

THE **PUBLIC-LAND** ISSUE

PETERSEN'S

BOWHUNTING

The Modern Bowhunting Authority

July 2022

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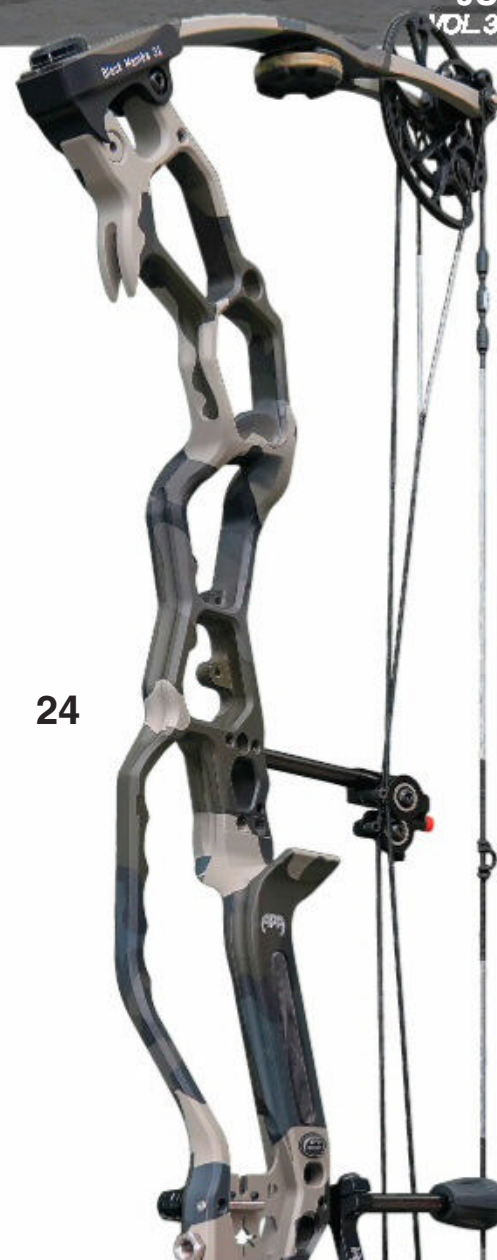
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By **CHRISTIAN BERG**

FIRST SHOT

THE PUBLIC-LAND BROTHERHOOD

BACK IN SEPTEMBER 2016, three buddies and I drove 30-plus hours from Pennsylvania to bow-hunt elk in Colorado's Unit 231.

On the plus side, this unit can be hunted on an over-the-counter archery license, holds plenty of elk and has lots of public land for eager bowhunters to roam. But the big downside is high hunting pressure — one of the key reasons overall archery success in the unit is less than 7 percent. In other words, 93 out of every 100 bowhunters in the unit will eat tag soup. I've always said you have to be an optimist to be a bowhunter, and I think the decision to tackle this hunt qualifies me in that department!

On the first day of our hunt, my friend Tory and I hiked about 7 miles into the backcountry. At midday, we were resting in the sunshine on a rocky outcropping overlooking an alpine lake when we heard something behind us. Turning around, we were surprised to see another bowhunter headed our way.

It was Barry Raugust, a high school biology teacher from Kansas who was hunting solo and sleeping in his pickup truck parked back at the trailhead. After chatting for a while, we told Barry to stop by the cabin where we were staying if he needed a hot meal or just got cold in his truck. With that, we wished him luck and parted ways.

Imagine my surprise when I rose early the next morning, walked out of my bedroom and saw Barry asleep on the couch. Well, it sure didn't take him long to take us up on our offer, I thought as a smirk crept across my face.

As it turned out, after our meeting the previous afternoon, Barry was sneaking through some dark timber when he stumbled onto a bull and killed it! By the time he finished quar-



Jamin Brower (left) and Barry Raugust load Raugust's bull elk onto a pack horse during a September 2016 hunt in Colorado's Routt National Forest.

tering and hanging the meat, hiked back to the trailhead and drove to our cabin, it was about 3 a.m. and he collapsed on the couch.

As fate would have it, a father-son duo staying at the cabin — Michael and Jamin Brower from Louisiana — had horses with them and time to kill, since Michael had already bagged his bull and Jamin was along to help his dad. Immediately, the Browsers offered to pack Barry's bull out of the bush, and the trio were soon saddled up and headed out to make a normally backbreaking task a relative walk in the park.

Some might say Barry got lucky. I say he found a band of brothers. As public-land bowhunters, we're all in the same boat. Barry beat the odds and bagged his bull. His success was our success, and while no one in our group even saw a live bull all week, we made memories — and friendships — that will last a lifetime. **B**

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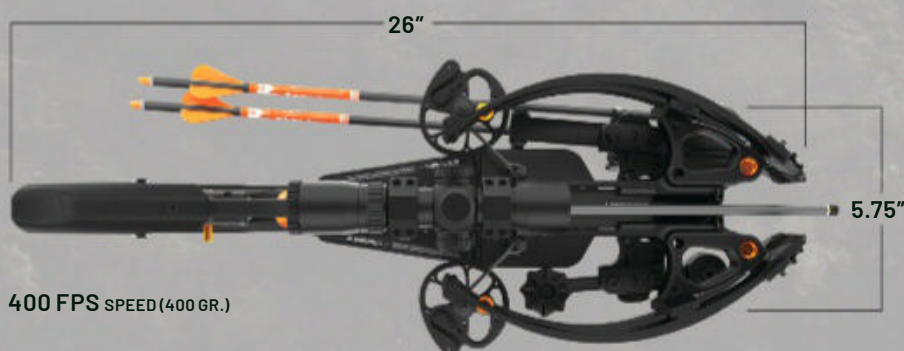
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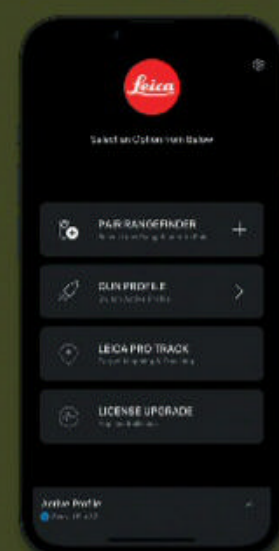
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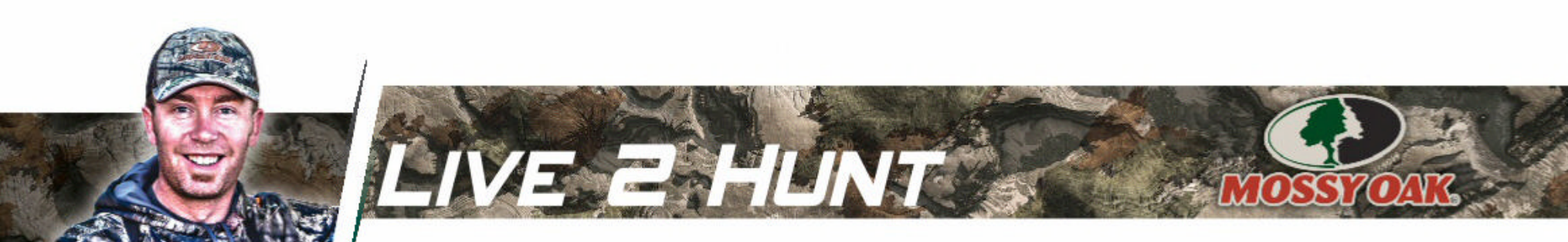
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By **CODY ROBBINS**



Last fall, Cody Robbins (right) took Mason Moen, age 16, on his first archery hunt, and Mason arrowed this buck at 22 yards.

TWO-WAY STREET

Taking a new hunter afield can be thrilling for both of you.

A PASSIONATE bowhunter's favorite time of the year is coming. In only a few short months, we'll be climbing into our stands, hoping for that big chance to come to full draw.

With no choice but to wait until then, it's during these summer months that we find ourselves "prepping" for success in the fall.

I don't know about you, but right now I'm antsy, and I find every excuse I can to prepare for the best hunts I can have down the road. In the mornings, I drive back roads with a spotting scope in my lap, hoping to catch a glimpse of a buck. Come midday, I check trail cams to see if anyone familiar shows up in my regular stomping grounds. And, in the evenings I hang with the family and shoot bows.

Kelsy and I have two girls, ages 4 and 8, and they love shooting. Honestly, for me, they make archery fresh again. I've always loved the sport, but after 30 years of shooting, I don't get an adrenaline rush before, during or after flinging an arrow. It just is what it is. It's a pastime that's part of who I am, and I'll always be an archer.

Now that I'm teaching my kids to shoot, I find my childhood butterflies coming back. When you're crouched down on your knees, helping a 4-year-old girl come to full draw and patiently waiting for her to let it fly, in that moment your heart is pounding with anticipation. You know that if she hits the target 8 feet away, dead center, she's going to scream with joy. And, if she misses, she might throw her bow in the dirt and collapse with a broken heart. That's when you know archery is real again, and I love it!

I just painted the picture of how colorful life can be when you take time to include a child. Now, let's take it one step further. The whole point of this piece was to help bowhunters better prepare for the fall. So, let's home in on my original direction: scout all summer, find big bucks, practice shooting often — then take out a youngster or newcomer who wants to go hunting.

Guaranteed, there are hardcore guys out there shaking their heads in disbelief about what I just wrote. To some, this notion would shatter the peace and solitude that come with bowhunting. And I get that, but I promise you there will come a day when you'll consider this to be the best move you ever made as a sportsman.

In my experience, just like shooting a bow, the act of hunting has become

decades of repetitiveness. I've found myself much more "comfortable" in the exciting moments — that is until I started taking newcomers with me. One day, I was sitting in a blind with a friend who was after her first buck. A spike appeared and she started breathing like she just ran a marathon. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "Can I take my safety off?"

I instantly snapped out of my relaxed daze. To me, this was just another small whitetail and I'd taken her to this spot to hunt for *big bucks*. I inconsiderately whispered back, "No, he's not big enough." Her body language reminded me of an untied balloon being let go. Over the next few minutes, my mind started racing. I watched her out of the corner of my eye, and I could tell that deer meant the world to her!

That moment made me realize so many great things about hunting — moments and things to which I had become immune. Or had I? It also made me realize that there were so many more moments that I could be living, that could be great again, as long as I had the right hunting partner.

It was then that I whispered to her to take the safety off. Within seconds, my heart was pounding harder than hers. The footage I was recording was too shaky to use, and I was using a tripod. Why was I losing control? Because my partner was! Her appreciation for things was brand new and in hunting, that excitement is contagious.

From that time on, I've done everything I can to interrupt my own hunting schedule to take others. It's the best favor I've ever done for myself.

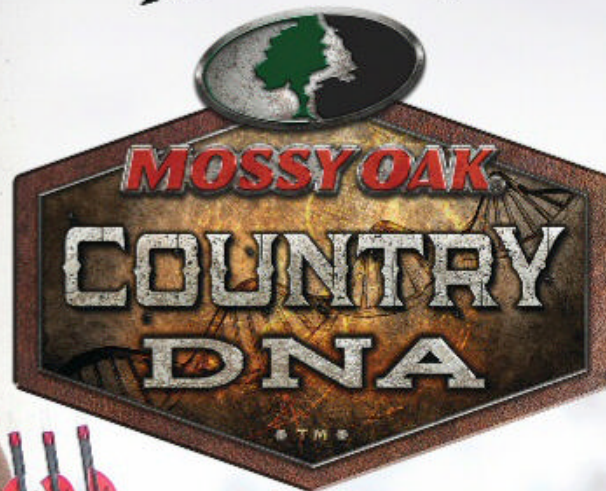
Last fall, one of the rookies I took hunting was Mason Moen. Mason wanted to be a bowhunter, and we made it happen as a team. The moment he arrowed his buck took me back to the day I arrowed my very first deer. My heart was pounding, just like his, and I had tears in my eyes like he did. There's no way I ever would've had that much fun if I was alone that day.

This fall, do yourself a favor and take a kid hunting! **B**

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By **JASON SNAVELY**

WHITETAILS



Although no bowhunter intentionally aims to hit a deer in the paunch, a gut shot is always lethal and the key to recovery is patience. Editor Christian Berg hit this Iowa buck well back in the body and waited overnight before taking up the trail for an easy recovery. Your arrow (inset) typically tells the tale on a gut shot, and Berg's was covered in stomach contents that confirmed the location of the hit.

THE SCIENCE OF THE SHOT (PART 2 OF 3)

GUT AND SINGLE-LUNG HITS

Understanding anatomy and physiology plays a key role in the recovery process.

IN THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of this series, I addressed cause of death from an arrow-inflicted wound to both the circulatory (blood flow) and ventilation (oxygen) systems.

My interview with retired surgeon and bowhunter Dr. Joe Bumgardner also detailed two types of shock that lead to an animal's demise: hemorrhagic shock (massive blood loss) and spinal shock (transecting the spinal cord with an arrow). Now, I'll discuss the "gut shot" and also explain why a single-lung hit isn't always lethal.

Gut Shots

If you bowhunt long enough, you may very well face the frustration of releasing an arrow and hearing that

dreaded, hollow sound of a stomach or paunch hit. The mood in camp when a fellow bowhunter has delivered an arrow "a little too far back" is one I've experienced many times. This is no time for feeling sorry for yourself; rather, you need to focus all your attention and energy on finding a dead animal.

Although no one intentionally shoots a deer or other game animal in the guts, let's start with the good news: an arrow/broadhead sent through the intestines or stomach of a whitetail is universally lethal. As Bumgardner puts it, "Infectious shock, aka septic shock, as the result of a gut or paunch shot is 100-percent lethal...from the spillage of intestinal contents into the abdominal cavity."

A gut-shot animal dies of septic shock from bacterial spillage into the abdominal/peritoneal cavity, resulting in further bacterial proliferation. "The bacteria from the intestinal spillage invade the lining of the abdominal cavity and enter the blood stream," Bumgardner said. "When the bacteria

get into the blood stream, it causes infection, sending the blood pressure down, ultimately to the point that the circulatory system fails."

If we know a gut-shot deer is going to die, what's the bad news? For one thing, the blood trail on such a shot is generally nonexistent. Most of the time, abdominal shots are pass-throughs, with the arrow often found stuck into the ground beyond where the deer was standing. Despite having both entry and exit wounds, the lining of the paunch often seals the exit hole and little to no blood or other body fluid can be found. In many cases, this leaves even the most observant tracker with no choice but to grid search the area for the dead animal.

So, how big of an area should you search? Well, that depends. "A paunch hit deer slowly walks off in a humped-up position," Bumgardner said. "Gut-shot animals will not generally go very far *if left undisturbed*. They will generally bed down within 100 yards

CHRISTIAN BERG PHOTOS



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WHITETAILS

and succumb to intestinal bacteria entering the blood stream, causing septic shot and demise from infection."

It's important to note that although a gut shot is always fatal, not all gut-shot deer are recovered. Given that, what is the most important quality to put the odds in your favor? Patience!

Bumgardner said gut shots must be analyzed carefully to determine the odds of finding the animal. "If you hit the paunch, it will take longer for the animal to die than if you hit the small intestine," he said. "However, if you hit the large intestine or the rectum, the much higher bacteria count results in a quicker death."

"Some abdominal shots can end quickly," Bumgardner said. For example, he recalled a personal shot on an animal that took a step during his release "I inadvertently hit about eight inches back and high, and I thought, 'Oh my, I've got a gut shot.' The animal ran about 30-40 yards, stopped, waited about 10 seconds and fell over."

Only after hanging up the animal did Bumgardner realize he'd hit the large artery that goes to the small intestine, causing it to bleed out. As for a more common gut shot, Bumgardner says it can take between 5 minutes and 72 hours for the animal to expire, depending on the location of the shot and bacteria content. The higher the bacterial content, the quicker the death.

The moral of the story here is never hurry to track a gut-shot animal. If you are hunting in the evening, letting the animal lie overnight is definitely the right call. And if you are hunting in the morning, give it the better part of the day before searching. Remember, if you remain patient and don't push the animal while it still has the strength to flee, you will generally find it dead in its bed within 150 yards of the sight of impact.

Single-Lung Shots

In whitetail deer, the right and left lungs are separated by the mediastinum, a structure that houses things such as the aorta, trachea and esophagus. A single-lung puncture will actually just collapse that one lung; the other lung is sufficient for ventilation to continue and support the tissues and organs in the animal. I repeat, a single-lung shot is NOT always lethal!

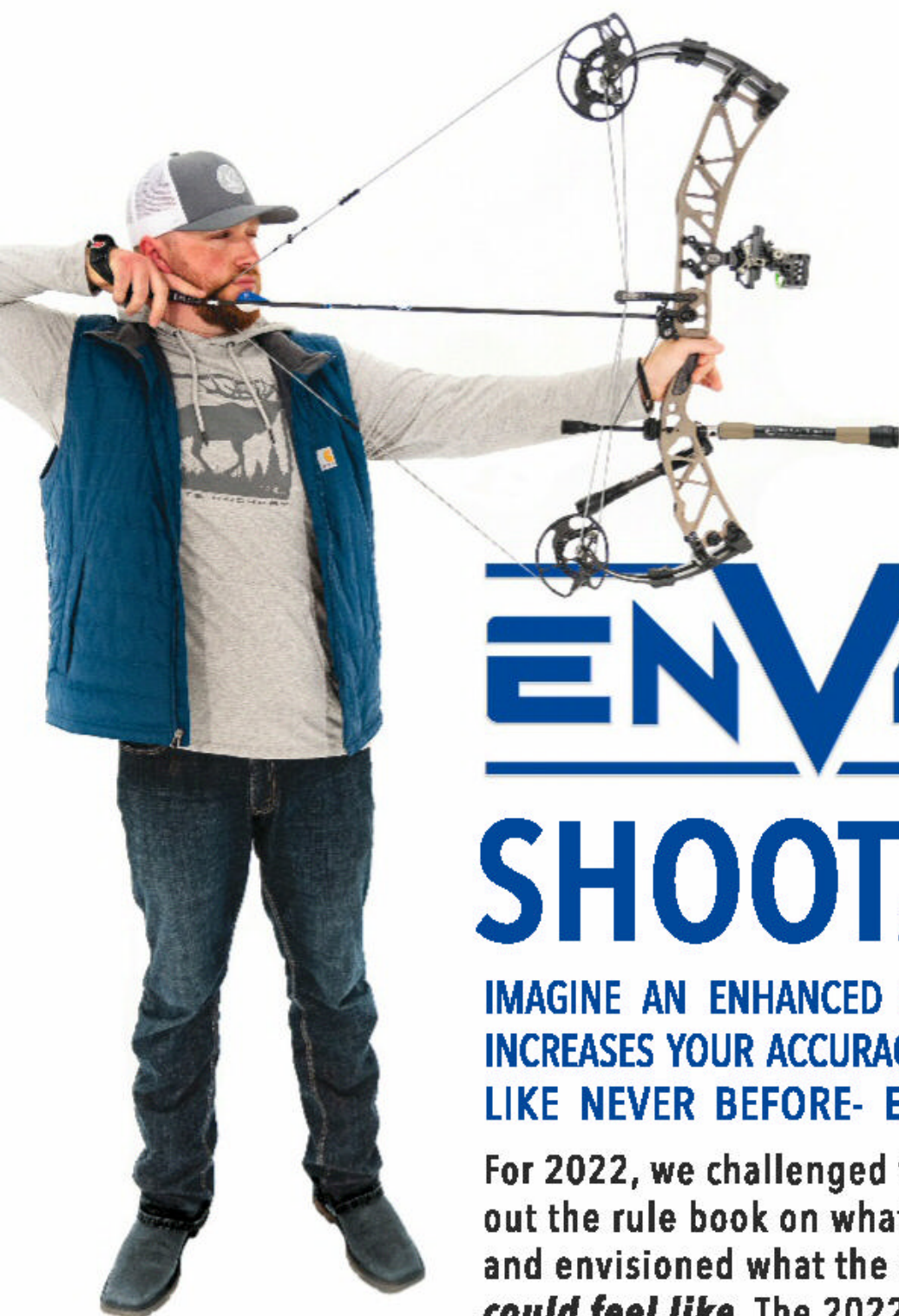
If you collapse both lungs, you have a ventilation-circulation mismatch and you've made a universally lethal shot. However, a single-lung hit can result in an unused tag. In this case, the animal still has one lung oxygenating the blood carried throughout the circulatory system, and the odds of recovery can be long. Moreover, a single-lung hit can clot and make the blood trail sparse.

Bumgardner's experience with humans shows just how reversible a single-lung collapse can be. He recalls stabbing and shooting victims being rushed to the ER for single-lung punctures, only to be fixed up and sent home three days later!

"They come in a little short of breath, and with a little bit of pain or discomfort on the top of the shoulder, but their circulatory and ventilation systems are functioning," Bumgardner said. In the hospital, a patient with a collapsed lung will have a tube inserted to suck the clotted blood from the lung. The tube will then be hooked up to a machine that applies negative pressure to cause the lung to re-expand.

