

January 2011 Newsletter

2010 Summary

The data are in and to be frank about it, I am very surprised. But arguing with the numbers is about like arguing with a compass, it does not get you anywhere but lost.

I have placed 2010 alongside 2009 and 2008 for side-by-side for a comparison:

	<u>2010</u>		<u>2009</u>	<u>2008 - 125 Members</u>
Hours hunted	11,373		11,116	13,571
125+ bucks	119	120+	196	260
Other bucks	2,342		2,243	3,410
Does	4,241		4,056	5,873
Fawns	811		833	1,260
Unknown	900		961	1,461
Total Deer	8,372		8,289	12,264
Total Bucks	2,454		2,439	3,670
Deer/hour	.75		.73	.95
Bucks/hour	.22		.22	.27
Buck-to-doe raio	1:1.7		1:1.7	1:1.6

Year 2010 125+ hunter success 12%

Year 2009 120+ hunter success 36%

As Gomer Pile would say - "surprise, surprise surprise."Well, some of it surprised me anyway.

This year was, by general consensus, not a bang up year. There was a lowered buck kill which was expected. But there was also a general malaise in being able to see deer.

The surprise is that 2010 did not compare badly against last year, although 2009 also was not a banner year. However, during 2009 we seemed to have a reasonable answer for why there were relatively fewer sightings - a booming mast crop.

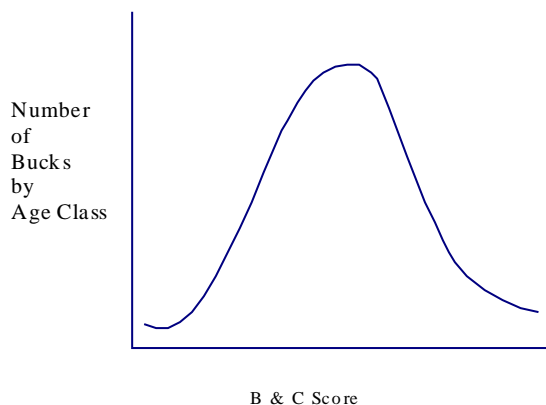
I also included 2008. It was one of our better years, but keep in mind that we had 125 Members.

Given my own experience in the field this year, especially during the second gun season, along with what I was hearing from the Membership, I expected 2010 to be in the bottom of the tank. It compared with last year across the board - except shooter sightings which we expected to be about halved.

Part of the success this year is due to the new guys also being very productive.

Now these data are like mayonnaise. You can pile them on the bread however you want. However, regarding hunter utilization of Ames, there times when a majority of the Membership is here and there are times when very few are here (I have never observed a day when everyone was here and *very few* days when no one was here). **If just half of the Membership was here for about half of the entire season and each person spent 6 hours in the woods each day - - - the total time afield would be ~12,500 hours (not far off of what we had this year).**

Here's another way to look at it: excluding juvenile seasons there are 105 days of deer hunting - dividing the total number of hours hunted (11,373) by 105 gives an average of 108 man-hours of hunting per day. If we assume that the average hunting day is about 6 hours, that means on average there are 18 people Ames per day.



As expected, the number of shooters seen and the number of shooters on the board were both less than in the past. We expected this to be true.

The size range in any age class probably follows the typical bell-shaped curve that fits most populations for most attributes. It can be "skewed" one way or another, or fat or skinny, depending the population's quirks, but it is often what we would refer to as being "normal" or symmetrical - a nice even bell (better than

the one I was able to draw). The biggest part of the population is centered on the average with only about 10% occurring in the "tails" of the curve. That means very few animals are truly extraordinary, either unusually small or excessively large.

This curve applies to human populations as well. Most of us are near enough whatever average we want to consider . . . for example, height.

Pre-season, I guessed that about 16 shooters would come in. I continue to believe that the drought knocked some bucks far enough back that they were passed. However, the move to 125 let the best 2-year-old deer walk by putting an extra-whammy on the trigger finger.

