



ELK HUNTING

ON YOUR OWN

A QUICK PRIMER

BY RANDY NEWBERG



CONTENTS

- Getting Those Tags 4**
- Finding a Place to Hunt 7**
- Where to Find Them 10**
- Hunting Pressure is Your Ally 15**
- After the Tag 19**
- Who to Know 22**
- Randy's Equipment List 23**

As one who films multiple public land elk hunts every year, I get asked most any question you can imagine, as it relates to hunting public land elk. I am always struck by the perception many have that elk hunting requires mountains of money, exclusive access, and years of applying for tags. You can make it that way, if you want.... but I don't.

And with the highlight provided here, I hope to show you how I do it.

For me, elk hunting is about going as often as I can, in as many places as I can, and not breaking the bank in the process. My objective here is to give you some ideas of where to start and how you can do this, year after year, eventually building a vault of elk knowledge that allows you to have more success than you likely dreamed of.

This is not provided to be the "Encyclopedia of Elk Hunting." (I am working on that.) Rather, this compilation is put together to give some starting points for the person who is interested in western elk hunting and is in search of a place to begin.

With that, let's get started!



PART ONE:

GETTING THOSE TAGS

First, let's talk about getting tags. Western states have these elaborate application rules for their limited-entry tags. Some states have over-the-counter or left over tags that can be really good hunts. This is different than a lot of states where you might be coming from. **In many of the “deer states,” you can go down to the sporting goods store and buy your license/tag the day before season. Not out west.** Most the elk tags in the west require that you apply months in advance, with some exceptions that I will talk about.



If you look at ease of obtaining tags, I break the states into three groups – easy, moderate, and difficult. Below is the list, in alphabetical order, of where the primary elk states fall in the spectrum of drawing these tags. Some other states have elk hunting, but are not usually considered viable options for the travelling hunter wanting to get a start in elk hunting.

EASY	MODERATE	DIFFICULT
Colorado	Wyoming	Arizona
Idaho		Nevada
Montana		New Mexico
Oregon		Utah

No doubt, the easiest hunts and those with the greatest age class of bulls, are the most difficult to draw. It can take decades to draw one of those limited-entry tags. And when you draw it, you may or may not have the hunt of your life.

Imagine waiting 20 years for one the great tags in Nevada, only to be unlucky to draw your tag in a drought year that drastically compromises antler growth. Sad, but it happens often. Point being, drawing those glory tags is no guarantee of a big bull in your sights. Many guys cash in their decades of points, only to be dealt a bad hand when it comes to weather, conditions, fires, or other factors beyond their control. An inherent risk to these once-in-a-lifetime tags.



The hunts I suggest you look for are the easier tags to draw. For ease of acquiring tags, with lots of public land, there are three states that stand out for most travelling elk hunters: Montana, Idaho, and Colorado. Each of those states do have some limited entry areas that are considered trophy hunts. But, drawing one of those tags requires years of applications, or some serious gamblers luck.

Each of those states allow you to go back year after year, allowing you to learn an area, almost as if you were a local hunter. Just because the tag was easy to acquire doesn't mean the area is voice of mature bulls. **A look at the record books over the last five years and you see that Montana and Colorado are in the top four states for trophy entries,** with Montana being first.

That doesn't mean that you ignore the states with difficult drawing odds. If your budget allows, apply in these difficult states, building points in the states that have a point system. When your number finally does get pulled, you will have a great hunt, for sure.

Wyoming is a great state to build preference points, with a lot of units that only require one or two points to draw. Wyoming has some great hunting, lots of public land, and some great bulls on all their

STATE / PROVINCE	# OF ENTRIES
Montana	41
Utah	35
Colorado	27
Wyoming	27
Arizona	21
Nevada	21
New Mexico	12
Alberta	8
Washington	7
Idaho	6

Records courtesy of Boone & Crockett Club website

units. Last season, you saw us shoot two bulls in Wyoming, on a tag that required four points to draw. Is it worth waiting four years, and hunting over-the-counter tags in neighboring states, while waiting for the Wyoming tag? I think so, and I suspect if you saw the episode, you will agree.

A benefit of hunting the states where tags are easy to obtain is that when you finally draw that once-in-a-lifetime tag in Nevada, Arizona, Utah, or New Mexico, you will have some elk hunting experience under your belt. And in the process of building that knowledge, you have a ton of fun, and **hopefully put a lot of elk steaks in the freezer.**

Even the hard-to-draw states have some tags that are easier to draw. Most often, archery and muzzleloader tags have better odds than rifle tags. In Arizona, an elk hunt you saw us on the last two seasons, is a late rifle hunt. Those tags have 20-35% draw odds, as most people are holding out for one of the early rut hunts. Fine with me. I've been able to hunt Arizona four of the last six years, due to this strategy.

The amount of public land for elk hunting in the west is mind-boggling. Montana, Idaho, Colorado, and Wyoming, the four states where tags are easiest to acquire, have over 120 million, yeah, MILLION, acres of public land to chase elk. That is lots of ground to have a fun hunt.

PART TWO:

FINDING A PLACE TO HUNT

When you do finally draw the tag, the big challenge becomes, “Where can I hunt?” This segment is designed to help you navigate the land ownership issue with greater confidence.

I think back to when I moved west, thirty years ago. I was clueless about how to find public land and how to know what was public versus private. It was very intimidating, albeit, 20 years before the proliferation of hunting information being so easy to acquire on Al Gore’s internet.

Thankfully, finding your way around the hunting hills of the west is easier today than it has ever been. Yet, that doesn’t mean you won’t have to invest some time.

