

"THE LAST ELK"



At dusk in an enchanted alpine meadow, 10,000 feet high in Wyoming's great Washakie wilderness, I knelt alone beside the last bull elk I shall ever kill. As the sky darkened, a full moon floated over my shoulder like a yellow-gold balloon, bright enough for me to admire the wide, solid six-point rack and burly body out of which, at last light, I had let the life. Paying reverent last respects, I felt a strong sense of gratitude to this animal, for having been *what* he was and *where* he was.

What he was, simply, was one of the most splendid wild animals on this planet. The "where" was a place to which I could, with the help of a stout horse and a gritty, clenched-teeth sort of determination, drag my protesting body with enough strength left to pull a trigger.

It was always billed as a tough trip; I'd known that when it was first proposed. Ron Dube, a past president of the Wyoming Outfitters Association and proprietor of the well-known Bear Track Outfitters (Rural Route 1, Box 195, Buffalo, WY 82834), made no bones about it, saying candidly that even his bighorn sheep hunts are usually easier, physically, than his elk trips. That's saying *something*. This was to be nobody's pick'em-up-truck, ranch-type type hunt!

Dube runs the real thing, genuine wilderness elk hunts in the majestic Absaroka range southwest of Cody, and getting there is *not* part of the fun—not for most people. Camp is a solid eight hours in the saddle, over rugged trails, from the forest service trailhead on the South Fork of the Shoshone River. Elevation at Ron's camp, where Bliss Creek joins the South Fork, is 8200 feet above sea level, and the hunting is all uphill from there.

I'd been candid with Ron, too, during our first conversation. I told him I was crowding my sixtieth birthday, and that it gets tougher every year to get into any sort of shape for a mountain hunt. At that moment, I'd thought I could do it, but I was wrong. An unforeseeable medical condition stopped me cold. I debated canceling the hunt, right up to departure date. I probably should have—but I'm glad I didn't.

I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I yearned to see the mountain wilderness just one more time, and to straddle the Continental Divide again. I wanted to smell the Christmas-tree scent of alpine fir, to watch the early sun paint towering stone parapets, and to look *down* on a soaring eagle.

And I wanted just one more elk.

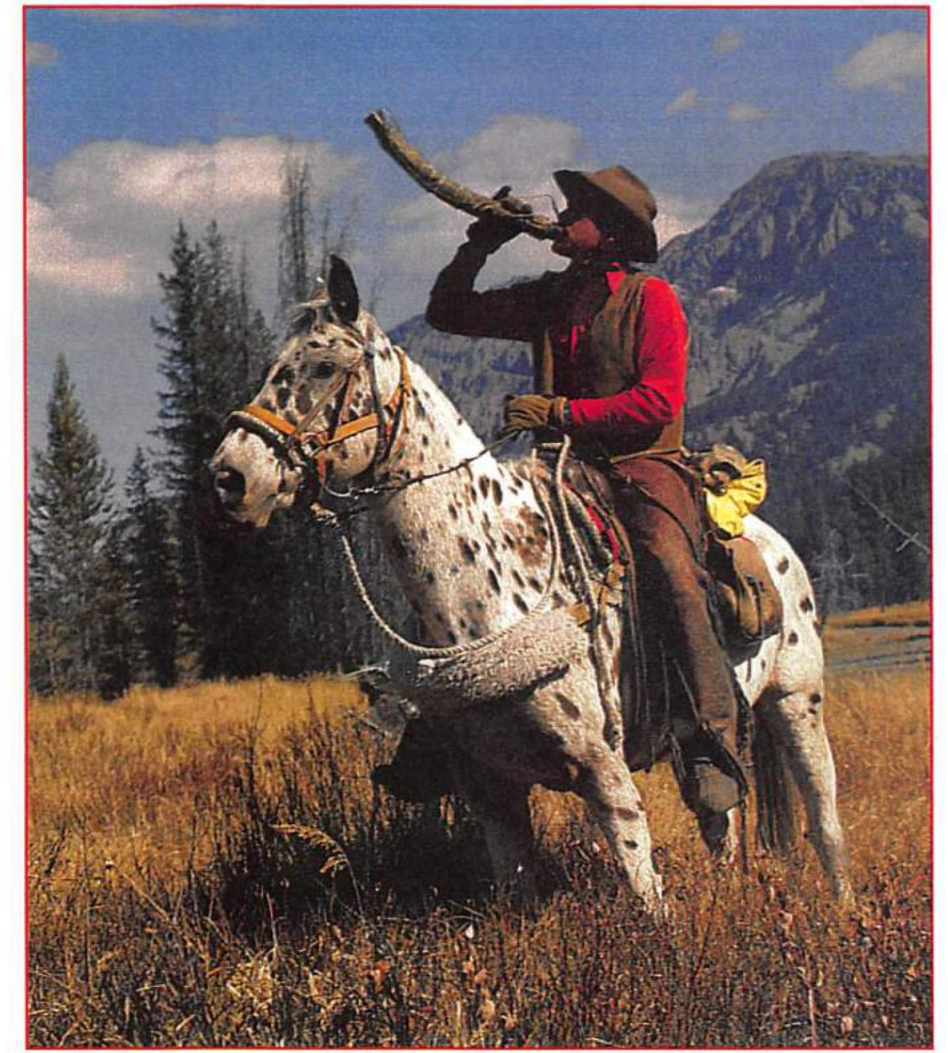
He didn't have to be a monster; I figured I'd already shot the best elk I'll probably ever see, and had no right to expect a big trophy bull—or any bull, for that matter—in my condition.

