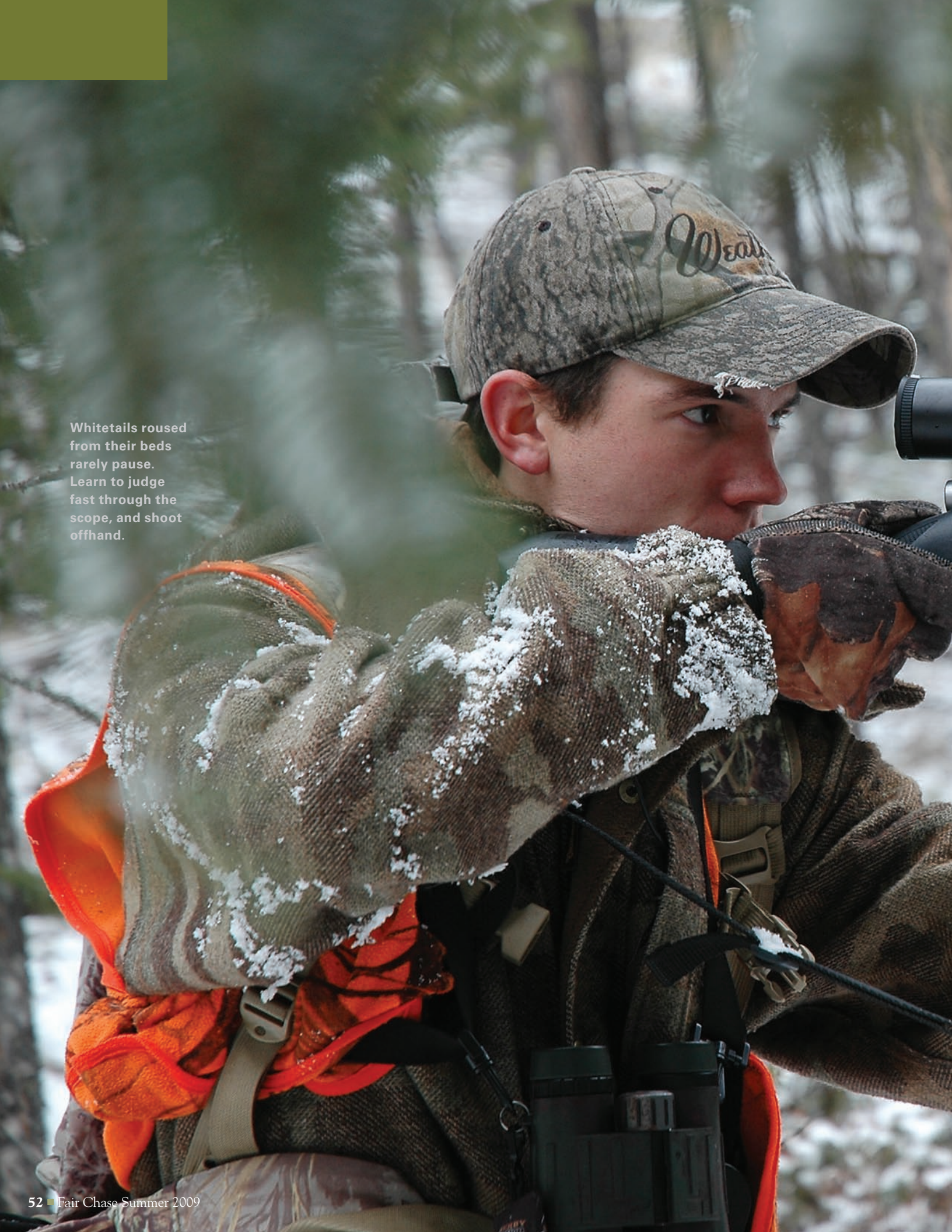

Whitetails roused from their beds rarely pause. Learn to judge fast through the scope, and shoot offhand.

See Big Fast

Truly big animals can vanish fast. You must be as quick with your eye.

