



ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION

ELK COUNTRY and the HUNT

BUCKLE

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Where Have All the Old Bulls Gone?

The apex predator of bull elk is hairy, hunts alone or in packs and is highly adaptable to its environment. Glance in the mirror—it's us. No other predator has more influence on the age structure and prevalence of bulls.

Tom, a veteran Montana game warden, flashed a sheepish smirk through his handlebar mustache toward Nate, his warden trainee, as we rode horseback into the long-established hunting camp. "Hold on to your hat," Tom said. "You are about to meet some of the local color. This is the hunting camp of all hunting camps." Nate fully accepted his role on this journey as a quiet, inconspicuous sponge.

This camp, known far and wide as Pucker Flats, was our

last stop before a nighttime ride back to a Forest Service cabin that served as our base camp. The evening sun slid behind Sheep Mountain, ushering in a brisk November feel to the backcountry air.

A grizzled hunter wearing a plaid shirt torn at the elbow and a pair of tired wool pants emerged from one of the three spacious wall tents as the wardens sank deeper into their winter coats. He marched with purpose toward the officers as the sounds of clanking pots and pans rang from the nearby cook tent.

Thrusting a half-empty bottle of hooch in their

direction, he barked, "Any of you need to adjust your clutch?"

The sudden movement set our ponies on edge. Tom declined the clutch fluid from atop his dancing horse. The hunter responded, "I was offering it to your horses anyway. I'd be a fool to waste good whiskey on the likes of you." He allowed his stone-faced grimace to linger perfectly, then followed it with an avalanche-triggering laugh sending our mounts into another spirited dance. Nate nervously reined in his horse and soaked it all up.

"Griz" and his longtime hunting partners spend 10 days in this camp each season. Most of them have made this trek for the past 35 years. They know the country, hunt hard and have probably horse-packed an entire elk herd out of their treasured hunting grounds over the decades. At first, elk camp served as a rendezvous point. Hunting built their friendships and became a source of both meat and recreation. Unlike their fathers, they preferred harvesting bulls over cows or calves. The mystique of elk antlers added challenge and value to their harvest, along with important stature among their peers.

Other longtime hunters in the area respected the Pucker Flats crew. These were highly successful hunters and proven mountain men. The Pucker

PHOTO: WILLY ONARHEIM



Flats camp often served as a refuge for the lost and less experienced elk hunter. They had helped more than a few out of some life-threatening backcountry situations.

Tom led his horse toward the hitching rail and eyed the trifecta of bull elk carcasses hanging head down on the camp's meat pole. As long as snow covered the ground, Griz and the boys used their horses and lariats to drag their harvested bulls back to camp. They only quartered their game out of necessity or for the pack trip out to the trailhead.

The three raghorn bulls represented the week's catch. Griz explained that hunting conditions seemed about average, hunter success in camp remained on par with past years, but they had experienced a gradual decline in the number of older bulls harvested over the past handful of years.

Back in the day, Griz and company used to tip their hats to bulls like these and let them head their merry way. But, Griz reasoned, if they didn't shoot them they'd run over the ridge and get shot by another hunter. Griz explained he and his crew missed matching wits with big, old bruisers.

Tom continued checking the elk licenses attached to the young bulls. A slight grin reached his face as he looked Griz in the eye.

"I know you're going to accuse me of being all hat and no cattle, but the only way you're getting your old bulls back is when more hunters start backing off these teenagers," Tom said. "The only way that's going to happen is if the department limits the number of hunters searching for them or shortens the season."

Griz scratched at his 10-day old scruff and replied, "I figured you'd say something

like that, which is why I offered my best whiskey to your horse." All three men broke into a good-hearted chuckle.

Transformation: Meat Gives Way to Mounts

From my own experience as a lifelong hunter and career biologist, I know many of the hunters during the 1940s and '50s headed up the mountain

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packing the theme that you hunt better when you're hungry. These hunters often selected cows over bulls. They considered a 150-yard shot the outer margin of ethical shooting. They weren't out looking for antlers to adorn the walls of their homes. Untold sets of antlers fed backcountry chipmunks.

Elk populations experienced less hunting pressure and far fewer off-highway vehicles into the 1960s. Even though elk populations were generally much lower all across the West then, bulls had enough security to live into their twilight years. Interestingly, many of the elk seasons in those days allowed season-long either sex hunting. Those liberal seasons tapered the growth of elk populations, especially on private land. Yet, these same liberal seasons, where hunters often harvested the first legal elk within range, probably allowed a fair number of bulls to grow old.

Economic changes in the 1960s and '70s set the stage for elk numbers to boom throughout the West. Hunters' income and leisure time increased while livestock and commodity prices remained volatile. Private landowners, wanting to build stability in their business models, began to manage elk and looked to leasing and outfitting as an added source of income. Wealthy individuals bought large tracts of the West, including some of the best elk habitat. Many of these new landowners held a higher tolerance for elk. Both hunters and these "amenity landowners" asked state wildlife agencies to grow more elk.

