



Bow & Arrow Hunting

Interview with the Elk Expert

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September 2002, Volume 40, No.7

If you're looking for elk-hunting wisdom, bowhunter Dan Evans of Plains, Montana, has a lot to offer.

Note: With 16 record-book bull elk to his credit, Dan Evans-designer and owner of the famous Trophy Taker Drop-Away rest-is considered one of this nation's most successful elk bowhunters. Even more impressive is that Dan killed his first archery bull in 1992, and most if not all of Dan's big elk have come from public-land areas. Given Dan's success, we took the opportunity to survey his knowledge. We asked Dan a variety of specific questions that should help you become an elk expert yourself.

Bow & Arrow Hunting: Looking at your success at bowhunting elk, you've obviously done very well, especially at harvesting trophy-class animals. If you had to summarize your formula in how you approach hunting big elk, what would it be? Where should an average bowhunter start?

Evans: First off, you have to hunt where there are big bulls. To find good elk areas, surf the Internet, read magazines, talk to biologists and game wardens and even join a club like Garth Carters Hunter Services to keep up to date on the hot areas. Once you've found a good area to hunt, spend as much time as you can there, learning the terrain and the animals. There is no substitute for time. With enough time, sooner or later you'll get your opportunity.

Second, once you've found a bull to go after, you must do what's necessary to get within bow range of this animal. This means making the right calls when needed and staying mobile to ambush or trail a bull. You just have to improvise in each situation on what to do, but you must be ultra cautious by constantly monitoring the wind, mimicking sounds like a real elk would make, and simply being as stealthy as possible.

And last, but certainly not least, you should be fully confident in making the shot once it's presented. I know too many guys that hunt smart but when it comes down to the shot, they blow it. Do what you can to work the bugs out of your equipment and mental shooting ability. Remember that it really only takes about a minute to set up on a bull and make a killing shot. Make it count!

B&AH: How do you go about accessing trophy-rich elk areas? Do you day-hunt away from the truck, or do you pack in using your two legs, horses, ATV, etc.?

Evans: I do it all. I day hunt close to the truck or a four-wheeler and even spike out every now and then. You have to remember that you don't have to be way in the backcountry to kill elk. In fact, I've shot every one of my bulls within 5 miles of a vehicle. I really think a lot of hunters fail to hunt the 'buffer zone' which I classify as the areas 1 to 5 miles away from roads. This is because most do-it-yourself hunters hunt about a mile or so from their trucks, and when going with outfitters, hunt areas well beyond 5 miles from the nearest road. This leaves a lot of non-hunted areas in between.

B&AH: Would you recommend hiring an outfitter if you're limited on time or have little experience hunting elk?

Evans: Yes, time spent in the field is the key to taking big elk. If you don't have the time, then you should hire someone who does.

B&AH: What hunting technique do you prefer to employ when hunting elk-calling, taking a stand, or spot and stalk? Also, do you often hunt alone or with a buddy? If alone, are you still able to call effectively?

Evans: I use all of them. I've killed a lot of my elk by calling, a few by taking a stand and by spot and stalk. I hunt almost exclusively alone. It's more difficult to call alone, but I make it work, plus I like the sense of accomplishment I get from killing an elk all by myself. Really you shouldn't limit yourself to one hunting method.

B&AH: In preparing for an elk hunt, what would you suggest to our readers on how to properly prepare? Is Physical fitness all that important?

Evans: Being in good shape is definitely important. But and this is a big but, being smart and patient is more important. You have to have mental stamina too. This is very important. Honestly it comes down to being in the right place at the right time, and you need the right mindset (mental toughness) to get you there. Remember-it only takes a couple of minutes to be successful on a two-week hunt, so don't give up!

B&AH: Do you think bugling works well on today's hard-hunted, call-shy elk? If so, do you use a bugle just as a locator call?

Evans: My theory on calling is simple. If you can convince an elk you're in fact an elk, it'll work. If not, it won't. You must call well enough to not leave any doubts in an elk's mind that you're artificial. I've been pretty successful at this by imitating the bull's bugle and tone. But this only works when I've done everything else right like getting close enough to entice a fight. I've found in most cases, big elk will move away from you almost always, so I continue to follow the bull until I can eventually get him turned. I like to close the gap to about 40 yards or so. This way the bull only has to turn back 20 yards before he's in range. You have to remember-hunting big bulls and small bulls are two entirely different things. A big bull is careful even if you sound like a real elk.

B&AH: Most serious elk hunters admit that cow calls when used properly can lure in even the most pressured elk. Do you agree? Also, when you use a cow call, how do you use it and can you recommend your favorite models?

Evans: Producing the right cow sounds at the tight time will coax in a big bull, but it has to be perfect. Otherwise even a cow call won't do it. Elk have to believe it's real. I highly recommend a smooth-sounding diaphragm call in conjunction with a raspy blow-through call. I have used several different diaphragms by Larry D. Jones, Primos and Barry Game Calls; blow-through calls by Primos, Sceery, Carlton and Woodwise; and I use bugles by Promos and Barry Game Calls. My advice is to master the diaphragm call. When a bull comes in, you'll need to stop him, and you'll need a mouth diaphragm to do this.

