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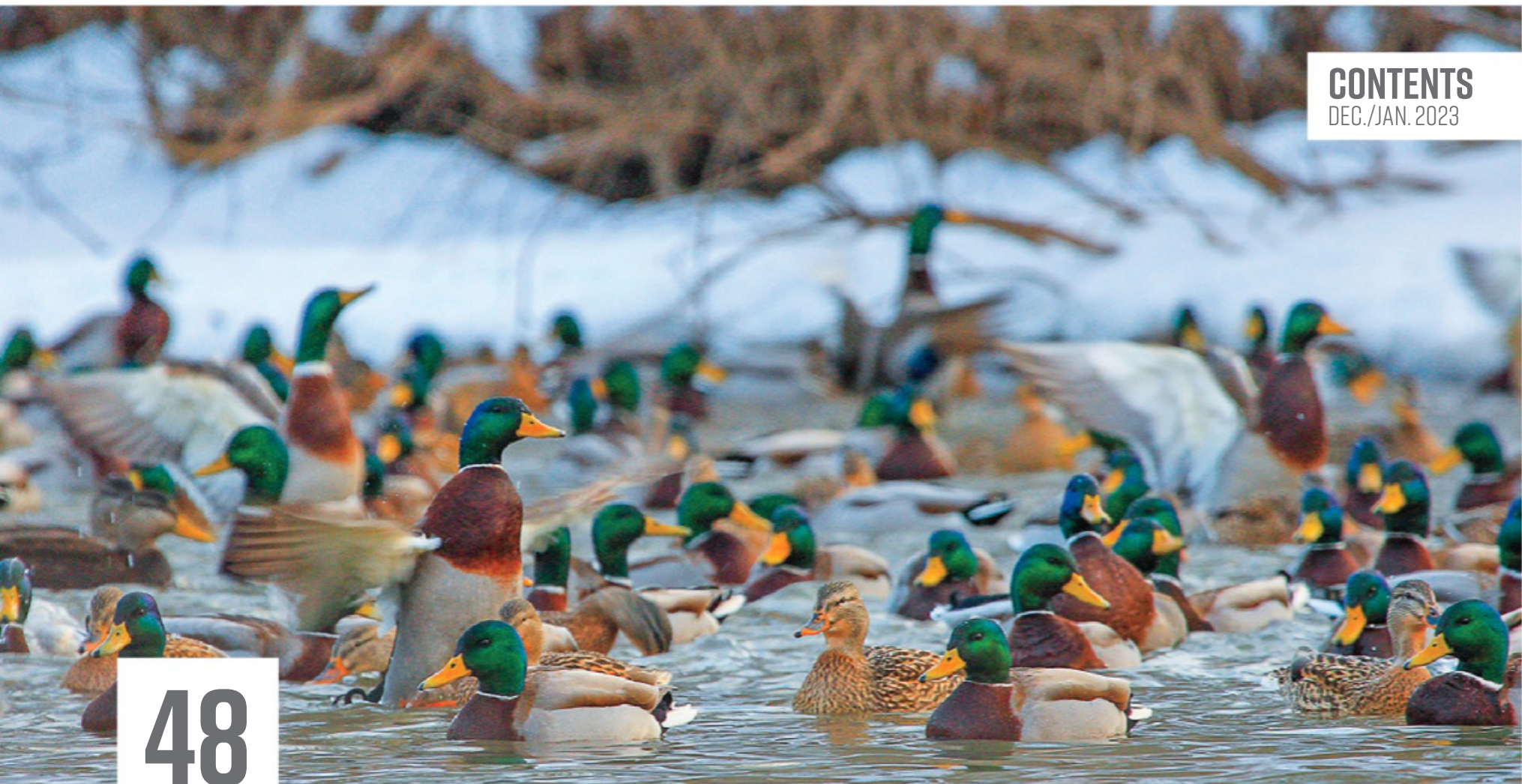
GAME & FISH EAST

The Regional Outdoor Guide



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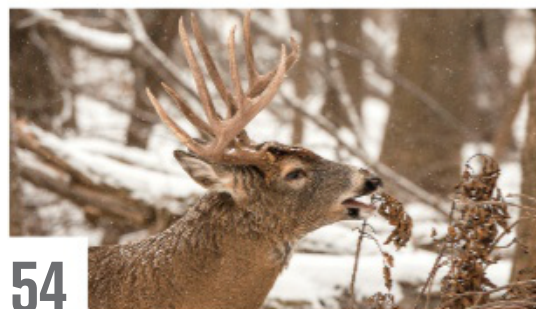
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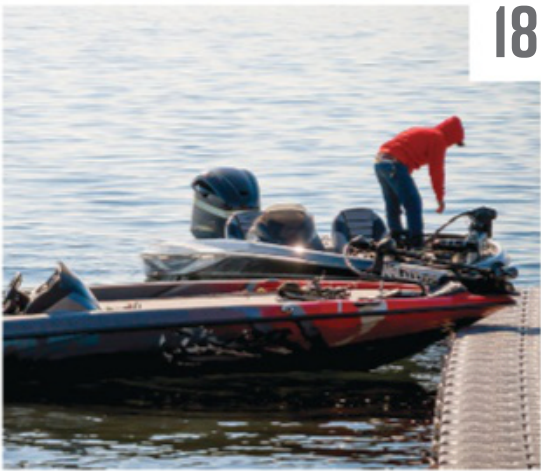
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Yia Vang is the host of Outdoor Channel's "Feral."

DINNER PLANS

The holidays bring memorable meals with friends and family: perhaps an elk or deer roast, a few geese or pheasants, or a ham if you still haven't filled a tag. But can you imagine gathering around a table with a delicious iguana on the serving plate? How about a pile of python? Before you dismiss this fare as inedible at best, consider culinary arts explorer Yia Vang.

Vang is a James Beard Award nominee, master chef and host of Outdoor Channel's new original series "Feral." He's also an avid angler, hunter and traveler, and his training and passions come together in the series as he targets invasive species and then puts them on the table. Each 30-minute episode features Vang arriving in a new location, identifying an invasive species and coming up with a plan for catching or bagging it and then cooking it. Local experts sometimes guide him on his quests—and help him through some mistakes—as he strives to create an amazing and unusual meal by the end of every episode. The menu includes iguana, lionfish, Burmese python, carp and, of course, feral hogs.

Born in a Thai refugee camp, where he lived until his family resettled in central Wisconsin, Vang started his career working as a dishwasher. He knows his way around a kitchen and a restaurant, has competed on "Iron Chef" and has been named Best Chef in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) multiple times. Vang's goal is to change how people think about food by considering the influences in each bite. If he can make python palatable, I'd say he's well on his way.

"Feral" will air on Outdoor Channel on Monday nights during the "Taste of the Wild" programming block at 9 p.m. Eastern beginning Nov. 28. If you can't serve up iguana for your crowd, at least you can get some tips on the best way to do it.

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GAME & FISH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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We highlight huge whitetails bagged this season all over the country in our “Big Bucks” report (under the “Special Collections” menu on our homepage).



TREAT THE MEAT

The steps taken from field to plate are critical for delicious venison. Start by studying “Best-Tasting Venison: Tips for Proper Handling, Storage and Prep.”



HARD-WATER HOW-TO

It won't be long till winter's fishing frenzy arrives. Find tips, gear, destinations and more to get prepared on our “Ice Fishing” pages.



SHOW TIME

With January comes a first look at new hunting gear unveiled at the ATA and SHOT shows. We'll bring you coverage straight from manufacturers' booths.



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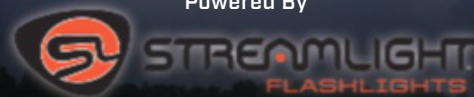


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4 am 7:30 to 9:30 pm 7:54 to 9:54	5 am 8:18 to 10:18 pm 8:42 to 10:42	6 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	7 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	8 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06 FULL	9 am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	10 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42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

JANUARY 2023

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8 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	9 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	10 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	11 am 2:42 to 4:42 pm 3:06 to 5:06	12 am 3:30 to 5:30 pm 3:54 to 5:54	13 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42	14 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30
15 am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18 LAST Q	16 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06	17 am 7:30 to 9:30 pm 7:54 to 9:54	18 am 8:18 to 10:18 pm 8:42 to 10:42	19 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	20 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	21 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06 NEW
22 am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	23 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	24 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	25 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	26 am 2:42 to 4:42 pm 3:06 to 5:06	27 am 3:30 to 5:30 pm 3:54 to 5:54	28 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42 FIRST Q
29 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30	30 am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18	31 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06				

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.

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DAYS

GOOD
DAYS

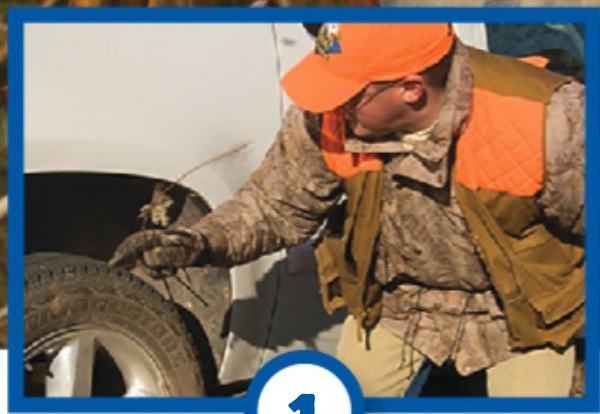
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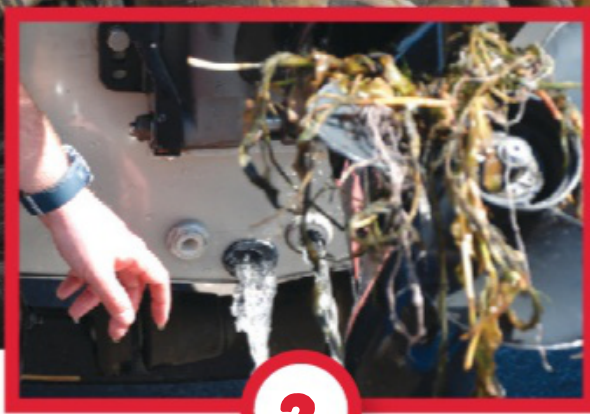
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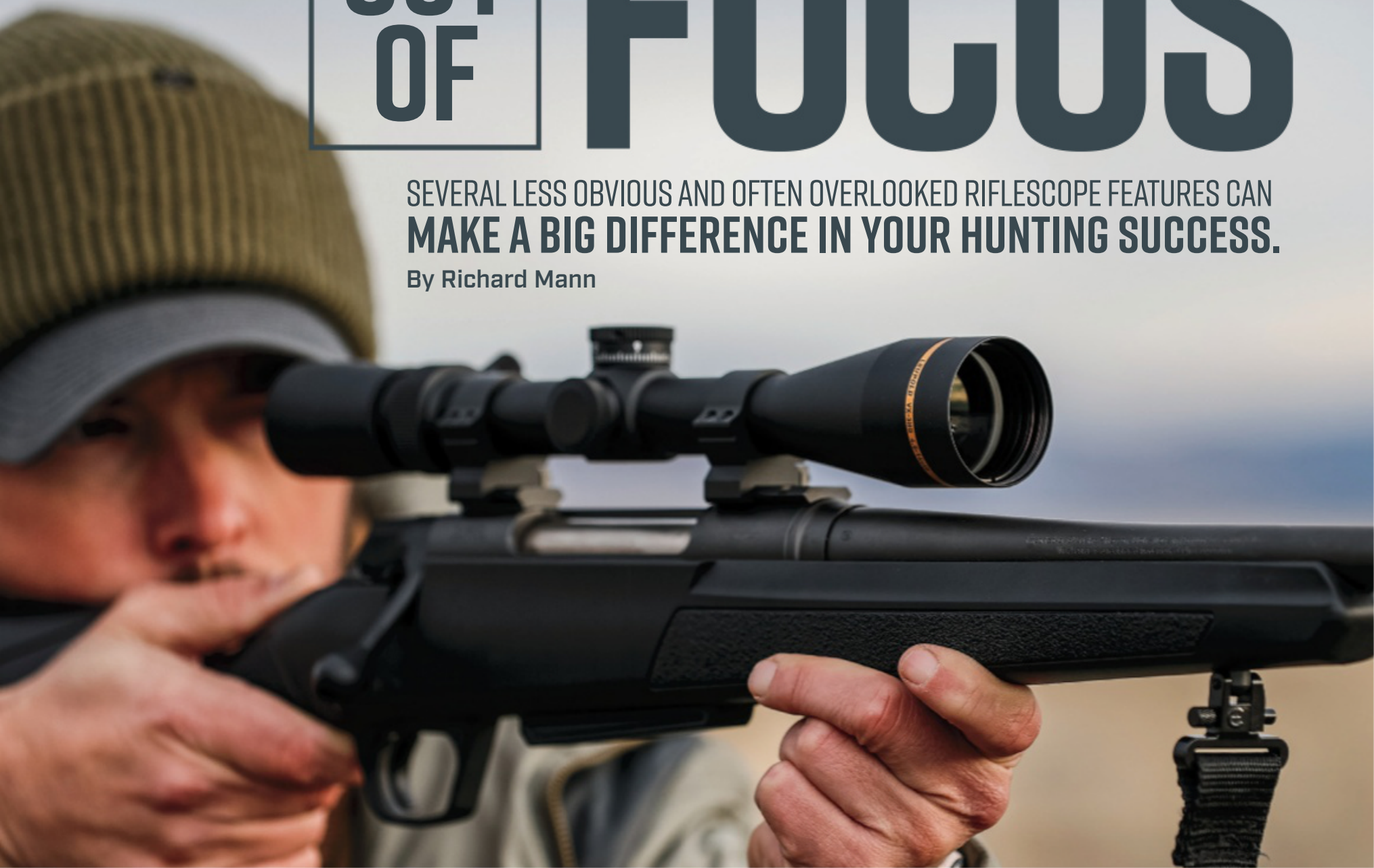
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OUT OF FOCUS

SEVERAL LESS OBVIOUS AND OFTEN OVERLOOKED RIFLESCOPE FEATURES CAN **MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN YOUR HUNTING SUCCESS.**

By Richard Mann



Not all that long ago, when a hunter was considering a new riflescope, magnification was the only real concern. However, the riflescope has since evolved. It's no longer just a magnifying tube with an "X" in the center. Modern scopes are marvelous optical sighting devices. Now things like objective lens diameter, exposed target turrets, click adjustment value, zero stops, illuminated reticles and trajectory- and wind-compensating reticles are all popular considerations when selecting a riflescope. Some modern options even have an integrated rangefinder or an interface with a separate rangefinder, and then provide you with a shooting solution.

All these things matter when choosing a riflescope. However, in trying to pick the newest, best, brightest and smartest

scope, some other key features often get overlooked. Below are five things you should not ignore when evaluating riflescopes. Depending on your rifle and what and how you hunt, some characteristics may be more or less important than others. Just ensure you don't discount any of them entirely.

MOUNTING SPACE

I believe this is the most overlooked riflescope feature. By mounting space, I mean the available space on a scope's tube where rings can be placed. It's the unobstructed space behind and in front of the saddle at the riflescope's center where the adjustment turrets are located. This space determines how far you can move the scope in the rings; it's how you adjust eye relief, and eye relief is a key part of user interface with riflescopes.

I recently tested a bunch of new riflescopes, and the available mounting space ranged from as little as 5 inches to as much as 6 3/4 inches. For bolt-action rifles chambered for cartridges like the .308 Winchester, you need at least 4 1/2 inches of mounting space, and for long-action cartridges like the .30-06, you need about 5 inches. Those measurements are just to mount the riflescope; to adjust for eye relief, you'll need more mounting space. If your rifle has a rail-type scope base, mounting space is usually not an issue, but for non-railed rifles, it is an important consideration.

OCULAR HOUSING SIZE

The ocular housing, or eyepiece, is the rear portion of the riflescope that contains the ocular lens. It's the end of the scope you look through. Large ocular lenses are

The proper amount of eye relief is key when using a scope. The main tube must have enough mounting space to adjust accordingly.

nice because, to some extent, they are like a big-screen television. However, with bolt-action rifles, the bolt handle must clear the ocular housing when the bolt is cycled, and larger ocular housings require higher rings to accommodate this. Higher rings can make it difficult to look through the riflescope while maintaining a good cheek weld on the stock.

At only 1.56 inches, Leupold's VX-3HD riflescopes have about the smallest ocular housings available. In comparison, the eyepiece diameter of many modern riflescopes is about 1 3/4 inches.

But eyepiece diameter is not the only concern. Many riflescopes have even larger magnification adjustment rings, and the bolt must clear that as well. Some, with a raised power setting bump or indicator, can exceed 2 inches. This means the riflescope must be mounted even higher

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for bolt clearance. Also, magnification throw levers are becoming very popular, and quite often they, too, interfere with bolt operation, especially when set at maximum magnification.

RETICLE INSTRUCTIONS

A riflescope feature that has really evolved is the reticle. Many of today's reticle styles offer additional aiming points to compensate for trajectory and wind. To use these reticles properly, you must know what the spaces between these aiming points subtend to. For MOA- or mil-based reticles, this will be in MOA or mil increments. For some ballistic-style reticles, these subtensions are proprietary to the reticle design.

Most riflescope manufactures detail their reticles online, giving all the necessary information. But some, like Vortex and Meopta, provide detailed reticle instructions in the box with the riflescope. However, I've also seen riflescopes where the reticle information must be classified because you simply cannot find the data anywhere. If you must, you can work this out on a target with grids at 100 yards, but data from the manufacturer is most appreciated. Look for information on the reticle before you spend your money.

WEIGHT

Because of long-range shooting's popularity, large and heavy riflescopes are trendy right now. For that shooting discipline, weight isn't critical. However, for hunters it can be.



It's not just the size of the eyepiece that matters; magnification rings can also get in the way of proper bolt operation.

The new Zeiss LRP S5 3-18x50 is a spectacular long-range riflescope, but it weighs 2 pounds. Add it to Nosler's excellent Model 21 rifle, and you're now carrying around 9 pounds. For those who hunt out of shoot houses, that's not a big deal. If you're climbing mountains or walking prairies, it matters.

By comparison, Leupold's VX-3HD 4.5-14x40 riflescope weighs less than a pound. And, with its Custom Dial System (CDS) that can be tuned to your ammunition, out to 400 yards or so, it's just as effective as the larger and heavier Zeiss. The point is, don't over-scope your rifle; a heavier riflescope doesn't make you shoot any better. Find the features you need for the hunting you like to do, and don't overlook riflescope weight in the process.

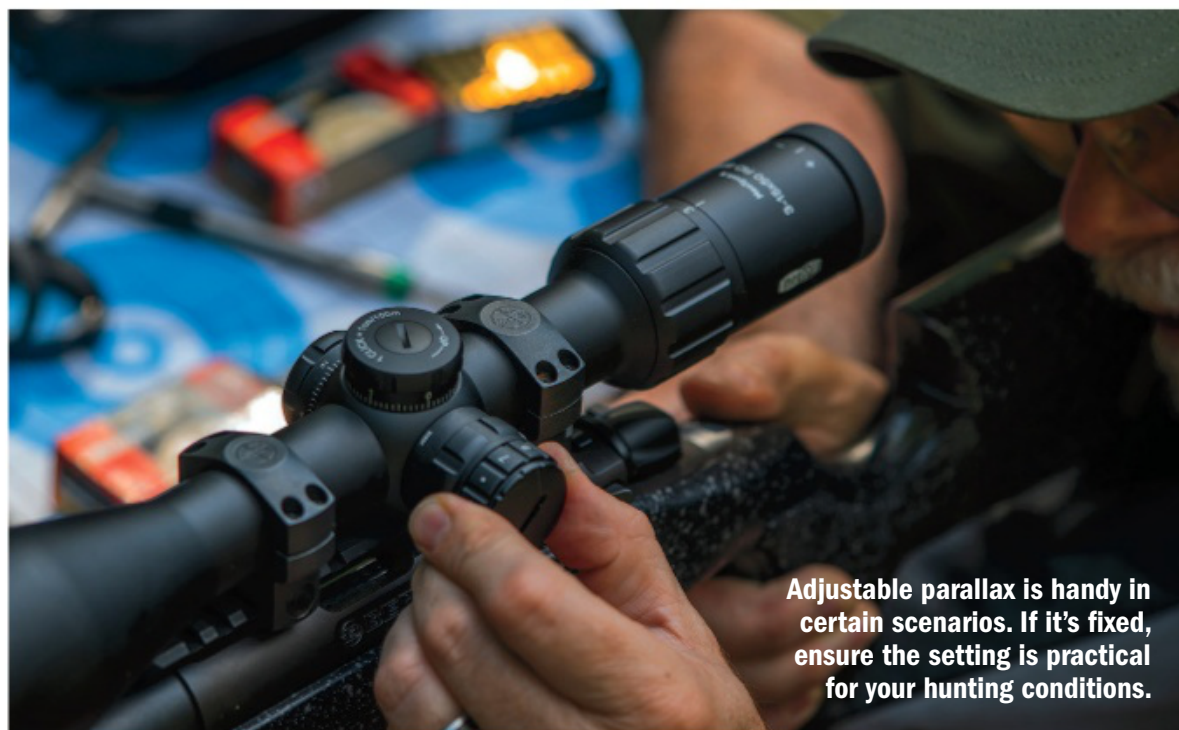
PARALLAX

Parallax is a very important but often misunderstood aspect of riflescopes. You can check for excessive parallax by resting your rifle, so it is fully supported, and then looking through the riflescope and moving your head from side to side. If the reticle moves in relation to the target, parallax is present at that distance.

