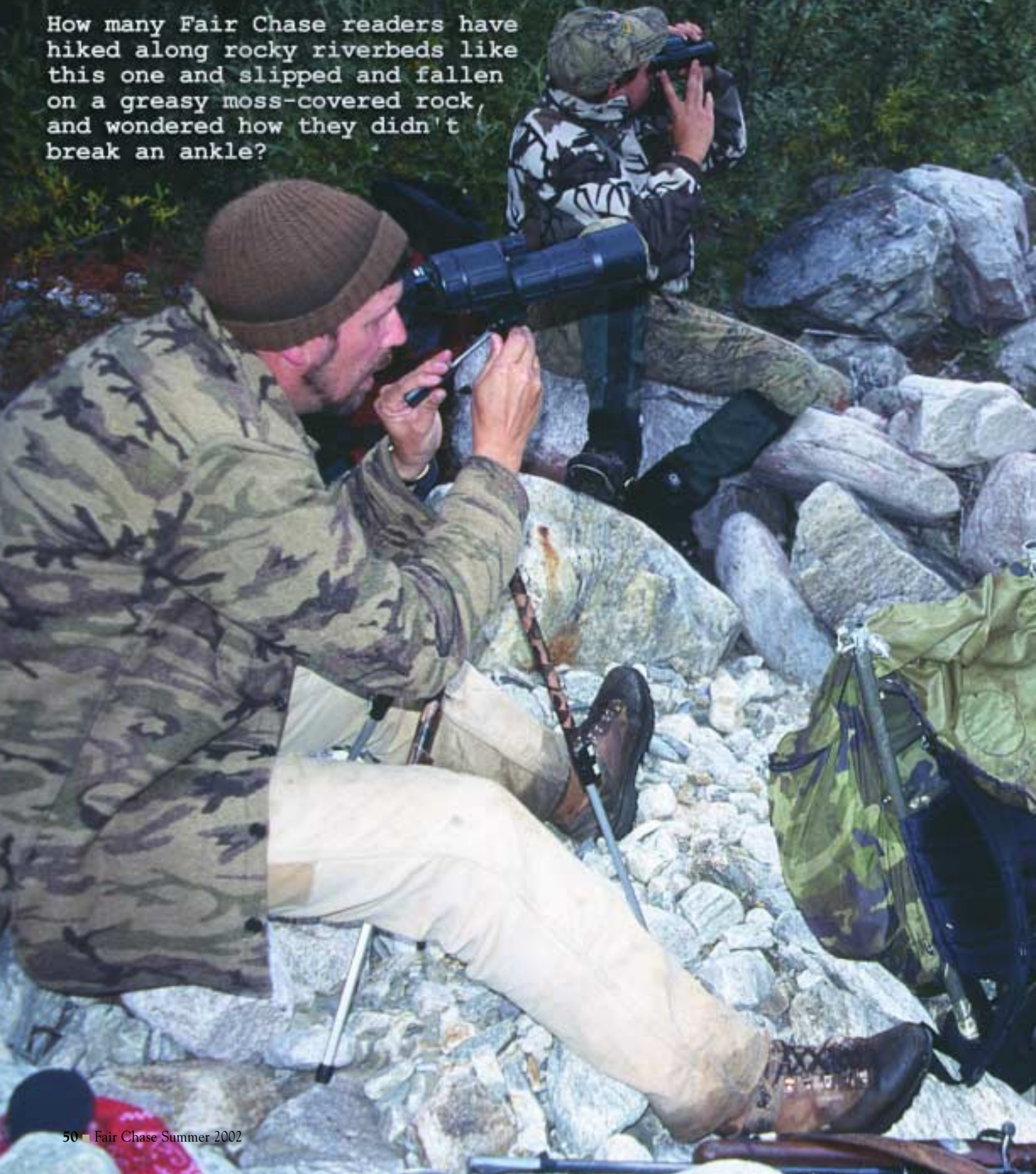


Everytime you step into the woods
you need to be prepared to take
care of yourself should something go
wrong. That goes triple for winter.

Striker Overly climbs into the Wrangell
Mountains of Alaska for Dall's sheep.
The flat river bed many miles away is
the nearest link to civilization.

The smart money always hunts the backcountry with a partner that can share the load and help out should something go wrong.

How many Fair Chase readers have hiked along rocky riverbeds like this one and slipped and fallen on a greasy moss-covered rock, and wondered how they didn't break an ankle?





into the woods, he or she must be prepared to take care of themselves should the dice roll snake eyes.

In the 21st century, we are surrounded with high-tech gadgets and gizmos that give us a false sense of security. Many people bet everything that they won't get in trouble in the first place, but if they do, their gadgetry will save them. It is this "it can never happen to me" attitude that can kill you.

Skookum sportsmen and sports-women always plan for the unexpected. They know there are more ways to get into trouble in the wilderness than you can shake a stick at. Most people who find themselves in trouble get lost. Some take nasty falls and break bones, severely sprain ankles, or cut themselves deeply. In the Far North and, increasingly, the mountains comprising the Yellowstone ecosystem, grizzly attacks are rare, but possible.

Many hunters are taken by surprise by unexpected bad weather. In Alaska, where I live, experienced woodsmen know that good weather only means that bad weather has been blessedly postponed for a few hours or days. We never leave home without being prepared for horrible weather, because, simply stated, in this wet, cold environment, Mother Nature rewards the prudent and punishes the unprepared unmercifully.

Common Sense Precautions

Never, ever go hunting without telling someone where you'll be and when you expect to return. That's as true for a half-day's sit on a whitetail stand as it is for a week's backpack hunt. Know the country that you'll be traveling. On backcountry trips, carry topographic maps and a compass, and know how to use them. A GPS unit is great, but you best be ready if it fails. Also, know the area's weather extremes. Historically, what are the worst conditions you can expect? Be prepared to handle them.

Naturally, the gear you pack depends on where you're hunting and how long you expect to be gone. For backcountry hunts, always pack basic survival gear, including a first aid kit customized to your

individual needs. If you have not taken a certified first aid course, do so. A call to the Red Cross, your local college, or fire or police department can help you find out when one will be given in your area. The knowledge gleaned from a short, one-day first aid class can literally save your life, or that of your companions.

STOP, Count the "Rule of Threes" Survival instructors teach you that the first thing to do when something goes wrong, whether it be an injury or being lost, is to STOP — Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan. Sit down and think the situation through. Remember the "Rules of Three": you may



Hunting solo in the wilderness is something I love to do, after being "bitten" on a previous Alaska sheep hunt in the Chugach Mountains.

be doomed in three seconds if you let panic rule; you cannot live more than three minutes without oxygen; you cannot live much more than three hours in extreme temperatures without body shelter (warmth); you cannot live much more than three days without water; you can live up to three weeks without food.

With this in mind, prioritize your next moves in a calm, orderly, and controlled manner. Build your course of action around the following steps: 1) choose a well-sheltered campsite, preferably near water and fuel for a fire; 2) set up a system of signals, with back-ups; 3) build a shelter, if you have sufficient strength and materials handy, without wasting valuable energy; 4) gather firewood and water; 5) maintain a positive attitude, dispel your fears, and boost the will to live.

What would Travis Hall do if he turned an ankle packing out this dandy bull?

In the Rocky Mountain West, often the best hunting for the unattached sportsman is to hike around large chunks of private land to public acreage where game is undisturbed. That often means trips lasting several days.



One of the most important things in a survival situation is being mentally tough enough to handle the stress and deal with whatever the problems are with a calm mind and upbeat attitude. Don't be embarrassed if you're "temporarily misplaced" (lost); it happens to everyone sooner or later. And really, having to stay overnight is nothing more than a boy scout camp out — if you are prepared. Remain calm, move deliberately, stay disciplined, and don't panic. Because you're carrying the right survival gear and took the time to learn how to use it before leaving home, you know deep down inside you'll be fine. If there are physical injuries, that Red Cross refresher class you took and your first aid kit will help you get through it. If you're with someone else, remember that an upbeat attitude is contagious. Laughter and old war stories are much better than worry.

Survival Kits

I never, ever head afield without basic survival gear. That's true whether I'm traveling by foot, horseback, boat, vehicle, or airplane. In fact, I am so anal retentive about it that I never head off on a day hike, climb in the back seat of a Super Cub, or hop aboard a small boat without a survival lighter and a couple of granola bars in my pocket. On backpack or fly-out hunts, I have a more complete first aid kit in camp, and a small, pack-sized kit in my packsack. I know how to use each and every item. What good will all that gear do you if, when the time comes, you have no idea how to use it, or whether or not the things you've been carrying work at all? An emergency is not the time to go to school.

Regardless of the size or type of survival kit you carry — and I have several, depending on the trip, time of year, terrain, and mode of transportation — it must be able to do the following: carry out basic first aid chores; build a fire, using two different techniques; construct a shelter; signal for help; and purify water. My kit also contains spare eyeglasses, a compass with mirror, and a small wallet-sized survival guide.

