

COW CALLS

BY GEORGE CARLSON

Anyone who has traveled in the higher elevations of the Northern Rocky Mountains knows that it's cloudy a lot. There's a lot of precipitation with snow, sleet, and rain throughout the year. In some places the amount of excess humidity causes moss to grow on shaded tree limbs in long strings. That's the way it was at our base camp set up along the east side of Montana's Hungry Horse Reservoir. Five guys from three states on a combination deer-bear-elk hunt were in for the wettest three weeks of our lives.



Figure 1. For 3 weeks we were camped half way down this 35-mile long reservoir.

A couple of years ago, our group decided we would set up camp along side of the Bob Marshall Wilderness area just south of Glacier National Park. Getting ready for a non-guided expedition like that takes a lot of planning. So much so that the lead-time was about two and a half years. Getting vacations, farm chores, and fishing help (one guy in the group is a owner of a commercial Atlantic fishing boat) to all fall in place is no easy task. A November hunt was planned with it ending on Thanksgiving weekend. So, there should be snow to help in tracking by that time of year, right? Well maybe not!! With an unusually warm fall and nights seldom dropping below 35 degrees F., the little snow we did get, didn't last long. Rain, rain, rain. We were averaging 8" a week .We could tell that by how fast the open containers we had around camp were filling up. After a week of getting soaked every day, we were all starting to get a little depressed. You just couldn't keep anything dry. If it weren't for a little toy I had along, that mountain vacation hunt would have been the worst time this flatlander has ever had.



Figure 2. One of the three different types of cow calls we had along.

Toy is what I called it, because it made the trip fun. The people that make it call it a cow call. Cow call you say? Yes cow call. Cow elk that is. We've all heard of duck or crow or fox calls. I can remember reading stories of Indians using birch bark for moose and little wood boxes for turkey. This little doodad I got, was just a piece of folded plastic with a couple of rubber bands on it. For me, it made a wet dismal hunting trip into a unique experience.

About six months before our grand adventure, I read an article about some hunting guides who came up with a gadget that sounds like a cow elk. I sent an order to Cabela's for the call and a book by these same guys that had patented the call. The book goes into detail on how and when to use cow calls plus a lot of information on elk habits. The bull calls are used mainly in the early Fall during the rut (breeding season), but what can you use after the rut? In late October and November hunting season is still on so a cow or calf call is the answer. We brought three different calls along thinking that if one didn't sound quite right, another might do the trick. Some hunters that lived in the area had never heard about the cow calls before. When we tried them out in their camp, they said they've heard that same sound before but mistook it for birds or other animals in the area not thinking it could possibly be elk. While out in elk country, and even at home the book advises a lot of practice. They said the call will work on other game also, so don't be afraid to use it often. As I found out, they knew their stuff!



Figure 3. Survival tents used on our first Oregon elk hunt in the Wallowa Mountains, Whitman National Forest.

In Oregon when I was still in the service, 25 years before this trip, I hunted elk twice in the same year. When we left for our first two-week hunt none of us greenhorns even knew what elk tracks or elk dropping looked like. Opening day, I came across a wounded cow. I dispatched her and notified hunters in a neighboring camp it was available. They had a cow tag, and we agreed ahead of time that if the got a bull, we'd trade animals. As it turned out, all we got was a jug of whiskey out of the deal. The sounds and sights of the mountains in northeastern Oregon were all new to us. The calls of unknown critters are a blur now. But I do remember hearing high-pitched calls, but I always thought it was hawks or eagles. To my untuned ear, a bull elk or cow call was just another noise in the woods. I guess as a farm kid, I expected a big animal like that to sound more like a cow, not a bird. I did shoot a cow elk on the second trip to help co-hunter fill his tag. The Co-hunter was a civilian working in our shop on base and has been hunting in that area many times before, but has never been able to fill his tag. He wanted to make sure he didn't get skunked like before, so he said "shoot anything that come along". Back then party hunting was legal. I'm not sure if it's still that way or not.