Some riflescopes—especially long-range riflescopes—have adjustable parallax, and it's a must for a big-game riflescope intended for use at extreme ranges. Riflescopes without an adjustable parallax have their parallax set at a specific range. In most cases it's between 100 and 150 yards. This means that out to around 400 yards or so there won't be enough parallax to drastically impact your shot on a big-game animal.

Parallax is very important for rimfire riflescopes, especially for small-game hunting. A riflescope with the parallax set at 150 yards might show as much as 1 1/2 inches of parallax at 50 yards. A shot that's 1 1/2 inches off on a big-game animal usually isn't a big deal. However, if you're trying to head-shoot a squirrel, your own head will need to be perfectly positioned along the center line of the riflescope to eliminate the parallax.

Thus, most rimfire scopes have the parallax set at 50 or 60 yards. However, if that's the case, you can expect excessive parallax at 100 yards and beyond. As with a long-range big-game rifle, a riflescope used on a rimfire rifle for small-game hunting can benefit from an adjustable objective. 



Adjustable parallax is handy in certain scenarios. If it's fixed, ensure the setting is practical for your hunting conditions.

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HUNT THE FOOD?

IT'S THE LATE SEASON AND YOUR DAYS TO TAG A BUCK ARE DWINDLING. REST ASSURED, THERE'S HOPE.

By Tony Hansen

Most “experts” are willing to offer their advice on how to hunt late-season whitetails. Just be careful how much of it you take to heart.

If you ask 10 top whitetail hunting experts for their advice on punching a late-season tag, you’ll invariably hear “hunt the food” from a majority of them. They will claim that applies to both getting that last doe for the freezer or grounding a trophy buck.

Admittedly, it sounds like solid counsel and is often applicable to general, late-season hunt scenarios. However, it is very limited in real-world applicability. In areas where most folks hunt—places that have been overhunted—it

doesn’t apply. It’s also limited advice that, at best, doesn’t tell the full tale. Or at worse, applies only in those special circumstances where you’re hunting an area that saw limited hunting pressure during deer season (especially during gun seasons) and has been managed so standing agricultural food sources are still in the food plot.

Or, you get incredibly lucky, and something occurred during the standard fall harvest season that left those fields unpicked. Let’s dive in and separate the “half-truths” from the realities.

REALITY 1: There are fewer bucks left to hunt in the late season.

I live and hunt in southern Michigan, which is the most heavily hunted area in one of the most heavily hunted states in the nation. We can argue later over whose state really has the most pressured deer, but we can certainly agree that deer that have run the gauntlet of a 16-day general firearms season (in which about 500,000 hunters participate) followed immediately by another two weeks of “special” gun seasons puts a

COURTESY OF MEDIA DIRECT

serious hammer to buck populations. In short, the odds of you seeing a buck, let alone a mature buck, are as slim as they have been all year. This is not an opinion. This is a fact.

Even in states where hunting pressure is more moderate and season timing is a bit more favorable to the survival of older bucks, this holds true. Late-season hunters are dealing with fewer bucks than existed at any other time of the year.

HALF-TRUTH 1:
The “best food source” is your best bet for harvesting a late-season buck.

In general, I’ve found this to be an accurate statement. The half-truth portion comes into play however when you apply the words “your best bet.” This is false.

Unless you have access to a property with those special food sources that have the potential of drawing in a high percentage of deer from the area, your best bet is not an excellent food source when you don’t have access to hunt that food source.

This comes into play often when hunting big timber areas. There often is not an obvious “go-to” food source in this situation, aside from the occasional ag field that may or may not be within your reach. Instead, many times you’re dealing with vast areas of cover that have a scattering of available food, and none of those food sources are concentrated in a manner that makes targeting them quite as simple as just setting up on the inside corner of a soybean field.

Greenbrier, remnant acorns, locust pods ... these are all prime late-season food sources that can draw deer in areas of heavy timber. They’re also food sources that are sporadic and require that deer develop a true browsing behavior rather than a bed-to-feed routine where they can gorge on waste grain in a crop field.

Even here in southern Michigan where the landscape is classic Midwest farm country and ag fields abound, there are absolutely defined pockets of food sources that draw deer heavily but are simply inaccessible to me because I don’t have permission to hunt them. Thus, the statement that you simply need to “hunt the food” is a half-truth.



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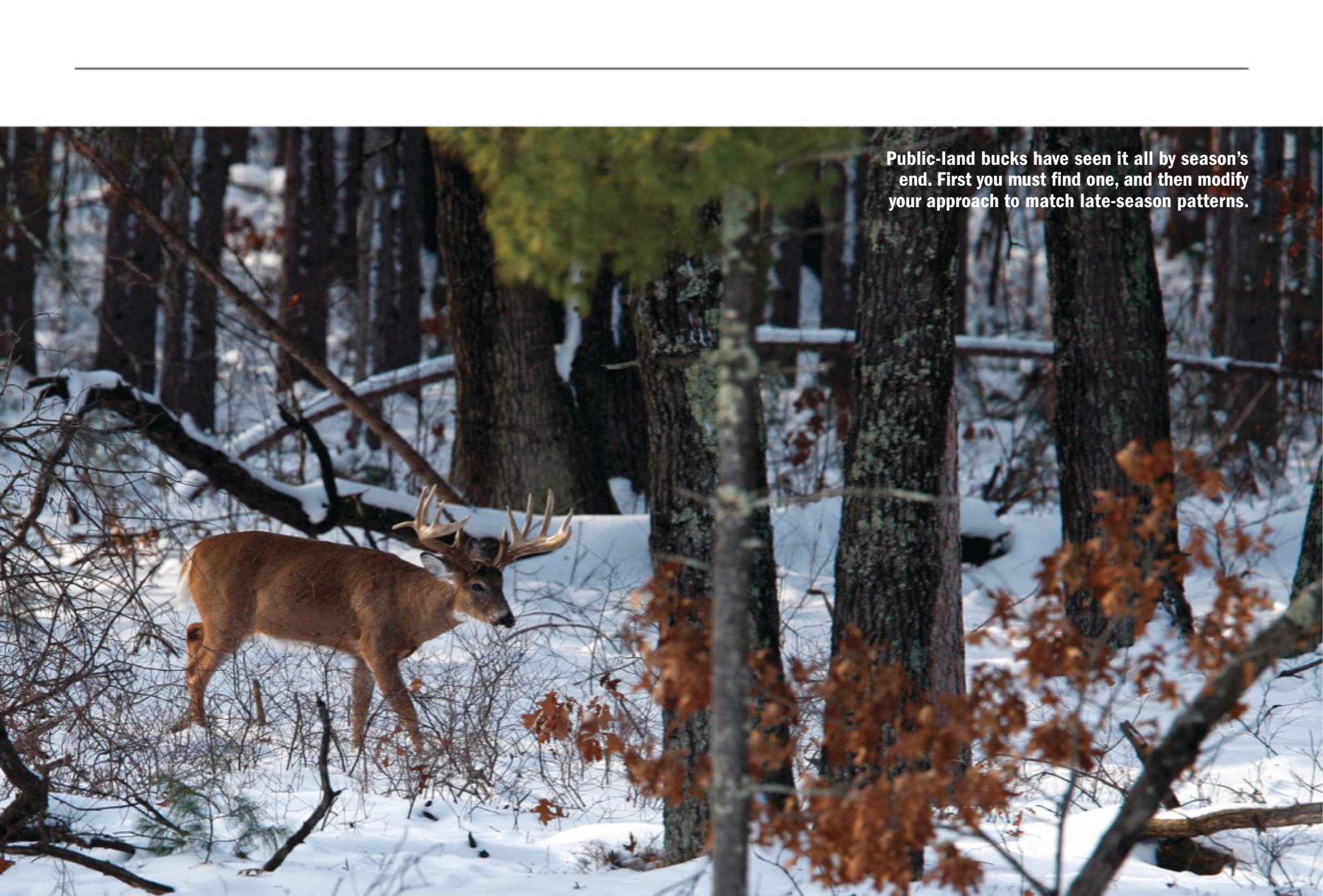
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A photograph of a buck with large antlers standing in a snowy forest. The buck is facing right, and its antlers are prominent. The forest is covered in snow, with bare trees and some evergreens visible in the background.

Public-land bucks have seen it all by season's end. First you must find one, and then modify your approach to match late-season patterns.

REALITY 2:
Your real best bet at killing a late-season buck is the place where you can hunt one.

It's no secret that I've spent the majority of my hunting career chasing whitetails on public land. It's also no secret that, over the past five years or so, the public-land hunting game has changed dramatically and not necessarily for the better in terms of mature buck opportunities and the ability to hunt less-pressured deer.

Public lands are busier than ever. However, that activity drops like a stone once Thanksgiving hits (aside from states where gun seasons happen to take place in December).

This is a real opportunity for tagging a late-season buck. I will never have access to as much private land as I have access to public land.

During the late season, we're hunting a time of year when mature buck numbers are at their lowest. To hunt one, you have to find one. The more acres available for the search, the greater the odds of finding one.

For me, trail cameras are far and away the most effective and efficient manner of searching. Yes, I target those cameras on food sources but, again, I likely will not have access to a mega-plot that's drawing every deer in the neighborhood. Instead, I'm seeking out areas of natural, preferred browse that I feel may have seen less hunting pressure throughout the year. The more of these areas I find, the more cameras I can utilize, and the greater my odds of finding a good buck.

HALF-TRUTH 2:
Late-season hunts should be limited to evenings only.

This is another common topic when discussing late-season hunts. Again, it's kind of true. If you're targeting deer hitting a primary food source, you should do everything you can to avoid disrupting those deer.

When deer are flooding into a corn field by the dozens every evening, it's likely just a matter of time before a good buck joins the fray. However, most of us aren't hunting in those types of situations. I'm certainly not and thus I will hunt

late-season mornings. This is particularly true if I've found an area in heavy cover that's well-away from any destination-type food source (like a big ag field) and contains browse-type food sources. In this situation, deer can't load up on food in one small area. Rather, they must browse to fill their bellies and that means they have to cover some ground to do it.

A sunny, warm(ish) day is ideal for a morning hunt. And you'd be wise to stick it out until the sun is pretty high in the sky. I've seen the majority of my late-season morning deer activity well after sunrise, typically around 9 or 10 a.m.

I believe deer are bedded during the last few hours of the night and wait for the sun to rise and warm things up a bit before they get up and begin a mid-morning round of browsing. They'll feed along ridges as they move toward south-facing hillsides to bed up for the rest of the day.

Be there when they move through, and you just might find that old adage about hunting the "best" food source isn't exactly wrong...but it's not exactly true either. 



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BUYING A USED BOAT

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING A BIG PURCHASE

By Shane Beilue



Buyers looking for a used boat can make several visual checks before seeking an inspection from a mechanic at a boat dealership.

The COVID pandemic stressed the supply chain in almost every industry, with the bass-boat market being no exception. Add to the fact that during the pandemic lockdown, demand for new and used boats soared from participants new to the sport, as well as existing anglers with added time on their hands wanting to upgrade their bass rigs. The lack of new boat inventory caused consumers

to try to fill the demand from the used-boat market, driving up the prices for used boats as well.

Brian Hughes is a senior sales associate for Fun-N-Sun Boats, with two locations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The Hurst, Texas, location is the largest bass-boat dealership in the country for boats 20-feet and longer, and is the largest Skeeter dealer in the U.S. He explains the current state of the bass boat market.

“We are starting to see some relief in new boat inventory becoming available again,” Hughes said in October. “About 18 months ago every boat that came off the delivery truck was already pre-sold. Now when I get a delivery truck, two of those boats may be pre-sold and I can place the other two on the showroom floor.”

Hughes notes that prior to negotiating a final price and handing over the check, a prospective buyer of a used



bass boat would be wise to make sure the investment is sound by having a list of pre-checks to inspect. Hughes has the following advice for prospective buyers of a used boat.

PROFESSIONAL CHECKUP

Hughes' advice for inspecting a used boat begins with the following: "If you're buying a used boat and have identified a strong candidate for purchase, my best

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advice is to take it to a nearby boat dealership, pay them the required fee [likely \$250 to \$500] and have them check it out as if they're trading for it. They can perform checks the average consumer cannot, such as opening the lower unit and checking cylinder compression in the engine."

From the mechanic's inspection, Hughes notes that the compression on all the engine cylinders should be within about 10 pounds of each other. "If you get too many variances, that's an indicator that the entire power head may be ready to give way, which can cost as much as \$16,000 on a 4-stroke Yamaha outboard," he says.

Before seeking expert advice regarding the internal condition of the outboard, Hughes says a prospective buyer can avoid costly repairs later by making some visual checks as he or she inspects the boat, beginning with the prop shaft.

"Just look straight down the shaft, give the prop a spin to see if you detect any wobble," he says. "If it doesn't wobble at all, you're probably good. If you detect a little wobble, there's a slight bend to the shaft. But here's the thing, a small bend can often be more destructive to a lower unit than a significant bend in the shaft—those are easy to detect because it disrupts operation of the motor. The minor shaft bend may not be noticeable to the driver, but it's causing stress to the

lower unit gears and likely damaging the seals to the lower unit."

Hughes notes that a new prop shaft runs about \$1,500, and a new lower unit can run \$3,500, so you could possibly be looking at a \$5,000 repair with that slight wobble in the prop shaft.

LOOK FOR CRACKS

Further boat inspection should focus on the condition of the fiberglass, looking for cracks and gouges.

"Superficial cracks actually don't worry me all that much, depending upon the age of the boat," Hughes says. "If you have cracks on a relatively new boat, then that's a problem; but cracks on a 15-year-old boat are probably not that big of a deal. It really depends upon where those cracks are located. If you see deep stress cracks around the transom, that's worth exploring further. Stress cracks around the console on an older boat really aren't going to hurt anything. If you see gouges in the gel coat that reveal the fiberglass mat, then that needs to be addressed as well; either the seller needs to fix it before you buy, or you need to be prepared to fix it once you take ownership."

Hughes points out that there's always going to be normal wear and tear on any used boat, but you really want to look for cracks and gouges that indicate abuse.

Transom damage was a common issue in the past when manufacturers

used fiberglass-encased wood; however, today's bass-boat transoms are composed of composites that are much stronger and not prone to water damage should the transom have a crack in the fiberglass. Nevertheless, significant cracking around the transom could indicate abuse or significant impact damage to the motor.

ACCESSORIES AND TRAILER

Hughes points out that accessory items like graphs, trolling motors, bilge pumps, etc. should be checked by simply turning them on to see if they power up.

"It really is buyer beware because if any of these items fail after purchase, there's nothing you can do about it because it's a used boat, and equipment eventually fails," he says.

The final point of emphasis from Hughes is to thoroughly inspect the boat trailer.

"Check every connection point on a trailer, meaning you need to visually inspect each weld seam to make sure there's no cracking," he says. "Also look at the axles to ensure they aren't twisted or bent. Check to see if the bearings have been greased—even hook the boat to your truck and pull the boat for a few hundred yards and listen for any grinding noise in the bearings. Also make sure to check that the trailer coupling and brakes are working properly, as these are critical safety items when towing a boat." 

All used boats, depending on age, will show signs of normal wear and tear. Signs that indicate potential abuse are cause for concern.



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RECONSIDERING CONSERVATION FUNDING

**THE RECENT ATTEMPTED ASSAULT
ON PITTMAN-ROBERTSON FUNDING
SHOULD SIGNAL THAT WE NEED TO DO
A BETTER JOB OF EXPLAINING THE
BENEFITS OF THE 'GUN TAX.'**

By Andrew McKean

It's been called the only tax we're happy to pay, the excise fee that each of us shells out every time we buy a new gun or the ammunition to feed it. Because this federal tax—it is 11 percent on most long guns and all ammunition, 10 percent on pistols and revolvers—isn't displayed on price tags or sales receipts, it's easy to overlook.

But this revenue, which is collected by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and then redistributed annually to state fish-and-game agencies to be used for everything from wildlife management to hunter education materials to land acquisition, is the engine for most of our wildlife successes in America, and can be credited for creating the shooting and hunting culture that most readers of this column belong to. This self-taxation (it includes archery products) has collected and then reinvested more than

\$15 billion in wildlife benefits since the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act was passed by Congress in 1937. By any measure, it's been wildly successful.

But, as your grandmother might say, no good deed goes unpunished. The benefits of "P-R," as Pittman-Robertson funding is often called, have been downplayed while the alleged tyranny of the tax has been amplified.

Welcome to the confluence of guns and public policy in America, a place that's especially thorny these days as guns take on an outsized role as agents of polarization. Just this past year, P-R funding has been "weaponized" both by anti-gun activists and by lawmakers who suggest either redirecting the fund or mining other sources of revenue for wildlife investment in America.

The rhetorical raid on P-R funding started, as so many trends do, in

California. Hoping to tap a funding source to address the societal cost of gun violence and also to impose additional burdens on firearms buyers, state legislators introduced a bill that would hit firearm and ammunition sales in the Golden State with an extra 10 percent to 11 percent tax on top of the P-R tax. While scholars debated the constitutional merits of the bill—which ultimately didn't gain legislative traction—the U.S. Congress got involved, floating an equal and opposite bill that would repeal the P-R tax.

You might have heard of this congressional effort to abolish P-R, officially known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration fund. Introduced last June by Georgia congressman Andrew Clyde and ultimately co-sponsored by more than 50 House Republicans, the RETURN (it stands for Repealing Excise



Target shooters helped push Pittman-Robertson Act funding for wildlife and shooting projects to more than \$1 billion in 2021.

Tax on Unalienable Rights Now) Our Constitutional Rights Act, HR 8167, would repeal the federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment and replace the dedicated P-R funding with annual appropriations from the U.S. Treasury and revenue from offshore oil and gas leases. It would also reduce—but not abolish—a similar tax on fishing equipment that serves the same purpose for aquatic habitat and fisheries management that P-R does for terrestrial wildlife.

Nearly every conservation group in America came out in strong opposition to Clyde's bill, which many interpreted as virtue signaling.

"It has zero chance of getting far down the legislative process, but was a way to express opposition to the California bill and to further make the point that this sacred cow of conservation funding might not be all that sacred," said one

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



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

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

Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and purchased it for our *Sedona Turquoise Collection*. Inspired by the work of those ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features a unique, one-of-a-kind matrix surrounded in Bali metalwork.

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conservation leader who has been active in quashing the bill but didn't want to be named out of concern that it might diminish his influence. "But it should get our attention because it represents the first time that the American system of conservation funding has been attacked."

It's also a sign that this wonky system is poorly understood by most gun buyers, who might not see the benefits of a fund that puts more deer in the woods and more elk on the mountain.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF GUN PURCHASES

When the Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Act was passed, in the dark years of the Great Depression, fish and wildlife populations were plummeting after years of unregulated hunting and habitat loss. The fund was imagined as a "user-pays" model in which those who would benefit from wildlife restoration would pay for the hard work to bring back deer, turkeys, pronghorn and trout to America's woods, prairie and waters.

While the fund didn't differentiate between firearms purchased for hunting,

target shooting or personal defense, the vast majority in the first decades of P-R were bought by hunters for hunting. The feedback loop worked even better than its creators might have intended. The more guns Americans bought, the more money was available for wildlife restoration, which created more hunting opportunities and more sales of guns to hunters.

But starting in the early 2000s, with the rise of AR-platform rifles and recreational shooting, the balance of guns sold to target shooters versus hunters has been tilting. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which administers the P-R account, between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, the fund generated \$718 million annually on average. But the mix of firearms has changed remarkably since 1937. The Service reported that ammunition sales accounted for 32 percent of P-R revenue in the 2016-2020 time frame, while pistols and revolvers accounted for 31 percent of revenue. Firearms (meaning rifles, shotguns, and other long guns) made up 30 percent of the revenue stream, while archery equipment accounted for only 6 percent of revenue.

Recreational skeet and trap shooters make significant contributions to the Pittman-Robertson Act, which also funds projects not directly tied to hunting.



In the two years since that report, P-R revenue has spiked. Last year alone, these excise taxes generated more than \$1 billion in funding to assist state wildlife agencies in fulfilling their missions, according to the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.

P-R UPDATE

The rise in recreational shooting activities has left some target shooters and those who use guns for purposes other than hunting feeling like the P-R model could use an update. They've made some gains, the most recent of which is the 2019 "Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act," which allows funds to be used for hunter and shooter recruitment efforts and to build shooting ranges across the country. The idea of that legislation, which was signed into law by President Trump, was to both expand and broaden the base of hunters and shooters, and to recognize the significant contributions to P-R by recreational shooters.

"If you think about it, the updates to Pittman-Robertson funding eligibility are the same as they were back in the 1930s and 1940s," says the conservation leader. "We're still funding the seeds and rootstock that grow our community, only now we are including new hunters and shooting ranges in our definition of rootstock. If we take care of those elements, then we'll continue to grow our community of hunters and shooters in America, which is the original idea of the Pittman-Robertson Act."

The conservation leader noted that recreational shooters have a valid reason to expect more P-R funds to be used for non-hunting-related infrastructure.

"These are the folks who pushed the annual balance above \$1 billion," he says. "All those ARs and personal-defense shotguns and pistols, and all that ammunition that folks were buying during the [COVID-19] pandemic generated record amounts of excise tax. Just as we built wetlands and deer habitat during the early days of P-R, we now need to be building community shooting ranges and trap clubs and making sure that we're growing our ranks. If we can continue to support more shooters and hunters, then they can expect to have places and opportunities to pursue their passions. Because they paid for them." 

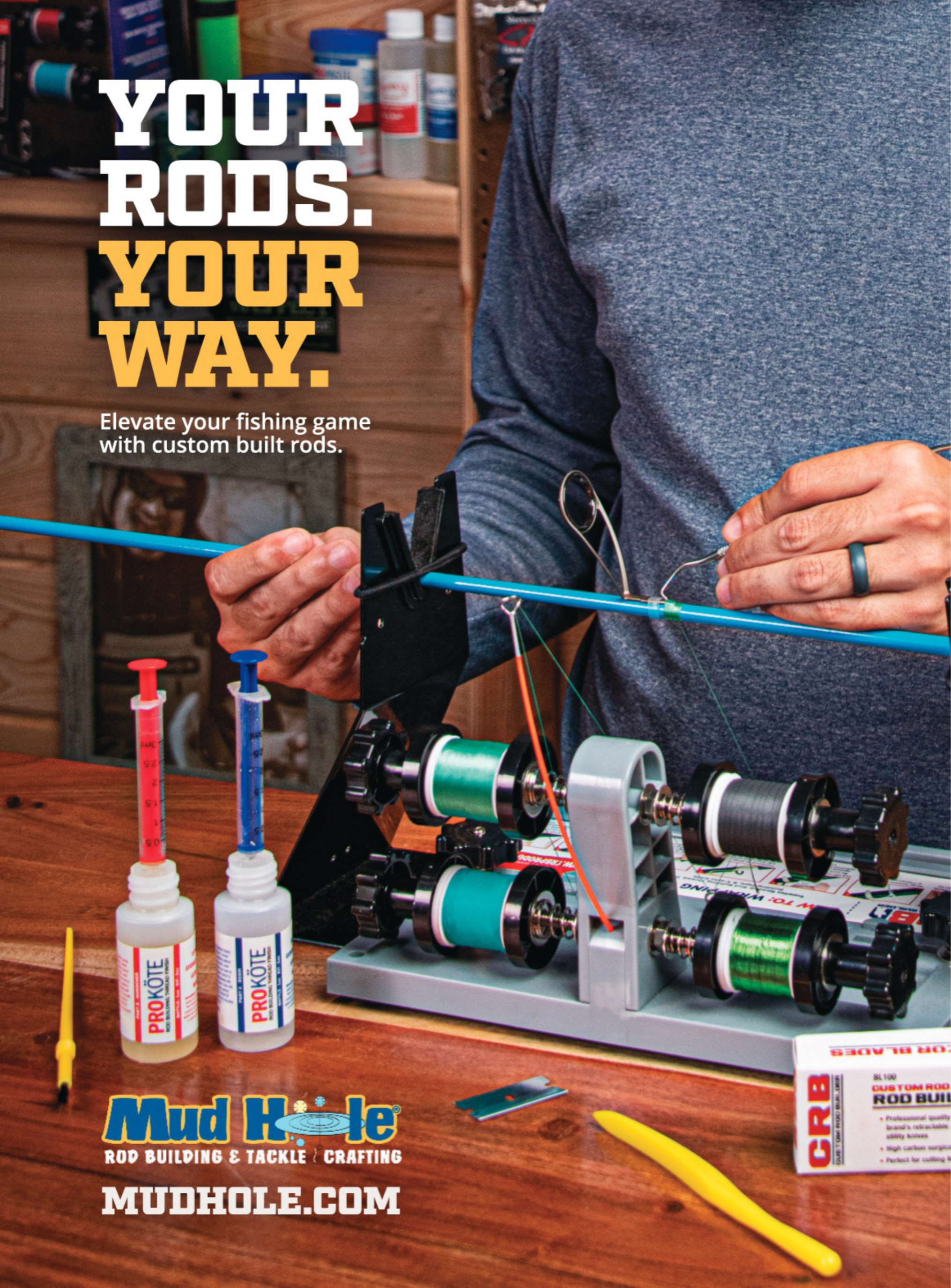
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SNOW SHIFT

WHEN DUCK SEASON ENDS IN ARKANSAS, HUNTERS AND GUIDES
SWITCH FROM FLOODED TIMBER TO OPEN FIELDS
IN EXPECTATION OF WHITE TORNADOES.

By Alan Clemons

A semi-auto shotgun with an extended magazine is a popular choice during the Light Goose Conservation Order season. Regs do not limit magazine capacity.



MARK SIDELINGER

Until you've experienced it, nothing can prepare you for the whirling, spinning, mind-blowing cacophony of hundreds or thousands of snow geese over your spread. It's intense. You might get pooped on. You'll get amped when the first handful lights in the spread, but don't shoot just yet. More are coming. Just hang on a little bit longer.

"Wait ... wait ... let 'em land ... wait," urged Keaton Kelso, hoarsely giving us instructions. He was quiet enough to not spook the geese on the ground but emphatic in expressing that trigger time was nigh. "They're still coming. Wait ... some more of them will come down and bring in the rest."

Finally, thankfully, we and Keaton's quivering Labrador retriever were given relief. At the command of "Take 'em!" we unloaded our guns. After hunting waterfowl for 40 years it's crazy to think about an unplugged magazine that holds 10 rounds. A couple of us emptied the guns, just because we could, to see what it was like. All of us hit geese, their white-and-black bodies shuddering at the impact of the 3- and 3 1/2-inch Kent steel ammo. They thudded to the warm soil, falling amid the socks and rags and hardshell decoys. The flock turned and lifted higher, their dissonance disappearing as we flung a long shot here and there, identified stragglers for the Lab to go after, and lay in the field in awe.

"Well, that was pretty freakin' incredible," one of us said before we broke into "Did you see ..." and "I thought that one was going to ..." and other tales. The Lab continued to bring in geese as we watched the massive flock separate and fly hither and yon. Some landed in an adjacent field; they toyed with us a couple of times. Keaton and his brother, Kendall, assessed the decoy spread. Kendall went to make some adjustments on the edge where the snows had knocked things akimbo.

With snow geese, you shoot the snot out of 'em and then get ready for more, because you never know when the next group of 20 or 2,000 will decide to come in.

FROM DUCKS TO GEESE

Many places claim to be the capital of something. Stuttgart, Ark., a town about as big as a flock of snow geese,

Large spreads of assorted decoys attract larger flocks of snow geese and help hide hunters in open fields where birds graze.



claims to be the duck hunting capital of the world. It's a boast made for almost 100 years, thanks to several factors: rice, water and timber on the southern end of the Mississippi Flyway. By late autumn when the rice fields have been harvested, and the pin oaks and other mast trees are dropping acorns, and the ducks are arriving from their trek down from Canada's lovely summer, hunters are eagerly and anxiously waiting in Stuttgart like high water pushing against a dam. For many hard-core duck hunters, it's a rite of passage to make a trip to hunt there, to visit Mack's Prairie Wings and at least see Bayou Meto, and to drive around at sunset watching the skies.

The dam breaks in November each year. Stuttgart transforms from a small, quiet, unassuming Grand Prairie town to a nonstop grind of muddy, four-wheel-drive pickups holding occupants with soaring expectations. Other small towns in Arkansas are the same way. Gas stations, cafes, outdoor retailers, big chain stores ... all thrum with a

camo-infused vibrancy. Everything is at full tilt. Hunters often arrive late on Thursday night, driving from nearby states after work to their leases, to hunt three mornings and then scamper home before doing it again four days later.

The afternoon I arrived in Stuttgart before our goose hunt, duck season was ending. One day remained, the last hurrah of the three-month camo beatdown. Two trucks in the hotel parking lot exhibited giveaways: mud, decoys, a dog box in the back. But that was it. The hotel was quiet. Downtown was quiet. No lines at the gas stations or fast-food drive-through lanes. The Mexican restaurant had locals at the tables, but no one wore camo or boots or weary expressions. Technically, one day remained in the season but Stuttgart already had reverted to its quiet, usual routine that would revolve around farming for the next nine months.

Goose hunters like Kendall and Keaton were the notable exception. They were in geeked-up scouting mode for the snow goose season. Officially it's known

as the Spring Light Goose Conservation Order, which provides hunters with the chance to use unplugged shotguns and electronic calls with no limits under generally relaxed regulations. The federal and state agencies won't be so blunt about it, but they want hunters to kill as many snow geese as possible every year. The problem is, even with all those allowances, it doesn't make a dent in the population.

Stuttgart, and the rest of the Arkansas prairie through which the snow geese migrate, valiantly attempts to do its part. But by the last Sunday in January, when duck season closes, the duck hunters pretty much are done. They're either wiped out, tired, ready to end it, or they simply don't care about snow geese. Duck hunters can boat into the timber and lean against a tree in waders, crouch when a gang of mallards is lighting, chuckle softly, kill them in a bag-of-decoys spread, and then go home. It is neither easy nor incredibly difficult; the exhaustion comes from the elements and doing it for days on end.

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With snow geese, though, you're looking at hundreds of rags and socks and shells and decoys, a flying decoy contraption run by batteries, chairs to sit in, bags with ample ammo and gear, calling devices and more batteries, and all of that must be put out before sunrise in some arrangement you hope will attract the geese. Your truck has to be moved far enough away. Anyone hunting with

you must be decked out in white. Dark blotches amid white decoys are a no-no. If the shells are on stakes, the stakes must be set correctly so the shells bob instead of lean over like a drunk fan after the big football game. Wind and weather can be friend or foe. If the geese don't come, you might have to gather all of that stuff and move it to a new area, put it out again and hope for the best.

"It wears on you, for sure, after a few weeks," Kendall said. He and Keaton have been chasing geese for about 40 years starting as kids in Iowa. As owners of K&K Outfitters (duckandbuck.com), they have guided hunters for 25 years for snow geese in spring, and for deer in autumn and winter in southeast Missouri and western Kansas. When geese begin migrating from Louisiana in early spring,



There's a lot going on when a flock of snows drops into the decoys. Each hunter must establish a safe shooting lane and stick to it.

SAFE, SUCCESSFUL AND STRESS-FREE

Keep these things in mind for a great hunt.

Snow goose hunting is a lot of work, but when things work out right, the shooting is fast-paced and furious. Up your odds for having a banner day by bringing good gear and enlisting the help of an expert or two. Most importantly, put safety first when a flock descends.

SHOOT IN YOUR LANE: This should be a no-brainer, but it's critical to remember and emphasize to your hunting party. You're likely hunting from the ground or chairs. Everyone should know their shooting lane and stay in it. No swinging hard left or right, no crossovers to "help with the one getting away" or anything like that. Shoot in your lane and be safe.

RELIABLE GEAR: Snow goose hunting requires a lot of decoys, a shotgun that can hold up during prolonged fire and good clothing to keep you warm, dry and comfortable. Spring weather can be weird. Be prepared with proven and properly maintained gear, and have tools or replacements on hand. A good blind bag helps keep stuff organized.

STAY CONCEALED: White pants, coat and toque, or a white jumpsuit, and you're good to go. Gloves might help but aren't necessary. It's not like the entire ground is white. Just blend in. Your boots, hands and face aren't going to cause a problem unless you're moving them around. Hunker in, chill out, watch the birds, and stay still until it's time to shoot.

HUNT WITH GUIDES: I'd have to be really committed to hunting and chasing snow geese to buy everything needed to do it right. All that money can be used to go hunting with guides who already have almost everything you need. You show up with your clothes, gun, ammo and whatever else they recommend. They take care of the rest. For what you save by not buying gear you might be able to do two or three trips a season. Pay your guides, shake their hands, enjoy the trip and create some memories.

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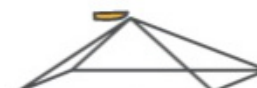


A gar and crappie
suspended in a fallen tree.

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they load their trailer and trucks to chase them north through Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, maybe Illinois or farther north. They put out 500 to 1,000 socks, full-body decoys, shells, rags and mechanical flying decoys, often in a “dog bone” or “fat X” shape, with a glob in the middle to obscure them and the hunters.

They’re obsessed, even if it wears them down physically.

“There’s nothing like it,” Kendall noted, after our monster volley proved to be the highlight of the day. Warm temperatures and fickle birds—typical for snow goose hunting—had them scattered.

“Just like you saw this morning, we got these decoys set out last night hoping the birds that were in that other field, and whatever birds had been feeding here, would come in,” he continued. “Some did, and then finally that giant group did, and it’s just mesmerizing. We’ve seen that kind of thing with two or three times as many birds swarming, landing, lifting and hopping over and over, and it’s just amazing. It got in our blood years ago and we love it.”



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Dogs can really get a workout on good days during the Conservation Order season. It's an opportunity for training, reinforcing good habits and enjoying a Lab's efforts.

MARK SIDELINGER

SNOW BIOLOGY 101

Snow geese breed and rear their young each summer from Russia across the Arctic to western Greenland, migrating in autumn through the four North American flyways. Most of these are lesser snow geese, weighing from 7 to 10 pounds, while the greater snow geese are a bit bigger and are found primarily in eastern Canada and parts of the northeastern United States.

Hunters will find snows from the Carolinas to California. Their haunts are changing, and have changed. Thirty or 40 years ago it was cool to head to south Texas to chase snow geese around Katy and all the open agricultural land around there south of Houston. That's all developed now. The geese have moved east and west, to Louisiana and other parts of Texas and the Central Flyway. The ones now east move back up to Canada via the Mississippi Flyway, following the rivers and the flyway's ample fields of rice, beans and corn in Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, western Kentucky, Iowa and Minnesota.

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GREAT GOOSE GEAR

Grab these items when the snows start to fly.

1 ALPS OUTDOORZ SNOW GOOSE CHAIR

This comfortable chair (\$249.99; alpsoutdoorz.com) features the same ergonomic seat as the ALPS Zero Gravity Layout Blind but without the blind panels. Elasticized lacing that ties the padded assembly to the frame minimizes torso and leg pressure. The headrest keeps the head ideally positioned. Adjustable backpack carry straps are integrated into the chair. Bonus: The chair makes it easy to take a mid-morning nap if the geese aren't cooperating.

2 STOEGER M3500 SNOW GOOSE SHOTGUN

Specifically designed for hunting snow geese, this version of the M3500 (\$899; stoegerindustries.com) features an inertia-driven action, extended 10-round magazine tube, 28-inch barrel and 3 1/2-inch chamber. The stock and receiver are finished in Distressed White Cerakote. The gun handles and shoulders well, offers a fine sightline to the target and rips off 10 rounds with ease. A couple of us intentionally loaded 3 1/2-inch ammo to test recoil, which wasn't any more recognizable than with 3-inch loads. While this shotgun is made for snow geese, it would be great for hunting coyotes or hogs, too.

3 DRYSHOD NOSHO ULTRA HUNT BOOTS

If you're a big ol' boy, you appreciate sturdy boots with ample insulation and a wide, adjustable gusset in the back for your calves. DryShod had you in mind with its NoSho Ultra Hunt boots (\$214.95; dryshodusa.com). They have seven layers to defeat the cold from the tough exterior and rugged, gripping sole to the soft internal lining that breathes but keeps your tootsies warm. In total there's 11 mm of insulating layers; you might get by with a thin, wool running sock, like I did during our goose hunt.

4 ALPS OUTDOORZ PIT BLIND BAG

Finding a good, durable blind bag for your gear is a must if you're a waterfowl hunter. The ALPS Pit Blind Bag (\$89.99; alpsoutdoorz.com) fills that need. It has a wide-mouth pop-open compartment with a removable divider so you can separate ammo from gear, for example. Multiple pockets hold everything from licenses and phone to tools for repairs. The deep, large interior features a pocket to hold a thermal beverage container or other gear. (Choose the beverage.) The handles and zipper will withstand rugged use, and a waterproof, molded bottom keeps your stuff dry.



Federal officials estimate a population of about 17 million light geese, which include snow and Ross' geese, with a significant number of those being juveniles. Adults are smart, learning quickly about hunting scenarios and where to go or avoid. Juveniles stay with their parents the first year, migrating and learning. Snow geese use traditional areas each year; it takes loss of habitat, like in southeast Texas, to push them elsewhere. Juveniles learn these migration routes, and the cycle continues when they, after a year, disperse to rear broods while their parents tend to another clutch of three to seven eggs.

It's a tough situation, though. Hunters aren't killing enough juveniles (or adults) to reduce the population significantly enough. Loss of habitat on breeding grounds eventually will hit a tipping point, pushing birds to seek new areas. And despite the lack of regulations—snow geese essentially are feral hogs with wings—hunters don't and won't go out to kill hundreds of birds every day. The population will crash due to something, perhaps avian flu or another disease, or natural mortality and habitat changes will eventually keep it in check. The other scenario is snow goose numbers will expand to the detriment of habitat and other species. None of these are pretty pictures.



Flocks can hold thousands of snow geese and strip a field of green forage in a couple days.

IT ALL DEPENDS ...

The Kelso brothers work like a well-oiled machine, setting up decoys and plotting strategy with hardly a blink of an eye. Has the wind shifted or is something else making the geese act weird over the spread? The two guides identify it and adjust accordingly. Has it been hours without a sighting? Time to pack up and move, or leave things for the next day if they have a good feeling about the spot.

Driving the roads around Stuttgart, you'll see snow geese in fields. It may be a small or large group. The birds may not appear to have any rhyme or reason in how they move along in the field. Seeing others come in, landing in certain areas, doesn't always offer clues about why they picked that spot. In fields with larger groups, you'll see a hopscotch game break out: 40 to 50 geese suddenly lift, fly ahead and land. Moments later, another does the same.

"They're feeding and trying to get ahead of the other birds to the best food," Kendall says about the hopping maneuver. "They're always trying to get as much as they can. They're voracious. You'll see a field one day, and come back a day or two later and it's been grazed to the dirt."

We begin taking up our gear and all the decoys. Our crew is scrambling to beat a potential ice storm bearing down on the region in a couple of days. The

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spread begins to disappear, piled into neat stacks to be loaded a specific way into the enclosed trailer. Kendall and Keaton are heading north, likely to Missouri for a few days, if not more. I ask about what they've learned over the years with the decoys and watching the birds.

"Full-body decoys are time consuming, and it adds a lot more work to it," Kendall admits. "But the realism to it ... those big decoys that are fingered out on the ends, you can't beat that. They just

look so good. If you see big flocks in fields, they'll often have a long trickle tail where the birds are landing and walking up to the flock. Those full-body decoys help with that.

"We probably ran 1,200 to 1,400 decoys back in our younger days," he remembers. "It didn't really seem to change the game, though. I'm sure in some situations it might have helped to have more, but overall, we didn't see it. Probably 400 to 500 is the minimum. You can't mass enough of them in the center

to adequately hide you in the chairs, I think, unless you have at least that many if not more. Now, if you use a pit and are completely ground level and hidden, you might be fine with that or maybe even fewer. Blending into the flock [of decoys] is so critically important. If you do it right, by the time you're lying there in your white coat or jumpsuit, you're all blocked in. But it all depends on the birds and what they want to do."

As always with waterfowl hunting, it all depends on the birds. **G&F**

With dozens and sometimes hundreds of birds within range, bagging doubles and even triples is not uncommon during the spring snow goose season.



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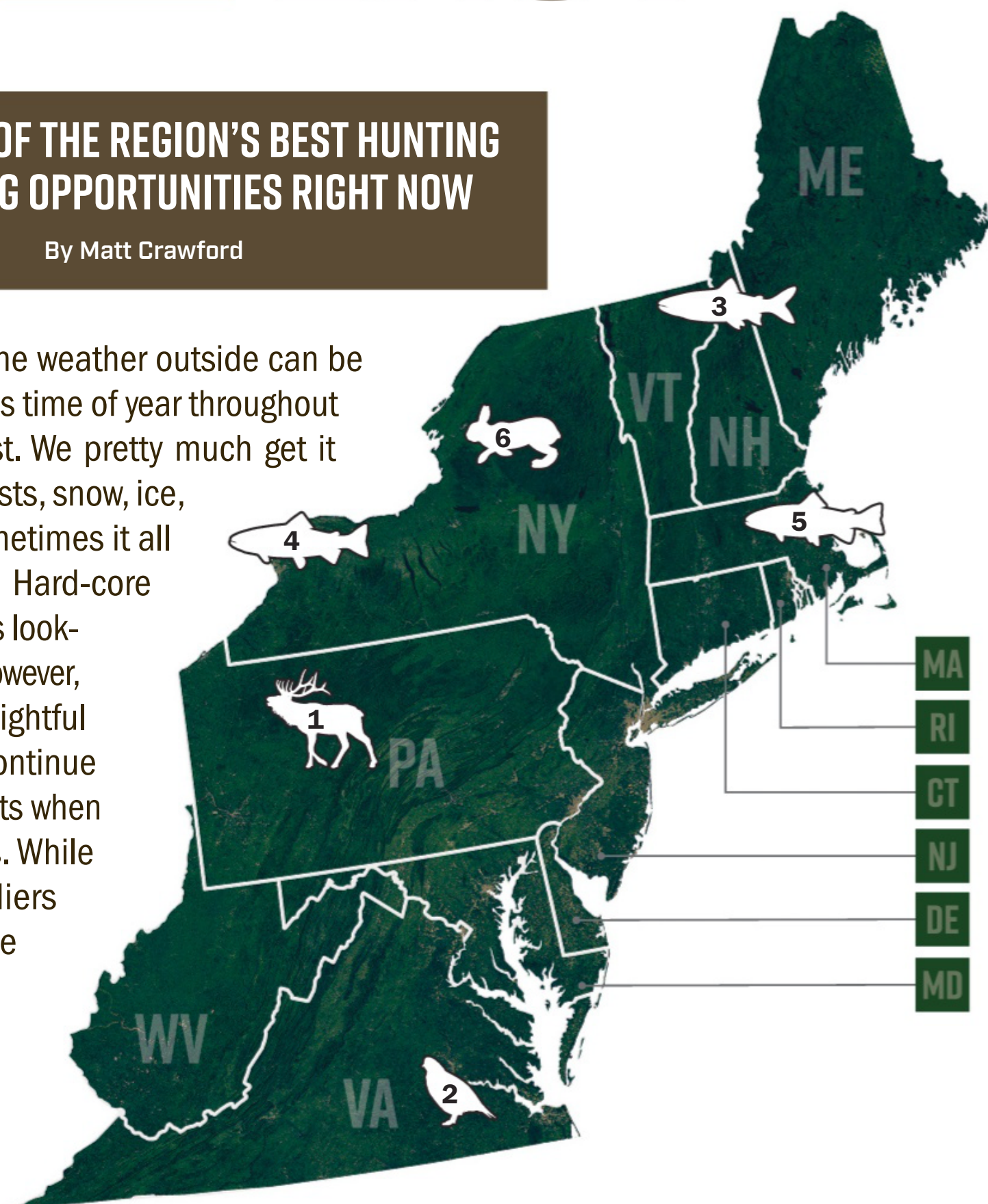
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AROUND THE EAST

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES RIGHT NOW

By Matt Crawford

No question, the weather outside can be frightful at this time of year throughout the Northeast. We pretty much get it all: Arctic blasts, snow, ice, sleet and rain. Sometimes it all comes in one day. Hard-core hunters and anglers looking to get outside, however, have plenty of delightful opportunities to continue their favorite pursuits when the weather allows. While deer hunting soldiers on for most of the Northeast states, there are several other options to consider as well.





