

The unforgettable thrill of the hunt

By Jon Rombach
For The Chieftain

Being so close that you feel something happening through vibrations in your body can be exhilarating. It can also be terrifying. Or it could be hard on your hearing, if the vibrations you're feeling are coming from speakers on a concert stage you're standing too close to. What?

I remember the first time I felt big rocks tumbling along the bottom of the Wallowa River, pushed along by high water. I felt the impacts through my legs, standing on the bank. Got my attention, I'll tell you that.

A lightning strike way too close to a truck I was driving on the Dug Bar Road once lit up the daylight even brighter and raised every arm hair inside the truck. Our eyes were so wide none of us could blink for the better part of two days. I can't say that we felt any vibration from that lightning bolt, but it's the same principle. Close enough quarters to register a physical response makes an experience difficult or dang near impossible to forget.

Avid is probably the best description for where I was at on elk hunting a few years back. Hadn't been successful yet, but was dedicated to changing that. Then I became downright addicted to bow-hunting for elk, and it was all about feeling vibrations.

Mike Baird had taken me on as a hunting partner, and this was a major improvement over my previous approach of trying to teach myself. As the wise man Mitch Hedberg once said, "I taught myself how to play



GOOD
VIBRATIONS

By Jon Rombach

guitar, which was a bad decision because I didn't know how to play it."

Ditto for my elk hunting self-help efforts. I read articles, watched videos, asked for advice and tried to apply it all but just ended up with lots of hiking, scanning through binoculars and inspecting old dried-up piles of elk poop, wondering where everybody went.

Fast forward. Out with Mike Baird, we heard a bugle from way off. Mike found a route for us to sneak in downwind, set me up close to the edge of brush and timber and dropped back to do some calling. It worked. Boy, did it work. I could hear the bull coming, snapping branches as he closed the gap. My heart rate shot up to the range that will blow a pressure cuff right off your arm. My brain panicked and told my arms and legs to start trembling. They were already shaking, so when trembling was added it turned into really quiet break dancing.

I'd survived buck fever a few times before. Almost had a nervous breakdown watching a steelhead leave a wake as it closed in on my swinging fly. But this sensation of the dam breaking on my adrenaline reservoir while the bull marched my way was beyond buck fever and into elk mania.

Then this happened: the bull pulled up

short of breaking through the thick brush. There was a pause. Then he let loose and screamed a bugle aimed right through me. And I do mean through me. I could feel it. I try not to get real fancy with italics or capital letters when putting things on paper, but I'm telling you I could feel his vocalization in my breadbasket, vibrating through my chest cavity. I could FEEL his scream as it rattled and bounced off my short ribs and solar plexus. Never experienced anything like it, before or since.

This bull never did step beyond the brush. Never even saw him. He backtracked, figured something was rotten in Denmark, gathered his ladies and lit out. But that incident changed me. Being that close. The bugle strumming the strings of my nerve endings. Hoo-wee, I was hooked. Wasn't so much about backstraps and elk steaks anymore as regaining that proximity and getting that close.

This was a general bow season, over-the-counter tag. I do put in for premium hunts, try to be smart about gathering points and take a flyer on elk hunt raffles and all that. But I do like that you can buy the ho-hum general bow tag in Wallowa County, go out and find a bull to yell at you close enough to have it rattle your insides. Don't get me wrong — as soon as I can afford it, I'll be up in the mountains with an outfitter/guide and not have to worry about how far the pack out might be. Meantime, though, these Wallowas do hold the magic for a do-it-yourself elk hunter to go out and get rattled. In a good way.

Record year for Oregon big game raffles, auctions

Wallowa County Chieftain

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's 2016 auctions and raffles for Oregon big game hunting tags grossed a record \$755,963, of which \$537,816 will go to the Access and Habitat Program and \$218,147 to big game research and management.

Winners of the special tags enjoy an extended season and expanded hunt area.

The auction of 13 special big game tags grossed \$517,000 and included the first auction for an Oregon Rocky Mountain Goat

tag, which sold for \$30,000. Several of the statewide deer and elk auction tags sold for new records, including a statewide elk tag that sold for \$49,000 during the Oregon Hunters Association banquet. The governor's combination deer/elk tag broke the previous record (by \$2,000) and sold for \$70,000 this year.

Raffle winners were drawn at the Oregon Hunters Association state convention on May 21 in Canyonville, Ore. A total of 95,343 raffle tickets were sold, grossing \$238,964.

The sportsman/conservation groups that sponsored the auctions at fundraising banquets of their organizations in the past few months will keep 10 percent of the auction proceeds (\$51,700). Those groups include local, state and/or national chapters of the Wild Sheep Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, Oregon Hunters Association, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Safari Club International, National Wild Turkey Federation and Oregon Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

The A&H Program funds

hunter access to private lands and wildlife habitat improvement projects in the state. Proceeds from the pronghorn, big-horn sheep, and Rocky Mountain goat raffles and auctions fund the research and management of these species, including ODFW's big-horn sheep and goat transplants which are putting these species back into their native habitat across Oregon.

For more information on Oregon's Auction and Raffle Big Game Tags visit www.Oregon-RaffleHunts.com.