

You Won the Draw

Now What?



Our top 20 elk hunting tips

By Charlie Logsdon

THE FIRST PHONE call came just five minutes after the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources posted the results of the elk drawing on its website. "I got drawn for the elk hunt," the caller said. "How do I do it?"

It is a question that department employees will be asked hundreds of times before opening day.

Most people drawn have never hunted elk before and have no idea what to expect. While a few have hunted elk out west, they might be surprised to learn the differences in a Kentucky elk hunt.

With more than 1,000 elk hunters this year, it's not possible for department employees to answer every question from every person. With this in mind, *Kentucky Afield* presents this list of top 20 tips to help make your elk hunt the best possible.

Remember that Kentucky Fish and Wildlife is actively doing research on the elk herd. If a department employee contacts you, then you can assist by providing samples or general information about the elk you harvest. You can help the department better manage the elk herd to benefit all Kentucky hunters.



DAVE BAKER PHOTO

Bring good optics.

The vast size of eastern Kentucky's reclaimed mine country surprises many hunters.



DAVE BAKER PHOTO

GENERAL ELK HUNTING TIPS

1 Find your hunting spot early. Competition for hunting spots is getting intense. While department employees may be able to help you find landowners willing to allow you to hunt on their property, in the end it's your footwork that will enable you to find a hunting spot. Start early. Visit the department's website at fw.ky.gov to find information on public areas to hunt.

2 Check references for guides. Check the guide's references and success rate if you choose to hire one. Any reputable guide will provide this information. Although a partial list of guides is available from the department, remember this is only a list of contacts and not a recommendation for any particular guide.

3 Know your boundaries. Know the boundaries of the property you're hunting and find out if other hunters are using the same area. Each year, the department receives trespassing complaints due to hunters getting confused about boundaries. Surface mining has blurred many boundary lines, so if in doubt, stay away. Always stay away from active mine sites and never shoot in their direction. If other hunters are on the area, respect their rights. Hunters can often come to an agreement about sharing an area if they just talk to each other.

4 Don't shoot from your truck. It's illegal to shoot elk from a vehicle or ATV unless you have a disabled hunting exemption permit from Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. Also, make sure the landowner allows ATVs. Some landowners do not.

5 Be prepared to handle the meat and cape. This is particularly important during the bull hunt, when temperatures can top 90 degrees. Talk to a taxidermist about how to handle the elk and cape the head if you

plan to mount it. Don't drag the animal, as this will pull hair out of the hide, particularly the mane. Also, have a meat processor lined up prior to the hunt if you're not doing it yourself. Few processors in eastern Kentucky are set up to handle elk. Ice to cool down the meat is essential hunting gear. The department can provide a list of processors and taxidermists in the area. Again, this is not a recommendation for any of them, just a list of contacts.

6 Know your limitations. Deciding how you're going to get an elk out of the location where it's standing is important before taking a shot. Elk shot at higher locations are easier to bring down the hillside than animals taken over the edge of a remote hollowfill. A hollowfill is a steep area that is sloped and terraced to prevent soil erosion. Most do not have an access road at



Be prepared to pack out your elk.

JOE LACEFIELD PHOTO

the bottom. Few ATVs and trucks can pull an elk up the steep slope of a hollowfill, and trying to do so will damage the terraces. Remember, it is your responsibility to get your animal out. Be prepared to quarter the animal and pack it out.

7 Bring good optics. The vast size of eastern Kentucky's reclaimed mine country surprises many hunters. You can literally see for miles on some of the larger sites. Glassing from high knobs with your binoculars is an effective way to locate elk. Hunters accustomed to deer-sized animals can easily misjudge an elk's distance. A miscalculation could result in a wounded animal that runs down into a hollowfill, making for a very difficult retrieval. This is why a rangefinder is essential.

8 Practice shooting. Become proficient with your rifle at 100-300 yards, as the wide-open nature of reclaimed mines can force longer shots. Look past the elk before shooting to see what's behind it. A miss or shoot-through can travel a long way. It is possible to kill two elk with one shot, so make sure there isn't another animal on the other side of your target.

9 Prepare for fog. Fog in eastern Kentucky is common. This can make it difficult to determine your backstop and which animal you have shot. After your first shot, make sure you are shooting at the same animal if you need to take a second shot. Never shoot at what "looks" like an elk in the fog. Always confirm your target before pulling the trigger.

10 Be ready to shoot more than once. Elk are large animals, weighing 300-800 pounds. They can take multiple hits despite the size and knockdown power of the bullet. If the animal continues standing after the first shot, shoot again until it falls. Always make sure that you're shooting at the same animal.

