KEEPERS OF THE FLAME

Defying stereotypes, Millennials are maintaining the long tradition of wilderness guiding and wrangling.

By Ben Long

"OFFICE" WINDOW VIEW A hunting guide leads a string of horses along a trail in a western Montana mountain range. In exchange for the long hours, difficult labor, and seasonal pay, the guides, wranglers, and others who work for outfitters get to spend months each year in some of the state's wildest places.

JESS MCGLOTHLIN

It's noon on the autumnal equinox. Cottonwoods along the Spotted Bear River fly their golden flags, tossed by a wind that holds a bitter edge. Unknown to us, we're just a few days ahead of a historic late-September blizzard that will dump several feet of snow and drop temperatures well below freezing.

Six of us sit on mules and horses at a U.S. Forest Service trailhead. We feel eager, if a bit uneasy, waiting here on the cusp of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

The honest truth? Most of what we know about riding we learned from old cowboy movies. But that's about to change. It's elk season in the Bob, and we are under the tutelage of riding, hunting, and backcountry experts with Montana Wilderness Lodge & Outfitting for much of the next week.

My three friends and I grew up elk hunting and always prided ourselves on our do-it-yourself attitude. Fellow hunters Pat and Cody, a father and son from Wisconsin, are new to the elk game—Cody had never even *seen* an elk before this trip out West. Novices and old hands alike, we all appreciate the serious nature of a wilderness expedition and know how much we depend on our outfitter, Rich McAtee, of West Glacier.

In Montana, hunting outfitters are business owners licensed by the state to provide full-service guided hunts to paying customers. Since running these hunts is typically too big a job for one person, outfitters hire guides and other staff to keep things running smoothly. Guides scout the game and accompany hunters afield, and must also be licensed. In addition, permits are required to run these commercial operations in national forests or other public lands.

On this trip, our team also includes a cook, camp-tenders, and a wrangler who manages the horses and mules. Today, Kaitlyn Casazza and Maddy Snyder, both in their 20s and young enough to be my daughters, are in charge of the string of saddle horses. They will lead the six of us hunters 15 miles to a temporary base camp in the heart of the Bob. Snyder adjusts my stirrups. Too long or short and my knees will suffer, she says.

I wonder aloud how many other details must be in place to avoid disaster with six rookie riders on several tons of horseflesh in one of the most remote, rugged, and wild places in the Lower 48. Snyder, who lives and was raised in West Glacier, shrugs. "It's not that complicated." She's probably just being modest. I guess I'll have to wait and see.

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WISDOM PRESERVATION

People generally think of wilderness preservation in terms of protecting clean rivers, pristine wildlife habitat, and scenery unmarred by industrial development. But wilderness is also a place where we preserve human wisdom, from the routes and vision quest sites still sacred to the Kootenai and Blackfeet, to the woodlore that would have been common a century ago but is evaporating today.

The men and women working as wranglers, cooks, and hunting guides in the Bob Marshall and other backcountry wilderness areas are practitioners of these key skills. Many are young. The work and hours are too brutal for most people over 30. The pay is seasonal and difficult to stretch into a living for someone raising kids and trying to cover a mortgage, truck payments, and insurance.

Yet despite the meager financial rewards, these young adults will saddle your horse, lead you to the Continental Divide, and scratch out a fire under a tree to wait out a snow squall. Maybe find you an elk. Keep you comfortable most days and alive in an emergency.

After that, they'll even show you how to get the most out of your smartphone.

Wilderness is no more dangerous than

BALANCING ACT A wrangler carefully distributes weight on pack mules and horses.

PHOTOS: JESS MCGLOTHLIN

STOCK STOP At a base camp in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, guides and camp-tenders unload packs and panniers carried in by pack stock. Understanding and tending to the stock is critical to backcountry work. "We live and die by our horses back here," says one outfitter.

civilization, but the hazards are different. You won't get mauled by a grizzly in New York City. But you won't get run over by a taxi in the Bob, either.

After we arrive at base camp, a Kalispell Regional Medical Center helicopter buzzes overhead. The rescue chopper is looking for a hunter from another camp whose bones were crushed when his horse rolled over him. McAtee waves his arms to signal "all clear here" and the chopper flies off over the treetops.

When trouble strikes in the wilderness, help is often days away. Satellite beacons and rescue helicopters are rendered useless by dead batteries or low clouds. It is rare today to be surrounded by nature's power and isolated from the technology we typically use to hold that power in check. To me, that feeling, along with the sense of solitude and challenge, is what makes wilderness travel so alluring. It's a deeply personal connection to wild nature. Some folks find it too difficult or even boring. But that hunger for wilderness is something that first drew me to Montana and has kept me here all my adult life.

Here's the bottom line: There are many easier places to hunt elk than the Bob Marshall Wilderness. But for those of us who come here to do just that, it's not really the elk we are seeking. Not the elk alone, anyway.

LONG-HELD DREAM

The year 2019 marked my 40th elk season. Since age 12, my hunts had always been back-of-the-pickup affairs with friends and family. Any elk I lucked into came out of the woods on my back and those of my companions. It's given me a keen feeling of satisfaction.

