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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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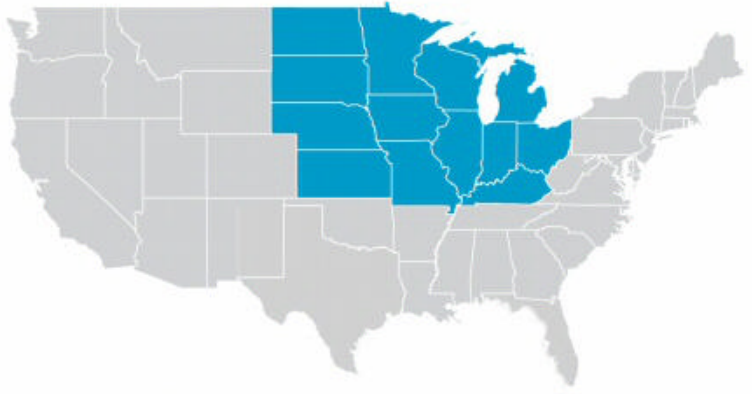
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GAME & FISH

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MIDWEST



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CONTENTS
DEC./JAN. 2022



52

HOW-TO

40 ADAPT AND THRIVE

Adjust your coyote sets to the conditions at hand to boost success.

By Mark Kayser

52 ARTIFICIAL ATTRACTION

Can soft plastics imitating small insect larvae beat the real thing for panfish beneath the ice?

By Mike Pehanich



40

46 HOUSE HUNTING

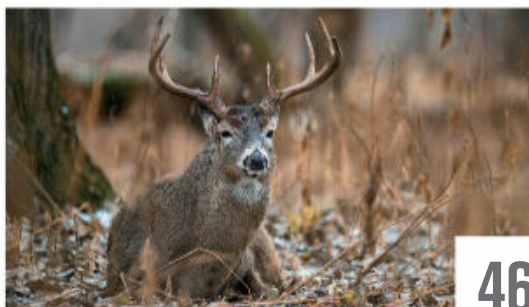
Find key solar and thermal bedding areas to plot an ambush for a late-season buck.

By Josh Honeycutt

58 TROUT ON ICE

Get in on an overlooked hardwater bite this winter: inland trout.

By Dr. Jason Halfen



46

34 AROUND THE MIDWEST

'Tis the season for ducks, bucks, walleyes, crappies and more.

By Brandon Butler

FIELD SKILLS

36 GOOSE GO-TOS

Try these three classic decoy setups for late-season honkers.

By Brian Lovett

DESTINATIONS

62 WINTER WONDERLANDS

Fish Lake of the Woods, the Apostle Islands and other top ice bites throughout the region.

By Scott Mackenthun

FEATURES

20 DIXIELAND DELIGHT

Deer seasons are generous across the Deep South. Add Southern hospitality and cooking, and deer camp in Dixie is something hunters from all regions will savor.

By Craig Boddington

66 CALL OF THE COAST

Floating in the Atlantic and waiting for sea ducks spurs deep reflections on our nation's history, because the layout boat is surrounded by it.

By Alan Clemons



20

GEAR

72 RANGE REPORT

The Ruger Hawkeye Predator is well-equipped for stealthy setups.

By Richard Mann

76 FIELD TEST

Leupold's VX-3HD riflescope line offers value and practical features.

By Adam Heggenstaller

78 FIELD TEST

Federal Premium HammerDown loads boost lever-gun performance.

By Adam Heggenstaller



78

DEPARTMENTS

10 SHOOTING

Two recent 6 mm rifle cartridges build on the dual-purpose versatility of their predecessors.

By Richard Mann

14 BOWHUNTING

Examining this season's trends can teach us some things about strategy, gear and attitude.

By Tony Hansen



14

18 CONSERVATION

Your opinion not only counts, but also is vital, in effectively managing game and fish populations.

By Andrew McKean

IN EVERY ISSUE

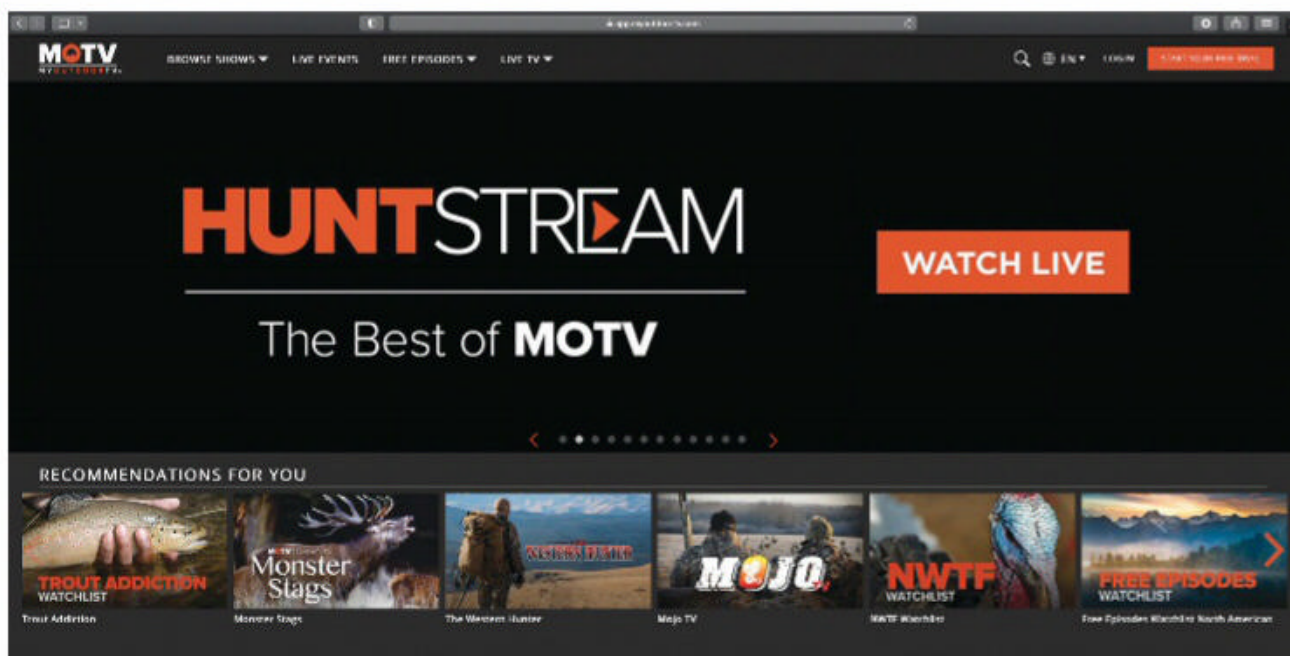
04 EDITOR'S LETTER

08 MOON TIMES

80 RITES



66



OUTDOOR PROGRAMMING AT A DISCOUNT



We're all looking forward to a little downtime around the holidays, but it's a shame to fill it with cheesy movie marathons. If you're not able to get into the field or on the water, tap into adventure by accessing top hunting and fishing content through MOTV. The video-on-demand service caters to the outdoor lifestyle, and it's available through mobile phones and tablets, desktops and laptops using an Internet browser, smart TVs and other devices.

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Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

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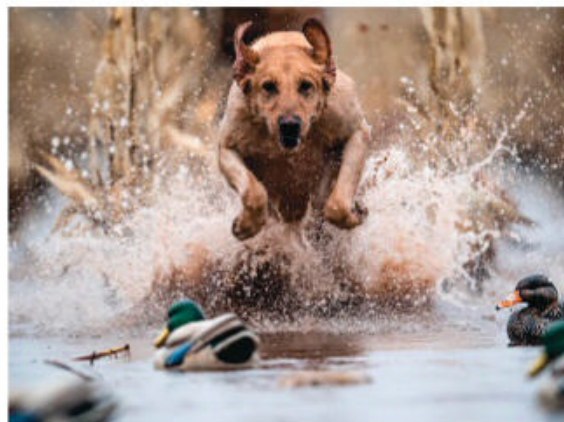
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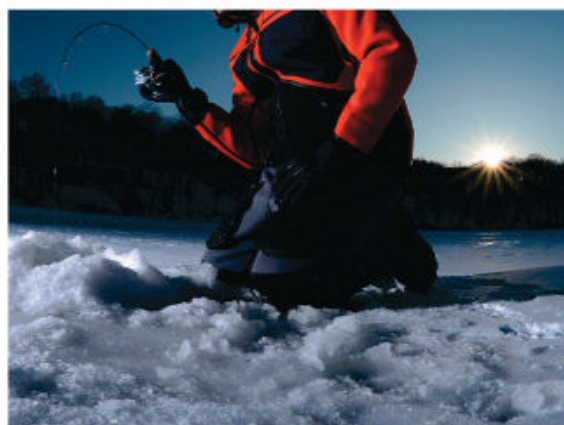
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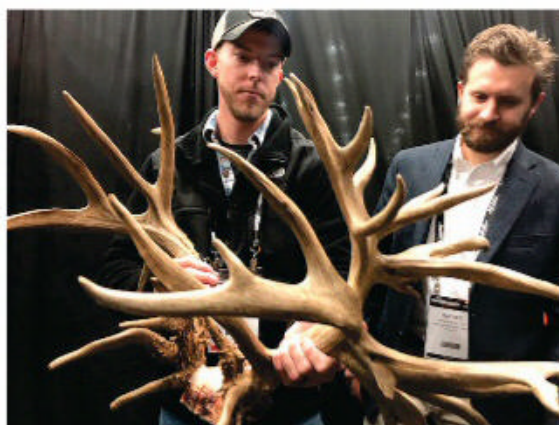
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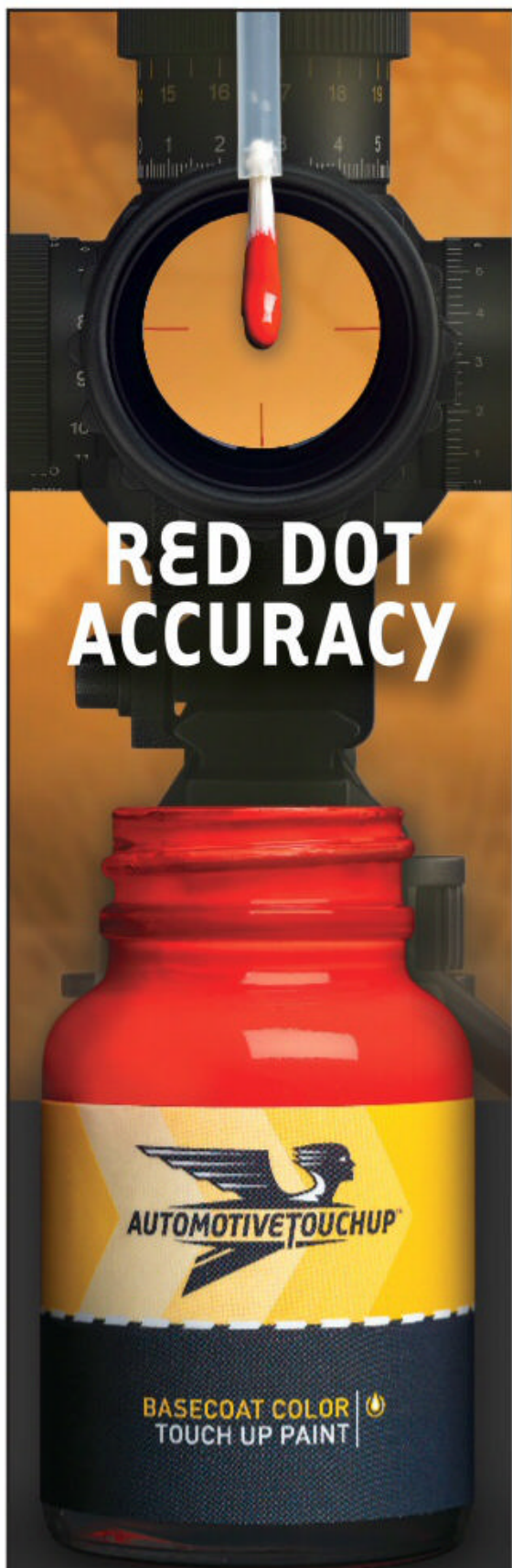
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SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	2 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	3 am 10:18 to 12:18 pm 10:42 to 12:42	4 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06
5 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	NEW 6 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	7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

JANUARY 2022

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

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.

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THE 6 MM STORY

DUAL-PURPOSE VERSATILITY

MAKES 6 MM RIFLE
CARTRIDGES,
BOTH OLD AND NEW,
WORTHY IN THE FIELD.

By Richard Mann

Although .30-caliber cartridges are perennial favorites and 6.5 mm rounds now get a lot of attention, cartridges that fire 6 mm bullets are ideal for many American hunters. They offer low recoil and flat trajectories for varmint and predator hunting, and they have enough punch for deer-sized game. This dual suitability has been a defining characteristic of 6 mm rifle cartridges, and they can even be effective on larger game if partitioned, bonded or monometal bullets are used. (In 2014 my wife used a .243 Win. to take a gemsbok and wildebeest in Africa with one well-placed shot each.) Let's look at the progress of 6 mm rifle cartridges, which continues today for good reason.

In 1955 Remington introduced the .244 Rem. cartridge. It was based on the .257 Roberts, which was a .25-caliber cartridge derived from the 7x57 mm Mauser. The .244 Rem. utilized a bullet with a diameter of .243 inch, which equates to 6.172 mm, and had a land-to-land bore diameter of .237 inch. Suitable for varmints with lightweight 75-grain bullets and deer-sized game with 90-grain bullets, the .244 Rem. would become

one of the first commercially successful 6 mm cartridges in America.

But Remington made a mistake with the .244. Originally, the company specified a rifling twist rate of one turn in 12 inches. This limited the cartridge's ability to stabilize longer, heavier bullets. In 1963 Remington renamed the .244 Rem. the 6 mm Rem. and introduced it in the new Model 700 bolt-action rifle with a 1-in-9-inch twist rate. However, it was too late. Also in 1955, Winchester had introduced the ballistically similar .243 Win. It was based on the .308 Win. case and used the same diameter bullet as the .244 Rem. But Winchester was smarter with its introduction; the company chose a 1-in-10 twist rate that would stabilize heavier bullets.

The .243 Win. quickly became a favorite of hunters who wanted one rifle they could use for groundhogs, rock chucks, coyotes, and deer- or pronghorn-sized big game. It became known as a both-ways (varmint/big-game) cartridge. Shortly after its introduction, the .243 Win. earned a spot in the top 10 best-selling rifle cartridges and has remained there ever since. The first deer rifle my father ever purchased was a .243 Win.,

and I watched him use it with great success on groundhogs and deer for more than 40 years.

Weatherby recognized the popularity of the .243 and in 1968 introduced the .240 Wby. Mag. It was the last cartridge designed by Roy Weatherby and could push a 60-grain bullet to 3,800 fps and a 100-grain bullet to 3,300 fps. It had a velocity advantage over the 6 mm Rem. and the .243 Win., and it filled the same niche. The .240 Wby. Mag. is still with us—Weatherby offers factory ammo and rifles for it—but like many Weatherby cartridges, it never achieved mass appeal.

In 2003 Winchester introduced another 6 mm called the .243 WSSM (Winchester Super Short Magnum). It had a shorter overall length than any previous 6 mm—the same as the .223 Rem.—but was much fatter. The base of the .243 WSSM cartridge measured .555 inch in diameter as compared to .471 inch for the .243 Win. Essentially a ballistic twin to the .243 Win., it enjoyed an initial flurry of fanfare and storm of popularity. However, the .243 WSSM faded away just as quickly as it arrived. It could not dethrone Winchester's older 6 mm.



The metric equivalent of .243 inch is 6.172 mm, but Remington rounded down when in 1963 it named the 6 mm Rem. cartridge.



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6 MM EXTERNAL BALLISTICS

CARTRIDGE	BULLET WEIGHT	BALLISTIC COEFFICIENT	MUZZLE VELOCITY	300-YARD VELOCITY	300-YARD DROP	600-YARD VELOCITY	600-YARD DROP
6 mm Rem.	95	.355	3,235	2,445	-9.81	1,782	-72.37
.243 Win.	90	.409	3,150	2,469	-10.08	1,883	-71.38
.240 Wby. Mag.	90	.376	3,320	2,557	-8.50	1,910	-65.76
.243 WSSM	95	.379	3,150	2,419	-10.30	1,779	-74.29
6 mm Creedmoor	103	.512	3,050	2,510	-10.34	2,090	-69.70
6 mm ARC	103	.512	2,800	2,288	-12.93	1,833	-85.27

Data represents the flattest-shooting big-game factory loads for each cartridge, using factory-advertised velocities and ballistic coefficients. Data was calculated at sea level with a temperature of 59 degrees, barometric pressure of 29.92 inHg and 50 percent relative humidity. Bullet weight measured in grains. Velocities measured in fps. Bullet drops based on a 100-yard zero.



The defining traits of the 6 mm ARC are its ability to function in the AR-15 and its use of bullets with high ballistic coefficients.

Though it had been a wildcat cartridge since 2009, Hornady legitimized the 6 mm Creedmoor in 2017. It's essentially a 6.5 Creedmoor necked down to 6 mm. With a specified twist rate of 1 turn in 7.5 inches and a case slightly shorter than the .243 Win., the 6 mm Creedmoor can utilize longer, sleeker bullets and still work in short-action rifles. The 6 mm Creedmoor and .243 Win. are very close

in ballistic performance. However, the 6 mm Creedmoor's compatibility with bullets having high ballistic coefficients allows it to perform better at extreme distances. For shooting game at typical ranges, the 6 mm Creedmoor offers no practical advantage over the .243 Win.

On the other hand, the new 6 mm ARC (Advanced Rifle Cartridge) does. The 6 mm ARC is based on the 6.5 Grendel (which has the 7.62x39 mm as its parent). Because of its shorter overall length, the 6 mm ARC works well in the AR-15 platform—something no previous 6 mm cartridge could do. Like with the 6 mm Creedmoor, the fast 1-in-7.5 twist rate of the 6 mm ARC also permits the use of bullets with high ballistic coefficients. This gives hunters who like the varmint/big-game capability that 6 mm cartridges offer the option to use an AR-15. (The AR-15 platform can be made to work

with the .243 WSSM, but the configuration never became commercially viable.)

If you want to hunt with an AR-15, the 6 mm ARC is the way to go. It might be the best dual-purpose varmint/deer cartridge yet for that platform. If you want to ring steel out past 500 yards, as well as hunt deer and vermin at more sensible distances, the 6 mm Creedmoor will do both jobs admirably. The 6 mm Rem. and .243 WSSM are dead, and the .240 Wby. Mag. never gained a huge following. If you own rifles for any of these, don't fret. They're all excellent; you will just likely struggle to find factory ammo.

The .243 Win. is still the king of 6 mm cartridges. I've effectively used it across the United States and in Africa. It's not the fastest or flattest-shooting 6 mm, and it's not AR compatible. But it has been proven and offers a great balance of everything that makes a 6 mm rifle cartridge worth considering in the first place. 



With 85- to 100-grain bullets, the .243 Win. is an excellent whitetail cartridge. Lighter bullets make it suitable for predators.



More than six decades of cartridge development separate the venerable .243 Win. (left) from the recently introduced 6 mm Creedmoor (center) and 6 mm ARC.

RICHARD MANN (3)

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CONSIDER THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY TO BECOME A BETTER BOWHUNTER.

