A Country for Kind of Old Men

by Samuel Western

On the far side of 50, with Wyoming's toughest-to-draw tag in his pocket, he felt a strong pull to hunt this quiet, spare country alone.

TONY BYNUM

When I first glassed the Fortification Unit, I thought: this county is a good fit for me. I'm 52, an age when nicks and dings to the body leave a collective residue. But I felt an urge to make this hunt alone.

There were some pieces of topography I'd best not tackle. The ground wasn't exactly a cakewalk, containing its share of the ankle-snapping terrain that favored youth and strength. It was breaks country, Powder River Breaks, to be exact, in northeastern Wyoming: open sagebrush-covered hillsides transected by deep, steep ravines and the occasional broad creek bed. The land's openness rewarded patience, not adolescent aggression and gamesmanship. Waiting, glassing and strategy carried as much weight as burning boot leather.

I reveled in this country's spare nature. Even at the bottom of these draws there were no pockets of pine, Douglas fir or even a solitary cottonwood. Eastern red cedar provided the only semblance of a tree.

I'd been told that during the day elk hole up in these cedars, green patches as thick as Merino wool. Once out of the cedars, I was warned, these elk were akin to antelope: skittish, antsy critters that flee to the next drainage at the first sign of danger. Distance is their friend.

These elk were worth whatever tactic one had in mind. In the lottery system of Wyoming elk licenses, I'd pulled the magic number. An applicant to the Fortification Unit, so named for a creek at its center, had a 4 percent chance of drawing a tag, the most discouraging odds in the state. Why? Small area, about 125,000 acres. Small herd, around 250 elk total. Big racks, with 350-class bulls not uncommon.

I walked forward slowly, still smelling elk, telling myself not to ignore these signs even though I couldn't see any animals.

It was also country with human qualifiers. The Fortification Unit offers a good deal of Bureau of Land Management land. But it's almost completely sewn up by private ranches. Some landowners give permission; some don't. I was lucky enough to have two give their okay, but no scouting permitted and no hunting the first two days of the season. That was reserved for ranchers to fill their landowner tags. Beyond a certain point, the owners permitted no motorized traffic, even though there was a road.

So I went on the unit cold, on foot, prepared only by a map. Within 20 minutes I got what might be called a Fortification lesson.

I was walking a path overlooking a dry creek. There were a lot of elk tracks, all of them at least three days old. I cut a single fresh track, big and probably bull, made in the last few hours. Then, within minutes, I began smelling elk. *Ah, probably just a pile of fresh droppings up ahead,* I thought. The wind was blowing steadily into my face.

I stopped and glassed; nothing but sagebrush, grass and a lot of rocks. I walked forward slowly, still smelling elk, telling myself not to ignore these signs even though I couldn't see any animals.

From the creek bed below me, I heard a *thwok*, *thwok*, *thwok*, like someone pulling their boots out of the mud. A small rising bluff blocked my view of the creek. I crept over and saw the head of a cow elk walking through boggy ground. Then I saw another cow. Where there are two cows, a bull might also be present, I reasoned.

I flopped down on my stomach and looked through my scope. I watched the heads of five cows file by, then a 6x6 bull. I was within 100 yards. I put my crosshairs on him. His tines were fairly long, but the rack was pretty spindly. I paused.

All my life I've shot cows and spikes and was happy to do so. Grateful for every one. But I had just pulled the toughest elk tag in Wyoming, the unit famous for wallhangers. I was 20 minutes into a six-day hunt. There would be other opportunities. I simply did not want the hunt to end this fast.

I saw the lead cow getting twitchy. She knew something was up. The elk moved off about 50 yards, then stopped.

I put the bull in my scope again and heard the voice of utility whisper in my ear. *Think of all the days when you came back to camp soaked and chilled and exhausted and didn't see so much as last year's rubbing. Your freezer once went empty of elk meat for three years. This guy is a mile from your truck.*

I shoot a venerable Ruger Number One, a single-shot rifle. For nearly 25 years, it has prosecuted its accuracy with great vigor. Yet this fealty does require certain attention to detail on behalf of the operator—like closing the receiver all the way. For when I pulled the trigger, there was no *crack*, no push of recoil. I heard instead a simple *clack* as the receiver snapped closed.

Then I heard the sound of elk running. When I caught up with the bull again, he was 200 yards away in full stride. Next time I saw the herd they were a half-mile away, standing on a hillside, looking at me. Then, as I was warned, they fled to the next drainage, up hills steep enough to make a mountain goat sweat.

Then my hunt really started.

I had the country to myself. Except for a trio of men, adjacent landowners riding up on horseback to an elk camp in the high country, I saw no one.

