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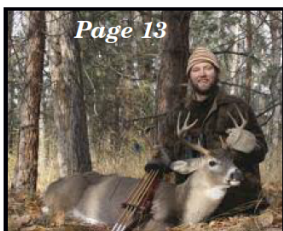
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On The Cover — A bowhunter returns to his high country camp by moonlight after a successful mule deer hunt.

Photo by Jerry Gowins, Jr.



There are artisans spread across the wide breadth of traditional archery. Some make extremely beautiful and highly functional bows; others work their magic with leather building quivers, armguards, and such. Then there are those who excel in both. Virgil Vosse, owner of North Archery outside of Paris, France, is one of the latter.

For years, Virgil and I have kept in contact via email, Facebook, and telephone, but we never met until July 2013 when he came to Idaho with his girlfriend, Marie Castlebon, for vacation. I picked him up at his hotel and we spent the day together, showing him the main sights of Boise, Idaho and giving him a tour of our office in Eagle. Before he and Marie left, I gave them ideas on where to go in the state to fish and camp, and from the photos he sent me, the fishing was excellent.

Last fall, my old friend Xavier Péchenart wrote me asking if I was ever going to come back to France to partake in one of his two annual rabbit bowhunts on his castle lands in central France. It didn't take long to reply that yes, I would be coming in December. A quick call to Virgil, and the deal was set

Virgil Vosse of Paris, France, with a rabbit he took at the annual North Archery rabbit hunt on Xavier Péchenart's castle property in the Loire Valley.



An Interview with— **Virgil Vosse** **of North Archery**

By T.J. Conrads



Although he lives in one of the nicest areas of Paris, Virgil's bow and leather shop is outside of Paris where it is more affordable. Here Virgil searches for true center on a Taïga recurve's limbs.

for two weeks of sightseeing, hunting, and enjoying the French countryside once again.

As luck would have it, I spent my birthday in a hunting lodge with Virgil, Xavier, Paul de Foucaud, and Pierre Fisse hunting Russian boar. That morning, I had a special request for breakfast: litchi fruit and dark coffee with eggs and bacon. At breakfast, Virgil handed me a box and said it was a

birthday gift from him, Marie, and Xavier. Inside was one of the most intricately hand-tooled leather armguards I have ever seen, and a custom Laguiole knife that Virgil had made specifically for me. I knew that he was one of the finest bowyers in France, but the leatherwork on the armguard was so exquisite, I had to know more about him and his business.

After a day of hunting, Virgil showed

me how to make fois gras while we talked about his business, bowhunting, and future goals.

T.J.—Virgil, thanks for taking time to sit and talk with me today. I have to say, the hand-tooled leather armguard you made for me for my birthday is one of the finest pieces of leather work I have seen. You are well known for your quality leatherwork, both in the United States and here in France. How did you learn this trade?

V.V.— I learned all about leatherwork from my father. He has been a leathersmith for over fifty years now, making high-end American saddles, gun cases, gun or knife holsters, motor-bike saddlery and cases, etc. As a child, I worked for him to acquire my very first hunting bow.

On my school holidays, I used to work in his shop for, you know, the same old story: at first cleaning and wiping the shop, then doing some simple leatherwork, and then more complicated ones. Over the years, I acquired the skills I have today.

T.J.— You have made some very impressive and beautiful armguards and broadhead carriers for me. What other items do you fabricate from leather for bowhunters?

V.V.— I first started offering accessories because I knew how to make them, but also because I always found it a pity to have a very nice bow with a cheap fleece case. It is like having a beautiful custom knife made for you with an ugly sheath.

I make all the classic accessories we all use on the field, from string keepers to bow stringers, back quivers and back-pack quivers, different bow cases from the basic sleeve ones to more luxurious cases, broadhead pouches, armguards... just about everything the bowhunter would want. I'm always thinking of new items to make and add to my product line. As with my custom bows, I like to keep things as simple and functional as possible, but always with the best quality material available.

Making bows or accessories...it is like cooking for me. Everything starts with the best ingredients you can find. If you use bad material, you can try everything you want, but it won't work.

