

# North America's Toughest

In the end, they'll make you a better hunter—or at least happy to be home.

**H**unting is more real, more primal, even more fundamental than all those "extreme sports." Sure, base-jumping, rock climbing and spelunking are statistically more dangerous, but so is jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. Hunting is not an empty taunt at death, a pastime adrenaline junkies do to prove they can "conquer" nature. No, hunters do something far deeper: We become a part of the wild as alpha predators. We enter nature, if only for short primal forays, to see if we can kill our own meat. And sometimes we travel beyond the local woodlot to test our woodsmanship, fortitude and nerve deep in the wild. So went the conversation during an editorial meeting here at *American Hunter*. Being editors, this prompted us to make a list of what we thought the 10 toughest hunts in North America are—hunts worth the toil. After a lot of tall tales of injury and misery, here's our top 10 list. Sure it's subjective, but maybe it'll help you tailor your own list of must-do hunts—or, perhaps, talk you out of one.

# 10



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

We used three factors to calculate the score—the *American Hunter* staff estimated a number from 1-10 for hardship imposed by the terrain, the weather and the possibility of trouble with the local wildlife. Each editor's scores were then added up and averaged.



## Pennsylvania Black Bear Drives

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### TOUGH METER

**Where:** North-central Pennsylvania

**When:** The statewide bear season opens the Monday before Thanksgiving and closes just two days later (November 17-19, 2008).

**D**rives are sometimes mocked as the easy way out for hunters who can't sit still long enough to bag game on their own, but I have scars on several body parts and a few rifles that beg to differ. The only thing easy about driving black bears in the big woods of Pennsylvania is quitting, unless you delight in self-inflicted punishment—or want what may be the best chance of bagging a bear in the state. Pennsylvania has a lot of bears—the state game commission estimates their population to be around 5,000—and several weighing 600 pounds or more are taken each year, but getting one in your scope is no cakewalk. Baiting is prohibited, as is hunting with dogs. Bears love to hole up in thick cover, and the best way to roust them from their lairs is with sheer manpower, unbridled determination and a general disinterest in comfort. The gang of guys I hunt with (mostly all under 35 years of age) drives mountainsides hoked with rhododendron and mountain laurel. You don't walk through this stuff so much as swim through it, and the thick growth forces you to become an amateur contortionist. Imagine trying to bull your way through a 10-foot-high pile of unfolded aluminum chairs on your roof. Slopes can approach 40-percent grades and are nearly always covered in rocks sharp enough to gouge shins, slippery enough to twist ankles and unforgiving enough to break guns and scopes. It happens every year. Some of my friends wear kneepads so they can crawl under the morass of leafy branches. This torture comes in doses of roughly a half mile and can last up to two hours. Alternating between driving and posting, we take it for three days straight, regardless of weather, because we might as well make the best, or perhaps worst, of a short season. The sole comfort I get while driving is in knowing that five or six guys on either side of me are going through the same hell. Staying in contact with the other drivers—important for safety as well as to ensure there are no gaps in the line where a wily bear could double back—is facilitated by the constant shouts of pain and frustration. I rarely see another driver during a push, as visibility is 10 yards at best. Joy comes only when I hear shots ringing out ahead—bear in the drive! However, it almost pales in comparison to the relief I feel as, at last, I break through the entanglement and realize that if I can hunt this tuff, I can hunt anything.

**Adam Heggenstaller**, Associate Editor, *Shooting Illustrated*

## The Toughest Turkey Hunt

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### TOUGH METER

**Where:** Southern Florida

**When:** March 15th-April 20th

**M**ost turkey experts agree that the toughest of the four North American turkeys is the Florida Osceola. The key to finding good hunting for this bird is the right kind of property and most of the better land is tied up in private holdings. That makes most of the best Osceola hunting only accessible to those hunters with a big enough checking account to pay for access.

The Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge offers a public-land alternative that might well be the toughest, most exotic and wildest turkey hunt you ever encountered.

