



Just like many elk hunters, I remember vividly the first elk I ever saw. It was on my Grandfather's ranch in Sand Springs, Montana, on the southern edge of the Missouri Breaks. The image of this majestic animal will be forever etched in the pages of my memory. So much so that every time I ride past that spot along the Tindall Divide I always glance across the deep coulee toward a specific patch of trees from which that rag horn bull emerged. With those few steps, he ignited in me the flames of passion and a lifetime respect for one of North America's most sought-after big game species.

It was 12 years ago that I saw that first elk, while I was a junior in high school, on a hunting trip with a bunch of high school buddies. I still remember how much excitement there was in that red pickup as we talked about how awesome it would be to get a tag someday. That excitement has only grown over the years for my longtime friend, Adam Vogel, and me. Every fall from since, we would leave our hometown or our college and eventually our jobs for our annual pilgrimage to LO Cattle Company, in hopes of seeing an elk or two. Eventually that turned into a spring trip as well to scavenge the hills for elk sheds.

Fast forward all those years and it is hard to believe how the wildlife has changed at the LO Bar. The ranch over the years has become a refuge for large trophy elk who move into the area because of the stewardship that my grandfather, father and this generation has invested into improving the natural resources so that both cattle and wildlife flourish. Seeing larger groups of trophy elk moving freely is no longer the obscurity that it once was.

While seeing an elk on the ranch isn't a rarity, drawing a tag for the Missouri Breaks in Montana can be. This vast area is a restricted permit area of Montana for both archery and rifle hunting. Adam was the first lottery winner back in 2008 and harvested a bull with his bow. I got lucky in the rifle drawing

next and was fortunate enough to score a great bull in 2010. Adam, who has developed into an award-winning taxidermist here in Montana, mounted this bull and it now proudly hangs in the great room of our hunting lodge here at the ranch. In March of 2011 I left my career as an Ag Banker to move back to the ranch and care for the land that has been in our family for the past 54 years.

Caring for this land and these cows full-time, has truly been a labor of love. I have also enjoyed learning about the abundant wildlife and how their habitat and our livelihood work hand in hand. Our careful range management and use of farming technology has increased our carrying capacity as well as wild life populations over time. My personal passion for elk grew as I picked up shed antlers, learned their habits and movements while gathering cattle and rejoiced in the stories and triumphs of other successful elk hunters. I have also watched as those same elk have damaged hay crops and destroyed fences, all a part of hosting more and more elk on our property.

In 2012 I was fortunate enough to draw another elk tag and was quickly on the phone to Adam to start scheduling a time for our annual hunting trip, much to the dismay of my girlfriend who was disappointed she was not my chosen guide. We decided on the 10th and 11th of November and impatiently waited for hunting season to arrive. Now you might think that being a rancher would mean that you spend all fall scouring the hills for elk but that couldn't be further from the truth. There are always cows to feed, fences to fix, hay to move and many of the other ranch chores. Usually the only time for hunting is a quick trip in the evening once every couple weeks. Nevertheless, Adam showed up the evening of November 9th with his pickup and gear despite a weather report of a storm blowing in. We woke up bright and early Saturday morning to snow, cold and generally pretty wintery weather. Now my job in the fall and winter is running our feedlot where

CATCHING A BREAK IN MONTANA

BY TRAVIS BROWN

he LO Bar

Travis Brown of Sand Springs, Montana, with the magnificent bull elk he took in 2012. Travis is a fourth generation of cattle rancher on their spread called the LO Cattle Company which sits on the south side of the very rough Missouri breaks that they call God's Country. What made this really sweet is that the gigantic bull was taken right on their ranch. The antlers carry enormous mass and gross 383 amazing inches.



we feed and develop heifer calves for ourselves as well as our neighbors. If you know anything about feeding cattle then you probably know that bad weather makes everything move more slowly. We didn't bat an eye though; we just set about the task of feeding cows and checking water, knowing that this would cut into our precious hunting time.

Finally we got finished up and headed out into the storm that afternoon, where the snow and freezing rain had every living thing pretty well tucked into their holes. We were lucky enough to see a few small bulls to keep our hopes up for Sunday.

The storm broke Saturday night and it was cold but calm early Sunday morning. Tucker Boyd, one of the cowboys on

Another photo of the big bull that Travis took in 2012.
Their land has made a number of hunters very happy the last few years.



the ranch offered to feed for me so Adam and I could hunt all day and I readily accepted. Off we went on what seemed like a perfect morning.

It was a very different story in the hills as the storm that had kept everything hunkered down had left all the wildlife with big appetites. We saw the first bull of the day shortly after leaving the main road but kept driving because we had a specific spot we wanted to get to. The hills seemed to be alive with elk! A pair of bulls here, 3 more headed over the draw up there, a bunch going over the hill...they were everywhere we looked. Filled with excitement we kept a running tally 10, 12, then 15 head we saw. As we crossed the Tindall Divide, straight out the pickup windshield I saw four more. I said "Stop!" and Adam was already raising his binoculars. That's when he uttered those four words that make the hair stand up on the back of every hunter's neck, "That one's a shooter." If there is one thing that I have learned over these past 12 years of elk hunting though, it is that patience is a virtue. Slow is smooth and smooth is successful.

