



Salting in the Thorofare

*Is salting for elk
outside of Yellowstone
illegal? Unethical?
Or much ado
about nothing?*

by Hal Herring

"Although we hunted only nine days out of a seventeen day trip, I personally saw eighty- four bull elk and many times that number of cows . . . We also ran into fifty-six mule deer and sixteen moose. I would give a good deal for a color movie of the bull that came out onto the skyline of a rounded ridgetop not forty yards from where we stood. Silhouetted against a background of snow-capped peaks, he stopped broadside, and sounded his ringing challenge while we watched the vapor jetting from his nostrils."

Grancel Fitz



Mark Gocke

Such was hunting in the Thorofare region just south of Yellowstone National Park in the early 1930s, as described by Grancel Fitz in his classic collection, *North American Headhunting*. Guarded on three sides by barren, high-altitude plateaus, the Thorofare, at 7,800 elevation, is a world unto itself, a complicated vastness of open parks, south-facing hillside

meadows and meandering flatwater creeks draining northward to create the upper Yellowstone River. It is famous elk country, and the herds still gather in the wide, grassy creek valleys to joust and breed and pursue the rituals of their wild and wandering lives. Trophy mule deer still drift silently among the lodgepoles or clatter in the rocks along the ridges, and they are

joined now by growing numbers of animals that had almost been wiped out in Grancel Fitz' day—bighorn sheep, grizzlies, a far-ranging pack of wolves.

The Thorofare is about as close to what North American big game country once was as anything we have left.

Most elk hunters would agree that Yellowstone Park Ranger Bob Jackson leads an enviable life, even though his time for actual hunting is short. For the past 20 years, from snowmelt to snowfall, he has patrolled the southern boundary of the park on horseback, based out of a small cabin in the Thorofare north of Bridger Lake. His love for the place and for its wildlife is obvious—in

conversation he often refers to the southern Yellowstone as "my country." And he has been an enthusiastic guardian, pursuing poachers in the park and watchdogging the many hunters and outfitters who press right to the boundary in search of a trophy bull.

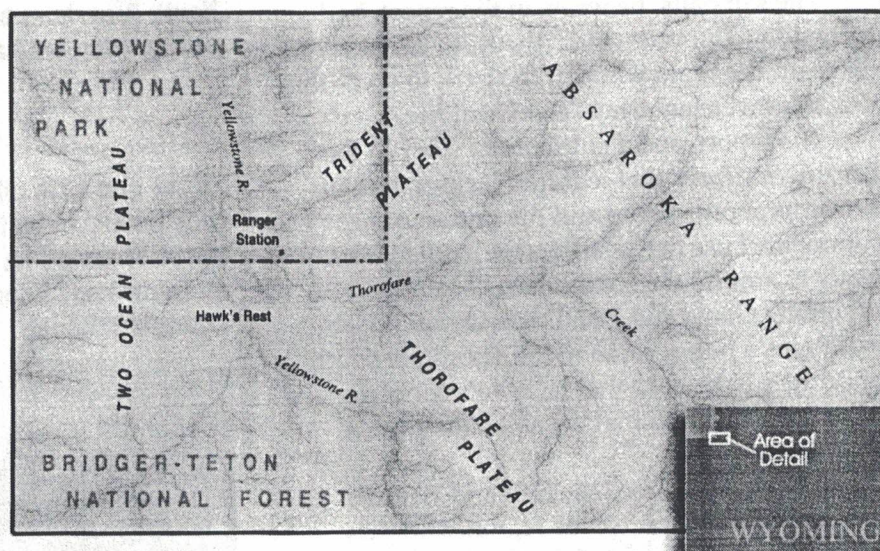
In the role of guardian and watchdog he has made enemies. He has been accused of overzealous enforcement and of exaggerating the problems caused by outfitters and private hunters. Some even suggest that Jackson, who grew up hunting and trapping in the farmlands of Iowa, has joined the ranks of the antihunting brigades. Jackson forcefully denies the charge, describing himself as an "avid hunter."

