



# ECHOES IN THE ASPENS

HUNTING IN THE ELK-RICH  
COLORADO HIGH COUNTRY.

BY DIANA RUPP

TIM CHRISTIE



It was bedlam. I had never imagined a herd of elk could make such a deafening cacophony, but then again, I had never been this close to such a large herd. As the animals milled around in the aspen grove below us, they chirped, mewed, and barked. Bulls of every age sounded off with bugles of varying depth and intensity. Cows screamed like junior-high girls at a haunted house. Hooves pounded as older elk chased off younger ones. I wondered why we had even bothered to sneak in quietly—with so much commotion in their ranks, the animals probably wouldn't have heard us if we'd announced our presence with a bullhorn.

I was sitting on a hillside some fifty yards from the edge of the herd, which must have numbered at least two hundred elk. Below me, my hunting partners, Tim Christie and Stephen Holley, were set up in hopes of getting Tim a shot at one of the bigger bulls in the group. But dusk was falling fast on this balmy evening in mid-October, and there were so many elk that Tim had not been able to sort out a clear shot at the bull he wanted. Still, the

experience of being so close to this big herd was exciting, and we could hardly be disappointed. As darkness closed in, Tim and Stephen finally got up, and I followed, hiking back toward the old road while carefully staying downwind from the elk. The animals had never even noticed our presence, as far as we could tell. That would certainly bode well for tomorrow.

This elk hunt, on the huge White River Mountain Ranch in western Colorado, had been filled with action and excitement right from the start. On the very first evening I hunted with Josh Dickens, the ranch manager, and toward dark we had heard a bull bugling below us, in a canyon filled with aspens. After several unsuccessful attempts to lure him in our direction, we had decided to put on a stalk.

We crept to within fifty yards, using downed logs as cover. Although we were well within range, the bull was behind a patch of thick oak brush. All I could see through the scope was a mesmerizing view of a 6x5 rack tipping

back every time the bull let loose with a spine-tingling bugle. Trying with all my might to stay calm, I knelt on the sidehill just above him, waiting for him to step clear. As the light faded, however, the wind suddenly shifted, funneling downhill. The bull winded us and bolted, taking with him several previously unseen cows and a large piece of my still-pounding heart.

The action continued the next morning, when Tim and I headed out with Stephen to a different part of the ranch. We drove up an old road to the top of a mountain, parked the truck, and then walked slowly along a dim trail in the predawn. Cows were chirping and bugles were coming from the canyons. These vocalizations were ideal for locating the elk, although the main portion of the rut was past and the animals were unlikely to come in to our calls.

We came upon a group of cows and two 5x5 bulls feeding in some aspens and made a stalk on them, crawling to a convenient tree about 260 yards away. This time, I had a clear view and the wind was right. I knelt with my rifle on a Bog-Pod and waited for the bigger bull to step clear. When he did, I squeezed off a shot, but I wasn't as steady as I should have been. The bull showed no reaction and took off running, strongly, with the rest of the herd. We hiked over to where the bull had been standing and looked carefully for any sign of a hit, but found none. I was puzzled and a little disheartened at missing, but with the large numbers of elk in the area, I figured I was likely to get another opportunity. For now, though, since I had blown my chance, it was Tim's turn.

We regrouped and continued our hunt, moving quietly down a ranch road. We saw many cow elk and one young bull that morning, and that evening we returned to the area and set up on the edge of the herd of 200-plus elk, listening to the bedlam I described earlier. It was something I had never experienced even though I had been on several elk hunts, and it was fascinating to watch the interplay and interaction of so many animals. We all headed back to the lodge that night

thrilled with the experiences of the day, the chirps and bugles still ringing in our ears.

I was hunting this elk-rich private ranch at the invitation of the crew at SIXSITE Gear, a Texas-based company that makes high-end technical clothing and gear for hunters. Founder Ste-

phen Holley and his team invited several writers to the company's Colorado ranch to test out the gear, figuring a high-country elk hunt, with its unpredictable weather, would be the perfect venue for evaluating clothing made for a variety of conditions. Relaxing in the ranch's comfortable lodge that evening,



DIANA RUPP

Diana Rupp with her 5x5 bull elk.



RENEE GROSSMAN

Aspen groves provide excellent elk habitat in this region.



we listened with interest as Stephen explained how his experience as a Navy SEAL had inspired him to make the gear he wore for hunting more functional, leading him to start the new company. He also shared his thoughts regarding the importance of his company's focus on helping veterans. As part of that, SIXSITE maintains a strong charitable partnership with Carry the Load, a nonprofit organization helping to connect Americans to the sacrifices

made by our military and first responders. It was a great reminder that the experience of chasing elk in the mountains, which we were currently enjoying so much, is just one of the many freedoms safeguarded by those on the front lines around the world.

Two days later, well before dawn, I stood watching a huge yellow hunter's moon hanging low over the craggy peaks. I was hunting again with Josh as my guide. We were standing

silently on an old logging road, waiting for daylight. The morning before we'd walked in a little too early and blundered into a herd of elk in the darkness, spooking them. We weren't about to make that mistake again.

