

The Eagle Has Landed
Written by
Brent Cherry

"You hear that?" I said as I broke into some sort of twisted Irish jig. The pearly whites of my two hunting partners shining back at me told me they had indeed heard it. A bull announced its presence. Their smiles faded a bit when they realized it was straight up the mountain we had just come down. Hunting in the thin Colorado air at ten thousand feet can make a man think twice about scrambling back up what had just taken a good portion of the afternoon to get down, but a bugling bull seems to summon strength you didn't know you had.

As we discussed a game plan two more bulls started piping off to our left. I could tell by the look on Ralphy's face that down the hill and towards the truck was a bit more enticing, but I had a feeling about the bull up the mountain. So we parted ways and exchanged "Good Lucks!" I turned to Billy and said "Put on your running shoes." An audible gulp left his mouth and we were off like two thoroughbreds that just left the starting gate.

My "elk hunting career", for lack of a better term, began some fifteen years ago in the coastal mountains of Oregon. The first season was spent carrying a rifle in, well the best way to describe it is a week long MONSOON that only quit raining long enough for me to get my hopes up. "Maybe today I can hang some clothes out to dry." "Maybe today I can get out of this old rubber rain gear ." But OH NO here comes the rain again. Looking back on it now I think that first season had a lot to do with me becoming a bow hunter. That and a chance encounter with an old family friend whose arthritis had left him

unable to shoot a bow any longer. He said "I've got an old bow. You want it?"

I said "Heck Ya!" The next week he showed up at my house with a truck load of stuff.

Three bows, arrow making equipment, everything a teenaged boy could want.

So there I was, officially an archer.

BACK TO THE HUNT

As the adrenaline rush subsided and the elevation sapped the energy from our legs I heard from behind me "Dude slow down I need to breath." Knowing he has a few years on me and I tend to set a pace that would give the Tasmanian Devil a heart attack I decided a quick rest would do us both good. We worked up the mountain another two hundred yards or so and found spot to set up. When I tried to send Billy out front so I could call for him he said "I don't know. I think I heard some cows talking off to the right." Knowing the bull was probably with them we abandoned the idea of calling for the time being and went to check it out.

Sneaking through the timber we came to an avalanche chute. Getting across fifty yards of yards of loose bowling balls undetected is at best an iffy proposition.

Calling a bull across that, especially one that is with his ladies is even less likely.

"Let's give it a shot" I said and we went into Super Stealth Mode. Inch by inch each step an adventure feeling the rocks shift underneath us. We had to put our feet in just the right place. One misstep and at best the whole mountain would be alerted to our approach at worst a broken leg and a hellish trip out or who knows what. Expecting to hear thundering hooves at any second we continued our tap dance across the rocks. Reaching the other side all I could say was "Holy cow, I can't believe we pulled that off." The chirps and mews of the herd kept us from

basking the glory of our little victory for long. A flash of tan here and a snapping twig there told us we were close. They were just on the other side of a small meadow, still calm and going about their business. If the wind cooperated we just might have a chance.

Taking a moment to evaluate the situation we decided to circle in from below. With the wind blowing downhill and a little cover it seemed like the best option. Putting a few yards between us we crept up ever so slowly. We must have looked like a couple of lions putting the final stalk on a herd of wildbeast, every step carefully calculated. Using impromptu hand signals we kept each other in tune of what the other was seeing.

Seeing Billy's posture stiffen I knew something was up. He looked over and raised an open hand to the side of his head. ANTLERS! As he raised his bow I thought "Finally, all this work is going to pay off. Billy is going to get a shot at a bull." Just as soon as he raised his bow he lowered it. The bull had stepped behind some brush. Just then some movement to my left caught my eye. I snuck up another five yards and peeked over a little hump just in time to see a dandy five point step into an opening thirty yards away.

The bull must have sensed something, I could tell by his tightening muscles he was getting nervous. It's funny how much you can tell about an animal's mood by how he is standing. The way they twitch and shudder when they are about to head for the next county. Anyway this bull wasn't spooked, just a little nervous so I drew my bow, picked a spot and let it go. As soon as my arrow disappeared so did the elk. Not just the one I shot at, but every elk had just vanished. I still find it hard to believe that a bull

standing thirty yards away can spin and be gone so fast that it leaves you questioning your shot, but that's just what happened. Not sure of the hit we went to where the bull had been standing to look for sign. Full of nerves I paced in circles and wouldn't you know it, blood, then my arrow stuck in a tree twenty yards away, covered.

Even with a passthrough shot and good blood there is still that little voice. The one that keeps you up at night. The one that makes you doubt yourself even after months of shooting five hundred arrows a week and hiking mile after mile when you are dog tired just to get ready for this one moment, this one opportunity that might be your last of the season. Having lost an elk as a teenager I swore that was a voice I wouldn't hear again, but here it was after all these years, tormenting me like a schoolyard bully. Billy reassured me "We'll find him." "I know" I said. Still trying to chase that damn voice out of my head.

We were losing light fast so I marked the sign with ribbon as we found it. There was a forecast for rain that night and I wanted to make it as easy as possible if we had to come back in the morning. Billy went out in front and I kept marking. "More blood" he would say. By now it was pitch black and we were tracking with headlamps. Out of nowhere I heard him start singing his rendition of "We are The Champions". Nearly breaking my neck, I scrambled through the darkness towards his voice and sure enough there was my bull piled up in the middle of a meadow. Nearly in tears I hugged Billy dropped to my knees and thanked the good lord. Fifteen years and finally a good bull!!!

We spent the next couple of hours quartering the bull and hanging the meat as high as we could. The whole time being serenaded by another bull bugling up the mountain. Digging through my pack I got out my radio and called Ralph. Stealing a line

from my cousin Ray Petty, one of the finest men I know and quite possibly the best elk hunter out there.

"Ralphy you copy?"

"Ya I hear Ya."

"THE EAGLE HAS LANDED!!!!!"

P.S. I haven't heard that little voice since and God willing I never will.

