd led us. Gorgeous. *If I were an elk, this is exactly where I'd be today*, I thought, *high on this mountain, far from any road, trying to escape the heat and find a cooling wind*. Right now that wind was blowing up the mountain, directly into our faces.

A bugle rang from the timber below. Then another. And another. Chris and I listened in amazement. There were at least six bulls in that little basin, all hollering at each other and their cows. We agreed not to call at all unless one of us had a bull down. If we were so fortunate, we'd signal with four long consecutive cow calls. Hopefully that would lead us together before a grizzly arrived. Our plan was to split up, circle the basin and eventually meet up on the other side. We never even came close.

Not two minutes after I left Chris, a bugle blasted out of the basin from a few hundred yards off. I immediately slid behind a big pine, knocked an arrow, donned



MARK SEACAT/SEACAT PHOTOGRAPHY

What every bowhunter hopes to find ...

my facemask and slipped into the timber below. Skinned and shattered saplings stood before me. The earth was churned black. When I glanced left I saw a wallow the size of a stock tank. The wind shifted a bit and I doubled back a couple hundred yards to change my approach lane.

The hillside below stair-stepped through three short benches then dropped steeply away again. I first spotted the bull in a small meadow on the lower bench from 125 yards. This bull dwarfed the six-point I'd been so close to. I glassed him for only a second, before moving on to see how many cows he had. Only one! This bull was obviously on a hot cow. And out of sight just below him was another bull fully aware of that fact. Perfect. I kept my eyes glued to the cow, only moving when the bull bugled and she looked the other way.

Over the course of almost 20 bugles, I crept toward them, finally reaching a deadfall that gave me good cover and a possible shooting window. The cow was leading him right below me. I crouched beside the downfall and



MARK SEACAT/SEACAT PHOTOGRAPHY

Fall colors. You don't have to be Ishi to follow a trail like this.



The dream made real.

ranged the trees on the path she would likely follow—50 yards. I had practiced religiously for months. If I could just get a clean angle I felt very confident I could make the shot.

The cow kept coming, and the bull stopped in a panel of sunlight and fired another growl at the bull below him. He turned and stretched his neck to the ground, twisting his head to maneuver through the timber. That gave me

a good look at the top of his right beam—definitely the bull I wanted. I ranged the cow: 48 yards. She stepped forward into a cluster of trees, and here he came, nose in the air, bugling all the while. And then, in good karmic fashion, he stopped with only his head and neck obscured by the timber, no view of me at all, perfectly broadside. In one motion I stood and drew. My pin settled on his vitals, I slowly exhaled, focused

and watched my arrow disappear about one inch above the spot I'd been concentrating on.

The bull turned and walked back into the meadow he'd just littered with bugles. He stopped for a moment in a shaft of sunlight, pausing to look out across the meadow one more time. I cow-called softly and he dipped out of sight onto the bench below.

Seven steps from where he'd stood, my arrow lay in the grass,



ANDREW CROW/SEACAT PHOTOGRAPHY

Walking with your torso parallel to the slope isn't normal behavior. Who said elk hunting in the wilderness was normal?



ANDREW CROW/SEACAT PHOTOGRAPHY

Unconventional footgear for packing elk. But when you've logged long mountain miles and the temps are in the 70s, Chacos have their charms.

fletchings soaked with bright red blood. Somewhere in the timber beneath me, the largest bull I'd ever arrowed was mortally wounded. Slowly I sank to the ground to wait.

Bugles sounded from around the basin, bulls and cows shifting like schools of salmon, life going forward as it had for every September since elk had called this wilderness home. I'd hunted more than 20 days, covered more miles on foot than I could track and glimpsed close to 30 different bulls. Every one of those bulls lived on public land—some of it Wilderness, some of it just country that is, for now, undiminished by roads.

I had hunted five different mountain ranges with five different partners, and I found myself whispering their names: *Crow and Sara, Ari, Awe, Katie ... the Tobacco Roots, Absarokas, Gallatins, Bridgers, Madisons*. Our only guides had been the mountains, the wind, instinct and the elk themselves. We knew that at every moment a

grizzly, mountain lion or wolf could be stalking the same bulls we were. It was the real wild. Sitting there waiting to take up the blood trail, I couldn't help thinking, *I don't get to do this again until next September.*

After 45 minutes, a blood trail my parent's dachshund could follow led me 70 yards to the bull.

Before I held his thick beams and dark, deeply grooved tines, I sat and gave thanks, my hand against his golden side. Unfortunately, the climbing sun said the time for reflection had passed. Temperatures were forecast to reach 80 in the valley below, and the race was on.

Within half an hour I had the backstraps and tenderloins in

game bags. Chris arrived after my third sequence of our agreed-upon cow calls, just as I was ready to start quartering. He had been at full draw on a beautiful six-point himself, but never got the angle he needed. I reminded myself how lucky I am to hunt with someone whose borderline-crazy passion for elk is tempered by a respect that

And you can't even begin to see the top of the ridge yet.



insists on only ethical shots. And, especially at that moment, who possessed a strong back and legs, with the will to match.

We worked together to get the quarters free and then hauled the meat in two heavy trips apiece 200 yards up the hillside away from the carcass. The antlers, front shoulders, our bows and remaining gear would be spending the night 12 feet up in a tree, pine boughs shading and masking our cache. With a hindquarter, backstrap and tenderloin loaded into each of our respective packs, Chris and I began the brutal climb to the ridgeline. Eight miles and six

ridiculous hours later, we were headed down the road toward a cooler in Bozeman.

As I lay in bed that night, I briefly imagined grizzlies heisting the bull's shoulders from the tree. I wondered how warm it would be that night. Then the long day caught up with me, and I thought no more.

My alarm blared after what seemed like a scant hour of sleep. My longtime hunting partner and roommate Andrew Crow was already packed and eating breakfast when I crawled into our kitchen. He'd be skipping out of work today to lend a hand. Chris arrived before I'd finished my first

cup of coffee, ready to do it all over again. Thank goodness for great friends.

By four that afternoon we were back at the truck, completely haggard, but the meat was still good, the rack was incredible, and all of it was out of the woods. Sleep came even easier that night.

Which is best, summitting Denali, flyfishing for giant browns, or chasing wilderness bulls in September? Why choose? When he's not field-testing their products, Mark Seacat feeds his passions by working as marketing director for Mystery Ranch Backpacks out of Bozeman, Montana.

Totally haggard, 3½ miles still to go, but smelling the barn and a cold beer. There's nothing quite like the feeling when you've gone deep and met the elk on their terms.



ANDREW CROW/SEACAT PHOTOGRAPHY