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**HOW TO CHOOSE** A LEAD-FREE TURKEY LOAD, **P.36**

# GAME & FISH

**EAST**

The Regional Outdoor Guide

GAFMAG.COM  
MARCH 2021

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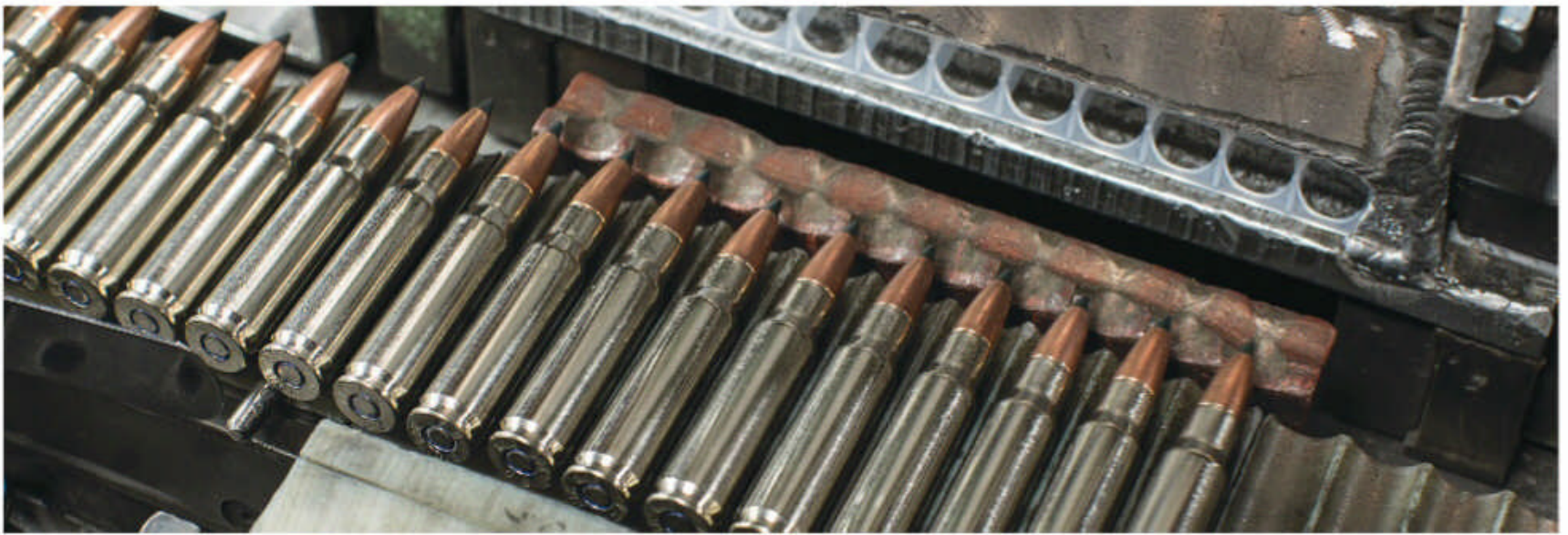


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# DEMANDING MORE

**H**eading into spring, the biggest question among hunters and shooters isn't about turkeys, or whether next month's match will be held, or even the year's new guns. It's "Where's the ammo?" I've heard it dozens of times at my local range, at the gun shops I frequent, via text messages, and over social media and email.

We're finding bare, or nearly bare, shelves where boxes of cartridges and shells used to be stacked, and we're concerned. Some of us are scared. Others are angry. But just like when dealing with any other issue, we should not let emotion override facts. Conspiracy theories only make things worse by distorting reality and driving panic.

Here's what is not happening. Ammunition manufacturers are not sitting on stockpiles of inventory to control supply and prices, or because the government is subsidizing a lack of supply to consumers. Companies are making and shipping ammo at their fullest capacity.

"We promise we are shipping everything we can," said Jason Hornady, vice president of Hornady Manufacturing. "The stuff that goes out today was literally put in a box yesterday. There is no government conspiracy; no one is paying us not to ship."

Further, said Hornady, the company is making ammunition at record levels. Increasing capacity to meet demand is not as simple as just adding employees, but Hornady noted the manufacturer is dedicated to producing as much ammunition as possible.

"We've made one-third more [ammunition] than we did last year," said Hornady. "Unfortunately we don't have an extra factory laying around or anything else. We've got X number of people. We're certainly trying to add as much capacity as we can. Everybody here is working as hard as they can to make sure we ship as much as we can."

Jason Vanderbrink, president of Federal, CCI, Speer and Remington Ammunition, said those brands have recently hired hundreds of employees to try to meet demand. That fact, however, has become lost in misinformation and rumors.

"Every day I hear something new, and it's simply not true," he stressed. "We are indeed making ammunition, we indeed are shipping ammunition, we're not storing it in secret warehouses. ... We are doing everything we can to meet this demand."

If ammunition manufacturers are doing their jobs, why can't consumers find ammo? Just like we saw with toilet paper and hand sanitizer at the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, there is unprecedented and immediate demand for a highly desired product. Consumers are buying ammunition as fast as it appears on shelves, and they're buying more of it.

Social unrest, the pandemic, the results of the presidential election—all have contributed to increased demand, and it started more than a year ago. The mentality of many hunters and shooters I've talked to has been, *better buy all I can get when I can get it*. Folks who would normally purchase two boxes of ammo have been buying 10 or more. As supplies of common cartridges and loads began to dwindle, consumers turned to anything they could get their hands on. One guy at my local gun shop told me he had bought a .300 WSM just because he found 27 boxes of ammo for the rifle.

On top of that, there has been a huge number of new shooters joining our ranks. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates 8.4 million people bought a firearm for the first time in 2020. Plus, last year saw a record number of background checks by the National Instant Criminal Background Check System for the sale of a firearm—a total of 21 million. An increase in gun sales drives an increase in ammo sales, particularly in the case of new shooters who are also buying ammunition for the first time.

Ammo manufacturers are scrambling to catch up. They cannot meet prolonged, extraordinary demand overnight or over a few months or perhaps even over a year. But they will keep trying, and that's a fact.

*Adam Heggenstaller*  
**Editorial Director**



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# GAME & FISH

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MARCH | VOL. 41, NO. 2



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# GAME & FISH

## The Regional Outdoor Guide

PUBLISHER Michael F. X. Cassidy

### EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR Adam Heggenstaller | Adam.Heggenstaller@outdoorsg.com

EDITOR John Taranto | John.Taranto@outdoorsg.com

REGIONAL EDITORS David F. Johnson, Dr. Todd A. Kuhn, Drew Warden

ONLINE CONTENT EDITOR Scott Bernarde

ART DIRECTOR Brian Judge ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR Andrew Tuchscherer

### PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION MANAGER Melissa Williams | Melissa.Williams@outdoorsg.com

### ADVERTISING

NATIONAL ENDEMIC AD SALES Jim McConville | (440) 791-7017 | James.McConville@outdoorsg.com

WESTERN REGION Hutch Looney | Hutch@HLooney.com

MARINE/FISHING ADVERTISING Michael Cassidy | (407) 625-0992 | Michael.Cassidy@outdoorsg.com

MIDWESTERN REGION Mark Thiffault | (720) 630-9863 | Mark.Thiffault@outdoorsg.com

### NATIONAL AD SALES

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR – DETROIT OFFICE Kevin Donley | (248) 798-4458 | Kevin.Donley@outdoorsg.com

NATIONAL ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE – CHICAGO OFFICE

Carl Benson | (312) 955-0496 | Carl.Benson@outdoorsg.com

DIRECT RESPONSE AD/NON-ENDEMIC Anthony Smyth | (914) 409-4202 | Anthony@smythmedia.com

### GAMEANDFISHMAG.COM

For questions regarding digital editions, please contact digitalsupport@outdoorsg.com.

## OUTDOOR SPORTSMAN

### GROUP®

PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA

PRESIDENT & CEO Jim Liberatore

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA Mike Carney

EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS Derek Sevcik

VP, CONSUMER MARKETING Peter Watt VP, MANUFACTURING Deb Daniels

SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION Connie Mendoza

DIRECTOR, PUBLISHING TECHNOLOGY Kyle Morgan SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR Tim Neher

DIRECTOR, DIGITAL EDITORIAL Jeff Phillips

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**GAME & FISH MAGAZINE EDITORIAL OFFICE**  
6385 Flank Drive, Suite 800, Harrisburg, PA 17112  
(717) 695-8171 | Fax (717) 545-2527

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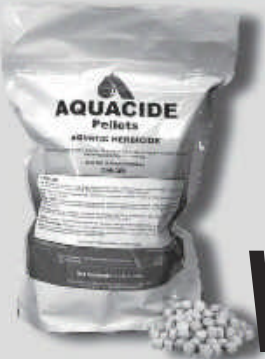
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|---------------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| SUN           |       | MON  |      | TUE   |       | WED   |       | THU   |       | FRI   |       | SAT   |       |
| 21            |       | 22   |      | 23    |       | 24    |       | 25    |       | 26    |       | 27    | FULL  |
| am            | pm    | am   | pm   | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    |
| 6:42          | 7:06  | 7:30 | 7:54 | 8:18  | 8:42  | 9:06  | 9:30  | 9:54  | 10:18 | 10:08 | 10:30 | 10:42 | 11:06 |
| to            | to    | to   | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    |
| 8:42          | 9:06  | 9:30 | 9:54 | 10:18 | 10:42 | 11:06 | 11:30 | 11:54 | 12:18 | 12:08 | 12:30 | 12:42 | 1:06  |
| 28            |       |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| am            | pm    |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 11:30         | 11:54 |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| to            | to    |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 1:30          | 1:54  |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |

| MARCH 2021 |       |       |       |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|
| SUN        |       | MON   |       | TUE  |       | WED   |       | THU   |       | FRI   |       | SAT   |         |
|            |       | 1     |       | 2    |       | 3     |       | 4     |       | 5     |       | 6     | LAST Q  |
|            |       | am    | pm    | am   | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm      |
|            |       | —     | 12:42 | 1:06 | 1:30  | 1:54  | 2:18  | 2:42  | 3:06  | 3:30  | 3:54  | 4:18  | 4:42    |
|            |       | to    | to    | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to      |
|            |       | —     | 2:42  | 3:06 | 3:30  | 3:54  | 4:18  | 4:42  | 5:06  | 5:30  | 5:54  | 6:18  | 6:42    |
| 7          |       | 8     |       | 9    |       | 10    |       | 11    |       | 12    |       | 13    | NEW     |
| am         | pm    | am    | pm    | am   | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm      |
| 5:06       | 5:30  | 5:54  | 6:18  | 6:42 | 7:06  | 7:30  | 7:54  | 8:18  | 8:42  | 9:06  | 9:30  | 10:42 | 11:06   |
| to         | to    | to    | to    | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to      |
| 7:06       | 7:30  | 7:54  | 8:18  | 8:42 | 9:06  | 9:30  | 9:54  | 10:18 | 10:42 | 11:06 | 11:30 | 12:42 | 1:06    |
| 14         |       | 15    |       | 16   |       | 17    |       | 18    |       | 19    |       | 20    | FIRST Q |
| am         | pm    | am    | pm    | am   | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm      |
| 12:30      | 12:54 | 1:18  | 1:42  | 2:06 | 2:30  | 2:54  | 3:18  | 3:42  | 4:06  | 4:30  | 4:54  | 5:18  | 5:42    |
| to         | to    | to    | to    | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to      |
| 2:30       | 2:54  | 3:18  | 3:42  | 4:06 | 4:30  | 4:54  | 5:18  | 5:42  | 6:06  | 6:30  | 6:54  | 7:18  | 7:42    |
| 21         |       | 22    |       | 23   |       | 24    |       | 25    |       | 26    |       | 27    |         |
| am         | pm    | am    | pm    | am   | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm      |
| 6:06       | 6:30  | 6:54  | 7:18  | 7:42 | 8:06  | 8:30  | 8:54  | 9:18  | 9:42  | 10:06 | 10:30 | 10:54 | 11:18   |
| to         | to    | to    | to    | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to      |
| 8:06       | 8:30  | 8:54  | 9:18  | 9:42 | 10:06 | 10:30 | 10:54 | 11:18 | 11:42 | 12:06 | 12:30 | 12:54 | 1:18    |
| 28         | FULL  | 29    |       | 30   |       | 31    |       |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| am         | pm    | am    | pm    | am   | pm    | am    | pm    |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| —          | 12:06 | 12:30 | 12:54 | 1:18 | 1:42  | 2:06  | 2:30  |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| —          | to    | to    | to    | to   | to    | to    | to    |       |       |       |       |       |         |
| —          | 2:06  | 2:30  | 2:54  | 3:18 | 3:42  | 4:06  | 4:30  |       |       |       |       |       |         |

| APRIL 2021 |        |      |      |      |      |      |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|------------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| SUN        |        | MON  |      | TUE  |      | WED  |       | THU   |       | FRI   |       | SAT   |       |
|            |        |      |      |      |      |      |       | 1     |       | 2     |       | 3     |       |
|            |        |      |      |      |      |      |       | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    |
|            |        |      |      |      |      |      |       | 2:54  | 3:18  | 3:42  | 4:06  | 4:30  | 4:54  |
|            |        |      |      |      |      |      |       | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    |
|            |        |      |      |      |      |      |       | 4:54  | 5:18  | 5:42  | 6:06  | 6:30  | 6:54  |
| 4          | LAST Q | 5    |      | 6    |      | 7    |       | 8     |       | 9     |       | 10    |       |
| am         | pm     | am   | pm   | am   | pm   | am   | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    |
| 5:18       | 5:42   | 6:06 | 6:30 | 6:54 | 7:18 | 7:42 | 8:06  | 8:30  | 8:54  | 9:18  | 9:42  | 10:06 | 10:30 |
| to         | to     | to   | to   | to   | to   | to   | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    |
| 7:18       | 7:42   | 8:06 | 8:30 | 8:54 | 9:18 | 9:42 | 10:06 | 10:30 | 10:54 | 11:18 | 11:42 | 12:06 | 12:30 |

The moon's phases are listed as New, First Quarter (First Q), Full, and Last Quarter (Last Q). Times listed represent the peak activity times for game and fish each day.

|           |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Best days | Good days | Fair days |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|

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A close-up photograph of a hunter wearing a light-colored cowboy hat with a red and black braided band and an orange safety vest. The hunter is aiming a rifle with a red-dot sight. The rifle has a black and gold finish. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a body of water. The image has a red overlay on the left side.

# SEEING RED

**RED-DOT OPTICS CAN EXCEL FOR FAST SHOOTING AT SHORT DISTANCES, BUT HUNTERS SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THEIR LIMITATIONS.**

By Richard Mann

**A**lthough their popularity has increased considerably, the electronic sights that collectively have become known as red-dots are not new. Zero-magnification sights that present an illuminated red dot as an aiming point have been around for almost 50 years. However, they did not become common on hunting rifles until the turn of the 21st century. As more hunters started using AR-style rifles, particularly for feral hogs, the red-dot sight became an attractive option. About the same time, high-quality red-dots became reliable and affordable enough for that purpose.

What many hunters do not understand is that there are several kinds of sights generally called red-dots. There are prismatic sights, reflex sights and holographic sights. All provide an illuminated red (or other color) dot for the shooter to use as an aiming point; they just do it in different ways. Most do not magnify the target, and most permit comfortable, both-eyes-open shooting. This is the primary advantage of these sights and one of the reasons they're popular with the military and law enforcement. Likewise, those who enjoy feral hog hunting have found red-dots well suited to that application.

The ability to swiftly place the aiming point on the target has lots of appeal in certain hunting situations. A red-dot sight might make it easier to shoot feral hogs from a helicopter or to shoot several at a nearby feeder, when the position and angle of the targets are constantly changing. However, the nature of the red-dot sight can become a hindrance in others. When distances get much beyond 75 yards, particularly in cover or timber, red-dot sights are not the best option. Hunters using red-dots may gain a false sense of their capabilities on a range where targets are in the open, well lit and easy to see.

RICHARD MANN





If your hunting typically involves only close-range shots, especially in open areas where an optic with magnification is not needed to resolve intervening brush or to enhance low-light resolution, a red-dot sight can be ideal. Besides feral hog hunting, dangerous-game hunting for buffalo, hippo and elephant qualifies. Other species and situations may also warrant a red-dot, but in each case the animal being hunted, distance of the shot and topography will come into play. For those who hunt with a handgun, where the shots are generally at close range, the smallest red-dot sights—reflex sights—are well suited to the task.

I recently outfitted a Marlin 1894 CSBL chambered for .357 Mag. with a Leupold DeltaPoint Pro, which is a fantastic reflex sight. My purpose was to set up the little carbine as a home-defense gun that I could also use for hunting. Along with installing the reflex sight, which was simple because Leupold

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Mounting a magnifier behind a red-dot sight enables the hunter to aim more precisely not only at distance, but also in thick cover and low-light conditions.



## POWER UP

*Magnifiers make red-dots more versatile.*

For general hunting applications, the primary weakness of red-dot sights is their lack of magnification. A solution to this issue is the magnifier, an optical device that mounts behind the red-dot sight. It magnifies the image you see through the sight. Depending on the model, a typical magnifier may offer anywhere from 3X to 6X magnification.

You might be thinking, *If I'm going to get a magnifier for my red-dot sight, why don't I just get a variable-power riflescope?* That's a good question. The Aimpoint 6XMag-1 magnifier weighs about 8 ounces and costs about \$1,200. Add that to a \$900 Aimpoint Micro H-2 red-dot sight that weighs 3 ounces, and the setup is heavier than a Leupold VX-3i 1.5-5x20mm riflescope that costs about \$1,500 less.

Of course, there are less expensive options. The EOTech HHS III package combines the company's 518-2 holographic sight with its 3X G33 magnifier. The combo retails for about a grand and weighs about 25 ounces.

Vortex offers the 3X VMX-3T magnifier, and it can be paired with the company's SPARC AR red-dot sight. Together they weigh about 19 ounces and retail for around \$500. All these systems work perfectly with AR-style rifles, and in some cases you can mix and match magnifiers and red-dots.

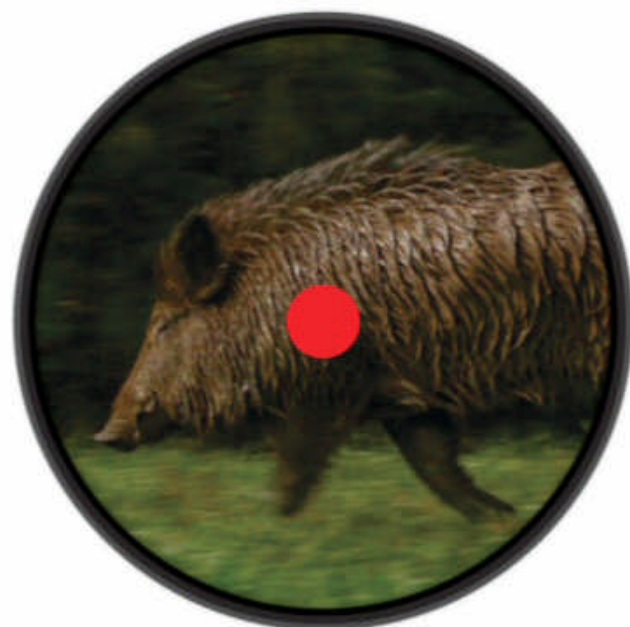
The advantage most magnifiers like the 6XMag-1 offer is a mount that lets you flip them to the side and use only the red-dot sight, with no magnification, for aiming. This is a popular setup in military and law enforcement circles where engagement distances can change rapidly. In some hunting applications the same situation exists.

Combining a magnifier with a red-dot works well on AR-style rifles, but not so much on conventional bolt-action rifles that don't offer as much mounting space. For those who like to hunt with ARs, the combination of a red-dot sight and a magnifier is a versatile option.

offers a base plate that attaches to the rifle, I added the companion rear sight accessory. It attaches to the rear of the DeltaPoint Pro and provides a bladed sight that can be co-witnessed with the red-dot aiming point. This means if the battery in the reflex sight dies, I still have a useable sight.

On the range I found that I could deliver kill-zone shots out to about 150 yards with relative ease. That is, as long as the targets were very visible. When I placed brown cardboard targets in the woods, seeing them with enough clarity to shoot with precision much past 50 yards became impossible. I've had the same experience with virtually every non-magnifying red-dot sight I've used. Additionally, low-light performance was poor when compared to a conventional riflescope with magnification. These drawbacks are why magnified optics tend to be the best option for hunters, particularly variable-power scopes with 1X to 3X minimum magnification. By presenting a clear, magnified image, they allow you to better see what you intend to shoot.

Given my intentions for the Marlin, however, I did not want a traditional optic. I wanted a sight that allowed for lightning-fast acquisition and the ease of both-eyes-open shooting—a sight that would perform exceptionally well at short engagement distances. I ended up taking the rifle on a hog hunt to put some pork in my freezer. While I was watching a field, a big boar came out at around 60 yards. With both eyes open I tracked him as he sauntered across the open ground. When the red dot found the right spot, the hammer dropped and so did he. **G-I**



RICHARD MANN





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# 50 YEARS OF FLUORO



## TODAY'S FLUOROCARBON LINES ARE BETTER THAN EVER, BUT WHAT MAKES THEM SO SPECIAL?

By Dr. Jason Halfen

**C**ontemporary anglers have three distinct options when spooling line onto reels: monofilaments, braids and fluorocarbons. Each is fundamentally different from the others and possesses its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Many of these differences are rooted in the unique chemistry and manufacturing processes used to prepare the three line varieties, making each particularly well suited for specific presentations.

In recent years, advances in fluorocarbon line design and engineering have dramatically enhanced the scope of its applications in both fresh- and saltwater angling. Let's explore the factors that make fluorocarbon a must-use line option whenever you hit the water.

