

Tom has field tested many different steels and blade designs on over 100 elk.

Tips & Techniques



CHOOSING A TROPHY HUNTER'S KNIFE

By Tom High

As the sun began its descent to the horizon, I had just completed my stalk through a grove of stunted aspen approximately one acre in size. About 90 minutes of good hunting light was all that remained of the day. Sagebrush spread for miles before me, broken only by an occasional pocket of aspen

spilling down to the creek bottom in the valley below.

It was against the horizon that I first caught the movement of a mature 4x4 mule deer as he fed 150 yards above and west of me. If the buck continued his feeding pattern he would soon be over the ridge, which would enable me to quickly stalk in for a bow shot.



Whitetail with Michigan Hunter blade

Antelope with Michigan Hunter blade

Whitetail with Michigan Hunter blade

This buck refused to cooperate, however, promptly bedding in the thick sage, facing into the wind with only his antlers and one eye visible. There was little or no cover between us. To get close enough for a reasonable shot, I would have to crawl in full view of him with only six- to eight-inch cover to disguise my movement. Flattening my body and gently moving the bow ahead of me, I inched my way 125 yards to a taller clump of sage. I figured if I reached the sage undetected, I could work in and get a good shot before he saw or smelled me. I had to take the chance.

Thirty torturous minutes later, I had reached my goal. The wind was swirling as the buck stood, so I knew I had only seconds to make the shot. He was broad-side and relaxed as the arrow

struck two inches above his heart. The buck turned and ran full tilt for the cover of an aspen thicket that stood directly behind me. He passed by at less than 12 inches, almost trampling me in his haste to retreat.

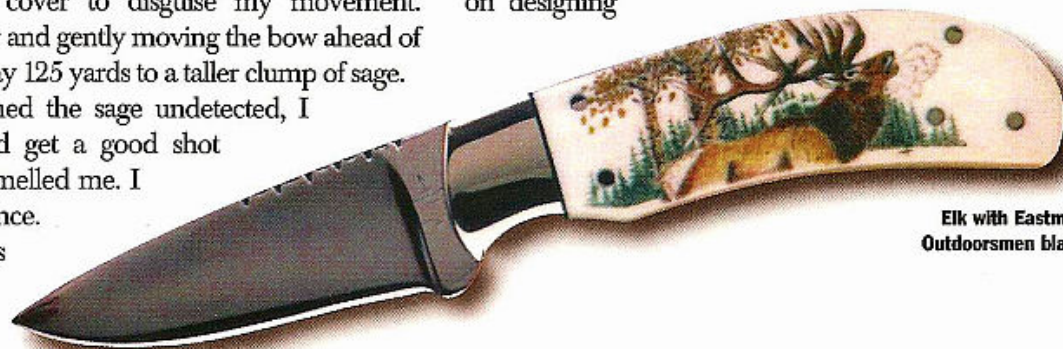
The mule deer piled up in a thicket 200 yards from the shot and then the real work began. After field dressing and caping, I had a 2 1/2-mile, uphill pack job ahead of me. At that stage of a successful hunt, all other equipment becomes less vital than a quality, razor-sharp hunting knife.

Working as a guide, I see clients who dress in the finest of camouflage clothing. They could walk a fashion runway and be the envy of any hunter, except when they bring out their hunting knives. Such knives run the gamut from 16-inch Rambo serrated combat models to imported cheap blades of questionable steel...possibly recycled tuna cans?

