

FROM FOREST TO FREEZER My ELK's JOURNEY

A GUIDE TO FIELD DRESSING AN ELK

FIRST FOR HUNTERS



ELK MEAT MAKES FOR GREAT EATING, WHY LEAVE ANY IN THE BUSH?

I am a hunter. I hunt for the enjoyment, for the meat and occasionally, for the bragging rights and fodder for great stories over a beer and around the campfire (yes, I am old enough to still enjoy camping with a tent and open fire).

Over the past decade or two (since the invention of digital cameras), I have taken thousands of hunting pictures, including many of the field dressing (gutting) process and butchering of elk (I haven't hunted moose for years, but the same process would apply).

This past year while elk hunting, we came upon a fresh kill where the hunters short quartered a very large bull elk (took the front shoulders, hind legs to the ball joint, and back straps without gutting the animal) and left the rest for the hundreds of scavengers that live there to clean it up. This was despite being able to get their ATV to the very spot this animal died.

This got me thinking.

Were they just lazy, or was it that they did not know how easy it can be to gut the animal and take the entire carcass out of the bush and back home?

So, with that in mind, I write this for those who may wish to learn a bit more about what we do once our very large animal is lying dead on the ground in front of us. Our goal is to bring the animal home in four butchers quarters, no mud, no hair and no excess blood. Of note, this is a somewhat abbreviated version that does not explain every step in detail.

Although I now hunt where I know I can get my quad too, this same process used to apply in my earlier years when my brother and I hunted where we had to pack out the animal in 4 full quarters on packboards. Just not feeling that tough anymore.

When I do go elk hunting, my day pack includes several lengths of small, strong rope (30 – 40 feet), knives and a small saw. Depending upon how far I am from my truck or quad, I may also pack a small 3 – 4 sheave rope block c/w a small chain to attach it to a tree branch. On my quad is a chain saw, 20 amp reciprocating saw with 4 amp battery c/w 12 inch blades, more rope and chain, a small pass block, multiple ratchet straps, a small tarp, garbage bags, paper towel and 4 large game bags that can each completely enclose the entire quarter (prefer the canvass ones used in conjunction with pack horses)

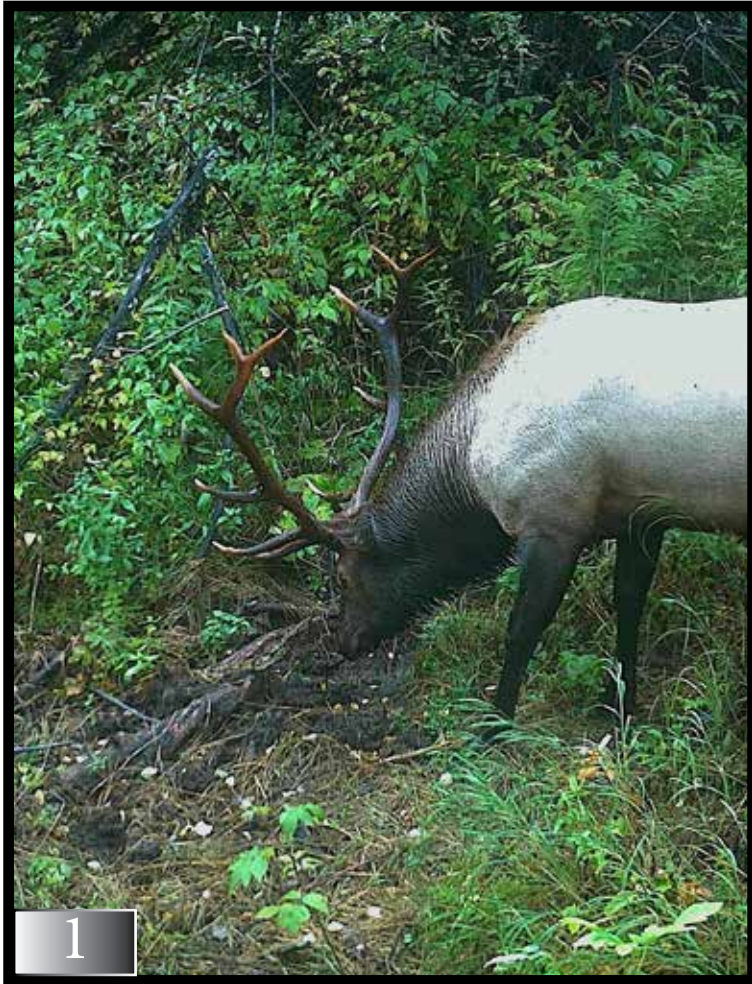
Of note, I also take no issue with those who bone their animals out and take them home that way. I prefer to hang and age my meat for 10 days to 2 weeks and that can become difficult with boned out meat.

For those who are a bit on the squeamish side, be forewarned, the following pictures contain scenes with dead animals being butchered, including blood, and entrails.

For those who do not understand the “why” part, this is the process in turning animals into meat for our table.

