*Title*: "A Self-Guided Elk Hunter has to know his/her limitations. — Lessons learned when comparing a Self-Guided Hunt vs. Guided Hunt."

by Stephen P. Boyer

**Self-Guided Hunt**

The purpose of my story is to keep fellow sportsman and specifically elk hunters from making the same mistakes I made in preparation for a self-guided elk hunt during the fall of 2011. On my 1400-mile drive home from Montana to Arkansas, all I could keep thinking about was a quote from a Clint Eastwood, Dirty Harry movie, “A man has to know his limitations.” I realized, I had to write an article on my experiences and lessons learned from my adventure. I wanted to save other sportsman from making the same errors in judgment.

My journey started in October, 2010, when my brother-in-law forwarded a photo, by e-mail, of one of his co-workers with a 7x6 bull elk taken in Central Montana during a blizzard. Knowing that one of my quests in life was to hunt elk, his e-mail stated, “Eat Your Heart Out.” Upon viewing his co-worker’s 360 BC bull, I immediately responded to him, “How can I get with your co-worker?” After receiving the co-workers e-mail address, I wrote and asked, “Could you provide me with information on where I should hunt in Montana?” He informed me, he took the bull south of Lewistown; however, it was going to cost me in antique fishing lures and waterfowl decoys for him to get more specific with his information.

I pressed him to be more specific; however, no luck, since it took him 3-years to finally find the right area in Central Montana. Not to be discouraged, I applied in March, 2011, to the Montana Game and Fish Department for a Non-resident Elk/Deer Combo license. The cost for the license was not cheap. I realized then, I was going to try and save money by planning this self-guided adventure on my own. **(Mistake #1)**

To my surprise, I was selected for a combo Elk/Deer tag in June. With my tag in hand, I immediately wrote the Montana Game and Fish Department and the Division of Forestry to obtain more specific regulations, rules and maps on how to pursue elk in Central Montana. After several e-mails, phone conversations, and unsuccessfully applying for special elk permit areas, I concluded from the numerous hours laboring over the information received that I needed to hunt elk in the Little Belt and Castle Mountains just east and south of White Sulphur Springs. With less than 3 ½ months remaining until opening day (October 22) of General Gun Season, I started planning for all possible contingencies I would run into in the mountains. With each passing day, my planning checklists grew.

With my personal safety as a concern and not attempting to do this elk hunt on my own, I tried to get a life-long hunting buddy to go with me. I told him I would be paying all the planned hotel and gasoline costs to Montana since I had the tag. At first, he really wanted to go; however, in the end, he could not break away. It was then, I told myself with tag in hand, I can do this alone. **(Mistake #2)**

In all my life, whenever I set out on a challenge or quest, I was able to achieve it. I was told by several personal friends, “Steve, you have the self-discipline and the perseverance to achieve your goals.” Each day that went by, I became further convinced I can do this elk hunt alone. I kept telling myself, I have thirty-nine years of hunting experience with smaller game. I am prepared for this hunt.

With 6 days before opening day, I left St. Paul, Minnesota, for Montana. It took 2 ½ days to drive to White Sulphur Springs, MT, with stops in Bismarck, SD and Billings, MT. As each mile past, my excitement and enthusiasm for this hunt grew.

When I arrived in White Sulphur Springs on Tuesday afternoon, October 18, and viewed the beautiful mountainous vistas and elk habitat**,** I was impressed with the recommendations I had received from a District Manager of the Montana Department of Fish and Game. Every recommendation he made to me came true. I also convinced myself that I had three days to scout the National Forest locations that I had earlier studied and prepared for.

When I arrived at the hotel, the accommodations exceeded my expectations. I told the owner, his newly-built hotel had a hunting lodge atmosphere. At this point, I started to unpack and immediately went over to visit the Department of Forestry’s White Sulphur Springs local office for further direction prior to my 1st day of scouting. The customer service at the forestry office was outstanding, they provided maps, directions, and answered all my questions.

On Wednesday morning after breakfast, I started my first day of scouting the Little Belt Mountains. As mentioned earlier, I followed the recommendations of the District Manager to the letter. Within the first hour of entering the national forest, I was seeing whitetail deer, antelope, mule deer, and finally toward the end of the day----elk!!! When I saw approximately six cow elk off the road, I immediately stopped my vehicle and checked out the area. I saw bull elk rubs, scrapes, tracks, droppings, etc. throughout the area. I was convinced from all my deer hunting experience, this is where I need to be for opening day. I was excited, I could feel my adrenaline bubbling over. Also, to my surprise, I saw no other hunters as I drove back almost 23-miles from the mountains to the freeway. When I arrived in White Sulphur Springs, I went to one of the local restaurants for dinner. I was surprised how quiet things were in town since opening day was Saturday.