In 1998, Jackson wrote a report to his supervisors, stating, in part, that commercial use of the Thorofare country was out of hand, with outfitters running too many clients, cutting too many ethical corners in their hunts, and generally abusing the land in their struggle to survive and prosper in an intensely competitive and difficult business. As a prime example, Jackson pointed to the dozens of man-made salt licks that line the park boundary inside the Teton Wilderness, designed to lure elk out of the park onto national forest lands where hunting is allowed. The salt blocks are strictly illegal under

a Forest Service prohibition enacted in 1990. But Jackson says nobody has ever enforced it in the Thorofare. Indeed, he says salting is a common practice.

"The intensity of the salting was increasing to the point where I just couldn't ignore it," said Jackson, "and it is driven by the need to provide more bulls for more clients every year. The herds in there are taking it in the shorts. From my own observation, I can tell you that there are a tenth as many elk in there as there were 20 years ago, and the bull-to-cow ratio is way down."

Actual elk numbers couldn't be verified. But Al Langston, an information officer for the Wyoming Department of Fish and Game, said elk numbers are close to "historical" averages.



"We are getting close to the numbers that people want," he said.

Jackson, however, believes that ranchers and landowners have pressured both the Wyoming Game and Fish department and the Forest Service to reduce the herds below their historical numbers.

"With the new technology, ranchers can come up with a forage count that will tell them exactly how much grass they are losing to wintering elk," he said. "And with ranching already as tight as it is, they just can't afford to lose anything. So there is less tolerance for big wintering herds on private land."

The result, says Jackson, is that the illegal salting has been tolerated by wildlife officials who want the herds reduced and view the

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In his report, Jackson wrote that the number of elk being killed over the artificial salt licks was leading to a kind of "garbage dump" syndrome, where grizzlies were being habituated to gut piles and to excessive amounts of meat left behind by overworked guides.

"What made me write that report, and tell what I knew," he said later, "was the five self-defense shootings of grizzly bears in the Thorofare country in 1997. Those shootings could and should have been avoided. With the salting, and the shooting over the salts, we have a situation that is going to be more trouble, for bears or hunters, or both, someday very soon."

The salt baits, he wrote in the report, had turned the Thorofare into "the Killing Fields" for elk. And the bears who left the park to work the carcasses were entering "a circle of fire."

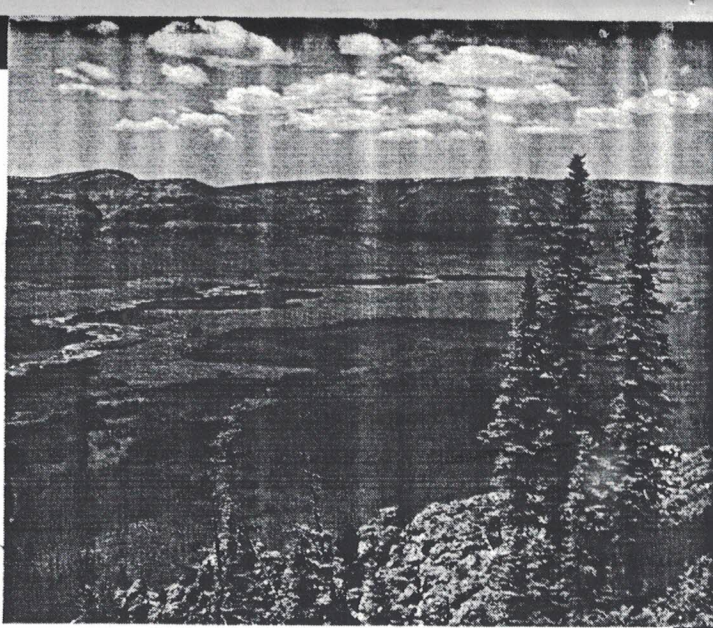
The report, and a subsequent story in the *Los Angeles Times* that featured Jackson and his concerns about salting and the impact of heavy commercial use in the Thorofare, ruffled a lot of feathers around the southern Yellowstone. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department, which maintains a patrol cabin in the Thorofare south of Bridger Lake, said that Jackson's concerns were not valid, and that the salt baits were a "non-issue."

Wardens with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who also patrol the region, said they could find no evidence of the "garbage dump" syndrome.

"We looked at grizzly mortality in the Thorofare and didn't find anything significant," said Tim Eicher, a special agent with the USFWS based in Cody.

