

An Afternoon in Heaven

By
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It was a Thursday in late September and I had nothing to do... I had been to the westernmost incorporated town in the continental United States, Forks, Washington for a timber sale at the Department of Natural Resources offices there. My purpose was to bid on two timber salvage sales I was interested in. The first quickly went beyond what I was willing to pay, so I let it go and waited on the second one. As luck would have it, the first one up was of much less interest to me than the second one, so, I was at least curious as to what would happen.

What happened was that the person who bought the first sale had left, so I was all alone when the sale was announced and I got it for opening bid... something that does not happen often, but is surely nice when it does. I was prepared to pay well for this sale because, not only was it an area of blown down timber that had been thinned a few years prior, opening it to the machinations of the winds as is what generally happens with thinnings in this timber, but beneath it was a substantial amount of ancient western red cedar to be salvaged as well. Somehow, the shake mill buyers must have missed this fact, which did not hurt my feelings in the least.

Leaving the DNR office while being completely ecstatic with what had transpired, I wondered what I should do to celebrate my good fortune. Since it was almost noon, I headed for the Antlers restaurant on Main Street with the idea of putting away a rare rib steak in celebration. Although I was not fond of eating alone in



a restaurant, I was not averse to the idea entirely, but that all changed when I ran into Craig Fletcher and his Truck Boss just heading to the same place. Craig and his uncle, Rocky, ran a big logging company here and was the president of the Olympic Chapter of the Washington Contract Loggers Association. I knew him better through this agency than from his logging company because he concentrated in this far western corner of the state and my area was on the very northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula... I worked just about as far north as one could go in Washington without my hat floating! We enjoyed a fine lunch together when I made my farewells and headed out of town.

I was not expected back on my logging site today and I had enough timber on the ground to last for at least four more days, so I determined to take some time to myself and indulge in one of my favorite activities when given the time... I would head west from Forks toward the reservation at La Push, then turn north on the Rayonier Mainline into the Dickey River country. I had an idea developing in my mind... it was still a bit early for the elk to begin bugling, but not by much and there may be one who hadn't read the paper on it and might start early, but, for sure, there would be deer out and perhaps a bear or two as well... What I would do was to find a 8 to 12 year old logging unit here where the reprod timber was not thick enough to entirely block off access to the ground. I would drive as close to the landing that logged it as I possibly could then find a place to perch and just watch what happened.



I had a spot in mind... one I'd discovered while elk hunting in this area the year prior. It had everything I needed for my afternoon of adventure. I could drive within a hundred yards of the landing before the trees growing in the road got too large to get around, through or over and the landing was at the end of the world at this level. It dropped off from its edge into a deep creek bed, affording a fantastic view for at least a half mile across this basin. In addition, there was a very conveniently located pile of logging slash that had escaped the drip torch and was just sitting there, approximately twenty feet high, on the edge of the drop off into the basin, affording the best possible vantage point.

Less than an hour after leaving Craig in town, I was perched atop that conveniently located



pile of trash and had my two pairs of binoculars hung from my neck and was using first the 8 power glasses to scan the area, then the 12 power glasses for a closer look at whatever had caught my interest in the lower powered glasses... and they were many... I had located several deer feeding on the brushes between the rapidly growing fir, hemlock and cedar in the old cutting unit. Among the fourteen or so deer I

found, three were very nice bucks and one was exceptional. He would easily have weighed over 230 pounds on the hoof, which was, for a Columbian Blacktail, a huge deer! It is very

seldom a mature buck will exceed 130 to 140 pounds. As these fellows were paying no attention to the does in the area, it was quite obvious the rut was still in the future.

It was a sunny day... something to be treasured in this land of over 220 inches of rain per year, especially deep in September as we were. I was most content sitting in my wooden throne surveying my domain from aloft. This was, after all, nearly Nirvana for me to be able to sit and watch nature do her thing...

The deer were seemingly unconcerned with anything in their domain and, although I had not yet seen an elk, I felt that this was imminent as well. I had had but a glimpse of a good sized black bear earlier, but he had gone into a thick patch and had not yet emerged. I was on the lookout for him when I saw one group of four does with five fawns among them suddenly come to full alert. Their ears had come to rigid attention and all 18 eyes were riveted on the same spot in the brushy bottom... Try as I might, I could not find anything that might be causing their distress when, all of a sudden, I saw two ears rise above a clump of fern and immediately recognized the outline of a coyote! Immediate, two does ran towards the small predator and he turned to run... or rather, THEY turned to run as there were, in fact, two of them.

