

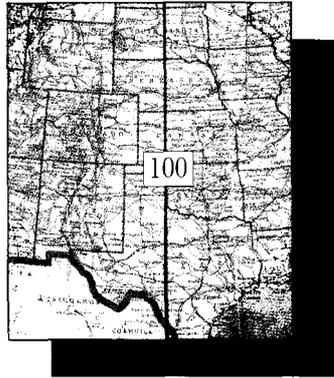
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Elk Country

As the supernatural world is eternally at work behind events in the natural world, so the world of man-in-nature continues to operate behind the synthetic, abstracted, and unreal world of man-outside-of-nature. For that reason alone, I shall always hunt elk. (Though of course, I really don't need any reason.)

On the afternoon before the start of season, I rode past the busy hunting camps along Fontenelle Creek, among them Kovaches' 25-man Army tent guyed in a stand of tall aspen. Ten or 12 years ago, when I was still learning the country, I had hunted with John and Jim Kovach, riding the mountains all day on sheepherders' horses borrowed from the Taliaferro ranch and returning at night to John's elk-heart stews cooked with milk, potatoes, and sliced onions. Since that time, all but one of the Kovach brothers has moved out of the area, John to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he nearly lost his life when a chainsaw kicked back on him, splintering his rib cage and cutting up his heart like a jigsaw puzzle. Now, alone save for the mare beneath me, I forded the creek at the crossing and ascended the West Bear Trap trail in the smoky light of a dying October afternoon to make camp under the red steps of Indian Ridge, within a stand of limber pine at 9,080 feet. As we approached the site, the mare unprompted stepped from the trail, walked between the trees to the fire ring I had built years before, and halted with her nose against the familiar pine trunk, where I snubbed her short and unloaded the packs. An hour and a quarter of light remained. I raised the tent in the oval clearing, removed the rocks from the ash and added them to the ring, and went in search of wood for a fire. The dead lower boughs of a nearby pine made smears the color of dried blood on the blue twilight of the forest. I gathered several of these brushes and laid them over a handful of twigs in the bottom of the fire pit. They exploded in flame at the touch of a match, and I threw on some larger sticks from the pile that remained from the year before. While the conflagration burned down to coals I removed the cook pots from the



horse packs, and the eating utensils as well. Tonight instead of elk-heart stew there were canned chili and beef stew to choose from. I opened the stew with my camp knife and scraped the contents into the battered, carboned pot. Somewhere in the timbered hole not far from here an old boar bear has his den. I tossed the empty can and the greasy lid with it onto the fire, so as to put temptation beyond him. Finally I took the fifth of Jim Beam from the pack and poured a finger or so of whiskey. It tasted all right, but failed to exhilarate. While I drank, I set the stew pot on the fire and ate a hurried meal while the mare grazed at the end of her picket line. When I finished eating I cleaned the pot with boiling water and a rag, retied the mare to the tree, undressed to my longjohns inside the tent, and got into the sleeping bag. Though it was early still for sleep, today was over. Tomorrow at daybreak I was going to hunt bulls.

The mare stood without stamping through the night. At dawn the air was still, the brooding wilderness hushed. I took a long drink of cold water from a poly bottle and walked away from camp with the rifle at a few minutes before seven, moving carefully through the blue dusk with the morning star over my left shoulder toward the rise of cliff that blocked the final stars. A tired half moon tipped in the western sky signaled another fine Indian summer day, dryer and warmer than preferred for hunting. As the sun rose behind me I glassed the ridge from a polished log before slipping along its rocky base into the trees, where without warning the elk smell jumped at me like a startled overpowering herd from the massed black trunks of the forest. Almost at once I cut fresh sign, the

tracks nearly indistinguishable on the forest floor but the droppings still moist and slick. I bent to finger the pellets and heard a sound like a hammer striking a wooden plank: a rifle shot, miles to the northeast and far below. I listened, but heard no more shooting. Following the game trail for half a mile, I found much sign but no animals, not even in the grassy openings where elk often linger to graze after sunrise. There were plenty of elk in the forest, some of them perhaps observing me as I paused, but approaching them in the timber without tracking snow or another hunter to work with me would be very difficult. The tops of the trees were still in the windless morning. I hunted my way back to camp under a small bombardment of pine cones tossed by the chattering red squirrels that flowed up and down the tree trunks and along the branches, picketed the mare, and built up the fire to boil coffee and plan out the day's hunt. I had just poured a second cup when an orange coat bobbed up from a gully 100 yards away, and beneath it a large man with a gray beard, wearing an orange coat with a camouflage pattern in it and a rifle over his shoulder. I offered him coffee, which he refused politely. "Where do you get water for your horse?" he asked. I showed him on the map how to find the spring on the west slope of Indian Ridge. "I guess we'll go deeper in then," he said. "I ain't cut any fresh sign this morning. Must be because there ain't no water here. No use huntin' 'em where they ain't at." I nodded sympathetically, but did not mention the sign I had found in the timber. "Where are your horses?" "Oh, just over there." He gestured vaguely at the trees on the other side of the trail, from which I understood that he and his party had tied up only a few hundred yards away. We wished one another luck, and he walked off in the direction he had indicated. He was scarcely out of sight when a volley of shots rang out behind Indian Ridge; it was followed by a pause, then another volley, and finally by spaced but nevertheless sustained shooting. I tossed what was left of the coffee over the coals, seized the rifle from a tree branch, and, leaving the mare to graze on the picket, ran toward the cliff with my orange coat flapping from

JANUARY 1996/49

my shoulders.