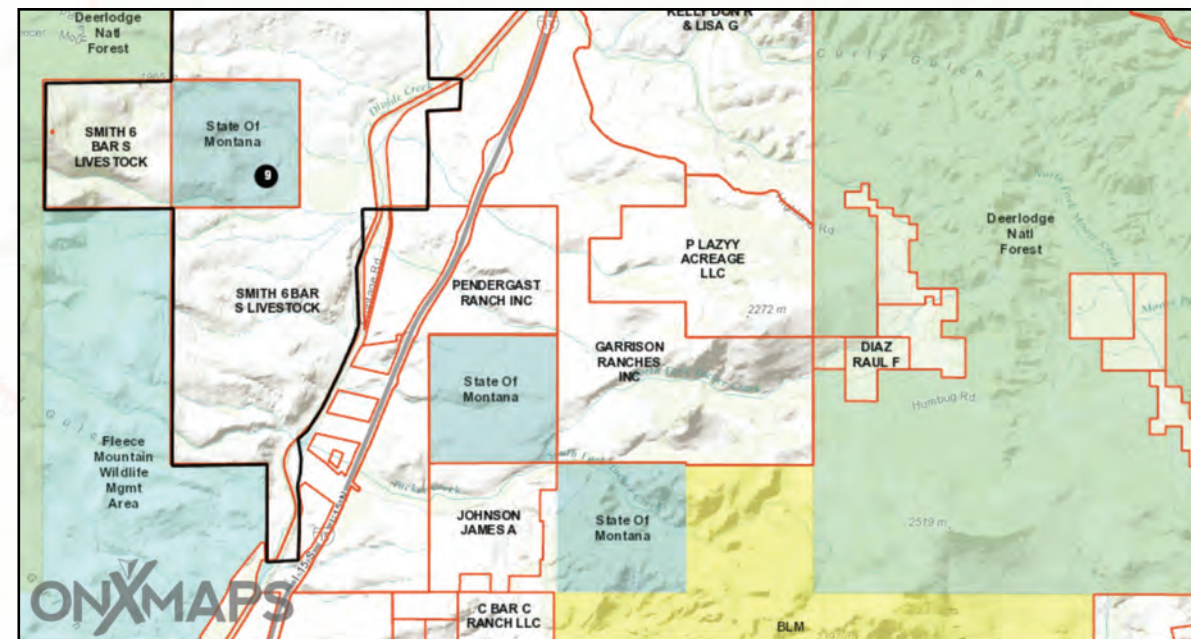
I remember wondering, “Who is the BLM, USFS; what is a NWR, a WMA?” and a lot of other terminology that seemed foreign to me. To know what public areas you can hunt, you need to know which agency owns the land, and whether that is a Federal or State agency. Here is a quick primer to help you over some of the hurdles I faced.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages over 260 millions of acres of land in the western states. Most of the BLM lands are range lands. Even if those lands are leased by others for grazing, minerals, etc., these Federal lands are open to public hunting.

United States Forest Service (USFS) manages over 160 million acres in the western states. Those lands may also be leased for grazing, timber, minerals, etc. And like the BLM lands, these lands are open to public hunting, even if leased for those purposes.

State School Trust Lands (State land) - States own large amounts of properties in the western states. In exchange for their statehood, the western states were granted land to use for funding of their school systems. Each state has different rules related to public access to these properties.

Most states, with the exception of Colorado, allow public hunting on the millions of acres held by the states. Yet, overnight camping on those State lands is heavily restricted and in many states, prohibited. Some of the best State lands have been converted to Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) which are usually open to hunting, though may close during wintering or migratory seasons.



If you look at a surface map of western states, you will see they are all consistent in what color is used to mark the land owned by the agencies.

Yellow is BLM. Green is USFS. White is private. Blue is usually state lands. **If you look at any surface ownership map, these colors are consistently used.** Thank goodness for that.

As hunters, we need to be respectful of private property at ALL times. You may come from a state that requires private property to be posted “No Hunting” or “No Trespassing,” but that is not the case out west. Most western states place the responsibility on the hunter, whether the land is posted, or not. Our responsibility as hunters also places that burden on hunters. There is no excuse for trespassing, especially with the technology at our disposal today.

So, now that you have a tag, and you have found some public areas you might want to hunt, there are some other things you need to know. Mostly, the type of access is allowed on those properties; foot, horseback, motorized, or a combination. **Make sure you know what access is allowed, as if you shoot a big animal like an elk in a non-motorized area, you'll need a plan to get all that tasty meat to the trailhead, without spoilage.**

I bring this up, as many people show up for a western hunt and then are disappointed that some areas are open only to foot or horseback. They may have built their hunting plan on using an ATV or vehicle to get deep into the unit, only to find out such motorized travel is not allowed. Most often motorized restrictions are designed to protect wildlife values that might be disturbed by motorized traffic, or by the large amount of hunting pressure and landscape disruption that can come when access is made easier by motorized travel.

I'm still an old map guy, buying a Tyvek map for every unit I hunt. Just a habit of mine, and not necessary if you are comfortable using an electronic device. **Even as an old school map guy, there is one new piece of equipment I never go without, no matter the state or species I hunt: a GPS map chip that show the ownership of the property.**

The biggest game changer in my western hunting has come in the form of surface map chips that you can load into your GPS or that you can download to the newer smart phones. For years, I have been using the map chips built by OnXMaps. They are not only the first to design these maps for hunters, but make the best maps I know of for hunters.

With these maps at your disposal, you know exactly where the public and private lands are, giving you comfort that you will not trespass. I would suggest every western hunter invest in this new map technology, whether they are an old hand at navigating these landscapes, or a newcomer fresh to the world of western hunting.



