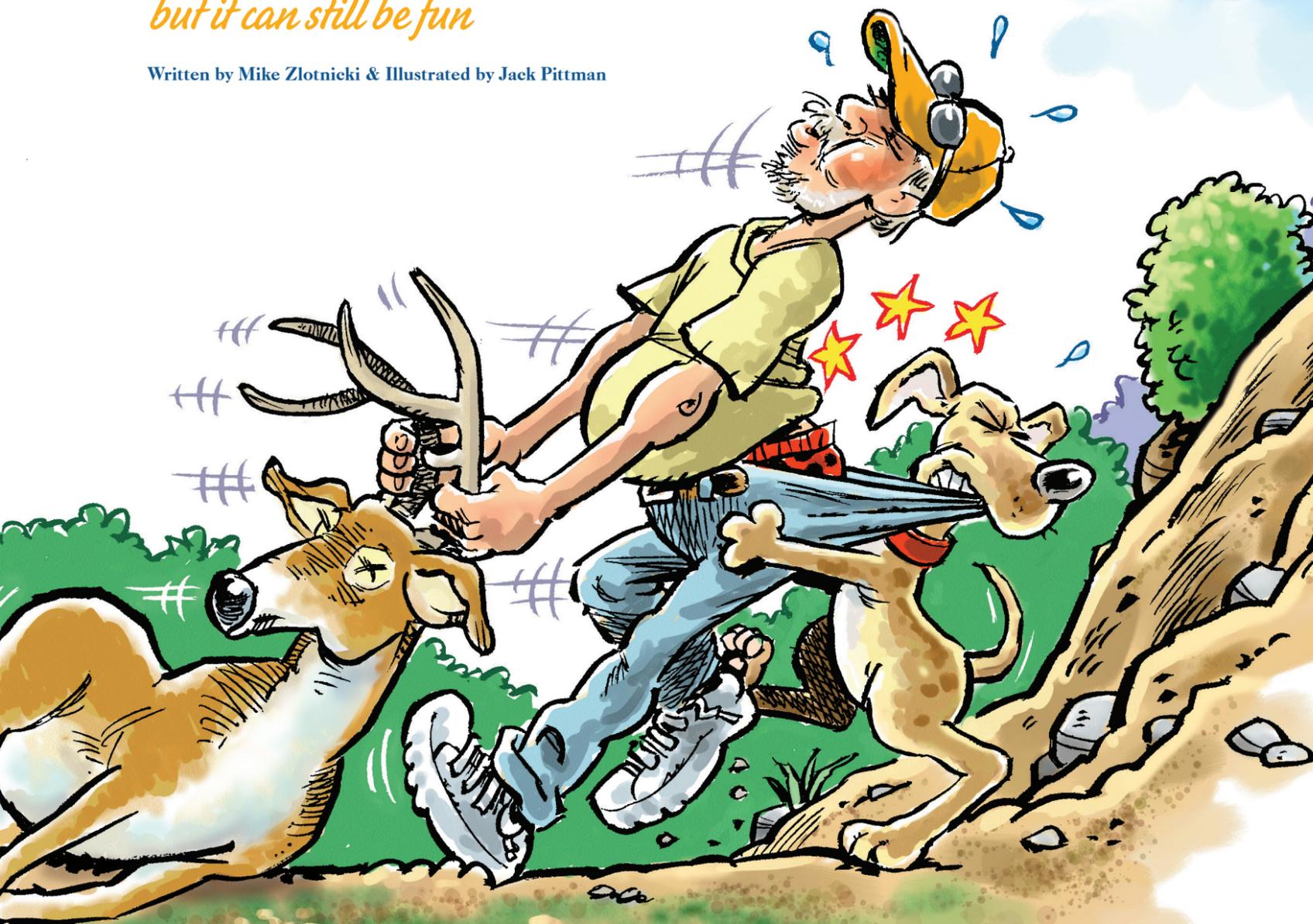


Aging *in the* Outdoors

*Getting old ain't easy for outdoorsmen,
but it can still be fun*

Written by Mike Zlotnicki & Illustrated by Jack Pittman



Irish author and playwright George Bernard Shaw once said that youth is wasted on the young. I was reminded of that last December.

Due to aging parents and various family matters, I was unable to get in the tree stand as often as I usually do in a given season. In fact, I got out just twice and was fortunate enough to kill a small six-pointer. As luck would have it, he ran down a steep hill in Chatham County toward the Rocky River and piled up in blackberry thicket.

I dragged the buck—which might have weighed 130 pounds—about 60 yards up a hill to load in my Tundra to then take to the gambrel for skinning and processing. I am a regular in the weight room and admittedly could use more cardio work, but I was downright alarmed at my struggles getting that deer up the hill. Dragging backwards using short, choppy steps, my heart was pounding and my breathing was labored.