On September 15, 1997, two hunting guides killed a sow and three cubs in self defense. The incident occurred in Silvertip Creek, close to the Thorofare, but not near the salt pits. It's the only known killing of grizzlies in the area that year. Jackson, however, believes that twice as many grizzlies are killed than are reported, a claim that can't be verified. Neither can the relationship between the killing of grizzlies and the salt pits.

"As far as hunting over salt, that is an ethical question and not one that we have any business addressing," Eicher says. "The only real issue I see here is whether the Forest Service wants to make the effort to enforce their salting

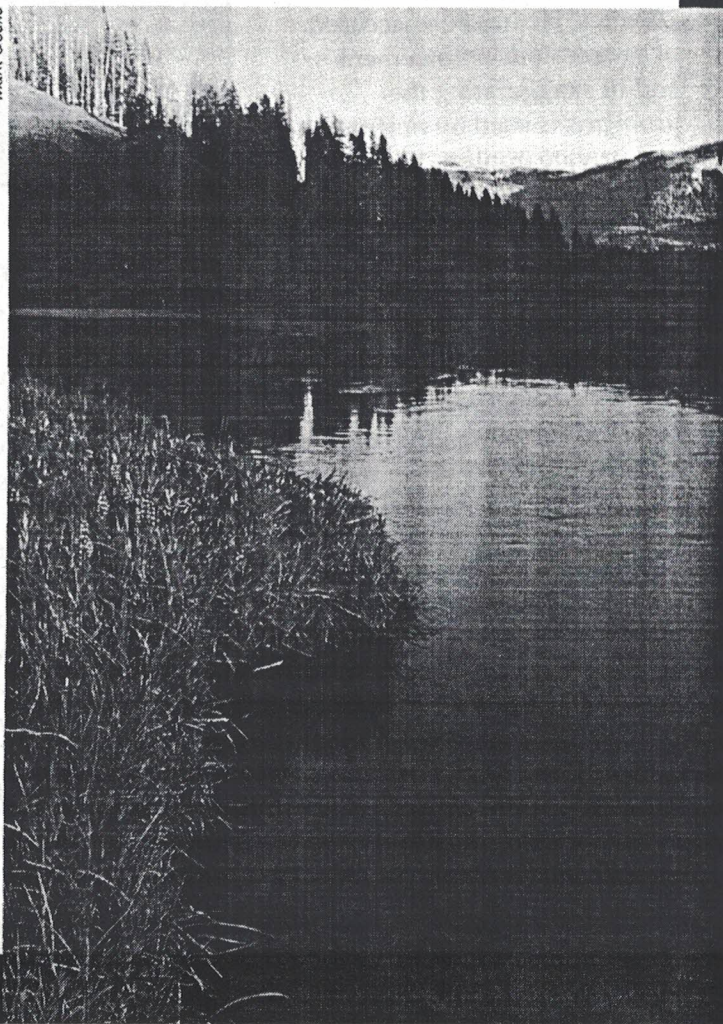


Jeff Henry

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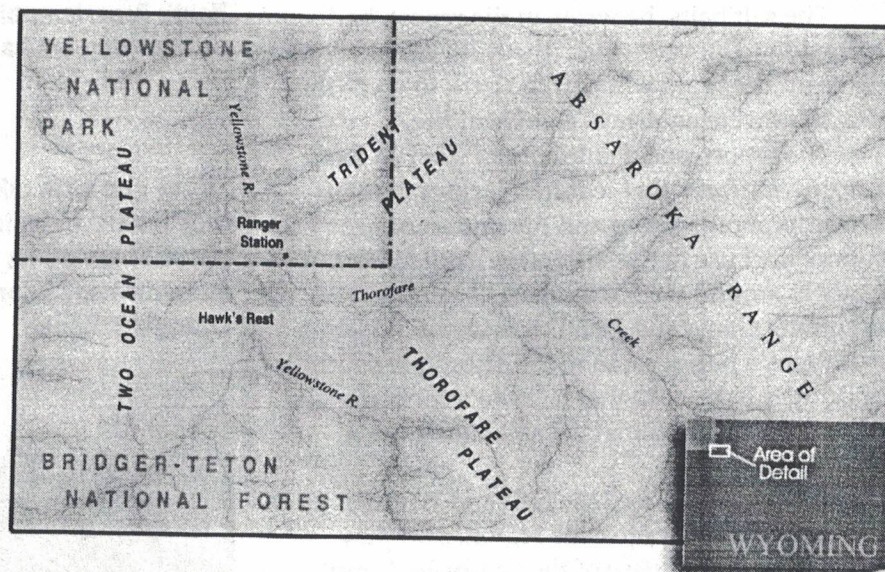
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There is no doubt that the salting is illegal. The special order issued in 1990 for the Teton and other Rocky Mountain wilderness areas strictly forbids bringing salt in "for the purpose of attracting wildlife," and provides for a fine of \$500 or six months in jail for those who violate it. But no one has ever been prosecuted for salting in the Thorofare, or anywhere around the park.

