Elk can confound you with all kinds of behavior, but no matter the situation, putting your tag on one comes down to a few basics: Don’t let them smell you, then get close enough for a shot. You can stalk closer, call them closer, ambush them, drive them or wait for them to show up somewhere special—all tactics described here. But in the end, you need to know elk, know their habits and habitats and keep hunting. Persistence pays. It can make even the dumbest elk hunter look brilliant.

By Ron Spomer, Field Editor
Bull elk are big, tough, wild and experts at putting and keeping distance between their hides and your projectiles—but they aren’t smart. Never mind what every hunter who’s ever eaten a tag whines. Elk are stupid. This makes it really embarrassing when you can’t outsmart one.

Tommie had this Idaho bull cold. It wasn’t more than 30 yards away, bugling like a love-struck teenager with a new cell phone and practically dead already. There was just the small matter of putting a broadhead through its chest, but that was about to happen. Tommie cow-called again. The bull bugled. Brush obscured all but glimpses of its dark, wet legs and patches of white hide. The recalcitrant beast came no closer. So the music played on. Mew. Bugle. Mew. Scream. Mew mew mew. Grunt, bugle, scream. After what seemed like an hour—and tired of the auditory stand-off—Tommie decided to shift right and uphill to clear a shot. And the bull decided to shift left and downhill. The shrubbery was still in the way. At that point the melody changed to “Round and Round the Mulberry Bush” as man and bull tried to glimpse each other without exposing themselves. But this dance didn’t last long. Despite his “scent-proof” garments and cow urine cologne, Tommie eventually leaked a clear warning and his romantic partner jilted him.

You might say that bull was smart, but “cautious” and “patient” would be more accurate. Like virtually all animals except humans, elk can’t reason. They don’t look at a hillside clump of brush behind which a cow elk is calling and think, “Hmm, that bush could be hiding one of those pesky bowhunters blowing one of those new Primos cow calls. It is, after all, the ninth month of the year. I’d better stand here and see if he’ll expose himself. If it is a real cow, she’ll step out eventually. And even if she walks the other way, I can pick up her scent trail later.”

This isn’t to say that elk can’t learn and remember. Bugle a bull in today, scare the pellets out of him by leaping up and yelling “boogady boogady” while exploding 70 grains of Ramshot Magnum powder in his ears, and there’s a good chance he’ll be bugle-shy the next day. Possibly even the next season. They remember. Like Pavlov’s dogs, we condition them. When a sudden influx of vehicles on the normally lonely Forest Service roads combines with the scent of campfire smoke on the air and a sudden and huge increase in bugling bulls (all calling from the roadway), a veteran bull gets quiet or lost. He remembers that the last four times he detected all those things, two-legged predators disturbed him. So he and his harem pack up the kids and head for the isolated hole two canyons over or the No Trespassing private ranch at the base of the mountain or wherever it was they found peace and quiet the previous years when the hunting season opened.

Thus, in order to outsmart elk, you must first consider how an elk thinks, or rather reacts, to stimuli.
Based on tracks, droppings and the sounds of midnight bugling, at least one bull and several cows have been cavorting in an alfalfa field at the upper end of a mountain valley hemmed in by dry, juniper-covered ridges. But every morning as you watch the lights come on near the end of that field, you discover it’s empty. How do you outsmart those elk?

Outsmarting Them:
First, you must realize that the whole bunch is pulling out under cover of darkness. This is standard operating procedure for hunted elk. It doesn’t take them long to figure out that trouble comes from the lower end of the feed field at dawn. It’s probably been going on annually since 1930. Even elk in Yellowstone begin moving toward daily bedding cover when the sun comes up. It’s the way nocturnal and crepuscular animals behave. Feed at dusk and dawn, sleep in or near the feed grounds at night so you can wake for snacks, but sleep under cover during daylight. There are exceptions. One is the herd that’s discovered sanctuary on private lands closed to all disturbances. You’ll see them throughout the West from state highways and Interstates, lolling about open fields and pastures throughout the day like so many oversized antelope because no hunters are allowed to bother them.

You have to ascertain where your group of elk go and intercept them. Usually they go uphill and toward heavy cover, but they’ll settle for lighter cover if for some reason it’s undisturbed. Depending on human pressure, this safety zone could be as much as 3 miles away, but often it’s as little as a few hundred yards. Again, it all depends on pressure. One year a buddy and I, glassing from more than a mile away, discovered a small herd with two spikes and a raghorn bull feeding in a high-mountain meadow about 3 miles from the nearest vehicle trail. At dawn they would wander into bordering trees and, as far as we could tell, stay there. The trees were surrounded by open ground, and they never appeared in any of it. In the evenings they’d emerge from the trees into that same meadow. “I think they’re staying in those trees every day because no one’s willing to hike all the way back in there,” I announced.

