

photograph by PETER YANG

A TERRIBLE CAR ACCIDENT LEFT GEORGE  
BOLENDER A QUADRIPLÉGIC, BUT HIS LIFE  
AS AN OUTDOORSMAN DIDN'T END.  
IT JUST GOT A LOT HARDER

THIS  
MAN  
CAN  
HUNT

by T. EDWARD NICKENS

AT 3 A.M. THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK PEALS, EACH BARITONE chime ringing hollow and pensive. From my place on the couch, the living room feels spare even in the dark—no ottomans, no coffee tables, no rugs. There are footsteps, and the click of a dog's nails on the floor. Under a door, a seam of light flashes yellow-white, glinting in the glass eyes of four mounted deer heads on the wall. The door swings open. "Come on in," Julie Bolender says softly. She is barefoot, in sweatpants and a T-shirt. "He's just waking up."

George Bolender is in bed, on his back, right arm crooked over his eyes to shield them from the light. Julie smiles wanly. She unhooks an overnight urine bag and pulls back Bolender's covers. First, the blue jeans. She lifts his right foot, threads the pants leg on. Now the left. She bends his knees

TROPHY ROOM:  
George Bolender and  
wife Julie in their  
Ontario, New York,  
home. Bolender  
killed the buck on the  
right before his acci-  
dent; the one on the  
left, "from the chair."



and struggles to get the pants over his calves, his thighs. Bolender exhales. It is not easy on anyone.

Next, the morning exercises. Julie works each of Bolender's knee joints back and forth. She stretches the quadriceps, then the hamstrings. Bolender winces. "Spasms, not pain," he explains, through clenched teeth. "Not really." Attie, a young chocolate Lab, pads over to Bolender's bed, begging for attention. He drapes an arm over the edge of the mattress and rubs the dog's ears with the bone nub at the base of his wrist. Nearby, gray-muzzled Sam never cracks an eye. He is used to this.

Julie bends over her husband, hooks an arm under his shoulder, and lifts Bolender's torso off the bed. Now she can tug the thermal tops down. She pulls on superinsulated coveralls. Right leg, then left. Julie is efficient. Each movement is fluid. It is a routine as familiar as dressing herself. Next the boots. Then insulated overboots. Quadriplegics have a diminished ability to thermoregulate, and Bolender has to bundle up in anything below 50 degrees.

It is 3:50 A.M. by the time Bolender is in the wheelchair and Julie cinches the boot straps around the frame to hold his feet steady when he pitches and rolls over rough spots in the trail. Finally it's time to go hunting.

George Bolender is 46 years old, slender and quick to smile and sporting a recently grown goatee. He is thoughtful and friendly and chatty. After all, he says, one thing he has is plenty of time.

Since a horrific vehicle accident in June 1991, Bolender has been a quadriplegic. He still has control of his biceps, but not his triceps. "I can move my shoulders, but I don't have any hands. Below the nipples, I got nothing." Except for pain. At times, his legs and butt will throb with terrific pain. "Of course, you could hit my toes with a hammer," he says, "and I wouldn't feel a thing. It's weird. But that's all a part of it."

The phantom pain, the severely restricted mobility, the constant chills, the odd looks from strangers, the altered relationships, the lost friendships—they are all a part of Bolender's day-to-day life in Ontario, New York, just east of Rochester. But astonishingly, so, too, are long days in the woods. Close shots at black bears. Wild turkeys feeding inside bow range. And whitetail deer on the wall that would turn most walking hunters green with envy.

Hunting with intricately modified bows and guns, Bolender takes

three to four deer a season. It's enough to provide venison for his family, a few landowners who give him access to their woods, and a local needy family. He hunts two, three, sometimes four days a week. He does it through force of will and a network of supporters that brings tears to his eyes to contemplate. Julie, one of his sons, or a hunting buddy drops him off in the deer woods. Once at his stand site, he backs the electric wheelchair up against a tree or into a blind built with a backdrop of brush. His companion cocks his bow or racks a shell into the gun chamber, and then leaves. Alone, Bolender hunts. For food. For solitude. For a connection to the wild that he refuses to sever.

**"OH, YEAH.** Let me tell you about that one." Bolender is a good talker, a good storyteller. He rests his chin on his forearm,

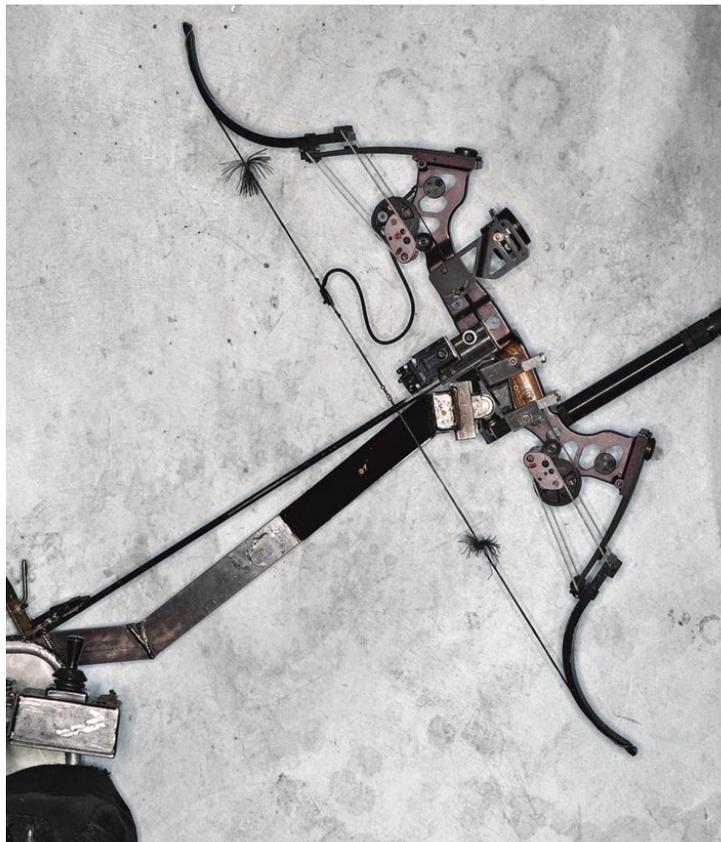
draped across the top of a kitchen chair. It's early afternoon, and we've both been up since that clock tolled in the middle of the night.

"That one" is a deer anyone would want to talk about. He was in Ohio, hunting a few days of last year's gun season. The day dawned windy. Does and fawns meandered by, then, at mid-morning, a nice 8-pointer came through a ravine at 50 yards. To hunt with his Ruger Red Hawk .44 magnum, Bolender utilizes a homemade pistol mount crafted with a pair of car struts to handle recoil. To adjust for elevation, he bumps on and off an electric screwdriver whose gears drive the gun mount up and down. To fire the gun, Bolender sips on a mouth tube, which completes an electrical circuit that involves a solenoid attached to a car-trunk lifter that in turn pulls on a wire wrapped around the pistol trigger. Before he could get on target, the buck heard the whining screwdriver and took off. "There's not a thing I can do about that noise," Bolender says with a shrug, "except keep hunting."

Which he did. Seven hours later a "very big deer" started working his way up the ravine, disappeared, and then popped out of the brush. "What a beautiful sight!" Bolender exclaims. "Eighty yards, quartering away. I put the scope on his shoulder and sipped off a shot."

Nothing happened.

Bolender figured the solenoid was balking. "You know, they're not



*"WITH THE BOW DRAWN AND LOCKED INTO THE RELEASE, BOLENDER AIMS WITH HIS MOUTH. AS HE MOVES HIS HEAD, THE MOUNT AND BOW MOVE AS ONE."*



**HARDCORE:** Bolender on stand in New York during a November 2004 snowstorm (left) and with his Ohio 14-pointer, taken with a handgun in November 2005.



really made for this kind of thing,” he says. “So I tried to free up the solenoid. I beat the crap out of it with my wrists. Two more shots, and nothing. That’s when the geese showed up. They were heaven-sent.”

With light falling, a flock of geese flew low over the trees. Their honks gave Bolender the cover he needed to “make all the noise I wanted. I uncocked the gun, pounded on the back of the solenoid as hard as I could—which isn’t all that hard, of course—worked it back in the mount with my wrists, got the scope back on the deer, and sipped on the straw. All I saw then was muzzle flash. I heard him crash into the thicket. I laid my head back in the chair and almost began hyperventilating. I still remember my big puffy breaths making clouds in the cold air.”

The buck sported 14 points, with double brow tines, 5-inch antler bases, “and kicker points all over the place.”

It was his biggest deer to date. Which is saying something. As does the George Bolender story in general.

**“UNRESTRAINED** passenger,” Bolender intones. “That’s the term they use. Throw the keys to somebody else, thinking they’re a little less drunk than you are. It’s a bad idea.”

