

Big Bulls in the Killdeer Mountains

By Mike Lambeth

At the invitation of my friend Wade Derby, I was invited to go on an elk hunt in the Killdeer Mountains of northwest North Dakota. Derby operates a prolific hunt consulting business called Cross Hair Consulting in California, booking premium hunts all over the globe on some of the finest lands God ever created. He suggested I hunt with outfitter Tim Dvirnak of Killdeer Mountain Outfitters – a spectacular hunting operation offering scenic vistas and lots of big bull elk – with some scoring well over 400 inches! The hunt would be a preserve-type hunt on a huge chunk of land, but Derby assured me that I better be prepared to hunt hard – which later would prove to be prophetic.

Derby explained his philosophy about preserve hunting. “The average hunter will go to the mountains elk hunting five or six times, before they will ever score on an elk,” Derby opined. “No telling how many thousands of dollars they will spend in the process. Normally, the average-sized elk taken there is much smaller than what most hunters dream of. So, why not hunt elk in a preserve on rough terrain, where most hunters will get shot opportunities at a fabulous elk at a fraction of the cost of an expensive guided trip. After all, it is all about the experience.”

Being an elk buff myself, I jumped at the opportunity to go and invited my friend Steve Scott along with my brother David to come along. Scott, no stranger to big game hunting produces three fine outdoor television shows, and has taken his fair share of big game on several continents. For my brother David however, this hunt would take on a special meaning. Being in the middle of a messy divorce, and having a lifelong dream to take a nice bull elk, this hunt would make some special memories for my younger sibling. Football injuries had left my brother with bad knees, so doing a steep mountainous hunt had never been an option, however, this hunt would be different. Derby assured me that the hunt would be easier on David than most, and that it would be done entirely at my brother's pace.

Upon arrival we were met by Tim Dvirnak at the front gate. His infectious smile insured us we were in for a good time. Our camp was a nice wilderness cabin that was with many amenities, including a pool table and an area rich with whitetails, turkeys, and other wildlife. After a sumptuous barbeque dinner prepared by Tim's wife Sally, we were itching to go look over our hunting area. Being a gracious host, Tim took us to a high vantage point where we heard a bull bugle in the distance. The land featured big rolling hills, deep draws with thick brush, and grassy meadows – just the kind of terrain that elk love. We spotted a few distant bulls and soon darkness descended like a black veil, so we returned to our cabin and turned in for the night.

The Hunt Begins

In an effort to video each hunt for later broadcast, David was elected to be the first hunter of the morning, while Steve and his videographer Todd Roberts would follow

close behind to capture the excitement for television. We loaded up in Dvirnak's truck and drove a ways before hiking to a vantage point to begin glassing. Three bulls were spotted in the distance so a stalk was made for a closer look.

After getting within 100 yards of the bulls the wind shifted, and like a wisp of smoke the three huge bulls vanished. We spent most of the morning looking for another bull, without success. Just before lunch we spotted a huge bull in a thick bottom area. The massive elk carried huge antlers with long ivory-tipped tines. A changing wind proved to be our nemesis again, and we watched in awe as the 400-class bull crashed out of his bedding area, shredding limbs on his departure. We decided to return for lunch and regroup for the afternoon's hunt.

After a delicious lunch prepared by Sally, we grabbed a short nap and then returned energized and ready to find my brother a bull. Tim suggested that we head to the highest peak on his land and glass a while. The view there was picturesque. We watched scads of whitetail deer filter out on a distant alfalfa field nearly a mile away. Soon we caught movement in the distance. "There are four bulls near that brushy draw," Dvirnak said. "One of them looks like a real dandy. Let's go get a closer look."

Carefully utilizing the wind, we closed the half-mile distance on the feeding elk. When we arrived near the spot where the elk were last seen, they had vanished – leaving us dumbfounded. I walked over a nearby hill to glass when I spotted the bulls 75 yards away feeding unaware.

Summoning Tim and David, a stalk was made and David selected a heavy-horned bull that had recently shed its velvet. Borrowing my .300 Thompson Icon, David made a perfect shot at 50 yards, and his dream of taking an elk was now a reality. His bull was a heavy-horned 6 X 6 with a broken brow tine, later scoring 321 2/8.

