

The Promise

By Eric Merritt

“I want to go elk hunting with you, Daddy.” Yeah, sure, I thought as I held a coveted Nevada archery elk tag for one of the hottest public elk hunting areas in the West. I had waited 20 years for this opportunity and I wanted nothing more than to share this event with my children. However, I had my doubts as my seven year old daughter, Josie, followed me out to feed the hounds dressed in pink, wearing flip-flops, and carrying a toy cell phone. That’s not exactly elk-hunting equipment. I dismissed her first request, remembering that she was just as excited to go to the feed store with me.

Weeks later, as the hunt approached, Josie came up to me and out of the blue she asked, “Daddy, do you think my .22 is big enough to kill an elk?” Wow, I thought, she’s really been thinking about this. Can she be serious about going? I realized that I had to make my hunting plans to include her. Right then and there I promised Josie and myself that I would not hold out for a big bull, but I would shoot the first 5x5 I saw as long as she could be right next to me.

My only scouting trip consisted of one weekend about two months before the hunt. Although I have extensively hunted central and western Nevada for over 25 years, I was not familiar with the eastern part of the state. I had a once-in-a-lifetime Dall sheep hunt in August and could not devote a lot of time to scouting. I did a lot of research on the unit by making phone calls to a Nevada Fish and Game biologist and game warden inquiring on bulls in that area. I also poured over the atlas with my own connection in the area, a friend of my in-laws who lives in the nearby town of Panaca and rides his quad on the 4-wheel drive trails in the surrounding mountains. It was he who said to scout the Reed Cabin Summit area as he heard elk had been seen there. So, my only scouting trip was a frantic rush trying to learn the country and look for elk sign. I started on the southern end of the unit and worked my way north to the Reed Cabin Summit area. When I first walked into the guzzler where I would eventually kill my bull, I knew the country was easy enough to get my daughter in, even if she wanted to wear her flip-flops. It even came with its own homemade tree stand 24 yards from the guzzler. To top it off, as I scouted the surrounding country, the basin, the incoming draws, and the trees all funneled together and ran down to this guzzler, which happened to be pounded out with big bull tracks. I have guided enough elk hunters to know that it could all happen right here.

On September 1, 2006, I set up camp and got a late start on my first day of the hunt, the seventh day of the season. My wife and girls were coming later when school got out. When I drove to the guzzler, I wondered if I was too late to see anything come in to water, but I climbed in the rickety tree stand and stood about five feet off the ground and waited. Within ten minutes I heard a bugle way off in the distance. Silence. Thirty minutes later the bull bugled again, noticeably closer. More silence. Fifteen minutes later he bugled again. This is a good bull, I said to myself. The fourth time he bugled I knew he was under a hundred yards away, so I picked up my bow and nocked an arrow. I was pretty sure he was coming to water. I focused all my concentration on the water 24 yards in front of me. I was startled as the bull stepped out of the trees to my left. I hit him with the range finder, which read 68 yards. He stood there bugling and whipping trees and sagebrush and I knew that I could make the shot, even if the

pins on my bow only went to 60 yards. I started to draw my bow. I got to about a half-draw and something told me not to shoot. My promise to Josie. I let down my draw and watched the biggest 5-point bull I've ever seen walk right by me, heading for Utah. I drove back to camp fighting my head. The reality was that I just let a 370+ inch bull elk walk right past me. But if I had killed that elk without Josie I knew that I couldn't face that little girl in her new camo shirt waiting for me at camp. I arrived at camp to find that the rest of my family made the 350-mile trip without trouble. Knowing how long I had waited for this hunting opportunity, my wife told me I should have taken the shot. "Josie will get over it," she added. No, I told her, I made a promise. I began making plans to go back to the same location with my daughter before first light.

About 4:30 a.m. the next day, Josie and I took off to look for that bull in the general area of the guzzler for a little bit of early morning spot and stalk. As I looked across the seat at my daughter, I hoped this was going to be one of those treasured moments we would share together. Josie is what I would call a girly-girl. She is the height of fashion at age seven, whose entourage includes dolls and stuffed animals. In fact, I wasn't sure she would be able to stop talking long enough to endure an archery hunt. She was confirming this as she talked non-stop from the time we left camp to the moment we parked the truck.