By Tony Hansen

With another bow season soon to wrap up, it's time to take a look at the season that was ... and the ones that will be. One of the parts I enjoy about bowhunting is the constant evolution of the game. I like to learn and consider myself to be a lifetime learner. I make plenty of mistakes every season and try to learn from them. I'm always interested in new technologies, patterns or tactics that can help me see more deer in the woods. Some of these advancements don't always live up to the hype. Others have turned out to be incredible additions to the hunting experience.

I find it worthwhile to pay attention to trends because I might learn something. There were several that dominated the 2021 season, a few that might continue to have an impact in seasons to come, and one that I hope will die a silent death.

MOBILE HUNTING

The mobile hunting movement continued to roll in 2021, and I don't see much sign of it stopping. This is one trend I'm on

the fence about. While the strategy is solid, its execution takes more care than many hunters realize.

The concept is pretty simple: Carry as little gear as possible and don't hit the woods with a pre-set plan laid in stone. Instead, react to the conditions and the hottest sign. If that means hunting from the ground, so be it. If an elevated position is beneficial, then use a saddle setup to minimize prep time.

Nothing wrong with any of this. In a lot of ways, it's something I've incorporated into my own bowhunting efforts for a long time, albeit without the use of a saddle. I've long favored light, portable stands and never married myself to a particular tree or location. If the deer tell me to move, I move. But I do it carefully, based on observation and known patterns. Mobile hunting shouldn't be random, but it sometimes seems to be done that way.

I don't see this trend going anywhere any time soon. In fact, I think we're likely just on the edge of the boom in gear specific to this approach.

We've already seen a number of new saddle offerings hit the market, and a couple of smaller treestand manufacturers have popped up with uber-light (and uber-pricey) stands designed specifically for the mobile run-and-gun game.

Climbing sticks are getting lighter, smaller and, yes, more expensive as well. We should see more packs designed specifically for mobile hunting setups, more mobile-related accessories and a continued focus on tactics related to this trend.

HEAVIER ARROW SETUPS

This trend has taken center stage over the past couple of seasons, and I've been a fan of it for some time. Heavier arrows fly better. They penetrate better. They tune easier.

Previously, we were somewhat limited on options for creating a heavier hunting arrow. Most arrow shafts were made for speed and thus were lighter. Broadheads were pretty much stagnant at 100-grain models.

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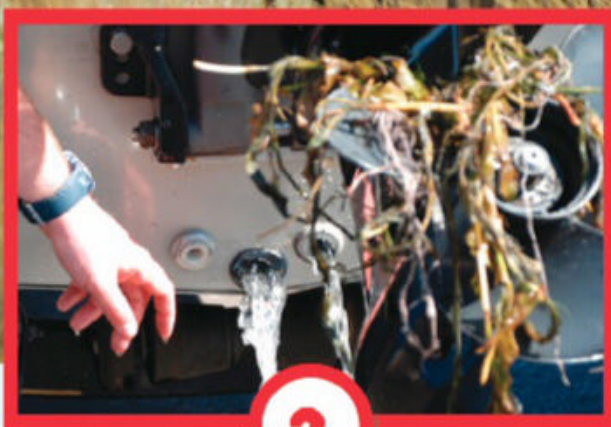
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for heavier overall arrow weight and increased front-of-center configurations. Broadheads are also following suit. We've seen an influx of 125-grain heads hit the market as well as a number of 150-grain-plus options. I expect to see more heavy shafts, and broadheads at or above 125 grains, at the Archery Trade Association show when companies unveil their 2022 lineups.

BETTER BUDGET BOWS

Several bow manufacturers released models starting around 2019 that were friendlier on the wallet. From Bear and Xpedition to Hoyt and Mathews, top-end brands unveiled bows priced several hundred dollars below their flagship models. I hope this is a trend in the making.

I'm fortunate that I don't usually have to buy a bow. One of the perks of my outdoor-media gig is field-testing new bows on loan on an annual basis. But there was a time when I simply couldn't fathom spending more than \$1,000 on a new bow, and that doesn't factor in accessories and arrows. I bet there are far more bowhunters in that position than there are ones who don't blink an eye when dropping a grand on a bow.

With today's technology and systems, clearly a top-quality bow can be built with a lower price tag. Maybe it doesn't have every bell and whistle, but it will still be a great shooter.

SOCIAL-MEDIA SHAMING

I'll wrap this up with one trend that none of us should be proud of. The social-media circus continued this season. Whether it was attacking someone for killing a buck that "looked like" it came from a deer farm or smashing on the parent of an 8-year-old boy who killed a giant buck during youth season, the keyboard cowboys were out in force.

To this I say: Enough. I could go on a rant about how we're all hunters and we're supposed to stick together. But I won't even go there. Instead, I'll go at it on a more basic level, and you don't have to be religious to see the wisdom.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, He didn't mince words. He gave two simple directives: Love God. Love each other. Here's hoping next bow season we all see a bit more of that attitude when checking our social-media feeds. 



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SPEAK UP FOR WILDLIFE

FISH AND GAME MANAGEMENT ONLY WORKS WHEN WE
FULLY PARTICIPATE IN SHAPING REGULATIONS AND SEASONS.

By Andrew McKean

Once threw a party and no one came.

I had reserved a banquet room with seating for 50. I had bought cookies and perked coffee. I had sent out invitations far and wide in my role at the time as information officer for Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks. But besides me and a half-dozen of my colleagues, only two guests came to the party, which was a biennial season-setting meeting for my region of the state, the opportunity for the public to comment on proposed regulations for deer, elk, pheasant and turkey seasons.

One guest mistook my meeting for a book club. The other wanted to know why game wardens had ticketed his son, and few of his comments were useful, or even printable in a family magazine.

WORTHY OF CELEBRATION

SCI International Hunters' Convention lauds 50 years of hunting advocacy.

Meetings of state wildlife agencies aren't the only places to express your thoughts, and hear perspectives from other hunters, regarding game management and hunting regulations. If you're interested in furthering the connection between hunting and wildlife conservation on both a national and global scale, make plans to attend the International Hunters' Convention hosted by Safari Club International (SCI) in Las Vegas, Nev., Jan. 19 to 22.

The convention, which will feature more than 1,000 exhibitors and guest

speakers such as Tucker Carlson and Donald Trump Jr., will celebrate SCI's 50 years of defending the freedom to hunt and supporting wildlife conservation worldwide. The Mandalay Bay Convention Center will host the events, which also include informative seminars as well as special auctions to support hunter advocacy and the SCI Foundation's conservation and education programs. For more information and to register, visit showsci.org.
-Game & Fish Staff

I'm guessing that if you've been hunting and fishing long enough, you've been to at least one of these meetings. They're a chance for biologists to explain fish and wildlife trends, to propose changes to the way fish and game populations are managed, and then to get feedback from the very people who participate in fishing and hunting.

I'm also guessing that you've seen the sort of sparse turnout I described. In fact, it's a national trend. Hunters and anglers have a number of reasons why they don't participate in these meetings, but when state agencies make decisions that the public doesn't support, critics come out of the woodwork. That discontent is actually a good thing, because it's an indication that the public cares about wildlife management and finds ways to make their voices heard. That's the North American model of wildlife conservation in action. Public input into hunting and fishing regulations, season structures, and even what species can be pursued is the very foundation of our citizen-based model.

We agreed a long time ago that our wildlife would be owned by no one and everyone at the same time, and this public resource should be equitably distributed. This is the essence of what's called the "public-trust doctrine," and it's the mechanism that we've used to recover populations of depleted fish and game. It's why we have licenses, bag limits and seasons that we agree are in the best interests of the fish and game.

We asked state wildlife agencies to be the "trustees" of this resource, and to use science—instead of politics or emotion—to guide their management decisions. Hunters and anglers (and also trappers, wildlife watchers and land-owners) are the beneficiaries of this public trust. Wildlife agencies work for us beneficiaries on behalf of America's fish and game.

We are obligated to hold up our end of the bargain: to speak up when asked. Every state agency has some opportunity for public comment. Find it and use it. If you don't speak up, then you can't blame agencies for their decisions. But if you do speak up, then you've cast your vote not only for your opinion and perspective, but for the public resource at the center of the conversation, the fish and game that don't have a voice. 



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BAG LIMITS.

By Craig Boddington

While perhaps overshadowed by the Midwest in terms of trophy-class bucks, the South is home to some exceptional whitetail hunting.

Regardless of how folks below the Mason-Dixon line view me, I'm not a Yankee. I'm from Bloody Kansas, a border state in my great-grandfather's war. Though I was a boy at the time, I clearly remember the headline when the last-known Civil War veteran passed in 1959.

Back then we had almost no deer in Kansas, and no deer season, but in my lifetime the Sunflower State has developed great whitetail hunting. It is not true that Kansas has a Boone and Crockett buck behind every tree, but we have good deer and a lot of bucks. I've always considered Kansas home, and for the last 15 years we've had a farm there.

Kansas rifle season is the only inviolable block on my calendar, but there are some problems. While archery season is

generous, rifle season runs 12 days and starts the Wednesday after Thanksgiving. Plus, Kansas is a one-buck state. As a hunter, I support this rule; it creates good age-class distribution and a high buck-to-doe ratio. As a landowner, I hate it. We cannot remove bucks with poor genetics except by sacrificing that one buck tag.

So, from a time when I had no local deer hunting until today, when our Kansas buck hunting is exceptional but limited, I have always looked to the Deep South, where seasons are long and limits laughable. I hunted Alabama and the South Carolina low country when "one buck per day" or "no limit on bucks" was the regulation. Mind you, I'm talking whitetail deer! I suspect the game departments always knew the odds were in the deer's favor.

LIMITING OUT

I'm not sure where the Deep South really starts, but over 50 years I've hunted in both Carolinas, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi. Hailing from a one-buck state, I love going into a Southern hunt knowing I can take a buck ... and then keep looking.

Usually this doesn't come to fruition. Although the whitetail is the most numerous big-game animal on the planet, it's also the wariest, wiliest and most hunter-educated. I've taken multiple does when meat was wanted or herd reduction needed, but I can recall only a couple times when I've taken more than one buck on a Southern whitetail hunt and numerous times when I never pressed the trigger. Even so, for a kid who grew up with no deer season, it's



Roadways and narrow lanes through the piney woods of the Deep South offer hunters fleeting shot opportunities at deer on the move.



Wide powerline rights-of-way are common features on many Southern whitetail hunting properties. They are perfect places for food plots and offer great visibility.

a wonderful feeling to start a hunt with the world as my oyster. Reality or results don't matter; the potential is awesome.

Years back, I was hunting on buddy Zack Aultman's place in southern Georgia. Zack's only rule is to shoot mature bucks. My first time there, I made a horrible mistake and shot a gorgeous young 11-pointer that needed to grow up. As humans and hunters, we make mistakes, but that was one of the worst.

I didn't expect to be invited back but, surprisingly, I was. Next time, I never saw a decent buck (not uncommon with whitetail hunting) and never shot. Then, during a bitter November cold snap, we caught things just right. During the first day, freezing rain sluiced off the roof of the blind but later slacked to a cold drizzle. I was on the edge of one of those classic, wide Southern powerline rights-of-way, and a buck came out on the far side to tend a scrape.

Oh boy, can't afford another mistake. The deer was a heavy 8-pointer but not "big." Having messed up before, I was scared to death, but I took a deep breath and made the shot. Later we all agreed it was a nice buck, mature and never going to be a monster. Whew, good call!

In the afternoon the temperature plummeted, and my wife Donna and I were both freezing in an elevated stand farther down the powerline. The deer didn't mind the unseasonal cold, and the rut was in full swing. Toward sunset, a parade of bucks chased does back and forth across the 100-yard opening. All were small, young or both, but the activity was as good as it gets. The sun had long set and there were maybe 10 minutes of legal time left when three does came out to the left of the stand and stared into the black timber behind them.

The buck that followed was a fine 10-pointer with tall eyeguards—a good,

solid deer and a no-brainer. The buck crashed off into the pines, but the shot from Donna's .270 looked good. It was full dark by the time we found him, a gorgeous Southern whitetail.

A couple days later, operating on pure instinct with no time to be sure, I shot a second buck crossing a narrow cutline in the Georgia pines. Although sure of the shot, I never found a drop of blood, just deep-cut tracks where I thought the buck had bolted.

He lay 40 yards into the pines, one of few animals in my life that just kept getting bigger the closer I got. I reached for my cell phone, found a bit of signal and tried to call Zack, but my hands were shaking too hard to press the buttons. He was an awesome buck, my best Southern whitetail. Also, since Georgia has a two-buck limit, it was the only time I have limited out on Southern whitetails.



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MAKING PLANS

Throughout the region, deer densities are high and whitetails are the major road hazard. However, the cover is thick and hunting is difficult. Public land can be limited, although there is much forest land open to public hunting in some areas if you dig a bit. Despite generous seasons and limits, cashing in on the full potential is unlikely, especially for an outsider (or Yankee, if you will).

Success depends on your goal as well as on local management. I offer this purely from an outsider's perspective, with no stones thrown toward management goals: When you step across the

line from Alabama (buck-a-day limit for many years) to Georgia (longtime two-buck limit), you quickly encounter a different potential in bucks.

I take this in stride; I like to hunt whitetails and love their venison. I'm always hoping for a monster, but I'm also a realist. I'm happy to follow along with management goals and local standards. At Zack's place, we look for grown-up bucks because we know they are there. Sometimes we see one, sometimes not. Other times, in other places, any buck can be a sensible goal. And, wherever you're hunting whitetails, sometimes you're going to go home empty-handed.

Those long Southern seasons and generous limits are seductive, but whitetail hunting is an insider's game. Local hunters have a huge home-court advantage. If they're your backyard deer, you can watch moon, weather and wind, and track the rut. Few of us are so obsessed that we'll hunt every day of a several-month season; we wait until conditions are right, and then apply a full-court press.

When we're outsiders, though, we can't do that. On any hunt away from home, we have to pick a "good" time. It seems to me this is difficult with Southern whitetails! In my own home court in Kansas, there is no choice; for

While mornings and evenings can be cold, midday temps often rise considerably, making water vital for rutting deer. Scouting ponds for tracks is always a good strategy.



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rifle hunting it's that short period in late November and early December, usually catching the tail end of the primary rut. For archery, early November is reliable for pre-rut activity, with the rut usually peaking Thanksgiving week.

Southern whitetails are different. The rut hits at different times in different places, and perhaps because the weather is usually warmer, it seems the rut spreads out over a longer period. In southern Georgia, November usually catches the rut, but my friends in Alabama believe January sees the most rutting activity. That said, the pre-rut period, when bucks are rubbing and scraping, can be better than the rut itself, when buck movement is erratic and unpredictable. Given a choice, I try to avoid a post-rut hunt.

In Kansas, the rifle season has been locked in stone for decades. We can look up the moon phase, but we can't do anything about it. In contrast, the long Southern seasons allow us to plan a hunt during the dark of the moon and perhaps focus on the rut.

One critical factor we cannot plan around is weather, and in the South it's all over the map. That brutal November cold snap in southern Georgia, coinciding with the rut, was glorious, but I haven't hit those conditions again. Snow is unlikely, but it can rain. More frequently, it's too warm, with shirt-sleeve weather at dawn and midday highs into the 80s. Doesn't matter. The deer are used to it. They're going to move when they're going to move. You just need to be there.

TAKING A STAND

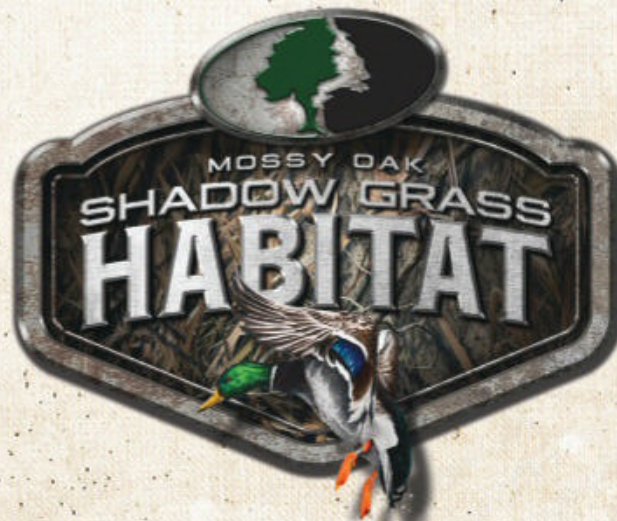
I don't go south for whitetails every year, but last season during the pandemic not much was happening. I did some driving rather than flying and headed south twice, to Georgia in early November and Alabama in January.

As an outsider, I plan my Southern whitetail excursions months ahead, picking a few days from a long season, trying to avoid a bright moon, and hoping the wind and weather will be favorable. Even if they are, there's no guarantee the right deer will move during any period of just a few days. Today, most Southern whitetails are taken from elevated stands. Based on wind and expected movement and feeding patterns, you put yourself in the best



A buck like this 3 1/2-year-old 8-point can be hard to pass, but the author had already taken one buck, making the choice a bit easier.

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stand possible for the conditions, but the final move is up to the deer.

Zack and Debi Aultman's place in southern Georgia is a pine plantation that's well-managed for whitetails. Nobody is successful all the time, but I expect to see bucks here. The first evening I took the "Cherry Tree" stand, overlooking a long food plot on a mild, sunny afternoon. A couple of young 8-pointers came out early, and they were easy to pass. When the shadows grew long, a heavy-bodied buck stepped into the field. He was past mature, with funky, ugly antlers. Tough call! Age-wise, he fit the bill; I knew I should probably take him, but it was the first evening and I couldn't do it. He stayed out for a long time, as did the two young bucks, along with 20-some does. Then they all wandered back into the woods, and at dark the field was empty.

A couple days later, I did a morning hunt at "The Pond" stand, a gorgeous place overlooking a food plot with a perfect woodduck pond off to the left. It was still early, but long past full daylight, when a buck stepped to the edge of the woods near the pond and tended a scrape. This was an easy decision: The buck was big in the body with antlers that were high, wide and heavy. As he worked the scrape, I saw prominent "acorns" on several tines. No hesitation. I'd already switched binocular for rifle. Done with his marking, the buck trotted along the edge of the field toward me, and when he slowed, I shot him on the shoulder.

That was that. I hunted three more days and saw only young bucks. Lightning doesn't always strike twice, and that was just fine.

In January I joined friend Gordon Marsh, proprietor of the Wholesale

Hunter e-commerce site. We started near his home close to Montgomery, but the bucks he'd been seeing on trail cameras had gone to ground. To change things up, we went a bit north to join Mike Crutchfield and Jeff Slatton at their deer lease, a classic Southern deer camp in the Alabama woods.

Here, I had no great expectations; we were just deer hunting in a fun place with wonderful people. I saw deer at every outing, which pretty much defines good deer hunting, but no antlers for several days. Not knowing the area, I alternated stands at my buddies' suggestions. The grass is always greener on the other side, and it's boring to stay in the same stand if you're not seeing much.

One stand was a tall tower overlooking an excellent food plot, where a good 10-pointer had appeared on trail cams. I saw just a few does from that stand, so I



Although taken early in the hunt, the author's 2020 Georgia buck was a no-brainer—high, wide and heavy, with unique "acorns" on the tips of three tines.

