

TACKLE TEST: WE RANK THE TOP NEW RODS AND REELS, P. 64



GAME & FISH

MIDWEST

The Regional Outdoor Guide

GAFMAG.COM
MAY 2022

RIVER RUNNERS

**FISH MOVING
WATER NOW
FOR THE BEST
SMALLMOUTH
ACTION OF
THE SPRING**

**TROUT HEAVEN: INSIDE THE
EPIC SMALL-STREAM FISHING
OF THE DRIFTLESS AREA**

**THE FINER POINTS OF
WALLEYE SPINNER RIGS**

**SEAL THE DEAL ON A
SECOND-CHANCE TOM**

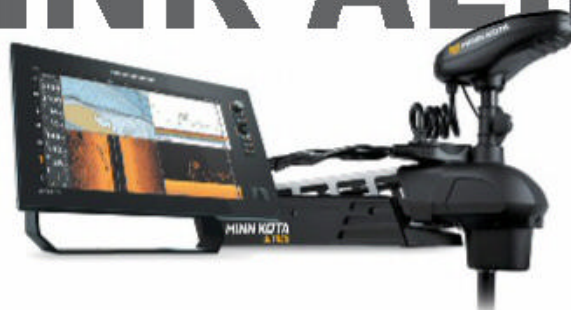
**7 WAYS TO
IMPROVE
CHANNEL
CAT BAIT**

REGION ROUNDUP

- ST. CLAIR MUSKIES
- 'HUSKER GOBBLERS
- HAWKEYE BLUEGILLS
- NODAK LARGEMOUTHS
- STOCKTON LAKE SLABS
- BADGER STATE TURKEYS



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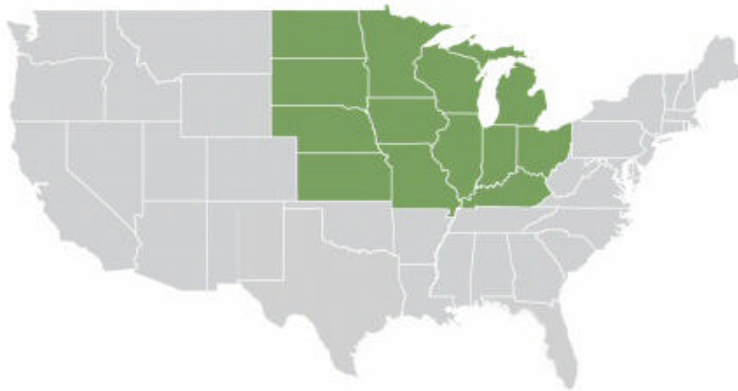


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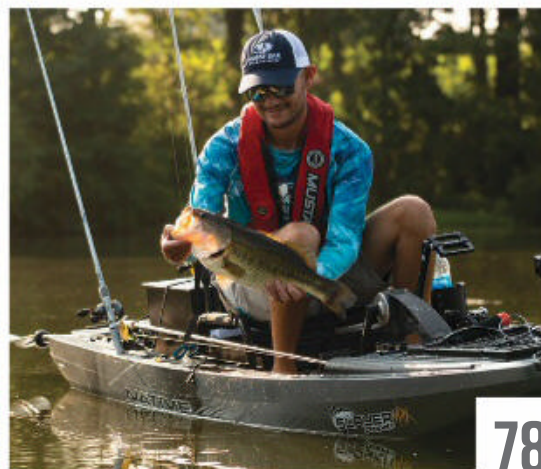
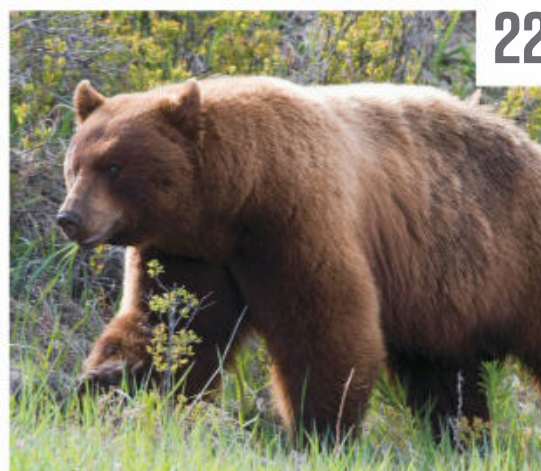
Consider these seven things to choose the right kayak for the water, fish and angling technique.

By Drew Warden

82 FISH FINDERS

We review six kayaks from Hobie, Old Town, Bonafide, Native, NRS Fishing and Jackson.

By Outdoor Sportsman Group Staff



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PROVING GROUNDS

As a born-and-raised Northeasterner, I'd never experienced anything like Bienville Plantation in north-central Florida the first time I visited. The towering pines draped in Spanish moss, the alligators lazily basking in the midday sun, an indescribable sweetness to the air, fried frog legs for dinner—I might as well have been on a different planet. Then, of course, there was the epic bass fishing. Our group caught more and bigger bass on that trip than most of us had caught in our lives to that point. That was some 20 years ago.

Last December, I returned to Bienville, now under new management and known as Bienville Outdoors (bienville.com), for the fourth-annual *Game & Fish* Tackle Test and was pleased to find that not much about the place has changed... except for the fishing. Somehow it has gotten better. Over the course of four days, our team of four boated more than 500 largemouth bass, with several in the 6- to 8-pound range. One twosome caught 126 fish in a single day. The list of places where such an achievement is even possible is not very long.

As such, the carefully managed waters of Bienville proved to be the perfect place for us to put the newest bass rods and reels—47 pieces of tackle in all—to the test. Aside from myself, the team consisted of three of the most hopeless bass addicts I know: *Game & Fish* South Regional Editor, Dr. Todd Kuhn; Todd's good friend, Capt. Jamie Harris, a former guide and all-around gear geek; and *Game & Fish* contributor

and the managing editor of *Fishing Tackle Retailer*, Ken Duke. Between the four of us, our bass fishing experience totals more than 150 years.

I tell you all this not to brag, but so that when you get to the Tackle Test on page 64, you can rest assured that the reviews you read are honest and come from a place of authority. The people behind our Tackle Test are the real deal, and so is the venue that hosted us.

John Taranto
Editor



The test team debates the merits of a baitcasting reel after another superb day on the water.

GAME & FISH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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May is a great time to be an angler almost everywhere. Tune up by species with expert tips, trending techniques and gear under the “Fishing” menu.



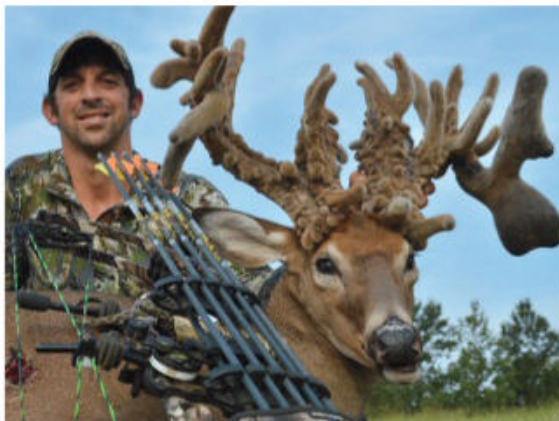
GREAT CATFISH BAITS

Flathead catfish can be finicky about what they eat. “6 Best Baits to Catch Big Flathead Catfish” looks at natural offerings the brutes can’t pass up.



RECIPES BY THE DOZEN

Whether you still have venison in the freezer or are planning for a successful harvest this fall, “12 Most Popular Venison Recipes” gives you tasty options.



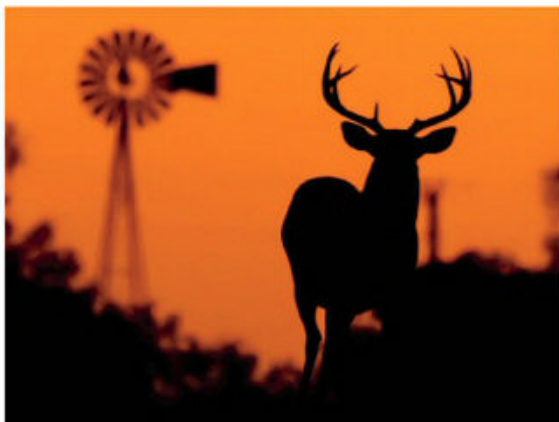
SPECIAL TREATMENT

Check out our new “Special Collections” area for popular exclusives like “Crash Course” how-to videos, “Big Bucks” field reports and much more.



TEXAS-SIZED BASS

The Lone Star State has been on fire with double-digit largemouths this spring. Read “17.06 Pounds! Lunker Bass Biggest in Texas in 30 Years” for details on one giant.



DON'T GET NOTICED

“5 Easy Ways to Ruin Your Favorite Deer Hunting Spot” covers basic mistakes to avoid so whitetails won’t be tipped off by your presence before you hunt them.

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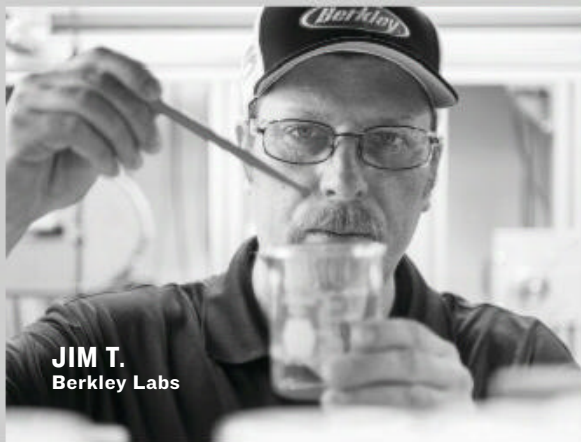


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SUN		MON		TUE		WED		THU		FRI		SAT	
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24		25		26		27		28		29		30	NEW
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6:30	6:54	7:18	7:42	8:06	8:30	8:54	9:18	9:42	10:06	10:30	10:54	11:18	11:42

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

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GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SCOPE

AVOID MOUNTING MISTAKES AND APPLY SOME MATH TO BOOST EFFECTIVENESS.

By Richard Mann



Dialing for elevation requires a properly mounted and leveled scope in order to achieve accurate corrections to point of impact.

Modern riflescopes are optical marvels. You can haul your rifle around on an ATV and the scope will never shift zero. You can dial in bullet corrections as small as an inch at 400 yards. With zoom ranges as high as eight times, you can view a crystal-clear image at 3X to 24X. A riflescope is one of the primary interfaces between a hunter and a rifle, and we must take some steps to avoid common mistakes and optimize that interface.

The first and most critical task is mounting the scope to the rifle. Too often hunters skimp on scope mounts only to discover the cheap mounts are the reason the setup won't hold zero or shoot itty-bitty groups. Worse yet, cheap mounts that don't fit the scope or rifle correctly can damage both. Precisely

machined bases and rings are key to taking full advantage of a scope's benefits.

Mount the scope as low as possible. This makes it easier to establish a good cheek weld on the stock while comfortably looking through the riflescope. At the same time, make sure at least 1/8 inch of clearance exists between the objective housing and the barrel, and the bolt handle does not interfere with the magnification adjustment.

Eye relief, the distance from your pupil to the ocular lens in the scope, is another aspect of shooter interface. The scope should be mounted far enough to the rear so that when you shoulder the rifle from any position and comfortably rest your cheek on the comb, you can see the full field of view through the riflescope. Rubbernecking around trying

to obtain a full view is detrimental to fast and good shooting.

Once you have positioned the scope correctly, make sure it is level. If the scope is not level, any adjustments you make will not move the reticle in a true horizontal or vertical direction. Leveling a riflescope can be tricky, but there are a variety of tools available from brands such as Real Avid and Wheeler Engineering to help with the process. Confirm the scope is level by shooting a three-shot group on a target at 100 yards, adjusting the elevation 48 clicks (1/4 MOA clicks) up and firing another three-shot group while aiming at the same spot on the target. The center of the second three-shot group should be directly above the center of the first group by about 12 inches. If the second group

is left or right of the first, the scope is not level, and any elevation adjustments you make will cause the bullet to impact farther off the target at greater distances.

Zeroing a riflescope is the first step in refining how you use it. The process is nothing more than adjusting the reticle so that its primary aiming point—where the horizontal and vertical crosswires intersect—matches the point of impact at your preferred range. Many modern riflescopes come with reticles that offer additional aiming points for extended ranges. Others have rotating turrets designed to let you dial in corrections at longer distances. With both types of scopes, a 100-yard zero is common. If your riflescope is the more traditional type and has a simple duplex reticle with capped turrets, many hunters opt for what is known as a maximum point-blank zero (MPBZ).

With an MPBZ you adjust the reticle to coincide with a point of aim that will allow you to hold dead-on a big-game animal from the muzzle out to the farthest practical distance. There are a variety of ways to do this. I use a ballistics app to determine how far my bullet will travel in 1/3 second (250 to 300 yards for most modern big-game cartridges), and then adjust the reticle so that my bullets strike 3 inches below my point of aim at that distance. The result is a zero where the bullet will never be more than 3 inches above or below my point of aim out to that range. (See “Shooting Tips: The 1/3-Second Zero” at gafmag.com for details.)

