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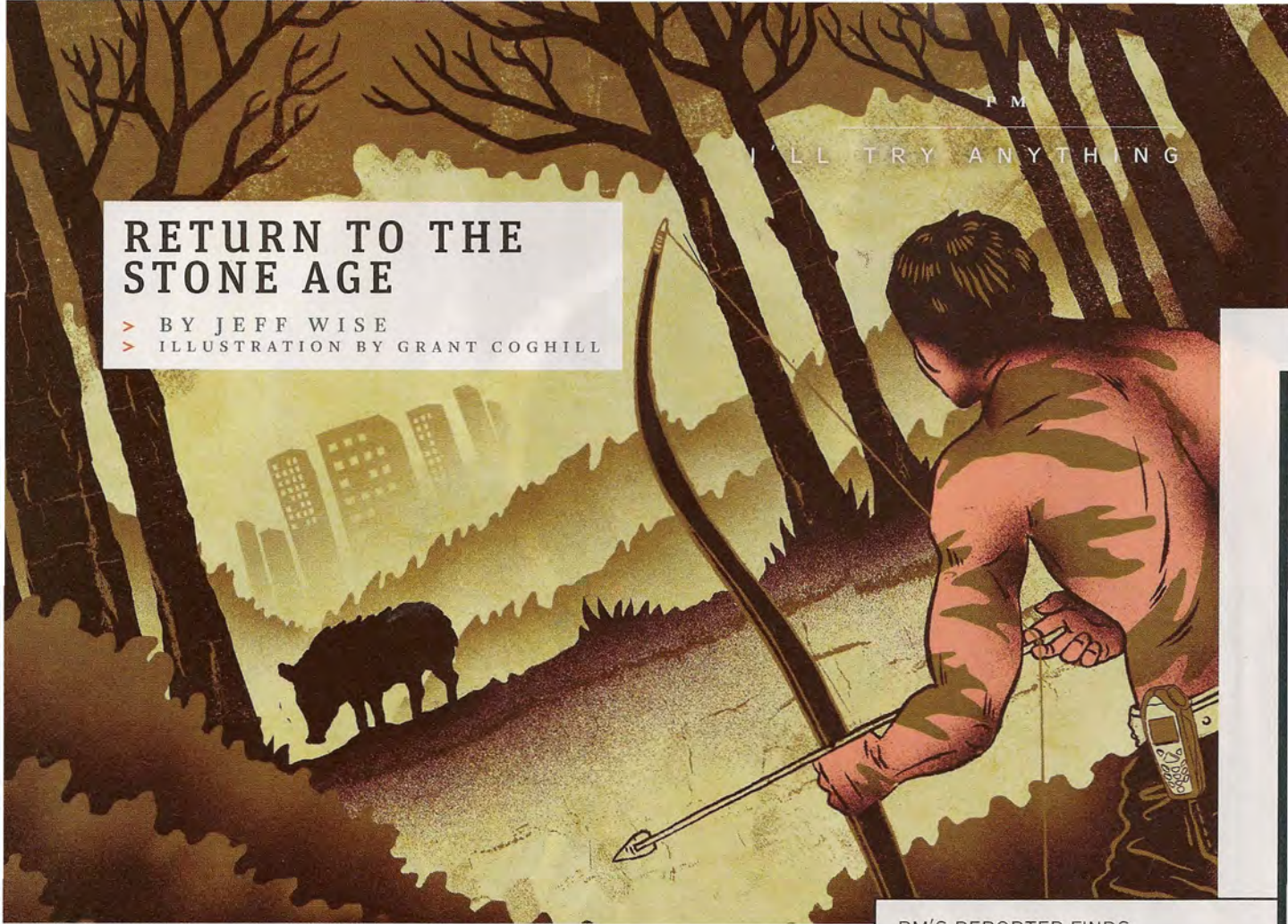


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# RETURN TO THE STONE AGE

> BY JEFF WISE  
> ILLUSTRATION BY GRANT COGHILL



PM'S REPORTER FINDS THAT PRIMITIVE HUNTERS NEEDED MORE THAN SKILL TO BAG A MEAL.

# A

**MIST HANGS IN THE FORESTED VALLEY AS** dawn approaches. Somewhere a lone bird calls. I sit on my haunches, listening. There are wild pigs in this forest, somewhere. Daylight might draw them up through this thicket to the ridgeline behind me. My quarry is a razor-tusked beast that can weigh several hundred pounds and is famous for exacting violent revenge on hunters. I check my weapons—a wooden bow and a single stone-tipped arrow—and find myself wondering: Is this really a great idea?

Ahead of me, a rustling in the bushes. I sink lower. There's the sound again, the *scritch-scritch* of an animal rooting through leaf litter. Whatever it is, it's close, no more than 4 or 5 yards ahead through the undergrowth. The noise moves closer. Is it a pig? If so, I'll have just one chance to inflict a mortal wound.

