



JOIN THE HUNT

From the Rocky Mountains to the Eastern Plains, Colorado boasts millions of acres teeming with wildlife that's ripe for harvest. Sharing in the bounty, however, requires accepting your responsibility to become a steward for conservation. Here, our beginner's guide to using what Mother Nature provides.

BY SPENCER CAMPBELL



Know Your Why

You'd better have a darned good reason for taking another life.

Before she was big enough to carry a gun, Melissa Johnson would follow her father through the grasslands surrounding Trinchera, the rural southeast Colorado community where her family has hunted for decades. But when she turned 14, Johnson approached her dad. "I'm not going to be able to hunt," she told him. "I just cannot pull the trigger. I cannot kill something." He conceded to her conscience, and Johnson retired her rifle.

About 15 years later, the Colorado Springs resident returned to Trinchera to interview the ranching families in the area

for her master's degree, which focused on Southwest studies. Through her research, Johnson came to understand that hunting provided food for locals' tables and connected them to the land and each other. She started stalking again, this time with gratitude for the animals' sacrifice.

Johnson's daughter Clara, on the other hand, never shied away from the gruesome realities of the sport. "My grandpa used to call me 'heart-ripper,'" Clara says. That's because, when he removed the entrails during field dressings, young Clara was always eager to remove the organ during

harvest. "I thought it was super cool," she says. "To be able to see all the anatomy and the valves was interesting to me."

The Johnsons' backstories reveal a truism about hunting: Even people who share DNA—and a long familial history of harvesting animals—can have very different sensibilities when it comes to the pursuit. Wherever you think you stand on the subject, one thing is for certain: Hunting is a popular endeavor here in Colorado, and it's only been gaining interest. Applications for licenses have increased for five years running, a result of the pandemic and the state's growing population. "There was a huge push to get people outdoors," says Joey Livingston, a public information officer with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), "as well as, I think, a push for people that wanted to have their own meat for storage."

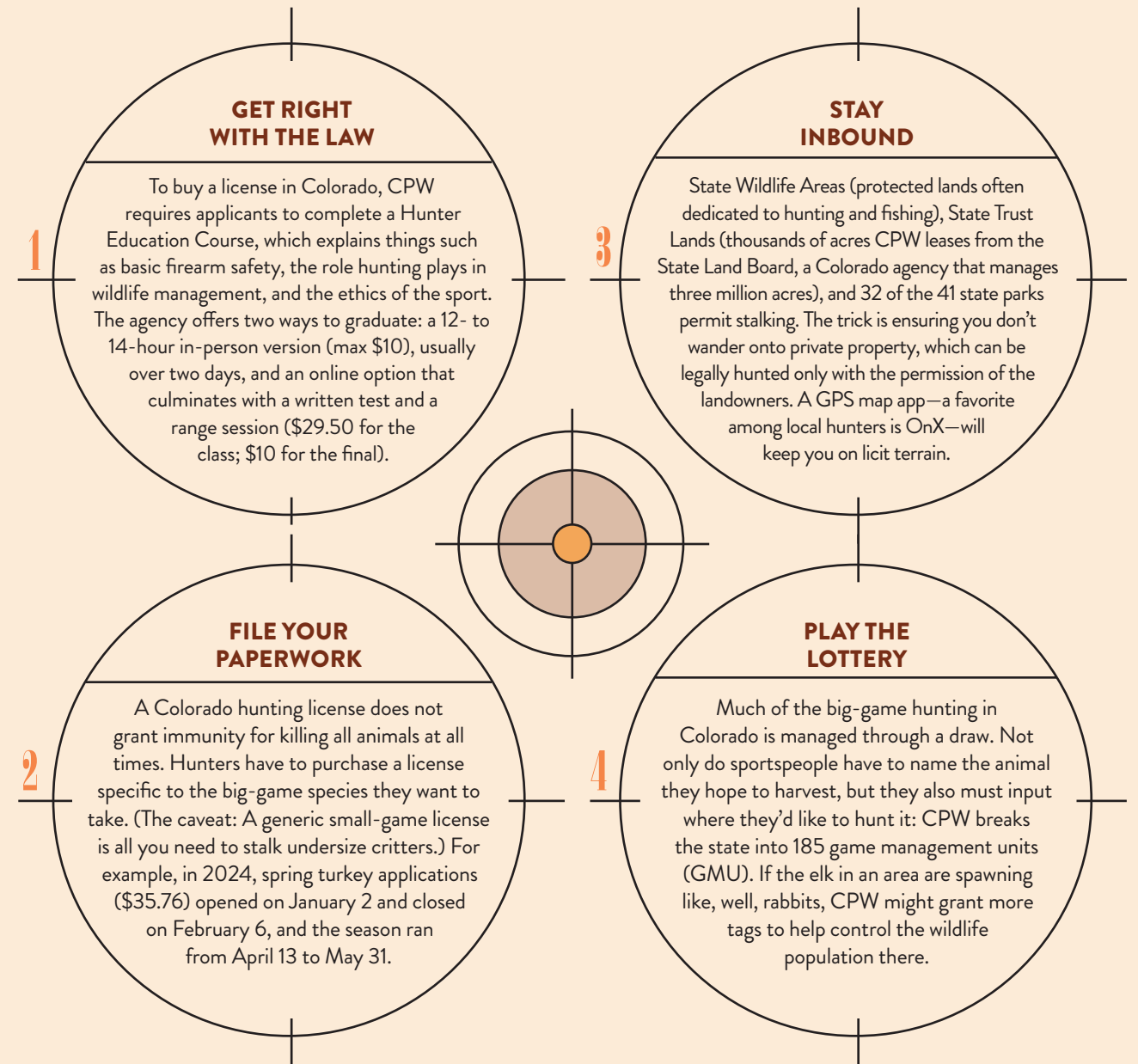
Hunting, however, is a far more intimidating pastime to pick up than, say, pickleball. Not only are novices venturing into wild terrain with loaded weapons, but they must also navigate CPW's licensing program, which can feel byzantine to the uninitiated. If you're successful, harvesting an animal—a requirement in most cases if you kill something—can be physically demanding and alarmingly grisly.

