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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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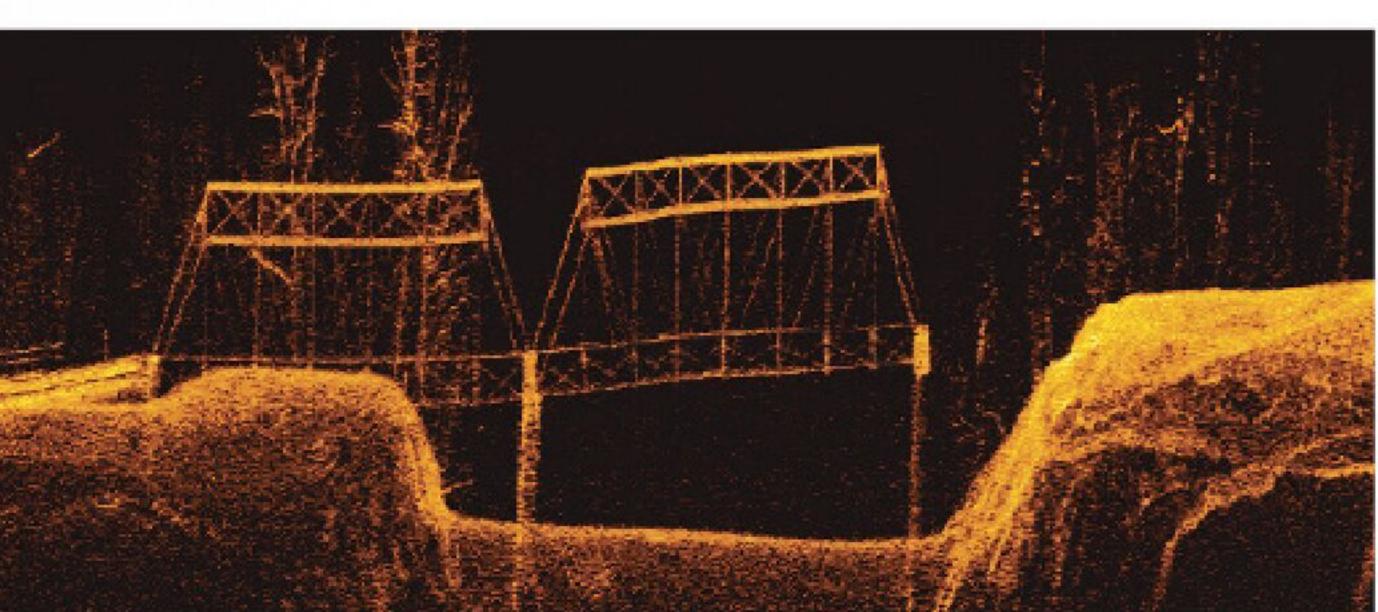
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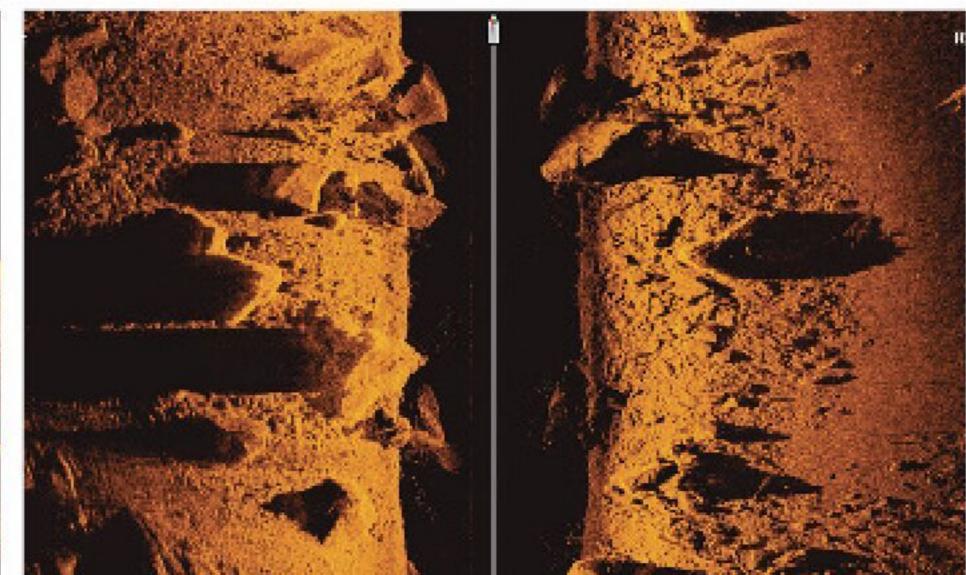
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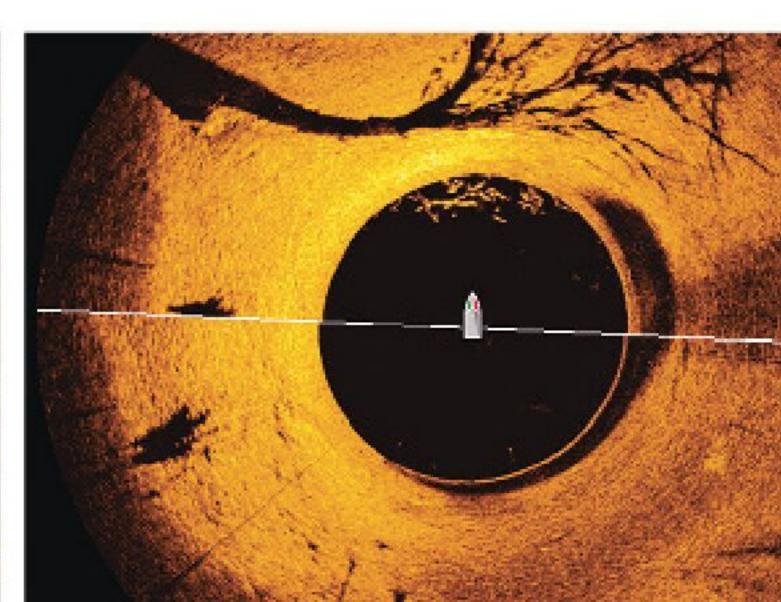
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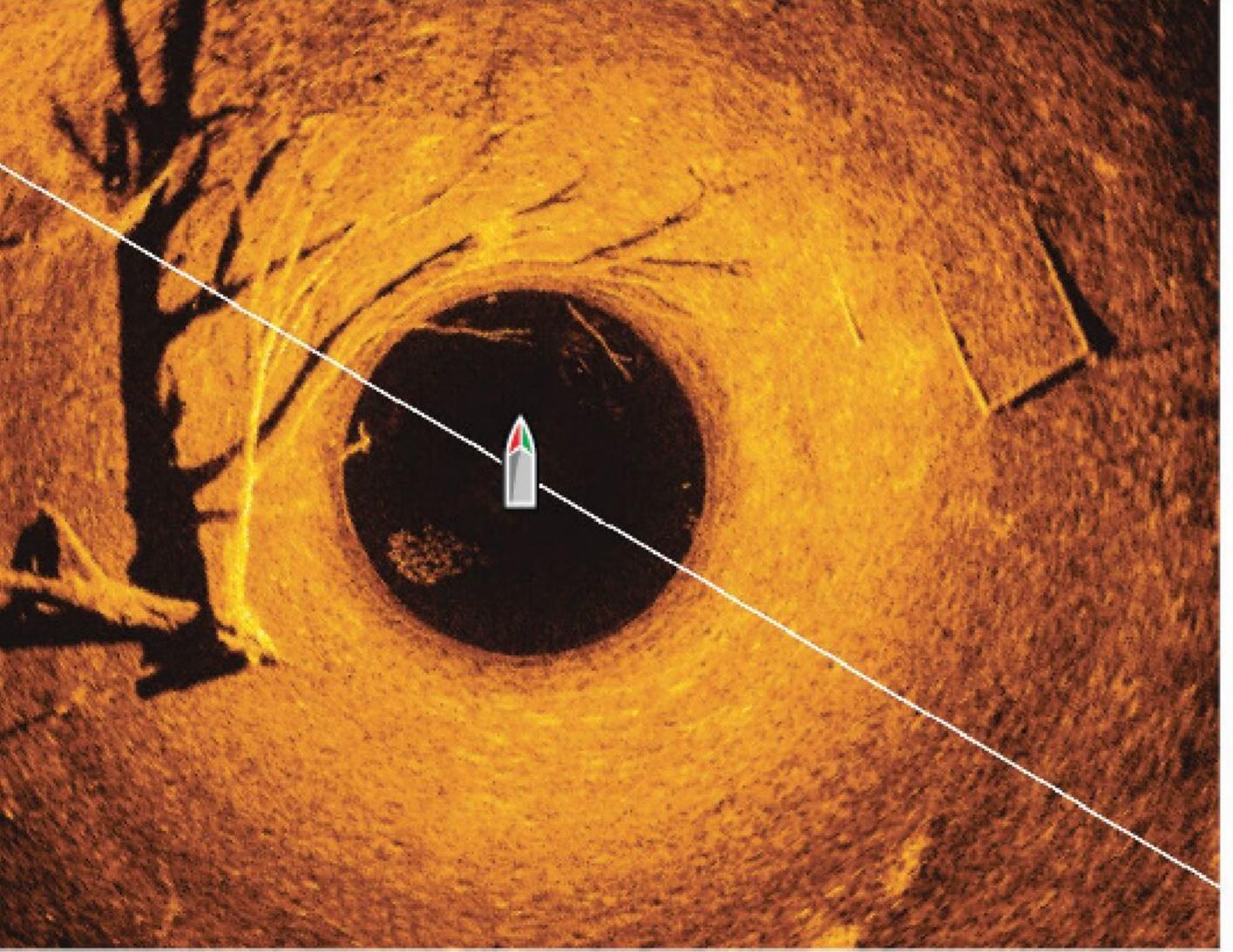
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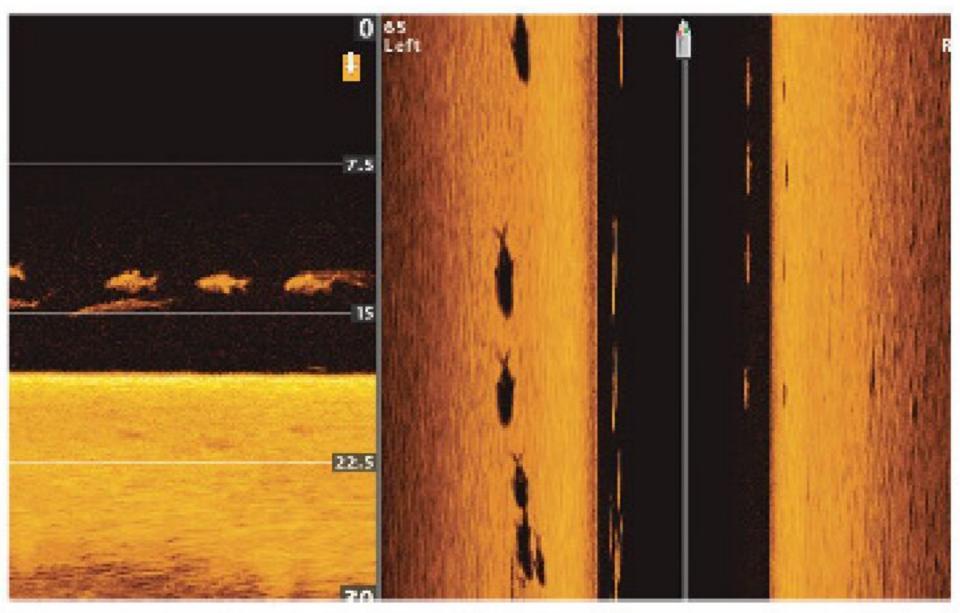


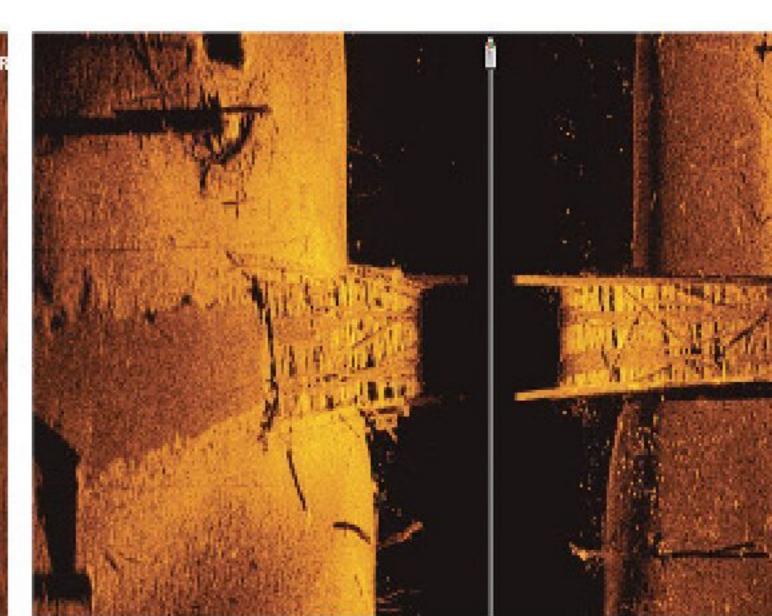




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THE LATE GAME

e call it the "Last Blast," that final hunt of rabbit season in late February, after which we put our shotguns away until spring turkey season. Usually there are four or five of us, all friends from college, who spend most of the day busting the brush for cottontails. While it doesn't carry the significance of the deer opener, the last day of rabbit season is something we anticipate all the same. Our hopes include bagging a few limits of rabbits, but our plans center on simply getting together for one more hunt before it's all over.

There have been times when the Last Blast was conducted with the benefit of a beagle, including the year when three limits of rabbits—12 bunnies—were brought to bag in about twice as many minutes. (Or so I'm told. I missed that year. Those in attendance that day never let me forget it.) Most years, though, we're our own dogs, which is just fine. Yelling at a pal is typically much more enjoyable and effective than screaming at a beagle. A friend will at least look at you when you call him a bad name.

The Last Blast is an annual reminder that there is more to hunt than big game and birds. And it comes at the perfect time: February, when so many other seasons have been long closed or are only distant dates on the calendar. Of course, there is more to hunt in February than just rabbits. Depending on where you live, this month is prime time for coyotes and hogs, both of which often receive attention in the regional pages of this magazine. And let's not forget about squirrels.

According to the "National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation" released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2016 (the most recent year for which data has been collected) 1.3 million hunters went afield for rabbits and hares. That same year saw 1.5 million squirrel hunters. The report categorized coyotes and feral hogs together as "other animals," which were pursued by 1.3 million hunters. Deer, on the other hand, attracted 8.1 million hunters.

It's no surprise that the number of hunters who go after small game, predators and other species such as hogs pales in comparison to those who hunt deer. But maybe it should be. After all, most states provide longer seasons for rabbits and squirrels than deer, and hogs and coyotes are typically fair game year-round. We certainly aren't lacking for opportunity, and simply being outdoors is one of the main reasons we hunt. Granted, deer provide more meat and, perhaps, a greater sense of accomplishment, but there is much satisfaction to be found in collecting a bag of rabbits for cacciatore.

I plan to eat well the evening of Feb. 27.

Adam Heggenstaller

Editorial Director

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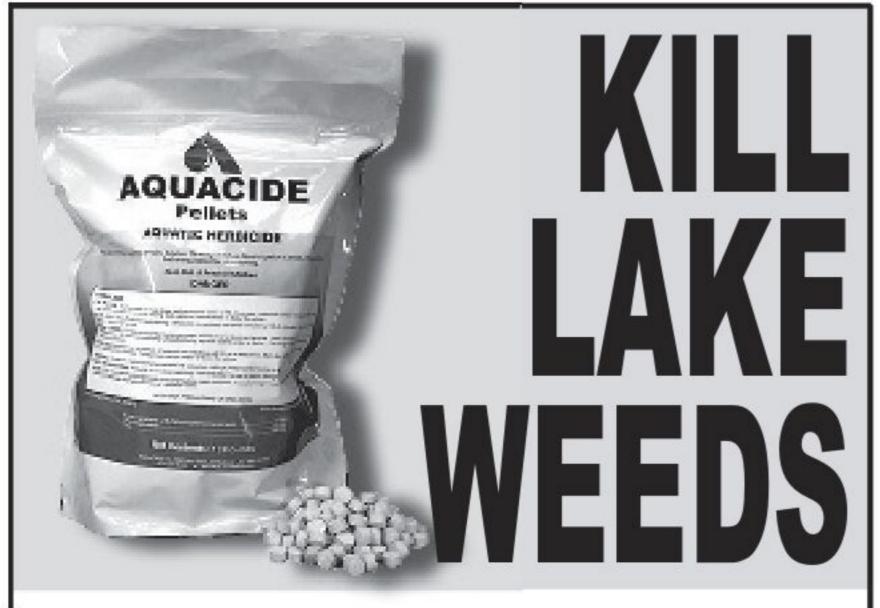
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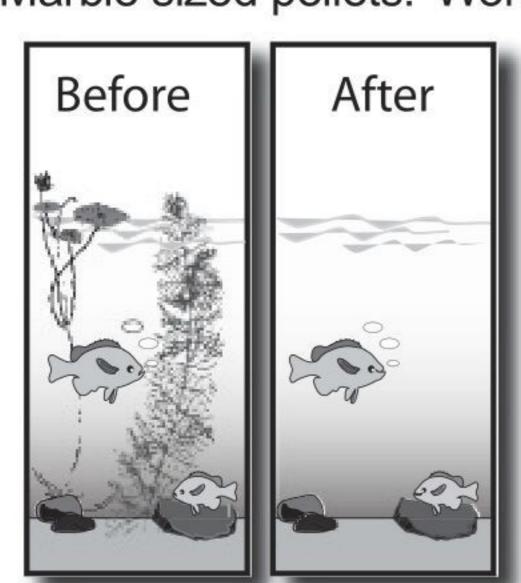
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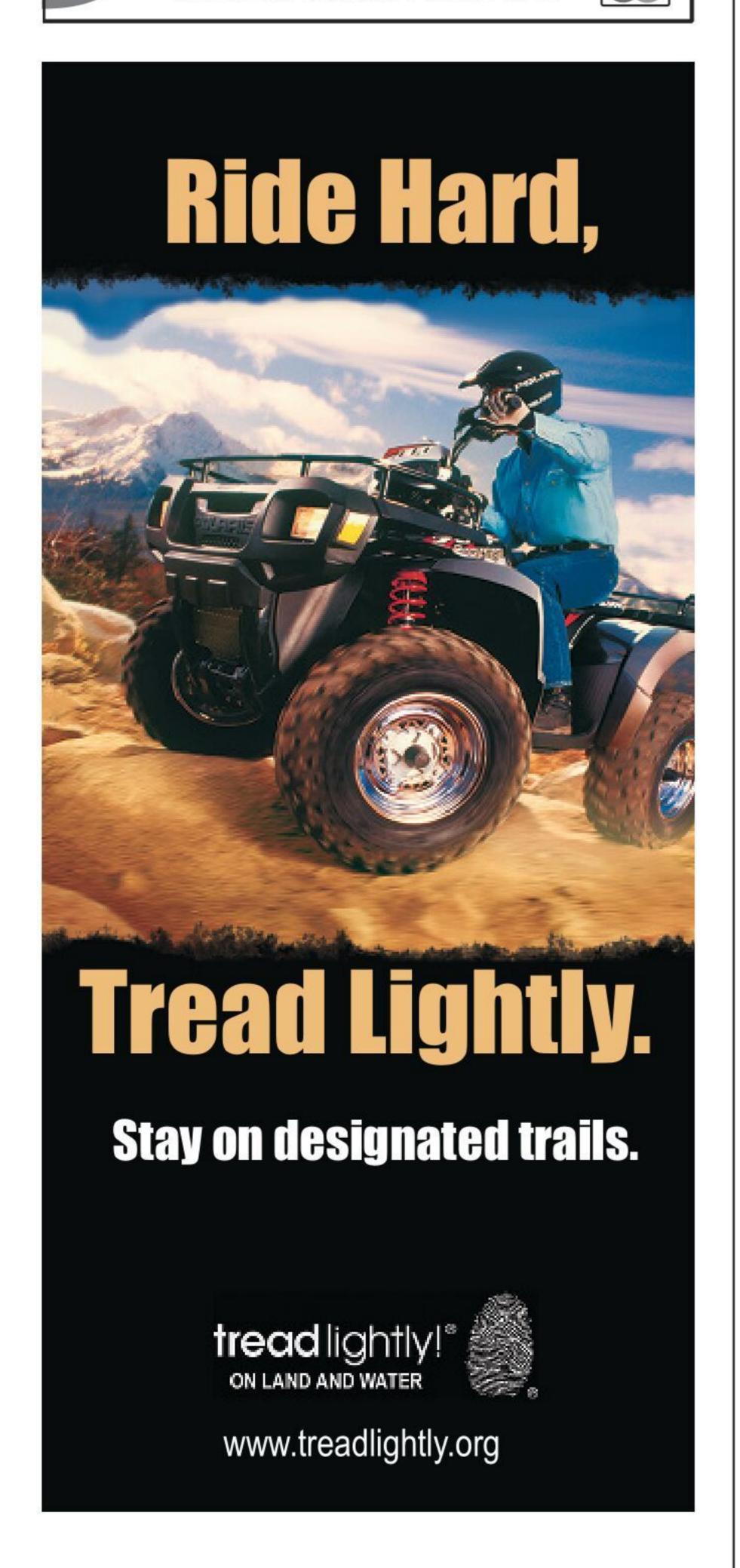
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24 am pm 8:18 8:42 to to 10:18 10:42	25 am pm 9:06 9:30 to to 11:06 11:30	26 am pm 9:54 10:18 to to 11:54 12:18	27 am pm 10:06 10:30 to to 12:06 12:30	28 FULL am pm 10:42 11:06 to to 12:42 1:06	29 am pm 12:42 to to 2:42	30 am pm 1:06 1:30 to to 3:06 3:30					
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14 am 1:06 to 3:06	pm 1:30 <i>to</i> 3:30	15 am 1:54 to 3:54	pm 2:18 <i>to</i> 4:18	16 am 2:42 to 4:42	pm 3:06 to 5:06	17 am 3:30 to 5:30	pm 3:54 to 5:54	18 am 4:18 to 6:18	pm 4:42 to 6:42	19 am 5:06 to 7:06	pm 5:30 to 7:30	20 am 5:54 to 7:54	pm 6:18 to 8:18
21 am 6:42 to 8:42	pm 7:06 <i>to</i> 9:06	22 am 7:30 to 9:30	pm 7:54 to 9:54	23 am 8:18 to 10:18	pm 8:42 <i>to</i> 10:42	24 am 9:06 to 11:06	pm 9:30 <i>to</i> 11:30	25 am 9:54 to 11:54	pm 10:18 <i>to</i> 12:18	26 am 10:08 to 12:08	pm 10:30 <i>to</i> 12:30	27 am 10:42 to 12:42	Pm 11:06 to 1:06
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MARCH 2021													
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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.

Fair days

For your own 2021 Doug Hannon's Moon Clock go to moontimes.com or send \$9.95 each, plus \$3.75 shipping/handling per order, to: Moon Clock, P.O. Box 28460, Atlanta, GA 30358.

Good days

Best days



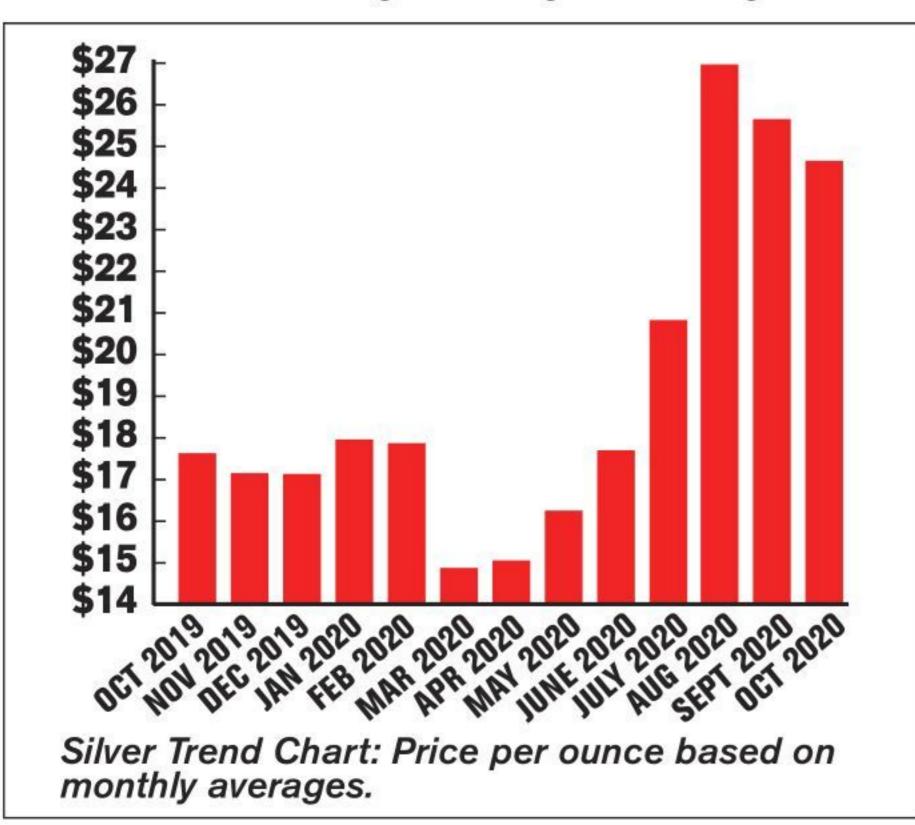
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unters know the importance of terminal performance. A bullet's ability to penetrate and damage tissue allows hunters to make clean, ethical kills, put meat in the freezer and keep taxidermists busy. While the terminal performance of centerfire rifle ammunition is talked about a great deal, the terminal performance of rimfire ammunition is often ignored. I find this odd; do hunters not want to use the most effective rimfire ammunition available for the game they are after? Of course they do, and so it pays to consider the terminal performance of the various rimfire bullets and loads available.