The rustling grows closer, then stops. I catch my breath. The Santa Cruz Mountains are home to more than pigs. There are mountain lions, too. Judging from the racket, this thing is big. I'm not packing a gun or even a knife. My God, I think. What have I gotten myself into?

The *scritch-scritch* moves closer still. I strain my eyes trying to peer into the undergrowth. At last, a flicker of motion, and it emerges. It's...

A robin.  
I've survived this close call, but my struggle is far from over. I'm in Northern California to participate in a ritual that many assume has been extinct since the frontier days. My guide, 30-year-old Cliff Hodges, is one of a few dozen people in the country who hunt pig, bear and other big game with weapons made only of natural materials—wood, flint and feathers.

Hodges grew up near Silicon Valley and earned a master's degree in electrical engineering from MIT, but then realized that what really spoke to him was the great outdoors. He turned his back on high tech and started a wilderness-skills school, Adventure Out. Primitive toolmaking, he says, is a way to feel closer to the natural world. "We rarely get to experience our food as living things," he says. "Only when you see an animal

I'LL TRY ANYTHING ///  
STONE AGE HUNTING

moving in its environment can you understand its sacrifice.”

Primitive-skills hunting is incredibly difficult. Each bow requires weeks of work, as a rough stave is gradually whittled and sculpted to a sinewy, springy arc. Even so, the end product has a lethal range of just about 15 yards. To take out a pig, a hunter has to get close and set up a shot from just the right angle, so the arrow passes

The finished piece is lightweight and surprisingly sharp. This is the original human technology; our ancestors began using sharpened rocks 2 million years ago. With time, techniques became more sophisticated, so that eventually distinct cultures could be identified by the unique patterns of their stonework. Archaeologists can tell how modern humans moved into Europe around 30,000 years ago by the way dainty Aurignacian blades replaced the more bludgeon-like Mousterian hand axes of the Neanderthals. Flint knapping is an art, but it

plausibly lethal-looking.

The next morning, we drive up winding roads in the predawn darkness to a 200-acre parcel of private land. Hodges has scouted it only once, which puts us at a disadvantage: What indigenous hunters lack in firepower, they make up for in patience, skill and cunning. They have to know the land intimately to understand the habits of their prey. As newcomers, we'll be relying to a large extent on luck.

We settle in just below a ridgeline, 100 yards apart, then move slowly down the slopes. After my run-in with the robin, I break free of thick underbrush and find myself on the edge of a grassy glade, alone, the morning sunlight filtering through the oaks. Now I understand the appeal of hunting: It's a great excuse to go into the wilderness and just sit.

Hodges once spent a week hunting a single buck, learning its habits so that he could position himself within firing range. Another time he went bear hunting, and on the first morning a 450-pound black bear appeared within feet of where he was sitting. He spun, drew and fired in one motion, sending an arrow through its rib cage. It was, he believes, the first bear killed in California by a stone-tipped weapon in over 100 years.

That kind of outcome isn't in the offing today. I spend the morning gradually working my way down the ravine. Near the bottom, I again hear a large animal moving through the undergrowth. This time, it's Hodges. By now the sun is high enough that any pigs that might be around are hunkered down for the day.

We hike back to Hodges's truck and retreat to a diner in Felton, a little town tucked amid towering redwoods. One of the things the day has brought home to me is just how demanding primitive technology is. Stone Age hunters had to constantly hone their craft. The price of failure was starvation. Nowadays, cosseted by civilization, we don't have to be nearly as tough or clever.

“We live in an age when so much is done for us,” Hodges says as the waitress sets down steaming plates of bacon and eggs. “And that certainly has its advantages.”

PM



← The author knapping an obsidian biface into an arrowhead.  
↓ Cliff Hodges doesn't just hunt with primitive weapons—he also gets into the indigenous spirit, fasting, saying prayers and sitting in sweat lodges before he hunts.

**The rustling grows closer, then stops. Judging from the racket, this thing is big. What have I gotten myself into?**



through the rib cage behind the shoulder blade. Hodges says he bags a kill on only one out of every 20 attempts.

Before Hodges went on his first hunt, he spent years honing his skills. I'm on a tighter schedule, so he starts me with a one-day primer. He hands me a chunk of obsidian and shows me how to hammer it with a piece of antler to knock razor-sharp chips from its edges. Flake by flake, the piece slowly assumes a rough oval shape, called a biface. Hodges then employs a more precise technique, carefully pressing a small piece of copper against the edge of the stone to flake off chips until the blade reaches its desired form.

also requires a kind of science. “You need a high level of understanding of the physical properties of the rock,” Hodges says. “It's comparable to the fluid dynamics I studied at MIT.”

That evening, Hodges shows me how to fasten the stone to the arrow shaft using a mixture of eggshell and pine resin. This, I hope, will be my fatal implement. I gnaw on strips of dried elk sinew, softening it so that I can use it to lash the stone more tightly to the shaft, and then seal the assemblage with a foul-smelling glue made of boiled hide. Once dried, the result seems surprisingly similar to modern synthetic resin. The finished arrow is