KEYSTONE ELK

We tend to think of elk mostly as denizens of the Rocky Mountains, but Pennsylvania is home to the largest wild elk herd in the northeastern United States. Each year, the Keystone State holds a special, permit-only, late-season elk hunt in late December and early January in the north-central part of the state. While it might not have the most elk in the nation, Pennsylvania has some of the biggest bulls in the U.S., with monsters routinely qualifying for the Boone and Crockett record book. While it's too late to take part in this year's hunt, put this on your 2023 calendar: Pennsylvania's application period for the elk hunt opens each year in mid-June and closes July 31.



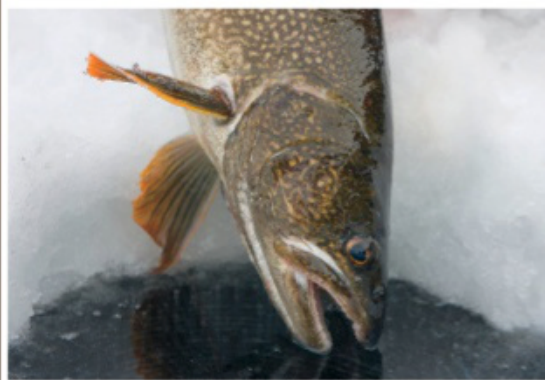
VIRGINIA QUAIL

Like elk, there aren't a lot of bobwhite quail left in the Northeast. In fact, there aren't a whole lot of quail left across their historic range, mostly because of a decades-long transformation of land usage that has severely reduced the amount of suitable habitat. A huntable population of bobwhites remains in Virginia, though, and thousands of hunters get after them this time every year. Quail hunting is closed on all public lands west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, but there are decent numbers of birds in the state's wildlife management areas in rural portions east of Interstate 95 where pine forests and agricultural crops grow on a large scale.



NORTHERN TROUT

If you want to head far north in search of ice-fishing adventure, consider trekking to the extreme northern tip of New Hampshire and the region where the headwaters of the Connecticut River rise. A few of the notable waterbodies here include Big Diamond Pond in Coos County; Lake Francis, which holds browns and rainbows; and First Connecticut Lake, where big lakers are known to prowl. Live smelt are often the choice in New Hampshire's northern lakes, but many of the region's best anglers will use big suckers to entice the biggest lake trout in the Northeast to come up through the ice.



LOWER NIAGARA HEATS UP

More than 700,000 gallons of water flow over Niagara Falls every second, which is both hard to comprehend and a 100-percent guarantee that no matter how colds it get, the Niagara River below the falls is never going to ice up. That means the uber-productive water is a good bet for fishing even at this time of year. The hamlet of Lewiston, N.Y., is angler-friendly and there are several public boat launches within a few minutes of downtown. Expect to catch just about anything from steelhead to lakers to walleyes to smallmouth bass. There are lots of charter captains on this section of river who can put you on the species you're most interested in (check niagaracharter.com).



NEW ENGLAND FISHING EXPO

If you're stuck at home in these cold months remembering all the big fish that got away last year, there's a way to scratch your winter fishing itch. The New England Fishing Expo (nefishingexpo.com) will be held Jan. 27 to 29 at the Foxboro Regency Hotel and Conference Center just a few miles northwest of Boston. One of the largest fishing expos in New England, there'll be plenty of new equipment to purchase, brand new boats to fawn over and an impressive list of speakers and seminars.



SNOWSHOES FOR SNOWSHOES

The massive Northern Forest stretches across Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York. One of the most prevalent critters of the forest is the snowshoe (or varying) hare, which just happens to be in-season across all four states. Hotspots include public lands around Jackman, Maine; Pittsburgh, N.H.; Island Pond, Vt., and the Tug Hill Region near Watertown, N.Y. Anywhere in those areas where active forest management of softwood stands takes place should hold bunnies. If you want a guided hunt with trained beagles, your best bets are found in Maine and Vermont, but don't overlook the national wildlife refuges (Umbagog on the Maine-New Hampshire border and Silvio O. Conte in Vermont) for a DIY experience.



KILL THE CHILL

HOW TO STAY IN THE WOODS LONGER—AND REMAIN EFFECTIVE—
DURING THE COLDEST DAYS OF THE SEASON

By Bruce Ingram

The mid-October guided trip for turkeys in West Virginia's Cranberry Wilderness had begun with temperatures in the mid-60s, light winds and blue skies. My lightweight camo became wet with perspiration from trekking up and down the mountains in the warm weather, and by the time I returned to camp near dark, the temperature had dropped into the 30s and the wind had begun blowing from the northeast. Then things got worse.

The camp cook accidentally set fire to the tent, causing a gaping hole in

the top. Soon afterwards, snow began falling through that chasm, the wind began howling at over 35 mph, the temperature plunged into the low 20s and I spent truly the coldest night of my life. The next morning, I awoke to snow covering my lightweight sleeping bag. Shivering uncontrollably, I told my guide that I was leaving and started the 3-mile snowy slog back to my vehicle. I recall keeping the car's heater on high most of the way home.

We can't plan on certain things happening—such as a camp cook starting a

grease fire then trying to extinguish the flames by pouring water on them—but we can strive to wear the right kind of clothing to keep us afield from dawn to dark during frigid conditions. Often, that requires more innovative thinking than just dressing in layers and keeping an eye on the forecast.

IDENTIFY YOUR COLD SPOTS

Dave Larsen, CEO of hunting apparel manufacturer Gamehide, believes that hunters should first consider their individual metabolism and cold spots.



MULTI-USE WARMERS

An environment-friendly, air-activated heat pouch

If you've made a concerted effort to cut down on single-use products and are always trying to think of ways to repurpose things rather than send them to the landfill, there's a new air-activated warmer option that's right up your alley. Ignik is the name and reducing waste is the company's game.

All of Ignik's warmers, which include hand warmers, toe warmers and full-foot warmers, come in resealable (and recyclable) packaging that allow the warmers to be used for up to 72 hours after the initial opening. On top of that, the company claims the warmers are 98-percent biodegradable and that the all-natural contents of the pouches can be added to compost once they're done producing heat.

The Week-Long Warm Pack (\$29.99; ignik.com) includes two pairs of foot warmers (which produce 8 hours of heat), six pairs of toe warmers (6 to 8 hours of heat) and 12 pairs of hand warmers (10 hours of heat).

—John Taranto



HEAT BOOSTERS

Four key items to consider for ice-cold hunts

Gamehide's Dave Larsen recommends hunters add these four things to their cold-weather wardrobe if they don't use them already.

- **HAND MUFF:** Larsen says that many wintertime hunters try to keep their hands warm by wearing heavy-duty gloves, but don't like the bulk when it comes time to pull a trigger or release an arrow. The solution, he says, is to wear light gloves and keep your hands inside a muff, attached around your waist, until it's time to shoot.
- **NECK GAITER:** Larsen believes one of the areas that hunters often neglect to protect is their necks. A warm, soft gaiter does a great job of keeping the wind off the neck and face while helping to keep heat from escaping through the collars of upper-body layers.
- **FACE MASK:** Even a lightweight mask will serve as some protection from the wind and cold; a heavy-duty one will help even more. Or try a wool balaclava.
- **BIB OVERALLS:** Larsen says his company's Pant/Bib garment adds an extra layer of warmth over the kidney area like a full bib does, but without as much bulk.

"For example," he says, "we have one staff person whose metabolism runs hot all the time, and he always dresses light in even the coldest weather. For me—and this has changed as I've gotten older—my feet are my cold spots. I've got to make sure they stay warm or my whole body will grow cold. Another challenge is to choose clothing that will stop the wind without impacting air flow underneath, and will add warmth but not bulk."

SETTLE IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

What we do after we reach our stand site also plays a major role in how well we stay warm during frigid conditions.

"Many hunters, myself included, will wear a light shirt and pants for the walk to their treestand," Larsen says. "But some hunters often make one of two mistakes after they get there: They either immediately put on their heavy clothing or wait until they get cold to do so.

"What I recommend is when you first arrive, wipe away the excess moisture that has accumulated on the way in," Larsen continues. "Then, after you are as dry as you can be, immediately put on your warmest clothing, again making sure that you pay attention to your individual cold spots. You definitely don't want to wait until you've gotten cold to put on extra clothes because by then you've lost the warmth you built up on the way to your stand."

Larsen says another advantage of this routine is being able to settle into your stand for the duration without squirming about and risking being spotted by game. Plus, you'll be able to concentrate more on the hunt than on how cold you are becoming.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Virginia offers a two-week January turkey season, and with a tag to punch, I went hunting on a day when the wind-chill factor hovered in the mid-teens, snow already blanketed the ground, flurries occurred periodically, and the wind pummeled me constantly. My cold spot is my chest and stomach area, so I donned two layers of wool underwear, a fleece quarter-zip top and my warmest camo jacket. For my head and face, I pulled on a 100 percent wool balaclava.

My legs rarely become cold, so I made do with a single layer of wool underwear and the jacket's matching pants. Wool socks were coupled with a pair of boots with 1,200 grams of Thinsulate, and I slipped on a pair of insulated gloves.

It took me until 11:15 a.m. to find and scatter a flock, and a full two hours went by before birds began to periodically answer my calls. I can't say that I was toasty warm as the hours went by, but the wait was tolerable. The 10.8-pound jenny I killed at 5:15 p.m. gave me my biggest hunting thrill of the season. 

RUFFS

AROUND THE EDGES

BAG A LIMIT OF LATE-SEASON GROUSE BY FOCUSING ON PREFERRED WINTER HABITAT.

By Al Raychard

Throughout the Northeast region, October is the traditional hot time to hunt ruffed grouse, but it's hardly the only time. For die-hard grouse hunters, it isn't even the best time. In most states from Virginia to Maine, bird seasons stretch well into December, January or February. While

weather conditions are not always ideal, and hunters might have to pick their days, the late-season grouse woods see fewer hunters, which offers the opportunity to have large parcels of grouse territory all to oneself. There is also less foliage, and snow is a good possibility, so it's easier to spot and get a bead on birds.

FOOD AND SHELTER

As with other wild creatures, a grouse's movements are dictated by seasonal changes in weather patterns, food availability and the need for shelter from predators and deteriorating weather conditions.

Wild berries and other fruits and various nuts, buds and seeds are primary



The best spots to search for grouse in winter are areas that provide desirable food sources near dense cover.

food sources early in the fall. Once these are no longer available, grouse seek out rose hips, raisin viburnum, dogwood berries, wild apples and other remaining fruit sources. Later, when we get into the colder months and these foods are gone, grouse concentrate on buds of aspen (especially second-growth

aspen), alder, birch, willow, mountain ash and hazelnut.

But it takes more than food to attract and hold late-season grouse. They also need cover. Stands of pine, spruce, fir and even stands of oak trees holding onto their foliage provide thermal cover from cold temperatures. Just as important, they

also provide cover from flying predators. From a grouse's perspective, the ideal late-fall and early-winter habitat features reliable food sources near cover. This includes dense timber bordering an area that has been cut in recent years, as well as dense cover bordering bogs and swamps.

HIT THE SNOOZE BUTTON

Early-season grouse hunters prefer to get up with the sun and hit the woodlands early. This is not necessary in the late season. Sleep in, get some rest. Ruffed grouse carry little fat and need to conserve what little they have to get them through the winter. Once the cold season arrives, grouse move very little; when they do, it's not until daytime temperatures have warmed up a bit. When morning temperatures warm quickly above the freezing mark, birds will typically be active and feeding after 10 o'clock or 10:30. If nighttime temperatures fell well below freezing and are slow to rise the next morning, noontime to just before sunset can be productive, as birds will be out feeding before settling in for the night.

WIND, SUN AND SHADOWS

Grouse don't like strong or gusty winds, especially in cold temperatures. During such periods, they generally hold tight in dense pines, firs or other thick cover, often near sheltered lowland pockets bordering swamps and bogs or near the bases of ridges. They venture out only when it's necessary to feed. Some productive gunning is certainly possible on windy days, but look for areas with food offerings nearby that are protected from the wind—where it blows through the high treetops, not at ground level.

This is a time to hunt slowly, concentrating on dense cover such as pines, firs and other evergreens with dense limbs low to the ground. Those dark, shadowed areas allow grouse to blend in with their surroundings, hidden from the prying eyes of predators and hunters alike.

As temperatures get colder, the sun plays an increasing role in both when and where grouse will be out and about. If wind directions and intensity are cooperative, open, south-facing ridges and sun-filled openings and glades where birds can take advantage of warming temperatures can be hotspots. The same is true of sun-filled woodland roads and trails that course through habitat where protective cover and food is close at hand.

DON'T FORGET TO LOOK UP

Keep in mind that grouse, like turkeys, roost in trees at night. Since birds usually sit tight until the sun has had a chance to work its magic, it pays to look up during

WHERE TO GO

Top public grouse spots across the region



MAINE

The **Bud Leavitt Wildlife Management Area** covers 6,385 acres of secondary upland forests and scattered forested wetlands in the towns of Diver-Foxcroft, Atkinson, Garland and Charleston, 25 miles northwest of Bangor. Primary access is from Route 15.



NEW YORK

Tug Hill WMA covers 5,100 acres of hardwood uplands, hardwood-spruce-fir woodlands and some wet lowlands in the town of Montague in Lewis County. Expect lots of snow during the late grouse season.



NEW HAMPSHIRE

Nash Stream Forest offers nearly 40,000 acres of mixed habitat in the towns of Stark, Stratford and Columbia. Road access is available, but plan to do some walking.



PENNSYLVANIA

Tioga County is home to some 26,599 acres of state game lands, including **SGL 37** near Tioga, **SGL 208**, **SGL 268** and **SGL 335**. Most are covered in hardwood forest, and ruffed grouse habitat improvements have been conducted on several.



VERMONT

The **Bill Sladyk WMA** covers 9,040 acres of mixed habitat north of Island Ponds on Route 114. The Ben Cole Clearing Areas are specifically managed for ruffed grouse.



VIRGINIA

The **Little North Mountain WMA** covers approximately 17,000 acres of hilly—and in places quite rugged—upland hardwoods in Augusta and Rockbridge counties. The area offers several recent ruffed grouse habitat improvement areas.



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morning forays. This is especially true when the temperatures are hovering around the freezing mark.

The question here becomes: Should we kill roosting birds? Personally, I've rarely had to make such a decision. No matter how carefully I hunt, it seems roosting birds inevitably see me before I see them. They take flight most often because I fail to look up at the right time and place, or because I am concentrating on lower levels.

Regardless of personal philosophy, scanning the trees from time to time is a good way to determine whether you are hunting in good grouse territory. It's also a potentially good way to flush birds. Once they take wing, follow their flight by sight or sound, conduct a follow-up stalk and hopefully you'll get a second opportunity.

BUDDY SYSTEM

Regardless of the part of the season, hunting with a partner is both more enjoyable and more advantageous. After all, four eyes are better than two and two shotguns are better than one when hunting grouse. Spread out while working an area to increase shot opportunities. If one hunter flushes a bird but fails to get a shot (or misses), his partner could very well get a follow-up opportunity. A grouse roosted in a tree has an uncanny habit of putting the tree between itself and the approaching hunter when



If possible, time a hunt after a fresh snowfall. Soft powder makes for quieter walking than old, crusty snow.

it flushes. A partner positioned and ready at a different angle, or standing back in a strategic location, might get the shot that's needed.

GROUSE AND SNOW

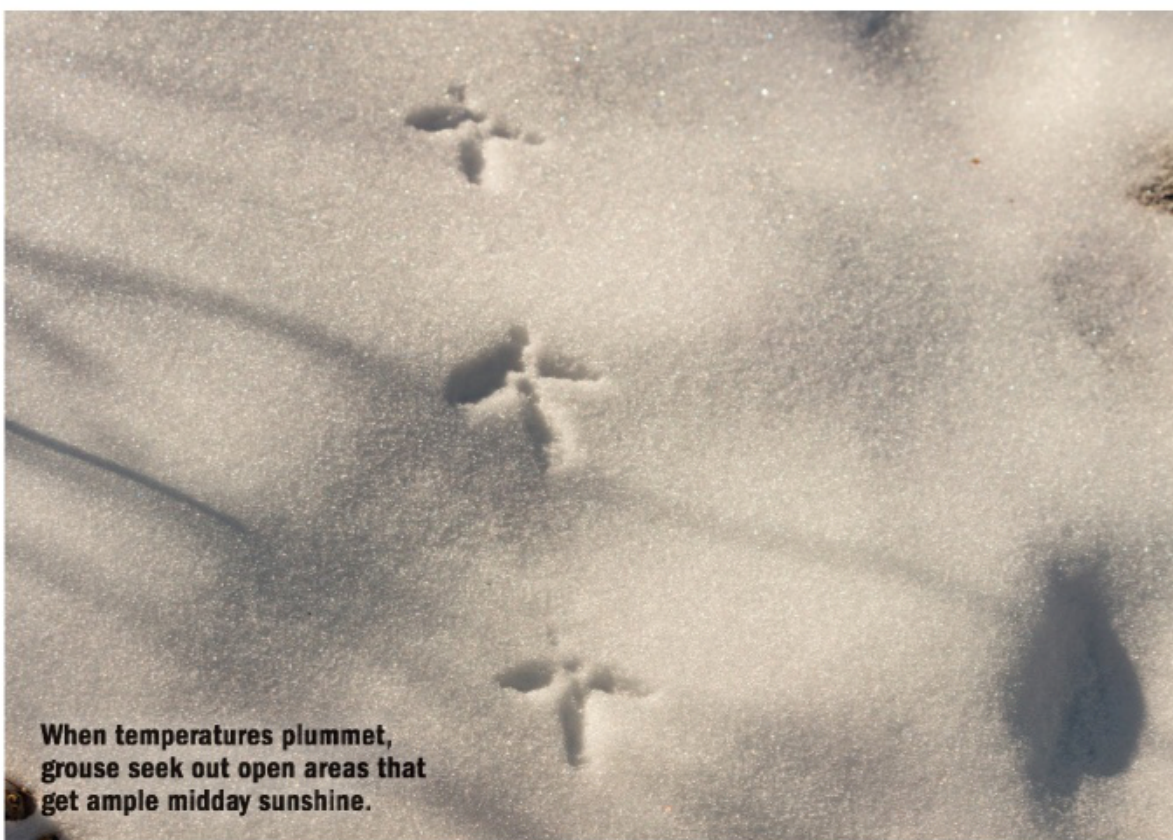
Snow can be a curse and a blessing during the late grouse season depending on how much covers the ground. A dusting to 5 or 6 inches of powder highlights the birds' brown plumage, making it

easier to see them on the ground or in pines and firs when snow blankets the limbs. Be sure to check at the bases of food trees, under low-lying branches where the snow has yet to accumulate and areas where the snow has melted or has blown away, exposing the ground. Grouse will often seek out these places in their search for seeds and other food.

I generally stay out of the grouse woods when snow is crust-covered, simply because of the noise created by walking. Birds are generally well gone before you get anywhere near them. Deeper snow depths, anything over 10 or 12 inches, can make navigating dense cover a pain, and hidden obstacles are easy to trip over. I've spooked birds on the ground with these snow depths, but the deeper the snow the more difficult it is for birds to get around, so I give a lot of attention to the trees.

CHANGE CHOKES AND LOADS

Late-season grouse woods are typically more open than in October, when 12- to 15-yard shots might have been typical in dense foliage. During the late season, 20-yard and longer shots are quite possible due to the open landscape. Hunting with an improved cylinder will help bag grouse at greater distances. If you use No. 8 shot early in the season, consider switching to No. 7 or 7 1/2 shot now. 



When temperatures plummet, grouse seek out open areas that get ample midday sunshine.

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One nice thing about jump-shooting is that you don't have to be on the scene at 0-dark-thirty. In fact, a mid-morning start is typically best.

JUMP TO IT

**FAVORITE DUCK HOLE FROZEN OVER?
HEAD TO MOVING WATER FOR SOME JUMP-SHOOTING FUN.**

By Scott Linden



A dog isn't required for a lot jump-shooting scenarios, but can come in handy when the water is deep or fast-moving. It should be well behaved or kept on a lead until needed.

In a rare case of the stars perfectly aligning, we'd limited on ruffed grouse. After the shock wore off, we got a look at the clock and debated the propriety of an early happy hour. Then my partner remembered the small creek nestled deep in one of the draws we'd pushed. Unlike every nearby pond languishing under a layer of ice, the creek's sparkling, emerald pools reflected the weak winter sun. The only open water for miles, they'd harbored ducks earlier in the day until our dogs bumped them out as they crashed through the brush in search of a drink.

We put the dogs up, swapped ammo and went into sneaky mode, ghosting through the timber, choosing our steps like whitetail hunters. When we emerged, the local mallard population was short a couple drakes. Our breath clouding in the chilly air, we broke out the libation and thanked the ducks,

Mother Nature and my buddy's one good idea of the trip.

We were a little wiser, we got more mileage from a hunting day, we brought home more meat for the tribe and a stellar day became epic. Who doesn't need more of those? Whether as an adjunct to an upland hunt or when still water is locked in ice, jump shooting waterfowl is a way to fit another day or three into hunting season.

DON'T JUST SIT THERE

As a committed upland hunter (some say I should be committed), sitting in a blind staring at the sky is not my idea of a good time, even when it's not cold and wet. I'd rather go to the hunt than wait for the hunt to (maybe) come to me, so jump-shooting is my go-to strategy if I want to put ducks in the Dutch oven or take smoked goose breast to the next holiday party.

Jump-shooting is a catch-all term for freelance waterfowl hunting tactics that don't involve shivering in a blind, doing much calling or even using decoys. The roles are largely reversed. Hunters are moving, sometimes a lot. The ducks and geese are holed up in a piece of open water until we get there and "jump" them.

As temperatures drop, jump shooters have a decided advantage over blind-bound hunters. We can seek out moving water that freezes later or less frequently than ponds and lakes. We can move with ease, discovering the open eddies, pools and edges often found even on frozen-over rivers. Jump shooting is Zen-like, our minds completely occupied by the mantra of intelligence gathering, reconnaissance, strategy and tactics.

Ready to try it? Here are 12 tips to help you get moving after ducks and geese while our brethren's teeth are chattering as they're hunkered in a blind.

1

Plan Ahead: Research where creeks and rivers are open to hunting and are possibly the only open water in a world of icy ponds. Consult maps, do some scouting and spend some time on your mobile mapping app.

2

Formulate a Strategy: String together a few likely spots, so if one doesn't pan out, another might—without a long drive in between. Plot your approach for maximum concealment and stealth. Start by finding streams near known waterfowl hangouts that freeze late in the season. Don't overlook your favorite smallmouth stream.

3

Have Another Cup of Coffee: We ambush waterfowl after they've fed in the morning and have found a safe place to rest for the day. Mid-morning is a good starting time. Likewise, your best hunting might be when ducks leave those spots and head for their evening feed. If you're there when they fly, all the better.

4

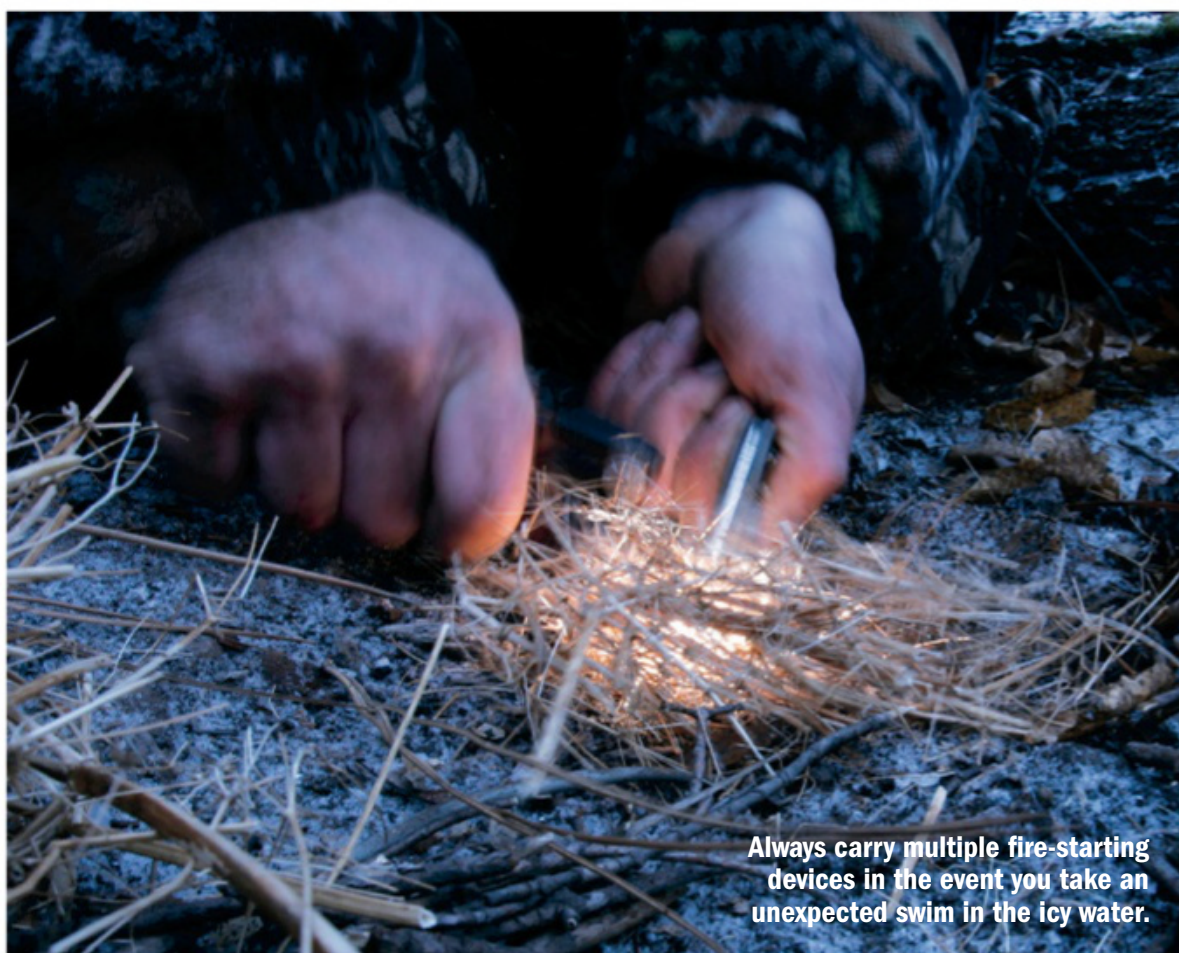
Go Full Ninja: Move with maximum stealth. Use every tree trunk, bush and hummock to conceal your movement. Taking a dog? Silence his collar tags and keep him on a lead.

5

Be Like Patton: The war hero was a legendary tactician. Earn your general's stars by assessing the situation before you (quietly) shut the truck door. Glass the area to find ducks or geese and plan the smartest approach. Use low spots, dikes, terraces, natural sounds and vegetation to cover your stalk. If there's another truck parked in "your" spot, head up- or downstream and set up to pass-shoot the birds that other guy spooks.

6

Stop, Look, Listen: As you get close, you may hear ducks gabbling or splashing and geese honking. Alter your sneak as necessary. Look through cover for pieces of birds and glints of water. Watch your step. The last thing you need is a plunge into a beaver hole when it's go-time.



Always carry multiple fire-starting devices in the event you take an unexpected swim in the icy water.

THE ESSENTIALS

Traveling light is one of the joys of jump-shooting, but there are a few items you'll want to be sure to have along.

- **YOUR FAVORITE DOUBLE GUN:** A third shot is exceedingly rare when jump-shooting. A modified choke covers most pass-shooting duties and close-in jump shots. Number 2 steel is a good load for ducks; opt for BBs for geese.
- **SHOTGUN SLING:** Helps to keep your hands free for busting brush, handling a dog lead and maybe even carrying a few decoys.
- **CAMO:** It might get you a couple steps closer to the riverbank before you're busted, which can be the difference between a hit and a whiff.
- **MULTIPLE LAYERS:** You may want to peel one off after a long sneak or add one if the weather turns.
- **HIP BOOTS:** Just in case, but definitely if you don't have a dog.
- **MAP OR APP:** Often, the most direct route to a waterfowl loafing areas is hardly the easiest one.
- **BINOCULAR:** Keep an eye on birds throughout your approach to sense for any wariness.
- **DOG LEAD:** While Rover will serve his purpose after you drop birds in the drink, he needs to be in control up until then.
- **A CALL OR TWO:** Leave the lanyard at the truck and put your favorite call in your pocket just in case you need to chat up the birds.
- **FIRE STARTERS:** Carry a couple in case you take an inadvertent dip and need to warm up pronto.
- **DUCK STRAP OR BACKPACK:** You know, in case you actually shoot something.

Finally, do everyone a favor—including search-and-rescue volunteers—and be self-contained and safe. Bring survival and first-aid equipment, hunt with a buddy and tell someone reliable where you're going and when you'll be back. Tell them how long they should wait before calling the sheriff. Give them a map with your spots circled. Before you load your shotgun, mark your parking place on your GPS or phone. Be aware of property lines, leave gates the way you found them and give livestock a wide berth—unless you're helping with an impromptu round-up.

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7

Find Calm Water: Waterfowl don't want to battle current when they're settled for the day, so they'll seek the quieter inside and outside edges of a creek's twists and turns. Look for oxbows and back eddies, too.

8

Pair Up and Spread Out: Work out a few basic hand signals with your partner and split up as you approach a likely spot. Ducks move. Water does too. Your quarry may not be where you burst out of cover for the shot. If your buddy is up or downstream, he might get a shot, or vice-versa.

9

Work the Wind: Skittish waterfowl will seek quieter pockets in cattails, or hang behind a log jam that breaks the wind. Once pushed into the air, they'll most often turn into the wind. Be there.



Just as ducks prefer to land into the wind, they also like to take off into it. Keep this in mind when planning your route to their holding area.

10

Be Patient: Every flock typically has a slow learner. Reload once you've cursed the bulk of the bunch as they flew away unscathed, and remember that ducks and geese choose their resting spots for a reason. They may come back. If you brought decoys, deploy them and sit tight. Consider tootling a come-back call.

11

Anticipate Obstruction: Someday I'll re-invent skeet shooting by planting a bunch of telephone poles in the field. For grouse hunters and jump-shooters, it'll be quite natural to shoot through and around those ersatz "trees" without a second thought. If your best shot is swinging through a streamside alder, do it. A pro guide once called it "shooting at the ghost" of a bird.

12

Be Good: We once had to push an escaped herd of cattle off the road to get to our spot. Then we found the nearest house and reported what we'd done. Our good deed resulted in an invitation to hunt the owner's secret spot on the far side of his pasture. We employed tips 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8, and brought a couple redheads to Thanksgiving dinner that night. **G&F**

Mallards and Canada geese are among the most hardy waterfowl. As long as there's open water and available food, they'll stick around.

CARTER KLATT (TOP); RYAN CAMPBELL (BOTTOM)



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HUNT THE KITCHEN

AT THE END OF THE SEASON, WHITETAILS ARE FOCUSED ON RECOVERING FROM THE RUT AND PREPARING FOR WINTER. **THESE ARE THE FOODS THEY SEEK OUT** TO ACCOMPLISH BOTH.

By Zack Vucurevich



Deer consume browse not just to fill their stomachs, but also to stay warm. Digesting foods with high lignin content helps stoke their metabolism.

Winter in the Northeast can be brutal for a deer herd. Fresh off the heels of the rut, most bucks have lost 20 to 25 percent of their body weight and are left to replenish their fat reserves during the greatest nutritional bottleneck of the calendar year.

Couple their dietary needs with the weather conditions they are facing—bitingly cold temperatures, howling winds and heavy snowfalls—and it's a wonder that deer don't succumb to winter kill more often. But how can we, as hunters, use this to our advantage to fill our late-season tags?

As a wildlife biologist and habitat consultant, my primary concern whenever I am working on a property in the Northeast is late-season habitat. Not only are deer here desperate for quality food resources to make up for what they lost during the rut, but their metabolism is the most important mechanism they have for generating internal heat to stay warm. For this reason, your late-season hunting strategy is simple: It's time to hunt the kitchen.

RED OAKS

While acorns are low in protein, they are extremely high in carbohydrates and fats—42 percent and 52 percent, respectively. These carbs and fats are what help replenish a deer's fat reserves and keep it warm throughout the winter. Because of their nutritional content, a productive oak grove is tough to beat for late-season hunting success. With that in mind, it is important to understand that not all acorns are created equal.

Whitetails can and will eat all acorns, though certain varieties are preferred over others. Factors such as availability and time of year will influence the deer's decision to visit one oak species over another. Survey your hunting buddies on what acorn is most preferred by deer, and the answer will be a unanimous "white oak." While this is true, it is important to understand why.

Although every acorn contains tannic acid, the concentration of tannins is what determines the palatability of a particular acorn type. Because of their low tannin levels, white oak acorns are the most desired by whitetail.

So if white oak acorns are more attractive to deer, why do we focus on

red oaks during the late season? It's all about timing. Because white oaks drop their crop from late August through early September, deer key in on that desirable food source during that period and will generally ignore the red oak acorns. White oaks will also germinate shortly after hitting the ground, making them less attractive to deer once they do. Due to their higher tannin content, red oaks acorns "preserve" better through the winter since they germinate the following spring.

How to Hunt: Being able to identify a red oak is the first step to successfully hunting over one. Luckily, the bark of species in the red oak family is conspicuous and easy to identify. It is fairly smooth (compared to its white oak counterparts), dark brown or gray in color and has thin, shiny veins running down the trunk that are typically of a reddish color. I often think these veins look like interwoven ski slopes running down the length of the trunk.

If you aren't aware of where the red oak groves are growing in the area you hunt, let the deer tell you. Because of their tolerance for dry soils, red oaks can typically be found on ridge tops and south-facing hillsides. A productive grove of red oaks can be an absolute dynamite hang-and-hunt scenario during the late season. Grab your tree saddle or climbing stand and follow the tracks and trails until you find fresh sign under one or a cluster of red oak trees. If you find a good stand of trees but don't see any fresh sign, move on to the next one. If you observe evidence of deer pawing at the ground in search of acorns and fresh scat, pick a tree to climb and hang tight.



Red oak acorns are higher in tannins than their white oak cousins. As such, deer usually don't target them until the white oak crop is exhausted later in the season.

YOUNG FOREST HABITAT

Woody browse—plant material high in lignin content, such as twigs, buds and stems—can constitute up to 80 percent of a deer's diet during the winter months.

Being ruminants, deer have a multi-chambered stomach like cows, sheep and goats. This means they can process tough-to-digest plant materials through

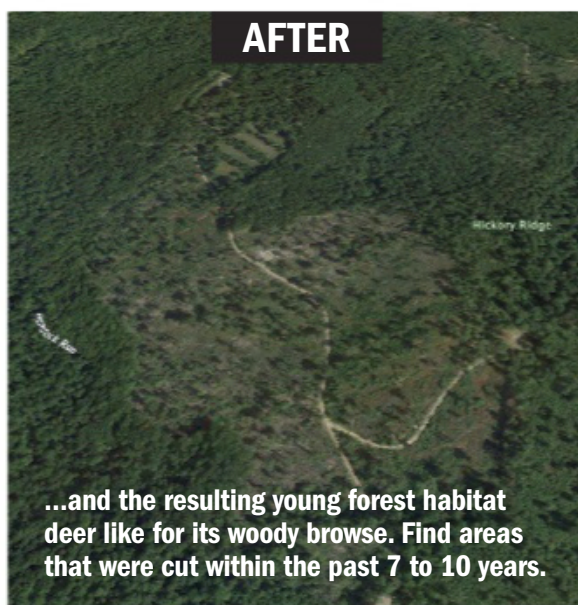
a microbial fermentation process in the front chamber of their stomach before digestion. Why is this important? As stated earlier, a deer's metabolism is what generates heat and keeps them warm through the harsh winter months.

The place to find the highest concentration of woody browse will be young forest habitat. In the Northeast, look for aspen or poplar cuts, clear cuts or any other intense timber harvest or thinning. In this region, a young forest will be productive for deer from the time of harvest up through 7 to 10 years post-harvest, depending on the site. North- and east-facing slopes will mature at a slower rate than south- and west-facing slopes. Species composition will also dictate how long these young forests are a productive food source for deer. For example, an aspen cut will regenerate at a faster rate than a hardwood cut.

As the seedlings and stump sprouts turn to saplings and eventually to young trees, they begin to shade each other out and grow out of the reach of the deer.



If you hunt public land late in the season, Google Earth's timelapse feature is a handy tool for identifying recent timber cuts...



...and the resulting young forest habitat deer like for its woody browse. Find areas that were cut within the past 7 to 10 years.

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Without standing on its hind legs, a deer can only reach limbs that are 4 to 5 feet above the ground, so it is important to take advantage of these food sources while they are available.

How to Hunt: My favorite tool for scouting for young forest habitat is the timelapse feature on Google Earth, especially when hunting public land. Search for your hunting area (WMA, national forest, etc.) in the app and look for recent timber harvests by scanning for large chunks of missing canopy. Once you find a possible harvest area, slide the time bar at the top of the screen to look back on aerial images of the same piece of ground from years past. If the most recent images are from 2020, but you slide back to, say, 2015, and the canopy is contiguous, you know the harvest has occurred sometime in the



Deer gravitate to old fields in winter for easy pickings on shrubs, brambles and perennial forbs.



Despite our best intentions and the work we put into them, food plots in the East rarely draw late-season deer like natural foods do.

WHAT ABOUT FOOD PLOTS?

Planted plots can attract deer in winter but are hardly a slam dunk.

As a habitat consultant and biologist, I love food plots and incorporate them as part of nearly every management plan I write, but they are not a cure-all, especially in the Northeast. Due to the terrain and short growing season, many food plotters are limited to what they can reasonably plant for their deer. Often we are restricted to small-acreage plots, leading to over-grazing and failed plantings. Unless you plant standing corn or sorghum, there is a good likelihood that whatever you planted will be under feet of snow in December and January. It is for these reasons that I prefer to focus my late-season efforts on natural food sources during this time.

last 7 years. This feature can save you countless hours and miles of hiking only to discover the harvest is mature beyond the point of being a productive hunting location.

Another resource I readily utilize is a simple phone call to the wildlife manager of the WMA or the district ranger for the national forest I want to hunt. It might take a little effort, but with a good attitude and some old-fashioned detective work, you can quickly figure out where the most recent timber harvest has occurred. I like to utilize the logging roads and landing strips from the timber harvest both for access and for choosing a hunting location. Consider using some of the debris left behind to construct a brush blind, as you will be limited to hunting the outskirts of the young forest due to limited visibility.

OLD FIELD HABITAT

Much like young forest habitats, old fields attract deer for their woody browse, albeit in a different form. Old fields tend to have heavy shrub and bramble components. American plum, sumac, elderberry, dogwood and blackberry are some of my favorite species to encounter when scouting an old field. Old fields also have the added benefit of possessing perennial forbs. Even though these forbs go dormant during the winter months, many of them will still be green

WINDIGO IMAGES (LEFT); LINDA FRESHWATERS ARNDT (TOP)

and nutritious at the base, where deer will paw down through the snow to reach the lush food source when there's no other greenery to eat.

How to Hunt: Much like looking for young forest habitats, I do most of my scouting for old field locations digitally. Using your favorite mapping software, look for areas that look “messy” from the aerial images. Most often found on neglected pasture lands and around flood plains, old field habitats can be easily distinguished from the surrounding woodlands and agriculture. If you are hunting around a flood control lake, look for areas where the creeks dump into the fingers of the main lake. These areas flood every couple of years, and the standing water will help “drown” many of the tree species and promote moisture-loving shrubs such as buttonbush. These spots offer great opportunities to hunt areas that other hunters don't have the means or determination to access.

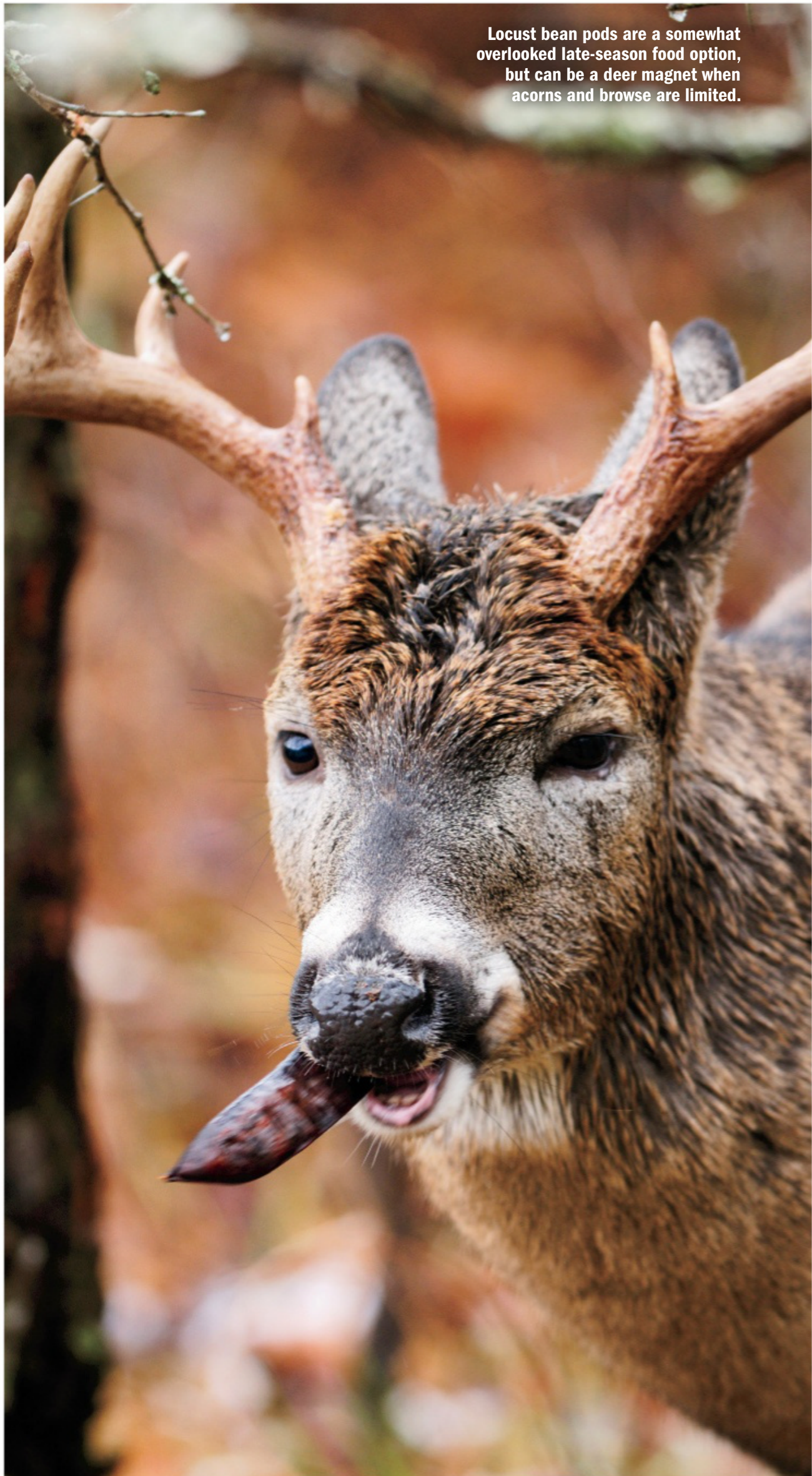
HONORABLE MENTIONS

Fern Patches: These are especially important for those who hunt the big woods. While deer typically won't feed on the leaves of ferns during the growing season, the bulbs of the plants can become a highly desirable food source for deer making a living in the deep timber. Deer will dig them out of the ground through the snow.

