A LITTLE MADNESS BETWEEN FRIENDS

by Tovar Cerulli

Matt and I met a decade ago and, courtesy of some strange, still-mysterious alchemy, forged an unlikely bond.

PHOTO: DONALD M. JONES

I hadn't moved swiftly enough.

Matt had spotted three bulls and pointed to a nearby pine. Unfamiliar with elk behavior, I moved too cautiously, reaching the tree and bracing my rifle just as they began to run. With a cow call, Matt stopped them. For several seconds, I had a bull broadside at 120 yards, but branches obscured his vitals. Then he and the others moved up through the trees and disappeared.

Rattled, I lowered my rifle. I hadn't expected to see elk so close so soon. An hour into the hunt, I already knew I was out of my depth.

Unlike Matt, I didn't grow up hunting and didn't know elk or the Rockies. I started bumbling around the Vermont woods with a rifle in my early 30s. Now, 20 years later, after many trials and more errors, I often tagged whitetails. Here, I felt clueless.

We tracked the bulls as they paralleled a Forest Service road, hoofprints crisp in fresh snow, but never saw them again. If they had been in our viewshed, we would have known. Thanks to a wildfire that raged across this Colorado landscape three years earlier, we could spot elk on hillsides once cloaked in dark timber, but now studded with scorched trunks and carpeted with lodgepole pine seedlings.

Glassing later that morning, we spotted three bulls on a far ridge. That afternoon, we picked out two more across a sheer canyon. In the fire's wake, lush grasses and forbs had kept elk here all year. Matt had never seen so many.

Shortly after sunset, as we descended into a steep draw, a big bull ran upslope 100 yards ahead. At the sound of Matt's cow call, he paused. Rifle firmly braced, I stared through the scope at narrow strips of tawny elk hide between tree trunks. Then he stepped into an opening.

I put the crosshairs behind his shoulder and fired.

The bull dropped instantly, slid, and half-rose on front feet as he vanished into thick brush. We heard crashing, then silence. Though surprised he had tried to get up, I felt good about the shot.

We circled the brush, sure we would find the elk down, if not dead. We found only tracks and a few tiny droplets of blood that we would have missed without snow.

We didn't follow far in the fading light before Matt suggested we back off until morning. If the bull was mortally wounded and heard no pursuit, he might bed down nearby and breathe his last. If we pushed him, he might go a mile or more.

I knew he was right. Sick at heart, I agreed we should wait.

Other hunters had told me something like this would happen eventually. For two decades, though, I had prided myself on quickly recovering every animal I shot. Until now.

My estimation of myself as a hunter lurched downward. I had surely fallen in Matt's eyes as well. Yet, as we headed back in the dark, I felt grateful to be with him, a hunter who knew me well and understood the regret roiling within. In my chest, I could feel the embrace of our friendship, fierce and forgiving.

Our friendship makes no sense if you believe the divisive narrative that dominates the American political and cultural landscape. Matt grew up in a deeply religious, deeply conservative, hardscrabble, rural community in the mountains of Colorado. I was raised in New England as an atheist. Most of my parents' friends were intellectual hippies, my politics had taken a hard left turn in college, and I'd spent a decade as a vegan, before starting to come to grips with my body's nutritional needs and the ethical complexities of eating. Our differences, so the partisan story goes, place us on opposite sides of an uncrossable chasm.

Early in each of our lives, though, a seed of curiosity and compassion had sprouted and taken root. For Matt, it was the biblical mandate to love all people unconditionally—a teaching he heard preached far more than he saw practiced. How can you love everyone if you avoid people who don't talk, act and believe as you do? For me, it was an instinctive belief in the power of empathetic imagination.

By the time we met a decade ago at a session on hunting for food during The Wildlife Society's annual conference, we were both committed to bridging the chasm, and—courtesy of some strange, still-mysterious alchemy—forged an unlikely bond.

Back at the cabin, maintained by Matt and his family for backwoods recreation and miraculously spared by wildfire, I went to the woodstove. "Let me build the fire. That's one thing I won't screw up."

That evening, Matt's listening ear eased my distress, as did stories he shared of other hunts gone awry. Still, neither of us slept well that night.

We were back in the draw at first light, dawn painting navy clouds with streaks of salmon. As we tracked the bull up and over steep terrain, occasional flecks of blood dwindled to nothing. He never bedded down.

