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A Whitetail Buck . . . With a Fang?

The author recently picked up a European mount from the taxidermist and was surprised to discover that his whitetail skull features a fang!

In November 2024, I killed a heavy-racked 5x5 in South Dakota. A few months later I was excited to pick up the European mount from the taxidermist and was surprised to discover that the skull features a fang!

I don't know how I missed this fact during my 50-year deer hunting career, but apparently a few whitetails have fangs. Who knew?





← The author's 2024 South Dakota buck features a single, quarter-inch-long fang on the right side of its upper jaw bone.

FANG FACTS

Fangs in whitetails are rare. Most experts agree that the prevalence is less than 1 in 100. Some researchers claim the number is only 1 in 10,000.

Most fangs are less than a half-inch. The fang on my buck is a quarter-inch. Fangs occur more often on a buck than a doe.

The occurrence of whitetail fangs varies by region, but due to their rarity, it's difficult to draw conclusions. Some experts say that Florida whitetails are more prone to have fangs, with a rate of about 4 percent.

Whitetail fangs, because they don't break the gum line, aren't discovered until the head is being prepared for a mount.

Wildlife biologists think that fangs in whitetails are a genetic throwback to their ancestors; those animals likely used their fangs for protection. Deer could have also used fangs for fighting each other, and because they were omnivores (eating plants and animals).

Other deer species with fangs include the Chinese water deer, musk deer, and male muntjac deer. Eventually these upper canines regressed in most subspecies, and whitetails evolved antlers for protection and mating purposes instead.

When I learned about my buck having a fang, I immediately thought of elk with their ivories (below). Remember, elk are members of the deer family.

So there you have it — the next time you shoot a whitetail buck, check it for fangs!

Elk ivories are made of the same material as walrus tusks. Scientists think prehistoric elk used long tusks for fighting.



Illustration courtesy of the Missouri Department of Conservation.

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EDITORIAL

EDITOR / DAVE MAAS

MANAGING EDITOR / HILARY DYER

PRODUCT EDITOR / GORDY KRAHN

EDITOR-AT-LARGE / BOB ROBB

FIELD EDITORS

CHUCK ADAMS **/** MARK KAYSER **/** DARRON MCDOUGAL

ADVERTISING

PRESIDENT/PUBLISHER / DERRICK NAWROCKI
(205) 807-5025 / DERRICK.NAWROCKI@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / PATRICK BOYLE
PATRICK.BOYLE@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / MIKE KIZZIRE
MIKE.KIZZIRE@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / DON HARRIS
DON.HARRIS@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

CREATIVE

MANAGING ART DIRECTOR / MARK KINGSBURY

BUSINESS

CIRCULATION / HOLLY GENSLER
HOLLY.GENSLER@COLEPUBLISHING.COM

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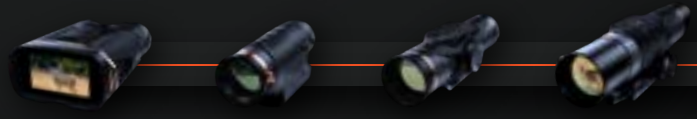


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Sweet September

Many hunters wait until mid or late October until they get serious about pursuing whitetails, but in some scenarios, the early season gives you the best chance for success.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARK KAYSER



Whitetail hunters live for the rut. Why not? Bucks move more; they ignore obvious danger at times; they respond to deer calls, scents and decoys. What's not to like about a hunting period ripe with opportunity?

Don't get too hasty with your fall whitetail hunt plans. Late October and November rock for a wide swath of whitetail country, but September is no slouch. Warmer days beckon activities other than hunting, including kids' sport schedules, pre-winter chores pending, and the never-ending demands of careers. Nevertheless, early fall hunting, especially in September, offers bonuses not found during any other time of year. Squirreling away for a few hours for hunting whenever possible could pay off in hunt dividends.

FIRST IN LINE

Who doesn't like to be first in line on a Saturday morning Costco opener? September bowhunters experience a similar feeling. You are first in line. Although you don't get those tasty samples while grocery shopping, you get to hunt deer that haven't been pursued for 7 to 8 months, or more. Sure, these deer felt some pressure from the occasional coyote encounter, farmer invasion or utility line inspection team. Yet, they haven't sensed the consistent presence of hunters in the field, especially those who make the mistake of pushing deep into a whitetail's home range.

Although whitetails have paranoia hardwired into their DNA, they do let their hair down from time to time. Summer is one of those periods, and as summer transitions to the colors of fall, whitetails do not necessarily go on the defense overnight. Use that to your advantage as you scout, plan ambushes and execute.

Another bonus about being enthusiastic about a September bowhunt is many others simply are not. The warmer temperatures don't spark a hunting interest. Ongoing warm-weather activities keep many bustling, a multitude of hunting seasons kicking off disperse hunters, and yes, some of you just fall in a rut and only wish to hunt the rut. Use this unfocused time by others as your focused window to have a hunting location all to yourself, with the added benefit of unparanoid whitetails as a bonus.

9-TO-5 CONSISTENCY

I go back and forth with a mind struggle in September, not unlike Godzilla versus Kong in an actual brawl: Should I be in a whitetail treestand or in the mountains pursuing rutting elk? My Kansas pal doesn't help because he sends me trail camera images of bucks on a feeding pattern more reliable than an atomic clock. Once whitetails latch onto a food source, they stick to their schedule until something dramatic causes them to forsake it for a better option.

That deer dynamic in September can rival the craziness of the rut. Although some mature whitetails enter feeding areas with caution, younger deer often walk out seemingly without a care in the world, just as they've done all summer. Almost all whitetails will hit popular nutrition zones with dependability as they bulk up for



↑ September equals great hunting for bachelor bucks, plus an ideal time to set up your shooting lane stop signs, like the Golden Rope Scent Rope Kit from Wildlife Research Center.



↑ September bucks are feeding voraciously to prepare for winter and may run toward acorns when they begin to drop.

the rut and winter ahead. That consistency is prone to change in October as crops are harvested, frosts change food plot forage palatability, and a new source of nutrition outshines the current foodie hotspot, but feeding patterns exist with reliability in September.

Your search for a whitetail bachelor group may end with trail camera images from your food plot; it could be that easy. If not, expand your search to neighboring soybean fields, hayfields and, of course, the ever-popular dropping of mast. A hunting property with an apple orchard or other fruit offerings has more appeal than the newest iPhone to a Gen Zer.

Be especially acorn-aware, as well as agriculture cognizant. Acorns may be the only game in town, and their crop doesn't have the consistency of the largest corporate corn farm in the county. Each year, oak trees vary in their production, and even when the acorns drop. Even so, both red and white oak tree families have a high guarantee of dropping in September, some earlier and some later, but never overlook the acorn draw to a bachelor group of bucks.

NO PUFFY JACKET

A real issue arises as temperatures drop. You layer up, and that changes your shooting form. Think about it. All summer you practice in a t-shirt, cargo shorts and even Crocs. Temperatures in the 80s and above equal pleasant times at the range. And on days with drizzle, downpours or wind, how easy is it to skip range day and focus on your 80-inch big screen? Your entire practice regime revolves around an agreeable atmosphere.

September provides you with a way to seasonally adjust your hunting clothing attire from a t-shirt to maybe a long-sleeved shirt or, at worst, a light jacket. This means your shooting form doesn't have to battle the bulge of puffy jackets, vests, neck gaiters and face masks. That extra bulk can easily alter your form, and although you may not notice accuracy variations on slam-dunk shots at 15 yards or less, it could rear its ugly results at 30 yards and beyond.

To this day I use a chest guard, popular with women for obvious reasons, to compress my puffy layers. This compression allows my bowstring to follow a near-normal draw back to my anchor point without having to struggle against layers of Thinsulate. Of course, in September, the chest guard stays at home and my form stays the same as summer arrow launches weeks prior.



↑ Mock scrapes should be built well before deer season. This gives bucks time to discover them. Adding deer scent during your hunt can help improve your odds.

TIME TO PLAN . . . JUST IN CASE

Whitetail bowhunting success rates vary, but suffice to say, you have at least a 50 percent chance of flunking out in early fall. Will that hunting time be a waste? I argue, no. Any time spent in the field, regardless of the species pursued, adds to your playbook for a future matchup. While hunting, why not pre-set your scent drippers, scent stations and mock scrapes? And even an army of trail cameras sometimes misses the subtleties of a mature buck feeding in a field corner you never considered for surveillance. Time in a stand could reveal that mature buck's peculiarity to show up in that far corner, or be last in line as the bachelors take the field.

Spotting a new target buck, zeroing in on a buck's core territory, even witnessing the patterns of other hunters giving you intel to adjust your ambush ambitions all adds up to success. That success may be on your next hunt, the next week or next month.

September bowhunting may not appeal to you with insects, sunscreen and sweat. Nevertheless, it has values that the rut fails to offer. Consider September and expand your horizons beyond the whitetail rut. BW



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Settling the Broadhead War

Insightful tips for choosing a deadly broadhead while the opinions rage all around you.



BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

One of the greatest debates among bowhunters is about broadheads. Given the market's countless brands and designs, not to mention all of the different types of bowhunters out there, I can see why. I've been bowhunting for close to 25 years, and as you might recall, I also worked at a family owned archery pro shop for 10 years. So, I've heard practically every broadhead argument out there. Some people even slander others for their broadhead choices, which creates senseless divides in a community that demands unity.

It's OK to be a three-blade Muzzy or NAP curmudgeon, a single-bevel bro, or a thick-skinned mechanical fan, but let's not create a broadhead war with our opinions. New folks are joining our ranks and are looking to the rest of us for solid advice. I'd be ashamed if all they see is a bunch of arguing.

At the end of the day, shot placement on game is way more important than what's on the end of your arrow. Excellent shot placement is largely the product of confidence, and confidence comes from proficiency and using what you believe in. To that end, let's keep an open mind as we discuss the ins and outs of the different broadhead types.

FIXED-BLADE

With fixed-blade broadheads, what you see is generally what you get. Most designs are effective, dependable and yield excellent penetration. These heads don't have moving parts. If a fixed-blade broadhead has a 1-inch cutting diameter, then you know it will yield a 1-inch (or larger) wound channel. That instills confidence.

Fixed-blade broadheads have two potential handicaps. Most designs are small compared to larger-cutting mechanicals, creating moderate wound channels. Earlier, I said that shot placement is the most important thing, and if you put a tiny but sharp fixed-blade broadhead through both lungs of a deer, you'll get your deer. However, humans are imperfect, and despite diligent training and equipment confidence, not every arrow launched

Photo: Morrell Targets

at an animal hits exactly where we want it to. If you're a few inches off, a small fixed-blade broadhead is less forgiving than a large mechanical.

The other thing about fixed-blade broadheads is they sometimes fly less consistently due to greater exposed blade surfaces while in flight. Wind or a poorly tuned bow can further magnify flight discrepancies, as can variances in arrow straightness. Even with a perfectly tuned bow, I've experienced differences in flight from one arrow to the next. High-end fixed-blade broadheads crafted from steel or titanium — these have the tightest tolerances — produce superior flight, in my experience.

Now, does a fixed-blade broadhead make an ideal fit for you individually? Here are some considerations to chew on. Women and youth pulling the minimum draw weight (30-40 pounds in most states) should always choose a razor-sharp, fixed-blade broadhead with a 1-inch or slightly larger cutting diameter. Limit shots to 20-25 yards on a broadside or slightly quartered-away animal.

Bowhunters pulling 50 to 70 pounds who doubt mechanical broadheads should also go with a fixed-blade broadhead (or perhaps try a mechanical on a turkey or hog hunt first). Tuning fixed-blade broadheads becomes finickier with longer draw lengths and higher draw weights with greater velocities. But it's doable, and I know many successful bowhunters who have great results with fixed-blade broadheads. Aim for a perfectly tuned bow, no matter what your setup, but especially when shooting fixed-blade broadheads.



↑ Broadhead choice should be a reflection of your bow/arrow setup and what gives you confidence.



↑ The author prefers the vivid blood trails produced by large mechanical broadheads, but he doesn't push his opinions onto others. If a fixed-blade broadhead gives you more confidence than a mechanical, then by all means, shoot one.



↓ While the larger cutting diameters of huge mechanical broadheads are more forgiving than smaller fixed-blade broadheads, not everyone can or should shoot mechanical broadheads. Use what is appropriate for your setup and what boosts your confidence.

Photos: Darron McDougal

MECHANICAL

I've taken dozens of game animals with various mechanical broadheads, and the results continually impress me. By no means am I a blood-guts-and-gore type. I don't thrill over blood pumping out or guts hanging from the wound of an animal I've arrowed. However, I do like blood trails that are easy to follow. I've witnessed enough skimpy blood trails, and they're not fun or simple to navigate.

In most instances, large mechanical broadheads produce devastating wound channels that maximize blood flow, delivering excellent blood trails.

In my experience, mechanical broadheads also fly extremely well. Some mechanical broadhead manufacturers even include a practice head of simulated weight and profile so that you can practice without dulling your actual broadheads. Mechanicals are deadly accurate and extremely consistent from one arrow to the next, primarily due to the compact in-flight profile. With mechanicals, there are different deployment designs. I've tested the different ones and have had great results. Currently, my go-to mechanicals are Rage's Hypodermic NC and G5's T2.

Now, not everyone can or should shoot large expandable broadheads. In my career, I've matched tons of bowhunters with broadheads based on individual bow setups. For women and youth shooting at or over 40 pounds, I recommend a small mechanical broadhead with a 1- to 1.25-inch cutting diameter. Shots must be

close and at broadside or slightly quartering-away animals.

Shooting 42 pounds, my wife took a buck in 2016 with a 20-yard broadside shot using a 2-inch Rage Hypodermic; I usually suggest a smaller diameter for that poundage, but I had faith in her and her setup, and the results were flawless. The buck ran less than 100 yards, and the blood trail was vivid.

I suggest saving the largest mechanicals for more powerful setups. For example, I shoot 70 pounds at 27.5 inches with a 441-grain arrow, which produces a 295-fps velocity. I've used mechanicals as large as 2.5 inches with outstanding results. On most hunts, I use mechanicals with 2-inch cutting diameters. The penetration and devastation have always been excellent, even when I've gotten too close to the shoulder and struck a leg bone.

"Choose what makes you confident, and that in turn will help you to take your shot more confidently, which almost always results in better shot placement."

FIXED-BLADE/MECHANICAL HYBRID

If you like the sounds of a large mechanical but are unsure about the reliability, you might be interested in a crossbreed between fixed-blade and mechanical broadheads. Several manufacturers offer such hybrids. The fixed blades cut no matter what. The expandable blades then open to create maximum hemorrhage. These broadheads are gnarly and can produce the most devastating wound channels possible.



↑ The author shot this buck from 20 yards with a large 2-inch mechanical broadhead, and as the size of the wound channel suggests, the blood trail was phenomenal.

Essentially, the fixed blades create a pilot hole for the expandable blades, then the expandable blades deploy once inside the animal. The only real challenges shooters face with hybrid broadheads are the ferrule's longer length (aluminum designs with mediocre tolerances are less likely to fly true at farther distances) and more exposed blade surfaces in flight.

I strongly recommend using hybrid broadheads only when shooting a sufficient draw weight. With huge cutting diameters, driving these monsters deep requires a powerful setup. I wouldn't even think about using them if shooting less than 60 pounds.

A FEW MORE THINGS

There are too many opinions floating around about broadheads, and some folks take it way too far by slandering others and their gear choices. This is nonsense. Follow independent broadhead tests, or do your own testing with ballistic gel, plywood or feral hogs. The results won't lie, and you'll then be able to confidently choose a broadhead to bowhunt with this fall.

Large mechanicals work for me, but I don't bash those who prefer fixed-blade heads. The best approach is to first stand back and look at a given setup. Next, do you lack faith in the accuracy of a fixed-blade broadhead, or do the moving parts of a mechanical broadhead instill doubt? I believe there is no room for a lack of faith in what you use.

Choose what makes you confident, and that in turn will help you to take your shot more confidently, which almost always results in better shot placement. Think about it: You're focused on making the shot, not worrying if your equipment will work.

Use what you believe in, but don't bash others and their choices. If we all look at things from this angle, we can end the broadhead war and the senseless divides it has created in the bowhunting community. BW

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NASP Latest News

NASP credited in new federal report; Academic Archer program enrollment reaches a new record of 43,262; and student archers raise $31,000+ for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

BY STEPHANIE EVANS, NASP PROGRAM MANAGER

NASP CREDITED IN DOMINANT PARTICIPATION RATES OF YOUTH ARCHERS IN NEW FEDERAL REPORT

A newly released addendum to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) landmark 5-year survey on target shooting recreation participation acknowledges the NASP as a likely influence in the current archery participation rates of those 18 and younger across the United States.

This influential study, titled "Target Shooting in the United States: Participation, Demographics, and Relationship with Hunting and Fishing," is widely regarded as the benchmark for tracking trends in target shooters. The latest addendum, published in March 2025, includes — for the first time ever — comprehensive data on archery participation, spotlighting NASP as a major catalyst for change in youth engagement.

"According to the Archery Trade Association, archery participation has increased significantly from 7 million in 2000 to over 19 million today. NASP is thrilled to be credited as a likely influence in the high archery participation rates among youth," said NASP Vice President Jeff Rawlinson. "We are so appreciative of our state fish and wildlife agencies, the USFWS, and NGO and industry partnerships for making this happen!"



AMONG THE KEY FINDINGS:

- The report emphasizes that archery participation is highest among youth ages 6–15, a direct reflection of NASP's impact on engaging the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts.
- This high participation rate among youth is supported by the introduction and expansion of NASP, which has now reached more than 23.5 million students in over 9,500 schools across the U.S.
- In contrast to firearm target shooting, where participation peaks among adults aged 25–34, archery has firmly taken root with younger demographics, thanks in large part to school-based programs like NASP.

"This level of recognition from a federal agency underscores what educators, parents, and conservationists have seen for years — NASP works," said NASP President Tommy Floyd. "We're proud to be a positive force in both youth development, shooting sports and the long- term future of conservation."

The report even features images from NASP programs, symbolizing the federal government's acknowledgment of NASP's far-reaching influence. The USFWS's inclusion of archery in this nationally significant survey is a milestone moment, further affirming NASP's role in shaping the modern outdoor landscape.

NASP ACADEMIC ARCHER ENROLLMENT REACHES 43,262 — A NEW RECORD!

NASP recently announced the highest total of NASP students to be enrolled in its Academic Archer program. Along with the Academic Archer Program title sponsor Easton Archery, NASP celebrates not only the success of students on the range, but also their hard work in the classroom. NASP continues to promote the positive impact that in-school archery can make for any school that incorporates it into the existing curriculum.

Academic Archer was established in 2015 to recognize success in the classroom by NASP participants in grades 4-12. The goal of the program is to reinforce the overall mission of educators. Life-long learning and the support of it, has long been a goal of the 23-year-old in-school-archery program. NASP realizes that once introduced, students love shooting archery. Educators everywhere leverage this love of archery to promote better outcomes in the classroom. Many times, students who are on the edge of performing better academically, find a reason to give the extra effort needed to succeed academically. Across the many NASP jurisdictions, participating schools also utilize downloadable Academic Archer certificates to recognize their student archers during their annual academic awards ceremonies.

NASP President Tommy Floyd said, "We are thrilled that Academic Archer numbers continue to increase and Academic Archer enrollment across our jurisdictions continues to be a priority for educators and coaches. We want to send the strongest of messages about our program's value to educators who combine the overwhelming love that students develop for in-school archery, with a leverage tool for generating the extra effort often required to motivate students to be more successful in the classroom. For 2025, our NASP team created multiple new pathways for nominations including non-competitive avenues. The new opportunities seem to have made a difference as several of these resulted in the increase in enrollment of student archers. Along with our longstanding partner, Easton Technical Products, we are extremely proud of our programmatic emphasis on academics."

Carri Garrett, Easton Archery Sales Manager said, "We are extremely proud to sponsor the NASP Academic Archer program. At Easton, we are committed to empowering students and promoting excellence in both academics and archery. It's inspiring to see how many young people gain confidence and life skills through their participation in NASP. We've witnessed firsthand how this program transforms lives, encouraging students to believe in themselves and strive for success in all areas. By supporting NASP, we are investing in the future of these students."

Following the close of registration for Academic Archer, NASP conducted its annual random computerized drawing from among all registered Academic Archers and selected 10 student names. Each of these young people will receive a new Genesis Bow in the color of their choice and custom Easton Academic Archer Arrows. NASP would like to thank Easton Archery for donating the arrows.

Academic Archer nominations will begin again on Sept. 1, 2025, for the 2025/2026 school year.

STUDENT ARCHERS RAISE $31,000+ FOR ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

NASP is extremely proud to again provide an opportunity for student archers and teams to raise funds for the children and families of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. For several years, NASP archers have been voluntarily raising money for those in need by hosting and participating in virtual and in-person fundraising tournaments. For the 2024/2025 season, NASP is extremely excited to announce that more than $31,000 was raised for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital charity.

NASP President Dr. Tommy Floyd said, "This speaks volumes about NASP archers and their coaches, as they voluntarily contributed to virtual and in-person tournaments to raise money for kids in need. We could not be more proud of schools and individuals all over the country who contributed to this worthy cause. Not only do our student archers love shooting archery, but they also love helping others in need. We value the idea of helping others, while our NASP participants pursue excellence on the range."

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.

Selecting the Right Bow for You

If you're considering getting into bowhunting, check out these tips for selecting the right hunting tool for you.



BY TAYLOR WALSTON, ARCHERY TRADE ASSOCIATION

If you're a brand-new bowhunter, you'll need to get set up with the right bow at your local archery shop. From draw weight and draw length, to compound, traditional bows and crossbows, the tips below will help you select the right bow for your ultimate experience.

DRAW LENGTH

Your draw length is the wingspan distance between the tip of your middle finger on one hand and the tip of your middle finger on the other hand when you hold your arms out in a "T" shape, divided by 2.5 (photo above). If you have a wingspan distance of 70 inches, your draw length would be 28 inches.

A correct draw length ensures that your body is in proper alignment when you're at full draw. Your non-dominant hand should be able to hold the bow without locking your elbow, while your dominant hand is pulling back the bowstring to the anchor point on your face. A draw length that is too long will cause you to overstretch and pull the bowstring past your jaw, causing improper form.

DRAW WEIGHT

Your draw weight is the amount of force you can pull back with the bowstring, measured in pounds. The heavier the draw weight, the faster the arrow will go. This is why states set a minimum draw weight in their hunting regulations. A draw weight that is too low may not impact the deer with the force necessary to harvest the game ethically, wounding the deer instead of killing it. Once you know your draw weight and draw length, you can choose the appropriate arrows and broadheads. Your local archery shop is the perfect place to get this advice.

COMPOUND VS TRADITIONAL BOWS VS CROSSBOW

Compound bows are easier to hold at full draw than traditional bows (i.e. recurves and longbows) because of the cams. Cams are wheel-like gears that are attached to one or both ends

Photos: Archery Trade Association

of a compound bow. In addition to cams, compound bows have unique strings. They have a buss, or "Y", cable and a control cable that attaches to the bowstring and runs through the cam. The extra cables take the brunt of the weight from the draw weight. As you come to full draw, the cams will hit a point where they "let off" and take the full draw weight, relieving pressure from your arm and back muscles. This will allow you to pull the string beyond your set draw weight, making it easier to finish the draw, set your anchor point, and hold.





← ↑ Whether you choose a compound or traditional bow, it's critical to practice in scenarios that mimic a real hunt.

Example: A compound with 80% let-off means you are holding only 20% of the total draw weight at full draw. If your bow is set for 60 pounds, you will briefly pull that weight during the draw cycle, but when the cams roll over, the weight is reduced (let-off) by 80%, meaning you'll be holding only 12 pounds at full draw. Obviously, it's significantly easier to aim and shoot a bow accurately when holding 12 pounds rather than 60 pounds, which would be the case if you were shooting a 60-pound-draw recurve or longbow.

