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FW: FW: Record Elk Found Pinned Alive With Antlers Stuck in Mud

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Be sure to scroll ALL the way down...lotsa photos and more to the story.

When Ryan Muirhead set out to fill his whitetail tag on the final day of Minnesota's muzzleloader season, he never imagined he would stumble upon a huge 9 x 10 elk with antlers that may rewrite the record books. The way he found the animal is even more extraordinary...it was pinned flat on its back with its antlers stuck in the mud. Steve Hill talked to Muirhead and got the amazing story of this record-book elk, how he freed it and got to keep the trophy rack.



Ryan Muirhead set out on the morning of December 12 with hopes of filling his whitetail tag on the final day of Minnesota's muzzleloader season. What he found instead--a huge 9 x 10 elk pinned flat on its back, alive, with its massive antlers stuck in the mud. Muirhead was able to free the animal, though it died from the ordeal two days later. Click through to find out how he was able to claim a trophy from this tragic freak occurrence that should rewrite the record books for Minnesota and the world.



The rack green-scored 475 5/8 gross, with a net of 456 4/8 on the Boone & Crockett scale. An updated score will be forthcoming after the 60-day drying period, and a special judging panel convening in 2013 would need to weigh in before anything becomes official. But based on the green score alone, the elk ranks as the third largest nontypical in the world and the largest ever in Minnesota.

The Boone & Crockett world record nontypical elk, a 9 x 14 taken in 2008 on public land in Utah, scored 478 5/8 with a gross of 499 3/8. The current no. 2 scored 465 2/8 and the current no. 3 scored 450 6/8.



How Muirhead eventually came to have the antlers in his possession--after a failed rescue attempt and an investigation by the Minnesota DNR--is a tale worthy of Wild Kingdom. Or Ripley's Believe It or Not. Muirhead and a couple of buddies were on state land in northern Minnesota's Kittson County when they spotted the elk. "We were planning to go out for the morning watch, but it was just too cold at 25 below," he recalls. "We decided to drive around and see if anything was moving."



Rounding a bend in a gravel road, they encountered an odd sight: About 30 yards from their truck, 8 yards beyond a barbed wire fence, a bull elk lay kicking in the snow. “He was on his back, chest heaving, steam pouring from his nose,” Muirhead recalls. “He’d been kicking for quite a while and he was worn out.” On closer examination they saw that the animal’s antlers appeared to be embedded in the muddy ground, pinning its head to the snow. “He’d stuck himself like turtle upside down. No way he was moving.”



“We just sat there for a while trying to think what to do,” Muirhead says. “We were in awe.”

They eventually decided that something needed to be done to help the animal. “He was an old bull and he wasn’t going to live forever, but you don’t want to see him die like that if you can help him.”



The men sought help from a local rancher, who supplied a two-by-four, which they used as a lever to pry the rack from the ground.



“It took a few minutes, but we finally got him three-quarters of the way turned and he flopped over and staggered off. You could see by the holes in the ground how his antlers had been dug down in the mud 8 to 10 inches.”



The bull didn't go far. "His legs were like Jello," Muirhead says. "He kind of staggered to the fence and fell down. We all backed off and let him be. His back leg was bloody where he'd been kicking his antler, his chest was heaving. You could tell was worn out and not happy that people were close to him."



After resting a few minutes, the bull stood and began walking toward the woods. "He kind of turned and looked back at everybody," Muirhead recalls. "I don't know if it was a 'thank you' or what it was. Then he made his way into the woods, and it was pure quiet; you couldn't even hear him moving he was so quiet. We stood and watched him disappear. At that point we're just in awe."



Muirhead still had the evening deer hunt ahead, but he couldn't get the bull out of his mind. "I just had to go back; I knew he wasn't going to make it far." On Tuesday, December 14, Muirhead returned to the site with his wife, Josie. They found the bull 600 yards back in the woods.

"He was hunkered down in the willows, and we got within 40 yards before he picked his head up and looked at us. He didn't try to run. He was coughing, wheezing. He probably had pneumonia from being on his back that long in the cold. You could see where he'd dragged himself 25 yards through the snow to get back in the willows. At that point I knew he was done."



Since the bull was on state land, Muirhead knew his best chance of claiming the rack was to be there when the animal died. He took Josie home and returned. Over the next six hours he watched the elk from a distance, returning now and then to the truck to warm up.

"It was sad to see a wild animal like that not be able to get up and run and do what he wanted to do. He'd pick up his head every now and then, but he could barely lift that rack. And finally he just stopped picking up his head. To stand there and watch him die, it was tough. It's tough to see."



Muirhead contacted the Minnesota DNR, and conservation officer Ben Huener took the carcass into Roseau for a necropsy. After skinning the elk, investigators found puncture marks in the skin caused by a broken rib and by drop tines that were pinned against its back while it lay upside down.

“Being on its back for a couple of hours doesn’t work well with a large animal,” Huener says. “I really can’t imagine there would have been much to do for the animal. I’m guessing the initial impact of falling on its back pretty much did it in.”



DNR biologists removed a tooth for aging, but results are pending. Huener says estimates put the bull at “8 to 10 years plus,” which he notes is far older than most bull elk in the wild. “The animal was on its way down; it wasn’t as big as some of the other bulls, though obviously it carried more mass on its head than some of the animals.”



Interestingly, the bull was found in an area where elk hunting is prohibited. “This is the only way this could have happened legally,” Huener says.

He praised how Muirhead handled the situation. “Calling the DNR was the right thing, because this was the only way he could possess the animal legally. Now he can have it mounted with pride and have all the proper paperwork.”



No one has explained how the big bull came to find himself pinned on his back, undone by his own majestic antlers.

A local landowner had spotted the herd on the move about 2 ½ hours before Muirhead and his buddies found it anchored in mud—he believes the herd was headed to bed when they crossed the road and jumped the fence. “I imagine the whole herd was coming off the field, and he jumped the fence, tripped and somehow flipped upside down and stuck himself,” Muirhead says. “A freak accident. But nobody really knows for sure.”



“You can say it’s just nature, it was his time to die. But nature didn’t put that barbed wire fence there,” he says. “From beginning to end I think everybody’s feelings were the same: Get his animal rolled over and give him a chance, see what happens. You want to see him make it, you really do.”

Adds Huener, “There’s something about a big bull in need of a hand, and everyone got together. It’s kind of cool.”

Now the rack will hang under Muirhead’s 22-foot cathedral ceiling, in a spot that has begged for an elk mount since the day he moved in. He has his mount—and a hell of a story to go with it.