Entering this land is like entering a time machine. Penetrating deep into the misty cypress swamp with its huge trees, cypress knees, standing water and constant twilight from the overhead canopy will have you watching for dinosaurs. This mosquito-infested place defines the term "primeval" and I suspect it has changed little since the time prehistoric monsters roamed there. It is inhabited by at least one leftover from that era, the alligator. But it's also the northern fringe of the Osceola turkey. These long-legged birds are tough to hunt under any conditions. They are survivors in a place where just about everything wants to eat them and the brush and habitat

Photo: Author



## Tracking Big-Woods Bucks

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

**When:** November

**Where:** Northern New England

**What's the toughest hunt in North America?** Well, if the measure is simply physical toughness my vote goes to hunting mountain goat. But if we expand the criteria to include physical and mental toughness as well as taxing every skill a hunter possesses, it is easily tracking whitetails in the big woods of the Northeast. Other hunting methods produce some success in the big woods, but for consistently taking trophy bucks from the North Woods no method produces better results than tracking. Providing you are hunter enough.

Northern Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine all have big tracts of unbroken and unpopulated woods. Snow cover is common in November and when a deer moves he has to leave tracks behind. The plan is to find one left behind by a big buck and follow it until you shoot the deer. Sounds easy enough, but as they say, the devil is in the details.

Whitetail densities are low here and there can be miles and miles of empty forest. But in that vast wilderness there are a few very big bucks lurking about. The traditional measure of a trophy in this country is the field-dressed weight of the buck. The benchmark is 200 pounds. Top that and you have bragging rights.

A typical hunt starts at first light, cruising the logging roads in search of a worthy track. Once one is located, park the rig and start walking. You may find the deer in the first half-mile, or more likely you will follow the track, no matter where it goes, for miles. You must be prepared to walk in the snow through rough country, hour after hour, without stopping to rest. If you shoot the deer or run out of time, you will need to walk back to your truck, which may be several miles away. Then be able to get up and do it again the next day and the next and so on, until you succeed or the season ends. That's the mental and physical challenge. It also takes a lot of skill to "read" the tracks and know when it's time to sling your rifle and put some miles behind you, or when it's time to slow down and sneak along while watching for the buck. Even the shot is likely to be tough, often at a running buck you just jumped from his bed. But, in the end I don't think there is a more satisfying feeling in the entire hunting world than pinning your tag on a buck that you tracked.

**Bryce M. Towsley**, Field Editor

(Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, 802-241-3700, [vtfishandwildlife.com](http://vtfishandwildlife.com); Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, 207-287-8000, [maine.gov/ifw/index.shtml](http://maine.gov/ifw/index.shtml); New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, 603-271-6355, [wildnh.com](http://wildnh.com))

Photo: Author

give their predators endless places to hide in ambush. The result is a paranoid bird with a highly developed survival instinct. Add in a little public and hunting pressure and tagging one becomes a challenge. The trouble in hunting these turkeys is that while they gobble willingly, bringing them to a call is often like herding cats. They travel where they want to travel, not where you want them to go. Barriers that cause "hang-ups" are ubiquitous and hunting these turkeys can be a frustrating experience. But shooting one is the epitome of a turkey hunting adventure.

The real challenge for the uninitiated is navigating in this endless swamp. Picking through the standing water means finding sunken paths that are less than boot-deep. After while your back trail resembles a crooked maze. The water fills your tracks as you pass and leaves no landmarks for your return. Oneypress looks like the next and after while direction has little meaning. Everything you see looks the same: flat, thick and wet. The canopy prevented my GPS from getting a signal and I wondered if I would ever find my way out. When I finally did, it was like stepping forward a couple of ons. With that I felt a sense of loss, as I had come to enjoy hunting this primitive, mystic and exotic land.