B&AH: What about calf sounds or other alternate methods, such as raking a tree, kicking a few rocks or other common sounds elk often make when challenged by another bull?

Evans: When calling, I don't try to be silent. In thick country, like where I hunt a lot in northern Idaho, the key is to make any sound an elk would make. I even sometimes pull grass out from the ground to imitate an elk grazing. Be noisy; just don't do anything that doesn't sound natural.

B&AH: Have you tried decoys?

Evans: I've tried decoys a few times, but so far I haven't been real impressed. I do like the designs by Montana Decoy and plan on putting them to use this fall. If you use a decoy, make sure you can set it up easy and that it's quiet.

B&AH: What would you consider the biggest mistakes most bowhunters make when hunting elk?

Evans: One, not watching the wind enough. Two, making too many non-elk-like calls. Three, expecting a bull to come to them. Four, not being in the right places at daylight and dark. And five, not being prepared to take the shot when it arrives.

When hunting mountainous country where elk reside, you have to remember that the wind is constantly changing-so keep an eye on it, always. Also, don't make an elk sound (calling or tree-raking noise) if it doesn't fit with the situation you're in. And never expect a bull to come to you. Instead, move, and make something happen. Moreover, I can't state how important it is to be in the woods at prime time meaning at your specific ambush spot (wallow, saddle, meadow, etc.) at light and just before dark. Most hunters time their hunt so they leave the truck or camp at light and arrive back at dark. If being in the dark scares you,

you'll have to overcome it. And last, be sure you and your bow setup are ready to perform when needed. Do whatever you can to expose yourself to high-pressure situations by shooting in front of friends, competing in 3-D tournaments, and so on.

B&AH: What about shooting equipment? Do you think light arrows and mechanical broadheads dispatch big elk cleanly? Or do you recommend medium- to heavy-weight arrows and conventional broadheads?

Evans: The bottom line is to hit what you're aiming at, so shoot the heaviest bow you can handle comfortably in awkward shooting positions, like from your knees and butt. Regarding mechanical broadheads, I've killed five bulls with mechanical-type heads, but I've gone back to fixed-blade heads. I don't like two-blades, and to get the penetration needed with a mechanical you should shoot a two-blade or a three-blade model with a small cutting diameter. Besides, I've had mechanicals deflect on impact and not always leave an entry hole. This is another reason why I've designed the Trophy Taker rest. It allows you to shoot great groups using fixed-blade heads. In allows, I recommend medium- to heavy-weight shafts.

B&AH: What does your personal hunting setup consist of?

Evans: I shoot a Martin Scepter II XRG with Fury Cams, somewhere between 75 and 80 pounds of peak weight. This bow is a great long-draw that's 43 inches long with an 8-inch brace height. It shoots Easton 460-grain ACC 3/71 arrows, using a 125-grain head, at 285fps. I use 360 Flex Fletch vanes with a strong helical, Winner's Choice custom bowstrings made of BCY's 452 material, and a tied-on string loop. I also use a bow quiver, Sims Vibration Labs products, my Trophy Taker rest and a prototype Trophy Taker pin sight (available next year). I prefer the Carter Lock Jaw 2000 release (open head) because I can adjust the trigger for zero travel.

For most bowhunters, I recommend keeping arrow speed under 275 fps with fixed-blade heads. I can shoot a touch faster, but I constantly tinker with my equipment for perfect arrow flight.

B&AH: It's obvious you believe in your Trophy Taker drop away rest. Do you think it has added to your success as well? If so, in what ways?

Evans: I've been using the rest for six years, and I've never had a failure. What I like best about this rest is that it's simple, it tunes easy, allows for great arrow flight with any style fletching and nock twist, and it's quiet-on the draw and after the shot. I designed it to have no "problem points," like small screws, exposed springs and plastic construction. Plastic works for a lot of things, but I don't want it on my arrow rest.

B&AH: When preparing for an upcoming elk hunt, what does your shooting practice consist of?

Evans: I like to keep all of my arrows in a 6-inch circle on elk-size animals. So I do what is necessary to shoot this accurately. I shoot in 3-D's, shoot small game constantly and I practice in my backyard from all different shooting positions. I also always sight my bow in to my rangefinder. And I shoot broadheads as much as possible. This is absolutely critical.

B&AH: Taking into consideration all the elk you've bagged over the years, what would you consider an average shot distance using archery tackle?

Evans: Of the 17 bulls I shot with my bow, my average shot distance comes out to 34 yards. But I wouldn't get hung up on averages. You should become as proficient at the furthest shooting distance possible. But remember, you must be 100-percent confident in making the shot before you draw your bow. If it doesn't feel right, don't take the shot. I'm very proud of the fact that I've only taken shots I know I could make. Since taking my first elk in 1992, I've shot 18 bulls and recovered 17. And I've never missed a shot. If you prepare correctly and are careful, this kind of record is within every bowhunter's reach.