

A PLACE CALLED DEATH VALLEY



Garry Donald photo.

BY ROB MANLEY

Was it me or did Garry seem a little too excited about building a fence? I had shown up to lend a hand cutting one by fours but try as I might I couldn't match the enthusiasm my friend was exuding. Perhaps he needed more projects around the house if this type of activity got him so wound up? I made a mental note to discuss the idea with his wife, Elaine. Eventually the true meaning behind the spring in Garry's step came out. "Rob, I drew a tag for elk. And it's in the zone that I shot all the bull elk video for my DVDs!" "I don't think I slept much last night after I found out....." I was at once relieved

and envious. Thank goodness my old buddy was still too adventurous to get that worked up about a little home construction but also how much more jealous could I be of his opportunity to hunt a monster bull elk in Saskatchewan?

A little background information on this particular subject may be in order. The zone Garry got drawn in has only 10 tags available. It is estimated there could be as many as three thousand applicants. Add to this lottery-winning fortune the fact that this is the exact territory that Garry has shot amazing elk footage, found huge elk sheds in and published great elk

hunting stories about and you may begin to understand where the anticipation was coming from. I had drawn a mule deer tag for the zone the previous year. I had gone down for a couple days of rifle hunting the beginning of November. During my first day I encountered at least a dozen bulls and large numbers of cow elk. I remember thinking at the time how much I wished I could get a tag to hunt elk there some day. Now, fast forwarded six months, here was Garry telling me he had the golden ticket in his hand. I think we both knew he wasn't going down there without me. We also both knew we wouldn't be leaving behind the real elk hunting fanatic; my 15 year old son, Jay. Plans were set for a September 1st opening day.

With such an early start to the season we decided to do our scouting while we hunted the first couple days. We felt the peak of the rut was likely a week or so away from when the opener was, therefore we did not feel an urgency to get down in the late summer heat. Garry had communicated

often with an old friend from a local Hutterite Colony in years past who always seemed to have the drop on where big bulls were holding out. Unfortunately he had moved to another Colony so we were heading into the area fairly green as to current elk movements. One particular ranch traditionally seemed to hold the bulk of the population and we were banking on the fact that this was still the case. We made arrangements to set up at a nearby campground and soon it was time to point the truck and camper towards elk country. The bar was going to be set very high for this special draw tag. The three of us fed off each other's excitement. Jay had shot a young bull the year before but this season it was all about helping Garry get his hands on a monster southern Saskatchewan bull. This felt like we had been called up to the pro's.

After setting up the campsite, we made our way to the rancher's house to check in and hopefully find out where the elk were hanging. Temperatures were unseasonably hot,



Garry Donald with his 2013 draw elk that he took near the south Saskatchewan River. It proved to be one of the hardest hunts he had ever been on with the deep canyons and extreme heat of 90 to 100 degrees. In country like this you need to be in fairly good shape or you may as well stay home. The antlers on this bull are very massive with both H-1s reaching 10 inches, with the H-2s going 9 inches, H-3s and H-4s are all over 7 inches. This was an old bull that had survived the big kill-off in that zone in 2009. The antlers scored 340 inches Rob Manley photo.



Rob and Jay Manley with Garry's big bull. Getting the bull was a team effort, and when we cooled off back at the Prairie Lake Regional Park campground the laughs came easy. The relentless heat made us all a little giddy. We were all very concerned as only four cows were spotted on the hunt, the rancher told Garry there still wasn't a single elk back on his ranch even by the end of October. It should be mentioned that the live weight on this bull was estimated to be over 1,100 pounds and just the meat alone at the butcher's was 550 pounds. No wonder they struggled to get the bull into Rob's big Dodge. Garry Donald photo.

making our shorts and flip-flops necessary but not welcome. Would the fattened up herd bulls be laying low in the darkest corners of the ranch? This is breathtaking country by a number of accounts. The rugged hills have been shaped by time's use of the mighty Saskatchewan River. Lighter soil is picked up by relentless winds and driven back against far more stubborn rock. Run-off from spring snowmelt carves deeper each year in its race down steep slopes to reach the river. The depth of the canyons formed is evident to only those who make their way to the bottoms then hope their legs and lungs can carry them back out. It was a sobering proposition in the withering heat.

