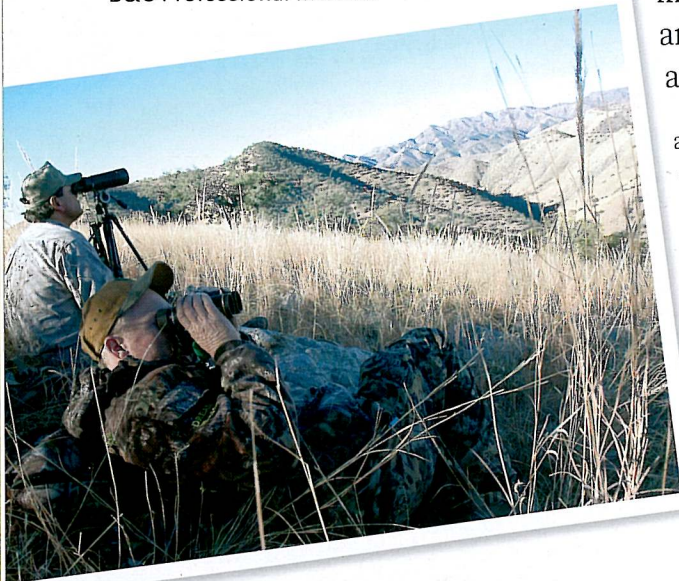


# Glassing is a Mind Game

It's More Faith Than Equipment

**By Craig Boddington**  
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Two techniques for glassing are shown above — a tripod with 20X binoculars and the old fashioned way with 10X Leupolds. The man looking through the mounted binoculars will find far more Coues' deer, but on other applications, the other technique may be more practical. Again, the keys are getting comfortable and steady and really looking, all more important than what you are looking with.

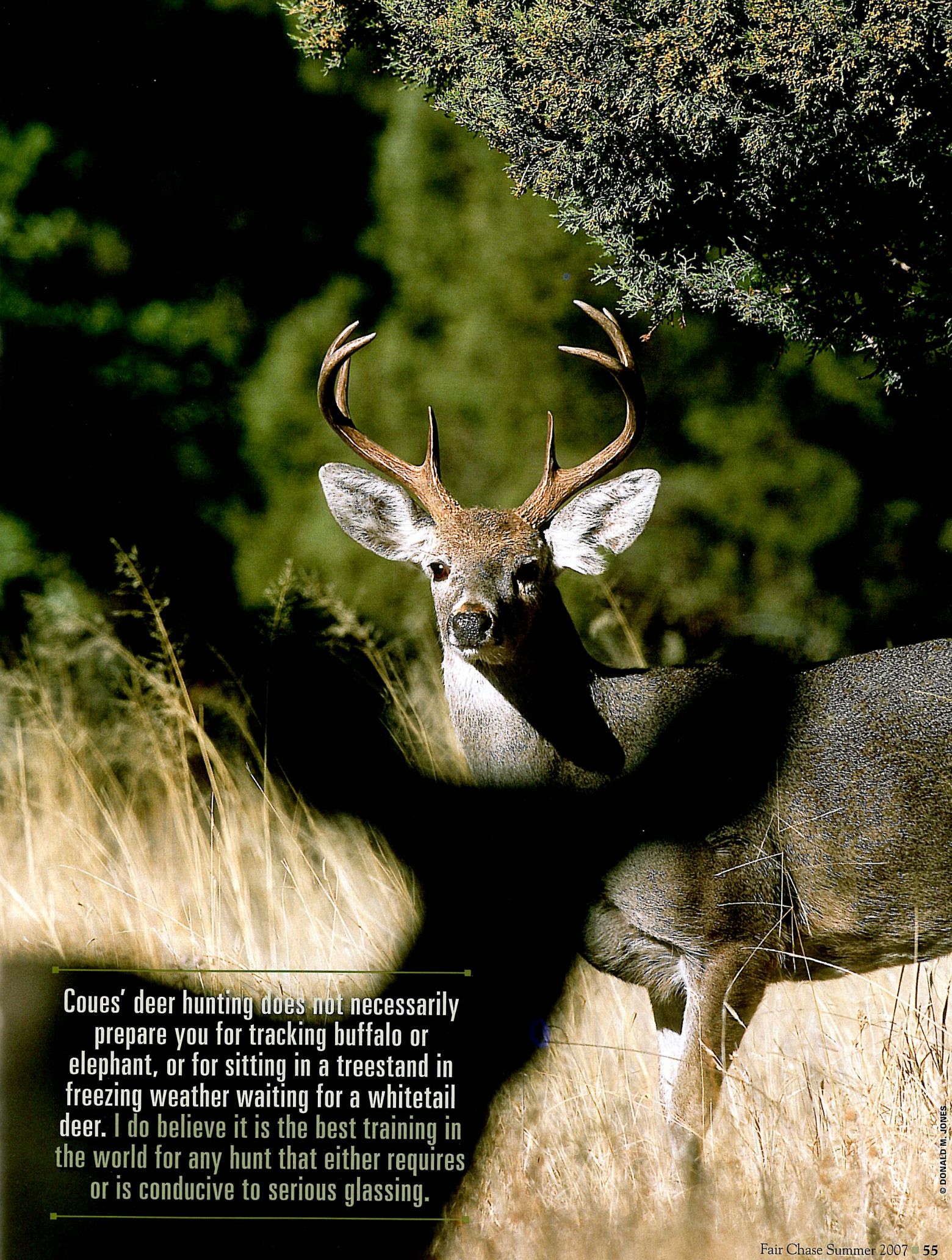
We climbed a horrible ridge in pitch blackness, sweat pouring freely despite the frosty air. Eventually we topped out and made our way to an outcropping. Cold now, we peeled down and grabbed dry T-shirts from our packs, then set up our optics and shivered as we awaited the dawn.