When scouting day #2 began, I went back again to the Division of Forestry’s office next to my hotel and asked for clarification and directions into the Castle Mountains which were just south of town. I was convinced I found my opening day spot in the Little Belt Mountains; however, I wanted back-up locations for the rest of the week, just in case. As I entered the Castle Mountains from the south, I immediately came upon a herd of mule deer (small bucks and does) on private property which is connected to the public access road. In my journey, I was aw-struck by the beauty of the Castle Mountains and their vistas**;** however, at this point I was starting to feel “very alone” and somewhat depressed because I had no one to share this experience with. At the same time, I started to think about all the expenses I was racking up on this trip, e.g. gas, dinners, wear and tear on my vehicle, hotel costs, etc. I kept telling myself, relax and enjoy your trip; however, I found I was not having the experience I had planned for, due to “loneliness.” Later, I found this to be one of the most important factors in why I was not having a great time. I kept thinking about Robert Redford’s movie*, Jeremiah Johnson*. Truly, I found, the friendship, camaraderie, and fellowship amongst other hunters in my past hunting experiences to be as important as the hunt itself.

On Scouting Day #3, I went back to the Division of Forestry office to thank them for their direction with the Castle Mountains. However, I told them at times I got confused on how much private land I saw that joined the National Forest. I realized you would have to be careful not to cross into private land. I then asked for additional information and maps for another section within the Little Belt Mountains. I remember the ranger asking me, “Are you going to pack the animal out yourself?” I told her, I had planned on de-boning the animal in the field and packing out the rack and meat myself with several trips. With that remark, she said, “Good Luck, and make sure you let someone know where you are at!” At this point, I reflected back on my 2005 elk hunting trip to Pennsylvania and remembered I had three people counting myself and equipment to pack out my 5x5 elk out of the mountains. On that guided trip I was fortunate to have two guides to one hunter because one of the hunters failed to show up. Even with that in mind, I still thought I could do this hunt by myself.

I then drove off to the Little Belt Mountains. As I scouted the areas, I could see how hunting preparation activities by other hunters were starting to build. After 3 days of scouting, I was seeing whitetail does, elk cows and small mule deer bucks and does. It was definitely apparent by the hunting pressure that the big bucks and bulls were headed to higher altitudes away from the access roads. I came to the realization, to go after the big bulls and bucks I would have to leave my vehicle and plan to spend the evening in the wilderness. “That was a hard pill for me to swallow since I was alone.”

At this time I was starting to question my abilities. The absolute loneliness on my journey was starting to become a significant factor. At the same time, I kept adding up all my expenses with driving in and out of the mountains each day, along with dinners, lodging, and wear and tear on my vehicle. I must admit I was starting to feel depressed. I kept telling myself, Steve, you found a great place for opening day, so cheer up! Opening day is tomorrow!!

When I got back to the hotel, I told the clerk that I would come down for breakfast at 3:30 A.M. because I planned to leave early and drive to my selected “honey hole” in the morning and allow enough time for the forest to settle down. All these strategies worked well for me in the past. When I arrived the next morning to my honey hole which was 50-miles total from the hotel, all my plans and resources came together. I parked my vehicle and walked approximately ¼ mile to a huge bottom that seemed to never end. All the elk sign were there! I have to admit, I was really pumped up! The woods were perfectly quiet and I believed since I was 23 miles back in the National Forest , I would have it to myself. That came true for the first hour, then, holy hell broke loose!! Road hunters in trucks and ATVs brought my peace and solitude to an end. All my planning, driving, and scouting really did not seem to help. From all my years of hunting, I knew with this much pressure from other hunters, the big boys would get out of Dodge!

After the first two hours of opening day, I left my so called “Honey Hole” and started driving the roads like everyone else. That entire day, I saw one medium size buck mule deer and four does. The loneliness factor was back again and I kept thinking of all my expenses and time that seemed to be wasted in preparation for this hunt. That day while driving out 23 miles from the national forest and an additional 27 miles back to the lodge, I told myself, Steve, this is the kind of pressure from road hunters you are going to experience for the entire opening week. At this point the loneliness factor came back again and left me disheartened.

I stopped for dinner prior to going back to the hotel and met three elk hunters from Michigan and one game and fish officer. We asked the game and fish officer if she knew of any successful elk hunters. She stated, all she heard was there were seven cow elk taken. Her response surprised me for an Opening Day; with not 1 bull. Another factor affecting the bull harvest was the weather. Central Montana was averaging 60s during the days and 40s at night. Only the very high elevations of the Big Belt Mountains had snow on the peaks. We were informed by the game and fish officer that the weather was not going to change over the next week.