Many of the newer landowners didn't allow the level of hunter access that former owners did. As elk populations grew, much of that increase occurred on or was influenced by private lands, which had far lower hunter densities. That imbalance of hunter densities created troubling distributions of elk between public and private lands.

Increased competition for elk on public land forced state game managers to pump the brakes on unlimited general license sales. Coincidentally, more private landowners began to dial in the recipe for growing large antlered bulls; after all, that's what their clientele wanted. As older bulls became more scarce on public lands, many hunters looked toward private land to find bulls in that 6- to 12-year-old demographic.

This rise of interest in big antlers didn't happen overnight, and a number of factors have played and still play a role. The scoring system created by the Boone and Crockett Club is one metric for evaluating the interest hunters hold in mature antlers. The club has been around since Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell created it in 1887.

B & C published its first records book in 1952. That publication resembled a pamphlet. Today, the records book arrives in two hard-cover volumes thick as an elk's backstrap. That growth represents a major increase in the overall numbers of big game herds, as well as in the management of those herds. But marketing is as much, if not more, of a factor. Any magazine that has the word hunt in the title does not feature an antlerless or even small-racked animal on the cover. Those spending hundreds of thousands of dollars for special tags are not vying for a chance at the fattest bighorn ewe.

This quest for bigger antlers and horns gradually supplanted necessity and practicality as the new hunting creed. Advanced shooting optics, rangefinders and custom rifles allowed some hunters to replace patience and stealth with long-distance shooting. The increase in motorized access, along with leaps in firearm and clothing technology, trail cameras, drones and on and on, combined with greater hunter numbers on many public lands of the West, placed additional pressure on bull survival. Seldom do hunters relate their harvest success over the past decade to being part of the reason there are fewer older bulls in many elk hunting districts.

In my 33 years as a wildlife biologist and early on as a game warden at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), I attended my share of public meetings. At these meetings, state wildlife biologists described potential proposals and changes for future elk hunting seasons. Every year, hunters stood up and commented on their favorite hunting spot. Many times, they detailed how the hunting quality and number of mature bulls declined over the past decade. There was almost a script to those comments. The hunters

used to kill a bull every year—often a mature one. Now, they expend greater effort and time but only find younger bulls. Blame usually trended toward minimal hunter access to key parcels of private land as well as predation by large carnivores. But there was more to the story.

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Hunters, it turned out, were incredibly good at killing any bull with antlers—be it a 6x6 monster or more likely a spindly raghorn. Thanks to decades of research, managers realized no other predator has anywhere near as much influence on the age structure of bull elk as humans. If something was going to change, it had to be us.

Managers Answer the Call

Wildlife agencies in several western states have an excellent record of long-term research on elk and the effects of harvest on bull elk. Montana, my home state, is no exception.

For example, Ken Hamlin and Mike Ross, researchers for FWP, led a 12-year research effort designed to understand how specific hunting regulations affect elk populations in southwest Montana. They collared hundreds of bull and cow elk across a study area that included vast stretches of public land with a high level of motorized access. Hunters killed 25 percent of all collared bull elk

on opening day of the general rifle season, 56 percent by day eight, and 75 percent by the end of the general rifle season. Apparently, hunters in Montana were really good at killing bulls—especially in places where they are made vulnerable by high densities of open roads.

The study found that brow-tined bull seasons do not significantly increase the number of 3-year-old and older bulls in the population. The mean age of hunter-harvested bulls increased from 2½ years old on day 10 of the season to 4½ years old on day 17. What's the take-home message? Younger bulls are more vulnerable and available to the average elk hunter. As the season progresses, hunters have to hunt harder for remaining bulls.

Other states have reached similar conclusions. Louis Bender and Pat Miller spent the latter part of the 1990s evaluating various bull hunting regulations on herd composition of elk in southwest Washington. They found that as bull harvest became more restrictive, moving from any-bull to limited-entry-permit only, annual bull survival nearly doubled, from 30 to 56 percent. In other words, bull survival increased from three out of every 10 to six out of every 10 bulls surviving each year. When hunters harvest seven out of every 10 bulls each year, the odds of a bull living long enough to reach maturity are minimal. But more restrictive seasons significantly increase both total bull numbers and the average age of those bulls.

Colorado's famous White River Elk Herd received attention by research biologists as early as the 1970s. R. Boyd documented that only 117 of 979 bulls killed by hunters sported six-point or better antlers. The herd exhibited an abysmal post-season sex ratio of four bulls for every 100 cows.

Subsequently, Colorado Division of Wildlife changed the elk hunting regulations from any bull to brow-tined bull in 1985. The sex ratio improved to 23 bulls per 100 cows within three years. However, yearlings comprised the vast majority of bulls surviving post-season. This season change bumped the number of spikes, but did little or nothing to improve

the number of six-point or better bulls in the harvest.

At this point, it should be clear that, generally speaking, hunters are really good at killing bulls. That means if we want young bulls to grow into mature bulls, there needs to be some sort of governor, or restrictions, placed on killing those young bulls. For this, let's go back

to Montana.