I almost shot the deer. It broke close, in a ravine choked with vines, thorns and saplings that in late November stood stripped of any identifying foliage. The antlers arced above broad shoulders in a nut-brown blur. My cross-wire swept by and found an alley just as the buck braked to check options. A window the size of my hand showed me a rib. The reticle quivered there. I pressured the trigger.

By Wayne van Zwoll
B&C Professional Member

Then I stopped. Thick neck and masculine torso, yes; but the rack had few points. They were sharp and, while not slender, lacked the heft of the records-book antlers that had lured me to Illinois. Shotgun and deer stayed frozen for a few loud heartbeats. Then the animal slipped silently from view.

Perhaps I should have killed that whitetail. I had still-hunted for the shot, and getting a mature buck this way means more to me than potting one from a stand. Cat-footing through cover, I'm not as discriminating. Can't afford to be. Few whitetail bucks surprised in their bedrooms give you second looks at their antlers. That this one did may have spared him.

Wayne jumped this Utah mule deer, then tracked it and killed it with a muzzle-loader. Big enough? You bet!

This hunter's first mule deer! "Shoot the animal that would satisfy you on the last day as soon as you see it."

The next afternoon I prowled a new area, suggested by my host Mike Rahe. "There's standing corn between big woods to the south and a brushy bottom on the east boundary." Wind quartering to me, I eased along the corn and looked hard into the bottom for something out of place. I didn't look hard enough. The buck pulled some briars when he left, and I heard them. A wide, white rack with long points winked in and out of view as, tail tucked, the deer tried to sneak away. I shouldered the 12-bore right away; then brush swallowed the buck. He appeared again, and stopped as I corralled him in the scope. Motionless, antlers behind a tree, he became invisible. My last glimpse came as he cleared the boundary fence. In memory, that buck may have grown bigger. Antlers lost never shrink. How you remember an animal, however, matters only after you decline a shot or bungle it. Often you must be quick to do either.

Animals need not score into the Boone and Crockett Club's records books or even meet local standards to qualify as trophies. Any game fairly taken makes that grade, especially when conditions stack the odds against you. But if you're selective, distinguishing between ordinary and extraordinary animals becomes part of your task. Fail at that, and you'll either shoot animals you'd as soon leave afoot, or you'll delay the shot a split-second too long and lose your chance.

"If you have to take another look, he's not big enough." That's the gist of

YOU MAY HAVE LITTLE TIME TO JUDGE ANTLERS—OR EVEN A CHANCE TO EMPLOY YOUR BINOCULARS WITHOUT SPOOKING THE GAME. THINGS TO CONSIDER: THE LIGHT, THE ANGLE, BODY SIZE, THE BELLY, CONTINGENCIES, AND YOUR GUIDE.

See Big Fast

advice from guides and professional hunters in country that produces exceptional game. They say it in different ways. Some may not say it at all. "Part of the fun of any hunt is looking," one guide observed. "You don't want to dismiss the lesser animals as unimportant; you don't want to reduce a hunt to comparisons of antler score." Truly. In fact, seeing animals you don't want to kill can make a hunt memorable. It should also train you to recognize top-rung specimens.

The first step in finding an eye-popping trophy is determining what qualifies. Average is what you normally see. Whether average means middle-range in weight or in net Boone and Crockett score, whether it means average for the area or average across the animal's range, is for you to decide. In my youth, the southern Michigan deer woods were heavily hunted. Deer ate well; but few lived long enough to grow outstanding antlers. An eight-point buck was a big whitetail. Since then, that country has become less accessible. Hunting lessors and landowners either posting their ground or cultivating records-class bucks limit pressure. Average antler size in the harvest has increased. Chances for an exceptional buck are better now for hunters who pay to prowl.

In Maine, and in parts of Canada, whitetails have traditionally been compared on the scale. Where Boone and Crockett racks are as common as green snow, hunters routinely collect bucks that outweigh many on the records lists. Black bears too, have long been ranked locally by weight. Because we can't double-check weight after rendering, and because diet and season affect body condition, bone measure by tape has eclipsed weight comparisons. But where even the best antlers are modest, a big buck may still be, to locals, a big buck. There's nothing unethical about shooting deer with compact racks, especially if you hunt where they're the norm on mature deer or when your aim is to fill a freezer.

