

The Self-Guided Hunter...

SUCCESS AFIELD

Having Fun in the Perfect Storm

Seventh in a series...

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The sharp pop of taut nylon fabric being whipped by the wind awakened me just before a second violent gust of wind slapped the side of the tent against the top of my head. Alternately the tent was flattened as the fiberglass poles gave to the strength of the wind and then popped back upright just in time to be flattened again by the next gust. Meanwhile, the wind howled and rain pounded the tent. When the tent popped back to its normal shape it was filled with a fine mist. Moisture which had gathered on the underside of the fly was being driven through the nylon inner tent by the violent thrashing of the tent. As the storm raged the sound of the waves crashing on

the shore came closer and closer to our tent as the tide came in during the early morning hours.

Our sleeping bags were protected by bivy sacks and our clothes were dry inside waterproof "Bill's Bags" commonly used by river runners. My brother and I were as comfortable as anyone could expect to be considering the weather conditions created by the raging storm coming off the Bering Sea.

I dozed off as the night passed and the rain finally quit. All that could be heard now was the wind and the cry of an occasional gull. It was light outside when my brother, Rich, jabbed me and said, "Did you hear that?" The tone of his voice conveyed both excitement and concern. "Was that a gull or was it a cry for help?" I replied. "I think it was a man's voice," he stated. "I'm getting up to see."

We were on a remote beach along the Bering Sea where we were staging to float our raft across a large, wide bay to access the mouth of a river. From there, we planned to pull the raft up river eight or ten miles in search of Alaska brown bear. We knew the storm was coming and were prepared. We simply dug our tent into the sand dunes suffi-

ciently back from the high tide line to weather the storm with the "right stuff" for gear. Timing is everything in this crossing as the bay is very shallow. If your timing is off you can easily miss the tide and find your raft high and dry on the tidal flat a mile from the shoreline. We had been dropped at this spot earlier in the day by an air taxi service and opted to spend the night to get the right timing for our crossing at high tide and wait out the storm.

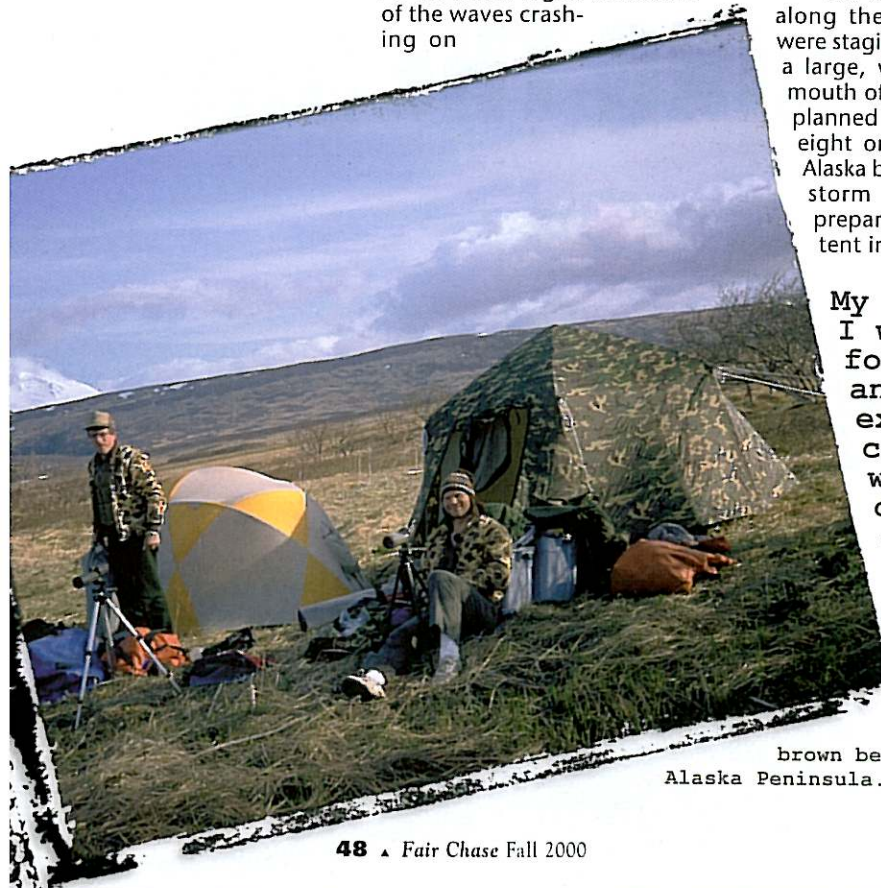
Several hours after we were dropped on the beach another self-guided party consisting of a father and son arrived via the same flight service we had used. The father was a physician from an East Coast state. His son was an attorney and an Army captain stationed at Fort Richardson, Alaska. (Alaska guide regulations permit family members to hunt with Alaska residents who are within the second degree of kindred.) As they emerged from the plane the physician yelled, "We're going to have fun!" Most of their camp and other gear had been obtained from the Special Services program at Fort Richardson. As we sized up their gear and observed their actions, we knew these hunters were unfamiliar with the area and their camping gear was probably fine for a week-end camp-out near Anchorage but definitely not up to the standards required to withstand the weather they were about to encounter.

The first thing we noticed was they did not know how to inflate the raft which had a plywood bottom liner. Wanting to be helpful, we attempted to give them a few pointers. We pointed out that the bay was very shallow and they had missed what high tide there had been in the afternoon. The tide was going out so fast that they would be unable to put their raft in the water and load it. The tide already had gone out a hundred yards from where their gear pile had been unloaded from the plane

My brother and I were as comfortable as anyone could expect to be considering weather conditions created by a raging storm coming off the Bering Sea.

Rich Bettas
(left) and Bert
Flotre at our

brown bear camp on the
Alaska Peninsula.



My brother Rich and I planned and carried out a hunt for Dall's sheep in Alaska's Tok Management Unit nearly a dozen years ago. The hunt was planned and executed to perfection.



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This young man was a novice backpack hunter when this photo was taken.

He learned that packs like this are unnecessary.

Photograph by Steve Wottlin

Todd Huck and his brother Troy are among the few individuals who are nearly always successful wherever I have suggested they hunt, as well as in areas they have researched on their own.

and they did not have their raft inflated. One person would have to stay with the raft keeping it afloat while the other put gear into the raft. They had so much gear that even if the person loading the raft ran between the raft and the pile of gear it was an impossible task. Rich noted that it would be impossible even if we helped them load the raft. I was surprised when the hunters looked at us as if we were plumb crazy. Then they learned the hard way that the task was indeed impossible. Defeated by the sea they hauled their raft and all their gear up near where we were camped.

At this point the weather was quite calm so Rich and I did some beach combing for glass floats. When we returned to our tent we were not surprised to see the other hunters' camp set up about 50 yards from ours. There was one significant difference. Instead of setting their tent above the high tide line their umbrella tent was set up on the flat, sandy beach. As we walked past their tent we noticed

the rain fly was not on their tent and the location of the tent on the tidal flat provided no protection from the impending Aleutian storm that was coming. The umbrella tent would surely be flattened by the storm and the high tide would do the rest. Rich commented, "High tide will be at 6:30 a.m. These boys are in for a surprise. I guess they will have to learn the hard way as I doubt they will pay any more attention to our advice about the high tide than they did earlier." With that we went to our tent and used a half-dozen oak barrel staves we found on the beach to solidly anchor our tent. We ate dinner and crawled into our tent for the night.

It was nearly dark when I heard our neighbors talking so I decided to at least give them one last bit of advice. Knowing the high tide would inundate their camp I gave it my best and most diplomatic try. I told them about the coming storm and offered them the last of our barrel staves. "Tomorrow is one of the lowest tides of the year," they stated with authority. "We have a tide chart." They did believe my weather warning and used the barrel staves to stake down their tent. They also used their out-



board motor as an anchor placing it on the seaward side of the tent as the wind had picked up some by then. "O.K.," I replied, and headed back to my tent. Rich was nearly asleep when I crawled into the tent. I noted that they had a tide chart and were quite firm about their decision to camp on the beach. Rich replied in a matter of fact tone of voice. "Tomorrow IS a low tide on the Pacific Ocean. This is the Bering Sea and tomorrow IS one of the highest tides of the year. Wait and see."

I could tell by the rapid shuffling of Rich's hip boots as he approached our tent that we had not heard a gull. It was our neighbors yelling as the high tide consumed their camp after the tent had been flattened by the storm. The aluminum poles were snapped in half and most of their gear was wet. Their rifles were soaked, the wooden stocks had begun to swell and rust was already appearing on the barrels. Their Swarovski binoculars had been in the salt water so long they were ruined. The physician was already suffering from hypothermia even though the son had stuffed him into a survival suit

and laid him on the lee side of the raft filled with wet gear to keep it from blowing away. The outboard motor was under about three feet of salt water, all of their gear was soaked and they had no fresh water to drink. They were in serious trouble.

At this point we had no choice but to help them. The wind was blowing so hard that you could hardly stand up, let alone walk into the wind. The only good thing about the situation was the rain had stopped. Rich knew about some freshwater seeps a half mile from our camp so we went after water first. Next, we fashioned a lean-to in the sand dunes from what was left of their tent. We spent the afternoon helping them salvage what gear they had left. Even though we had helped them immensely, their attitudes had not changed much. My brother got their outboard running and the next morning they loaded all their gear in their raft and launched into the high tide. The last we saw of them was the physician wading into the water and leaping on top of the heap of gear as the son gunned the motor.

We watched them cross the narrow part of the bay and saw them beach the raft and shoot a small bear. Later we learned the physician had been hunting some distance from camp and had shot a number of times at a large bear. He wounded the bear and ran out of ammunition. He went back to camp for more ammunition and returned to the location of the shot with his son. The hunters chose

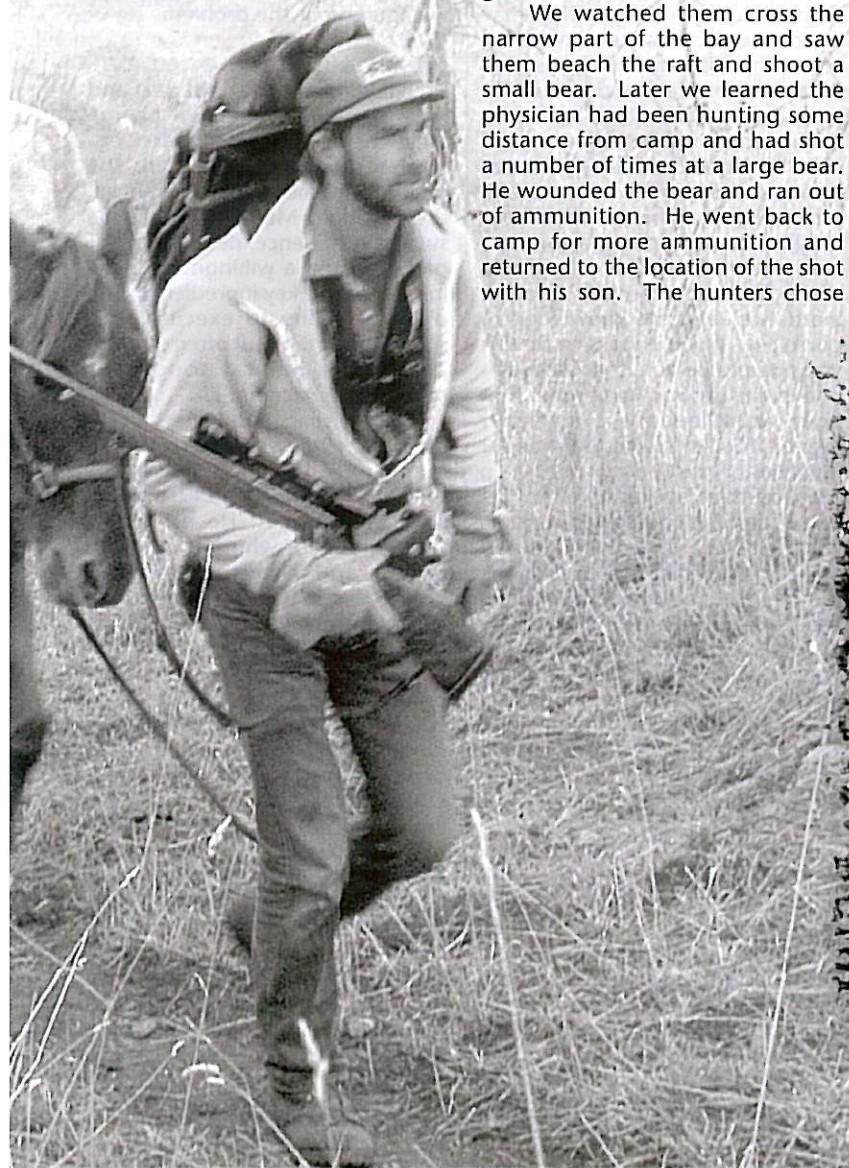
not to follow up the wounded bear for reasons only they know. I wondered if they were having fun.

Even though these fellows were in an excellent area for trophy Alaska brown bear, they were not fully prepared for the hunt they were attempting to undertake. Furthermore, they "knew it all" and had an "attitude" — two key elements for getting yourself into serious trouble and possibly even killed. Had it not been for Rich and me these men could have easily lost their lives. Their hunting ethics also left a lot to be desired. I cite this experience to make the point that planning and executing a successful hunt is serious business. Careful attention to detail and planning have no substitute. Alaska's guide rules are intended to prevent situations like this.

Success afield year after year is directly related to skill, confidence, determination, patience, proper planning, and a willingness to toil for success. A little luck also comes in handy, but don't count on it! Over the years I have planned and executed many wonderful big game hunts all over the lower 48 states and Alaska. On the Alaska hunts I have been accompanied by my brother, who is an Alaska resident. Perhaps the most memorable and enjoyable hunt of all was a hunt for Dall's sheep in Alaska's Tok Management Unit. My brother Rich and I planned and carried out this hunt with our friend Bert Flotre nearly a dozen years ago. The hunt was planned and executed to perfection. Everything worked and went according to our

On our Dall's sheep hunt, we used the "Owen method" for meat sacks.

White coveralls were used while stalking sheep and later cut up for meat sacks.



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plan. Even the weather was reasonable. Rich and I each took a fine ram topping off an otherwise unforgettable adventure. So just what was it that made this hunt successful? Planning, skill, confidence, determination, patience, and a willingness to toil for success were key ingredients. The weather was a gift from the hunting gods . . . or maybe it was Diana, the goddess of hunting!

Planning

Planning consists of gathering all of the information necessary to properly execute the hunt. It begins with researching the areas where the big game animals you seek are found in the numbers and trophy quality you desire. In the case of the sheep hunt we developed three alternatives, one of which was hunting in the Tok Management Unit, a controlled hunt with limited permits. We also researched two completely different areas and had three separate hunts planned. We drew the Tok tags and since this area was our first preference, this is where we decided to hunt. Had we not drawn the Tok tags we could have hunted either of the alternate areas.

Once we had identified the areas we proposed to hunt we developed detailed information on each. We put together the topographic maps of each area and researched biological data to determine the sheep ranges and distribution patterns. Once this was completed we identified air taxi operators for each area and developed a hunt itinerary including where we were to be dropped off and where we were to be picked up.

Information comes in many different forms and from many sources. How one develops information on areas is subject to personal preferences. Some people simply buy information from any number of commercial sources such as newsletters. Others hire people to actually scout areas for them. Some people scout on the telephone, calling any number of sources of information. Recently Internet "chat rooms" and web sites have added considerably to the amount of information that is available. Others resort to meticulous record keeping and research any number of reports, articles, books, and data sets in order to gather the information they desire.

The Boone and Crockett Club's Big Game Info-net (www.boone-crockett.org) is a new tool we are developing to aid the hunter. We currently have big game information for Colorado posted on our

web site and we are working on adding new states on a regular basis. If you look around on the Internet there are other similar sites that you can access for similar information.

In the case of the sheep hunt, I researched a number of areas and chose the Tok Management unit because of the quality of the sheep and the fact that I knew a research biologist who had worked in the area. I remember one research report in particular that compared horn growth of Dall's sheep in the various Alaska sheep ranges. The Tok area stood out above all others.

The speed and ease at which information is passed along in today's high tech communications environment has made information much easier to obtain on one hand but has also made secrets much harder to keep.

I often get calls from individuals who want to know where to go hunting for one big game species or another. Many individuals believe that just because one person successfully took a trophy animal in an area anyone can. That may be so in some cases but don't count on it. There is tremendous variability among hunters. I usually have some information to at least give the person a start. Sometimes I have very good, detailed information and occasionally will share it. I have a circle of friends who regularly exchange information and compare notes. The rule is you don't "break the circle." In other words we keep the knowledge to ourselves. If you choose to do this you need to be able to trust everyone in the group. Remember that your worst enemy is a former friend! Students often ask me for information and I attempt to help them as much as I can. I often "recycle" hunting spots after students have left the area and am amused at how important the skill of the hunter is in this equation. There are a few individuals who are nearly always successful wherever I send them. There are others who are equally unsuccessful even in premium areas with lots of game and top quality information. Some dogs just don't know how to hunt! Others won't hunt.

The Right Stuff

We talked about having the right gear in other articles in the self-guided series so I will not dwell on the subject in this article. But the key is to have appropriate gear, and the sheep hunt was a good example of this. We made a list and revised it a number of times. We had just

the right amount of the proper equipment to get us there and back. We studied what clothing would suit the area best during the early sheep season and planned accordingly. Careful attention was paid to every item we took on the trip to insure we carried packs that were as light as possible. We took extra care to not duplicate common items. We used the "Owen method" for meat sacks by using our white coveralls and used T-shirts for meat sacks, etc. We put the plans together over a period of more than twelve months. No detail was overlooked. Special attention was paid to such skills as fleshing and salting capes. We learned the techniques involved in fleshing capes, turning ears, and splitting lips by practicing on deer capes. Our boots were suited to the terrain we were hunting, our clothes were perfect for the weather we encountered, and stream crossings were the most significant obstacles we met. One good point we learned on the trip was that gaiters keep the small rocks found in glacial streams out of your boots. Bert and I had gaiters and my brother did not. Rich's feet were a bit raw after several stream crossings until we figured out the problem.

Mental Components

Even if you have the right gear and have done your research on the area, the two most common obstacles to success afield are the physical and mental components of the equation. Mental components such as confidence, determination, patience, and a willingness to toil for success are key ingredients. The physical ability to execute your plan is important but often secondary to the mental toughness required for success.

A few years ago I knew an individual who was interested in hunting elk in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and Clearwater backcountry areas. He was a West Point graduate who had been to ranger and airborne training. When I was in the Army during the Viet Nam era I had a number of friends who proudly wore the ranger/airborne insignias on their uniforms and a few even had West Point rings. These guys were tough hombres. Guys whom you could depend upon regardless of the circumstances. I assumed this individual was up to the challenge of elk hunting. On one hunt I packed him nearly 20 miles into a remote camp in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. After one day of hunting he wanted to go home. I sacrificed two days of hunting to pack him out to the trailhead and return to camp. On another hunt, he got lost one afternoon and fi-

nally found his way to camp in the dark suffering from hypothermia and panic. He was afraid of the dark and uncomfortable being alone in the woods. After several years of coaching this individual and taking him on hunts, my friends and I gave up on him. He simply did not have the mental toughness to persevere more than a couple of days in the wilderness. His confidence and patience were lacking, and he was unwilling to seriously toil for success.

When it comes to mental toughness, in some cases you either have it or you don't. It seems to me that those who excel at planning and executing difficult hunts on their own are also successful in their professions and other endeavors. I also believe one can refine his or her mental toughness and willingness to toil for success. Working hard for success is critical to the outcome of any hunt. However, sometimes it can come back to bite you.

At one point in my life I nearly died because of my intensity and determination to succeed. I got to the trailhead leading to my Idaho backcountry elk camp the day before the season opened and felt a sharp pain in my right side. I was annoyed at the pain and thought it would go away. Determined to not let the pain interfere with my hunt I toughed it out as we packed into our camp. As evening approached I could not stand the pain

and told my hunting partners about it. As I lay in the tent angry that I did not feel well, my hunting partners stood around the campfire outside the tent and debated what ailed me. My veterinarian friend suggested it could be an appendicitis while my orthopedic surgeon friend decided it was a hernia. When the pain became unbearable my friends convinced me that I needed to ride out and get to a hospital. The orthopedic surgeon accompanied me as we rode in the dark to the trailhead. Halfway to the trailhead I began feeling better and we decided it was hernia. I turned around and rode back to camp that night.

The next morning I shot a very nice bull and packed it to the trailhead. Feeling better, but with a dull pain in my side, I volunteered to pack a couple of elk out for two friends who had backpacked into a remote camp near mine. Leaving the pack animals to rest for the trip back to my camp I put the pack saddles on my saddle horses and hiked the ten miles round trip to the elk and back out to the trailhead. While I walked I kept my hand in my jeans under my belt pressing on the painful area to keep it from hurting. I had made a very foolish decision as I did indeed have an appendicitis in progress. It burst when I got home and I was sick for several months. I was lucky — had it burst in the backcountry camp I may have

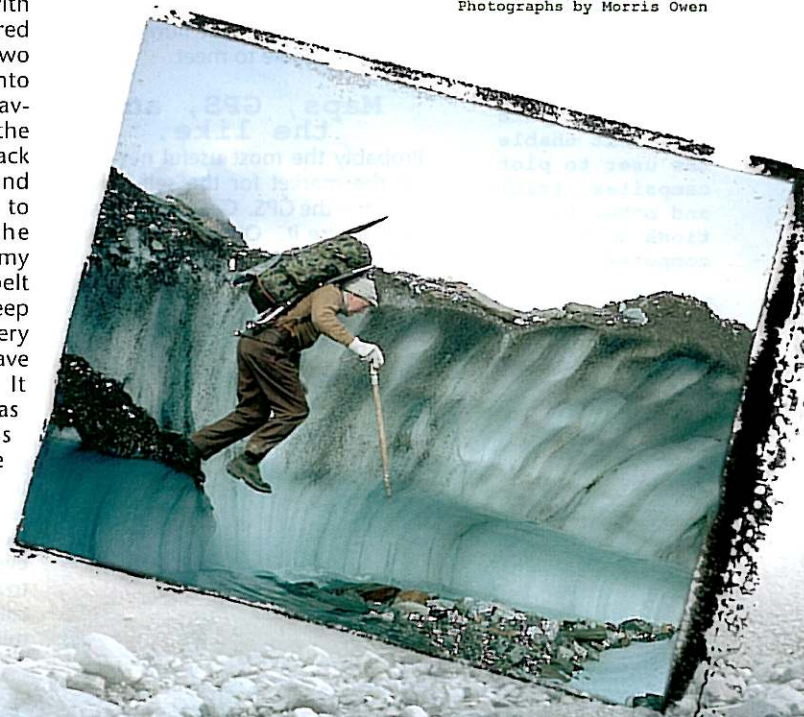
never seen another opening morning. I still hunt with my veterinarian friend but my other partner is an internist!

If one is willing to take the time to learn the skills required for hunting in remote areas on your own, confidence will come with success. Small successes contribute to larger successes. Start with simple trips and gradually build upon the complexity as you become more comfortable with traveling in remote areas. I often see two or even three guys hunting together in a "pack." Hunting with at least one other person is often a good idea for safety reasons but two people make twice as much noise as one. I find it amusing that many people are uncomfortable hunting alone

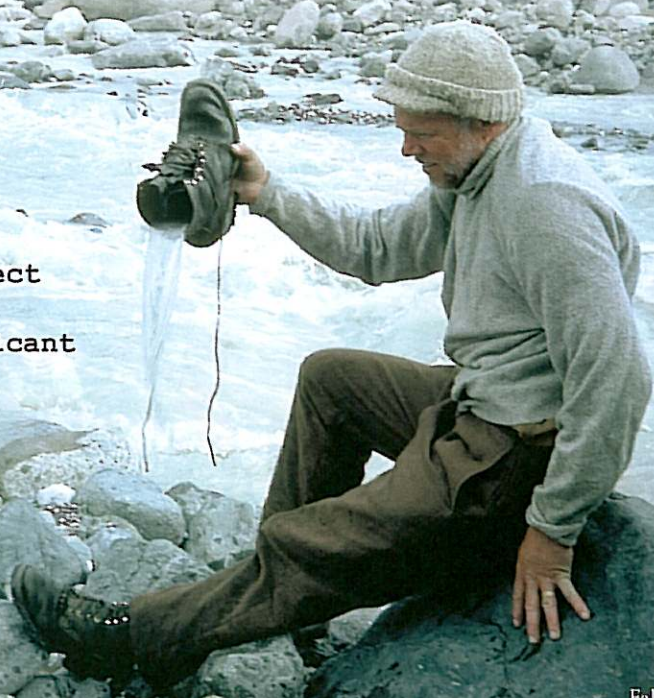
You never know what kind of obstacles you will encounter.

