

Archery Hunting for **ELK**

Success requires good strategy

Story by Art Lander Jr.

Photos by Dan Crank

NOT MANY ARCHERS have taken an elk in Kentucky. Only 172 of the 2,204 elk harvested in the state since 2005 were taken with a bow or crossbow. That's likely to change this year, as 320 of the 800 quota elk hunt permits were awarded to bow and crossbow hunters.

While rifle hunting typically involves taking a long shot at a cow or bull that's in the open, archery requires an up close and personal hunt. Successful elk hunting with a bow requires hunters to get within 40 yards or less – a major challenge when elk bed in the open and dozens of eyes may be on the lookout for danger.

“With bow hunters it's the distance factor,” said Prestonsburg elk guide Trinity Shepherd. “The biggest obstacle is getting close enough for a shot.”

Clark County resident David Banks personally knows the challenge of hunting elk with a bow in Kentucky. Banks, one of nearly a dozen successful archers guided by Shepherd over the past six years, took a cow elk with a bow during the 2009 season.

“I didn't make any equipment changes from what I normally hunt deer with,” said Banks, who has taken numerous whitetails in Kentucky during nearly 40 years of bow hunting. “My bow is set at 62 pounds draw weight. I shoot carbon arrows and a fixed blade 100-grain broadhead.”

But he did a few things differently to ready himself for elk season. “I figured shots would be longer, so I practiced out to 50 yards,” he said. “I shot my elk at 18 yards, but you have to be confident at longer ranges.”

Banks also scouted extensively to learn how elk behave in the mountains. “I had never elk hunted before and my hunting area

was hilly, compared to where I live,” he explained. “It takes time to learn how elk use the terrain. They move around a lot, and as the day progresses, it seems like they move into thicker cover.”

Kentucky's bull elk frequently remained in the open during the initial years of elk restoration, which began in 1997. Shepherd, who serves as the naturalist at Jenny Wiley State Resort Park, has observed the changing behavior of Kentucky's elk while conducting the park's elk viewing tours.

“There's been a big transition in bull behavior since I started guiding,” he said. “During the rut, our elk are acting like elk out West. They're more secluded and elusive. Bulls will be out early in the morning, then go back into the timber during the day and won't come out into the open again until right at dark.”

Hunting strategies for bull elk center on the annual mating season. This begins when herd bulls gather harems of cows in late September. The actual breeding commences as cows come into estrus in October.

“When I'm hunting with an archer, I prefer to spend more time in the timber, and

try to catch a bull when it is coming in or going out,” said Shepherd.

Shepherd uses cow calls to bring a bull into the range of the archer. He only uses a bugle call – and sparingly – to locate a bull if it hangs up out of range.

He positions the hunter in front.

“I like to be close, so I can communicate with the hunter, to help judge distances or the size of the elk, especially if the archer is new to elk hunting,” he said. “Nine out of 10 times a satellite bull (subordinate males that accompany the herd bull) will come out first. The big bull will be in the middle or at the back of the herd.”

Cow elk hunting with a bow or crossbow, however, can be more challenging than hunting a bull. “Cow hunting is difficult,” Shepherd noted. “Because after the firearms bull hunts, cows are leery and keep a watchful eye.”

Bull elk season coincides with the rut. Cow archery season starts Oct. 15, after breeding ends. This is when cows begin congregating in large herds, said Tina Brunjes, deer and elk program coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

There are two main strategies for bow hunting cows – spot

and stalk, or setting up on a travel corridor.

Spot and stalk involves finding a herd of cows, then using the terrain and prevailing winds to sneak close enough for a shot. “We had several close encounters with bulls, but opportunities for shots at cows were slim,” recalled Banks. “Getting close is what's difficult.”

Hunting travel corridors successfully relies on unraveling the daily routine of cows moving between bedding and feeding areas. “You have to position yourself in front of the herd and stay hidden,” said Shepherd. “If you know the terrain, they can get right in your lap.”

This strategy becomes more challenging as the season progresses, since cows spend less time in the timber and stay out in the open more. “On blustery cold, windy days they will always be on the warmer slopes, usually bedded down,” said Shepherd.

Hunters with 2011 season archery permits may not hunt during the four weeks of firearms elk seasons. Firearms hunters may not archery hunt elk outside the seven-day firearms season. Hunters with bull permits may take any elk with visible antlers.

For season dates and other information about elk hunting in Kentucky, visit the department's website at fw.ky.gov. ■

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