PART THREE:

WHERE TO FIND THEM

The “Fresh Tracks” TV show always showcases a number of elk hunts during the season, so I want to give more insight as to how we consistently find elk on public land. Most people will contact me asking why they are good at finding deer back home, but they struggle to find elk out west. I am going to give the highlights here to help you get started, though it is impossible to address all the aspects of finding elk in this short version. (We will have a lot more detail to come when I finish my elk hunting book.)



Most often, hunters lack a system for finding elk, even hunters who have been at it for a few years. They have a system for deer patterning in their home grounds. They know where to find deer at certain times of the year, based on the needs deer have in the months they are hunting. As a result, they see lots of deer and they kill lots of deer.

To kill an elk, you need to find an elk. To find an elk, you need to know where they live during the months you are hunting them. Yeah, it's that easy. Develop a system based on where elk will be in the season you are hunting. Implement a plan around that and you will find more elk, more consistently. Pretty simple, eh?

For the TV show, I've got five days to get it done. I usually show up in a new area and need to analyze the landscape, find the elk, and get it on camera. Those who have hunted public land elk realize the challenge that represents. Here's my system for doing it; probably similar to the system these experienced deer hunters use back home.

My system is predicated on one thing - know your elk. In other words, know an elk's biological needs during the season you'll be hunting.

Don't go any further until you understand this point!





Know what the elk needs, whether a bull or a cow, at the time of year you are hunting them. Their needs change throughout the hunting season. As needs change, locations change.

All the calling, scents, tactics, and other snake oil sold by TV guys won't do you a lick of good if you can't find elk. Forget about the gadgets and gizmos. Spend your time and money learning what elk need at the time of year you will be hunting them.

Bull locations differ from late August, to the rut peak in late September, to the winter range migration of December. Why? Because their needs change from August to December. Again, changing needs mean changing locations. Don't look for them in the post-rut period of November in the same locations you found them during the peak rut period of September.

Build your system around knowing what bull elk are looking for at certain times of the year. If you know what he's looking for to satisfy his seasonal needs, you know where to find him. Only when you find him, can you kill him. I know that sounds overly simplified, but that is really how it works. Don't overcomplicate it.

I break it into five periods over which we chase elk – Early, Pre-rut, Peak rut, Post-rut, Late. Bulls have distinct needs during each of those periods. Those needs will dictate where you find them.

I also identify four basic needs bull elk have – Food, Water, Security, Breeding. Those needs change in priority, depending upon each of the five periods I have listed above.



Come late August, bulls rub their velvet. As the calendar rolls into September, the rut controls their every breath. They look for one thing – females. Food is about number forty-seven down their list of concerns. Water is right after the urge to breed. Most hunters can find bulls in September; **find the cows and you find the bulls.** During this period they're vocal and they're active all day long. Don't get too confident; it gets progressively more difficult from here on out.

By mid-October, the rut is waning, possibly having ended. With that, needs change. Security becomes a higher priority. Bulls change their focus to escaping hunters; finding places where they can recover body fat to survive the winter, without exposing themselves to bullets.

By November, the rut is long past and bulls are in bachelor groups, hanging out in time-tested sanctuaries; places hunters don't want to go. Think rocks, ice, steep, maybe dark timber. History has taught them the best locations; hidey holes where food and water are only a few hundred yards away. This is when an elk hunter earns his stripes, not only in finding these bull nests, but tagging a bull who lives there.

The good news is that if you find post-rut bachelor bulls, those are historical areas they will use year after year. I don't mind sharing my locations for rutting bulls, but my lips are sealed if you ask me for those hard-found late season locations. The investment to find those spots is significant, but the returns are well worth the effort made.

I know this sounds too simple, but until you look at the calendar and landscape through the eyes of a bull elk, finding them is a struggle. Elk are not spread evenly across the landscape at all times. Rather, they are congregated in precise locations based on what their biological needs are at that time of year. That's why biologists are usually really good elk hunters.

If you remember one paragraph, let it be this - to tag an elk, you need to find them. To find them, you need to understand their needs and how those needs drive their locations at different times. Don't waste time where the elk aren't; hard to tag one that isn't there. Make that the core of your system for finding elk.

I only have five days to find an elk and get an encounter on camera. With that pressure, I've developed a strategy of how to find elk as efficiently as possible. It starts with knowing the elk's needs in each of the five periods that we hunt them. Know what bull elk need during your season, go to where those needs can be fulfilled, and you will find more elk. The videos below give an overview of each of these periods of the elk hunting calendar.



Overview of Randy's system for finding public land elk



Early Season



Pre-Rut



Peak Rut



Post Rut



Late Season



PART FOUR:

HUNTING PRESSURE IS YOUR ALLY

When the words “public land elk hunting” are spoken, some think orange masses crammed into one small area. Well, if you follow the crowd that is pretty much what you’ll find. **For the enterprising hunter, crowds can be your friend.** Here’s how it works for elk, and most any species that spends time on public land.



Hunters are human; we're programmed to look for the easiest path to the greatest reward. That's why so many hunters stay near roads and trailheads; why the woods are busy on weekends, especially in mild weather. Some call it lazy. To me, it's just a function of human behavior.

Elk understand human tendencies and react accordingly.

Hunters who consistently tag public land bulls account for how the bulls respond to those human tendencies; adjusting their hunting styles and locations to find elk that are impacted by hunting pressure.

I always scour my maps for terrain, roads, trails, and other landscape objects that funnel hunters to predictable locations. Locations that attract lots of hunters attract few elk. That's not a political statement on motorized access, just a fact of elk hunting and elk behavior. First thing I do is cross off my list those areas where easier terrain and access funnels hunters.

