
THOSE WHO MAKE IT HAPPEN

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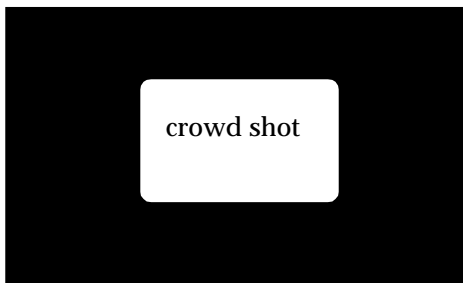
The Great Fall Elk Hunt

text & photos by
Michael F. Havelin

They come from far and wide, not just from the continental USA and Canada, but from Germany, Great Britain, South Africa and all the places in between. They come carrying handfuls of traveler's checks and thousands of dollars in shooting equipment and ammunition, seeking a quarry that is normally wary but which seems to accept the hunters' presence with great equanimity. Why shouldn't they? The elk have seen it all before, for many years now. And there are more and more the hunters every year.

Who are the hunters? They are the legions of nature and wildlife photographers who make the annual fall pilgrimage to Yellowstone to shoot rutting bull elk defending their cows against the younger comers. Some are the older hands with stock houses in Europe. They are the market for chrome films by the boxcar load. They are the photo-wannabes who think they can earn a living shooting the greatest wapiti pictures ever made. They are the people who make it impossible to find a 400mm lens in any photo shop in the USA because they're always waiting with credit card in hand for the shipment to arrive. They are the people who buy the press passes and video tapes from International Photographer magazine. They are the people who have made the photographic workshop business a booming industry in the USA and elsewhere in the world.

Very few of those thousands of elk pictures will ever see the light of day again after their first pass over the light



Shooters wait in ambush for unsuspecting elk in Yellowstone National Park.

box. Even fewer of those exquisite images will ever be sold. But still they come, by the hundreds, by the thousands, exposing miles and miles of 35mm (and larger) film, keeping Kodak from going out of business entirely (!) and keeping Fuji a going enterprise.

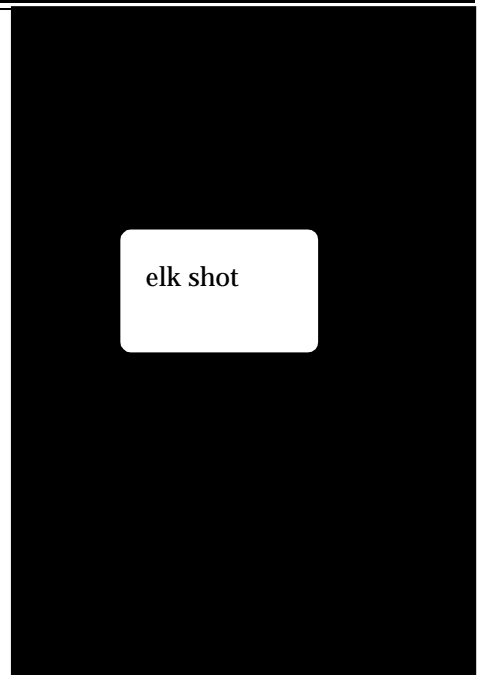
What draws them? What is the magic that brings the hunters to Yellowstone annually? Is it the weather? The profusion of wildlife and the ease of shooting? Is it Yellowstone itself, that wondrous place of fumaroles and bison herds, mousing coyotes and rampaging grizzlies? Is it for the "wilderness experience" of the place? Is it the comradeship with other photographers? It's undoubtedly all of these things. I've made the pilgrimage several times for all of these things myself. But there's something else involved too: a feeling of "doing it," of commitment to craft and the "being there" that is so often referred to in the photographic literature. We've all felt it, haven't we?

The Dark Side

There's more to shooting elk than there may seem at first. Remember the first time you went? There they were, literally hundreds of the beautiful animals lounging around out there in Elk Park or out around Mammoth. They're photogenic creatures to be sure, particularly those older bulls with the silver cape over their shoulders and necks stuck out a'bugling. Beautiful. Powerful. Wild. And therein lies the "more" of the situation.

There's an unpredictability, a danger that must be faced. Now, I'm not talking about something as obviously dangerous as going up to a mama grizzly bear with two cubs to get a family portrait. I'm talking about the insidious danger of absolute ignorance, or perhaps it's just a tendency toward the suicidal.

After a while, every shooter knows how to prepare for a shoot. We



can all estimate how much film we're going to need and pack the right camera bodies. We all know to stash those extra batteries, the lens tissue and air brush in the camera bag. But how many of us do any library research when preparing to shoot wildlife? Not a technical book, but a wildlife handbook! Ask any experienced outdoor shooter. They're sure to tell you that knowledge of a subject's habits and personality quirks has saved their bacon many times. Let's examine the problem. I see it as having two facets: finding the subject and staying out of trouble.

