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GAME & FISH

MIDWEST

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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FEBRUARY 2022

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THE RIGHT TIME TO
DROP MORE **FUR**

13 TIPS FOR BAGGING
WINTER **BUSHYTAILS**

5 SETS EVERY TRAPPER
SHOULD **MASTER**

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FOR **HARDWATER PIKE**

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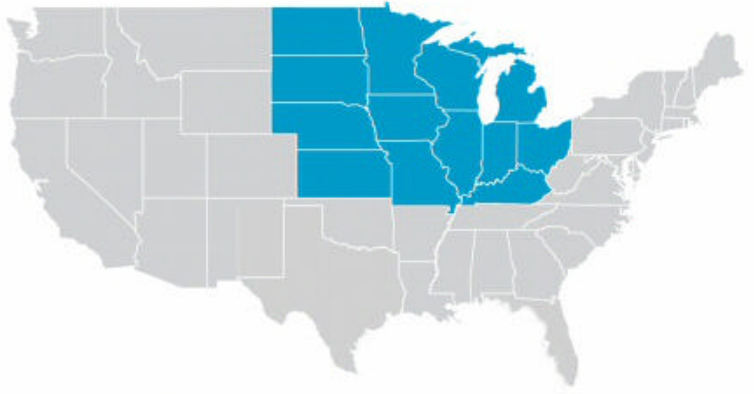


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REGIONAL EDITOR: Drew Warden, Drew.Warden@OutdoorSG.com | COVER IMAGE: Lon Lauber Photography | [@GAMEANDFISHMAG](https://www.instagram.com/GAMEANDFISHMAG) | [FACEBOOK.COM/GAMEANDFISH](https://www.facebook.com/GAMEANDFISH)

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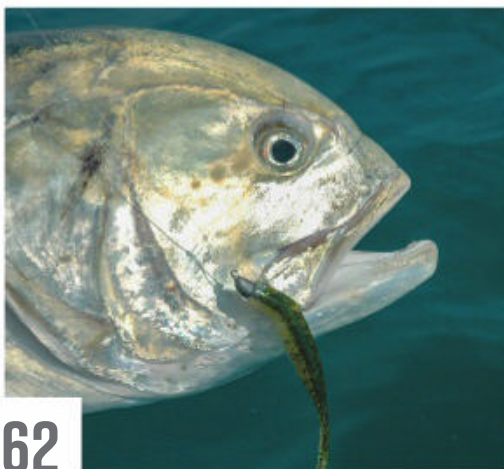
Wolf management is a hot-button issue that affects hunters' role in conservation beyond the West.

By Andrew McKean

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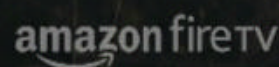
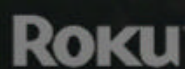
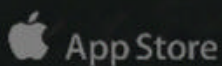
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MAKING MEAT

I'm writing this as the statewide firearms deer season comes to a close in Pennsylvania. More importantly, I'm writing this as a proud father.

Just last week my 11-year-old son killed his first deer, a spike buck. It's difficult to describe the emotions that tore through my body when Jacob fired his rifle, the buck behind the blind and out of my sight; when my son turned to me, exasperated because he was sure he had missed; when I found a drop of the buck's blood and when Jacob found another and when the trail soon turned to a wide spray of crimson. The spike had made it less than 50 yards, Jacob's bullet hitting the lungs and heart, just as we had practiced on a cardboard silhouette for months leading up to the season.

I have never felt a pang in my soul like the one I experienced that cloudy afternoon when Jacob started to cry, quickly reassuring me his tears were because he was happy to have made a good shot that killed the deer quickly. Perhaps his reaction was one of a boy, but his thinking was that of a man who respects the resources he is privileged to enjoy and consume.

And, together, along with his mother, sister and grandmother, consume we did. Two nights later we sat at the supper table, slices of the buck's backstrap taking deserved precedence as the main course. Our conversation, of course, once again turned to the hunt. Only this time, with his plate full of venison from the deer he had killed, Jacob had a deeper understanding of the action that had resulted in his taking of an animal's life.

On the Saturday when he tagged his first deer, he was excited and proud of his accomplishment. He had achieved a goal. He could tell his Papa and his friends that he had got a buck. Much of that was still there as he recounted the best moments from the hunt. But, halfway through the meal, he had a simple yet profound revelation.

"You know," he said, "we wouldn't be eating backstrap if I hadn't shot a deer." He paused to take another bite. "I shot it so we could eat it."

My son recognized that, as a hunter, he was a provider. I ate, and I was full.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

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PUBLISHER

Michael F. X. Cassidy

EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Adam Heggenstaller
Adam.Heggenstaller@outdoorsg.com

EDITOR

John Taranto
John.Taranto@outdoorsg.com

REGIONAL EDITORS

Dr. Todd A. Kuhn
Drew Warden
Chuck Smock

ONLINE CONTENT EDITOR

Scott Bernarde

ART DIRECTOR

Brian Judge

ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Andrew Tuchscherer

PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Melissa Williams
Melissa.Williams@outdoorsg.com

ADVERTISING

NATIONAL ENDEMIC AD SALES

Jim McConville | (440) 791-7017
James.McConville@outdoorsg.com

WESTERN REGION

Hutch Looney
Hutch@HLooney.com

MARINE/FISHING ADVERTISING

Michael Cassidy | (407) 625-0992
Michael.Cassidy@outdoorsg.com

MIDWESTERN REGION

Mark Thiffault | (720) 630-9863
Mark.Thiffault@outdoorsg.com

NATIONAL AD SALES

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR DETROIT OFFICE

Kevin Donley | (248) 798-4458
Kevin.Donley@outdoorsg.com

NATIONAL ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE CHICAGO OFFICE

Carl Benson | (312) 955-0496
Carl.Benson@outdoorsg.com

DIRECT RESPONSE AD/ NON-ENDEMIC

Anthony Smyth | (914) 409-4202
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GIANT '21 WHITETAILS

We have details on many of the biggest whitetails taken last season. "Big-Buck Stories: 10 Huge Whitetails from 2021" offers inside-the-hunt perspectives.



BEER FOR DEER

See what goes into crafting a beer for field-to-fork dining and cooking with venison. Read "Deer Beer: Brew a Perfect Pairing for Venison."



TRADESHOW SEASON

New firearms, bows and accessories were unveiled at the ATA and SHOT shows in January, and we were there. Check the "Gear" menu for in-depth coverage.



SHOOTING WITH AIR

There's a wide variety of air rifles for plinking, hunting and even survival. Watch episodes of "Modern Air Rifle" (under the "Watch" tab) to learn more.



GET READY FOR BASS

Our exclusive video series, "Crash Course" and "Beyond the Bait," are must-sees for those who chase bass. Go to our "Watch" tab to prepare for spring.



COLD & HUNGRY

Catfish aren't picky when it comes to eating, but some baits work better than others when waters get cold. Read "5 Winter Catfish Baits That Work."

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**CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,
PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA**
Mike Carney

EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS
Derek Sevcik

VP, CONSUMER MARKETING
Peter Watt

VP, MANUFACTURING
Deb Daniels

SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION
Connie Mendoza

DIRECTOR, PUBLISHING TECHNOLOGY
Kyle Morgan

SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Tim Neher

DIRECTOR, DIGITAL EDITORIAL
Jeff Phillips

For questions regarding digital editions,
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CONTRIBUTIONS: Contact Drew Warden at Warden@outdoorsg.com for writer's guidelines. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for loss or damage to unsolicited material.

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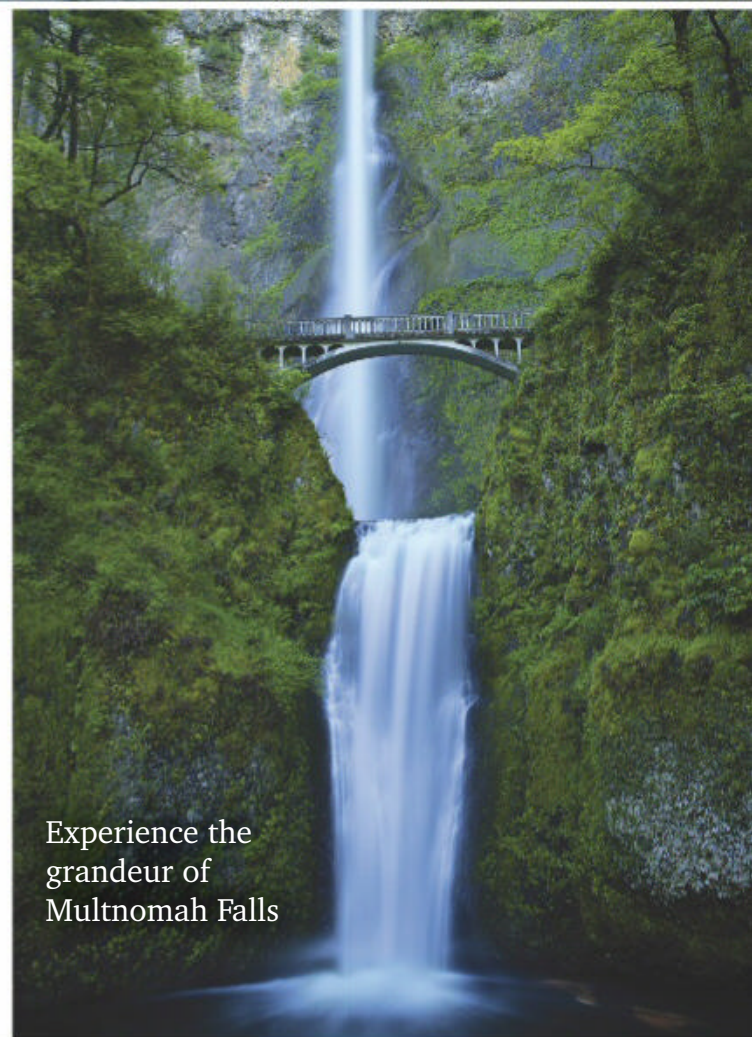


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SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
23 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42	24 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30	25 am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18	26 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06	27 am 7:30 to 9:30 pm 7:54 to 9:54	28 am 8:18 to 10:18 pm 8:42 to 10:42	29 am 9:06 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					

FEBRUARY 2022

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06	2 am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	3 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	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	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 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06	17 am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	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	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					

MARCH 2022

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	2 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06	3 am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	4 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	5 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30
6 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	7 am 2:42 to 4:42 pm 3:06 to 5:06	8 am 3:30 to 5:30 pm 3:54 to 5:54	9 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42	10 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30	11 am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18	12 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06

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

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DAYS

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DAYS

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The Tetra AlphaShield cancels harmful gunshot noise but enables hunters to hear softer and more distant sounds when in the field.

HEAR THE NO EVIL

**MODERN ELECTRONIC HEARING PROTECTION
GUARDS THE EARS AND BOOSTS AWARENESS WHILE HUNTING.**

By Richard Mann

Guns make loud noises. This is one reason suppressors have become so popular. It's also the reason many shooters have poor hearing, tinnitus or both. In my younger years I shot a lot of guns without hearing protection. I also spent a great deal of time on a military tank range, sometimes with only my index fingers in my ears to "protect" my hearing. It's no surprise that I don't hear nearly as well as I used to, and there is a constant ringing in my ears. Trust me, hunters should take every step they can to avoid hearing damage or loss—both on the range when shooting and in the field while hunting.

The obvious action is to wear hearing

protection, but common ear plugs and muffs come with an inherent problem. They not only reduce the amount of harmful noise from gunfire that enters your ears, but they also muffle every other sound. They make it difficult to hear range commands, your hunting buddy, guide and environment, and they make you talk really loud. The answer to this problem is electronic hearing protection that shuts down to block noises above a certain decibel level, but amplifies conversation and even the sound of a whitetail buck sneaking behind your stand while you're hunting.

I've tried just about every hearing protection device on the planet. Although expensive, the electronic models are

the best option. I've found that unless you spend the money for top-of-the-line electronic hearing protection, you'll soon regret your purchase. The failure rate of bargain-basement devices is so high that in a couple years you'll have spent enough money replacing them to have paid for high-quality electronic hearing protection.

When I was a young coonhunter, my partner and I purchased electronic hearing protection muffs that also amplified sound to help us hear our hounds when they got out of range. They worked reasonably well but sometimes gave us fits when trying to determine the direction from which the sound was coming. Modern amplification devices like the

COURTESY OF TETRA

Champion Vanquish Pro Elite, WildEar FieldEarz and Tetra Shield series work in stereo and make this easier. This, combined with the protection they offer, is one of the reasons in-ear devices like them are being used more and more by hunters when they're hunting.

In fact, one of the driving forces behind the development of the products from Tetra was that the company wanted to create in-ear sound-enhancing devices that would help hunters hunt better. On occasion I've used these electronic devices when hunting and found they do indeed allow me to hear sounds that would have otherwise whispered past my damaged hearing. Though I may be a bit old school to fully embrace the concept, they work. The primary downside I've found using electronic amplification devices when hunting is their magnification of wind noise.

Of course, you might be thinking, *My hearing is great, and when I shoot at game animals, I don't experience that loud ringing in my ears.* For many that's true and it's because high adrenaline levels often prevent the post-shot ear ringing you experience on the range when not wearing hearing protection. This happens because of auditory exclusion and aural reflex; it's the body's natural mechanism to protect hearing. This leads many to believe that when hunting they do not need hearing protection. However, while auditory exclusion and aural reflex may prevent that post-shot ringing, they are not reliable means of hearing protection. Hearing damage can still occur. Additionally, these natural reflexes typically only apply to the shooter. If your son or daughter is pulling the trigger, it's unlikely your adrenaline levels will be high enough to provide any natural hearing protection. The same applies to hunting guides.

Another consideration are muzzle breaks, which have become very popular. Muzzle breaks do a good job of reducing recoil, and an even better job of damaging hearing. Hunting guides hate them, and I do, too. Even the quietest muzzle brakes are loud enough to breach your body's audio exclusion and aural reflex limited protection capabilities. If you're shooting or hunting with a muzzle-brake-equipped rifle and not using hearing protection, you're either a fool or already deaf. 

HEARING PROTECTION FOR HUNTERS

Devices made for the stalk and the stand

Many hunters wear glasses to enhance their vision and protect their eyes. Using sound amplification devices to enhance and protect your hearing while hunting is no different. Here are several models worthy of field.

CHAMPION VANQUISH PRO ELITE

The best over-the-ear electronic hearing protection I've found is the Vanquish Pro Elite earmuffs from Champion. They're very comfortable, have two, full-dynamic-range HD speakers and an omnidirectional microphone, minimize wind noise, and are Bluetooth capable. While you're wearing them you can listen to music or even answer a phone call. They're also equipped with a 12-hour-run-time, rechargeable lithium battery. Of course, they are, like all over the earmuffs, a bit bulky. \$249.95; championtarget.com



WILDEAR FIELDEARZ

My primary hearing protection are custom-fit in-ear devices from WildEar. You create a mold of your outer ear canal with the Home Fit Kit, send it in to WildEar, and the company builds amazingly compact electronic ear plugs to provide a perfect fit. This means that even if you do not turn them on you will still get hearing protection. I've had mine for about six years and have broken them twice—miniature electronic devices will always be fragile—but WildEar has repaired them, free and within a week, every time. They run off standard hearing aid batteries. I'd now give \$10,000 to have had them when I was a teenager and when I was in the Army. \$1,095; wildear.com



TETRA MULTI-PURSUIT ALPHASHIELD

Tetra is a relatively new company providing in-ear electronic hearing protection devices. But Tetra is a bit different from other companies in that it has explicitly developed units for hunters. These devices are engineered to enhance the sounds emitted by the specific game you hunt, whether it be deer, waterfowl, elk or turkeys. The in-ear units offer both hearing enhancement and protection. Prices range from \$699 for AmpPods to \$2,199 for custom-fit, multi-pursuit, amplification and protection CustomShield ear inserts. A few years ago, Tetra provided me with a set of the non-custom Multi-Pursuit AlphaShield units to test, and they worked impeccably well. I've used them on the range and during turkey hunts. They perform as advertised. \$1,499; tetrahearing.com





EARLY BITES

AS WATERS WARM, SO DOES THE ACTION FOR **PANFISH, BASS AND WALLEYES.**

By Dr. Jason Halfen

The natural world bristles with life in spring—and not only on land. Beneath the water's surface, once-dormant shallows now teem with life, from the smallest insects to the largest aquatic predators, as the sun's powerful photons drag water temperatures out of their wintertime lows. While anglers in most parts of the country are still anxiously waiting for this to happen in their local waters, it's not too soon to start planning for the bites of spring.

Early-season fishing can be a daunting proposition. Which species should we pursue? Which part of the lake holds

the most active fish? Which baits or lures might be most effective? The answers to these questions will help us prepare for three of the earliest open-water opportunities of the season.

First, understand that no matter which species of fish you decide to pursue as spring arrives, water temperature is the key to success. Surface water that is even just a few degrees warmer than surrounding areas will tend to concentrate actively feeding fish. In general terms, focus your efforts on soft-bottomed bays that are off the main body of water. The best bays will frequently be sheltered from

the prevailing wind to minimize the influx of cold water. Within these bays, shallow, near-shore areas are generally better than deeper ones.

Interestingly enough, current from river inlets can be a double-edged sword in the spring. While current will help to attract and retain species like walleye, cold runoff delivered by river inlets can also reduce local water temperatures and turn the bite off for bass and panfish. Monitor surface temperatures with electronics as you approach river inlets. If you encounter a plume of substantially colder water, continue your search in another area.

DR. JASON HALFEN (ABOVE); TOM MARTINEAU, THE RAW SPIRIT (RIGHT)

SPRING FLINGS

Throw these baits during the first trips of the season.

Spring provides renewed opportunities for multiple species, but like any other time of year, certain presentations will be more productive than others. Get your season off to a memorable start by using the following baits.



PANFISH

2-Inch Big Bite Baits Crappie Minnow on 1/16-ounce jig

This extremely versatile soft-plastic offering can be cast and retrieved, fished vertically or even slow-trolled behind the boat. bigbitebaits.com

Rapala Ultra Light Rippin' Rap

An excellent choice for covering water and triggering the largest fish in a school, this compact Rippin' Rap shines in the often-turbid waters of early spring. rapala.com

BASS

Z-Man ChatterBait

Extract early season bass from wood and weed cover by dressing this vibrating jig with a soft-plastic fluke or boot-tail minnow trailer. zmanfishing.com



LiveTarget Sunfish Rattlebait

Whether it's fished fast or slow, shallow or deep, the Sunfish Rattlebait blends fine-tuned action with loud internal rattles and biomimetic patterns to trigger bass. livetargetlures.com

WALLEYES

VMC Moontail Jig

This jig is best fished with an aggressive snap-jigging retrieve, and without any sort of trailer or live bait. rapala.com



Rapala Rippin' Rap

No. 6 and No. 7 Rippin' Raps trigger some of the biggest bites of the year from walleyes in spring. rapala.com

GO SOFT ON PANFISH

Many a panfish has landed in a livewell after munching a chunk of nightcrawler or slurping an inch-long minnow in the spring. Nevertheless, savvy anglers recognize that they will typically catch more and larger fish by using artificial presentations. Such an approach has the added advantage of making fish easier to release, as bluegills and crappies are rarely hooked deeply when caught on lures.

Oversized bluegills respond favorably to slender-profile soft plastics rigged on the same small tungsten jigheads that Northern anglers use all winter through the ice. A particularly potent combination is a 5 mm tungsten jig dressed with an inch-long orange, red or black soft-plastic tail.

Early-season crappies love minnow imitations. Present a 1 1/2- to 2-inch minnow-profile soft plastic on a 1/16-ounce jighead. A long cast and slow, swimming retrieve that keeps the bait above emerging weeds or standing wood cover can be highly effective.



My favorite rod for both bluegills and crappies is 7 feet long with light power and extra-fast action. The length helps to propel lightweight offerings long distances on the cast, and it also moves a lot of line quickly to ensure productive hooksets. Its light power rating ensures abundant sport from panfish targets, while retaining plenty of backbone to handle incidental bass and pike. I add a 1000-series spinning reel spooled with 10-pound-test braided line and a 3-foot leader of 6-pound-test fluorocarbon to complete the rig.

GIVE BASS A FEAST

Cold-water bass are notoriously fickle feeders. However, this lethargic attitude is rapidly replaced by an aggressive, predatory stance as water temperatures rise into the 50s. The rapidly warming environment puts bass on the feed as they increase their calorie counts in advance of impending spawning rituals.

Hard baits are excellent choices for targeting early-season bass. In Southern

reservoirs, square-billed crankbaits can be fished productively along swing banks where creek channels run from the main lake toward the backs of bays. In the North, where pre-spawn bass congregate near shallow weed growth, vibrating jigs are an outstanding option. In this situation, a steady retrieve through the tops of submerged weeds in 4 to 8 feet of water is all that's required to catch good numbers of early-season largemouths.

