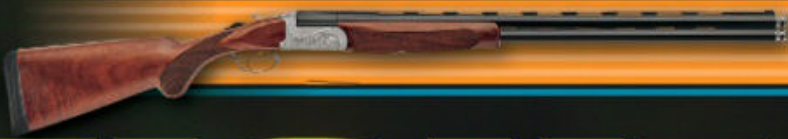


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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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OCTOBER 2021

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ON THE **PROWL**

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IN **60** SECONDS

5 FALL
TURKEY
MYTHS
BUSTED

DO'S AND **DON'TS**
OF THE **DUCK**
OPENER

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FAVORITE FALL
POWER-FISHING
TACTICS

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EXPLORING MICHIGAN'S
70,000 ACRES OF PRIME
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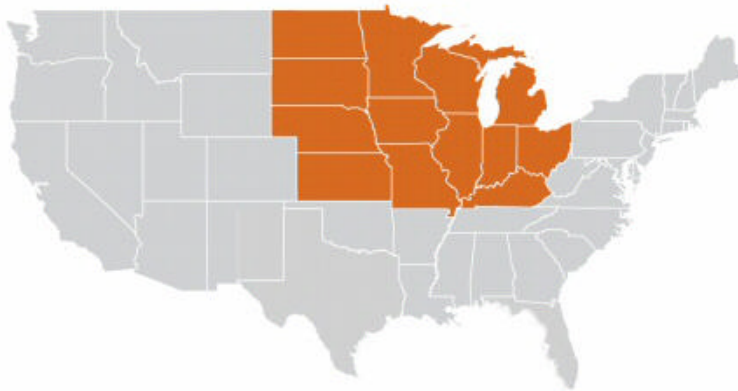
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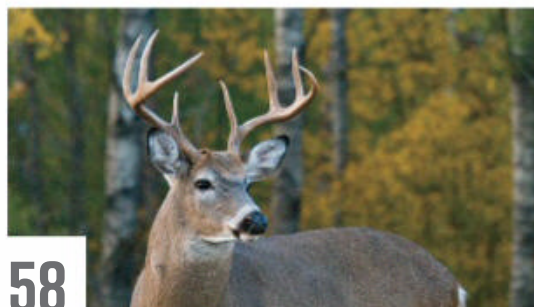
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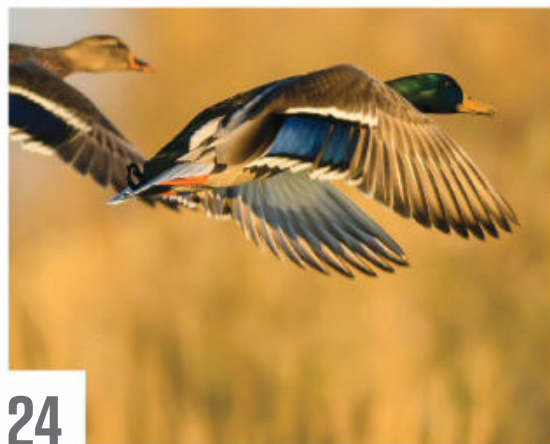
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Drought across the Prairie Pothole Region, as well as a lack of fresh data, has waterfowl biologists concerned.

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HIGH ON HOGS

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

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

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

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

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

Adam Heggenstaller
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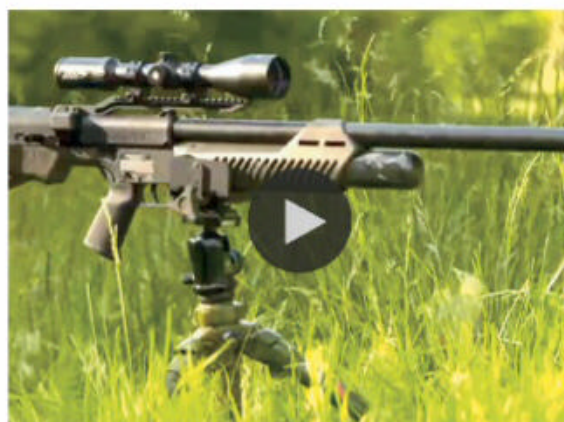
FALL FOR BASS

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



TASTY HARVEST

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



SHOOT WITH AIR

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



WHITETAIL WISDOM

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



DEER GEAR ... AND HOW TO USE IT

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



OFF-ROAD FIELD TEST

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

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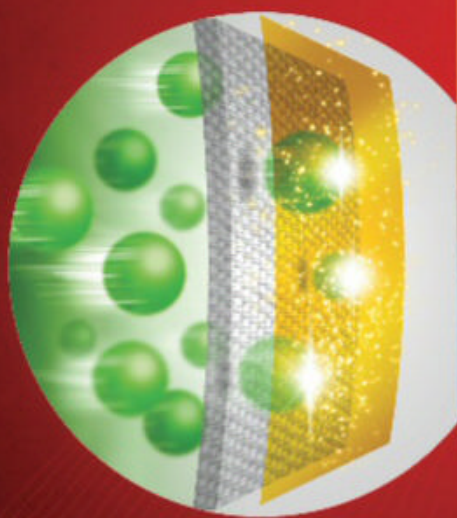
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SUN		MON		TUE		WED		THU		FRI		SAT	
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		11:18	11:42	12:06	12:30	12:54	1:18	—	2:06	2:30	2:54	3:18	3:42

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

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

CHECK YOUR CHEEK

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

Story and Photos by Richard Mann

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

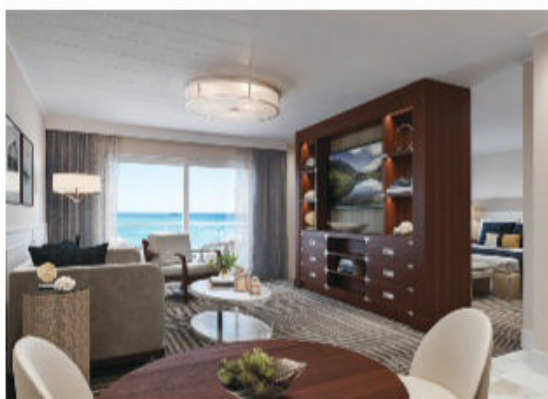
In the 1960s, a West Virginia teenager was given an air rifle. It had open sights, but he realized a riflescope would offer at least a 33 percent advantage because instead of looking at a rear sight, front sight and target, he would only have to look at a reticle and target. He mounted a riflescope to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



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

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

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

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



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

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MOBILE MISSTEPS

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

By Tony Hansen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CAN'T CUT CORNERS

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

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

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

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

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

ADDING TO THE PRESSURE

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

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

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

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

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

Then the duo arrived.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PROFESSIONAL PATIENCE

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

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

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

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



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THE ELECTRIC EDGE

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

By Drew Warden

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

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

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

A LEG UP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POWER POINTS

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

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STEALTH ELECTRIC ALL-TERRAIN

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

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

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

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

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

E-BIKE EDICTS

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

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

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



ALPHA PREDATOR

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

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

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

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

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



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



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DROUGHT IN THE DUCK FACTORY



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

By Andrew McKean

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

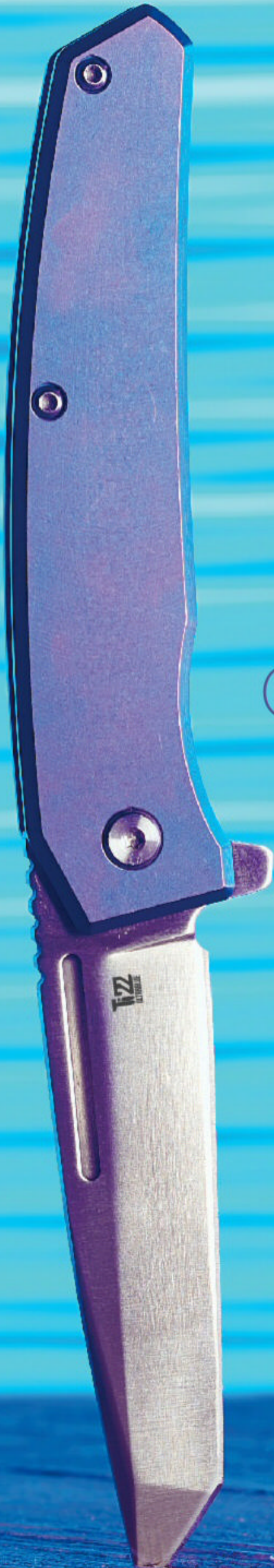
recent years, and ducks will be older on average. That means they'll be harder to fool into decoy spreads.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

KEEP THE TABLE SET

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE AMERICAN WILD BOAR

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

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

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

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

SHUTTERSTOCK



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



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

By Craig Boddington

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

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

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

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

PEST OR RESOURCE?

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

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

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



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

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

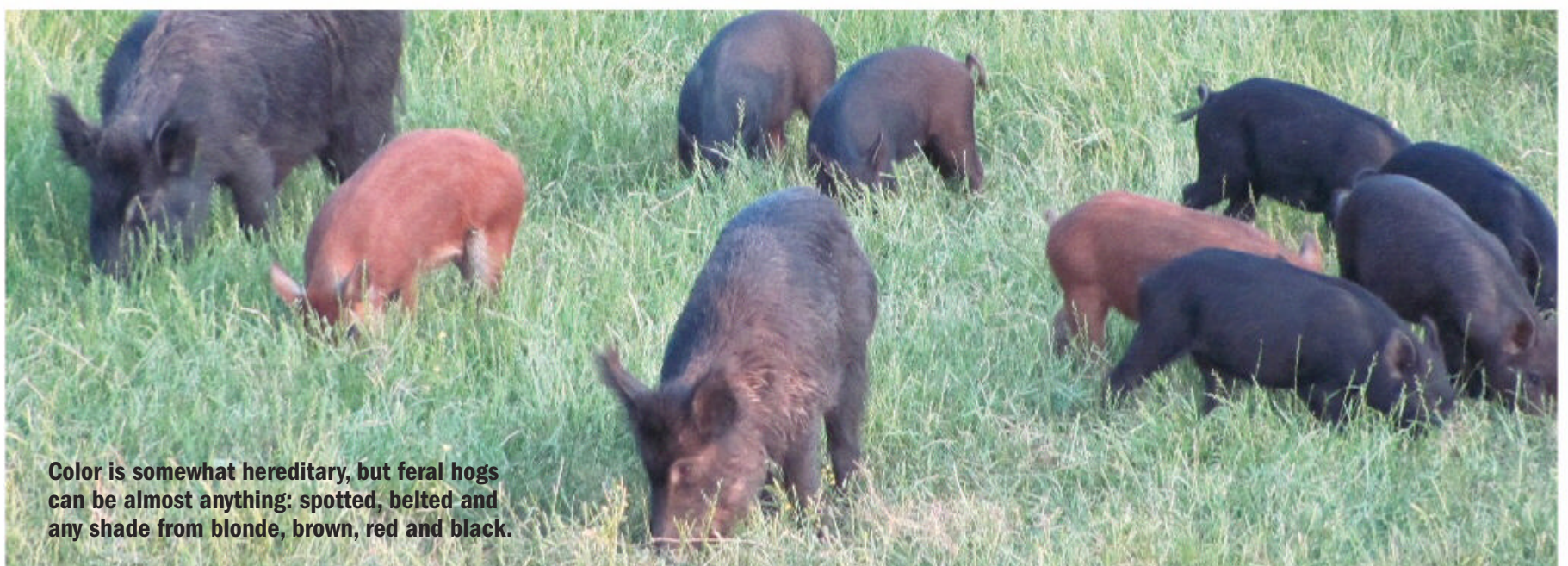
On the other hand, hogs have changed America's hunting culture perhaps

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

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

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

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



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

CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)



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

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

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

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

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

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

place in Georgia, where pigs must be shot constantly.