"It's not that we don't enforce it," said Eric Sandenow, a wilderness ranger in the Buffalo District, which includes the Thorofare. "We enforce all the wilderness regulations. But we've never caught anybody red-handed putting out salt. And although putting it out is illegal, hunting over it is not, at least not technically."

The fall after Jackson's report came out, local outfitter and wildlife advocate Tory Taylor accompanied Bob Jackson on a horsepacking trip into the Thorofare to photograph the salt baits and see the situation for himself. In the broad meadow a half mile from the Wyoming Game and Fish patrol cabin, a noisy flock of ravens led them to one of the salts, a bare depression in the ground, over 40 feet across and nearly 4 feet deep, with a puddle of snowmelt at the bottom. The earth was licked smooth. A gut pile and four legs sawed off at the hocks lay near the center. Seventy five yards away, near the Forest Service trail, they found the rest of the carcass, crudely butchered, with a great deal of meat left behind. Jackson could not have asked for a better confirmation of his reports. They rode to the Fish and Game cabin to report what they say was the illegal wanton waste of an elk, but no one was there.

Taylor, who has been a horsepacker and hunting guide in the Yellowstone for more than 25 years, was infuriated and saddened by what he saw in the Thorofare.

"This thing has got to be brought to a halt," he said. "Here we have one of the finest places left in the world, a place with the longest traditions of remote, fair-chase hunting, and it's being turned into an industrialized trophy shoot."

He sees salting and the waste of meat as dark omens. "If you're willing to fudge on one thing," Taylor said, "it's easy to fudge on the next. I know about the economic pressure that's



"Sometimes we do hunt over the salts, especially with rough country, but we don't do that well there." Lynn Madse

driving this thing. I know you can't pay the bills with just 10 or 12 clients anymore, and to get clients you have to offer a high success rate. But surely the clients who book a dream hunt into this country want the chance to really hunt, and the chance to shoot a legitimate trophy bull. You just can't do that sitting out here, 50 yards from the park border, shooting over bait. It's not hunting, and it's not legitimate."

Taylor, like Jackson, believes that the salt baits are enough to disgust the non-hunting public and hurt the image of all hunting. "Sometimes I get tired of trying so hard to defend hunting in the face of behavior like this," he said. "It just gives us all a black eye."

On the rest of the trip, Taylor and Jackson mapped 23 heavily used salt baits, many within 100 yards of the park boundary, some less than 50 yards. As if to further confirm Jackson's report on potential bear conflicts, they found clear grizzly tracks along the Forest Service trails, on the game trails leading to the baits, and in the bare earth of the licks themselves.

The salting continued to get a lot of attention from the media. Taylor wrote an article for *Pronghorn*, the newsletter of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, describing the scale of the



Photo of Tory Taylor by Hal Herring

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**guy who can't handle the real thing, can't take the
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baiting as "staggering" and saying that officials from Wyoming Fish and Game and USFWS, both of whom he encountered on the trip, "hemmed and hawed" when he tried to discuss the salting. A story from the Associated Press showed up in hundreds of newspapers around the country, Montana Public Radio picked it up, the Fund for Animals made a predictable antihunting statement, and various environmental groups jumped aboard. Feathers, already a bit ruffled, now began to fly.

Tim Fagan, a Wyoming game warden who works out of the fish and game patrol cabin in the Thorofare, is sick of the media spotlight on the salts and is beyond ready to put the whole issue to rest.

"There's no more bulls killed over those salts than anywhere else in the Teton Wilderness," he said. "Salt is just not that big a draw for elk."

