

An Elk for the Taking
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It was a bull the likes of which most hunters can only dream about, well within range. But there was a hitch.

The bull elk was massive, with a pulse-quickenning rack the likes of which I'd never seen outside a national park.

When I first saw it, the bull was hobbling along a fence-line just 200 yards away. A hind leg dragged uselessly behind in snow 3 feet deep. Then the elk stopped and casually glanced in my direction.

As I stared at the bull, he stared back at me. Leaning against a fence post bordering a snow-blanketed pasture, I was wearing white and brown-splotched camouflage fleece pants and jacket, and a white toque to ward off the -22 (F) chill on that late November morning in southwestern Alberta. My .30-06 was slung over my right shoulder, with five bullets in the magazine and nothing up the spout.

The bull seemed to be trying to interpret this lump in a place where he'd never seen one before. I was fighting to decide what to do.

It shouldn't have been a difficult decision. Any other time it wouldn't have been. After all, it was a half-hour into legal shooting time. The bull was on property I had permission to hunt, and I had an elk permit in my pocket. With my rifle sighted in an inch high at 200 yards, it would be a relatively easy shot, especially with the fence post for a steady rest.

And did I mention the size of the bull's headgear? Its beams were wide and heavy, with long, sweeping tines polished white at the ends. I counted seven points on one side, six on the other. When the bull tipped his head back to sniff the crisp air, the antler tips grazed its yellowish butt patch. The body was more Hereford than elk.

More urgently, the bull was hurt. Its leg hung limply. I couldn't tell the cause of the injury. There was no blood. But I was certain that this mighty monarch faced certain and imminent death from wolf or cougar in this forested patch of foothills.

My mind raced, factoring each part of the equation: I was less than a mile from my vehicle. I would have to quarter the bull, but the sturdy plastic sled back in my van would make the hauling relatively easy . . . but wait; I was getting ahead of myself. There was a hitch, a really big hitch.

Just 15 minutes earlier, I'd pulled the trigger on a bull elk standing broadside in the field in front of me. But I didn't know if it was down, and I had a nagging feeling that the elk now looking at me might be the one I'd shot at.

It had all happened so fast . . .

I'd parked the vehicle near the ranch buildings, cursing myself for arriving about 10 minutes later than planned. Hunting solo, I started snaking through the trees heading toward the fenced pasture. Its far edge marked the boundary between the private land I was on and a large tract of public land.

I was planning to cross the field and hunt the public land for a white-tailed buck. Although an elk tag was in my pocket, I wasn't even really thinking elk. As I quietly approached the edge of the poplars ringing the pasture, trying not to crunch the snow with my heavy boots, my plans suddenly changed. First one, then two, and then a third bull elk bolted from behind a brush pile and ran out into the field. I leaned against a tree, pulled my binoculars out from under my coat and started searching for points.

The first bull was a spike, a year away from being legal in this three-point zone. The second was a raghorn four-point, a shooter by the regulations. But the third bull really set my heart a-thumping. It was farthest out in the field, standing broadside at about 215 yards. Its antlers had more tines and greater mass than the four-pointer's. It was the largest bull I'd ever had in my scope. I stopped counting points once I determined it was legal.

Leaning against a poplar, I settled the crosshairs on the bull's barrel chest and sent a 165-grain bullet on its way. At the shot, all three elk took off trotting across the field, the biggest bull showing no sign of being hit. The two smaller ones headed directly toward the fence bordering the public land, but the big bull wandered downhill toward a draw clogged with willows. He was too far for a second shot.

Hunters are a funny lot. We anticipate that magic moment when a game animal suddenly appears before us. We plan for it and hope for it. And then, when the perfect scenario unfolds and the animal doesn't immediately drop at the shot, we second-guess ourselves silly. That's exactly what happened as I watched the elk disappear over a rise and into the draw: *Did I miss completely? Did I puncture the lungs as intended and now he's a dead elk walking? Have I only wounded him? Will he escape into heavy cover?*

Anxious for the answers but keenly aware I shouldn't rush things, I decided to give the bull a half-hour before following. I didn't want to push it

into heavy timber. Perhaps it would give me another shot. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't need one.

All was quiet for several minutes as I waited by the fence, eyes riveted on the willow draw. I worried the elk would move out the other end of the willow patch and into the forest. I'm not sure what made me look toward the east, but something did. When I slowly turned my head, I saw the monster bull hobbling along the fence line at the end of the pasture (the fence line was at the east side of the pasture – the other two elk that were with the one I shot had gone to the fence line at the end of the pasture south of where I was). At first it didn't seem likely that the bull I shot at could have come out of the willows in that direction without me seeing it. I watched this bull come closer, then looked back at the willow draw. Still nothing visible there. Suddenly I had a sneaking suspicion that maybe this *was* the one I'd shot at. The rack of this bull looked larger than that of the one I'd shot at, but I hadn't really studied it before I fired. Maybe my scope was off and I'd hit the leg instead of the lungs. Maybe he'd sneaked out of the willows and was doing an end-run around me.

As indecision wracked my entire being, two conflicting invisible forces took over, whispering into my ears from opposite shoulders. One said, "It's probably the bull you shot, and it's about to escape. And even if it is a second bull, it's obviously hurt and will die anyway."

The voice turned distinctly devilish: "If it turns out you've killed the first bull, you can always find another hunter to tag it. Or you can just leave it. Its carcass will be gone by spring. This is a huge bull, buddy, bigger than you could ever hope for. And, besides, maybe you completely missed that other bull and it has already sneaked out of the draw and into the forest. You're getting a second chance here, you idiot. Take it!"

On the other shoulder perched a miniature angel that sounded a lot like my regular hunting partner, the most ethical and responsible hunter I've ever known.

"Hold on there," the angel whispered. "You had a solid rest and made a good shot. The bull separated from his buddies, which is always a good sign. He was hit hard. He's down in the willows. You've always wanted to shoot an elk in that field, and now it's happened. Don't blow it. You're doing the right thing by waiting him out. Can you really live with yourself if you end up killing two elk this morning? Do you really want to break the law?"

The moral tennis match played on in my mind a few more minutes. The huge bull continued plodding along the fence line. Twice it stopped to jump the fence and twice it aborted the attempt because of its injured leg. By the time the elk reached the final opening before entering the forest, I'd made my decision.

As soon as the bull disappeared into the forest I slipped through the fence, slid a shell into the chamber, nudged on the safety and started creeping across the field—toward the willow draw that seemed to be the destination of the bull I'd shot at. I glanced at my watch. Thirty minutes had elapsed since I'd pulled the trigger.

My heart pounded harder with each step in the thigh-deep snow. I easily picked up the bull's tracks, but found not a speck of blood. It was 150 yards to the edge of the willows. No dead elk in sight. A jolt of self-doubt tingled my spine.

Cresting a rise, I saw where the bull had gone into the willows, but couldn't see any tracks leaving the patch. I slowly moved sideways a few feet to give myself a clearer view into the thicket . . . and there was the bull, not 75 yards away, lying dead in a small clearing, legs folded under its body as if resting. As I reached in my pocket for my tag, I marveled at the bull's antlers—six long and heavy points to the side, rising high above the snow. I gave thanks, for the bull on the ground and the other bull as well, and for having made the right decision.

Two mornings later I returned without my rifle to track the fence line bull. I was surprised to discover, a short distance into the forest, a long series of four distinct hoof imprints, with no trace of a dragging leg. In two places, he'd jumped fences without leaving even a hair on the barbs. Had he merely had some kind of temporary paralysis? A dislocated hip that somehow slipped back into place?

I never saw that elk again.