You must be physically and mentally prepared for any number of challenges.

Photographs by Morris Owen



Our boots were suited to the terrain, our clothes were perfect for the weather, but stream crossings were the most significant obstacles we met.



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Key habitat areas and terrain features can be located prior to a hunt and the maps may be printed for use in the field.

De Lorme has excellent topographic maps that enable the user to plot campsites, trails, and other key locations using a computer.

even when they are camping with a group of hunters. The small two-way radios are popular because there are many people who are uncomfortable being alone while afield. The radio gives them the confidence to get out on their own but often they are talking so much and making so much noise that they may as well be hunting in a "pack."

Go with a friend to start with, but as you become more comfortable with your skill level make short hunts on your own. My preference is to hunt with one or two reliable individuals and do coordinated hunts where you work canyons together. I do not like to arrange to meet people at a designated time because hunting is different from hiking. You can not be an effective hunter if you have a schedule to meet.

Maps, GPS, and the like.

Probably the most useful new tool on the market for the self-guided hunter is the GPS. Get one and learn how to use it. Once you are comfortable with the GPS and a compass

and can find your location on a topographic map you have control of one of the biggest challenges in strange country... not getting lost. Practice with the GPS, map, and compass until you get proficient using them. The ability to use these tools will give you freedom to roam and get back to camp. It will enable you to concentrate on the goal of finding the animal you seek. I noticed the other day that GPSs carry a warning label and caution the user to not depend entirely upon the GPS. Always carry an extra battery and use the GPS with a map and compass. Recently maps have become available on the Internet via sites such as www.topozone.com, www.mapspecifics.com and terraserver.microsoft.com. De Lorme www.delorme.com, has excellent topographic maps that enable the user to plot campsites, trails, and other key locations using a computer. Key habitat areas and terrain features can be located prior to a hunt and the maps may be printed for use in the field.

Stereo photographs are another variation of a map that is very useful. Along with a flight index where he had hunted in Idaho the previous year, a friend wrote me, "Enclosed is the flight index of the area I hunted in Idaho last year. In fact, the small lake on the topographic map and the aerial photos that I will reference is exactly where I shot a very nice bull elk. I had studied the maps for hours before we ever left on our hunt. I went right to the lake, sat down in cover and called the bull to me in less than ten minutes. It was almost too easy. I

had never hunted this area before. The maps really make a difference."

These photographs are used with a stereoscope, which is an optical instrument that allows simultaneous viewing of stereo photographs, creating a three dimensional effect. Stereoscopes are available from the Ben Meadows Co., 3589 Broad Street, Atlanta, GA 30341, and range in price from \$31 to \$1,500. If you are interested in ordering stereo photographs, send a topographic map or USFS map with the area you are interested in outlined to USDA-ASCS, Salt Lake City, Utah. USDA-ASCS will send you a flight index map from which you order your photos.

Weather Records and other helpful pointers...

Weather records are available on the Internet. Weather trends and forecasts and monthly data from previous years are especially useful for planning and anticipating weather conditions. The mountains are not kind. You must be prepared for the most severe weather so use the trends and data as a guideline in your planning.

Information about outfitter use of specific areas is especially helpful. I attempt to not interfere with outfitter operations and make it a practice to obtain base camp and spike camp locations as well as other data such as outfitter annual use statistics from the U.S. Forest Service. Public lands are open to everyone. The key is to be courteous and work together.

And one final reminder: If You Can't Pack It Out... Don't Shoot It! ▲▲▲



While I walked I kept my hand in my jeans under my belt pressing on the painful area to keep it from hurting. I had made a very foolish decision as I did indeed have an appendicitis in progress.

