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 episo-
dode that I met Bill Williams of Apex.
Williams is one of the most accomplished
outsiders 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
but admits to making some concessions.
The previous weekend, for example, he
didn't duck hunting in Hyde County. He
surveyed the impoundment and decided that he had
his artificial hip would let him and
his hunting buddy. He may not have
a realization: "Nah, I'm not doing that any
longer," 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
were able to find a path through 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 overturned a canoe in the Alligator
River while reaching too far for a duck.

"I find that I'm much more careful in
turkey hunting 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
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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: he is 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, 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 will never find those spare spots 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 equipment that makes a given job easier; and that would be the textbook answer.

“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 every one 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, hiking, going up a hill, biking, 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 heart attack out in the middle of nowhere, the chase of fish and game. I don’t envision enjoying life when I can no longer do it.”

“The richness, the outdoor activities, the chase of fish and game. I don’t envision enjoying life when I can no longer do it.”

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. Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor for Wildlife in North Carolina. He can be reached at 919-707-0175.

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