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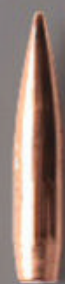


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C.

was happy to switch around. However, I know that if a stand is well-sited and the wind is good, it's probably better to hold your ground. The day after I left, Mike shot a smashing buck from that stand. If I'd stayed put, maybe I'd have seen him ... and maybe not. With whitetails, you can't always be in the right place at the right time.

This area, too, had a long section of powerline, a feature inextricably linked to Southern deer hunting, at least in my mind. I was in a tower stand on a ridge, with the wind in my face and a good view in both directions. I'd seen a few does early and then nothing for two hours.

I was carrying a nice .270 that I'd never shot a deer with. I was itching to use it, but it wasn't my intent to take the first buck that came along. I wasn't exactly asleep, but for sure I was asleep at the switch. I'd been looking left; about 9:30 I swiveled right, and there were two bucks chasing three does 250 yards from the stand. I should have looked longer and harder, but I shot the larger of the two, dropping him in his tracks. Two days later Gordon shot a similar buck.

Alabama being Alabama, I didn't have to quit with my buck, and I didn't. I kept hunting, hoping for something bigger and a little older. Saw him, too, just at sunset on the last day. This one I looked over carefully. I think he was 4 years old, a heavy-antlered 6-pointer with either broken or absent eyeguards. I had the crosshair on him for a long time at 160 yards and then put the rifle down. It had been a great hunt, and even a "Yankee" doesn't always need to press the trigger. **Go!**



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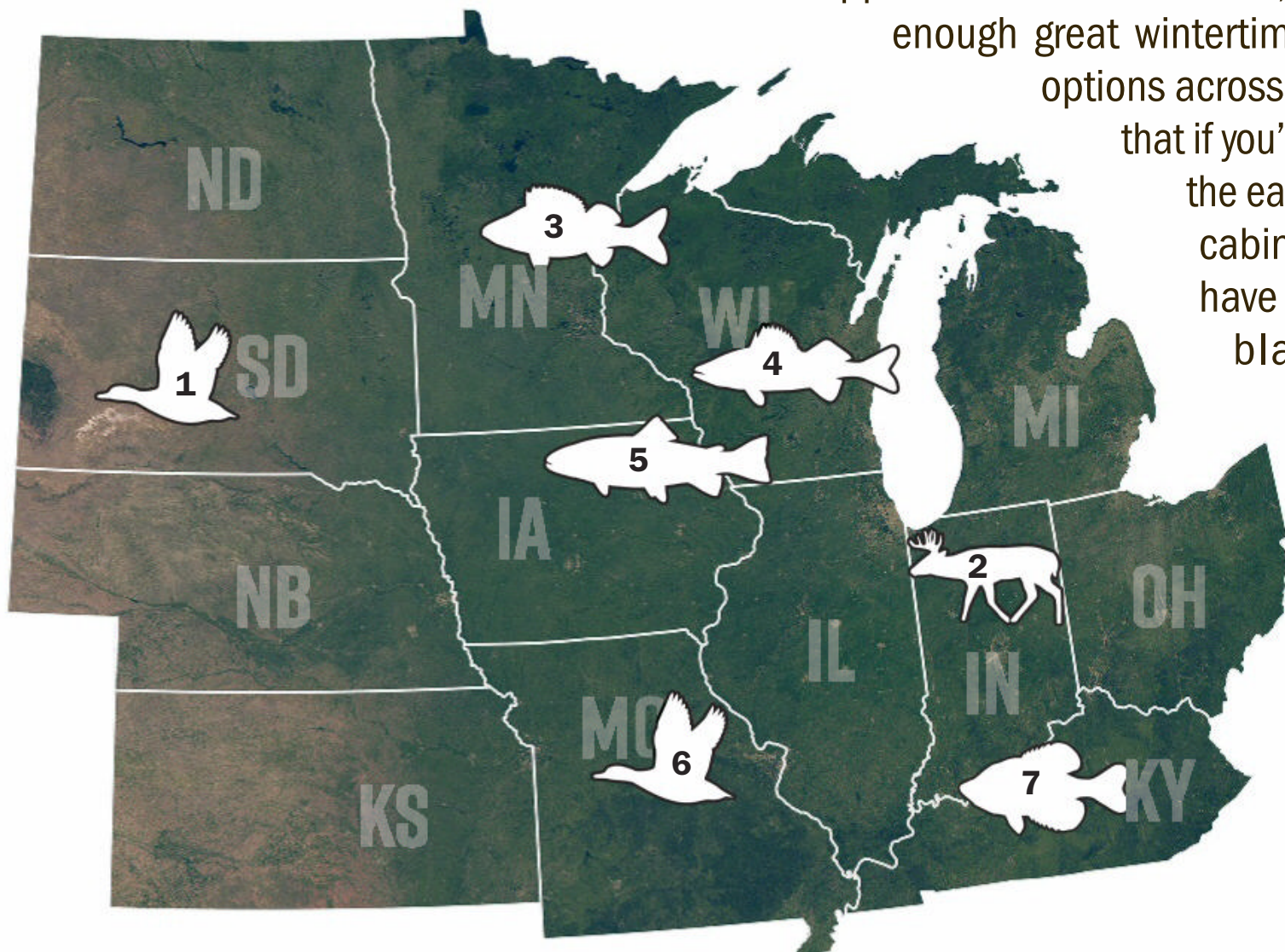
AROUND THE MIDWEST

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THIS WINTER

By Brandon Butler

With winter's arrival, some may already feel cabin fever setting in, but those willing to brave the elements can find ample outdoor pursuits during December and January. Deer hunters in Indiana may be searching for an early Christmas present in the form of a muzzleloader buck. Meanwhile, anglers desiring solitude can find it on an Iowa trout stream. As ice covers northern lakes, open-water reservoirs in the Midwest's southern reaches offer limits of crappie. Come to think of it, there are

enough great wintertime outdoor options across the region that if you're suffering the early onset of cabin fever, you have no one to blame but yourself.





HIGH PLAINS DUCKS

In South Dakota's High Plains Hunt Zone, duck season lasts until Jan. 13, 2022. This area encompasses much of the Missouri River and roughly the western half of the state—including a whole host of productive prairie potholes. South Dakota is a resident-friendly waterfowl state, but non-residents can get in the game, too, especially later in the season. Non-resident waterfowl licenses are distributed by a lottery, with many valid for only a handful of days. These are limited prior to November 1, but after that there is no limit to the number of non-resident waterfowl licenses a hunter may possess, giving out-of-staters more days to hunt.



INDIANA SMOKE-POLE DEER

Deer season is winding down in the Hoosier State, but there's still time to fill a tag or two with a muzzle-loader. Food is key to finding deer now. Locate an active source of food, like a picked agriculture field, and add some venison to your freezer during the Dec. 5 to 20 season. Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area near San Pierre and Greene-Sullivan State Forest around Linton are two public-land locations to consider.



MILLE LACS ICE PERCH

Ice fishing is underway, and perch are a favorite target at Minnesota's Mille Lacs Lake. This relatively shallow 130,000-plus-acre body of water is a legendary fishing destination. Look for transition areas along the shore where sand and mud come together. Using LiveScope technology to watch perch take your bait is a fun and exciting way to catch these tasty panfish. Wax worm-tipped jigs remain a go-to perch offering.



WISCONSIN'S RIVER 'EYES

Open water in Wisconsin becomes rare through December and into January. However, one sure bet for open-water walleye fishing is the tailwater fisheries below dams. The Wisconsin River's many dams offer walleye anglers plenty of wintertime action. Tailwaters require heavier baits to combat the flowing water. Along with crankbaits, a 1-ounce or heavier jig tipped with a shiner minnow or nightcrawler is a top producer.



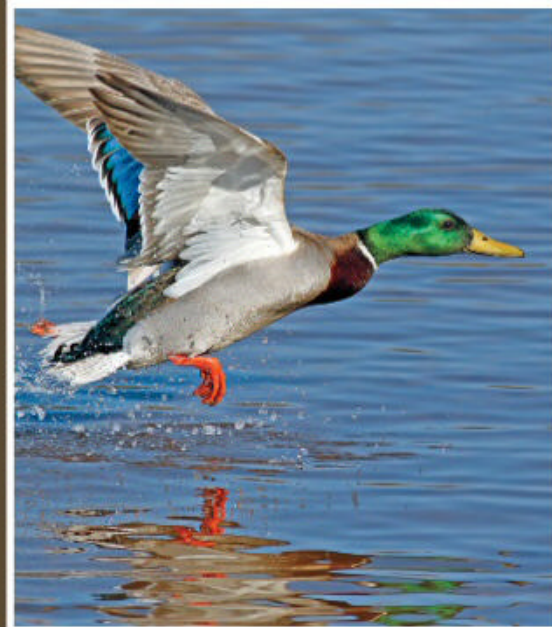
TROUT RIVER TROUT

Iowa's northeastern corner is home to 50 trout streams where the DNR stocks 300,000 to 400,000 trout each year. The season is open year-round, but December and January don't see the crowds of summer and fall. If you want these small streams to yourself, now is the time. Located about 5 miles southeast of Decorah, the Trout River Wildlife Management Area provides access to Trout River, where you can tangle with plenty of brown trout in the 9- to 12-inch range.



BIG-RIVER BIRDS

If you don't draw into one of Missouri's renowned public duck hunting areas and don't have access to private ground, you can always hit the rivers. Both the Missouri and the Mississippi offer abundant public-land duck hunting. In most cases, you'll need a boat to hunt these rivers. If you have one, finding public land along both major waterways is easy. In the central part of the state, check out the Big Muddy National Fish and Wildlife Refuge near Boonville. North of St. Louis, give the Great River National Wildlife Refuge a try.



TAYLORSVILLE LAKE CRAPPIES

Cold-water crappie fishing is a great way to get outdoors in the winter months, and Kentucky's Taylorsville Lake offers both white and black crappies. According to David Baker, a biologist with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the lake's 10-inch size limit protects the spawning class of fish, and results are encouraging. Crappies in the 12-inch range are common. The state plants pallet structures and Christmas tree clusters all around the lake. Visit the Department of Fish and Wildlife website for a map of the fish attractors.



THESE DECOY SPREADS ARE MONEY FOR LATE-SEASON CANADA GEESE.

By Brian Lovett

As snow and ice chase most waterfowl south, only the hardiest birds remain, including maybe the most stubborn: Canada geese. If they have access to food and open roosting water, many honkers resist winter's onslaught, refusing to budge.

These birds offer great opportunities but also present some challenges. Hunters have chased these honkers since late summer, using every conceivable spread and calling sequence. Also, hunting conditions during early winter can be difficult.

Luckily, late-season honkers often fall into easily identifiable patterns, and a few key decoy setups take advantage of them.

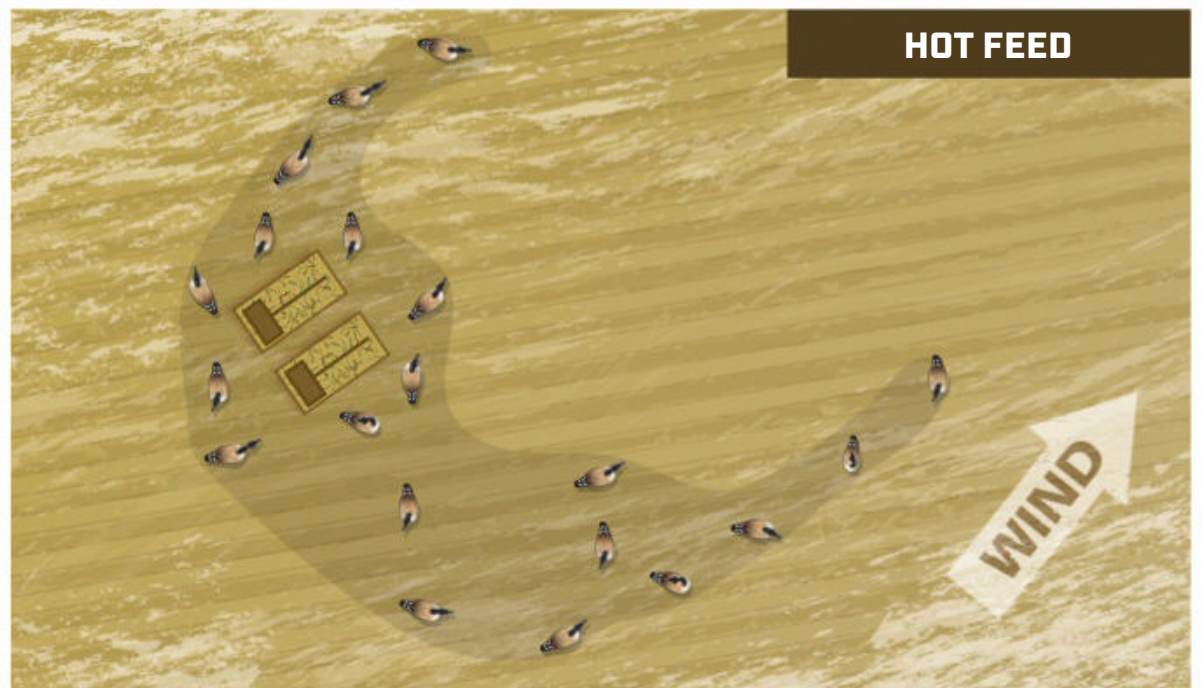
HOT FEED

When the mercury plunges, geese key on carbohydrate-rich grains like corn and beans. Often, hot fields attract every remaining bird in the area, and honkers may only make one feeding flight a day—usually right before nightfall—to help conserve energy. Such opportunities

might look like slam-dunks, but concealment can be an issue, and pressured geese might be wary of traditional spreads.

Micro spreads of fewer than 20 decoys can work well here, especially if relatively few geese—say 100—are using

a field. These spreads mimic a flock or two of birds that have just landed and begun feeding. **Use a mix of full-body decoys—feeders, loafers and a few sentries. If there's any breeze, decoys on motion stakes can be especially effective.**



BILL BUCKLEY PHOTOGRAPHY



Several decoy setups work, including traditional U- or J-shaped spreads, or two or three loose groups. But remember these rules: Always leave a large open area where geese feel comfortable landing. And, on windy days, set decoys tighter and closer to your hide. Geese fighting a stiff breeze have more time to view your blocks and spy an ambush.

Cover is vital during these hunts. If you're lucky, a field may contain sufficient natural concealment to hide layout blinds, such as long corn stalks or a weedy ditch. When snow covers the ground, use white sheets and spray-on snow to conceal the blinds. If you must gather other cover, such as weeds or grass from ditches, set up perpendicular to your spread instead of upwind. That way, geese focus on the decoys instead of the large "grass patch" while approaching.

OPEN WATER

After most marshes and lakes freeze, any open water draws many geese and yields great hunting. This is especially true if birds are loafing midday on such spots or following rivers or open shorelines to and from roosting and feeding areas.

Key with these spreads is determining how geese are using the open water. If birds are just passing through, use a large spread of several dozen decoys for maximum attraction. If multiple flocks are loafing during midday at a half-acre spring hole, pare down your spread to mimic one or two small groups.

Use a mix of floaters and full-body dekes. Set a few floaters in the open water to imitate birds that have just landed.

Place most of your decoys on nearby ice or the shoreline to look like relaxed birds. Use lots of loafer and sleeper decoys mixed with a few sentries. You can run silhouettes on the shore to boost numbers.

Late-season geese love loafing at fairly barren open-water spots like sandbars. As with field hunting, concealment can be tough. Use any natural cover around, like a cattail-covered point or shoreline driftwood. A well-brushed-in boat blind tucked against a riverbank can also work. Hide layout blinds at rocky or sandy shorelines and cut weeds or grass to conceal them. Again, set up perpendicular to your spread instead of upwind.

RUNNING TRAFFIC

If you can't hunt the X or open loafing waters, late-season geese can be difficult. But hunting fields or other open water

between roosting and feeding areas is another option. This common tactic, called "running traffic," centers on grabbing the attention of passing birds and convincing them they need to check you out.

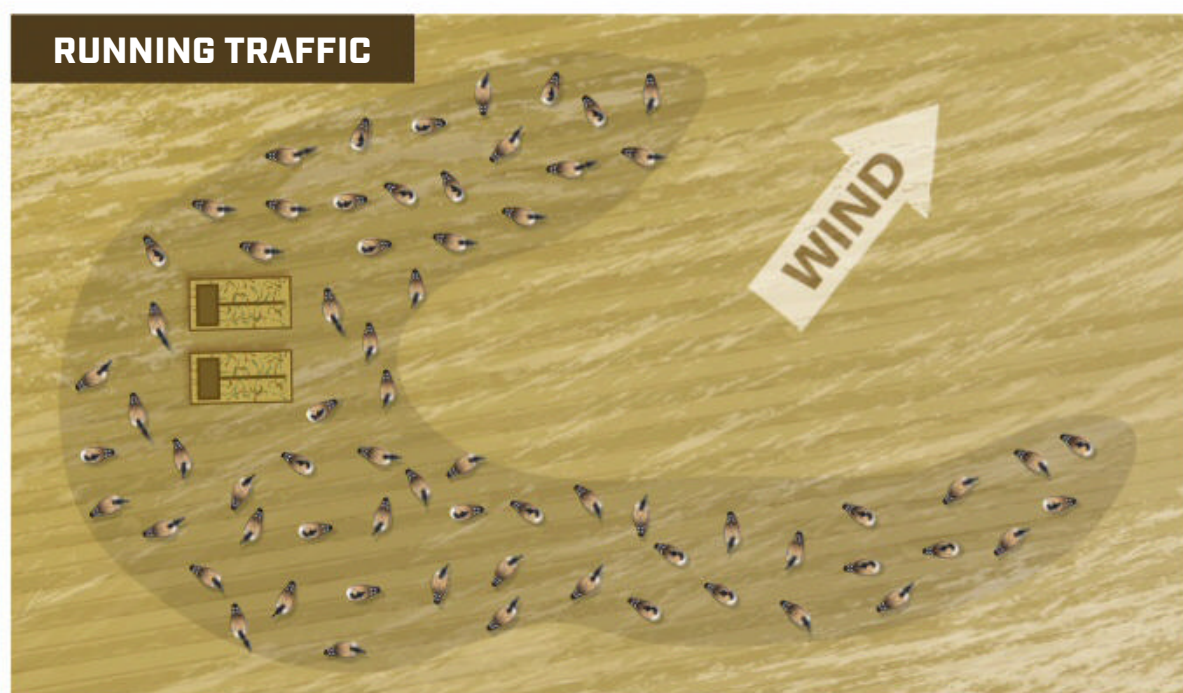
Big spreads are normal for traffic hunts. In fields, toss out as many full-bodies as you can tote and boost numbers as needed with silhouettes and shells. Large shell decoys can be really effective toward the upwind edge of your spread, as they help break up and hide layouts. Over water, place lots of loafers or sleepers on land, and mix in some floaters in the water. Setups can vary, but again, leave a big landing area and tighten up the spread during windy conditions.

Motion is often crucial for traffic hunts. On windy days, use windsocks or motion-stake decoys to add realistic movement. Also, use a flag to grab the attention of distant flocks. Flap the flag downward at first to imitate landing birds. When geese come closer, wiggle it just above ground level to help finish geese.

Calling is also more important when running traffic. You want to interest distant birds and bring them close enough for a shot. Everyone in your group should call, even if one hunter leads while others back him up with softer clucks and moans.