Fluorocarbon line traces its origins to 1971, when chemists and engineers at Kureha—a Japanese specialty chemicals

firm—first extruded fluorocarbon fishing lines from raw polyvinylidene fluoride resins and launched the company we now recognize as Seaguar. Early users of fluorocarbon quickly recognized many of its unique properties—attributes that helped them hook and land more fish—and these advantages have continued to build over the past 50 years.

One of the first things you'll appreciate when using fluorocarbon is that it's nearly invisible underwater to anglers and, more importantly, fish. This is not hype and hyperbole, but science and fact. The extremely low subsurface visibility of fluorocarbon is rooted in the optical property of refraction, which describes the speed of light as it travels through a particular medium. Because the refractive index of fluorocarbon (1.42) very closely matches that of water (1.33), fluorocarbon is quite difficult to see beneath

the waves. By comparison, traditional nylon monofilament line has a much higher refractive index (1.58), rendering even clear monofilaments much easier to visualize, by both anglers and fish, in the water.

"One of the reasons that fluorocarbon use has grown explosively during the past decade is that anglers have recognized the advantages of an extremely low visibility line," says Seaguar General Manager Gerry Benedicto. "Many lakes and rivers across the country have gin-clear water that allows fish to see basically everything, so when you have a line that is virtually invisible underwater, it's game on!"

The polymers used to prepare fluorocarbon lines impart other unique physical and chemical properties to these fishy filaments. Specifically, the fluorine-rich nature of their synthetic starting materials



render fluorocarbon lines uniquely water-repellent and resistant to the damaging effect of exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun. These properties stand in stark contrast to those of nylon monofilaments, which can absorb as much as 10 percent of their weight in water, and lose up to 20 percent of their original strength after 100 hours of exposure to ultraviolet light. If you want to fish with a line that's designed to stand the test of time, fluorocarbon is the obvious choice.

What else will you notice when you start fishing with fluorocarbon? First, unlike mono and braid, fluorocarbon lines sink in water, a result of their density (nearly 1.8 g/ml) being substantially higher than that of the water (1.0 g/ml) we cast them into. This means your baits, especially lightweight finesse presentations like the Ned rig, will fall into the strike zone faster and stay there longer.

In addition, fluorocarbon lines offer just the right amount of stretch, positioned between nylon mono, which can stretch up to 25 percent of its original



Fluorocarbon line isn't only for finesse presentations; its abrasion resistance also makes it suitable for toothy fish like pike.

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length, and completely no-stretch braided lines. As a result, fluorocarbon will yield positive hooksets at long distances, while still providing a measure of trophy-saving shock absorption when a big fish makes a powerful run at boat side.

Anglers fishing with fluorocarbon have two options when spooling up: running straight fluoro or using a braided main line linked to a fluorocarbon leader. If you plan to use a fluorocarbon leader in this way, learn to tie a quality braid-to-fluoro knot so you can quickly add a fresh leader should yours become damaged during the heat of battle. The FG, double-uni and Crazy Alberto knots are all good ones.

Many bass anglers will fill a baitcasting reel with 12- or 15-pound-test fluorocarbon when presenting crankbaits, taking advantage of fluoro's significant abrasion resistance (another beneficial consequence of all of those fluorine atoms) to protect their line's integrity as the bait deflects erratically off rocks and wood. At other times, spooling



Because it sinks in water, fluorocarbon line helps lightweight baits reach fish faster.

up with a silky-smooth, eight-strand braided line in 20-pound test and finishing with a 4-foot leader of 8-pound-test fluorocarbon can launch lightweight presentations into the stratosphere and reach hungry fish that other anglers cannot tempt.

One of the unique attributes of fluorocarbon lines is that their properties are completely dictated by the specialty resins used in their manufacture. "The quality of fluorocarbon has evolved

so much over the last 10 to 15 years," notes Benedicto. "Older formulations of the line were stiffer, making line management challenging and knot tying less forgiving. But now, fluoro is much softer allowing for better castability and sensitivity. At Seaguar, we even have custom resins that can be formulated to create fluorocarbon lines that cater to different fishing applications and techniques. With fluorocarbon, the sky truly is the limit." 

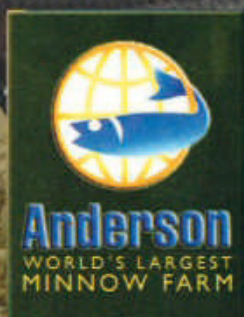
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# GET UNSTUCK

**THE UNOFFICIAL FIFTH SEASON KICKS OFF THIS MONTH: MUD SEASON.**  
USE THESE TIPS TO KEEP YOUR VEHICLE'S WHEELS MOVING FORWARD.

By Joseph Albanese

**I** attended college in one of New York's more rural counties. Just off campus was a vast network of seasonal and fire roads that allowed me to easily log 100 miles without touching pavement. Scouting turkeys one April morning, I was crawling up a steep, ice-covered hill when the frozen crust gave way and my old Jeep was instantly buried to the frame in mud. It took every trick I knew to extricate the vehicle from the hole that swallowed it.

Hunters and anglers spend a lot of time past the bounds of blacktop, chasing blue lines or pushing deep onto public land in search of their next trophy. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to avoid getting stuck or damaging your vehicle on these adventures.

## TRAIL TIPS

For starters, shift into four-wheel drive before you encounter an obstacle, not after you become stuck. Deflate your tires slightly by letting out 10 to 15 psi, which will help you “float” over soft surfaces such as mud or sand and will increase traction on slick surfaces.

Drive with your windows open and listen to your tires. If you hear them suddenly start to spin faster, immediately back off the throttle. Drop down to a lower gear or put the transfer case into low range if possible. If the RPMs start getting up there, your tires will bury you. Travel slowly but maintain momentum. Avoid obstacles such as rocks and deep ruts whenever possible.

Travel backroads long enough and you'll eventually find yourself buried in the mud—usually outside of cell service. If you sense that your vehicle is starting to get stuck, immediately take your foot off the gas. Exit the vehicle and perform a walk-around to assess the situation, looking for objects that would impede progress, then map the most likely way out.

You may be able to rock your way out by shifting from forward to reverse in an effort to regain momentum. If this doesn't get you out quickly, give the vehicle a minute or two to cool down. The rocking action, coupled with the lack of cooling airflow, is enough to cause transmissions to overheat. The transmission fluid could eventually boil

SHUTTERSTOCK

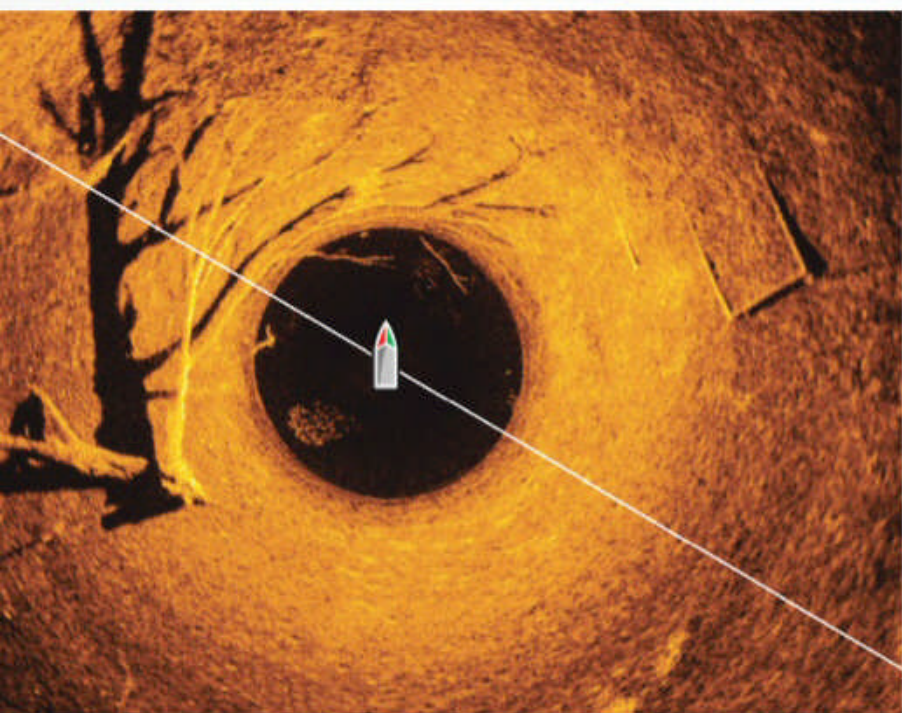
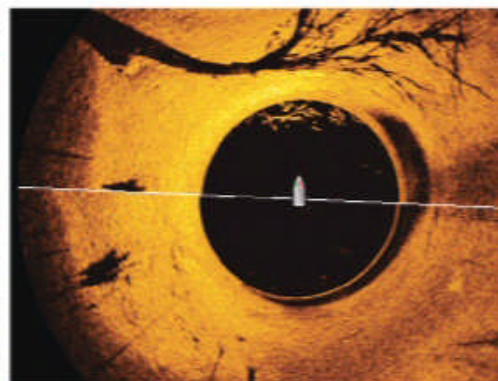
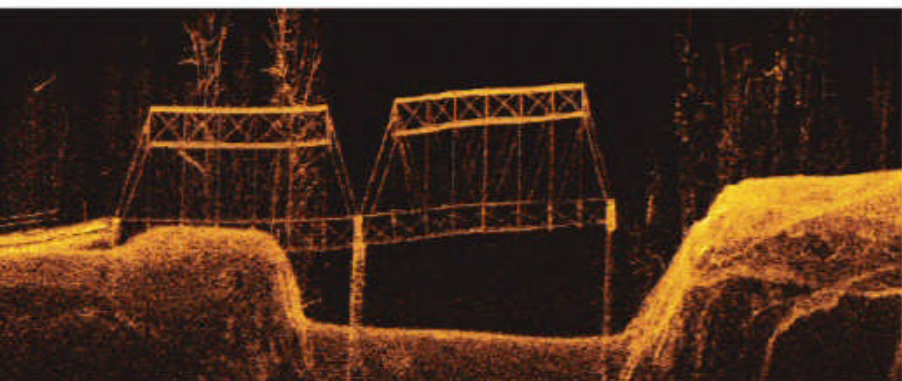


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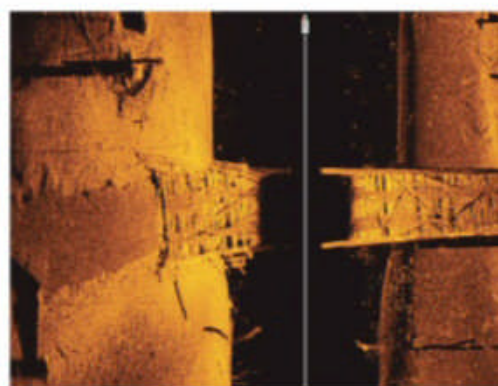
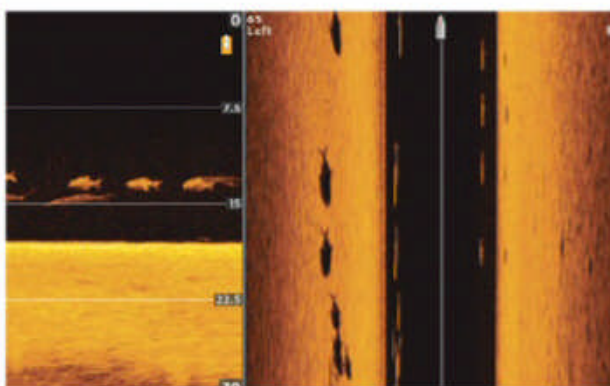
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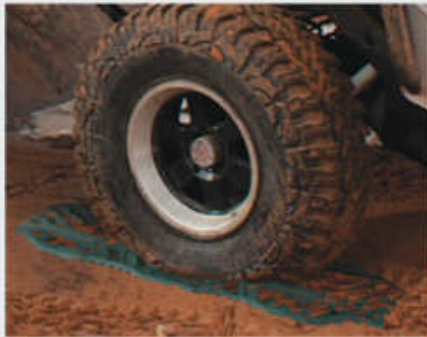
# BACK ON TRACK

*Three recovery aids that will have you on the road again in no time*

If you've ever watched a desert truck race, you've probably seen a set of recovery tracks strapped to the side of a well-equipped Land Rover. These innovative tools get vehicles moving again quickly by spreading the vehicle's weight over a larger area and giving tires something to bite. While you could use a pair of two-by-six boards to help get you out of the mud, there are a number of higher-performing aids on the market that are durable and lightweight.



**MAXTRAX** (from \$199; maxtraxus.com) were among the first molded plastic recovery boards available on the market, and many off-roaders believe they're still the best. The large, aggressive cleats sink into both the tire and the terrain to get you unstuck fast.



**SMITTYBILT ELEMENT RAMPS** (\$150; smittybilt.com) can support up to 7,700 pounds, despite being made of lightweight nylon-reinforced plastic. They come with a heavy-duty nylon carry bag to keep muddy ramps from mucking up your interior.



**OKOFFROAD EXPEDITIONS SAND LADDERS** (from \$229.95; okoffroad.com) are made from aluminum plate and dimpled for strength and weight reduction. Their solid material allows the boards to be used for bridging gaps or as ramps.



Recovery tracks are effective on all kinds of surfaces, including sand.

and spill out of the vent, and could ignite if it comes in contact with the vehicle's exhaust.

## GET A GRIP

If you have some sort of traction aid in your vehicle, now is the time to retrieve it. The simplest of aids are the floormats right under your feet. Sometimes, placing them on the soft ground in front of or behind your tires can provide enough flotation to get you out of the hole you've dug.

Floormats are less than ideal, though, so you should carry another solution. Recovery tracks help by distributing your vehicle's weight over a wider footprint and giving your tires something more substantial to grip (see sidebar). Place

these in front of or behind your tires, and slowly drive out.

Devices that strap over your tires can also help you regain momentum, acting like a paddle to propel you forward. If you're not totally buried, these will usually have you back on your way in no time. One word of caution: They can dig you in as quickly as they can dig you out. Use the lowest gear possible and go easy on the throttle. If you don't get moving again quickly, shut it down and think about another approach.

Jacking up the vehicle and filling in the holes created by the tires is an excellent way to get yourself out of a bind. This is often easier said than done, however, as you'll need to clear away the mud by your vehicle's jack points. You'll also

need some sort of hard surface such as a 2-foot square of 3/4-inch plywood to prevent the jack from becoming buried under the weight of the vehicle. Once you have the space needed, jack the vehicle up until the tires are above the surface and fill in the ruts, compacting the loose material with the back of the spade as you fill.

Sometimes, nothing but elbow grease will get you out. Carrying a full-size shovel makes digging out easier, though it's never a pleasant task. If you find yourself mired to the frame, use the shovel to create gradually sloping paths back from your tires. You'll need to create clearance underneath the vehicle as well, making sure that nothing will get hung up when you apply the throttle again. 





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# CAN WE UNITE FOR DEER?

THE NEW NATIONAL DEER ASSOCIATION AIMS TO BRING ALL DEER HUNTERS TOGETHER AND GIVE THEM THE ADVOCACY THEY DESERVE.

By Andrew McKean

**A**merica's deer hunters are a notoriously cantankerous lot. We find a way to squabble over methods and management, our expectations of what makes a good hunting season, and even what qualifies as a worthy buck. Our fractious nature is one reason deer hunters have been unable to get behind a common approach to deer conservation, even as species-specific efforts have successfully advocated on behalf of other critters from wild turkeys and ducks to ring-necked pheasants and elk.

The Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) changed some of that by coalescing whitetail hunters around the idea that if we carefully manage herds, we can help Mother Nature produce older and larger bucks. But the QDMA was mainly limited to the South and never escaped the perception that it was a club for large landowners, who had adequate acreage with controlled hunting pressure to enact management strategies.

Whitetails Unlimited has its roots in the Midwest and claims more than 114,000 members nationwide, but it functions mainly on the local level. The group hosts fundraising events and awards grants that support county and state conservation projects and educational programs rather than advocating for national deer policy.

Then there was the National Deer Alliance, which was born in 2015 out

of a recognition that individual deer-advocacy groups don't have the national clout that America's 11 million deer hunters should wield. The Alliance was created to be the voice on policy issues of the QDMA, Whitetails Unlimited and the Mule Deer Foundation.

That's all a backdrop for the biggest news in whitetail country since Jim Crumley introduced his Trebark Camo in 1980: the establishment last fall of the National Deer Association (NDA), created out of parts and pieces from the QDMA and National Deer Alliance. It's noteworthy because the new NDA knows what it wants to be—a membership-based deer-advocacy organization that remains lean and focused on threats to deer hunting, deer health and deer habitat.

We sat down with Pennsylvania deer hunter Nick Pinizzotto, the president and CEO of the NDA, to learn what the organization is, what it is not, and how it intends to give America's deer hunters the voice they deserve.

**Game & Fish:** How is the new National Deer Association different from the National Deer Alliance? They have pretty similar names.

**Nick Pinizzotto:** Their names are similar, but their missions are different. The Association was formed from QDMA and the parts of the National Deer Alliance that realized America's whitetail hunters need a voice. While there's no doubt

the QDMA was 100 percent focused on whitetails, the National Deer Alliance was always concerned with all North American deer species on a policy level.

The National Deer Alliance was 100 percent policy-focused whereas QDMA focused more on education, boots-on-the-ground conservation and hunter recruitment through the Field to Fork program. The other difference was the National Deer Alliance did not have a paid membership and instead considered anyone who signed up for its e-newsletter to be a member. The new organization brings the best of both groups together.

The merger makes the new NDA an organization for all deer, but we retain a lot of the boots-on-the-ground work from the QDMA, including Deer Steward certification, the Field to Fork hunter recruitment efforts, a focus on healthy habitat, etc. We think that's right, because we have the Mule Deer Foundation working on deer issues and habitats in the West.

**G&F:** Why do we need a National Deer Association in the first place?

**NP:** Seven out of every 10 hunting-license buyers in America pursues deer. No other species is close. The money generated by deer hunters when it comes to license sales alone is impressive, and when you consider how much deer hunters spend on items that support the Pittman-Robertson Act, which benefits all wildlife, then it becomes clear that



deer hunters are funding most wildlife conservation in America. And that's just in terms of dollars.

Now think about what an increasingly educated deer hunter is doing on the ground. We're doing conservation on private lands at a scale that's unprecedented, and I'm not talking about putting in a food plot here and there. Hunters are improving the landscape for all wildlife, even if their motivation is deer and killing big bucks.

**G&F:** That's great, but you still haven't convinced me that deer hunters need a National Deer Association in order to continue our work.

**NP:** Good point. Deer hunting is more than grip-and-grin photos over cranker bucks. When you are hunting, you might not appreciate all the work that put that deer in front of you. It's decades of work

trusted by sportsmen and -women than state or federal agencies. These agencies are less effective at reaching sportsmen or policy makers than we are, and going forward I see us doing more of their work, simply because we are trusted more than they are.

**G&F:** Why does the policy level matter to an ordinary deer hunter?

**NP:** I'm not asking all deer hunters to become experts on policy matters, but they should at least be aware and be willing to make a phone call or send a letter on things important to them. They need to learn about chronic wasting disease in particular and understand what they can do to help slow its spread, while also listening to the guidance of their state wildlife agency. They should also know that there is an increasing problem with deer hunters being elbowed out where

newsletter, which you don't have to be a member to get.

Our long-term goal is to create a movement for deer to raise awareness of their importance to all wildlife conservation, and also to educate people about how hunting is an important element. I said early on during our merger process that we are a conservation organization and we should endeavor to have people join us who may have no intention to kill a deer themselves. The caveat is they have to support hunting and understand why it's important. When people think about deer, we want them to think about us.

**G&F:** How will you know you are successful?

**NP:** In terms of big-picture success, we want policy wins annually and we want to have more educated elected officials. We're already making progress there. Five years ago I doubt you could find five congressmen that knew what CWD was and probably half of them couldn't pick a whitetail out of a lineup. But I don't ever want our success to be measured by how many paying members we have. Our mission is to ensure the future of wild deer, wildlife habitat and hunting, and our progress toward that is what's most important.

**G&F:** We started talking about all the things that deer hunters disagree about. What do we agree about?

**NP:** A love for deer. It's our most iconic game animal. Hunters lead the way in that regard and I'll always argue that nobody cares more about deer than hunters do. But we're a passionate group. We can become easily divided when it comes to hunting methods, population goals, antler-point restrictions and what camo pattern is the best. We stay out of those arguments and stay focused on the biological and political science so we can educate as many hunters who are willing to listen. When someone decides to become a member I want them to consider that they've just made a decision to be more informed about the issues that impact deer and hunting, and I hope they plan to take it even further by participating in our mission. 

**Editor's Note:** For information on joining the National Deer Association, visit [nationaldeerassociation.com](http://nationaldeerassociation.com). Annual membership dues are \$35.



**"Deer hunters are funding most wildlife conservation in America."**

—Nick Pinizzotto,  
National Deer  
Association president  
and CEO

by people to establish seasons and educate non-hunters to support the system that allows hunters to fund our own passions, through hunting licenses and federal excise taxes on sporting goods. We can't take that for granted.

We need a National Deer Association to continue to lead education efforts so we have more of the above, not less. Equal to our impact on education is our impact on policy that affects deer and deer hunters. Diseases like chronic wasting disease, habitat impairment and anti-hunting sentiments are all issues that affect our ability to hunt deer, and all are topics that we're actively fighting every week.

