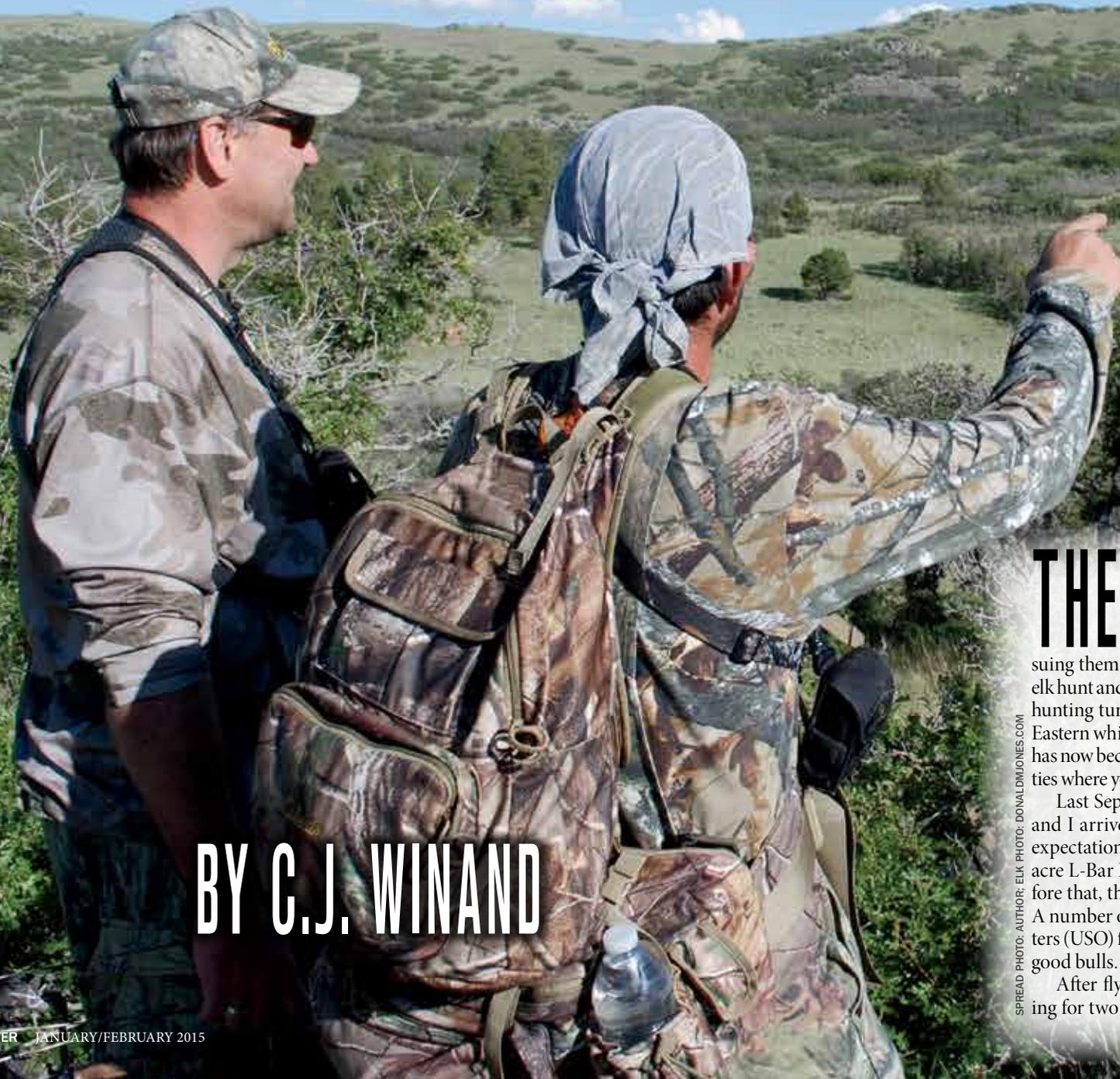


# THREE<sup>3</sup>

TIMES SUCCESSFUL

DO YOU WANT TO GO ELK HUNTING THIS FALL BUT DON'T KNOW WHERE TO GO? TRY NEW MEXICO FIRST!