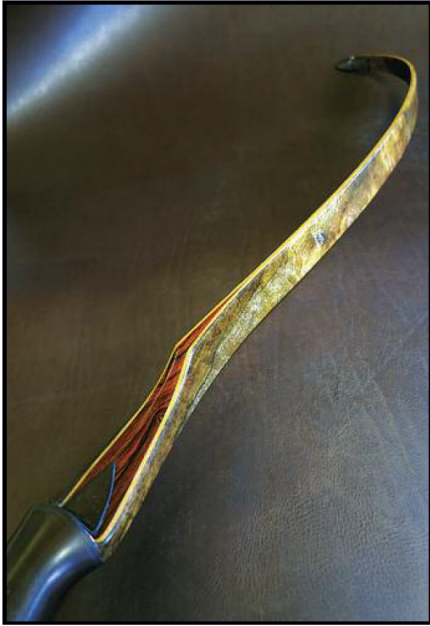
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A beautiful Taiga recurve.

I also try to buy all my supplies from France and America. For example, all the elastic, rivets, eyelets, and poppers are made in France. The wool that lines all my cases is 100% wool handmade here in France. The waxed cotton is from America and is, at least for me, the best you can get. The leather is also from France and it's vegetable tanned. It costs me way more than if I was buying my stuff from cheaper countries, but it is important for me to know where the products I use are coming from.

T.J.— And your bows...beautiful works of art, and I have seen them not only here in France, at the rabbit hunt at Xavier Péchenart's castle, but also in the States. Tell me about your bows, and how you developed your design and line of traditional bows.

V.V.— I'm really inspired by bowyers' work from mid 1950s to mid 1970s, but also by more "recent" bowyers and guardians of the traditional way, like Dick Robertson, Rick and Jerry of Great Northern, Monty Moravec, and by the writing of people like Jay Massey, Don Thomas, Doug Borland, Monty Browning, and you.

First of all, I'm a hunter and I don't know about you but as a hunter, I don't like spending hours on tuning and messing around with a bow. For me, a bow is a tool, a tool that can be beautiful (it doesn't hurt), but primarily a tool I



When the marine epoxy finish is dry, the bow is sanded with 1500-grit wet sandpaper and then polished.

can rely on. All my bows are in some way or another inspired by my commitment to the highest quality I can acquire in them.

For example, my Taiga recurve is a mixture of the 1950s recurve bows with some more hook in the limbs than you could usually find in those years. As for my longbows, it is the same as for my recurves. I've tried to please a large variety of customers without losing myself in what I believe is the traditional bow.

What I call my "Classic" longbow is my favorite type of longbow, with just enough reflex/deflex to alleviate any hand shock, which I don't like, but it still has the drawing of a typical American longbow.

I primarily made the Northwind longbow for 3-D competitors who wanted more speed than with a classic design longbow and still be within the 3-D shooting rules. The Northwind is also a very good and quiet hunting bow.

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After a final inspection, the leather grip and rest are applied.

The last bow I offer is the Westwind, the more radical longbow design I came up with. The Westwind is a longbow with a strong reflex/deflex design, which makes it the fastest of my longbows. Even so, the Westwind has a very pronounced reflex/deflex. I don't make it short, as I do not like short longbows...even saying that seems strange to me! All my bows can also be made in two-piece takedowns (TD).

After trying all sorts of TD systems for years and years, I finally chose the composite sleeve, which is the best for

me because it doesn't show that the bow is a takedown when it is strung, and also because it is very strong and there is no tool required to assemble it.

The risers of the takedown bows are reinforced with an invisible I-beam of G10/FR4 glass, and the sleeve is made out of carbon and fiberglass that make the entire system very, very strong. Having a TD longbow that still looks like a one-piece bow, and that allows you to carry it everywhere, which is a must for me.