The ranchers were just the type of kind-hearted accommodating people you feel privileged to meet. Garry had visited a number of times with them over the years during his trips to the area and it wasn't long before the conversation turned to elk on the property. Not much had been spotted to this point in the year but it was agreed they were likely in the vicinity somewhere, probably doing their best to stay cool. We also learned that seven of the ten tag holders would be hunting on the

ranch so specific areas would have to be established for each party. We decided to spread our wings a little and scout some nearby countryside in the hope of finding out where the elk summered, if not on the ranch.

As last light began creeping in, it soon became evident that the bulls and cows were still very scattered. A smattering of tracks spread out over a large expanse of farmland was all we found. A bonus was Bill Longman along with his son Garrett and Bill's brother Mike were rumbling down the trail towards us. They had volunteered to help Garry out also and would be camping alongside us. I really felt with the contingent we were gathering, the elk could run but they couldn't hide forever. That evening around the fire pit, stories were swapped and theories were formed. It was amazing to see the local folks stopping by to offer their good luck wishes and have a chat with the man behind the magazine they hold so dear to their hearts. I could tell it was times like these that make all the effort Garry puts into his business worth it. The fire eventually burned down to embers and we decided to make the best of a very early wake-up call.

First light gave us cooler air and the hope of a response to Jay's calling. We worked our way through our assigned section of the ranch from the lower reaches up and towards where we anticipated elk coming in from the cropland. Not an answer was heard. Very little sign was evident in the heart of the territory and only a single spiker was spotted in the distance. No other shots sounded from the other hunters. We continued to pound boot leather up and over ridges and down into canyons looking for rubs, trails or even tracks. It was like an elk ghost town. It seemed simple enough.....without the cows we couldn't expect bulls. We limped back to camp in the glaring midday sun looking for shade and some cool water to soak our feet in. We hoped Bill and Mike had found something encouraging.

The news didn't get any better when the Longmans rolled up. The same question bounced around the campsite, "where were all the elk?" By now we had covered many miles with little to show. Our great expectations were beginning to dip. The suffocating heat didn't help as the thought of venturing out from the shade was not enticing. Then we caught a break. An acquaintance of Bill's stopped by to see how we were doing. He mentioned his son had been bowhunting mule deer and had seen a big bull with a couple cows out in the crops near a different section of the ranch that no one was in. We decided right smartly that the evening hunt should start there. Bill and Garry had scoured that section in the spring finding some super elk sheds that can be seen in the fall issue. Jay went along as a third set of eyes and ears. Mike, Garrett and I took to the roads and trails to see if we could find a herd hiding out in the farmland. When darkness came, we once again met up at the campsite only to determine that Jay finding an elk shed was the only success our entire group could muster. The other hunters on the ranch fared no better.

It was a little tougher answering the call the next morning. There just wasn't much to get excited about. We knew we had to get on the ground though and chose to head in where the boys had left off the night before. Bill's truck took off on another windshield survey hoping to turn over every rock they could. As Garry, Jay and I worked our way into some good looking habitat a big mule deer buck got our attention. While watching it through my binoculars I spotted a couple elk in the distance. A big bull was right on their tails! This was more like it! We had to hustle as Garry figured he knew where they might cross. Just as we arrived we heard a bugle from behind a knoll right in front of us. Man, they can gain ground fast. A cow stepped from the brush, got downwind of us and took off. The bull busted out after her in cover up to his shoulder. Garry had one quick shot then his gun jammed as the elk got into a small clearing. As if to mock us the huge bull ran further out then paused on the crest of a hill to show us who really was the boss. Of course a jammed gun would never have happened if it would have been a satellite bull. Go figure! I got some quick video footage of him but we never caught up to them the rest of the morning. Elk are big animals but this land is bigger; they had many options.

