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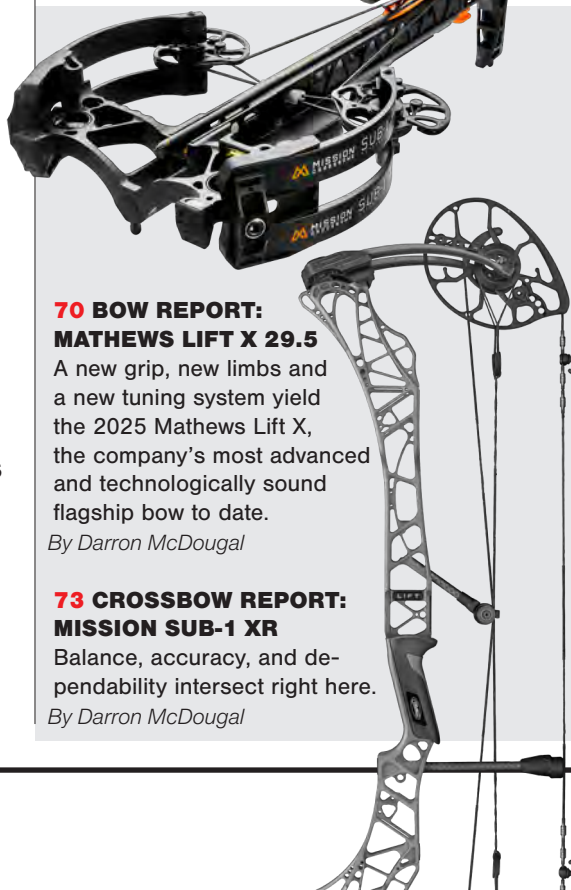
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No. 1 Blunder When Bowhunting Turkeys

Killing a turkey with archery gear is a challenge, but you can up your odds if you avoid this one common heat-of-the-moment mistake.

BY DAVE MAAS

Bill and I positioned our pop-up blind in the river-bottom, then I pressed a hen decoy into the spring snow at 9 yards, and a jake decoy (right) facing her nearby. Bill was prepared to shoot and I was on deck.

Soon after fly-down time, we spotted a few groups of toms working through the bottom. It wasn't difficult to spot their large black bodies against the white backdrop. Two longbeards stopped at 40 yards; they could easily see our decoys. Suddenly, three more longbeards arrived on the scene, and the two groups slugged it out. Even though it was two against three, the pair came out on top. As the three losers ran off, the winners decided to confront our jake decoy.

In half-strut, they walked directly toward us down a snow-covered two-track. The toms were bumping wings as they waddled closer, trying their best to stay on top of the crusted snow.

I expected Bill to draw his compound when the toms got to 20 yards, but he waited. The toms passed the 15-yard mark and Bill was still motionless. Finally, the toms were directly behind the jake decoy, facing us at 10 yards. Not sure why Bill hadn't drawn yet, I gave him a thumbs-up sign, pleading for him to get going.

As Bill completed his draw and then aligned his Magnus Bullhead in the opening of our blind, careful to keep the large head/neck-cutting broadhead in the center of the window, he unintentionally let up on his draw. This caused his arrow to spring forward, bumping the blind.

The toms heard it and became agitated. They weren't walking away — yet — but their heads



↑ Dress in black and you won't have to worry about a tom spotting you draw your bow in a pop-up blind.

and necks were now moving targets. Not good!

Bill was soon back to full draw, trying to find a stationary aiming point, but it wasn't happening. Seconds later, the toms quickly walked straight away, heads and necks still moving this way and that. Game over.

Later, Bill said he didn't want to spook the close-range birds because they were looking toward our blind. That was a mistake. We keep our pop-up blinds as dark as possible inside, and we dress like Johnny Cash. You must trust that birds can't see you in the shadows.

I suggest you draw your bow when a steadily approaching tom is at 15-ish yards. If he stops short and you have to let up on your draw, then so be it. Your best shot opportunity is the 1 to 3 seconds when a tom initially stops at your decoy. He's waiting for it to make the first move — that's when your arrow MUST be on its way. Good luck this spring! **BW**

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A November-Like Property Peek

Spring is the perfect time to walk your property, including sanctuaries, to learn all you can about the local whitetails.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
MARK KAYSER

The only problem with early spring is it looks like late fall, except you don't get to bowhunt whitetails. The landscape looks glum with its leafless environment, brown and gray façade, and the occasional snow drift tucked away on a north slope still waiting for a strong ray of spring sunshine to conquer its winter dominance.

With all this playing out on your whitetail hunting property, overcoming a bad case of cabin fever becomes almost impossible. Instead of waiting for those first green shoots to spring out of the soil, get busy evaluating your hunting property. There's no better time than early spring to assess, analyze and chart a course ahead to improve management goals and gauge your approach to hunting. Here's why.

WHY EARLY SPRING?

Before I dive into the nuts and bolts of why a pre-green inspection warrants your time, be selfish. Admit it. You have been holding back on treasure hunting your property for shed antlers, especially those from your target buck. Whitetails begin shedding antlers in January, and depending on genetics and stress, jettison through April. Typically, bucks that exhaust more testosterone (think mature here), drop antlers



↑ Shed hunting alone is a great reason for an early spring hike on your whitetail hunting property, but you can glean so much more from the venture.

earlier, giving you ample urges to hit the woods.

Selfishness is OK in this early intrusion mission. Finding shed antlers sheds light on the actual size of a buck. I cannot tell you how many times trail camera images of bucks during the rut fooled us on size until we shot a deer or were able to examine its shed antlers. In most cases, the trail camera images suggested a smaller size, especially in mass, to what a buck sported in real life.

You also may sadly come across

deer that succumbed to winter, possibly from wounding or predation. Although a bummer, this allows you to remove any unlucky target bucks from a future hit list. Now on to the analytical reason to hit the woods prior to the spring green up. You see the woods as they appeared when you left them after hunting season.

Yes, the terrain of early spring highly resembles what it appeared like during late fall. No leaves on limbs provides an unobstructed vision through

the woodlands. Trails are even more defined by winter usage and moisture, leaving routes packed by hooves in the telltale mud of spring. You clearly see where deer prefer to travel, giving you the opportunity to mark these pathways on your HuntStand hunting app or memory.

Also glaringly standing out in the dull backdrop are the signs of the previous rut. Like muddy trails, scrapes of a few months back, some even used yet, stick out more obviously than a freshly staked ground blind on a soybean field edge. Look for large scrapes that indicate community use along field edges and swarms of scrapes leading to possible sanctuaries, or unknown food sources such as a hidden acorn factory.

Rubs also stand out in the barren backdrop. Those of yesteryear lack the sheen and glistening sap of those created just a few months beforehand. Like scrapes, note rubs of significant size and groups of rubs whether strung along field edges or interior travel lines. Marking these rub masses on your hunting app could lead you to new hideouts like a trail of cookie crumbs to a cookie thief.

As you begin to amass clues, unleash your inner bloodhound. It's time to follow the trails and go where you couldn't during hunting season. That's right —

remove the “do not disturb” sign and invade the bedrooms on your property.

DISTURB NOW, NOT LATER

Now is the time to go right into a sanctuary. But time it accordingly. If your spring has not sprung and winter lingers, deer could still be stressed. Stay out. When deer get a few weeks of warm weather, sunshine and maybe a hint of green, then you have the green light to roust the deer for a brief trip into the homeland.



↑ Early spring is an ideal time to evaluate the nutritional needs on your property. You may need to add a supplemental feeding program to your property.

Follow the notes you made on your hunting app with a further foray along routes of rubs and scrapes. Take the trails straight into bedding cover to give you a firsthand look of how deer use refuge on your property, and to find those occasional shed antlers dropped while deer bed.

Again, make notes of trail junctions, hordes of beds, and possible perimeter stand sites you could set up before deer season that don't invade a bedroom. Make sure you use your time in



a sanctuary wisely as you do not want to make repeated trips into these deer privacy zones, even during spring. Rambling through any deer bedroom on a random schedule throughout the year erases the safety issue of the thicket, ridge or hollow they prefer.

PUTTING TOGETHER THE PIECES

Finally do a food assessment. Does it appear that deer still have food in the region, or are they beginning to travel outside your property more than usual to make up for a lack of calories? Scrutinize stands of oaks for signs of extreme digging for acorns. Evaluate food plots to see if they still offer nutrition or have been ravaged to the root. And in extreme instances, examine browse species for evidence of overbrowsing and the creation of a distinct browse line from hungry deer.

If any of these, plus missing



↑ An early season hike on your whitetail property can reveal trails that when easily followed can lead you toward future ambush sites.

deer, stand out, you may need a nutritional overhaul. A future food plot addition and forestry projects should top your “to do” list, but you may also need to consider a supplemental feeding program (where legal). Companies such as Moultrie produce a variety of feeders from 30 gallons to more than 300 gallons of feed rationing available.

Better yet, Moultrie, in combination with its Moultrie Mobile app, allows you to operate the

↑ Last year's rubs show you whitetail activity, and they stand out in the early spring. Follow a rub line and it could lead you to a new ambush site.

feeder, monitor battery life and even supervise feed levels from the comfort of anywhere. Add in a solar charger and the entire operation becomes a hands-free chore only requiring the occasional fill on your behalf. This team provides a break to your limited food plot or forestry resources yet keeps deer healthy, and home-bound. Remember, going into spring, a doe is growing fawns within, and a buck is sprouting new antlers. Both require an extreme amount of energy that your land may not be able to deliver before the spring resurgence.

Early spring may seem like a depressing time of the year, but an extended visit to your hunting property combined with a keen assessment could reveal a promising future ahead. Heck, you may even walk away with a few shed antlers to admire until the coming hunting season. **EW**



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Advanced Turkey Decoying Tips

If you've had spotty success with decoying gobblers into archery range, give these details a shot.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

The timber bordering the field I was hunting erupted with gobbles as I planted my decoys about 10 yards away before hopping into my ground blind. When legal shooting light arrived, I loaded a Victory VAP SS arrow tipped with a Rage Hypodermic onto my Mathews LIFT. A brief silence followed by slightly muffled gobbles meant that the two gobblers had floated to the forest floor. Would they stay in the timber or enter the field?

Suddenly, multiple dark puffs appeared about 200 yards away in the field. A few hens were joined by two jakes and two toms. The toms appeared to be fixated on the hens, while the jakes were seemingly tagging along. With my decoys plainly visible, I let their curiosity and possible dominance build. Soon, the flock had cut the distance to 100 yards, but the toms had no apparent interest in my decoys, until...

One of the jakes erratically broke off and beelined to my decoys. On arrival, he even hopped onto one of my hen decoys and awkwardly tried breeding it. The toms noticed and immediately came running in. As they approached the decoys, I picked out the tom on the left. My arrow flashed through his chest. That tom is one of dozens that I've bow-killed at less than 15 yards in the decoys over the last 20-some years.

There is nothing in turkey hunting like shooting a mature



gobbler with a bow at point-blank range. If you've had minimal or even no success with decoying gobblers in that close, give the following considerations a whirl.

GO AUTHENTIC

If you're having scant success with decoying turkeys, your decoys could be the problem. If they look fake to you, why would a gobbler forsake all commonsense and come running in with his beard swinging? If you've read a few of my many turkey hunting articles

across several publications and websites over the years, you've probably read that I started out turkey hunting with cheap decoys and always struggled to get consistent encounters with toms.

In 2010, I purchased a Dave Smith Upright Hen decoy and immediately experienced better success. When I spent \$165 a year or two later and purchased a Dave Smith 3/4 Strut Jake, my success literally skyrocketed. Those two decoys created the breakthrough I needed to pull toms in with

↑ There are several details to consider when setting up, but the first important step to consistent decoy success is buying decoys that actually look like turkeys. If your decoys don't cause you to do a double-take, they're probably not realistic enough.

→ Setting up on the highest point in a field is how the author usually goes about his decoy setups. It gives the decoys maximum visibility, and any gobbler that enters the field has a chance to see it and respond. The “high point” where this hunt took place has produced a number of archery toms.

↓ When placing decoys, make sure you’ll be looking away from the sun during both morning and evening hunts. Aiming into the sun needlessly adds difficulty to your shot, and your motion of drawing back your bow will be highlighted. Think things through and always factor the sun into your setups.



unparalleled consistency. I’d say my response rate to those decoys, if a tom sees them, is at least 75 percent. I’ve since experimented with Avian-X decoys, and they, too, look incredibly lifelike. I’ve enjoyed similar success with them, including the hunt referenced in my opener.

If you price out Dave Smith and Avian-X decoys, they look like huge pills to swallow just for turkeys. However, you cannot

argue with the results. I know other hunters who’ve switched, and their eyes were also opened to the difference. If you want to have tons of decoying success, use turkey decoys that look so real that they startle you when you look out your blind window.

PLACEMENT DETAILS

Location is everything for decoy placement. It’s so easy to put decoys in poor spots when you

hear a gobble and set up fast. Slow down and take an extra 10-20 seconds (if possible) to analyze where a tom will likely come from so you can set your decoys in the most visible location.

Since I almost always use a jake decoy, I want approaching gobblers to see it from a distance. I’ve found that it works best to give them a chance to size it up before committing rather than have them pop out 20 yards away from it and become startled.

To give your decoys maximum visibility, consider your surroundings. If you’re hunting on a field, look for the highest point. This is usually a great setup, and if you haven’t pre-scouted the property, it’s usually the best bet. From such locations, I’ve had birds see my decoys from up to 400 yards away and come on a string.

Setting up downhill from a bird or placing your decoys in a valley usually isn’t too good; it’s easy to lure turkeys uphill but not downhill. If you’re in the timber on flat

ground, consider any trails or logging roads that turkeys might travel or look down. The idea is to make your decoys as visible as possible in the immediate area. If you encounter a tom, he has to see your decoys, or you cannot expect a shot opportunity to unfold.

Decoy distance is another factor. If you have the time, carefully pace out your ideal shot yardage from your blind. Several times I’ve set my decoys way too close to my blind while setting up in the inky pre-dawn lighting. The problem with setting them too close is the yardage likely doesn’t correspond with your top pin, and if you aim with the top pin anyway, you’ll hit low. I did this on a South Dakota tom in 2014.

I set my decoys only 4 yards away because it was dark and I was so preoccupied with not spooking the roosted birds. Thankfully, my arrow took out his drumsticks and he expired quickly, but I had been aiming for a middle-of-the-body lung shot.

Lesson learned.

If you're going to set the decoys ultra-close, practice at that range so you know where to aim in order for your arrow to strike home. Or, determine the closest distance that works with your 20-yard pin. I shoot a stout setup, and from 10-20 yards, there is little variance in impact. So, I usually set my decoys about 10 yards away. It's a nice easy shot, but not too close.

A common blunder is setting up facing into the sun. Whether you're sitting in a ground blind or not, always know where the sun will rise (morning hunts) and set (evening hunts). It's almost always safe to set up facing north, but west is best for the morning, and east is best for the afternoons. If the sun is shining on you or into



↑ Anytime you pull turkeys within 10 yards, you've made a great setup.

your blind, you'll struggle to get drawn without being detected, plus the sun will make aiming nearly impossible.

I almost always put out a hen and jake decoy. A realistic jake, as I discussed earlier, just brings the toms running. However, particularly in pressured areas or in areas with lots of punky jakes, toms will avoid jake decoys. If this happens, especially if the gobbler(s) I'm hunting has (have) hens, I hunt the following morning with one or two hen decoys and ditch the jake. I've found that hens are more likely to come to hen decoys than a jake-and-hen combo, and bringing in the hens is the best chance to get a crack at a decoy-shy gobbler. If the hens trust the decoys, the tom often will, too.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While using decoys, especially on public lands, you're doing so at your own risk. Remember, there are other hunters out there, including folks toting shotguns. Use commonsense with decoys, and in areas with lots of hunters, you might consider leaving the jake out of the mix. There isn't a gobbler out there worth risking your life.

There is nothing novel about the tips outlined here, but I see a lot of hunters overlook them, and their success rates consequently suffer. To consistently bow-kill turkeys, you need to pull them in close. Decoys are the best way to bring birds to 10 yards for an easy shot, and these tips will increase your odds for such an encounter. **EW**

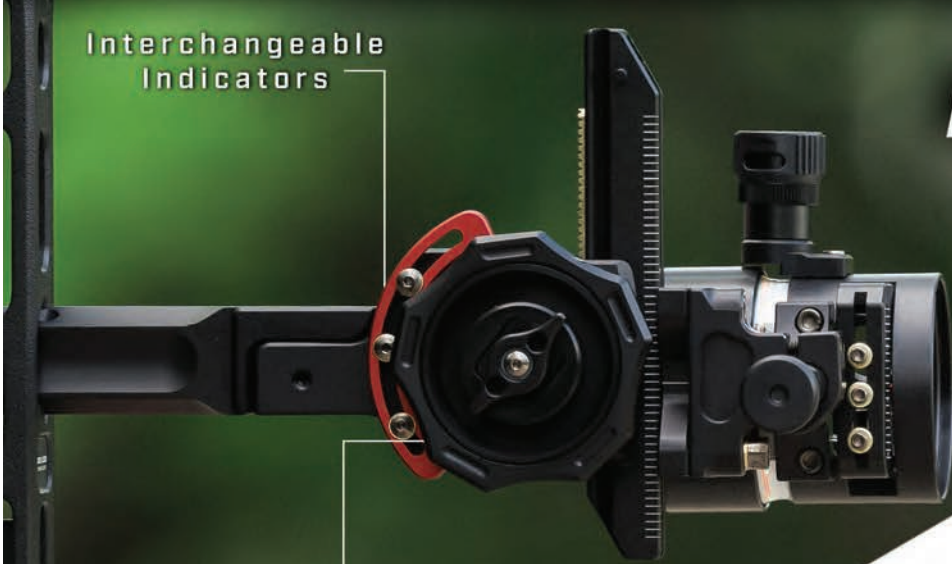
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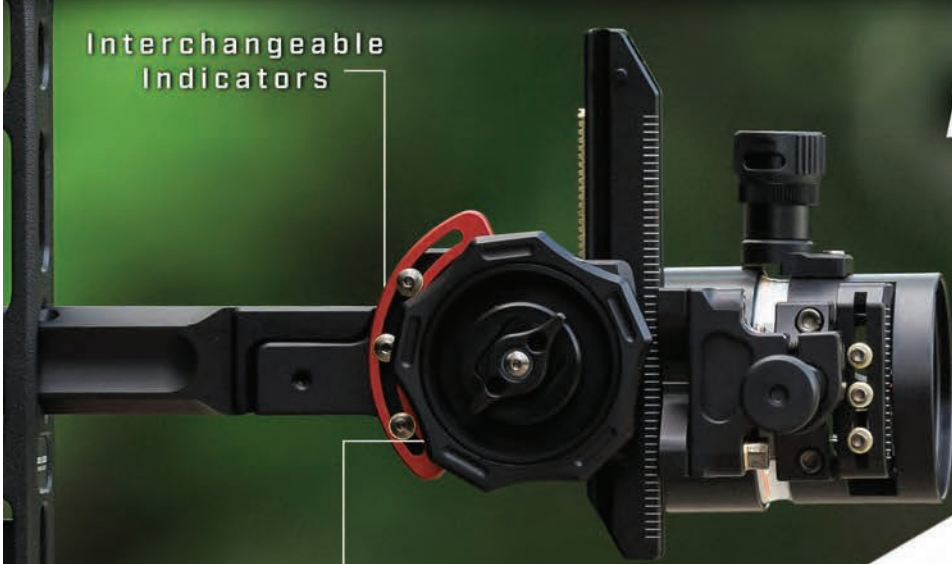
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Big game hunt with firearm	19%	26%
Bullseye archery other than NASP®	14%	28%
3-D archery competition	17%	32%
Bowhunt	17%	33%
Bowfish	8%	37%

Furthermore, 18% introduced family members to archery

* Data taken from the 2017 NASP® Student Survey (6,715 Responses; +/- 2%)



NASP Latest News

NASP 2025 National Tournament schedule announced, and registration opens for 2025 NASP Educator and Coaches Conference.

