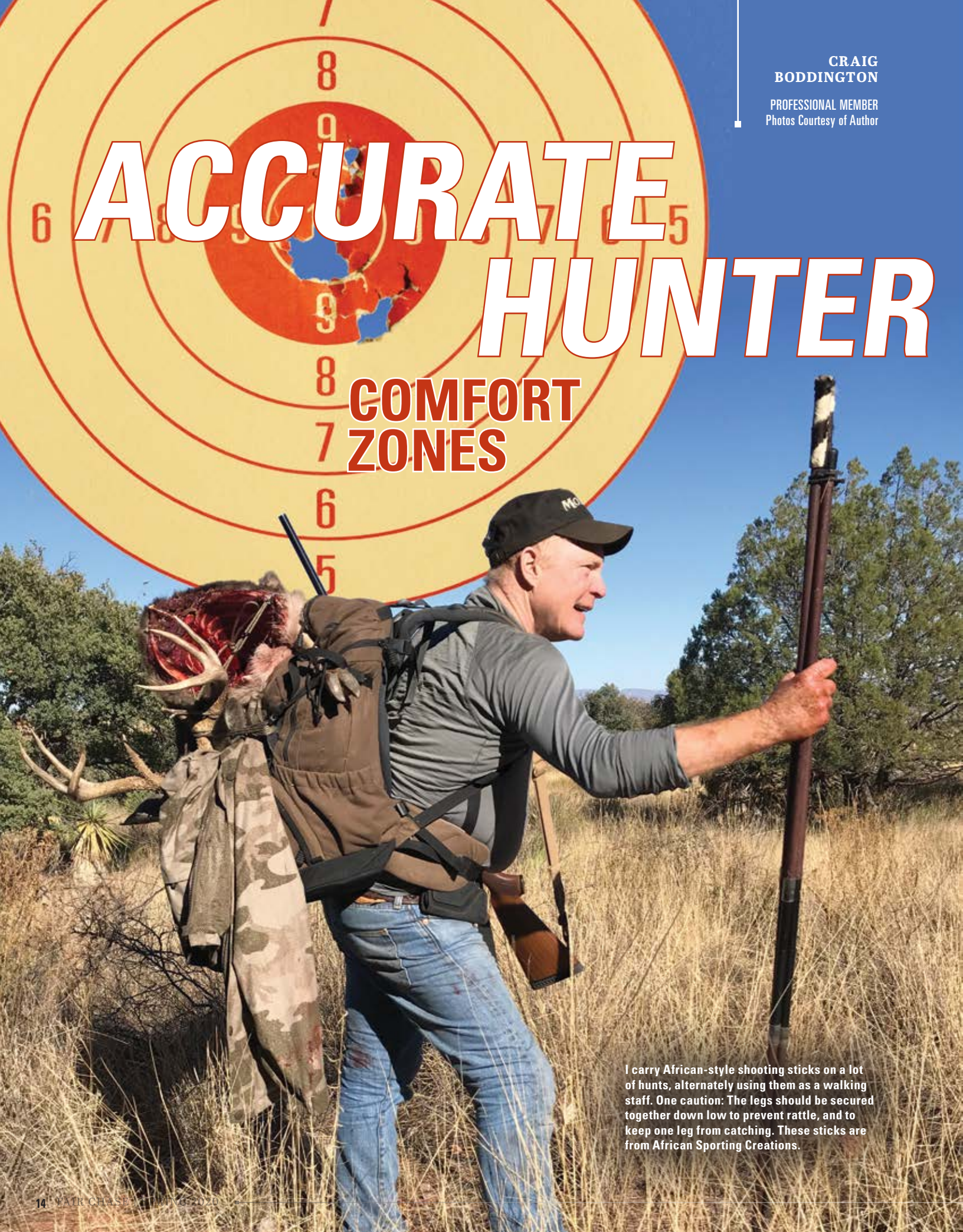


CRAIG
BODDINGTON
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

COMFORT ZONES



I carry African-style shooting sticks on a lot of hunts, alternately using them as a walking staff. One caution: The legs should be secured together down low to prevent rattle, and to keep one leg from catching. These sticks are from African Sporting Creations.