All the limbs of my bows are made out of tempered bamboo, then covered

with esthetical wood veneers. There are no wood, veneers, or any options on my bows, except for the TD version. You can choose whatever you want on the TD as long as I can find the wood, and is allowed by the Washington Convention. After years of cutting and gluing wood together to create esthetical effects on the limbs and the riser, I stopped all of that and went back to more "simple" looking bows.

Today, in my bow work, I prefer spending time choosing and matching different woods together, letting the wood species be the center of interest instead of showing off the bowyer's skill.

T.J.— I know you have hunted several times in the States, as well as France. What other countries have you hunted?

V.V.— I lived for few years in Australia where I hunted nearly every species, except donkeys and camels. I spent a lot of time in the bush camping down under and I really enjoyed it. Australia is a beautiful and very friendly country with a lot of hunting and fishing opportunities and...good food and good wine!

I also spent a lot of time in Scotland, my equally best place on earth with the United States. But, unfortunately, bowhunting is not legal there yet. If you like fly fishing, unbelievable mystical lights, and breathtaking landscapes, I highly recommend you go to the highlands. The only bad thing there is the

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food, but it is ok, as they have fantastic whiskey and plenty of fish!

T.J.— I have hunted Russian boar and rabbits with you here in France, and am amazed at your energy and excitement of the hunt. What other animals have you bowhunted?

V.V.— I never owned a gun or hunted with it in my life. I only bowhunt with traditional gear, of course and, from what my parents told me, I shot my first game at the age of five or six and it was a chicken on my grandfather's farm. Not good, but, well...

I still have the same excitement as I used to have when I was a kid when it comes to hunting. I just love being outdoors with my bow. It is really the place (next to being in the shop working) where I feel really good and completely myself. I'm more of a solitary hunter but, from time to time, I like sharing a camp or small groups hunt. What you and I have shared on the boar and rabbit hunts was everything I like in group hunting. Good company, good food, and hunting with people you don't have to talk to or explain the way you see hunting and how you think it should be done is what I enjoy most.

As for the other animals I hunt here in France, I hunt, kill, and eat all the species here except for the capercaillie, which is one of my holy grail, and the Corsican sheep, which I hunted but didn't have the chance to shoot. Otherwise, I bow hunt in Spain, Canada and, as much as I can, in America.

T.J.— What is your favorite animal to bowhunt?

V.V.— There are actually two animals I love to bowhunt, and it has to do with the seasons.

The first one is roe deer in the spring, where nature is at its best for me. You have all those nuances of green in the woods, the light is also beautiful, and that warm wind brings the lovely smell of the blossoming trees, the wheat fields, and blackberries.

Roe deer are beautiful and clever animals, and that makes them really fun to hunt.

They are territorial animals, so if you don't mess up running around everywhere, there is a good chance to see the same animals the next day, and that makes the hunt very interesting.



The Westwind takedown longbow by North Archery.

For the young ones, or the less paranoid ones, their curiosity can be their downfall...and they are really tasty to eat.

My other favorite animal is the wapiti. Autumn is my favorite season after spring and for the same reason: the incredible colors, the smell of the woods, and the nearly mystical light you can have on those cold mornings. I like everything about wapiti hunting.

Americans don't always realize how lucky they are to live in such a beautiful country and with so much space. The space is something we don't have here in France or in Europe.

Even in France there are some beau-

tiful places, but you will never have the feeling of that deep loneliness of being the last one on earth like in America. Here, there is always a plane, a car noise, a guy in the woods, or something else that takes you back to a certain reality.

Bowhunting wapiti is, for me, America at its best, and they are really tasty, too!

T.J.— Tell me about your most memorable bowhunting experience.