Ask any experienced elk hunter and they will tell you; "Where hunters are abundant, elk are not." Adjust your plans to find the lonely places on the mountain. And, if possible, plan your schedule to hunt the days following heavy pressure.





Elk havens don't always require hours of hiking, though distance does increase your odds. Often, it's how much/little effort the topography extracts that creates higher/lower elk densities. Here's an example.

I hunt the same place in Colorado, almost every year, on an over-the-counter tag. Locals tell me I'm crazy, given how many people are driving those roads. Yes, there are a lot of hunters, but also a lot of elk; though elk are in places hunters are not.

From the public trailhead I hike for about a mile, then divert from the crowd by crawling up a nasty face of vertical slope to where the terrain benches out; about twenty minutes of tough going. **I'm rewarded with two miles of easy terrain, stinking of elk.** That incline sorts out other hunters, except one old boy I bump into with frequency.

Even though I'm within earshot of whining two-strokes and truck doors slamming, there are always bulls on these benches. Elk know it's safe here. Years of escaping hunters has taught them where these places are. Elk who don't figure it out don't last long.

I was not told of this spot. **I found it while scouting from my computer, 800 miles away.** Thick topo lines told me that few hunters would travel there. Segments of tightly stacked topo lines are the "Stairway to Elk Heaven." Flight survey data told me elk abounded in these districts. They had to be somewhere. Somewhere happens to be an hour hike from the road. Hunting pressure puts them here.



Looking at maps of the forest, I see a dozen other similar places. I always commit to exploring those, but never find it necessary. Hunting pressure has made this a predictable location, providing plenty of elk to chase, especially on weekdays.

Hunting pressure is not always topographical. As a traveling hunter, I seldom hunt on weekends. I make those my travel days. I let the weekend pressure push bulls into the ugly country, spending week days stalking elk where I know they'll go to escape weekend warriors.

Using the predictable pattern allows me to focus on specific areas, eliminating huge sections on my map. Monday morning elk are not going to be anywhere near roads and trails. Weekend pressure has them predictably stacked in canyons or benches atop steep slopes. That's where I hunt following that weekend pressure.

Weather also dictates hunting pressure. In mild weather elk get pressured. Just too nice for hunters to stay home. Following a few days of good weather, I know elk are tanked up in the thick north slope jungles. Warm temps and hunter's hatred of blowdown put them there. Once the weather cools, elk emerge from the fringes of those dark holes. I'm there waiting for them.

Hunting pressure is not your enemy. It congregates elk in higher densities, though in fewer locations. **Successful elk hunters find where those congregations occur. And, they bring sharp knives and good packs; odds are they're gonna need 'em.**

PART FIVE:

AFTER THE TAG

I hope this small outline helps you get started on the path to become a successful public land elk hunter. If you are successful, you will need to know how to take care of an elk you have tagged. **Taking care of an elk in the field is a lot like handling a deer back home**, albeit maybe twice or triple the size and the fact that you are probably required to haul it out on your back in manageable pieces.





Handling an elk on a dark steep mountainside is a daunting task and is the reason many new elk hunters stay close to roads and trails. That is what I did when I first started hunting, worried that if I finally tagged one, he would spoil if I was too far from a road or trail.

Last year we did a fifteen minute video clip that shows you the basic techniques to convert an animal in the pieces you can take care of. You are not going to drag an elk, or at least not very far, so it is best to know these basic steps of converting 800 pounds of wapiti into 80 pound loads of pure venison that you can carry on your back.

[Here is a link to the video we did.](#)

The point of this video is to show you the basic steps. Many aspiring elk hunters have access to a deer near their home. Practice on a deer and gain the knowledge of what is necessary when you have your first elk on the ground.

The video is not “the gospel.” As I say in the video, with an elk, I usually take off the hind quarters as my first step. If the animal is in a difficult position, I might start with a different cut. If I am saving the cape, it results in a different sequence in which I complete the process.

Point of all this is, taking care of a big bull elk is a very manageable task. Do not let the complexity and work required keep you from venturing to where the elk will be found. Let the other guys hunt near roads and trails. Armed with the confidence that you can get an elk back to your vehicle without spoilage, the entire mountain is at your disposal.

The elk are out there somewhere. Hope a few of these points help you find him and put him in your freezer.

- Randy Newberg



WHO TO KNOW:

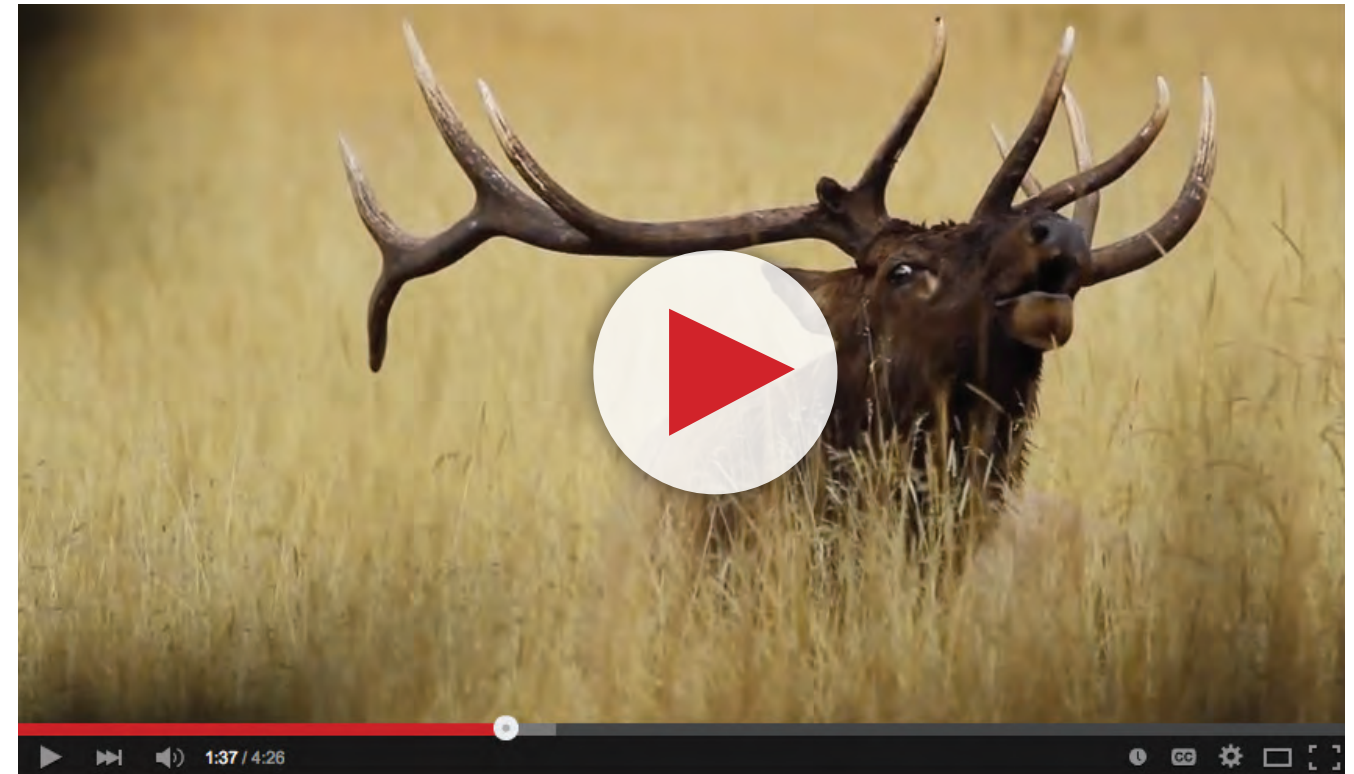
ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION



I'm not one to preach my beliefs, but I'm going to make an exception here. I can say, without any doubt, one of the greatest improvements to my ability to be a public land elk hunter is the work accomplished by the members, donors, and volunteers of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. It's that simple.

Approaching 7 million (yeah, that's million with an "M") acres of habitat improved, hunters have benefited greatly, as have the elk we chase. In most every state where elk exist, numbers today are far beyond what they were when I bought my first elk tag in 1992.

And at a time when hunting access is becoming harder to acquire; when we have politicians talking about reducing or selling public lands; when we have important battles to keep the access we have and improve upon what could be, there is one group that is working hard on behalf of all hunters, not just elk hunters. That group is the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.



I did this video about RMEF access projects three years ago. Since then, RMEF has added public access to another 75,000+ acres. RMEF is out on the landscape every day, looking for more opportunities to provide access for all of us. Take a look at this video and you will see that access is serious business at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

If you are already a member, donor, or volunteer, thank you. If you want to learn more of how you can help, how you can make a difference, [click here](#) to go to their website. There is no shortage of work to be done and as usual it will be the hunters who do the heavy lifting. Thanks RMEF.

RANDY'S

EQUIPMENT LIST

Many of you follow our show and our forum. You know I am not the kind of guy who is going to bore you with equipment discussions. I'm certainly not the guy who is going to waste your time trying to peddle you some gadget, just because I was paid to do it.

Nope, we use equipment based on how well it works for our kind of hunts. Most of the equipment we use is equipment I was using long before I ever started a TV show. Many offers are made to use products in our show, with nice financial benefits of doing so. Well, we have turned down more product offers than we have accepted. I'm not interested in who offers the biggest check. I'm interested in who makes the kind of gear we need; and who is committed to conservation and public access.

Many of you ask what gear we use. When I am at seminars, my backpack and all its contents seem to gather as much interest as what ideas I might share to find a public land bull.

With that, I am going to give some spotlight to the gear that is essential to the hunting we do. This is what works for us, not what pays us the most money. Some is gear, some are conservation groups, and some are sources of information.





OPTICS

Optics are a huge part of the western hunting style. No matter the species, optics are beneficial. I'm not just talking spotting scopes or binoculars. I'm talking about **an entire system of optics.**

For me, it usually starts with getting to a high knob well before shooting light, then spending the morning glassing with my binoculars. If I find something worthy of investigation, I break out the spotting scope. Sometimes, I will use the spotting scope to scour the hills, but most often it is my 8X42mm or 10X50mm binoculars.

Before ever heading to the field, my time at the range is spent calibrating my range finder and rifle scope. **Those who watch our show know I use the Leupold CDS system.** It is the easiest

and most reliable dial system I know of. My dials are built for my loads. Once I get it dialed in at ranges identified by my range finder, I know I am set. I use a range finder with a TBR feature, (True Ballistic Range) as part of the system. A TBR range finder gives you the actual distance over which gravity will act on your bullet. With that system, the guess work of hold over, angle of incline, and other variables are eliminated to a great degree.

When making the shot, I get as close as I can. Close means fewer variables to infringe on my accuracy; or at least less impact of those variables. Once I take the range, it is as easy as setting the CDS dial to what the range finder says. Hold dead on, squeeze the trigger, and if I have done my job, the system will do its job.

That's why I use the entire system made by Leupold. Simple, easy, and deadly. **If a guy of my marginal talents can have success, anyone can make it work.**

Another big reason I've been a lifelong fan of Leupold is who they are as a company. Based in Oregon, Leupold has a hunting culture that drives them to be an industry leader in conservation support. Leupold reinvests heavily in hunting and conservation. Since Leupold doesn't make fanfare of their investment in our future, I will. Leupold America's Optics Authority and a leader in conservation commitment.

