



A tree of tales

Not far from Oxbow Bend on the Snake River there's a tall pine that might look like all the others. But this one marks the spot an 89-year-old Wyoming hunter has waited on elk for more than 50 seasons, as life and wilderness change around him.

By Christine Peterson

Blas Medina and his wife Elanor sit at Blas' tree for a hunt in 2004. Behind them stands their grandson Kristopher Holmes. Holmes is now a spawning coordinator at Game and Fish and Blas still hunts near the same tree in this picture.
(Photo courtesy of the Medina family)



It's called Blas' tree.



Blas Medina

Everyone who has hunted there knows it.

It may not look like much to the average hiker — a towering pine tree among other giants.

But to Blas Medina, it's the spot where thousands of elk used to wander by. It's where he spent more than half a century sitting next to his beloved wife, waiting for the perfect shot. It's where he spotted dozens of elk that would eventually end up in his freezer to feed his family of six.

"Even the park rangers and wardens know of Blas and his tree," said Paula Hemenover, Blas' daughter. "They often refer to it when describing where a grizzly was seen or a fire."

That's the funny thing about important landmarks. Sometimes they're as notable as Devils Tower or Old Faithful, described in folklore or survey logs and written about in books. But other

times they're as average as a tree.

To Medina, who turned 89 this year, that tree is a symbol of a lifetime of memories. It's a consistent point in a lifetime of change as children and grandchildren were born, family members passed away and entire ecosystems shifted.

It's in an area where he will, with his doctor's permission and under the worrying gaze of his middle daughter, return for another season.

THE LANDMARK TREE

To tell the story of Blas' tree is to tell the story of elk hunting in northwest Wyoming. Like many hunters, Blas arrived in Hunt Area 79 near the Tetons on someone else's recommendation.

"It was (1963) and my brother-in-law said,

'Why don't you go hunting elk with me, there's a lot of elk over there in the Tetons,'" Blas said. "So I went with him that first morning and got me an elk right away at Oxbow Bend."

Blas couldn't believe the number of elk that moved through the park in the '60s. Thousands would migrate from Yellowstone National Park south. A nearby resident herd also had thousands of elk. So many elk populated Area 79, in fact, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department offered more than 1,700 any-elk tags there in the mid-1990s.

Blas and his wife lived in Egbert, a tiny railroad town east of Cheyenne. They had a growing family and needed the meat.

"I got an elk every year. I crawled the highest mountain I could find, and Lozier Mountain was one of them. So I studied them and studied how

the elk migrated out of Yellowstone," he said. "So in doing that, I was running into this tree ... After I found that tree, I liked that spot, so I figured I could find elk and there were always elk. My wife and I went there and all of my relatives, I took them up there. They all got elk."

He documented nearly every hunt, along with each oil change, tank of gas and family health problem in a journal as he waited for the elk to move.

"On Sat. Oct. 13 we killed a bull 5-point elk by my tree, east end of Emma Matilda Lake at 6 p.m.," he wrote in a 2002 entry in neat, tiny scrawl.

HONING A HABIT

Sitting in his daughter's kitchen on a hot July day in Cheyenne, Blas didn't look like a man headed into his 89th year.

He stood proud with a white moustache, holding a brown, felt cowboy hat affixed with tips of antlers from elk he's shot. It looks a little like Crocodile Dundee's hat — and he tells those who ask that they're bear claws.

His two daughters sat by his side with his son-in-law and told stories: How grizzly bear 399 used to wander through the clearing by his tree; how a park ranger once escorted Blas in by vehicle to collect his bull elk because Blas' mother had died and he was at risk of missing the funeral.

Nearly every story from Blas about Area 79, his tree or elk hunting in general includes his wife, Eleanor.

Blas and Eleanor, or Leonore, as he called her, met when they were 12 and 13 years old in Guadalupita, New Mexico.

"We threw papers at each other," he said.

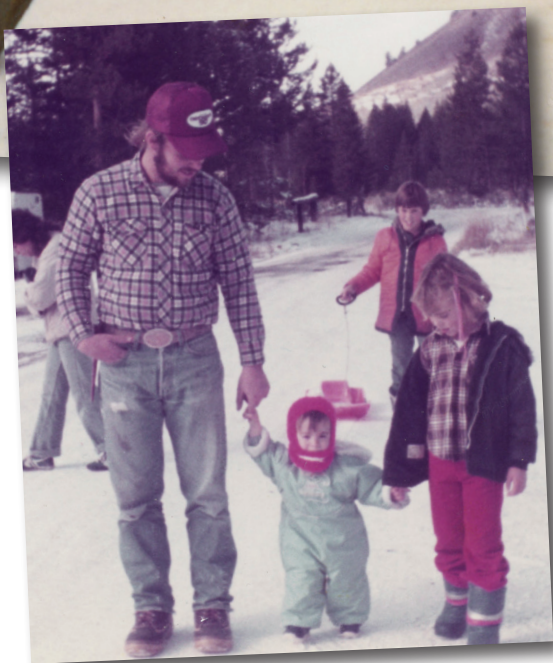
The two married when he was 18 and she was 19, and moved from New Mexico to Egbert in 1949 so he could work for Union Pacific Railroad.

Other than Blas' first hunt with his brother-in-law in 1963, Eleanor didn't stay home like many wives in the '60s. She went along, cooking meals, sitting next to Blas on a log by his tree and harvesting plenty of elk herself.

