

TESTED: 16-GAUGE FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX, P.76



# GAME & FISH

EAST

The Regional Outdoor Guide

GAFMAG.COM  
OCTOBER 2021

TM

## PATTERN PRE-RUT BUCKS

**4** KEY SPOTS  
TO HANG TRAIL  
CAMS **NOW**

**PLUS:** EXPERT TIPS FOR  
PERFECT GROUND VENISON

WHERE  
**DUCKS**  
**GO** AFTER  
OPENING DAY

SPAWNING  
**LAKE TROUT**  
INVADE THE SHALLOWS

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO  
**RUFFED  
GROUSE**  
**HUNTING**

**STRIPERS ON POINT:**  
HIT THE MONTAUK SURF TO  
CASH IN ON THE **FALL BLITZ**

### REGION ROUNDUP

- LANDLOCKED SALMON
- FINGER LAKES MALLARDS
- WEST VIRGINIA WHITETAILS
- NEW ENGLAND WOODCOCK
- OLD DOMINION SMALLIES
- KEYSTONE BLACK BEARS







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# GAME & FISH EAST

## The Regional Outdoor Guide



REGIONAL EDITOR: John Taranto, John.Taranto@OutdoorSG.com | COVER IMAGE: Matt Hansen Photography | @GAMEANDFISHMAG | FACEBOOK.COM/GAMEANDFISH

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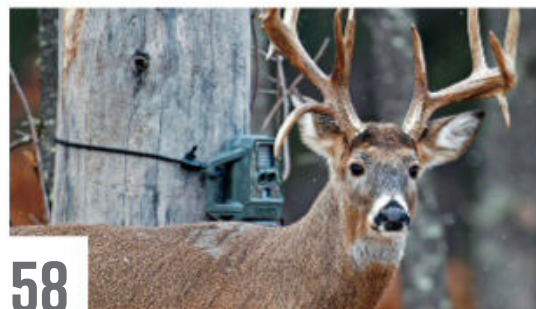
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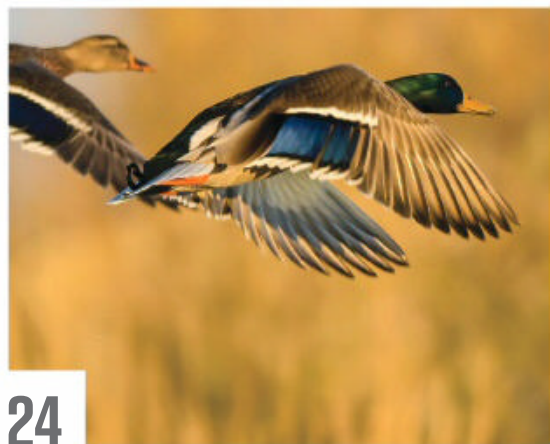
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# HIGH ON HOGS

**D**epending on where you live and hunt, October is a month for whitetails, mule deer, elk, pronghorns, black bears, waterfowl, pheasants, grouse, squirrels or rabbits. But what about feral hogs? It may come as a surprise that in some states more folks hunt hogs than several of these other game species. For example, as Craig Boddington points out in his feature, “Hog Wild, Coast to Coast,” beginning on page 28, feral hogs have replaced deer as the most popular big game in California.

Boddington would know. He’s lived on California’s Central Coast for 30 years, an area where feral hogs long ago established a stronghold, and he’s well aware of hunting trends. Many of you recognize Boddington as an international hunter, television-show host and award-winning author. He regularly contributes to *Petersen’s Hunting, Guns & Ammo* and other titles in the Outdoor Sportsman Group family, but this issue is the first time in recent history that his byline has appeared in *Game & Fish*. He loves to hunt hogs. A piece about the current hunting opportunities offered by hogs across the nation is right up his alley, because he’s hunted them in many of the states where they roam.

It might be hogs’ wide distribution, albeit mainly in the southern half of the U.S. (at least for now), that makes them so popular. Hogs are available to hunt. In many states seasons are either liberal or nonexistent, meaning hogs can be hunted all year. Most deer seasons are short in comparison; some of us are lucky to get just a few weekends of deer hunting. Hogs, meanwhile, offer a chance to hunt at almost any time.

Hogs can be challenging, especially if they’ve been pressured, but in many cases they can be patterned and stalked easier than deer. Despite their reputation as pests, they are worthy animals for experienced and novice hunters alike. And, of course, wild pork is wonderful on the plate.

If you haven’t seriously considered feral hogs as a huntable species, you’re in the minority. Will hogs become more popular than deer across the U.S. like in California? That’s doubtful, but it doesn’t mean hogs don’t deserve some respect. They’re only increasing in number, and that may not be a bad thing for hunters and hunting.

*Adam Heggenstaller*  
Editorial Director

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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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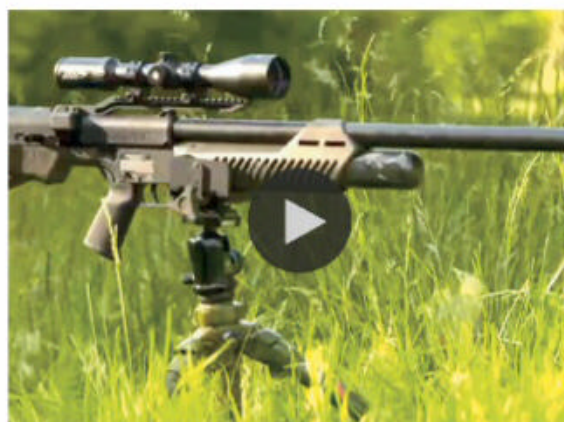
## FALL FOR BASS

What do the pros throw for bass once autumn colors arrive? Get some great advice in “5 Best Baits for Bass in the Fall,” and be ready when the bite turns on.



## TASTY HARVEST

As you fill your freezer this deer season, plan some awesome field-to-table meals with our recipe archive. “10 Most Popular Venison Recipes” is a good place to start.



## SHOOT WITH AIR

Air rifles are no longer just for backyard plinking. In “The Modern Air Rifle,” Mike Seeklander puts them to the test, including the .50-caliber Umarex Hammer.



## WHITETAIL WISDOM

Know how to make a mock scrape? Want to learn how to hang a treestand quietly? We can help. Find the “Whitetail” category to download deer-hunting knowledge.



## DEER GEAR ... AND HOW TO USE IT

With advice you can turn to throughout deer season, “Gear Up & Hunt” highlights equipment, tactics and destinations for the hard-core whitetail hunter.



## OFF-ROAD FIELD TEST

We took the new Polaris General XP 4 1000 Pursuit Edition through a three-month test drive to experience its power and creature comforts. It got muddy.

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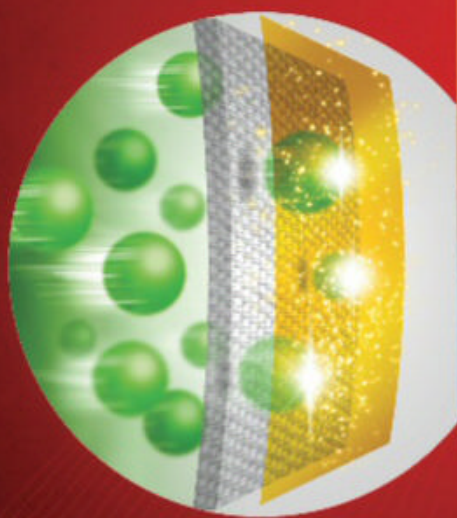
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|----------------|-------|------|--------|-------|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| SUN            |       | MON  |        | TUE   |       | WED  |      | THU  |       | FRI  |      | SAT  |      |
| 19           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

| OCTOBER 2021 |       |       |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |
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| SUN          |       | MON   |       | TUE   |       | WED  |         | THU   |       | FRI   |       | SAT   |       |
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| 10           |       | 11    |       | 12    |       | 13   | FIRST Q | 14    |       | 15    |       | 16    |       |
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| 24           |       | 25    |       | 26    |       | 27   | LAST Q  | 28    |       | 29    |       | 30    |       |
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| 31           |       |       |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| am           | pm    |       |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |
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| to           | to    |       |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 10:30        | 10:54 |       |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |       |       |       |       |

| NOVEMBER 2021 |  |       |       |       |       |       |       |     |       |       |       |      |      |
|---------------|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
| SUN           |  | MON   |       | TUE   |       | WED   |       | THU |       | FRI   |       | SAT  |      |
|               |  | 1     |       | 2     |       | 3     |       | 4   | NEW   | 5     |       | 6    |      |
|               |  | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am    | pm    | am  | pm    | am    | pm    | am   | pm   |
|               |  | 9:18  | 9:42  | 10:06 | 10:30 | 10:54 | 11:18 | —   | 12:06 | 12:30 | 12:54 | 1:18 | 1:42 |
|               |  | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to    | to  | to    | to    | to    | to   | to   |
|               |  | 11:18 | 11:42 | 12:06 | 12:30 | 12:54 | 1:18  | —   | 2:06  | 2:30  | 2:54  | 3:18 | 3:42 |

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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Maintaining contact between your cheek and the stock while obtaining a proper view through the scope is a key to precision.

# CHECK YOUR CHEEK

FIND A RIFLE THAT PROVIDES A SOLID CHEEK WELD, AND YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO BETTER SHOOTING.

Story and Photos by Richard Mann

**S**pend time around hunters, and rifles will be discussed. Things like cartridges, actions, triggers, magazines, barrels, riflescopes and much more will be debated. But rarely will the discussion turn to cheek weld, which is the contact made by the shooter's cheek with the comb of the stock. This is partly because many hunters do not understand the importance of it.

There are several areas of shooter-rifle interface. One is where the hands hold the stock; another is where the stock rests against the shoulder. The placement of the index finger on the trigger is also a critical aspect of shooter interface. So, too, is the interface between the shooter's dominant eye and the sights. This is largely determined by comb height, and it is where cheek weld comes into play.

Up until the later part of the 20th century, sporting rifles were designed to be

fired with open sights. Their stocks had a lot of drop at the comb with even more drop at the heel. This profile worked for open sights; when you shouldered the rifle and placed your cheek on the comb, your eye would line up with the sights. As riflescopes became more popular, some manufacturers stopped selling rifles with open sights but did nothing to adjust the comb to allow for good cheek weld with a riflescope, which was mounted higher. Many rifles still require you to raise your head off the stock to see through a riflescope.

A solid and repeatable cheek weld is similar to an anchor point in archery; it helps you mount the rifle the same way every time. A good cheek weld that lines your eye up with the riflescope permits you to achieve sight alignment faster; you don't have to move your head around to see through the riflescope. It also makes tracking an animal through the scope smoother, and it makes finding an

animal in the scope after recoil easier and faster. Most importantly, as part of doing the same thing the same way every time, a cheek weld that consistently aligns your eye with the scope makes you more accurate.

So why has it taken so long for rifle manufacturers to embrace an ideal stock configuration for use with scopes? I'm not sure; they had the answer more than 35 years ago.

In the 1960s, a West Virginia teenager was given an air rifle. It had open sights, but he realized a riflescope would offer at least a 33 percent advantage because instead of looking at a rear sight, front sight and target, he would only have to look at a reticle and target. He mounted a riflescope to his Crosman only to find his cheek was no longer in solid contact with the stock when he fired. The visual advantage gained by the scope was lost in the physical disadvantage of not having a good cheek weld.

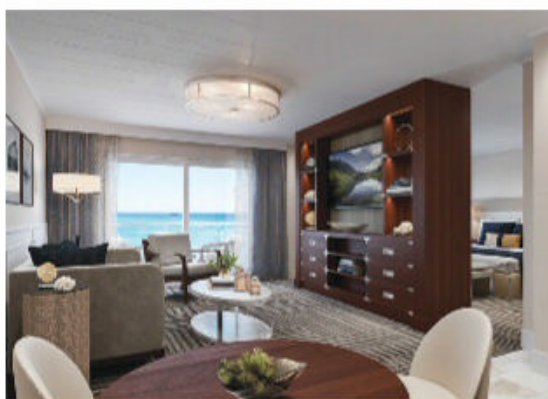




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A couple decades later this boy designed his own bolt-action rifle ideally configured for use with riflescopes. He did two important things to the stock. The nose of the comb was positioned 5/8 inch below the centerline of the bore, and the heel of the stock was positioned 1/4 inch below the same. This placed the comb so that with good cheek weld the shooter's eye would perfectly line up behind a riflescope mounted 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 inches above the bore centerline. The design also created negative drop to the comb so it would slide by your cheek as opposed to slamming into it during recoil.

The man was Melvin Forbes, and his company, New Ultra Light Arms, built the first bolt-action rifle with a comb height ideally situated for proper eye alignment with a riflescope while maintaining good cheek weld. (To be fair, Weatherby had tried this with its Monte Carlo stock design. It helped with cheek weld, but the excessive drop exaggerated recoil.) Steyr emulated Forbes' stock profile on its Scout Rifle, and Nosler used a similar design on its custom rifles. Kimber also followed suit but added a bit more drop.

Most bolt-action rifles made today still have stocks with a comb height better configured for open sights than a riflescope. Shooters often get around this by building up the comb with strap-on pads or even automobile body-repair putty. More recently, with the introduction of the precision rifle, we've seen the inclusion of stocks with adjustable combs. With its AccuFit system, Savage incorporates interchangeable comb sections that allow a shooter to precisely tune the stock to the height of the rifle-scope. The stock of the Benelli Lupo accepts Combtech cheek-pad inserts of different heights for the same reason. Ruger even offers stock modules with different comb heights for its American Rimfire line.

Regardless of whether you're shooting a conventional hunting rifle or more of a precision rifle design, having a good cheek weld will improve your shooting. Of all the considerations you make when selecting a new rifle, choosing one with a fixed, adjustable or replaceable comb height ideal for the riflescope you're using is one of the most important. 



The New Ultra Light Arms Model 20 (left) has a stock with dimensions designed specifically for scope use. The Savage AccuFit stock on the Model 110 Ultralite (right) permits users to adjust comb height via inserts for an ideal cheek weld with any scope.

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# MOBILE MISSTEPS

IT'S NOT ABOUT MAKING A MOVE; IT'S ABOUT MAKING THE RIGHT MOVE, THE RIGHT WAY.

By Tony Hansen

**B**owhunting isn't my only passion; I also love fishing small-mouth bass tournaments on the Great Lakes. I try to be a student of the game and have followed the careers, tactics and advice of some of the best in the business. Guys like Steve Clapper, Joe Balog, Mark Zona, Scott Dobson, Kevin VanDam ... these are the legendary anglers who pull giant brown bass from big water.

I've watched videos of all of them and have shared a boat with a couple of them. They make a cast, wait a bit and snap the rod skyward with a hard-fighting football of a fish on the other end of the line. They make it look easy, really easy. I have worked hard to mimic their success, and after a decade or so of spending a whole lot of hours on the water, I figure I'm roughly 20 percent as good as they are. And that's probably being generous with my assessment.

The simple fact is this: Folks who are pro-level good at something make success look a helluva lot easier to achieve than it is for the majority. This truth certainly applies to bowhunting. Let's talk about the newfound fad of mobile hunting. I bet you'll see the connection.

Spend some time surfing around social media, and you'll come across all manner of chatter about the virtues of

mobile hunting. You'll see gagger bucks that were taken in mobile fashion. You'll watch video after video of "aggressive" bowhunters taking the chase to the bucks and moving around as often as needed.

It looks pretty simple. Spot a buck. Make a move on it. Utilize ultralight gear that enables you to scale any available tree at a moment's notice (if you deem the use of an elevated perch necessary at all). If you aren't seeing deer, well, just keep moving around. You're bound to stumble onto a giant buck at any moment and the stalk will be on, or using your saddle you can swing into a tree just scant yards from the monster's bed.

In reality, it very seldom works that way. I'd dare to say such aggressive, mobile tactics aren't putting you one step closer to tagging a stud buck. In fact, they're likely moving you in the opposite direction.

## CAN'T CUT CORNERS

There's no question that the mobile hunting trend is a fad borne of results. Some very good deer hunters have perfected the art of taking the action to the deer, and they make it look much easier than it really is.

Keep in mind that on social media, you're typically seeing only the summation of success. What you aren't seeing

are the days, weeks and years of failure that led to that success. Moving in ways that give you an advantage without giving critters an education is an art, and it is absolutely something you can learn. But what you can't do is cut corners. In my experience, that's where the road ends for a whole lot of folks.

Learning to be mobile and effective takes a ton of dedication. You must be willing to fail a lot, and you can't simply go faster or harder in an effort to shorten the learning curve. No amount of lightweight gear or high-tech fabric will change that. In fact, the very best mobile hunters I'm aware of don't worry about any of those things. Sure, they cut weight where they can and rely on quality gear where it really matters. But their primary focus is on knowledge and experience.

The more they encounter game, the more they learn. They spend a crazy amount of time in the field honing their craft. If you want to be a successful mobile hunter, are you doing the same? Or are you simply out there wandering around with the latest-and-greatest tree saddle?

## ADDING TO THE PRESSURE

I've hunted public land for a long time, long before it was the vogue thing to do. I can say without hesitation that



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hunting pressure has increased exponentially over the past five to seven years. The quality of the hunting experience, however, has dwindled at a much faster rate over just the past few years. I attribute much of that decline directly to the mobile-hunting mantra.

Mobile hunting done correctly is a low-impact, low-pressure tactic. Done incorrectly, it's a recipe for driving out entire sections of ground in a hurry. I have seen it happen more than once.

I recall an incident I witnessed during late October in Nebraska. I was hunting a far corner of a piece of public ground. It wasn't terribly far from the road, maybe three-quarters of a mile, but it was the farthest from the access point that I could get. I wasn't there simply because of that; I had chosen the spot because a fence gap that the deer loved to use just happened to be in that location.

For the first two days of my hunt, I had the area to myself and I saw a couple of solid bucks just out of range. I'd seen enough to think that it was one of those "matter of time" spots, and I was very much looking forward to the rest of the week.

Then the duo arrived.

Two hunters, each sporting a tree saddle around his waist and one carrying a silhouette buck decoy, made an appearance along the road about 90 minutes before dark. I could tell they were glassing the crop fields and creek bottoms that wove through the property. No big deal. It was public land after all, and they were plenty far from me. I

watched as the pair split up and headed to nearby tree rows, where I assumed they'd settle into their saddles for the remainder of the evening.

I was wrong. About 20 minutes later, as a couple of deer entered the field in front of me, I saw the two hunters reappear. They'd also spotted the deer and were ready to get mobile.