Links:

[Rifle Scopes](#)
[Spotting Scopes](#)

[Binoculars](#)
[Range finder](#)



RIFLE & CALIBERS

One of the most common questions I get is, “What rifle and caliber do you use for elk hunting?” May as well get that answered right away. **I shoot Howa rifles.**

You have seen me using the Howa Model 1500 rifle for many years. They come with the Hogue rubber molded stock. That stock gives me a great grip in cold and wet conditions. Its rubber molding is also a much quieter stock.

In the last year I’ve been chasing all my animals with the new Alpine Mountain Rifle from Howa; a rifle I gave them a lot of input to when they were designing. I have the first proto-type here in my safe and it got a thorough test run last season. It is extremely light, and as you will see in the show this coming season, very accurate. Goes without saying, any rifle that can withstand a season with us is very durable.

[Click here for a video about Elk Hunting Cartridges and Calibers.](#)

Ask a question about rifle calibers and you are asking for an argument. I’m not here to say what is right or wrong in terms of calibers. I’ll just tell you what I use for elk hunting; the .308 Win and the .300 Win Mag.

I prefer these long-proven .30 caliber cartridges in 180 grain bullets. If you make me pick a caliber, I’m probably going to grab my .308 Win. For some reason I cannot explain, the .308 Win is more lethal on elk than the ballistic charts say it should be.

Plenty of good calibers out there. Many great rounds for elk hunting. The end result is usually less dependent upon the caliber or the round; rather mostly dependent upon the quality of bullet and the experience of the person behind the trigger. **Practice a lot and practice under adverse conditions.** We can all drill holes at the bench under perfect conditions. Knowing what your rifle does in wind, rain, snow; real elk hunting conditions, is sure to help in the field.

AMMUNITION AND BULLETS

In the previous segment I talked about calibers and cartridges. Bullets and ammunitions are a close tie to that topic. My general rule of elk ammunition is this – Buy the Best Bullets you can find, whether you handload or use factory ammunition. Or as explained by David Petzal, gun writer at Field & Stream, when he wrote of his Ten Commandments of Elk Hunting. Commandment IX, **“Strong must be thy bullet; all else is but the dung of horses.”**

Nosler
UP FRONT

I agree with Dave. I do not compromise on bullet construction. “Strong must be thy bullet” or it will not be my bullet. **I will take a smaller caliber with high-quality bullets before I would take a larger caliber with inexpensive bullets.**

Elk-quality bullets have three characteristics:

- **Accurate** – Design, consistency, and highest quality material drives accuracy.
- **Proper expansion** – Jackets, cores, and bonding. The process and the material determine expansion at all hunting ranges, with ranges influencing velocities at impact.
- **Weight retention** – Core, bonding, and construction.

Accuracy being equal, the bullet with controlled expansion and retains the greatest percentage of total weight will be the most lethal bullet for elk.

Accuracy rules and velocity matters. There is no substitute for accuracy, so I keep my shots within my practiced comfort ranges, where bullet velocity stays above 1,800 fps. Most hunting bullets travelling above 1,800 fps will deliver 1,250 ft. lbs of energy, my preferred minimum for elk.

Elk bullets come in three designs, with my preference in each of those designs listed below, all being very accurate:

- **Dual core** – Nosler Partition; 60-year track record of performance based on deep penetration on tough animals, while balancing weight retention.
- **Bonded core** – Nosler AccuBond; a high BC bullet designed for the same terminal performance as the Partition, with a polymer tip to initiate immediate expansion.
- **Lead free** – Nosler E-Tip; A one-piece design for superior weight retention and extreme penetration, adding lethality to lighter calibers.

A big bull elk is one of the toughest animals on the planet. Shoot him with a high quality bullet, in a lethal location, and most any reasonable caliber will fill your need.

[Click here for a video on Bullet Selection.](#)

CLOTHING

Like much equipment we use, I came to using Sitka as “Gear” through a series of tests. When we started the TV show, I bought, at full retail and out of my own pocket, the supposed best clothing lines for me and guest hunters to try out. By the end of the first season, there was no doubt what everyone thought was best; Sitka Gear. **I continued to buy Sitka Gear with my own money and at full retail, for two more years, even though other companies were offering us money to use their clothing.**

That is a testament to how we choose what gear we use and to the quality and performance Sitka Gear provides for the type of hunts you see on our show. It’s that simple; if it works, that’s what we use. If it doesn’t work, no amount of love or money is going to get it a place in our show.

When I’m chasing elk, you all notice I have what my camera crew calls my

“Elk Uniform.” It consists of two main pieces of Sitka outer gear; **the bomb-proof Timberline Pants and the Jetstream Jacket.** I have yet to find a combination of anything that works better for late elk hunts in the high country. Those two outer layers, over **Sitka’s Core Midweight Zip-T** and you’ve got the breathable layering system that mountain hunting demands. When it gets brutally cold, I pull the Kelvin “puffy” coat from my pack and the weather becomes a non-issue.

In earlier archery season, you will probably see me in nothing more than the Ascent Pants and a Merino Wool long sleeve T-shirt. At times, I might grab Sitka’s “90% System” if weather looks tenuous. For the warm times of early archery hunts, either of those systems are the ticket for active elk hunting.

Mountain elk hunts require breathability more than any hunting I know. I’m leaving the trailhead way before daylight, hiking a few miles to high points for glassing. The places we go require

some sweat to get there. You want something that wicks moisture, yet can be layered to provide warmth and wind protection while spending hours behind your optics; Sitka has that.

For us, clothing is Gear. It needs to perform. It is not a disposable item we replace every couple years. It needs to last for many seasons; we hunt 100+ days per year and some of my Sitka Gear has five seasons.

