

# Greg's Bull

by  
Jim Sayles

Over the years I took quite a few different people to New Mexico or Colorado on my quest to take a bull elk with a bow on public land, and my wife, Peggy, made the observation that none, other than Jim Tutt, were willing to make a second wilderness trip with me. I've never known why that's true, but the story of Greg Wheeler's hunt may provide some clues.

Greg is the oldest son of my dad's best friend, Jack Wheeler, but, because he is almost ten years younger than me, I never spent much time with him before we both started working for Pride Refining in Abilene.

When I couldn't talk anyone else into going with me, and refused to take my old hunting partner, Jim Tutt, after he blew my chance on a record book 7 x 7 bull the previous year, I talked Greg, who had neither bow hunted or elk hunted before, into going with me.

The first task was to get him outfitted with a bow. Then I had to teach him how to shoot, and, finally, I would have to teach him how to read a map and compass.

Learning to shoot a compound bow is relatively easy compared to a recurve or longbow, but I took it a step further with Greg. I made him run wind sprints and shoot at the target with his chest still heaving and his pulse thumping at 150 beats a minute.

"Why are you making me do this?" he asked.

"Because shooting at a monster bull elk will make your heart race and your breath come in gasps just like it does when you do a wind sprint. If you can still make the shot after a wind sprint, then you might be able to make the shot on a bull elk, too."

I reminded him of my friend, Truman Adkinson, the state champion bare bow archer from Abilene who had killed numerous whitetail and mule deer with a bow but missed a 6 x 6 bull elk at fifteen yards on his first elk hunt for that very reason, and Greg continued to run wind sprints as he practiced shooting.

"It'll help you get in shape for the mountains, too," I said with a grin, quietly tickled because I had never run wind sprints myself to practice shooting a bow.

At the time I had a short wheelbase Toyota Landcruiser, and we drove to New Mexico, picking up our licenses and some ice in Clovis before heading on up into Unit 6 in the Jemez Mountains east of Cuba.

The San Pedro Parks Wilderness is surrounded by a fence that marks the wilderness boundary, and we parked at the end of the four wheel drive road on a small brook adjacent to the boundary fence.

Jim Tutt and I had camped there in a previous year, and one hundred yards below camp was a beaver pond full of trout where a big beaver had scared us by slapping the water with his tail only a few feet away as we trekked beside the pond in the dark one morning.

Greg, who can't see to shoot without glasses, dropped his glasses as he got out of the Toyota and stepped on them, breaking the frame, but not hurting the lenses. I used leather boot laces to make a strap to hold his glasses on, and he wore his goggle-glasses for the rest of the trip with only an occasional snicker from me.

Greg had not, yet, learned to read a map and compass, and I did not want to take him into my secret hot spot, a stinking elk wallow surrounded by huge rub trees back in the wilderness under a steep drop off.

As an alternative for him, I knew about a long, narrow park running down the mountain to where it crossed the boundary fence only a half a mile north of our camp, and I told Greg to walk down the fence line, hit the park, cross the wilderness fence and go up one edge of the park until he found a heavy elk trail.

“Get about thirty yards above the trail and just wait. Don’t try to bugle or anything. Just wait. When it gets dark, find a camp somewhere close and be up at dawn to wait on the trail again. If you still don’t have anything by ten o’clock tomorrow morning, come on back to the Toyota.”

My own hot spot was impossible to find in the dark, and after I found the wallow that afternoon I set up a spike camp nearby with a marked trail back into the wallow so I could be there at first light.

I was fully confident that a big bull would come up the mountain to wallow and rub before going on up into the heavier timber to bed down, and pleasant visions of an elk rack adorning the rock chimney of the ranch house filled my head as I drifted off to sleep, comfy and cozy in my down bag and French, backpacking air mattress.

Greg followed the fence line, but he thought he was supposed to cross the fence at a wet creek. I said, “a wet park”, though, and when he came to a dry ravine he assumed that this was the creek I had indicated. So he went up the dry creek into the wilderness. Fortunately, by the grace of God, he found the long, narrow park just before dark, and he camped under a Ponderosa pine in the edge of some aspens on a ridge above the long, steeply sloping meadow.

