MIND GAMES

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Photos Courtesy of Author

Glassing in Alaska for Rocky Mountain goats.

It was almost 30 years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. The year was 1986 and I was on my first big, out-of-state guided wilderness hunting adventure, a three-week horseback hunt in Alaska's Wrangell Mountains with Master Guide Terry Overly. I had never been to Alaska before, and although I had spent almost 20 years backpacking the high peaks of the West and hunting wilderness areas on my own, flying into the tiny remote town of Chisana I was still in awe. There are no roads into this town, the only access being by small aircraft, or in winter by snow machine or dogsled.

The future belongs to those who prepare for it. Ralph Waldo Emerson

I had tags for grizzly bear, Dall's sheep, and caribou, and all the questions and doubts had gone through my mind before leaving home. Is a .280 Remington enough gun for grizzlies? Do I have the right boots? What do I wear? What will the weather be like? Am I a good enough shot? Am I in good enough shape physically to cut the mustard? I sure don't want to embarrass myself in front of Terry and the guides, who surely breathe fire and eat rusty nails for breakfast. I was quite literally a nervous wreck.

I have been a lot of places since then. Who'd have ever thought that I would eventually end up living in Alaska for nearly 15 years, hunting the state from top to bottom and even holding an assistant guide's license of my own? I've also been lucky enough to have traveled and hunted around the world, often in places you can't find on the map. To this day when I plan such trips I still get a little queasy in the planning stages. The fear of the unknown can do that to you.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Writing in the old *Horizon* magazine back in 1965, author Alvin Toffler defined "future shock" as the "dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future." The truth is, having a bit of fear of the unknown is not unusual. Both not knowing what's coming next or a previous bad experience can increase stress triggers in all of us. In preparing for an adventure-packed hunting trip of the type you've never experienced, the key to both maximizing your enjoyment and your chances for success lie in understanding how to manage your own stress triggers.

This can be a difficult thing for many people, especially those "Type A" folks who are used to always being in charge of their lives. Suddenly you're not hunting at home, you're in a far-off land where the outfitter and your personal guide are in complete control of your destiny. Then there are the vagaries of weather, the airlines, a cantankerous horse, a leaky boat, an unexpected equipment breakdown. The mountains seem bigger and rougher, the rivers deeper and wider than you ever dreamed they could be, and you think, "Can I handle it?"

The truth is, stress build-up before the hunt is usually more about perception than reality. Also, stress is a very personal thing and is different for everyone. One person might envision a tough backpack hunt and not worry

Bob with an Alberta mule deer.

On days when I don't feel like going for a run or hitting the gym, I motivate myself by thinking of a big ram, or muley buck, or bull elk I want to hunt this season. I know that those animals and the mountains where they live do not care a whit that I am older now and have had a few injuries, that my work demands more time at the desk, or that the family needs me.

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about it. Another envisions the same hunt and turns sick to their stomach with anxiety. The pressure becomes almost unbearable.

For many years I hunted with a psychologist with whom I discussed this phenomenon. I'll never forget what he told me. "Stress is usually seen as a noun; something tangible, like a rifle, or a car," he said. "But really, stress isn't like that at all. It should be seen as a verb—that is, something that you do; and mostly, people do it to themselves even if they are not aware of it. Pretend for a moment that stress is just the body's way of telling it to calm down or change something. Being stressed out is all about doing something, hyperventilating, or tensing up. These are all reactions that the body and mind can have to excessive pressure.

"Thus, does it not make sense that if stress is something you are doing, then you can choose to do something about it?" he asked. "Instead of worrying about it, how about doing something different that can alleviate it?"

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Many years ago I used to do a lot of semi-serious distance running. I ran in some organized races; 10Ks and half-marathons mostly, but also some mountain races. I approached them differently than the serious competitors in that I used both the race and the training leading up to race day as a way to get my body—and my mind—in shape for the upcoming hunting season.