Of course, whitetails don't have doctors and medical facilities to assist them in the case of a single-lung collapse. So, the healing process takes significantly longer; however, the collapsed lung generally re-expands after the blood is absorbed into the body. A single-lung hit on a deer quartering toward the hunter is only lethal when the arrow also clips a pulmonary artery or pulmonary vein. In this case, you will get enough bleeding to cause a blood circulation deficiency and lack of oxygen flow to the organs. This should drive home the importance of waiting for a deer to present a broadside shot that increases your odds of a pass-through that transects both lung cavities.

As bowhunters who cherish the game we pursue, it's crucial we spend just as much time educating ourselves on the anatomy and physiology of the animals we hunt as we do choosing and tuning our equipment. In archery, both the dreaded paunch shot and the single-lung hit bring thoughts of disappointment and disgust to many bowhunters' minds. With a basic understanding of the anatomy and physiology of whitetails, we can ensure those dreaded memories from the past remain in the past, while our future bow shots are patiently taken at broadside targets. **B**



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ELITE
THE WORLD'S MOST SHOOTABLE BOW™



By **RANDY ULMER**

BETTER BOWHUNTING

Installing a good, vibration-dampening stabilizer is just one of the steps you can take to help reduce the noise your bow makes at the shot.

PART 3

STRING JUMPING

Follow these tips to greatly reduce bow noise at the shot.

TRUTH BE TOLD, you cannot completely silence your bow.

Unless the wind is blowing violently, or thunder is crashing around you, any deer within bow range will hear you shoot — even if you are shooting a recurve bow with fingers.

However, the volume of sound your bow produces, the distance you are from the deer, and the quality of that sound (think metallic clang versus 'whoomph') all make a significant difference in determining whether the deer will react instantly and violently.

If you don't believe this, try an experiment. Sneak up behind an unsuspecting person and while standing directly behind them, clap your hands loudly just in back of their head and watch their reaction. Most likely, they

will have an instant physical reaction. Now, do the same thing, but stand 20 yards behind the person. In all likelihood, they will casually turn around to see who clapped.

The same phenomenon happens with deer. If a noise is close and loud, they will react much more violently than if the noise is quiet and far away.

As I've noted, the quality of the sound also matters. There are no natural metallic sounds in nature, so these types of noises are much more likely to put a deer into overdrive than a thumping sound of equal volume. Hence, you *must* eliminate any metallic clanks, dings, rattles or buzzes.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, let's go over how to minimize the volume of noise your bow produces.

Heavier Arrows

The fastest and easiest way to quiet a bow significantly is to shoot a heavier

arrow. In fact, there is no single other thing you can do to your bow that will silence it as quickly or as well as increasing your arrow weight.

A heavier arrow makes a bow more efficient. This means a higher percentage of a bow's stored energy is transferred to a heavy arrow as compared to a light arrow. Energy that is not transferred to the arrow is dissipated as vibration, and vibration causes noise. So, the heavier the arrow, the less vibration. And the less vibration, the less noise.

Heavy arrows will benefit your setup in many other ways. For example, a heavy arrow tends to be stiffer, which helps it penetrate better and group tighter with broadheads. Heavy, stiff arrows also make the bow more forgiving and tend to buck the wind better. In addition, they are less likely to bend or break.

The Quiver

The second-best thing you can do to reduce the volume of noise produced during the shot is to remove your quiver. I tried for years to minimize the noise produced by a quiver full of broadhead-tipped arrows and was never very successful. There's just way too much *stuff* hanging out there and none of it is bolted down. So, I gave up and began removing my quiver from the bow before the shot whenever possible.

I now use a detachable quiver that can be removed quickly from the bow and attached it to my belt. If you decide to remove your quiver for the shot, it's important to know how this will change the impact point of your arrows. With my bow, removing the quiver changes the impact point about an inch or two for every 20 yards. So, for example, when I'm shooting at 60 yards, I have to aim off 3-6 inches.

Silencers & Dampeners

I use aftermarket silencing devices (string leeches) on the bowstring and cables, and I double up on the inter-limb vibration-dampening devices (split-limb bows). If I don't plan on hiking great dis-

PHOTO BY JACE BAUGERMAN

tances during the hunt, I use a vibration-dampening stabilizer as well.

Some string stops are incredibly loud. Shoot your bow with and without the string stop installed and evaluate the difference in the sounds. It will not damage your bow to shoot it without the string stop; if you determine it's making too much noise, replace it with an aftermarket model specifically designed for stealth.

It is also important to make sure your string stop is in proper position. Most bow manufacturers suggest the bowstring just touch the rubber pad or be one credit card's width away when the bow is resting at brace height.

It is crucial you keep all your bow accessories and bolts tight. Any loose bolt will create a unique metallic buzzing sound. I use non-permanent Loctite on all bolts that aren't used for routine adjustments, and I routinely tighten all bolts, especially right before a hunt.

Release Aid

I use a release aid that is quiet when triggered. Some release-aid mechanisms are very noisy; for example, the hook may slam back against a steel backing, creating a loud metallic sound. These devices are seldom considered when most hunters are attempting to quiet their equipment, because the relatively small amount of noise is drowned-out by the sound of the bow. That said, they do contribute significantly to the overall noise produced at the shot.

The amount of noise produced by different models of release aids varies tremendously. Some are noisy when fired, and others still are noisy when cocked. I like to compare several before I choose the right one to use; I usually opt for something such as the Carter Whisper, which is a handheld release aid specifically designed with stealth in mind.

If your release aid's mechanism smacks metal on metal when fired, you can try to place a soft substance such as moleskin where the two metal parts collide. However, this is impossible on some models.

Other Issues

If you can hear a bothersome noise in your setup and can't quite pinpoint it, pull the string back an inch or two and let it go. By plucking the string over and over with your ear close to the bow, you'll be able to identify the source.

Last, bows with carbon risers are better at dampening vibration than traditional aluminum bows and, therefore, are quieter during the shot. They also tend to be less noisy if they bump up against a rock or a treestand.

We'll continue this topic in my next column, so check back next month! **B**

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The advertisement features a collection of CBE archery accessories. On the left is a black CBE Adapt quiver. In the center are two bowsights: a Trek Pro Bowsight with a green ring and a Trek Bowsight. To the right is a Torx Carbon Micro Stabilizer. The background is a light gray with a subtle mountain range pattern. The bottom of the ad has a red banner with the website URL, a QR code, and a call to action.

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BOWHUNTING WISDOM

By **BILL WINKE**



Summer is the perfect time to make small adjustments to shooting form that can pay big dividends on the range and in the field.

THE MIDSUMMER TUNEUP

Try these tweaks for better accuracy.

I'VE LEARNED over the years that it's the little things that add up to make a big difference, not only in hunting strategy but also in bow shooting and setup. In an effort to help you become even better shooters, here are seven simple tweaks that I focus on every summer to produce better habits and better accuracy in the fall.

Tuning Tweaks

Fine-Tune Your Rest: Proper left-to-right position of your arrow rest can instantly improve arrow flight and accuracy. If you are struggling with a bow that seems to have a mind of its own, or you just bought a new arrow rest and are setting it up for the first time, these basics will get it squared away right from the start.

When setting up for a release aid, your nocked arrow should line up perfectly with the forward thrust of the string. If you release with fingers, your arrow should be pointed slightly to the left of square (for right-handed archers).

There are several ways to go about setting the left-to-right position of

your rest. I use a simple method that relies on the stabilizer as a reference. To start, set the bow down on the floor resting on its bottom cam. Now, look down on it from above while comparing the nocked arrow to the stabilizer. Move the rest in or out until the arrow is parallel with the stabilizer (though it may not go right down the center of the stabilizer). If you don't have a stabilizer, you can still use this alignment method by picking up a couple feet of inexpensive 5/16-24 threaded rod at a hardware store.

Now, we'll move on to the up and down position of the rest and nock point. Release-aid shooters should install a nock point (or nocking loop)

so the upper edge of the arrow's nock is approximately one-eighth to one-quarter of an inch above the center of the bolt hole where the rest attaches. You will need a T-square to make this adjustment accurately. Finger shooters should start three-eighths of an inch above the attachment hole's center.

From here, you only have to adjust the rest vertically until the center of the arrow shaft crosses the very center of the rest attachment hole. Hold the bow so the hole is roughly at eye level to make this adjustment accurately. The arrow now should roughly make a 90-degree angle with the string. You will also enjoy good arrow flight if the arrow points slightly below a 90-degree angle.

Tweaking Your Shooting Form

If you are struggling with consistency, the following tweaks will help keep you on target:

Relax Your Bow Hand and Arm: Relaxation starts with your feet and legs and leads to your bow arm and bow hand. Everything should be relaxed, from the ground up. Bend your bow arm just enough to unlock the elbow and let the fingers of your bow hand hang naturally in a relaxed grip. The hand should be lifeless to shoot your best. Think of it as an inanimate cradle with no power to manipulate the bow.

This lifeless hand will feel really odd at first, but trust the process. As strange as it sounds, you will shoot your best if you don't manipulate the bow in any way using your bow hand. Use the bigger muscles of your hips to move the bow around the target.

Experiment With Your Grip: You want to be sure to hold the bow the same way every single shot, but how you grip it also can be a source of problems. I once had a terrible time eliminating a tail-right paper tear when tuning. I tried moving the rest one way and then the other, and that didn't help; I just couldn't get rid of it. Finally, two things made the difference.

First, I made sure I was pulling the string straight away from the target at

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARK GUDENGER

full draw and not to the side. Second, I started experimenting with different ways of holding the bow. I soon learned the way I flexed the wrist of my bow hand had a big impact on arrow flight. With these two tweaks in place, I was immediately shooting bullet holes.

If your arrows are flying poorly and nothing seems to fix this, change the way you hold the bow — where you apply pressure to the grip, how much you flex your wrist and the way you pull through the shot at full draw. This is one simple tweak that can make a huge difference in your accuracy.

Perfect Your Follow-Through: The follow-through holds everything together long enough for the arrow to escape the bow unaffected. Your grip hand must stay relaxed until the arrow hits the target. Many bowhunters snap the hand closed at the moment they release the string, and this destroys consistent accuracy.

Your bow arm must remain steady all the way through the shot. Resist the common tendency to drop it or move it when you release the string. Instead, try to keep your bow arm up and aiming until the arrow hits the target. Continue aiming until the small spot

you are trying to hit disappears at the end of your arrow. I have fixed a lot of shooting problems by simply focusing on the follow-through.

Maintain Your Focus: Work on your mental follow-through too. You have likely heard the old saying that if you aim small you will miss small. That is definitely true of archery. Learn to maintain a sharp focus on the spot you want to hit. Pick a single spot and when it comes into focus, you know you are ready to start executing the release. It all starts with your practice sessions. Taking 20 shots with maximum concentration is much better than 60 mediocre ones. Practice doesn't make perfect — perfect practice makes perfect.

Tweaking Your Arrows

Spin Test Your Arrows: I spin test all my arrows with broadheads installed. I place the tip on the pad of my palm and give it a good spin by flicking the arrow between the thumb and middle finger of the other hand. If I feel any vibration at all where the broadhead rests, I set the arrow aside.

My goal is to fill a quiver full of arrows with broadheads that are perfectly aligned to the shafts. If I fall short of

Replacing arrow nocks annually is a simple step that can boost accuracy.

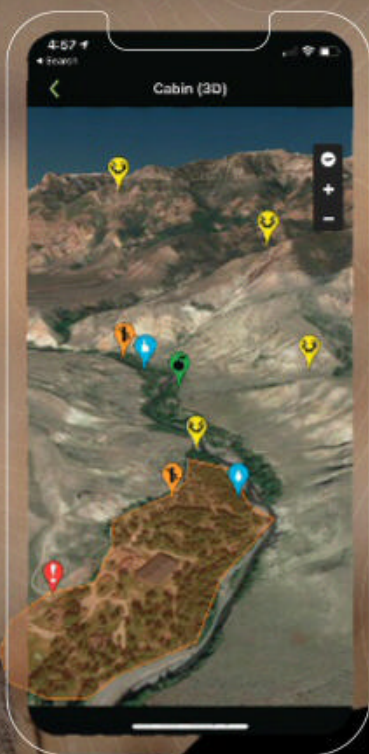


that goal, I start swapping broadheads on the wobbly arrows until I find the right combination. Your hunting arrows have to spin perfectly, or they won't fly perfectly.

Replace Your Nocks: Nocks take a beating during the off-season, so replacing them before each hunting season is good accuracy insurance and will often bring your group size down noticeably.

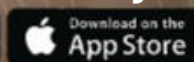
These seven tweaks are my own personal checklist when I'm gearing up for the season, or when my shooting is less than perfect. You always want to blame yourself — "I am just having a bad day" — but often it is something you can identify and fix that is holding you back. Focus on the fundamentals and you will enjoy fun summer shooting and a fall filled with success. **B**

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By **BRAD FENSON**

CROSSBOWS



There are numerous strategies and tactics you can employ to up the odds of success when hunting public lands.

GET READY!

Thorough preparation is the key to public-land hunting success.

HUNTING PUBLIC LAND can be a blessing and a curse. On one hand, archery enthusiasts have millions of acres available to hunt, hike and play with few restrictions. The downside? Everyone has access to these same parcels.

There are several ways to approach a public-land hunt with a crossbow; however, the best advice is to keep things simple.

Use Shooting Sticks

Crossbows are heavy and often touted as advantageous because you can be at full draw before encountering an animal. But for you to have that advantage, a rest or shooting sticks are required. Anyone who doubts this should try holding an 8-pound crossbow in position for a minute or two and see if they can keep the reticle steady on target.

Hunt From the Ground

A treestand locks you into one place and allows other hunters to learn from your scouting, while hunting from the ground allows you to set up differently every day or make a move depending on changing environmental conditions. When I find a treestand,

the first thing I do is assess why it is there. Game trails, water, prevailing winds and food sources all work into the equation quickly, without you having to do all the legwork. Of course, when hunting public ground, it's best to leave no trace or clues as to why you are hunting a specific spot.

I once hunted black bears with an outfitter who didn't use treestands. He said bears were more apt to locate you in a tree than concealed on the ground. But, the biggest reason for this eye-to-eye approach is it allows for the best angle and penetration from a bolt.

An animal shot through the vitals leaves a blood trail on both sides. Eliminating the angle means reduced chances of catching one lung or misreading the shot placement. In short, a level shot can reduce tracking time.

Stay Mobile

Hunting pressure moves wildlife out of regular patterns, and staying mobile allows you to think like the critters and adjust accordingly. Learning the game trails, escape routes and travel corridors between food sources and bedding areas allows you to stay one step ahead of everyone else.

Time spent scouting can tell you about the habitat and animals before opening day. Watch for spots to set up on the ground and use natural cover. Blinds can also work, but not all wildlife accept new features on the landscape without suspicion.

Take Advantage of Others

One of the most challenging things to plan for on public land is other hunters, so finding and setting up in areas where animals will naturally head to escape pressure is a significant advantage. The predictable movements of other hunters, and their impact on wildlife, allow you to be proactive. Count on them to push wildlife and then set up near the funnels you think are best.

Determine access points, where other users may approach stands or

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

hunting locations and what this will do to animal movement. Then decide if you need to adjust your tactics. Having a crossbow means you can move on the fly and reset anywhere.

Remain Concealed & Ready

The benefit of hunting with a crossbow is being ready to shoot without moving. You can kneel, stand or even shoot from a sitting position. So, plan accordingly and use this advantage to hunt intelligently.

Tying back a few limbs on a cedar or using your favorite turkey chair for hunting deer keeps you hidden and reduces your profile. Being mobile on an elk hunt can be an advantage, but always set up on shooting sticks before a bull shows up. The goal is to be stable and ready in the shooting position before the action. A pivoting head on your shooting sticks allows for slow movement to anticipate shooting lanes. Think ahead, create your advantage and generate as many benefits as possible from your hunting gear.

Know Your Range

As with all archery hunting, knowing your equipment is paramount to

success. Crossbows are noisy compared to vertical bows, and there is no better teacher for this than experience.

Crossbows are sometimes touted as long-range archery tools, and the Internet is brimming with videos of people shooting 100 yards with them. The reality, however, is that hunting in quiet conditions mean reduced range.

I recently harvested a buck on an evening without any wind and the silence made it difficult to move without making noise. When the deer showed up broadside at 36 yards, I quickly lined up the crosshairs on its vitals. My bolt broke its spine and knocked him to the ground. The lesson I learned from this was the buck "jumped the string" at 36 yards, and even though I was shooting an extremely fast bow, the deer was faster. The farthest I have shot at an animal is 46 yards, and it was on a windy evening and the buck never knew what hit him.

Plan Thoroughly

There is a wide range of habitats and conditions on public land, and scouting is the only way to hunt a spot effectively with archery equipment. Knowing your crossbow well helps to determine

practical and ethical shooting ranges; you should also learn to carry and use shooting sticks or support.

Spending time on the practice range is as crucial as scouting. It's important to know the trajectory of your bolts to avoid problems in the field, and to practice shooting from the ground and ensure your bow is level.

As far as the noise factor, try downloading a decibel meter to your phone to learn for yourself how noisy your bow is when launching a bolt. Another tip is to mark one of your bolts with the width of your crossbow uncocked and then use the bolt to determine your limb clearance in tight spots so you can hide effectively but still shoot with confidence.

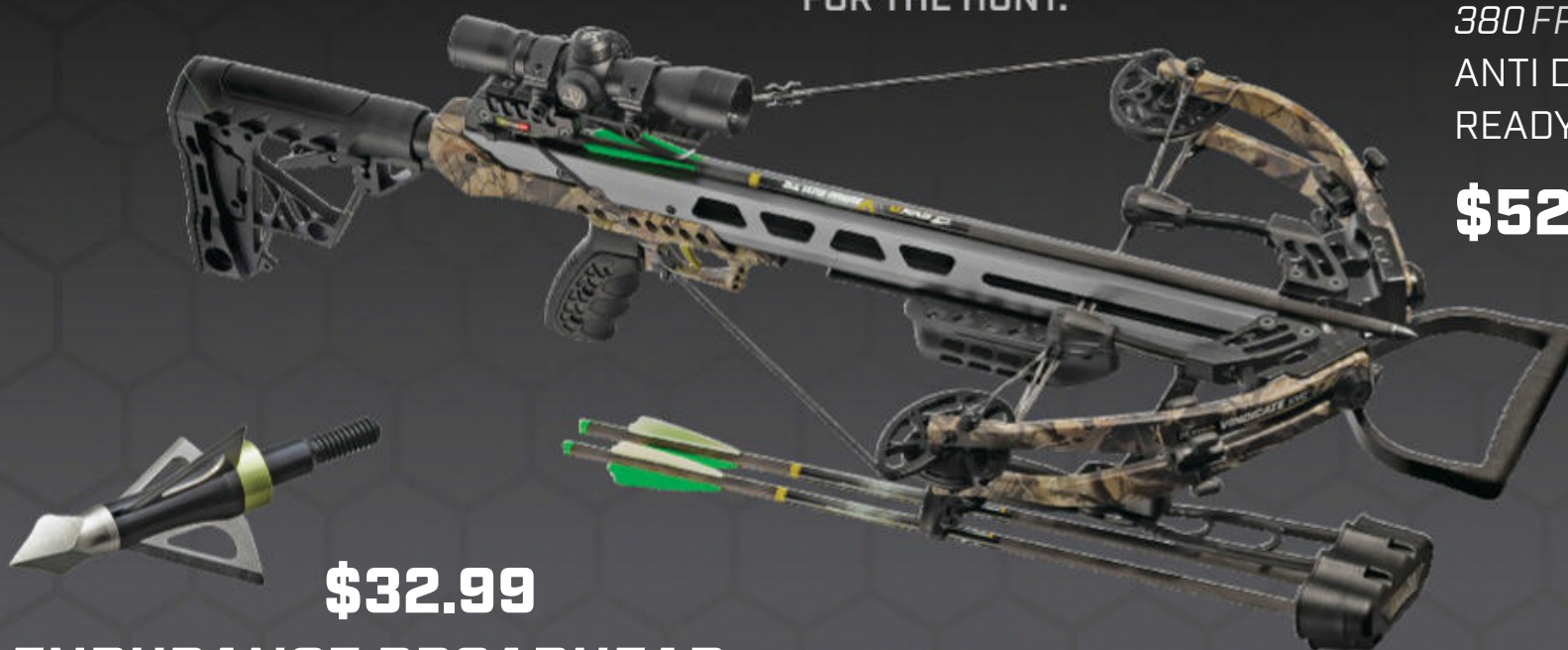
Show Respect

Last but not least, hunters need to respect others on shared landscapes. Yes, it can be frustrating when you encounter more individuals than you expected, and most hunters have at least one story of disappointment. Hopefully, however, staying flexible and having alternative routes and plans will lead to more opportunities and fewer regrets afield. **B**

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By **CABE JOHNSON**

SPOT-ON

WHERE TO FOCUS — THE PIN OR THE TARGET?