**Bryce M. Towsley**, Field Editor

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 850-488-4676, <http://myfwc.com>; Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, 352-493-0238) [www.gov/lowersuwannee/index.html](http://www.gov/lowersuwannee/index.html))

# Elk in Grizzly Country

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## TOUGH METER

**Where:** Southwestern Montana

**When:** Late September

**I'm a poor mathematician**, but even I know enough about statistics to understand that the more you venture into grizzly country, the greater your chances of running into one—a fact that used to weigh heavily with each new elk season. The good news, and bad, was that for my first 10 seasons never saw a grizzly. Sure I saw scat and the occasional print, but not what made them. I'd been pretty lucky, but some day my luck would run out.

Being a self-preservationist, I'd avoided the most bear-ridden areas of southwestern Montana, despite top maps showing north-facing bogs and imbered benches in the Madison Range—perfect elk habitat. Call me a pansy, but having a 70 percent chance of seeing a 350-plus bull doesn't trump the 100 percent certainty of stumbling into a grizzly.

One September afternoon I was hunting solo. The east-facing slopes were starting to cast shadows over elk-looking timber—a perfect time to bugle up a bull. And that's what I did. Within 15 minutes I covered 600 yards and set up by a tree just before a good 6-point walked in, turned broadside and took an arrow through both lungs.

It was near dark when I started to skin and quarter him. Realizing the strong thermals were carrying the scent of a freshly killed bull swiftly down the basin, I worked as fast as I could. About the time it turned pitch black, as I was bent over separating a shoulder, I heard it: *Woof—woof—woof!* My neck hair stood straight as I jumped back and grabbed my pepper spray. After five minutes of dead silence I went cautiously back to work.

Then I heard it again, and once more jerked upright, bear spray ready. All I heard was my pulse pounding in my ears. So back I went to cutting, when I heard it again. *Wait a minute!* I thought, and looked down at bubbles of blood oozing from the entry wound. *Woof—woof—woof!* Feeling foolish but relieved, I had that elk in game bags in record time. And since I was covered in blood, I sang the whole way to camp to warn off bears lurking in the black.

Maybe it hadn't been a close call after all, but like I said, you never know when your luck's going to run out.

**Bill Buckley**, Field Editor

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (956-441-7525; [www.state.mt.us](http://www.state.mt.us))



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## TOUGH METER

**Where:** West-central Alaska

**When:** Mid-September

**W**hen Gary Hakkinen's tent blew down the first night in drop camp amid a stout Alaskan downpour, we could have taken it as a bad omen. As it was, Bob and I were comfortably situated next door in our cots and sleeping bags, oblivious to Gary's plight and with absolutely no leaks, no sagging corners, no worries. It's nice to have a hunting companion who's self-reliant enough not to wake you up in the middle of the night for something as trifling as a collapsed tent under monsoon conditions.

The way the wind was buffeting the walls of our canvas tent, we figured the storm would blow over by mid morning at the latest, when we could fire up the Go-Devils and explore the river bottoms and mountains for big bull moose. And the next day the rain did stop long enough to enjoy a five-hour glassing session overlooking the Reindeer River downstream of camp. The poplars were vibrant yellow, the blueberry bushes and other ground cover deep orange and red—a stunning landscape that erased much of the lethargy two and a half days of travel tend to produce. That we saw not one moose did little to dampen our spirits. We had nine more days to hunt, and with the rut not far from kicking in, time was on our side.

As it turns out, though, the weather wasn't. What we thought was a fast-moving front turned out to be one gigantic low-pressure system that raised our hopes whenever the sky lightened to the west and the rain abated, only to start dumping again when the winds started roaring through the winding river valley. Day after soggy day we'd awaken and go to sleep to the sound of wind and rain, getting out for only a few hours at a time before showers made it

# Rocky Mountain Bighorn

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

**Where:** Central Colorado's Collegiate Peaks

**When:** Early September

**I**t wasn't enough that I had waited nearly a decade for a tag, that I had dutifully run our neighborhood hills throughout the sweltering Virginia summer and that, at long last, I had arisen at 2 a.m. and then climbed 3,500 vertical feet in order to meet sunup at the meadow where my guide had been spotting rams. On cue, a half-hour after we crawled into a crown of rock and reeled our cardio back to normal, a mature ram ambled across the bowl and stopped broadside at 240 yards. "He's pretty good, five-eighths curl with heavy bases," said the guide. But that wasn't enough. He didn't quite measure up to the rams I'd seen in this magazine and elsewhere. And it wasn't going to be enough after my guide added, "He's got bigger running buddies. They've got to be around here somewhere."

