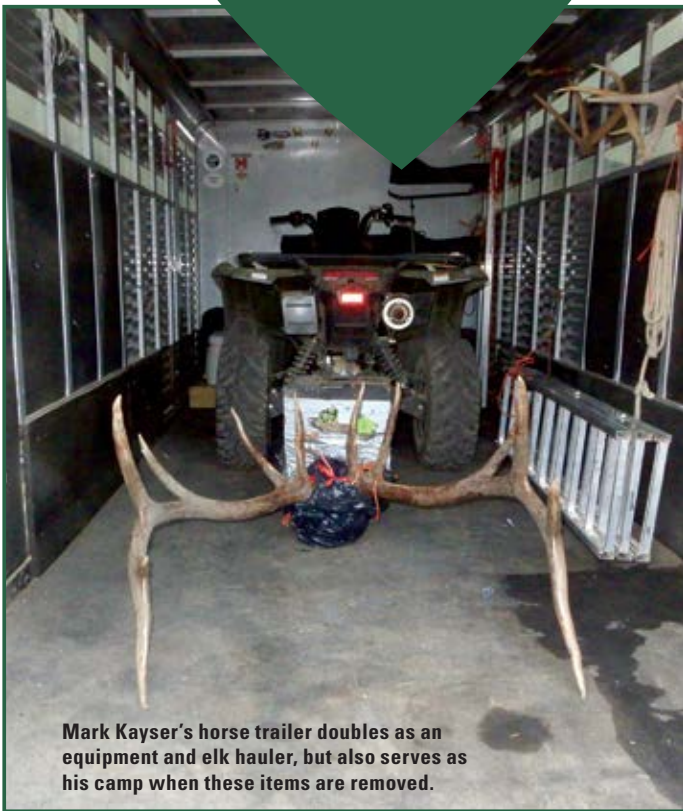




CAMP COMFORTS

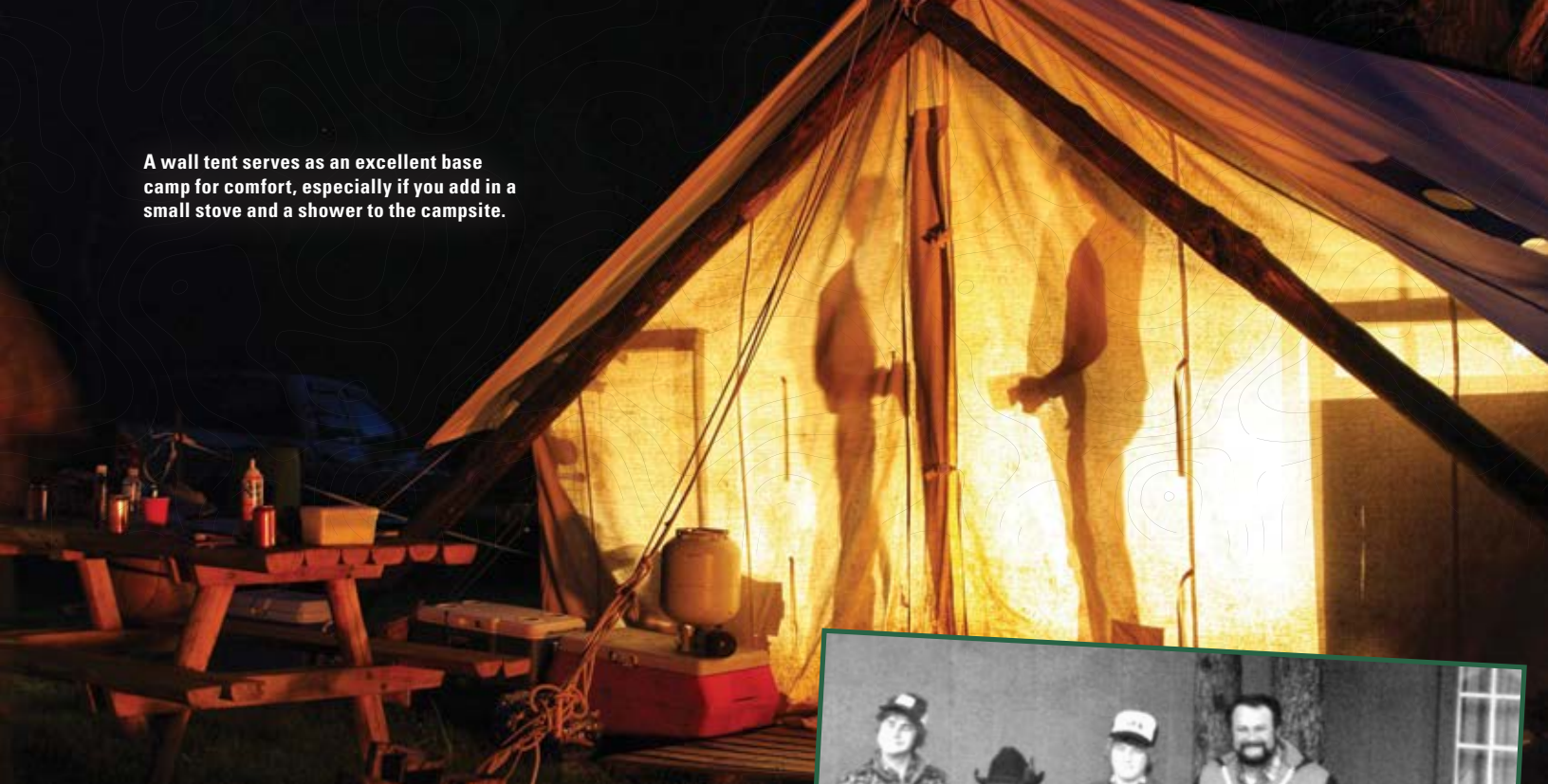


Mark Kayser's horse trailer doubles as an equipment and elk hauler, but also serves as his camp when these items are removed.

As I pulled into the small Montana town to resupply for another week of DIY elk hunting on public land, my smartphone buzzed like an angry rattlesnake beside me. It was my hunting partner driving separately an hour ahead of me. He had left our previous campsite to see if he could reserve a motel room while I stopped to check a trailhead for hunting access. With a frustrating tone, my buddy complained there were no motel rooms left in town and none likely for the foreseeable future thanks to hunters with Trivago foresight. With the bad news, my buddy had already turned his truck for home leaving me solo. I shrugged it off and headed to refuel.

A COMFORTABLE HUNTING CAMP MEANS SO MUCH MORE THAN A GOOD NIGHT'S REST. IT COULD MEAN A FULL FREEZER, TOO.

A wall tent serves as an excellent base camp for comfort, especially if you add in a small stove and a shower to the campsite.



Why was I not as frustrated? Our definitions of comfortable camps differed slightly. I was pulling my shelter in the form of an enclosed horse trailer. After backing out my ATV, I could quickly convert it to a comfortable camp with standard camping gear. It has been my go-to camp for more than 10 years. He had stayed with me in the trailer on several hunts, but he drew the line on this extended hunt. A motel room was the only comfort he sought now and without it the hunt was over.

With nearly four decades of hunting in my rear view, I can attest to the benefits of a comfortable camp for success on the hunt. Even if the hunting is hot, being uncomfortable, wet, cold, and cramped can snuff your motivation to hunt. In recent years, my search for the best accommodations follows quickly after I cement my plans to hunt an area. I know a comfortable camp equals success.