Traditional rifle competition is based on the four “NRA” positions of prone, sitting, kneeling, and standing. Always and forever, these form a good basis for all rifle shooting. However, hunting is our focus here, and there is no rulebook for field-shooting positions. What matters: Get steady enough to make the shot count.

In our techno-geek-gadget world there are all manner of shooting aids available: Bipods, tripods, monopods...and more. Most work well...if you practice with them. The problem is twofold: First, there is a limit on how much stuff you can carry. Second, none of us are likely to attain equal proficiency with all of the options!

An old friend, Terry Moore, always carried folding shooting sticks on his belt that quickly made into a bipod, almost the perfect height for sitting or kneeling. This was Terry's comfort zone. He'd whip out his sticks, drop down, and in split-seconds would be ready and steady. This seemed such a good system that I practiced quite a bit with the crossed sticks, but I couldn't get the hang of it. I got better, sure, but I never got rid of an up-and-down wobble.

Eventually I gave up and returned to my own comfort zone, which is to find a way to rest over my pack. This probably doesn't work for everyone (nor does anything else!), but I almost always carry some sort of pack. It's true that there are many field positions where angle, terrain, and vegetation preclude lying down. However, since it's my comfort zone, I can get pretty creative with a pack. Ideally, if I can't lie behind it, I'll put it on top of a rock or log.

Unless I expect to pack meat, I don't usually carry a full-size pack and frame. Too bad, because, upended, real packs are tall enough to sit or kneel behind. Daypacks limit the

ABOVE: My problem here was getting the rifle barrel over some rocks just in front of me. I stood my pack up, using the internal frame for rigidity and gaining the needed elevation to make the shot.

BELOW: Resting over my pack, I'm shooting at a Coues' deer in Arizona about 40 years ago—showing that resting over a backpack has been my comfort zone for a very long time!





ABOVE LEFT: If one pack is good, two are sometimes better! For daughter Brittany's shot at a Rocky Mountain goat, we used both our packs to gain enough elevation for an uphill shot. **ABOVE RIGHT:** If one set of sticks is good, two can be even better for longer shots. With practice, sticks fore-and-after can create near-benchrest stability. The obvious problem is there is some limit on how much gear you can carry.

options, but I usually carry a medium-sized pack with an internal frame, tall enough to stand upright and sit behind (with some scrunching around).

After a pack, three-legged shooting sticks are probably my next-favorite. To some extent, this is familiarity. I hunt in Africa annually; shooting sticks there are in such universal use that you'd better get used to them! For me, three legs are more stable than two, but that also depends on familiarity and practice. I take shooting sticks on a lot of North American hunts, and these days I'm seeing many other hunters using them.

One of the critical things, always, is getting the height right—both for you, and for the angle of a shot. For this reason, adjustable-height sticks are extremely popular. They work well, but I prefer plain old sticks because I've seen too many gears and adjustments fail on modern sticks. Either way, you still have to learn how to quickly adjust the sticks to the right height...and they must more or less fit you. I'm a very average five-nine, but taller people need longer sticks, and shorter people need shorter sticks. Ideal for best stability is for the legs to be spread at about a 30-degree angle from the

junction, and, for a standing position, for the intersection to be about the level of a first shirt button, about the top of the sternum. This allows you to lean into the sticks, the idea being to tie the rifle and the sticks together as one unit.

Sitting or kneeling behind a tripod is much steadier than standing with sticks. The "African shooting sticks" I use have jointed legs so I can unscrew a section and shorten them for a lower position. Commercial sticks often have adjustable legs, which are great, but I've experienced the same problem of "joint failure" at the wrong moment, with one leg collapsing just as you're trying to get steady.