Instant recognition of average animals as average is simply a convenience. Seeing a very fine animal for what it is right away can make the difference between a sighting and a kill. While you may have time to engineer long shots, the most outstanding animals are often found in cover, where you must pass or shoot immediately. These hints should help you recognize exceptional animals, and spare you tough approaches to animals you eventually determine are not.

Consider the light. Antlers freshly polished and illuminated against a dark background can look bigger than they are. Just last year I killed a whitetail that at first glance seemed a dandy buck. The deer appeared across a meadow in brush that obscured all but its head and antlers. A low sun highlighted the bone against dark forest beyond. I found a shot tunnel and fired. The deer bounded off. I found it dead a few yards beyond. The antlers were considerably smaller than they had seemed.

Conversely, dim light, foliage, and fog can minimize antlers, especially if they're stained or appear against a mottled backdrop. Take a second look—through your rifle scope, not your binoculars! By the way, while you're well-advised not to direct your rifle at anything you don't intend to shoot, you'll forfeit chances if, after identifying game within range as legal, you assess it through a binoculars. Once, while hunting mule deer, I still-hunted my way down a timbered ridge toward camp. With only minutes of shooting light left, I spied an odd patch of white in the lodgepoles ahead. It could have been snow or a rock or the barked trunk of a pine. I'd been looking at those all day. Because my binoculars were at hand, I raised it for a better look. The white became the tail of an enormous buck, partly hidden but eminently vulnerable at just 80 yards. I dropped the glass and swung my .270 into play—just as the deer bounded into the shadows downslope. I declined the running shot. Lesson learned.

Consider the angle. Animals trying to leave you behind funnel their ears back to keep track of you and other threats as they train their eyes ahead. Ears pinned to the rear make the head seem small and the antlers wider than they are. Mule deer antlers that tape 20 inches across can look as if they're a yard wide when the buck is bounding away, ears tucked. If that deer turns to face you, the rack will shrink to roughly the measure of its ears, tip-to-tip.

"I want a buck 30 inches wide." That mantra became so monotonous when I was guiding mule deer hunters that I began asking them why they wanted 30 inches of air in their trophy. After all, that's what they demanded. What counts, in my view, is the bone. I want thick, deep forks. Width matters as it makes the rack appealing. So my initial focus goes to antler height and depth, front-to-back. If these impress me, I scrutinize the forks, especially when there's lots of mass. To take the full measure of a mule deer, you must see it from the side. The same holds true for whitetails, elk, and caribou, which are often shot young by sportsmen who've never seen antlers as big as those on even a smallish caribou bull. On a deer hunt, a side view that excites me is reason enough to shoot the buck. I almost never fire after a rear view only. This isn't to impugn people pleased to kill deer with skinny, crab-clawed antlers that lay out flat under 30 inches of sky.

Consider body size. Just as humankind has produced midgets and giants, so you'll find big and little animals in the field. On a little buck, average antlers can look big. A big deer with big antlers can look ordinary. One of the best mule deer I've killed appeared as only an antler fork behind brush when I spied it 200 yards off. An icy slope scuttled my stalk; when the deer thought I was least able to react, it left its bed and made off over a ridge. I managed a steep uphill shot to its rear ribs. The 250-grain Core-Lokt from my .35 Whelen exited between the shoulders, then smashed into the base of an antler. The buck charged down-slope through thigh-deep snow into dense conifers, where I found and finished him. The antlers are not wide, but they're heavier and higher than at first blush—a magnificent trophy from a hard hunt. They looked less impressive early on because this deer was the heaviest I've yet taken, roughly 300 pounds live weight. It is the only deer I've ever halved to pack out on horses.

