

by Michael Altizer
Dawn
To
Dusk

With one great bull down and one to go, we had no idea how good the dream was about to get.

Sunrise. Nineteen years into my own personal odyssey – to finally take a grand bull elk from here in the majestic San Juan Mountains of northern New Mexico.

And now he is there in my rifle scope, high on a tawny pre-dawn ridge just below the pale silver skyline, crumpling in slo-mo as the bullet hastens through his chest, he and his massive rack settling to earth in a backlit spray of new frost, me sitting small and hidden in the shadows far below among the cold grey colors of winter.

At last I begin to tremble as the adrenaline starts to release, and I draw the safety back into its “on” position and look up from my rifle. My friends are at my side, and they both wait patiently as I alone ascend the ridge, rising through time from the deep snow and perpetual shade and a nearly two-decade quest for this singular, magnificent bull.

Up into the brimming sunrise I climb, traversing the broad, wind-swept canyon to finally stand below him and then kneel to touch him and pray. The ground is scarred and scattered where he’d gripped the earth in sudden reflex as the bullet struck, and his royal face is angled toward me with lifeless eyes still shining clear, as though their last duty were to register and reflect the image of the one who has stilled them.

Then suddenly the crown of a winter sun dazzles the lower rim of the lemon and purple sky mottled peach along the distant horizon as if from a painting by Turner or Kuhn, bathing us in its clear amber aura as together we wait there alone and lit, the old bull and I, while my friends climb from the chilled shadows below to join us.

It had been an especially bitter morning as winter mornings go, with temperatures sulking around zero at first light when I had taken my bull. We had seen him at sunset the evening before, over a half-mile away, the unchallenged leader of a small band of late-season, post-rut bachelor bulls we’d been watching for days, and I’d had him in my scope three separate times in the low light of dawn before finally having a clear, open shot.

I knew he was big; but when I had climbed the ridge that morning to finally meet him in person, I’d been astounded at his actual size and character. He was old and battle-scarred, and even with his right brow tine broken and semi-polished at the base, he scored nearly 350 points when we measured him the next morning.

We were high in the San Juan Mountains of northern New Mexico, Chuck Wechsler and I, close to where it butts into its common border with Colorado, in the midst of a dream that had been building for years: to take a pair of elk so grand as to be worthy of the telling. But if the air at 9,000 feet was thin and brittle, our spirits were full and alive from the fact that we were here together, completely immersed in this hunt we had been anticipating for so long. And when we finally had my elk off the mountain and caped out with the coming year’s meat ready for processing, we headed west up the Chama Valley to the Quinlan Ranch in search of a bull for Chuck.

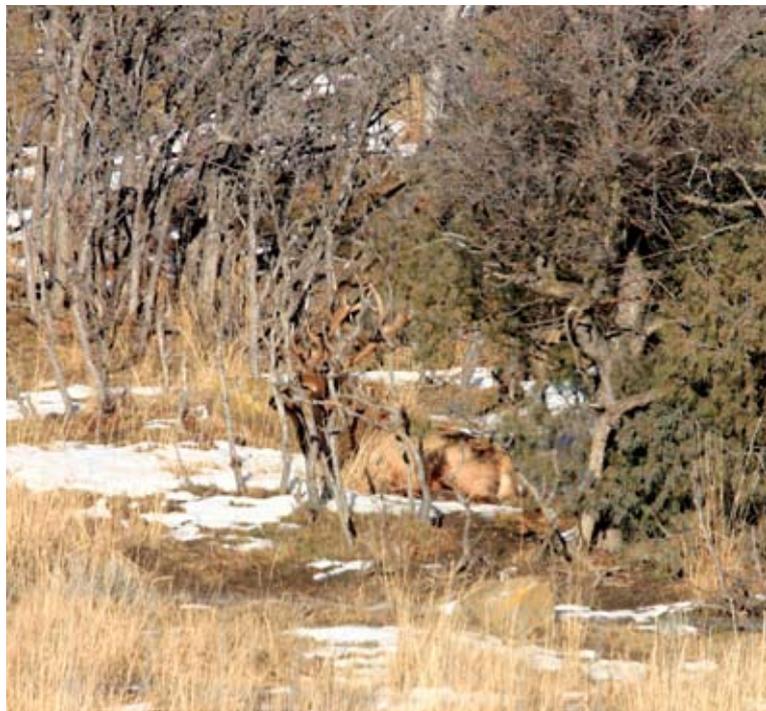
The Quinlan was a study in contrasts from the high snowy

terrain we’d been living in for the last few days; the sun had warmed the valley floor to a point that the snow down here was beginning to soften, and gone were the tall Ponderosas and the soaring peaks and ridges of the high country, replaced by rocky crags and precipitous cliffs and stands of cedar and juniper and piñon, along with the ubiquitous oak brush that is ever a part of northern New Mexico.

