

Cross the Divide elk hunt protects hay, serves veterans

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA COUNTY — Once again, Wallowa County has served as a place wounded warriors can get out in nature and heal — in particular, to hunt big game.

On Monday and Tuesday, Oct. 17 and 18, a father and son from Salem were taken to the Zumwalt Prairie, where they each bagged a cow elk.

Frank Wasson, an Army infantry veteran of the 101st Airborne, brought his 15-year-old son, Jackson, to take part in a hunt led by Andy Marcum, outdoor director and chief hunting guide for Cross the Divide.

The ministry

Cross the Divide transitioned Dec. 31 from the longtime veterans-support organization Divide Camp into a similar one that has a stronger focus on the Gospel message, its executive director, Emile “Mo” Moured, wrote.

“The cross (in the name) reminds of Jesus — our Creator, our Savior, the Author and Finisher of our faith and the only One who can provide true power for real inner change,” he wrote in a newsletter announcing the change late last year.

He emphasized that the change was just a subtle one from the direction Divide Camp Director Julie Wheeler had for her organization.

“Julie’s deepest conviction has been that Divide Camp focus more and more on God in its ongoing future growth,” Moured said. “My goals and desire are absolutely aligned with hers.”

That’s what Frank Wasson felt in the experience.

“It’s a great opportunity to get out in Wallowa County,” he said. “Especially when you’re able to bring your son and experience it. We’re pretty fortunate to meet people like Andy and the new director (Moured), and the community is pretty involved. It’s a pretty unique opportunity. We’re blessed to be here.”

The injury

Wasson served in the Army from 2003-13, and deployed for 15 months to Iraq followed by six months to Afghanistan.

It was the latter deployment that proved most fateful in a night ambush by the Taliban.

“I took a rocket-propelled grenade through my leg,” he said.



Andy Marcum, a hunting guide for Cross the Divide, left, and Jackson Wasson scout an elk herd on the Zumwalt Prairie early Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022.



Frank Wasson and son Jackson Wasson show off the cow elk Jackson shot Monday evening, Oct. 17, 2022, on the Zumwalt Prairie.

He lost his left leg below the knee, but added that if he was going to lose a limb, what he lost was minimal.

“It was just a paper cut,” Wasson said.

Jackson doesn’t remember his father prior to the injury.

But one thing he’s sure of: it doesn’t seem to be a handicap, certainly while hunting.

“Nothing slows him down,” the youth said. “Not at all.”

Frank has a prosthetic limb and only a barely perceptible limp.

The hunt

As he’s done many times, Marcum scouted ahead so he’d know where best to take his veteran charges. He works with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and with local landowners, many of whom are farmers with crops the elk raid.

Marcum said the elk, which have a taste for alfalfa, are prone to gobbling up the crops that are just now undergoing their last harvest of the year.

“That’s why we do what we do here we do it because I work with various landowners in the county and try to schedule hunts and give people good opportunities to harvest an elk while at the same time helping landowners keep the elk out of their alfalfa fields,” Marcum said.

He said the ODFW a couple of years ago created the antlerless damage tags any hunter can buy over the counter and use from Aug. 1 to Nov. 30 in areas deemed prone to wildlife depredation on crops.

“It’s a general season, antlerless damage season in these areas where the elk are harming our farmers’ crops — mainly alfalfa,” Marcum said.

He said the state created such damage areas in 19 units statewide.

“In Wallowa County, it’s from Little Sheep Hill up around Fergie to the Forest Service boundary. That’s our southern and western boundary all the way to Minam. It follows Whiskey Creek and comes in on Leap. It goes through several units,” he said.

Wasson was appreciative of Marcum’s prehunt efforts.

“Andy had a couple places scouted. We drove out there and took the side-by-side to the end of the road, jumped out and started

walking up the ridge,” he said. “There was a spot Andy wanted to get to we could sit and watch. We didn’t even make it halfway there. It only took 30-45 minutes.”

That was the morning hunt on which Frank Wasson scored.

Jackson’s hunt had taken a little longer — but not much — the previous evening.

“Both of them were pretty quick,” Marcum said. “Last night, we walked probably about a mile and we got the wind right and worked our way around. We glassed them from a few miles away from the west and they were way up on a ridge to the east. We drove the side-by-side up around the ridge, walked about a mile to get the wind right and snuck down over the top of them. Last night, it was an hour and a half maybe.”

“Then this morning, I had been watching this group in the evenings coming out of a draw headed to the alfalfa so I figured they’d be going back to the same spot this morning. We went up this draw to try to get in front of them and like Frank said, we didn’t even make it to where I wanted to get to and they started coming over the hill. So we laid down and Frank made a great shot.”

Frank Wasson has hunted with Marcum before. A couple of years ago he and his elder son, who is now 19, went on a hunt. Frank also has a 5-year-old daughter he hopes will want to hunt when she’s old enough.

But this was Jackson’s first elk, though he’s taken deer before.

“I was so nervous,” Jackson said of his reaction to dropping the animal. “It’s such a big animal, compared to the deer. It was just so big. It felt good to know that it was down and I could just walk over and see it finally.”

Marcum said that not only does the experience help veterans, it helps the local landowners whose crops the elk feast upon.

“As I always say, without the support and the access the landowners give us, we obviously wouldn’t be able to do what we do,” he said. “We really appreciate the landowners’ willingness to let us on (their land). We’re helping them, too, because they’re at the tail end of the year with their farming and getting their crops in, so we’re trying to help keep those elk out of there, out of the alfalfa fields, also.”

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