



### Know Before You Go

#### CHOOSING A HUNTING OUTFITTER

Selecting the best hunting outfitter can be one of the most important decisions you'll make in ensuring an enjoyable and successful guided hunt. But don't go into the decision lightly. This is one area that you are going to want to make an informed decision. There are literally thousands of hunting outfitters to choose from, make sure to choose wisely.

Here's a list of top considerations you need to make before settling on the right outfitter and even the right type of hunt.

**1. Pick Your Hunt**—The first step in selecting an outfitter is first deciding what it is and where it is you want to hunt. Have you dreamed of bugling up a huge 6x6 elk or arrowing a famed Pike County buck? That will shrink the pool size of likely outfitters to a manageable list. When considering the type of hunt, also take into consideration your own expectations and physical abilities. Be honest with yourself, if you are 50 pounds overweight and smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, a remote backcountry elk hunt in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness probably isn't for you. You could hunt elk in lower, less rugged areas where it's not so physically demanding.

For whitetail hunters, if sitting in a box blind all day in subfreezing temperatures sounds miserable, you may want to rethink that Saskatchewan deer hunt. Likewise, if hunting over a feeder that goes off like a dinner bell in the morning and again in the evening isn't your cup of tea, you may want to consider traveling somewhere besides Texas. Find the species and type of hunt you want to spend your hard-earned cash on, and that will give you a shorter list of potential outfitters to work from.

**2. Facilities**—Do you prefer the full lodge treatment of warm showers, made beds and dining hall-served, home-cooked meals as part of your hunting experience or is roughing it in some spike camp with a self-cooked meal over an open fire more to your liking. These too are important considerations as well as what type of accommodations your budget can afford. While obviously higher-end amenities tend to cost more, the budget-minded sportsman can still find a good, clean camp with excellent cooked meals for a reasonable price.

As you explore outfitters, keep all of this in mind. Even where the odds are good for an excellent hunt, bad weather or other obstacles may keep you from filling your tag. When the hunting gets tough, the saving grace of your investment into your trip will ultimately be recognized in how much you enjoyed the overall experience, particularly the meals, accommodations and the camaraderie of good friends.

**3. Tag Considerations**—Some outfitters will help you purchase or apply for or even secure tags for your hunt. If you need that help, you'll want to find an outfitter willing to help you out or at the very least, guide you through the process. It can be darn confusing.

But don't automatically assume an outfitter will help with all of that. Some outfitters won't have the time or are reluctant to get involved in those matters because it can be time consuming and difficult to coordinate. If you are hunting an area that requires that you draw a tag, check with the outfitter if landowner tags are available should you not draw (if they are, it will usually cost much more). Likewise, if you book a hunt and don't draw a tag, will the outfitter refund your deposit? Be clear on the outfitter's policies with this regard.

**4. Book Early**—How many slots does the outfitter have available for the coming season. Some outfitters, who have gained a great reputation and garnered lots of repeat business, may be booked up more than two years out. For this reason, plan to book your hunt at least a year early (this helps where drawings are concerned as well since many of these occur in the early part of the year) or more if you have a definite idea of who you want to hunt with.

**5. Time Your Hunt**—In line with booking early, is knowing the time of the season you want to hunt. An outfitter whose clients enjoy great success and is known for providing an excellent hunting experience may be booked at key times during the upcoming season, but have openings at less popular times such as the final weeks. Make a decision on when you want to hunt i.e., first week of gun season, anticipated peak of the rut, early bow season and make sure the outfitter has openings available at those times. Don't settle for second best, go during the best historical dates if you can.

**6. Type of Hunt**—If you're an avid bowhunter, but an outfitter deals mostly with gun-hunting clients, he might not be the right outfitter for you. Gun stands and gun hunting tactics depending on the type of hunt, don't require the same up-close situations bowhunters do. As such, stands with rails, stands overlooking huge bean fields, etc., will only create an aggravating hunt for the archer who sees game, but is rarely in position to capitalize on it. Likewise, if you are toting a rifle with the ability to reach out 300 or more yards to take a shot, you may not want to be limited to the type of shots a typical bow setup will offer. Discuss how many clients of each the outfitter accommodates each year and what types of stands or hunting methods he uses.

**7. Ask a Friend**—Who better to trust than a friend who has booked a hunt and had a great experience. Talk to your hunting friends to see who they were happy with if they've ever booked with an outfitter and see if he meets your other criteria. If so, he will probably be worth a look. Likewise, you can trust your friends to offer first-hand advice on things they did right and things they did wrong in planning their adventure. A wise man once said, "Don't learn from your own mistakes, learn from others'."

**8. Interview the Outfitter**—Just like you'd interview a potential contractor to remodel your house, interview the guys you may hire to provide you with your dream hunt. Ask him detailed probing questions about how much land he has access to, how many hunters he books each year and how many of them are successful. Find out what size animals his hunts typically produce and make sure that meets your expectations. Likewise, find out the minimum size allowed before an animal can be taken and make sure you're prepared to let anything smaller walk.

Ask him to lay out all of the expenses you will incur on your trip and what precisely the cost of the hunt covers and doesn't cover. Are there trophy fees, caping fees or other hidden charges such as a fuel surcharge? Make him spell it out in black and white and lastly, ask for references of both successful and unsuccessful guys that have hunted with him recently. Make sure that all your expectations are in line with what the outfitter actually provides. You can also check message boards and hunter reviews on sites such as Nexthunt.com to see what other sportsmen like you are out there recommending.

Answer these questions to your satisfaction when booking and it will greatly improve your odds of not just a great hunt, but a great overall adventure.