We got together with the Longmans and decided to try a push through a corner of the ranch where we hoped the elk may have holed up. I would loop all the way around and do what I could to get something by Garry's gun. Once I saw the crew get into position I started my hike. It was a forced march under the unrelenting sun. I was about half way through some dense tree

cover enjoying the shade when a large animal crashed out of the thicket. As I ran for the open pasture, there stood a tremendous dark antlered bull elk forty yards away. Without thinking I charged towards him, trying an outside rush in an effort to force him towards the hidden ambush. I didn't have a hope. Barney Rubble had a better chance against Secretariat. At least the boys got a glimpse of the bull as he crested a rise. We never did catch up to him.

We dragged our sorry carcasses back to the vehicles praying that the air conditioned cabs would breathe life back into us. Our gunner was done. The 37 degree (98 Fahrenheit) heat had finished us all. We headed back to the shady side of camp, licked our wounds and vowed to be back in a week. Maybe the elk would move onto the ranch and the autumn sun would take mercy on us.

During our week away Garry pulled out all the stops in sourcing any information as to where the elk might be. Most leads came up empty but a young sidekick of his, Josh Seniuk travels the countryside like a wandering gypsy. It seems if there are critters around he'll have stepped in their tracks. And he just happened to think there may be an elk or two in a pasture a few dozen miles from the ranch we had been on. It would be worth a look.

The week away ended with more extreme heat as we made our way back to set up camp again. Would the elk be moving? Well, apparently the hunters that stuck out the heat on the ranch were rewarded. While we were away three bulls over 340 inches got killed. From the pictures it was evident the bull Garry missed and the bull I had chased were both at the butcher's. As well, three other bulls were taken. Wow, where had they been hiding? Congratulations to the guys for sticking it out in weather more conducive for a Hawaiian Tropic swimsuit competition. Those were some tough conditions. Our dilemma became whether to abandon our ranch hunt and chase Josh's elk or see if there was yet another monster bull in the canyons.

Pre-dawn found us glassing the edge of some cropland where it drops into the steep and deep of the ranch. A few deer made their way towards day cover and then farther out I spotted a lone bull elk working his way back. He was a dandy. We let him drop into the valleys that eventually get deeper. The wind was perfect as we were about 20 minutes behind him. I figured it would be a slam dunk when we set up just over the edge. The rut should be on and a lone bull should be a sucker for Jay's cow calling and challenging bugles. After all, this was no satellite bull but it was odd that he had no cows with him. A couple series of calls and waiting proved that he must have kept on going right across the territory in search of some female company. We hiked and called through everything we could and made no contact. Beat again..... Garry found a huge elk shed on the walk back out. Usually we would be excited about a shed we had to drag because it was too heavy to carry but it just seemed to add insult to injury. It was time to check out Josh's secret spot. He had secured permission for us so that afternoon we went to see some new country.

When we drove to the area it was hard to get out of the air-conditioned truck and into the afternoon heat that was feeling more like a blast furnace. With my binoculars I could see the hills we needed to get to but before that lay an expansive flat

that needed to be crossed. It seemed like we would be travelling through Death Valley after the day's hiking at that point and we readily agreed to give it a pass until cooler temperatures prevailed. Back we went to the ranch for more glassing from a high vantage in an effort to catch some cows or our big bull moving. It seemed more like scorpion and rattlesnake weather however and nothing with four legs stirred in the suffocating heat. Tomorrow was another day.

Slightly cooler temperatures were forecast but it didn't affect our elk sightings. We drew a zero for the morning hunt so we vowed to cross Death Valley that afternoon come hell or high-water. When we arrived there we decided Garry would hike through the flats and set up in the hills. Jay and I would flank an old abandoned farmyard that had a woodlot around it and follow the cover to where it joined up to the hills. I videoed my old friend putting more miles on his boots as he trudged off in the distance and silently hoped we could send something his way. When our shooter became a mere speck on the horizon Jay and I dropped in to the farmyard below and almost immediately started jumping deer. As we pushed farther in we began to see an elk rub or two. It was looking more promising

as even more deer, both mulies and whitetails, were flushing from cover and heading to the hills Garry was prowling. Soon we came to a patch of shrubs that stretched to the crest of a ridge. As I went up my side I noticed Jay hit the ground just as he peaked over the edge of the hill. He held up his hands to show me he saw a rack so I quickly made my way over to him assuming I would video a nice buck as he only spread his hands about a foot apart. As I got closer he silently mouthed the words, "Big Bull!" Now he really had my attention! My son had been pretty sharp not to have exposed his silhouette as he topped the rise, instead choosing to peek over first. When I carefully eased up for a look I could hardly believe my eyes. 60 yards away, laying in a nice cool little waterhole was a heavy horned bull elk. There wasn't a stitch of cover anywhere near him.

We had some anxious moments. Our wind was blowing the bull's way yet he hadn't detected us, likely because he was well below us. But I knew that could change at any moment. We didn't want to jump him because we didn't know exactly where Garry was. So we sat there fretting like a couple grannies at a windy picnic. After an eternal five minutes I decided I better at

least poke the video camera over the ridge and get some footage of the relaxing bull before his bath got interrupted by an errant wind drift. Just as I got him in the view finder our long lost partner's gun thundered and I jumped three feet in the air at the sound. The bull began heading up a nearby hill and Jay starting screaming with his bugle. This stopped the exit and Garry kept pouring lead at the bruiser. One more shot found its mark and the bull collapsed. Jay was whooping, Garry was doing some type of Scottish tribal dance and I think I was just sitting there trying to swallow my heart back into place. It had all come together.....Jay and I galloped to where Garry was approaching the bull. I couldn't wait to see the elk up close and also to hear the story from the shooter's perspective.

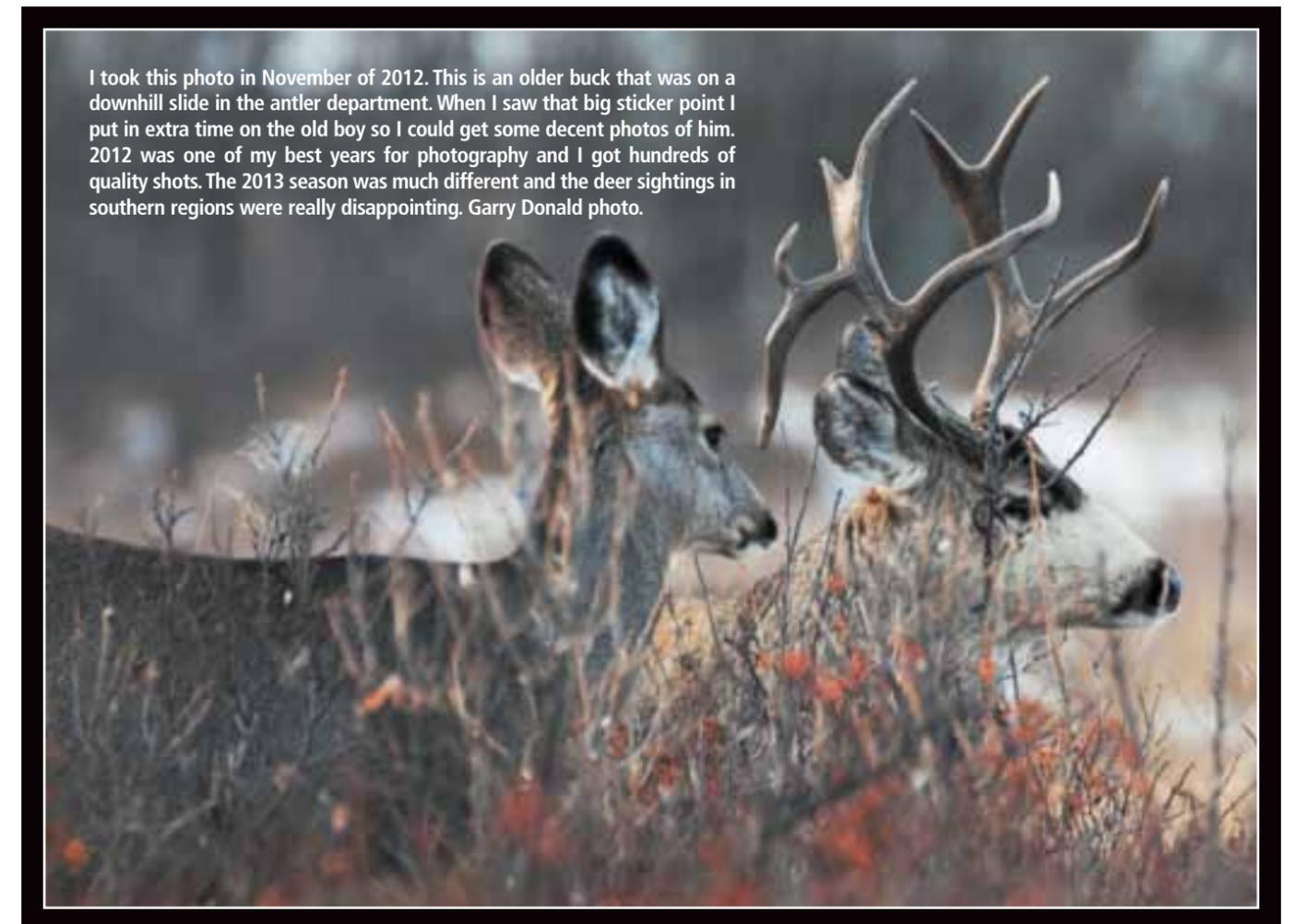
Apparently Garry had been in great position when the deer started heading his way. Some were jumping a fence and almost landing on him. The wildlife photographer in him was wishing for a Nikon instead of a Winchester. Duty called however and he eased along his fence line between deer charges. As he worked his way down a slope into a low area he spotted a large set of elk antlers jutting above some slough grass about 350 yards away. The bull was facing towards Garry so at first glance it didn't look that impressive. When the bull turned his head though the view through the scope revealed some very noteworthy antlers. It became immediately obvious this was a keeper. Garry wanted to close the distance and had to get to the base of the hill and under a barb-wire fence to get

into dead certain range. One can only imagine the interesting conversation he had with himself when his pants hung up on the fence as he slithered under the bottom strand while a nervous trophy bull elk eyeballed the scene. After extricating himself from the barb on the wire, Garry quickly got his gun up on his shooting sticks. He put his first shot right into the boiler room of the massive bull. It hardly flinched as it scrambled out of the pond and up a slope. Another shot missed its mark before a final bullet in the neck ended the bull's days of ruling the pasture.

I can only begin to describe the joyous feeling of watching one of my most cherished friends, high fiving and hugging my wide-eyed son. Jay had never been up close to a bull of this caliber, heck none of us had! To be able to run our hands over the heavy mahogany antlers and marvel at the size of the bull's neck and shoulders was special indeed. The sun began to touch down on the western horizon in this unlikeliest of elk hunting settings. When we took a moment to look over our surroundings and noticed the gently rolling hills and short-grassed prairie, we realized how fortunate we were not to be struggling out of the bottom of a canyon. With the cool evening breeze kissing us goodnight we knew it was time to process the beast at our feet. Walking back to the truck in the fading light, with Garry and Jay at my side, I was struck with how alive I felt in a place named Death Valley. 🍂



Garry with his 7x7 elk. Ken Maranduk photo.



I took this photo in November of 2012. This is an older buck that was on a downhill slide in the antler department. When I saw that big sticker point I put in extra time on the old boy so I could get some decent photos of him. 2012 was one of my best years for photography and I got hundreds of quality shots. The 2013 season was much different and the deer sightings in southern regions were really disappointing. Garry Donald photo.