As the sun rose I could see that our vantage point dropped sharply into a vast basin, the far ridge more than a mile away. I glassed my eyes out, but I could find nothing in that corrugated jumble of scrub oak, cactus, and crumbled rock. I think about two hours passed before Duwane Adams looked up from his tripod-mounted 15X Zeiss glasses and said, matter of factly, "Boddington, I've got a barn-burner for you."

He did, a big buck tending several does. I couldn't find them in my binoculars, and it took me quite a while to find them in my spotting scope, but they were there, down in a grassy ravine about a thousand yards below us. Getting to them seemed to take forever, but the deer were still there, and I shot the buck. That was more than 25 years ago. For a very long time, the buck was my best Coues' whitetail. I've since done a bit better, but that remains the best lesson I ever received in the fine art of glassing.

## **PATIENCE AND FAITH**

Duwane Adams opened my eyes. Despite the reading glasses now required by middle age, I was blessed with exceptional vision and have always been very good at spotting game. This being the case, until that day I thought I was pretty good at glassing. Honestly, I hardly knew the first thing about it. I had part of it right. I'd sit down and get comfortable and steady, and I'd work the binoculars. My biggest problem was innate impatience, probably exacerbated by the fact that I'd done most of my hunting in relatively open country — pronghorn, mule deer, caribou, and even sheep and African antelope in country where, if you can't see 'em, they probably aren't there.



Coues' deer hunting does not necessarily prepare you for tracking buffalo or elephant, or for sitting in a treestand in freezing weather waiting for a whitetail deer. I do believe it is the best training in the world for any hunt that either requires or is conducive to serious glassing.



So, like all too many of us, I was accustomed to sitting down — at least with perfectly good technique — essentially taking a quick look, and then moving on. I had done some Coues' deer hunting, but we'd done it much the same way. Although I hadn't taken a really good one, I'd taken Coues' deer, so my ineptitude had been masked by success. I know now, and in fact I learned on that day, that Coues' deer hunting is, if not properly at least most successfully, the most optics-intensive hunt I have been on in this world. I also know that hunting Coues' deer, though often frustrating, is perhaps the best way to learn how to really glass.