Depending on skill level and experience, one just might yield better results.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, we were all shooting together when one of us mentioned how blurry his sight pins were. Another said his pins were fine, but his target was blurry.

Before long, we were discussing whether our visual focus was on our pins or the target during the aiming process. Some of us didn't even know where our focus was.

Because of the way our eyes work, we must choose where we want to focus. Do you want to focus on your pins and leave the target blurry? Or do you want to focus on the target and leave your pins blurry? As archers, is there an advantage to one focal point over the other?

To help answer that question, we decided it would be interesting to

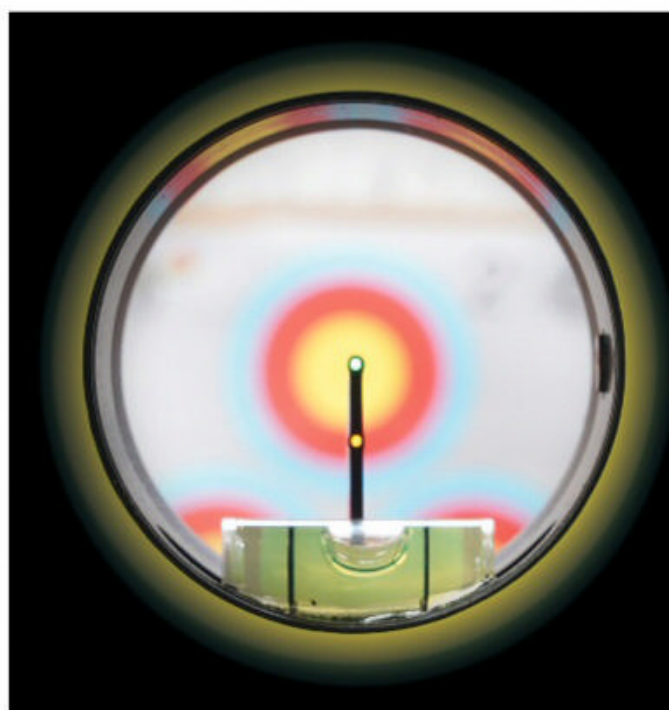
talk with some of the nation's top archers and see what they were doing. After all, if they are successful, they must be doing it right. Well, we got a variety of answers from these top shooters. Surprisingly, many didn't really know where their focus was. It was something they had just done naturally and didn't have to make a conscious choice between focusing on their pins or the target.

So, we decided we needed to experiment with our own shooting, using both focal points to determine which one yielded the best results. What we found was rather surprising.

We found that when we focused on the pin, we did a great job of leveling the bow, centering the pin guard in the peep sight and gapping (shooting the odd yardages) between our pins. The aiming seemed to be the priority.

However, when we focused on the target, it seemed like aiming became secondary and was less of a priority, which we figured would be a bad thing. Strangely, some of us shot tighter groups while focused on the target, because shot execution seemed to be the priority. Another bonus of focusing on the target was that we held steadier.

The holding steadier made sense.



While at full draw, you must choose whether to focus your eyes on your sight pin (left) or target (right). There are advantages to both options. So, experimenting with each and comparing your accuracy will reveal which one works best for you.

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

When we tried to hold our pin on a spot, we would fly by the spot then try to correct it by bringing the pin back to the spot and fly by again. This made us feel as though we needed to “catch” the spot as our pin flew past.

When we focused on the target, aiming was secondary so we didn’t keep trying to correct the pin position, which was causing a lot of unnecessary movement. We were able to hold steadier and shoot with fewer flinches and without punching the trigger.

However, we soon realized there isn’t a “one-size-fits-all” approach to focusing. More experienced archers seemed to have great success focusing on the target and letting the aiming be secondary. But the less experienced archers struggled. They seemed to shoot a lot better when they focused on aiming with their pins.

After studying this for a while, we realized this is because less experienced archers don’t have a good foundation of aiming. If they focused on the target, they would not center the pin guard inside the peep sight, choose the correct pin or consistently level the bow. They needed to consciously perform these steps to be accurate.

On the other hand, more experienced archers had built a solid foundation of aiming, so they could let it be secondary and still aim well. They could take advantage of focusing more on the shot execution.

So, depending on our skill level and experience, we have found that one focal point is superior to the other. We suggest shooting groups using both focal points (near and far) and experimenting, because you may be missing out on better shooting. **B**



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By **JON E. SILKS**

BOW TEST

APA BLACK MAMBA 31

Compact, lightweight and truly innovative!

APA ARCHERY, founded in 2002, is a think-outside-the-box company with bow designs and features you will not find anywhere else. Its unique risers are particularly interesting and bring instant brand recognition to both the company and the bows.

APA's innovation continues with the introduction of its Black Mamba 31, which is home to the company's slimmest riser to date, a riser fang, snake head cutouts, tool center, center shot indicator and much more. Let's dig in and take a closer look.

A Standout Bow

There's no mistaking APA bows due, in large part, to their unique risers. The Black Mamba 31 takes this to the next level with its snake head-shaped cutouts up and down the riser. It is CNC machined from a block of 6061-T6 aluminum and sports a reflex structure, meaning the throat of the grip is behind the pivot point of the limbs, resulting in a longer power stroke and increased speed.

A "fang" machined into the front of the riser provides a convenient hook that can be used to hang the bow on

APA's Black Mamba 31 is packed with features, including its Twin Flex limbs, X1 Dual Cams with Rotating Draw Stops, Micro Tune Technology, and a riser that is unique and extremely useful.

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: APA Archery, 306-948-5101; apaarchery.com

Model: Black Mamba 31

Riser: Machined aluminum, reflex, pre-loaded

Grip: Machined, wooden side plates, reference groove

Limbs: Twin Flex, solid, slim

Draw Weights: 40, 50, 60, 70 and 80 pounds peak

Draw Lengths: 25-31 inches, in half-inch increments; modular

Cam System: X1, Dual, Rotating Draw Stop

Letoff: 80 percent (advertised); 75.1 percent (as tested)

String: Scorpion, BCY X-99, 53 inches

Cables (x2): Scorpion, BCY X-99, 32.75 inches

Brace Height: 6.75 inches

Axle-to-Axle Length: 31.25 inches

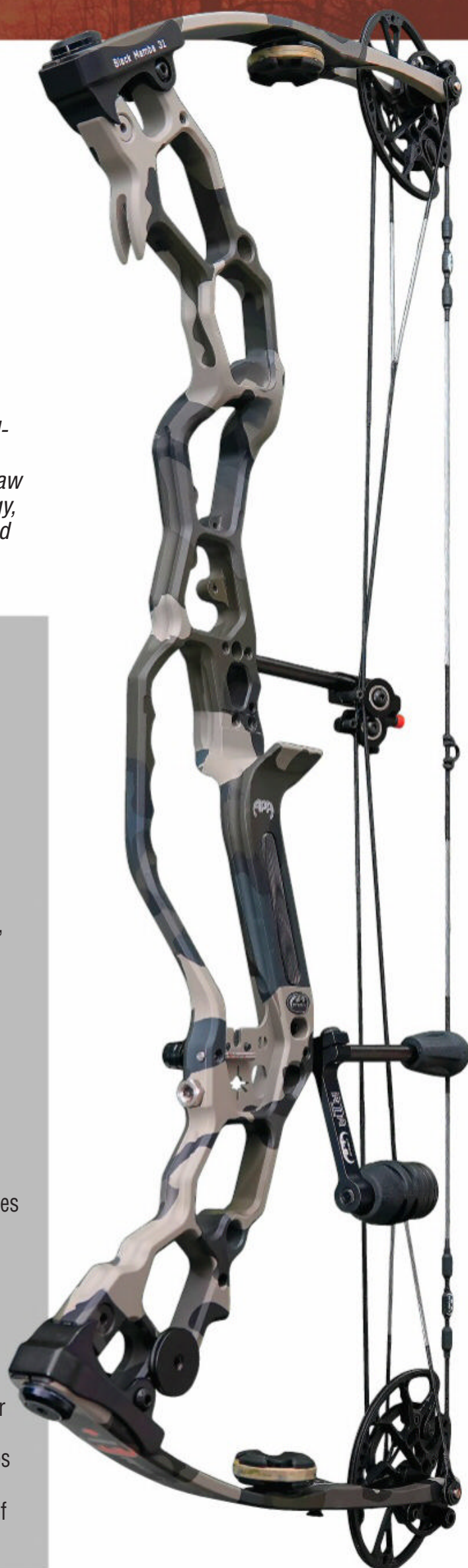
Weight: 3.8 pounds (advertised); 3.9 pounds (as tested)

Finish: Sandstone, Matte Black, Desolve Wing Camo and seven other hunting and target colors

Advertised IBO Speed: Up to 350 fps

MSRP: \$1,199

Comments: The Swiss Army Knife of compound bows!



limbs, accessory arms, etc. Two sight-mounting positions allow for a range of peep sight and anchor positions, while a second rest-mounting hole gives archers the opportunity to double up on rest bolts for a super secure lockdown. A built-in carrying handle — complete with finger contours — loops forward from the top of the sight window to just below the grip. Shallow recesses, which APA calls the Nockpoint Alignment Zone, are machined into the riser above the shelf and on the carrying handle to produce a visible line that can be used to ensure your arrow is square during the tuning process.

The Torque-Free Grip, machined into the handle, is outfitted with two wooden side plates and creates a neutral wrist position. A groove machined into the handle in front of the grip serves as a reference point for your fingers, promoting repeatability and better shooting. Immediately below the grip is one of the most interesting features you will find on any bow — the Tool Center. The included metal pin serves as APA's Center Shot Indicator when setting up the rig, and as a Cam Lock for in-the-field string work. Additional tools include a broadhead wrench, nock wrench and carbide sharpener. A string stop is mounted behind the Tool Center and a metal stabilizer insert is located in front of it. Multiple rear stabilizer-mounting holes, a roller-guard cable-management system, side-mount weight distribution system, built-in quiver, wrist-sling mounts and Soft Touch Armor coating complete the riser package.

The Muscle

APA's X1 machined aluminum,

SPEED & ENERGY*

	375-GRAIN ARROW	425-GRAIN ARROW
ARROW SPEED	301 fps	284 fps
KINETIC ENERGY	75.5 ft./lbs.	76.1 ft./lbs.
DYNAMIC EFFICIENCY	84.8%	85.6%
SHOT NOISE	89.4 dBA	88.8 dBA

*29.5-inch Draw Length

DRAW-FORCE CURVE



EDITOR'S NOTE:

All of our Bow Tests are conducted using the same standardized procedures and professionally calibrated testing equipment. Bows are tested with a draw length of 29 inches and a draw weight of 65 pounds, unless otherwise noted.

two-track dual cams power the Black Mamba 31 to advertised IBO speeds up to 350 fps on a 6.75-inch brace height and 80 percent letoff. A series of modules cover the draw-length range of 25-31 inches, in half-inch increments, while the Rotating Draw Stop (RDS) is designed to produce a solid back wall at any draw length. The adjustment also allows the shooter to fine-tune and personalize the feel at full draw.

With tuning as a significant focus, the Black Mamba features Variable Yoke Technology (VYT) that autocorrects its position, and Micro Tune Technology that allows the archer to quickly

and easily advance either cam for perfected timing. It's tuning made simple.

Double Flex Technology

APA's Twin Flex (TF2) limbs are machined from a fiberglass/carbon composite material and measure 13.5 inches long. They are designed to flex in two places along the limb — the forked section near the cams and the main belly of the limb between the limb pocket and limb 'V.' This distributes the load/stress over both bending sections, storing more energy and packing more power. Maximum efficiency and longer limb life result as well, according to APA. The narrow, solid limbs are matched into pairs based on deflection values and are available in 40-, 50-, 60-, 70- and 80-pound peak draw weights. Limb pockets are machined from aluminum, include the fang shapes and pivot during draw-weight adjustment.

At the Range

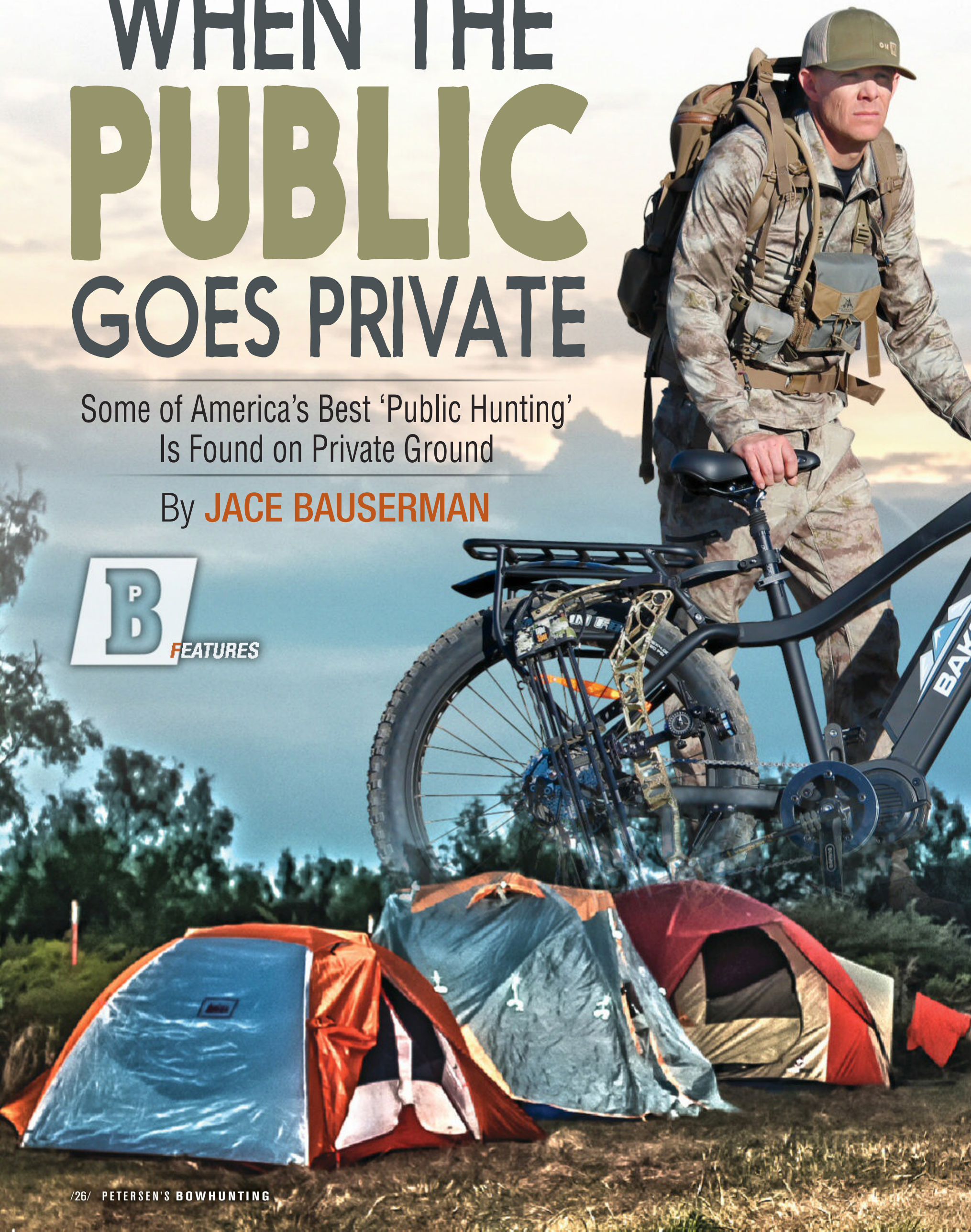
The first thing I did with the Black Mamba 31 was set it up for testing using the Nockpoint Alignment Zone and on-board Center Shot Indicator pin. I like those additions to the APA arsenal!

This bow is unmatched in the utility it provides beyond the norm. At the shot, the bow has only a small jump in the handle, mid-level vibration and proved notably quiet — all good performance markers for a bow that weighed in on our scale at only 3.9 pounds. The draw was stiff on the front end and loaded up just before dropping off into the valley and finishing with a rock solid back wall. The carrying handle is convenient and the grip is functional and comfortable. **B**

WHEN THE PUBLIC GOES PRIVATE

Some of America's Best 'Public Hunting'
Is Found on Private Ground

By **JACE BAUSERMAN**



NO, THIS ISN'T A BASH-PRIVATE-LAND-HUNTING ARTICLE. So, don't roll your eyes and flip the page. I love to hunt private land; in fact, I have a pair of whitetail leases in Colorado and one in Nebraska. However, most of my hunting each fall is on public ground. Much of this is due to my geographic location. The western landscape is riddled with BLM, National Forest, Wilderness Areas, Walk-In Access, Block Management Access, etc. With so much dirt open to the hunting public, I can pursue elk, mule deer, pronghorns, bears, turkeys and, last fall, bighorn sheep, all without shelling out any greenbacks for land access.

Still, there's no denying public land is getting more crowded. These days, it seems just about every bowhunter out there is captivated by the romantic notion of running carbon through a velvet-racked muley in a no-name alpine basin, or calling a drooling, love-sick bull elk into point-blank range. As a result, there are more bowhunters "out there" than ever before, and in some of the most popular areas of the country, overcrowding and intense competition for limited big-game resources is becoming a real problem.

The good news is that many state game agencies — not just in the West, but around the country — are responding by partnering with landowners to open private ground to public access. That's right, public hunting on private ground. I know it might sound too good to be true, but it isn't. Many of these tracts see little use, and if you do your research, chances are good you'll be in for a great hunt. These pub-

lic-private partnerships will grow and continue if we do our part. Follow property rules and guidelines to the letter, and always leave the land better than you found it.

With that, let's dive in and take a look at 10 great state programs that will let you conduct your next big "public-land" adventure on private property.

COLORADO

I've been told, more than once, that I purposely steer people away from the Centennial State. False. There is no better place to dip your toes in the elk-hunting water, and recently, my home state has increased the amount of private-land acreage available to public hunting through Walk-In Access.

Rather than spend big money for an outfitted hunt or a lease, many savvy bowhunters are taking advantage of programs that make private lands available for public hunting.



WHEN THE PUBLIC GOES PRIVATE

Now common throughout the northeastern and southeastern portions of the state where copious amounts of plains mule deer, whitetails and pronghorns dwell, Walk-In Access is a win. Keep in mind that most Colorado Walk-In properties are open to small- and big-game hunting, but many are for small-game only. Be sure to get a copy of the state's Walk-In Atlas or look the brochure up online.

Because Colorado is well known for its vast acreages of National Forest and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) ground, many Walk-In Access properties are largely overlooked when it comes to big-game hunting opportunities. My advice is to take advantage of them. Two years ago, I bowhunted whitetails on a Walk-In tract that measures less than 100 acres. Over the course of the season, I made 23 sits on the property and never encountered another hunter.

Drawing a bighorn sheep tag is like winning the lottery. Still, I'm living proof it does happen, and when your number gets drawn, depending on what unit you'll be hunting, be sure to look at the state's Bighorn Sheep Access Program (BSAP), which started in 2015 to open more private sheep ground to public hunting.

👉 Website: cpw.state.co.us

FLORIDA

I've had some stellar bowhunts in Florida over the years, and the state continues to up its game as a must-hunt destination. Currently, the Sunshine State has one of the country's largest Wildlife Management Area (WMA) systems. While close to 1.5 million acres of WMA land is owned by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), another almost 5 million acres of private land have also been secured.

WMA hunters must possess a management area permit and are encouraged to visit myfwc.com to view the WMA Finder. While some areas offer unlimited access, other WMAs are available through Limited Entry/Quota hunts. Time on the FWC website will be well spent planning a Florida hunt excursion. Not only can you search WMAs by species and location, but you also can access harvest reports to see where other hunters have scored in the past.

👉 Website: myfwc.com

IDAHO

Like many western states, public hunting opportunities abound in Idaho. Still, Idaho's Fish and Game (IDFG) continues to press the envelop and create additional opportunities. Enter Idaho's Access Yes! Program. Kickstarted in 2019, Access Yes! has opened 328,066 acres of private land to public access and has allowed public hunters to use landlocked public parcels by making navigation through private land possible.

A visit online will tell you all you need to know about the Access Yes! Program. From the Access Yes! homepage, you can locate property maps and read up on all rules and regulations. Once you pick a property off the map, you can view the landowner's access requirements. Not all requirements are the same, so be sure to do your homework.

👉 Website: idfg.idaho.gov

ILLINOIS

The Land of Lincoln is renowned for its gagger-sized



Above: Sometimes, focusing on smaller, out-of-the-way tracts that are overlooked by other hunters can pay big dividends.

The author took this drop-tine, public-land bull from a "fringe" elk area less than an hour from his southeast Colorado home.