“Duh, no kidding Sherlock. So are we going back in there tomorrow to get them or what?” Duh, heck yes! And we did. Our backs didn’t forgive us for days.

Even elk in Yellowstone begin moving toward daily bedding cover when the sun comes up. It’s the way nocturnal and crepuscular animals behave.
A bull has been responding to your bugle calls again and again. He’s hot, but he’s not moving closer.  

**Scenario 2**

**Outsmarting Him:**

Strike while the iron is hot. Most bulls that don’t come are with cows or have been beat up by bullies too often. Either way, you have to go to him. But first try cow calls. Occasionally a shy bull will grow a spine and come in if he thinks he’ll find Nirvana with 17 virgins. If the cow calling doesn’t work in short order, it’s stalking time.

Ideally, one hunter should keep the bull on the line while the other slips around to get the drop on him. As long as Mr. Elk is focused on the caller and is calling back, you can find him easily. But don’t waltz in like a prima donna. First, there are likely to be several cows spread all around the neighborhood. Second, bulls are hyper-alert while calling. Their ears swivel this way and that to catch any indication of another cow ready for a tryst or another bull threatening the family harmony. They won’t spook if you snap a twig or thump the ground, but they’ll focus on you, listening and/or staring. You don’t want them seeing a Homo sapien. A good camo pattern isn’t a bad idea, a bushy outfit is even better and a cow elk decoy might be best of all. Caution: this can be dangerous. Any of the light-weight, two-dimensional decoys such as the pop-open Montana models can fool a bull into letting you walk within bow range, but they can also convince another archer to loose an arrow! It’s not likely that another hunter will have inserted himself between you and a close bull, but it could happen. I recommend you don’t use a decoy on public hunting lands, but if you do, wear at least one item of pink, chartreuse or blaze orange. Like most ungulates, elk don’t see as far into the red end of the spectrum as we do, so these colors are likely to appear as bright yellows, possibly blues. Either is preferable to being shot as you crawl behind a decoy.

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Again you have the bugling bull that won’t come in, but this time you hear cows with him. Each time you sneak closer and call, he moves farther away.  

**Scenario 2.1**

**Outsmarting Him:**

This is a herd bull who doesn’t need a competitor mixing with his lady friends. He’ll challenge you, but he doesn’t want to see you. Colorado guide Tal Underwood and I followed one of these bulls until we were nearly exhausted, always getting close but never quite close enough. Sometimes you can entice a bull to step to the edge of cover and yell back at you if you get close enough. We couldn’t. He was always just inside the trees on the other side of the clearing. Then we had to wait for the herd to get far enough ahead that they wouldn’t see us cross the clearing.

“Let’s charge him,” I suggested while I still had an ounce of energy left.

“That sometimes works. But if it doesn’t we’ll blow them right out of here.”

“That’s okay. I can’t keep chasing them up and around this mountain much longer anyway.”

So we cow-called and ran right in and amongst ‘em. Cows stood with their mouths open, eyes bulging as two idiots dashed up behind them. They couldn’t smell us and we sounded like cows, so they stood scratching their heads long enough for us to have put a bullet from a 7mm Remington Magnum to work. But we couldn’t see the one with antlers. He’s usually near the back of the bus, but not this time. We heard him bugle from farther ahead when our cows finally thundered away, leading the whole troop to quieter climes.

An alternative approach is to again relegate one poor sucker to calling while the others stalk in for a shot—quite similar to Scenario 2, which is why this is 2.1. Yet another option is for someone to loop far enough ahead to lie in wait. Only then does the pursuer/caller resume pressing the bull, hoping that he and his cows move to the ambush point. Obviously this works best if you know where elk like to move or know of an obvious choke point ahead. Saddles are always good bets, but sometimes a narrow patch of timber or even a small meadow hemmed in by rocky cliffs will work.
Two days before the gun season opens, you glass the herd with the 6x6 boss bull and three satellite bulls frolicking in the same high-mountain meadow where they were the previous year. That time you were within 100 yards of the meadow’s edge at dawn when another hunter cut loose farther up the mountain, at which time your herd thundered away. After tracking them all morning, you hit a fence decorated with enough “no trespassing” signs to wallpaper your tent.