It was the tail end of a long night of barhopping. His buddy was driving his pickup when they ran off the road. The next few seconds are still a blur, filled in through police reports and a fragmented memory. “We ran the length of a ditch. Went through some mailboxes. Overcorrected and went to the other side of the road.” The impact of the ditch threw Bolender’s friend through the rear glass, relatively unscathed. “But I’m still in the truck. Next we hit a telephone pole. Then a culvert pipe, and that’s when the truck did an endo with a little flip-twist, went 50 feet through the air, and came down on the roof.”

The telephone pole had bashed in the roof, and when the truck came to a rest, upside down, Bolender’s head and shoulders were nestled in the indentation, between the truck top and the ditch. The rest of his body was still inside the vehicle. “I was folded in half. The only thing I really remember is waking up when they were drilling my head out. When I came to, it was three days later.” Bolender’s neck was broken between the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae.

After three months in the hospital, Bolender entered a rehabilitation center in Scranton, Pennsylvania, for six weeks of additional therapy. The sessions were difficult; the life they were designed to

prepare him for, painful to consider. After the workouts, he rolled his wheelchair along a bank of large windows that overlooked the clinic lawn. Late each afternoon, deer would step out of the woods to feed. Hunting had been his lifelong passion, ever since he’d hunted pheasants as a child, with a cocker spaniel tied to his belt. “So many times, I went from window to window to watch the deer.” He is quiet for a moment. “I’d tell myself: It’s never going to happen, George. Forget about it. It’s just never going to happen.” He would roll back to his room and weep.

But George Bolender wasn’t out of the hunting game. Still in rehab, he heard about programs for disabled hunters. Organizations such as Buckmasters Ltd. and the NRA’s Disabled Shooting Services department help support a nationwide network of clubs, organized hunts, financial-aid options, and consulting services for disabled hunters and shooters. Just a few weeks after his return home, Julie drove Bolender to Syracuse, New York, where a man built adaptive bow rigs for severely handicapped hunters. Within 15 minutes of trying out a bow, Bolender was sending arrows into a bull’s-eye.

“I kept looking around at Julie, like, *I just can’t believe this*,” he says. “A light went off for me. I could see a world of possibility that I thought had been shut off forever.” He’d lost his job as a contractor and faced daunting bills and an uncertain future, but he sold a few guns to pay for a \$750 PSE bow and rig. His brother-in-law, Russell Zaft, a welder, upgraded the bow with camber adjustments and an elevation screw. (Zaft has since built all of Bolender’s hunting rigs.) In November 1993, Bolender killed his first deer “from the chair,” he says, a small buck he took with a 20-gauge shotgun. He’d missed but two deer seasons and has not missed one since. To date, he has taken upwards of 35 deer with both bow and gun, plus a 6-foot 7-inch Newfoundland black bear arrowed from a ground blind at 14 paces.

**AS AN ARCHER**, Bolender has handicaps far beyond his lack of mobility. While he is exempt from that most critical aspect of felling a deer with an arrow—drawing the bow while an animal is in range—it’s a minor concession.

Bolender’s 70-pound-draw-weight Oneida compound bow is mounted permanently to a universal joint, which is in turn mounted to a system of metal bars and plates that fit securely into the armrest mounts on his wheelchair. A 33-inch-long metal rod is welded to the bow holder at a 90-degree angle. On the end are a standard mechanical release and a small bite plate. With the bow drawn and *(Continued on page 86)*

## This Man Can Hunt

(Continued from page 65) locked into the release, Bolender aims with his mouth. As he moves his head, the bite plate, metal rod, bow mount, and bow move as one.

To shoot, Bolender must first hook his left arm around the back of the wheelchair—no small feat without the use of triceps and torso musculature. If he doesn't, he will fall over and out of the chair when he raises his right arm, unsteadily, to hook his hand over the metal draw rod and maneuver the bite plate into his mouth. Next, he hooks the back of his right thumb in front of the release. He aims, then fires by flexing his biceps slightly, which pulls his thumb against the release.

He has one shot; he cannot reload the bow. If the deer come behind him, they will walk. If they pass too far to the right or left, they will walk. If the wind shifts and sends the scent of Julie and Attie and Sam and his clothes and the four-wheeler and the wheelchair their way, there is nothing he can do but sit and hunt.

But let a deer walk with its head down, within 35 yards of his chair, and within a field of fire from, say, 10 o'clock to two o'clock, and

it will most likely hear what Bolender describes as the sound of a hammer hitting a metal pole, which is the sound his bow mount makes when he squeezes off a shot.

