



Winging It

Sometimes the best hunting happens when you don't know what's in store

BY NATALIE KREBS

► "I'm turning around."

Shaking her head, Kali Parmley eases her 4Runner into reverse. The wheels just locked up on the icy U.S. Forest Service road, skidding us toward its edge and the steep mountainside beyond. I open the passenger door and climb out to direct her, nearly slipping myself.

"There are no birds up here anyway," she adds, talking through the open window. We didn't plan on snow at this elevation—or ice.

"You're right," I say, thinking of the two

does we bumped on the drive up. "But there are deer here."

In the time it takes to get the car turned around, I convince Parmley to leave me behind. She lends me a walkie-talkie and her pair of traction cleats to stretch over my worn leather boots, but I have everything else I need to spend the next few nights on the mountain. I shoulder my pack and my rifle, and start walking.

Half-Finished Homework

Every year, Parmley and I manage to meet for a hunt somewhere; this year it's a mountain ridge in Idaho I've never seen before. I'm not blundering into the woods blind, exactly, but the terrain's not what we anticipated either. Not only is it winter up here, but there's a huge swath of burned-out timber that didn't show up in our digital research. In-person scouting was never an option; my whitetail tag and one trip was expensive enough. Sure, I could've made some calls and arrived a bit more prepared. But truthfully—and unpopular though it is to say—I don't much like scouting. Once I'm pretty certain an area holds game, I call it good.

I recognize the usefulness of recon, and the principle behind it: Do your homework now to enjoy more success sooner come fall. But I wait all year long for deer season to open, and I have no intention of speeding it along once it arrives. For me, the appeal is in the unknown. Not having a plan makes it easy to adapt. And when I'm not sure what's out there waiting for me, anything can happen.

Split Decision

It doesn't take long to forget everything but the essentials right now: shelter, warmth, food, and hunting. The list gets even shorter once I find a place to pitch my one-man tent, in the only snow-free patch I can find beneath a towering pine.

With a lighter pack, I start hunting in earnest. I double back to the trail I hiked in on, where I'd cut deer tracks so thick it looked like a muddy waterfall of prints flowing down the switchback. Below the crossing were more, and a pair of rubs.

It's lonely up here, but the good kind. I follow my senses and my best hunch.

If I want to see where a set of tracks lead or turn down a likely-looking trail, I do it. Eager though I am to explore, I alternate between sitting still and easing through the snow. Breaking a path in the knee-high powder is warm work, and I take frequent breaks to glass. Whenever it feels as if I might start sweating, I stop. When I get cold enough, I start moving again.

It's on one of these breaks that I spot the first deer, a legal whitetail doe bedded in the timber of a steep slope. I think about how to move closer, even though I don't intend to. I'd like to kill a buck. In the afternoon, I'm

WISE WORDS

► **Leave a spot alone until the conditions are right.** It's hard not to hunt a field you planted or a stand you labored to build in the off-season, but wind currents are so critical. That first hunt is often your best chance at an old buck. And if you can leave it alone until the rut? That's even better. —*Bobby Cole*

► **Hunt the high ground.** I was wisely advised a very long time ago to focus on the upper third of whatever terrain I was hunting. Over the years, this bit of advice has served me well. —*Michael Dickerson*

► **Get a ride.** Have the farmer, ranch hand, or outfitter drop you off as close to your stand as possible when hunting new land. This prevents unfamiliar sounds and scents, and having to walk around in the dark with a flashlight. I've had people drop me literally on the steps of a stand and seen deer as the vehicle left. —*Eddie Stevenson*

► **Make some noise.** Cast a grunt every so often, especially when you hear something you can't see. If a squirrel starts barking, a blue jay squawks, or a crow starts fussing, throw a grunt that way. Blind calling pays off big. —*Brad Harris*

► **"Don't shoot unless you know you can kill it"** is what my dad always taught us. While the advice sounds simple, there's a lot of wisdom in it. —*Darren Woerner*

► **Watch the weather religiously,** and if a big front is moving in with a serious temperature drop, heavy rains or snow, and high winds, get in the woods the day that front is moving in. Or, even better, the afternoon before. —*Doug Howlett*

glassing again when I hear steps behind me. Slowly I sink into the shadow of a young spruce and wait. I can't sneak a look or else I'll scare it for sure. So I just sit until a young mule deer buck appears beside me, walking so close I could reach out and poke him with my rifle barrel. He's watching the path below, stopping only long enough to decide there's no danger. Then he continues his march down the mountain.

Later that week, I dog a mule deer doe over a hill and discover I'm not the only one trailing her. There's a nice buck nearby, a big-bodied mule deer. He has four good forks, but I don't have the right tag.

On the last night, I crawl into my tent with none of the usual anxiety about which stand I'll sit in the morning or what the weather will do. I have no way to even check the weather. What I do have is a goal—to kill a nice whitetail buck—and an intentionally vague plan to accomplish it. This complete freedom to do what I want, when I want, is exhilarating. This, right now, is exactly how I imagined adulthood when I was a kid. And I expect it's the best, purest version of it that I'll ever find.

In the morning I pack up camp and hunt down the mountain, following a mess of tracks to an old wildfire burn. But I regret going this way almost as soon as I start. The burn is a few years old, with enough undergrowth to make hiking difficult. Huge trunks are scattered like a giant game of pickup sticks. Once the slope steepens, it's all I can do to avoid snapping an ankle as I climb over the slick logs. And this, of course, is the downside of my no-scouting style: Sometimes you end up where you don't want to be.

Finally, I spot a whitetail buck working toward me. My pulse jumps before I realize he's a young basket rack. I pull up my rifle anyway, arguing with myself. It's the last day, I've got a tag to fill, and this buck is about to turn broadside. But I'm also surrounded by steep deadfall. I can barely hike myself out right now, let alone pack him.

In the end, he makes the decision for me and disappears. I know there is wisdom in choosing not to shoot, and that you don't have to notch your tag to have a good hunt. But I also know that if the buck had been a bit older, I would have gladly taken the shot first, and figured the rest out later.