BY STEPHANIE EVANS, NASP PROGRAM MANAGER

NASP 2025 NATIONAL TOURNAMENT SCHEDULE ANNOUNCED

The National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) is proud to announce its 2025 tournament dates and student scholarship opportunities. NASP continues to bring safe in-school archery to 1.3 million students annually in 49 states. Since inception in 2002, NASP has reached more than 23.5 million students and over 112,485 adult instructors!

These students look forward to participating in local, regional, state or national tournament events each year. NASP is tremendously excited about the upcoming national tournament series planned for spring 2025.

The 2025 national tournament series will begin with the Western National Tournament to be held at the Mountain America Center in Sandy, Utah, on April 25-26, followed by the Eastern National Tournament to be held at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville, Kentucky, on May 8-10.

The series of national-level competitions will culminate with the NASP Championship Tournament to be held at the Myrtle Beach Convention Center in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, on June 5-7, 2025. Each tournament will include Bullseye as well as the NASP IBO 3-D Challenge competition.

Top teams and individuals will be selected from the combined results of both Western and Eastern National Tournaments to have the opportunity to register for the Championship. In addition, top male and female individual winners from the combined results of both national tournaments will be invited to the exciting NASP Scholarship Shoot-Off to be held at the end of the June Championship Tournament.

In addition to the traditional individual and team scholarships that are awarded at the national events, NASP is delighted to continue awarding up to 120 additional \$500 scholarships to be awarded randomly to tournament participants. Simply competing in a Bullseye round will be the “requirement” for the chance to be selected for a \$500 award. Upon graduation, archers can apply these funds to any post-secondary education or training program of their choice. This wouldn’t be possible without the generosity of our scholarship program sponsors!



NASP President Tommy Floyd said, “2024 was outstanding as we reached more students than ever before. These large national tournaments are the culminating events for thousands of student archers who have been practicing and competing since the fall. It is so rewarding to witness so many dedicated archers taking part in these national tournaments. These are truly something special!”

“Thanks to our generous sponsors, we will again be awarding a huge number of randomly selected scholarships at Western, Eastern and the Championship Tournaments. At the end of the season, there will be up to 120 students who will receive post-secondary financial support just for showing up to compete! We thank our incredible sponsors who have made this type of opportunity possible for our participating archers!”

In addition to the (120) \$500 random awards, NASP will continue to provide:

Team Scholarships totaling \$54,000 — based on combined overall finished results from both National Tournaments:

- 1st place:** \$24,000 (24 team members @ \$1,000 each)
- 2nd place:** \$18,000 (24 team members @ \$750 each)
- 3rd place:** \$12,000 (24 team members @ \$500 each)

Individual Scholarship Shoot-off totaling \$30,000 — top five male and female finishers from combined results from both National Tournaments compete at the Championship Tournament:

1st place: \$5,000 Male and Female

2nd place: \$4,000 Male and Female

3rd place: \$3,000 Male and Female

4th place: \$2,000 Male and Female

5th place: \$1,000 Male and Female

Ties: \$1,000 each is minimum per qualifying archer.

Visit naspschools.org and click on “Tournaments” for more information on these events.

REGISTRATION OPENS FOR 2025 NASP EDUCATOR AND COACHES CONFERENCE

The fourth NASP Educator and Coaches Conference — July 24-25, 2025 — is open for registration. This great educational opportunity for teachers and coaches will be held at The Park Vista — a Double-Tree by Hilton in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

NASP will offer attendees a full 2-day conference, with concurrent sessions led by some of the nation's most successful NASP educators, coaches and industry professionals. These experienced individuals will share their expertise and best practices on various aspects of running a successful NASP program and working with student archers in grades 4-12.

Attendees will leave with new ideas and resources to enhance their own archery programs. We are excited to announce the following sessions being presented:

- Effective Practice Techniques – Ashley First of Indiana
- 1820 Arrow Maintenance and Tuning – Carri Garrett and Easton Staff
- Genesis Bow Maintenance and Tuning – Brennan Factory Staff
- Coaching Kids Prior To and During a Tournament - Terrie Streetman of Louisiana
- Team Building Tips – Lee Scripture of North Carolina
- Coaching the Advanced Archer – Ladney Keener & Brad Cowan of Oklahoma
- Coaching the Beginning Archer – Jim DeLine of Texas
- Coaching Mixed Groups of Archers – Jeff Fryman and Brad Yearsley of Kentucky
- Running an Effective Local Tournament – James Sanders of Texas
- Dealing With Target Panic/Mental Management – Alexander Villanueva of Texas
- Conditioning/Health/Fitness – Brad and Stacy Briscoe of Kentucky
- Introducing the NASP® IBO 3D Challenge – Chelsi Leggett of Missouri
- Adaptive Archery Strategies- Special Needs Instruction – Kia Wallen of Kentucky
- From Educator to Coach- Making the Transition from Teaching In-School to Coaching an Afterschool Club – Susan Provance of Missouri



NASP President Tommy Floyd said, “We are excited to once again bring NASP educators and coaches together from all over the country to learn from each other. This is one of our favorite events of the year, to bring so many minds together to learn and network. We anticipate the energy level and excitement to be very high. Gatlinburg, Tennessee, will be a fantastic location for NASP educators and coaches to bring their families to one of the premier family vacation destinations in the South! We are expecting this event to be one of our best conferences yet.”

Conference registration costs remain very affordable, as well as a great lodging rate at one of the premier properties in Gatlinburg. Note that registration will close when maximum capacity is reached. Look for updates on this event by visiting naspschools.org.

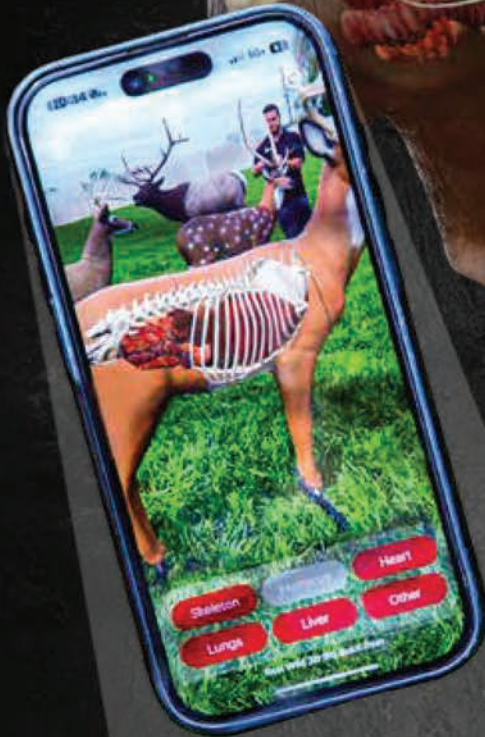
NASP: Changing Lives One Arrow at a Time

NASP is an activity that doesn't discriminate based on popularity, athletic skill, gender, size or academic ability. It's open to any student — and its biggest supporters are professional educators. NASP promotes instruction in target archery as part of the in-school curriculum in grades 4-12. Through participation in the shooting sports, students are learning focus, self-control, discipline, patience and the life lessons required to be successful in the classroom and in life. For more information, including the four steps for bringing NASP to your school, visit naspschools.org. **BW**

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Trail Camera Fun!

Where legal, capturing images of wildlife with trail cameras can help with scouting, and it's just plain fun, too.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHUCK ADAMS

Tall antlers floated above the brush 75 yards away. One second the landscape was empty. The next, the big rack appeared like a lightning bolt. My heart leaped into my throat and I gripped my bow in a white-knuckle fist.

"Relax," I told myself. "Tense muscles and good shooting do not mix!"

The big boy popped out 30 yards away. I had never seen him before from my stand, and had never laid eyes on him in the distance with a binocular. But I recognized the buck. Several times during summer, he had passed one of my trail cameras after nightfall. His 12-point antlers were distinct — a typical 5x5 with two extra tines on the right.

Record-book whitetails are rare near my Wyoming home. There's too much rifle hunting pressure, and antler genetics aren't that strong. But trail camera pictures proved this nocturnal buck was a Pope and Young contender. I put up a hang-on treestand near his nighttime route and kept my fingers crossed.

Once in a while, things work out in bowhunting. Near the start of the September Wyoming archery season, I climbed to my stand in mid-afternoon. Just after sundown, the 12-point whitetail appeared. Less than a minute later, my arrow smashed through both lungs as he trudged past at 20 yards. The antlers weren't huge by national standards, but still scored about 140 Pope and Young points. For my part of Wyoming, that's big.

DIFFERING OPINIONS — AND LAWS

Opinions among bowhunters are mixed when it comes to trail cameras. So are laws from state to state. Some archers scoff at trail cameras and believe they create an unfair hunting advantage. Others will not enter the woods unless they have monitored critters with cameras.

My opinion on the matter is simple: If it's legal and you're having fun, I say suit yourself. Animals will still have a huge advantage, and bowhunting difficulty will still be high. In fact, the very process of using trail cameras can be a challenge. You've got to scout terrain, set cameras where animals are likely to pass, check for movement patterns over weeks or months, and formulate a hunting plan. I might have bagged my 12-point Wyoming buck without using a trail camera, but it helped me decide where to hunt.

In Wyoming, basic trail cameras are legal during archery season, but remote-access cellular cameras are not. In the neighboring state of Montana, where I also bowhunt, any kind of trail camera is illegal during



↑ This nighttime image of a good-sized Wyoming whitetail buck (inset) helped the author to place a treestand along a likely travel corridor. The deer showed up during archery season within solid bow range.

hunting season. Trail camera laws vary considerably. In a few states, the rules can be complex. For example, it might be legal to use trail cameras on private property, but it's illegal on public land. Always be sure to check local statutes before you use these tools.

The quality, versatility, and size of trail cameras have steadily

improved over the years. For example, my Bushnell trail cameras from the early 2000's were big and bulky, would not accept high-capacity SD cards, offered limited options for still photo and video setup, drained batteries quickly, and produced relatively poor image quality. By comparison, the latest trail cameras like Browning



↑ Trail cameras near the author's Wyoming home capture images of grizzly bears, mountain lions, and many other types of wildlife. Just knowing what is walking by is worthwhile in and of itself.

models I favor today are ¼ the size, accept high-capacity SD cards, have longer battery life, offer a myriad of photo timing and video options, and can be set for several levels of image quality.

SMART SHOPPING

A mind-boggling array of trail camera brands and models is available today through retail stores and online. But it is easy to do research online and/or with help from your sporting goods dealer. Most modern trail cameras will serve you well if you match your needs to features the units offer. No need to spend extra money on options you will never use. For example, I cannot legally employ more expensive cellular cameras in my state, so basic and less costly non-cell cameras are all I need.

More sophisticated cell cameras

might be a better bet if they are legal where you hunt. So-called wireless or Wi-Fi cameras are relatively useless unless you plan to hunt within shouting distance of your home or cabin. These work only if an internet router is solidly in range. By comparison, cellular trail cameras allow instant programming and image access wherever cell service is available. With your smartphone and an inexpensive cellular-camera data plan, you can quickly check your cameras without the hassle of driving to the hunt area and manually retrieving SD cards. You can also remotely adjust camera settings. Cellular trail cameras eliminate the possibility of spreading human scent as you check images — another plus. Some hunters believe such high-tech help is cheating. But it's legal in many places. To each his own.



↑ Spring black bears are prime candidates for using trail cameras. Whether it's a nice bruin that the author passes up, or a skittish nighttime whopper, the photos make every bowhunt more enjoyable.

My favorite uses of trail cameras are on my own property for fun, and during whitetail and spring black bear seasons.

I live along a river frequented by a variety of wildlife. I routinely capture photos of grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, mule deer, whitetails, elk and moose on my cameras — not to mention rabbits, skunks, raccoons and other small critters. Most are within 100 yards of my house. It is a treat to discover what's walking by. I've never hunted near cameras on my property, but capturing images is reward enough.

WOODLAND CLOWNS

Spring black bear can be legally baited in most parts of Wyoming. May and early June bowhunting for bruins is enjoyable. Several friends and I set up bait barrels,

install non-cell trail cameras, and review bear photos each day in camp. A painted stripe on my barrels is 30 inches above the bottom to clearly show a mature bear's backline height. Any bruin that stands on all fours above the stripe is a good one. Any bear that stands near the top of the 35-inch-tall barrel is a whopper!

I have yet to shoot a spring black bear in Wyoming, despite seeing dozens each year from my stands. The big boys are smart and almost always feed at night. Even if I don't shoot a whopper, I still enjoy watching these clowns of the woods. Sooner or later, I figure a "barrel blocker" will make a mistake and show up in the daylight. Fingers crossed! Meanwhile, I'll watch smaller black bears and drool over nighttime trail camera images. **BW**



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NEWGEAR

BY GORDY KRAHN

RAVIN LR CROSSBOW

The all-new LR Crossbow from Ravin is modeled after today's advanced long-range rifles, its ergonomic design and integrated technology creating a forgiving crossbow that delivers that same stability, precision and handling. It is Ravin's most accurate crossbow to date, delivering speeds of 450 fps and 222 foot-pounds of kinetic energy. Its longer profile enhances balance, reducing recoil transfer to the shooter for increased stability. The adjustable turret scope, paired with a full-length scope rail, allows for the addition of precision accessories to optimize long-range performance. The Ravin LR comes with a 1-8x24mm adjustable-turret scope, scope level, three-arrow quiver, draw handle and three premium arrows.

MSRP: \$2,549.99; ravincrossbows.com



HAWKE OPTICS XB30 ZOOM FFP 2-8X36MM CROSSBOW SCOPE

The XB30 Zoom FFP 2-8x36mm crossbow scope from Hawke delivers the accuracy of FFP (first focal plane). Users can now zoom in and out through the entire magnification range of the scope and trust that the distance markers on the reticle are correct. Unlike a second focal plane scope, where the reticle size is constant throughout the magnification range, the reticle size in the XB30 Zoom FFP changes throughout the magnification range. Users can choose a low zoom setting for close shots (reticle will be small) and a high zoom setting for longer shots (reticle will be large). Three models are available for crossbows with speeds of 385-420, 425-465 or 470-510 fps. The scope has illuminated central aimpoints, a 30mm monotube chassis, 1/2-MOA fingertip-adjustable turrets and fixed parallax at 50 yards. It is equipped with Hawke's System S7 premium optics with 16-layer, fully multicoated lenses for crystal clear vision. The scope has removable zoom throw levers in both Standard and XL sizing that work with a fast-focus eyepiece. It comes with flip-up lens covers, is nitrogen-purged, shockproof, waterproof and fogproof, and carries Hawke's lifetime warranty. MSRP: \$419; hawkeoptics.com



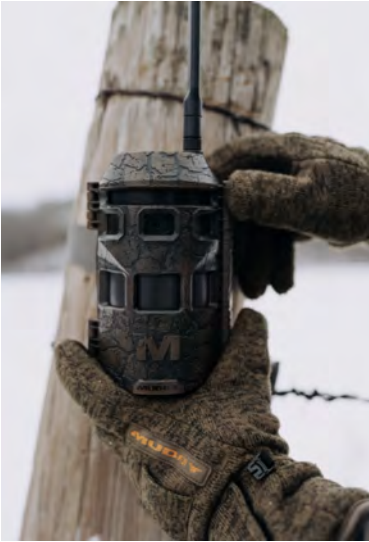
EASTON FMJ MAX ARROW

Easton Archery's 5mm FMJ Max Arrow delivers an outstanding blend of high velocity and FOC accuracy. Crafted in the USA, it features a seamless, light Acu-Carbon core fused with a precision aluminum jacket that creates greater ballistic efficiency, higher energy at impact, and increases momentum for taking down big game. The FMJ Max utilizes the new 5mm Microlite Nock System, featuring shorter ears and an improved throat design for increased forgiveness and easier tuning. Finished with a hard-anodized OD Green matte diamond plate aesthetic, FMJ Max arrows are available in both Standard and Match grade versions and come in five spines (200, 250, 300, 340 and 400) to fit virtually any bowhunting setup. MSRP/Six-pack fletched: \$113.99/Standard grade; \$139.99/Match grade; eastonarchery.com



BOHNING ALPHA VANE

The Alpha is Bohning's newest and most versatile vane profile — a design that combines stealth, speed and torque — made of AR1250 vane material, which is the stiffest and quietest material that Bohning produces. The vane profile features an advanced torque apex, which is the position on the vane providing peak rotational torque, combined with a gradual taper to the tail of the vane, which creates the optimal balance of spin and stealth. At the rear is a contoured tail, which minimizes vane flutter. A low-profile design allows clearance on even the tightest bow setups. Blazer Bond or Fletch Fuse adhesives are recommended for best adhesion. Alpha vanes are available in 14 colors to match any archery setup. MSRP: \$20.24/36-pack; bohning.com



MUDDY TRIFECTA 180 CELLULAR TRAIL CAMERA

The Trifecta 180 Cellular Trail Camera from Muddy captures 180-degree photos and videos by combining 180-degree motion detection with three independent PIR sensors. It captures and delivers panoramic-style photos and videos by breaking an area into three distinct zones — providing users with the equivalent of three cameras in a single device. When triggered, the camera responds immediately, rotating and situating the lens in the zone where movement was detected. The resulting 36MP photos, or 1080P videos with audio, are then accessible on any mobile device via the Command Pro app. The Trifecta's Single-zone Capture mode takes a single photo or video of the triggered zone only, as most traditional trail cameras do. MSRP: \$119.99; gomuddy.com

WENZEL'S FARM VENISON SNACK STICKS

All Wenzel's Farm Venison Snack Sticks are made with grass-fed venison and are gluten free, making them a great, high-protein snack for hunters who want a grab-and-go snack. They are available in three varieties, Original, Teriyaki and Jalapeno Cheddar. Wenzel's Farm offers 14 tasty beef snack stick varieties and five varieties of jerky, all of which are crafted in small batches using premium cuts of meat, perfectly seasoned and naturally hard-wood smoked — a tradition that has been in place since the Wenzel's Family first started producing high-quality meat products in 1949. The Venison Snack Sticks come in a single-serve 1.5-ounce package. MSRP: \$16.99/Package of eight; wenzelsfarm.com



KUIU PRO G3 BINO HARNESS

The Pro G3 Bino Harness from KUIU integrates a new Rail-Lock Accessory Connection System, a quiet waterproof softshell fabric with a fleece-lined interior and redesigned pocketing for improved functionality. The Rail-Lock Track System allows for the quick and secure attachment of accessory holders, including options for rangefinders, phones, bear spray canisters, ammo and more. At the core of the harness is a structured pouch featuring a forward-folding lid, made from ultra-quiet fleece-lined softshell fabric. The pouch is equipped with a waterproof/dustproof membrane, ensuring that optics remain dry, clean and clear, even in the harshest conditions. KUIU has engineered the Pro G3 with a shapeable pouch opening for easy and unrestricted access. MSRP: \$129; kuiu.com

SITKA ALPHA FLEECE HOODIE

Built to take a beating, the Fleece Hoodie from Sitka Gear features double weave stretch StormFleece material that handles rugged environments and wind gusts with ease while a DWR coating mitigates unexpected moisture during the hunt. The Alpha Fleece Hoodie sports a seamless shoulder construction and an intentionally positioned zippered kangaroo pocket to ensure comfort and accessibility while the user is wearing a pack. Its low-bulk fitted hood provides coverage without encroaching on field of view. It is available in Olive Green, Buckskin and Optifade Subalpine and Optifade Waterfowl Marsh camo patterns. MSRP: \$179; sitkagear.com





A person wearing camouflage clothing is holding a black crossbow. The crossbow is held vertically, with the barrel pointing downwards. The background is a grassy field with a wooden fence and trees in the distance. The lighting suggests it might be late afternoon or early morning.

ARE CROSSBOW HUNTERS **REALLY** **THE BAD GUYS?**

A lot of controversy about crossbows and crossbow hunters runs rampant throughout the hunting community. Where do you stand on crossbow hunting?

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

“The amount of controversy that runs rampant throughout the hunting community is alarming.”