BULL ELK HUNTING

1 Stalk or call. There are two primary ways people hunt bull elk in Kentucky. The first is spotting and stalking. Start by locating bulls with your binoculars or listen for bugling. In spotting and stalking, you close the distance by using the contours of the land and vegetation to hide your approach. Paying attention to the wind is critical. Elk have excellent noses and will spook if they smell you. The key is getting within comfortable shooting range. This is the most common method for firearm hunting, and the way most hunters take large bulls guarding a harem of cows. The second method is calling the animal into range. Most bowhunters try to call a bull into shooting distance.

2 Learn to call. Hunting videos are great tools to learn elk calling. Using cow calls, much like using hen calls in turkey hunting, is the primary way to go. This is especially effective when working subdominant bulls that hang around the harems.

3 Hunt the low light. It's usually hot when the bull season opens in October. Elk heat up quickly under the hot sun and begin moving into the timber early in the morning. They don't move back into the open until late afternoon. These are the best times to hunt.

Elk won't move far from where you saw them in the morning. They often come back out in the same area where they went into the woods. During bull season, don't pressure the animals during the middle of the day. Just be patient – they'll be back.

4 Watch the water. Although few hunters take elk from tree stands, this can be an effective tactic for bowhunters when the weather is still hot. Elk like to wade in water to stay cool during hot weather. Since ponds are not common on most reclaimed mine property, a good pond could be a hot spot. Take your shot before the animal enters the water, however, because it is illegal to harvest an elk that is swimming. It is also difficult to retrieve an elk in the water.

5 Judging antlers. Kentucky has trophy Boone and Crockett Club sized bulls, but you really have to search for them. Most Boone and Crockett bulls are between 7-9

years old. Because Kentucky's restoration program only hit its stride 10 years ago, many of the state's bulls are not mature enough to be in that category. If you're seeking a trophy, there are ways to estimate a bull's potential while in the field. Concentrate on the beam and tine length because these make up most of the scoring of the animal. In judging beam length, look for antlers that sweep over the back and appear as though the bull could scratch his rear end with them. If the animal is holding his antlers erect, the rack will appear at least as tall as the bull's shoulder height. A typical mature bull has six tines on both sides, an antler configuration known as a 6x6. Most bulls in the record books have 6x6 antlers. The best way to judge tine length is to look at the nose of the animal. The distance between the burr and the tip of the nose is approximately 16 inches. The first point (G1) should be at least as long as the nose with a good curve, usually meaning that the point is at least 18 inches long. The second point, or bez (G2), and the third point, or trez (G3), should be nearly as long as the first point. The fourth point, or dagger (G4), is usually the longest tine and should be about 1½-2 times the length of the nose-to-burr distance. The fifth point (G5) should be 8-10 inches long. If you find an animal like this, you have a big bull.

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DAVE BAKER PHOTO



Avoid shooting at cows bunched together, as you may hit more than one. Pick one by itself instead.

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COW ELK HUNTING

1 Expect large herds. Whether you're in eastern Kentucky or out west, cow elk form large herds during the winter season. Expect herds of 30-100 elk.

2 Stalk hunt. Most cow elk hunters spot the animals and then stalk them. Locate herds by glassing or scouting a few days before the hunt. In December, the cows have formed their winter herds. They won't be far from where you first saw them. Once you spot elk, use the contours of the land and vegetation to approach the animals. Stay low. A crouching hunter can better approach the animals than one who is standing.

3 Call cows back. Don't forget your cow call. Cow elk are social animals. If they do spook, cow call loudly and don't be surprised if they turn and look at you, especially if they haven't identified you as a human.

4 Group hunting. If other hunters are in the area, coordinate your hunt with

them. It's possible for more than one hunter to harvest an animal out of the same herd. Don't rush to the animal once it is down. If the animals haven't identified where the shot came from, or if they didn't react to the shot, other hunters may get a chance to shoot, too.

5 Cow or calf? A calf may weigh 300 pounds and stand nearly as tall as a mature cow by December. It's easy to confuse the two. While calves are excellent to eat, many hunters want to harvest a large cow. Several things will help you avoid calves. Most calves will be noticeably smaller than cows. However, some will be as tall. If the animals are facing or moving away from you, the cows will be noticeably wider. Calves also have shorter noses than cows and curly hair on their foreheads. Bull calves are legal to take during the antlerless hunt, as they don't develop antlers until March. Spike bull elk, however, are illegal for harvest during the regular quota hunts. Spike bulls are about the same size as cows in December. ■



Cows are noticeably wider than calves.

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