Compound bows made for bowhunting are shorter and lighter than compounds designed for target archery. Recurves and longbows weigh much less than compounds, but as explained previously, because traditional bows don't have let-off, they require a great deal more practice to shoot accurately, especially at distances beyond about 15 yards.

This isn't to say that you can't harvest wild game with a recurve or longbow; many people do every year, including members of our ATA staff! Recurves and longbows have a single bowstring, so the gear is simpler and has the look of classic archery. As long as you meet the minimum draw weight for your state and use the correct broadheads, you can use either type of bow. Those who choose traditional gear understand that they must be very close to an animal before taking a shot; 7 to 15 yards is ideal. Most deer hunters who choose traditional gear "shoot instinctive," meaning they don't use a bowsight. Compound shooters with bowsights can stack arrows in a target's bull's-eye and harvest game at much longer ranges. Example: A compound bowhunter using a five-pin fixed bowsight likely has their bowsight pins set for 20, 30, 40, 50 and 60 yards.

Another striking difference between shooting a traditional bow vs. a compound is that a recurve or longbow shooter places their fingers on the string while a compound shooter uses a mechanical release aid. The primary reason for this is bow length; a bow shorter than about 40 inches is difficult to shoot well with fingers due to "string pinch" — the string angle caused at full draw. Most recurves and longbows are at least 54 inches long, and many are 60 inches or longer, which reduces string pinch. Most compounds are less than 35 inches, with many measuring about 30 inches.

Crossbows are legal for bowhunting in some states. Crossbows are unique in that they don't require you to hold any of the draw weight; you pull back the string with the aid of a crank or a string-cocking rope. After the crossbow is ready to fire, hunters typically rest it on a monopod, bipod or tripod while waiting for a shot. Crossbows have scopes to help with aiming, and when you're ready to shoot, you move the safety to the "fire" position, aim, then squeeze the trigger.

Crossbows are a good choice for deer hunters who don't meet the draw weight requirements for their state. They are especially popular with youth hunters and aging hunters. Crossbows have the advantage of not having to move (draw the bow) when a deer is approaching; the hunter simply has to switch off the safety and they are ready to shoot. Check your state's regulations to verify whether you can use crossbows in your state. BW

Join Bowhunters United

For more content like this, become a member of Bowhunters United for free. A BU membership gives you access to member-exclusive discounts and rebates on archery and bowhunting products, and you'll be the first line of defense when a legislative issue comes up in the bowhunting world through our Action Alert system. Contact: bowhuntersunited.com

Coping With Meat in the Heat

Through a lifetime of bowhunting during the heat of summer, the author has learned several tricks for ensuring that game meat doesn't spoil.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
CHUCK ADAMS

There are many summertime bowhunting seasons in North America. Such opportunities are awesome, but daytime temperatures are often high. Short-sleeve hunting offers advantages such as comfort and accurate shooting, but meat salvage can be a problem.

Take for example a good-sized Columbia blacktail deer I shot in my native state of California 2 years ago. The temperature was 107 degrees Fahrenheit when I nailed that buck near water at midday. I grew up hunting during the Golden State's July archery deer season, so I knew exactly what to do. I field dressed the buck, hung and skinned him in the shade, covered the carcass with a full-length game bag, and raced to the nearest butcher shop with cold storage. Meat does not last long in high heat.

I've bowhunted Sitka blacktail deer in Alaska many times in August. It's a great summer trip in remote and deer-rich habitat. Although not as warm as summer in California, daytime temperatures often top 70 degrees. Clouds of insects swarm like smoke, and meat salvage requires extra effort.

In Alaska, standard warm-weather steps apply. Field dress your deer immediately. Skin the carcass to accelerate cooling, and de-bone meat unless trees are close by to hang the quarters. De-boned meat gets grimy more easily, but weighs about half as much as the field-dressed carcass with hide attached. In remote areas, it makes no sense to carry out all those bones.

Alaska is dangerous bear country, so leaving your animal on the ground is risky. I normally submerge meat in a cold stream or lake after securing it in durable waterproof garbage bags. In cold water, deer meat will keep nicely for up to 3 days, and bears won't smell it. After that, it must be transported by bush plane to a freezer in town.

Here is one trick I learned as a bowhunting teen in California: You can keep a skinned deer up to 48 hours without meat spoilage, even in 100-degree conditions. Hang the carcass or quarters each night. Wrap meat in heavy sleeping bags at dawn, always in the shade. Bags hold in coolness that meat has absorbed in the dark, preventing rapid spoilage.

PRECAUTIONS FOR LARGE CARCASSES

The two main enemies of meat are heat and moisture. Combined, these provide a perfect breeding ground for bacteria, and bacterial action rots meat. If you





← ↑ The author has taken many Alaskan Sitka blacktail deer in August. Like this record-book buck, he usually removes the bones on the spot for easier transport and more surface area to dry and cool.

keep a carcass cool and dry, the table fare should be awesome.

Elk and other large animals require more elaborate meat precautions. Heat is slow to leave a 500- to 600-pound carcass, even when immediately field dressed, hung and skinned. If you cannot load up and transport an elk whole, it's best to quarter your animal immediately, or at least butterfly back the shoulder blades, cut into the ball joints where hams meet pelvis, and slice the back or sides of the neck all the way to the spine. Wild game butchers tell me the most common spoilage areas on elk, moose and other giant critters are between shoulders and ribs, near the ball joints of the hams, and along the bone in the neck.

If you drop an elk, large deer or other big animal, cannot butcher or hang it on your own, and need to hike out for help, be sure to skin and slice deep into the insides of the hams, cut between shoulders and ribcage past the "armpit," and open up the neck before you leave. If possible, manhandle the carcass onto a bed of logs or rocks to promote air circulation. Coyotes, bears, foxes or other scavengers might find the animal if it's left too long, so return as soon as you can. Meat will be properly cooling in the meantime.

I did just that 3 years ago after dropping a big Wyoming bull in a deep canyon. The sun was going down, so all I could do was roll over the elk, gut it, skin half the hams, and slice deep into the armpits and neck. There were no bears in the area and very few coyotes. I got lucky. Three friends and I arrived back at the kill site before sunrise with backpacks. The meat was cold and untouched by critters.



↑ Even if you can transport a whole elk out of the woods, it should be hung and skinned quickly to promote the cooling and drying of meat.



↑ In a pinch, a large animal must be gutted, partially skinned on its back, and sliced deep in the pelvis, neck and shoulder/ribcage areas so these heat-retaining places can cool. Return with meat packing help as soon as possible.

Unless the weather is cool, you must transport large-animal parts to cold storage ASAP. This can mean some serious grunt work in remote hunting situations. If possible, make arrangements ahead of time with a professional meat packer. Horses or mules can be a godsend once an elk is down far from the nearest road, and so are strong-backed bowhunting buddies willing to lend a hand. I have packed out more bull elk on my back than I care to remember, and it was never fun. Even when de-boned, that's a lot of meat to hustle from the woods before it goes bad.

SMALL-PEST PROBLEMS

Though less of a problem than coyotes or bears, small pests can cause headaches. Blowflies congregate on warm-weather kills and contaminate the meat with larvae that quickly hatch into maggots. Carnivorous bees can do surprising damage to the surface of a carcass. Birds like magpies and ravens quickly devour exposed special cuts such as tenderloins and hams.

A few years ago, I helped a friend stalk and field dress a cow elk in Wyoming. Birds completely consumed both tenderloins during the 2 hours it took us to hike out and return with an ATV. It was wide-open grass country with no tree limbs or brush to pile over and protect the meat. We should have been carrying game bags. It's a mistake I'll never make again.

The easiest way to protect wild meat from small scavengers is using game bags on the ground or in a tree. Commercial cinch-up quarter bags or full-length deer bags are sold at most large sporting goods stores, and can also be ordered online.

The Alaska hunting regulations offer excellent advice on caring for meat in the field. One tip in that booklet is not known by many hunters: Spray all surfaces of a skinned carcass with a weak citric-acid/water mix, and bacterial action will be slowed





↑ In warm weather, trophies with complete skulls must be de-fleshed, de-brained and heavily salted to prevent messy spoilage and blowflies.

considerably. This will also ward off destructive insects. Food grade citric acid can be purchased at most feed stores or pharmacies. In a pinch, lemon juice also works.

Blowflies and bacterial spoilage can be especially hard on the skull of a trophy animal. If you plan to preserve a deer, elk, bear or other critter with an intact skull, you must skin the head and remove as much tissue from the bone as possible. Using protective rubber gloves, pulverize the brains through the spinal hole at the rear of the skull with a flattened stick. Add water through the hole, and use the stick to stir and scoop out all the "soup" inside the brain cavity. This process takes no more than 10 minutes.

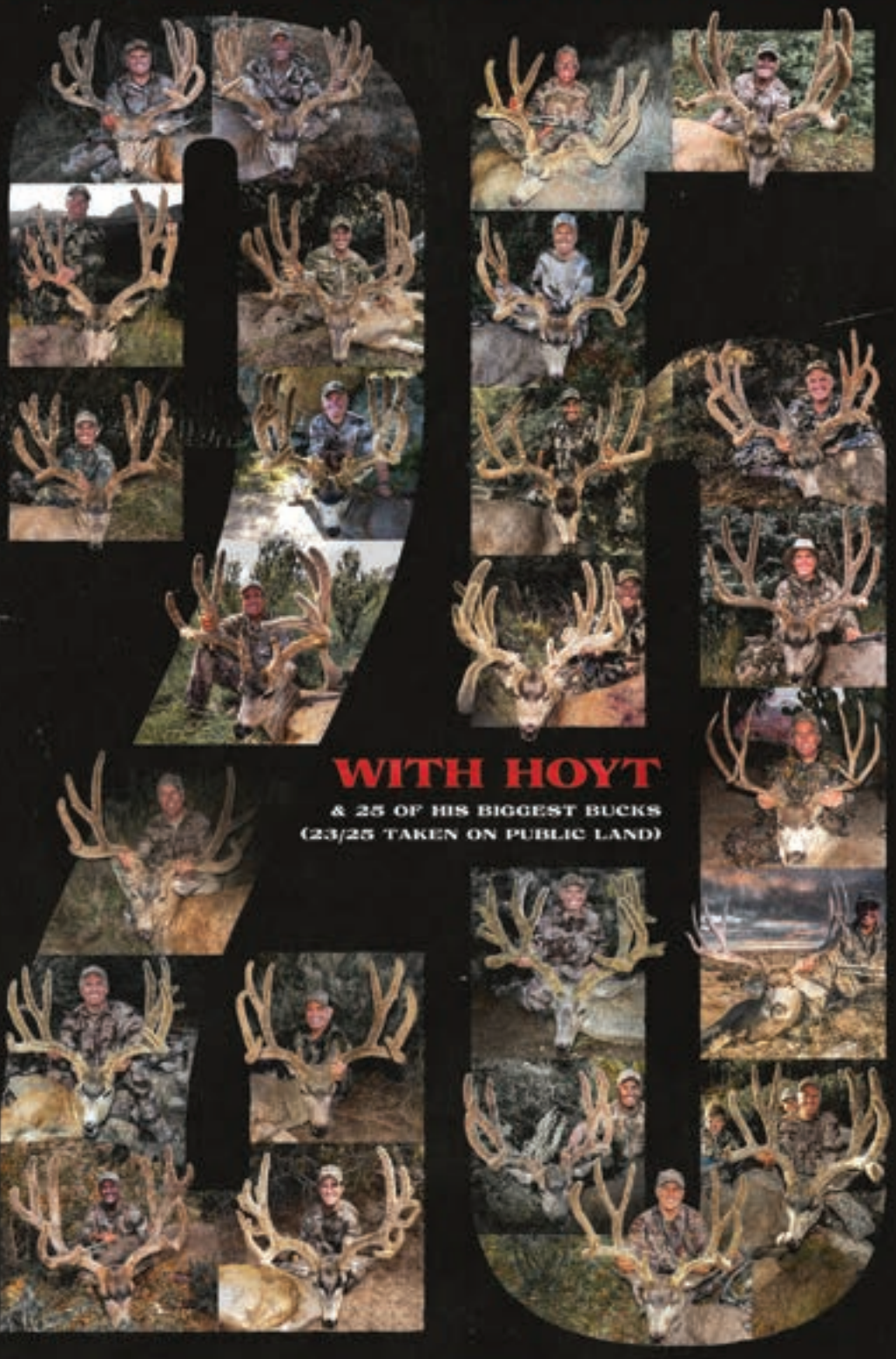
Once this is done, fill and coat the skull with plain table salt. Your trophy will dry in a few days with little or no smell. The alternative will be a stinky and maggot-infested mess.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Coping with meat salvage in summertime bowhunting weather is largely common sense. Field dress your animal immediately for rapid cooling. Skin, de-bone, or slice deeply into key areas that are likely to spoil first. Hang meat in the shade for cooling air circulation unless you can transport it to cold storage immediately. Use game bags to protect from birds and insects. In remote areas, employ special tactics such as submerging meat in cold water or spraying surfaces with citric acid. Transport as quickly as possible, and you will enjoy many fine meals ahead! BW

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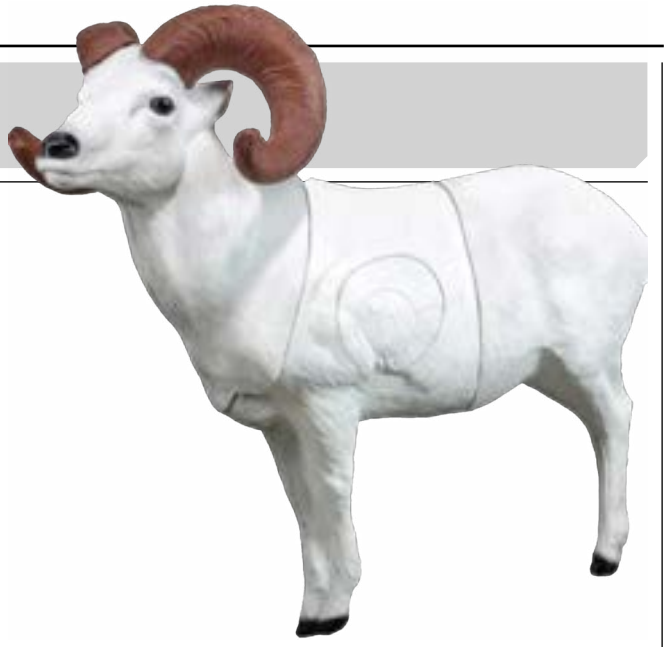
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HOYT

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NEWGEAR

BY GORDY KRAHN



BIGSHOT ARCHERY REALWILD 3-D DALL SHEEP TARGET

Bigshot Archery's 3-D Dall Sheep Archery Target is the latest addition to its expanding line of RealWild 3-D targets. This premium 3-D true life-size target continues the brand's evolution, building on the recent success of the Mountain Goat, Opossum and Pro Hunter Coyote targets. This target is meticulously painted to bring out the unique details that make this animal so desirable to hunt, built to last, with competition-grade, easy-pulling foam capable of stopping arrows shot from compounds, crossbows and traditional bows tipped with field points or broadheads. The Dall Sheep target includes a replaceable core, making it ideal for clubs and individual bowhunters looking for long-term performance and value. MSRP: $649.99. **bigshottargets.com**



EHD-FENSE WATER TREATMENT KIT

EHD-fense, a new product developed by a team of aquatic biologists and wildlife experts, has introduced the first water treatment kit designed specifically to help landowners and hunters protect deer from Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD). The kit is an all-natural, three-part system that treats small ponds and waterholes where EHD-carrying midges breed. It uses beneficial bacteria, enzymes and muck-reducing pellets to improve water quality and limit the conditions that allow midges to thrive. Each EHD-fense kit includes Catapult Liquid Enzymes, LiveWater Beneficial Bacteria Packets and D-Muck Muck Removal Pellets. Together, these three components restore the natural balance of the pond and reduce organic material that serves as breeding grounds for the midge. One kit treats a 2,500-gallon pond; that's roughly 18 feet in diameter and 1 foot deep. MSRP: $229.99/Kit. **ehd-fense.com**

EASTON AXIS SPT ARROWS

Axis SPT Arrows were first introduced for bowhunters with shorter draw lengths who were pulling lighter poundage. More recently, Easton added a full range of spine sizes to round out the offering. Now, Axis SPT arrows are available in spines from 260 to 700, fitting virtually all hunting bow setups. Although Axis arrows utilize USA-made Acu-carbon for increased durability and accuracy, most of the hunting-camp talk about them centers on their ability to out penetrate regular carbon arrows, their micro profile focussing kinetic energy into an ultra-small frontal area for less friction and greater penetration. The small diameter also means Axis arrows fly much better in crosswinds than regular carbon arrows. MSRP/Six pack fletched: Sport/$86.99; $117.99/Standard; $143.99/Match Grade. **eastonarchery.com**





DELTA MCKENZIE QUIVAR CAPABLE 3-D TARGETS

Delta McKenzie Targets has introduced five new additions to its existing QuivAR Enabled Archery 3-D Target line — Backyard Strutter Turkey, Howling Coyote, Elite Walking Bear, Backyard Boar and Pro Turkey. By leveraging DM's new iPhone capable QuivAR technology, these targets will provide shooters with an unprecedented 360-degree view of an animal's internal organs. This allows archers to accurately see where their arrow would hit "inside" the animal. The iPhone capable QuivAR app provides visualization of the actual bone structure and organs inside these 3-D targets, providing extremely accurate feedback as to what organs the arrow would hit. It's an outstanding training tool for bowhunters to practice ethical and accurate shot placement. MSRP: $149.99-$437.99. **dmtargets.com**



MILLENNIUM M-008-SL HANG-ON TREESTAND

The compact M-008-SL Hang-On Treestand from Millennium Outdoors is super light and hunt-ready — designed for stealth, efficiency and durability. Weighing just 9 pounds, this 6061-T6 aluminum stand supports up to 300 pounds. Its 20-inch ComfortMax seat ensures all-day comfort and flips up for standing shots, while the large-hole expanded metal platform (20.5 x 20 inches) allows for quick snow and mud cleanout. Designed to fit trees from 9 to 22 inches in diameter, the stand's standoff system helps maintain stability even on crooked trees. It comes with double-loop connection straps with cam buckles and backpack straps for easy carry. Finished with a durable powder coat and including a full-body harness and SafeLink life line, the M-008-SL meets or exceeds TMA-recognized industry standards. MSRP: $256.99. **millenniumoutdoors.com**

WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER GOLDEN ROPE KIT



Wildlife Research Center's Golden Rope Kit allows hunters to create an attractive mock scrape and interaction site that both bucks and does will visit year-round. The rope is made with proprietary natural fiber with high absorption, no chemical treatments and high durability, and the kit comes with 4 fluid ounces of Golden Rope concentrate that makes 20 fluid ounces of the ultimate long-lasting attraction scent to dip the end of the rope in. It also includes a convenient wide-mouth resealable container to hold the rope scent so users can easily dip and re-dip the end of the rope. The kit includes three 30-inch scent ropes, scent concentrate, three cable ties and a resealable container for mixing and dipping. MSRP: $47.99. **wildlife.com**



REDI-EDGE KNIFE SHARPENERS

Manufactured in Ohio, every Redi-Edge Knife Sharpener stays true to the brand's core values of craftsmanship, reliability and performance. Engineered with Duromite blades — a material harder than most steel — each sharpener delivers consistent, razor-sharp results with minimal effort. Ergonomic thumb imprints and a thoughtful design make them as comfortable to use as they are effective. Available in multiple ultra-portable formats — including business card size, slim tactical and dog tag size — Redi-Edge sharpeners are convenient, easy to use and compact. Most models are factory pre-set to a 40-degree inclusive angle, ensuring an ideal edge every time. Select Pro Series sharpeners are enhanced with Ceramitized coating for added durability and performance. Every sharpener comes backed by a lifetime warranty. MSRP: Starts at $19.95/Price varies by model. **rediedge.com**

NOMAD MEN'S BA CROSSOVER BOOT

Nomad took its best-selling camo boot and made a Crossover model to wear in and out of the field. Crafted from durable weatherproof suede and neoprene with a low crud outsole, this boot was designed to keep users dry no matter what the day brings. Made for hunters on the go, the Nomad Crossover has a similar design and shape to the BA boot, but has an attractive suede upper for stylish casual wear. Comfortable and easy to pull on and remove, the Crossover is durable but remarkably light to reduce fatigue. Its slice technology outsole provides good traction on a variety of surfaces and the 8mm molded EVA footbed liner conforms to the wearer's foot for all-day support and comfort. MSRP: $150. **nomadoutdoor.com**



NEWGEAR



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 Trifeca'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**

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Axis SPT Arrows were first introduced for bowhunters with shorter draw lengths who were pulling lighter poundage. More recently, Easton added a full range of spine sizes to round out the offering. Now, Axis SPT arrows are available in spines from 260 to 700, fitting virtually all hunting bow setups. Although Axis arrows utilize USA-made Acu-carbon for increased durability and accuracy, most of the hunting-camp talk about them centers on their ability to out penetrate regular carbon arrows, their micro profile focussing kinetic energy into an ultra-small frontal area for less friction and greater penetration. The small diameter also means Axis arrows fly much better in crosswinds than regular carbon arrows. MSRP/Six pack fletched: Sport/$86.99; $117.99/Standard; $143.99/Match. **eastonarchery.com**



RIPCORD MICRO-ADJUST RAK ARROW REST

Ripcord Arrow Rests has unveiled the latest iteration of its RAK rest — now featuring micro-adjust capabilities. Designed to deliver the ultimate in fine-tuning precision, the Micro-Adjust RAK Arrow Rest allows archers to easily dial in horizontal and vertical positioning for a new level of accuracy and confidence with every shot. This intuitive system allows shooters to perfect their arrow flight and minimize tuning time, ensuring every shot is as accurate as possible, and features Ripcord's proven drop-away technology, engineered to deliver consistent arrow clearance for superior flight and minimal contact with the vane or shaft. The RAK's internal damping system reduces noise and vibration, providing bowhunters with the stealth they need in the field. MSRP: $179.99; **ripcordarrowrest.com**





LEUPOLD RX-5000 TBR/W LASER RANGEFINDER

Leupold has announced the addition of a suite of archery-related features to its RX-5000 TBR Laser Rangefinder, including Bow mode, featuring both TRIG and Archer's Advantage profiles, which can be downloaded to new and existing units. TRIG mode provides ballistically equivalent horizontal distances for archery shots and is ideal for treestand hunting and spot-and-stalk shooting situations out to 70 yards with angles less than 20 degrees. Archer's Advantage uses personal bow and arrow ballistics to deliver accurate archery shoot to range. Among the RX-5000's bevy of other features is Long Range mode with an impressive 5,000-yard ranging capability, which can be invaluable for navigational situations. Bow mode can be downloaded for free from service providers. MSRP: $699.99. **leupold.com**



TENPOINT TRX 26 CROSSBOW

Building upon the success of its TRX 515 and TX 440 crossbows, TenPoint Crossbows recently introduced the new TRX 26, designed with a micro-footprint and low profile at 26.5 inches short and 5.75 inches narrow (cocked, axle-to-axle) The TRX 26 shoots 460 fps and features Twin-Riser technology (TRT), a custom TriggerTech trigger, Zero-Trac barrel and a RangeMaster 100 scope. It is equipped with a nock retention groove that allows users to hear an audible click and feel the positive engagement of the nock to the string. An AR-style ambidextrous thumb safety is conveniently located directly above the firing hand — allowing the shooter to keep both hands on the crossbow and eyes locked on the target. MSRP: $3,049.99-$3,149.99. **tenpointcrossbows.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**





CANYON COOLERS PRO 85 COOLER

The Pro 85 Cooler from Canyon Coolers was intuitively designed for hunters and hardcore outdoor enthusiasts who demand top-notch quality, function and durability. With a true 85-quart capacity, this premium ice chest is longer in length (34x20x17.5 inches) than comparable coolers, and is equipped with a host of valuable features hunters and outdoor enthusiasts will appreciate, starting with the front and side drain plugs. The cooler's premium eco-friendly pressure-injected foam insulation ensures world-class ice retention, keeping provisions ice cold even when outside temps reach all-time highs. Front and rear lip slots make tying it down with cam straps simple, keeping it securely fastened. The Pro 85 incorporates upgraded oversized latches built from premium, sun-resistant polymer. MSRP: $400; **canyoncoolers.com**

VICTORY HLR HUNTING ARROWS

Victory Archery's HLR Hunting Arrow was designed for bowhunters who demand speed and power without sacrificing durability. Its .204-inch small-diameter shaft reduces wind-drift for long-range performance and delivers deadly penetration for quick, ethical kills. Engineered with a high-modulus carbon structure and carbon weave technology, the HLR minimizes torque and provides a more uniform spine consistency for repeatable accuracy. Sleek 50-grain Shok inserts, paired with Victory back weights, further boost penetration and durability in the field. Available in Elite, Gamer and Sport models, HLR arrows boast a straightness tolerance of ±.001, ±.003 and ±.006 inches respectively. They are individually hand fletched with a left helical for optimal vane alignment. MSRP per dozen: $234.99/Elite; $209.99/Gamer; $189.99/Sport; **victoryarchery.com**





IS USING CELL CAMS FOR HUNTING FAIR CHASE?