We had waterproof, gore-tex bivouac sacks for our bedrolls, but Greg didn’t have an air mattress like mine. He was pissed off later when he found out that I had a French, seven compartment, backpacking air mattress to put under my sleeping bag, and that I hadn’t included an air mattress on his list of items to bring.

“What the hey, Greg. I can’t think of everything for you,” I said, tickled again as I thought about how he would curse me again and again each night of our week long camp out.

That night the sound of falling limbs, small animals scurrying through the forest litter, night birds, and the dark, dark, star-filled sky added to his discomfort, and, when the sky began to lighten up, he was almost glad to be getting up.

As he rolled up his bedroll he thought, “That damn Sayles. He went to his secret hot spot where he’s sure to kill the biggest bull on the mountain, and he sent me over here where he knows I’ll never see an elk just to get me out of the way.”

Following that thought, he decided to pray.

“Lord, if you’ll just let me shoot a bull elk with my bow, I promise not to brag about it.”

The aspen grove where he had camped was on a ridge above the park, and Greg left his pack and bedroll there to sneak down to a spot on the edge of the park. As he was sneaking down to the edge of the park he spotted two mule deer does, and they spooked. But they were not looking at him. They were looking back up on the aspen covered ridge.

Greg moved slowly to see if he could see what they were looking at, and he spotted a bull elk heading down along the ridge toward his pack and toward the spot where he had evacuated his bowels, Indian style.

The bull elk looked away, and Greg dropped down into the tall grass to move toward a spot that would get him close enough for a shot. Greg had to correct his stalk several times as the bull moved along, casually grazing on some short green grass. Eventually he raised up on

his knees about thirty-five yards away from the bull, but the bull was looking straight at him. Greg froze, and when the bull began grazing again, Greg got down on his stomach. When he came up on his knees the second time the bull was looking the opposite way about ten yards away from Greg's pack and night time camp site.

Now, keeping in mind that the vital area of a bull elk's chest is about the size of a haybale up on its side, Greg's wind sprint training came in handy. With his pulse racing at 150 and his breath coming in gasps, Greg didn't even remember taking the shot.

One minute Greg was just looking at the bull on the ridge up above him, the next minute the arrow was on its way.

"Whack!"

Greg's instant thought was that his arrow hit a tree, but the bull toppled immediately and rolled down the steep hill toward him.

Greg had to scramble out of the way, because the Lord, it seemed, intended to deposit the bull at Greg's feet.

A wounded bull elk, not hit perfectly in the vitals, can run for miles, but Greg's bull dropped in his tracks with an arrow in his spine, only two inches away from a complete miss.

Greg administered the coup de gras by shooting an arrow into the bull's heart. And, as he stood back, waiting for the bull to stop kicking, he was suddenly staggered by the realization that he had just killed a bull elk with a bow and arrow on the first day of his first bow hunt ever.

That's when it got tough. A bull elk is as big as a horse, and Greg's only experience gutting an animal was gutting whitetail bucks that weighed about one hundred twenty-five pounds.

Greg used the folding saw that I included in his list to remove the bull's rack and then to open the chest cavity. The bull's feet were still pointed uphill, and as Greg struggled to pull two hundred pounds of gut out of the bull's chest cavity, the bull was pulled up past the balancing point, and he turned over, knocking Greg down and trapping his arm inside the cavity all the way up to the shoulder.

It was a jui jitsu takedown and arm bar by an expired bull, one of those unexpected accidents in the field that can easily catch even experienced woodsmen by surprise.

After a few moments of panic, Greg was able to reach a stout Ponderosa limb, and he forced it up under the bull's top front leg, using his free arm to hammer it into place with a handy rock until it took enough weight off Greg's other arm that he could break free.

After that he hammered the tree limb into place inside the cavity to keep it open while he continued to cut and pull to remove the bull's guts.

Meanwhile, Indian Jim, the great hunter, saw nothing at all, and I came back to camp despondent, thinking about my next move.

