

The Self-Guided Hunter...

BACKPACK TO BETTER HUNTING

Second in a series...

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A lot of big game in the west and far north is shot by hunters on out-fitted trips. Most whitetails are killed by hunters a few minutes walk from their vehicles or cabins. Still, no matter where or how you hunt, you can increase your flexibility — and success — with a backpack.

Not long ago I hunted from a caribou camp north of Yellowstone. We saw enough caribou to be selective, but I did not fill my second tag. The last day of the hunt, I spied a fine bull

perhaps two miles away. The outfitter was with me but plainly did not want to make the walk. Sadly, I'd not brought a backpack, so getting the animal to the boat alone would have taken two trips and more daylight than I had.

A couple of years earlier, hunting whitetail deer in Alabama, I hit a buck a bit low and trailed it for several hundred yards before finding it dead. It had run through a thick lowland and a pine plantation. A backpack would have been the logical way to get that deer to a road. Again, I didn't have one.

Leaning on outfitters or planning an afternoon sit across the hay field, a lot of us don't think about packs. If we had one ready and loaded, and made a point of slipping into the straps for every hunt, we'd soon come to depend on it. The hardest travelers have for centuries. In fact, a frozen hiker aged at over 5,000 years was still wearing a crude external-frame pack when he was pulled from an Italian glacier a few years ago.

I got introduced to back-

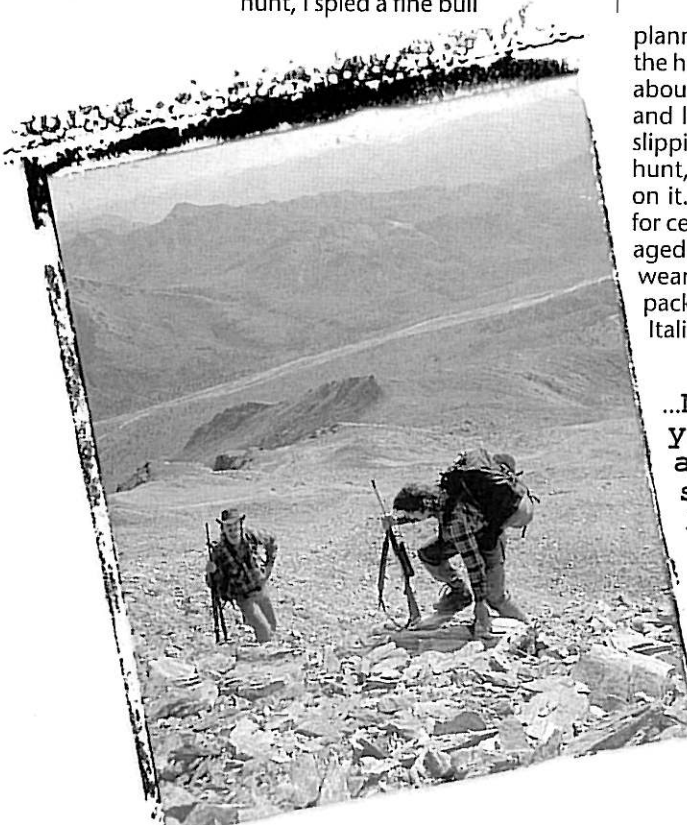
...Nothing prepares you for lugging a heavy load in steep country like lugging a load in steep country.

