


# SKULL



AN OUTFITTER'S JOURNAL

BOOM!

MAKING  
THE  
MARK

ED'S  
**MUZZ**  
BULL

A SANDY HILLS HUNTING PUBLICATION

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# SPANISH

# GOLD

ED BIANCHI • ELK



I booked a muzzleloader elk hunt with Sandy Hills Hunting Company in 2019 as soon as I found out they had successfully secured several elk leases in Southern Colorado. I had met Jeremy Fiscus several years prior while hunting mule deer near Saguache. Jeremy was already quite well known for consistently guiding hunters to enormous

mule deer bucks. In 2016 and 2017, I had the opportunity to book rifle antelope hunts with Sandy Hills on the plains of Colorado. Each time I killed trophy antelope (approximately 82 inches) the first day of my hunt. My experience was excellent, and I was excited for an opportunity to now be able to hunt elk with the crew.

In mid-September, I arrived in a small town in Southern Colorado the day before my 2019 muzzleloader hunt. Jeremy and Neil met me and helped get my gear upstairs to a spacious 4-bedroom, 2 bath loft. The accommodations were excellent and approximately only 15-20 minutes from the ranch we would be hunting.

The next morning we ate breakfast and drove through the dark to the ranch. We only went a short distance past the entry gate, when Neil said we were going to work the lower scrub oak patches, as they had been productive in the past. We could hear some faint elk bugles in the distance, farther up the mountain, but nothing close. Neil noted the bulls were not very vocal yet and tended to bugle later in the morning as they got closer to their beds.

As the sun rose, we carefully picked our way through the scrub brush, which was interrupted frequently by grassy openings and small springs. Elk sign was plentiful. After about two hours, we started uphill. As we climbed, the scrub oak gave way to numerous large grassy meadows surrounded by black timber. I thought at any

minute we would run into elk. It was gorgeous. At about 9am, we heard a bugle about a half mile away. A short time later, we heard another bugle indicating the bulls were moving up the mountain, presumably to bed in the thick black timber. Neil knew of some trails that we could use to follow our chosen bull to his bed. The hike was uphill and the trail system helped us gain ground. The bull would occasionally bugle and was accompanied by cow calls – a great sign that we were close and also chasing a mature herd bull.

Being a flatlander with a faulty knee replacement, I started to wish that I was 20 pounds lighter and 10 years younger (Note- I am not making excuses, just stating the facts like Joe Friday on the TV show Dragnet; once again dating myself). But Neil was obviously watching me because he skillfully pushed me when I needed it and took rest when appropriate. Clear signs that he is a true professional. We keep pursuing the bull up the mountain, gaining ground, but clearly the bull was on a mission to get to thick timber and bed down with his cows. Just as my stamina was



faltering, we heard, and immediately saw, several cows about 75 yards uphill. The bull bugled off to the side of the cows, so we quickly moved positions and watched as the cows moved away, slowly and undisturbed. Although we heard the bull again, we never laid eyes on him in the thick timber. The thermals were switching, so we stopped, listened and adjusted our strategy to accommodate mother nature. It was now about 3 hours into the stalk and the elk were still pushing up the mountain which was historically unusual. Neil mentioned that typically they would have already bedded. Neil and I decide to leave the area, go back to the truck, get some lunch and make a new plan. We walked downhill for a good distance, finally reaching the truck. It had warmed up considerably. Heavy with sweat, we proceeded to head into town for lunch and some rest before the evening hunt.

Following a brief rest, we returned to the ranch, drove past the scrub oak, and stopped just short of the large series of meadows we had seen earlier. It was still warm as we hiked along the edge of the largest meadow. We settled in to wait for the sun to get lower on the horizon, hopeful elk would start moving into the meadows to feed. It was quiet for the next 1.5 hours. About 1 hour before dark, we heard a bull elk bugle on the mountain – perhaps the herd bull we pursued earlier in the day. Intermittently the bull bugled and was slow working its way down the mountainside. We moved higher along the edge of the meadow, where it interceded with black timber hoping to ambush the herd. Time was passing and it looked like dark would end the hunt before the herd got to us. As it neared dark, the bull suddenly bugled approximately 100 yards away at about the same elevation we were standing, but in the thick timber. Thinking the herd was heading for the lower meadow, Neil directed me to an old road so we could move closer. We could clearly hear the bull bugling and the cows calling to each other. We waited in the timber hoping they would pass by allowing for a good shot. We could hear them walking nearby when darkness took away any chance of a shot. We slowly backed away from the herd, not wanting to spook them. On the dark walk back, we could hear more bulls bugling near a large pond on the ranch. Tomorrow would be another day and my anticipation was high.