Below: The author with a nice wild hog from Florida. Although the Sunshine State doesn't make the average list of must-hunt states, it actually is game-rich and offers lots of great public-hunting opportunities.



whitetails, yet ranks a dismal 46th in the nation when it comes to public-land access. However, that doesn't mean an enterprising DIY deer hunter can't find stellar opportunities. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is doing its part to help through the Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP). Using VPA-HIP grant funds, IDNR is working with private landowners and, since 2011, has secured more than 27,000 acres in 52 counties. When landowners enroll in the program, they get a comprehensive habitat/forestry management plan done and become eligible for government-funded habitat restoration projects.

According to the IDNR, IRAP properties have produced numerous trophy-caliber bucks and plenty of turkeys over the years. Hunt numbers are controlled through a permit and reservation program. Archery deer-hunt applications are available starting July 1, and awarded hunters receive no fewer than 15 days to hunt their chosen property.

👉 Website: huntillinois.org



Colorado bowhunter Danny Farris has found consistent whitetail success in Kansas by employing decoys on overlooked Walk-In Hunting Access properties in the western part of the state.

KANSAS

When it comes to whitetails, few states compare with Kansas. The Sunflower State ranks No. 8 all-time in Boone and Crockett Club record-book whitetail entries, and unlike most whitetail super states, there is plenty of open-to-anyone land to roam.

Kansas has 19 Deer Management Units and most offer some form of Walk-In Hunting Access (WIHA). Don't overlook prairie units in the far west that lack traditional whitetail habitat. Kansas deer have adapted well and rolling CRP fields with cedar breaks hold many deer.

Kansas has an easy-to-use, interactive WIHA online map available at ksoutdoors.com. Hunters should know hunting is by foot traffic only, which keeps overall hunting pressure down, and open hunt dates are posted on all maps and posted signs. If you do your homework and spend time surfing the map, you'll find numerous WIHA areas that limit use to bowhunting-only. When you click on a WIHA, the map will provide you with acreage, county, access period, any property-specific regulations and the game species you are likely to encounter.

👉 Website: ksoutdoors.com

MONTANA

Few states speak to a hunter's heart like the Treasure State. Montana is rich with game and offers millions of acres of public land to roam. Over the past few years, the big public-land story is the state's Block Management Program. Montana has partnered with more than 1,200 landowners and enrolled 7.1 million acres of private land in the Block Management Program that provides the public with free access to private land.

Every hunt region in Montana offers Block Manage-

ment, and you can do your research via the state's Block Management Access Guide to find areas where the species you're hunting are likely to be found. Visit the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks website to get the ball rolling.

Block Management hunters are encouraged to do their research as two types of Block Management properties exist. The first is a Type I BMA, where hunters use sign-in boxes to register. Type I BMAs have no hunter quota, and reservations are not required. Type II BMAs require hunters to contact a FWP staff member or the landowner to gain access. Regardless, this is a remarkable program, and resident and nonresident hunters are the beneficiaries.

👉 Website: fwp.mt.gov

NEBRASKA

Nebraska has more than 1.2 million acres of public land, and it's no secret the state is a turkey and whitetail gem. Hunters can purchase up to three turkey tags over the counter, and in most areas, bowhunters can buy a pair of buck tags.

Nebraska is a Walk-In Access kingpin, and I've had some unforgettable hunts for deer and turkey by taking advantage of Walk-In ground. Don't overlook small tracts of Walk-In. These parcels often get ignored and can produce some excellent hunting. Walk-In Access is exceptional throughout the state.

If you have a youth hunter, I recommend taking full advantage of the state's Passing Along the Heritage Program (PATH). This fantastic program allows youth to hunt on private and selected public lands. It's open to youth hunters under 18, so mentors must be present. Private-land access is limited to a specific number of users to help ensure hunters get the best experience possible.

👉 Website: outdoornebraska.gov

WHEN THE PUBLIC GOES PRIVATE

OKLAHOMA

The Sooner State is another must-hunt destination. If you're a whitetail fanatic, few other states can rival Oklahoma's winning combination of overall deer numbers, sound management practices and huntable ground.

Oklahoma is well-populated with Walk-In Access ground, but another public program not to overlook is the Oklahoma Land Access Program (OLAP). In 2014, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) received a \$2.26 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and this money has been used to provide financial incentives to landowners who allow public access.

Click the *Where To Hunt* tab on the ODWC website to access the interactive OLAP map. All archery-only properties are marked with a fixed-blade broadhead symbol, and a click on the logo reveals additional property information.

👉 Website: wildlifedepartment.com



Few destinations are better for bow-hunting in the spring than Oklahoma. The Sooner State has plenty of public-hunting opportunities and plenty of longbeards to chase.

SOUTH DAKOTA

The Rushmore State is one of my favorite hunt locales, and though 80 percent of the state is private, South Dakota's Game, Fish and Parks department has done a remarkable job of opening a considerable amount of that private ground up for public hunting.

Top South Dakota species include mule and whitetail deer, while pronghorn populations are also robust in the southwest and northwest. Walk-In Access is the state's most popular private-to-public hunt program, but don't overlook tracts of Controlled Hunting Access Program (CHAP) and COOP Management Areas.

CHAP lands are working farms and ranches leased for public hunting. Hunters using a CHAP area need to complete the required check-in registration slip and drop that slip in

the self-service box. Hunters can also reserve permission to hunt CHAP areas up to eight days in advance. Visit the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks website and you'll be on your way to hunting private land turned public in no time.

COOP Management Areas, branded by a bright yellow sign, are common in the state's northeast portion. Other than for disabled hunters, most access is limited to foot traffic, and no reservations or permission are needed to access COOP dirt. Foot access is always something to keep in mind. When bowhunters can't drive, especially if top-notch game spots require a significant hike from the parking area, you may find acres of ground that don't see many human footprints during a season.

👉 Website: gfp.sd.gov

WYOMING



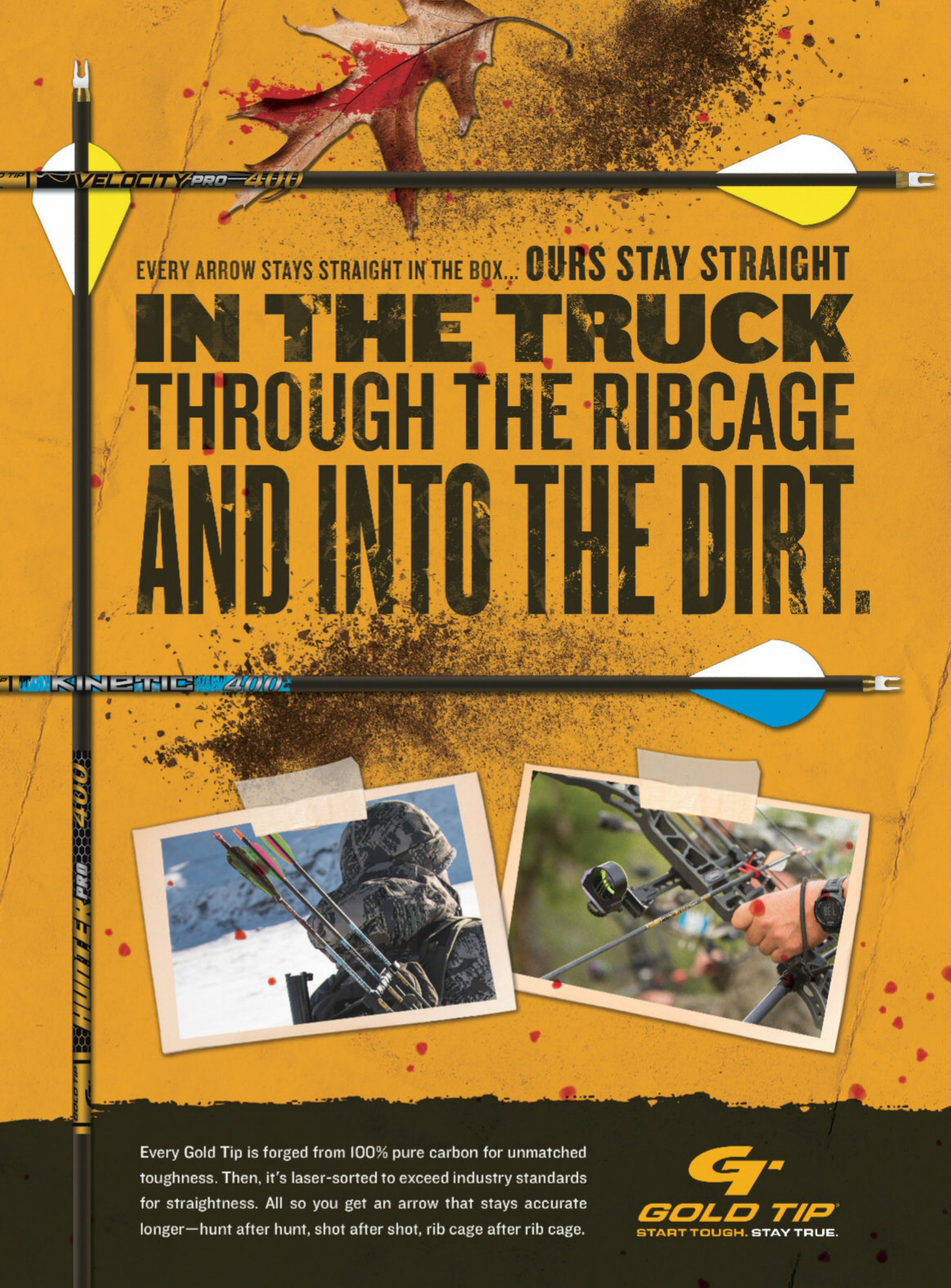
Wyoming is literally home to more antelope than humans, a fact that makes it an incredible place to plan and execute a DIY, public-land pronghorn hunt.

With more than 31 million acres of public ground, it's hard to trump the Cowboy State, and the state's Hunter Management Public Access (HMA) Program sweetens the public pot. All HMAs can be viewed on a statewide map, and the map allows you to search by species or property location. The great thing about the program is that it requires hunters to apply for a permission slip before accessing a given property to keep hunt pressure in check. When applying for an HMA, you will need to know your vehicle's make, model, year, color and license plate number.

Another hunter/landowner assistance program gaining traction is Access Yes! According to Wyoming Game and Fish (WGFD), numerous landowners contact the department each year seeking help from hunters to control wildlife populations. Gaining access to the list of landowners to call is easy. Answer a single question on the Wyoming Game and Fish Department website, and you're good to go.

Most every county in Wyoming has Walk-In Access land, and you can view these parcels on the WGFD website. As with most western locales, Walk-In Access tends to fly under the radar due to the amount of BLM and National Forest land available. Study the map and find a few areas, especially whitetail-looking areas. Wyoming is a wonderful whitetail destination, and hunter success rates are typically greater than 50 percent. **B**

👉 Website: wgfd.wyo.gov



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MIKE DEL RIZZO ILLUSTRATION

By **WILL BRANTLEY**

INFORMATIO

PHONE-BASED MAPPING APPS GIVE HUNTERS GREAT POWER.

MY BUDDY KERRY AND I were driving across a moon-scape in Western Nebraska with designs on finding the promised land of DIY turkey hunting. We were a blue dot on a map, and somewhere ahead was an orange icon marking a spot with great potential. You see, a buddy of a buddy had shared with Kerry the location of a piece of walk-in ground, with a wink and a whisper that turkeys lived there.

Still, we were dubious. We hadn't seen water or a plant taller than a yucca in 15 miles. "Dude, what the heck would a turkey be doing out here?" I asked. "There hasn't been a roosting tree for miles."

Just then, a row of towering pine trees appeared on the horizon like an apparition. A creek bubbled alongside them, and on its bank stood six wild turkey gobblers in various

stages of strut and display. Had our digital map of the unknown led us to a winning, unclaimed lottery ticket stuck in a roadside tumbleweed, I'd have been no more surprised. We parked just over a hill and out of sight, and 20 minutes later, I shot one of those gobblers with my Hoyt. Kerry followed up on a longbeard of his own with his 12-gauge.

That was six short springs ago, and the first time I'd ever personally witnessed the power of the onX Hunt smartphone app. Simply put, without that app guiding us across the prairie like blind men, we'd have never killed those turkeys. I can be something of a proud Luddite when it comes to technology, but I knew right then that onX wasn't something to ignore; it represented a hunting revolution, right up there with the trail camera and Holless Wilber Allen's funky bow with wheels.



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BUT WHAT IS THAT DOING TO HUNTING AS A WHOLE?

I now use apps such as onX Hunt almost daily, year-round (there are a host of similar apps, too, such as HuntStand, Base-Map and GOHUNT). At home, I can measure food plot acreage for fertilizer applications and study topographic lines for stand setups I've never considered. I've used the app's land ownership layer to research and secure hunting leases. But the apps *really* come into their own when planning out-of-state adventures. I have "pins" (the vernacular term for waypoints you mark on the map) saved in states from Tennessee to Wyoming, for everything from turkeys and waterfowl to mule deer, antelope and elk. With the app guiding the way, I've knocked on farmhouse doors and introduced myself to landowners I never would've met otherwise and found hidden gems of public ground that previously would have been impossible to locate during a weeklong trip.

Problem is, in a few short years, thousands of other hunters have done exactly the same thing. It wasn't long ago that fish and wildlife agencies were warning of a decline in hunting license sales that jeopardized conservation funding as we've always known it. But the pandemic year of 2020 changed that, bringing with it an estimated 25 percent increase in participation from new hunters. According to Zach Sandau, marketing manager for onX, new users of the company's Hunt app increased by 300 percent that year.

Although those newcomers have largely been welcomed into our ranks, there also have been whispers from veteran hunters who aren't all that giddy over the sudden explosion in competition for their favorite spots. Out West, hunters who have applied for years for coveted tags in limited-entry units are dealing with "point creep," as more hunters

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are applying for the same limited number of licenses. In some states, elk units that were previously over the counter have recently become limited entry.

Meanwhile, back East, state Wildlife Management Areas are more crowded than ever — and that's not just anecdotal. Tennessee sold a record number of non-resident turkey tags in spring of 2021, for example, and had a near-record turkey harvest on WMAs that spring. But that harvest came after the Volunteer State shortened the turkey season in some regions and reduced the bag limit statewide, over concerns of a dwindling flock.

In other words, there are numerous examples of resources declining, in terms of game-animal populations and opportunities to pursue them, at the same time hunter demand is increasing. And in mapping apps, hunters everywhere have an unbelievably powerful tool available that didn't exist a few years ago.

No More Secrets

So, how impactful are these mapping tools? Well, for all the advancements in gear that we've witnessed over the past decade, you'll never fill a tag where a critter doesn't live. Location, above everything, separates the most successful hunters from everyone else. That location could be a private farm with food plots behind a locked gate, but there's also more public land in North America than anywhere else in the world, and that land is the backbone of our hunting culture. Right up until the past decade, some of the country's best hunting was found on land open to

Smartphone mapping apps such as onX Hunt, make it easy to "scout" new hunting ground remotely and navigate directly to those locations once you arrive.

BILL KONWAY/REALTREE MEDIA

everyone but known to few. This wasn't because of some special privilege; those few were frequently just the hunters who scouted and worked the hardest. The locations of their hotspots, if they were shared at all, were passed along by word of mouth to trusted hunting buddies.

Longtime *Petersen's BOWHUNTING* Field Editor Eddie Claypool worries the flood of new hunters in previously secret places is creating a bubble that's bound to burst. Claypool, of Oklahoma and now in his 60s, has been a traveling, DIY bowhunter for more than four decades. He says he has seen hunting at its peak, but that there's been an undeni-

DURA BULL

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SURROUNDVIEW[®]
DOUBLE WIDE™

ROUGHNECK[®]

3 PANEL
STAKEOUT™

able decline in quality, especially on public lands, over the past decade.

"You don't have to be a go-getter anymore to find the secret spots," Claypool said. "There's so much stuff getting killed now in places where the general public never used to go. I had places I hunted for 30 years and rarely saw anyone else. Now, they're overrun with people. Game and fish departments are struggling with increased harvest. The Western resource has surely been impacted. It used to be, if you didn't have the wherewithal to do your scouting, you weren't going far. Now, you can sit with two screens open, Google Earth and onX, and effectively scout any spot in the United States."

Miles Fedinec, who has made his living as a Colorado big-game guide, outfitter and booking agent for more than 20 years, agrees. "Finding good spots used to be the number-one thing that separated the top-level hunters from weekend warriors," he said. "In the off-season, I used to spend days in the assessors' offices studying 3x3 county maps, finding property lines and taking notes. Today, you can pull onX up on your phone and get all the information that used to take me hours to find — plus satellite imagery to go with it — in a few minutes."

Fedinec uses onX himself every day and says it's a great tool, but one with some downsides. He has seen a particular uptick, for example, of hunters crowding the public boundaries of private ranches. "The number of hunters sitting on property lines of ranches we have leased has increased tenfold," he said. "It's human nature to assume all the game is on the private ground, and I think hunters feel more emboldened than ever to crowd the line. They look at

onX as their 'get out of jail free' card. Of course, if they're indeed on the public land, they have all the right to be there."

Fedinec says it's important to remember, however, that boundaries shown on your phone screen are only as accurate as the surveys recorded at county assessors' offices and sometimes, the information shown on an app isn't completely accurate or up to date.

Sandau says onX has a full team of employees to keep boundary records accurate, but some areas still have challenges. "Some states are better than others; we've been able to automate our process easier, but some places are just more difficult and require manual (input)," he said. "There are still counties out there that don't have updated digital records."

Screen Reliance

There's no doubt plenty of experienced hunters are using onX Hunt and similar apps to their benefit, but many new hunters in particular see them as indispensable. Numerous surveys have shown that access is the single biggest barrier to entry for new hunters and indeed, navigating the rules and regulations for public land can be complicated and even overwhelming. In January of 2022, OnX published a survey of more than 800 hunters from across the country about their attitudes on various topics, including hunting technology. The survey was conducted in partnership with Southwick Associates and is called *Hunting For Community: What We Can Learn from Hunting's Biggest Year in Decades*.

Among the new hunters surveyed, 41 percent said they would choose a hunting-specific app or GPS if they could only take one tool with them to the field. In fact, of the surveyed "new-in-2020" hunters, the three most important

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tools listed were, in order, hunting apps, a GPS and a compass. Experienced hunters chose optics, weather forecasts and trail cameras.

Fedinec has seen that reliance play out first-hand. Last fall, he and some clients set up on the edge of a private hayfield for an evening elk hunt during rifle season. There's BLM ground just up the hill from the field, and Fedinec says it gets hunted pretty hard. "About an hour before dark, I saw two hunters in orange pop up on the ridge above the river," he said. "I put my spotting scope on them, and one guy was older, probably 60, and he was just standing there looking and watching. The young guy with him was probably in his 20s, and he walked straight off the hill, staring at his phone. He got right to the property line, then turned and walked up it, and then followed it back down to a corner. He eventually hit a fence line and followed it back up over the hill, to where he came from, and they left.

"He never looked up from his phone screen," Fedinec laughed. "And I'm not kidding, the elk were bedded in the willows not 180 yards from them. That kid never looked up or glassed for them. The elk ended up coming out onto the hayfield and we killed one, and the rest of them turned and ran right back up onto the BLM property where those guys had been — but they were already gone."

Responsibility

As heralded as the influx of new hunters has been within the hunting industry, Claypool worries the resource is approaching a tipping point and eventually, more limitations will be required to sustain it and the quality of hunting we've come to expect. That could mean things such as shorter seasons, reduced bag limits and more limited-entry licenses — a trend we're already seeing in many places. "It's a finite resource," Claypool said. "We can't accept everyone, provide unlimited access and expect nothing to change."

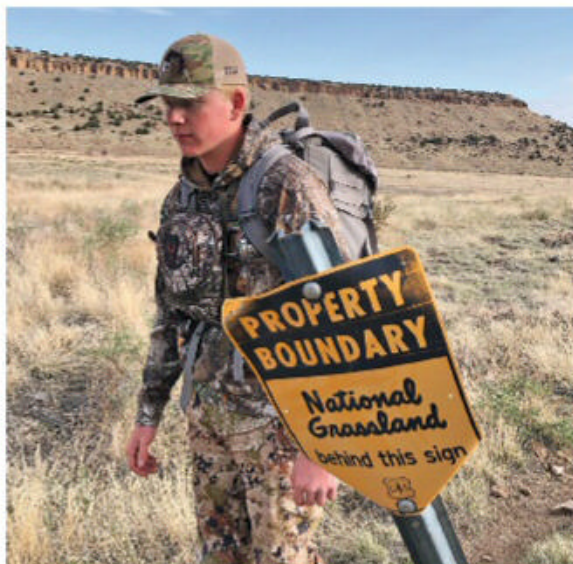
Regardless of changes made, technology such as map-

ping apps is going to be a big part of the hunting culture fabric for the foreseeable future. Like any "Big Tech," the companies profiting from the mapping apps bear responsibility that goes beyond simply giving donations to conservation groups, too.