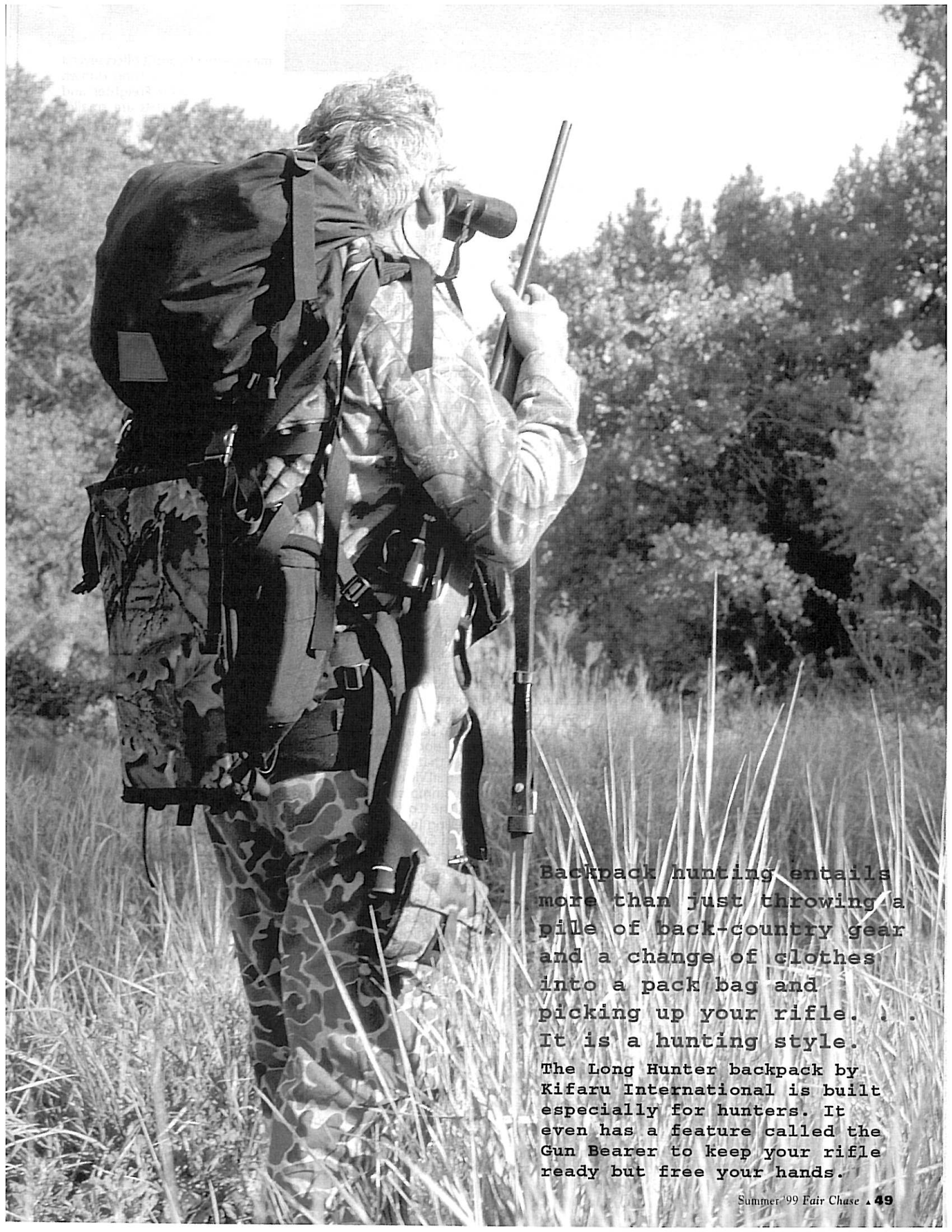
Backpacking gives you the flexibility to go where the game goes to avoid other hunters. These hunters are after Dall's sheep.

packing in the mountains of New Hampshire. Stubby by western standards, the Presidential Range rises to only 6,000 feet. The base is close to sea level, though, and timberline comes at an elevation that defines elk winter range in the West. Storms have roared across the top of Mount Washington at over 200 miles per hour. So when you see wooden crosses beside the Appalachian trail, you think again about what you threw in that backpack. Many people, counting on a day's hike to the crest and back, have started out in shorts and T-shirts, only to be caught in deadly squalls.

When I moved to the Pacific Northwest, I brought with me a well-used backpack from New Hampshire. It had belonged to a climbing buddy who had lived from it on hikes all over Europe. I used that pack for my first trips into alpine basins after mule deer, and for midwinter snowshoe trips into Oregon's Wallowa Mountains. On these treks I also learned what to carry and what to leave home, and a little more about packs and packing.

There's a distinction between backpacks and day packs. Day packs have no frame. They may be rucksacks, carried on the shoulders, with or without a chest strap or waist belt. They may be fanny packs or belt packs, suspended from your waist as well as your shoulders. Backpacks have frames, either internal or external. You don't carry these packs, you wear them. The main thing to keep in mind about any pack is that it must become a part of you, fitting like a turtle's shell. To make a backpack part of your outfit instead of something you pick up and chafe under,





Backpack hunting entails more than just throwing a pile of back-country gear and a change of clothes into a pack bag and picking up your rifle. . . . It is a hunting style.