SHELTER

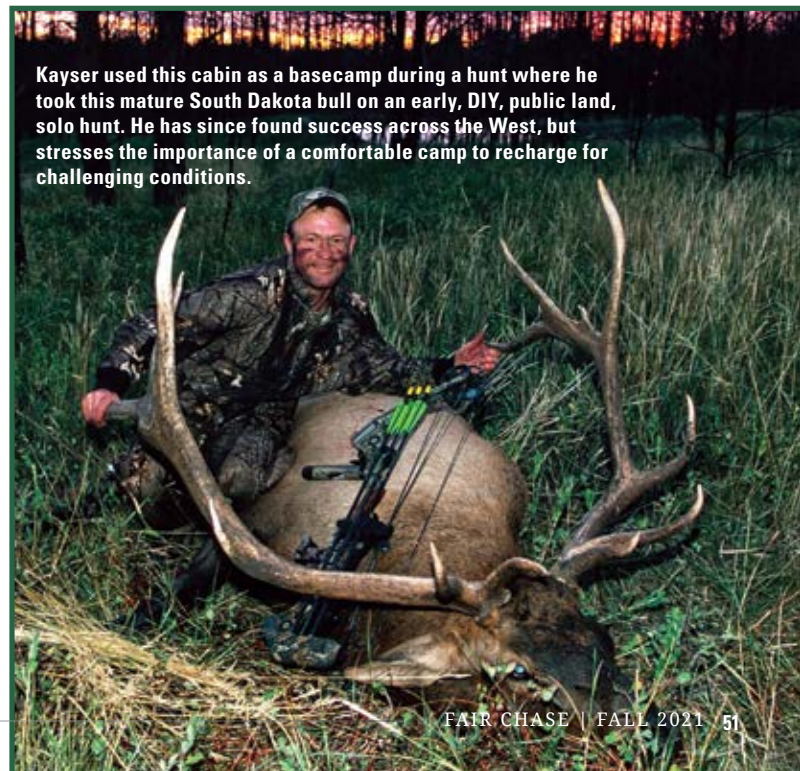
When I define a comfortable camp, shelter tops the list.

That shelter varies on the location and logistics of the hunt. You may be forced to hunt from a lightweight, two-man tent or even bivy on the ground. Your hunting troupe could be sheltered in a wall tent or possibly a modern, pull-type camper complete with satellite TV. And some prefer the setting of a cabin or as my buddy sought out, a motel room with an icemaker down the hall.

My big game hunting kickstarted in the late 1970s with South Dakota's Black Hills as the backdrop. A few years prior, my parents purchased a small, uninsulated cabin in a remote, high elevation area. The meager structure proved a great location for deer and elk hunting despite the lack of running water. A woodburning stove, propane cooking and a pioneer style outhouse brought comfort to this secluded area of the Black Hills. Electricity had been strung into the location so lights and electric heaters helped supplement the rustic interior, especially when returning after a long hunt with below zero temperatures.



While growing up, Kayser's family owned a modest, uninsulated cabin high in South Dakota's Black Hills. It provided a great base camp for many early hunts. Mark Kayser, third from left, on a November 1980 deer hunt at the family's Black Hills cabin.



Kayser used this cabin as a basecamp during a hunt where he took this mature South Dakota bull on an early, DIY, public land, solo hunt. He has since found success across the West, but stresses the importance of a comfortable camp to recharge for challenging conditions.



A warm fire in a cabin or a wall tent creates a comfortable atmosphere to recharge after a long day of hunting.



My first elk taken with rifle and bow were the result of the marginal setting. Healthy elk populations within walking distance and the simple comforts of four walls and heat added confidence each morning. Tossing aside covers in a warm cabin is a great way to launch a hunt instead of crawling out of a chilly sleeping bag in a frosty tent.

But a tent is not an end all to dampening spirits and success. On a recent Montana archery elk hunt I tagged along with a friend on an outfitted hunt. Wall tents were the shelter of choice, and each included a pellet stove, ample lanterns, padded cots and carpeting that was vacuumed between camps. Homemade meals were served up in another heated tent and a heated shower house met daily hygiene needs. Truthfully, the tent camp was better than many motel rooms I have booked.

I have one hunting area I access with my horse and mule. Equine power

gives me range from the trailhead and room to pack in a comfortable camp for solo hunting. This is typically a warm September hunt, but one year it dumped a foot of snow. My backpacking gear serves as the foundation for camp basics, but to add some warmth to the snowy backdrop I stowed a portable propane heater in a pannier. Firing it up at night and dawn took the chill off nighttime dining and predawn prep for the day. Being toasty was comforting in the small digs.