You see, you're looking for a small, well-camouflaged animal thinly distributed in vast country. Their habitat is not only big. It's also covered with scrub oak, mesquite, ocotillo, prickly pear, palo verde, saguaro, cholla, and more; and it's rocky and uneven, with innumerable folds and ridges. Almost anything out there can hide these small deer, and even when in plain sight they aren't easy to see. Coues' deer hunting is truly like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. On the other hand, the country is so big and deer so thin on the ground that you have to cover an awful lot of ground to blunder into one. Logically, then, the best way to find them is to get high where you can see, get comfortable, and look.

Coues' deer hunting does not necessarily prepare you for tracking buffalo or elephant, or for sitting in a treestand in freezing weather waiting for a whitetail deer. I do believe it is the best training in the world for any hunt that either requires or is conducive to serious glassing. Good Coues' deer hunters may

or may not be useless in close country, but in any situation where vantage points allow glassing, an experienced Coues' deer hunter will generally do well — and will find most other game comparatively easy to spot.

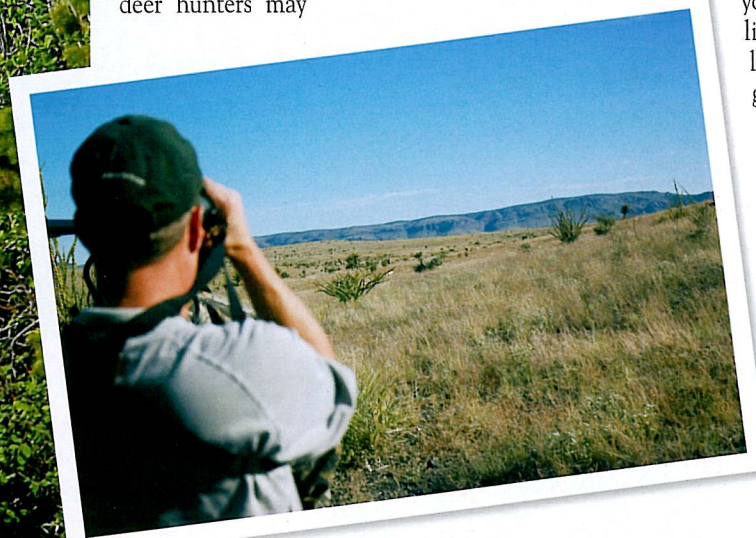
There are many elements to serious glassing. I'll touch on a few but, unfortunately, real skill comes only with experience, and it isn't an exam you can cram for. Perhaps the first key, then, is patience. You have to take your time, not only in the actual act of looking, but in understanding that the only way you will get better is to keep doing it. I remain impatient, so will probably never be as good at this game as my Coues' deer-hunting mentors, Duwane Adams and Kirk Kelso, or Jack Atcheson, Jr., in sheep hunting. It is very hard for me to sit still and glass for more than a few minutes, let alone several hours — but real glassing is a matter of hours, not minutes.

While patience is a key as well as a virtue, its real cornerstone is faith. To glass successfully you must believe the game you are looking for is there, and it is simply your job to find it. A bit of homework is required to hold this belief. There is no point in glassing for greater kudu in the mountains of Sonora. Whether by research, scouting, or previous experience, you must know that at least the game you seek, if not the specific animal, is in the general area you are hunting.

Then you must read the terrain well enough to find a vantage point that allows you to view as many likely areas as possible. This, of course, varies with different species, so some basic knowledge of the game you're hunting helps. Of course, any animal can appear anywhere within its range, so you

don't rule out anything — but you concentrate on the most likely. With Coues' deer we like to glass saddles and grassy basins. In the evenings bighorns are likely to drift up from uppermost fingers of timber into little sagebrush basins. All goats the world over are likely to appear on little benches amid the nastiest rocks. And so forth.

Game country is big, and game animals are small. The biggest leap of faith is accepting that just because



**This is not glassing! This is just stopping to take a quick look. There's nothing wrong with this, and because of the white on their bodies pronghorn are extremely visible at incredible distances. On the other hand, if you set up and really glass, it's astounding how far away you can spot them.**

# Glassing is a Mind Game

you cannot readily find an animal doesn't mean it isn't there. If the country is good and you've chosen your ground well, you must take this to mean not that the animals aren't there and it's time to move, but that you simply can't see them — but if you remain patient and keep looking they may move into a position where you can see them.