The Long Hunter backpack by Kifaru International is built especially for hunters. It even has a feature called the Gun Bearer to keep your rifle ready but free your hands.

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you must fit the frame to your body.

For decades before aluminum made backpacking a joy, the Trapper Nelson or Yukon frame enabled men to become mules. Like the sawbuck saddle, this wooden yoke could be strapped to almost any torso and padded to prevent gross skin loss. With its durable canvas straps and webbing, it became a freight car for Alaskan pioneers slogging over Chilkoot Pass. Beyond

the load. Now often of plastic or other synthetic material, they offer more flexibility than external aluminum tubing, and they won't catch on brush. They used to be considered a light-load option, when you needed more volume than was available in a day pack but didn't carry so much weight as to require an external-frame pack. The slim, projectionless profile of internal-frame packs has made them a popular all-around choice for many back-country hunters and hikers. Improved stays have boosted their weight capacity.

In my view, one of the best of all packs for big game hunters is an internal-frame product manufactured by Kifaru International. Designed by Patrick Smith, himself an avid hunter, the Kifaru Long Hunter pack can handle as much meat as you'll likely be able to move. Its 5,250 cubic inches certainly accommodate 100 pounds; the stays and rugged pack material support it. Reversible (camouflage and blaze orange) panels of Polarfleece enable the

pack to slide silently through brush. The thickly padded waist belt and shoulder straps are properly positioned and contoured. There's a top pouch that detaches to serve as a day pack. An interior pocket carries a water bladder that keeps you hydrated on the trail via a plastic tube. You get an ammo pouch too.

The Long Hunter's most compelling features are its Cargo Seat and Gun Bearer. The Cargo Seat is cleverly designed so you can sit back against the pack as if in a chair, or strap the Seat to the back and use it as a shelf. The Gun Bearer includes a pocket for the rifle butt, which rests at your right hip. The barrel is secured by a Velcro stay you can release with a tug. The rifle falls into your hands. I've used this device enough to vouch for it. In brush and on slopes, it frees your hands. The rifle's center of gravity is close to your body. There's no accidental release. It is infinitely better than slinging a rifle across the back of an external-frame pack or hanging it on your shoulder to bang against aluminum tubing.

Incidentally, Kifaru custom-tailors its packs to your

measurements, and it offers several models besides the Long Hunter. The Long Hunter Freighter and Spike Camp models are smaller backpacks. The DayStalker and StillHunter are lumbar packs, with one auxiliary shoulder strap. The Gun Bearer comes with all models.

When choosing an external-frame pack, consider only high-quality models with welded aluminum junctures. For years after Kelty introduced aluminum frames in the 1940s, heliarced joints were the mark of high-quality frames. In my view, they still are. Some frames feature adjustable metal or plastic couplings. Because external-frame packs are by design meant for heavy loads, you're smart to pay attention to joints. A strong frame with weak joints is a weak frame. Every aluminum frame should bear up under a 100-pound load for extended periods on the trail.

Make sure the frame fits you. Measure your back from the prominent vertebra at the base of your neck to the top of your hips. Packs built for 18- to 19-inch torsos are of average size. If you're taller or shorter, look for frames to match. Be sure the shoulder straps are wide, well padded and fully adjustable. Insist on firm foam padding. Shoulder straps must pivot freely to follow the slope of your trapezius muscles. Years ago, on the trail under a cheap backpack for a week, I bloodied my shoulders with thin, soft shoulder straps that could not pivot. There was no waist belt. The last miles were painful indeed.

The advantage of a substantial waist belt is hard to overstate. Your hips are more stable than your shoulders and can well afford to carry much of your pack's weight. Be sure the belt is wide and thickly padded — again, with firm foam — and encircles your waist completely. Side-straps from the frame's base are not as comfortable. Make sure the belt is situated so it meets your torso squarely. If it's too high on the frame it won't do you much good because it won't contact your hips until the pack is riding too low. If the belt comes below the point of your hips instead of just above them, the pack will ride too high when you cinch it snug. You should be able to adjust the belt easily when walking to vary the load on shoulders and hips. Periodic changes in weight distribution keep you fresh and prevent sore spots.