**G&F:** Don't state agencies advocate for deer hunters?

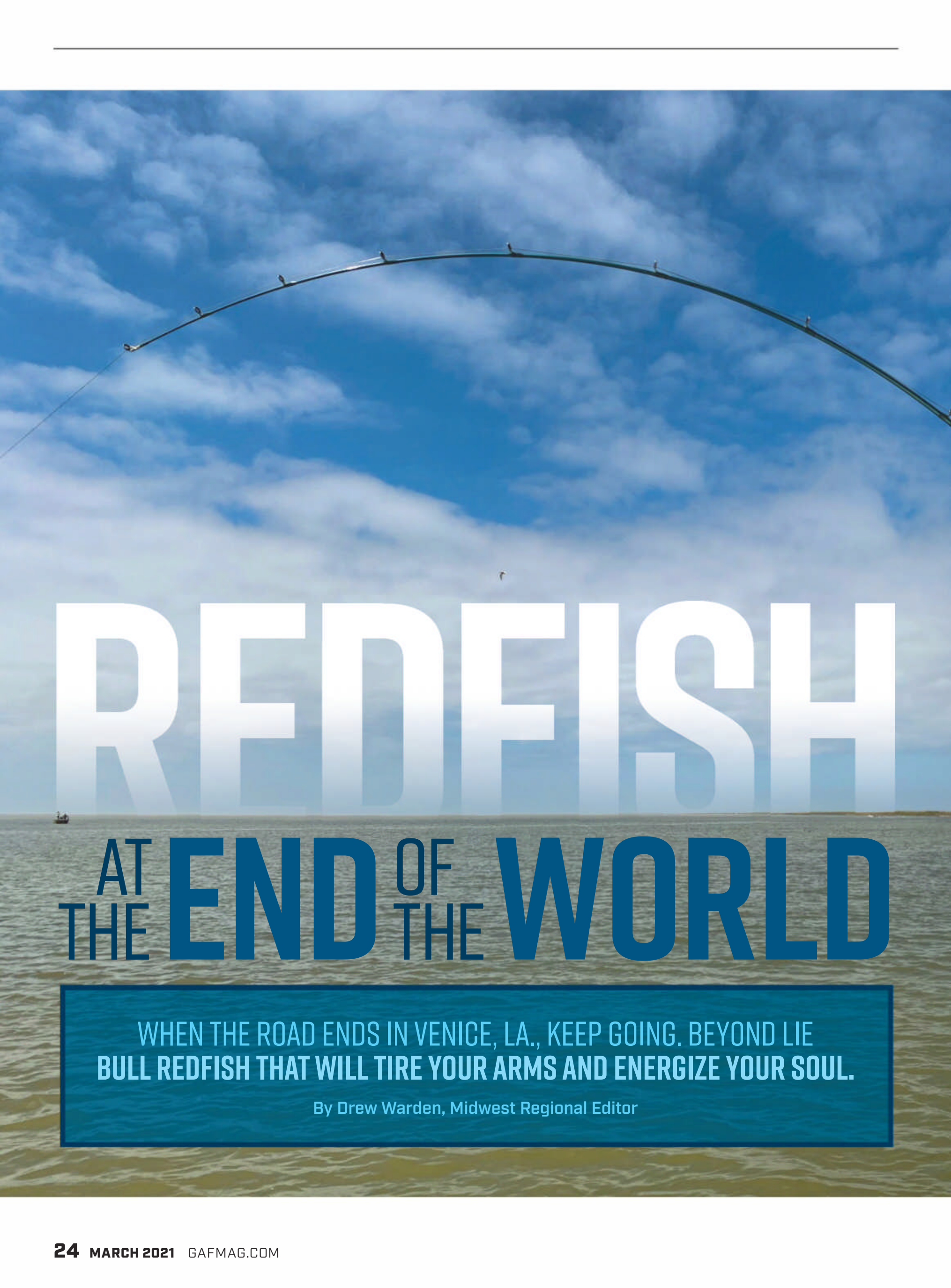
**NP:** State wildlife agencies do a great job, but we know through research and reality that groups like ours are more

they can be helpful, particularly on the edges of cities and in the suburbs where local officials are turning to things like vasectomies and contraceptives instead of hunting. It's not just happening in the big urban areas like most would suspect. I see unwillingness to manage overpopulated herds through hunting in my own community, and I live in a rural western Pennsylvania county where you'd least expect it.

**G&F:** How can a deer hunter make a difference in these issues?

**NP:** We want to make it as easy as possible for them to act. We use a grassroots advocacy program that allows people to send letters to their elected officials with just a few clicks of a mouse, or even their phones. We also provide weekly policy updates and other important information in our free weekly





# REDFISH

## AT THE END OF THE WORLD

WHEN THE ROAD ENDS IN VENICE, LA., KEEP GOING. BEYOND LIE  
BULL REDFISH THAT WILL TIRE YOUR ARMS AND ENERGIZE YOUR SOUL.

By Drew Warden, Midwest Regional Editor





CAPT. MIKE FRENETTE

## “YOU THINK IT’S THE COLOR I HAVE ON HERE?”

I posed this question to Capt. Mike Frenette as he leaned over the side of his boat to rinse fish slime off his hands in the warm, turbid Gulf waters southwest of Venice, La. It was our second day of fishing—my first with Frenette—and in the short time we’d been on the water, he’d already brought three big bull redfish to the boat. Meanwhile, I had yet to hook one, and I simply wanted to know if the fish gods were displeased with my offering.

We were both throwing a 3/4-ounce Strike King Red Eyed Shad. Mine had a little bit of color, while Frenette’s was mostly silver. He said that the slight difference shouldn’t matter, but he offered to swap lures anyway, and I went ahead and took him up on it. Naturally, a few casts later, another bull pummeled the bait I’d just traded him and started peeling line off his reel.

“Guess it wasn’t the color,” I laughed to the sound of his drag screaming.

He just smiled and shook his head. Sometimes in fishing that’s how things go.

Thankfully, about 10 minutes after he landed his third fish, I ended my schneid. I bombed a cast off the starboard side of the boat toward the distant shore, slowly turned the reel handle five or six times and felt something hammer my bait, nearly wrenching the rod from my hands. I was finally tied into my first big redfish of the trip. It would not be the last.



## GATEWAY TO GIANTS

Situated on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the small community of Venice represents a terminus of sorts. It's the last town accessible by vehicle along the Mississippi. The Great River Road—a collection of state highways and local roads tracking the course of the Mississippi through 10 states—concludes here. It dead-ends unceremoniously at a loading dock on the edge of a canal, and a humble sign announces the spot as the “southernmost point in Louisiana.” About 20 miles southeast of there, however, is the real last stop of note: the mouth of the great Mississippi River emptying into the vast Gulf of Mexico.

These attributes have led many to refer to Venice, perhaps unflatteringly, as “the end of the world.” While it might offend residents, it's not a totally unjustified moniker.

Driving toward Venice on Louisiana Highway 23, you can't help but feel a certain liminal quality about the area, a vague sensation of passing through the remnants of one world and teetering precariously on the edge of another, wilder one. The Mississippi River delta's flat greenery extends mystically into the horizon to the west, while the river itself runs parallel to the road on the eastern side, often obscured by a levee. It seems the farther you put New Orleans in the rearview on 23, the closer you feel to leaving.

Of course, Venice goes by several other epithets, and the one that probably draws most anglers to town each year is the much more exciting “Redfish Capital of the World.” If there's any correlation between the amount of love people have for something and the number of nicknames they give it, *Sciaenops ocellatus*, or the redfish, has a devoted following. Alternatively called red drum, channel bass, puppy drum, spottail bass, pumpkins, swamp donkeys or simply reds, redfish are popular inshore targets from the coast of Virginia to south Texas. However, they are especially cherished and elevated to legendary status among the southern reaches of Louisiana.

While locales in other states also claim “Redfish Capital” standing, Venice represents one of the most highly regarded destinations to pursue big bulls,

usually describing fish more than 27 inches or 10 pounds. What makes this fishery particularly special, however, is that giant reds can be consistently caught here year-round.

## AROUND THE WHEEL

A trip to Venice for redfish had been on my list for a while, and last March—just before the COVID-19 pandemic began unfolding in the U.S.—I had an opportunity to make it happen and fish with a great group of fellow anglers. After a flight to New Orleans and an hour-and-a-half drive through the lowlands, I came upon the entrance of the Redfish Lodge of Louisiana. Owned and operated by Capt. Mike Frenette and his family, the lodge has been a part of Venice lore in some capacity since the late 1980s. The most recent iteration, a neat little double-decker home connected to the Venice Marina dock system, has been around since 2005, after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the previous lodge.



Capt. Frenette's Redfish Lodge has been a fixture at the Venice Marina for many years, and it serves as a great base camp.

Frenette has guided here since the early '80s, but he started fishing Venice about a decade before that. His extensive experience and knowledge have led him to quite a few professional redfish, and offshore, tournament successes. During that time, he's also guided clients to four world-record fish and to 28 others that have claimed top 10 spots in the Louisiana state records. Frenette has worked hard at his passion, becoming a highly respected guide, and something of a Venice legend, in the process.

While the Redfish Lodge would be home for the next three nights for some of our group, another couple houses on stilts in the marina would serve as auxiliary sleeping accommodations for others, including me. I unpacked and quickly ventured back to the main house where we all chatted and started getting gear ready for tomorrow's fishing. In the meantime, Frenette and his wife, Lori, were busy readying a crawfish boil, a perfect Cajun welcome to kick off two days of redfishing.



Early the next morning, I stepped onto the balcony of the house I was occupying and into the crisp March air. Bad news greeted me. Overnight, a dense fog had rolled in and settled over the delta. The hazy mist cloaked everything in obscurity, and from my elevated position, I could barely make out boats docked in the marina about 50 yards away. This was less than ideal.

At the main lodge, Frenette and the rest of our group were sitting comfortably in easy chairs or kicking back on

couches while chatting and drinking coffee. Their relaxed demeanor confirmed what I already suspected: We weren't going anywhere anytime soon. In fact, as it turned out, we'd be waiting two more hours for the fog to lift so we could safely depart.

I'd spend the day fishing with Blair Wiggins, a former Florida fishing guide and current television-show host. While the others would check out the action downriver, our plan was to fish Venice's famed "Wagon Wheel" west of the marina.

Fog delayed fishing, but anglers still managed to catch quite a few big reds once it evaporated around midmorning.

Clearly distinguished on a map by its visual similarities to—you guessed it—a wagon wheel, this area takes its strange appearance from a circular network of canals dredged back in the '50s and '60s. Drilling operators at that time were exploring around the edges of a circular salt formation called the Venice Salt Dome. They were searching, naturally, for oil. Today, this area is a maze of dredged canals and roseau cane where anglers can easily get turned around, or run aground, if they aren't careful.

After Wiggins and I made our way along the main canal, we tucked into some shallower water and started exploring. We remained at idle speed in most places to ensure we didn't go too shallow or run into one of the many oil company pipes tracing across the marsh like veins. Often, we'd reach a shallow impasse, requiring us to back out and search for a new route to our destination. Fishing proved difficult as a result, but even just experiencing this unique area was incredible. The mental image of fishing vessels navigating an expansive marsh alongside pipes and other oil infrastructure almost perfectly captures the two industries at the heart of Venice.

In all our exploring, we did manage to catch one fish. As we drifted through water a few feet deep and came upon a pinch-point opening into a larger pool, Wiggins said he saw a fish tailing. He called out the direction, and I dropped a popping cork with an artificial shrimp along the edge of a swath of cane. After waiting a moment, I gave the cork a single pop. Moments later, it plunged below the surface, and I was hooked into my first redfish of the trip. Wiggins pegged it at about 26 inches, meaning it fell within Louisiana's 16- to 27-inch slot limit—a nice fish, but not exactly what we were looking for in Venice.

Unfortunately, some unexpected boat trouble that day sent us hustling back to the docks, so we didn't get a chance to investigate the Wagon Wheel much further. But I was still satisfied in experiencing a beautiful place full of remarkable plant and animal life. It was interesting to hear Wiggins, who hadn't fished the Wheel for several years, talk about just how much the area had changed since he'd been away from it.





Capt. Mike Frenette caught this bull redfish on a Strike King Red Eyed Shad (inset). The author discovered that the bait's color didn't seem to matter to the fish.



## RUNNING OF THE BULLS

While day two brought with it the same fog as the previous morning, it also contained more promise. As Wiggins and I were struggling around the Wagon Wheel, the others had been catching big bull reds farther south near the mouth of the Mississippi. And that's exactly where we'd all be fishing on this day. Each angler swapped boats, and I climbed aboard with Frenette.

As the fog began dissipating, we idled out of the marina and through a canal, and started buzzing down the churning waters of the Mississippi River. I was grateful I had a comfortable jacket,

as the ride downriver proved a little cold. That is, until suddenly it wasn't. Almost out of nowhere it seemed, we hit a palpable wave of warmer air that overtook the chill.

"What is that?" I asked Frenette. "Is that the Gulf?"

He nodded in reply. He said that at this time of year in particular, the Mississippi runs cold due to melting snow and runoff in the northern states upstream. This explained the sharp temperature increase we felt upon hitting Gulf waters, which must've been at least 10 degrees warmer. We would, of course, experience the opposite—a

burst of frigid air—coming back at the end of the day.

After following the river to its conclusion, we pulled off and motored a quarter mile or so to our immediate left and started a drift several hundred yards from shore. We had apparently arrived at our destination.

Over roughly an hour, I proceeded to watch Frenette catch three big bull reds, each one seemingly more impressive than the last, before I'd get on the board myself. When I finally hooked up, it was spectacular. Although reds are not, generally speaking, fast-moving fish, when they decide to grab a bait, they





seem to do it while summoning every ounce of aggression and energy they possess. I didn't even get the chance to set the hook into my first bull red. It handled that for me, striking with authority and making the first and longest of several runs.

As I brought the fish to the boat and we were able to get a grip on him, the slight disappointment of the previous day melted away in an instant. The fish was around 36 inches long and hefty. We took some quick photos, and then I held him beside the boat until his powerful tail thrashed in my hands and sent him back down into the stained waters.

# SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest— but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and snatched it up for our **Sedona Turquoise Collection**. Inspired by the work of those ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features a unique, one-of-a-kind matrix surrounded in Bali metalwork. You could drop over \$1,200 on a turquoise pendant, or you could secure 26 carats of genuine Arizona turquoise for **just \$99**.

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The author was awed by the mammoth proportions of Venice's reds. Fishing may be best in the spring and fall, but big bulls can be caught year-round.



## TOOLS FOR BULLS

*Take tough gear to Venice.*

Big bull reds in the salt are tough customers. Because of this, anglers need similarly tough gear to get—and stay—in the game. While fishing around Venice, I used both baitcasting and spinning rods from Lew's Inshore Series Speed Stick line (\$139.99; lews.com). You need a solid backbone in your rod to turn big, stubborn redfish, and the premium HM40 graphite blanks these rods utilize proved up to the task. The rods' durable stainless steel guides with aluminum-oxide inserts also stand up to corrosive saltwater.

Baitcasting and spinning models both incorporate Winn Dri-Tac material to ensure comfort and, perhaps most importantly, a solid grip for fighting strong saltwater fish. Spinning rods use Lew's patent-pending CT-1 ComfortTouch grip with an extended foregrip for added leverage over fish, which I benefitted from several times on the water. Meanwhile, baitcasting rods utilize the patent-pending G-Clutch handle system with Midas Touch, which offers direct contact with the blank for improved sensitivity, balance and a more compact profile.

With spinning rods, we used Lew's Custom Inshore Speed Spin Series spinning reel (\$129.99). We paired baitcasting rods with the Custom Inshore Speed Spool SLP Series baitcasting reel (\$199.99).

The Speed Spin performed admirably in Venice, courtesy of its saltwater-ready attributes—premium stainless steel bearings, a flush-and-drain port, a sealed carbon-fiber drag system and precision-cut Speed Gears with a passivation treatment for corrosion resistance. The drag system, capable of generating up to 24 pounds of drag, worked perfectly on the big reds we encountered. The Speed Spool SLP, likewise, has a sealed corrosion-resistant stainless steel ball-bearing system (with 10 bearings), and it features a Zero Reverse one-way clutch bearing. Casting is smooth and controlled due to a Multi-Setting Brake dual cast-control system with both an external adjustment for the magnetic brake and an internal centrifugal brake with four individually disengaging brake shoes. Both reels use Winn Dri-Tac material on handle knobs for added grip.

CAPT. MIKE FRENETTE (TOP LEFT, MIDDLE RIGHT); DREW WARDEN (TOP RIGHT)





Reds home in on noisy baits in Venice's stained waters. Hefty bulls are dogged fighters that require sturdy tackle.

We would spend the next few hours catching several more, each of which seemed just as big, if not bigger, than the first. All provided a dogged fight that had me eager to toss out the next cast.

While we caught most of the fish by blind casting off either side of the boat—the water was too deep and too murky for sight-fishing—there was one instance in which I cast toward a specific spot. I had seen something break the water quartering off the right side of the boat about 60 or 70 yards away. By the time I was ready to throw out, the disturbed water had calmed, and I had to guess a bit on placement. Somewhat desperately, I fired off a cast close to where I thought I had seen it. I must've guessed well, though, as I had barely turned the reel handle twice before I was tied into another big redfish.

In roughly four hours of fishing, I caught a number of bulls, all more than 35 inches, as well as one smaller speckled trout. Frenette bested that effort by a fair margin. Even with a shortened fishing day due to the morning's fog, it was a striking display of the exceptional action possible in Venice. After returning home, it would be several weeks before the excitement of the trip would dissipate. However, the desire to tangle with Venice's big bull reds ... I'm not sure that will ever go away. 

We spooled up with Strike King's Tour Grade Braid and Fluorocarbon (\$29.99 to \$79.99; [strikeking.com](http://strikeking.com)). We ran 30-pound braid as the main line with a 3-foot leader of 17- or 20-pound fluorocarbon. In terms of baits, Frenette and I almost exclusively used the 3/4-ounce Strike King Red Eyed Shad (\$8.49 to \$10.49)—either the standard version or the Tungsten 2-Tap. It proved enticing to the many big bull reds we found and durable against repeated abuse. Other anglers on the trip caught fish on Strike King's new Thunder Cricket (\$13.99) and the company's time-tested Redfish Magic Spinnerbait (\$4.99). If you're planning a trip to Venice, consider bringing along these baits or something like them, and make sure you pair them with a quality rod and reel and appropriate line.



Lew's Inshore Series Speed Stick Casting Rod



Strike King Tour Grade Braid



Lew's Custom Inshore Speed Spool SLP Series



Strike King Red Eyed Shad



Strike King Redfish Magic Spinner Bait



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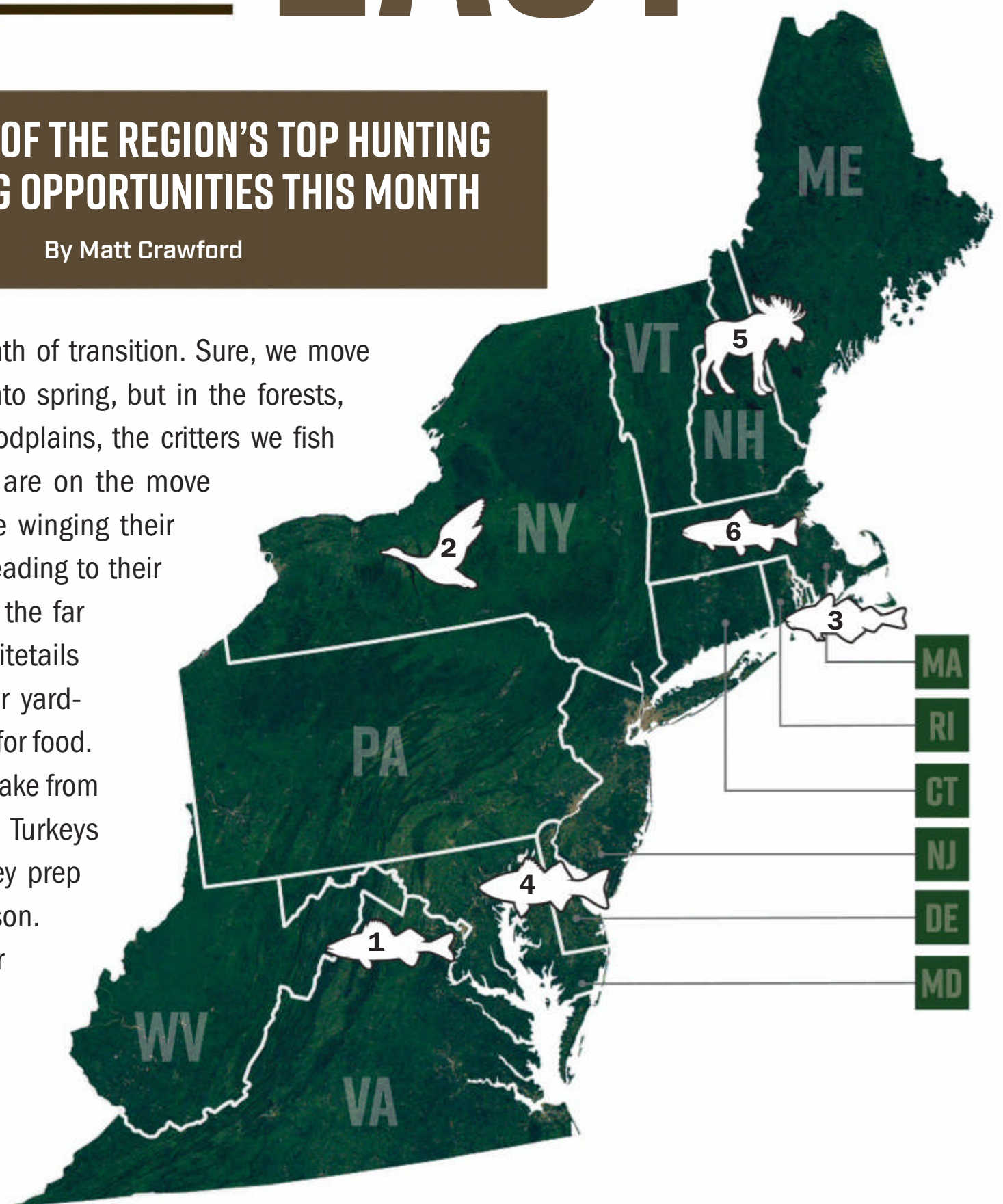
# AROUND THE EAST

## A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S TOP HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THIS MONTH

By Matt Crawford

**M**arch is a month of transition. Sure, we move from winter into spring, but in the forests, fields and floodplains, the critters we fish and hunt for are on the move

as well. Waterfowl are winging their way north. Fish are heading to their spawning grounds. In the far northern reaches, whitetails are leaving the winter yarding areas and looking for food. Bears are starting to wake from their winter slumber. Turkeys begin gobbling as they prep for the breeding season. Is it the best month for fishing and hunting? Probably not. But it's a darn good time to get moving.