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE CELLULAR TRAIL CAM DEBATE.

BY JOSH HONEYCUTT

Technology changes at a rapid pace. Although the hunting industry has notoriously been slower to adopt both change and technology, it always catches up … eventually. Thus, it's no surprise that cellular trail cams are now commonplace within hunting.

It begs the question, though. Is using cellular trail cams for hunting considered fair chase? I'm here to enter the debate. But first, some context, scene setting, and words from each side of the aisle.



Photos: Moultrie

BANS ON CELL CAMS?

The vast majority of states still allow the use of cell cameras and traditional trail cams. In fact, most have no regulations at all on the use of these important scouting tools. In my opinion, that's a good thing.

However, not all states look at cams the same way. Alaska, Arizona, Montana, New Hampshire, Nevada and Utah currently have forms of trail camera bans. Some restrict the use of cell cams. Others limit the use of trail cameras on public lands. Still, some ban trail cams altogether.

More specifically, Montana doesn't permit the use of cell cameras. New Hampshire allows cell cams, but a hunter cannot hunt on the same day photos are taken. Arizona outlawed live-streaming and subsequently banned all trail camera use. These are but few examples of how some states — albeit the vast minority — are handling the use of trail cameras.



GROUPS IN OPPOSITION OF CELL CAMS

Some of the record book organizations currently oppose the use of cellular trail cameras (sort of). A look at the Boone and Crockett Club's and Pope and Young's fair chase rules clearly outlines their stances. While there aren't blanket statements over the use of cellular cameras, these do address using cams for real-time data. For example, a cell cam set to send photos "automatically" would in all likelihood be considered unfair chase. Those set to send once per day, say at 8-9 p.m., generally would not break this rule.

According to B&C: "Trail cameras can be a helpful tool in game management and selective hunting. The use of any technology that delivers real-time location data (including photos) to target or guide a hunter to any species or animal in a manner that elicits an immediate (real time) response by the hunter is not permitted.

"Alaska, Arizona, Montana, New Hampshire, Nevada and Utah currently have forms of trail camera bans."

"'Real time' is the key concept. Seeing a photo and harvesting an animal a few hours later, or even the same day, uses this technology to assure a kill. It also takes advantage of the animal, which cannot detect impending danger from a camera. Waiting several days, or even until the following season, to pursue an animal captured on camera is different, and would not be deemed an unethical use of a trail camera."

P&Y is similar in its stance: "With the invention of wireless trail cameras, as well as other devices that can send real time data to a hunter, all hunters need to consider how the use of these devices may affect fair chase. While the use of a wireless trail camera is not automatically a violation of the Rules of Fair Chase, using this technology to deliver real time location data of the animal being hunted would be a violation of rule No. 7 of our Rules of Fair Chase.

"For clarification, if you receive a wireless image (photo, video, GPS coordinate, etc.) and it elicits an immediate (real time) response that guides the hunter to the animal, it would be considered a violation of the Rules of Fair Chase and prohibit that animal from being eligible for entry into the Pope and Young Club's Records Program. Fair Chase is defined as the ethical, sportsmanlike and lawful pursuit of free-ranging wild game animals in a manner which does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the animal."

Of course, just because B&C and P&Y have this position on the use of cell cams doesn't make these devices bad. It certainly doesn't make them illegal. (Only your state and local laws can do that.) However, it certainly can impact whether or not a deer can be entered into their record books.

After all, hunters must sign an affidavit to enter a big game animal into their record systems. An affidavit is a legal document, and making false statements on one is a form of perjury, which can be met with fines or more serious consequences.

GROUPS IN SUPPORT OF CELL CAMS

Despite the B&C and P&Y rulings against cellular trail cameras, not all record books rule against the use of these. For

Photos: Moultrie



example, Buckmasters doesn't consider the use of cellular cameras as an issue with fair chase. Hunters who use these tools can still place deer in the record books.

Furthermore, the National Deer Association (NDA), which was formerly the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA), released a position statement on the matter. In short, "NDA supports the use of all trail cameras as hunting, wildlife observation and deer management tools."

Diving deeper into the topic, NDA offers more details on its position. It suggests that trail cameras have increased interest in hunting. It's connected people to the outdoors in ways not previously possible.

"It appears that trail cameras are improving whitetail herds thanks to more awareness and better decision-making."

"From a hunting perspective, there is no data to suggest the use of trail cameras has had a negative impact on deer populations," NDA said. "Rather, deer hunters today are more active in wildlife and habitat management, and trail cameras are an excellent tool for monitoring a deer population and setting management objectives. Trail cameras are useful for deer hunters as well as professional deer managers and researchers."

As for its official position on trail cams? "The NDA supports the use of all trail cameras as hunting, wildlife observation and deer management tools," NDA said. "As trail camera technology advances and social/ethical issues arise, we will evaluate them on a case-by-case basis and, where necessary, support standards and regulations that are science-based and ensure fair-chase hunting."

DEFINING "REAL TIME" COMMUNICATION WITH CELL CAMS

From my personal perspective, I believe cellular cameras can be used in unfair manners, especially

Advanced Cell Cam Tips for Deer Hunters

Some bowhunters are ready to take their cell cam game to the next level. Keep the following in mind to implement more advanced cell cam tips and tricks.

- **Deploying cams in layers**: Position some cams along food sources, others in staging areas, and still, others closer to bedding areas.
- **Placing cell cams closer to daytime deer haunts**: Locate cell cams in more sensitive areas, such as the edges of bedding areas, staging areas, and food and water sources within cover.
- **Letting a cam soak in a bedding area**: Hunters should never enter a bedding area to pull an SD card. However, letting a cell cam (with external battery source) soak in a bedding area until the post-season gleans much information.
- **Hanging high and angling low**: Cell cameras are bulkier and more visible than SD cams. Thus, it's even more important to hang them higher and get them out of whitetails' lines of sight. Hang cameras higher and angle them downward toward target areas.
- **Hanging cams over scrapes**: The best option for capturing the bulk of bucks on the property is hanging cell cams over active scrapes.
- **Pairing with an external battery**: The one Achilles' heel of cell cams is battery life. Pair these with external battery sources to maximize battery longevity.
- **Studying direction of travel**: Observe the first and last frames of deer that walk in front of cams. Note the direction they came from and went to in relation to time of day, travel pattern and other relevant contextual details.
- **Observing preferred wind directions**: Study each daytime trail camera photo of target bucks. Using a historical weather data service, such as Weather Underground, note the wind direction for the timestamp in the photo(s).
- **Moving cams throughout deer season**: Deer use various portions of their home ranges throughout the season. If needed, move cameras to new locations as conditions and circumstances dictate.

Photos: Moultrie

in terms of real time communication. Even where legal and without restrictions, deer hunters shouldn't misuse these tools.

For example, using cell cams to aid real time in a hunt is, in my opinion, an unethical use. In fact, many states regulate against using cell cams in this way. Some have direct language in their game laws. Others are more obscure and indirect. Nonetheless, that's the issue being addressed.

The same or similar laws still regulate against using handheld radios to communicate with nearby hunters. A quick "Hey, a big buck is heading down the valley toward you," on the radio is not allowed. Similarly, a text saying, "There's a deer walking east to west across the field," isn't legal, either.

That said, how does "real time" apply to cell cams? While each state regulates it slightly differently, it's the use of the camera to assist in the hunt in real time.

For example, hunters cannot be sitting in one stand location, see a buck hit a cell cam elsewhere, and climb down to pursue that deer. Furthermore, a hunter can't be walking to hunt one stand, get a hit on a different cell cam location, and change course.

Of course, this subject is ripe with gray areas. Even within the situations outlined above, states might look at these differently. Hunters might do the same.



↓ The author's cell cams captured several late-summer 2024 pictures of this tall-tined Kentucky buck, and he was able to tag it in September.

Hunters have long had access to immediate sends in the form of individual photos and videos. A newer concept is here, though. At least one cell cam brand offers live-streaming capabilities. Meaning, with the click of a button, hunters can view the camera's target area. This is even more "real time" than the cameras sending photos of videos "immediately." Oftentimes, even cameras in "send immediately" mode take several minutes to upload, notify, and appear in the app. This is especially true in areas with poorer cellular service.



With live streaming, that's not the case. If service allows, this provides far more real-time assistance than any other cellular camera feature. While I support other legal uses of cellular trail cameras, I can't get behind the live streaming methods. Even if I could, current game laws do not permit it in most of the states that I hunt in.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: CELL CAMS MAKE DEER HUNTING BETTER

Outside of real time use, I completely and wholly believe that cellular trail cameras make deer hunting better. I also believe cell cams can make deer hunters more ethical. I hold to this belief for several reasons.

First, cellular cameras enhance herd management efforts. These are more powerful tools than SD cameras and provide management intel that's simply not possible without cams on the landscape.

These tools make it possible to more accurately conduct trail camera surveys, gauge buck-to-doe ratios, determine buck age structures, observe herd health, and more. This elevates a hunter and land manager's ability to improve deer populations, make harvest decisions, and more.

Cell cams also allow hunters to be more selective. Despite some arguments, this is a good thing for the overall deer herd. Cameras can reveal bigger deer on the landscape that hunters otherwise wouldn't know about. Because of this, they are more willing to pass on



↑ The author arrowed this Kentucky buck in September 2024. He was able to keep tabs on it via a cell cam.

younger 1.5-, 2.5- and even 3.5-year-old bucks.

It's no coincidence that the National Deer Association reports that the percent of yearling (1.5-year-old) bucks in the United States antlered harvest was 62% in 1989 and only 26% in 2022. Observing the curve, the significant improvement coincides with the advent and eventual proliferation of trail cameras. It appears that trail cameras are improving whitetail herds thanks to more awareness and better decision-making.

It even helps in making the best decisions when harvesting antlerless deer. For example, if you need to reduce the deer population, shooting a more productive doe is the best method. If the deer population is far too low, it's better to shoot an unproductive doe, or shoot no doe at all.

These things considered, this allows the deer herd to mature and thrive at or close to the carrying capacity. It helps keep balance within deer and plant life alike.

Lastly, cell cams minimize disruption of wildlife. The ability to check cameras without needing to walk the hunting property and physically pull cards decreases the amount of stress applied to the deer herd. That's especially important during times of year when they need to conserve energy.

Furthermore, although trail cameras don't always paint an accurate picture of the activity in an area, if hunters see via cams that deer movement is minimal, they're less inclined to hunt a given area. Instead, they might wait until a later date to hunt. This too applies less pressure to the deer, effectively reducing stress and burned calories.

From the hunter standpoint, trail cameras (cell cams included) have increased hunter interest. It's kept people engaged who otherwise might have moved on. Also, it's helped bring new hunters into the fold. Simply, cell cams make deer hunting better IMO.

DEFINE FAIR CHASE FOR YOURSELF

Overall, cell cameras provide no guarantees. Just because a hunter uses trail cameras, or cellular trail cameras, does not guarantee a filled tag on any deer, let alone a mature buck. I'd argue it saves more deer lives due to increased pickiness in selection, effectively allowing increased percentages of young bucks to age. Used ethically, and within the confines of game laws, this is merely another scouting tool in a hunter's bag of tricks.

My parting words? Within the confines of hunting regulations, it's important for everyone to define fair chase for themselves. So long as hunters abide by hunting regulations in their states, zones, and counties, there isn't a right or wrong answer. Follow that moral compass. BW



THE BIVY HUNTING EDGE

Trekking across remote mountain country with your camp on your back offers a serious hunting edge. Here are some tips for planning a successful bivy adventure.



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOE BELL

With my mountaineering-style pack loaded to the gills, I trekked my way up through the juniper and sage-covered lowlands and up into the aspen-covered alpine. It had been a number of years since I hiked this side of the mountain range. On my first adventure, a wrangler took my friend and I into these remote, Nevada mountains. We saw a number of big mule deer bucks on that hunt, but sneaking close proved to be a daunting challenge for this then-inexperienced backcountry hunter.





↑ Bivy hunting can be coupled with normal backpacking strategies. For example, the author starts the vast majority of his bivy hunting adventures by hauling in a fully loaded pack to a main camping area. He then "off loads" most of this gear, returning when needed to resupply his bivy hunting pack.

However, after more than a decade of wilderness hunting, I was much more confident in my approach. My plan on this muley hunt was simple: backpack into one of my known honey-holes, then hunt for a couple days. If I didn't have success, I'd move on to new country and hopefully better hunting.

The day was ending as I arrived at a large meadow with a gurgling creek flowing through it. It seemed like a prime spot to pitch my one-man tent. I cooked up freeze-dried spaghetti and then swallowed two Advil PMs to ease the soreness from the arduous hike in.

Unfortunately, I awoke to a symphony of elk talk. It was total chaos as the large animals stampeded all around my dinky tent. There wasn't too much shuteye for me that night, but at least I knew I was in real-mountain country.

At daybreak, I gathered my gear and headed out for a quick look-see. It wasn't long before I came across a large-framed 4x4 muley. I slipped on my fleece stalking booties and began the sneak. At the 80-yard mark, an errant wind carried my scent to the big guy, and he vanished like smoke.

I hiked across the valley and tried another area, but things seemed sparse over there. I went back to camp and decided I'd load up and trek deeper into the backcountry.

By the end of the day, I was astonished by my progress. I had cleared another 8 miles of trail, and I was now nearly at the other end of the mountain range. This meant I was 16 miles from where I parked my truck at the trailhead!

Fortunately, I had all I needed to survive on my back. I also had a satellite phone and an emergency locator beacon. I was deep in the woods — and completely alone — yet I felt entirely at peace. Camping under the stars that night was certainly dreamlike. Before dozing off, I couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

The next morning, I was up before dawn, boiling water for coffee and oatmeal. After breakfast, I eagerly ventured out, searching for game.

This side of the mountain range was denser, with more continuous sections of aspen and mahogany. My hunting tactic quickly switched from spot-and-stalk to spot-and-sneak. Only minutes into the morning hunt, and I caught movement. It was a bachelor group of bucks, feeding amongst the aspens. I quickly tiptoed toward the deer.

My focus was on a particular 4x3 buck and, before I knew it, I had set up a 45-yard shot on the deer. I drew carefully, aimed and squeezed through the shot. The arrow flashed ahead and made a piercing sound as it entered the buck's chest. He was down quickly. As I admired this great buck, I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. I had traveled a long ways, I thought, but it was clearly the reason behind my success.



Photo: KUIU

↑ A reliable shelter is important in the backcountry. A tent or tarp with a roomy vestibule is quite useful for cooking meals in inclement weather.

STAYING MOBILE

Bivy hunting works because it keeps you highly flexible and mobile. Unlike other hunting methods, you aren't putting all your chips in one particular basket. Instead, when hunting conditions run dry, you have the luxury of moving on and exploring new country. In other words, you can change a poor situation into something potentially more productive — and you can do it all in less than a day's worth of walking!

Of course, this hunting approach works well only if you plan wisely, travel light and get in moderately decent shape. Here's how to get started.



→ A solid bivy pack is durable, comfortable, and large enough to hold all your gear. Mystery Ranch's Metcalf 75 has a carrying capacity of just over 4,500 cubic inches and comes equipped with ultra-thick-padded shoulder and waist straps.



↑ The author has taken all his biggest mule deer on bivy hunting adventures.

PLANNING YOUR ADVENTURE

There are two ways to approach a bivy hunt: You can load up a backpack with 3 to 5 days' worth of essentials, then venture out into the backcountry, camping in different locations while looking for game.

Or you can hike out with an even heavier pack on — carrying 7 to 12 days' worth of gear, for example — and then arrive to a base camp area 5 to 8 miles in. At base camp, you can then "off load" much of the gear (such as extra food, fuel and clothing). This gives you the ability to travel light, return to base camp, and then resupply for your short bivy outings. This is the approach I use on most of my bivy hunts, as it improves my ability to penetrate deeper into wilderness country.

Keeping your bivy pack weight to no more than 45 pounds is prudent. Remember, you'll be hiking off-trail a lot, climbing steep terrain while hunting around for game. To maintain this weight limit, you'll need to scrutinize everything that goes into your pack — and trust me, every ounce counts!

Prior to the hunt, I like to take an overview of my hunting area by using e-scouting tools, such as onX and Google Earth. These tools can help identify important landscape details, all from the comfort of your home. For example, if I'm pursuing early fall mule deer, I'll note areas with sub-alpine terrain above 9,000 feet. Then, I'll look for prominent ridgelines that lead to good-looking feeding and bedding locations. I also identify adjacent water sources.

Once I'm confident a particular area has appropriate cover, food and water for deer, I'll begin identifying nearby vantage points for glassing, along with potential hiking routes and camping locations. Once you have your onX map all marked up, you can download the map for later reference in the field, without using the internet.

USING THE RIGHT GEAR

When it comes to important bivy gear, nothing could be more vital than a well-designed backpack. If your pack breaks or causes discomfort on the trail, your hunt is potentially over.

Author's 5-Day Bivy Pack



- Kifaru Timberline Pack – 5 lbs. 9 oz.
- Easton Rimrock 1P Tent – 3 lbs.
- Big Agnes Greystone 20-Degree Down Sleeping Bag – 2.4 lbs.
- Therm-a-Rest Neo Air Sleeping Pad – 1 lb.
- Sitka Dew Point Rainwear – 23 oz.
- Lexan fork and spoon, mug – 5 oz.
- Food for 5 days – 11 lbs.
- Water Filter – 16 oz
- Stoves and fuel – 1.5 lbs.
- SOG Power Pint Mini Multitool – 4.2 oz.
- Spyderco C48 Hunting Knife – 5 oz.
- Small Knife Sharpener – 3 oz.
- Outdoor Edge Griz-Saw – 5.4 oz.
- Parachute cord (25 feet) – 3 oz.
- Small First-Aid Kit w/ACE bandage – 4 oz.
- Lighter and waterproof matches – 1.25 oz.
- Topo Map – 4 oz.
- 2 headlamps with new batteries – 9 oz.
- Duct Tape (tiny roll) – 1 oz.
- Extra clothes: 2 extra wool socks, 2 merino wool boxer briefs, long-sleeve T shirt, ¼ Zip mid layer, insulated jacket, and stocking hat, (add fleece vest and base layer thermals for hunting mid-Sept. or later) – 3.5 lbs.
- Archery Items: 2-3 Extra broadheads w/extra blades, 1 field point, Allen wrench set, extra center-serving material (6-feet of thread only), dental floss (4 feet). 8 oz.
- Alaskan Game Bags – 10 oz.
- Fleece Stalking Booties – 10 oz.
- Cell phone w/battery charger – 12 oz.
- Toothbrush and toothpaste – 2 oz.
- 2 black trash bags (1 for covering backpack at night and 1 to make a tent ground cloth) – 5 oz.
- Nalgene Canteen (96 oz.), Bottle (32 oz.): 7 ounces
- Platypus Big Zip Reservoir: 7 ounces
- Easton Game Trail Hydration Pack (for day hunting): 25.6 oz
- Drinking Water (3 liters): 6.6 lbs.

Approximate Total Weight: 45 pounds

The best bivy packs have internal frames, adjustable torso systems, and thickly padded shoulder and waist belts. The pack should also be large enough to hold all your camping gear, yet remain fairly compact and streamlined, so you can balance the load well and go under tree branches with ease. Packs with approximately 4,500 cubic inches of storage capacity are ideal for multi-day bivy hunting. Kifaru, KUIU, Mystery Ranch, Gregory and Osprey, are all great brands to consider.



↑ An insulated puffer jacket, such as KUIU's Super Down LT Hooded Jacket, is ideal for keeping you warm while minimizing carrying weight. It also doubles as a pillow when stuffed into a small storage sack or game bag.

Sizing the pack to fit your body is critical. I highly recommend shopping for a bivy pack at a high-quality backpacking store. You might pay a little extra compared to online prices, but the expert advice you'll receive will be worth every extra cent.

Fortunately, there are lots of helpful videos on how to properly fit a pack, so if you do purchase a pack online, you can have a friend measure your torso length and then dial in your pack's settings to fit your body's unique size and shape.

For shelter, a one- or two-man tent works best, depending on the hunter's preference. For example, my Easton Rimrock 1 tent weighs exactly 3 pounds, but it's pretty small inside. There's just enough room for my sleeping pad and bag and that's it. A hunter who wants a little more wiggle room for increased comfort and storage should go with a two-man model. KUIU's Mountain Star 2 tent is a great model to consider; it weighs only a little over 3 pounds.

If I'm hunting with a partner, we may decide to "share the load." If this is the case, I'll pack my Big Agnes C Bar three-man tent. At just under 5 pounds, this tent is sized perfect for two hunters and gear. KUIU's Mountain Star 3 tent is also similar in size and weight.



↑ A solo bivy hunter should consider carrying a personal locator beacon to improve peace of mind and safety.

As far as sleeping bags go, anything over 3 pounds is a bit heavy. Your sleeping pad shouldn't weigh more than a pound, either. I use a 20-degree down-filled sleeping bag and a Thermarest NeoAir inflatable pad. In cold weather, I add a Thermarest Z-Lite foam pad, which goes under the inflatable pad to prevent the loss of warmth due to the cold ground.

For my early fall hunts, I use a 15- or 20-degree sleeping bag. For December and January deer hunts in Arizona, I use a 0-degree bag and also put an extra sleeping bag in the truck, or I pack along a lightweight fleece liner to ward off extreme cold.

Remember, every ounce counts and your shelter/sleeping system often weighs the most and takes up the highest amount of bulk in your pack, so strive to keep it light and compact.

