

I am not a big hunter; although I enjoy hunting, it is not my passion. That said, I have long wanted a chance to hunt elk. They are a big, impressive animal – and require a lot of effort to harvest. Last year I finally achieved my wish and went on an elk hunt with two of my sons in southern Colorado on the J Bar M ranch owned by my son Richard's friend (and landlord) Porter McConnell. Alas, the elk did not cooperate and all we saw was a distant herd of cow elk, and a lot of big mule deer. Still, it was a memorable experience, and I decided to try again this year.

Part of the pleasure of hunting is the preparation. Things were a lot easier this year as I had a better idea of what to do. Richard assured me we would have a local guide for the event this year who could take us to some new places. I ensured my trusty Sprinter van, Frida, was ready. I sighted in my rifle and made sure I had plenty of cold weather clothing – which is to say all that I own. I carefully planned my route and headed north and west at first light on a Tuesday, planning on arriving in Ridgway on a Thursday, which would give me Friday to check the sighting of my rifle and get a bit acclimated.

My overnight stop was the little north Texas town of Dumas, 'famous' for its feedlots. The center of the main drag in Dumas was under construction leaving a huge trench down the middle. Fortunately, there was a motel on the right so I did not have to negotiate that particular obstacle. There was a local diner near the Red Roof Inn so I gave it a try. Note for future reference: when a place says 'breakfast served all day' it might be best to avoid it for dinner; kind of like ordering sea food at a steak place.

I waited until almost first light to depart the following morning. I should have waited a bit longer as it is DARK out on the Llano Estacado. But soon the sun coming up behind me gave me a glorious golden image of the wheat fields, illuminated by the nearly horizontal light. The second day of travel to Colorado is always more scenic; you anticipate the first sight of the Front Range of the Rockies, looking at first like low-lying clouds in the distance. In this case the mountains were wrapped in low-lying clouds. This is not a good thing when you have to go over the high mountain passes, especially when driving a two wheel drive Sprinter. Frida is the best road car I have ever had the pleasure to drive, primarily because of the custom memory foam seat we had installed. I like being up high and cruising along, usually listening to an audio book. However, she is built for comfort, not traction, and I am inexperienced with driving on ice – especially ice with steep drop-offs to the side. As I cruised up I-25 with the mountains looming to my right toward Walsenburg, Colorado where I would make my turn west I could not help but notice the heavy rain clouds that were dropping precipitation on the roads up in the hills. Even though Frida indicated outside it was in the lower 40's I knew that that precipitation up in the mountains was probably in the form of snow.

Sure enough, as I penetrated the mountains I began to encounter snow showers. By the time I stopped in Salida in a parking lot to eat my leftover sandwich, it was snowing steadily, beginning to cover the ground. I popped into a nearby store to buy some hot coffee and inquired as to the conditions at Monarch Pass.

"The snow is still melting on the roads," they kindly local informed me. "The snowplows are out but the asphalt sun is still holding the heat from the sun, so they are not icing up to bad. No need for chains."

Good thing. I did not have any.

With this encouragement, I headed west and up, up, up. I fell in behind other vehicles and followed the dark stripes of their tires in the otherwise white landscape. It got colder and colder, but I continued to

press forward; as we approached Monarch Pass the road became completely covered in white. Then we were over the pass, I noted the temperature: 20 degrees. Now all I had to do was go down. I was in no hurry, I used my gears to keep things steady, and soon enough I began to see the dark lines of where the tires of the cars in front of me had melted the falling snow. Whew. Of course, I still had to get through the stretch of Colorado Highway 50 between Gunnison and Montrose. That narrow two lane was under construction and always a pinch point. Although the road was open, a long five mile stretch was being repaved which meant driving on slushy frozen mud; behind a long line of car who were in turn behind a log truck whose driver apparently had not noticed all the signs that warned 'No Large Trucks' and 'No vehicles over 8' in width'. It really didn't matter; I was not going to go much faster on a single lane than we were over that muddy track on the side of a mountain.



