

WESTERN HUNTING & FISHING NEWS

NOVEMBER 2026



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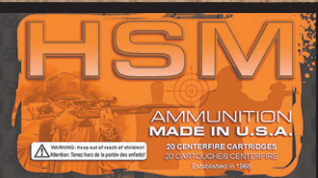




Photo courtesy IDFG <https://idfg.idaho.gov>

Late Fall And Winter Can Be Productive For Stream Fishing

Idaho Dept. Fish & Game
<https://idfg.idaho.gov>

Dress for the weather and catch some trout and whitefish

People may see anglers wading streams during frigid weather and wonder "what are they doing?" The short answer is probably catching fish.

Late-fall and winter fishing are often overlooked on Idaho's rivers and streams because many people don't want to deal with the cold, but trout and whitefish remain fairly active. In fact, late-season fishing has some advantages because many streams are at their lowest levels and fish are concentrated. Many rivers are also nearly empty of anglers, so you get your pick of prime fishing spots.

Find the right river or stream

Spring-fed rivers and streams, and those fed by dam releases often fish well during winter months because temperatures tend to be slightly warmer and more stable.

Rainbow trout are a favorite winter quarry, and where you find them, you will often find whitefish. Whitefish school up in the fall and typically spawn in November, so where you catch one, you're likely to find more. (Read more about catching whitefish here: <https://idfg.idaho.gov/press/anglers-dont-overlook-catching-whitefish-idahos-rivers-and-streams>.)

You will find trout and whitefish in similar places you find them other times of year, but in late season, they often favor deeper, slower water, although you can still catch them in riffles as well.

Also remember that while fish remain active during winter, they're still cold-blooded, and they may be a little sluggish. They're unlikely to aggressively chase food, but they will take it, or a good imitation of it, when it's placed in front of them.

Tweak your techniques

Winter fishing doesn't require any special tactics, just figure out where the fish are and what they're likely to be feeding on. Drifting bait or fly fishing with nymphs are often your best tactics. If you see dimples on the water, it may be fish rising to feed on insects, which will likely be tiny midges or mayflies, and fish will rise to a well-presented dry fly.

Try different sections of the river and try to figure out where fish are holding and feeding. After you catch a fish, seek out similar water, but remember, fish may move around during the day. But where you find them one day during winter, they're likely to remain nearby, so keep those places in mind when you return.

Fly anglers should not overlook streamers. They can look like a big, easy meal when presented slowly, but don't expect trout to vigorously chase them like during summer. Even dead drifting a streamer can be effective.

Fish spook easily in low, clear water, so be stealthy. Walk softly, don't immediately wade into the middle of a fishing hole, and wear drab colors. Repeatedly cast into likely looking water before moving on. You may be surprised that you can catch multiple fish in a fairly small area, so cast and drift (or slowly retrieve) your bait or fly numerous times before moving to the next spot.

To find places to fish, check Fish and Game's Fishing Planner: <https://idfg.idaho.gov/ifwis/fishingplanner/>.

While many of Idaho's waters are open to fishing year round, some are limited to catch-and-release fishing during winter. so double check the regulations...

Sleep in: There's rarely a need to be there at first light. You will usually have better fishing late morning to early afternoon when the water warms a few degrees.

Stay close to home: Winter is a good time to explore your local trout fisheries, or rediscover them.

Plan short trips: There's no getting around the effects of cold weather, and eventually it will take its toll. Plan to fish for an hour or two and call it good. If you can last longer, consider it a bonus.

Bring hand warmers: Your hands are most likely to get wet, and they can easily get chilled...

Think about traction: Rocks are slippery when wet, and more slippery when icy. Wading boots with cleats are a good option. It's also good to have a set of dry clothes in your vehicle in case you take an unexpected plunge....

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2026 Fall Mack Days on Flathead Lake

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Cash and Prizes-bonus amounts, lottery prizes, tagged fish

More Entries per angler=Higher Payout for that angler

(1)-\$10,000 & (3) \$5,000 & (5) \$1000 + over (9,000) \$500-\$100 Tagged Lake Trout



Thursday-September 10th to Sunday-November 8th

(Contest may end earlier if total harvest exceeds the payout limit-prior notice will be given)

Fish one day or several days-every fish gives you a chance to catch a tagged lake trout, receive bonus \$, and/or win in the lottery drawings!

Bonus \$ amounts (Mon-Sun) **increase as your total goes up**-bonus amounts and tagged fish amounts are estimated-anglers who enter 11 or more lake trout receive bonuses-examples: 11-30 lake trout entries- \$45, 31-50-\$88, 51-75-\$150, 76-100-\$205,205-225-\$518, 301-325-\$813 on up. No pooling of fish is allowed. Lake trout are to be entered the same day as caught. See bonus chart at www.mackdays.com

Friday- Sunday-competitive Mack Days-lottery prizes, tagged fish, and bonuses-ends Sat 11/7
Top twenty angler prizes: Pick your best 18 days/26 possible-Friday-Sunday. Check out pick up sites on the website or turn in at Blue Bay from 11 till ½ hr. before sunset

Monday-Thursday- 11:00 am to ½ hr before Sunsturn in fish only at Blue Bay – 3-\$100, 3-\$200 4-\$250 lottery drawings plus bonus dollars -33 days-entries totaled with Fri-Sun totals at the end of the event for bonus amounts

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 8th -SEPARATE DAY ALL ENTRIES IN BY 3:00-only AT BLUE BAY
All prizes & lottery drawings will be done on Sunday morning 11/7 and posted for awards ceremony at 3:00. Cash Drawings for Sunday will be-\$400, \$350, \$300. Largest lake trout under 30" \$100-1st \$75-2nd Smallest \$200 Top Angler by 11/8 total \$300 Totals count for bonus awards
All it takes is one ticket (one for every lake trout under 30") to win a lottery drawing

Friday-Sunday Prizes excluding the last day

Lottery drawings **\$2,000- \$600** all lottery drawings & prizes end Saturday 11/1

Top twenty angler prizes **\$950-\$200 totals**

Top lady anglers **\$300, \$200, \$100**-by total fish entered

Smallest lake trout **\$250**-(2 prizes) Largest lake trout **\$500**

Youth anglers- (17-13) 1st- \$200, 2nd-\$150, 3rd-\$75 (12 & under)-1st-\$100, 2nd-\$75, 3rd-\$50

Weekend Prizes-4-\$100 & \$200 per weekend-9 weekends

Golden Angler (70 & older)-\$300 & \$200, \$100-determined by total fish entered

Fish the entire lake- Check in stations and times listed on mackdays.com (subject to change).

Check the rules, prizes, bonuses, check in sites in emails or send an email requesting information

Email entries to joe.santos@cstk.org with name, mailing address, telephone #, m/f, and age.

Applications are free and available at:

Zimmers Tackle-Pablo

Walmart-Polson

Sportsman's Warehouse-Missoula

FWP-Missoula and Kalispell

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Thinking Of Putting A Red Dot On Your Turkey Gun?

Vortex Optics <https://vortexoptics.com>

Optics on turkey guns are becoming more and more popular, for the same advantages they provide tactical and competitive shooters: Easier sight alignment, faster target acquisition, and the ability to focus on your target while shooting. If you're thinking about mounting an optic on your shotgun for this year's hunt, here's a few tips to get you started.

OPTIC SELECTION

In our opinion, a red dot is perfect on a turkey shotgun. They are durable, offer a good field of view, and at realistic turkey shooting distances, there generally isn't a need for magnification.

We prefer an optic that sits as low on the gun as possible so we can maintain a solid cheek weld on our gun. We've added a soft neoprene cheekpad to our stock as well. You'll want an optic with a broad range of brightness levels so you can start with your dot dim at first light, but be able to crank it up when the sun is beating down. When you're hunting, be sure to adjust the brightness of your optic periodically to match the conditions so you're ready to go when a Tom pays you a visit.

Take a look through your optic on different parts of the rail. Positioning the optic forward or backward will change how much you can see through the optic and what you can see around it.

If you're one of those people who refuses to put a red dot on your shotgun because the dot doesn't look perfectly round to you (a phenomenon resulting from an astigmatism) – stop for a minute and think this through. You are shooting a gun that throws a spread of hundreds of pellets downrange. You do not need a perfectly round circle to do that. So long as you can put any part of the red squiggle you see somewhere on the bird's neck, you'll have no problem killing every single turkey you shoot at...

MOUNTING THE OPTIC

The easiest way to mount a red dot is via a picatinny (or weaver) rail attached to your shotgun. Modern turkey shotguns will come with a rail, or at least a tapped receiver where you can mount one. If a top rail isn't an option with your receiver, there are various mounts available that attach to a receiver using the trigger housing pins, or can be secured between the stock and the receiver itself.

Don't just haphazardly throw your optic on top of your gun. Experiment with its position on the gun and see how it looks. Red dots have unlimited eye relief, so where you mount it is a matter of personal preference. Further forward will provide less field of view looking through the optic, but will allow you to see around it more easily. Moving the optic closer to your eye will provide a wider apparent field of view looking through



Photo courtesy Vortex Optics <https://vortexoptics.com>

the optic, but may make it harder for you to see what's going on around it.

ZEROING THE OPTIC

Usually we talk about "patterning" a turkey shotgun, but with a red dot, we actually have to zero it. You'll want a large piece of paper with a center aiming point. I like to start at about 20 yards, using pheasant loads to get started. This will save both your shoulder and your wallet some discomfort as you get the optic dialed in.

Find the approximate center of your pattern and adjust the optic the same way you would were it on a rifle to roughly center your pattern on your target. It will be helpful to use a clean sheet of paper for every shot. At 20 yards you will need to move your dials 5x as far as you would at 100 yards. So – if your optic has 1 MOA clicks, it will take 5 clicks to move your pattern one inch.

Switch to your preferred turkey load now to fine tune and confirm your zero. We like to do this at 40 yards. At this distance, it will take about twice as much dial movement to adjust your optic as it would at 100 yards (1 MOA clicks mean roughly 2 clicks per inch). Pay attention to both the shot density and the center of your pattern. Your pattern is dictated by your gun, choke and load. Ideally, the densest part of your pattern should also be at the center of your pattern (or very close). If it's slightly off center and consistent, zero based on the densest part of your pattern. If it is way off, you may want to look at different loads or another choke...

Once you feel you have a solid zero at 40 yards, we highly recommend checking as far as you may shoot and also at a closer distance as well (with our current setup we check at 20 and 60 yards). You may find at these distances you have to adjust your point of aim slightly higher or lower.

HUNTING WITH THE OPTIC

This is the fun part – just get out there and hunt! The first time you put that dot on a tom's head, you'll realize how nice it is to be sure exactly where your shot is going to go before you let the lead fly.

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Brady Miller with his giant 204 inch mule deer on a late season hunt.
Photo credit Chris Neville courtesy GOHUNT.com

How To Find Mule Deer Bucks During The November Rut: 8 Tactics For Success

By Brady Miller

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

As November rolls in, it's prime time for hunting mule deer during the rut. There are a ton of different tactics for hunting the rut/late season, but here are eight of the ones that can exponentially increase your success.

1. Get away from the crowds



Tipi and stove setup for late season mule deer hunting.
Photo credit Brady Miller courtesy GOHUNT.com

I feel it's best to find a way to get away from the crowds, so avoid easy-to-access spots where people will hunt out of their trucks or ATVs.

Barriers of entry are huge for this. If there is a trailhead and surrounding the trailhead is a bunch of terrain that is harder to hike in, most people are probably going to avoid that area and hike further in along the trail. But you can use this to your advantage and possibly hunt some closer areas that are not fun to get into.

It's no secret that many hunters will be out during the rut, so finding ways to avoid hunting pressure is key. You don't need to trek deep into the backcountry per se, but avoid heavily trafficked areas. Many hunters stick close to roads, so pushing further into areas others may overlook increases your chances of finding

mature bucks. Also, if you have the ability to camp away from roads with a tipi and lightweight tent stove, that can greatly put you in a position to take a mature buck.

Use other hunters to your advantage—observe where they're glassing and hunt from different angles to avoid direct competition.

2. Find the does, and you'll find the bucks

Love is in the air in the mule deer world during November in most western states. So if you find the does, eventually, bucks will show up. You could sit on doe groups and wait, or another great strategy is to run around and keep checking out all the doe groups you can find so you have backup plans. Note: take your glass and look at areas around where the does are at. A lot of the time, you might catch a buck bedded in some cover near the does. Even during the rut, some bucks still like to be a little secretive when it comes to showing themselves in the open.