If you've read enough of my articles, perhaps you recall that I worked for a decade in a family owned archery pro shop. In addition to the mountains of compound bows and related equipment that I sold during my tenure, I also set up and sold dozens of crossbows. Not once during that decade, though, did I hunt with a crossbow myself. I have deep roots in compounds, and that is my passion and preference.

When I left the pro shop to pursue my writing career, there was hardly a lapse in my regular handling of crossbows. Almost immediately, I became the editor of a bowhunting magazine that is no longer published. I also wore the second hat of the equipment editor of that magazine, as well as a trade publication owned by the same publisher. Those roles entailed testing and reporting on compounds and crossbows for every issue. I even attended a media hunt with a few other outdoors writers/editors in Ohio in 2013. There, we hunted exclusively

↓ If your reason for switching to a crossbow is to make archery easier, that's probably a poor reason. Bowhunting is meant to be challenging.



↑ For mentoring a new hunter who isn't sure if they even like hunting, crossbows are a great avenue, as it usually doesn't take a novice shooter long to become proficient with one.

with TenPoint crossbows. It was the first time I had ever hunted with a crossbow. Out of seven hunters, I was the only one who didn't have a shooter buck walk by after five days of hunting.

More recently, I accepted the role of testing and reporting on crossbows for Bowhunting World and Grand View Outdoors' archery trade publication, Archery Business.



All of this is to say that even though I'm primarily a compound shooter, I've been immersed in crossbows for the last 23 years.

Last May, I decided it was time to experience a successful crossbow hunt to see what it is all about. I had already taken dozens of gobblers with compound bows since 2004, so I had nothing to prove. Two mornings in, I flattened a tom right in the decoys. It was cool to experience how deadly a crossbow can be and the confidence I had as I squeezed the trigger. It almost felt easy.

As someone who prefers to hunt with a compound but has had dealings with crossbows for more than two decades, I want to clear the air just a little bit and give both sides — those who love crossbows and those who hate them — some things to consider and evaluate. Let's discuss.

IMPACT OF CROSSBOWS DURING ARCHERY SEASONS

The greatest debate about crossbow hunting centers on who should be able to use one during regular archery hunting seasons, and whether or not they should even be allowed. When my family owned our archery pro shop in Wisconsin, the state allowed hunters only 65 years old or older, or disabled folks with a doctor's note to crossbow hunt. Aptly, the crossbow crowd was much narrower than it has been since Wisconsin more recently opened up crossbow hunting during the bow season to any properly licensed hunter.

In Wisconsin, like other states that have opened the gate to crossbow hunting, bowhunters wailed about the legislative move. To be fair, there was and is some level of merit to the concerns and complaints. For starters, gun hunters who want to extend their deer season without the commitment of learning a compound and becoming proficient with it now have an avenue that requires very little effort — many of these folks sight in a crossbow and then rarely practice with it, much like they do with their firearm of choice. In a state that allows more than one buck to be harvested, this means that more bucks will likely be harvested.

Also, I know that there are plenty of compound hunters who have switched to crossbows to greatly extend their range without the commitment of repetition on the range required to extend their effective range with a compound.

That is all fine and dandy, but we cannot ignore the caveats of unleashing crowds of crossbow hunters into the fields and forests. First, the legalization of crossbows during archery seasons means more hunters afield and busier public lands. Folks who never archery hunted



in their lives are now taking to the woods with a crossbow because it's easy compared to compound hunting. And from a conservation standpoint, spikes in harvest rates are a valid consideration. A 40-yard shot with a compound, for example, is one that a lot of compound hunters will pass or think hard about taking, while a lot of crossbow hunters are taking that shot, most making it with little effort.

Another element regarding conservation is wounding and losing animals. Some folks say that shooting a crossbow is "just like shooting a gun." Fundamentally, it is; you shoulder and shoot it much like a firearm. However, crossbows have much greater limitations than firearms. Still, some crossbow hunters get way too confident and lob bolts at distances they shouldn't. Even if a given crossbow can hit a baseball every time at 100 yards, it doesn't mean that an animal isn't subject to moving between the time the bolt departs the crossbow and when it arrives at the animal. Even the market's fastest crossbows — slightly over 500 fps — are roughly only a third as fast as a 12-gauge shotgun pushing slugs. As for rifles, even the modest .30-30 Winchester hits velocities exceeding 2,000 fps. Are crossbows just like rifles? Not even close.

Now that I've issued some concerns and considerations, let me clarify that I'm not calling crossbow hunters or crossbow hunting ugly. In and of itself, I have no problem with crossbows or crossbow hunting. Hunters toting all types of hunting equipment — not just crossbows — are subject to making poor calls at times.

↑ As a longtime archery hunter and outdoor writer, the author has had dealings with crossbows for more than two decades, but it wasn't until May 2024 that he committed to experiencing a successful crossbow hunt in order to see what it's all about.



↑ Even if you don't have special limitations, it's OK to hunt with a crossbow if that is what you want to do and it is legal.

OPINION: WHO SHOULD HUNT WITH A CROSSBOW

With the concerns aside, let's direct the conversation in another direction. I believe that crossbows are good within the right realm. I'm going to explain what that looks like from my perspective to get you thinking. If you disagree, fine; you are entitled to your own opinion.

First, the obvious crossbow candidates are those who are too small/young to draw a hunting-weight compound, those who are disabled, or those who are aging and dealing with aches and pains. If shooting a compound or traditional bow is hard on you and/or makes you experience discomfort, a crossbow makes a fine solution. Other folks, especially with the onset of colder temperatures and bulky apparel, can barely pull the minimum weight for compound hunting. Again, a crossbow is a viable solution to that dilemma.



Age and physical limitations aside, I see some other practical applications in which a crossbow is not only a better choice than a compound bow, but an ethical one. There are tons of blue-collar folks who love to hunt, but due to work and family life are unable to hunt more than a handful of times each fall. Likewise, they have almost no time to practice and develop compound proficiency. I'm not saying you don't need to practice with a crossbow. I am saying that it is easier to become proficient and deadly with a crossbow with minimal practice as compared to a compound bow. Someone who barely gets time to practice and hunt shouldn't tote a com-

pound and run the obvious risk of wounding animals. A crossbow is a more ethical choice, so long as ethical shot distances are observed.

Another solid example of when to break out a crossbow is when someone doesn't really know if they want to become a hunter. It makes a mentor's life so much easier.

Case in point. My nephew lives in the city. I've taken him turkey hunting with a shotgun, and he has taken a few birds. During the school year, he expressed a little bit of interest in deer hunting, and he got a compound bow. However, with school, hockey, and no place to shoot

his bow at home (I live an hour away, so my yard isn't a viable platform), letting him hunt deer with his compound bow would be a tremendous mistake that would likely lead to a wounded animal. Ultimately, I'd be setting him up for failure because he is not proficient with his bow. But, he wants to try deer hunting.

Because I live an hour

away and because he is so busy with school and sports, taking him hunting with a crossbow makes sense. I put my TenPoint TX440 into his hands at my house, and every single shot he has taken with it out to 60 yards has been a kill shot. I won't allow him to shoot that far at a deer, but it has given him the confidence that any deer 40 yards and closer is in big trouble. It also instills a lot of peace for me as his mentor. I'm not taking him hunting hoping he can hit a deer in the lungs; I'm taking him knowing that he can and almost certainly will. As I write this, I've taken him deer hunting twice, but we haven't had a deer within shooting range. We'll hunt once more before the season closes and hopefully have a mature doe walk by within 40 yards. If that happens and he loves deer hunting, I'll probably push him to get more serious with his compound.

If the considerations we've run through don't apply to you but you still want to or currently hunt with a crossbow, nothing is stopping you as long as you're legal to do so. Bowhunting requires a lot of time and passion, and if you love to hunt but don't have a passion for shooting 50

Devil's Advocates on Social Media

Have you ever read comments on social media big-buck posts? If so, you've probably seen the ugly comments, such as, "He cheated and shot it with a crossbow." "Nice farm deer." "Shoulda let it go another year." The list goes on. Maybe you've even made idiotic comments like those on the post of someone you've never even met.

Online trolling is an epidemic. Some people waste hours upon hours looking to stir things up rather than use their time positively and productively. It happens on social media, and it happens on online forums. People get incredibly brave and confident when they're on their phone or behind a keyboard. If you are or have been that person, ask yourself: Would I say this to someone's face? Is this message going to cause abuse and stir up hatred and negativity?

If you don't know the person and exactly how they killed the animal, then keep your comments to yourself. If you do know the person and that they used illegal measures to take the animal, contact the appropriate authorities rather than commenting on the post.

Hunters have a lot of good, positive interactions on social media, but for every positive exchange, there are plenty of negative and destructive ones. This is a trend that we must aim to change. Our hunting future could depend on it.



arrows or more a week, then there is nothing wrong with crossbow hunting. By doing so when you're physically able to draw and shoot a compound, however, you'll have to accept the fact that there are neigh-sayers out there who will give you flack for it, especially if you kill a monster buck. Most of that transpires when you hang a picture up at the local bow shop's bulletin board or post your picture to social media or hunting forums.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The amount of controversy that runs rampant throughout the hunting community is alarming. A large share of the "hate" is directed at crossbow hunters, though some trolls will nitpick at literally anything. Let me issue

a call to action: Hunters must stand with one another. I'm not asking everyone to agree that crossbows should be considered legal equipment during archery hunting season. If you're exclusively a compound hunter until you die, great, but don't hate on someone who chooses to hunt differently than you or has different preferences and outlooks. Remember: Some bowhunters who

use only recurves and longbows think that compound shooters are cheating.

In closing, I understand why crossbow hunters face more political fire than compound hunters. However, crossbow hunters aren't the bad guys. Anyone who hunts by the regulation booklet and practices sound ethics shouldn't be criticized, regardless of their preferred hunting tool. From chucking a spear, to hunting with a tactical semi-automatic rifle, there are many different ways to hunt and take game. Let's put more emphasis on standing together and agreeing to disagree than on hurling insults upon those who do things differently than we do. Why should we let something like a crossbow divide a group as great as the hunting community? [EW](#)

"Remember: Some bowhunters who use only recurves and longbows think that compound shooters are cheating."



2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Once again it's time to reveal our Readers' Choice Awards winners. As we've done for decades, we asked readers of *Bowhunting World* magazine to vote for their favorite hunting and archery brands. The manufacturers highlighted on the following pages were chosen as Readers' Choice Awards winners in 54 categories.

BOWHUNTING WORLD STAFF

Toward the end of last year, we asked readers like you of *Bowhunting World*, which is printed four times per year by Grand View Outdoors, to vote for your favorite hunting and archery brands. For convenience, readers could place votes for the 2025 Readers' Choice Awards via an online submission system.

To ensure we tapped into as many hunters as possible, we promoted the voting process heavily on all of our consumer Grand View Outdoors websites, as well as associated e-newsletters and dedicated e-mail lists. Like in previous years, the response to our call for votes was outstanding.

Here are the top products based on the collective voice of the *Bowhunting World* readership. Perhaps some of the results will surprise you. If so, maybe it's time to update your current gear list?

P.S. If you took the time to vote during this year's awards period, we say "thank you." If you missed your opportunity, then be sure to keep an eye out for next year's awards. We want your opinion to be heard.

COMPOUND BOW

GOLD: Mathews
SILVER: Bowtech
BRONZE: Hoyt

QUIVER

GOLD: TightSpot
SILVER: Mathews
BRONZE: Hoyt

HUNTING RELEASE

GOLD: T.R.U. Ball
SILVER: Scott
BRONZE: TruFire

ARROW REST

GOLD: QAD
SILVER: Hamskea
BRONZE: HHA

MOVABLE BOWSIGHT

GOLD: HHA
SILVER: Axcel
BRONZE: Spot Hogg

FIXED BOWSIGHT

GOLD: Axcel
SILVER: HHA
BRONZE: Black Gold

STABILIZER

GOLD: Bee Stinger
SILVER: Mathews
BRONZE: Shrewd

2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS RESULTS

MECHANICAL BROADHEAD

GOLD: G5
SILVER: Rage
BRONZE: SEVR

FIXED-BLADE BROADHEAD

GOLD: G5
SILVER: Muzzy
BRONZE: QAD

VANES

GOLD: Bohning
SILVER: AAE
BRONZE: TAC Vanes



BOWSTRINGS

GOLD: GAS
SILVER: ThreadZ Custom
BRONZE: Zebra



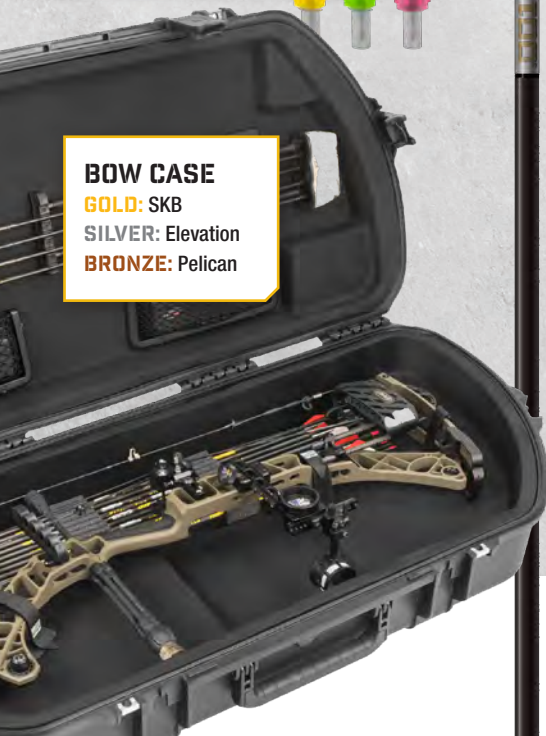
ARROW

GOLD: Easton
SILVER: Gold Tip
BRONZE: Victory



LIGHTED NOCK

GOLD: Nockturnal
SILVER: Lumenok
BRONZE: Glory Nock



BOW CASE

GOLD: SKB
SILVER: Elevation
BRONZE: Pelican

MANUFACTURER	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE
Bow (Compound)	Mathews	Bowtech	Hoyt
Bow (Traditional)	Bear	Hoyt	Black Widow Bows
Crossbow	Ravin	TenPoint	Mission
Bow Case	SKB	Elevation	Pelican
Hunting Release	T.R.U. Ball	Scott	TruFire
Target Release	T.R.U. Ball	Scott	Stanislawski
Arrow Rest	QAD	Hamskea Archery	HHA Sports
Arrow	Easton	Gold Tip	Victory Archery
Feather Fletching	Trueflight	Gateway	Ozark Feathers
Vanes	Bohning	AAE	TAC Vanes
Quiver	TightSpot	Mathews	Hoyt
Lighted Nock	Nockturnal	Lumenok	Glory Nock
Fixed-Blade Broadhead	G5	Muzzy	QAD
Mechanical Broadhead	G5	Rage	SEVR
Bowstring	GAS	ThreadZ Custom Bowstrings	Zebra
Peep Sight	Hamskea Archery	Specialty Archery	G5
Fixed Bowsight	Axcel	HHA Sports	Black Gold
Movable Bowsight	HHA Sports	Axcel	Spot Hogg
Stabilizer	Bee Stinger	Mathews	Shrewd
Bow Silencers	Limbsaver	Mathews	Bowjax
Camo Pattern	Mossy Oak	Realtree	Sitka
Clothing Manufacturer	KUIU	Sitka	ScentLok
Boots	Muck	LaCrosse	Rocky
Safety Harness	Hunter Safety Systems	Muddy	Summit
Pack	Badlands	Sitka	Alps OutdoorZ
Bino & Spotter	Vortex	Leupold	Bushnell
Rangefinder	Vortex	Leupold	Bushnell
GPS Unit	Garmin	Magellan	Kestrel
Hunting App	onX	HuntStand	HuntWise
Trail Camera	Moultrie	Browning	Stealth Cam
Cellular Trail Camera	Moultrie	Tactacam	Spartan
Hang-On Treestand	Millennium	Summit	Hawk Hunting
Climbing Treestand	Summit	Millennium	API
Ladder/Tripod	Millennium	Big Game	Muddy
Climbing Sticks	Hawk Hunting	Tethrd	Muddy
Saddles	Tethrd	Latitude Outdoors	Trophyline
Ground Blind	Ameristep	Primos	TideWe
Deer Call	Primos	Extinguisher	Flextone
Elk Call	Primos	Phelps	Rocky Mountain
Turkey Call	Primos	Woodhaven	H.S. Strut
Wild Turkey Decoy	Avian-X	Primos	Dave Smith Decoys
Deer Decoy	Flambeau	Primos	Montana Decoy Co.
Scent/Lure	Tink's	Code Blue	Wildlife Research Center
Odor Eliminator	Dead Down Wind	Scent Away	Ozonics
Mineral/Supplements	Big & J	Trophy Rock	Lucky Buck
Food Plot Seed	Whitetail Institute	BioLogic	Antler King
Feeders	Moultrie	Boss Buck	Wildgame Innovations
3-D Target	Delta McKenzie	Rinehart	GlenDel
Foam Target	Block	Rinehart	Delta McKenzie
Bag Target	Morrell	Delta McKenzie	Rinehart
Knife	Outdoor Edge	Buck	Benchmade
Cooler	YETI	RTIC	Grizzly
E-Bike	Bakcou	RAMBO	QuietKat
Best New Product in 2024	Mathews Lift	Moultrie Mobile Edge 2 Pro	Axcel Achieve XP Pro

CROSSBOW

GOLD: Ravin
SILVER: TenPoint
BRONZE: Mission



CELL TRAIL CAM

GOLD: Moultrie
SILVER: Tactacam
BRONZE: Spartan



SADDLES

GOLD: Tethrd
SILVER: Latitude Outdoors
BRONZE: Tropyline



CLOTHING MANUFACTURER

GOLD: KUIU
SILVER: Sitka
BRONZE: ScentLok



SCENT/LURE

GOLD: Tink's
SILVER: Code Blue
BRONZE: Wildlife Research



CLIMBING TREESTAND

GOLD: Summit
SILVER: Millennium
BRONZE: API



RANGEFINDER

GOLD: Vortex
SILVER: Leupold
BRONZE: Bushnell



FOOD PLOT SEED

GOLD: Whitetail Institute
SILVER: BioLogic
BRONZE: Antler King



ODOR ELIMINATOR

GOLD: Dead Down Wind
SILVER: Scent Away
BRONZE: Ozonics



BINO & SPOTTER

GOLD: Vortex
SILVER: Leupold
BRONZE: Bushnell



BAG TARGET

GOLD: Morrell
SILVER: Delta McKenzie
BRONZE: Rinehart



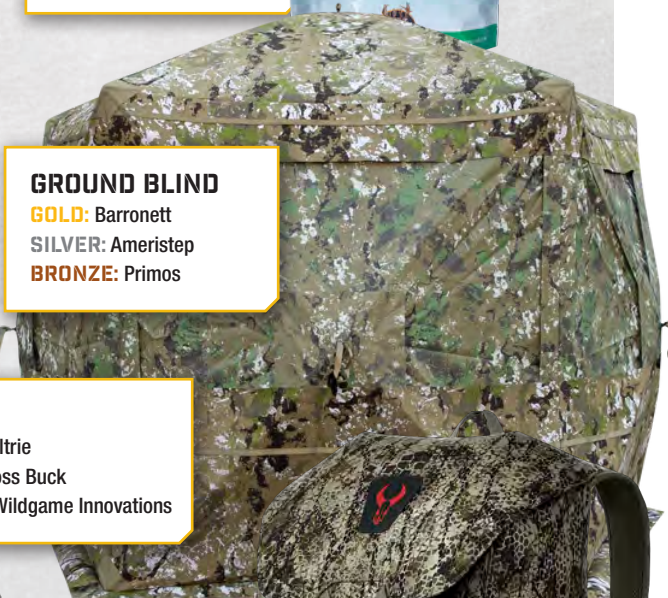
BOOT

GOLD: Muck
SILVER: LaCrosse
BRONZE: Rocky



GROUND BLIND

GOLD: Barronett
SILVER: Ameristep
BRONZE: Primos



FEEDER

GOLD: Moultrie
SILVER: Boss Buck
BRONZE: Wildgame Innovations



PACK

GOLD: Badlands
SILVER: Sitka
BRONZE: Alps OutdoorZ



GOLD AWARDS PRESENTED AT THE ATA SHOW

Bowhunting World staff had the pleasure of presenting Readers' Choice Awards to many winners during the 2025 Archery Trade Association (ATA) Show in Indianapolis, Indiana.