## VIRGINIA WALLEYES

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources deserves kudos for its walleye and sauger stocking efforts over the years. The result is a healthy early-season fishery for these tasty critters on waterbodies like the Upper New River in southwestern Virginia and the Shenandoah River in the northern part of the state. The Upper New has some tricky size regulations designed around giving the most productive spawners some protection, but there are plenty of opportunities to add the filets of smaller fish (usually males) to the freezer and to tangle with big mamas that push 30 inches.



## NEW YORK SNOWS

When the snow of winter begins to fade in the Northeast, its signals the start of the northward migration of snow geese. In New York's Finger Lakes region, the light goose season runs until April 15 and the hunting there can be fast and furious. Snow geese can be a pain to hunt on your own—they require copious decoys and a lot of scouting—so consider hiring a guide who will provide the gear, dogs and access to land. A good snow goose day is as memorable a hunt as you'll ever have. Just make sure you have plenty of shells.



## LITTLE RHODY COD

Pull on the long johns, buy a good pair of fishing gloves and head out with a charter off the coast of Rhode Island this month for some cold-water cod action. True, the cod fishing isn't what it used to be, but charter operations out of Narragansett are pretty good at finding schools out on the fishing grounds. A charter trip aboard a party boat won't break the bank, and it can provide plenty of fresh fish for your freezer.

## SUPPORT CONSERVATION

This month marks the one-year anniversary of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic. Not much to celebrate there. Among the victims of the pandemic, both this year and last, are conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited and the National Wild Turkey Federation, which have had to cancel important fundraising dinners. If you can afford it this year, consider donating part of your tax return to your favorite organizations. They do good work.



## MID-ATLANTIC SCHOOLIES

March sees the start of the striped bass migration up the Atlantic Coast, and the fish are starting to show up in spawning grounds like Chesapeake Bay tributaries. Schoolie stripers should be active in warmer parts of Delaware Bay, and New Jersey's backwaters and bays will begin to see some action now, too.



## NEW ENGLAND MOOSE TAGS

If you want to hunt moose in Maine, New Hampshire or Vermont this fall, keep an eye on these states' wildlife agency websites. Generally, the season frameworks begin to take shape around now, and the agencies will provide info on how to enter their moose-tag lotteries.



## MASSACHUSETTS RAINBOWS

Throughout the Northeast, stocking trucks are out and about in March, and on Cape Cod there's a long tradition of trout fishing the freshly stocked ponds and lakes before the Atlantic's waters warm. Spoons are the preferred lures because it's more fun to spend a day casting than it is to sit around waiting for bait to be picked up. Many of the trout ponds on the Cape are also stocked in the fall, so there are chances to catch rainbows that have weathered the winter and seem almost wild.





# GET THE LEAD OUT



## NON-TOXIC LOADS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULAR FOR TURKEY HUNTING. BUT WHICH IS THE RIGHT ONE FOR YOU?

By Al Raychard

**S**ince the ban on lead shot for waterfowl hunting back in 1991, at least 30 states have enacted further restrictions on lead ammo on some level. Not all relate to turkey hunting, but some do. Here in the East, a number of states are considering requiring non-toxic loads for turkey hunting; at least a half-dozen

posted bulletins last year encouraging and strongly recommending hunters give non-toxic alternatives a try.

Ban or no ban, it makes little difference. Turkey hunters are quickly discovering the ballistic and terminal performance of some non-toxic shot materials match or surpass that of lead and are making the switch. That's good news for the

environment, but bad news for turkeys. Here's a look at three lead alternatives you might consider this season.

### STEEL

Steel shot weighs about a third of lead pellets of the same size and is less dense. This means it slows down faster than lead shot and sheds energy rather quickly.



Although manufacturers have worked to increase velocity, steel shot still delivers less energy when compared to lead shot of comparable size. These two factors make steel less effective and not an ideal choice at long range—say beyond 40 yards or so. To compensate for the lower weight, lesser density and loss of velocity, it's not uncommon for turkey hunters to load up with steel shot one or two sizes larger than what they would use in a lead load.

But steel shot has some advantages over lead and can certainly be deadly on turkeys. Steel shells contain more pellets than their lead counterparts of the same size. The popular No. 4 steel load may contain as many as 300 pellets depending on the charge, while a lead shell of the same size contains just over 200. Steel shot also spreads less and delivers tighter shot patterns than lead, meaning more pellets strike the target. Perhaps equally important is steel shot doesn't flatten out upon impact. Unlike lead pellets, steel shot retains its true form from the minute it exits the barrel to impact, and close-range penetration means deeper, more lethal wound channels.

No manufacturer sells a turkey-specific, steel-only load, though some, like Hevi-Shot, offer loads with steel plus another material. Hevi-Metal Turkey, which combines steel and Hevi-Shot, is one such example.



Hevi-Metal Turkey features a combination of steel and Hevi-Shot.

## BISMUTH

Bismuth by itself is frangible; that is, it breaks apart upon impact. This was a problem early on, but today's bismuth loads are alloyed with 4 to 6 percent tin to provide the necessary cohesiveness to hold together as it departs the barrel and impacts the target. Bismuth-based shells cost more than steel, but in terms of ballistic and terminal performance they are far superior and well worth the extra few dollars.

A number of manufacturers offer three-inch, bismuth-based, 12-gauge shells with No. 3 to No. 7 shot. For turkeys, sizes 5 to 7 will get the job done nicely and are popular choices. Bismuth is also available in 2 3/4-inch 20-gauge shells, typically loaded with No. 5 and No. 6 shot, for those who prefer small-bore guns.

What makes bismuth such a good non-lead alternative is its density. Bismuth pellets are similar in density to lead and provide similar ballistic velocities, retained velocity and energy, pattern density and terminal characteristics upon impact. An added bonus is that unlike steel, bismuth shot can be used and performs well with older lead-only barrels and chokes.



Winchester uses its proven Shot-Lok technology in its Xtended Range Bismuth loads.

## TUNGSTEN

Tungsten is the most lethal of the non-toxic turkey shot materials. The reason, in part, goes back to density. Depending upon the manufacturer, today's tungsten turkey loads have a density close to 60 percent higher than lead. As we all know, higher density equates to more retained energy, and no other commercially available lead shot alternative is as dense as tungsten.

Tungsten shot is also many times harder than lead, allowing it to retain form at short and longer ranges alike, and because of this it maintains better patterns. Because tungsten is heavier and harder, smaller tungsten shot performs on the same level as larger lead shot, allowing for more pellets per shell. My old No. 5 1 3/4-ounce heavy field lead loads carried less than 300 shot pellets on average, but a 1 3/4-ounce load of No. 9 tungsten carries more than 600 pellets. The weight and hardness of tungsten also makes it a viable alternative in lighter 20-gauge and even .410-bore guns. The range limits on these guns will be shorter but just as deadly.

Tungsten loads are available with No. 5 to 10 shot for most gauges. Whatever the size, tungsten provides a deadly combination of retained speed and energy, resulting in deep penetration beyond what is considered normal shooting range.

The only downside to tungsten is its cost. Last spring, a box of five 3-inch shells loaded with No. 7 shot got me a penny back in change from my \$50 bill. Good thing my home state has a two-bird limit during the spring season. I still had three shells left for fall.



A 3-inch, 20-gauge load of Federal Heavyweight TSS with No. 8 and 10 shot contains 653 pellets.

## TESTING AND PATTERNING

As with lead shells, patterning your gun with non-toxic loads is of utmost importance—but be prepared to experiment a bit. Not all non-lead loads shoot the same. Every shotgun is different, and your gun may shoot one type better than another.

In general, thanks to changes in wad technology and the addition of buffering agents, most modern shotguns can shoot these popular non-toxic loads, though certain chokes or specialized tubes may be required or recommended for peak results. Steel loads are not recommended for pre-1969 guns, older Damascus barrels or in modern guns with fixed or tighter removable chokes. If you're unsure which non-lead alternatives can be used in your fixed- or interchangeable-choked gun, or what choke is best for a certain load, check with a qualified gunsmith or the gun's manufacturer.

Lead loads may be with us for some time yet, but as more hunters discover that non-toxic alternatives can be equally or more effective, and game departments become more concerned with lead's toxicity in the environment, it's only a matter of time before more and more states impose bans. Now's a good time to find the right alternative for you. 



# SOLVING THE PRE-SPAWN PUZZLE

THIS IS ARGUABLY  
THE TOUGHEST TIME  
OF THE YEAR TO TARGET  
SMALLMOUTH BASS.  
BUT IT CAN ALSO BE  
ONE OF THE MOST  
REWARDING.

By Tony Hansen



**H**ere in the frozen North, early spring smallmouth fishing is often a feast-or-famine affair. With the ice just off the lake, the water temperature is still plenty frigid, and the air temp often matches. Finding fish can be maddeningly difficult, but once you find them...well, those can be days of legend. The trick, of course, is finding them.

Unlike largemouths, which seem to head shallow as soon as the ice leaves the lake, smallmouths are a deep-water fish for much of the open-water season. Sure, you can find a few fish shallow throughout the season, but for the most part they hang deep. Think back to where you caught the last fish of this past season. Odds are they were in deeper water and relating to some sort of structure. Rock piles, ledge breaks and contour changes in deep water are late-summer and early-fall staples. Such is the case in early spring.

SHUTTERSTOCK



## LACKING STRUCTURE

Things really get tough when the fish aren't relating to any type of structure, which is often. For whatever reason, these early-spring smallmouths simply hang out where they hang out with little rhyme or reason to it.

A sensible starting point is the deepest main-lake structure you can find and know has previously held bass. I always start deeper than I think any bass will hang out and work my way toward shallower locations that held bass in the heat of the summer. This seems to save me time and puts me on active fish more quickly than if I start at the bank and work my way deeper. When my approach is the latter, I spend too much time on likely looking breaks and structure areas. By starting way deep and working toward shore, I cover water that seems to lack any features, and often this is where I find the bass.

Smallmouths seem to group-think when it comes to the spawn. They move up in waves when the water is near that magical mid-50s mark that seems to trigger the migration to shallow water. Until that happens, they group up in deeper water. A maddening aspect of this seasonal behavior is the fact that they often relate to nothing—no structure, breaks or obvious visual clues as to their location. This is further compounded by the fact that smallmouths are notorious for suspending in super-deep water. This means you not only must look for fish hugging bottom in deep water, you also need to scout really deep areas for schools of bass suspended in the water column. On big lakes, that means you'll have a whole lot of water to search.

## HOW TO FIND THEM

This is a great time of year for using forward-looking sonar. With minimal vegetation growing, forward-scanning systems can make quick work of scouring areas and clearly revealing the location of bass, which will likely be in schools and therefore much easier to locate. Don't just look for smallmouths on the bottom, though. Brown bass are known to suspend partway down the water column, too. With forward-looking sonar, you can cover a ton of water to locate the baitfish these bass will be keying on and see them in front of the boat as you



The search for early spring smallies starts around the deepest main-lake structure you can find and gets progressively more shallow until you locate the bass.

approach without spooking the school.

However, while seeing the fish (once you find them) can be simple indeed, getting them to bite can be a challenge.

## JERK AROUND

The time-tested jerkbait is a go-to spring-time lure, and the key is to fish it slow. Like, boring slow. Long pauses between jerks is the order of the day. Remember, the water is likely still frigid, and the bass are somewhat lethargic. A jerkbait allows you to cover a lot of water with long casts and target bass that are both suspended and hugging the bottom. In clear water, the flash of a jerkbait can be seen from

a great distance, and that visual cue can trigger bass from a long way off.

Often, you'll see bass follow your bait to the boat without committing to strike. That's okay, because it tells you when you've located a potential fish-holding area. This is where the long pauses really come into play. I like a jerkbait that has near-neutral buoyancy, which allows the bait to suspend at the same depth at which it runs. The vast majority of bites will come when the bait is sitting still partway down the water column. Baits that rise slightly can be excellent, too, as that slight upward movement can trigger bites.





The beauty of Lake Champlain is matched by its outstanding spring bass fishing, accessible by motor- and paddle-powered craft alike.

# TOP SMALLIE WATERS

*Unlock the spring bite on these regional favorites.*

**EAST GRAND LAKE, ME:** This fishery could be one of the last best-kept secrets in smallmouth fishing. It's largely known for its May-to-July bite, but those fish are still in the lake in early spring, and you just might have the water to yourself.

**LAKE WINNIPESAUKEE, NH:** This popular spot is choked with boat traffic during the summer. Hit it early in the spring, however, and you'll find calmer waters and plenty of big brown bass.

**LAKE CHAMPLAIN, NY/VT:** Boasting both smallmouths and largemouths, Champlain is one of the prettiest lakes you'll ever fish, and it's known for its springtime action.

**ST. LAWRENCE RIVER, NY:** This system is a smallmouth factory, and early spring can be awesome. Because it's a river system, finding fish can be a bit easier than in a lake thanks to the more obvious current and structure.

**LAKE ONTARIO, NY:** The big water of the Great Lakes can be plenty intimidating in the spring, but hit Ontario on a calm, sunny day and you just might experience a day of fishing you'll never forget.

**ONEIDA LAKE, NY:** This shallow, rocky Central New York fishery often warms a bit more quickly than other lakes in the region, meaning springtime fishing can be excellent.

## GOOD GRUB

Early spring is the only time of year that I'll throw an old-school curly-tail grub. For whatever reason, smallmouths seem to prefer these classic plastics this time of year. Later in the season, I do far better with a standard tube jig or drop-shot setup, but early in the season the curly-tail seems to be the ticket. Again, you'll be targeting deeper water and dealing with schools of bass waiting to move onto the shallow flats once the spawning temperature is reached (about 60 degrees on most smallmouth lakes).

I don't go crazy with colors and rigging. A basic round-ball jig head tipped with a white, yellow or smoke grub typically works just fine.



Old-school baits like curly-tail grubs and hair jigs are top producers for early-spring bass.



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## GET HAIRY

Another top producer in early spring is the hair jig, which I've found performs well now but is often ignored later in the season as the water warms. Go with the lightest jig you can. In deep water this will require plenty of patience, as it will take a long time for the bait to hit bottom. But it's this slow, tantalizing fall that will help you target those finicky, suspended bass.

I'll again stress the importance of forward-looking sonar here. I can see a hair jig falling on forward-looking units better than just about any other style of lure because of the bait's slow descent. Not only can you see the jig on the screen, you can also see how fish respond to it and adjust accordingly.

## THE GEAR

I see no reason to ever carry baitcasting rods and reels on a smallmouth lake. I realize I've likely just earned myself all kinds of labels from hardcore largemouth

anglers, but the simple fact is all of the abovementioned lures have proven to be deadly on early-spring smallmouths—and they're all more effective when fished with spinning tackle.

Jerkbaits can certainly be thrown with a baitcaster, but you'll encounter many more problems when doing so since they tend to catch the wind when cast, creating line twist and backlashes. I also find it far easier (and less work) to snap a jerkbait with spinning gear than with casting gear. I like a 6-foot-long rod with medium power and a medium-fast action.

Similarly, lightweight grubs and hair jigs simply can't be thrown as effectively with casting gear. For these baits I prefer a 7-foot rod with medium power and a fast action. For the reel, anything with a good drag system will work. I'm partial to the Daiwa Fuego LT, a very good, mid-priced reel.

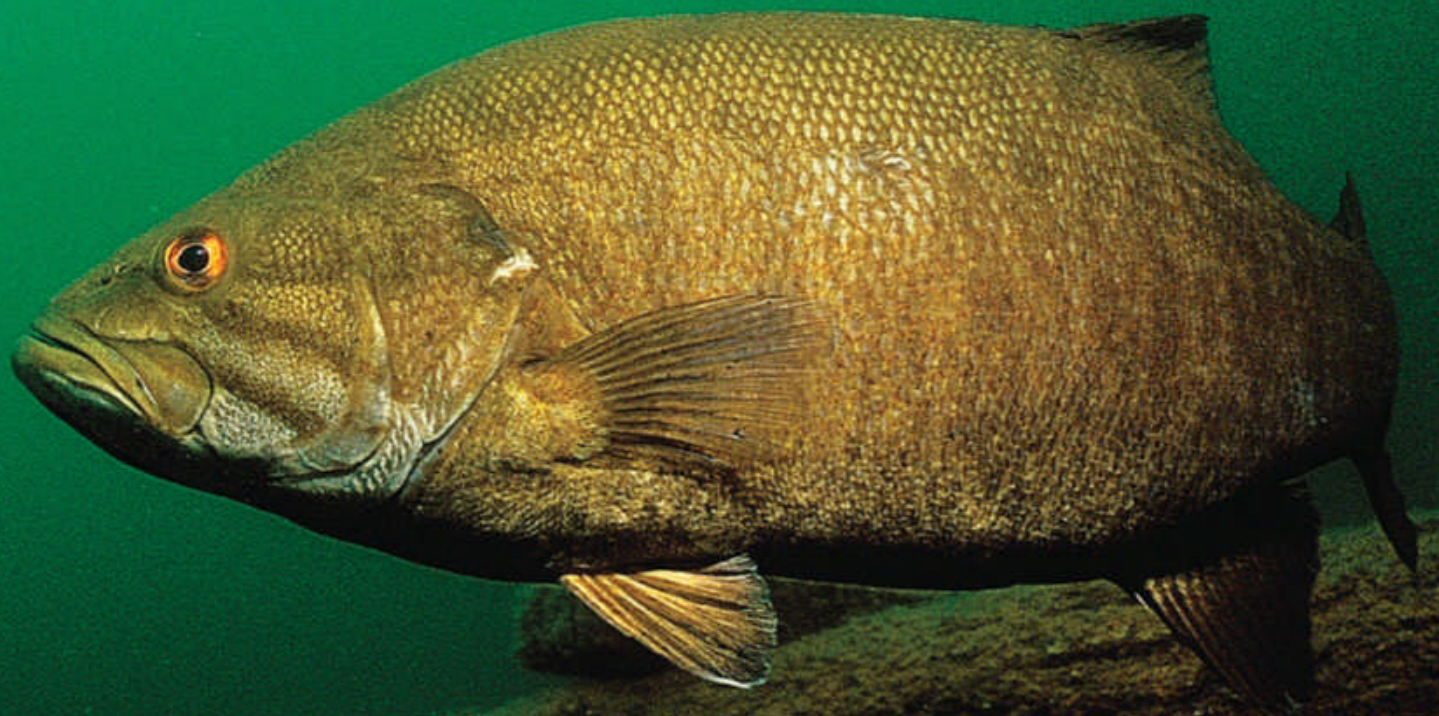
The line setup is the same for all: Back the reel about a quarter full with cheap

monofilament (the pound test doesn't matter; this is just filler), followed by enough 15- to 30-pound braid to almost fill the reel and then a 15-foot (or about three arm lengths) fluorocarbon leader. I keep the leader on the long side so I can retie a lot more without having to redo the Alberto knot that connects the braid to the fluorocarbon.

For hair jigs and light grubs, I go with 6-pound-test fluoro in clear water. Jerkbait get 8- or 10-pound test. You can use a quality bearing swivel between the leader and braid to help with line twist if need be, but I typically reserve that for when I'm fishing tubes or drop shots, which seem to create more twist.

There's no arguing that early-spring smallmouths can be tricky—they can be tough to find and often tougher to convince to bite. But once you find the fish and trigger one to commit, that wolfpack mentality seems to kick in and the feeding frenzy begins. It's well worth the wait when it happens. 

A lack of submerged vegetation in early spring makes finding bass with forward-scanning sonar easier now than at other times of the year.





# A MATCH MADE IN WHITETAIL HEAVEN



From their farm in the woods of eastern Iowa, Lee and Tiffany Lakosky have built a world-class whitetail paradise. Don't miss the heart-pounding action as they pursue their passion for big game bowhunting — at home and across America.

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## RIVER

## MONSTERS

THREE SUREFIRE TECHNIQUES FOR TANGLING WITH MOVING-WATER MUSKIES.