Now, back to that horse trailer/camper combo. Sometimes my horse and mule fill the cargo space while other times the trailer transports my ATV. Once at a hunting area, I unload, sweep out the compartment and set up camp. Two tables, cots, a cook stove, lanterns, coolers, water jugs and a Big Buddy portable propane heater provide all the comfort of home. It is bearproof, hail proof and waterproof. You can hook up a propane-heated shower outside or go old-school



WHILE HUNTING SOLO ON A DIY, PUBLIC-LAND HUNT, KAYSER CAN PACK IN A COMFORTABLE CAMP COMPLETE WITH HEAT VIA EQUINE POWER.



An enclosed trailer for hauling ATVs, or even a horse trailer, convert readily to a waterproof shelter to keep you comfortable close to hunting areas.

like me. I merely heat up water on my Coleman stove and pour the water over me as needed while standing in a used livestock lick tub. I ask any campmates to step outside to avoid awkward moments during the hillbilly splash bath.

Two can sleep in the main cargo compartment and I have sealed, carpeted and added a memory foam mattress to the tack compartment of the gooseneck trailer for a studio apartment. Most of the time I hunt solo from the trailer, but it can accommodate up to four easily.

Whatever your camp accommodations, keep in mind these three tips. First, you need a waterproof shelter from the elements. Make sure your roof does not leak. Second, you need warmth to ease your morning launch and to dry gear out at night. Third, plan to have some form of bath house. A week in the wilds without a shower has the tendency to also dampen daily enthusiasm. Win the body odor battle to continue an already demanding DIY hunt.

I would rather add an hour to my morning hike into a tract of public-land than rough it in a camp where most conveniences are left behind. A warm night's sleep after a

hot meal and bath can do wonders to energize you day-after-day while on a DIY hunt.

CONVENIENCE

Several years ago, a hunting partner of mine suggested a campsite smack in the middle of a public-land hunting unit. The area he chose was secluded, protected and offered a myriad of directions in which to launch hunts. Unfortunately, the only area that consistently held elk was a back-breaking eight-mile drive on my ATV and then another hour and a half ascent up a near vertical, 1,500-foot slope. I hunted the area for five days with two friends. When they burned out, I returned and hunted another week solo.

The daily grind was incredibly draining, but with dogged perseverance I arrowed a mature six-point bull at the tail end of the hunt. To this day, it stands out as one of my personal best hunts. At the same time, it evokes memories of an exhaustive venture I would rather not repeat. The lesson learned here? Choose your campsites wisely, preferably close to your quarry.

Whether you tent camp, base from an RV or rent a cabin, estimate the amount

DIY, PUBLIC-LAND DROPOUT STATS

Looking back on a decade of DIY, public-land elk hunts, most averaged 10 days for success. My largest bull came after nearly 20 days of hunting, but I did have a couple of breaks in between that marathon event. Regardless, if you spend 5, 10 or 20 days on a DIY hunt, more time in a cozy camp renews your drive for the next morning.

In addition to reviewing how many hunting days I tallied for success, I also keep notes on how long my hunting partners stick with me. Few make it to the five-day mark and typically begin fading or packing at day three or four. This is for DIY elk, not woodlot whitetails, but I make all drive separately so they can leave at will and I can continue the chase.

Some flee early due to rougher-than-expected camp amenities, but other factors play more into this dropout statistic. At the top of the list is lack of physical fitness, followed by crappy weather and the depression of running into masses of other hunters. Still, you cannot be successful on a DIY hunt if you turn your truck toward home after three days.

Comfortable quarters can help lift spirits and extend hunts when situations go bad. Maintaining year-round physical fitness ensures you can win the public-land foot race. Oftentimes you can walk away from the crowds. Watching the forecast with your hunting app, like the free HuntStand app, helps you maneuver around wacky weather.