SMALL GAME

The .22 LR is arguably the most popular rimfire cartridge for squirrels and rabbits, and many hunters take only head shots to preserve meat. If that's your intent, ammo selection from a terminal performance standpoint is less critical. Any lead round-nose .22 LR load should

do the trick, provided it shoots accurately from your rifle. Higher velocity options give you a bit more reach without having to factor in holdover.

If, however, you plan to take body shots, you need a bullet that will expand, and velocity helps with tissue destruction. In this case, quality standard or high-velocity hollow-point loads like the Winchester Super-X 40-grain copper-plated Power-Point at about 1,200 fps are ideal.

VARMINTS

For mid-size varmints like groundhogs, rock chucks, raccoons and such, lead round-nose loads still apply when taking head shots. For body shots on the larger and tougher-skinned critters, though, chose a hollow-point bullet with a bit more velocity. These loads can increase damage to internal organs, resulting in quicker kills.

Two outstanding options are the CCI Stinger 32-grain copper-plated hollow point at about 1,600 fps and the CCI





Velocitor 40-grain copper-plated hollow point at 1,400 fps. The Stinger load will expand 1.3 times its original diameter and penetrate to around 10 inches in 10 percent ordnance gelatin. The Velocitor load with its heavier bullet will expand a bit wider and penetrate 40 percent deeper.

PREDATORS

With the correct loads, the .22 LR is suitable for predators like foxes, bobcats and even coyotes. Whether you're taking head or body shots on these larger



animals, opt for high-velocity loads with expanding bullets.

The CCI Velocitor is an excellent load for this application as well. So, too, is the Winchester Super-X Hyper Velocity 40-grain copper-plated hollow point at about 1,400 fps. In 10 percent ordnance gelatin both of these loads will deliver more than a foot of penetration and decent expansion of about 1.4 times the original bullet diameter.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

There are specialty rimfire loads to consider as well. Though Remington ammunition is now a part of Vista Outdoors and we're not sure what loads will remain in production, the CBee22 subsonic load has a 33-grain hollow-point bullet that will expand. If you're not hunting with a suppressor but want a very quiet and deadly option for squirrels and vermin out to about 25 yards, this load is

ideal. If you do run a suppressor on your .22, consider the slightly faster CCI 22 Suppressor 45-grain subsonic hollow point. It will show some expansion even at its velocity of about 950 fps.

The segmented hollow-point loads from CCI are also unique. They feature bullets that break apart into three sections almost immediately after impact and penetrate 6 to 7 inches in 10 percent ordnance gelatin. CCI has four .22 LR loads with segmented hollow points: a 32-grain high-velocity version at 1,640 fps; a Mini-Mag with a 40-grain bullet at 1,235 fps; a subsonic Quiet-22 with a 40-grain bullet at 710 fps; and another 40-grain subsonic offering at





1,050 fps. I've not seen stellar accuracy from any of these. However, they're plenty accurate out to about 40 yards, and they can deliver lethal body shots on mid-size varmints due to the fragments radiating out from the bullet path as much as 2 inches.

Rimfire bullet selection matters. While the wrong bullet choice with a big-game rifle might result in a longer-than-desired blood trail from a whitetail buck, big-game hunters do not have to worry about the animals they shoot climbing into a den 30 feet up a hickory tree. You surely do not want to shoot a big fox squirrel and have it disappear into a hollow trunk. Nor do you want to hit a groundhog only to watch it crawl down his hole. Choose your rimfire load wisely, and shoot straight.





ew presentations have universal appeal to our finned adversaries. For example, you'll rarely catch bluegills when frogging in the lily pads for largemouths, and walleye will turn up their noses at a wad of chicken livers fished on the bottom for catfish. Yet, in our array of strike-provoking tools, there is one technique that quite simply gets bit all year long, by every fish that swims in your favorite lake, river or reservoir: the drop-shot rig.

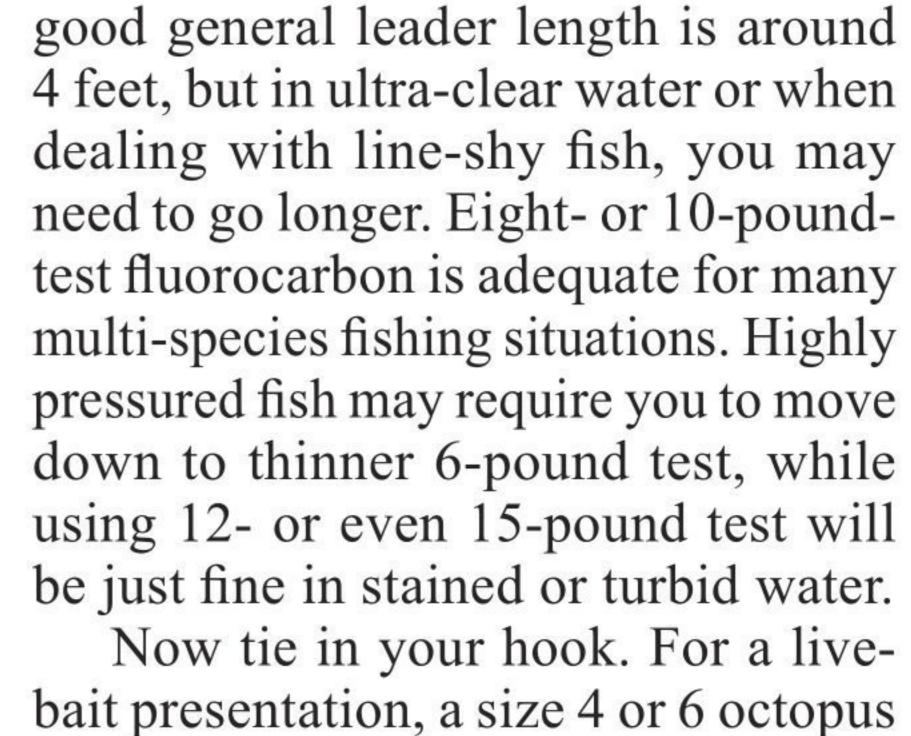
At first glance, the drop-shot rig seems like little more than a rearranged version of "hook, line and sinker," but in fact, the

drop-shot is an extraordinarily versatile way of targeting fish during any month on the calendar. If you've never fished a drop-shot rig, use the beginning of this new season as your opportunity to learn—and perfect—your drop-shot technique.

Begin building your drop-shot rig by spooling up with a braided main

line to support long casts and provide with a smooth finish and the thinnest diameter possible. These attributes will help you cast the drop-shot far, and will reduce air and water resistance as you fish it back to the boat. Generally, an eight-strand braided line is preferable to other options. Because many subtle drop-shot bites are detected visually, select a high-visibility braid to make your main line easier to see under all sky conditions. Add a small swivel at the end of the braided main line to eliminate the line twist that a drop-shot rig can cause.

enhanced sensitivity. Select a braid



Next, add a fluorocarbon leader. A

Now tie in your hook. For a livebait presentation, a size 4 or 6 octopus hook is a good starting point. With a larger soft-plastic bait, a more traditionally sized bass hook is appropri-

> ate. In any case, match the overall hook size to the bait you're presenting. Attach the hook to the leader using a Palomar knot, leaving a long tag end. In general terms, if I have a 4-foot leader, my hook will be positioned halfway down the leader length. Pass the tag end back through the eye of the hook from the top to



the bottom, which will help the hook stand out horizontally from the leader.

Finally, add a sinker. For simple drop-shot rigs, I like to use a bell sinker with enough weight to keep my rig on the bottom in the face of wind, waves or current. Carry a range of weights, from 1/8 ounce to 1/2 ounce or more, depending on the depth range you typically fish. Eco-friendly tungsten dropshot weights are becoming popular and allow your rig to fall through the water column more quickly than when using a lead sinker. The high density of tungsten also does a superior job of telegraphing bottom hardness or softness through the line to the angler. The hook-to-sinker distance on the leader is critical (see sidebar). A distance of 10 to 12 inches is probably the minimum that most anglers will use for fish that are tight to the bottom, but don't be afraid to position the hook farther away from the sinker in very clear water or when targeting suspended fish. In most instances, a 20- to 24-inch distance between the hook and sinker is a good place to start.



Dress the hook with the bait of your choice and make a long cast. Keep the bail open until the sinker contacts the bottom, then close the bail and reel up the slack. Now, on a tight line, wiggle and twitch the bait, but do so without lifting the weight off the bottom. After you stop that motion, get tight to the weight again and pause. This is frequently when strikes will occur. After a few moments, repeat that bait shaking, or, reel in a small amount of line and start shaking again.

We want that bait to hover, twitch and convulse just off the bottom, right in the faces of the fish living there. If your sonar unit shows fish in the area but your drop-shot rig isn't getting bit, the first change to make is to lengthen the distance between hook and sinker. Most fish won't feed down but will happily investigate an offering that is quivering a few feet above them. When you feel the strike, reel down toward the weight and set the hook with an upward sweeping motion to pin the fish.



DROP-SHOT RECIPES

Tailor the rig to the species and water conditions.

The drop-shot rig may most often be used for bass, but it's equally effective on other fish. The key is matching each component of the rig to the species you are targeting, as well as the area and time of year you are fishing. Hook, weight and the distance between the two should suit both the bait and the water conditions. Here are some suggestions, but don't be afraid to make adjustments.

LARGEMOUTH BASS

Conditions: Grass flats in spring and early summer

Bait: Big Bite Baits 5-inch Sugar Cane Worm, rigged Texas-style

Hook: Size 1/0 VMC Fastgrip Wide Gap Worm

Sinker: 1/4 ounce, tied to suspend bait just above the grass. Estimate the height of the grass using your fishfinder, and adjust the dropper length accordingly.

SMALLMOUTH BASS

Conditions: Deep rock structures in late summer into fall

Bait: Berkley 4-inch Powerbait MaxScent Flat Worm, nose-hooked

Hook: Size 1 Berkley Fusion 19

Sinker: 3/8 to 1/2 ounce, tied on an 18- to 24-inch dropper. Longer droppers are often necessary in clear water or calm conditions.

WALLEYES

Conditions: Rock piles and mud flats in midsummer

Bait: Northland Fishing Tackle 4.5-inch Impulse Rig'n Leech

Hook: Size 2 VMC Octopus Live Bait

Sinker: 1/4 ounce, tied on an 18-inch dropper. Use 8-pound fluorocarbon for a stealthy presentation.

CRAPPIES

Conditions: Channel edges and deep flats in reservoirs during fall

Bait: Live shiners or fatheads

Hook: Size 4 Eagle Claw Light Wire

Aberdeen

Sinker: 1/4 to 1/2 ounce depending on depth. A 20-inch dropper is a good place to start for bottom-oriented fish.

GET YOUR GRIND ON

FOLLOW THESE TIPS TO MAKE BETTER GROUND GAME MEAT AT HOME.

By Josh Dahlke

here are certain situations in which dropping off your kill at a trusted butcher shop makes sense, but whenever possible it's much better to take meat matters into your own hands. I continually hear about hunters who process most of their game at home ... except for any meat products that involve grinding. Burger, sausage, ground jerky—for some reason many folks are intimidated by grinding meat. That shouldn't be the case.

Grinding your own game meat is economical. These days, commercialgrade meat grinders are inexpensive and extremely powerful. Invest in a high-quality grinder, and it will pay for itself within a season or two of use. Plus, modern grinders are so efficient that you won't burn too much of your precious time or energy pushing wild protein through the blades.

Flexibility, freshness and creativity are further benefits of DIY meat grinding. There's no need to grind all your meat at once. It can be fun and efficient to have a grinding party and bust out massive batches of hamburger and sausages all in one sitting, but consider keeping a grinder on your countertop for on-demand access. Fresh ground meat is almost always better, so running a couple of pounds through a grinder right before firing up the grill or making pasta is pretty awesome. By limiting your grinding to a meal-by-meal basis, you can get creative in the kitchen by trying new recipes; you won't end up being forced to use 50 pounds of the same boring sausage till next season.

Grinding is usually synonymous with big game, but you can grind waterfowl, upland birds and wild turkeys into delicious concoctions as well. Lately, I've been grinding gobbler legs into breakfast sausage.



It's taken me two decades to become proficient in butchering and processing wild game, and that includes becoming comfortable with grinding. Here are some hard-won shortcuts to help you get your grind on.

GRINDING GEAR

My first at-home grinding experience involved a hand grinder, a wobbly table and plenty of cursing. Early on I didn't have excess income to fund my budding meat processing addiction, but since then I've constantly upgraded my grinding equipment. Looking at the bright side, all this experimentation allowed me to appreciate a good grinder. What I've learned might save you a headache.

Small, low-horsepower meat grinders will work for light grinding jobs, and you might even want a compact grinder to keep on your countertop like I mentioned earlier. However, small grinders have their limitations—don't count on using one to grind meat from a whole deer. If space isn't an issue, splurge on a medium- to high-power grinder that can

handle everything. Shoot for a grinder with a 1/2- to 2-horsepower motor. You can expect somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 pounds of ground meat per minute from a 1/2-horsepower motor.

Premium grinders are also typically designed better. You'll find smoother seams on grinder parts for easier cleanup, and the bodies will usually be strong metal instead of flimsy plastic that's prone to cracking.

There are hordes of accessory options for today's grinders. Sausage-stuffing tubes, mixing attachments, various plate sizes and other smart options tailor the grinder to your specific needs. Upper-end grinders typically include more accessories in their stock packages.

KEEP IT COOL

Grinders operate better, cleanup is easier, and meat will stay in optimal condition if you keep everything cool. Perform operations in an environment with a cool ambient temperature. Pre-cool all metal grinder parts in a freezer. Partially frozen meat is usually ideal for grinding.



WELOSE, YOULOSE

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A grinder will naturally generate heat from friction and the motor doing its job. Meat will quickly warm up to meet room temperature while simultaneously getting sticky. Plan ahead and work in batches to keep meat and grinder components as cool as possible throughout the process.

THINK TEXTURE

Texture is one of the most overlooked aspects of meat preparation. "Bad" texture can often be a turnoff to new wild-game eaters. Final texture should always be considered when grinding meat.

A quality grinder will mash up silverskin and large tendons into edible ground, but try your best to eliminate these undesirable parts from the meat before grinding. Clean meat will allow your grinder to run more smoothly with less clogs and will improve the texture of the finished product (i.e., it won't be chewy).

Another texture decision you'll need to make while grinding is how coarse you want the ground. When making snack sticks and most sausages, you'll probably want finely ground meat. (Many sausage recipes that use casings call for the addition of ice water to create more of a paste prior to filling the casings.) Coarse ground is often preferred for burger patties or taco meat.

FAT VS. ALL NATURAL

Wild-game connoisseurs can have strong opinions about adding fat to game meat. I love hunting and harvesting wild meat because it's pure, lean and generally healthy. The idea of mixing domestic



animal fat into all of my ground game meat is crazy to me.

When it comes to straight-up burger, I almost always keep it 100 percent wild with no added fat. Many folks claim all-natural game is too dry or too lean to make burger patties, but I don't have those problems. Just like wild-game steaks, don't overcook your burger and it won't dry out. When pattying burgers, thoroughly roll the ground into dense balls before flattening into patties. If you're still having trouble, consider adding egg or mix your burger toppings (such as cheese) into the meat.

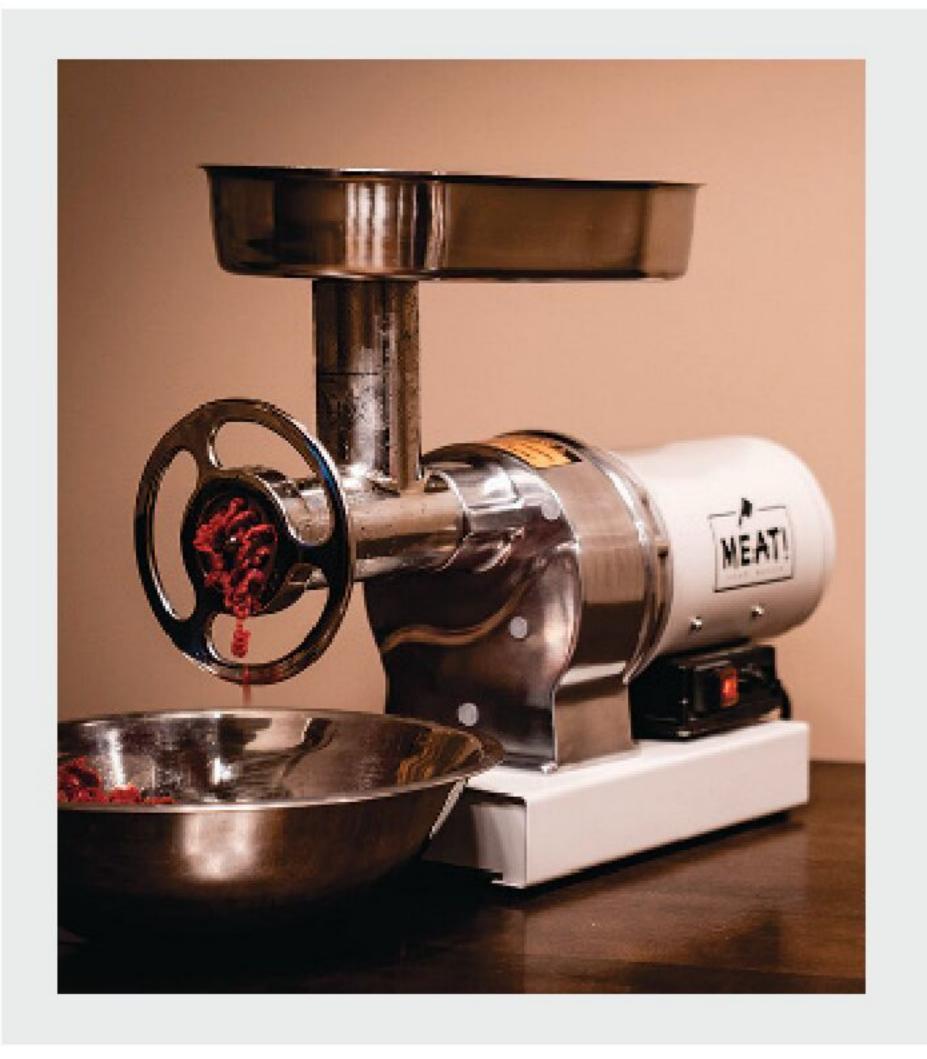
Sausage is the notable exception to my no-fat rule. Sausage shouldn't even be called sausage unless it's fatty. It's up to you how much fat to add, but pork and beef fat are the two most popular options. A week before grinding sausage, I reach out to my local butcher shop and ask it to save all the fat scraps for me to purchase.

HANDLING AND STORAGE

You've probably heard that ground meat from domestic animals should be cooked medium to well-done. This is mainly because ground meat gets handled more than primal cuts, thereby increasing the odds of harmful bacteria finding its way into your next meal.

The beauty of processing your own game meat is that you are able to control your food from start to finish, so with due diligence your burger should be just as clean as your steaks. Keep your meat processing sanitary, and you don't need to worry about overcooking your ground.

Properly packaged and frozen groundmeat products can last for years. Wrap your ground meat or sausages tightly with plastic wrap and then cover with butcher paper, or splurge on a vacuum sealer for the best results. The key is keeping air out of the packages to prevent freezer burn, and limit direct light exposure to minimize discoloration.



MEAT MAKERS

New grinders and more

There's a sweet new line of gear—including killer grinders—on the block for DIY meat processors. Aptly named, MEAT! has established an attractive brand across social media during the past year. But it's not all just flashy marketing; MEAT! products have proven to be ultra reliable among at-home processors, restaurant chefs and even commercial butchers. Perhaps the most alluring part of the MEAT! brand is that its products are sold online, direct to consumer, removing middleman markup and allowing working-class ladies and gentlemen to get more (and better) gear for less cash.

I've been using most of the new equipment from MEAT!, including the 1/2-horsepower grinder (\$350; meatyourmaker.com). It grinds meat faster than I can cycle the bolt on my rifle. This model includes sausage-stuffing accessories and a handy drawer to keep things together.



WELCOME, HOMEWRECKER

HOW DO WE MANAGE **INVASIVE SPECIES**WHEN THEY BECOME PART OF OUR SPORTING LANDSCAPE?



apt. Bob Wetherald has been guiding hunters and anglers on the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River for 16 years, but until five years ago he had never guided bowfishers. His clients were interested in targeting northern snakeheads, predatory fish native to China and Korea that had started appearing in increasing numbers in the grassy flats of the Potomac and its tributaries, so Wetherald rigged up a boat with lights and shooting platforms.

"When snakeheads first started showing up, I was like a lot of people who heard only about how detrimental they were to our sport fisheries," says Wetherald, who owns and operates Mid River Guide Service (midriverguide service.com). "We'd see them occasionally when we were targeting bass, and I was like, 'kill 'em all,' and with extreme prejudice."

Maryland's Department of Natural Resources has taken a hard line on the invasive fish, which were probably brought to the United States in the aquarium trade. The sinuous fish can live out of the water for hours, breathing air instead of extracting oxygen through their gills. They have no natural predators in their adopted

waters. They are highly adaptable to a wide range of habitats. And they are so aggressive and reproductively successful that they can decimate native and managed sport species if their populations are unchecked. Maryland, and many of its neighboring states, has a made it illegal to possess, import or transport live northern snakeheads, and even if you catch one inadvertently, you must kill it. There is no limit or minimum size for snakeheads.

But if you think these swimming gullets are Public Enemy No. 1 to sportsmen and -women, think again. They're sporting to catch on light tackle. They are a hoot to shoot at night in shallow water with bowfishing gear. And they are delectable when prepared in any num-

ber of ways. In the 19 years since they showed up in Mid-Atlantic waterways, they have developed quite a following.

"Snakeheading has become extremely popular, to the point where we'll see five to six boats a night, whereas even five years ago, we didn't see another boat," says Wetherald. "There are a lot of reasons for that. First, it's something to do at night. Second, archers like it because it keeps them conditioned for bowhunting season. Flats shooting has been popular for years in the South, where bowfishers love their gar and flounder, but it's new to the Mid-Atlantic area. Equipment is good and getting better every year. And snakeheads are extremely good to eat. If you look back on their history in the Far



East, that's why they were propagated. They're fast growers, they are prolific reproducers, and their value as table fare is excellent."

Does this sound like a despised invasive species to you? It sounds more like our relationship with another species that brings out the best and the worst of us: feral hogs.

While America's invasive hogs have their origins in less exotic locales than the snakehead, their detrimental impact on our natural habitats is pretty similar. But so is our love-hate relationship with these mammals that are a kick to hunt, even while we feel guilty for loving to chase wild pork as much as we do.

MANAGEMENT CROSSROADS

We have been conditioned to despise the species that are classified as "invasive" and "noxious." The classifications of "exotic" and "feral" are a little harder for us to categorize or hate.

Here are some examples. Species classified as "invasive" include the Asian carp that have infiltrated the Ohio and lower Mississippi rivers as well as zebra mussels that were brought to the Great Lakes from Eurasia. Noxious species—this classification usually applies to weeds—are those plants that are "injurious to agricultural or horticultural crops and natural habitats or ecosystems."

Then there are those species defined as "exotic." These are the slow-burners of our landscapes. They are typically neither as aggressive nor as injurious to our native ecosystems as the invaders, but because they're from elsewhere, they may displace or outcompete native species. Examples of these exotics include soybeans, native to East Asia, which fuel much of the American Midwest's agricultural economy; Chinese ring-necked pheasants, which draw so many of us to



the uplands in the fall; and brown trout, which for more than a century have been a premier species for anglers across the country. But even feral cats and dogs, when they roam from those homes where they have names and collars, are considered exotic across much of the country. This "feral" classification defines animals or plants that were once domesticated but have since lost their domestic nature and turned wild. The poster children for feral species in the U.S. is wild pigs.

So, what are wildlife managers to do when an invasive or exotic species comes to their midst? First, don't let the organism accrue a value, either commercially or recreationally. In Missouri, where feral hogs are moving in from Arkansas and Oklahoma, the state's Department of Conservation discourages shooting pigs for two reasons. First, it doesn't want to create any recreational value for these invasive exotics. Second, biologists are concluding that shooting hogs is ineffective. Hunters rarely kill entire sounders—or family groups—of feral hogs. Some survive, and because hogs are highly adaptive, the survivors become more evasive and educated, making each generation of survivors harder to kill.

Back in Maryland, where the staterecord snakehead of 19.9 pounds was caught in May 2018, there's some indication that the predatory fish are similarly becoming harder to kill efficiently.

"Bowfishing requires clear water,

and tidal surges and wet springs that bring turbid runoff from the tributaries and upper Potomac are becoming more frequent, so the conditions required to target snakeheads are getting narrower and harder to predict," says Capt. Wetherald. "Meanwhile, they've been such effective predators, they're having to move to find new food and habitats. We're hearing of them traveling the big [Potomac] river to get places. If they're relocating and expanding, that's not a good sign for other species, like largemouth, perch, trout and even striped bass."

FLUID SITUATION

But as fisheries managers intensify their effort to making northern snakeheads unwanted and unwelcome, another species is starting to make its presence felt in the Mid-Atlantic watersheds: the blue catfish, which is native to rivers farther south. Its resident status puts it in a strange definitional box. It's not an exotic, since it's as American as striped bass, but it certainly is invasive, especially as it shifts from a bottom-feeding scavenger to an open-water predator.

"Blue cats have been expanding their range, either because of habitat shifts or whatever," says Wetherald. "They've adapted to the point where they are moving out of their normal ecosystem, devastating crabs and eating the same baitfish as saltwater fish, and the state has removed limits and restrictions on means and methods of catching them. Five years ago you never heard of catching a blue cat while trolling open water, but now we catch as many blues while trolling as we do stripers."

Wetherald is taking advantage of the new fishery. Starting this year, he's offering a straight-up catfishing service.

"It's an opportunity that's there, people can catch numbers of big fish, and we should try to assist the state to control numbers. Sure, they're unwanted, but if they can adapt, so can we."

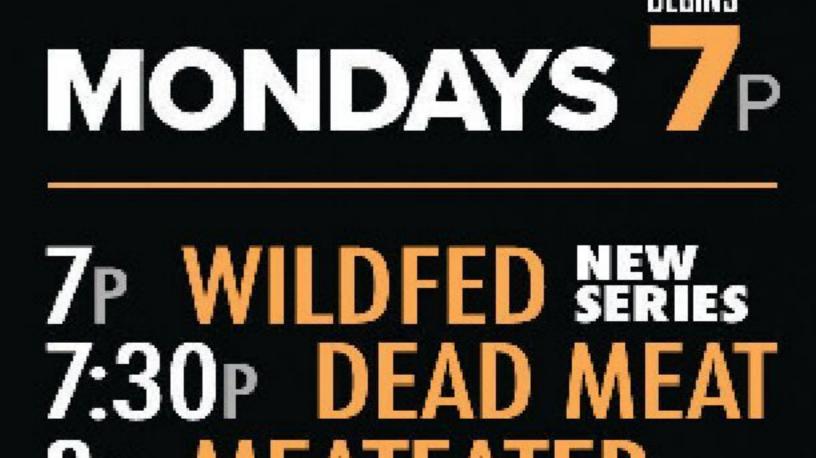


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y approach had been reduced to one of rudimentary locomotion. On all fours and hunched as low as I could go, I clawed along, inching painfully closer to the outcropping that stretched out above me.

To make matters worse, my protracted ascent along the seemingly near-vertical path was littered with prickly cacti and razor-sharp volcanic rocks. The blood now seeping from my palms and knees bore testament that thin-skinned humans are neither wanted nor welcome here.

Upon reaching the summit, I peeked cautiously in the direction my guide was pointing. Three hundred yards across a dry, desert gorge, three aoudad were sunning on rocky shelves. Two others were up and feeding. Even before glassing them, I knew these were exceptional sheep.

LIKE FURRY FOUR-WHEELERS

Folklore has it the Chinati Mountains in West Texas were named after an Apache word for "gate" or "mountain pass." The small range rises to 7,728 feet and is primarily comprised of jagged igneous and metamorphic rock upheavals and outcroppings formed by volcanic events many millennia ago.

The Chinati Mountains were ex-

tensively mined for silver in the 1860s until the veins ran dry in the 1910s. Today, the Chinatis are home to freeranging Barbary sheep, or as they're more commonly called, aoudads. In the 1940s, aoudads were introduced to West Texas; specifically, they were released in the area around Marfa. The forbidding mountains here have proven to provide the perfect habitat for these sheep to thrive. Free-ranging aoudads are impressive creatures, with male specimens weighing as much as 315 pounds on the hoof (females weigh 75 to 200 pounds). Their horns can weigh as much as 30 pounds.

Aoudads need cover to survive; however, that cover is not the generic type most hunters think of, such as brush, understory or timber. An aoudad's ideal cover is topography: rocks, boulders, ravines, outcroppings, shelves and, of course, altitude.

Aoudads have unique hooves, which make them peerless in their agility and ability to climb. Their hooves are elastic as well as concave, able to form to their footing, which provides unparalleled traction and subsequent upward mobility. As such, mountainsides become their sanctuary and provide perfect solace from predators.

To say aoudads are great climbers is a gross understatement. In fact, they can climb 60-degree inclines (and reportedly steeper) in loose and crumbling footings. When predators approach, they almost always retreat uphill, leaving pursuers incapable of running uphill over steep grades with poor traction far behind. Free-ranging aoudads also have a propensity for residing at the highest elevations close to the steepest terrain. As you can imagine, this is the same terrain that makes hunting a real challenge for bipods.

ROUGH, TOUGH AND TYPICAL

My November aoudad adventure would be my first, and, needless to say, I didn't know what I was getting into. I flew to Midland, Texas, and made the 2 1/2hour drive to Marfa where I met up with veteran outfitter Steve Jones, owner of Backcountry Hunts

of Carlsbad, N.M. Jones has run aoudad hunts in Texas for 29 years and knows the area better than anyone. Aoudad season is open year-round in Texas. However, Jones hunts them from the day after Thanksgiving until March 31.

Camp Nopolosa, at an elevation of 5,035 feet, served as the base for my hunt at the Love Ranch, a sprawling, 40,000-acre working cattle operation. From the front gate to camp is a 33-mile drive along an insufferably bad cattle trail that leads straight up the mountains to the shabby-chic cowboy camp.

Late November in the Chinatis can be a fickle mistress. Daytime temperatures are generally in the 40s, dipping into the 20s at night. Camp is comfortable, with each hunter having a cot and a heavy sleeping bag. While Nopolosa is primitive, electricity is provided during the day by generator. At lights-out, the generator is turned off, making camp seemingly the quietest place on earth. Nights offer hunters time to reflect on the day's activities and ponder their deepest thoughts.

My aoudad hunt was to be a four-day affair, but I was confident I'd tag out early. After breakfast the first morning, my guide David Callaway and I loaded up into his battle-worn truck



long before sunrise. Callaway is the typical Texas rough-and-tumble sort, a no-nonsense kind of guy, so hard his calluses have calluses.

Callaway is a gifted wrench out of necessity. On the trail he can fix anything, from an ill-shifting transmission to a faulty carb with just a roll of duct tape, bailing wire, spit and a pair of rusty pliers. And, most importantly, he's patient from years of hand-holding flatlanders like me on tough mountain adventures.

As the '77 GMC High Sierra 3+3 rattled to life with a thick billow of black smoke, Callaway, sipping steaming-hot cowboy coffee from a well-crinkled Stanley thermos, ran me through the expectations for the day. According to him, we'd spend it creeping through brush-filled canyons, rock ridges and ravines, glassing the high-percentage areas where he'd found aoudads while scouting days prior to my arrival.

The sage guide warned me that aoudads move often, and they can be difficult to find. He also said I'd need to be mobile, fleet of foot, ready to put a spot-and-stalk on a quality animal once we had located one. That was foreboding, of course, given the less-than-hospitable terrain that had thoroughly jostled and rearranged my innards on the long slog into camp the day before.

As I settled in to the passenger side

of the truck's expansive bench seat, one obscured by all sorts of hunting essentials (thermos, two-way radio, striking paper—Southern-speak for toilet paper—etc.), I couldn't help but feel eager for what lay ahead. I





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DR. TODD A. KUHN (3)

was confident I'd soon be wrapping my hands around an impressive set of aoudad horns...well, maybe not so fast.

QUICK BAPTISM

As we rolled around the first bend of the day, with gravel crackling under the tires and the sun unfolding its fingertips over the mountain tops, Callaway eased into an aggressive stop while simultaneously throwing up his binocular. A split second later, he had a sounder of hogs in focus.

Dave gestured aggressively up the hill, telling me to jump out and get a prop on the hood. Caught a bit off guard by the unexpectedly sudden sighting and a bit disheveled, I grabbed my Ruger Hawkeye Hunter .300 Win. Mag. and staggered awkwardly out of the truck.

My mind racing and hands fumbling,

I struggled to chamber a round and get propped solidly on the hood as I'd inadvertently left my pack in the truck cab. As I scoured the hillside I couldn't find the hogs Callaway had centered in his glass. After my guide called out some landmarks, I was able to see the hogs, a distant poke up the hillside near its ridge. I rolled my scope to maximum power and settled in on the biggest one of the bunch.

I slipped my safety off and punched the trigger as if it owed me money, yanking the muzzle hard right, sending dirt, rock and hogs scattering frantically about. Callaway, sensing my hastiness, told me to take a deep breath and get back on them. My second shot—much less rushed and better planned than its predecessor—found its mark on the

unlucky pig that had stopped to see what all the commotion was about.

That first day we'd cover only about 2 miles as the crow flies, chugging our way up the mountains and deep into aoudad country. We climbed unimaginably steep grades, and crawled over cragged rocks, washes, dry creek beds and boulders so big they had their own gravity. We scaled the high ridges on foot and glassed canyons for hours, scanning for aoudads in the terrain. Occasionally, Callaway would find one and point it out. For me, it was nearly impossible to find one glassing on my own as they blend into the backdrop perfectly.

After the morning hunt, we had lunch on the trail and then we were back at it, glassing and exploring Callaway's favorite aoudad haunts. We saw plenty



AOUDAD ... AND MORE

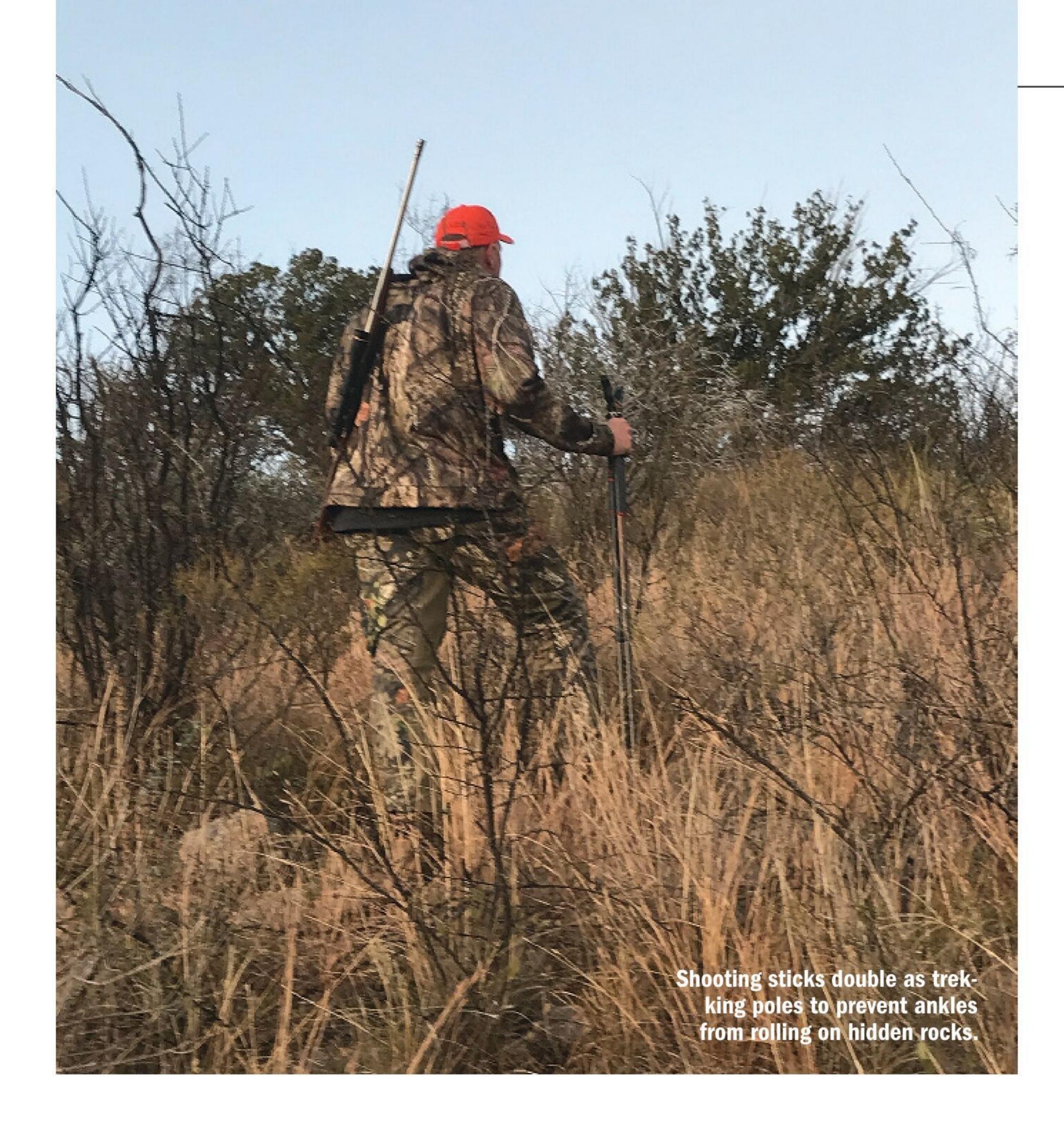
Backcountry Hunts offers multi-species adventures.

Since aoudad can be hunted year-round in Texas, Steve Jones of Backcountry Hunts (backcountryhunts.com) gives clients the option of combining the species with whitetail and mule deer during a single trip. Jones offers a \$500 discount when hunts are combined (a \$315 license is

required). He prefers hunters take rams with horns larger than 27 inches, and most clients' rams measure an impressive 28 1/2 to 30 1/2 inches. The hunter success rate is high; most years Backcountry Hunts enjoys 100 percent success on aoudad.







of animals; however, none was worthy of taking according to my seasoned guide. We also glassed elk, mule deer, Carmen Mountain whitetails and, of course, those wild hogs.

As the sun faded, we rumbled back to camp for a great meal and a much appreciated hot shower. While still relatively early, it was time for bed. The day's climbing and glassing had taken their toll on me. I wasn't in "climbing shape" apparently, and the cot felt nice. As I lay there, the wind shuffling over the rusty tin roof, the propane heater hissing, my legs throbbing a bit and my feet a touch sore, I felt a little less confident I'd tag out quickly. We had covered plenty of ground and still came up empty-handed.

CLIMBING TO THE TOP

Two days followed with more scouting and glassing, searching for a trophy aoudad. We weren't able to put a stalk on any of the animals we found, as they were exceptionally skittish, spooking



RAM RIG

Ruger's Hawkeye Hunter in .300 Win. Mag. can handle hardship.

Free-range aoudad hunts aren't for the faint of heart or wimpy gear, as the terrain is unruly and unforgiving. I carried a Ruger Hawkeye Hunter chambered in .300 Win. Mag. (\$1,099; ruger.com) and loaded it with Hornady Precision Hunter 178-grain ELD-X ammo (\$49.99 per 20 rounds; hornady.com). It proved to be a winning combination, offering a muzzle velocity of nearly 3,000 fps and plenty of power to down a hefty ram.

The Hawkeye's one-piece, stainless steel bolt features a non-rotating, Mauser-type controlled-round-feed extractor, which makes cycling rounds foolproof. A hinged, solid steel floorplate allows easy unloading without having to chamber each cartridge. The free-floated, cold-hammer-forged stainless steel barrel has 5R rifling and precise headspace to ensure tight groups downrange, while a radial-port muzzle brake significantly reduces felt recoil.

As smooth and crisp as any I've shot out of the box, the trigger helps hunters realize the rifle's full potential for accuracy. The three-position safety is easily accessible even when hunting with thick gloves, and it allows the

shooter to lock the bolt or to load and unload the rifle with the safety engaged.

The walnut stock is an ergonomic treat, and its slender grip fits my hand perfectly. Rounded contours along the fore-end and on the top of the grip make the rifle a pleasure to handle and aim. Wrap-around checkering on the grip and fore-end add surehandedness.

I mounted a Leupold VX-Freedom 3-9x40mm riflescope on the Hawkeye Hunter mainly because the no-frills scope is lightweight but durable enough for tough hunting conditions (\$324.99; leupold.com). Thanks to the coatings and other optical enhancements that make up Leupold's Twilight Light Management System, the scope also offers excellent light transmission—a distinct advantage when hunting early and late.

The VX-Freedom is waterproof and shock proof to handle difficult terrain and unpredictable weather. With 1/4-MOA finger-click adjustments for windage and elevation, this reasonably priced, made-in-America optic offers an enormous amount of value from a very well-known brand.



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when they spotted us. On our last morning in camp, we headed out with a sense of urgency to make our familiar mountain rounds.

As we idled out of camp, Callaway mentioned he had a "go-to" spot deep in the high country, one where he'd found quality animals days prior to our arrival in camp. But there was a catch (there's always a catch): It would be a significant hike to get there. After a few minutes of discussion, we both agreed it was well worth the trek.

After several hours of gut-wrenching off-roading, we rock-crawled into a lengthy dry gulch. Our big truck's motor labored to muster enough willpower to continue forward over the angry terrain. A few hundred yards later, we came to a stop at the base of a seemingly vertical bluff. Looking up, I recall praying that wasn't the "hill" Callaway said we'd need to climb. At its apex, a jagged ridge jutted abruptly skyward, a remanent of

the belched molten lava that formed it many millennia prior.

Turns out that was the hill we had to climb, so I gathered my Ruger and binocular, and we began our slow, painful creep up, with Dave leading the way. Once near the summit, panting and out of breath, I waited just below the peak while my guide glassed the canyon.

Looking back, he signaled that there were five rams. I eased myself up and over the peak, climbing into position and eventually nestling behind some rocks that camouflaged my presence. Across the canyon, three of the rams were sunning on rocky outcroppings, while two were feeding slowly our way—none at a range I felt comfortable shooting. Callaway decided we'd stay put, hoping one of the rams would feed closer and into a clearing for a shot. For the next two hours we stayed hunkered down, waiting.

Finally, the largest ram wandered from the group and started climbing

in our direction. Although the aoudad was still a few hundred yards away, Callaway told me to get ready as rams can close distance quickly. Three hundred yards, then 200 yards, and minutes later just as my guide had said, the ram was within 100 yards.

I was propped on a large rock and ready for the shot, my heart racing as I could now see firsthand just how big these wide-shouldered animals really are. With the ram at 75 yards and still closing, I settled my scope on its shoulder. I gently squeezed, and the Ruger responded with a heated bark. The ram collapsed where he stood, and in that blink of an eye my hunt was over.

Leaning back against a pile of rocks, with the bright Texas sun beating down on me, I reminisced about what had brought me here. After days of scouring the most rugged and inhospitable terrain I'd ever hunted, just a few yards beyond me lay my last-day ram.













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A ROUNDUP OF THE REGION'S TOP OPPORTUNITIES THIS MONTH

By Brandon Butler

the outdoor activities available across the Midwest. It may not be 70 degrees and sunny outside, but fishing, hunting and trapping are all on the table. Chasing after overpopulated light geese is an admirable pursuit. So is plying the waters of any warmwater discharge reservoir or adding more small game meat to the freezer. If you do want to take a weekend off from being outdoors, February is also sport show season. The Indianapolis Boat, Sport and Travel Show—assuming it happens—is the largest in the Midwest, and runs Feb. 19 to 28 at the state fairgrounds.

1

WINNEBAGO CHAIN PIKE

The Winnebago Chain, including Lake Winnebago, Little Lake Butte des Morts, Lake Butte des Morts, Lake Winneconne and Lake Poygan, is a top pike-producing region in Wisconsin. By February, northerns are usually moving shallow to prepare for the spawn. Look for them in bays with depths less than 6 feet. Drill multiple holes and use tip-ups to spread out your offerings. Large, live minnows are a top bait choice. For a real treat, fillet a fresh pike right out on the ice and cube it into nuggets. Add the meat to a pot of water with salt, lemon juice, celery and onion, boil it up and enjoy a plate of poorman's lobster with melted butter.



DEVILS LAKE PERCH



Speaking of good-eating fish, with the decline of southern Lake Michigan's yellow perch fishery, anglers have had to look for new sources of supply. A favorite is Devils Lake in North Dakota. With a 20-fish daily limit and a 40-fish possession limit, you and a few buddies can load up on enough tasty fillets to last you until ice-out. At 200,000 acres, Devils is a big lake, so it's worth considering a guide service, like the folks at Perch Patrol (701-351-3474; perchpatrol.com), to make the most of your time on the ice.



THOMAS HILL WIPERS

Most lakes in northern Missouri are covered with ice in February, but not Thomas Hill Reservoir. This 4,950-acre impoundment's warmwater power plant discharge makes it a year-round open-water fishery. If jigging a tiny rod while staring down a hole isn't for you, break out your favorite baitcaster, tie on a big silver Rat-L-Trap and give your arm a workout on the lake's mean hybrid striped bass, aka wipers.

Missouri Department of Conservation fisheries biologist Mike Anderson says they stock 49,500 wipers in Thomas Hill each year. Population and growth are both very good, he says, because of the lake's ample gizzard shad. Most sampled fish fall between 18 and 25 inches, but larger fish are fairly common. Give the Brush Creek Arm a try. In February, the water there usually remains between 55 and 63 degrees.



BUCKEYE TRAPPING

Trapping is a timeless tradition that is both fun and important to conservation. Mink, muskrat, beaver and river otter may be trapped through Feb. 28 in Ohio. For all the information you need on how to trap and where to go, check out the Ohio State Trappers Association website (ohiostatetrapper.org).

AROUND THE VIDIUS





The Wolverine State is home to three species of squirrels: eastern fox, eastern gray and red. A unique opportunity also exists in Michigan to hunt black squirrels, which are the result of a faulty pigment gene. For a shot at one of these neat looking critters, check out the 50,000-acre Allegan State Game Area. Squirrel season is open statewide for all of February, with a bag limit of five and a possession limit of 10.

HUTTERSTOCK (MAR, 5)



HAWKEYE RABBITS

Growing up, my uncle had a friend who owned a Greek restaurant. This

guy could make a rabbit taste better than filet mignon. He'd lightly coat it in a lemon pepper seasoning and pan fry it to golden brown. This recipe alone is enough to make rabbit hunting a wintertime must. Iowa has a daily limit of 10 rabbits and a possession limit of 20. The DNR has a map of heavily populated rabbit areas on the "Pheasant and Small Game" page of its website. Many of the best spots are in the state's southeastern region, with Iowa City and lands south of it being a particular hot spot. Iowa's rabbit season ends Feb. 28.



SHAWNEE NATIONAL FOREST SHEDS

You may only be allowed to shoot two bucks per year in Illinois, but you

can collect as many antlers as you can find. Shed hunting is a great reason to explore this large parcel of public land in February and begin your scouting for next season. The Shawnee National Forest spans 289,000 prime southern-Illinois acres of big-buck habitat. Look for sheds in feeding and bedding areas, along logging roads and anywhere bucks are required to jump, like fences and small creek crossings.



EXPERIENCE THE THRILL OF SPEARING LARGE NORTHERN PIKE THROUGH THE ICE.

By Richard Massey

magine this. You're sitting stone-still in complete darkness in a windowless shelter set atop the ice. Below, in a large, rectangular hole, a 6-inch wooden fish decoy sits motionless in the water, which offers clear visibility to the bottom. Suddenly, a 40-inch northern pike materializes in the hole, mere feet below you. It scopes out the decoy, and as your heart races, you gently slide a spear into the water and guide it over the pike's back before striking.

Sounds exciting, no? If you live in the upper Midwest and have never tried darkhouse spearing, consider doing so this winter. Here's how to get started.

THE GEAR

First, you'll need a few items: a spear, a decoy, an ice auger, an ice spud, some rope, a pair of tongs, a dipper, a darkhouse and a jig stick with a reel and line. The darkhouse is either a portable popup shelter or a semi-permanent shack. The spear is one that features multiple tines with barbs.

Many decoy options are available, or you can carve your own. Some bait shops also carry "spearing chubs," big suckers that can be paired with a harness to keep them alive and active. Used alone or with a decoy, they act as a type of early warning system. When a pike is nearing the hole, the baitfish gets anxious, darting as fast as its tether allows.

THE SETUP

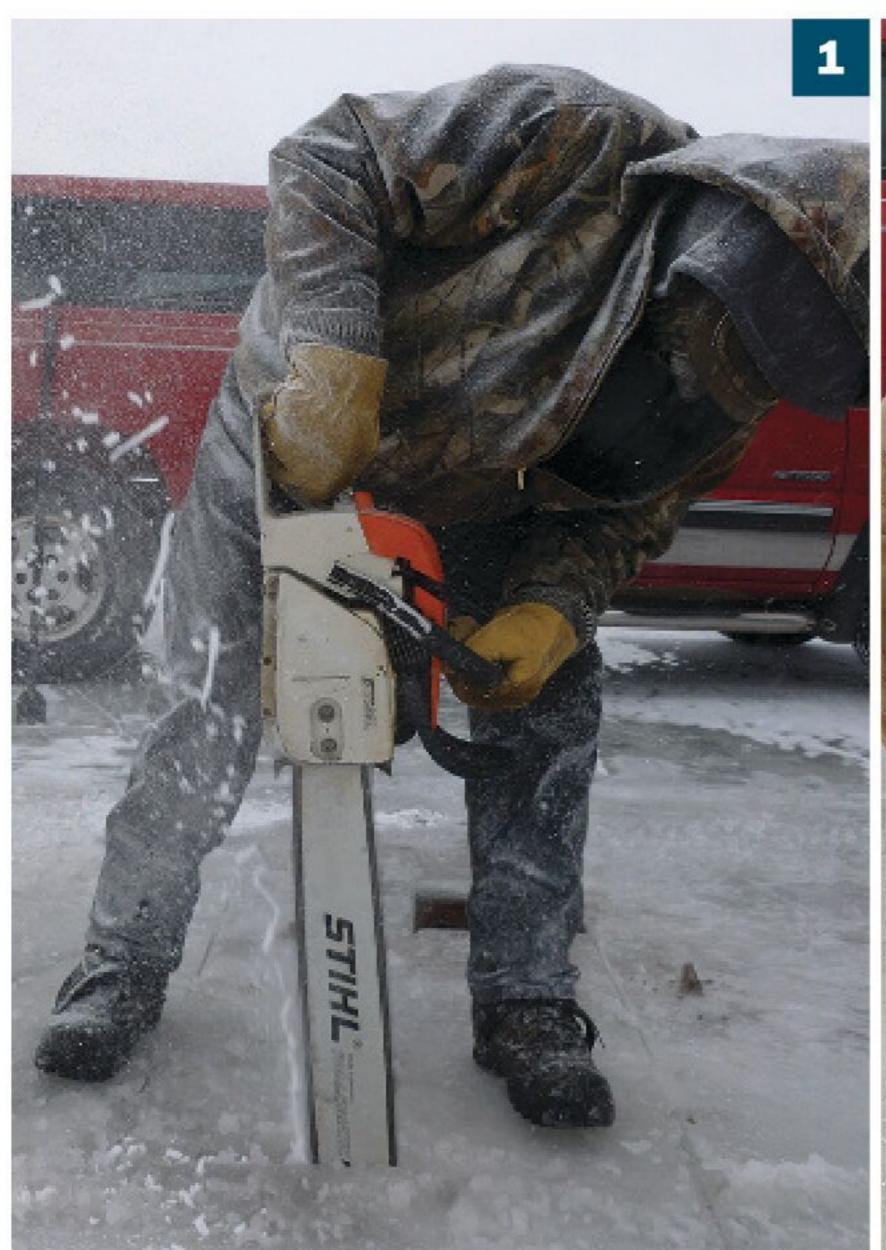
With gear gathered, head to a nearby pike lake and chose a location for your setup. Often, simply finding a village of spear houses offers clues to good areas.

Generally, these shelters won't have windows, and big blocks of ice will be sitting outside them. If houses are present, set up nearby but not too close.

If you can't find other spearers, look for weed beds. Pike love cruising along weed lines when hunting baitfish, which makes them great spearing areas. Weed beds are close to shore on most lakes, often in as little as 5 to 8 feet of water.

Next, it's time to open up a hole with either a chainsaw or an auger. With an auger, drill holes next to each other in the shape of a rectangle. Chop between each hole with an ice spud until the block of ice floats free. Then, grab the block with a pair of tongs and pull it out onto the ice.

Next, set your house over the hole. Use a dipper to clean excess ice chips from the water. I often use a portable











fish house, which you can make darker by covering with a black tarp. Several companies also offer solid houses on wheels. Whatever you use, keep the shelter well ventilated to avoid asphyxiation.

THE ATTRACTION STAGE

With setup complete, you're ready for action. Before lowering the decoy into the water, tie your spear to the house or onto your wrist so you don't lose it. A large pike, once speared, can yank it from your hands. A tether also helps with retrieval after a miss.

After dropping in the decoy, decide on your presentation strategy: jigging or stationary. Pike often come to a jigged decoy pretty aggressively, so spearers must always be ready. A motionless presentation is more subdued, and fish usually make a slower approach, which can provide additional time to line up your strike.

Whichever method you choose, consider using a reel with your decoy line. A jig stick with a reel works well in a portable shelter. In a solid darkhouse, you can also attach a reel to the ceiling.

A pike striking the decoy hard and fast can easily run away with it. If tied to a fixed object without a reel, a fish might snap the line, carting off your decoy in the process. A reel also allows you to slowly pull a fish back into the hole to spear it.

THE KILLING STRIKE

Much like bowhunting, darkhouse spearing is a game of stealth. Trophy pike usually come in slow and listen for any sound, such as an angler's movement above the ice. As adrenaline surges through you, patience is required. Often, slowly pulling the decoy across the hole provides a better angle for your jab.

Before you strike, slowly lower the tines of the spear into the water. This

SPEARING STEP BY STEP

1. Open a large, rectangular hole with a chainsaw or auger. 2. Remove the block, or blocks, of ice with tongs. 3. Place your darkhouse above the hole in the ice and block all sources of external light. 4. Use a decoy or spearing chub to draw fish into the hole. When a pike arrives, slowly guide spear tines into the water to avoid spooking the fish. 5. Aim to spear the fish just behind the head with the center tines, and drive the spear through the bottom of the fish when possible.

ensures your jab won't splash and spook the fish. It also eliminates accuracy woes caused by refraction.

You should aim to place the middle tine of your spear just behind the pike's head when you strike. When you do, be sure you are driving the spear so that the barbs on the tines come through the bottom of the fish. This helps ensure it doesn't come loose as you bring the fish up through the hole.

PARTING WORDS

While you'll learn other tips and tricks as you gain experience, that's the gist of darkhouse spearing. Some other things to keep in mind are the regulations in the state where you're spearing and proper fish identification. States have different rules regarding where and when spearing is allowed. Also, most states prohibit the spearing of muskies, so be sure of what's swimming in your hole before you do anything irreversible.

I've been spearing pike for 60 years, and it never gets old. In a way, it's similar to big-game hunting. The spearer often experiences a long, boring wait rewarded with a quick moment of heartstopping action.

VOICE LESSONS

TWO PREDATOR HUNTING PROS OFFER TIPS ON USING COYOTE VOCALIZATIONS TO SCORE MORE SONGDOGS DURING THE BREEDING SEASON.

By Heath Wood

he topic of calling coyotes during the breeding season is heavily debated among veteran predator hunters. Like many other animals, a coyote's period to breed is short. This brief window creates high anticipation for coyotes, as well as hunt-

ers looking to take advantage of what some refer to as the coyote rut.

I've overheard veteran hunters voice two main schools of thought on calling during this time of peak activity. One is that, even though it's the breeding season, distress sound tactics should

still carry the day. A coyote still must eat, especially when temps are low and they need more food, particularly females preparing to carry their young. During this time coyotes are burning energy while seeking a mate and when breeding, thus supporting the argument



that calls representing a potential meal excel despite the season's distractions.

On the flip side, others change their tactics to focus on what's occurring in the coyote's world. Instead of food sources, they key on February breeding and place more emphasis on coyote vocals.

Two facts that both sides agree on is that coyotes are one of the most territorial animals on the planet, and there is a distinct behavior change caused by the February breeding season.

We recently sat down with two predator hunting pros who both rely

on coyote vocals in order to trigger breeding and territorial instincts, including food, when calling. Both tend to agree that they get faster responses, and more of them, when they decide to introduce vocalizations into their calling sequences.

GET VOCAL

Steve Criner, host of *Dog Soldier TV*, is a veteran predator hunter and worldchampion coyote caller. Needless to say, he knows how to call in coyotes using vocals. Criner says that while his overall tactics don't change significantly when hunting February coyotes, he does like adding vocals to his calling regimen.

"I always use howls during the breeding season," Criner says. "I tend to draw them out, though, making long, subtle howls. Then I follow them up with a few whimpers."

He implements these vocals as an answer to what he refers to as "the February lull," when responses from coyotes to food-source or distress sounds exclusively are delayed. By adding soft, subtle howls, followed by a few whimpers, he can often trigger the territorial instincts of coyotes that might hold up or not respond to distress calls alone. The thought of a competitor entering their area simply draws them into action.

FoxPro pro staffer John Embry, of central Missouri, also knows coyote vocalizations and their effect on calling coyotes. He has more than 30 years of experience calling and hunting coyotes,

and his favorite technique is decoy dogging, which involves using a trained dog to draw in coyotes. Like Criner, Embry uses vocals year-round but says he adds more emotion during the breeding season.

"I use a lone howl for the first 5 to 8 minutes when I begin calling," Embry says. "On many occasions I get a response during that time before I make any other sounds."

He then switches to submissive sounds or breeding sounds, such as the yips and whines made by a pair of mating coyotes. When adding breeding sounds, Embry believes he gets responses from lone males who haven't found a mate yet, or male-and-female doubles that have already paired up and think another pair of coyotes has slipped into the area.

CALL QUALITY

Calling predators has gained tremendous popularity over the past decade. This is excellent for the sport of hunting, but it can create challenges for the hunter.

"Calling predators was once something hunters did after deer season because there was nothing else to hunt,"

Embry says. "Now, it seems there are many hunters like me who like to decoydog coyotes during the summer and call them during the fall and winter."

Because of this boom in popularity, coyotes often get fewer breaks from hunting pressure, which can make them somewhat call shy. Embry says he has used hand and diaphragm calls in the past, but the large selection of vocals and the quality of sounds available at the push of a button with electronic calls have made them his go-to choices. He uses realistic sounds from his FoxPro X2S to keep on-edge coyotes comfortable enough to come within shooting range.

Criner also leans on electronic calls for his vocals during the February breeding season. However, he combines his electronic call with his hand call howler or his diaphragm call. He loves using an open-reed-style call to begin his calling sequences.

"I use my Blood Red Moon Howler to create long, drawn-out howls, and then to do the yip, yip, yip sounds of the coyote whimper by sliding my mouth to the end of the reed of the call," Criner says.

Used in conjunction with an electronic call, the open-reed howler also allows him to create a realistic scenario that might take place during the breeding season.

"I place the electronic call a little farther away from me [about 50 to 60 yards], then answer myself once I've completed my vocals on the Blood Red Moon Howler," Criner says.

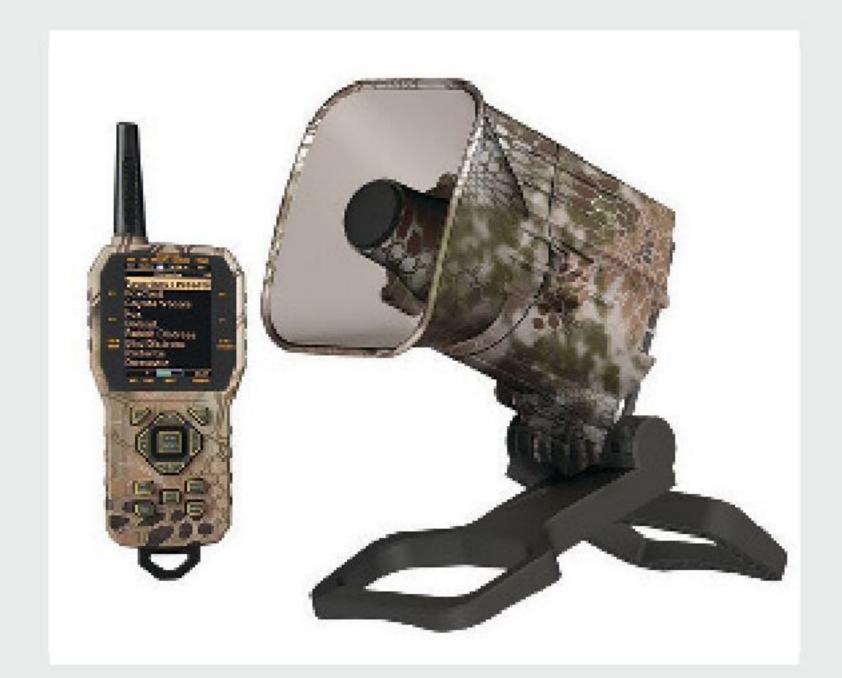
With these two calls, Criner can either sound like multiple coyotes challenging each other for territory or a pair of coyotes seeking out one another for breeding. Either way, coyotes often respond because of the presence of another coyote, even if they might appear to be call shy when using familiar distress sounds. In any case, to get the most out of coyote vocals, you need calls capable of producing realistic sounds that trigger a response from coyotes.

LOCATION MATTERS

The right sounds are important, but so, too, is being in the right spot. You want to call from a quality stand, preferably in an area with lots of coyotes.

"I try to make quality stands where I know there are coyotes," Criner says. "I try to hunt in open areas, where I can see a long way, because coyotes will work





TOP TRANSLATORS

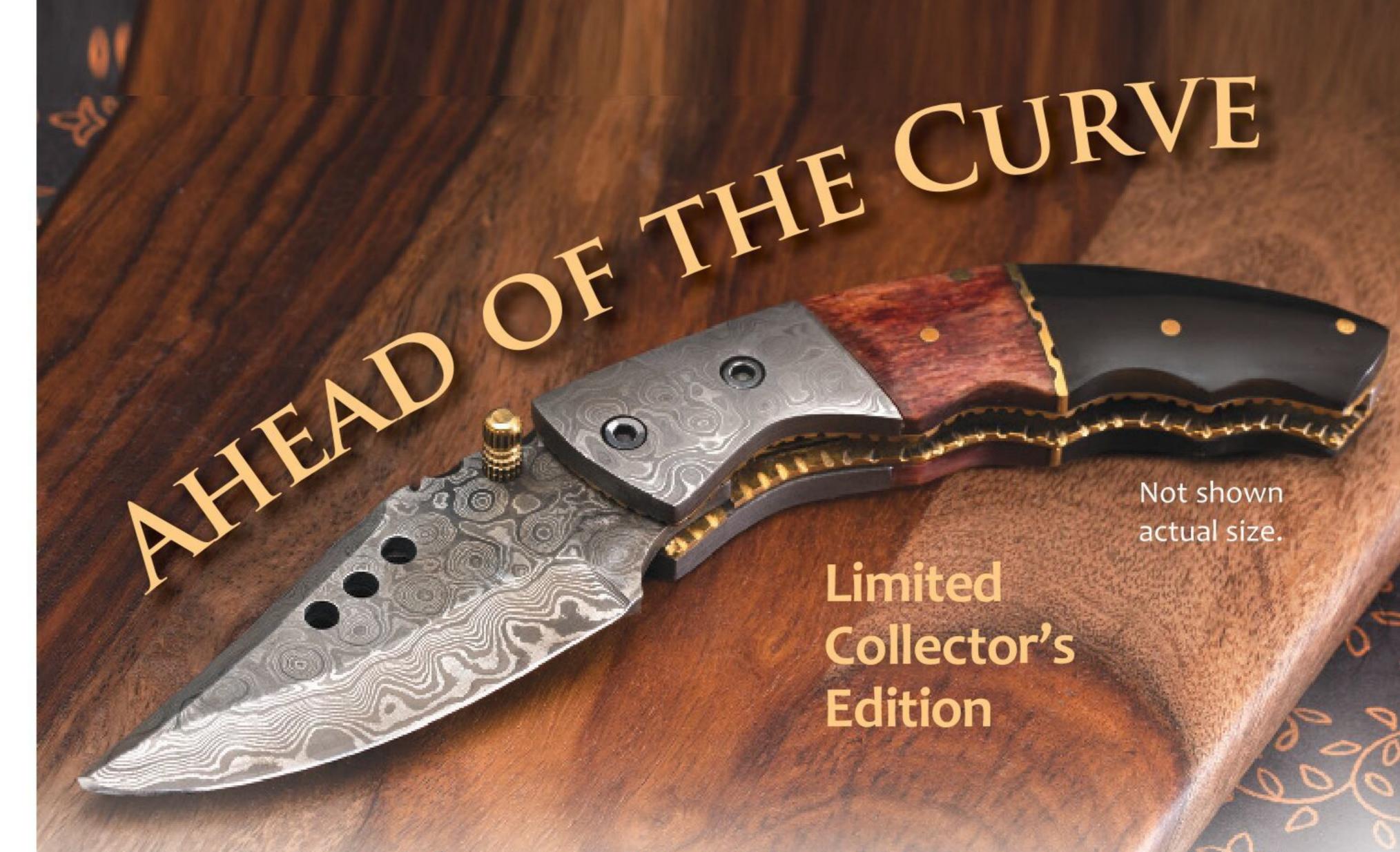
Two calls to tempt songdogs

Voice Box

The FoxPro X2S (above) is a compact and powerful unit with a positional, high-definition speaker. The horn-style speaker has an added tweeter for improved frequency response, and the system allows for extreme volume and realistic sound clarity. The X2S features Bluetooth compatibility, so users can connect wirelessly to devices and use their own personal sound libraries. With 100 pre-loaded sounds and the ability to store up to 1,000, this electronic call is a potent predator tool. It also comes with the popular TX1000 remote that includes FoxPro's pre-loaded sounds, as well as barometer, moon phase, temperature, timer, clock and battery-level displays. (\$579.95; gofoxpro.com)

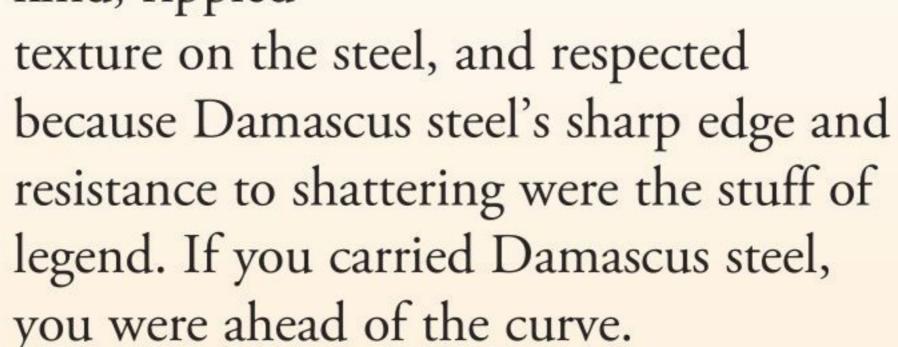
Handy Howler

Part of the Dog Soldier Legend Series designed by world champion caller Steve Criner, the Blood Red Moon Open Reed Howler is an incredibly user-friendly openreed-style howler. The call produces authentic howls, barks and many other coyote vocals SOLDIER perfect for breeding season. Each howler is designed and handtuned by Criner himself and is guaranteed to produce authentic sounds. (\$44.99; coyotecalls.com)



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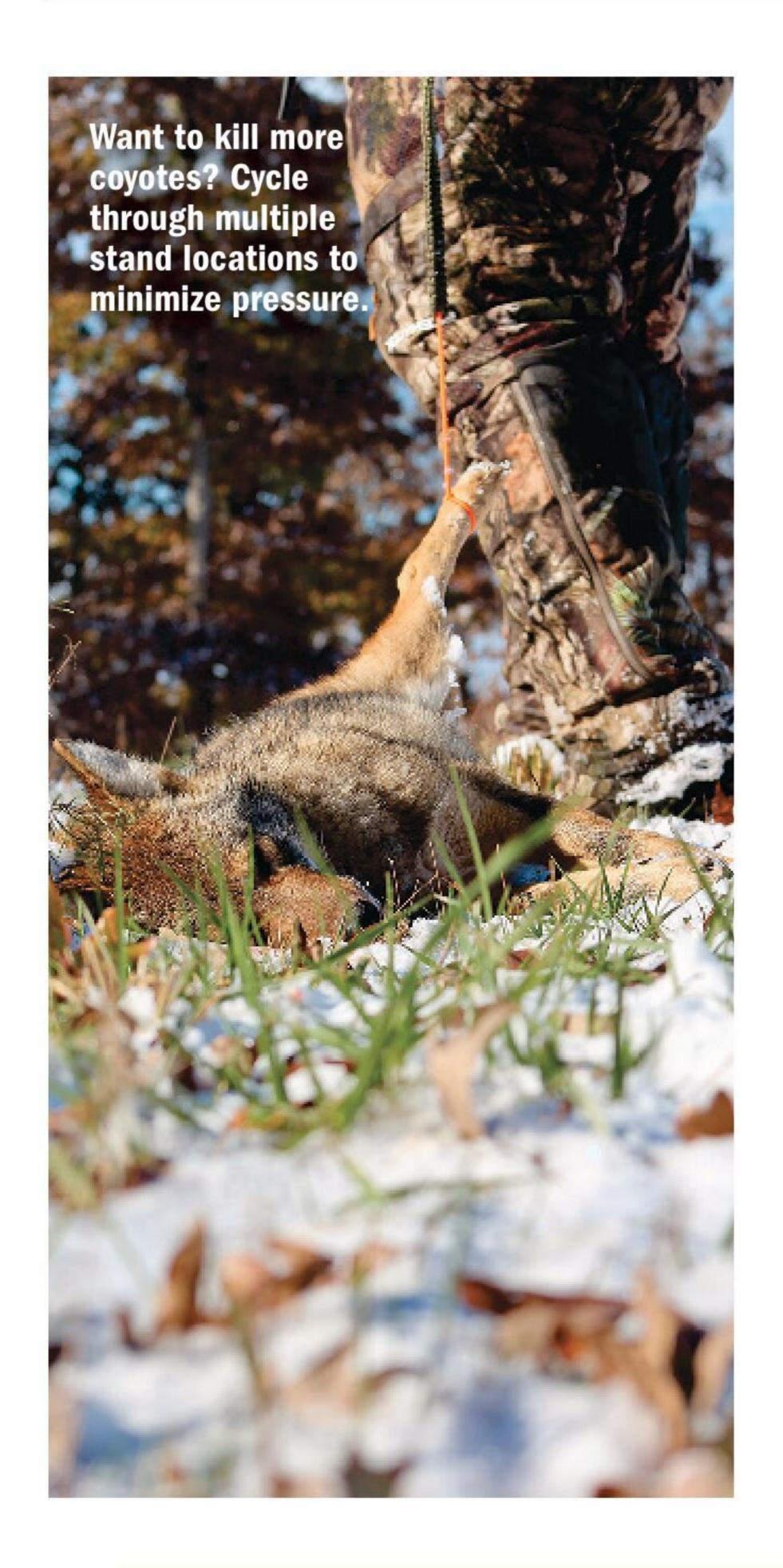
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the wind. They will figure out things before they get to you."

To ensure you're choosing a good site, Embry suggests scouting areas

on foot and howling to confirm the presence of coyotes. If done ahead of time, this helps assure better stands throughout the season.

Keeping pressure in mind is also important when choosing stands.

"I've had hunters tell me, 'I know there are coyotes where I'm hunting, but I'm not having any luck calling them in," Embry says. "After talking to them, I usually find out that they are hunting the same places every weekend, thus putting too much pressure in the area."

He likens hunting coyotes to hunting a mature buck. If you hunt the same stand over and over, they are going to feel pressured and leave. Once you've identified several locations with coyotes, rotate through them over the course of the season. This will help hold coyotes in your area and make for more successful hunts.

The bottom line is, during the winter months of January, February and March, coyotes have more on their mind than simply figuring out their next meal. They are anxious to find a mate, and they are aggravated, annoyed and curious because other coyotes are doing the same. When a coyote is actively responding to a certain sound—whether it's food or vocalizations—hunters should take advantage of the opportunity and speak their language to help seal the deal.

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ebruary has long been an ice angler's August. Instead of dog-day heat, it's frigid weather and finicky fish. There are times when you can be marking fish even be on them like glue—but not get them to do more than window-shop the artificial offerings you drop down the hole. This is when it's time to go stealth with live-bait presentations.

you need onto the ice. Otherwise,

you're just wasting it.

By February, ice on most systems is at its thickest, and anglers have cov-

ered many of the best spots. Fish have been there and done that. They've seen everything, and they've been pushed around with constant vehicle traffic and drilling overhead. Aggressive presentations might draw them in during peak feeding periods, but even then they rarely seal the deal like a properly presented live bait.

Oddly enough, live bait—especially the good stuff—gets tougher to find this time of year. For panfish, this includes a variety of euro larvae, wax worms and small minnow species. Crappie minnows are the easiest to find, followed by wax worms and euros. For walleyes and perch, shiners are the premium bait, followed by rainbow and other chub species, then your average fathead. Again, with all of these, availability can be a challenge. If you're serious about getting bit during these dog days of winter, consider farming or at least tending your own bait.



HARDWATER MUST-HAVES

Essential gear for live-baiting



A Helping Hand

The Rattlesnake Rod Holder (\$19.99; catchcover.com) is my choice for filling a permanent or portable house with rod holders. Mount several of the inexpensive wall disc attachment units throughout your house or shelter, and slip in the flexible rod holders wherever you need an extra hand.

'Gill Getter

Northland Fishing Tackle's Tungsten Larva Fly (\$3.99; northlandtackle. com) features lifelike soft hackle that "breathes" underwater. Available in some great fish-catching colors, this is a panfish staple.