THE FINAL PUSH

Late-season goose hunting isn't easy. The weather is often uncomfortable, and birds are perhaps warier than ever. However, you'll have a long off-season to recover, and a few more days watching honkers cupping over your blocks will quickly warm your bones. 



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ALL-WEATHER AMBUSHES

**WINTER CAN
THROW A LOT OF
DIFFERENT WEATHER
CONDITIONS AT
COYOTE HUNTERS.
DON'T LET ANY OF THEM
RUIN YOUR HUNT.**

By Mark Kayser

Weather affects all hunting, and winter coyote outings are no exception. I recall one particular morning hunt on public land where I encountered a trio of challenging climate conditions. Hiking in under the cover of darkness before dawn, I faced deep snow, temperatures falling to single digits and endlessly shifting winds that had me constantly adjusting my final setup. The snow and temperatures were unavoidable, but I hoped daybreak would at least calm the wind.

I plowed my way up to a high ridge overlooking several brushy draws and plopped down in time for shooting light.

Luckily, wind had blown the area somewhat free of snow, daybreak brought more stability to the wind direction and my hand warmers fought off frostbite as I prepared to call. After one series of howls, a coyote appeared less than 100 yards away, and I put a quick end to this frosty hunt.

Ample research shows weather prompts animal movement, and this includes coyotes. They respond in different ways to changing climatic conditions like barometric pressure swings, heat waves, cold snaps, shifting winds and more. If you're a weekend warrior, you don't always have the luxury of picking

JOHN HAFNER



Coyotes take advantage of feeding windows before and after winter storms. You should, too. Look for areas with high prey populations, especially if they offer 'yotes easy access.

your coyote hunting days. You get out when you can regardless of weather. Fortunately, success is possible with most of these weather changes if you tailor your setups to the forecast.

SNOWMAGGEDON

“I have to leave for a few days for business, but you can hunt the entire farm,” said my Kansas realtor friend, Greg Gilman. “With more than a foot of snow on the ground, I would call on the perimeter of all the food plots. Those coyotes should be in there hunting for mice.”

With the key to the farm, I made myself at home, and before daybreak the

next morning I settled into an elevated shooting blind for my first set. It didn’t take long for a coyote to respond to my hand calls. I missed the first, easy shot, but luckily stopped him on the run with a second. My next set produced another prime coyote on the edge of a second food plot on the opposite side of the farm. Coyotes were hungry after holing up during the storm, and now they were hunting hard in prime food locations.

As with most other animals, there’s little doubt that coyotes can sense barometric changes associated with a storm. When the barometer begins nose-diving, look for predator and prey movement.

The same is true of a rising barometer after a major front passes. Animals realize they have a window to recuperate and take to the fields to fill their paunch.

Look for areas of high prey populations paired with easy travel opportunities. The food plots I hunted on Gilman’s farm were havens for all wildlife. After the storm he filled his deer feeders and his truck left packed tracks in and out of the area. Across snowy coyote country, I see coyotes follow similar paths left by tractors all the time to ease travel in bad conditions. Keep these paths of least resistance in mind following heavy winter snow, especially if they’re around food.

BITTER COLD

As a child of the Great Plains—specifically South Dakota—I know cold temperatures. As I hiked from my truck in the subzero teens one dark morning, I kept asking myself, “Why am I doing this?” At dawn, I found my answer when a cold and hungry coyote charged my position high in a stack of round hay bales. I tipped him over easily, decided it was a “one-and-done” morning and dragged the heavy coyote back to my truck.

As they do with any weather event, coyotes sense an oncoming arctic wave of cold. They try cramming in as much food as possible before frigid temperatures arrive. During a prolonged event, coyotes can and do hunt when temperatures bottom out, but if they know it’s a brief cold snap, they’ll often simply bed up and wait it out. Minimized movement allows them to conserve energy, and when they sense a change in the barometer—a southerly shift in winds or other warming factors—they increase activities again to regain energy.

Days like these favor a bold prey-in-distress ruse to call in hungry coyotes. Begin with howling for confidence and then later add in the sounds of rodents or fawns saying “goodbye cruel world.”

RAINY DAYS

Matt Swanson is a blue-collar worker out of Kansas who has a passion for calling coyotes. When he invited me on an outing last winter and I saw a forecast of rain, I almost declined. However, I knew I’d miss out on some great hunting. Our plan was to hunt hard up until the hour before rain began, as we knew the coyotes would likely take a similar approach. A couple cagey ’yotes slipped past us, but we managed to call one in for a chip-shot ending.

As with any weather event, consult your hunting app for accurate, hourly updates on advancing systems. I used my HuntStand app to determine we had a small morning window for two to three sets before the torrent began falling. Also, look beyond the rain forecast. Once it quits, the coyotes will often turn on again.

Understand, too, how animals operate in rain. Like construction workers, coyotes normally don’t shut down with a misty drizzle. A downpour, on the other hand, severely limits their movement and, in turn, your hunting efforts.

Take a break and pick up where you left off when showers diminish.

If the rain is minimal, look for woodland settings offering some cover from irritating splatters. Because rain helps with scent elimination, you could potentially call a coyote in from any direction in a timbered setting, so consider hunting with a partner to cover approaches you might miss.

HEAT WAVE

Mossy Oak pro-staff member and “Carnivore TV” host Gary Roberson and I once hunted coyotes together on a sunny day when temperatures were climbing. Because he knew it was supposed to get unseasonably warm that day, we had started out early. For our first setup, he chose an area near a brushy creek bottom with a nearby reservoir. He knew coyotes would focus on shade and water before hiding from the sun the remainder of the day. Five minutes into the setup, Roberson’s hunch proved right, as his calling at-

tracted a dark coyote into my shooting lane. The old male had chipped teeth and was an exceptional trophy to begin a day of hunting in the sunshine.

Depending on your locale, coyotes packing a prime pelt may either be seeking refuge from the sun or basking in it to take advantage of solar warmth. This is especially true in more northerly, snowy sections of the Midwest. Calling strategies will not change, but a mild day with little wind allows coyotes to nap anywhere. This means they may bed in a position where they can snooze and survey intermittently if temperatures are frigid.

To avoid detection, have an entrance plan. Always maintain a low profile and use hills, coulees, creeks and other terrain features to hide your approach. On the first set of the morning, the darkness and a downwind approach are excellent cloaking tools. When nearing your calling site, stay off the horizon and set up in the shade to veil shiny surfaces—and your movement—after sunrise.

When they sense a warming trend ending a cold snap, coyotes become highly active and responsive to calls. Use vocalizations first, and then switch to distress sounds.



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If an unexpected heatwave arrives in January (I have seen 60s in Iowa), adjust to coyotes seeking heat relief. Concentrate first and last setups on the chilly periods of dawn and dusk. In between, try to call coyotes from cooler areas like brushy bottoms and near water sources. Shade, hydration and cooler temperatures all add up to more coyote encounters.

WHIPPING WINDS

Heath Wood, a Missouri-based Mossy Oak pro-staffer, recommends allowing coyotes to retreat to bedding cover or interior hunting cover without hassle to boost their confidence before calling.

“Waiting until midmorning, midday or midafternoon allows them to relax, and in the meantime, you can use a down-wind approach to set up on edges near suspected hideouts,” he says.

This strategy is ideal for calling confident coyotes from their homelands, but it also provides an advantage when winds whip up. Timber interiors break the wind and funnel it into easily recognizable directions, which helps in devising better setups to control for scent.

When the forecast calls for high winds, scout for large tracts of timber, deep ravines, brushy lowlands and other topographical features acting as natural windbreaks. Coyotes will seek out these protective landscapes for bedding and wind relief.

Although the wind might be screaming in open country, your calls should carry louder in protected environments, especially to coyotes already waiting in the shelter. Never begin a set with your caller on high, as you might unintentionally set up within close range of a coyote. Begin on low volume and slowly increase it over your time on stand. A shotgun loaded with BB or buckshot, like Hornady’s Heavy Magnum Coyote, is a good option since coyotes may show up close and fast.

GET OUT THERE

Weather can certainly make a coyote hunt more difficult. In a few cases, it can even shut things down completely. However, with some foresight and planning, you can usually find an opportunity to win any weather anomaly. Just be aware of how different weather extremes influence coyote behavior and adapt your strategies accordingly. 



On warmer, sunnier days, coyotes often seek refuge from the heat. These two were called out from shady hideouts during unseasonably warm weather.

GIVE 'EM A HAND

E-callers are all the rage, but don't sleep on simple hand calls for coyotes.

There are many reasons for carrying a hand call. First off, it's an inexpensive way to start calling predators without the initial cost of an electronic caller. Many hand calls are available for less than \$10 and most for under \$20. Depending on their reed configuration, different models provide fluctuation to create a medley of distressful sounds.

They also allow you to adjust volume—and inflection—instantly. You can program some e-callers to change sounds and pitch with the push of a button, but with a hand call you simply manipulate your lungs and the call to send a different message of peril to your quarry.

BAD BIRDY

A great, inexpensive but variable call is the **.22-250 Bird Distress Cartridge Call** by **Rocky Mountain Hunting Calls** (\$9.95; buglingbull.com). This small call is designed from a .22-250 cartridge and sounds like a bird in peril, but you can change the inflection to also mimic the squeaks of a mouse or other agonized rodents. The call weighs almost nothing and produces volume that can be heard from a mile away on a calm morning. I know, as I've watched coyotes trot that far to investigate.

SWEET SHORTY

Another affordable yet effective call is the **S-2 Close Range Call** from **Burnham Brothers** (\$7.99; burnhambrothers.com). Small in nature but loud enough to call across any field, this versatile short-range call creates distress sounds varying from fox pups to cottontails and all rodents.

HANDY HOWLERS

Do not overlook the benefit of using coyote vocalizations. **Rocky Mountain Hunting Calls** offers the **Stealth Dirty Dog** (\$24.95) and **Stealth Yipper Yapper** (\$19.95) in a space-age design for easy use. Both reed-driven calls produce realistic howls, yips and barks.



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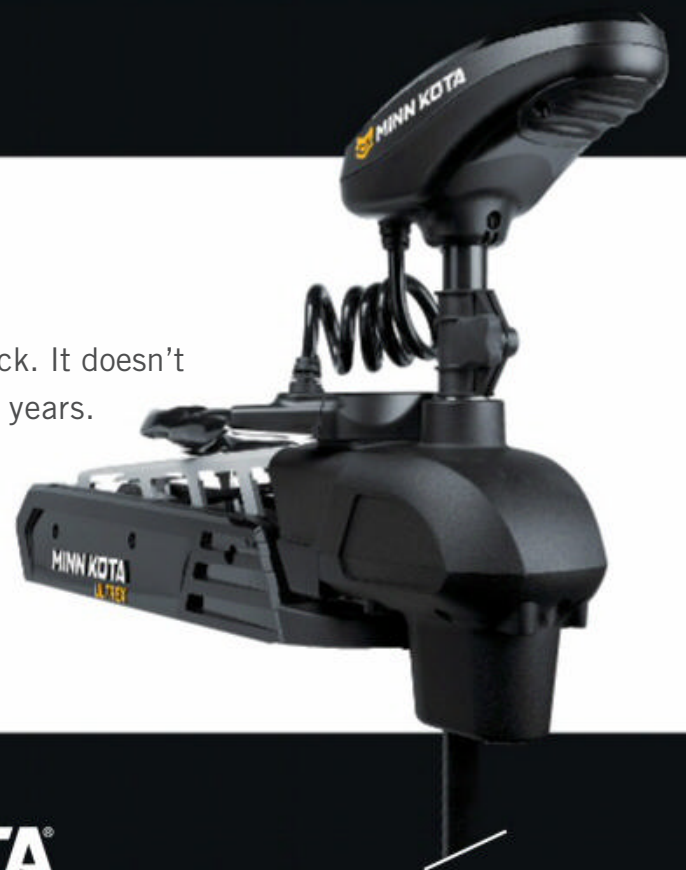
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INCREDIBLY EFFECTIVE AMBUSHES.

By Josh Honeycutt

During the late season, deer seek out solar bedding cover—often on south-facing hillsides that get more sunlight. Plot an afternoon ambush between these areas and food sources.

A couple years ago I spent the entire season thinking about a deer called “Buckets.” A homebody on our 80-acre Ohio lease, “Buckets” was a lucky rascal. He moved like crazy in daylight but never when my hunting buddy or I were present to capitalize on it. This deer not only had my number, he also captivated my thoughts. His overlapping tips—a negative 1 1/2-inch tip-to-tip spread—haunted my dreams and I had difficulty thinking about much else.

Despite my persistence, he ate up almost all of my 2019–2020 deer season. He survived the early season, pre-rut, rut and most of the late season. Then, during the late muzzleloader season in early January, after months of obsessive effort, I finally came face-to-face with Buckets. In the end, the deciding factor had been determining where the buck was bedding.

I had realized Buckets was bedding on our property part of the time, but that he usually came from our neighbor’s land to the south. Using HuntStand, I saw a southerly slope that stretched along that property, as well as a bench. I deduced that Buckets was likely bedding there often. Luckily, we had the food that he wanted, and I set up in a staging area along a heavily used trail on our side of the property line. After three days of hunting, I got my shot and made it count. So can you if you learn where bucks are bedding, and hunt wisely based on this information.

BEDROOM BASICS

It’s always key to know where bucks are bedding, no matter the time of season. However, it becomes increasingly crucial as the season progresses, and especially during the late season. At this point, some bucks have been killed, and those that remain are holed up in the best, most fortified bedding areas they can find.

Of course, there are different types of bedding areas, and other factors determine whether bucks use them during the late season. One such factor is hunting pressure. Areas with heavy human intrusion earlier in the year are less likely to hold deer during the late season.

Food is also essential. Sources deplete as fall yields to winter. In some areas, deer willingly travel great distances between bedding areas and food sources. However, if they can find a good bedding area with necessary security from the cold, hunters and predators, and it’s close to food, they’re even more likely to use it. And when food is found in close proximity to solar, thermal and other types of bedding, you just might be on a late-season hot spot.

SOLAR BEDDING COVER

Finding It

Perhaps the most crucial location to consider in the late season is solar bedding cover. Varying topography defines it, and the best areas are often south- and southeast-facing hillsides. Deer like bedding on these due to the increased direct sunlight they receive throughout the day.

In winter, deer are running on fewer calories while burning many to stay warm. More sunlight helps conserve energy, and since these southern-facing slopes receive sunlight first each morning, deer that use them warm up quicker. This is also why deer commonly return to bedding areas before sunrise on colder days. They want to be there to catch those rays of warmth peeking over the horizon. When you battle severe cold and starvation for months on end, every little bit counts in the battle for survival.

Often, deer in solar bedding areas are situated along a bench somewhere between halfway and three-quarters of the way up the hillside. They might also be just below the ridge line. Rarely are they all the way at the bottom.

Hunting It

Because deer often occupy solar bedding areas in the morning, it’s usually difficult to hunt them then. However, it’s certainly possible to do so in the afternoon. Deer will rise from their beds and head toward food sources later in the day. Remaining acorns, crop fields, food plots, concentrations of forbs and highly digestible browse are all attractive.

If you’ve found these potential bedding areas and know where food sources are still present, hang cameras to see which trails deer are taking from point A to B. If trail cams aren’t an option or you don’t have time to wait on such intel, hunt from an observation position that offers the best vantage point. Then,

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Readily accessible, reliably bright light for outdoor adventures is a valued commodity. It’s especially helpful if you’re in your stand and you’ve forgotten a headlamp or need to dig one out of your bag in the darkness. Streamlight’s Pocket Mate USB (\$29.99; streamlight.com) is a microlight that clips onto a zipper, backpack, hat bill or key chain to be there whenever you need it.

The CNC-machined aluminum body, with its stout integrated snap hook, features a polycarbonate lens and shockproof LED (50,000-hour lifecycle). An onboard lithium-polymer battery charges via a provided USB cord, offering a 1-hour runtime on low (45 lumens) and a 20-minute runtime on high (325 lumens).

An oversized, recessed on/off switch eliminates accidental activations and is easy to find and operate in the dark. It is a

welcome deviation from the tiny switches found on comparable lights. The Streamlight Pocket Mate is IPX4 weather-resistant, making it the perfect companion for inclement conditions.

A handy illuminated charge indicator is housed under the on/off switch, providing a visual indication of the charge status (charge time is 4 hours).

The Pocket Mate USB weighs just half an ounce, is available in four colors (red, silver, pink and blue) and carries a 24-month warranty. —Dr. Todd A. Kuhn



once you know what the deer are doing, move in and intercept them during daylight hours.

This time of year, though, that's easier said than done. When the foliage is off and the woods are loud, it isn't easy to walk through the timber undetected, especially near bedding areas. This makes finding good entry and exit routes crucial. Use the terrain to your advantage. Creeks, ditches, ridge lines, hills, benches and other varying topography can help conceal your approach and departure.

Wind is always a concern, and hunting around solar bedding is no different. In the afternoon, thermals should carry scent downhill. Because you're starting out below the deer, you should be in the clear, as long as the wind doesn't swirl, bounce or do something funky.

THERMAL BEDDING COVER

Finding It

Unlike solar bedding, thermal bedding cover has nothing to do with topography. Instead, it's easiest to picture as dense, expansive areas of coniferous trees. This includes red cedars, white cedars, spruces and pines among others.

Deer like these areas for several reasons. First, the trees hold their foliage, which shields deer from rain, snow and wind. This alone helps them conserve energy. Conifers—sometimes referred to as evergreens—also retain heat, keeping it closer to ground level.

Essentially, these trees serve as two-way shields. They keep some heat from escaping into the atmosphere and they help prevent some precipitation and wind from reaching the forest floor. Sometimes, this can increase the temperature by as much as several degrees.

Hunting It

This type of bedding doesn't directly benefit from the sun, nor does it necessarily rely on terrain, which provides visual, audible and winding advantages (although some thermal bedding will be on hillsides). Due to the heavy foliage in and around dense stands of conifers, hunters may find it a little easier to slip into position. You're still pretty vulnerable in terms of producing unintended noise, but visually you have much more cover. It remains key to map out viable entry and exit routes, though.



Deer bed in thick cover during the late season for security and to evade hunting pressure. Cattails and other types of dense cover can be just the ticket for wary bucks.

As before, picking where to set up demands more than knowing a deer is there. Know where food sources, water sources, staging areas and connective trails are found. Then, piece it all together.

With the wind in your face—or at least a crosswind—it's time to do your thing. Slowly ease into position along a safe entry route. With ample evergreens on the landscape, you might have enough concealment to get there. Also pay attention to the weather report. On windy days, your steps usually aren't as audible.

Regardless, spend extra time and energy approaching quietly. Step on exposed soil rather than leafy mounds. Avoid stepping on rocks, sticks and limbs, too.

OTHER BEDDING COVER

Solar and thermal aren't the only two types of bedding cover; other areas sometimes enter the mix. Often, these aren't as attractive as solar and thermal options, but under the right circumstances, they can still hold deer. This is especially true if there is really good food nearby, the spot is hard for humans to infiltrate and/or it hasn't received much pressure throughout the season. Let's look at some of these.

Thickets

A thicket with really small trees and saplings spaced tightly together can be productive. Here, the stem count is high,

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which minimizes visibility and makes it hard for hunters to enter. If it's so thick that you can't access it, or if there aren't trees big enough to hang stands in, try setting up along the perimeter between the beds and destination food sources. More times than not, a mature buck will position itself at the highest point of elevation within a thicket.