Back in 2018, every morning I would check on a group of does and only small bucks were with them. It wasn't until later in the hunt that a true giant finally showed up, and I was able to capitalize on my biggest buck to date. So checking on that group of does each day paid off in a huge way.

During the rut, bucks are actively seeking does. If you find groups of does, bucks are likely nearby. However, large bucks may not always be in plain sight with the does; they often hang back in nearby terrain, especially early in the rut.

Don't be discouraged if you don't see bucks immediately. Keep an eye on doe groups and return to the same area as the rut progresses. Bucks may appear later in the season, or even within the same day, as they cover long distances searching for hot does.

3. Optics are king during the mule deer rut



Glassing for rutting mule deer with a...spotting scope.
Photo credit Brady Miller courtesy GOHUNT.com

Glassing is essential during the mule deer rut, and with colder, harsher conditions, you'll need to be diligent with your optics. Bucks will often bed in areas sheltered from the wind or in thick cover, so glassing from multiple angles is crucial.

Use your binoculars in the early morning and transition to a spotting scope during midday when bucks are more likely to be bedded in shaded areas.

Focus on glassing small pockets of terrain that others may overlook—these often hold mature deer.

Glass and glass some more

You can't hunt bucks you can't see. So always utilize your optics and try to dig up a buck that might still be hanging out in thick timber or brush. Put yourself in an area where you can cover a lot of the country, especially near areas that some people might not want to hunt in due to thick terrain or lack of roads. The more time you spend behind your optics, the greater the chance you will pick up deer and learn where the deer like to hang out during the rut.

Also, if there is snow on the ground, I really like to glass up tracks and then try to see what direction they are headed. Then, I will either use my 16 power ZULU6 HDX Image Stabilized binoculars or my Swarovski BTX and 115mm spotting scope, and dissect the timber or brush to find bedded deer. Or I will hike closer and try to ambush the area by finding a spot to look into it from higher up and be close to the action. That will put you within striking distance and allow you to potentially find hidden pockets that might have been tough to glass from further away.

4. Cover country

Covering ground is important, whether glassing from different vantage points or using roads to your advantage. In some states, driving and glassing from a vehicle is a legitimate tactic, especially in more open country. So, even though I stress getting away from the crowds, you can still use roads and long-distance glassing to your advantage.

Be willing to explore less obvious areas close to roads. Many hunters overlook small pockets of habitat near roadways, but these areas can hold deer, during the mule deer rut, especially when the rest of the landscape is heavily pressured.

5. Stay mentally tough



The challenges of late-season mule deer hunting can wear on you. Photo credit Brady Miller courtesy GOHUNT.com

Late-season hunts can be physically and mentally demanding. Cold, snowy conditions combined with long hours of glassing can wear you down. However, mental toughness is key to staying in the game.

The rut provides brief windows of opportunity, and being prepared to seize those moments can make the difference between success and failure.

(continued on page 38)



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Photo credit Chris Neville courtesy GOHUNT.com

Effective Late November Whitetail Hunting Tips For A Successful Season

By Chris Neville

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

You are halfway through November, and you haven't shot a buck yet. You are tired of scrolling through social media, seeing everyone else grip and grin, and you've come to the hard realization that this just might not be the year for you. However, I'm here to tell you not to throw in the towel yet. Some of the best hunting opportunities for those truly old giants are about to kick off!

Why the second half of November can be better for whitetail bucks

Hands down, the number one reason why late November is so great is mature buck sightings during daylight hours may be just as good — if not better — this time of year than early November.

Usually, this time period falls right after lockdown when a majority of the breeding is taking place. What's left are those later estrous cycle does that are about to come into heat.

For the most part, it's the older age class bucks that are aware of this and take advantage of this time of year because of their past rut experience.

They know it's a marathon, not a race. Most of the younger bucks have wasted all their energy already, making it easy pickings for old mature bucks to tend to one more doe.

Weather is also a big factor this time of year, which helps to get those old crusty bucks on their feet during daylight hours. The last few years, the beginning

of November has been fairly warm, which means most of the rutting action will take place at night and those old bucks don't show their faces during daylight. Yet, for the most part, the second half of November, you are going to get much cooler temps, which are more conducive to overall daylight deer movement.

Hunting areas to focus on for late November whitetails

Hunting tactics and areas to focus on this time of year are going to be pretty similar to what you were doing the first week of November.

The top three areas I would recommend focusing on are transition areas, bedding areas, and food sources for the end of November when the temperatures can plummet.

Transition areas and their importance

Finding a good area between bedding and food sources where a lot of different trails converge is a great spot where those mature bucks will be cruising this time of year, looking for those last does to come into heat. If you have multiple transition spots, I recommend going to the spot that has the most does. This time of year, if you find the does, you'll find the bucks. Transition areas are also good spots for all-day sits, which you should still definitely consider this time of year. Over the years, I've had some of my biggest bucks appear on trail cameras in the middle of the day in late November, so sitting all day can pay dividends this time of year.

Bedding areas

Hunting the downwind side of bedding areas can be dynamite during late November. Find where most of the does in your area are bedding this time of year and set up on the downside of that bedding area to find those mature bucks scent-checking for does. If you have been hunting the fringe of bedding areas up to this point or don't have setups in bedding areas, I would say don't be afraid to get aggressive and move stands as close as you can to their bedding without spooking them. This is another good spot to consider for all-day sits. Bedding areas will be best for morning and midday movement. It will begin to slow down at the very end of the day as most deer have left their bedding and are transitioning to food.

Whitetail food sources

A lot of times during the beginning of November, you might see food sources begin to go cold for deer movement as deer are eating less due to high-intensity rutting activity. However, as November wears on, the action on food sources in the evening during late November can start to pick up again. Particularly, this can occur during that last week in November or if a long stretch of cold weather hits — both of these occurrences will get deer back to hitting those major food sources as does and mature bucks begin to gain some of those calories back that they have lost throughout the rut. I recommend only hunting food sources during the evening as that is your best chance to catch a mature buck during daylight hours without spooking him...

5 Rifle Season Tips For Hunting Post-Rut Elk

By Ryan McSparran

Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Co. www.caribougear.com



Photo courtesy www.caribougear.com

The rut is a fantastic event. Big bulls let down their guard, chase cows and become more vocal and visually available to hunters than at any point in the year. Because of this vulnerability, most rut hunts are limited to primitive weapons like archery and muzzleloader. After the rut, rifle hunters must adapt their tactics in order to find those big bulls.

As the rut winds down, things change quickly. It's necessary for hunters to develop a strategic game plan. Post-rut bull elk aren't vocal and they won't be moving as much as they were in September. This can make them very difficult to find. On the other side of that coin, post-rut bulls can be more predictable and easier to stalk without a herd around them.

As we prepare for rifle seasons and the pros and cons of hunting elk after the rut, here are a few tips to remember:

1. Get to Know Elk Behavior After the Rut

The rut is a taxing event and it drains the energy from bulls. They lose weight and strength and often incur severe wounds while sparring for breeding rights. This leaves them at a caloric loss and drives behavior towards feeding. While some bulls will jet straight back up to the safety of steep and nasty country, others will hang out low and capitalize on high energy food sources like alfalfa fields and lush river bottoms. Look for public land access in areas close to quality food sources. They will need this to quickly regain strength and energy.

The dominant bulls expend the most energy during the rut. They are especially in need of a post-rut refuge with access to food and water. The smaller bulls use less energy and are more apt to stay on the move while being somewhat more visible. This can make the solitary, mature bulls more difficult to locate.

(continued on page 39)





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Photo credit Mike Hanback courtesy Big Deer Blog <https://bigdeerblog.com>

91 Tips For Hunting Peak Deer Rut

By Mike Hanback

Big Deer Blog <https://bigdeerblog.com>

You don't need a grand plan to kill a whitetail when the rut is on in November. Just go out and have fun, hunt every hour that you can, and use these time-proven pointers to your advantage.

1) Did you know? Studies show that one mature buck may blaze as many as 1,200 rubs from late September through November, or some 17 rubs a day.

2) Which rubs are the best sign? Look for antler-blazed trees as thick as your bicep. All bucks rub saplings, but only mature bucks work trees 4 to 6 inches in diameter or larger.

3) A copse of antler-mangled saplings or cedar branches are sign of an aggressive buck, the kind of beast you want to hunt because he's apt to move in daylight.

4) "In many areas the first scrapes pop up in old logging roads, slip along and scout those first." — Jim Crumley, Virginia bowhunter and creator of Trebark camouflage.

5) A Tennessee study found that bucks rub like crazy in 2 types of terrains—valleys and secondary points, or fingers of timber that drop off the sides of ridges. The more brush and saplings in these funnels, the more rubs you'll find there.

6) "Big trees with scarring from years of rubbing are signposts. Our observations suggest older bucks deposit pheromones on these rubs, and that plays an important role in the dominance ladder of a herd.

All deer, does and bucks, interact with signposts—they smell and rub them—but only mature bucks make them. They act as communal scent wicks and are located in areas with high deer traffic." —Dr. Grant Woods, Missouri biologist and hunter

7) One November day a few years ago in Illinois: The wind was blowing 20 miles per hour. "I wasn't going out," says bowhunter Gary Sulcer, "but I did." He'd been in the woods only minutes when a doe tipped by with a bruise on her heels. Gary's arrow was true; the main-frame 8-pointer scored 160. Lesson: You only have so many days to hunt the rut, go when you can, no matter the conditions.

8) "We didn't have any trail camera photos of that buck, and I had never seen him," says Gary Sulcer. "But I knew there was a big one in the area, he was rubbing trees as big around as your thigh."

9) Studies show deer rut hard when the barometer is between 29 and 30.

10) Penn State researchers tracked GPS-collared deer for a month, during which it rained 9 days and 22 were dry. Bucks moved on average eight-tenths of a mile on dry days and six-tenths on rainy days. That's negligible, don't let rain stop you.

11) Perfect rut morning: Still and frosty, high-pressure, with temps in the 20s. Hang tough on stand, a buck might wander by until 11:00 a.m.

12) "We've analyzed tens of thousands of camera images, and our data clearly show one terrain where mature bucks move throughout November: the intersections of two or more drainages and/or fingers of timber deep in the woods."—Whitetail biologist Mickey Hellickson

13) Best rut stand #1: Downwind of the junction where several draws and finger ridges intersect.

14) Set one or two trail cameras on a ridge or bottom that you don't have confidence in and have never hunted before. You might get a picture of a good buck in a "poor" spot, which quickly becomes a good new spot.

15) Killer bow setup: Tree stand on an edge where pines or cedars meet hardwoods. Bucks rub, scrape and prowl for does on "break lines."

16) A scrape without a broken lick branch hanging above it is not worth hunting. Move on.

17) Best scrapes to watch: In brushy cover with doe trails nearby.

18) Watch active scrapes 50 to 75 yards from dense bedding cover. You might catch a mature buck milling around scrapes closest to his sanctuary at first or last light.

19) In hill country look for scrapes dug 70 yards or so below a brushy hilltop. Bucks like to bed on a ridge or bench, watching for does and scent-checking scrapes below.

20) On ridges and flats where you found the most acorns in September expect heavy rubbing and scraping in November.

21) University of Georgia research: Multiple bucks hit one set of scrapes while other scrapes 100 yards away go dormant. Scout, move and hunt the hottest sign.

22) Set up too close to scrapes and deer will see, smell or sense you there. Back off 100 yards or so, even when bowhunting, and watch for a buck circling into scrapes.

23) Wear rubber gloves and clip a mangled lick branch, which holds the forehead and saliva scent of several bucks and does, from atop an active scrape and wire it over a mock scrape near your stand.

24) Best rut stand #2: Downwind of the "X" where two trampled doe trails cross.

25) "Set tree stands between 17 and 20 feet. When a buck comes by at 20 to 30 yards, you'll see plenty of lungs, the perfect shooting angle." — Terry Drury, Midwest bowhunter and outdoor TV personality

26) Buy a climbing stand to go along with your lock-ons. Use the climber to move in for a quick strike at scrapes, or on a ridge when you get cam images of a big buck.

27) Best rut stand #3: Thirty yards back in the woods off the corner of a field, along a main trail.

Does will come from several directions, converge in the corner and make their way back into the timber. Bucks prowl a corner where they can see and scent check many does.