We heard numerous bulls bugling every day we hunted the 25,000-acre L-Bar Ranch.



BY C.J. WINAND

**THERE** was a time when all I ever cared about was whitetails. I was so addicted to whitetails that all of my vacation time was spent pursuing them. Then it happened: I ventured out west for my first elk hunt and I was hooked. Someone once said hunting elk is like hunting turkeys on steroids. I couldn't agree more. Like many Eastern whitetail hunters who live and breathe deer, elk hunting has now become one of my favorite hunts. It's one of those activities where you do it one time and you're addicted for life.

Last September, *Bowhunter TV* cameraman Mike Malley and I arrived at elk camp under a full moon with very high expectations. Located near Grants, New Mexico, the 25,000-acre L-Bar Ranch had not been hunted in two years. And before that, the ranch was only hunted with primitive weapons. A number of years ago I teamed up with United States Outfitters (USO) for an elk hunt. Since then, I've been two for two on good bulls. Could lightning strike a third time?

After flying into the Albuquerque airport and then driving for two hours, we met everyone at camp. Our guide, Jody Mondragon, suggested we get to bed early because we'd be hitting the mountain hard, and first-day luck was always possible on the L-Bar Ranch. As Mike and I prepared our gear, Mike said, "C.J., I feel like a trifecta. How about you?"

I just grinned and said, "I'd just be happy to hear some bugling."

Little did we know our first day would turn out to be what every elk hunter dreams about. With the sun just starting to crest the horizon, we heard two bulls directly below us. After one bugle from Jody, we had both bulls coming our way. After setting up no more than 100 yards away from the bulls, two cows and two calves showed up across the meadow from us. Whether this small group messed us up we don't know, but both bulls suddenly shut up.

While waiting for the bulls to respond to our calls again, Jody spotted the one bull about a half-mile away. The six-point wasn't a giant, but his 300-class frame was more than good enough for me. After some more bugles and cow calls, he simply walked away from the cows and us.

SPREAD PHOTO: AUTHOR; ELK PHOTO: DONALD MONES.COM

## Three Times Successful

While taking a water break 30 minutes later, we heard another bull. After some binocular work, we observed something none of us had ever witnessed. The big six-point had 18 cows and calves, and was bugling from his bed. Then all the elk got up and started our way. Since we were already in position, we watched in amazement as the elk came directly toward us. Our good luck came to an abrupt stop when the wind switched directions. Everyone agreed that had the wind not changed, we would have been eating elk tenderloin the first day.

Our first day at the L-Bar Ranch was phenomenal. Without a doubt, we experienced a day of bugling we will never forget.

The next day was cloudy and the bulls were no longer cooperating. Although we tried sitting patiently, we soon realized that following the bugling elk from mountain to mountain would be our only option.

The good news was we were still seeing and hearing some sizable bulls. In fact, on the third and fourth days, we actually saw more bulls than cows. Granted, not all the bulls were giants, but the L-Bar Ranch was loaded with bulls. Obviously, the two years of no hunting on the ranch was paying off. Without a doubt, we were having a fantastic elk hunt, and I hadn't even drawn my bow yet!

On the fifth day, while we were heading toward yet another bugling bull, I looked down and found a horseshoe. The same thing had happened when I killed my first bull. As far as I was concerned, this wasn't just good luck — it was great luck! As I carefully placed the shoe in a small tree, we heard a bull bugle just over the ridge, no more than 75 yards away. It's funny, no matter how bad your body may hurt, the sound a bugling bull sends you into second and third gear. This was the case on this bull. Yes, we were frustrated because nothing was responding to our calls, but the mere opportunity to get a shot was all the incentive we needed to go into kill mode.