On the following pages, you'll find lessons newbies should learn to ensure they become an ethical, safe sportsperson. But the first tenet is simple: Hunting is not a hobby to take up lightly. "You've got to know your 'why,'" Melissa says. "You've got to know your motivation—because it's hard, but it's also so rewarding." Melissa has overcome her aversion to hunting because she believes it's the most ethical way to provide meat for her family. Clara simply loves the opportunity to be outside that hunting affords her. Although their "whys" are different, their reward is the same. Together, they have hunted pronghorn antelope along the Eastern Plains near Trinchera, moose in the frigid mountains of Grand County, and after Clara graduated from high school in 2023, springbok, warthog, and other animals in South Africa. "When we're hunting," Melissa says, "I'm not the mom, and she's not the kid." They're both hunters.

Previous spread, clockwise from top left: Jeff Edwards/Getty Images; Ken Redding/Getty Images; Sarah Banks. This page: Sarah Banks

VALIDATE YOUR PRESENCE

To ensure hunters don't kill off certain species, as they did during the early white settlement of North America, state governments have instituted animal protections, creating an overarching philosophy called the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. What that means is that Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) imposes strict controls over who can hunt and how many animals can be harvested. It's a simple strategy but one achieved through a complex, red-tape-lined labyrinth you'll need to know how to navigate.



A BRIEF GUIDE TO COLORADO HUNTING LICENSES.

SMALL-GAME LICENSE

Grants access to the diminutive wildlife you can bag anywhere hunting is permitted in Colorado for the entire year, though different animals have different seasons. \$15.55 for one day; \$33.96 for the season

LIMITED LICENSE

A big-game permit procured via a draw that specifies species, GMU, sex, dates, and weapon (such as rifle or archery). Deer \$47.91; elk \$66.12; pronghorn antelope \$47.91; moose \$366.13; bear \$60.05; prices for adult residents

OVER-THE-COUNTER (OTC) LICENSE

Sometimes called "unlimited licenses" because there's no cap on the number CPW sells. But these big-game passes do specify species, sex, and weapon, and are available only for certain GMUs. Prices are the same as limited licenses

TALK THE TALK

Knowing the vocabulary of hunting not only ensures you won't sound like a goof around the campfire, it also makes you a better sportsperson.

BAG LIMIT

The quota CPW sets for kills of a certain species. For example, in 2023, hunters were only allowed to harvest three rooster pheasants each day but could take up to eight quail.

BLIND

Structures that conceal a hunter. They can be located on the ground (behind natural terrain such as a log or an artificial tentlike edifice) or elevated in a tree or tower.

CALLING

Mimicking animals' sounds to draw wildlife

closer to you. Common examples include elks' bugles, turkey hens' yelps, and ducks' quacks.

CLEAN KILL

A shot through an animal's vital organs, which results in a quick death—the goal of all sportspersons. Conversely, a gut shot enters through the entrails and leads to a slow, painful demise for the animal.

DRAW

The lottery that determines allotment of limited licenses. Colorado organizes two each year.

DROP CAMP

A temporary headquarters used as a base of operations while stalking a particular area, usually in the backcountry.

FIELD DRESSING

The act of removing a carcass' entrails and internal organs following the kill to cool the meat and reduce spoilage.

FLUSHING

A technique in which some members of a hunting party walk toward an area in the hope of startling birds into flight, where they make better targets.

HARVEST

Although this term might conjure pastoral images of gathering crops come autumn, when applied to hunting, it means, simply, to kill an animal for food.