So I passed on the "bird in the hand." An hour later we saw a half-curl buddy, and that afternoon we peered over the far edge and spooked four youngsters.

For nine more days we climbed to the skyscraping meadows of sheep country. Our lowest hunting elevation was around 12,500 feet. A couple days we fought our way to nearly 14,000. There is little hunting in North America that occurs at higher altitude. On rubber-band legs I would pitch my way back to camp in the dark at the end of 20-hour days. My feet blistered and bled and oozed fluids I didn't know I possessed. Beyond perfunctory washups and tooth-brushing, no thought was given to hygiene.

There were wonders. Terrifying thunderstorms. Mountain goats we passed on the way up. Above-the-treeline mule deer and elk. Best of all was the sensation that I was closer to the sky than the earth. But we saw not a single ram after day one.

Bad as my body ached, it was nowhere near as bad as the beating I took from myself. A few days made it clear how stupid I had been to pass on the first-hour/first-day ram, and then every step was a grinding reminder that I have more ego than sense. Like all trophy hunters I clung to the hope that in the end we'd find another. But the realization that I had blown my chance was an ever-growing burden. Only time will tell if my hope to climb back into Rockies' highest places is delusion or redemption.

**John Zent**, Editorial Director

(Colorado Division of Wildlife, 303-297-1192, [wildlife.state.co.us](http://wildlife.state.co.us))

**We Want Your List**  
Send us 200 words on your toughest hunt. As we did here, relate where-and-when info, and briefly explain why it's so tough and why it's worth the pain. Send stories and photos to: *American Hunter*, Tough Hunts, 11250 Waples Mill Road, Fairfax, VA 22030; email, [Publications@nrhq.org](mailto:Publications@nrhq.org). Photos will not be returned.

Impossible to glass any country more than 200 yards away. And every night we'd reposition our boat-anchor stakes a little higher up the gravel bar upon which we were camped. Thankfully our tents were dry, but when you have a hook in your hands more often than your bow or rifle, you know the hunt's not going according to plan.

And then after eight days of this God looked down through the pea-soup sky at three hunters huddled in a tent with coffee mugs in their hands and decided to throw them a bone. The next thing we knew a nice bull came grunting into camp, in the process getting shot and expiring 5 yards behind our tents. The next morning, being forced out of camp a day early by rising water and, as fitting, during a torrential downpour, we motored our way downriver toward the outfitter's camp, loaded with gear and moose meat and feeling, given the circumstances, pretty darned fortunate indeed.

**Bill Buckley**, Field Editor

Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Kodiak office, 907-465-4100,

# Kodiak Island, On Your Own

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

**Where:** Kodiak Island's extreme south end, where hunting pressure is low due to the cost of flying, and phy quality is excellent.

**When:** Deer season runs Aug. 1 to Dec. 31. The best time is from mid-October through mid-November.

**You hear a lot about hunting on Kodiak Island, Alaska, for Sitka blacktail bucks, but mostly it's done from boats. If you like the comforts of home and short day hikes—and spotting small bucks—this works fine. If you want adventure and the chance to kill whopper deer, there's a better way—if you're tough enough.**

Start by hiring an air taxi service to fly your party out. They'll drop you at a backpack-style camp, just you and your buddies, the deer, the nasty weather—oh, and the giant brown bears that are always in the neighborhood. In this style of hunting you must be able to hike several miles each day, then be able to pack a boned-out deer back to camp on your back.