So we waited in the pickup, dripping with excitement and anticipation, but knowing that a pickup door opening or a tire moving might alert them. The four of them were about 700-900 yards away and saw our pickup crest the hill, looked up from their breakfast, saw us stop, decided they were at a safe distance and calmly did the exact same thing we did...waited for the other one to make the next move. There we sat, looking

through the binoculars and spotting scopes, trying to make guesses at scoring all four different elk, trying to take a digiscoping picture (albeit without proper equipment). We waited for about an hour.

Finally they drifted over the hill. We waited another 30 minutes or so after they went out of sight just to be safe and hoped that they had bedded down as we cracked open the pickup doors and bundled up to track them down. Adam reached in the backseat of the pickup and pulled out a brand new set of snow camo which only served to make me green with envy. My winter hunting outfit looked a lot like my winter calf feeding outfit, adding in an orange vest. We got bundled up and headed down into a small draw leading into the main coulee drifting down toward where we thought the elk were going to bed.

Looking back at this game of chess that we were playing with the four bulls, one of the most important things that happened was this hour and a half of waiting. It gave us a great opportunity to slow down, let the initial excitement and nerves subside and put together a plan that would give us a high chance of success. We sat in the pickup and discussed what our advantages and disadvantages were and how to close the gap on this great bull. It was 10 AM when we left the pickup, so we had time on our side. We had 8 hours or so to get a high percentage shot. There were 6 inches of fresh snow on the ground so even if we lost visual we could have a great chance

of picking up the trail. We knew they were hungry after the storm, so hopefully they were more concerned with their breakfast than with us. We had a few disadvantages as well. The snow had come with some freezing rain leaving every blade of grass with a quarter inch coat of ice and making the snow about as crunchy as walking on a field of Doritos. We didn't have much cover at all in the sagebrush prairie of the Southern Missouri Breaks, so our sneak was going to have to be low and slow. All things considered we thought we had a pretty good chance as we left the pickup. The thermometer read 6 degrees.

We followed the small draw down for a couple hundred yards and sneaked up toward a big rock along one of the fingers before it dropped into the main coulee, to see if we could get another glimpse of the bulls. Adam spotted them almost immediately at about 500 yards. Two of them had bedded down and two were still browsing but they were starting to look like they were about to get comfortable. We evaluated our options and decided we could get closer. There was another finger of the draw between us and them and we thought by dropping into the main coulee we could come up that next finger and be somewhere under 200 yards.

The problem was that there was almost no cover. There was not a breath of wind that day so we were confident that our scent was safe but what about our silhouettes? This coulee winds down to a reservoir and an electric well so we knew there would be a trail down the bottom of the coulee that was well worn with cow and game tracks. This trail, plus a small amount of sage brush and some old grass would serve as our cover...it had to. But how long would it take to cut that distance? Two Hours. Adam and his winter camouflage went in front with me following directly behind putting every hand print and knee print in the track of the one he had left.

Anywhere along this sneak you could slowly raise your head and see them calmly lying up on that hill keeping a watchful eye; but we didn't look up very often. We stayed as low and as quiet as we possibly could until we got to the top of that next finger where we planned to take the shot.

When we got to that little knoll we began to prepare for the shot. Adam eased his camera out of his coat and got ready as I slowly unfolded my bipod, one at a time, painstakingly trying to do it in a manner that wouldn't be heard. After all we were only 96 yards away and I was sure that the cold spring unfolding would give us away, since it seemed like you could hear the sound of my heart beating in the crisp air.

The bull that I was after was facing east, perpendicular to our north facing position, calmly lying with his friends. We were so close that as I watched him through the scope I could almost hear his teeth grinding as he chewed his breakfast. I took a few deep breaths as I watched him down the barrel of my Winchester Model 70 .270 caliber rifle. I have used this rifle for over 10 years and have a great trust in it. I know that if I did my job the sun would do the rest. "Deep Breath, squeeze the trigger," I said to myself. "Ready," I whispered to Adam,

so quietly I am not even sure any sound came out, "Yep," he replied in the same manner.

I set my crosshairs 2 inches behind the big bull's shoulder blade, center mass, took one last deep breath and squeezed the trigger. The unmistakable "THUD" of a true shot echoed across the draw, followed by a "Nice Shot!" from Adam. Big smiles and more than a few fist pumps came next as we watched the other 3 younger bulls jump up and mill around, unsure of which direction to head. We stood and walked across the draw, exactly 96 steps through the crunchy snow to where he lay. We were able to load him ourselves, to preserve the cape so that this trophy could provide the artwork in our ranch house for years to come.

Adam set right to work preparing him for the Montana Taxidermy Show, coming up that following March. He received a second prize in the Gamehead Division for his excellent work preserving and mounting this elk in a beautiful pedestal mount which will serve as a treasured memory and a great marketing tool for many years to come.

Toward the end of the season a neighbor hosted an official Boone and Crockett scorer for a Thanksgiving weekend hunt, and he was kind enough to invite me down to unofficially score my bull for me. It had only been four weeks since scoring the trophy so I couldn't officially have him scored yet. He came up with a gross score of 383 and he said that an elk with this much character would be one he and his buddies could argue over. The elk has 8 points on one side and is a typical 6 on the other but the scorer ended up determining that the bull's 1st, 4th and 5th points were abnormal points and that he lacked a traditional 3rd point on the non-typical side.

I can't wait until next season when the leaves start to turn and hunting season comes around again. The Missouri Breaks are a truly special place, whether you call it cow county, elk county or God's country, you are right; because that's who makes their life out here: some great elk, some beautiful cows, with a few good cowboys, some hunters and of course God, carefully looking after it all. 🍏

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