Running these types of races requires more than just physical training. They also demand mental preparation that will both motivate you to train on a regular basis, and allow you to withstand the abuse your body is going to take. For example, on days when I don't feel like going for a run or hitting the gym, I motivate myself by thinking of a big ram, or muley buck, or bull elk I want to hunt this season. I know that those animals and the mountains where they live do not care a whit that I am older now and have had a few injuries, that my work demands more time at the desk, or that the family needs me. The animals are still as tough, the mountains still as steep and rough as they always were. If I want to have a chance this year, I best lace 'em up and work out today—no excuses.

In the field I use the same mind games to keep myself going that I use when running a hard race. For example, when running a half-marathon of 13.1 miles, at about the eight-mile mark, when I start to fatigue and my legs begin to burn I tell myself, "Hey, I can do the next two miles no sweat; after all, what is two miles? Just a short warm-up" I tell myself, and so on, and so on. I do this until the end of the race, breaking it up into short, manageable bites. It's a sort of mind over matter thing. This way, the greatest computer that ever existed, the human brain, is tricking the body into believing that after a certain mileage point it is just running a series of small races that are connected, but not at the same time. Thus, the body becomes less physically stressed and more capable of running the distance through mind over matter and a very healthy rush of endorphins after each mileage barrier is handily crossed.

It's the same when hunting. When I hit the mountains I break the drudgery up into little bite-sized pieces. And in being able to do so I actually helped save my life. That's the day I fell off a cliff on a solo Dall's sheep hunt in Alaska that snapped my left fibula, broke the same ankle in six places, and mangled my left hand. I had to slide on my butt, one small body length at a time, for ten hours down the

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MANY YEARS IN THE GAME: Bob with an Alaska-Yukon moose in 1991.

mountain to a spot where I could erect a shelter while awaiting help. Breaking that "butt slide boogie" up into small segments helped keep me going without succumbing to the fear of the unknown.

PREPARATION IS THE KEY

Most hunters are sports fans to some degree. You know that athletes train to be able to do specific tasks well. In fact, exercise physiologists call this "specificity training." An example would be a sprinter. Rather than lift heavy weights to bulk up his chest and arms, the sprinter trains to be able to run fast. Doing this accomplishes two things. First, it trains the body to be able to best accomplish the upcoming task. And second, it gives the athlete the confidence that he can run the race well, defeating the fear of the unknown.

As a hunter, you can do the same thing, both physically and mentally. When planning your adventure, get as much information as you can about it. Ask lots of questions, always remembering there is no such thing as a stupid question. Talk to both the outfitter and previous clients. What's a typical hunting day like? How much walking and climbing do I need to do? What kinds of shots are most common? What are the little things I need to know to make my hunt more enjoyable? What do I need to be able to do to maximize my chances for success?

At the same time, be realistic about yourself. Even if you can spend an hour a day at the gym for six months prior to your hunt, there is still no way on God's green earth a 50-year-old man who works at a desk job five days a week is going to be able to hike as long and as fast as a 30-year-old hunting guide who has been guiding for a decade and been in the mountains for a month or two prior to your arrival. Nor should you expect to. To be sure, you want to be in the best physical condition you possibly can be in. Just as important, though, is a never-say-die attitude. As a hunting guide, I am much more likely to bust my petunias for the guy who tries as hard as he can, who prepared before the trip, and who is cheerful and willing to help with camp chores and who never, ever gives up, than a young tough guy with an attitude who whines a lot.

TESTING ONE, TWO, THREE...

As a hunting guide, we always do two things before hitting the woods: make a guy shoot, and see how he handles himself around camp. Is he fit? Can he walk? More importantly, what kind of guy is he? Does he pitch in and help with camp chores or expect the guide to be his personal servant? How does he carry himself? Is he a braggart, a "Big Hat, No Cattle" kind of guy, insecure deep down inside? Is he the kind that will listen to the guide, push himself a little bit, get wet and cold and have sore feet and not complain? Backcountry wilderness hunts are not a sprint, they're a marathon. The race goes to the slow but steady guy, the guy who will not ever give up, not somebody that shoots their wad the first day or two and then, when it is obvious it will be a grinder, start bitching and whining and blaming people.