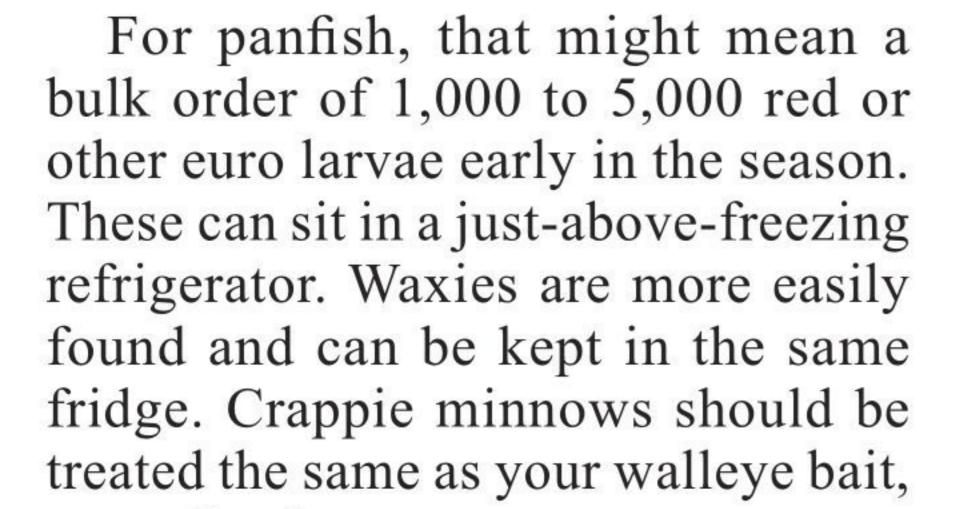
Ice Eater

When parked over communal schools of panfish, you'll have to re-drill old holes a number of times. The ION G2 ice auger (\$729.99-\$749.99; ioniceaugers.com) does a great job of it. It's one of the fastest augers I've ever run on the open ice, making it a great choice all season long.



A Deadly Deadstick

St. Croix's Croix Custom Ice Dead Eye (\$140; stcroixrods.com) is a major part of my walleye strategy all winter. I had a hand in building this rod, which features a hollow carbon butt section for an incredible power-to-weight ratio, and an ultra-forgiving fiberglass-fused tip. It gives the minnow and walleye all the play it needs while telling the angler what the fish is doing.



As a general rule for the swimming bait species, the larger the minnow, the trickier they are to deal with.

as outlined next.

Suckers might be the exception, at least compared to ever-so-fragile shiners. However, even they are less hardy than crappie minnows or fatheads. Cold, frequently changed well water, along with a good diffuser stone on an adequate aerator, conquers most minnow evils. After-market livewell and bait tank additives, like G-Juice—which removes harmful substances such as chlorine and ammonia while adding essential electrolytes—and oxygenation tablets, like OTABs, should also be considered.

Employ a bulk storage system with larger receptacles in the garage and a roving scout system approach with smaller, more mobile bait storage units when going out to fish. There's no need to carry several dozen of any minnow species onto the ice. All you're doing is stressing and killing more of your valuable bait supply. Take only what you'll use.



PANFISH PREFERENCES

Bluegills love a euro, especially when it's still fresh and wriggling. To accomplish that, keep your euros and waxies in separate bait pucks close to your body so they don't freeze.

For a euro, you'll want to hook it in the head with whatever jig you're using. The small dots and flat end on the forward part of the worm indicate the head end. Small wire hooks keep your bait livelier, and don't hesitate to load a few euros on a single hook.

Waxies are more easily shredded and pulled off the hook, so experiment with both head-hooking and threading them onto the hook. Sometimes threading can be the only way to actually put a hook in wary panfish. Other times, you won't even get a look without dangling the length of a head-hooked waxie below a small piece of tungsten. Head-hooking allows the waxies to move naturally and impart more action. However, they often die more quickly on a hook than euros do.

Re-bait often, especially if fish are in view and don't commit. The great part about having fish on-screen is that you're basically running a natural testing scenario. Offer different live bait looks until a fish commits and a pattern emerges.

For finicky 'gills, color can play a big role on difficult days. All panfish species are into natural colors, especially in clear water. Black has been a go-to in recent years when the bite gets tough, as have the increasingly popular fly-fishing-style tungsten jigs that add soft hackle and detail to the lure. These baits more accurately mimic the larval species panfish are scouring mud bottoms for and offer an advantage over certain teardrop or other jig types.

Think too about vertical versus horizontal presentations. Tip each of them similarly, but realize that, like us, panfish are creatures of habit. They get used to eating specific meals in certain ways. Depending on the prey available, fish will usually display a willingness to eat one version over the other. It's up to you to find fish, give them multiple looks and tip with lively bait that pulls the whole presentation together.



WALLEYE WANTS

While walleyes are a favored target throughout their range, the following advice also pertains to most predators that chase minnow species, including perch, pike and bass. All fish seem to love a good shiner, and that ranges from the heartier species of the Erie and Ohio Valley areas to the upper Midwest, where spottails and emerald shiners are the species of choice. Each locale has its own varieties, and each are a little different in terms of care and availability. No matter the species, shiners can be crucial to bringing in fish come February. Last winter, they were so important to the Mille Lacs Lake bite in Minnesota that anglers paid double or triple the usual price to clean out available stock at bait shops.

No matter how you do it, take care of them both above the ice and below it. That means light line and fine wire hooks appropriately sized (not oversized) for the species of interest.

Hook shiners below the dorsal and above the spine, so as not to kill them. If you do happen to kill one, you can still fish it. I've seen times where a dead shiner outproduces a live fathead. Still, the goal is to keep them alive at all costs. Change water when it becomes stinky, or before minnows die inside the tank and kill the others.

Rig lively ones with as much as a 1/8-ounce sinker clipped on or sliding no more than 6 inches above the bait. If you go higher, an erratic baitfish can swim up and tangle in the rest of your rigging. That's usually truer for chub species or suckers, but either way, don't give a heavy-thumping minnow too much chain.

For dainty shiners and ultra-finesse presentations, a small crimp-on sinker 12 inches above the hook works just fine. Small gold or plain hooks can reign supreme over bright red ones, but experiment with these and even teardrop-style lures to see what fish like. In February, I'm usually running almost all plain hooks.

Whether presenting below a rod and reel or a stationary set like a rattle reel, use the smallest bobber or line marker possible to detect a bite. I strongly prefer a deadstick-style rod that can telegraph bait movement, indicate a slow take and demonstrate a pickupand-drop just by the way it behaves in a rod holder. However, it's nice to keep hands and eyes free when busy and instead rely on the audible tone of lightly set rattle reels to tackle a tough bite.

Whatever species you're pursuing, observe a few live-bait rules and you'll improve your success in February, no matter where you fish. Source a good supply of quality bait, care for it in your garage and take only what you need to the ice. Then, employ finesse rigging on the laake to deliver the most lively, natural presentation possible. These small details really pay dividends in February, or any time the bite goes south.





PUBLIC

WITH A LITTLE BIT OF LEGWORK, THE SKY'S THE LIMIT FOR RABBITS ON PUBLIC LAND.

Story & Photos by Tony Peterson

ou don't have to work too hard to hear hunters' laments about small game opportunities on public land. In many areas, especially those with decent-sized population centers, the general feeling will be that the small game is shot out and it's not worth the effort. This may be true on certain parcels, but that belief is most often centered on squirrel populations, not rabbits. Bunnies often thrive on public land where you couldn't shoot a limit of bushytails if you were given a full season to try. For anyone willing to carry a 20-gauge on a long hike, this is good news.

COTTONTAIL COVERTS

Those beautiful acres of deciduous forests that beg you to rest against a tree with a .22 or a .17 in your lap and scan the treetops for squirrels are worthless for rabbits. Cottontails are nature's candy bars, and because everything eats them, they tend to live where the cover offers real advantages to seeing another sunrise.

are a must because whether it's day or night, avian predators will be looking for rabbits—and the rabbits know it. Everything from frozen cattail sloughs to plum thickets and gnarly fencerows qualify, or at least demand a closer look from hunters.

To narrow down your search, scour satellite imagery to pare down possible rabbit hideouts. Edges between two types of cover are good places to start, as are overgrown homesteads and building sites and anything that doesn't feature tall, mature trees or blatantly open and featureless ground.

COVER GROUND

The easy-to-walk two-track that winds its way through 600 acres of public land will have plenty of boot prints on it. The low ground, well off that trail and covered in aspens and willows, probably won't, but it might have rabbit tracks and droppings. On private ground, you could have easy walking

This means that overhead tangles around an old farm site where you can pick off sunning rabbits, but that's a pipe dream on public.

You'll have to get into the morass, and you'll have to stay there until you start running across sign. The good news for you is that rabbits leave a lot of sign. If you've got snow, spotting a concentration of tracks and droppings is easy and essential for success. You might also see patches of saplings where the bottom foot or so is peeled off. That's when you know you're around rabbits. If you don't have snow to work with, droppings are key.

But remember, it's not enough to find some rabbit sign. You want to look at the ground and definitively know that some rabbits have spent days upon days using that exact spot. When you do, keep any eye out for the best hiding spots scattered throughout the cover. An old blowdown that is draped with saw grass yet still offers rabbits room to run underneath is ideal. The goal is to find the places where cottontails feel safe being above ground in daylight.

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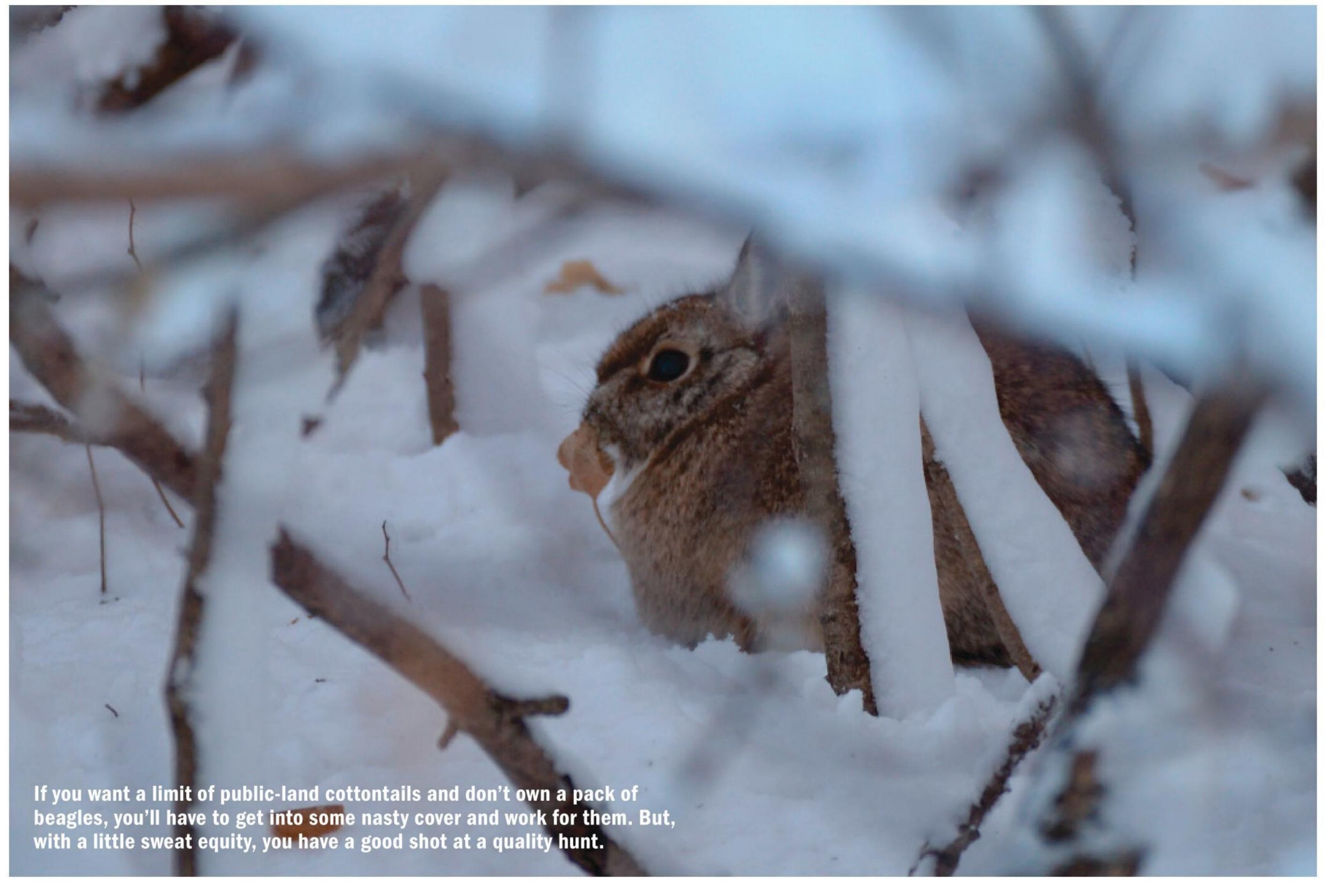


WEATHER AND TIMING

The ideal situation for adding a few bunnies to the game bag is a warm(ish) winter evening, just before sunset. Unfortunately, that's not something you can rely on when you have limited hunting time and are subject to the whims of Mother Nature.

Temperatures that are seasonal will do just fine. A serious cold snap is a different story. If the temperatures are so low that bunnies will run a calorie deficit, no matter how much they eat, simply by being out in it, you're going to have a long day of jumping on empty brushpiles. Days when the sun is shining and the temps lean in the warmer direction are a better bet for moving cottontails.

While the last hour of legal shooting light is the best, you can have rabbit action all day long if hunting in spots with decent numbers. My hunting partners and I usually try to time our routes so that we hunt some of our secondary cover during the middle of the day and work our way to prime spots as sunset looms closer.

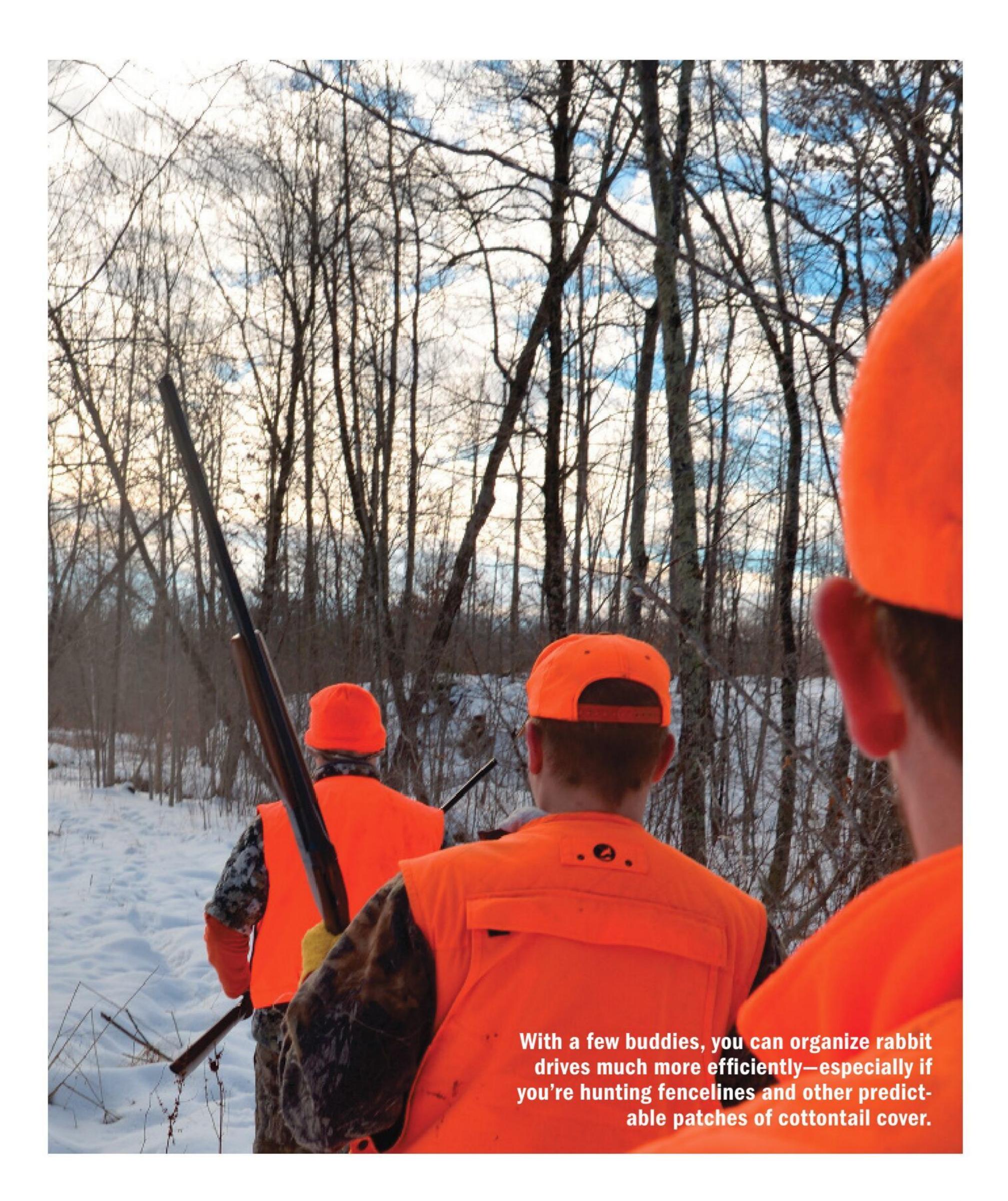


GROUP OR SOLO?

Beagle-free hunting turns at least one member of the party into an honorary dog. If you're hunting solo, well, you know who the dog is. This part is the hardest for new rabbit hunters to understand. You can't just walk next to cover and hope rabbits will move; you've got to get in there and make them nervous.

The ideal hunt involves two or three hunters making small drives if cover allows. My hunting partners and I often switch off as the shooter(s) and the brush buster(s). In some cases, like long fencerows, making drives is key. In others, where the cover is thick enough and the line of travel isn't so easy to predict, we'll hunt in such a way that one person works forward for 10 or 15 yards and stops, then the other person goes. This can work with more hunters if you've got a bigger party, but it demands a serious eye toward safety for all involved given the often difficult nature of the terrain.

This also means that shotguns are the weapon of choice for us. Rimfires are awesome for rabbits in areas where you can count on seeing them sitting statuestill, but they aren't great for multiple hunters navigating gnarly cover. You'll probably only get a second or two to make your shot once a bunny breaks, and that means you'll want to send a load of 6s in his direction if you have





VARIETY SHOW

Bonus game to add to your bag

Maybe you want a break from all-day rabbit hunting, or you're in an area where the squirrels aren't shot out. If this is the case, planning a route back to the truck to swap your 20-gauge for a .22 and heading into the hardwoods might be worth it. Winter squirrels are most active when temperatures are peaking at midday, so get out there when the sun is shining.

If you're in the North Country, you might also notice some rabbit tracks running a little bigger than usual. In Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, specifically, a dual cottontail-and-snowshoe-hare hunt can be had. The beauty of snowshoe hares is that they don't have underground burrows, meaning you can always find them somewhere if you look hard enough. They also leave a ton of sign and are prone to sticking to hare trails when the snow is deep enough. This allows you to predict escape routes.

Lastly, they call the big woods home. Huge tracts of national forest or open-tothe-public timber company land will hold hares, and often, cottontails. This can easily be one of the most fun, and productive, combo hunts that you can find on public land anywhere.

any desire to eat rabbits at the end of the day (you do).

No matter who you hunt with, if you plan your routes according to the best cover and resign yourself to getting into the thorns, you'll find that rabbits live on public land that might be largely devoid of other small game opportunities. After a few hours of hunting them, you'll probably get why no one else is putting pressure on them. But, you'll also realize there are some great options for January and February hunts when most folks don't think you've got a chance.

That's motivation enough to get out there and search for public-land rabbits in my book.





HOPPIN' HOT SPOTS

Four great areas to try for rabbits

BIG-WOODS BUNNIES

When searching for a hunting destination that might hold rabbits, anything advertising forestry as one of the uses is a good start. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin qualifies, and depending on which tract you choose to hunt, you'll find cottontails and snowshoe hares alike. With over 1.5 million acres to hunt, you'll realize that satellite imagery and pre-hunt planning are crucial. While this is big country, you'll appreciate not having to see another boot print in a month of hunting, which is always welcome.

SHOW-ME COTTONTAILS

Missouri's rabbit season shuts down Feb. 15, so be aware if you plan to hunt there. That said, cottontail hunting on the state's many conservation areas can be incredible. Visit the Missouri Department of Conservation website (mdc.mo.gov) to plan a hunt. Focus on areas like those near Kirksville, where you can either find large tracts of ground or clusters of public land—or, in some cases, both.

PRAIRIE PARADISE

The best public-land cottontail hunting I've ever experienced was in Nebraska. Cheap nonresident licenses, ample hole-in-the-wall motels to stay at, some of the nicest people you'll meet anywhere and quality public land. Having hunted from east to west and north to south here, it's impossible to pick a "best" area. If it looks like a rabbit should be holed up under some cedars, in a plum thicket or along a brushy creek bottom, there probably is. The season runs through the month of February, and if you're west of U.S. 81, you can take jackrabbits, too, as a big-bunny bonus.

MINNESOTA MAGIC

Minnesota's small-game season extends to the end of February and offers opportunities for both cottontails and snowshoe hares across the state. Whitewater Wildlife Management Area (WMA), located in the southeastern corner of the state, offers more than 20,000 acres of potential rabbit habitat spanning three counties. The brushier and gnarlier the cover you can find, the better your chances of busting a few bunnies.



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he scene was reminiscent of lying in the dandelions under my mom's clothesline on laundry day. But instead of damp, freshly washed sheets and white dress shirts snapping and flapping in a brisk spring breeze, a varied assortment of flying decoys popped and twirled above me in a cut cornfield as I waited for snow geese to arrive.

This scene has been recreated countless times since the Light Goose Conservation Order (LGCO) was mandated in 1999. Spurred by a need to control a burgeoning population of midcontinent snow geese, fanatical waterfowlers have jumped at the chance to help with population control and extend their hunting seasons.

Scott Butz is one such fanatic, and is a major innovator and inventor of snow goose hunting gear as the founder of Reel Wings Decoys. He spends each LGCO season hunting in his home state of North Dakota as snow geese push northward on their spring migration.

"Chasing the snow line has its good points and bad points," Butz says.

One of the "bad" points, he contends, is the ever-changing weather this time of year. A spring snowstorm can force birds back south, whereas a thunderstorm might melt the snowpack all at once and cause the geese to blow right through. On top of that, the first birds to arrive tend to be decoy-wise adults hurrying to reach their breeding grounds. Research shows that the average adult snow goose lives 8 years, with some living more than 20. That means some birds have flown over similar-looking decoy spreads dozens of times.

For Butz, though, half the fun of snow goose hunting is duping these battle-wise birds. And he has plenty of tips to help others do the same.

THE DECOYS

Luring cagy snow geese into shotgun range begins with a monstrous, convincing decoy spread. Butz considers 600 to be the absolute minimum number of decoys for any spread, and says 1,200 is better. When he's hunting in the spring, he runs a giant spread of 2,000 decoys—a number most hunters can only dream of.

In the spring, spreads should skew mostly white, says Butz. While as much as 40 percent of his fall spreads will be speckled, blue, Canada and juvenile snow goose decoys, in the spring he reduces that to 15 percent. He says dark decoys shrink the appearance of a spread's size in the eyes of flying birds, whereas all-white or mostly white spreads look bigger. He adds that juvenile snows that were gray in the fall are mostly white in the spring.

In terms of a spread's decoy makeup, windsocks have been the snow goose standard for years. They provide movement, are inexpensive compared to fullbody decoys, deploy easily and can be stored in a relatively small amount of space. While there are many benefits to windsocks, they also have their limitations. First, because they have to be pointed into the wind to be effective, all



SNOW GOOSE **SWEET SPOTS**

Top destinations for traveling hunters

Show-Me Snows

The spectacle of a million snow geese on the Squaw Creek National Wildlife refuge near Mound City in northwestern Missouri is absolutely breathtaking. Guide Scott Croner (855-473-2875; fsguides@gmail. com) has leased several prominent hills overlooking the refuge for years. With a million chances of a snow goose visiting your spread on any given day, odds are pretty decent you'll have a good hunt. Some of the best hunting happens after the adults leave and all that remain are naïve juveniles.

Prairie Paradise

In the spring, goose freak Rob Kobel heads to the James River Valley in South Dakota for snow geese. When the birds show up depends on the weather, but he says adults usually turn up around the middle of March, and birds are there well into April. Juveniles show up a little after that.