Sandau says many of the original onX employees are lifelong hunters, himself included. And he acknowledged that the crowds of today can be frustrating. "For me, out in Montana, and growing up here, there were some unique locations that we'd found, where no one else had ever even driven by. Or there was the little, standalone state section that no one was brave enough to hunt. Now, you see people at all of those," he said. "We recognize we have opened up a lot of land and opportunity. I had secret spots like that, and now there are more people there. It's like 10 years of information in 10 minutes, and that can be frustrating for someone who has been hunting an area for a while."

That's part of the reason why, in addition to maps, onX and other apps are also digital content hubs. In addition to reports such as its 2020 survey, onX recently published the *Corner-Locked Report*, which details the controversial issue of access to some 8.3 million acres of landlocked public land in 11 Western states. "Access is a big thing for us. Our goal is to find more land to hunt and help with [hunter] dispersion," Sandau said. "And we've been trying to focus on stories about things such as etiquette. It's great to find a landowner's name or access point, but now, there are landowners getting too many phone calls or too many people sitting at a state section. A couple bad eggs can ruin it for everyone."

"OnX is a great tool, and it didn't create bad people," Fedinec added. "It just gave [hunters] more tools. The basic advice of close the gates behind you, don't rut the fields and don't leave trash hasn't changed. The new hunters we're seeing will need to learn that stuff — and also maybe look up from their phones every now and then." **B**



These days, getting away from the crowds on public land requires more effort than ever. This spring, Editor Christian Berg and his bowhunting companions sought unpres-sured turkeys by hiking many miles into a public-land canyon in Eastern Colorado.



EXERT

CRISP

CONTROL

PRECISION

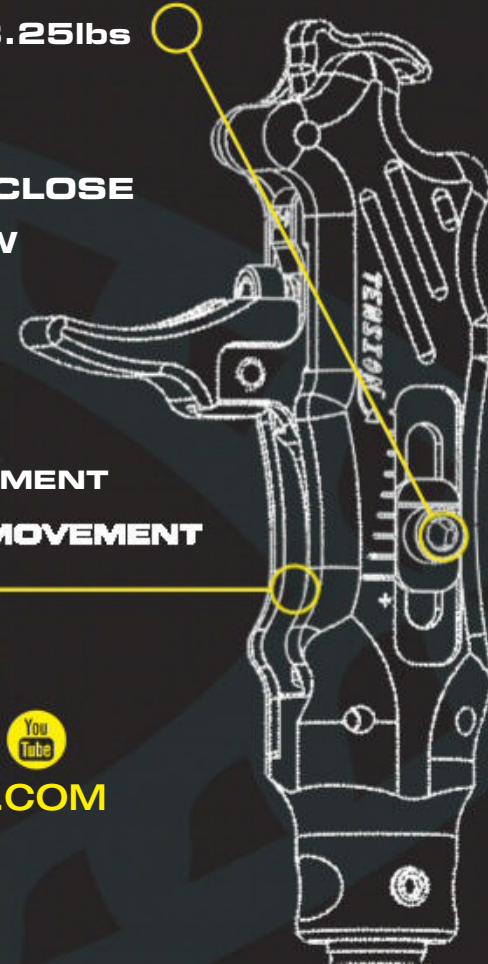
**TRIGGER SENSITIVITY ADJUSTABLE
FROM 1.75lbs TO 3.25lbs**

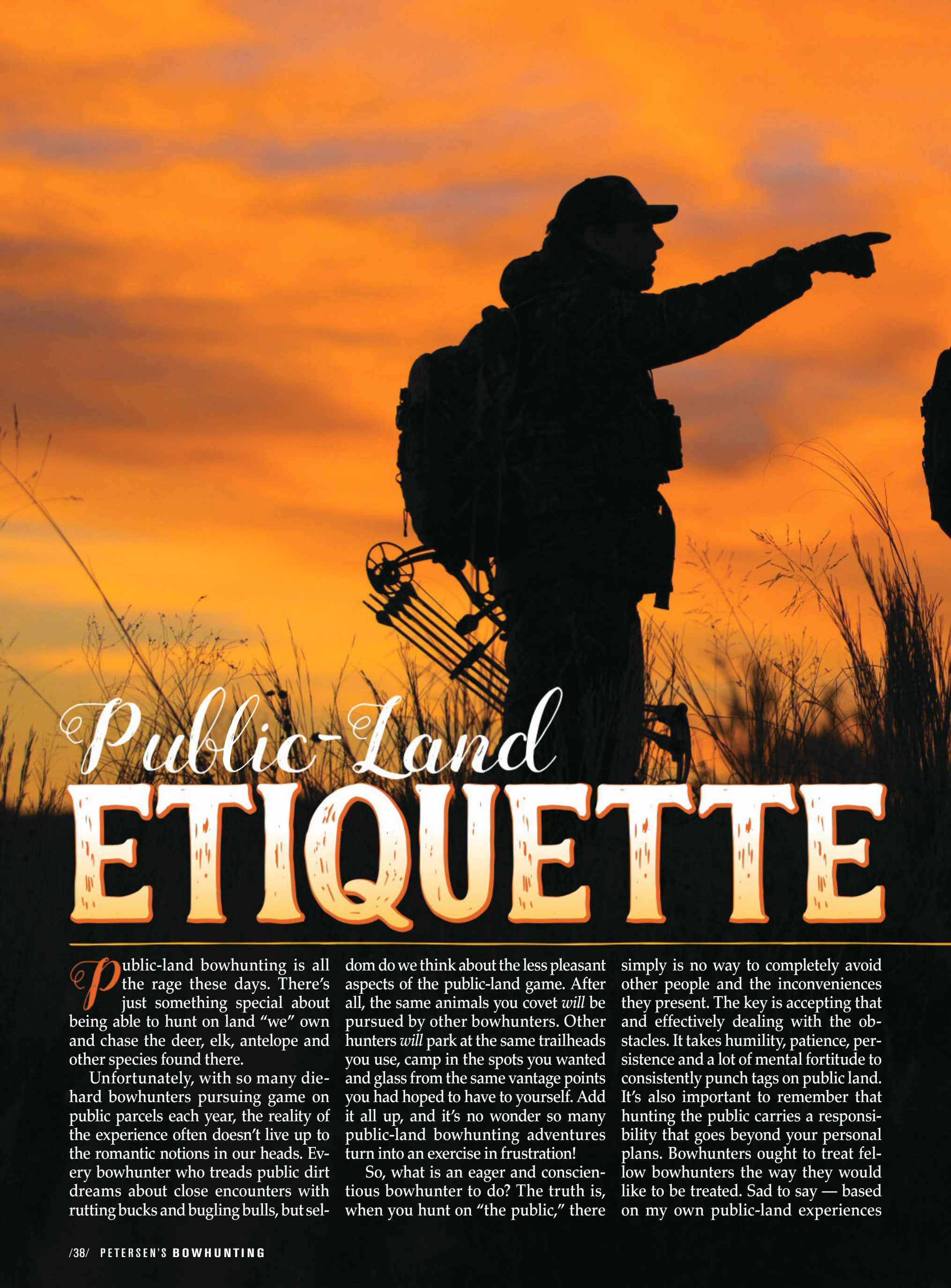
**DUAL SEAR, PUSH TO CLOSE
HOOK STYLE JAW**

**OVERTRAVEL ADJUSTMENT
CONTROLS TRIGGER MOVEMENT
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A silhouette of a bowhunter wearing a cap and carrying a large backpack, pointing towards the horizon. The background is a vibrant orange and yellow sunset sky with some dry grass in the foreground.

Public-Land ETIQUETTE

Public-land bowhunting is all the rage these days. There's just something special about being able to hunt on land "we" own and chase the deer, elk, antelope and other species found there.

Unfortunately, with so many die-hard bowhunters pursuing game on public parcels each year, the reality of the experience often doesn't live up to the romantic notions in our heads. Every bowhunter who treads public dirt dreams about close encounters with rutting bucks and bugling bulls, but sel-

dom do we think about the less pleasant aspects of the public-land game. After all, the same animals you covet *will* be pursued by other bowhunters. Other hunters *will* park at the same trailheads you use, camp in the spots you wanted and glass from the same vantage points you had hoped to have to yourself. Add it all up, and it's no wonder so many public-land bowhunting adventures turn into an exercise in frustration!

So, what is an eager and conscientious bowhunter to do? The truth is, when you hunt on "the public," there

simply is no way to completely avoid other people and the inconveniences they present. The key is accepting that and effectively dealing with the obstacles. It takes humility, patience, persistence and a lot of mental fortitude to consistently punch tags on public land. It's also important to remember that hunting the public carries a responsibility that goes beyond your personal plans. Bowhunters ought to treat fellow bowhunters the way they would like to be treated. Sad to say — based on my own public-land experiences



The popularity of public-land bowhunting has exploded in recent years, and that has created a host of challenges as multiple hunters compete for the same animals.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSY OAK

MINDING YOUR MANNERS IS CRUCIAL WHEN BOWHUNTING COMMON GROUND *By Clint Casper*

and stories shared by countless others — I believe public-land bowhunting etiquette is nearly a lost art!

Me First!

Each year, I travel far and wide from my Ohio home to bowhunt around the country. Whether it is a spring turkey trip to Kansas and Nebraska or a September outing for high-country mule deer in the Rockies, I find myself on public land a lot. Over the years, I have witnessed a ton of good and bad behaviors on public land, and I've

learned some lessons along the way. By far the best advice I can offer my fellow bowhunters is to think like the other guy. What I mean is, when you are faced with a situation, think about how the other guy would feel about your actions.

For example, a few years ago I was deep in the high country of Idaho in search of velvet mule deer. As far as I knew, I had the area all to myself, and I had a great camping spot all picked out. Little did I know someone else had the same idea! Needless to say,

after a long hike, I was pretty shocked when I arrived at “my spot” at 4 a.m. and discovered another bowhunter’s tent already there. I had a decision to make. Do I camp beside the sleeping bowhunter who beat me fair and square? Or do I figure out Plan B and keep walking?

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t angry and upset, but I put myself in the other guy’s shoes. How would I feel, if the tables were turned, and another bowhunter started setting up camp beside me in the middle of the night? Frankly,

PUBLIC-LAND ETIQUETTE

it was a pretty easy decision, and I quickly headed up the mountain in search of a different campsite.

Hands Off!

Another scenario where etiquette is needed involves other people's property. Although we hate to think of bowhunters taking advantage of one another, theft of hunting equipment is a real problem for many, including my good friend Beau Martonik, owner of the East Meets West Hunt podcast and an avid public-land bowhunter who specializes in chasing big mountain whitetails in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest.

"Particularly when hunting white-tails, I frequently come across other treestands and trail cameras. I don't look at the pictures on the cameras and I don't mess with their treestands," Martonik said. "Instead of getting upset when I see someone else in an area I wanted to hunt, I chalk it up as they beat me to the punch this time, so I'll need to be more prepared next time.

"However, I can't tell you how many times I've had my cameras stolen, shut

off, SD cards removed, you name it. We are all sportsmen and women, and we need to respect one another. Believe it or not, we are all on the same team and need to treat it that way. Hunting public land is like learning to share your toys in pre-school. It's a give-and-take relationship with mutual respect required from all parties."

I couldn't agree more. Unfortunately, I hear many stories each year about stands, cameras, blinds, bicycles and other gear being stolen off public land.

Cooperation Is Key

Another very frequent and confusing scenario occurs when two or more bowhunters are frantically chasing the same animal, or simply hunting the same areas. Utah bowhunter Martin Chagnovich is no stranger to chasing big public-land bucks and bulls and has run into this situation many times over the years.

"Public-land hunting can be one of the most rewarding yet frustrating forms of hunting," said Chagnovich, who offered the following thoughts and advice for fellow bowhunters.

First, take note of where you're hunting. Are there a lot of vehicles at



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEAU MARTONIK

When bowhunting public land, it is important to respect other hunters' property such as stands, blinds and cameras. Here, Pennsylvania bowhunter Beau Martonik sets up one of the many cameras he uses to monitor his public-land hunting areas.

Hiking into your planned camping spot, only to discover another hunter has beaten you to it, is a common frustration when bowhunting public land. Although it can be a hard pill to swallow, the author's advice is to show respect for others and simply move on to a different area.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSY OAK



the trailhead? Has this area been publicized on social media to the point it may be a popular destination for out-of-state hunters? Will there be hikers and other non-hunters recreating in the area? These are all questions you need to ask, and if you don't like the answers, perhaps you should find a different area to hunt. "If you do choose to hunt the area, respect everyone you run into," Chagnovich said, "because they have as much right to be there as you do!"

When you do bump into another hunter, it is best to communicate. "If both people have clearly noticed each other, and it isn't going to disrupt the wildlife, I try to talk with the other hunter," Chagnovich said. "Ask them what their strategy is, get a feel for their goal and what they plan to do for the day. Sometimes, they don't plan to stay long, or they may be willing to hang back and let you go ahead with your plan. I met a couple of my best friends by bumping into them while bowhunting, and we ended up helping each other out!"

When hunting public land, more often than not you are going to run into other bowhunters. Communication is key, and the author has made some great friends over the years by working with fellow archers rather than competing against them.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSY OAK



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSY OAK

Of course, things don't always go that smoothly. "Sometimes you're going to bump into someone who isn't willing to work together or wants first dibs," Chagnovich said. "Even though it may hurt, the best thing you can do is let that person have their way. It's just not worth the stress to play into the drama. Get an idea of what their game plan is and play Plan B. Give them space, sit on escape routes if they're moving in on an animal or spend your time glassing from other points."

Getting Ugly

I had the pleasure of interviewing a Colorado Wildlife Officer who had some very strong words about the struggles he has witnessed on public land resulting from lack of etiquette among fellow bowhunters. In fact, some of the situations got so bad he has received death threats as a result of policing bad behavior. Because of that, he agreed to speak with us only on the condition his name not be used.

"I have unfortunately been involved in some nasty situations where a giant buck or bull has brought out the ugly side of people," the officer said. "I've seen trailheads and roads being blocked off to keep other hunters from entering the area, cameras and property stolen and even fist fights and other physical altercations."

In the officer's opinion, most of the problems stem from a hunter or group of hunters feeling as though they have ownership of a particular animal or hunting area on public ground. Once that sense of entitlement manifests

itself with anger and selfish behavior, it then becomes his job to sort out the mess.

"As long as the rules are being followed, I'm out there to help all of you out," he said. "I want everyone to succeed, be respectful and get along as they enjoy the great outdoors on public land. More times than not, negative situations could have been resolved by both parties communicating and finding common ground, instead of working against each other and then having to get law enforcement involved."

In closing, I hope this article has shed some light on the need for a renewed emphasis on etiquette when chasing bowhunting dreams on public land. Respect one another, help each other out and remember to treat others as you want to be treated. That will take us all a long way in the right direction. Public-land etiquette shouldn't be a thing of the past. Rather, it should be a staple of our behavior today and an example for future generations to follow. **E**



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOSSY OAK

FOUND MYSELF BEING

lulled to sleep by the soft hum of the ozone generator as I gazed out of my box blind onto the neon green food plot. The weather was perfect, with a significant late-October cold front making its way toward me, and I couldn't help but focus on the mock scrape I had strategically placed at 20 yards. I had a cellular camera posted on this same scrape to keep me updated on its many visitors. Approximately 24 hours previous, the camera had captured a buck I lovingly referred to as "Big Brows" as he contributed his own artistic touch to my rubbing post.

Anticipation was high when I noticed the small 6-pointer that always seemed to show up just before Big Brows made his grand entrance. I watched the young buck as he worked his way through the belly-high brassicas towards the scrape. It wasn't long until I noticed movement to the north edge of the field. Sure enough, it was Big Brows, the buck I had now been chasing for four years. As if it was scripted, he worked his way into range and I sent my arrow through his lungs. The big buck ran back into his safe haven and crashed shortly after leaving the field edge.

I wish this story was mine, but the truth is, it's about as far from one of my deer-hunting stories as you can get. Personally, I have been bowhunting whitetails in northern Michigan for more than 30 years and have *never* experienced a situation anywhere close to what I described at the beginning of this article. Northern Michigan is a challenging place for any bowhunter, regardless of skill level or experience. Gun seasons are long, hunter density is insane and mature animals are scarce.

Even so, over my three decades as a bowhunter, I have had the opportunity to kill some very nice bucks, given the circumstances. To put things in context, a 120-inch buck is the "deer of a lifetime" for most hunters in my neck of the woods. My playbook has changed through time; however, one strategy that has consistently produced success is hunting in tight quarters where mature bucks feel secure.

A Different Experience

Hunting bucks in close quarters is nothing like the made-up hunt I described earlier. I don't own a fancy box blind, an ozone generator or a cell camera. Even the binoculars I wear around my neck are mostly just for show, as I rarely have time to identify approaching bucks beyond a quick determination of whether they're big enough to shoot.

Most of my time in the tree is spent perched in thick cover with my head on a swivel, afraid that I'll miss out on a fleeting shot opportunity at a passing buck. I have a single-pin, adjustable bow sight, but it hasn't moved from the 25-yard position on a whitetail since the last time I was in South Dakota almost 10 years ago. My hunts would be almost laughable on TV. The only footage would be from cameras pointed at my one or two shooting lanes, with the buck appearing about two seconds before my arrow. In other words, my style isn't very good if you need a lot of "B-roll."

Finding "The Spot"

I don't just hunt any random location in thick cover. In fact, I spend a tremendous amount of time during the off-season identifying

FINDING BOWHUNTING SUCCESS
IN EXTREMELY CLOSE QUARTERS

POINT.

When bowhunting heavily pressured deer such as this public-land Ohio buck, concentrating on thick cover is an effective strategy because that is where deer feel comfortable moving during daylight hours.

PHOTO: LANCE KWIEGER

By JIM BOUCHARD

BLANK BUCKS

POINT-BLANK BUCKS

To avoid alerting deer to your presence, it is important to set up stand locations in thick cover well before the season. Author Jim Bouchard finds that a significant amount of trimming work is typically needed just to open one or two narrow shooting lanes around his chosen tree.

places where I want to spend time in the fall. I usually hit the woods hard as soon as snow is off the ground to decipher as much of the previous year's rut sign as I can.

The good thing about these tight spots is that they are typically locations other hunters overlook because of the lack of visibility. I totally understand the appeal of overlooking a ridge full of mature oaks and seeing deer approach from a long way off. However, in the high-pressure hunting world where I live, those locations are typically not very effective. Yes, such areas may be filled with rubs and scrapes, but it's likely they were all made at night. As hard as it is to routinely sit for hours without seeing deer, I would rather see one animal and kill it than see 50 at a distance and end the season with an unfilled tag.

The foundation of my hunting philosophy is answering this question: "If there are mature bucks in the area, where will they be active during daylight hours?" Those are the only places that matter to me. Yes, I do need to read deer sign and know when they're coming and going. But the most important thing is figuring out where I can kill them. These spots are typically right off the bedding areas, so that if the bucks do leave their beds during daylight they might show up with enough light remaining for me to capitalize. Or, if I get in early enough in the morning, I might just catch them before they get back to bed.

Since I'm generally looking for those last-light spots, these places are typically thick and create some unique challenges. You can't set up these spots during the season and expect consistent success. Rather, they must be prepped well in advance so any trimming or other alterations to the area will not put the deer on alert. Given the nature of these locations, I often have to do significant trimming work just to open up a couple small shooting lanes.



This is the giant 8-pointer the author describes in the article. The buck approached within 10 yards without Bouchard even knowing it, and as is typical when hunting tight quarters, he came to full draw and prepared for the shot before seeing enough of the buck to know whether he wanted to shoot it.

High Alert

Another important thing to keep in mind is that hunting these locations is *not* relaxing. You can't just stare off into space or play games on your cell phone, or you'll miss your chance at most of the deer that pass by. For example, in November 2017, I was hunting a tight cedar funnel one morning during a steady drizzle. I knew that with the ground covered in wet moss, I would have to be on high alert. Despite giving my best effort, I had a buck scare the heck out of me at 10 yards when he busted a limb while making a rub. His entire entry route was blocked by a large cedar. He decided to take out some frustration on a thigh-sized balsam for a few seconds, allowing me to prepare for action. I still couldn't really see any detail about the buck; I just knew he sounded like a moose! When I saw the rear quarters swing around to continue on his way, I came to full draw, immediately realizing he was a shooter and released the arrow at 12 yards. That buck turned out to be one of my largest to date — a 4-year-old 8-pointer that weighed more than 200 pounds dressed and had a 32-inch neck circumference right at the throat patch.

