



*By Andre Desrosiers, Manitoba NRO*

# HUNTING THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGHS

The Hancocks wake up to this view every day.

## **IT'S RAINED EVERY DAY SINCE JULY 4!" stated Laurie Hancock.**

Not exactly the words I wanted to hear. Hunting in the rain is never a good experience but you can't do anything about the weather. Plus we'd driven 1,200 miles and weren't going to let a little rain stop us from Colorado elk and the Rocky Mountains. This was August 24, 2006 and my son Serge was on a Colorado archery elk hunt. I was the driving, hunting and camping "helper." Later in the day, Randy Hancock took us to the local archery range where we threw some arrows at the many fake "critters" spread around the course. The day ended with grocery shopping, rounding up Randy's horses, and test packing "paniers." But I guess I'm getting a little ahead myself...

Years ago Randy Hancock asked me, "When are you coming to Colorado to hunt elk?" I could only roll my eyes as I felt that such a trip was way out of reach for a Manitoba flatlander on a game warden's salary. Randy kept up the pressure though as every time we'd see each other, he'd repeat the question. My answer was also repetitive.

Thanks to NAWEOA and the Rapid City, South Dakota conference in 1993, our families had become the best of friends. Our children (mostly young

adults now) feel at home in either household, share common interests and communicate with each other regularly. To some degree some or all members of both families have been able to socialize together in relation to the Halifax (1994), Saskatoon (1996), Colorado Springs (1997), Omaha (2001), St. John's (2003) and Winnipeg (2004) conferences.

I had fallen in love with Colorado back in 1997 when my family attended the NAWEOA conference in Colorado Springs. Following the conference, we spent several days at the Hancock Hacienda. We fished for brook trout in a remote mountain lake. We went on a horseback ride into the Rockies. We white water rafted the Arkansas River. We were in awe of the spectacular scenery visible from every window of Randy and Laurie's house. I was captivated and knew that I would return someday.

Randy's son, Fletcher and my son Serge are the same age. While they live 1,200 miles apart, they share many interests. As such, I suggested to Randy that as added incentive for the boys to give their best effort in high school perhaps we could dangle an archery elk hunt carrot in front of them. Randy agreed and the boys were all over it too.

Serge's name was entered into the Colorado licence draw system three years ago to guarantee a draw for the fall of 2006. As planned, his name was drawn and August 23, 2006 was identified as our departure date from Winnipeg. Unfortunately, Fletcher's college term had begun already so he would be unable to hunt with us.

Friday morning found us headed for the San Isabel National Forest Wilderness Zone. The horses were trailered part way then off loaded and walked behind our trucks until we reached the end of the road on top of a nameless mountain. Randy did a masterful job of instructing us on how to load paniers on horses. I wasn't much of a horse person but I knew that I should be nice to them as they were carrying all of our hunting and camping gear. "Spirit" and I got to know each other really well on the mile hike down, up and back down to our camp site. I knew what to expect in terms of thin air at higher elevations so I did pace myself as much as a flatlander walking up and down a mountain "leading" a pack horse could.

The second challenge was finding a flat piece of ground to set up tents; places where a guy wouldn't find himself squished against the low side of the tent after a night of tossing and turning.



**Andre and Serge Desrosiers leave behind a bit of Canada in the mountains of Colorado**

Then Randy suggested that we “hike” another three to four hundred yards to see something. He led us through the pines to the opening of the mountain bowl that we would be hunting. In the distance, we could clearly see approximately a dozen elk in groups of three or four feeding through old logging areas. Randy stated that Serge and I needed to be over there before legal shooting time the next day (opening day). Things were looking mighty good, except for the weather of course which was still intermittent showers.

As we headed back to set up camp, Serge said, “You know what we forgot?” This is a game that is played between every child and parent so I bit, “What?” He answered, “The bows, we left them in the truck.” It could've been worse; we could've left them back at the house.

The thing that made the most sense was me walking back to the truck to retrieve the bows while Serge and Randy began setting up camp. Thanks to my GPS I did the walk and returned with bows. Randy bid us farewell and left with the horses. Excitement superseded fatigue as I ventured back to the mountain bowl with a camera to see if I could catch some elk on film.

An early bed time led to an early

wake up. The tapping of raindrops drowned out the sound of the 04:30 alarm; followed by the 05:30 alarm, the 06:30 alarm and so on. We finally rolled out of bed at the crack of 09:30.

It was too late to follow the previous day's plan so we still hunted elk trails, stopping every once in a while to “cow chirp.” From an open hill side we could see three elk slowly make their way to a bedding area, eating as they went. We decided to try to beat them to the bedding area. Unfortunately three elk in prime physical condition can still move faster than two prairie boys in the mountains. In short, they beat us by about five minutes. All we saw were patches of brown and tan running away.