Locust Bean Pods: If you know of an area full of locust trees, don't overlook their bean pods as a late-season food source. I've witnessed deer in West Virginia bed down and wait for the wind to blow these large pods off the tree. When pods hit the ground, the deer will stand up, walk over and consume them, then go back to where they were bedded and wait for the next wind gust to knock more of them down.

Persimmons: The great thing about a mature persimmon tree is it can hold its fruit all the way through January. If you live in an area blessed with persimmon groves, do not think of these trees as simply a “candy crop” only available during early fall. Keep tabs on the persimmons in your area, and see if any of them are holding fruit late into the winter. 

Locust bean pods are a somewhat overlooked late-season food option, but can be a deer magnet when acorns and browse are limited.



KNOCK ON WOOD

CHANGE YOUR LUCK BEFORE ICE-UP BY TARGETING YOUR FAVORITE FRESHWATER SPECIES AROUND SUBMERGED WOODY COVER.

By Jeff Knapp



The drive to the lake was filled with both anticipation and apprehension. A series of submerged cribs in 25 to 28 feet of water had been quite productive during recent trips, accounting for the former. As for the latter, it was mid-December, and I knew open-water action would soon come to a halt.

Thankfully, the lake's surface had only a thin layer of skim ice—nothing my deep vee would have a problem busting through. Within a few minutes, my friend

Sid Brown and I were hovering over a crib that had been hot my last time out. The sonar unit showed plenty of fish life in and around the wooden structure.

During the next few hours, from this spot and similar ones, we plucked crappies up to 15 inches, yellow perch, a walleye and a couple big channel cats. We also boated a nice musky that was likely making good use of the varied fodder found there. It was a nice way to close out the open-water season. The lake iced over the next day.

FISH MAGNETS

Deep submerged wood becomes a magnet for a variety of gamefish and panfish species during the late fall. Cover that was devoid of fish throughout the summer months suddenly becomes alive after fall turnover and fish have access to the entire water column. In addition to the species mentioned at the outset, I also consistently catch both largemouth and smallmouth bass from these areas.

Primarily, I'm talking about submerged cover located offshore. While



A wide range of species, including bass, panfish and catfish, gravitate to submerged cribs, brush piles and tree limbs after the fall turnover.

shoreline laydowns will hold fish—particularly ones along creek channel swings that fall into deeper water—they also tend to experience fishing pressure due to the fact that they’re visible. I much prefer to find cover well detached from shore that sees much less attention.

In general, submerged wood comes in the form of brush piles, tree limbs and cribs. This cover can make its way into a lake or reservoir naturally, or it can be placed there by man. Along steep shorelines trees can topple into the water. When you see a splintered tree truck along

the bank, it’s worth investigating (with sonar) the nearby lake bottom for the tree that once stood there. Wood can also be washed into reservoirs during high-water events, where it becomes waterlogged and eventually embeds in the lake bottom.

Brushpiles and cribs are commonly introduced for the sole purpose of attracting fish, either by anglers or by resource agencies responsible for managing the waterway. In some states it’s illegal for individuals to take it upon themselves to place cover in a public lake or reservoir.

Regarding depth, submerged wood in 15- to 30-foot depths has been the most productive in my experience, especially 20 to 25 feet. Cover shallower than that doesn’t seem to have the stability to consistently hold fish. I rarely fish deeper than 30 feet due to concerns of barotrauma should I prefer to release fish, which I typically do. Crappies don’t fare well when taken from depths greater than 25 feet.

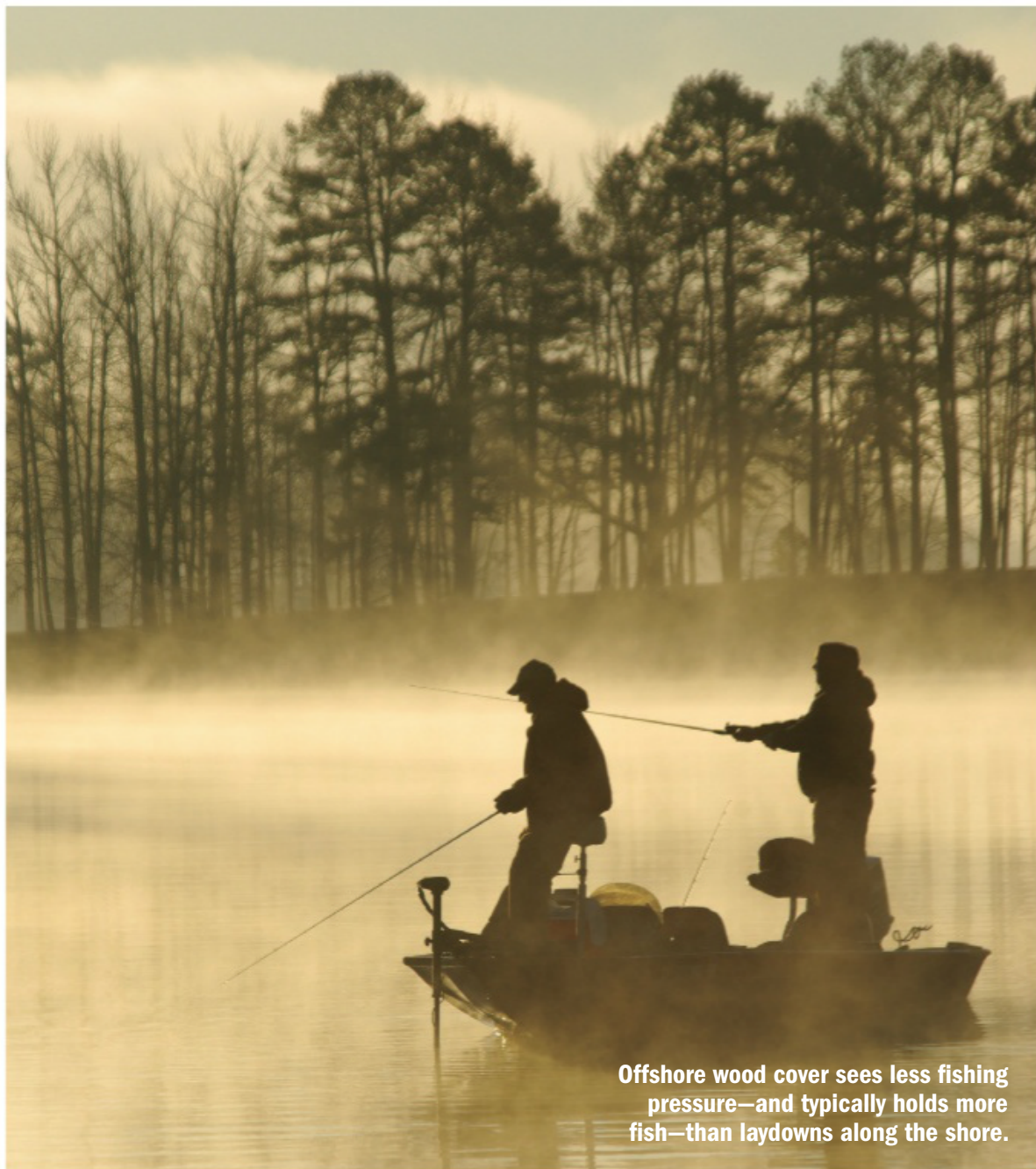
LOCATING GOOD WOOD

As with any fishing scenario, you’ve got to find them before you can catch them. In this situation the first step is locating and evaluating deep wood cover. Once that’s accomplished, you can determine its fish-attracting potential.

Some state fisheries management agencies offer habitat improvement maps that show the general location of items such as cribs. It’s worth an online search to see if this is the case in your state, as it can greatly hasten things.

Whether it’s sunken treetops, brushpiles or cribs, bigger is generally better. More is better, too, as is taller. A single, branchless tree limb lying tight to the bottom doesn’t have much fish-attracting power. But a treetop that’s loaded with branches and lying at a 45-degree angle that puts the uppermost cover 10 feet off the bottom, does.

The same goes for cribs. Short structures that rise a couple of feet might hold



Offshore wood cover sees less fishing pressure—and typically holds more fish—than laydowns along the shore.

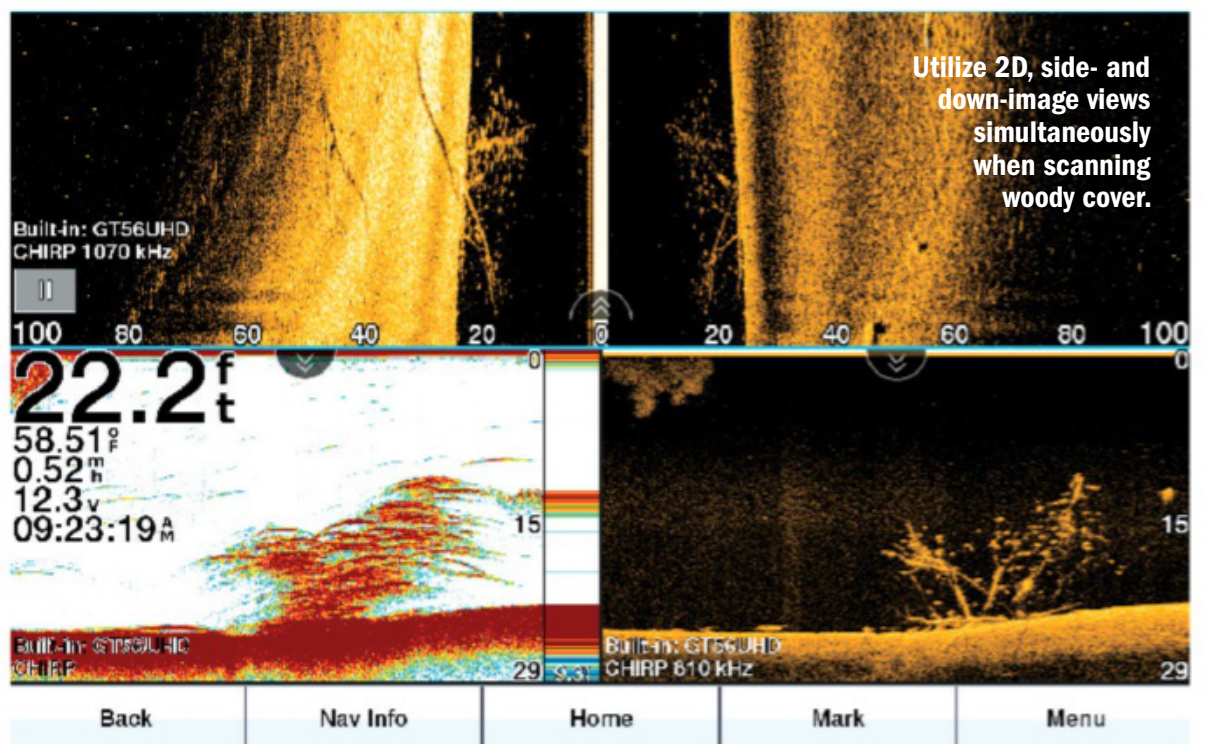
fish. But ones double that height are much more likely to. Brush cribs that combine a crib with lashed brush extending vertically often qualify as a fish Taj Mahal.

An array of 20 cribs will most likely hold more fish, and more consistently, than a quarter as many. If brush piles are nearby, so much the better. And just like weed or rock cover, submerged wood located on structure such as a point or channel ledge tends to be more productive than that found on an otherwise featureless flat.

SONAR FOR THE WIN

Electronics play a huge role in locating submerged wood and determining if fish are present. Traditional 2D sonar will locate wood, but it's time consuming since the boat must pass directly over of it. Being able to scan to the side (Garmin SideVü, Lowrance StructureScan, Humminbird Side Imaging) vastly increases efficiency in locating submerged wood cover. Anytime I see potential wood on my Garmin Echomap Ultra, I mark the location with an icon and examine it from different angles to get the best understanding of what's present.

Side-scanning sonar can also show fish—especially ones suspending in



branches—but this is where down-scanning (Garmin ClearVü, Lowrance Downscan, Humminbird Down Imaging) really comes into play. The target separation provided by this 3D-like view paints a great picture of what (or what's not) present. In my opinion, scanning cover at 2 to 4 mph while comparing all three sonar views—2D, side image and down image—is the best way to determine if fish are holding on wood cover.

FEATURE PRESENTATION

Having located deep wood cover and verified that fish are holding on it, it's now time to target them. Given the relative depth at which they are holding, regardless of the species, a vertical presentation is necessary. Even though a long list of gamefish and panfish can be taken from such cover, I've found the lures needed are quite simple. These include blade baits, bucktail jigs and jigging spoons. All three can be worked around cover and have qualities that trigger bites in cold water. A good lure retriever is also handy to have along.

At a time of year that brings cold, wind and associated challenging conditions, boat control is paramount. I always fish into the wind, hovering over cover as I fish it by using the spot-lock feature on the bow trolling motor to hold me in place. Lacking spot-lock, mark a spot with a marker buoy as a point of reference and methodically work the water around it.

I prefer 1/2-ounce blade baits and jigging spoons, and 1/4-ounce bucktails. All are fished on a relatively short spinning rod, such as St. Croix's 6-foot 3-inch Eyecon (medium power, extra-fast action). A 1000-size spinning reel is spooled with an ultra-thin braid like 8- to 10-pound-test Sufix Nanobraid. The thin line allows the lure to sink rapidly and transmits strikes well. A short leader of 10-pound-test fluorocarbon is joined with a barrel swivel and terminated with a VMC crankbait snap. The snap makes changing lures easy and prevents knot failure at the lure from the jigging motion.





Basically, I fish all three lures with a short but sharp upward snap of a few inches, then follow the lure back on a semi-tight line. Pause the lure for a few seconds before repeating. Some hits occur on the fall, others on the pause. With crappies, it's not unusual for the hit to come from below, in which case

the line goes slack as they push the lure upward. Bass do this, too, at times.

There's an art to working lures around snaggy cover. Part of it comes from working both over and near the cover. When you're over it, verified by the sonar return, fish the upper reaches of the cover. When you're next to it, you



▲ The sweet spot for cold-weather bass and other species is between 20 and 25 feet down.

◀ Vertical presentations work best when fishing submerged wood. Blade baits, jiggling spoons and bucktail jigs are top lure choices.

can drop right down to the bottom. If you feel the lure hanging up in the wood, resist the impulse to yank it, which will likely ensure a snag. Oftentimes, you can work the lure free if you simply shake your rod tip.

Bass seem to like to mill around cover, such as a cluster of cribs. For that reason, it often pays to camp out between cribs, making contact as fish move through. Crappies suspend higher in the water column, so be sure to fish areas off bottom by cranking up a turn or two, making a few jigs, then cranking up a couple more turns. **Gf**

BUNDLE UP

Stay on the water longer by dressing for the weather.

Wintertime open-water fishing is only fun if you can stay comfortable. Keeping your core warm is relatively easy. Starting out with a base layer of merino wool or synthetic underwear, adding an air-trapping insulating layer and capping things off with a wind barrier like your standard raingear should suffice. The walk from the parking lot to the boat isn't the same as hiking to a deer stand, so overheating or even perspiring shouldn't be an issue. The extremities—head, hands and feet—are the issue. Having fished in cold weather for three and a half decades, I offer these solutions.

HAT: A wool beanie with a brim, such as Carhartt's Knit Visor Hat, keeps your head and ears warm and the sun (on the days it decides to show itself) out of your eyes.

FEET: Neoprene boots 14 to 16 inches tall and at least one size bigger than normal allow ample air circulation. A heavy pair of merino wool socks will likely provide the needed warmth; add a pair of wool ankle socks for thickness if needed. The boots will also aid at the landing, as docks are typically pulled now.

HANDS: I use fingerless wool gloves combined with chemical hand warmers. Wool is a hook magnet, but nothing else keeps my hands as warm when wet—and they will get wet. Take along as many pairs as you think you need, and then one more. When your hands start to protest, take a break and sink them into pockets that are toasty warm from the hand warmers.



A wool cap and wool gloves are essential parts of the author's wintertime fishing outfit.

STOMPING GROUNDS

**HEAD DEEP INTO THE
BIG WOODS OF VERMONT'S
NORTHEAST KINGDOM**
FOR A SHOT AT A MATURE,
LATE-SEASON BUCK.

By Al Raychard

Given the amount of land and lack of hunting pressure at West Mountain WMA, whitetails have the potential to grow old and big.

Every whitetail hunter has his or her favorite technique for filling tags, and if you're like most modern deer hunters, you probably spend the majority of your time in a treestand or ground blind. You attempt to lure deer to your stand with any number of calls, decoys and scents, and you use soaps, detergents, shampoos and activated carbon clothing that promise to help you hunt "scent-free." To be honest, it is amazing to me the amount of hard-earned cash we spend to achieve success in the deer woods.

There was a time, however, when hunting deer was simpler—though not

necessarily easier. A time when it was more of a test between human woodsmanship and animal instinct, when patience, endurance, stamina and determination were key factors governing the true meaning of the hunt. While the deer hunting world seems to have gone bonkers over gadgetry, there are still those who prefer the contest between hunter and hunted on a more one-on-one level, where the hunter enters the woods prepared mentally and physically, cuts a track that gets the adrenalin pumping and goes wherever it takes for as long as it takes. Tracking deer once snow hits the ground, or hoofing into remote

areas and waiting patiently, isn't easy or for the faint of heart. But for some it is the only way to hunt.

ROOM TO ROAM

It takes big territory to hunt this way, and while the hunting woods seem to get smaller with each passing season, there are still places where it can be done. Some of the larger public reserve lands in Maine and state game lands in Pennsylvania; the Adirondack and Catskill regions of New York; and the national forests in Virginia and West Virginia are good examples. Another is the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, home to the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area.

Covering 22,971 acres in the towns of Maidstone, Ferdinand and Brunswick, it is the largest wildlife area in Vermont. The state also holds access easements on an additional 86,000 acres of private land abutting the state-owned wildlife area. Singularly or combined, the properties offer plenty of room to still-hunt—or hunt any way the heart desires—without seeing another human soul.

Regardless of your chosen hunting mode, it all starts with finding fresh sign or determining where deer are concentrating. Miles of dirt roads, including the South American Road off Route 105 and the Maidstone Lake and Paul Stream roads accessed off Route 102, circumvent the property. Lesser maintained roads travel into some interior areas, and any gates are typically open during hunting season. Even with these access options, West Mountain WMA is, by and large, a vast, roadless area best hunted on foot. Fortunately, finding fresh sign and starting points, and tracking or deciding where to trek in and set up, are made easier once snow hits the ground. This can happen as early as November during the regular deer season and most certainly by December during the late archery or muzzleloader seasons. Lacking snow, extensive timber harvesting and wildlife habitat improvements in recent years provide good places to start.

LAY OF THE LAND

Because West Mountain covers such a vast area and is so heavily forested, deer are less likely to use any one trail or system of trails, as is often the case in



Vermont's muzzleloader season runs from Dec. 3 to 11 this year. Assuming there's snow on the ground, it's a great time to track a buck.

southern locations. Instead, their movements are dictated by weather patterns, snow depth and food availability. Early in the hunting season, the biggest bucks are generally found along the higher spruce- and fir-covered ridges or in remote, mid-level hardwood locations, but during the rut, fresh sign is apt to be found anywhere.