POCKETS OF PIGS

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

CRAIG BODDINGTON



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

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



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

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



CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)



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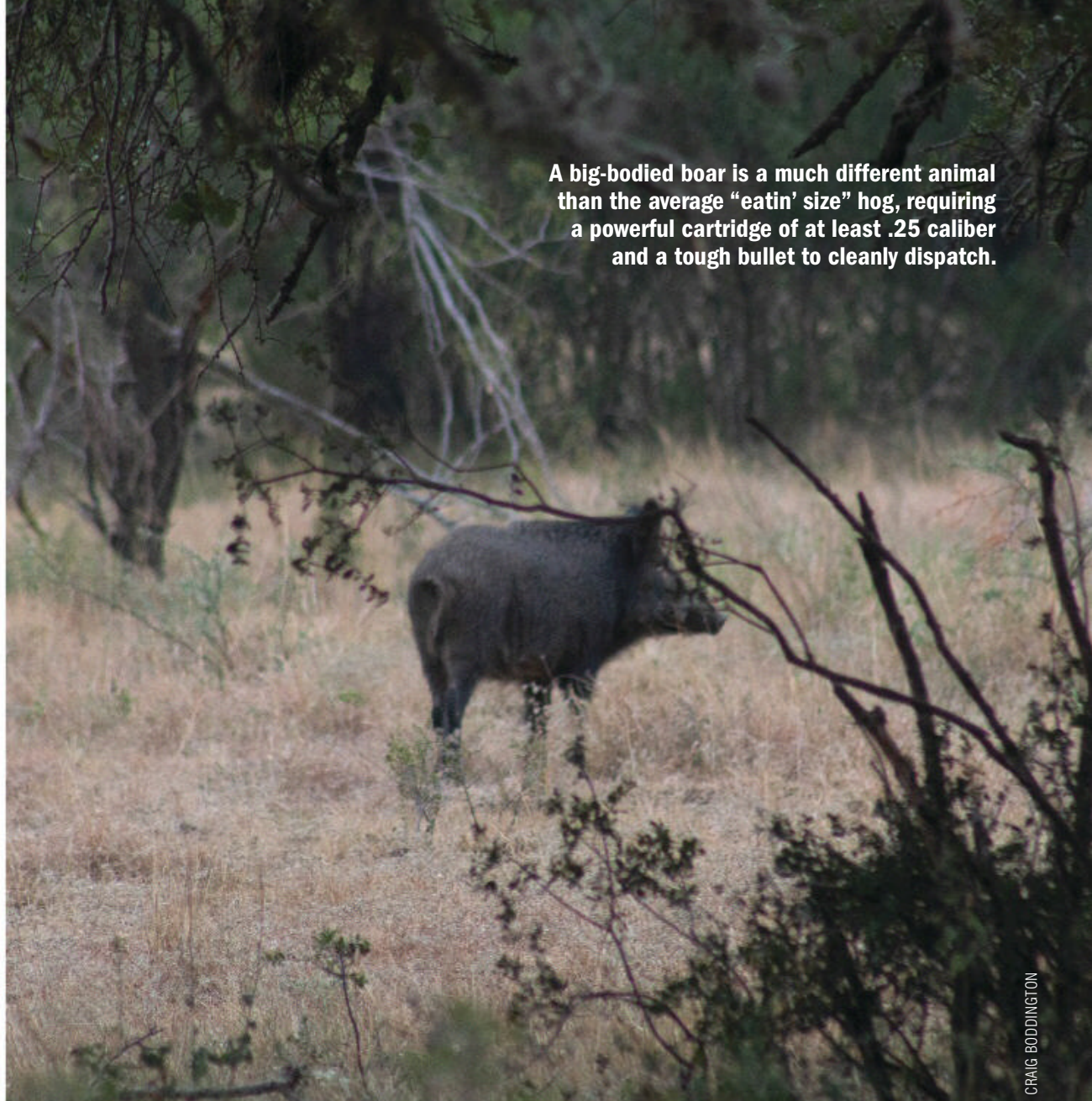


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LOAD UP

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



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

CRAIG BODDINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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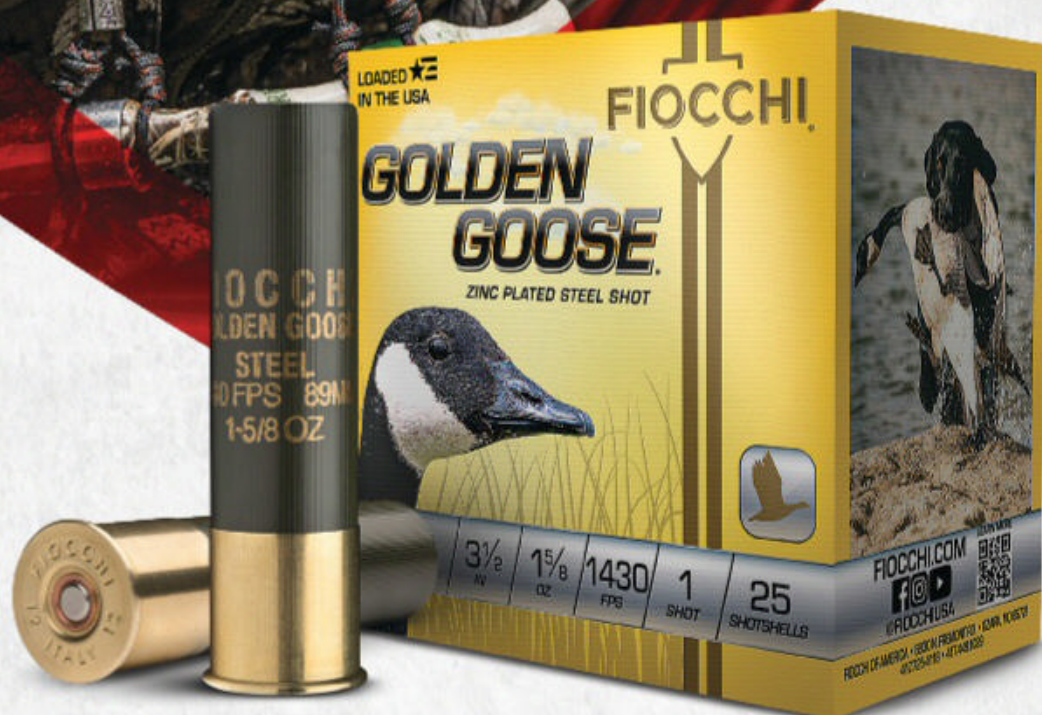
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AROUND THE MIDWEST

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

By Brandon Butler

If only there were six Octobers. With so much opportunity available this month, trying to cram it all into a mere 31 days is an unfair test. The fall fishing bite is hot across the Midwest, and big-game archery seasons are in full swing. You can't overlook the incredible upland hunting, but ducks and geese are also calling your name.

If you are an all-around sportsman, October is when you travel with a bow, shotgun and fishing rod in your truck at the same time. This is it. The prime time. Make the most of it.





ILLINOIS WHITETAILS

Deer hunting changes drastically in October as bucks near the rut and engage in pre-rut activity. Mature bucks lose their minds near the end of the month and start showing up in daylight hours. Set up in the right draw or timber patch, and you never know when a true “Booner” might cruise past. Archery season kicks off October 1, and it only gets better from there. Those looking to hunt public should consider the 1,140-acre Ray Norbut State Fish and Wildlife Area bordering the Illinois River in Pike County. Further north, along the Mississippi River near Galena, there are many public spots, like Hanover Bluff State Natural Area, which offers nearly 400 acres.



LITTLE BAY DE NOC WALLEYES

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is a special fishing destination. Squeezed between three Great Lakes and littered with rivers, streams and inland waters, the U.P. offers a diversity of angling options tough to find elsewhere. Little Bay de Noc is a 30,000-acre bay on Lake Michigan near Escanaba known for its robust walleye population. If you’re seeking giant trophy walleye, this is the place to go and now is the time to be there. Walleyes are gorging themselves to prepare for the long winter months. Trolling around river mouths is the best bet.



SOUTH DAKOTA RINGNECKS

The South Dakota pheasant opener is one of the biggest deals in North American hunting. This year it takes place on Saturday, October 16. Shooting begins at 10 a.m. and lasts until sunset. With plenty of public land, plus private lands enrolled in the state’s Walk-in-Area Program (WIA), hunters should be able to find a place to hunt without needing an outfitter. That said, the state is home to many top-notch guides and private lodges catering to all of a pheasant hunter’s needs. According to Game, Fish and Parks Department estimates, more than 800,000 pheasants were taken in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available.



BLUEGRASS STATE BUCKS

The idea of Daniel Boone making his way across Kentucky with his muzzleloader in hand inspires a sense of nostalgia, and a longing to try your luck at taking a buck under similar limitations centuries later. However, if buckskins and flintlocks aren’t your bag, you can still pursue whitetails with modern smokepoles during the early muzzleloader season on October 16 and 17. Hunters may harvest a deer of either sex in Zones 1, 2 and 3. Hunters may only harvest antlered deer in Zone 4.



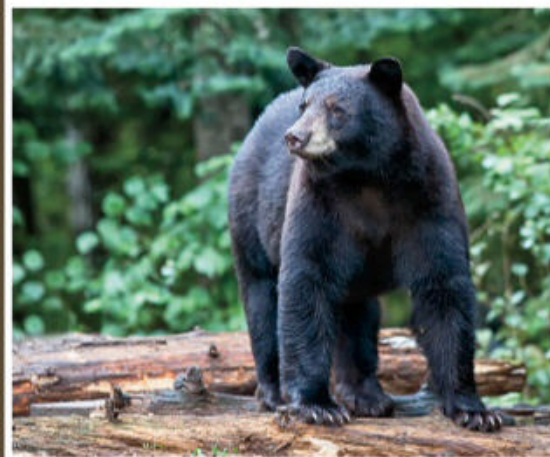
PATOKA LAKE CRAPPIES

The 8,800-acre Patoka Lake is Indiana’s second-largest reservoir. It’s a great fishery, with quality bass, bluegills and catfish. But with deep coves and standing timber throughout, it’s best known for its crappies. Using jigs and fishing minnows under slip-bobbers are both common tactics. Right now, you’ll catch fish consistently in 10 to 15 feet of water. Use sonar to locate brush piles and you should be on them. The crappie bite should remain strong all month.



MISSOURI BLACK BEARS

This year, Missouri holds its first black bear season. The Missouri Department of Conservation completed an updated black bear management plan in 2020, which considered info from a bear research project partly funded by joint grants from Safari Club International Foundation (SCIF) and its hunter legacy fund. The project tracked reproductive rates, identified suitable habitat and movement corridors, and built a population trajectory model based on black bear demographics. Missouri estimates it has roughly 800 bears. The state issued 400 permits through a lottery, but the season total across three hunt zones allows for 40 bears to be killed. The season runs October 18 to 27.