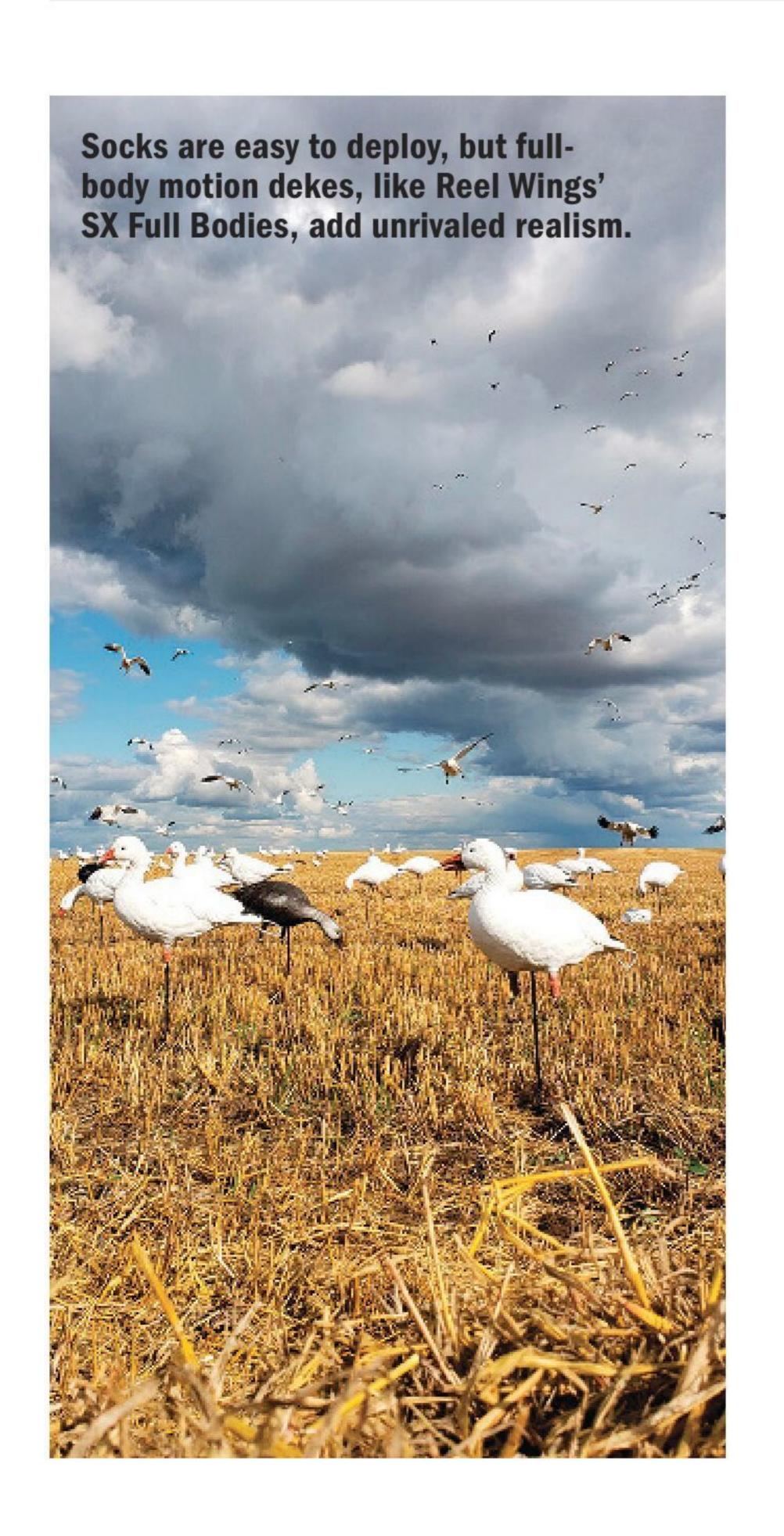
Aberdeen, S.D., is a great base of operations, but be prepared to spend hours scouting to find concentrations of birds and seasonal roosting sites. Water is often the key. You might very well end up in Britton, Webster or Waubay, though.

Kobel says a key is to locate a stopping point where geese might hang out for a few days. He then sets out a massive 2,000-decoy spread, up to 30 flying decoys, e-callers and two to six rotary machines. Then he prays. Usually his prayers are answered.

Northern Promises

North Dakota's expansive Devils Lake is a huge draw for migrating spring snows. Thousands collect there and then fan out as much as 60 miles each day to feed. Hunters must be very mobile and scout often. Matt Kostka of Top Gun Guide Service (507-696-0208; topgunguideservice.com) says they hunt many traffic fields, as well as feeds when possible, especially if they find one while scouting. When there's no snow line, Kostka sets dekes in prime migratory funnels birds use each year.

The season usually runs late-February to early May. Often, mid-April is when juveniles offer great action and more consistent hunting. A good base of operations for freelancers is Woodland Resort (701-662-5996; woodlandresort.com) on Devils Lake.



sock decoys in a spread must face the same direction, which is certainly not how real geese sit. Second, the blustery winds common in spring often take a toll on frail windsocks.

Full-body decoys and silhouettes can help add mass and realism to a spread, but they lack motion, which helps dupe educated snows. A good motion decoy, such as Reel Wing's SX Full Body, can be just the ticket (see sidebar, page 58).

Decoys can be arranged in a number of ways. Probably the most common is some type of feed-line setup, with decoys packed tightly in a thick band that trails off in a loose triangle as it moves downwind. An "X" setup is also common, as is a "donut."

TAKE A FLIER

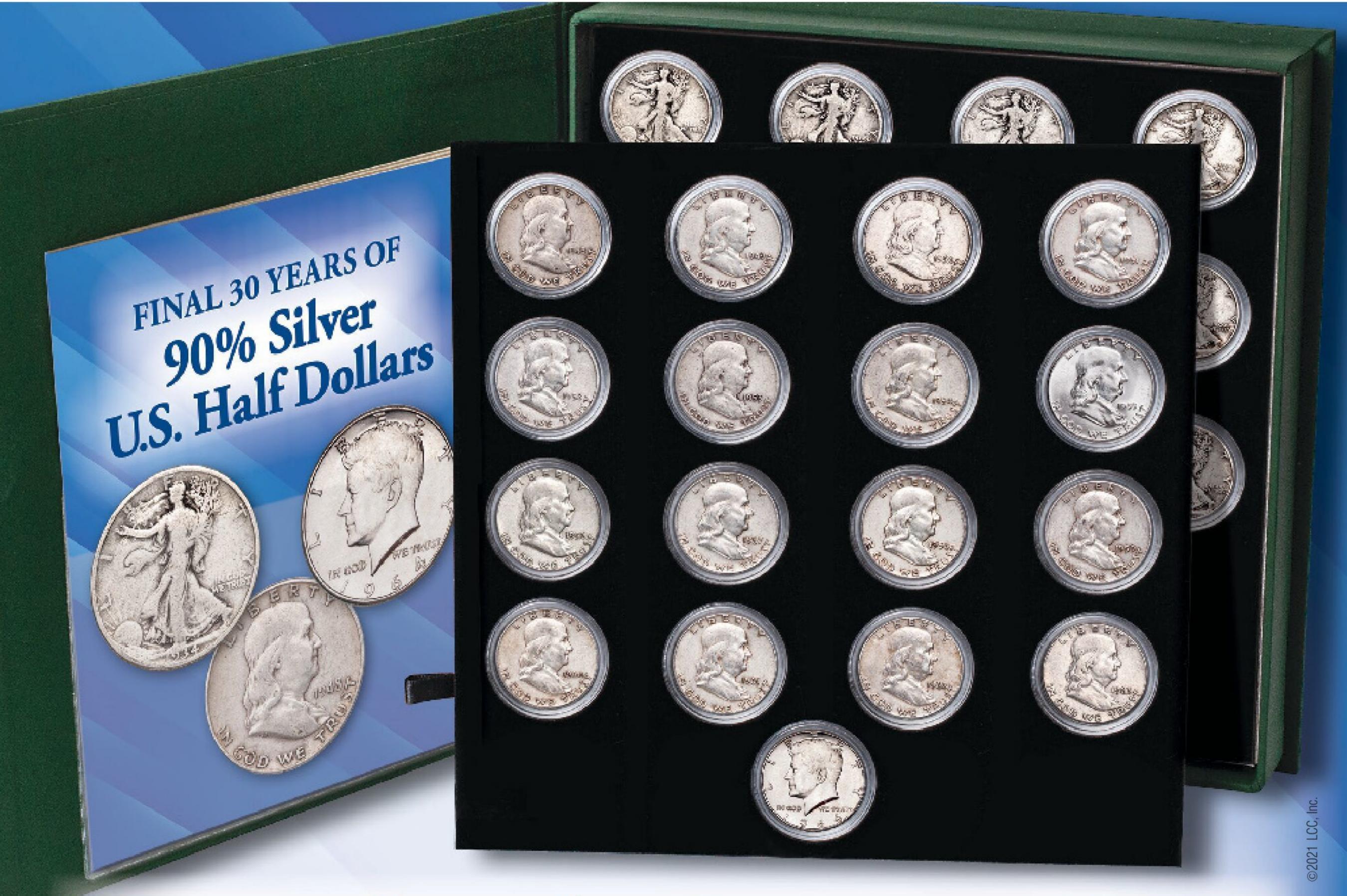
Fliers are a type of motion decoy designed to mimic birds flying into the spread. These are intended to catch the attention of passing geese at a distance, and they might be the most important part of a convincing setup. Various types of flier decoys exist, and the rotary, or vortex, machine variants have been quite popular over the past several years... though perhaps too popular.

"I think vortex machines have seen their day," Butz says. "Geese have gotten used to seeing that circular motion, and they're getting more and more leery of it."

Butz uses a combination of his own 360 Air Wings and Reel Wings, depending on wind velocity. The 360 Air Wings move in wind as slight as 2 miles per hour and can be used on the sturdy 5-foot pole they come with or on a vortex machine. The Reel Wing decoys excel in higher winds and come with a 60-foot cord for high deployment.

The main purpose of the fliers is to direct the geese where you want them to land in a massive spread of decoys. Ideally, Butz likes having three levels of motion in his spreads—on the ground, above ground with intermediate fliers and far above the ground with high fliers.

"A mistake a lot of hunters make is to spread the fliers out," Butz says. "You want to clump the fliers close, add the flashing and move their eyes so they're not looking directly at the blinds."



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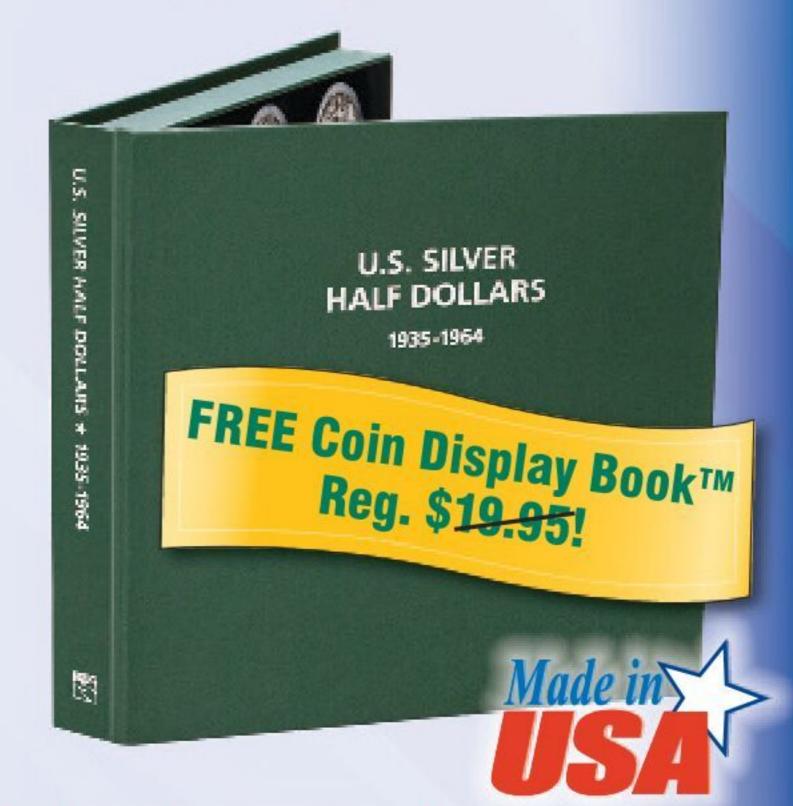
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FANTASTIC FLIERS

The White Rock Decoys Deck Boss Flying Decoy (\$34.99; whiterockdecoys.com) has indestructible foldable wings that offer a realistic flapping motion in all winds.

Reel Wings Flying decoys (\$25.99-\$39.99; reelwings.com) are another aerial option. Reel Wings come with a 60-foot cord to deploy the fliers high above the spread, and excel in winds from 9 to 30 mph.



SLICK SOCKS

Pre-assembled Tanglefree Slammer Socks (\$289.99/mixed 50 pack; tanglefree.com) make setup a breeze with a collapsible back support, easy-grab stake cap and a 28-inch fiberglass rod. A new updated artwork design adds realism, and Tyvek material brings durability.

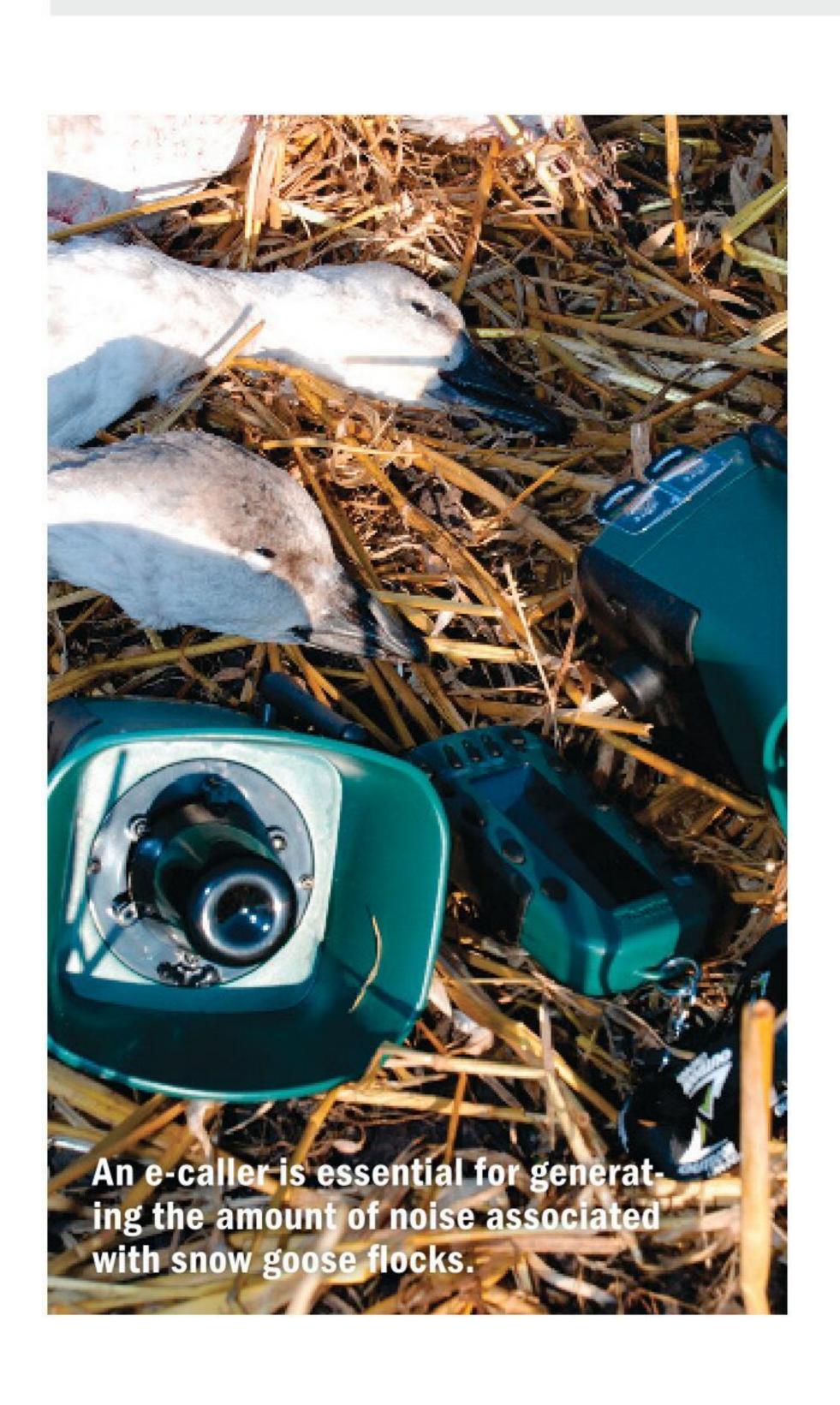
Pre-assembled **Dive Bomb Industries S5 Tall Snow Socks** (\$300/60 socks; divebombindustries. com) use 36-inch stakes; a sturdy Tyvek sock body; and a realistic paint scheme. A snap-locking backbone system offers easy storage and deployment while a spring-open sock mouth always catches wind.



FINE FULL-BODIES AND FLOATERS

For water, consider Final Approach's Snow Goose Floater (\$110/6 pack; fabrand.com). Carved by world champion decoy carver Wayne Simkin, it has a lifelike paint scheme, onepiece rugged design and weighted keel with cord lock system.

The SX Full Body (\$219.99/10 pack; reelwings.com) motion decoy features Reel Wings' Bird Vision UV paint technology, a patent-pending Fast Motion system and patent-pending loop kits. A set comes with three sentries, one looker and six feeders. —Drew Warden



He adds that he typically runs a combination of 24 fliers, again depending on wind velocity. With light winds, he recommends placing fliers 10 to 15 feet ahead of blinds so that birds are landing in front of the shooters. In strong winds over 15 mph, he prefers placing them behind hunters so that geese are right on top of them when they flare. He suggests making the hole, or landing area, bigger on windy days.

E-CALLERS

Electronic callers are legal during the LGCO and are the coup de grace in this illusion. They definitely add another dimension of realism to a lifelike spread.

"We'll run our Snow Screamer ecaller with four speakers and put them 15 to 20 yards in front of the spread," Butz says. "Make it a point to not put them underneath the fliers because they will affect the sound."

He advises using a remote to turn the caller off when no birds are in sight to save the batteries and give your ears a break. He often uses the Snow Screamer's two 8-foot cords to point two speakers out at a 45-degree angle and its two 20-foot cords to point the other two speakers straight up.

"Don't go nuts with the volume," Butz adds. "Use the decoys and fliers as attractors and the e-caller as the finisher."

A DAY'S WORK

There are no shortcuts to spring snow goose success. It requires ample scouting in order to locate birds and productive fields, hours of decoy setup before your hunt to craft a realistic spread and a great deal of patience to deal with finicky, well-educated birds. But, if you can manage those things, all your hard work and attention to detail can pay off tremendously.



OPEN FOR BUSINESS

IF YOU'VE GROWN TIRED OF STARING INTO ICE HOLES, HITCH UP THE BOAT AND HEAD TO ONE OF THESE OPEN-WATER FISHERIES THIS MONTH.

By Mike Pehanich

ure, my casting accuracy is impeccable when standing over a 6-inch hole in February ice. Yes, the subtle twitch of a spring bobber delights my angling senses. And sprinting toward a tip-up sprung by a hefty northern pike always brings an adrenaline rush. But by late winter, the urge to fish open water usually gets the best of me.

Where can a Midwest angler travel for a taste of fast, early-season angling and perhaps even a shot at a true trophy? Check out these waters that are sure to cure both cabin fever and your angling itch.

PATOKA LAKE, IN

Crappies have been the big draw for anglers at Patoka Lake since the Patoka

River's impoundment in the 1970s. Although some fish tend toward the smaller side at 6 to 7 inches, big slabs up to 17 inches or more are certainly possible at this 8,800-acre lake, and anglers dialed in to the bite can pull some impressive stringers. According to Andrew Bueltmann, the District 6 biologist for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, the average length of crappies in the 2019 creel survey of Patoka was around 10 inches. Despite this, he encourages anglers to add additional small crappies to their 25-fish legal harvest.

In February, crappies suspend in deeper sections of the reservoir at varying depths. At this time, they're feasting primarily on shiners and small gizzard shad. They'll often be hovering

in Patoka's ample standing timber at 10- to 20-foot depths.

Variable February conditions tend to dictate fish patterns. Patoka's crappies respond to a wide variety of baits and techniques during this time of year, so be sure to dig into your arsenal to discover what works.

In an early spring, 14- to 16-inch white crappies succumb to trolled crankbaits in deeper water and jig/ plastic combinations in flooded vegetation. Dock-shooting is also popular in the marinas.

If crappies don't excite you, Patoka Lake offers many other sportfish to occupy your time. An abundance of gizzard shad prompted the Indiana DNR to add striped bass, hybrid stripers and walleyes to the existing largemouth bass, bluegill and channel and flathead catfish populations.

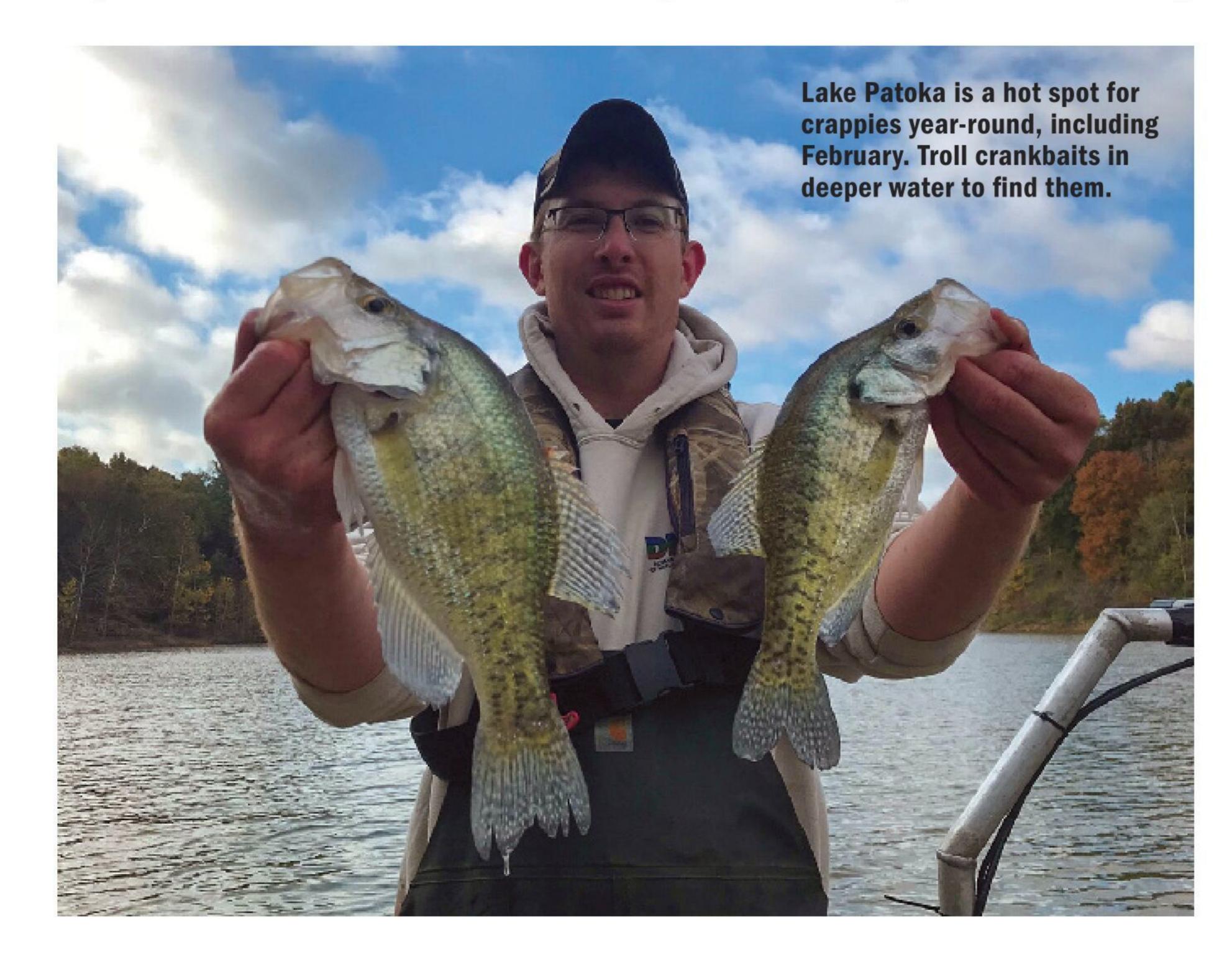
"Walleye is the sleeper trophy fishery in the lake," says Bueltmann, who is an avid angler. "We stock 6 million fry in the lake every spring. Being in southern Indiana, the fish have a longer growing season and a chance to grow big—and fast—on the gizzard shad, yellow bass and other available forage."

He adds that by their second year, these fish often reach the 14-inch legal size.

"It's not unusual to see walleyes over 8 pounds caught," he says. "Last year, we had a fish just shy of 10 pounds come in, too."

Walleyes begin staging for the spring spawn in February and March, positioning themselves along rocky causeways where they are caught by trolling and casting stick-style minnow lures or casting jigs.

Patoka Lake Marina and Lodging (812-685-2203; patokalakemarina.com) offers boat rentals and lodging on the lake.





OAK CREEK POWER PLANT, WI

Leave the wicker creels at home, trout anglers. The brown trout in Lake Michigan can grow to mammoth proportions, as evidenced by the 41.7-pound former world-record specimen taken by Roger Hellen of Yorkville, Wis., back in 2010.

What's more, they are a year-round resource, thanks in part to the Oak Creek Power Plant, an electrical power generating station between Racine and Milwaukee. Water used to cool the generators of the coal- and natural gasburning plant is discharged into the big lake, drawing brown trout and keeping them warm and hungry throughout the winter and into the spring.

