

# BULLS &

By Christian Berg



There's nothing like September in the Colorado high country — golden aspens, green pines and blue skies make for a picture-perfect elk hunt.



Barry Raugust (above) of Wichita, Kan., took this 5x4 bull elk while hunting on his own in Colorado Unit 231. Barry made two trips from his home to the area and hunted 10 days before his patience and persistence were rewarded with his first bull.

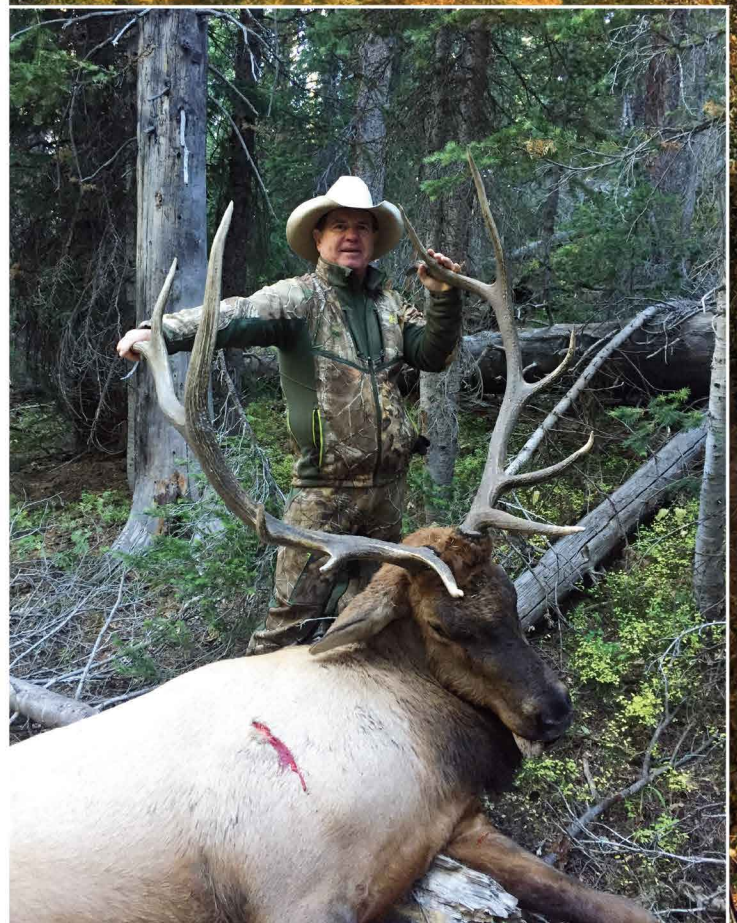
**T**he first time I saw Barry Raugust, he was little more than a ghost.

It was the first morning of our 2016 DIY elk hunt in Colorado's Unit 231, and my friend Tory Graver and I were hiking through the pre-dawn darkness toward Gill Reservoir in the Routt National Forest. We were about a mile in from the trailhead when we heard footsteps coming up from behind.

"Good morning," said the shadowy figure as he passed, barely breaking stride. Moments later, the unknown bowhunter was around the next bend in the trail and gone.

"I don't know where that dude is going," I told Tory, "but he's sure in a hurry to get there!"