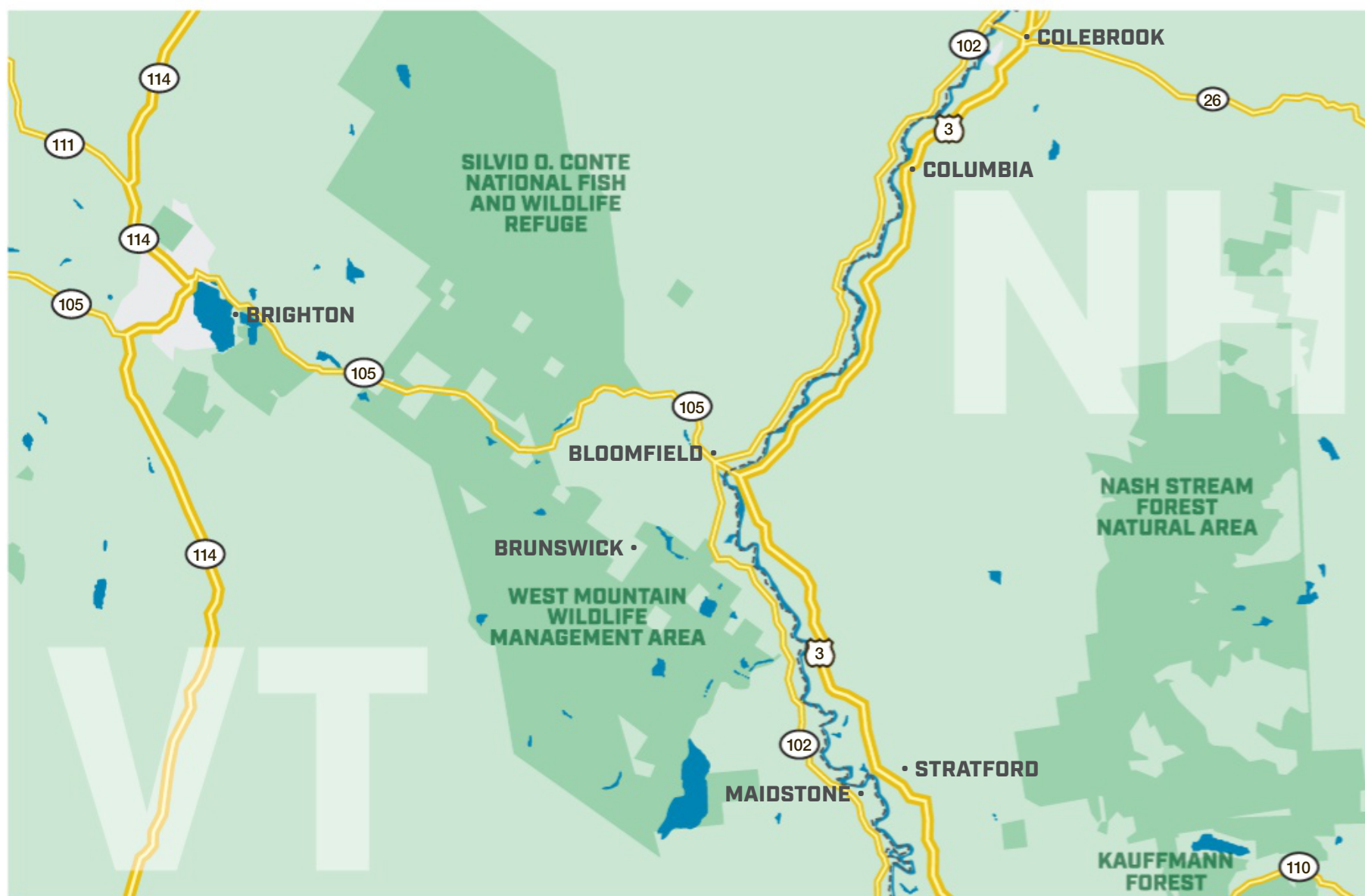
During the post-rut, and especially once the snow deepens, deer seek shelter from the elements in protected pockets and lowland bogs at lower elevations. The terrain within the wildlife area

reaches an elevation of over 2,700 feet on the top of West Mountain. From there, a continuous series of ridges descend to about 1,100 feet along Paul Stream.

In between, deer have lots of options. In the lower reaches, nine major ponds and more than 75 miles of streams, as well as extensive bog and swamp areas, offer dense thickets that provide deer protection from the elements during periods of harsh weather. The best sources of hard mast are typically found on the ridges.

Tracking deer when conditions allow, or hoofing into a remote location

and setting up for a day-long vigil, can be physically demanding at any elevation. Hunters should be prepared for a workout and carry lots of water, food, a first-aid kit, a compass or GPS, a radio or cell phone (reception might be limited), as well as other essentials for the duration. Due to the area's remoteness and potential for mishaps, it is also a good idea to let someone know where you're headed and when you expect to return. Keep an eye on the weather, too; it changes quickly and sometimes severely.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Keep these things in mind as you plan a West Mountain adventure.

Vermont's firearm deer season closes Nov. 27, but archery season remains open until Dec. 15, and there's a muzzleloader season from Dec. 3 to 11. Hunters may take four deer, but only one may be a buck and one antler must be 3 inches or longer. Check the Vermont Hunting Regulations Summary (vtfishandwildlife.com) for license and permit requirements and other rules and regulations.

Lodging and services in the immediate vicinity of West

Mountain WMA are extremely limited, so hunters should go well-prepared. Camping on the wildlife area is allowed during hunting season for three consecutive nights. Campsites must be at least 200 feet from any waterbody or road. A general store and café offering basic supplies and fuel is available on Route 105 in Bloomfield. Groceries, restaurants, fuel and other full-service amenities are available in Colebrook, N.H., 40 minutes to the north and east.



The best way to find deer at West Mountain WMA is to cut a fresh track and patiently follow it until you catch up with the animal.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Tracking deer is a time-honored hunting tactic in northern Vermont. Snow is a must, but once you strike fresh tracks,

the game plan is to move slow enough to stay on the trail but fast enough to see a deer and get a shot before the deer sees you. It is a painstakingly tedious,

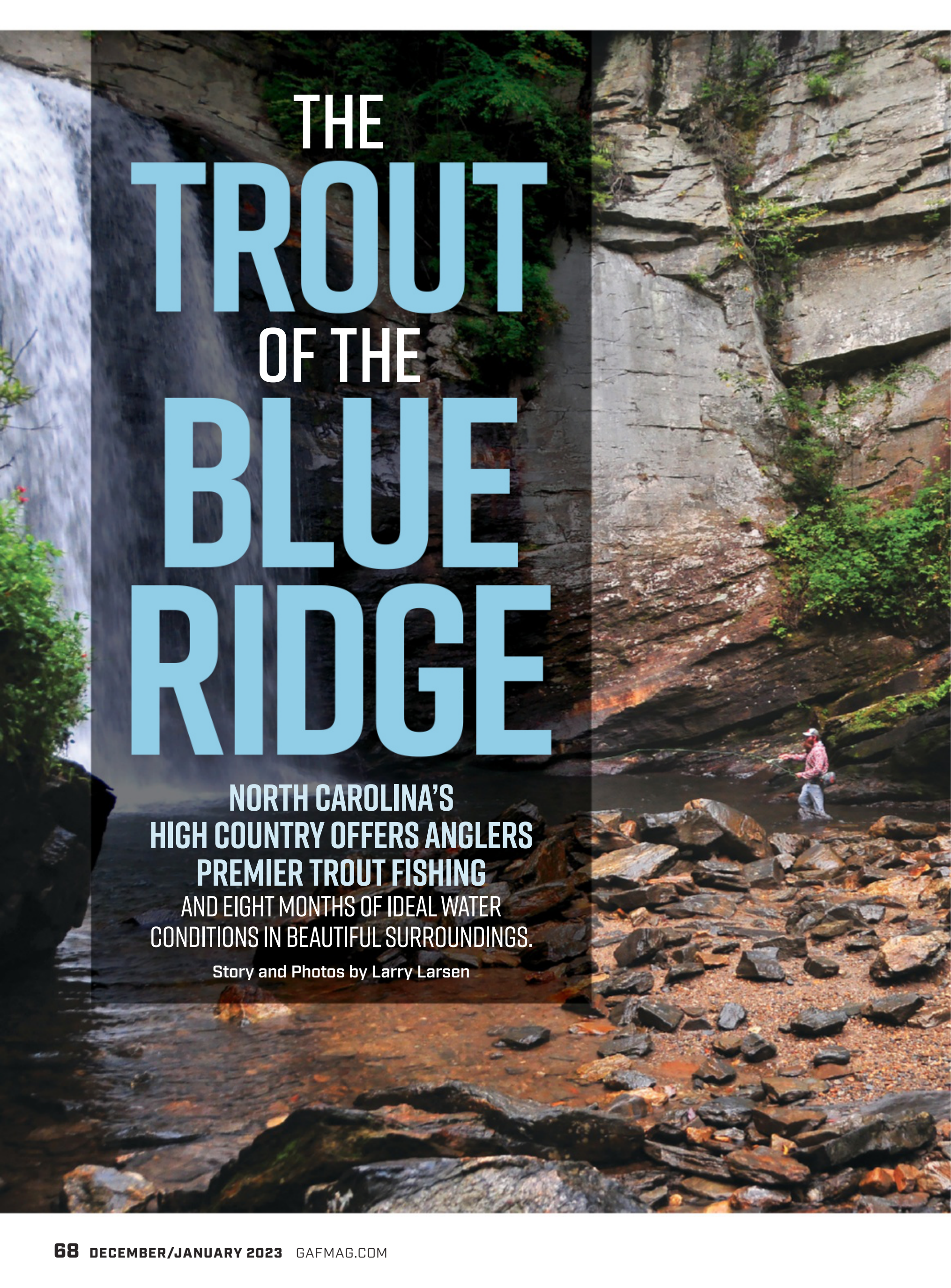
sometimes frustrating way to hunt for an animal that is instinctively paranoid and blessed with keen senses. On top of that, we are hunting on their turf and are at a disadvantage from the start. It may not be for everyone, but for those who take up the challenge, tracking is the most rewarding and gratifying method for hunting northern, big-woods whitetails.

There are, of course, alternative methods. Some prefer to study topographical maps or utilize one of the hunting apps to identify the best locations, then hike in and make a day of it. Treestands are also used, especially in areas where timber has been cut and new browse is available, as well as near bogs and other low-elevation areas where visibility from the ground might be difficult. Portable or temporary stands are allowed. Pre-season scouting trips are advised for identifying multiple potential hunting locations to allow for changes in weather and access conditions.

Make no mistake, West Mountain WMA can be a challenging place to hunt deer. But for those looking for big woods and little competition, it doesn't get much better. 



When there's little snow on the ground, hunt spots that have recently been logged and other habitat improvement areas.



THE TROUT OF THE BLUE RIDGE

**NORTH CAROLINA'S
HIGH COUNTRY OFFERS ANGLERS
PREMIER TROUT FISHING
AND EIGHT MONTHS OF IDEAL WATER
CONDITIONS IN BEAUTIFUL SURROUNDINGS.**

Story and Photos by Larry Larsen



A 60-foot-tall waterfall on Looking Glass Creek north of Brevard, N.C., is just one example of the spectacular scenery awaiting anglers in the Pisgah National Forest.

My wife, Rosie, made a dozen or so casts to a rock-strewn run before hooking up with a stout 15-inch rainbow. Her fish shot upstream through the pool toward a couple of large boulders as guide Debbie Gillespie looked on and readied her net. Seconds later another 'bow sucked in my nymph as the current swept it through the waist-deep riffle by a large rock. It, too, took off upstream, heading toward the women until I snubbed it. The trout leaped skyward. I turned the fish and continued the battle in the smaller pool closer to my position while watching the catch and release above me. Gillespie then headed downstream to put a net under my fish, a beautiful twin of the rainbow Rosie had just caught.

Rosie and I were dry-dropper fishing with 9-foot, 5-weight fly rods most of the morning. We used a terrestrial as our dry fly and fished a single nymph or squirmy worm underneath it. According to our guide, in the summer there are lots of larva that fall into North Carolina's Davidson River, such as inchworms, caterpillars and grubs. We added the tiniest of spilt shot in fast-current areas to keep the offering deeper in the water column.

The action in the catch-and-release section of the Davidson continued over the next 3 1/2 hours, and we ended the morning having caught and released 14 big trout, all rainbows. They averaged about 17 inches, and five were between 18 and 20 inches in length. I caught my last fish, a fat 21-inch rainbow, from the shallow center of the flow below a short weir. The low-water dam once provided an intake for a paper mill that went defunct during the 1960s. The waters were shallow there except for the pools on each side of the river. The 5 1/2 pounder was an appropriate finale to a great day on the water!

The Davidson is one of many rivers in the southern Appalachian Mountains that provide anglers with great trout action and lots of fond memories. The Blue Ridge Parkway running through North Carolina is the backbone of the highest portion of the scenic range that extends to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In North Carolina the parkway runs from Alleghany County at the Virginia line southwest to Swain County bordering Tennessee. Flows from the High Country in the western

23 counties of the state are impressive, and the legendary Davidson River in Transylvania County is one of the best.

The Davidson River is a freestone waterway with wild rainbow and brown trout, and an occasional native brook trout that washes down from a cooler feeder stream. From the Blue Ridge Parkway, the headwaters flow south from underground springs through the Pisgah National Forest toward Brevard, N.C. The smaller tributaries include Looking Glass Creek, Avery Creek, Cove Creek and Daniels Ridge Creek. A couple of the fishable forks average 15 to 20 feet in width.

The main Davidson River is public water that runs 13 miles through the Pisgah National Forest. All but 1 1/2 miles of that stretch are under catch-and-release regulations. The waters vary from shallow to 6 feet in depth. They are fairly rocky with large boulders, which makes wading a little difficult. The average fish are 12

to 14 inches in length, and a trophy is anything over 20 inches. The Davidson near Bobby N. Setzer State Fish Hatchery down to the mouth of Looking Glass Creek can be particularly productive.

We were fishing a couple of areas in the last 3 miles of the Davidson River before its confluence with the French Broad River. These are private-access waters offering riffles, small runs and deeper pools with some spots as wide as 40 feet. They are leased by Davidson River Outfitters (DRO), the premier fly-fishing shop and guide service in the region. The DRO section of river is fly fishing only, and the number of rods per day is limited. It offers anglers a slightly larger average size of trout than does the public water.

In the DRO stretch, small rocks along most of the bottom are scattered over gravel making for easy wading. A significant flood in August 2021 made the entire river shallower and left more sand

and sediment. The Davidson still stays fairly clear most of the year; even after a big rainstorm, the river clears in half a day, according to Gillespie. She has guided anglers nine years on waters all over the Blue Ridge area and has been named “Blue Ridge Outdoors Guide of the Year.”

RIVER FEATURES

There are several great trout waters in western North Carolina, notes Kevin Howell, owner of DRO. Howell, who was born in Brevard, began guiding for DRO when it opened in 1993 and became manager in 1996. In 1998 he became owner. He has fished all his life in most of the trout waters in western North Carolina and can boast of an 11-pound brown trout from the Davidson.

“The Davidson, North Toe and South Toe rivers, and Cane Creek are very typically classic mountain trout waters,” he explains. “They are 40 to 50 feet wide

Guide Debbie Gillespie readies the author's 5 1/2-pound rainbow for release back into the Davidson River.





Fly anglers do well with dry-dropper rigs on the Davidson during the spring and summer.

and have 70 to 100 cubic feet of flow per second. They have sections of catch and release and wild trout, and other sections that are hatchery supported. The waters within the Pisgah Forest are generally public fishing.

"Most of the wading in all these waters is mid-thigh depth," Howell continues. "The geology of the region's waters is similar. Draw a 2 1/2-hour radius around Asheville, and you'll find most streams have a series of small granite rock bottoms, riffle shoals and pools, with maybe some sandstone and limestone rocks."

The regulations on the waters in western North Carolina vary greatly from stream to stream and even from one section of a river or creek to another. Water designations include Hatchery Supported, Delayed Harvest, Wild Trout, Wild Trout Natural Bait, and Catch and Release Artificial Flies and Lures Only. Some of these streams are limited to unscented, single-hook flies and lures. In some hatchery-supported areas, you can use plugs and spinners with treble hooks.

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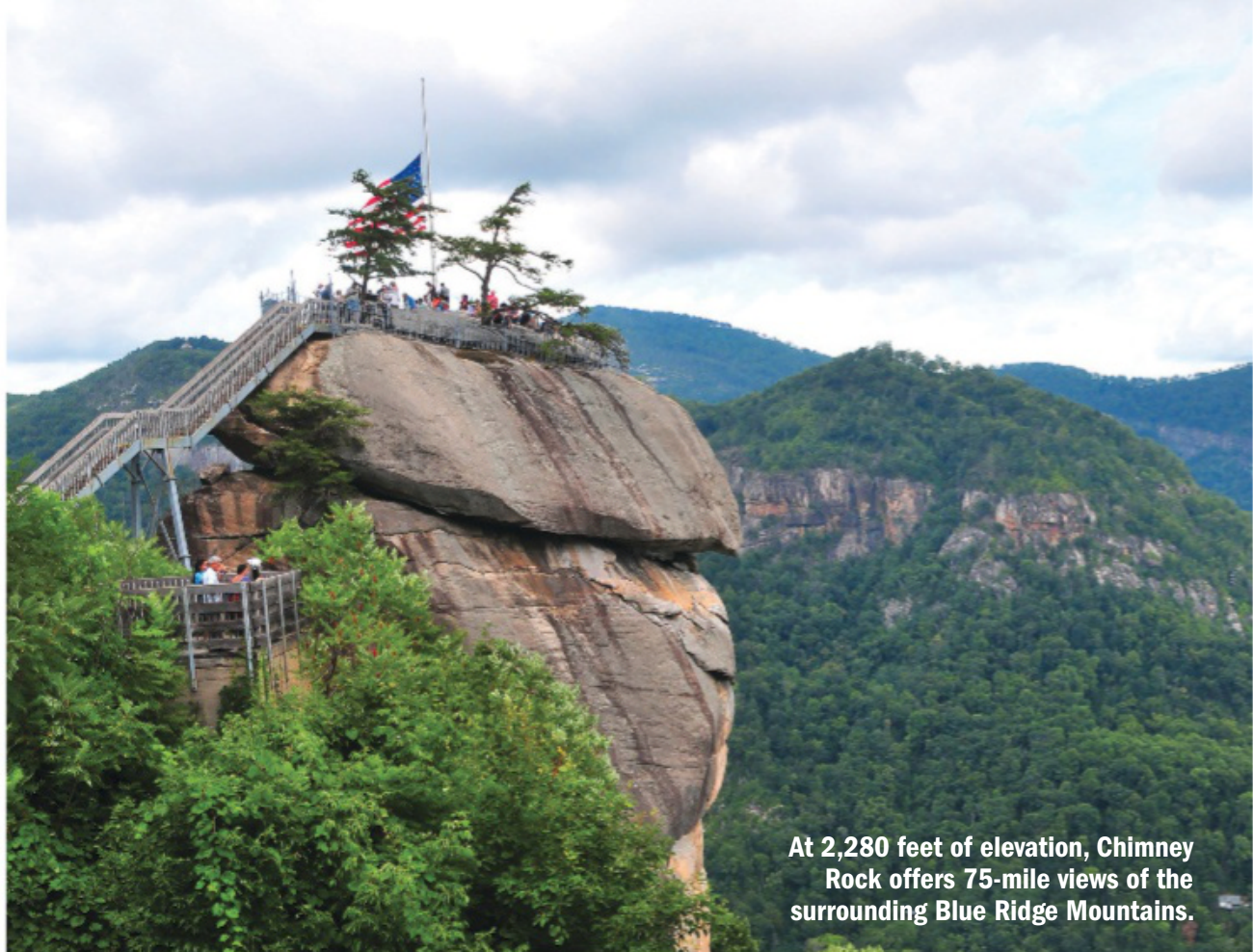
What are ideal characteristics of a great trout stream? Hatches on most North Carolina waters are similar across the regions and are relatively weak, Howell notes. They seldom generate big numbers of catches. Hatches are strong enough, though, to motivate the fish to feed on top and keep them looking at the surface. Timing of each hatch may vary by only a week or two from one end of the region to the other.

“Weather can have an impact on determining the best waters,” the DRO chief points out. “In general, the cooler, the better the fishing, and the more rain, the better the fishing year-round. The ideal water conditions are a rising water level from a rain shower. A tea-stained water color where I can stand in waist-deep water and see the toes on my boots is perfect.”

The temperatures of the trout rivers in western North Carolina typically vary from 35 to 72 degrees F. August is typically the warmest time of the year but during the week that Rosie and I fished, the Davidson River was 64 degrees, about 8 degrees cooler than normal. The ideal water temperature for catching trout is usually 45 to 55 degrees, and that occurs from mid-October to Christmas and then again from mid-February to mid-June, according to Howell. Most of the springs at the headwaters of the creeks in the mountains emit 55-degree water all year long.

“What I look for in any stream is strong current coming into a deeper pool,” Howell says. “In such a location, the fish can easily transition from feeding near the back of the pool to moving right up to the head of the pool where the current supplies the oxygen they need.”

The best public waters to catch rainbow trout currently in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains are the Watauga and Davidson rivers, according to the 53-year-old outfitter. Both receive heavy fishing pressure, and larger fish may be very spooky. Thus, he suggests a guide on those waters can increase success. The DRO owner believes the best rivers to catch a big brown trout are the Davidson and the cold-water South Toe River. He also suggests the best water to catch brookies is the Tuckasegee River due to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission’s heavy stockings.



At 2,280 feet of elevation, Chimney Rock offers 75-mile views of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains.

BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS TRIP PLANNER

See waterfalls and white squirrels in western North Carolina.

Davidson River Outfitters (DRO), located in North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest, carries a full line of gear, apparel, tackle and fly-tying materials (davidsonflyfishing.com). More than a dozen experienced guides fish a variety of surrounding waters within two hours of the DRO headquarters, and they can be booked for half, full or multiple days of wade- or float-fishing trips.

