

The “Don’t Die on the First Ridge” Training Plan

By: Waypoint Outfitters

3-Month Beginner/Intermediate Hunt Prep Plan

If this is the first time heading into mountainous country, here’s the truth: elk don’t hang out near the truck, and the mountain doesn’t care how many steps your smartwatch says you’ve taken. Expect 3–8 miles a day and come ready for at least 5 miles per day of steep climbs, rocky descents, and the occasional “whose idea was this?” moment.

This 3-month plan is built for beginners and intermediates who want to show up ready—not gasping for air halfway up the first ridge.

If knees are a concern, start using a brace or wrap during training. Better to figure out what helps now than halfway through a pack-out.

The Big Rules

- Train 4–5 days per week. Consistency beats hero workouts.
- Increase one thing at a time: time, pack weight, incline, or distance.
- Train in your hunt gear: boots, pack, trekking poles, bino harness, holster—anything that might rub or bruise later.

Month 1 (Weeks 1–4): Build the Base

Goal: Build cardio, leg strength, and joint stability without overdoing it.

Weekly Schedule (4 days/week + optional easy day)

Day 1 – Cardio Choice (Bike, Treadmill, OR Nature)

- Bike Option: 3–5 miles on a slight incline
- Treadmill Option: 30–40 minutes at 6–8% incline
- Outdoor option: Brisk 2–3 mile walk or hike with light hills
Finish with 5–10 minutes of stretching (calves, quads, hips).

Day 2 – Step-Ups with Pack

- Step-ups with a light pack: 20–30 minutes
- Step forward and sideways to mimic stepping over deadfall.

Day 3 – Rest / Mobility

- Easy walk 20–30 minutes or full rest
- Stretching 10–15 minutes

Day 4 – Hike or Treadmill Incline

- Outdoor: 2–4 miles on hilly terrain
- Treadmill: 30–45 minutes at full incline
Wear your boots to start breaking them in.

Optional Day 5 – Easy Cardio

- Light bike, treadmill walk, or outdoor stroll 20–40 minutes

Progression: Add 5 minutes per week to step-ups or cardio sessions.

Month 2 (Weeks 5–8): Add Strength + Steeper Effort

Goal: Build endurance and confidence on steeper terrain.

Weekly Schedule (5 days/week)

Day 1 – Cardio Choice (Bike, Treadmill, or Nature)

- Bike: 4–6 miles with more incline or faster pace
- Treadmill: 40–50 minutes at 8–10% incline
- Outdoor: 3–5 mile hike with moderate elevation gain

Day 2 – Step-Ups with Pack

- 30–40 minutes
- Increase pack weight slightly each week

Day 3 – Hike or Treadmill Hill Climb

- Outdoor: 4–6 miles with hills

- Treadmill: 45–60 minutes at full incline

Day 4 – Recovery / Mobility

- Easy bike or walk 20–30 minutes
- Stretching 15 minutes

Day 5 – Cardio Mix

- Alternate between bike, treadmill, or outdoor hike
- Keep it light but steady for 30–45 minutes

Progression: Increase distance, incline, or pack weight weekly (pick one).

Month 3 (Weeks 9–12): Hunt Simulation Month

Goal: Be ready for 5+ miles/day, steep terrain, and full gear movement.

Weekly Schedule (5 days/week)

Day 1 – Cardio Choice (Bike, Treadmill, or Nature)

- Bike: 5–7 miles with sustained incline
- Treadmill: 45–60 minutes at 10–12% incline
- Outdoor: 4–6 mile hike with steep climbs

Day 2 – Step-Ups with Pack

- 40–60 minutes
- Add weight gradually
- Include forward, sideways, and “step-over” motions

Day 3 – Long Hike (Full Gear Test)

- Outdoor: 6–8 miles with elevation
- Wear boots, pack, poles, and harness/holster

Day 4 – Recovery / Mobility

- Easy movement 20–30 minutes

- Stretching 15–20 minutes

Day 5 – Steep Hike or Treadmill Challenge

- Outdoor: 4–6 miles of steep terrain
- Treadmill: 60–75 minutes alternating incline levels

Progression: By the end of the month, handle 5+ miles comfortably with full gear and hills.

Extra Notes

- Downhill hurts more than uphill. Train both directions.
- Hot spots now = blisters later. Fix rubbing gear immediately.
- Sore is fine. Sharp pain is not.

Steep Terrain Simulation Add-Ons

Not everyone has a mountain in their backyard, but that doesn't mean training for one is off the table. These add-ons can be mixed into the 3-month plan to help build the same strength, balance, and grit needed for steep country. Pick one or two each week and rotate them to keep things interesting.

1) Stair Work (Closest Thing to Climbing)

Find a stadium, parking garage, or apartment stairwell and start climbing.

Workout: 20–40 minutes of steady stair work

Progression: Add pack weight slowly or increase time before adding speed.

Pro tip: Going down counts too—control each step to protect your knees.

2) Treadmill Hill Ladder

If the treadmill is your mountain, make it count.

Routine:

- 5 min warm-up flat
 - 5 min @ 6–8% incline
 - 5 min @ 10–12% incline
 - 5 min @ 15% (or max incline)
- Repeat 2–3 rounds, then cool down 5–10 minutes.
- This mimics the rolling climbs and descents of real terrain.

3) Downhill Training (The Knee Saver)

Most people train uphill and forget the descent—until their knees remind them.

Options:

- Treadmill: use decline if available
- Outdoors: find a hill and practice slow, controlled descents
Cue: Short steps, soft knees, and steady balance—don't "brake" with locked legs.

4) Step-Downs (Downhill Strength at Home)

Use a sturdy step or bench and focus on lowering yourself slowly.

Routine: 2–4 sets of 8–12 reps per leg

Add pack weight only after you feel stable. Builds control and knee durability.

5) Weighted Carries (Pack-Out Simulation)

Steep terrain isn't just cardio—it's about staying upright under load.

Options:

- Farmer carry: heavy dumbbells or buckets, 30–60 seconds x 6–10 rounds
- Pack carry: wear your hunting pack and walk hills or stairs for 15–30 minutes

6) Uneven Ground Practice

Hunt country isn't flat, so train your ankles and balance.

Outdoors: trails with rocks, roots, or sidehills

Goal: time on feet and stability, not speed

Use trekking poles if you plan to bring them on the hunt.

7) Deadfall Drills

Deadfall trees are the number-one cause of twisted ankles and bruised everything.

Routine:

- Step over a low object (cone, log, or bench edge) slowly
- Add sideways steps and controlled turns
- Do it with your pack once comfortable

8) Sidehill Walking

Sidehilling works muscles that flat ground ignores.

Find: a safe grassy slope

Routine: traverse across for 10–20 minutes, then switch directions

This builds hip and ankle strength for those long traverses across ridges.

Simple Rule for Progression

Increase only one variable per week:

- Steepness
- Pack weight
- Total time

Final Word: Earn the View

The mountain rewards preparation. Show up strong, steady, and ready to grind, and you'll spend more time hunting and less time gasping for air. Train hard now—because once you're here, the only easy day is the one you spent getting here.

Train smart, stay consistent, and by the time the hunt rolls around, the mountain will feel a lot less intimidating—and a lot more like home.