Like a well-oiled machine, Mike and I got set up while Jody backed off and started to cow call. Just then, Mike decided there was too much sunlight for his camera and said, "C.J., we have to move." Like two old men arguing over a hockey game, I gave in and we moved to a location which was better for video, but not for me to shoot the bull. With the bull coming in fast, he totally surprised both of us as he made his way over a very steep embankment, a mere 20 yards away.

I drew as the bull crested the hill, but it was too late. He had already spotted us, and within a millisecond turned completely around. The problem was his antlers became stuck in the branches. It looked as if he had hung himself. He finally dislodged his antlers, and we never saw him again, but the visual of this five-point almost hanging himself will always be engrained in my mind.

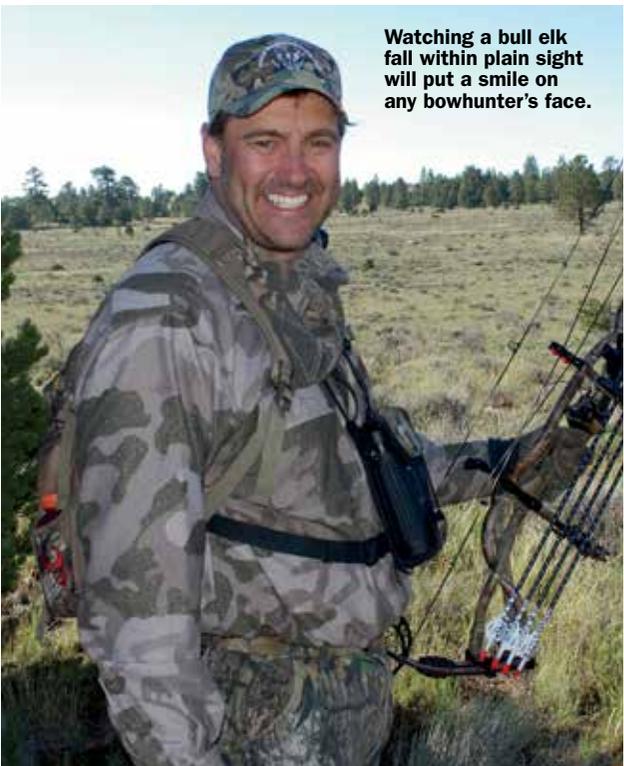
After listening to Mike and I bicker back and forth, Jody grinned and said, "We should be able to kill a bull if you two give each other a man hug and get over your little hissy fit!" Although nothing was said, we knew we had worked too hard to fail. And then, just like magic, Jody heard a bull bugle.

But, just like before, this bull wasn't responding to our calls. In fact, he was heading away from us into another valley. The guttural bugles from this bull sounded much more dominant. His constant hair-raising bugles kept us going. Finally, we caught up to him in an open valley, but we struggled to put glass on him.

Just then Mike said, "C.J., there's a bull coming directly



The camp at the L-Bar Ranch was very comfortable. The guides and cooks were all first class. Better yet, running water and electricity provided all the comforts of home.



Watching a bull elk fall within plain sight will put a smile on any bowhunter's face.

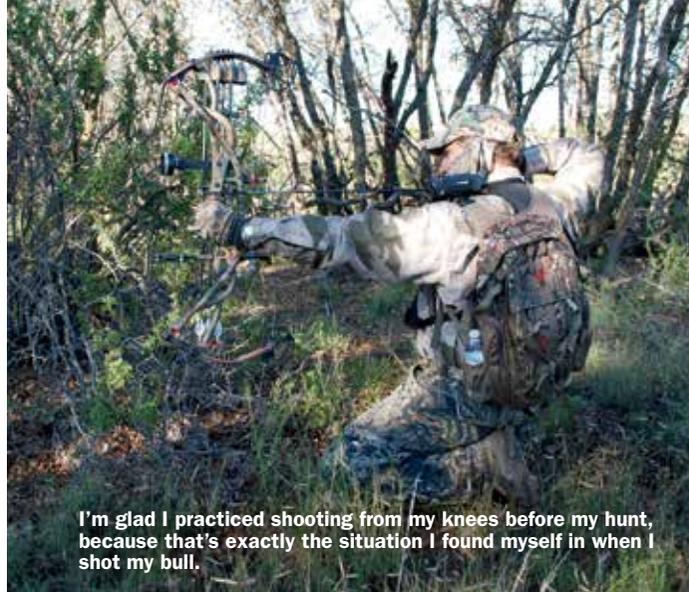
toward us!" It was a small four-point, but behind him was a solid five-point that was raking his antlers in a small spruce. As the smaller bull walked by us, the larger bull kept making a rub only 200 yards from our position. We assumed the bull was raking his antlers to attract cows or intimidate the smaller four-point.