28) In Indiana one November, bowhunter Brent Ireland got a single cam picture of a double-drop giant.

He hung a stand on the ridge near his camera and killed the 199-inch giant two days later. Lesson: Get one image of a monster on his feet in daylight, move in and hunt him.

29) Set trail cameras on different sets of scrapes and you'll get images of most of the bucks on your land, both the locals and the passers-through.

30) 3 camera tips for scrapes: Set cams 15-20 feet away from the sign; lash them waist-high and level on trees; if you don't get images of a good buck after 3 days, move cameras to new scrapes.

31) Invest in a cellular trail camera like the Spartan Ghost. Monitor scrapes and trails without checking cards and scenting up the woods.

32) A doe that flits around with her tail erect is ready to breed or almost ready. A buck or bucks will be close.

33) Best rut stand #4: Hogback ridge flanked by crops and CRP, swamp or similar thick cover on the other side.

34) One humid Texas morning we rattled up 15 bucks. Guide Clay told me, "With moisture thick in the air, horns have a high-pitched tinkling, bucks like that."



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35) Rattling bags and boxes work, but nothing beats the real thing. A solid set of 140-inch antlers are the bomb, with just the right tone and volume.

36) After rattling at a buck a good ways off, don't let your guard down, even if he shows little interest. Sometimes a buck will walk 50 more yards, get curious and circle back to check you out.

37) Best time to rattle: Sunrise to 10:00 a.m. I don't carry horns in the afternoon.

38) Hold one rattling antler tight to your body and bang and grind on it with the other antler to cut down on hand movement.

39) "If your arms and hands aren't tired after a rattling sequence, you're not doing it hard enough."—Texas rattling expert Gary Roberson

40) Screw a rubber-coated hook (\$2 at Home Depot) into a tree close to your stand. Hang rattling horns within easy reach.

41) Shooter trots by 100 yards out—try a quick burst of rattling to stop him.

42) Research from Texas shows ground rattlers don't see half the bucks that come in. Elevate and rattle from high ground or a tree stand or tripod to spot more bucks.

43) Best-sounding grunt call for the money: Ridge Runner from Quaker Boy (...at Amazon).

44) When a buck hears your rattles or grunts and is interested, he begins to hunt you. Set up with thick cover to your sides and behind you. Make a buck commit close as he searches for the "deer" he hears.

45) A stud chasing or tending a doe makes loud, weird sounds. Blow urrrp, urrrp or urrrg, urrrg on your grunter to mimic it.

46) Blowing a sequence of 10 to 12 grunts on your call is most realistic.

47) Primos' original CAN call is still the best for bleats of estrus does (primos.com).

(continued on the next page)

91 Tips For Hunting Peak Deer Rut

(continued from page 11)

48) Keep doe bleats short and sweet: meaa, meaa.

49) “Back up bleats with blowing and wheezing, like a doe not ready to breed. Blast air and wheeze through your nose. It can drive a buck wild.”—Mississippi expert Will Primos

50) When a buck rolls in out of nowhere don’t reach for your call. Bleat or grunt loudly with your voice—baaahhh or eckkkkk—he’ll stop.

51) Remember to draw your bow or aim your muzzleloader before you grunt or bleat to stop a buck. Obvious, but it’s easy to forget when a big-racked bruiser is close!

52) “The grunt-snort-wheeze is the most aggressive rut call. It can bring in a dominant deer, but it can also scare off young bucks.”—Georgia biologist Dr. Karl Miller

53) Good rattling/grunting setup: Wind in your face and rock bluff or stream at your back. A buck can’t circle downwind and bust you.

54) A deer’s eyes are oriented to pick up predator movement on or just below the horizon. You can get away with a bit more movement in a tree stand, but still be careful.

55) Favorite muzzleloader setup: Sitting on a hillside, looking across to an adjacent hillside where I can cover 2 or 3 thickets. Bucks move all day from one cover to the next checking for does.

56) Best rut stand #5: A creek or shallow river crossing pocked with fresh tracks in brushy woods. The waterway dictates and funnels most all deer movement through the area.

57) Deep, splayed tracks 2½” to 3 1/2” long in mud tell you buck, though the size of his rack is anybody’s guess.

58) Position a stand or blind so the sun rises or sets behind you. You’ll have an extra 10 minutes of shooting light at dawn and dusk.

59) “On land that has been managed for years, 5- and 6-year-old bucks can’t compete with the aggressive 3- and 4-year-olds anymore, or don’t want to. Some old giants travel across the fences and take up residence where there’s less competition for does. If that happens to be where you hunt, great.”—Expert Iowa bowhunter Don Kisky

60) Best tip for public land: Hang a tree stand in thick, secluded cover and sit in it all day. You might catch a buck rutting a doe on natural movement, or another hunter might inadvertently drive a 10-pointer to you. Either way, you win.

61) Multi-year data from a property in South Carolina showed that 95% of the 3.5-year-old and older bucks harvested were killed within 100 yards of a well-defined sanctuary, such as a pine stand, brushy clear-cut or cedar thicket.

62) Around November 10, break out the hot-doe scent like Tink’s #69 (Bass Pro Shops).

63) Reach up and hang scent wicks 6 feet or higher so the wind and thermals swirl and carry the scent.

64) Texas study: Bucks split time equally at scrapes juiced with doe or buck urine. Might as well dump both into a real or mock scrape you’re watching.

65) “The weekend of November 8 to 10 should be excellent, especially if it’s cool. I think your best shot to see a mature buck is 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Hunt your best food source.”—Mark Drury, Iowa expert and TV personality

66) Douse a doe decoy with estrus scent and set her in a clearing where a buck can see her and approach comfortably from downwind.

67) In an abundance of caution to prevent the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease, 9 states prohibit the use of natural deer urine and permit only synthetic scents. Check your regulations. Don’t worry, synthetics smell like deer and work fine.

68) Cut tarsal glands off a doe or buck your buddy shot, and hang them near your stand both as an attractant and cover scent. Black hocks from a buck that has rutted for weeks reek the best.

69) Did you know? You can store deer hocks in a Baggie in the freezer and use them again next November.

70) “Around November 10, a big, loner doe is ready to breed. Watch her close, a buck is gonna be on her tail soon.”—Kentucky call maker and expert Harold Knight

71) In mid-November don’t overlook a giant guarding a doe or bedded with her in a fallen treetop, clump of brush, fence row or other weird spot.

72) Did you know? Sometimes you can smell a rutting buck upwind of your stand before you see him.

73) A 10-pointer chases a doe close to your tree stand. The instant the shot is clear take it! The pair might stand there panting for a minute, or they might crash off any second. Don’t miss your chance.

74) One November morning in Saskatchewan, a doe kept throwing her head up and looking back into the timber. I aimed my 7 Mag. She bolted as the 150-inch buck broke out, and I killed him. Lesson: Watch the does, they give away the bucks.

75) In mid-November, many does sneak out to CRP fields, ditches and the like where bucks can’t chase them anymore. Of course, bucks follow and keep hassling them. Glass these spots.

83) When gun season opens, monitor where people park their trucks and enter the woods. Hunt a secluded spot that others overlook. It might be 2 miles deep in the woods, or 200 yards off a back road.

91) Studies of hunter behavior consistently show that most people hunt only a half-mile or so from a road, field or other easy area. For more elbow room and fun, hike deeper.



Photo courtesy Rapala https://www.rapala.com/us_en/rapala

Fall Walleye Trolling: How To Run Hard Baits When The Water Cools

Rapala https://www.rapala.com/us_en/rapala

Why Trolling Shines in Fall

The cooling water temperatures...draw massive pods of perch, shiners, and eventually cisco into the shallows, which in turn attract walleyes. Fall walleye trolling with a handful of proven shallow- to mid-depth crankbaits is a dominant tactic for contacting and triggering roaming walleyes. Legendary fishing guide Tony Roach shares his fall walleye trolling strategy for locating and catching scores of walleyes, including key locations, tackle, and electronics considerations for increasing your odds. You might ask, "Why not just cast for these fish?" While casting is always an option, trolling is often more effective for contacting walleyes scattered across miles of shallow water zones, plus big baitfish-imitating plugs excel at triggering some of the biggest bites of the year.

Tony Roach notes that trolling has stood the test of time because it consistently connects anglers with fish when other methods fall short. "Some breaks are a mile or two long," he explained. "When fish spread out, it's often easier and more effective to troll and pick them off while you go."

Where Walleyes Set Up as Temps Drop

The fall migration is predictable. During the day, fish often linger just inside 10 feet, and after dark, they usually push shallower, sometimes into only four to six feet of water. Long stretches of shoreline breaks or flats all produce, especially when baitfish are present. Structural elements such as points, inside or outside breaks, and high spots or depressions can all concentrate fish. As far as bottom type, walleyes can relate to anything — sand, gravel, rock, grass — so use your electronics to confirm the presence of baitfish and walleyes. Then, take note of the specific structural and bottom composition features so you can search other similar spots. Replicating productive locations and presentations yields the best results, and trolling success is driven by patterns.

Concerning forage dynamics, spottail shiners move shallow first, followed by perch, and later in the season, schools of cisco — also called tullibee or herring — pile into the shallows. Roach has seen times when the bait was so thick it looked like you could walk across it.

Forward-facing Sonar: A Smarter Way to Troll

Forward-facing sonar doesn't replace trolling it enhances it. Roach explains that he typically trolls with the bow-mount down for steering while also running a pole-mounted transducer from the helm. That combination allows him to scan ahead of the boat, looking for fish, determining the depth they're relating to and water column position, as well as other cues such as if they're boat shy.

By paying attention to what the sonar reveals, anglers can quickly determine whether boards are necessary, based on the boat spook factor, or if a direct pass over them works just fine. The depth of the fish also informs smart lure choices — choose a bait with a running depth close to where walleyes are holding, and you improve your odds. If walleyes show consistently in eight feet of water, trolling passes can be adjusted accordingly. If you have modern mapping, color the productive depths (contour ranges) with color shading to help you keep your boat and lures positioned in the sweet spot. Again, it's all about pattern development for less wasted time and more consistent bites.

Lure Selection by Water Temperature

Water temperature is the primary factor that determines which baits are most effective. Warmer water supports the use of faster-wobbling lures and quicker trolling speeds. Roach leans heavily on the Rapala® Shad Rap® in sizes 2 to 3.5 inches (SR05–SR09), along with the Shad Dancer®, Jointed Shad Rap®, and the DT® (Dives-To) Series when surface temperatures hover in the 60s during late summer and early fall. Despite its bass crankbait designation, the DT Series is an excellent walleye catcher due to its refined balsa action and a range of running depths that span from four to 20 feet of water. Each of the aforementioned baits features a tight, high-frequency wobble that imitates small forage and can be trolled at speeds between 2 and 3 mph.

As the surface cools toward 55 degrees and below, the bite shifts to minnow plugs or jerkbaits. Roach calls the Rapala Husky Jerk® his go-to option, with the 4.75-inch (HJ12) being a fall classic. The Rapala Shadow Rap® and Original Floaters also earn plenty of time in the spread. These lures have a slower rolling action on the troll. The key difference is speed. Instead of clipping along at 2 mph, Roach recommends slowing down to 1.8, 1.5, or even as low as 1.0 mph when walleyes want a lazy body roll rather than a fast wiggle. "When surface temps hit around 55 or below, stick baits take over," Roach said. "I'll slow down to 1.4, even 1.0 mph."

Night Trolling: Tradition Meets Technology

Full-moon nights...are tailor-made for trolling. Walleyes push extremely shallow under the cover of darkness, often into water so skinny you'd hesitate to run a boat there during daylight. Long passes over sand flats and shorelines with Rapala Husky Jerks or Original Floaters can deliver consistent action.

Modern equipment, from LED deck lights to powerful headlamps, makes the after-dark bite more accessible and safe than it was a generation ago. For Roach, it also holds a nostalgic draw. It's relaxing to set up on a nice trolling pass with family and friends and take in the serenity and fresh air of a fall night.

Sure, casting to fish is fun, but so is kicking back and letting the boat and motor do the work.

Matching Colors to the Season

For Roach, color patterns follow the forage base. Early in the fall, perch are a primary food source, and baits in Perch (P), Firetiger (FT), Gold (G), and Green Tiger UV (GTU) are particularly effective. As the season progresses and cisco slide shallow, Roach switches to Pure Chrome (PCH), variations of white, Purpledесcent (PD), and translucent patterns that mimic silvery baitfish. Natural perch stripes dominate early, while cisco and shiner take over in October and November.