Most clients think the shooting range session is to allow them to make sure their

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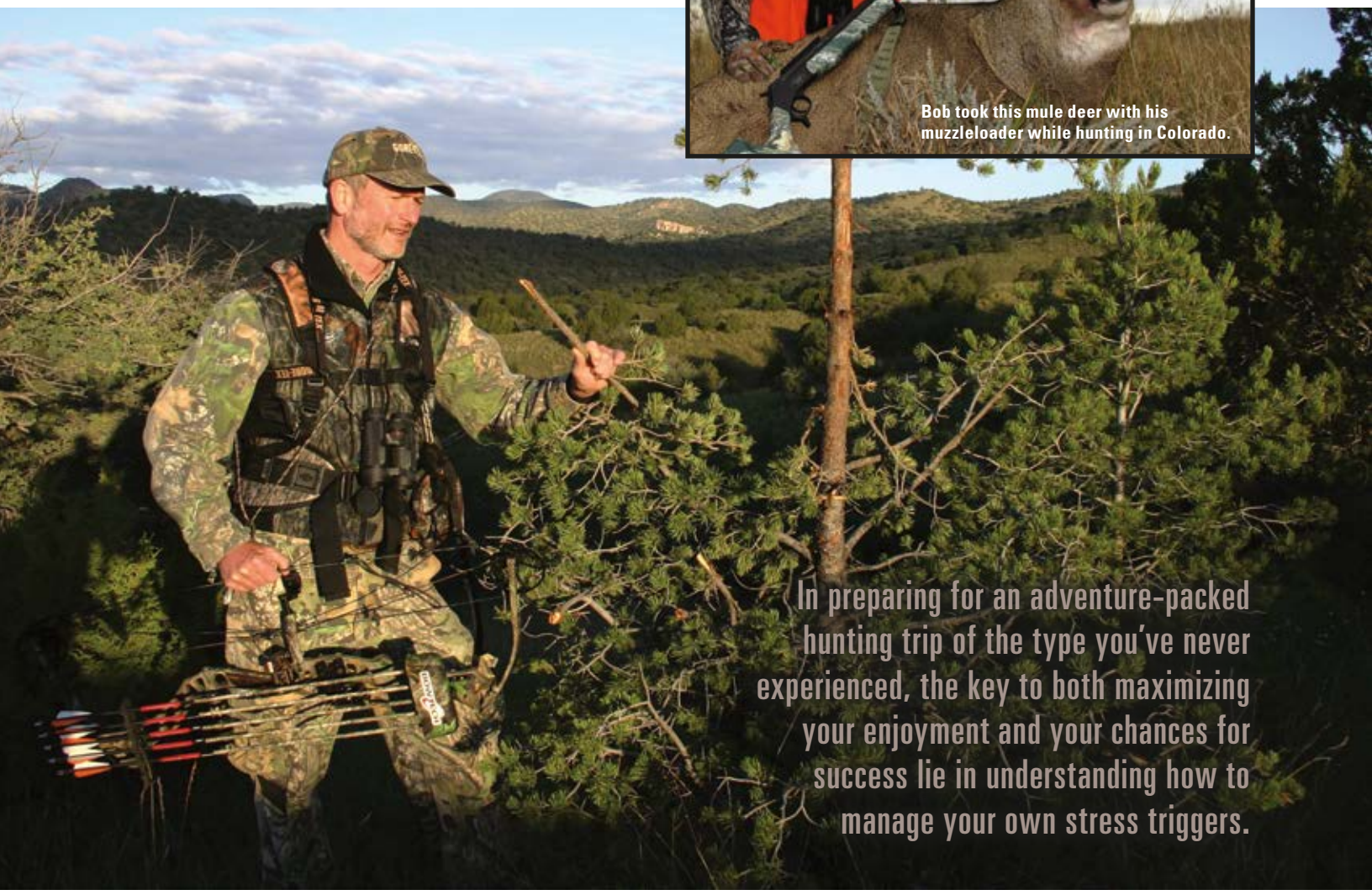
rifles or bows are sighted in after a long trip, and that's true. But also true is the fact that the guides are testing you. The range session tells the guide what kind of shot you are, and thus, what kind of shot he will let you take once the time comes. As an extreme example, one year in Southeast Alaska my client was a guy who wanted to kill a brown bear with his bow. After a few innocent questions I discovered he had arrowed exactly three deer, none from the ground, nor had he ever shot even a black bear with a gun. When I grabbed my own bow and asked if he wanted to shoot a few arrows he balked, which was amazing to me since I personally can never get enough practice time in. I soon discovered why. His equipment sucked, and he couldn't hit a pie plate at 20 yards one out of five times. I went to the outfitter, a good friend, and said, "Dude, no way can I ethically allow this guy to shoot an arrow at a bear—even if he can keep from wetting his pants when one gets close, which I doubt." Jim agreed, we had a sit-down with the guy, and he actually seemed relieved when I said I'd happily loan him my .375, which he then used to shoot a dandy bear. The pressure was off, and he had a fun time.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

