

Straight Shooter

A Wyoming hunter fights for a West left wild

Tory Taylor says it's just the way he's put together, and can't explain beyond that, but he prefers looking at the world from horseback. It may have something to do with the easy way the day and distance unfold before him, how

crushed sage smells under hoof, or the intimacy he experiences with sun, snow, stars, and wind. Whatever it is, Taylor moves most often through the western landscape slowly, with care and attention, and at an elevation of 16 hands.

Raised in the shadow of Colorado's Pikes Peak, Taylor has always liked to be outdoors. As a youth he spent summers working on his grandparents' farm in the eastern part of the state. He raised chickens and turkeys for 4H, winning puffy blue ribbons for champion poultry two years running at the Colorado State Fair. Both prizes hang in Possum Lodge, the office/guest house I stay in the night before Taylor and I head into the wilderness for the beginning of elk-hunting season. The ribbons are accompanied by plaques he won as the 2000 Budweiser Outdoorsman of the Year and the Wyoming Wildlife Federation's Conservationist of the Year for 2001. The trophy wall maps the life of this quirky westerner—who's made a name for himself, and plenty of enemies, as both a hunter and an environmentalist.

When the young Taylor wasn't working he was riding and hunting near the farm or in the Rocky Mountains above his parents' home. On an outing with his father and brothers when he was 15, Taylor got his first elk. "I love to ride, hike, and hunt," says Taylor, who translated that passion into a profession as an outfitter in Wyoming, where he now lives and works.



Taylor can walk out his back door and into the Dubois badlands.

BY MARILYN BERLIN SNELL

Taylor's move toward Wyoming began in 1971. His number hadn't come up for the Vietnam draft, but college didn't suit him either. Like a character from a Cormac McCarthy novel (the unromantic, lamentatious ones), with his parents' blessing Taylor took two of the family horses and headed out alone. "I didn't know where I was going, exactly," says Taylor, now 52. "It took a month, just ambling along. I covered 500 miles, met people, and began to understand better how the land is put together." He ended up in

the upper Wind River valley near Dubois, Wyoming. A "gruff-acting rancher and wonderful character" was out on the range breaking a horse when he caught sight of the lone

rider. The rancher rode out to have a talk. “He saw a young guy looking for a life and wanted to help,” says Taylor of Jay Richardson, who died several years ago. “A couple of days at his place turned into weeks. He and his wife had a cow I milked, trying to earn my keep. He was also a logger and helped me get a job in the woods, working timber.”

During Interior secretary James Watt’s tenure in the 1980s, Taylor jumped to more lucrative work as a pumper, roughneck, and roustabout on Wyoming’s oil wells. It was the drill rigs, ironically, that provided the perfect forum for an environmental education. The areas where Taylor worked were “well roaded, well trashed,” he

says. But when Exxon proposed drilling an oil well in “pristine land, on top of a mountain that was critical habitat for bighorn sheep,” Taylor began attending meetings and writing letters of protest to politicians, the U.S. Forest Service, and local newspapers. Since the drilling project would entail building miles of road, power lines, and pipelines through public land, the Forest Service conducted an environmental-impact study, which recommended airlifting equipment to the mountaintop, an expensive endeavor. The oil company dropped its plans. “When I was protesting drilling in other areas of Wyoming, my boss knew about it and said one day, ‘You must really love those mountains.’ He could have fired me but he didn’t.”

Wyoming was a different place then, more tolerant, says Taylor. He remembers how ranchers and others weren’t afraid to take a stand when they saw something destructive going on. He refers to “Teddy Roosevelt types” like the Shoemaker family, who owned and operated the C-M Dude Ranch. “Les and Alice, both gone now, came to Dubois in the ’40s. They were grassroots environmentalists long before that label was invented, working to create elk-hunting regulations, stop large-scale logging by Louisiana-Pacific, and get grizzlies listed [as an endangered species] and protected. They inspired, mentored, and shared a dream of a West left wild.”