For many effective hunters, the comfort zone is a bipod attached to the rifle (usually at the forward sling swivel stud). For me, the attachment to the rifle is the difference between this and crossed sticks or any other two-legged arrangement. Attachment makes it part of the rifle; with practice, wobble-free stability is near-perfect. Most of the shooting schools I'm familiar with promote use of an attached bipod, and for good reason. Prone over a bipod, and with support under the toe of the stock to get the height exactly right, I can produce groups almost as tight as with

sandbags off a bench. The problem is the same as always: Many field situations preclude going prone because of vegetation and terrain. This cannot be your only solution and perhaps isn't the best comfort zone because it's too limiting!

Bipods with longer legs that telescope offer options for shooting from higher positions, and you can get creative, setting the bipod legs on a rock, log, or backpack to gain elevation. I often carry an attached bipod on open-country hunts such as for pronghorn or caribou. There are many brands and styles, but Harris Engineering bipods, attaching at the forward sling swivel stud, are probably the most common. The Harris is available in a variety of models, including with legs long enough for sitting. However, no solution fits all situations. Attached bipods add weight and bulk, and you aren't going to cram an attached bipod into a saddle scabbard. Lately I've been "working out" with the Javelin system from Spartan, made of strong, light carbon fiber and attaching to the forward sling swivel stud via a powerful magnet. Their light bipod can be carried on a belt, and there's a larger system with telescoping legs for sitting, kneeling, or standing...or tripod for spotting scope or camera. It's a

versatile system offering a wide array of options.

As I keep saying, it's wise to practice from a wide variety of positions, and experiment with multiple ways to get steady. Heck, I keep learning! We all establish comfort zones, but it's good to have a large bag of tricks, the bigger the better.

In the field it often comes down to time: how long will the animal remain visible and in range? Of course, we can't know that. Part of the charm of hunting is that much of the final move remains with the animal. All we can do is try to get steady enough as quickly as possible while doing it slowly and quietly as we use good cover. And also remembering this is not competitive shooting. The heart/lung area of big-game animals is a large target. It is not necessary to hit a tennis ball; hitting an area the size of a volleyball will do the trick. This doesn't mean you can be sloppy; the old adage of "aim small to miss small" applies. However, with a broadside presentation, if you're concentrating on the shoulder and holding about one-third up from the brisket line, you have a few inches' leeway in every direction.

When a shot is offered, there are usually multiple ways to gain stability. On a



ABOVE LEFT: The Javelin and Sentinel bipod/tripod system from Spartan attach at the forward sling swivel stud with a strong magnet, making them instantly attachable and detachable. **ABOVE RIGHT:** You can get creative with any shooting aid. Using tall shooting sticks in standing mode, I leaned against an old corral to take an excellent Oregon blacktail from this very odd (but steady) position.

recent caribou hunt in Alaska I carried plenty of options: In a cargo pocket, a short Javelin bipod; on my pack, its big brother, Spartan's Sentinel tripod, also carbon fiber, strong and light. That sounds like overkill and probably was, but I used the tripod for my spotting scope. And while walking, I unscrewed one leg and used it for a hiking staff. No system is useful unless you practice, but I did a lot of

shooting with this gear and intended to use it.

At the end of a long stalk, my caribou was bedded with his harem at about 300 yards. I was shooting a 6.5-.300 Weatherby and had prepared for a longer shot, so this was close enough. The caribou were all balled up, so I had to wait. They were on a slight rise, and so was I. I crawled to the forward edge, pushed my pack into position and rested

the rifle over it. There were other options, including the gear I was carrying, but although I had the luxury of time, the rifle was steady, so I gave it no further thought. I had to stretch my neck

muscles now and again, but as soon as the bull stood clear, I took the shot. Comfort zones are good, so long as you understand there will be times when you must use other options—and then have them ready! ■

Jordan Wallace and I back to camp with our caribou. I carried the Spartan Sentinel system, which acts as either a bipod or tripod. While hiking, I unscrewed one leg and used it as a walking staff, carrying the other two legs in my pack, for use either as a spotting scope tripod or shooting aid.



Although I had several other options with me, on a caribou hunt in September 2019, I immediately defaulted to my comfort zone, resting over my backpack. The caribou are on the next rise at 300 yards; this position was steady and certain.