Before first light on the second morning, we drove thru the ranch gate to the lower meadow. We stood outside the truck in the dark listening for elk bugling, deciding which direction to start the hunt. Just before dawn, we heard a bugle about ¾ mile away near the large pond. We worked our way through the brush and arrived at the edge of the pond at first light. We sat down in some thicket, scanning the area for the bull. Nothing was there. The far side of the pond was about 150 yards away – a doable shot for a muzzleloader with open sights, but definitely not a sure thing for me unless I had a solid rest. We waited with anticipation, but the bull was already up on the hillside in the black timber. The bull called occasionally for the next hour, so we decided to try and sneak up on the bull. As we got closer, the bull suddenly bugled on the backside of the hill, indicating to Neil it had dropped into the adjacent steep canyon. We decide to discontinue this pursuit rather than spook the bull. Neil thought he was headed to a different pond on the far side of the ranch and it would be better to approach him from another direction.

We spent the rest of the morning hiking the mountain, through the black timber above the large meadows where we had seen the first morning's bull, but to no avail. On one of the trails, we came across a recently dead bull elk, which a bear had been feeding on (cause of death unknown). The 6x5 bull scored 346" and would have been a solid 360" if he had a matching 5<sup>th</sup> tine. We hunted hard through the morning, but the temps were up and the elk vocalizations were down.

For the evening hunt, we drove to the bottom of the lower meadow and started hiking uphill. It was fairly warm so we didn't expect any activity until closer to dark. Slowly we worked our way through the edge of several meadows, and then, suddenly in the distance we heard a bugle once again near the large pond. We decided to try and reach the pond before running out of shooting light. Just as we reached the pond it was too dark, but the bull was bugling nearby along with several cows. We hiked uphill in the dark and finally got to the truck. On the drive out just

below the ranch house in an irrigated pasture, a herd of about 20 elk, with what appeared to be a shooter bull, could be seen in the headlights. We drove past the herd trying not to disturb them on our way back to town. That night we discussed several potential strategies for the next morning but decided to stay low.

It was still dark as we drove to the ranch gate on the morning of the third day. The anticipation was high due to the sighting of a good herd bull the previous night. Neil had already planned on parking just inside the ranch gate to start the hunt. As we got out of the truck, we could hear several bulls bugling at different locations. This morning the bulls were finally very vocal. One bull was bugling near the open pasture - likely the bull from the previous evening. Numerous other bulls were bugling throughout the ranches open meadows and suddenly, just a couple hundred yards away, another bull bugled followed by cow talk. We decided to attempt the close bull and at least have a look at him.

We anxiously waited for light for what seemed to be an eternity. We did not want to walk into the elk herd in the dark and blow them out. Fortunately, the wind was blowing in our favor, so we decided to be patient. As the sun rose, I realized we were near the location where we started the hunt on the first morning. Finally, there was enough light and we slowly moved toward the herd. At this location, thick patches of scrub oaks were the dominant vegetation, giving way to small openings of grass. The draws were generally filled with lush grass and springs. The bull and cows were calling regularly and were only slightly uphill and moving laterally across the slope to our left. Neil told me they were moving to a deep drainage and we could utilize a certain trail to put us in position. Away we went!

We slowly moved up the trail toward the herd. After a couple hundred yards, Neil saw the herd at the edge of a clearing. He only got a glimpse of the bull and wasn't sure how big it was, but could tell he was wide. Numerous cows were moving through the oak thicket, so we paused beside a large scrub oak and Neil coaxed the bull in with a bugle. Suddenly, through the branches of the







trees, we saw the bull walking down the trail toward us. Neil whispered me to get ready, so we positioned the shooting sticks and I aligned my open-sights CVA Accurra muzzleloader (scopes are not legal in Colorado during the muzzleloader hunt). The bull continued to walk toward us, I could see that he was a great 6x6 bull – definitely a shooter, but he needed to clear the tree for me to get a shot. The shot would be less than 50 yards. Suddenly, the bull turned around before clearing the tree and walked straight away toward a lone cow. He did not seem aware of our presence, but anyone who has hunted bull elk know that they somehow possess the uncanny ability to avoid unverified danger at the last minute. We watched the bull slowly walk off.