V.V.— My most memorable bowhunting experience was actually a human experience. It was on a wapiti hunt. I was supposed to meet Bob

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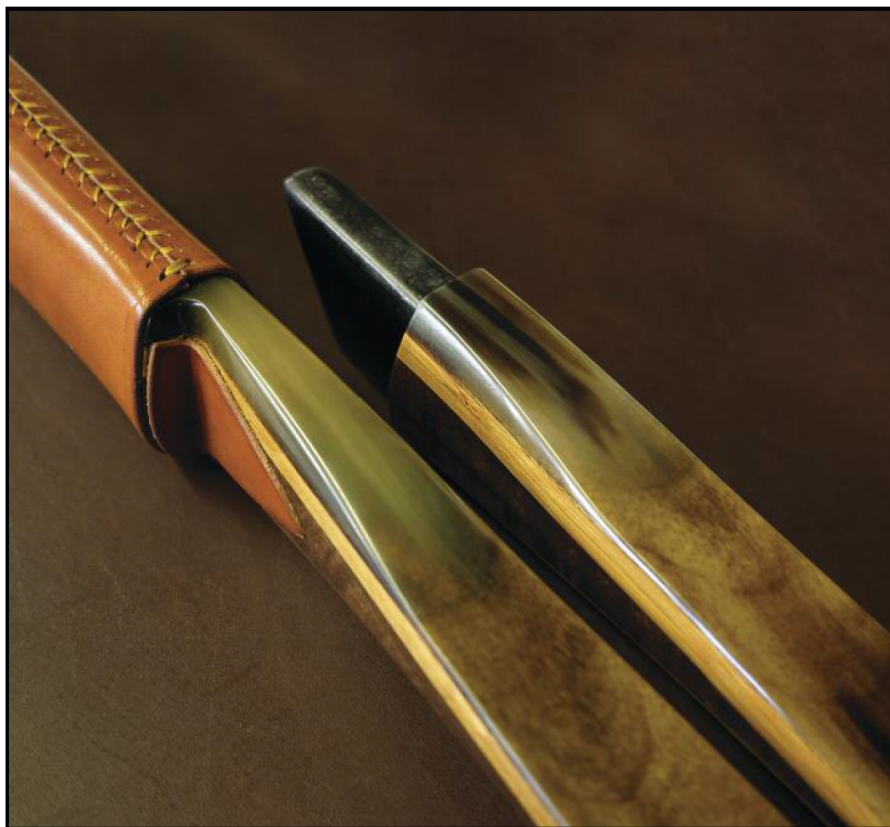
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Holzhauser of Silver Arrow from Derry, New Hampshire. I was on my way to Denver, Colorado from Paris, France with a stop in Dallas, Texas on September 11th, 2001. We were flying for about five to six hours and approaching the coast of Newfoundland, Canada when it all happened for us.

I guess we all remember what we were doing or where we were that day.

The pilot of the plane picked up the microphone and told us that we had to land in Newfoundland because of a technical problem. After an hour or two on the ground, and seeing dozens and dozens of planes landing at that small airport, the captain told us that America had shut down its borders, but without explaining why. We spent forty-eight hours on the plane on the ground, not knowing anything and waiting for the very nice community of Gander to organize a shelter and food for the next five or six days we were going to spend with them. There, I met and became friends with a young American journalist and, luckily for me, he was also the son of a very important person working for the airline company we were flying with.

Anyway, after those days of adventure with the very generous people of Gander, we flew to Dallas. While there,



North Archery's Northwind takedown longbow.

this strange journey continued. I was stuck in Dallas, with no plane back to Paris, of course, and no plane to Denver. So, my new friend offered to let me stay at his father's place until further notice.

His father had a computer at home where he could see all the planes taking off and landing in Dallas, and he also could see the seat availabilities on the planes of this company. He told me that I could stay with them or that I could go and do my hunt, because there was no way I was going back to France for at least the next eight days. So I decided to go to the mountains.

I again said goodbye and thanked my new friends and jumped on a plane to Denver.

Once in Denver, one of my outfitter's employees came to pick me up and we drove to Vail where Bob, instead of going hunting, waited six days for me in a motel. We finally arrived at camp where—I will always remember that moment—my friend and outfitter Larry said to me, "You enjoy your time in the mountains and don't worry about anything. If you are stuck here, you have a job for as long as you want or need it."

The rest of my time in the mountains had been very powerful and intense, thinking of this absurd and terrifying tragedy while paradoxically thinking of all those lovely and generous people I had met that helped me in going through that journey. I will always remember that hunt.