If you're using turrets to dial in trajectory corrections, the MPBZ is still not a bad idea. Instead of walking around with your elevation turret set to a 100-yard zero, adjust it for an MPBZ. This way if you must make a quick shot inside the MPBZ range, you'll not have to take time to dial in a correction. The concept can also be used with ballistic reticles that have additional aiming points. It requires some math and time on the range, but by adjusting the primary aiming point for an MPBZ, the additional aiming points will work at greater distances. Use the primary aiming point unless the target is beyond the MPBZ range.

Despite the popularity of fancy reticles and dialing turrets, some hunters prefer simpler riflescopes. You can use a common duplex reticle to adjust for

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The handle is made from genuine natural bone, and features decorative wood spacers and a hand-carved motif of two overlapping feathers—a reminder for you to respect and connect with the natural world.

This fusion of substance and style can garner a high price tag out in the marketplace. In fact, we found full tang, stainless steel blades with bone handles in excess of \$2,000. Well, that won't cut it around here. We have mastered the hunt for the best deal, and in turn pass the spoils on to our customers.

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The amount of space between the crosswire intersection and the tapered point on the bottom vertical wire of a duplex reticle can be employed as a reference for holdover. Start by determining this space at 100 yards by viewing a target with a 1-inch grid, and then apply the following formulas.

Range Change

$$(NR/OR) \times OS = NS$$

*NR is New Range; OR is Old Range;
OS is Old Subtension; NS is
New Subtension*

EXAMPLE: If the subtension at 100 yards is 3 inches and you want to know the subtension at 350 yards, the calculation would be $(350/100) \times 3 = 10.5$. Magnification must remain the same.

Magnification Change

$$(OM/NM) \times OS = NS$$

OM is Old Magnification; NM is New Magnification; OS is Old Subtension; NS is New Subtension

EXAMPLE: If the subtension at 100 yards is 2 inches at 12X and you want to know the subtension at the same range at 6X, the calculation would be $(12/6) \times 2 = 4$. Reticle must be in the second focal plane.

trajectory and to make range estimations. Again, some math and time on the range are required. Determine the height covered by the distance from the crosswire intersection to the tapered point on the bottom vertical wire at 100 yards. Once established, you can use the tip of the taper as an additional aiming point, controlling the correction it provides by adjusting the magnification. For this technique to work, your scope reticle must be in the second

focal plane so that the size of the reticle in relation to the target changes as the magnification is adjusted.

For example, if that space equals, or subtends, 3 inches at 100 yards with the scope set at 9X, it will equal 12 inches at 400 yards at the same magnification. Similarly, it will subtend 4 1/2 inches at 100 yards and 18 inches at 400 yards with the scope set at 6X. In the same manner, you can use the tapered points on the horizontal wire

for wind corrections. (See sidebar for subtension calculations.)

These are just a handful of ways you can get the most from your riflescope. But for any of these techniques to work properly, you'll need a scope that has been solidly mounted and that is perfectly level. Take the time to make sure that's done correctly, and then spend some more time on the range learning to work with the precision marvel that the riflescope has become. 



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ACHIEVE PERFECT BALANCE

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WITH TACKLE COMPONENTS THAT
COMPLEMENT ONE ANOTHER.**

Story and Photos by Dr. Jason Halfen

A rod's action, or the area of the blank that flexes under force, is an important aspect in casting and working baits as well as hooking fish. It should not be confused with rod power.

Every long cast, authoritative hookset, sporty battle and thrashing fish in the net results from balance—not the kind of equilibrium we seek between mind and body or work and home, but rather a well-balanced tackle system, consisting of rod, reel, line and lure. Most anglers recognize that bluegill rods shouldn't be used when chasing muskies, and that finesse tubes don't perform to our expectations when presented on long, stiff

rods and levelwind reels. While poorly balanced tackle can make for a frustrating and expensive experience, a tackle system that is well-balanced will enhance everything that happens on the water involving a cast, a fight and a fish.

Assembling a balanced system of rod, reel, line and lure requires that you address two fundamental questions: what species of fish do you plan to pursue, and what type of lure do you plan to present. The answers to these

questions will dictate the power and action ratings of your rod, the weight and capacity of your reel, the composition and pound-test ratings of your line and leader, and the weight and style of your lure.

Let's begin our discussion by considering rod power and action. These ratings reflect rod characteristics that are derived from their design and engineering. They are often used interchangeably—and incorrectly.



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Simply stated, a rod's power is an indication of the force or weight required to flex the blank, while a rod's action describes the specific area along the blank's length where that flex will occur. Rod power ratings begin at ultra-light and proceed through extra-heavy (or higher), with an ultra-light rod flexing with much less applied force than does a light, medium, heavy or extra-heavy rod. Rod shoppers will often see this force translated into a range of lure weights that perform well with a particular rod power.

As an example, my all-time favorite panfish rod, a St. Croix Legend Elite Panfish, has a light power rating. The lure weight for this rod is 1/16 to 3/16 ounce, which is absolutely perfect for my all-time favorite panfish presentation: a 1/16-ounce VMC Mooneye jig dressed with a 2-inch minnow-profile soft plastic. Manufacturers present these weights on the rod blank because casting lures within this range will cause the blank to flex just the right amount during the cast, propelling the lure farther and allowing you to cover more water. If I were to cast a 1-ounce jig with my light panfish rod, the jig would certainly fly through the air, but the rod would flex far more than its design and engineering would tolerate. The blank would oscillate in an ineffective and destructive manner, possibly causing it to fail in the most extreme cases.

That same Legend Elite Panfish rod has an extra-fast action, which means that the blank is designed with a flex point that is very close to the tip. Rod action imparts visual sensitivity; a delicate bluegill nibble will cause that extra-fast tip to twitch far more than the tip on a moderate- or slow-action rod would. In addition, rod action describes the amount of "backbone" in the blank for driving the hook into bony mouths. An extra-fast or fast rod will flex close to the tip, with the rest of the blank's length being stiffer and much less flexible. These rod actions excel with jigging presentations for panfish and walleyes, as well as with traditional soft-plastic presentations such as Texas rigging or Ned rigging for bass. Select a slower rod action, something in the moderate-fast or moderate range, when throwing crankbaits for bass or walleyes.

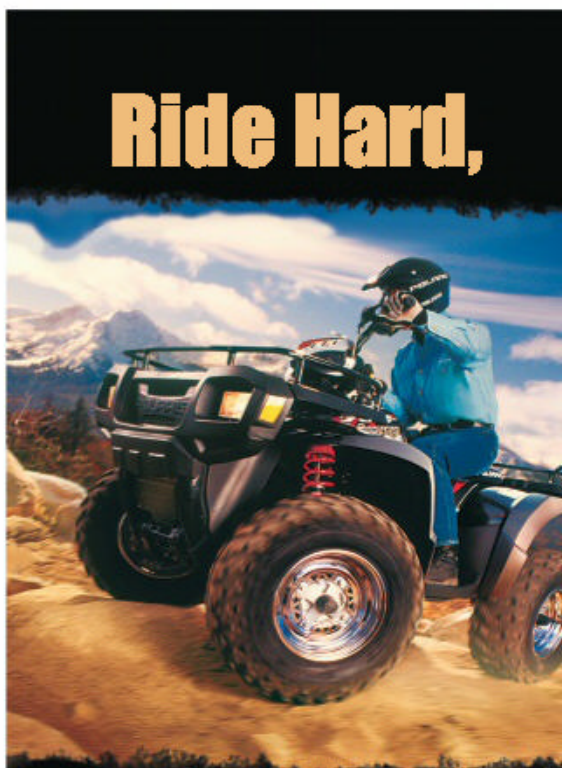
A rod must be balanced with a reel of appropriate weight, and the reel must have sufficient line capacity for the task at hand. A reel that is too heavy or too light for a particular rod will not only feel awkward in the hand, but also impact the casting, retrieving and hooksetting motions that we perform while on the water.

As a general rule of thumb for spinning tackle, select a 1000-series reel for panfish applications, a 2500-series reel for most walleye and bass presentations, and a slightly larger reel—perhaps one in the 4000 series—for larger, powerful fish



Reels should not only hold an adequate amount of line having an appropriate strength for the target species, but also be matched to rod weight and power.

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like pike, catfish and sturgeon. For fans of baitcasting tackle, a 150-series casting reel, like the Shimano Curado MGL 150, is an excellent all-around choice when paired with a medium-power casting rod for presenting jerkbaits, Texas rigs and Carolina rigs. A much lighter Curado BFS is a specialty reel for presenting Ned rigs on casting tackle, and it pairs well with a medium-light casting rod.

As the series of a reel increases, the reel will become larger and heavier, and it will have greater line capacity on the spool. Even a once-in-a-lifetime crappie is not likely to pull all of the line off a 1000-series reel, while a powerful flathead catfish or white sturgeon could easily rip half a spool of line from a 4000-series reel during a run in heavy current.

The amount of line you load onto your reel will also be impacted by the line's composition. Braided line has a smaller diameter than fluorocarbon or monofilament at each pound-test rating, so spooling up with 8-pound-test braid will always place more line onto your spool than would 8-pound-test mono. With very limited exceptions, every reel in my arsenal is loaded with braided line and finished with a fluorocarbon leader.

The final variable in our tackle balance equation is the lure. If you've done a good job of assembling a well-balanced system of rod, reel and line, don't ruin all of that work by casting and presenting a lure that falls outside of your combo's specifications. For example, bass anglers who love to throw spinnerbaits may find themselves needing two (or more) spinnerbait-specific rigs: one that is designed to slow-roll a heavy, 1-ounce spinnerbait in deep water, and another to churn the surface with a lighter 3/8-ounce offering. Likewise, if I'm pitching soft plastics on 3/16-ounce jigs on the Mississippi River for trophy pre-spawn walleyes, I'll rely on a rod with medium-light power and extra-fast action to handle that specific task. However, if I'm pulling heavy Dubuque rigs upstream in strong autumn current, I'll reach for a medium or medium-heavy rod with fast action as I tie up for the day.

In pursuit of balance, one size most certainly does not fit all. Well-balanced tackle systems will help you fish more effectively, leading to more success and enjoyment on every trip. Take time to find balance, and you will be rewarded. 



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DAMMED IF WE DO

CONSIDER WHAT IS GAINED—AND SOMETIMES LOST—IN THE DRIVE TO
FREE AMERICA'S STREAMS BY REMOVING DEFUNCT DAMS.

By Andrew McKean

It was one of those places I could catch a dozen hammerhandle pike on any given day and with just about any method. Milltown Reservoir, just east of Missoula, Mont., was never intended to be a pike fishery, but it had all the attributes: shallow, weedy water; abundant prey in the form of juvenile trout; and the neglect of fisheries managers.

My main problem was that I couldn't keep any of my fish. Milltown Reservoir had another distinction: an EPA Superfund cleanup site that trapped tons of poisonous slurry from a century of copper mining upstream. Those toxins accumulate in the flesh of predatory

gamefish. Health officials strongly discouraged anyone from eating any fish from the reservoir or from the miles of Clark Fork River upstream of the dam.

But in 2005, after years of planning, the dam that created the reservoir was removed. The action allowed the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers to flow and supercharged the cutthroat and bull trout fisheries. I lost a pike-fishing spot but gained miles of free-flowing trout streams, and vastly healthier fisheries habitat, as a result.

The removal of Milltown Dam was, relatively speaking, a big deal because the river systems it constrained are large in both cubic volume and the lore of the

West. The Blackfoot, after all, was the river featured in the seminal novella and subsequent movie “A River Runs Through It.” But across the nation, many less-celebrated dams are removed every year by various local, state and regional agencies and conservation groups. Over the past two decades, the pace of dam removal has accelerated every year, with 69 dams removed just in the past year, according to the conservation group American Rivers, which tracks decommissioned dams.

The group notes that “Dam removal brings a variety of benefits to local communities, including restoring river health and clean water, revitalizing fish and

SHUTTERSTOCK



Some dams benefit agriculture by holding runoff for irrigation, but the tradeoff is they present a barrier to natural fish movement.

wildlife, improving public safety and recreation, and enhancing local economies.”

