

TRAIL TRAINING

The 10 Commandments of Horseback Hunting

Colorado outfitter Randy Palmer offers insider tips for sportsmen hoping to score on a commercial horseback hunt.

BY JENNIFER ZEHNDER

1 Do the research. Check with state regulatory agencies to make sure the outfitter you are considering riding with is licensed for the areas in which you will travel. Also, consider the longevity of the operation, the experience of its staff, and quality of its resources before you make your reservation.

2 Shape up. Make a conscious effort to get in shape before you leave. Be prepared to spend long hours in the saddle, hike rough stretches on foot, and frequently mount and dismount in full gear. Riding regularly prior to your trip can help prepare your muscles for the workout ahead.

3 Prepare to work. Riding a horse or mule into the backcountry in search of game does not exempt you from the additional "leg work" associated with hunting. An outfitter uses stock animals to cover ground quickly and efficiently. Their job is to deliver you safely to fertile hunting grounds; the rest is up to you. Forget any visions you might have of riding up on "the big one" and harvesting him from your saddle. Close encounters do occur while horseback, but shooting should not.

4 Disclose. For your safety and that of others, discuss any medical conditions or physical limitations you have with your guide prior to heading down the trail.

5 Heed your guide. Your guide's No. 1 job is to keep you and your mount safe during your big adventure. Listen closely to what he or she has to say, especially when it comes to handling stock. If you don't understand something, feel free to ask. Guides are often eager to share their knowledge with others.

6 Be responsible. Drinking and hunting don't mix, especially on a horseback hunt.

7 Trust your mount. Your outfitter will match you with an animal that he or she feels is best suited for your skill level and size. So, unless you discover later that you've been horribly mismatched, honor that selection, even if it requires swinging



aboard a mule for the first time. Remember, your mount knows his job, so let him do it. He'll be your constant companion each day, carrying you safely across rough country.

8 Weigh in. Be honest about your weight when you make your reservation. Your mount's health in the backcountry is critical. Keep in mind that a 200-pound person can easily become a 250-pound load once gear—rifle, ammo, water, food, extra clothing and tack—is added.

9 Travel light. Learning to travel light while on a hunt benefits you and your horse. Leave all hunting non-essentials back at base camp.

10 Have fun. Remember, riding a horse or mule into the backcountry in search of big game is the opportunity of a lifetime. Consider your role in keeping Western hunting traditions alive by savoring the whole experience, not just the harvest.

Randy Palmer is a seasoned outfitter and guide from Durango, Colorado. For more information, contact him at (970) 247-1694, or visit overthehilloutfitters.com.

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