These claustrophobic stands can also be tricky during the rut. They are definitely a great location for buck movement, because does also use them. But if the bucks are chasing in these tight quarters, it can be absolutely infuriating! On many occasions I have listened to long chase sessions of crashing and grunting, only to see occasional flashes of movement resulting in nothing but skyrocketing blood pressure and my bow begging for mercy after being held with a death grip. Other times, you'll hear a twig snap in the distance and prepare yourself for the big one to come out, only to be met by a doe and fawns. But you can't afford to wait to see what the animal is before you get ready. Time



Calling can be a very effective tactic when hunting thick cover. Since deer can't see very well in the brush, they will often come closer to investigate the source of the sound. Back in 2020, Bouchard spotted this 10-point buck working a scrape 40 yards from the base of his tree and used a couple soft grunts to call the deer in for an easy bow shot.



The author took this big 8-pointer in the fall of 2021. He had just suffered through a 30-minute rain and sleet storm when this buck presented an unexpected opportunity. The entire encounter lasted less than 30 seconds.

is of the essence. There also have been many opossums, squirrels and raccoons that have nearly taken my arrow as if they were the buck I was after.

Make the Call

One bonus of these locations is that calls can be extremely effective. Unlike field edges or areas with open, mature hardwoods, bucks can't see any better than you can in these tight quarters. So, rather than just using their eyes to see where the noise has come from, they're more likely to come to investigate.

I never call blindly (without knowing a deer is in the area) or use long rattling sequences. Rather, I prefer to call only if the deer's travel pattern will result in no shot opportunity. If the wind is favorable, and I know the buck is passing out of range, a short grunt sequence can often convince the buck to change course. For example, after spotting a particular buck working a scrape 40 yards away, I made a couple soft grunts and the beautiful 10-pointer slipped through the cedars and came into 8 yards. Once again, I couldn't really identify much detail about the buck as he approached, but I was ready for the opportunity and the buck left in a hurry after my arrow found its mark!

All About Access

Another big challenge these locations present is getting in and out without the deer knowing. It is difficult in such tight cover, but much easier if the stands have been prepped well in advance so you can slip in and out quietly under cover of darkness. I like to get in very early and often will sit all day when conditions (weather and rutting activity) are right. What's another few hours in the field if it will result in higher odds of success?

Like so much else in bowhunting, your attitude is the key to success in these close-quarter locations. You have to invest significant time in scouting and hunting these spots. Trust me; it can be mentally taxing to sit it out in a location where you don't get the constant reassurance of seeing deer. That's where your pre-season scouting is crucial. If you've taken the time to understand the lay of the land, and how the local deer herd relates to it, you'll maintain your confidence even when the action is slow and your spirit is low.

If you've done your homework properly, trust your gut, stay patient and remain present — not just physically but mentally — so you'll be ready when a good buck finally shows up during shooting light. Early last November I'd climbed into a stand in a tight cedar swamp at the bottom of an oak ridge. After enduring half an hour of sleet and rain to the face and was about to gather my gear and call it quits when a mysterious gray form worked its way out of the swamp. The entire encounter lasted fewer than 30 seconds, and just like that I had a beautiful, northern Michigan buck on the ground.

If you have access to the kind of hunting I described in my introduction, I'm sure you can be successful hunting whitetails that way. But for those who don't, fear not; you can still get the job done. Your hunt may not be as "sexy" as the ones you see on TV, but so what? The hunt is yours. You are not out there to entertain the masses. There is something very special about closing the deal on a buck on his turf with nothing more than good, old-fashioned woodsmanship and grit. My blue-collar strategy is cost-efficient and proven to work anywhere whitetails roam. So, get in there deep and enjoy the exhausting drag out of the swamp. You won't regret it! **B**

RISK VS. REWARD

The Key to Whitetail Hunting Is Knowing When to Go 'All In' on Your Buck.

BY BILL WINKE

Every time you go into the woods, you run the risk of alerting deer to your presence. They will stop moving naturally when they are uneasy about their safety in a certain area. As a result, they move less in daylight and are much harder to kill. That's bad news!

Deer learn they are being hunted by finding human scent on low vegetation, or seeing a person on stand or walking to and from the stand. They also register intrusion when they smell human scent in the air in places where they're not used to finding it.

Deer don't pay nearly as much attention to signs of human activity in places where they expect to find people and where those people have long proven unthreatening. That is why deer often walk on hiking trails in state parks where hunting is not allowed. It is also why

they can live seemingly without concern just 100 yards from a suburban home.

But should the deer find signs of human presence in places where they're not used to them, they will immediately take notice and adjust their patterns.

This balance between risk (hunting spots where the deer will soon learn you're hunting them) and reward (the ability to create a close-range bow shot) is at the very heart of bowhunting whitetails. The good news is, there's a way to win the balance!

There is much about bowhunting whitetails that comes down to studied behavior and biology. The experts have done the research and tell us how deer live — where they travel, when they breed, how they relate to temperature changes, etc. That is all fine and good, but it doesn't address

A large buck with impressive antlers is captured in motion, running through tall, dry grass. The buck is shown from the side, facing left, with its head turned slightly back. Its antlers are large and multi-tined, with a light brown color. The buck's body is covered in brown fur, and its tail is white with a black tip. The background is a blurred forest with green and yellow foliage.

Knowing when to move in on your target buck is more of an art than a science, and experience is the best teacher. There is a time to be aggressive, but taking too many chances can make your season go south in a hurry!

MARK RAYCROFT PHOTO

this tradeoff of risk versus reward, which in the end has more to do with our success than anything else.

This big element of success is more art than science. That's where this article comes in — helping you gain a better feel for the art of whitetail hunting and how to balance risk with reward so you enjoy your best season yet.

It is usually best to hunt very carefully, not hunting places where the deer are likely to detect any sign that you are, or have been, there. But there are times when even the most cautious hunter should take some risks by hunting closer to the action.

Aggressive Hunting

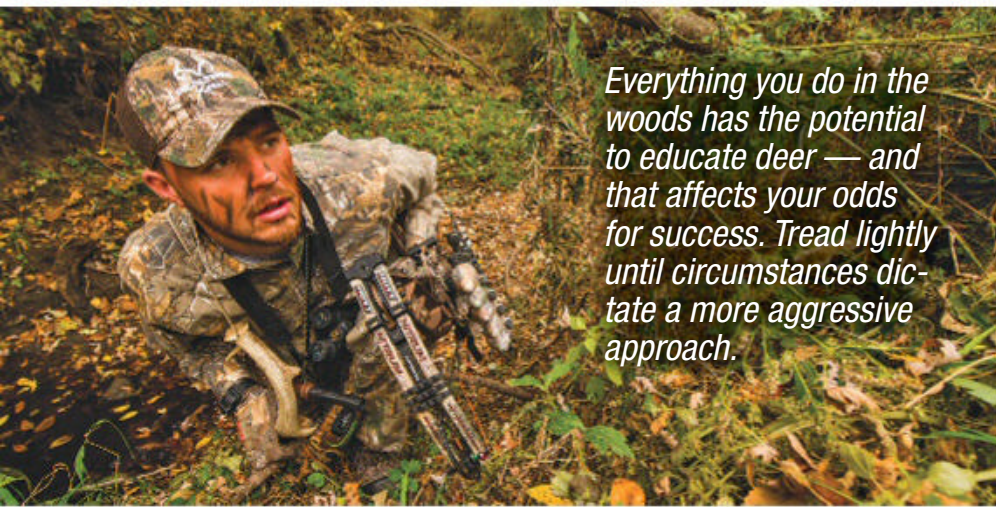
There is a big difference between taking a few calculated risks and being dumb. Dumb hunting occurs when you know you're likely to bump the deer you are after as you

head to your stand and just decide to wing it and hope for amazing grace. For example, it is just plain stupid to hunt with a wind that blows toward where you expect the deer to come from. That is never a good way to hunt, no matter how badly you want to make things happen.

By contrast, taking calculated risks will have you hunting closer to your buck's home — right in what some biologists call his "core area." This is where he most often beds and where he spends most of his time during daylight.

I don't believe bucks have specific beds they always use, but I do think they prefer certain areas. Maybe it's a ridge where they most often bed, or a brushy bend in a river bottom. Your trail cameras, with some careful use, will reveal these places. Generally, you need to hunt around these areas very carefully, rarely diving in.

RISK VS. REWARD



Everything you do in the woods has the potential to educate deer — and that affects your odds for success. Tread lightly until circumstances dictate a more aggressive approach.

Normally, you would pick away at these core areas from the fringes where you can get in and out without any chance the buck will know you're hunting. It is usually better to bide your time, keeping the buck moving naturally and you living to hunt him another day.

Eventually, he will come past if you have enough time to hunt. The key is keeping him moving in daylight as much as possible. But what if you don't have that much time? When the clock is ticking, hunting tight to where the buck actually lives can make the most sense.

The Ticking Clock

Each day of the season brings greater urgency and a stronger temptation to press the buck — to hunt close to where you think he beds. Just as the drip, drip, drip of water eventually makes a hole in a sandstone rock, your cautious efforts eventually pay off. That is much better than blasting the rock out of sight by trying to make a hole with a pressure washer. Keep the deer from knowing you're hunting them for as long as possible. OK, I have beaten that fundamental into your brain enough. Now for the exceptions to that rule.

Exceptions to the Rule

There are those times when it makes sense to press in closer to where you believe the buck beds. Here are three examples:



As the season draws to a close, your sense of urgency rises and you have less to lose by making bold moves. Iowa bowhunter Larry Zach, a good friend of the author, killed this great 10-pointer in 2009 after moving right into the buck's bedding area during the closing days of the early archery season.

End of the Season: As your time winds down, you have much less to lose by pressing. You can hunt spots with a higher risk of being detected without fear of paying the price later, because there is no "later." Next year, the bucks won't remember where they discovered you this year.

Competition: When other hunters are nearby, you may need to make your move sooner than you would otherwise. That can be the case when several people share permission to hunt the same property, when you hunt only a small tract with neighbors hunting all sides and certainly when hunting public land.

Rut Is Winding Down: Your best chance to catch a buck on the move is during the rut, and when the best phase of the rut is coming to an end, it might be worth pressing a bit more.

Next, I will take a closer look at each of these situations to come up with a plan for how hard to make that aggressive move.

Season Is Ending

A friend of mine, wildlife artist Larry Zach, has killed a lot of really good bucks over the years, and Larry is always creative in his approach. I don't think Larry talks to a lot of people about how he is supposed to hunt deer; he just naturally does it in the way that makes the most sense to him, and that is always interesting to me. He definitely marches to the beat of his own drum.

In 2009, Larry was hunting a dandy 10-pointer on his farm. I can remember he had a few encounters with the buck throughout November, but one encounter sticks out. The buck was moving between cover on opposite sides of the open ridgetop and one of the places Larry hunted him was from a small grain bin that was sitting on a wagon, like a mobile ground blind.

Another friend of mine was filming Larry's hunts that year, and one evening in mid-November was stationed in a nearby tree filming Larry in his improvised blind. I still smile at the memory of that video with Larry's upper body sticking out of the access hole in the top of the grain bin as the giant buck walked toward him. At some point I think the buck either saw or smelled Larry and quickly made a getaway. There's never a dull moment on Larry's farm!

The first half of Iowa's bow season ends the day before the first Saturday in December. The regular firearms season comes in on that Saturday. As this deadline approached, Larry became increasingly aggressive in his hunting strategy, to the point he was hanging stands on the very ridge where he expected the buck to be bedding.

The strategy paid off on the morning of Dec. 4, three days before the opener of gun season. Larry sneaked onto the ridge stand from the opposite direction of the food sources on the ridgetop. Shortly after first light, the buck followed one of the trails Larry had bush-hogged through the woods, offering an easy bow shot.

This is the perfect example of the ticking clock at the end of the season giving Larry the motivation to take more risk by hunting closer to the buck's most likely bedding area. While this doesn't pay off every time, it definitely did this time.

Rut Winding Down

This past season was an example of how the progression of rut phases can force your hand and give you the

kick needed to take additional risk. It is my story from last season. I hunted one buck for 19 days, starting on Oct. 25. By Nov. 12, I had seen him three times, but I was getting burned out. I had not seen him for more than a week and was losing hope, as the best part of the rut was coming to an end. There was a nagging doubt in the back of my mind that my best chance had passed, and I had failed to make good. I feared I wasn't going to get him. With no other bucks on my radar, it was this buck or none. I was starting to feel like it would be none.

I have rarely shot good bucks during the very middle of November. By then, the highest possible number of does are in estrus and it is hard to find a buck out cruising all alone. So, with this lull right at my doorstep, I was going to make one more trip to the ridge where I figured he was bedding and then head home for a week.

I needed to get some things done in the office, and I needed to recharge my enthusiasm for more hard hunting. I planned to come back after the lull (around Nov. 20) for the final days of November, when I hoped more solitary bucks would once again be searching for does.

With that in mind, I wasn't concerned about my impact as I headed to my best stand on the hardwood ridge on Nov. 12. The spot is almost impossible to get out of at the end of legal shooting time, because you have to climb down the long bluff and then pass through a large valley filled with crop fields.

Prior years of failure suggested deer were certain to hear me and see me as I descended the ridge and crossed the fields. As I have already mentioned, educating deer like this, even as you exit after sunset, reduces the short-term prospects for that stand.

All season I had only hunted that ridge when I was able to spend the night there, sleeping on the ground near my tree. But on this day, I was going to head home after dark and decided that even though I would surely spook a



It often makes sense to hunt aggressively on public land, since you are in direct competition with numerous other hunters for the same bucks. One proven strategy is to identify likely buck bedding areas and then hunt them in October, a couple weeks before the rush of hunters who tend to focus on hunting the rut.

bunch of deer (and maybe even the buck I was after) on the way out, I was going to hunt it anyway. It was going to be a week before I came back, and hopefully by then the deer would have mostly forgotten about that shadowy figure crunching past them during last light of day.

As luck would have it, an hour before the end of legal time, the buck I was hunting got out of his bed about 100 yards away and followed a doe past my stand. I made the shot, and that turned my last evening of early-rut hunting into a celebration I won't soon forget.

Had I not been willing to take the calculated risk of bumping deer on my way out, I never would have been in that stand and wouldn't have killed that great buck. On the other hand, had I hunted that aggressively all season, I surely would have spooked the buck earlier and never killed him. On this last evening before a long break, the

risk proved worth it. As the best part of the rut winds down, it often makes sense to be a bit more aggressive.

Besides pressing harder in your actual pursuit of a buck you've found on camera, you also can hunt sanctuary areas harder during the peak of the rut for bucks you haven't seen. I know of several spots deer use more than any others in my hunting areas. I never hunt these high-activity hotspots until the last few days of my rut hunting vacation, when I



Field Editor Bill Winke hunted a big ridge on the property he had access to nearly every day for 19 days last season. He hunted it very carefully, but it was on a hunt when he took some risk that he finally killed the buck he was after.

RISK VS. REWARD

can expect to get the best reward for the amount of impact my presence is sure to have on natural deer movement. This is just another example of waiting to be aggressive until the time is right.

Competition — Public Land

When I was still running the video series Midwest Whitetail, I had several employees who specialized in taking great bucks on public land. One of their favorite strategies was to scout for buck beds and then hunt those areas hard in October, prior to the rut and prior to the influx of other hunters.

They knew that when other bowhunters started taking their rut-hunting vacations, these areas would be overrun and the bucks would soon abandon their early fall patterns in these areas.

This strategy is way more aggressive than any I would recommend for private land, where access by other hunters is more controlled and October is not the time to press.

Sure, the guys sometimes made things happen, but by hunting that close to the bucks' bedrooms, these hunters occasionally bumped the bucks they were pursuing. To combat this, they scouted many good areas and were ready to move on to the next area if their top choice showed signs of burnout. In this way, the guys were able to have great hunts in October before the competition from other hunters became a factor.

If you want to take this approach, the obvious first step is finding buck bedding areas. While it's best to do

this during the post-season, when your presence won't affect deer behavior, that is not always the most effective time. Bucks come and go on public land, and just because you know where one bedded last year doesn't necessarily tell you where he (or another buck) will be bedded this year. It may be a starting point, but you still need to confirm it.

For this reason, the guys did their most effective scouting in early October and then set their stands accordingly. Just bumping a buck from his bed once on public land in October is not going to drive him off. Finding these spots well before the end of the month was the key, allowing them to come back in a couple weeks for the payoff.

The fellows focused on single, large beds near thick cover or in strategic ridge locations where the bedded deer chose spots where they could see anything below and smell anything on the ridge behind them.

Then, as the month went on, these hunters focused on sneaking as close to these buck bedding areas (one they nicknamed "The Buck Nest") as possible before setting up. It proved very effective!

Pick Your Pitch

During most of the season, it makes sense to keep your distance from the places where you think bucks may be living and hunt their travel routes in and out. While you'll never take a mature buck if you don't hunt him hard enough to be in the right place at the right time, you still have to know how to "pick your pitch," or swinging for the fences will only lead to another strikeout. This is the art of whitetail hunting. **B**



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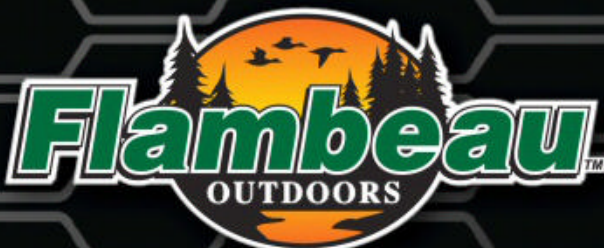
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THE BOWHUNTING

IF I HAD TO SUMMARIZE MY lifestyle in only a few words, the title of this article would pretty much accomplish that.

Having been afflicted with wanderlust from the time I was a young man, I have long gone on exploratory binges all over our great country. Never intimidated by the challenges of exploring remote wilderness, I've always made provisions for having a pickup truck, good camping gear and a little money for fuel. With these ingredients, an entire world of adventure and excitement has remained at my fingertips more than 40 years now.

You don't have to save big chunks of money in order to "hire" yourself as a guide; you simply need to make time to free yourself from the grips of everyday life and scout yourself into a lifetime of great bowhunting fun. The mental and physical well-being, savvy and satisfaction that you'll attain from this investment will change you forever, for the better.

Interested in getting a feel for how I've bowhunted hardcore on a shoestring budget? Well, read on for a potpourri of thoughts and advice on how this commoner has gotten it done at a top level — 100 percent DIY — for more than four decades, with absolutely no regrets.

It's All About Choices

If you want to be a bowhunting vagrant, it's best to start planning early in life so you can lay the most productive foundation possible. From this perspective, there are two main influences that will have more control over your success or failure than all others combined: occupation and marital status.

As a young man or woman, choosing the married-with-children path will certainly handicap an all-out pursuit of the wandering bowhunter lifestyle. On the other hand, I'm living proof that it can be done since I was married, with a baby, at age 24. I will, however, note that such an accomplishment came with big sacrifices and compromises (My *first* wife would agree heartily).

It's important to decide what your priorities are, so think long and choose wisely. There probably aren't any wrong choices, so to each his own.

The occupation you choose will have a substantial effect on your available freedom or lack thereof. Many 9-to-5 jobs, for example, are a ball-and-chain that bind

you to an everyday existence. So, it's important to pick a line of work that offers extreme flexibility.

As a side note, don't think outfitting and/or guiding is the way to make your dreams come true. I pursued that very line of work for a few years in my 20s, and even a young, dumb kid like me soon realized the futility of that. I was spending 12-14 hours a day, all through hunting season, guiding others to hunting success, but my own bowhunting time afield was almost nil. As a result, the wailing of my selfish inner-child soon drove me certifiably insane (it was a short drive) and I walked away from the life of a hunting guide to focus on a more traditional line of work in construction.

As a pipefitter welder, I worked helter-skelter locations, hours and jobs. Thus, I was not tied to the stifling rules of any one employer. A big plus was that this arrangement allowed me to mold my time away from work fairly effectively. Working all the hours I wanted when I was employed allowed me to save good money, which, in turn, enabled me the freedom to roam. And, unsurprisingly, my roaming always seemed to lead me toward high, wild places.

Throughout my career, I was never employed more than 8-9 months of any year — talk about bowhunting freedom! Now that I think about it, how many people would really consider being unemployed a third of every year a blessing? Well, as I said earlier, it's all about perspective.

Anyway, at the end of the day, think carefully about your choice of employment while you're young if you want to bowhunt hardcore. And don't believe that old line, "I'll wait until I'm retired." Has God guaranteed you a long life? And, if so, did He guarantee you good health at age 65 or 67? My advice is to get real and just do it now!

Embrace the Intangibles

Now that we've addressed the two most important lifestyle choices that will influence your dreams of becoming a woods rat, let's move to the two great intangibles that will dictate your success or failure: mental desire and physical ability. Luckily, both of these are completely within your control. In other words, if you want to supply the mental prowess and physical toughness to excel at outdoorsmanship, nothing can stop you from attaining success.

