



**YOU CAN'T
CHEAT
THE MOUNTAIN** *by Trevor Hubbs*

We wanted to believe we were still the lean, mean paratroopers we used to be, but five years behind a desk takes a toll—and the mountain never let us forget it.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: CHUCK GRAHAM / COURTESY OF TREVOR HUBBS

When I picked my friend Kevin up from the airport in Jackson Hole, we stared at the Teton Mountains towering above us, knowing that was where we were headed.

Kevin and I served together in the Army's airborne infantry until I was discharged in 2016. Once we were both out, we found work and made our homes 2,200 miles apart, so we hadn't seen much of each other in the last five years.

Growing up, Kevin only went on a few grouse hunts with his father. He'd shown little interest in hunting since I'd known him. But when I told him I had an Idaho elk tag for the 2020 season and couldn't find anyone who would come along, he stepped up.

As we drove across the state line from Wyoming into Idaho, I think Kevin and I started to realize how long five years had been. A bit of bravado was inherent in our personalities. We each wanted the other to think we were still the lean, mean paratroopers we used to be. But Kevin was COO of a software firm in San Francisco, and I was a project

manager for a construction company in Milwaukee. Five years behind a desk had taken a toll on our physical fitness. While the truck shifted into lower and lower gears as we climbed in elevation, a lump formed in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure we were going to measure up.

In our eight years in the Army, Kevin and I had been on exercises that kept us in the field for up to three weeks. Academically, a seven-day elk hunt didn't seem like anything to stress over. However, as the trip approached, it became apparent how much we had depended on the Army during those field excursions. Clean drinking water and food would not be provided or be available for aerial resupply.

We did a video chat with all our gear laid out to compare necessities. In the end, our packs each weighed around 65 pounds and contained too many survival blankets, quick clot bandages and lengths of climbing rope.

We slept in the bed of my truck at the trailhead with plans to wake around 3 a.m. to begin our five-mile trek to an alpine lake where we'd camp and glass. An hour into our pack in, I thought we had surely gone three miles or more into the mountains. I was seriously beginning to question how we'd ever get an elk out on our backs. Another two hours in, and the sun was coming up. I thought we must be almost there. Poor map reading and wishful thinking led me to miscalculate the distance. What I thought would be a five-mile hike was actually over eight.

We finally reached the lake at noon after nine hours on the trail. There was no longer any point in pretending we were physically anything but shadows of what we'd been five years ago. We dripped with sweat even in the 30-degree weather and gasped for air as the elevation took its toll. Our altitude sickness wasn't quite debilitating, but our allotted recovery time would need to be dramatically increased. We simply could not get enough oxygen.

The first evening, we set up camp by the lake and climbed a nearby hill to start glassing. As we surveyed the sprawling valley before us, we couldn't help noticing several wall tents and livestock camps in the area. I thought by hiking in this far, we would avoid pressure from other hunters. In hindsight, it was clear we'd gone too far. We had passed the backpack hunters and instead ran into the horseback hunters. Neither Kevin nor I knew anything about elk habits or this area except what we'd tried to absorb from Randy

Newberg's YouTube channel, but we thought we should focus on north-facing hillsides, especially with all the company. We identified two valleys leading off the lake and made a plan to start hiking up one of them in the morning.

Morning came, and we carefully picked our way up the closest valley. About two miles up, Kevin caught a glimpse of an elk 400 yards away. It stepped into the trees a quarter of the way up the slope. He couldn't tell if it had been a bull or not, so we tucked into some brush and set up to glass the area. But the elk had ghosted into the forest, and never reappeared, so we continued up the valley.

The valley floor was covered in elk tracks and droppings, which was a huge confidence boost. While following an old game trail, a bull burst out of the thick brush where he'd been bedded just 15 yards away. His flight was so sudden and violent that I didn't comprehend what was happening until too late. I bolted after him, charging through the

undergrowth, but the brush was too thick for any shot opportunity. I reached a small clearing just in time to see the bull halfway up the 50-degree slope. He crested the top at 600 yards. It would have taken me 15 minutes to do what he'd done in 15 seconds.

Hiking back that evening just after shooting light ended, we spotted a third elk just 200 yards away from camp grazing in a small meadow. It only stood still for a moment before disappearing into the darkness.

Given our three encounters on the first full day of hunting, we were extremely optimistic about the following morning. We made plans to work that same drainage. This time we would get there earlier and spend more time carefully observing the hotspots where we'd seen elk the day before.

We set off in the pre-dawn blackness, heading for a nice glassing knob overlooking the valley where we'd seen that first elk. We worked our way up through the drainage in the dark with red headlamps just like we used to do in the Army. We set up and waited for what seemed like forever. Pretty soon Kevin began to fidget. He had never been very patient.