↑ Gold Awards: Fixed Bowsight, Hunting and Target Releases — Axcel and T.R.U. Ball



↑ Gold Award: Arrow Rest — QAD



↑ Gold Award: Quiver — TightSpot



↑ Gold Awards: Hang-On Treestand, Ladder/Tripod categories — Millennium



↑ Gold Award: Movable Sight — HHA



↑ Gold Award: Bow Cases category — SKB



↑ Gold Award: Traditional Bow category — Bear Archery



↑ Gold Award: Bowstring category — GAS Bowstrings



↑ Gold Award: Trail Camera — Moultrie



↑ Gold: Lighted Nock — Nockturnal



↑ Gold Award: Saddles — Tethrd



↑ Gold Award: E-Bike category — Bakcou



↑ Gold Award: Boots — Muck



↑ Gold: Peep Sight — Hamskea



↑ Gold Awards: Scent/Lure, Odor Eliminator — Tink's and Dead Down Wind



↑ Gold: Fixed and Mechanical Heads — G5



↑ Gold Award: Arrow category — Easton



↑ Gold Award: Deer Decoy category — Flambeau



↑ Gold Award: Bag Target — Morrell



↑ Gold Award: 3-D Target category — Delta McKenzie



↑ Gold Award: Stabilizer category — Bee Stinger



↑ Gold Award: Knife — Outdoor Edge



↑ Gold Awards: Deer Call, Elk Call, Turkey Call categories — Primos



↑ Gold: Harness — Hunter Safety System

FIELD CARE TIPS FOR FIRST-CLASS VENISON

Research from the cattle industry and various colleges of animal sciences provide clues on how bowhunters can obtain the best venison from their harvested big game.



BY TIM L. LEWIS

Bowhunters, by the nature of our equipment, harvest game in the exact manner most conducive to the yield of the tastiest flesh. This article explains the reasons behind this reality, and also some tips to make the most of the meat we take.

The cattle industry and various colleges of animal sciences, in the interest of producing the best tasting meats, have painstakingly investigated the production of the most flavorful and tenderest beef, and their research offers bowhunters a wealth of insight. The three key factors are reduction of stress, removal of blood from the muscle tissue, and aging. Let's delve into each of these.

STRESS

Most of us know that stress isn't good for humans. Neither is it good for the quality of an animal's meat,

bringing about a diminution of flavor and tenderness, a shorter shelf-life, and an increased risk of spoilage. The cattle industry's studies and experiments involved detailed chemical analysis, but a few relatively simple concepts sum up their findings.

The first concept is that when meat is slightly acidic, the bacteria that tend to colonize it are beneficial; that is, they promote tenderness and enhanced flavor. In addition, chemicals naturally in the animal's body that serve to break down damaged muscle so it can heal (called proteinases) function well in the mildly acid environment to divide muscle proteins into shorter strands. The result is greater tenderness. In other words, acidity in meat is a good thing; in fact, a lack of acidity favors the growth of harmful bacteria that cause spoilage, off-flavors, and sickness.



↑ Bre Lewis toting a field-dressed fallow buck to camp where it can be hung for aging. The hide protects the meat from contamination by dirt or insects during the carry.

So, we want acidity, but how does the meat become acidic? Muscles receive their primary energy supply, along with oxygen, from the blood. This power source is called glucose. However, nature provides a backup energy source for times when the blood cannot keep up with the demand. It is called glycogen and is present in normal muscle. Most of us can remember starting a new ab-workout or running hard after a summer of less activity that resulted in muscle soreness. When muscles are worked harder or faster than the blood can supply glucose, this second energy supply, glycogen, is broken down. However, converting glycogen to energy results in a by-product, lactic acid. When our workout caused muscles to need more energy than the blood could provide, lactic acid was produced, and this acid was responsible for a day or two of soreness in the overworked muscle tissues. The bottom line is that normal muscles have the natural ability to become mildly acidic if the correct conditions are met.

Game animals, like people, release cortisol, often

called the stress hormone, into the bloodstream when they are stressed. A boost of the stress hormone can help the individual escape from or survive a threatening event, however, its presence in the blood depletes glycogen stores, thereby removing the source of lactic acid formation and the chance of acidifying meat. Both chronic stress and a single stressful stimulus bring about elevated cortisol levels, however, the elevation resulting from a single, one-time stressor is delayed about 15 minutes. The cattle industry has learned that minimizing stress to animals before slaughter allows adequate glycogen reserves for lactic acid production, a paramount factor in producing the best beef.

Bowhunters take unaware and, thereby, unstressed animals. The wound itself can induce some stress but the animal typically expires in less than 60 seconds, well before the 15 minutes required for a cortisol spike. Therefore, fortunately, game hunted by stealth or ambush, is immune from the stress-induced glycogen depletion that prevents meat from acidifying.

REMOVAL OF BLOOD

Exsanguination is a fancy term for the removal of blood from an animal or organ and, for livestock, is an important part of the slaughtering process after stunning. The curtailment of circulation quickly shifts the energy source for muscle tissues from glucose in the blood to stored glycogen, resulting in lactic acid production and the subsequent desirable acidifying of the meat. The length of time muscle produces lactic acid varies with a host of conditions but can be prolonged, continuing even after game is quartered.

As bowhunters, we strive to achieve a wound on an unstressed animal that quickly removes blood from circulation. Bow kills result in absolutely ideal conditions



↑ Even in cold conditions, the incredible insulating properties of a tahr's hide, especially with a bull's full mane, make it worthwhile to butcher the bull on the spot, instantly beginning the cooling process.

for the best quality meat; muscle tissue bereft of blood supply yet retaining adequate glycogen reserves. The resulting acidic nature of the muscle tissues render it ideal for aging, a process that enhances the flavor of the meat while simultaneously increasing tenderness.



↑ Breaking down a southern whitetail after aging two and a half weeks in a walk-in cooler. Note the flesh has darkened and hardened where no skin protected it from drying. Just below the dried layer, the flesh is still red and wonderfully aged.

AGING

When meat, on the gutted carcass, quartered, or boned-out, is maintained at a temperature slightly above freezing, it is said to “age.” The suggested temperature range is from 34 to 39 degrees. Deer and elk can be hung for two to three weeks. In the south, walk-in coolers are

typical in deer camps for this purpose. In climates where deer are hung outside, temperature fluctuations may limit the aging duration. Even a few days of aging provides improved meat quality but, when possible, a minimum of two weeks is suggested. Bear and hogs should not be aged very long at all; three days is more than sufficient, and a week might border on being excessive.

During the aging time, chemicals in the tissues called proteinases, divide muscle fibers into shorter sections and beneficial bacteria likewise tenderize the meat and increase desirable flavors. While these bacteria are helpful, other bacteria can cause harm. As stated, acidic tissue favors good bacteria. Non-acidic conditions, heat, and moisture all favor the growth of harmful bacteria causing spoilage, off-flavors, and even sickness when

the meat is eaten. Good practices, outlined later in the article, eliminate this worry. By the way, increased populations of beneficial bacteria inhibit the growth of many harmful bacteria, yeasts, and molds.

Arrow wounds kill almost exclusively from inducing hemorrhage. Therefore, a game animal’s death at the hands of a bowhunter precisely parallels the conditions that research has demonstrated as ideal for meat quality! That said, it is worth considering the few wounds that fall outside the typical ones.

First, very occasionally, the brain is targeted resulting in an instantaneous kill with no damage to muscle groups. Such wounds, although quickly lethal, allow blood to remain in the musculature. Both oxygen and glucose are available in the blood and are utilized before glycogen. The resulting meat is untainted and wholesome, but may not acquire quite as much flavor and tenderness through the aging process and be more



↑ In cool environments, venison can be aged outside. Often gutted deer are aged whole but quarters and backstraps and even boned-out meat can be hung. Without an overhead roof, meat may need to be shifted to protect it from sun or rain.

prone to spoilage.

Another wound category is not an intentional but rather accidental target. Termed “gut shots,” wounds to the abdominal cavity are almost a hundred percent fatal (although some very few exceptions have been documented). The contents of the digestive tract teem with bacteria, and gut wounds introduce these to the animal’s



↑ After caping, venison from this red stag will be packed to camp and hung to age. While two or more weeks is ideal, even a few days of aging is helpful.

abdominal (peritoneal) cavity and bloodstream. As these bacteria multiply and invade the host, they infect more and more tissues, eventually causing the blood pressure to plummet. Insufficient oxygen reaches the brain and death ensues. The amount of time for death to occur varies with a whole range of conditions, but stress invariably attends the passing and it is safe to assume the meat will not be acidified. In addition, harmful bacteria have been pumped into all of the tissues. In other words, not only are the conditions tilted for blooms of undesirable bacteria, but these bacteria have already been seeded. If the animal is recovered in a reasonable time after expiring, the flesh can safely be consumed but is not a good candidate for aging.

Arrows seldom, if ever, cause death by shock, but shock is worth discussing for modern firearms and vehicle/game collisions do. Shock results when severe damage occurs to part of the animal. Blood is composed of fluid, called serum, and the red and white blood cells which exchange gases and fight infection. When tissues are damaged, the tiny blood vessels supplying the affected tissues open channels between the cells of their walls.

The fluid portion of the blood leaks through these channels into the damaged region. The process is beneficial for minor injuries for it promotes healing. However, when the damage is extreme, so much serum enters the tissue that the volume of blood in vessels diminishes drastically and the blood remaining in circulation is thick and sluggish. The loss of blood volume radically reduces blood pressure. If the decline in blood pressure precipitated by shock does not fall below a threshold value, the animal may survive. A great enough drop in blood pressure compromises the availability of oxygen to the brain with death ensuing. The thickened blood does not circulate well causing blood to remain pooled in the muscle tissue. If, as typical, shock brings about a slower death, cortisol levels spike depleting muscle of the glycogen necessary for lactic acid production. Regardless, with blood available, muscle tissues will fail to achieve the desirable acidification. Most road-killed deer die from shock. Even when recovered fresh, their meat does not often approach the quality of hunter killed venison although it still yields good grind or sausage.

“A game animal’s death at the hands of a bowhunter precisely parallels the conditions that research has demonstrated as ideal for meat quality.”



TREATMENT OF HARVESTED MEAT

These unusual cases have been discussed in detail, but bear in mind, far and away, the vast majority of well-placed bowhunting shots bring about quick, clean deaths in a fashion perfectly suited for hunters to reap first-class venison. Having procured excellent meat, what can hunters do to get the very best from it?

As mentioned, two of the factors that promote harmful bacterial growth are moisture and heat. Hunters should do their best to protect their hard-earned venison from both. While it is important not to push a wounded

↑ Freshly aged venison pieces, sprinkled with salt, stuffed with jalapenos, and wrapped with bacon sizzle over a campfire the author shared with his daughter.

animal before it has had time to expire, recovering it before excessive time elapses is desirable. In the sun, a fallen animal heats quickly. The hair of northern animals

often is thick and hollow, designed to maximize heat retention, so, as counter-intuitive as it sounds, sometimes game in cooler climates can spoil faster than those in the warmer climes. I have never seen a Florida deer that did not fall in water spoil overnight but have heard of such occurrences in much colder conditions.

After recovery, the animal should be field-dressed. If a stream or other water is nearby, the temptation to rinse the cavity may present, but it is better to wipe out the ribcage and abdomen with grasses or leaves. Anyone who has read early accounts of hunters will remember frequent references to carcasses being dried with grass tufts. People living primarily off the game they killed knew from experience

the best practices.

Some animals are large enough to be quartered on the spot, and others are hauled to a distant site for gutting. If gutted at a camp, it is still best not to rinse with water unless the carcass can be dried. Walk-in coolers have fans to circulate air and usually evaporate rinse water quickly. Elsewhere, if the meat has been submitted to water, it can be patted dry with towels. Avoidance of exposure to water still reigns ideal.

Cooling the meat is important. If quartered and hung in the shade in mild to cold weather, the meat begins to cool. During the season, many hunting areas enjoy cold conditions and cooling is easy. In hot climates, the meat can be placed in insulated coolers or, for whole carcasses, ice can be introduced to the chest cavity. Here arises a dilemma: Both heat and moisture are counter indicated yet the very act of cooling subjects the meat to water from melted ice. Sometimes conditions are extreme enough to dictate the most important course of action. In high heat, spoilage from temperature outweighs the negative effects from exposure to water. Even so, as soon as possible, the meat should be patted as dry as possible, and then maintained in a cool, dry environment. Refrigerators can be employed to keep the meat cold, but care must be taken to ensure air flows on all sides of the carcass or quarters.

Sometimes, say when camping with portable coolers or at the dictates of limited refrigerated space, meat must be kept for temporary periods in plastic bags. Although not as ideal as dry storage, this problem can



↑ A cut from a deer's rear leg, butterflied and stuffed with assorted peppers, garlic, zucchini, mushrooms, and cheese, and draped with bacon can be roasted in an oven or on a grill. Remove from heat before the meat is overcooked and slice into thin sections.



Simple and Superb Backstrap Recipe

A simple yet amazingly tasty recipe for venison backstrap is to marinate the whole (or half) backstrap overnight in olive oil, rosemary and thyme. The next day, remove the meat. Pour the marinade into a skillet and heat. When hot, quickly sear backstrap from all sides. Wrap with aluminum foil and allow to rest. Add red wine and brown sugar to pan remnants. Slice the medium-rare meat thinly. Pour skillet liquid over slices and salt lightly.

be overcome by daily removing the meat, patting it dry, draining any blood or fluid from the bag, and replacing it. This relatively minor bit of attention imparts a pronounced difference to meat quality.

Muscle tissue that is harvested in a way to quickly eliminate blood and subsequently is maintained cool and moisture-free yields the most ideal meat. Bowhunting ensures the first part. Judicious treatment of the meat takes care of the rest. **BW**

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BEARS AND BUGS

Never hunted black bears? In the author's opinion, Manitoba is tough to beat, but be prepared for nasty mosquitoes, too.

BY JEFFREY MILLER



The Canadian early summer evening was simply beautiful. There was a cool breeze brushing my face, the scent of pine hung heavy in the air, and migrating waterfowl lent a soundtrack to the countryside. The only fly in the ointment was the incessant hum of voracious mosquitoes. I looked at my Thermacell unit watching the vapor drift off the appliance. Though a few skeeters still got through, all was forgotten when I caught the movement of a jet-black bear slowly approaching the bait.

My buddy Justin Fisher and I had been anticipating hunting Manitoba black bears for more than a year, since booking



↑ The author spotted this black bear on the first night of his Manitoba hunt. He passed because it wasn't quite big enough.

a trip with Mikey Price at Plum Lake Outfitters. Justin and I had both shot a bear in the past, and we were looking forward to a new location.

Plum Lake Outfitters is a small, family run operation located in the Interlake region of Manitoba. After a few email conversations with Mikey, we had no hesitation in booking the first week in June. Mikey is passionate about bear hunting and probably wants his clients to succeed more than they do.

As the winter began to loosen its grip on my home in North Dakota, I began shooting my bow. While hunting bears over bait doesn't usually produce tough archery shots, there is difficulty in visualizing the vitals on black fur, especially in low-light situations.

In addition, being close to a bear, for hunters unaccustomed to it, can result in an adrenaline overload. Night after night I shot arrows at ranges from 10 to 20 yards near sundown. The poor bear target took a beating, and my confidence soared.



↑ Thick cover in the form of swamps or fallen trees provide bears with security cover, making it more likely they'll visit bait sites in daylight.

FIELD JUDGING BLACK BEARS

One of the reasons we chose Manitoba is that bear camp was less than 5 hours from our homes. It was an easy drive north, and as we left the Red River Valley of North Dakota and entered the Canadian bush, things changed quickly. While the land was still flat, spruce and pine forests began to dominate the landscape. In the breeze, golden tree pollen drifted across the road.

Settling into camp as dusk arrived, we sat around the fire with Mikey and guide Ryan. One of my favorite aspects of traveling to hunt is meeting new people and seeing new places. Swapping stories over the crackling fire went on late into the night.

The next morning, after Justin and I took a few practice shots to loosen up, Mikey placed a bait barrel next to the bear target. He explained both the best shots to take, a few inches behind the front shoulder, as well as how to judge bear size. The bear target was just above the second ring of the barrel, meaning it was a smallish bear. Closer to the third ring, and the bear was borderline. Over the third ring, he said, was a shooter for most hunters. A bear that was taller than the barrel was a giant.

Unlike my previous Minnesota bear hunting experience, the baits were scattered over hundreds of miles of forest. We never saw another vehicle on the gravel roads, and once we parked the rigs, it was another ride on ATVs. We were truly in the bush.



SHUFFLING STANDS

As the only bear I would end up seeing on the first night drifted in, I knew right away I wouldn't be reaching for my bow. While it had a luxurious slick black coat, the bear was too small to consider shooting on the first night (photos opposite page). Bears on bait allow the hunter time to watch and observe the animal, and it was a joy watching the bear feed. The mere presence of such a magnificent animal, at nearly handshaking distance, made the night memorable.

While I didn't release an arrow that evening, Justin did. Unfortunately, he was so focused on the bear that he didn't see a small branch, and the arrow deflected into the dirt. Even without a bear to trail, we arrived back in camp well past midnight because we could hunt until nearly 10:15 pm.

After sleeping in the next morning — black bear hunting over bait is almost always an afternoon-only affair — we gathered around the picnic table to enjoy a delicious meal. Mikey and Ryan had made the rounds the previous evening as we hunted and decided to move both of us for the next evening's hunt. My bait seemed to have been taken over by a sow with small cubs, and the bears at Justin's site were more than likely spooked after the missed shot. Overhunting stands are a great way to shut down activity, and Mikey wanted us to see new baits that evening.

My day No. 2 stand was the most perfect location I've ever hunted for bears. The stand itself was a roomy ladder stand, so comfortable I almost dozed off in the late-afternoon sun. Three barrels were chained to jack

pinces in a small opening. The two farthest barrels had a very small hole cut in top and contained corn. The closest barrel had a large opening and contained sweets. Before leaving, Mikey added some lure and fresh bait. On three sides of the baits was mature jack pine forest, with a densely forested swamp on the other side. Numerous bear trails converged on the bait, and a large pile of scat was near the ladder stand.

A quick glance at my phone showed it was a little past 3:30 pm. Sunset was 9:42 pm, so I settled in for a long, relaxing wait.

In the distance, the repeated drumming of ruffed grouse caught my attention. I was focused on listening to them when a snowshoe hare hopped into view. It seemed to enjoy the granola on the ground, quickly eating before disappearing back into the bush.

A black flicker coming from the swamp caused my heart to race. Unlike hoofed animals, bears make little to no noise as they pad across the forest floor, and the bear was like an apparition. As it walked past the upright barrels, the bear's back was above the second ring but just below the third. It wasted little time knocking the main barrel down and getting to the business of filling its belly.

As the bear fed at 13 yards, I had ample time to evaluate it. While I'm not much of a trophy hunter, I knew I was hunting in a fantastic location for big bears. It was only the second day of a 6-day hunt, so, with much difficulty, I decided to leave my arrow on the string.

After feeding for a bit, the bear moved off and disappeared back into the bush. The sun was still high in the sky when the second bear of the evening showed up.

I knew right away I wasn't going to shoot this bear, ei-



Preparing for Bugs

I thought I had experienced mosquitoes before. I was wrong. The number of skeeters in Canada during spring must be experienced to be believed. Simply making the short trip to the outhouse required a Thermacell and a steely resolve.

A single Thermacell works wonders on early season deer hunts, but there were times during our bear hunt when the barrage of mosquitoes overpowered it. Justin sat each night with a pair of devices and didn't have nearly the problems I had.

Pay close attention to the pad on the heating unit. I tend to be a frugal person and try to squeeze every drop out of the pads. I quickly learned that the cost of the pads is nothing compared to mosquitoes. Keep fresh pads on the Thermacell.

