

The Huge Elk Was King Of The Mountain. And I Didn't Want To Shoot Him!

By Lee Marvin (*Gun World*, May 1964)

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THE SUN was still hanging behind one of the high Colorado peaks as I sat on the flat aspen-studded bench and slowly swung my rifle about, glassing the terrain through the variable scope.

Sitting there beside my guide, our horses munching the dead grass to our rear, I counted more than thirty elk. Most of them were cows, but there were half a dozen bucks in the scattered herd. Not one of them, though, was exactly what I had in mind in the way of a trophy.

Across the stillness came the sound of bugling, and I tried to determine where the elk bull's challenge had come from. I swung the rifle again, squinting through the nine-power scope, looking higher. Then I saw him.

He was a huge cream-colored creature standing on another bench nearly straight across from me, probably no more than five hundred yards. And he had the most magnificent rack I've ever seen. As he arched his neck to bugle again, his horns stretched back to actually scratch his hind quarters.

The guide had spotted him, too. "Lord, what an elk," he whispered, his tone almost reverent. But I was having some serious misgivings. The range was five hundred yards, and I'm not a five hundred yard shooter. But that was only part of it. I may not be able to explain exactly what I felt.

Nature is something you can forget. In the caverns of the Hollywood sound stages, surrounded by harsh lights, microphones and other mechanical monsters of the movie and television industries, even in the concrete jungles of Beverly Hills, nature becomes something dream-like and a long way off. In short, it seems unreal.

That, I think, is one of the reasons I had decided to take up serious hunting again, after a layoff of nearly twenty years; as a release; an escape from every day pressures; or perhaps a chance to simply commune with the basics. Call it what you will.

As a teenager, I had gone to school in Florida and had spent weekends and spare time hunting deer, puma, wild turkey and bobwhite in the wilds of the then uncharted Everglades. In those days and that area, the shotgun was the universal all-purpose gun, shooting everything from 00 buckshot to bird sizes, selecting your shot to match your game.

Then, when World War II came along, I had enlisted in the Marine Corps. It wasn't long before I had gotten my fill of serious shooting with the game, this time, shooting back. As a result, when I was discharged, there was a period when firearms held no particular charm for me. After all, I had virtually slept with a rifle at my side for months on end. The Corps had insisted that, like all Marines, I was married to this bit of precision machinery, and perhaps I had begun to take it seriously.

Then, before I could go through that post-war cooling period that a lot of us needed, I got into this acting business and attempting to shape a career began to eat up what otherwise would have been recreation time.

Eventually, I began to use a shotgun, again, concentrating on seasonal duck shooting along the Mexican border near Mexicali. I had tried a number of guns for this type of shooting, trying to settle on a specific model as I had in my youth. Eventually I went back to what amounts to a family heirloom, an old 12-gauge over/under Adamey with full flow barrels.

I had taken up sportfishing, too, and I suppose I can give credit to Al Zapanta, ramrod of Sportsmens Travel Service in Los Angeles, for my getting back into game shooting. We were talking during one of the fishing trips off the Baja, California coast and he mentioned a ranch high up in the La Plata Mountains of Colorado, not far from where the corners of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona meet. At first it didn't mean much, but the longer I listened to his description of the area and the game that was to be had, the more intrigued I became.

And that was how I found myself on that fall morning, the frost coming out of my nostrils and a cold breeze nipping my ears, while I scoped the big elk across the canyon from me.

We were hunting out of Dale King's Circle K Ranch, which seems like a million miles from nowhere, but uses the community of Dolores, Colorado, as a post office.

Unlike some of the hunting ranches you read about, it's not quite so simple as walking out into the yard after breakfast and knocking down your deer. The tab for this tour runs something like \$350 for the week, and they make you work for your game in addition. That's a part of the hunt. After a bit of getting acquainted, we had saddled up the horses and packed into the mountains, seeking those big elks

that my guide, a deputy sheriff in addition to his hunting activities, kept telling me were there.

Dale King had come along on the pack trip with us. Whether his purpose was one of duty or to really determine whether an actor actually could make a showing with a rifle I'm still not certain. Or maybe it was to back up the claims of the guide and Zapanta that some of the country's largest game existed in these mountains.



I had heard the claims, of course, but Al Zapanta who set up the trip for me was supposed to have come along. I had secretly suspected that he had found business to keep him in Los Angeles after some of the claims he had made. He didn't want to be around if it turned out that I was blanked in the trophy department.

After packing in we had set up camp on flat benchland and I had turned in early, lying awake in the sleeping bag to stare up at the canvas top of the tent, wondering what the next day would bring. According to the natives, there was a herd of mule deer in the area with one specific buck whose back was said to rise a full eight inches above the rest of the herd. Until now, we had been too busy getting into the area to spend much time in glassing the terrain, but the promises of King and the guide that we were in the midst of game

country was fresh in my ears.

As for the ranch operator's interest in how I handled a rifle, I had no qualms. After deciding to make this' trek, I had pondered what kind of a rifle to use, checking out some of the calibers that had come along since I had carried a long gun for a living as a Marine. There were dimensions I never had heard of; wildcats given respectability on the mere fact that they now were being manufactured in quantity on a production line.

There are some of the magnum buffs who'll sneer at my selection, too, but I settled on a .30/06 for several reasons. All of my military training had been done with the old '03 Springfield and I was familiar with the caliber and what the 180-grain bullet would and could do at various ranges. Using that round, I know I wouldn't be required to keep mental tables and run through them every time I wanted to fire. That information had been thoroughly pounded into my skull by an irate rifle coach years before.

More important, I knew the limitations of the round and knew what it could not do.

Now, as we sat on the bench, glassing the huge elk bull on the other side of the canyon, I ignored the excited suggestions of my guide that I try for him. Finally, I lowered the Browning custom model and turned the Redfield variable back down to four-power. I shook my head.

"I don't want to shoot him," I told him. The guide stood looking at me, mouth open, as though wondering what kind of a hunter I might be. An unusual breed, no doubt.

"Let's go look for that mule deer," I suggested. Mounted again, we rode down into the canyon and through the aspens until I heard the sound of antlers rattling the trees. I slipped off the horse and made for the opening ahead, where I found another huge bull elk. He wasn't as large as the one we had seen moments before, but he would weigh over a thousand pounds and he, too, had a beautiful rack.

The range was close, under a hundred yards, and I flopped down to line him up in the scope, ignoring the elk cow that was the object of his intentions. I held my breath, slowly taking up the trigger, recalling the training of long ago. Even so, it was still a minor surprise, when the rifle bellowed and I felt the impact of the butt against my shoulder. I couldn't hold back the whoop of joy as the bull dropped in his tracks. I couldn't hold back the blood, either, that blossomed on my forehead where the scope had backed into it with the recoil.

There was a feeling of satisfaction as we packed out the thousand-pound bull. The cape and rack are now being mounted and both Zapanta and the taxidermist seem certain it should go into the Boone & Crockett record annals.

But there is more to it than that. It involves the first bull we had seen. He was a good deal larger, a certain record winner.

But he had lived this long to become king of his particular part of the mountain. There always is the chance -- probability, in fact -- that another hunter will down him and claim the record. But for me, there is more satisfaction in believing he is still there, looking over his cows and bugling that challenge.

Perhaps it's even more than that. It may go back to that feeling about

nature and the fact that it is shrinking, being reduced by a jungle of concrete and steel.

But as long as the huge bull elk is up there on that mountainside, there's the chance that my eleven-year-old son Chris may get a chance to see him, too, and realize that this is a part of a different world than that in which he is growing up. He may even have the chance to know it as most of us did as kids. I hope so. ◇◇◇