The 2-year-old animals to the right of the curve (i.e., the bucks 2-year-old bucks scoring 120-to-128 B&C) were not killed this year. For most of us, those 5 little inches really made us pause *...but...* what it also did was illustrate how many border-line deer have always been out there - - - how many 120-to-128 deer that have often found their way to the

concrete pad and the long stairs a'winding. We've been weeding out our very best animals in a young age class.

If you shoot the curve's right-hand tail off every year with 30-06's, then a slightly lopsided curve finds its way to the next age class. The extraordinary animals in this age class usually are the extraordinary ones in the next.

That's the theory anyway. *When a program gets to the maturity where it can address tails with some confidence then it is pretty well along.*

This is not a trophy program, but it is an attempt to get as many bucks as possible at least to their third birthday.

Using antler size to index age is an imperfect rule. It is simply the best way for a shifting Membership to grasp and apply . . . *something that works reasonably well*. It provides a little order on what would otherwise be a chaos of opinions.

Certainly, body characteristics would be a better way to accomplish the objective; but to date, even the old hands are reluctant to "burn a tag" trying to judge a deer by belly, chest and neck alone. By the way, the reluctance to *burn a tag* philosophy seems a little short. Few of us kill two bucks in a season anyway.

Hopefully this year's passed-over deer will be available next year. Some will die of natural causes. And the ones that live will not come back dumber. They will be relatively less available on the basis of smarts. This will be the test - how does this translate to the buck board and sightings - and next year alone will not tell the full tale.

I have watched state-wide statistics and will not be surprised if there is a slowly percolating murmur about deer being harder to see. Hunters are becoming more selective and are stocking the woods with the age classes that are naturally harder to see. Older deer have built-in avoidance software that activates with age; a virus working against hunters. And, unlike some mid-western states, Tennessee has a mix of expansive woodland cover types that provide good hidey holes.

Regarding Ames' potential, consider this: if a purely guided hunting system were installed, food plots, lodging . . . the whole nine yards . . . and only 5+-year-old bucks were on the tab . . . i.e., pure trophy hunting . . . what do you think the scores would be? What if *all of the 2, 3, and 4-year-old deer* were protected?

Let's see if there is a pay-off next year. The curve's tail will tell.

Who Hunted

<u>Employee Hours</u>	<u>Shooter sightings</u>	<u>Bucks Does Fawns Unknown</u>			
305	7	108	224	52	38
<u>Guest Hours</u>					

1096	5	201	405	76	73
<u>Member Hours</u>					
9972	106	2033	3612	683	789

Percentage of Hours Hunted

Ames Employees	2.7%
Guests	9.6%
Members	87.7%

The Bad and Ugly Boards

I was pleased with the low numbers on the bad and ugly boards. Certainly, we killed about as many non-shooters as shooters (9 and 10, respectively), but that is not entirely how these boards should be judged.

We only killed 9 non-shooters. With 11,373 hours in the woods that is only one non-shooter per 1,264 hours or perhaps a better way to look at it, with a total of 2,454 buck sightings we goofed only once every 272 times.

We'd like to see those boards with no bucks on them, but quite frankly that is not a reasonable expectation. Mistakes will happen.

Nine bucks did not hurt us too awful bad.

Once again, thanks for bringing them in. It is not easy to do. Aldo Leopold said that character was never so tested as by a line of quail running down a row of corn, all to be had in a single shot. I'd say a dead buck, too small and stripped of his dignity, lying hidden in a lonely place and with us having everything to gain by sneaking away, would top that by a long shot.

That's not to say someone did not walk away. We keep finding 95-to-105 heads in the same place every year. It's getting to where we do a post-season search.

The Doe Board

We whacked 152. This was not enough -but not real bad- although also not as well-distributed as we'd like. Unit 2 came up pretty short. Surely there are issues in Unit 2 for getting a doe out, yet no more so that for Unit 1. Both 1 & 2 are set up to provide a relatively remote, wilderness-type, hunting experience. It's a catch 22 and something we may need to address in some way.