EATING RIGHT AND STAYING HYDRATED

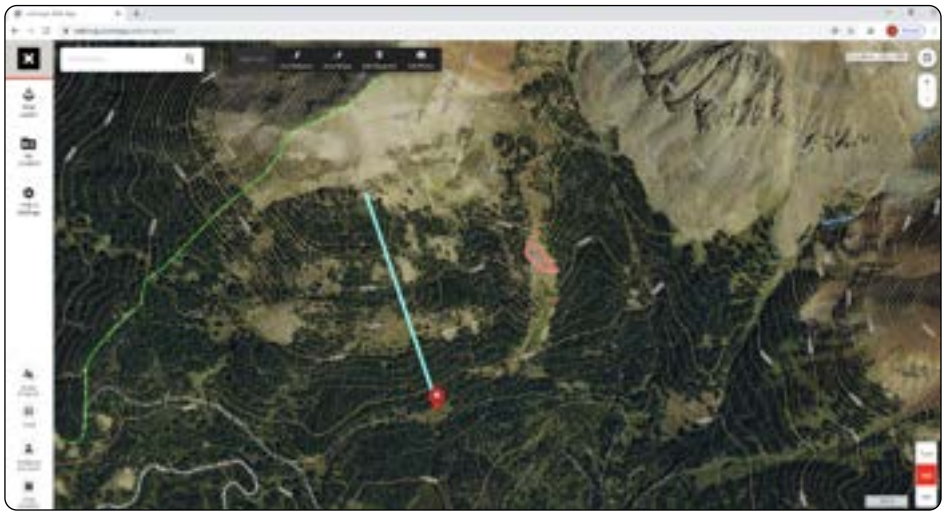
I typically pack instant oatmeal for breakfast and high-carb, high-protein snacks for lunchtime, such as bagels, peanut butter, meat sticks or jerky, packaged cheese, fruit leather, trail mix, and Cliff Bars.

"I typically pack instant oatmeal for breakfast and high-carb, high-protein snacks for lunchtime, such as bagels, peanut butter, meat sticks or jerky, packaged cheese, fruit leather, trail mix, and Cliff Bars."

For fast morning hunts — that is, when I need to get going because the elk are already screaming and nearby — I may forgo the hot, instant oatmeal and coffee in exchange for a Cliff Bar and cold tea or coffee mix.

For dinner entrees, the simplest, lightest option are freeze-dried meals, although instant ramen noodles and pouched meat work in a pinch, too.

My camp stove is a Jet Boil Titanium SOL. One standard-sized fuel canister lasts about 5 days when cooking morning and evening meals, but I always take an extra canister when off-loading gear at a basecamp. I also carry two Bic lighters, a small backup stove and a compact titanium heating pot. The MSR Pocket Rocket, Soto Windmaster, or BRS 3000-T are all good models to consider. I've had backpacking stoves fail, so I don't chance this one.



↑ Prior to the hunt, onX can be used to identify productive hunting locations, based on terrain and elevation features. You can also sketch out the most user-friendly hiking and glassing spots, then download the map so you can use it later without internet access.

Obviously, proper hydration is key when bivy hunting. Because water is heavy (a half gallon weighs about 4 pounds), I prefer to chart out water points during my hikes to resupply and avoid lugging the weight. You'll hunt better this way.

Depending on the duration of my trip, I'll use a lightweight MSR MiniWorks EX pump or Sawyer Squeeze to filter water for safe drinking. I prefer a pump over a filtration straw or tablets. This way I can filter, drink immediately, and resupply my water bladder as needed.

In my pack, I use a Platypus Big Zip EVO Reservoir (3 liters), which is fully loaded during the initial hike-in. I also take along a 32-ounce Nalgene Bottle and 96-ounce Nalgene Canteen (both empty) for camp water.

DRESSING FOR SUCCESS

Clothing: I prefer high-tech synthetic clothing. These garments are lightweight and warm, but dry fast. They also come with antimicrobial properties, so you smell better despite lots of high exertion.

Pants that are durable, comfortable and offer stretch capabilities are best for bivy hunting. My favorites are KUIU's Attack or Pro Pant, or Sitka's Ascent or Mountain Pant.

I pack one extra set of pants. This way, I can wash my primary pant after 4 or 5 days of hunting. While this pant is drying, I hunt in my backup pair, which is often an ultra-thin hiker's pant that smooshes down to the size of a grapefruit.

My upper garments consist of synthetic t-shirts, mid-layer fleece or merino wool quarter-zip tops, and a lightweight insulated jacket filled with Primaloft or high-quality down. At night, I stuff the insulated jacket into a game bag and use it as a pillow. It works like a charm! For September hunts or later, I usually pack thin thermal base layers, too.



Best Bivy Shelter

Many hardcore bivy hunters prefer a bivy sack over a small tent because it offers unbeatable weight savings. The problem is, if bad weather strikes, you'll need to hunker down in this cocoon-like sack until the storm passes. That can be atrocious. To remedy this, you can pack along a tarp for additional rain protection, but most wilderness tarps weigh anywhere from 1 to 2 pounds. When you combine the weight of a bivy sack/tarp combo, it comes in at about the same weight as a one-man tent.

For this reason, I prefer a tent over a bivy sack for nearly all of my backcountry bowhunting adventures. Fortunately, today's tents just keep getting lighter, too, thanks to innovative designs and high-tech fabrics. For example, Big Agnes' Tiger Wall or Fly Creek UL1 tent weighs just 2 pounds. Compare this to the company's Three Wired Hooped Bivy that weighs 22 ounces, and we're talking about a .625-pound difference between the two shelters!

Another lightweight shelter to consider is the versatile tarp-like tent. KUIU's Summit Star 1 is a high-strength, waterproof, ripstop nylon tarp that forms into a single-person shelter by using a trekking pole. It weighs about 1 pound with stakes and guy lines, so it's a great choice for those minimalist bivy hunters. You can also add a footprint that weighs another 4.8 ounces for added protection from the cold, wet ground. The shelter provides an incredible 43 square feet of floor space for outstanding protection for you and your gear.



Trekking poles improve walking stability when carrying heavy loads across technical terrain. They are also quite useful when crossing streams, to improve one's balance while stepping across logs or boulders.

Rainwear: Good rainwear is a must, too. For years, I used Cabela's Ultra Space Rainwear with solid results, but I did tear the fabric once or twice when traveling through thick brush. My favorite rainwear nowadays, due to overall weight, packability and durability, are KUIU's Chugach Series and Sitka's Dew Point. Other top choices include Hally Hansen's Loke, Patagonia's Torrentshell, Columbia's Watertight II, and REI's Ranier.

Footwear: You'll need supportive footwear to keep your feet and ankles tracking appropriately, especially when side hilling with a heavy pack on. I prefer stiff, yet lightweight backpacking boots. Such boots weigh 3 pounds or less on average, have a 7 or 8-inch upper, and come equipped with rugged outsoles to prevent slips and falls.

Lighter boots are better for two reasons: they improve my physical energy throughout the hunt and they enhance my stalking capabilities as a bowhunter.

I've used some great bivy hunting boots over the years, but my new favorite is Kenetrek's Bridger High. I'm extremely impressed with this boot's comfort and construction, lateral sole stiffness, and overall weight (only 2.9 pounds). Other good boots to consider include Crispi's Thor or Summit, Danner's 453 GTX, or LaCrosse's Ursa MS GTX, to name a few.

To prevent blisters and hot spots, I use a relatively thick, high-quality wool sock like Smart Wool's Classic Hiker Crew or Kenetrek's Montana Mid-Weight. I've used both of these socks with outstanding results during the past several years of hunting. I also use a thin Coolmax or merino wool liner sock. This prevents the main sock from chaffing my skin and causing "hot spots" or blisters. In all my boots, I use Power Step Heat Moldable or Super Feet Green inserts, depending on the boot. Both of these inserts support my arches extremely well and prevent foot pain, even after weeks of hard hunting.

Optics: Aside from a top-notch binocular, you might need a compact spotting scope, too. This mainly applies if you're trophy hunting deer, goat or mountain sheep. I've used Nikon's Fieldscope 13x30x50 ED with great results. It weighs just under 20 ounces. Swarovski and Vortex offer similar models with improved optical systems. I also carry a small tripod that extends to about 14 inches. I find the tripod useful for self-portraits and lifestyle photography, too.

GETTING IN SHAPE

You might be surprised to learn that an effective bivy hunter doesn't need to be in marathon-type shape. I've been hunting the backcountry effectively for decades, and I stay in decent-enough shape by walking and mountain biking regularly, while also doing some light weight-training. I also have a cross-country skiing machine that I use maybe once a week, depending on my family/work schedule.

Every person will favor a different exercise routine, so explore and choose something you really enjoy. The key is to make it a long-term lifestyle solution, so you'll do it consistently, day after day, month after month, year after year.

Eating healthy is a good way to improve your fitness, too. Resist sugary drinks and snacks, and avoid greasy or highly processed foods.

Drink more water and consume lean protein — wild game is perfect — along with lots of fruits and vegetables. Sweets and candy bars should be consumed in moderation.

If you're tired of bowhunting big game in the same ol' wilderness spots year after year, usually with mediocre results, you should consider a new approach. With the right mindset and plan, bivy hunting can deliver true results by helping you locate and take down big trophies in the backcountry. BW

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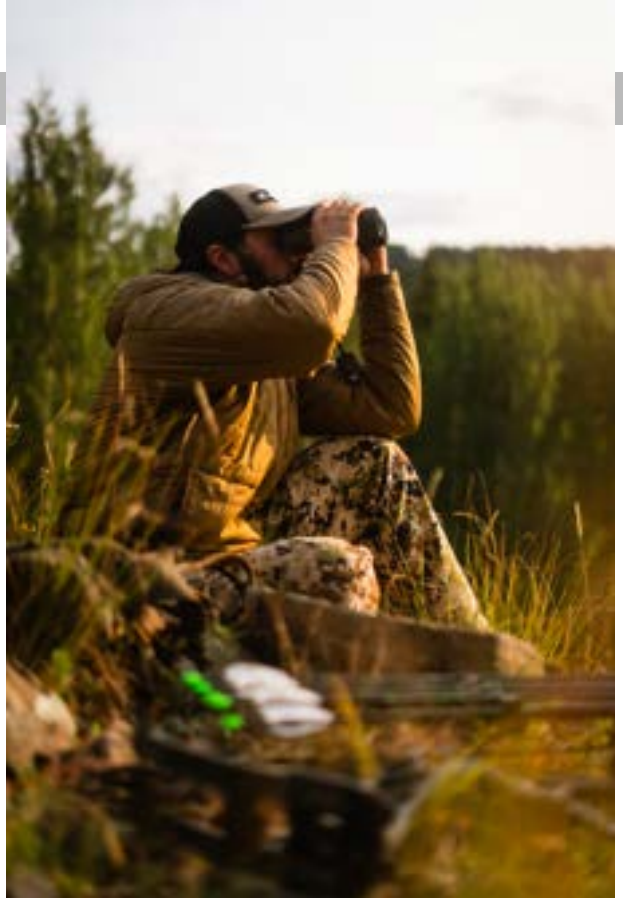


4 WESTERN ARCHERY HUNTS THAT DON'T REQUIRE A TON OF POINTS TO DRAW

Tips for planning DIY bowhunts for spring black bears, early fall mule deer, late-season elk and winter Coues deer.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOSH KIRCHNER

The allure of a western archery hunt is something that appeals to more than a few bowhunters across the country. Big mountains, vast rolling hills, and country as wild as you can imagine invoking thoughts and inspiration of adventure by the bow. This is a seed that was planted in my mind long ago and one that still grows with deep roots beneath it.



Surely hunts that are so great and fulfilling would take years and years to acquire enough points to draw a tag? On the surface, yes. I'm not one for just thinking about doing something rather than doing it. Running in unison with many other bowhunters out there, I want to archery hunt as much as I can and know that I can go hunting, not hope for it.

Because of this, I've come up with a few main squeeze hunts to lean on. There's nothing wrong with setting your sights on those top-tier dream hunts, because you may just get lucky and draw. Until then, though, there's no reason you can't go have some fun with your bow in the field and hone your skills at the same time. Here are four western archery hunts that I've come to love through repetition year after year.

1 SPRING BLACK BEARS

Let's kick off this party in the springtime. There's really two main options for hunting in the spring and that's either black bears or wild turkeys. While there are ample spring turkey hunting opportunities in the West, there's also a ton of it in the Midwest and East Coast. So, in the spirit of keeping things western, we're going to focus our attention on spring black bears.



Setting foot into the rugged mountains of the western United States in pursuit of a black bear is not only a great opportunity to harvest a bear of your own, but it's also a phenomenal time to test gear and shake the dust off from the off-season. And with that, these hunts are always packed with adventure, due to the awe-inspiring landscapes that black bears call home. Your body and mind will be tested, but I promise you it's worth the price of admission.

Your best bet for getting into the field sooner than later are the over-the-counter tags for spring black bears. There are, of course, spring tags that one can apply for across the West, but these can be more of a waiting game, depending on the state and particular area of state. Over-the-counter tags are just easier to plan in advance for, and your best bet for those is going to be Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Arizona.

Be sure to check regulations for each state because they can differ in terms of timeframe and what units are open for spring black bear hunting. For instance, Idaho allows a non-resident to acquire two bear tags. They offer $40 Reduced Tags (specific to certain units) and a $231 statewide tag. Their seasons don't have sow quota limits, unlike Arizona, which does. A bear unit there will close down to hunting when a certain number of sows is killed. Also, baiting is allowed in Idaho while it's not allowed in Montana or Arizona. Know the rules.

For the most accessible style of black bear hunting, it's hands down a spot-and-stalk hunt. You're going to want a good binocular as well as a bit of patience. Black bears can be observed from afar through high-powered optics. During spring, bears will primarily be feeding on fresh green grass, and will do it on and off throughout the entire day with an emphasis on the evening. This focus on food provides a choice opportunity to spot and stalk

into bow range. Should the bear venture into cover after feeding, they'll likely come back out to feed later. This is a great time to set up and wait for them to emerge for a possible shot.

2 EARLY SEASON MULE DEER

After spring has sprung and we're looking at the tail end of summer, it's time to start thinking about the early fall. While many minds tend to drift toward bugling bulls and elk rut fests, there is another direction with much more accessible opportunities. Early season mule is an archery hunt well worth your time and effort.

Bowhunting mule deer during the early fall represents a phenomenal entry point into the fall hunting seasons. What better way to kick off the season than above timberline among green slopes, wildflowers and towering jagged mountains in search of big velvet mule deer bucks? This hunt is a backcountry bowhunter's dream. If the alpine isn't for you, though, don't worry. There are also opportunities to hunt bucks in the sagebrush, as well as the desert.

As far as where to go in search of velvet bucks in the West, the OTC side of things is quite limited, but not



quite unheard of just yet. States such as Arizona and Idaho have OTC opportunities with caps, so you need to be early to the game in order to take advantage of those. The more plentiful opportunities are going to come in the form of 0-1 point units that are easy to draw in places such as Colorado, Utah and Montana. These hunts are hard, yes, but this is bowhunting you're signing up for. It's all hard.

During this early season, bucks are still in their summer routines — meaning they are very predictable and

Gear Talk

Gear is a giant discussion no matter if you're hunting the West or not. In the spirit of this article, though, I want to chat about gear to help not only save you some money, but also make your western archery hunt more enjoyable.

When planning your big game hunt, don't feel that you have to buy the absolute best of everything out there. You can spend $10k in a hurry, especially if you're talking about backpack hunting.

Areas to focus on that will greatly impact your hunt are boots, backpack and optics. Your boots are your mobile tires, your backpack is what's going to carry everything you need (including your harvest), and your optics are likely what's going to find that animal to begin with. Skimping on any of these can result in a painful experience, whether it's blisters from the boots, a big Advil bill from insufficient optics, or a sore back, hips and shoulders from a less-than-great backpack.

Most importantly, spend your money on tags. You can get by with a budget layering system, broadheads that won't break the bank, a 7-pound backpacking tent, and arrows that aren't .001 straightness.



bed for long periods of time, usually during roughly the same times each day. For a bowhunter, this offers a prime spot-and-stalk opportunity. Hunters can glass bachelor groups of bucks from afar, bed them down, and sneak their way into bow range from there. It's much easier said than done, but it doesn't get any better for a spot-and-stalk archery hunt.

3 LATE-SEASON ELK

The brunt of attention when it comes to archery elk hunting is without a doubt focused around the early season. It isn't even a debate. The hard part is trying to get an early season tag year after year. With most of the attention on early season elk hunting, the late-archery elk seasons tend to fly under the radar. For the bowhunter looking to get more field time, and ready for a challenge, these late-archery elk hunts deserve some attention.

Once the late season hits, we'll say in November, bulls will start to break away from their cows and seek peace. They are depleted from the rut and in need of recovery. In the spirit of not wanting to be bothered, they'll move into more rugged terrain and live in a smaller area than in the earlier season. Sometimes they are alone, and sometimes there can be multiple bulls with one another. Most of their day is spent bedded with a movement to feed/water in the morning and evening.

The most productive way to see bulls during the late season is through high-powered optics from a vantage point. Bulls can be observed going about their tight routines from afar, and when you find one, you can almost throw a blanket over them. They just don't move around that much and are very predictable, as long as something doesn't push them out of an area. This gives a hunter the advantage of either patterning them with the intent of setting up an ambush, or bedding them down for a stalk.

While there aren't a plethora of OTC tags available for these late-archery elk hunts, they are going to take you a heck of a lot fewer points to draw than the early tags will. Look into Utah and Arizona for some great late-archery elk hunts. They may not be filled with the haunting sounds of bugles that September offers up, but if you want to hunt elk with a bow, in some prime areas, these will put you more in the fast lane rather than stuck in gridlock traffic.



Glassing 101

If you're planning a western archery hunt, there is a fair chance you'll get very acquainted with a binocular. Being how vast and open much of the West is, using optics to survey large chunks of land is simply the most effective way to locate big game animals without them knowing your whereabouts.

In order to get the most bang for your buck during your glassing sessions, consider mounting your binocular on a tripod with a fluid pan head. Not only will you be able to spot movement much easier, but you'll also be able to instantly lock your optics in place once you do find an animal. And when it comes to the finding part, there is no better way than grid-searching with your binocular. Break the landscape up into sections and slowly grid-search each one looking for any sign of life.

This doesn't always mean an animal standing out in the open. Look for oddities, things like different textures that might resemble fur, slightly off colors, and horizontal lines that would represent the spine of a standing animal. The most important tool of all, though, when glassing is patience. Without it, you'll only go so far.




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4 WINTER COUES DEER

Once the core fall hunting season passes, most folks hang up their bows and settle in for a cozy winter by a fireplace. Of course, for many people, there is usually no shortage of shoveling snow, too. That is unless you head to the Southwest. Come December/January, things are just getting good with a tiny little ungulate called a Coues deer.

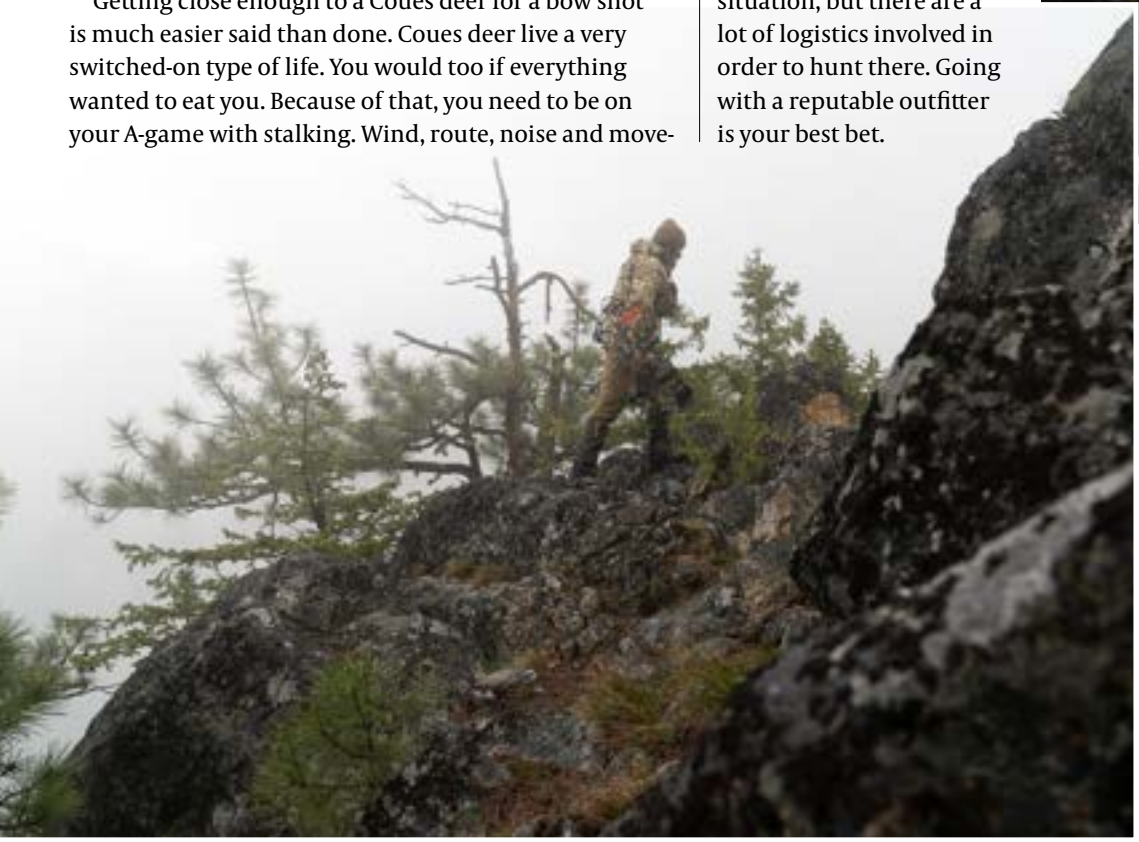
Down in the southwestern deserts of Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico, the Coues deer rut spans from the last few days of December through the whole month of January. These deer may be small, but they sure put on a show during the rut. Not to mention, they are some of the finest tablefare that exists in the wild game world. Putting an arrow into one is no easy task, as they are a very on-edge type of animal. With persistence, though, it can be done.

Coues deer are masters of melting into their environment and can prove very challenging to see. The best way to locate them is through meticulous glassing via optics mounted on a tripod. They can be found from the low desert flats all the way up into ponderosa pine forests. Whatever habitat you choose to hunt, be prepared for long hours of grid searching with your optics. And when you do find them, don't take your eyes off of them. They aren't nicknamed the "grey ghost" for nothing.

Getting close enough to a Coues deer for a bow shot is much easier said than done. Coues deer live a very switched-on type of life. You would too if everything wanted to eat you. Because of that, you need to be on your A-game with stalking. Wind, route, noise and movement. It all needs to be dialed for these little deer. If you possess the patience, you could also sit water for them, or even on a well-used game trail. They have a small home range and can be patterned, especially in the early fall.

Getting archery tags for Coues deer usually isn't too big of a hill to climb. Tags can be acquired in Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico. All provide an early season or late season (rut) option. Arizona is probably your best bet with its OTC archery tags, but there is a cap on these for non-residents, so be early to buy your tag. New Mexico offers some fairly easy-to-draw archery Coues deer tags, and Mexico is technically an OTC situation, but there are a lot of logistics involved in order to hunt there. Going with a reputable outfitter is your best bet.





GAME ON!

These are just a few of my favorite go-to options for being in the field consistently with a bow. Of course, there are other hunts as well that don't require a ton of points such as pronghorns, whitetails, turkeys, javelina, etc. It just depends on your preferred flavor. With that said, I wanted to write this piece because far too often I've heard hunters complain about not being able to get drawn, and that they wish they could just go hunting, especially in the West.

Well, what I've laid out here is proof that if you want to go bowhunting, you can. Do the research, pick up your bow, and get after it. The only thing holding you back is you. Game on! BW



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GOING PUBLIC IN IOWA

Here's how to make the most of your next DIY Hawkeye State bowhunting adventure.

BY MARK MELOTIK





I'd begun the long lonely hike into my targeted stand site in predawn darkness, but after finally cresting the steep wooded hill nearly a half-mile from the parking lot, I stopped cold and crouched. My view in the murky moonlight revealed the shadowy figures of several deer — 8? 10? — milling about in the cut cornfield far ahead. On this day, the sighting was both good and bad. It was the peak of the Iowa rut, and by the looks (and sounds) of things, a buck or two was pushing around a generous handful of local does that had been filling their bellies in the fresh-cut field. Even from 200 yards, I could hear the playful doe snorts and soft buck grunting.