For future spring bear hunts, I plan on wearing a lightweight bug suit in addition to using one or two Thermacells. Canadian spring evenings are beautiful, but that beauty is somewhat diminished by the constant blood draining of mosquitoes.

It's not fun to dread the afternoon hunt simply because of the bugs.

“My heart was in my throat as it was seeming less likely that we would find my black bear in the dark.”

ther. It was a bit smaller than the first, looking much like a healthy black Labrador retriever. With long legs and a small head, it was obvious it wasn't a Manitoba monster.

The opportunity to witness a bear at close range, with no idea a human is near, is rare, and I soaked in the moment. Despite thick fur, the bear still was bothered by mosquitoes. It would shake its head or scratch its ears. A halo of flying insects surrounded the bear's head.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

After the bear moseyed off, time slowed. The sun slowly kissed the horizon, and whippoorwills started to call. Frogs were croaking in the swamp and, far away, an owl hooted.

Without warning, another bear popped into the clearing. As soon as I saw it, I grabbed my bow. Though not a Northwoods giant, it was a nice-looking bear I would be happy to tag. Of course, I still needed to make the shot.



↑ This 3-D target is placed near a bait barrel so bowhunters can learn proper shot placement, as well as learn to field judge bear size. This would be a small bear.

The bear fed at the main barrel for a few minutes while I waited for a good broadside shot. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I stood motionless, barely noticing the mosquitoes eagerly draining blood from my face. Just when it seemed like I would never get a shot, the bear stepped forward to look to the north. Hitting full draw, I settled the pin behind the bear's shoulder. The arrow was off and the glowing nock flickered through the bear before burying in the soft soil behind it. With a woof, the bear loped off into the swamp.

As darkness enveloped the bush, I eagerly examined my arrow. I was a bit concerned as the blood was sparse on the white fletching and wrap. Backing out, I met Mikey, Ryan and Justin back on the road.

The next 2 hours was a master class in blood trailing from Mikey. He was able to find pinpricks of blood on

Spring or Fall?

While I'm certainly no expert on bear hunting, I've learned a lot from previous hunts. Three times I've hunted during the fall and once during the spring. In most of the United States, fall is the only option. I started bear hunting in Minnesota, a state that offers only fall bear hunting. We placed baits as soon as the regulations allowed, and bears would almost immediately begin hitting. Unfortunately, it seemed there was always a flush of natural foods around opening day. In addition, no matter how remote a bait was, there would be off-road vehicles all over the public lands. The bears would turn nocturnal, and I never saw a bear on stand over two seasons of DIY hunting.

My first successful bear hunting occurred on Lake of the Woods in Ontario. At the time, spring hunting was not allowed, and I booked a hunt for the first week in September. The walleye fishing was world class, but a heat wave gripped the area. Bear movement was absent during shooting hours. I was very fortunate to shoot a smallish chocolate boar, the only bear I saw.

Spring hunting has distinct advantages over fall, namely less natural foods and better weather. I prefer spring hunts simply because my home bow seasons for big game open in September, and I'm eager to get in the woods. From a scheduling standpoint, spring hunts are better for me.

Besides the terrible bugs, spring hunts can be hampered by long winters. When the cold and snow stick around, the first few weeks of the spring hunting season can have slow to non-existent bear movement. Bears weigh less as well, after coming out of hibernation. Fall bears are preparing for the long winter's nap, gorging on food. If a heavy bear is the goal, fall is the time to hunt.

Hunters looking for a glossy, thick bear pelt for the wall should hunt during spring, as the fur is thicker after coming out of hibernation. However, the bears soon begin rubbing to get rid of the winter fur. The unsightly patches make unattractive rugs or mounts, so look over each bear carefully before shooting. During fall, the fur is shorter but rarely rubbed. Of course, skull size, which is used by the record keeping organizations, remains the same for both seasons.

→ Bowhunting World Editor Dave Maas (left) and his father keeping bugs away during a recent spring bear hunt in Manitoba.



leaves and grass as the trail led into the swamp. We sloshed through the 8-inch water and doghair thick popples. Tree pollen drifted through the illuminated light from the flashlight, and we fought the brush to plod forward. Mikey would find a small smear of blood on a tree or leaf, wait for me to mark the last blood, and move forward. My heart was in my throat as it was seeming less likely that we would find my bear in the dark. I was preparing myself to come back in the morning when Mikey knelt in the water and peered into the bush.

"Do you see any more blood, Mikey?" I asked.

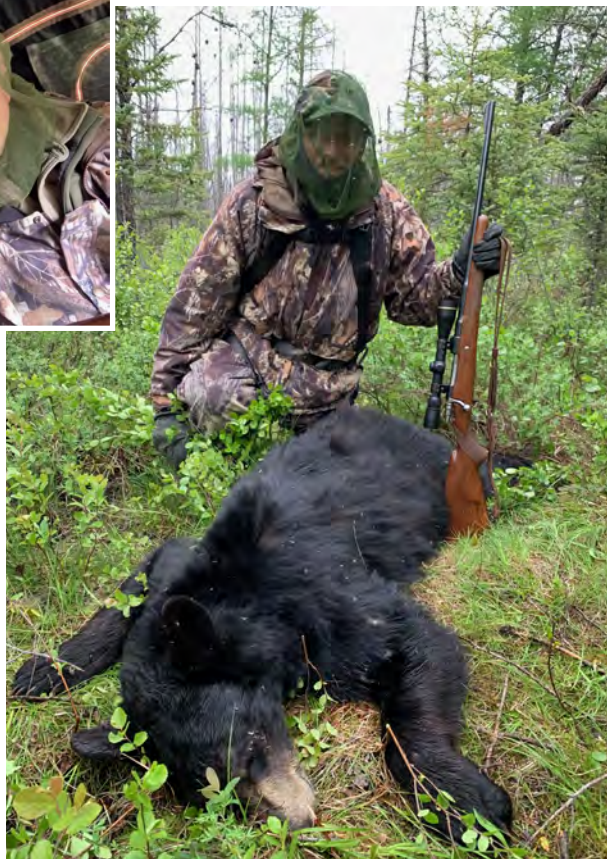
"Nope," he said, and my heart dropped. "But I do see a pretty darn nice bear!"

Forget the work that followed. Mikey pulled an ice fishing sled, full of bear, while I pushed and pulled it around the millions of tree stems. A smile was plastered on my face that would take days to leave.

The entrance of my arrow was perfect, but the bear was not as broadside as I thought. Instead, it was slightly quartering toward me. After traversing the near lung, the NAP Shockwave-tipped Carbon Express arrow centered the liver and exited through the stomach. A piece of fat firmly plugged the exit hole, making the blood trailing difficult.

PLANNING OUR RETURN

Justin had a good adventure, but his hunt ended when his arrow passed low through a chocolate-phase bear. After a long trail, the blood petered out. Like most bear outfitters, Plum Lake has a blood policy: Once blood is found, the tag is considered filled. This policy helps protect the resource and helps limit poor shot selection, and we fully understood



← Frank Maas (86 years old in spring 2024) relied on a headnet and leather gloves to battle the bugs. Look closely and you'll see the many mosquitoes!

it. Still, it was a bitter pill for Justin to swallow.

When I first decided to pursue black bears, I thought I'd shoot one and be satisfied. However, I've fallen in love with the Northwoods, the beavers and muskrats, the pines and the bears. Justin and I are already planning a return trip. Some nights though, warm in my bed, I wake up and can swear I hear a mosquito buzzing. **BW**



← The author with his Manitoba bear taken during the first week of June. He was hunting with Plum Lake Outfitters, which is located in the Interlake Region.

GREAT — AND AFFORDABLE — GIFTS FOR HUNTERS

Believe it or not, you don't have to spend more than \$20 when shopping for a great bowhunter's gift.

BY JOSH HONEYCUTT

Modern times post significant economic challenges. Inflation rages, wages are stagnant, and other economic strains remain. Even so, people still want to give to others. For those on a budget, or for those gifting to numerous people, consider the following presents for \$20 or less that make great gifts for hunters.

\$1 TO \$5 GIFTS

Hunters Specialties Field Dressing Gloves

Hunters who field dress and process game should wear gloves. Oftentimes, the best practice is keeping a pair of gloves in a hunting pack, so they're always there once needed. Hunters Specialties Field Dressing Gloves assist with that. One pair is wrist length, and one pair is shoulder length. These disposable latex gloves come as one size fits most. At \$1.49, it's a price that's hard to beat.



HME Hunter's License Holder with Pen and Zip Ties

Most hunters are required to keep hunting licenses, tags, and even hunter's education cards. Of course, it's easy for these to get wet and ruined. Therefore, the Hunter's License Holder with Pen and Zip Ties by HME is excellent for protecting your important hunting documents while in the field. It's \$4.99.



HME Econ Game Bags

Game bags are necessary for toting quarters and processed meat out of the field. These econ-friendly cloth bags are tailored for deer, elk and other big game animals. These come knitted for excellent air circulation, odor-free, washable and reusable. Get these in 12 inches by either 48 or 54 inches long. Price ranges from \$4.99-\$11.99.

QAD Tune-A-Nock F/S

Another nocking solution, the Tune-A-Nock F/S by QAD was designed to increase accuracy, consistency, and speed. It's lightweight and has minimal string friction. This allows it to add up to 4 fps, especially compared to other nocks. These come in black, green, orange, or white. A pack of 12 runs \$4.99.



\$5 TO \$10 GIFTS

T.R.U. Ball Archery Rubber Wrist Bands

Some people enjoy wearing wrist bands. The T.R.U. Ball Archery Wrist Bands are solid picks. Get these in black, green, orange, red, or as a variety pack. Get them in a pack of six for \$5.19.



MTM Case-Gard BH16 Broadhead Box

The BH16 Broadhead Box by MTM is ideal for those storing or traveling with broadheads. This box holds up to 16 fixed or mechanical broadheads. This increases safety by reducing the odds of cutting skin or other gear, such as archery strings and cables. Furthermore, it helps preserve their sharp edges, rather than being damaged within other storage methods. This box is priced quite affordably at \$9.40.



Cyclops Black Hat Clip White LED Light

Some hunters prefer a hat-clip style light. This one from Cyclops does just that, and incorporates white LED lighting. It's built with four LEDs with bright illumination in a top-mounted design that provides easy attachment. Get it with IPX4 water-resistant construction (for wet conditions). The included battery lasts up to 279 minutes. MSRP is \$9.99.



GAS Bowstrings Wax

Every bowhunter needs to wax their string. Over time, wax runs out, and we need more of it. So, consider the GAS Wax by GAS Bowstrings. It delivers a scent-free, water-repellant protection for bows. Its Super Silicone Formula offers abrasion-resistance, great wear protection, and more. Use this with cables, strings, and exposed servings. MSRP is \$10.



\$11 TO \$15 GIFTS

Wildgame Innovations Trophy Tape

The Trophy Tape by Wildgame Innovations is a solid gift that's affordable and fun. Use this accurate, simple, and fast method for scoring big game animals. It automatically keeps score as you measure the animal. It comes in a pack of three rolls. The tape maxes out at 200 inches. The beauty of it? You can be sure every element of the rack is scored. Get it for \$12.99.



Easton Shooter Towel

Archers who spend a lot of time on the range might benefit from a towel. Thus, the Easton Shooter Towel. It features a light grey coloring with black lettering. It's a Turkish Signature Towel by Towel Specialties that works well for male and female archers alike. Get it for \$11.99.



\$11 TO \$15 GIFTS

Easton Arrow Puller Wedge

Pulling arrows isn't always easy. High-poundage bows, subpar targets, slipper fingers, and a host of other factors can increase arrow removal difficulty. Thus, the Easton Arrow Puller Wedge includes a proprietary compound that maximizes arrow grip. The internal-molded sides make it easier to pull arrows in wet weather. Plus, the ergonomic wedge shape makes for a comfortable fit. MSRP is \$13.99.



HHA Sports Replacement Sight Tapes

Those who use sight tapes should consider HHA's Replacement Sight Tape. Enjoy brightly colored tapes that are durable and reliable. Of course, select the correct tape version that's compatible with the sight in use. MSRP is \$13.99 and up.

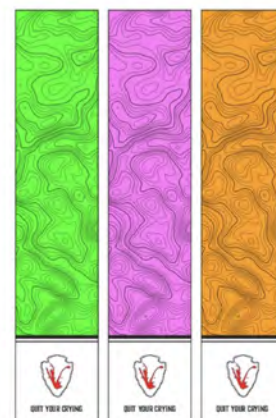
Vapor Trail Topo Arrow Wraps

Some prefer arrow wraps, and Vapor Trail has you covered. Available dimensions include .75x5 (most micro-diameter arrows), .88x5 (most small-diameter shafts), 1x5 (most standard-diameter arrows), 1.125x5 (most stiffer spine shafts), 1.25x5 (most fatboy-style arrows), or 1.4x5 (most large-diameter shafts). Colors include blue, orange, purple, green, white or yellow. MSRP is \$13.99 for 13 wraps.



HME Better Trail Camera Holder

The Better Trail Camera Holder by HME is another solid pick. It's compact, sturdy and simple enough to get the job done well without unnecessary fluff. Pan or tilt as needed to obtain proper orientation. It supports all trail cameras with 1/4x20 threading. Pricing is \$14.99.



Scent Thief Body Wash & Shampoo

The Scent Thief Body Wash & Shampoo is part of the No Smell System. But this phase is made for cleansing the hair and body. It implements patented odor blocking technology to minimize scent emitted in the field. The price is \$14.99.



Stealth Cam Memory Card Reader (for Android)

Most individuals prefer to flip through trail camera photos ASAP. Other times, there are specific needs requiring in-the-field camera checks; example, before an afternoon hunt. The Stealth Cam Memory Card Reader is made for Android only. MSRP is \$14.99.

QAD Ultra-Nok II

The Ultra-Nok II by QAD is designed to optimize adjustability. This nocking point solution is for all arrows. Easily install and tune it. Of course, it aligns well with peep sights and it's superior to a string loop. Get it in the Micro, Large, or XL version. Colors available in black, blue, gray, green, yellow, pink, purple, or red. MSRP ranges from \$14.99-\$16.99.



GAS Bowstrings Logo Long Sleeve Tee & Dry-Fit Visor

Another archery-focused shirt, the GAS Bowstrings Logo Long Sleeve Tee is a pick archers are sure to love. It has a gray base with white lettering. It features a casual look, comfortable feel, and shows off the archery lifestyle. It's 60% cotton, 40% polyester, and weighs 4.4 ounces. It costs \$15.

The GAS Bowstrings Logo Dry-Fit Visor is ideal for those who enjoy wearing one. It's made with moisture-wicking material, utmost breathability, lightweight construction, Velcro closure, and more. It's 96% polyester and 4% spandex textured knitting. Get it in navy. MSRP is \$20.



\$16 TO \$20 GIFTS



Easton Quiver Belt

The Quiver Belt by Easton is good for bowhunters who enjoy competition archery. This is an important tool for anyone who spends much time on the range. Get it for just \$15.99.

Scent Thief Field Spray & Laundry Detergent

Another part of scent management, the Scent Thief 24-ounce Field Spray comes in an earth scent designation. According to Scent Thief, its patented formula relaxes the portion of an animal's nose associated with scent detection. MSRP is \$15.99.

Another important part of scent management, the 32-ounce Laundry Detergent helps keep clothing clean. It too is part of the No Smell System. It comes phosphate free and is safe for carbon clothing, technical fibers, and even wool. Pricing is \$16.99.



Easton Pro Hex Fold Up Allen Set

The Pro Hex Fold Up Allen Set by Easton is just what the bow doctor ordered. This set increases the odds you'll have the exact matchup for the task ahead. The XL sizes include 1/4, 7/32, 3/16, 5/32, 9/64, 1/8, 7/64, 3/32, and 5/64. Get it for \$17.99.



MTM Case-Gard BTAC-41 Arrow Case

The BTAC 41 Traveler Arrow Case is capable of carrying up to nine arrows measuring up to 34 inches. This compact design is only two inches thick and fits within most bow cases. It comes with notched foam padding to protect arrows and fletching and internal storage for small accessories. MSRP is \$19.16.



Flextone Battle Bag Plus & Buck Collector Plus Grunt Tube

The Battle Bag Plus by Flextone is a great pick for deer hunters. It serves as a small, compact substitution for rattling antlers. These are made from polymer sticks and a rubber bag design. Ventilated holes create great sound, especially compared to cloth-style rattle bags. MSRP is \$18.99.

Most bowhunters prefer to carry a grunt tube afield. The Buck Collector Plus by Flextone fits the bill quite well. This call is easy enough to operate for new and experienced hunters alike. Mimic buck, doe and fawn vocalizations with this versatile call. Pricing is \$18.99.



Easton Hip Quiver, Beanie & Performance Socks

The FlipSide 2-Tube Hip Quiver is perfect for those target shooting at home, or traversing archery courses. This quiver is constructed with rugged, high-denier poly construction. It has a stainless-steel belt clip attachment and durable injection-molded arrow separator tubes. Colors include black, blue, red, ranger green, or camo. Fits right- or left-handed archers. Pricing starts at \$17.99.

Cold weather pairs quite well with the Easton Beanie. This comes in black or tan. This is a great gift for men and women alike. It's priced at \$19.99.

Most never show their socks, and even for those who don't, interesting socks have a place on feet throughout the nation. These Easton performance socks include BravoFiber Technology, and work well for early season timeframes. These are crafted for general active wear. Features include a reinforced toe, heel, and footbed. Furthermore, the socks are antimicrobial, breathable, moisture-wicking, odor-resistant, have a soft upper cuff, and have a compression arch for support. Made in the USA. Get these for \$20.99.



HHA Sports Sight Cover

While modern sights are quite durable, extra protection via a sight cover can prove useful, and can add even more longevity. This neoprene option from HHA fits most of its lineup of sights. Get it for \$19.99.



Vapor Trail 32-ounce Nalgene Bottle

Most need a good bottle to stay hydrated. The Vapor Trail 32-ounce Nalgene Bottle is a practical pick with some flair. It's made of BPA-free Tritan co-polyester with superior impact resistance. Its wide mouth makes for easier cleaning. It's suitable for cold and warm beverages (-40 to 212 degrees). Made in the USA. MSRP is \$19.99.

Evolved 5 Card Draw Seed & NFuze Salt Lick Block

Planting food plots is a significant part of land management. Evolved's 5 Card Draw is a great yet affordable solution. It incorporates five food plot species, including chicory, oats, turnips, wheat, and white clover. It's an annual/perennial blend that is high in minerals and protein. Deer will enjoy these nutritious, highly palatable plants. One 10-pound bag plants .25 acre, and is priced at \$19.99.

In areas where baiting and/or feeding deer is permitted, the Evolved NFuze Salt Lick Block (in apple flavor) is a significant choice. It delivers a sweet and salty taste and serves up important minerals and vitamins needed at crucial times of the year. The block is 8x8x6 inches and weighs 25 pounds. Get it for \$19.99.



HME Target Cover & Camera Post

A good target cover can make a target last years longer than it otherwise would without one. HME's Universal Target Cover is a winner. This heavy-duty, weatherproof target cover helps protect targets from the elements. It works with 3-D and bag targets. Get it at \$19.99.

Some spots that call for trail cameras don't offer suitable trees for positioning the camera. Furthermore, some cameras, such as 360-degree models, must be on a stake. Therefore, the HME Trail Camera Holder Post is the ideal solution. It's \$17.99.



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THE TRUTH ABOUT DIY PUBLIC LAND WESTERN BOWHUNTING

Here's what influencers and podcasters aren't telling you.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BOB ROBB

As someone who grew up in California, back in the late 1960s through the 1980s, I spent most of my big game hunting roaming most of the West on DIY hunts for elk, mule deer, pronghorn and black bears. It was a far different world then.

Licenses and tags were relatively inexpensive, and you could buy them over-the-counter. There was no internet, no smartphone hunting apps, and if you were willing to backpack a short ways off the beaten path, you encountered virtually nobody else, and hunting was excellent.