Thinking Bigger

Fall is a time to upsize. Roach has caught countless big walleyes on large Husky Jerks, CountDowns, Original Floaters, and even magnum-sized baits like the Super Shad Rap® originally intended for pike and musky. With jumbo perch and cisco measuring 8 to 10 inches in a system, walleyes are primed to eat larger meals before the winter metabolic slowdown hits. Still, he notes that when lakes are filled with clouds of small perch or bluegills, downsizing to a 1.5-inch Shad Rap (SR04) or a similar bait can make the difference. Forward-facing sonar helps shorten that experimentation curve by showing what size baitfish walleyes are targeting.

Speed, Spread, and Depth

Speed is not static. Roach views 60-degree water temperature as the turning point. Above it, trolling 2 mph or faster is standard. As water slips into the mid-50s, 1.8 to 1.5 mph becomes the sweet spot, and by the low-50s, he often slows to barely more than a crawl. Ultimately, the fish dictate the pace, which can vary day to day.

Planer boards add another layer. They not only spread baits away from the boat but also impart extra surge and pause action in the waves. Walleyes often strike as lures stall or speed up, so boards can out-produce flatline trolling on some days. Roach frequently pumps rods or steers in gentle S-curves to trigger bites. When inside rods get bit, it signals that the fish want a slower bait. When outside rods fire, speed or added surges may be the ticket.

Gear Considerations

Roach favors a braided main line in the fall because of its durability and sensitivity. He then attaches a fluorocarbon or monofilament leader in the 8- to 12-pound range to add a little stealth and some stretch, which improves hooking and retention. Leaders 6 to 8 feet in length are typical, though he will extend them in very clear water.

Terminal tackle plays a role as well. A VMC® crankbait snap ensures maximum lure action through freedom of movement while also making bait swaps fast and easy. If line twist becomes a problem, adding a barrel swivel a couple of feet up the line solves the issue...

Rod choice matters too. Roach prefers longer rods around 8 feet in medium power with a moderate to moderate-fast taper. The softer action absorbs the strike of a big walleye and keeps hooks pinned, while the length allows him to monitor lure action at a glance. "I'm always watching rod tips to make sure baits are running right and not fouled," he said...



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Gut-Shot Elk Meat: What To Keep Separate, What To Trim And When To Discard It

By Ted Ramirez Jr

Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Co.

<https://www.caribougear.com>

Quick answer: A gut-shot elk is not automatically a total loss. The safe field decision depends on where digestive contents traveled, which meat and tools they touched, how long the recovery took and whether the carcass began cooling promptly. Keep clean meat completely separate, trim and discard localized contamination with clean tools, and do not try to rescue questionable meat with water, vinegar, citric acid, spray or extra cooking.

The first clean quarter matters more than the last dirty cut.

Once feces, rumen contents, bile or dirty rinse water reaches clean meat, one contained problem can become a whole-packout problem.

Field rule: Nothing goes into a clean Caribou Gear game bag until the crew has decided that the meat belongs in the keep lane.

A Gut Shot Does Not Automatically Ruin the Whole Elk

A hit through the abdomen creates a contamination problem. It does not prove that every shoulder, hindquarter and backstrap is contaminated.

The real question is contact.

Digestive contents can carry bacteria associated with foodborne illness. The bullet or broadhead can also move contamination along the wound channel. A contaminated glove, knife, hide flap, tarp edge or stream of rinse water can carry it farther.

That is why the breakdown cannot begin as if this were a clean recovery.

Before cutting, identify:

- the entrance and exit path
- visible feces, rumen contents, bile or urine
- which side of the animal appears cleanest
- where clean meat and clean tools will be staged
- where contaminated tissue and waste will go
- how long the animal was down and what temperatures it experienced

The gutless method can reduce unnecessary handling of the digestive tract, but it does not erase contamination already created by the shot.

Start on the cleanest side only if that can be done without dragging the dirty hide, wound channel or tools across exposed meat.

Complete every required tag, evidence-of-sex and salvage step for the state and unit. Food-safety judgment does not cancel game laws.

Make the First Decision Before the First Clean Quarter Comes Off

Do not open every bag, lay every tool on the ground and then decide where the contamination is.

Build the work area first.

1. Put on clean disposable gloves.

Carry enough pairs to change immediately after handling the wound channel, digestive tract or contaminated tissue.

2. Create a clean side.

Keep clean Caribou Gear game bags, unused gloves, the clean knife and the meat-staging surface uphill and away from runoff.

3. Create a dirty side.

Put contaminated trim, used gloves and waste in a separate location or container that cannot touch edible meat.

4. Use two knives when possible.

Once a knife or handle touches contamination, retire it until it can be properly cleaned and sanitized.

5. Work clean meat before suspect tissue.

Do not bounce between the clean shoulder and the contaminated wound channel with the same gloves and blade.

6. Assign one person to the clean side.

On a two-person crew, one hunter can handle hide and contaminated material while the other handles clean meat and clean bags.

A Caribou Gear Hunters Tarp can give the crew a controlled clean work surface. Keep the tarp in the clean lane. Do not lay contaminated trim on one corner and clean meat on another.

Keep Clean, Suspect and Discard Meat in Three Separate Lanes

The three-lane system is a field organization method, not a laboratory test. Its purpose is to stop uncertainty from moving into the clean load.

LANE	WHAT BELONGS THERE	NEXT MOVE
CLEAN	Meat with no observed contact with digestive contents, dirty hide, wound-channel material, contaminated tools or runoff.	Move directly into a clean Caribou Gear game bag, identify the load, then stage it in shade with airflow.
SUSPECT	Meat that may have been contacted, has no clear clean boundary or has a questionable time-and-temperature history.	Keep it out of the clean-bag system. Isolate and label it for a conservative decision with a qualified processor or food-safety authority.
DISCARD	Visible feces or ingesta, damaged wound-channel tissue, material with no practical clean boundary, or meat showing clear spoilage.	Remove it from the work area and dispose of it under current local carcass-disposal rules. Do not grind it or mix it into trim.

Do not use a clean game bag as a holding place while you “figure out” suspect meat. Once suspect material enters that bag, the bag and everything it touches have to be treated as contaminated.

(continued on the next page)



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Gut-Shot Elk Meat: What To Keep Separate, What To Trim And When To Discard It

(continued from page 17)

Trim Visible Contamination—Do Not Spread It

Localized contamination calls for a clean cut, not a wet wipe.

Use a clean knife to remove the visibly contaminated surface and surrounding damaged tissue. Move that material directly to the discard side. Then change gloves and switch to a properly cleaned and sanitized knife before returning to meat you intend to keep.

There is no honest universal inch measurement that makes every contaminated cut safe. Wound angle, bullet performance, tissue damage, fluid spread and time all change the decision.

If you cannot establish a clear boundary between contaminated and clean tissue, the conservative move is to discard the affected cut rather than shave off the visible material and hope.

Current South Dakota State University Extension meat-safety guidance tells processors to trim fecal matter and ingesta from a carcass instead of rinsing it, because dripping water can spread E. coli. University of Florida IFAS wild-game field-safety guidance likewise says to trim meat contacted by feces or digestive contents, clean the knife after trimming contamination and get the meat below 40°F as quickly as possible.

Those sources are written for controlled processing and deer-sized game, but the contamination-control principle applies directly at an elk breakdown site: remove the problem without carrying it across meat you planned to keep.

Rinsing, Vinegar, Citric Acid and Spray Are Not Rescue Methods

Water can move visible material. It does not prove the meat is safe.

For a small, localized spot, trim rather than washing contamination across a larger surface. If digestive contents have broadly soiled a body cavity and clean potable water is used as part of the cleanup, control the runoff, keep it away from clean cuts and dry the surface promptly. Never use creek water, a dirty bottle or melted snow that has contacted the ground.

Vinegar, citric acid and game-bag spray also have limits. They are not substitutes for:

- removing feces, ingesta and damaged tissue
- changing contaminated gloves and tools
- keeping suspect meat away from clean meat

- rapidly releasing heat and reaching dependable cold storage

Use any labeled product only for its intended role and exactly as directed.

No rinse or spray can turn spoiled, heavily contaminated or temperature-abused meat back into safe meat.

Do not confuse clean-looking with proven safe.

Pathogenic bacteria do not have to change the smell, color or feel of meat. A good-looking surface is not permission to ignore a contaminated wound channel or an uncontrolled warm recovery.



Bag Only Meat You Have Chosen to Keep

A Caribou Gear game bag supports cleaner handling, airflow and load organization. It does not sanitize contaminated meat.

Once a clean quarter or boned-out muscle group is removed, move it directly into a clean bag before returning to the dirty side of the animal. Close the top and move the load away from the carcass, discard pile and used tools.

Match the system to the legal breakdown:

Wapiti Game Bags for Elk fit a meat-on-bone plan with separate quarter bags and a meat-parts bag. Carnivore Boned-Out Game Bags for Elk divide boned-out meat across five matching meat bags instead of one catch-all sack.

Both current systems are available through the Caribou Gear elk game bag collection.

View here:

<https://www.caribougear.com/collections/game-bags-for-elk>

Carry at least one clean spare bag. A difficult recovery is exactly when a dropped, torn or contaminated bag should be replaced instead of pressed back into service.

Do not combine meat from the wound area with clean trim just to balance the pack. Load weight is a secondary problem. Contamination control comes first.

Use the Tarp and ID Tags to Keep the Decision From Getting Lost

The clean-versus-suspect decision has to survive the entire packout.

Use the Hunters Tarp only as the clean work surface. Keep the waste side downhill and far enough away that boots, gloves and runoff do not cross back through the clean lane.

Then identify every keep load before it moves. Caribou Gear Game Bag ID Tags are waterproof and tear-proof and provide fields for the hunter, species, contents, date and destination. On a complicated recovery, write the actual contents—"clean right hind," "clean left shoulder" or another plain description the processor can understand.

If suspect material must be transported for an official or professional decision, put it in a completely separate, clearly marked container. Do not attach a vague note to a normal clean-meat load.

The complete field labeling sequence is in How to Label Game Bags During a Multi-Hunter Packout here: <https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/how-to-label-game-bags-multi-hunter-packout>.

An ID tag is an organization tool; it never replaces a state carcass tag, transfer form, evidence-of-sex requirement or other legal document.

Know When to Discard a Cut—and When the Whole Carcass Is in Question

Localized contamination and a sick or spoiled animal are not the same problem.

Discard an affected cut when:

- visible feces, ingesta, bile, urine or dirty fluid cannot be removed with a clear margin
- contamination has been pushed deep along the wound channel
- a dirty knife, glove or runoff has spread the boundary beyond what you can identify
- the tissue is heavily bloodshot, bruised, fragmented or mixed with hair, dirt or bone debris
- the cut has an off odor together with a sticky, tacky or slimy surface

Question the entire carcass when:

- digestive contamination is widespread and cannot be isolated
- the recovery was prolonged in warm conditions and
- the time-and-temperature history cannot be trusted
- organs have an offensive smell, greenish discharge or other abnormal signs
- blood in the muscle appears abnormal, or the animal looked sick or behaved abnormally before the shot
- multiple areas show spoilage rather than one localized damaged spot

(continued on the next page)

FREE ENTRY FEE

Thanks to a generous donation, the Boone and Crockett Club announced that the \$40 entry fee will not be charged for entries received after January 1, 2026.

SCAN TO LEARN MORE:



WWW.BOONE-CROCKETT.ORG



Gut-Shot Elk Meat: What To Keep Separate, What To Trim And When To Discard It

(continued from page 19)

Color alone cannot prove spoilage, and normal smell cannot prove safety. When the condition of the whole animal is in question, stop processing, keep it away from other meat and contact the local wildlife agency, a qualified wild-game processor or a food-safety authority. Explain exactly what happened. Do not ask a processor to discover the contamination after the carcass enters the shop.

When the boundary is uncertain, losing one cut is better than mixing it through an entire batch of ground meat.

Cooling Still Decides What Happens Next

Contamination control does not buy extra time.

As soon as a keep load enters a clean Caribou Gear game bag, move it into shade, off the ground and away from the other warm loads. A quarter pressed against the carcass or a dense bag of boned-out meat can keep holding heat while the crew works on the wound area.

Move edible meat toward 40°F or below as quickly as field conditions allow. Use a clean food-safe probe when practical, and clean it between loads. Prioritize the warmest clean load that can be carried safely.