With nothing more than a knife, tin snips and a source of running water, cleaning squirrels is quite easy.

SIMPLE SKINNIN'

TAKE THE HIDE OFF A SQUIRREL IN LESS THAN 60 SECONDS.

By M.D. Johnson

Over my many years of hunting, I can't begin to guess how many people have told me they don't hunt squirrels because of how hard they are to clean. Or because of how difficult it is to keep hair off the meat you later intend to eat. I've probably heard it all a thousand times.

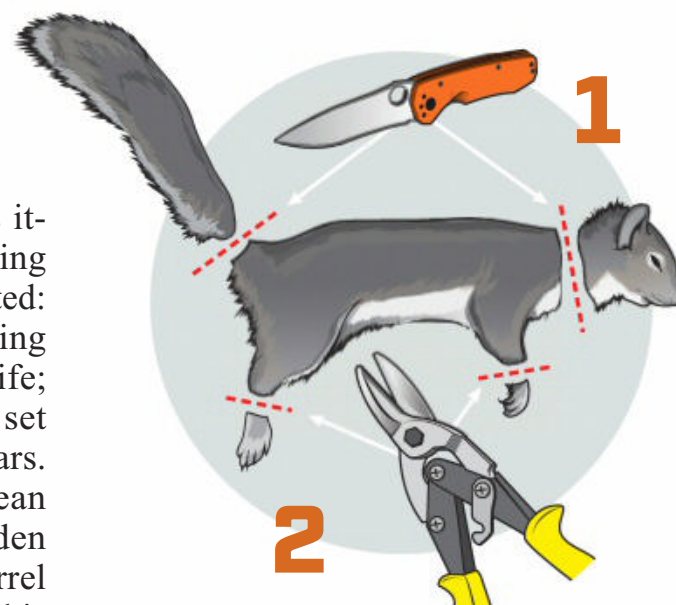
Fortunately, these individuals have it all wrong. Preparing a squirrel for the table isn't—or at least shouldn't be—challenging. In fact, with some practice, the process can be completed from start to finish in less than 60 seconds. An experienced squirrel skinner can probably do it in 30 seconds or less. And while there might be a stray hair or two left when you're done, dressing bushytails in the way described here should result in clean, succulent meat to be baked at 350 degrees.

EQUIPMENT

As simple as the cleaning process itself is, the equipment list for skinning squirrels isn't much more complicated: a source of running water; a cutting board; a sharp, medium-spine knife; a large clean bowl; and a heavy set of tin snips or game-cleaning shears. Weather permitting, I usually clean bushytails outside using the garden hose. However, my father, a squirrel fanatic for some 70 years, prefers his deep-set tubs. Either works.

STEP ONE

With a knife, remove the head and tail close to the body. I generally set the tail aside to be sent to Mepps Lures for its squirrel-tail program after drying. Mepps will pay for harvested squirrel tails, which the company uses in its lures. There are



specific rules and rates listed on its website, so be sure to check those out first.

STEP TWO

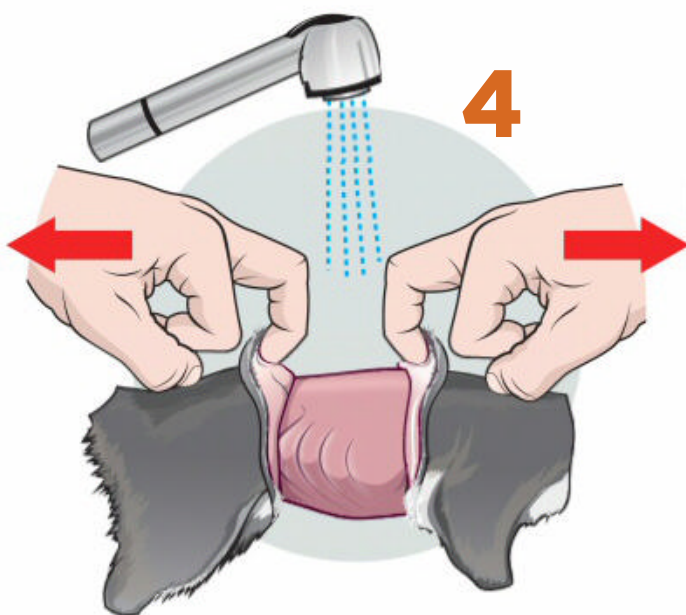
Using the tin snips, cut all four feet off at what you might call the “wrist.” Heavy-duty snips make this step a snap. However, some folks—my father included—rely solely on a trusted knife.

WINDIGO IMAGES (2)



STEP THREE

Next, soak the still-furred carcass thoroughly under running water. If you're right-handed, use your left thumb and forefinger to pinch about an inch of hide in the middle of the squirrel's back. Then, taking your knife, cut a small slit just enough to fit two fingers into the hide you've pinched. Rinse the knife and set it aside. Do all of this under the gently running water.



STEP FOUR

Put your middle finger of each hand partially into the slit you've just made and, keeping the carcass under the running water, pull in opposite directions. Each half of the hide should peel off inside-out like a glove. Young squirrels are easy; older squirrels can provide a bit of an upper-body workout. To prevent hair contamination, every time your hand leaves the hide, rinse it off under the water. Some knife work might be necessary, particularly for an oft-stubborn strip of hide on the belly.



STEP FIVE

The hide now removed, place the carcass belly-up on a rinsed (hair-free) cutting board. On each front leg at the wrist you'll find a tuft of 6 to 10 stiff hairs that have survived the skinning process. Cut these away and discard.



STEP SIX

Now it's time to gut your squirrel. Think of it as a tiny whitetail. With the knife edge up, make an incision from the crotch to the neck opening, splitting all the way through the sternum in the process. You should now be able to easily remove the animal's entrails. Returning to the running water, thoroughly rinse out the body cavity. Then you can safely—and "hairlessly"—place the fully dressed squirrel in the clean bowl and repeat the process with the next in line. 



CAST-IRON CLASSIC

Pop's Dutch oven squirrel recipe

My father, now 81, has enjoyed making this incredible squirrel dish for as long as I can recall. It's a bit time-consuming, but once you taste it you'll realize it's worth the effort. It's easy, wonderful, and the next-day leftovers are out of this world.

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 squirrels cut into five parts each: hindquarters, back and shoulders/legs
- Canned diced tomatoes
- Mushrooms (I prefer wild chanterelles or hen of the woods, but canned mushrooms work)
- 1 large Walla Walla onion, peeled and cut into rings
- 4 links of hot (or mild, if preferred) Italian sausage
- Flour, salt, pepper, garlic and other spices to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Dredge each squirrel piece in seasoned flour and brown in bacon grease. Set aside when complete.
2. In a heavy Dutch oven, place a layer of diced tomatoes and onions.
3. Next, arrange a layer of browned squirrel, followed by more tomatoes, onions and one or two hunks of Italian sausage.
4. Continue this layering until all ingredients are gone, finishing with a thin layer of tomatoes and onions.
5. Cover and bake at 350 degrees for 75 minutes.
6. Serve over plain white rice.

5 FALL FALLACIES

THERE ARE A LOT OF ESTABLISHED BELIEFS WHEN IT COMES TO FALL TURKEY HUNTING, BUT MANY OF

**THESE MYTHS
SIMPLY DON'T
HOLD UP.**

By Tony J. Peterson

Fall turkeys are too often misunderstood. Toms still gobble and respond to calling, and even occasionally strut.

Fall turkeys just don't get a whole lot of love. Outside of a few eccentric, go-against-the-grain hunters and the folks who have it bad for turkey dogs, it's mostly a bolt-on hunting opportunity. Part of this is due to bigger quarry being available, but the lack of interest also stems from some misconceptions about fall birds.

Most hunters don't think it can be as exciting and interactive as spring hunting, so why bother? The reality is fall birds don't fit our preconceived notions about them. They can actually be a blast to hunt—you've just got to open your mind and give it a shot. Here are five common myths concerning fall turkeys, and some strategies to make your autumn hunting more fun—and successful.

MYTH 1 **Fall birds aren't vocal.**

WHY WE BELIEVE IT: We aren't listening. We reason that because gobbling is a spring thing and there really isn't any reason for hens to yap away in October, they must not talk now.

WHY WE'RE WRONG: Gobbling like mad off the roost won't happen too often in the fall, but that doesn't mean it won't happen. I once sat 75 yards away from four fall toms that gobbled 500 times in an afternoon before I killed a different bird that slipped into my setup. Longbeards will gobble, but they are also just as likely to yelp back at your calls.

Hens, on the other hand, are much more vocal in the fall than in the spring. They talk and talk and talk. In fact, if you want to learn how to be a better all-around caller, let a flock of hens tell you how to do it in October.

HOW TO EXPLOIT IT: Fall turkeys often need encouragement to speak up, so get them going. Call like it's your job. I use a slate and a mouth call together to sound like two hens getting after each other. Ramp up aggressive yelping and cutting and mix in some scratching.

When you get a response, engage them in a rap battle. Too many hunters think that because the birds won't talk first that it's time to whisper or shut up, but it's not. Do the opposite.

Turkeys are highly predictable in the fall. The common denominator for toms, jakes and hens is food. Scratchings, droppings, tracks and feathers identify a hot food source.



JOHN PENNOVER (LEFT), JOHN HAFNER (RIGHT)

Full-on strutting is rare in the fall, but it can happen. With both males and females quite territorial when it comes to food, birds are aggressive and dominance displays do occur.



MYTH 2 **Fall toms don't strut.**

WHY WE BELIEVE IT: When we're cruising the backroads in the fall, we don't see black blobs in the backs of fields with regularity. This is because toms aren't out there showing off for the ladies, but that doesn't mean you can't see some strutting or other spring-specific behaviors.

WHY WE'RE WRONG: I'll admit it's hard to get a tom to strut in the fall. In fact, it's much easier to get a hen to strut. Territoriality is the name of the fall-turkey game, and dominant hens do not like interlopers on their food sources.

I've shot and arrowed quite a few hens in my time that were posturing up and trying to intimidate their rivals. I've also shot some toms that came in to fight and, while not strutting in full display, did put on their best bad-boy act. It's pretty incredible to witness, and you can see it with some regularity if you know how to call, where to set up and what decoys to use.

HOW TO EXPLOIT IT: The key to witnessing bad-to-the-bone turkey behavior is to make them mad. You do this by calling correctly and then addressing the following two myths about decoys and daily bird patterns.

MYTH 3 **Fall birds don't decoy.**

WHY WE BELIEVE IT: I honestly don't know why so many hunters believe this, because turkeys are social critters. We could decoy turkeys every day of the year if we so desired, but we don't. We think this is something that only happens in April and May. This myth probably just stems from a lack of actually trying to hunt with decoys in the fall.

WHY WE'RE WRONG: Just think about this for a second: Turkeys have a pea-sized brain and they hang around with other turkeys most of the year, especially in the fall. If they see another turkey, which they do every day of their lives, they don't think that—because it's not April—they're not going to interact with that bird over there. Fall birds are more

concentrated than they are at any time of year (except the dead of winter), and they are quite used to being around their fellow turkeys. This is all you need to know about whether decoys will work or not.