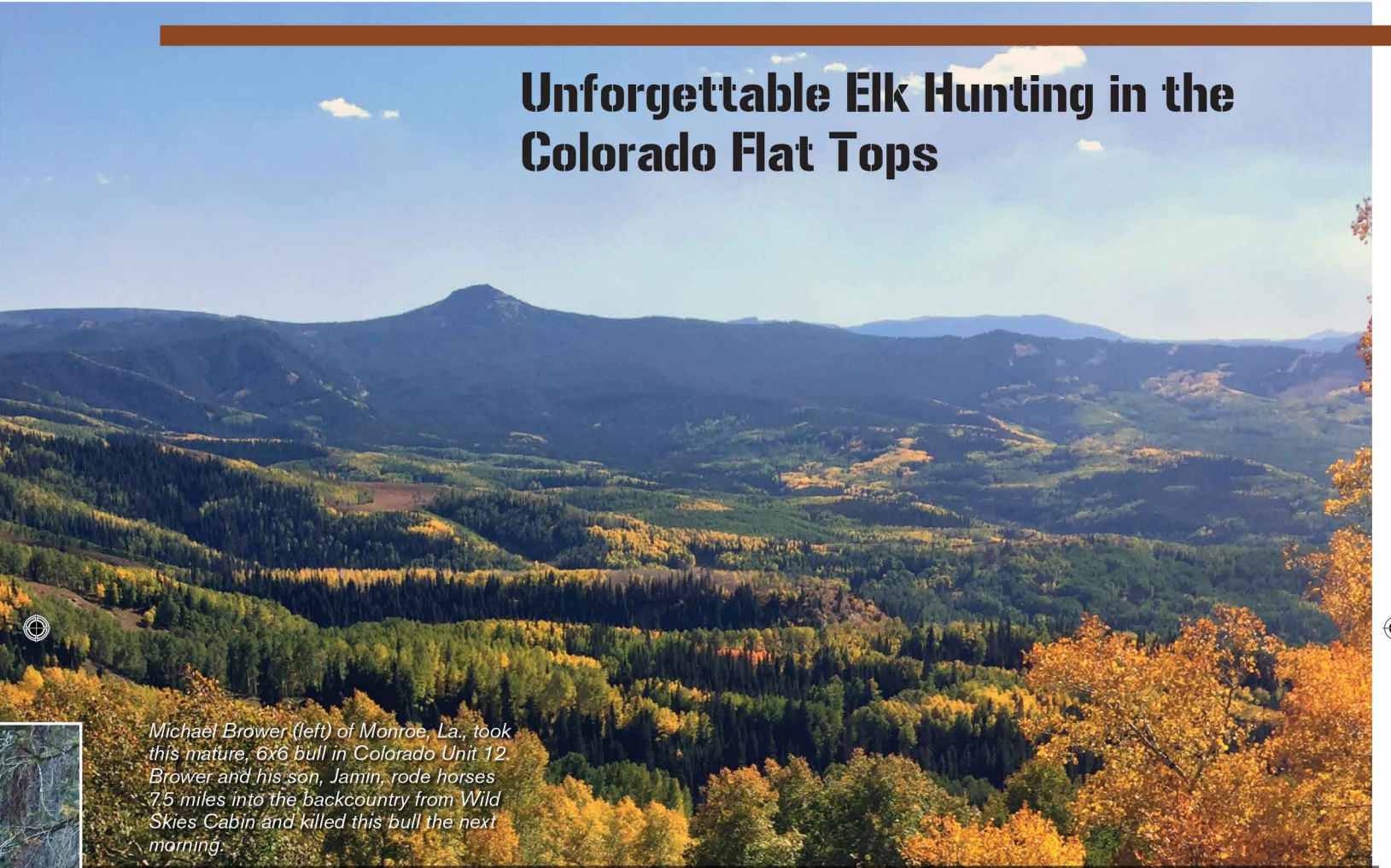
Before long, the sky began to lighten, and with a couple bulls bugling in the distance, we were soon engrossed in our hunt and forgot all about our mysterious trail mate. In fact, we probably never would have thought about him again if the ghost hadn't magically reappeared later in the day.





# BROTHERHOOD

## Unforgettable Elk Hunting in the Colorado Flat Tops



*Michael Brower (left) of Monroe, La., took this mature, 6x6 bull in Colorado Unit 12. Brower and his son, Jamin, rode horses 7.5 miles into the backcountry from Wild Skies Cabin and killed this bull the next morning.*

By early afternoon, Tory and I were about five miles into the backcountry, where we sat down on a rocky knoll to have lunch, enjoy the gorgeous scenery and take a midday nap. With a bright September sun warming our camouflage-clad bodies, we were drifting in and out of consciousness when we again heard footfalls moving across the rocks.

Sitting up and peering in the direction of the noise, we saw a lone bowhunter approaching. "Hi there!" I said, slowly rising to my feet. "You must be the one who passed us on the trail this morning."

"Yes," the hunter replied. "My name's Barry."

And with that, the three of us began a conversation that lasted nearly an hour. Barry, 66, was a veteran whitetail

bowhunter and retired high-school biology teacher from Wichita, Kan., who had made the 11-hour drive from home to chase elk for the first time. Well, technically speaking, it was the *second* time. You see, Barry had been in the area at the beginning of the archery season, hunting hard for nine days and coming up empty. After a couple weeks at home, he decided to come back and try again in the season's fourth week, hoping a combination of cooler temperatures and fewer hunters would yield better results.