First settled by the forerunners of today’s Jicarilla Apache Nation in ages unwritten, and formally established as a ranch in 1912, the Quinlan is 14,800 acres of classic Western tradition, history, beauty and big game. So now with this perfect day beginning to wane and the sun on the downside of afternoon, Chuck and his guide Randy Slaughter of Rio Brazos Outfitters had invited me to tag along with them to glass the tangled country along the base of Gobbler’s Knob where it rises into the sky.

It didn’t take long for us to see elk. But Chuck is a selective man with very high standards, and he wasn’t about to settle for anything short of spectacular. Armed now with only a camera, I was focusing on a fairly decent six-by-six easing up a trail in the low evening light a quarter-mile across the valley when the sun-dappled oak brush 75 yards beyond him began to move.

At first it didn’t quite register. Surely this must be a major downdraft or minor earthquake, or a landslide or alien landing or something equally bizarre. But then the great bull slowly began turning his head, and I realized I was looking at a huge, gnarly mass of hard golden antlers



A telephoto lens reveals the secluded hiding place of the huge bull that Sporting Classics Editor Chuck Wechsler would kill a day later. Opposite: Gobbler’s Knob, one of New Mexico’s most stunning geologic formations, towers above the 15,000-acre ranch.

that made the six-by I had been watching look somewhat less spectacular.

The big bull was bedded down just below the crest of a ridge tumbling off the main peak in a thick stand of oak brush and frankly, if he hadn't moved, I would never have seen him.

I whispered something I'm certain was completely unintelligible as I turned to Chuck and Randy, who were fixed on yet another bull, a very respectable six-by-six a couple hundred yards farther up the canyon. Finally, they realized that my sudden lack of composure was totally unrelated to my own big bull of the morning and turned their attention to the oak brush I was gesturing toward.

I have been told by those who love hunting elephants that sometimes when you are in the African bush and so close to them you can smell them and hear their breathing, and their rumbling guts are sending pounding, sub-sonic vibrations up through the ground and into the soles of your shoes, you often can't actually see them, for their very size and bulk betray all preconceptions you've ever harbored about how an elephant should look. And that's exactly what was happening with this elk.

For with the big bull once again resting motionless in his bed, his great bulk and contorted rack looked more like a part of the landscape than the magnificent creature he was, and for a moment Chuck and Randy thought I was still on my adrenaline high from the morning.

Until again, he turned his massive head.

Quickly we tried to formulate a plan of action. He lay 400 yards north, and the stalk was laid out clear and unapologetic for us there in the waning light of evening: hurry a half-mile east

down the valley to the base of a narrow ridge falling south off Gobbler's Knob, then climb 500 feet up the back side of the ridge before scurrying to a little spur that overlooked him from less than 150 yards. For my part, I could stay right here and photograph the whole affair and perhaps even signal my friends if the big bull were to move. There was only one problem: the light.

It was fading fast, and with low clouds moving in from the north and the temperature once more beginning to dip below freezing, we knew we had less than 30 minutes to pull the whole thing off. Everything would have to work perfectly or all would be lost. And so we reluctantly made the decision to back out and start over at dawn and hope to locate him again.