You don't need an above-average IQ to acquire the woods smarts required to thrive at wilderness

JUNKIE

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A HARDCORE BOWHUNTER?

By **EDDIE CLAYPOOL**

A commitment to living the lifestyle, plus dedication to the mental and physical preparation required to excel at a top level, are essential if you dream of being a hardcore western bowhunter. The rewards include a lifetime of memories, seeing some of North America's most amazing scenery and, yes, perhaps even a set of antlers or two.



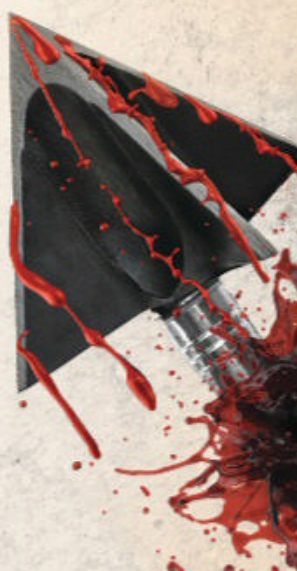
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THE BOWHUNTING JUNKIE

survival and bowhunting for big game. No matter if you're fit or need to lose a few pounds, you can work hard — and then harder — to achieve success as an outdoorsman.

The old saying, "Life is all about your perspective," couldn't apply more than it does here. How badly do you really want to be mountain tough? How badly do you want to consistently harvest big game with a bow? How much do you love nature? Is pursuing your passion for the outdoors a sacrifice or a labor of love?

Only you can answer these questions, so get started and find *your* answers. Start small, work into it and then ratchet it up (or slack off). Soon, you'll know the level at which you will choose to participate. If long stretches of time spent alone only feed your passion, you are headed for expert status. If heaving, sweating and stinking make you feel empowered, you are destined to become a modern-day mountain man. If attaining the summit only makes you want to look over the next summit, you have the right stuff. But, if such a lifestyle seems too much like work, well, then you just may need to be content reading about it in *Petersen's BOWHUNTING* or watching on Outdoor Channel.

Gear Up and Go!

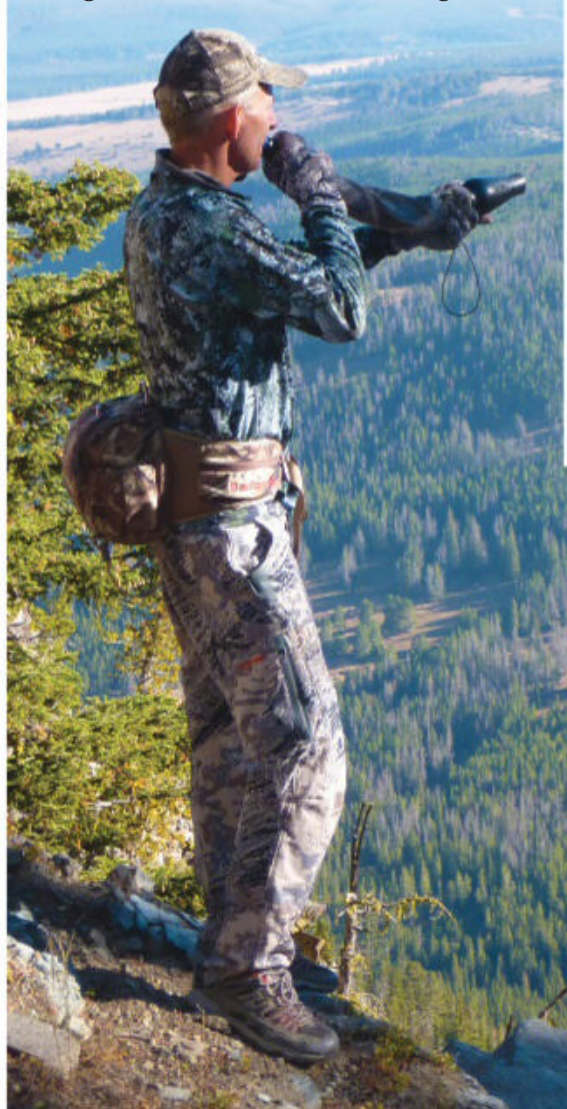
Now that we've addressed the main intangible barriers to becoming a hard-

core bowhunter, let's move on to some of the other real-world items you will need to attain: gear and savvy.

It goes without saying you will have to own some quality, basic gear if you're going to bowhunt the western wilderness DIY-style. My necessities have always consisted of a backpack, one-person tent, sleeping pad and sleeping bag. With these core items, you can go anywhere and do anything fairly comfortably. Whether you're sleeping on an alpine ridge or in your pickup bed, carrying a boned-out elk or a treestand, these items will put you in the game. You can complement this starter kit with additional support items of your choosing, and then it's time to start trying to wear your gear out. This is where the rubber meets the road; here is where the contenders are separated from the pretenders.

OK, are you still in the game? Well, then maybe you really do have what it takes to be a top-end DIY bowhunter of the places less traveled. So, what's next? It's time to hit the ground running, live large and let nature take its course. In doing so, you will be glean- ing the greatest reward you'll ever attain from nature...*savvy*. And there's really no shortcut to that stuff. It just takes time, miles, sweat and frustration, with everything finally ending in satisfaction. By the way, you can always shorten the learning curve slightly by getting a crotchety, old coot to mentor you (yes, my services are for hire!).

Bowhunting at a top-end level is a year-round undertaking — there is no off-season. In fact, if you're not hunting, you're preparing for the next hunt. And, nowadays, with the incredible technology and information at your fingertips, there's no excuse for not knowing the game inside out. Do your research, study fish and game department websites front to back and dig





Bowhunting savvy can't be bought; it must be earned with hard work in the field. But once you have it, the returns on your investment can be big!

deep for hidden tidbits of material that can be embedded in sections of websites where only diligent sleuths go.

Scour Google Earth all night long, since outside of actually being in a destination, nothing beats 3-D aerial scouting. Absorb and assimilate all this information; then choose wisely where and how you make your move. And when you make your play afield — whether you're after an old, trophy whitetail buck, a majestic alpine muley or an intimidating, rutting bull elk — learn from and correct your in-the-field mistakes quickly. Therein comes your accrument of *savvy*.

Outside of the hunting seasons, it's important to physically work hard every day, refine gear in the evenings and conduct your research at night or when you can. Take a couple of short "vacations" to future hunting destinations and do a blitzkrieg scout of them. Plan hunts that begin in late summer, pound the mountains hard for at least 3-4 weeks and then make a smooth transition right into whitetail season. Becoming a good, DIY western bowhunter will make a Midwestern whitetail season seem like child's play.

Lastly, when all the bow seasons have finally closed, it's time to start the process all over again, more earnestly with each passing year. Expand your hori-

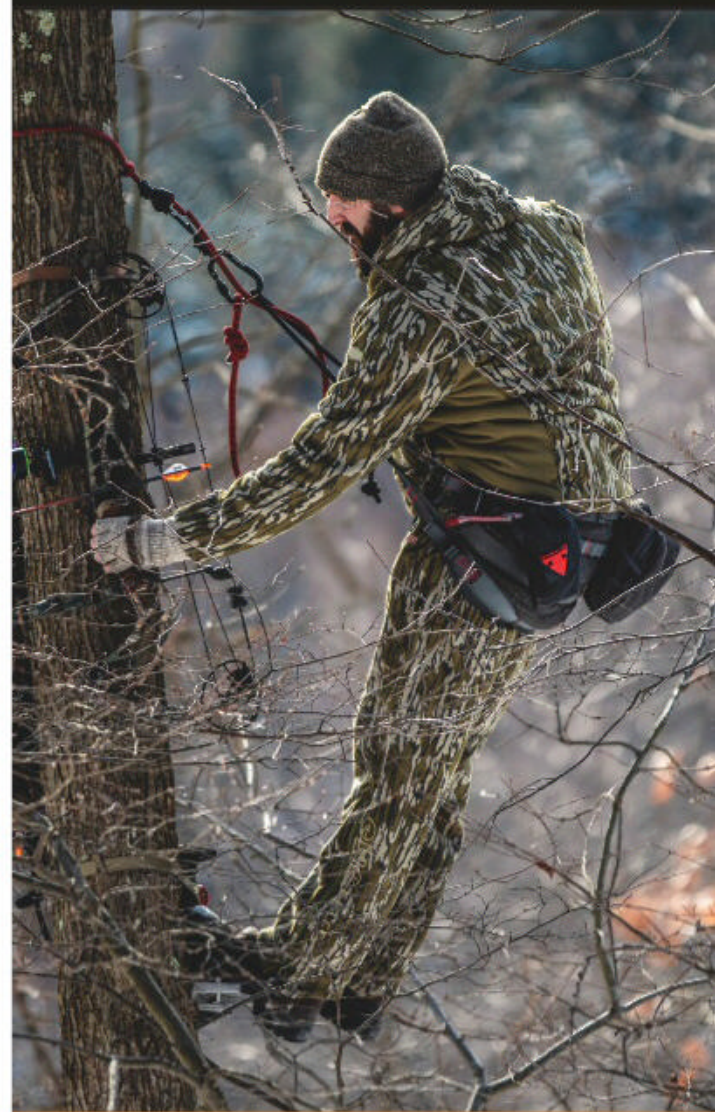
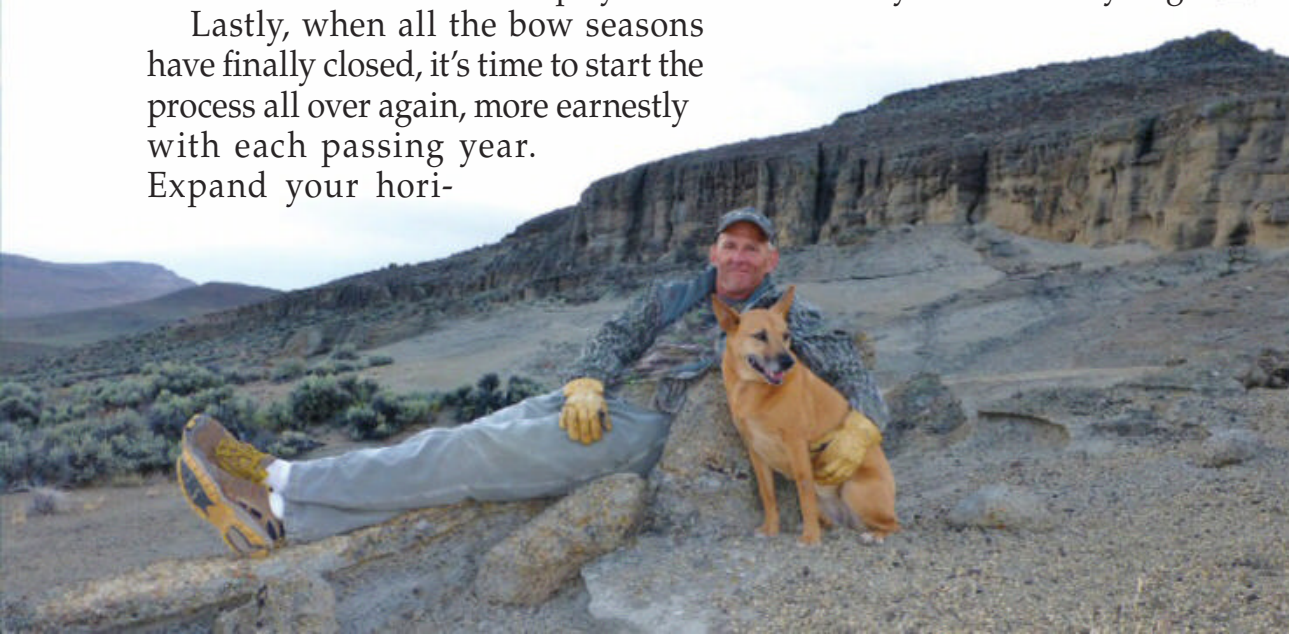
zons and expertise and you'll grow as an outdoorsman with every season. Eventually, you'll find yourself accomplishing things you never dreamed possible. Then, at this mature stage of your outdoor life, you can finally start reaping the dividends of satisfaction from your investment — your ROI will never be sweeter!

Looking Back

If you opt to become a year-round, hardcore bowhunter — a bowhunting junkie — such a lifestyle will probably get you branded as an "oddball" in the eyes of society, and justly so; there's a price to be paid for choosing such a path in life. You'll never fit into mainstream social life, and somewhere down the line, the ramifications of a life lived as a loner will start catching up with you. There may not even be a mate to care for you when you're old!

On the other hand, you will have lived a life of adventure and satisfaction, with wisdom and big antlers surrounding you. If you find yourself spouseless in old age, just caress those curvaceous antlers.

It's really not a bad way to go! **B**



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By JON E. SILKS

CROSSBOW TEST



SYKD HUNT VINDICATE XVC

Customizable, light
and accurate!

SYKD Hunt's Vindicate XVC Crossbow is outfitted with a telescoping tactical stock that offers a personalized fit, along with a pistol grip with a rubber overmold wrap and a flared forearm that promote comfort and control.

SYKD HUNT is a relative newcomer to the bowhunting world, with the company's concept and vision born around a campfire in northern Pennsylvania.

The folks discussing possibilities that day were clear their venture would focus on hunting and the success of the hunters who trusted them with their hard-earned money. Any product with SYKD's name on it would provide performance well beyond the price tag.

SYKD's Vindicate XVC Crossbow is designed to be a workhorse and is built with the company's values at the forefront. It features a lever-action, adjustable tactical stock; molded pistol and foregrips; aluminum rail;

4-pound trigger; Anti-Dry Fire and ambidextrous safety. The "bow" part of the Vindicate XVC is built on a cast aluminum riser, fiberglass split limbs and dual cams.

Comfort & Fit

A hunter's experience is greatly influenced by the fit and comfort of a crossbow, and SYKD outfits the Vindicate XVC with a telescoping tactical stock that is easily adjusted over four positions that span 2 inches. Adjustments are made via a lever located on the underside of the stock, with minimal pressure needed to activate the lever. As a result, the shooter is able to quickly customize the length of pull to fit them, increasing control and comfort. A thin butt pad can be quickly removed, exposing the base stock that's ribbed in the event you prefer shooting without the pad. A sling-mounting tab is also molded directly into the stock.

A separate, molded piece mounted to the rear of the rail is home to the

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: SYKD Hunt, 866-797-9539; getSYKD.com

Model: Vindicate XVC

Safety Features: Anti-Dry Fire, auto trigger safety, safety wings

Cam System: Two-track dual cams, black anodized aluminum

Riser: Cast aluminum, black anodized

Overall Length: 35.5 inches

Axle-to-Axle Width: 17.75 inches (at rest); 14.5 inches (cocked)

Advertised Weight: 7.95 pounds

String: BCY D97, 37 inches

Cables (x4): BCY D97, 20.25 inches

Limbs: Split, compression-molded fiberglass

Draw Weight: 185 pounds

Power Stroke: 15 inches

Grip: Pistol, contoured rubber overmold wrap

Forearm: Flared, adjustable position

Finish: Black/G2 Camo

Advertised Speed: 380 fps with 390-grain bolt

MSRP: \$529.99

Comments: Customizable, comfortable and lightweight.

SPEED & ENERGY

	BOLT SPEED	KINETIC ENERGY
420-GRAIN BOLT	384.7 fps	138.1 ft./lbs.
500-GRAIN BOLT	358.7 fps	142.9 ft./lbs.
417-GRAIN MFR. BOLT	387 fps	138.7 ft./lbs.

BOWHUNTING Test Measurements:

Maximum Width: 21.75 inches (at rest); 18.13 inches (cocked)

Overall Length: 36.25 inches (plus adjustments)

Mass Weight: 7.21 pounds (crossbow only); 8.35 pounds (with accessories)

Average Trigger Pull: 2.63 pounds

Length of Pull: 14 inches (plus adjustments)

Average Shot Noise: 105.8 dBA with 420-grain bolt; 105.6 dBA with 500-grain bolt

Maximum Shot Deviation at 35 Yards: .88-inch

tube to which the telescoping stock is anchored, a large trigger guard and tactical pistol grip. Four small screws secure the overmold wrap to the base pistol grip, which is attached with a single bolt.

Forward of the pistol grip and trigger guard, SYKD attached a Picatinny-style rail to the underside of the main, machined-aluminum flight rail where the flared foregrip and safety wing combo unit is attached. The foregrip/safety wing body can be quickly adjusted to any point along the attached rail for further customization aimed at comfort and performance.

Shooters will experience a relatively light trigger that is advertised at 4.25 pounds of pull but tested much lighter. The trigger is optimized for a crisp and motionless, single-stage break for smooth operation. A physical trigger safety and anti-dry fire mechanism are auto engaged when the Vindicate XVC is cocked. All are housed in the trigger housing, which is seated at the back of the flight rail and sports a scope-mounting rail and bolt-retention arm.

The Bow

A single bolt attaches the company's cast aluminum bow riser to the front of the flight rail; its entire footprint is approximately 7x3x2 inches, making it rather compact. A dished-out section is cast directly into the riser to allow broadheads to be drawn further into its structure, and a generously sized foot stirrup is attached at the front of the riser and features a rubber coating and ribbed boot contact for a secure anchor. The

main body of the limb pockets is also cast directly into the riser, with only a limb bolt and limb-bolt cap needed to complete the system.

A plastic wear pad is positioned between the pockets and limb pieces where they pivot. The 185-pound limbs are split in configuration, which means there are four separate pieces, with each measuring 11 inches long. The limbs are made of fiberglass and are built/formed through a compression molding process before being matched into sets based on deflection values.

Limbs are water-dip finished in G2 Camo. A set of two-track dual cams outfitted with BCY D97 string and cables works with the limbs to power the

Vindicate XVC to advertised speeds of 380 fps with a 390-grain bolt. SYKD puts a premium on silence with the addition of dual string stops seated on rods connected to brackets mounted to the riser on either side of the flight rail. A set of rubber vibration-dampeners are also mounted between the split limbs for further silencing.

What's in the Box?

The Vindicate XVC crossbow comes with a 4x32 two-color, illuminated scope with lens covers, rope cocking aid, three SYKD carbon crossbow bolts, 5-bolt quiver, string wax and rail lube.

At the Range

With the Vindicate XVC, SYKD accomplished its goal of creating a get-it-done workhorse at the very favorable price tag of only \$529.99. It's worth noting that SYKD exceeded its advertised speed of 380 fps with a 390-grain bolt, as our testing resulted in an average speed of 384.67 fps with a 420-grain bolt. The adjustable stock will fit a wide range of shooter body types, as proven by the good fit I found despite my T-Rex arms. Hunting weight, which we define as the overall weight of the crossbow as you would take it to the woods (minus the bolts), was a very lightweight 8.35 pounds.

I am hoping for a more compact version of this rig in the future, as the Vindicate XVC has a relatively large footprint. Cocking was pretty easy with the provided rope cocker, and the pistol grip and flared foregrip were both comfortable and functional, giving me excellent control. **B**

CBE TREK PRO:

A SERIOUSLY GOOD BOW SIGHT

THIS HIGH-END AIMING option is packed with features.

Serious bowhunters demand serious bow accessories. When it comes to a sight, that means rugged dependability and a host of features such as multiple mounting options, second- and third-axis adjustability and the aiming versatility to take advantage of quick, close-range shot opportunities while also maintaining maximum precision on longer shots that are sometimes required in the field.

Custom Bow Equipment's Trek Pro — a brand new offering for 2022 — checks all those boxes and more, giving archers an all-important boost in confidence in the moment of truth. In fact, after putting a Trek Pro on my hunting bow, I feel confident saying it is among the very best bowhunting sights available today.

So, what makes the Trek Pro so special? Well, for starters, it handles the basics of sight design like the “pro” in its name. Available in 1-, 3- or 5-pin configurations, each with 12 inches of .010- or .019-inch fiber optics depending on your preference, the movable Trek Pro features a pin housing, yardage adjustment dial/mechanism and bow-mounting bracket machined from sturdy 6061-T6 aluminum. Meanwhile, the lightweight yet durable carbon-fiber mounting bar that connects the sight to the mounting bracket offers your choice of four mounting positions (closer or further from the riser) that engage with an audible click for precise placement every time. The 3-pin Trek Pro I tested weighed exactly 11 ounces on my scale.

Other highlights of the Trek Pro include: left- and right-handed shooter compatibility; first-, second- and third-axis adjustability; a sliding cover atop the pin housing that allows you to adjust pin brightness based on ambient light conditions; interchangeable green, yellow, red and white



\$329.99-\$369.99 / Custom Bow Equipment
877-503-5483; custombowequipment.com

peep-alignment rings; quiver-attachment holes in the mounting bracket; an included battery-powered, rheostat sight light; and the ability to add a 41mm sight lens.