MUZZLELOADER

Hunters looking for a challenge often embrace the firearms of the Founding Fathers. Muzzleloaders require inserting the powder and projectile directly into the barrel, rendering them less



powerful and less accurate than rifles. They can only be used during specific seasons.

PROCESSING

Colorado law requires hunters to prepare the animals they harvest for consumption; processing is the fancy name for transforming meat into hamburger patties, steaks, sausages, or jerky.

POSTING

This method of hunting means a hunter stays in a single spot and waits for game to come into range. It's best employed with a blind or other cover, when you have studied the terrain, and when you know where wildlife crosses in a certain area. Also called ambush or stand hunting.

STILL HUNTING

A strategy that involves walking and then staying, well, still as you survey the terrain. It's most successful when the hunter uses cover and spends at least 10 times longer being still and observing than walking.

STALK

Hunting by tracking—following broken brush, tracks, or noises. But that noise you heard could be another hunter, so avoid this technique in call-heavy pursuits, such as turkey.

TAG

What hunters often call their license. In Colorado, it also refers to the portion of the license that must be attached to the carcass to ensure you don't kill more than you were allotted.

Cultivate Your Killer Instincts

Colorado Parks and Wildlife hunting mentor Cheryl Varela takes us to school.

For rookies who are full of enthusiasm but light on skills, CPW's Hunter Outreach Program includes educational offerings, from in-person clinics to online curriculum. The agency also organizes mentor hunts, during which a seasoned stalker guides novices on an outing. Perhaps no Coloradan has embraced these learning opportunities more than Cheryl Varela, 53, who attended her first class as a beginner in 2016 and became CPW's first woman mentor this summer. We recently spoke with the Longmont resident about the importance of proper schooling.

5280: Why did you want to start hunting?

Cheryl Varela: Being a mom of two boys, one of them with special needs, it's just a good way for me to get outdoors. It's not even about the harvest. It's about enjoying nature and being part of conservation.

How did you get connected with CPW's Hunter Outreach Program?

I was looking on the CPW's website, and it has all these learn-to-hunt classes. I think I did every class they had. Then, I went on a mentored pheasant hunt. I remember there was a lot of snow and it was really tiring because I hadn't trudged through knee-deep snow before. The great thing was having the mentor walking the field with you, helping you, and reminding you of safety and a lot of the different things you don't know.

That was your first hunt. Were you nervous?

Oh, I was extremely nervous. My biggest

fear was, Can I positively identify a rooster from a hen before I take the shot? Because in Colorado, you're only allowed to shoot the roosters, not the hens. Having mentors hollering "Rooster!" or "No shot!" was beneficial to building my confidence.

What's an example of a time when a CPW class helped in the field?

A friend and I went on our first big-game hunt in GMU 27 [in Routt and Grand counties]. We got out there at about two

o'clock and sat until sunset. All of a sudden, we heard this sound, like King Kong crashing through the forest. The next thing you know, I see a bull elk. I'm like, "Tiffany, you shoot him." She was so nervous, she missed, and I dropped him. We both looked at each other, like, Oh, my God, what do we do now? Fortunately, I had taken a class in field dressing in Colorado Springs. We worked till midnight gutting him out. I've never worked so hard in my entire life. I equate it to childbirth. But we actually did it, two girls by themselves.



LEARN THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

THE FAMILY SHOOTING CENTER

Located inside Cherry Creek State Park, the Family Shooting Center in Aurora offers a firearm safety course that decreases in price the more people you bring (starting at \$60). Once you're comfortable, move to the rifle or skeet (for shotgun sports) ranges to scope in for the season.



EMPTY QUIVER ARCHERY

This Broomfield archery range organizes beginner classes (\$22, plus \$8 for equipment rental) twice on Thursdays (4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.) and three times on Saturdays (9 a.m., 12 p.m., and 3 p.m.). You'll still probably want to book some private lessons with one of Empty Quiver's instructors before letting loose on any elk.

From top: Illustrator Credit TK; Getty Images

Sarah Banks





Hunting Buddy For Hire

Guides are a novice hunter's best friends.

While digesting CPW's curriculum is important, nothing can prepare you for the experience of your first excursion into the wild—which is why it's a good idea to hire a guide. These seasoned stalkers will not only point you where to go and teach you practical tracking skills but, as the three mentioned below indicate, offer various levels of comfort.

ROUGH IT

Based near Durango, Jennifer and Geoff Burbey have been stalking the San Juan Mountains since 1988. The couple's Highlands Unlimited sets up its drop-camp wall tents on rugged public land that's part of the National Wildlife Preservation System. That means motorized transportation is prohibited, so plan on hoofing it—literally. With 35 horses and mules, Highlands specializes in equine treks to environs rich with elk, bear, deer, and turkey.

