Hunting, to me, has always been about adventure and exploration. Spending time in the outdoors with friends and family is great, but the thing that gets me out there is the possibility of encountering something in the field I’d never see behind a desk. Last October I traveled to New Mexico to hunt elk, and I was reminded of that when I experienced several firsts.

There were four of us in the party that hunted the Floyd Lee Ranch: myself, Rob Fancher, PR point man at the time for Steiner Optics, Tom Slaughter of C.A.M.P. Technologies and another writer, Pete Mathieson. Fancher and I hunted with guide Bobby Strand, while Slaughter and Mathieson were guided by Dave “Gadget” Huf. I’ve hunted elk enough to know we’d be lucky to get two bulls between the four of us. But I didn’t care if I was one of the unlucky two, I just looked forward to another view of the West.

“There’s elk,” whispered Bobby as he peered through the windshield into the darkness. He needn’t have been quiet—we were ensconced in the cab of his pickup. I pulled up the Steiner and pointed it in the direction he was looking and made out a handful of elk.

“Are you sure? I mean, the rut’s over, but they should still have their harems.”

“Yeah,” said Bobby, “I saw a pretty good one here last week with a handful of cows. He should be around here somewhere.”

Within moments the growing light revealed two more groups. Elk were everywhere, or so it seemed to me. It was more like pronghorn hunting, not elk hunting. We drove over the hills to our right and cut left, then right, meandering this way and that until we finally spied a large herd feeding in the sun on a hillside a mile away. We watched them in our binoculars a long time before we found the bull. Actually, there were several bulls, but the one we liked didn’t materialize for 20 minutes. When it did we scrambled to set up the spotter for a better look.

We figured it was a 5x5 and worth a shot, but we couldn’t walk straight at them, either—the elk would trot away when we topped the ridge before us. So Bobby and I left Rob behind the spotter and swung far right, using the low land between the elk and us to hide our approach, then carefully picked our way through scattered trees and drew within 300 yards of the herd.

Two hours later Bobby and I nestled beneath a pine watching bedded elk. We could make out ears everywhere, a few heads and the tines of the bull we were after, too. But until it stood we could do nothing. It seemed the whole herd was on its feet before the bull stood, and when it did we both knew it wasn’t one...
Steiner’s Peregrine XP

Steiner Porro-prism binoculars have been a top choice of our nation’s military units for years. What’s more, the German company reigns supreme in the marine world and is popular among birders, too. And while Steiner binoculars have always been popular with hunters, only recently did the company produce an elite unit, the roof-prism Peregrine XP, American Hunter’s Optic of the Year for 2007. Fully multi-coated glass, oversized 30mm ocular lenses and a new dielectric prism mirror deliver high-contrast color and exceptional light transmission. Unique eye “wings” block extraneous light, and an oversized focus wheel provides fast adjustment when wearing gloves. A lightweight magnesium chassis, skeletonized barrel design and gel-filled thumb pads make for excellent ergonomics. XPs are available in 8- and 10x44 configurations. They’re waterproof, too, and “nano-protection” coatings on exterior lens surfaces repel water—just rinse off dust with a squirt from your water bottle. www.steiner-binoculars.com.

A hunt can lead to many things besides a trophy. After the author, below, and the rest of his party killed their bulls, they discovered petroglyphs and cliff dwellings of ancient hunter-gatherers.

“Well heck, that’d do,” said Rob, perplexed as to why we’d spend so much time with nothing to show for it.

“He just wasn’t worth a day-one shot, Rob,” I said. “There’s plenty of time.”

Which was true, but experienced elk hunters will tell you it’s not always wise to pass up a gift. Rob fell in that camp: He wanted to go after the bull. It was doable; the herd hadn’t wandered far.

Off we went, and not far from the battleground the herd mingled about skittishly. There wasn’t much time to set up. Rob went prone beneath a tree and

we wanted. Bobby shook his head.

When the herd fed off we pulled back and swung around them again to look for other animals we might have missed, crouching when a cow and her calf trotted below us. We cleared the ridge and herd a bugle and nodded to each other.

More prodding spooked a cow, then another, then a fork-horned bull that poked its head from the trees, stared wide-eyed at us and thundered away. Another bugle beckoned just out of sight. A hundred yards later we emerged from the brush and saw the herd, and two bulls squaring off. Every animal watched the spectacle—including the two humans in attendance. I’ve seen whitetails battle before, but never like this. The 5x4 we’d passed on was fending off a satellite bull on a battleground a hundred yards away. Charges led to locked horns.