As we talked, we learned that during his first visit, Barry stayed at the Wild Skies Cabin we were now renting. And when Barry explained that on this trip, his camp was his truck, Tory and I didn't hesitate to extend an invitation. Wild Skies can

accommodate 12 people, and there were only nine hunters staying there during our hunt.

"If you need help or a hot shower or a warm bed to sleep in, come on down," Tory said. "We have room and plenty of food."

After swapping some deer-hunting stories and trail-cam photos from Kansas and Pennsylvania, it was time to start hunting again. So, Tory and I exchanged phone numbers with Barry, donned our packs, wished him luck and headed out. Slowly hunting our way back to the trailhead, we arrived at the truck in the dark and made the 15-minute drive back to the cabin for dinner with Tory's brothers, Troy and Kiel, who had spent the day hunting a different area around Sheriff Reservoir.



# BULLS & BROTHERHOOD

## A Bull on the Board

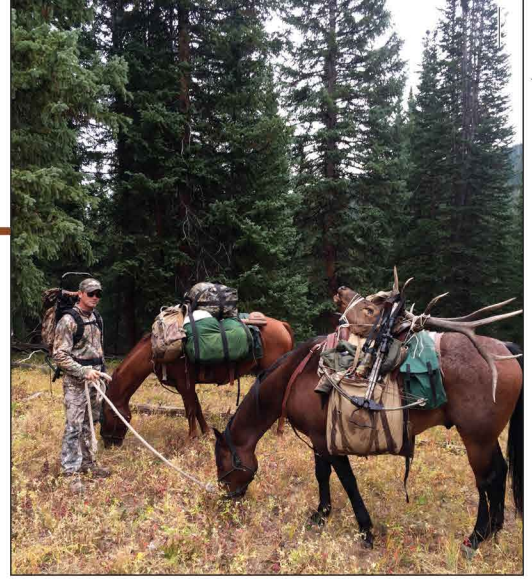
Arriving back at camp, we were greeted by the smiles and excitement that always accompany elk-hunting success. A father-son duo staying at Wild Skies that week — Michael and Jamin Brower of Monroe, La. — had returned that afternoon on horseback with a mature, 6x6 bull.

This was the first time we had seen the Browsers, who headed into the backcountry the day prior to our arrival. So, we were eager to meet them and hear about their success. Michael, 65, explained this was his third visit to the area. On his first

preference points needed to draw a non-resident archery tag for Unit 12.

Based on his scouting from past visits, Michael had a good idea where to find bulls in Unit 12. And it didn't take much encouragement to convince Jamin to tag along and help his dad get the job done. Arriving on Friday, Michael and Jamin spent Saturday scouting before loading their camping gear onto their horses on Sunday and riding 7.5 miles into the backcountry to a recent burn Michael knew had become a prime elk feeding area.

Around 3:30 that afternoon,



Jamin Brower takes a break with the horses while packing his father's 6x6 bull elk out of the backcountry. Horses play a key role in accessing hard-to-reach areas and make the job of getting meat and antlers out of the forest much easier.



Many bowhunters who find success in over-the-counter elk units do so by focusing on the steepest, nastiest terrain where few others are willing to go. Thick, shady mountainsides filled with tangled timber such as this are where pressured elk seek refuge.



The scenery is one of the best parts of any Western elk hunt. Here, BOWHUNTING Editor Christian Berg pauses for a selfie after spending two hours hiking to the top of a mountain high above Gill Reservoir in Colorado's Routt National Forest.

visit, he took a cow elk with his bow near Gill Reservoir. On his second visit, he came during the third rifle season, and although he didn't fill his tag, he learned a lot more about elk activity in the area.

This year, luck was on Michael's side, as he traded his over-the-counter, Unit 231 tag for a limited-draw Unit 12 tag when a handful of left-over licenses unexpectedly went on sale a couple weeks prior to the hunt. The Wild Skies cabin sits in Unit 12, just a couple miles from the Unit 231 border, making it easy for hunters who stay there to access either unit. And since Unit 231 is open to those with over-the-counter archery tags, anyone can bowhunt there and gain experience while accumulating the

Michael and Jamin were still riding in when an elk bugled nearby, prompting them to dismount quickly, tie the horses to trees and shift into hunt mode. "I almost got a shot," said Michael, who had a mature bull close to within 100 yards before winding them and taking off.

Bugles echoed through the forest all night Sunday, and on Monday morning, the duo was into the action immediately. "Elk started bugling all over the place," Michael said. "We heard no fewer than a dozen bulls that morning, and we headed for the ones that were most vocal."