The broader breakdown, airflow, first-load and cold-storage sequence is covered in the Field-to-Freezer Elk Meat Care Playbook here: <https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/field-to-freezer-elk-meat-care-playbook>.

Keep suspect material physically separate from clean meat in the vehicle, cooler and processor handoff. Do not let leaking fluid, shared ice or a common tub reconnect the two lanes after the mountain.

Gut-Shot Elk Meat Field Checklist

- Confirm the animal, tag it and follow current salvage rules.
- Inspect the wound path and identify visible digestive contamination before opening bags.
- Build separate clean, suspect and discard lanes.
- Use fresh gloves and a clean knife for edible meat.
- Keep the Hunters Tarp exclusively in the clean work zone.
- Trim localized contamination; do not rinse it across a larger surface.
- Do not rely on vinegar, citric acid or spray to rescue questionable meat.
- Put only chosen-to-keep meat in clean Caribou Gear game bags.

- Identify every clean load before it leaves the breakdown site.
- Keep suspect material out of the clean-bag, cooler and grinder system.
- Move clean meat toward dependable cold storage without delay.

Gut-Shot Elk Meat FAQ

Is a gut-shot elk automatically ruined?

No. The wound location alone does not prove every part of the elk is contaminated. Clean meat that had no contact with digestive contents, the wound channel, contaminated tools or runoff may remain separate. Every affected area still requires conservative inspection, removal of contaminated tissue and prompt cooling.

Can you wash gut contents off elk meat?

Do not use rinsing as the default for localized contamination. Trim the affected tissue so water does not carry bacteria across a larger surface. If clean potable water is used to clean a broadly soiled cavity, control the runoff and dry the surface promptly. Washing removes material; it does not prove the meat is safe.

Will vinegar, citric acid or game-bag spray make gut-shot meat safe?

No. Those products cannot replace removal of feces, ingesta, damaged tissue or temperature-abused meat. Use any labeled product only as directed and only after gross contamination has been removed. Never treat a spray as permission to keep questionable meat.

How much meat should be trimmed around gut contamination?

There is no universal inch measurement. Remove all visible contamination plus surrounding damaged tissue with a clean knife. If the contamination path is deep, widespread or impossible to define, discard the affected cut and seek qualified local guidance instead of guessing.

Can thorough cooking make questionable gut-shot elk meat safe?

Do not use cooking as a rescue plan for spoiled, heavily contaminated or temperature-abused meat. Proper cooking is still required for meat you have chosen to keep, but it does not correct a failed field-handling decision. Never grind suspect trim into clean meat.

When should the whole elk be discarded?

Question the whole carcass when contamination is widespread, the recovery stayed warm for an uncontrolled period, organs or muscle show abnormal signs, the animal appeared sick, or several areas show spoilage. Stop processing and contact a local wildlife agency, qualified wild-game processor or food-safety authority. When a clean boundary cannot be established, discard rather than gamble.

Shop online at <https://www.caribougear.com>.

Finding Luck On Public Land Hunts

A few key tips to help you be successful when hunting pressured public lands.

By Anthony Wright

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

Don't Be Intimidated by Other Hunters

Something common that I used to do when heading out on the weekends would be to get discouraged immediately when I saw other parked vehicles in the vicinity of the area I chose to hunt. When rolling up to the parking area, trailhead or locked gate, don't get discouraged. That's part of the beauty to finding success on everyone's land. Just because there are other potential hunters in the area doesn't mean they have the drive to go as far as you nor are they going to the same spot you've picked out. In the event that they are in the same area you've chosen to go to, take a step back, look at topography lines and think like the prey. Where would you go if pressured?

Do What Others Won't

There comes a time when hunting public land where it helps to get a little "western." Lands across the West are as diverse and as vast as we are. This means that there are more than likely areas of units that most hunters chose not to venture to due to the difficulty. This is where having a wild hair can pay off. Seek the nasty and possibly far-off lands to help increase your odds, view more game and likely see fewer people. Get to those areas that others opt out of if you can. Nothing is guaranteed in hunting, of course, but doing what others won't can certainly pay off.

Know Your Craft When It Counts

I'll be the first to admit that finding a true giant on public land does take a little luck. So, when the opportunity arises for you to make the stalk and execute the shot you must know your craft. Whether it is shot accuracy, weapon familiarity, navigation, etc., you have to be proficient.

The time to fiddle with your bipod or try a new technique is not while you need to focus on the task at hand. Know your equipment before the season starts. This will improve confidence and remove any negative variables when the time comes to notch your tag. I cannot stress this one enough: become proficient prior to the season's eve.

Stick It Out

This one is fairly straightforward: keep after it. I know first-hand the ups and downs of public land hunting — like most of you reading this — but there is also a rewarding feeling when you can find success. The easy thing to do would be to leave and head home once you find adversity, but once you get home the "what-ifs" will slowly sink in. What if I would've stayed? What if I would've hiked over the next ridge? Don't go home with the "what-ifs." Leave nothing to question and grind it out.



Glass, Glass, Glass



Photo courtesy GOHUNT.com

If the country that you are hunting warrants the opportunity to glass, then do so. I would recommend at the least glassing from binos off a tripod. If there is a lot of country for viewing, then let your spotter and binos do some of the walking. I'm a huge fan of glassing with binos off a tripod and it's proven you will be able to pick apart the terrain better. It was a major advantage for me this past season. It's definitely worth the additional weight!

I'm blessed to live in a state that has plenty of land for many of us to hunt. Sure, there are some highs and lows with the pressure, but hey! That's public land. If you don't like it, oh well! There are quality animals to be had if you're willing to put the work in. One thing that separates those who are successful versus those who are not is how hard they worked. With some sweat equity, strategy and a little bit of luck you, too, can find success.

As Always, Stay Safe and Hunt Hard!

Learn more at GOHUNT.com or start a free trial of GOHUNT Insider, see the tools they have to offer, and leave the hunting pressure behind.

Go to: <https://www.gohunt.com/user/register?plan=insider-trial> for your free trial.

Lightweight Rifle: Accuracy, Carry & Performance

How rifle weight changes fatigue, handling, recoil, stability, and confidence in the field.

Christensen Arms
<https://christensenarms.com>



A lightweight rifle can make long approaches, steep climbs, and all-day hunts more manageable, but weight also changes how a rifle balances, recoils, and settles on target.

The best hunting rifle is not simply the lightest one available. It is the rifle that carries efficiently and still gives the shooter enough control to make a confident shot.

Understanding rifle weight as part of the complete shooting system helps hunters choose more intelligently. Bare rifle weight matters, but so do the optic, rings, sling, ammunition, bipod, muzzle brake, and suppressor that may travel into the field with it.

WHAT DOES LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE WEIGHT REALLY MEAN?

Published specifications usually describe the rifle before accessories are installed. Once a hunting setup is complete, its field-ready weight can be substantially higher.

A scope and rings may add more than a pound, while a loaded magazine, sling, bipod, and suppressor continue to change both total weight and balance.

BARE RIFLE THE STARTING POINT

The manufacturer's listed weight before optics, ammunition, and field accessories are added.

FIELD-READY RIFLE THE WEIGHT YOU CARRY

The complete setup, including the optic, mounts, sling, ammunition, and attached accessories.

BALANCE WHERE WEIGHT SITS

Two rifles with the same total weight can handle differently when one is muzzle-heavy or rear-heavy.

USE CASE WHAT THE HUNT DEMANDS

Backcountry, timber, stand, and long-range hunts place different demands on rifle weight.

Compare complete configurations, not bare-rifle numbers alone. The best lightweight rifle should remain balanced after the optic and accessories you actually use are installed.



Photos courtesy Christensen Arms <https://christensenarms.com>

HOW A LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE CHANGES CARRY AND HANDLING

Carry is where reduced weight delivers its clearest benefit. A rifle that trims one or two pounds may conserve energy across miles of broken terrain, reduce strain during elevation gain, and leave more capacity for water, optics, safety gear, or packed meat.

Lower weight can also make a rifle feel faster when it comes off a sling. It may be easier to maneuver in timber, move around a blind, or position from improvised support. Balance still matters: saving weight near the muzzle can make the rifle feel lively, while too much rear bias may make it harder to settle naturally.

This is why a lightweight hunting rifle should be evaluated in the positions where it will be used. Shoulder it, carry it with the intended sling, and test how it settles from kneeling, sitting, prone, and supported field positions.

DOES A LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE AFFECT ACCURACY?

A light rifle can be mechanically accurate. Weight does not determine the quality of the barrel, chamber, action, bedding, trigger, or ammunition. It does, however, affect how easily the shooter can hold the rifle steady and manage movement through the shot.

Heavier rifles tend to resist small inputs and feel more planted from a bench or supported position. A lightweight rifle is easier to disturb with breathing, trigger pressure, wind, and inconsistent shoulder contact. That makes solid fundamentals and a stable field position especially important.

Independent field testing also shows that lightweight rifles can deliver strong precision when balance, build quality, and shooting technique work together.

For a practical discussion of the difference between rifle weight and shooter skill, see these long-range shooting tips from Field & Stream:
<https://fieldandstream.com/outdoor-gear/guns-gear/rifles-gear/long-range-rifle-shooting-tips>

WEIGHT FACTOR	POTENTIAL BENEFIT	WHAT TO MANAGE
LOWER MASS	Easier carry and faster repositioning	More visible movement in unsupported positions
BALANCED BUILD	Natural point of aim and smoother handling	Optics and accessories can shift the balance
RIGID COMPONENTS	Supports repeatable alignment without unnecessary mass	Material quality and engineering matter
STABLE SUPPORT	Lets a light rifle perform closer to its mechanical potential	Requires deliberate field-position setup



5.4 LBS STARTING WEIGHT

RIDGELINE FFT LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE

The Ridgeline FFT combines an FFT carbon fiber stock, Aerograde carbon fiber-wrapped 416R stainless steel barrel, precision-machined action, TriggerTech trigger, and sub-MOA accuracy guarantee in a mountain-ready platform.

View Ridgeline FFT here:

<https://christensenarms.com/product/ridgeline-fft/>

RIFLE WEIGHT, RECOIL, AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

When the cartridge and load remain the same, a lighter rifle generally moves more under recoil than a heavier rifle. The shooter may feel a sharper impulse, and the optic may leave the target more aggressively. That can make follow-through and spotting an impact more difficult.

Recoil is a complete-system issue. Stock fit, recoil pad design, muzzle brake or suppressor, shooting position, and technique all influence what the shooter experiences. Cartridge choice matters too. A lightweight rifle chambered in a moderate cartridge may be easier to shoot well than an ultra-light rifle chambered for a hard-recoiling magnum.

- **Fit the rifle:** Consistent cheek weld and shoulder contact help control movement.

- **Choose the cartridge deliberately:** Match recoil and terminal performance to the hunt rather than selecting power in isolation.

- **Use support:** A backpack, bipod, tripod, tree, or natural rest can stabilize a light rifle.

- **Practice follow-through:** Stay behind the rifle and maintain the sight picture through recoil.

HOW CARBON FIBER REDUCES RIFLE WEIGHT

Reducing weight responsibly requires more than removing material. The rifle still needs a stable stock, rigid barrel structure, dependable bedding, durable action, and consistent trigger. Advanced composites allow designers to place strength where it is needed without relying on the mass of traditional materials.

Christensen Arms uses carbon fiber in two key areas. Aerograde carbon fiber-wrapped barrels pair a 416R stainless steel core with a composite exterior, while Flash Forged Technology creates lightweight carbon fiber stock components. Together, those systems reduce carry weight while supporting the rigidity expected from a precision hunting platform.

Explore the construction behind Christensen Arms carbon fiber barrel technology and Flash Forged Technology here:

<https://christensenarms.com/fft/>

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE

The right target weight depends on the terrain, distance carried, expected shot positions, cartridge, recoil tolerance, and accessories. A mountain hunter may prioritize every ounce, while a hunter walking a short distance to a stand may benefit more from extra stability.

BACKCOUNTRY PRIORITY RIDGELINE FFT

Starts at 5.4 pounds with an FFT stock and carbon fiber-wrapped barrel for demanding mountain carry.

EXPLORE RIDGELINE FFT here:

<https://christensenarms.com/product/ridgeline-fft/>

STAINLESS PLATFORM MESA FFT

Starts at 5.9 pounds and pairs an FFT carbon fiber stock with a stainless free-floating barrel.