Indeed, many of the dams in the American Rivers database — it counts 1,797 dams removed nationwide from 1912 through 2020 — were derelict structures, long past their productive lifespan. Many of these were old millwheel dams in the Northeast, stone structures designed to create a millpond and funnel releases through a flume that turned a millwheel to grind grain, sharpen scythes or turn lathes in the decades before readily available electricity. Others, including those in my area of the arid West, were irrigation structures, engineered to hold spring snowmelt and parcel out the

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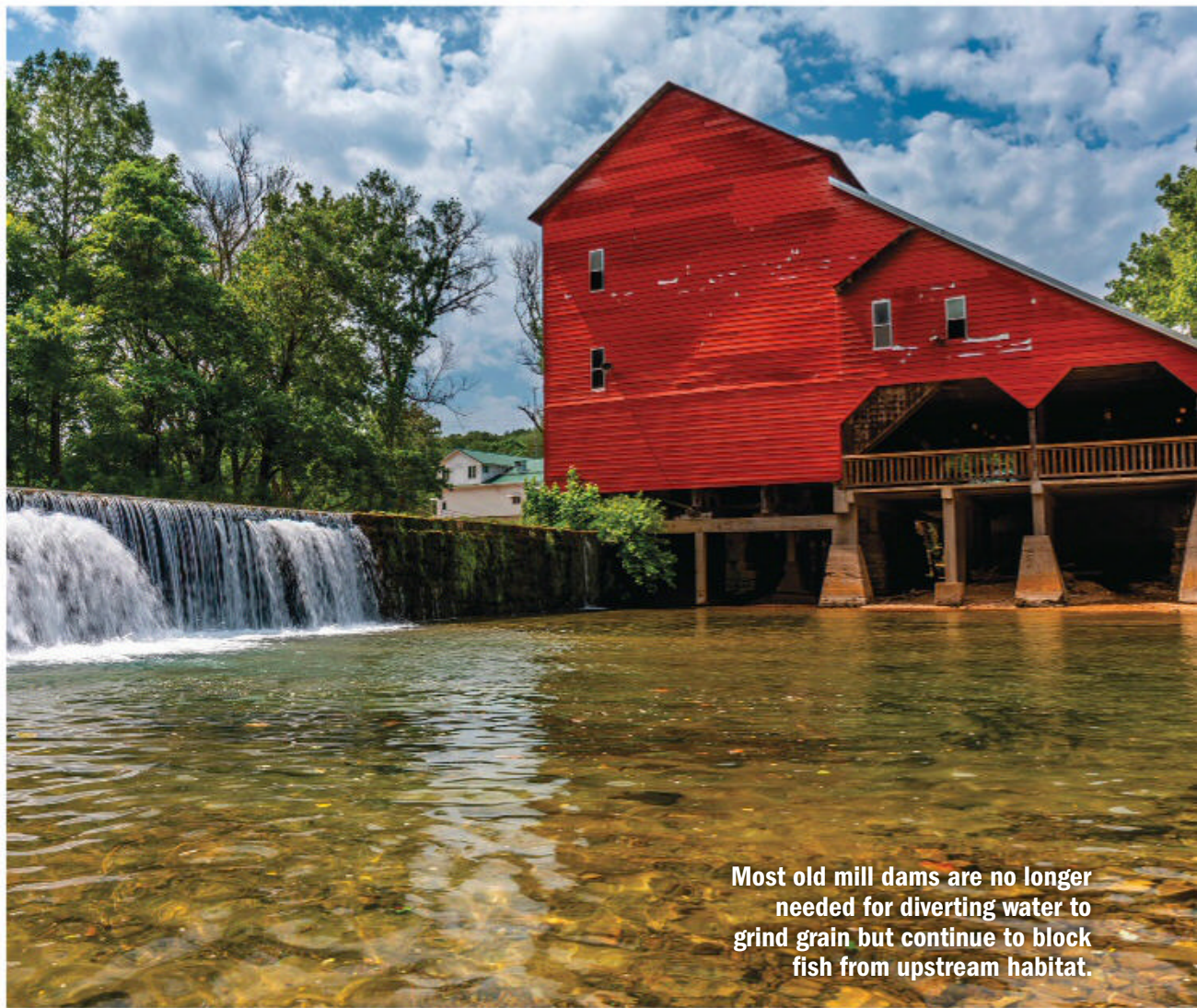
— The Jewellery Editor, 2021



water over the summer to grow alfalfa and watermelons.

From a native fish's standpoint, dams are generally not particularly positive. They impede not only spawning migrations, but also movement of individual fish that travel up and down river systems to find suitable seasonal habitat. They tend to accumulate sediment behind the dam, so every year the impounded volume decreases. And, because dams are usually built at the narrowest, most rapid portion of a river, they change the character of entire stretches of formerly free-flowing water.

An example of the benefits of dam removal is the Elkhart River Dam in downtown Elkhart, Ind. The dam was built in the late 1890s to divert the river into raceways used to power industry in the gritty Midwestern city. But after a few decades, the raceways were filled and the dam no longer served a purpose. When the structure was removed in 2020, 40 miles of upstream habitat was reconnected to the Elkhart River and made available to fish migrating out of



Most old mill dams are no longer needed for diverting water to grind grain but continue to block fish from upstream habitat.

TOP THREATS TO CONSERVATION

SCI fights loss of access, nonscientific management, trophy bans and censorship.

With the mission of expanding hunting opportunities and improving wildlife conservation in the United States and around the world, SCI constantly monitors and battles threats to that goal. The organization recently listed several areas of top concern, committing to fight new and continued threats.

"In the United States, both hunting and conservation are threatened at the federal and state levels," said W. Laird Hamberlin, CEO of SCI. "And SCI is in the unique position as the only hunting rights organization with a Washington, D.C.-based international advocacy team. We take such threats very seriously and are committed to representing hunting access here and abroad."

At the federal level, SCI is advocating for a no-net-loss commitment from the Biden Administration following significant access expansions for hunting and fishing from the Trump Administration. A no-net-loss policy means maintaining the current hunting and fishing access

level on federal public lands across the country. This is particularly relevant to the 30x30 Initiative, and SCI is working to ensure the continued participation of hunters in conservation.

SCI carefully watches state ballot initiatives aimed at hunting and wildlife as well. The group points out that these initiatives are too often rooted in emotion rather than science and leave wildlife decisions to the public, which removes management from experts and wildlife professionals. Colorado's Proposition 114, a wolf-reintroduction initiative that passed in 2021 with just 50.58 percent of the vote, is an example. In addition, last year several state legislatures introduced international trophy import bans. These bans have detrimental impacts on species conservation and the livelihoods of rural communities abroad. Regulated hunting provides irreplaceable funding for conservation, biodiversity and habitat protection around the world.

Big Tech censorship targets the hunting and conservation community, with Facebook, Instagram and others perpetuating stigmas against hunters, SCI points out. The group has launched a petition against the injustice and invites hunters to share their accounts of Big Tech censorship. To sign this petition and others regarding conservation issues, visit the Hunter Advocacy Action Center at safariclub.org.

—Adam Heggenstaller



SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); COURTESY OF LEUPOLD (BOTTOM)

the St. Joseph River. They comprise 50 species, including the greater redhorse, longnose dace and northern brook lamprey—all listed as endangered or species of special concern in the state—as well as numerous gamefish.

On balance, the removal of dams is a net benefit to native fish. But there are some entries in the liability column. They include access. Dams have historically provided important—and in some cases, sole—recreational access to downstream rivers and upstream reservoirs. It's important to retain that traditional access any time a dam is removed.

The conversion of free-flowing river to impounded reservoir has benefitted a number of species, including America's fish—the largemouth bass. Introduced species such as crappie, bluegill and perch have thrived in the reservoirs created by America's dams, and it's hard to imagine the Great Plains' walleye fishery without crediting dams. Many of the West's most consistent trout fisheries are those that thrive in the cool, clear water discharged from the bottom of reservoirs. Among them anglers will find the Bighorn and Missouri rivers in Montana, the South Platte and Yampa in Colorado, and the blue-ribbon North Platte in Wyoming.

Boaters, too, enjoy millions of acres of impounded water for recreational use. Other benefits include flood control, irrigation, reliable water for towns and rural communities, and hydropower generation. As this issue is being produced, water managers on the Colorado River are trying to apportion water behind Hoover Dam in Arizona (Lake Mead), Glen Canyon Dam in Utah (Lake Powell) and impoundments upstream as they figure out how to provide water to a system that has way more demand than supply. Without water-storage dams, their task would be infinitely more difficult.

However, as long as access, public safety and water supply (and water rights) are considered, there are relatively few reasons to prolong the lifetime of derelict dams. They're expensive and sometimes dangerous to maintain. Because many were built before our knowledge of fish passage and habitat connectivity was well-developed, dams often cut off important headwater habitats to many species of aquatic organisms.

On the Pacific Coast, fisheries managers are increasingly understanding the importance of small headwater streams to the spawning success of salmon and steelhead. Many of these streams have been dammed over the years to provide benefits to timber companies and rural communities, but most low-head dams have been abandoned since their construction. Fisheries professionals are in the process of identifying dams

and working to remove them, opening many miles of high-quality spawning habitat to anadromous species.

Back at the former logging community of Milltown, the Blackfoot River runs wild and frothy at the point where it joins the deeper, moody Clark Fork River. The pike are gone, but it's a killer spot to catch scrappy cutthroats on streamers twitched in the seam where the two undammed rivers meet. 

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FLYING COLORS

A VETERAN HUNTER REFLECTS ON COLOR-PHASE BLACK BEARS AND THE
TACTICS USED TO TAKE THEM OVER DECADES OF PURSUIT.

By Jim Zumbo



The black bear is an inherently fascinating big-game animal, given its curious proclivities and the mythology and mysticism with which we, as hunters, associate them. Those bears that exhibit a color-phase coat take our fascination to a whole other level.

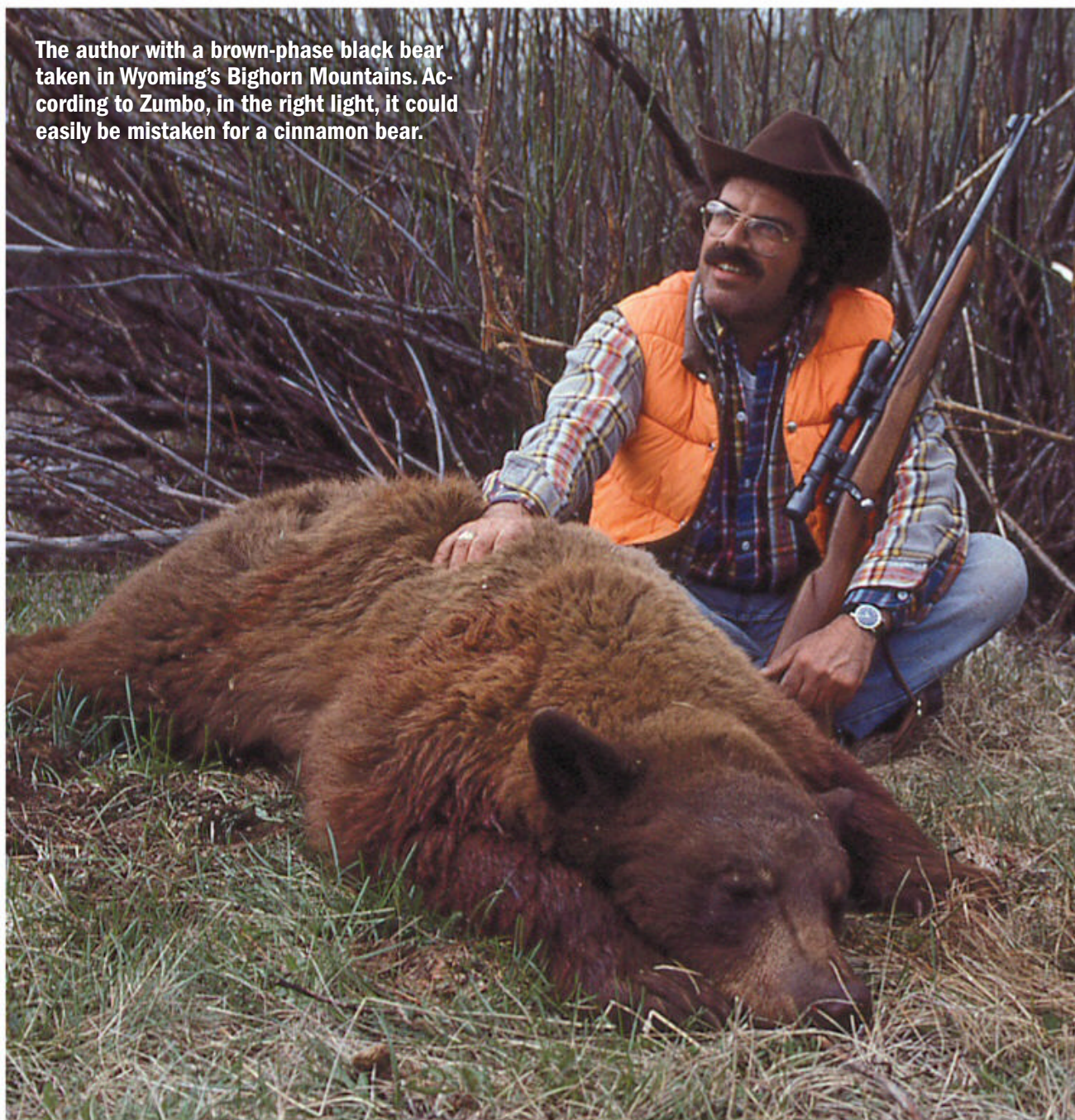
Of all the North American big-game species, black bears are the undisputed champions of color phases. No other game animal comes in so many different hues—cinnamon, brown, blonde, chocolate, blue-gray, white and, of course, black. Some individual bears may even exhibit multiple colorations, such as a cinnamon body with dark brown or black legs. As such, color-phase black bears are among the most captivating and highly desired trophies pursued by hunters.