Today, with some exceptions, elk, deer and pronghorn

tags are mostly issued via a lottery system, and serious hunters accrue preference points to help them draw a tag whenever they can as demand for tags has skyrocketed. Thanks to the internet, there are no "secret spots" any longer. Wolves and grizzly bears — few and far between back in the day — now seriously affect big game numbers in multiple states, and have forced many of those populations down out of the public land mountains onto private ranches, where hunting for the unattached dude is verboten.

If you're a nonresident living east of the Rocky Moun-



tain West dreaming of someday embarking on a low-cost DIY bowhunting adventure, or a western resident wanting to hunt another state, be forewarned. It can be done — but it's not easy, and you'll have to overcome some serious obstacles.

OBTAINING TAGS

There are still some units in multiple states that offer over-the-counter (OTC) tags for whitetails, mule deer, elk and pronghorn, but their numbers are shrinking, and in all cases, these units are hunted hard. Very hard. Serious hunters employ a strategy of hunting an OTC unit annually, or as often as they can, for the experience while accruing preference points in multiple states that will allow them to draw tags in trophy-type units every decade

or so. That's right, decade. It's a complicated process that varies by state. Using a tag application service such as WTA Tags (www.worldwidetrophyadventures.com/TAGS) can help you plan, and execute, an application strategy that's right for you.

Also, be advised that the cost of licenses and tags for nonresidents is steep, and it's going to keep increasing. Western big game departments receive the bulk of their annual budget funding from these revenues. It's a matter of supply and demand — and as long as there are millions of nonresidents looking to hunt the West, they're going to soak you for the privilege.

LOW SUCCESS RATES

If you are hunting public land for elk, deer or prong-

↑ The author with his Montana DIY public land bull, taken in 2021 after six days of hard hunting.

horn, be advised that success rates are alarmingly low, often in the single digits, percentage-wise. Here's an example. Colorado has more elk than any other state in the West, yet the 2022 statewide success on any elk with all methods of take, on both public and private land, was a paltry 20 percent. There were 40,425 total elk killed



↑ DIY hunters need the gear, including high-quality optics, and the skills to use them, for a chance at success.

(23,125 bulls, 15,891 cows, and 1,407 calves) by 206,496 hunters who spent 1,050,993 days afield. I cannot tell you how many expensive nonresident tags employed on DIY hunts I have eaten over the decades, but it's certainly more than I have filled.

Research is critical. When planning your adventure, remember that game populations can vary greatly by region, and even specific units within a specific region. These populations can also be affected by brutal winters, as was the case in parts of Wyoming in 2022, which killed a ton of mule deer and pronghorn, and where it will take a decade or more for their numbers to recover. Game department websites can give you data on herd numbers and hunter success rates.

HUNTING PRESSURE

In units where nonresident tags are easy to obtain, expect to be dealing with pressure from other hunters — in some cases, lots of it. Not all of them will be as serious as you are. Some will be casual folks who like to party



↑ Filling an elk, deer or pronghorn tag on a western DIY hunt is done by thousands of dedicated, budget-conscious sportsmen every season.



↑ DIY hunters will face private lands full of game that are closed to the unattached hunter.

as much as hunt, some will bring family members who are there to rip around on ATVs and dirt bikes. During early seasons, there will be campers, hikers, dogwalkers, maybe some target shooters with firearms. One year in Arizona while hunting a hard-to-draw elk unit, I was sneaking into position on a huge bedded bull elk when some wood cutters roared through my stalk on ATVs on a road ostensibly closed to all vehicular traffic. Never saw that bull again.

The podcasters and YouTubers may have convinced you that to avoid these issues you simply have to hike deeper into the woods to get away from the crowds. While that can help, it's not that simple. While many of the casual party-hearty hunters stick near the roads,

there will be more than a few serious hunters in the boondocks. Using internet research and smartphone mapping apps such as onX, it's easy for anybody to locate promising game-holding pockets and navigate even the toughest terrain.

The serious local hunters — and there are lots of them — might have side-by-sides, ATVs or horses to get them into areas in short order that will take a hiker a day of backbreaking work to access. It seems that every area I hunt these days has a handful of younger, fitter local hunters who have structured their lives around the quest, and who have years of experience in the area. It's hard to compete with that. You have to learn how to hunt around the other guys and how their actions affect game movements.

As mentioned earlier, hunting pressure will tend to drive big game animals in general, and elk in particular, out of the higher elevation public lands down onto private ranches that don't allow the general public hunting access. This pressure can come from both people and apex predators, primarily wolves but also grizzly bears and cougars. I cannot tell you how many times I have hunted public land hard and found no sign of game, then glassed down onto a private ranch and

Elk Hunting Guided vs DIY

For too long, DIY elk bow-hunting by nonresidents has been romanticized by writers, bloggers and You-Tubers who leave you with the impression that if you kill an elk on a guided hunt it's somehow not as worthy an accomplishment as one taken on a do-it-yourself public land hunt. To that I say, simply, hogwash.

The truth is, it's a matter of time vs money.

Success rates in all western states for elk archery hunting rarely exceeds 15 percent — and many of those elk are killed on private land unavailable to the unattached nonresident. Many of those 15 percenters are locals who know the country and are able to spend a lot of time afield during the course of the season. Because most elk tags are now issued via a drawing, it's the rare nonresident who has spent enough seasons in a particular unit to learn it well enough to up their odds during a one- to two-week hunt. (Colorado, for decades the go-to state for DIY bowhunters because tags were available over-the-counter, ended that program in 2024.) Also, public lands are inundated with hunters during the elk archery season. The older bulls are highly educated and call shy. You can spend many a season in the elk woods without getting an opportunity at any bull.



On the other hand, a private land outfitted hunt allows you access to excellent elk country where hunting pressure is tightly controlled. Elk concentrations are generally much higher than on surrounding public land, and the guides know the land and how the elk use it. Shot opportunities are much greater on these hunts.

Let's talk cost. I have done a DIY buddy elk hunt in a popular unit in Montana the past three seasons. The license/tag sets me back a tick over a \$1,000, with the rest of the expense fuel and food, which I figure is about \$100/day. My first season, I shot a nice 5x5 bull on day No. 6. The second year, I hunted a total of 18 straight days without a shot, though I was in the elk daily. The third year, wildfires closed most of my favorite spots; I hunted 6 days with no shot. So that's

↑ Jeff Avegis with the dandy 6x6 bull he took on an outfitted hunt in Idaho in 2024. The author blew an excellent shot opportunity at a dandy bull on the same trip.

30 days over 3 years, with one shot and one bull in the bag. That's \$3,000+ for licenses, and about \$3,000 more in expenses, plus travel costs to and from Montana. And one shot in 3 years in very rough country.

Last season I took an excellent outfitted elk hunt in Idaho run by Table Mountain Outfitters (www.tablemountainoutfitters.com), a Wyoming-based outfit with whom I have successfully hunted with for decades. The hunt lasted 5 days, and the three bowhunters in camp killed one big 6x6 bull, another client missed a 10-yard shot, and, sad to say, I totally screwed up an excellent opportunity at a 6x6 bull I figured would have scored

330-plus Pope and Young points. We were all in multiple bulls every morning and evening, stayed in a beautiful Airbnb, ate like kings, and hunted country that was physically easy. The guides were hardcore elk hunters. It was outstanding. The cost? About \$2,000/day. And that price is going up.

I'm all about DIY hunting — but one has to be realistic about their chances at success. And if you finally draw a coveted tag after a decade or more of applying, or if you want to increase your odds at getting a high-quality shot at a bull, it just makes sense to me to seriously consider the outfitted option.

watched huge elk herds, little groups of pronghorn, and hayfields inundated with deer during the evenings. It's very frustrating — but part of the game today.

THAT'S THE GLAMOUR PART

When I was doing outdoor television, we showed viewers only the successful stuff. You never saw the days and weeks spent doing the research, prepping gear, practicing shooting, physical fitness training, long drives to



↑ DIY hunters need to consider how they'll pack game back to their camp, whereas outfitted hunt clients have guides to do that for them.

→ Pronghorn hunting offers decent public land opportunity, with licenses and tags offered at reasonable cost to nonresidents.

and from another state, those days afield when the weather sucked, and those that produced nothing more than a fun day in the great outdoors — but no close encounters with critters. When these days strung themselves together, as they often did, I'd joke that "this is the glamour part of the business."

The key to successful DIY western hunting is just like those glamour days. The truth is, it takes years of researching, scouting, and hunting the same unit to learn its intricacies, which will stack the odds in your favor. Know that the first year you choose to hunt a particular unit for deer or elk, you should not realistically expect to shoot one. Not saying it doesn't happen, because it most certainly does. But if it does happen to you, immediately go buy a Power Ball ticket, because you're on fire. I always use that first year as a time to primarily learn the unit and lay a base for future hunts, or to decide that this unit

is not for me and I need to look elsewhere.

When you watch YouTube and Instagram videos of successful DIY public land western hunting, mostly the dudes there have either hunted the area a lot, or have received at least some assistance from locals or friends who have hunted the area for years and know it well. Also, these folks are professional or semi-professional hunters who spend the entire year making their living figuring this all out. I've received that kind of help myself, and treasure it, because it cuts the learning curve immeasurably. And this doesn't take into account the skills you need when hunting a specific species, or the developed ability to make a shot under less-than-ideal conditions when the chips are down.

Another point to consider. When on a DIY public land western bow hunt, unless you have drawn a unit known for trophy-class critters and are willing to spend a ton of time and are ready to eat that expensive tag by passing up shot opportunities at smaller animals, never forget that on these hunts, any legal buck or bull is a trophy. This point cannot be stressed enough.



DON'T BE DISCOURAGED

Don't let low success rates and the difficulties discourage you. Win, lose or draw, bowhunting the West has been one of the great joys of my life. Hearing bull elk bugle, watching a beautiful herd of pronghorn come to a waterhole to drink, glassing up a stately mule deer or Coues deer buck, seeing the sun rise and set in some of the world's most magnificent country, and feeling my body at work hiking and climbing up, down and all around — there's nothing like it. To me, it's been worth every penny.

It can be the same for you, too. **BW**

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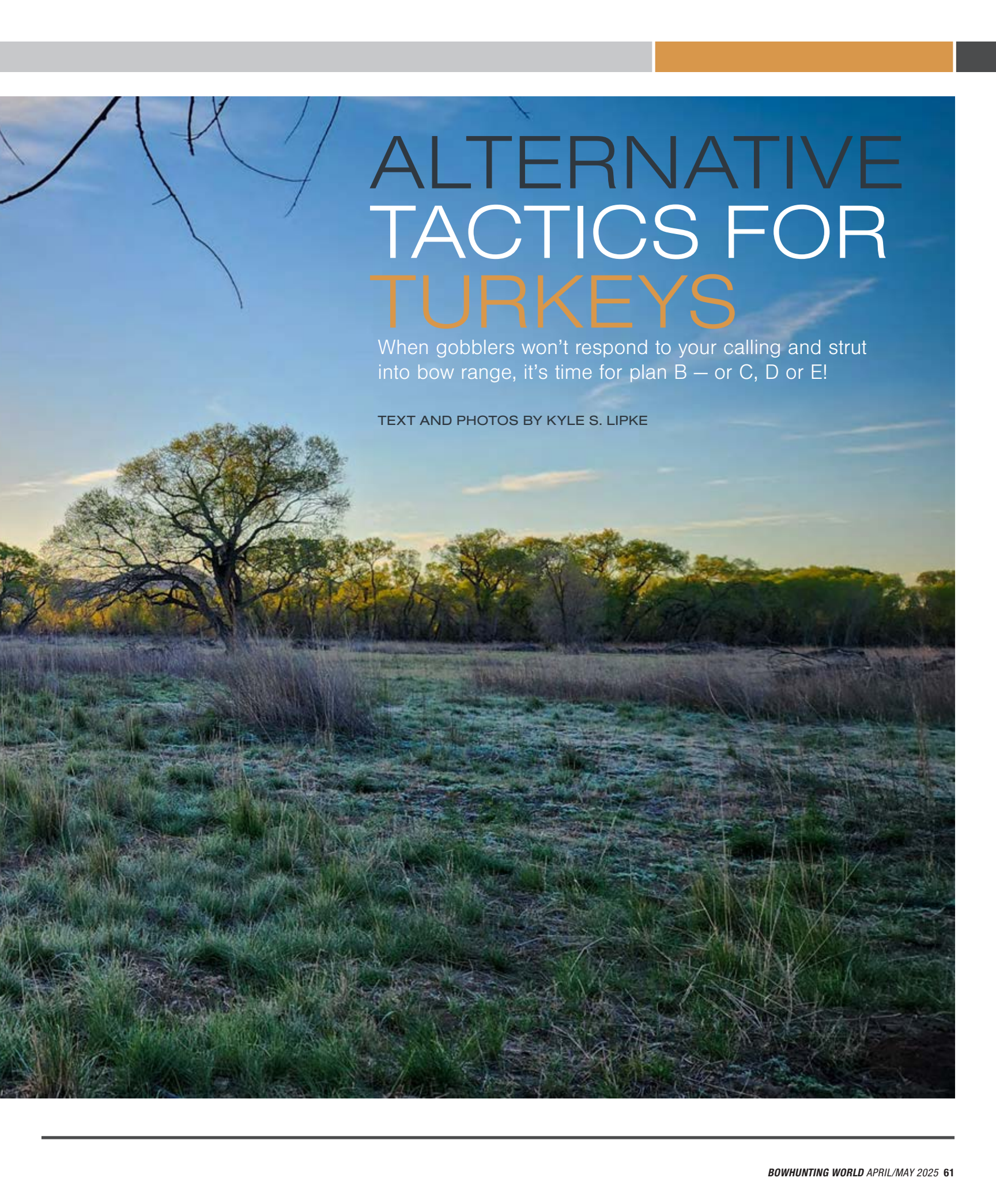
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A landscape photograph of a field with trees in the background under a blue sky. The field is covered in green grass and some dry, brown grass. In the background, there is a line of trees with green and yellow leaves. The sky is a clear blue with some light clouds. The title 'ALTERNATIVE TACTICS FOR TURKEYS' is overlaid on the top right of the image. 'ALTERNATIVE' is in dark grey, 'TACTICS FOR' is in white, and 'TURKEYS' is in orange.

ALTERNATIVE TACTICS FOR TURKEYS

When gobblers won't respond to your calling and strut into bow range, it's time for plan B — or C, D or E!

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KYLE S. LIPKE

Calling a strutting tom into spitting distance with a bow in hand is one of the most exhilarating experiences a bowhunter can have during the months of April and May. Those up-in-your-face encounters with red-faced strutters always makes you want to go back for more.

However, when the stars don't line up with typical calling techniques, bowhunting spring turkeys can be downright discouraging. I've had spring mornings where I was so disgusted with the lack of response to my calling efforts that I all but gave up and went hunting for shed antlers instead. It is these types of mornings that contribute to turkey being at the bottom of my favorite species list.

Nonetheless, every spring I find myself under the guise of dawn — waiting, listening, for an opportunity to arrow a longbeard. Over the years, as calling action has ebbed and flowed, I've learned to adapt to various gobbler responses, or lack thereof. Bowhunting stubborn gobblers that don't want to come to a call can be frustrating. The following are alternative tactics that I have proven to be effective on spring gobblers.

MIX IT UP WITH DECOYS

One major factor of bowhunting turkeys is decoys. When I have trouble getting toms to commit to my setup, one of the first things I consider are my decoys. Are the de-

coys where the birds can see them? Is the wind blowing a decoy?

Eyesight is one of the greatest assets a turkey possesses. If they can't see the decoy as they come in, or if the decoy looks unnatural due to gusts of wind or poor placement, they aren't going to come.

Much of my archery turkey hunting ventures have taken place out west where I put on miles in the mountains, trying to locate birds. In these instances, I often have only one hen decoy in my backpack because carrying more than that just isn't realistic. I've found though that often one hen decoy isn't enough to trick a tom; they want to see multiple birds.

When I am not trekking throughout the hills, I will place multiple decoys. This tactic has been most effective when I have put a strutting tom decoy in place. Doing so often gets a tom to

come challenge the competition, and I have had toms charge in and beat the snot out of my strutter decoys.

On one bowhunt, I was getting incredible calling action. The timber was erupting with dozens of gobblers. The problem was, the toms were henned up, and as soon as the birds hit the dirt off the roost, they were promptly trailing hens. Though the toms would respond to my calling, they showed little interest in coming to look for hens when they were surrounded by them.

After a few days of unsuccessfully calling in a tom, I knew I needed to try something new. Having roosted the birds the evening prior, I crept in tight to the roost trees, less than 100 yards. To get away with this sneak attack, I got to the spot more than an hour before dawn. I planted my strutting tom decoy and a fake hen where I thought the toms would see them when they landed, tucked into the front side of a spindly ponderosa, and waited for the world to come to life.

I kept silent until the toms awoke and let out a couple gobbles. I then replied with a handful of clucks and yelps to let the toms know my location. When the first tom pitched to the ground, he immediately spotted my decoy setup. He puffed into strut mode, made a few circles, then marched right up to my tom decoy and started slapping it around. When the tom spun his head behind the decoys fan, I quickly drew my bow. When the tom walked out from behind the decoy just 9 yards away, I zipped a Rage two-blade Hypodermic through his center. Before I could celebrate the successful execution of my plan, another tom gobbled just yards behind me, then



↓ Strutter decoys can be extremely effective at bringing in apprehensive gobblers.





↑ In addition to having multiple plans of attack, be sure to also carry extra calls.

charged in and started beating the daylight out of the bird I had just arrowed.

Another method of switching things up with decoys is to simply discard their use altogether. Many of the public land areas that I bowhunt get a lot of pressure, and I have found in some instances that decoys can deter toms from coming in. If you are hiking in heavily hunted areas and the decoys seem to make the birds skittish, then consider leaving them in the truck.

I have called in numerous turkeys without the aide of a decoy. A turkey's astute sense of hearing allows them to pinpoint your location based on your calling. So, if I'm hunting without a decoy, I will stop calling once I can see or hear that they are close and coming.

Example: This past spring I set up on an open field

along a creek side with no decoy in place. I could hear multiple toms gobbling a few hundred yards away. After about 30 minutes of calling, I could see three toms working their way to me. I shut up and prepared for a shot as I anticipated their incoming stroll. Minutes later, the three young toms were standing 11 yards from me. After making a decisive shot, I was standing over a beautiful bird.

SET AN AMBUSH

One of the first turkeys I ever killed with a bow, I ambushed in a pinch point between his daily feeding area and his roost. Over several days of chasing this big tom, I learned his basic travel routes, which included flying down from the tree, chasing hens, and then heading to the river to feed for the day. Then he and his hens would reverse the travel route in the evening.

With no luck getting the old tom to come to call, I set up against a pine tree in his travel corridor where I believed he would follow his hens back to the evening roost. Having spotted the birds working their way up from the river, I had an arrow knocked and ready when the tom trailed his hens 20 yards to my left. When the tom stepped behind a tree, I drew my bow. As he stepped out on the other side and stopped, I held my top pin on his upper chest and touched off the release. The tom was

Switch Up the Sounds

Even when toms aren't responding well to calling, I try to always carry extra calls with me, particularly diaphragms. Some days certain sounds resonate better with toms than others. What is hot one day may not be the next. Just as with trying different hunting methods, don't be afraid to try a multitude of calls until you find what the birds are responding to. Also, if the birds won't commit to coming in, being able to locate them through calling still gives you the opportunity to implement other bowhunting tactics.

↓ Turkey movements are often patternable, allowing for a variety of bowhunting options.



dead before the arrow landed on his opposite side.

Turkeys typically form routines that can be patterned. Roost trees, travel routes, feeding and watering areas, as well as open areas where toms will strut their stuff for the ladies are all patternable aspects of a turkey's day. Discovering these routines can inform you of places to sit and wait for birds to move through.

Also, look for tracks and wing tip marks in the dirt such as in ag fields, meadows, or down two-track roads. This sign indicates locations where toms have been strut-



↑ Setting an ambush over travel routes, water or feeding areas can be a good way to arrow a tom.

ting. Toms will often return to these places from day to day and can be good places to set an ambush. If you are having difficulty getting toms to come to a call or decoys, establishing a pattern of turkey movements and travel routes and then setting up a blind may be the perfect way to waylay a tom.