T.J.— That's quite a story. I think we all remember where we were and what we were doing that fateful day.

What equipment do you prefer (bow, length, weight, arrow shaft material, broadhead, clothing, accouterments, etcetera)?

V.V.— I like to keep things simple as possible. I'm not a gadget person at all. I shoot 50 to 55 pounds maximum. I prefer a 64" to 66" longbow with very moderate reflex/deflex. I also like self-bows, or 1950s style recurves.

As for the arrows, I really prefer wood even if, from time to time, I use carbon just to understand what everybody is talking about. I have used a simple but visible all white cresting for years, maybe not the most visible all year around, but I'm used to it and really see my arrow when I hit or miss my

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Manolo, Virgil's son, with his first game animal he shot, skinned, and cooked for the family. Small game is a good way to introduce anyone to bowhunting.

target.

As for broadheads, I have used the same simple ones for years, which are the 145-grain Eclipse. They are extremely strong and I find them very easy to sharpen, so I don't see the point of changing.

I'm not so much into camouflage, either. I have an old duck camo jacket from the 1970s that I bought at a flea market, and a King of the Mountain shirt. These are the only two pieces of camo I own. In summer, I wear a cotton shirt or plain T-shirt and, for the rest of the season, wool or fleece stuff.

My binoculars are the only very expensive piece of equipment I own. I use a Leica 8x42.

I use my binoculars a lot in spring searching for roe deer in wheat fields or during any stalking hunt.

T.J.— Bowhunting in France is relatively new. I believe the first year it was actually legitimized was 1995. What was bowhunting like before that?

V.V.— It was illegal but legal, or legal but illegal. The law wasn't explicit in saying you couldn't hunt with a bow, but it wasn't telling you could either.



Some examples of what North Archery can offer. All armguards are hand-made and lined with softer, thin leather.

So, after hard work from our pioneers, the government finally changed the law and bowhunting became legal. Our friend Xavier Péchenart, whom we hunted with this past December, was one of the people who worked diligently getting bowhunting legalized here in France. I believe you were the first American to legally bowhunt in France, which was in the fall of 1996, with Xavier at his brother's castle down in the Loire River valley.

T.J.— Yes, I did hunt here in 1996. It was November, and it was quite an experience. I shot three Russian boar on that trip, one of them a very old boar while stalking the forest in a rain storm. The following year, I stopped to hunt in August with Xavier after I had spent two weeks in Africa. I was lucky and arrowed two mature roe deer bucks that trip.

I'm sure there was a long push to get bowhunting recognized in France, but who were the people who really pushed the concept?

V.V.— Besides Xavier, there were many people who worked hard for legalizing bowhunting in France and giving names here wouldn't do anything except get me into trouble if I forget one!

Let's say that many of those people who worked for us gained a lot of insight from the U.S. and got inspired by the work you guys have done over the years with the government, game

management people, local hunter associations, and individual hunters who worked to legalize and legitimize bowhunting there.

T.J.— What organizations are involved in bowhunting in France?

V.V.— We have a national federation that is called FFCA (Fédération Française des Chasseurs à l'Arc) and the French Federation of Bowhunters. The FFCA is looking after the national and international communication, the politics and legal issues of our sport.

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Then there are the local bowhunting associations everywhere in France. Local organizations are really important. They promote bowhunting, help new bowhunters with any questions, and they organize the JFO. What we call JFO is the equivalent of your bowhunter education course. In France, we need two legal papers to hunt with a bow: a regular hunting license, which can be acquired after filling out a questionnaire on gun safety, wildlife knowl-

edge, hunting regulation etc., and a green license that proves the hunter has taken, and passed, the JFO course.

When the hunting license is obtained, the young hunter must take the half day bowhunting course, the JFO. This bowhunting course is not a test. It's a half-day where people are going to learn the very basics of equipment and laws that are strictly concerning bowhunting. At the end of that half-day course, a FFCA instructor gives to the new hunter

a green paper that proves that the hunter has done that course.