↑ The author's 2020 Iowa buck was a nice last-day consolation prize but paled in comparison to the two monsters he encountered at the same stand site earlier during the peak-rut week.

My dilemma was the deer were gathered just outside the woodlot where I'd found a promising stand site the day before. But then, just like that, they scattered — in several directions. Confident no deer had seen me, and with daylight quickly approaching, I stalked slowly on into the woodlot and quickly began setting up. I had to pause when a young 3x3 buck came bird-dogging by, nose to the ground at first shooting light, well within 10 yards. Two minutes later came a coyote, skirting by at a mere 10 feet. Thankfully, the morning would see even more lively action. Boy, would it ever.

NETWORKING PAYS

Although I've been fortunate to hunt Iowa several times over my career on some well-managed private tracts, soon after my decision to undertake my first DIY public land hunt in the Hawkeye State back in 2020, I made a very fortunate contact. I was at the counter of my local archery shop in June, exchanging fall plans with some on-staff friends, when the guy standing next to me suddenly spoke up.

"I know some great public areas in Iowa you need to try," said Ryan, who, as it turned out, was not kidding in the least. Jackpot. After a brief discussion, I would hook up via phone with the former state resident some days later, each of us with maps in hand. And Ryan, a young, dedicated bowhunter who also shed-hunted Iowa regularly, including that very spring, offered up some sweet advice I would take to heart. I was glad I did. Hanging out at an archery pro shop had just paid some unseen dividends.





↓ → Sign discovered on the author's 2020 public land hunt was stand-out impressive on virtually all of the tracts hunted, from thick rubs to massive scrapes with overhanging branches broken and mangled well above the ground. Is hunting Iowa worth your time? Absolutely.

My experience, though solely by chance, brings up a critical point all first-time Iowa hunters should heed. Well before your hunt, find someone — or a few people — who know the score. Whether it's a friend who lives in the state or has hunted it before, or maybe a state DNR employee with insider knowledge, any type of solid lead can shave days — even weeks — off your research and help lead you to success. Maybe it's an overlooked public tract, or a relatively new tract enrolled in the state PLOTS program that allows public access to private tracts in exchange for tax breaks — much like the farmland described in the opening graphs above.

Regardless, research pays big, and there's plenty to dip into beginning on the informative Iowa DNR website (www.iowadnr.gov). While there, find the Public Hunting Atlas that shows all such lands statewide.



Through it all, realize that hunting any new state is a lesson in research and patience. And also, set realistic expectations. Few know that more than Aaron Warbritton of The Hunting Public YouTube team that specializes in hunting public tracts nationwide, and especially in Iowa where Warbritton once lived — and where at least one Hunting Public staffer still does.

THE PROMISED LAND?

"Actually, in my opinion, I'm not going to paint such a rosy picture of Iowa's public hunting," Warbritton said. "There is really not a lot of public land opportunity in Iowa, but I lived there for 13 years, and couldn't afford to pay an outfitter, couldn't afford to go to a lease. So public land was kind of my only option."

Of course, if you follow The Hunting Public's adventures on YouTube, you know that over the past several years Warbritton and his team of dedicated public land hunters have regularly tasted success on public lands across many whitetail states. And for Aaron and the rest of his team, much of that expertise was honed in the Hawkeye State. One of the primary challenges Warbritton has found, as you'd expect most anywhere on public dirt, is competition. Sometimes, lots of it.

"I think the hunting can be good, but you need to have realistic expectations going into it," he said. "First of all, hunting public land is just a very different animal. On public land, you can't manipulate the hunting pressure like you can on private tracts; you have to be able to adapt to those conditions on the fly. Going into any hunt I routinely expect my Plan A, B and C to go wrong. And it's not just other hunters you're dodging. A lot of Iowa public land is multi-use, so you have people out there just recreating, and they can be a factor. This is key: You just have to keep a positive attitude in the face of altering your hunting plans, sometimes daily."

Warbritton, who currently lives nearby, back in his home state of Missouri, has found a commonality in most all states where he and his team hunt public tracts.

"Hunting Iowa is really no different than hunting public land in your own home state," he said. "The more time you put into it, the more success you're going to have. A lot of the time what happens is, someone draws an Iowa tag and they think they'll automatically have a chance at a 170-inch deer, and that's just not reality. Sure it can happen, but it's more a factor of how much time you can put into your scouting and research. The more you can do — and you should start years in advance of your hunt — the better off you'll be. And truth be told, most people could be spending just as much time on public land closer to home, and having just as good of results."

As an example, Warbritton said it was year five of hunting public lands in Iowa before he and his team really started hitting their stride. That season they took several high-quality bucks after logging several years filled with some moderate success, but mostly hard-won lessons.

"This is key: You just have to keep a positive attitude in the face of altering your hunting plans, sometimes daily."



↑ While The Hunting Public team is known for its entertaining and informative YouTube content filmed across several top whitetail states, team members honed their whitetail skills on Iowa's public lands.



↑ The key to better public hunting? The Hunting Public team has found that the more time they log learning public areas in Iowa and elsewhere, the better their hunting success.

His takeaway? Experience in an area matters, anywhere deer roam, and Iowa is no exception.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Everybody's definition of a trophy deer is different, but when the topic of Iowa hunting comes up, some benchmarks exist. And because it's Iowa, expectations get blown up fairly quickly. So what is realistic? Are you looking for a Pope and Young record book-qualifying typical scoring 125 inches? Nothing wrong with those. And a 140-inch buck is a good one most anywhere they roam.

Several outfitters in Iowa have a trophy benchmark of 150 inches, mostly to ensure the availability of top-notch bucks on their managed tracts for years to come. Shoot a buck that scores less than 150 in those trophy camps and you'll be paying a fine. Of course, you bypass any such expectations when going public on a DIY hunt, but the questions remain: What is a good goal? What should be your personal goal?

Well, let's take a look at that 150-inch benchmark. That is a stud anywhere deer roam, and they're not behind every bush, not even in Iowa.

"Realistically, if you've done your scouting and research, and hunt really hard, after a week of hunting, you should be able to get an opportunity at a P&Y-type (125 inches) buck," Warbritton said. "It just depends on what your goals are. Lots of guys pick a premiere zone, they set their sights on a 150- or 160-inch buck, and the area they hunt might be full of 140-inch 8-points. They might be disappointed, but that's a buck I will take every day.

"150 inches or greater is a tough proposition. I've hunted Iowa for 13 years as a resident, and during that time I've killed three of them — and I scout 50 days a year in Iowa. The amount of time I'd guess required to [ensure an encounter with] a deer of that caliber, is probably north of 60 days of scouting per year.

"For me, my goals, I'm just trying to get a solid opportunity at a nice buck. I started hunting Iowa in 2011; at the time we were mid-20s deer hunters. We were

Hedging Your Public Land Bets

As you've read, Aaron Warbritton and his teammates from The Hunting Public are all about making the most of the opportunities found on Iowa's public lands. But they're not so laser-focused as to pass up a chance to hunt cherry private tracts they might run across.

As Warbritton says, as long as you're spending time scouting your chosen public areas, it just makes good sense to knock on as many doors in the immediate area as you can, which just might reveal a private honey-hole free from competition.

"Don't overlook knocking on a lot of doors during your scouting, because if you finally do draw the tag, you'll have a pile of different areas from which to choose."

Even in today's world of social media blowing up the demand for, and worth of, Iowa's private ground, Warbritton says that most bowhunters would be shocked at the quality of deer hunting you can access there, merely for the asking.

"You might only need a few dozen acres or less to be able to find a good rut-hunt setup, and it might be the place where you kill him. I am a big fan of having options."

Warbritton says it might not be the easiest conversation you'll ever have, but the right approach can pay big dividends.

"Gaining permission in Iowa is no different than anywhere else, really. Be kind and respectful, be honest, and be willing to offer help with things and reciprocate as you can. I'm not the greatest at it, and it can be kind of intimidating, but my buddy Jake is really good. If he finds a spot that draws his interest, he likes to wait for a nice day and circle back, maybe when the owners are out working in their garden. He might just pull into the driveway and wave, and start up a conversation.

"You're going to get rejected a lot, but you need to be optimistic and stay respectful. Oftentimes, if they won't let you hunt, they might give you some information on who to ask nearby. And that can be a gold mine."

students of the game, and we hunted really hard and we had success, and saw some big ones. But it was 4-5 years in, when we really had the confidence that we could expect to get a chance at a 150-caliber buck, that it definitely can happen. It took that amount of time. With that said, we're really not serious trophy hunters. If a nice 130-inch 8-point walked in to 10 yards, versus having a 150-inch deer at 40 or 50 yards, I'm taking the 130-inch buck every time."

WHICH ZONE?

If you've researched Iowa at all you know the state is broken up into specific hunt zones, and you must apply for a specific zone. So which zones are best? Do your research and you'll find the most popular. And there's no doubt those premiere zones can deliver if you get on the right property. However, make no mistake, there are big deer in every zone.

"A lot of people who apply to hunt Iowa want to hunt the best areas in the state, but in my opinion, I think the opposite," Warbritton said. "I think you're better off picking a certain area, maybe not so well known, and try to focus on it as much as possible with your scouting. You can scout a lot during the winter, but not until you actually get in those locations and hunt them, will you see how the deer actually behave there. If you're one tree off, or 15 yards, that could make or break your tag. Typically it takes me a long time to put those pieces together, but in reality, you only have to guess right one time."

A MEMORABLE HUNT

Speaking of guessing right, the Iowa woodlot stand site discussed at the beginning of this feature turned out to be most everything I'd hoped. About mid-morning, the sounds of deer hooves crunching dry leaves became almost deafening, and soon I watched a parade of seven does emerge from the steep ravine to my left — followed soon after by a beast of a buck. I guessed the tall heavy 10-point would score in the mid-150s, and I quickly readied for my shot.

Once drawn I needed the buck — now at just 25 yards — to clear the tangled branches of a large recent blowdown, but it was not to be. Just before hitting my lane the buck, and a large group of does, didn't spook, but suddenly moved off and disappeared down the steep drop straight away from me. The tangle of tree branches perfectly shielded his exit.

Within minutes, more movement caught my eye. From my position at the edge of the woodlot I could see two more deer emerge far to my right, some 200 yards away, from the few rows of corn left standing in the mostly cut field. One was a doe, the other, a certified Iowa monster. Easily one of the largest typicals I've ever seen on the hoof was bird-dogging the hot doe, and I stared in amazement, then grabbed my grunt call.

As I watched I could not believe the width and height of the buck's rack, which I judged at some 24 inches inside, with an overall score pushing the magic 170 mark. Good grief. The buck's headgear was so large it appeared almost cartoonish. I'll never forget the sight of that buck suddenly snapping its head toward me, in response to my best fake grunts, and glimpsing that stunning spread for the first time.

The pair would come no closer than about 125 yards that day, but a consolation prize was waiting. I would end up arrowing a fine young 9-pointer later on that hunt, from the very same woodlot stand. It was a hunt I'll never forget, and one that will have me going public in Iowa for many years ahead. BW



↑ Aaron Warbritton of The Hunting Public with a beauty Hawkeye State buck. No longer a state resident, Warbritton typically spends 50 days per year scouting areas in Iowa to prepare for his next hunting adventure there.

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THE MILE-LONG

A big summit and its slopes held two mature mule deer bucks day after day, and the author finally connected with one of them on day eight of his DIY Colorado bowhunt.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
DARRON MCDOUGAL

As the top of the young aspen patch became visible, the leaves gently quivering in the west wind, I went into stealth mode. Keeping a juniper between the aspens and me, I crawled forward, knowing that a few mule deer, including two mature bucks, were taking shelter from the climbing heat under the aspens. Fully exposed to the sweltering sun, I coveted their shade.



MOUNTAIN

About 35 yards from the aspens, I was close enough. Now, I needed one of the two big bucks to stand and mosey into an opening. With an arrow nocked, I planned to stay as long as it took to get a shot, but the wind suddenly shifted 180 degrees — it was strange because I was on the highest hill in the vicinity and no front was moving in. Instantly, the tall 3x4 stood, looked straight at me, then bolted. The others, including his wide, old 2x2 running mate, followed.

That was the first stalk of my 2024 Colorado archery deer hunt, and it stung to be so close and have the encounter fall apart at no fault of my own. But that's bowhunting. Allow me to set the stage for how this hunt came to be, and then we'll get back to the story.





SITTING ON POINTS, SETTLING ON A HUNT

Annually, I buy preference and bonus points for several species in several western states. As Colorado's 2024 big game draw deadline approached, I felt it was time to cash in my six deer points and embark on a DIY public land mule deer hunt. But, where?

I'd been studying a unit, but according to my GoHunt Insider research, I had strong odds of drawing but wasn't guaranteed. I checked with one of my Colorado pals, and he said, "Why don't you try unit ____ right next door? You'd draw that one for sure." He also shared some tidbits and a few glassing spots to get me started. The hunt would be on BLM ground and potentially a chunk of state ground.



↓ HuntStand Pro was a key to the author's success. Not only was it valuable for pre-hunt scouting, but before beginning a stalk, he marked the bedded bucks' approximate locations for easy reference during the stalk.

E-SCOUTING

I drew the tag and began scouring HuntStand Pro to supplement my buddy's map markers with my own. Most of the unit is the highest of the low country, with elevations around 9,000 feet. My best odds of finding and patterning a mature buck would be best around the September 2 opener. The area's average temperatures during September are hot, and with the hills covered in open sage, I knew the key to finding deer would be to locate shade-tree pockets near water sources.

Utilizing HuntStand Pro's Natural Atlas base map made larger water sources obvious, and the high-resolution Hybrid base map helped me uncover smaller ponds and waterholes near tree cover. Next, I employed the 3D feature, which allows you to tilt the map and pan around. This helped me identify ideal glassing peaks and gave me an idea of what I'd see from those spots. If you're planning a Western spot-and-stalk hunt, HuntStand Pro's 3D feature is priceless and gives you an in-person perspective of the terrain and visibility.

NEXT STOP, COLORADO

I'd been shooting my Mathews Lift 29.5 extremely well all summer in preparation for the hunt, and the day before leaving for Colorado, a broadhead-tipped arrow shot from 90 yards that hit exactly where I was aiming had my shooting confidence soaring — not that I'd shoot that far at a deer, but ya know.

About five days before the opener, my wife, Becca, and I hooked up our travel trailer and aimed west. After 2.5 days of driving, we reached our destination, checked in at an RV park, and got our little home-away-from-home situated.

SCOUTING BEGINS

The first morning at one of my buddy's glassing markers was a solid observation outing. I spotted a young buck and several does and fawns. I also spotted several other deer here and there. When I expected that all of the deer had bedded and that my morning was done, the east slope of a mile-long hilltop, which was more than a mile away, begged for a closer look. Down in the sage and heading uphill toward some young aspens were the two bucks mentioned earlier. Both had swayed backs and potbellies, and their antlers were pretty nice.

We scouted the next few days. We saw some deer and elk, and one morning, when Becca stayed back, I even saw a female mountain lion with her two young ones slinking through the sage. I've hunted out West for 20-

some years, and these were the first lions I'd ever seen.

We didn't find any better bucks than the tall 3x4 and wide 2x2, until it was nearly dark the night before the opener. I was glassing a completely different area when I spotted what appeared to be a monster buck's antlers sticking above the sage. In the waning light, I would've bet a hundred bucks I was looking at big velvet deer antlers. I knew where I was hunting opening morning.

THE OPENER

When daylight spilled onto the sage flat where my spotting scope had been fixed the evening prior, I hoped to see a world-class velvet buck slipping back to bed. Instead, I saw a funky-shaped sage bush, which I had mistaken for antlers the previous evening. Bummed, I didn't see any deer, and opening morning was over. Well, not quite. On my way out, I chased up two coyotes, which ran in separate directions.



↑ The author arrowed this coyote from long range, which boosted his confidence for the deer hunt.

One coyote stopped, and I ranged it at 120 yards. Having practiced at 140 yards, I nocked an arrow and dialed my UV Slider sight to 120 yards. The coyote stared as I drew my bow, settled my pin, and pushed and pulled until the shot broke. The arrow's arc seemed too high, but it lobbed right in through the coyote's ribs.

He ran erratically through the sage, and a huge blood spot on his side confirmed a great hit. After running in a couple of circles, it went down. Finding my kill took me a while because the sage was tall. Seeing the fruits of my summer practice was awesome. Of course, I'd never take an initial shot at a big game animal at that distance, but I practice out to such long distances just in case I need to finish a wounded animal.

STALKING BUCKS

Over seven days, I stalked the big 2x2 and 3x4 three times, and I stalked another bachelor group led by a solid 155-inch buck in a different area one morning. All were bedded beneath shade trees. I got close enough to shoot on all four stalks, but the wind shifted 180 degrees while waiting for a shot in each scenario.

The neatest part of stalking the 2x2 and 3x4, particularly, is that they taught me a ton about mature mule deer bucks. Many hunters misconceive that once a mature buck blows out after smelling them that the hunt for that individual buck is over. But, even though these bucks caught my wind, I always turned them up on the same mile-long mountain in my Maven spotter.

I suspect it was for two reasons. First, that mountaintop had pockets of dark timber and young aspens — plenty of shade-tree bedding options for different winds. Second, bedding on that hill worked for the bucks. Three times they smelled me and exited alive.

DAY NO. 8

On the morning of September 9, more than a mile away, I glassed the bucks silhouetted atop the mile-long mountain. Once the temps began rising, they went over the hill to bed on the west slope rather than the east slope, as they had been. That seemed odd because the west slope gets full sun exposure during the hottest part of the day, and it has very few shade trees. I couldn't see where they bedded, but I identified a landmark where they had dipped over the hill.

I drove to the mountain's base and began the arduous climb. About a mile and a half later, I



↑ The muley hunt occurred in rocky terrain, which was challenging to traverse and unforgiving for stalking.

was where the bucks had dipped over the hill. Carefully, I tiptoed to the edge of some sheer cliffs and worked south, glassing every little nook and cranny, but didn't find the bucks. There were a few juniper shade trees, but I couldn't distinguish any ears or antler tips. I didn't know it then, but I was very close to the bucks at that point. Eventually, I found some fresh mature buck tracks (obviously from the bucks I was stalking), but once they left the loose soil and entered the rocky sheep-like cliffs, I lost them. Eventually, I assumed the muley bucks had somehow moved on without me knowing it, and I hiked down to the truck.



↑ Shade trees are the name of the game when hunting bucks in the sweltering sage hills in early September. Though there wasn't a buck under this tree, a big bed confirmed that a buck had recently bedded beneath it.

After getting some water, I drove around the mountain and glassed the west slope from the highway. If the bucks were up where I had just been searching, they'd be under a shade tree, of which there were only a handful of suitable options. Soon, I spotted the tall 3x4 beneath a juniper. I had glassed that tree from the top less than 2 hours earlier, but the steep decline had not provided the view needed to see the bedded buck. With the temperatures now sweltering, I determined to make a 2-mile hike back up and across the mountain, slip in, and kill this buck. I marked the juniper on HuntStand, which helped substantially once I was stalking.

I drove around to the south base of the mile-long mountain, shot a couple of practice arrows, then started climbing the rugged sheep-like country. On top, it's like a mile-long flat football field, so I covered lots of ground fast and bumped into a big pronghorn buck. Once within 400 yards of the juniper, I kept tabs on my HuntStand marker, ensuring to stay on track as I entered the cliffy country where the buck was bedded. The closer I got, the harder it became to pick my way through the steep, rocky terrain. Once I knew the buck was 100 yards away, I began moving loose rocks out of the way so I wouldn't bump them and cause a slide. It was the most finicky stalk I've ever attempted. Inadvertently kicking even one small rock would immediately blow the stalk.

Finally, I saw antler tips underneath the juniper. I was 60 yards away, but I knew I had time until the buck would stand, so I continued stalking, again moving loose



Protect the Velvet

Velvet, love it or hate it, is a reality when you bowhunt deer at the beginning of September. If you do nothing, velvet will attract bugs and rot, and when it dries, it will split and peel. Anticipating that I'd kill a velvet buck, I brought a bottle of VelvaLok from Velvet Antler Technologies. It's a preservative in a convenient spray bottle that repels bugs and preserves velvet in 72 hours. A spray bottle has enough contents to preserve 180 inches of antlers. Liberally douse the antlers and let them dry in the sun.

Now, I'll admit that I had a couple of oversights while retrieving the buck that caused the velvet to split and peel in some spots before treating the antlers with VelvaLok. First, dragging the buck by the antlers was a mistake. Failing to avoid making contact with the antlers on the sage was my second mistake. Still, VelvaLok kept the bugs away and prevented further damage to the velvet. If you go on an early bowhunt, I suggest packing a bottle of VelvaLok and avoiding my mistakes.

rocks aside and moving inches at a time. At 43 yards, trying to get closer seemed foolish, especially because I knew the entire time that the big 2x2 was tucked in somewhere nearby. With an arrow nocked, I just needed the 3x4 to stand.

The west wind held, and while watching the 3x4's antler tips, the giant 2x2 suddenly walked out broadside between the 3x4 and me — he had been bedded on the other side of the juniper. A rock was covering his vitals, but he continued browsing from right to left and was soon in the wide open, 33 yards away and clueless to my existence. When he lowered and turned his head downhill, I drew my Mathews Lift. I settled the pin, and after 8 long, hot days of hunting, this was the opportunity I'd endured the long miles and punishing heat for.

Upon the arrow's arrival, the buck dropped and turned away, causing it to hit above the spine. Disgusted, I watched him run 700 yards downhill to within 100 yards of the highway. Agitated, he kicked up dust and spun in circles. I saw a big blood spot atop his back, clearly too high to have gotten the lungs or artery; I was sick. With darkness less than 2 hours away, I had to get down there and shoot him again, otherwise he'd likely move by morning and be impossible to relocate.

The Lord guided my stalk to within 79 yards of the buck. He was bedded and facing me with his head turned left; I waited to see if he'd stand. Afraid of the darkness coming, I dialed my sight to 79 yards and held at the base of his neck, which was a small target. I shot, and the buck sprang up and ran, stopping 114 yards away. I later learned that my arrow had just grazed his chest a few inches right of where I'd aimed.

I didn't skip a beat. I wouldn't shoot that far at an unwounded deer, elk or pronghorn, but to finish what I started, I dialed my sight to 114 yards and drew back on the broadside buck. My arrow connected in front of the buck's shoulder in the neck. He ran toward me and bedded 40 yards away. An arrow through his ribs ended the unfortunate escapade with only minutes of legal shooting light remaining.

As I approached the buck, great sadness consumed me. I knelt in silence and shed a few tears before the reality that wild critters are string-jumpers brought me back to the "mission accomplished" mindset. No, it wasn't a one-arrow kill, but the hunt was still a gift from God, and I was relieved that I was fortunate enough to finish the giant 2x2, my first velvet buck.

After marking the downed buck's location on HuntStand, I walked the highway shoulder about 1.5 miles to the truck in the dark. The unpolluted sky with the mountain silhouettes was breathtaking. When I finally reached the truck and drove back to the buck, I had the most difficult 100-yard drag ever. His velvet antlers were extremely jagged and poky at the bases, and it hurt like heck to pull him by the antlers. Plus, the field-dressed animal was huge.

First, I had to drag him down and back up a steep dry creekbed. Then, I had to drag him through thick sage and cacti. Finally, I had to maneuver him underneath tightly strung barbed wire, including his wide frame. But that wasn't it. I had to lift the enormous-bodied buck into the pickup bed.