RATTLE UP WALLEYES

Once the ice is off the lakes and water temperatures have risen into the 50s, walleyes will have completed their annual spawning movements. They will remain in relatively shallow water in search of recuperative meals. Contrary to popular belief, these fish can be targeted with great success using lures that provoke aggressive reaction strikes. A great place to look for these post-spawn walleyes is on the edges of near-shore sand flats in 8 to 12 feet of water.

Lipless rattlebaits are ideal choices for targeting post-spawn walleyes. These

baits excel at provoking reaction strikes, especially when presented with an active rip-jigging motion. The 1/2-ounce size is preferred for beefcake Great Lakes walleyes, while a smaller 1/4-ounce rattlebait is a good choice for inland waters, pressured fish or post-frontal conditions.

I prefer a powerful, responsive rod when rip-jigging rattlebaits. Look for a rod that is 6 feet 8 inches to 7 feet long with medium power and fast or extra-fast action. A 2500-series spinning reel spooled with 20-pound-test braided line completes your ticket to springtime walleye action. 



TRICKED OUT FOR TOMS

A small red-dot optic makes a turkey gun much easier—and faster—to aim accurately than when using a standard bead sight.

TURN A STANDARD SHOTGUN INTO A GOBBLER-GETTER BY MAKING THESE THREE EASY UPGRADES.

By Adam Heggenstaller

Shotguns built for turkey hunting come from the factory with a variety of enhancements that fall into three purpose-driven categories. Some features such as back-bored barrels, extended forcing cones and species-specific choke tubes are designed to boost the performance of turkey loads. Other aspects—sight setups and stock designs in particular—help hunters direct tight patterns to the target. Finally, there are attributes that improve concealment and handling.

A new turkey gun that has all these elements can carry a price tag that exceeds \$1,000. These shotguns are impressive tools to wield in the spring woods, but a rig that will deck a gobbler need not come at such expense. In fact, many general-purpose “field” variations of popular models will admirably serve turkey hunters after making a few upgrades to the standard equipment.

With turkey season just a couple months away in most states, now is the time to tune up a shotgun for toms. The following modifications will make a scattergun more effective on longbeards,

and they can be completed in little time at home with basic tools. And since none of them are permanent changes, the shotgun can be returned to its original state when turkey season is over.

CHANGE THE CHOKE

This is the easiest upgrade to give an upland or waterfowl shotgun in converting it to a turkey gun, yet many hunters fail to take full advantage of the available options. While most shotguns come with a set of interchangeable choke tubes that include one with full constriction, aftermarket choke tubes offer much tighter inner diameters that can improve patterns and give a turkey gun a greater effective range.

A choke tube is represented by its inner diameter at the muzzle end; the smaller the measurement, the tighter the choke. Most 12-gauge full choke tubes measure .685 to .695 inch at the muzzle, while many turkey-specific choke tubes have inner diameters of .660 to .670 inch. When selecting a turkey choke tube, don’t assume the tightest constriction will yield the best patterns. In fact, some of the recent

turkey loads that utilize tungsten-alloy shot pattern better in moderately tight choke tubes. In addition, just because one gun or load patterns well with a .665 tube doesn’t mean another will do the same.

Finding the perfect combination of choke tube and load can take time and money, but there is a way to save some of both. Aftermarket manufacturers like Carlson’s (choketube.com) and Trulock (trulockchokes.com) have done extensive research with a wide variety of constrictions and loads in most of the popular shotgun models. It’s well worth asking them for advice on a specific combination and then heeding it.

IMPROVE AIM

A gobbler’s head and neck are small targets, and they require precise aim to hit. Unfortunately, the conventional shotgun bead sight—even when it includes a secondary bead midway down the barrel—is about the worst arrangement for directing a tight pattern to the kill spot. There’s nothing in which to center a single bead for reference, and it’s difficult to tell whether the gun is

being aimed high or low. Aligning two beads isn't much easier, as the rear one is often too small to be of much assistance when the eye is focused on the front. Another problem: beads sit low on the barrel, and the muzzle ends up obscuring the head and neck of the turkey.

Adding sights that offer a rear notch (or aperture) and a front post greatly facilitates aiming a shotgun. TruGlo (truglo.com) offers models such as the TruBead and GobbleDot that attach to the ventilated rib of most shotguns. Fiber-optic inserts improve visibility, and the sights are adjustable for windage and elevation.

Better yet, if the receiver is drilled and tapped for optics, install a rail and a small red-dot or reflex sight. The illuminated aiming point these sights present is by far the easiest and fastest object to paste on a longbeard's neck. Since these optics are parallax free, the eye doesn't have to be directly behind the dot for accurate aiming—a benefit when a gobbler comes in at an odd angle. Burris (burris.com), Bushnell (bushnell.com) and Hawke

(hawkeoptics.com) offer several solid models at reasonable prices.

STAY HIDDEN

Turkeys have incredible eyesight, and the gleam of a glossy stock or glint from a shiny blued barrel can ruin a setup. Make a shotgun blend in with the spring setting by covering it in camo. Don't worry; no paint is required.

A hassle-free solution is wrapping the gun with a roll of stretchy fabric like Camo Form (gearaid.com). It's elastic and sticks to itself to conform to curves, but it's removable with no sticky residue left on the gun. Each roll is 2 inches wide and 144 inches long, which will cover most shotguns.

For more precise coverage, Camo Gun Skins from Mossy Oak Graphics (mossyoakgraphics.com) come in kits with pre-cut pieces that fit the barrel, receiver, fore-end and stock. The vinyl material installs without trapping air bubbles, and it leaves no residue when removed. The finished result looks impressive—not that the turkeys will notice. 



Cover a shiny barrel, fore-end and buttstock with self-adhesive camo fabric to better conceal a gun in the turkey woods.

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WOLVES AT THE DOOR

STATES FROM IDAHO TO WISCONSIN SEEK TO CONTROL WOLF NUMBERS, EVEN AS CURRENT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ARE UNDER ATTACK FROM ANTI-HUNTING GROUPS.

By Andrew McKean

Jim Heihorn saw it coming. When I talked with him back in 2009, the fifth-generation Idaho rancher was all too happy to buy his first wolf hunting license. It had been, by his admittedly rough estimation, 80 years since wolves were last hunted in his part of the state. He was sanguine about the opportunity but questioned whether hunting would be an effective management tool.

“If I see a wolf, I’ll shoot it, no doubt about it,” he said. “But I don’t know if that’s enough. That’s the thing about wolves. I don’t know that we can control them with individuals with tags. The last time they were in this valley, there were a lot more sheep. But there were also full-time wolfers who used everything at their disposal—poison, snares, airplanes—to hunt wolves.”

Thirteen years later, that pressure campaign on wolves has reached a rock-and-a-hard-place moment, with Western states approving aggressive means to control wolves, and environmentalists staging equally aggressive campaigns to stop all wolf hunting. In terms of intensity and consequence, this is the conservation story of the year. And, like most intense value expressions of the

last few years, this one has overtones of extremely partisan politics.

SUCCESSFUL RECOVERY

That year I talked with Heihorn, wolves had just been removed from the federal endangered species list. Management had passed from the Department of Interior’s U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) to the states of Idaho and Montana. Wyoming’s management of wolves had to wait a few more years, until the state reclassified them as trophy game animals instead of shoot-on-sight predators.

The return to state management was celebrated as evidence that conservation works. In the 14 years between the release of wolves in Yellowstone National Park and the start of hunting seasons, populations in their core habitat around Yellowstone had increased more than 1,000 percent. Moreover, all the benchmarks that the USFWS had established as evidence of wolf recovery had been met. That included a minimum of 15 breeding pairs in at least 15 packs each in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Since then, wolves have expanded their range to Washington, Oregon, California, parts of Utah and now Colorado, where voters passed a ballot measure calling for

the state agency to actively repatriate wolves in the Golden State.

Another population of wolves in the Great Lakes states are similarly way above recovery benchmarks, and hunting seasons have been established in Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. Wisconsin hunters killed 218 wolves in just a few days during the February 2021 season, far exceeding harvest quotas established by the state’s Department of Natural Resources. In comparison, the harvest in Montana was about 300 wolves last year out of an estimated minimum population of nearly 1,200. Michigan has not had a wolf season since 2013 and Minnesota’s last wolf hunt was in 2014.

ADEQUATE REGULATION?

The friction in this latest wolf war is less about the total kill than about how states are allowing it. In Idaho, the state legislature authorized the Fish and Game Department to allow the use of snowmobiles, ATVs and even “motorized parachutes” statewide and year-round to kill wolves in a stated effort to reduce the state’s wolf population by more than 90 percent.

In Montana, the state’s legislature authorized Fish, Wildlife & Parks to

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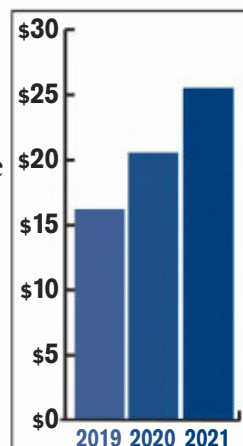
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Silver Trend Chart:
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establish aggressive population-control measures, using snares, night hunting and a compensation arrangement pioneered in Idaho. Under that provision, hunters can receive payments from private organizations to offset expenses accrued in successful wolf hunts and trapping forays.

To many wolf advocates, that last action sounds a lot like the bounties of a century ago, mechanisms that were used to incentivize wolf harvests that led to the canine’s extirpation from the American West. Compensation, baiting, snaring, night hunting – these all seem to wolf advocates like extremely punitive measures to hunt an animal that is classified as a trophy big-game species in many states.

There’s little doubt that wolf restoration efforts have succeeded. We have more wolves in more places than we’ve had in 100 years. But one of the key pieces of language that allowed management of wolves to transition from the USFWS to states was the assurance that states had in place “adequate regulatory mechanisms” to ensure that the species wouldn’t return to federal protection. That term has the force of law; it is one of the criteria that can be used to renew federal protection of wolves.

The term is being revived as states adopt aggressive management measures. It’s one that Dan Ashe, the former director of the USFWS under President Obama, used to argue that states can’t be trusted to manage wolves. In an opinion piece published by the Washington Post, Ashe stressed that his former agency should immediately stop wolf hunting on federal land and enact a year-long biological review of wolf populations, distribution and harvest trends. In the influential piece, he claimed that states lack adequate regulatory mechanisms to manage wolves.

Indeed, a month after Ashe’s piece appeared, and on the very day that Idaho and Montana opened their liberal wolf-hunting seasons, the USFWS announced it would undertake that year-long review. The agency said the risk of “potential increases in human-caused mortality” was the basis for the review, and that “recent regulatory changes in Idaho and Montana may pose a threat to wolves in these states by expanding the means and methods of harvest such that the species may become threatened or endangered.”

2020 WOLF POPULATION AND HARVEST

STATE	EST. POPULATION	HUNTER HARVEST
Idaho	1,556	408
Montana	1,177	328
Wyoming	327	31
Michigan	695	no season
Minnesota	2,696	no season
Wisconsin	1,034	no season

Data obtained from state agency population surveys and harvest reports for 2020, the last year for which information was available in all listed states at press time.

POPULATION POLITICS

Tony Schoonen doesn’t think that wolves are anywhere close to returning to either threatened or endangered status. The CEO of the Boone and Crockett Club, Schoonen has been a longtime advocate for scientific management of wildlife, including predators like mountain lions and wolves.

“The real question: can we be patient, trusting and calm enough with each other to figure this out,” noted Schoonen. “We need to get back to the professionals using science to avoid over- or under-management.”

However, Schoonen also conceded that hyper-aggressive measures to control wolves, which have shown limited harm on either livestock or big-game species in most of the West, do introduce stress and politics into what should be value-blind wildlife management. It’s worth noting that one of President Trump’s last actions from the Oval Office was delisting the Great Lakes population of wolves, and the state legislatures in both Idaho and Montana are heavily Republican. Many wolf advocates are Democrats, or at least liberal-leaning, and the Interior Department advocating for the year-long biological review is a branch of the Biden administration.

It’s too easy to dismiss the aggressive hunting and trapping of wolves as Republican actions, and the continued protection of wolves as a Democrat effort. But the same extreme partisan divide that has held sway over everything

from voting rights and abortion restrictions to gun regulations certainly casts a shadow over this issue, which Schoonen says should be free from politics.

“Scientific wildlife management requires regular adjustments to meet biological and social carrying capacities,” says Schoonen. In other words, management shouldn’t be imposed by legislatures or citizen ballot initiatives, but rather from trained wildlife scientists.

Any decisions regarding wolf regulations will likely reverberate among big-game hunters well beyond Western and Great Lakes states. They could also have an impact on the future management of another alpha predator: the grizzly bear.

In the core range of grizzlies, Yellowstone Park and the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem that extends into Glacier National Park, most recovery benchmarks have been achieved. Yet grizzlies are still classified as endangered species and managed by the USFWS, despite repeated evidence that hunting would probably reduce the number of grizzly-human incidents, reduce the incidental mortality of grizzlies by wildlife officials and balance bear populations with their carrying capacity.

If the feds are reluctant to allow states to continue to manage wolves, how likely are they to give grizzly management authority to state agencies and legislatures whose regulatory mechanisms have been called into question? The role of hunters in the conservation of these two species hangs in the balance. 

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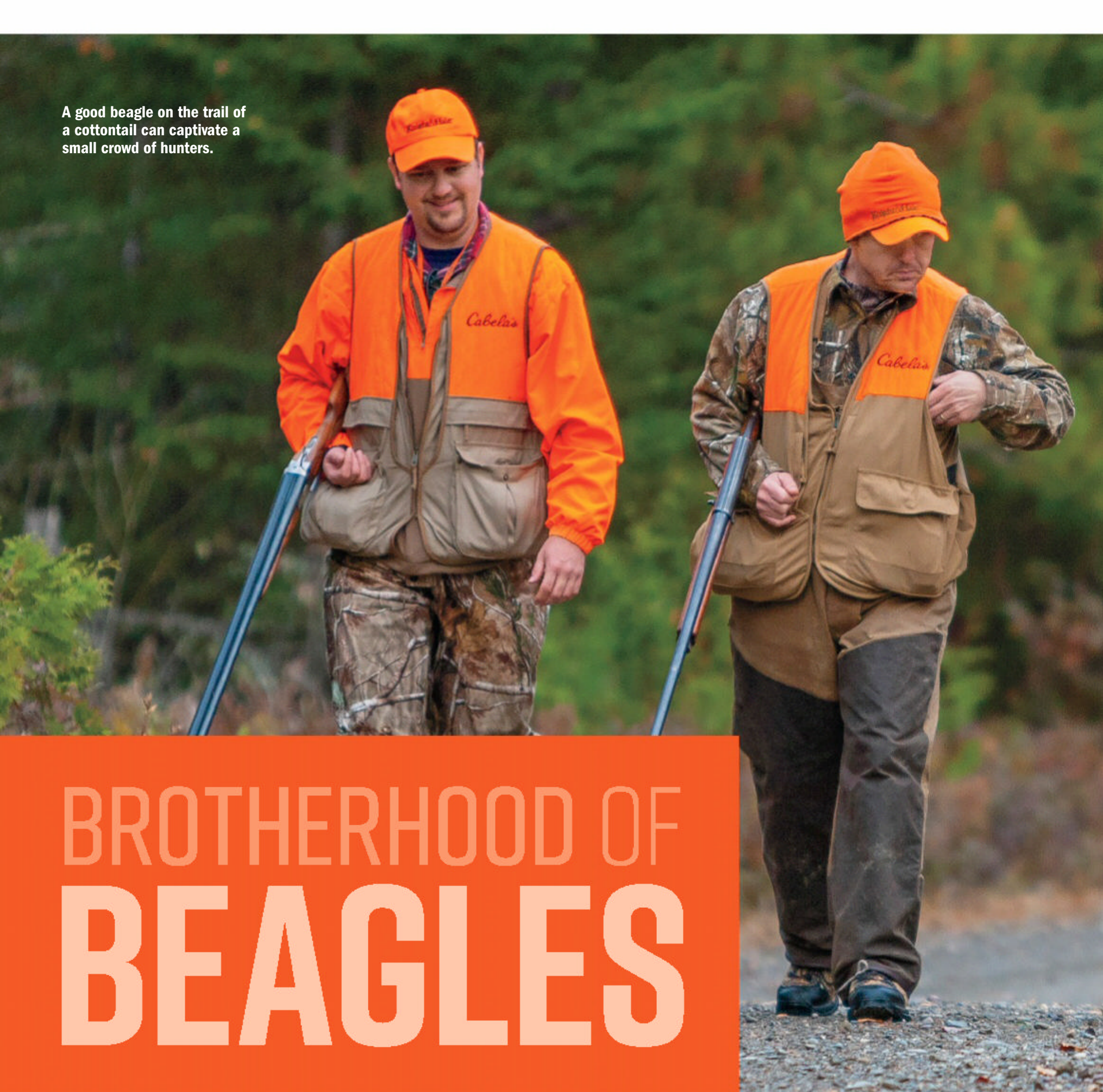


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BROTHERHOOD OF BEAGLES

THE BONDS BETWEEN HUNTERS AND HOUNDS RUN DEEP, AND ARE ROOTED IN THE CHASE AS MUCH AS THE COTTONTAILS.

By Brad Fitzpatrick

The first hunting dog I ever owned was a stray beagle named Casey Jones, though “owned” is a relative term. I was 10 years old when the stray beagle showed up on my family’s doorstep, and at that age I thought of little else besides being in the woods hunting. Casey Jones had no collar and seemed rather thin, but he had a passion for chasing rabbits. Soon I did, too.

Casey Jones hung around for just a few weeks before eventually wandering off to parts unknown and was never seen again. In that short time, he’d left an impression on me, though, and listening to him run rabbits through the woods behind our house set the hook for a lifetime of hound hunting.

The stray beagle that took up temporary residence in our barn set me on a quest to own a rabbit dog of my own. I



eventually found a local breeder that owned several hounds, and despite my having saved for over a year to buy a beagle, he gave me the dog that I wanted at no cost. It was worth giving me a good dog, he said, so that I would enjoy rabbit hunting, and he invited me to tag along with him once rabbit season arrived in November. He told me that owning one good hound would make me a beagler for life.

Were those words ever prophetic. Since that time, I've hunted on four continents and in dozens of U.S. states for a variety of game, but I still run rabbit hounds almost every day that I'm home on my farm and carve out a portion of the fall to spend chasing cottontails on public land. It's a fantastic change of pace from chilly mornings spent silently waiting for a suitable deer to pass by my treestand, and cottontail

makes excellent table fare. But the real reason that I go rabbit hunting so often is that I still enjoy listening to the sounds of the chase and spending time with my beagling buddies.

BORN TO RUN

As far back as 400 B.C., hunters in Greece were following small hunting dogs in pursuit of hares, and 200 years later similar hounds had found their way

to England. By the 15th century, small hounds resembling beagles were being used by hunters across Europe. The breed's name comes from the Celtic word *beag*, which means small, and they caught the attention of European aristocrats including Queen Elizabeth I of England, who owned an entire pack of these hounds.

Beagles became popular with rural landowners in England, France, Ireland, and Scotland in the 1700s, and as immigrants from these countries arrived in the United States they brought their dogs along. Gen. Richard Rowett of Illinois began importing European beagles in the 1870s and refining the breed into the dog that we recognize today and his dogs are partly responsible for the beagle's current popularity. In the 1880s the National Beagle Club registry was established.

A letter in *Field & Stream* magazine in the spring of 1892 addressed the issue of the varying height of registered beagles. Some hunters preferred smaller, more compact dogs that measured less than 13 inches at the shoulder, while other breeders preferred dogs up to 15 inches. The National Beagle Club decided that the beagle breed should be divided into two size categories, and today in some registries like the American Kennel Club (AKC), beagles compete in either the 13- or 15-inch class. The first beagle was registered with the AKC in 1885.

Tall or short, the beagle became a popular breed throughout America by the 1900s. In New England, beagle clubs were established and the dogs were used to chase snowshoe hares as well. Throughout the Midwest and the South, hunting with beagles became a ritual that was repeated each fall.

A DOG FOR ALL SEASONS

Beagling remains a popular sport in many areas, and in recent years there have been an uptick in the number of rabbit hunters in many parts of America. The reasons are easy to understand once you've spent some time chasing a pack of howling hounds through the tall grass and briars. Hunting cottontails with hounds is a low-impact sport that's more suitable for novice or young hunters than sitting for hours pursuing deer or turkeys, and cottontails are abundant on public land throughout much of the country. Much of the public land in my home state of

Bloodlines are important to serious beaglers, and pups are often chosen based on the performance of their parents in hunts and competitions.



Ohio is managed for rabbits, and so I oftentimes have thousands of acres to myself and my dogs during the week.

But chasing beagles isn't a sport that's reserved for the fall and winter months. The popularity of AKC, UKC and PKC hunts means that beaglers can come together and run their dogs in competition year-round. In addition to the friendly competition and potential trophies and prize money to be won if your hounds perform well, these hunts offer a chance for rabbit hunters to meet, compare dogs and bloodlines, and form friendships that last a lifetime.