Traditional external frames have webbing across the top and



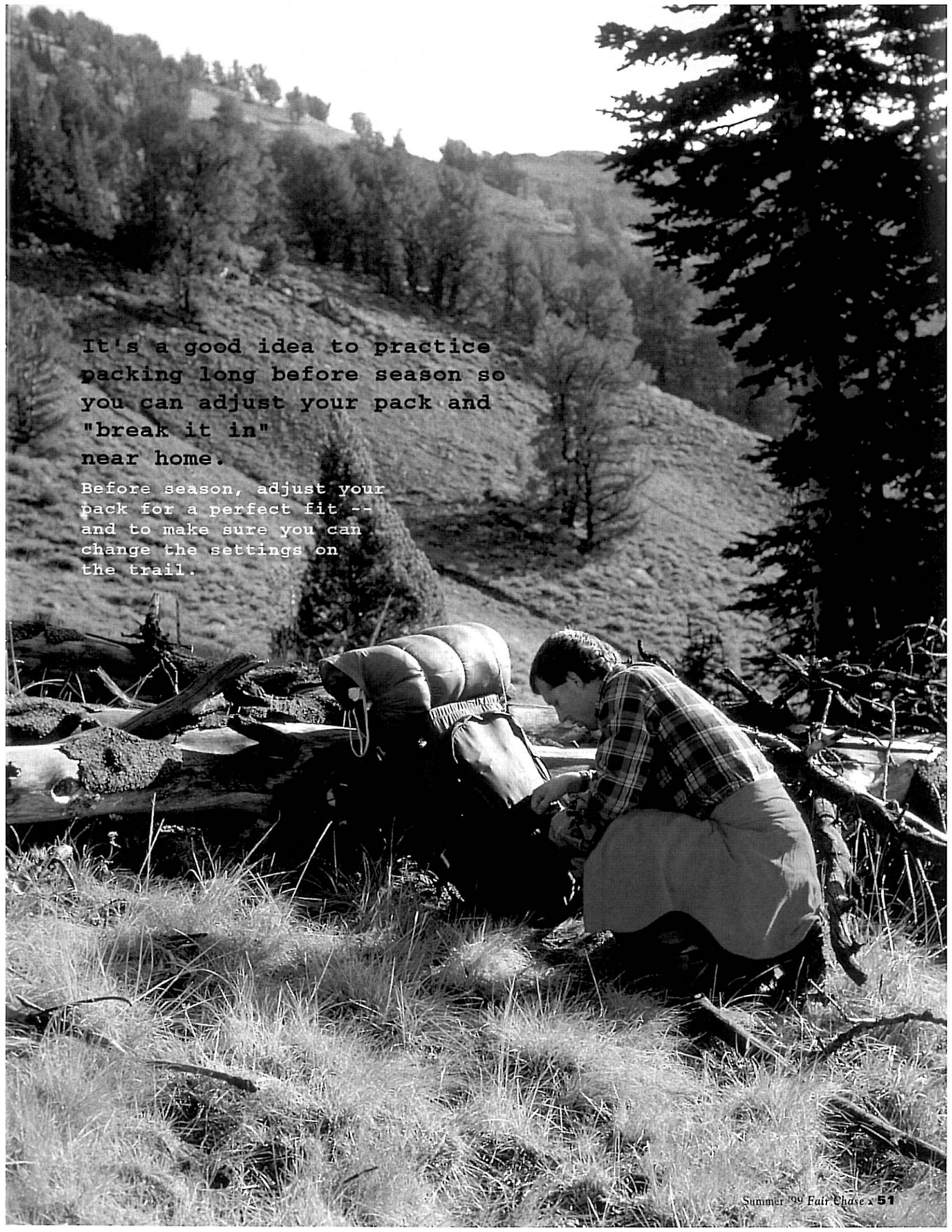
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Proper pack fit is important for day-long comfort. You wear a pack; you don't carry it. The Yukon and Selkirk packs by Rocky Mountain Pack Systems rides low like a fanny pack but has the extra support of shoulder straps.

road's end everywhere it hauled meat and horns and hides, camp stoves, cabin windows, boat fuel and firewood.