Taylor, lanky, grizzled, and bespectacled, pushes his Day-Glo orange cap back on his forehead. “These days, folks stay silent rather than risk being associated with environmentalists,” he says. “If you’re going to fight for wildlife habitat around here now, don’t wear your nice clothes.”

A year ago, Taylor and his wife, Meredith, were at a Dubois watering hole when he nearly got into a fistfight with a local outfitter over the supplemental feeding of elk in Wyoming during the winter months. Many outfitters maintain that feed grounds are essential for sustaining large elk populations. Taylor argues that these feed grounds foster the spread of brucellosis, a bacterial disease that causes fever and spontaneous abortion. (Named to a governor’s task force on the



Wyoming’s Shoshone National Forest draws hunters from all over the country.

illness in 1991, Taylor has studied the subject extensively—Wyoming Game and Fish biologists I contacted bear out his argument.) “Financially strapped wildlife-management agencies continue to pour scarce dollars into monitoring and vaccinating game against brucellosis,” says Taylor. “I’m for free-ranging, indigenous animals living on adequate habitat, not human-fed and vaccinated ‘wildlife.’”

Taylor has also taken other unwelcome stands. He says lazy outfitters strategically place salt blocks just beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone, luring the animals out of the park and into rifle range of waiting clients. Taylor calls the practice “disgusting and unethical.” When he was invited to speak on salt baiting by the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance in 2001, outfitters packed the hall. “They put me in the hot seat,” he says with a grin. “But I had the facts and the law on my side. These guys are breaking the law to kill trophy animals.”

Taylor says he and Meredith don’t go out much anymore because tensions are so high. “Thank God there are liquor stores with drive-up windows,” he laughs.

When Taylor has wanted to make his points less confrontationally, he’s done it on horseback. Between 1982 and 1985, as a board member of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, he made four lengthy and well-publicized trips called “Ride for Wildlife”—talking about habitat protection along the way. He says he met a few stinkers but most folks were receptive. On his last ride, his horse Spot took him “right downtown” in Denver to deliver a pro-conservation letter from Wyoming’s governor to Colorado governor Roy Rohmer, who was attending a meeting of the National Wildlife Federation.

As he talks, Taylor twists a silver wedding ring stamped with wolves. He and Meredith chose the pattern after rough outdoor work wore through their original bands (they’ve been married 24 years, though Taylor still refers to Meredith as “my bride”). “Meredith and I are both strong wolf advocates,” says Taylor. “You provide habitat and the animals thrive. It’s as simple as that.” What’s complicated are human

reactions to the reappearance of wolves: One side passionately supports the canid, while many ranchers and farmers reject the whole idea of protecting an animal they say threatens their livestock. Taylor says that being a conservationist got even lonelier after wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone in 1995. “The way people look at predators is almost genetic,” he says. “You’re either for or against them and nobody is going to change your mind.”

Woming is the ninth largest and least populated state in the union. Fifty-four percent of its land is publicly owned. The state contains the oldest national park, Yellowstone, with nearly 3 million visitors a year, and the oldest national forest, Shoshone, a much less traveled 2.4-million-acre spectacular of rugged, remote, and creek-veined terrain—more than half of which is designated wilderness. Taylor makes his living in these untamed places. By his own estimation he spends 100 days a year camping in either Yellowstone, the Wind River Range, or Shoshone’s Washakie Wilderness, taking people—some of whom “have never seen the stars, never been on a horse, never camped”—into the wild.

After more than 20 years as an outfitter, 2002 is the first elk season in which Taylor has decided to guide only friends and family (his summer business of horseback, hiking, and fishing trips continues). The Taylors live simply and can get by without the hunt-trip income. From the time he was 15, Taylor has killed at least one elk a season, relying on the animal for sustenance throughout the rest of the year.

Taylor’s love of hunting even shapes his definition of freedom: “To be able to come out on public land, our land, and connect with wildlife. You’re on your own, and that’s what’s interesting—to see what comes into play when people have that freedom.” But he got sick of providing that hard-earned freedom for hire. “As an outfitter, when



Disdaining the “canned hunt,” we packed into ours.

you’ve committed to hunt for money, it changes the focus. There’s a lot of pressure to get your clients what they came for.”