I will never claim to be a great glasser, but I have studied under friends who are. I believe this matter of faith (which, since nothing is sure in hunting, can well be misplaced!) is of primary importance. A couple of years ago Kimber's Dwight Van Brunt and I were on a Stone's sheep hunt in Yukon's Pelly Mountains. I had already taken my ram, so we and our guides went separate ways, Van Brunt looking for his ram and me looking for a ram he might like — and hoping to find a grizzly along the way. We were on a knife-edged ridge when two rams burst out of some timber below us and headed up a canyon system. One looked really good, so we watched them for a long time.

The next day Van Brunt's party headed up to where we had last seen them, while we went one system farther up. It was a nasty day that had it all, from rain to hail to snow squalls, but I was certain these two rams were somewhere in the drainage we were glassing. It was pure supposition, but I based it on the fact that we had spooked them badly, and when last seen at great distance, they were still stepping out smartly. Our system was rugged and looked "rammy," and the distance seemed about right. About two o'clock, after hours of glassing and seeing nothing, both rams skylined on a flat-topped ridge, then moved down and bedded on a buttress far above us. It took us hours to find Van Brunt and outfitter Randy

Babala, and more hours of a really tough stalk. It was past nine o'clock when he shot the ram, and a whole lot later than that when we stumbled into camp.

## MOVE OR STAY PUT?

Obviously, there is a fine line to be drawn between patience and stubbornness. Even in the best country, the game you're seeking will not be present on every hillside, and even if present, game that's bedded tight may not show. In some terrain there may be few options. For instance, on my first hunt in Ethiopia, we hunted a single huge mountain, Mount Kaka. One of several false summits was a big rockpile we called Negussie's Fort after our outfitter, Colonel Negussie Eshete. The vantage point was superb, and throughout the safari, until we were both successful, either my partner or I, together with guides and scouts, spent entire days perched on those rocks.

Usually there are multiple vantage points and a lot of country to look at. Within any hunt there is only a certain number of days, and within those days the peak hours of game movement are even more limited. So, depending not on your patience, but on the strength of your faith in any one vantage point and the vista it overlooks, even the best glassers will spend an hour or two and then move, sometimes to obtain a different angle, and other times to look at entirely new country. These decisions should be based not on boredom, but on carefully weighing the odds. For instance, while Coues' deer are extremely difficult to see, animals like caribou, Dall's sheep, and Rocky Mountain goats are extremely easy to see. In any sitting you must give it enough time for animals to move up out of hidden

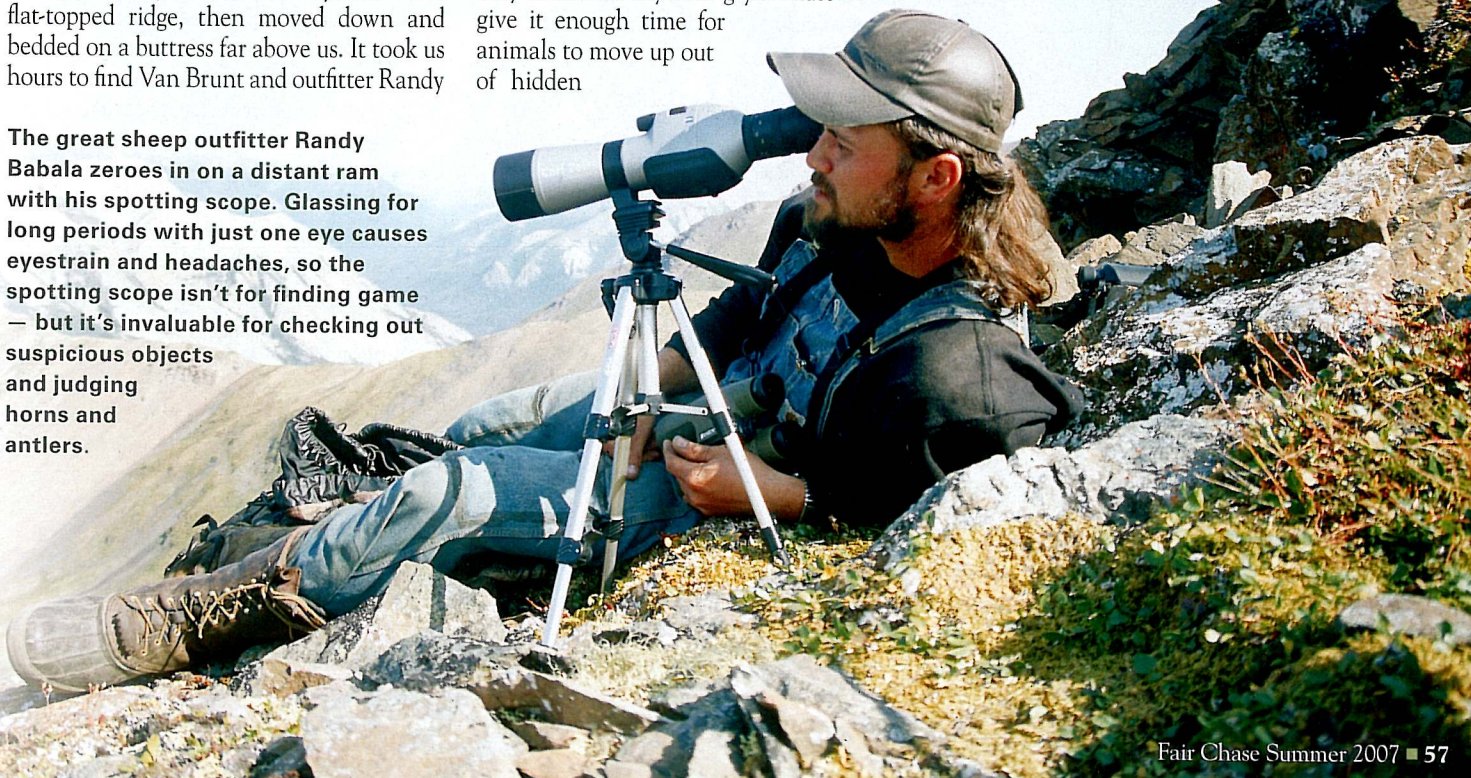
folds and patches of cover, but with animals that you know are readily visible, you may move more often.

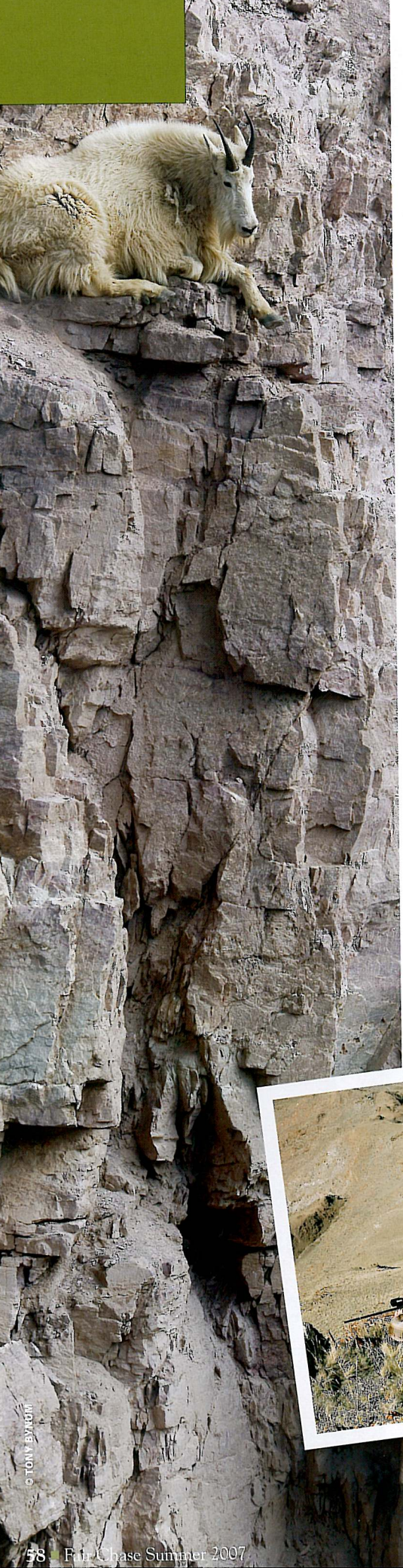
Time of day is also important. Almost any animal may move at midday, but midday movement is generally less likely than early morning and late afternoon. So there is little advantage in moving from vantage point to vantage point during midday hours. Depending on the animal and the terrain, midday hours might be spent attempting to locate bedded animals (post-graduate glassing), or might be best spent resting, then moving into a prime location for the afternoon hours.

## THERE ARE NO LIMITS

One of my basic mistakes in my early glassing was that I believed there was a limit in how far I could spot game, so I limited the distance I even bothered to look. To a degree, what you can see depends on the quality and magnification of your optics and how steady you can get. Strong wind, for instance, limits distance because you can't remove all the vibration. Mirage and heat waves are also factors, especially in warmer climates. Here's a

**The great sheep outfitter Randy Babala zeroes in on a distant ram with his spotting scope. Glassing for long periods with just one eye causes eyestrain and headaches, so the spotting scope isn't for finding game — but it's invaluable for checking out suspicious objects and judging horns and antlers.**





trick I learned from Duwane Adams. The natural tendency is to start glassing close, then work out. This is opposite of what you should do. Serious Coues' deer hunters constantly deal with heat waves and mirage, so at first light, in the cool of the day, they glass as far as they can see — then work closer as the heat comes up. In the evening it's just the same, but for different reasons. As the light goes so does your ability to see — this obviously varying with the light-gathering capability of your glass. So you glass as far as you can as long as you can, then work in.

Some animals are harder to see than others, and a bedded animal may be completely invisible even though it's quite close. But you are breaking faith with yourself if you mentally establish any limits on what you can see. Dall's sheep and pronghorns, of course, can be seen at ridiculous distances — but so can the white rump patches of big-horns. So can moving animals, and so can the shine off an antler or a sleek hide. Also to be avoided is the concept of looking for a whole animal. Nice, but not that common. You are looking for horizontal lines, pieces of brush too regular to be brush, the shine of a damp nose, and tiny nuances like color, texture, and light reflection.

All of these things take experience to recognize, but it comes with time, and success begets success. The wonderful thing about glassing is that all skills are transferable to all areas and all game. You just have to know what you're looking for, and then you must be able to recognize what you're looking at.

Can glassing be practiced? You bet! Scouting on the ground is the best practice, and that's exactly what my Arizona-based Coues' deer hunting friends do throughout

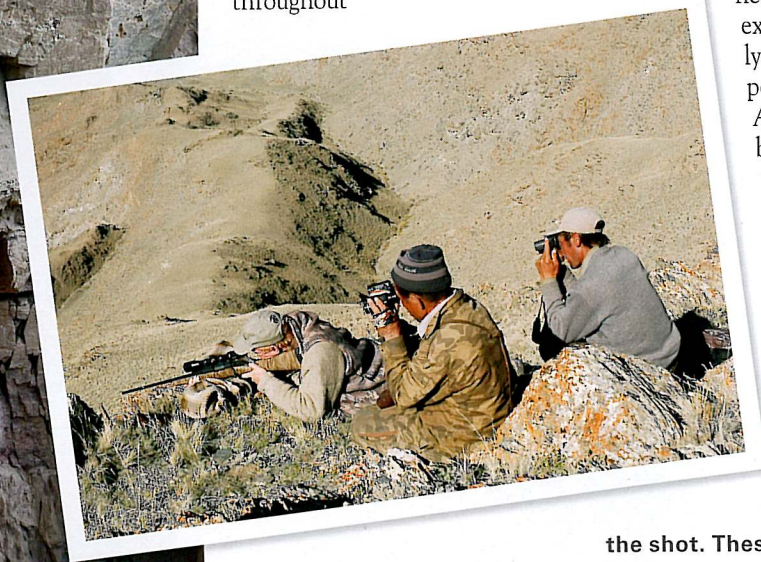
the year. But any glassing is very much to the good, so there is always a binocular in my truck.