Hurrying to close the distance while negotiating a steep ascent to 10,500 feet, Michael had serious doubts about his physical ability to

complete the hunt. Aside from being 65 years old, Michael has an artificial heart valve and numerous injuries from an ATV accident that make it difficult for him to draw a bow. As a result, he has a permit to hunt with his TenPoint Pro Fusion crossbow.

Despite Michael's need to stop for frequent breaks during the climb, Jamin refused to let his father give up, and the pair eventually found themselves between two bugling bulls, with a third bull closing the distance. Michael estimates all three were within 150 yards, but due to thick timber, they couldn't see any of them.

Finally, after a 15-minute wait and with the encouragement of a few soft cow calls, the 300-class, 6x6 bull Michael dreamed about stepped from



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After a chance meeting in the backcountry, BOWHUNTING Editor Christian Berg and Kansas bowhunter Barry Raugust solidified their friendship back at the Wild Skies Cabin.

the cover and walked to a mere 18 yards, its vitals blocked by a spruce tree. With father and son watching in amazement, the bull looked directly at them and stared. Michael was sure the bull would turn and run before he could get a shot, but miraculously, the bull took two more steps to expose its vitals, allowing Michael to send a bolt directly into the boiler room.

"It was all high fives after that," Michael said.

Once the initial rush of euphoria subsided, Michael and Jamin realized how difficult it would be to get the bull out of the woods. The kill site was on a steep slope filled with thick brush and tangles of fallen timber. Getting the horses to the carcass would be impossible, and with Michael unable to shoulder heavy loads, Jamin became the frontrunner for the son-of-the-year award. After breaking the elk down, Michael went back for the horses and brought them as close as possible, while Jamin spent the day ferrying loads of meat, hide and antlers off the mountain.

"If he wasn't with me, I'd probably still be out there trying to get that thing out!" joked Michael, who ranked the hunt among the best of his life. "I have been hunting elk over 25 years, and I have only experienced that much bugling and rutting activity like three times. It was a hunt every elk hunter who has ever lived wants to experience. In a lot of ways, it was the hunt of a lifetime."

## Surprising Success

After a good dinner and some



social time celebrating the Browers' success, everyone was ready to get some rest before another hard day afield. The 4 a.m. alarm sounded way too soon, and as I stumbled downstairs for breakfast, I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw none other than Barry Raugust asleep on the living room couch.

Man, I thought to myself. *This guy didn't wait long to take us up on our invitation!*

As the other hunters and I noisily prepared bacon and eggs, Barry slowly roused from his slumber. And when I ribbed him about abandoning his "truck camp" so quickly, he simply looked at me with a wide smile and said nonchalantly, "Oh, I shot a bull yesterday — a little while after I left you guys."

"Unbelievable!" I exclaimed. "Congratulations."

After we parted ways, Barry hiked up the mountain to a place where the timber met a sheer face of rimrock that stretched to the mountain peak above. His plan was to still-hunt his way through the patches of dark timber on the steep slope. However, he didn't have to hunt long.

"I was easing along, right at the edge of the rimrock, and dropped into a little patch of dark timber," Barry said. "As soon as I stepped in there, there he was — standing broadside at 23 yards, facing uphill, looking at me."

Barry was as surprised by the bull as the bull was by Barry. Yet somehow, he managed to reach into his quiver, get an arrow nocked and come to full draw without the bull spooking.

"He couldn't tell what I was, because I was only visible from about the bellybutton up in the brush,"

*The Wild Skies Cabin works kind of like a hostel, bringing bowhunters from across the country together in their pursuit of elk. Our group for the week included, top row, from left: Ben Garcia, California; Michael Brower, Louisiana; Kiel Graver, Pennsylvania; Jamin Brower, Louisiana; Troy Graver, Pennsylvania; and Tory Graver, Pennsylvania. Bottom row, from left, Ken Baune, Oregon; John Sanna, Oregon; and Christian Berg, Pennsylvania.*

Barry said.

At the shot, the bull ran uphill about 25 or 30 yards, stopped for a bit and then simply walked away. Barry waited 15 minutes before moving to investigate and was relieved to find quite a bit of blood where the bull had stood. It was a short tracking job, with the young, 5x4 bull falling only 60 yards from where Barry had first seen it.

Now, with only a couple hours of daylight remaining, Barry knew the real work was about to start. "It was just nasty where he fell, with big boulders all around him and about a 45-degree slope. So, it was a fun job to dress him out," Barry said. "I was going to call you guys and say, 'Hey, you want to help pack a bull out?', but there was absolutely no cell service."