A long-term research effort in the Elkhorn Mountains of west-central Montana documented that elk hunters harvested 90 percent of radio-collared bull elk during any-bull seasons from 1982 to '85. Managers changed the season to spike bulls and cows on a general license, with brow-tined bulls only available via highly limited permit. These mountains now more than live up to their name, consistently producing some of the largest bulls in Montana. The average age of hunter-harvested bull elk more than doubled from three years in 1990 to over six years in 2000. Hunters still have ample over-the-counter opportunity to hunt for cows and spikes, but the odds of drawing a brow-tined bull permit here are about one percent.

Build It and They Will Come

There's comfort in understanding that we control the fate of most management scenarios. The fix, purely from a cause and effect relationship, is an easy one but bitter to swallow: reduce hunter access to bull elk. Socially and economically, the process of allowing more bulls to survive on public lands can be cumbersome and painful—at least in the short-term.

Many hunting districts like the Elkhorns that produce mature bulls on public land by limiting hunter harvest began under loud protests from hunter groups. But in case after case, once participant groups observe how these regulations produce significantly higher numbers of significantly older bulls, hunters strongly support the changes. Nearly every western state that allows elk hunting has limited-entry bull elk hunting districts that produce highly sought after hunting opportunities. Unfortunately, based on the single digit—or even decimal point—drawing odds that



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characterize these areas, a hunter may apply their entire life and not draw one of these coveted permits.

These poor drawing odds reflect two things. First, hunters indeed want a legitimate chance to hunt older bulls. Second, relatively few opportunities exist to harvest older bulls on public lands and private lands that allow public access in areas managed through

unrestricted general license sales.

Hunter opportunity is always an important factor in elk management. In turn, those license sales drive most wildlife agency budgets. However, with so many elk herds in the West over state management objectives, there may actually be more opportunity for hunters to harvest antlerless elk than at any time in the past

century. Strictly from a population management standpoint, some of these herds are so far over objective that it's reasonable to suggest that antlerless elk should be the single goal of most or all harvest opportunity. After all, hunters are a manager's most effective tool in shaping game populations.

And it goes deeper than just hunter opportunity. Older bulls may also benefit overall herd health and productivity. Valerius Geist, a world-renowned expert on elk behavior, described older bulls as the "traffic cops" of the rut. He suggested older bulls stop younger bulls from "harassing" cows. Thus, both the cows and younger bulls save energy they need later to survive winter.

Researchers at Starkey Experimental Forest and Range near La Grande, Oregon, reinforced Geist's observations. They found conception dates occurred earlier with older bulls around. The rut might go on for as long as 71 days when yearlings dominated the breeding, but when 5-year-old bulls dominated the breeding, the rut decreased to 46 days. Thus, far more calves were born earlier, giving them the highest chance to grow strong enough to survive their first winter. And far more calves were born in a shorter window, giving them a higher chance to survive those first weeks when they are most vulnerable to predation from grizzlies, black bears and wolves. A take-home message from this 1996 report suggests herds that retain older bulls in the population enhance herd productivity and may have a major effect on survival in hard winters.

As hunters, we have to ask ourselves if we want to see older bulls make up a relevant proportion of our public land elk populations. How many elk populations currently experience an overabundance of branched-antlered bulls, let alone mature bulls?



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Managing for mature bulls is straightforward; don't shoot them and they will grow. However, we need to tip our hats to state wildlife agencies, because managing elk hunters is hard. Restricting bull harvest in one area concentrates hunters in other areas offering more liberal regulations. More hunters equals fewer bulls. Proposing more restrictive bull harvest almost always leads to a combative public process, especially when the livelihoods of outfitters and landowners are threatened. Yet when these changes occur, hunter groups often strongly support the outcome of having more old bulls.

Perhaps there's a balance or steady rhythm to combining some of the old and the new regarding an elk hunter's creed. We need to make hunting antlerless elk the standard again, especially since elk are over population

objectives in many places across the West.

Hunting cows could replace some of the bull opportunity in these areas. We need a cultural shift that makes filling a freezer

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just as cool as killing a 2½- or 3½-year-old bull. Game agencies have the power to do this, but only if hunters ask them for more opportunities at antlerless elk—and mature bulls.

This past fall, Griz sent Tom and Nate a photo of the Pucker Flats meat pole. He took it with the cell phone he said he'd never buy. Those pixels showed two

cow elk bending that meat pole for the first time in 35 years. Griz's caption below the photo read, "Shooting bulls doesn't automatically make me a better elk hunter." There's wisdom in those hills, and every elk herd deserves as much.

RMEF member Craig Jourdonnais, retired game warden and wildlife biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, leads big game research and helps coordinate hunting on the MPG Ranch near Florence, Montana.

Craig wrote this in close consultation and collaboration with Philip Ramsey, an RMEF life member who manages the MPG Ranch. A professional ecologist, Philip has authored 43 peer-reviewed papers on topics ranging from bears to soil microbes. Craig and Philip work together to manage MPG's hunting program where public hunters harvested 120 antlerless elk over the past two years.

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