RELAX IN RUSTIC COMFORT

Colorado's ample public lands are thick with wildlife. They're also thick with other hunters trying to harvest your animal. Great Western Hunting Camps leases a combined 120,000 acres of private ranches, split between two camps—one near Trinidad and one near Montrose—so your only competition will be the other sportspeople with you (the outfit takes a max of six hunters at a time). These quests sometimes occur in the mountains and foothills but often find their way to flat land, where elk,

pronghorn antelope, and white-tailed deer loiter in the brush and scrub oak. And because you're on private property, a truck will ferry you and your trophy back to your temporary digs: a plain-but-comfortable ranch house.

BRING THE FAMILY

The 8,500-acre-plus C Lazy U Ranch borders Rocky Mountain National Park, though elk, deer, and pronghorn antelope have no clue where the boundary begins. Guests of the resort's outfitter wing benefit from the wildlife's GPS-less navigation, though that's far from their only reward at the upscale ranch. Guides work one-on-one with each hunter, who are treated to luxe accommodations in the log-cabin-chic lodge and three daily meals as part of the all-inclusive hunting package. And while your children might not be keen to join you in a wall tent in the San Juans, they'll likely register little complaint about tagging along to C Lazy U for complimentary admission into the resort's Kids Club, which features horseback riding, zip-lining, and, for the very little ones, scavenger hunts.



TAKE AIM

Jennifer Burbey, president of the Colorado Outfitters Association, zeroes in on the questions you should ask to ensure you find the right guide for you.

1 Are They Bona Fide?

Any outfitter who hunts on land they don't own must be licensed by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA), whose website allows you to search by name. The results will show whether their license is valid and whether any complaints have been lodged against the company. If an outfitter operates on public land, the local U.S. Forest Service office should know whether it is bonded, insured, and approved to lead parties into the area.

2 Are They Your Kind Of Guide?

Some outfitters specialize in rough backcountry hunts, others in what could be called glamping expeditions. Some stalk one-on-one with their clients, others take a dozen or so customers with them. None of these options are wrong, but they might not be what you want. So ask how far into the bush their camps are located, what type of gear they use, and how many hunters they accommodate at a time.

3 Are They Skilled?

Almost all guides will wow you with photos of their kills, but remember: You have no idea if they had any hand in those hunts. To get a true barometer of their skills in the wild, ask for references and give greater weight to outfitters that seem to attract clients who return year after year.

Courtesy of C Lazy U Ranch

RUN THE NUMBERS

Playing the big-game lotto in Colorado is complicated, and many hunters aren't able to snag the limited licenses they wanted because they applied to hunt an animal in a game management unit (GMU) where requests exceeded quotas. To help you avoid going bust, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) publishes statistics each year that detail how many hunters put in for a GMU and how many tags were awarded. We combed the 2024 data to find areas that have good odds for big-game licenses. Hitting your mark once you have your tag? That's on you.

MOOSE

GMU 16
Located near Walden, where CPW introduced the species to Colorado in 1978, GMU 16 sits inside the Mount Zirkel Wilderness. Field note: Private land surrounds Zirkel, but there are a number of trailheads, including Lone Pine South, that lead you into the wilds.

field: In 2023, 60 percent of hunters left the Four Corners region with an ungulate.

PRONGHORN ANTELOPE

GMU 106
About an hour east of Denver, GMU 106 boasts large quotas and

high chances—if you can access it. The entire area is private land, but you're allowed to hunt it as long as you get the owner's permission. (They're often eager to have someone eradicate these crop-munching animals.) A guide with rights to a parcel can also escort you to your

prey.

WILD TURKEY

GMU 34
Turkeys may not technically be big game, but CPW uses the same GMUs to regulate their draw. (Bighorn sheep and mountain goats have completely

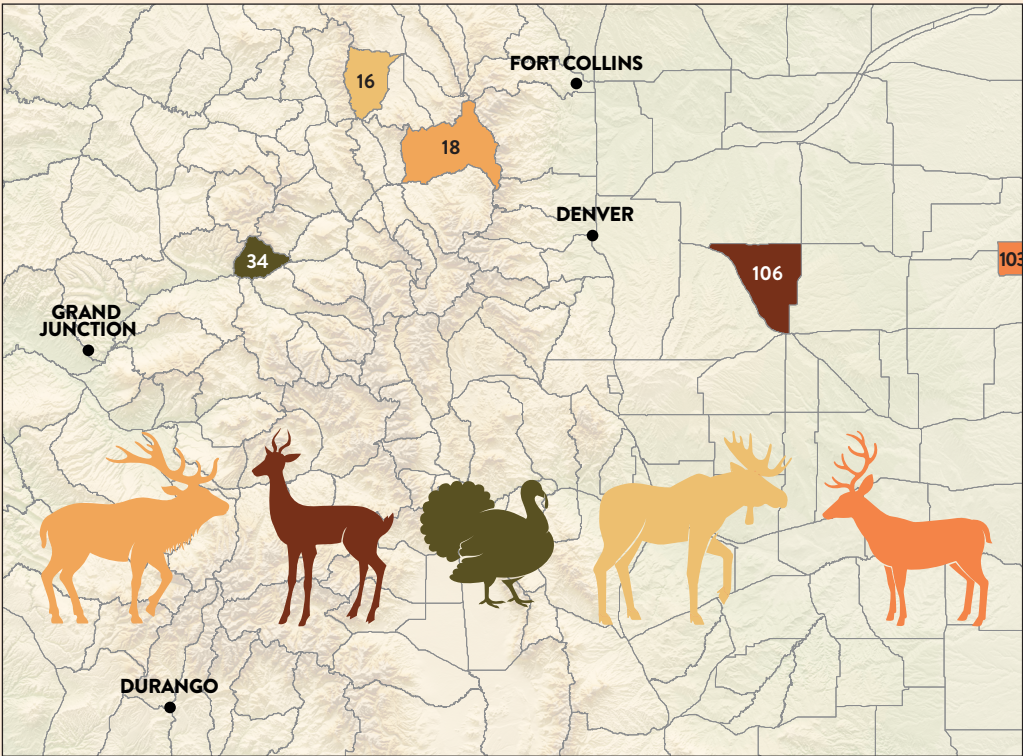
different GMUs.) There is a cornucopia of tags available in this section, and you can soak your blues away at nearby Glenwood Hot Springs should you leave the field empty-handed.

ELK

GMU 18
This Grand County unit is managed for opportunity. Its high quota for each season means you're likely to snag a tag—but its close-to-Denver location means you're also bound to bump into other hunters. Seek out the east fork of Troublesome Creek to avoid the crowds.

DEER

GMU 72
Deer tags are relatively easy to nab, but GMU 72 strikes a balance between luck in the lotto and luck in the



FIELD SURGEONS WANTED

The squeamish need not apply.

Whether you call it gralloching or field dressing, removing an animal's still-warm entrails can be a little ick. OK, a lot ick. You'll need to get over it, though—and quickly. At field dressing's most basic, it requires a hunter to slice open an animal's belly and remove the blood and internal organs. This cools down the kill, reducing the proliferation of bacteria often caused by heat above 40 degrees. Working quickly and cleanly—dirt and moisture can lead to spoilage, too—hunters often quarter the animal, slip the parts into a game bag, and haul out what can be as much as 400 or 500 pounds of meat (depending on the animal) to a wild-game processor. If you're hunting on private land, you can load your kill into a truck or ATV. But many public spaces don't permit motorized vehicles beyond a certain point, so you'll have to haul the body out using human power. (Field dressing lightens the load, but the load isn't light.) Whatever method hunters deploy, CPW doesn't mind if you leave the bones and entrails behind for the vultures to fight over.



Getty Images (2)

CLEAR YOUR CONSCIENCE

Throughout history, hunters don't have a great track record of conservation. Thanks to oversight from agencies such as Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), however, animals that were once driven to the brink of extinction by overhunting are thriving in Colorado—and actually require culling to prevent their populations from overrunning their habitats. Here, three big-game opportunities you can feel good about harvesting.

GAME	WILD TURKEY	ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK	MOOSE
			
BACKSTORY	These Thanksgiving treats were near-extinction in North America during the Great Depression, but CPW managed a reintroduction in the 1980s, and there are now more than 35,000 gobblers in the state.	Just like turkeys, elk almost went the way of the dodo, with fewer than 40,000 roaming the continent in the early 1900s. Today, Colorado boasts the largest population of elk—they're found everywhere in the Centennial State, but the majority hang out on the Western Slope—in the world, with about 280,000 animals.	Typically ranging from 800 to 1,200 pounds, these mammals aren't native to Colorado. In the 1970s, CPW began importing Bullwinkles from Utah and Wyoming to generate revenue from hunting licenses. The imports' offspring have rutted like crazy, and their descendants now number an estimated 3,000 in the Centennial State.
WHY YOU MIGHT WANT TO HUNT THEM	Found almost everywhere in Colorado, turkeys are accessible. Plus, spring turkey season starts in April, presenting the first opportunity for hunters to chase something other than small game. And turkeys are the closest targets hunters can get to elk (without hunting elk) because they require interaction with the animal: specifically, calling to lure them into range.	With all due respect to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (the state animal), there's no better emblem of Colorado's rugged character than elk. Their numbers have grown so dramatically here that hunters are necessary to help reduce the species' competition among itself for resources—especially during winter.	Bull moose are a once-in-a-lifetime quarry. CPW limits hunters to one per lifetime, though there's no quota on cows. They usually travel alone, and are typically spotted in riparian zones (along rivers, streams, and lakes), where they can be difficult to spot while munching on brush in shaded areas.
HOW YOU CAN HUNT THEM	There are two turkey seasons, one in the spring and one in the fall. Both require draws. Over-the-counter (OTC) licenses are also available for certain game management units (GMUs). Hunters usually take the birds with shotguns, but you can also loose an arrow at them. Rifles and handguns are illegal during the spring season.	Archery and muzzleloader seasons come first, opening and closing in September, followed by four rifle seasons, starting in October and running through November. These all require limited licenses via draws, but OTC licenses for certain GMUs are also available. (For more tips, study CPW's exhaustive online curriculum, Elk Hunting University.)	During the season, you can take moose with a bow, muzzleloader (both in September), or rifle (October). You must enter a draw to receive a license; CPW doesn't offer OTCs for the mammal. Even in the lottery, the chances of receiving a tag are slim: In 2024, almost 60,000 hunters selected moose as their first choice in the draw, and the agency bestowed only 664 winning tickets.