For safety's sake hunting in pairs

is recommended. Here's why: One year a buddy stepped in a hole and broke his ankle 2 miles from camp. We had to immobilize his leg and half-carry him back to the tent, then keep him comfortable for the remaining five days of our hunt. Many times we have been confronted with big brown bears on the prowl, and while I have never personally had them attack me or tear up my camps, friends have had both experiences. Then there's the weather. Kodiak Island is a wind tunnel. We've often had to deal with sustained winds of 50 mph and a constant wind of 20 mph isn't unusual. Those who choose to bring cheap tents and clothing pay Mother Nature's toll. In this place it is the weather more than anything that will kill you if you're careless.

**Bob Robb**

(Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Kodiak office, 907-465-4100, [www.adfg.state.ak.us](http://www.adfg.state.ak.us); Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, 907-487-2600, [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov); Kodiak Chamber of Commerce, 907-486-5557)

# Backpacking for Dall Sheep

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

**Where:** Alaska's Wrangell Mountains

**When:** Alaska's Dall sheep season runs Aug. 10-Sept. 20. Later is better as deteriorating weather moves big rams off the steepest cliffs.

**This hunt actually ran in several stages over the course of a few days. We rode horses for seven miles across a quicksand-filled river before camping overnight at a small cabin. The next morning, we rode for five hours to the edge of a huge glacier. A wrangler then took the horses to the cabin while we backpacked miles on top of the ice to the glacier's edge. We scrambled to find a safe place to set up camp. Then we set up a second camp. The next day we**



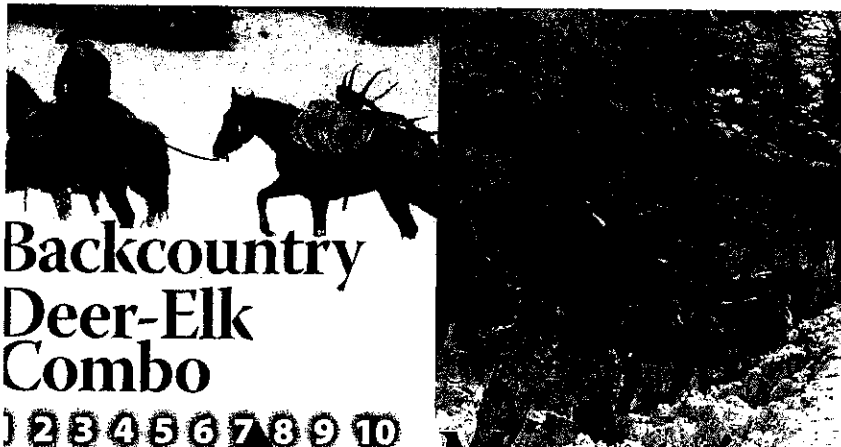


Photo: Author

# Backcountry Deer-Elk Combo

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TOUGH METER

**Where:** Gros Ventre Wilderness, Wyoming

**When:** Elk gun season runs from Sept. 26-Oct. 31; deer gun season is Sept. 15 through Oct. 10.

**A**s we packed into the base camp we must have stopped at least a dozen times in 8 miles to clear the trail of fallen trees so the lozen horses could ferry us to where the elk and mule deer live. The first morning out found me at the head of the drainage in about 3 inches of snow now straining to peer over a tree that partially blocked the view across a 250-yard swale to see the largest mule deer I had ever seen with a rifle in my hand and a tag in my pack. I maneuvered to get to a place to rest my rifle, but two deer busted me and the big boy took off. We pressed on and the trail crossed a 300-yard-long slope of steep talus—10 inches wide at the most—with nothing for 100 feet above and at least 500 feet below but now covered in snow. Suddenly my feet were above my head, and I started to accelerate downhill. The only thing between me and the snowy rock was the Supergrade stock of my Model 70. It rolled onto my belly and clung to the slope like a crab.