Greg was nowhere to be seen. I ate a little, looked at the maps, took a nap, and then started to worry. Greg did not know how to read a map and compass. He didn't even have a compass with him. What if he started wandering around and got lost?

At noon I started preparing a daypack with food, a good flashlight, fire starting materials, and a nylon groundsheet that I could use to make a tent.

"It might be an all nighter," I thought to myself with dread.

Almost the moment I had that thought, Greg, stripped down to his blood-stained thermal underwear shirt and his army surplus camo pants, came dragging into camp with a big, goofy grin on his face and his big, owl eyes sparkling with delight through his goggle-glasses. The 5 x 5 rack on his back was the obvious reason for his good humor.

After photos were taken Greg told me about his prayer to the Lord.

"I promised the Lord that I wouldn't brag about killing a bull elk with my bow. But...you could brag for me." .

We used an unmarked four wheel drive road to get to the wilderness fence line at the park, and I explained that I would quarter the bull without gutting him so we could carry the meat down to the Toyota on our backs and then into Cuba to have it processed.

"You don't have to gut 'em?" he asked with a complaining whine in his voice.

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me? That's why it took me so long to get back to camp. I spent two hours guttin' 'im. Like guttin' a horse. He rolled over on me while I was pulling the guts out, and I thought I might be trapped there until you found me, which might've taken who knows how long. I mean I wasn't even sure I was where you told me to be. So you might not've known where to look for me. Then I used all my drinking water trying to wash all the blood off me and finally had to use dirt to finish the job."

I grinned again. This trip was beginning to be a lot of fun.

After taking Greg's bull into Cuba to be processed we went back up the mountain on another road that ended at the wilderness fence line again. This was the trailhead for a series of trails that would lead to a set of wet parks that Bill Montoya of the New Mexico Game & Fish Department told me about when he came to the Sayles Ranch to hunt whitetails.

What we would do with a bull, once I killed him, would be to bone out the meat and carry it down in our backpacks.

"It'll only take three or four trips up and down the mountain. Better hope I get one on the first day."

By this time Greg was not sure whether to believe me or not, but I was dead serious. And, as Greg told me later, he was determined to stay with me as long as it took without putting any pressure on me to leave because he had already taken his bull.

San Pedro Parks Wilderness is steep going up the sides but gently rolling on top, and, because it was getting late, we set up camp just at dark on the flattest place we could find. Once we were in our bedrolls, though, we both began to slide slowly downhill, and we finally had to tie our bedrolls to a couple of aspen trees so we wouldn't end up all the way back down on the wilderness fence line by daylight.

As we continued on our way up the mountain early the next morning we saw a spike bull but no other elk, and at noon we found a pleasant camp site on top in the edge of a grassy meadow lined with fir trees.

Our food rations were now down to some freeze-dried raspberry cobbler, a small baggie of corn meal, and some instant oatmeal, and the raspberry cobbler was giving Greg the scours.

A small snow-fed brook in the meadow held native trout in the deeper pools, and Greg asked, "How can we get the trout so we can have some fresh meat to eat?"

"Use your bow."

"All I have is hunting arrows."

"Doesn't matter. You hit one with a broadhead, and he's dinner."

I lay back with my head on my rolled up sleeping bag to watch and grin as Greg missed fish after fish until he gave it up after ruining three aluminum arrows.

"All right. I'll show you how to do it," I said as I stood up and started gathering softball size granite stones from a stony outcrop back in the fir trees.

We piled the rocks up near the largest pool at the upper end of the meadow, beyond which no trout could go. Then I went downstream with a fir branch and started driving the trout from each successive pool back upstream towards the final pool.

With the final pool full of trout, I built a small dam out of granite rocks so they could not get out.

“What are you gonna’ do?” asked Greg.

“Watch,” I said as I went to the rocky outcrop and carried a huge, thirty pounder back to the pool.

I lifted the rock up above my head and threw it as hard as I could into the middle of the pool with water splashing out over the sides as if Hoot Gibson had done a cannonball. A dozen trout were left swimming on their backs and sides, stunned, and Greg and I scooped them out of the water and onto the grass like a couple of grizzly bears.