Then came tubular aluminum. More easily shaped to the curves of the back, it was as light and strong as ash, if not as pleasing to the eye. Its shape kept the weight close in, but crossmembers guaranteed the air circulation so notably lacking under loaded Trapper Nelsons. Since their introduction, external aluminum frames have gotten better, and the stoutest models are still your best choice for hauling very heavy loads. But lately the internal-frame pack has stolen some market share.

Internal stays that take the place of external aluminum tubing give the pack shape and support



It's a good idea to practice packing long before season so you can adjust your pack and "break it in" near home.

Before season, adjust your pack for a perfect fit -- and to make sure you can change the settings on the trail.

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bottom to keep the pack away from your back. The bigger and more substantial your waist belt, the less you'll depend on the

PACK LIST

1. Underwear and T-shirts, one change every two days.
2. Socks, one cotton and one light wool pair per day.
3. Camp shoes, one pair jogging or deck shoes.
4. Shirts, sweatshirt and wool shirt, a size too big.
5. Trousers, one light wool.
6. Jacket, wool.
7. Rain gear, a complete suit or full-length parka.
8. Gloves, two pairs wool, shooting style, with finger slits.
9. Compact camp stove and fuel (white gas for high altitudes).
10. Plastic bowl and cup, steel utensils and cooking pot.
11. Down sleeping bag and full-length foam pad.
12. Tent, freestanding four-season, with rain fly, rated for one person more than will use it (I like dome-shaped tents, but many clever designs are available).

PRODUCT INFORMATION

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lower webbing. But both mesh bands must be adjusted occasionally to keep them taut. A lot of backpackers neglect this. It's especially important to check the webbing after toting a heavy load in hot weather. The same rule applies to newer packs that feature a single broad piece of webbing in place of top and bottom bands. Pay attention to the way the mesh is fastened. Remember that on the trail you may have to adjust tension when everything is wet or even frozen, and when your fingers are cold and you're in a hurry.

Pack bags should be no smaller than 4,000 cubic inches, and 5,000 is much better. You can always snug the bag over a small load with compression straps. Compartment design is as important as size. For meat hauling and bringing base camp to timberline, I rely primarily on a big external-frame Kelty with a single top-loading compartment. That is the best design for meat and bulky things like tents and cooking gear. I once carried 120 pounds of boned elk with this pack. To keep the load from shifting or sagging off center, I use compression straps, tugging the pack tight around its contents. A pack with top and bottom main pockets makes access easier and quicker when you're carrying light camping gear and clothes. No matter your choice of main-pouch design, look for packs with lots of external pockets. You'll want them for snacks, maps, flashlight, water bottle, first aid kit, ammunition, survival gear.

Another very high quality backpack built for heavy loads is made by Barney's Sports Chalet. The Pinnacle is their largest and

top of the line pack at 7,600 cubic inches. The Pinnacle has a rifle carrier and roomy side pockets suitable for a spotting scope or other long items. The next size down is the Hunter at 5,800 cubic inches. Both the Pinnacle and the Hunter are available in either Cordura or kevlar reinforced pack cloth. Barney's also makes a Packer model at 4,200 cubic inches and a Super Moose model at 3,700 cubic inches. These packs have been used extensively throughout Alaska and are top of the line for quality.

A unique, sturdy, take down, external pack frame that has just come on the market is built by Rocky Mountain Pack Systems, LLC. Dubbed the Rhino, this is the finest full-size take down frame available. There are no nuts or bolts to come loose or be lost. A variety of fanny packs, day packs and meat bags manufactured by RMPS may be attached to this frame. The Rhino frame may be conveniently packed in your duffel for travel on commercial airlines and can be packed easily on a horse, in a small plane, or on an ATV, making it an extremely versatile piece of equipment for the backpack hunter who is tight on space.

