

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

ACCURATE HUNTER

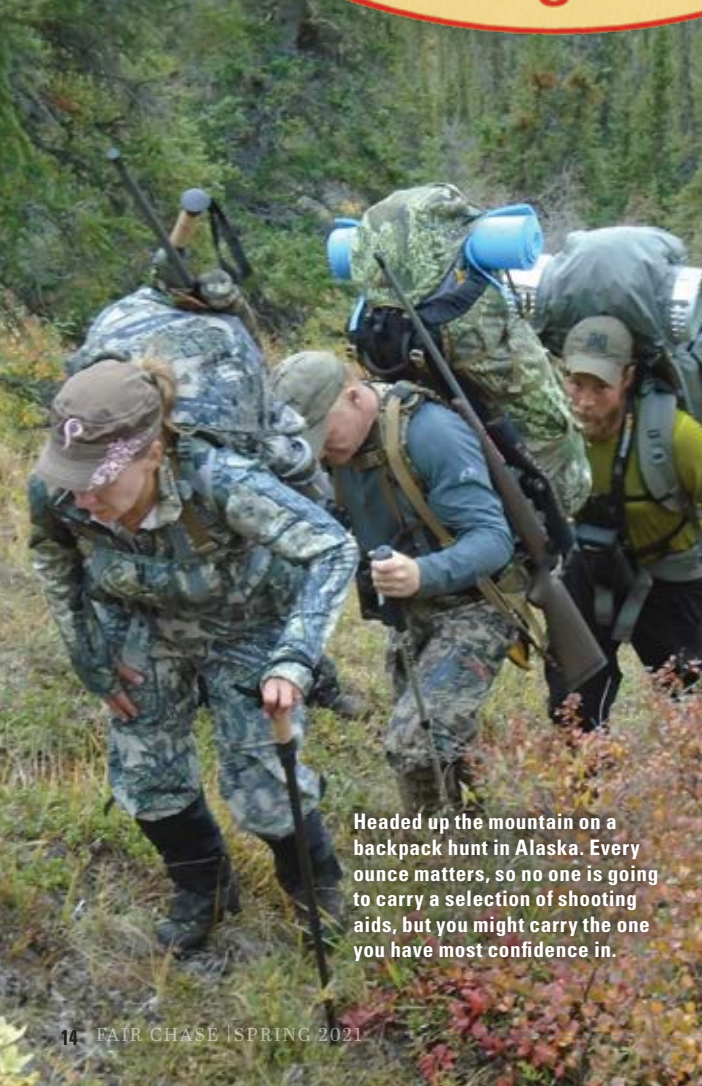
**FIND A
REST...
OR CARRY
ONE?**

I was pronghorn hunting, walking through rolling sage, when a coyote came out of a little draw and trotted across my view. I flopped down to shoot prone—right on top of a clump of that low, fine-thorned prairie cactus. I can't recall if I even got the shot off, but I spent a lot of time pulling out tiny little thorns!

Part of the rationale for the three-legged shooting sticks that are almost universal in African hunting is the simple fact that almost everything over there has nasty thorns, so you want to be extra careful where you flop down! However, Africa doesn't have a monopoly on thorns. I just did two southwest U.S. hunts back to back—a free-range aoudad hunt in the Davis Mountains of far West Texas, followed by a Coues' deer hunt on my son-in-law's ranch north of Phoenix. On both hunts, as I looked for comfortable places from which to glass—and potential natural rests if a shot came along—I was constantly surrounded by various cacti, mesquite, and other prickly plants.

Thanks to a lot of time in Africa, I'm comfortable with shooting sticks and often carry them. So long as the legs are secured at the bottom to prevent rattling and avoid one leg getting caught and snapping, they make a pretty good hiking staff; they are not heavy. However, sticks are at their best for fairly quick shots at less than 200 yards. This pretty much defines most game shooting in Africa, but while I am definitely not an extreme-range advocate, in North America we often have to shoot from longer distances. We need more stability than most of us can attain standing off-sticks.

The sticks I most often carry, from African Sporting Creations, have jointed legs, so I can unscrew segments and use them as a low tripod for sitting or kneeling. However, this takes time; thus it's not



Headed up the mountain on a backpack hunt in Alaska. Every ounce matters, so no one is going to carry a selection of shooting aids, but you might carry the one you have most confidence in.

Amid sharp rocks and thorny plants, Boddington found a boulder he could lie down on. Obviously, there were shooting aids readily at hand, but this remains his preferred method if there's a natural rest of suitable height available.



BELOW: Three-legged shooting sticks are almost universal in Africa. From a standing position you are above grass and low brush. However, over there, you're almost never hunting alone, with competent help for both carrying and setting up shooting aids.

going to work in fast-breaking opportunities. I can't imagine any rest or position that is applicable in all situations.

Sticks work well when longer shots are unlikely, such as hunting hogs or black bear, or in thick country. I would never say they are ideal for sheep hunting. Generally, my preference is to find a solid log or boulder I can nestle my pack on, then snuggle the rifle on top. So long as you're creative, this works pretty well—most of the time. But one size doesn't fit all. Just now, in both Texas and Arizona, I glassed from a number of positions where I looked around and asked myself, "If you get a shot here, what are you going to do?"

This is an important exercise in almost all hunting—a "what-if" game you play with yourself. Sort of like the dilemmas presented at the Marine Corps Basic School known as "What now, Lieutenant?" As an optimist with a glass half full, it's wise to constantly expect a shot, and play the mental game of how you might handle it.