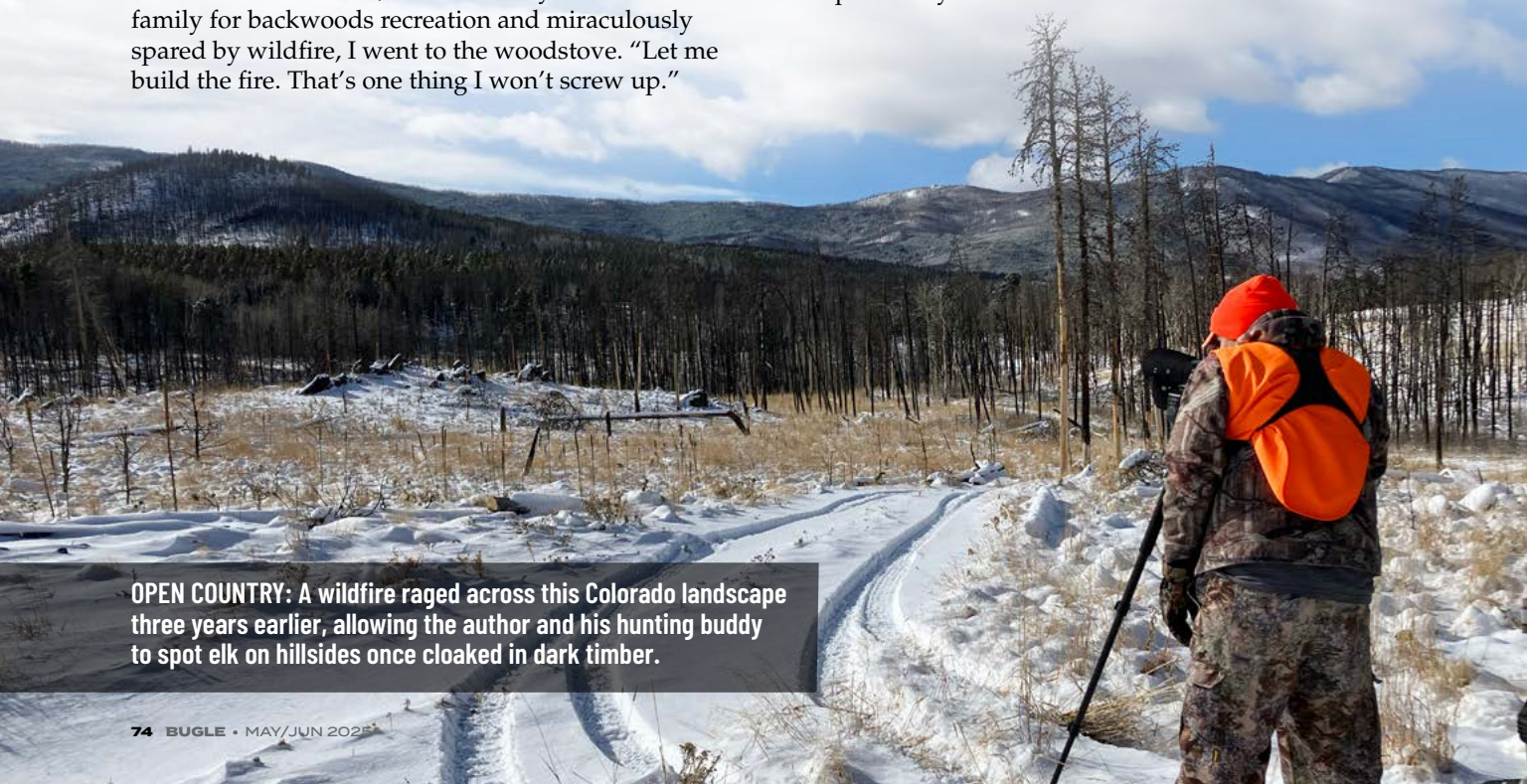
After a mile, we stopped to talk. Ahead, the bull's tracks swept steadily upward into a big saddle leading to the next basin. Clearly, he was not mortally injured. We concluded that my bullet must have grazed his spine, paralyzing his hind legs for mere seconds. The small wound must have closed quickly. Given the evenness of his gait, the steep slopes he had ascended, and his 13-hour lead, we felt sure we would never catch up.