But there's a problem if you want a color-phase bruin: You could hunt bears for the rest of your life and never see one. Although black bears inhabit all but a handful of states, color-phase bears are typically found in specific regions—some well-defined, some not. Hunters who really want to take a color-phase bear must therefore travel to regions where those bears make up a decent percentage of the harvest.

Some ardent hunters attempt to collect all four major color phases (brown, cinnamon, blonde and chocolate) for a “color-phase slam.” To do this requires a substantial investment of time and money. You must hunt the right areas and have a degree of luck on your side. Planning and research are key to achieving this lofty goal. While there's no guarantee you'll see a color-phase bear, even in areas where they are most common, the more time you spend in these regions, the better your chances of scoring will be. I've been hunting black bears for 60 years and have, in fact, recorded a color-phase slam, but it took most of my adult life and a whole lot of hunting to get the job done.

WHY AND WHERE

Color-phase bears are mostly found in the Rockies, from the southwestern U.S. up through the western Canadian provinces, as well as in parts of California, Washington and Oregon. A theory on why Western bears are more prone to color phases centers on the idea that



The author with a brown-phase black bear taken in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. According to Zumbo, in the right light, it could easily be mistaken for a cinnamon bear.

they're more likely to forage in open meadows than their Eastern cousins, and their lighter-colored fur cuts down on heat absorption from the sun. Most of the bears east of the Great Plains are black, and the majority of them inhabit areas of thick timber and brush. Some believe the melanin in black fur resists abrasion better than others.

The Kermode bear, aka the “spirit bear,” some of which are white, inhabit small parts of coastal British Columbia and southeast Alaska. The Glacier bear, which lives in a small area in southeast Alaska, has silvery-gray fur with a bluish luster. I hunted them once near Yakutat but was unsuccessful.

Ten states offer a roughly 50 percent chance of scoring on a color-phase bear: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Among those, Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah present the best odds.

THOUGHTS ON BAITING

In most habitats where the timber is dense with a thick understory, your chances of even seeing a bear in the woods are poor. To improve hunter opportunities and to meet harvest objectives, wildlife managers in many states and provinces allow baiting. This practice increases the hunter's chances of seeing bears, but can be a frustrating challenge. I've learned from countless hunts that sometimes the appearance of a bear at a bait is purely a matter of luck. I recall a hunt in New Brunswick in which my pals and I sat at baits that had recently been hit hard by bears yet didn't produce a single sighting.

A big advantage of hunting over bait is it allows you to really study a bear, not only for size but to determine if it's a sow with cubs, which are almost always protected by law. By sitting at a bait, you have the option of closely observing the bear to make sure it's

solitary. There's also the advantage of quickly determining a bear's color phase, allowing you to pass up bruins that aren't to your liking or that have coats that are badly rubbed if it's late in the season. If you get a quick glimpse of a bear in dark shadows, you may not be able to tell if it's black or dark brown. But at a baited stand you typically have more time to observe.

I took my first-ever color-phase bear over a bait in Colorado more than 45 years ago. It was a beautiful blonde boar—not terribly large, but I was thrilled with it all the same. I'll never forget that moment. According to my watch I had five minutes of shooting light left. I heard a sort of "huff" behind the bait and watched the bear cautiously approach. I waited until he presented a good shot before taking him with my .30/06. It was a short hunt. Incidentally, baiting is no longer legal in Colorado due to a ballot box referendum in 1992, Initiative 10, by which voters nixed the practice.

THE GUARANTEED BEAR

An outfitter buddy who hunted Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains called at the end of one season to say that all his clients were gone but he still had a bear regularly visiting a certain bait every day at the same time. A guide who tended the bait had seen the bear and said it was a beauty—cinnamon with dark-chocolate legs. The outfitter asked if I wanted to try for the bear while they broke down camp and packed it out. With no hesitation on my part, I immediately drove to camp.

The guide had a routine. At 9 o'clock in the morning, he'd approach the bait barrel, open the lid noisily and hit it with a stick before dropping in fresh bait. After he left, before topping out over a ridge, he'd watch the bait for a short while. Without fail, the bear would appear out of the forest and head for the bait, whereupon the guide would slip away.

"Lead-pipe cinch," the outfitter told me before I headed to the bait with the guide. "That bear's a goner."

The guide and I hiked for half a mile before he continued on to the bait while I hung back. I selected a vantage point where the wind was in my favor, and sat in brush under a lodgepole pine while I watched the guide as he went through his bait routine. Before leaving, he placed a rag over the hole in the barrel. If a bear reached in it would push the rag off, allowing the guide to determine from a distance if a bear had hit the bait while

READING SHADES

How to distinguish between color-phase black bears in the field

Color-phase bears can be easily identifiable if the light is right and you have a reasonably clear view of the animal. Obviously, blonde bears are the most striking, but in low-light situations they can look much darker. However, there's usually no question when you see a blonde since its fur is so recognizable.

Cinnamon bears have a very distinctive reddish/rust color, which is very easily spotted. The distinction between brown and chocolate bears is difficult to determine in some bears because the coloration can vary slightly. Basically, a brown-colored bear can be compared to the color of fresh coffee grounds, while the chocolate is much darker, similar to a brownie or a chocolate bar. Since prime bear-hunting time is the last hour of the day, you can be fooled by the poor light, even with high-quality binoculars. A bear in deep shade with a brushy background can also be tough to identify. I've taken black-colored bears thinking they were chocolate and vice versa. The best way to tell is to get as close as possible to a bear and look at it from several angles.

There are no game laws that require a legal black bear to be a certain color phase. If you shoot a grizzly bear (which also exhibit color phases) by mistake, however, you would be in serious trouble.



One look at a black bear's thickly padded paw reveals how these animals, despite their size, are able to slip through the woods silently.

no one was watching. After the guide left, I was on high alert, waiting for the bear to show up according to schedule. Nothing happened after the first hour. I double-checked the wind, which was still blowing from the barrel to me. All good. Two hours later, the bear still hadn't shown. After four hours had passed, I decided to head back to camp for lunch. Because everyone was so sure I'd get that bear in short order, I hadn't bothered to bring anything to eat. When I returned to the bait after lunch, I checked the barrel with my bino and was dumbfounded to see the rag was gone. The bear had outfoxed me. I sat at the bait until dark, but nothing showed. The next day was the last day of the season. I watched the bait from dawn to dusk and saw nothing but magpies. So much for the sure thing.

By far, most of my hunts over bait have taken place in western Canada. British Columbia doesn't allow baiting, but I've had great luck in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where there's an outstanding chance of taking a color-phase bear. In fact, most of my

colored bears came from those three provinces. As an bonus, there's typically a two-bear limit, meaning you can take the first bear that meets your size desires, even if it's black, and then hold out for a color-phase bear. On some Canadian bait stands, I've seen as many as a half-dozen different bears in a single sitting.

BAITING BEST PRACTICES

If you want to try a DIY hunt for bears over a bait, be aware that the strategy takes plenty of time, effort and physical endurance. Also, every state has different regulations. Many require bait stations to be registered, with signs placed around the area. Generally, baits cannot be placed near roads, major trails, campgrounds and, in some cases, streams and ponds. There are usually rules that spell out the type of bait that can be used, as well as how the bait is situated. Some states require baits to be placed in containers that can't exceed a certain size.

If you've chosen a good spot, you'll need to replace the bait frequently, and just carrying bait from your vehicle to a

station can be a formidable task if you're in mountainous country. You'll be at an advantage if you're baiting close to home because of the need to visit the site on a regular basis. Be aware of special rules. In my home state of Wyoming, bear baiting is not allowed in regions occupied by grizzly bears because of the possibility of mistaking a grizzly for a black bear. Unfortunately, it occasionally happens.

Bait items can include anything smelly, though bears have a sweet tooth and will devour old candy, chocolate, pastries or whatever you can scrounge up. I once had a deal with a shop that would give me stale doughnuts. Bears are suckers for beaver carcasses, too. Some trappers make extra income by selling their skinned carcasses to bear hunters. The carcass is hung from a pole high enough off the ground that bears can't reach it. If one does, it will make off with the prize.

If you see a bear act nervously around a bait, there's a good chance it's a subdominant bear on the lookout for a bigger, dominant bear. The majority of

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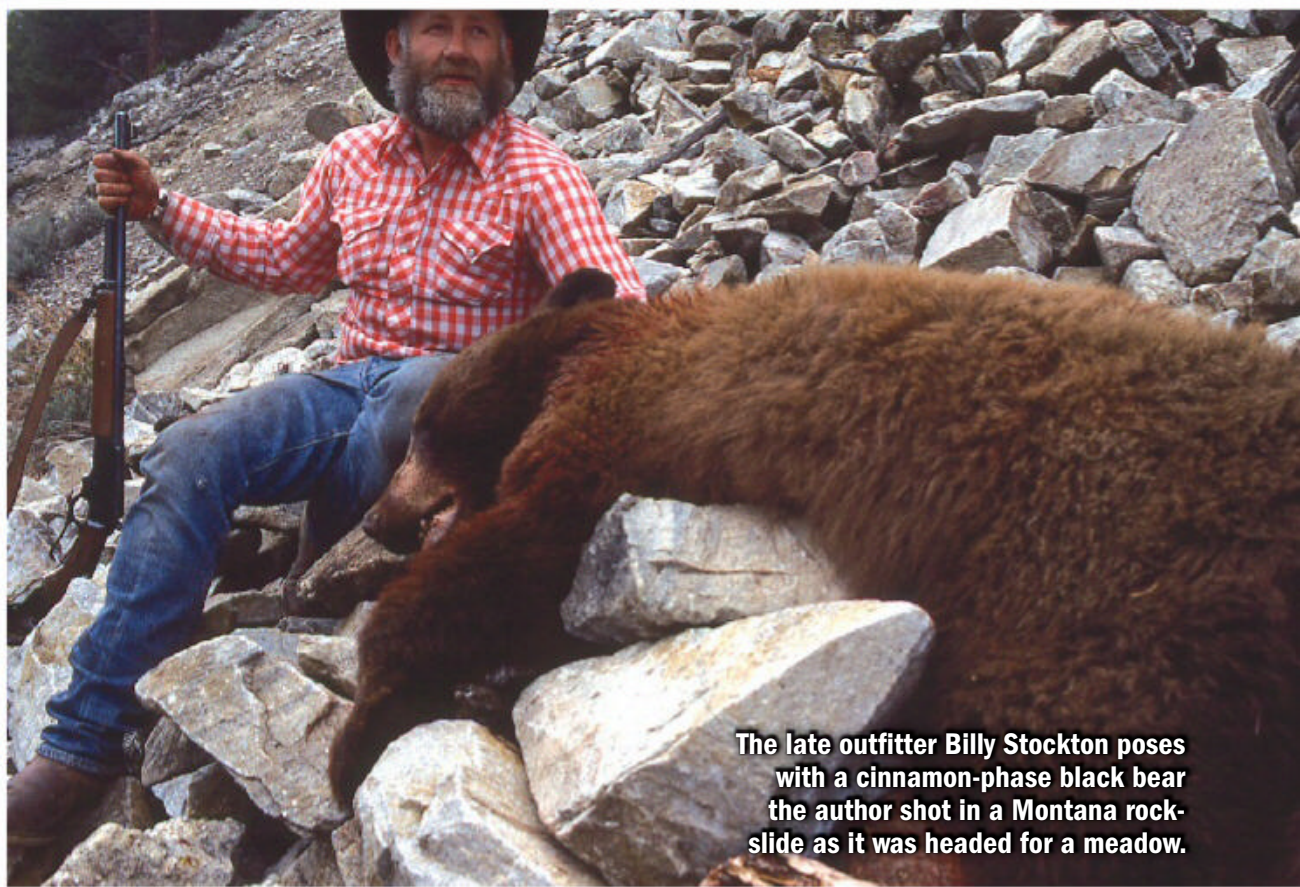
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bears are seen the last hour of the day. It makes sense to remain at the stand as long as possible, though I can tell you it can be a harrowing experience walking out of the dark woods knowing bears are prowling about.

SPRING AWAKENING

When bears emerge from their dens in the spring, they immediately begin to gorge themselves. They'll feed on anything edible, primarily fresh grass and, if they're lucky, winter-killed elk and deer carcasses. In mountain country, they follow the snow line down to lower elevations where more forage is available. I've had good success on color-phase bears by watching a meadow with plenty of lush grass as well as fresh bear droppings and tracks.

On a hunt in Idaho many years ago, several of us sat at the edge of a meadow where we'd located good sign. After a two-hour wait, a beautiful light-brown bear ambled out of the timber and began feeding. One of my companions was offered the first opportunity and made a perfect shot. In that case we were successful because we knew color-phase bears were common in that area and we scouted hard to find that meadow with fresh sign.