Holding the decoy in front of them, they snuck up the tree row. The wind was hitting them somewhat in the face, but it was also blowing into the creek bottom past them. That creek bottom made a sharp turn, which apparently eddied the wind direction. Less than five minutes after the hunters started their approach, a big buck snuck out the backside of the creek bottom and headed for parts unknown.

The duo continued their stalk unaware. After covering about a quarter of a mile, they'd reached the end of available cover and had to skip across the field to another patch of trees. During that maneuver, a second good buck appeared. This time, the buck had simply laid low in the creek bottom and the hunters had walked right by it. I spotted the buck as it high-tailed out the other side of the bottom and over a hill.

All told, the pair ended up bumping four different bucks, one of which was a deer I had seen earlier that week and hoped to encounter in range. The hunters got within 100 yards of the deer they were looking at and never saw any of the other bucks. Those were the last deer I saw on the property that week despite hunting for three more days.

## PROFESSIONAL PATIENCE

Being a mobile hunter can pay big dividends, but the mobile movement has the very real potential to place unneeded pressure on areas if it's done wrong. Intrusion and disturbance brought on by the tactic can have lasting negative consequences. In a lot of cases, I think the allure of being mobile is so great that folks tend to move around just for the sake of saying they're mobile.

I consider myself a hybrid. I'm not a spot-and-stalk kind of guy. I think tree saddles can be useful in a very specific set of circumstances, but in most situations, I'll opt for a quality hang-on stand. I can hang a set about as fast as I can go up in a saddle, and I'm more likely to stay put long enough to make a difference.

I choose stand sites by evaluating sign, terrain and opportunity. If I chose the location, I feel confident it can produce, so why would I need to keep moving? That said, I do not anchor myself in one location if that spot isn't the right one. I have zero hesitation in adjusting my setup when I see something that tells me I need to move.

My advice is to have a mobile mentality but with patience. Give a location time to produce and the game in the area the opportunity to show you how it travels, then take that information and make an educated decision. Think before you move. Determine whether a move is advantageous and based on information that points in the direction you're considering. Being mobile for mobile's sake likely hasn't filled many tags. Executing at a pro level has. 



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# THE ELECTRIC EDGE

CONSIDER UPPING YOUR HUNTING GAME WITH **PURPOSE-BUILT E-BIKES.**

By Drew Warden

Quiet, comfortable and, above all, useful, electric hunting bikes increase the amount of ground a hunter can cover in less time and simplify the process of getting game out.

**T**echnology affects everything that we do, and hunting is no exception. Every year hunters benefit from developments in optics, firearms, bows, remote scouting tools and other gear items. Electric bikes, or e-bikes, are one such innovation becoming increasingly popular. While similar to a standard bicycle, e-bikes use an integrated electric motor that assists with propulsion. This motor allows users to travel farther and faster with less effort than pedaling alone.

With recent advances in lithium battery technology, e-bike manufacturers have been producing models specifically tailored to hunting. Powered by reliable, long-lasting batteries, these e-bikes sport premium components, sturdy frames, rugged fat tires and powerful motors to tackle tough terrain. As with any new technology, e-bikes have their detractors, but their benefits can't be ignored.

## A LEG UP

Probably the two most compelling reasons to invest in a hunting e-bike are added distance and speed. Whether scouting or

simply heading to your stand or ground blind, an e-bike covers more ground, faster, than walking alone. And it requires less effort than a standard bicycle.

In the West, where land tracts stretch for many miles and demand extensive travel to scout, this is a gamechanger. However, e-bikes are useful anywhere. If you're hunting unfamiliar land in the East and want to set out a bunch of trail cameras near and far, an e-bike is the perfect tool for the job. Older and mobility-impaired hunters everywhere may likewise appreciate the extra power and range these bikes provide.

Another advantage is the level of stealth offered by electric bikes. This past spring, I used QuietKat's Jeep and Apex e-bikes while hunting Illinois turkeys and never once worried about spooking game as I scouted field edges or open terrain. I can't say the same about a gas-powered ATV or UTV. With e-bikes, you also avoid leaving scent on the ground, which isn't guaranteed when walking or traveling in an off-road vehicle.

If you're loaded down with gear or heavy clothing, an e-bike can be equally

useful. Most manufacturers offer accessory trailers, racks and packs for their e-bikes, and these make bringing in gear—or packing out an animal—much easier. This is especially true if you're far from a road or in an area where ATVs or larger vehicles can't access due to terrain or restrictions.

If there's one caveat with e-bikes, it's price. Quality hunting models usually run from \$2,000 to \$8,000 or more. While that's less than many UTVs and ATVs, it's certainly not inconsequential. Usually, added cost is associated with high-quality components, so you at least get what you pay for here.

## POWER POINTS

Most hunting e-bikes offer three means of propulsion: user-powered with the pedals, a mix of user- and electric-powered with pedal assist, and fully electric-powered with the throttle. I prefer using pedal assist, but the throttle is handy when starting with a heavy load or when facing difficult terrain. Many models have multiple pedal-assist modes for additional performance or conserving battery life.



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Obviously, the higher the pedal-assist setting or the greater the use of the throttle, the faster the battery will drain.

Motors on current hunting e-bikes range from 500 to 1,500 watts or more. The majority are mid-drive designs, but some bikes use a hub motor inside the rear wheel. Located between the pedals and encased in the frame, a mid-drive motor directs power through the bike's crank and is typically favored over the hub style because it offers more torque. Generally speaking, the more powerful the motor, the more expensive it is. Top-of-the-line mid-drive bikes with torque sensors are most expensive, followed by standard mid-drive models and hub-motor types. Bikes described as all-wheel drive use two hub motors, one in each wheel.

Good e-bikes will have a quality lithium-ion battery, preferably featuring cells from Panasonic, Samsung or LG, which are all highly regarded in the e-bike community. Ideally, the battery will also have a large capacity, which is typically measured in watt-hours (Wh) and greatly influences a bike's range. Most estimates suggest you use about 20 to 25 Wh for every mile traveled. So, an e-bike with a battery capacity of 1,000 Wh might have an expected max range of 40 to 50 miles. Actual range could be much more or much less, however. It depends on factors like rider and gear weight, terrain, how much the motor is assisting you, temperature, tire pressure and others.

Be wary of outrageous range claims, and when manufacturers don't provide Wh, multiply voltage by amp hours (Ah) to calculate it yourself. If you don't have

at least two of these values, you cannot find the third. You generally want a battery with high voltage and high Ah for quick acceleration, solid climbing and long-distance capabilities.

### E-BIKE EDICTS

Electric bike regulations represent a good news/bad news situation for hunters. The good news is that many public lands and trails do allow e-bike access, and efforts are ongoing to expand opportunities and make regulations more uniform. The bad news is that others don't permit e-bikes, and those that do may have policies that vary widely by state and even by individual area. In many places, e-bikes are treated like traditional bicycles; in others, they're viewed like motorized off-road vehicles.

Some states can't even agree on a definition for an e-bike. Several use different names, or varied speed or output restrictions, to define them. And, while most states don't require e-bikes to be registered, licensed or insured, a handful mandate one or more of those things—or an operator's license—particularly for the higher-powered bikes.

Luckily, many states are adopting the e-bike industry's standard classification system. This breaks e-bikes into three categories based on how the motor assists users—as the rider pedals or via a throttle—and at what speed it ceases to provide assistance. Recent pushes at the national level have set out to increase e-bike opportunities on federal public lands. Still, your best bet is fully reading and understanding e-bike regulations for the state, and any local area, you intend to visit. 



## ALPHA PREDATOR

*QuietKat's Apex e-bike dominates rough terrain and expands a user's hunting grounds.*

Good e-bikes scale steep hills, travel long distances and support heavy loads. QuietKat's 2021 Apex (\$4,999 to \$5,599; [quietkat.com](https://quietkat.com)) does this and more. It has a 750-, 1,000- or 1,500-watt mid-drive motor to climb difficult terrain and take users farther. The 750-watt Apex serves as a Class 2 e-bike, with a throttle-actuated motor that stops assisting when the bike hits 20 mph. Users can remove the thumb throttle to make it Class 1 compliant, too.

Bikes use a lithium-ion 14.5 amp-hour (Ah), 48-volt (V) or 17.5 Ah, 52 V battery, depending on the model. I hunted with the 1,000-watt Apex last spring, and it easily tackled everything from steep hills to soggy marshes. And the color display made viewing pedal-assist settings and remaining battery life simple.

Other features include fat, 26-by-4.5-inch Kenda Juggernaut tires, an inverted 150 mm air-suspension front fork, a 12 mm rear thru-axle and sealed bearings in front and rear hubs. A wide-range 11-36T cassette and SRAM nine-speed drivetrain multiply the mid-drive motor's power, and Tektro four-piston hydraulic disc brakes help control steep descents.

The Apex comes in a large, medium or small frame. It weighs 71 pounds, with a 325-pound carrying capacity. For 2021, it has an integrated pannier rack. The Apex is compatible with all QuietKat cargo trailers, making it perfect for transporting gear or harvested meat.



E-bikes are equally handy for anglers. Some of the best fishing spots are often far away from public accesses, and you can carry more gear farther with an e-bike.





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# DROUGHT IN THE DUCK FACTORY



WATERFOWLERS MAY BE DISAPPOINTED IN THIS FALL'S FLIGHT, BUT **AS LONG AS HABITAT REMAINS INTACT, BOOM TIMES WILL RETURN WITH RAIN IN THE PRAIRIES.**

By Andrew McKean

**C**ome waterfowl season, you will likely notice the effects of a drought gripping the Northern Plains. You may see fewer birds in the marsh, and they may be maddeningly reluctant to pile into your decoys. Maybe you'll hear chatter at the café or the boat launch about this being an "off" year compared with the last several.

None of that will surprise Dr. Johann Walker, director of operations for Ducks Unlimited's Northern Plains office in Bismarck, N.D., and a well-regarded waterfowl biologist. When we talked in the summer, he couldn't help but look ahead to how drought conditions in the Prairie Pothole Region, the "duck factory" of the Central and Mississippi flyways, might affect the fall flight.

"It's dry. Really dry. Especially in North Dakota," said Walker. "We have widespread extreme or greater drought conditions, and it's really been building since the winter. It's as dry as we've seen it in 25 years, since the last really profound drought back in the 1980s. As a result, we can expect to see fewer and older birds in the migration."

Weather forecasters and statisticians confirm the crippling drought. National drought monitor maps in late summer

showed an area the size of Ohio centered on central North Dakota, the deep magenta of the map indicating "exceptional" drought. Farther west and north, "extreme" drought covered most of the Dakotas, the eastern half of Montana, and the southern third of Canada. Drought conditions started with negligible snowfall on the Northern Plains last winter and continued through the spring, with only an inch or two of rain falling on areas that normally would receive 10 times that amount.

Shallow wetlands across the Dakotas, eastern Montana and southern Canada that would normally be teeming with ducklings throughout the hot, sticky summers were dry and dusty in July. The renowned Prairie Pothole Region, an area the size of Texas, has the capability in a non-drought year to pump out millions of ducklings. Conservation efforts here that have preserved wetland and adjacent grass cover for nesting are largely responsible for a bumper crop of ducks over the last 20 years. The last census of ducks, in 2019, pegged the continent's flock at about 38 million birds.

Walker, along with state and flyway waterfowl managers, expect this fall's flight will be smaller in size than in

recent years, and ducks will be older on average. That means they'll be harder to fool into decoy spreads.

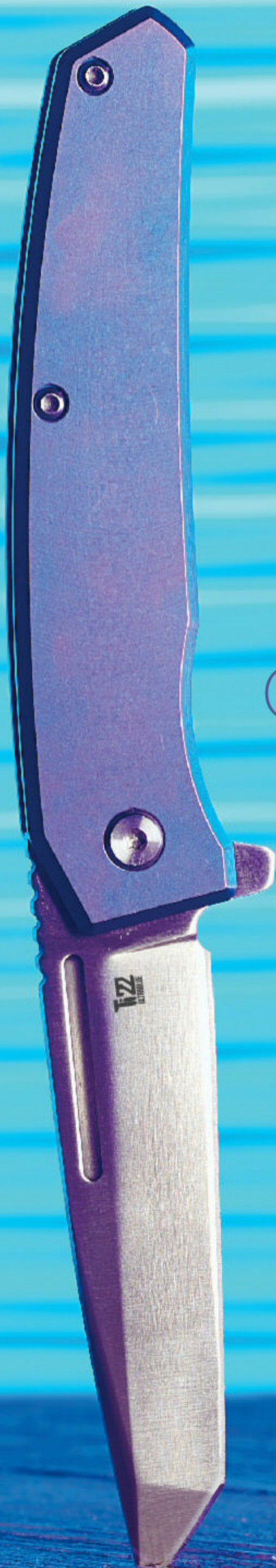
## KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Compounding the complications of the drought is a lack of knowledge about how ducks may respond. For the second straight year in 2021, biologists weren't able to conduct surveys of breeding grounds across Canada.

This is highly unusual. Ducks are among the most intensively studied of our wildlife, thanks to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual Waterfowl Population Status Report, which has been conducted nearly every year since 1955. But the 2020 and 2021 surveys were canceled because the U.S. pilots that fly them weren't allowed to enter Canada due to COVID restrictions.

The annual population surveys are used by flyway managers to establish bag limits and season structures. Last year's season-setting work was fairly easy, even without the breeding-pair survey. We had a near-record number of ducks entering the breeding season, and water and wetland conditions were fairly normal across the prairie and boreal forest. Waterfowl managers made an assumption—since





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they couldn't rely on data—that the fall flight would be fairly normal. While some hunters complained about fewer ducks in their particular areas last fall, most indications showed it was a typical year.

But this year, waterfowl managers are worried. They approved liberal packages based on an expectation of a bountiful fall flight before the grip of the drought tightened on the prairie. There's widespread concern that duck hunters this fall may overharvest the drought-impaired population of southbound migrants.

"It's not ideal to have two years without data," said Walker. "We're flying a little bit blind. But we do have North Dakota's breeding-pair survey, which gives us some indication of trends."

Those trends are not good. North Dakota's 2021 survey noted that water indexes were down 80 percent from the previous year and 68 percent below the long-term average. Biologists estimated North Dakota mallard numbers are down 49 percent from 2020, and pintail numbers are off 68 percent.

Assuming U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists can once again enter Canada this coming spring and conduct the annual continental breeding survey, Walker and other managers think the 2022 season could be tightened, with lower bag limits and shorter seasons, in order to give drought-impaired flocks a chance to recover. That assumes drought conditions won't linger across the prairies, as they did the last time we had severe drought conditions in the 1980s.

#### KEEP THE TABLE SET

Back then, in the years before the Conservation Reserve Program and other conservation-minded provisions of the federal Farm Bill, farmers capitalized on drought conditions to drain wetlands and maximize the amount of tillable acreage. Walker doesn't expect that to happen this time around.

"Mainly, because those wetlands are dry now, there's little incentive to drain them," he said. "Second, we have a number of mature conservation

programs designed to create alternatives to 'swamp busting.'"

Walker noted that there's a broader recognition of the resilience of the potholes now compared to 25 years ago.

"One of the things that's true of the classic prairie pothole system—the complex of shallow wetlands—is that they thrive on cycles of wet and drought," he explained. "Wetland productivity tends to decline through extended wet periods. Drought is a useful reset, especially if it doesn't last too long."

He said waterfowlers—no matter where they hunt—need to speak up to ensure that the prairie pothole habitat remains intact so that when the water returns, so will the ducks.

"We have to keep the table set, intact nesting cover and intact wetland basins," Walker stressed. "As long as they're there, when we get wet, ducks will recover regardless of harvest. Drought reminds us that habitat affects duck populations more than anything else." 

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**I**t was spring gobbler season in Georgia, a beautiful sunny afternoon, but I wasn't hunting turkeys. Just before sunset I saw movement on the edge of the woods as three hogs stepped carefully into the food plot. That's what I was there for, so I put my binocular aside and slowly reached for the rifle. All three were red, nice size but no giants. Crosshair on the shoulder of the largest hog, I pressed the trigger as soon as it stopped. I expected the animal to drop, but you never know with pigs. It ran down the field as if nothing had happened. I was just about to fire again when it rolled into the ripening grain.

Another spring day several thousand miles west, Chad Wiebe and I jumped a

big boar in tall, sloping barley. The hog went through the stalks like a torpedo, but we didn't get another glimpse until he was across a steep bottom and working his way up the next ridge through thick wild mustard. I was on sticks, waiting him out, a shot looking unlikely. Then, just below the crest, he slowed and the mustard thinned. I held forward at the top of the shoulder, and at the shot he vanished into the yellow flowers. He was probably my best California boar ... and a shot I'd just as soon not repeat!

### **THE AMERICAN WILD BOAR**

Free-range hogs aren't new in North America. Seafarers released swine to provide a meat source for passing ships. Populations in Florida and California's

Channel Islands are believed to hail from Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

Homesteaders often let domestic swine roam free, establishing feral populations; there are horrific Civil War accounts of wild hogs scavenging battlefields! All North American wild hogs are some mix of domestic swine, but there were historic introductions of pure European wild boar. George Gordon Moore released some at Hooper Bald, N.C.; William Randolph Hearst did the same on California's Central Coast. More recently, various game ranches have introduced European stock to improve the "look" of local hogs.

The pure Eurasian wild boar is an imposing animal, tall at the shoulders, body sloping down to the hips, with

SHUTTERSTOCK





Feral hogs have inhabited some parts of the U.S. for more than 500 years, and they have expanded their range greatly.



## THE U.S. IS NOW HOME TO 9 MILLION FERAL HOGS, AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE NATION ARE TOO GOOD TO IGNORE.

By Craig Boddington

grizzled hair and sharpened tusks. However, domestic hogs and the real Eurasian deal are the same species, *Sus scrofa*. All North American wild hogs are non-native feral animals. Depending on the original stock, hogs can be belted, spotted, and any color from white to red and brown to black. A hog's color certainly doesn't influence the quality of meat, and it doesn't relate to tusk or body size.

We hunters tend to place a premium on dark hogs that are visually "closer" to the Eurasian strain, especially big boars with long teeth. The Central Coast, where I've hung my hat for 30 years, is the epicenter of California's feral hog range. Hearst's introduction a century ago still exerts influence. My experience is that

the pure European strain is dominant; some percentage of our hogs still look Eurasian, but we also have spotted and belted hogs and all colors.

After a couple generations in the wild, domestic swine change. Males always grow tusks and develop a cartilage shield to protect their neck and chest. With both sexes, tails and ears straighten, shoulders become more powerful and hams become less prominent. I find this fascinating, but it has nothing to do with America's pig problem.