CRP

Deer prefer bedding in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields because these areas do a good job of hiding them and offer them a good deal of security. Hunting in grasslands isn't easy, though, which is another reason deer like them.

Try finding isolated trees offering a good vantage point. If that doesn't work, set up elevated blinds. Whatever you do, get high enough to see and shoot down into the CRP. In most cases, if these fields are quite large, setting up on the perimeter likely won't put you in position to capture these bucks moving during daylight.

Wetlands

Marshy and swampy areas are also really good. If there are pockets of dry, high ground, or maybe even islands, deer will certainly bed on these. Whitetails aren't dumb, and they know water gives them an edge.

If water levels are low and safe enough, wade out to these spots with the wind in your favor. Move slowly enough that sound is minimized. Use cattails and other foliage to conceal your approach.

Other Options

In hilly country, other bedding areas to consider—regardless of whether they offer solar or thermal advantages—are leeward (downwind side) ridges, benches, ridge endings and more. In flatter terrain, don't overlook islands of trees, big woods, low flats, oxbows, standing crops, cutover timber, suburban areas and more. Each of these offers visual, audible and winding advantages to deer, too, and by the late season, bucks and does alike take every edge they can get.

HIGH-DEMAND HOMES

Some late-season spots are much better than others and seem to hog all of the deer. There's a reason for this, and it essentially comes down to compounding factors.

If you've ever shopped around for a house, you know the most desirable have features that check lots of boxes. This is exactly the case with quality bedding areas that offer several of the advantages outlined above.

For example, a south-facing slope along a ridge with plenty of tightly packed conifers offers both solar and thermal cover. With a northerly wind, it also becomes the leeward side, which makes it even more attractive. Say there is an oak flat with acorns down below, maybe a standing crop field or even a brassicas food plot. Now the stage is set for a dynamite late-season hunt.

Bottom line this time of year: If you can find some of the best, most desirable bedding areas, you've got a good shot at success. 

Water never ceases to be important to deer. If you can set up between a good solar or thermal bedding area and a destination like food or water, you could be in for a great hunt.

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THE PLASTIC REVOLUTION

MORE ICE-ANGLERS ARE THREADING TINY SOFT-PLASTIC IMITATIONS OF BUGS, WORMS, LARVAE AND OTHER FORAGE ON THEIR HOOKS. BUT DO THESE ARTIFICIALS REALLY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO SUPPLANT LIVE BAIT?

By Mike Pahanich



Live bait has long dominated the ice fishing arena, especially for panfish species, which often key on small insect larvae. However, in recent years a wave of new miniature soft plastics has emerged. More ice-anglers are testing these promising plastics to see if they offer any benefits over their go-to live baits. Many have enjoyed the results, with some even suggesting these fakes offer an upgrade to their traditional live-bait approaches.

ARTIFICIAL ADVANTAGES

So, what makes these new soft plastics so attractive? Much of it may boil down to efficiency and a general change in the tactics of ice anglers. With quality lightweight drills and advanced electronics, many are adopting more mobile strategies that aren't conducive to lugging around bait. Others just want a more streamlined process. John Crane, a renowned Bemidji-area angler and tackle designer for Clam Outdoors, describes

a natural evolution among anglers and a desire to be more efficient on the ice.

"Live bait is getting to be old-school," he says. "Quality live bait can be tough to get, and it requires care and maintenance. With plastics, fishermen are spending more time fishing—and often out-fishing the live-bait angler."

Plastics are also usually available in whatever shapes fish are feeding on at the time. The same isn't always true at the local bait shop. Stores may run out



Bluegills are especially susceptible to small soft plastics on tiny jigs. Bright colors fished around pockets in weedbeds often produce well.

of one high-demand bait, forcing anglers to choose less-desirable alternatives.

Some believe these faux baits are even more realistic than the squirming wax worms and spikes they mimic. Live wax worms and spikes can become notoriously limp when threaded on a hook; many times, they fall off, too. Plastics, however, often look livelier in the water. And their advocates say these artificials look incredibly natural when fished with compact tungsten jigs. Meanwhile, for

hard-to-find live baits like bloodworms, artificials may be the only option.

Brian “Bro” Brosdahl, a veteran Minnesota ice fisherman and bait designer for Northland Fishing Tackle, believes in the power of plastics. Years ago, he convinced John Peterson, the founder of Northland Tackle, to make a plastic bloodworm for ice anglers. It worked well and became a precursor to the Impulse line of plastic baits now sold across the country.

“[The Impulse baits] catch crappie, bluegill and perch and are even better than live bait because they look like what fish are foraging on,” Brosdahl says. “The movement and silhouette of soft plastics better represents life in its purest primitive form. A soft plastic undulates like a living thing. A chunk or clumpy piece of bait doesn’t.”

When evaluating soft-plastic baits for panfish, he suggests examining three key attributes: profile, action and scent. Does a bait look like the real thing? Does it move like the real thing in the water? Does it have a similar smell that entices fish to bite?

Many of today’s plastics seem to check all these boxes.

PERFECT PLASTICS

Panfish gorge on a host of different critters beneath the ice, many of which are difficult for us to even see. Bloodworms, wax worms, mealworms, spikes, euro larvae, mousies, nymphs, fish fry, plankton, freshwater shrimp or scuds and various minnows all are consumed by cold-water panfish. Thankfully, many great plastics imitate these micro-sized live baits very well. Most fall into different styles or categories, though they are also pretty nebulous, often mimicking several food sources simultaneously.

Larvae

Larvae are top fodder for winter panfish. The bloodworm is a particular favorite, but fish like larval forms of many flies and moths. The Impulse Bloodworm that Brosdahl helped devise years ago remains popular today. The company’s newer Impulse Skeleton Minnow is another solid bloodworm mimic that also resembles tiny baitfish, tadpoles and various insects. It has a forked tail, segmented body and a ringworm head that makes for easy hooking. Clam Outdoors’ Maki line of soft plastics offers one more bloodworm candidate with its Bloodi, which also simulates various worm and plankton shapes when its pronged tail rides the shank of a jig hook.

DeLong Lures’ Pre-Rigged Corn Borer is a solid wax worm option. For mousies, look to Northland’s Impulse Slug Bug or Custom Jigs & Spins’ Ratso and Tutso—which can also resemble small minnows—and their Original Finesse Plastic replacement tails.

Shrimp, Scuds and Crayfish

Everybody loves shrimp, but panfish really do! Clam's Maki Scudi XL imitates tiny freshwater scuds (shrimp) that panfish feast on in winter. Northland's Impulse Scud Bug is another scud pattern, featuring lifelike antennae, legs and a hinged flitter tail. Custom Jigs & Spins Shrimpo and Purest, which also imitates Daphnia, are other good choices.

Crayfish are popular for panfish (and many other fish), too. Clam's new Maki Chunki is a solid match for the crustacean and is deadly on a tungsten drop jig.

Nymphs

Panfish enjoy nymphs, the immature form of certain insect species, almost as much as trout do. A Hexagenia (mayfly) hatch ignites fish and angler delirium alike in summer, but seasoned ice anglers know panfish feed on mayflies long before the bugs take wing. Northland's inch-long Impulse Mayfly mimics the nymphal stage very well, as does the new Clam Maki Wammi, which features tiny, writhing appendages. The Wammi also imitates shrimp well. While it doesn't represent any nymph specifically, the

3/4-inch Digger's Jig Tails Skeleton Bug is a very buggy-looking bait that has a lifelike fluttering action.

"Wedgees" and "Stingers"

While not specific food sources, wedgees and stingers suggest various forage, including microorganisms like zooplankton and the ever-popular bloodworm. Other plastics also mimic these foods, but these two bait types work particularly well.

Stingers (also called "nuggies") feature an inch-long plastic tail that narrows to a teeny tip at one end with a ball head at the other. These plastics resemble sperm under a microscope. However, crappies and other panfish love them, especially glow-colored ones during low-light periods. The Clam Maki Polli, Digger's Jig Tails Ice Stinger and Little Atom Nuggie fall into this category.

The wedgee, or wedge, meanwhile, is basically a tail that tapers to an incredibly thin, wispy tip. This plastic creates a ton of subtle action with very little rod movement. It can also be trimmed to any desired length. The Custom Jigs & Spins Wedgee, Little Atom Wedgee and Digger's Jig Tails Slab Wedge are

good picks. Whichever one you use, always align wedgees evenly on hooks to ensure proper action.

Minnows

Many plastics resemble minnows, minnow heads and other baitfish. Some of those previously discussed also imitate these forage fish well. A few specific options, however, include Northland's Impulse Mini Smelt, which suggests young-of-the-year minnow fry, and Clam's Mino, Mino Head and Mino XL.

Spiders, Ants and Oddballs

There are several different plastics that might not mimic specific insects but are still really buggy-looking and catch fish. Some include spider or octopus patterns with splayed-out legs or tentacles attached to a grub or rounded core. Examples include the Little Atom Spidgie, Digger's Jig Tails Ice Spider, the Clam Maki Neki and Maki and the Custom Jigs & Spins Nuclear Ant and replacement legs. Small tube baits like Berkley's new PowerBait Pre-Rigged Atomic Teasers also drive fish crazy with their tentacles and teaser.

After finding the right plastics, hit the ice, determine where the fish are holding and properly present your baits.

BLUEGILLS AND OTHER SUNFISH

Bluegills and related sunfish family members become incredibly popular when northern lakes don their ice caps. While bluegills get most of the love, all are fun to catch—and tasty to eat.

Brosdahl says bluegills are creatures of edges, structure and weedbeds, especially in winter. He likes carrying various colors to suit water color and light conditions and "selling" bluegills with bait action.

"A jittery, jerky action triggers their aggression," he says. "A shimmying action can get the most tight-lipped bluegill to open up and eat it."

He feels bright colors like orange, pink and gold draw more strikes. Once one fish in a school bites, he says, anglers can capitalize on bluegills' wolf-pack mentality for fast action. Like crappies, 'gills and similar sunfish have binocular vision, and what they feed on is difficult to see with the naked eye, which is why micro-sized baits often work well.

Mike Albano, another veteran ice angler, often likes a "finesse" approach, using light line (1- to 3-pound test), tiny

Look for winter crappies around the deep edges of aquatic vegetation. Fish frequent brush piles they favored in fall's open water, too.



jigs and natural-color baits. But, he says, some days a tungsten head with gaudy diamond sparkles draws aggressive bites.

He often finds his biggest fish near bottom in thick vegetation. While he looks for holes in those dense beds to fish, he also creates his own by pushing a piece of PVC conduit into thick mats. He then lets the spot rest, returning later to fish the pocket with high-vis glow baits.

CRAPPIES

The best time to start ice fishing for crappies is the fall. That is, fall is when you should start pinning down winter crappie spots. Clam's John Crane likes finding the open-water areas that produced from September through November and then investigating them in the ice season. Brush piles fish favored in autumn often remain crappie magnets in winter. Also, check deep edges of aquatic vegetation in 6- to 18-foot depths.

While daytime surges of crappies into shallow water are not uncommon, the most consistent bite is at dawn and dusk. Albano, who prowls the ice of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, says he often arrives just as others leave.

Bait-wise, he likes Dan Langenfeld's supple Digger's Jig Tails line of soft plastics. He usually fishes these on 1/32- to 1/16-ounce round jigheads.

Whatever you fish with, presentation is key. Brosdahl suggests a slow lift-and-fall presentation and subtle twitches between pauses. He keeps his jig above the fish set up highest in the hole. Crappies will move up to grab a bait but rarely pursue one below them. He says the fish located highest in the water column often is reluctant to move, but once it does, as with bluegills, it can yield a feeding frenzy.

Glow plastics shine (literally) for low-light crappies. At these times, Crane swaps from standard to fluorescent colors, favoring pink and glow orange, which suggest shrimp and crayfish. Glow white and chartreuse produce, too.

PERCH

Sunfish species may dominate ice-season discussions, but ears prick up with whispers of "jumbo perch." Yellow perch rival their cousin, the walleye, in table fare, and their elegant barred flanks and sunset-orange fins add to the delight of icing them. Hungry, aggressive perch mean torrid winter action.

HARDWATER HOT LIST

Make your time on the ice more productive with solid gear.

Manufacturers are always developing new products to make things easier for ice-anglers. New shelters and clothing keep you warmer than ever. Innovative electronics improve your odds of finding fish. The latest lures are designed to garner more bites. And new rods, reels and tip-ups help convert those bites into catches. Here, and throughout this issue's ice-fishing articles, we'll cover some of the latest gear designed to assist you in your hardwater pursuits.

SHELTERS

CLAM OUTDOORS KENAI PRO THERMAL, ICE TEAM EDITION

This 50-pound flip-and-go fish trap is perfect for the hole-hopping ice-angler. The well-appointed one-person shelter has a full thermal skin and a deep tub for storage, and it comes with a light bar, battery bracket and travel cover. (\$549.99; clamoutdoors.com)



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CLAM OUTDOORS VOYAGER X THERMAL, ICE TEAM EDITION

This shelter is designed for hardcore ice-anglers wanting to fish long and hard while staying as warm and comfortable as possible. It accommodates two anglers and incorporates a built-in, yet removable, deluxe seating system. It also uses the Side Symmetry Door system for easy access, and, like the Kenai Pro Thermal, it includes a light bar, battery bracket and travel cover. (\$1,049.99; clamoutdoors.com)



ESKIMO ESKAPE 2400

This side-door shelter offers easy access and collapses down to fit within a tonneau-covered bed of most crew-cab trucks. It has an integrated bench seat for comfort and offers 25 square feet of insulated fishable area—enough for two anglers. (\$699.99; geteskimo.com)

—Drew Warden



“Perch often act like a swarm of bees,” Brosdahl says. “One hits your bait, and another is there trying to take it away.”

Crane says he often finds perch in three separate tiers: 7 to 9 feet of water, 14 to 32 feet of water on mid-lake rock piles and humps, and suspended in deep water below 32 feet. This final group he describes as roamers—schoolies working pelagic baitfish. According to Albano, perch also like sand grass (chara) and a dark bottom. He says that combo often leads to the bigger perch.

PITCH A PLASTIC

Live bait won’t exit the ice-fishing arena any time soon. It still catches lots of fish, and remains a “go-to” for when the bite gets truly tough. Even hardcore plastics advocates sometimes hang a wax worm fragment beside their plastic for more scent and flavor in challenging conditions or when fish get lockjaw.

But today’s writhing, undulating plastics are here to stay. These eye-catching artificials have a power all their own—one that can turn a school of lazy panfish into a raging mob. 



Active perch mean a fun day on the ice. Drop plastics near sand grass and dark bottoms to tie into jumbos.

TOM MARTINEAU / THE RAW SPIRIT

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THE OTHER ICE BITE

OFTEN OVERLOOKED
DURING THE
HARDWATER SEASON,
**TROUT OFFER A FUN
CHANGE OF PACE FOR
MIDWEST ANGLERS.**

By Dr. Jason Halfen

TROUT represent one of the most unique winter fishing opportunities throughout the ice belt. Unlike most typical hardwater targets—especially walleyes, pike, and panfish—trout sustain very high activity levels beneath the ice. Indeed, as a group of cold-water species, trout thrive in chilly water temperatures and feed reliably through the winter months. Anglers can take advantage of this simple fact of biology to add some spice to their ice season.

TROUT TWO WAYS

Ice fishing options for trout in the Midwest come in two basic flavors: Great Lakes and inland. On big water—home of big trout—sustained cold weather is required to provide safe ice in the harbors and near-shore areas where winter trout can be found. In recent years, ice fishing for big browns and steelhead has become all the rage in many of Wisconsin's harbors dotting the Lake Michigan shoreline. On Lake Superior, when conditions permit,

DR. JASON HALFEN

CLOTHING

CLAM OUTDOORS EDGEX ICE SUIT

Built to keep anglers comfortable on the ice, the EdgeX Ice Suit has a soft-touch waterproof fabric shell with a super-soft, long-nap fleece lining. It has 150 grams of fixed insulation, a rapid drain system and waist-high two-way zippers on pants and bibs for easy ventilation. (\$199.99/parka, \$199.99/bibs, \$169.99/pants; clamoutdoors.com)

**ESKIMO LEGEND ICE SUIT**

Available in both men's and women's cuts, the Legend Ice Suit contains 100 grams of Thinsulate insulation for warmth and uses Eskimo's Uplyft breathable floatation assistance technology to keep you safe. Meanwhile, the suit's windproof and waterproof—yet breathable—material (10k waterproof/10k breathable) keep you dry from both sides. (\$289.99/jacket, \$289.99/bibs; geteskimo.com)

**HUK ICON X SUPERIOR JACKET AND BIBS**

Huk's Icon X Superior jacket and bibs offer protection from the elements and the water below. Both articles of clothing are 100-percent windproof and waterproof (20k waterproof/20k breathable) and feature Float Technology to add buoyancy in the event things go sideways. Body-mapped insulation is also included, as are fleece-lined hand warmer pockets and additional pockets with magnetic flaps. (\$300/jacket, \$290/bibs; hukgear.com)

**CLAM OUTDOORS DEFENDER ICE SUIT**

The Defender Ice Suit is a great choice for harsh and potentially dangerous conditions. This float suit utilizes durable waterproof, windproof and breathable fabric and features the integrated Motion Float System in the event of an ice break-through. Despite the float system, anglers still retain a lot of mobility with this suit. (\$199.99/parka, \$199.99/bibs; clamoutdoors.com)



Stocked inland trout are a fun change of pace on the ice. Trout often roam the shallows in winter, so holes often don't need to be quite as far out.

anglers venture into deep water to chase giant lake trout with heavy tackle. Always work through a reputable outfitter when heading offshore on the Great Lakes to help ensure your safe return.

Stocked inland fisheries offer another, perhaps more accessible, opportunity to target hardwater trout using conventional ice fishing tackle and equipment. Across the Upper Midwest, state natural resources agencies frequently stock deep, clear lakes with trout—especially rainbows and brookies—in the fall and

sometimes through winter. Some of these lakes receive “broodstock” fish. These are larger, mature trout that have been raised in hatcheries for a number of years to provide milt and eggs as part of trout stocking programs. These put-and-take fisheries offer anglers the chance to tangle with a number of fish and also enjoy some fresh trout on the grill during the cold winter months. For the purposes of this article, we’ll focus on these more accessible inland fisheries rather than big water.

PROPER PLANNING

Knowledge is the first key to hardwater trout success on inland waters. Start with online research using the free resources provided by your state natural resources agency. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources posts the results of its annual stocking activities in an easily searchable database. Here, anglers can search on a lake-by-lake basis in each county across the state to locate bodies of water that are stocked with trout. Often, you can even see what the average size of the fish were at the time of stocking.

Add to this knowledge by having a conversation with your local fisheries manager. He or she can help fill in another part of the puzzle: stocking dates. Fish stocked in the spring are frequently gone by winter. Instead, look for fall stockings—especially late in the season—to provide quality winter angling.

Timing your trout adventure during the hardwater season is the next important consideration. Although trout are usually active below the ice, their general willingness to eat is a function of dissolved oxygen levels. In ice-capped lakes, dissolved oxygen is high during the first-ice period but declines throughout the winter as the frozen surface prevents the liquid water from exchanging gases with the atmosphere above. The decrease in dissolved oxygen can become even more pronounced when heavy snow covers the ice, which leads to the death and decomposition of aquatic vegetation—a process that consumes oxygen dissolved in the water. As such, hardwater trout action is frequently highest early in the ice season and can be sustained over long periods when snow cover on the ice remains limited.