"The area stays open pretty much all year," says Jim LaFortune, veteran angler and tournament director. "Ice is rare and limited even in January and February. Water can get to the mid-30s in the lake proper, yet be 41 to 45 degrees at the power plant."

LaFortune keeps close tabs on these winter browns. On one mid-winter outing at Oak Creek, we broke through skim ice in the launch harbor near Grant

Park Beach to reach open water near the power plant. We set out trolling lines with an assortment of stick-style minnow baits and soon had our hands full fighting fish and resetting lines. Fishing into the early afternoon, we never waited more than 10 minutes between bites. Most fish ran between four and eight pounds, but our catch included multiple double-digit browns, as well.

LaFortune has favored casting over trolling in recent winters to stay on top of schools of trout. "Last year, cold west winds congregated fish in a down-current area where it was easier to anchor and cast to the fish," he says.

The lesson? Follow warm water to reach the biggest concentrations of trout.

"Setting up in front of the power plant isn't always the idea," he says. "Browns want the warmest water they can find. Pay attention to the winds a day or two before you fish. And always check the NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] website for surface temperatures."

Lake Michigan browns feast on bottom-hugging gobies. It's no coincidence,

then, that LaFortune's top bait choice is the Savage Gear 3D Goby.

"It looks like a real goby, with a goby color and flakes in it," he says. "Just cast it in the current and let it go to the bottom. It has nice action. It climbs over rocks like a real goby. On one outing, we had fish on 35 casts in a row."

Other favorites include minnow-style plastics in the 4-inch range on a darter jighead. LaFortune counts the Berkley Flicker Shad among his most productive hardbaits, though he likes the Rapala Husky Jerk and Tail Dancer, Savage Gear 3D Minnow Diver, Brad's Thinfish and spoons like the Michigan Stinger, too. Baits in the Smithwick Rogue and Bomber Long A lines are also productive. Browns respond to a range of colors. Orange, red, white and "earthy" greens are good choices.

"And always have a bait with purple in it at the ready," says LaFortune.

Although most trout tend to run between 3 and 5 pounds, Oak Creek yields a generous share of giant Seeforellen browns. LaFortune's largest brown last winter tipped the scales at 27 pounds.





LAKE OF THE OZARKS, MO

Winter forces most Midwest bass anglers into a three-month retreat, but it doesn't have to be that way. Lake of the Ozarks in central Missouri offers outstanding angling for largemouth and Kentucky bass through the entire winter for anglers willing to wake from hibernation.

"Winter bass fishing is generally for the hardcore angler," says James Dill who, with his wife Denise, owns and operates James Dill Guide Service (573-204-9005; jamesdillguideservice. com). "We do a lot of on-the-water angler education on how to work jigs and stick baits during the winter. Fishermen come here to learn. And it's a great time to catch a trophy."

Each winter, the Ameren Missouri power company, formerly Union Electric, draws down the 54,000-acre impoundment on the Osage River six feet on average. This drawdown concentrates bass populations.

"Bass relate to the steeper bluff ends and channel banks in winter," says Dill. "I use my Garmin electronics for mapping and follow where the river and creek channels brush against the bank to locate these fish. This vertical structure positions bass to move up and down in the water column without having to travel far when the water is in the 30s and low 40s."

Rock is key to finding productive areas. Bass gravitate toward larger and darker rock and may move shallow to soak up sun on warm winter days. Dill explains that bass need this warmth to incubate their eggs, and the darker rock absorbs heat better.

He limits his winter arsenal to three lure categories: jerkbaits (aka "stick baits"), creature baits and small jigand-trailer combinations. Suspending jerkbaits are a mainstay on the lower third of the reservoir. Bass see the baits better in the clearer, more stable water.

"Bass suspend in the water column," Dill says. "You want that bait to get down and sit over them."

He recommends long pauses between twitches to keep the jerkbait in the strike zone for a longer period. "They won't chase much when it's cold," he says.

Favorite jerkbaits include the Lucky Craft Pointer 78, Smithwick Rogue series and Megabass Vision 110 in shad-imitating colors. Fishing 6- or 8-pound-test fluorocarbon, the baits will get down 6 to 12 feet.

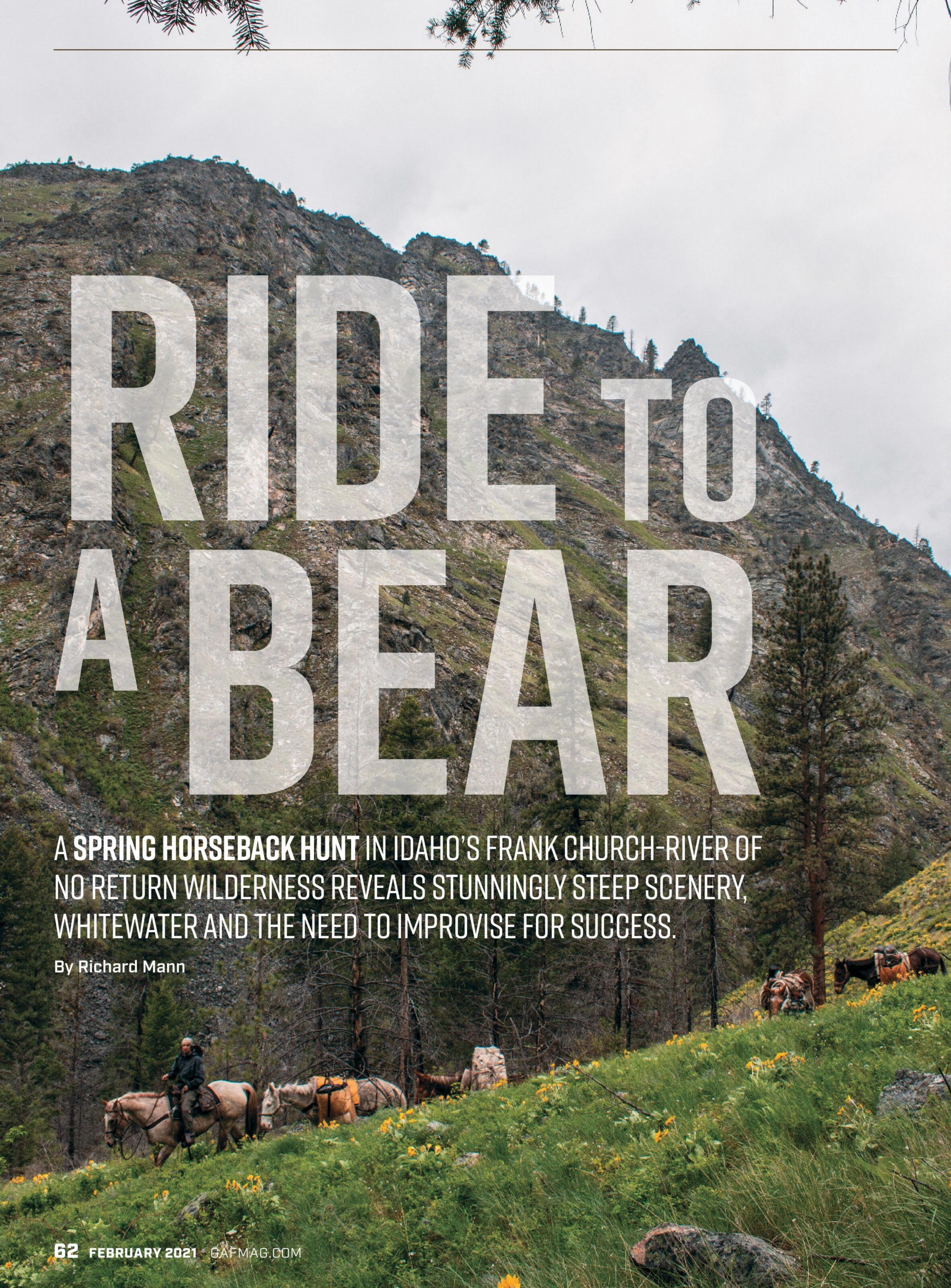
Jigs usually remain consistent producers in February. However, Dill dials down to 3/8-ounce and lighter jigs with 2 3/4-inch craw-type trailers to present a slower drop rate and smaller mouthful.

"Small creature baits and small spider jigs can be productive, too," he says. "Work the baits slowly and add scent. Nothing moves very fast when the water is this cold. Bass may look at the bait a long time and follow before they hit. It's a subtle bite."

He advises anglers to launch boats only at the state ramps during the drawdown. For more information on the Lake of the Ozarks bite, visit Fitz Fishing Tackle and Supplies (fitzfishing. net; 573-693-9299) in Osage Beach, or check out Bob Bueltmann's website, bassingbob.com, which offers interactive fishing maps, daily fishing reports and expert how-to articles on Lake of the Ozarks bass fishing.

START NOW

While most outdoorsmen are focused on ice-fishing or hunting now, hard-core anglers can get in on some overlooked bites in this second month of the new year. Colder water might require an adjustment in tactics, sure, but for those who can't get enough, it's more a challenge than a deterrent. If you're fed up with hardwater or are uninterested in watching the Super Bowl, now's the time to hit the open water to try to get a jump on the 2021 season. (1)





ome dreams subside with time; others remain, prowling your soul, even though they seem as unobtainable as the fountain of youth. As a boy hunting whitetails in the Allegheny Mountains, like many Easterners I dreamed of packing into

the wilds of the West on a big-game hunt. At the half-century mark I managed to drag that dream from a coalmine-like hole of my memory and make it come true. I saddled a horse and rode into Idaho's Salmon River Mountains with a rifle.

Ten miles from civilization, I tensed in the saddle as my mount negotiated a tight trail above Horse Creek. The terrain was so steep I could almost lean in the saddle, reach out and touch the ground on the uphill side. I felt like I was in the heart of 1800s America, in the center of everything wild. I was riding a horse, carrying a rifle and breathing possibly the cleanest air my lungs had ever consumed. And, I was coursing the watershed of the river Lewis and Clark described as, "foaming and roaring through rocks in every direction, so as to render the passage of anything impossible."

Although I was surrounded by the majestic mountains of the West, I wasn't looking for elk, sheep or even deer. I had joined Adam Beaupré of Horse Creek Outfitters for a spring black bear hunt in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, the largest contiguous wilderness in the United States with the exception of Alaska.

Mesmerized by evergreens three telephone poles tall and a canyon so steep it seemed to defy the laws of geometry and nature, I was not paying enough attention to my mount or purpose. When I heard Adam whoa his horse, I immediately reined up and saw him pointing skyward. Even at what seemed like a quarter mile away, the bear stood out like a wart on a witch's nose. Its black coat was dark in contrast to the fresh, brilliant green grass, and the sun lit its back like it was covered in aluminum foil.

"There's your bear," said Adam, and the roar of Horse Creek faded behind the thump of blood now swiftly pulsing through me. We hurriedly dismounted, Adam secured our horses, and I pulled my Steyr Scout rifle from the scabbard. Instantly I realized the rifle's integral bipod would be of no assistance shooting at an angle steep enough to paralyze a protractor.

After some panicked searching we settled by a fallen tree with a trunk about 3 feet in diameter. I struggled to get into some semblance of a shooting position, unlike anything I'd learned in the military or at Gunsite Academy. All the time the primary axiom of rifle shooting was echoing in my head: If you can get closer, get closer; if you can get steadier, get steadier.

Closer was not an option. The bear was nearly 400 yards straight up a canyon wall so rugged and perilous it would have put a strain on me 30 years ago when I had just graduated basic training. Steadier it had to be. I managed to slide my legs partially under the fallen tree and rested my rifle vertically on the log. I guessed the angle to be nearly 30

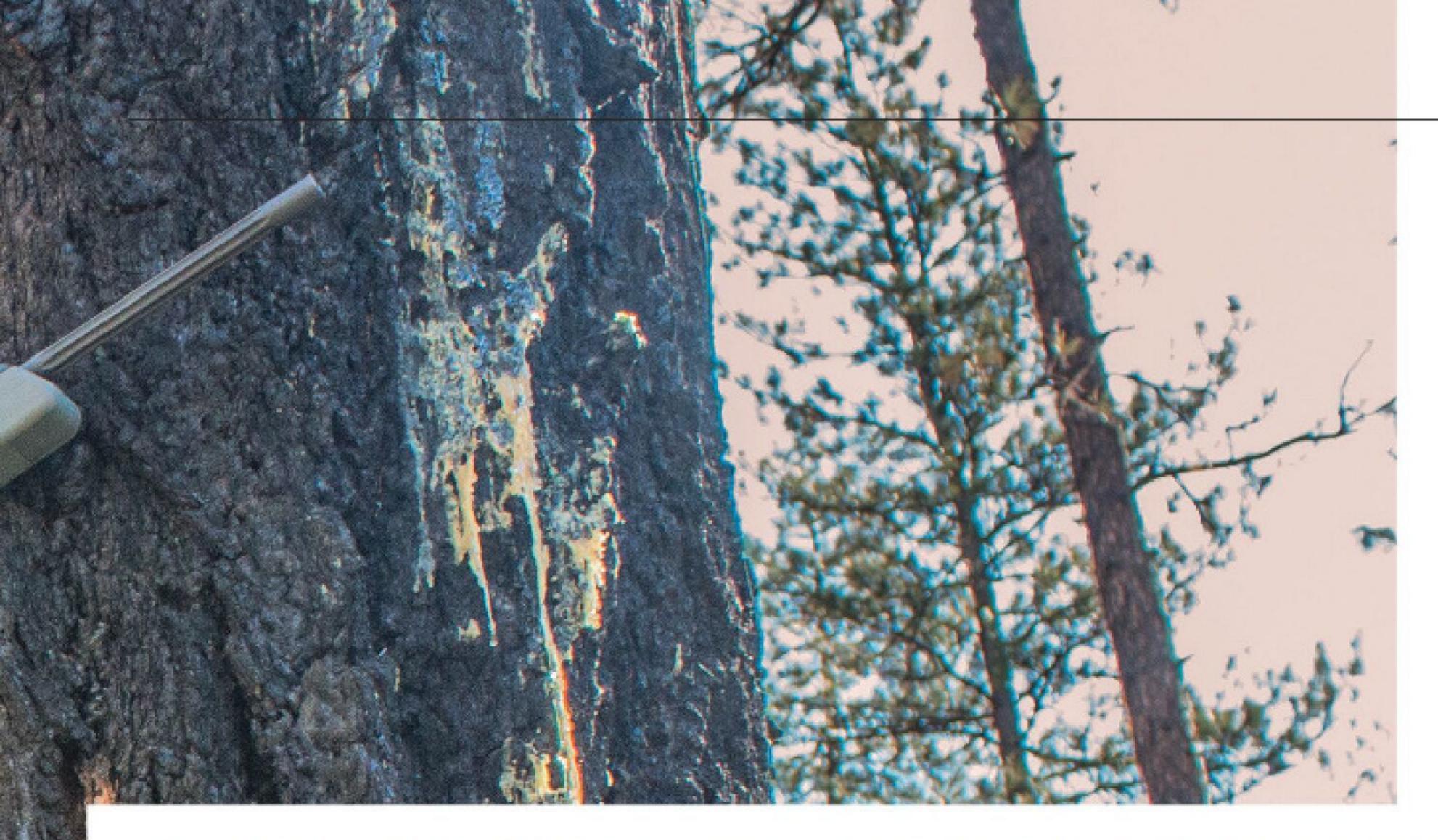


degrees. Adam slid in behind me as I found the bear in the scope. He called the range at 365 yards, and I applied the correct holdover with the reticle in the scout scope.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Yep," Adam whispered, and my finger broke the trigger at almost exactly the same time his lips closed together. The bruin reacted with a jerk and jogged about 20 yards to the cover of a burned-out section of young trees about the size of a mobile home. Adam called the shot a miss and jumped up.

"Let's move fast; get a better angle and a better rest," he said. I crawled







out from under the log as quickly as I could, and we sprinted 100 yards or so up our side of the canyon. I no longer noticed the sound of Horse Creek.

We managed to find an opening through the tops of the trees where we could see the bear milling around in the tangle. It seemed fine. I continued to watch the animal as Adam tried to construct a shooting platform, one that would allow me to shoot uphill while positioned on a downhill slope. He worked with rocks and logs for a few moments, but I still could not rest the rifle with the elevation needed to shoot the bear.

Positioned behind a huge Ponderosa pine with my rifle trained on the bruin, I realized I had a big knife clipped in my pocket. I pulled it out, opened it and instructed Adam to drive it into the tree's bark with a rock where I indicated. The result was a makeshift but sturdy "limb" I could use for a rest. I looped up in my sling and was rock-steady on the bear. Then we waited, trying to calm our heart rates while hoping the bear would step into the clear.

Pounding a pocketknife into the side of a tree for a shooting rest might seem like a silly thing to do; why would I not just rest the rifle against the side of the tree on top of my hand? Well, when all the trees are so big two men cannot reach around them, that technique does not work. We improvised, and surprisingly, the rest was pretty darn good.

The bear was in no hurry. Unusually, it was preoccupied with licking its paw. A bit perplexed by the results of my shot, I asked Adam if he'd given me the true ballistic range or the actual distance to the target; his binoculars were capable of providing either reading. This was critical because when shooting at this kind of distance, and at this kind of angle, it mattered. Not just a little—it mattered a lot.

Like a good guide should, Adam had his rangefinder set to true ballistic range, but when he'd read out the 365 yards, I mistakenly assumed he'd given me the actual distance. I then reduced the range by 80 percent, which is about right for a 30-degree angle, and held dead on with the 300-yard tick mark on the reticle. This resulted in a drastic variance with regard to my point of impact. My first shot had impacted about 10 inches lower than where I was aiming. (This also explained the bear's unusual fixation with licking its paw—it had a bullet hole through it. Of course, while we were sitting on the side of the mountain watching the bear, we did not know that.)

After this bit of very important news, we got on the same sheet of music and confirmed the new, *true* ballistic range to the bear using both of our rangefinders. From our new position the bear was, as far as ballistics were concerned, 403 yards away. Lesson learned: when your guide is running the rangefinder in steep country, have this conversation well before the shooting starts.



After a long session of paw-licking, the bear finally stepped into the open. This time I placed the reticle's 400-yard tick mark right on the bruin's shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The bear was hit but broke into a run and passed behind a Ponderosa treetop. I scooted to the right, picking up the shooting sticks as I ran. Planting my butt on the steep

hillside, I looped up in the sling once more and swung through the bear as it ran. When my 400-yard mark passed its nose, I broke the trigger. The bruin collapsed and began to roll.

And roll it did. It rolled and rolled and rolled some more. After plunging almost 400 yards, the bear came to a rest just a matter of feet from the torrent of water at the bottom of the gorge. We congratulated ourselves, wondering what kept the bear from rolling into the rushing water, and then began discussing the seemingly impossible task of getting to the animal.

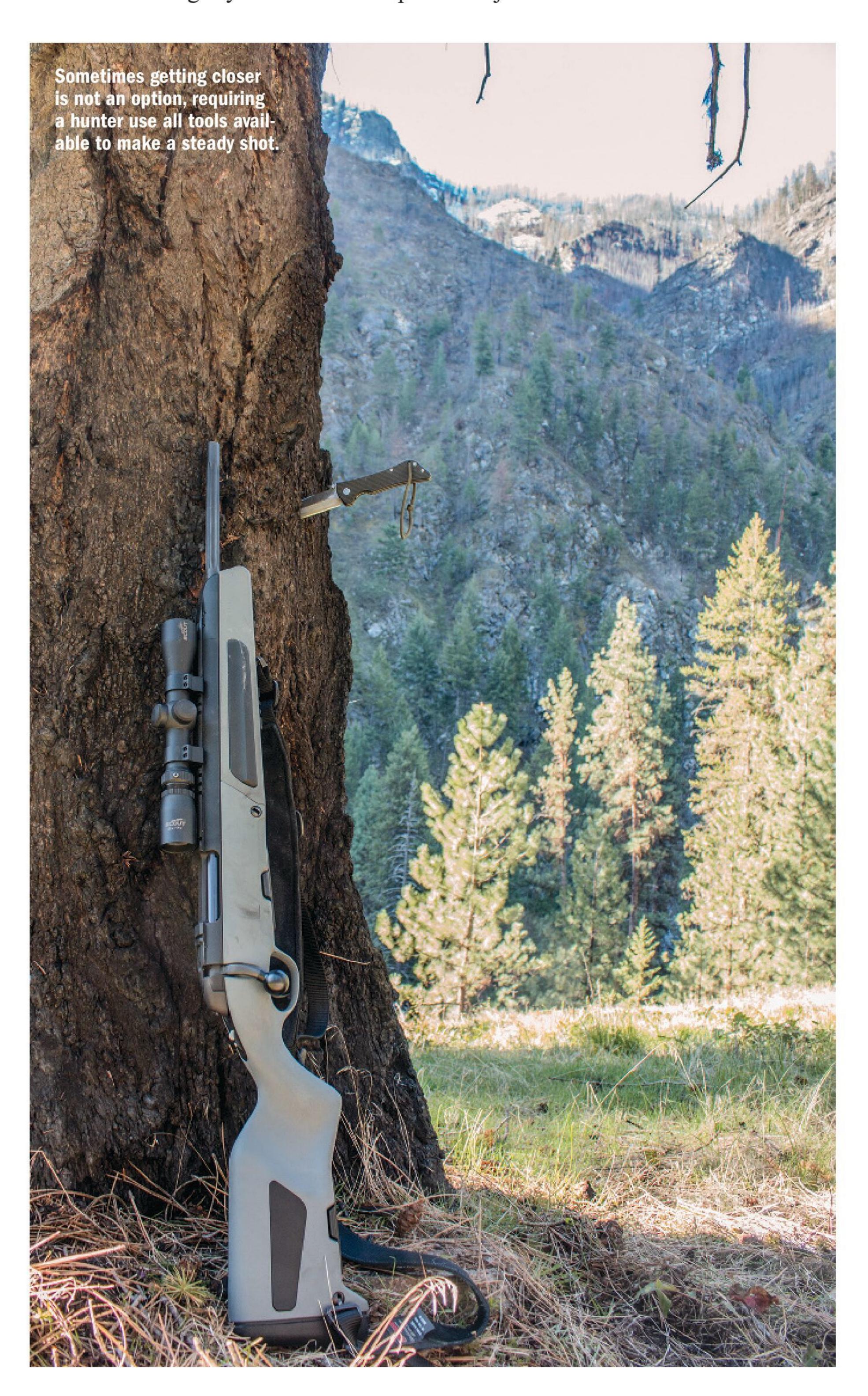
The recovery would be the hard part. Horse Creek was a raging, rock-filled, whitewater blast of ice-cold melted snow. Few would have braved it in a raft. We rode back to camp to get supplies, and on the way we found a huge log across the creek. The plan was for Adam to scoot across the log, travel up the other side, secure the bear with a rope and then float it across the river at a small oxbow. The plan worked to perfection. The bear was the only one of us who got wet.

As it turned out, that bright silver reflection off the bear's back I had noticed earlier was due in part to the unusual silver-colored hair running down its spine. The taxidermist said it was only the second bear he had seen with hair like that, and that both had come from Horse Creek. When I told him the story of the hunt, he also said it was the only bear he'd ever seen that had been killed with a knife.

The time I spent in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness was without question one of the most memorable hunts I've been on. When it comes to wilderness hunting, maybe the great gunwriter Townsend Whelen said it best in his 1927 book, Wilderness Hunting and Wildcraft: "The delight of wild scenery, the exhilaration of bodily exercise in pure air, and the every-varying circumstances of the wild and majestic country; the inspiring sense of solitude, broken only by the whistle of the marmot or the laugh of the loon; the intimate communing with Nature in every aspect of sunshine, mist, and storm—all these, and with them the satisfying of that hunter's instinct which is one of the most deeply rooted things in human nature; the delight of pitting the intellect and the senses against the instincts of self-preservation of a really wild animal—that is wilderness hunting."

I wonder if Townsend Whelen ever killed a bear with a pocketknife.

Editor's note: This story was adapted from Richard Mann's new book, Under Orion, Volume 2, available at amazon. com in February.





THE CRESTINE

By Dr. Jason Halfen

SPRING BRINGS NEW BOATS, MOTORS AND ACCESSORIES THAT

MAKE GETTING TO THE FISH ALMOST AS MUCH FUN AS CATCHING THEM.

ne constant that has held us all together and given us hope for a brighter future through unprecedented times is our collective love of the water. As ice begins to fade across the northland and waters warm throughout the South, our attention turns once again to boats—especially new boats rolling into marinas—as well as the powerplants and accessories that make fishing from a new boat a true joy.

While the fundamental acts of fishing—presenting a lure and coaxing a strike—remain unchanged, the specific features and functions that we look for in a new boat may vary widely depending on where we fish and what we're fishing for. Indeed, the boating needs of a halibut angler plying the waters of coastal Alaska will not match those of

a crappie enthusiast in the low country of Louisiana.

Begin your boat selection process by considering how and where you plan to spend most of your time on the water. Expansive waters, like large Southern reservoirs or the Great Lakes, frequently call for longer boats to provide a smoother ride in rough conditions. If your adventures take you to skinny rivers or pothole lakes, then a shorter boat with a shallow draft is more appropriate.