Taylor has no patience for “slob hunters and canned hunts,” where, he says, “you pay your money, drive into some fenced-off place, get an animal pointed out to you, shoot it, and drive off.”

“If you’re hunting just to kill and don’t have respect for the animal and the surroundings,” Taylor continues, “you’re hunting for the wrong reasons.” His style is to use horses to get deep into wilderness, then set up camp and hike farther into the backcountry, hunting on foot. He calls this “hard hunting.” I’ve never hunted and am nervous but agree to join him and his friend Ellen Dudley, a 62-year-old artist and avid hunter from Sheridan, so I can get a taste of his ethic.

The night before we head out I take an inventory of Possum Lodge. In addition to Taylor’s ribbons and plaques, there are eight antler racks; a stuffed pheasant with a hole in its neck (amateur taxidermy by Taylor); deer hooves made into ashtrays; turkey feet propped on the bookshelf near *Jack O’Connor’s Big Game Hunts* and the book Taylor

authored, *Plains and Peaks: A Wilderness Outfitter’s Story*; a photo of Taylor’s father with a Dall sheep (a few sheep horns are curled in the corner of the room); myriad grouse and turkey wings hammered to the wall; knives with bone handles; a skunk hat. I’ve never slept in a room with so many dead animals.

The next morning we trailer seven horses into Shoshone National Forest—three for us, the rest for our gear—and then ride on a dirt road toward the east fork of the Wind River. The sky is turquoise, though clouds are bunching up against the peaks of the Absaroka Range in the Washakie Wilderness, where we are headed. A golden eagle circles overhead and Taylor calls back from his lead horse that he takes it as a good omen.

Where the road ends and wilderness begins, horse trailers, campers, and trucks are parked. Elk season begins tomorrow, October 1, and camouflage-clad hunters are out in full force. Not many venture beyond their vehicles, however, and we lose sight of them shortly after we pass through the camps.

The packhorses separate us, so there’s not much talking on the five-hour ride into the backcountry. The willows along the river are golden, the wind-loving aspen leaves flicker in the slanting light. Taylor periodically stops and points out moose, grouse, and elk tracks, or where a bear has clawed the skin off a whitebark pine. The wild strawberry is a fiendish red; the air, thin and crisp. I smell damp leaves, pine duff, and the earthy aroma of horse sweat.

Ellen Dudley, her high Nordic cheekbones and shoulder-length silver hair incongruous beneath her fluorescent hunting cap, brings up the rear. I can hear her singing when the wind is right.

By the time we reach camp it is snowing nicely. Lash ropes and diamond hitches are untied, the horses unpacked and then hobbled or tethered in the meadow below camp. Taylor and Dudley had been out with another

group fishing a few days before and had left the tents up, which is good because we're above 9,500 feet, I can hardly breathe, I'm near paralysis after being on a horse for so long, and it's freezing. Taylor knots lodgepoles together to set up a canvas cook tent. We make a simple meal of chicken with vegetables from Dudley's garden, discuss the hunt that will begin tomorrow at 6:30 A.M. (Dudley is after a meaty bull elk, Taylor a "spike" or male yearling because they're more plentiful and easier to pack out), and then collapse.

At breakfast the hunters clean and ready their rifles. Taylor's is a .270 Winchester, pre-1964 Model 70—after 1964 these models were made overseas and the quality suffered, he says. "My dad gave me this rifle 25 years ago," says Taylor as he checks the scope. "I cherish that fact more than anything else about the gun."

The snow had continued through the night and we hike in several inches of it up the faint impression of a mountainside trail. This is challenging enough, but soon we leave the trail to trudge free-form through the forest. In a clearing Taylor uses binoculars to scan the ridges and meadows for elk. He spots a few far off along a ridge. At 7 A.M., just as it begins to get light, we hear in the distance the first shot of the season. A half-hour later there are two more, then another.

Taylor decides we should separate. Dudley heads left toward an area Taylor calls Sheep Camp. He and I go right, then circle back toward her slowly, arduously, along the timberline.