Disappointed, we followed a well utilized game trail approximately 100 yards to a meadow. Serge froze and whispered, “There's an elk looking at me.” We stayed still for approximately five minutes as several elk fed within 30 yards of us. Suddenly, a slight wind switch sent six or seven cows and calves running in the opposite direction. Any hunter knows that scaring game out of their bedding areas is not good and I feared that this would set the stage for a tougher hunt.

We headed back to camp as Randy

and Fletcher were set to arrive for a visit. Along with the Hancocks, we took the customary, “Look who's reading IGW” photograph.

Serge and I hiked back up to the north end of the bowl and set up a hunting blind within bow distance of a heavily utilized elk trail. Within an hour of setting up and after a couple of cow chirps, Serge pointed to an elk that was coming down the trail. It was a young cow...perfect for the pot. While Serge preferred to take a bull if given the opportunity, he would stick a cow if the shot was right. Critters have different ideas than hunters so we watched patiently as the elk munched away on grasses, oblivious to the two men in camouflage hidden under the pine and spruce trees. She started to wander off so I chirped again. She came back to the trail and peered around for the source of the chirp. Unfortunately she did not come any closer and eventually wandered off back in the bush.

Before heading back to camp, I stepped off the distance between Serge and the elk. The closest that it had gotten was 48 short-legged prairie boy steps or approximately 47 - 50 yards; the maximum distance that Serge would shoot an arrow and only if the exact distance was known. Without the



**Above: Wishful thinking action shot**

**Right: Serge Desrosier, son of Manitoba NRO Andre Desrosier and Randy Hancock, Colorado Game Warden, in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado**

knowledge of the exact distance, Serge made an excellent decision to NOT shoot an arrow at that elk.

The next morning (Sunday) was a little better but still with intermittent showers. We did the still hunting thing again as spotting and stalking did not produce any elk. Scouting the area and generally soaking in the awesome beauty of the country sufficed as our objectives of the day. No elk for the pot today either.

Every night seemed to get colder than the last so extra layers were added, including the hood of our "hoodies."

Monday morning dawned clear, cold and quiet. We still hunted the area south of our camp, stopping to chirp and bugle every quarter mile or so. No responses of any kind.

The early afternoon found us above tree line so we called my wife Rachelle from Serge's cell phone. Rachelle was busy at school and we were put on hold while the secretary tracked her down. Technology helped us touch base from a mountain top 1,200 miles from home. I don't care who you are, that's neat! Building an "Inukshuk" (Inuit type of rock structure), the customary afternoon nap and more scouting took up the rest of the afternoon.

Randy's pre-hunt information included an area where three bulls had



been observed therefore we slowly approached the area down wind and stayed in the shadows of standing timber.

Once again, an elk saw or heard us before we could see it as the sound of hooves hitting the ground just ahead of us dissipated with distance. Moments later a cow was seen running away and literally heading for higher ground. We watched her climb above tree line and disappear over the ridge and presumably into another range. Although we continued to still hunt then chirp and bugle in ambush areas, we were skunked again. The walk back to camp took one hour and 20 minutes of steady walking, almost entirely down hill too.

Another perfect morning greeted us on Tuesday. Sitting and spotting failed to find elk so we began another still hunt, to the northwest this time. At one point, I spotted elk in the same general

area as the cow seen the day before. It was approximately three miles and virtually up hill all the way. Therefore, by the time that we would have arrived at the elk location, they would have wandered off in unknown directions and we would then have to find them. We remembered the previous day's walk back to camp and decided that chasing down those elk was not in our best interests. The rest of this day was spent admiring the country, still hunting and taking photographs.

Our last morning was perfect again. We still hunted up the drainage to the south. Same results as the other mornings. Absolutely perfect calling conditions but not a chirp or bugle could be heard, other than ours. Randy arrived as

we finished up a lunch snack. We tore down our camp, packed the horses and began the climb back up to the truck.

Upon returning to the Hancocks, we peeled off the camo clothes and cleaned several days of hunting dirt from ourselves. Laurie prepared a terrific dinner of what else? Elk!

Serge and I really can't thank Randy, Laurie, Lindsey, Fletcher and Diana enough for their friendship and hospitality. We are incredibly fortunate that such a bond was forged 13 years ago in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Despite the absence of a hunted elk, we had an overwhelming feeling of satisfaction as we left our Colorado friends on Thursday August 31. John Denver's Rocky Mountain High is indelibly stuck in my head.☺

***Andre Desrosiers is a Natural Resource Officer stationed in Selkirk, Manitoba. He's been a Game Warden and active member NAWEOA for 18 years. He's been married to Rachelle for 26 years. Together they have a daughter Janelle and son Serge. All of whom have attended multiple NAWEOA conferences and are also friends of NAWEOA. Serge is currently enrolled in the Conservation Enforcement program at Lethbridge Community College in Alberta. Andre invites officers to contact him if they wish to fish and/or hunt in the Channel Catfish and Canada Goose Mecca of North America.***