I never sleep well on the eve of opening day. Once upon a time, I imagine the cause for that was the kind of what’s-in-the-stocking excitement that keeps a kid from sleeping on the night before Christmas. But after 40 years in the elk timber, I’m inclined to think there’s something different working on me these days—anticipation, for certain, but possibly, just possibly, an almost subconscious concern over whether I’ll stand up to the challenges the mountain and the elk present this year. Sometimes physical, more often psychological and even spiritual, there are always the tests. It’s a lesson I’ve learned the hard way: Elk don’t come for free.

Whatever the reason, I found myself sleeping fitfully a few years back, cracking an eye every hour or so as I lay in my down cocoon, glancing out the window into the moonless night where the stars cast faint shadows in the sage. A quick check of the clock next to the stuff sack I was using as a pillow. Two o’clock. Three. At a quarter to four, I switched off the alarm and waited for the Professor’s old-fashioned travel clock to detonate. Promptly at four, it managed to ring for almost a second before the Professor killed it in the dark. On the other side of the room, I heard Mike’s feet hit the floor. He hadn’t slept any better than I had.

The sound of stocking feet in the darkness, a click as the LED lantern came to life—a major improvement over the old Coleman white-gas version—and the light caught the Professor pulling on the battered corduroys he wore in the timber when the weather was dry and not too cold.

“Eggs this morning,” he commented to no one in particular, as he rattled the frying pan, “and some of last year’s antelope sausage.”

Mike rustled up sandwich fixings while I filled a water bottle and stuffed a pair of wool socks in my daypack. Ten minutes later, the Professor set a pan of scrambled eggs next to the fried sausage.

“Grab a plate.” And as I sat down across from

Letting the Quiet In

by Chris Madson

Days of silent concentration demand discipline, but in return, they offer a kind of enlightenment. And sometimes even an elk.
him, he added, “Where you going today?”

“Down Allenby Canyon from the top, around the buttress of the ridge to the south, then back up behind the Razorback and maybe down into the head of Doniophan Creek.”

He looked at his watch.

“Well, if you want to start before light, you better get out of here.”

I wolfed the last of my eggs, grabbed the daypack next to my bunk, and wished Mike and the Professor good luck as I headed out into the night.

There’s that old saw about hard times being as tough as 40 miles of bad road. I don’t know who invented it, but he must have had BLM Route 4110 in mind. The sagebrush foothills it crosses on its way to the mountain are heaps of cobblestone stuck together with a sparse deposit of bentonite that raises a half-mile plume of dust behind the truck when dry and turns into a bottomless combination of axle grease and epoxy glue when wet. The bentonite quits where the road starts up the mountain, replaced by heaps of loose shale and spikes of bedrock sticking up where the builders had to blast their way across the cliffs.

It’s a good idea to have 10 plies of top-grade steel-belts under you when you go up that road and at least eight in the sidewall. If the tires are new and you go slow and careful, there’s a chance you won’t have to use your spare and waste a day of hunting on the drive back to town for a replacement.

A few stars were still visible in the west when I pulled off at the head of Allenby Canyon. As I climbed out of the truck, the silence flowed back around me, cool and dense, the disturbance of my arrival spreading, fading, disappearing like ripples in a still mountain lake.

An old acquaintance, but always a little startling after a year spent in the unremitting noise of life in town. It slips up on you, surrounds you, and, if you let it, it will seep into your head, your heart. Quiet rules the elk timber.

Bugle and cow call around my neck, daypack and .270 shouldered, I slipped into the lodgepoles, reminding myself to focus right away. Can’t ever tell.

The elk are most likely down the canyon away from the road, but there’s always the chance of catching a bull crossing the shoulder between this canyon and the next at first light. And wouldn’t that be nice—a kill within half a mile of the truck, no more than a couple hundred vertical feet below? There was a game trail at that crossing, and in other years I’d seen many tracks through there. Go carefully.

I did. But there were no elk. No fresh sign on the crossing trail. So, we’ll do it the hard way.