If you haven't hunted with beagles before but are interested in the sport, attending these events is one of the best ways to get to know local hunters. Before I ever owned a beagle I attended a beagle field trail in Kentucky, and much to my surprise the competitors were more than happy to allow me to accompany them during the competition. Field trail formats vary depending upon registry: the hunt that I first attended was a UKC hunt and so the dogs would be randomly divided into "casts" of three or four dogs depending upon the number of entries. In UKC trials, dogs hunt for a total of two hours. Dogs earn points for striking rabbits and their position in the pack while on the rabbit's trail, and lose points for "checks" (temporary losses on track) or lost tracks. Dogs that fight or run game other than rabbits are immediately disqualified. The hound with the most points at the end of the two-hour period are cast winners, and the highest-scoring cast winners advance to the final cast.

I attended several trails before I got my first dog, and I learned a great deal at these events. I had no intentions of wasting my times following "trashy" hounds (nor of being disqualified when I was competing with my own dogs), so a dog that only chased rabbits—an honest hound, in beagle vernacular—was my first priority. I didn't care about speed so long as the dog was honest and stayed true to the line, but more speed was desirable provided the dog remained on the track. I also wanted a dog that had a desire to hunt and wasn't afraid to dive into twisted tangles of thorns and honeysuckle, known as a good "jump" dog.

These, of course, are the traits most beaglers want in a hound, whether it's a hunting or competition dog. But my

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A beagle that can run a rabbit track quickly is desirable, but more important is the dog's persistence and focus.



time spent watching field trails taught me which dogs had the hunting style that I liked, and I got to know several beaglers very well. Many of them remain my friends almost 30 years later.

ON THE HUNT

I competed with beagles during my teenage years and hunted cottontails every weekend in the fall and winter, but by the time I left home for college beagling wasn't high on my to-do list. Following my college graduation, finding a good beagle was a top priority.

That search led me back to competition hunting, and the results of those hunts led me to contact a man named

Jason Olinger who lived near Coshocton, Ohio. Jason's female dog Polly had won the UKC Junior State Race for Ohio, which meant she was the winningest dog in that registry under two years of age, and the following year she won the all-age division as well. She also won some major hunts and was a semifinalist at the national championship.

My background in competition hunting told me a lot about Jason's dogs before I ever met him. First, if Polly had won so many events she had to be an honest dog that was fast on the trail and didn't lose very many tracks. She was almost certainly a good jump dog (the first dog to bark on a rabbit track

is awarded the most points), and she wouldn't have won so many competitive hunts if she was running off-game.

I contacted Jason, and it turned out that his story was similar to mine. He'd grown up following a pack of beagles with his grandfather and other relatives, but by the time he left for college he no longer owned any hounds. That changed when he saw an advertisement in the local paper for hunting beagle pups. Jason and his grandfather went to look at the dogs with strict orders not to bring any home. Despite that direction, Jason and his grandfather bought two of those pups, Polly and her full-sister Sadie. Jason chose well, for both Sadie and

RABBIT GEAR

Beat briars, track beagles, bag bunnies.

How much equipment do you need to hunt cottontails with beagles? Not much, but here are a few items that are worthwhile investments for rabbit hunters.

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NITE LITE PRO 1,000 DENIER

BRIAR BIBS: These waterproof and windproof briar bibs are an essential item for any rabbit hunter. Briar-proof 1,000-denier material covers the front and back of the legs to keep you protected from thorns and dry in damp conditions. The breathable design is comfortable on warm days, and the zip-to-waist legs make these bibs easy to remove. Triple-stitched leg cuffs and heavy-duty suspenders and hardware ensure that these bibs survive hunts in nasty cover. \$84.99 to \$89.99; huntsmart.com

LACROSSE ALPHABURLY PRO:

These boots have become a favorite of rabbit hunters because they offer protection from briars and thorns while keeping feet warm and dry. They are constructed of hand-laid premium natural rubber over neoprene, and a triple layer of rubber on the toe and heel ensures these boots will last season after season. The unique tread pattern also offers grip in slippery conditions. \$190 to \$220; lacrossefootwear.com

FEDERAL UPLAND STEEL

SHOTSHELLS: These 2 3/4-inch shells contain a payload of premium steel shot (3/4 ounce in 20 gauge, 1 1/8 ounces in 12 gauge) that is perfectly suited for hunting cottontails. The 12-gauge load is rated at 1,400 fps while the 20-gauge load reaches 1,500 fps, making these lethal with non-toxic shot. They're also quite affordable; expect to pay less than fifty cents a round. They're also great for doves, quail or breaking clay targets. \$8.95 to \$9.95; federalpremium.com

Polly went on to win several competition hunts, and to jump and trail thousands of rabbits during their hunting careers.

When I first met Jason I was writing an article on rabbit hunting, but I had done my research. I'd checked on the results of local hunts and Polly's name frequently appeared in the winner's column. He hunted at some of the same clubs where I had competed, and so we knew some of the same people. I joined Jason, his wife Jenny, and several of their friends and family members on a hunt in February of 2014. Jason knew that this was a work trip, but he didn't know that I had other selfish reasons to hunt with him: I wanted to get back into the beagle fraternity and I was in the market for a dog.

Jason and Jenny led our hunting caravan to a farm not far from a railroad track. Old railroad beds are especially popular with rabbit hunters because the cover on both sides of the tracks is usually quite dense, which makes good habitat for rabbits, but the open track offers a clear shooting lane. By late winter dead goldenrod and ironweed stems and tangled brush along the rail bed offered the best habitat for cottontails for miles. It wasn't long after the tailgates dropped and the dogs went streaming into the brush along the railroad that we heard the long, opening howl of a beagle that had found a rabbit track.

"That's Polly," Jason said.

It wasn't long until all the other dogs—Polly, Sadie, Cash, Apollo, Capone and others—fell in on the rabbit's trail and added their voice to the growing roar of the pack. The cry of a beagle on the trail is a sound of passionate pursuit, and a whole pack at full voice is something that cannot be forgotten once heard. That morning it echoed up and down the rail bed and through the winter-bare maple and hickory trees.

The roar of the beagles died away as the dogs hit the far end of the rabbit's circle. Some hunters mistakenly believe that beagles herd rabbits back toward the shooter, but that's giving the hounds too much credit. In truth, their talent is following the scent trail laid down by their quarry, and they are simply following the track wherever it leads them. It's the rabbit that engineers the circular trail while avoiding the dogs. Cottontails and other rabbits have well-defined home ranges. They're familiar with these areas



GARMIN ALPHA 10

NITE LITE PRO 1,000
DENIER BRIAR BIBS



LACROSSE
ALPHABURLY PRO

FEDERAL UPLAND
STEEL SHOTSHELLS



and the cover and escape routes within those territories. Naturally, rabbits aren't inclined to run into unfamiliar territory when pursued and instead run a circular pattern around their home territory, giving rise to the rumor that beagles have the ability to intentionally run rabbits to the gun.

The sound of Jason's dogs faded, and then, 10 minutes into the hunt, the howls of the hounds began to grow louder. We knew that meant that the rabbit had circled and that the dogs were running in our direction, and based on the speed and intensity of the chase they weren't more than 50 yards behind the cottontail. The hunters spread out, taking up positions on the rail bed while we watched through our frozen breath for the silent brown form of the rabbit slipping through the trees.

When the hounds reached my position and passed me I knew that the rabbit had slipped by unseen. But less than a 100 yards down the tracks I heard the clap of Jason's 28-gauge shotgun. I waited, and soon the voices of the dogs went silent. The trail had ended. Jason hadn't missed, and he hoisted the cottontail into the air with a smile.

We hunted throughout the rest of the day, killing a few more rabbits on the railroad before moving on to another location in rolling, timbered country. Cottontails can survive in just about any habitat so long as there is sufficient ground cover to protect them against predators, and that means most hunting areas within the cottontail's range will likely hold a few rabbits. When the frost burned off the grass and the midday sun warmed the woods and made tracking more difficult, we decided to call it a day.

FAMILY TIES

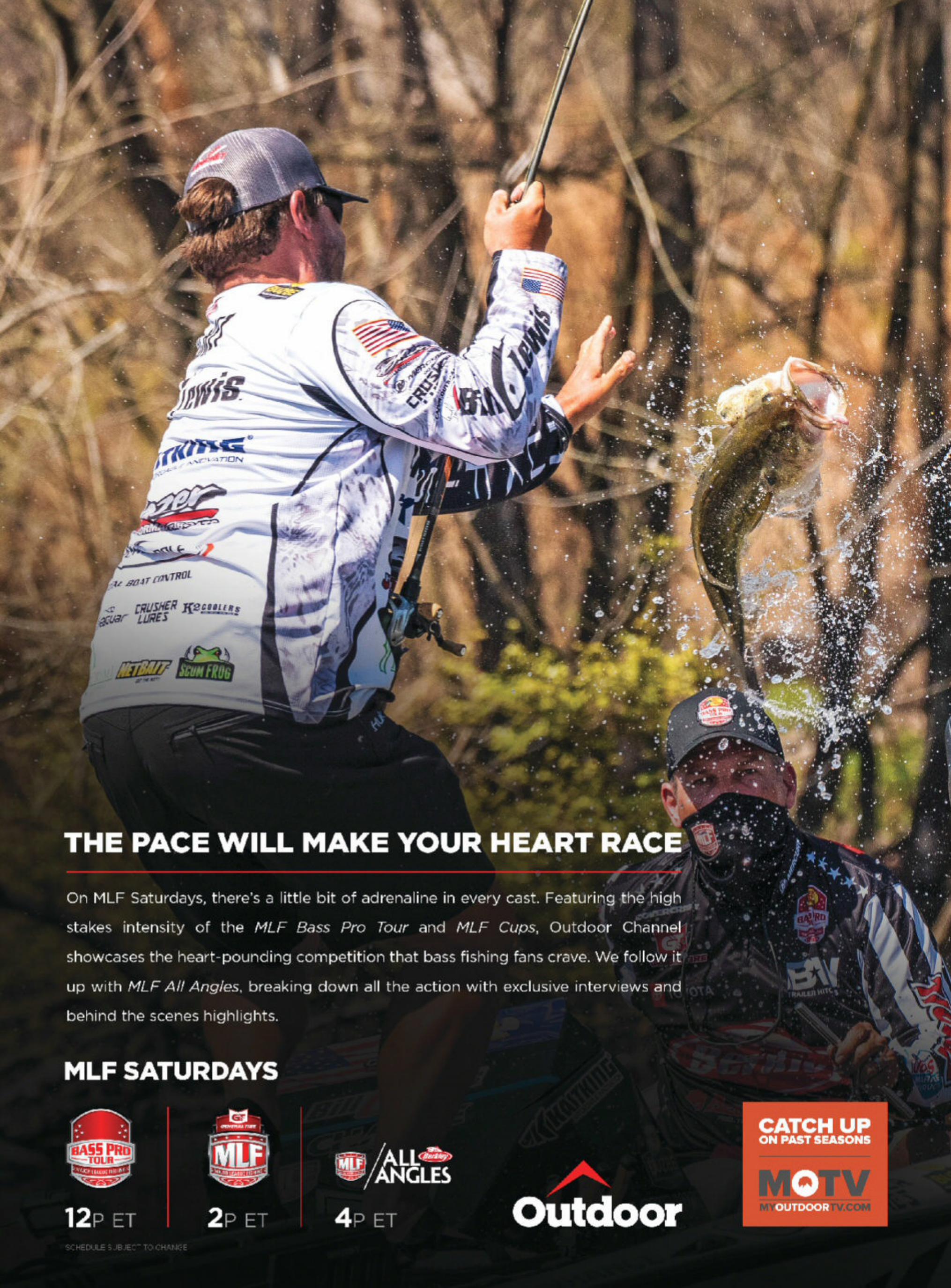
Three years later I purchased two of the dogs we'd hunted that day, Cash and Apollo. I also made fast friends with the Olingers and we've hunted together a handful of times since then whenever our schedules have allowed. Shortly after that first hunt Jenny gave birth to their first son, Colton, and he was following rabbit hounds almost since the day he was born.

"I'd take Colton out in the field when he was still in diapers," Jason told me. "We set up lawn chairs and listened to the dogs run. He loved it. He still loves it."

Beagles don't "circle" a rabbit back to hunters but instead simply follow the trail laid by the quarry. A rabbit has a natural tendency to return to the place where it was jumped.



LON LAUBER PHOTOGRAPHY



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SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Friendships formed between hunters while running beagles for rabbits can last a lifetime and extend through generations.



My daughter was born a few months after Colton. The Olingers also have a daughter, Delaney, and my son Caleb turned 5 this year. All these children have grown up with rabbit dogs, and all of them have spent hours listening to the sound of the hounds and have learned to love the chase. Because rabbit hunting (and running dogs in the off-season) is a low-impact, exciting sport, these kids have enjoyed the hunt well before they

were old enough to sit quietly in a deer stand or turkey blind. Beagling quickly becomes a family affair, and all our kids spend time with the dogs, learning to care for them and taking part in a tradition that has lasted for generations.

Will our kids grow up to own packs of beagles of their own? That's impossible to say, but even at a young age they've already had a chance to spend time in the woods and won't be swayed by the

anti-hunting rhetoric they'll undoubtedly encounter as they grow into adulthood. What's more, they'll have had a chance to experience the thrill of hearing their dogs opening on a track and listening as they drive a rabbit through the brush and forest. They'll be part of the fraternity of hound hunters, and even if they don't have dogs of their own they'll always have friends with whom they can tag along for a few hours of running.



Rabbit hunting is a good way to connect with other hunters. It's a wonderful way to spend time in the woods. Will I ever stop deer hunting? I doubt it, but as soon as I climb down from the treestand after an uneventful sit in the woods I'll likely unleash a few hounds and spend leisurely afternoons hunting rabbits with my friends. As long as I'm able, I'll always keep a few hounds around the house. 

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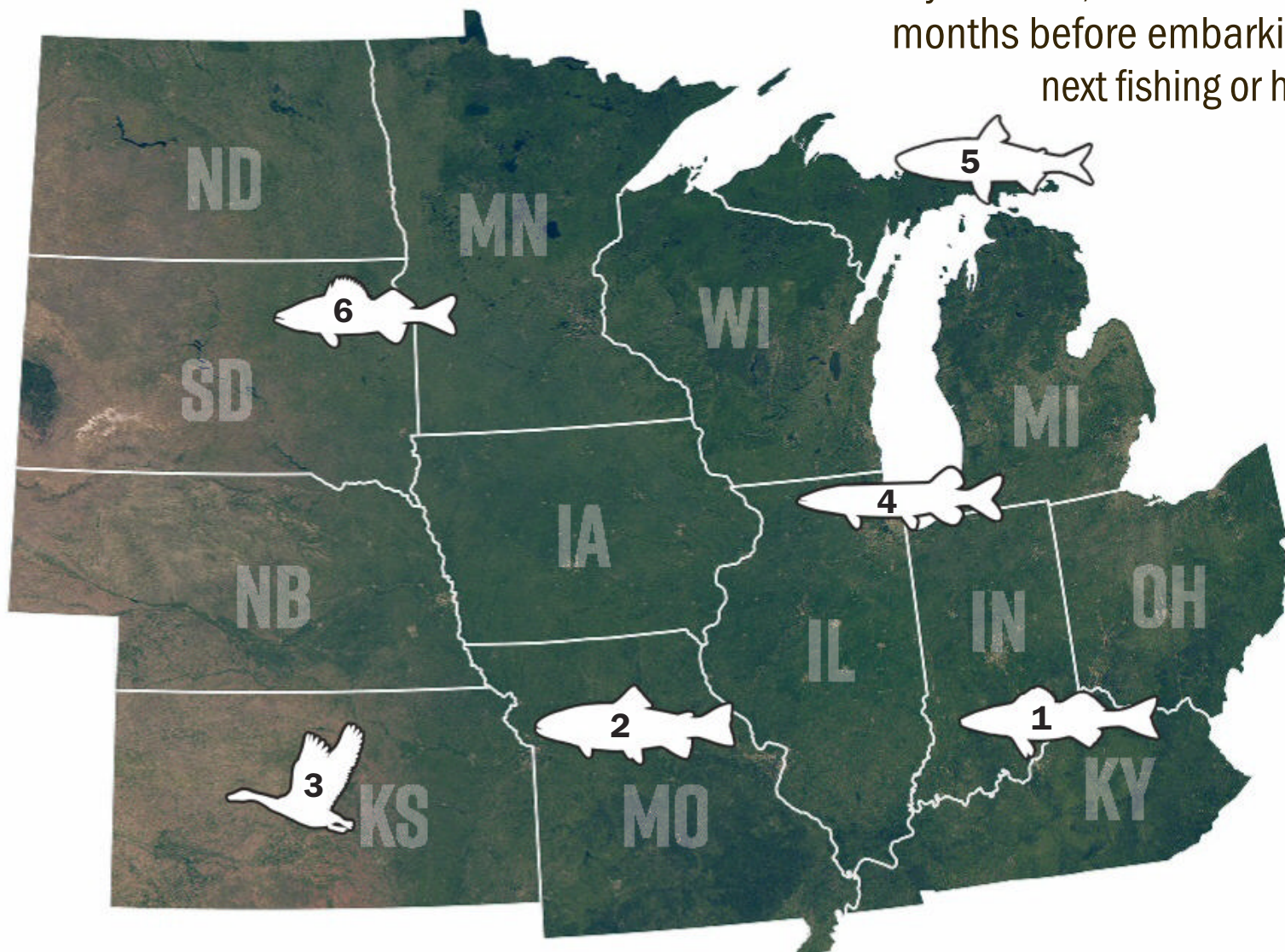
AROUND THE MIDWEST

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

By Brandon Butler

Too many hunters and anglers think February is just for visiting boat, sport and travel shows. While those are fun, and possibly productive, there's plenty this month to keep outdoor enthusiasts busy across the Midwest.

Ice fishing remains strong on a number of popular lakes up north. Meanwhile, open-water river fishing and late-season waterfowl hunting provide plenty of chances to wet a line or bag a limit of birds. So go ahead and visit the local sport show if you want, but don't wait a few months before embarking on your next fishing or hunting trip.





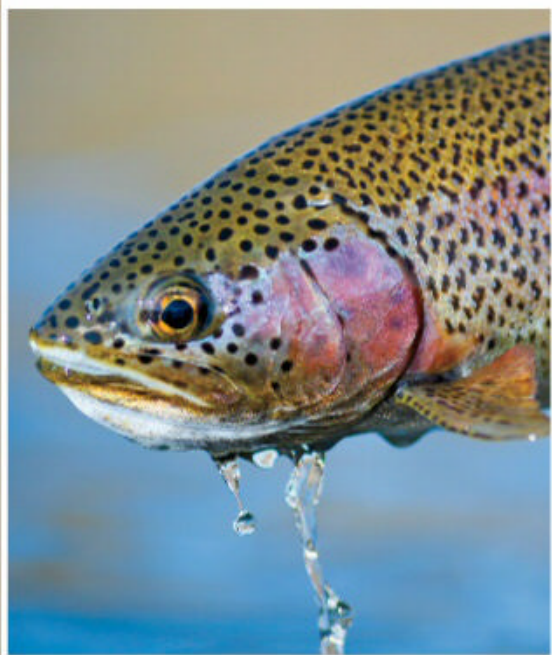
OHIO RIVER SAUGERS

Winter is high time for sauger fishing on Indiana's stretch of the Ohio River. Fish school-up in deep holes below dams, making them much easier to find. Vertical jig 1/2-ounce white jigs tipped with a minnow in the deepest holes in tailwaters below any of the dams on the river. Indiana has a bag limit of six sauger per day, and a possession limit of 12. The minimum length is 14 inches.



MISSOURI URBAN TROUT

Missouri's urban trout stocking program provides anglers the opportunity to fish for put-and-take trout throughout Missouri. Approximately 30 lakes are stocked with trout; most are in St. Louis and Kansas City. Columbia, Jefferson City, St. Joseph and a few other cities also receive stockings. Trout fishing occurs in the winter on these lakes because they become too warm in the summer to hold over cold-water fish, so don't feel bad about keeping what you catch. Busch Conservation Area in St. Louis, James A. Reed Memorial Wildlife Area near Kansas City and Cosmo-Bethel Lake in Columbia are top destinations.



KANSAS LATE GEESE

Kansas waterfowl hunters can shoot dark geese until February 13. These include Canada geese, white-fronted geese, brant geese and cackling geese. The daily bag limit is six, with a possession limit of 18. You'll need a Kansas HIP permit, state waterfowl permit and federal waterfowl stamp. Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area near Great Bend is a historic waterfowl hunting destination, with 13,000 acres open to hunting.