There isn't always an obvious answer, and in the field, probably no such thing as a perfect answer. But when the animal you're looking for appears, you have limited time to figure out how to make a shot that is accurate.

Often there are multiple options, and a decision must be made. Will you use a natural rest (if such exists), or something you've carried with you? I like natural rests, but I also like bipods and tripods, and often they can be combined. But with man-made rests, somebody has to carry them, so choose wisely!

These days I am amazed at the diversity and complexity of shooting aids—sticks, bipods, tripods, quadpods, more—and their cost! I am least excited by devices with gears and wheels because I've seen too many fail (always at the worst possible moment). However, they all work (when they work) and work best with practice.

Obviously, only so much can be carried afield, so decisions must be made as to what you're going to



carry—and who will do the carrying! This is where much North American hunting diverges from elsewhere in the world. In the African context, there's almost always a professional hunter (PH) and tracker(s). At the outset, a tracker will often carry the shooting sticks. In open country, someone in the party may carry a second set of sticks. With two sets, one under the fore end, the other under the butt (or perhaps tucked into the armpit in the "chicken wing" position), the range limitation of standing sticks goes out the window; the equivalent of a standing benchrest (again, only with practice!) can be quickly erected for extreme stability.

However, North America is the land of do-it-yourself (DIY) hunting. Some of us hunt

alone, many with a hunting buddy or family member, sometimes with a single guide. Rarely is there a retinue of "helpers." And, in our millions of acres of public land, we hunt tough country. True, sometimes we never get far from a horse or four-wheeler, but North America is also the land of backpack hunting. Every item to be carried must be evaluated and considered. Are we likely to carry two sets of shooting sticks (of any type), plus a selection of tall and short bipods, and maybe a couple of sandbags? I think not! There are many options, so it's important to experiment at the range and find out what you like. It's great to know how to use a wide variety of rests and positions, but on a hunt, you'll probably carry whatever works best for you.



LEFT: John Stucker sets up for a shot at a big aoudad ram in far West Texas. He's already grabbed his Javelin bipod from his belt and attached it; next step is to lie prone and prepare for the shot. **TOP RIGHT:** Tucson gunmaker John Lazzeroni with a big feral hog taken with a .308 Patriot. Regardless of anticipated shot, "Lazz" almost always hunts with a height-adjustable Harris bipod, definitely his preferred option. **RIGHT:** On a prairie-dog shoot, Boddington experiments with the French 4StableSticks system. This system is extremely light, provides both fore-and-aft support, with height adjustable. Nobody can carry all the diverse systems available today, but only with practice can you learn what works best for you.

We also must consider who will set things up for a shot! In Africa, at the start of a deliberate stalk, the PH will often take the sticks, but both he and his trackers understand their use. If an animal suddenly appears, it's second nature to set up the sticks and get ready long before horn evaluation is done. In North America, we're often on our own. This is a whole different deal. We have to evaluate the animal and the shot, negotiate the rifle, and quickly set up a shooting solution. It's good to have options, but too many alternatives can confuse the issue; after all, how many shooting aids have we really carried up the hill?

Usually, I'll cast around for a solid natural rest first. Depending on terrain, this may be only a slight hump in the ground that I can flop down on with my daypack. If there isn't something obvious that will work, only then do I consider what else I might have with me. There is no right or wrong solution. One

only needs to be steady enough to make the shot, which depends on distance, size of animal, and training. This last is critical. Others, depending on practice, may reach first for the shooting aid they won't leave the truck, trail, or camp without.

My friend, gunmaker John Lazzeroni, is an awesome rifleman and better than I will ever be at extreme-range shooting. I'm sure "Lazz" knows lots of ways to set up for shots, but whether in typically difficult shooting conditions like pronghorn and Coues' deer or simple situations like hogs at medium range, I've noticed that he defaults first to an always-present adjustable-leg Harris bipod. Like many systems, the Harris attaches to the rifle via the forward sling swivel stud. This arrangement is semi-permanent: it's either in place or not. In place, weight and bulk are added to the rifle and are almost impossible to use in specialized

situations like saddle scabbards. No system is perfect in all situations.

The Harris is the grandfather of bipods. Today there are other options, with strong (but lighter and more expensive) carbon fiber replacing metal, and other attachment means. The Javelin Bipod carbon-fiber system has a strong magnet that replaces the forward sling swivel stud. A shorter bipod can be carried on the belt, a taller adjustable bipod or tripod in the pack—either quickly attached when needed. In the Davis Mountains, I was hunting aoudad with my friend John Stucker. I noted that he had a Javelin bipod mount on the front swivel of his Christensen .300 Winchester Magnum. When he got a shot at an awesome ram, we were stuck on a bald ridge, no boulders in sight and only scraggly brush. The band of rams came out of a little draw below us. Without

hesitation, Stucker took the bipod from his belt, clamped it into place, and set up prone. I was impressed. With proper, steady shooting position established, the next problem to be solved was keeping track of the largest ram and catching him clear. This took agonizing seconds, but when the big ram finally stood clear, the shot was perfect at 332 yards.

Today, some would consider this a close chip shot. It was neither, but hardly unusual by North American standards. I was there but staying out of the way (not my shot), so I don't know the thought process. As we topped that little rise, expecting a shot from the top, I assume thought was given to finding a handy boulder, but there were none. Stucker almost immediately defaulted to the shooting aid he'd carried and set up in a position he'd obviously practiced. Folks, that's the way it's supposed to be done! ■