I conned myself, telling me that it would be easier, now that I hadn't smoked for a long time. My ace in the hole was that, since boyhood, I've always been okay on horseback. Never in my life had I ever

gotten even slightly saddle sore, not even on the toughest trails or after the longest layoff.

Well, they say there's always a first time. This was it. The last few miles of packing-in from the trailhead were unexpected agony. The first day's hunting was worse. The mountain air delivered too little oxygen for my sea-level lungs, even after lengthy abstinence from cigarettes. At the end of the second day, I was feeling so sorry for myself that I had little emotional energy left with which to motivate myself to hunt. It was hard to get out of the sack in the wee hours of morning, but I did it. We were in the saddle one or two hours before daylight each day, and seldom returned to camp much before 9:00 p.m. Although this was the first hunt of the rifle season, the weather was too warm and the moon big and growing bigger, and for elk hunting, the first and last hours of daylight were worth all the rest put together.

Ron was sympathetic, but his job was to get me a bull. He pushed me when I didn't want to be pushed, when my only alternative was to give up. He pushed himself, too, as well as his horses and his guides, wrangler, and cook. Dube is a restless, hard-driving hunter (I'd known that, too, when I booked the hunt) but he is not "merciless," as he has sometimes been called. He hunts a challenging animal in a hard and merciless country and he de-



By John Wootters

Wyoming's wilderness gets tougher and steeper with every birthday. After a week in the saddle, *HUNTING's* executive editor believed this Washakie wilderness bull would be...

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livers the wilderness hunting experience he promises, in full measure. His Bear Track outfit is one of the top hunting organizations in America, not only for wilderness elk but also for deer, pronghorn, Shiras moose, bighorn sheep, black bear, and mountain lion hunting, and for summertime high-country pack trips.

It's quite an operation. We had seven hunters in camp, with a staff of nine and 41 head of livestock. That's a little bigger party than usual for Dube; his average is five hunters. Four of the seven of us took bull elk on this trip, for a 57 percent success ratio in eight days of actual hunting. Three more bulls were missed. Everybody had at least one reasonable chance. If you could see the country, you'd say that ain't bad! Ron Dube refuses to deal in kill ratios. According to the score he keeps, in the four seasons he has hunted the upper South Fork about 85 percent of his rifle-hunting clients have been presented with decent shots at one or more legal bull elk. How many elk have been hit and how many missed is another, sadder story.

By the third day, I could feel myself coming around a little. The air didn't seem quite so thin, and my riding muscles were beginning to harden. I'd be pleased to tell you that I succeeded in riding myself into shape during the hunt, but it wouldn't be true . . . and it would be no favor to you to encourage you to try the same thing. What I did manage was to toughen up enough to just make it, at least to keep on hunting. I wasn't having much fun at times, but I was keeping up, after a fashion. Every hunter pays a price for an elk bull on any honest wilderness hunt; I was paying a stiff one in advance, with interest.

Mark it well: If you go up the South Fork with Bear Track, get in shape, do a lot of riding in preparation, wear sturdy boots with heels and deep-lugged soles, know your rifle and load, and above all, practice.