### PEST OR RESOURCE?

Wild hogs are among the most prolific of all animals. Sows breed young and produce large litters. Under ideal conditions, two litters per year are possible.

Population growth is thus exponential. America's feral hog population is now estimated at 9 million and annually causes \$2 billion in agricultural damage.

After whitetail deer, the feral hog is America's second-most numerous large animal. The primary hog population is found from Oklahoma and Texas eastward to the Atlantic, plus California, where feral hogs occur in all counties. Once a breeding population gets going, it's difficult to get rid of hogs. States that don't have breeding populations are working hard, in conjunction with the feds, to keep them out. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), not U.S. Fish and Wildlife, has responsibility for invasive species, and the feral hog surely qualifies.





Feral hogs thrive around agriculture, taking advantage of food and water provided by crops and irrigation, and causing \$2 billion in agricultural damage annually.

I have a little farm in southeast Kansas, 15 miles from Oklahoma, where an estimated 900,000 hogs reside. I expect hog damage, but so far, we've never seen one hog on the farm. For several years, a team of USDA hunters has done a heroic job of holding the line. Where hogs are established, it's almost too late to get that genie back in the bottle. Kansas doesn't want a hog problem!

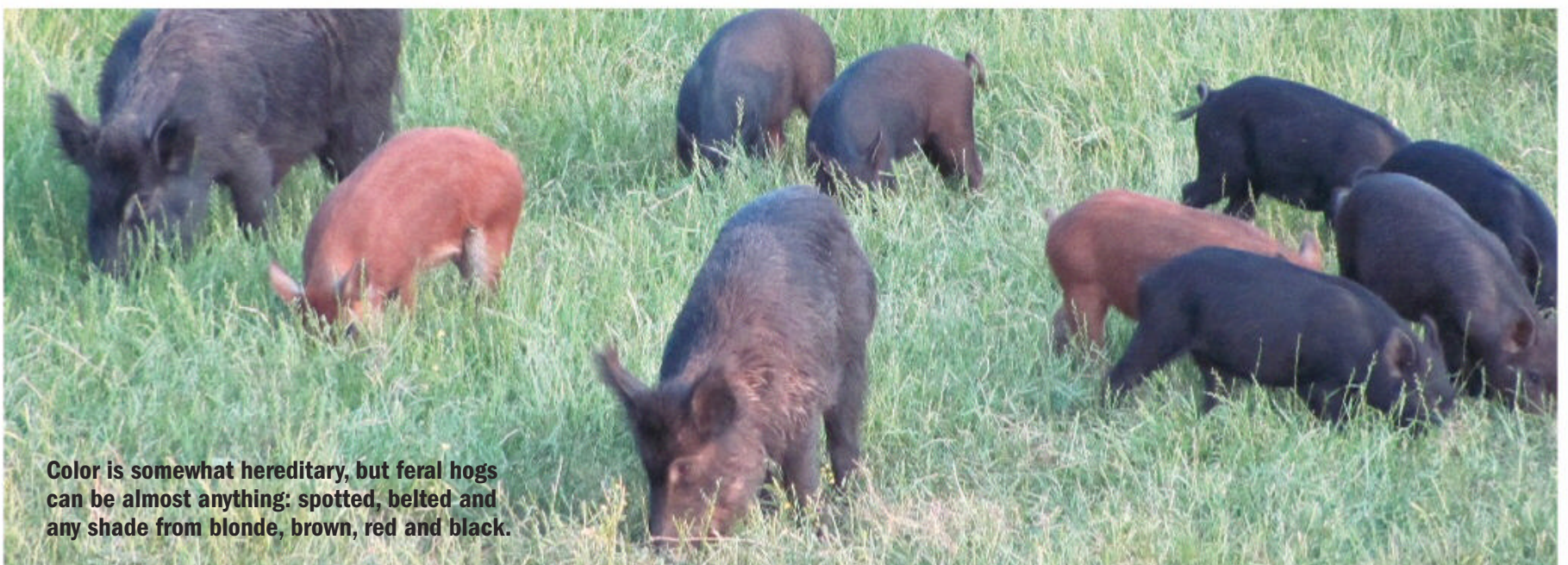
On the other hand, hogs have changed America's hunting culture perhaps

for the better. They can be hunted year-round, yield good pork and provide lots of excitement. Success is high, in part because any hog is legal. Sows are tastier and therefore often targeted. If pig hunting were "boars only" the game would change, but that would be silly because taking sows is essential to population control. Mature boars are a small percentage of any population. Pig-hunting regs are often relaxed because the intent is to control the population. Baiting and

night hunting (including using thermal and night-vision devices) are often legal. Texas, with the worst pig plague, even legalized helicopter gunning.

Still, by most accounts, the pigs are winning! They have added a new dimension to American hunting. In California, feral hogs long ago surpassed deer as the most popular big game.

Nonetheless, in most places wild hogs are viewed as a nuisance, which is why traditional hunting rules such as methods



Color is somewhat hereditary, but feral hogs can be almost anything: spotted, belted and any shade from blonde, brown, red and black.

CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)





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Sows breed at a young age and can have up to two litters per year, leading to population explosions in some areas.

of take, shooting hours and bag limits are often relaxed. Most states require a basic hunting license, but Texas even did away with that (for hogs only, and hunting permission is still required).

Kansas (and some other states that don't want hogs) took a different approach. Hoping to avoid a repeat of Oklahoma's rapid hog proliferation, Kansas made it illegal to possess, own, hunt or transport feral hogs. (Realize that in some states, feral hogs exploded because short-sighted people dropped off truckloads of pigs so they could hunt them or sell hog hunts.) I can shoot hogs 24/7 on my farm, although I've yet to have that chance. However, if one of my deer hunters sees a hog, he or she cannot shoot—unless we go to the nearest Parks and Wildlife office and I make the hunter an “agent” for pig control.

As a hunter, I wouldn't mind encountering the occasional hog on my farm. Problem is, there's no such thing as “occasional.” Once they are here, we'll have too many of them, along with all the damage they bring and the negative impacts on our deer and turkeys.

Almost everywhere hogs occur, local outfitters deal with them as an extra profit center, and why shouldn't they? California, however, recognizes them as a resource. Declared a “big-game animal” back in the '80s, all rules apply: There are shooting hours and regs that outline methods of take, including the prohibition of baiting. A basic hunting license is required, plus a pig tag. This seems onerous, but I love pig hunting and I always have a tag. The season is year-around, and I can buy as many tags as I like. Central Coast pig hunting is just plain fun, spot-and-stalk in rolling oak ridges.

To folks in Texas and the Southeast, where every pig shot is to the good, this licensed and regulated approach likely sounds insane. The difference is California hogs aren't a major problem (unless it's your barley field that gets ruined). Because of periodic drought, the region's hogs are sort of self-limiting. They come back strong with good rains, but numbers drop off quickly in dry years. This is altogether different from Texas or my buddy Zack Aultman's

place in Georgia, where pigs must be shot constantly.

### POCKETS OF PIGS

There have been feral hog sightings in all 48 contiguous states. Boars in search of sows can wander long distances, and groups of pigs come and go. Concentrations are well known, but there are scattered smaller populations, sometimes closely guarded by local hunters. Despite extreme efforts, Kansas has isolated breeding herds. There were feral hogs in southeast Colorado, but this appears to be the rare successful eradication. Nebraska has hogs in a couple of counties, with efforts ongoing to contain them.

There are isolated populations in Arizona and New Mexico, Oregon and Washington, the Upper Midwest, Canada and along Mexico's Gulf Coast. Pigs are long-established in Hawaii and Puerto Rico, but to my knowledge there are none in Alaska.

I have no interest in seeking out hidden hotspots, but I like pigs enough that I've hunted them from Florida





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to California and many places in between. In some areas, like buddy Zack's Georgia pines, and often in Texas, it's a matter of helping control numbers. In California, I don't mind buying the tag, but I usually wait till we're low on jalapeno-cheddar sausage, or I have a gun or load I want to use.

Either way, I'm usually not looking for a long-tusked boar. A big, mature boar is an awesome beast, uncommon, tough and potentially dangerous. Seeing one gets my blood going, but in many circumstances, I'm just as happy to leave him for someone who will appreciate him properly.

However, being an unabashed pig hunter, sometimes I can't control myself. Tucson gunmaker John Lazzeroni and I had been planning a hunt that



A hog's body size mainly depends on food availability and age. The author and his wife, Donna, took this large boar in Texas.

CRAIG BODDINGTON



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got scotched by the pandemic. John claimed he knew where to find pigs in New Mexico. Sounded unlikely, but we were desperate so I headed to Arizona.

With a full-size freezer in John's big truck, we masked up and drove east, braving a potential lockdown. We hit the jackpot, finding hogs in arid ranch country where I'd least expect them. To my eye these were pure feral hogs: spotted, belted, rainbow, oddly co-existing with cattle on big irrigation pivots, fat and well-fed. At least at that moment, there was an unusual concentration of massive boars. In just a couple of days we used several of Lazzeroni's fast short magnums, filled his freezer to the top, masked up again and headed back to Arizona.



Spot-and-stalk is the author's preferred method of hunting hogs in California, where a red-dot optic suits the terrain.

Closing the distance on a hog isn't particularly difficult, although the wind must be favorable.



CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)





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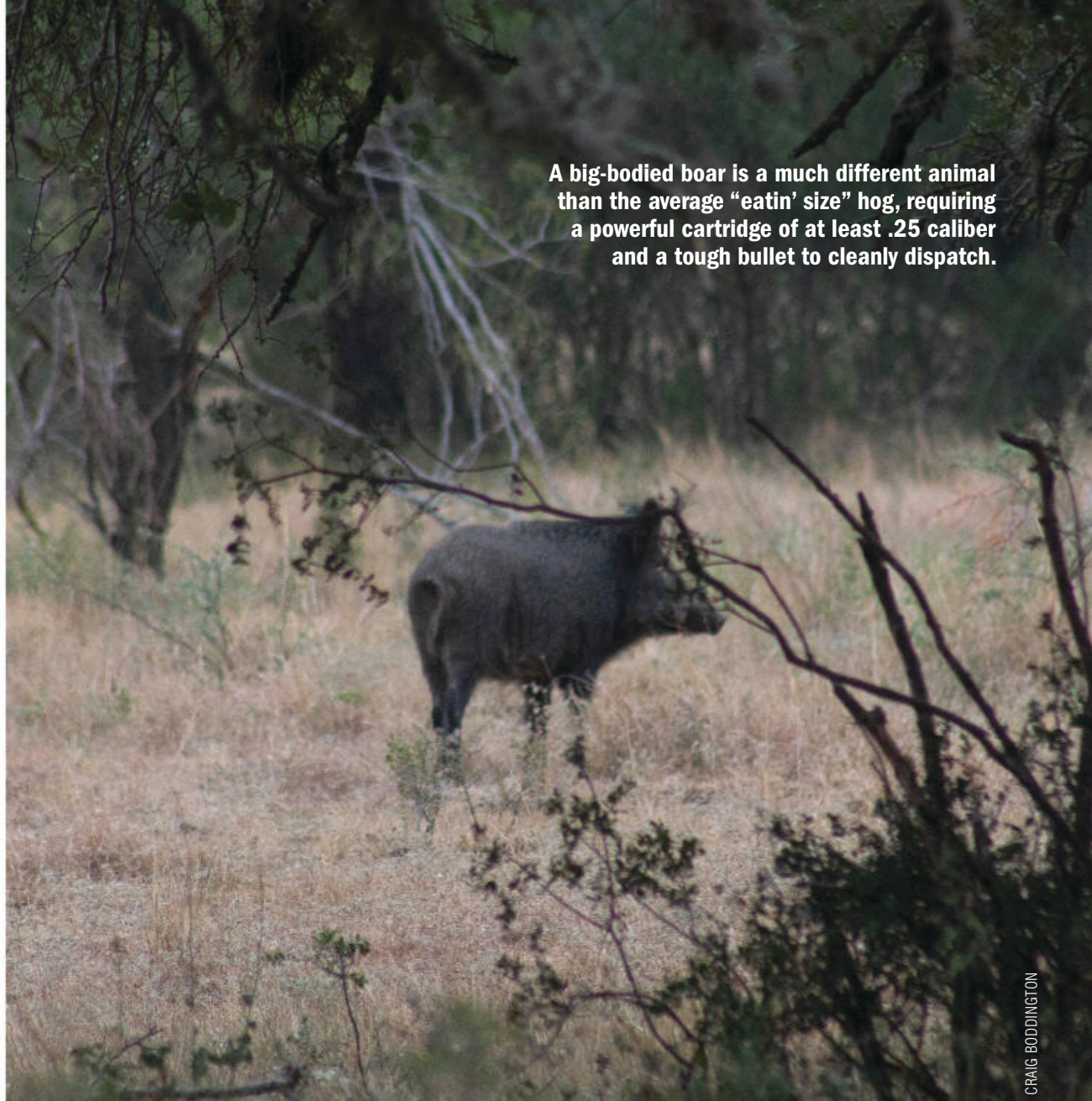
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## LOAD UP

I've had ready access to good California hog hunting for 40 years, and I've also hunted them a lot in Georgia and Texas. Collectively, they've been a prime cartridge and bullet-testing laboratory, so I've hunted them with just about everything from handguns and .22 centerfires on up to elephant-capable big bores, along with archery equipment. Whenever I write about guns and loads for hogs, I'm sure to get emails from hunters who respond, "I head-shoot all my hogs with a .357 revolver (or .223 AR) and never have any problems." Sure you do; I don't doubt it can be done. Recently I shot a good-sized Texas hog with a .22 Hornet. The bullet impacted near the base of the ear at about 60 yards — end of story. But



A big-bodied boar is a much different animal than the average "eatin' size" hog, requiring a powerful cartridge of at least .25 caliber and a tough bullet to cleanly dispatch.

CRAIG BODDINGTON

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**In many states, hogs can be hunted year-round with a variety of equipment, making them popular among bowhunters. The author used a crossbow to take this hog in Florida with Hoppy Kempfer of Osceola Outfitters.**

absent a dead-certain brain shot at close range, that's not enough gun.

There's a big difference in body size (and toughness) between a meat hog and a big boar. However, to some extent, ideal guns and loads depend on methodology. Houndsmen often use large-caliber handguns: The range is short, and pistols are handy. It's a different story if you shoot your hogs over bait. Where you set up controls the distance, and you can also ensure a steady rest. Spot-and-stalk hunting is the common technique with California hogs, and it's a different deal. Out there, we take the shots we get. Long shots are rarely needed. Often, we can get within archery, handgun and iron-sight range ... but sometimes we can't. For sure, we can't always close to dead-certain head-shot range.

Intent also matters. I don't have hogs on my property so, even where they're legally a nuisance, I think of hogs as

big-game animals. I hunt them, and arm myself, accordingly. I do a lot of hog hunting with lever-action rifles because I love them. The great old .30-30 is a wonderful hog gun, plenty powerful, and with enough range for most shots. I love the .45-70 and have a lifelong thing for the .348 Winchester, both real hog-thumpers.

However, you don't need something over .30 caliber to hunt pigs. You also don't need a fast magnum or a lever action; there are good hog cartridges in all action types. You do need to put a good bullet in the right place, and although I like to hunt hogs a lot with iron sights, a low-power scope or red-dot sight on any platform greatly extends its versatility.

Regardless of range, I'm not comfortable with body shots on big boars with anything below about .25 caliber. Above that, any decent, scoped deer rifle makes a pretty good pig gun. However,

sometimes we don't give hogs proper respect. I've never been touched, but I've had more genuine close calls with hogs than any of Africa's big nasties, almost always from a mere moment's disrespect. Not long ago, we shot a big, toothy boar on friend Tony Lombardo's place. The hog went down and looked dead, so Tony went to check, absent rifle. Seconds later he came scrambling back, the angry and very agile boar right on his heels. Tony got clear and the .348 solved the problem ... too close.