HOW TO EXPLOIT IT: Skip the full strutters and bring out the hens. If you've got a flock of ladies scouted out, a single feeding hen decoy is the ticket. It'll work on a flock of longbeards too, but in that case I prefer a single quarter-strut jake. The goal is to represent a lone, vocal bird right in the middle of a flock's preferred feeding grounds or on a tight travel route like a logging road.

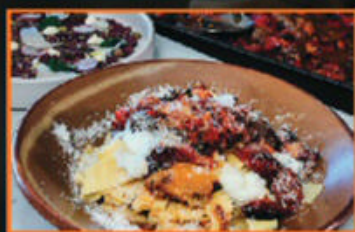
Fall turkeys are insanely territorial, and they will not tolerate a single bird squawking away where they want to feed or walk. I've had several dominant hens come in to this type of setup and strut, chest-bump my decoys and even stomp birds that I've already arrowed. It's pretty wild, and a hell of a lot of fun. It's also important to note that while both toms and hens will commit to a single decoy, the toms usually come in much quieter but with a purpose—so pay attention.

JOHN HAFNER

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

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MAN EATS WILD
WITH MARIO KALPOU



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MYTH 4 **Fall turkeys are random.**

WHY WE BELIEVE IT: Let's be honest, most turkey behavior looks random throughout the year because we only see a glimpse of it on any given day. This is like getting three trail camera images of a buck in September and assuming you have him patterned for the remainder of the fall—it's just not a complete picture. With turkeys, what we see is random, but what they do is not.

WHY WE'RE WRONG: Nothing is more patternable than a flock of fall turkeys. The boys will hang with the boys; the girls will hang with the girls and the youngsters. They'll roost in very specific spots every night and take specific routes to food sources each day. Wild cards might show up to alter the routes at times—things like a warm fall day that gets the grasshoppers going or a crabapple tree that is loaded with good stuff. However, what they do today, they'll generally do tomorrow. This is a huge benefit to the fall turkey hunter.

HOW TO EXPLOIT IT: Scout. Establish where turkeys are hanging out and feeding over the course of several days. Whether they are scratching along a wetland edge for bugs or hitting up a freshly picked cornfield, fall birds live through their stomachs. They spend the daylight hours eating, and they don't want to spare a calorie for any turkey that isn't in their clique.

When you find a hot food source, you'll know it. There will be droppings, tracks and random feathers. If the birds are there today at noon, get in there tomorrow before noon. Use scouting to inform exactly where to set up.

MYTH 5 **Fall birds aren't as fun.**

WHY WE BELIEVE IT: We've mostly been doing things wrong. A poor or misinformed effort will lead to less-than-stellar results, which aren't much fun.

WHY WE'RE WRONG: Listen, fun is subjective. But the idea that fall birds aren't—or can't be—as enjoyable as spring birds is bananas. It's a different game, and you have to look at it as such.

But that doesn't mean it isn't a blast, because it can be.

It's also an opportunity to hunt a low-demand situation. Public-land hunters and folks who deal with high hunting pressure in the spring might actually have a more enjoyable hunt in the fall simply by not facing the same competition.

HOW TO EXPLOIT IT: The only way to know is to go. Better yet, go with the idea that the birds will call and decoy

and should offer up a great hunt. If you don't want to post up for the birds in a specific spot, run and gun them like in the spring. If you want to try busting them up, do that. In the right situation, a scattered flock and a hasty setup is as good of a time as you'll have with turkeys no matter what month it is. Spend some time out there focusing on the birds and what they offer up as far as hunting opportunities, and you'll see what so many others are missing out on. 

Whether you use a gun or a bow, fall turkey hunting can be a blast. Set up on a well-used travel route or on a good food source, and then draw birds in with calling and a decoy.



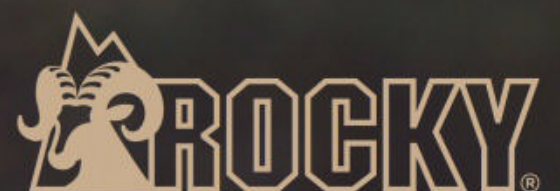
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THE PERFECT OPEN

OPENING DAY OF DUCK SEASON ON PUBLIC WATER CAN BE PHENOMENAL ... OR PROFOUNDLY DISAPPOINTING. **HOW YOU PREPARE FOR IT WILL DETERMINE THE OUTCOME.**

By Brian Lovett



Public-water duck openers might be the most polarizing phenomenon in waterfowl hunting. On one hand, you can't wait to hit the marsh to kick off the new season. Still, you might cringe thinking of the heavy competition and mosquitoes awaiting you and secretly long for later-season hunts and lighter crowds.

It's easy to understand each point of view. Areas with lots of local birds or early migrants can produce fantastic opening-weekend gunning. But seasoned hunters also know that allure often leads to long lines at the boat ramp, harsh words in the dark and consistently disappointing results.

That's unfortunate. Opening day should be enjoyable, and with some basic planning and strategy, it can be. Try these tips to overcome common opening-day issues and make the duck opener great again.

PRESSURE

Opening-weekend hunting pressure can be intense in much of the Midwest, and that will typically be your biggest obstacle to success. Pressured ducks usually don't work or finish, and they often get blown out of some spots within a few hours. You can't change the popularity of opening day, but you can counter pressure by either avoiding it or adapting to it.

Avoidance

Years ago, hunters got up early to secure "their" spot for the opener. That doesn't work as well nowadays, as many folks sleep in the marsh or simply push in 50 yards downwind of you before shooting hours. To truly avoid pressure, scout intensely and work hard to find and access spots other hunters can't or won't get to.

Start searching for new opening-day digs long before the season. If you've missed that window, devote some serious time to it right now. Avoid obvious hot spots. Forget about areas with good public boat launches. Instead, check out lists and descriptions of wildlife areas or walk-in properties from state or federal



Many hunters make the mistake of going too big with their opening-day spreads. Tailor your decoys to the water you're hunting and opt for subdued, natural calling sequences.

agencies, then view aerial photos to find out-of-the-way, difficult-to-access areas that might hold ducks. These might include small ponds, pothole lakes, remote sloughs, tiny flowages, hidden bayous, distant timber holes or the backwaters or wide main branches of creeks and small rivers. Many won't be worth a darn, but some probably will.

After finding several likely options, scout them in person. Remember, you're trying to avoid easily accessible spots, so this might involve long, tough walks, paddles or push-poling sessions. Note areas that are holding birds and offer good setups. If possible, return to good-looking areas a week or so before the season to see if other hunters have built blinds or staked out spots. If so, you might have to resort to a Plan B.

In addition, keep things in perspective. Many faraway spots won't hold as many ducks as popular areas, but they might offer chances to shoot a few birds in relative peace.

Adaptation

Despite your best efforts, it's not always possible to avoid other hunters on public water during opening day. You can still hunt effectively, but you might need to overhaul your approach.

Remember that hunting pressure often dictates duck movement after the first hour or so. Set up as far as possible from other hunters and, above all, don't let your positioning afford competing groups the opportunity to cut you off especially downwind.

Furthermore, don't focus on areas that seem ideal for working or decoying birds or spots where they loafed before the season. Identify flight lanes birds use to escape pressure, including narrow pinch points between larger areas of water, tiny timber holes that might not be visible via Google Earth and hidden creek arms connected to big bays or flats. In some cases, shoreline or vegetation features act as travel funnels for pressured puddle ducks. Teal often follow water, flying over channels, creek arms or river channels. Wood ducks are notorious for following timber lines to and from roosting and feeding areas. Even mallards will use these funnels as escape routes when harassed.

One caveat: Funnels and escape routes sometimes aren't ideal for decoying birds. However, during the frenzy



To avoid opening-day pressure, go where others won't. Usually that means hiking in farther or hunting overlooked areas.

UNDER THE RADAR

Six areas with less pressure and solid hunting on opening day

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you can't find remote, lightly hunted opening-day honey holes at the local marsh, lake or wildlife area. When that happens, seek out spots other hunters don't consider, such as these sleeper options.

CREEKS

In states with water-access rights, small creeks can provide great duck action. Many tiny waterways are difficult to access, which weeds out competition. Also, the farther you wade, paddle or float, the more distance you'll likely put between you and other waterfowlers.

Look for hidden backwaters where woodies and mallards might feed and loaf. Also, check out wide bends or sandbars that could allow good pass-shooting action.

SMALL WATERS IN TIMBER

State, county and national forests are known for timber, but they're often dotted with small potholes, marshes or lakes, many of which are tough to access and host decent waterfowl numbers. Scour topographical maps or mapping apps to find hidden gems, then formulate a plan to hike in opening day. You'll likely be the only duck hunters in the neighborhood.

WALK-IN PROGRAM LANDS

Several Midwest states have excellent walk-in land access programs that grant the public entry onto certain private lands, and many enrolled properties feature ponds, potholes, marshes or streams. Check state walk-in atlases or online databases to find potential hot spots. As with other public waterfowl

options, areas that require longer walks will typically see less pressure.

AG FIELDS

Most hunters don't associate opening day with dry-field hunting, but ducks and geese often hit harvested small-grain fields (such as barley or winter wheat) during the early season. And some private properties enrolled in government programs that allow public hunting—such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program—include such fields. First, identify properties enrolled in those programs. Then, make quick scouting runs to see if crops in those areas have been harvested and might attract birds.

NEARLY UN-HUNTABLE WATERS

This is not suggesting that hunters violate any laws. Many lakes, rivers and marshes in urban and suburban areas are within municipal boundaries and thus un-huntatable. But, sometimes, small portions of those waters fall outside the no-hunting zone. Use online apps to find huntatable spots others might not know about. Make hay on opening day, though, as ducks quickly learn they can stay safe by not leaving protected waters.

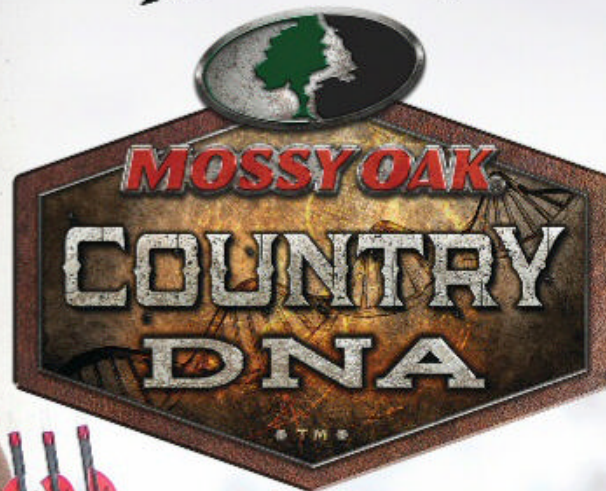
NEWLY FLOODED AREAS

Fall rains can create "new" waters in otherwise dry public-land woods, grasslands or lowlands, and sometimes those spots might appear overnight. Pay attention to precipitation patterns before opening day. If your area has been soaked, check out some spots that might flood to see if they're wet and holding ducks.

