



ADAPT OR SUFFER

**WHEN IN ROME,
HUNT LIKE A ROMAN.**

As hunters, most of us have comfort zones. We're familiar with our home turf and local game, whatever the terrain and species might be. Eastern whitetail hunters are probably most familiar with treestands and ground blinds. Texas deer hunters love their box blinds and tower stands. Western deer and elk hunters are probably more versatile and accustomed to hunting by glassing and spot-and-stalk techniques.

Neither is better nor worse; it is just a fact that terrain and vegetation vary. Regardless of species, wildlife adapts to their habitat. Hunters need to adapt as well. I don't want you to think I'm a Communist agitator, but the truth is I'm not crazy about hunting from stands. I get fidgety. I probably have a short attention span. My Kansas farm is a thick oak forest with a foot of leaf litter. Trust me, if I could figure out a better method than stand hunting, I'd do it. Our woods are just too thick and noisy for still-hunting to be productive.

After a couple of slow days on stand, somebody in camp is certain to say, "Have you tried drives?" Uh, no. We have a high deer density, but the properties we hunt aren't huge. There is no way I want to spook deer in my bedding cover over to the neighbors. We hunt from stands because it works. We finished our third straight 100 percent rifle season six days ago, so I know it works.

PRACTICE AND TRAIN FOR THE TERRAIN

I grew up primarily a Western hunter. Still young when I went on my first African hunt, I didn't have nearly the experience I thought I did. I'd never seen or heard of shooting sticks until my PH set them up in front of me and suggested I shoot a waterbuck using them. I suppose I can be forgiven. There was no internet or outdoor television. Today, there's no excuse; the resources are out there. I was in Barry Burchell's

Headed into one of Montana's "unlimited bighorn areas" on a backpack hunt...a long time ago. Look at that country! Boddington doubts he could do a hunt like that today. Best to be honest with yourself, as well as guides, outfitters, and hunting partners.



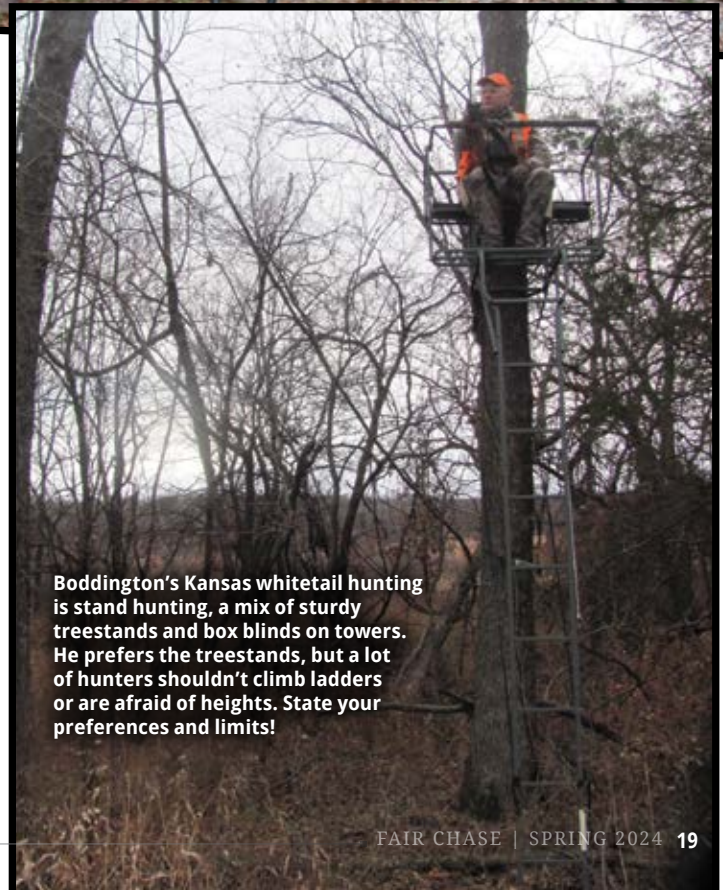
ABOVE: This was a big surprise: Cross-country skis on a spring bear hunt in Kamchatka. Boddington snow-skis but had never been on cross-country skis. He fell down a lot, swore a lot, but eventually got a nice bear. **RIGHT:** PH Ben Rautenbach demonstrates the Four Stable Sticks to Melissa Belcher. Sticks are universal in Africa, but many PHs have shifted to sticks that support both buttstock and fore-end. All shooting aids are good, but all require practice.

camp in the Eastern Cape a couple of years ago. A family from Texas had their teenagers with them. These youngsters hadn't practiced off sticks and were having trouble getting the hang of them. Being young, with great eyes and reflexes, they quickly figured out the sticks. I got lucky; I actually hit that waterbuck with the first shot I ever fired off of them. Today, in this information age, there's no excuse for not studying and practicing the shooting you're likely to encounter in new country.

In Africa, shooting sticks are almost universal for many good reasons. The PH or a tracker habitually carries them. They get you above low vegetation. And sticks get you off the ground with its thorny plants and creepy crawlies. When Africa-bound, get or make a set of shooting sticks and practice with them. Today, I'm simply amazed when I'm in camp with a first-time African hunter who has never before used shooting sticks.

Most hunting is spot and stalk in the American West, western Canada, and Alaska. Extreme range isn't often required, but open country is daunting if you aren't used to it. Many of us are hard-pressed to find ranges with targets beyond 100 yards but practice at distances up to 400 yards. Spend as much time as possible away from the bench, shooting how you'll likely shoot on the hunt—bipod, sticks, off your pack, or all of the above.

Most of us have hunting dreams, but we must be as realistic. Most of us work hard for years before realizing some of these dreams. We don't suddenly wake up in our middle years ready to tackle a tough mountain hunt. If you've never hunted wild sheep or goats, it's difficult to envision how tough it can be. Also, guys like me who live at sea level often underestimate the effects of altitude. Long before your hunt, check with your doctor and tell them your plans. Then start



Boddington's Kansas whitetail hunting is stand hunting, a mix of sturdy treestands and box blinds on towers. He prefers the treestands, but a lot of hunters shouldn't climb ladders or are afraid of heights. State your preferences and limits!

training early, months ahead. Walking is the best training—and find some hills. Start slow, and increase distance gradually. Use the same logic when carrying a pack. Start with nothing and increase gradually. Horses are wonderful in tough country, but a long ride is sheer murder on your body, especially if you have no horse experience or it's been a long time.

A lot of our dream hunts are, of necessity, outfitted hunts. It doesn't matter how much you want to do it or how much it costs. Being honest with prospective outfitters regarding your overall health and physical capability is essential. Every outfitter has stories about hunters who neglected to reveal medical conditions or just plain lied about their condition. Even tough hunts can be possible for even guys my age. Much of it is mental, one step ahead of the other, but we all have limits.

PACK THE RIGHT GEAR
As baggage allowances seem to decrease with every flight, it's essential to pack as lightly as possible. Still, you need

what you need, and it needs to be the right gear. I always ask my outfitters for an equipment list, but modify at your peril.

This past October, I went on a fall brown bear hunt on the Alaska Peninsula with old friend Dave Leonard of Mountain Monarchs of Alaska. I got his equipment list and followed it pretty well, including insulated hip waders. Dave recommended a long raincoat. I couldn't find one, so I went with the good raingear I already owned. We saw ten days of near-constant rain and wind. Everything was fine except for a four-inch gap between the top of my waders and the bottom of my rain jacket. I did not get a bear, but my outer shell will have an extra long tail when I return in the spring. I have no desire to spend another ten days with a wet butt.

Hunting is hunting throughout the world, and conditions vary tremendously. Weather influences the gear we need to be comfortable and successful, while topography and vegetation—probably more than the animals—dictate the kind of



shots taken. When going into an unfamiliar area, do as much research as possible and try to understand what to expect. Like they say, there is no such thing as a stupid question. On unfamiliar turf, there are almost sure to be surprises. Prepare for them as best you can, then be flexible and roll with the punches. It's all part of the fun when we travel to hunt. ■

Ready to head out on a backpack sheep hunt in Alaska. Such hunts must start with months of serious training...and aren't for everyone.



Dave Leonard and Boddington on a spring grizzly hunt up in the Arctic. Pack light but do your research and make sure you have the gear you need.



Rainy day on the Alaska Peninsula. See that gap between the bottom of my rain jacket and the top of my waders? No bueno! The outfitter's equipment list was clear, but I failed to find an outer shell or raincoat that was long enough, wet crotch most of the hut.