## IT AIN'T ALL ABOUT EQUIPMENT

You will note that the only reference so far made to specific equipment is the big tripod-mounted binoculars Duwane Adams carried. I made this reference not to plug that manufacturer, but simply because this was the first time I had ever seen binoculars more powerful than 10X, and also the first time I had seen binoculars mated to a tripod. Extra-powerful binoculars steadied on a good tripod are almost standard today with serious Coues' deer hunters. In my opinion there is no better tool for finding small, hard-to-see animals in really big country.

On the other hand, these are not essential or even useful in all applications. A spotting scope is wonderful for zeroing in on a distant suspicious object, and irreplaceable for actually judging horns and antlers. Even a 20X binocular cannot replace a spotting scope of twice that magnification for judging trophy quality. Rarely, can you carry everything. So, for hunting most mountain game (understanding that sheep are relatively easy to spot), I tend to carry a good 10X binocular, with a spotting scope and tripod in my daypack. In really open country, I've used 12X a lot lately, which is about the limit of magnification that I can handhold and be steady. Some people can effectively use 15X without a tripod, but absent a tripod, 10X is often the practical limit.

I do prefer to use the best-quality optics available because I believe they help me see better. However, and this is extremely important, glassing is actually more about technique, patience, and persistence than it is about optics. We Americans have a terrible tendency to believe we can replace these things with high-priced technology and be successful. We purchase flat-shooting rifles and big scopes and believe we are instant experts at long-range shooting. Likewise, we buy the costliest optics and believe we can instantly see more game. Learn how to use these tools and amazing things are



**I'm preparing to take a shot at an ibex in Mongolia's Altai Range while my guides spot**

**the shot. These Mongol hunters were the best I have ever seen at glassing distant game. They wiped my eye, so to speak, and not that the old binoculars of the guy in the middle lack an objective lens. He uses it as a monocular and does just fine!**

possible — but simply owning them doesn't imply the skill to use them.

Last fall I hunted Siberian ibex in Mongolia's Altai Mountains. I had been told that the Mongolian guides were the most experienced in Asia, and they did not disappoint! In fact, they were so slick and so conscientious that it took me a couple days to figure out what they were up to. On the first morning, I left my ger (the proper word for yurt), and we took a Russian jeep up a long valley until we came to some saddled horses. "How kind," I thought, "they brought these horses up at dawn to save me the ride." We rode and walked up a steep ridge, and two Mongol hunters met us and we started glassing.

It was past dark and cold when we rode back to camp for supper, and the next day was a repeat. Only then did I figure out that, while I was getting ready for bed, my guides had ridden from camp in the dark and slept on the ridge in their saddle blankets so as to be up high and glassing at the first hint of daylight.

My guides had terrible old Russian

binoculars, and one had only half a binocular, long broken and used as a monocular. I had clear Steiner 12X binoculars and a big spotting scope. I also have a lot of ex-

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perience in a lot of places, and my eyes are still 20/10. I don't claim that I can keep pace with genuine glassing experts like Duwane Adams and Kirk Kelso — especially when

# Glassing is a Mind Game

they're using big binoculars on a tripod — but in most settings I find game as well as anyone. These Mongolians beat me pants down.

They spotted all the ibex, and even with my fine optics I had trouble locating distant animals they had spotted. Their advantage, of course, was that they had hunted ibex in these mountains all their lives. They knew the color and texture, and they knew the most likely movement patterns. But these guys could see! It was humbling, and I could only imagine what they could see if they had the equipment I was carrying. On the other hand, it really isn't about the equipment — you do the best you can with

what you have. Rather, it's knowing where and how to look, and believing that if you look long enough and hard enough you will see the game you seek. ■