



SUBSTITUTIONS

Make a list of items
needed for your hunt,
but begin your shopping
at home.

Article & Photos By
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At first,

I only succumbed in late summer when the hunting catalogs arrived in my mailbox. With each glossy booklet, I suffered a relapse of acute-onset outdoor-gear-enviosis, a condition which causes severe anxiety, excess sweating and turns skin a light shade of green. This chronic condition worsened with the advent of the Internet. Then the captivating photos of successful hunters and the intriguing descriptions of their camo, camping gear and cargo carriers tantalized me daily instead of seasonally. How could I possibly bag a bird or a big-game animal if I didn't have the latest ultra-X-tech-zone-insulated-digitally-enhanced-camo jacket or multi-function-combo-radio-GPS-alarm clock?

Overwhelmed, I was about to give up hunting several years ago when I came across an old photo of my father-in-law riding a horse down a snowy alpine meadow wearing a weathered cowboy hat, wool pants and a wool jacket, leading a second horse laden with elk meat. The photo dated back to the 1950s. There was nothing high tech about anything in the photo, yet he had bagged a bull.

I reconsidered my situation. I love to hunt upland birds, waterfowl and big game. I've hunted every fall for 30 years on a budget. Each year, my freezer fills up without the assistance of the latest super-secret-scent-free-thermostat-controlled blind. Though I pick up a cutting-edge item now and again, I usually find substitutes by rummaging around those repositories in my abode containing items that may have a use sometime in the future, namely my basement, attic, garage and guest room closet. My scrounging has kept me afield comfortably and without compromising my chances of success.

Here are some of my tricks for a simpler, less expensive approach to getting outdoors:

Clothing. In 1977 I bought a pair of dark gray Johnson Woolen Mills work pants for

\$24.99, a princely sum for me at the time, but a worthwhile investment as I still wear them in the woods today. They've not only held up, but gotten softer and more pliable with age. The wool is warm when wet and more resistant than synthetic materials to holes from wayward campfire sparks. And they're quiet. To get 40 years out of a pair of wool pants, there are only two requirements: 1. You maintain the same waistline more than four decades, and 2. You don't accidentally throw your "woolies" in the dryer turning them into dwarf-size knickers.

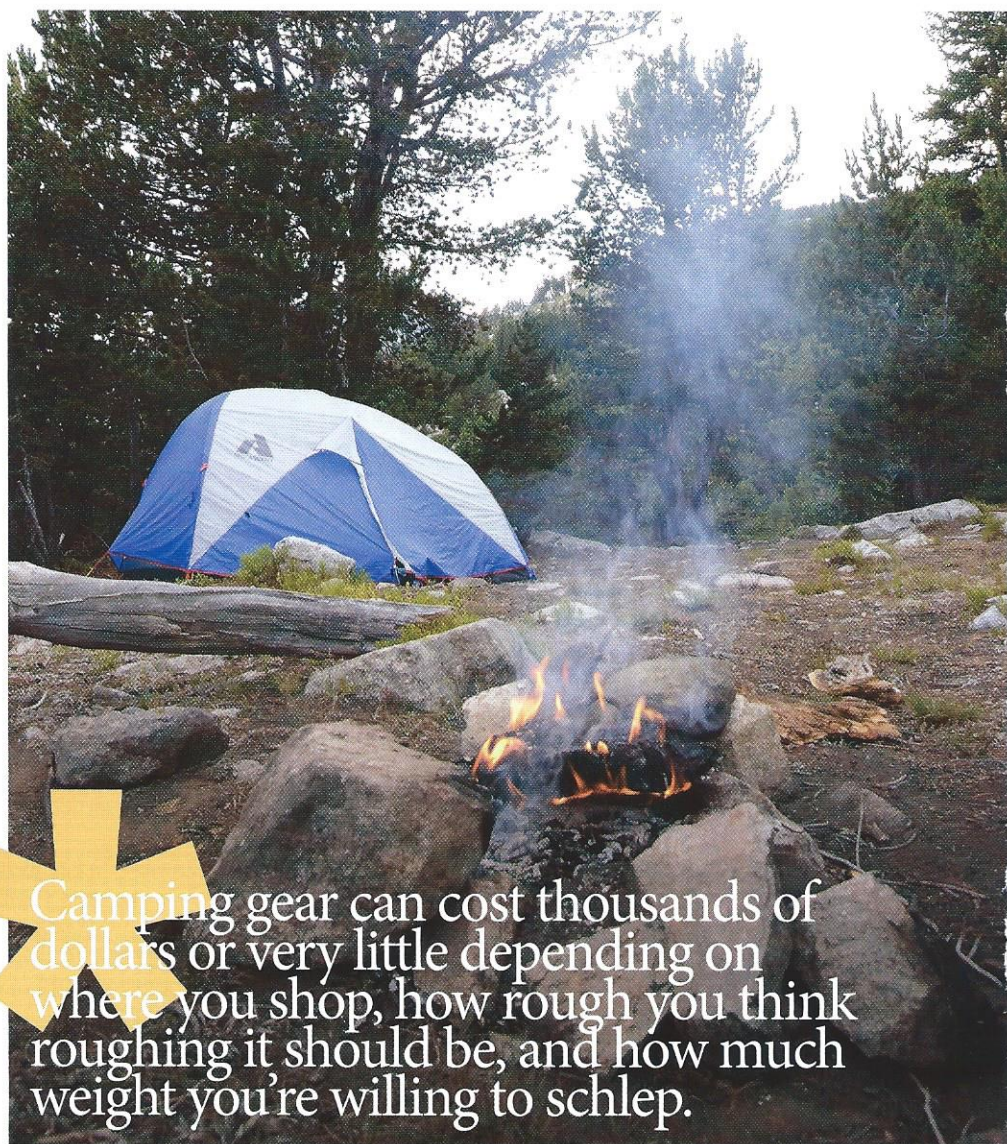
A heavy wool jacket works well, too. Dark brown, dark green or black is preferable though the verdict is still out whether solid or plaid is better. Some hunters believe a solid dark color stands out against the mottled fall landscape, but since you need to wear solid blaze orange on your torso and on your head in Colorado, you're going to present a large, solid look regardless of your outerwear.