On this Montana trip, we learned quickly how identify the different tracks left in the wet soil, Moose, bobcat, bear, deer, elk, even mountain lion. We'd visited a camp several miles away one afternoon and the 'ol wrangler that was feeding the spare horses and taking care of the place mentioned seeing bear tracks in camp that morning. With both black & grizzly are in the area, getting up and walking to the throne in the dark can make a believer out of you. Packing a handgun was a must with a flashlight in hand looking for the facilities. When it's still two hours to sunrise,

it's an eerie feeling when you're walking on the trail back from doing your duty and all of a sudden the batteries in your flashlight say goodnight, and it gets very, very dark. We Scandinavians say UFDA!!



Figure 4. Our home for three weeks was this old school bus made into a camper. The driver seat was removed and a homemade sheet metal wood burner installed. The smoke stack went straight up through the roof. Two bunk beds in the back and a small couch was a tight fit for 5 hunters & their gear. On the left is a horse trailer used as a kitchen. Everything needed to be covered because of the constant precipitation. Just in case, the wheels had chains installed when it was parked.

I was in charge of armament and ammunition. Rounding up enough big caliber handguns for 5 guys to carry, just in case, was one of the first things I did. Loading up 300 rounds of ammo for them posed no big problem either. I was taking two 50/70 rifles, and the other 4 guys all were going to carry 30-06's. So I proceeded to assemble 500rds of '06 ammo. If that seems like a lot, remember all the guns had to be sighted in for those Nosler partition bullets for hunting, and a quantity of Remington Bronze points for sighting in and practice. Both bullets were 180grain and shot the same place on a target in all guns. To familiar themselves with the handguns everyone was encouraged to fire at least 25rds of pistol ammo. I'll tell you up front none of us are hand gunners. They all double-checked their rifles also at my range at home before we left. As it turned out the gun I took as a spare, a 308 Model 70 Winchester, got used after my Nephew's scope got fogged up from all the rain.

The first animal I used the call on was a fair sized 4X4 mule deer buck. While walking up on a steep ridge with switchbacks in 4" of new soft snow, I was scanning the countryside and happened to look back towards my vehicle which was about 400yds. Away. The deer was not more than 50feet from the station wagon walking in the opposite direction. As soon as it heard me call, it turned and looked up straight at me. Our non-resident tags allowed one deer, and as I hadn't seen any elk, I thought why not! The only problem was, the gun I was carrying. A 50/70 Springfield with a 440gr. slug and sighted in at 100yds. For 20 some years I've used a 50/70 Springfield to take all my deer the South Dakota flatlands, but it isn't a long-range outfit by any stretch of the imagination. Doing some quick trajectory figuring and Kentucky windage, I fired and missed. At that distance I had to aim at least two feet over his back. I didn't see where the bullet hit, and the deer just stood motionless still looking straight at me. Reloading the trapdoor 16 times a minute like the old army manuals state just doesn't go that easy. No mater how you prepare, with gloves, candy bars, and whatever else you have to fumble through to get your next loaded round out of your pocket it isn't easy. You can tell I'm really prepared to hunt. Before I fired the second time I blew the call again. At 250yds.the 440gr. 50/70 is supposed to drop at least 24" but at this distance and angle how much higher do you aim? Well I tried 2 1/2' over and still nothing. What the heck is wrong, I know the deer hears the call but it just stands there. After I fired the third round the deer just slowly trotted away out of sight. I guess the animals haven't caught on to what that "boom" means.



Figure 5. Someone hollered “I see something” and everyone bails out of the car. Big animals stand out like a sore thumb in the snowy mountainsides. Driving my old Dodge station wagon up in these high mountain logging trails required chains on the wheels. We had a couple of scoop shovels along that were used a lot.

The most memorable incident for me was while walking down a steep logging trail with a half-inch of wet sloppy snow. Feeling slightly depressed and thoroughly soaked I was blowing the call softly. Just looking side to side up and down the ridges into the thick pole pines not expecting to see much of anything. All of a sudden right on the road just 15 feet in front of me was this 20" creature sitting in the middle of the road and staring into my eyes. At first glance I thought it looked like a Great Horned Owl with its big eyes and long ears and mottled body color of gray and brown mixed almost looked like feathers. The way it was sitting, I couldn't see any legs or feet the way they were tucked in close to its body. I knew it was a bobcat but it had a striking resemblance of an owl. Why the heck was this big cat sitting still staring into my eyes. The cow-call was the reason of course. God only knows what that cat was thinking. Elk sounds weren't new to it I'm sure, but when that sound comes from a two-legged critter that he's probably never seen before, it made him stop and wonder.