Frida in the snow at Salida



Rich's driveway. His house is on the hill

Eventually we regained the delights of asphalt and eventually reached Montrose. As I refueled I noted that I was cold, even colder than the conditions warranted. It was a relief to get back into Frida and crank up the heater for the last short leg into Ridgway. I was delighted when at last the Lazy Dog Saloon, Rich's restaurant, came into view. Rich's girlfriend, Sierrah came out from behind the bar to give me a hug. I was not hungry but ordered some food, and Sierra, who is a skilled mixologist, made me one of the best Old Fashioned cocktails I have ever had. I knew Rich would be back from the dentist soon, but between the long drive, high altitude, cocktail, and what I recognized as an oncoming fever, I knew I had to make to Rich's house before sundown and so, after a half hour, I drove the three miles up the dirt road to their house, completely knackered. I was so tired I did not even unload my things from the van. Instead I kicked off my shoes and, pulling the blanket over me, fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. I awoke an hour later and managed to finish unloading most of the van, ate some food, pulled on my jammies, and went right back to sleep.

I was running a fever and all that night, leading to some tremulous dreams. I finally awoke, ten hours later feeling slept out. I made some coffee and stumbling about until I realized it was only 0500, not 0600. I had not reset my watch to Mountain Time. I went back to bed for another two hours. I hung out at the house until Rich came back from work at 1600. By then I was ready to go sight in the rifle. Sighting in a rifle just before a hunt is necessary for three reasons: to confirm the scope has not been bumped slightly out of alignment during the trip; to ensure it is still accurate at higher altitudes; and most importantly, to reassure the shooter that the gun will do its part.

It had been snowing in the mountains during the previous week and the hills put on their best appearance as we drove up to one of Porter's houses which had a nice gun range behind the house. The day was cool and perfect. So was my 270 Winchester. The first two shots were literally touching, about two inches high which is exactly where you want them. I knew my most likely shot distance I would be shooting would be between two and three hundred yards. Bullets drop in a predictable rate. Two inches high at 100 yards would be slightly high at 200 yards and three inches low at 300. Long range shooters get deeply into putting the 'dope' into their scopes, but I do not intend to go into the mathematics of mills and such. I was just happy with the results. I let Rich and Sierrah also both shot a couple of rounds with equally good results. Then after covering the holes with tape, we shot a 300 Magnum rifle. It required a bit of adjustment but was also satisfactory. The recoil from the magnum was noticeably greater than the 270 which was part of the reason I would use the 270 for the hunt. The most important part of bullet effectiveness is bullet placement, and I was confident I could shoot my rifle accurately.



Porter's beautiful gun range. Target is circled. The brown tape covers holes touching each other

After sighting in we took another scenic drive back home. I did not even stay up to see the World Series; I would be up early for opening day. Even though our first hunting spot was close enough to walk, it still would take a while to get there and we had to be in place well before light. In addition to being old and fat, I still felt weak from my fever the day before to say nothing of the effects of the thin air. Rich gamely carried my rifle and chair for the walk up to our hunting spot. Walking is not a hard thing, but it is much harder uphill, over rough ground, at night, in the cold. Rich was endlessly patient waiting for me as I huffed and puffed up to our spot where we had hunted the year before. When we arrived I gratefully opened my folding chair and flopped down. As expected, I had sweated on the way up, so I had unbuttoned my coat and jacket. Now I buttoned everything up and sat in the 25 degree weather enjoying the darkness. The stars had that hard brightness you get at altitude. The Milky Way was not visible but there were still lots of other stars to observe. I have watched the transition from night to day many times, mostly at sea. In the mountains it is a more gradual thing. First you notice that the stars are not quite so bright. Then there is a slight graying of the sky. Suddenly you can make out things around you. Then, quite abruptly, there is light enough to see out across the meadow. Soon it is light enough to make out things through optics; what I call 'shooting light'. This morning the light revealed nothing to shoot. Rich ranged up and down the ridge we were on, glassing the expanse before us –

nothing. Eventually the sun crested the mountain and Rich suggested we go back. I was a LOT easier going back as I could see, and it was downhill. As soon as we got back I went to bed. We would be hunting with a local guide in the afternoon.