The argument against plaid claims that straight lines and regular patterns don't occur in nature. At least plaid is not a solid, but then you've got blaze orange over it anyway. So all bets are off except for the fact that wool is warm, durable and quiet no matter on which part of your body you wear it, including your head. A hat is arguably your most important piece of cold-weather apparel. You can likely find each of these items for under \$20 at your local Goodwill store.

Camo. The ducks and the deer don't care if you drink your coffee from a camo mug, pay for your hunting license from a camo wallet, sleep in a camo sleeping bag. Camo gives items an outdoorsy look, but you can find the same items in plain-Jane often for less. As a rule of thumb, if an animal or bird can see it, camo can help. Despite my endorsement of a wool jacket, I usually wear a camo-patterned jacket, but I don't worry if my underwear is neon pink or Mossy Oak or if I wear a dead-grass pattern in the timber. I'm more apt to spook an elk if it hears or smells me.

Camping gear. I've always been a tent camper, even at campgrounds, in part because an RV is beyond my budget. I also like to trek a few miles into the backcountry where there's much less hunting pressure. Camping gear can cost thousands of dollars or very little depending on where you shop, how rough you think roughing it should be, and how much weight you're willing to schlep. That said, there are ways to cut weight and cost, starting with leaving the cookstove and fuel at home.

One of my most memorable camping ex-



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periences occurred when my stove failed. Needing to get dinner ready for myself and my hyper-hungry teenage son, we fashioned a ring of rocks such that a pot would heat over the hot coals from our fire. Our stew was doubly satisfying because we heated it over a campfire. I've cooked over a fire many times since then deriving the same pleasure and with the bonus that I don't need to carry a stove or fuel in my pack. A windproof Zippo lighter and a few strips of fire starter gets a fire going. Granted, campfire cooking is inconvenient at 4:00 a.m. when an infusion of coffee is paramount. So there are pros and cons to stove-free food preparation.

As another cost- and weight-saving scheme, I bring plastic spoons and forks, the more durable of the disposable varieties, and eat either out of the pot or using paper plates. This works well for short trips of a night or two. We burn the plates as we use them, which makes clean-up

easier and lightens the load as we go.

Food and drink. A little planning goes a long way toward eating like a king for a paltry price tag at hunting camp. For starters, we make most of our dried fruit and jerky at home. A decent counter-top dehydrator costs under \$40, less than a few packages of jerky. A \$3 Gatorade bottle doubles as a water bottle, a quarter the price of a "real" water bottle in our local outdoor store. We feast on food purchased in bulk at places like Costco then repackage it at home in quantities for hunting camp. For beverages, we bring powder mixes that make many more gallons per buck. And we purify water with iodine tablets or Aqua Mira rather than more expensive ultra-violet water purifiers and high-tech pumps. If the water needs filtering to get debris out, we run it through porous fabric in addition to treating it with iodine.

Packs. I confess, as I've gotten older, I've

become less tolerant of pack straps digging relentlessly into my shoulders or of unbalanced weight crushing my hips and realigning my neck. I haven't discovered a home remedy for a functional, comfortable backpack that can handle 50-plus pounds of meat or gear, so I dig into my piggybank for this required piece of equipment, but luckily not too far. There are many types of packs at a wide range of price-points. An exterior-frame pack tends to be cheapest and can carry an irregularly shaped load the best. In general, a plain pack made by a mass-market camping company that's not hunting specific will serve as well as a high-end, camo-colored, quiet-fabric, name-brand one and save you a couple hundred dollars.