Figure 6. This is similar to what the cat looked like.

It probably was as just puzzled as I was. I'm sure it didn't know that it should be afraid of humans. There I was standing with my big .50 caliber rifle in my arms and a .45 auto on my hip. But there's no way I'm going to shoot an animal I don't intend to eat. I just wanted to enjoy the moment. I would say a good solid 2 minutes passed without any movement at all, from me, or that critter! Oh God I wished I had my Minolta with me. I blew the call a couple more times just to watch the reaction I'd get. Finally the cat got tired of sitting staring at me and stood up turned around and trotted into the some of the thickest cover you can imagine. By the way, the call has a kind of a house cat sound. With a loud heeow instead of meow is how the manufacturers describe it

Using the call on a bull elk really made my heart race. A moving patch of yellow orange got my attention, in some thick pole pines. So thick in fact that only about 6" of hide was visible. That color had to be an elk, but I had to drop to

my knees to see under the pine branches. Then using my 7X35 field glasses, I could focus out the branches, and focus in and look for any horns. He was only a small two-year-old spike, but a legal elk, and beggars can't be choosers. Only part of the head was visible. A pair of binoculars can be used to see through obstructions that eyes alone can't. He was about 75yds away and slowly walking towards me as I started to blow on the cow call. I pulled the hammer back on the Springfield, getting ready to shoot, but the brush and snags were so thick there was no way to snake even a big 50-caliber slug through it. All this time I had the call pinched in my teeth and blowing on it in intervals of 30 seconds or so. At 65yds the bull seemed almost on top of me but I still couldn't get a good enough sight picture to shoot. Still on my knees, I started to shake with excitement, and holding a gun up still trying to blow the call all at the same time when using the binoculars, just isn't the way it supposed to work! At 45yds I guess he smelled my breakfast. He spooked and took a 180 off in the opposite direction. The authors of the call book say keep calling, because even if you shoot sometimes they'll come back. I hadn't shot so I figured why not keep blowing. I did, for about ten minutes or so, but to no avail. My chance for an elk that year was gone.



Figure 7. You do what you gotta do when the pickup is 5 miles on the other side of the mountain, and no communication. Even with the plastic on the floor it was all three guys could do to slide this bull in. Note his feet sticking out the window.

20% success on elk is the norm for Montana. We were right in there with two of our five guys scoring a hit on the same bull. As it turned out that spare 308 Winchester I mentioned earlier, was used to bring down that bull. Then the work starts. Gutting, hauling, skinning, a dead animal this size isn't for slackers. All hands pitch in and get the meat carved up big quarters for the long 1200-mile trip back to South Dakota. The New Jersey Hunters still had a 2600-mile ahead of them.



Figure 8. All hands pitch in.

Heck, Buffalo Bill used a 1866 Springfield 50/70 he called Lucretia Borgia to shoot buffalo for the U.S. Army. He supplied meat by the ton. The gun must have been wicked for him to give it that name. Some day I want to prove to myself that my 50/70 1866 or a 1868 Springfield will bring down an elk. Maybe next trip, but any time I get into elk country, even if I'm not hunting, I'll take my cow call along. You can't believe how much fun it is.



Figure 9. This is my modified 1868 Springfield I carried in Montana for elk. It's taken many South Dakota deer.

While deer hunting in eastern South Dakota I've used that same cow call with varying results. From a very high tree stand, a red fox walked under me while I was cow calling and found a temporary bed under a log, not 20 feet from me. All the time I kept blowing the same call that's designed to attract elk. Again I wished for my Minolta camera. I would like to be able to share that vision in my minds eye, because it still brings a smile of satisfaction to me.