Hunting is very quiet, it turns out, because it's dependent on the element of surprise. Communication, when necessary, is in whispers. As we walk, the only sound is my scratchy nylon ski jacket and the crunch of our boots in the snow. There is no plan, no route. The animals dictate movement. Taylor whispers that he's just following his intuition. We've shortcutted, zig-zagged, and cross-countried so much I've completely lost my sense of direction, while Taylor—never sure where he's going—always knows where he is.

An hour later we meet up with Dud-

ley just as a bull elk begins to bugle. The sound comes from the other side of a knoll and down in a steep drainage. Taylor is standing utterly still, except for a smile that crosses his face each time the elk cuts loose with its high-pitched shriek and whistle. The sound is eerie, piercing, and ricochets at us off Eocene-era volcanic rock faces.

When Dudley hears the bull's bugle she loads her chamber and leaves our hiding place. Taylor and I try to follow the elk with our ears, tracking the sound of its call. Dudley returns a while later, short of breath, saying the elk had jumped the drainage and gotten away.

The morning is fruitless, the scenery exquisite. After five hours of hiking at timberline, through deepening snow, we return to camp to eat and rest, then head out again for a four-hour afternoon hunt. We spook a couple of elk in a clearing across the valley from where we'd been hiking that morning. The animals vanish into the pines before the hunters can take aim.

A Clark's nutcracker makes a racket from somewhere. I look up into the trees. The whitebark pines with their puffs of green needles are now covered in snow so they look as though made of cotton.

Silence returns swiftly, light all along the wide valley begins to fade. Taylor whispers that we should make our way back to camp. I'm numb and exhausted. My frozen feet turn and follow his.

That night around the cookstove, Taylor reads a passage from *Little Big Man* (another campfire favorite is the Gettysburg Address). He reads the words of an Indian named Cheyenne: "Human beings believe everything is alive. The white man believes everything is dead. That's the difference between white men and human beings." Taylor pauses, then adds, "I agree with that."

It happens in a flash. At dawn we return to what we've dubbed "Surprise Meadow" in honor of the elk we scared off the day before. Dudley has cut away from us to hunt in the trees nearby. Taylor and I come through some young pines and face an uphill clearing, where

two spikes graze. Taylor drops immediately to one knee without making a sound. One instant he's forging ahead and the next I nearly trip over him. The Day-Glo cap he's loaned me is too big, and constantly slips down to obscure my vision, but I push it back in time to see the crouching man. (Around the cookstove later, we laugh at the near-collision and make up Wyoming headlines: "Sierra Clubber Falls on Hunter, Saves Elk!") Without thinking, I mimic him, so that I end up with my right knee planted in a snowdrift only a foot behind him.

Taylor raises his gun and takes aim as my pounding heart counts off seconds. The sound of the rifle is less loud than I had anticipated, but more concentrated—like the crack of lightning as it hits a tree.

The spike takes the bullet behind his left shoulder. It courses through his heart, killing him instantly. The elk falls to the ground. There is stillness. The air is solemn, weighted with a mix of melancholy, achievement, and completion. No one speaks.

Dudley appears through a thicket, and whistles at the distance (200 yards) and accuracy of the shot. There is no need to whisper, yet as Taylor approaches and begins to field-dress the animal his voice remains soft, like someone in a church, or at a funeral.

Huddled in the tent later, while Dudley cooks up a portion of the elk's liver in a seasoned black skillet, Taylor is reflective. "Hunting isn't a 'sport' for me. It's hard to describe. Maybe it's easier in another culture, another language. 'Lifestyle' would be closer: horses, camping like this, those marches through the snow. I might even risk using the word 'religion'—the feeling of connection to the animal and the land. My human spirit relates to all of this."

When we ride out the next day, the packhorses are jumpy with their fleshly burden. The snow is crisscrossed with tracks: elk, deer, moose, grouse, bear, coyote. The hills, though silent, are alive. ■

MARILYN BERLIN SNELL is Sierra's writer/editor.