Day after day we rode the high country. Dube hunts elk as he does bighorn sheep: Get high and glass the whole world until a bull is spotted. Then he plans his tactics for the stalk, later that day or even a day or two later. Having guided sheep hunters and bowhunters for elk in the same country for most of September (our hunt began on October 1), he'd been scouting, glassing, and looking for elk for weeks before opening day. As we rode and

glassed, day after day, he recited an endless litany of missed shots, pointing out this park or that tiny meadow where some client had once missed a bull "five times at 60 yards," or worse. Those heartbreaking misses are seared into Ron's memory like his bear-track brand on his horses' hips.

At daybreak on day six, for example, we were perched on the very tip of a hogback ridge off Wall Mountain, overlooking the river valley far below to the east (where we could see mule deer and Shiras moose), and, to the west, several alpine meadows. From behind his binoculars, Ron poked his chin at the largest of these and listed in a monotone the several bulls that had been seen, taken, or missed—mostly missed—there during the past two seasons. He mentioned, among others, a nice six-point that his head guide, Tim Doud, had bugled in close for a bowhunter only a couple of weeks earlier and that had been missed at hand-shaking range.

Suddenly, he stiffened and his voice shifted gears. "Well, at last!" he muttered. "Some elk where they're supposed to be!"

With a few references to the traditional mountain-man coordinates (" . . . just down from that big triangular rock, to the left of the dead spruce") I got the animals, a thousand yards distant, in my own lenses.



A whitewall tent camp with a warm fire is part of wilderness elk hunting with a good outfitter, as are packhorses to bring out game—but such luxuries are paid for by very hard hunting.

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"Four, five, six of them—no, seven—wait . . . eight, with that last cow and calf," Ron was muttering. "There are probably some we can't see. With a herd that size, this time of year, it's unlikely there's no bull around, but I can't find him."

"There he is," I murmured, "down low, behind that lowest cow." Ron doubled-checked and then grabbed for the backpack in which he routinely carries a 40X spotting scope and tripod. With that instrument in action, he pronounced the bull a mature six-pointer, a respectable trophy head, probably the same one missed by the bowhunter.

Strung out, the herd ambled leisurely across a steep, sparsely wooded slope toward a denser patch of spruce and fir at the foot of a beetling cliff. I watched the bull in the early sun, his brown mane contrasting handsomely with his creamy yellow body, his antlers rocking as he walked. He was beautiful, a better trophy than I ever hoped for on this hunt. I wanted him very badly. But it was obvious that the herd would bed for the day high up in the thick stuff—and equally obvious to me that there was no feasible route of approach, especially not one my lungs and legs could negotiate. We watched until the last animal disappeared, and Ron began screwing lens caps onto his scope and collapsing tripod legs. All at once, he was cheerful as a chickadee, as though we already had that bull on the ground.

"Good!" he chortled. "We'll just head for camp now and grab lunch and a nap, and ride back up there this afternoon and shoot that gentleman." I was impressed with—but couldn't wholeheartedly share—Dube's confidence. This was not exactly my first elk hunt and I knew that a bull in the binocs beats 200 in the bushes! But I tagged along; I needed the nap.

We rode out of camp that afternoon about 4:00 p.m., and in an hour were hunkered on the same hogback ridge, with more than half a mile of clear mountain air between us and where we'd

last seen the elk. I asked my guide why we didn't simply set up an ambush on the big meadow that the herd had been leaving when spotted that morning. That would eliminate the long, hurried stalk and the chance of failing to locate the bull before dark, or blundering into him and chasing him over two or three mountains—or blowing the chance because I was panting too hard to shoot. (Five days of Ron's melancholy recitation of misses had left me dreading missing, when and if my chance came, more than I dreaded dying!)

He responded by pointing out several other parks on the mountain to which the herd might choose to come, noting that we could see most of them from our vantage point. He could then adjust his tactics to the animals' actions. Furthermore, an unfortunate veer or eddy of the mountain breeze could wreck everything if we tried to sit on the park itself.

I couldn't fault the reasoning, but I wasn't really sold on the plan. One thing I learned many years ago, however, is that it's downright dumb to hire a qualified professional guide, pay him good money, and then insist on dictating his moves. So I sat and soaked up the mountain scenery and awaited developments.