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of opening day, birds often don't present classic decoying shots anyway, as gunshots or other human interference are constantly spooking them. If nothing else, find areas where passing ducks should offer good shooting opportunities and take the first quality shots they present.

GOING TOO HARD

Duck hunters obsess over calling and decoys, so it's fitting these considerations often top their checklist for the opener. Ironically, though, chaotic public-water openers sometimes negate the effectiveness of these tried-and-true tools. Use

your head and temper your enthusiasm when it comes to opening-weekend calling and spreads.

Calling

That fancy duck call might be the most overused tool in your boat on opening day. Unless you're hunting flooded timber, where calling is critical to success, consider putting it in your pocket. Everyone at your local marsh or wildlife area will likely be blowing the reeds out of their calls. Do you really think mallards will hear your hail call, focus on your decoys and pitch in when there's gunfire and movement in every corner of the marsh?

Instead, try a low-key approach. Use soft single quacks and sequences or feeding chuckles when ducks swing near. Basically, paint a picture of contented ducks on the water. Also, get species-specific, using gadwall blats for gray ducks, a teal/wigeon/pintail whistle for those species or even diver "burring" for early ringnecks and redheads. Bottom line: Be different than all the loudmouths in the marsh.

Decoys

As with calling, try to stand out from the crowd during the opener. Most hunters toss out 24 to 48 decoys in tried-and-true patterns. Sometimes that works fine. What often works better is tailoring your spread to the spot you're hunting and the number of birds likely to visit that area.

A dozen or fewer decoys work fine in small backwaters, bayous and creek bends. Consider putting a few full-body field decoys on nearby sandbars or mudflats to imitate loafing birds. Likewise, don't choke out sloughs and potholes with massive spreads. Use enough blocks for visibility, leave a large landing hole and make sure the spread looks relaxed. If early-season divers might be on the menu, toss out a few black-and-white blocks for added attraction, but don't go crazy.

Don't neglect motion, but don't overdo it either. The multiple spinners everyone else in the marsh is using are often too much. Rather, use a pulsator, swimming decoy or jerk cord to add subtle, natural movement to your spread. This can be especially critical during calm early mornings.

OPENING SALVO

Admittedly, these considerations represent lots of work and preparation. Some measures might seem like overkill for a single weekend of duck hunting, but remember: Opening day comes but once a year. You might as well go all in by scouting hard, planning wisely and hunting intelligently to make it an event to remember.

Let other hunters blast hail calls until they're blue in the face and waste half a box of shells on the same three circling birds everyone else is trying to shoot. Instead, hunt over small spreads on overlooked hot spots. And consider leaving that call in your pocket. 

Teal, a common early-season species, escape pressure by following flight lanes over river channels and creeks.



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BIOLOGICAL WARFARE

USE A MATURE BUCK'S ANATOMY AND HABITS AGAINST HIM.

By Josh Honeycutt

I often wonder if we give whitetails too much credit. These critters—especially mature ones—are certainly skilled in the art of survival. But whitetails aren't intelligent in the way humans are. They can't add, subtract, reason or rhyme. They're purely reactionary; they adapt to environmental challenges, including hunting and predation. In that sense, they're geniuses of the wild. But their very makeup makes them vulnerable in some specific ways, too.

While every deer operates within the confines of its biology, they aren't equal in terms of their aptitude or weakness. Some are inherently nocturnal and skittish and

actively avoid human intrusions. Others are less afraid of the daylight, bolder, and hunting pressure doesn't affect them as much. Many times, a deer's age, the amount of testosterone it has, its experience with hunters and more influence this. These factors can even culminate in the illusion of what hunters might describe as a unique "personality."

Still, most whitetails express baseline biological compulsions. And history has proven that a buck's physiology makes it susceptible to specific, well-timed tactics. Let's look at some of these natural impulses and preferences, and discuss how hunters can poise themselves to take advantage of them.

CREPUSCULAR CRITTERS

In terms of movement, Grant Woods, of "Growing Deer TV," says whitetails are best defined as crepuscular animals, meaning they move most at dawn and dusk.

"I hear a lot of comments about them being that way because of the light, but that's untrue," says Woods. "We've all busted deer in the dark, and I've never heard one hit a tree yet. Nor in full daylight. Their rods and cones are bigger than ours, so they're getting twice the light and are better skilled to move at dark."

So, if their sight isn't the reason for their crepuscular nature, what is it? Woods chalks it up to swirling winds.

"The sun is coming up, and for the first couple of hours, that wind is just churning," Woods says. "That's why deer move at that time of day. They can just sense everything around them with a swirling wind. So, if you can find a morning or evening crepuscular spot where the wind is blowing a known direction, that's a huge advantage. Whether it's 200 or 2,000 yards, they're going to be traveling during that time."





Bucks often grow more cautious as they grow older, but they also become set in their ways, inhabiting smaller core areas that provide everything they need.

HOMEBOY HABITS ←

It's a common belief that a buck's home range and core area increase with age, but the opposite is actually true. As bucks get older, they know their home ranges better and tend to spend more time in the areas that offer the best bedding, food, water and overall security and spend less time exploring.

This is good and bad for hunters. If a buck's home range shrinks so much that it recedes from a hunter's accessible property, that deer is suddenly out of reach.

On the flip side, if you're the hunter with access to the property where the buck now exclusively lives, your chance of killing it becomes quite favorable ... as long as you play it right.

LIKE CLOCKWORK ↓

I can't fully explain the phenomenon, but I've experienced via my personal trail camera data that individual bucks will often display the same patterns of behavior year after year, sometimes even down to the day—almost like they're robots programmed on a 12-month repeat. On more than one occasion, I've seen a deer transition from its summer to fall range, return to a specific location, hit the same scrape or complete some other action approximately or exactly one year later.

This obviously isn't true for every deer. Some remain completely random. But plenty do lend evidence to this theory. And once a deer shows that tendency, it's likely to repeat it again.

If you have multiple years of history for specific target bucks, study all available trail camera photos from past seasons. You might find that a buck likes to return to a property, walk in daylight, hit a specific scrape or do something else for the first time on the same (or similar) date each year. That's incredibly useful information.

LATE RUTTING

A yearling doe's weight determines whether or not it will be receptive during its first fall, not its age. If it reaches the necessary threshold, it'll pair off with a buck.

"One thing that's helped me tag several good bucks is knowing that if an area has pretty good food, female fawns will be 65 to 70 pounds during the late season, and they might become receptive," Woods says. "I'd rather hunt near receptive female fawns than adult does, which tend to go to a different portion of their home range when receptive. Doe fawns are going to a good food source every afternoon. If you have a place where several fawns are feeding, I'd hunt there for a big buck during the late season."

KING BEDS →

Although younger bucks select bedding locations mostly at random, mature ones choose them very carefully. Bedding areas must check certain boxes and provide visual, winding and escape route advantages. Once bucks discover the most beneficial beds within their respective home ranges, they often become very loyal to these spots and frequent them over time.

Of course, bucks do have numerous bedding locations, as a given bed will prove more advantageous than others under certain circumstances—time of year, time of day, wind direction, etc. Understanding where these great beds are located—and what conditions make them desirable—helps hunters out greatly.

For starters, it's incredible intel for future use. It helps you plan out a hunt down to the entry and exit routes you'll use.

Secondly, this is where the bump-and-dump tactic—where you use a soft bump to ease a deer away from its bed—might be advantageous. Over time, bucks gain confidence in specific beds. Even if bumped from a favorite bed, a mature buck is likely to use it again in the future, and it might even return that same day. So, if you want to push a deer out and set right up overlooking the downwind-side trails leading back to it, it might just pay off. And definitely don't think the jig is up just because you unintentionally push one out of its bedroom.

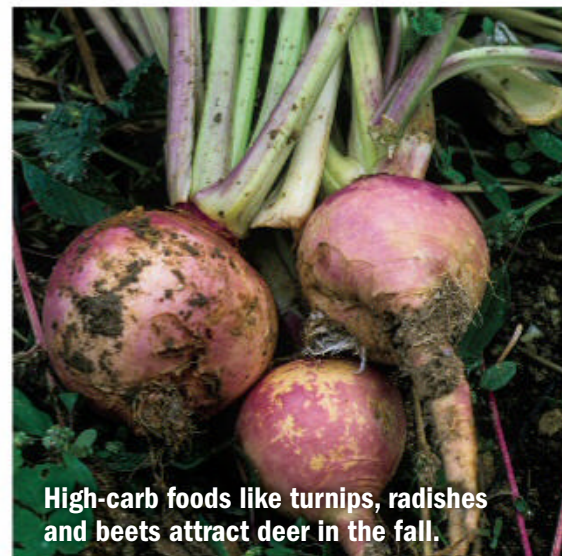
Certain bucks will display ritualistic tendencies—visiting the same scrape, for example—at nearly the same time from one year to the next, sometimes down to the day.

FEEDING FRENZY

According to Woods, a whitetail's primary defense mechanism isn't its nose but rather its stomach.

"Deer have this great big stomach with four chambers," he says. "It allows them to go get a whole bunch of forage, then regurgitate and chew for many hours without having to regularly return to food and subject themselves to possible predation."

Basically, they are able to feed openly at night and bed during the day, when moving is riskier. Without this multiple-chamber stomach, whitetails would need to feed up to 10 times per day. Given that the early season has longer days, there is more time between feedings because daylight lasts longer. Because of this, Woods encourages hunters to get as close to bedding areas as possible without alerting the deer, of course in an effort to tag a buck returning to or leaving its bed.



High-carb foods like turnips, radishes and beets attract deer in the fall.



MATT HANSEN (LEFT); JOHN HAFNER (CENTER); SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP RIGHT)

A mature buck is highly selective about its bedding areas. Once it finds one that lets it see and smell potential danger, and offers good escape routes, it will visit it again and again.

PICKY PREFERENCES ↑

Whitetails are fairly selective about what they eat. While they do browse for their food rather than graze like many of their ruminant cousins that eat grass, and are somewhat defined as browsers (animals that consume plants), the way deer feed is a little more specific. Namely, they are "concentrate selectors," as Brian Murphy, HuntStand wildlife biologist and past CEO of the Quality Deer Management Association (now the National Deer Association), says. This means that whitetails are very discriminatory in what they eat, according to Murphy. While they consume a wide variety of plants over 200 different species locally they usually focus on the best, most digestible parts of them. Because deer choose these easily digestible plant parts, they are able to have a smaller stomach compared to most other ruminant mammals.

In spring and summer months, deer key on fresh, high-protein growth. Once October and the fall proper arrives, the food focus shifts to high-carb options, which help them produce the energy to make it through winter. Think hard mast like acorns and other nuts; beets, oats, radishes, turnips, wheat, winter peas and more in terms of cool-season vegetation; and nature-provided greens like forbs. Once primo foods become scarce, deer turn to woody browse, such as tree buds and the most palatable stems on the landscape. Hunters would be wise to keep this high-carb shift in mind moving through the fall.

TESTOSTERONE TIDES ↓

Every buck has testosterone. Sure, there are instances where they'll produce an abnormally low level, including cryptorchidism (the absence of one or both testes) and injuries to the testicles, but most experience consistent cycles of this chemical each year. This makes deer more susceptible to calling and rattling, especially once those levels reach a certain point. And, as Woods says, it only gets better and better through the pre-rut.