But this approach has its limits. The farthest I've packed elk quarters on my back is four miles. That was years ago. I don't know if I could do it anymore.

Now that I've passed 50, I've learned that sometimes it's okay to ask for help. It is not easy to admit you need assistance to achieve a long-held dream. But if you long to hunt deep in the Bob and own no pack stock, I don't see anything wrong with paying an outfitter to help. Sure, you sacrifice some self-satisfaction. But the trade-off is a wilderness hunting experience you would otherwise never enjoy. Plus you get to meet some inspiring young people.

Grizzly bears have been reduced to just 5 percent of their historic range in the Lower 48. You might say that human wilderness skills have decreased just as much. Yet it's no coincidence you find both in the Bob.

During our first breakfast in the mess tent, McAtee assigns one guide per two hunters. He sees skepticism on our faces as we eye the three men half our age charged with finding elk and keeping us safe.

"You are in very good hands with these guides," McAtee says. "Yes, they are young, but they have a ton of energy. They have been doing this all their lives. They grew up in the wilderness. They know the land, they know the elk. But most of all, they know the horses. And we live and die by our horses back here."

My guide, John Yoder, a man in his 20s who grew up in the lush forests of Lincoln County, wears an oilskin slicker and a cowboy hat and carries a Colt revolver. He's owned his horse, Star, since he was 12. He

rides smoothly and effortlessly, especially compared to my own awkward, self-conscious horsemanship. Ben Miller, a Kalispell civil engineer who guides during his vacation, and Trevor Hoerner, another twentysomething and a member of a well-known hunting clan from the Flathead, round out our group's guiding trio.

UP BEFORE DAWN

That night, the weather turns gnarly, with cold rain and wind, but the guides awake eager to get at it. At 4 a.m. they are saddling horses by headlamps in a downpour. Yoder holds the reins of my mule, Boots, as I strain to get a toe in the stirrup. I pull myself aboard and follow Yoder and my high school hunting buddy Tod Byers of Spokane.

We split off in three parties of two hunters and a guide. Our group stops to water our animals in the nearby river, their shod hooves scraping the cobble under the rushing water. Then we head off, single file, into the darkness to greet dawn at timberline.

"These young people embrace the wilderness lifestyle fully."

The spruce bottom is still entirely dark when Yoder clicks off his headlamp. I put my faith in him and Boots. Riding blind in the rugged landscape yanks me out of my comfort zone and into the exhilarating—and intimidating—zone that is wilderness.

WIELDING THE MISERY WHIP

Wilderness elk hunts are iconic Western experiences, first popularized by a young Theodore Roosevelt who, before he got into politics, wrote a memoir called *The Wilderness Hunter*. In 1893, the book received rave reviews in the *New York Times* and planted images of pack strings and elk meadows in the American imagination.

More than a century later, backcountry guides and wranglers carry on that tradition. "These young people embrace the wilderness lifestyle fully," Mac Minard, executive director of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, told me recently. "Few are part-timers who flit in and out. They are dedicated all the way."

Becoming a Montana hunting guide is fairly straightforward. You must be at least 18 years old, be sponsored by a licensed outfitter, and pass a basic first-aid test.

BASE CAMP BASICS Facing page, top: Camp-tender Kaitlyn Casazza, who was raised and lives in West Glacier, splits firewood to prepare the base camp for an approaching early season blizzard. Rows of tack (facing page, bottom) hint at the complex logistics behind every wilderness pack trip. In the backcountry, horses and mules are essential for carrying gear, food, and hunters to the base camp, and then packing all that—plus, if all goes well, meat and antlers—back out. Below: As snow begins falling outside, hunters and outfitter team members keep their spirits up in a cozy mess tent.

PHOTOS: BEN LONG

WAY BACK IN IT Hunting guide John Yoder leads the author and his hunting companion over the Continental Divide in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Guiding in the backcountry requires expertise with pack stock, emergency first aid, wilderness survival, and, of course, finding big game animals.

But becoming a skilled wilderness guide is another matter. Four-wheelers, chainsaws, and other motorized devices aren't allowed in designated wilderness. The terrain is more rugged. Grizzly bears are more common. Help is more distant.

The job description for a backcountry guide defies the modern syllabus: clear trails with a "misery whip" (crosscut saw) and hone it when dull; secure panniers to packhorses with a California diamond hitch; keep the hunters and stock healthy and happy; and fell and buck firewood with Pulaskis and double-bit axes.

You also need to be able to start a fire when the stove has two inches of standing rainwater in it; keep bears and packrats out of the grub; and negotiate vast tracts of roadless wilderness, across rivers, up and down cliffs, often without trails and in the dark.