More common is the ground shrinkage hunters find when they visit Texas from the north. Lone Star whitetails are dainty compared to bucks from the Big Woods, and have sleek, summer-length coats. To the uninitiated, modest antlers can look huge on such deer. Other game can fool you in the same way. I once spied an elk far off, closed to 300 yards and fired. My 154-grain Jensen bullet put the animal on its nose. Upon reaching the five-pointer, I was astounded to discover it was no bigger than a yearling. Slight of frame, it was likewise diminished by an arrowhead lodged in its spine—an injury not apparent earlier but which no doubt affected the animal's ability to forage. It was very thin.

Consider the belly. You can tell a lot about a man's eating habits and exercise regime—even his age—with a glance at his belly. Animal bellies deliver the same signals. Taut, flat guts belong to young, active males. Bellies that sag indicate older animals. So do concave back-lines, thick shoulders and necks, and heads lacking prominent detail in profile. These days, I'm

more inclined to shoot game that's old than game that scores well. So I pay special attention to physique. But signs of age matter if you lust after big antlers too, especially when they're less visible than the animal's torso. Increasingly, private-land whitetail hunts come with age restrictions. You may, for instance, be limited to bucks at least four years old. Aging deer by examining the antlers alone is difficult. On bears and cats, body profile may be your only clue as to the animal's size. Even the track is not a foolproof signal, as ordinary animals can grow big feet.

"The biggest black bears have small ears and bellies that drag the ground," a biologist told me long ago. "They walk with a rolling gait." I've found these observations ring true. Here are a couple more: Big, old bears wear their ears to the side, not on top—just as antler pedicels shift from the top of the head toward the sides as years pass. Also, a bear that seems to have a big head is almost always a juvenile; the head looks large because the body is small. Long legs likewise make a bear appear tall; they look long because the belly doesn't fill the space between them. Seek bears with tiny ears perched low on broad heads that seem short, on necks so thick you can't tell where they start or stop. If the bear in your sights is also bow-legged, with a rocking swagger, and if his belly drags the ground, get on that trigger!

A bear in a "muscle pose" can look bigger than it is. There's lots of daylight under this belly and the ears are big.

Consider contingencies. When you see a big animal, your next goal is killing it. That may involve an approach or a deliberate long-range shot. You may instead have a split second to shoulder your rifle, aim, and shoot. Whatever the situation, the decision to kill has already been made. Game that's not quite big complicates that verdict. The old axiom, "You can't kill big animals by shooting little ones" may suddenly come to mind. Fill your tag and you're done. Kill a young deer, and you erase any chance it has to grow bigger antlers next year. But circumstances matter. How many days can you hunt? How will the availability of game be affected by hunting or weather during that time? Will you endure, physically and mentally, long enough to hunt the area well? What if others in your camp kill early and want to leave? Are you prepared to go home without venison? Answering those questions is much easier before you paste that reticle against ribs. Dally to think when you sight game, and you risk losing the shot. On the other hand, an exceptional animal may not look exactly like the one you've envisioned, so you're smart to keep an open mind.

Once, when I was guiding elk hunters, I drew a client with a clear idea of what he wanted. "A 360 bull," he told me, before scarcely a sentence of self-introduction. On the first morning, in a snowstorm, he passed up a bull that I thought quite appealing. I turned to my other client, a Texan who'd never killed an elk. Because the experienced hunter had declined this shot, the novice wondered, understandably, if the bull was as good as we'd find. I conceded we might see a bull that scored better. Then I said: "But if I had a tag, I'd kill that elk." This bit of theater apparently convinced the man. As the bull angled away into the storm, he sent two Noslers from his .300 Winchester into the lungs. Though it scored 345 and thus fell short of the first client's minimum, this elk remains one of the most striking I've seen shot, with 58-inch mahogany beams thick as tractor axles, and sword points as long as, well, swords. Short front tines drew the first man's attention and kept him from seeing the rest of the rack for what it was: a massive, captivating trophy that looks much bigger than it scores.

Sudden changes in the situation may affect how you look at game. A goat hunt on which I'd anticipated seeing lots of game was scuttled by a huge Pacific storm that bore down on us as we climbed. Laden with moisture that would bury the mountain in deep snow, it signaled my last chance—and spurred us ever higher in deteriorating weather. An hour past safe turn-around time, in thickening horizontal

B.C. moose cover may seem empty for days. Then you'll get one short window of opportunity. Be ready!