The first and most obvious problem can be dispensed with quickly. Simply stated, if you don't know your wildlife subject's preferences and habits, how are you gonna know where to look for it? That's easy, you say... the elk and bison are everywhere in Yellowstone. Or you could just follow the crowd to the next photographer gathering. But I know people who've gone out and had a hard time even finding something as big as an elk herd because they simply don't know where to look. Read about the creatures. If you want to shoot marmots or ichneumon flies, where are they? What do they feed on? When do they congregate for mating? Do they congregate at all? You get the idea.

The second problem is the real subject of this article (finally). It concerns safety in the field. Ever looked at

an elk's antlers? Those spikes can be 6-8 inches long up on top. And they're really pointy too. They can make a nasty hole in you, maybe puncture a lung or even your heart, depending on where you get hit. But my purpose isn't to scare you... or is it? No, I'm trying to help you stay alive and stay out of trouble. But I can't do it without your cooperation.

How about the crowd picture that accompanies this article? Just look at all the photographers! This was the early morning scene at Elk Park in Yellowstone early one morning in late September. I counted almost 50 photographers arrayed in a skirmish line along the road. And guess what happened? No one got run over by a bull elk... but it wasn't their fault. The elk had been through it all before. He had more experience than the shooters did.

There was a beautiful bull and a herd of about 25 cows out in the meadow to the west of the road. That was why everyone had stopped to shoot. Problem was, the bull was trying to move the herd across the road. The photographers' presence prevented the herd's movement. The bull wandered back and forth parallel to the road for a while

trying to spot a route through the mob, but the photographers had things pretty well blocked off. The cows, with fewer aggressive hormones driving them, settled down to grazing fairly soon, but the bull's frustration was obvious, at least to me. I really wonder how many of the shooters recognized his agitation. In my opinion, if they didn't see it for what it was, they weren't properly prepared. And they were headed for trouble.

Let's look at preparation for a minute. As I said earlier, preparation for an outdoor shoot isn't just buying a Super Snobagon lens, 100 rolls of ColorChrome film and insulated camo coveralls. You need to spend some time in the library too. You need to read about the creatures you are going to be shooting. Know their habits and the indicators of their moods. What does that tail swish mean? What about the way they hold their heads? Head up may mean one thing, but neck stretched down and forward means something completely different. Ever been sprayed by a skunk? Did you notice that it stamped its front paws before letting go? That was the final warning. Most animals have levels of warning that they

will progress through before launching an attack. Attacks without warning tend to occur when an animal is surprised of if it sees no other way to deal with the situation. That morning at Elk Park, the photographers were lucky that no one got hurt by that frustrated bull.

Here's another little story, more personal this time. It was 1988 and in almost the same spot. A young bull (with very little experience with predatory photographers) was walking along the edge of a small river in the late afternoon. I was there shooting, framing the elk against the sunset and mountains in the background. But I wasn't paying attention to my immediate surroundings. Somehow, I got myself in a position where I blocked the young bull's progress along the river bank. Other shooters were closer to the road, and they blocked him from going up that way. The bull decided that to avoid getting into the cold river, he had to come right through me, and that's what he did. Without a warning, he put his head down and came at me fast, leading with his antlers. I grabbed my tripod and back-pedaled as fast as I could, crashed into a small tree and ducked around it to have something between me and the over-wrought teenage elk. Having moved me aside, the elk turned and continued on his way. The other photographers behind me burst into laughter, but let me tell you, my adrenalin was pumping and my heart was racing. I had learned a very important lesson and managed to get away unscathed except for my dignity. I was lucky. Had it been a grizzly, I probably wouldn't have gotten away so easily.

So there you have it. The lesson is: know what you are dealing with before you meet it face-to-face. Part II of the *Interview with John Shaw* (in this issue of **Shooter's Rag**) details one of his animal encounters too. Every photographer has a personal story to tell if they're out shooting for a few years. It just amazes me that so many of us live to tell the stories.

Natural History of *Cervus Canadensis* (Wapiti)

Wapiti are the second largest American deer, second only to the moose. Related to the European red deer, elk feed on grasses, leaves and other vegetation. They spend their summers high in the mountains and move to lower elevations with the coming of winter. Elk are generally gregarious but the sexes live separately during the summer season. A cow may give birth in May or June to a single spotted fawn weighing from 30-40 pounds. The white spots disappear at the first molt around August.

A mature bull elk may stand 5 feet high at the shoulders, and weigh 700-1,100 pounds. Cows are somewhat smaller. During the September/October mating season, bulls will gather harems of up to 50 cows and defend them aggressively against theft by other males. Bulls challenge one another and proclaim their rut by a characteristic squeal know as "bugling." Hunters mimic this call to draw bulls in close to their guns. Though elk are generally possessed of great equanimity, bulls can become extremely dangerous when in rut. Don't block their path or get too close. Their antlers can kill. Use long lenses (300mm and more) for photographs without stress to either subject or photographer.

Plentiful across North America when the white man first arrived, as with the bison, wapiti were hunted to virtual extinction east of the Mississippi. They are now found mainly in the Rocky Mountains. Some attempts have been made to reintroduce them across their original continental range.

Most published photographs of elk seem to have been shot in Yellowstone National Park. The backgrounds show this clearly to the educated eye. Elk look their best for photography during their breeding season: mid-September through October.