When he said he wanted to creep up a few hundred yards to make sure we were seeing all the terrain, my gut said it was a bad idea, but I didn't protest. I watched Kevin through my binoculars as he scrambled up a small rock pile. Just then, 200 yards below us along the small creek running through

I keep thinking about Bear Claw Chris Lapp, the mountain man from the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*, and his famous line, "You can't cheat the mountain, Pilgrim."



FIND YOUR PEAK



SCAN TO
LEARN MORE

the valley, an elk ripped out a bugle in response to the noise Kevin had just made. Trying to salvage this golden opportunity, I let out a bugle of my own. But the bull wanted no part of that. We could hear it crashing through undergrowth far up the drainage, again with no opportunity for a shot.

We spent the rest of the day setting up on more glassing knobs farther up the valley and scanning the slopes, but to no avail.

Early the fourth morning, we headed back up the drainage and set up on a small knob we'd glassed from before. We hoped to see elk moving somewhere in this drainage. There were hoof prints and droppings everywhere.

At 8:30 a huge animal stepped out of the brush barely 30 yards downslope from us, feeding through the willows. After a moment of intense adrenaline and hurried readjusting of optics, we realized it wasn't the massive bull elk we'd hoped for, but rather a cow moose. It was the first time either of us had ever seen a moose. She worked her way up the hillside opposite of us, casually browsing willows, and we were able to watch her for a solid hour and a half. We glassed that slope until dark, but when the sun set, it was our first day without spotting an elk.

On day five, we returned to the same drainage. Given our previous encounters and the abundance of sign, we felt giving that spot at least one more day was our best bet. I began to feel the pressure for success that everyone does on the backside of a long hunt with no notched tags. After four days of looking at the same small valley and hillside, it was all starting to feel a bit monotonous and hopeless.

At 9:37 a.m., Kevin threw a small stone at me. One look told me this was something serious. He was pointing up the draw along the creek and mouthing



The author (left) and his friend Kevin Liscovitz meeting the mountain on its terms midway through their seven-day Idaho elk hunt.

The bull's flight was so sudden and violent I didn't comprehend what was happening until too late. I charged after him, but by the time I hit a small clearing in the brush, he was cresting the ridge at 600 yards. It would have taken me 15 minutes to do what he'd done in 15 seconds.

crosshairs behind its shoulder. It was a deep chocolate color, but I was hesitant to shoot until I was positive it wasn't a grizzly. There was no hump, and the bear didn't have the dished face of a grizzly. I'm now 100% confident it was a black bear. But at that moment, behind the trigger, I wanted absolutely no doubts.

I watched that bear cruise and browse bushes for 10 minutes. When it stepped behind a tree, I mouthed to Kevin, *When it comes out, I'm going to shoot it.* Except it never came back out, and we waited an hour and a half. We thought it had bedded down not far behind

the tree. After two hours, I had to go down into the valley to investigate. We ventured to where the bear had been standing, and what had seemed like small bushes from our glassing knob proved to be chest-high in the valley. The bear standing on four legs was six or seven inches above these bushes, making it the largest black bear I had ever seen.

It started to snow. As I sat on the hill eating a cold, wet PB&J in a tortilla, all I could think about was that nice

chocolate hide on my wall and lounging next to a ripping fire roasting bear chops. I kicked myself for not taking the shot. Even now, every few weeks I still send Kevin a random text or receive one from him saying, "Should've shot the bear."

That afternoon, we worked into a new drainage and set up at around 9,000 feet. We could see all the surrounding peaks and our camp beside the alpine lake far below. This had to be our best chance to see



DEDICATED SINCE 1902



Learn More

EVERY PART
IS DEDICATED
TO YOUR
SUCCESS

METICULOUSLY
DESIGNED SO YOU CAN
FOCUS ON THE HUNT



BONDSTRIKE™

Norma BONDSTRIKE has been meticulously designed and manufactured for extreme long-range accuracy with minimal loss of velocity during flight. Regardless of the distance to the target, BONDSTRIKE will penetrate, expand, and retain 10-15% more weight than the closest competitor. Norma, synonymous with quality for more than 100 years.

NormaShooting.com

Now it's up
to you.

DH Dedicated Hunting

something come out and feed in the evening. We spent the final four hours of light combing the hills with our spotting scopes and binoculars, and turned up one mule deer doe.

On day six, I was out of ideas. We used our digital maps to find what looked like a high cirque a few miles away and headed that direction before the sun came up. The valley was beautiful. There was a waterfall coming out of the rocks and a bunch of caves in the side of the hills that looked perfect for a mountain lion. But the only animals we saw in that bowl were a group of six mountain goats casually browsing on a near-vertical slope above the waterfall. We crept to what would have been an easy 250-yard shot. But even if we'd held a goat tag, neither of us could figure how we would have been able to retrieve an animal from that precarious terrain. On our way back to camp that evening as shooting light had just died, Kevin saw what looked like a spike bull on the same hill we'd been sitting on for the first five days. It would have been legal to shoot just a few minutes earlier.