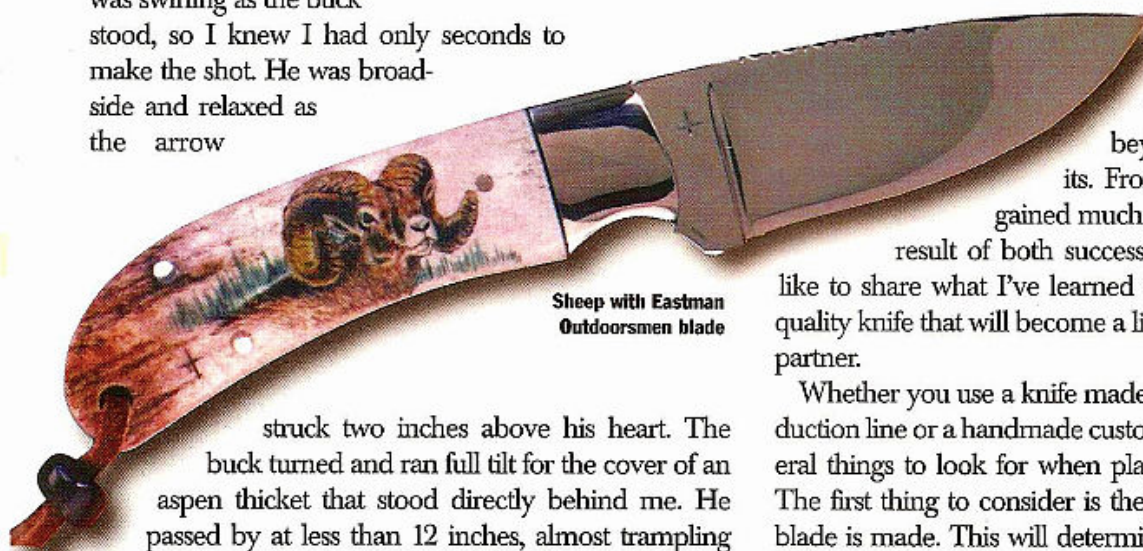
I have come to appreciate a good, high quality knife over the past 30 years. This appreciation is especially strong late in the evening as you flounder in the snow and bone chilling cold to quarter an animal and pack it onto mules. The last problem you want is a knife that gets dull half way through your butchering process in the fading

light of a cold fall evening!

As a custom knife maker, I have field tested many different steels and blade designs on over 100 elk and numerous deer and antelope. Early in my knife making career, I concentrated on designing



Elk with Eastman
Outdoorsmen blade



Sheep with Eastman
Outdoorsmen blade

knives for outfitters and guides since those professionals were using knives beyond the normal limits. From their experience, I

gained much valuable insight. As a result of both success and failure, I would like to share what I've learned to help you choose a quality knife that will become a lifelong trusted hunting partner.

Whether you use a knife made on some factory production line or a handmade custom knife, there are several things to look for when planning your purchase. The first thing to consider is the steel from which the blade is made. This will determine how well the edge sharpens and how long it will hold its edge.

So which steel is best for hunting knives? Personally, I prefer stainless steel (actually stain-resistant is more accurate as these will discolor over time when confronted by highly corrosive elements). Carbon steels have a tendency to rust in humid areas, and despite being easier to sharpen, in my experience carbon steels tend to dull easier too.

My favorite custom steel today is ATS-34. Many of the outfitters I have designed knives for report field dressing as many as 17 deer before a major sharpening. I have personally field dressed up to two bull elk and four deer in one season and the knife was still capable of shaving hair.

Stainless steel factory made knives have a bad reputation for being hard to sharpen. This is not the fault of the steel. Stainless steel, 440C in particular, is very hard, (58-59 on the Rockwell scale). These hard blades are brittle and subject to pitting if not used with care. To combat this problem, many factory blades are made

thick, and thus when it comes time to sharpen, normal sharpening stones cannot remove the hardened steel.

To sharpen a stainless steel knife, I recommend using a diamond stone or steel. I also urge you to select a knife with a thinner blade that requires less steel be removed to get your perfect edge. After the honing is complete, remember to clean the particles of steel from your stone or steel with detergent and water.

Since stainless steel is brittle when hardened, use a folding saw to split the pelvic bones of animals during field dressing. There are numerous styles available that fit nicely in a day or fanny pack. They also work well for removing the skull plate and antlers from a trophy animal during the caping process. The quickest way to damage a good knife is to use it as a pry bar or pound the blade through a pelvis with a rock!

To achieve good results with any sharp knife, you need to avoid hitting hard objects such as bones, antlers or teeth. Another thing to avoid is sticking the blade into the ground near the carcass while attending to packing the quarters. This literally sands off the sharp edge.