ST. MARY'S RIVER WHITEFISH

Smoked whitefish is a northern treat. Bought at the market, the cost adds up quickly. Save money and make friends by catching and smoking your own. The St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie is a prime place to fill a cooler with whitefish. Around the Soo Locks is a top spot, but whitefish can be caught throughout the river. Fish on the bottom using small jigs and ice fishing jigs tipped with waxworms.



WAUBAY LAKE ICE-FISHING

As ice season wraps up in South Dakota, a trip to Waubay Lake for a mixed bag will keep you in fillets until open water returns. Walleyes, yellow perch and northern pike are all found in good numbers in this Day County lake. Grenville Slough and Breske's Bay are two well-known ice spots on Waubay. Fish a jig tipped with a minnow or wax worm on the bottom. The lake is known for its jumbo yellow perch, and anglers can keep 15 per day.



CHICAGOLAND PIKE

Anglers in and around the Windy City live near quality northern pike fishing. Many rivers and lakes house these toothy predators, including Lake Michigan. Anglers here can do well fishing live suckers under big bobbers in the harbors and shipping canals. The Amoco discharge is one Lake Michigan spot known to produce. The Fox River and Fox Chain O'Lakes are also top options.

ICE EDICTS

FOLLOW THESE BEST PRACTICES TO STAY SAFE ON THE ICE THROUGHOUT THE HARDWATER SEASON.

By Joel Nelson

On early, late or simply questionable ice, the author tests the ice every couple steps with a weighted chisel or spud bar.

One of the most dangerous ice fishing scenarios I've encountered happened one morning on Lake Superior's Duluth Harbor. Ice cutters keep the harbor open for shipping, which yields a continual ebb and flow of ice chunks, open water and safe ice that is broken and refrozen daily. A group of us headed out on the harbor in the pre-dawn darkness, but an unseasonable rain had left the ice jet-black and wet, hiding any treacherous spots. Everything looked the same, and one of our companions pushed ahead, literally walking into open water.

Fortunately, he survived that encounter, but it offered a harsh lesson. Even with decades of experience, the old adage, "No ice is safe," always rings true. Whether it's early in the season or closer to ice-off, be prepared and follow some key rules to stay safe on hardwater.

RIGID RULES Plan Ahead

Develop a plan and make your fishing intentions known to others. Better yet, use the buddy system and never venture onto the ice alone. A solo angler stands little chance of making it out of a perilous situation should the unthinkable happen.

Test to Verify

Chisel or punch all ice to test its integrity. If you don't have a chisel, buy one. Or wait until wheelers and sleds are hitting the ice before you dare walk out.

Every step or two, swing a weighted and aggressive chisel downward. For the first few steps from shore, chip a hole and observe general thickness, then measure to be sure. On late-season ice especially, shoreline ice often erodes first. This is why many anglers use waders or some type of bridge, like a plank, to access the

main ice sheet—often still feet thick and safe—and reach stellar late-ice bites.

For foot traffic, you want to measure at least 4 inches of solid ice. On early or late ice, I chisel about every 6 feet or so—basically every two steps. I do this until I reach a place where I'm comfortable with my surroundings. Often, I'll even create a border or perimeter of safe ice that I want to stay inside of while fishing.

Read the Ice

Last year we were filming in South Dakota under brutally cold conditions, with nearly 10 inches of the most beautiful black and clear ice you ever saw. Our snowmobiles cruised over the frozen lake, drivers confident in their safety. That is, until we saw a small neckdown.

Most know that inlets/outlets, channels or even narrow spots in a lake can freeze at a much slower rate—especially

with flow. But this was in a small slough with temps hovering around zero. Still, a crew member spotted what looked like cattails that were not snow-covered like the rest of the shore. Sure enough, the chisel plunged straight through the inch of ice present at that location.

The ice couldn't support a single person, let alone several with snowmobiles and equipment. Too often, it's under these conditions, with good ice in most places and poor ice only in some, that ice can be most dangerous.

Many times, as in this scenario, reading ice means reading the snow on top of it. Soaked snow, absent snow or snow that appears to have re-frozen is a tip-off. Ice heaves or other areas where large frozen chunks are not lying flat and flush with surrounding ice are trouble spots, too. The aforementioned inlets and outlets, as well as springs and woody areas also make the list. Avoid these areas, or cross only in marked or tested locations.

The same is true for ice that doesn't look like what's around it. On late ice, for example, discolorations suggest softer



5 ITEMS FOR THE ICE

Gear you need to ensure your safety during the hardwater season

FLOAT SUIT

There's no excuse not to own one. Their performance has risen a lot in recent years, and affordable options abound. You won't know they float until you need them to, and I'm fine with that.

SPUD BAR

It's your number-one safety tool. Use it constantly and treat it accordingly.

ICE PICKS

Hang them around your neck and forget about them. Hopefully, you'll never have to use them.

CLEATS

Ice safety isn't just about staying above it. You want to remain upright while on it, too. Cleats have prevented many nasty spills and kept more than a few anglers from seriously injuring themselves on the ice.

THROW ROPE

Manufacturers make several convenient bagged options these days, but any kind of rope will work. Ideally, you want one that is 25 feet or longer. Having a heavy item tied to one end often leads to more accurate throwing, too.

IN COLD WATER

Tips to save yourself after falling through the ice

The unthinkable has happened and you've plunged into water cold enough to take your breath away. Here are a few tips for surviving a break-through.

- 1.) If possible, keep yourself from going under completely—many people drown on the initial dunk.
- 2.) Calm yourself before thrashing to escape.
- 3.) Turn your body to head back in the direction of safe ice.
- 4.) Kick your feet behind you to get horizontal near the water's surface.
- 5.) Get your elbows up on the ice sheet, kicking repeatedly to "swim" up onto the ice.
- 6.) Roll away to safer ice before standing.

ice that's starting to become water; lots of darker patches throughout the lake essentially water coming up through the fractured ice near the surface signal the end of safe ice. Whatever the case, if ice is different, test it with a chisel first, and measure in several places. Then, consider the test holes your cordoned-off area, and fish only inside this safety zone. Also, if you're drilling late in the season and find you're cutting snow almost as much as you're cutting ice, consider moving to a different area.

Bring a Rope

Rope isn't on most anglers' checklists, but it should be. If you do go in, a handy throw rope not only helps you, it keeps others at a safe distance to prevent them from falling in, too. Without a rope, and even with a friend nearby, there's often no safe way for them to aid you. Make rope an essential gear item, and keep it accessible if you need it.

Include Ice Picks

If a rope isn't handy, ice picks are your last line of defense. These are far less effective for thin first ice, as the ice around you is often easily breakable once there's already a big hole in it. But if they're on

you, ice picks offer some grip even if only temporary to help you make your way closer to shore or up onto more stable ice.

Slow Down

Use all tools at your disposal and give yourself time to properly chisel and check every pathway. Early ice and late ice aren't necessarily ideal for children or inexperienced ice anglers. It's simply too easy to forget where you're safe and where you might not be.

Start small and fish an area for a while. From experience, there's a big difference between so-called "making ice" (ice that's still forming and is contracting, cracking and shifting a bit) and "cracking ice" (ice that's literally cracking under the strain of supporting you). So, trust your gut here, but go slow enough to pay attention to what you hear and feel. Ice can bow a lot under your weight, and if it feels like it's "giving," it probably is.

Macho rants and broad declarations about fishing on 2 inches or less are best left at the tavern, not brought out onto the ice with you. Take your time, heed this advice and fight the urge to be the very first (or last) person out there. Be the safest instead, and live to fish another day. 

LATE-SEASON SQUIRREL SECRETS

USE THESE TIPS TO BAG MORE SQUIRRELS
AS THE END OF WINTER DRAWS NEAR.

By Keith Sutton

When still-hunting in winter, avoid scuffing leaves and breaking sticks, and scan ahead to spot squirrels before they see you.

Hunters often need to turn their attention to the ground in the late season. Hard mast is harder to find, and many squirrels switch to more available food sources on the forest floor.



Veteran squirrel hunters know that hunts near winter's end can be far more challenging than early-fall outings. The often-inclement weather in January and February keeps squirrels inactive and holed up in nests or dens. The trees are bare of leaves, which means squirrels can more easily see hunters stalking through the woods. Hard mast, like acorns and hickory nuts, no longer clings to the branches. As a result, squirrels spend more time on the ground—where they are harder to see—looking for food.

Despite these difficulties, late-season squirrel hunting can be productive and fun if you know what you're doing. In over half a century of squirrel hunting, I've learned a lot both from my own experiences and from other great hunters. Here are a baker's dozen tips that have helped me fill limits during the late season.

1. FIND THE FOOD

When acorns and other nuts are plentiful, you can bet squirrels will congregate in trees where those foods are available. But mast is often harder to find in late winter, and you may need to look for "limb chickens" feeding on other items like flower buds and fungi once those food sources start to appear. Also, search for winter squirrels eating the seeds and leaf buds of maples, tulip poplars, hackberries and dogwoods, which are among their favorite foods this season, too. Before these become available, and if nuts are scarce, you may even find squirrels gathering to feast on unopened green pinecones.

2. WATCH DEN HOLES

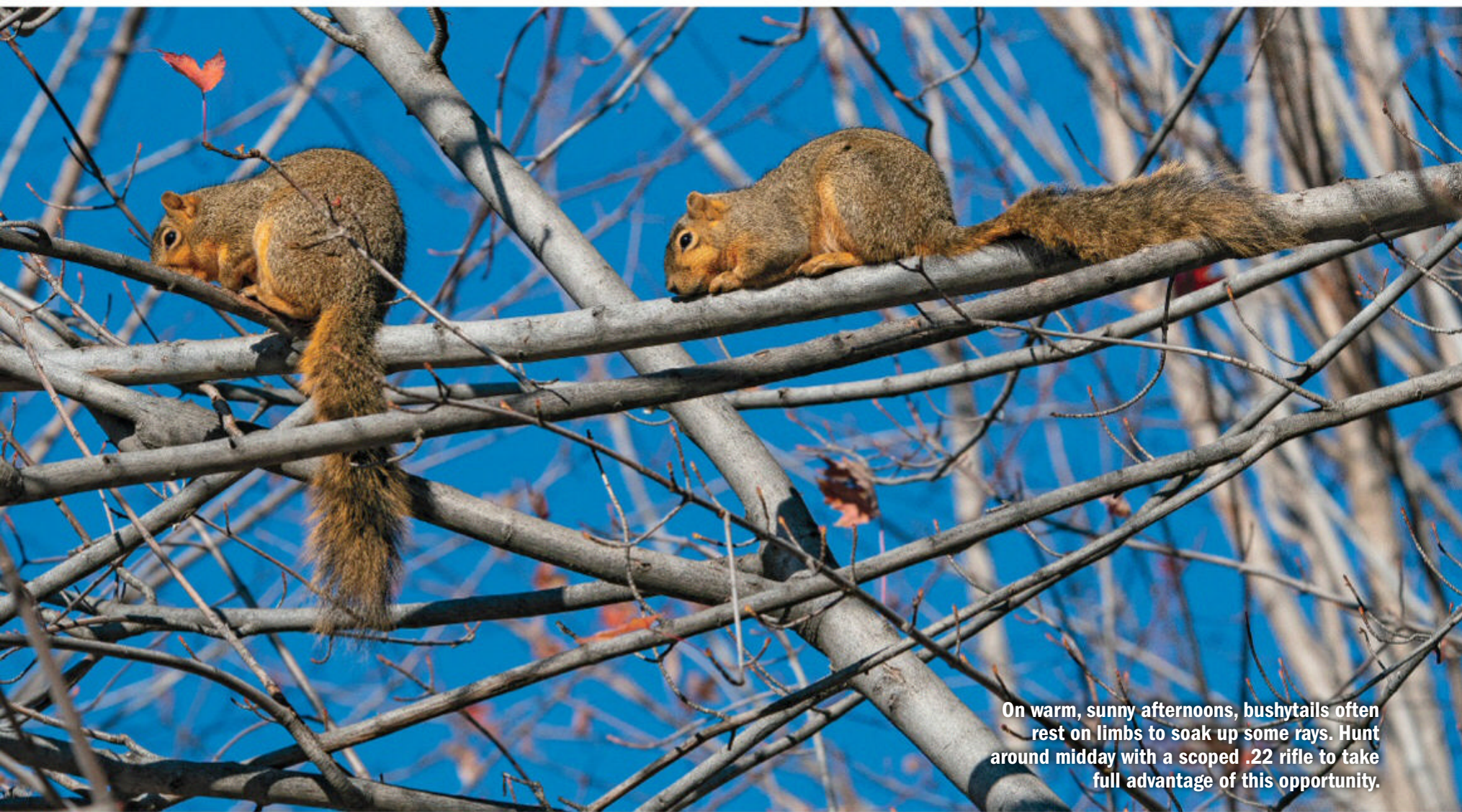
You'll typically see more late-season squirrels by looking down, not up, as the animals scratch for mushrooms and

remaining tidbits from last fall's nut crop. However, it pays to get comfy and watch den trees, too.

Throughout much of the Midwest, litters of young squirrels are often being born just as winter turns to spring. Trees with hollows or interior cavities are sometimes bristling with tender juveniles that go better with dumplings than a barnyard pullet. When looking for these squirrel hot spots, use your binocular to check for holes worn smooth by frequent squirrel traffic. Killing squirrels then simply becomes a matter of sitting vigil on active dens and being ready when bushytails emerge.

3. STALK PROPERLY

Some squirrel hunters prefer to stalk their quarry, but stalking can be tough when the crunch of dry leaves alerts bushytails to danger. To overcome the



On warm, sunny afternoons, bushytails often rest on limbs to soak up some rays. Hunt around midday with a scoped .22 rifle to take full advantage of this opportunity.

squirrel's keen senses, select stalking routes carefully. Avoid stepping on sticks that will crack underfoot, and if possible, move along creek bottoms or other moist, low ground that mitigates the amount of sound created by footfalls.

Concentrate on moving noiselessly with your eyes to the ground, and pause frequently to study your surroundings for game. When possible, scan the woods 100 yards or so ahead. If you don't, squirrels will see you and be hidden before you're even aware of them. A rifle often provides more shot opportunities.

Once you spot a squirrel, the slower you go, the better your chances will be of killing that animal. If you can, move forward at the same time the squirrel is in motion. For example, advance when two squirrels are chasing each other around a tree and freeze when they stop. The single most important thing a squirrel stalker can learn is that patience is a golden virtue.

4. SPOT SUNBATHERS

During warmer months, squirrels are often most active early in the morning and late in the afternoon, retreating to their hideaways during the heat of the

day. But in late winter, in still and clear conditions, many bushytails will stretch out on limbs where they can soak up the warmth of the midday sun. Observant hunters can do very well by stalking slowly through the woods and using a binocular to scan for these animals as they bask. You might kill a few with a shotgun, but a scoped .22 rifle works better on limb-huggers. It also permits longer shots, thereby reducing the risk of spooking your quarry.

5. LISTEN UP

Savvy squirrel hunters use their ears as much as their eyes. Rustling leaves often give a squirrel away, as can the sound of one gnawing a nut with its sharp teeth or the sound of cuttings falling to the forest floor. Also listen for barking or chattering squirrels. A bushytail that's agitated because it spots some sort of danger is often an easy mark for stealthy hunters.

6. START SMALL

Be flexible when selecting a hunting area. Big-timber tracts do harbor lots of squirrels, but in territory with a mix of small woodlots and big timber, hunting smaller

blocks of forestland may prove more productive in the late season. Because there's less acreage, these areas often don't hold large numbers of squirrels, but the restricted environment makes bushytails easier to find. Obtain landowner permission before hunting; then, move from one small tract to another, taking care not to overhunt any one spot.

7. FOCUS ON FARMS

When you do hunt small blocks, keep in mind that squirrels, particularly fox squirrels, love corn and soybeans. These farm foods contain carbs and protein that offer the energy and warmth these animals need in winter. If hunting a hardwood lot adjacent to a corn or bean field, bring a hunting stool and sit for a while where you can see down an open turnrow. From there, if you're quick, you can plug squirrels dashing across the opening between the woods and the crop field. A shotgun makes quick work of them.

8. HUNT DEER STANDS

Remember all the squirrels you saw during whitetail season but didn't shoot for fear of spooking deer? Well, in late



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winter, you can go back and take vengeance on those critters.

Sitting inside an enclosed stand makes your movements less noticeable in leaf-bare winter woods. A stand also offers a gun support, so shooting accuracy is improved with a scope or open sights. Deer stands are also great places to introduce youngsters to late-season squirrel hunting. Their chances for success are improved and they're more comfortable than they would be on the forest floor, so they're more likely to enjoy the experience and develop an interest.

9. WAIT TO COLLECT

Winter squirrels are usually reluctant to leave a reliable food source, even after hearing gunfire. So, if you see several squirrels feeding in a small area and you shoot one, mark the location of your first kill, but hold off on retrieving it. Within 5 to 10 minutes, the remaining squirrels are likely to move again, and you'll get another shot opportunity maybe several.

10. SEEK OUT WINDBREAKS

If the wind kicks up while you're hunting, active squirrels will most likely be on the ground, not in trees. Look for them in thickets, along creek banks and near

other features that break the wind. If you know ahead of time it might be windy, try to hunt mountains or hilly areas. Scouting often reveals a few hollows where calmer conditions prevail and where squirrels are more active.

11. WATCH THE WEATHER

Fast-approaching fronts and persistent stormy weather will shut off squirrel activity like closing a water tap. Squirrels den up and stay there until the weather changes, drastically reducing the hunter's chances for success. If a heavy rain suddenly stops and the sun pops out, however, get to the woods as soon as you can. In this situation, the treetops and forest floor are likely to be teeming with hungry squirrels.

Hunting during a light rain can also be quite good. Bushytails don't mind wet days and often forage on the ground with their tail spread over their back and head like a miniature umbrella. During these periods, the damp forest floor can create ideal conditions for the quiet stalker.

12. CALL TO THEM

Squirrel calls can be fun to try during the latter weeks of the season. These



The late season is prime time for hunting squirrels with dogs. The lack of foliage makes it easier to see squirrels leaping from tree to tree.



Squirrel calls can help expose bushytails' positions. After you kill one, wait to retrieve it, as more may appear within a few minutes.

handy gadgets don't usually draw a squirrel to the hunter (although that may occasionally happen). Instead, they persuade squirrels to expose their whereabouts by coaxing them to bark or move. This is especially helpful in freezing temperatures when squirrels are holed up.

A variety of calls are available. Some bark, some chatter, some imitate the distress call of a young squirrel and others still mimic a squirrel's sharp teeth cutting a nut. Some operate via a rubber bellows that is pushed with the palm of the hand. Others are blown into or have two pieces that the hunter rubs together. When properly used, each type should help you see more squirrels than you would without calling.

13. HUNT WITH DOGS

If you're fortunate enough to own a squirrel dog, or you have a hunting buddy who does, late winter is prime time for taking your canine friend out into the woods. With leaves off the trees, it's now easier than at any other time to keep your eyes on squirrels that are "timbering" from treetop to treetop when the dog barks. It's also easier to see and shoot squirrels hiding in a fork or pressed against a limb. 

ZACHARY HEIN (ABOVE); KEITH SUTTON (LEFT)



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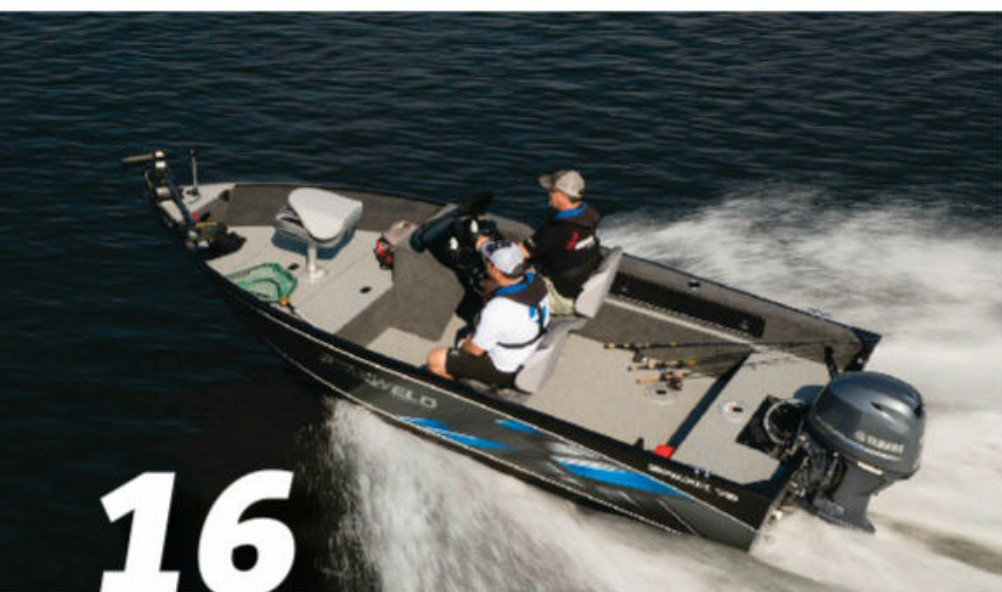


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PRIME TIME PIKE

BIG NORTHERN PIKE PUSH SHALLOW IN LATE WINTER AS THEY GEAR UP FOR THE SPAWN. PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT, AND IT'S ONE OF **THE BEST TIMES OF THE YEAR FOR TROPHY-SIZED ESOX.**

By Scott Mackenthun

Late winter offers opportunities at monster pike in the shallows. Fish concentrate around submerged weedlines or on the edges of vegetated flats.