At 1600 the ranch manager, Gabe Gurrola, rolled up in a little motor vehicle called variously a 'mule' or 'side by side'. It had an enclosed cab that could seat three and, best of all, had a heater. We hardly needed it that fine autumn afternoon as Gabe, Richard, and I headed out over one of the many back roads of the J Bar M. As ranch manager, Gabe is out on the ranch all day every day. He had an idea where we might see some elk. After about a 15 minute drive over dirt 'roads' he stopped at the top of a ridge. We stood there with our binoculars looking across a wide forested valley.

"There's an elk," said Gabe.

"Where?"

He referenced to some landmarks on the opposing ridgeline a couple of miles away. Rich quickly picked out the elk. Not so his dad. It took several minutes before I was finally talked onto spotting the light brown animal on the other side of the valley. Once you saw it, it was easy. Soon, Gabe was pointing out several more elk. Over the next ten minutes or so, more and more became visible, including what Gabe assured me were some bulls. They began heading down the mountain, trending to our left. Gabe pointed out a house midway down the slope on the far side. Rich identified it to me as one of Porter's currently uninhabited homes on the J Bar M called the Rock House, so named because of it's lovely stone facings. We could see the highly visible orange of some hunters who apparently sitting on the porch. Note: it is simply amazing how far you can spot the hunter's orange which Colorado requires hunters to wear. This is a good thing.



Gabe and the tractor



View from Rock House. I would move down to the fence to shoot

Gabe got us into the mule and headed over their using back trails which included fording two mountain streams. He intersected a sketchy dirt road and headed up to the Rock House. Although he did not say so, I suspect he wanted to ensure whoever was setting up on the porch had permission to hunt on the ranch. A man and his elderly father were all sitting on back porch. Both were known to Porter. It was very companionable standing around up there on Rock House's covered back porch. The house, though empty, was lovely, about 2500 square feet and designed to give magnificent views. The older

gentleman had a beautiful rifle. It was a Remington 30-06 bolt action that he had had put into a lovely wood stock. He was out to harvest a cow with his son. We chatted for a bit, discussing where the elk would emerge from the hill to the right of the house. The other two men decided they would roll down the road in their truck a hundred yards or so, not starting the engine to avoid spooking the elk. They would set up on the road in a hasty blind and let the bulls, who would presumably be leading the herd, go past. Then the old man would harvest his cow elk. Okay.... After they set up we could see their orange gear through the foliage about a hundred yards to our left.

After they departed we stood in the lee of the porch watching the sun going down and speculating which side of the house the herd would come down. Rich used his rangefinder to verify the distance to a jog in the fencing where we suspected the elk might jump the low barbed wire fence to get into the meadow which stretched to the west below the house. Suddenly Rich and Gabe were gesturing me to get my gun and move to cover close to the house. Gabe had seen a couple of spike elk who were watching. Now things began to get tense. Elk were coming, making their eerie high bugling sound. Then we saw elk jumping over the fence into the pasture. For such a large animal they are surprisingly graceful, like a great big deer. Gabe identified two bulls in the field below. I cranked up the magnification on my scope and confirmed that there were indeed two young bulls down there with long, skinny antlers. Definitely shootable. Things amped up. Then there was a shot from down the road off to our left. The old man had filled his cow tag. The cows literally turned tail and made off directly away from us. Not so the bulls. They milled around and then moved back toward the cover on the left.

"Come on," Gabe spoke low and urgently. He led us about 50 yards to the left to a gazebo near the wood rail fence. I moved up and steadied my rifle on the fence.

"Three hundred eight yards," Rich said quietly.

"The one on the left is bigger. Take him," Gabe advised.