I shaded north into the drainage at the top of the canyon and started down. It’s an elk thoroughfare, this canyon, leading up from the sagebrush flats 1,500 feet below to a narrow place on the mountain between the head of Allenby to the east and Horse Creek to the west. The cool north-facing side of Allenby is a lodgepole pine gallery; the bottom dense spruce thickets with willow and alder along the spring-fed creek; the south-facing slope a combination of aspen thickets and scattered pine with sagebrush and prairie in between. Food, cover, water, quick escape routes in every direction—good elk country.
I paused where the canyon starts. The white-beat of the rut had passed, but, occasionally, a bull answers a bugle this late. I carried the smallest commercial bugle I’ve ever seen. I didn’t want to imitate the biggest, baddest bull on the mountain; better to sound like an adolescent with just enough testosterone and poor judgment to challenge his elders. Maybe a senior bull would take offense and express his displeasure. The squeal rang hollow in the trees.

As I waited for a reply, I remembered another morning. An answer had come that day, a scream rising until almost hypersonic followed by the rhythmic grunts that raised the hair on the back of my neck. I’d scrambled down to the creek, forced my way through the willows, and humped up the far slope to bugle a second time. He’d answered again as he drifted away to the north, and I’d given chase, over the top of the ridge and down into the next canyon. On the third call, I’d gotten two answers, and, before I could make an approach, I caught movement in the lodgepoles 60 yards below me. A bull with five...six...seven cows I could see, screened by the timber so I couldn’t shoot, but close enough to see me if I tried to move with them. They all drifted to the left, uphill. As I watched, a second bull offered a challenge out of sight above me. I’d stumbled into the middle of a rumble. Could I move without the closer elk picking me up? Had to try. The bull and his cows focused on the challenger, not looking my way. I’d slipped from tree to tree at last, an open slit in the timber with a tan flank at the end. And the shot.

Sure be nice to get an answer like that today. A minute. Two. No reply. So we’ll do it the hard way. I followed the game trail down to the first waterfall. It’s a dance, and above...six...seven feet across at the base of a boulder where a seep feeds a trickle down to the creek. A fine place for a bull. But the tracks were old and the water transparent. No elk had been here in several days. I eased down on the trail as the first sun touched the top of the ridge to the north.

Patience is an odd concept. The modern version seems to require an active exertion of will, a conscious effort to suppress the desire to be somewhere else, “to get to the end,” wherever or whatever that happens to be. For many years, I quelled that urge by distracting myself. Lord knows, I had plenty to think about, what with that gray cloud of details from work and home that whines around our ears like a horde of mosquitoes on a summer evening. So much of what we do is accomplished while we think about doing something else.

I remembered thinking how nice it would be to bugle this late. I carried a cow license that year and had slipped the rifle off my shoulder with serious intentions, looking at her through the scope as my thumb drifted toward the safety. Then, the weight of the mountain settled on the back of my neck. The truck had been parked then where it was now—two miles of deadfall and a thousand vertical feet behind and above me. A tough pack. I paused, and, in that instant, she disappeared into the wall of aspen. A minute later, a column of elk appeared on the sagebrush slope under the canyon wall to the north—fourteen cows and the biggest bull I’d ever seen. The harems walked over the shoulder of the mountain without a pause, but he stopped on the ridgeline to look back, maybe 200 yards away, broadside.

I remembered thinking how nice it would be to have a bull tag, and shook my head all over again at the contradictions of elk hunting—I hadn’t wanted a pack 200 pounds of cow elk quarters out of that awful hole, but I’d have packed 400 pounds of bull without a murmur.

An encouraging recollection, but as I made my way down through the aspens, the memory was all I found. I struggled to understand why they weren’t here—two miles from even the most primitive road, at the bottom of a canyon no sane human would investigate, plenty of fresh water, lush grass nearby, aspen browse and bitterbrush, shade from the noon...seven cows I could see...
sun, shelter from the wind, and escape routes in all four directions. The ground under the trees was worn bare with elk tracks, but for reasons known only to the elk, they were elsewhere.