Then there's the hunting aspect. Backcountry and frontcountry guides must know Montana's hunting laws inside and out. (The last thing they want is for clients to be fined or have hunting privileges revoked.) They need to know how to cook and keep a clean camp. How not to get lost, and what to do if that happens. How to set a broken leg and administer CPR. How to find elk, deer, wild sheep, mountain goats, or other big game and then help the client (who may have never even seen that species before) sneak within range. Guides must judge if the animal has the horn or antler size, or is of the correct sex, to be legal for that hunting district and allowable under the client's license or permit. They have to coach the client through the shot ("Wait...wait...okay, now."). Then, if all goes well, they need to gut, skin, and quarter the animal, then either sit out the night on the trail or pack the meat into camp well past midnight. Finally, there's cleaning and cooling hundreds of pounds of meat and transporting it 15 miles to the truck at the trailhead. Repeat the next day. And the next week. No matter the weather.

Also required: consoling dudes with bad knees, sore hips, or poor aim, and coping with the occasional tender or inflated ego and the psychology of strangers under stress. In short, you need a PhD taught only in the mountains.

TIME OF THEIR LIVES

"Wilderness and wilderness preservation is not just about preserving the landscape and preserving the experience, but also preserving the skill sets necessary to get out

PHOTOS: BEN LONG

there and enjoy it," Minard said. "Congress had that in mind when it passed the Wilderness Act. They wanted people to retain those skills."

As a teenager, I bought a copy of *Horses, Hitches and Rocky Trails* and practiced my diamond hitch with clothesline. But I've never owned an animal larger than a Labrador retriever. I thought I wanted to be a hunting guide, but it turned out I lack the drive and desire to guide others on hunts rather than hunt myself. To be honest, I was too unskilled and maybe too selfish to ever work in that profession.

Last September I watched those young Montanans with admiration and amazement. So much work. So much hardship. Yet I also had the sense that they were having the time of their lives. Did I ever have that much energy?

A LITTLE ASSISTANCE The author with a 6x6 bull taken last September deep in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Though an experienced elk hunter, he realized that a backcountry hunting trip required more heavy labor than his body could bear: "Now that I've passed 50, I've learned that sometimes it's okay to ask for help."

Minard noted that skilled wilderness guides serve more than their clients. Backpackers, anglers, and others who use the wilderness often depend on the trails that outfitters and guides regularly clear. With Montana's increased wildfires and beetle-killed windfall, clearing trails in the wilderness is a constant and growing chore, especially as U.S. Forest Service budgets get cut year after year.

"But more than that, guides and outfitters are keeping the wilderness relevant to generations of people all across America," Minard said. "These public lands belong to everyone, and many folks don't have the experience or the equipment to enjoy the wilderness on their own. Guides and outfitters let them do that."

According to the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, Montana has roughly 600 active licensed outfitters. Each year, those outfits hire about 1,700 hunting and fishing guides and hundreds of wranglers, cooks, and other workers. It's all part of Montana's outdoor recreation economy.

As Montana becomes more urbanized and modernized, it's harder to find young people with the skills and drive to become wilderness guides. "Just like any other business, hiring and retaining good, skilled employees is the single biggest challenge," Minard said.

Likewise, it seems that fewer hunters want to follow the trails of Jim Bridger and Teddy Roosevelt. "The true wilderness hunting experience is rigorous. It's not for everyone. It's entirely different from riding around in a pickup truck and sleeping in a bunk house," Minard told me.

IT IS INDEED COMPLICATED

Millennials are often unfairly dismissed as spoiled, lazy, unmotivated, and self-centered. Such complaints are as perennial as grass, repeated by one generation after another.

Don't believe it. Many kids still follow their hearts deep into the wilderness, just as young people have done for generations. And these young Montanans have the grace and generosity to share what they learn with others.

Five days after embarking on our wilderness pack trip, three of the six hunters had to head back to civilization. Pat and Cody from Wisconsin and I had lucked into elk the first day of the hunt. We had three bulls—two 6x6s and a 5x6—to contend with. I left my three high school buddies to continue hunting, despite the deteriorating weather. They would race the snowfall to the trailhead a few days later, with nothing but tales of adventure to recount.

For our fortunate trio there was elk meat to be cut, wrapped, and put in the freezer. Families members to see. Deadlines and meetings beckoned. I was reluctant to leave, but the barometer and the snow line were both dropping as the approaching blizzard built steam.

Leading the pack string back to the trailhead, the stock laden with quarters and antlers, was Snyder, the same woman who led us in. Back on Day 1, she had said that wrangling pack stock isn't complicated. I admired her nonchalance, but what I witnessed proved otherwise. Running a pack string requires proficiency at tying complex knots and hitches; exactly balancing pack boxes or bag loads on both sides of horses and mules; lining up stock based on each animal's experience, temperament, and aptitude. Wranglers know which horses and mules are lazy or goofy, which ones spook easily or nip, and which ones lead and tie well.

Any mistake could send hundreds of pounds of gear and game meat—not to mention clients—tumbling into a river or down a mountainside.

It's perhaps odd—unnerving, even—that outfitters and their clients put so much trust in people barely out of their teens. Yet the young wranglers and hunting guides accept that responsibility and live up to those expectations.

I was glad to meet them, to witness their skill, humility, and good cheer. It made me hopeful—about young people, about wilderness, and about Montana.