She stood no more than 4-foot-8-inches tall, but was a force in the field, helping carry elk and equipment back to camp, said his daughter, Patsy Holmes.

Area 79 quickly became the family's hunting destination each fall.

They would load up their camper and take



From top left clockwise: Blas Medina at Pacific Creek hunt camp in 1992. Blas Medina takes aim during a 1997 hunt in Area 79. Eleanor Medina poses next to an elk from the day's hunt in 1989 at the Pacific Creek hunt camp in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. From left to right, Francis Holmes, Kyle Holmes, Shawn Hemenover and Mandy Hemenover take a snowy walk at the Pacific Creek campground in 1984. (Photos courtesy of the Medina family)

anyone who was interested. Each of their four children went at various times, some sticking with hunting, others moving on to other pursuits. Blas blames himself for his son's lack of interest in hunting.

"When he came of age to go hunting, I got him a moose permit. We didn't get his moose, but I almost drown him and froze him... And I guess that is one of the reason he didn't like to be a hunter," Blas said.

During more than half a century, Blas took his son and daughters, three son-in-laws, three grandsons and one great-grandson hunting in Area 79, teaching many of them the fine art of stalking and killing, field dressing and butchering. One of those grandsons, Kristopher Holmes, is now a Game and Fish spawning coordinator in Pinedale.

In the old days, the area was more like a community than a solitary hunting experience. Hunters with tents and RVs filled the road on opening morning, waiting for a spot to camp. Blas' grandkids brought their Halloween costumes to camp and trick-or-treated, shuffling from trailer to trailer filling their bags with candy, treats and even dollar bills.

With every year that passed, Blas and Eleanor cared a little less about filling their freezer and a little more about spending time in their favorite place. Instead of killing an elk on the first day and driving home the next, they would bring the camper up early in the season and stay until the very end.

One November, they stayed so long the snow buried them in camp.

"They were stranded for Thanksgiving," said Paula. "All they could eat was sardines because they couldn't get into Jackson."

"Well, that was food," Blas replied.

They went the year Blas broke his trigger finger. They went the year he sliced through his hand cutting firewood. They even went the year Eleanor had a stroke.

"My wife had a stroke Sept. 19," his journal reads from 2008.

The next page says: "But we are all going to Moran Oct. 8th. John and myself are leaving Oct. 8th. My wife and Terry are going with Francis and Patsy Thurs."

Blas and Eleanor kept busy that way, continuing their tradition.

"He would always ask the doctor when something was wrong with her or him, 'Am I going to be well enough to go elk hunting?'" Paula said.

CHANGING LAND, CHANGING LIVES

Though Blas and his family continued to gather at the tree, the days of large numbers of elk and thousands of licenses south of Yellowstone wouldn't stay forever.

The migrating herd has changed as fewer calves survived and the elk shifted to new areas. It was a combination of hunting pressure from humans, the reintroduction of wolves and the comeback of the grizzly, said Doug Brimeyer, the Game and Fish deputy chief of wildlife. He was a wildlife biologist and coordinator in the Jackson area where Blas hunts for more than 20 years.

As Blas watched his family change — his father and mother and siblings passed away and he welcomed grandchildren and great-grandchildren — he also saw those elk numbers drop. Hunters stopped coming from around the state and country. Elk stopped pouring past his tree by the hundreds.

"Not only was there a high density of hunters in the area, but when there were a high number of predators in there that also influenced the elk," Brimeyer said. "... the resident elk shifted further into Grand Teton Park. While the park population remained strong we didn't see the distribution where the hunters could have opportunity to hunt."

This season, Area 79 does not have its own license type anymore. Area 75 nearby is still open, and Game and Fish offers 42 resident tags there that also give the chance to hunt in Area 79 for four days.

Boundaries and land use have changed. The campground is closed where dozens of trailers once packed in a clearing.

But the biggest change for Blas came in June 2017, when Eleanor passed away.

ONE MORE VISIT

Even without Eleanor, Blas keeps returning to his area, and his tree. It's what keeps him alive, his family said.

Last year, he and Paula trekked to his tree with his rifle to look for elk sign. It was the first hunt without his wife and ever-present companion.

"His pace was slower, but his adrenalin was racing," she said. "He reminisced about all the trips to his tree, he and mom sitting on a log, waiting and watching for elk."

He plans to go back this year. His back isn't so great these days. He turned 89 on Aug. 4.

"I see him have less aches and pains and a bigger smile on his face while hunting," said Paula, tears welling in her eyes. "He walks faster when hunting."

If all goes according to plan, he will tow his old 1973 Prowler trailer back up the winding roads. Paula, Patsy and their husbands will go along. They can't think of him there alone. They will make food for him in their camper and invite him in to visit and eat. But he will sleep in his, and wake in the morning to look for elk and reminisce on old times.

And, if his back holds up, he will use his walking stick to hike back up to that tree in the path of the old migration and sit on the log by its side. It's no longer part of the hunt area, so he can't bring a rifle, but he can still visit.

There he'll think of the love of his life that once perched next to him, and the herds of elk that once wandered through, and the villages of friends who once crowded together and visited him in his trailer.

He will be sad, but also thankful, for the life he lived in the shadow of the Tetons.

— Christine Peterson is a freelance writer based in Newcastle. This is her second contribution to Wyoming Wildlife.

Blas Medina sits outside of the 1973 Prowler camper he tows to hunt camp each year. (Photo courtesy of the Medina family)