Then hooves dug in and clouds of dust filled the air as they pushed and pulled, guttural grunts bellowing from deep within their chests. Spit flew, eyes bulged and glowed red. It was all right there for the seeing through the Steiner, but my camera and its short-focal-length lens was worthless.

“I wish I had an ‘American Hunter Television’ crew in tow,” I said.

Tired of the battle, eventually the satellite trotted away and the herd bull took away his harem. An hour later Rob spied us walking across the valley, and drove down to pick us up: “What happened? I didn’t hear any shooting.”

“Not what we thought,” replied Bobby. “Not much beam length, and he was missing the fifth tine on one side.”
rested his rifle across a high root, which pulled his chest too far from the ground. I could see it wasn’t a good setup. Surely he’d hold off… then a shot rang out, the bull ran and Rob cursed himself.

“I shouldn’t have taken that shot,” he hissed. “I wasn’t steady enough. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay,” said Bobby. “I saw the dust fly—you missed him cleanly. Look, they didn’t go far. Let’s try again.”

This time I stayed behind, which was a good thing, because within moments I was laughing like a hyena. In a futile fly—you missed him cleanly. Look, they missed him cleanly. It’s okay, “ said Bobby. “I saw the dust fly—you missed him cleanly. Look, they didn’t go far. Let’s try again.”

Moments later atop the hill I chortled, I could see it wasn’t a good setup. Surely I was laughing like a hyena. In a futile fly—you missed him cleanly. Look, they missed him cleanly. It’s okay, “ said Bobby. “I saw the dust fly—you missed him cleanly. Look, they didn’t go far. Let’s try again.”

Bobby must’ve known that, because when they emerged from the wash he led the way and Rob’s face was planted right on his back. The guide raised the shooting sticks above his head as if he expected the sentry to assume the same tract, in a muzzleloader-only unit, was 20 miles away high in the timbered mountains to our east. I figured

“Hey, it coulda worked,” he laughed.

We ate lunch, then explored more of the ranch. It was huge, 400,000 acres in all. This was only half of it. Another camp on the same tract, in a muzzleloader-only unit, was 20 miles away high in the timbered mountains to our east. I figured

This was my second elk hunt in New Mexico, and while each occurred on private land, each experience was unique. The reason for the disparity lies mainly in the difference between the two ranches, to be sure, but other factors were at work, too.

In 2006, our camp of six was the first in years to hunt the 300,000-acre Hubbell Ranch with rifles, which meant every one of us had decent chances at a handful of monstrous bulls. The Floyd Lee Ranch totaled 400,000 acres, but our party was just one of many to hunt it last year with firearms or archery tackle. In fact, United States Outfitters (www.unitedstatesoutfitters.com) has leased the land for many years with great success. There, hunters can expect to see many bulls and possibly tag one, but not necessarily a monster.

Why? For starters, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) manages different game units for different goals. The famous Valle Vidal herd in Unit 55A, for instance, is managed for trophy hunting because of the beauty of its habitat and a modest number of elk totaling about 3,000. Licenses there are once-in-a-lifetime. But many units are managed for hunter success. Unit 9, which encompasses the Floyd Lee Ranch, holds the Mt. Taylor herd, approximately 6,000 animals managed for opportunity rather than quality.

A hundred years ago the last of the Rocky Mountain subspecies of elk in New Mexico was extirpated by soldiers, miners and homesteaders. The Merriam’s subspecies, which once inhabited the southern part of the state, disappeared a scant nine years previously. Today, thanks to re-introduction efforts of hunters, ranchers and other conservationists that began in 1910 and ended in 1966, Rocky Mountain elk can be found throughout New Mexico.

Over the years, a growing herd allowed the game agency to shift from restoration to management. In the 1970s, elk hunting began on a regional basis; in 1982, the statewide herd numbered roughly 53,000; in 1994, the hunter kill exceeded 10,000 elk for the first time in recorded history; in 1999, elk numbered about 72,000, and a herd reduction was ordered for 21 units. Today there are 90,000 elk in New Mexico.

The U.S. Forest Service manages 37.3 percent of the land in New Mexico; the Bureau of Land Management runs 11.6 percent, Indian tribes own 13.8 percent; and 29.8 percent is owned privately. This hodgepodge provides a unique opportunity for a variety of hunters and incomes, because it’s believed that upwards of 56 percent of the elk population uses public land. Coupled with NMDGF’s management philosophy on some units, even a do-it-yourselfer has a reasonable shot at seeing horns on national forest land.