Greg was laughing like a kid as we carried double handfuls of fish back to the campfire, and, after I gutted them, I rolled them in the salted corn meal and dropped them, three or four at a time, into our small skillet filled with hot, bubbling oil.

As each batch was done we ate them like French fries, head, tail, fins, and all. And, from the leftover cornmeal I made hotwater cornbread or “hushpuppies.” It was great, and Greg was so pleased I wondered if our meal of wild brook trout and hushpuppies had taken over top spot on his highlight list for this trip.

For the next three days we backpacked and hunted all over the top of San Pedro Parks without getting a shot at another bull. Greg was tired, sore, hungry, and dirty, but I’ll give him credit. He didn’t complain, though he did start talking about chicken fried steaks, milkshakes, and big greasy cheeseburgers.

I had to have one last chance before we gave up the hunt. So we hiked back down the mountain and drove over to the National Forest area south of the wilderness where Jim Tutt and I hunted on our first bow hunt in New Mexico.

We found a windmill with a water trough to clean up in, and, while we were washing up, a pair of coyotes passed by only fifty yards away. They looked at us, lifted their noses to catch our scent, and then casually trotted off.

Apparently we must have smelled like a pair of coyotes ourselves.

We met some bow hunters from New Mexico in a Bronco on their way out with a young 3 x 3 bull, quartered in the skin and wrapped in a tarp. The hunter who killed him was lucky. The young bull ran down the mountain after being arrowed, and he fell over in the middle of the road, making the chore of quartering and packing relatively easy.

That reminded me of the bull Truman Adkinson and our New Mexico bow hunting friend, Juan, killed. They left camp in the middle of the day to look for spruce grouse, a blue-gray grouse that thinks it’s safe from hunters if it’s up on the limb of a spruce tree.

Bow hunters, using flu-flu arrows can walk up under the tree and get a ten yard shot.

At one spot the boys got out to take a shot at a spruce grouse when Juan spotted a cow elk lying down on the grassy slope thirty yards below them. The cow stood up when she spotted the hunters, and, before either one could get a broadhead arrow on the string, she moved off. They waited, bows at the ready, hoping that another cow in the herd would step into the first one’s place.

The next elk stepping into her place was a 4 x 4 bull, and two arrows hit the young bull simultaneously in the chest.

Sometimes it’s just that easy, but it has never been that easy for me.

As Greg and I walked slowly down a logging road through a cut over forest near the top of the mountain we spotted a line of cow elk coming down to cross the road. It was evident that the elk would cross about forty yards in front of us.

Greg and I had agreed (against New Mexico hunting regulations) that whoever got a shot at the second elk should take it, cow or bull, and Greg hurried ahead of me with his eyes on the elk as he fumbled to get an arrow out of his bow quiver.

I was pretty angry with Greg for rushing ahead, because a nice 6 x 6 herd bull was at the end of the line. Greg was obviously going to get the first shot, and all I could hope for was a shot at the bull on the downslope.

In the fumbling to get an arrow out of his bow quiver one of the arrows fell nock first to stick in the mud with the broadhead pointing straight up.

The elk had become aware of us, but they continued to trot, one at a time across the road. The bull was next. A bent aspen branch leaned out over the road, obscuring Greg's view, and, as Greg squatted to shoot from a kneeling position, the broadhead jabbed him in the butt.

The broadhead drew blood and Greg yelled out loud, making the elk break into a run, but we were so tickled over the event, after a week of intense effort, that we couldn't stop laughing. And that was the moment we knew the hunt was over.

As a postscript, Greg, who was a little soft from easy living, but not overweight, lost seventeen pounds during the hunt, and his knees locked up on him once we got back in the Toyota. And, like most of the others who've been on an Indian Jim hunt in the mountains, he never asked to go again.

But this story is the "brag" I'm making on his behalf, because his promise to the Lord would not allow him to make it. I'm proud of you, Greg, and I would take you again if you ever feel up to it.