I got the deer uphill enough to get the truck to it and had the help of fellow Commission staffer Thomas Harvey to load it, but the realization hit me: At 54, I'm getting old and some things are more difficult than they used to be (or should be). Fortunately, I'm not alone in this realization and have plenty of peers also figuring out how to continue doing what we love as we age. So, I reached out to some colleagues of mine to see how they handle Father Time.

Still Hunting After All These Years

It wasn't long after my deer-dragging episode that I met with Bill Williams of Apex. Williams is one of the most accomplished outdoorsmen I know. If it swims, flies or walks, Williams has probably pursued it, and he's lost count of the number of wild turkeys he has taken or helped someone else harvest.

At 76 years young, Williams is still at it hard but admits to making some concessions. The previous weekend, for example, he went duck hunting in Hyde County. He surveyed the impoundment and decided that he and his artificial hip would let the younger hunters put out the decoy spread.

"Sometimes the juice isn't worth the squeeze," he said.

Williams has taken a similar step back when it comes to turkey hunting. No longer does he take a run-and-gun approach, but rather waits for the bird to come to him. It has allowed him to continue pursuing turkey in a manageable way.

Like most older hunters, Williams has some hearing loss. I suffer from tinnitus also, due to years of shooting sports and a decade of working concert security at the Dean E. Smith Center. Another thing we share is a need for reading glasses and a penchant for losing them in the field.

"I think the strongest, most evident thing was when I was turkey hunting with another person, which I frequently do," he said, "and they'd say, 'Did you hear that turkey?' And I'd have to say no."

Slippery Road Ahead

Jim Wilson, former editor of *Wildlife in North Carolina*, believes that there are two issues with aging and continuing outdoor pursuits. "One is physical limitations," he said. "Those are pretty obvious most of the time. Some people get too heavy, others have heart problems, etc. Fortunately, I don't really have any of those yet at age 66."

Wilson thinks he falls into the larger category of outdoorsmen, comparing himself to the guy who looks at his roof one day, notices

the gutters need to be cleaned and comes to a realization: "Nah, I'm not doing that any longer." Then he calls a handyman. Or lets somebody else put out the decoys.

An avid trout angler, Wilson has also become a more cerebral wader.

"I find that I'm much more careful in trout streams than I used to be," he said. "I've come to realize that if I suffer a badly broken bone in my 60s, I might live with it for the rest of my life. Old bones just don't heal like younger bones do. A wading staff has become my best friend on the water. I try to eliminate situations that might lead to problems."

Wilson used to enjoy duck hunting, which can be a lot of work and offers the potential for mishaps galore. As he continues his journey through middle age, he tries to limit the risk factors in his outdoor activities.

"My last duck hunting trip was five or six years ago in Hyde County with a group of guys I didn't know very well," he recalled. "They knew little about hunting anything other than Piedmont swamps. Two of them nearly overturned a canoe in the Alligator River while reaching too far for a duck. Another hauled out a submerged log when he was pulling his boat from the river and nearly knocked me into the river. That was the same trip when I got up at 3 a.m. to drive back to Raleigh and mistakenly brushed my teeth with cortisone ointment instead of toothpaste. It took 24 hours to get rid of the taste. I miss duck hunting, but I don't miss it enough to go."

Upland Effort

Some of the most strenuous hunting in North Carolina is the pursuit of upland birds, particularly if the quarry is ruffed grouse in the mountains. One of the best at that is Stephen Faust of Stoneybrook Outfitters. Faust and his Gordon setters chase birds in Minnesota, Michigan, Virginia and North Carolina.

Last season, Faust recorded 1,326 woodcock flushes and had 486 grouse flushes with a couple of hunts to go when I talked to him. That's a lot of birds, but also a lot of miles where the ground's not flat. Although Faust is still young and fit, his clientele demographic ranges from "mid 20s to 82"

in age. I talked to him about guiding older hunters in physically challenging terrain.

"I carry extra snacks and water for my older clientele," he said. "I remember to stop once in a while."

(He forgot about that part when I went out with him.)

"Honestly, it's more of a challenge for the dogs to pace an older client," he said. "It takes them about a half-hour to adjust [to a slower hunter]."

One of Faust's strategies is to hunt the hardest, thickest coverts first while the client has the most energy. That makes sense for any strenuous hunting. He keeps a first-aid kit in his truck, and he is CPR certified. His insurance requires his clients to sign a waiver stating they are physically fit enough to hunt.