Some of you work very hard at killing does. You help keep this program going. And, I fear that some of you assume that the guys doing the work do it because they find it easy. There is, I believe, still a couple or folks or more who still think that killing does is bad medicine. Believe me, it is good medicine. If you will remember some of the best years followed heavy doe kills.

I hear among the Membership a lessening patience with the folks who have never or have very rarely contributed to the doe-goals.

The Check-in Station

My Dad, whom some of you met, is the veteran of about 75 years worth of deer camps. He loves it down here and I extend my thanks to all of you guys who took him in to your conversations and tall tales. He mentions one thing every time we talk about the experience down here. He loves the hunting and the camaraderie, but he really loves Ms. Betty's cooking.

We all do. Keep her well Irby, we all love that woman.

A Note for Comparison

Enclosed is a record of your hunting success this year. It is based on what you gave us on the observation sheets. For comparison here is mine:

All told, I hunted 35 hours and saw 55 deer for an average deer per hour of 1.6 (and this largely the result of two very good mornings). I hunted about half of the time on Closed Areas and the other half here and there, often using hunting access to do a little patrolling along the borders.

I killed two does and in the last few minutes of the last day apparently missed the third. I spent a couple of hours searching for her. The last hour and half was with a snow storm slanting down through the trees. I looked and looked, two flashlights strong, until my filling tracks showed me that I was looking where I'd already looked. No doe. But it was a rare experience, one I would not trade, the light darting into every shadow and line, with every log a deer and finally as my spirits fell, every log just a log. Eventually I became slightly disoriented from walking circles in the privet-thick timber and my world limited inside the wall of swirling snow. I stopped to listen as it hissed through the pines, wondering mildly just where it was I was . . . and well contented to be nowhere else but here.

I saw one shooter during the season and several nice, "nearly bucks."

I assumed the role of guide with my Dad and did a plumb sorry job. He hunted 41.5 hours exclusively on Closed Areas and saw 15 deer which works out to .36 deer per hour. He killed two does, shot at one shooter - and killed a stump.

The Mine Cautionary

I really enjoyed meeting the new guys this year. It was nice to see genuinely enthused folks. Most of you had outstanding success, seeing deer (and bucks) very well. I truly hope the Ames experience meets expectations.

We have a good Membership and those of us working at Ames remarked a number of times during the season how well-pleased we are with the people in the Membership. Certainly, we have a range of personalities, but we got 'em on this side too. They're allowed.

I want to throw out a notion for everyone. In the old days they kept a canary deep in the mines to check for gas. A dead bird meant that things were no longer OK. A dead canary meant: "hold your breath and climb." I'll use a "cautionary" bird for the Ames mine.

This is about the place where most hunting Memberships/leases begin to fail. It is about here that folks become disenchanted within a set of over expectations, frustrated with a firm hand on the controls and just plain mad about not having occasional exceptions.

Over expectations can poison personal experience and color perceptions of anything that is attempted - *frustration with a program that sticks to its goals* can lead to a herky-jerky plan that is run based on whims, opinions and eventually nothing but arguments - and *exceptions* lead to a set of ambiguous and unenforceable rules.

As we've gained more data, we have focused our program all the way from the initial hue and cry of, "it won't work," to a tiny 5-inch regulation hoping to protect more of the 2-year-old bucks. We've come a long way.

One thing we surely can agree on is that the Ames program has not been static. It has been an exercise in adaptive management, a lineage of decisions based on the best biological data in hand and with a certain child in mind.

As such, you have been in for the ride as well as the destination. The ride will continue. We will adapt the program as we understand the ecology and economics.

Ecologically, we plan to adhere to QDM tenets.

We struggle daily with money and unlike most big farms are burdened with a large research/teaching mission. Field trials cost, they do not pay. The fall festival breaks even or brings in only a little. The total income from all hunting programs do not equal what was removed when the University removed its support. Our auditors (yearly) have a negative number field day when they factor in secretarial, administrative and field support for the QDM program. Yet we are still here. We plan to be here.

This program began as an experiment, an attempt to make a good thing happen, with absolutely no guarantees cast into the wind. It is, to some extent, still an experiment, but I think a litmus test for success has been the enthusiasm of some new Members who have come in to what is now an extraordinary, and for them, sparkling situation.

Certainly some responsibility for the experiment's final solution rests with us and part of that is couched in the commonsensical grounds of listening to you and trying to do right. But it also means for us to keep expectations real, keep a steady hand on the controls and keep the playing field level.

To an equal extent the solution rests with you, a Membership, albeit a loose collection of people (that are, however, coming more and more together) whose “ownership” includes things like killing enough does, but it also includes some measure of fidelity to the ideals. That does not mean complete or blind agreement with the means, but agreement that this experience, this vision, is worth the keeping. That’s your job too.

There is a test once given as an experiment. In that test there are 10 lines of 5 words each. With those 5 words the student is to make one 4-word sentence. For example, use the words “old-frog-can’t-the-is,” and make a 4-word sentence. I come up with “the frog is old.” If you are like most everyone else on the planet after all ten sentences, if I use words like “gray, wrinkled, Florida, bingo, crippled, sorrow,” in the solutions you will walk slower, be more prone to interrupt conversations and not join deer clubs. Success can be subtle.

One thing I have noticed as I’ve listened to some talk is that there is a whole lot not to know. There is some misinformation but also good, weighed debate. Listen carefully.

If you have questions, write or call me. I promised transparency in the beginning. However, in some cases I do not have the answer. In some cases I can offer only the odds dictated by the set of dice that I must play with daily. In some cases I can actually give you a hard answer.

The Grid System

Thanks for taking time to record your observations by grid. These data will be fascinating when we get enough to make some inferences. We’ve talked about eventually trying to get a grant to put on a graduate student to GIS map all grids (including habitat thickness, travel corridors along with hunter experience, etc.) and use the information to get correlations for sightings and success.

There were 2,700 observation forms in 2010.

Wearing Gloves when Cleaning a Deer

Here’s a little news out of last month’s *New England Journal of Medicine*. Two deer hunters in Virginia developed sores that eventually turned into pretty nasty, infected lesions after dressing deer. Neither of the two hunters were wearing gloves and both nicked themselves with a knife while field dressing.

The culprit was a poxvirus that infects ruminants and can be transmitted to humans. Incubation for the virus is 3-to-7 days. The clinical and pathological features were described in the article. I’m guessing that for the article to appear in such a prestigious journal, that the medical community expects the virus to become common enough that doctors need to know what to look for.

Both hunters recovered. The lesions (on their fingers) looked about what you might expect if you had gotten a bad splinter and the wound eventually become raised, red and infected.

Obviously two hunters an epidemic do not make. But it brings to mind the need to wear rubber gloves while handling the insides of a deer.

ATV's

ATV's seemed under better control this year. I found tracks in some funny places, but in the main it seemed OK. So far, we have not had erosion problems. There are a few places that are particularly prone to erosion, certain hills where the roads can wash completely away in a single rain event. Of course, these places are not always vulnerable to rutting. But, after a freeze and a light rain or snow, some of these hills are so rotten that an ATV can cut 4-inch ruts that will be knee deep gullies come April.

To those who have not had much experience along these lines, I can only offer up 30 years of experience with these roads and soils and bulldozers.

This is *one reason* ATV access is limited. Hunting takes place in all kinds of weather and it only takes one muddy run to fix up a road with some misery.

Parting Shot

This will be the last of a series of articles about my experience with western hunting. Now it might be tempting to take all of this as some sort of chest thumping account of daring and eating dynamite. It is not.

My experiences out west have been limited - I am no old hand. My experiences have been distinguished mainly by some poor shooting, but no man has ever enjoyed his time out there more than I have. I've met some extraordinary people and have seen some wonderful ground. And, I can truly say that elk hunting is, for me, the apogee of the hunting experience. I would rather hunt the elk than see the lion.

I once spent 4 hours stalking a fine elk across a half-mile of coulees and gambrel oaks, with a guide who had been pretty well convinced that I was an idiot that morning when I'd seen the animal but he had not. We stalked that same animal that afternoon and got him. I would not trade that day for a pot of gold (a small pot).

If nothing else, I hope these little snippets will encourage you to go. And if you go, perhaps help you get ready. If nothing else, they make me write a record for my old age.

If you tent camp, and especially if you tent camp in the outback and away from your vehicle, getting ready is very important. It is also fun.

I found that the very best place to begin is not with good old *Field and Stream* and similar ilk, but with the very best camping magazines and especially their year-end product tests and recommendations. Three friends and I spent 15 days in Montana way up high away from everything on an archery hunt. I spent 4 months digging through the camping journals for the best and best-priced stuff. The serious campers/hikers/mountaineers weigh things down to the ounce and often make judgments on a product's usefulness based on a tiny weight difference. That is because ounces add up.

On Montana trip I was almost down to cutting the labels out of my shirts. I was desperate to keep my pack and gear from weighing more than 50 pounds. It was tough to do, especially when you are expecting all sorts of weather.

I learned several things. A good tent is absolutely necessary. A two man tent is a two man tent only if one fellow is a midget and the other is real small and docile. But the right kind of two-man tent does just fine for one man . . . if it has vestibules. You do not want muddy boots and a bow and a wet raincoat in the tent with you. A three-season tent will handle only so much wind and snow. A four-season tent can handle just about anything if it is a good one.

On that trip, one of my friends had a Wal-Mart special and had to chase it across the meadow a couple of times when it took off like a tumble weed in the wind. It also leaked, a mighty miserable situation. The other fellow's tent was a one-man job and so small that he had to go outside to change his mind. He had no room - at all - for the things that 15 days in the wilderness requires. He would have had more room with me in my two man tent, but he is not a midget and I am not docile.

I had researched mine and bought the "Editor's Choice" for good performance and good value. The folks were right and I would not trade it.

Weight figures into everything. I am hearing that the airlines are going to start charging for using the overhead bins. Next will be the full fanny fare. You can set cocked up on one cheek for a 3-hour flight and save 10%, but boy, let that other half settle down for just a moment and the stewardess will come bounding down the aisle with a thermopile to check the seat.

You can save baggage weight by carrying your heavy coat aboard and as I said earlier by using your pack as a carry-on - if it is small enough. And you can save luggage weight by wearing your heaviest boots aboard, although I do not like doing this if I can help it.

Speaking of boots, take two of everything you really need. For example, I was hunting in northern Montana. We decided to take an evening and hunt pheasants down a long, flat coulee. A small stream ran the length of the coulee and my buddy made one of those hops across the stream that lacks the momentum to carry you on across. He waggled his arms and made some bad noises but all to no avail. He stepped backwards into water that would make a cryogenics lab look like a sauna and made more bad noises.

The next morning the temperature hovered around 18-degrees and his wet boots, the only pair he'd brought, were not inviting.

I always take two pairs. And, in Colorado, I learned something from another fellow in camp. He brought a light pair of deck shoes, almost bedroom slippers, for when he was lounging around camp. Brilliant. I was clomping around in hot boots and he was comfortable. I always take some light shoes now.

It is not real hard to check a firearm, usually. Have it in a locked, sturdy case. Have the ammunition in the original box and that in a stout box (I use a pistol carrier) . The ammunition must be in a check-in bag separate from the gun. Have your key to the firearm case handy. Grin and look innocent. By the way, wearing a bit of camouflage on the way home can lead to some interesting conversations. I have never had it fail, from the stewardesses to fellow hunters, you will get a question somewhere.

A good sleeping bag is a must, as is a good pad. For you young guys lumpy ground is probably OK. It was for me once upon a time. But not now. The good earth has no mercy. There are all kinds of things that do the job, but the mat that rolls up tight then inflates to about 2 inches is what I finally settled on, and this only after long and happy hours reading the hiking magazines. I've spent some surprisingly good nights on it, although the little rascals are slippery. Keeping a sleeping bag on it all night is about like trying to keep a piece of hot butter in the middle of a slanted frying pan. Sleeping bags come in all shapes and sizes and weights. Down is warmer per ounce than anything else, but it is also worthless if it gets wet.