It was after 11 p.m. when I finally reached the camper, where my smiling wife said, "That thing looks like an elk!" We stood there and admired the wide, velvet-clad antlers, which stuck above the truck bed.



↑ After eight days under the sweltering Colorado heat, the author connected with this giant 2x2 buck on BLM ground. The buck was estimated to be 6.5 years old based on tooth examination by a trained acquaintance.

REFLECTION

Looking back on the hunt, I'm glad I didn't punch my tag in the aspen patch on day two (the hunt described in the opening paragraphs). I've hunted mule deer a lot on the prairies, but this was my first time hunting them in big, steep country. I learned a ton in eight days of hunting, and got to experience a part of Colorado I'd never visited before. Lord willing, someday, I'll return to the mile-long hill and hunt another mature mule deer buck. BW

TO EARN A BULL

The author and his two brothers head deep into the mountains of New Mexico for a lengthy DIY elk hunt, enduring tough terrain, sporadic action and finally an opportunity with the bull of a lifetime.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KYLE S. LIPKE



In 2024, I was fortunate to draw an archery elk tag in New Mexico's famed Valle Vidal. Nestled in the southern tip of the Sangre de Cristo's, this public land paradise is 101,794 acres of sheer beauty. Ranging from ponderosa forest to subalpine ecosystem, this region's numerous streams host a healthy population of native cutthroats, and its vast meadows provide optimal calving areas for cow elk in springtime. The same crisp September temperatures that fade chlorophyl from aspen leaves, turning them gold, also kick the elk rut into gear, throwing bulls into a mating frenzy.



This hunt is given once in a lifetime, and it's not easy. Walk-in-only areas mean lots of boot miles at high elevation. Because of this, I wanted to do everything in my power to make the most of this bowhunt.

Throughout the summer, I walked, hiked and ran hundreds of miles, preparing my legs and lungs for the task of chasing bulls above 9,000 feet. I practiced shooting dozens of arrows each week and made sure I was lacing bull's-eyes with broadhead-tipped arrows. From bow to backpack to clothing and everything in between, I purchased tip-top gear vital for high-country elk hunting. Extra time was spent staring at OnX, pinning prospective hotspots. Additionally, I made two scouting trips to get firsthand knowledge of these areas. By the last week of August, I felt my efforts and preparation had placed me in a good position to earn a bull on this DIY hunt.



↑ The author's brothers, Ian and Ben, played a big role in this successful elk bowhunt.



→ It took seven days of pounding the high country before the author earned a shot opportunity.

DREAM ON

On September 1, prior to the glow of first light, bulls were sounding off before my brothers, Ben and Ian, and I finished cinching down pack straps at the truck. Working to get above the bulls, we began chasing them down a ponderosa laden spine ridge. The morning was warm, but as the blaze orange sun crested the horizon, we could hear no less than four bulls sounding off.

We made multiple setups and had an old, growly bull come within 100 yards, but ultimately, we couldn't convince the bull to commit. The elk numbers were thick, but the rut was nowhere near its peak. Late in the morning, after the calling waned, we slipped in on a herd that had bedded in the shade of a north-facing bowl. There were a handful of cows, calves, spikes and one smallish bull, his antlers still caked in velvet. Being just a few hours into day one, I chose to pass.

The opening morning was a false assurance of how the hunt would go. The next few days held little calling action and few elk sightings. Despite hiking 10-12 miles a day, I had yet to have an opportunity on a mature bull. It wasn't until after a rainstorm on day five that elk activity started to pick up. The cool weather got the bulls moving, and we saw four different six-point bulls that day. Faulty winds and lack of light cancelled opportunities, but the uptick in action was encouraging.

We saw zero elk on day six and the morning of the seventh, but it wasn't for lack of getting into elk. We had been continuously intermingled in a symphony of bugles; we just couldn't get in the right spot at the right time.

After a much needed nap and creekside bath, we headed 2 miles into a basin where we heard multiple bulls calling that morning. The plan was to sit at the edge of the drainage until we heard or spotted a bull, then make a move. We sat beneath the boughs of multiple Douglas

fir, sheltering from the drizzling rain. As the spattering ceased, I decided we needed to move farther in as we hadn't seen or heard anything. The three of us cut several hundred yards up the meadow where we gained a vantage point.

As we crested the grassy knob, Ian spotted an elk. A mile away, a single bull graced another meadow's center.



Through 12X optics, we could see the bull rearing his head back, the resulting scream reaching our ears seconds later. Not wanting any opportunity to be barred by a lack of effort, we immediately headed for the bull. We weren't sure it was possible to get to the bull's location before we ran out of light, but this was my dream bowhunt. I was going to give it everything I had.

NO TIME TO WASTE

We hustled across the pristine meadow to the treeline, striving to buy extra minutes. Connecting with a pack trail, we dropped a couple hundred feet into a creek drainage. Muddy imprints at the water's edge affirmed the presence of elk.

Descending into the hole increased our concerns about reaching the bull. Then another announcement of his location renewed our spirits. Despite dissipating light, there was a new sense of optimism that we could get to the bull in time. Our pace quickened as we climbed in elevation. Working our way through an aspen grove, we noted a cow and calf feeding 150 yards away. Not wanting to bump them, we paused to assess the situation. The bull screamed. He was merely a few hundred yards above us.

Thinking the bull was heading down to the cows, we left Ian with our packs and made haste to intercept the bull. Ben and I worked cautiously from one spruce tree to the next, freezing in position each time the cow or calf raised their head. Once we exited the edge of the meadow and entered the timber, the cows were below us. We could move without fear of getting caught. At that point, we had not called a single time. Our goal



↑ When there are loads of fresh elk tracks, you know that the animals can't be far away.



↑ High-quality optics helped spot elk in open meadows and cluttered timber.

was to creep in as tight as possible without the bull knowing before making a peep.

As we neared the ridgetop, the bull bugled and so did another. We ran toward the top of the ridge, stopping just below the crest to catch our breath. Another report rang out from the bull. The gap between us was closing. Ben and I scrambled for a place to set up. I started to tuck into a spruce tree when Ben noted I would have more shooting lanes farther up. He was right.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

We dashed 40 yards farther where it was more open for a shot. Standing in front of an aged aspen, I knocked an arrow. Ben knelt behind a stocky spruce tree and let out a handful of salacious cow calls. No more than 30 seconds later, Ben whispered,

High Country Elk Gear

During my New Mexico elk hunt I shot a Mathews Lift 33 with a Spot Hogg Wiseguy release. Accessories included a Hamskea Everest drop-away rest, Spot Hogg Fast Eddie XL sight, Mathews Bridge-Lock stabilizer/sidebar, and a TightSpot 5 arrow quiver. I shot Easton 6.5mm Match Grade arrows with Bohning Blazer vanes and G5 Stryker broadheads. My optics included a Vortex Viper 12x50 binocular and Vortex 1800 Ranger rangefinder, both protected by a Marsupial Gear chest pack. I wore KUIU clothing and Altra Lone Peak trail shoes. We used Rocky Mountain Hunting Calls, "Elk Slayer RTS" and "Wapiti Wacker" bugle tube as well as Primos Cowgirl, Hyper Lip single and double, and Sonic Dome diaphragm calls. My Alps OutdoorZ Elite 3800 pack carried both gear and meat. Mapping was provided by OnX.



↑ For the author, notching his New Mexico elk tag on this backcountry bowhunt was a dream come true.

"I see him! Get ready." A moment later I caught the movement of the bull's legs trotting between tree trunks. I whipped my rangefinder from its pouch as the bull ambled into an opening. The display read seven zero.

The bull continued cruising to our right, moving slightly closer. When the bull hit another shooting lane, I laser-ranged him again and prepared for a shot. The stud was as far as I wanted to shoot, but being unsure of the bulls' next move, I decided it was now or never.

I turned the yardage dial on my bowsight as the bull entered what may have been my last shooting lane. Ben eeked out a cow mew from his diaphragm call and the bull, muddied chest damp from a recent wallow session, stopped broadside and let out a throaty bellow. I was already at full draw and settling my pin before the bull's vocal cords stopped oscillating. As I was about to release the arrow, I inadvertently let the draw down on my bow. Never in my 19 years of bowhunting have I done that before. The heat of the moment had me coming unglued.

Thinking I had choked on a shot of a lifetime, I was surprised the bull remained standing broadside. Instantly, I yanked my bow back to full draw. Battling an adrenaline dump, I struggled to hold my bow steady as I focused on the center of the ribcage and pressed the release trigger. The bull turned and exploded through the timber. The knock of antler smacking wood and limbs crashing rang out through the forest. Then all was silent. Neither of us saw the arrow connect, but Ben was sure he heard the arrow impact. It happened so fast; I wasn't sure what to think.

Light was fading fast, so we waited only 10 minutes before going to look for the arrow. We scoured the area beyond where the bull was standing, but couldn't find my arrow in the limited light. There was no sign of blood either. After a few minutes of deliberation, we both agreed on backing out and returning at sunrise.

We met up with Ian and began the 3-mile trek to the truck via headlamps. We relayed the details about the shot, the bull's reaction, how I felt, and the lack of sign. There were a lot of questions with few answers. All we could do was return in the morning for further evaluation.





↑ Procuring pure, free-ranging protein is one of many rewards bowhunting has to offer.

THE SEARCH

Surprisingly, I slept well that night. I had a sense of peace about the situation, and no matter what happened, I was going to make the best of it. 4:30 a.m. came quickly and after a cup of coffee, we drove to our spot, slung on our packs and headed for the high country. Frosted sage glistened under the flash of our lights as we exhaled visible clouds of carbon dioxide. The gradual uphill climb circulated our blood enough to keep our extremities from going numb.

Just before sunrise, we arrived at the tree where I shot, with plenty of light to assess for droplets of blood and my arrow. Again, we looked at where the bull was standing and the surrounding area, but could find nothing. No arrow. No blood. No tracks.

As we spread out from the location of the shot, my heart sank. Even though we had just started searching, the fact we had no sign at all had me doubting the outcome of the day.

The three of us spread out 30 to 40 yards apart, covering ground in the

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↑ Ben — a beast! — cracked his carbon-fiber pack frame when carrying this heavy load.

direction the big bull was seen running through the timber. We covered about 100 yards of ground. Still no sign. I continued searching along a small island of aspens when I heard Ben and Ian talking in a low tone of voice. "Kyle, come here."

As I walked over to see what they had found, Ben came running down the hill to me with his arms pumping into the air. "He's dead right here!" I couldn't believe it. Forty yards up the hill, dark, heavy beams laid sideways on the ground.



The emotion of success combined with exhaustion and thanksgiving were overwhelming. We sprinted to the bull, ecstatic. I ran my fingertips over the bull's smooth antler tips, grateful and appreciative of such a majestic animal and the opportunity to bowhunt him in such a wild, pure expanse. The bull was old, and rut weary. His ivories, smooth and bronze, were worn thin. He was everything I hoped for on this hunt and then some.

My arrow had entered the middle of the chest, clearing through both lungs, not quite exiting the opposite side, which answered the mystery of the missing arrow. The last crack of branches breaking the previous evening marked the final moment of the bull's life.

We thanked God — for the bull . . . for the hunt . . . for freedom to be able to chase elk in mountains of grandeur. Then we began the process of deboning. The ordeal became an all-day event with two grueling trips, all three of our packs stuffed to the gills.

We laughed. We reminisced. We strained and we cracked a pack frame. By the time our last load hit the tailgate at 11:30 p.m. we were sapped.

I wouldn't have had it any other way, though. All the planning, training and preparation paid off. Over the course of 8 days, we logged approximately 103 miles. We hunted at elevations up to 10,800 ft, ascending and descending several thousand feet most days. Sleep was deferred for hikes in and out of the dark. We pushed hard, even when the hunting was slow. And we endured a pack out that was deemed by a guide with horses as, "Gangster." On this bowhunt, success was earned. BW



↓ Killing this 6x6 bull in New Mexico's Valle Vidal with the help of his brothers was everything the author hoped for and more.

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DEVILS TOWER WHITETAILS

A large deer population, high success rates, and the region's Old West history makes this one of the author's favorite bowhunting road trips.

BY BOB ROBB

It was hot — real hot. The little thermometer attached to my daypack was approaching triple digits, and my cameraman, David Gilane, and I were stripped down to T-shirts as we sat in a ground blind baked by the Labor Day sun. And yet, whitetails started trickling out of the woods a good 3 hours before sundown, making their way to a nearby alfalfa field. An hour later a trio of bachelor bucks could be seen back in the trees, heading our way. I nocked an arrow, they came out of trees directly in front of us at 60 yards, hit the edge of the field, and turned left — 41 yards.

"I'm on him," David said, and a moment later I sent the arrow on its way. Just like that, we had a velvet 5x5 down. It was day one of a 5-day hunt, and the fifth straight year in which I'd taken an early season archery whitetail buck hunting this same area.

The majestic Devils Tower National Monument was visible in the distance. That, and the history of the Old West that permeates the region (the "Wild Bunch" once terrorized the area, for example), as well as the abundance of whitetails — these are just three reasons I love this place.

Photo: iStock / Joeche-16

As someone who, for decades, has traveled extensively throughout the country bowhunting whitetails, I've come to understand that different regions offer different experiences. One travels to the big buck states in the Midwest, for example, looking for a dream buck with eye-popping antlers and a massive body. Texas hunters often sit in blinds or on elevated platforms near feeders. Big woods hunting in the Northeast is far different from the swamps of the bayou country. You get the picture. In most of these scenarios, one understands that success during a week's hunt is never guaranteed; indeed, it can be relatively low.



↑ Ground blinds tucked into oak motts near water sources are common stand locations for early season whitetail hunts in this region.



When I want to hunt an area where I am going to see a lot of deer every stand shift, success rates are extremely high, and the hunting is more fun than drudgery, there's one region I've gone back to on a regular basis — the extreme northeast corner of Wyoming. Historically, whitetail numbers here are so high you have to use extreme caution when driving after dark to avoid deer/vehicle collisions. The Devils Tower National Monument, near the towns of Huelett and Sundance — rising 1,267 feet above the Belle Fourche River and standing 867 feet from summit to base — is the de facto hub. It was the first-ever United States National Monument, established by President Theodore Roosevelt back in 1906.

DECADES OF HUNTING THE REGION

I made my first hunt in this area — encompassing Wyoming deer game management units 1-6 — over 4 decades ago. In recent years it has been a near-annual trip, for the reasons described earlier. I like to hunt the early season, which opens September 1. The days are long, the weather mild (with the exception of the occasional thunderstorm and rain), and bucks are still running in small bachelor groups that can be patterned.

Deer populations remain high despite a 2021 die-off due primarily to epizootic hemorrhagic disease, or EHD. As the numbers continue to bounce back, game managers have recommended more generous hunting seasons and harvest quotas to help prevent rapid population growth. It has not been an uncommon occurrence for me to see dozens of deer every stand shift, with multiple bucks in the mix.

"We've had a series of pretty mild winters and no disease since the die-off," said Ralph Dampman of Trophy Ridge Outfitters (trophyridgeoutfitters.com), with whom I've successfully hunted this area many times. "They've been coming back strong."

PRIVATE VS PUBLIC LAND

The one downside, if it can be called such, for the traveling hunter is the fact that the vast majority of whitetail deer occupy private lands. The notable exception is the Black Hills where, as whitetail numbers continue to increase following the 2021 die-off, more and more are moving onto public tracts near private land agriculture holds. That being said, success rates for public land hunters are nothing like those for those hunting the private ground. This means your best chances for success will be employing the services of a reputable outfitter — and there are many to choose from. In addition to Trophy Ridge, you can find a list of other area outfitters by visiting the website of the Wyoming Outfitters and Guides Association (wyoga.org), and searching the Casper and Sheridan regions under their "Find Your Wyoming Outfitter" tab.

For those who wish to explore public land options, there are a handful of public land hunting



↑ The author has used mechanical broadheads on these whitetail hunts for many years. He ran this 100-grain SEVR through the ribs of a good buck.

areas controlled by the Wyoming Game & Fish Department in Region A, which encompasses game management units 1-6, with hunting open for both big and small game. Information on all things hunting and fishing in Wyoming can be found at wgfd.wyo.gov.

How about trophy quality? While whitetail numbers here are high, you cannot expect to take a buck with antlers the size of those you'd find in well-known big buck states like those in the Midwest. Here, a reasonable expectation would be a mature 4x4 or 5x5 buck green-scoring in the 110-130 Pope and Young point class, with the occasional larger buck taken. Body sizes are also smaller, with the average mature buck weighing perhaps 150 pounds on the hoof.

TACTICS AND GEAR

Bowhunting tactics are pretty straightforward. Guides will have pre-scouted ground blinds and/or treestands set up on or near water or agriculture where you'll wait in ambush. During early season, afternoon shifts are definitely more productive than morning shifts, though I have had success in the morning setting up in a travel corridor far off ag fields waiting for whitetails returning to bedding thickets.

Crossbows are legal for archery hunting in Wyoming, and more and more traveling bowhunters are using them in this area. "We really like the crossbow guys," Dampman told me. "They can use shooting sticks in the ground blind, which helps them make an accurate shot, even if the distance is a little longer than they'd be comfortable with when using a compound bow." This can be a big benefit when hunting in and around the region's huge agricultural fields.

Other than that, it's business as usual when selecting bowhunting-related gear. I'm a big fan of mechanical broadheads with a wide cutting diameter for whitetail hunting, and never travel without a 10X binocular and laser rangefinder. For hot weather early season hunting, I bring a small rechargeable fan to help keep me cool during those long afternoon sits.

LICENSES AND TAGS

All Wyoming big game tags are issued via the draw, and it is complicated. The application process for deer tags opens in early January, with the deadline in 2025 being May 31. Nonresident applicants must submit a $15 nonrefundable application fee. There is a regular and a special draw for nonresident elk, deer and pronghorn in Wyoming, with the general deer tag costing $374, while the nonresident special deer tag costs an eye-popping $1,200.

↑ Treestands set in oak motts are great places to intercept whitetail bucks as they move to and from bedding thickets, heading for water and food early and late in the day.





↑ The author took this dandy 5x5 velvet buck during a 2022 early September hunt when daytime temperatures soared to near 100 degrees.

The licenses are exactly the same. Wyoming has used this strategy to improve the odds in the special draw, working under the presumption that fewer applicants are willing to pay a higher price, thus increasing odds. Under this program, 60 percent of the nonresident licenses for each hunt are given to the regular draw, with 40 percent given to the special draw. Personally, I refuse to play this game, and always apply for the lower-priced license. I have never not drawn a tag for whitetail hunting in the Devils Tower area.

In addition to the deer tag, archers need an annual conservation stamp ($12.50) and archery license ($72 adult, $12 youth), as well as proof of completion of a hunter education course if born after Jan. 1, 1966. Your outfitter can assist you in the application process.

A GREAT ROAD TRIP

The area is filled with history. Traveling hunters often fly into the Rapid City, South Dakota, regional airport, which is just a 2-hour drive from Devil's Tower. Along the way you can visit Mount Rushmore, the historic Old West town of Deadwood (where Wild Bill Hickok was killed), and the South Dakota portion of the Custer National Forest, where they hold an annual Buffalo roundup — usually in late September — that attracts thousands of visitors. The area makes a great road trip for the entire family.

I'm already planning my 2026 trip. BW

Make It a Combo

One way to extend your visit to this region is by making it a combination hunt. The area is home to solid numbers of both pronghorn and Merriam's turkeys. Pronghorn populations in the Casper region have fluctuated in recent years. According to the Wyoming Game Department, some herds around Casper have remained at or near population objectives, while herds to the northeast from Douglas to Lusk to Sundance are still below objective. The good news is that following better fawn production and survival in 2024, most herds have begun to recover. Despite this, hunters should experience average to high pronghorn harvest success as buck ratios remain strong, and license issuance is structured in an attempt to ensure high success for hunters. Tags are issued via the draw. Most archery hunting is done from a ground blind adjacent to a water source.

Merriam's turkey hunting can be excellent, with the Black Hills being Wyoming's best public land turkey hunting area — though success odds are always higher on private lands. The fall season runs September 1-December 31, and the $74 nonresident tag can be purchased over-the-counter. It's super fun. In 2023 I took my first-ever bearded Merriam's hen after punching my deer tag with Trophy Ridge Outfitters. It was awesome!

There are also elk and mule deer in the region. Elk hunting in limited-quota areas is good, and mule deer hunting very dependent on the exact locale. Interested hunters should discuss these possibilities with outfitters before committing.

SUBMIT YOUR VOTES NOW ONLINE BY NOVEMBER 1, 2025

Bowhunting WORLD



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Official Ballot

	BRAND	MODEL
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TRADITIONAL BOW		
CROSSBOW		
BOW CASE		
HUNTING RELEASE AID		
TARGET RELEASE AID		
ARROW REST		
ARROW		
FEATHER FLETCHING		
VANES		
QUIVER		
LIGHTED NOCK		
FIXED-BLADE BROADHEAD		
MECHANICAL BROADHEAD		
BOWSTRING		
PEEP SIGHT		
FIXED BOWSIGHT		
MOVEABLE BOWSIGHT		
STABILIZER		
BOW SILENCER		
CAMO PATTERN		
CLOTHING MANUFACTURER		
BOOTS		
SAFETY HARNESS		
PACK		
BINO & SPOTTER		
RANGEFINDER		

	BRAND	MODEL
GPS UNIT		
HUNTING APP		
TRAIL CAMERA		
CELLULAR TRAIL CAMERA		
HANG-ON TREESTAND		
CLIMBING TREESTAND		
LADDER/TRIPOD		
CLIMBING STICKS		
SADDLE		
GROUND BLIND		
DEER CALL		
ELK CALL		
TURKEY CALL		
WILD TURKEY DECOY		
DEER DECOY		
SCENT/LURE		
ODOR ELIMINATOR		
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GUIDE'S SECRETS: PACKING OUT GAME MEAT

The author has guided big game hunters around the world, and along the way she's learned the best ways to pack out animals.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BRE LEWIS

"Don't shoot something where you can't get a horse," I've heard many times out West from outfitters and other guides. True, a horse can make packing a load much easier, especially a bull elk, and definitely a moose. However, hunting with a horse isn't always practical for the average hunter. For those of us afoot, technique and practice can help maximize the efficiency of a pack out.



My experience packing comes a little from being an avid hunter myself, but more from countless pack outs during my 9 to 5 — for the last 7 years, I've guided big game hunters full time, often traveling through the hemispheres to hunt fall ruts. My adventures in the hunting industry have led me to New Zealand, British Colombia, Tanzania, Wyoming and Colorado. Traveling to new ecosystems and diving into hunting new species in each location has further enhanced my appreciation of the animals, but also of universal hunting practices and techniques.



While I've mainly used horses and mules to pack game out while guiding in wilderness areas in North America, in New Zealand we typically foot hunt. The lack of tags and government-mandated game seasons in New Zealand has given me bountiful opportunities to employ, practice and tweak my pack-out techniques. To give you an idea, in New Zealand, my clients average hunting four animals a week for a 6-month season! With no predators, culling to manage populations is necessary, and we recover these carcasses as well to donate the meat. With these numbers of carcasses to deal with and carry out, proper technique is imperative for efficiency and longevity.

Growing up in Florida, mountain hunting and longer totes were foreign to me. However, the opportunity to learn a myriad of measures from different people as an adult, instead of simply doing something one way "because that's how I do it," has given me a more diversified understanding. Also, at 5-feet 4-inches and 120 pounds, what I lack in size I have to make up for in skill.

The following article entails some pack out techniques that I find most efficient and comfortable for a multitude of different situations that may be encountered. Armed with this quiver, you will have the best technique for each situation.