Sitting on beach chairs, my friend and I stared out through mirrored, polarized sunglasses as the sunshine warmed our faces and the morning. We were the only ones around for miles. It was college spring break, and while most everyone we knew had traveled south for boozy debauchery, we went north to the Minnesota-Canada border. Our goal was to fish the final days of the rapidly deteriorating, spindly and snow-free ice.

A line of tip-ups out in front of us kept us busy most of the day. “Flag up,” one of us would announce, and we’d rise and trot excitedly over to a hole, alternating opportunities to land fish. The northern pike were bellicose and beastly.

I don't think we caught a fish under 30 inches, and we taped a handful over 40.

Days like that are a pike angler's dream. The weeks of late February, March and early April, as the ice is leaving and open-water season beckons, are some of the best days of the year to catch giant, trophy northern pike.

THE SHALLOW SURGE

By late ice, the biological clock is ticking for northern pike. Spurred on by lengthening days, the changing photoperiod triggers hormonal releases that finalize egg development in females and ramp up milt production in males. Pike cruise midwinter haunts, spending time both deep and shallow, but eventually the call to spawn pushes them to predictable locations in shallower waters.

Standing submerged weedlines in shallow bays and edges of expansive vegetated flats are concentrating locations as pike stage for the spawn. Look for northern pike in water as shallow as a couple feet to as deep as 15 feet. Thick aquatic plants like large-leaved pondweeds, milfoil and coontail usually brown by this late in the winter still function as cover for pike to prowl in search of prey. They can also serve as a suitable substrate on which pike lay their sticky eggs. In general, pike love transitional areas that end shallow but abut deep water.

If you can find an inlet on a lake or reservoir, you can set up near one of the best features for big pike. Moving water draws northerns; some pike will even move to upstream wetland habitat to spawn. The rushing water also means food, as baitfish ride the incoming tide of melt water.

A SWEET SMORGASBORD

The menu for big pike this time of year is simple: whatever is most abundant and easiest to catch. Cold temperatures and the entire non-growing season are hard on all fish, and some succumb to natural mortality if they can't eat enough to run the machinery of their metabolism. As the ice thaws, dead fish some locked in icy tombs are released. Northern pike get big by being energetically efficient, and they seldom turn down a free, lifeless meal unlocked by late-season melting.

The northern pike is one of the first fish to spawn each year, but yellow perch,

The upper Midwest has phenomenal trophy pike fisheries, and late winter is the perfect time to fish them with big dead baits or large jigging-style lures.



PIKE PARADISES

After monster northerns? Try these fisheries that routinely produce big fish through the ice.

Late-season ice fishing for pike involves setting up in high-traffic areas likely to see big females coming in to feed ahead of the spawn. It's no surprise that big water produces big northern pike. These fisheries put giants on the ice every year and offer tons of locations to catch huge gators.

BADGER STATE BEAUTY

With a 40-inch-minimum size limit in place, Wisconsin's Lake Mendota cranks out some nearly 4-foot-long northerns each winter. Aided by a remarkable prey buffet including suckers, shiners and ciscoes, Mendota is the pike crown jewel on the Madison Chain of Lakes.

DAKOTA DREAM DUO

Lake Sakakawea, a Missouri River impoundment in North Dakota, has some giant northerns, too. The lake's ciscoes, suckers and goldeyes grow some huge pike. East of Sakakawea is Devils Lake. This continuously

expanding lake is fantastic pike habitat, as northerns do well on flooded terrestrial habitat. With lots of bays, flats and flooded roadbeds, there is structure all over that attracts big pike.

WOLVERINE WONDERS

Michigan ice anglers can find trophy pike in Little and Big Bays De Noc on Lake Michigan in late winter. There are also some giants in Lake St. Clair on the shores of Detroit.

BORDERLAND BLISS

Minnesota's big pike fisheries on the Ontario and Manitoba borders have late-ice open seasons. Flag chasers on Lake of the Woods routinely haul in massive pike now. Good days see double-digit counts of fish, with many over 40 inches. Basswood Lake is where ice anglers go to swing for the fences. Minnesota's state-record northern pike in both the kill and catch-and-release categories have come from Basswood.

A man with a beard, wearing a camouflage baseball cap and a matching long-sleeved shirt, is shown in profile. He is holding binoculars with both hands and looking off to the side. A rifle is visible behind him on the left. The background is a blurred forest.

BORN TO WEAR CAMO

A hunter is more than just a predator. Hunters are caretakers, providers and leaders, too. Head into the backwoods with Michael Waddell, Travis "T-Bone" Turner and Nick Muntz as they honor America's authentic hunting culture.

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white suckers and redhorse suckers aren't far behind them. Perch prefer vegetation, wood snags or anything onto which they can attach their long, ribbonlike masses of sticky eggs in shallow-water areas. Sucker species are drawn to moving water—either in-stream or in gravelly inlet mouths—where they can lay and fertilize eggs. This timing is perfect for northern pike. As they begin staging in shallow water adjacent to their spawning grounds, their prey is doing the exact same thing. The convergence means a prey buffet for the pike and some of the best fishing of the year for anglers as the ice season nears its close.

SETLINE STRATEGIES

Devices

For ease of covering an area, it's hard to beat blanketing a probable spot with setlines, either tip-ups or tip-downs. Some tip-ups allow you to set a rod into the device and then feed line off the rod's reel spool. This lets you see the flag go up, walk over, set the hook and catch the fish on a rod rather than handlining in a large, thrashing pike. Some tip-ups, like Jaw Jackers or Automatic Fishermen, use the rod as a spring and set the hook automatically on the bite.

Baits

It's time to put your dead suckers to use. Bring out frozen ciscoes, smelt (where legal) or suckers, and don't be afraid to use the big ones. Pike can eat prey that are a third or even half their body size, but most commonly take offerings about a quarter of their size.

When prepping baits for the deep freeze, use vacuum-sealed bags. You won't catch fish if your bait smells and looks funky, and you want fresh-smelling baits that aren't freezer-burned. If you don't have a freezer filled with bait, hit



Quick-strike rigs reduce the chances of hooking northern pike deeply, which helps ensure healthy releases.

up the local bait shop for spearing decoy-sized suckers and ask for any dead ones they're going to throw out. Some bait shops give away dead suckers for free.

With suckers on the move to make their spring runs up creeks, you're matching the prey base. An active and agitated sucker creates plenty of movement and flash, which is just the ticket for attracting roaming northern pike.

Rigging

Use a quick-strike rig in seven-strand wire for large northerns. For pressured fish, you can also use fluorocarbon. Either should have a high-test strength of over 20 pounds. Big pike have big teeth that will snap anything less.

Quick-strike rigs usually have small beads or blades as attractants, but the main features are a set of two large treble hooks, size No. 4 or No. 6. Place the rear hook near the tail and the front hook near the dorsal fin. This sets the baitfish up to level off in a head-down posture that makes it easy for a pike to come in, smash the bait as it desires it—headfirst—and swim off. You can also use quick-strike rigs that yoke the bait, keeping it horizontal and more naturally postured. The quick-strike rig is designed so that anglers set the hook into the corner of the fish's mouth, reducing or eliminating the chance of deep-hooking and promoting catch-and-release of trophy pike.

Placement

Spread your setlines over as large of an area as you can easily monitor. Many anglers now deploy bite alarms made popular by European coarse fishermen. You can also use a Bluetooth-enabled alarm that links to your smartphone. Either allows you to extend your effective fishing area.

Deploy setlines at a range of depths. If you are on a drop-off, set some on the deep edge and some on the shallow edge. If you are on a flat with a uniform depth, run some baits just below the bottom of the ice and some just a foot or two off the bottom. Big pike are not afraid to go up for a bait, so I prefer setting my lines about halfway down the water column to start. A big live or dead sucker or frozen cisco has a large profile and makes a good silhouette against the brightly colored bottom of the ice on a sunny day.

ACTIVE ALTERNATIVE

Another great option to draw fish to the area and to really get your adrenaline going is to jig for big pike on late ice. Braided line, heavy-action rods and a big bait are the ticket. You're looking for a reaction strike, but a byproduct of jigging is it attracts northern pike into your setup to potentially trip a nearby setline.

Northland Air-Plane jigs that dart back and forth through your ice hole; large, rattling jigging spoons that call in lunkers; and Jigging Rapalas, Salmo Darters and Clam Tikka Minnows with shiny finishes all are great choices.

Dart the baits around erratically as if injured, create the biggest commotion you can, then slow things down if you mark a fish or see one while sight-fishing. Tip those lures with fish heads or bodies to make them irresistible—so long as they don't negatively impact the swimming action—and hold on tight for a fight you won't soon forget. 

Don't be afraid to go big with baits for northern pike. In waters that contain them, large frozen ciscoes are classic dead baits for pike.



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THE NIGHT SHIFT

THE COVER OF DARKNESS EMBOLDENS PREDATORS TO BE MORE ACTIVE AND VOCAL. INCREASE YOUR ODDS OF CONNECTING WITH COYOTES, BOBCATS AND FOXES BY HEADING OUT AFTER DARK.

By Scott Bestul

Predator species like coyotes feel safer moving in the evening, especially after sunset. According to some pros, nighttime hunts are your best bet to call in multiple 'yotes.



BUZZ HAYES

The moon was bright enough to cast shadows and the wind just brisk enough to feel against one cheek. The conditions had Tad Brown, a veteran caller and predator hunter—and a product development specialist for Hunter's Specialties—feeling confident as he slipped down a field road bisecting a cut corn field. The road ended on a timbered point that was a favorite hangout for area coyotes, and Brown found a slight rise in the field and set up.

As he often does after getting in position, he let some time pass before reaching for a call. This waiting period gives any nearby coyotes or bobcats a chance to relax if they hear anything during setup. However, as it turned out, he didn't have to wait long.

After soaking up the moonlit scenery for several minutes, Brown heard a coyote howl from the nearby timber, then go silent. He let the echoes of the howling cease, gave it a few minutes more, then interrupted the serenity with his own brief rabbit-in-distress calling series. The response was nearly immediate.

Brown heard a coyote rush through the timber, crunching leaves as it ran. Then, after the animal cleared the timber, he followed the sound of the coyote's feet ticking corn leaves in the field. Brown could see the coyote's dark form coming into focus as it approached and angled back toward the road—and his position.

The uber-sharp senses and incredible caution of even the hungriest coyote are legendary, however, and this song dog was no pushover. To this day, Brown doesn't know what that coyote heard, saw or smelled, but suddenly it pumped the brakes, looked around for a second, then turned to leave. Fortunately for Brown, the animal was clearly visible and already in gun range, and he dropped it on its second step.

BETTER AFTER SUNSET

While calling to coyotes, foxes and bobcats has long been a favorite winter activity for Midwesterners, few hunt these predators at night. This is a big mistake, according to Brown. In fact, he feels nighttime can be the most productive window to hunt them, largely because human activity is almost nonexistent and predators simply feel safer when moving. He says these wary creatures will often travel down roads and cross open

fields—places they'd use very cautiously in daylight, if at all—without a second thought at night.

Contrary to popular belief, Brown doesn't think predators like coyotes are inherently nocturnal. They've simply adapted to be active then.

"I think before humans became such a factor in their lives, they hunted whenever they were hungry," Brown says. "Human activity forces them to hunt when they have less chance of encountering danger. They just feel safer at night. I kind of compare coyotes to burglars; they are most active when everyone else is asleep!"

Perhaps just as important, much of their prey, like rabbits and mice, are also active at night. This only makes night hunting that much more productive.

Brad Biddle, a pro-staffer with Johnny Stewart Game Calls, agrees with Brown. He's hunted predators since he was a boy and believes that nighttime offers much better odds to call in multiple coyotes than daylight hours. In fact, during specific times, like fawning or calving seasons, he feels night hunting might be the *only* way hunters find any success.

THE NIGHT LIFE

Obviously, hunting after sunset poses some challenges, chief among them the lack of light. While more and more states are legalizing the use of lights (always check your state or area's regulations before hunting), not all allow the practice.

"We've only recently been able to use lights here in Missouri," Brown says. "But I've been hunting at night for many years, using nothing but moonlight."

Full-moon nights, or those with some degree of moonlight and a clear sky, offer enough light to see and kill coyotes, according to Brown. He says it gets even easier with snow or a light background, like a frost-covered field. Even gravel can make a difference in total darkness.

"Lots of the public wildlife areas I hunt have roads or parking lots covered with light-colored gravel," Brown says. "And coyotes use those roads and parking lots all the time at night. They usually avoid them during the day, but at night they feel safe. So, these are really good spots to target on a moonlit night because you can see them coming."

Where lights are legal, use them cautiously to avoid alerting incoming predators. Biddle tries not to shine light

directly on trees or brush as a coyote is approaching. He says that while predators might not be able to see a red light, they can sometimes spot the shadow left on the ground if you're shining it directly on a hard object. Some people have difficulty believing this, he says, but he's seen it many times. Biddle believes in the intelligence of these animals, and he has no doubt that a predator that's traveled that field edge hundreds of times might spot a shadow not normally there and spook.

To combat this, Brown has learned to "halo" predators with his lights to avoid spooking them. "Haloing" essentially refers to catching a coyote's or another predator's eyes in the outer edges of your

light source. To accomplish this, Brown aims the main beam of light up at about a 30-degree angle in order to only hit the eyes and not cast shadows where the animal might see them. Once the predator is in range, he drops the light directly on it to make the kill.

Brown also recommends using your ears to help you pinpoint predators at night. As mentioned earlier, you can often hear a predatory animal—especially a coyote—running toward you in the dark. Once you quit hearing it, Brown says, it probably means it has stopped to search for the source of the sound.

"That's when you can drop the light on it and get ready for the shot," he says.

If lights are legal where you hunt, it's important to cast them in a way that doesn't create well-defined shadows that could tip off a coyote or other predator to your presence.



Brad Biddle used an e-caller to draw in this after-dark coyote. Biddle likes to set up on a field or opening near thick cover, and always uses trees or brush to obscure his form.



PICK THE SPOT

Anyone who's hunted predators knows that how you set up is crucial to success, and this certainly applies after dark. Setup basics—playing the wind, getting in and out without alerting coyotes—are no different than during the day, but Biddle does like to start with howling spots. He says coyotes typically start their night hunts by howling, and he looks for a specific area where howling begins.

Luckily, Biddle says finding howling locations is often not difficult. Where he lives in central Kentucky, properties are usually not that large, so the first thing he does when he gets permission to hunt a spot is consult an online mapping system. He uses this to find the backside of the property and, more specifically, an area where several farms meet. Often, this is the corner farthest from a road and least accessed by people. If dense cover is present, he says it's almost a guarantee that's where the night's howling will begin.

Thick cover might offer predators security, but it's often not the best place to kill them. Biddle likes a field or opening near the thick stuff where he can see well. He also wants a tree, brushy fenceline or other backdrop to hide his silhouette.

With his setups, he often looks for any kind of high spot in a field. In his experience, that's exactly where coyotes want to go, and he'll make sets with a clear shooting lane to that spot.

Most of the areas Biddle hunts are fairly wooded, and with typical setups, he can't see more than about 80 yards. He positions himself where the wind is in his face and his electronic caller is a bit off to one side. That way, even if a coyote circles downwind—which he says they usually do, even at night—the animal will still be in range for a good shot opportunity.

Brown also seeks thick cover, where prey species are most abundant and where predators feel the safest. The Missouri bobcats he hunts really like dense, cedar-

covered hillsides, especially if there's a farm or logging road going through it.

He encourages hunters to think about setups the way they would when deer hunting. Wind is crucial, and he suggests anticipating a coyote circling the call. Being mindful of your approach is equally important. If a coyote comes down the road and catches the scent of your boot track, Brown says that 'yote will back out immediately. He recommends walking off to the side of any road or clearing you think a coyote might use as an approach.

The last thing Brown adds regarding setups pertains to visibility. If sitting down to call means poor visibility, by all means stand next to a tree or fencerow instead. Brown also doesn't hesitate to hunt predators from a shooting house or blind that he might use for deer hunting.

"You're up off the ground and your visibility is so much better," he says. "Plus, if you're using an electronic caller, you can place it on the ground, and that's exactly what the coyote is going to focus on."

MAKE THE CALL

Food Focus

When selecting calls, Brown likes to mimic the most prevalent prey species in the area. In timbered areas, or spots where many deer are present, he likes a fawn-in-distress call. Many associate that call with late spring and summer, but coyotes will respond to the sound throughout the year as fawns and young-of-the-year deer are always favored prey. In CRP or grassy terrain, mice and rabbit calls are his go-tos. That said, one of his favorite and most successful calls is a jackrabbit sound, even though those don't exist where he hunts in Missouri. So, a hungry predator can be fairly indiscriminate if it sounds like any critter is in trouble.

Brown usually starts soft on volume in case there's something close to his initial setup. If there's no immediate response, he amps it up after several minutes. This higher-volume calling reaches out a bit, so he'll wait again before returning to softer calling to give a coyote time to cover a great distance.

Fight Night

Like Brown, Biddle also begins with short, low-volume sequences, waits a bit, then goes a little louder. However,

instead of using prey distress sounds, he typically starts off howling.

Usually, he's already setting up close to a known howling spot, so he just sneaks in there before he expects them to start howling and waits for them to go off on their own. If he hasn't heard anything after 30 to 40 minutes, he'll howl to kick things off.

"Coyotes are very territorial," he says. "If they hear another dog in their area, they're probably coming to investigate."

GET OUT THERE

While both Brown and Biddle are quick to praise night hunting, they admit there's a learning curve. And Biddle acknowledges that he's made many mistakes over the years, but always does his best to learn from them. He strongly believes coyotes are more vulnerable at night, but he still regards them as one of the smartest animals out there and feels every coyote he kills is a trophy.

Brown, likewise, admits there are some extra challenges to overcome with night hunting. However, he says, once a rookie night hunter starts figuring things out, there's no question he'll start spending more time hunting at night. The odds are just too good to ignore. **G**

Tad Brown says bobcats in his home state of Missouri often prefer dense, cedar-covered hillsides, but will cross open areas at night.



OVERNIGHT BAG

Staying out late for predators? Pack along some essentials to help.

Nighttime predator hunting is a specialized pursuit that often requires tweaks in gear. The items here will get you started.

NIGHT LIGHT

A light (where legal) is an obvious addition to a predator hunter's after-dark arsenal. The GSM Outdoors Coyote Light (\$429.99; coyotelight.com) is a valued part of Biddle's kit.

FUR DROPPER

Most predator hunters tote a rifle, but both Brown and Biddle feel a shotgun is

a deadly tool for hunts after dark. While Brown doesn't think predator loads for shotguns have come as far as turkey loads have in recent years, they're getting closer. He says with today's modern loads, he considers any coyote or bobcat at 75 yards to be in range. Brown's favorite predator shotgun load is Hevi-Shot's Dead Coyote (\$56.95/box of 10; hevishot.com).

OPTICAL ADVANTAGE

Whether using a shotgun or rifle, a scope is a must at night due to its light-gathering

capability—even one with a relatively small objective lens. One good option is Leupold's Mark 3HD 1.5-4x20mm (\$499.99; leupold.com).

CAPABLE CALLS

If you're looking to add to an arsenal of e-calls, or perhaps acquire your first, you won't go wrong with models offered by Johnny Stewart Game Calls or Hunter's Specialties. The Johnny Stewart Executioner Electronic Game Call (\$149.99; hunterspec.com), in particular, is a solid all-around e-caller.

GSM OUTDOORS
COYOTE LIGHT



HEVI-SHOT DEAD COYOTE



LEUPOLD MARK 3HD
1.5-4X20MM



JOHNNY STEWART
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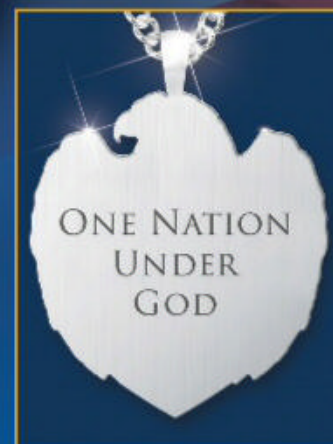
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WALK THE LINE

WITH MOST MAJOR HUNTING SEASONS CLOSED, NOW IS THE PERFECT TIME TO TRY YOUR HAND AT TRAPPING. THESE FIVE SETS WILL GET YOU STARTED.

