



HUNTING ELK IN MONTANA

There are big differences between hunting elk in the timbered regions of western Montana and the eastern prairie country. It pays to know some of those differences and I offer some useful tips and information that has made my hunting successful.

When I hunt the western mountains a must have device or two often overlooked such as an altimeter and GPS receiver are very useful. In the mountains a good way to locate elk is by going uphill until you hit tracks. Then, keep going uphill until you quit finding tracks and note the elevations for each. In effect you can locate a zone or 'ring' that extends around a mountain that starts at one elevation and ends near the upper tracks. This is where the elk are at the time, a hunter can then circle around the mountain while staying in the zone between the elevations and improve the likelihood of finding elk.

Dense, heavily forested areas are where you find western, mountain elk which often frequent just a few areas where the abundance of food, water and cover make for good security. Once the forage is gone or the snow gets too deep or even if the hunting pressure is too great and interrupts their normal patterns they will move but otherwise you can usually find them in preferred habitats that offer these four key needs: food, water, cover and security. It gets hot in the forest and elk like to lie on hillsides where the updraft breezes help keep them cool while also carrying the scent of strangers and predators. Elk are typically reclusive and extremely sensitive to out-of-the-ordinary sounds and scents. Large, older bulls frequently spend their days hidden in heavy cover only moving if forced or sensing something out-of-the-ordinary that makes them uncomfortable.

During the day elk tend to feed and lie in the bordering timbered cover adjacent to sharp, often rocky tops of ridges. Steepness does not bother them very much but they do like to bed down in a relatively flat spot. Sometimes they will even lie next to a fallen or standing tree to keep them from rolling downhill.

Mountain habitats generally have an abundance of available water. Elk will travel long distances to get a drink but usually prefer water that is not too far thereby conserving energy unless they are being harassed or are in migration. In my experience, the size of herd groups tend to be larger in the mountains than their prairie counterparts even though more mouths to feed means moving more often. Another difference between prairie and mountain elk is the bugling by bulls, especially the big herd bulls. In addition to attracting cows, bugling is often an attractant for other elk such as younger bulls who want to steal females from a harem. While prairie elk tend to move more they do not bugle as much as mountain elk. It is often more difficult to locate a mountain bull by his bugling due to the resonance of the calls banging around between canyons and timber.

Western bulls are more likely to find a place to wallow and will do so often when it gets hot and the mating season is in full swing. The wallows tend to be at the upper ends of timbered bowls at higher elevations where springs seep out of the ground. The trick here is to get close enough for a shot or to be stationed close enough so that you can determine the best shot placement due to the dark timber.

Things are different on the prairie where the open grasslands have occasional stands of timber; hiding cover and security is less abundant, more of a premium. Finding water is also more of a challenge except for the many cattle troughs. But once the cattle are rounded up and removed from the range in the fall the water is usually turned off in the troughs to keep them from freezing and elk head toward natural water sources.

The elk must now travel farther or find locations closer to a river, pot hole, or lake. Prairie elk seem to prefer small reservoirs, stock dams, and pot holes. They generally have more forage available to them but the need for water now dictates where they will be found.

Scattered bands of prairie elk seldom get very big except on reserves or private land. It is not all that unusual to see small groups of 3 to 12 animals throughout the season. If a large, herd bull does accumulate a large harem of cows he is often run ragged trying to fend off the lesser bulls from stealing breedable females. The vast, open country seems to lend itself to small groups that often have a lead bull that is anywhere from 3 to 5 points. The exception to this might be in some parts of the Missouri River Breaks area. Competition and the need for bugling tends to take place after dark if it takes place much at all.

The warm prairie means a lot more annoying insects. Biting flies and mosquitoes seem dedicated to making life miserable for a hunter especially when sitting in a blind or a rocky outcrop trying not to spook animals with movement. Frequently used water holes are fairly easy to locate and many hunters set up near them to observe animals as they come to drink, wallow or loaf in the coolness. Because of the heat and the often strong winds elk like to feed in early morning and stay in the bottoms to feed or rest during the day only coming out near or after dark to graze on ridge tops which are much flatter than in the mountains.

All in all the challenge to hunt elk with a bow is a difficult process. An in-depth, intimate knowledge of elk behavior and how they move where you plan to hunt will improve your hunting odds. Knowing how to accurately shoot a slightly longer distance than in the mountains may help on the prairie but arrow placement is still critical no matter where you find them. Having said this, the closer you are to the animal the better and the more likely you are to realize a harvest. My preferred shot is when an elk is facing a quarter away so that you can aim for the far shoulder and slip a sharp broadhead into vital organs.

Successful bow hunting for elk in Montana is a combination of experience, knowledge, and confidence. Luck does play its part but a person who understands and respects the quarry pursued will generally be the most successful. And, remember – practise, practise, practise with your bow or firearm so that it becomes an extension of your body and mind. As hunters we have an obligation to the wild game we pursue to be proficient and responsible. If you have any doubt that your shot will or will not be a clean kill –don't take it!

Carl Wolf lives near Worden, Montana where he runs a gunsmithing shop, Wolf's Gun Works. He has taken elk from all parts of the state and some adjoining states with bow and arrow, rifle and black powder.