When folks ask me about certain hunting trips now, before talking specifics I ask them what kinds of hunts do they like the most. You should ask yourself the same thing. For example, if you absolutely abhor sleeping in small tents without indoor plumbing or a camp where there is nothing but freeze-dried food on the menu—if there's any food left after the first few days—by all means do not book this type of hunt. Instead go the lodge route; nothing wrong with that.

If you want to hunt mountain sheep and you have a debilitating physical problem, admit it, and search for an outfitter that will accommodate you. In the world of Dall's sheep hunting for example, you can hunt them start to finish out of a

Bob took this mule deer with his muzzleloader while hunting in Colorado.



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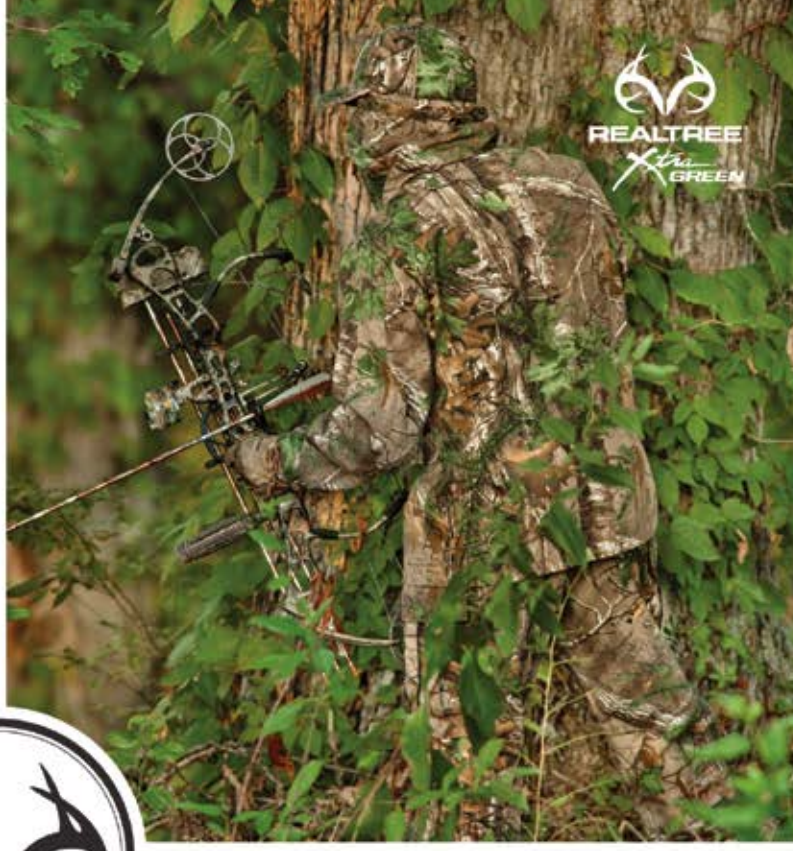