By Jeffrey Miller

The morning was clear and quiet as I walked through the dark forest, my flashlight illuminating the path ahead. I was approaching my first raccoon set, and I heard a commotion in the darkness. Soon, a set of eyes reflected in my flashlight's beam. A coon was caught firmly in a dog-proof trap I'd set. It was a wonderful start to a morning of running traps.

For those who've never tried it, fur trapping is a great way to get out during the fall and winter months. It's a challenging pursuit that requires you to know the habits of your prey intimately. Whereas a bowhunter must be within 30 yards or so of a deer to be successful, a trapper needs an animal to come within inches of his or her sets. This makes having success at trapping a challenge, but therein lies the fun.

While there are truly hundreds of different ways to catch the Midwest's various furbearing animals, some tried-and-true methods are particularly simple and effective. For those just getting started trapping, or for trappers looking to mix things up, here are five sets that will give you a leg up on furbearers.

FOOTHOLD CASTOR MOUND SET

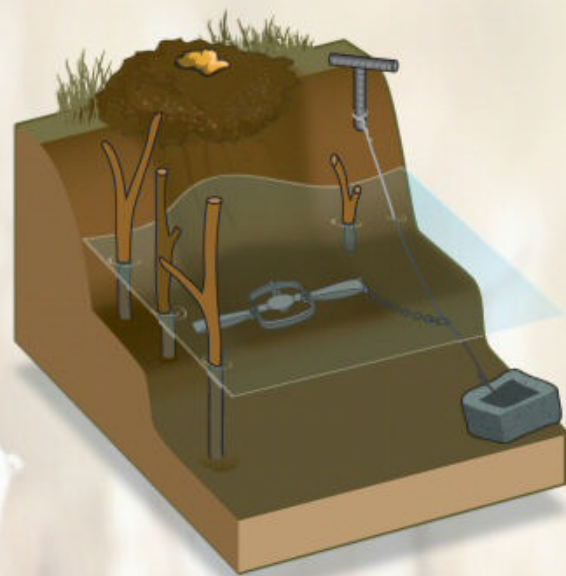
Target Species: **Beaver**

Beavers are North America's largest rodent. The aquatic animals can tip the scales at more than 80 pounds, though most are smaller. With webbed feet and broad, scaly tails, beavers are masters of manipulating their environments to suit them. The industrious rodents will build dams, cut down trees and dig dens in the banks of rivers.

At one time, beaver pelts were the king of furs. Unfortunately, today's market prices are low. However, the castor glands, located in the rear of the beaver, are highly sought after by lure makers, and at times these glands exceed the value of the pelt. As a bonus, beaver meat is surprisingly delicious, with a flavor and texture similar to beef.

Every year, I look forward to spring beaver trapping. After a long winter, I eagerly anticipate the break-up of ice on the river. So, too, do beavers, and they quickly start moving out of their dens to establish territories.

When a beaver finds somewhere it wishes to call home for the year, it builds castor mounds on the banks. The animal



A foothold castor mound set capitalizes on a beaver's territorial instincts. The set's castor-based lure attracts beavers, and a large foothold trap and drowning cable guard against the powerful capabilities of these animals.

collects mud and leaves and pushes them out of the water into piles. Once the pile is to their liking, they'll excrete castor on it. If another beaver swims by and places its castor on the mound, a fierce territorial battle often ensues.

The castor mound set exploits this tendency. Walking along the riverbanks, I search for tracks in the mud or even the scent of castor in the air. With this



WINDIGO IMAGES

You want a fairly large foothold trap for beavers, which have big, thick feet. Whether you choose a double long-spring or coil-spring, go with the largest size your state allows.

set, sharp banks often work best. When I find a vertical bank, I get to work.

Using a shovel, I'll cut a notch in the bank, pulling the mud up onto the bank and fashioning it into a mound. Let the water run out of the mud back into the water. This suggests a beaver has recently been there.

Foothold traps for beavers are usually big. However, every state has a legal maximum size for foothold traps, even when underwater, so follow your state's rules. Use the largest-sized trap that's legal, be it a double long-spring or coil-

spring, as the beaver's back foot is large and can easily tip a small trap.

Beavers are very powerful, so traps are set on drowning cables attached to rebar stakes. Some trappers prefer rebar rods, while others use cables. I prefer a 10-foot-long cable attached to a weight of at least 20 pounds.

The cable also needs a drowning lock in place. The trap's chain will attach to the drowning lock, which allows the beaver to swim down to the bottom of the river. The lock only allows one-way travel, preventing it from surfacing.

After setting the trap and attaching it to the drowning cable, place it in the notch of the bank. Be certain it's at least six inches below the water's surface for a back-foot catch. I like placing a few dry sticks on both sides of the trap as guides to ensure the beaver's foot sets down right on top of the pan.

Lure is needed to finish off the set. I simply goop a castor-based lure on top of the mud mound and on a stick. While the castor mound set tends to work best in the spring, it produces in the fall as well.

BOTTOM-EDGE SET

Target Species: Muskrat

Musk rats have often been called the bread-and-butter of the fur trade. While the price of muskrat pelts fluctuates each year, these critters never fail to put a little money in a trapper's pocket.

Many sets catch muskrats, but the bottom-edge set is a super-simple and effective blind set. For newbies, a blind set is one without any lure or bait. It relies solely on the animal's use of the habitat to lead it to the hidden trap. First brought to the nation's attention in a book by Ken Smythe and Bob Noonan in the 1990s, the technique was designed for mink. However, trappers also reported large catches of muskrats with the set, and many have adapted it for beavers and otters, too.

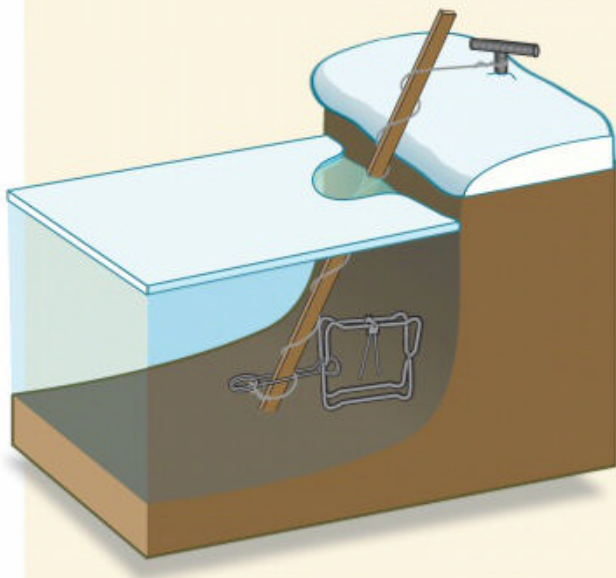
I live on a medium-sized prairie river, and for a long time I had difficulty catching muskrats. Fortunately, the bottom-edge set shines on rivers and streams. Musk rats—especially after freeze-up—will swim along the base of the streambank, often carving a furrow where the bottom of the stream meets the bank. Areas where the bank plunges down into the water at a sharp angle are muskrat magnets, particularly if these drop-offs occur on a small point or bump-out of the bank.

The #110 body grip trap was made for the bottom-edge set. After locating a point with a sharp edge, chop through the ice with a hatchet or spud bar. Next, attach some 14-gauge wire to the spring of the trap and run out enough to reach the bank.

After carefully setting the trap, insert a four-foot wooden lath through the spring of the trap. Push the lath into the water, nudging the side of the trap without the spring tight against the bottom of the bank. I recently started using HAGz spring clips on my traps, and I use a piece of rebar rather than a lath. Either way, once the trap is securely set, tie the wire off to something firm on shore. Lacking a rock or tree root to anchor to, a T-shaped rebar stake works well.

That's it. Any muskrat swimming under the ice along the bank will slip right into the set. Best of all, the set is impervious to snow and cold. While blizzards rage above the ice, the trap stays in working condition under the water.

Protected against the effects of snow and cold, the bottom-edge set is ideal for muskrats on streams and rivers. It takes advantage of a muskrat's natural tendency to swim alongside the base of a stream bank beneath the ice.



Look for steep banks, especially those on small points, when placing bottom-edge sets for winter muskrats.



HAY SET

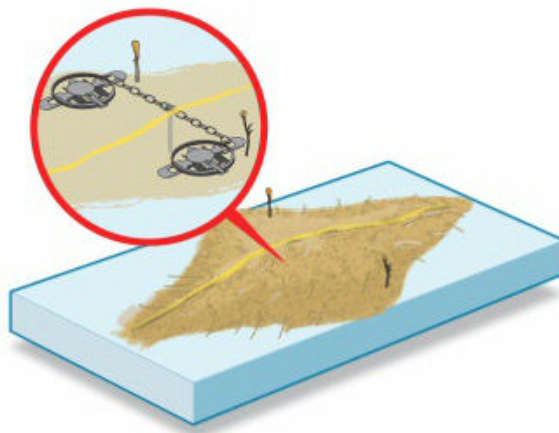
Target Species: Red Fox

Red foxes were historically the cream of the crop for trappers. Today, they bring little money on the open market, and coyotes have disrupted their range somewhat. Still, the red fox is a fun animal to target, and a tanned fox pelt adds tremendous character to any home or cabin.

Red fox pelts are at their most luxurious in the early winter, which means snow and cold. Standard dirt sets can be difficult if not impossible to keep operating in those conditions, but one set shines during this most difficult time of year: the hay set.

The hay set is simple and effective. To begin, drive a stake into the frozen ground with a pair of #1.5-coil or #1.75-coil spring traps attached. Set each trap opposite of the other on tight chains.

Sift clean, dry straw over each trap, then make a small ridge of straw perpendicular to the traps. Do not use alfalfa or grass hay, as they will attract deer.



A hay set baited with fox urine and gland lures is perfect for red foxes. The hay stands out amongst snow and ice, and it offers cover for mice and other prey species. The placement of two traps boosts your odds of success.

Pour some fox urine on the ridge and dip two pieces of straw in a bottle of fox gland lure, placing one above each trap. Voilà. The set is complete.

The hay set works well for several reasons. It provides visual appeal in an otherwise featureless landscape, it provides cover for mice and other prey species and it prevents the traps from freezing to the ground.

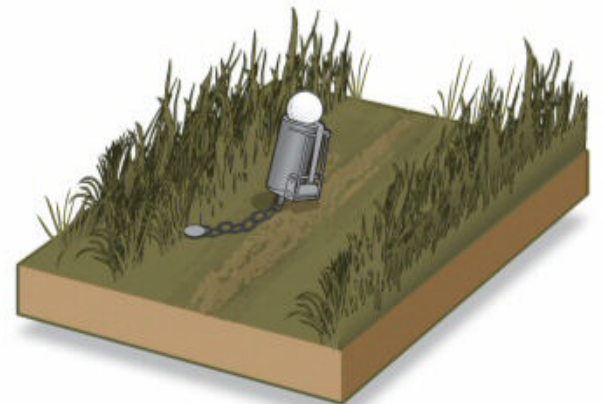
DOG-PROOF SET

Target Species: Raccoon

A clever trap rather new to the market is the dog-proof. While variations on the dog-proof design have existed since the early 1980s, the past 20 years have seen an explosion of designs and manufacturers.

The trap is simple. A metal tube—a bit smaller than a cardboard toilet paper tube—contains a trigger at the bottom. When a raccoon places its paw entirely in the trap and pulls the lever, a metal loop catches it by the wrist. It is a safe and effective tool for raccoon trapping.

My favorite way to use the dog-proof is to first find a heavily-used raccoon trail. This could be one entering a corn field, along a riverbank or snaking through tall grass.



This easy set protects dogs and produces on raccoons. Placed along a high-traffic trail, ringtails have no choice but to investigate the raccoon lure and cat food inside. A golf ball placed on top keeps mice from swiping the bait.

First, anchor the trap to the ground with a rebar or wire stake and place the trap directly in the middle of the trail. I want the raccoon to bump its nose on the trap and have no choice but to be intrigued.

Next, fill the trap to just below the rim with dry cat food. Drip some sweet-type raccoon lure over the cat food and down the front of the trap. Cover the top with a golf ball to prevent mice from stealing the bait. If the trail is active, there should be a ringtail waiting the next morning.

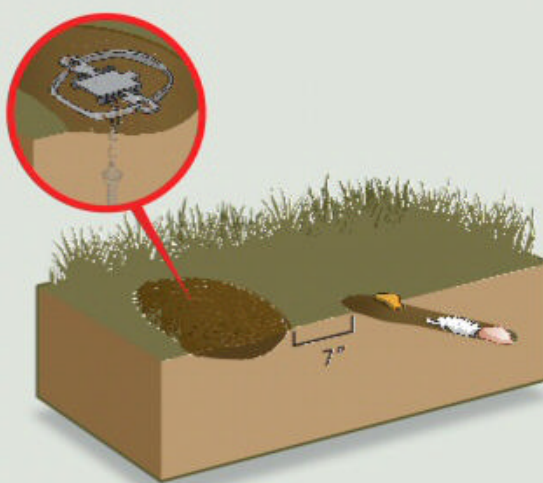
DIRT HOLE SET

Target Species: Coyote

My friend Chad Burrer is a seasoned trapper from North Dakota, and he stacks a sizable pile of top-notch coyote pelts each season. His set of choice for the big song dogs is the dirt hole set.

Burrer contends with frozen ground nearly all season, so he prefers stout No. 2 four-coil traps anchored with double rebar stakes. They are strong enough to hold the biggest coyote but small enough that he doesn't have to spend a lot of time chopping through frozen ground to bed them. He carries a bucket of dry or waxed dirt to help bed the trap and ensure that it's rock-solid and won't tip or wobble. A coyote will dig up any trap that isn't solidly bedded.

Burrer uses a cordless drill with a concrete bit to drill a hole an inch wide by 8 inches deep at a 45-degree angle. In open country, a large dirt hole gives a set extra eye appeal. Place the trap pan roughly 7 inches from the lip of the dirt hole to ensure a solid catch.



With the dirt hole set, bait and coyote gland lure attract song dogs and encourage them to spend time around the set. Once sprung, the bedded and staked stout four-coil trap holds them in place.

To finish off the set, push some commercially produced bait into the hole with a stick or piece of wire. Then, place some coyote gland lure on the lip of the hole. Ideally, a coyote will work the set for enough time to get caught—Burrer likes to shove sheep wool into the hole to make them work for it. More time working the set means a higher likelihood a coyote will step on the pan.

GET TRAPPING

Trapping offers hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts much more than opportunities at fur. It's an experience that gives participants another way to enjoy the outdoors and learn about the natural world. While trapping has its challenges, some of the sets identified here can get newcomers on the right track and hopefully send them home with some fur this winter. 

SHOW-ME

SNOWS

MISSOURI'S "GOLDEN TRIANGLE" IS A SNOW GOOSE HUNTER'S PARADISE.
BIG-NUMBER DAYS ARE POSSIBLE IF YOU'RE WILLING TO PUT IN THE WORK ...
OR A HIRE A GOOD OUTFITTER WHO WILL.

By Brandon Butler





When things go right, the snow goose hunting in central Missouri can be exceptional. Lots of public land is available, though there are ample outfitters if that's more your speed.

DENVER BRYAN/WAGES ON THE WILDSIDE

The town of Sumner in north-central Missouri is known as the “Wild Goose Capital of the World.” The sleepy burg of about 100 people celebrates this distinction with an annual Goose Festival that dates to 1955, and is home to Maxie, the world’s largest goose. The giant honker statue was erected in 1976, stands 40 feet tall and weighs just over 5,000 pounds. To say Sumner is proud of its renown in the waterfowling world would be an understatement.

Canada geese may have put Sumner on the map, but today snow geese draw a lot of hunters to the famed region known as the “Golden Triangle,” which includes Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Fountain Grove Conservation Area, Grand Pass Conservation Area and the Missouri River. There is a lot of public hunting opportunity in this area, thanks in large part to Missouri’s model of conservation funding.

Back in 1976, voters passed an amendment to self-impose a one-eighth-of-one-cent sales tax to directly fund the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC). Voters turned out favorably to support the idea that tax dollars would be used to purchase and manage land for public use. For nearly 50 years, the MDC has delivered on that promise. Areas of conservation concern and lands well suited for outdoor recreation—mainly hunting and fishing—have been added to the system ever since. Today, the MDC owns and manages close to a million acres of well-managed public land, and plenty of it includes prime snow goose territory in central Missouri.

PUBLIC OPTIONS

Thankfully, this quality public land is available for all to enjoy; you don’t have to be a resident of Missouri to use the state’s resources. There are different types of draws and reservations for waterfowl hunting, so anyone interested should study up on the MDC website before making a trip. You can also always hunt the river, but you’ll need a boat and some solid snow geese hunting knowhow if you plan to tackle the Big Muddy.

Established in 1937, Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge serves as a breeding grounds and sanctuary for migrating waterfowl. Its 10,795 acres were developed into prime wetland habitat

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PLANNING POINTERS

Outfitter and lodging options for traveling hunters

Options abound for snow goose hunters in the Golden Triangle. Hunters can find plenty of places to camp, including Pershing State Park by Fountain Grove or Van Meter State Park by Grand Pass. There are limited hotels in the area. However, better ones are available in Chillicothe, Brookfield and Marshall.

Arnold Compton (660-676-2306) is old school. He doesn't have a fancy website and doesn't spend much of his time on social media. He relies on word of mouth to book clients, and stays as busy as he'd like. He doesn't provide lodging.

Habitat Flats (habitatflats.com) has become a very well-known outfit in the waterfowl world. Tony Vandemore and his partners have developed a world-class waterfowl destination right in the heart of the Golden Triangle. The notoriety the operation has received in recent years is well earned. The hunting is known to be outstanding, as are the accommodations.

Tony Toye of Big River Outfitters (toyesbigriverguideservice.com) claims to have killed 30,000 snow geese during the spring since the conservation order was put in place. He offers affordable hunts and stacks up piles of snows.



While the end results make snow goose hunting look easy, it is anything but. This is why many hunters end up going with a guide or outfitter their first few times.



With ample wetlands and agricultural land in the region, central Missouri has outstanding habitat for migrating geese.

for ducks and geese by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Initially, ducks were the primary species of concern at the refuge, but after Canada geese were observed there for the first time in the early 1940s, they became the focus.

The normal snow goose season set by the MDC opened Nov. 11 and runs to Feb. 6, but the Light Goose Conservation Order (LGCO) immediately follows. This special season, set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help reduce the snow goose population causing harm to critical tundra habitat, affords hunters an extended opportunity to shoot "light geese." The LGCO runs from Feb. 7 through April 30 and is open across all of Missouri's waterfowl zones. Light geese include snow geese both white- and blue-phase birds and Ross's geese.

The hunting at both Grand Pass and Fountain Grove can be lights-out for the DIY hunter. These conservation areas are recognized as two of the top public waterfowl hunting spots in the state, and that carries over into the LGCO for snow geese. It is still possible to obtain permission to hunt private agriculture fields, but many of them are leased up these days. Opportunities are there for the guys getting after it on their own if they have the right equipment.

GOING PRO

While there's a lot to love about hunting snows on Missouri's public land, outfitters are certainly a solid alternative, mainly because hunting snow geese can be such an ordeal. Decoy spreads usually number in the thousands. There are multiple blinds, electronic callers (legal

during the LGCO), flags and well-trained dogs. To start pursuing snow geese on your own, you better be ready to crack open the checkbook.

Or simply consider hunting with a reputable outfitter.

Arnold Compton is one such individual who has built a solid reputation as a snow-geese hunting guru in the region. A longtime local, the retired rural electric cooperative worker has chased snows in the spring since the LGCO debuted. He now guides snow goose hunters throughout the LGCO season every year.

"I've had a love affair with snow geese since 1999, the year the conservation order came in," Compton says. "It has been amazing to see the evolution of this whole fraternity of outfitters operating during the conservation order."

Snow geese travel in massive flocks, so it makes sense that you'd need giant decoy spreads to attract them. Smaller spreads will work, but typically, the more decoys the better. The number of decoys needed for regular snow goose hunting success inhibits most hunters from participating without the assistance of an outfitter. While there's nothing stopping anyone from hunting snows on public land with their own spread of decoys, this is a game perhaps best eased into considering the financial investment required.

"Snow geese hunting is an outfitter's dream because it is cost prohibitive to just jump in and buy 2,000 decoys to try this," Compton says. "With duck hunting, you can sort of do that. A gun, a license and a dozen decoys is all you need to get started. Not so much with snow geese. That's why I recommend hiring an affordable outfitter and [giving] it a whirl.



Snow goose hunting is a gear-intensive endeavor. Big spreads are usually required, and rotary machines are used to add motion.

If you like it, then start throwing your money into it.”

SMART SNOWS

Like all hunting pursuits worth undertaking, snow goose hunting offers ample opportunities for frustration. It’ll drive you batty when you’re lying in a blind surrounded by a solid-looking decoy spread, and there’s thousands of snows coming over you that won’t even give you a second look. But nothing is worse than when a flock comes in and hovers right above your spread, studying you from 200 feet up before ultimately breaking off.