Speaking of wet . . . check your rain gear and see if it will keep you dry . . . *twice*. In some hunting situations you may be putting wet gear back on day after day. It needs to do its job. I always take a cheap poncho. It really can come in handy. You can get them most anywhere and they range from a few dollars up to whatever you want to pay. They keep most of the rain off of the things that you will want to carry back into the tent or lodge that night. Take one.

All kinds of weather can hit and some of it can keep you in camp. If you are a reader, take a book or two. I've set in the rain under my poncho, reading a cheap western while a squall passed.

Have your doctor fix you up with a prescription for some antibiotics. An unwelcome case of the snorts can ruin a trip. If you know that you are developing an infection, a quick dose of medicine can save the day. Also, be sure your tetanus vaccination is up-to-date. A rusty nail will have your name on it otherwise.

Bear-proof the camp. On the Montana trip we had ammunition cases, the big things that the army uses. Every night we would pack the food and haul these things up in a tree. Our tents were a good distance away, and mine not the closest. We learned later that another party of hunters three canyons over did not do these things. After a bear tore up camp, four men spent a rainy night in a single two-man tent. This gives me visions of

sleeping in a dishwasher with two dogs and with the door closed. About midnight, I would say . . . maybe earlier, any bear that strayed into that camp would have looked like it had been attacked by huge leeches, as four homicidal campers sucked the life out of it.

Know what can hurt you. In Montana I decided to go “over there,” a likely looking saddle that had been burned several years before. The timber was dead and gone. It looked to be covered in good grass. The saddle ended abruptly in a small line of rocks. About an hour later I was in the middle of that “small line of rocks” only to discover that they were a small line of cliffs.

I hate to tell this because it was so spectacularly stupid. I was about half way up and speculating about whether to use my two upper teeth to help me hold onto the rocks or settling for a single canine, when it occurred that my last will and testament would not be worth the parchment it was written on - because they would never be able to prove me dead. They would never, ever find me if I fell.

I finally made it up near the top and perched my chin just over the edge, digging it in like a shovel. I have a minor problem as a mountaineer. I am afraid of heights. I dared not look down and was afraid I could not get up. I was stuck. Space, that final frontier, was clawing at my back.

Finally, with just a little wiggle here and a waggle there I managed to snake my way over the top. The federal government lacks thirty dollars of ever having made enough money to get me to do that again. The west is big and can make you do things that are bigger than you are.

I once found myself crawling in 2-foot-high grass, face on the ground, stalking a mule deer. I actually crawled under the muley’s chin (she helped me by grazing my way). But I would not have tried it, if I’d known about Montana’s September rattlesnakes.

On that trip we also hunted on a butte. As most know, a butte is a conical land form, slopping upwards all around with a sudden line of rocky cliffs that support a flat top. From a distance these things look simple. They are not. They are full of rocks and wrinkles with room enough to hide villages.

We were hunting mule deer which often lie up along the base of the cliffs. The place was also hopping with rabbits. We liked the rabbits because we could shoot them and eat them, a fine addition to the table fare we’d been able to carry in.

Rattlesnakes also like rabbits.

The mornings started off cold, but the days warmed up nicely. I settled in against a warm spot at the base of the cliffs to eat my lunch and nodded off into a nap. Just about the time that the sugar plums had done their first pirouette a practical joker of a bug started a whizzing sound about 3 inches from my ear that sounded more like a rattlesnake singing than a rattlesnake sounds like a rattlesnake singing. Stomping a hoe blade and getting

whacked in the face with the handle and seeing me come off that ground and onto my heels have much in common.

By the way, my friend caught a small one and put it in his big flashlight for all of us to see. Odd, but it works.

And, once upon a stupid time, I found an elk wallow. It was in the last hour of light and about 3 hours of walking back to camp. I decided to sit over the wallow and head back as soon as it got dark, something that happens pretty late the farther north you go. Above the wallow was a patch of raw earth, a place about 15X40 feet that was dug up like a potato gardener gone mad. I knew that grizzlies often dig up places like this but black bears rarely do. I also knew that we were supposed to be about 40 miles out of grizzly country. No grizzlies said the locals.