One of the highlights of my trip was breaking bread with those three elk hunters from Michigan. Talking with them during dinner validated the importance of fellowship while you hunt. As we finished dinner, one of the hunters turned to me and said, “If you drop one, here is my number, call and I’ll help you pack it out.” His kind gesture really meant a lot to me; however, I had made a big decision. During dessert, I realized I have to know my limitations. I cannot do this hunt alone.

When I arrived back to the hotel, I informed the clerk I would be checking out in the morning. I realized, I gave up on a challenge for the first time in my life. I called my wife and told her I was coming home. I have to admit, she was worried about me because she was not use to this kind of behavior from me. I packed up that evening and went to bed and slept in all the next morning. I kept trying to rationalize what happened to me. I thought maybe I arrived too early and did too much scouting; however, my bottom line was the loneliness factor. Also, when I thought of all the costs I had racked up, that issue did not help either.

The next morning I started my 1400-mile drive home. All along, I kept telling myself, Steve, you made the right decision. As I drove out of the White Sulphur Springs area, I noticed a beautiful rainbow in front of the mountain side and immediately thought of my son, Phillip. I was telling myself this is a sign from him telling me, “Dad, it’s OK! There will be another day.” My wife and I always associate the sighting of a rainbow with my oldest son, Phillip. He passed in 1997.

It took me three long days to drive home to Arkansas with stops in Casper, Wyoming and Lincoln, Nebraska. When I started leaving the hotel in Casper, I called the wife again and she said, “You sound much better.” I told her, I made the right decision by leaving, because I felt I was wasting my time and money. I told her, to be successful with the big muley bucks and bull elk, I would have to leave the vehicle and roads behind, and climb the mountains by myself. Since I was by myself, this was not an option with having to contend with bears, wolves, and mountain lions.

After arriving home and unpacking, I just could not believe all the work and preparation I did for the trip. By the time I got back my lodging, food, and gas expenses amounted to over $2,000; plus the 3500 miles of driving wore both me and my vehicle out. These were hard lessons to learn. In addition, I came back with an unfilled elk/deer combo license.

During the next few days, very close friends of mine called and asked me how my trip went. Most heard the story I told above. I have to admit, “All the air was taken out of my balloon.” I’d been knocked down pretty hard. Then, one evening, my wife Lauretta and son Chris said, “Let’s go out for Chinese food.” We went to the local Chinese restaurant and had dinner. At the end, the fortune cookies arrived and we jokingly passed them around. When I opened mine, it said, “You will achieve your passion in life before year’s end.”

**Guided Hunt**

With the reading of that fortune, I started telling myself, “I can finish what I started out to do.” I just could not see myself giving up on a challenge. It was not in my make-up as a human being. Plus, I had two tags of a lifetime that needed to be filled. When we arrived home from the Chinese dinner, I found myself back on-line looking for a Last Minute Elk Hunting Opportunity from Montana Outfitters. I started checking several websites. Before long, I wrote to four outfitters (based on their affordable prices) and asked if they had a last minute elk hunting opportunity available. I was beginning to realize after reviewing their prices, I should have taken this option from the beginning after all my expenses with a self-guided hunt effort.

One outfitter’s website really attracted my attention, it was Rich Ranch, LLC. I was impressed by their mission statement. The Rich Ranch Mission Statement stated, “It is the mission of the Rich Ranch and Double Arrow Outfitters to provide our guests with a safe and enjoyable, high quality recreation experience. It is our mission to enhance your experience by sharing our knowledge of horses and the outdoors, along with the local history and culture; and to do this in a way that will leave our natural resources unimpaired for future generations.”

As I read further into their website which was developed by Big Sky Design, both Jack and Belinda Rich, the owners, paid tribute to their parents C.B. and Helen Rich by illustrating pictures and a written narrative on the Rich Family Montana Legacy. It became evident to me that Jack, his wife Belinda and other family members carry on a forty-plus year family tradition. Their story reached out to me in a very genuine manner. I knew at that point this was the kind of experience I was looking for.



The next morning, I was surprised to receive an e-mail response from Belinda Rich that stated her husband Jack would be back this evening and you are welcome to talk to him about your request for a last minute elk hunting opportunity. With anticipation, I looked forward to my call with him. Within the first few minutes of our conversation, Jack emphasized he believes in fair chase hunting and results often depend on weather, ability of the hunter and just plain luck. He stated, we adjust our hunting methods to your desires and ability. We extend every effort to make our guests hunting experience enjoyable and successful. He went on to say, he supports wildlife and habitat conservation and strives to carry on an ethical hunting tradition. In conclusion, he stated, “Steve, if this is the kind of experience you are looking for, I will check my schedule to see if I can fit you in from November 13-18.