“I think people often have the misconception that snow geese hunting might be easy,” Compton says. “Folks see these huge flocks and piles of dead birds. But they’re very, very intelligent. It’s not something that you can go out and have regular success with if you don’t have the right equipment.”

Back in the early years of the LGCO, he explains, it seemed like every flock at least looked at spreads, with most giving up some potential targets. There was a lot of success in those days. But snow geese are wising up. They can live a long time, with some aging out over 20 years. These birds are hunted about nine months out of the year from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and it’s easy to understand how pressure that intense—over so many years—can educate a species.

Consider it in this way: A 4-year-old gobbler is a pretty old turkey in most places. Now, think how smart that bird is. And it’s only hunted three weeks a year.

Can you imagine how hard it would be to kill a 15-year-old gobbler? Well, that’s exactly what’s going on with some of these snow geese. As hunters, we’ve sort of evolved the species.

PERMIT PURCHASES

Licensing requirements to stay on the right side of the law

As noted, regulations during the Light Goose Conservation Order are dramatically eased compared to regular waterfowl seasons. Still, to participate in Missouri, residents and non-residents age 16 and older need a Conservation Order Permit. This permit costs \$5 for residents and \$47 for non-residents. Hunters with a Resident Lifetime Conservation Partner Permit or a Resident Lifetime Small Game Hunting Permit do not need to purchase a Conservation Order Permit.

Resident and non-resident hunters age 15 and younger are not required to purchase any permits in Missouri to take part in this hunting opportunity. However, they must satisfy one of two conditions: They must hunt in the immediate presence of a properly licensed adult hunter 18 or older who has a valid hunter education certification card or was born before Jan. 1, 1967, or they must possess a valid hunter education certification card.

WILD TIMES

Weather is often a factor in snow goose hunting, and it can change a lot during the LGCO in central Missouri. Some of the best days are miserably cold with wet conditions. Other days, you’ll hunt snows in short-sleeved shirts, and you might still do very well. It’s nice to be hunting when it’s 65 degrees. After a chilly morning, it feels great to stretch out in the sun once it’s warmed enough to shed your sweatshirt.

These types of days are great for taking young people out hunting. In fact, snow goose hunting is an awesome all-around hunting experience for youngsters because you’re usually at least seeing birds, and if they work, the action can be fast and furious.

Dan Appelbaum has been hunting with Compton for years. He’s killed piles of snow geese with him, but his favorite memories involve bringing his sons along for hunts.

“Arnold got my boys out on their first snow geese hunts, and the memories we made are treasured,” Appelbaum says. “We had one of those epic hunts where we killed 80 geese over two days. It absolutely ruined them.”

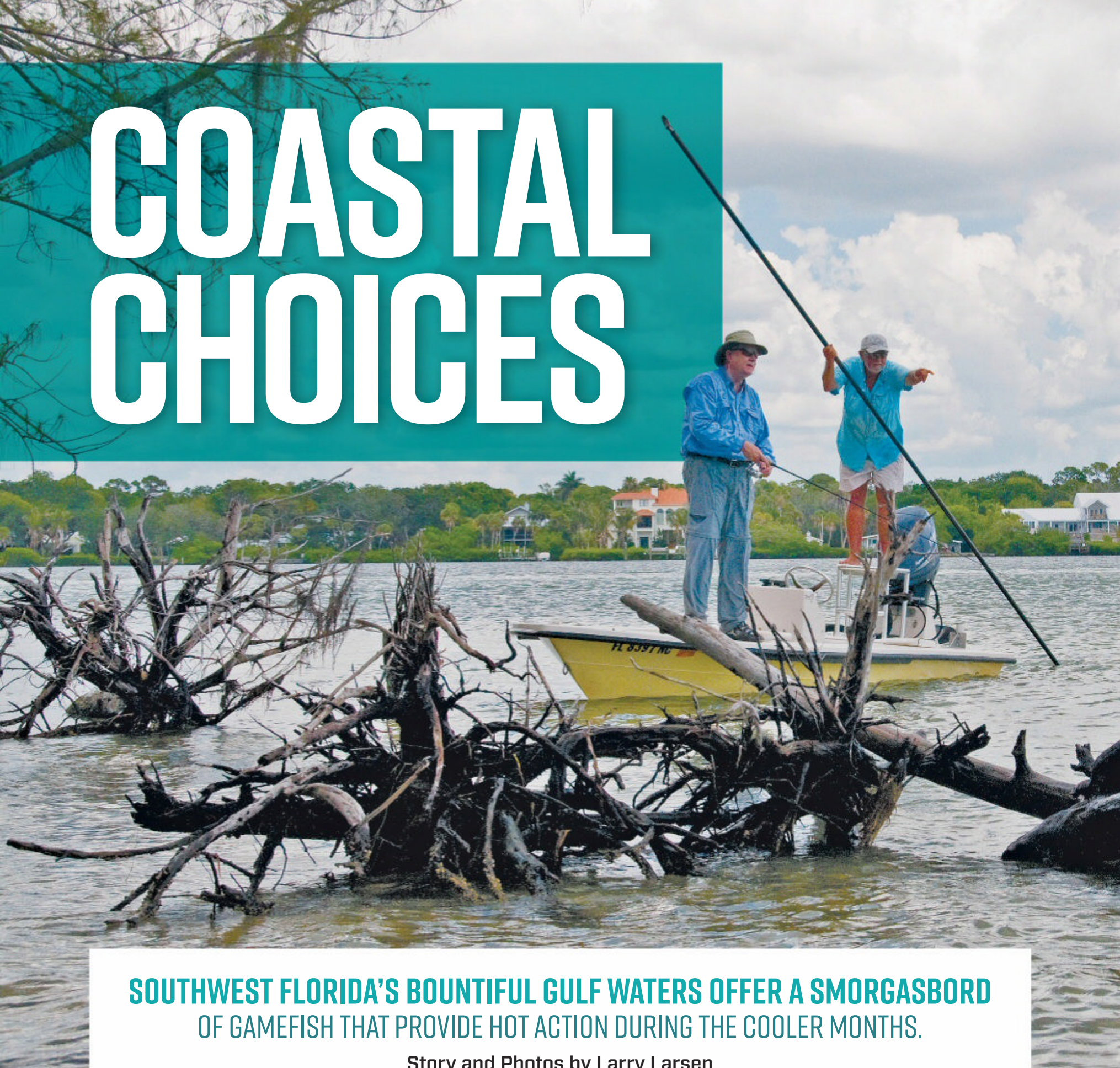
CONSERVATION IN ACTION

The LGCO affords hunters special regulations, which makes for some interesting experiences afield. There is no limit on how many birds can be killed. Shooting time is extended to a half hour before sunrise until a half hour after sunset. The use of electronic calls is legal. Shotguns do not need to be plugged, and some guys even shoot custom guns that hold a dozen shells.

The goal of the LGCO is to reduce numbers, and the regulations are set to make that as feasible as possible. Of course, hunters must still draw birds in and make their shots, but such is always the case.

“Hunting is conservation” is a tagline we’ve heard for years. However, hunting the Light Geese Conservation Order actually puts the saying into practice. Through relaxed rules and an extended season, hunting is the tool being used to reduce numbers of a species that’s causing serious habitat damage. And central Missouri’s Golden Triangle is one of the finest places to do it in all of North America. 

COASTAL CHOICES



SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S BOUNTIFUL GULF WATERS OFFER A SMORGASBORD OF GAMEFISH THAT PROVIDE HOT ACTION DURING THE COOLER MONTHS.

Story and Photos by Larry Larsen

Southwest Florida is a compelling destination that offers big challenges for expert anglers and a variety of fishing opportunities for anglers of all skill levels. The inshore waters, coastline passes, back bay country and shallow Gulf of Mexico flats between Ft. Myers and Sarasota are particularly productive for anglers chasing a diverse array of fish species. These include speckled trout, redfish, snook, tarpon and other abundant marine species such as

Spanish mackerel, ladyfish, pompano, jacks and even cobia.

The moderate weather in the spring along the coast seldom affects fishing in this region from Sarasota Bay southward along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) through Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound. Anglers in Sarasota, Charlotte and Lee counties have a variety of good fishing spots in the form of islands, beaches, bays, creeks and in the meandering ICW. Throughout southwest Florida, there are many beautiful

and expansive flats with lush grass and sand potholes spread across thousands of acres.

In the Sarasota Bay area, there are 50 miles of shoreline and numerous shallow oyster bars around which to locate activity. Great fishing exists all around Longboat Key and Anna Maria Island, which are surrounded by fishing flats. Farther south along the ICW are Lido, Siesta and Casey Keys, which are often targeted by inshore and backwater guides for a good reason. They produce fish!



Sarasota Bay is known for its spring-time opportunities to sight fish for trout, redfish and other species.

COLOSSAL CHARLOTTE HARBOR

Further south, the massive Charlotte Harbor area includes more than 830 miles of shoreline, and more than 84 percent of it is designated as a nature preserve. It also includes Boca Grande, known to many as the “tarpon capital of the world,” Gasparilla Island, Bocilla Pass, Punta Gorda and Manasota Key. There are more than 100 square miles of uninhabited estuary and prime backcountry habitat in the mangroves along huge grass flats.

Charlotte Harbor has plenty of seagrass patches, sandy bottoms, oyster bars, mud flats and young mangrove islands in its shallower estuaries, along with lots of wildlife. Close by are the passes, Gulf beach-side areas and cuts between the interior islands, which almost always harbor fish. I’ve frequently located large concentrations of trout that average 16 to 24 inches in length and redfish up to 30 inches on the flats off Cape Haze.

Many passes, like Boca Grande, are renown for tarpon in the spring months. It is a “stack-up” point for giant concentrations of tarpon because the pass there is deeper and wider than most of the others along the Southwest coast. Tarpon migrate between freshwater and saltwater. In Boca Grande, the fresh waters of the Myakka and Peace Rivers flow around Cape Haze into the northern end of Charlotte Harbor, and the Caloosahatchee River adds a little flow through Pine Island Sound. Most of the Caloosahatchee dumps water into the Gulf around Sanibel Island.

Giant tarpon may be on boat channel humps, edges or ledges in the 40- to 70-foot deep passes between islands. They may also be in 8 to 15 feet of water off the nearby Gulf beaches or in the shallow 4- to 6-foot-deep flats for about 100 to 130 days. Many of these silver kings exceed 100 pounds, and some may top out at more than 150.



Southwest Florida’s backcountry areas offer anglers plenty of spots to tangle with tarpon, which can approach 150 pounds.

PICTURESQUE PINE ISLAND SOUND

According to one of the area's top guides, Capt. Pete Greenan, Pine Island Sound is the longest continuous grass flat in the state. It lies south of the harbor behind Cayo Costa, the Captiva Islands and Pine Island. Capt. Pete, a longtime friend of mine, has often proven to me that he can find fish throughout the 50 square miles of uninterrupted mangroves and shallow bars. In fact, he has successfully guided anglers on waters all along the southwest Florida coast for about 40 years.

"The weed beds and docks centered around the flats off the islands of North Captiva and Cayo Costa offer some of the better trout fishing in the area," notes the captain. "My favorite spots are where trout regularly move into deeper stretches of the grass flats and then out into shallower weed beds to feed.

"A great area for larger trout and redfish in the southern end of Pine Island Sound are the grass beds off Sanibel

Pier," he continues. "During low tide levels, trout move into the finger channels that are formed by tidal flows over the flats. Those channels usually cut through large grass beds and around barrier mangrove islands in the Sound."

When water levels drop due to the outgoing tide, the surrounding grass beds will usually be exposed, pushing large schools of trout into the channels. With depths of 7 to 8 feet lying adjacent to the better flats, the "speckled bottom" is usually good for both trout and redfish, according to the captain.

The sandy potholes surrounded by grass in 1 to 3 feet of water are then ideal for sight fishing the reds. When the falling tide practically dries up the speckled bottom, the redfish will move into the deeper waters nearby. The grass flats off Bokeelia Point on the north end of Pine Island can be productive for trout on both the incoming and outgoing tides. Be on the lookout for eddies and finger channels where the fish might move along.

PRIME INSHORE FORAGING FACTORS

The red-hot action could heat up in southwest Florida during the late winter/spring season anytime from mid-February through April, depending on when the waters get warmer. Keep an eye on the warm "fronts" and repeated days of southerly winds along the coast. The areas farther south near Ft. Myers Beach and Sanibel normally warm up first and a week or two later, Sarasota Bay temperatures will heat up.

Baitfish show up with the rise in water temperature, and when they come in, they quickly move into the weed beds. The inshore species then become very active. The larger scaled sardines, menhaden and threadfin herring are usually found in the deeper cuts, along the beaches and ICW passes separating the islands in March and April. Other areas to locate baitfish include the grassy rips and markers lining the ICW.

Later in spring, the most productive

White sand beaches and abundant shore birds like herons provide the backdrop for southwest Florida fishing.



Cobia add to the variety found in Pine Island Sound.



sand shoals to fish are those that are covered with grass beds close to deeper water offering small cuts and channels. The forage fish will spawn as waters warm on the flats that vary from 3 to 10 feet down. The larger baitfish usually start leaving the area around the first of June.

INSHORE PREDATORS

Once water temps are moving up, be sure to keep an eye out for little herds of baitfish that may move by the boat on an incoming tide. Small schools of snook might be following them in the relatively clear waters. While the snook bust baitfish on the surface, birds exploit the baitfish that pile up near shorelines.

“Tarpon also may move to the beaches or into the backcountry where Springtime redfish angling is excellent when you can find them schooling,” says Pete. “Big snook may also be hungry, but these inshore fish may be difficult to locate. Often docks and seawalls will offer the better fishing in cooler weather because they are the more protected places then.”

Tarpon move in and out of the passes and run the adjacent beaches. Some of my favorite battles were with 80- to 100-pound tarpon in about 8 feet of water just off the beaches on either side of one of the area’s passes. Tossing live crabs early in the morning often is productive, but the fish can get skittish when the sun moves higher in the sky.

With fish on, you might have 15 to 25 minutes to enjoy a tremendous battle, particularly if they drag you and your boat into a pass a couple of miles away!

The fishing is generally best when the tides are strongest and bait movement is greatest, during the full and new moons. In fact, the crabs and shrimp move through the passes all along the southwest Gulf coast on those moons. The better months for chasing tarpon may begin as early as late March or early April and last a few months.

Some tarpon might be in the region year around. They reportedly winter in the Boca Grande area as long as the water temperature doesn’t drop below 65 degrees. Several days of cold temperatures



SOUTHWEST FLORIDA SIGHTS

Attractions and activities both on and off the water

Florida's scenic southwest Gulf coast has an abundance of both active and peaceful waterways, but most are seldom crowded. From Sarasota to Charlotte Harbor and Naples to the south, there are plenty of outdoor recreation opportunities in addition to the great inshore fishing. Aquatic offerings include swimming, paddleboarding, snorkeling, kayaking, boating, sailing, surfing, water skiing, jet skiing, nature cruises, offshore trolling, party-boat charters and beach fishing.

There is always plenty to do when off the water. Check out the remote barrier islands, harbor shoreline walks, surrey bike rentals, Gulf sunsets and great dining in the numerous coastal communities located in this 100-mile stretch of bays, harbors, passes, creeks and rivers.

In the Sarasota area, the Ringling Museum (ringling.org) celebrates the history of the circus at the complex spread over 66 acres of beautiful gardens and footpaths. There are plenty of other attractions, parks and activities to do in Sarasota, including the Mote Marine Laboratory (mote.org), a non-profit marine science center, aquarium, shark research site and marine hospital. Other great attractions are the Myakka River State Park and the Mary Selby Botanical Gardens at Historic Spanish Point.

In the Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach area, much of the land attractions and activities are on the wide Gulf Island coast beaches. The area's beautiful powder-white sand beaches are renowned and considered the very best in the country for beach combing for shells and shark's teeth. The Don Pedro Island State Park and the Stump Pass Beach State Park at the end of Manasota Key are fun spots to visit and take a short hike. You may even see a mother osprey tending to her chicks in her huge nest.

In the Charlotte Harbor/Ft. Myers area, check out the Babcock Wilderness Adventures and Nature Park at the Shell Factory. For a natural unspoiled beach, head to Sanibel Island's 3 public beaches or to Bowman's beach.

There are also great places to stay and dine all along the southwest coast. In the Charlotte Harbor area, one of my favorite restaurants is the Lock 'N Key in Englewood (lockandkeyrestaurant.com), which is located across the road from a beach and features a large indoor dining room, bar area and an outdoor dining area where you can hear the waves tumbling on the Gulf sand. I'm a fan of the place's huge scallops.

Several great accommodations exist, but I have a couple of favorites. The beautiful Lido Beach Resort (lidobeachresort.com) on Lido Key near Sarasota has roomy suites with kitchenettes, a great restaurant and two heated pools, and lies just a mile from the best boat ramp in Longboat Key. The Westin Cape Coral at Marina Village is a beautiful and quiet resort just off the fish-laden Pine Island Sound.

drives them out of the passes, and they move south. When the Gulf water gets hot (near 90 degrees), the majority of tarpon will migrate north to cooler waters, usually by the end of June.

WATER CHARACTERISTICS AND LOCATIONS

In mid-March or April, snook and redfish move out of their wintering spots in the rivers, canals and deeper parts of the bays and cuts. As the backcountry waters along the southwest coast warm further in the spring and winds subside, the clear grass flats are normally the most productive spots for trout, snook and redfish.

Prime fishing locations to check out in each of the inshore areas along the coastline and ICW are grass edges, mangrove roots or any oyster bars that have formed at the edge of the mangroves, as well as potholes in the sandbars.

Snook love glass minnows. On a recent trip to Sarasota Bay, we found snook busting little herds of tiny glass minnows that were bunched up right on the shoreline. We caught about a dozen, mostly small snook that were feeding on the little baitfish. Our successful day was complete with a couple of 24-inch reds and several nice trout from sandy pothole areas.

When the springtime waters are low after an outgoing tide, redfish can often be found on grass flats that drop off to deeper water. When the tide turns and starts pushing back, the fish will work their way into the clear water tide holes. On brighter, sunny days, both redfish and snook can often be found hiding underneath the bushes. As the incoming tide continues, the fish may be up underneath the roots of the mangroves and it will be difficult to get at them.

Tarpon often relocate if the water gets very muddy from predominate southwest winds lasting several days. They don't like silt in the water and will leave the passes, backcountry and near-shore beach areas for cleaner offshore water. Rainwater typically flows into the bays and sound from the east. It may have a lot of tannic acid in it, which can affect the fish. Tarpon will leave their locations until the water clears again. That might last for a week or two depending on how much rainwater has flowed into the flats and passes.



Speckled trout are numerous around Sarasota's expansive grass flats.

ACCESS TO THE FISHERIES

Several nearby southwest Florida airports make the fishing very accessible from anywhere in the U.S. The Punta Gorda Airport, Sarasota/Bradenton International Airport and Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers are close by. About 60 miles north of Sarasota lies the St. Pete/Clearwater International Airport and the Tampa International Airport.

The southwest Florida area has tremendous facilities for visiting anglers, good boat rental places, kayak rentals and great boat ramps. Due to the vast variety of topography and habitat along the coast, hiring a guide who knows the area is a wise investment. An experienced guide will know where to go and can cut down the "hunting" time. They also know the extensive and sometimes confusing fishing and boating regulations and restrictions that are in place.

For more information on the in-shore fishing in the region, contact two, long-time guide friends of mine, Capt. Pete Greenan at Gypsy Guide Service (Sarasota and Boca Grande) at 941-232-2960 or Capt. Van Hubbard (Venice to Pine Island Sound) at 941-468-4017. 

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STOEEGER M3500

SNOW GOOSE



BRAD FITZPATRICK

THIS SEMI-AUTO IS PURPOSE-BUILT FOR FRENZIED SHOOTING AMONG LIGHT GEESE.

By Drew Warden

The M3500 Snow Goose's inertia system makes it a reliable shooter, while the extended magazine tube keeps it in the action.

In 1999, to address concerns about burgeoning populations of snow geese, blue geese and Ross' geese (aka light geese) and the damage they were doing to northern breeding areas, the federal government mandated the Light Goose Conservation Order (LGCO). This created a spring season in many states with relaxed regulations intended to boost harvests and reduce the numbers of these migratory birds. Bag and possession limits were removed, shooting hours were extended, unplugged shotguns were allowed, and electronic callers with recorded sounds were permitted.

In the years since the LGCO was federally mandated, each spring hardcore waterfowlers have chased wily light geese on their return migration from wintering habitat back to breeding grounds in the Arctic. Pursuing these

SPECIFICATIONS

STOEGER M3500 SNOW GOOSE

stoegerindustries.com

TYPE: semi-automatic shotgun

GAUGE: 12

CHAMBER: 3 1/2"

CAPACITY: 10+1 rounds

BARREL LENGTH: 28"

OVERALL LENGTH: 50"

WEIGHT: 8.2 lbs.