SPOT-AND-STALK

A low-odd, near last-resort option I've used on turkeys is spot-and-stalk, or a combination of still hunting and stalking. This is extremely difficult to execute due to a turkey's keen eyesight and its nomadic nature. I have spent a decent amount of time trying to stalk in close to birds, having experienced failure the majority of the time. However, it has provided me with a few shot opportunities and plenty of appreciation for a turkey's wariness.

Sneaking up on a turkey is a challenging endeavor that makes you feel incompetent when you fail but quite fulfilled when it all comes together. The best way to try to do this is to look for birds where there is cover available



↑ Don't give up. Keep trying new tactics until you find one that works.

for stalking, either rolling terrain, trees and brush, or a combination of both. If a bird is in the wide open, such as a wheat field or open prairie, all bets are off.

Another factor that is ideal for trying this tactic is finding birds that are relatively stationary, such as when they're feeding, or toms are focused on vying for a mate. If they are just cruising from one area to the next, it's nearly impossible to catch up to them.

Arrowing a turkey by spot-and-stalk can be done though if you have the right situation. On one bowhunt, I could see a pile of toms strutting around some hens. They were several hundred yards from my blind, and it was obvious they weren't coming in. With the birds staying in the same spot and nothing to lose, I barreled out of the blind and headed for cover. I watched and waited until all the birds walked over a small hill, then I made my move. With the birds out of sight, I ran to the base of the rise, knocked an arrow, and eased up to the top, eyeing for the first glimpse of a tom. Staying low to the hillside, I could see turkeys everywhere, including a tom walking straight at me. I drew my bow, and when the bird cleared the last blades of grass, I sent an Easton Axis through him.

Another memorable spot-and-stalk outing occurred on a last-day hunt. It was mid-May and most of the breeding action had died down. That afternoon, though, this one tom was fired up, courting a hot hen. He would

gobble on his own and occasionally answer my calls, but it was clear he was moving away from me. That being the case, I moved off the ridgetop to the draw where I could hear him. As I eased closer, the gobblers started getting louder, so I dropped my pack and clipped an arrow to my bowstring. When I caught glimpses of the gobbler's tail fan through the trees, I made a dash up the tree line, cutting the distance to where the tom would emerge. As the hens made their way into the opening, I grabbed a quick range then drew back to my anchor point as the tom followed. My arrow collected only a few feather tips, but the rush I got from getting so close while spotting and stalking had me smiling from ear to ear.

BAIT AND WAIT

In states where it is legal, another option for finding success on turkeys with a bow is to set up over bait. If there are no law restrictions against it, and you have no personal reservations about ethically bowhunting turkeys over bait, then this may be a good alternative option when all else seems to fail.

I've bowhunted turkeys over bait a couple of times.

Though this method does provide high odds of success, I would argue that it doesn't necessarily guarantee success. Planning and preparation are required to place the bait site and subsequent blind location. This is typically any area where birds frequently travel and can access the cracked corn with plenty of open space to feel safe when coming and going. Additionally, you must get drawn back undetected and place a vital arrow. This isn't my preferred option, but it has provided some exciting bowhunting action when the calling had essentially ended for the season and nothing else was working.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Getting a shot at a gobbler isn't always as straight forward as getting one to come to your call. If your usual methods aren't working, try mixing things up with these previously mentioned tactics.

Whether the pursuit is a longbeard or otherwise, bowhunting is a game of adapting to circumstances. If one method isn't working, try something else. With patience and persistence, something will eventually lead to success. **EW**

↓ When all else failed, the author was able to bag these toms over a corn pile. Of course, be sure to check whether baiting is legal for your area.



COMPOUND BOWS

New-age compound bows come packed with fantastic features that will have you reaching for your wallet.

BY GORDY KRAHN

If you haven't set foot in an archery pro shop in recent years you might be in for a shock. Those models that were the cat's meow 10 or even 5 years ago are now relics by comparison to the new wave of feature-rich, technology-driven compound bows of today. And those bowhunters who have failed to upgrade are missing out on a performance curve that has reached for the stars.

The Class of 2024-25 is a good example — a bevy of bows that push the envelope in terms of speed, accuracy, weight and noise reduction and a smooth shooting experience. Today's compound bows typically weigh in the neighborhood of 4 pounds, and many sport super-short axle-to-axle spans — perfect for hunting from tight places such as treestands and

ground blinds. They are equipped with space age cams and limbs that generate Incredible Hulk power, and coupled with today's equally fantastic high-tech arrows push velocities to the outer limits — 340 fps and beyond. Top-shelf bowstrings and cables, string silencers, grips and string suppressors round out the package.

And then there are the add-ons — those ancillary items that make your new bow the best it can be: peep sights, D-loops, stabilizers, wrist slings, bowsights, rests, releases, arrows, broadheads, oh my! Today's bowhunters have never had it so good. Here are eight compound bows that will elevate your game.

APA ARCHERY SUMMIT

Designed for maneuverability and enhanced in-the-field function, and built on APA Archery's Pro Lite riser, the all-new 28-inch axle-to-axle Summit compound bow is packed with the company's highest level of innovation, including APA's Pro-Connect sling, Pro-Connect stabilizer and all-new Shift Tune technology, which allows archers to tune the bow effortlessly with no tools required. The bow weighs 3.4 pounds and produces IBO velocities up to 340 fps, with a forgiving 7.375-inch brace height. The Summit has up to 80 percent let-off, draw weights ranging from 40 to 70 pounds, and draw lengths from 25.5 to 30.5 inches. MSRP: \$1,153; apaarchery.com



BEAR ARCHERY LEGEND 30 RTH

The Legend 30 RTH compound bow from Bear Archery features the Ready-to-Hunt package from Trophy Ridge, with an IMS V-Biscuit rest, Picatinny-mounted four-pin sight, five-arrow quiver, stabilizer, peep sight and wrist sling. With its compact 30-inch axle-to-axle length and 6.5-inch brace height, the Legend 30 strikes a balance between maneuverability and forgiveness. At the heart of the Legend 30 is the revolutionary DHC-XR hybrid cam, with draw lengths ranging from 18 to 31 inches. The Legend 30 also features draw adjustable weights from 14 to 70 pounds, ensuring a perfect fit for every shooter. The Bear Paw Grip provides comfort and control, while the Cable Roller System ensures smooth, consistent draws with minimal friction. MSRP: \$629.99; beararchery.com



BOWTECH PROVEN 34

Based on the Bowtech SS34 with new/added technologies such as Timelock, GripLock and a second generation CenterMass Sight System, the Bowtech Proven 34 utilizes two different cam sets (STD and LD) to allow shooters of all draw lengths to use a 34-inch ATA bow platform length. Two premium packages — Treestand and Mountain — simplify the buying experience, featuring products that are expertly designed to complement each other, ensuring the bow is perfectly balanced and performs at its peak. The Treestand package includes the bow, Centermass DualTrac 2-pin slider sight, quiver, 6-inch stabilizer and Ripcord cable-driven rest. The Mountain package includes the bow, Centermass 5-pin slider sight, 8-inch stabilizer, Tightspot quiver and Ripcord limb-driven rest. MSRP: \$1,449.99; \$2,399.99/Package; bowtecharchery.com



G5 PRIME FORM

The all-new 34-inch axle-to-axle G5 Prime Form compound bow features Advanced Structures technology (AST), which incorporates carbon where it is needed and aluminum where it is needed to increase strength, stiffness and precision. Prime's Core Cam System allows for draw length specific mods, which delivers maximum efficiency at every draw length. The bow is equipped with a Picatinny sight mount for easy bowsight mounting, along with QAD's Dovetail, machined directly into the RVX, which allows for additional rest mounting options. The Prime Archery Form delivers velocities up to 336 fps, has a brace height of 6.25 inches, draw lengths from 26.5 to 30.5 inches and draw weights from 40 to 80 pounds. MSRP: \$1,595; g5prime.com



ELITE ARCHERY EXALT-35

Elite Archery's Exalt 35 compound bow features its new R.A.C. system, a revolutionary accessory connection platform that enables the mounting of various accessories, including Picatinny-style attachments, ensuring compatibility with Elite's wide range of add-ons. Another key feature is the efficient SPX Cam System with smooth mods that generate IBO speeds up to 337 fps (344 fps with performance mods). And shooters can customize their setup for a perfect fit and feel every time, with let-off weights from 70 to 90 percent, S.E.T. technology for simplified, exact tuning, wider limbs with a strategic weight distribution on Elite's dual caged riser to enhance aim-ability and balance for faster shot acquisition and Delta VRT vibration elimination. MSRP: \$1,399.99; elitearchery.com



HOYT CARBON RX-9

With redesigned riser geometry and updated limbs and limb pockets, the Hoyt Carbon RX-9 compound bow is accurate, light, ultra stable and fast. It has a speed increase at every available poundage and draw length over last year's RX-8 (in some cases close to 20 fps), all while being lighter and containing a smoother draw cycle. The RX-9 measures 30.5 inches axle-to-axle and has a brace height of 6.125 inches. Weighing just 4 pounds, it generates an IBO speed of 342 fps, has 75-, 80- and 85-percent let-off options and 25- to 30-inch draw lengths. It is equipped with a HBX Generation 4 Improved Module System to ensure no performance is sacrificed at any available weight/draw length. MSRP: \$2,099; hoyt.com

**MATHEWS LIFT X**

The 2025 Mathews Lift X features the company's new Limb Shift technology, which allows archers to micro-adjust with the simple turn of a wrench — no bow press needed. In addition, ARC7 Limb technology delivers the most durable and efficient limbs Mathews has ever created, and its new Bond Grip System customizes the point of contact for every shooter. Ranging from 24.5- to 31.5-inch draw lengths and peak poundages from 55 to 80 pounds, the 2025 Lift X is available in 29.5- or 33-inch axle-to-axle variations and is available in eleven finish options, including Mathews' newest variations: KUIU Verde, Shale and Shale Fade-to-Black. MSRP: Lift X 29.5/\$1,359; Lift X 33/\$1,496; mathewsinc.com

**PSE MACH 33 DS CARBON**

The Mach 33 DS Carbon from PSE is a masterpiece of modern engineering — an advanced, reliable and powerful hunting platform. Building on the success of the Mach 30, the Mach 33 offers an excellent string angle, advanced features, exceptional feel and blistering speed. With Bowtech's Dead Frequency Carbon, the Mach 33 is faster and stiffer, ensuring a crisp, quiet shot. The PSE Mach 33 is packed with features. The Precision Bow Tuning System (PBTS), captured roller guards and integrated sight and rest mounting options make setting up and tuning this bow an absolute breeze. With the longer effective brace height (6.625 inches) from the Full Draw Stability System, users get incredible speed and tremendous forgiveness. MSRP: \$1,899; psearchery.com



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MATHEWS LIFT X 29.5

All of 2024 Lift's best features combine with a new grip, new limbs, and a new tuning system to yield the 2025 Mathews Lift X, the company's most advanced and technologically sound flagship bow to date.

BY DARRON MCDUGAL

Last year, Mathews Archery accomplished a tremendous feat with its Lift. Since compounds have become practically all riser in terms of axle-to-axle length, I'm not aware of any other premium, machined-aluminum compound bow that has weighed less than the 2024 3.99-pound Mathews Lift 29.5. Shorter limbs made possible by a top-mounted cam axle, as well as the most geometrically intricate Bridge-Lock riser design yet, yielded a mass weight that rivals even some of the market's carbon-riser bows.

No matter what accessorized mass weight an archer prefers, I always say that a lightweight bow allows you to add weight where you want it to land on an ideal finished mass weight that feels unbelievable. Start with a heavy bow, on the other hand, and you'll often have a boat anchor once fully accessorized. The original Lift is not only lightweight, but Mathews takes the guesswork out of accessorizing it for the optimal feel and balance with Mathews Genuine accessories.

While the original Lift was a lethal rig and one of my all-time favorite Mathews bows — I've owned many — we're not here to talk about last year's bow. Mathews always seems to identify room for an improvement or three, and to that end, the 2025 Lift X pushes

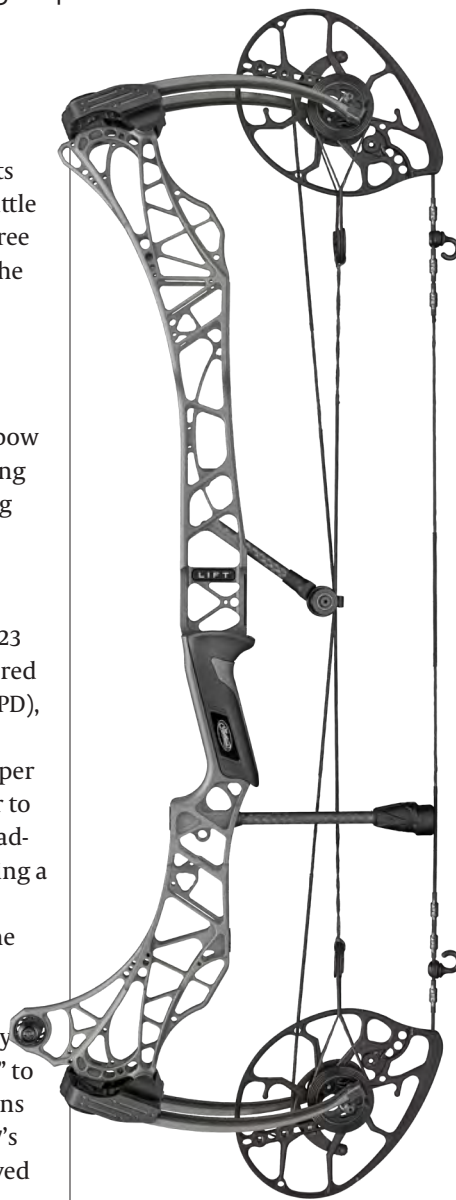
the needle to the peg.

Let's discuss the ins and outs of a new bow that weighs as little as the original Lift, but has three key advancements that oust the original from its throne.

NEW LIMBS AND TUNING TECHNOLOGY

When it comes to shooting a bow thousands of times and hauling it through the most punishing environments — that's where hardcore bowhunting often takes you — durability cannot be compromised. Both the 2023 Phase4 and the 2024 Lift featured Resistance Phase Damping (RPD), which utilizes four different limb pairs (eight limbs total) per bow. It allowed each limb pair to sandwich a silencing rubber, addressing vibrations and yielding a substantially stealthier shot.

The Lift X captures that same brilliant RPD technology, but Mathews engineers rewrote the book on limb durability by adding what they call "armor" to the limbs. Through the millions of cycle tests during the ARC 7's development, the design proved to be durably superior to previous limbs without sacrificing efficiency and performance. By all standards, it is the frontrunner of all Mathews limb designs, and a central reason why bowhunters from the Florida swamps to the



TEST BOW SPECS

AXLE-TO-AXLE LENGTH: 29.5 inches

BRACE HEIGHT: 6 inches

DRAW LENGTH: 27.5 inches

DRAW WEIGHT: 76.4 pounds
(75-pound mods)

LET-OFF: 80% or 85% (tested at 85%)

BOW-ONLY WEIGHT: 3.99 pounds

ACCESSORIZED TOTAL WEIGHT: 5.7 pounds
(including sight, rest, front stabilizer, and quiver)

VELOCITY: 288 fps (with 468-grain Easton 6.5mm Acu-Carbon 340 arrow); 293 fps (with 456-grain CX Maxima Triad 350 arrow); 296 fps (with 441-grain Victory VAP SS 350 arrow)

KINETIC ENERGY: 86.22 foot-pounds (Easton); 86.95 foot-pounds (CX); 85.82 foot-pounds (Victory)

TEST-BOW FINISH: Shale

MSRP: \$1,359

CONTACT: mathewsinc.com



Alaskan tundra can trust the Lift X on every hunt.

With previous Mathews models, I felt that the tuning system had room for improvement. Top Hats are spacers of different widths that effectively reposition the cam on the axle to address cam lean. It had limits, not to mention that each tweak required pressing the bow, pulling the axle, moving the cam aside, and then removing the existing Top Hats and replacing them with a different set. Then, you had to put the cam back into place, re-insert the axle, make sure the string and cables were all on their pegs and tracks, and then un-press the bow. It worked, but a couple of other manufacturers had what I felt were superior tuning features that simplified and sped up tuning duties without a bow press.

This year, Mathews delivered Limb Shift Technology to put easy tuning within a DIY bowhunter's

↑ Brand new ARC 7 Limb Technology, which offers superior durability without unhitching efficiency and performance, makes the Lift X a bow you can trust from your backyard to a dream hunt in the Alaskan wilds.

reach, and it also simplifies and speeds up the tuning process for correcting a nock-left or nock-right paper tear for dealers. Here's how it works. On a right-handed Lift X, the top and bottom cams are slaved to the left limbs. On the right side of each axle is a removable screw that exposes the Limb Shift Adjustment. Simply insert a 5/32-inch hex wrench into the axle and move the cam left or right. Etched reference marks near the adjustment allow the user to track adjustments. After adjusting, simply replace the axle screw and you're done. Finally, a hassle-free tuning system on a Mathews bow, no bow press required.

NEW GRIP

I've personally replaced the En-

"This year with the Lift X, Mathews delivered Limb Shift Technology to put easy tuning within a bowhunter's reach."

gage grip with Engage side plates on my recent Mathews bows. For me, the Engage Grip has always felt a bit too tacky, which makes it easier to torque the bow, especially when wearing thin hunting gloves. The grip wasn't horrible in my opinion, but it wasn't the best, either. The side plates solved the issue and made a great alternative for me.

The Lift X debuts the new Bond Grip System. The bow comes standard with the Bond Engage grip. Also available are the Bond



↑ Mathews has finally streamlined the way that users and bow technicians tune its bows. Limb Shift Technology is a user-friendly tuning feature that doesn't require a bow press and is so easy that most archers with a basic knowledge of paper tuning can utilize it safely and effectively.

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BOW REPORT



← A slider sight was the missing component in the Mathews Genuine accessory line until Mathews and UltraView Archery joined forces and unveiled the fully featured Bridge-Lock UV Slider sight, which mates directly with the Bridge-Lock Riser and weighs a scant 9 ounces.

Contour and Bond Taper. These three grip options all offer an individual fit and feel that will harmonize with most archers. Each grip is formulated from a durable, non-tacky polymer base and features a lightly textured inlay for positive hand traction while maximizing comfort. Bond Grips look awesome, they're available in colors that match or complement any and all bow finishes, and they're compatible with the Shot Sense module.

So far, I've played only with the Bond Engage, and I immediately felt that it was a huge improvement over the previous Engage grip. Not only does it feel better, but it aligns with the quality and craftsmanship that Mathews bows are known for. For those who still prefer to grip directly on the riser, the BOND Side Plates are the answer. Bond grips are compatible with Mathews hunting and target bows that are 2019 and newer, so keep that in mind if you want to make an upgrade to your existing Mathews bow.

HOW IT HANDLES AND SHOOTS

My first arrow through the Lift X floored me. Since the 2020 VXR, I've always shot my Mathews bows with 75-pound SwitchWeight modules. It drew smoothly, but even more remarkable, the shot was nearly silent; it sounded like a kid's bow. A bow so powerful shouldn't be so quiet, but the Lift X is even quieter. After checking the draw weight on my



↑ The Bond Grip System has four options. It exudes the quality and craftsmanship that Mathews shooters expect, and it isn't tacky to the touch as with the Engage Grip, making it more comfortable and easier to avoid torquing the bow.

Last Chance Archery digital scale, it peaked at 76.4 pounds. The draw cycle is beautiful, which isn't surprising since it features the same SwitchWeight X Cam system as the original Lift, but the Lift X shot stealth is off the charts.

The long and flawless Bridge-Lock Riser delivers all of the stability it takes to hold rock solid on the target, and I specifically noted the calmness I felt during each shot sequence as my pin virtually locked where I wanted to hit. The balance and stability on the Lift X are everything you could ever ask for.

For even more stability, you could choose the Lift X 33. And for those willing to trade some stability for extra maneuverability, the Lift RS has a 27.5-inch axle-to-axle length. I found the 29.5 to be the happy medium, and I expect it to be the hottest seller.