I was simultaneously relieved and shaken. *What had gone wrong?* Recalling that final image through my scope, I saw the crosshairs on a spot mid-body, behind the bull's shoulder. Nowhere near his spine.

Back at the cabin, I placed a bullet dead center in a target at 100 yards. My rifle and scope were fine. I had blown the shot, or something had deflected it.

Either way, opening day had started with one good chance to take a bull and ended with another. I had missed both. Hunters wait years for chances like those.

It had been 16 years since I first applied for a preference point. Another friend had encouraged me to start banking points, but it wasn't until nearly a decade later—in the crucible of my relationship with Matt, talking and hiking these mountains together—that elk hunting morphed from fanciful notion to real possibility.



OPEN COUNTRY: A wildfire raged across this Colorado landscape three years earlier, allowing the author and his hunting buddy to spot elk on hillsides once cloaked in dark timber.

Now, here we were. This might be the only elk hunt of my life. And it wasn't going well.

Discouraged, I wondered if my eastern hunting skills were of any use in pursuit of elk. I'm good at waiting, still-hunting and operating in close quarters. Absent the opportunity to glass, I'm also used to acting on nothing more than probabilities and guesswork. None of that seemed relevant here.

The next morning, we found fresh tracks in the steep draw. We also found an answer: a dead Douglas fir. In the gathering dusk of that first evening, neither of us had noticed its thin, dark branches. We guessed that my bullet had struck one and angled upward, nicking the bull's back. I pictured how it could have gone sideways instead, puncturing his gut. It appeared I had been lucky.

The odds were pathetic. Pursuing the unattainable, he felt sure I would end up disappointed and exhausted, facing a long hike back in the dark.

On an open plateau, we found more elk tracks and hiked a grassy ridge, full sun softening the snow underfoot. In a lodgepole stand spared by fire, we came across a maze of cottontail and bobcat tracks and a small five-point shed. Above it, a bull had rubbed larger antlers against slender pines, stripping bark nine feet high. I picked up the shed, delighted. When I began pursuing deer two decades ago, I never imagined hunting outside New England, let alone this far afield. If I brought home only this antler, I would be content.

After lunch, we passed back through the steep draw. Given all the tracks we had seen there and on the plateau above, we would sit those areas that evening. Unless another possibility materialized.

Glassing the basin where bulls abounded two days earlier, we saw nothing. Even with his spotting scope—double-checking that two far-off lumps were, in fact, rocks—Matt spied no elk.

Then, on what would have been his last pass, he picked out a distant raghorn. Then two more. Scanning with binoculars, I picked out a fourth, larger bull. In the spotting scope, that elk came into focus as a pot-bellied giant with long, sweeping antlers, six or seven points on each side. The four were spread out in a line, walking slowly.

Examining the area, we found a sloped meadow ahead of them, where three more bulls were feeding: two big six-points and a second giant. We stood admiring them. What a privilege it was just to see such magnificent animals.

Then we started to talk. Could we get to them? It seemed far-fetched.

As the crow flies, they were nearly a mile away. As the human walks, they were much farther. And a canyon stretched between us.

We noted a rocky ridge we might reach, but Matt estimated we would still be 600 yards from the bulls. And the afternoon was deadly quiet. Even if we didn't snap twigs, the snow underfoot would make noise. We had less than two-and-a-half hours of light left.

Matt shook his head. All he could see was "Hail Mary after Hail Mary," a long series of improbabilities.

His hesitation, he would later say, was complicated. Alone, he would have pursued immediately. With me in tow, he was resisting temptation. Once committed, he knew he would enter a single-minded, predatory mode. Chasing a once-in-a-lifetime bull, he wouldn't care how I was experiencing the hunt. That worried him. And the odds were pathetic. Pursuing the unattainable, he felt sure I would end up disappointed and exhausted, facing a long hike back in the dark.

It made more sense, he said, to sit the draw and plateau as planned. We could always come back tomorrow morning, try to relocate this group, and devise a plan.

I figured he was right. Going after these bulls was probably a fool's errand. But I couldn't let it go.

I circled back to the rocky ridge we had eyed.

How long, I asked, would it take to reach the top? Forty minutes, he estimated.

We took turns watching the bulls through the scope, reckoning the odds.