Even though this wasn't the big bull we were hearing, Jody backed off our position and started to bugle. And just like the first day, his calls were now working. The bull turned his head in our direction and bugled back. Game on!

As the bull slowly made his way across the open field, my anxiety grew. It was almost as if the bull knew something wasn't right. The anticipation was only compounded by his slow, inquisitive gait. As I knelt motionless in front of a small tree, my heart rate was in overdrive. The good news was the bull would be walking behind the only tree in the meadow. This would give me a chance to draw. At 40 yards, I drew and watched the bull stop broadside. Tag soup was not on the menu as I released my arrow.

Although I initially thought my hit was a little high, the bull only ran 75 yards across the open field before he collapsed. As Mike and I watched the bull fall, Jody emerged from behind us, grinning from ear to ear. Evidently, our tandem cow calls coaxed the bull in just enough to get a shot.

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS



I'm glad I practiced shooting from my knees before my hunt, because that's exactly the situation I found myself in when I shot my bull.

We never did see the bull we were originally chasing, but to have the bull I shot fall within sight was priceless. Many hunters wait a lifetime to go elk hunting. If you want to kill a bull elk, this is the place! On average, we were seeing 10 to 12 bulls every day as we hoofed it across the mountain valleys.

Bowhunting is an exciting sport, but bowhunting elk is extra special. Nothing compares to the moment in time when you first hear a mature bull bugle. When you put all of the elements of planning, executing and following through, it all

comes down to a split second of time when you release an arrow. It's no wonder why so many bowhunters have a spiritual connection with elk. The excitement level of investing so much hard work is almost more than anyone can handle. I'm not one bit embarrassed to admit that after walking up on my first bull elk, I literally cried with pure joy. This emotion is something only successful elk hunters can appreciate.

Wildlife biologist Bob Humphrey determined within **Bowhunter's** "2013 Elk Forecast" a North American success rate of 23 percent for elk hunters. So far, I'm 100 percent, and two of those bulls were 300-inchers. I think I've now passed Elk Hunting 101? Maybe next year I can go four for four... did I just hex myself? <<<

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** My equipment on my New Mexico elk hunt included a Hoyt Carbon Matrix RKT bow set at 83 lbs., Easton Full Metal Jacket arrows fletched with Bohning Blazer Vanes and tipped with 125-grain Muzzy MX-3 broadheads, Spot-Hogg sight, QAD Ultra-Rest HDX, Fuse Ventura quiver, Zeiss binoculars, Badlands pack, and clothing from Cabela's.

Many times, the sheer number of hunters and less-than-quality bulls can make elk hunting very undesirable. For those unsuccessful elk hunters, you might want to consider United States Outfitters (USO) in New Mexico. USO has a limited number of openings on some quality private ranches with guaranteed tags. If you're interested in a fantastic elk hunt, contact USO at 1-800-845-9929, [usoutfitters@huntuso.com](mailto:usoutfitters@huntuso.com), or visit them at [www.unitedstatesoutfitters.com](http://www.unitedstatesoutfitters.com).



This New Mexico bull wasn't my first, nor was it my biggest, but it still holds a special place in my mind as a bull I truly earned. The takeaway lesson on this hunt is to never give up, and don't be afraid to "hump" it over the next mountain!