Fagan believes that the real issue is that Bob Jackson, after so many years as a ranger, just doesn't like to see park elk cross over the boundary and fall to the guns of hunters. "I am disgusted with some of this stuff that he's spewed to the media," he said. "A lot of it is just lies, like that 'circle of fire' deal. It's ridiculous. And I'm disappointed that Tory Taylor is

regurgitating it as truth."

Fagan said the salt baits were first established by wildlife officials in the 1950s, who wanted to hold elk on the national forest where they could be hunted, and their numbers reduced, to curb overgrazing in the park during the summer months.

"I don't personally like the salts being there," Fagan said, "but there's no state statute against putting salt out for whatever reason. As far as the ethics of hunting over bait, well, we don't legislate ethics like that. We can't."

As for the carcass that Jackson and Taylor claimed was left with usable meat, Fagan said it probably did not constitute the "wanton waste" which is prohibited under Wyoming law. "In the backcountry, you don't always bone out every last piece of meat. They said there was 40 pounds of meat left there; well, the neck alone can have 40 pounds of meat on it. That just wasn't a valid complaint. With all the stuff we're dealing with now—wolves, loss of habitat and winter range—it's pitiful that this issue is getting this much attention."

Harold Turner runs the Triangle X dude ranch and has a long-established camp to the west of the Thorofare. The headquarters of the Triangle X is a landmark just off the road from Jackson to Moran Junction, a sprawling collection of weathered cabins, houses, offices and barns, all in excellent repair with the heart of the Teton Range in view across the Snake River bottoms. Turner has guided in the Yellowstone for most of his life, and his guides now run up to 55 hunting clients a season, as well as accommodating backcountry fishermen and sightseers in the summer, and just about every other kind of recreation in the area. His is a big, competitive business, and any edge is welcome.

"In the early '60s," he said, "there were very few elk in our area, and we asked fish and game for permission to put more salt in the places where they put it in the '50s, and they said yes. It helped to concentrate elk then, and it helps now—especially given the fact that we've got a wolf pack in there scattering them out nowadays."

He said that outfitters put out salt most years, "but since the Forest Service prohibition, they don't talk about it much." In his view, the

salts work the way they were intended to work when they were established 40 years ago.

"If you can brush aside sentiment," Turner said, "the salt is a good thing for hunting, and for game management in general. The fish and game want the herds kept in control. If we can't kill elk on the Teton wilderness, they'll have to be hunted on the winter range or culled on the feedgrounds. Which is more ethical? I don't know."

Outfitter Lynn Madsen, of Yellowstone Outfitters in Jackson Hole, handles 35 to 40 hunters in the Thorofare each year, and his guides often take clients to the meadows near the fish and game cabin. "We are not renegades down there," he said. "Sometimes we do hunt over the salts, especially with guys who can't handle the real thing, can't take the rough country, but we don't do that well there. Jackson at one time said that there were 75 bulls shot over the salts in one season. I keep a careful record of exactly where we take every animal and last year we shot three bulls near the salts. The best year ever: seven bulls." Other outfitters who work the area also dispute Jackson's claims.

Madsen pointed out that ethics are sometimes a matter of who is doing the judging. "We try our best to be ethical," he said, "but who appointed these people to be our watchdogs? Jackson is a park ranger, and this is the Teton Wilderness. He's way out of bounds and has been for a long time."

Regarding Jackson's claim that the salts increase the chance for bear conflicts, Madsen and Turner both say that the numbers of grizzlies in the Thorofare have increased dramatically in the past few years, to the point where it is time to draw up some kind of management plan. "There's just a lot more bears now, and the gut piles that we leave behind help them to get their protein for hibernation. So they kind of keep track of us," said Madsen. "But it isn't the salts that are bringing them in."

In response to increased grizzly encounters, Madsen recently helped launch and operate a program designed to teach outfitters and hunters the best ways to avoid conflicts with grizzlies.