The late outfitter Billy Stockton poses with a cinnamon-phase black bear the author shot in a Montana rock-slide as it was headed for a meadow.

Another time, on a Montana hunt about 45 years ago, I was sitting alone, watching a trail that had fresh bear tracks. The trail connected two large meadows, each of them having bear sign. Rather than flipping a coin and watching one meadow or the other, I decided it might be best to sit near the trail. I waited most of the day and finally saw movement in the

dark shadows. There was heavy timber between me and the trail, and I couldn't tell if I was looking at a deer, elk or bear initially. Finally, the animal walked out of the shadows and I was delighted to see its lovely cinnamon coat. My bullet took the bruin behind the shoulder, and it ran 30 yards and expired. That was my first-ever cinnamon-phase bear.

Chocolate-phase black bears have a distinct, deep-brown coat that can often be compared to the color of a brownie or chocolate bar.



A CAMPGROUND PEST

Sometimes you'll locate fresh sign in places where you don't expect it. On one Montana hunt, I saw where a bear had fed on tall, lush grass near a campground in a national forest. It was dry and tracks were barely visible. I decided to hike an old two-track road that led up the mountain I was hunting. Bears will often use roads and well-worn trails as travel lanes. I hadn't gone a quarter-mile when I saw a black-colored bear slowly walking down the road, foraging as it went. At the time I wasn't selective about holding out for a color-phase bear.

I watched it long enough to be sure it wasn't a sow with cubs and squeezed the trigger. I was amazed to see there was a small tag in each ear. I reported the bear to the state wildlife agency and was congratulated by a wildlife biologist. He said the bear was a repeat offender and had been trapped several times in the campground. It was a 12-year-old sow, had poor teeth and wasn't in good body condition.

JIM ZUMBO (TOP); LON LAUBER (BOTTOM)

HUNTING WITH HOUNDS

Running bears with hounds is the most specialized form of bear hunting because you must either have a pack of hounds of your own, a good buddy with a pack or be willing to hire an outfitter who runs hounds. This tactic is also the most physically challenging of all, and there's no close second.

When you turn the hounds loose on a bear track, you need to move fast, often in rugged terrain and underbrush that's almost impenetrable. Unlike lion hunting, where the lion is apt to jump into a tree when pursued by hounds, a bear will often elect to fight the dogs on the ground. That's not a good thing. The dogs can be badly injured.

I recall a bear hunt in North Carolina where a major university set up a mobile veterinary clinic exclusively to care for injured dogs. There was no charge to hunters—the clinic was used as a training facility for vet students.

Aside from stamina, hound hunting requires no special skills once a track is located. Simply start running and keep

going until you reach the chaotic scene of a pack of dogs barking their heads off at an ornery bear. I first started hunting bears with hounds with a government trapper in Utah when I was fresh out of forestry school. We chased many bears, and it quickly became obvious that if we ran enough of them we'd eventually find one with a color phase. In prime bear country, with good deer-broke hounds, you can run several bears a week.

BRING THEM RUNNING

It's been my experience that bears are most receptive to calls in the Southwest, with Arizona, New Mexico and California among the top states. As noted, these happen to be among the best states for color-phase bears as well. I've had some luck calling in Montana and Idaho, but I've noticed that those bears are more inquisitive and not hell-bent on locating the caller.

I've used fawn-in-distress, jackrabbit and other calls, and I've found that sitting longer during a calling session works best because a bear often dawdles along as it

travels to your call. For best results, try calling late in the afternoon when bears are starting to move from their daytime beds to feeding areas.

BUY THAT TAG

Sometimes a bear will show up when you're hunting deer or elk. If bear season is open and you have no tag, you'll be kicking yourself—I know because it's happened to me more than once. On a solo elk hunt in Utah, I was following a game trail through a thick aspen stand. At one point I saw something move on the trail, walking toward me. I quickly moved off the trail and watched a lovely, brown-colored black bear walk my way before it caught my scent and tore off into the forest. It would have been a 15-yard shot. From that day on, I've always made sure to have a bear tag in my pocket when hunting other species of big game.

Taking a color-phase bear is often a matter of luck. But put in the effort in a high-odds area and you could very well strike paydirt. A pretty bear is worth the time and effort. 

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AS LONG AS THAT GAME IS STILL FUN.



Open terrain makes spotting birds easy but also increases the odds of spooking gobblers from a distance while moving into position.

Turkey season isn't turkey season without its ups and downs. Hunt longbeards long enough and you learn to shrug off the failures because there's no sense in getting mad. The gobblers don't care, and it's a sin to be angry at the world on a sweet spring morning.

Still, there are times—usually late in the season or toward the end of a week's

vacation with a tag still unfilled—when the frustration becomes almost unbearable. You want to bite your mouth call in half or carve a four-letter word in your slate or, worse, sleep in the next morning.

Why won't that bird gobble? Why does this bird gobble but won't budge? How come the toms are still with hens? How on earth did that gobbler see me? What is it about my decoy that the birds

don't like? Is it too shiny? Too dull? Too big? Too small? Why do deer always run toward the bird I'm working? Why didn't I sit still for 20 more seconds?!

These questions and a few dozen more bang around inside the heads of turkey hunters when nothing seems to be going right. But there's always *always* hope. Three of our hunts from last spring prove it. **Gaf**

DREW WARDEN

WILD, WILD WEST

TWO BUSTED SETUPS SET THE STAGE FOR UNEXPECTED REDEMPTION.

By Drew Warden



The author, right, and Daniel Holder doubled on Montana gobblers while sharing a single over-under.

We hear it come over the next set of hills, muffled and distorted in the wind, but unmistakable. Gobbles. Maybe a pair of birds, maybe more.

It's our second day of hunting turkeys in eastern Montana with Trophies West Outfitters, and, as a Missouri resident, it's my first-ever trip for a Merriam's bird. Our trio includes Daniel Holder, marketing coordinator for CZ-USA; and our guide, Chris Dalley, who goes by his last name only. We've been blind calling in a patch of ponderosa pine forest amongst rolling hills and plains, hoping to strike up a gobbler. Now we have.

Dan, whose yelping on a pot call prompted the gobblers, smiles at Dalley and me when he hears the birds fire.

He has a turkey tag, too, but he left his gun in the truck today to focus on helping me tag out. After some bad luck yesterday and seeing only a pair of jakes and one gobbler on someone else's property this morning, we're all excited to hear the birds.

We make a hasty setup on the edge of a draw between us and the gobblers. However, after a bit more calling, it's clear the birds are getting farther away. We start moving to close the distance.

Similar decisions backfired twice yesterday, with the terrain burning us both times. The first gobbler, initially obscured by a rise lying between us, saw us the moment we crested an adjacent hill. The other tom, perched atop a ridge, busted us as we made a move on a different group of birds, ruining our chances at both.

For the next half-hour, we experience a predictable pattern. We walk to the next ridgeline and call; the birds gobble and continuing moving. It's a classic situation: birds calling over their shoulder while actively going away. After a few repetitions, Dalley has had enough of it. He knows how the land unfolds ahead, and he's done playing the birds' games.

Below us, the forested ridge declines into an expansive meadow, and across that a valley forms between two hillsides. The valley pushes ahead before meandering left and eventually forming an elongated, inverted "U." Dalley thinks the birds will follow the valley around to where it opens to the meadow again. If we move left quickly and quietly, we might cut the birds off at the end.

Doing so means skirting a pond, and as we make our move, a loafing Canada

goose threatens to blow everything. Thankfully, we make it about 40 or 50 yards from our anticipated setup point. Abruptly, Dalley tells us to get down. He already hears gobblers coming down the valley—possibly the same birds, or perhaps different ones.

He has us drop everything nonessential so we can crawl forward into position. Just after I sit up and shoulder my CZ-USA Reaper Magnum over-under, a gobbler's red-and-white head bobs over the rise between us. This time, he's not looking our direction. I let him clear the rise, but a tree now blocks my shot.

"Shoot him," Dan whispers. He probably wonders why I haven't taken what should be an easy 35-yard shot. I murmur that I'm blocked.

The gobbler finally clears the tree, and I pin my Bushnell RXS-250's red dot to the bird's neck a little below the head. He's gained about 5 yards, and I flick the barrel selector to the top full-choke barrel and slip the safety off. The bird drops at the shot.

As soon as my bird hits the dirt, seven or eight others rush forward from behind the rise. Many are gobblers.

"Pass me that gun," Dan whispers. As we make the handoff, the birds are still unaware of our presence. He quickly breaks open the chamber, moves the second shell from the bottom modified-choke barrel to the top barrel, closes the action, picks out a gobbler and drops him at 45 yards.

We immediately laugh and high-five, dumbfounded at what's just happened. While I've heard of turkey doubles, I've never seen one happen with a single gun, much less an over-under.

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DREW WARDEN (TOP)

LAST-HOUR LONGBEARD

RIOS DON'T ALWAYS COME RUNNING TO THE GUN.

By Adam Heggenstaller

They say that when a gobbler is with a group of hens, you should call in the hens and the tom will follow. These are the same people who claim that killing the Rio subspecies is easy. I had heard both of these half-truths so many times that I almost believed them. But now, with my backside numb and my mouth dry as the Texas dirt on which I sit, I realize they are just plain lies.

A few days ago, it seemed like this hunt would indeed fit the so-called effortless description that hunters who find quick success on Rios like to bandy forth. When I showed up at the bunkhouse on Los Encinos Ranch outside McAllen, hunt organizer John DePalma was all smiles. He had tagged a gobbler earlier and then spent several days photographing others.

"Lots of turkeys," said John. "There's a good group that works across the pasture just on the other side of this pond every evening." He pointed to a couple tree lines a few hundred yards from the porch. "I'd set up over there this afternoon."

I did, and just like John said, toward sundown there was a big Rio in full strut off my right shoulder. Thing is, the bird

was 80-some yards away and could not have cared less about all the trouble the folks at Avian-X go through to make sure their decoys look alive. He was plenty responsive, would gobble every time I purred or made a soft cluck, but he wasn't about to move another step in my direction. He put on a show for 20 or 30 minutes before walking off behind me.

A couple mornings later I was scrunched under the low branches of a huge live oak hoping I wouldn't run into another coral snake as a gobbler and his hens literally walked a circle around me. This time the birds were 20 or so yards closer, but they might as well have been in Mexico. While the 12-gauge Mossberg and Boss Tom TSS loads would have done the job, I knew better than to trust my aim with a bead at that range.

These encounters replay in my mind as now, on the last afternoon of the hunt, two longbeards stand at attention on a small rise staring at the flock of hens feeding in front of me. The hens are anywhere from 15 to 45 yards away. The gobblers are at 100 plus. I sigh so loudly when the toms turn and walk away that it's a wonder the hens don't scatter.

TOM TOOLS

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The hens drift off and I start to accept the fact that I'll probably have to fight the next person who tells me Rios are easy. But then, a gobbler comes from the direction where the toms disappeared. Another and another, and soon I see the bird heading my way. He's way out there, but he's coming. Just when I'm convinced that I might have a chance, a large group of hens and jakes—dozens of them—pour out of a patch of live oaks and gather between me and the gobbler.

This time, of course, the tom goes right to them and wades into the party. Once again, he's well out of range, and I've had enough. I cutt on the Zink mouth call as hard as I can. I insult the hens with my best renditions of turkey curse sounds. I ask the gobbler if he even likes hens.

For reasons way beyond me other than pure, good ol' luck, a few hens take issue with what I'm saying and start yelping back. Long series of angry yelps. I match them. The gobbler sounds off. The hens head my way. The gobbler sounds off again ... and then starts to follow. When he passes me at 35 yards I pull the trigger. Maybe the call-the-hens tactic does work, but telling me that Rios are easy will still start a fight.



A man with a beard, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a vest, sits on a large log in a forest. He is looking off to the side. In the background, there are trees and a stone fire pit with a kettle on it.

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HUNG-UP HYSTERIA

PATIENCE CAN DRIVE ANY GOBBLER—OR HUNTER MAD.

By Adam Heggenstaller

Compared to the last three days, this morning is like attending a concert. My seat is near the top row of the amphitheater, a small stool jammed in the back corner of a blind positioned near the top of a hill in southcentral Ohio. The stage is the river bottom and the fields adjacent to it.

The performers are the gobblers. Sounds like at least three of them, and they are hammering. It sure is better than the faint couple gobbles of the past mornings.

I glance at Adam Hansen, who is running a camera beside me, and can tell he's excited. Maybe nervous. This is the most gobbles we've heard all week, and we need to kill a bird to film a series of cooking videos with Camp Chef. It's our last chance before the trip is a bust.

We're hunting with Chad and Lear McCoy of Real McCoy Outdoors, and

the two brothers have a history with a particular bird on this hill. They gave him a try earlier in the season but things just didn't go right.

"He's a monster," Lear told me the night before. "He'll be on this hill in the morning, and hopefully he doesn't hang up. Don't take decoys and don't call too much. It'll just make him suspicious."