Automatic hook-setting devices baited with fathead minnows often do well on trout. Just be sure to check on their legality in the state and area where you’re fishing.



TROUT TRIPS

Inland waters to satisfy salmonid fans

Many Upper Midwest lakes and ponds are stocked with trout in late fall to provide winter ice fisheries. Your state’s natural resources department and local fisheries managers can help dial in locations to chase hardwater brookies, browns and rainbows. Here are some quality options to get you started.

MINERAL WEALTH

Crosby, Minn.

The Crosby Mine Pits, just north of famous Mille Lacs Lake, are stocked with brook, rainbow and brown trout throughout the year. Due to the depth of these former iron mine pits, trout survive—and are catchable—all year.

TWIN CITIES TREASURES

Chaska and Shakopee, Minn.

Courthouse Lake and Quarry Lake near the Twin Cities are well-known hardwater trout fisheries. They are heavily pressured because of their proximity to so many anglers. However, this accessibility makes them perfect for fishing with young anglers.

WILDERNESS WONDERS

Ely, Minn.

For an adventure, many Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness lakes host tremendous winter lake trout fishing. Accessibility is tough, as

motorized vehicles aren’t allowed in the wilderness area. A long hike—and possibly a weekend-long winter camping trip—may be required.

NORTHWOODS NOTABLES

Seeley and New Auburn, Wis.

Numerous smaller lakes and ponds in Northwest Wisconsin receive annual allocations of broodstock trout, especially brookies and rainbows. Some favorites include Silverthorn Lake near Hayward and Bass and Hennemann lakes north of Eau Claire.

WOLVERINE WATERS

Roscommon and Walloon Lake, Mich.

Opportunities abound across much of Michigan, but Higgins Lake in central-lower Michigan is one good option, as is Walloon Lake roughly an hour north. Many smaller Upper Peninsula lakes are also solid for icing some trout. Use the Michigan DNR’s fish stocking database to narrow down choices.

TROUT TACTICS

With insights on where and when to fish, it's finally time to hit the ice. Interestingly, fishing for inland, stocked trout is not necessarily the high-precision, "spot-on-the-spot" angling game that we often play for walleyes or panfish. As such, high-definition contour maps of stocked trout lakes are, in general, not essential.

Stocked trout are roamers, often covering large stretches of shoreline or even making laps around the perimeter of smaller lakes as they hunt for their next meal. I tend to catch more trout within 100 feet of shore than I do farther out into the lake. Small bays, shoreline bends or near-shore obstructions like fallen trees can help concentrate trout—or at least make them linger for longer periods of time—as they meander. Water depth and break lines don't seem to be as important as proximity to shore and shoreline cover.

Fishing for hardwater trout involves using similar tactics you might use for walleyes. However, there's a bit more emphasis on waiting for constantly roving schools of trout to find you and your offerings. Tip-ups or other set-line devices work well. Bait them with walleye-sized fathead minnows and ensure that fish can easily pull line out after the strike, as resistance will cause trout to drop a bait rapidly.

Remember that in clear water, trout can see baits from a long distance. Setting baits about halfway down the water column, regardless of depth, is a good approach. Fathead minnows under a slip-bobber can also work well.

If you're in the jigging mood, rattling spoons and other flashy presentations can be effective. Usually these are tipped with live bait, like minnows or wax worms. Unlike jigging for walleyes, trout will frequently appear out of nowhere to attack your spoon—far different from your typical cat-and-mouse approach to eliciting bites from lethargic warm-water fish.

CHANGE IT UP

Ice fishing for trout has become one of the highlights of my hardwater season. Consider giving it a try this year. I'm confident you'll appreciate the aggressive fish, beautiful colors and, above all, the change of pace as we fish our way through the winter months. 

ACCESSORIES

CLAM CLAMLOCK ACCESSORIES

Trick out your trap, shelter or permanent ice house with ClamLock. This system uses easy-to-install pucks, or base plates, that can attach to center hubs on hub-style shelters, flat surfaces on flip-over shelters and the walls of fixed ice houses. An integrated slide lock allows anglers to attach various ClamLock accessories such as rod holders, rattle reels, shelves, gear pockets and even a cooler bag. (\$9.99–\$29.99; clamoutdoors.com)



HUMMINBIRD ICE HELIX BUNDLES

For this season, Humminbird has upgraded its line of Ice Helix bundles, as well as introduced several new ones. Some include MEGA Live Imaging or MEGA 360 Imaging. Anglers also have access to a purpose-built premium ice shuttle and new lithium batteries in select bundles. (\$399.99–\$2,999.99; humminbird.com)



GARMIN LIVESCOPES ICE FISHING BUNDLE LI

This slick bundle takes Garmin's incredible Panoptix LiveScope sonar technology, with forward- and down-scanning modes, and pairs it with a new lightweight lithium-ion battery to keep you fishing longer. It also uses a large, 9-inch ECHOMAP UHD 93sv touchscreen and comes with a charger and power cable in a glove-friendly portable bag. (\$2,999.99; garmin.com)



STRIKEMASTER PRO LITHIUM 40V LITE AUGER

The new Pro Lithium 40v LITE upgrades StrikeMaster's standard Lithium 40v auger with a Lite-Flite Lazer Drill Unit and new 6-amp battery. The result is less weight and more hole-drilling capabilities. It comes with an 8-inch-diameter blade. (\$649.99; rapala.com)



AQUA-VU QUAD HD

The Quad HD's four 720p underwater lenses in one camera module permit forward, backward, left and right viewing. Its 10-inch LCD has four touchscreen-selectable quadrants and touch zoom, or it connects to larger displays, like a TV. It comes with 125 feet of camera cable, adjustable infrared (IR) lights, powerful battery, smart charger and a soft carry bag. (\$1,799.99; aquavu.com)



THE HOTTEST

10

THE MIDWEST IS AN ICE ANGLER'S PARADISE. THESE 10 BODIES OF WATER OFFER THE VERY BEST HARDWATER ACTION.

By Scott Mackenthun

Ice fishing's popularity shows no signs of slowing. According to the most recent National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, U.S. anglers spent approximately \$181 million on ice-fishing equipment in 2016. Anecdotally, one only has to look at the proliferation of new ice gear or the crowds of anglers on frozen lakes to know that ice fishing is alive and quite well. Perhaps nowhere in the country is this clearer than in the Midwest. Our region is loaded with avid ice anglers, ice-fishing companies and hardwater outfitters and retailers.

It also contains many of the nation's finest ice-fishing destinations. In fact, we're blessed with so many

great hardwater fisheries that determining the Midwest's best waters proves challenging. Yet, that's exactly what we mean to do here. Before that, though, let's set a few ground rules.

To be an elite ice-fishing destination, a location must offer exceptional fishing for a particular species or, better yet, a mix of species. Prime locations should be large enough for anglers to spread out and withstand the inevitable angling pressure accompanying such top billing. And, key for any great hardwater fishery, of course, is ice. Good candidates should ice up reliably enough for a solid window of safe ice angling annually. The 10 ice-fishing destinations here meet these qualifications and are exceptional choices this season.

1. LAKE OF THE WOODS, MN

THE DRAW: Ridiculous walleye and sauger fishing, giant northern pike, big burbot and more.

THE WINDOW: December's early ice is the peak, but the bite is solid all season.

When I describe Lake of the Woods to new ice anglers I often say, "Your worst day walleye fishing on Lake of the Woods is usually better than your best day walleye fishing elsewhere." Walleyes and saugers are the main event here, but giant northern pike, state-record burbot, jumbo yellow perch and ciscoes for the smoker are present, too. The lake's also noteworthy because it heats up fairly early in the season.

SPOONS AND JIGS

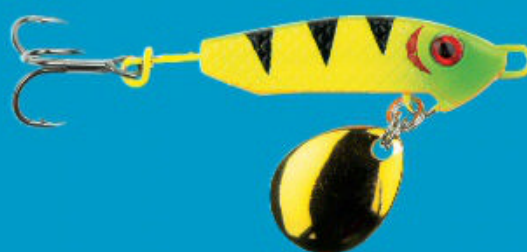
CLAM OUTDOORS RIBBON LEECH FLUTTER SPOON

Taking after Clam's popular Leech Flutter Spoon, this new lure features a thinner cut, which makes it fall through the water at a much slower speed. A noisy flapper blade helps attract fish. It comes in 12 different colors. (\$5.99; clamoutdoors.com)



FREEDOM TACKLE CORP. FREEDOM FLASH

A premium zinc, UV-coated body and a belly-mounted Indiana blade combine to mimic the erratic action of a baitfish in trouble. The lure is available in 12 colors and two weights: 5/32 and 5/16 ounce. (\$4.49; americanbaitworks.com)



FISHLAB BIO-MINNOW VERTICAL JIG

This jig utilizes a metal tail, which increases durability and allows for fine tuning. Anglers can choose an aggressive side-to-side darting action or flatten the tail for more of an up-and-down presentation around cover. It's available in five sizes and seven colors. (\$6.99-\$8.59; fishlabtackle.com)



NORTHLAND FISHING TACKLE BUCK-SHOT COFFIN SPOON

This spoon takes its name from its unique shape, which produces a tantalizing tumbling and gliding action. An internal brass rattle calls to fish, while the flicker tail mimics the motion of a baitfish's tail with each pump. It comes in four sizes and 12 colors. (\$6.99; northlandtackle.com)



VMC TUNGSTEN MONGO JIG

The fast-dropping Tungsten Mongo Jig offers a small profile and an X-long Power Gap hook that's perfect for soft plastics or live bait. It also has a 90-degree line tie to always keep the jig balanced. Now available in six new glow colors. (\$5.89/2 jigs; rapala.com)



Lake of the Woods' monster pike attract many ice anglers, but this northern Minnesota gem offers exceptional fishing for many other species, too.

"Early ice is some of the best ice," says Joe Henry, an avid ice angler and the executive director of Lake of the Woods tourism. "Those fish get a little break in late fall, and by early December are primed to chow down. There are resort houses going out by the first weekend most years. You can catch fish year-round, but it's hard to beat first ice in December."

He adds that accesses and resorts dot the lake's south shore, providing ample opportunities to get out quickly and easily on maintained road systems. These help anglers connect to the myriad structures fish frequent around the lake, like specific reefs or humps, as well as deep-water mud flats. Henry says the key is staying on fish as they move over or adjacent to structure because of forage or fishing pressure.

Tactics-wise, Henry loves the one-two punch. Drop a setline or deadstick with a plain hook or glow jig minnow near the bottom. The second line should

have a jigging spoon in gold or pink with glow—preferably with a rattle to attract fish in the lake’s stained waters.

TRAVEL TIPS

Check out the Lake of the Woods Tourism Bureau web site (lakeofthewoodsmn.com) or Facebook page for fishing reports, how-to videos, lake maps, snowmobile trails and a resort and lodging list. There’s something for everyone here, whether you embark on a freelance seek-and-destroy walleye mission or rent a fish house from an outfitter. Most resorts also offer “you-catch-we-cook” fish fry services.

2. CHEQUAMEGON BAY AND THE APOSTLE ISLANDS, WI

THE DRAW: Trophy lake trout, big browns, whitefish, walleyes and many others.

THE WINDOW: Varies, but ice starts forming in the bay in December and reaches the islands in late January or early February.

Most Great Lakes get unreliable ice cover through winter, but Chequamegon Bay and the Apostle Islands on Wisconsin’s share of Lake Superior are an exception. Relative to the rest of Superior, this bay, the islands and the areas around Bayfield and Ashland, Wis., are quite shallow. Ice usually starts forming in December and extends to the outer islands by mid-winter.

This area’s species diversity is without equal among ice-angling destinations. Local guide Josh Teigen (joshteigen.com) says walleyes, bass, perch, northern pike, lakers, splake, browns, brookies, whitefish, burbot, herring, salmon and even lake sturgeon are all possible targets in the bay. Because these fish utilize the same areas in winter, anglers might catch seven or eight species on a given day. In the Apostles, big lakers, browns, splake, whitefish and herring are the main attractions.

Teigen always follows the ice progression from Chequamegon Bay north to the Apostle Islands. He likes to hit new ice and unpressured fish and escape crowds. He says the islands usually start freezing in late January and early February, but it all depends on weather conditions.

Much of Teigen’s fishing happens on big flats, but Lake Superior always has some current to attract fish. He also rec-

Big walleyes can be found at hot spots across the region this winter, whether you’re fishing Green Bay, Devils Lake or another body of water.



THE BEST OF THE REST

Rounding out the region’s remaining top destinations

4. MILWAUKEE HARBORS, WI

Catch giant Seeforellen brown trout and steelhead on the Milwaukee lakefront’s iced-over harbors. These gorgeous giants are some of the biggest trout in the Midwest.

5. DEVILS LAKE, ND

Devils Lake has prospered during 30 years of mostly wet cycles and the expansion of the lake. Its abundant and large walleyes, northern pike, yellow perch and white bass offer incredible fishing.

6. LAKE GOGEBIC, MI

Lake Gogebic yellow perch will give any perch angler a run for his money. They’re fussy and discriminating, carefully inspecting lures and keying in not on minnows but wigglers, the larval form of the giant mayfly.

7. IOWA GREAT LAKES, IA

Sight-fish for big ‘gills on Lake Okoboji’s clear waters, or hit Spirit Lake for numbers and size on perch and walleyes. White and yellow bass

are fun if you find a school or two, and big pike, muskies and bass offer even more action.

8. SANDHILLS LAKES COUNTRY, NE

The Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Pelican Lake and many other small basins in the Sandhills offer ice anglers huge panfish and bass. Filled with vegetation and insect life, these productive systems are good places to find a bluegill, crappie, perch or bass for the wall.

9. GREEN BAY, WI

Green Bay has the best lake whitefish angling around, with fish feeding heavily on abundant and invasive round gobies. Fill your whitefish limit, then fish structures early and late for walleyes, including some huge ones.

10. GLACIAL LAKES, SD

Perch, walleyes, pike, bluegills and black crappies are abundant in South Dakota’s northeastern corner, famous for its glacial lakes. Fish the hot bite or chase down a wall mounter.

ommends checking out available structure, like inside turns where depths change rapidly, prominent rock bars, points that stick out and river mouths. Teigen starts his season fishing in 5 to 40 feet of water to determine the depth fish are cruising at, then moves out from there.

The guide prefers being aggressive. Jigging often outproduces setlines. He likes calling fish in with an Acme V-Rod blade bait but also throws Kastmasters,

flutter spoons and flashy spoons tipped with minnow heads. He fishes some tip-ups with shiner minnows throughout the water column, too.

TRAVEL TIPS

Satisfy all bait-and-tackle and lodging needs in one place at River Rock Inn and Bait Shop in Ashland (riverrockinn.net). Then, head downtown to grab a bite at The Deepwater Grille (deepwatergrille.com).

3. OTTER TAIL LAKES COUNTRY, MN

THE DRAW: Super-sized sunfish, slab crappies and other northern goodness.

THE WINDOW: Prime time for panfish is late February and March, but safe ice often forms in mid-December, depending on weather conditions.

This may surprise some, but it shouldn't especially panfish fans. Recently, the Otter Tail Lakes region has become known for serious trophy sunfish.

"Our sunfish are older and slower growing, but they tend to live longer and reach some giant proportions," says local fishing guide Garrett Svir (slabseeker fishing.com). "You have an honest chance with every hole drilled in the ice to catch an 11-inch bluegill."

If that isn't enough, the region is filled with productive, mesotrophic lakes sustaining excellent crappie populations, including large fish. And Otter Tail County's more than 1,000 lakes offer ample shots at walleyes, perch, northern pike and bass, too. A major plus of the ice here is it grants access to lakes where you can't launch a boat during the open-water season. This gets ice anglers on prime water that's less pressured the rest of the year.

Panfishing can be good in December and January, but Svir says the bite explodes in late February and March. Panfish move shallow, and on warm days the shallow-water action heats up.

Svir feels finding green weeds is key to finding fish. He suggests inside turns hold the best cabbage and coontail beds with remaining green vegetation.

His go-to lures are 3- to 5-millimeter tungsten jigs tipped with euro larvae or plastics. On less-pressured lakes, Svir says anglers can use slightly bigger jigs; on pressured waters, he likes the opposite. Jigging spoons and hardbaits also produce, especially if anglers encounter lots of tiny perch and wish to reach bigger fish. He really likes a 1/8-ounce Eurotackle Z-Viber fished a few feet off the bottom.

TRAVEL TIPS

Book a room at East Silent Lake Resort (eastsilentresort.com). Or, if you want to go no-frills, Grand Stay Hotel (grandstayhospitality.com) in Parkers Prairie offers rooms and a continental breakfast. Enjoy a fantastic cheeseburger at The Rusty Nail in Battle Lake. 

RODS, REELS, COMBOS AND TIP-UPS

CLAM OUTDOORS SCEPTER CARBON ROD

With an extra-stout backbone for hard hooksets and an extra-fine tip for delicate bites, the Scepter Carbon should be a hot item this year. It also features an ergonomic reel seat and handle. It's available in eight models from ultra-light to medium-heavy. (\$99.99; clamoutdoors.com)



ABU GARCIA VERITAS ICE SPINNING COMBO

The new Veritas ice combo sets anglers up with an ultra-responsive 24-ton graphite blank paired with a smooth, four-bearing reel. The reel's Rocket line management system improves control of line coming off the spool, while the high-density EVA handle provides greater sensitivity and durability. (\$49.99-\$59.99; abugarcia.com)



ST. CROIX TUNDRA ICE RODS

The new Tundra Series of rods packs ample features into nine different models. Extra-fast action, light-power options use strong Extreme-Flex solid glass blanks and sensitive, hi-vis strike-indicating tips while other models have powerful Precision-Taper solid carbon blanks for landing bigger fish. (\$100-\$130; stcroixrods.com)



DAIWA BALLISTIC MQ LT

This new reel utilizes a host of proprietary features, including Daiwa's one-piece Zaion V body, Digigear system, Zaion V air rotor, air bail and an 8-ball bearing system. The result is a smooth-operating reel with plenty of fish-turning power. It's available in sizes 1000 to 4000. (\$229.99; daiwa.us)



FRABILL VYPR TIP-UP

This next-generation thermal tip-up incorporates a built-in aerator to inhibit ice formation, an inline reel for sensitivity and a lighted trip indicator. It runs on two D batteries and has an oversized design for use in holes up to 10 inches in diameter. (\$69.99; frabill.com)



OKUMA CEYMAR TG REELS

Available in smaller 500 and 1000 sizes, the ultra-compact Ceymar TG reel is perfect for the ice. The TG models sport a tactical green matte finish and can be had in spinning and baitfeeder (TGF) configurations. The reels use an 8-bearing system with Quick-Set anti-reverse. (\$59.99-\$79.99; okumafishingusa.com)



BIG BIRDS,



BIG EXPERIENCES

HUNTING SEA DUCKS OFF THE NORTHEAST COAST IS A **THRILLING, AND SOMEWHAT UNNERVING, ADVENTURE** FOR INLAND WATERFOWLERS.