It's rarely easy, though. One afternoon we hunt a gorgeous tract of land with Bolender's buddy, Paul Juszcak. Cornfields slope away into a tangled bottom, wet and mucky and trel-lised with deer trails worn down like cow paths. We work on a rough blind as falling leaves signal a shifting wind. Across the path is dense brush, a perfect place to hide the chair. But the swirling air, wrong for just about everywhere, is perfectly wrong for that side of the trail. For 20 minutes Juszcak and I cut and drag brush to break up the outline of two men and one wheelchair. "It's no good," Bolender finally says, shaking his head, and he's right. "Come on. The light's getting lower. Let's just settle down and give it a shot."

So we sit. I go directly behind him. For the duration of the hunt, Bolender holds his mouthpiece between his teeth, something he rarely does. But our exposure demands extreme stealth. We hunt hard, which in this case

means we are stone still and stiller, until our legs cramp and the shadows blacken and the wood ducks begin to leave the swamp for some other roost. We hunt hard, which means we don't move a muscle in two hours.

Suddenly I catch a glimpse of movement, off to our left. A nice-size doe makes her way down the wood's path, slowly, feeding. I slant my face away from her approach and tap the wheelchair with the toe of my boot. "Left," I whisper. For long moments I wonder if Bolender heard me. Could he feel the tap-tap-tap? Then I notice that his bow is creeping to the left so slowly that I can only discern the movement by tracking the bow's progress against the vertical tree trunks. He pivots his head to bring his bow toward the deer. Ever. So. Slowly. I grin: The man can hunt.

The day before, in his house after a morning on a different stand, Bolender spoke about what he finds in the woods. "I know there's work that's got to be done beforehand," he told me. "I know I can't do this without a lot of help. But after that, it's just me. All the weight is gone. All the *stuff* is gone. And when I'm out

there, I feel total freedom. I'm one-on-one with the animal, and that's what a hunter does."

The doe feeds on chest-high thistles, a step closer, now two. She snips off greenery in the path, then she senses that all is not right. She freezes, head up, ears flared. She has seen no movement—there has been no movement—but something is amiss in the reeds and she knows it. Her tail twitches. When she stamps her right hoof in alarm, my heart sinks. The deer turns and walks away. Bolender never sees her. In a day and a half of hunting, she is the only chance we'll have.

BOLENDER COULDN'T HUNT WITHOUT A remarkable community of support. His sons, George Jr. and Jessie, load gear, drive the van, monitor the cellphones when he's in the woods. They clear the ground along hundreds of yards of trails so his wheelchair can pass safely and quietly. His buddies, Paul Juszcak, Jeff Emerling, and Ed Soble, scout new territory, build blinds, take him into the woods, drag deer.

But it is Julie who makes all this possible. "Every move I make," her husband says,

"she's got to make two." "A saint," declares Juszcak. "There's going to be a statue of her in a church some day."

She does not like to hear such talk. She waves away the words. *No, no, I'm not like that.* But she is. She has learned to enjoy the walks home in the dark woods. ("They're nice, now, really.") She has learned to blood-trail. ("It's like one of those crime shows, you know? It's a lot of fun to figure it out.") But she does not like the questions, for all the questions lead to the same place: *Why?*

"Oh, I don't know," she says and looks away. "Maybe it's a little crazy," she says, softly, her voice like an echo. "But everything's crazy."

Another morning, like all the others. She is up, Bolender is dressed, she makes Eggo waffles and coffee. An overnight rain has left the woods a mess. This time they'll have to take the four-wheeler. She hooks up the trailer, loads the ATV, and warms the van.

Later, in the woods, she holds a quiver of five arrows. "Which one?" she whispers. Bolender points with a knuckle. She pulls the arrow from the quiver, tests the broadhead to make

sure it's screwed in tightly, tests the nock. He nods. She then nocks the arrow to the bowstring and, standing behind the rig, pulls the bowstring, grimacing, and locks it into the mechanical release. "Is that okay?" she asks. Bolender studies the rig for a moment. "Perfect, pumpkin."

Julie drops a cellphone into the seat, pulls an insulated hood over his head, steps back, takes a look. She tugs on the bottom of Bolender's facemask to pull the eyeholes down just a bit.

"All set?"

"You bet."

She leans down. It's a meaningful kiss, no perfunctory brush of the cheek. I hear their lips smack like the cracking of a twig.

"Have fun," she says, and she turns and walks away. Bolender follows her with his eyes, silent, watching the light of her headlamp wink out behind the trees. For the time being, he will say no more. He is hunting. He is just another man in the woods, searching for peace and quiet and discipline and dignity and that remarkable moment when his life meets the wild and he's got as good a shot as any. 