There are ways to capitalize on this. While blind calling can lead to deer getting downwind without your knowledge, using these tactics in areas where it's hard for deer to get the wind is effective. And if you do call blindly, put yourself in a position to get a shot off before a buck circles downwind of you.

Another strategy Woods employs to take advantage of testosterone is looking at trail cameras—usually placed under an oak tree or in a food plot—to help identify bucks that might be the most receptive to calling.

“You might notice one buck that might not be the largest-antlered buck, but it pushes other bucks out of the way,” Woods says. “He’s got a bit of an attitude, and when I see that buck out there, and I can grunt at him, there’s a high likelihood he’s going to come.”

If you see a deer that’s always in the back of photos, or that avoids other deer, it’s probably timid, and calling and rattling likely won’t do the trick. This is why being able to read whitetail body language is such an important skill.

WATER WORKS

Just as food is important, so is water. A 200-pound buck drinks an average of 3 to 5 quarts per day, but this can fluctuate based on circumstances. Regardless, some of this intake occurs during daylight hours, meaning that bucks oftentimes bed close to water sources. This makes finding well-used buck beds within 75 to 100 yards of a water source—even small, stagnant ones—a surefire strategy. While deer need water year-round, I especially like this tactic during the early part of the season (when it’s hottest) and the rut (when deer are moving the most).

Every mature whitetail has its own perceived personality or set of habits and tendencies that make it seem relatively unique. That said, most express enough similarities to be susceptible to the tactics outlined here. Use these this season and increase the odds of putting a big buck on the wall and in the freezer. **G&F**

Buck testosterone levels rise throughout the fall. Look for bucks exhibiting dominant behavior on trail cams and in the field, as these deer are highly susceptible to calling.



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POWER MOVES

KEVIN VANDAM HAS BUILT HIS CAREER ON POWER-FISHING TACTICS. HERE ARE THREE OF HIS FAVORITES FOR FALL IN THE MIDWEST.

By Mike Pehanich



Fishing quickly with power tactics allows Kevin VanDam to cover more water in the fall. When he gets bit, he often focuses his pattern more narrowly to drill down on bass.



It's hard to slow professional bass angler Kevin VanDam down, even when autumn temperatures slow nature's rhythms. VanDam's ability to work large expanses of water quickly, find bass and dial in the pattern for the day has framed his legacy, and the whole concept of "power fishing" is exemplified in his aggressive, find-'em-fast approach.

Fall is the Michigan native's favorite time to fish waters in his home state. Wherever he fishes, though, finding bass is always the first order of business. After assessing seasonal patterns and the current weather and water conditions, he identifies high-percentage target areas—contours, irregularities and other key structural elements—on high-definition Humminbird LakeMaster maps.

Then he hunts for the missing link. In the fall, this predominantly means bait. On reservoirs in the South, he keys on shad or whatever the main baitfish species is. On some of his favorite northern Michigan lakes, on the other hand, it might be perch, emerald shiners or gobies—not to mention crawfish, which fat smallmouths love. In general, he says, once you find the bait, you'll find the bass.

KVD fine-tunes both his senses and his electronics for forage cues. On the electronics side, he uses the Mega 360 Imaging on his Humminbird to find structure and deep vegetation that he couldn't otherwise see. With his eyes, meanwhile, he searches for weed clumps, sand edges or drop-offs that he can see without electronics.

Once he's narrowed down where to fish, VanDam decides which power-fishing tactic he'll employ. In particular, he has adapted three popular techniques to best fit his trademark approach.

POWER-SHOT

Most anglers are at least somewhat familiar with the drop-shot rig. It's a potent finesse tactic, particularly for fish in clear, deep water (though it works well in many scenarios). However, KVD has his own twist on this presentation, one that turns this prototypical finesse rig into a deadly power-fishing tool.

"A drop-shot is something I have tied on all the time wherever I go, because it is so efficient," VanDam says. "But I've adapted it to my style. 'Power-shotting' is what I call it, and it fits very nicely into the way I fish. It's faster than fishing a tube or a Ned rig."



Unlike traditional drop-shot techniques, VanDam's power-shotting process involves an aggressive, stop-and-go retrieve.

RIG UP RIGHT

KVD's gear recommendations for three power-fishing tactics

It should come as no surprise that Kevin VanDam prefers rods, reels and line that either carry his moniker or are made by one of his sponsors, but any tackle that shares the specs and features of the gear below will do the trick.

POWER-SHOT

Rod: Lew's KVD Series Dropshot/Ned Rig (LKVDGS2); 7'; medium-light power; extra-fast action (\$99.99; lews.com)

Reel: Lew's KVD Signature 3000-Series Spinning Reel (\$79.99)

Line: Strike King Tour Grade Braid with a 20-foot fluorocarbon leader; 8-pound test for both

KVD Says: "Tie that leader to the braid with an FG knot, and you are good to go."

JERKBAIT

Rod: Lew's KVD Jerkbait Rods (LKVDGC2); 6'8" and 6'10"; medium-heavy power; fast action (\$99.99)

Reel: Lew's KVD LFS Series 7.5:1 Baitcasting Reel (\$139.99)

Line: Bass Pro Shops XPS 100% Fluorocarbon; 10- to 20-pound test depending on conditions

KVD Says: "I want a rod that maximizes the action and a handle that is not so long that it hits you in the stomach when you are working the bait. The reel just picks up the slack line, so a high-speed reel really helps."

BLADED JIG

Rod: Lew's KVD Open Water Bladed Jig/KVD 2.5 (LKVDCC5); 7'1" and 7'4"; heavy power; moderate action (\$99.99)

Reel: Lew's KVD LFS Series 7.5:1 Baitcasting Reel (\$139.99)

Line: Bass Pro Shops XPS 100% Fluorocarbon; 20-pound test

KVD Says: "A composite rod is important to fish a bladed jig effectively. I use the [7-foot-1-inch] rod for accuracy and the [7-foot-4-inch] rod to make long casts in open water."

He calls it "a presentation for all scenarios" and lauds its versatility and inherent advantages. With its heavy weight, it gets the bait to the bottom quickly whether he is fishing two feet of water or 40. It also puts a wide range of soft plastics in play, imparts outstanding action with the weight positioned below and is difficult for a hooked fish to throw.

"You can cover water shallow to deep—and fast," VanDam says. "But you still can make a very subtle 'finesse' presentation with it, too."

Favored power-shot baits include the Strike King Z-Too and Baby Z-Too and the Strike King Dream Shot and Fat Baby Finesse Worm. He opts for a Mustad Grip-Pin Edge Hook for Texas-rigged baits. Regarding bait selection, VanDam says he's always trying to determine the mood of the fish and then offer up something natural, but with a really enticing action that can also generate reaction strikes.

With this tactic, long casts to a grass edge or a drop-off are the norm. VanDam

allows the bait to fall vertically but then tightens his line to add tension the last stretch of the fall.

"When it gets to the bottom, I'll work it a little bit, shake it three or four times, then reel it in. Work it a little bit, pick it up, do it again," he explains. "I am trying to cover water. Every 40 feet or so along this drop, my bait is hitting bottom. If I know fish are there, I'll be more thorough, work the bait a little more, try to get finicky fish to bite."

His drop-shot weights vary from 1/8 to 1/2 ounce depending on conditions. His advice is to use a weight just heavy enough to maintain good bottom contact.

JERKBAIT

At the heart of most jerkbait discussions is the retrieve, and VanDam's propensity for erratically working a jerkbait is pretty much common knowledge among bass fans. The pro angler likes to start with hard, almost violent downward snaps of the rod.



VanDam violently works his jerkbaits in the fall—always starting and finishing with slack in the line. He also selects jerkbaits that stay above where fish are holding.

"Fishing cold water in the spring for pre-spawn largemouths, I deliver a subtle jerk. But fall smallmouths want a real aggressive presentation," he says. "The bait needs to jump around and be real erratic."

He varies his cadence, mixing single thrusts with pairs and triples, until fish demonstrate a preference. He starts and finishes each jerk with slack in the line, a practice he underscores emphatically.

"Point the rod at the bait with some slack, snap it and point the rod right back at the bait," he says. "That makes the bait jump quickly, but not too far."

Jerkbaits shine in the upper Midwest's deep, clear smallmouth waters. VanDam says the way the lure angles off and darts erratically does a great job of attracting fish from a distance in these water bodies.

The pro has designed three sizes of lures for Strike King's KVD Jerkbait line. The two-trebled 200 Series works to 3- or 4-foot depths. The three-hooked 300 Series dives to 6-foot depths and works



Photographer: Austin Hilgenberg

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well over deeper submerged vegetation. The latest addition, the KVD Deep Jerkbait, extends reach to 12-foot depths.

“The critical point is to pick a bait that stays over the top of the fish in the depth zone you are fishing,” VanDam says.

Clear water calls for long casts and natural colors that match the hue and patterns of the perch, smelt, shad, emerald shiners or other forage bass may be keying on. In off-color water, he turns to baits with bright colors like chartreuse—say a Sexy Shad or a bait with added flash.

“If my graph shows baitfish off the bottom, the jerkbait is going to be really effective,” VanDam adds. “If they are up on the flats, it still will be an efficient bait. The biggest thing I look for is water clear enough at the depth zone where the fish can see it.”

BLADED JIG

New designs and heavier baits have expanded the range of the popular bladed jig’s effectiveness. Today, the bladed jig is one of VanDam’s favorite fall baits.

“Before, the bladed jig was something I would throw in shallower water,

especially around vegetation,” he says, reaching for a hefty version of the Strike King Thunder Cricket Vibrating Jig. “But I can throw this 3/4-ounce bait a little deeper. Bass are attracted to the vibration it gives off and the flash. And this heavier size gets down.”

The larger 5/8- and 3/4-ounce Thunder Crickets become primary “power” tools in fall when baitfish hover over deeper structure. VanDam especially likes fishing bladed jigs in the center of the water column, as the vibration has a lot of drawing power that attracts and catches quite a few fish. His primary trailer for the Thunder Cricket is a 3 1/4-inch Strike King Rage Swimmer. He selects his jig and trailer components to match favored forage.

“This is one of my favorites,” he says, holding up a colorful bluegill pattern by the blade. “It looks like a perch or a bluegill, or even a crawfish. I can cast and let it sink, then crawl it just above bottom—slow-roll it. It just has a great feel.”

Just as the vibrating jig performs well in shallow vegetation, so too will it produce results in deeper cover. For

deep grass, VanDam recommends getting the bait down into the weeds and ripping it out. Shake it and twitch it. He adds that oftentimes these baits—and particularly the Thunder Cricket—will bring in larger-than-average-sized fish, which is never a bad thing.

CONTACT CLUES

Power-fishing techniques enable VanDam to filter water, find fish and home in on productive patterns quickly. If he gets a few bites while covering water with these tactics, he’ll often go back with a tube or slow down his drop-shot presentation to get a few more fish.

“When you do get a bite with any of these techniques—and this is pattern fishing 101—you need to analyze everything about what happened,” VanDam says. “Consider the area. Think about how the fish bit. Did it bite on the fall or when you stopped your bait? Did it bite on the sunny side or the shady side of the bush? How deep was my bait when it bit? Every clue you get when you come in contact with a bass is going to help you develop a more narrowly focused pattern.” 