Once the bull was out of sight, we started after him. We walked about 25 yards when to our left, out of the scrub oaks, 2-3 cow elk suddenly bumped uphill toward the last location of the bull. Neil quickly cow-called a few times to

calm the cows and the herd - it worked! We started to once again move toward the bull's last position, but frankly I thought the odds of seeing him again were low. Neil was encouraging and suggested that we be patient and stick with it. Neil then suddenly stopped and up ahead in a small clearing several cows were observed just inside a tree line. I moved along side of Neil and put my muzzleloader on the shooting sticks. From our right, a bull came into the clearing and stopped broadside looking in our direction. Neil didn't have a good vantage of the bull from his position and couldn't fully determine if it was the same bull we had just encountered. He was wide, but his points blurred into the oak brush behind him. Neil said he couldn't be certain. He left it to me to decide whether to shoot at that moment. From my position, I was almost certain it looked like the same bull we had seen previously. I could just make out width and a long 4<sup>th</sup> point, but only got a quick glimpse, and given the situation, we didn't dare use our binoculars. I quickly decided

this was the shooter bull, so I lined up the open sights and squeezed off a shot. The bull turned his shoulder in at the shot, spun and ran off, but his stride seemed to be off. Excitingly, I asked Neil if I hit the bull. He thought it was a hit but wanted to investigate the bulls last known location.

I will steal an old line from the book/movie "A Tale of Two Cities", every time I shoot at an animal I think "it is the best of times, and it is the worst of times". What I mean by that is I am totally excited about the hunt and shot (I could feel the adrenaline in my stomach and taste it in my mouth), but at the same time somewhat apprehensive and definitely anxious to verify that I made a good shot and the animal would be found quickly. The last thing you ever want to happen is make a bad shot and lose an animal on a weak blood trail. Despite my shaking hands, I reloaded and then we quietly moved to the spot where the bull was last standing, scanning the area for his presence. As we got to the spot, a herd of about 20 cows and

several small bulls were moving about 150 yards out, crossing a large clearing from left to right and unaware of our presence. The bull was not in the herd. Suddenly a small bull unsuccessfully attempted to mount a cow. I thought the bull must be hit or he would be with the herd, and certainly would have not tolerated the smaller bull's action without exerting his dominance. As the herd went out of sight, we starting looking for blood.

At the edge of the clearing, there was a thick patch of scrub oaks 8-10 feet high. There were three trails leaving the clearing any of which the bull could have travelled. We thoroughly searched each trail for blood. Nothing. I was starting to get nervous and that dreaded tightness in the stomach could be felt. I asked Neil why we haven't found any blood. Although my first muzzleloader hunt, I thought a .50 caliber bullet would result in an extensive blood trail. Neil calmly informed me that he had often seen an elk





hit with a muzzleloader (and other projectiles) not bleed right off even with great placement – many variables to consider. It's best to stay neutral and take the situation as it comes, be diligent, and keep after it - he said. This certainly was not what I expected, and my anxiety only increased.

We carefully proceeded down two of the trails looking for blood on the ground and vegetation. No luck. On the third trail, Neil found a penny-sized drop of blood on the ground, and I silently let out a sigh of relief - finally we had proof the bull was hit and we found his escape route. We slowly picked our way down the trail finding an increasing blood trail. We approached a small draw, which was open with lush grass and scattered brush on both sides, and a spring in the bottom. As we peered around a scrub oak, Neil saw the bull laying down with his head drooping across the draw about 50-60 yards. I got my muzzleloader up on the shooting sticks and hit the bull behind the shoulder. The excitement was overwhelming. The bull was indeed a shooter!

Neil went back to retrieve a Ranger and was able to drive right to the downed elk. Jeremy and his hunter arrived shortly afterwards, having received a text from Neil about the kill. It sure does pay to have experienced professionals who have intimate knowledge of the elk and ranch,

not only to put you in position to be successful, but to also deal with the elk once it is down. The elk was skinned and broken down in short order. We loaded the truck with the meat, cape, and antlers, and headed to town. It was not a coincidence that I killed my best elk with such a great company. The memory of this hunt will be with me for a lifetime. I am and will forever be thankful to Neil and Jeremy at Sandy Hills Hunting Company.

I have been hunting big game for almost 50 years and have had the incredible opportunity to experience numerous unguided and guided hunts throughout the western U.S., Alaska, Yukon, and Africa. I hunted with Sandy Hills Hunting Company because of the quality Jeremy, Neil and the rest of the crew represent. Their discriminating selection of ranches to lease truly provide trophy opportunities, their accommodations are great, and the food was exceptional. And quite frankly, they are a group of friendly, down-to-earth guys that thoroughly enjoy hunting trophy-class animals and doing the absolute most to make sure their hunters are successful. You can't beat that!

I did the only logical thing a sane man would do for 2020 – book another Colorado elk hunt with Sandy Hills Hunting Company!