Once you have those two papers, you can bowhunt.

Foreigners don't have to own those papers to hunt in France; they just have to prove that they have some sort of license from their country. American hunters, for example, will have to show hunter safety or a local bowhunter class to acquire a hunting license.

T.J.— As I mentioned earlier, my first time hunting in France was in 1996, when Xavier Péchenart invited me to bowhunt Russian boar at his brother's castle land at Chateau Vaguion. It was the first full year of legal bowhunting in France, and I remember the strict rules and regulations. How have the licensing and regulations changed since then?

V.V.— Legalized bowhunting, as we now have it, came into being in 1995. To legalize bowhunting in France, we had to show the hunting and political authorities our determination and some implication, so the rules for a bowhunter are a bit different than for the gun hunter.

We have to do that course I previously talked about. We also have to write our hunting license number on our hunting arrows. It seems strange to do that, but at the time the authorities liked the idea and it showed them we were serious and responsible and that we were not going to poach. Yes, they all thought a bow was for poaching! Now, they know that there are far more efficient ways to poach than with a bow.

No broadhead-tipped arrows are allowed to be shot into the air, and there are a bunch of other little rules. However, one significant thing has really changed since you came here and that's that you guys can more easily come to hunt in France now.

T.J.— As you know, I was voted to become a member of ASCA (Association des Chasseurs à l'Arc/ Bowhunter Association), an honor that means a lot to me. Explain to our readers what the role ASCA plays in the protection and promotion of bowhunting opportunities in France.

V.V.— ASCA is the first association of bowhunters in Europe and all the founding members have been, in some

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A closer view of a belt bow holder. The workmanship is stunning.

way or another, involved in the legalization of our passion in France.

Everything started with ASCA here, so the rules and beliefs are very strong, and to be able to get into it you really have to be an accomplished outdoorsman, hunter, conservationist...well to make it short, a good hunter.

This is the way the founders wanted it to be, and this is how it still works.



Not only is Virgil a master bowyer, his leatherwork is known all over the world. Here are leather and waxed cotton quivers, belt bow holders, and lined armguards. All leather used at North Archery is vegetable tanned.

The test to get in is very hard. You really have to know a lot on world wild hunting, animals, regulation, conservation, etc., and the shooting test is the same. To get in, you also have to be sponsored by two members: a founding member, which in your case was Xavier, and an old time member, which was me.

The ASCA is also at the origin of the national hunting knowledge test, the hardest of the tests I've ever seen in the world. It is called the BGG, Brevet Grand Gibiers (Big Game Certificate). The BGG is a questionnaire you have to complete to test your knowledge on big game hunting, animal habitat, animal illness, fauna and flora, climate and so on. It is the same sort of test you pass to get into the ASCA. I really like that test because it doesn't give you anything, except personal knowledge.

T.J.— I have dozens of friends who want to come bowhunt France. What advice would you give to them on travel, licensing, and opportunities to do so?

V.V.— Getting a hunting license is fairly easy, but hunting here is way more complicated than in America. Unfortunately, you cannot buy a tag over the counter and go on your own to hunt public lands. Hunting public lands can sometimes be very expensive here, because the government controls it, so your outfitter will be a ranger and the

Contact Information

For more information on Virgil's bows and leather archery accessories, go to www.northarchery.com.

game tag fee will go to the government. But the government hunts are, for some, very nice with protected access and very good regulation, which means there are a lot of animals with quality trophies, if this matters for you.

All the other hunting territories are private. Either there is an association, which is a group of landlords that put the land together to have a big territory to hunt, or you have private property that sells shares or half shares.

So my best advice, if you don't know anybody here, would be to search on the Internet for an international or local outfitter like you would normally do when you go overseas to hunt.

T.J.— Virgil, thanks for taking the time to sit and chat with me today. Any closing comments you'd like make?

V.V.— I really hope to build and sell a lot of bows and accessories so I can come and spend more time fly fishing and bowhunting in the United States. I also look forward to hunting with you for many more years to come, both here in France, and in America.



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