We don't have pigs everywhere from coast to coast, nor throughout the land from Canada to Mexico, but we've got them in a lot of places. They aren't going away. We don't yet know their long-term effects on native flora and fauna, so I'm not in favor of hog proliferation. I am in favor of hog hunting, however, an exciting, interesting and relatively recent development in the U.S. hunting tradition. **G&H**

CRAIG BODDINGTON





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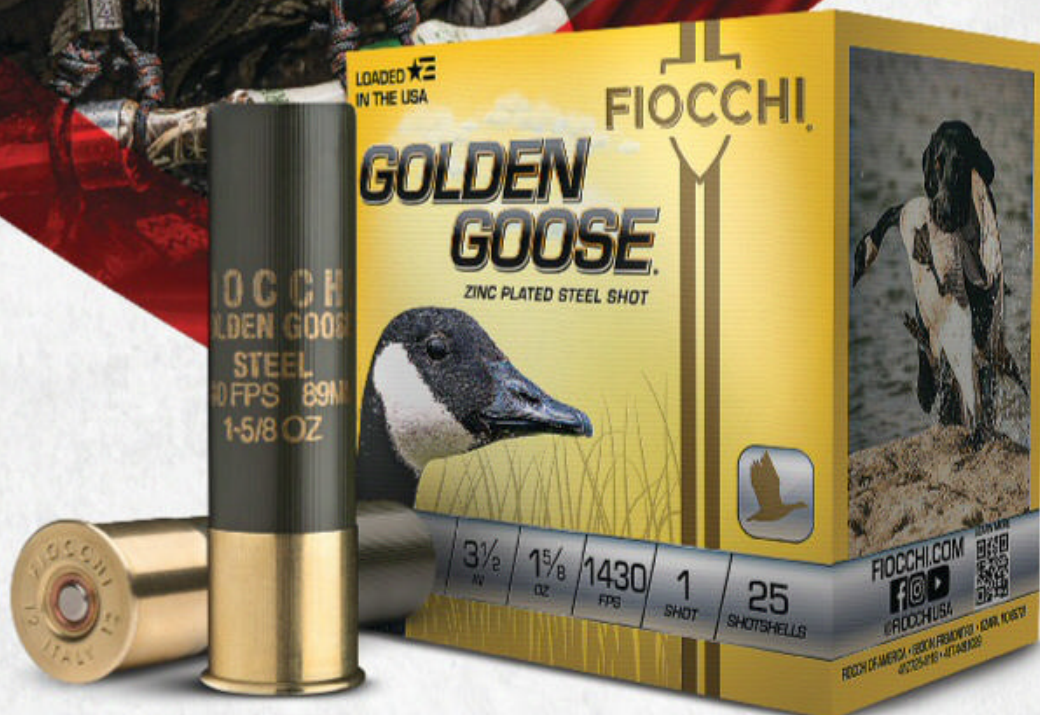
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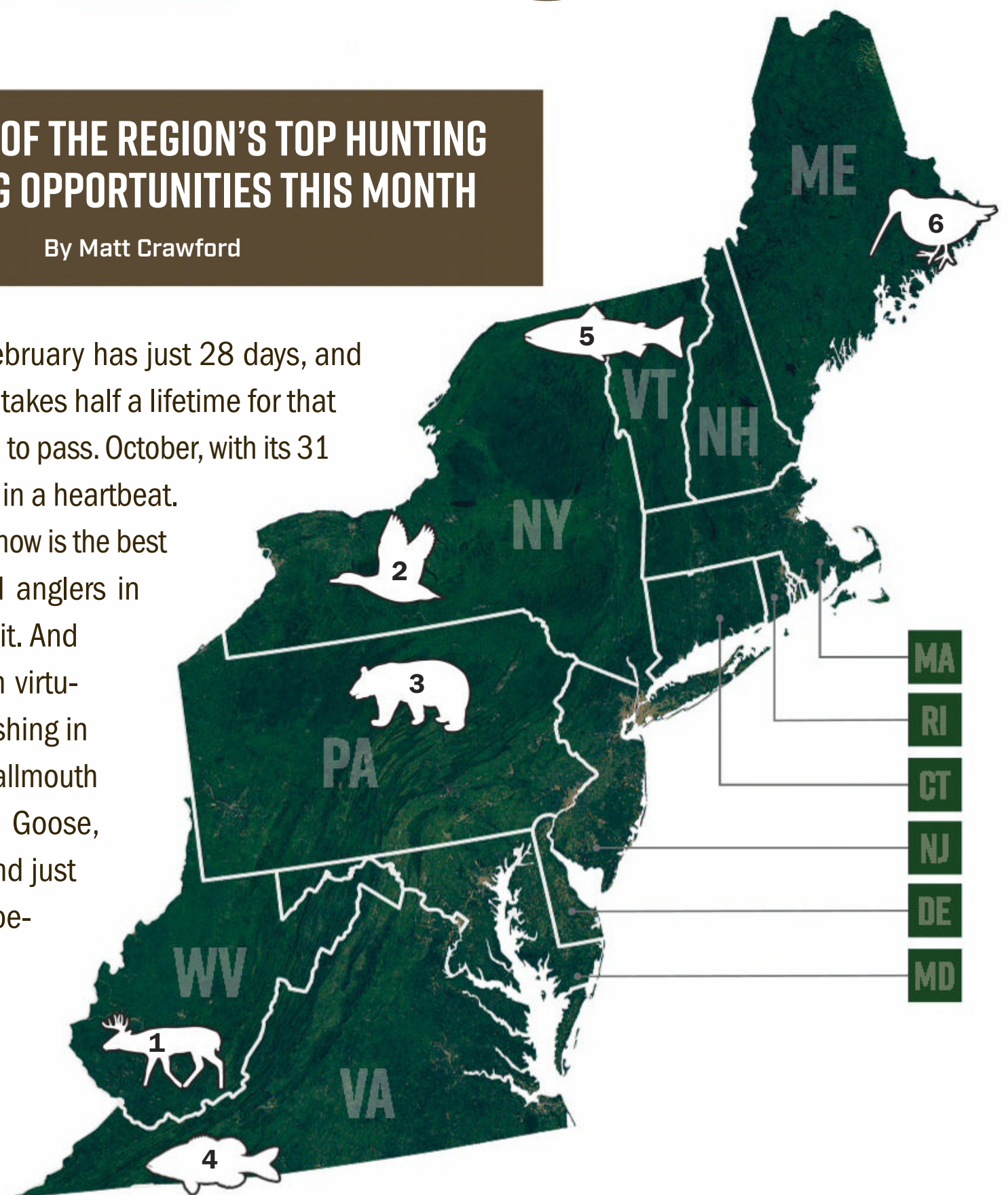
# AROUND THE EAST

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

By Matt Crawford

**F**unny, isn't it? February has just 28 days, and it can feel like it takes half a lifetime for that cold, dark month to pass. October, with its 31 days, whizzes by in a heartbeat.

Not fair. Nonetheless, now is the best time for hunters and anglers in the East to get after it. And by "after it," we mean virtually all of it. Striper fishing in the surf. Topwater smallmouth fishing on the lakes. Goose, duck, deer, moose and just about everything in between. Whether you carry a gun, a rod or both, October is prime time.







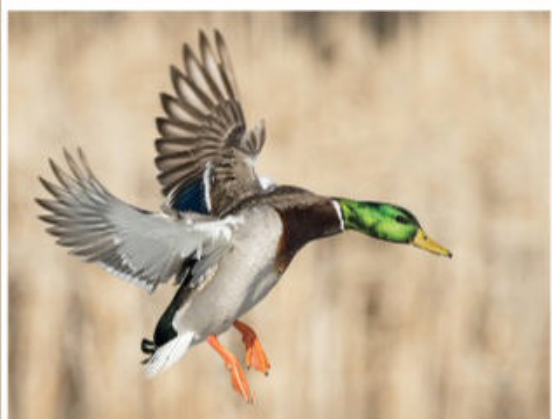
## WEST VIRGINIA WHITETAILS

While there is some deer hunting in West Virginia's vast agricultural fields and some discreet urban opportunities, the Mountain State's deer hunting tradition is unique to the region. There is some variation by zone, but archery season is held statewide during October, and archers here have a new record to chase. During the 2020 bow season, hunter Jody Dalton set the new state record with a massive 12-pointer that scored 191 2/8 inches. That big buck came out of Wyoming County in the southern part of the state, an area known for its coalfields. That, dear reader, is as West Virginia as it gets.



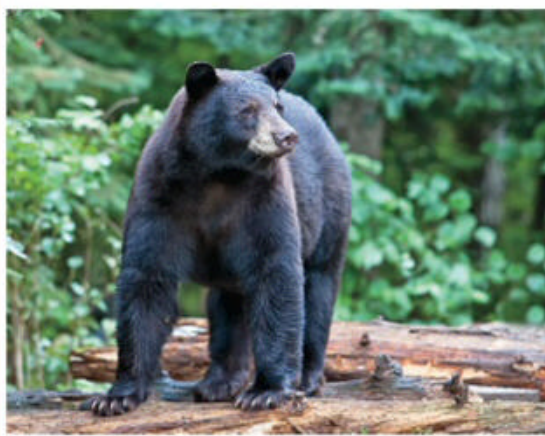
## FINGER LAKES GREENHEADS

Once the frost kisses the vineyards and the summer homes are shut down for winter, New York's Finger Lakes Region becomes a waterfowl hunter's paradise. Thanks in part to the forethought of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which established the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in 1938, there's still plenty of public land to chase decoy-ready mallards each October on the north end of Cayuga Lake. There are some reputable guides for hire in the region, too, who can help fill your mornings with greenheads, Canada geese and other waterfowl species.



## KEYSTONE BRUINS

Pennsylvania has a well-earned reputation as a whitetail state. Hunters killed more than 435,000 deer here last season, and nearly 25 percent of Pennsylvania deer hunters successfully bagged a buck. Beyond deer, however, there's some tremendous black bear hunting. The Pennsylvania Game Commission sells approximately 170,000 bear tags annually with somewhere in the neighborhood of 3,500 of those tags getting filled each year. Yes, most bears are taken during the November season, but archery season, which includes crossbows, kicks into high gear in October. Also this month: A special statewide bear season held October 21 to 23 for junior and senior license holders, disabled hunters and those serving in the armed services. The north-central part of the state is the hot spot.



## SMALLIES UP TOP

Virginia is for smallmouth lovers. Okay, that doesn't quite fit on a bumper sticker, but there is great topwater smallmouth bass fishing to be had this month in the Old Dominion. Consider floating the Upper Potomac River as well as the main stem of the mighty Shenandoah—or North Fork and South Fork in the northern part of the state. The North Fork of the Holston River and the Clinch River provide excellent bronzeback opportunities in southwestern Virginia.



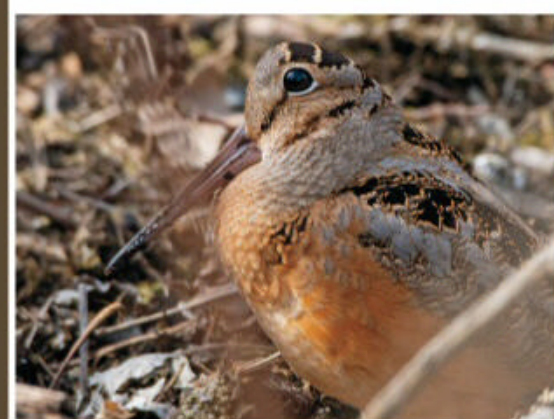
## SWINGING FOR SALMON

October salmon fishing in Lake Erie and Lake Ontario is well documented. For something a bit different, consider swinging streamers in Vermont, New York or Maine this month for landlocked Atlantic salmon. The Winooski River near Burlington, Vt., offers a unique urban opportunity. The Clyde River in Newport, Vt., is classic rural New England, while Grand Lake Stream in eastern Maine can provide the big woods feel. And don't overlook the Boquet and Saranac Rivers on the New York side of Lake Champlain. Both are excellent landlocked streams.



## WOODCOCK ARRIVAL

Every fall, and unseen by most of us, the airspace above our region fills with reclusive little gamebirds winging their way to warmer climes. Woodcock don't garner as much attention as other migrating birds—unless, of course, you're an upland bird hunter. In October, outstanding hunting on public land takes place all over northern New England. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages several national wildlife refuges in the region specifically for woodcock and allows hunting for them with some restrictions. The Silvio O. Conte Refuge - Nulhegan Basin Division in northeastern Vermont and parts of the Moosehorn Refuge in Down East Maine are two of the best spots.







# GROUND RULES

THESE TIPS WILL TAKE YOUR  
VENISON GRINDING GAME  
TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

By Bruce Ingram

**A**s a confirmed wild-game eater, I try to kill 10 deer per season to supply my wife and I with red meat for the year. We especially enjoy ground venison for the variety of entrees in which it can be used. Elaine also often grinds the meat from spring and fall turkeys. With countless hours of wild-game grinding experience under our belts, we've developed an efficient routine and a few pointers that'll make your grinding experience more enjoyable.

## TOOL TIME

The process starts with choosing the best grinder for the job. When we first started processing our own deer, we purchased a mixer and a meat grinder attachment. Had we wished to only prepare meatloaf, for example, the standard mixer would have worked well. But processing a deer might involve grinding 15 pounds

of meat. Within those chunks of meat are layers of silver skin and other connective tissue that the sharpest knives can't always deal with. The silver skin can be striated within cubes of meat to the point that removing it would waste a lot of meat. Eventually, we determined that we needed a stronger motor and a bigger blade.

Our meat grinder can take care of 3 to 5 pounds of meat per minute. This is considerably faster than what the mixer accomplished. In addition, the grinder chews up the silver skin more easily; previously we would often have to stop the mixer numerous times to disassemble the grinder attachment and clean the blade of silver skin. The process of grinding, cleaning, more grinding and more cleaning would often take 30 minutes. With a standalone meat grinder, we can complete the process in 10 minutes or so.

## TIME SAVERS

The first few times we ground meat we would tear the freezer paper from the box each time it was needed. The tears were often jagged and irregular, and the paper box became smudged with meat bits. Other times, the roll would spin and we would inadvertently tear off a piece that was either too big for one package or too small for two.

We soon learned to precut sheets about 14 inches wide. We stack the sheets ahead of time and weigh them down with canned goods in order to flatten them prior to use. We also purchased a weighted tape dispenser with a rubberized bottom that makes it easy to quickly grab a piece of tape with one hand while holding a package closed with the other.

We also recommend coming up with a labeling system so the meat you grab from the freezer each time you make a

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meal with ground venison contains meat from deer killed earlier in the season. Using a permanent marker, note “Deer 1-2021-Burger” or similar on the paper. We keep meat from deer 1, 2 and 3 on one shelf, deer 4, 5 and 6 on another and so on. This system does a good job of preventing freezer burn from developing on meat stored too long.

### FAT VS. NO FAT

We don’t add fat for “flavor.” One of the virtues of eating wild game is that it is higher in vitamins and minerals and lower in calories than domestic red meat. Why change that by adding fat? Besides, we cherish the concept of consuming wild, lean, organic deer and turkey that we killed, processed and cooked ourselves. It tastes sublime, too. In our opinion, adding fat gives burgers a greasy, unappealing flavor.

But that’s just our opinion. Many other hunters would argue that adding fat is essential for a juicier entrée. Some prefer a ratio of 90 percent burger to 10 percent fat. Others might go as far as two-thirds meat and one-third fat. Perhaps the best mix for you is somewhere in between.

### PAPER OR PLASTIC?

As a cancer survivor, Elaine worries about plastic coming into contact with the meat she consumes, especially when heat is involved, as is the case with a vacuum sealer. Granted, the likelihood of chemicals leaching into the meat is unlikely, but we prefer to not take that chance. Besides, with our packaging and labeling system outlined above, paper works just fine for us.

### BEST BLADES

To prepare meat for grinding, the right kind of knife is essential. Over the years we’ve tried a number of different blade styles and have decided boning knives work best for us. Their thin, flexible blades are excellent for removing silver skin from meat. One good technique is to lay the meat with the silver skin down and cut through the meat until you reach silver skin. Then, slide the knife between the meat and the silver skin very slowly so that the two parts separate completely, leaving a clean piece of meat and a thin strip of silver skin to discard.

Using sharp knives makes the entire butchering process much easier, so don’t hesitate to stop and sharpen your blades whenever you feel like you’re fighting with the meat.

### THE CUTS

When processing a whitetail, we cut out the bottom and top loins and several rump roasts and package those separately. The rest of the meat from the hind legs, the entire front legs, the neck and meat left over from anywhere else are all candidates for the grinder. We place the front and hind quarters in clean garbage bags, then put them on ice in coolers for about 24 hours. As the meat chills, it hardens and becomes easier to handle later when we separate

meat from bone. After the meat has properly cooled, we start on the hind quarters because they are large and have less extraneous bits. Getting them out of the way first gives us a feeling of accomplishment.

Next, we work our way down the front legs, cutting off usable chunks. By this stage we have also set up workstations on the counter with our cutting boards, two large bowls for usable chunks of meat, a bowl for scrap, plus knives and towels. After all the usable meat has been placed into bowls, we cut it into chunks about one to two inches in size—small enough to slip into the opening of the meat grinder. All that’s left then is the grinding, packaging and the celebrating of many wonderful entrees. **Go!**

## GET YOUR GRIND ON

*Two new units make quick work of ground meat.*

If you’re in the market for a new grinder or looking to graduate from a mixer attachment to a dedicated grinding unit, there are a couple new brands that have brought some excellent, industrial-strength equipment to market in the past couple of years.

The first is Chard, whose #12 Heavy Duty Grinder (\$179.99; [chardproducts.com](http://chardproducts.com)) will process about 6 pounds of meat per minute. Fine, medium and coarse grinding plates made of sintered steel are included, as is a stuffing plate and two stuffing tubes for sausage. Additionally, Chard offers .75-horsepower and 400-watt models.

The other brand is the aggressively named MEAT!, which offers a 1.5-horsepower model (\$599.99; [meatyourmaker.com](http://meatyourmaker.com)) capable of chewing up and spitting out between 14 and 18 pounds of meat per minute. It comes with coarse and fine grinding plates, as well as a stuffing plate with three stuffing tubes. All plates are stainless steel. If you’ve got lots of grinding in your future, and price is not a factor, this is the machine for you. In addition to the 1.5-horsepower model, MEAT! has more budget-friendly .5-horsepower and 500-watt grinders in its lineup. —John Taranto



The MEAT! 1.5-horsepower grinder can process between 14 and 18 pounds of meat per minute.



# LAKERS FOR ALL

LAKE TROUT RETURN FROM THE DEPTHS OF LAKE ERIE IN FALL, PRESENTING A CHANGE-OF-PAGE NEARSHORE OPPORTUNITY FOR ANGLERS.

By Dr. Jason A. Halfen



In fall, big lake trout return to the shallows of eastern Lake Erie to spawn, providing a unique and accessible late-season opportunity.



**F**all is a time of change for outdoor enthusiasts across the country. Boats are put to bed, waders are hung to dry, rifles are sighted in and gun dogs focus their gaze upon the sky. As crisp winds spill out of Canada and the last leaves tumble from the trees, an annual opportunity beckons along the shores of the Great Lakes—especially eastern Lake Erie. During a few short weeks in November, schools of aggressive lake trout gather in staggering numbers to participate in their annual spawning ritual, concentrating in relatively shallow water and creating an exceptional opportunity to tangle with gorgeous, double-digit-class fish on light tackle.

Jason Plant, an avid angler based near Columbus, Ohio, is no stranger to cracking the code of Great Lakes giants. Plant spent 10 years fishing the Lake Erie Walleye Trail, netting Team of the Year honors in 2015. Now, in addition to chasing walleyes, Plant makes time to tackle big bronzebacks in Sturgeon Bay, muskies in Lake St. Clair and lakers on the east end of Lake Erie.

“Lake trout are a fish of mystery and mystique,” says Plant. “In the past few years, I’ve become absolutely infatuated with them. Obviously, they are big, and that muscular tail makes them incredibly powerful. During late fall, lakers are extremely aggressive, and we’ve developed a presentation pattern that matches their amped-up attitude. What’s best about this bite is how accessible it can be. We’re typically less than a mile from shore, in relatively shallow water, fishing with tackle you would use for bass or walleyes. It’s an absolute hoot, and anyone can do it.”