From left: Tim Nichols/Getty Images; S.J. Krasemann/Getty Images; Matt Dirksen/Getty Images

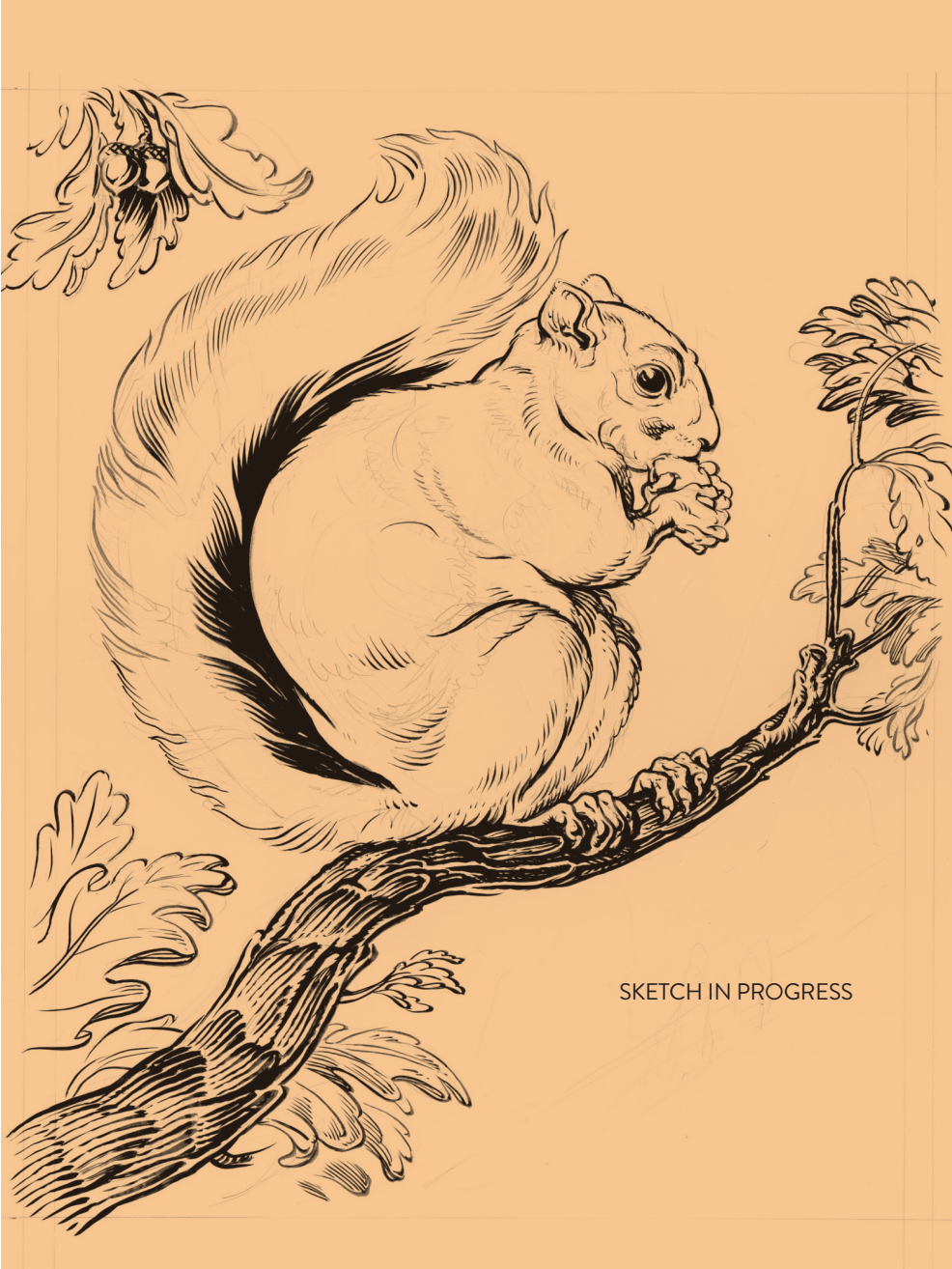
The Most Delicious Game

For novice hunters, squirrels are a great place to start.