In addition to basic survival clothing items (packable Gore-Tex rain suit, stocking cap, warm Gore-Tex gloves plus a compressible fleece or microsuede Gore-Tex or Windstopper hunting jacket are always with me), in my day pack you will always find the following items: space blanket; compact space bag; 50 feet of nylon parachute cord; a multi-tool, like a Leatherman; hunting knife; half-roll of

black electrician's tape; one new butane lighter; one "light anywhere" butane survival lighter; fire starter materials; half roll fluorescent orange flagging; water purification tablets; one plastic wide-mouth, quart-size water bottle with screw top; small wire saw, with which you can cut poles for rigging a lean-to; and small square of aluminum foil, for melting snow. I also like to carry a couple of very large, extra-heavy plastic garbage bags — trash compactor bags are great — both for storing stuff out of the elements and for use as a crude shelter if need be.

Basic First Aid Kits

First aid kits are personalized for your needs, and should include a few spare prescription pills. In mine, I carry a half-roll of 1-inch cloth athletic tape; small tube antibiotic ointment; several assorted band-aids; roll of mesh gauze; small roll of antacid tablets; ibuprofen tablets; small bottle of eye drops; lip balm; prescription pain pills; suture materials; and a small tube of Super Glue. Believe it or not, you can stop reasonably serious bleeding by gluing deep cuts together rather than stitching them up.

Shelters and Signaling

The secret to life is staying dry and warm, an important consideration even in temperate climates and good weather. That means staying out of the elements. Building an emergency lean-to type shelter and fire is paramount to this. Your space blanket, rigged with your parachute cord and some poles as a crude lean-to, can keep the wind, rain, and snow off. The silver side should be toward you so it can reflect warmth from your fire back onto your body. Remember that you can use literally anything and everything Mother Nature provides to build your shelter, including blown-down trees, chunks of sod and mud, rocks, overhanging rocks or small caves, and even snow. On winter hunts, one shelter type I use even in midday when I'm cold and miserable is to dig the snow out from around the base of a conifer tree having limbs that hang down to the snow level, trim all the dry inside branches away both for comfort and tinder, and line the bottom of the shelter with green limbs. It can get quite cozy.

Hypothermia is your worst enemy, and it doesn't have to be below freezing for this killer to grab you. Statistics show that more people die from hypothermia in temperatures ranging from the low 40s to mid 50s (Fahrenheit) than any other. If it looks like you're going to be there a while,

even overnight, creating a crude shelter from wind, rain, and snow is important. (This is where that packable Gore-Tex rain suit comes in handy. Not only does it serve as protection from rain or dew as you sleep, it also blocks 100 percent of the wind, helping ward off the dangerous effects of wind chill.)

The four ways to avoid hypothermia are: stay dry; stay out of the wind — thus avoiding wind chill; understand the cold; and never ignore shivering, which indicates that you could be on the edge of hypothermia. Another "gotcha" in cold weather is frostbite, which is the freezing of body parts. It is a constant danger in freezing and sub-freezing weather, especially where strong winds are blowing. The first sign of frostbite is numbness, not pain, and a grayish-yellow or whiteness to exposed skin. It is important to get potential frostbite victims into shelter and near heat as soon as possible, warming the affected parts with warm (not hot) water until soft, even if this hurts (it probably will.) Body heat, commercial heat packs, and extra clothing and blankets can be used to help treat frostbite.

The item that saved my bacon on that fateful sheep hunt is a portable radio that sends and receives on aircraft frequencies. It's the size of a standard walkie-talkie, costs about \$350, and runs on 6 AA batteries. With it I was able to send a mayday on the standard emergency channel and reach a Federal Express cargo jet I only heard, but never saw. The crew, in turn, called a hospital in Anchorage, which dispatched a rescue helicopter to pick me up.

Cellular telephones are more common in the wilderness than ever, and they are certainly helpful at times. However, like radios, they don't work in all places all the time, so I never count on one as the only piece of survival gear I need. Satellite phones are readily available today and are much better than a cell phone, though they are bulky. Believe me, I never, ever hunt north country areas without my radio and/or a cell phone, though I like the radio because it permits me to talk easily with passing aircraft. If need be, the mirror of your compass can be used to flash signals

TOP: When planning a wilderness backpack hunt, it is important to carefully sort through your gear, discarding the "like to have" stuff and taking only the essentials. Never, ever forget your survival gear. My friend Scott Newman, a crackerjack Alaska guide from Petersburg, is sorting through our stuff in preparation for a mountain goat hunt.

INSET: On a solo Dall's sheep hunt in the Alaska Range early one September, I went to bed to a clear sky filled with stars, and woke up to two feet of wet snow that kept my pick-up aircraft from flying in for three days. A person must be prepared for the unexpected on wilderness hunting trips.



to search parties and aircraft.

The key to backcountry survival is avoiding trouble in the first place. However, as one of my bowhunting buddies is fond of saying, "In bowhunting, anything that can go wrong will go wrong — and then something else will go wrong." The same is true with wilderness hunting. The more time you spend in the backcountry, the chances of needing your survival gear and skills increases proportionately. Will you be ready to meet the challenge when it happens to you? ■