

Priest awaits next Elk hunt

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Many Midwesterners are waiting for summer to pass so they can do what's really important — bow-hunt Rocky Mountain elk in the wilds of the West.

One Missourian in particular is biding the time until he can pack the last few items of gear and head toward north-central Idaho in September for what's become an annual pilgrimage for the mighty bull elk.

Father Joe Classen, a parish priest at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in Oakville, who regular readers may recall from a previous column, hit paydirt during his first-ever archery elk hunt. Needless to say, he is counting down the days until September.

Father Joe only recently discovered what so many others learned long ago: Simply being in some remote mountain range, far from civilization, will quickly cure whatever ails you.

Countless metro-area archers travel west each year to test their woodsmanship, skill and mettle in some of the continent's most unforgiving terrain. Archery elk seasons generally get under way earlier than firearms seasons, so bad weather is rarely a concern. Still, only the foolish would disregard the threat of snow altogether, early season or not.

Father Joe, luckily, has had no such problems, or at least not yet. You might say that bowhunting, hunting and fishing luck has been with the man since the 2006 publication of his first book, "Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord: Encountering the Sacred in the Great Outdoors."

After reading the book, Bob Reineke, an Idaho resident, and Cathy, his wife, were moved to offer its author the chance to go hunting in Idaho for elk, bear or whitetails. "Two words lit up like the Milky Way in Bob's letter," said Father Joe. "They were 'hunt' and 'elk.' That was my lifelong dream, something I never imagined I'd be able to do for a long time, if ever."

Over the next several months, Bob and the priest prepared for the hunt via e-mail. Since Bob and Cathy had relatives in the St. Louis area, Father Joe was able to meet the pair in person when they came here for a visit.

September 2007 finally arrived and it was time to catch his flight to Idaho. Just as he has done this year, Father Joe had honed his archery skills to perfection and worked out seriously all year long — getting in the best shape of his life, just a few weeks shy of his 34th birthday.

When all preparations had been made and the hunt was finally ready to get under way, Bob and Father Joe packed their gear into a canoe for a seven-mile float down a wild mountain stream through Idaho's Clearwater National Forest. The two then backpacked several miles on foot to where they set up camp.

At 4 a.m. on the hunt's first morning, Father Joe crawled out of his sleeping bag and into freezing temperatures. "I had to put on all my hunting clothes just to warm up," he said.

The bowhunter then busied himself attaching cow urine scent wafers (yes, they sell such things) all over his person to mask his human scent. "Believe me, those wafers smell far worse than they sound," the priest said.

On the third day, the men were preparing to follow some fresh elk tracks when Bob stopped briefly to make a cow call, which resembles a cat's 'mee-ew,' only with the last note falling in pitch.

"I heard a frenzied bugle off in the distance," Father Joe said. "I looked around and noticed a tiny brown dot about 400 yards distant moving on a steep rock hill. I whispered, 'That's an elk ... a bull!' We both looked and now the 'dot' was getting larger and coming toward us."

Bob and Father Joe crouched down low as the bull continued to bugle. They hurried to get into shooting position, but then Bob became worried about a deep gully that he feared the bull would refuse to cross. "Hurry up and get in front of that gully," Bob ordered the archer.

Father Joe hurried to the spot, but his heart sank when the only nearby cover was a meager, knee-high patch of grass. With heart pounding, the priest got ready, listening to the cow calls that were luring the big bull closer.

"When the bull finally emerged 30 yards in front of me the sight was beautiful beyond words," Father Joe said.

One last cow call and the bull, which had been quartering toward the priest, whipped around broadside and presented him with a perfect 25-yard shot. "The earth stood still as I knelt there," Father Joe recalled. "I slowly drew back my bow, took careful aim and gently touched off the arrow."

After drying, the six-by-six (six points on each antler) bull elk scored 262 6/8 Pope and Young points, enough to make the archery record book.

Is it any wonder why Father Joe and others like him are driven to return to the mountains each season? Elk hunting, they say, gets in one's blood.

Just ask Father Joe.

For more information about Father Joe Classen's current books, as well as those scheduled for publication, visit his website at www.huntingforgod.com.