Working by himself, Barry caped and quartered the bull before boning out the meat and hanging it to cool in trees around the kill site. By the time he finished the chores under the glow of his headlamp, it was 9 p.m. and he still had a 4.5-mile hike back to the trailhead.

"I carried out the backstraps and tenderloins," Barry said. "I got to the cabin about 11:15, took a shower in the basement, made myself some supper and sacked out on the couch."



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As amazing as Barry's success was, here's what's even more amazing: Barry had no idea the Browers were staying at the cabin, or that they were tagged out and had three horses! Barry figured it would take him six trips — nine miles roundtrip each — to get his bull off the mountain, and with daytime temperatures climbing into the low 70s, he was rightly concerned about spoilage.

But when Michael and Jamin woke up and heard about Barry's good fortune, they didn't hesitate to offer their assistance. So, instead of requiring two backbreaking days of labor to do the job, Barry's bull was off the mountain by 2:30 that afternoon thanks to the Browers and their horses. Man, you gotta love it when a plan comes together — even when there is no plan!

## Beating the Odds

I wish I could tell you the rest of us followed Michael's and Barry's success with bulls of our own. But despite hunting hard for the remainder of the week, exploring some of the prettiest country you'll ever see and getting close to a few elk, we just couldn't make it happen.

However, with two branch-antlered bulls among us, our group certainly beat the odds when it comes to DIY, public-land elk hunting. According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the 2016 archery success rate in Unit 12 was 29 percent for any elk and 18.7 percent for bulls. And in Unit 231, it was 11 percent for any elk and 6.1 percent for bulls.

In addition to posting a better-than-average success rate, our group enjoyed luxury accommodations at Wild Skies and a tremendous atmosphere around camp. Although members of the group went their separate ways to hunt during the day, it was great to reconvene at the cabin each night to share good meals, swap stories and discuss strategy for the following day.

And, as Barry will attest, having a camp full of hunters willing to lend a hand is priceless if you run into a bull too big to handle on your own! ➔

## Wild Skies – DIY Elk Made Easy

Most bowhunters love the idea of a do-it-yourself elk hunt. But let's face it; the logistics can be daunting. For East Coast hunters such as me, just getting yourself and your gear out West is a challenge. Sure, you can drive, but that'll add two days to both ends of the trip, leaving little time to hunt if you only have one week off work. And if you fly, taking all the necessary camping gear is impossible, meaning you'll have to pay for a hotel or drop camp.



In addition to the excellent accommodations, Wild Skies boasts a top-notch location in the heart of Colorado's largest elk herd. The local elk population is officially estimated at nearly 41,000 animals, with a cow-to-bull ratio of 4:1. The cabin sits on 70 private acres within hunting Unit 12 (a limited-draw unit) and is surrounded on three sides by the Routt National Forest. Hunting Unit 231 (an over-the-counter unit) is just a few miles up the road. Hunters with a Unit 12 tag can literally hunt right out the cabin door, while those hunting Unit 231 can do so within a 10-minute drive from camp.

Wild Skies owner Lisa Bennett was tremendously helpful in identifying productive hunting areas prior to our hunt, even providing a detailed topo map of the area with marked kill sites from past clients. The entire area was littered with fresh elk sign, and although the hunting certainly wasn't easy, our group proved success is possible for those willing to work hard and go deep enough into the backcountry to get away from other hunters.



Our DIY hunt at Wild Skies Cabin eliminated all those hassles and put us in the lap of luxury — comparable to any five-star hunting lodge at a fraction of the price. From queen-sized beds and leather sofas to satellite TV, air hockey and foosball, the week at Wild Skies was nicer than a week at my own home! Wild Skies even has a horse corral for hunters who want to bring their own horses or rent them from a nearby ranch.

After a long day hiking in the mountains, the cabin is the perfect place to rest, relax and socialize. Accommodating up to 12 hunters per week, our group consisted of 10 hunters from five states. And though we started the hunt as several small groups of strangers, we ended it as one big group of friends.



In addition to elk hunting, trout fishing in the area is excellent, including in the stream directly below the cabin, where numerous cutthroats were landed.

**For more information about DIY elk hunting at Wild Skies Cabin, visit [www.flattopshunting.com](http://www.flattopshunting.com) or call Lisa Bennett at 970-926-0216.**

