Lottery Winner

Nebraska Soldier bags trophy elk on first try after earning rare big game state permit

Photo courtesy of Spc. Gary Redden

What A Trophy: Spc. Gary Redden poses with a trophy elk he took in the Niobrara River Unit. Redden, of Wayne, Neb., shot the elk after he won a hunting license lottery on his first try this year. The bagged elk was the result of months of scouting and coordination with land owners in the north central part of Nebraska.

By David Nore
Public Information Officer

Gary Redden admits it's been quite a year.

He recently became the first Nebraska hunter to win a big game permit in his first try at a state lottery. He then followed that up by bagging a world class elk.

"It's quite a story," the lifelong hunter said recently as he recalled the application process he went through — a process that began during a blizzard last February.

"I was substitute teaching at Winnebago, Neb., because I had just got back from basic and (advanced individual training)… I had to fill in my time before the next school year started, so I started substitute teaching," said Redden, a specialist assigned to the 189th Transportation Company, based in Norfolk and Wayne, Neb. Redden had previously taught for four years in the Wayne school system.

"So, during the big February storm me and two teaching colleagues thought we could make it back to Wayne on gravel roads — you know, a four-wheel drive truck — typical guy thinking, right?"

Winter Fortunes

After dropping off the female teacher, Redden and his friend soon saw a stalled vehicle as the drove up a snow-crusted hill. Stopping to pick up the stranded motorist, they then proceeded down the hill.

Soon, they too became stranded when their truck slipped off the icy gravel road.

"We had to call the husband of the lady that we had just previously dropped off a mile back," he said. "He couldn't get us out."

So in typical rural Nebraska fashion, the blizzard found Redden and his colleague staying over at the rural farm house with time on their hands. That soon led to an evening conversation about hunting with the generous Nebraska family while waiting out the storm.

Redden grew up in South Dakota hunting and fishing with his father, but he has a special penchant for game hunting.

"I grew up in the Pierre area; my dad hunted a little bit and fell away from it, so I started to get together with friends and their dads to hunt," he said. "My dad liked to fish – we fished all the time – but I took more of the hunting aspect and from there hunted ducks, geese, pheasants and deer and about anything you can imagine in South Dakota."

Talking through the long wintery night, the farm family soon told Redden that they knew someone who had hunted in western Nebraska who had got a "nice" elk. They gave Redden the friend's phone number.

"I happened to just keep that phone number and gave the gentleman a call a week or two later," Redden said. "He said go ahead and apply for (a permit) and if you get one I will help you."

"I didn't tell my wife, but I applied for a first-time application and the unit (Niobrara River unit) I was in, this was only the third year for applications," he said. "I don't check my e-mail regularly, so I didn't know the draw status of the elk tag."

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"We were over at my father-in-laws for Easter and I checked the draw status on the computer and it says 'Awarded.' And a week before that my wife says 'How come there is a $150 transaction taken out of our account and it says Game and Parks?'"

Redden finally told his wife about his application for the game tag. His mind then began to race.

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I got the elk tag.' My father-in-law laughed about that. It was only one of four bull elk tags for that unit," he said.

In fact, according to Game and Parks information, the Niobrara River unit has the smallest number allowed elk tags for big game in Nebraska. The overall success rate for elk tags hovers around 33 percent statewide, so Redden knew he was fighting an uphill battle.

After confirming with Game and Parks that he'd won the lottery, Redden said he couldn't believe his luck. "I just started jumping up and down," he said. "Thank goodness there wasn't anyone in my house because I started screaming and hollering, they would have thought I was crazy."

Redden then called the person who had offered assistance months earlier.

He, too, couldn't believe Redden's luck since many hunters had tried for years to win the coveted big game permit.

"I had my contact – and when I say contact, I mean the guy that helped me hunt. You know how it is with hunting, you know a buddy that knows a buddy that can help or knows something. He said he knew somebody over in the Cody-Kilgore area and he would be willing to give him a call," he said.

Preparations

Redden soon began his pre-hunt preparations, hoping that they would lead to the successful filling of the elk tag.

"I went out in June, July and August to meet the gentleman that my buddy hooked me up with and met a couple of land owners and got to know them so they could see my face and get to know me. You know, ask for permission if we needed and kept in touch with them," he said.

"One land owner took me out on his ground and said 'Here is my ground and you are more than welcome to hunt on my ground', things like that."

Redden wanted to hunt in the correct fashion.

'I wanted to do this the right way, not just be one of those guys that shows up on a Saturday morning and says 'Oh, I'm here to go elk hunting, do you care if I shoot an elk on your land?'" he said.

"It is a big honor to hunt. I don't care if you are hunting pheasants or turkey or what, I don't have ground like that so you have to do it the right way. You know you don't have to develop a friendship, but, what I want to say is develop a trust."

During the pre-hunt stage, Redden would typically drive out to the grounds at 2 a.m. and scout to find tracks and signs. Still, he knew there was only so much he could accomplish.

"Scouting in the summer and scouting during the breeding season is totally different because there is so much rut activity," he said. "There aren't mountains out there, but lots of canyons.