Few back bags are waterproof. Don't expect it. Get a rain cover. Look instead for durability in your pack bag material. Empty weight shouldn't be a factor. It's such a small percentage of loaded weight you won't notice it. In fact, you might want to add a little weight with wool or Polarfleece patches to make the pack quieter as it brushes rock and tree branches. Even if you don't intend to hunt under this pack, you may run into game between going in or out, or while you're moving from one camp site to the next. A backpack shouldn't be a liability when you suddenly see what you want to shoot.

Mind the zippers. They should have REALLY BIG TEETH so they'll last a long time. I prefer slick nylon zippers to traditional metal. They should also have REALLY BIG TABS so you can open and close them with gloves on. You might want to knot a leather thong on each to further facilitate quick entry. Weather flaps over the zippers are a good feature.

You're smart to load a pack heavily in the store before you buy it, and strip to your T-shirt so you can feel the straps, belt and webbing under weight. While you're

in the shopping mood, make sure you have a slender but sturdy cloth belt with a trim buckle for use in your trousers or shorts when you're carrying a pack. A thick leather belt with a big buckle will chafe you when you bind it with the waist belt of a loaded pack. You'll want that thick, wide pack belt bearing directly on your hips.

If you're using an external-frame pack, get some rubber caps for top and bottom frame ends. They'll not only protect the frame but keep it quiet when you're pushing into thickets or setting the pack down on rocks. This is a good idea even if your pack frame has plastic ends. Depending on tube size, crutch tips can do the job. Glue the caps on, and carry spares (just as you carry spare D-rings or clips for the pack frame).

What you put in the pack depends on where you are and what you're hunting, how long you'll be afield, whether you have a partner and what kind of camp you want. Here are some "core list" suggestions for hunting in the western mountains:

1. Underwear and T-shirts, one change every two days.
2. Socks, one cotton and one light wool pair per day.
3. Camp shoes, one pair jogging or deck shoes.
4. Shirts, sweatshirt and wool shirt, a size too big.
5. Trousers, one light wool.
6. Jacket, wool.
7. Rain gear, a complete suit or full-length parka.
8. Gloves, two pairs wool, shooting style, with finger slits.
9. Compact camp stove and fuel (white gas for high altitudes).
10. Plastic bowl and cup, steel utensils and cooking pot.
11. Down sleeping bag and full-length foam pad.
12. Tent, freestanding four-season, with rain fly, rated for one person more than will use it (I like dome-shaped tents, but many clever designs are available).

This list works if you're dressed in hiking gear to begin with and have a hunting kit that includes a knife, binocular, waterproof matches, fire-starting material, compass, maps, flashlight, ammunition (10 rounds is enough), stocking cap, whistle, signal mirror and first aid packet (Ace bandage, gauze, iodine, Band-Aids, pain pills).

Back-country menus can include expensive freeze-dried food and heavy steaks and potatoes. I generally make do with ramen noodles and carrots for din-

ner, oatmeal for breakfast. They're both hot dinners but easily made in the one pot I have. Lightweight and crushable, dried noodles and oatmeal are perfect in the pack. My lunches include bagels and raisins and cheese. I also carry apples to camp, despite their weight and easily bruised skins. I like apples.

One of my friends routinely brings a huge plastic bag full of fried chicken seven miles up to deer camp. If you're planning on packing a deer home, a few extra ounces in victuals on the first leg of the trip shouldn't make you sweat.

You're smart to transfer dried fruit, bread and noodles into labeled Zip-Loc bags. They're quiet, reclosable and reusable.

To load a pack, keep heavy things close to your back. It might seem best to stuff all the heavy things in first. After all, they'll sift toward the bottom anyway, and no one puts the canned goods on top of the bread in a grocery bag, right? The logic is flawless, but in carrying a heavy load through the back country, you must also consider your back. With all the weight against your lumbar spine, you have less control than if the load were held tight against your back from shoulder to hip. Keeping the mass close to your center of gravity gives you better balance. Compression straps help hold items in place, but straps can't always ensure against shifting. Help them out by using bulky clothes like sweatshirts to pad and increase the bulk of heavy items. Don't let edges of hard contents chafe against the pack bag. Given enough bouncing, an innocent can of tuna can eat its way through any pack.