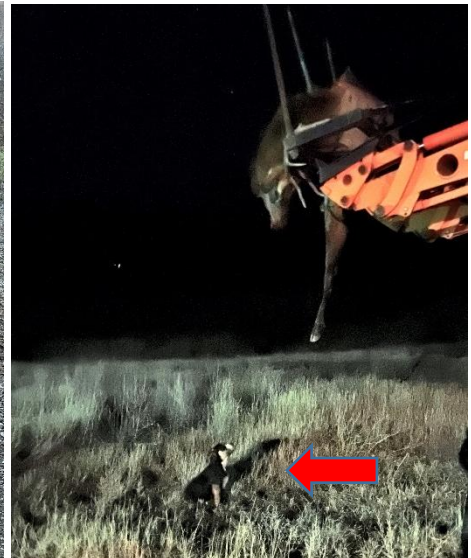
I could see the elk, walking slowly broadside to me in the meadow below. I could not seem to get the reticle to hold steady. I now know it was because I had dialed it up to 9 power; it is always hard to hold a reticle steady at that magnification. I pulled away muttering I needed to get steady. Then I settled back down and got a good hold on the left elk, putting the second reticle in the center of his chest. I did not consider all the things you need to mind for a longish shot like that, such as whether to adjust the aim to compensate for the downhill shot. I did not worry about the wind. I just focused my entire attention on holding the reticle steady as I started to initiate my shot.

Like all good shots, I was surprised by the report as the gun went off. I had no idea where the round went. But almost immediately I heard the best words I could have heard from Gabe.

"You hit him. Hit him hard. He is staggered."

Rich confirmed this great good news. Immediately Gabe recommended a second shot. I worked the smooth action of the Winchester and reacquired the wounded elk. The other elk was still standing right next to him. I got Gabe and Rich to confirm that my animal was on the left. Once again I went into full concentration mode to steady the reticle. My second shot was rewarded by Gabe and Rich telling me the elk was down, literally flipping on his head. I did not see him in my scope but was extremely relieved I had made the shots. Rich and Gabe were congratulating me as we got in the mule and drove down the dirt road toward the kill. A couple hundred yards down road, there was a cow, piled up on the side of

the road. The old man had let the other elk pass, just as he promised, and then killed a big cow elk at 60 yards. A hundred yards farther down, also on the side of the road was my elk. He was what is called a rag horn elk, meaning a three or four year old with three to five prongs on each side. Mine elk was a 4X5, probably three years old. Rich informed me that the downed elk was 318 yards away.



Rich and I with the elk. He looks even happier than I do.

Bark Twain was fascinated by the elk

We took the requisite photos; pictures I never thought I would get to make. Then the work began. Let me repeat something. Elk are a LOT bigger than the whitetail deer I have cleaned. Gabe estimated the cow elk was about 400 pounds. My bull was over a quarter ton. To clean elk you have to gut them where they lay; it is not practical to lift them up. Gabe drove the mule around and shone its lights on the elk to start work. The old man had said that at age 84 he was too old to clean elk anymore, it was simply too physically difficult for him now. So Rich helped his son with that cow while I assisted Gabe. Fortunately, like everything else I saw Gabe do, he was extremely competent. In twenty minutes he had slipped the gut bag out and cleared it from the carcass. The old man was right – it was hard work, even if you know what you are doing. That done, Gabe and Rich took the mule and went to get our special tool, the tractor while I stay with the other two hunters.

We waited on the road talking. The old man's son asked about my two shots, and I explained.

"Pretty good shooting, Tex."

I was absurdly pleased at the complement.

I have never had any hunt go so well. We had a plan and it worked beyond any expectations. The old man got his cow, then I got my bull. And they both dropped right next to the road. I wondered at the hunters who had to quarter and pack out such huge animals. As it was, we had left a couple of hundred pounds of scraps for the resident coyotes, weasels, badgers, crows, bears (if any were still active) and mountain lions, of which there are a number in the area. We had provided them with a feast. Before long we heard the tractor coming with its big front hay forks protruding out the front. Gabe skillfully lifted the cow elk up and into the other hunters' pickup truck and off they went. Our little mule could never hold the bull. Instead, Gabe lifted him up and headed back to the house, with Rich and I following

behind. I commented that one of the good things about getting this elk was that I did not have to get up at 0430 and do that 'death march' again.

"Dad, it was half a mile."

"It was a death march. Parts of it were definitely uphill."

Eyes rolled.

