

Getting There

Why going hunting can be every bit as essential as the hunt itself. By Allen Morris Jones

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uch of what's most important about hunting comes in the quiet moments, the days and hours that precede the trigger pull. Early morning headlights cutting through grainy gray light. The abrupt, jostling transition from blacktop to gravel. The soft click of car doors

pressed gently closed and the whisper of a rifle sliding out of its case. A wooden gatepost under your hand and a bloom of blue breath as you stare up toward the mountains. Beside you, if you're the luckiest person in the world, a father, a daughter, a brother, a good friend. Here's something to think about: *Going* hunting can be every bit as essential as the hunt itself.

Driving away from the cracked concrete and vapor lights of town, you are, in some measure, leaving your life behind. The anxiety

of dwindling bank accounts and rising credit card debt gives way to shifting breezes and fresh tracking snow, pine forests, and the mysterious clattering of a nearby rock slide. Hunting is about optimism, about convincing yourself that the next ridge will be the *one*, the ridge to show you the buck or bull of your life. To imagine it is to briefly possess it. And so to make the trip, to even step out the door and take the first few steps away from the mundane...it already feels like a bit of magic. Am I making any sort of sense? Perhaps.

Maybe it starts in childhood. When I was 12 or 13 years old in Livingston, we pointed our early morning drives toward Tom Miner Basin or the Castle Mountains, sometimes Rock Creek in the Crazyes. We'd glass for spring bears and later, in September, listen for bugling bulls. In November, we'd take long hikes after bruiser mule deer bucks. It would always take at least an hour to get to where we were going, usually starting at five o'clock in the morning. Wedged



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MATT ROWLEY; DICKINSON/MEYER; STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: DENVER BROWN; DONALD M. JONES; DIJAN SNETANA

On either side of you, co-conspirators, collaborators. Buddies. There's an aspect of the tribal about it.

between my father and older brother, Mark, in the bench seat of a 1970s-era Dodge, I huddled up to the heater vents and tried to keep from nodding off. When you're that age and in the middle of your first hunting sea-

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son, each day is precious. I didn't want to miss a minute. Dad and Mark talked easily, rehashing old hunts, passing along brief asides that I rightly picked up as cautionary tales. "Anyway, turns out he still had the safety on." A snort of sympathetic laughter. Later, the first tentative plans for the day's hunt. "I'll drop you and Allen off at the bridge then drive a few miles farther up. We'll work our way down toward each other, maybe push something out of its bed." Five o'clock in the morning, just outside Lennup, I remember a bobcat leaping liquidly across the road. "Did you see that?" Memory compresses things. Snow swirled in the headlights and a cow elk jerked her head at our passing. Magic, and a bit of the sacred as well. There's something holy about the transition, moving from the predictably mundane toward possibility. All it takes is a truck and a big game license. Maybe a bag of homemade jerky.

Growing older, aging into a life spent hunting, it turns out that friendships are built into this same space, the blank minutes, the pauses. Shared experiences and common goals. "Remember when you got that buck fever so bad you shucked out half your shells?" Respect hidden under derision



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and the warmth of a quick, half-embarrassed shoulder squeeze. “Helluva shot.” On either side of you, co-conspirators, collaborators. Buddies. There’s an aspect of the tribal about it. Huddled around a hat-sized campfire, it’s us against the world. Hunting together, you come to know one another in a way that’s largely unavailable to the rest of the world. Putting it into words threatens to cheapen it. Fifteen years ago, my brother stood at the window of his house outside of Missoula, looking out at the yard. I saw him tense very, very slightly. He was suddenly... intent. We’ve hunted together every year since I was 12. I said, “What do you see?”

“Fox. Little red fox. Just ran through the yard, into those bushes.”

Hunting is about essentials. Life and death. Predator and prey. Fathers and mothers and sons and daughters. My four-year-old boy, before he could put a sentence together, could whistle out a pretty good elk bugle. Now he’s already talking about our first hunting trip. “When I get my first bow, I’ll use it to go bowhunting with you. Right,

Daddy? Right?” Indeed. Bows and little boys, reaching out to find a target, impact the world. As he grows up, I’ll teach him the essentials first. Treat every gun like it’s loaded. Only take the shots you’re sure about. We eat what we kill. But I also want to pass along those things that are more easily shown than discussed. How to sit and listen, just *listen*. How hunting is about more than simply killing; it’s about finding an aspect of nature inside yourself. Shifting breezes and a fresh snow, a clattering of shale. Optimism. Our modern world is riddled through with irony, sarcasm, insecurity. I want to show him the opposite of all that. It’s one of the surprises of fatherhood, how much I’m looking forward to showing him the virtues of hunting. Exertion, ambition, silence. And afterwards, if we’ve done it right, I’ll try to show him how to bring these most essential aspects of the hunt home with us. Respect, patience, awe. Here, son, here’s how the world works.

Going hunting with my boy? I can hardly wait. 🐾



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: DENVER BRYAN; DONALD M. JONES; BETHANN GARRAMON; MERKLE