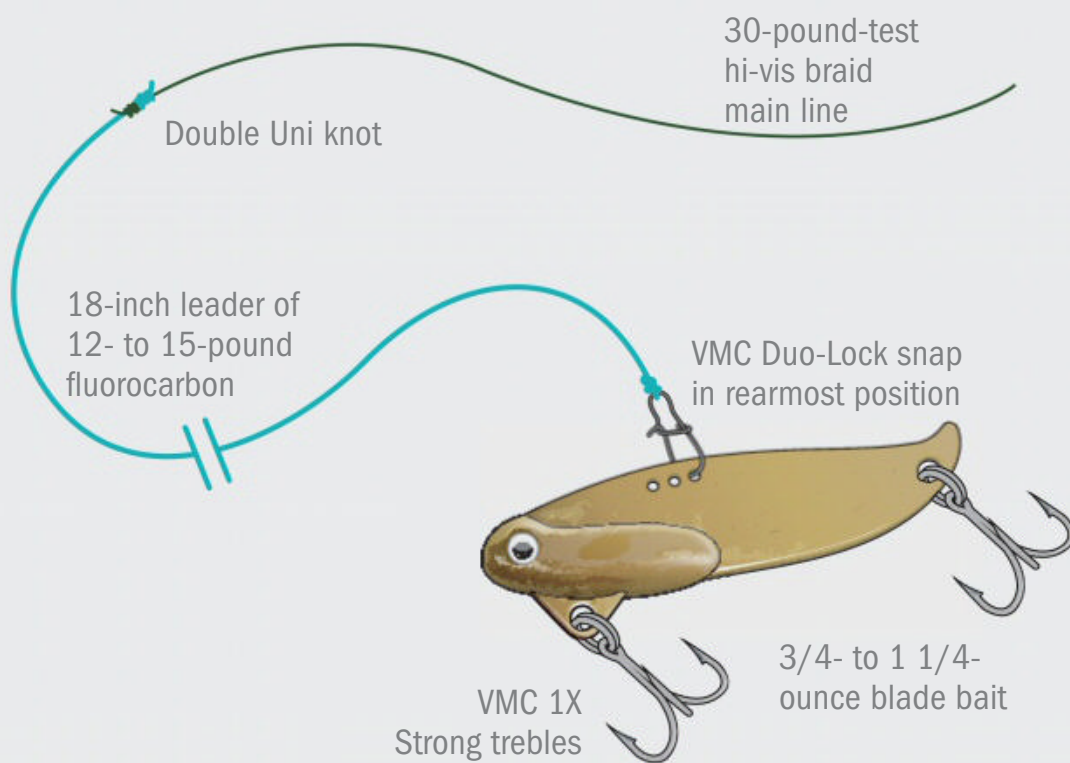
## THE SPAWN IS ON

Plant’s lake trout alarm begins ringing in mid-November and lasts until harbor and near-shore ice makes launching the boat and navigating to the fish difficult. Surface water temperatures in the mid-to-high 40s are a key metric. In any given year, the window of opportunity may be small—perhaps just a few weeks—and is highly dependent on the weather. Calm seas or a south wind are optimum; a stiff west or north wind means you can spend the day organizing the garage or sorting your tackle. Lake trout gather in impressive numbers along Erie’s south shore for one reason—to spawn.

“This isn’t a feeding run,” says Plant, “but that doesn’t mean the trout won’t bite. In fact, it’s quite the contrary. These trout are so fired up that they will attack lures with extreme aggression—not necessarily to feed, but to kill.”

Key areas to scour for Lake Erie lakers in fall are small high spots and

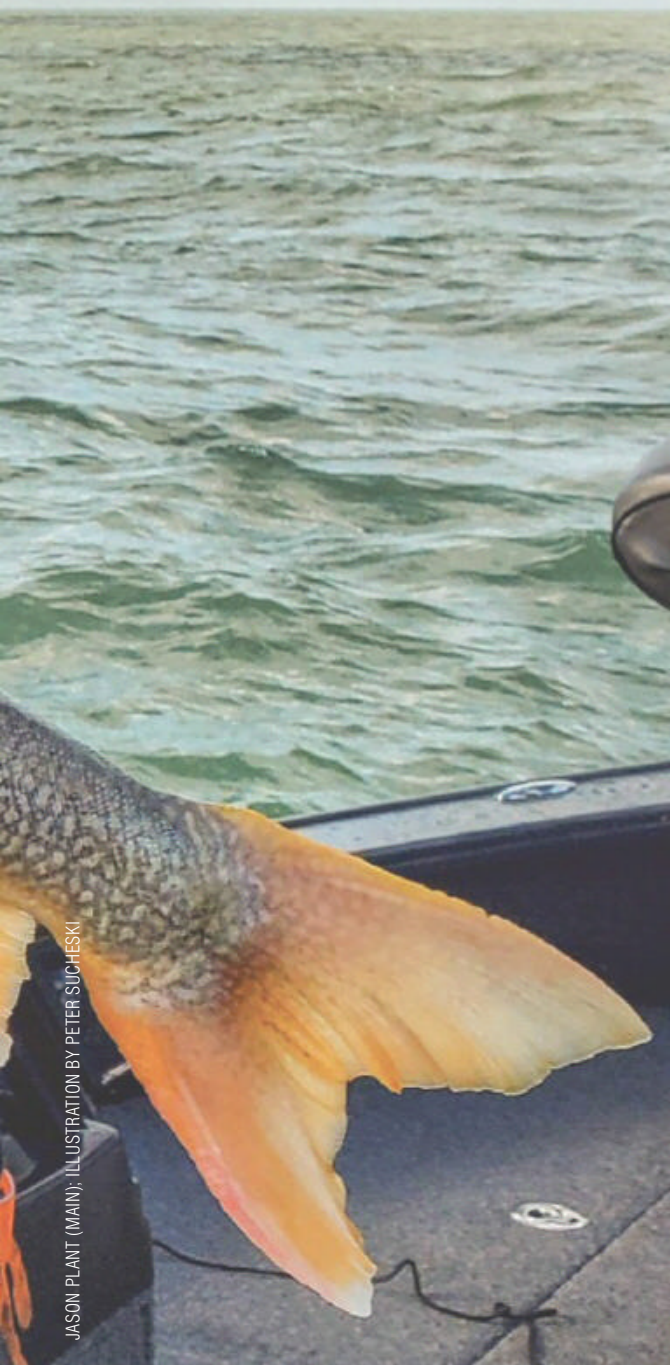
## JASON PLANT’S LAKE TROUT SETUP



## RIG IT RIGHT

*A proven method for tying on a blade bait*

The basic blade-bait rig consists of high-visibility, 30-pound-test braided line joined to an 18-inch leader of 12 to 15 pound-test fluorocarbon. Link the main line to the leader using an Double Uni or Alberto knot. Add a strong cross-lock snap and attach the blade bait by passing the snap through the hole closest to the bait’s tail. This snap placement allows the blade to aggressively dive nose-first to the bottom, triggering vicious strikes from trout.



JASON PLANT (MAIN); ILLUSTRATION BY PETER SUCHESKI



offshore reefs in 18 to 22 feet of water. Any type of rocks on the bottom can be good, but shale in particular will concentrate fall lake trout in this part of Erie. You'll see some of these areas on high-precision digital mapping, but some of the most waypoint-worthy reefs aren't any bigger than the size of your living room, so they're not on the map chip.

"We use the AutoChart Live feature that's built in to our Humminbird units to map smaller reefs in precise one-foot contours," says Plant. "If you're looking for a place to begin, we generally start finding fish in the Ashtabula, Ohio, area and work our way east through the waters off Pennsylvania and into New York."

Anglers will find an abundance of near-shore rock on the eastern end of Erie, and there are likely dozens of lake trout-packed reefs within a quick boat ride of most major harbors along the south shore.

"When we pull up to a reef, we're not looking for forage since these fish aren't here to chase baitfish. Instead, we're looking for rocks and trout," says Plant.

Big fish like lake trout are easy to identify with Humminbird MEGA Side Imaging, providing a large, bright-white sonar return and a corresponding dark sonar shadow. The resolution and clarity of MEGA Side Imaging even lets anglers see the anatomical features of individual trout, like heads, tails and fins. The ability to easily identify the species of fish swimming around the boat before you actually hook one is a big confidence booster.

"Seeing a handful of those big, bright Side Imaging returns is good," says Plant, "but seeing them by the dozens is even better. Having all of those fish schooled up tight in a confined area really makes them snap."

Once a trout-infested reef is located, Plant recommends locking the boat in place with a GPS anchor.

"We primarily target these fish with vertical presentations, and the presence of the boat right above them doesn't seem to affect the trout at all. During one of our last trips last year, we were [anchored] right on top of a school of lakers and caught 30 giants in an hour. We'd hook up, land a fish, toss it back and then hook right up again. Fishing like that is not the exception; when the conditions are right, it can be the rule."

#### FLASH A BLADE

A variety of artificial lures will trigger fall lakers, but the common thread among them is they work best when fished aggressively, provoking reaction strikes from the trout below. Anglers can snap-jig with hair jigs, jigs dressed with soft plastics or even the classic Rapala Jigging Rap, but Plant's favorite way to fish is with a blade bait. The flash and vibration of a blade as it rips off the bottom then



Heavy tackle isn't required for spawning lakers. Medium- to medium-heavy spinning and bait-casting rigs will do the trick.

rumbles its way back down drives lake trout nuts. Look for a heavy blade that falls quickly—something in the 1/2- to 1-ounce range works well. Plant's

## TACKLE TALK

*Rod, reel and line considerations*

An extraordinary spinning combo for chasing Lake Erie lakers starts with a **G. Loomis IMX-Pro 853S JWR**—a 7-foot-1-inch rod with medium power and extra-fast action. This strong and extremely sensitive rod provides a constant stream of information to the angler regarding bait action and bottom composition and is built to handle the toughest trout.

Pair the rod with a **2500-series Shimano Stradic FL (ST2500HGFL)**, an incredibly strong spinning reel featuring an ultra-smooth, run-stopping drag. Spool up with 30-pound-test **PowerPro Maxcuatro** in the hi-vis yellow color pattern, which makes it much easier to visually monitor the line and detect bites. PowerPro Maxcuatro is 25 percent thinner than standard PowerPro lines of comparable strength, so you can downsize your tackle as you maximize your fishing performance.



SHIMANO  
STRADIC FL

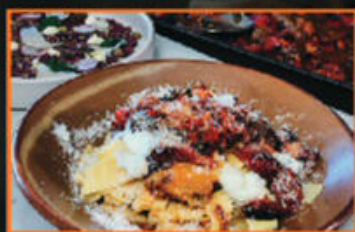
JASON PLANT



A man with a beard and a baseball cap, wearing a tactical vest, stands in a forest. He is holding two antelope heads with large antlers over his shoulders. The background is a blurred forest scene.

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favorite colors are silver chrome and gold chrome to put out extreme amounts of flash as the blade works up and down. He swaps out thin-wire stock trebles with something a little more stout and uses a strong VMC Duo-Lock snap to keep the blade tethered to his line.

Lake trout anglers can present a blade bait with either spinning or baitcasting tackle. Plant favors a spinning rod, and recommends a 6-foot, 6-inch to 7-foot rod with medium or medium-heavy power and fast action. Premium graphite construction will telegraph the blade's rhythmic rise and fall and alert you to the presence of vegetation, zebra mussels or other debris on the lure.

Rig the rod with a 2500-series spinning reel with a high-quality drag. Plant spools up with 20- to 30-pound-test braided line and adds a short leader of 12- to 15-pound-test fluorocarbon. The leader provides a measure of abrasion resistance when fishing around the rocks and also helps to keep the blade from fouling with the main line since fluorocarbon is stiffer than braid.

## NET RESULTS

"One of the other things we've learned over the years is to bring multiple landing nets because doubles and triples happen," says Plant.

It's important to use a net with a rubber- or latex-coated bag to make it easier to release the fish unharmed and to be able to quickly retrieve lures from the net without them getting hopelessly tangled. Plant uses RS Nets, the same ones he uses when landing other Great Lakes giants.

Go prepared for the weather by dressing in layers, with a water- and wind-proof outer layer. And by all means wear your lifejacket. Hypothermia sets in quickly with water temperatures in the 40s.

"One of my favorite things about this bite is that you can easily do it with friends," says Plant. "Honestly, once you find fish, catching them isn't all that difficult and there are no better memories than seeing a couple of your buddies getting worked over by giant lake trout up in the bow of your boat." 

## HEAVY METAL

*Big blade baits rule the day.*

Plant's top lake trout lure is a **1-ounce blade bait from SteelShad**. These blades have a longer profile than most traditional metal lures, presenting a larger target for aggressive lakers. Another excellent, locally made option is the **Vibra-Max Blade Bait from Venom lures**. Plant recommends the largest, 1 1/4-ounce size for this blade. Silver and gold chrome colors are excellent choices.

Plant also snap-jigs with 4-inch fluke or paddletail-style soft plastics rigged on 3/8-ounce jigs equipped with a wire plastic keeper. Snap jigging with soft plastics is a good search tool to locate pods of fish once an active bite begins to fade.



STEELSHAD BLADE BAIT

Jason Plant employs side-imaging sonar to locate big, spawning lake trout this time of year.



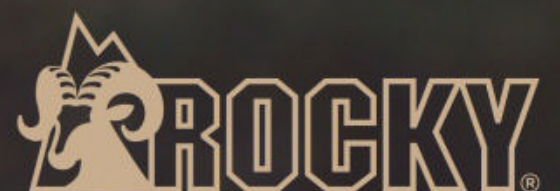




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# DUCKS

## AFTER DAY ONE

WHERE TO FIND BIRDS, AND HOW TO HUNT THEM, FOLLOWING THE CHAOS OF OPENING DAY.

By M.D. Johnson





To get into ducks after opening day, sometimes you have hunt the places most other hunters aren't willing to access.

**I**f you've spent any time at all chasing ducks, you've experienced it firsthand. More ducks than there are stars in the sky, as my father used to say, on opening day. Then...nothing. Maybe there's a wood duck here or there on day two, but the bulk of what was seen on the opener has seemed to disappear. At 10 years old, I didn't understand it.

"They're still there," my old man would tell me, his hand on my shoulder. "We just need to look a little harder for them."

Now, almost 50 years later, I have a better idea of what happens after the frenzied activity of opening day, and how to hang more birds on the strap during the days and weeks that follow.

## 1

### SCOUT SMALL

Expansive public marshes can provide excellent hunting for the opener; however, these same waters are often heavily pressured. As such, they see a sharp drop in bird activity during legal shooting hours following the chaos of day one.

If the public marsh is the only hunting grounds you have access to, start looking at previously unexplored possibilities within its boundaries. Are there any new, perhaps recently acquired acres on the area? Any spots that haven't yet been well publicized? A chat with the WMA manager might be insightful. And while you have his or her ear, ask about beaver activity. Have the critters dammed a creek, which in turn backed up water into a small stand of cottonwoods? It doesn't take long for ducks, especially hard-hunted birds, to find such out-of-the-way waters, but these spots often go unnoticed by hunters at least for a short time.

Off the area, I continue this philosophy of scouting small, a process made easier today thanks to mapping apps and Google Earth. Whether on a device or paper topographic map or while scouting in your vehicle, look for little,

oft-unnoticed places where birds feel safe, like farm ponds, backwaters or something as seemingly insignificant as a wide spot in a meandering creek.

## 2

### SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Like many waterfowlers, I always have a mallard call on my lanyard. Or two. But during the days following the opener, after ducks have been exposed to a cacophony of screaming highballs, long-winded comeback calls and machine-gun-fire feeding chuckles, something a little different might be in order. If I'm tired of hearing it, I assume the birds that made it past the opening three days are too. Fortunately, there are plenty of sounds you can make that not only draw attention to your rig but can lend an element of realism to your spread.

"Leave the mallard call in your pocket because everyone's pounding away on those," says world champion caller, Sean Mann, of Maryland. "Have it with you, because you might need it, but it's all about the change-up after opening day."

Alternatives to traditional mallard calls include gadwall calls, pintail and widgeon whistles, teal and wood duck sounds, even the eerie *dwweeeek* of a drake mallard.



While everyone else continues to wail on their mallard calls, change things up with gadwall calls and pintail and widgeon whistles.





When a spot proves to be a bust and there are still plenty of shooting hours left in the day, packing light enables you to relocate easily and get back in the game.

**3**

### SET SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Look around any popular public marsh during opening week, and chances are good you're going to see mirror-image spreads scattered across the WMA; two-to four-dozen mallard decoys and one or two spinning-wing decoys. Do they work? Sometimes, but the fact is that repetition doesn't look real, and it doesn't take long for the ducks to figure it out.

"Pay attention to other hunters," says John Walls, a Delaware-based duck calling champ. "We like to do the exact opposite of what others are doing. We keep it simple. Use a dozen decoys at most and make (the spread) look as relaxed and natural as possible. And use a jerk cord."

I'm a huge fan of multi-species spreads, especially on public waters. A couple pairs of mallards will be in the mix; however, the bulk of the rig will consist of gadwalls, widgeons and northern shovelers. A pintail or two, along with a pair of drake buffleheads, add long-distance visibility, while an off-set trio of black ducks bumps up the realism. Want to really set yourself apart from the masses? Set two dozen coot decoys with a jerk cord in the center, along with a pair of mallards off to one side.

**4**

### SKIP THE SPINNER

Spinning-wing decoys over water aren't as effective as they were 20 years ago, partly due to the fact everyone has one. Or two. Or six. As tough as it might be, consider leaving the SWD under the seat, and instead operate a jerk rig or two to create on-the-water motion in the spread. If you can't bear the thought of forgoing the electronics, set a spinner 75 yards downwind of the spread and partially obscured by brush, cattails or some other natural screen as a subtle enticement.

**5**

### STAY MOBILE

One of the biggest mistakes a hunter can make after opening day is to be reluctant to change locations on days when the ducks don't show up. To stay mobile, I pack light: a smaller, less gear-intensive blind bag with just the essentials; a dozen quick-set, Texas-rigged decoys and a two-block compact jerk cord; a simple stake-style blind or ghillie jacket. Equipped as such, I can pick up, move and re-rig in short order, whether the relocation is 500 yards or 5 miles from my initial spot.

Rather than toss out several dozen decoys and multiple spinners, go small with a dozen dekes and a jerk cord.

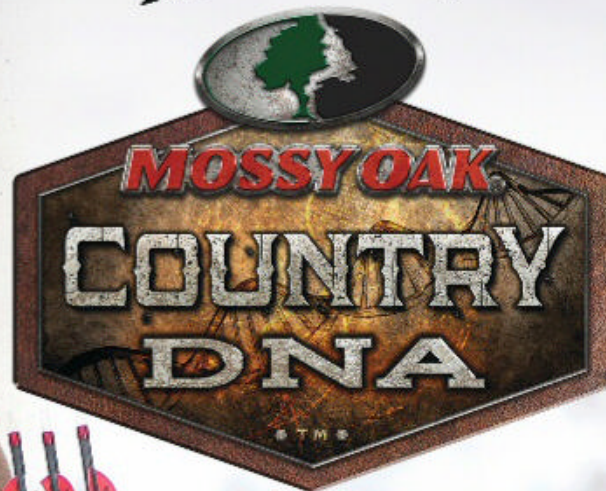




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6

### DON'T FORGET FIDO

In the frenzy that is opening week, it's easy to forget the vital role your retriever plays in your day-in, day-out success, and how important it is to keep her on top of her game, even if the gunning is short of stellar.