I coveted the silence. I live in a busy, commodity-driven western town. All day long I hear hammers

echoing off buildings, the whine of chop saws, jake breaks growling, the hissing of tires going too fast over new pavement, yipping and barking dogs tired of being ignored all day in the yard.

Here, hours would pass and I would hear nothing but the wind brushing the sage or the occasional magpie scolding something down in the draw. No four-wheelers. No gun shots. No camp tender bucking up firewood. In creek bottoms, the afternoon sun allowed grasshoppers to come to life and their clicking sliced through the warm air. Only when back at camp, curled up in a sleeping bag and bivy sack, could I hear the deep arterial throbbing of a train hauling Powder River Basin coal to a power plant somewhere in Missouri. A coyote would bark, then yip, then silence again. Otherwise, the only sound was the thumping of my heart.

That morning I saw more elk, five cows walking single file across a steep ridge about a mile away. Like bighorn sheep, they took time to inspect the land below them for danger.

I began to notice a regular pattern: most tracks headed one way—downhill. They were, I realized, walking toward water. Those elk I saw first off that morning were not there by accident. They were drinking at a stock tank. Most of the drainages in Fortification are dry; the few yards where a creek does surface, the banks are black with churned up earth. *This may be like waterhole hunting in Africa,* I thought, having never graced the Dark Continent myself.

I huffed up the ridge where I saw the five cows. Tracks everywhere, a regular thoroughfare. I ate a piece of overcooked barbequed chicken and gulped down water from a half-frozen water bottle, smelling elk the whole time.

From the vantage point of the ridge, I saw why, despite the lack of cover, this is good elk country. At the root of these skinny, parched creeks are big, open bowls, capable of growing knee-high grass. Above these bowls sit benches, perfect for bedding and observing the hill below. Classic defensive strategy for any creature, two-legged or four: find a place to observe thy enemy. No wonder they call it Fortification.

At mid-afternoon, I returned to camp, refueled my system and took 40 winks. That stock tank needed another visit.

By 4:40, I was there and settling in. I found a natural berm, an ideal spot for shooting supine. The wind, as it had that morning, came straight at me. I made a rough blind, rearranging some sage to hide my position, set my pack to act as a rest and waited.

I didn't expect action for at least an hour, maybe two. I could legally shoot until nearly 7 o'clock. I fiddled with some gear and gawked at the scenery. As the daylight faded, a Townsend's solitaire, the

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thrush that seeks out lonely and barren places, sang its one-note song.

The evening's shadow line crept farther and farther up the eastern slopes, out of creekbeds and draws, past the sagebrush and green patches of cedar, and finally beyond the exposed bluffs of red sandstone.

A five-point appeared at the tank. He looked to be about 3 or 4 and had one horn missing. He sniffed the wind for a bit then took a long drink. Afterwards, he moseyed over to the boggy ground where I'd seen the cows and bull earlier that day. He stuck his one antler in mud and gave the ground a good thrashing, sending up a hail of clotted grass and black chunks. Then he knelt down and eased his whole body into the mud, rolling about. For the first time in my life, I saw an elk that was not dead with all four feet up in the air. He got up, shook himself like a dog, then repeated the whole process again.

Then he grazed, brown water dripping from his cape, for about 10 minutes, coming within 50 yards of my blind. Eventually he drifted off and trotted back up the hill the way he came. That show alone was worth the price of admission.

I took Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* out of my pack and read for a spell. The evening got darker and I expected no more action. I was just to the part in the book where Uncle Buddy and Tomey Turl were playing cards to decide the fate of their slaves, when I saw a dark shape move across the hill on the other side of the creek. I hadn't seen a rack, but it was alone and possessed a singularly large body. It disappeared behind a bluff then reappeared in the creek bed about 300 yards from the stock tank.

Even with my naked eye and fading light, I could see this was a big bull. His choreography bore witness to wisdom. He slowly moved up the creek bottom, tacking from bank to bank like a frigate, moving his head up and down, side to side, trying to catch any alien scent. He did not stop, though, to graze or dally. Just kept moving toward the tank. Relaxing a bit, he put his head down and walked straight toward me for about 100 yards. I feared he'd spot me. I got a head-on look at a mature bull with a heavy 6x6 rack, long tines in front tipped in ivory.

About 150 yards away, he turned broadside. Through my scope I saw a thick set of beams that I guessed exceeded 40 inches in length. *Okay, Mr. Aesthete, How many times are you going to let opportunity pass you by?*

I pulled the trigger and did not hear a clack.