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MINING GEMS

MICHIGAN'S GROUSE ENHANCED MANAGEMENT SITES
OFFER A TREASURE TROVE OF RUFFED GROUSE AND WOODCOCK HUNTING ON PUBLIC LAND.

By Mike Gnatkowski



Some excellent grouse and woodcock hunting can be found in Upper Peninsula GEMS near the Wisconsin border.

It was mid-October, and my friend Andy Duffy and I were attempting a combination grouse hunt and color tour of Michigan's central and eastern Upper Peninsula. Unfortunately for us, the weather was not cooperating and our trip was turning into a bust. It had rained for two straight days and a third now seemed imminent. Instead of knocking down grouse for my Lab, Samson, to retrieve, we'd joined a parade of sodden sightseers to view the U.P.'s breathtaking waterfalls and the drenched fall foliage. Not a horrible way to pass the time, but it wasn't exactly what we were looking for either.

Over two days, we'd found a few coverts that looked promising, but hunting them seemed a dismal prospect with the torrential downpours we'd faced. At some point, Andy mentioned trying one of the nearby Grouse Enhanced Management Sites, or GEMS, instead. In Michigan, GEMS are large tracts of public land that the department of natural resources (DNR) manages specifically for improved ruffed grouse and woodcock hunting, and which feature walk-in hunting access trails. These areas offer

hunters hundreds or thousands of acres and contain lots of young forests, which provide upland game with habitat and food sources. Andy and I happened to be near the 5,000-acre Bill Rollo Memorial GEMS, so we turned our Jeep west on M-28 and headed toward Gwinn.

Upon arrival, we split up to hunt different sections, with a plan to meet back at the vehicle in an hour and a half. Grouse love edges, and the section I decided to walk had an obvious edge with a dense, dark spruce/fir forest on the right and a clearcut on the left. I took the access trail down a ways, then dove in to work the clearcut back to where I started. Samson worked into the forest a bit, and I took the trail along the tree line's edge, following the sounds of the bell on my dog's neck.

Suddenly, the sun peeked through the clouds and a shaft of light pierced through the trees, falling on a spruce log just inside the forest's edge. My eyes followed and landed, jarringly, on what looked like a puffed-out grouse resting atop the log.

After two days of hunting without seeing a bird, however, I did a double take. I thought my grouse-starved brain was tricking me. But then, just as I re-

alized the bird was real, we made eye contact. The perfectly camouflaged gray-phase ruff flushed up through the conifer canopy as I shouldered and swung my Ruger Red Label. As fast as I had spotted it, the bird disappeared into the vast forest, a ghost once more. That's how grouse hunting goes sometimes.

RUFF DIAMONDS

Since its debut in 2014, Michigan's GEMS initiative has created an extensive network of public lands for grouse and grouse hunters. Overall, GEMS account for almost 70,000 acres of public land and contain more than 160 miles of hunter access trails across the northern Lower and the Upper peninsulas. GEMS program lands range in size from 890 to 11,000 acres, with only four out of 19 total properties occupying fewer than 2,000 acres. No matter which one you hit, that's a lot of ground—and a lot of grouse and woodcock habitat—to cover.

Glen Blackwood, the Ruffed Grouse Society's director of regional development for Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, touts the GEMS especially for the easy access they afford young hunters and older shooters who just can't bust the

brush anymore. However, these destinations are just as worthwhile for other grouse hunters, too.

The DNR's habitat manipulation on GEMS ensures hunters of all ages and experience levels find ideal grouse cover and habitat. Efforts focus mainly on planned timber harvests, which create the young forest habitat that grouse love. At seven years in, the GEMS program is still in its infancy, but ideally a quarter of the acreage would be cut every 10 years to facilitate the different stages of natural succession in which grouse thrive.

In addition to second-growth aspen, grouse also need openings where they can forage for insects, seeds and the succulent fruits of briars. Trails the DNR cuts through GEMS provide this—areas where grouse can find clover and other desirable forage. They also make it easier for older hunters—and older dogs—with mobility issues to hunt.

Some grouse hunters might shy away from GEMS because they are well known and offer easy public access. This is a mistake. GEMS are sizeable tracts of land with ample options for those willing to leave the beaten path behind. Avoid well-worn trails and access points near a GEMS navigation kiosk and you might be surprised with what you find.

Plot circuitous routes into the far corners of these areas with mapping tools like Google Earth and onX, and you'll likely be rewarded. Also, look to new clear-cuts adjacent to or close to GEMS. The newer cuts can be especially productive for woodcock before they're ideal for grouse. As GEMS create strongholds for grouse, birds will disperse during the fall shuffle to repopulate surrounding suitable niches. For this reason, consider hunting nearby properties if access is available or can be obtained. Many GEMS share land with or abut county, state or national forest lands, so often this is not a problem.

GO-TO GROUSE SPOTS

Michigan's GEMS fall all over the Upper Peninsula, and a handful are scattered across the northern Lower Peninsula north of U.S. Highway 10. The MDNR web site has a full list, directions, detailed maps and other information. However, because GEMS are dispersed across a pretty wide area, when planning hunts it may make sense to break things down geographically.

Lower Tahquamenon Falls is one of the most visited waterfalls in the state of Michigan. Consider taking some time off from hunting to see this and other sights.



POINTS OF INTEREST

What to see, where to stay and what to eat

SIGHTS

Fall is great for viewing Michigan's beautifully colored foliage and stunning waterfalls. Some of the state's best grouse hunting even coincides with the peak of fall colors. The Upper Peninsula's waterfalls, which range from famous venues like Tahquamenon Falls to smaller, lesser-known ones requiring hikes, are equally impressive. Planned right, you can do a color tour, view scenic waterfalls and hunt some of Michigan's most productive GEMS all in one trip.

One way to do so is by pulling a four-wheel-drive vehicle behind a motor home or towing a camper. Most GEMS have decent access roads and offer nearby campgrounds. The motor home or camper can be a base of operations, while the vehicle can be used to discover coverts off the beaten track.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Do you prefer a hot tub and fine bourbon after your hunt? Or, are you just looking for a place to rest? The U.P. and northern L.P. offer both in spades.

The Fox River Motel (foxrivermotel.com) in **Seney** was our base camp. With its central location, we could strike out to GEMS in any direction.

The town of **Newberry** (newberrychamber.net) is a great spot for exploring eastern U.P. GEMS. There are plenty of decent motels, and the ribs at **Timber Charlie's** (timbercharlies.com) are excellent.

Marquette (travelmarquette.com) is another great, centrally located option with upscale lodging, rustic cabins and fine or family dining. It's also close to popular tourist destinations and GEMS.

The western U.P. is a grouse and woodcock hotbed, and a stay at **Timbers Resort** (thetimbersresort.com) in **Bergland** puts you close to the best hunting.

Lower Peninsula hunters should try **Grayling** or **Cadillac**. Both are close to GEMS in the northern L.P. When in Grayling (grayling-mi.com), visit **Hartwick Pines State Park** to see one of Michigan's last remaining stands of majestic old-growth pine forest. In Cadillac (cadillacmichigan.com), stop by the **Carl T. Johnson Hunting and Fishing Center** (231-779-1321) for insights into Michigan's rich hunting heritage.

MIKE GNATKOWSKI



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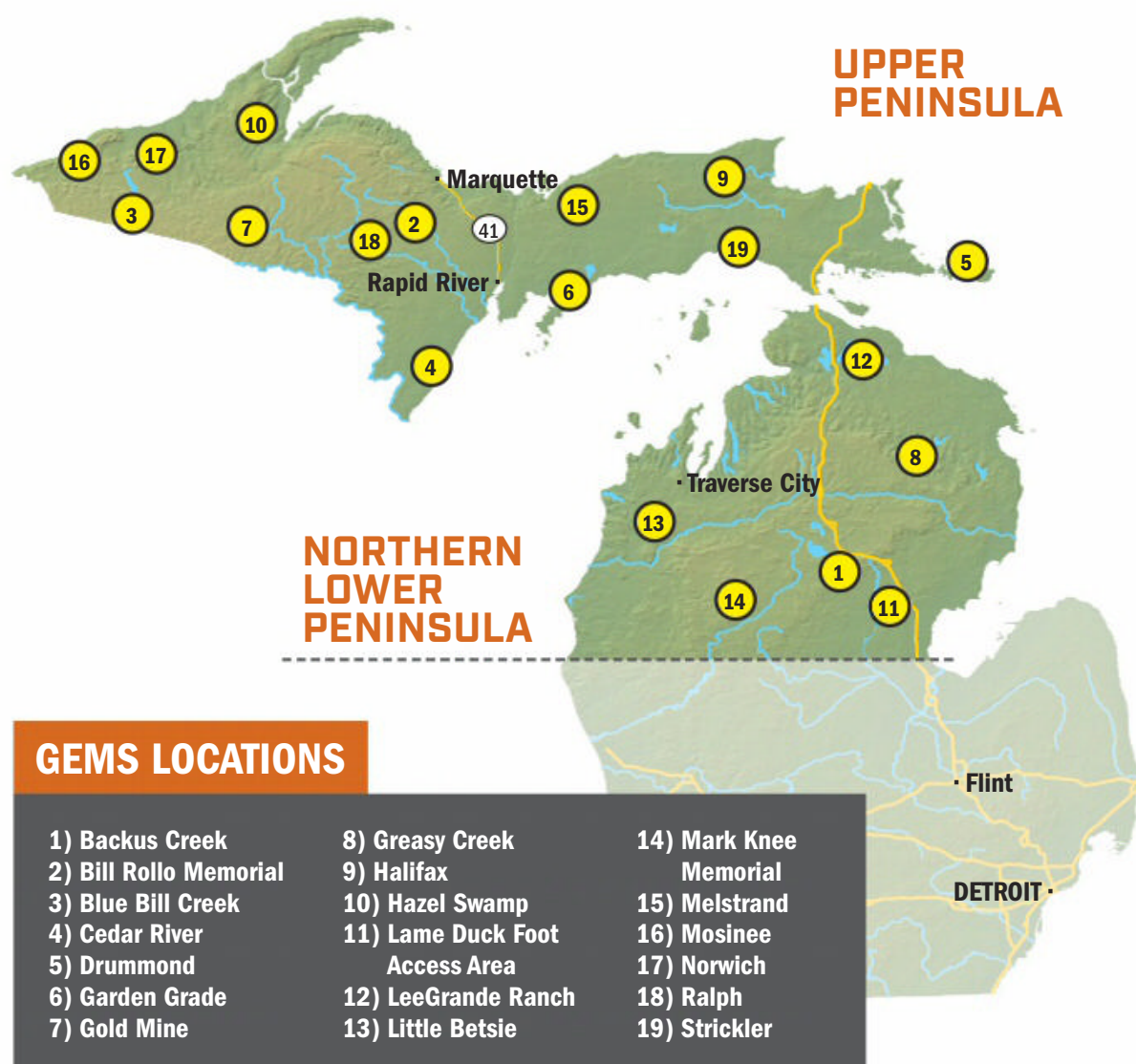
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NORTHERN LOWER PENINSULA

GEMS in the northern Lower Peninsula offer 27,070 total acres to explore. This includes the largest property in the GEMS program, the sprawling 11,000-acre Lame Duck Foot Access Area, 3 miles southwest of Alger. With thousands of acres of aspens and planted wildlife openings spanning parts of two counties, this area offers plenty of chances to go off-trail in search of grouse. Roughly 40 miles northwest lies the 4,380-acre Backus Creek GEMS area, nearly 60 percent of which is actively managed aspen and offers lowland conifer and tag alder for year-round cover. Other GEMS include Greasy Creek, Lee Grande Ranch, Little Betsie and Mark Knee Memorial.