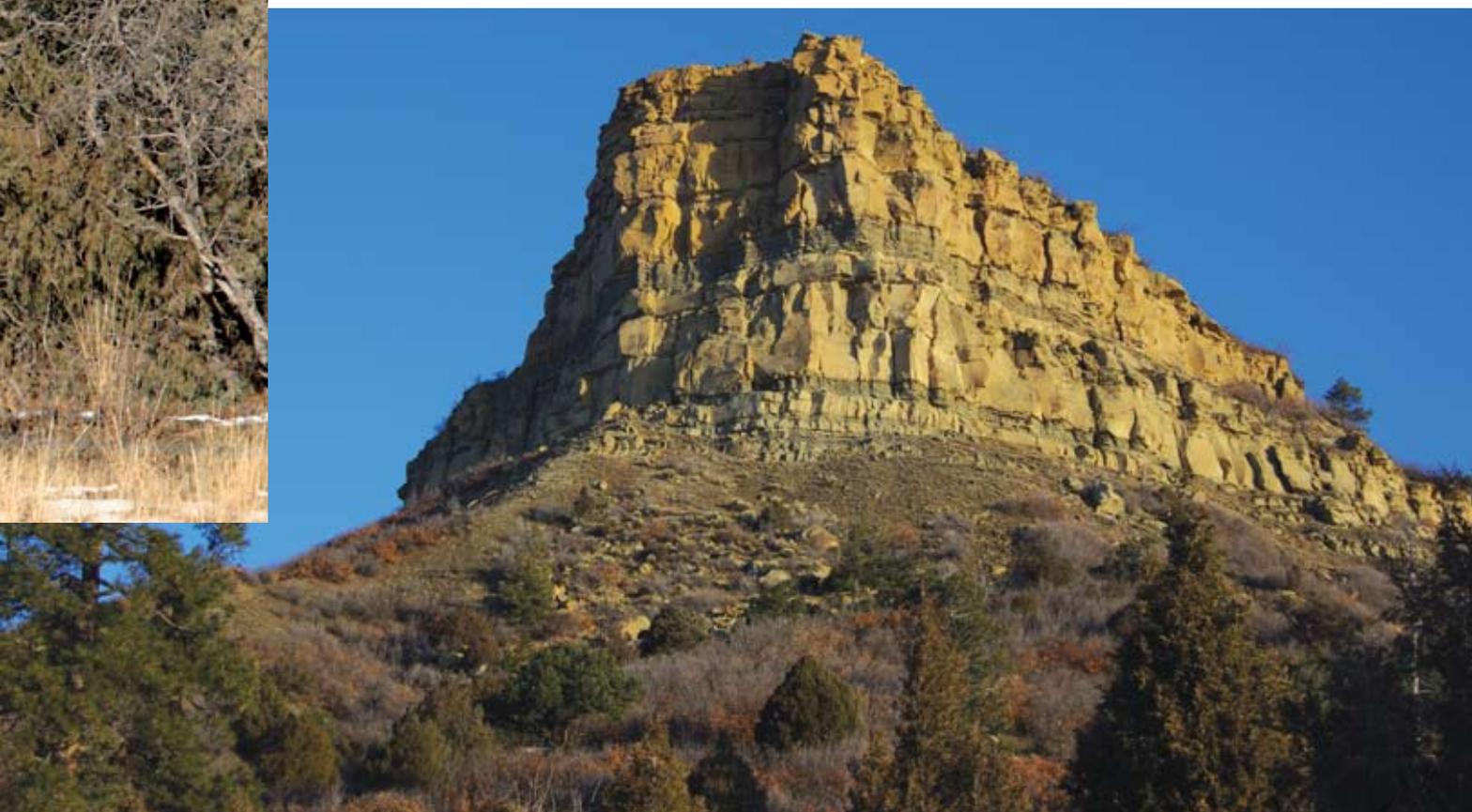
We all met for breakfast at 4:30 the next morning, along with our host Frank Simms, president and general manager of the Lodge and Ranch at Chama where we were staying for this hunt of a lifetime. The sky had cleared during the night, and I'd decided to head out alone before daylight to photograph the sunrise on the mile-high granite face of Bandit Peak, an hour away. It was a stunning drive north, watching the rising sun light up the mountains with its signature bronze and coral patina. I couldn't possibly image how life could get any better.

Unless, of course, Chuck and Randy could settle with the big bull.

Let me tell you about Chuck Wechsler:

I knew that even if he and Randy could manage to find the big bull from the previous evening and make the stalk and Chuck could pull off a perfect shot and drop him cold, he would still not be nearly as thrilled for himself as he had been for me yesterday morning when I had dropped my bull.

It's just the kind of friend he is.



So as I drove north in the cold light of sunrise with my dream bull now a reality, Chuck and Randy had their own dream to pursue. I spent the better part of the morning alone with my cameras and then took time for a late, leisurely breakfast and was back at Chama by mid-afternoon.

Frank and I were just settling in with a pot of some very manly cowboy coffee when Frank's cell phone rang. I could read the grin slowly spreading across his angular face and knew something good had happened, and less than an hour later with the sun lowering, I was climbing out of the pickup on the Quinlan Ranch a half-mile from the base of Gobbler's Knob.

I hit the ground running and flew alone up the crest of the ridge with my cameras and knives, racing the fading light north along the snowy trail with the sun now barely touching the ragged ridgeline to the west. I found them there together, Chuck and Randy and the great elk we had first spotted 24 hours earlier, tucked into the edge of the oak brush. The old bull's antlers were even more massive in person than they had been in my camera yesterday evening, and as I knelt beside them to gather my breath and shake their hands, Chuck began telling me their story:

“**T**he ranch roads in the valley were clogged with heavy snow this morning, making it virtually impossible to reach the thick country that extends upward along the cliffs. And so Randy and I were forced to head out on foot, making for a high rock ledge where we could scan the pines and open meadows.