Finally it was time to hunt.

Elusive Target

"Day one we sat and called, but nothing big came by. Day two and three, we were near a water tank because we saw tracks around that earlier and nothing," he said.

At this point the wait was beginning to wear on Redden because he only had one week from school during a 30 day elk season to bag his game.

The fourth day was different. As Redden and his companion went back to their original spot they soon found elk signs. The two were dumbfounded.

"We were up high and guess where the elk were?" he said, "They were down low."

"It was just like turkey hunting. They (elk) give a little bugle, like with a turkey's gobble in the distance. We were walking and heard that bugle and thought it must have been a hawk scream."

After walking through the rugged terrain for about five more minutes, they heard the bugle again.

"We heard that second bugle and we stopped and turned and said 'That was a bugle.' We turned around and I was running faster than the fastest sprint runner in the world."

Closing to within 500 yards of the elk, Redden bugled toward the game, which quickly returned the horn-like sound. "Then we carefully closed the distance, trying to sneak up on them and came upon this little open patch by some trees," he said. "I bugled and he bugled back, so I thought he would walk out of the trees."

Redden knew he was close to his lifelong dream.

"We just sat there 10 or 15 minutes and nothing was happening," he said.

Redden knew the rule of thumb: don't walk into the trees with elk because they will run, and not like a deer, which will run 100 yards and then stop and turn around to see what is going on. Instead, elk run for 10 minutes or until they are long gone and safe.

Redden told his partner he couldn't go into the trees, but his buddy urged him on.

"My best description to him of what it would be like was like Elmer Fudd going after Bugs Bunny," he said. "But, I decided to go into the trees after all… sure enough a satellite bull (small bull) and a couple of cows see me and they take off running just like that.

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>
> ***— Spc. Gary Redden***

After saying a few choice words, Redden took off after the animals.

"All of a sudden I see these other elk out in the field," he said. "Mind you, this is where I had hunted three days before without seeing anything and here are 40 elk out in this pasture."

Redden quickly made his final preparations.

"They are about 180 yards, I ranged them and I am trying to find which one to shoot, like 'Where is he at?'" Redden recalled. "All of a sudden I saw the rack moving; he was kind of shaking his rack around trying to get his hair back together… so I kept back in the trees about 10 yards just to keep my concealment and they kept looking, but they couldn't see me."

"I had my shot, I took my shot and he dropped with one shot," Redden said.

Waiting for a few minutes, Redden then moved slowly toward the fallen elk. It was dead.

Redden had just shot the biggest trophy of his life and one of the biggest big game trophies on record in Nebraska.

"I guess I didn't jump up and down or anything, I just sat there and said thank you… with a grin from ear to ear" he said.

"I called my wife," said Redden. "You have to understand I thought I was just going to shoot a typical elk. I didn't think I was going to shoot a nice 341 class elk. She knew from the tone of my voice I got a good one."

"I told her that I got a good one alright. I asked her where I could hang it and she said jokingly 'in the garage.'"

One For the Records

The Boone and Crockett North American Big Game scoring system is a method to rate big game as trophy animals. Redden's green score (or first field score) placed this animal in the 341 point range.

"With a rifle… anything over 350 is considered a trophy, but rule of thumb anything over 300 is considered a trophy," he said. "We green scored him at 341 and three-eighths."

"After 60 days of drying time I can have him measured officially, but when I go out there in May to pick him up I will have the Nebraska Game Fish and Parks score him. We figured he will be a non-typical because of the six points on one side and seven points on the other side" said Redden.

"That doesn't matter to me. That is just a little character as far as I am concerned. We think he may come out to be around 334 after drying."

The elk has been measured at 51 inches on the right and 50 on the left, "and we think he is around 45 inches wide," he said.

Later in Kilgore, Neb., Redden was icing down the animal's chest cavity when a man saw him on the street. Redden quickly recognized him as the landowner of the ground he had hunted.

The owner told Redden he didn't think an elk would be shot on his land.

"I got a couple of pictures with him and sent the photos of him and the elk with a big thank you card a couple of weeks later," Redden said, adding that he also sent cards to the people who originally helped him during the snow blizzard.

"I will definitely send him some elk meat when it is ready" he said. "It takes a lot of people to make something like this successful."

Redden admits Molly, his wife of seven years, is a good sport about the whole hunting process. She even has mentioned they could maybe add a family room onto the house to mount the monstrous elk trophy.

His three children, Sydney, 5, Gavin, 3, and Mallory, 1, watch the hunting channel with him; Sydney is already asking for a pink BB gun he admits.

Redden said he plans to host a party when he gets the elk back from the taxidermist in May. He also placed much of the credit on those who helped him in the hunt.

"I met some new friends now and hopefully I can help them out someday also," he said. "That is the great thing about this, besides shooting a beautiful trophy."

When asked if he would try for another tag next year Redden said: "I believe the rules say I can apply for a cow tag for the next three years. Am I going to apply? No," he said with a chuckle. "I want to stay married."