UPPER PENINSULA

The U.P. is home to the remaining 13 areas and 61 percent of the GEMS program land. It also boasts a fairly active timber industry and conservation-based cutting, which means there's a lot of young forest habitat present and developing across the region. And finding new clear-cuts near any GEMS area could mean exceptional hunting.

Western U.P.

If you arbitrarily bisect the Upper Peninsula along the line of U.S. Highway 41 from Marquette in the north to Rapid River in the south, there are eight different GEMS to the west. This includes the aforementioned Bill Rollo Memorial GEMS, as well as the similarly sized, 5,350-acre Ralph GEMS some 30 miles to the southwest. Other GEMS, like Mosinee, Blue Bill Creek, Norwich, Hazel Swamp, Gold Mine and Cedar River, offer great hunting as well.

Eastern U.P.

There are five GEMS east of highway 41, with most between 2,000 and 3,000 acres in size. The exception is 7,000-acre Garden Grade, the second-largest property in the GEMS program. Garden Grade has a heavy aspen presence and an impressive 12 miles of trails, though getting off-trail is certainly a recommended strategy. For a truly unique experience, consider the 2,800-acre Drummond GEMS, which requires a ferry ride over to Drummond Island. Other eastern U.P. GEMS include Melstrand, Strickler and Halifax.

GET EXPLORING

While my time on Bill Rollo Memorial GEMS started inauspiciously with a missed bird, things improved a little. In about an hour of walking, Samson and I moved several woodcock, one of which I sent cartwheeling into the undergrowth on a crossing shot. Unfortunately, our temporary good fortune did not hold. Almost as soon as we linked up with Andy back at the vehicle, it started to pour again. The pounding rain cut our GEMS experience short and dashed our hunting hopes once more.

Still, the trip wasn't a total loss. In a short amount of time, I had moved some birds, made a good shot on one, and watched my Lab get a decent retrieve—all without venturing much off the trail. There's no telling how many more grouse and woodcock I could've found on Billo Rollo's vast terrain. And certainly, the GEMS program's remaining 60,000-plus acres offer countless more. Although I was disappointed with the weather, in the end I was also excited at the possibility of exploring more of Michigan's expansive GEMS. **G+**

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FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX

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

By Drew Warden

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

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

DREW WARDEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX SPECIFICATIONS

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

Length of Pull: 14 1/4"
Drop at Heel: 2"
Drop at Comb: 1 1/2"
Overall Length: 46 1/4"
Weight: 5.8 lbs.
Accessories: 5 extended Mobil choke tubes (C, IC, M, IM, F); fitted hard case
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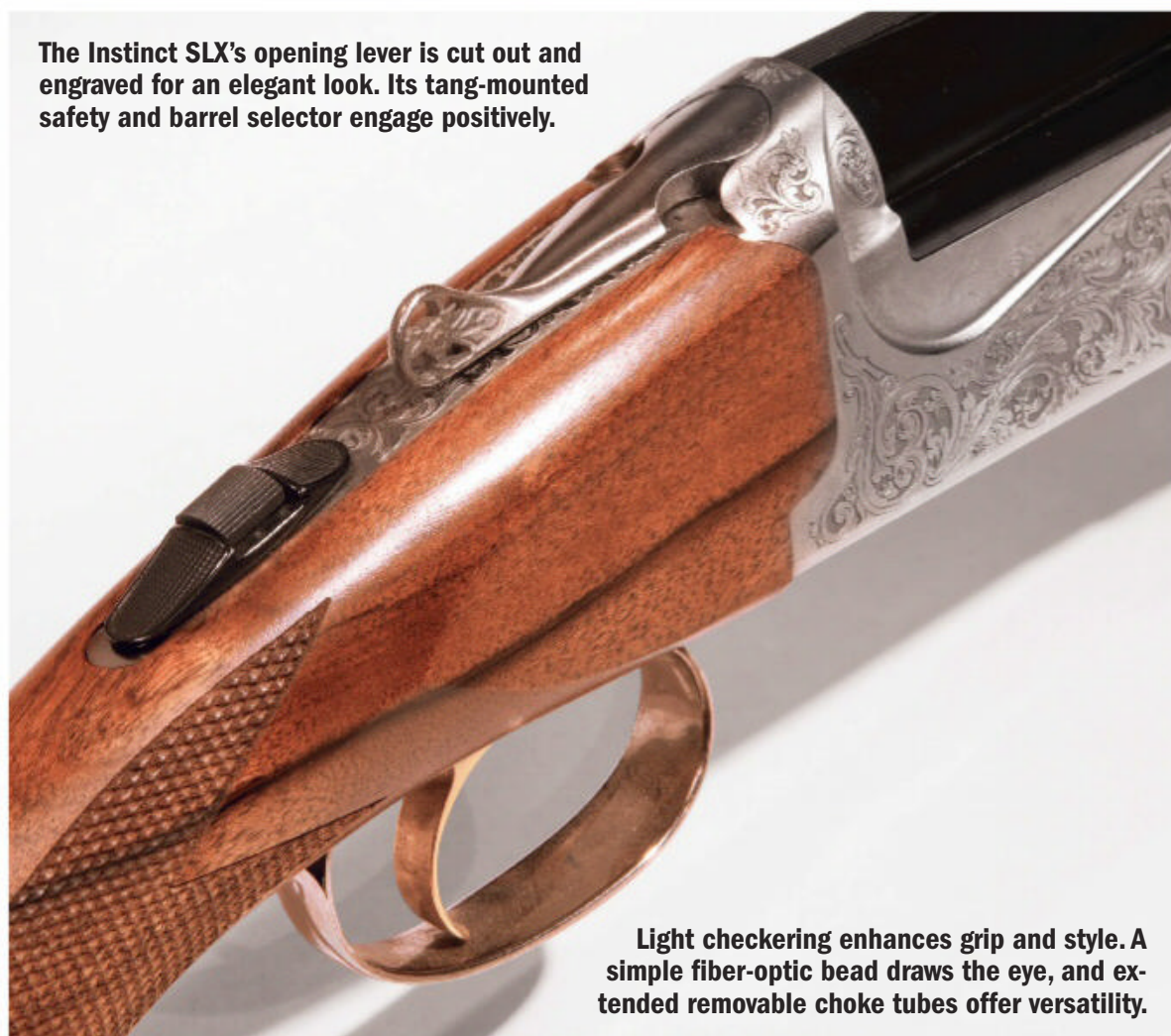
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The Instinct SLX's opening lever is cut out and engraved for an elegant look. Its tang-mounted safety and barrel selector engage positively.



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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V167

OPTICS THAT UP THE ODDS



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

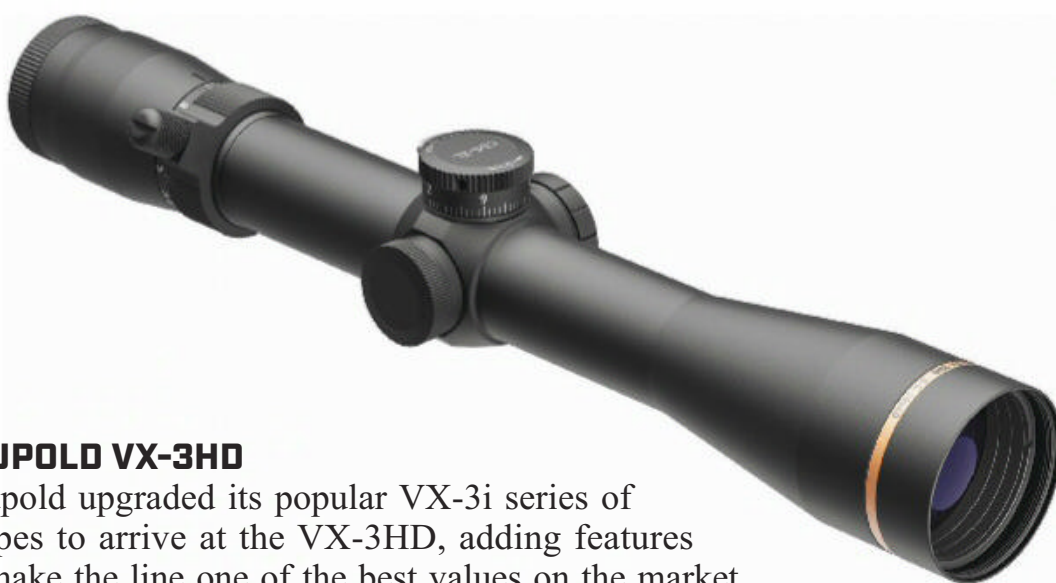
NEW TECHNOLOGY IN THE LATEST RIFLESCOPES AND BINOCULARS HELPS HUNTERS FILL TAGS.

By Game & Fish Staff

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

LEUPOLD VX-3HD

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



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LEICA AMPLUS 6

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



BUSHNELL RIMFIRE

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



TRIJICON CREDO HX

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





The Biggest Event In Silver Dollar History!

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

The Most Important Coins in the Modern Era

When President Ronald Reagan signed the Liberty Coin Act into law, he didn't know American Eagles would have the impact they've had, year after year. The coins were so popular that between 1986 and 2020, over 535 million were struck. That's more than HALF A BILLION coins, easily making Silver Eagles the most bought coins in the world. Hugely popular now, Silver Eagles may soon become even more popular!

Collectors Crave Firsts

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

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

If You Knew Then What You Know Now...

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

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

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5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13 #DEER WEEK	14 #DEER WEEK	15 #DEER WEEK	16 #DEER WEEK	17 #DEER WEEK	18 #DEER WEEK
19 #DEER WEEK	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

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ZEISS VICTORY SF 32

Hunters looking for a more compact, lighter-weight bino will find it in the Victory SF 32. The real surprise, though, is that Zeiss has optimized the field of view in both the 8x32 mm and 10x32 mm versions so that it includes up to 20 percent more observable area in comparison to similar models. The field of view for the 8x32 mm Victory SF is 465 feet at 1,000 yards, for example. Lenses are Schott fluoride glass with Zeiss T* coatings, a combination that produces 90 percent light transmission and high-contrast images. The SmartFocus wheel is positioned for easy and comfortable operation within the bino's triple-link bridge, and it requires just 1.6 revolutions to move through the entire focus range. Zeiss also redistributed the weight of the Victory SF 32, shifting it rearward so that the bino doesn't feel front heavy. MSRP: \$2,249.99 (8x32 mm), \$2,299.99 (10x32 mm); zeiss.com



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THE PASS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The truck hadn't fully stopped before Uncle Ron

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Huh?" said Shane.

"Is anyone starving here?" asked his father.

"No sir," said Shane.

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

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

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



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