

**CRAIG
BODDINGTON**
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

**KEEP IT
NATURAL!**

There are no benchrests in the field, but when available, a sturdy, natural rest is the next best thing. In previous columns we've discussed the four classic shooting positions: prone, sitting, kneeling, and standing. We're not going to throw these out the window, but we're throwing out all the National Rifle Association rulebooks for competitive shooting. In the field, the goal is to get as steady as possible and make the shot, so these positions can be endlessly modified. They are best enhanced by a solid natural rest that you can lie, sit, kneel or stand against.

Outfitter Chris Bilkey demonstrates one of several ways to cushion the rifle against a vertical rest. It's critical to keep something, if only a hand, between the rifle and a hard surface.

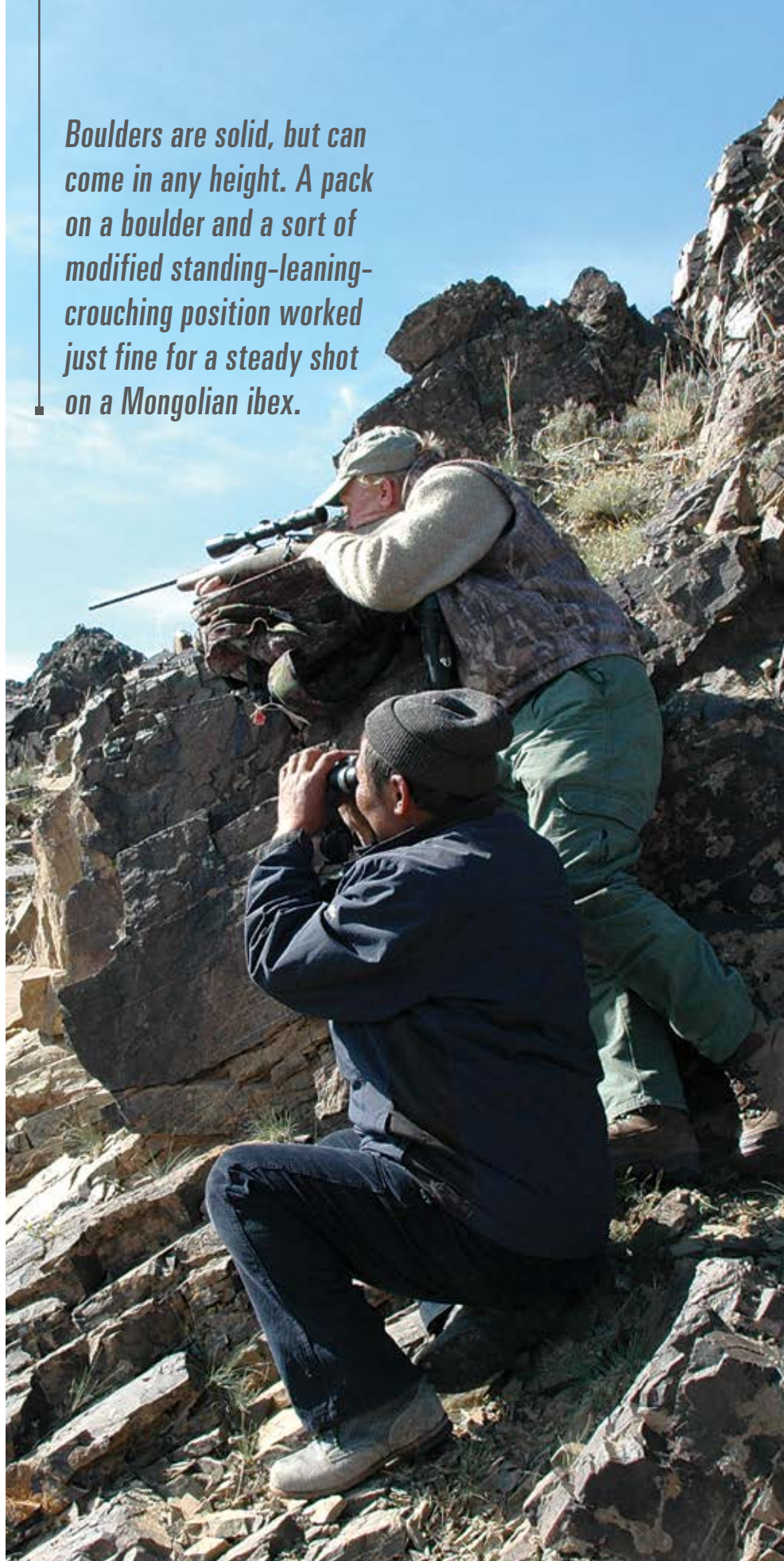
Nothing is as solid as the Earth's surface, so absent a natural rest, the closer you can get to the ground, the steadier you can be. But if you can find a firm extension of the Earth to rest over or against you should be able to get steadier than is possible with any unsupported position. The options are endless: boulders, logs, stumps, tree forks and branches, the lip of a ravine—anything solid, sturdy, and more or less horizontal. Vertical rests are also useful, usually better than being unsupported, but they are neither as steady, nor generally, as easy to use.

We'll address vertical rests last, but one rule remains the same: *Never* rest the firearm's barrel directly against any solid object. This will alter the barrel's vibration during the passage of the bullet and will usually change the point of impact. Now, even though a barrel might be free-floated in its channel, the action will be tightly bedded to the stock. So, although the effect may not be as extreme, pretty much the same rule applies: *Never* rest the stock directly against a solid object! Also, even if you get away with it and make the shot, you can expect plenty of damage from the stock being scraped across rock or tree bark during recoil.