They were late in coming, as expected. The first cow appeared in the meadow with 45 minutes left before the end of shooting light. A few minutes later, we made out other elk filtering through the broken timber above her . . . and, finally, located and identified the bull among them. Still, Dube didn't twitch.

The bull stepped out into the clearing with only 25 minutes of light left. Coolly, Ron double-checked to make certain it was the same animal, and then packed up his spotting scope.

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After days of hard hunting on horseback and afoot, Wootters took a fine Wyoming bull using 210-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw bullets in handloads fired from a Winchester Model 70 in .338. He claims it's his "last elk"—until next time.

"Now we have to haul it!" he said. "There's not much time." I was in the saddle in seconds, and followed Ron as he led his own horse rapidly through the timber, down and across the slope toward the meadow. Two hundred yards short of that clearing we tied the horses and shed heavy coats. I slipped a handload into the chamber of my Winchester Model 70 .338 Magnum, set the safety, and verified the 4X setting on the Bausch & Lomb 1.5-6X scope. Then we were off, moving quickly but quietly, bent over, trying to pick up the shapes of the elk herd underneath the lowest spruce branches.

On hands and knees now, Dube scuttled sideways, searching and scanning with cat-like intensity. Then he jerked back as though burned, sprang up, and gestured to me to follow as he sprinted along a line of spruces. After a few steps he grabbed my shoulder and pointed straight ahead.

There, 75 yards away, was the bull, completely unsuspecting. His head was down and he grazed peacefully—with his rump straight toward us! Even though my rifle was loaded with the deadly 210-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw bullet, I was reluctant to try to rake it into the vitals from that angle, so I simply knelt and waited. And waited! The tension grew. We were losing shooting light, and both of us realized the bull could disappear with a stride or two toward either side. I struggled to control my breathing and watched for the slightest opening. At last it came. The bull turned slightly, and Ron hissed, "Shoot!" I fought for breath control, tried to steady the cross hairs, and eased the trigger back.

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The big rifle bucked hard, but I never heard the roar. I did hear that bullet slam home, though, and saw the bull go down hard! I hadn't missed!

Instantly, Ron was banging me on the shoulder and yelling with joy. The rest of the herd milled for a few seconds and thundered away across the meadow. From long habit, I racked the bolt, feeding a fresh round into the rifle's chamber.

Then the elk got up! It was nightmare time. I knew how tough this animal can be, and my heart sank to see a front leg swinging. Too far forward! I hadn't compensated enough for the sharp angle of his body. I jumped up and ran forward for a clear field of fire as the stricken bull circled away across the clearing. I snapped off another shot as he ran, and Dube shouted, "Missed 'im . . . high! Shoot again!"

The bull was slowing noticeably now, still circling. His lunging run brought him around to face us at 150 yards, and now the cross hairs rested solidly against his neck for a moment. Almost of its own volition, the rifle bellowed one more time, and the bull went down as though poleaxed, inert and motionless.

It was finished. I'd done it!

No, that's wrong: We'd done it. Ron's tactical planning from the first sighting of the herd almost 12 hours earlier had been perfection itself, almost as if he had that bull on wires. A bay horse named Babe had served as my legs on the mountain, making it possible for me to be there when the moment came. All I really did was shoot, but that was no mean accomplishment for me, under the circumstances. Subsequent examination of the carcass revealed that either of my hits would have been fatal.

Ron Dube was almost hysterical, whooping and hollering in the gathering dusk. He danced in the meadow and waved his arms and bear-hugged my 185 pounds completely off the ground. "Hiiiyee!" he yipped. "You did it! This elk hunt is over!"

Yes, it was over, and, suddenly, I wasn't sure how gracefully I could accept that idea. With a little luck and a lot of help, I'd pulled it off, one more time. But now I had to face the probability that not only was this elk hunt over, but so was my elk-hunting career, going back more than 20 years. So, most likely, was any and all mountain hunting for me—and that's a solemn thing to have to face.

That was what I was thinking of, kneeling alone in the alpine meadow with my bull under the harvest moon, while Ron went to get the horses. It had been a grand and glorious hunt, a hard, hard hunt, and, in the end, a fabulously successful one, conducted honestly and proudly by all parties. It ended at twilight on the sixth day, with my gloved hand resting lightly on the shoulder of my last bull elk.

Of course, that's what I called my last previous elk, too!