STOCK: composite; white Cerakote

LENGTH OF PULL: 14 3/8"

DROP AT HEEL: 2 1/2"

DROP AT COMB: 1 1/2"

RECEIVER/BARREL FINISH:
distressed white Cerakote

SIGHTS: red-bar front

CHOKE TUBES: extended; IC, M,
XFT, Close Range, Mid Range

MSRP: \$899



The gun's beveled loading port eases loading. Federal Black Cloud FS Steel made short work of snows on the author's hunt.

birds effectively, however, requires specialized gear. Giant decoy spreads and loud e-callers are the norm. As are highly dependable semi-automatic shotguns—ideally, ones outfitted with magazine extensions to handle spring light goose hunting's high-volume shooting.

While dedicated DIYers can add an aftermarket magazine extension to their shotguns, there's a definite advantage to a factory-built gun already equipped with an extended magazine tube. And if such a gun happens to offer other features perfectly suited for the unique demands of hunting light geese, so much the better.

This is exactly what Stoeger Industries has done with its new M3500 Snow Goose shotgun, which I was able to test last season while hunting snows and blues in southeast Missouri with K&K Outfitters (duckandbuck.com). Tailor made for whacking and stacking snows, blues and Ross' geese, the Snow Goose pairs Stoeger's field-proven inertia-driven M3500 shotgun with an extended 10-round magazine tube from the company's Freedom Series line. Stoeger also incorporates other snow-goose-specific niceties like a 3 1/2-inch chamber, oversized controls and a stylish and functional distressed white Cerakote finish on the stock, fore-end, receiver and barrel. Apart from the extended magazine, this distressed white finish is one of the more eye-catching

elements on this new gun. And it's rugged, weather-resistant and blends right into white snow and decoy spreads.

I've long favored inertia-operated guns for waterfowl hunting due to their cleaner functioning, and the M3500 Snow Goose's action performed flawlessly during testing. It spit out and cycled shell after shell while hunting from layouts or sitting in whites in a dry, dusty ag field. The larger chamber accommodates 2 3/4-, 3- and 3 1/2-inch shells. I generally prefer shooting 3-inch shells, but some like 3 1/2-inchers, especially for longer shots on wary geese, so it's nice that the Snow Goose has that capability.

To assist gloved hunters—or simply those scrambling to reload in the chaos of

spring light goose hunting—the M3500 Snow Goose has oversized controls and a specially machined and beveled loading port. In the field, the enlarged bolt handle proved very intuitive to find and operate with or without gloves, and the paddle-like bolt-release button was similarly large, tactile and easy to engage. Stoeger appears to have borrowed these features from its earlier M3K competition shotgun, but it's sensibly chosen to alter their color from light blue to black. The only controls not oversized on the gun are its crossbolt-style safety and the cartridge drop lever, which should be familiar to anyone who's used a Benelli, Franchi, Stoeger or similar inertia-driven semi-auto shotgun. The beveled loading port, meanwhile, naturally facilitates easier



Having extra shells on hand is helpful for snows, and the M3500 Snow Goose's 922r-compliant extended magazine tube holds 10 rounds.

DREW WARDEN (2)



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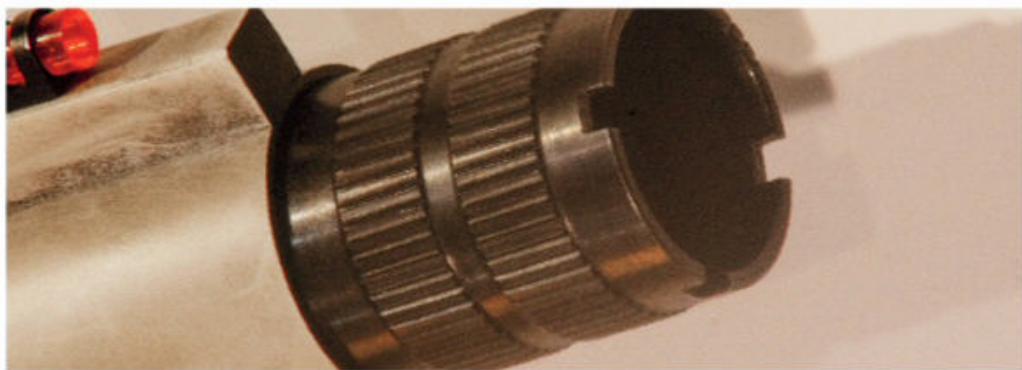
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LEFT: The gun comes with five extended choke tubes to meet the needs of hunters and the changing moods of wary snow geese. **RIGHT:** The cross-bolt safety and cartridge drop lever are standard sized on the M3500 Snow Goose.

reloads, especially when loading five to 10 shells at a time to refill the extended magazine tube.

Speaking of the extended tube, the Snow Goose's 10-round unit is 922r compliant. For those who don't know, 922r compliance refers to a specific portion of federal law that prohibits the import of certain firearms not "suitable for ... sporting purposes." It also forbids the assembly of one

of these guns from too many imported parts—namely, no more than 10 from a list of 20 key components. This small subsection of the U.S. Code most often applies to imported FAL, AK and similar rifles, but it's also the reason why foreign semi-auto shotguns aren't sold with magazine extensions. In this case, the M3500 Snow Goose complies with 18 USC 922r and thus eliminates the need to add any additional U.S. made parts to satisfy the law.

Already having a 922r compliant extended magazine in place doesn't just take legal concerns off shooters' plates,

though. It also removes the burden of installing an aftermarket magazine extension themselves. While not exceedingly complicated, this process can involve trimming an oversized magazine tube spring to fit and attaching an extension tube barrel clamp, which requires a proper fit to avoid potential damage to the barrel's finish. Many hunters could probably install an extension on their shotgun and create a suitable light goose rig, but the M3500 Snow Goose offers a no-fuss turnkey solution that ensures it's done right. Of course, those using this gun on birds outside of the LGCO



The M3500 Snow Goose performed reliably in the field, and the gun's added capacity proved beneficial in knocking down more snow geese.

DREW WARDEN (TOP); BRAD FITZPATRICK (BOTTOM)



LEFT: The distressed white finish on the gun and the black Paracord sling are nice touches. The sling easily clips on or off depending on the user's preferences. **RIGHT:** An oversized bolt handle and bolt-release button make operating the M3500 Snow Goose easy, even with gloved hands.

season will need an extra-long dowel rod to limit shell capacity where required.

If there's any downside to the extended magazine, it's likely the additional weight. The M3500 Snow Goose weighs 8.2 pounds, and with its 28-inch barrel, it has an overall length of 50 inches. It's not a handy gun to take on extended treks, but, then again, it's not designed to be. To help tote its weight afield, the Snow Goose features a black paracord sling. While great for walking, it kept hanging up on the layout I was hunting from, so I ultimately removed it on my test gun.

The gun has an advertised length of pull of 14 3/8 inches, a drop at heel of 2 1/2 inches and a drop at comb of 1 1/2 inches. However, an included shim kit permits drop and cast adjustments. It also has five extended choke tubes (IC, M, XTF, Close Range and Mid Range) and a choke wrench, giving shooters ample options for varied setups. Meanwhile, a ventilated rib rides along the full length of the barrel, and up front a red-bar sight provides a highly visible reference point for the eye. Finally, a simple rubber butt pad offers recoil mitigation when firing heavy goose loads.

Overall, I really liked Stoeger's new M3500 Snow Goose. With a reliable inertia-driven operating system at its core and a built-in extended tube magazine, it's a simple, straightforward snow goose slayer. In fact, it may very well be one of the most affordable snow-goose-ready shotguns on the market. And it comes with a 5-year warranty. If you're already a snow goose fanatic, put this gun on your list. If you're not, maybe this new extended capacity shotgun made just for snow geese could be the incentive you need to get started in this challenging yet extremely fun pursuit. **G&F**

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RIFLES FOR ALL CONDITIONS

**BAD WEATHER
NEED NOT RUIN
YOUR HUNT—OR
YOUR GUN.**

By Game & Fish Staff

We don't always get ideal weather conditions when we hunt, but there are silver linings to those storm clouds. Rain, snow, wind or a mixture of all three keeps many hunters home, which means less pressure on days when the weather takes a turn for the worse. Plus, some big-game species move better when the temperature drops or a front rolls in. To stay comfortable and hunt effectively in these conditions requires gear that's up to the task, including rifles that can handle moisture without rusting or shifting their zero. Here's a batch that will hunt hard regardless of the weather, just like you. 

BROWNING X-BOLT HELL'S CANYON MAX LONG RANGE

The popular Hell's Canyon series continues with an offering from Browning designed to tackle the elements as well as long shots. With a 26-inch heavy-sporter-contour barrel, removeable Recoil Hawg muzzle brake, Burnt Bronze Cerakote finish and fully adjustable stock, this rifle has many of the features long-range hunters look for. The rifle is available in 10 chamberings ranging from 6.5 Creedmoor to .300 PRC, and it feeds from a rotary, detachable box magazine.

CALIBER: .300 PRC

CAPACITY: 3 rounds

BARREL: 26"

STOCK: fully adjustable composite

SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: Burnt Bronze Cerakote

OVERALL LENGTH: 46 3/4"

WEIGHT: 8.19 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,509.99

browning.com

NOSLER M48 MOUNTAIN CARBON

Built on the Nosler's own action, the Mountain Carbon is equipped with a carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel from Proof Research, Timney trigger and 100 percent carbon-fiber stock now available in the Shale Gray color. The Mountain Carbon is guaranteed to be sub-MOA accurate with Nosler ammunition and is offered in 10 chamberings including 6.5 PRC and .280 Ackley Improved, both recent additions.

CALIBER: .280 Ack. Imp.

CAPACITY: 4 rounds

BARREL: 24"

STOCK: carbon fiber

SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: Tungsten Grey Cerakote

OVERALL LENGTH: 45"

WEIGHT: 6 lbs.

MSRP: \$3,140

nosler.com



RUGER HAWKEYE LONG-RANGE HUNTER

The Hawkeye Long-Range Hunter retains Ruger's Mauser-style controlled-round-feed action and marries it to a free-floating, cold-hammer-forged stainless steel barrel with 5R rifling. The muzzle is threaded and includes a radial-port brake. A speckled black and brown finish covers the laminate stock, which is adjustable for length of pull via spacers. The rifle features Ruger's LC6 trigger and comes with a 20-MOA Picatinny rail.

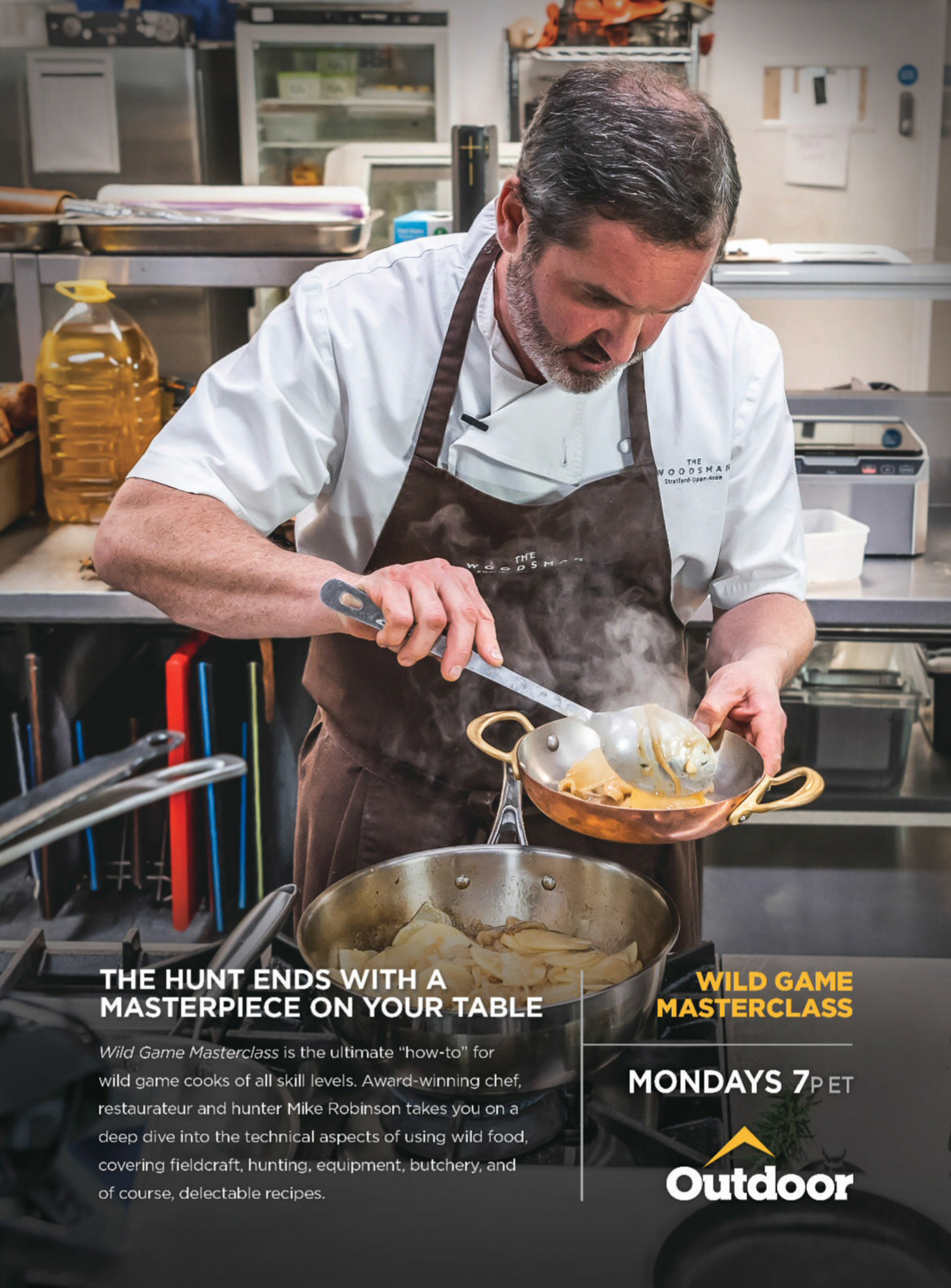
CALIBER: 6.5 PRC
CAPACITY: 3 rounds
BARREL: 22"
STOCK: laminate
SIGHTS: none; Picatinny rail included
FINISH: Hawkeye matte stainless
OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/4"
WEIGHT: 7.19 lbs.
MSRP: \$1,529
ruger.com

SAVAGE 110 ULTRALITE CAMO

The Ultralite Camo packs a bunch of features into a rifle that weighs less than 6 pounds. Savage combines a carbon-fiber-wrapped, stainless steel barrel from Proof Research with a skeletonized receiver to cut weight. The barreled action is housed in a composite stock with a KUIU Verde 2.0 finish and Savage's AccuFit system that permits length-of-pull and comb-height adjustments. A threaded muzzle and AccuTrigger that's user-adjustable from 1 1/2 to 4 pounds of pull weight are other features hunters will appreciate.

CALIBER: .30-06 Sprg.
CAPACITY: 4 rounds
BARREL: 22"
STOCK: composite with AccuFit
SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases
FINISH: Melonite receiver
OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/2"
WEIGHT: 5.85 lbs.
MSRP: \$1,639
savagearms.com





THE HUNT ENDS WITH A MASTERPIECE ON YOUR TABLE

Wild Game Masterclass is the ultimate "how-to" for wild game cooks of all skill levels. Award-winning chef, restaurateur and hunter Mike Robinson takes you on a deep dive into the technical aspects of using wild food, covering fieldcraft, hunting, equipment, butchery, and of course, delectable recipes.

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Outdoor

SEEKINS PRECISION HAVAK ELEMENT

Though the company is best known for its semi-auto rifles, Seekins Precision applied its machining knowledge to the bolt-action world with the release of the Havak. The latest evolution is the Element, a lightweight rig that uses 7075 aluminum for unstressed portions of the receiver and bolt. Short-action versions weigh just 5 1/2 pounds, and long actions come in at 6 pounds. The spiral-fluted, 5R-rifled, stainless-steel barrel comes with a threaded muzzle; it and the action ride in the company's own composite stock.

CALIBER: .308 Win.

CAPACITY: 5 rounds

BARREL: 21"

STOCK: carbon composite

SIGHTS: none; integral Picatinny rail

FINISH: anodized black action, bead-blasted stainless barrel

OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/2"

WEIGHT: 5.5 lbs.

MSRP: \$2,795

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CALIBER: .300 Wby. Mag.
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BARREL: 26"
STOCK: Monte Carlo composite
SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases
FINISH: Flat Dark Earth Cerakote
OVERALL LENGTH: 48 1/2"
WEIGHT: 7.25 lbs.
MSRP: \$999
 weatherby.com

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CALIBER: .270 Win.
CAPACITY: 3 rounds
BARREL: 24"
STOCK: composite
SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases
FINISH: Flat Dark Earth Permacote
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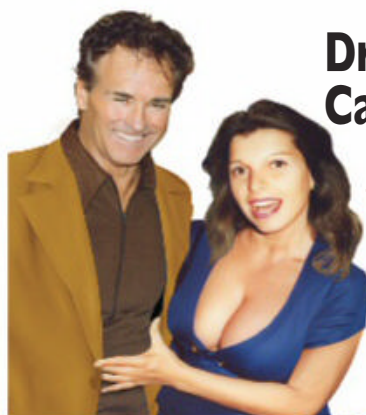
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V191

BIRD IN HAND

A LIFE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, SHOULD NEVER BE WASTED.

Hunting seasons had ended a month ago, but young Shane hadn't yet had his fill. During the bus ride home from school, he spied an immense flock of blackbirds in the field behind the Methodist church. He was soon at his house, and it took him less than a minute to dash upstairs, put on his hunting jacket, grab his pellet gun and run out the door. Deftly he jumped the backyard fence and entered the forest that led him behind the church. Once in view of the steeple, he crawled to the field edge. Moments later a small group of blackbirds lit in front of him.

Shane drew a fine bead on one bird's eye and squeezed the trigger. He heard the pop of air as the pellet flew and then the thud of lead upon feathers. The sky over the church momentarily turned black as all the birds in the field took to wing in a startling whoosh—all except one. A lone blackbird remained in the snow next to a few drops of gleaming red blood.

Impressed with himself for hitting such a tiny target, Shane rose from his hide to pick up his trophy. He thought the bird was pretty in its own black, nondescript way. But when he dropped it into his coat pocket and felt its warm weight, a slight pang of guilt hit him.

Shane melted into the trees and slunk back to the house. He had almost made it inside when his little sister stopped him.

"Whatcha doin' with your BB gun?" she asked.

"It's a pellet gun," replied Shane. "I was doing some shooting, duh."

"Whatcha got blood on your jacket for? Catch somethin'?"



"I didn't *catch* anything," said Shane. "You lie!" Lucy pestered him.

"I shot a stupid blackbird," Shane fired back. "Big deal. There's millions of 'em."

"Ummm, I'm tellin'!" wailed Shane's sister as she leaped from the stairs and ran out of the room.

Lucy kept her word. Shane was in the garage, half tinkering around, half hiding, when his father found him.

"True you shot a blackbird today?" he asked.

"Yessir," said Shane.

"You know there isn't a season on 'em," said his father. "They're classified as migratory songbirds, and you could get in trouble for killing one. Actually, I could get in trouble since you're my son."

"I didn't think about all that," said Shane. "Guess I just felt like hunting something."

"Hunting or killing?"

"Hunting," said Shane. "I was a little sad when I killed it, to tell you the truth."

Shane studied his father's face. "Are you mad?" he asked.

"Well, it's not good. You broke the law. Besides, when I gave you that gun I told

you not to go around just shooting stuff. But the truth is, I did the same thing when I was your age. Your grandpa did, too, as I suspect his dad did."

"So you're not mad?" asked Shane, exhaling a deep breath.

"No, because there's something good that can come from this."

"What's that?" wondered Shane.

"Well, for one, no life will be wasted," said his father, "because you are going to eat that bird for dinner tonight."

"What?" wailed Shane in disbelief.

"Just be grateful you didn't shoot 10 like I did," said his father.

Later in the kitchen, Shane removed the small, battered nuggets of blackbird from the hot oil just as his mother had advised. Just then, in walked his sister.

"Something smells good!" she said, eyeing the fried food. "Can I have some?"

"Nope," Shane said while trying to hide a smile. "It's a secret recipe I learned. Sorry, there isn't enough."

"Not fair!" Lucy yelled as she stormed off. "I'm telling Dad!"

A few moments later his sister returned to the kitchen. "Dad said you have to give me a bite," she reported.

"Fine," said Shane as he selected the biggest piece and dropped it in her mouth.

"Mmm, pretty good. What is it?"

"Blackbird!" shrieked Shane. Lucy gagged and spat and tried to slap her brother, who was laughing.

"Dad! Do something!" Lucy screeched as her father entered the kitchen. He had overheard everything.

"Do what?" asked Shane's father with a chuckle. "Blackbird makes a fine meal for poachers—and tattletales." 

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