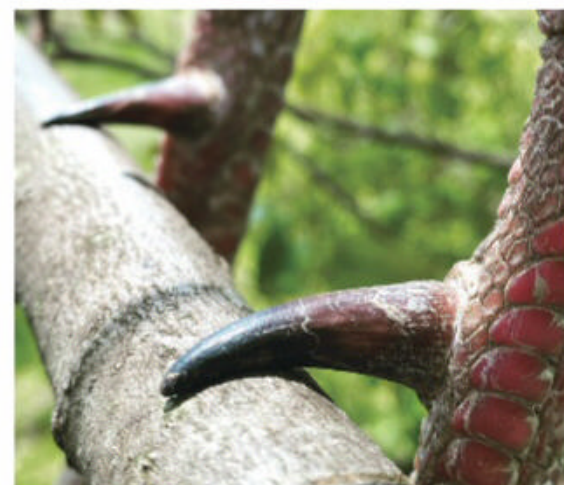
It's more than an hour after light and I haven't made a sound, but when 20 minutes pass with no more gobbling, I figure a few yelps won't hurt. When a bird answers, I reason a few more might help. No response this time, but I remember Lear's advice and resist throwing out a few cutts to spice things up.

Five minutes later, the gobbler sounds off again, and he's cut the distance in half. Another gobble a few minutes after that, and he's even closer. Then it's

maddening silence for what seems like an eternity. *The bird must have lost interest or found a hen, I think. I should have kept calling, I think. I should probably call now, I think.*

I press the diaphragm to the roof of mouth and take a short breath in, but just before I let it out I catch movement up the hill on my right. It's a turkey. Seconds later a rattling gobble lets me know without a doubt it's a longbeard.

The bird heads in our direction but stops behind a couple hardwoods about 50 yards out. My gun is up and Adam's camera is trained on the spot, but the only part of the bird we can see is the edge of his fan. He gobbles again, and his head appears



from behind the trees for a split second with each syllable. It's an awesome sight the first five or six times it happens. By the time I count 30 gobbles, I'm sick of it.

I don't know how long the bird has been standing there gobbling and drumming and strutting, but my patience breaks. I turn my head ever so slowly and whine ever so softly over my left shoulder. Two minutes pass with no sound or sight of the bird. I'm about to tear the blind apart at the thought of blowing this hunt, but my heart leaps into my throat when I see the gobbler move to the left of the trees that had obscured him.

Four more strides, and he's in the wide open. I don't remember aiming, but the bright red dot must have been where it needed to be because the bird topples when the gun roars. I rush to where he has fallen and am awestruck by his spurs. He's a monster, as Lear had said. I spread the gobbler's fan and think that patience is a virtue as long as you don't apply too much of it.



A standoff with this long-spurred tom made the author second-guess his tight-lipped strategy.

TOM TOOLS

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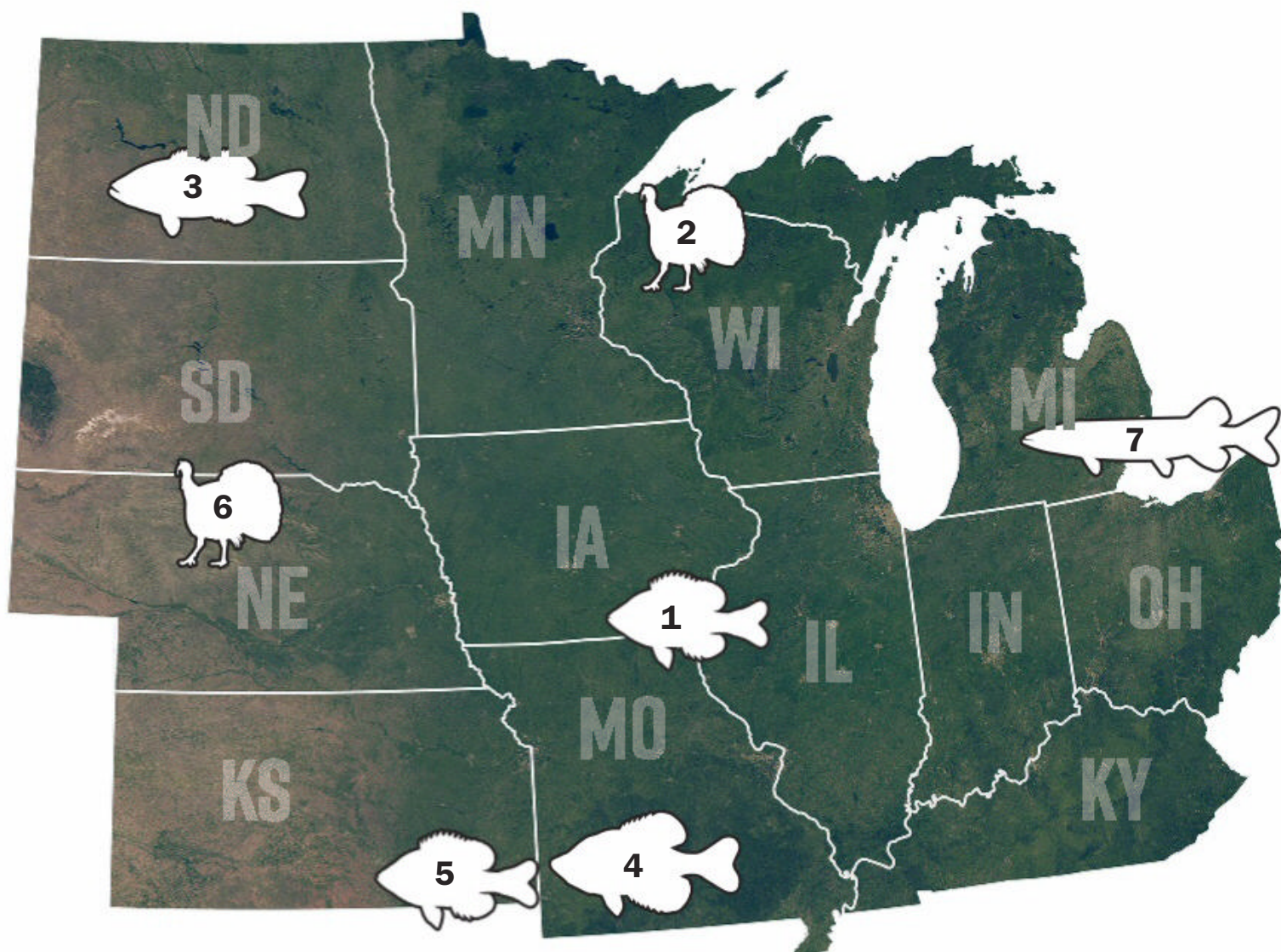


AROUND THE MIDWEST

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

By Brandon Butler

When it comes to fishing in the Midwest, few months compare to May. Bass and bluegills are beginning to spawn across the southern tier, while ice-out fish up north are feeding aggressively. Turkey seasons commence in areas that didn't open in April, mushrooms start popping and cool nights provide for perfect for camping weather. In short, now is the time to get outdoors. So, load the truck, hook up the boat, grab a tent and sleeping bag, and get ready to make the most of May.





SOUTH IOWA 'GILLS

Located in Lee and Van Buren counties in southeast Iowa, the 9,448-acre Shimek State Forest is divided into five forest units that are home to four small lakes. Both 7-acre White Oak Lake and 6-acre Black Oak Lake are in the Farmington Unit, and they offer canoe or kayak anglers great opportunities for a mess of bluegills. Throw worms and crickets for these fish around the shoreline, where they are beginning to spawn. If you have a turkey tag, the entire forest is open to hunting. There are four campgrounds in Shimek.



WISCO TURKEYS

Wisconsin doesn't have the simplest turkey hunting regulations, but it does have some of the top harvest numbers in the nation. The season runs through May, and there are seven zones and six hunting "periods" lettered A-F, each representing a different date range. In later periods, gobblers may be more active up north. Tags are allocated through an application process, but leftovers are common in later periods, and you can purchase them over the counter. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest offers more than 1.5 million acres of Northwoods habitat for turkey hunting.



NELSON LAKE LARGEMOUTHS

North Dakota may not leap to mind for largemouths, but they thrive in Nelson Lake. An electric power cooperative uses lake water to cool generators before discharging it back into the lake. The year-round warm water enhances growth opportunity, and the state-record largemouth—8 pounds 8 ounces and 22 inches—came from Nelson in 1983. Could the next state record be in there today? Search for pre-spawn bass in the shallows this month and try to find out.



STOCKTON LAKE CRAPPIES

Missouri's Stockton Lake is an Army Corps of Engineers reservoir surrounded by more than 16,000 acres of undeveloped public land. The 25,000-acre lake has walleyes, crappies, bass, white bass and catfish. The lack of development is nice compared to other Midwestern lakes. Use electronics to find brush piles in water 20 feet deep with a 1/32-ounce jig head tipped with a minnow. Limits of 15 fish over 10-inches are common.



KANSAS MIXED BAG

The reclaimed 14,500-acre Mined Land Wildlife Area in southeast Kansas contains 1,500 acres of water, with more than 1,000 strip pits formed by surface mining for coal from the 1920s through 1974. Pits range in size from a quarter acre to 50 acres, with depths down to 60 feet. They are home to bluegills, channel catfish, crappies, largemouths, trout, walleyes and wipers—and they're all biting in May.



NEBRASKA GOBBLERS

Nebraska offers Midwesterners chances at a Merriam's turkey, as well as plenty of Easterns. Much of the state is a sparse landscape of agriculture, native grasses and small clusters of trees, and most ground is private. When planning a visit, know where you are going before you arrive. You can kill three male or bearded turkeys in the spring, but each turkey requires its own permit, and each one costs \$128 for non-residents. The Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest near Valentine offers hunters a chance at a coveted Merriam's.



LAKE ST. CLAIR MUSKIES

Michigan's Lake St. Clair is sometimes called the "Sixth Great Lake," and without question it's one of the best musky fisheries in the world. At 430 square miles, St. Clair is massive; however, it's also shallow, with an average depth of only 11 feet. About a third of the lake is in the United States, but the towns of Grosse Pointe, New Baltimore and Fair Haven, Mich., offer access. Muskies spawn when water temperatures rise above 50 degrees, and dedicated anglers can catch them by casting big bucktails and Bull Dawgs on heavy tackle. Anchor Bay is known for consistently producing fish.



GUTS ABOVE

Use a fillet knife with a thin, flexible, very sharp blade to more easily navigate a walleye's bones.

GET MORE OUT OF YOUR WALLEYES BY IMPROVING YOUR KNIFE WORK.

By Scott Mackenthun

The walleye is the state fish of Minnesota and South Dakota, but its culinary qualities are revered all across the Midwest region. The fish's flaky, soft and sweet white flesh pairs well with just about anything you can imagine. Personally, if I were sentenced to death and could choose a final meal, I would ask for a shore lunch with—you guessed it—walleye fillets.

Unfortunately, many anglers do themselves—and the fish they harvest—a disservice when they rush through the cleaning process. In their haste, some either leave valuable pieces behind or reduce the end quality of the fillets with their handling practices. To make the most of your walleyes, you need to work carefully and efficiently with your knife and leave nothing to waste. Let's look at how to do just that most effectively.

STEP 1

Without question, the tastiest fish fillets come from meat that receives good care. Just as you care for wild game, so too must you care for your fish.

After you've decided to kill a fish for the table, have a cooler with ice ready to chill the fish. Then, euthanize the fish with a billy club to the top of the skull and cut the fish's isthmus—the fleshy throat region below the gills. Within the

TOM MARTINEAU, THE RAW SPIRIT



“Walleye wings,” taken from the belly of the fish around the pelvic fins, are delicious when fried.

isthmus are blood vessels that connect the heart and gills. Severing this connection will bleed the fish out quickly.

STEP 2

Once at the cleaning table, use a sharp and thin fillet knife to work along the outline of the walleye, cutting diagonally from above the gills, sliding past the gill covers and pectoral fins and down to the pelvic fin and belly. Keep the shallow cut going to the tail or caudal fin, working past the anus and anal fin.

On the top side of the fish, work the knife tip past the dorsal fin and connective bones again to the tail or caudal fin. Next, cut down toward the ribs, then carefully edge around the ribcage. Once you’ve cleared the last rib, you can again cut the entire height of the fish and remove the fillet, leaving bones, head and guts together as one.

STEP 3

After repeating Step 2 with the second fillet, next comes removing the skin—as long as you are eating the fish right away and not transporting your fillets.

Many state agencies require skin patches for positive fish identification toward your possession and daily bag limits. You can save yourself the hassle of struggling through starting a skinning cut by keeping the very last bit of skin near the tail attached to the body. If you keep the very rear of the skin attached to the carcass, you’ll have extra leverage to pull against while separating the fillet from the skin.

To remove the skin, start your cut running parallel to the skin. Turn the knife edge a couple degrees and pull the skin up onto the knife blade. If your blade is sharp enough, you can pull your fillets over the knife’s edge and remove the skin with minimal effort.

