

My Father's Chance

RAY ALEXANDER • ELK • WASHINGTON • BY CAMERON ALEXANDER

Ever since I was old enough to tag along, and well before I could carry my own weapon, my dad, Ray, would take me with him on hunting adventures. I can still remember hiking through the snow on a late archery elk hunt or climbing the foothills of the Snake River looking for deer. At the age of 9, (I'm now 27), when my dad felt I was mature enough to hunt for myself, he made an instant and joyful transition from hunter to guide. He has stuck to that transitional role ever since, rarely engaging in the role as shooter, even though we are often side by side when hunting big game. This year, however, was different. After 18 years of participating in the Washington hunting lottery, my father had the blessing of being selected for a branched antler bull permit. A 14-day hunt in eastern Washington backcountry. It

was going to be my father's first backcountry hunting adventure. For us, this hunt was like a dream come true and we knew this would be an opportunity to take a bull of a lifetime.

My dad and I were so excited and we talked about our anticipation and preparation every chance we had. It meant making sacrifices—if you can call them that—of time, energy and money for new binoculars and a riflescope. Fortunately, we had Luke Carrick of Guiderite Adventures as a volunteer guide. Luke streamlined our preparation by creating a list of what needed to be done and gathered prior to the start of the hunt. We knew we needed to focus on getting in shape and improving my dad's confidence in long distance shooting. The average

shot in this country is 500 to 700 yards and Luke assured my dad it could be done with practice, discipline, and the right equipment.

For us, the right equipment turned out to be Luke's .28 Nosler by Proof Research, shooting a 160 grain Nosler Accubond at around 3,200 feet per second. Luke willingly spent a significant amount of time working with my dad on proper shooting form, thought process, and trigger pull for long distance shooting. Getting in shape took more discipline. After about five months of anticipation, preparation and training, the time had arrived.

Two days before opening, we arrived at the trailhead with one of my dad's lifelong hunting partners, Dave Koontz, and met up with our guide, Luke, and a mutual friend, Caylen. At this point it was all smiles and we were exuberant with anticipation. We had to hike three miles to a base camp with 40+ pound Stone Glacier packs. Base Camp sat at 6100 ft. elevation and consisted of a Seek Outside Teepee tent, a campfire and a small fireplace.

Luke had been hunting the area for several years and was very familiar with the elk and their habit. He had many trail cameras monitoring popular elk trails and had sent us photos of a large and unique bull. The bull was easily identifiable by a large drop tine on the right

side, and Luke appropriately named him "Captain Hook." When we arrived, it had been over a month since Luke had last seen Hook, but we still had hope that he was in the area. That afternoon, Luke spotted the first elk and it happened to be a bull. Although it was several thousand yards away, we could see its large white body with our bare eyes. Luke quickly switched from his Swarovski binoculars to his spotting scope and to everyone's surprise, said, "It's Hook!"

The day before opening, we got up early, ate breakfast, put on warm clothes and headed to the glassing point, just before sunrise. We saw several groups of elk, including some nice bulls, and once again, Hook made an appearance. We made a plan for the morning, double checked our packs and I wondered if any of us were going to be able to sleep at all that night.

The next morning, the season was finally open. Our seriousness and focus was palpable, as we set out under our headlamps, to be within range of where we had seen Hook the past two days. We saw Hook about 30 minutes into shooting hours, but he was further up the canyon than the night before and we had to resituate in order to have a chance at a shot. By the time we were within shooting distance of where Hook was last seen, he was gone. We never saw him again that day, however, we did see a number of other elk, including several 6 point or better bulls.



The next day we hiked in the dark, to where we saw Hook the day before, so we would be within shooting distance at first light. Dave spotted Hook and I got a quick glimpse before he walked into the bottom of the canyon and disappeared for the rest of the day.

There was no sign of Hook for the next several days, and with time running out, we decided it was time to start looking for alternatives.

With two more days to hunt, we went to another lookout point and spotted two bulls way in the distance. One was a 5x5, but Luke said the other one was a definite shooter, so we made our move. It took several hours to get within shooting distance. Once there, we watched all afternoon and evening. We were just about to leave for the night, when the smaller bull stepped out. It was minutes before last light and the larger bull didn't step out until it was too dark to see anything but a white blur through the binoculars. We headed out with the plan to return first thing in the morning.

The last day of the hunt, we woke up at 4:00 am to wind, rain and hail. We were exhausted and not sure if Luke would suggest going out with the weather the way it was.

He said it wouldn't affect the elk and so we headed out with a two-hour hike ahead of us, in the dark, to return to where we left the two bulls the previous night. At the top of the canyon, Luke took out his binoculars and said, "There is the bull". Our pace definitely picked up at that moment. We still had 20 minutes of scrambling down the ridgeline to be within shooting distance. Sure enough, when we got there the larger bull was easily seen with our bare eyes.

In a flurry of activity, we scrambled to get my dad prone and ready to shoot. Luke quickly set up his 45x spotting scope to video the shot and I had video rolling on my DSLR. Luke's range finder said 706 yards (although he would not tell my dad how far it was so as to not shake his confidence) and after he made a quick adjustment to the turret on the Leupold scope my dad asked, "Ok, you will tell me when to shoot? You are going to tell me right?" Luke responded, "Yup, anytime, anytime" and then there was silence. Boom! After a second, Luke firmly said, "Hit! He's down!" My dad exclaimed, "Are you serious?" As if any of us were in the joking mood at that moment. After a couple more shots to finish him off, we headed down the canyon and up the other side to get a look at what Luke said was a true shooter. Although



it took more than an hour to get there, and we were completely exhausted, we gasped as we laid eyes on this monstrous bull.

It had been a total of 9 days in the field, 70+ miles on foot with 40+ lb. packs on our backs, and huge elevation changes. We'd endured everything from sun, to rain, to

wind and hail. We saw more than 30 bulls and let many pass. The hunt culminated in my dad's first branched antler bull, a 7 x 8, including the crown points. It was a truly wonderful adventure that challenged us daily and pushed us past what we thought was our limit. We are forever grateful to have had such an experience. It is a memory we will treasure for the rest of our lives.