I looked the spot over carefully, getting down on my knees around the edges, looking for tracks or claw marks. All I saw were elk tracks.

I perched behind a small juniper and wedged myself into the hill with my heels dug in, almost like I was standing in the stirrups. For some reason I kept looking at the black timber just to my right. It was a forest full of white spruce and lodgepole pine, thick . . . so thick that even in the noon-day sun very light made it to the ground. For some reason I had the willies. I kept looking at the timber line, about 20 yards away, thinking "wow, something could jump out of there and get me" *and I was really feeling it*. What that something might be I was not sure and I had not had any uneasiness in the several of days of hunting before now.

But I've learned through the years to listen to that little set of bells that sometimes go off in the inner recesses of your noggin. Or, like the wisdom of wives, I've learned that I *should* listen.

I am sure that a sixth kind of sense, maybe my own subdued awareness of sight, sound and smell registered a few ticks in my unconscious to let me know that something was looking at me -- or if not looking, then smelling me -- which in the animal world may be more sure a perception than eyes.

Way over yonder, up high and behind the timber I heard a sound that I can only best describe as "aaaharggg." It was distant and faint at least to my ears. Here I was, a first time western pilgrim, and I wonder, "is that an elk . . . ? . . . do elk say aaaharggg? I listened. After a minute I heard it again, closer this time. Funny, says this pilgrim to himself, "that sounded sort of like a growl." A really nasty growl.

A moment or two later I found myself about six steps away from where I'd been sitting, propelled by an inner rocket that we all employ from time to time, an ability to levitate over snakes or jump five-strand fences when we have an unfriendly hive of bees in our hair.

A sure enough Rottweiler growl, a chest thrumming rumble and loud enough to blow chiggers out of your hide had sounded off directly behind me. I'm not sure what it said, but it was nearly in my ear and resonated with "sit there sonny and I'll be using you to gargle with."

I had enough sense not to run, barely. I was sure that it might provoke a charge of some sort, from what I was not sure, but resurrected Tyrannosaurs would not have surprised me. But I also did not dawdle. I moved out through the growing darkness and through the waist-high grass. I wanted some room. Whatever it was did not follow. After such a cussing it seemed content to watch me leave.

I still, to this day do not know what that was, but as far as I am concerned the grizzly's territorial maps can be expanded. I sometimes catch myself about half wishing I had seen what it was, but even now safe and sound, I'm also glad that I didn't.

Be ready for the thin air. Elk hunting is almost always done above 7,000 feet. At that height you will notice it. Anything above 5,000 will have some impact, above 7,500 and it can be quite stressful, above 10,000 and it can be debilitating. But everyone is different and being in shape really counts.

Think about it for a moment. If you are setting in Memphis reading this, then imagine someone has just dropped a rope ladder and asked you to climb it - straight up - two miles.

Altitude sickness is partially hereditary. Some folks are born to be prone and others not. I was on a Colorado hunt and my good friend developed what may have been a pretty serious case of altitude sickness. If he had gotten worse, indeed, if he had not begun to improve, I would have asked for him to be taken down. We were only hunting at about 8,000 feet, but symptoms can occur as low as 6,500 feet.

Another friend of mine and two of his buddies wanted to see the base camp for Everest expeditions. After a year-long regime of exercises to get in shape they flew to Kathmandu and hiked the 30 miles to base camp. At no time were they over 17,000 feet. One buddy made it fine, my friend was moderately miserable and the other fellow was downright sick. While they were there a world-class cyclist was evacuated because she was simply unable to adjust. She was predisposed and developed high altitude cerebral edema (HACE).

You can expect some normally occurring effects, including a mild head ache, inability to sleep well at first and a feeling of weariness. To have some idea of what it can be like to operate in a low oxygen environment, put a straw in your mouth and breathe through it while running a half-mile. No cheating.

