



What To Expect

As professional hunters in Alaska we often find ourselves dealing with the seasoned hunter, an individual who has hunted for many years in the lower states, perhaps made a hunt or two into Canada, and now is coming further north to hunt for species that have eluded him elsewhere. The seasoned hunter knows what firearms he needs and what equipment will be necessary. And he knows the ropes about traveling,

The most noticeable thing about seasoned hunters is that they don't seem to be lost souls in an airport. It's obvious that they have done this before. They generally bring one rifle in a hard case, and it is sighted in and sporting a fiberglass stock, quality scope (generally Leupold) and a couple of boxes of extra ammunition. They also have a minimum of personal equipment, which is packed in two small duffels that will easily fit behind the seat of a SuperCub. New ankle-fit hip boots are in one of the duffel bags, and a super light 35mm camera is tucked in a shirt pocket. Perhaps the only items of obvious excess are the sport jacket and ostrich skin boots they wear for travel.

Many first-time hunters are sure they know someone of the type I'm talking about. Furthermore, on their first hunt they are often positive I've described everyone else in camp. The truth is very few hunters are the above-described "perfect hunter." Most hunters still bring too much gear, and they pack it in oversize gun cases and extra-large duffels that have been designed so that they will not fit into a Cub. In spite of such strong evidence to the contrary, we most often find that they are experienced hunters who have hunted the north on at least two or three occasions, hopefully in one of our own camps. These fellows really do have a pretty good idea of what is going on and are quick to make themselves at home. We consider them to be good clients and they do not present us with too many surprises.

I think we probably come to expect this of everyone, and all too often forget about the people who haven't hunted in the north before. These fellows often are overwhelmed by what goes on around them. At last they are in Alaska, The Great Land, The Last Frontier, the place that dreams are made of. It's all new to them. The size of the country, the remoteness, and the casual manner in which everyone treats small aircraft is quite different from what they are used to.

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They sometimes feel they do not fit it. They don't ask questions for fear of looking ignorant, or maybe they just don't know what to ask. It is obvious to me that many don't book hunts, simply because they do not know what to expect. Others are willing to go, but only if they have someone along who has been there before.

What to expect:

So....what should a client expect from a guided hunt, and how should he prepare? These are valid questions, which in a sense almost defy solid answers. So much depends on the outfitter, area and the form of transportation. Nonetheless, clients are asking these questions, and we will attempt to answer them.

If you are serious about hunting, write or call several outfitters who have caught your interest. Do not send a Xeroxed letter (it indicates a lack of interest on your part). An outfitter probably receives hundreds of letters from would-be clients and often cannot afford the time for a detailed response unless he is sure you actually are interested. You should receive a prompt response, which should include information on the hunt, or hunts you are interested in, prices and a list of references. Do not expect a personal letter, an equipment list, or a list of booked and un-booked hunts.

When you get an answer, read it carefully, and call several references from each outfitter. You will learn a lot more from these people than the printed information tells you. Don't be reluctant to call them. Most hunters are more than willing to tell you about their hunt, good or bad, its part of the camaraderie of the sport of hunting. After talking with them, you now should have a better idea of the outfitter you want, **so pick up the phone and call him**. Just remember the time difference (Alaska is 4 hours behind the USA east coast). You won't learn much if you get an outfitter out of bed at 3:00 a.m., and you will be lucky if he remembers you called. Take some time to visit, check available openings and dates, and ask about his operation,

Here are some of the things you will need to know:

Is travel into and out of camp done on days separate from the hunting, or are those days numbered as part of the hunt? Where should you fly into, and what carriers do you fly once you arrive in Alaska? What is the cost of the flights from arrival point to the point of outfitting?

Most outfitters do not include the cost of transporting you and your gear to their camps as part of the hunt price, so be sure to ask who pays for this. The higher-priced hunt you are shying away from may include the cost of your bush charter. Some outfitters will not move you and your guide to a different area to hunt if needed.

What equipment does he provide? And what are you responsible for? Outfitters who do and do not provide sleeping bags and pads or back packs are about evenly split, so be sure to ask. Also you need to know the quality of the equipment he does provide. An important item often overlooked by clients is safety plans and equipment, first aid kits,

communications equipment like radios, satellite telephones, number and type of aircraft available in camp.