As fast as the brush and the terrain would allow, the two coyotes were retreating with those two does slowly gaining ground due to the fact that their longer legs allowed them better access in the brush and trees. The last I saw of them, the deer were still gaining as they disappeared from my sight as they neared the standing timber that created the border of the clear cut.

With them gone from sight, there was nothing more to gain by straining to see them, so I returned my search to the ground I could see and it was not long before I found that a blue grouse, my all-time favorite game bird had hopped up onto a downed, rotted log and was busily scratching and pecking at the wee critters that were providing him with an obviously good living. His kind were in season, and if he had been in range of the .22 High Standard 9-shot revolver I carried in my shoulder holster for just such contingencies, I might have been forced to bring him home for dinner... but then again, with all the enjoyment I was realizing from this outing, perhaps not... for the sound of a shot would certainly put an end to my dream day.



I was more than a bit surprised that I had not seen elk yet. In this area, it would be a remarkable thing to not at least see a small band feeding on the brushes in this large of an area. From where I had been perched for some three hours now, I could see two other landings across the no name creek below me. In the time I had been here, I had seen not

another person and I was, in fact, quite sure there had been no one here since last year's hunting season. In a phrase, there was simply nothing to draw them in the off season, so I had it all to myself... with no elk!

I continued my glassing of each area I could see, foot by square foot, I moved across the unit. I was painstaking in my effort to see everything there was to see while keeping those critters I had seen in mind and in sight. The deer.. including the larger bucks... the single bear that kept wandering in and out of view... even the grouse I had located atop an old downed log showed no great desire to leave. He was calmly feeding on huckleberries and other vegetation within his reach.

A motion caught my eye from one of the landings within my range of vision and I instantly swung my glasses to see what I could find... What I did see was magnificent. I had found my elk! There, bedded on that landing in some tall sword ferns was a herd... but not just the typical herd of cows, calves and immature bulls normally found at this time of year, but what was probably, likely even, a breeding herd because there, standing in



the midst of more than 40 cows was a magnificent bull! Perhaps he was not bugling yet, but he was certainly feeling the urge because his neck was fully swollen and he was ready to begin the breeding cycle. There might be a few more days left on the calendar, but this grand fellow had no need of our calendar... he had his own!! Evidently this herd had been bedded in the tall ferns and therefore unseen until they began to stand up to feed. This activity brought this magnificent herdmaster to his feet as well as he prepared to keep his harem in check.



I was in total awe of all that I had been allowed to be part of this late summer day but so thankful for the opportunity to be in God's creation and enjoy a part of what He provides. It was late now, and I was preparing to make my exit when the grouse began to chirp nervously and to kind of step anxiously in one direction, then the next... he was obviously distressed over something but I knew not what it was, but decided to wait a moment or two more so see what was up. I switched back to my 12X glasses and watched his area very closely. That it was some kind of predator, I was pretty sure, but I could not imagine just what it was... when, all at once, the ferns moved and a triangular face appeared with two of the darkest eyes imaginable shining forth and he was staring directly at that grouse. Yes, I know that all

God's creatures have to make a living, and it's a natural thing for weasels to kill and devour grouse... but not today... nothing was going to destroy this Idyll on my watch... So I stood up immediately so everyone in the biome suddenly knew I was there and what I was... and they ALL bolted for cover...

The elk were the least disturbed and simply watched me closely.. the deer moved away slowly, but the grouse took off like its tail feathers were on fire!!! This is the outcome I wanted... I wished than little summertime version of an ermine good hunting elsewhere and made my exit back toward my waiting truck. As I drove the two and a half hours back to my home near Sequim, WA, I thought about what I had done and seen this afternoon. I considered this to have been a nearly perfect outing and time well spent. The only thing I had not seen that I would have liked to have encountered was a Sasquatch. It happens to me often enough in this area that I have sort of come to expect it, but, that said, it still does not happen every time out. As it was, I had things to talk about over dinner tonight... and, as to that... who should I call? It's gonna be late when I get there... but I'll bet Sherri would be amenable... or Karen? Hmm...