WHOLE ANIMAL BACKPACK

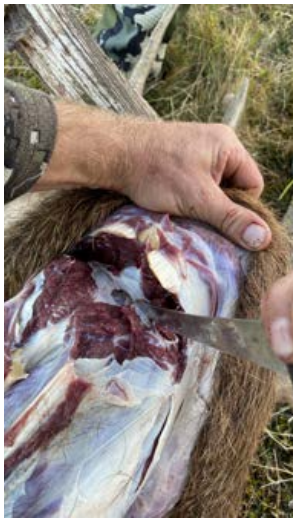
Packing out an entire gutted animal keeps the meat clean and together, ideal for aging. While this technique is impractical on larger species such as elk or moose, it's manageable for smaller deer species. However, weight isn't the only challenge; the awkwardness of an unbalanced load can make even a short walk difficult. Constructing a quick backpack out of a whole animal secures positioning and provides control of an otherwise unwieldy load. Important tip: Make sure to secure a bright color (think blaze orange) to any animal part when packing out to save any potential incident with another hunter.

This improvised backpack, while not as comfortable as a commercial one, effectively distributes weight and, most importantly, allows you to get the job done. Animals can be transported whole or gutted. Field dressing reduces overall weight and allows faster cooling of the meat, ensuring better quality and simplifying later processing. Removing the head further lightens the load if toting a female animal.

To detach the head, bend the head forward towards the animal's chest and work the tip of your knife down into the joint between the skull and spine located at the back of the ears. When the joint is successfully pierced by the knife, fluid will be released and a dark cavity will be visible. Extend from this point along both sides of the joint, cutting through the connective tissue slightly above this hole and continuing back to the same level around the side and front of the neck. After the tissue around the joint is severed, twist the head to further open the joint and slice through the remaining attachments inside.

For trophies, the head (and cape if desired) can be carried separately or left attached, although the unsupported, weighted head on a limp neck may compromise balance through rough terrain.

To create the pack,



↑ Free the first joint between the head and first vertebrae.

bend the front knee and sever the lower break in the joint by cutting at the bottom of where the bend occurs. Because this joint is composed of many flat and uneven carpal bones, freeing the lower connection will achieve a smoother and more straightforward break. Severing the connections around the front and sides of the joint will allow a twist to free the break without compromising the strong suspensory ligament at the back of the joint. Once the joint is free, run the knife parallel to the bone for about 3 inches towards the hoof to release the ligament (photo below).



↑ Run your knife between the ligament and flat cannon bone for a few inches to allow your straps to be secured for the backpack.

Once both front legs are prepared, cut slits in the skin above the hock joint between the Achilles tendon and the leg on each hindquarter. These slits should be large enough to pass a front hoof through. Thread each front leg through its corresponding hind leg slit until the cut joint (right). At the break, turn the lower portion of the leg perpendicular to form a "T" against the slit, completing the pack.

Even though it is slightly heavier, retaining the lower hind legs serves as stabilizing levers for the load. On larger bodied deer, such as red deer, I find that pulling the front legs through from the inside out is more comfortable on my narrower shoulders. Experiment to find what works best for you and your load.

Hog legs are too short for this technique, but cord can be used to make a similar pack by fastening the legs together with a tight loop above the dewclaws on front and back



↑ Secure the backpack by placing the front legs through the slits in the hind legs and turning the bone to cross at the cut joint to prevent them sliding back through.

legs. Cord looped around the bottom jaw can help control the heavy head, balancing the load.

BACK LEGS OR SHOULDERS TECHNIQUE

When only part of the animal is desirable for consumption, or for when additional people are available to tote, typically the usable meat is portioned to fit in or on a pack. This technique, however, allows for efficient transport of quarters without a pack or when packs are full.

Quarter the legs from the animal's underside as usual, but keep the skin on and connected between opposite legs (shoulders together, hind legs together). Drape a leg over

My Favorite Hunting Knives

While I always carry spare knives in case of emergency, I have a "one knife for everything" outlook when it comes to handling big game in the field. For this reason, I use a boning knife for caping, skinning, gutting, quartering and deboning.

My 6-inch blade peels off at least double its length with each stroke skinning, and requires only one pass to reach the bone when deboning a hindquarter, maximizing the efficiency of my work. The length also allows me to delegate different tasks to different portions of my blade, such as only cutting joints, tough connective tissue, and against bone with the lower portion of the blade up against the handle, keeping my tip sharp to cut through skin. Most importantly, I can reach an animal's heart from behind their front leg with this knife and finish them humanely without damaging a cape for a mount.

I always keep a steel in the sheath with my boning knife to keep the edge on my blade as I work. I prefer Victorinox's boning knives because the steel is somewhat soft, making it easy to stand the edge back up in the field and quick to sharpen at home. No wonder butchers use these knives because they work well for the quantity of animals and efficiency.

A long blade is a lot to handle, but practice for technique pays dividends in the long run with the improved efficiency. That being said, I keep a Havalon Piranta-Edge skinning knife as my spare, so I know I always have something sharp and to use for head skinning where the 6-inch blade of my boning knife can get in the way for delicate work. Although Havalon is slightly more expensive than some of the other replaceable razor blade knives on the market, the quality of the blades seem to be much better, not breaking as easily to unintended lateral pressure.

Victorinox 6-inch boning knives, curved or straight, are readily available online or in most kitchen or home stores around the world. I find the straight blade to be simpler for gutting animals, though a curved blade is slightly smoother when boning out meat. Victorinox blades are utilitarian and are therefore priced as a tool, not as artwork, keeping costs very reasonable. On Amazon, they are retailing for $25-$35. Most outdoor shops carry Havalon knives and blades, and although they are a slightly greater initial investment ($56), they shouldn't break the bank either.



↑ Removing the skin can make it easier to see the bulge where the joint below the hock breaks the easiest.

each shoulder, fur side down. For smaller animals, the lower legs serve as handles for balance, though for large ones, the hock joint can be broken to remove the lower portion of the leg to reduce weight. When the joint that allows the movement in the hock joint is severed, the integrity of Achilles tendon, prized for hanging meat, is lost. However, by freeing the lower joint, this vital tendon is maintained and the lower leg is easily removed.

Cut straight across and around at the slight bump below the area on the hind leg where the bend occurs. Finding the correct joint is easier once the hair is removed and a visible bulb can be seen (photo left). If in doubt, work up from the straight and flat cannon bone of the lower leg until the first slight bulge. Connective tissue all around this flat joint holds it together, but connections are the thickest on the sides. Once these are severed, pushing the joint towards the inside and back will open it with minimal effort.

It is easiest to break this joint when the hindquarter is still attached, holding the upper portion of the leg in place. Cut slits above the hock for handholds if the lower leg is removed. A wider skin portion between legs distributes weight more evenly across your neck and shoulders. When carrying, ensure the skin lies flat to avoid concentrated pressure points.

DEBONING QUARTERS

Skinning and deboning quarters to carry out in a pack is undoubtedly the most comfortable method for any tote. While this approach sacrifices the structural support and protective benefits that bones and skin offer for hanging, transport and aging, it significantly reduces weight and bulk—a crucial advantage in backcountry scenarios.

A technique for deboning quarters without breaking them down into muscle groups or compromising prime cuts can be employed after separating the quarters from the carcass and hide. Learning to debone while maintaining muscle connectivity of the entire quarter may be important when hunting in a state or province where the law requires you to keep meat from each quarter together with proof of sex. Perform this process on the hide's interior or the animal's carcass to maintain meat cleanliness.

For hindquarters, position the quarter inside-up and cut along the seam of the small meat flap between the exposed ball joint bone and stifle. Angle downward beneath this flap, between muscle groups, until reaching bone. Slide the knife gently along the bone to free the meat without dulling the blade. I prefer longer knives with somewhat flexible tips for this, but



↑ The author carried out red stag hindquarters over her shoulders plus the head and cape, while her client carried the remainder of usable meat and their gear in her pack, letting them make only one trip!



↑ Emily (left) and the author deboning meat from a female tahr to carry out in packs.

Perfect Packs

In my opinion, Alaska Guide Creations Kobuk Backpacks are perfect for hunting, backpacking and toting out a heavy load. The carbon rods keep the frame light but strong, and the foam helps the fit and comfort when loaded. Most importantly for me, everything on the frame is adjustable, so no matter your size, this pack will fit you perfectly.

Alaska Guide Creations has a detailed video on its website to show how to properly fit and set up your frame once you've purchased it. The meat shelf is ideal for back-to-back hunting missions because it lets you keep your gear and the inside of the pack clean and accessible, while loading the weighty meat near the frame.

For functionality and comfort, this pack is the complete package. You can buy the Kobuk frame with the 28 liter bag for $639.98 on the website: alaskaguidecreations.com. If you're repetitively carrying heavy loads, this backpack is what you need!

any blade will suffice. After the femur's center is freed, cut the meat and sinew from the top ball joint. Hold the ball joint upright, using gravity to assist in separating meat from the stifle joint and shank.

While the front shoulders may seem like more work, understanding big game animal anatomy will make them simpler. Cut behind the shoulder blade's central protrusion from the topside. Slide the knife flat along the blade once bone is reached. Cut down the protrusion's front and along the blade. At the blade's end, curve underneath and continue freeing meat along the backside. Work from the top down to preserve connections to remaining shoulder meat. As with the hind legs, use gravity to help separate meat from the lower bones. Remember to exercise caution near the joints to maintain muscle connectivity.

FASTENING QUARTERS TO A PACK

When supplies or camping gear leaves limited pack space for harvested meat, whole cuts can be tied to the pack's exterior. For structural integrity, leave bones in when fastening quarters. Without the bones, it's almost as difficult as trying to tie jelly! Additionally, leave the hair on to protect the meat if possible.

Two key considerations when securing a heavy load are centering it to avoid imbalance, and fastening it tightly to prevent shifting. Uncentered loads, especially top-heavy loads, can escalate a situation where the carrier is slightly off balance. Loose loads, too, allow play that can alter weight distribution, unbalancing a packer or causing the load to come undone.

Pack frames with game shelves simplify this process: place quarters on the shelf with legs upward and secure with horizontal straps. The pack portion can then be secured on the outside of the meat.

For other packs, assign flatter cuts to the interior and meatier cuts to the exterior. For instance, rib sections can be tucked between the pack and a hindquarter. Balance is crucial; equally sized quarters can overlap slightly on either side, while uneven cuts should be stacked facing opposite directions. Ideally, limit external loads to one quarter, with remaining meat deboned inside the pack. Excessive weight attached away from the frame compromises balance and maneuverability.

Use the pack's tie-down straps, cinching across the load or in an X-pattern. Additional rope or paracord can enhance security, particularly between horizontal cinches and around the meat's bottom. For packs without straps, create horizontal latches with rope, then cinch these together. If possible, secure the bottom and shanks with vertical bights to minimize movement.

Heads can be attached to the pack's top or middle, with antlers facing downward and backward for safety.

These techniques should help you make the most of your harvests and maximize meat recovery in any scenario. The best way to internalize them is through hands-on experience, so consider trying them out on your next hunting trip. Happy hunting! BW



← When fastening quarters to a pack, center the load to avoid imbalance, and secure it tightly to prevent shifting.



↓ My Alaska Guide Creations Kobuk pack has a meat shelf that allows me to center quarters, backstraps and tenderloins wrapped in the cape between the pack frame and my gear inside the bag, keeping my load balanced and tight.

Timing Is Everything

As imperative as getting your meat home, is keeping it from spoiling. Breaking your meat down further by skinning and deboning it will allow the meat to begin cooling quicker if hunting in hot conditions, far from a cooler or freezer.

Keeping meat cool and dry are the two most important things we can do to mitigate spoilage. Therefore, I spread quarters or boned out meat in the shade when I'm able to cool and dry meat slightly before packing together. Also, avoid using plastic bags that trap heat and moisture, and instead store meat in breathable game bags, pillow cases or cheese cloth.

Consider temperature and timing to get the meat to a cool location when determining which technique to use to pack out your game. The work of a large packout isn't worth it if the meat spoils, so take time and do the extra steps needed to break down and let meat cool before the trip out if needed.

If your meat stays warmer than desired on the pack out, shorten or skip aging meat and use or freeze the meat right away. Freeze meat in small, four-person portion sizes to ensure the meat is quickly frozen through.

BOWSIGHTS

Get dialed in this bow season with these top-shelf sighting solutions for crossbows and compound bows.

BY GORDY KRAHN

Riflemen who are considering the purchase of a new gun and topping it with a quality riflescope, live by the credo: "Buy the best optics you can afford," knowing it makes little sense to drop a pile of Benjamins on a new rifle capable of shooting MOA groups and then equip it with optics that inhibit that accuracy. The same is true of bowsights. Any bow or crossbow setup benefits from a premium bowsight that's both accurate and reliable. And taking a tip from the rifleman, prudent bowhunters buy the best they can afford. As far as bow accessories go, bowsights are a big-ticket item, with prices ranging from a hundred bucks to well over $400 — and beyond that for a high-quality crossbow scope. So it's important to do the research to determine which make and model will best serve your needs.

There is a wide variety of sighting solutions available — fixed single-pin, fixed multi-pin, movable (slider) single-pin, movable multi-pin, and red-dot crossbow scopes, to name a few — designed to consistently put bowhunters and competition shooters on target. From simple to complex, budget to expensive, here is an assortment of top-shelf bowsights that will put you on the path to more accurate shooting at the range and in the field.



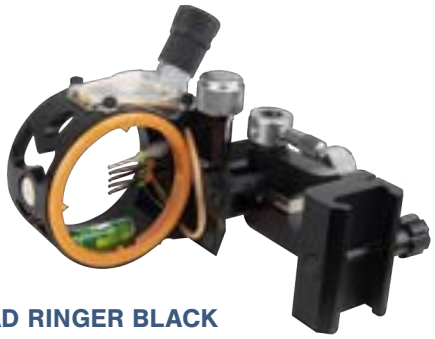
ARD ADJUSTABLE RED DOT

The ARD Adjustable Red-Dot bowsight features a unique mount that allows for a consistent anchor point and keeps the sight aligned with the eye as the shooter adjusts for distance. The only way to see the dot is with good form. If the shooter torques the bow or anchors too high or too low, he or she won't be able to see the dot. When form is good and the dot is centered, the shot is true. Once the bow is sighted-in at the baseline yardage, the shooter adjusts for distance by using the sight's simple click system. The ARD Adjustable Red Dot lets the shooter view the target with both eyes open and has 11 different brightness settings and six dot size options. MSRP: $610; **adjustablereddot.com**



CUSTOM BOW EQUIPMENT TREK PRO 2V

The Trek Pro 2V bowsight from Custom Bow Equipment (CBE) offers tremendous versatility and flexibility in a premium hunting sight, featuring a single pin with two fiber-optic aiming points at a fixed gap for improved visibility and functionality. It also gives shooters the ability to add a lens or sunshade and includes a slinging rheostat cover for adjusting pin brightness. The redesigned machined aluminum scope housing of the Trek accepts CBE peep alignment rings and includes four different colors to choose from. Rheostat sight lights are included, as well as the ability to use CBE Picatinny or CBE bridge lock adapters. Trek vertical sights are available with .010- or .019-inch fiber pins and in right- or left-handed configurations. MSRP: $329.99; **custombowequipment.com**



DEAD RINGER BLACK SERIES TACKDRIVER

Precision machined from 6061 CNC aluminum, the Black Series Tackdriver five-pin bowsight from Dead Ringer easily attaches directly to a Picatinny rail mount system and offers generous windage and elevation adjustments. An integrated sight level, five micro-adjustable .010-inch sight pins, a fiber housing and rechargeable pin light allow for visibility and accuracy, even in low-light situations. The Black Series bowsight boasts a sleek design, lightweight elements and performance features packed into a high-quality product without sacrificing functionality. Each piece is engineered to meet the demands of a variety of hunting scenarios at an excellent value. Other features include a tool-free locking arm knob, fiber housing system for increased light to the pins and a built-in sight level. MSRP: $149.99; **deadringerhunting.com**



HHA SPORTS NYTRX

The Nytrx bowsight from HHA Sports redefines customization and efficiency, giving bowhunters complete control over their setup. Want to shoot a two-pin model for whitetails, but a three-pin setup for elk without the need for two separate bowsights? The Nytrx is the answer. Users can easily swap between indicators, scopes and frames to customize any setup. Available in two models — the Nytrx and Nytrx Pro — the Nytrx Pro includes all the features of the Nytrx, plus the ability to swap between yardage wheels to shoot multiple arrow setups, and for ease of swapping between sight tapes. Both are available in one-, two-, three- or four-pin designs, as well as a Picatinny, Integrated Side, or Dovetail compatible with Mathews Bridge-Lock mount. MSRP: $329.99-$519.99; **hhasports.com**



IQ BOWSIGHTS PRO HUNTER

The Pro Hunter three-pin bowsight from IQ Bowsights now has a 50 percent thinner bladed pin design with a floating third pin for hyper-accurate extended-range shooting. Tool-free windage and elevation adjustment comes standard in addition to IQ's Retina Lock Alignment technology system. The Pro Hunter's Retina Lock aiming point creates an unobstructed view of the sight bubble and offers outstanding consistency with or without the use of a conventional peep sight. A forward-facing yardage scale allows full visibility of yardage marks, and enhanced friction-free ergonomic adjustment knobs aid in ultra-fine, micro-adjustment of elevation and windage with exact precision to the laser-engraved windage and elevation marks. The aluminum sight weighs just 9.6 ounces. MSRP: $329.99; **feradyne.com/iq-bowsights**



RAVIN INTEGRATED XERO X1I CROSSBOW SCOPE

The Ravin Integrated Xero X1i crossbow scope is customized exclusively for Ravin from Garmin, optimized for Ravin crossbow models. Sighting-in the Xero X1i scope is quick, easy and automatic. Simply mount the scope, select the Ravin crossbow model and sight it in at 20 yards — the precise digital aimpoints are pre-calibrated. Garmin Xero X1i's advanced processor does the rest. This high-performance upgrade increases deadly accuracy and eliminates the need for a rangefinder, saving precious time and weight (no need for a separate laser rangefinder). The X1i is preloaded with the ballistics for every model ever made by Ravin except the R18. MSRP: $1,899; **ravincrossbows.com**



ROCKY MOUNTAIN HORIZON FIVE-PIN FIXED

The Horizon Five-Pin Fixed bowsight from Rocky Mountain is precision engineered and constructed using premium-built components with machined aircraft grade aluminum mounting brackets and sight housings designed to be tough and durable. It is equipped with a floating bottom pin furnished with a dovetail mount specifically engineered for compatibility with the Mathews Bridge Lock Mounting System and features 2nd and 3rd axis adjustments, laser-etched windage and elevation marks, ultra-bright full-capture .019-inch pins, built-in light adapter, precision bubble level and a durable plastic sight housing ring. Weighing just 9.6 ounces, it has four sight mount length options, an ambidextrous design and tool-less adjustments. MSRP: $99.99; **feradyne.com/product/horizon-5-pin-fixed-sight**



SPOT HOGG FAST EDDIE XL SINGLE PIN

The Fast Eddie XL Single-Pin bowsight from Spot Hogg is built off the widely popular Fast Eddie. The XL version features a newly designed 6-inch dovetail bar and bow mount, with special attention given to the bar design to maximize strength and minimize weight. The Fast Eddie XL, with solid 6061 aluminum construction, is easy to remove and reinstall while still maintaining perfect sight marks. Key features include micro-adjustable 2nd and 3rd axis, coarse horizontal and vertical toolless adjustments, and a silent quick release lock yardage knob. Whether it's heading to the woods or hitting the tournament trail, the Fast Eddie XL is up for the challenge. It's also available in a double-pin version. MSRP: $329.99; Single Pin; $334.99/Double pin; **spot-hogg.com**



T.R.U. BALL AXCEL RHEOTECH

The rock-solid Axcel Rheotech fixed-pin bowsight from T.R.U. Ball is named for the rheostat cover that allows archers to adjust fiber brightness and eliminate starbursting. During midday or in open field settings with full sun, the rheostat can be dialed down quickly with a half turn of the cover and dialed in to keep pins bright without the starburst. Then, as the day wears on, the rheostat can be dialed back to allow full light into the fiber. The sight's lock knobs feature gear teeth so the thumbscrews are out of the way and won't catch on weeds or vines when trekking to the treestand or stalking game. Micro-adjustable windage and elevation knobs ensure extremely accurate adjustments. Retail: $294.99; **truball.com**

ARROW RESTS

The importance of a good arrow rest cannot be overstated.

No compound bow setup is complete without the addition of an arrow rest. Aside from the string, it is the only component in the stick-and-string setup that makes contact with the arrow, and accuracy lives and dies by its flawless operation. Arrow rests come in a wide variety of designs and price ranges — full capture, prong, drop-away, blade, etc. — sure to fit every hunting application and personal preference.

Undoubtedly, the drop-away rest is the most popular — and it could be argued, for good reason, because of its minimal contact with the arrow's vane and shaft upon launch. But in the end, it all comes down to shooting style, hunting/shooting application and personal preference.

As the last point of contact with the arrow, it is imperative that the arrow rest is properly installed and adjusted. This is a service most archery pro shops offer for free when a customer purchases a new bow or upgrades Old Faithful. Same with accessories such as bowsights, peep sights, D-loops, etc. The archery pro staffer is a bowhunter's best friend so get to know yours well.

Here are four tried-and-true models you might want to check out. Do your research and choose wisely.



QAD ELITE ULTRAREST INTEGRATE MX2

The MX on steroids, the QAD UltraRest Integrate MX2 has a rugged capture bar and robust 7075 aluminum launcher that holds up during the most grueling hunts. And now it's available for the 2025 Elite bow line. The MX2 features precision click micro-adjustments, drop-away, slow let-down, total containment and lock-down technology, and its intricately machined launcher is bulletproof yet hushed thanks to built-in customizable dampers. A seamless connection to the Integrate Mounting Systems found on Mathews, Hoyt, PSE, Bowtech, Prime, Elite, Darton, Bear, Xpedition and APA bows, guarantees a rock-solid mount and a trimmed down design. Made in the USA. MSRP: $289.99-$299.99; **qadinc.com**





RIPCORD MICRO-ADJUST RAK

Ripcord's latest iteration of its RAK rest now features micro-adjust capabilities. Designed to deliver fine-tuning precision, the Micro-Adjust RAK allows archers to easily dial in horizontal and vertical positioning for a new level of accuracy. This intuitive system allows shooters to perfect their arrow flight and minimize tuning time, ensuring every shot is as accurate as possible. The Micro-Adjust RAK features Ripcord's proven drop-away technology, engineered to deliver consistent arrow clearance for superior flight and minimal contact with the vane or shaft, and its internal damping system reduces noise and vibration, providing hunters with the stealth they need for success in the field. MSRP: $179.99; **ripcordarrowrests.com**



TROPHY RIDGE PROPEL IMS

Limb driven. Fully captured. Deadly quiet. The Propel IMS Drop-away Arrow Rest from Trophy Ridge uses a versatile design that allows it to be configured for either upper or lower limb activation. Installation is a breeze and requires no need for a bow press. Simply bolt on the rest, adjust for center shot/tune, attach the cable to the limb and hunt with confidence. Made from aluminum with a black finish and weighing just 4.8 ounces, the Propel utilizes the IMS mounting system for an unmatched low profile. Key features include full arrow containment, which eliminates arrow contact with the bow, and deadly quiet operation. MSRP: $99.99; **beararchery.com**



VAPOR TRAIL VICTOR

The Vapor Trail Victor combines the best features of the company's Micro Elite and Gen Integr8 designs. Its Limb Driven Activation (top or bottom limb) ensures consistent performance with every shot, and micro-adjustable windage and elevation provides precise tuning to optimize accuracy and consistency. Other key features include a full-containment rubber over-molded cage, free-floating head (supports the arrow for up to 70 percent of the shot cycle), Spring Tension Adjustment technology, variable launcher angle, Attachment Bridge System and multiple blade options. The Vapor Trail Victor is designed for archers who demand the highest level of performance and customization. MSRP: $339.99; **vaportrailarchery.com**





BOWTECH VIRTUE

A monumental weight reduction, refined CenterMass Sight System, and Cerakote finish combine with DIY-friendly tuning features to make this one of 2025's finest flagship bows.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

I'm blessed to call tinkering around with archery equipment "work." The challenge, though, comes when I sit down to write. Why? Every name-brand bow manufacturer makes great bows, and it's difficult to word each bow report uniquely, though I manage. The adjectives we've long used to describe bows—words such as fast, smooth, quiet and accurate—are tough to avoid and basically interchangeable from one flagship bow to another.