On a crisp morning in February 2023, a few pals and I set off through the woods outside of Fairplay—though this was hardly a leisurely hike. Armed with a shotgun, I scanned the trees looking for movement. The silence was broken when we finally heard a rustling in the branches above us. Acorns from the wall of oaks surrounding us littered the ground. As yet another hit the earth, I steadied my gun and took aim at the critter perched on a branch above me. Even from 20 yards away, I knew this particularly plump squirrel would make for good eating.

Now 30, I grew up hunting deer and turkey on my grandfather's farm in Missouri and survived college in Florida on the wild boar meat I harvested there. I always believed big game was the pinnacle of the sport, especially after moving to the elk-thick environs of Colorado in 2019. But then, in 2023, I heard about the World Championship Squirrel Cook-off, held each September in Springdale, Arkansas. Being both curious and country (my mother owned a pet bear growing up; I pulled out my wisdom teeth using pliers), the contest appealed to me. I filled out my entry form and immediately began dreaming up recipes.

To test and perfect my dish, I needed to procure a steady supply of the main ingredient, so I began scouring Colorado's public lands for squirrels. (You need to buy a small-game license, and different squirrel species have different seasons and bag limits.) Much to my surprise, squirrel hunting offered a refreshing contrast to big-game hunting, which might require you to spend days traversing tough terrain without spotting a single animal and, if you're successful, pack out a massive carcass. Squirrel hunting, on the other hand, is low stakes and



SKETCH IN PROGRESS

high reward. You're likely to see multiple squirrels in a single outing, and they're particularly forgiving of novice hunters: You don't have to be quiet because startling the rodent only betrays its location, and there's likely to be another opportunity if you miss your shot.

Another surprise was how versatile squirrels are in the kitchen. They absorb flavor like a Nerf football soaks up water. I experimented with various recipes, from squirrel steaks to squirrel soup, before eventually settling on tamales fried in bear fat served with a crema sauce made from ancho chile peppers, red chiles, red peppercorns, chili powder, and tomato bouillon. My dish was good—but got destroyed in Arkansas.

It isn't often that I get out-rednecked,

but most of my competitors looked like they'd been frying bark bacon since Moby Dick was a sardine. (I should've known better: I've been on hog hunts in Arkansas. I'll never forget the look of shock on the men's faces when I told them I'd never eaten raccoon before.) These men and women were wild-game culinarians, cooking up squirrel and waffles, squirrel khao soi, and squirrel al pastor. Every bite tasted delicious.

Still, I remain undeterred. I've spent the past year preparing for a return to the Natural State this month, and I'm leaning toward presenting a reimagining of my grandmother's Bolognese. As fun as the cook-off will be, though, my favorite part remains procuring the ingredients for the test kitchen. **-TY FLORES**

Pay To Play

Hunters have picked up the tab for millions of acres of protected land in Colorado.

Even within the picturesque confines of Colorado's South Park region, Collard Ranch stands apart. Flanked by Pike National Forest and surrounded by the Lost Park Wilderness, the Kenosha Mountains, and the Mosquito Range, the property stretches across 1,860 spectacular acres. A five-mile section of Tarryall Creek, a tributary of the South Platte River, winds through the parcel, creating a wetland ecosystem that draws elk, woodpeckers, mountain plovers, and boreal toads.

Collard Ranch presented a rare opportunity, then, when its previous owners put the land up for sale in 2023. Rather than risk the acreage being snapped up by a private buyer, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) purchased the property this past March. As unique as Collard Ranch's landscape is, however, this type of acquisition has become common in Colorado—thanks, in large part, to hunters. In 2006, CPW launched the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Protection Program, an initiative that raises money through the , a now \$12.15 annual fee tacked onto hunting

and fishing licenses. (You can also secure a lifetime stamp for \$364.63.) CPW uses those funds, often in concert with profits from the state lottery, to buy and preserve important ecosystems under its State Wildlife Area designation. In turn, hunters and anglers get to reap the land's bounty—under strict conservation rules imposed by CPW, of course. Since the program's inception, the stamp has helped purchase 146 million acres of state land.

To secure Collard Ranch, CPW used \$2 million in stamp money and \$6.25 million from Great Outdoors Colorado. After building the necessary infrastructure, the state will eventually open the property as Collard Ranch State Wildlife Area, where anglers will cast their lines into Tarryall Creek in search of trout, and hunters will pursue the litany of elk that migrate across the property during the fall, as well as mule deer and pronghorn antelope. "All hunters are conservationists," says Kara Van Noose, a public information officer with CPW. "I know that sounds strange, but hunters care about wildlife." After all, the sport is not possible without it.