Although Faust said cell phone service is surprisingly good in most of his spots, a GPS is still good insurance when cell service is sketchy. For those hunting, hiking or boating

in extreme isolation, an emergency position-indicating radio beacon unit (EPIRB) might be worth the investment. These units use satellites, not cell towers.

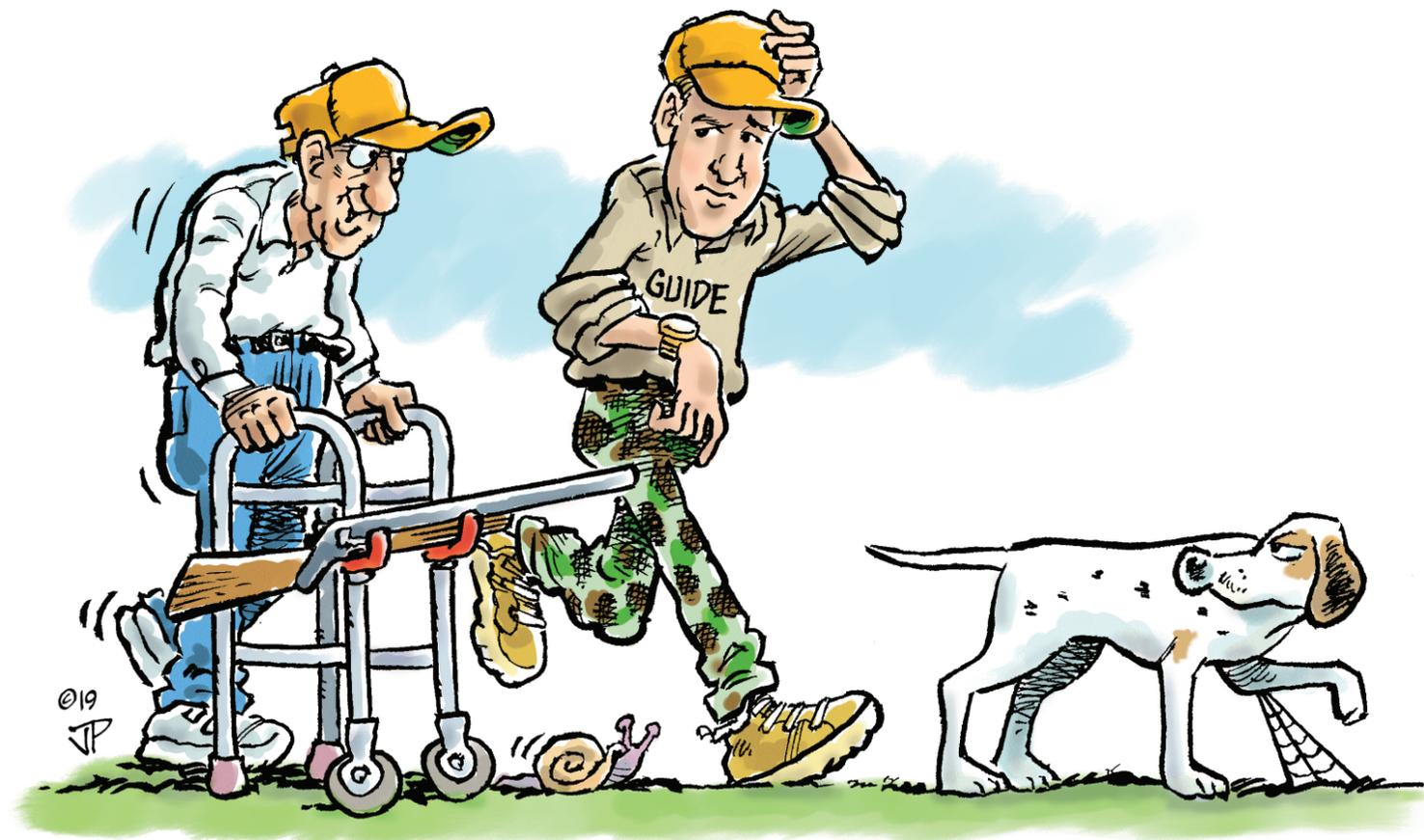
"The first thing I do is mark where the truck is," he said. "In case something happens to me, my clients will know the pass code to the truck, and they will know where my keys are hidden."

Often with his older clients, Faust's role is less of a guide and more of a companion. "A lot of my older clients don't care if they shoot," he said. "Sometimes I'm just a paid hunting buddy."

Don't Hate Me Because I'm Active

Next on my list of middle-aged outdoorsmen is Walter "Deet" James, the Commission's hunting heritage biologist from Shamokin, Pa. I thought he would be a great source at age 58, but after our conversation, not so much. James bikes to the bus stop each

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morning, works out regularly, has no noticeable belly fat, owns a nice collection of guns and stays in a tree stand all day long. So yes, there is a lot to dislike about my colleague.

