Back to the BACK COUNTRY

More and more hunters are turning to expertly managed private parcels leaving the nation's out-of-the-way public hunting grounds to the dedicated adventure seekers.

By A.E. Walsh
Photographs courtesy of Author

Growing up surrounded by vast National Forest and Bureau of Land Management tracts, I never knew how good I had it. In fact, I've burned many a campfire log wishing I had access to the coveted private lands of the valley floor. Meanwhile the stars burned brightly above, twinkling in laughter at my ignorance.

The ritual was always the same: I followed the pre-dawn crowds to the wide spots in the road, parallel parked amongst other hunters, and waded through the sea of hunter orange, staking out a meadow to watch as the sun rose and set. Like those around me I endured seasons of scarce game by getting lucky and taking the occasional animal that ran the gauntlet. I quickly tired of the routine and started looking for an escape.

More out of necessity than daring, I found myself chasing bulls and bucks across thickly timbered ridges that were devoid of human footprints. Amongst the crowds I was never more than an hour from my truck (or a convenience store, ATM, or mini mall for that matter), and while I was surrounded by trees, I was a million miles from the wilderness. It was a need for the truly wild that initially pushed me beyond the trailhead, but the quality experience I discovered drove me back to the back country.

March 30, my 20th birthday, I found myself staring at the same tattered county map planning my fall hunting applications. This had become an annual rite of preference point accumulation as I (and seemingly every other Oregonian) would follow the path of popularity to stand little chance of drawing a coveted tag. Out of post-adolescent spite I decided to apply for a hunt based on nothing more than availability of public land. I reasoned that an 85-percent chance of going hunting was far better than a less than one-percent chance. When my mule deer tag arrived in the mail a few months later, my excitement was tempered with the knowledge that I probably wasn't going to find the trophy quality I was after.

My fears were confirmed the first time I set out to scout. I had drawn a tag in a unit comprised mostly of the Eagle Cap Wilderness — 358,000 roadless acres of clear water alpine lakes, deep draws, and towering granite peaks that remained in snow regardless of the late summer temperatures. I parked at an established trailhead, loaded my camp on my back and set out for a long weekend to familiarize myself with the area and its game. I made several mistakes on that trip that nearly cost me my desire to ever leave the road again, including but not limited to: hauling a pack more suited for a team of mules, wearing a pair of only moderately broken in boots, and attacking the first five miles of the trail with misguided reckless abandon. At the end of the first day I'd traveled no more than 10 miles. I'd twisted knees, ankles, and just about every other joint in my failing body and maintained the zeal of a rodeo clown at the end of a losing day. Undoubtedly the huffing and puffing contributed to the fact that I saw nothing more than abandoned hoof prints.

Going deep into the wilderness can be an unmatched adventure and an immensely rewarding experience, or it can kill you. Unfortunately, each year hunters seek a secluded stand of timber "just over the next ridge," but do so wholly unprepared. Sometimes they don't come back. Planning in the beginning makes the trip more rewarding and less dangerous.

B&C Official Measurer, J.D. Gore, took this old mule deer with his bow on public grounds. He and the author found a remote location, packed in, and both worked to get this fine deer. (The author is still a little bitter!)
OPPOSITE: Packing in is one thing, but packing out of the back country after a successful hunt is something entirely different. While a downed moose is certainly a chore for the do-it-yourselfer, even smaller game can be tricky without planning.

Train for Success

No bit of advice is harped on louder than the need to get in good physical condition before a hunt, but hunting the back country is serious business. The chief reason other hunters aren't there is because it's far from easy trekking, and the rougher the better for finding an out-of-the-way honey hole. Even in areas where horses are allowed, you'll find yourself on the ground leading as much as in the saddle riding.

The air is usually thin in the high mountains of the wilderness, and it doesn't take long for out-of-shape legs to burn up what little oxygen fills your lungs. Fit legs will carry you farther, and they're more efficient in their oxygen needs. Find uneven terrain near your home and spend time working your legs, strengthening your muscles, limbering your tendons and ligaments — and as important — breaking in your boots. Start well in advance of the hunt with casual walks through the woods, and gradually work up to spirited hikes with a heavy pack.

First Aid

Despite our best efforts, accidents happen all too frequently — especially when you're traversing a shale slide or swollen alpine creek with a loaded pack. If you carry nothing else with you, make sure you have an ample first aid kit (See sidebar about Basic Back Country First Aid Kits). Spend some time at the library or on the Internet familiarizing yourself with emergency techniques, including the treatment of broken bones, bleeding wounds, allergic reactions, and medical conditions attributed to adverse weather. Practice these techniques until you are confident that you could perform these operations on (a) yourself, and (b) under the most urgent circumstances, which is exactly how it will play out. With any luck it will be time wasted, but when you're a hundred miles from the nearest road, there is no such thing as too prepared.

Plan for Contingencies

When I set out to scout my wilderness area I overlooked one very important detail: What would I do

Use current maps to plan your wilderness hunts, but be sure to let someone know where you are going, just in case there is an emergency. The National Forest and U.S. Geological Service are excellent sources for quality maps.

BASIC BACK COUNTRY FIRST AID KIT

These things are a necessity in any long-hauler's backpack. There are other things you should consider depending on where you are going and your own physical needs. Keep all of these items in their own baggies or bottles, and store the kit in a single, waterproof storage bag.

- Aspirin or Tylenol
- Antihistamine
- Neosporin
- Tweezers
- Medical tape
- Laxative
- Anti-diarrhea tablets
- Band-Aids (various sizes)
- Safety pins
- Sterile gauze pads
- Scissors
- Mole Skin
- Elastic bandage
- Triangular bandages
- Peroxide
- Calamine lotion

The Self-Guided Hunter...

The author shot this bull on public lands in New Mexico. The area was choked with hunters in low-lying areas, but with the help of horses, the author was able to get above the crowds and into some outstanding hunting. **INSET:** Be sure your woodsmanship is up to par before setting out. Nothing will spoil a trip quicker than not being able to start a fire in inevitably adverse conditions.

WILDERNESS HUNTER'S GEAR

Below is a short list of the things I've found useful (and could justify the space and weight in my pack!). It's important that you start with a quality backpack; I prefer an external framed unit, as I find it easier for loading meat and antlers.

n Parachute Cord n Flashlight (SureFire type with a couple of spare batteries and a bulb) n Compass n Water Purifier/Tablets n Maps (in Zip Lock baggy) n Waterproof Matches n Film Canister of Vaseline (for starting fires) n First Aid Kit n Multi-Tool (with saw) n Space Blanket n Baking Powder (for bathing) n Large Trash Bag n Toothbrush (I can only go so far)

if I had shot something? I had crammed my pack full of items I thought were necessary and left little room for more than a found shed antler. When I returned to hunt, I pared my pack down to the bare necessities and still had to get creative to make room for the trip out with the buck. By planning ahead for all conceivable events, you'll be forced to find what is truly important and what you'll have to do without (See sidebar on Wilderness Hunter's Gear).

Of critical importance is a quality map and equally true compass or GPS. Although I've made it around my familiar woods a hundred times with a key-chain compass, I could probably do the same with my eyes closed. When hitting the back country, your compass (and your ability to use it effectively!) is your lifeline to getting home. If you're like me and think you have an internal compass and fine eye for geographical waypoints, forget it. Take a compass, know how to use it, and rely on only it and a current map. And make sure your map is protected from the elements; there's nothing scarier than trying to read a wadded pulp mass that used to be your map.

Additionally, always let someone know where you are going and when they should expect you to be back. Chances are they won't rat out your secret honey hole, but if an emergency occurs, it's nice to have someone who can point rescuers in the right direction.

I'm also a big fan of parachute cord, available at almost any sporting goods store. It is lightweight, extremely strong, and has a million and one uses.

Trail Food

It's hard for me to leave my own kitchen without emergency rations, so meal planning in the wild can be a difficult task. Given that you are limited on the amount of cargo you can pack, including food, an honest personal assessment is an important part of the planning for your trip. Obviously, low-weight freeze dried M.R.E.s (Meals Ready to Eat) are an excellent source of nourishment. Dried fruit, jerky, and G.O.R.P. (Good Ole Raisins and Peanuts) are also an excellent travel food. If I'm hunting a familiar area, I've found a lightweight rod-and-reel combo spells disaster for attention starved high-alpine trout.

And last, but certainly not least, I utilize the day or so after harvesting an animal to prep the trophy (cool and dry the cape, remove excess meat from the skull plate), care for the meat (remove all bones and as much heavy fat as possible), and eat as much of the meat and excess food as possible. I may run my gut as taut as a basketball, but with the exception of an elk, I can almost always get it all out in one trip.

After my first scouting trip to the Eagle Cap Wilderness, I made serious adjustments in my approach to wilderness hunting. Gone is the bar of soap I "needed" to wash up, replaced by a baggie of baking powder. Instead of quantities of water I now pack a lightweight water filtration system and/or some water purification tablets. (Equally valuable, I realized the importance of where I could and could not drink.) I don't pack all the food I could ever want, rather only what I'll need in an emergency; the rest I pick, catch, or shoot. I've become an expert at starting a fire with wet tinder, so the hatchet stays home, and if for some reason I can't find natural shelter, I have a space blanket that makes an excellent lean-to.

And what I found after that first trip is that I was much happier not packing a small homestead on my back. I can go deeper, stay longer, and hunt game that have never seen a human face. That first trip ended when I packed a nice 26-inch wide mule deer to the trailhead. In five days I saw more unfettered game than I ever imagined possible, and better yet, I didn't see another hunter. From then on I was sold on hunting the back country, whether Oregon, West Virginia, or Alaska.

Every year I take one, self-guided reaffirmation into the deep timber of public lands. Most years I take what I would consider a trophy animal, but win, lose, or draw, every year I take the trip-of-a-lifetime. If you're like me and you're tired of the hordes of hunters crowding public hunting grounds, hike right past them, live on your own skills, and reintroduce yourself to the great natural resource just over the next ridge. n