Finally, Matt turned to me. "What do you want to do?"

The hunt teetered on a knife-edge.

My eyes caught his. "Let's do it."

In a heartbeat, everything changed. Inside us both, a coiled energy unleashed.

As we dropped into the canyon, I turned to him: "What's a little madness between friends?" In two hours, maybe less, it would be too dark to shoot.

We descended swiftly, along the flank of one slope and straight down another. Soon, we reached the base of the rocky ridge. The ascent, though not long, was steep. For months, carrying a weighted pack, I had been hiking hills a mile-plus closer to sea level. The training paid off. Focused on just the next step or two—each a short, choppy, "woodsman's step," as Matt put it—I followed him upward, pausing a few times to let my breath settle.

Near the top, we checked our watches. Thirty minutes in. Moving fast, we had shaved 10 off his prediction. Matt turned, eyes dancing. "Almost no one I know would have done what we just did," he said.

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Easing over, we spotted a single bull in the sloped meadow, 550 yards away.

Hunting whitetails, I had never shot farther than 75 yards. Preparing for this hunt, I had practiced at 200. Even in an ideal scenario, I wouldn't shoot past 250. Matt would shoot to 350. Like me, he was carrying a rifle and bull tag but had been prioritizing my opportunities in this precious week. If a long-distance shot presented itself now, I said, I wanted him to take it.

Our only option was to follow the ridgetop, where slender, scorched tree trunks offered scant cover. We had to move slowly, Matt whispered, staying close, hoping to go unseen. To me, walking in the open made no sense. But my friend seemed certain, so I became his shadow as we crept forward.

MAGNIFICENT MADNESS: A last-ditch stalk bore fruit against the odds.

Gently, we dropped into the next draw. The breeze remained silent. At every step, snow compressed with a soft *shuuunk* underfoot. When a jet hummed high overhead, providing faint sound cover, we quickened our pace. Once, a branch snapped.

Atop a second ridge, we crossed a patch of mullein, dry stems rasping loudly as we brushed by. A cottontail bolted, setting our hearts thumping.

In the next draw, the land flattened to our left, then dropped off. Could the bulls be that close, hidden by the drop-off? Unlikely. But I whispered, "A bench."

"So what?" Matt retorted.

With time running out and bulls somewhere nearby, my friend—normally gracious but now single-minded—was getting testy, impatient with anything that didn't clearly lead toward elk. I shrugged.

A third ridge rose ahead. "What a perfect fortress," Matt said.

Partway up, we paused at a cluster of rocks to peek into the sloped meadow's lower end. Empty.

In that moment, he would later admit, Matt's confidence crumbled. He had started to believe we might get close and was sure elk would be in the meadow. Confused, he figured we had blown it. The bulls were gone.

He turned and whispered. "Okay, whitetail hunter. We're in close quarters with a cervid. What are you going to do?"

For days, though contributing to decisions, I had depended on his skills and knowledge. Over the past hour, as we moved from ridge to ridge, he had turned to me more. Now, he had passed the baton.

Inside, a switch flipped. I pointed to an outcropping on the ridge's spine: "I'm going up there."

The bulls might have continued southwest. That might put them on this side of the meadow. As Matt suggested, this close-up stalking resembled eastern whitetail hunting. So did the decision-making. It was all probabilities and guesswork.

Carefully, I approached the outcropping. Crouched low, I glanced over.

A bull was right there—quartering away, feeding—100-plus yards across a narrow draw. His antler mass told me he was no raghorn. I was peripherally aware of other elk but didn't scan for another opportunity. He was the one.

Easing back down, I gestured to Matt. I needn't have bothered. My movements had told him elk were close.

I eased up, left hand braced on rock, holding my rifle's walnut forearm. Three weeks later, Matt would return to that vantage point, retrieve a brass casing and snap a photo of a daunting tangle of trunks and branches. But I saw only the path between the bull and me. The path was clear.

The crosshairs quivered and settled behind his shoulder. I squeezed the trigger.

The bull wheeled downhill, covered 30 yards, and crashed to earth. Relieved to see him go down fast and hard, I felt confident but not quite certain. After all, another elk had gotten up and walked away two days earlier. As I reloaded, I saw only slight twitches of hoof and antler.

