

How to pick an Outfitter/Guide, Tips from *God's Great Outdoors Board*, by Bill Brown

The right outfitter/guide can be the difference between a great hunt or a horrible memory. There are a number of steps that you can take to ensure the best experience possible.

1. First of all you need to start months in advance. I would recommend starting the year before your trip. Considering that most hunting areas now have limited nonresident licenses and tags, you need to know the application deadlines.
2. Understand your own abilities and know your goals; are you an experienced hunter capable of a self-guided hunt, wanting a trophy class animal, or a respectable animal with a great memory? Are you in the physical conditioning to complete the hunt? The average hunter from Georgia who walks the 400 yards to his tree stand will have a rude awakening climbing a ridgeline at 7,000 feet day after day.
3. Know the game laws applicable to your hunt. A non-resident must have a licensed guide to hunt mountain goat, brown bear, and Dall sheep in Alaska. Although I lived in Alaska for twenty years I would now have to hire a guide, unless I was accompanied by my son who is an Alaskan resident.
4. Check the on-line resources of the state wildlife agency. Often the state will have links to licensed guides and outfitters. Usually a guide is licensed to accompany the hunter, an outfitter is simply permitted to provide transportation, equipment, and other non-guide support to a hunter. Be sure that the business is licensed to provide the services you are contracting.
5. Ask wildlife personnel for recommendations and the Better Business Bureau for any complaints.
6. Do not assume that the business is under the same management. Ask. I had several friends stranded for seven days in the Brooks Range of Alaska when the pilot did not return for them. It was the same company they had used for years, but the new owner had overextended his bookings and lacked the experience to finish the job.
7. Contact three or four of the top businesses for your hunt area. Ask for a list of former clients, then contact them. In the course of your conversation be sure to ask them for any names they can refer that are not on the guide's list.
8. Communicate with several of the "finalists." Ask them:
 - a. What success rate do they have? Be suspicious if the rate sounds high.
 - b. What range of animal can you expect? If you are wanting a 180 plus whitetail don't go to a region that 160 is the exception.
 - c. Is the hunt "fair chase"? Laws vary concerning the use of radios, motorized transportation, baiting, and other factors that affect the hunt.
 - d. What is the guide/ client ratio?
 - e. What services are included in the cost; care of the trophies, equipment, food?
 - f. What do you need to bring? A pair of boots suitable for Kansas will not last long on the sheer slopes of the Rockies. Cotton clothing, especially waffle long johns is courting disaster in cold, wet, weather. Most guides provide a list of recommended equipment.
9. Get a sense of the guide's personality. Most of the people in the business are good guys, but personalities differ. Talk enough with them to get a sense of how well you fit.
10. Stay in touch until the hunt. One of the things I enjoyed most in the off season was talking with perspective clients about their upcoming "trip of a life time."