The best trout fishing generally occurs from October through Christmas and then again from mid-February through June, according to DRO owner Kevin Howell. The most successful fly casters use dry flies in the spring and dry-dropper setups in the summer. They fish streamers and nymphs the rest of the year. January and February are usually the slowest trout-catching months due to the cold weather. August is also normally slow because water temperatures are too warm and water levels fluctuate.

Howell’s guides have put clients on rainbow trout up to 30 inches and weighing around 10 pounds, brown trout up to 11 pounds, stocked brook trout to 24 inches and wild brook trout to about 10 inches. Advice on catching trout in area waters is always free from Howell and the DRO staff.

The regulations and lure restrictions on North Carolina trout waters vary widely. Anglers must pay attention to where they are fishing on each river and stream. For a full list of mountain trout fishing regulations, visit the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission at ncwildlife.org.

The Blue Ridge Mountains and Blue Ridge Parkway, as well as the Great Smoky Mountains, offer anglers and their families an abundance of outdoor activities and sightseeing opportunities when not chasing trout. There are myriad pursuits such as hiking, mountain biking, camping, photography, whitewater rafting, kayaking, canoeing and paddleboarding, plus unique natural sights such as waterfalls. In Transylvania County alone, there are 250 waterfalls to visit.

I saw for the first time a white squirrel in Brevard and soon learned this color variant is not uncommon in this river town. Brevard even has a white squirrel festival. Check out explorebrevard.com.

Other attractions from Asheville west include the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Chimney Rock State Park, Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, Oconaluftee Indian Village and Fontana Lake. Northeast of Asheville near Boone are Linville Caverns, Linville Falls, Grandfather Mountain and Blowing Rock.

BEYOND THE DAVIDSON

The Tuckasegee River running through the towns of Tuckasegee and Dillsboro in Jackson County is a northwest-flowing tailwater stream below a couple of lakes. Fishable tributaries include Greens, Savannah, Panthertown, Tanasee, Scott and Cullowhee Creeks. The Tuckasegee is about 80 feet wide and shallower than the Davidson. Float-fishing it successfully depends on favorable power-generation water releases. The schedules are posted online by Duke Energy.

The “Tuck” is hatchery supported with browns, 10- to 12-inch brookies and rainbows that may grow to 20-plus inches, according to Howell. DRO float-fishes the river in the Nantahala National Forest from mid-October through May. It has several access areas over 20 miles and receives fairly heavy fishing pressure with a mix of drift boats and wade anglers. The waters are stocked with 20,000 hatchery fish several times each year, which helps keep fishing productive.

Running about 70 miles, the French Broad River begins south of Brevard and continues through Asheville to the Tennessee border. DRO fishes the remote and rugged North and West forks, which have predominately wild brown and rainbow trout. They also have plenty of wild waters, Class III rapids and minimal access points. The East Fork of the French Broad runs along the road, offers easy access and is one of Gillespie’s favorite flows. It is a Delayed Harvest area with 10- to 12-inch rainbows, browns

and brookies. The Mills River and Cane Creek are also productive tributaries.

The South and North forks of the Mills River are scenic public waters in the Pisgah National Forest southwest of Asheville. The South Fork is a wild trout, catch-and-release fishery yielding rainbows of 8 to 11 inches and an occasional 18-incher. The waters are a little wider than the Davidson in some spots and have more volume. Preferred by 29-year-old DRO guide Zach Hart, the South Mills winds through a wilderness area and is primarily accessible only by hiking along a rough trail through the forest.

“Because it takes more effort to walk in, the remote South Fork is my favorite,” Hart says. “It doesn’t get hammered like a lot of rivers. South Mills is also cool because you can really get away from folks in there and catch some large trout from deeper pools. We’ve had great days and really bad days. On one day, you may not see a fish. The next day you may catch 20. It’s all about the weather and what the bugs are doing.”

Eighty miles long, the Watauga River is a hatchery-supported waterway that runs through Avery County and into Tennessee. In the North Carolina section, the flow is 40 feet wide with moderate current across runs and shallow shoals with plenty of fish in the pools. There are several public access points, such as the Valle Crucis Community Park, located behind the historic Mast General Store. DRO only guides with rafts or drift boats on the Watauga section in Tennessee, which

is 90 minutes from the headquarters in Pisgah Forest. There, the river is a tailrace water that is 120 feet wide and very deep.

The Oconaluftee River in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Swain County is about 70 feet wide and has a high gradient with lots of rapids, a few pools and wild fish. DRO guides anglers inside the park. The river outside the park is private water in the Qualla Boundary, which requires a fishing permit from the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

Popular for whitewater rafting, the Nantahala River is located southwest of Bryson City. Fishing on the scenic river is controlled, and only a couple of guiding operations are permitted to fish it (DRO does not guide on the river). The narrow, high-gradient Nantahala has a delayed-harvest section that yields rainbows of 10 to 14 inches up to 22-inch trophies. It also has hatchery-supported upper and lower sections. Below Nantahala Dam, hydropower discharge can increase the water level 2 feet or so all at once, which can make fishing (and wading) difficult. Nantahala anglers often deal with armadas of whitewater rafters and kayakers.

Other rainbow trout waters favored by DRO guides are the West Fork of the Pigeon River near Waynesville; Tanasee Creek, which is also good for brown trout; the Chattooga River, mostly in South Carolina; and Looking Glass Creek above the Davidson. The rule of thumb is the more remote the water, the better the opportunity to make angling memories in the Blue Ridge Mountains. 



The Davidson offers wild rainbows and browns, and much of the river north of Brevard is under catch-and-release regulations.

SAVAGE MODEL 110

A COMPANY KNOWN FOR ACCURACY
CUTS NEARLY 1½ POUNDS
 FROM ITS VENERABLE BOLT GUN.

By Adam Heggenstaller



The Savage Model 110 bolt-action rifle has been serving hunters for more than 60 years. It's gone through numerous changes during that time, including changes in its manufacturer's ownership, and has been offered in hundreds of

variations and chamberings. The 110's original reputation was one of affordability, retailing for 20 percent to 30 percent less than competing bolt-action rifles in its early years. It quickly gained esteem for accuracy as well, and these two qualities combined earned the 110 high marks for value.

During the last two decades, Savage has advanced the 110 by including smart,

new design features while continuing to offer its flagship rifle at reasonable prices. One of the latest variations, the Ultralite, is a great example of the company's penchant for providing hunters with rifles having modern upgrades that remain within most budgets.

As its name suggests, the Ultralite is a lightweight version of the 110 made for backcountry pursuits or any hunt

MARK WEBB/MURRAY ROAD

ULTRALITE

rifle at the ready can lead to fatigue over time. I doubt this will be an issue with the Ultralite.

Weighing just 5.8 pounds in .308 Win., the 110 Ultralite is almost 1 1/2 pounds lighter than the standard 110 Hunter. Most of the weight savings comes from the Ultralite having a Proof Research carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel rather than a typical steel barrel. The Proof Research barrel starts as a 416R stainless steel blank, which is thinned between the chamber and the muzzle, reducing both weight and profile. Proof Research then rebuilds the barrel contour by wrapping the thinned area of the blank with high-strength carbon fiber bound with a proprietary resin. The resulting barrel is both stronger and up to 64 percent lighter. In addition, the carbon fiber improves heat dissipation and reduces harmonic vibration, which lessens shifts in point of impact. The barrel on the Ultralite has five-groove, single-point cut rifling, and the muzzle has 5/8x24 threading to accept a suppressor. It comes with a flush-fitting cap.

Another place where Savage reduces weight is in the receiver. Instead of the round contour of most 110 receivers, the Ultralite's stainless steel receiver is milled with flat sides having rectangular recesses where material has been removed. A durable, corrosion-resistant Melonite finish covers the re-

ceiver. Spiral fluting on the bolt further reduces weight, although to a smaller degree than the receiver cuts and the carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel.

Savage blueprints the receiver to ensure that critical surfaces are square to the receiver's center line. The barrel is secured to the receiver with Savage's hallmark barrel nut, which allows for precise headspacing, with the recoil lug sandwiched between the two. As with all Model 110 rifles, the Ultralite has a two-lug bolt with a floating head that permits the lugs to self-center in the barrel recesses to achieve ideal lockup. All these design features contribute to excellent accuracy.

where a day will add miles to your boots. Of course, you don't have to hike over half a dozen ridges to appreciate how easy it is to carry the Ultralite. A still-hunt, for example, when the best place for your rifle is in your hands at all times and not over your shoulder, is another situation where the Ultralite shines. You may only cover 300 yards in three hours, but keeping a heavy

SPECIFICATIONS

SAVAGE MODEL 110 ULTRALITE

savagearms.com

TYPE: bolt-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: .308 Win. (tested)

BARREL: 22"; Proof Research carbon-fiber-wrapped stainless steel; 1:10" twist rate

TRIGGER: AccuTrigger; adjustable for 1 1/2- to 4-lb. pull weight

SAFETY: three-position tang

MAGAZINE: detachable box; 4-round capacity

SIGHTS: none; receiver drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: matte black Melonite

STOCK: synthetic AccuFit; adjustable for length of pull and comb height

OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/2"

WEIGHT: 5.8 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,649

The Savage AccuTrigger helps hunters realize that accuracy. It's user-adjustable with a small tool (keep it somewhere safe) for a pull weight of 1 1/2 to 4 pounds. The rifle I tested came from the factory with the pull weight set at a little more than 2 1/2 pounds as measured with my digital trigger-pull scale. I detected no creep in the trigger pull. The AccuTrigger is one of those seemingly small upgrades that make a big difference when shooting at game from field positions. It's a whole lot easier to hit where you're aiming when you don't have to wrestle with a stiff or spongy trigger while trying to hold steady.

Another feature of the Ultralite that helps hunters shoot the rifle to its

greatest potential is the AccuFit stock. The composite stock comes with spacers and inserts that permit adjustments to length of pull and comb height. The polymer spacers nestle between the end of the buttstock and the recoil pad, and two screws secure them in place. Length of pull is adjustable from 12 3/4 to 13 3/4 inches in 1/4-inch increments by selecting one of the four spacers provided with the stock. Five comb inserts are also included. One follows the lines of the buttstock, and the other four increase in height in 1/8-inch increments. Find the one that allows you to achieve a solid cheekweld while maintaining a full field of view through the riflescope. You'll shoot the



The stainless steel receiver is finished in Melonite.



Four buttstock spacers allow length-of-pull adjustments from 12 3/4 to 13 3/4 inches. Five comb inserts increase in height in 1/8-inch increments.



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AVERAGE GROUP 0.87"

LOAD Remington Core-Lokt Tipped
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MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,761 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.03"

LOAD Federal Premium Terminal Ascent
BULLET WEIGHT 175 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,573 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 0.76"

Muzzle velocity is the average of 10 consecutive shots fired through a Caldwell G2 chronograph at 10 feet. Accuracy is the result of five consecutive, three-shot groups fired from a sandbag rest at 100 yards.



Holding four rounds, the center-feed magazine sits flush with the bottom of the stock when latched in place.



The Ultralite's carbon-fiber-wrapped stainless steel barrel is threaded for a suppressor and comes with a protective cap.

Ultralite better, and more comfortably, when it fits you and your natural point of aim. Switching spacers and comb inserts does not require any special tools, and tailoring the Ultralite to your body should take less than 15 minutes. It's time well-spent.

The fore-end of the stock is slim and, coupled with the rifle's light weight, makes for a gun that's easy to handle and point quickly. Overmolded panels on the stock's fore-end and grip improve purchase in dry, dusty conditions as well as rain and snow. The Ultralite's four-round magazine fits flush with the



belly of the stock and complements the rifle's streamlined form. The magazine requires some force to seat it within the well, but it latches tightly and feeds cartridges smoothly.

The three-position safety is located on the tang where it's easy to access without altering your grip on the rifle. The middle position unlocks the bolt for cycling a round from the chamber but does not permit the rifle to fire. In front of the trigger guard is a cylindrical button that serves as the bolt release.

Some lightweight rifles have a reputation for being difficult to shoot well. From what I've seen during testing on the range and while hunting with the Ultralite, accuracy is as notable as the rifle's weight. I fired a half-MOA group at 200 yards with my test sample—one of the best groups I've managed to get from a hunting rifle in quite some time. At 100 yards the Ultralite demonstrated sub-MOA performance with all three hunting loads I tested. Even better, on a recent trip to Alaska's Kodiak Island, I used the Ultralite to take two blacktail bucks and a caribou with three shots at ranges of 170 to 230 yards. That's the kind of accuracy Savage is known for and hunters will appreciate—especially when it comes in a rifle that weighs less than 6 pounds.

The Ultralite is available in a lefthand version as well as with a KUIU Verde 2.0 finish on the stock. With an MSRP of more than \$1,600 for the base version, the Ultralite is at the upper end of the Savage price range. But realize there are many rifles that weigh about the same as the Ultralite and retail for more than \$2,000. When you consider its features and weight, and compare them to other sub-6-pound rifles on the market, you'll realize that Savage is still committed to providing hunters with value. 

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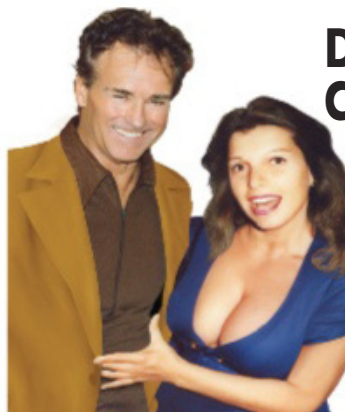
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V196

GREAT WHEN IT'S LATE

**STAY COMFY TO THE
SEASON'S BITTER END**
WITH GEAR THAT
TAMES THE COLD.

By Game & Fish Staff

Part of the challenge of hunting during the late season is simply showing up. Burnout may start to set in (*I've been trying to fill this tag for weeks so why would today be any different?*) and the weather doesn't help. The weather, however, is often the key to success, as game must move to feed when conditions turn nasty. Be out there to take advantage of cold fronts and pending storms, and remain focused to the final day, by dressing in clothing that helps you handle the elements. **G&F**

❶ BORN PRIMITIVE TUNDRA JACKET

A good puffy jacket keeps you so warm that wearing it is like wrapping your upper body in a tailored sleeping bag. The Tundra, from veteran-owned and -operated Born Primitive, has 200-gram synthetic insulation that makes it feel downright luxurious during cold days in the mountains. A drawback to most puffies is their lack of durability, but Born Primitive addresses this in the Tundra with a slick nylon shell that resists snagging and reinforced elbows. A fitted hood keeps body heat in, while zippered armpits let it out when you start to get too toasty. Front pockets have a soft, fuzzy lining, and two interior mesh pockets provide a place to stash snacks so they don't freeze solid. MSRP: \$229; bornprimitive.com

❷ KUIU PROXIMITY INSULATED PANT

No one wants to sit for hours in freezing temperatures only to spook a buck the moment a noisy outer layer drags across the rail of the treestand. That's just torture, and the Proximity line from KUIU is designed to prevent it. The pant's 160-gram polyester knit exterior has a brushed face to keep it quiet. A bonded SynthaCell open-cell foam membrane resists wind and is quieter than liners with the same purpose. Water resistance is afforded by a DWR coating. Body-mapped Toray 3DeFX+ synthetic insulation in 60- and 90-gram weights provides warmth without bulk, and its siliconized fibers further resist water. A raised back seals in heat, and full-length side zippers make the pant easy to put on and take off while offering ventilation. MSRP: \$259; kuiu.com

❸ PARAMOUNT OUTDOORS EHG ELITE THERMOWOOL JACKET AND PANT

Old-school wool gets a boost from synthetic insulation in this EHG Elite jacket and pant. Wool has a degree of natural water resistance thanks to its lanolin content and retains its insulative qualities when wet, but the addition of polyester adds warmth without weighing as much as its counterpart. A silver-ion treatment helps control bacteria that causes odor. The jacket has zippered handwarmer pockets and an inner chest pocket, while the pant has six, including two cargo pockets. A three-panel hood offers additional protection from the elements, while reinforced knees increase durability. MSRP: \$159.99, jacket; \$119.99, pant; paramountoutdoors.com



COURTESY OF LEUPOLD

4 DANNER VITAL BOOT

The problem with some heavily insulated boots is they make you feel like you're wearing clown shoes, which certainly doesn't promote stealthy or agile movement in the woods. You need not be concerned with clumsy clomping in the Vital, as Danner builds the 8-inch boot on a streamlined, athletic-style last and pairs it with 1,200-gram Thinsulate Ultra insulation. A waterproof Danner Dry barrier keeps moisture out but allows it to escape from inside the boot. Other comfort features include an open-cell polyurethane footbed and Plyolite midsole to absorb shock, multi-density foam in the upper to eliminate pinch points and a mesh-lined tongue to promote moisture management. MSRP: \$230; danner.com

5 FIELDSHEER PREMIUM 2.0 MERINO HEATED SOCKS

These aren't the electric socks with bulky batteries and heavy wires your father used to wear. Each sock is powered by a 3.7-volt lithium-ion rechargeable battery that's not much larger than a lighter, and the heating elements in the toe area are slim enough that the sock's cushioning keeps you from feeling them. You'll certainly feel the heat, though, as these socks have Bluetooth-enabled Mobile Warming technology that allows you to choose among four levels of output via the MW Connect app. Battery life on the low heat setting is 10 hours. The calf-height socks are made from a Merino wool blend with arch support and reinforced toe and heel areas. MSRP: \$134.99; fieldsheer.com

6 KUIU NORTHSTAR GLOMITT

Part glove, part mitten, glomitt is a goofy name for a design that keeps fingers together for more warmth but also facilitates dexterity by isolating the index finger and the thumb. The Northstar is packed with 340- and 170-gram Primaloft Gold insulation on the back and palm, respectively. The HDry membrane keeps moisture out, and the gauntlet-style cuff prevents snow, rain and wind from leaking into the jacket sleeve opening. Covered in Pittards OilTac leather, the palm offers a secure grip whether wet or dry. MSRP: \$139; kuiu.com

7 ALPS OUTDOORZ HAND WARMER

Stuff your hands into this fleece-lined tube with a couple heat packs and laugh at the icy wind. The neoprene exterior resists water and wind, and cuffs help retain heat. A waist belt is built into the back, and swivel clips permit waterfowlers to attach the hand warmer to waders. A hand warmer allows you to get away with thin gloves—or maybe none, which is a big advantage when fine motor skills are needed to slip off a safety and press a trigger. MSRP: \$39.99; alpsoutdoorz.com



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THE BIG BOOMER

MORE POWER DOESN'T MAKE A BETTER RIFLE.

Shane's first deer rifle was a Remington Model 700 in .243 that his father passed down to him. It wasn't particularly pretty with its plain stock and blued steel that now shone silver. But man, it was a tack driver. Shane had taken several deer and coyotes with it, and it had never failed him.

One night in early December, with the upcoming holiday on his mind, Shane found his father watching a football game. "I know what I want for Christmas," he pronounced.

"One minute, bud. Steelers have the ball with three seconds left," his father said, leaning toward the TV. Shane looked just in time to see a kick ... and a football sailing wide right. The kicker fell to his knees in agony while the Bills players ran wildly across the field celebrating.

"Dang it all," barked Shane's father in disgust. "Why put a rookie kicker in if he's unproven under pressure? What's a big leg if you can't send it between the uprights?" he mumbled.

Before his father could turn out the lights and head to bed, Shane spoke up again. "I want a Winchester Model 70 Classic in .300 WSM."

"Three-hundred Short Mag, eh?" his father said. "Perfect for elk, I read. But don't you think it's an awful lot of gun for our whitetails?"

"No," said Shane. "Its energy at 500 yards is tremendous!"

"When's the last time you had a 500-yard shot at a deer? In 40 years my farthest is 150 or so."

"Well I'm plannin' to hunt the powerline next year, and it's possible for a really long shot there."

Shane's father rubbed his chin, as if he was somewhat buying that logic, ballistically at least. Economically he had a different notion.

When Christmas came around, though, a long, narrow box appeared under the tree. It was a Model 70 in .300 WSM.



Sitting near it were two boxes of ammo.

"Dad!" Shane yelled. "Are you kidding me?! You said you couldn't swing it!" He opened one of the boxes of ammo to check out the short, fat-bodied cartridges and noticed a few were missing.

"You got really lucky, son. Last week Bob at the pawnshop called and said someone had brought in this rifle. Said the guy wanted something else. It's only been shot three times, but it's considered used so we got a great price on it."

After lunch was devoured, the two drove to the range and stapled a target at 25 yards to check the scope's zero. Shane concentrated on a smooth trigger squeeze as he aimed.

BOOM! The magnum erupted, flexing the tin roof of the shooting shed. When the concussion subsided, father and son could clearly see a .30-caliber hole in the bullseye.

"You nailed it!" said Shane's father as he turned toward his son in jubilation. Shane's hat was sitting crooked, and blood streamed around the corner of his right eye and down his cheek.

"And it nailed you. Are you OK?" Shane's father unfolded his handkerchief.

"It hurts something fierce," said Shane, a bit woozy. He held the cloth tight to his eye. After a couple minutes, Shane's father removed the makeshift bandage and took another look.

"Bleeding's stopped," he said. "Doesn't look too bad, though your mother will disagree. You wanna fire a couple more at 100 since we're here? Just don't cheat up on that scope so much."

"I guess," said Shane. He knew he had to shoot it again now. He hurriedly took aim at a steel target and pulled the trigger.

BOOM! No pinging sound of steel followed the report.

"You flinched big time," said his father. "Missed it by about three feet."

"This thing really kicks, Dad."

"I know! I can tell! Want to try again?"

"Not right now. Everything's still kinda blurry."

"OK, son, good idea." Then under his breath Shane's father mumbled, "What's a big leg if you can't send it between the uprights?" **G-F**

Shhhhh. No wake zone.



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