

# Hunting Marmot in the Alps

By Magnus Pelz

I have gone through a lot in the many hunts I've been on. My perseverance and patience has been thoroughly tested, stalking through the thick brush of Namibia, crawling through the prairie in Wyoming, taking part in driven hunts in subzero temperature, and having waited countless hours in hiding while the temperature was in excess of 100 degrees, yet nothing up to now has been as strenuous as this: hunting marmot in the Alps!



## Tanya Keizer

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*As far as the weather was concerned, we couldn't have picked a worse day. There was a light drizzle when my hunting buddy Klaus and I got to Umhausen in the Oetz Valley in Austria and met up with our guide Michael at 5:30 early in the morning, and although morning had broken, the majestic Austrian Alps were cloaked in a thick fog. Michael greets us in utter disbelief, "You really wanna go up there today, in this kind of weather?" Well, the "want to" is kind of iffy. Even though it's only end of August, it is really cold and the weather downright disgusting; the kind that makes you feel like pulling the blanket over your head, turning over in bed, and getting a few more winks. We did however, drive a long way and here we are, so now we are more than determined not to let this weather stand in the way of our planned hunt.*

With an all-terrain vehicle, we start up the mountain using a service road at first and then taking whatever way seems feasible and safe in the lower gear case, slowly climbing through the rough terrain, trying to reach the highest elevation that we can. The grade of incline isn't the problem though. It is traversing the steep slope sideways that has us holding our breath, and once it starts to rain more heavily, we decide to count our blessings and park the vehicle where we are. At an estimated 1800 meters above sea level, we continue on foot ignoring the rain, which is pushing the fog somewhat down into the valley so that our vision up here is actually a bit better than it had been on our way up. Yet nothing to write home about. Beyond 100 meters, we are still looking into the twilight zone. We take a small hiking path up alongside a ridge, where after about 500 meters we come to a posted sign: Hiking Path Closed! Bridge Out! "Well, I guess we'll have to rough it from here," was the factual statement we got from Michael, and indeed, we do just that. The climb uphill is steep, but there are still lots of trees so that we can get a good hold on the trunks of larch

and pine to brace or pull ourselves up. After about an hour of struggling our way up the slope with extreme effort, we stop to take a break, thoroughly wet from the rain and drenched with sweat. "That", I hear Michael say, "Should be about a quarter of the way", and I'm not quite sure if I didn't hear an ironic ring of platitude in his voice when he said it.

Now and then as the fog starts to clear, we are fooled into thinking it will be a nice day after all, only to be disappointed time after time when the fog thickens again. On we go, further and further uphill, and after a couple hundred meters that feel like kilometers, we reach the tree line. I vaguely remember from my previous mountain tours that, right now, I should actually have a fantastic view, yet there is nothing but a grey veil surrounding us. All you can tell is that on one side of the veil it goes uphill and on the other side downhill. "The problem will be finding an occupied tunnel system up there," Michael blurts out of nowhere, seemingly having read my thoughts. First, we gotta get there, we gotta keep going. The rain lets up a bit and the vision gets a little better; nevertheless, it doesn't really lift our spirit. As we cross a small mountain brook after another two strenuous hours uphill, there is a sudden change in the landscape. The Alpine rose shrubs that, up until now, had covered the ground and impeded our progress, are replaced up here with grass, moss, and li-





circumvent the lair at a 90-degree angle and get to within 55 meters, at least that's the reading on the range finder, in the fog it is extremely difficult to estimate distances accurately – everything seems much farther away than it really is. We are now poised at a somewhat higher position, lying in wet grass, which is not comfortable at all; it does, however, afford us the best view.

Time passes by; now and then the fog thickens, obstructing the view of the targeted terrain. Klaus bravely endures the wait in a prone position for way over half an hour, while I, sitting in a halfway comfortable position somewhat further away, most assuredly feel no envy. Then suddenly, as the fog briefly clears, a marmot appears, about 10 meters from where Klaus and Michael had expected the next sighting. Klaus has to correct his position, a slight movement, which, nevertheless, catches the attention of the alert animal. The piercing warning shriek of the marmot and the sound of the shot fired almost simultaneously shatter the stillness of the moment. Lost forever in the echo of the gunshot, the marmot lay silent. What none of us had really thought likely this morning down in the valley had now actually happened – Klaus got his well deserved kill and could now finally light up that cigarette he had been longing for all day.

Now it's my turn, and I am more than ea-



ger at the chance. Not an hour ago, I had thought that being second in line under these extreme conditions that my odds for a kill were zero to none. We decide to stick with the same lair. Michael had noticed that the Marmot that Klaus shot was not one of the two he had originally spotted. Again, we circumvent the lair by 90 degrees and locate a boulder about 80 meters away, behind that we can sit and wait quite comfortably. Unfortunately, the fog moves in again so that for the time being we don't see the lair at all, and so it is for the next 40 minutes. Lucky for me, I can hide quite

comfortably here, compared to Klaus who had to lie prone in the wet moss, so I am somewhat more relaxed while waiting for the action. This changes in a heartbeat as the fog lifts and the contours of two Marmots can be clearly seen on the mount of their lair. "The left one is the male," murmurs Michael, so I take that one into the cross hairs of my scope. I zero in on the target and slowly pull the trigger, the Marmot drops with the shot. I reload and stay on target. You never know how fast a Marmot might still escape into the lair! Yet, everything stays still, so after two minutes I put the firearm on safe. The tension we all have been feeling is instantly released – Klaus and I both have a wide grin across our face, and we can tell just by looking at Michael how happy he is about this double hunting success that we had to work so hard for under these most adverse weather conditions.

After taking the pictures for the photo album, we start our decline with the prey slung over our proud shoulder. The down-hill journey seems even steeper, even longer, and so much wetter than our ascent. More than once we have to slide down mountain terrain on our rear with nothing to hold on to. After three hours, we finally reach our vehicle, and there are a number of blisters on my feet and a severe muscle ache that will remind me for some time of this exhilarating hunting experience. UHM