EXPLORE MESA FFT here:

<https://christensenarms.com/product/mesa-fft/>

(continued on the next page)

Lightweight Rifle: Accuracy, Carry & Performance

(continued from page 23)

FIND YOUR FIT RIFLE QUIZ

Compare terrain, game, carry needs, and shooting priorities to narrow the Christensen Arms lineup.

TAKE THE RIFLE QUIZ here:

<https://christensenarms.com/product-recommendation-quiz/>

- Calculate field-ready weight with your intended optic, mounts, sling, ammunition, and muzzle device.
- Choose a cartridge you can control from realistic hunting positions.
- Check the balance after accessories are installed, especially a suppressor or bipod.
- Prioritize stock fit, trigger control, and a stable shooting position alongside low weight.
- Practice with the complete hunting setup before relying on it in the field.

LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE FAQ

WHAT IS CONSIDERED A LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLE?

There is no universal cutoff, but many modern lightweight bolt-action hunting rifles fall near or below seven pounds before optics and accessories. Intended use and field-ready weight matter more than a single category line.

ARE LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLES LESS ACCURATE?

Not inherently. A well-built light rifle can be mechanically precise, although its lower mass may require better support and more disciplined shooting fundamentals.

DO LIGHTWEIGHT RIFLES RECOIL MORE?

With the same cartridge and load, reducing rifle mass generally increases rifle movement and felt recoil. Stock fit, recoil pads, brakes, suppressors, and technique can help manage it.

WHAT MATTERS MORE THAN RIFLE WEIGHT?

Balance, fit, cartridge choice, build quality, field support, and the shooter's ability to control the complete setup all matter alongside weight.



Shop Christensen Arms online at <https://christensenarms.com>

If You Care About Hunting In Montana...Take This Online Survey Through MFWP

MFWP <https://fwp.mt.gov>



Photo credit cbosewell | depositphotos.com

Hunters who are interested in sharing their experiences and opinions on the impacts of nonresident hunting on how licenses are allocated can provide feedback via a new survey from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

The survey is part of research released today as required by House Bill 568, The Montana Hunters First Act, which was passed during the 2025 session.

The legislation, sponsored by Rep. Courtenay Sprunger, required FWP to do a nonresident hunting impact study. The data collected in the study and the survey can be found on the FWP Website here: <https://fwp.mt.gov/legislature/montana-hunters-first-act-hb-568>.

Overall, Montana is seeing growth in nonresident license sales across the board, though some of that has tapered a bit in recent years.

In general, license sales are sold according to state law, which can change with every legislative session. The Fish and Wildlife Commission can also dictate how licenses are distributed and has cut back on some licenses for nonresidents in recent years.

HB 568 required FWP to assess nonresident hunting impacts on deer and elk hunting in the state in each of the seven FWP regions. The legislation also required FWP to identify specific issues for consideration by the legislature, the department and the Fish and Wildlife Commission "concerning nonresident impacts on deer and elk hunting."

On the website (<https://fwp.mt.gov/legislature/montana-hunters-first-act-hb-568>), people can see a license trends report, the language of HB 568, and study of license trends, **along with the survey which will be open through Dec. 1.** This is a preview (<https://fwp.mt.gov/legislature/montana-hunters-first-act-hb-568>) of the data being compiled by FWP for a final report that will be published by Dec. 1.

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www.hsmammunition.com

Manufactured in Stevensville, MT.



Photo credit Ted Ramirez Jr. <https://www.caribougear.com>

The 10-Minute Reset SOP: How to Keep Your Hunting Kit Always Ready

Ted Ramirez Jr.

Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Company

<https://www.caribougear.com>

You don't lose hunts because you "forgot everything."

You lose them to small failures that compound: wet gear that never dried, a dead headlamp battery, missing tape, a dull edge, a tarp stuffed away muddy, and a pack that slowly turns into a cluttered junk drawer.

Your latest Field Organization mindset only works if you protect it with one habit:

The Reset.

This is the 10-Minute Reset SOP—a post-trip checklist that keeps your hunting kit staged, quiet, dry, and always ready for the next mission.

Executive Summary: Readiness Is a KPI

If you want a simple metric, use this:

- Time-to-ready: how fast can you go from "truck door closes" to "moving with purpose"?
- Failure rate: how often do you discover a problem only after you're already in the field?
- Reset speed: can you reset your system in under 10 minutes?

This reset SOP pairs well with:

Truck-to-Trailhead Checklist (start organized):

<https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/truck-to-trailhead-checklist>

Spring Scouting Kit Standard (build the kit right):

<https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/spring-scouting-gear-checklist>

Gear Care & Storage (make the system last):

<https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/blogs-hunting-tips-gear-care-storage-how-to-make-your-hunting-kit-last>

The 10-Minute Reset SOP (Do This After Every Trip)

Minute 1: Dump and Sort by Module

Do not "put things away." Sort them.

- Command module: Ditty Bag essentials (batteries, lens cloth, wind checker, tape, small tools)
- Weather/control: tarps, rain layers, gloves, insulation
- Rifle transport: Waterproof Rifle Cover + straps
- Meat care: kill kit pieces, game bags, spray, cordage

Minute 2–4: Dry Anything That Can Fail If Stored Wet

Wet storage is how "good gear" turns into unreliable gear.

- Open up tarps and let them fully dry
- Air out soft goods (gloves, layers) instead of stuffing them back into the pack
- If the rifle cover took weather or mud, wipe it down and let it dry before stowing

Minute 5–6: Recharge and Replace Power

Dead batteries are a preventable failure. Make it automatic.

- Recharge power bank
- Replace/charge headlamp batteries
- Check rangefinder power

Minute 7–8: Restock Consumables

This is where systems win. Top off the small items before they become field problems.

- Replace tape/flagging (minimal, but consistent)
- Restock gloves/wipes if you run them
- Confirm kill kit is complete and staged in order-of-use

If you want the full kill kit staging standard, keep this saved: The Kill Kit Standard:

<https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/hunting-kill-kit-checklist>

Minute 9: Repack the "Command Module" (Ditty Bag)

Your Ditty Bag should be a single pull that says: this runs my day.

- Lens cloth + small brush
- Headlamp battery plan
- Wind checker
- Minimal tape for quiet fixes
- Notes system (consistent format)

Minute 10: Stage for the Next Trip (Zero Friction Tomorrow)

Close the loop. Don't leave decisions for the morning.

- Put the Ditty Bag in the same pocket every time
- Fold and stage the tarp where it's accessible
- Stage the Waterproof Rifle Cover for transport so it's not "somewhere in the gear pile"

(continued on page 32)



RAZOR® HD LHT™ RIFLESCOPE

Western hunting demands an optic built for long range and the long haul, and the Razor® HD LHT™ 4.5-22x50 FFP delivers. You still get the core of the Razor® HD LHT™, including a stunning HD optical system and rugged build in a hunting scope that's among the lightest in its class. Where the Razor® HD LHT™ 4.5-22x50 FFP distances itself is in offering more magnification, and a first focal plane reticle featuring the XLR-2 reticle system, which is intuitive, easy to use, and illuminated. You also get our RevStop™ Zero System for a reliable return to zero after dialing in the field, and a locking elevation turret keeps your zero safe.



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3-15X42
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Photos credit Jeremiah Doughty courtesy www.vortexoptics.com

Let's Talk Burgers, Wild Game Burgers

By Jeremiah Doughty Vortex Optics www.vortexoptics.com

When you start talking about wild game burgers, the first thing people ask is how much fat—and what type of fat—do you add to wild game meat when making patties? I am here to tell you that I don't add any fat to burgers, and you shouldn't either. Here's why.

Adding fat usually means adding a domestic animal's fat into a wild animal ground. This for me is kind of counterproductive to what we as hunters are trying to do when we say we want to know where our meals come from. You have to add domestic pork or beef fat to your burger, and 99% of the time, that is store bought bulk fats or bacon.

There is this huge misconception that if you don't add fat your burger patty will be dry and/or chalky in texture. Again, this is only true if you don't know how to handle or cook your burgers.

So how can we avoid using domestic animal fats and only use 100% wild game meat, yet still get a moist delicious burger? That's why I'm here; I'm here to help you. So, let's get into it shall we?

THE PERFECT WILD GAME BURGER

I am going to break down the perfect burger into three, easy-to-follow parts: Grind, Temperature, and Cooking. If you follow these three steps, you'll have a delicious wild game burger that will have your family coming back for seconds and thirds.

GRIND

If you take your meat to a butcher for processing, there are a few things you need to ask, and make sure they do.

1. Make sure it's just your game animal. Butchers are notorious for taking scraps from multiple animals and doing one huge grind.

You can ask the butcher to just grind your meat separate, or even better, ask them to just put all scraps in a bag and you can grind at home.

2. If they are grinding it for you, ask for the largest grind plate they have, a #32 is a perfect grind. The bigger the grind, the meatier the burger. Most butchers will use a #22 or smaller, and it tends to leave you with almost a paste.

3. Have them package it flat, not in the ground meat tubes. When you stuff the meat into a tube it's like stuffing a sausage. You end up with a mushy meat, plus it thaws at different rates and this will lead to a mushy core.

4. Have them remove all silver skin and funk before the grind. If they don't, you will end up with a very chewy ground meat.



I recommend getting a meat grinder and doing it at home, this way your hands are the only hands that are handling your wild game meat.

You can take the time to make sure all the above steps are taken, and you will have a much better ground meat burger. You can get a good intro grinder for \$100-200 bucks. It will pay for itself after the first deer.

TEMPERATURE

You want to keep the meat and grinder parts as cold as you can. I like to grind my meat while still 25% frozen. This guarantees the meat will stay cold. From there, I place in a glass bowl lined with paper towels and allow the meat to "drain" for an hour or so. This will take out any blood and water still retained within the meat.

Next, take the meat out and season to your liking.

Make a meatball between the size of a baseball and golf ball.

Get a square of parchment paper and smash the meatball down. Round the edges and keep pressing until it's 1/2" thick. Set aside and finish the patties.

Once they are all finished put them back in the fridge for 30 minutes. This is a key step. This step will allow the meat to form, all the fibers will meld together and keep your burger from falling apart.

Unless you are doing a smash burger (smashing the patty onto a griddle or flat top) then this is a step you don't want to skip.

COOKING

Get your grill hot, a nice med-high heat is ideal. You are now going to pull those patties from the fridge and place them directly on the grill. Once they are on the grill, you are not going to touch until you start to see the juices rising to the top of the meat and the sides start to cook. Once you see that, after about 5 minutes, then you're going to flip once, and once only. The more you mess with the burger patty the more moisture it loses. Once you've reached an internal temp that you're comfortable with, pull the burger patty and let it rest 1-3 minutes.

Common Mistake: one common mistake many grillers make is over cooking the meat. You want to eat these game burgers at medium; with the lack of fat they will dry out quickly. So, keep an eye on them and cook to medium.

Now that we have the foundation for the perfect burger patty, let's get into the perfect burger, shall we?

INGREDIENTS: PATTIES

2 pounds ground wild game meat (Venison, Elk, Moose, etc.)

2 tbsp Garlic, minced

1 tbsp Worcestershire

1/4 cup onion, minced

1/2 tbsp cracked pepper

1 tsp paprika

1 tsp sea salt

1 tsp garlic powder

INGREDIENTS: MUSHROOMS

1 pound baby portobellos, sliced

1 tsp garlic, minced

1/4 tsp salt

3 tbsp butter

1/4 tsp cracked pepper

OTHER:

Garlic mayo
(mashed smoked garlic and mayo mixture)

Leaf lettuce

Buns

3 tbsp butter

Swiss cheese

DIRECTIONS:

1. In large glass bowl, mix game meat along with all other ingredients.

2. Take a baseball size handful of meat mixture and roll it into a ball. On a piece of parchment paper toss the ball down. Once down, press down on the ball and, with other hand, follow along the sides to form a perfect patty. Continue until all patties have been formed. Place all patties in the fridge for 30 minutes before cooking. This is key.

3. Preheat grill to medium high heat.

4. Place the burgers on the grill and don't touch!!! Once they've cooked for 5-8 minutes flip once. ONCE. Add cheese after the flip. Pull patties, cover and let them rest 1-3 minutes.

5. While the burgers are resting, start on your mushrooms. Begin by melting the butter in a skillet. Add garlic and cook 30 seconds.