My first kill with last year's Lift entailed a longer-than-average 55-yard shot on a western whitetail, which I made almost effortlessly. I expect the Lift X to instill the same confidence I experienced on that hunt when I take it afield (at the time of this writing, I haven't hunted with it, but I will have hunted with it by the time this report is published).

Even in the short period of time I've owned it, I already feel deadly. I haven't shot it at long ranges yet due to cold weather and a short testing window, but it groups arrows like a champion. I've been doing this long enough to know that the Lift X will do everything the Lift did and more.

Last year's Lift 29.5 held its tune all season long, which I attribute to the Match bowstrings. They didn't creep, and the servings didn't separate. The Lift X is also rigged with Match bowstrings, so I expect another easy season of accuracy with little to no tinkering and tuning. With Match's proprietary blend of BCY 452X ultra-low wax fibers, you don't have to worry about peep alignment, creep or serving separations.



ONE ELEVATED ARCHERY EXPERIENCE

One of the most undeniable benefits of recent Mathews bows is the effectiveness and streamlining of accessorizing with Mathews Genuine accessories. The entire setup is better balanced and lighter by eliminating the unnecessary bulk of mounting brackets and such. And while Mathews has been offering an Axcel 5-pin sight, a slider sight was the missing link to the Mathews Genuine accessory lineup. Sure, several of the market's dovetail slider sights are compatible with the Bridge-Lock Sight Mount, but most are bulkier than necessary.

For 2025, Mathews and Ultra-View Archery have delivered a gem. The Bridge-Lock UV Slider features a short mounting bar, and at 9 ounces, it is the lightest and most functional slider sight that you can slide into the Bridge-Lock Riser. It has first-, second- and third-axis adjustability, and is the

smoothest, easiest-to-use, and most streamlined slider sight I have ever used.

I rigged my 2024 Lift 29.5 with Ultra-View's UV Slider and liked it immensely, but the Bridge-Lock UV Slider is more compact and lighter, which I love. It also seems to slide even more smoothly. There are other great slider sights out there by Axcel, Spot-Hogg, and others, but in my opinion, the clear choice for a hunter looking to optimize their Mathews bow is the Bridge-Lock UV Slider. It's simply brilliant, and it is available in different pin configurations via an interchangeable pin-cartridge system. It is compatible with all Mathews bows that feature the Bridge-Lock Sight Mount (V3X and newer), and it features a rechargeable light (removable for bowhunting in states where electronics are illegal).

While it's undeniable that Mathews accomplished great things with the original Lift last

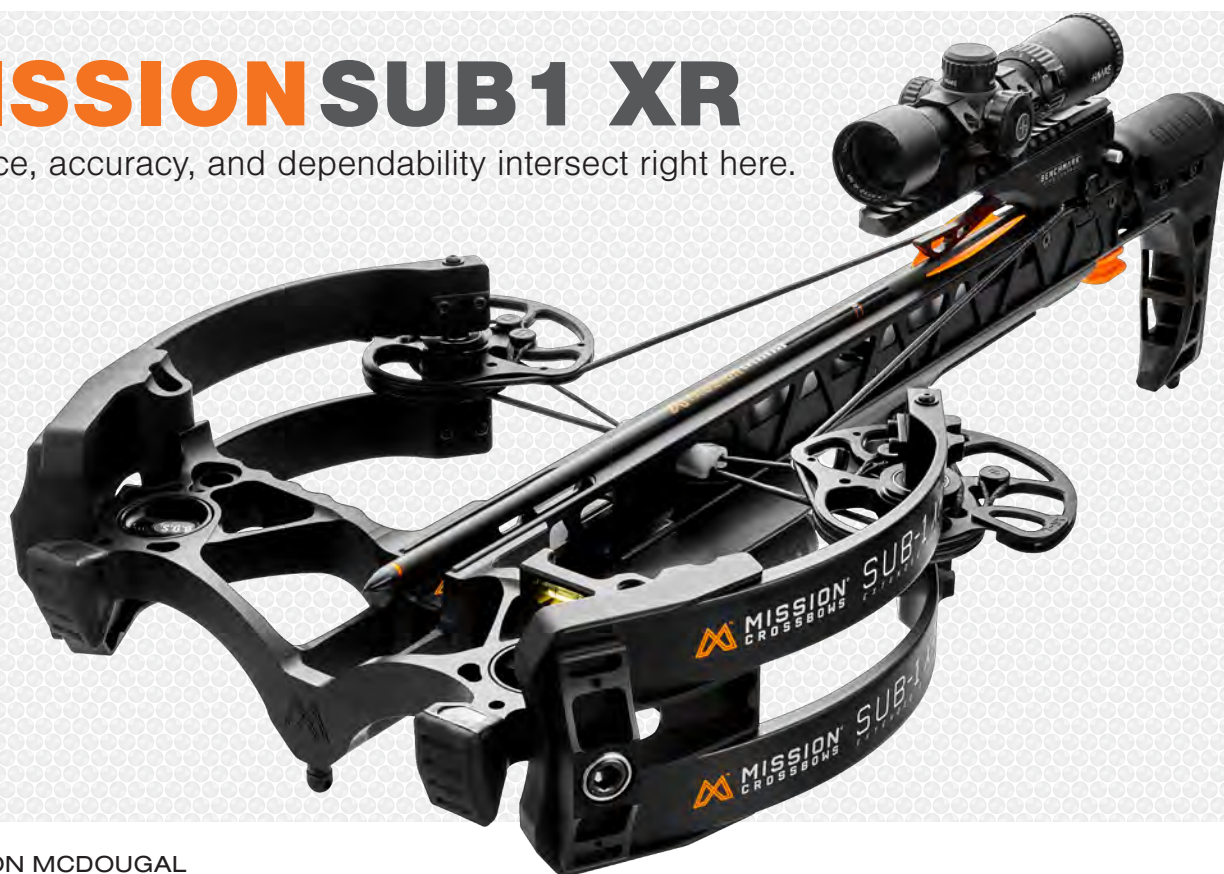
year, the new talk of the town is the Lift X, which incorporates the Lift's best technologies with a revamped grip system and an overdue new tuning feature that will change the tuning game. Add to that the bonus of more durable limbs and a sweet new Mathews Genuine slider sight, and we're talking about a bow that literally checks all of the boxes.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

The Lift X 29.5 was set up using a Last Chance Archery EZ Green Bow Press and EZ Green Bow Vise, and the draw weight was calculated using Last Chance Archery's Digital Bow Scale. A Caldwell Ballistic Precision Chronograph measured the arrow velocities. Other products used were Easton's Nock and D-Loop Pliers and Pro Hex Fold-Up Allen Set. Arrows were weighed on Last Chance Archery's Pro Grain Scale. **EW**

MISSION SUB1 XR

Balance, accuracy, and dependability intersect right here.



BY DARRON MCDUGAL

The well-known adage, “You get what you pay for,” really rings true in the crossbow world. Sure, some models as inexpensive as \$300 shoot pretty well out to 40 yards, but they’re fairly slow, a bit noisy, and lack high-quality accessories. They’re also not very compact or well-balanced. You get what you pay for, and hunters seeking the best possible accuracy and overall shooting experience should be prepared to shop for a crossbow with a wad of cash.

Mission Crossbows, as you might know, is a subsidiary of Mathews Archery. Like Mathews’ compound bows, Mission’s crossbows flaunt high-quality craftsmanship and dependable performance. The SUB-1 XR is the top dog in Mission’s lineup, and it was launched in 2019. For whatever

reason, I just got my hands on it for the first time in December 2024. After putting it through its paces in Wisconsin’s winter elements, here are my takeaways.

THE PACKAGE

A crossbow can perform only as well as the accessories it is paired with. The SUB-1 XR Pro Kit includes a top-notch Hawke scope with a bolt-drop reticle featuring holding points from 20-100 yards in 10-yard increments. The yardages are posted beside each holding point, and the scope features red and green illumination for easy low-light reference.

The Pro Kit also includes a soft case, rail lubricant, a rope cocking device, three 19-inch Mission Premium Bolts, and the M Quiver. The bolts are engineered for SUB-1 series crossbows and have a +/-

TEST CROSSBOW SPECS

MAKE/MODEL: Mission SUB-1 XR

FINISH: Black

MASS WEIGHT: 7.6 pounds (without accessories)

OVERALL WIDTH: 12.5 inches (uncocked); 9.1 inches (cocked)

OVERALL LENGTH: 30.5 inches

DRAW EFFORT: Not listed

POWER STROKE: 14.625 inches

BOLT LENGTH AND WEIGHT: 19 inches; 347 grains (measured with Last Chance Archery Pro Grain Scale)

MANUFACTURER LISTED VELOCITY: 410 fps

TEST VELOCITY: 413 fps (347-grain bolt; found with Caldwell Ballistic Precision chronograph)

MANUFACTURER LISTED TRIGGER PULL: 3 pounds

COCKING DEVICE: Rope Cocking Aid (included); RSD Crank (sold separately)

SCOPE: Hawke

MSRP: \$2,199 (no kit; includes case and Rope Cocking Aid); \$2,398.99 (Pro Kit)

CONTACT: missioncrossbows.com



↑ The Mission SUB-1 XR is comfortable to aim, lightweight, well-balanced and extremely accurate.

.001-inch straightness tolerance for tremendous accuracy. The M Quiver is just like the Mathews Arrow Web Quiver for compounds. It mounts solidly, holds the bolts securely, and removes easily.

The RSD Crank is an upgrade (\$189.99 MSRP). It is removable if desired, but it mounts completely out of the way for shouldering and aiming the crossbow, negating any reason to remove it after the SUB-1 XR is cocked. It does need to be removed, however, in order to use the Rope Cocking Device. I will say that there are better and more streamlined integrated cranks on high-end crossbows from Mission's competitors, but the RSD works dependably and isn't cumbersome in the least.

While the Pro Kit will get a deer

hunter started, you'll probably want to purchase some extra bolts because the kit includes only three.

Mission offers a lighted bolt version featuring a Clean-Shot Archery half-moon lighted nock, which many crossbow shooters will find attractive for tracking arrow flight and locating bolts following pass-through hits.

There are other options for this crossbow such as a custom Mission/SKB Hard Case, but the most practical one is the SUB-1 Removable Foot Stirrup. The SUB-1 XR's riser is designed to work as an integrated foot stirrup and decrease the crossbow's overall length (just 30.5 inches), but hunters who need more boot space will find the Removable Foot Stirrup a worthwhile upgrade.



↑ The riser-mounted level informs the shooter as to whether or not they're holding the crossbow level.

"All SUB-1 crossbows are made in Sparta, Wisconsin, and they feature the quality and craftsmanship that will have you feeling like you got what you paid for."

VELOCITY, ACCURACY AND HANDLING

After shooting a few bolts to get the SUB-1 XR zeroed, I shot a bolt through my Caldwell chronograph. It posted a 413-fps reading, which is just slightly above the XR's 410 fps list velocity. Over the years of testing crossbows, I've commonly found that some models post an actual velocity that is below the manufacturer's listed velocity, but the XR exceeded it. Now, 413 fps doesn't hold a candle to the market's fastest crossbows, which have broken the 500 fps threshold. However, 413 fps is more than 100 fps faster than most highly lethal compound bow setups. In other words, the XR could easily take (and has taken) the world's largest game animals without a problem.

I did some shooting out to 70 yards with the SUB-1 XR in some miserably cold and windy Wisconsin weather. I didn't achieve the sub-1-inch groups that Mission claims the crossbow can produce at 100 yards, but I was shooting

from shooting sticks, not a bench. I was also on a tight timeline to turn in this report, so I didn't stretch out to 100 yards and shoot from a bench to see if I could attain rifle-like accuracy. The groups I shot from realistic hunting yardages were plenty tight, and with more time, I'm positive that my groups would tighten up even more. I found that shooting groups at 40 yards can become costly, as one of my bolts whacked the metal half-moonnock of another bolt already in the target.

I cocked the SUB-1 XR with the RSD Crank for part of my field test and then with the Rope Cocking Aid for the other part. I found that my group sizes didn't change, however, the location of my group did. I had sighted in the scope using the RSD Crank, and my 40-yard group was in the bull's-eye, but when I shot a three-bolt group from 40 yards by cocking the XR with the rope aid, my group was about 1 inch high and 3 inches to the right. I'm sure the impact would be minimal at 20 yards, but I felt that my 40-yard anecdote was worth noting. Based on those results, I'd suggest using one device or the other and not changing back and forth between them.

One minor complaint: Both the rope aid and the RSD Crank's rope make substantial contact with



↑ The Back Out System allows users to decrease draw weight, but they can also back the limb bolts out until the tension comes off the string and cables. This makes it possible to replace the string and cables in the field.

↑ Benchmark Fire Control includes features such as a Match Grade Trigger, De-Cocking Button, and the Easy-Load Arrow Retention Arm.

Featuring Benchmark Fire Control, the SUB-1 XR is rigged with a Match-Grade Trigger. You'll feel a slight amount of travel, which is the trigger's first stage. At the end of the first stage, the trigger reaches its second stage and then breaks at a clean, crisp 3 pounds, which is a key to the XR's accuracy. A De-Cocking Button allows the user to de-cock the crossbow with the Rope Cocking Aid, negating the need to fire the crossbow following an unsuccessful hunt. As a side note, Mission does not condone using the RSD Crank to de-cock the SUB-1.

Also part of the Benchmark Fire Control System is the Easy-Load Arrow Retention Arm. It has two stages, allowing the bolt to load easily but applying sufficient downward pressure to hold the bolt in place, even when acquiring a target at a steep, declined angle.

The SUB-1 XR is one of the quieter and more vibration- and recoil-free crossbows I've tested lately. Part of the reason is it

the stock and rail. It isn't an issue in relation to accuracy, but I can't help but wonder how quickly the ropes will wear out due to rubbing/friction. After about 40 shots, the wear wasn't evident, so maybe it won't happen as quickly as I initially thought. Both devices made cocking the XR a piece of cake, especially since the cams have 80-percent let-off.

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shoots a manageable velocity, but it's also by design. The tactical stock, ventilated rail, and parallel limbs all contribute to the XR's smooth-shooting characteristics.

Acquiring the scope and my target in the scope was comfortable and nearly effortless. The stock's cheekpiece is well-placed, and the rifle-inspired Precision Stock has three positions to choose from, giving shooters of all different statures a comfortable fit and feel.

The XR also weighs just 7.6 pounds without accessories, which is comparable to a typical deer rifle. It is also very short and narrow, with a 9.1-inch cocked width and a 12.5-inch uncocked width. Add to that the control of the XR's pistol grip, and you have a crossbow that is virtually effortless to use and maneuver.

A FEW MORE DETAILS

Another secret to the SUB-1 XR's accuracy is the patented flight deck, which is CNC machined to terminate vertical nock travel. As a complement, the synced cams take care of horizontal nock travel. The end result is flawless bolt departure, every single time.

The SUB-1 XR is designed to be ambidextrous, with both the safety and the RSD Crank having options on both sides so a left- or right-handed hunter can shoot it interchangeably. This makes it a nice option for a family. Parents can shoot it, but so can their little youth hunters.

Along those same lines, the



↑ The patented and CNC-machined flight deck is designed to eliminate vertical nock travel, while the synced cams are designed to eliminate horizontal nock travel, resulting in clean and consistent bolt departure.

B.O.S. (Back Out System) allows the draw weight to be decreased, and you can also back out the limb bolts until the tension comes off the strings and cables, making it easy for capable shooters to replace their own string and cables in a pinch — a great option in the event of a mishap during a dream hunt.

While Mission hasn't launched a new crossbow in several years, its SUB-1 XR still holds its own in the marketplace, and it delivers no-nonsense performance, outstanding comfort, and benchmark accuracy. Plus, all Mission SUB-1 crossbows are made from start to finish in Sparta, Wisconsin, and they feature the quality and craftsmanship that will have you feeling like you got what you paid for. **EW**

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Misguided Marketing?

In the author's opinion, some crossbow companies are shooting themselves in the foot.

BY BOB ROBB

I've recently seen these crossbow advertising statements:

- Rifle-like accuracy built into every product, every time.
- Astounding long-range capability with its adjustable turret scope.
- The reverse-draw Model XXX shoots 515 fps.
- The tripod's clamp-on design allows for use with both crossbows and firearms.

When states began making crossbows legal during archery-only seasons, their inherent technology made them relatively short-range tools, with shots limited to 50 yards or so. This was at a time when only the best archers using the best compound bows could make a 50-yard shot, too. That all changed back in 2017, when Mission Crossbows — owned by archery legend and design genius Matt McPherson and his Mathews Archery — pushed the technology envelope and created a crossbow called the SUB-1, touting sub-1-inch group accuracy at 100 yards.

Today, multiple crossbow manufacturers tout their product's ability to produce this kind of accuracy with hunting-weight arrows flying at 450-500 fps or more, and equip their crossbows with variable-power scopes and triggers that break as crisply as those on the best precision rifles. When coupled with a laser rangefinder, these modern crossbows make rifle-like accuracy at 100

yards a reality.

So I have to ask: Are manufacturers shooting themselves in the foot when they promote crossbows as long-range capable?

Since I began seriously bowhunting back in the late 1970s, long-range bow shots at game have been frowned upon, for good reason. Without diving too deep into the weeds, it takes a 400-grain hunting-weight arrow leaving a bow of any kind at 350 fps about 1 second to travel 100 yards. That's plenty of time for an animal to move, resulting in either a miss or, worse, a wounding hit. Also, that same arrow will drift off-course several feet with a crosswind of just 5 mph. Throw in the adrenaline rush all hunters feel during the moment of truth, and it's easy to see why the variables involved make taking these long-range shots unwise.

AN OLD DEBATE?

Is the crossbow/compound debate the same one made decades ago by traditional archers when compounds first came out? Trad bowhunters, who shot their deer inside 20 yards, said that the compound made it "too easy" and you could shoot deer "too far away." This was back when the maximum range for a skilled compound shooter was maybe 40 yards. But the difference between 20 and 40 yards is not the same as 40 and 100 yards, by any stretch of the imagination.

The debate about whether crossbows should be allowed during archery-only seasons has largely been settled, with crossbows legal during archery-only seasons in 32 states. Most of the states with restrictions are in the West, and only Oregon bans crossbow hunting completely.

The crossbow is increasingly becoming the preferred choice of the whitetail bowhunter. In states where there are no restrictions, if you ask an archery pro shop that sells both compounds and crossbows where the sales are these days, many, if not most, will tell you crossbows.

The difference is this: In this high-tech modern world, where people are used to finding anything and everything immediately with a click of a mouse or a tap of their phone, instantaneous success has become almost expected. To become a consistently accurate shooter with a compound bow takes regular practice over months, not days, and an intimate knowledge of the equipment so you can tweak those inevitable "gotchas" that plague compounds.

Conversely, you can pull a modern crossbow out of the box that's been pre-sighted in at the factory and, if you have any experience with rifle shooting at all, hit the X ring at extended ranges immediately. Every time. That's one of the reasons they have become so popular, and a big reason why

crossbow use has been touted as a way to increase hunter participation, which all states acknowledge is a challenge for them.

To date, there's no data showing that the use of modern crossbows have increased overall big game harvest, nor that buck age class has been affected.

That said, will their evolution follow that of modern muzzleloaders, which when matched with a riflescope and sabot-encased bullets, are accurate to at least 250 yards? Fact: There has been a subsequent reduction in muzzleloader-only seasons, and equipment restrictions such as no sabots, no pelletized powder, and no scopes.

Some manufacturers tell you their crossbows are accurate to 100+ yards, that they are "built like long-range precision rifles," but you should never shoot at game further than 60 yards (it used to be 40, then 50 yards). Isn't that some sort of Orwellian Doublespeak?

Hunting is an individual thing in which you really have to please only one person — yourself. If you want to hunt with a long-range capable crossbow and it's legal, I'm all for it.

For me, though, bowhunting is all about getting in their face, and when I do, having to cautiously draw the bow, hold the string with my own muscle power, and make the shot when the window of opportunity opens. **BW**

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