While all those features are great, I want to devote the bulk of my review to the Trek Pro's easy sight-in system and how the sight is designed to get the most distance possible from your bow. Sighting in the Trek Pro begins by using the yardage dial to move the mechanism as high as possible to the “hard stop” position. Starting with the sight housing as high as it will go ensures the longest maximum range possible as you dial down from there. It also ensures that, in the heat of the action while bowhunting, you can always be sure your pins are reset to the “zero” position simply by dialing the pins up until they stop. That way, you can shoot confidently at your known pin distances without wasting precious moments looking at the sight or making additional adjustments.

Once you have the pin housing all the way up, the next step is to place your top pin where you want it in the housing for a 20-yard shot, making sure to leave adequate room below it for calibrating longer yardages if using a multi-pin configuration.

Next, you use the two gang adjustments on the sight to achieve proper pin elevation for a 20-yard shot without ever moving the yardage dial. Once your elevation is set, you can then set the windage using the sight's gang windage adjustment bar.

From there, you can then switch to the sight's elevation and windage micro-adjust knobs to set your desired yardages for any additional pins. Again, this is done without moving the yardage dial, as you want the pin housing to remain in its uppermost position until calibration is complete.

Once you have all your pins sighted in, you can determine the proper yardage

scale by using your top pin to sight-in at 30 yards and 60 yards using only the yardage dial to lower the pin housing. Mark each location (30 and 60) on the sight scale and then use the included Sight Scale Gauge to measure the gap and find the corresponding sight scale for your setup. The Trek Pro comes with 14 laser-engraved, aluminum scales that can be screwed to the sight, providing spot-on aiming points from 20 yards all the way to a minimum of 100 yards and a maximum of 130 yards, depending on the speed of your bow.

The final step in the process is to set your yardage indicator(s). Move the yardage dial back to its highest, 20-yard position and move the indicator so that it points to 20 yards on the sight scale. If you have a multi-pin setup, you can then set the second indicator to point to the yardage for another pin. For example, on my 3-pin setup, my second indicator points to 40 yards for my bottom pin. This allows me to use either my top pin or bottom pin as the “floater” on shots beyond 40 yards, and also ensures I always have a second yardage mark dialed-in at longer distances.

Personally, I feel that setting up the Trek Pro this way gives me the best of both worlds as a bowhunter, as I can confidently handle all shots 40 yards and under using my three fixed pins and handle any longer shots — whether that be a follow-up on a whitetail or a first shot during Western forays for elk, mule deer and pronghorns — using the yardage dial and the benefit of a spot-on aiming point.

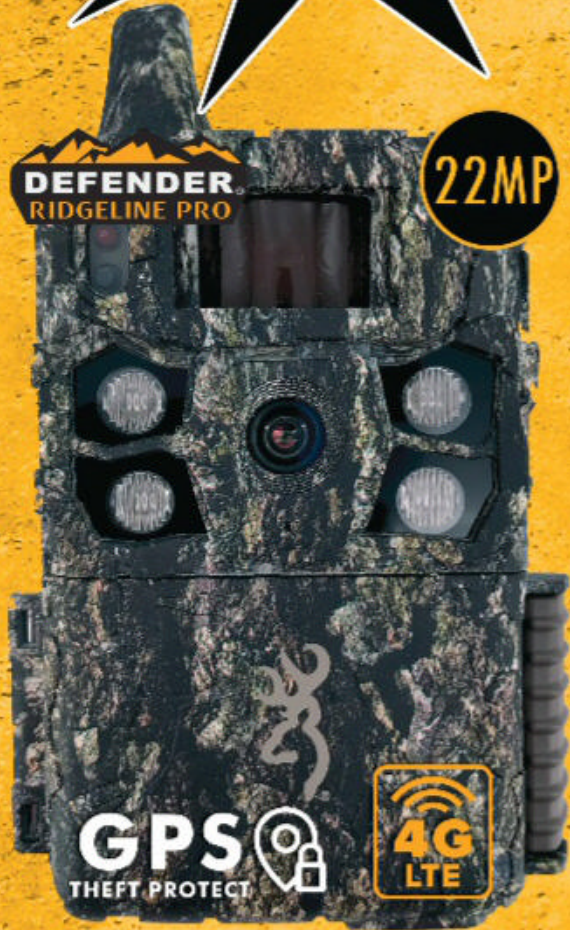
As an added bonus, a sight set up in this manner also works great on the 3-D course, making it the perfect companion not only during your hunts but during the months leading up to opening day. **B**

— Editor **Christian Berg**



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LEICA GEOVID PRO 32:

EXCEPTIONAL & COMPACT RANGE-FINDING BINOS

WHEN BOWHUNTING, it's not uncommon to have to flip between your binoculars and rangefinder while sizing up and preparing to take a shot at an animal. And, sometimes, you only have a few seconds to do it.

Well, with Leica's new Geovid Pro 32 laser-rangefinding binoculars, you can have the best of both worlds at your fingertips, helping streamline the process and saving you valuable time as a fast-moving buck or bull approaches.

Billed as the first-ever compact premium rangefinding binoculars, the Geovid Pro 32 combines exceptional optics and precision rangefinding capabilities in a lightweight, compact design, making them perfect for Western hunts and wide-open spaces. Of course, they'll also come in handy in the whitetail woods, especially when you have a big buck show up at a moment's notice and quickly move into shooting range.

Available in 8x32 and 10x32 models, the Geovid Pro 32 provides the exact distance to any nonreflective target up to 2,500 yards away simply by pushing a button. The distance can be displayed in either yards or meters, plus there's a scanning mode so you can range continuously if an animal is on the move or you're glassing the terrain.

Setting up the Geovid 32 is simple, with the two buttons atop the housing responsible for turning the unit on and navigating the menu. Downloading the Leica Ballistics App — available for both iPhone and Android — then allows you to



GEOVID PRO 10X32

\$2,899 / Leica Sport Optics
800-480-5422; leica-sportoptics.com

pair and calibrate the binos in just a few minutes, unlocking a multitude of range-finding features.

It goes without saying that when you're bowhunting, especially when it comes to longer shots, having pinpoint readings to your target is crucial. To this end, the Geovid Pro 32 promises incredible accuracy — to within less than a foot on distances out to 200 yards.

One of the Geovid Pro 32's highlights is the ability to create and store ballistic profiles (including for crossbows) in the app, and working with the unit's on-board Applied Ballistics software and atmospheric sensor to generate important real-time data such as wind speed and direction and offer ballistics solutions. The rangefinder factors in environmental conditions such as air pressure, temperature and shot angle, to provide precise "simple range" and "equivalent horizontal distance" readings. Gun hunters who are shooting longer distances will, of course, find these technologies and features extremely helpful, but archery hunters will benefit too, primarily on Western and mountain hunts where steeper uphill and downhill shots are more common and arrow flight has the potential to be impacted by ambient conditions.

Another feature bowhunters will really appreciate is the advanced GPS tracking via Leica ProTrack (LPT). Once you locate your target, the app syncs with Google Maps, Garmin devices or BaseMap software, allowing you to mark the spot of that target. For example, if you see an elk

or mule deer hundreds of yards away but need to navigate across rugged or mountainous terrain to get close, this function can help you with your approach to the area where you last saw the animal. Of course, the same principle can be applied to tracking game after the shot, helping in the recovery process. The best part? It can all be done without a cell signal.

As for the optics, the Geovid Pro 32 binos come with the renowned Leica clarity and precision sharpness. The Perger-Porro Prisms and HD lenses result in exceptional image quality, color contrast and light transmission, even in poor or low-light conditions. And, as mentioned, the unit is compact and lightweight.

Both the 10x32s and 8x32s are only 6 inches long and 5.1 inches wide and weigh less than 2 pounds. That's pretty important, especially when you're on day-long hunts or lengthy treks hauling gear. The binos are waterproof to a depth of 16 feet, which means they will remain fog-proof at high altitudes, and they come in a sturdy, shockproof housing to help withstand wear and tear in the field.

When you think about the cost of a high-end laser rangefinder, coupled with the price of high-quality binoculars, Leica's Geovid Pro 32 is an excellent value, especially when you consider all the features the Applied Ballistics software offers and how these optics can aid in the field. Simply put, this is one pair of binos worth its weight in gold. **B**

— Associate Editor Mark Demko



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ADVENTURE IS ALWAYS IN SEASON

Anytime. Anywhere. Any species. On *Winchester Deadly Passion*, Melissa Bachman hunts the world, chasing everything from turkey and bugling bulls to record book whitetail and red stag.

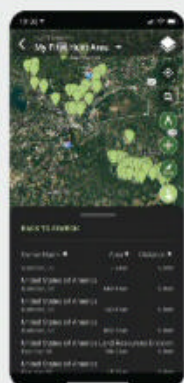
SUNDAYS
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SPORTSMAN

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE



By **MARK DEMKO**

NEW GEAR



EXPANDED MAPPING CAPABILITIES

\$29.99 FOR HUNTSTAND PRO
HuntStand; huntstand.com

Whether searching for a new deer-hunting property close to home or remote scouting for a public-land elk trip, having a quality mapping app is invaluable. And, in an effort to keep improving the experience for its users, HuntStand continues to unveil new features that make it easier than ever for bowhunters to plan their next outing.

Among the new highlights is an advanced parcel search tool to easily query the Property Information Layer to find the right land and ensure you're in the correct spot. Hunters can also search by landowner name or property size within any state or county and filter results by acreage or proximity to their location. Selecting a tract brings up all parcels associated with that mailing address, and you can save results to a customized map, making planning easier. Also new are monthly satellite image updates that provide the most up-to-date aerial views possible while allowing you to look back over time to analyze changes and trends.



PHOTO BY JOHN HAFNER



10 INCH

SLIM, LIGHTWEIGHT STABILIZERS

\$89.99-\$249.99

Custom Bow Equipment; custombowequipment.com

The Torx Carbon Micro Stabilizer promises balance, stability and vibration reduction, all in a slim, lightweight design. Available in 8-, 10- and 15-inch lengths, these high-modulus carbon stabilizers seamlessly integrate dampeners and 2 ounces of stainless steel weights. They are also available in front/rear kits (8- and 10-inch or 10- and 15-inch). The kits come with a quick-connect front/rear mounting bracket and feature a tapered fit to ensure stabilizers don't move once set.



VERSATILE ARROW HOLDERS

\$54.99-\$56.99

Alpine Archery; alpinearchery.com

Compact and versatile, Waypoint Quivers are designed to hold fixed and mechanical broadheads, accommodate standard and micro-diameter shafts and fit on most compounds and crossbows. These quick-detach, 11-inch quivers have a vibration-reducing bracket, open-hood cavity to help protect blades and a loop for hanging the quiver. The 3-arrow model weighs 5.6 ounces, while the 4-arrow one is 6.4 ounces. Available in Black, OD Green or Realtree Edge.



REDUCES TORQUE

\$129.99

T.R.U. Ball; truball.com

The Centerline wrist-strap release features a wrist strap and hook that are aligned to reduce torque, with a Tri-Hook that automatically resets after every shot. The release's thin profile allows your finger to reach the trigger more naturally, and there are knurled, textured thumb and forefinger locations for easier draw. The Globo-Swivel strap lets you adjust the release stem for a perfect fit, while travel and sensitivity set screws allow you to adjust trigger travel and pressure from very light to very heavy while maintaining a crisp feel.

HIGH FOC ARROWS

\$99.99-\$184.99

Gold Tip; goldtip.com

Bowhunters who shoot longer distances will appreciate the new Force F.O.C., Gold Tip's high-FOC arrow that promises long-range accuracy without compromising speed. These lightweight, .246-inch-inside-diameter carbon arrows have a $\pm .001$ -inch straightness tolerance and $\pm .5$ -grain weight tolerance. They come in four spine sizes — 250, 300, 340 and 400 — and are available fletched with four 2-inch or 2.75-inch vanes, or as a dozen bare shafts. Aluminum and brass inserts are included so archers can customize arrow weight.



TROUBLESOME TRESPASSER

\$220

Flambeau Outdoors;
flambeauoutdoors.com

Add a new tool to your deer-hunting arsenal with the Scraper Buck decoy, designed to lure in bucks looking to mark or defend their territory. This lifelike decoy, which mimics a 2.5-year-old buck, features adjustable ears for different poses, adolescent-deer paint scheme and a faux tail that moves with the slightest breeze. It's 44 inches long and 47 inches high to the antler tips and comes with a carrying bag and stakes for anchoring legs to the ground.



SEE THEM FIRST

\$499.99

Primos Hunting; primos.com

More features and easier access highlight Primos' latest Double Bull SurroundView blind. The SurroundView Double Wide offers 300 degrees of one-way, see-through viewing, so you can see game without it spotting you, and the blind includes a 180-degree front window for shooting. The double-wide door provides ample room for entry/exit, even with a pack or bulky clothing, while the built-in visor shields you from the sun's rays during sunrise and sunset. The blind is 70 inches tall, with a 60x60-inch floor space.



LIGHTING THE WAY

\$19.99 PER 3

Brite Spot; britespotleds.com

Never miss the mark, even in low-light conditions, with BriteSpot Target Lights. Available in red or green, these bright LED lights can be pinned to your practice target to provide a focal point when shooting long distances or in fading light. The anchors provide a strong, reliable hold, and the lights are both durable and dependable. You can also set the lights in different areas of the target to create new aiming points, extending the life of your arrow catcher.



SWEET REST, SWEET PRICE

\$199.99

QAD; qadinc.com

Sleek, light and compact, QAD's Integrate R2 rest is made for archers looking for the sweet spot where QAD's exceptional quality and a solid price point intersect. Designed for the Integrate Mounting System, the rest includes many features QAD fans love, including easy tuning, drop-away technology, full containment, no bounce back, total fletching clearance, a machined metal launcher and more. It also has grip-glide technology, which ensures precision when making adjustments.

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By **EDDIE CLAYPOOL**

THE DIY GUY

THREE DAYS

There's always time for one more elk hunt.

IT WAS 1991, and I was in the prime of my life.

Thirty-three years old, strong mentally and physically, I was consumed with an elk-hunting passion that burned hot in my spirit. I'd rat-holed some money and managed to get a bowhunting tag for the Gila country of southwestern New Mexico. Full of excitement and hunger for new adventure, I'd bowhunted hard for the first two weeks of September, finally harvesting a mature bull.

Now, as I drove toward Oklahoma with a large set of antlers in the back of my truck, I was flat broke. I had begged from Peter to pay Paul for this outing, and I desperately needed to get home and get back to work so the Claypools could keep their heads above water. If I was going to be able to do any whitetail hunting in November, there would have to be some seven-day-a-week work in my near future. Still, my heart yet longed for more mountains, more elk and more antlers. What was a guy to do?

By the time I pulled into my driveway, my mind was already hatching a new plan. Colorado's archery elk season had a week left in it, and I believed I could make something happen. But, where could I get some money? Grabbing my chainsaw, I headed to the woods to get some firewood to sell. Within a couple days, I had a little jingle in my pocket.

Getting "wifey" to trade vehicles with me for a week, I went to work. Removing the passenger and rear seats, I had soon added much interior room to the little Ford Festiva.



Placing a 150-quart cooler in the back end and throwing a backpack on top of the cooler, I soon had 90 percent of my mission accomplished. Grabbing a Coleman stove, some groceries and some clothes, I was soon ready to roll. In the back of my mind, I knew I was pushing my luck, but hey, you only go 'round once!

As the sun set on my sixth day home from New Mexico, I pointed the runty Ford west, making tracks. At 42 mpg, and with gas at a \$1 per gallon — and with 1,000 miles to travel each way — I'd been able to allow myself \$100 for fuel and extras. Another \$200 would cover the tag, and that would be the sum total of this trip's budget; there would be no room for problems!

By mid-morning of day one, I found myself in southwestern Colorado, bumping down a rough two-track I knew well. In years past, this area had provided me with a lot of elk action, and I hoped it would do so again. There were two days of bow season left. Parking at an old, abandoned mine near timberline, I ate a sandwich and grabbed a two-hour nap. As early evening arrived, I grabbed my bow and headed into the mountains. Within an hour, as I approached the edge of a dark-timbered basin, a bugle reached my ears. Aaah-hhh, I was alive again!

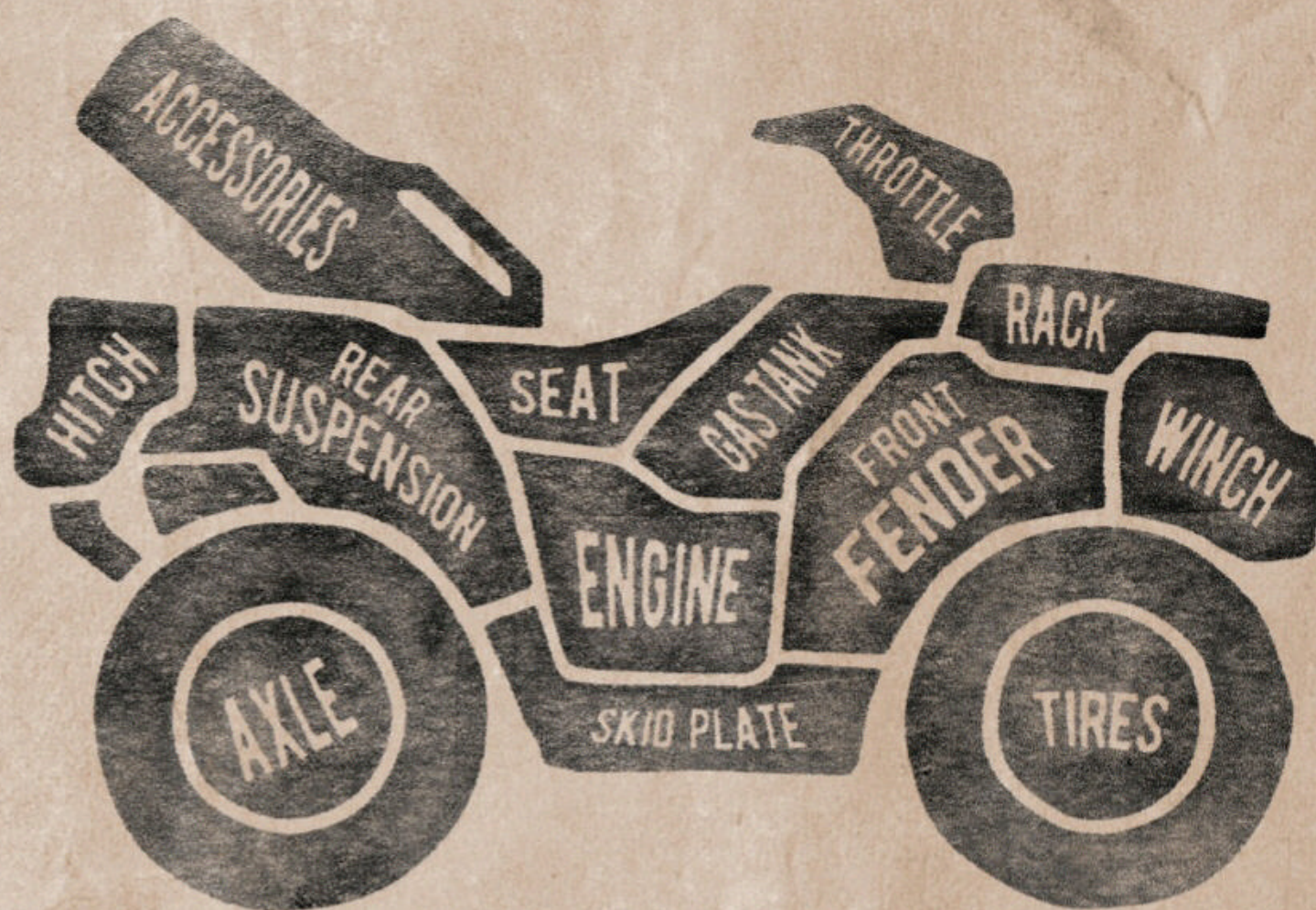
Instantly excited, I assessed the situation. The sun had just dipped behind the western peaks, providing downhill thermals, and I planned on making something good happen with this setup. Dropping off into the basin, I approached the bugling bull from below. Soon, I found myself sneaking toward a herd bull nosing a group of cows just below the timberline. As I slipped closer, nearby movement caught my attention; a bachelor bull was only 40 yards to my left. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush, and sending a well-placed arrow on its way, I was soon standing over an expired 5x5 bull. I could not believe my good fortune! I'd been in Colorado less than 12 hours, in the woods a little over an hour, and I was now reaching for my knife.

The following afternoon, as I lugged the last load of meat back to the tiny Ford, I wondered where I would put the antlers — they certainly wouldn't fit in the car! Grabbing some rope, I soon had them attached to the roof. Slowly steering down the narrow mountain road, the Ford was squatting low. When I hit asphalt, I headed for Oklahoma at a fair pace. Driving most of the night, I found myself home the middle of the next day. I'd been gone less than three days! The Claypools' larder would be lacking nothing for a long time to come. **B**

MARK ANDERSON ILLUSTRATION

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