The sun stood above the canyon wall to the south—where had the morning gone? I decided to indulge myself in one of life’s great luxuries, a pair of dry socks, lacing my boots carefully after I put them on to make sure my heels didn’t rub. The easy part of the day was done; there were six or eight miles of black timber, deadfall and mountainside ahead, and a quarter of a mile of altitude to win back before dark. I wolfed a sandwich and a Hershey’s bar, shouldered the pack and rifle again, and started sidehilling across the vast buttress of the southern ridge, headed for the mouth of the next canyon.

As I followed the edge of the timber up from the creek, a pronghorn buck snapped to attention a hundred yards ahead. He watched as I approached, surprised to see anything on two legs in this untrammeled spot, waiting until I was almost within bow shot before turning and leading his substantial harem down the hill into the vastness of the prairie below. Like his forebears before him, he found safety, not in cover, but in space. A novelty to be remembered—not every day I see antelope on an elk hunt.

The afternoon offered other points of interest. I passed the airy aspen stand on the prairie edge where I once surprised a bull and five cows and managed to get the shot before they ran. This day, the sun played on the gold of the leaves trembling in the breeze, but no elk. And later, on the tiny creek that traced its way under the cliff on the north side of the Razorback, an eddy revolved slowly in the shadows under a moss-covered rock, the transparent water bearing a flotilla of red and gold aspen leaves in an endless circle, like something out of a Japanese Zen garden.

I took the game trail up the creek and over the notch behind the Razorback, avoiding the mistake I’d made years before when I tried to find a way through the lodgepole timber there—impossible deadfall, stacks of wind-thrown logs six and seven feet high, so dense even an elk would struggle to get through. Instead, I made the mistake of venturing into the head of Doniphan Creek. The game trail petered out as the mountainside tipped past the angle of repose until I found myself rock-climbing up a cliff face with the rifle cross-slung. Where the headwaters of the little creek seeped out of the mountainside up above, the grass grew waist-high and I sank in the muck past my boot tops as I crossed. Several wallows scattered through the shady timber, but no elk.

After another mile and several hundred feet of climbing, I struck the far end of the game trail that led back to the saddle where I’d started at dawn. The sun had dropped behind the mountain, and the evening promised frost overnight. I went gently along the trace—always possible to meet an elk traveling the other direction, and the result of a meeting like that almost always depends on who sees who first. There were no elk.

Venus was rising in the east when I got back to the truck. I cased the rifle, slid behind the wheel and turned the key. At the first sound of the engine and the stab of the headlights, the night shrank back into the trees, watching yellow-eyed from the shadows, waiting for me to leave. I felt that strange sense of being cut off from something that had followed me all day. Something wild. The good news was that I’d be back to meet it at dawn.

The long trip down the mountain gave me time to reflect on my acquaintance with this place. For 10 years, I’d kept an October appointment with these canyons and their elk. The mountain broods on the horizon 30 miles from the nearest gas station, 80 miles from anything like civilization. No one ends up here by accident; you have to decide you want to come and make a substantial effort to get here. It’s a blank spot on the map that keeps its secrets close. Over the years, I’d discovered some of those, along with the elk that feed my family.

And it occurred to me that this was hunting. When we tell our stories, we apply the first rule of engaging an audience and “cut to the chase”—the moment of the encounter with our quarry, the approach, the shot. Occasionally, that incandescent experience stretches over several hours, but, in the black timber, it’s usually one intense minute set against the background of days of silent concentration. We don’t bother to describe those days—another hunter already understands them; a nonhunter never will. And yet, those days, those connections, are the essence of the hunt. They demand discipline from us; in return, they offer a kind of enlightenment. And sometimes, even an elk.

I broke out of the timber at the top of the last switchback that led down the mountain face. Far below, a single yellow speck of light stood out on the prairie in the dark. Mike and the Professor were already back—a good chance supper was cooking on the stove. Be good to get some hot food, I thought as I crept down the road. Even better to get horizontal in that sleeping bag.

I always sleep well at the end of opening day.

When he’s not hunting, Chris Madson writes on wildlife conservation and the environment from his home in Cheyenne, Wyoming.