With darkness approaching the huge elk was loaded up and taken back to camp for skinning and quartering. Sleep came easy that night as I thought about my own hunt the next day.

Hunt For The Wide Bull

The next morning dawned to overcast skies and a strong wind. Tim suggested we go back to the high observation point, where we spotted David's bull the previous afternoon to glass. Upon arrival we spotted three bulls feeding across a valley 200 yards away. One of the bulls looked particularly wide and I set my sights on him. Using my Bog Pod to steady my rifle, I placed the crosshairs of my .300 on the bull's shoulder and fired a perfect shot anchoring the awesome bull in his tracks.

After some high-fives and backslapping, we filmed a few cutaways before going to check on my trophy. The walk was precarious as we navigated our way down the rock-strewn hill, before arriving where my bull lay. The old monarch was awesome and

carried a wide 7 X 6 rack with long tines that would later score 340 and change. We loaded my bull and then headed back to camp for lunch and a nap.

Now it was Steve's turn to take a big bull. No stranger to elk hunting, Scott has taken elk in many western states. On this trip he would attempt to take his bull with a newly released Smith & Wesson .460 scoped handgun. The pistol utilizing a 250-grain bullet had fired some remarkable groups previously, when we sighted in our weapons.

That afternoon we heard a bull bugle and decided to try for him. Setting up on a waterhole near a wallow, we waited for the bruiser to appear but darkness came without a sighting. We returned to camp hungry and amazed at all the wildlife we had seen that day.

Packing Heat For A Big Bull

The next morning after sleeping in, David and I decided to take photographs of the area scenery. Tim, Steve, and videographer Todd left under the cover of darkness to make another attempt to get a bull within handgun range. The morning was mild and the wind was light. Tim knew of a small waterhole near a wallow that had been red hot a few days before we arrived, so the trio navigated through the thick vegetation to set up nearby.

As light began to break, a big bull appeared like a ghost 50 yards away. Trees shrouded the vitals of the giant wapiti, and Roberts had no choice but to tell Steve he couldn't get the footage necessary. Scott bemoaned his bad luck when the bull caught the hunter's wind and blasted out.

The rest of the morning was spent without seeing another bull. However, there were whitetail buck sightings, mule deer sightings, even a cow elk walked by, but no bull elk. The trio returned for lunch sweaty and tired and Scott's long face told the story. "We had a nice bull 50 yards away," Scott lamented. "I set Todd up in the wrong place and he couldn't see the bull well enough for any footage. To add insult to injury, the bull stood perfectly behind some big trees and then winded us. Boy, I can't win for losing."

After lunch and a nap Tim, Steve and Todd were optimistic about the evenings hunt. David and I played several games of pool at the cabin as we enjoyed the "good life."

The Moment Of Truth

That evening as the sun was sinking in the west, David and I sat on the cabin's porch and watched as whitetails filtered out onto the alfalfa field. One good buck appeared and we entertained watching the 160-class typical feed in the distance. Soon the evening's solitude was interrupted by the sound of a distant gun shot.

While selecting a grassy hillside as an ambush point, the trio of hunter, videographer, and guide watched a well-worn elk trail 70 yards below. Just before darkness two giant bulls appeared and began walking down the trail that would parallel Scott's position. Soon the bull walked within range and stopped to graze giving Scott time to steady his scope on the big bull's vitals.

At the roar of the handgun the bull spun before staggering and falling a few feet away. Scott had accomplished his goal. After previously taking elk with a rifle, muzzleloader, and a crossbow, Steve could now add a handgun kill to his resume.

Scott's bull was heavy and carried small strands of velvet on a few tines. The perfectly matched 6 X 6 bull would later score 360 and 5/8.

On the Road Again

The next morning we loaded our trailer with three impressive sets of elk antlers, and several ice chests of elk venison that would bring back tasty memories of our North Dakota experience. With our bags packed we piled into Scott's Suburban and headed back home to repack, when Steve and I would leave on an antelope hunt a few days later.

Truly, the hunt with the Dvirnak's had been memorable. The deeply religious couple had left a lasting impression on us all. My thoughts about hunting in a preserve had changed, as well, and I vowed to return again.