Generally you will be expected to provide your personal gear, rifle, binoculars, and purchase your license and tags in camp. You should not be expected to bring such items as spotting scopes; your outfitter and/or guide should provide this. Can you stay for the full length of the hunt if you fill out early, or will you be expected to leave camp? Are there extra fees if you are successful? What deposit is required to book a hunt? Will the guide have your licenses & tags in camp, or do you need to do it yourself? How are trophies shipped and who pays for it? Does every hunter have a personal guide? How many hunters hunt out of camp? What is the success rate and what quality of game was taken in the past season -- not 4 or 5 years ago? How are you expected to pay, and when?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. They vary with the outfitter, and may vary on different hunts with the same outfitter. The important thing is to know in advance, so you can pick the arrangement you are most happy with.

Equally important is an opportunity to visit with the outfitter. You may or may not like someone's attitude, and that can make a big difference on whether you enjoy your hunt.

You've made your decision:

So you've decided. Call your outfitter immediately and make the booking, then follow the call with a letter and your deposit to confirm it. Most outfitters will hold a hunt for a few days while they wait for your money, but they can't hold it indefinitely. Don't be surprised if your outfitter books the hunt to someone else if he has to wait more than 7- 10 days for your deposit. Hunting may be your recreation, but it's his business and he has to treat it that way.

Now that your hunt is booked, you should expect to receive a confirmation and a list of equipment, specific dates, air carriers and connections, and other related information you may need to plan for the trip. In most cases, your travel agent will be able to confirm flights and hotels, but some commuter airlines and charters may require the assistance of your outfitter.

Study the equipment list when you start to pack. You may wish to call one of the references again for his views on some items. If your outfitter says you need a specific item, believe him and buy exactly what he says. There will be a good reason. Pack using light, soft waterproof luggage such as that made by North Face and other good quality outdoor manufacturers. Select multiple-purpose items to keep weight down and in two bags. If you have too much gear you can expect to pay excess baggage charges and may have to hire additional charters. You may even have to thin down your gear at the airport just to make it fit into your aircraft. Bring everything you need, but be positive that you need everything you bring.

Be sure to bring your own personal binoculars. You will use them. You cannot purchase binoculars of too good a quality. Shirt-pocket binoculars generally are not adequate. Transportation from home to the camp varies on every hunt, and you will have to rely on your outfitter's advice. Plan enough time to make all connections, leaving time to take care of any baggage problems. Be sure you have your name and address written on your luggage and gun case, not just on a tag, and put your business card and address inside each piece of your baggage. All other identification may be lost or removed.

When you arrive in camp you should expect to be met by your guide, or someone assigned to greet you. They will assist you in getting your gear to your quarters, and may familiarize you with the camp. Don't expect too much at once, and don't expect to be the center of attention. The aircraft that brings you in is an important contact with the outside world and your outfitter will have important items that he needs to discuss with the pilot. It's also likely that other clients will be departing on the flight and there will be good-byes that need to be said. Be patient, your outfitter will be free to talk with you after the aircraft has departed.

After things have settled down, feel free to ask your guide any questions you may have. Before you go into the field you will have some paperwork to fill out. You will be asked to sign the Financial Remuneration Statement required by the State of Alaska. Your guide will also want to go over your license and tags to be sure that they are in order, and of course there is the matter of payment. Normally, you are expected to pay the balance due on your hunt when you arrive in camp, before the hunt starts. Funds should be in the form requested by the outfitter.

In the field

At last you are in the field. Your outfitter should now have the time to introduce you to your guide. Yes, someone probably will guide you other than your outfitter. Most outfitters have several registered and assistant guides working for them. These are highly competent individuals who are licensed by the State of Alaska. They are employed by the outfitter to do the actual guiding, cooking, packing and trophy care. It's unlikely that your outfitter would have the time to guide you, even if he wanted to. He has responsibilities to too many other people.

Your outfitter or your guide should take time to explain what is going on. He will tell you where you are going, how the camp is run, what equipment you will need in the field, when you should expect to be back to main camp, etc. All of which will be somewhat tentative because the timing will always depend on a lot of factors, not the least of which is the weather.