STEP 4

Next, you’ll remove the y-bones from your skinless fillet. Run your finger along the middle of the fillet, just above where you removed the rib cage. You’ll feel tiny pin bones sticking out, creating what feel like raised dots along the fillet. Cut on either side of the bones, removing a small strip of meat to the end of the former rib cage location. Many folks call this “zippering” out the y-bones because the remaining fillet looks like an unzipped jacket.

You now have two boneless fillets that you can chunk up into smaller pieces for frying. Equally sized pieces of fish will have equal cook times. Unevenly sized pieces can lead to some pieces being overcooked and others undercooked. Avoid the latter scenario.

STEP 5

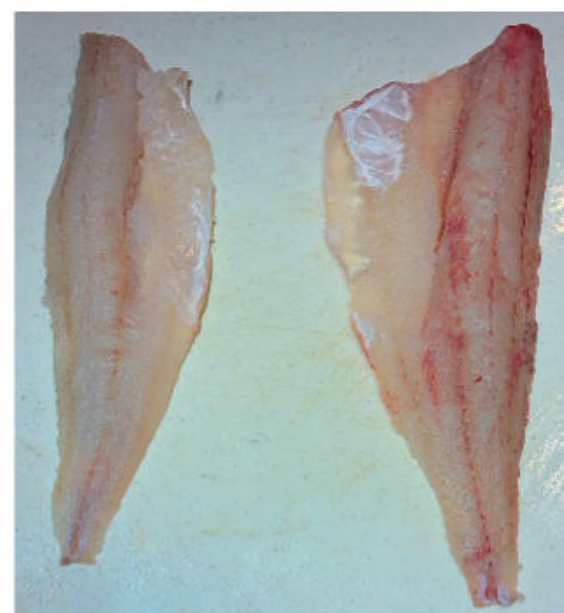
Finally, you can make a couple more cuts for some fantastic eats. The first is to remove the cheeks.

Turn the knife and cut along the opercle, or gill plate edge, at a downward angle, slicing back to the eye socket.

Stop the cut and turn the blade upward at the eyes, then pull the scallop-sized and textured pieces over the knife to sever them cleanly. Cheeks are a delicacy.

Returning to the carcass, cut forward from the pelvic fins and you’ll get a nice chunk of thick meat from the belly that you can cook whole. Realize, though, that it’s attached to a flat bone called the pelvic girdle, but it’s easy to take bites from it. Many refer to this cut as “walleye wings.”

With nothing wasted on your fish, you’ll enjoy delicious meals and no guilt. *Bon appetit!* 



BAD BLOOD

Why bleeding your walleyes—or any fish—is so critical

If you don’t already do so, make bleeding your fish a part of your fillet care process. Blood is nutrient-rich and often a source of undesirable taste in fish. It’s also a food source for bacteria. The quicker a fish is killed and put on ice, the better the quality of your fillets will be. Fish that marinate in warm water or fillets that sit in expelled slime coats take on poor taste.

If you’ve gone to the trouble to catch eating-sized walleyes, do those fish justice and take good care of their fillets for the best culinary experience. The proof is evident in a side-by-side comparison; bled fish (left, above) produce nearly snow-white fillets while un-bled fish (right) carry much more color on their fillets, ultimately affecting the taste.

Jigs can work well for bottom-oriented pre-spawn fish. Use a moderate jigging stroke that keeps the bait near bottom.

GO WITH THE FLOW

LAKES OFTEN STEAL THE SPOTLIGHT FOR LATE-SPRING SMALLMOUTHS, BUT DON'T OVERLOOK RIVERS. THEY CAN OFFER EVEN MORE CONSISTENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOT-AND-HEAVY ACTION.

By Jeff Knapp

With the boat back on the trailer, the drive home was a pleasant one. My buddies and I had just experienced a characteristically productive day of river smallmouth bass fishing, complete with not only excellent sport but eagle sightings, budding trees and very few other anglers.

I couldn't help but think of how the day might have gone on any of the nearby lakes. We likely would've caught bass, but we would have had competition for spots, dealt with crowded ramps and missed the general serenity springtime river smallmouth fishing can provide.

This doesn't mean river smallie fishing during the spring is a slam dunk. The fish still go through pre-spawn, spawn and post-spawn transitions that offer challenges. But from small, wadable cool-water streams to boat-worthy larger rivers, flowing water often provides dependable, quality action. Let's look at where you can find smallmouths right now and how you can catch them on rivers big and small across the Midwest.

LARGER RIVERS

In my mind, larger smallmouth bass rivers are those that you can, for the most part, navigate with a prop or jet-driven boat. Although exact physical characteristics might differ, most smallmouth rivers feature a riffle-run-pool progression and are of medium gradient. Dams might interrupt free-flowing sections, and these often create slack-water pools.

Pre-Spawn

Generally, sometime in May (exact timing depends on latitude and the spring weather) smallmouth bass will move from deeper wintering holes to eventual spawning areas. Spawning habitat consists of gravel, cobble or sand, and it's often located off the force of the main current. Islands, river bends and gravel bars formed at the mouths of incoming streams can all be current deflectors that provide quality spawning habitat nearby.

Some of spring's best smallmouth fishing occurs during the pre-spawn, as fish gather in staging areas close to actual spawning flats. River smallmouths often spawn in 1 to 3 feet of water relatively tight to the bank or island shore, so deeper nearby pockets—4 to 10 feet deep—often serve as staging areas.

These staging areas often hold lots of pre-spawn smallmouths, including the bigger females. Frequently, these fish are also aggressive due to their competitive nature in tight groups and because they're feeding up prior to spawning.

In moderately deep staging areas—4 to 5 feet deep—soft jerkbaits such as the Zoom Super Fluke and hard jerkbaits like Rapala's Husky Jerk often coax bites from river smallmouths. In deeper water, or when bass aren't willing to move for a jerkbait, a bottom-oriented bait like a

hair jig, grub or Ned rig (see sidebar, below) often yields bites.

With both soft and hard jerkbaits, bass often prefer a slower presentation—subtle twitches followed by a pause of at least a couple seconds. Rigging the fluke-style bait on a 1/16- or 1/8-ounce swimbait hook helps place it in the zone.

The same goes for bottom baits. A classic jigging stroke that keeps baits within a few inches of bottom while moving forward at a moderate pace usually draws the best response.



The Ned rig is a staple for spring and summer smallmouths, especially with Z-Man's TRD, made from highly durable ElaZtech plastic.

NO-NONSENSE NED

The Ned rig is a proven smallmouth producer in all its iterations.

While various presentations tempt mid-spring river smallies, the Ned rig should always be part of your lineup (the only possible exception being high/dirty water). For those unfamiliar, the Ned rig is simply a 2 1/2- to 3-inch piece of sinking, cigar-shaped worm coupled with a lightweight jighead.

Due to its popularity, many manufacturers produce such worms. But, one of the most popular—and arguably the best—is Z-Man Fishing's TRD. Besides catching lots of fish, the ElaZtech material the TRD is made from is remarkably durable. It's likely you'll lose the bait before it wears out.

Ned rig baits—whether a TRD or similar profile from another maker—match up well with mushroom-head

jigs such as Z-Man's ShroomZ and VMC's Half Moon Jig. A dab of superglue, like Loctite's Gel Control, will secure the nose of the bait to the flat surface of the jig head's underside.

Another good Ned rig bait option is a full-size Z-Man ZinkerZ worm that's been cut in half. The ZinkerZ is slightly fatter than the TRD, which can be a good thing, as it slows the rig's descent and potentially keeps it in the strike zone longer.

A final thought on TRDs: Keep them in their original packaging, as they will curl up like a grouse dropping if you put them in a utility box. And keep all ElaZtech baits out of contact with standard plastics in order to prevent a goopy mess.

Spawn

Before smallmouth bass firmly settle on spawning beds, they'll often move back and forth between staging areas and spawning flats. In this transitional window, unweighted flukes and Ned rigs excel for probing these areas.

When bass do get on their beds, flukes, Senko-style baits and Ned rigs all take spawning river smallmouths. Targeting bass on spawning beds is a matter of both legality and your conscience. In terms of legality, things are straightforward: Ensure it's legal on your waters if you plan to fish beds.

From an ethics standpoint, it comes down to the angler. On many smallmouth bass rivers, panfish populations can threaten nests when anglers pull guarding male bass off of them. Spawning bass also sometimes take baits strangely, and the result is often deeply hooked fish. Personally, I try to avoid nesting areas when I know bass are on beds, and either concentrate on post-spawn areas or target other species at that time.

Post-Spawn

Like their lake-dwelling counterparts, river smallmouths sometimes go into a funk following the spawn. However, when they wake up it's often like flipping on the light switch. Feeding bass will be in higher-current areas, including the heads and tails of pools, as well as riffle areas. Top lure choices are slashing-style hard jerkbaits, like Rapala's X-Rap, and soft swimbaits such as Z-Man Fishing's Swimmin' Trout Trick rigged on an open jig head.

Rivers being rivers, they are subject to dramatic increases in flow. Smallmouth locations quickly change when a river rises significantly. Generally, they'll move to the bank to duck out of the heavy flow. Within reason, high water can mean excellent fishing, as river smallies will crush spinnerbaits chucked tight to shore. I prefer 1/4- or 3/8-ounce spinnerbaits with a single Colorado blade and a dark skirt.

SMALLER STREAMS

Much of the advice for larger rivers applies to medium and small ones, too, just on a smaller scale. Bass still set up out of the current before and during the spawn and migrate to higher-current areas post-spawn as their activity level



Missouri's Meramec River offers fantastic small-stream smallmouth action in spring and early summer. The special-regulations area is particularly productive.

SWEET SMALLIE STREAMS

Hit these Midwest smallmouth rivers for outstanding spring fishing.

The Midwest boasts a wide variety of excellent river smallmouth fisheries. These include the famed Menominee River along the border of Wisconsin and Michigan and the upper Mississippi River north of the Twin Cities, where smallmouth bass of lunker proportions are taken throughout the spring and early summer. Larger rivers such as these are accessible to motorboats in many areas, though jet-driven vessels (either outboard or inboard) are appropriate in shallower sections.

In addition to these larger waters, there are many smaller rivers throughout the region that harbor excellent numbers of smallmouth bass. Although these streams generally don't grow smallies as large as the fish in larger rivers, they usually see comparatively lighter fishing pressure. Before fishing any river, though, be sure to check for regulations that apply specifically to bass fishing there during the spring. Here are five smaller streams to consider.

FOX RIVER, IL

The best smallie water on this Illinois river flows from the Algonquin Dam downstream to Oswego, though brown bass are found throughout. Power boats work for the stretch upriver of Algonquin Dam; kayaks, canoes and wading excel downriver. A recent survey revealed smallmouths up to 19 inches.

DRIFTWOOD RIVER, IN

Relatively short at around 16 miles, the Driftwood River is a great choice

for kayak anglers. The best access area is located one mile north of the confluence of the Driftwood and Big Blue rivers.

MERAMEC RIVER, MO

Some of the best smallmouth bass fishing on this Missouri river is found in the special regulations area, which runs from the Highway 8 bridge to the railroad bridge at Bird's Nest Access Area. Recent surveys revealed high numbers of brown bass in the 8- to 12-inch range and good numbers of fish from 12 to 15-plus inches. The creel limit in this area is one fish with a 15-inch minimum length. Largemouths and spotted bass are also present in smaller numbers.

GREEN RIVER, KY

Of the various stretches of Kentucky's Green River, the one located below Green River Lake Dam might be the most consistent. The section below the tailwaters can offer more predictable flows during wet times especially. An access area located just below the tailwaters serves kayaks, canoes and small motorboats.

TUSCARAWAS RIVER, OH

A tributary of the Muskingum River, the Tuscarawas provides more than 100 miles of free-flowing river that smallmouth bass call home. Good access areas in the lower end of the river near Coshocton include the Charles B. Miller Boat Ramp, Orange Access and Waterworks Park in Coshocton.

In high water, fish spinnerbaits with large Colorado blades and dark skirts close to shore.



year, when I'm fishing a large river and have the mobility of a power boat, I tend to cherry-pick prime areas. After I fish a spot, I simply put down the hammer and scoot off to the next one.

If I'm floating in my kayak or wading, this obviously isn't possible. Here, it's wise to fish good-looking areas more thoroughly. For instance, if a spot has produced a couple smallies on a hard jerkbait, it's likely those were the most active fish. You might get a few more from the area if you slow down and target less aggressive fish with bottom-oriented presentations like a grub or Ned rig.

Spring blesses anglers with a dizzying array of great fishing options. While it's tempting to hit your favorite bass lake this month, consider what your local smallmouth stream might have to offer. If you know where fish are holding before, during and after the spawn and how to catch them you may be surprised to find more consistent action and less fishing competition. 

picks up. And although medium and small rivers can produce smallies over 18 inches, the average size generally runs smaller.

Perhaps the biggest difference between large rivers and their smaller counterparts is in how you allocate your fishing time. Regardless of the time of

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DOMINATE YOUR DO-OVER

USE THE LATE SEASON TO
MAKE GOOD ON AN
EDUCATED BIRD
YOU MISSED EARLIER
IN THE SPRING.

