

Elk Hunting 101

Colorado Parks and Wildlife

By Jim Bulger



Notes from Jim

Preparation before the hunt

- **Scout from the house**
 - Topographical Maps
 - Federal Center at Alameda and Kipling
 - BLM Maps
 - National Geographic Trail Maps
 - Google Earth
 - CPW Hunting Atlas

- **Read Articles and do some research**
 - Elk Hunting University
 - Hunting Magazines
 - Eastman's Hunting Journal
 - Other periodicals
 - Look for the concepts not the hunting stories
 - On Line resources: Most are free to read

- **Private Property and Unit Boundaries**
 - Make sure you know where you are in relation to private property
 - Some Landowners will allow you to drive across the property – ASK!
 - Insure you read the unit boundary descriptions in the brochure

- **Check with the DWM and Biologists**
 - A busy time of year for us but call and ask questions
 - If you see an officer, stop and visit – Ask Detailed and specific questions

- **Know your firearm/bow and the ballistics**
 - Shoot from different angles and positions
 - Know the ballistics of the firearm and bullets
 - Shoot as much as you can before the hunt. Shoot to PRACTICE not just verify the scope settings
 - Use 3D or digital paper targets to “see” an elk not just a bullseye or sight-in diamond.

- **Inventory your documents and place them with your gear**
 - Hunting License
 - Check it to verify the season dates, units and SIGN IT
 - Hunter Education card (unless verified on your license)

- Personal information; Driver's License, medical cards, etc
- **Talk to other hunters and experts**
 - Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
 - The guy sitting next to you in this seminar
 - Ask about How to ideas, not the hunting story

Gear and Equipment

- **Optics**
 - Binoculars – The most important investment you will make for hunting any big game animals
 - In big country, they save you a ton of walking
 - Swarovski and Lecia's are the upper end but are great in low light conditions
 - Reasonable priced optics such as Nikon and Bushnell are great for closer ranges and for stalking. Leave the \$1000.00 pair in the pack
 - Spotting scopes – A decent 30-60 power scope will be the job. A light tripod and a soft case can be strapped to your pack. They will save a lot of walking if you want to look at specific elk.
- **Tripod** – A great tool for you to consider. Bog Pod makes a tripod that can be used for your optics and as a gun rest with a quick change of the head. A good tripod can be used as a gun rest, without the removable head.
- **Boots** – This is not tree stand country for the most part and you will do a lot of walking. Match the boots to the kind of hunt and the terrain you are hunting. Boots are a preference by the hunter but stiff midsoles will help if hunting higher, more rocky, elevations and the softer soles are better for walking the dark timber where quiet steps are important.
- **Trekking Poles** – Not just for the hikers anymore. They are great to help your balance and ability to walk up and down the mountain. Using them when you are packing out an elk is a definite plus. – They can work in a pinch as a gun rest as well.
- **Backpack** – A definite requirement to carry gear but match the pack to your kind of hunt. A soft pack will carry your hunting gear and fit tight to your body. If hunting back country and carrying tents, sleeping bags and gear, a frame pack may fit your needs better.
- **Rain Gear** – If you hunt the earlier seasons, rain gear is a good item to have in your pack. It does not have to be expensive but needs to be quiet and last a few seasons. The hikers have some great yet inexpensive gear, look at REI. Do not forget to get a rain cover for your pack as well.
- **Clothing** – Match the clothing to the time of year you are hunting but layers are the important concept. Early morning, even in September can be chilly in the high country, only to warm to 80 degrees during the day. Later season will call for heavier jackets, gloves and footwear. LAYERS are the key.
 - Camo vs no camo – The market is full of all kinds of field clothing. Archery hunters need to be more conscious of blending in. The rifle hunter needs to be more conscious of skylining on the ridge than camo. Remember to wear at least 500 square inches of daylight fluorescent orange when hunting during a firearms season. Camouflage orange does not qualify

- Weight vs Warmth – There are a number of new fabrics on the market now that provide excellent warmth but weigh less than the old heavy coats and pants. Your call to make but consider lighter fabrics and more layers.
- **Lights** – Headlamps are great for allowing you to walk with your hands full and still have light. Consider taking a headlamp and a smaller LED flashlight. Take spare batteries for both.
- **GPS and Compass** – GPS units have taken the market share and are a great asset but you need to know how to use them and navigate with them to find the truck, camp, your downed animal. Carry a compass and map of the area and make sure you know how to use them if the GPS fails or you are in a place that does not get satellite reception.
- **Cell Phone** – Networks now cover much of Colorado but there will be places that you cannot use them. Do not assume you can use them in your area, check while scouting. Consider renting a satellite cell if you plan to hunt alone or in the wilderness areas that do not have normal cell coverage.
- **Water Bottle** – Not just for the backpackers. A good filter bottle will cost about \$50.00 but it will save you from having to carry water long distances if you are hunting an area that have streams or ponds. Do not just assume you can drink from a running stream in the high country, filter the water and then you can be sure. Hydration is the key to sustaining yourself over a long hunt.