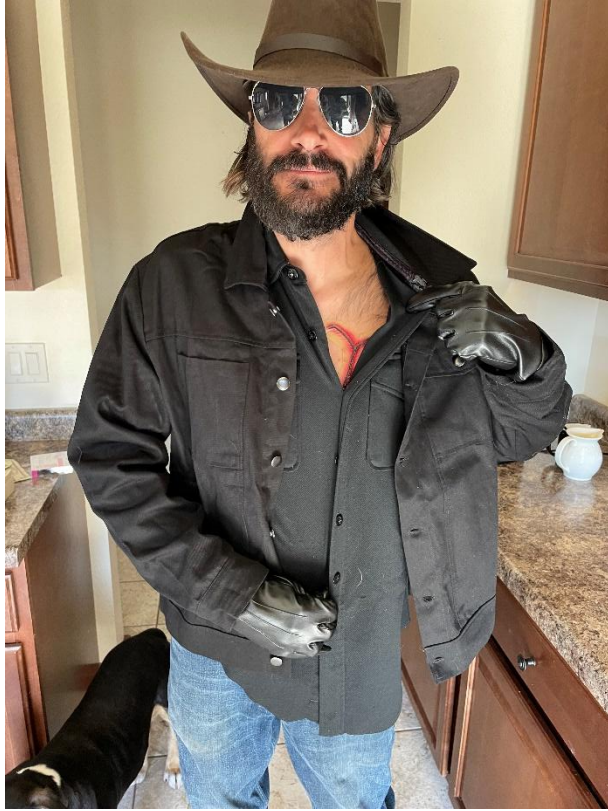
By this time it was full up dark. Really dark. I commented to Rich about the blackness of the drop off at the shoulder of the narrow dirt road on his left. They have lots of steep drop offs at the J Bar M, but none any of those wimpy guard rails. Richard tensely let me know he was aware of the edge. Still, we made it back to the house without incident. Gabe left the elk on the front forks of the tractor until the morning, elevated high to deter pesky scavengers and went home, promising to return in the morning with his truck to deliver the elk to the processing plant.



Gabe in the tractor on a good stretch of 'road'. The Lazy Dog Saloon – with typical eclectic clientele

From here on in, as Richard put it, I was on vacation. Gabe came by at 9 the next morning and loaded the elk in his truck to take to the processing plant on Sunday morning. The staff were kind enough to put my elk at the top of the list so I could pick it up on Monday, Halloween for the long trip to Texas the following day. I had the great pleasure of following Gabe in his truck as he returned the tractor to its home barn, which gave me lots of time motoring slowly through the mountains savoring the scenery and wildlife. That evening I had very nice little birthday dinner at the Lazy Dog before retiring for an early night.

Monday was Halloween. We ran some errands and then picked up my meat, which just about filled my 128 quart ice chest. I watched my son and his lady put on their costumes for work; they went as characters from the TV show Yellowstone. I later went down to the Lazy Dog again, enjoying the evening, talking with other hunters, some successful, some not, before once again heading home early. I had a dawn departure to make.



Rich dyed his beard and put on a brand as Rip

Sierrah was perfect as 'Beth' from Yellowstone

The van packed I was ready to head out as soon as I could see the road. I had pondered my return route. I did not want to go east over Colorado 50 again. There were two ways south: back roads down from Telluride, or Highway 550, the Million Dollar Highway, aka, the Highway of Death. The Million Dollar Highway has stunning scenery, but also lots of twisty turns with steep cliffs. I suggested that since there was not a lot of snow on the roads and it saved an hour over the alternative route I might hazard at trip over it. Rich pointed out that the warmer temperatures during the day just caused the snowpack to melt and cover the road in water that froze into black ice at night. Black ice. Hmmm. Nope. I will take the longer, safer road. Which turned out to be a very pleasant and beautiful ride. I hit Durango on schedule and began the long boring two day drive back home.

My elk hunt was immensely satisfying to me. I have had accomplished a number of dream adventures in my life: sailing from Panama to Jacksonville, spending a week backpacking in the High Uintas Wilderness, completing a marthon, and crossing all of the earth's 360 degrees of longitude. These were goals I never thought I could attempt, much less accomplish. Like all worthwhile things, none were easy – and all were deeply satisfying. This one was especially gratifying because it went so well. It also resulted in a lot of tasty meat. I am glad to have completed so many adventures while I was still physically capable of doing so. I can only hope my next adventure goes as well.