How much gear are you willing to load (and unload) for every trip? Be sure that your boat has enough dry storage available to accommodate not only tackle, but also foul-weather gear, safety equipment, ropes and buoys, lunch and more. Do you spend most of your time fishing at anchor, or is trolling more your cup of tea? Thinking carefully about

how you will use your boat—before you buy—will help you find the perfect new rig for the ways and waters you fish.

Contemporary boats are built to last, and to deliver you, your partners and all of your equipment to and from your favorite spots in comfort, style and safety. Meanwhile, motors and marine electronics do the heavy lifting, propelling you over the water, easing you along the weedlines and helping you locate the fish. Just like boats, this year's outboards, trolling motors and electronics feature noteworthy enhancements you'll want to consider including in your strategy. Game & Fish was treated to a behind-the-scenes look at some of 2021's boats, motors and accessories, and the following hot new fishing rigs will help you make the most of your time on the water.



CAYMAS CX 195 BUATS

Tennessee-based Caymas Boats offers a dazzling array of high-performance fiberglass platforms for both freshwater and saltwater anglers. The most recent Caymas boat to take flight is the CX 19, a roomy, 19-foot-9-inch boat with a 96-inch beam, and a 50-gallon fuel capacity that will get you to the fish and back again.

When paired with its top-rated 225-horsepower outboard, the CX 19 delivers an astonishing 70-plus-mph top speed without a hint of chine walk. Caymas notes that the rough-water handling capabilities of the CX 19 will surpass the expectations of even the most seasoned tournament angler.

Integrated into the boat's deck mold

is a unique wedge for the trolling motor bracket. It ensures the trolling motor is positioned at the precise angle needed to project the sonar beam directly beneath the boat—perfect for fishing drop-shots and Ned rigs. Open the CX 19's expansive, thoughtfully-designed compartments to find room to store more than 30 rods and more than 25 standard-dimension tackle trays.

An available option on the CX 19 is the industry's first high-speed livewell pickup, which continues to add fresh water into the livewells while running down the lake. Anglers no longer have to worry about making a long trip back to weigh-in, only to find they have lost a lot of water—and fish—in the livewell.

SPECIFICATIONS

Construction	. Composite
Length	19'9"
Beam	
Max Horsepower	225 hp
Fuel Capacity	50 gal.

FISHING FEATURES

38-gal. livewell 8' rod storage

STARTING PRICE

\$49,699 caymasboats.com

CRESTLINER MX-21

Competitive bass fishing has been the nearly exclusive domain of fiberglass boats for a number of years, but that trend has begun to change with the introduction of high-performance aluminum hulls designed with the needs of tournament anglers at the forefront. Crestliner expands its all-aluminum bass boat offerings in 2021 with the new MX-21, a 21-foot-5-inch powerhouse with a roomy 96-inch beam, sporting a 40-gallon fuel capacity and a 250-horsepower rating.

The MX-21 is designed around Crestliner's Pad Hull, which provides enhanced lift and handling capabilities.

An enormous bow deck with 60 square feet of fishing space pairs perfectly with a spacious stern deck, home to a 45-gallon livewell and room for four batteries. Abundant rod and tackle storage beneath the bow deck ensures that all of your tools are at your fingertips, no matter the conditions.

A premium fiberglass console protects the driver during long runs down the lake, with space for a flush-mounted 12-inch fishfinder. Watch for Crestliner pro anglers to be in command of the MX-21 on the FLW and Bassmaster Elite circuits this year.

SPECIFICATIONS

ConstructionAluminum
Length21'5"
Beam97"
Max Horsepower
Fuel Capacity40 gal.

FISHING FEATURES

45-gal. livewell 8' rod storage

STARTING PRICE

\$39,576 crestliner.com





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FALCON BASS BOATS F185

Falcon introduces a new 18-foot fiberglass bass boat to its lineup for 2021. Hitting the tape at 18 feet, 9 inches, the F185 presents anglers an economical, mid-horsepower vessel that shares all of the characteristics of larger Falcon boats, but in a package that fits the bill for those searching for a compact rig that is easy to tow and store in the garage.

Despite its shorter length, the F185 boasts a beam of 93 1/2 inches for a comfortable, stable ride and features a 31-gallon fuel tank for those long days on the water. While the F185's standard powerplant is a 150-horsepower outboard mounted on a manual jackplate, this Falcon can also be propelled by a 175-horsepower motor when more speed is desired.

Like all other Falcon models, the F185 features a deck layout that includes the innovative and familiar Falcon Wing front-hinged rod-locker design, highquality components and storage compartments. The deck is engineered to provide more fishing room, and the F185 provides the smooth ride that anglers have come to expect from the company's bass boats. Even though the F185 is a shorter package, Tim De Priest, Falcon Bass Boats co-founder, says consumers should expect a lot from this new boat.

"This is a Falcon boat, without a doubt," said De Priest. "We took great care to make sure it fit our lineup, had all the same quality components and had one of the best fishing platforms in the category. The F185 lives up to our performance demands and our 'Big Decks' motto; fish it and see, we think you'll agree."



SPECIFICATIONS

Construction	. Composite
Length	18'9"
Beam	93"

FISHING FEATURES

34-gal. livewell rod storage

STARTING PRICE

\$35,000

falconbassboats.com



SMOKER CRAFT 176 EXCURSION DC PRO

For five generations and counting, Smoker Craft has focused on delivering value without sacrificing performance. The company's attention to innovative hull designs produces boats that offer smooth rides, excellent handling and much-appreciated fuel economy. After all, anglers would much rather spend their hard-earned money on tackle than gas. On the water, they will enjoy Smoker Craft's uncrowded interior layouts that provide comfort to fish all day.

The new Excursion Series furthers Smoker Craft's reputation for high-performance aluminum fishing boat design, providing some of the best acceleration, handling and ride quality in the industry.

It features the Vertex Performance Strake Hull, C-Zone digital switching, center rod storage, open-port running rod storage and stern deck storage. Excursion Series boats come in 16- and 17-foot lengths with floorplan options that include dual-console, side-console and tiller layouts.

The company's 176 Excursion DC Pro is a 17-foot-8-inch boat with an 88-inch beam, a dual-console layout with a walk-through windshield, and a 115-horsepower rating. With abundant storage and a variety of standard creature comforts, the 176 Excursion DC Pro is ready to carry you to a limit of crappies and maybe a 30-inch walleye, even when conditions get rough.

SPECIFICATIONS

Construction	Aluminum
Length	17'8"
Beam	88"
Max Horsepower	115 hp
Fuel Capacity	24 gal.

FISHING FEATURES

20-gal. livewell center and open-port running rod storage

STARTING PRICE

\$31,060

smokercraft.com



STARCRAFT 166 STORM SC

SPECIFICATIONS

ConstructionAlu	minum
Length	16'4"
Beam	
Max Horsepower	. 90 hp
Fuel Capacity	

FISHING FEATURES

20-gal. livewell rod storage

STARTING PRICE

\$24,504

starcraftmarine.com

Starcraft Marine has been building aluminum fishing boats since 1903, and the brand is well known among North American boat manufacturers for its breakthrough designs and industry firsts. Today, Starcraft continues to produce innovative interior layouts that maximize space and high-performance hulls that deliver exceptional strength and fuel economy.

New for 2021, Starcraft introduces the Storm Series with the first-time boat buyer in mind. The Storm comes standard with the proven Vertex Performance Strake (VPS) hull, which incorporates specifically designed integrated performance strakes that provide undisturbed

water to prop, faster hole shot, quicker time to plane, better stability and a higher, drier ride. Best of all, VPS achieves this level of performance with smaller, lighter, more fuel-efficient engines that help reduce ownership costs.

The 166 Storm SC is a 16-foot-4-inch boat with an 88-inch beam, a spacious single-console layout and a 90-horsepower rating. You'll find a port-side rod locker, a stern aerated livewell and plentiful storage room in the front deck. The Storm Series includes a variety of 16- and 17-foot models with sideconsole, dual-console and tiller floor plans. A wide range of upgrades are also available.

VEXUS ADX190

Vexus boats are built to be different, from the keel to the deck and everywhere in between. Engineered using the company's innovative Glass-Infused Aluminum Hybrid design technology, Vexus boats marry the custom curves and creature comforts of a fiberglass boat with the raw durability and fishability of aluminum hulls. In many respects, Vexus boats represent the best of both worlds for today's angler.

The latest addition to the Vexus lineup is the ADX190, a boat with a deep-V hull and a 175-horsepower capacity. The ADX190 is engineered for hard-core fishing all year long as well as family fun on the water during the warmer months. With an 18-foot-11-inch length, an expansive 98-inch beam and a 38-gallon fuel capacity, the ADX190 is designed to tackle long weekends on the lake without batting an eye.

The boat's expansive port and center rod-storage lockers hold rods up to 8 feet, 8 inches in length. Integrated jump seats on the back deck make it easy to bring the whole crew on the water without filling the floor space with pedestal seating. And when you're not fishing, add the available ski-tow pylon assembly for skiing and tubing fun with family and friends.

SPECIFICATIONS

Construction Aluminum hybrid
Length
Beam98"
Max Horsepower
Fuel Capacity

FISHING FEATURES

livewell 8'8" rod storage

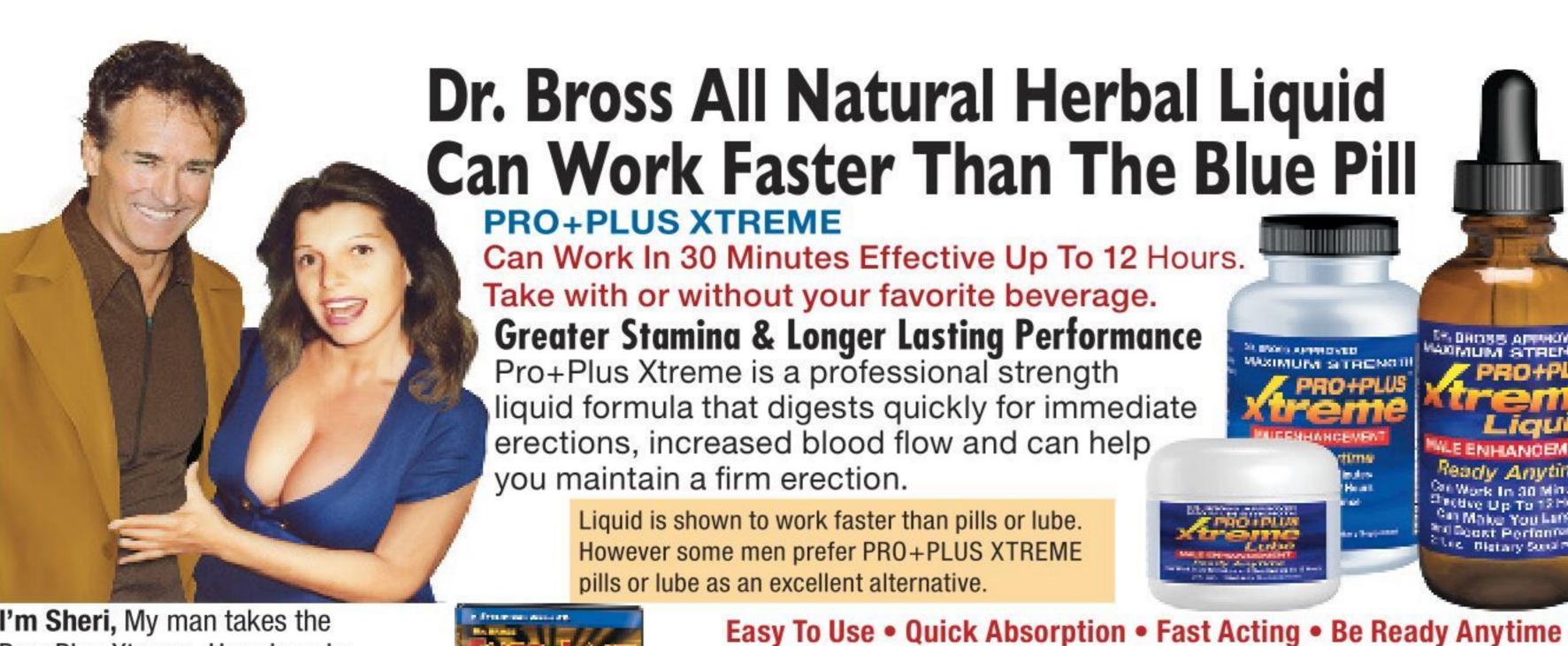
STARTING PRICE

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SUZUKI DF115BG AND DF140BG OUTBOARDS

Suzuki Marine (suzukimarine.com) is recognized worldwide for making advanced technology and features available to boaters of all types, not just those who run the largest, highest-horsepower outboards. This tradition continues with the introduction of Suzuki's DF115BG and DF140BG four-stroke outboards, the first in their class to offer all the advantages of drive-by-wire technology. With this advanced motor-control interface, you'll enjoy simplified rigging in a wide range of boats, along with silky smooth shifting, instant throttle response, enhanced performance and superior fuel efficiency. These motors also include 40-amp alternators that deliver improved output and battery-charging performance at low idle speeds—ideal for today's power-hungry boats that spend a lot of time trolling.

LOWRANCE GHOST 52 AND 60 TROLLING MOTORS

Lowrance (lowrance.com) expands its lineup of Ghost brushless trolling motors to include new models with longer 52- and 60-inch shafts. The brushless advantage delivers 25 percent greater thrust and 45 percent longer run times than comparable motors on the same charge, while eliminating noise and electrical interference with on-board sonar systems. The new Ghost 52 and 60 models bring all the benefits and features of the original Ghost trolling motor to boats with higher bows.





GARMIN STRIKER VIVID

MOTORGUIDE XI3 **KAYAK TROLLING MOTOR**

Kayak fishing continues its international surge in popularity, and MotorGuide (motorguide.com) is ready to propel kayak anglers to memorable catches with the new Xi3 trolling motor. Sporting a 36-inch shaft, the Xi3 features a lightweight design and SecureStep system that makes it simple to stow and deploy the motor, even in a seated position. Along with its nearly silent operation and wireless remote, it's the perfect addition to any kayak. MotorGuide's Xi3 is also available with the Pinpoint GPS system, which allows anglers to focus on fishing while taking advantage of GPS functions like anchor, heading lock, route record and more.

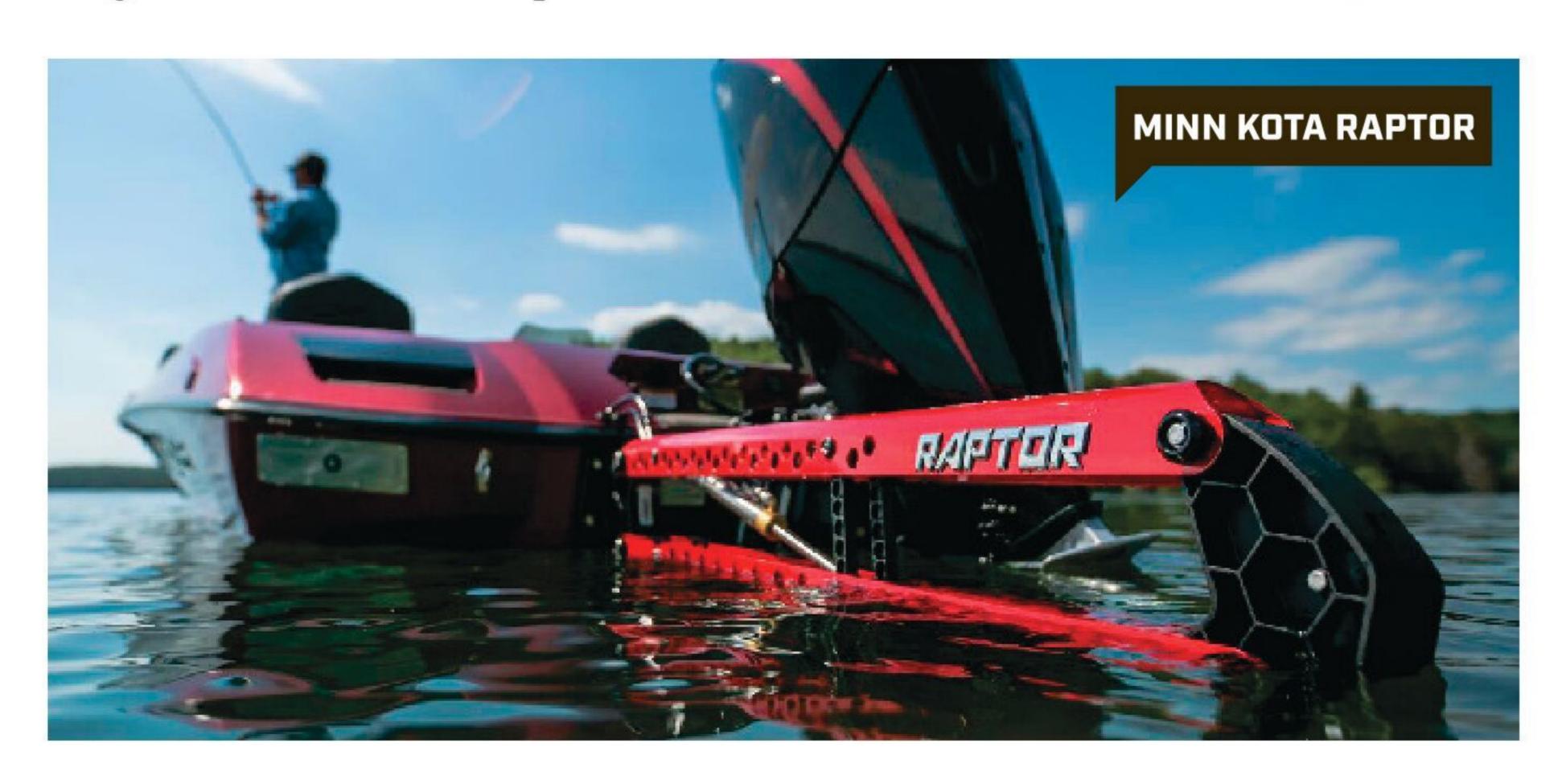
MINN KOTA RAPTOR SHALLOW-WATER ANCHOR

Anglers that spend their time in the shallows appreciate the precision boat control provided by durable shallowwater anchor systems. New for 2021, Minn Kota (minnkotamotors.com) reveals the new Raptor, which keeps working to hold you reliably even in rough conditions. With help from new

Active Anchoring technology, the hydraulic Raptor reads the bottom, senses the anchoring force and reacts automatically to keep you locked down until the moment you're ready to change spots. Enjoy multiple control options, user-selectable anchoring modes and a rugged composite anchor spike in both 8- and 10-foot models.

GARMIN STRIKER VIVID FISHFINDER

To help anglers find fish faster, Garmin (garmin.com/marine) introduces the new STRIKER Vivid lineup of sonar/GPS combos for 2021. Featuring Garmin CHIRP traditional sonar along with CHIRP ClearVü and SideVü scanning sonar technology, STRIKER Vivid ensures that anglers see crystal-clear fish arches and remarkable target separation. With seven new color options, Garmin offers a choice of 16 palettes, making it easier to distinguish fish from structure based on user preferences and fishing conditions. Available with a 4-, 5-, 7or 9-inch color display, the STRIKER Vivid has a rugged design and keyed interface that's built to withstand the harsh marine environment.





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ANGLERS GATHER.

By Colin Moore

and Stove Company in 1913. He introduced his first lantern, a single-mantle model fueled by pressurized petroleum naphtha, in 1914. Gradually the company added other pressurized keroseneand gas-fueled lanterns in the U.S. and Canada. In 1927, about the same time Coleman started offering camping cookstoves, a two-mantle lantern begot a new line and further cemented the company's position as the market leader.

Times and needs changed over the ensuing decades, but not the Coleman Company's reputation for producing a wide variety of quality outdoor recreational products—lanterns, stoves, ice chests and other camping gear among them.

Two kerosene, seven dual-fuel, 25 propane and 38 LED lanterns are in the product line nowadays. It says something about the durability of the original pressurized gas versions that outdoorsmen still scour online sales sites for replacement parts to keep trusted lanterns made decades ago in operation. They appreciate the fact that no matter the type of fuel or design features, the company still provides what was embodied in W.C. Coleman's long-standing slogan stamped into the base of his lanterns: "The Sunshine of the Night."



ertain companies become so established in the minds of consumers that even their one-word brand names are synonymous with entire product categories. Count Coleman among them, as the mention of its name conjures a venerate line of outdoor lighting products.

There's no telling how many hunting camps have been brightened by Coleman lanterns, how many blood trails have been exposed in the darkness or how many nighttime fishing docks have been illuminated. The company has sold more than 50 million lanterns

during its 120-year history, and the brand continues to embody quality and dependability today.

William Coffin Coleman grew up in Parsons, Kan., and eventually became a part-time traveling salesman to augment his teacher's salary. On one of his sales trips he was introduced to the pressurized gas lamp. Impressed with its potential, he bought the patent for one particular design and, after a few tweaks, introduced the Coleman Arc Lamp for indoor use.

The industrious Coleman moved to Wichita and founded the Coleman Lamp



START SMALL

Big bucks aren't always best.



hane's uncle and his family from St. Louis were visiting, and 10-year-old cousin Marcus was keen on going hunting. Though he didn't hunt, Marcus' father knew Shane had an impeccable safety record. He also knew that at 18, Shane had already taken several great bucks. His uncle could think of no one better than Shane to take young Marcus afield, and Shane was glad to do it.

"So what do you want to hunt, buddy?" asked Shane as soon as the luggage was unloaded.

"Umm, I don't know. Anything really," said Marcus. "What's the most fun?"

"Well, I really like hunting deer—big bucks," Shane replied. "Why?" asked Marcus.

"It's challenging. A mature buck is a wise animal with a nose like radar," explained Shane. "If you can kill an old buck in this thick country, cuz, you've done something really special."

"I watch hunting shows on TV and they always hunt deer, so yeah, that's what I want to do," said Marcus anxiously.

Being careful not to disappoint Marcus, Shane explained to his cousin that since he didn't have a license and had not practiced with a high-powered rifle yet, he couldn't actually shoot a deer.

"But you can go with me and watch," Shane quickly added. "It's lots of fun just being out there."

"Yes!" said Marcus, his excitement growing. "I'd love that! And if we get one will you show me how to gut it and stuff?" "I sure will," said Shane.

The next morning the boys got up at 5:30, and Shane drove them to the deer woods. Dawn was frigid, with a north wind that cut like thin wire. Shane could feel Marcus shivering as the two sat in a brush blind on the edge of a meadow. But Marcus temporarily forgot about his aching toes when two deer entered the meadow.

"Shane!" blurted Marcus. "There's two!"

"Shhh," Shane softly breathed. Slowly he leaned in so his lips almost touched Marcus' ear. "If you move or talk, they'll run off."

Marcus nodded and then whispered, "If you shoot one, it can't run off!"

"True," said Shane, "but they're does ... and I'm looking for a buck."

Not much time had passed when Marcus' eyes again lit up as a forkhorn appeared in the field.

"Shane! A buck!" Marcus hissed. "Shoot!" he almost screamed. But Shane didn't shoot.

"It's a buck!" Marcus gasped. "Why aren't you shooting?"

"It's a small one," said Shane. "He needs to get bigger." Marcus' shoulders slumped as if a balloon inside him had burst.

An hour later, Shane heard teeth chattering beside him and was about to call it a morning when an 8-point buck strode into the meadow. Its rack gleamed in the sun as mist curled from its nostrils. Marcus was sure his patience had finally paid off, and at any moment he'd hear the roar of the rifle. But to his bewilderment, Shane did not even raise his gun.

"Shane!" said Marcus. "Don't you see that it's a great big buck? Shoot him!"

"He does have a nice rack," Shane whispered, "but I only get one buck tag and I know there's a bigger one around."

Confused, cold and defeated, Marcus sighed audibly as the buck exited the field. At that point Shane knew it was time to go.

On the way home, Shane turned to Marcus, whose toes were just starting to thaw under the truck's heater.

"Well, we sure saw a lot of deer! What do you think?"

"I think deer hunting kinda sucks," said Marcus. "I thought the point was to shoot 'em, not watch 'em."

Shane chuckled at his young cousin's honesty.

"Good point," he replied. "When I was your age I just wanted to kill a deer—any deer. Actually, I liked squirrel and rabbit hunting much better. You can walk around, see stuff, talk, shoot a bunch of critters and then eat them for supper. How about we go squirrel hunting tomorrow?"

"That sounds good," said Marcus, now perking up. "But can I ask you one thing?"

"I sure will buddy!" said Shane with a laugh. "I sure will." GAME & FISH MIDWEST (ISSN-2687-7694) is published monthly with bi-monthly issues in June/July and December/January by Outdoor Sportsman Group®, 1040 6th Ave., 12th Floor, New York, NY 10018-3703. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Canadian Publications Mail Sales Agreement No. 41405030. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: 500 Rt. 46 East, Clifton, NJ 07011. Yearly subscriptions — \$19.97 for one year (\$28.97 Canadian). POSTMASTER: Send address changes (form 3579) to GAME & FISH MIDWEST, CDS, P.O. Box 37539, Boone, IA 50037-0539 or call 877-416-2649. Copyright© 2021 Outdoor Sportsman Group®.