I almost always carry a daypack, real handy to throw across a boulder or log. My old friend, gunwriter Bob Milek, usually wore a cowboy hat, and he'd scrunch it under his rifle or the hunting handguns he preferred. To my thinking, however, more padding is better. This is not because you need it, but because there's one problem with a natural rest: it is what it is. You cannot adjust the height of a boulder or the thickness of a log, but you can adjust the height of your rifle with your pack—and sometimes your buddy's pack as well. Depending on the height, you may lie, sit, kneel, or even stand behind your rest. You may contort yourself into absurd and sometimes uncomfortable positions, but I still believe you'll be steadier over a solid rest than in any unsupported position.

One trick to sweeten almost any position is to find a way to stabilize your

Boulders are solid, but can come in any height. A pack on a boulder and a sort of modified standing-leaning-crouching position worked just fine for a steady shot on a Mongolian ibex.



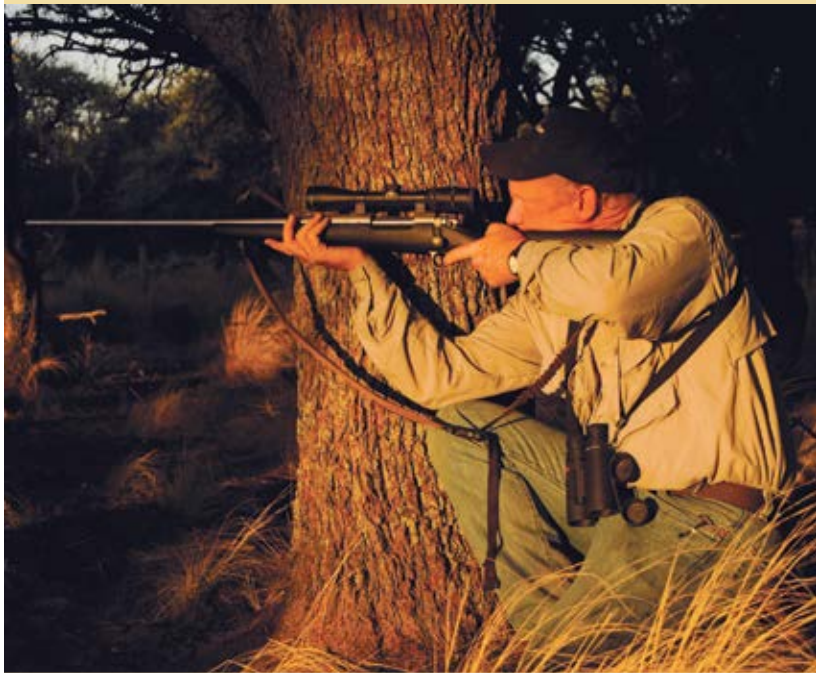
shooting elbow; it's truly amazing how much this helps. Over a flat-topped boulder perhaps you can get far enough forward to firmly plant both elbows. Then there's the "reverse-kneeling" position I mentioned in the Winter 2016 issue of *Fair Chase*. Since the rifle is supported over your solid rest, there's no reason or benefit for resting your supporting elbow on your knee. Reverse it, grounding your supporting knee and cocking your shooting knee up so you can rest your elbow on it. Keeping that shooting elbow from flapping in the breeze makes a big difference in almost any position.

The availability of a solid natural rest can't exactly be planned much of the time, but in game country, I'm always on the lookout just in case a shooting opportunity suddenly develops. I consider this part of situational awareness, because a shot can happen at any time—so how are you going to handle it? Nearly 40 years ago, on my first blacktail deer hunt, Mike Ballew and I were working two sides of a volcanic ridge down from Mount Lassen. I suppose we were 50 yards apart when Mike hollered, so I bailed over the top toward him and saw a nice buck streaking up the next ridge. I spotted a cone-like lava boulder in front of me, so I slid in behind it, mashed my cowboy hat over the top, rested the rifle, and took the shot. Today I couldn't be quite so quick—but maybe I'd find a solution that saved me a 50-yard dash.

A good natural rest is so important to me that I'll

often stop a stalk a bit farther than necessary if a good shooting position turns up. Come to think of it, all things being equal, in broken ground I'll often plan a stalk around a good place to shoot from. This is pretty simple in the mountains, where there are often plenty of good rocks to choose from!

A vertical rest—whether a tree trunk, a stout fencepost, or the corner of an old barn—is a bit different. For most people, vertical rests aren't nearly as steady, so I view them more as impromptu situations, preferably for use at shorter ranges. There are lots of ways to use one, but for me, the fastest and most efficient is to simply grip the fore end, place your hand between fore end and your vertical rest, and lean into it. This generally means that for righthanders, it's probably best to work off the right side of the rest, lefties to the left; if it's a good, stout tree you can actually rest your forearm against it. Pretty much the same situation applies as with a more horizontal surface: you can lie against the base of the tree; or you can sit, kneel, or stand, depending on the desired height and how much time you have. The stouter the support the better, but there are no rules in getting steady. In extreme situations, I've even gathered together a fistful of flimsy stalks. It comes down to whatever works; if available, a solid natural rest is one of the very best options. ■



TOP: I'm not sure exactly what this position should be called, but a low boulder with two packs allowed the rifle, the body, and both elbows to be perfectly stabilized. **MIDDLE:** There are many ways to use a vertical rest, depending largely on its size. A stout tree like this allows you to lean into it, putting the supporting forearm against the tree. **BOTTOM:** A vertical rest usually isn't as steady as a horizontal platform, but for a fast, quick shot, a handy tree is a lot steadier than any unsupported position.