By Alan Clemons



At some point you're just collecting thoughts in the twilight as eiders and scoters weirdly chatter and zoom overhead. Your shotgun is loaded and set, ammo box open and positioned by your thigh for quick access. Clothing is adjusted and readjusted because you're in thick layers sitting on your bottom in a two-man boat. You and your boatmate make sure you can shoulder your shotguns and swing with a couple of practice moves. You check the clock for the fourth or fifth time, making sure your phone is in

the zippered chest pocket of your parka. All this finally ends, and then you and your boatmate sit quietly, listening, watching big birds flying, thoughts wandering in myriad directions.

During that time, if you're realistic, you think about being in a two-man boat gently riding the tide in a deep cove of the Atlantic Ocean. The mothership is hundreds of yards away. It's a quick zoom with a wide-open throttle but by then, you think, you'd be in the cold water and maybe flailing a bit. You scan the horizon, and those thoughts disappear.

Stuff happens everywhere, all the time. You're in a two-man boat with a loaded Benelli Super Black Eagle waiting for official shooting time for one of the coolest experiences you've had in a lifetime of hunting waterfowl. Get ready for it.

If you're not geeked and a bit unnerved when thinking about what goes on out here, chasing sea ducks might not be for you. But if you're into our nation's history—sporting and founding—and want to experience new waterfowl hunting tactics and unique birds, I can tell you that hunting sea ducks off



A two-man layout boat is surprisingly stable in the chop of the Atlantic and effective at hiding hunters from eiders, scoters and other ducks.

the Northeast coast is something you should not miss. I've been in blinds and leaned against trees in Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee. This was one of the coolest hunts I've ever done.

Reilly McCue has been hunting ducks for about 40 years. He is in awe each morning. You hear guides who say they love their work. They love the grind and long hours. McCue does. He admitted that after about 20 years it's not as easy as it once was yet still is a thrill.

"It amazes me to hold these birds in my hands, knowing where they came

from up north and what they've endured to migrate here each year," McCue said. The eiders, scoters, brant, long-tailed and other ducks breed far north of the shores of Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York. They come each autumn from Thunder Bay, Nunavut, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and other faraway breeding grounds, just as mallards and teal wing their way from the Prairie Potholes.

"I want to ask them questions," McCue continued. "What they've seen, what they've experienced."

GEAR UP FOR SEA DUCKS

Plan accordingly for the weather conditions.

When we hunted in Massachusetts, the weather was pretty doggone stunning for December. No rain, wind or snow, sunny days and comfortable conditions. But being on the water always knocks a chill in your bones. And even though you watch weather forecasts it's not unusual to encounter a crazy wind or storm.

My base layers were merino wool **Icebreaker Tech top and bottom** (icebreaker.com) and **Swiftwick socks** (swiftwick.com). All are comfortable, not itchy and stay warm if wet. They also resist the odors of several days of hunting. I usually go one size up, and they're my first choice for winter hunting. Next came jeans, shirt, a **Sitka Fanatic hoodie** (sitkagear.com) and **Stormy Kromer Woolover jacket** (stormykromer.com). I topped off with a **Sitka fleece neck gaiter and GTX hat** for roaster warmth.

Over all this was a **Drake Waterfowl Refuge 3.0 3-in-1 jacket** (drakewaterfowl.com), which has a removable liner, multiple magnetic-snap pockets and roomy hood. Zippered chest pockets can hold phone, ammo, gloves or other gear, and fleece-lined pockets on the breast are positioned perfectly.

I also donned **Drake Waterfowl Guardian Elite waders**, which have an internal tearaway insulated liner. A belt cinches tight around your chest or belly, and a flexible front zipper is fantastic yet does not leak. The waders have three-layer breathable fabric, ample insulation, and reinforced boots, knees and seat. They're tough and comfortable.

Finally, do not forget to pack sunglasses. Sunlight and glare off the water is harsh, and they can ruin a day as much as the cold.

HUNTING IN AMERICA'S HISTORY

You can hardly toss a 3-inch shotgun shell around the Northeast, especially along the coast, without it hitting something steeped in history. When the country's pioneers landed they were smart enough to stay near water and head north from Plymouth, where ample seafood, wild game and mild summers awaited. Winter, of course, was a bit harsh, but they adjusted.

Our crew of hunters last December stayed in Hampton, N.H., which was founded in 1639. Just up the road is Portsmouth on the Piscataqua River, first explored in 1603 and founded in the 1620s. Boston was founded in 1630. Native Americans were here well before those settlers arrived, of course, in what is now the United States and Canada. The history runs deep for whatever avenue of interest you pursue.

As for waterfowling, that includes the earliest settlers learning likely hard lessons about tides and mud flats. Marshes with winding routes. Hitting waterfowl and seeing them skitter but keep flying, or fall to the water but dive out of sight. Those experiences still happen today, though over the 350 or so years of hunting ducks and geese we've learned more about strategy, hiding, blinds, ammunition and how to hunt. Our crew hunted

near Gloucester and Salem, Mass., and the Merrimack River.

"You know, a lot of the places with the richest duck hunting are the places we settled long ago," McCue said. "Big harbors, protected bays ... we hunt down in Boston Harbor all the time. The islands down there have relics of forts and other structures, whether they're from way back in time or World War II. There's tons of history along the coastline of Massachusetts. We're close to an area where they had the witch trials.

"There's great waterfowling tradition here from years past. There is a lot to see and visit, along with knowing you're part of the history of waterfowl hunting. But it doesn't seem as if there are as many people doing it anymore, which is great for me."

ABOUT THE BOAT

McCue has a regular routine that begins just before waterfowl season, and to the non-guiding world, it sounds pretty harsh. But it's how he stays on top of things and makes sure his hunters are in what he believes are the best places for ducks.

He's up every morning at about 2 o'clock to get ready. He checks the weather reports—again—and tides, and anything else relevant. His custom 25-foot Fab-Tech deep V-hull boat is ready

to go: decoys in the side storage panels, clips and weights secured, gas in the 250 hp outboard, the Core Sound twin layout boat secured in the bow.

The latter is like a flying saucer with the dome removed and seats added. Two hunters can securely sit in it, shooting front and sides, without tipping. Our hesitation to roll over the gunwale into it quickly disappeared. McCue also hunts islands off the coast, but pointed out that he never puts clients on islands that will be covered by the tide. That's a recipe for potential disaster, he said.

Layout boats, sneak boats and similar blinds have been used for probably centuries in coastal areas. Low to the water, they afford camouflaged hunters the chance to sit back and become a blip on the surface. In the Southeast, they often are in marshy areas or agriculture fields and resemble coffins or sunken boxes. In the Northeast, you're on the water in a round rig like ours or maybe a floating box. All are effective techniques, provided you're in an area with ducks.

McCue's scouting throughout the season puts him in the prime locations for birds moving to the best feeding areas. These big pillow-sized eiders, scoters and other divers seek mussels and clams, repeatedly diving to eat and surfacing in the morning before a midday roost and



SALTWATER AND SHOTGUNS

A new treatment from Benelli blunts the impact of saltwater, mud and harsh conditions.

The new **Benelli Surface Treatment (Be.S.T.)** offers impressive protection against rust and abrasion, which we discovered with our Super Black Eagle 3 shotguns in Massachusetts. Post-hunt maintenance is much easier, too, and Benelli guarantees Be.S.T. with a 25-year warranty.

Benelli engineers worked for a decade to develop Be.S.T., a treatment that uses physical vapor deposition and plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition to apply diamond-like carbon particles to the gun's exposed metal surfaces. These particles are molecularly adhered to the metal through the intense vapor deposition process.

As with any waterfowl hunt, our gear got wet. Being in saltwater is more of a concern, but even after splashes, being knocked around in the boats and shoved into cases after the hunt, none of our shotguns experienced any issues. Saltwater can attack metal parts quickly. Our days ended midmorning before stowing the gear, returning to the ramp and then traveling to McCue's home to split up ducks. The guns spent more than half a day in saltwater conditions for three days straight, and yet no rust or malfunctions occurred.

Benelli got it right. Unfortunately, older guns cannot be sent in to be treated due to the amount of work required. Benelli currently applies Be.S.T. to the Super Black Eagle 3, Ethos and Ethos Cordoba models, and the treatment may come to others (benelliusa.com).

rest. They may feed again before nightfall, where they will raft overnight in massive groups. The shellfish beds may shift a bit depending on river and tidal influences, but for the most part, they're historical areas the birds come to each year.

On the islands McCue said clients also may shoot mallards, scaup, mergansers, buffleheads and common goldeneyes. Unlike Arkansas, where greenheads rule and some hunters consider anything else to be trash, it's a wide-open menu on the coast.

McCue started hunting when he was about 9 years old, going with his father and uncles. They had a weekend get-away and would hunt the marshes. He's tried everything from big to small boats, layouts, wading in the marshes, blinds and sitting on the islands. He prefers hunting around the islands but will do whatever is best based on his scouting and the clients. After about 40 years of hunting and 20 of guiding, he may not have seen it all but he's come close.

"The [two-man] boat is just another way to get after them," McCue said.

Capt. Reilly McCue has spent 40 years hunting scoters and other sea ducks off the coast of Massachusetts.



READY FOR ACTION



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“We’re using these layout boats because we’re in an open bay where the birds are diving and feeding on clams and mussels. There’s no way to get after them and hide effectively without using these layout boats. They’re deadly.

“These mussel beds at low tide will be exposed or may be a couple of feet under. For a lot of these common eiders, the mussel beds they’re feeding on are in 20 feet or less of water. These birds come back year after year, and the mussel beds or clam beds shift and change but generally are in the same places. With some of the abilities to put GPS on the birds and track them, biologists figured out that they return to the same areas. When you’re considering your hunting locations you also have to account for the pressure you and other hunters might be putting on these birds all season long.”

KEEP SHOOTING

We were eager to hunt after going through McCue’s routine of off-loading and anchoring the two-man boat, then clipping weights on decoys attached to a main line that he set in front of the rig. Skeins of brown and black eider and scoter decoys bobbed along with some lines of hand-made wooden decoys that looked like big yard ornaments. The size stands out to ducks flying far off. Ducks see lines of birds on the water and zoom by, often cartwheeling to land or making a loop before splashing down. McCue uses dark decoys on cloudy days and lighter ones on sunny days, often mixing dark and light depending on conditions and the birds.

We were shooting 12-gauge Benelli Super Black Eagle 3 shotguns loaded with 3-inch Kent Faststeel 2.0. Having shot sea ducks in Maine years ago, it was no surprise when McCue reiterated what we had heard on that trip long ago: If you hit a duck, shoot again and watch it fall because you may have to hit it again. These big ducks with thick feathers and down are tough, and they can take a smack or two. The “Woohooo!” shot you make may not be enough.

“With improvements in steel and chokes, you definitely can hunt with steel and not worry about the non-toxics,” McCue said. “My favorite is probably a No. 2 or No. 3 load. It depends on how you’re set up, too. We’re set up with these birds coming within 40 yards of the decoy spreads, so some guys might

want to shoot bigger and faster steel like BBs. But if you’re trying to get them to decoy in, I think No. 2 probably is a good all-around load. If you use some of the more expensive non-toxics, No. 4 is ample. One thing about these sea ducks, though, is they don’t like to die. They don’t give up the ghost real easy. Gotta hit them hard.”

We did, pounding the birds and celebrating the splashes. We laughed about some of the misses, and as waterfowlers often do, we looked confused with a few shots that didn’t connect. Sea ducks are big but they fly quickly. Don’t be fooled into thinking these little tanks are slow. You better have your A-game dialed in.

After a flurry we would contact McCue on the walkie-talkie to come over, and the crew would net the birds from the mothership before moving several hundred yards away.

The ducks didn’t seem to care about us shooting and moving, or the big boat. They would fly overhead, within range, land in the decoys, fly out, still buzz around after we shot, and then a few moments later we’d have another flurry. McCue watched from the big boat, communicating, taking photos of ducks with his Canon camera, and enjoying the moment. A woman on the beach, well away from us, watched birds and ducks through a spotting scope. The



The quaint, family-owned Lamie's Inn is a Hampton landmark built in 1740.

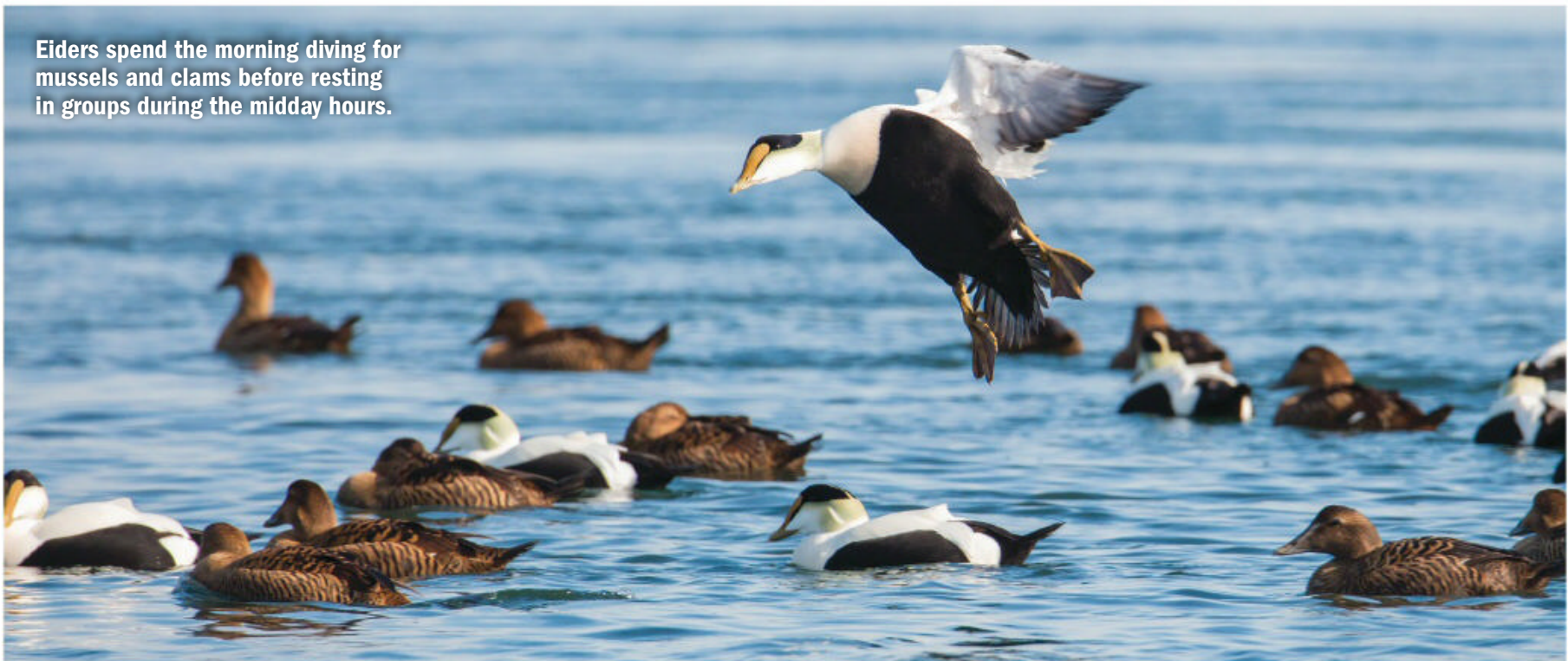
WANT TO GO?

Sea ducks are the main draw in Massachusetts, but there are other attractions to fill an afternoon.

Veteran guide and U.S. Coast Guard captain Reilly McCue of RPM Outdoors (rpmoutdoors.com) runs trips out of harbors along the Northeast coast. He takes into account his scouting, weather, tides and what his hunters want to accomplish. McCue is stringent about safety, licenses and limits. He enjoys a good hunt but doesn’t tolerate tomfoolery or unsafe actions.

I suggest staying at Lamie’s Inn and Old Salt Restaurant (OldSaltNH.com) in Hampton, N.H. This charming inn welcomes hunters, as does the town, and has long been a part of the area’s history. Rooms are comfortable, clean and quiet. At the Old Salt, be sure to get a cup of clam chowder, slab of haddock, and lobster mac and cheese. Wash it down with a Smuttynose Finestkind IPA or Old Dog Brown, an Allagash White or a Shipyard Prelude Winter Warmer.

Fly into Boston or Manchester, N.H., and drive over. If it’s the former, work in some time to visit Revolutionary-era sites downtown and Fenway Park. Salem is famous for the witch trials, of course. Other possibilities include the SIG Sauer Academy in Epping, N.H., and the Kittery Trading Post in Kittery, Maine.



Eiders spend the morning diving for mussels and clams before resting in groups during the midday hours.

coastline, even in winter, is one of the best birdwatching areas in the country. McCue occasionally deals with anti-hunters at the boat ramps. He remains polite, explaining about the ducks, his scouting and birding year-round to help with biological surveys, and conservation

issues. Some get it, some don't. He tries to be understanding. In spring and summer he often is in the woods doing biological counts of birds, fungus and insects. His beard gives him the appearance of an old salt, but his inner kid hunting marshes with his father and uncles never grew up.

“Like to do what we do and enjoy being outdoors,” he said. “One of my lines in my life in general is I try to not let my good time negatively affect someone else’s good time. There’s a lot to do and enjoy, man, so let’s just get along and enjoy it.” **G&F**

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RUGER

HAWKEYE PREDATOR

**BALANCE
AND
PRECISION
COMBINE
IN A RIFLE
WELL-SUITED
FOR FURBEARERS
AND VARMINTS.**

By Richard Mann

Ruger Hawkeye rifles are the latest incarnation of Ruger's famous Model 77 bolt-action centerfire rifle design. The origin of the name "Hawkeye" is found in early American literature. It was the nickname of fictional hero Natty Bumpo, the lead character in James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales." (Remember "The Last of the Mohicans?") Today, "Hawkeye" is commonly used to describe anyone who is an exceptional rifle shot. This all makes it a fitting name for an American-made hunting rifle.

I recently tested the newest rifle in

the Hawkeye line. Called the Predator, it is available in four chamberings: .204 Ruger, .223 Rem., .22-250 Rem. and 6.5 Creedmoor. One version comes with an adjustable length of pull, and all but the .223 Rem. Hawkeye Predator have 24-inch barrels. Ruger gives the .223 Rem. rifle a 22-inch barrel. For me, the appeal of the Predator is the melding of a standard sporting-type rifle with a moderately heavy barrel, making it seemingly ideal for mobile, or "walking," varmint and predator hunting.

Like all Hawkeye rifles, the Predator

utilizes a non-rotating, Mauser-type, controlled-round-feed extractor, has a hinged floor plate with an engraved Ruger logo, and a bolt-mounted three-position safety. Other shared features include a cold-hammer-forged barrel, integral Ruger scope bases, and a two-stage adjustable target trigger. Features unique to the Predator are a natural camo-like Green Mountain laminated hardwood stock, and a stainless-steel action and barrel with a matte finish. Additionally, though the Predator is not a heavy rifle, it does have a robust barrel. Just in front



The Predator's hinged floorplate is secured by an unobtrusive, but easily accessible, latch built into the front of the trigger guard.



48 mm (external measurement) objective bell of the Swarovski .13 inch above the barrel. This is about ideal. If you were to mount a riflescope with a much larger objective bell, you'd probably need to order a No. 6 ring for the rear and use the No. 5 ring on the front. Doing so might push the centerline of the scope above the height desired for a comfortable cheek weld while shooting.