Viewed from the air, the Thorofare country is vast and remote, seemingly pristine and protected. To the south lie miles and miles of

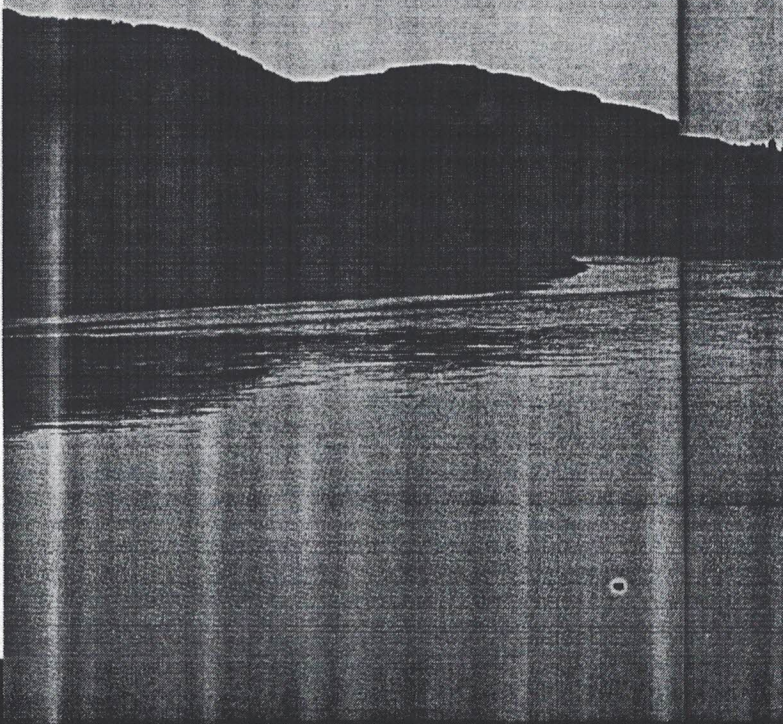
mountains, rising to red rock plateaus, barren and lunar, etched by drifts of wind-piled snow. Small lakes, shining with ice, dot the edges of the plateaus and spill off into networks of whitewater creeks, descending to treeline and then down through dark timber toward the wide valley of the Yellowstone.

Most wildernesses in the lower forty-eight are high and rocky, composed of the unyielding leftovers of the country. The Upper Yellowstone is nothing like that. The hills are low angled, rolling. Enormous open meadows stretch to thin stands of lodgepole. Most of it burned in the fires of 1988, but there are belts and islands of green timber where the fires passed over, and much of the burn is carpeted green with lodgepoles on the comeback. The big creeks that form the Yellowstone River are a pale green, with every feature of the bottom visible. Rich and tangled thickets of red willow enclose them for most of their length.

The Forest Service trail that skirts the southern edge of the park can be seen easily from the air, a dark thread through the yellow grass of the meadows. The big salt bait near the fish and game cabin shows as a black spot, with

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threads coming into it from all directions. Just beyond is another salt pit, actually two joined together, making a figure-eight, like two bullet holes printed on a target when a rifle is dialed in just right. Farther along there are more pits, dead center in meadows or just at the edge of the timber. They are clearly visible, but overwhelmed in the grandeur of the landscape.

Seventy-five years ago, in an account of his adventures in the Thorofare, called *One Elk for a Lifetime*, Grancel Fitz wrote:

Most of us feel that the trophy really worth having is the one which has been hard-earned; that when by sheer luck, a wonderful head is bagged too easily, it cannot compare in personal value to the more modest specimen which has been won after a notable expenditure of effort . . . we simply raised the standard of what we would accept, and made a real hunt of it.

If, perhaps, the modern world did not seem so thoroughly under the thumb of mankind, there might be no conflict over the salt baits. Those who believe, as Fitz did, in the honor of hard hunting, might never rub up against those

whose standards are more flexible. But such is not the case today, in the Thorofare or anywhere else in our remaining western wildlands.

The controversy will reach a new level, and an even wider audience, very soon. Kim Floyd, the executive director of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, says his group cannot let the subject rest until the Forest Service enforces its own prohibition against salting in the wilderness.

"We have correspondence with Forest Service officials who say they are going to address this issue, but they don't say when or how," said Floyd. "We want to work this out with them so we don't have to consider a lawsuit that would force their hand. We don't really have a choice—it is in our mission statement that we are the promoters of ethical hunting and fishing, and the practice of baiting elk is just completely contrary to that. It's unacceptable, and we don't accept it."



Hal Herring is a frequent contributor to Field and Stream and Bugle. He writes and hunts from his home in Corvallis, Montana.