"Keep a bumper in your blind bag to reward your dog's patience with retrieves on a slow day when the birds seem shy," says Bob Owens of Lone Duck Outfitters and Kennels of Parish, N.Y. "Remember to make sure the dog is having fun and using the skills you've taught it."

These in-the-field reminders don't have to be intense; five minutes here and five minutes there will help keep both of you prepared.



If you can't keep your retriever busy by dropping ducks, be sure to have a bumper handy to give her some action on days the birds aren't flying.

7

### HUNT THE TIDES

While inland waterfowling on any given day starts at oh-dark-thirty, hunting ducks on the coast is a whole different ballgame. Coastal waterfowlers know all about hunting the tides, but the twice-daily ebb and flow can become even more of a factor following the opener.

"Hunt the tides, not the time," says Larry Seaman, a third-generation bayman and avid duck hunter from Long Island, N.Y. "Tides rule everything when it comes to hunting salt marshes. Sometimes, low tide will be in the middle of the day—not a time most hunters would think is best for ducks. But I've had some epic puddle duck hunts in the middle of the day when it's coincided with dead low tide."

8

### TAKE THE SECOND SHIFT

In keeping with this concept of time, don't be shy about hunting mid-morning or even midday following the opener, whether on the coast or not. Ducks, like humans, operate more or less on a routine, but their day-to-day schedule is radically changed with the advent of hunting season. Birds change their habits and adapt to these intrusions by leaving the roost earlier, coming back later and adopting an altered internal clock.

This means a hunt from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. might make all the difference, assuming fewer hunters and increased bird movement. Or maybe 12 to 4 is the ticket. Just as the ducks broke their routine, you also should be flexible.

9

### CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

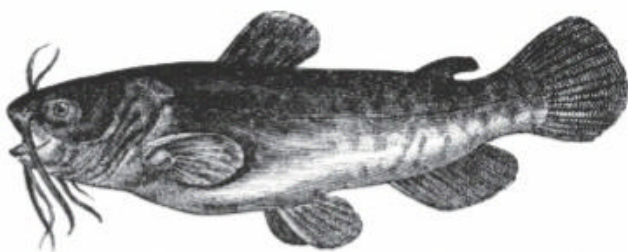
Let's be honest: Few waterfowling experiences can hold a candle to opening day, even when the competition from other hunters is stiff. But this fast-paced day of days is a major contributing factor to the challenges and frustrations that follow day one. So, perhaps it's wise to step back, re-evaluate and, at least momentarily, switch your focus just a bit.

"After opening day, adjust your expectations, change up your goals and limit the size of your hunting party," says Captain Mike Bard, a Jordan, N.Y.-based outfitter. "Instead of going out with a group of four or five, go with one or two. That way, each of you will hopefully have a greater number of individual opportunities."

Think of it this way: You're only a week in, and there's a lot of season to come—traditionally the best part of it. These next couple of weeks might be the perfect time to work with that young dog or get a new hunter into the field and train him or her in the basics of concealment, decoy spreads, calling, scouting and duck identification.

Consider it all preparation for when the north winds blow, the mercury drops and the real game begins. It'll be here before you know it. **G+D**

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Cams that were hung near food sources in September should be moved in October to places where you can pattern bucks' movements in the weeks leading up to the rut.





# PATTERN THEORY

**AS BACHELOR GROUPS BREAK UP AND THE RUT NEARS, NOW'S THE TIME TO DIAL IN THE HABITS AND MOVEMENTS OF WHITETAIL BUCKS.**

By Dustin Prievo

**S**eptember has always been my favorite month to inventory deer on both the public and private lands that I hunt. The bucks are still in their late-summer patterns, they haven't felt the pressure from human intrusion and they're still pretty focused

on socializing and food. Through the use of trail cameras, I can get a pretty good idea of what deer are in the area. The best part is their movements are usually consistent from day to day. But all that changes almost overnight when the calendar turns to October.



---

As the acorns begin to fall and testosterone levels start to rise, deer begin to change their habits. What was once a predictable, bed-to-food-to-bed daily pattern shifts to what amounts to a vanishing act. To be successful in October, you need to first understand what it is deer are doing during this time. Then you need to follow up by locating and patterning these bucks where you are hunting.

I've found the best way to find and pattern October bucks is by moving my trail cameras. While September is good for cams over bait (where legal), food plots and low-impact areas, October brings on a new strategy. At this time of the year, by strategically relocating my trail cameras, I not only capture some of the best images of the bucks in my area, I put myself in position to successfully harvest a mature buck year after year.

### SCRAPES AND MOCK SCRAPES

By far my favorite place to move my trail cameras to in October is over scrapes and mock scrapes. Although hunting over a scrape may not be the best option, as most scrape activity occurs at night, placing your trail cameras near them can really help you get a sense of what bucks are in your area.

Scraping activity increases in October, and while scrapes are visited by all deer, bucks tend to interact with them the most. This offers a great opportunity to not only capture the bucks on your property but also provide insight to help in patterning them. If you are familiar with the bedding and feeding areas, trail cameras over scrapes can provide an idea as to how they use the land.

When setting up my scrape trail cameras, I do a few things. If I'm monitoring scrapes near a field edge, I'll first hang a cam near the lowest lying scrape in the field (we'll get into this more in the next section). Next, I'll look for scrapes that are near a major game trail where a buck may stop quickly, even if he doesn't plan on entering the field. If I'm not focusing on field scrapes, my goal is to find the largest, most popular scrape in the area and hang a cam there.

My settings for the trail cameras over scrapes are simple. I prefer a camera that has a black flash to minimize exposure, and will hang it about 20 feet away from the scrape at waist level to hopefully

Scrapes and mock scrapes are perhaps the best places to hang cameras in October, as these spots see regular buck activity now.



MATT HANSEN PHOTOGRAPHY



# ENTER WITH CAUTION

*Minimize your impact on the herd when moving cams.*

Human intrusion or a change from the norm is the most important thing to avoid when running trail cameras. If you often ride an ATV on your property, regularly operate a tractor or walk your dog every day, it may not be a big issue for you to take an ATV across a field to hunt a stand or hang a trail camera. But if you rarely step foot on your property during the off-season and all of a sudden start using an ATV for scouting or hunting purposes, you risk invading the deer's comfort zone and causing them to no longer feel safe. If deer on your property rarely see human activity, you need to use extra caution come hunting season.

Keep in mind that deer are prey 100 percent of the time. Once you think in that sense, you can understand how even one or two attempts to hunt them will force them to change their habits.

One thing you can control when hanging trail cameras is your scent. I'll often shower in scent-free soap; wear scent-free clothing, rubber boots and rubber gloves; and use scent-elimination spray. It's also good to go during or just after a rain, as this will help knock down your scent and minimize the sound you make. Wind, too, will mask noise, and since scent is carried more by the wind than thermals, you can plan your route accordingly.



Always practice scent control when hanging or checking cams, especially in areas that rarely see human activity.

JOHN PENNOVER (TOP); JOHN HAFNER (BOTTOM)



Hang cams 75 to 100 yards from bedding areas to minimize intrusion. Place them on the downwind side, as bucks often approach from that direction to scent-check for hot does.

capture a full-body image. I set it on three-burst mode with a 60-second delay. With these settings, I am able to capture multiple images of deer and get a good look at their body size and antler characteristics. I opt for a minute-long delay since does often visit scrapes more than bucks, and a shorter delay will quickly lead to a full SD card. My goal is to capture several images of a buck, try to determine where he is coming from and going to, and use this information to help me set up my evening or morning stands.

## LOW-LYING FIELD EDGES

I have often found when fields are close to bedding areas, deer will enter them in the evening at their lowest point. I believe this has a lot to do with thermals. As cool evening air pushes down on the warm air, scent is carried from higher spots across the field into these low-lying areas. These are great spots for treestands, but don't over-hunt them—getting in and out can be difficult, and you can do more harm than good sometimes. Instead, try to split the difference between these field entry points and known bedding areas and set up there. This will allow you to exit and enter without bumping deer off the field or out of their beds.

Here again, my trail camera settings are photo-only. But, instead of a 60-second delay or burst, I set my camera to capture with zero delay and only one photo at a time. I'll look for trailheads where deer may come in and out of the wood line and try to set up there. If I can't find one, I'll try to locate any type of bottleneck in the field that might force deer to move closer to my camera, or else I'll look for areas that show heavy browsing. These areas are often visited over and over by the same deer. Many people believe deer prefer the edges, and although there is some truth to that, many will not hesitate to feed in the middle of fields. Finding where they are entering and leaving in a low-lying area can help increase your chances at capturing images of the majority of the deer using a given field.

## BEDDING AREAS

I never used to focus on bedding areas. Growing up it was all about acorns and clover fields. And while acorns are a major food source of deer in October, trying to get a buck to walk in front of your camera on a large oak flat can be difficult. It's often even harder to hunt a deer on an oak flat during daylight hours. Eventually I grew tired of one



frustrating hunt after another and started hunting and hanging my trail cameras closer to the bedding areas.

The bedding areas are sanctuaries on my private properties. If I know where they are on public land, I also try to avoid them there unless I'm crashing in for a hunt and know I won't be returning that season. Deer feel safe in bedding areas, and the closer you get the more risk is involved when hunting them. Additionally, continually checking trail cameras near a bedding area will send up a red flag and push deer to another location. The goal is to use these locations to gather information to pattern your deer and avoid entering and exiting as much as possible (**see sidebar, page TK**).

I'll never move my trail cameras to bedding locations unless it's raining, which helps mask my scent and sound. If I can, I like to get within 75 to 100 yards of a known bedding area, preferably on the predominate downwind side, as I've found many bucks will skirt the downwind side of a bed to scent-check for hot does as the rut comes in. I'll keep my trail cameras low and over areas that have heavy deer sign, like droppings, signs of heavy browsing or tracks.

Deer use bedding areas as safe havens, so oftentimes they will have multiple means to access and exit such an area. A cellular cam with an auxiliary battery pack or solar charger is a good idea for minimizing human intrusion. Once you begin to collect images, you can compare the deer you capture to ones on other cameras and begin to pattern them.

My settings for bedding are trail cameras are the same as those of my field edge cams: No delay or burst, just the highest quality image possible. My bed cams also typically have a black flash in order to be as discreet as possible. I'll often carry a spare trail camera with me that's ready to go in case I ever have to enter a bedding area to recover a deer or for some other reason. While I'm there, I'll hang the camera inside the bedding area.

## GAME TRAILS

I like to have several cameras on game trails this time of year simply to get a sense of where deer are moving to and from. These cams are very important when it comes to patterning deer because I can compare images from them to those from cams in other locations.

When placing cameras on active game trails, use your highest-quality cams with the fastest trigger speeds to minimize motion blur.



Let's say there's a buck I have seen multiple times on a set of scrapes on the north end of a property. He's been there three out of seven nights around midnight. I also have him two out of those three nights using a particular game trail. Both game-trail images were taken prior to him using the scrape. My goal then would be to move more cameras farther from the scrape along the trail, to try to get daylight images of him. Once I begin to capture daytime or dusk images, that is when I make my move and set up to kill him.

My game trail cameras are set up a little differently. First, I want my cams with the fastest trigger speeds on these locations. Additionally, I'll use my better-quality trail cameras here because they

usually have less image blur, and I can get higher quality images if the deer is moving. I like to have my trail cameras almost perfectly perpendicular to the trail to minimize the chance of being spotted and to provide a full-body image to help with approximating the age of the deer. I'll set the cam on a two- or three-image burst mode with no delay and try to use the largest SD card possible, as oftentimes they fill up quickly.

Overall, my goal is to collect as much data as possible. Doing so helps me increase my knowledge of the deer herd or even specific deer and establish a hunt plan. With strategic trail cam placements, you'll put the odds in your favor for greater success this month. 



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SO, YOU WANT TO BE A

# GROUSE HUNTER

THE HEYDAY OF NORTHEAST RUFFED GROUSE HUNTING MAY BE BEHIND US, BUT **THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF BIRDS AROUND FOR THOSE JUST LOOKING TO GET INTO THE GAME.**

By Matt Crawford



JEFF MOORE IMAGES





Ruffed grouse gravitate to early successional habitat with ample flowering plants, browse, insects and soft mast to feed on.

**J**eep has long since departed and I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations has expired, so here goes.

It was 1976, and we were visiting my grandparents in northern rural Vermont one fine autumn day. My grandfather, nicknamed "Jeep" because of the post-World War II Jeep Willys he drove, decided to take me for a walk in the woods. We carried a single-shot .22 and we were accompanied by a grossly overweight beagle.

We weren't overly stealthy, but as we approached a stand of wild apple trees, Jeep stopped me, whistled the dog over and pointed out a ruffed grouse pecking away on the ground some 15 yards ahead. He pulled back the hammer of the .22, handed it to me and told me to try to shoot the grouse.

So I did. With a single shot. From a .22. Stone dead.

In the 40-some-odd years since that walk in the woods with Jeep, I've gone on to shoot a lot more grouse (though I've missed even more). I've traded in the rimfire for a classic American shotgun. My first grouse was the only one I've ever shot with the help of a beagle. These days it's a French Brittany, German shorthair or even Labs. I've chased ruffed grouse in Wisconsin and Maine, Quebec and New Brunswick and places in between. And while I still hunt in northern Vermont, grouse hunting has transformed dramatically in a generation.

If you've never been a serious grouse hunter, this story is for you. There's plenty of fun and natural history to find enjoyment in being the kind of upland bird hunter that occupies that space between using a .22 and a fat beagle and having a professionally trained pointer and a high-price shotgun.

While times have changed and grouse populations are on a heart-breaking decline, there's no better place to be a fledging bird hunter than in the northeastern U.S.



## GROUSE ARE WHERE YOU FIND THEM

Throughout North America, ruffed grouse are generally found along the 45th parallel, which is located halfway between the Equator and the North Pole. In the U.S., ruffed grouse occur in the greatest numbers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Along the fringes, states like West Virginia and Virginia have small, but huntable, populations, particularly in the mountainous regions.

Regardless of the state, the key to finding grouse is finding the right habitat, and that means finding what are known as “early successional forests.” In a nutshell, these are young forests where there is an abundance of flowering plants, browse, insects and soft mast.

Admittedly, finding early successional habitat is getting tougher throughout most of the ruffed grouse’s range. The loss of this type of habitat, which requires active logging, natural disturbance or management, is one reason why grouse numbers are in steep decline, along with other

critters like songbirds and butterflies.

With plenty of places in the region *not* holding any grouse to speak of, where do you begin to look? The commercially logged paper lands in Maine, northern New Hampshire and Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom are the honey holes here. The Tug Hill Plateau in northern New York is a solid bet, too. In Pennsylvania, where the ruffed grouse are the official state bird, the central part of the state in the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains are the hotspots. In West Virginia, the mountains of Randolph and Greenbrier counties still hold decent numbers of birds.

A general rule of thumb is that the woodlots where you find whitetails will quite often be where you also find ruffed grouse—except in New Jersey. While the Garden State has plenty of deer, it serves as a cautionary tale for the future of ruffed grouse in the region. In 2019, after decades of habitat loss and changes in farming practices, New Jersey stopped offering a ruffed grouse season for hunters. Let’s hope that isn’t a bellwether for other Northeastern states.

## A DOG’S LIFE

Hardcore grouse hunters have argued long and loud for decades about the best dog to use when hunting ruffed grouse. There are two factions, each ready to go to war with the other: pointer partisans and flusher fanatics.

Look at the paintings of David Maass to see how a pointer is supposed to work. It smells the bird, pins in a frozen state and the hunter approaches to shoot the bird as it flushes in a thicket of alders and apple trees. It doesn’t always work that way, but when it does it’s magical.

A flusher—typically a springer or cocker spaniel—hoovers around the woods, getting on the scent of the birds and flushing them toward the hunter. Flushers don’t always work perfectly either, but it, too, is pretty special when it all comes together.

Labs generally work as flushers (some will point, but that’s a whole other war being fought elsewhere). If you’ve got a half-trained Lab that may be your duck dog, it’s better than no dog at all.

And, despite what the purists say, you can hunt grouse without dogs. It’s a lot of work, and a good dog increases your success rate exponentially, but it can be done.

Putting up birds with a dog is far easier than without, though dogless hunters still can have success if they’re willing to put in the work.







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## GUNS AND SUCH

In the grouse-hunting game, it's easy to spend thousands of dollars on beautiful side-by-side shotguns. Traditional American classics like Parkers and A.H. Foxes harken back to an era of vest-wearing, pipe-smoking gentleman like Burton Spiller, whose written works (read *Drummer in the Woods* if you can find it) remain today as the legacy of the poet laureate of

grouse hunting in the 20th century. But any shotgun, in gauges 12, 16 or 20 will work. It's likely more grouse have been killed with the Remington 870 than all the European brands combined.

You'll need your gun's chokes to be as wide open as you can get. My go-to gun is a 20-gauge over-under with skeet 1 and improved cylinder tubes. A modified choke will suffice, barely. Grouse have glass jaws and you don't

need to center them to bring them down. Stack the odds in your favor by getting that pattern as wide open as possible.

While ammo supplies across the country have been abysmal for the past few years, grouse loads are easy to find at gun shops and big-box stores alike. No matter the gauge, shot sizes of 7 1/2, 8 and 9 will do the trick.



Grouse favor thorny, tangled habitat. Quality boots, pants, gloves and eye protection are suggested when venturing into the thick stuff.

## GEAR UP

If you're going to chase grouse more than once a year, do yourself a favor and buy a good pair of brush pants. Sure, heavy-duty Carhartts can work (as can jeans, in a pinch), but grouse, as we noted, often live in some of the nastiest, thickest parts of the woods. There will be briars. There will be brambles. Anything but brush pants (or chaps) will come out torn and shredded.

A pair of leather gloves is a must. You can always tell a hard-core grouse hunter by the number of scrapes and cuts on his hands come October. A good pair of shooting glasses is strongly recommended, mostly for your own

protection. A game vest is a good idea to carry shells and, hopefully, dead birds. A water bottle, too. You will likely work up a sweat.

And don't skimp on your footwear. Ruffed grouse hunting requires putting in some miles, so quality hiking boots or lightweight hunting boots are key. Good wool socks help, too. Don't go into a grouse cover with Nikes and gym socks.

Also, don't overlook the importance of wearing lots of hunter orange. Grouse will flush at the most inopportune times in the thickest cover, and you'll want to know where others are before you pull the trigger as much as you'll want them to know exactly where you are.