Like other companies we work with, Sitka is passionate about conservation. Sitka is a hunting company who makes high performance hunting gear with the same passion they invest in supporting hunting and conservation. A perfect partner for us.



GPS & LAND OWNERSHIP NAVIGATION



For the TV show, we need 10-12 tags per year. People ask how we can draw that many tags each season. Well, besides relying on over-the-counter tags, we look for areas that many hunters shy away from due to the complications of private-public property boundaries. In other words, we look for units with ample public land to hunt, yet complicated access issues that result in better drawing odds for us to get the number of tags we need.

That always leads to the question, “How does a public land TV show hunt these units where public access is complicated by private grounds?” Easy answer comes in an easy-to-use solution; the **map chips from OnXMaps that we use in our GPS.**

With the OnXMap chips, we can navigate these boundary areas with complete confidence. We know where we are at any time, due to the accuracy these chips provide. End result is that we draw more tags, get to hunt in areas of less pressure, and find older age classes of animals in these places most hunters would rather not hassle with.

We also **use these maps as scouting tools.** Before we start hunting, we can log into our account at OnXMap and get tons of information about the surface ownership of the areas we think are the best places to start, right from our office.

We cannot afford to show up in the field without having everything dialed in. A day lost due to not knowing the access and land ownership of a spot that looks good is not only expensive for us, but a huge hit to the likelihood of tagging an animal.

I would say these OnXmaps have changed my tag application strategy and my hunting strategy more than any product I have encountered in the last five years. **Other than my rifle or bow, these maps are at the top of the “Don’t leave home without it” pile.**

[Click to watch our basic map reading video >>>](#)

ARCHERY GEAR

I don't profess to be a world-class archer who you will see winning ribbons at 3D tournaments. I've become pretty good at placing arrows in elk and other animals under hunting conditions. **A big part of what I am looking for is archery gear built for hunting, specifically hunting elk in the mountains.** Not target gear. Not fragile, fickle, plastic stuff. Tough, dependable, accurate, hunting gear.

I've been shooting Bowtech bows for a long time. **I shoot Bowtech because they work great for my style of hunting:** backpacks and covering a

lot of ground. I abuse them and expect that they will continue to place arrows with greater accuracy than I have; and they do.

A big part of my archery set up are the accessories I use. I'm looking for gear that will

taking a beating and continue to perform under the adversity elk hunting subjects it to. Backpack elk hunters know that elk country is unforgiving to our bodies, and our gear, especially archery gear.

My sight is the long-proven Ascent by Black Gold. I've been shooting Black Gold sights since they started the company. The sights have been dropped, fallen on, banged into rocks and trees, and continue to shoot exactly where the pins tell me they will hit. Black Gold sights have been an industry leader for serious hunters, since the company started two decades ago.

In addition to the Black Gold sight, **I use the Ripcord Arrow Rest.** Those using a fall away rest are probably very familiar with the simplicity and durability of the Ripcord. True arrow flight starts with the rest. For me, the Ripcord has proven to be fail-proof; extremely durable for the ugly places elk seem to take me. Like the Black Gold sight, my bows have never had any fall away rest other than a Ripcord.

Last, I like a sturdy, quiet, yet removable quiver. I use a TightSpot. I prefer to shoot with my quiver off, if opportunity allows. And when I keep my quiver on the bow, I want something that is light, yet strong. My shooting form imposes enough torque, so I don't need the weight of a big clunky quiver making matters worse. In addition to being removable, the TightSpot is fully adjustable, allowing you to find the best mounting position.

I've found many different arrows that work, leaning toward the heavy side. I don't shoot a lot of draw weight, normally in the low 60s. I've found I don't need it. I shoot heavier cut-on-contact broadheads than most, as I want penetration when I hit an animal the size of elk. Every person will find an arrow-broadhead combination that gives them comfort. For me, heavy arrows with razor-sharp fixed blades give me comfort that a bull will not go far when hit. Think long and hard about your arrow set up for elk. They are tougher than you think and you don't want to learn that lesson the hard way.



BOOTS

By now, you are seeing a pattern about our equipment choices, and it continues here; we were using Kenetrek boots before we ever started a TV show. We use them because they work great for our style of hunting. We use them because we know the people at the company; hunters who hunt just like we do.

I have some screwed up feet. If you Google the term Posterior Tibial Tendon, you will find a condition I have in both feet. One has been surgically reattached. I cannot afford an inferior boot even on flat ground and light loads. My feet need support. Add in the conditions of our hunts being steep and uneven terrain, where a light load is a 25# pack and heavy can be three times that, and I need a great boot. I need a boot that will give me support in my arch, where that tendon attaches, and in my ankles; the place of greatest stress when gravity pulls at heavy loads in the mountains we hunt.

It is for this reason that **I use Kenetrek boots.** Yeah, I could get paid a lot to use other boots. But, I'm here to talk about the gear that works for mountain hunting. My first pair of Kenetreks are 2007 vintage; 400 gram Mountain Extremes. They are still my go to boot for cold weather, albeit having been re-soled once in those eight years.

When temps are above 10F, I will be wearing my non-insulated Mountain Extremes. Early archery and warm weather hunts find me with my Hardscable Hikers. **All are made from the same sturdy platform, designed by folks who know mountain hunting as a result of their days hunting the mountains.**

To hunt 100 days in the mountains each season, our feet get a workout, as do our boots. A good boot not only serves you well by keeping your feet comfortable and warm, a great boot with great support requires far less energy when carrying loads in uneven ground. Kenetrek boots is a big part of what lets us hunt the way we do, for months on end.