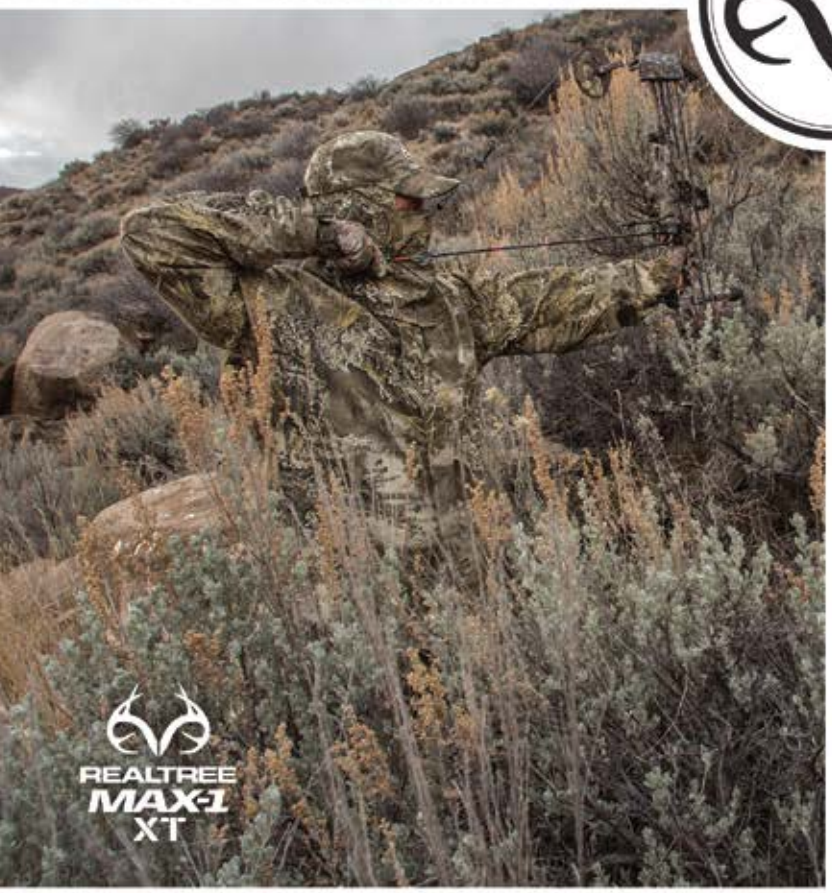

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backpack and really get physical with it. Or, you can fly or ride ATVs or horses to main camp, and hunt on foot from there. Or ride horses all day, climbing on foot only if you spot rams. Or if you really want to make it cushy, in the Northwest Territories it is legal to use helicopters to fly to the top of the mountain and go from there. One year I saw some Alaska guides put an 80-some year old man on a horse, work with him for a few days, then get him into position to make the shot on a very nice ram. The man was mentally as tough as they come, willing to do anything and everything his aged body would allow to get the job done, and it paid off in spades.

Before the hunt, you also must control all those variables which you can control. These include your proficiency with your weapon, physical fitness, the condition of your equipment, researching the hunt area beforehand, etc. In so doing you'll remove much of the doubt, knowing what you can and cannot do and making it much less stressful than going in blind. An extreme example of that was when I fell off the mountain and broke myself up. I am trained in wilderness survival, had my first aid and survival gear with me, and knew what to do. Instead of panicking, I just went through my checklist and performed the tasks necessary. Had I not had those skills and experiences, I am sure panic would have set in and surviving would have been much iffier.

And finally, be willing to eat some humble pie. You won't be the toughest guy in camp, or the best hunter of the animal you're pursuing in that specific location. Your guide will be. Bond with him, trust him, work with him, and do the very best you can. Expect him to try and get a bit more out of you than you think you can give, and be grateful for it.

And trust me when I tell you that after tackling a tough hunt that kind of freaks you out in the beginning, successfully enduring the tedium of preparation and the grinding during the hunt itself, then having it all come together in that one moment when you are in position and make the shot, you'll experience a euphoria that will be hard to truly share with those who have not been there.

It's the sweetest wine on earth. ■

Boone and Crockett Club Professional Member Bob Robb has been a full-time outdoor writer since 1978. Currently he is Editorial Director of Grand View Outdoors.

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