By Jeff Knapp

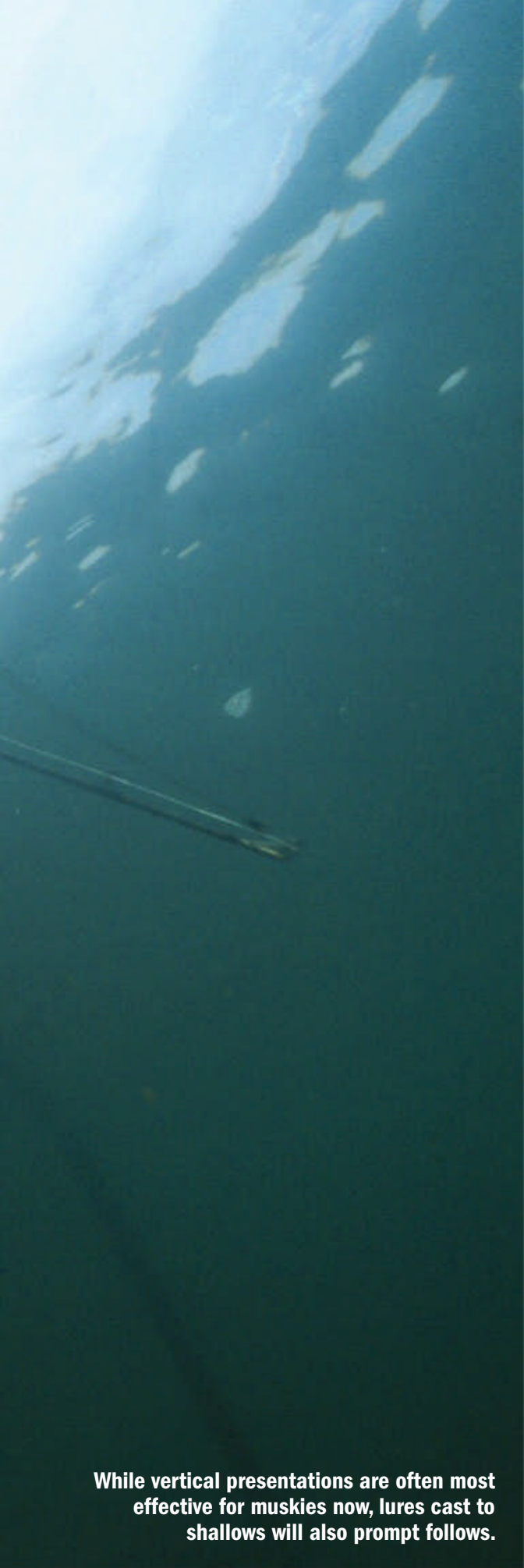
**M**y 4-inch tube jig, dressed over a 1/4-ounce insert-style jig-head, had barely landed along the sun-drenched bank when I felt a sharp tick. Following the reactive hookset, my medium-action spinning rod doubled over. In water that barely scratched the 40-degree mark, the fish put up a strong but admittedly lethargic battle. A few minutes later, a 44-inch musky was safely in the bag of the

Stowmaster net I keep on board for just such an incidental musky encounter when the primary targets are walleyes and smallmouths.

That experience took place nearly two decades ago. In the time since, I've come to learn that such events aren't necessarily incidental. In rivers that harbor muskies, it's common to catch them during late winter and early spring, right along with big smallmouth bass and

walleyes. When you think about it, it's not all that surprising. Come March, with longer days and warming water, muskies become more active, often moving into nearby shallows to feed. The experience described above occurred on a shallow, soft-bottom flat just above a slack-water hole with depths of 15 to 20 feet. Also, early-spring muskies are known to prefer downsized lures, and I've put dozens of late-winter and early-spring river





While vertical presentations are often most effective for muskies now, lures cast to shallows will also prompt follows.

muskies in the boat on baits intended for walleyes and smallmouths.

This isn't to say muskies can't be caught on outsize lures now. They can, which provides justification for folks who feel a musky catch isn't valid unless the fish succumbed to a dedicated musky lure. Let's examine three tactics that will help you put muskies in the boat (or, in some cases, on the bank) this month.



## TOP MUSKY RIVERS

*The region's best March river musky fishing occurs in drainages where the fish is native or has long been established.*

**1. NEW RIVER:** The New River provides both Virginia and West Virginia anglers with top-quality options for muskies, including trophy-class fish. Well known for its whitewater sections, expect to find March muskies in the placid pools. The New's flow is interrupted by dams in both states.

**2. ELK RIVER:** The Elk River, below West Virginia's Sutton Dam to its merger with the Kanawha River, features a stream-bred musky population with individuals reaching the 45- to 50-inch mark. A medium-sized river, the Elk is appropriate for both smaller boats and shore anglers.

**3. MONONGHELA RIVER:** Flowing north from West Virginia into Pennsylvania, the industrial look of the "Mon" can be deceptive. It holds a good musky population, particularly in West Virginia and just across the

Pennsy border. Most fish are taken below the navigation dams at this time.

**4. ALLEGHENY RIVER:** Well over a hundred miles of the Allegheny River provide Pennsylvania and New York anglers with options to quell March musky madness. This includes southern New York above Kinzua Dam, the free-flowing middle Allegheny from the Kinzua Dam outflow to East Brady and the lower Allegheny from East Brady to Pittsburgh.

**5. SUSQUEHANNA RIVER:** The North Branch of the Susquehanna in New York and northern Pennsylvania has a great muskellunge population. The same can be said of the West Branch in the north-central part of the Keystone State. The main stem of the Susqy provides miles of viable March musky water all the way to Conowingo Dam on the Penn-Maryland border.



Strikes on large, vertically presented baits tend to occur on the fall, so keep a tight line as the lure descends and be ready to sink the hooks at the first sign of a bite.



### GO VERTICAL WITH SMALL BAITS

As mentioned, muskies spend much of the winter and early spring in areas protected from the main force of a river. This could be a deep hole on an outside river bend; deep slots behind barriers such as islands; in slack-water pools formed below and sometimes above sand, gravel and rock bars, often at the mouths of small feeder streams; and below river dams, particularly if a lock chamber is present.

In my experience fish that hold in the depths of these pools aren't very active, but still might be catchable if you put some easy-to-eat morsel in front of them. I've used a jig-and-minnow to catch 40-inch-plus muskies that bit as lightly as a 12-inch walleye.

Classic muskie lures—crankbaits, glide baits and big rubber baits—typically don't reach the depths at which these fish are holding. And even if you can get them down that deep, their horizontal movement is more than an inactive muskie is likely to respond to. However, put a smaller vertical presentation in front of a musky and the result can be far better. My most productive examples of this are a classic leadhead jig tipped with a chub or sucker minnow and a half-ounce Silver Buddy blade bait.

Either should be fished in a vertical manner, close to the bottom, while drifting over the deeper holes and pools muskies spend much of their time in when the water is cold. This

isn't the power fishing most musky anglers prefer, but it's highly effective.

Pair sucker minnows and chubs in the 3- to 5-inch range with leadhead jigs in the 1/4- to 3/8-ounce range. You might wonder about the strength of a leadhead jig meant for walleye fishing, but remember that muskies don't fight as hard in 40-degree water. Plus, you don't have to lean on them too hard since they're in relatively open water. We've taken fish well over 30 pounds without straightening a hook.

The same goes for blade baits. Drift them over deeper pools, keeping the lure close to the bottom and giving it short, sharp upward jigs of 6 inches to a foot.

Though most muskies are lip-hooked at this time, I use a short leader of



20-pound-test titanium leader material tied to the mainline with a clinch knot to prevent bite-offs.

### GO VERTICAL WITH BIG BAITS

Earlier we mentioned that classic musky-sized baits are generally not designed for fishing vertically in deeper water. There are exceptions. These include the Bondy Bait, a lure designed for fishing the deep water of the current-strong Detroit River, and big blade baits like the Shumway Fuzzy Duzzit and larger sized Steel Shad offerings.

Whereas smaller vertical presentations can be fished on standard medium-power spinning and baitcasting gear, you'll need to beef things up for musky-sized vertical baits. I fish Bondy Baits on an 8 1/2-foot St. Croix Mojo Musky casting rod with an Abu Garcia Max Toro reel.

Hits on the Bondy Bait typically occur when the bait is falling. As such, it's important to drop the lure on a fairly

tight line and be prepared to deliver an aggressive hookset when a musky strikes. Even in cold water, a musky can bite and then quickly reject such a lure. Lift-drops of a foot to a foot and a half close to the bottom are appropriate. Fish the larger blade baits in the same manner as the half-ounce versions, again using heavier, stiffer tackle to compensate for the added resistance the lure creates.

### HORIZONTAL OPTIONS

Finally, it should be stated that muskies can also be taken with more traditional cast-and-retrieve tactics now, especially when environmental factors like evening twilight, moonrise and moonset suggest an increase in activity.

Expect actively foraging muskies to slide up into the shallows adjacent to the mild, slack-current pools they inhabit during less active times. This could be simply closer to the bank, or upriver or downriver of the deeper wa-

ter. The other high-percentage location is the mouth of a feeder creek or river, especially during the evening twilight. Such spots often attract baitfish and walleyes, both of which are fodder for a hungry musky. This is also one of the best scenarios for shore-bound anglers.

Crankbaits like the Rapala Super Shad, Grandma, Crane Bait and Jake all excel in this setting, as do rubber baits like the Bulldog and Medusa. The key is to work them slower than you would in warmer water. Since the rubber baits sink, your speed of retrieve also dictates the depth at which they are fished, something you can tailor to the spot.

It's worth noting that the Medusa also works well as a vertically jigged lure. So, you have the option of casting the bait over shallower water and jigging it under the boat when in depths greater than 10 feet—an efficient blending of tactics for fish that are just starting to emerge from their winter slumber. 



Early-spring muskies holding in deep pools are fairly inactive, but will respond to smaller offerings dropped in front of their faces.





Don't just drive and scout for birds on the ground. Identify roost sites well in advance of the season to increase the odds of opening-day success.

WINDIGO IMAGES





# TURKEY RECON

GET THE DROP ON A GOBBLER OR  
THREE NOW AND SET YOURSELF  
UP FOR OPENING-DAY  
SUCCESS.

By Bob Humphrey

**O**pening morning. The long-awaited day has finally arrived. You make it to the roost site you've carefully scouted, set out your decoys and settle in for fly-down. Then it happens: The birds pitch down, ruffle their feathers and head off in the opposite direction. Now what?

Even worse, you arrive at your secret honey hole only to find another hunter has beaten you to the spot. Or maybe you wake to sound of wind and rain pelting your bedroom window.

Any number of variables can throw a wrench in your plans for the start of turkey season, which is why it's never too early to start scouting and devising contingency plans in order to make the most of those early days. The following tips can help you find birds now, and then determine where they'll be on opening day.

## SCOUT EARLY

Getting ahead of the competition applies as much to scouting as it does to opening morning, especially on public or unfamiliar land. Most hunters scout mornings by driving and glassing for visible birds, and evenings by stopping on the roadside and roosting birds with an owl hoot. Just because they don't gobble doesn't mean they're not there, and you may be far more successful at locating roosts by scouting at pre-dawn and listening when the birds are most eager and willing to gobble on their own. Knowing where the birds are after fly-down is important, but locating roost sites can give you a leg up on the competition.

Furthermore, with a smart phone and some mapping software, or a good old fashioned paper map, you can use a process called triangulation to zero in

on the locations of roost sites well off the road without intruding on the spot. When you first hear gobbling, draw a straight line from your position to the estimated location of the bird. Next, drive or walk to another location nearby, preferably following a curved path or a right angle. Stop again, listen for a gobble and draw a second line to the perceived source of the sound. Do this one more time and the intersection of the three lines should mark the roost site location.

## SCOUT LATE ... AND OFTEN

Even the most dedicated turkey hunters sometimes fall short by not putting in enough scouting time. They find a flock at first light, maybe even locate the exact roost site, and formulate a slam-dunk plan for opening day. But as the saying goes, roasted ain't roasted. So many things can go wrong. An unwelcome



Don't focus your scouting efforts on a single gobbler. Have backup birds pegged in the event your primary target tosses you a curve.



predator, a stray dog, a fidgety hunting companion or interference from other hunters can ruin an otherwise ideal opening-morning setup. Sometimes the turkeys simply change their tiny minds and do something different. Hunters who scout dawn flocks then call it good and head off to work have no idea where the birds go after the flocks disperse.

If your off-the-roost plan fails, you've still got a whole day ahead of you, and the birds are out there somewhere. If you plan on hunting later in the day, it only makes sense to scout at those times. While there are no guarantees, turkeys do tend to follow routines until they're disturbed. They may filter down into the river bottoms where the first green plants pop up. They may work their way to a waste grain field or a hardwood ridge laden with left-over acorns. By knowing these tendencies, you can extend your day and increase your chances of bagging an opening-day bird.

Even if you don't see or hear the birds while scouting, you can sometimes pick up on subtle signs that suggest recent activity, like turned-over leaves and exposed moist soil. After a morning



BOB HUMPHREY (LEFT)





Snow, wind and rain can throw turkeys off their routine. Scout during bad weather to know where to look should opening day bring less than favorable conditions.



WINDIGO IMAGES (BOTTOM); BOB HUMPHREY

## GEAR PREP

*Get your equipment lined out now so you can hit the ground running come opening day.*

When last season ended you probably hung up your vest and called it good. Don't wait too long to take that vest down and make sure everything is present and in good working order.

**CALLS:** Depending on how and where you stored them, your diaphragm calls might be dried out, stuck together, moldy or just plain worn out. Soak them in a diluted solution of mouthwash and water, then carefully tease the layers apart with a toothpick. Test them and replace the ones that don't sound as sweet as they did last spring. And don't forget to sand your slate and chalk your box.

**SHOTSHELLS:** Make sure you have enough of your favorite loads to both pattern and hunt with. Check the bases for rust and throw out those empty hulls that are rattling around in your game pouch.

**LIGHTS:** You probably have a headlamp and maybe a hand-held flashlight. You can check the batteries to see if they still work, but you're better off just replacing them with fresh ones, lest you get halfway to your opening-morning destination only to have the lights go out.

**DECOYS:** Make sure they're clean and in good shape and that you have all the necessary stakes, which tend to get lost or misplaced.

**SPARES:** While you're at it, throw a spare face mask and pair of gloves in your vest. Those things always seem to go missing.



feeding frenzy subsides, turkeys turn their attention to other tasks like feather maintenance. Hollowed out dust bowls in dry, sandy soil can be great mid- to late-morning ambush spots. And, of course, don't forget to keep your eyes peeled for fresh tracks and droppings.

### HAVE OPTIONS

As alluded to above, so many things can go wrong to foil your opening-day plan, especially when hunting public land or crowded areas. I've arrived at locations I was sure nobody knew about only to find a vehicle parked there. I've had hunters move in and set up between me and the birds I was calling, and I've even had a pair of hunters pull up on the roadside and light me up with a spotlight when they saw me walking across an open field in the dark. I've also had birds disappear between the time I put them to bed and when I arrived well before sun-up the next day.

Unlike a turkey, you can't put all your eggs in one nest. Scout multiple locations so you have a Plan B should

your sure thing turn out to be not so certain. Then have plans C, D and E ready to go. Be sure to give each the same level of attention, scouting before fly-down and during different times of day. Since you can't be at every location every day, consider setting trail cameras in time-lapse or video mode in open areas to help you establish a timeline for when the birds visit each location.

### FOWL WEATHER

Remember that morning you skipped scouting because it was raining? That could come back to haunt you. My first Merriam's hunt started out under less-than-ideal conditions. My host had scouted the flock on the farm we'd be hunting and had them pretty well dialed in, but when my plane landed the snow was falling diagonally across the runway. By dawn the next morning, more than a foot had accumulated.

That doesn't just happen in the West. I've hunted spring turkeys in the snow in New York, Maine and Massachusetts, and many other places in pouring rain

and howling winds. Each situation was unique, but the one commonality was that turkeys behave differently in bad weather. The urge to breed gets temporarily set aside in favor of survival. Rather than strutting around the field and casually picking clover, they may head straight for the nearest silage pile or oak bottom. They might fly down much later than usual, too. Know where they go in the wind, rain or snow and you could pull off an opening-day tag-out while other hunters are hiding under their covers.

There's an inverse correlation between scouting and hunting: The more you put into the former, the less you'll do of the latter. Start scouting early—both in the year and in the day. Stay out longer to learn where the birds go after the first flurry of activity. Give yourself plenty of options, including alternatives for bad weather. Do all those things and you'll have better odds of bagging a bird on opening day. And if it doesn't work out, you'll be that much further ahead for the rest of the season. 



Understanding a gobbler's routine in the hours after fly-down is just as crucial to success as identifying his favored roost site.



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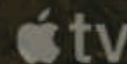
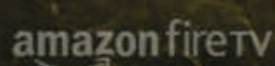
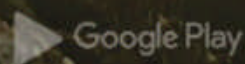
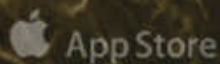
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# PANFISH ON THE FLY

KNOCK THE WINTER RUST OFF YOUR BACKCAST BY TEMPTING HUNGRY SUNFISH, CRAPPIES AND PERCH THIS MONTH.

Story and Photos by Joseph Albanese



Sunfish species are voracious feeders in early spring and will readily gobble up almost any fly cast near them.

**A**s we stood on the dock, my young son Charlie clumsily made a cast, the fly landing in a pile with the line and leader next to some lily pads. No sooner had the fly disappeared from view and the rod bent over under the weight of a good bluegill. I don't know who was prouder when he lifted it out of the water, Charlie or me.

While trout and other gamefish species require technical fly presentations, panfish are far more forgiving. They can

be found just about everywhere: farm ponds, lakes, municipal duck ponds, streams and everywhere in between. Because they're so aggressive and prolific, they offer ample opportunity to dial in your casting and work on your hook sets after the long winter.

Get out of the house and back on the water this month and load up on hungry sunfish, crappies and perch. And if you've ever wanted to learn to fly fish, spring panfish offer the perfect opportunity.

## BACK TO LIFE

Old Man Winter has finally loosened his grip on the Northeast. The white blanket of snow has given way to the first sprouts of spring greenery, and the ice that covered ponds and lakes has returned to liquid form. Below the surface, aquatic creatures are springing to life as the temperature climbs.

The shallows are the first to warm, feeling the full effects of the sun as its rays strike the bottom. The warming water draws insects out of the mud,



which attract minnows and gamefish alike. The increasing temps kick-start the metabolism of panfish, which feast on the nymphs and smaller fish. The combination of shallow water, ample bait and hungry fish make this the perfect time of year to catch them on a fly rod.

The temperature of a water body in the spring is highly variable, so you'll need to stay on your toes to really score. The northern end of a pond is a good place to start, as it warms first since it receives the most sun this time of year, and the shoreline protects it from harsh northern winds that can chill the southern end. Plan on fishing later in the day, giving the sun some time to warm the water and get fish moving. The temperature can rise as much as five degrees in a day, which can have a big effect on fish behavior.

### BLUEGILLS

In early spring you can often find bluegills in as little as 2 feet of water. Look for them hanging around visible structure such as fallen timber and boat docks (if any are in yet). Bluegills also relate to floating vegetation, so once lily pads emerge you'll find them there. Submerged weed beds also congregate 'gills, allowing them hide out until a tasty morsel swims by.

When water temps get to around 68 degrees, bluegills will begin to spawn. In the Northeast, this is usually around May. You'll see the circular nests the males build on the bottom, usually in water less than 4 feet deep. When you find one there will be many more around, as males cluster in an area of suitable habitat to vie for available females. If a female does choose his nest, the male will stay and guard the eggs until the fry swim off on their own. Tossing flies at nesting bluegills is a surefire way to hook up.

### CRAPPIES

Crappies tend to seek out the warmest water they can find in spring, so they often run up into the shallows right after ice-out. Look for them in areas with a dark bottom, as those tend to heat up the quickest. Creeks, backwaters and marinas are all good places to check. They also home in on structure, showing a strong preference for submerged bushes and the like. Areas of flooded dogwood or buckbrush are likely spots.



## FOR THE KIDS

*A few thoughts on getting young ones into fly fishing*

**PRACTICE FIRST:** One year, Santa brought my son one of those small rods designed for practicing casting indoors. He got the motion down once I shortened the line and attached it to the tip-top. Soon, he was "casting" 10 feet of line in the living room, much to the delight of the cats.

**THE REAL DEAL:** I eventually got him his own fly rod, an inexpensive Eagle Claw Featherlight in 3/4 weight, and loaded it with a cheap double-taper line. The slow, forgiving nature of the fiberglass construction helps him throw a decent loop with a short amount of line—and I don't have to worry when he smacks it against a tree or uses to prod the bottom.

**FORGIVING FISH:** Panfish don't require technical presentations, which makes them ideal quarry for youngsters and others just getting

into fly fishing. They're pretty forgiving of errant casts and flies that hit the surface less than gracefully, greedily slurping up nearly anything placed near them. And because of their numbers, catch rates are usually high.

**KEEP IT FUN:** Keep in mind that kids' attention spans are limited. You don't want to make fishing a chore; keep it fun so they want to continue to go. This might mean that you fish for only a few minutes on some trips and spend the rest of the time chasing frogs and quacking at ducks.

**CREATURE COMFORTS:** Make sure you dress kids warm enough for the weather and bring an extra layer just in case. And don't forget to bring plenty of snacks. Finally, don't hesitate to pull the plug if your little one gets cold, tired or just wants to leave. Above all else, fishing should be fun.



Crappies look to spawn when water temperatures reach 60 degrees—some time around the beginning of April. Just like bluegills, crappies build bowl-like nests in 1 to 6 feet of water, which the males defend until the fry have left. Just about anything presented near these nests will be met by an aggravated crappie attacking the intruder with a vengeance.