## HUNTING TRICKS AND TIPS

Here you are. You found a good piece of habitat, loaded with briars and brambles (also, some softwoods that provide roosting cover during inclement weather). You've got your trusty 20 gauge. Maybe you have a Labrador or a friend's bird dog at your side. You've got some brush pants and plenty of hunter orange. You're ready to hunt.

While ruffed grouse certainly live in some of the deepest, darkest parts of the forest, they also are attracted to gravel for the grit they need to aid digestion. That means you don't always need to get far into the woods to find them. As soon as you enter a grouse cover or venture off an old logging road, be ready.

You will burn boot leather (and, as an added bonus, calories), so be prepared to walk. A slow, steady walk is best, and don't worry much about making noise. Once you find lots of apples, aspens or alders be on the lookout. These are the foods grouse love. If a bird flushes and you either have no shot (likely) or miss it all together (more likely), don't be afraid to follow up where you think the bird might have flown. Grouse typically don't go more than 100 yards before landing again.

Most of all, enjoy yourself. We may be long past the "good old days" of grouse hunting in the northeastern United States, but that doesn't mean you can't have some great days in the woods right now. 





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# THE END

In autumn, anglers regularly hook up with blitzing striped bass in the shadow of iconic Montauk Point Light in eastern Long Island.

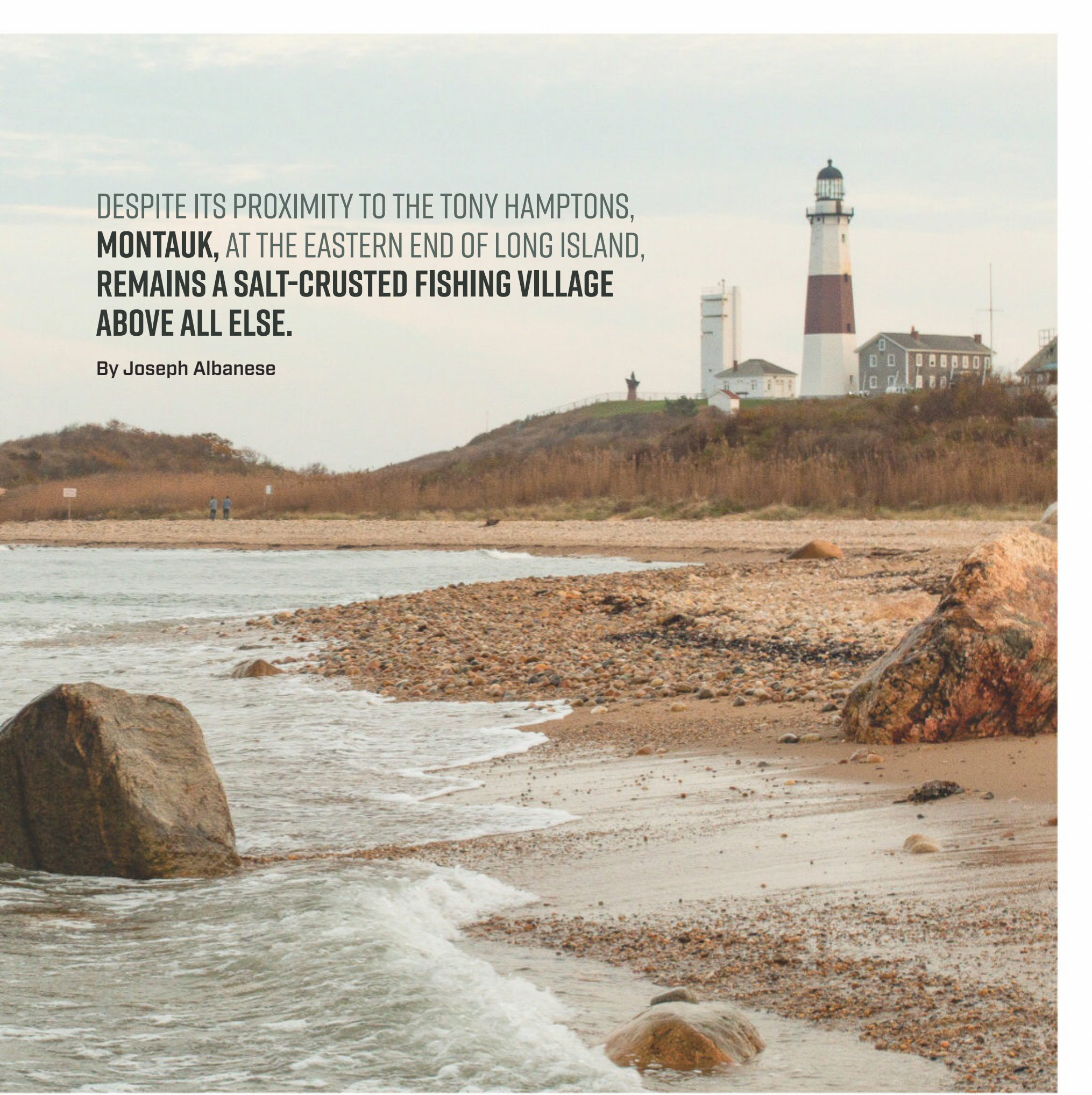
**I** finally had the timing down, launching my bucktail seaward and turning sideways just in time to avoid the full wrath of the crashing wave. Though my position atop the surf-pounded rock was precarious, the risk was worth the reward: Every fifth cast was intercepted by a hungry striped bass weighing a dozen pounds or so.

Montauk Point is just 120 miles from

New York City at “The End” of Long Island, but it is a world away. Despite the ritzy glamour of the nearby Hamptons, the town of Montauk remains a quaint fishing village. Dutch explorer Adriaen Block first came upon Montauk Point in 1614 and proclaimed it “Hoeck van de Visschers”—Point of the Fishers. This remains an apt description of the area, from where commercial fishing vessels head out daily.

On the offshore reefs and wrecks, anglers can target bottom fish such as black sea bass, porgies and blackfish, while bluefish prowl the beaches and inshore waters. Striped bass, however, are the undisputed kings of the wash in Montauk, and there’s no better time to target them than during the fall run, which kicks off toward the middle of September and can go as late as November.





## DESPITE ITS PROXIMITY TO THE TONY HAMPTONS, **MONTAUK**, AT THE EASTERN END OF LONG ISLAND, REMAINS A SALT-CRUSTED FISHING VILLAGE ABOVE ALL ELSE.

By Joseph Albanese

### ESSENTIAL GEAR

If you're going to Montauk to hit the surf, you better go prepared. It has been said that the meek shall inherit the Earth, but the brave will get the oceans, and there's perhaps no better evidence of this than the rocky interface where water meets land surrounding Montauk Point. The boulder fields are washed over by pounding surf when the wind picks up, making navigating the shoreline difficult

for even experienced surf fishers. But the ensuing calamity stuns baitfish and provides an easy meal for the striped bass and bluefish that prowl the rocks, making the exercise a worthwhile endeavor.

"On calmer days the wading isn't quite as treacherous, but you should always keep both eyes open for rogue waves that can send you tumbling," says veteran surf fishing guide Bill Wetzel (631-987-6919).

A dry top prevents your waders from

filling if you do take a wave overhead, and always wear a tight-fitting wader belt to keep water out in the event you get knocked over. Studded overshoes that bite into the rock, like Korkers Casttrax and Rocktrax, should be considered standard equipment when the surf is up. Wetzel suggests stout rods of around 11 feet with plenty of backbone that are capable of tossing lures weighing anywhere from 1 to 3 ounces.



Lure selection depends on the bait present, though bucktails tend to catch no matter what the bass are feeding on. Starting in September, bay anchovies, mullet and juvenile bluefish provide forage for stripers in the wash. Throw bucktails, bottle plugs, metal-lipped swimming plugs or darters—whichever best imitates the shape of the dominant bait. When October rolls around, sand eels and juvenile Atlantic menhaden, known locally as peanut bunker, move in tight to the beach. The thin profile of sand eels is best matched with diamond jigs or bucktails fished in conjunction with a “teaser,” which is basically a fly tied above the primary lure. The deep profile of peanuts are best simulated by swim shads or metal-lipped swim plugs. Signing up for Wetzels website ([surfratsball.com](http://surfratsball.com)) will give you access to decades of his logbooks and up-to-date info on what’s happening in the wash.

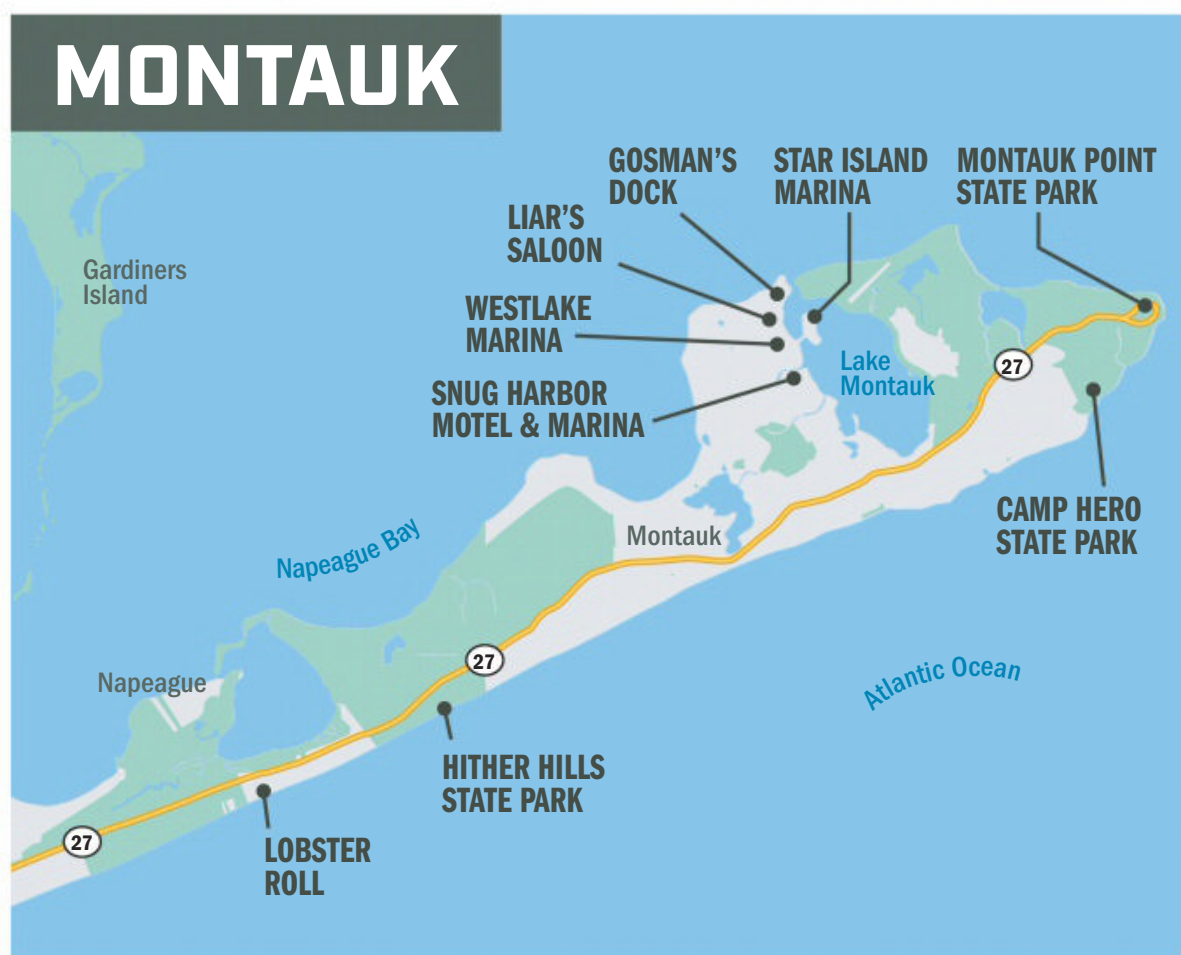
## ACCESS OPPORTUNITIES

Shore access is accomplished thanks largely to New York’s State Park system. Montauk Point State Park allows folks to cast plugs under one of the world’s most historic lighthouses. Camp Hero State Park provides access to the Point’s south side and lets casters wander around a defunct World War II military installation. Hither Hills gives anglers access to sand beaches farther west, both on the ocean and in the bay behind. But those that prefer to skip the baptism by waves have plenty of other options, as Montauk’s many harbors and marinas are home to numerous charter and head boats. Star Island Marina and Westlake Marina are two of the more popular options.

“Trolling is the most consistent way to catch striped bass, but bait and diamond jigs have their place,” says Capt. Hugh Chancey III of Chancey Charters (631-838-7229; [facebook.com/chancey.charters](https://facebook.com/chancey.charters)).

Prime time for him is the second half of September and lasts about a month. He says you can still catch stripers through November, but the biggest bass typically head out at the end of October.

And the captain knows a thing or two about big striped bass, having caught 33 stripers weighing more than 50 pounds around the point over the years. Trolling spoons and umbrella rigs have accounted



## IF YOU GO...

*Where to stay, eat and drink in Montauk*

The **Snug Harbor Motel and Marina** (631-668-2860; [montauksnugharbor.com](http://montauksnugharbor.com)) is one of the most affordable lodging options in Montauk. Located right across from beautiful Lake Montauk, this motel offers a variety of rooms sized to fit solo travelers or families. The attached marina has a launch ramp and transient dockage for those who bring their own boat.

**Gosman's Dock** (631-668-5330; [gosmans.com](http://gosmans.com)) offers fresh seafood in a variety of dining options. Choose from full-service on the rooftop, à la carte dockside or indulge in your favorite shellfish at the raw bar. However you decide to dine, the salt air will enhance your entrée.

Though it’s officially known as the **Lobster Roll** (631-267-3740; [lobsterroll.com](http://lobsterroll.com)), one of the area’s best eateries is known simply as “LUNCH,” thanks to the giant sign on the roof. This no-frills restaurant has some of the best lobster rolls you’ll ever eat, plus all your other seafood favorites.



Montauk has been referred to as “a quaint drinking village with a fishing problem.” Nothing typifies this characterization quite like the **Liar's Saloon** (631-668-2406; [offshoresportsmarina-liarssaloon.com](http://offshoresportsmarina-liarssaloon.com)). Tucked away in the back of a boatyard, this dive bar is frequented by crews fresh off the ocean, oftentimes still in their bibs.

JOSEPH ALBANESE (BOTTOM)





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The surf and boulder fields around Montauk Point can make striped fishing there a contact sport. Go prepared with quality equipment.

for many of those fish, but Chancey says to not discount light-tackle jigging as a big-fish producer.

“Last year one of my clients landed a 52-pound striped they hooked while diamond jigging,” he says. “When the conditions are right, it’s an exciting way to hook up.”

Though he has the stripers dialed in, they aren’t the only fish in Chancey’s repertoire. He loves bottom fishing, too, and the rips and wrecks around Montauk offer plenty of opportunities to score with a variety of species. Porgies, also

know as scup, provide fast action and coolers full of tasty fillets well into the cooler months. Black sea bass are among the most delicious fish that swim and the rocky waters around the Point hold plenty. When blackfish season kicks off in the middle of October, Chancey dedicates most of his attention to the scrappy bottom dwellers.

“Once blackfish opens, it’s game on,” he says. “We have a very good fishery here in Montauk, to the point that we’ve caught them by accident when jigging for striped bass. Quick access to deep-water

wrecks right outside the port mean we can be catching fish just a few minutes after leaving the dock, but we can also steam north and fish [Long Island] Sound, or go farther south and hit the deeper holes. We can put together a really nice mixed bag, sometimes including cod.”

Whatever the season, Montauk is a place of bounty. But throw on your waders or hop on a charter in the fall and you’ll encounter some of the best fishing the East Coast has to offer without having to endure the throngs of city dwellers who flock to the area during summer. **GoF**



A wide variety of lures and flies will yield bites from big bass during the fall run. Selection should be based on whatever the predominant forage is at the time.

DOUG STAMM (BOTTOM); JOSEPH ALBANESE (TOP)



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# FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX

HANDY AND HANDSOME, THIS 16-GAUGE OVER-UNDER IS A LIVELY, LIGHTWEIGHT OPTION FOR UPLAND GAME.

By Drew Warden

**L**auded by some, mocked by others, unused by most, the 16-gauge shotgun has clung to life despite numerous obstacles over the years. It was given the cold shoulder in competitive skeet shooting in the 1920s, not receiving its own category when rules were devised. Throughout the 20th century, the 12 and 20 gauges stole more and more of its share of the shotgun market due to technological advances, like the debut of 3- and 3 1/2-inch shells. And when the switch from lead to non-toxic shot for waterfowl occurred in the late '80s and early '90s, the 16 gauge, with its smaller 2 3/4-inch shells incapable of holding as much of the larger steel shot required, fell even further from grace. With each hit, the 16 gauge's position in the shotgun world became ever shakier, and as a result, manufacturers devoted fewer resources to it.

The 16 gauge has always been an upland hunter's delight, and Franchi's new Instinct SLX lives up to that reputation.



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Nevertheless, during its most respected days, many hunters—especially upland hunters—loved how the 16 carried and performed afield. Many still do, which is why it persists. The gauge patterns 1-ounce, 2 3/4-inch lead and bismuth loads very well, making it deadly on pretty much every upland gamebird one might have occasion to hunt. The often-discussed tendency of a 16 gauge to “carry like a 20 and hit like a 12” was what endeared it to hunters in the past, and this same rationale—and some degree of nostalgia—is why fans still love it today.

Despite this, few companies offer dedicated 16-gauge shotguns. As part of a recent resurgence in sub-gauge shotguns as a whole, though, a handful of manufacturers have bucked convention to add 16-gauge offerings to their lineups. One of these is the Italian gunmaker Franchi, which has debuted two 16-gauge over-unders in the past three years, the most recent being its new Instinct SLX.

The deluxe version of Franchi’s Instinct SL line, the SLX is a sweet shotgun decked out with features one would expect on a high-end over-under. The lightweight aluminum-alloy receiver has elegant floral engraving with gold inlays, the opening lever is cut out and engraved, and the trigger is gold plated. The gun also wears an AA-grade satin walnut Prince of Wales stock and a narrow Schnabel-style fore-end, both artfully checkered for grip and aesthetics. Barrels, meanwhile, are gloss blue.

There aren’t many manufacturers offering similar features on a shotgun priced around \$2,000. Even fewer furnish them in a 16-gauge model. The Instinct SLX stands out on those merits alone.