Though it may not be obvious, there is a method to James' madness and a lesson to be learned from his one-track mindset: Be prepared. And for James, that includes physically training for hunting.

"Nearly everything I do on a daily or weekly basis pre-season includes light weight training—not the heavy stuff like I used to do," he said. "Primarily dumbbell

workouts. When it's not hunting season, [I usually train] two or three times a week. I also bike and bus to work two miles in and two miles back. If I'm not riding it's because it's raining."

James also credits his simple lifestyle and diet for his good health. As we all know, fat is harder to burn and calories tougher to shed as we get older.

"I try to watch my diet. It's primarily a diet of venison and vegetables," he said. "I'm like a dog; I live by myself and I don't eat variety and I enjoy that. I like healthy eating and I try to lose some weight in the spring. I typically cheat with some fatty junk in the fall.

"Year-round, whether it be parking in a Wal-Mart parking lot or somewhere else, I'll never find those spots up close by the door. I will typically park in the back of the parking lot to get those extra few steps in. I avoid elevators. I also try to do two to three sets on the six flights of stairs at work."

James recommends older hunters check with their doctors and then develop an exercise regimen at least three times a week that includes stretching. He also recommends equipment that makes a given job easier; good boots for walking, using a cart to haul a deer out of the woods, lighter (and more expensive) aluminum climbing stands.

"For deer hunting, climbers are my favorite," he said. "I feel most safe and secure in one. It's like I'm still 20 years old in a climber."

Go See a Doctor

In search of some medical information, I found myself at UNC Rex Hospital—thankfully, only as a visitor. I had arranged time to talk with Dr. Ben Walker, department chair of cardiology and director of cardiac rehab. He reiterated that cardiovascular issues are the biggest health threats to outdoorsmen and women. While the timing of symptoms can depend on a person's family history, risk factors begin to change in your 40s and 50s.

"It's like a house," he said. "It has the pipes in there [that] are more likely to build up crud the older the house is. It's the same thing with our bodies. The older, the more likely."

I found this particularly interesting since I do have a family history of heart issues. So, this naturally led to the question of how do I know if what I was feeling in my chest after dragging a deer 60 yards up a hill was, in fact, a heart attack? Much like with risk factors, Walker said, symptoms can depend on the person.

"I think each person is different," Walker said. "The classic teaching is having chest pressure or tightness in the center of the chest. People describe [a sensation] like a load of bricks or an elephant sitting on their chest that won't go away. That's the most classic. It can sometimes radiate or move up to the left jaw or the left arm, and that would be the textbook answer.

"What we get worried about is not everyone has the same symptoms, particularly patients with diabetes. They don't always have chest discomfort. And, also, females are less likely to have common presentations. They're more likely to have an atypical presentation."

Walker stressed the importance of making sure that you are physically able to handle heavy exertion before going afield. This can include being tested for high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol and other risk factors. Perhaps most important, he said, is being aerobically fit. Any outdoors enthusiast needs to be able to do aerobic activities without symptoms. It's sort of a crude stress test.

"Whether you're walking, biking, going up a hill, hiking, whatever it is that makes you happy," he said. "Doing that for about 20, 30 minutes without limitations, that's what you're kind of looking for. And as you exercise, even if you are deconditioned, the more you exercise, typically you get better over time. It's when you don't get better that [we] say, 'Well, maybe we should test your heart first before we actually start doing heavy exertional activities.'"

As your risk factors increase, so does the need of having a partner with you afield and having a reliable means of communication.

If you have a medical emergency, getting help—and getting it quickly—is paramount.

"If your cellphones don't work because you're in a remote area, those emergency response [devices] people have [like an EPIRB] are really helpful if you do have symptoms," Walker said. "Because all this comes down to time. If you have a blocked artery and you get unlucky and have a

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heart attack out in the middle of nowhere, the clock's ticking. And that clock, the same thing with a stroke, you're looking at about 90 minutes or less before permanent damage happens."

Don't Let Fear Win

As scary as some of these warnings sound, they should not frighten you out of doing what you love. This was reaffirmed as I thought back to my conversation with Bill Williams, particularly his love of the outdoors. His words were at once quiet and earnest.

"I live for it," he said, staring out the den window. "The richness, the outdoor activities, the chase of fish and game. I don't envision enjoying life when I can no longer do it."

Hopefully, that won't come for a good while. It's been said that one's life is a start date, an end date and a dash in the middle. What you do in that dash is up to you. Take care of yourself, for starters. Nobody else can. ♦

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