I went with a scope having a more traditional size and magnification range because, while this rifle proved long-range capable, I felt it best suited to snooping around the edges of pastures for groundhogs and setting up in the same locations to call coyotes. Both situations typically offer shots in the 100- to 300-yard range, and at those distances a 3-10X riflescope works well. In fact, after testing from the bench I conducted a good deal of shooting from unsupported field positions and from a Spartan Sentinel tripod. The rifle's perfect balance—right between the hands at the front scope ring—was optimum for that type of shooting as the results on target proved. Several three-shot groups from the sitting position at 100 yards measured right at an inch, and from the tripod, two of the 200-yard groups were about the same size.

I did not tinker with the Hawkeye's adjustable trigger. Out of the box it broke at exactly 3 pounds and was very crisp. Interestingly, Ruger describes it as a two-stage trigger with a short take-up stage. I could detect only an infinitesimal amount of first-stage movement, and as

of the action the barrel's diameter is 1.155 inches, and it gently tapers to a muzzle diameter of .676 inch.

For testing, I mounted a 3-10x42 mm Swarovski Z3 riflescope with a 1-inch tube in the matte stainless rings that came with the rifle. Since the current trend in riflescopes seems to be bigger is better, some discussion of the Ruger rings is in order. The rifle ships with Ruger No. 4 front and No. 5 rear rings, which are considered medium in height. Attached to the Hawkeye's integral scope bases, these rings positioned the

SPECIFICATIONS

RUGER HAWKEYE PREDATOR

ruger.com

TYPE: bolt-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: .223 Rem.

BARREL: 22"; cold-hammer-forged stainless steel; medium contour; 1:9" twist rate

TRIGGER: two-stage adjustable; 3-lb. pull weight

SAFETY: three-position wing

MAGAZINE: internal box with hinged floorplate; 5-round capacity

SIGHTS: none, scope bases integral to receiver and Ruger rings included

FINISH: matte stainless steel

STOCK: Green Mountain laminated hardwood; 13 1/2" length of pull

OVERALL LENGTH: 42"

WEIGHT: 7.7 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,359

advertised there was no creep. It is a very good trigger—as good a factory trigger as I have pulled on a sporting-weight Ruger rifle—especially for off-hand shooting where most of the shooter's focus needs

to be directed toward sight alignment.

I had only a single complaint with the rifle. As I've found with most Ruger Hawkeye rifles, out of the box the bolt seemed a bit rough. Experience with previous Ruger 77s and the more modern Hawkeye iteration has shown this roughness ebbs rather quickly. Ultimately, after several hundred rounds you end up with a bolt action that operates smoothly.

I also must mention that the test rifle in .223 Rem. weighed 7 percent more than the advertised 7.7 pounds. It's not unusual for factory weight specifications to be a bit off, they're generally averages as opposed to exacts, but a half-pound discrepancy is worth noting. Regardless, don't mistake the rifle's svelte appearance to mean it's a lightweight. The moderately heavy barrel is there for good reasons: to not heat up during volume fire and to help stabilize precision shooting in the field.

Ruger offers 10 different Hawkeye rifles suitable for hunting everything from prairie dogs to pachyderms. Several are available in 6.5 Creedmoor and two come chambered for the .204 Ruger. However, only the Predator version of the Hawkeye is available chambered for the .223 Rem. and 22-250 Rem., which are unquestionably two of the best predator hunting cartridges ever offered. The Predator also comes out of the box with a matte finish on all steel surfaces including the scope rings and a stock that's somewhat camouflaged. All it needs for stealthy predator hunting is a suitable riflescope and a good shooting sling.

I really liked this rifle and expect serious predator hunters will too; the Predator shoots very well, balances perfectly, and requires no aftermarket camouflage treatment for the field. In .204 Ruger it'll work just fine for gophers, groundhogs, bobcats and coyotes. The .223 Rem. and .22-250 Rem. options can do the same and work for deer with the right ammo where .22 centerfires are legal. With a Predator chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor, a hunter would have a rifle capable of taking care of all varmints and most big game. And like with all the other Ruger Hawkeye rifles I've tested, if there's any missing going on, the gun won't be to blame. 



SHOOTING RESULTS

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MUZZLE VELOCITY..... 3,227 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.19"

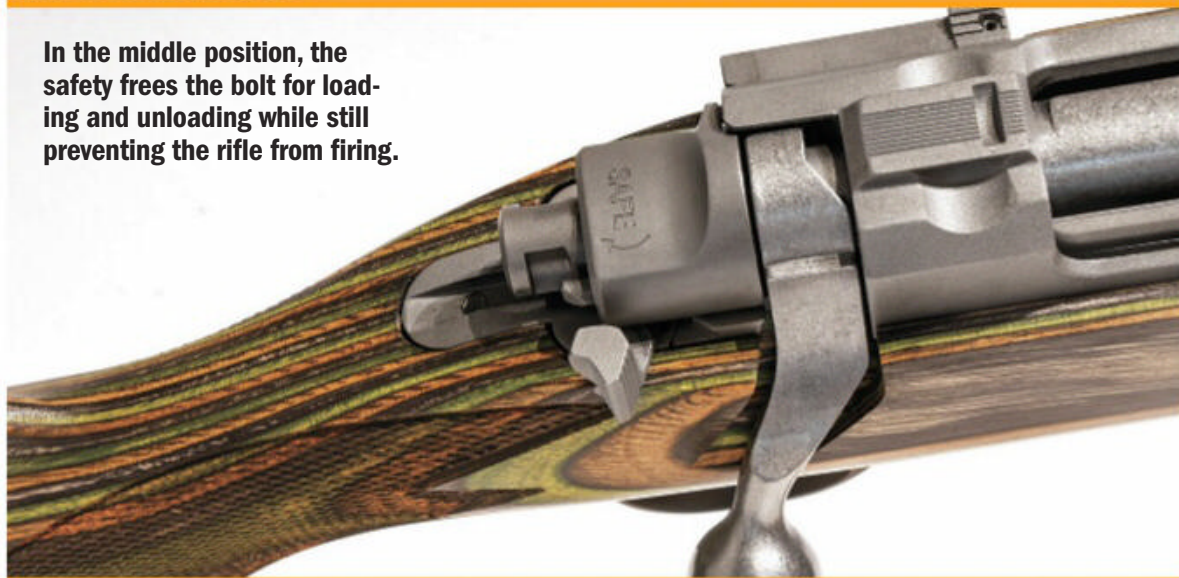
LOAD Nosler Flat-Base Tipped Varmageddon
BULLET WEIGHT 55 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY..... 3,105 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 0.70"

LOAD..... SIG Sauer Varmint & Predator
BULLET WEIGHT 40 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY..... 3,565 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 0.98"

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



Scope bases are integral to the receiver, and the rifle comes with Ruger rings.



In the middle position, the safety frees the bolt for loading and unloading while still preventing the rifle from firing.



The full-length, Mauser-style claw extractor retains cartridges for controlled-round feeding.

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- 9P ET** The Gamekeepers of Mossy Oak
- 9:30P ET** Driven with Pat & Nicole
- 10P ET** Drury's THIRTEEN
- 10:30P ET** Critical Mass

LEUPOLD VX-3HD

THE VX-3HD LINE IS
RICH IN PRACTICAL
FEATURES BUT
REMAINS AFFORDABLE.

By Adam Heggenstaller

I could tell Shawn Skipper was excited, and it wasn't because he had just returned from a successful elk hunt. (I think it was elk. Skipper hunts so much that it's difficult to keep track.)

"Big news from us," he said, "and you're going to like it."

By "us," Skipper meant Leupold.

The CDS-ZL dial has a locking button that prevents it from accidentally moving from the zero position.

He serves as the company's industry relations manager and therefore keeps me abreast of the latest product developments coming from headquarters.

"We're giving the VX-3i line a bunch of upgrades and calling it the VX-3HD," he dutifully reported. "I know you're a fan of the VX-3i, but these new HD scopes are even better—"

I interrupted him with a groan. Recently I'd come to notice that scope "upgrades" meant larger main tubes and objective lenses. Several VX-3i scopes had been favorites of mine because they were compact. Before I could pose the question I was afraid to ask, Skipper continued the conversation.

"Don't worry, we'll have a bunch of scopes with 1-inch tubes in the line. The zoom range and most of the objectives are staying the same."

We could still be friends. While I recognize the benefits of 30 mm main tubes, mainly increased adjustment capability

and a larger magnification range, I don't find them necessary for the majority of my hunting. The tradeoff of a larger, heavier and in some cases quite bulky scope aren't worth the extra clicks and power. Call me old-fashioned; I like 1-inch scopes on hunting rifles.

I ordered the 2.5-8x36 mm VX-3HD, and I've hunted with it on bolt-action rifles and lever guns for almost a year now. Skipper was right; Leupold did upgrade the line in several ways while keeping it practical and affordable.

The VX-3HD scopes are built around Leupold's Elite Optical System, which considers every aspect of the view presented by the scope. The glass formula, arrangement of the lenses and their coatings are all taken into account when assembling the scope. The result is not only better light transmission in low light, but also improved clarity, resolution and glare reduction. The Elite Optical System "handles" the available light

and makes it most useful to the eye. In addition, the VX-3HD has Leupold's Guard-Ion lens coating to protect the exterior glass surfaces from dirt and debris while helping them shed water.

One of the most notable upgrades is the VX-3HD's CDS-ZL elevation-adjustment dial. The Leupold Custom Dial System (CDS) has been available for about 10 years now, and it keeps getting better. Provide the company with load, rifle and environmental data, and it will etch a dial with marks that correspond to the elevation adjustments needed for various ranges. Instead of having to look at a drop chart and count clicks to make the necessary adjustment, simply turn the dial to the number that denotes the range to the target (3 for 300 yards, 3.5 for 350 yards, and so on). It's a slick, practical system that eliminates guesswork while in the field—as long as you provide Leupold with solid data—and I've made good use of it while hunting elk, mule deer and coyotes.

The ZL portion of the dial's name refers to the ZeroLock function, and this is where the VX-3HD receives an improvement. Built into the rear of the dial near its top is an oval button. When the button is engaged, the dial is locked at the zero position to prevent accidental movement. Unlocking it simply requires pressing the button with your thumb while you pinch the dial to make an adjustment. It's a small but very notable enhancement that offers peace of mind.

The CDS-ZL dial isn't useful only for 300-yard-plus shots. Hunters using muzzleloaders, slug guns and center-fire rifles chambered in straight-wall cartridges all can benefit from having elevation marks at closer distances. And they can get this advantage in reasonably sized VX-3HD scopes.

While the 2.5-8x36 mm hits a sweet spot for deer hunting, there is a 1.5-5x20 mm VX-3HD and several higher-power models up to 6.5-20x50 mm. Interestingly, the standard 3-9x40 mm configuration is absent from the line. Leupold offers a 3.5-10x40 mm VX-3HD instead.

Most VX-3HD scopes come with a checkered, cylindrical throw lever that mounts to the magnification ring for quick changes in power. I'll admit I had planned on removing the throw lever to maintain the scope's streamlined shape, but its low profile didn't get in

the way during the first few months that I tested the VX-3HD so I kept it. Plus, the lever really did make it faster to zoom up and down through the magnification range.

I was glad I had it when a buck came trotting through an overgrown clearing at just more than 100 yards from my stand. I could have shot the deer with the scope on 2.5X, but the throw lever made going up to 8X so quick that I didn't have to.

This occurred after three days of snow, sleet and rain, and the VX-3HD weathered it all with no problems. The scope is waterproof, fog-proof and shock-proof. The one I've been testing answers adjustments precisely, and it's been right at home on .30-30 Win. and .45-70 Govt. lever actions.

The VX-3HD ranges from \$499.99 to \$999.99 (leupold.com), with the pricier



A short but sturdy throw lever aids quick changes in magnification.

models having features such as an illuminated reticle, side parallax adjustment knob, and yes, a 30 mm tube. The line offers a scope for just about any hunting situation, but I think I'll stick to the 2.5-8x36 mm. Did I mention it's built on a 1-inch tube? 

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By Adam Heggenstaller

To me, the lever-action rifle will always be the quintessential deer gun. Whether it's chambered for .30-30 Win., .45-70 Govt. or even .35 Rem., a lever gun belongs in the woods come deer season. I suppose those feelings come from growing up in the East and toting a Winchester Model 94 through the hardwoods and hemlocks during my formative years as a deer hunter. A lot has changed about rifles, cartridges and deer hunting since then, but the iconic lever action continues to be favored by a whole lot of hunters—and not just in the Appalachians.

Federal Premium (federalpremium.com) recognized this when, working

with Henry Repeating Arms, it set out to develop a new line of ammunition specifically tailored to up the performance of lever-action rifles. The HammerDown line was announced in 2020 and has grown to include loads for not only the .30-30 Win., .35 Rem., .444 Marlin and .45-70 Govt., but also the .327 Fed. Mag., .357 Mag., .44 Mag. and .45 Colt. While these latter four may be regarded as handgun cartridges, they are also used in lever-action rifles in states that now permit hunting with straight-wall center-fire cartridges in areas previously open only to shotguns and muzzleloaders.

Ballisticians at Federal focused on several areas when developing

HammerDown. Let's start with the bullet. All HammerDown loads feature molecularly bonded bullets, meaning the bullet's jacket is permanently adhered to its lead core. This eliminates the chance for the jacket and core to separate during impact, and it helps retain weight during penetration for deeper wound channels. Federal uses the process to make Fusion bullets, and Speer relies on it for Gold Dot bullets.

The bullets loaded in what are typically handgun cartridges are heavier than normal in the HammerDown ammo. For example, the .357 Mag. bullet weighs 170 grains instead of 158 grains, and the .44 Mag. bullet weighs 270 grains rather than 240 grains. This is a nod to the substantially higher velocities these cartridges produce in longer rifle and carbine barrels. Federal lists the velocity of the .357 Mag. HammerDown load at 1,610 fps and the velocity of the .44 Mag. load at 1,715 fps. The four rifle cartridges in the line have more conventional bullet weights and velocity ratings.

Federal loads HammerDown in nickel-plated brass cases to ward off corrosion and aid in extraction. The front face of the case's rim is chamfered for smoother cycling. The HammerDown loads, being a Federal Premium product, are loaded with Gold Medal primers. Suggested retail prices for 20 rounds are \$25.99 (.45 Colt) to \$65.99 (.45-70 Govt.).

I tested the 300-grain .45-70 Govt. HammerDown load, which Federal advertises as having a muzzle velocity of 1,850 fps. From a Marlin Model 1895 Guide Gun with an 18 1/2-inch barrel, the load averaged 1,983 fps when I shot it through a chronograph. Accuracy at 100 yards was excellent, as all three-shot groups were less than 1.5 inches and several crowded 1 inch.

In Ohio, I shot a nice buck with the load at a range of a little more than 100 yards. The bullet impacted the deer about halfway up the body along the rear edge of the shoulder and passed through. The deer fell and never moved another inch. While the big bullet did its job admirably, there was little undue damage to the meat surrounding the wound cavity—something that nearly always occurs with lighter, faster bullets.

Lever-action rifles simply work for whitetails. With HammerDown loads, they may even work a little better. 

"...with average 5-shot groups shrinking by around 25%"
- John Barsness, Rifle #311, July 2020

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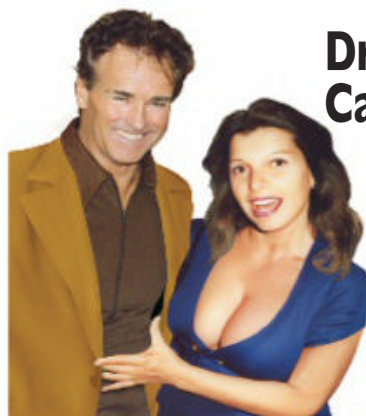
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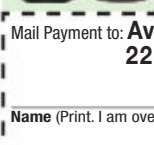
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SKEET LESSONS

CONFIDENCE AND MANNERS ARE
 MORE IMPORTANT THAN FANCY GUNS.

One Saturday Shane's buddy John Jackson invited him for a round of skeet at Oak Hill Sporting Club, where John's father was a member. Shane had never shot skeet, nor did he know his town had a "sporting club." But if it involved shooting, Shane figured it had to be fun.

When they arrived, however, Shane felt out of place. The men he saw looked like they were dressed more for business meetings than for fun. There was no camouflage anywhere.

His apprehension increased as John and his father uncased their shotguns.

John's was an over-under with long, deeply blued barrels that glinted in the sun like an ocean wave. The gun's silver receiver was engraved with the word Beretta and the initials J.C.J. underneath. John broke the shotgun open and deftly balanced it on his shoulder, barrels forward so they pointed down. Mr. Jackson's shotgun had gold inlays and ornate wood with a wispy grain like smoke over a campfire. It made Shane's hand-me-down Mossberg 500 feel inadequate.

After Mr. Jackson signed in, the trio, along with an older gentleman assigned to their group, positioned themselves on station No. 1.

"Just study the birds' speed and angle, and you'll do fine," said Mr. Jackson as he stepped onto the shooter's box.

"Pull!" he growled. An orange clay disk sped across the sky before quickly disappearing in a gray puff of dust.

"Pull!" Another clay pigeon flew from the opposite direction and was promptly pulverized. The attorney-turned-shooter



loaded the over-under and called again, and this time two birds flew simultaneously. Both were blasted into smithereens.

Next up was John, who hit the first three but missed the last. Then the older gentleman stepped up. Shane noticed his shotgun was even fancier than Mr. Jackson's. He dropped one bird, but Shane could tell he knew what he was doing.

It was Shane's turn. He loaded a shell in the chamber and, knowing there were four targets coming, slid three shells into the magazine.

"I meant to tell you," said Mr. Jackson politely, "but in skeet you load a maximum of two shells."

"Yessir," said Shane, embarrassed as he ejected two shells from the Mossberg. "Pull" he yelled finally, before breaking the target into pieces.

"Good shot!" said Mr. Jackson. "Now do it again."

By the time the foursome was on the last station, Shane was no longer nervous. He had hit 21 out of 23 birds thrown. John had 19, the older gentleman had 22, and Mr. Jackson was perfect.

"Wow! You haven't missed a single target yet!" blurted Shane just before Mr. Jackson called for his final bird.

"Pull!" he said, firing almost immediately, but the bird sailed away unblemished. Mr. Jackson grumbled, clearly upset.

The group took the rest of their targets, with Shane hitting the high-house bird but missing the one from the low house. As they walked to the clubhouse, Mr. Jackson complimented Shane on his shooting.

"Just think what I could do with a gun like yours," replied Shane.

At that moment the older gentleman spoke up.

"Son, can I offer you three points of advice?"

"Yessir," said Shane.

"Sometimes in sport, like in business, adversaries underestimate those who are humble, and that can give you an edge. So don't be too quick to retire that pump gun if it's working for you. Secondly, etiquette is very important. Never remind a shooter about a streak they've got going. It's poor form. And most importantly," he continued, "never drink too much coffee."

Shane furrowed an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I can't go a full round without nature calling," said the gentleman. "So take my Perazzi here and go run 25 straight while I visit the men's room."

Shane had no choice but to accept the shotgun. He looked at John, who was chuckling.

"You know how much that thing's worth?" asked John.

"I don't wanna know," said Shane.

"Just don't drop it!" kidded John.

Shhhhh. No wake zone.



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