Still, while form matters—to some more than others—function remains foremost for the majority of hunters. If you want a 16 gauge that feels lighter than a 12 gauge yet packs a similar punch, it should be built on a dedicated 16-gauge frame. Historically, many manufacturers have introduced 16s that were little more than 16-gauge barrels placed atop 12-gauge frames. Hunters looking for a light field gun have, understandably, received these hybrids poorly, as they end up sacrificing power without shedding much weight. Instead of a gun that hits like a 12 and carries like a 20, they get one that hits like a 20 and carries like a 12—something no one wants.

Thankfully, this is not true of the Instinct SLX. The 16-gauge SLX is built on a true 16-gauge frame. Actually, every gun in the SLX line (which includes 12-, 20- and 28-gauge models) comes with a proportionate frame. The result with the 16 gauge is a gun light enough to be mistaken for a 20 gauge but powerful enough to handle any upland shot one might encounter. In fact, with its 5.8-pound weight, the 16-gauge model weighs about the same as, or less than, many prominent 20-gauge field guns.

In two days of hunting pheasant, chukar and Hungarian partridge at Pheasant Bonanza Hunt Club near Tekamah, Neb., I was able to experience the Instinct SLX’s lean form firsthand. While a couple full days of hunting with my 12-gauge semi-auto sometimes leave my arms a bit heavy, I experienced no such thing with the SLX. The gun was not only light, but the ergonomic design of the stock and fore-end made carrying it quite comfortable.

## FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** over-under shotgun  
**Gauge, Chambers:** 16, 2 3/4" (tested)  
**Capacity:** 2 rounds  
**Receiver:** aluminum alloy, engraved  
**Safety:** tang-mounted automatic with barrel selector  
**Barrels:** 28"; vent rib; gloss blue finish  
**Sights:** fiber-optic front bead  
**Stock:** AA-grade satin walnut; Prince Of Wales

**Length of Pull:** 14 1/4"  
**Drop at Heel:** 2"  
**Drop at Comb:** 1 1/2"  
**Overall Length:** 46 1/4"  
**Weight:** 5.8 lbs.  
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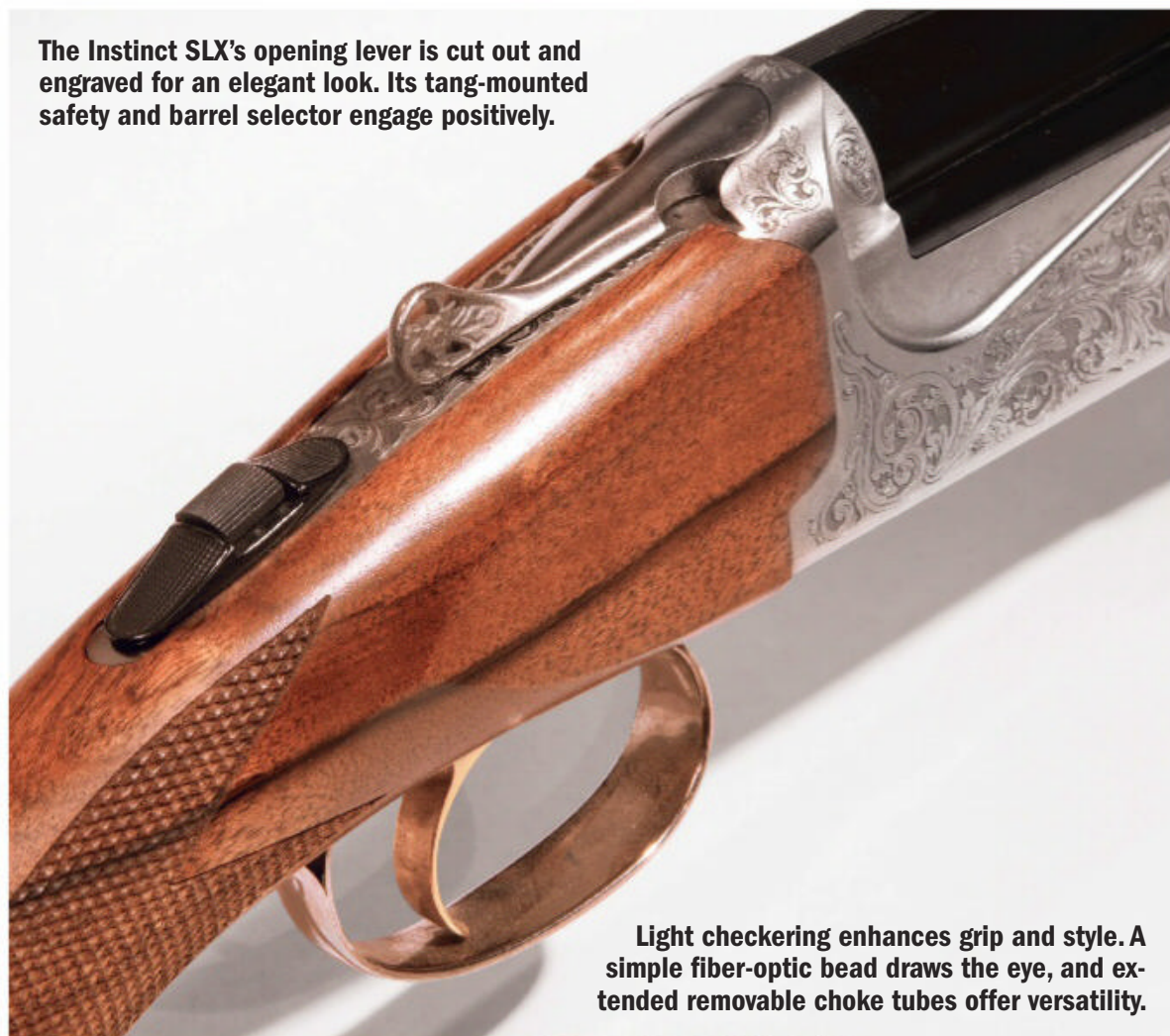
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### CONTACT

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The Instinct SLX's opening lever is cut out and engraved for an elegant look. Its tang-mounted safety and barrel selector engage positively.



Light checkering enhances grip and style. A simple fiber-optic bead draws the eye, and extended removable choke tubes offer versatility.



A gold-plated trigger and engraved receiver are just two of many aesthetic touches on the 16-gauge Instinct SLX.



Similarly, shouldering and firing the SLX also felt instinctive. The lightweight 16 was fast swinging, and the vent rib and red fiber-optic sight combined to offer an easy reference point without drawing attention from the target. Recoil seemed minimal, and a cushioned black buttpad helped mitigate what little there was.

The gun's mechanics and operation were likewise straightforward and effective. Being a new gun, the action was a bit stiff, but additional use will break it in more. The SLX's tang-mounted safety and barrel-selector switch functioned perfectly. Both the safety and selector engaged positively and audibly, making accidental changes to their status unlikely. The shotgun's all-steel automatic ejectors, meanwhile, spat out spent shells with force each and every time.

On the front end, the SLX comes with extended removable choke tubes. While some prefer flush-fit chokes, I like tubes that continue beyond the barrel. In addition to creating what I find to be a cool look, they also make it easier to quickly identify which chokes are in the gun.

Although ammo quality affects a shotgun's downrange performance, I feel confident in the Instinct SLX's capabilities. My hunting partners and I admittedly used some good ammunition on our hunt—Kent's FastLead and Bismuth Upland loads—and it did well with the gun. We were each able to drop birds with shots out to 40 or 50 yards. One of the guys had an incredible shot with the bismuth load that folded a pheasant at about 60 yards. Of course, the Instinct SLX also handled shorter crossing and flushing-away shots with ease, too. In short, I felt no less capable of making any shot with the 16-gauge SLX than I would have with my own 12 gauge.

That's more or less the entire point of the 16-gauge shotgun. It bridges the gap between the 12 and the 20 by combining attractive qualities of each: much of the 12 gauge's power and a good deal of the 20 gauge's lightweight feel. Technology advances have blurred the lines a bit; 12-gauges have become lighter, and 20-gauge shells have become more potent. But, the 16 still does everything it was intended to quite well, and guns such as the Franchi Instinct SLX only make this more apparent. If in the process the SLX manages to look good, too, what's wrong with that? 

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# OPTICS THAT UP THE ODDS



The Leupold VX-3HD is available in versions from 1.5-5x20 mm to 6.5-20x50 mm.

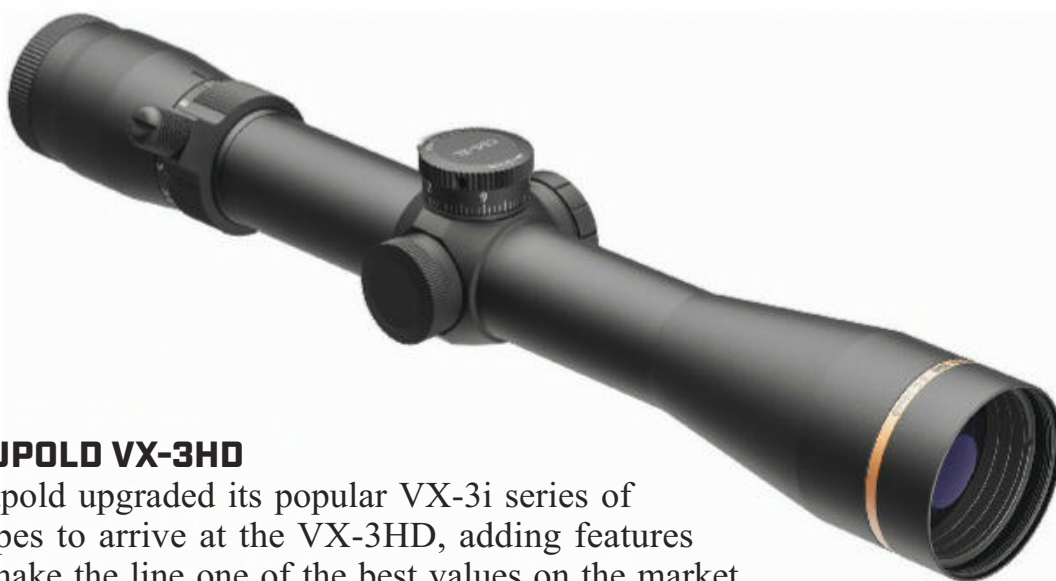
## NEW TECHNOLOGY IN THE LATEST RIFLESCOPES AND BINOCULARS HELPS HUNTERS FILL TAGS.

By Game & Fish Staff

**B**eing able to see a buck clearly in the final minutes of shooting light, quickly calculating the amount of elevation correction needed for a long shot, or simply remaining comfortable when spending long hours behind a binocular in search of game can make a difference when trying to put meat in the freezer. Quality optics enable these things, whether the task be finding an animal or precisely placing a shot. Here are six worth carrying on your hunts this fall that will help you do both. 

### LEUPOLD VX-3HD

Leupold upgraded its popular VX-3i series of scopes to arrive at the VX-3HD, adding features to make the line one of the best values on the market. For example, all VX-3HD scopes come with the company's Custom Dial System and feature ZeroLock to prevent unintentional movement of the turret. A removable throw lever is also included to make quick magnification changes. The HD suffix means the scopes have Leupold's High-Definition lenses to maximize clarity, color and image quality throughout the field of view. Elite Optical System coatings reduce glare and promote light transmission, while the Guard-Ion treatment repels water and dirt. All VX-3HD scopes are waterproof, fogproof and shockproof. One-inch and 30 mm models are available, with the latter having illuminated reticles. Magnifications and objectives range from 1.5-5x20 mm to 6.5-20x50. MSRP: \$499.99 to \$999.99; [leupold.com](http://leupold.com)



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### LEICA AMPLUS 6

Amplus 6 scopes offer 6X zoom, illuminated reticles and Leica's premium optics at an attractive price. Built on a 30 mm tube, the eight Amplus 6 models have second-focal-plane reticles with an extra-fine, illuminated dot for precision aiming. Illumination can be set to 10 levels of intensity. Leica combines high-quality glass elements with advanced coatings for bright, color-neutral views. The Amplus 6 scopes achieve more than 90 percent light transmission while suppressing stray light that can interfere with clarity. Each is designed to resist shock and weather. Models include 1-6x24 mm, 3-18x44 mm, 2.5-15x50 mm and 2.5-15x56 mm. The latter two configurations are offered with three different reticles. MSRP: \$1,199 to \$1,599; [us.leica-camera.com](http://us.leica-camera.com)



### BUSHNELL RIMFIRE

Squirrel and varmint hunters who want to reach out with their .22 LR rifles will appreciate the two new scopes in Bushnell's Rimfire line. Both 3-9x40 mm scopes feature the DropZone 22 reticle with hold points out to 125 yards calibrated for the trajectory of a 40-grain .22 LR load. Each can be used with the Bushnell ballistic app to fine-tune holdovers based on individual loads and environmental variables. A model with an illuminated reticle is available, offering 10 levels of intensity with an off setting between each. The scopes have fully multi-coated lenses with EXO Barrier protection to ward off water, dirt and abrasion, and both carry an IPX7 waterproof rating. MSRP: \$149.95, \$179.95; [bushnell.com](http://bushnell.com)



### TRIJICON CREDO HX

If there is one word to describe Trijicon scopes, it's rugged. The company builds optics for the U.S. military and puts the same amount of attention into making sure its hunting scopes will stand up to hard use in the field. The Credo HX is one of the latest scope families to come from Trijicon, and besides reliability, hunters will find a host of notable features in the line. All Credo HX scopes have LED-illuminated reticles, which vary from duplex to holdover designs. They also come with a magnification lever that can be positioned to suit the user. Fully multi-coated broadband anti-reflective glass lenses provide excellent clarity and light transmission. Available with 30 mm and 34 mm tubes, the Credo HX line includes seven configurations with 4X, 6X and 8X zoom, from the 1-4x24 mm model to the 4-16x50 mm. MSRP: \$999 to \$1,799; [trijicon.com](http://trijicon.com)







# The Biggest Event In Silver Dollar History!

The American Silver Eagle has been the most popular silver coin *on the planet* since its introduction in 1986. Its beautiful, iconic design inspires collectors, and investors love it because it's struck in one full ounce of 99.9% fine silver, and guaranteed for weight and fineness by the U.S. Government. Now in 2021, for the first time ever, the coin's design is changing.

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## Collectors Crave Firsts

Collectors covet coins with Key Dates. Key Dates mark significance in a coin's history...firsts, lasts, lowest mintage,

new finishes and new designs. Now, for the first time in over three-and-a-half decades, the Silver Eagle is getting a new design, leading to a historic "first" unlike anything we've seen. The iconic Heraldic Eagle reverse is being replaced by a beautiful new "Eagle Landing" design. This is arguably a bigger deal than even the actual introduction of the coin because there's so much more interest now than in 1986, with investors and collectors!

## If You Knew Then What You Know Now...

If you'd had a crystal ball in 1986, you undoubtedly would have grabbed every Silver Eagle you could get. Those coins in uncirculated condition continue to be sought-after. Now you're getting another chance to land a big Silver Eagle first, a Key Date. Additionally, since these newly designed Silver Eagles are only being released during the second half of 2021, it's quite possible this will be one of the lowest mintages we've seen. That's significant because it could make 2021 a DOUBLE Key Date, with both a new design and a low mintage. Demand for these coins is already sky-high, but if that

happens, watch out! No one can predict the future value of silver, but many Americans are rushing to stock up, for themselves, and their loved ones.

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# THE PASS

SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT TO TAKE THE SHOT.

**O**ne autumn morning Shane's father announced that the family would be visiting relatives in North Carolina in a few weeks. While there, he told Shane, they'd hunt bears.

In the time leading up to the trip Shane could scarcely sleep. Ever since he was a little boy he'd heard his father's stories about hunting bears in the Blue Ridge Mountains. "Let me tell you about the day I became a man," his father would often say before launching into an epic tale of canines, claws and calamity. Shane devoured every bear hunting article he could find and mulled over every scenario he could imagine. Would he hold his ground if a bear came at him? Would he make a good shot? Would he even see a bear?

The weeks flew by, and Shane didn't have the answers. On the night before the hunt, his uncle saw the need for some instruction.

"Once we turn them dogs out, there ain't no callin' timeout," said Uncle Ron. "The chase could last two hours or two days, but ya can't ever let up. If it's a big bear he may not tree, and if he don't tree, he'll take to workin' them hounds over. So ya stay near me, and when I say to shoot, ya give that ol' bear the bad news."

The next morning, Shane, his father, Uncle Ron and five Plott hounds set out on a winding mountain road with Ringo riding on a flat metal platform affixed to the truck's hood. Not even two miles had passed before the hound bawled shrilly.

"Ringo's done struck one!" shouted Uncle Ron.

The truck hadn't fully stopped before Uncle Ron

had the dog-box doors open and all bedlam broke loose. When Shane cornered the tailgate he saw the dogs trying to climb the trunk of a dead pine tree about 150 yards off the road. As he hurried toward the snag with Uncle Ron, Shane saw a furry black blob clinging to its top like a giant lollipop.

"Ya loaded?" asked Uncle Ron through the din of raucous bawls and scraping sounds as the pack tried to climb the tree. "Put one behind his shoulder!"

Shane raised the Marlin, but when he looked through the sights he saw the bear's dreamy eyes as if it were still groggy from a nap. Shane thought a bear would look scarier ... or bigger ... or something. He hesitated.

"Is this bear big enough?" stammered Shane, unsure.

"It's legal, I know that!" Uncle Ron hollered back. "It's a youngish male, but we've gotta get these hounds some satisfaction, and we may not tree another. So If ya ain't gonna shoot, I will."

Shane looked at his father, who shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Your call, bud."

After a few tense moments he handed Uncle Ron the rifle, who promptly took it, aimed and fired. The bear slid down the tree trunk and hit the ground with a thud. Instantly the hounds enveloped the dead bear and worried it for a few seconds before Uncle Ron began peeling them off.

Shane turned away and sat on a nearby log. Perhaps he was ashamed of his actions; perhaps he was sorry for the bear. Likely it was both. Then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder.

"Son, are we in danger of going hungry?"

"Huh?" said Shane.

"Is anyone starving here?" asked his father.

"No sir," said Shane.

"That's right; none of us is in need of food," said his father. "These days we mainly hunt for sport. So if something doesn't feel right about killing for any reason, don't do it. Stand by your decisions, son, and people will respect them. But you also must respect those of your fellow hunters."

"They say life's like a box of chocolates, but that's horse," added Uncle Ron. "I say it's more like a bear hunt. Ya never know what's gonna happen when ya turn out them hounds."

"That's for sure," said Shane, chuckling a little as he stood up to go check out the bear. 





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