Each year outfitters put a couple of camps in west of Indian Ridge, at the head of South Fork of Fontenelle Creek. They equip the dudes who want them with horses, and turn the rest loose on the forested slopes to beat the timber and kick the elk over the ridgetop and down the eastern cliff face, where they find me lying on my belly waiting for them with the rifle across a log. This morning I failed to reach the log before elk began to spill across the ridge, compelling me to take cover in a pine stand where I discovered a springy, fairly unsuitable branch for a rest. The elk separated as they descended into two herds of 20 or 25 animals each, one group moving lower on the slope than the other; mostly cows and calves, some spikes, but also a number of good bulls, five or six-pointers to judge by their coloration, bulk, and the angle at which they carried their heads. They were still 800 or 900 yards out, and holding so tightly together that it would have been next to impossible to kill one without wounding several more. The 200-odd hooves striking upon scree filled the shallow concavity of the cliff wall with a roar like that of approaching cavalry, causing me to remember the hunter in camp who had left only minutes before to collect his horses—and his friends. They would be arriving momentarily, riding straight at the herds scrambling high above the forest floor—far too high still for a responsible shot. In five or even four minutes the lower herd, which included two of the biggest bulls, would have descended within rifle range, but in much less time the riders would be upon me, taking crazy shots and scaring the animals back out of range, if they did not actually wound some of them. The sound of traveling elk became confused in my mind with the clatter of horses approaching along the trail from the rear. Already my too hasty maneuverings for a better rest had caught the attention of one of the lead cows, who stopped short and pointed her nose downhill in my direction. Stepping forward abruptly from the trees I fired a shot into the air, causing half a hundred elk to wheel almost as one animal and flow back up the ridge to the saddle where the horse trail went over. Then, shouldering the rifle, I started for camp, expecting to meet up with the party of horsemen on the way. In fact I encountered no such party, nor did I ever see the gray-bearded hunter him-

self again.

Half an hour later the mare was breasting the trail to the top of the cliff, where we turned and followed the herd northward a few hundred yards below the ridgeline where, of a sudden, we were entirely surrounded by elk: great dark shadows leaping, bounding, sprinting through the trees and over deadfall in total uncanny silence. I swung down from the mare, drew the rifle from the scabbard, and was proceeding on foot when three shots at very close range exploded ahead, catching us on the verge of a clearing in the wind-stunted pines. I dropped the reins, bolted a shell into the firing chamber, and froze with the mare at my back, watching the opposite edge and the narrow corridor that ran behind it through the trees. When the first elk appeared, its dark face reddened by sunlight, I was certain that it must have seen us. But we remained moveless, and it continued along the corridor passing behind a thicket away from the now audible voices of the unseen hunters. I set the rifle stock against my shoulder and the telescopic sight on the next opening in the trees, my heart pounding but the rifle steady in my grip as I waited. The cow trotted directly behind the reticule, followed, as I brought the gun down, by an earnest but apparently carefree calf.

The outfitters' camps were quiet that afternoon, and nobody kicked back game for me to shoot. I rode out as much of that high magnificent country as I could, riding as far south as the end of Indian Ridge above the deep gorge of South Fork, with views to the mountains of Idaho and Utah and a towering column of gray and pink smoke rising from a prairie fire 40 miles away at Nugget Canyon. I rode through timber and across open parks, hunting as John Kovach had taught me so many years ago when, in a good season, the Kovach camp had four or five animals down at once and we picked them up with a pack string and a chainsaw on October 31. At the center of one of these parks I came upon a pile of half-burned pine boughs, relic of an accident I had witnessed several years before in which a hunter from Fort Bridger received a compound fracture of the leg from being bucked off his horse when the pistol he was carrying tied into the saddle strings discharged a load of bird shot. While one of his party went to call for help on the cellular phone, the others built a smudge fire of green pine to guide the Lifelight heli-

copter from Salt Lake City in. On the way to water the mare at the outfitters' spring we were nearly run over by the biggest cow elk I had ever seen, fleeing in terror at our approach from behind a tree. When we arrived back at camp the shadow of Indian Ridge made an early twilight, and the firepit was cold. I built up a roaring blaze in it and poured three fingers of the whiskey, which seemed more inspirational than it had the previous evening. Stretched on the ground with the drink in my hand, watching the blue smoke shot with sparks rolling among the black spires of the trees, I did not really care whether I shot an elk this season or not. The engagement at close quarters that I had experienced all day seemed more than sufficient satisfaction or reward.

The next morning was as still and warm as the previous one had been. Restless from a surfeit of sleep I rose early, hiked the few hundred yards in almost pitch dark to the log, and sat with the rifle across my lap, awaiting first light. When it came, I discerned no game on the ridge above. As I had expected, the shots and excitement of the day before had caused the elk to go deep in the timber, where they would hold for the next several days. Dutifully but without enthusiasm I entered the forest and checked the openings and the game trails connecting them. I was nearly back at the log when the outfitters' dudes cut loose. By the time the first elk showed on the ridgeline I was behind it, cradling the rifle on a perpendicular stob. They were a cow, a spike, and a three-point, which however was hanging far behind the first two animals. I had the spike just in range when suddenly he stopped and posed for me there on the steep, as if he wanted his picture taken: young, handsome, and very proud. The bullet's impact knocked him back on his suddenly powerless haunches, and then he fell, rolling and bounding over the clattering talus blocks. It took him as long to die as I required to reach him across 650 yards, and as I clambered upward he beat a frantic tattoo on the rock with his front hooves, rolled his eyes, and emitted a terrible death-yell. The eyes remained wide open, clear, and sentient in death, as if he intended to haunt me for the rest of my life. I had him gutted in four minutes, and flung a piece of the liver to one of the squawking attentive camp robbers that had been following me all morning from tree to tree. c

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