See Big Fast

snow, we spied a goat. "A billy!" rasped my guide. I dropped to my knees in the snow, jammed my shoulder against the mountain and fired through a window in the clouds. Horn length mattered not. The goat was mature, a worthy trophy on a most demanding hunt.

Another Alaska hunt took me into sheep country, where I'd committed a week to look for a big Dall's ram. But the outfitter, I learned after the Super Cub brought me into camp, had recently hosted a friend. They'd scoured the hills nearby, and the friend had killed a fine sheep. Camp supplies were low. The wrangler was enlisted to accompany me up the mountain. Neither he nor the outfitter seemed keen for a long walk, and soon they lagged. When we found sheep, I asked about the size. The outfitter shrugged. "Better shoot," said the wrangler. I did, upending the ram with my iron-sighted .30-06. I was not surprised the horns were shorter than I'd sought. The situation, not the wrangler's imperative, compelled me to change my plans. Such trips happen.

Consider your guide. Before you take a step from cabin or tent, or shove your rifle in that scabbard, tell your guide what you expect from the hunt. Last fall, I joined a landowner for dinner before striking off on my own to hunt deer on his property. "What are you looking for tomorrow?" he asked. A simple question; one I should have answered without hesitation. But I had to think. "You might see a buck that scores over 150," he smiled. "But a lot of mature deer don't." In so many words, he reminded me to make up my mind before the woods gave me a look at a borderline buck. Not that you can't change your mind. In fact, it's important to let a guide know that you value his judgment and expect him to quickly weigh in on trophy quality and shot distance. Add that you will decide to fire or pass, and whatever that decision, you'll live with it cheerfully. I've declined many shots at animals that would send any guide scrambling for the shooting sticks. From six-point bull elk and deer that would get the attention of the most jaundiced taxidermist, to an exceedingly fine ibex and a kudu bigger than any I may ever see again, I've decided at the last moment not to fire. I once relinquished a shot at a great bull elephant. Those decisions and memories, many made when I was hunting solo, still wear well. But losing a chance because you're not ready is different. So is an opportunity lost because your guide is unclear about what you want. A friend who has guided many hunters advises them to "shoot the animal that would satisfy you the last day as soon as you see it." A useful corollary: Figure out what will satisfy you before it appears and keep your guide updated if goals change during your hunt.

Some sportsmen unwittingly reduce their odds by thinking out loud. I once hosted a hunter keen to shoot a big elk. After just a day on the hill, he complained of a sore leg. Though chances for a trophy-class bull were very good, I was compelled to think of alternatives. Next morning, my client limped visibly as we headed down a ridge. When an elk brayed from a stand of aspens, I slipped forward and found the animal, a mediocre six-point. "He's almost surely not the best elk we'll see if we hunt hard," I said bluntly as the man joined me. "But I don't know if you can hunt hard. Your call." The hunter hesitated, then leveled his rifle and fired. The bull turned out to be a lesser elk than I'd thought – not uncommon when you know the animal is substandard in the first place. The following day the man said his leg was better. He accompanied me and his friend into a hole ringing with the shrill calls of rutting bulls. The other hunter shot a fine elk. The first fellow's disappointment showed. But he had made the decision. Naturally, had I known his leg was sound, I'd have urged him to pass on that early bull. But to do so based on the information he gave me might have put me on the hook, either for an unsuccessful hunt or for a preventable injury. Telling your guide you can't ride more than a few miles or that your asthma kicks in at 8,000 feet may be telling him you can't go where he's seen the most animals or the biggest. Think before you whine; ask how a change in plans might affect your hunt.

Adventure is properly part of any big game hunt. You can't be assured of a shot or predict how it will come or take the measure of an animal before it appears. Killing may hinge on quick thinking and decisive action. You'll waste less time if you recognize instantly what you want to shoot. ■