Evan Saugstad





1. There he is. You were skilled, or lucky enough, and have found one.



2. For most of us, be it big or small, as long as it is legal, that is what counts. Good, tasty meat, and lots of it.

3. You made your shot, now your elk is on the ground, it is yours.



4. It may be young, or much older and may be very large. Big bulls in Northeast BC can weigh over 800 lbs live weight.





5. You now have the time it takes to set the scene and take your photos, but first, assess whether to bleed the animal before its heart stops pumping (if it hasn't bled out as a result of your shot).

6. Remember to clean any blood off the animal, put its tongue back in its mouth and cover any blood on the ground, as these will detract from your pictures.



7. A smile or two always helps but remember to always show your respect for the life you just took.



8. A good photo is worth a thousand words, especially when it comes to recording a hunters first big game animal.





9. Close up pictures are great, but so are ones from further afar – backgrounds help tell your story.

10. Now the pictures are over, where to start? I start by putting the animal on its back and tying up its legs (always carry lots of light rope), using the horns to stabilize the head.



11. Use available trees, small bushes tied close to the ground level (they don't pull out so easy) or cut and drive stakes into the ground (axe, club or rock).





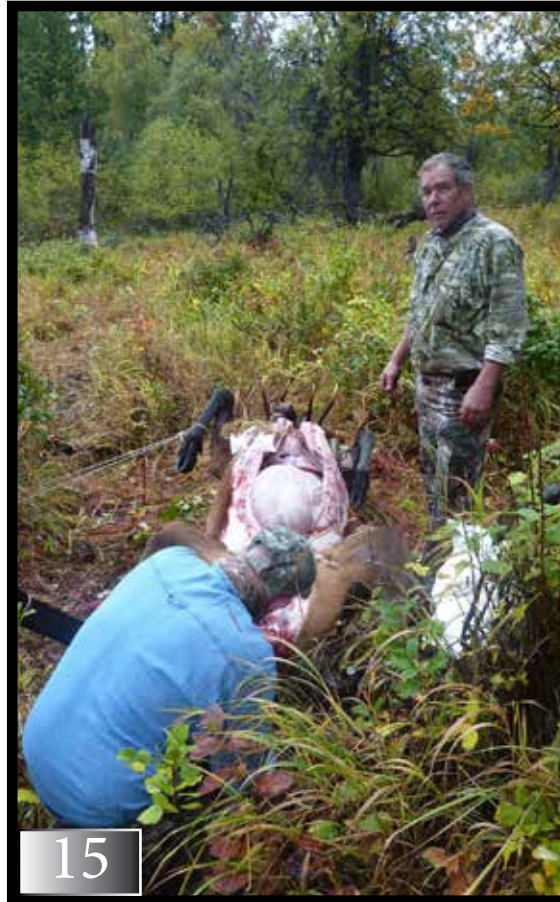
12. We do much of our hunting in relatively thick forest, so always lots to tie to.



13. Rutting bulls will pee on their brisket, so you may need to skin that off and discard before opening up the animal. Note: if you are going to move the animal to another location to hang and fully skin/quarter, then one needs to assess whether the brisket skin is removed now or later, to avoid dirt on the meat.



14. Open up the animal by skinning back from the belly centre line. Then begin your cut through the abdominal wall, starting at the brisket (there is a small air pocket between the abdominal wall and stomach when the animal is laying on its back), being careful not to puncture the stomach. Use a small saw (hand or power) to split the brisket and pelvic bones.



15. Cutting the pelvic bone and around the rectum can be completed at this stage or left to later when the animal is hoisted; it does become a little bit more accessible when hoisted. Brisket skin is removed now, or later to avoid dirt on the meat.



16. When fully opened, reach inside and cut through the windpipe and esophagus well in front of the lungs and stomach (as far as you can reach). Note that if the animal was recently eating, a small amount of chewed material may come out of the esophagus, which can easily be wiped off. Cut a small slit in the windpipe that you can insert two fingers in (an inch or two back from your cut).



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17. While one person firmly pulls the windpipe/esophagus back towards the rear, the other cuts the diaphragm and connective tissue along the backbone.

18. Cutting of the diaphragm is the trickiest part of gutting an animal, as one does not wish to puncture the stomach, and part of this cut must be completed by feel, as the stomach will hide the top part of the diaphragm (near the backbone).



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19. While cutting the diaphragm I hold my knife between my fingers with the point covered. Standing over the animal with the knife pointed towards its head, place the blade on the diaphragm and gently push down using a small sawing motion to cut. Use your free hand to reach in and push as much of the stomach to the side as you can. Cut the diaphragm until you feel the backbone, then complete the other side.



20. Pull the entire entrails out over the pelvic bone, cutting any connective tissue as you go, including what may be left from the diaphragm.



21. One can remove the bladder, rectum and penis during this process, if the pelvis is split and connective tissue cut. Can also be completed later.



