

Outdoors

Hunting horsemanship

Jack O'Connor, that legendary guns-and-hunting guru of Outdoor Life magazine, once said of horseback hunting, "Never forget that a horse is almost as powerful as a bulldozer, with about the same amount of brains." He was right about horse power, but way out in left field about equine IQs.

Since horseback is the only practical method of hunting the majestic mountains of the western United States and Canada, it may be useful to examine the differences between cowboy riding and big-game hunting on horseback.

First, there is a big difference in the horses themselves. Professional mountain horses have to be big and strong to carry a 200-pound hunter and his rifle, binoculars, camera, lunch, and rain gear, not to mention a heavy saddle, up a steep mountain at high elevations where oxygen is scarce.

Most mountain horses have a high percentage of Percheron or other draft-horse blood. They are very strong, but because hunting outfitters regularly put dudes on them who never sat a horse in their lives, temperament is at least important as sheer muscle. These animals must also be very calm, patient and tolerant of riders' ignorance.

They must also be in top aerobic condition. One outfitter I hunted with in British Columbia moved his horse herd to a high-mountain ranch each spring to allow them to acclimate to high elevations before the fall hunting seasons.

Also, hunting horses need versatility, usually being trained to do double duty as packhorses as well as saddle stock.

Riders must understand that the horse under them knows more about the country and his business than his rider, and cannot be bullied or "shown who's boss."

The horse is entitled to his own opinions about where you want him to go, and you do well to respect them, being as how your tender young body is going along for the ride.

Obviously, it's necessary for the rider to direct his steed, but if the latter balks, there may be a good reason ... such as the scent of a grizzly on the trail, or a hornet's nest in the bushes. It pays to develop a sense of partnership with your horse, instead of a false master-and-servant relationship. Respect the horse and follow the guide's lead.

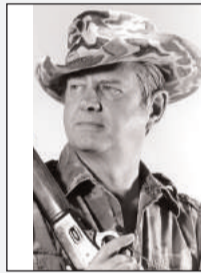
There are ways a hunter can make the job easier on the horse, which, of course, also makes it easier on the rider. One is to help the mount on steep up- and down-hill trails by shifting his weight in the saddle, leaning back on downhill and up over the mount's



Photos by John Wootters

The author rode the lead mare — a fiery ex-barrel racer — on a Wyoming pronghorn hunt. He was a handful and had to be watched constantly, but she gave Wootters an exhilarating ride and carried him to his lifetime-best pronghorn trophy, seen here on packhorse.

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John Wootters

neck uphill. Actually, on long downhill hauls, it's easier on the horse and safer for all to dismount and lead him to the bottom.

Now forget what O'Connor said about intelligence. There are smart horses and dumb horses, of course, but most experienced mountain horses are plenty smart: smart enough to know when they need to stop and blow while climbing a mountain; smart enough to know where they can and cannot safely go with men on their backs; smart enough to know where camp is at all times, day or night. If confused lost, hurt or left alone, start your horse in what you think might be the right direction, then give him his head. Trust his built-in "GPS," even when you think he's wrong, and he'll take you home.

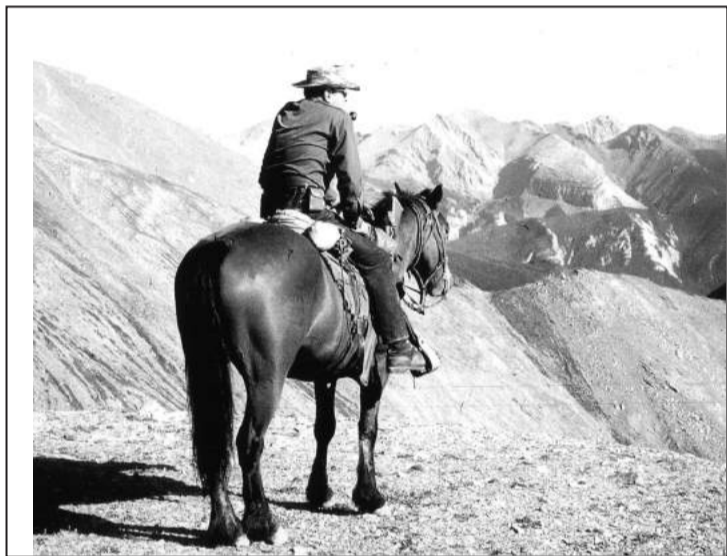
How "dumb" is that?

He's also smart enough to know why you're out there in the wilderness. He will almost always spot game whether near or far, before you can. If he stops and alerts, ears pricked, just peer between his ears. Chances are you'll find yourself looking at a moose or mountain caribou, or some other animal.

Wow, you get transportation and a "pointer" at no extra charge!

It's very hard not to become fond of this gentle half-ton-plus of muscle between your legs that so patiently and willingly does all the hard work while you have all the fun.

Yes, some "dude horses" do get spoiled by timid



The author admires a view of the Canadian Rockies from the saddle of his all-time favorite hunting horse, Captain. Captain, steady and honest, was a retired bucking bronc from the Calgary Stampede rodeo, but he never recalled his glory days as a bucker while carrying Wootters to a fine Stone ram in British Columbia.

and/or inexperienced riders, dawdling along the trail and snatching a mouthful of grass here and there, but it's your own fault if you let him get away with it the first time.

Truly, I've spent many of the happiest days of my entire life atop good horses, and remember them all as valued companions. I'm richer by far for having traveled a few days with them.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.