

# Stairway to Heaven

*By Bruce Masterman (High River, Alberta)*



**The ridge has called my name for more than 30 years.**

It looms high above the scenic river valley in the Rocky Mountains west of the foothills town where we live. It's a steep, west-facing slope, which means it loses snow early in the spring, and most years is carpeted by May in a soft blanket of lush green grass and wildflowers.

I've cycled the paved highway that winds its way north along the valley, and I've caught trout in the river that flows adjacent to the road. Whenever I've played at the base of the ridge I've found myself peering longingly high above me and wondered what it would be like to be way up there.

I always wondered whether I'd be able to do it, physically, or would my bum hip and knee force me to turn around partway up. Nobody likes having to turn around.

Someday, I kept thinking, I will find out. But that day never came. Year after year passed and I still hadn't climbed the ridge. Friends would regale me with tales of having done it. They'd breathlessly describe it as if it were a spiritual experience.

My response would be mixed; although happy for them, I was upset at myself for not making it happen, year after year after year. It seems I always had an excuse – too sore, too fat, too old, too busy.

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, after a winter of physical sloth and frenetic work and volunteer schedule, I was sitting in my office, watching doves and robins splash in the bird bath as I contemplated death. Not my own, but of two close friends within a week.

Both were younger than 70, and both had gone quickly. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye to one of them, and the other didn't know I was even there when I visited the afternoon before he passed.

There's nothing like death to make one aware of his own mortality. As I sat pondering this reality, inspiration struck. Today I would hike the ridge.

I quickly pack a water bottle, lunch, bear spray, binoculars and hiking poles. Less than an hour later, I stand beside the car and ponder the ridge looming high above me. I note its steepness, as if seeing for the first time how very far it is to the top. It is an ambitious first hike of the season, to be sure, but it's time. Past time.

The day is warm and sunny with a strong west wind. The first few hundred yards go well, even though I can't seem to catch my breath. I've been fighting a cold, and of course the extra pounds aren't helping. I stop often to take pictures and savour the view of snow-covered mountains and the river flowing peacefully far below. Brilliant mauve prairie crocuses punctuate the landscape.

I reach the edge of a poplar grove. A flicker of white in the trees gives away three whitetail deer, grazing peacefully just 70 yards away. I quietly sneak away to leave them in peace.

I'm serenaded by a constant chorus of Columbian ground squirrels, their voices sharp, high-pitched squeaks. Some run for cover in their dens but

many do not. They watch, curious yet undisturbed, as I walk past. At the start of the hike, several golden eagles circled in the thermals above me; as I climb higher, some fly below me

An hour later, just about two-thirds of the way to the top, I'm breathing heavily and my winter-weary muscles are complaining. I sit on a flat boulder, where I sip water and eat orange slices and barbecued elk steak left over from our supper the night before. The elk is courtesy of my friend Tom, who was pushing 80 last November when he shot a fat cow near his log cabin, not 20 yards from where I tagged a whitetail buck just a few days earlier.

Evidence of elk surrounds me. The ground is indented with hoof prints and covered with droppings. I stop often to glass the openings on the ridge, hoping to see an elk. I'm also eager to see a black or grizzly bear on a distant ridge, but preferably not the one I'm on.

Continuing my slog upward, the top of the ridge is 75 yards away. But, when I get there, it proves to be a false summit, as there's yet another hill beyond it. A few minutes later, I top out. I finally made it. I can't stop smiling.

Here, the elk droppings are fresher – moist and soft when I poke them with a hiking pole. Suddenly, I smell elk. Their odour is heavy, musky, and I know they are close. I advance cautiously, using spruce and poplars for cover.

Then, there they are: four cow elk standing in a clearing a stone's throw away. Although the wind is in my favour and I'd tried to be stealthy, they've made me. Their tawny bodies are on full alert, ears upright as they peer directly at me.

On silent cue, they begin trotting, then disappear over a hill. I explore the

ridge top for an hour – spying several more elk, one feeding just 50 yards away – before I find a thick fallen log to sit on. For 30 minutes, I use the binoculars to scan the surrounding mountains, ridges and clearings, and the river far below.

There are elk everywhere, small herds of feeding cows and yearlings. The bulls have lost their ivory-tipped antlers but I spy a few small bachelor herds, and one big old buckskin-coloured boy on a distant ridge. I also spot small bunches of mule deer and three more whitetails.

From my high vantage point, I inhale the clear spring air and marvel at the view. I silently give thanks for the experience, the strength to get here and for good friends and family, past and present. I have finally made it to the top of the ridge. It took me 90 minutes of actual hiking, but the journey began more than three decades ago.

And now that I'm here I don't want to leave.



**Bruce Masterman** is an award-winning Alberta writer, book author, photographer, magazine assignment editor and college journalism instructor with a passion for conservation and almost anything outdoorsy. He contributes to various magazines, including *Outdoor Canada*, *The Conservator*, *West*, *Reader's Digest* and several others. Bruce is the author of two nonfiction books – *Heading Out: A Celebration of the Great Outdoors in Calgary and Southern Alberta*, and *Paradise Preserved: The Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area* – and has contributed to five others. Website: [www.brucemasterman.com](http://www.brucemasterman.com).