There are no guarantees on a DIY, public-land hunt, but you can increase the odds in your favor with forethought and contentment back at camp.

of time it takes you to drive or hike from camp to your hunting area. Each hour of travel equals an hour of lost sleep that accumulates quickly. You may not think that an extra hour of travel each way is a negative, especially while driving. You have a warm vehicle, a blaring radio and a cup of hot coffee to keep you going. Nevertheless, it is the cumulative effect that sneaks up on you. By day three of a grueling hunt, that long drive will seem more like a morning commute on the Santa Monica Freeway. That is followed with another hour of possible hiking to arrive at your hunting area by shooting light.

One of my favorite hunting units has limited camping areas near the wilderness sections I prefer to hunt. Each time I hunt the unit I try to arrive early and stake claim to one of the few

flat locations for my trailer near my favorite trailhead. The prime camping location reduces my ATV ride to less than 10 minutes. Sometimes I can hear elk bugling right from camp, but on most occasions, I still need to hike an hour or more to separate myself from the typical forest road hunter. This small win may not seem like much, but after eight days of chasing elk up and down vertical slopes the brief trip back to camp adds time to recharge.

FOOD/WATER

Never underestimate the power of a hearty, warm meal. That element alone has rejuvenating powers that could equal a hot shower and a crackling fire. I would bet some of you likely spend more time in meal planning and preparation than planning for the actual hunt. The atmosphere of hunting camp



Your culinary desires will differ with campmates. Spend ample time developing a meal list that includes enough meals for your time in the field and some diversity if that is important to you.



Mark Kayser's son Cole preps freeze-dried, hot meals to take the chill off an early snow during a backcountry hunt.

beckons you more than the bugle of a bull or the sight of a mature buck staring back at you on a far ridge. I appreciate that simple satisfaction in a hunting environment so oftentimes strewn with disappointing challenges. I have told several of my hunting partners I would be happy if they just came along to cook and wrangle horses, but so far, no takers.

Your culinary desires will differ with campmates. Spend ample time developing a meal list that includes enough meals for your time in the field and some diversity. I've been known to stock up on fast-food fried chicken before camp. I also mix in smoked sausages, homemade lasagna and other preheatables for main courses.

Chicken aside, research indicates your diet should include 50 to 60 percent carbohydrates, 12 to 20 percent proteins and up to 30 percent fats. A normal diet includes a daily intake of approximately 2,600 calories, but you can nearly double that on an intense DIY hunt.

In the backcountry when I'm backpacking, my

go-to freeze-dried meals are AlpineAire and Mountain House. They are packed with calories but also sodium. Power bars, trail mix, jerky, apples, dried fruit, oatmeal and energy drink mixes round out breakfast and lunch, along with the occasional PB and honey sandwich.

I recommend you try several dishes in the off-season to see what you prefer.

Of course, you will need a fresh supply of water to make camp comfortable. My supply varies with the setting. In my horse camps I utilize several filtering systems including a Katadyn hand pump and a base camp 10-liter filter bag. At a trail-head or trailer camp I use five gallon jugs totaling anywhere from 20-50 gallons depending on trip details. This allows me enough water to cook, make coffee, bathe and refill water bottles as needed.

In the end, your camp digs will vary depending on time of year, terrain, and quarry. There is one constant to keep in mind, a comfortable camp will refresh you, extend the time you will want to hunt and, if you're lucky, help punch that tag. ■

DIY CHECKLIST:

HUNTSTAND HUNTING APP AND MAP PRINTING

ALPS OUTDOORZ COMMANDER X + PACK

SIG SAUER ELECTRO-OPTICS ZULU7 10X42 MM HDX BINOCULAR

WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER SCENT KILLER GOLD FIELD WIPES AND BODY WASH

CABELA'S HUNTING CAMP PRODUCTS, WATER FILTERS, CAMP STOVES, LANTERNS, TENTS



If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Justin Spring or Karlie Slayer for details.

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