6. Add mushrooms, salt, pepper, and cook until mushrooms are soft, 3-5 minutes.

7. Build the burgers: Bun, garlic mayo, patty, mushrooms, leaf lettuce, garlic mayo, top bun.

8. Enjoy!

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Tips To Hunt In Bitterly Cold Weather (And Why You Should)

By Ryan McSparran & Zach Lazzari

Caribou Outdoor Equipment Co. <https://www.caribougear.com>

It's rifle season. And it's getting late into the fall. When you look at the weekend forecast, temps are going to be in the teens or even single digits. Do you cringe? Or do you think, "Game on!"

When the weather turns very cold, you shouldn't hesitate to go hunting. In fact, you should get motivated when you see a major cold snap coming just in time for your hunt. When bitter cold temperatures arrive, it can mean fewer people on the mountain. Plus, it vastly improves your chances of seeing animals on their feet.

In very cold conditions, strategic clothing and a logical approach to staying comfortable will extend your hunting day. Being able to hunt those extremely cold dawn temperatures and all the way through dusk can increase your odds of harvesting an animal.

Here are a few tips to take advantage of these cold weather opportunities while staying comfortable in the field...

TIPS FOR STAYING DRY

Moisture is the enemy in cold weather and you must find ways to let sweat escape while preventing outside moisture from entering. This starts with your clothing materials.

Base Layers

Wear base layer materials that help manage your body's moisture and dry quickly. Fabrics like merino wool are ideal, as they retain their insulative properties even if damp. Quick drying synthetic base layers are also important. Don't even think about cotton – and that includes your socks and underwear.

Outerwear

Waterproof, breathable outerwear is also critical. A high quality hardshell jacket and pants will evacuate moisture from the inside while protecting you from snow and moisture from the outside. A garment with a waterproof, breathable membrane is also windproof – a major key to avoiding convective heat loss.

Managing Moisture

While hiking through elk and mule deer country, you will build up a sweat. Sitting after that hike will quickly lead to a chill. When you are about to begin a climb or any period of exertion, layer down. It's better to be a bit cold when you begin the climb than to be drenched in sweat a few minutes later. You might even carry an extra base layer to swap out when the original becomes wet. When it's time to sit and glass, bundle up with your dry gear and you'll maintain the heat that you generated on the hike.

Footwear

The same principle applies to your feet. Cold feet are very uncomfortable and they will quickly end a day in the field. Waterproof, insulated boots are ideal. Use a boot with a breathable membrane to help evacuate moisture. We highly recommend Kenetrek boots. They're warm, waterproof, comfortable in rugged terrain, and they'll last you for many years.

Even in a breathable boot, your feet will inevitably build up some level of sweat. For that reason, carry an extra pair of socks in a plastic zip bag. If your feet become sweaty and then cold, swap them out. Putting on a fresh pair of socks will make an incredible difference, adding comfort and preventing blisters.

Choose a high quality merino wool or merino-synthetic blend sock and avoid cotton at all costs. Again, we can't say enough about Kenetrek. Check out Kenetrek's cold weather socks here:

<https://kenetrek.com/collections/socks>

Shelter

Finally, be prepared to stay dry through sleet and snowfall. Our ultralight Hunter's Tarp weighs just 4.3 ounces and is totally waterproof. This is a no-brainer to keep in your daypack. It's a ground tarp for quartering or deboning meat. It's a pack liner for transporting game bags full of meat. And in these foul-weather situations, it's a great waterproof shelter. Stake it out with trees or trekking poles and paracord to make a great little storm shelter or glassing shelter.



TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE LAYERING

You've heard this one a thousand times but it remains important. Carry base layers, insulating layers and quality outerwear throughout your hunt. The key however, is to use them strategically.

Layering Priorities

If you're on a budget, your order of importance should be your outerwear first – those waterproof, breathable jacket and pants aren't cheap. Save up and buy good ones. Next come your base layers. Try to find high quality merino wool or synthetics. And lastly, insulating layers. These mid-layers are the easiest to find at reasonable costs. A cheap down puffy from your favorite discount store will do. Sure, it will be heavier and bulkier than the expensive version with 800-fill goose down. But if you're making cuts somewhere, that's usually the layer to do it.

Bring at least two different mid-layers of varying weights in the truck so that you can mix or match depending on the weather. For example, pack a synthetic fleece jacket for milder temps and a puffy down jacket for very cold weather.

Gaiters

When the weather is foul, gaiters become another important piece of gear. If the ground is wet or if there's snow, eventually water can wick up your pants and then down your socks. You might think your boots are leaky when in fact, moisture is moving in from your calf down. Gaiters provide an extra layer of protection to keep your feet and the bottom of your pants dry.



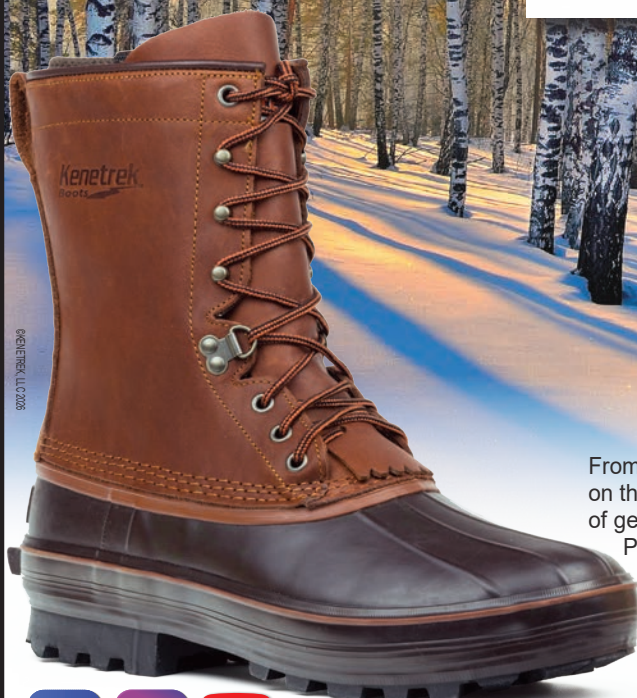
Extremities

In addition to the layers, winter calls for a warm hat and serious gloves. Choose a hat with insulation and plenty of cover for the ears. A neck gaiter will also make a big difference. And in extreme cold, a balaclava that covers everything including the neck is useful.

OTHER TIPS FOR STAYING WARM

Sometimes, an external heat source can make all the difference. Depending on where you're hunting and how far into the backcountry, consider bringing a thermos full of hot coffee, tea or soup. Warming from the inside out will make you feel much better on a bitter cold day. Soup is especially nice because the extra calories will keep you warm for an extended period of time.

(continued on the next page)



From the morning sits in the late season Whitetail stand to chasing after hounds hot on the trail of a Colorado Cougar, your boots are arguably the most important piece of gear you will use. Stay out longer, hike further, and perform better with Kenetrek Pac Boots. Built with the mountains in mind, our supportive leather uppers and high traction K-Talon™ outsole will keep you upright, while wool felt liners and extra insulation in the bottoms will keep you toasty warm in temperatures down to 0°F.



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Tips To Hunt In Bitterly Cold Weather (And Why You Should)

(continued from page 31)



Alternatively, you might bring a lightweight stove system, like a Jetboil, in your daypack. Even in harsh conditions, a Jetboil will heat water in no time. Then, some instant coffee or tea is all you need to warm up out in the backcountry. In addition to beverages, this allows you to fix a hot meal while you're on the mountain. During those long hours of glassing in the cold, a hot lunch or cup of coffee can make a big difference to keep you energized and focused.

Calories are Fuel

And finally, when the weather is extremely cold, pay attention to your calorie intake. Bring enough food and make sure you're snacking throughout the day. When you're feeling cold, a bite to eat can recharge your system. If the weather is extremely cold, plan on having a snack every hour. Late season mule deer and elk hunting means lots of glassing – so there will be plenty of stationary time to snack while you're behind the glass.

If you have questions or need help getting ready for your next hunt, please don't hesitate to reach out! The later seasons offer some of the best hunting conditions of the year – get out there, take advantage of it and have fun!



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The 10-Minute Reset SOP: How to Keep Your Hunting Kit Always Ready

(continued from page 26)

Why This SOP Pays Off

- Less pack digging (more quiet movement)
- Fewer preventable failures (dead batteries, missing essentials)
- Better field decisions (because you're not troubleshooting)
- And most importantly: it protects the momentum you build with scouting and preseason work.



Caribou Gear Waterproof Rifle Cover

<https://www.caribougear.com/products/rifle-cover>

Frequently Asked Questions

How often should I reset my hunting kit?

After every trip. Even short scouting loops. The goal is "always ready," not "eventually organized."

What's the quickest way to improve pack organization?

Stop storing essentials as loose cargo. Build a command module (Ditty Bag) and repack it the same way every time.

What gear should always be staged for travel?

Your rifle transport protection, tarp/work surface, and the command module. Those three prevent most "trailhead chaos."

Bottom line: Your kit is only as good as your reset discipline. Run the SOP. Stay ready. Execute clean.

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Mark Boardman - Brand Experience Manager
Check him out on the Vortex Nation™ Podcast and Cartridge Talks.



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Photo courtesy <https://www.hardcorewaterfowl.com>

Still The Benchmark Bird

By Jay Anglin

Hardcore Waterfowl <https://www.hardcorewaterfowl.com>

Traditions Media <https://traditionsmedia.com>

Ask a non-hunter to name a duck, and there's a good chance they say mallard before anything else. Green head, curled tail feather, that unmistakable quack. Mallards are the species the whole sport gets introduced through, and for most waterfowlers, they're still the bird the season gets measured against. They've earned that spot. Mallards are the most widely distributed puddle duck on the continent, breeding from the prairie potholes of the Dakotas and southern Canada all the way north into the boreal forest and west into Alaska. They winter across nearly every flyway in the Lower 48, which means whether you're hunting timber in Arkansas, a cornfield in South Dakota, or a coastal marsh on either coast, mallards are probably part of the conversation.

Where the Numbers Stand for 2026

The latest data backs up mallards' status as the anchor species of North American waterfowling, even in a year that's holding steady rather than surging.

The 2026 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Population Status Report puts the continental mallard breeding population at 6.55 million birds, essentially flat with 2025 but still running 17 percent below the long-term average. That's still roughly one in five of all breeding ducks in North America. Total breeding ducks across the survey area came in at just under 34 million, also unchanged year over year.

There's some movement worth noting underneath those numbers. More mallards settled into the Canadian prairies this spring than they did in 2025, a shift from the year before, when a larger share pushed into the Yukon and Northwest Canada.

In the Atlantic Flyway, the Eastern Survey Area logged 1.14 million mallards, essentially unchanged from 2024. None of that points to a boom. But it doesn't point to a bust, either, and it's part of why the 2026 season is carrying the same liberal framework hunters have grown used to. Mallards remain steady, plentiful, and everywhere.

One Species, Two Jobs

Every mallard spread has two jobs to do at once. It must hold up and look alive from three hundred feet in the air and must look completely at ease once birds get close enough to study it.

Hardcore built a decoy for each job, but both belong in the same spread. Each one runs on the WhaleTail™ Keel, so whether a bird's sitting upright or tipped down feeding, it's carrying that same subtle, lifelike motion on the water. That shared foundation is what lets the two styles blend instead of looking like two different product lines thrown side by side.

The Rugged Series Standard Mallard Decoys are the anchor, a mixed-pose set built to carry the bulk of the spread. Field Series Mallard Feeder Butt Duck Decoys are the accent, a pair that floats tipped down in a natural feeding position, the exact posture that tells cruising birds everything's calm down there.

Here's a closer look at both.



Rugged Series Standard Mallard Decoy

At Hardcore, dedication knows no bounds, and the Rugged Series line epitomizes the passion, persistence, and sheer perseverance the brand pours into every product. Built on Hardcore's ultra-durable FowlFlex™ Technology, these decoys are built to endure the toughest conditions hunters can throw at them — hauled through mud, tossed in a boat, left to soak, and still ready to work the next morning. What sets this decoy apart is the finish. True-to-life paint schemes give it a texture and depth that plastic alone can't fake, the kind of detail that closes the deal on birds

that have circled a few decoy spreads this season. Add in the WhaleTail™ Keel, and the whole set comes alive with subtle, realistic movement even when the water's barely moving.