Later that day I took a nice bull elk and seven days later—after another equally hairy ride—I shot a nice mule deer. The Gros Ventre (pronounced "gro Vaughn") Wilderness southeast of Jackson, Wyo., is big, tough and tall. Hunting there will take all you've got and take you wish you were in better shape. But the mule deer are big and the elk are plentiful. Nonresidents must draw tags.

**Dave Campbell**

Wyoming Game and Fish Department,  
307-777-4600, [gf.state.wy.us](http://gf.state.wy.us)

# Mountain Lion Hunt

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TOUGH METER

**Where:** Central Utah

**When:** December

**D**one on fair terms, a mountain lion hunt with hounds can be as physically demanding as hunting gets. Add 3-6 feet of snow and Utah's rugged, ice-covered rock faces and you can find yourself on a chase that would pucker most experienced rock climbers.

Once you cut a track the real fun begins. The dogs are released, and before you can load your gun they are out of sight, bobbing up the boulder-and-pine-studded mountainside like snow seals. Your only goal is to keep as close to them as possible. Several times I had to throw a dog up a rockface, then toss my rifle up after it, remove my snowshoes, then climb up, only to repeat the procedure again and again. The cat might tree after a mile, or it might not tree after 20. You can't quit, because once those dogs are unleashed on a hot track, you are no longer in control of the hunt. Because the dogs are in danger of the cat turning on them, you have to stay close: If you finally reach the cat, it will stare at you with green slits of eyes that burn right down to your soul. If you're lucky, the snarling, flashing of fangs, incessant barking of crazed hounds and the guide yelling at you to shoot will be drowned out by the pounding flow of blood heard in your eardrums.

**Jeff Johnston**, Senior Editor

(Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, 801-538-4700, [wildlife.utah.gov](http://wildlife.utah.gov); Orion Outfitters, 208-941-3078, [wildlife.utah.gov/index.html](http://wildlife.utah.gov/index.html)) **dh**

## Our Closest Calls

>> The three seconds I spent sliding down a frozen tree in the predawn darkness gripping my climbing trees-stand and bracing for impact. I walked out unharmed. That climber, as far as I know, is still there.

**Frank Minter**, Executive Field Editor

>> The sheep trail seemed safe ... until a boulder came loose, hit my backpack and took me over the edge of a 150-foot vertical shale face. Result: ankle broken in several places, snapped fibula, two mangled fingers. I was alone, backpacking in Alaska's Talkeetna Mountains, 50 miles from the nearest road. I managed to radio a passing FedEx cargo jet, which then relayed my coordinates to a medevac chopper.

**Bob Robb**

>> The snow was blowing vertical and the temperature was dropping fast in the North Woods. It was long after dark and I was wet, lost and weighing the odds of surviving the night in woods too wet to build a fire. Then I stumbled onto a road. It wasn't "my" road, but it was a start.

**Bryce M. Towsley**, Field Editor

>> Lying on my back in the Gallatin River in 15-degree weather, staring up in shock after falling in from high up a rip-rap bank on the way back from a solo duck hunt. I'd hit my lower spine on a sharp protruding rock and felt sure I had to have broken it. I thought, *So this is how I'm going to die.*

**Bill Buckley**, Field Editor

>> While bowhunting elk in Colorado a buddy chirped on a reed call while I hunkered down near a sage bush. I saw movement, then an ear tuft, then a yellow eyeball, slinking near the ground. When I finally realized what it was, the mountain lion was within 2 yards of me, getting ready to spring. I leapt up and screamed. Thankfully, it was as surprised as I was and leapt away.

**Jeff Johnston**, Senior Editor

>> Four of us were coming off a mountain above Alaska's Wood River with two horses carrying a moose I'd shot when my guide fell in a dry creek bed. A horse then panicked and stepped on Randy's legs and back, then kicked him in the head. I thought I was watching the man die. Then Randy sat up and shook it off. Alaska guides are tough.

**J. Scott Olmsted**, Editor in Chief