On the last day of our hunt, we decided we would try to punch through the tree line and get to even higher elevation. We could see from our camp where the steep timber gave way to the knee-high grasses and wildflowers of a high alpine meadow. I thought that's where I would go if I was a bull elk, especially if there was a spring or a creek up there.

I'll be honest with you—that was one hell of a climb at four in the morning. Several times as the light began to spread I looked down at where we had come from in disbelief. As I crested what I thought was the summit, I was crushed to learn it was a false peak. Although the grade decreased to a 45-degree climb, it went on for at least another mile. As the sun peeked over the mountains we were still climbing. But elk sign and game trails covered the ground. There were only intermittent spruce trees and knee-high grass, so if there were elk up here, we should be able to see them.

We worked uphill at a painfully slow pace, our

bodies shot from the week of climbing all over this drainage. My legs were shaking, cramping and threatening to give out with every step. Worse, I could not get enough oxygen. I felt like I was going to pass out.

At 11:30 just after breaking through the tree line with the mountain summit in sight, Kevin spotted movement in a groove of stunted aspens. Five elk stood in the shadows. Three were cows. The heads of the other two were obscured by branches. Any other day I would have waited the elk out and made a move when they came out to feed in the evening. But then I started calculating the nine-hour hike back to the truck, not to mention a packout that would take several days even with two people. We couldn't wait.

I started crawling to see if I could get close enough to spot antlers and hopefully get a shot. After what felt like 150 yards on my hands and knees, I stuck my head and rifle up over a log to investigate the two unknown elk. One was a small spike bull and the other a five-point. I was at 450 yards. It was not a shot I had practiced, hoping to be much closer. I weighed the options and consulted a small, laminated, windage and drop chart in my pocket. With the log as a bombproof rest, I decided to take the shot.

As I squared up against the log, I felt a distinctly pleasant, cooling sensation against the back of my head as the wind shifted. The first cow picked her head up, and almost instantly the whole group headed up the mountain. I watched them through my rifle scope as they slipped away, the last bull cresting the peak at 800 yards.

To Kevin's credit, he hurried to my position with both our packs as soon as he saw the elk move off. He was more than willing to miss his flight and keep pursuing this herd, but my legs and lungs were done.

As we turned to head back down to pack up camp, we heard a faint shot ring out from the other side of the

Day six found the pair in this high cirque complete with a cascading waterfall, where six mountain goats greeted them instead of the bull they sought.



OUR LAWYER SAID WE SHOULDN'T
GUARANTEE
EVERY SINGLE THING ABOUT OUR RIFLES



WE GUARANTEE YOUR ALLTERRA RIFLE WILL

- SHOOT SUB .25" 3-SHOT GROUPS WITH OUR HANDLOADS
- SHOOT SUB .5" 3-SHOT GROUPS WITH PREMIUM FACTORY AMMUNITION
- SHOOT DIFFERENT WEIGHT BULLETS AND MAINTAIN ACCURACY
- CYCLE IN ALL FIELD CONDITIONS

HE NO LONGER REPRESENTS US.



ALLTERRA
A R M S[™]
BUILT FOR YOU

ALLTERRAARMS.COM | 208-608-5179



mountain. Later while getting ready for the hike out, we saw a pair of hunters working their way down the same mountain we spent the morning climbing. We must have pushed those elk over the summit right into their laps.

Still, it was hard to be disappointed. We had a hell of a trip in brand new country and more than our fair share of opportunities. The whole hike back to the truck, Keven kept talking about taking his hunter education class and starting to apply for preference points in a couple states. We'd had a great time, and it appeared we had made a new hunter out of Kevin. If I was disappointed about anything, it was my own decision to not pursue the elk. I could have pushed hard to the peak and maybe had another opportunity. But I quit a half mile from the top. I decided it couldn't be done.

I keep thinking about Bear Claw Chris Lapp, the mountain man character from the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*, and his famous line, "You can't cheat the mountain, Pilgrim."

I don't know if I tried to cheat the mountain,

but I do believe the mountain weighed and measured me in those seven days and found me lacking. When faced with hardship and crushing disappointment, I turned around. The mountain knows what treasures it has, and it can see when those who are not deserving search for those treasures. The mountain will not abide a quitter under any circumstances.

I will train harder in the off season and Kevin and I will come back next year, or the year after. Next time we'll have two tags. Next time I will earn the mountain's respect and, hopefully, an elk.



Trevor Hubbs is from a small town in southern Illinois where the Mississippi and Ohio rivers meet. He grew up running hounds on raccoons and coyotes before transitioning to training bird dogs and recently to the pursuit of western big game. Trevor especially enjoys taking fellow veterans hunting and fishing.

PHOTO: VIC SCHENDEL