The other elk ambled back toward the meadow. Below me, Matt raised his rifle. *We're going to have two down,* I thought. A giant had stepped into view with two smaller bulls directly beyond him. Then they moved off together, bunched up, offering no shot that would kill one without risking injury to another.

Matt lowered his rifle and came toward me, eyebrows raised in question.

"He's down!" I answered.

We descended toward the bull together. Touching trekking pole to eye, I saw no reflex.

A jumble of feelings, actions, words: Awe at the bull's sheer size, as I knelt to give thanks. Shock at

PHOTO: COURTESY TOVAR CERULLI

what had just happened. The soul-wrenching tug of ending a life. Hugging Matt, sharing the moment's intensity, then laughing together. Thinking back over that hour-and-a-half, asking how we pulled that off.

Though not one of the giants, the bull was big. His heavy antlers would each have had six points, but one had broken below the last fork, presumably in a fight. Their dark color mirrored the scorched trees.

Daylight had begun to fade.

Settling into this startling reality, I fished out my tag. Matt tried texting his wife Kayte, but the signal was faint. Snowflakes drifted down around us.

By headlamp, I field-dressed the bull using an old Boy Scout knife my uncle gave me when I started hunting. "It's like a whitetail, just bigger," Matt said, as he talked me through his techniques. *Much bigger,* I thought.

Under the hide near the far shoulder, we found the 127-grain bullet. The copper projectile had traveled nearly 150 yards, then opened into a deadly four-petaled flower that tore apart one lung, punctured the other and cut an artery above the heart.

As we began quartering, three headlamps appeared on the nearest ridge. Gratitude washed over us. Kayte had gotten the message. She and their two teenagers, Owen and Emma, were here to help, each with a pack.

Skinning carefully to preserve the hide, we broke down the elk: tenderloins as big as a whitetail's backstrap, backstraps nearly the size of my leg, thick neck, large forequarters, massive hindquarters.

By the time packs were loaded, a dense fog had settled in. The hike out was gentle by mountain standards: less than a mile, mostly downhill. Taking care not to slip in the snow—Matt and I each fell once—we didn't reach Kayte's vehicle until nearly 11 p.m.

Three of us went back for the head, hide, and last hindquarter. Slowed by my eastern legs and antlers catching on aspen saplings, we emerged from the woods two hours later.

In the morning, Matt and I loaded his old Chevy Suburban and drove down out of the mountains through an icy fog. If we had passed up the far-fetched chance to pursue those seven bulls and tried to locate them this morning, our hopes would have been crushed. With this much moisture suspended in the air, elk would be invisible at 75 yards.

Over the next few days, with everyone's help, we got the hide fleshed and salted, skull boiled and cleaned, lymph nodes submitted for chronic wasting disease testing, and 200 pounds of meat deboned, packaged and stashed in freezers.

A week after heading to the mountains, we tucked two big coolers into my car alongside hide and antlered skull. That last feat of three-dimensional puzzle-solving disappointed Matt. He had not-so-secretly hoped I would have to endure the awkwardness of traversing the country with antlers strapped atop a Subaru.

AN UNLIKELY BOND: The author (right) and his hunting buddy Matt came from different worlds but found common ground in hunting.

PHOTO: COURTESY TOVAR CERULLI

After a few more hugs, I headed east. Audiobooks had gotten me from Green Mountains to Rockies and would get me back home. The first few hours, though, I drove in silence, replaying the week, committing moments to memory, grateful for how the hunt pushed me—body, mind and heart—stretching my sense of the possible.

I was grateful, too, for renewed faith.

On the way to Colorado, I had listened to a book that documented disturbingly closed-minded, authoritarian trends on the American political right, and a podcast series that documented similar trends on the left. Together, they had left me dispirited. And even more committed to bridging the chasm.

Being with Matt had reminded me what can happen on a well-built bridge. Differences in our perceptions, personalities and abilities could easily have sabotaged the hunt. Instead, we complemented each other's strengths and offset each other's weaknesses. The way we navigated the entire week—including those wild two hours, from spotting that first raghorn to firing that final shot—reminded me of how we navigate radioactive conversations. Every step is on the solid ground of trust.

If the two of us, with our deep blue and deep red roots, can forge a bond like ours, if the madness of our friendship can bring this much joy, there is cause for hope.

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