We walked to the top of the first knoll just above the guzzler and I picked up my binoculars and began glassing. Within 30 seconds I had that huge 5x5 bull from the night before spotted with four cows. After watching him through the spotting scope for 20 minutes, I realized they were feeding into a draw that we might have a chance at getting set up in. Josie and I started to walk toward him in an attempt to cut him off from his cows. With the wind right, we were able to get about 200 yards from him. I cow-called to him one time and he left his cows and headed right for us. I told Josie, "Do you see him right there? He's coming." He dropped down in the bottom of the draw and came up the same hillside we were on and stopped about 40 yards out and began whipping a tree. "You hear that noise?" I whispered to Josie. "That's the bull whipping his antlers on a tree." She nodded. "Come on, we're going in to shoot him while he's on that tree." We took a step and heard BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! The bull was gone. Within 300 yards of us, back on the guzzler, I sat on the night before, two dove hunters blasted away at doves coming in to water. It happened to be the second day of dove season. On the way back to the truck, it took a lot of explaining to an upset little girl that it is public land and anyone could hunt there. Disappointed, we headed back to camp.

On the way back, I called my best friend, Todd Ricketts, who was on his way down from northern Nevada to hunt with me. He knew I passed up the bull the night before and was now as upset as I was at the unfortunate turn of events that happened that morning. He was due in camp later that morning and we were making plans to set up on the guzzler in the early afternoon. After all, I knew that the bull didn't water last night or this morning and he was going to be thirsty. I was feeling hopeful.

We left early for the afternoon hunt because I was pretty sure the bull was going to get a drink that night and I didn't want to miss him. This time I had a truck full, with Josie, Todd, and my father-in-law, Tom Moessner. We dropped off Tom with a four-wheeler to go sit on a nearby guzzler to see if the bull would come to water over there. Josie and I went to the tree stand on the guzzler where I saw the bull

the night before while Todd parked the truck and walked the ridge above the guzzler to watch for the bull coming in.

After waiting for about 30 minutes we heard a faint bugle – reminiscent of the night before. Again we waited for the bull's approach. As he got nearer, I glassed the ridge to see if Todd had spotted him, and it was apparent by Todd's body language and hand signals that the big 5x5 was coming right towards us. The bugles kept getting closer. Josie had been keeping herself busy in the tree stand with a plastic backpack full of baby doll accessories as well as a snack pack full of grapes, cheese crackers and granola bars. The wind had been in our favor until now. The evening brought a slight breeze blowing right at the incoming bull from our direction. This change in the wind concerned me, but there was no moving now. The bull was too close to try to make a location change. We would have made more noise and swirled scent in an attempt to work around the wind.

The bull was now within 26 yards of us, out of sight behind a tree, and suspicious of human activity around his watering hole. I figured he had us pegged because he stayed in that position for over 30 minutes. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him shuffling his feet on the graveled earth. Josie, tired of the tree stand and out of snacks at this point, was moving around a lot which made the tension build even more. She was having a hard time sitting perfectly still for that long. "Be still!" I kept telling her. She finally chose a sitting position with a baby doll in one hand and a hair brush in the other.

When the bull finally got thirsty enough, he poked his head out from behind the trees and took a step towards the water, put his nose in the guzzler and began drinking. I quietly tapped Josie with my foot and mouthed, "There he is!" Josie looked up past the water and didn't see him. I gestured to her and when she finally saw him she whispered, "Daddy, he's huge!" I had a very small window through which to shoot. I had to clear a tree limb and miss his shoulder blade which left me about a six inch space in which to make this all happen. Whatever you do, don't screw this up, I said to myself. When I released the arrow Josie screamed, "Daddy, you hit him!" The bull ran about 40 yards and stopped. He walked another 30 yards and fell over. I told Josie to stay in the tree stand and I jumped out and snuck down through the trees toward him. At 28 yards I shot him again to make sure he would stay down. After picking up Josie, we walked back to the elk, hugging and hollering in celebration. With her arms around my neck Josie said, "Mom is going to be so proud of you."

After field dressing and quartering the elk, we returned back to camp at about 11:30 p.m. After some celebration with the rest of the family, my wife and I settled into the bed of our camp trailer. My wife asked me how Josie did and had been wondering if she would be able to handle seeing such a large animal killed – and the rather large gut pile that came afterwards. Josie was comfortable with the whole process. In fact, she spoke her only concern as Todd and I were gutting the bull. "Daddy, Mommy is going to be very mad at you if you get blood on your boots," she lectured. Yep, she's a girly-girl.

Score:

Year:

Filler: