

# Great Adventures in Bow Hunting

Lonny Vanatta

By Duayne Truax and Del Look



In 1978 Three Wire Winter interviewed one of Steamboat's pro skiers, Lonny Vanatta. Lonny finished fifth in 1980, third in 1981, and second in 1983 in world. He gave up pro skiing in 1984. While he was on the pro circuit Lonny started bow hunting. He has become one of Colorado's best bow hunters. We finally got ahold of Lonny after the 1985 bow season was over, after he told us his hunting stories we started the interview.

"I was born February 1, 1957, right here in Steamboat Springs. My dad was always a big hunter. I pretty much tagged along with him whenever I could. Then I started hunting as soon as I could buy a license, which was 14. I always pretty much hunted elk with a rifle and deer with bow. I started bow hunting when I was 15 and just hunted deer. Then when I felt I was more comfortable and better with a bow I started bow hunting for elk, which was 8 years ago. I started just hunting with a bow only, and that's all I hunted with. I haven't hunted with a rifle now for 8 years and I think probably if I ever had to quit bow hunting I don't know if I would hunt with a

rifle again. I just enjoy it so much, probably just going out with a camera and taking pictures. It's just so much more exciting. I've told people stories that I've experienced with bow hunting that people just don't believe. I've bugled an elk in to five and six yards, having bears crawl up the same tree you're sitting in. It gives the animal a sporting chance, and it's a nice time of the year. There's a lot of reasons why I like it.

"I think when you first start out hunting it's kind of exciting as I think back. My real goal was to kill something. You just really want to go out and get something and going to school and telling all your buddies. I just enjoy going out and being close to the woods and the animals and if I get one that's great that just is icing on the cake, but if I don't that's fine too. I think being a good hunter is not somebody that can go out and kill the most animals or get the best game. A good hunter is knowledgeable about hunting. Somebody that just goes out and happens to kill their animal the first weekend or happens to year after year get the meat, I don't feel that

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those people are always the best hunters, I think the guy who is the really good hunter is a person that is just knowledgeable about hunting." We asked Lonny how much hunting has changed since he got started.

"I don't know if the hunting really changed too much in the last 12 or 14 years. I think the quality was probably a little bit better then, but I think the big problem is the game and fish is too greedy to try to set the quality back into the herds. I think eventually they will have to do something like they've started this year in a few of the areas with the four points and better regulation. I don't think there were as many people that hunted back then which made it a little bit easier and it was probably a little more enjoyable. Also, I don't think there are as many big animals now. But I think I became a better hunter and learned a lot more about hunting, and learned some new areas so actually I think I've seen more bigger animals in the last few years than back then, and this is because I'm more knowledgeable about hunting and the animals I hunt."

Since Del was interested in bow hunting this year he asked Lonny how he started out with the sport.

"I started hunting with a Damon Howatt Recurve that was 50 pounds. I think the first deer I killed was out on the Look Ranch right at the edge of an alfalfa field. I was sitting over on the other side of the field where there's a big bush, where the fence line runs right along the edge of the field. I was sitting on the other side of that bush when some deer came down the fence line and hopped the fence over where Carver's fence comes down by the gate. The last one that hopped the fence hopped over after the others because he was feeding off the same bush that I was sitting in. I was just looking at him because he was on the other side of the bush. There were too many branches in the way then he finally walked out into the alfalfa field to where I could get a shot and that was the first deer I ever killed. He was only a two-point.

"I've owned four different kinds of bows since I've started hunting. Right now I have two bows. Both are P.S.E. Lazer Magniums. I've used this model for about seven years now. The reason I have two bows is that if one happens to have something go wrong with it, I have another one I can just pick up and feel comfortable with. They are exactly the same bow and poundage, which is 70 pounds."

It takes a lot of practice to become good with a bow so we asked Lonny how much he practices before the season.

"We have a local club here in town called The Wapiti Bowmen. We shoot indoors during the winter, usually one night a week. We usually shoot in the old junior high gym on 7th Street



### **His first record antelope.**

until wrestling practice is over, then we shoot in the auxiliary gym at the high school. Also, we have a range up behind Howelsen Hill on Emerald Mountain and it's set up almost like a golf course. I think we have 14 targets where you have to estimate the yardages. They're all not out in the open; most of them are in the woods.

"I enjoy the sport not only because of the hunting, but it just is fun to shoot a bow. We go to a lot of different shoots during the summer. The Colorado Bow Hunters Association puts on a shoot every summer and we go to that, then we have our own local shoot so when I'm not hunting it seems like I'm always doing something with a bow. It really takes a lot of time. It's not like picking up a rifle and going out and sighting it in then going out and hunting; it really does take a lot of time. It's two different kinds of hunting, because archery hunting takes a lot of homework.

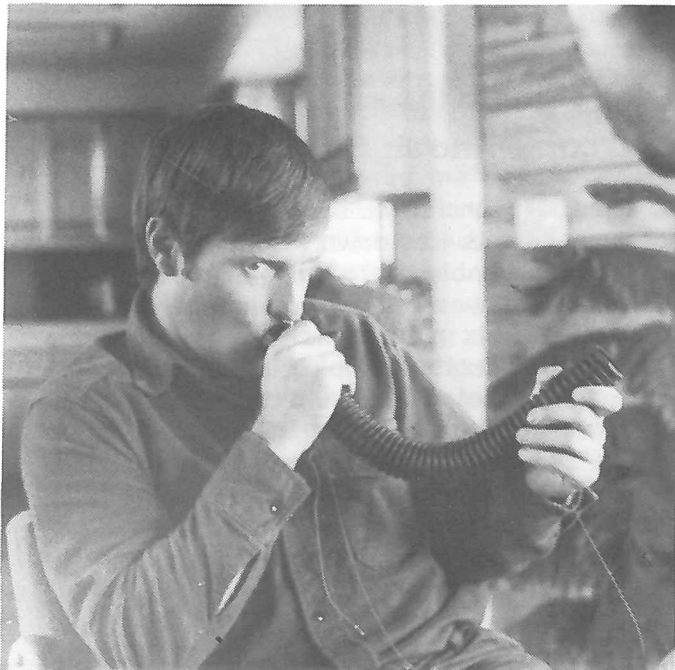
"It basically comes down to scouting. If you're going hunting on private property, talk to the land owner. If you're going in to an area you don't know anything about, try to talk to a biologist in that area. The game warden or people who live in that area can also be of some help. Just spend as much time as possible in that area trying to find water holes, places where they're rutting, trees that have been rubbed. Tracks and droppings are your first clues.

"After doing my scouting I can tell where to put up my tree stand or blind. But I never have used a tree stand or blind to hunt elk. It would work around water holes and good trails or a place where they're coming in to an alfalfa field or an oats field. Elk really move around a lot so they don't really have a set pattern as, say, for example a whitetail deer does. I have a hard

time sitting in a tree stand for long a time. It's just so much more fun being on the ground and out still hunting and stocking them. I try to do as much scouting before the season starts to find out where the elk are at in that area. But elk make so much noise you can locate them real easily if you're in a good area. They're bugling at that time of the year during archery season which makes it kind of nice locating them."

We then decided to ask Lonny on what animal he uses a tree stand. "I use it for bear hunting; that's really the best way to hunt bears. Because their scent is so strong and if you can get up off the ground you can get that scent up off the ground and your chances are a lot better plus a lot of animals really don't look up. I hunted out of a tree stand when I was hunting Whitetail Deer. Camouflage definitely makes a difference.

"I have a suit that is reversible and is shaded green on one side and brown on the other, depending on what type of country you are hunting in. You can switch sides accordingly, then I usually wear some kind of camouflage gloves. Then paint my face, because it's the only thing that sticks out and it really does makes a difference. I think if you just find clothing that breaks up the colors and that's just not a solid color is the main thing. One way we hunt antelope is we dig a pit and put sagebrush all around the sides so we're all camouflages, then you hunt out of tree stands. You want to make sure you have good camouflage in the tree. You don't want to put up your tree stand in a bare tree. Make sure you have some branches to break up the outline of your body. Then you want



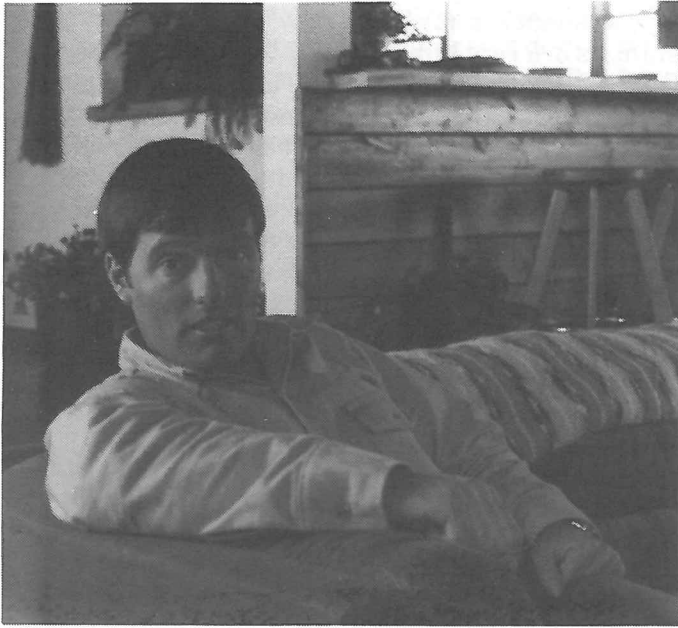
**"A big thing in elk hunting now is a turkey diaphragm and a grunt tube."**

to use silencers for your bow because a lot of animals are real jumpy so any foreign noise they hear they're going to take off running or jump at that noise and if you have a bow that makes a lot of noise when you release that arrow the animal will do what we call jumping the string and they will move or jump before the arrow gets there. That's if they're more than 20 to 25 yards away. It's pretty hard for any animal to jump out of the way of an arrow under the distance of 25 yards. I had one with its head in the water, and I released an arrow at it and he had done a complete 180-degree turn and was gone before the arrow got there."

We talked a little bit more about camouflage and silencers, then Lonny told us about the importance of using an elk bugle in bow hunting for elk. "I use a bugle for elk hunting. The big thing in elk calls now is a turkey diaphragm and a grunt tube. I think before I even started bow hunting for elk it has always been fun to go out and listen to the elk bugle in September. Using a bugle makes it so much easier to hunt elk; it is also easier to locate them. They only have one thing on their mind and the elk are just not quite as smart. I have heard the worst callers in the world go out and call an elk just because they're in the mood to fight and find a mate.

"It's the same way with the turkey. I just really started turkey hunting. You just go out there and make any kind of old noise and if they're in the right mood on a given day they come a running. That's really exciting. In hunting elk I've called them in so close that I could almost reach out and touch them. I enjoy that just as much as going out and killing them. Bugling is a better way of getting the elk to come closer so you can get a shot at them. I have had big elk come in, but I couldn't get good shots at them. They would stay out of range or they would stay behind the brush and trees. That's another problem with bow hunting — you might bring them in to about 15 yards, but may never get a shot at them, mostly because of the brush and the trees."

We asked Lonny how he found out about this trophy area. Bill Grammer and I happened to run into someone who lives here in town that knew of another area they were opening. He said to put in for a license in this area because it wouldn't be as popular. The elk were bigger and if we drew he said he'd tell us where to go, and we drew. So we went and talked to him and he told us the land owner would tell us about the country. We spent a lot of time scouting and doing our homework. When we went down there we had no idea where the elk were. Our first trip down there we didn't know where to go, so we decided to go on a little hike. We walked about 200 yards, and right below us a six-point bull jumped up and took off running through the



**"I guess I like elk hunting, because their such a big majestic animal."**

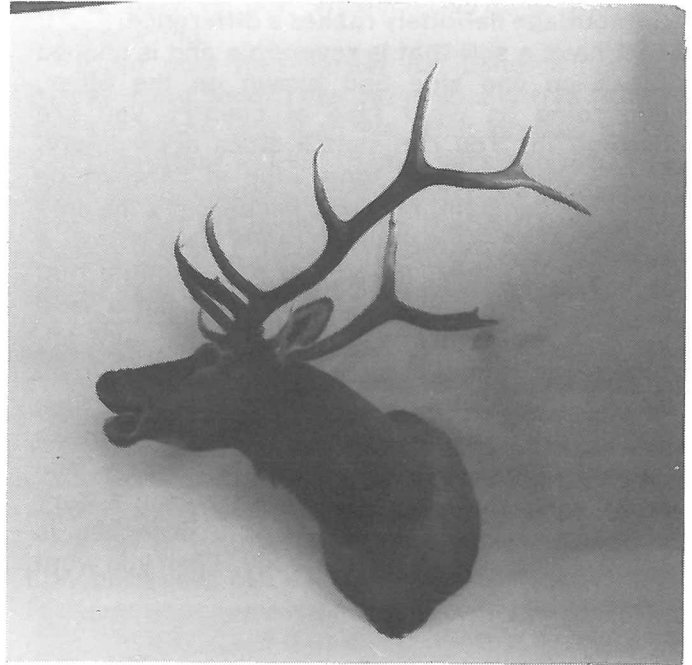
trees. I looked at Bill and said, 'This is going to be easy.'

"Before the weekend was over we ran into the landowner and got his permission. We ran into him on the road. He said, 'I suppose you're bow hunters.' Oh, now, here we go; nobody likes bow hunters, especially the ranchers. 'Well, you look like you've got a little bit of luck running your way today. You can go any place you want, but don't go near my water holes. My cattle won't come in, I just got rid of the wild horses down here and now I've got 400 or 500 head of elk. It takes quite a bit of land to run cattle down here, because there's not much feed and the elk don't help matters much.'

"So before the weekend was over we saw about 6 or 8 six-point bulls. And then the next trip when we went down, we didn't see too many. When we went down and hunted I don't think there was a day that we didn't see half a dozen six-point bulls. When I killed my elk there were about six or eight bulls that were that size as the one I got and bigger within 200 yards of us just bugling their heads off. We were right in the middle of them and they were just going crazy. I didn't shoot one until about 11 o'clock.

"There were so many elk in there it was really tough to get in on a big bull because they kept moving out in front of us. We were right at the tail end of them and we just couldn't get close to them so we decided to circle around and get ahead of them, so we got up on the ridge. They were feeding and we just started down the hill. We heard a bugle right out in front of us and so I bugled back and here he came straight at us with his head down, just looking at the ground. Then

he angled to the left when I saw him coming. All I could see was the spread and I knew he was a good bull. That's when I knew I was going to shoot him. He turned to my left and when I shot him he didn't even know what hit him. He turned around and ran back the way that he walked in. He stopped and looked back and I just sat there real still and he didn't even know that he had been shot. When he went out of sight I could hear a bull bugling and I thought it was the elk that I just shot, then another bull right in the same footsteps came up. He probably would have scored another 20 or 30 points higher than the other bull and I was just wishing that I had my arrow back, but I am real happy with that bull. It was quite a hunt, that's for sure.



**"Then right in the same footsteps a big bull came into sight."**

"The first morning we saw two or three other hunters and this was down in the area that we knew was probably pretty popular right off the main road, but we did see some elk that morning. We saw two six point bulls right off the bat. There were two other people bugling at them so we decided to set off and hunt another area. We found most of the elk, but we never saw another hunter. We scouted it so we knew elk were there. I was lucky enough to get a friend of mine, Don Valentine, to fly me down there three days before the season opened. We did see quite a few elk in that area."

Since Lonny uses calls we asked him how close has he been to an animal. "I touched a fawn this year that was the first time that had happened to me. I was just standing there real still and it came right to me. It stopped bouncing about five feet in front of me then it started running. It



### **Lonny with his first record bull elk.**

walked up about two or three feet beside me.”

Lonny talked about how different archery hunting is from rifle hunting. “When you shoot an animal you don’t just stop them in their tracks, but an animal that is shot by an arrow dies by hemorrhaging or bleeding, while one shot by a bullet dies from shock and bleeding. The only place to shoot an animal with an arrow is behind a shoulder. An arrow won’t penetrate bone. It can break ribs, but it won’t go through a skull like a bullet will. There are many vitals behind the shoulder — heart, lungs and liver.

Lonny has a black bear that got into the **Pope and Young Record Book** in 1984. He told us the story on how he got that bear. “Probably the biggest thrill I have ever had was before I got the big bear. The way I hunt bears is I put out bait and then I wait until the bear starts hitting the bait. Then I put up a tree stand. Usually you put up your tree stand out 10 to 15 yards off your bait, because you want to make sure you get a good hit on the bear. Not because of the danger factor, but because they’re pretty tough to kill if you don’t hit them in the right place. But I put my bait out and I guess I got a hit about four or five days after I put it out. I saw a black bear the second day I hunted it and since I have two black bear rugs, I was hoping for a different color or

just a big bear.

“If it was a big bear I couldn’t refuse shooting it, but this first bear that I saw was pretty small. He came in behind my tree stand then he hit the trail that I walked up, the trail went right underneath my tree stand. My bait was up to the left at my tree stand. I heard him come in and turned to my right, then he hit my trail and immediately his nose went to the ground. It’s incredible how their noses are so sensitive; it’s just unbelievable. I always try to put a cover-up scent on, then I walk into the bait to help hide my scent.

“He walked up underneath my tree stand and he stood up on his hind legs and he just looked straight up at me and I was looking straight down at him and he knew that something was there. He just didn’t know what it was. Then he went up and sat down at the bait and started eating. He was black and he wasn’t too big. I think he was probably a 2-year-old bear and I wasn’t too interested so I watched him eat for a while. At 10 yards it’s a lot of fun just to watch them.

“The next time I went in and hunted, it was a couple days later, the bear came in the same way. When I walked up I carried in a bottle of Liquid Smoke that you buy at the supermarket; it’s a real good cover-up. I sprinkled it on my boot soles for the last hundred yards and set the bottle on the branch of a tree about five yards below me. He walked in and smelled the Liquid Smoke. He followed the trail up, then he got to that tree and smelled that bottle up in that tree. He finally looked up there and spotted it. He reached up with his paws and grabbed the bottle and brought it down and tipped it back in his mouth and started sucking on it just like a little baby. When he walked in he looked up and saw me again, but their eyesight is pretty poor and I was all camouflaged. He played around with that bottle and he would look up at me and I was just sitting there real still watching him.

“Finally he dropped it, walked up underneath my tree stand and I thought he was going up on to the bait. I was just sitting there real still waiting for him to come out on the other side, but he didn’t so I didn’t want to lean out off to one side or the other to see what he was doing. He knew I was there. I thought he might be looking up so I sat there and waited and waited, but no bear. I knew he was down there. I didn’t know what he was doing. Then all of a sudden I heard something scratch and I felt the tree shake a little bit. He was coming up the tree and I leaned out and looked down. Boy, he had all four paws stuck in the tree. He was looking straight up at me and I was looking straight down at him and my feet to his nose couldn’t have been more than four or five feet apart. That got the blood flowing a little bit.



**"He was looking straight up at me and I was looking straight down at him."**

"It's fun watching them anyway; it gets exciting just watching them, and getting one that close is pretty neat. I think if he had taken another step or two up that tree I would have been yelling or making some noise. I don't think he knew what I was and I think he was just curious. I think if I had made a sudden movement or a noise he would have been gone. So he finally backed down the tree, went up, sat down and started eating on the bait. I let him go again.

"Toward the end of the season another bear had started hitting my bait and I knew it was a different bear. I went up and hunted one night and it was this big one. The first time he came in was about 7:30 and he just circled around about 40 yards from the bait and then he left. He came back about a quarter till nine, then I nailed him right through both lungs. He ran about 15 yards, which was about five yards from the tree I was sitting in. I knew he was a big bear, but I didn't know how big. I knew he was a record book bear but I had no idea that he was really as big as he was. When you see an elk or a deer and you see four or five bucks running together it's pretty easy to judge which of the animals are bigger. If you don't have three or four bears together it's pretty hard to judge their size."

After Lonny finished telling us about the bear

hunt he told us a little bit about the bait and equipment he uses. We first asked him about the kind of bait he uses. "For bait I usually go to Safeway and collect meat scraps, pastries and their chicken. Those are all pretty good items to use as bait. Then I usually try to hang it in a bag until I get one hitting, because if you leave it on the ground the coyotes will get to it most of the time. Plus, when you hang it up, the scent is up a little bit higher. But if you're baiting on national forest you have to have it in an indestructible container. I didn't have to worry about that because I killed the bear on a private ranch. I have also taken three other bears in the same baiting area."

Then we asked Lonny where he thinks the best bow hunting is in Routt County. "I would say that the best elk hunting right now is down on the private ranches. I think since the elk was a plains animal in the beginning, they are changing their ways by coming down from the high country. There aren't as many elk in the national forest. I hunted around here this year on private ranches and I saw a lot of elk — not many big elk, but I saw a half-dozen five points. I didn't see anything bigger than that. I think it's great what they're doing with these 'four-points or better' areas. In three or four years there will be some decent elk again."

We asked Lonny why he likes elk hunting so much and if he ever wanted to hunt out of state for other animals. "I guess I like elk hunting, because they're such a big, majestic animal. There's just something about elk hunting. It gets into your blood. I like deer hunting, too. I was going hunting for a big mule deer during archery season this year, because I haven't really killed



**"I was all camouflaged and had my war paint on my face."**



**"I knew he was a big bear but I didn't know how big."**

a big buck. I got a nice elk, bear and a nice antelope, and I wanted a big deer. I just have a real hard time hunting deer when I haven't taken an elk yet.

"I haven't done a whole lot of out-of-state hunting. It costs a lot of money and I really like hunting the animals of Colorado. However, there comes a time when you feel like doing something different. This last season I made a hunting trip to Nebraska. We were hunting for whitetail deer. It really is an altogether different type of hunting than hunting mule deer. I think whitetail senses are a little bit better than a mule deer. I don't think there's any animal harder to hunt than a big mule deer buck, but I think over all a whitetail is a little bit smarter than a mule deer. Their senses are better. They usually stick to a set pattern and usually use the same trail to feeding places and to water. I hunted out of tree stands and just found a trail that they were using, plus they were starting to rut.

"A whitetail will make what they call a scrape. They paw the ground out, then urinate on it. You can usually find trails or a scrape or a place where they have been rubbing their antlers and put up a tree stand and wait for them to come by there. I spent the first day just putting up tree stands. I didn't hunt real hard. The next day I got

up in my tree stand about a half-hour before day light and I had 12 deer come by about 9. Four of them were bucks and the one I shot was a 4x4 whitetail. It was about 9, so I only got to hunt about a day and a half.

"The Nebraska deer hunt was nice, but if I could only hunt one animal I would pick an elk. I could hunt elk 300 days of the year. Hunt bear for 20 days, antelope for 20 and deer for 20. And then rest for the last 5 days. I'm going on a hunt next summer that is going to be pretty exciting. I'm going up to the Northwest Territories with Bill Grammer to hunt Dall Sheep. I've already booked the hunt and sent in my deposit. I've hunted around here all my life and there gets to be a point where you want to do something different. It's a back pack hunt, only we don't have any horses or anything, and it's 28 miles in to where you start hunting, so it will be quite a trip. It's a 14 day hunt and the days that you spend walking in are included in the hunt.

"It will take probably 2½ days to get in there where we start hunting. The outfitter has had 13 bow hunters and 10 of them have taken sheep; 3 have missed. And you know, when you're hunting sheep, it's pretty hard hunting with a bow. Our area is set aside for bow hunting only, and the terrain is a little more broken up and there's a little more cover. I will be going from July 15 to July 29. I hope to be in good shape. I'd better be ready for it."



**"I could hunt elk three hundred days of the year and bear twenty days."**