EAT YOUR MEAT

A visit to your friendly neighborhood processor completes the wilderness-to-table journey.

Trophy hunting, as in killing animals solely for sport, isn't really most Coloradans' bag. Even if it was, a state statute requires that hunters eat the edible portions of their harvests. Fortunately, the process of processing wild game into palatable portions is as simple as finding a processor. One such provider, 38-year-old Steve's Meat Market in Olde Town Arvada, divvies up about 4,500 carcasses per year; its basic package includes burgers, steaks, and roasts, all vacuum-sealed and (if desired) flash frozen for long-term storage. The price: \$1.60 per pound, and customers can expect about 60 percent of the total weight of the carcass to yield comestible portions. More specialized products, such as sausage and jerky, cost more. The difficult part is getting the harvest to the processor in time to avoid rotting—a task that's become more difficult as temperatures rise. "We have seen a huge change in our weather in Colorado," says Steve's co-owner Trev Stuckey, who recommends skinning the animal and getting it into a cooler quickly to ensure the carcass cools faster. With autumn and winter staying hotter longer, he adds, hunters have taken to bringing generator-fueled freezers with them on hunts. But the most surefire way to keep your meat from going bad before you have a chance to enjoy it is to field dress it properly and make a beeline for the processor. Also: "You can never have too much ice," Stuckey says.

Christi Bode/Courtesy of Western Rivers Conservancy

SAVOR THE FLAVOR

The most ethical (and satisfying) hunts end at the dinner table.

When Elise Wiggins was six years old, her father took her hunting on family land in Louisiana. The duo eventually came upon a blackbird, but before firing, he told her, "We don't just shoot to kill. We shoot to eat." Wiggins never forgot the lesson. Today, she's the chef/owner of Cattivella, a wood-fired Italian restaurant in Denver's Central Park neighborhood, as well as an avid sportsperson who's passionate about wild game. In fact, she bagged her first elk last year in New Mexico. Many people would have ground the resulting meat to make simple sausages or chilis. Then again, most people aren't world-class toques—but you can pretend to be by following Wiggins' recipe for grilled elk chop, featuring ingredients found in the wilds of Colorado.

ELK FORAGING DISH

Serves 2 to 4

INGREDIENTS

For the elk

- 1 elk tomahawk chop, bone-in (anywhere from 2 to 5 lbs.)
- 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 large rosemary sprig
- Olive oil for rubbing
- Salt

For the sauce

- 20 pine needles, foraged locally
- 3 wild juniper berries
- 2 Tbs. fennel seed
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 1 cup demi-glace sauce
- 1 cup ruby port
- 1 orange peel
- 1 Tbs. lemon juice
- 4 Tbs. unsalted butter

For the garnish

- Hand full of lichen (aka old man's beard, foraged locally, soaked in water, and rinsed 5 to 6 times over 1 day)
- 1 oz. frying oil of your choice
- 2 whole garlic cloves
- Salt
- Gorgonzola crumbles
- Tarragon, chopped

For the butternut squash puree

- 1 butternut squash
- 1 pinch cinnamon
- 2 pinches sea salt
- 1 Tbs. white pepper
- 1 tsp. lemon juice
- 2 Tbs. unsalted butter

DIRECTIONS

1. Rub elk chop with garlic and rosemary. Place in large sous vide bag. Cook in oven at 130° for 4 to 6 hours until medium rare.
2. To make the sauce, combine all ingredients except the lemon juice and butter. Simmer and reduce until the sauce coats the back of a metal spoon. Strain and set aside.
3. To make the lichen garnish, drain the lichen and set it on a towel to dry. Heat the frying oil with garlic to 350°, then remove the garlic. Fry the lichen in batches no wider than four inches and salt it after you remove it. Place it on paper towels to soak up extra oil.
4. Preheat your grill or flat top to smoking hot. Remove the elk from the sous vide bag and pat it dry. Rub it with olive oil and sprinkle with salt. Sear your chop until a nice crust forms on both sides. Remove and set it on a resting rack.

Allow to rest for at least 6 minutes.

5. Split and de-seed the butternut squash, then place it flesh-side-down on a roasting pan that has been rubbed with oil. Roast at 350° for about one hour or until the outside is squishy to the touch. Puree in a blender, then heat the puree, cinnamon, salt, and white pepper on medium heat, folding in the spices. Add the lemon juice and butter. Whisk quickly until the butter is melted. Remove from heat.

Plating

6. Cut your elk loin off the chop, then slice it into quarter-inch to half-inch thick pieces. Place the butternut squash puree on a large serving platter. Shingle the loin slices across the squash. Lay the tomahawk bone beside the slices and pour the sauce over the top of the meat. Garnish with the Gorgonzola crumbs, chopped tarragon, and fried lichen. ▲



Sarah Banks