Making Camp

- **Choose a spot**- Depends on the type of hunt but all camps have some things in common
 - Never in places the elk will travel
 - Secluded if possible
 - Good water source nearby
 - Good drainage but not in a chute
- **Critters in camp** – Place food outside of the tent to prevent company in early season
- **A place to rest and plan** – warm, comfortable and secure
- **Fires** – Check the fire bans. Contained fires in stoves in camp. Less smoke is less scent
- **Leave it right!** – Be a good steward of the land

Scouting

- **Early season** – Get high and be there early. Early season elk are in the higher elevations due to the heat and the potential forage at the higher levels.
 - Look for scat, rubs and trails
 - Glass more than you walk if possible
 - Check wallows and water sources

- **Hunting the Tree line and Timber** – Until the snow depth pushes the elk down to winter grounds, they will stay at the high elevations and feed on the meadows just above tree line. Glass the edges of the timber. Elk will stay in the dark timber if there is water and sufficient forage to keep them in the cooler shaded areas.
- **Glass the entire country you can see** – Look at every tree line, every meadow and every drainage and ridge. During the early morning hours you may catch the elk feeding in areas near tree line so they can go into the shade to bed during the day. In areas that are in heavy timber, look for the small open pockets of alpine meadows and aspen parks.
- **Look at the same area at least three times** – Most folks tend to glass an area too fast and then move on to another area. Look at an area then look at it again. Develop a search pattern grid to insure you look at every inch of ground – three times
- **Look for parts** – Many novice hunters glass expecting to see a whole animal and miss the “parts”. Look for an antler, irregular shape in the trees, a patch of brown/tan or slight movement of a leg or head.
- **Skyline Elk** – Elk tend to travel the ridges in early morning and late evening. Watch the ridges to see where the elk are going. Even if you cannot get to them tonight, you can see where you need to be tomorrow morning.
- **Leave no trace** – During scouting trips, especially near the season, you want to see the elk but not be seen. Do not push the elk and often they will stay in the same area into the season. Too much human pressure and they will look for a new home.

Hunting Tactics

- **Understand why elk do what they do** – Learning the habits of the elk, why they do that they do is key to becoming a successful elk hunter.
 - Types of food they desire
 - The need for security
 - Understanding the Rut
 - Winter Migration – Times and routes
- **Elk Senses** – Elk use all of their senses to survive.
 - Sight – Elk can see OK but have trouble distinguishing color and details. They can see shapes but rely on other senses to “validate” what they see.
 - Smell – The most developed sense. If an elk smells you, they will leave
 - Hearing – Elk can hear extremely well and even the slight cracking of brush underfoot will attract their attention. But they hear sounds in the woods all the time, they attempt to validate the nature of the sound with sight or smell.
- **Stand vs. Stalk** – Many successful elk hunters use stands along a well traveled trail or waterhole and will sit and wait it out. Others prefer to find the elk through glassing and stalk into shooting range.
 - If you plan a stalk, consider the wind direction, available cover and options to get to your shooting point

- If you stalk, try to approach from above or the side and downwind. Avoid stepping on loose rock, twigs or downed limbs.
 - Play the wind first. Keeping downwind of an elk will always be the best advantage. Hunting uphill is tough as elk tend to look downhill when bedded but if the wind is in your face, at least that is to your advantage.
 - Caught moving – If the wind is in your face and you get caught moving, stay still, avoid eye contact with the elk and hope for the best. If they have been pressured during hunting season, they will probably bust.
 - The Eyes Have it – Elk rarely travel alone, they are herd animals so there are many eyes and ears to watch and listen for danger. When stalking one elk, just assume there are others near and make sure you look at the area around you – not just at the elk you are stalking
- **Using calls** – During the rut, using a bull or cow call can be very effective. Learn to use one and when to use it. Use a cow call even after the rut is over. But know what you are “saying” when you call – do not just make noise
 - **Stopping them** – If you get busted, try to stop the elk with a cow call. They may stop for just a second or so to determine what it was that spooked them. If they are lining out and leaving the country, try calling anyway, there is not much to lose if they keep going. You will not be able to run to catch them.

After the shot

- **Archery shot** – Once you have made the shot, cow call with some excited mews, sometimes the bull will stop and stand 50 or so yards away instead of continuing to run, and expire right there – Stand still and make no human noise
 - Give the animal time to expire. Wait at least 30-45 minutes after the shot to begin to blood trail
 - Trail slowly and look at every tree or bush before moving forward
- **Rifle Shot** – Once you have made the shot, reload and get back on the animal, even if down. An elk will hit the ground and lay there for a few minutes, only to get up and run. If possible to place a second shot accurately in the vital area, do so if the animal is standing or struggling on the ground
- **The Key here is give it all time!**

The Harvest

- **Properly tag** the animal before you do anything else
- **Take a camera** – take a lot of pictures. You can never recapture this moment again
 - Take some fishing line in pack to tie the mouth closed and stick the tongue back in the mouth
 - Take some baby wipes to clean off the blood
 - Take the shots from different angles and display the animal with respect
- **Take** several knives and a good sharpener

- **Bone out or quarter** – This decision is usually dependent on how far you have to pack the animal out.
- **Insure** you leave evidence of sex attached “naturally” to a major portion of meat (hind quarter)
- **Cool** the meat as quickly as possible – hide off quickly in hot weather. Use game bags to keep the meat clean and free from flies in the early seasons.
- **Take** all edible portions of meat. By law this is a minimum of the two hind quarters, two front shoulders, backstraps and tenderloins.

Sunset

- **Enjoy** the hunt, every moment of it. You could purchase beef or bison to eat but this is all about the memories
- **Take a friend or relative**. Share the memories
- **If you can**, take another novice and learn together. Make a new hunter.

Good Luck!