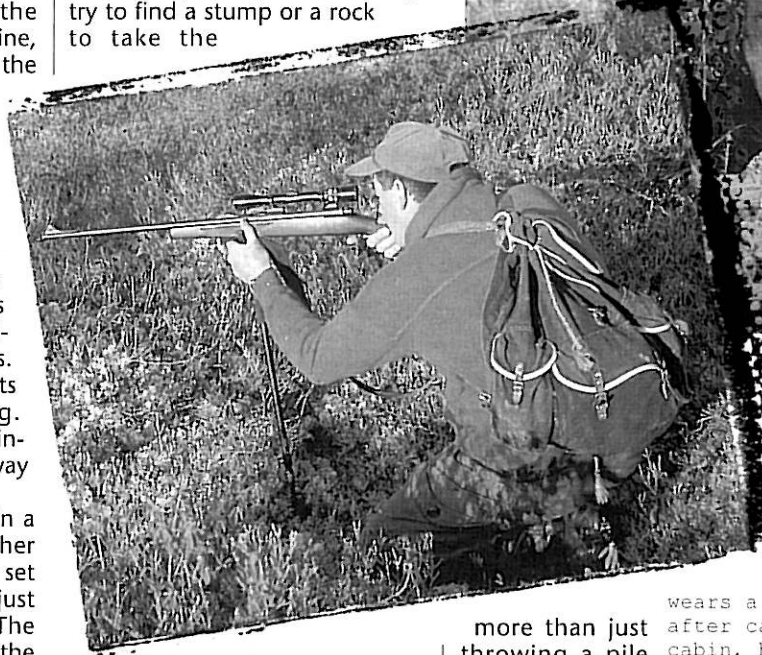
Put your sleeping bag in a plastic garbage sack and either strap it under the pack bag or set it on top of everything else just under the pack's top flap. The foam ground pad goes around the bag or can be rolled up by itself. The rigid lip at the top opening of some pack bags can be removed if you prefer a pack that lies flat and have no need for a bag mouth that's perpetually gaping. The lip is a help when you're loading.

Carry a few extra plastic garbage sacks. You may want to keep things dry but separately stowed in camp. The sacks can also be used as bag liners for packing out meat, as long as it's cool when you load up. You won't want to carry meat in plastic for long distances, especially in hot

weather. But a few hours on the trail won't hurt it. The sacks will protect your pack and its contents from bloodstain. Where the pack does get bloody, use cold water and mild detergent with a soft brush to clean it.

It's a good idea to practice packing long before season so you can adjust your pack and "break it in" near home. You might want to sew on extra straps or a notepad pocket on a shoulder strap. Maybe you'll want to install a binocular pouch or handwarmer up front (the Kifaru Long Hunter comes with this handy feature). You'll certainly want to practice getting a loaded pack on your back. The easiest way for loads up to 50 or 60 pounds is to flex one foot to bend one knee, hoist the pack up onto your upper leg and with only the briefest pause, swing it onto your back. With very heavy loads, you may have to "walk" the pack onto a rise in the ground and squirm into it backward from the sit, then bend forward to pull it onto your back as you stand up. When I'm packing meat, I always try to find a stump or a rock to take the

One advantage of a big pack -- you can carry clothes for any weather. Mid-day in the Rockies tells you little about weather conditions in late afternoon.



No matter your choice of main-pouch design, look for packs with lots of external pockets.

This Newfoundland wears a spartan pack for day trips after caribou. Hunting from a cabin, he doesn't need a frame pack until there is meat to haul.

weight off the pack during a rest stop. I may not even take the pack off; if I do, it will be ready for a quick remount.

Shakedown hikes before the season help condition your body too. During summer I occasionally slip into my old New England pack after strapping in a 50-pound bag of salt. Then I climb a hill. Sure, you can do other things to get in shape. But nothing prepares you for lugging a heavy load in steep country like lugging a heavy load in steep country.

Backpack hunting entails

more than just throwing a pile of back-country gear and a change of clothes into a pack bag and picking up your rifle. It is a hunting style, a way of looking at the hunting experience to which few sportsmen have committed. But these hunters typically have high success rates. They can reach those remote pockets of cover and the tough places that trophy-class animals retreat to when less mobile hunters push them out of day-trip range.

Besides, backpacking into game country is just plain fun. ▲▲▲