That evening, Jack’s wife, Belinda, responded by saying, “Glad to hear Jack has room to fit you in, you will be staying in one of our cedar/log cabins’ with a private bath and gas fireplace. Hearty meals will be served family style in the main lodge. You'll enjoy horseback hunting. Fishing is also available in nearby lakes and streams.” Belinda also informed me they would have a shuttle pick me up at the Missoula airport when I arrive on November 12. Once she made that statement, my memories of the round-trip 3500-total mile drive to Montana and scouting the mountains three weeks earlier, started to melt away.

On November 12, my wife, Lauretta, drove me to the Tulsa, OK, airport to depart for Missoula with a stop in Denver. I really appreciated her patience and understanding with allowing me the time (kitchen pass) to complete my journey. Upon arrival in Missoula, Belinda Rich was waiting to pick me up and take me back to the ranch. When I was greeted with a hug at the airport, I knew I was welcome to their ranch. Upon arrival at the ranch, my accommodations exceeded my expectations and I was looking forward to meeting everyone for breakfast the next morning.

As expected, I arrived thirty minutes early for breakfast to ensure I shook hands and met with all Rich Ranch family members, guides, and other hunting partners. Within the first hour of my arrival at breakfast, it seemed like I was meeting close friends. The lonesome feelings I had on my self-guided journey seemed to pass.

After a super breakfast, I was thrilled when Jack Rich, owner, stated he was going to assign me 1 on 1 with Jason as my guide. My agreement with Jack only called for 2 hunters with one guide. Jack stated since one of the hunter’s would be a late mid-week arrival, I would be assigned 1 on 1. Since we had a significant snow fall (blizzard like conditions) on the first morning, we would hunt using 4x4 vehicles first and head out on horseback in the afternoon when the snow was forecasted to let up. Client safety was always of paramount importance to Jack. After a thirty- minute 4 x4 ride into the mountains, Jason took me to a beautiful area where he had previous success.

To our surprise, within the first five minutes of setting into our stand (two tree stumps overlooking a large creek bottom), a beautiful full grown 8-point white tail buck bounded out to within 25-yards of us. I remember saying to myself, “this is going to be a great week!” Jason was surprised that I did not take the buck and after the buck walked away, which seemed like 2-minutes, I explained to Jason that I have taken several nice and even larger white tail bucks in the past and that I was looking for a nice mule deer buck. Yes, I was being choosy!! Plus, I was holding out for a 6x6 bull elk, since I took a beautiful 5x5 in 2005.



After our morning hunt, we came back to the ranch to have a wonderful lunch followed by riding horseback into the mountains. Upon arrival at the barn after lunch and since I had limited experience with horseback riding, I received full instructions on how to ride. As soon as we departed into the mountains, I truly felt I was experiencing a high quality western recreation experience just as the Rich Ranch mission statement stated.

As we rode into the mountains, my guide informed me about the area and showed me breathtaking mountainous vistas and where they found elk and mule deer. As we rode, we saw several white tail and mule deer; however, my high expectations for a large mule deer buck and 6 x 6 bull elk limited my expected success .

After an afternoon of hunting, we headed back to the ranch for dinner “and the stories.” Our cooks, Jack’s sisters, gave us outstanding home cooked meals. Those meals combined with the camaraderie and fellowship of the other hunters with their stories, made this guided-hunt a truly wonderful experience.

During the week, two of the fellow hunters, Gordon and Russ from Washington State, saw several bull elk with Jack as their guide. Gordon, missed a shot on a nice 6 x 6 bull elk. As a result of that missed shot, I had the opportunity to witness a ceremonial “shirt-tail cutting” at dinner with Jack as host of the event.

Each afternoon, of the late-fall hunting week, we enjoyed a nice fire while having lunch in the mountains. This fire helped us to stay warm since we were in the field all day.



Another reason these fires are essential is because you find out how mother-nature can turn unexpectedly on you at 9000 ft.

On my last day of hunting, I found out first-hand the importance of having a guide. Both Jason and I were at the top of the mountain viewing a mule deer off to my right. To get a better view, I got off my horse and tried to slip around a fallen tree blocking the mountain trail I was traveling. Needless to say, I slipped and fell tearing a tendon (MRI revealed two months later) in my left shoulder. Since I would not be able to shoot my rifle due to muscle weakness in my left shoulder, we decided to head back to the ranch before it got dark. With a weak left arm, Jason helped me into the saddle and carefully guided us out of the mountains back to the ranch.

My week-long experience on a guided-elk hunt demonstrated the importance of (1) the need for your personal safety, (2) the hospitality provided by your outfitter and its members, and (3) the priority that needs to be placed on the friendships made amongst fellow hunters and guides. Finally, my trophy would have to wait.

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