Firearms and ammo. Successfully harvesting a game bird or animal is based less on the price tag of your gun and more on how accurately you shoot it. Over the last decade, the manufacturing processes of many budget firearms have improved to the point that they rival the accuracy of custom guns. If a rifle is properly sighted or a shotgun fits your frame and face and you've practiced with targets before going after game, most modern well-maintained firearms won't hinder you afield and will give you many years of service.

For a shotgun, pick a 12-gauge or 20-gauge gun, the two most common gauges, which makes finding shells more convenient and inexpensive. Shells for small gauges, such as .28 and .410, are less commonly stocked at discount sporting goods stores and cost more. With rifles, a common caliber such as a .270 Winchester or 30-06 Springfield require less expensive ammo which is easier to find.

Even with a common gun, the ammo can get very expensive quickly. Shotgun shells containing steel shot rather than bismuth, tungsten or similar alloys, save cash. Basic rifle ammunition, such as the Winchester Super-X, Remington Core-Lokt or Hornady American Whitetail series, rather than premium cartridges with special bonding, high-tech tips or complex structures, can be much cheaper.

Blinds. One of my all-time favorite and most portable duck-hunting blinds, which could also be used as a ground blind for turkey and deer, was made by simply draping camo fabric from an army surplus store over several arching tent poles stuck in the ground at both ends. The more we used it, the scruffier it looked and the better it got at hiding me and a hunting pal. Other times, I've crafted blinds from fallen branches. For a layout blind, piling natural vegetation over

me or, if it's snowy, lying under an old white sheet works great.

Light. A reliable flashlight or headlamp that doesn't suck battery power or rival the size of a baleen whale is an important piece of gear not only to see around camp at night, but also as you head out on a predawn hunt. I've found a basic Coleman headlamp works as well as more expensive brands. If you prefer a flashlight, for a couple of bucks, a small flashlight from a discount store throws a bright beam and won't give you heartburn if you lose it.

Scent screening. For big-game hunting, there's a myriad of sprays, detergents, odorants, scent-masking apparel, ozone machines and other products promising to cover your scent. If the choices make your head spin, don't fret. The best way to keep a buck in your sights is still to simply stay downwind of it and be quiet.

Electronics. Don't worry if you don't have the latest GPS, you can navigate just as well with an old-fashioned map and compass, or spring for a basic GPS like a Bushnell Backtrack that allows five waypoints instead of a thousand.

For communications, most radios, no matter how expensive, have a limited range in irregular terrain, often two miles or less. A cell phone often works just as well or better if there's a signal.

Regardless of what electronics you use, it's simplest and makes good safety sense to make a plan. Pick a time and a place to meet, and decide what to do if someone doesn't show up.

Don't get me wrong, I would be thrilled to wear the latest waterproof-breathable-weather-predicting-smart jacket with a thermal-regulating computer chip hidden in the hem. My point is just because you don't have a gear closet filled with high-tech gadgets and apparel doesn't mean you don't have options that will work outdoors. ☺

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7 PLACES TO AVOID CORNER-CUTTING!

Here are a few areas where you should NOT skimp when it comes to outdoor gear and clothing:

1. **Get a quality tent.** A super-cheap tent is more likely to break, leak in bad weather and let in bugs, any of which could ruin your trip.
2. **Take care of your feet.** Cheap boots with poor soles provide inadequate support and traction which contributes to lower-leg fatigue, general discomfort, blisters and more serious injuries. They also wear quickly and bog down with water and mud.
3. **Socks.** A good pair of wool or wool-blend socks keeps your feet warmer, provides more cushioning inside your boots, and depending on how they are woven, gives mild compression which stimulates blood-flow and reduces foot-fatigue.
4. **Avoid cotton clothing.** There's a saying among savvy outdoorspeople, "cotton kills." Cotton retains water and keeps you wet which can induce hypothermia even when temperatures are fairly warm, particularly if it's windy. Opt for synthetic or wool base-layers that wick moisture away from your body; insulating layers that don't retain water such as synthetic down, fleece and water-proof, breathable or wool outerwear.
5. **Be safe.** Invest in a quality first-aid kit or put one together yourself that allows you to treat minor cuts, burns, bites, and always bring a reliable lighter or waterproof matches and fire-starter so you have the ability to make a fire to stay warm.
6. **Buy a quality knife.** Cheap knives break and become dull quickly. A sharp knife is a survival tool and is critical for gutting game. It doesn't have to be big, just a good one.
7. **Invest in a decent sleeping pad and bag.** Your pad insulates you from the cold ground and provides a more comfortable night's rest. Your sleeping bag should be rated about 15 degrees colder than you anticipate the coldest temperature. For example, if you expect temperatures to drop down to 25 degrees, your bag should be rated for 10 degrees or colder to keep you cozy at night and for first aid if someone becomes hypothermic.