



# Moving Meat

*Your deer or elk is down.  
Now what?* *By Scott McMillion*

PHOTO BY STEVEN GABRIEL GNAM



Elk have an infuriating habit of hiding out in inconvenient places: distant ridgetops, black timber, inaccessible holes full of deadfall. So after you've accomplished the impeccable sneak and squeezed off the perfect shot, you're faced with moving a mountain of meat across inhospitable terrain back to the truck, which now seems impossibly far away.

Horses or mules are the time-honored option, but their proper care and training demand land, money, and time unavailable to many of us. Plus, because they're tough to bring along while hunting, horses require a trip back to camp or the trailhead to retrieve them for packing out the elk.

Thousands of people have quartered elk and made repeated trips to haul meat to their vehicle. Boning out the meat can reduce the total number of loads. But it's still backbreaking and time-consuming to schlep 60- to 85-pound loads for miles, several times—even on trails, much less through a forest littered with downed trees.

Thomas Baumeister says he's found an alternative: llamas. Get the right ones and you've got a string of agreeable animals that eat almost anything, navigate the toughest terrain, and don't need much water. He calls them his "string of pearls." "And they get along with everyone, including each other," says Baumeister, an avid hunter who is chief of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Conservation Education Bureau.

Baumeister keeps five llamas at his home

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near Helena. "They trim my lawn and the neighbor's lawn," he says. Cost? Baumeister only spends about \$350 a year on hay. A bonus: Llama pellets make valuable fertilizer, and since they poop in the same place every day, it's easy to scoop up. "We grow our tomatoes in it," Baumeister says.

When hunting season rolls around, they help him hunt elk and then haul the meat back to his vehicle.

Hunting with llamas is simple, Baumeister says—or at least a lot easier than using skittish horses or stubborn mules. Llamas are easy to load in a trailer, then hang around camp and don't need to be hobbled. Distant elk don't seem spooked by them, and if you keep the llamas between you and the elk, they can provide a few valuable moments of portable cover. Like faithful dogs, pack llamas stick close to their handler, whether on steep talus slopes or in thick lodgepole, and they go on alert when predators or other wildlife are nearby. Baumeister calls his lead animal his "periscope" because its head is usually within a few inches of his own, providing an extra set of eyes for spotting game.

Then, when the shooting is done, the pack animals are already there with you,

each ready to carry 60 to 70 pounds of meat.

Baumeister bones out his downed elk, cools the meat, and puts it in plastic buckets that fit inside the llamas' panniers, measuring the weight with a luggage scale to make sure the load is balanced. The process takes about an hour. "It's surgical," he says. "It's quick, it's clean, and you're in and out."

Gunshots don't spook his llamas, and their unique feet—a sort of cross between a goat's hooves and a dog's paws—make them incredibly agile.

There are drawbacks. You can't ride a llama, they can be expensive to purchase, and finding the right animals isn't always easy.

If you're in the llama market, Baumeister advises looking for breeds made for packing, not guarding livestock. Also, you'll need more than one. Solitary llamas, he says, can actually die of loneliness.

At a cost of \$800 to \$1,200 apiece, putting together a string of pack llamas can take a chunk out of the budget.

But, as Baumeister says, they'll let you go farther, hunt later in the day, and bring more comforts to camp. His string of five animals once hauled all the gear for three hunters into the backcountry. Then the llamas packed out the meat from two cow elk. The hunters had to carry most of their camping gear on the way out. But at least it was downhill and the gear weighed a lot less than the meat.

#### PACK GOATS

Another option for hauling elk out of the backcountry is goats. Though little known in this country, goats have been hauling gear in Asia for centuries. A 200-pound goat can carry 30 to 50 pounds and, like llamas, they'll eat about anything and can go two or three days without water. A half-dozen can easily transport a disassembled elk carcass.

Pack goats are drawing enthusiasts in parts of the West. High Uinta Pack Goats, an Evanston, Wyoming, company, is one of them. "They can travel over a wide variety of terrain, including packed snow, downed logs, and rock," says owner Clay Zimmerman. "Short of climbing a cliff, if you can get there, so can your goats. Probably with a silly face watching you catch up."

If properly trained from infancy, they also bond well with people and offer about a



**HUNTING BUDDIES** Top left and right: Llamas can carry 60 to 70 pounds of meat each. The docile animals need little water and can eat most anything. Bottom left and right: Packing with goats. Clay Zimmerman, owner of High Uinta Pack Goats in Wyoming, says goats provide an almost unfair advantage for hunters. "They mask scent and, when you hunt with them, elk and deer don't really recognize you as a human," he says.



#### GUTLESS FIELD DRESSING

After shooting an elk, most hunters still field-dress the carcass—cutting open the body cavity and removing entrails to lessen weight and cool the meat. But a growing number are doing "gutless" field dressing—removing the animal's skin and then cutting the meat off the bones in large chunks in the field. This method takes slightly longer than gutting and quartering an elk, but produces lighter loads. The meat, freed from heat-trapping bones, cools far more quickly. An added bonus: Because you don't need to open the smelly body cavity, gutless field dressing greatly reduces grizzly-attracting scent at the kill site. Dozens of instructional videos are on YouTube under the heading "gutless field dressing." ■

decade of productive work. But Zimmerman cautions that you need to spend at least a few minutes every day with your goats and prepare to spend some money. A fully trained pack goat costs up to \$600, and you need at least two, since they are herd animals. Keeping the goat will cost between \$30 and \$60 monthly.

Great Falls hunter Aaron Turner told the *Great Falls Tribune* last year that his goats, which weigh about 200 pounds, can each carry 60 or 70 pounds for a few miles. He uses wethers (castrated males), but some people use does (females) so they can have fresh milk in the backcountry.