22. Be sure to leave a testicle, or two, or a piece of the udder attached to the animal.



23. When complete, wipe down the inside for any excess blood and the gutting is complete.



24. This animal was shot late in the day and was left in the bush overnight. Poles were placed under his back to allow some air flow beneath it for cooling. It was skinned out to ground level as we did not have the equipment with us to hoist and skin, and overnight temps were forecast to be near freezing.



25. After gutting, this animal was covered with branches to help keep the blow flies away as it was going to take 2 or 3 hours to get a quad to the site. Although cool in the morning, temperature went to +29 this day. A stick with a ribbon was placed on top so one could see, from afar, if a marauding grizzly bear found the animal before we got back.



26. After gutting, this elk was skidded to a place where we could hang for skinning and quartering.



27. A stout limb is used in conjunction with a block and tackle and the quads winch. A strong spreader bar is made from local materials – in our area alder or aspen works well.



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28. A meat pole is cut and ratchet strapped between two trees, using the quad to help get some height above the ground. This elk was skidded to this site.



29. Attaching the block and tackle to the meat pole. Chain is advised as the block can easily sever rope with all the weight and tugging.



30. This block and tackle was attached to a rope hung over a limb, then pulled by hand. All butchering was completed before we left for the quad (another 3 hours on a +30-degree afternoon).



31. Lower part of the legs removed, and spreader bar inserted under the tendon.



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32. The quads winch placed over a large limb was used to lift this one.



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33. Pass block attached by chain to the meat pole and then quad winch used to hoist the elk.



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34. When pulling by hand using a small block system, you're not always able to lift the entire animal. You just need to raise the hind quarters off the ground (I halve the animal between the 2nd and 3rd ribs).



35. Easy skinning when hanging straight. Stand back when lifting in case something breaks.



36. Using a hand saw to split the quarters. We now use a 20-amp reciprocating saw that has sufficient speed, strength and blade length to compete the job on a single battery. A blade stays sharp for about two animals.



37. Getting ready to bag. Note skinned portions of front quarters are placed back on skin to keep clean. A tarp can also be used.



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39. Using quad winch to lower the spreader bar and then quarters onto the quad.



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40. Bagged and both lowered to ground. We usually leave a piece of skin, with hair, below the leg joint. If quarters not all traveling to same destination, leave a piece on each quarter in case of inspection.



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41. For front quarters, cut a slit between 2nd and 3rd rib, close to backbone and insert spreader bar for lifting.



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42. Fronts ready for splitting. Make a straight knife cut down the backbone on the outside to help guide the saw. Easier to cut from the inside than outside but can do either.

43. Four quarters bagged and left in the shade, waiting for the quad.



44. Hind quarter loaded with leg pointed back so leg bends when striking trees, front quarter with leg pointing ahead over rail. Both quarters attached by ratchet straps. Winch line may be used on front rack, but be sure you won't need it on your way out.



45. A well-balanced load makes for an easier ride.

46. Bags were not large enough on this one. Drive careful to ensure horns don't poke you in the back.



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47. Both quads loaded, horns, attached to a rear bumper.



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48. Three quads make for one trip out. Two with meat and one with gear, keeping gas cans and power saws away from meat.



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49. Lots of meat, lots of gear, the hard parts over, we're getting ready for the trip down the hill.



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50. Same place, same satisfaction, different elk.



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51. Taking a break after a rough trail down off the hills.



52. Bagged and hanging until morning, then heading home. Time to relax. Note the double bags on fronts as most game bags are not large enough to do full northern elk quarters.

53. Heavy canvas bags removed to let quarters air out and cool.



54. Part of what hunting is all about!!



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55. An early season elk hanging in my cooler – this is how it arrived home. My cooler was built to hang two – sometimes we get lucky enough to see that.



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56. Elk, some of the finest wild game meat in the world.



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57. Some of the finished product and why most of us keep hunting, despite the critics. Nutritious meat to feed our families and friends.



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58. And finally, do not forget the bones and larger pieces of trim for the dogs. I brine, smoke, and dry mine, then leave in the freezer until they are ready to chew.



Hunters for BC - Interior Chapter SCI is hunter-conservationist organization in the Province of British Columbia.

Our mission is to actively promote, support & advocate for responsible conservation & management of British Columbia's wildlife and natural resources.

We are extremely proud to announce that our chapter has won two prestigious international awards from Safari Club International.

Rookie Chapter of the Year 2020 and Chapter of the Year 2020

These two international awards are a testament to the extremely hard work and diverse talents of our team and our members in not only initiating this great organization in BC's Interior, but growing it for the benefit of all our Province.

We are First for Hunters and Hunters for BC SCI, working hard to promote and protect Hunter Heritage and the conservation of our wildlife and wild places. I urge everyone with an interest in hunting and conservation to join with us in our fast paced and forward-thinking organization.

We are here for the long haul and pledge to dedicate our efforts to put the wild and wildlife back into our Beautiful and Supernatural British Columbia.

www.BCInteriorSCI.ca

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