Outsmarting Him:
Obviously you’re hunting a herd that has discovered the joys of private ranch living without the cost of a mortgage. Too bad we all can’t be so fortunate. Now that you know this bunch will seek safety once the first shot is fired, you have two options: Try to be in position at the meadow to take the first shot of the season or try to intercept them on their route to the Safe-T Ranch. I’d lay odds on the intercept. You can’t predict how other hunters will perform. As happened last year, someone may shoot early and ruin your chances. But no matter what happens, those spooked elk have to migrate to their safety zone. Based on previous year’s behavior, find the most likely spot to intercept them. This could be the trail they last used, a natural funnel of trees that provides visual protection all the way or even a break or low spot in the fence where they like to cross. Other hunters could get into positions to mess up their natural travel routes, but if you have no guarantee that will happen, make your best educated guess and await developments. This will be a one-shot deal, so don’t oversleep.
While hiking forested ridges, bugling and cow-calling in 70-degree heat, you get a response from a thickly forested basin at 2 p.m. It's the boogie woogie bugle bull!

**Outsmarting Him:**

This bull is either bored or hot. Either way, choose a setup with good shooting lanes and wind in your favor and get to work. Just because hard-called bulls are a challenge in some areas doesn't mean they all are. Some still hustle right in, for whatever reason. Never argue with a lucky break. You've likely found a satellite bull, probably a raghorn. Fair chance it could be a 3 or 4-year-old 6x6. Slight chance it could be an older bull that's been pushed out. Now, if judicious bugling doesn't lure him steadily closer, shut up for about 15 minutes. If he hasn't sneaked in silently, move to a different calling area, right or left or closer to your target bull so long as it keeps air currents in your favor. At 70 degrees this usually means you should remain above your target. Heat rises, taking scent with it.

Now, in the new location, here are your options. Whack limbs and rake a small tree with a dry branch to imitate a rubbing bull. Maybe chuckle or grunt, but skip the full-throated bugles. A spike squeal should be okay. You don't want to challenge your bull so much as pique his curiosity. Who is this newcomer? Is he small? Can I take out my frustration on him? Does he have any lady friends? Alternatively, skip the bull imitations and cow call. Stomp the ground a few times like hooves hitting the trail. If soft, subtle calls don't fire your boy up, get aggressive. Blow one call and squeeze another. Run left and right as if you're squabbling with another cow. Change tones. Try to sound like an entire harem that has abandoned its previous master. Or slide into a bunch of estrus whines. Don't be surprised if lover boy comes in silently. Beat-up bulls can be shy suitors.  

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It’s late season. Bugling is over and snow covers the ground. You’re seeing enough tracks in the meadows to call it a feedlot. You’ve seen herds of 100 cows with a couple of spikes and one raghorn bull.

Outsmarting Him:
Him? What him? Late-season bulls often seem to be extinct. Actually they’re just loners. One or a small bachelor band will detach from the cow herds to recuperate in some lonely corner where they aren’t bothered by anything. They’ll settle for deeper snow way high if that’s what it takes, or dense conifers, doghair stands or dry sagebrush flats. Some will even move onto the prairies. The challenge is finding them and the snow is key. Drive roads or hike trails looking for large hoof prints of single animals or small groups with no smaller calf tracks in the mix. Follow these toward heavy bedding cover. Even in nasty, cold, snowy weather bulls will bed in dark conifer stands. If the snow is deep and fresh, you should be able to track along, glassing and still-hunting your way to glory. Often these bulls won’t stand or run until you practically step on them. You’re not really outsmarting anything. You’re just hunting smart and hard and persistently until you find your game. You’re a tracker.

It’s mid-October and the general rifle season has just opened. You’ve spent two hours in the dark hiking 4 miles high and deep into the mountains, but you don’t hear an elk until nearly noon. It’s in a copse of firs just under the treeline. You spend another hour glassing, shifting position and glassing some more attempting to spot this elk. Finally you see two cows stand, stretch and feed. Then you spot a spike 200 yards above them. But no bull.

Outsmarting Him:
Odds are the herd bull is bedded with cows and a few spikes or satellite bulls scattered around him. You can wait until evening and hope he’ll show himself, then spend the night on the mountain or hike out in the dark. Or you can get a steady rest overlooking the edge of that copse and start whining like a cow in estrus. By mid-October the bulk of breeding is over, but there’s always a late cow or two and the bulls are more than willing to take care of them. An estrus cow will stretch out her mewing calls into a whine that rises and falls with a pleading quality that drives bulls wild. Usually wild enough to abandon a midday bed and come running. Or at least walking. Such was the case during a hunt with Wyoming Expeditions. Guide T.J. Reder did the whining, a 6x6 herd bull did the walking, I did the shooting and a 140-grain Barnes TSX closed the mating season for that bull.