Proper care of your hunting knife also includes washing the blade with soap and water after the job is done. Blood is one of those corrosive elements that can discolor your blade. If the blade is carbon steel, I recommend using gun oil or a silicone spray. Folding knives will work better if they are clean inside and out. Also, put a drop or two of oil on the springs and blade pivots to keep them working properly.

When the season is over, don't store the knife in its leather case. Leather can stain or discolor the blade because of chemicals used in the tanning process. After cleaning the knife, it should be wrapped in a cotton cloth to store between seasons.



FLAT
GRIND



Hollow
GRIND



CHISEL
GRIND

Despite a lot of discussion in knife circles about hollow grind versus flat grind, I've made both and used them side by side, and in my opinion, neither appears to be superior. I use hollow grind because it looks better. A person should not allow blade grind to affect his decision on which knife to buy. To me, blade thickness is of much more importance.



Just for the ladies

Tom also creates beautiful scrimshaw jewelry for ladies. Each one is hand-made and unique. I own several different sets of earrings and necklaces. It doesn't matter where I go, people always compliment my jewelry. They are all reasonably priced yet so classy. You can dress up with the fancy ones or choose the more casual pieces for everyday. I love them all and I know you will, too.

Just let Tom know you are interested and he'll send you some information.

Bertie Eastman



I recommend that my buyers avoid chisel points on blades unless they will be used as a camp knife to cut saplings and firewood. Chisel points are for axes and cold chisels; a razor-sharp knife requires a thin, tapered edge, not a wedge-like chisel edge. A polished sharpened edge will extend the life of the edge.

When it comes to blade shape, my preference has always been a drop-point over the upswept style. This allows the hunter better control and visibility when working in those close quarters. I also prefer a narrow blade to a wide one, except in specialty knives such as skinners, which have more belly (curvature) in the blade. Skinning knives reached their height of popularity with the old buffalo skinners. These men used the knife primarily for skinning, while today's average hunter is more concerned with an all purpose blade. Blade shape is really much more a matter of personal taste than practicality.

One thing hunters should avoid are the "combat" style knives. Select a knife that fits the hand well and is easy to maneuver. Many of the outfitters I've designed for want a blade no longer than their finger. Pat Dewil, a professional safari outfitter in Zimbabwe, uses his knife on animals ranging from cape buffalo to African lion. Pat prefers a blade designed for him be less than four inches long. Big knives might be impressive on the movie screen, but those heroes never need to field dress a deer. Too many hunters forget the value of control of the blade, which is difficult to achieve with a long blade.

Expect to pay more for a quality knife, especially if its handle is made of unique material such as ivories or sheep horn. Such materials are things of beauty, but handles of elk and deer antler and Micarta (a synthetic product), are quite durable and easy to maintain. I don't recommend soaking natural handle material in water, rather use a damp rag to clean and then dry your handle.

If you are like most hunters, you pay a lot for your equipment because you want the best quality that will last the longest. Your knife is part of that equipment and you can expect to pay accordingly. The old saying, "You get

what you pay for!" can often be applied to the purchase of a knife.

Choose the folding blade or sheath knife YOU prefer and feel will fill YOUR hunting needs. Personally, I'm partial to the folding, lock-back knives, but I know there is no comparison to the strength and durability of a good sheath knife. Again, you should choose a knife that fits your personal tastes and needs. That's the right knife for you. Before your next hunt, whether you are going for trophy moose or antelope, give some serious thought to your knife purchase. Once the animal is down and you are faced with field dressing chores, the



Whitetail with Eastman Outdoorsmen blade

knife becomes your major tool. It can make the job difficult or, if well chosen and used wisely, quite simple. The choice is yours!

Notes: Tom High is an artist and custom knife maker who designed Number .012 (The Eastman Outdoorsmen knife), specifically for Mike Eastman.

This year, Tom is donating a knife at each of the following events:

Safari Club International 27th Annual Convention-January 20-23, 1999, Reno, NV. The Limited Edition Prehistoric Cave Bear knife #2, valued at \$12,000 will be on display at booth #1533

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation 13th Annual Convention-February 11-14, 1999, Reno, NV. This will be the Commemorative Knife that is valued at \$5,000.

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