The bull fell and got up and ran crookedly, and in 100 yards fell again. Got up and ran 20 more yards and fell. This

time he stayed down. As I ran over to him, all I could see was one long tine sticking out of the tall, creek-bottom grass.

I discovered in my run I'd lost my flashlight out my coat pocket. During evening hunts, I make it a point to keep a flashlight hanging around my neck. But waiting around in my blind, I'd taken it off to check the battery and inadvertently stuck it in my coat pocket, where it stayed only temporarily.

I had one back-up source, a headlamp with 3-year-old batteries. I gave the quivering beam an appraisal: about five minutes of candlepower left. Save that for the cutting around the anus. I gave the sky a quick perusal. Maybe 10 minutes of decent light. Better get to work.

Then I discovered the challenge of trying to solo flip a mature bull with a good rack onto his back for gutting. A taxidermist would later estimate that by the size of the bull's head, the animal exceeded 750 pounds.

I was on flat ground. No tree or even a piece of sturdy sagebrush for a hundred yards. I had rope, even a pulley, both worthless. I succeeded twice in getting him on his back, but the hind legs had their own agenda.

As I squandered precious light wrestling the carcass, it dawned on me this was going to have to be a gut-em-on-the-side affair. And this is where being over 50 years old paid dividends. Patience and perspective came to the fore. The weather was good. I was warm. I had water. I had food. I was not lost. There were no griz. I had three sharp knives and a bone saw.

Take your time. Take all the time you need, I told myself.

There was not so much as a ray of moonlight, but the stars obliged. A job that usually takes me 20 minutes took an hour. I gutted by feel, grateful for all the other eviscerating I'd ever done. *No major slashes to your body*, I warned myself. I once saw a fellow hunting guide sever his femoral artery by falling on a deer antler. Luckily, he had access to transport and others were there to rush him to a hospital. I had no such support.

After manhandling the carcass for about 15 minutes, trying to get the blood out of the inner cavity, came the really fun part. I had to leave the body overnight and return the next day. In previous similar situations, I've pulled the carcass at least 50 yards away from the gut pile to give the coyotes something to chew on besides rump roast. With one exception, this decoy tactic has worked well.

Wrapping one end of the rope around the base of his antlers and the other around my waist, I gave a mighty heave. The bull moved perhaps two inches. Somewhere around the tenth try, I concluded something else was going to have to move: the gut pile. So I embraced the viscera—which is sort of like squeezing a warm jello compote—and pulled it back about 20 yards.

Minutes later I was at the stock tank, stripped to the waist and washing myself off in glacially cold water. My lower back ached. My hands and forearms burned from all the nicks and scratches made from the jaggedly cut sternum. It felt wonderfully primal.

Using an Alaskan pack frame, I carried the bull out in seven hours the next day. Five trips, 10 miles total. When you've got 100 pounds on your back, you get to be quite the student of contour lines. Just a week previous while guiding hunters, I'd stepped in a badger hole and hyper-extended my left knee. It demanded protection.

I spread my bivy sack out on the shady side of my truck and watched with satisfaction as the pile of elk parts grew with each trip. The toughest load was the front quarters; I packed out the pair in a single trip. After I staggered to my feet, I said to myself, *Nine out of ten orthopedic surgeons would not recommend this procedure.*

I wish someone had taken a movie of me trying to get up when I had the head strapped to the Alaska frame. The previous trips I'd pulled myself up by using the bull's antlers. This time they were on my back. It took three tries.

In such a hunt, the head comes out last, a symbolic gesture that while it may be a fine set of horns, what fills your freezer comes first. Yet on this trip, I took the head and rack out second to last, knowing that after four trips I might not be able to fulfill the task.

It took me a few days to realize why this hunt so resonated within. The big bull was grand indeed, but the beauty came in reveling in limitations. I was not too old to learn. Fortification demanded on-the-ground adaptation. I'd never hunted elk without scouting the country first. I'd always been there on opening day. In this unit, neither was possible. Okay. Mistakes gave way to opportunity and self-deprecating chuckles, not anger. I had a hyper-extended knee. Ice it daily. Lose your flashlight? So what. Can't manhandle a big bull? Try something different. The experience synthesized 25 years of hunting and guiding.

How many of us have run scenarios like this through our heads? But the chance to act on them seldom materializes, especially after one crosses the half-century mark. For one person, it did. Lucky me.

A month has passed since the hunt. My knee still hurts and I'm still buzzing.

Samuel Western hunts, fishes and writes from Sheridan, Wyoming. His main interests are visiting wild places, game cuisine, economic history and poetry, but not necessarily in that order. His latest book is: A Random Census of Souls, *published by the Fithian Press.*