#### **PERCH**

Perch tend hang out in open water, hugging the bottom in depths of 10 to 30 feet. But in the spring they'll move much shallower and can often be found in large schools on the water's edge right after ice-out. They don't cling to structure like bluegills do, but you can usually find them near some sort of bot-

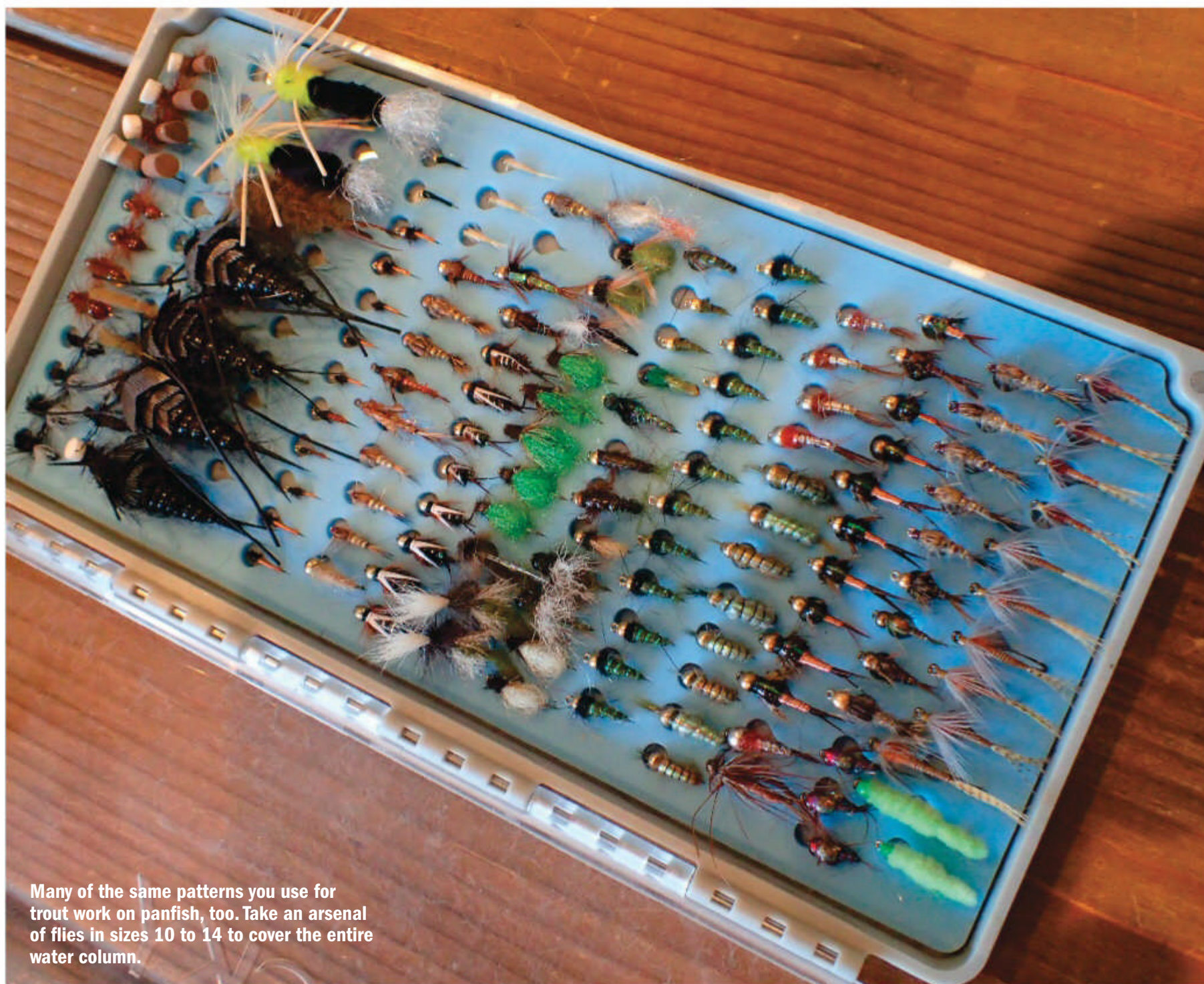
tom structure, such as humps or slopes.

Perch are early spawners, depositing their eggs when the water temperature hovers around 45 degrees. Unlike sunnies and crappies that build nests, female perch simply drop eggs into shallow cover such as fallen timber, brush or submerged vegetation and the males fertilize them. Once the eggs are laid,



It's hard to top the fun of catching springtime panfish, like this pretty pumpkinseed, on poppers.





Many of the same patterns you use for trout work on panfish, too. Take an arsenal of flies in sizes 10 to 14 to cover the entire water column.

perch vacate the shallows and head back to their deep-water haunts. Though they don't guard the eggs, you can usually find perch in really shallow water for a week or two around the spawn.

## TACKLE AND FLIES

You don't need fancy tackle to pursue panfish. If you're a trout angler, you probably have everything you need already. If you're not, you can get in the game rather inexpensively. Nine-foot fly rods in the 3- to 5-weight range are ideal. Reels are spooled with a floating, weight-forward line. Going old school and selecting a fiberglass rod can make this even more fun, as each of these species will put a deep bend in such a rod. Reels can be of the click-and-pawl variety; you don't need a heavy-duty drag system for these bantams. Knotless

leaders in 4x or 5x are ideal, though you can step it up a bit if you're fishing in heavy cover.

You'll want a variety of flies in sizes from 10 to 14 to cover the water column from top to bottom. Classic nymphs and wet flies all work, with favorites such as Zug Bugs and Copper Johns excelling. Love them or hate them, there's no denying the effectiveness of mop flies for panfish. Small streamers like Woolly Buggers and Clouser minnows both produce well. Foam spiders are a perennial favorite, getting sucked greedily off the surface. In areas with caddis or stoneflies, pack some stimulators and Elk Hair Caddis patterns. In my experience, perch and crappies will very rarely rise to hit a popper, but bluegills will smash them with abandon, so keep a few on hand.

If you can see some form of fish food around, like minnows darting about or caddis flying, dig into the box and tie on your closest imitation. But you don't need to worry too much about matching the hatch, as panfish tend to be opportunists; it's more important to put the fly in front of the fish than it is to imitate forage perfectly. Because they're in the shallows, you probably can reach the bottom just by letting your fly sink. Once your fly is just about on the bottom, begin inching it to you. Because the fish can still be sluggish, you want to start out using slower retrieves, but you can increase speed if you find the fish willing to chase a bit.

This month, stay close to home and investigate your local panfish hole. You'll sharpen your skills and have a blast in the process. **G-F**





Nymph patterns like Bead Head Princes and Copper Johns in size 14 to 18 do well on White Top Laurel Creek throughout spring.



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# VIRGINIA <sup>IS</sup> <sub>FOR</sub> TROUT LOVERS



WHILE TROUT OPENERS ARE STILL A MONTH AWAY IN MANY NORTHERN STATES, **THE SEASON NEVER CLOSES IN VIRGINIA.** GET PRIMED FOR THE SEASON IN YOUR HOME STATE WITH A TRIP TO THE OLD DOMINION THIS MONTH.

Story and Photos by Bruce Ingram

**M**arch trout fishing in Virginia is a little like the girl with a curl in the Longfellow poem. “When she was good, she was very good indeed, but when she was bad she was horrid.” For example, last March my son and I went fishing for native brookies in the Jefferson National Forest and the weather gods clobbered us with high, stained water and icy rain. However, I’ve experienced sublime days in March on put-and-take trout streams like Potts and Jennings creeks, where I’ve caught my six-trout limit in an hour or so.

But with trout seasons in most of the rest of the region not open until April, you gladly take the bad with the good in the Old Dominion since the season is open year-round there (though a few streams close briefly prior to a traditional “opening day”). Let’s take a look at some of the leading destinations.

## WHITETOP LAUREL CREEK

Located in the far southwestern corner of the state, Whitetop Laurel is one of Virginia’s premier trout streams. According to Zac Stoval and Chris Mann, who operate Feeld Trips in Damascus, the two special regulations sections (12-inch minimum, single-point-hook lures) are outstanding places to fish. One section is from the first railroad trestle above Taylor Valley to the mouth of Green Cove Creek; the second is from the mouth of Straight Branch to a sign at the Forest Service boundary.

Stoval maintains that a 6 1/2-foot 3- to 5-weight rod with a 7-foot, 3 1/2-pound leader will perform well on Whitetop or any any stream in the state, for that matter. Solid spring patterns include size 14 to 18 Bead Head Prince Nymphs, size 14 to 18 Copper Johns, size 16 Cinnamon Caddis and size 12 to 14 black or olive Woolly Buggers.

**Guide:** Feeld Trips (276-728-8866; [feeldtrips.com](http://feeldtrips.com))

**Lodging:** Damascus Cabins (276-492-1041; [damascuscabins.com](http://damascuscabins.com))

**Dining:** Located in the hamlet of Taylor Valley, the mom-and-pop Creeper Trail Café is well-known locally for its three-layer chocolate cake. I highly recommend the tomato soup and chicken salad as the main course.

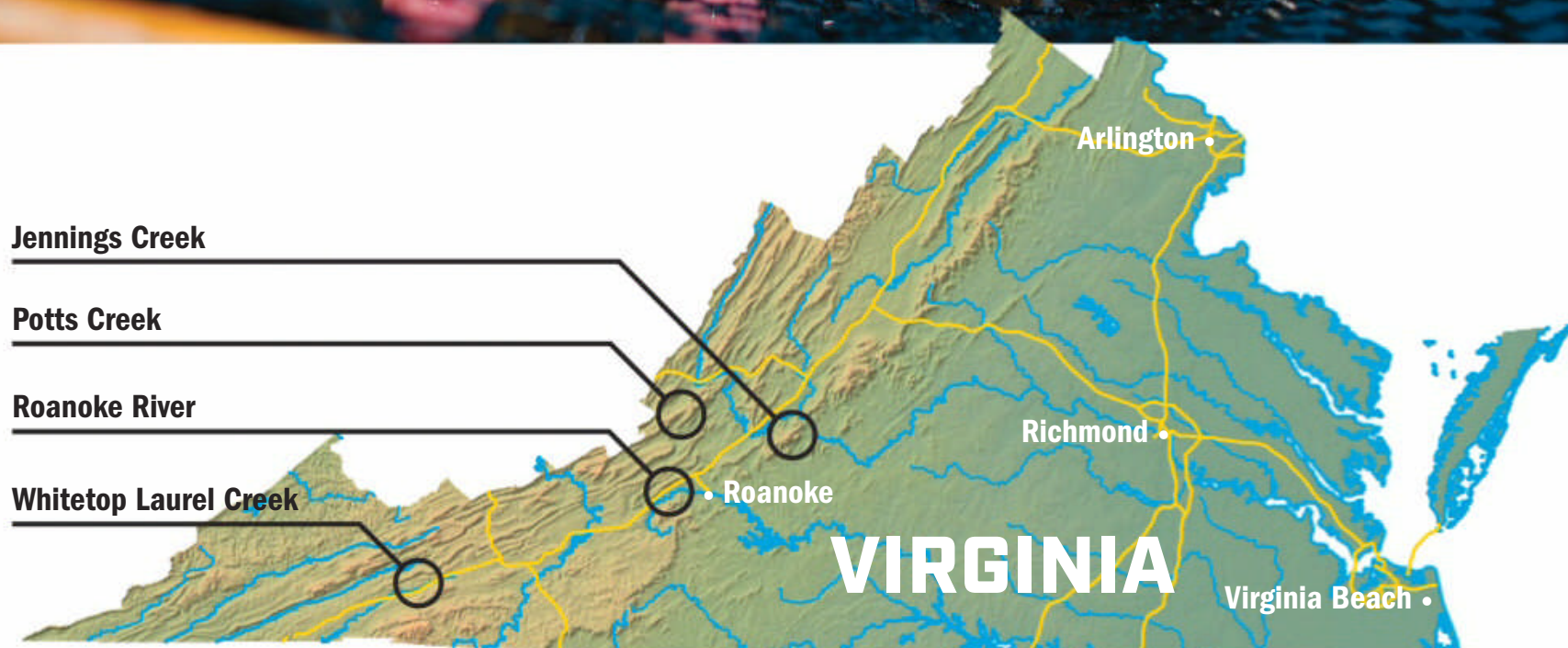
## POTTS CREEK

Potts Creek, a highland put-and-take trout stream in Craig County, is one of Virginia’s best stocked trout streams. Potts receives five stockings between October 1 and May 15, and given its rural setting, fishing pressure is typically very light during the week. The numerous stocked sections are well-marked; many are along Route 18. I’ve done well there churning Mepps Aglia spinners through prime runs or drifting nightcrawlers around current breaks.





Virginia's mountain waterways are home to rainbows, native brookies, and brown trout alike.



**Guide:** Potts Creek Outfitters (540-897-5555; pottscreekoutfitters.com)

**Lodging:** The Depot Lodge (540-897-6000; depotlodge.com)

**Dining:** The Swinging Bridge Restaurant (540-897-5099; theswingingbridge.com), a sister business of Potts Creek Outfitters and The Depot Lodge in Paint Bank, has its own buffalo herd. Try the buffalo burger or stew.

## JENNINGS CREEK

I first fished Jennings Creek in Botetourt County in 1970 with a group of high-school chums. Today, it's one of some

20 heritage waters in Virginia that are closed for a single day prior the opener on the first Saturday in April. These waters are heavily stocked the week before and are great destinations, especially for anglers with children.

Jennings is typical of many Virginia trout streams, with its rocky substrate, riffles and current breaks. The Blue Hole sees most of the fishing pressure, though numerous other pools and runs are stocked along Route 614. A medium- or light-action spinning rod spooled with 4- or 6-pound-test mono will suffice.

If you prefer solitude while fish-

ing, a number of Jefferson National Forest native brook trout rills flow into Jennings and are within an easy drive. Some of these streams, which are characterized by their plunge pools and rhododendron-shrouded banks, also hold wild rainbows.

**Guide:** Dead Drift Outfitters (540-521-9214; deaddriftva.com)

**Lodging:** The 25 East Main B&B (540-798-5134) is located in the historic town of Fincastle.

**Dining:** Just down the road from the B&B is the Fincastle Café and the Pie



Shophe. All three businesses are operated by the Barkett family. I recommend the chicken-and-vegetable pot pie and key lime pie at the Pie Shoppe (pieshoppefincastle.com).

## ROANOKE RIVER

If you enjoy urban fishing with amenities nearby, the Roanoke River in the Salem and Roanoke area meets that requirement. The upper delayed harvest area begins at the Route 760 Bridge (Diguids Lane) and extends upstream for one mile into Green Hill Park. Access is easy inside the park along the Roanoke River Greenway trail.

The lower section is in downtown Salem along Riverside Drive, and runs from the Colorado Street Bridge downstream for about two miles to the Route 419 Bridge. During the delayed harvest season from October 1 through May 31, only artificial lures can be used, and, of course, catch-and-release is required. Numerous stocked trout sections exist in Roanoke and Salem as well.

The Roanoke features runs, riffles and Class I rapids, so this is a larger body of water than the others mentioned here. Elk Hair Caddis, Woolly Buggers and streamers consistently perform well come spring.

**Guide:** Dead Drift Outfitters (540-521-9214; deaddriftva.com)

**Lodging:** The Hotel Roanoke (540-985-5900; hotelroanoke.com) is the iconic place to stay when visiting the Big Lick, a Roanoke city nickname derived from the salt licks that once attracted deer and elk here.

**Dining:** My wife and I have two favorite places to dine in Roanoke. Try the flounder almandine at the Coach & Four (540-362-4220; coachandfour.com) and the grilled salmon at Hollywood's Restaurant and Bakery (540-362-1812; hollywoodsrestaurant.com). Better yet, try them both. 



Many of the trout streams in western Virginia are characterized by their picturesque rhododendron-shrouded pools and runs.



# CHASING THE SNOWS OF

**WATERFOWLERS DREAM OF TRIPLE-DIGIT DAYS DURING THE SPRING SNOW GOOSE CONSERVATION SEASON, BUT THEY DON'T COME EASY. HERE'S HARD-WON ADVICE ON HOW TO STACK THE ODDS IN YOUR FAVOR.**

By Shawn Skipper

**M**y dad, like so many other fathers born of a generation that long predates smartphones, the Internet and even color television, is the toughest guy that his son will ever know. I've seen him shrug off countless injuries that I was sure would fell lesser men, and never truly feared for his physical safety over the years, even as time has had its way. So you can imagine my surprise a few years back, when I watched a goose, of all things, nearly knock him unconscious.

SHUTTERSTOCK





The northern migration of snow geese is on in March, but the trick is knowing exactly when large flocks will be flying through a given area.

It was a cold, foggy day of hunting in our home state of Delaware when a dozen or so birds dropped from the sky and gave us a close enough pass. Dad called the shot, everyone in the blind raised our guns, and the action was on. I'd slapped the trigger twice myself before coming to an abrupt stop when my father collapsed in the pit blind beside me. Fearing the worst, I threw my gun down and turned to check on him. When spring snow goose hunting is good, you've got to be careful: Somehow, some way, one of the first birds to get

rolled on that pass had come crashing down on Dad's head, leaving him a little bloody and maybe even concussed.

Action like that—so fast, so furious that you'd better watch your head—draws more and more waterfowl hunters each year to spring snow goose hunting. Since 2000, a number of states in flyways across the nation have authorized what they call a Light Goose Conservation Order, which serves as an extension of the “light goose” hunting season beyond the existing migratory bird hunting framework. No one's hiding it: There

are too many snow geese, they're having an adverse effect on the Arctic tundra that's critical to nearly every species of migratory gamebird, and nobody knows what else to do about it.

Enter hunters like you and me. Thanks to extended seasons that can run as late as March or April, incredibly large or uninhibited bag limits, loosened restrictions on the use of electronic callers and several other perks, Light Goose Conservation Orders present an attractive way to continue hunting and chase one of the legendary “tornadoes” that



can result in 100-bird days, or better, if you're lucky. I've spent my fair share of early spring mornings somewhere across America's Great Plains, chasing the next great snow goose hunt. If you're ready to embrace such an addiction, here are a few tips that will help you maximize your chances of success.

Dad recovered just fine, by the way. Always was a hard-headed old cuss.

### LOCATION, TIMING AND TRAVEL

Decide early if you're going to use an outfitter. Spring snow goose hunts require a lot of gear, notably on the decoy side, which makes a bucket list hunt difficult to properly execute unless you're one of those guys who already owns an adequate rig. Local guides tend to have access to the best land in an area, too. They come at a cost, but when you're scratching hunts off your list, guides can be worth it.

With or without an outfitter, the trip-planning advice is largely the same. Just be prepared to drag around a lot of decoys and knock on a lot of doors

asking permission if you're set on a true DIY experience.

The first step in planning any trip is determining the where and the when. Unfortunately, I only have a concrete answer to one of those questions. Let's start with the where.

Though snow geese can be found in all four of North America's major flyways (I'm currently planning a week-long spring snow goose hunt in my current home state of Oregon) you'll want to target the Great Plains, or prairie, portion of the U.S. to optimize your chances. Conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl report that, based on breeding ground surveys and population estimates using banding and harvest data, the Central and Mississippi Flyways have seen the greatest gain in light goose populations in the last few decades. Further, the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Population Status report placed more light geese in the middle of the country than any other region, and the numbers weren't close. Coupled with the fact

that the flyover states have more farmers, more agriculture and generally less development than our nation's coastal regions, the two interior flyways are absolutely where you need to be.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identifies Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin as Mississippi Flyway states. Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas make up the Central Flyway. Many, if not all, of these states have light goose conservation seasons. They tend to open and close earlier in the South and later in the North, which tracks with the migration path.

More than anything else, selecting a state comes down to two key factors: When you want to go and how far you're willing to travel. Light goose conservation seasons open as early as February and run as late as April. When you're planning a trip you'll have to look ahead and decide when you might





be able to spend a week or so on the road. Once you've figured that out, think about how far you'd be willing to fly or drive. Driving is honestly the easier of the two options, given how much gear you'll probably be hauling with you.

With both pieces of information in hand, you should be able to start narrowing things down. Arkansas, for example, is always a hot state earlier in the migration, and a prime candidate for a February hunt. North Dakota, meanwhile, is near the tail end of the migration and could be your destination if you're looking at a late March or early April trip.

But what's the best state and time combo? If I could answer that I'd be selling hunts rather than providing advice. The reverse migration follows a general timeline, yes, but weather patterns and simple goose behavior can make hitting on the ideal week incredibly difficult, especially since you'll probably schedule your trip well in advance. I've hunted the Mississippi Flyway during weeks where the majority of birds had already passed through, and I've hunted the

Dakotas when the birds just weren't there yet. Once I got stuck between two different storms in Illinois, which kept the hundreds of thousands of birds in the area from flying at all. The hail pelting my face in the layout blind was great, though. You can game the system a little bit, but it's still hunting.

There are ways to get inside help, however. If you're hunting with one, ask your outfitter when you should go. Outfitters want you to kill birds, spread success stories and re-book, so they'll tell you. Stay in touch with your outfitter as the hunt approaches. Reputable outfitters will level with you about where the birds are—or aren't. If they have flexibility, they may even ask if you'd like to change your trip to another set of dates if the ones you've scheduled aren't looking great.

If you're going to freelance your hunt, do your homework. There are migration reports published throughout the yearly waterfowl season, and they're available online. Ducks Unlimited ([ducks.org](http://ducks.org)) actively tracks the light goose migration. If you keep an eye on what's happening

and are willing to go when the birds are where you need them to be, you'll maximize your chances for success.

When it comes to travel, how far you're going and what you're bringing with you will make all the difference. I've road-tripped from the Eastern seaboard to the Midwest several times, and it's a chore. But it was also far easier than flying, since we were dragging a half-dozen shotguns, five cases of ammunition and a golden retriever along for the ride. Hunting with a group of buddies and splitting things like drive time and gas expenses can also be a more economical option, and it adds some fun to the trip. An old-school road trip with the boys? I'll take it. Just remember to factor in all your costs, like gas, tolls, food, potentially a motel stay if you don't think you can make the trip in one long haul, etc.

If you're going to fly, note that TSA has limits on things like how much ammunition you can take with you (8 pounds, which equates to a couple boxes of shells), so you'll have to make arrangements to ship a significant amount of gear.