Initially, you are going to have to make a few adjustments. All too often hunters come into camp directly out of Corporate America. In their businesses they have to keep an exact time schedule, and they come to expect it of everyone they deal with. At first, this may cause you some problems and misunderstandings. In remote hunting camps, there

are a lot of things that are important, but a tight time schedule isn't one of them. Problems and unexpected events are constantly turning up.

Your guide has a tremendous amount of responsibility to a number of people, all of whom are important, and he constantly has to give priority to different events. He sometimes will be late into another camp because you need immediate attention, other times you will be the one waiting. Always remember that you are not the only one in camp, and be patient when your guide does not show up exactly when you expect him.

Your guide will do everything possible, within the law, to insure your success. Believe me; any reputable outfitter will be extremely interested in your success. That's what his reputation is built on. Where you go and what you do will depend on his estimation of what will be most successful. Sometimes these decisions defy explanation because they are made on gut feelings. In the evening you may be told that you will do something in the morning, only to find that plans are changed by morning. This is not necessarily indecision or poor planning. The best-laid plans have to be scrapped if the circumstances dictate. Perhaps the wind changed overnight, or the weather deteriorated. Maybe your outfitter saw something on an earlier flight that made a change advisable, or perhaps he realized that the area he had in mind is too difficult for your condition.

Day in and day out he is making decisions to make your hunt a success. Sometimes it may be confusing, but listen to your guide. You hired him for his ability to make these fine-tuned decisions, so don't fight them. If he has the time he probably will explain why he changed his mind, but if he is pressed he may not. Cooperate with him; it's to your advantage.

I know of a situation where a last-minute change of plan was in order, but the client complained loudly about poor planning and indecision, demanding that they continue with the plan he had been preparing for. In disgust the outfitter relented, and put him where planned, despite the wind that now was blowing up the valley. The game had moved elsewhere, of course.

As in any business, the customer is always right, but in this case it's usually to his disadvantage.

As much as you and your guide may hope-wish-and-work for success, it won't always come. You know this and you have often said, "that's hunting." That's easy to say from where you sit right now, but it becomes more difficult to accept after you have paid for a hunt and you are in the field, but it's no less true. Go into your hunt with realistic expectations: six to ten days for a single animal, 14 days for two or more (unless the area is really exceptional). If you plan a combination hunt, plan on only hunting the animal of choice for the entire hunt if necessary. Forget about the second animal until you are successful on the first. Sometimes, if the guide suggests it, it may be more beneficial to purchase up front all the species' tags that you may be interested in

hunting. For example, the wolf tag, or the caribou tag if these species are in the same general location of your primary hunt species.

Do not be afraid to pitch in and help with the camp chores. The less time spent on chores, the more time will be spent in hunting. A guide in North America is not a servant. He is there to assist you on the hunt. If you act as if you are on an African safari, you will have great trouble gaining his respect, and it's likely that he will not put out the effort he would if you were at least taking care of your own gear.

One item that often comes up is the subject of tips for your personal guide. Many new hunters are uneasy about this, as they don't know what is expected. Assistant guides appreciate tips of course, and they work hard in anticipation of this reward. The amount is really up to you, but it should be based on the effort your guide put out. It's possible to take good trophies in spite of a lazy guide, and it's possible to get skunked regardless of your guide's super-human effort.

You must weigh everything in the balance: trophies, effort and attitude, length of the hunt, *etc.* then decide. Currently, tips range from \$500-\$2,000, depending on the client and the hunt. The majority falls in the upper half of this range. How the client determines the amount is beyond me. A lot of clients say "I give my waitress 10 %, why not give my guide the same." I suppose if there is a mathematical equation it could be 10 percent the cost of the hunt, but I would be at a loss to prove it with any solid data. Regardless, each client seems to have his personal formula or methods, and whatever they are - the tip they give their guide is very much appreciated. Don't forget the cook, pilot and packer if you have one they look forward to a tip also. A \$100.00 tip is about the average, and although not the dollar amount given to the guide, it's greatly appreciated. And remember that they all work very hard for you every day and are a very importune part of your trip.

If you are interested in a hunt please call, we can talk about it and we can answer your questions. A phone call is cheap!!!