Goats don't require much space, but you will need stout, tall fencing to keep your animals at home. Goats are prodigious climbers and good jumpers.

Plus, they're friendly. You can even use one for a pillow once you get to camp.

#### OTHER OPTIONS

Game carts have been around for decades and are popular, particularly with elk hunters who cover a lot of open country. But their value erodes quickly if you're moving meat across a sidehill or up a steep slope. And if you need to traverse downed timber, forget about it.

One innovation is called the Honey Badger Wheel. Designed by a Utah bicycle manufacturer, it resembles a freight-hauling unicycle that you steer from behind with hand grips, like a rototiller. Prices start at \$500 and go up from there. Accessories let you haul children, adults with disabilities, or a brace of loaded coolers to a beach party. Designers say the Honey Badger Wheel can haul 250 pounds. Another is Neet Kart, which



**HANDMADE HAULER** Not all transport devices need to be fancy or even store bought. You can fashion a sled out of tree branches and rope.

has two in-line wheels and handles in the front and back for one- or two-person use.

Note that all wheeled vehicles, even game carts, are banned in wilderness areas.

Plastic toboggans or snow disks are

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**"I tell people there's always a bit of work involved."**  
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lightweight and inexpensive devices that can haul a lot of meat, especially when there's snow on the ground. (Don't forget to bring lightweight rope or straps to keep your load in the sled.) But carrying a plastic sled while hunting can be noisy or awkward in brush or high winds. Several companies make roll-up sleds—basically a thick sheet

of flexible plastic—you can put into or strap onto your hunting pack.

Packing out bone-in or deboned quarters is a time-honored but grueling method. Fortunately, you can lessen the strain on your body. First, get the right gear, says Bozeman hunter Randy Newberg. Newberg has grunted a lot of meat out of the backcountry, much of that documented in his popular television shows, podcasts, and YouTube videos that focus on public lands hunting. Invest in some trekking poles, he says. "They're just like having four-wheel drive," and you'll avoid wear and tear on your knees and ankles.

A good pack is important, too. Newberg advises buying one with a built-in load shelf, a waist belt that transfers weight to your hips, and lots of straps to secure the load close to your body and keep it from wobbling as you traverse tough terrain. "One that's sized and adjusted to your body makes a world of difference," he says.

Don't be afraid of walking extra miles. It's easier to put in more trips with lighter loads, Newberg says, and a straight line isn't always the best route to the truck. If making it to a trail adds a half mile to your trek, it's worth the extra steps just to avoid clambering through deadfall or sidehilling. Your body will thank you later.

Whatever your preferred method, moving meat out of the backcountry requires effort. Pack animals are a year-round commitment. Carts don't work everywhere. And the human back has its limits. Particularly with elk hunting, "I tell people there's always a bit of work involved," Newberg says.

Fortunately, hunters across the West continue to find new ways to lessen the load. 🐾



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: STEVEN GABRIEL/IGNIA; LIS/SHORE BULLARD; DONALD M. JONES; BRANDON KESLING; RICK CLARK; MARC PERCE; IMAGES ON THE WILDSIDE

**MEAT MOVERS** Top left: Wheeled game carts are popular for hauling animals back to the vehicle. They are especially handy for flat terrain. Top right: In-line carts are more expensive but allow hunters to traverse small downed timber and sidehills. Above left: Plastic kids' sleds and saucers work especially well in snow. Some versions can be rolled up and tied to a pack. Above right: Hauling meat on your back is easier with a quality pack.



#### THOSE LAST TWO FEET

Last year's elk hunt left me with a dilemma. Hunting alone, I dropped a mature cow elk on private land, gutted it, then hustled to my pickup, a mile or so away. I backed right up to the carcass, got out, and had to scratch my head for a while. The elk was on the ground. The tailgate was about two feet high. Those two feet might as well have been 200 feet.

The ground was flat, so I couldn't drag the animal to a rise and roll it into the pickup. There was no wood around to make a ramp. My buddy Vince can crouch on the ground and do a pretty good impersonation of a hydraulic jack with an elk on his back. But he was fishing in Alaska.

The temperature was above 60 degrees F., there wasn't a shred of

shade, and flies were on the way. I had to get that animal off the ground. So I started skinning and carving. I set up a stout tote box to use as a step, enabling two short lifts instead of one long one, and was able to hoist the animal into the truck in several big chunks. The front quarters were easy, the torso and neck were hard, and the hindquarters were a real grunt.

The job took more than an hour and it made a mess of me. By the time I finished, I was sore, thirsty, and covered in blood.

There's got to be a better way, I told myself. And this has to be a common problem, especially with Montana's new shoulder seasons directing more elk hunters to private land, where they're more likely to be able to drive to a carcass, only to face the problem of the last two feet.

So I took the approach common to perplexed folks in the modern era:

I logged onto YouTube, seeking instruction and advice.

Here's what I learned: First, bring a ramp. It doesn't have to be fancy. Some old planks and plywood will work fine. But even with a ramp you can't shove a mature elk into the truck by yourself. So also bring a winch. An electric one mounted on a roll bar works really slick, but it's not an option if your truck, like mine, has a topper. The best idea I found uses a hand-cranked boat winch anchored to the pickup bed's inner side rails, in the corners up by the cab.

A pulley system can ease the chore as well, if you have stout ropes and the pulley has a locking mechanism. That way, you can shove or tug the animal up the ramp inch by inch, and the locking pulley will hold it there while you catch your breath, waiting for the strength to shove some more. ■