Get in shape. It takes me 8 months of fairly focused, aerobic work to get ready for a high-altitude trip out west. And then the guys out there embarrass me. And this brings something home; these guys have thicker blood than you do. Likely you cannot duplicate their efforts at 10,770 feet. But you will want to because on even ground it would seem that

you are every bit the man or woman they are, or you'd like to think so. But, these guys trot up and over mountains for a living.

I saw a flatlander bludgeon an elk practically to death with bullets from a 984 magnum. The elk was not dead; we had to follow it up. The guy was embarrassed, the guides were in a hurry, the shooter was trying to keep up . . . and I thought he was gonna die. I would not pass him on the trail because I knew it would embarrass him further, but after watching him stumble, I took him by the shoulder and said, "look this is your hunt, you came here to have a good time - tell the guides to slow down and if they do not want to slow down, tell them to leave us a good trail in the snow - we'll be along directly." He did, they did and we all lived merrily ever after. Except the elk.

I'll end here with this. Sometimes magic happens. It will be the siren call that brings you back. On my very first day of my first western experience Jim and I left camp in the predawn frost. I had a map (a must - do not fully trust your GPS' batteries - also take a compass) and was working my way up a canyon. Jim saw elk way up high to the right and took off after them.

I continued up the canyon feeling my way along with the map's features. I saw a meadow up and to my left and decided to have a look-see. After about 50 minutes of huffing up the mountain, with the meadow apparently no closer, I began to understand just how far "over yonder" really is out west. Every once in a while I'd stop to rest and during one of these times I spied movement across the canyon at about my elevation. There were several whitetail bucks, and some were nice, including one that was pushing 140.

However, one will be perhaps the largest buck I will ever see. As he moved among the rabble, it was like Moses parting the water. The others wanted nothing to do with him. He was a Titan walking with stiff intent among the children of lesser gods.

I made up my mind to try for him. Oh, gracious, he was huge. Baseball bats for bases and antlers wide enough to hold my lounge. Ten . . . could not tell at this distance, maybe 12 points, stickers like a berry patch.

I waited till evening when the lifting air currents began to subside. As soon as the cooling air began to fall off the mountain, I moved up into the snow berries where I'd seen him earlier. I sat down and after a few minutes a kamikaze squirrel came streaking through the snow berries and ran up my leg. Now I do not know if you've ever had a squirrel run up your leg but it will make you thrash around and jab at it with your arrow. I do not know why he did this. I doubt he knew; but if he happens to be alive, and that is doubtful given his apparent propensity toward dare-devilism, he is still telling about a log that made funny sounds and attacked him.

After a time a knee that had been kicked by a pack horse the day before began to hurt and I stood up. It was then that the bear I wrote about earlier came pouncing out of the woods 18 yards to my right. Maybe the squirrel had attacked him too.

Anyway, the bear and I soon parted ways, amicably enough, and as I was easing back down the coulee I saw a mule deer about 40 yards to my right. I was camouflaged from head to toe, looking much like a walking bit of landscape. She did not know what I was and stood still, unsophisticated and mesmerized, peering at me like a gabby old girl trying to get a good look at the miracle of a walking tree so she could tell it to the neighborhood later. She owed me more than she would ever know.

Suddenly, I saw a coyote flash down behind a bit of sage just ahead. I put the binoculars on him and it was not a coyote but a cougar. There was not even an ounce of doubt . . . the way the cat was crouching behind the grass - eyes ablaze and boring in on me - switching among the stems trying to get a better look, this cat thought I was something good to eat.

I knew they hunted cats in this area. I had specifically asked. It stood to reason that she would fear man.

My first impulsive thought was, "you devil, you're looking for a fight" and I took a step toward her. She saw what I was and exploded out of the brush. She ran to the left, away and up the mountain. She was about as long as a tan couch with a tail added. She disappeared into the rocks in about the time it would have taken me to sneeze and wipe my nose. I could not have made that little trip in less than half an hour.

I took one more step and two more cougars, probably her 3/4-grown cubs, galloped off and into a copse of brush to my right. I had interrupted these guys from taking that doe out of the microwave.

I stood for some time. I was amazed. I was fascinated. I was hooked.