

Kentucky Elk Hunt

One man's experience of the hunt of a lifetime

Extinct from the Commonwealth of Kentucky for one and a half centuries, elk again are plentiful and roaming the mountains and hollows of eastern Kentucky. Bull elk, majestic troubadours, bugle their shrill songs seeking cow elk mates and challenging other bulls to fight. A bull elk bugling is unlike any other sound, starting as a low whine and building into a crescendo, a high-pitched shrill trumpet. Their love songs echo through the eastern Kentucky mountains in early morning and late evening, sending chills through those fortunate enough to hear them.

I was one of the lucky 100 whose names were drawn to hunt elk for the 2005 season. It is a privilege shared by fewer than 200 people who have hunted elk in Kentucky in the past 150 years.

Elk hunting is a feast for the senses. The sound of the bull elk's bugle mixes with the sight of pale pink skies before sunrise and after sunset. Walking the reclaimed strip mine, I feel the gravelly earth beneath my boots and smell the pungent aroma of bull elk in rut. In camp the night before my hunt in the Begley Wildlife Management Area near Pineville, I taste smoky elk meat cooked over an open wood fire. Tomorrow, with my friend, David Bishop, I will hunt elk in Kentucky.

Opening day: Saturday morning, October 1, we hunt without seeing any elk. We hear their calls, we smell their odor and we follow their fresh hoof prints so we know where they have gone and where they may be in the evening. Two hours before sunset we set up an ambush where the elk disappeared into the forested ravines earlier in the day, a place where we bugled to a large bull in the morning. We suspect he is a large herd bull because of his deep bugle and his heavy growl.

We determine that the elk should return this way in the evening as they head to the fields to feed. We start to call the elk using bugles to locate them and cow calls to lure them to us. Two

large bulls bugle back as they close on our position atop a mile-long ridge. We hear them crashing through the forest, climbing up the sides of the ridge toward our position. But just as they are nearly in view, ATVs, forbidden to be in the area, buzz around the hollows and frighten the bulls back into the forest.

Disappointed, we pack up our hunting gear and head back to elk camp where we tell the law enforcement officers with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources about the intrusion of the pesky ATVs. The officers tell us that tomorrow they will watch the area to keep the 4-wheelers away while we hunt.

The next morning, we are intent on returning to the same ridge. But this time we will hunt down the sides of the mountain, intent on finding the herd bull with the deep growl and the deep bugle.

An hour before sunrise, just as we enter the area designated for us to hunt, we hear a bull elk bugle nearby. We stop the truck and shut off the engine so we can listen. He bugles again and we can tell he is behind us. Another bull bugles in response, just 200 yards away in a field to our right. Then two larger bulls bugle due east 200 yards in front of us, on the other side of a small rise. We quickly realize that we are bordered on three sides by bull elk that are bugling to each other. All of them are converging on our position.

Quickly and quietly, we get out of the truck and ready our hunting gear. We don orange vests and hats, gather our elk calls



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John Vissman, shown with his bull taken during the 2005 season, calls a Kentucky elk hunt “a feast for the senses.” Kentucky will issue 200 elk permits for the 2006 season, and hunters can apply now for the hunt. It costs \$10 to participate in the quota drawing.

Then we see them. What looks like two sets of large trees start to rise over the ridge. It is their antlers. They keep coming until we see two huge bull elk in perfect black silhouette against the pink sky. Then they stop, stretch out their necks and start bugling. It is a sight and sound that I will never forget and will often relive as a once in a lifetime moment for any hunter.

As the legal shooting time arrives, I shoulder my rifle and fire a shot at the largest of the bulls. But in the weak light, I miss. It strolls back over the ridge, out of sight. My hunting buddy, David, starts elk cow calling. It stops the bull. He starts to bugle again, just out of sight. Stealthily I creep up the ridge until I see the bull broadside to me. As he starts to bugle, I raise my rifle and fire again, this time hitting him in the heart. The bull elk falls 20 yards away. It is a clean kill.

The sun rises as we field-dress the bull and I feel a sense of wonder that I have hunted and killed an elk in Kentucky. This is something I would have considered impossible a decade ago. The bull is a huge animal with thick 6x6 antlers. His eye guard antlers are over 14 inches long. It takes six men grunting and groaning to load his 700-pound bulk into the back of a pickup truck. His meat will feed many families over the next year.

As the herd grows, more hunters will be able to experience the thrill of a Kentucky elk hunt. Through the vision and accomplishment of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, herds of elk once again populate our land. After 150 years, a wildlife legacy has returned to our Commonwealth.

Author John Vissman of Covington is a long-time deer hunter, but a first time elk hunter. After learning that he had been drawn for a 2005 bull elk permit, Vissman said, “I immediately went out and bought a lottery ticket.”

and load my rifle. We face the east, toward the bulls that are out of sight behind a small rise just 80 yards away. The predawn sky glows pink and as two bulls bugle. They are getting much closer.