"True-to-life paint schemes make or break a decoy like this," said Doug Veldhuizen, Merchandise Manager for Hardcore Waterfowl. "We spent a lot of time getting the color and pattern right on both the drakes and hens, so birds see what they expect to see. That's what closes the deal on ducks that have already worked a few spreads."

The set includes six decoys in a deliberately varied mix: two active drakes, two resting drakes, one relaxed hen, and one resting hen. That range of postures is what separates a realistic spread from a row of identical plastic ducks, as real mallards don't all hold the same position on the water, and now neither does the spread. "A spread where every bird looks the same is a spread that looks fake," Veldhuizen said. "We built this set with active birds, resting birds, drakes, and hens, because that's what an actual raft of mallards looks like. Variety is what sells it."



RUGGED SERIES STANDARD MALLARD FEATURES:

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- True-To-Life Drake and Hen Paint Schemes
- WhaleTail™ Keel Creates Lifelike Movement With Little Current
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- MEASUREMENTS: 15.75" L x 8" W

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(continued on the next page)

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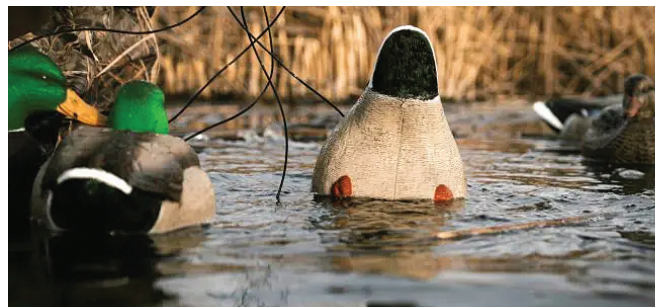
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Still The Benchmark Bird

(continued from page 35)



Field Series Mallard Feeder Butt Duck Decoy

Where the Rugged Series floater carries the bulk of the spread, the Field Series Mallard Feeder Butt Duck Decoy handles the finishing touch. This two-pack — one drake, one hen — floats tipped forward in the water, head down, tail up, one of the most convincing postures a decoy can hold.

It's a small detail with an outsized effect on approaching birds. A spread full of upright, alert-looking decoys can put cruising mallards on edge. A couple of feeder-butt decoys mixed in says this is a safe spot, birds are already comfortable enough to tip down and feed.

Built with true-to-life drake and hen paint schemes and a durable plastic blend meant to hold up season after season, the Feeder Butts also carry Hardcore's WhaleTail™ Keel, which makes them a strong option for hunters who like to work them into a jerk rig for a little added motion across the spread. "Feeding posture is one of those details hunters underestimate," Veldhuizen said. "A spread that's all heads-up can actually work against you. Mixing in a couple of birds that look like they're already feeding tells incoming ducks everything's fine down there."

FIELD SERIES MALLARD FEEDER BUTT FEATURES:

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 - True-To-Life Drake and Hen Paint Schemes
 - Durable Plastic Blend for Years of Use
 - Great Option for Use with Jerk Rigs
 - INCLUDES: 1 Drake & 1 Hen
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Built for the Bird That Built the Sport

A mallard hunt doesn't hinge on decoy count. It hinges on believability, and believability comes from variety. Real rafts of mallards aren't lined up at attention. Some birds are alert and upright, working the edges. Others have their heads down, comfortable enough to feed, telling every other duck in the sky that the water's safe. That's the gap Hardcore built these two decoys to close together. The Rugged Series Standard Mallard Decoy brings the pose variety and paint detail that anchors a spread — active birds, resting birds, drakes and hens, all carrying the WhaleTail™ Keel's subtle motion. The Field Series Feeder Butts bring the one posture a lot of spreads are missing entirely: birds tipped down and feeding, the detail that turns a good-looking spread into one that finishes.

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3 Stands For Hunting Thick Cover In The Deer Rut

By Mike Hanback

Big Deer Blog <https://bigdeerblog.com/big-deer-blog>

• Three days or so before the peak of the rut, many does pile into stands of thick cedars or pines. They're tired of being chased over hill and dale by horny bucks, so they try to hide out in the thickets. Of course, the boys pitch in there and keep harassing them.

Check an aerial photograph for a small clearing in the greens, like a third-row thinning in planted pines.

Sneak in there (great quiet walking) and set up in a ground blind on the downwind side of the opening. A doe might pop out to browse with a buck on her heels, or more likely she'll flash across, still trying to dump a rowdy 8-pointer.

An old buck is apt to amble by any time, trolling for a doe, because he feels comfortable moving in the thick stuff. Since the cover is tight, this is an especially good archery, muzzleloader or shotgun spot.

• Set up to cover an "inside corner" where a strip of pines or cedars corner into a block of hardwood timber. The more fresh rubs and scrapes along the edges the better. The edge and corner create a pinch point between the 2 blocks of trees to funnel a lot of rutting deer.

• A regenerating clear-cut or burn grown thick with brush, briars and brambles that are head high to a buck is a great spot for a dawn-till-noon gun post.

• Hang a tree stand on the edge, or climb high and sit in a pile of logs pushed together by a bulldozer (the latter is cool because you have a built-in rifle rest with the logs).

A buck is liable to push or chase a doe across the cut anytime of morning because he feels safe and hidden in the cover.

My favorite time to watch and rattle from the setup is 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. on a cool, still day.

This is a also great place to hunt during peak rut, or a week later in "lockdown." If you spot a doe bedded or walking in the cut, glass closely around her for a drooling buck waiting not so patiently to breed her for the first time or again.

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POLARIS

How To Find Mule Deer Bucks During The November Rut: 8 Tactics For Success

(continued from page 7)

Stay motivated, even if you haven't seen any action for hours—bucks can show up at any time, and persistence often pays off.

6. Research backwards

It is well known that on later-season hunts under ideal conditions, you should seek out migration corridors, as that is where deer will start moving once heavy snowfall blankets the mountains or the hint of the rut hits the air.

But what happens if you look at those migrations routes backward? What do you see? If you take note of a migration route, you'll see that they start from a higher elevation and move downward. So, if you happen to have a chance at mild weather, you can use this to your advantage and hunt above the "typical" migration corridor.

What do mature deer do if they sense pressure from hunters and, at the same time, have all their nutritional requirements at higher elevations? They head to those so-called "unusual places." What I mean by this is if mature mule deer sense pressure from hunters in late October and early November, why would they want to move to lower elevations where there are more hunters, more commotion, and an increased chance that they will get shot? If higher elevations still have the nutritional requirements as well as safety, then a giant buck will not risk moving into the firing range. This is what I believe also happened on my 2018 Colorado hunt. So, I never let "elevation" determine where I will focus my efforts. I will always search for bucks at higher elevations which some people might avoid due to cold temperatures or difficulty accessing with a truck or ATV. Searching out all the zones where a buck could be will eventually put you in the spot with the most deer activity.

Also, a key part in this stage, is again using hunter pressure to your advantage. If you see large groups of hunters in one area, that is a great opportunity to move to areas on the fringe. This is where deer are going to get pushed into. Lots of hunters might be hunting in a spot due to easy access so you just need to start figuring out ways to out-hunt other hunters.

7. Hunt near public/private land borders

If you are in a mountain area, the later in the season, the greater the chance that deer have started to migrate down, and that means they might start to congregate on private lands. So a great strategy is to focus on some of the public lands near private to either catch bucks coming off private or moving to a private land spot. This tactic can be kind of frustrating at times, as it could be a game of patience. But with patience can come success!

Even if the area you are hunting doesn't have a ton of high elevations, hunting near private land can still be a great tactic. You'd be surprised at how many people avoid the small accessible sections of public land near big sections of private because they feel that all the deer might just get sucked into private.

Private lands are also deer sanctuaries because deer there start to know they are safe. But it's the rut, and you just never know if a buck will come into the area and push a bunch of deer back to public land.



Photo credit Chris Neville courtesy GOHUNT.com

8. Think outside the box

I've always said that if you want to be more successful at mule deer hunting, you need to think outside the box. Sometimes, getting away from people might involve grabbing a tent and a stove and backpacking out. A lot of people aren't going to want to do that. You've probably heard me say it before, but if you always do what 95% of the hunters do, then you will have success like 95% of the hunters do. If you want to take a buck that maybe 5% or less of the hunters take, then you need to think outside the box and do what other hunters aren't willing to do. A solid plan and a great mindset will put you in the right position for success on a big rutting mule deer.

Conclusion: Mastering the mule deer rut

Mule deer hunting during the rut requires a combination of patience, persistence, and strategy. You'll increase your chances of success by getting away from the crowds, focusing on doe groups, utilizing optics, covering lots of ground, and staying mentally tough. Mule deer rut hunts are a special time of year, so enjoy every moment and make the most of the opportunity!

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5 Rifle Season Tips For Hunting Post-Rut Elk

(continued from page 9)

2. Try a Locator Call

The rut is over and your odds of calling in a bull are slim. That doesn't mean they won't respond to a random call. When the going is tough, send out a bugle and you might get a response that reveals a general location. Using this technique at night while driving back roads can help to narrow down a more focused hunt area.

Get to a high point where you can hear from multiple directions and where you're away from the noise of creeks or vehicles. Send out a location bugle and then listen carefully for a response. If you're hunting with friends, spread out a little bit. Multiple sets of ears will make it easier to pinpoint the location of a response. If you don't get a response, don't be tempted to overdo it. Move to the next ridge and try again.

3. Head for the High Country

Many mature bulls will hold out in the high country until the weather forces them to lower elevations. If the snow is accumulating up high, you have a chance at catching bulls as they move to find available food. If the snow isn't deep enough, they will hold out in high basins. Hunters should plan on hiking to reach these difficult areas.

While bulls can be found at a variety of elevation zones after the rut, the high elevation areas with difficult access provide sanctuary and are worth exploring. If backpacking into these zones is not feasible, focus your day hunting energy on ridge tops and steep slopes with dark timber. The timber provides cover and the late season grasses are fresher in these sheltered areas. Even after snow begins to accumulate, bulls can still be found high up on windblown ridges or south-facing slopes where grass is still accessible.

4. Use Your Glass

Hunting post-rut bulls can require spending a lot of time behind the glass. Put your binoculars on a tripod for more comfortable and steady glassing. After the rut, bull elk like to hang in places where they don't have to travel far between food, water and security. Unless pressured, don't expect them to be out and about in wide-open areas. Focus your glassing on timber edges, the edges of burns and skinny avalanche chutes. Be persistent. They may only feed out into the opening for a few minutes before they disappear back into the timber.

If you spot a bull, even for a moment, the game is on. Unless pressured, these solitary elk aren't likely to travel far. That spot where the bull fed out into the open is probably where you should be for the next morning or evening hunt.

5. Know Your Area

Scouting ahead of the season and getting to know the area is a major advantage. Ideally, you'd begin scouting in the spring and early summer. Watching the elk

migrate from winter range back to summer range is a big help. Getting to know these routes up the mountain allows you to hunt these same travel corridors after the rut.

However, it's not realistic for many of us to watch the elk year-round. At the very least, spend time at home scouting with tools like OnX Hunt and Google Earth. Mark roads, access points and likely areas where post-rut bulls might find sanctuary. Identify likely glassing points where you can watch those timber edges or avalanche chutes.

The more familiar you can become with the landscape, food sources, escape routes and travel patterns, the better informed decisions you'll be able to make during the hunting season.

Before you get out there this rifle season, take a look at our Caribou Gear Bullet Wallets. Made with tough ballistic Cordura fabric, we designed these bullet wallets with a slim, streamlined folding design that still protects soft and polymer-tipped rounds. Check out the video to learn more:



<https://youtu.be/JPB54SLzCmM?si=0trNg3PabZmVBfYN>

Of course one of our primary goals this rifle season is to come home with high quality wild meat. So make sure you're prepared to take care of it. Our Wapiti game bag set is perfect for backcountry hunts. This set will hold an entire bull elk with bone-in quarters. It includes four 23"x40" quarter bags and a 16"x30" meat parts bag.

Alternatively, our Elk Magnum Pack is great for anyone hunting from a base camp, horses or who simply wants the additional features. These Magnum Pack game bags are cut slightly larger than the Wapiti bags for increased airflow. Plus, the Magnum Pack includes two additional bags: a cape bag and a camp meat bag. Click here to learn more about the Magnum Pack: <https://www.caribougear.com/products/magnum-pack-medium-elk-game-bags>

No matter what species you're hunting or where you're hunting this season, we have a specific set of game bags that's right for you. Explore all of our available game bags here or contact us with any questions

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