The economic incentive presented by an increasing elk herd hasn’t been lost on landowners. In bad years when cattle merely pay the bills, elk hunting can be the difference between a rancher breaking even and making a profit. It’s estimated that the annual net economic impact to rural communities from private landowners selling bull tags is $34 million; public-land hunters pump even more than that into local economies.

New Mexico uses a draw system that distributes 78 percent of licenses to New Mexico residents, 12 percent to nonresidents who’ve booked with an outfitter and 10 percent to nonresidents who have not. Licenses cost $91 for residents, $543 for nonresidents. Statewide, roughly 30,000 are issued each year; about a third of all hunters kill a bull or a cow. Last year, Unit 9 hunter success averaged 29 percent (it was 52 percent on private land like I hunted; a prime reason to book with an outfitter).

Guided hunts can suffer a bum rap, depending on the guy doing the talking. But they can double your odds. It’s true some first-class elk setups in New Mexico can run as high as $14,000, but the typical guided hunt falls somewhere between $4,000-$6,000. For more information, log on to www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

From Bust to Boom in 100 Years

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the hunting there to be more difficult than what we were encountering.

We motored along late in the day checking out one herd after another, but finding no bull bigger than a fork-horn. Then, as we inched along a two-track, I thought I glimpsed an antler ahead of us.

“What’s that?”

“Where?” asked Bobby.

“Is that … I think I see an antler.”

“I don’t see it.”

“Yep—saw it move,” I said, lowering the Steiner after seeing the mahogany beam dip, then rise in the haze of the dying day. “See it on the horizon?”

Before Bobby could reply I was quietly opening the door and chambering a round. Seconds later my guide joined me.

We duck-walked up the road and knelt to assess the sight. The bull stood in a shallow bowl a couple hundred yards away, surrounded by a few cows. I didn’t dare rise any higher for fear of “skylining” myself. I let my guide do that. Bobby turned, clearly thrilled. “He’s a good bull, a great bull,” he whispered.

We tried to get closer but stopped after another 50 yards. I knelt, settled the rifle in the sticks and found the bull in the scope. But I had no shot—the cows grazed before and behind him. Bobby steadily gazed through his binocular: “He’s a good bull. About 180 red-brown coat, thankful to take such a majestic creature.”

With three bulls on the ground, attention turned to scouting up one for Slaughter, which happened soon enough. With four bulls on the ground, my attention turned to something Mathieson had declared a day earlier.

“We found petroglyphs,” he’d said. “Where?” I asked, pointing in jest at Gadget: “You’ve been holding out on us.”

“Yeah,” he said, “they’re out there—cliff dwellings, too.”

I’d seen cave paintings and rock carvings in Africa, but never evidence of the ancient civilizations of North America, not even an arrowhead though at times I’ve looked hard. We found the petroglyphs on a rock face beside a road in a tract we hadn’t entered before. They weren’t much—one could have missed them if he wasn’t looking—but I spent an hour photographing them, wondering who could have painted them and why. I was mesmerized, lost deep in thought when Bobby stopped later and pointed across a dry riverbed at the cliff dwellings. My jaw dropped.

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I studied my pictures, then took another stab at the Web and learned that between 300 B.C. and 100 A.D. three Ancestral Puebloan cultures, the Anasazi, Mogollon and Hohokam, inhabited Arizona and New Mexico.
At about the end of this period, the Anasazi settled on the Colorado Plateau, where the Floyd Lee lies. By 600 A.D., farming was a major part of their economy. They had acquired more possessions by this time, which meant they were less nomadic. They made pottery, stored food, adopted the bow and arrow and domesticated turkeys. Surplus squash, corn and beans were stockpiled in pottery or baskets inside small masonry structures in the village, or in small granaries tucked under overhangs on ledges above the desert floor. A picture I found looked similar to the dwellings I’d photographed.

In my mind I returned to New Mexico and imagined a landscape dotted with pithouses, shallow depressions in the ground covered with canopies of brush. Rather than a small band, it likely was an entire tribe that used the cliffs as storehouses, not homes. I closed my eyes and saw an entire village before me that stretched across the valley. Men were returning with elk hides and meat to dry. Women ground corn into meal and sewed robes. Children flitted about. And a river now dry ran clear and cool.