

Outdoors

Hey, put me down; he ain't dead!

Hunting guides see a lot of shots at game. Mostly, they keep their opinions to themselves, perhaps permitting themselves a mumbled "Good show" or "Well done".

In my 40 years of guided hunting, I've been pleased to receive many compliments on my shooting, ranging from a slap on the back to a heartfelt "Good shot!" But no reaction has ever compared to one I got from my guide-outfitter after I dropped a 6x6 bull elk in Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest.

The man probably weighed 150 pounds, while I went at least 210 with my rifle and hunting gear. Yet the guide threw his arms around me and lifted me off my feet, dancing wildly around while chanting "You did it! You did it!"

This all started months earlier when he called to invite me on a "real wilderness elk hunt" in the Wyoming mountains. The fact that I was at that time executive editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and thus a potential channel for publicity for his hunting operation may have occasioned the call, although I never bartered space in the magazine (which didn't belong to me) for a free hunt.

Anyway, I tried to refuse on grounds that I was too old to tackle the mountains, out of condition and plagued by emphysema.

"I really don't think I can hold up my end of the deal," I said, "and it wouldn't be fair to come and then not be able to get to the elk after you worked hard to find him. I just can't walk much and can't climb at all."

"Can you ride?" he asked. He'd found my weakness.

"I can ride a horse anywhere the horse can go," I told him, "and I can still shoot."

"So I've heard," he answered, "Come on up. We'll hunt on horseback and I won't ask you to go anywhere you don't want to on foot."

So, ignoring my doubts, I went to meet him at the historic Irma Hotel in Cody.

Despite his reassurances, it was a tough hunt. Honest elk hunts always are. We were in the saddle hours before dawn until long after dark every



John Wootters photo

Wootters poses with his hard-earned elk trophy, the one his guide was so happy to see go down that he celebrated by lifting the author bodily off his feet and whirling him around ... until the "dead" elk started to get up.

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day. The country was much steeper than I'd expected, and the elk weren't bugling. We had a lovesick record-book Shiras moose hanging around camp, but nobody had a moose tag. We saw several trophy-grade bighorn rams that would have been easy stalks, but I didn't have a sheep tag, either. And bull elk were making themselves very scarce.

A couple of evenings before the hunt's end, the guide and I were sitting about 9,000 feet up on a mountain, glassing the countryside, when a few elk cows wandered out into a big meadow one mountain over. Then antlers appeared. The guide steadied his binoculars and counted tines.

"He's a 6x6," he announced excitedly, "There's your bull! But we won't be able to get to him before dark. We'll come back tomorrow evening and set up closer to the meadow. He'll be there about the same time ... if nobody spooks him."

It was a big "if." Ours was not the only elk camp in the valley, and there were two other guides with hunters in our camp.

Three o'clock the next afternoon found us looking over the big meadow. The problem was that the meadow was so large that elk could be grazing in it and still be out of range of my .338 Magnum. In fact, they could be there and not even be seen, due to undulating terrain and scattered timber.

As the shadows lengthened, we suddenly spotted a

cow elk, then another and another. It was our herd, all right, but we couldn't see the bull.

Then, as the mountain dusk was turning purple, the guide spotted him. "C'mon," he urged, "we have to get to those trees yonder to have a chance for a shot. Can you make it?"

"I don't know," I replied, truthfully, "but we're sure about to find out."

It was only 150 yards but we had to move fast. After 50 yards I was panting heavily and at 100 I was heaving, almost gasping in the thin mountain air. I slowed down but kept going.

Then the bull appeared, grazing broadside at 80 yards. I dropped to a knee and struggled to control my breathing. At times like this, the whole world seems to shift into slow motion, and that helped. Somehow I managed to time the shot between wobbles, and we heard the bullet strike solidly. The bull lifted his head as if puzzled, and then slowly collapsed.

That was when the weird

waltz with my ecstatic guide began. I was literally swept off my feet and whirled around and around by a man yelling "You did it!"

"Hey, dammit, put me down!" I growled, "He's not finished; he's trying to get up!" The guide dropped me and another bullet ended the affair.

He would be my last elk, and I already knew it. He was beautiful, more than I'd had any right to hope for, and I'd truly earned him.

But I swore off high-country hunting that afternoon because, among other reasons, I never did like dancing with guys.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.