**Snow geese travel by the thousands. Attracting that many birds into shotgun range requires setting a huge decoy spread and making lots of noise with an electronic caller.**



## GUNS, AMMO AND GEAR

Talking to a dedicated waterfowler about gear is a risky proposition; you may not be able to pull the ripcord on the conversation for a solid two or three hours. No hunting pursuit calls for more gear than migratory bird hunting. Sure, every niche has its fair share of gear-heads. But success on a waterfowl hunt simply requires more gear, which almost always means a heavier investment, right out of the gate. The good news is that, assuming you have some duck or goose hunting under your belt, you already own most of what you'll need to chase snows.

You probably have at least one shotgun you trust, and that's great. Hopefully you own two, and hopefully they're both semi-automatics. Why two guns? That's simple: redundancy. Your scattergun is

going to spend all day in some sort of dusty ag field, either lying on the ground next to you or cuddling up with you in a layout blind. It's hopefully going to be emptying at least a box of shells a day. And you're hopefully going to be so gassed that you elect to skip your post-hunt cleaning procedure at least once or twice.

Point being, your gun is going to take a beating. I once saw a guy pull half of a corn husk out of his jammed action, which had mucked up his entire afternoon, and he had no idea how or when it got there. Having a solid No. 2 as a backup gun is just smart practice, and we're not even accounting for random failures that could just as easily occur when you're hunting your usual spot back home. The difference here is that a busted gun could end your hunt,

unless a buddy has a spare or you're willing to throw down a few hundred bucks at the local sporting goods store. Come prepared.

Why semi-automatic shotguns? Simple physics: Pump guns typically produce more felt recoil than semi-autos, and you may be shooting an awful lot. I know you can run your Remington 870 as fast as anyone's semi-auto and that you wield it like Leonardo Da Vinci did a paintbrush. But after you put your shoulder through a case of heavy shells in just a few days, your shooting will look more like a Picasso. Run a semi-auto and thank me later. As for specific shotgun recommendations, just take something known for being rugged and reliable, and you can't go wrong. Properly preparing your shotgun for a snow goose hunt is another story altogether (see sidebar).

## SNOW GUNS

*Rig your shotgun for the storm.*

Your faithful scattergun is going to have to Hulk out a bit if you want to turn it into a true snow goose slayer. Light Goose Conservation Orders don't just open up bag limits and extend seasons, they take strides to make you more lethal by eliminating the requirement to have a plug in your shotgun. And while removing the plug will get an extra shell or two in there, we can do better. Not taking advantage of that is foolish and will cost you birds. Get your gun ready by boosting capacity and making a couple other upgrades.

### ADD AN EXTENSION TUBE

A magazine tube extension can grant you up to five more shells, depending on what you're shooting. (Extensions vary in length based on your firearm and their manufacturer.) Snow geese are prone to dropping into your decoys in large groups, occasionally allowing you to shoot far more than the three shells you'd be sending on a regular hunt. More steel in the air is rarely a bad thing. Once during a hunt in Illinois I ran a shotgun for a day that simply had its plug removed. Never again. My companions got to shoot long after I was empty, because scrambling to reload while a white tornado is touching down is a lot harder than you'd think.

### CHANGE THE CHOKE

The choke tube that's currently in your gun can and will do the trick. But if you're trying to optimize your pattern, consider an upgrade. Most choke companies are working with ammo manufacturers now, meaning you can probably get a choke that's matched to whatever shotgun load you settle on. It will be designed to produce a tighter, more efficient pattern for the shell. Trust me, this isn't marketing jazz. Load-specific chokes work and are worth the investment. Carlson's Choke Tubes ([choketube.com](http://choketube.com)) are a great place to start. The folks there are always tinkering with new chokes and have relationships with many of the popular shotshell manufacturers.

### INSTALL AN AFTERMARKET SIGHT

Oh, I know. You haven't even seen the bead on your favorite shotgun for years, and you don't need anything there in order to hit a snow goose. I get it. But modern technology isn't a crutch, and aftermarket front sights like the magnetic versions from HiViz Shooting Systems ([hivizsights.com](http://hivizsights.com)) or the easy-to-install options from TruGlo ([truglo.com](http://truglo.com)) can make things a little easier on your eyes during long, potentially gray days.



In the heat of the action, reloading from a blind bag isn't easy. Maximize a shotgun's capacity with an extension tube.

WINDIGO IMAGES



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Semi-automatic shotguns and 3-inch loads are less taxing on the shoulder when a good day's shooting empties several boxes of shells.

When it comes to selecting shotshells, things get a little stickier. In a good week you'll shoot a lot. Avoiding 3 1/2-inch magnums and super-high-velocity loads, most of which are actually marketed as "snow goose" loads, might not be a bad idea. If you're like my dad, though, you only shoot 3 1/2-inch shells because nobody makes a 4. I'll leave that decision between you, your shoulder labrum and your orthopedic surgeon.

The more important thing is shot size. As with any goose hunting, good old No. 2s work great when the birds are decoying and BBs are your best friend on days when the birds don't want to finish. Pack a case of each on your hunt, and have at least a couple boxes of both with you in the blind at any given time. If the birds are doing what they're supposed to do, stick with the No. 2s. If they're not, you know what to do. Flexibility is key, and having enough shells to get you through your trip without having to make an emergency stop is a nice perk. Plus, it's not like they'll go bad if they wind up back in your ammo closet.

If you're going to add new clothing to your collection before the trip, make it white. If you wind up hunting in a pit or layout blind, any old camouflage that you're comfortable in will do. But adding some white duds to your collection will give you versatility. Some of

the best setups for snow geese can end with you and your buddies lying on your backs among the decoys. When that's the case, you're better off blending in with the dekes around you than hoping your favorite jacket looks enough like the ground beneath you. Tyvek suits are great and will keep you dry if the ground is damp or you catch a little rain.

You're going to need decoys if you go the DIY route. Snow geese tend to travel in enormous groups come the reverse migration, and it behooves you to put out a grand decoy spread to entice flocks into giving you a good look. The most practical and economical way to do that on a road trip is to stock the truck and trailer (freelancing snows is probably going to require a trailer) with some style of silhouette or SilloSock decoy. They're lightweight, mobile and all you'll need for running and gunning on the prairie.

Most outfitters will recommend setting at least 500 decoys, but that's a bare minimum. You're probably looking at closer to 1,500 to 2,000 as a good starter set. I once hunted with an outfit that offered a 10,000-decoy setup, as long as you booked far enough in advance. You want to catch these birds' eyes as they're heading back north, and quantity can make a big difference.

Of course, no set of snow goose gear is complete without an electronic caller.

Conservation seasons typically allow for the use of e-callers, and they're darn handy. This is a piece of gear that is an absolute requirement if you're going to hunt without an outfitter's assistance. Don't even worry about your favorite reed call; set up an e-caller and as many speakers as you can lug around, and get loud. Without it, you're just not going to get the birds to cooperate. Whether the caller is from Primos, Flextone or another brand, you want to have the sounds of a flock on your side.

## SEEING IT THROUGH

Sometimes-forgotten items in all the excitement are things like lodging, meals and the like. If you're hunting with an outfitter, never forget to ask if there is a lodge. Many waterfowl outfitters don't have lodges since they spend significant parts of their season chasing the migration. Fortunately rural America is covered in hotels, motels and even houses for rent. Before you hit the road, make a few calls, read a few reviews and make sure you have a comfortable place to rest your head each night. It'll make a difference when you're lying on your back in a cornfield for 12 hours the next day.

Food's always a key consideration. A hunter has to eat and, again, not a lot of snow goose outfitters will offer the service. Be sure to ask, and then research local restaurants to see where you'll find sustenance. If you decide to drive, packing along a mobile cooking setup, like those offered by Camp Chef, is a great idea. A few years back we took a Camp Chef Pro90X grill to South Dakota for a week-long hunt. Each day we'd break for lunch, hike back to the truck and cook a hot meal. It was a lifesaver on some brutally cold days.

Other than that, just keep in mind that snow geese hunting is hunting and an imperfect science. Just like any bucket-list hunt, you're going to need a few things to break your way. To get one of those legendary 100-plus-bird days you're going to need the weather to be right, the migration to be right and the birds to be hungry. But they can and do happen, and you're never going to experience one from the couch. Make your plans and embrace a new addiction, because that's exactly what snow goose hunting is to those of us who do it. 



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# RACKED OUT

**HUNTING AND FISHING ARE GEAR-INTENSIVE ACTIVITIES. FORTUNATELY, THERE ARE MYRIAD PRODUCTS THAT SIMPLIFY GETTING OUR EQUIPMENT TO THE WOODS AND WATER.**

By Joseph Albanese

**W**hether you're headed to the whitetail woods or the fishing hole, odds are pretty good that you've got a bunch of stuff to take with you. Guns, treestands, canoes and fishing rods all take up space, and can max out a vehicle's capacity in short order. Adding the correct cargo management system to your vehicle makes taking it all with you easier and minimizes the chance of damaging your valuable equipment. And, perhaps more importantly, it will make loading up faster so you can spend less time packing and more time hunting or fishing.

## CANOES AND KAYAKS

A trip to any river, pond or smallish lake will reveal the popularity of canoes and kayaks. But because of their size, getting these watercraft to your favorite fishing spot can be difficult. The simplest method involves throwing a few foam blocks between it and the roof of your vehicle and lashing it down. This will work, but it's time consuming and not necessarily the most secure way. A dedicated rack made for your vessel is faster and more secure. There are two basic styles: J-cradle racks and saddles. You'll need a roof

rack on your vehicle already, but both styles install quickly.

J-cradle racks make the most of available roof space because they tilt the kayak on its side, so you can use the remainder of the roof rack for other equipment like fishing rods, bicycles or even an additional kayak. **Yakima's JayLow** (\$199; yakima.com) works with nearly any factory or aftermarket roof rack and just about every kayak, be it sit-on or sit-in. The upright nature of these carriers creates drag on the highway even without a 'yak attached, and can create issues getting into parking





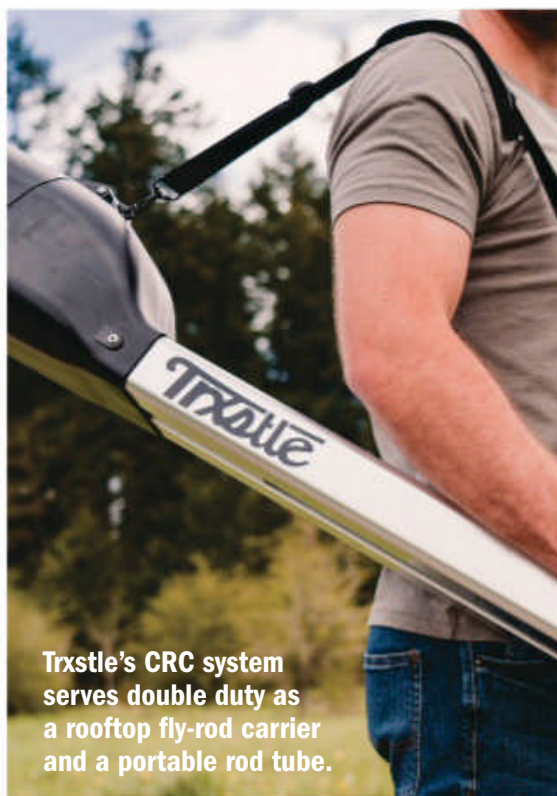
J-cradle racks, like Yakima's JayLow, hold kayaks upright and free up space on the roof for baskets and other cargo.



Saddle racks are easy to load, and most can accommodate a wide range of hull types. Yakima's SweetRoll is one option.

garages. Folding J-cradle racks, like **Malone's Downloader** (\$170; maloneautoracks.com) have a smaller footprint when not in use.

Saddle racks work with a wider variety of hull styles and make loading easier. To get your boat on the roof, simply rest it on the back and push it up and forward, eliminating the need to lift the entire weight of the vessel. **Yakima's SweetRoll** (\$239) has a roller built-in to make the process even easier. **Malone's SeaWing with Stinger Assist** (\$230) adds an extension to protect your vehicle's rear glass and facilitate loading. Canoe-specific saddles, like **Yakima's KeelOver** (\$119) and **Thule's Portage** (\$140; thule.com) are designed to protect the gunwales while preventing the boat from sliding from side to side.



Trxstle's CRC system serves double duty as a rooftop fly-rod carrier and a portable rod tube.

## FISHING RODS

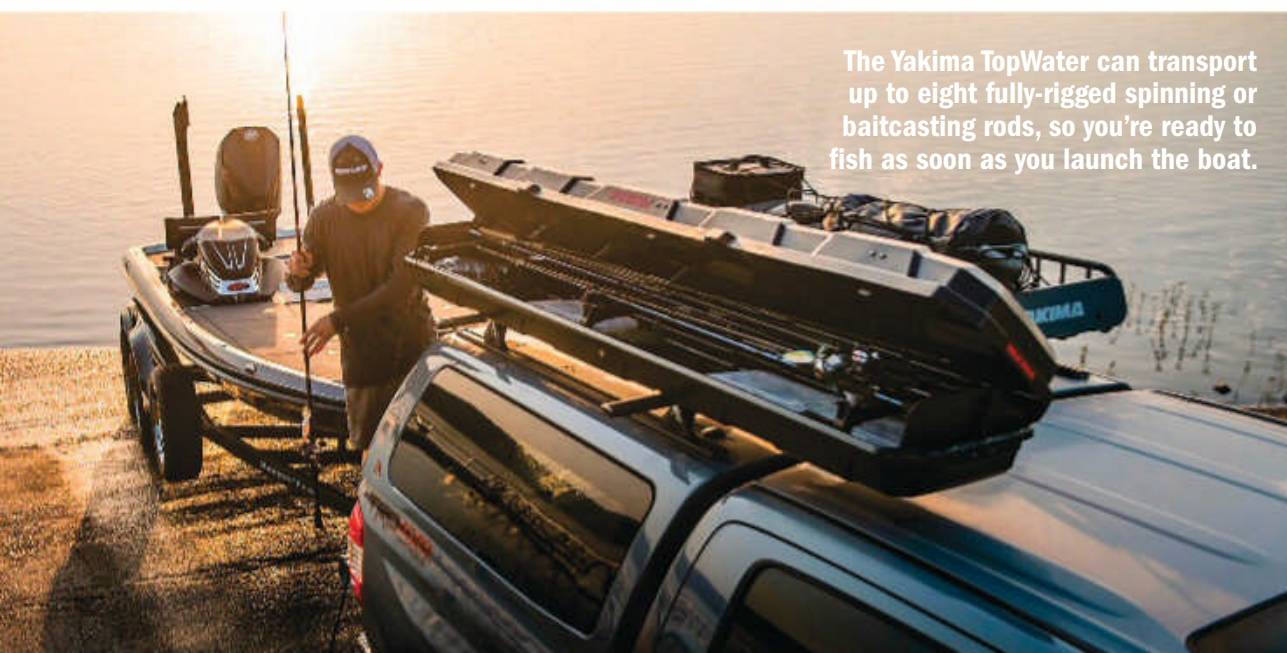
Because of their length and fragility, fishing rods present a unique transportation challenge. Storing rods inside the vehicle decreases the chance of theft and keeps them out of the elements, but you still need to secure them to keep them safe as you travel.

Racks like the **Rodmounts Rod-Up** (\$199; rodmounts.com) keep your casting, spinning or fly rods tucked up along the roofline with a metal framework that won't wiggle free on even the bumpiest roads. If you'll be sticking to smooth thoroughfares, the **Rod Saver Vehicle Rod Carrier** (\$35; rodsaver.com) is an economical choice. Just keep in mind that the nylon straps that keep the rods suspended will sway with each bump.

While many vehicles can accommodate rods up to 7 feet long inside the cab, anything over that becomes a challenge. If you don't have the room inside your vehicle to fit your rods, you'll need to transport them on the outside.

One option is the **Portarod rod holder** (\$119 and up; portarod.com), which fits inside the bed of a pickup and securely holds rods upright as you drive.

Fly anglers hopping from hole to hole will sometimes tuck their rods under a windshield wiper and hope for the best. Obviously, this is a gamble—one sharp bump and your prized rod can be destroyed. To keep your rods in place as you motor upstream, use a carrier like the **Rodmounts Sumo** (\$150). This two-part system attaches to the hood and the roof,



The Yakima TopWater can transport up to eight fully-rigged spinning or baitcasting rods, so you're ready to fish as soon as you launch the boat.





Portarod rod holders come in three-, four- and five-rod versions and install without bolts.

letting you strap your rods in quickly. Both suction and magnetic models are available, so the rack will work no matter what your vehicle is made of. The Sumo rod holder doesn't require any additional mounting equipment, and will work with other types of rods.

If you have a roof rack and want the ability to keep a pair of fly rods rigged and ready, the **Trxstle CRC System V2.0** (\$395; [trxstle.com](http://trxstle.com)) is an excellent choice. Unlike other rigid tube carriers, the CRC system collapses for storage. This lets you use the CRC as a protective case, safely storing your broken-down rods for airline travel or other rough passages. A pair of locking, quick-release clamps lets you install the carrier on a variety of racks quickly.

If you want to keep up to four fly rods rigged and don't need the portability of the CRC System, then **Yakima's DoubleHaul** (\$699) fits the bill. This carrier stacks the rods on their sides, making the most of roof rack space. The reel box accommodates the butts of two spey rods, so you can store double-handers up to 10 feet in length.

You can also get locking exterior storage for spinning and casting rods. **Thule's Rodvault ST** (\$450) features the now-familiar tube-and-box construction of rigid fly rod holders, with an increased diameter for larger guides. **Yakima's TopWater** (\$550) takes a different approach, completely enclosing up to eight fully rigged fishing rods in a weatherproof box.

If you have really long rods, such as surf, spey or centerpin setups, then you'll need an open carrier to accommodate them. **Racarod Rod Holders** (\$245 and up; [racarod.com](http://racarod.com)) feature locking reel cradles and tip sections that gently sandwich your rods to keep them stable at highway speeds. These are built beefy to handle the heaviest setups.

## FIREARMS

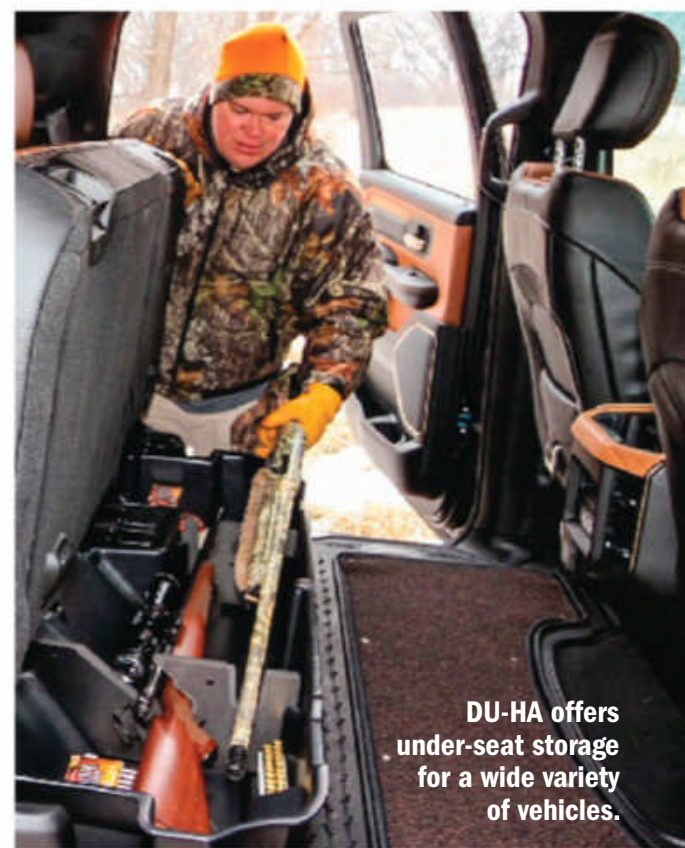
Years ago, it seemed like every pickup truck had a gun rack in the back window. You can still get away with that in some parts of the country, but visible guns tempt thieves. Keeping guns locked up—especially when you're away from the vehicle—is the safest course of action.

One of the easiest ways to store handguns is to harden your existing console with a locking top. **Tuffy** makes a variety of locking console safes for handguns (\$168 and up; [tuffyproducts.com](http://tuffyproducts.com)), custom fit to a number of vehicles. Prying eyes will only see the stock upholstery, so the addition won't let on that you have valuables in the car. If you don't want to give up your center console, you can utilize one of Tuffy's under-seat locking storage containers (\$141 and up). These are also out of sight and won't attract any unwanted attention.

Rifles and shotguns are a bit tougher to store, but you can make use of the space under your truck's back seat. **DU-HA** offers custom-molded liners

formed with slots to securely hold long guns (\$179 and up; [du-ha.com](http://du-ha.com)). These are available for most full- and mid-sized trucks. If you want something a bit more secure, there are locking versions (\$299) for select vehicles.

If you'd prefer to keep your guns more accessible, you can install the **Great Day Center-Lok Overhead Gun Rack** (\$195 and up; [greatdayinc.com](http://greatdayinc.com)) in your truck or SUV. The Overhead Gun Rack is built similarly to the old-school window racks, but is designed to hug the ceiling, keeping your guns out of view of most passers-by. To retrieve your firearms, just undo a couple Velcro straps and be on your way.





## TRUCK BED SYSTEMS

Many outdoorsmen and -women choose to drive pickup trucks because of their off-road prowess, load capacity and overall utility. You can make your truck even more useful by outfitting the bed with a drawer system. These allow you to carry cargo, such as ATVs, treestands or other bulky, heavy items, while creating an easily accessible storage area below. These systems are more complex to install than a kayak rack or rod holder, but you can get it done in a few hours with the help of a buddy.

**Tuffy's Heavy Duty Gear Drawers** (\$2,472) provide organized, weatherproof storage in two locking drawers with a 2,000-pound load rating above. You won't have to worry about your gear walking off, thanks to Tuffy's automotive OEM-quality pushbutton locking mechanism that incorporates a 1/4-inch-thick steel security latch and all-metal construction. Even when the drawers are fully loaded with guns, bows or camping equipment, the precision-ground stainless steel sealed roller bearings ensure they pull out easily. Check with Tuffy to see if they make a drawer system for your truck.