I wasn't the only one mesmerized by the enormous full moon sinking below the mountain ridge. A pack of coyotes sounded off, yipping and howling. A bull elk added his challenge moments later, sending a thrilling bugle across the mountainside. As the moon sank out of sight, I watched through puffs of frosty breath as streaks of pink began to highlight the eastern sky. A few minutes later Josh and I began to move, slowly and quietly, down the old road. The colors of the sunrise deepened and spread across the sky. It was a magnificent morning, but then, it had been a magnificent few days. Since missing the elk early on, I'd hiked many miles and stalked several bulls that had given me the slip. Just the evening before, I had passed up a cross-canyon shot at a nice bull because it exceeded my self-imposed range limit. Despite the fact that my quads were killing me from the steep climbs and my shoulders ached from hauling my rifle and pack, I couldn't have been happier.

It was still sunny on the high ridges this morning, but the air had cooled considerably. Josh and I began our hunt, walking slowly and glassing likely meadows and aspen groves. We saw elk here and there throughout the morning, but had no close encounters.

Eventually we gained the top of a saddle crossed by a muddy ranch road. Although it was late in the morning by now, Josh suggested we walk down the road a short distance and listen. Sure enough, we could hear a few bugles and mews below us, so we continued, sneaking along as silently as possible. There were distant sounds of elk talking, sounds we assumed meant they were gathering to bed down for the afternoon.

Suddenly, though, we spotted an elk walking on the ridgeline above the narrow, muddy two-track we were sneaking along. It was a cow, and several more were following her—a small

herd, with two bulls toward the back. We froze. I thought they would continue moving along the top, but then the lead cow turned and headed down the hill toward the road we were on. The wind was perfect; they hadn't seen us.


I dropped to one knee and rested my rifle on my Bog-Pod. The elk angled down the hill and crossed the road just 100 yards ahead of us. I watched six or eight cows come down, and then spotted two 5x5 bulls behind them. One stepped into view with two cows close by. When the cows moved clear, the bull was quartering slightly toward me, and I found the point of his shoulder in my scope. I squeezed the trigger on my trusty old Remington 700 7mm Magnum. The bull took two steps and stopped, standing stock-still behind a double aspen tree. As I worked the bolt, he slowly sank out of sight as the rest of the elk trotted on across the road and vanished into the trees.

The 5x5 elk was exactly what I had hoped for—a perfect meat bull, about 3½ years old, with a pretty rack but only a single brow tine on its right antler. The ranch owners, whose goal is to manage the property for trophy bulls, were encouraging our party to take single-brow-tine bulls, so this kill fit right in with their management plan. In any case, my bull had provided me with four exciting and unforgettable days of hunting in the Colorado Rockies and the additional reward of a freezer full of my favorite game meat.

Josh and I began the arduous but rewarding task of skinning and quartering the elk. As each quarter was detached from the carcass, I slid it into an insect-proof game bag and wrestled it into the shade. Following a flurry of satellite-messaging between Josh and Stephen, Stephen was able to get a four-wheel-drive pickup down the muddy road, and it required only a mercifully short hoof to carry the heavy quarters to the vehicle. We headed back to the lodge for a late lunch and a celebratory beer, and I was thrilled to discover that by now the four other hunters in camp had also filled their tags.

After a fun evening of swapping stories with my new friends, it was time to head back to civilization. I hit the

road early the next morning, pointing my truck east across the Continental Divide, the back loaded down with two big coolers of elk meat and a set of antlers. As I stopped to open the gate at the

border of the ranch, an elk bugled on the ridge to the west, and I paused to listen one more time to the stirring and beautiful soundtrack of the Colorado high country. 

## SIXSITE Gear

Stephen Holley developed SIXSITE hunting gear based on his experience as a Navy SEAL. It's typical for SEALs to customize their clothing and gear to be more efficient in a combat environment. Stephen realized the same approach could be used to make the gear he wore hunting more functional. Thus, the clothing incorporates intuitive pocket angles and placement, accessory anchors, and other elements that help you access your gear while minimizing movement when you're out in the field. The fabrics are technical, quiet, and highly abrasion-resistant, and each piece of gear is built in the USA. Also, if you look closely at the RANA camo pattern on SIXSITE gear, you'll notice a more than passing resemblance to the skin of a reptilian—both effective and appropriate for an ex-Frogman.

On the hunt, I wore the Gunnison Soft Shell Jacket and Pants, versatile pieces featuring a brushed fleece interior and quiet, water-repellent outer fabric. The fit was perfect, stretchy enough to move with you, yet fitted enough not to bunch up or get in the way. I also used SIXSITE's 2,200-cubic-inch frame pack, which has a nifty integrated seat that folds down and proved surprisingly comfortable when sitting on the ground and glassing. The pack features numerous customizable adjustments on the hip pads, shoulder straps, and waist belt, and a variety of pockets as well as an integrated hydration sleeve.

Stephen told me that the name "SIXSITE" refers to the sixth sense that all successful hunters have to develop, an intuition that serves them well in the wilderness. Learn more at [sixsitegear.com](http://sixsitegear.com).—D.R.



Spotting a distant herd of elk from an aspen grove.



From left, Tim Christie, Stephen Holley, and Diana Rupp elk hunting in western Colorado.



SIXSITE Gear founder Stephen Holley, right, and Diana Rupp in the field at White River Mountain Ranch in western Colorado.