“The sun rose just as we rounded a steep rutted trail, and we were treated to an amazing sight – living proof of an elk's ability to surmount near-vertical terrain. There was a small patch of brown moving about three-fourths of the way up the cliff. Raising our binoculars, we spotted a trio of elk scaling an unbelievably steep outcrop, as if they were mountain goats.

They barely hesitated as they trotted and jumped and even hurdled fallen trees and massive boulders on their way to the top, where they finally stopped to look back over their tortuous route, as if basking in their own accomplishment.

“But the old bull from yesterday evening wasn't with them, and so we spent the rest of the morning alternately scrambling over the rough terrain and stopping to glass the woods and open meadows below. We finally paused in mid-afternoon for a quick bite from Randy's pack.

“Late in the afternoon we spotted a bachelor herd of five bulls about 400 yards up the canyon, feeding in a narrow, grassy amphitheater bordered on three sides by high granite walls. We slid across the rocks until we could set up and get a good look at them.

“It was at that moment that Randy peeked over the crest, and there, only 30 yards below, stood a young and very surprised branch-antlered bull staring up at us. He immediately wheeled and began racing away, triggering a stampede of elk up the far end of the canyon.

“And that's when we saw him.

“Halfway between us and the herd now going away, the great bull slowly rose from the thick oak brush and began easing up the ridge, not entirely certain what was happening.

“‘I think that's him!’ Randy exclaimed in a tense whisper as he peered intently through his spotting scope. ‘He looks really good – he's heavy and I can count seven . . . no *eight*, points on one side.’

“I could only see bits and pieces of him through my riflescope as he deftly weaved his way through the thick oak and piñon, but what I could see was certainly impressive – long, heavy ivory-tipped antlers that seemed to jut out in all directions.



“Quick, get set up for a shot!” Randy whispered, but I had already settled into position with my rifle on the shooting sticks.

“I’m not going to shoot unless he stops,” I told Randy.

“And would you believe it? That’s exactly what he did, pausing for a moment halfway up the slope, not at all sure what had triggered his companions to bolt. I’ll never forget him standing there, broadside in the warm afternoon light.

“He was looking down the steep ridge to the west when I fired, and he staggered and I hit him again and he went down for keeps. It took a half-hour to work our way across the canyon and back up to him. We knew we were going to need help getting him off the mountain, and so I stayed with the bull while Randy made his way back down the ridge to call you and Frank.”

A pair of bald eagles circled high above us in the final fading rays of sunlight as we moved off the mountain. The weather had warmed well into the upper 30s since yesterday morning’s single digits, and the edges of the drifts had begun to melt to the point that the old bull slid relatively easily down the softening trail. We finally got him to a point where Randy thought he could reach us with the truck, and by dark we had him back at the lodge.

We had a grand dinner that evening, made even grander by the warm fellowship of dear friends and the two great bulls who would forever live in our memories.

Chuck headed out the next morning for the four-hour drive to Albuquerque and his flight home. But I hung around for a few days to photograph the next blizzard bearing in from the north . . . back there in the borderlands where December comes early and stays long.

It is now late April and it’s warm and greening here in the mountains of East Tennessee. Spring turkey season is in full bloom. Chuck called from South Carolina a few minutes ago to let me know that his elk mount has just arrived from Jonas Brothers in Colorado. Mine showed up here at the house two days ago. As it turns out, both bulls were real veterans, their capes covered with scars old and new.

And now we look with great awe and affection at the two grizzled old warriors who adorn our respective walls, mine in my greatroom here in Watauga and Chuck’s in his conference room in Columbia. But from now on, whenever we turn our gaze toward them, no matter how warm our summers may be, we will surely feel the fresh winter winds in our faces and see the two old bulls as first we saw them back there in the San Juans, one at dawn and one at dusk, standing royal in the low shearing light of a cold December day. 

Editor’s note: To read the story of the author’s quest for his own big bull, see “Nineteen Years to Sunrise” in the July/August 2008 issue of *Sporting Classics*.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Rio Brazos Outfitters is the booking agent for the Quinlan Ranch, which offers outstanding hunts for elk, mule deer and Merriams turkeys. Rio Brazos also books hunts for whitetail and mule deer, wild turkey and pronghorns in west Texas and New Mexico. For reservations or to learn more, call 505-979-1349 or 505-231-8615. Or visit www.QuinlanRanchesNewMexico.com.



This bachelor herd of five mature bulls found a secluded high country ridge to their liking, as both a place to rest and to browse. Oak brush, pines and quaking aspen cover most of the mountains slopes in northern New Mexico. • Sporting Classics Publisher and Editor Chuck Wechsler took this huge 8x7 bull with a Kimber Model 8400 Classic in .300 WSM. The rifle shoots one-inch groups at 100 yards with Barnes 165-grain Triple Shok bullets from Federal Premium.