**Decked** (\$1,149 and up; [decked.com](http://decked.com)) takes a distinctly different approach to truck bed drawers, manufacturing them out of high-density polyethylene with a metal skeleton. Despite the mostly plastic construction, the system has the same 2,000-pound payload capability. The drawers hold 200 pounds each, sliding over the existing bed on rubber casters. Decked has a variety of custom-made

accessories designed to fit the drawers and keep your gear organized.

If you're looking for weatherproof storage that's less permanent than a drawer system, check out **Pelican's Cargo Cases** (\$249 and up; [pelican.com](http://pelican.com)). These rotomolded containers are designed with mounting systems for truck beds and roof racks, so you can keep them loaded with gear and be ready to hit the road in minutes. Built with oversized handles for easy carry, the cases go from

garage to truck to campsite easily. Sizes for everything from firearms to a couple weeks' worth of hunting or fishing gear are available.

Whatever vehicle you drive, outfitting it for your adventures will ensure you make the most of your available space, and that your stuff gets there in one piece. And with the proper gear to haul your equipment, you'll spend more time in the woods or on the water and less time packing. 

Tuffy bed storage systems feature all-metal construction. The unit boasts a 2,000-pound load rating atop the box.



Decked's sliding drawers hold up to 200 pounds of gear apiece.





# BUDGET-FRIENDLY TROUT COMBOS



## GET IN THE FLY FISHING GAME THIS SEASON WITHOUT EMPTYING YOUR BANK ACCOUNT.

By John Taranto, Editor

It's not difficult to drop four figures on a new fly rod and reel these days. Space-age materials, boundary-pushing innovation and highly specialized manufacturing don't pay for themselves, after all. And there's certainly a market for such tackle, as many hard-core anglers endeavor to build epitomical fish-fighting outfits for battling leviathan trout in far-flung destinations.

At the same time, it's never been easier to find a quality fly-fishing combo that'll get the job done just fine on your local stream. Besides, if you're just getting started in the sport, you probably don't want to go for the high-end gear right out of the gate anyway. That's like handing the keys to a McLaren 720S to a kid on the day he passes driver's ed. Instead, consider one of these ready-made combos that'll fit just about any budget. 



**White River Fly Shop Dogwood Canyon**  
LENGTH: 8'6" | SIZE: 5 wt. | BUILD: 2 pc.  
PRICE: \$100; [basspro.com](http://basspro.com)

### LEARNING TO FLY

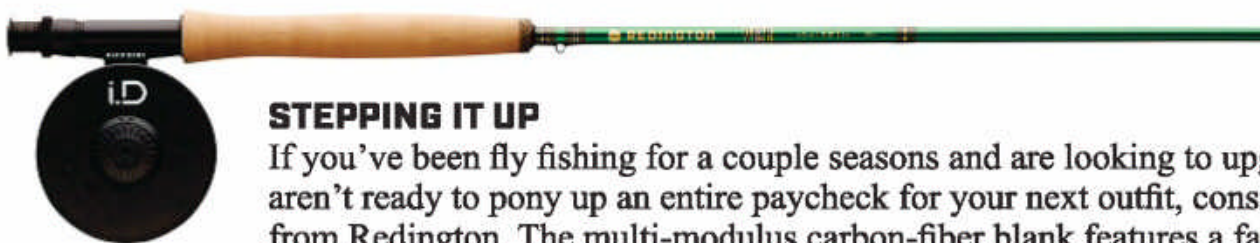
This capable, entry-level combo from Bass Pro Shops' house brand White River includes a two-piece, medium-action graphite blank with aluminum reel seat and a matching aluminum disc-drag reel. The reel comes pre-loaded with backing, weight-forward line and a tapered leader. This is a great option for newcomers looking to get their feet wet (pun fully intended), as many will find the 8 1/2-foot length easier to cast than a 9-foot rod. One thing to keep in mind is that being a two-piece rod, it won't break down for transport as compactly as a four-piece rod does. The combo comes with a protective rod sock.



**Orvis Encounter**  
LENGTH: 9' | SIZE: 5 wt. | BUILD: 4 pc.  
PRICE: \$169; [orvis.com](http://orvis.com)

### UNMATCHED PEDIGREE

There's perhaps no more legendary name in fly tackle than Vermont-based Orvis. Indeed, the company's founder, Charles F. Orvis, invented the fly reel in 1874. The Encounter outfit is a very forgiving and versatile combo for any number of applications and presentations, and has been a favorite among fly-fishing neophytes for years. The combo includes a four-piece graphite rod (medium action) and large-arbor, disc-drag reel with backing, weight-forward line and leader. Some may be turned off by the composite plastic reel, but it's widely regarded as being quite durable. The Encounter combo comes with a Cordura carrying case.



**Redington Vice**  
LENGTH: 9' | SIZE: 4 wt. | BUILD: 4 pc.  
PRICE: \$300; [redington.com](http://redington.com)

### STEPPING IT UP

If you've been fly fishing for a couple seasons and are looking to upgrade your rod and reel, but maybe aren't ready to pony up an entire paycheck for your next outfit, consider this excellent intermediate combo from Redington. The multi-modulus carbon-fiber blank features a fast action and is adept at delivering dry flies and light nymphs with precision. Redington's i.D reel features cast aluminum construction, a Rulon disc drag and a large arbor, and rides snugly in an anodized, machined aluminum reel seat. The reel comes spooled with 100 yards of 20-pound backing, RIO Mainstream line and a 9-foot 5X leader. Also included are a Cordura rod tube and a lifetime warranty.



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# TACKLING SPRING

HERE'S THE LOWDOWN  
ON TOP NEW RODS,  
REELS, BAITS AND  
OTHER GEAR TO  
GET YOUR SEASON  
STARTED RIGHT.

By Game & Fish Staff

**A** new year on the water calls for new gear. Whether you're adding a rod with a different action to your arsenal, spooling up with fresh line or stocking your boxes with the latest baits, there's bound to be a trip to the tackle shop in your near future. Indeed, picking new tackle is a rite of spring that's almost as fun as the fishing you plan to do with it.

Tackle manufacturers roll out their new offerings for the coming year at the International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST) show, organized by the American Sportfishing Association, in July. Although last year the COVID pandemic caused ICAST to be a virtual event rather than the in-person tradeshow typically held in Orlando, Fla., *Game & Fish* editors nonetheless received an advance look at new fishing gear from hundreds of brands.

The tackle introduced at ICAST is now available on retailers' shelves and just waiting for a trip to the water. We compiled noteworthy products from several categories to give you a heads-up on what to look for and consider when planning your fishing strategy. Spring is here, and it's time to go shopping.

## RODS

### Lew's KVD Series

Kevin VanDam needs no introduction to bass anglers; he's one of the most successful professionals in bass tournament history. Lew's teams up with KVD to offer a series of casting and spinning rods

designed to his specifications, all with powers, actions and lengths purpose-built for certain presentations. A casting rod made for dock skipping and swimming frogs, and a spinning rod designed for drop-shot and Ned rigs are just two examples. The entire KVD Series includes 10 casting rods and seven spinning rods, all with IM8 graphite blanks, and six graphite-glass composite casting rods to cover a wide range of fishing conditions. \$99.99; lews.com

### Daiwa Tatula Swimbait



Big baits call for big rods, and although swimbaits are heavy, Daiwa shows us a rod that can handle them does not have to be. The Tatula Swimbait rod has a heavy action, but the blank's carbon construction made with HVF Nanoplus Technology results in a stick that weighs less while remaining strong. Daiwa's X-45 Bias concept and fiber-braiding technology enables the blank to resist twisting when loading up, and Fuji FazLite Tangle-Free K-Guides contribute to long, accurate casts. The Tatula Swimbait is available in 7-foot-3-inch and 7-foot-9-inch lengths. \$189.99 to \$199.99; daiwa.com

### Daiwa Dark Water



Engineered for East coast offshore anglers, the Dark Water series includes 21 rods with blanks specifically constructed for targeting kingfish, sailfish and other Atlantic species. Configured for conventional and spinning reels, Dark Water rods provide a range of lengths and actions to suit various techniques. Daiwa's HVF rod-building technology produces a lighter blank with a soft tip and strong backbone, and provides a slight parabolic bend during the fight. The rods' EVA grips ensure all-day comfort while handling the rigors of fishing the salt. \$179.99 and up; daiwa.com

## REELS

### Lew's KVD LFS Casting and KVD Spinning Series



These reels, designed by Lew's with input from Kevin VanDam, show that pro-grade gear need not break the bank. The KVD LFS Series offers six casting reels set up for right- or left-hand retrieve, aluminum frames and spools, solid brass Speed Gears, a bearing-supported pinion gear and Lew's Multi-Setting Brake dual cast-control system. The KVD Spinning Series includes three reel sizes, all with an aluminum body, sideplate and spool, and a C40 carbon rotor. More durability comes from a stainless steel main shaft and solid brass pinion gear. Reels in both series feature a 10-bearing system for smooth casts and retrieves. \$139.99 (casting), \$89.99 (spinning); lews.com

### Lew's Pro SP Skipping and Pitching



A super-shallow design enables the Pro SP's spool to start up faster and prevent deep-spool backlashes while skipping and pitching baits—a feature Lew's developed by working with pro angler Andy Montgomery. The externally adjustable QuietCast braking system includes a "skipping zone" to maximize cast distance while further reducing backlash. In addition, the spool has an innovative Knot Slot that recesses the spool knot so it doesn't interfere with line lay. An 8.3:1 gear ratio minimizes the time your bait is out of the zone. \$199.99; lews.com

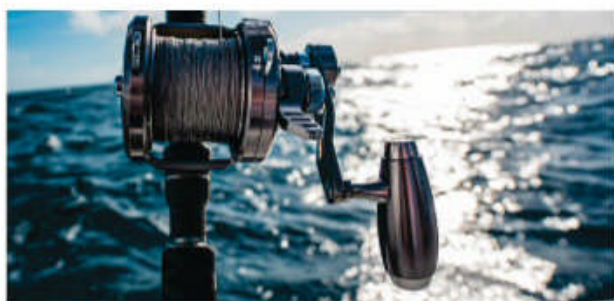
### Daiwa Tatula 300





Here's a reel made for throwing fat, big-lipped crankbaits and meaty swimbaits with control. The Tatula 300's T-Wing level-wind system allows for less resistance on the line when the reel is out of gear, permitting longer casts. Anglers can also finely tune spool tension to reduce backlashes when throwing large baits with this 300-size reel. Daiwa's Magforce magnetic casting system is easy to adjust to suit wind conditions, rod characteristics and bait aerodynamics for hassle-free presentations. Larger gears in the reel are designed for handling hefty baits—and fish. \$269.99; daiwa.com

### Daiwa Saltiga Lever Drag



The Saltiga Lever Drag reels feature frames and sideplates machined from a single piece of aluminum, which ensures the precise alignment of bearings and gears for increased performance during tough battles in the salt. Oversized stainless steel main and pinion gears provide strength, while oversized spool bearings make turning the handle smoother and easier. Daiwa's Advanced Tournament Drag System stays cool while providing consistent pressure. The reel is available in six single-speed models, 10 two-speed models and two special-purpose tournament-style sailfish designs. \$419.99 to \$699.99; daiwa.com

## BAITS

### Strike King KVD 100 Jerkbait



Working a jerkbait is one of Kevin VanDam's go-to presentations, and he teamed up with Strike King to offer a bait that has the ideal combination of roll, wiggle and flash. The bait's 3D eyes add realism, and black-nickel hooks keep fish secure. A proprietary weight-transfer system aids in casting. \$8.99; strikeking.com

### Strike King 2.75-Inch Ned Rage Craw



It may be a small bait, but the Ned Rage Craw produces big action. This finesse-focused soft plastic offers anglers Strike King's Rage Tail design in a more compact package, and features a flat end for use with jig heads typical of Ned rigs. It's available in 12 colors. \$6.99; strikeking.com

### Yo-Zuri 3DB Jerkbait 110 Deep and Pencil Popper



Whether you're fishing the middle of the water column or on the surface, Yo-Zuri has two new baits to cover both areas. The 3DB Jerkbait 110 Deep dives 8 to 12 feet while using Yo-Zuri's Wave Motion Technology to send out vibrations. A walk-the-dog topwater bait, the 3DB Pencil Popper features a deep mouth to spit water, 3D internal prism to reflect light and rattle to add sound. \$9.99; yo-zuri.com

### Yo-Zuri 3D Inshore TopKnock Pencil and Mag Popper



Surface strikes may be even better in saltwater than in freshwater, and Yo-Zuri introduces two topwater baits to bring the action. The TopKnock Pencil features Yo-Zuri's 3D Prism finish and a rattle in the back of the bait that adds casting distance and produces a knocking sound during the retrieve. The Mag Popper has the company's Magnetic Weight Transfer system to enable longer casts, while its bottleneck design and deep mouth create disturbance. \$17.99 (Mag Popper), \$8.99 (TopKnock Pencil); yo-zuri.com

## LINE, TOOLS AND STORAGE

### Daiwa J-Fluoro Samurai



Anglers know fluorocarbon line for its low visibility and long-lasting durability. Daiwa adds versatility with its J-Fluoro Samurai, offering the small-diameter line in strengths of 2- to 25-pound test. Developed and made in Japan, J-Fluoro Samurai is available in 220-yard filler spools and 1,000-yard bulk spools. \$20.99 to \$42.99 (filler), \$59.99 to \$159.99 (bulk); daiwa.com

### Strike King KVD Tools



For pro anglers like Kevin VanDam, wins often come down to efficiency on the water. Good tools help make that happen. Strike King offers a set of tools developed by KVD to help rig baits and maintain gear with ease. The collection includes 5 1/2- and 8-inch scissors, 7- and 7 1/2-inch pliers, 5 1/2-inch split-ring/braid cutter pliers, a 6-inch fillet knife, 15-in-1 multi-tool, Ocho wacky-rig tool and lure wraps. \$6.99 to \$44.99; strikeking.com

### Lure Lock Ultra-Thin and 3-in-1 Deep Boxes



The tacky, soy-based gel in the bottom of Lure Lock's boxes keeps baits and terminal tackle in place—even when a



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box is flipped over. Lure Lock calls it TakLogic Technology, and it prevents damage to baits and hooks during transportation. The company now offers an Ultra-Thin box that measures about 1 1/4 inches high, as well as a 3-in-1 Deep box that's 4 inches high and includes two divider configurations. \$14.99 (Ultra-Thin), \$34.99 (Deep); lurelock.com

**Plano Edge Flex**



Allowing complete customization, Edge Flex boxes come with 38 pre-cut dividers in four sizes that interlock to form compartments based on an angler's needs. One box will organize everything from tools to small weights. Edge Flex boxes are available in 3600 and 3700 sizes, and include Rustriector rust-preventing technology, a Dri-Loc watertight seal and Water Wick desiccant dividers. A label system and clear DuraView lid make identifying contents quick and easy. \$29.99 (3600), \$39.99 (3700); planomolding.com

**WATERCRAFT**

**Old Town Sportsman AutoPilot**



The new Sportsman line from Old Town includes seven kayaks, but the most exciting may be the AutoPilot. Available in two sizes, the AutoPilot features a fully integrated Minn Kota saltwater-safe motor, which offers 45 pounds of thrust and GPS Spot-Lock anchoring. The motor is controlled by Minn Kota's iPilot remote, enabling anglers to control the craft easily while keeping their hands free to fish. \$3,799.99 (AutoPilot 120), \$3,999.99 (AutoPilot 136); oldtowncanoe.com

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## Old Town Sportsman Discovery Solo 119



Weighing just 56 pounds, the Sportsman Discovery Solo is ideal for reaching out-of-the-way places that may require a portage. Although it's shaped like a canoe, the Solo comes with a kayak-style seat and is easy to handle with a double-blade kayak paddle. Old Town's three-layer hull construction surrounds closed-cell foam with high-density polyethylene for durability. The Solo includes four rod holders, a forward accessory track, padded armrests with tackle trays and a tackle box. \$999.99; oldtowncanoe.com

## ELECTRONICS

### Tactacam Fish-I



One press of a button allows you to capture your catches in HD video with the Fish-I. The compact, waterproof action

camera records in a continuous loop, and you can save only the moments you want. It's light enough to attach to your body, a net or even a rod. The camera is compatible with a remote and the Fish-I app for more control when recording. Ultra-wide-angle and 2X zoom lenses are available. \$199.99; tactacam.com

## Hornady RAPiD Safe



The RAPiD Safe line includes several portable safes ideal for securing firearms, valuables and documents while on the boat or traveling to the water. Contents locked inside a RAPiD Safe are quickly accessible with touch-free RFID technology. Simply place the included RFID wristband, key fob or decal over the reader, and the safe opens instantly. The RAPiD Safe 2600KP will accommodate a compact handgun, the 2700KP will hold a full-size handgun, and the 4800KP has enough space to secure two full-size handguns. Each safe attaches to an immovable object with a security cable. \$220.99 to \$286.51; hornady.com

## APPAREL

### Fish Monkey The Blocker Gloves



These gloves are made for the damp, windy, chilly days of early spring. The 2 mm neoprene material keeps hands dry and warm, but it's not so thick that it impedes dexterity. A slit at the tip of each index finger allows tying knots and operating touchscreen devices

without having to remove the gloves. The company's Griptanite non-slip grip design enhances purchase on surfaces no matter if they're wet or slimy. \$29.95; fishmonkeygloves.com

## Yooneek Gloves and Sleeves



The FIR-SKIN T+ fabric that Yooneek uses for its gloves and arm sleeves contains titanium fibers that reflect the body's far infrared ray (FIR) emissions for warmth and comfort. The technology keeps muscles and tendons performing well during long days of repeated casting. In addition, the thin, four-way stretch fabric blocks the sun's UV rays and has an SPF 50+ rating. \$27.99 (half-finger gloves), \$29.99 (sleeves); yooneekproducts.com

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# THE ESSENTIALS

## GEAR IS FUN TO BUY, BUT SKILL ISN'T FOR SALE.

**A**lready in his young life Shane had accumulated a mountain of accoutrements designed to make the hunter more comfortable and more successful afield. He had more knives than a steakhouse and a closet full of camo. He had treestands, blind stools, calls, scents, scent eliminators, decoys, broadheads, backpacks, hats, handwarmers and just about anything else he could buy, borrow or convince his friends and family to get him for Christmas or his birthday. Shane dreamed of the day when he'd have a good-paying job, just so he could buy the best gear to make bagging big bucks easier.

One morning during bow season, Shane, his father and his father's friend, Jack, planned to hunt together at a nearby WMA. Jack Blackburn worked down at the plant with Shane's father. He was three-quarters Native American whose family hailed from the Chickasaw Nation. More important to Shane, Jack was legendary around town for being a keen bowhunter who'd taken many great bucks.

When Shane's father stopped outside his friend's house, Jack opened the truck door, put his bow and a plastic grocery-store bag containing his lunch on the seat and stepped in. Shane noticed he didn't have a backpack or much else besides an antler-handle knife on his belt.

"Mornin!" said Jack.

"Mornin'," said Shane's father.

"Don't forget your bino," offered Shane, trying to be helpful.

"Aw heck," said Jack. "I'm not much of a trophy hunter, so I don't really care for studying every last burr on a buck's horns. If I can't see what a deer has on his head with my own eyes, he's too far to shoot."

Shane nodded as if he'd never thought about it that way.



"What kinda bow you shoot?" asked Shane as he peered over the seat. The bow leaning beside Jack looked ancient. Its string was frayed, and much of its camo paint had been worn off so it was mostly a dull gray color.

"That's an old Golden Eagle I got before there was wind or snow," Jack replied with a grin. "I don't even think they make 'em anymore."

"OK, but what do you think is the best out now?" asked Shane. "I've been reading a lot about parallel limbs and the new cams with 80 percent let-off. It's like holding air!"

"Well, bud, a wise man once told me that the best bow is the one you can hit with. And since this one ain't broken, well, I haven't looked at new ones in a coon's age," Jack said. "What do you know about 'em?"

Shane immediately launched into a long soliloquy about the advantages of high arrow velocity, drop-away rests, single-pin slider sights, mechanical

broadheads and cam lean that's said to ruin accuracy.

Jack humored the boy and listened. He could tell Shane was a student of bowhunting and was thirsty for knowledge, just like he'd been when he was that age.

"What about camo?" asked Shane. "I see you're wearing green fleece, but surely you believe in camo that looks like trees and leaves, right?"

"I've found that the best camo out there is called 'Sit Still,'" said Jack. "It's been around forever."

Shane did his best to hide his growing frustration with Jack's over-simplification of everything, when he was hoping for hard-core hunting talk. Meanwhile, Shane's father hadn't said a word, but his smile hinted he was enjoying the conversation.

Soon after arriving at the WMA, the three hunters took off in different directions with plans to meet at the truck at 11 o'clock. Shane marked the location with his GPS before walking into the dark woods.

At 10:40 Shane arrived back at the pickup to find Jack lying in the grass under the shade of the tailgate. A heavy 8-point buck lay in the truck's bed, neatly field-dressed. Shane, amazed, began asking all kinds of excited questions that continued during the ride home.

"I can't believe it!" said Shane. "You didn't have anything the magazines tell you to use. No camo, no climbin' treestand, no rangefinder. Heck, you smoked a cigarette before you walked in!"

"Shane," said his father, finally joining the conversation, "what Jack has been trying to tell you is what I've been saying all along. It's the secret of hunting."

"Well, what's that?" asked Shane.

"It ain't the arrow that matters," replied Jack with a wink, "but the Indian." 



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