Kenetrek
Boots
OF MONTANA



KNIVES

I've been sent most every knife you can think of to use in the TV show. I've also bought a lot of my own, hoping they would meet the needs of an elk hunter. In a normal year, I quarter and pack out about ten critters each hunting season. A few decades of that regimen and you quickly learn what works and what doesn't work.

My years as a backcountry butcher have given two knife styles a place in my pack: a good fixed blade that holds its edge, and a replaceable scalpel blade knife.

I use the fixed blade knife for the ugly work near bones: work requiring some torque, like caping, taking knee joints off from quarters, getting the skull ready for a euro mounts. I've broken too many scalpel blades when trying to do that work. Very frustrating to replace blades in the dark, with cold fingers.

That said, I won't leave home without my replaceable scalpel blade knife and a small pack of replacement blades. It is always sharp, light, and works amazingly well for most of the tasks breaking down an elk requires.

As I said, I tried most knives out there, both fixed and replaceable blades. Recently I started using the



Gerber Vital replaceable scalpel blade knife. I was looking for a knife that was much safer when replacing the blade. **Gerber has the slickest blade replacement system I have found.** The Vital is now in my pack and in the pack of many friends.

I had kind of given up on finding a fixed blade knife that could hold an edge, plus be stout enough for the grinding and wrenching I do on a carcass. Gerber sent me their new Gator Premium fixed blade knives and asked me to give them a try. I will admit to thinking it would be like the many others knives I have in a drawer. Well, I'm impressed.

Right now, I'm looking at the Gator Premium I used to skin a few beaver I trapped this spring, along with skinning and quartering a bear in Alaska. I have yet to re-sharpen the blade and it is the same razor edge as when I took it from the box. Not sure how Gerber has done that, but the knife is scary sharp and has stayed that way through tasks that normally put other blades to butter-knife detail. I carry enough weight with me. Having a blade that can stay sharp through many critters saves me the weight of a sharpening steel, and the headache of stopping to re-sharpen many times.

BACKPACKS

You watch our show, so you see that we are usually hunting from a backpack, far from roads and trails. It is the basic rule of elk hunting; where hunters are, elk aren't. And the inverse is true; where elk are plentiful, hunters are scarce. To get to where elk are more plentiful and hunters more scarce, you need to get at least one mile from motors, most likely two or three miles.

A question I often get is, "I see you hike far from the trailhead, how do you drag that elk to the truck?" Easy answer, we don't. **Nobody drags an elk to the truck in the areas we hunt, even with good snow and a downhill grade.** We quarter them, sometimes bone them, and we haul them out on our backs.

When hauling elk, you're talking loads of 60+ pounds, most often closer to 75 pounds. Loads of that size, most often unbalanced, need a bomb-proof backpack that is not going to fail under those conditions. **That is why we use Mystery Ranch packs.**

Mystery Ranch packs are over-engineered and over-built. Which is what I look for. I bought my first Crew Cab in 2007. It has been put through the test. As have my Longbow and Metcalf. My go-to pack is my Mystery Ranch Metcalf. I had a shop full of other packs I had bought, all of which failed in some manner. In eight seasons of heavy use, over a hundred days afield each year, **I have not had a single failure on a Mystery Ranch pack;** not one. Nor have any quest hunters who get to use these packs.

Point is this. Elk hunting in the mountains will put extreme strain on your body and your equipment. Failure is not an option. A pack should allow you to carry big loads with stability. It needs to take the load off your shoulders and onto your hips. A good pack will do that, requiring you to burn less energy, and saving your back and shoulders from abuse.

Like all other gear you see us use, we don't use Mystery Ranch packs for the money. We use them for the performance and results.



INFORMATION

ELK101.COM

When it comes to getting a lot of good elk hunting information, a friend of mine, Corey Jacobsen is providing plenty of it over at Elk101.com.



Some would question why I would refer you to a website that has a competing forum, and is providing similar content to what I am providing in this guide. Easy answer is that I want you to have good resources at your disposal.

Elk101.com gives you lots of information and also sells gear specific to elk hunting. Corey has tested many of these products himself. Corey knows what works and his advice is as good as you will find in the elk world. Besides, he is also the seven-time world elk calling champion.

Corey started Extreme Elk Magazine and recently sold that, returning to his passion of providing information to elk hunters. Go to www.Elk101.com and look around. And, look to see Corey on an episode with us and helping me produce some great YouTube content.



INFORMATION

goHUNT.com

I've been hunting multiple states for twenty years. I have libraries of research material. I have draw odds, maps, articles, harvest data, you name it, for most every unit in every western state. Accumulating and analyzing all this information is a formidable task.



I'm always looking for ways to make this research task easier. Two years ago I found the best service I know for bringing all of this information to one location and making it "searchable." That is the INSIDER service provided by goHUNT.com.

To get the 10-12 tags required for a season of TV, I need the best drawing odds available. Anyone can do the odds for simple states like Wyoming or Idaho. Analysis gets infinitely more complex for states like Nevada where all five choices are considered, or states like Arizona where the draw is split into two drawings and your first two choices are considered. That is when I need the best possible information. A disclaimer of "these are simplified draw odds" is not going to cut it with me. "Simplified odds" are incorrect odds.

In addition to the best draw odds, goHUNT has thorough explanation of all western state drawing systems, deadlines, point systems, and other information I want at my fingertips.



I spend hundreds of hours researching my hunts every year. As a result, I draw enough tags for me and our crew to spend a hundred days hunting every season. The INSIDER from goHUNT.com makes that process far easier than it has ever been.

For our audience, goHUNT has a special promo code that will get you a \$50 Sportsmans Warehouse gift card if you sign up for the INSIDER service using promo code RANDY.

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