Albeit, I believe in honest, authentic journalism, so I won't copy and paste a previous report into a new Word document, rework it slightly, and e-mail it over to Bowhunting World Editor Dave Maas. You deserve better, so I always aim to deliver original content. Whether it takes two hours or two days to write 1,000-1,400 compelling words, I'm committed to authenticity. That said, writing this bow report was easier than some because Bowtech bows are very unique and teeming with purposeful features. Additionally, the 2025 Virtue unveils new noteworthy technologies that require a handful of other adjectives.

Having test-fired the Bowtech Virtue at the 2025 Archery Trade Association Show in Indianapolis, Indiana, Maas was impressed with the bow, then contacted me to conduct a thorough test and evaluation. Here you go.

TOUGH AS NAILS, LIGHT AS A FEATHER

Every Bowtech bow I've ever tested has looked and felt tough. The risers are always robust, the limbs wide, and the connection between the two solid. Bowtech bows always trigger this thought: Man, this thing is built to withstand virtually anything. With a Bowtech in my hand, durability and dependability are my last concerns.

Remarkably, Bowtech's engineers eliminated .7 pounds with the Virtue (compared to the Core SR). It's no surprise, then, that I was shocked as I pulled the Virtue from its shipping box; I immediately noted that the Virtue feels substantially lighter than its predecessors. The Virtue weighs only 3.7 pounds; I know of no other non-carbon high-end bow that is so light.

What's the secret sauce? Bowtech's AeroMag Magnesium Riser achieves weight savings while enhancing durability, strength and stiffness. From hopping over deadfalls in Colorado's high country to holding a tune through hundreds of shots, this new riser construction combines the best of durability and light mass weight so you can have your cake and eat it, too.

While we're discussing durability, coatings are a big deal. The Virtue harnesses the rigidity,



TEST BOW SPECS

AXLE-TO-AXLE LENGTH: 32 inches

BRACE HEIGHT: 6.19 inches

DRAW LENGTH: 28 inches

DRAW WEIGHT: 71.8 pounds

LET-OFF: 85% (Performance); 87% (Comfort)

BOW-ONLY WEIGHT: 3.7 pounds

ACCESSORIZED TOTAL WEIGHT: 5.5 pounds (including sight, rest and front stabilizer)

VELOCITY: 281 fps (with 468-grain Easton 6.5mm Acu-Carbon 340 arrow); 284 fps (with 456-grain CX Maxima Triad 350 arrow); 288 fps (with 441-grain Victory VAP SS 350 arrow); 306 fps (with 388-grain CX Predator 350 arrow)

KINETIC ENERGY: 82.08 foot-pounds (Easton); 81.69 foot-pounds (CX Triad); 81.24 foot-pounds (Victory); 80.69 foot-pounds (CX Predator)

TEST-BOW FINISH: Tac Black

MSRP: Starting at $1,999

CONTACT: bowtecharchery.com

In-the-field photos by Becca and Darron McDougal



↑ The Virtue comes with a high-grade Cerakote finish, which is ultra-durable.

scratch-resistance and resilience of a protective Cerakote coating. Cerakote is an undeniable leader in the coating business. With that, the Virtue is available only in solid colors. Based on my bow-finish discussions with dealers, solid colors seem to be more popular than camo finishes anyway, so I don't believe it's a make-or-break issue for most bow buyers.

Another noteworthy durability attribute is the Virtue's titanium hardware. I can't count how many stubborn screw and bolt heads I've stripped out in my archery career, so I appreciate the attention to detail here along with the rust- and corrosion-resistance.

DIY CUSTOMIZATION AND TUNING

Bowtech was one of the first, if not the first, to offer lateral cam adjustment to address cam lean, no bow press required. DeadLock Technology has proven itself across multiple bow models, and it saves archery shop staff time in tuning their customers' bows. It also puts tuning within each bowhunter's reach. Each cam can be adjusted left or right on the axle in minute increments, and adjustments take seconds with a small hex wrench. It's outrageously easy and ultra-effective.



↑ This is the author's first three-arrow group from 40 yards with the Virtue. In skilled hands and with practice, avid bowhunters should experience similar accuracy.



↑ The second-generation CenterMass Sight System mounts Bowtech's compatible sights to the inside edge of the riser to bring the accessory weight to the center of the bow. CenterMass eliminates the need for a sight bracket, and the IMS rest mount perfectly harmonizes with Ripcord's Ratchet Cable Driven rest.

GripLock Technology was introduced on last year's Core bows, and it's back on the Virtue. Adjust the grip angle from low-wrist to high-wrist and every position in between. Simply loosen the screw on either side of the rotating grip module, then insert a hex wrench into the circular hole below the grip on the front of the riser and micro-adjust the grip angle to preference. It's like having multiple custom grips but without the expense.

Synchronizing cams on compounds has long been finicky, especially for bowhunters who want to do some of their own bow work. The avenue has always been to twist or untwist a cable to get both cams to roll over simultaneously. TimeLock is a novel, bow-



← Bowtech's TimeLock feature allows the archer to synchronize the cams in minutes without a bow press.

bow-press-free timing solution, and like DeadLock, it has a locking screw and an adjustment screw. Users can tighten or loosen the cables in finite amounts until both cam stops hit at the same time.

Another outstanding customization feature that Bowtech fans have enjoyed for years is the FlipDisc. In addition to bow-press-free draw-length adjustability, it has two unique draw cycles. One side of the Flip Disc gives you the Comfort draw cycle (easier and smoother), while the other side gives you the Performance draw cycle (slightly more difficult with a shorter, more abrupt valley but more velocity). I prefer the Comfort cycle, but I found that the Virtue achieves the same velocity at a 28-inch draw length in the Performance cycle as a 29-inch draw length in the Comfort cycle. For bowhunters with shorter draw lengths, this is a good avenue to gain some extra power.

CENTERMASS AND INTEGRATE

On the 2024 Core SR and SS, Bowtech's CenterMass Sight System accepts the sight bar through the riser and bolts down with a single bolt. The Virtue features the second generation CenterMass Sight System. It's now located on the inside edge of the Virtue's riser (above the shelf), which moves the sight's mass weight even farther toward the center of the bow, optimizing the accessorized balance. Also, this improved system uses two bolts to lock the sight directly onto the riser (no mounting bracket) instead of one.

For the test, I installed Bowtech's CenterMass Dual Trac sight, which is manufactured by Black Gold in the USA. This slider sight has two pins and two yardage pointers. The pins are independently micro-adjustable. The Dual Trac has 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-axis adjustability, and the 3rd axis is micro-adjustable. Black Gold's long-proven PhotoChromatic Shell intuitively adjusts pin brightness to the setting. It comes with multiple yardage tapes for different arrow velocities, delivering to-the-yard precision out to long ranges.

I also tested out Ripcord's Ratchet Cable Driven rest. It attaches directly to the riser via the IMS mounting system. It features micro-windage and -elevation adjustments, and it has an arrow

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containment bar so that you never have to worry about your arrow falling off. The launcher also locks in the up position until the bow is fired. Both the launcher and the containment bar are padded to mute arrow contact. The anti-bounce-back launcher yields true vane clearance. SpeedSet Technology allows users to seamlessly fine-tune the cord length. It's a rock-solid rest that is ultra-lightweight and super-dependable.

TEST AND EVALUATION

Besides the Virtue being lightweight, I immediately noted the steadiness I felt when I drew it right out of the box. It holds almost effortlessly. Besides its optimal balance, I attribute the steadiness to the riser's wideness and bridging above the sight and below the grip, as well as the wide limbs. The bow naturally holds level with no tendency to tip left or right.

Reaching full draw is also easy. Bowtech's flexible FLX-Guard reduces friction-causing lateral torque on the cables during the draw cycle. Again, the Performance draw cycle is a bit more strenuous, but the Comfort draw cycle is one of the smoothest available. Regardless of the FlipDisc setting, the draw cycle ends with a solid back wall via draw stops that contact the cables.

Like last year's Core SR, the Virtue is a grouper. I shot it out to 60 yards and experienced immediate accuracy. Shooting groups at 40 yards felt easy. Accuracy-wise, I believe this bow will perform right next to any other flagship out there.

If I can complain about one thing, it's that the Virtue lacks vibration-dampening products. Yes, the Orbit Dampeners arrest most vibrations, but for a $1,999 bow, I'd like to see some limb and bowstring dampeners to smooth and silence the shot even more. I'm not calling the Virtue loud; I just think it should come with limb and bowstring dampeners.

FINAL THOUGHTS

With all of the market's new bows, what makes one more desirable or attractive than another? The Virtue makes that easy to answer. I believe Bowtech has achieved the most customizable and DIY-tuning-friendly bow there is with integrated features. Pair that with the monumental weight reduction due to the AeroMag Magnesium Riser, the refined CenterMass Sight System, and the Cerakote finish, and the Virtue is a bow that many hunters will want to test out. It's so awesome that it made my writing duties for this bow report a walk in the park.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

The Bowtech Virtue 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. BW





EXCALIBUR HYBRID X

In May, Excalibur launched another new-for-2025 crossbow model completely different from anything we've previously seen from the brand.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

Fundamentally, Excalibur Crossbow hasn't budged for 42 years — until now, but we'll get to that momentarily. Hunters and the hunting industry have always known Excalibur as the premium crafter of simple, effective recurve crossbows. Of course, over the years, limbs have narrowed, velocities have boosted, accuracy has increased, and cranks have become integrated. But, the basic platform has always been similar, keeping in touch with the brand's motto, "Different for a Reason." While other crossbow brands have chased radical designs and unfathomable velocities, Excalibur has stuck it out in the recurve lane.

That has all changed. Well, not really. Excalibur still has a robust selection of tried-and-true recurve crossbows and will continue to do great things in that category. But something new has been baking in the Excalibur oven, and now the secret is out. For the first time ever, I present to you — in a million years, I never thought I'd be writing this — an Excalibur crossbow with cams.

THE HYBRID X

Because Excalibur has always stayed true to its recurve roots, I'm not surprised that its first compound crossbow is unlike anything else on the market and has recurve undertones. Excalibur's brand manager, Todd Snader, said, "At Excalibur, we don't compromise. We build the world's toughest, most reliable crossbows. The Hybrid X is proof of that commitment. This is how

TEST CROSSBOW SPECS

MAKE/MODEL: Excalibur Hybrid X

FINISH: Mossy Oak Country DNA

MASS WEIGHT: 8.3 pounds (without accessories); 10.3 pounds (with accessories)

OVERALL WIDTH: 18.5 inches (uncocked); 10.8 inches (cocked)

OVERALL LENGTH: 29.6 inches

DRAW EFFORT: 14 pounds (with integrated crank)

POWER STROKE: 11.5 inches

BOLT LENGTH AND WEIGHT: 18 inches; 449.5 grains with 150-grain tip or 399.5 grains with 100-grain tip (measured with Last Chance Archery Pro Grain Scale)

MANUFACTURER LISTED VELOCITY: Up to 435 fps

TEST VELOCITY: 415 fps with 449.5-grain arrow; 435 fps with 399.5-grain arrow (found with Caldwell Ballistic Precision chronograph)

MANUFACTURER LISTED TRIGGER PULL: 3 pounds

COCKING DEVICE: ChargerX Integrated Crank

SCOPE: OverWatch

MSRP: $2,199

CONTACT: excaliburcrossbow.com

In-the-field photos: Becca McDougal



↑ The Hybrid X is a very well-balanced and comfortable crossbow to handle and shoot, with a balance point just in front of the trigger rather than way out front.

we do compound crossbows — with brute reliability, bulletproof strength, and unshakable confidence in the field."

Appearance-wise, some will say that the reverse-draw design isn't new. Correct — other manufacturers have beaten Excalibur to that punch. However, the Hybrid X is completely different from other reverse-draw crossbows because the concentric InnerDrive cams attach to the riser, not the limbs. This allows the bow to maintain a recurve limb design but with the addition of cams. That might not seem like a big deal, but wait, there's more … a lot more.

PERFORMANCE REIMAGINED

If you're familiar with Excalibur, you're probably asking, "But why?" Well, this crossbreed checks several boxes. First of all, recurve crossbows are a very niche category. Many hunters love the idea of simplicity, but when they see the wild velocities of today's radical compound crossbows, many can't help but gravitate in that direction. The Hybrid X is rigged with cams, so it is positioned to compete with other compound crossbows, but it boasts the DIY serviceability that Excalibur crossbows are known for. Hunters can unstring the Hybrid X and replace the strings and cables in the field or at home.

Next, Excalibur sought to deliver its narrowest crossbow yet, and this unique design accomplished that. Even though Excalibur's crossbows have become narrower over the years, they're still considerably wider than the ultra-compact compound designs. The Hybrid X's cocked width is only 10.8 inches, making it the tightest Excalibur to date and a great option for those who love Excalibur simplicity but demand a more compact profile.

Earlier, I mentioned that the Hybrid X's InnerDrive Cam System is mounted to the riser rather than the limbs. The cams are parked and rotate in place, where traditional limb-mounted cams rotate and also move with the limbs as they spring during the shot. Fewer movements mean there is less that can go wrong. And the connection point where the cams attach to the riser on an axle is a fortress. Additionally, the limbs protect the cams due to their positioning. When a user accidentally drops the crossbow, the cams won't likely be susceptible to damage.

Next, the InnerDrive Cam System operates much like Bowtech's Binary Cams (Bowtech is owned by the same parent company as Excalibur, which is Pure Archery Group). They are essentially self-equalizing, which mitigates the need for synchronization tuning. When you install a new string and/or cables, simply draw



↑ The ChargerX Integrated Crank is one of the finest on the market and reduces cocking effort to merely 14 pounds.

the crossbow and the cams will balance out.

Excalibur launched its Bulldog many years ago, and at 440 fps, it was the fastest recurve crossbow, but the speed was the product of firing a lightweight 350-grain bolt. The Hybrid X's reverse-draw compound design pushes the velocity envelope. With a 450-grain bolt, it shoots 415 fps, and with a 400-grain bolt, it shoots 435 fps. In other words, the Hybrid X yields considerably more kinetic energy than the Bulldog 440 due to the heavier bolt. If you read between the lines, I'm saying that it's Excalibur's most punishing crossbow to date, and that's pretty exciting.

The riser is extremely strong with a shoot-through bridge design. This keeps in step with the durability and dependability that Excalibur has long been acclaimed for, and if the crossbow is dropped upside down, the riser will hit first, not the cams. The Hybrid X's limb-pocket system has tight tolerances, solidly contains the limbs, and is a bridged, shoot-through design.



↑ Unlike other reverse-draw crossbows, the Hybrid X's InnerDrive Cams are slaved to the riser rather than the limb tips. This means less movement during the shot cycle.



↑ With holding dots from 20-100 yards and red/green illumination, the OverWatch scope is a premium optic that comes standard with the Hybrid X.

While we're discussing durability, the HO (High Output) Extreme Recurve Compound Limbs are new and engineered specifically for the Hybrid X. They are beefed up and ready for the most grueling hunting environments. Some crossbows with high velocities and narrow limb widths have some durability issues, but the HO Extreme limbs are next-level durable.

HANDLING AND SHOOTING

Most compound crossbows have a lot of weight forward, and carrying them afield can be cumbersome. The Hybrid X's center of balance is just in front of the trigger, which makes it easier to carry and maneuver. The limbs are also positioned relatively even with the rail, whereas many other compound crossbows have limbs positioned higher than the rail, which makes the crossbow laterally tippy. That isn't an issue with this one. It will also be easier to shoot off-hand after having it shouldered for a minute or more while waiting for a buck or bull to step out and present a shot opportunity. It handles and shoots awesome with superior balance.

The ChargerX Integrated Crank? Well, it's practically seamless. When not in use, the cocking lever stows conveniently on the bottom of the stock near the butt pad. Ready to cock it? Simply unclip the lever, slide it into the crank mechanism, and then unwind the crank to slide the entire firing mechanism forward until it latches onto the bowstring. Then, enjoy easy cocking with merely 14 pounds of user effort. If you need to pause the cranking process to swat a mosquito, simply let go of the handle, and the crank will not spin out of control. The crank also operates silently, and it allows you to quickly and quietly unwind the crossbow following an unsuccessful hunt. It's also positioned farther forward so you can hold the





↑ The Rebolt Quiver is one of the most solid crossbow quivers the author has ever tested.

back of the stock for leverage with one hand while cranking with the other and not pinch your hand, thumb, or fingers. Great crank.

Loading the V-Flight Pro 18-inch bolts is simple, and the odd vane is noted as the one to position down into the rail's groove. If someone improperly loads a bolt, the crossbow won't fire. CeaseFire Technology inhibits the crossbow from firing, even when the safety is off, if a bolt is not loaded or one is improperly loaded.

While shooting the Hybrid X, my sole complaint is it is fairly loud. I found the percussive pop too much for my ears, so I wore foam ear plugs. I've done this with several other crossbows, one from Excalibur as well as some from other brands. As you probably know, there are silencing options, which could reduce the noise plus yield an add-on sale.

The accuracy makes up for the noise. It took only a few shots to get dialed at 20 yards. From there, I set the scope magnification to correspond with the 415 fps reading that my Caldwell chronograph produced when I shot the 450-grain bolt through it. Next, I stepped back to 30, then 50 yards. The immediate groupings I achieved were stunning. I eventually moved back to 80 yards and found that, in the right hands and with a solid rest, the Hybrid X is about as accurate as any crossbow I've ever tested.



↑ The accessory package, which includes four V-Flight Pro 18-inch bolts, is top-notch.

Other things that elevate the shooting experience are the pistol grip, which is rubberized to bolster comfort and control. It makes settling in and squeezing the trigger a piece of cake. I wouldn't change a thing. By the way, the Hybrid X features the same two-stage rifle-like trigger as other models and breaks cleanly with approximately 3 pounds of pressure.

THE KIT

The Hybrid X MSRPs for $2,199, and that price tag comes with all of the goodness that we've discussed so far, plus a premium accessory kit. I already noted the sweet cranking system. Next is the OverWatch scope, which is rigged with aiming circles from 20-100 yards, red and green illumination, and 30mm mounting rings. The Rebolt Quiver is perhaps the solidest crossbow quiver I've seen, and it is modeled by TightSpot Quiver, another brand under the Pure Archery Group umbrella. Four V-Flight Pro 18-inch bolts boast a +/- .001-inch straightness tolerance and are ultra-durable. For field points, you get four that are 100 grains and four that are 150 grains. Excalibur suggests the heavier ones for the optimal downrange accuracy and penetration, but folks who crave more speed and are hunting deer-sized game and smaller have the option to push the velocity needle without compromising penetration.

HISTORY MADE

I never thought the day would come when Excalibur launched a crossbow with cams, but now it has, and not just a me-too of some of the market's other compound crossbows. This one is very different and helped the brand to compete in the compound category without swerving completely out of the lines it has always stayed within. Plus, this crossbreed was the catalyst that helped Excalibur achieve its highest power and its narrowest design ever.

History has been made at Excalibur, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for this fortress of a brand. BW

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Whose Spot Is It?

Someone shows you their public land hotspot — should you ever visit it solo?

BY BOB ROBB

The cost of everything is escalating though the proverbial roof these days, and hunting is certainly no exception. That's just one reason why the allure of DIY public land hunting has taken off like a SpaceX rocket. This has been my bread and butter since I first laced up my boots back in the 1960s, when I began backpacking into wilderness areas to fish and hunt.

Back then, there was no such thing as a GPS, and the closest thing there was to a cell phone was the creative "shoe phone" used by Agent Maxwell Smart in the popular TV series "Get Smart," which premiered in 1965. Both the worldwide web and cable television were decades away, so we didn't have several hundred mediocre hunting shows or YouTube videos to watch, just the "Big Three" outdoor magazines — Outdoor Life, Field & Stream, and Sports Afield — whose pages were filled with tales of adventure and gear information, along with a few tips. To learn the lay of the land, we didn't have OnX or HuntStand, only topographic maps, a compass, and a working knowledge of navigation by the stars.

If you were lucky enough, you learned how to hunt from family and friends. If not, you did as I did — stumble around the mountains, blind as a baby, learning from the bazillion mistakes made every trip. If you wanted to figure out where the best public land hunting spots were, you had to find them yourself, something that often took years, or even decades. Or, if you were lucky, somebody honored you by showing you one of their secret spots.

Which brings me to the question of, "Whose spot is it?" After all, you're on public land. Just because somebody found the spot and then showed it to you doesn't make it theirs for all time, does it?

RESPECT AND TRUST

For some this might be a gray area. Not to me. To be blunt, I would never, ever go back to a public land spot someone else showed me, with the following two exceptions: they asked me to go back with them, or I asked them if it would be OK and they concurred. Even then, I would think long and hard before asking for their blessing. To some people, this line of thinking makes no sense. To me, it's as black and white as a skunk's back.

Think about it for a second. Despite the fact that America is blessed with millions of public land acres open to hunting, within that vast acreage there really are very few places that consistently produce high-quality hunting. That's all about habitat, private land boundaries, hunting pressure, and seasonal effects such as fire, weather and predation, among others. Locating those sweet spots is never easy, nor does it happen overnight. Hunters who have "secret spots" usually have paid their sweat equity dues many times over. Not only have they spent countless years in the woods, but they have also spent a lifetime learning how to read the lay of the land, decipher sign, and know why it all comes together through the school of hard knocks.

Back when I first started my DIY public land hunting throughout the Rocky Mountain West, backpack hunting was not yet "hip," with just a handful of hunters figuring out that if you hiked just a mile or three away from the road, hunting quickly improved. For those willing to hump it, it wasn't all that difficult to pack in and find some really good big game hunting with little, if any, competition. Today, though, that's about done. The evolution of backcountry gear plus the internet age plus smartphone hunting apps have made locating top-notch hunting areas, then getting back and staying there for several days, much more commonplace. There are more roads today, too. Secret spots are vanishing.

Here's an example. My good friend Rick Wemple is one of the toughest, most highly skilled and ethical public land outfitters and guides I've ever had the privilege to stomp around God's country with (montana-hunting-outfitter.com). He's lived in, guided and hunted the same public land area of southwestern Montana for six decades. A few years ago he invited me to come over and buddy-hunt with him for elk in an area I hadn't hunted in decades. Long story short, after 6 days of pounding it, Rick cow-called a big 5x5 bull into less than 20 steps, and I hammered him. It was unbelievable! I've been back and buddy-hunted with Rick in the same area two other times, and though we haven't killed another bull, we've been close a bunch of times, and had an absolute blast doing what we both love to do as much as anything on earth. The area is hunted hard by others, but he knows where the sweet spots are, and how to hunt them. And now, so do I. I could easily go back and hunt this area by myself. But I never will, without Rick.

It's all about respect. This might be hard to understand for people who don't live and breathe hunting. They really don't understand that these little sweet spots are as rare as the proverbial four-leaf clover. Once found, they have to be carefully nurtured. They don't understand that it's not just the great hunting they offer, but the chance to enjoy something you discovered without worrying about some other yahoo spoiling the solitude.

By holding my hand and showing me country he's hunted all his life, Rick did me a great honor. He trusted me not to expose his secret spots through my media work or coming back without him. I'll never violate that trust. BW

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