By Brian Lovett



Gobbling echoed through the timber nonstop. On any other day, my pulse would have soared.

But not that morning. The turkey wasn't coming, and I knew it. I also knew why: I'd missed him at 39 steps earlier that morning as he followed several hens down a foggy logging road. The gobbler had jumped in the air, sailed to a nearby

ridge and sprinted back toward his roost. I was surprised when I struck him later that morning, but it was clear that while he'd gobble, he wouldn't budge.

That prompted a dilemma for the rest of that season. Knowing I'd squandered a great chance, I fumed about how I might still tag that bird. I knew from hard experience that gobblers usually act differently after being shot at or pressured.

Some clam up. Others relocate to another portion of their home ranges. Inevitably, all become much more difficult to kill.

But turkey hunters know all about difficulty, and we're accustomed to changing strategies when needed. So, let's talk about some tactics to try if you're locked in on a bird that you've already missed once. Then I'll tell you what happened with my own wary and wise gobbler.

TOM MARTINEAU, THE RAW SPIRIT



Birds that you've previously missed can be tough customers. But if you regroup and mix things up—switch calls, move setups and stay persistent—you can get it done.

RECON REBOOT

First and foremost, observe how a turkey behaves the first few days after a miss. If the gobbler relocated, find out where he roosts and spends his days. Glass fields to catch him strutting for hens and note how much he gobbles. Basically, restart your scouting process and learn as much as possible about the bird's new habits. Pressured turkeys

are tough, but they still leave visual, audible and physical evidence of their presence and activity.

After you obtain info, connect the dots and form a plan. If you generally know where a bird roosts and where you've seen him later in the day, make an educated guess about his travel route between the areas. Perhaps there's a ridge, point or logging road he might use. Then, find a good setup spot in that area to try and intercept the gobbler.

If you only know one element of a gobbler's daily activity equation—for example, where he roosts—focus intently on that. Use aggressive roosting tactics during evening to pinpoint a turkey's nighttime haunt. Start with owl hoots, fly-up cackles and even coyote howls at sunset and continue until night falls. Often, toms won't gobble on the roost until it's almost dark. When a bird responds, slip closer, then repeat the process as you try to pinpoint the roost tree. If successful, mark the spot, slip out quietly and then return well before sunrise the next morning.

Try to sneak almost within range of the roost, then set up and wait for fly-down. This is easier on dark, cloudy nights and when the forest floor is wet. However, using the cover of darkness, you can get surprisingly close to roosted birds. Often, you'll hear a gobbler drumming on the limb long before he gobbles. Wait for the turkey to fly down. If he lands within range, end the hunt there.

CHANGE IT UP

No matter your approach with a missed bird, ensure it differs from your initial strategy. Don't set up at the same spot and use similar calls and calling approaches. Birds might gobble, but they'll rarely come in.

First, control the easy stuff and switch up your calls. If you used a slate and diaphragm when you missed your gobbler, try something different when you hunt him again. Maybe that means switching to a trumpet or a tube call. You want to sound like a different hen—or better yet, several hens—than the one that almost got him killed.

Also, set up at fresh spots, or at least take a different approach to an area. Turkeys have a strong sense of place, and although they're not feathered Ph.D.s., they often instinctively recall where



GET AMPED

*Turn up the volume
on turkeys with TETRA
Hearing's Turkey AmpPods.*

Turkey hunters must be able to hear turkey sounds and know where they originate. If you've endured years of loud gunshots, though, those calls may be growing fainter and fainter. Or, if you can hear well, you may still want to boost your capabilities.

TETRA Hearing's Turkey AmpPods (\$849–\$1,099; tetrahearing.com) address both. Made by audiologists and turkey hunters, AmpPods hearing devices use TETRA's patent-pending Specialized Target Optimization (STO) technology to target and enhance gobbles, clucks, purrs and other turkey sounds. TETRA scientists analyzed the acoustical signatures of turkey sounds to identify the frequencies these devices should isolate and amplify, while keeping other sounds at natural levels. With built-in AlphaShield Compression technology, AmpPods also shut off instantly upon detecting a gunshot or other damaging sound to greatly suppress its volume.

AmpPods come in two levels: 75 and 90. The 75 level offers one turkey program with customized programming for your specific hearing loss, plus wind reduction technology. The 90 level has three turkey programs with customized programming, one ClearComm program to enhance human speech as well as wind-noise elimination technology. Both come with two pocket-sized soft cases and a cleaning tool. The 75 level has a water-resistant soft case, while the 90 level has a waterproof hard case. Amp Pods run on size 10 hearing-aid batteries, and one pack is included. —Drew Warden

they've had bad experiences. Setting up and yelping from the same field corner might make a longbeard gobble and strut, but that's about it. However, calling from a fresh spot, such as a ridge connecting the field to a creek bottom, might spark his curiosity and lure him close.

Temper your expectations, too. Turkeys that are shot at or spooked badly might not change their behavior drastically, but they usually don't rush to the gun either. Even birds that gobble well often hang up, drift off or come in silently. Birds that do come in typically do so slowly, so patience and perseverance can be critical with pressured birds. This doesn't mean a turkey you missed earlier won't gobble steadily all the way to your gun barrel. You just might have to wait longer for such birds to commit. And always listen for drumming or footsteps in the leaves that might betray a silent approach.

LAST-DITCH MOVES

Often, missed turkeys evade our best efforts. As the season winds down, hunters wonder about a final, sometimes desperate, attempt to fill that tag. Barring last-minute revelations, it's often best to hunt scenarios. If the forecast calls for rain, commit to a field, pasture or similar open area where turkeys will likely congregate. Conversely, if it's supposed to be hot and sunny, find a cool, shaded loafing area and resolve to wait there through midday. When no condition stands out, find the area with the best sign and camp out there. Pop-up blinds help tremendously in such situations, as they let you stretch and turn your head without fear of being busted.

With nothing to lose, also consider calling tactics you don't ordinarily use. Run several calls to simulate a turkey

When late-season birds are hard to pattern, and when no weather condition suggests where birds will be, it often pays to set up in areas with lots of sign and wait patiently.



With a pressured bird, or one you missed previously, consider restarting your scouting process. Glass fields, find where he's roosting and relearn his travel patterns.

fight, uttering aggressive purring and jake yelps. Slap your ball cap against a tree and the ground to mimic flapping wings and flailing legs. These mock battles can prompt curious or even aggressive reactions from gobblers.

Don't neglect boy talk, either. Throw some jake yelps, gobbles and jake gobbles at a reluctant turkey. Hen talk gets all the attention in spring, but remember, male turkeys hear other male turkeys every day of the year. Sometimes, vocalizations from jakes or other gobblers can spark a social or combative response.

With the clock ticking, it's tempting to try last-ditch cutt-and-run outings, walking long distances and yelping aggressively to provoke a gobble. That mobile approach can work, but only in areas with sufficient timber, vegetation or terrain to cover your



TURKEY TRIPS

Looking for a late-season hunt? Consider one of these five states.

KANSAS

Easterns inhabit far-eastern Kansas and Rio Grandes rule the western two-thirds of the state. Hybrids can be found between. Hunters can purchase tags online or over the counter. The spring 2022 season runs April 13 through May 31.

NEBRASKA

Hybrids dominate most of Nebraska, with some true Merriam's in the northwest. Hunters can purchase tags online or over the counter. While the archery season opened on March 25, the gun season runs from April 16 through May 31.

MINNESOTA

The southern half of the Gopher State features great turkey populations. The spring season is divided into six periods, and hunters must choose a period when purchasing a license. The final period—F—runs through May 31.

WISCONSIN

The southern two-thirds of Wisconsin feature world-class turkey populations. As in neighboring Minnesota, the spring season is split into six time periods. However, unlike its neighbor, here hunters must apply into a preference-based drawing where they select their top time period and zone combinations. Successful applicants are awarded a maximum of one harvest authorization, or tag, from the drawing. However, beginning in March, leftover tags for several units are sold over the counter. The spring 2022 season runs through May 31.

MICHIGAN

Portions of the Upper Peninsula and all of the Lower Peninsula have great turkey numbers. The state holds an early draw, but leftover licenses go on sale in March. In 2022, the spring season runs through June 7 in some areas.

movements. Further, it typically only works when turkeys are somewhat talkative. Roaming the woods and hammering calls at hush-mouthed birds usually turns cutt-and-run hunts into cutt-and-bump hunts.

SECOND-CHANCE SUCCESS

Remember that hard-gobbling bird I missed at 39 paces? Well, he stuck around that farm, and I stayed with him. He was maddeningly frustrating, but as the season progressed, his weakness betrayed him: hens. The gobbler was almost always henned up, and when some of those hens began nesting along a brushy fencerow bordering a stubble field, I set up there to meet him.

On the season's final morning, I heard the gobbler fly down and hammer at crows. He then strutted into the field as several ladies paraded past him. After breeding one of the hens on May 29 he followed the group to the middle of the field, strutting and pirouetting for 90 minutes. Ultimately, however, one hen became curious about my decoy and edged closer. And when the longbeard followed and offered a shot, I made sure I didn't miss.

That's when I realized again that the best tonic for a painful gaffe is making good on that rare second chance. I hope with some of the tactics discussed here, perhaps you're able to do the same. 

Exercise patience with late-season birds, particularly those that you've missed or spooked before. Birds may hang up or come to you silently or very slowly.



TAKE A SPIN

WHEN WATERS WARM IN LATE SPRING AND EARLY SUMMER,
GET BUSY TROLLING SPINNER RIGS FOR
SOME OF THE YEAR'S HOTTEST WALLEYE FISHING.

By Mark Romanack



Trolled crawler rigs work very well for summer walleyes. Thread the first hook through the nose and the second in or around the worm's collar for a presentation with less roll.



WINDIGO IMAGES

For every fish species, certain times of the year offer peak fishing action. For walleyes, it's often after the spawn is complete and when sunny early-spring days send water temperatures creeping upward. Once the water hits 50 degrees, the walleye's metabolism kicks into high gear and fish start feeding heavily to fuel this spike. In the Midwest, this often occurs in May, and prominent waters come alive with hungry walleyes.

Although many methods catch walleyes now, nothing beats time-tested nightcrawler harnesses. Several variations of the nightcrawler harness, aka "spinner rig," exist for multiple slow-trolling presentations. All include an attention-grabbing blade and an enticing live nightcrawler, but each is fished a little differently.

BOTTOM BOUNCERS

In the spring, when walleyes are relating to bottom structure, nothing tops bottom-bouncer spinner rigs. In natural lakes and Great Lakes waters, post-spawn walleyes typically slide off spawning reefs and onto adjacent flats where food is most abundant. Meanwhile, river walleyes move downstream after spawning and congregate on sprawling flats that form where rivers drain into lakes. In reservoirs, walleyes often spawn in creek arms and return to the main lake when finished. Shorelines and flats are again where walleyes find optimal foraging opportunities.

Most bottom-bouncing action occurs on sand and gravel flats. However, if some boulders and emerging weed patches are present, too, even better.

Rigging Up

Tie bottom-bouncer spinner rigs on 36- to 48-inch fluorocarbon leaders (10- to 15-pound test is ideal). At the business end, snell up a couple octopus hooks, thread on a few colorful beads and add the blade and clevis of choice. A No. 4 hook works well for inland lake walleyes, while a larger No. 2 hook is recommended on reservoirs and the Great Lakes.

In natural lakes where average fish size is modest, smaller No. 2 or 3 Colorado- and Indiana-style blades often produce best. In reservoirs and Great Lakes waters, larger No. 4, 5 or 6 blades produce both "eaters" and trophy fish.

Productive flats can be shallow or deep, depending on the body of water. Use a 1-ounce bottom bouncer in shallow water to about 10 feet. From 10 to 20 feet, 2-ounce bouncers shine. In 20- to 30-foot depths, you'll need a larger 3-ounce bottom bouncer. Beyond 40 feet deep, a 4-ouncer is best.

Use medium or medium/light, slow-action baitcasting rods paired with baitcasting reels loaded with 10- to 12-pound-test monofilament or fluorocarbon line. Fiberglass crankbaiting rods often have an action and parabolic bend perfect for bouncer fishing.

Fishing It

When fishing bouncers, first set your desired boat trolling speed. A gasoline kicker motor or a GPS-equipped electric motor serves well. Speeds from 1.2 to 1.5 mph are usually ideal—fast enough to keep blades rotating properly, but slow enough to maintain bottom contact.

Next, bait the rig with a lively night-crawler. Pierce the crawler's nose with the front hook and place the back hook in its collar. This makes the crawler extend straight and prevents rolling or twisting while trolling.

To set the rig, place it in the water, watching to ensure it isn't tangled, the blade spins freely and the crawler pulls straight. Then, free-spool until the weight hits bottom and the line coming off the

GPS-equipped electric motors work great for trolling spinner rigs. For bottom bouncing, run about 1.2 to 1.5 mph. If trolling with lead-core line, 1.8 to 2.2 mph may work better.



spool temporarily pauses. Use a finger to stop the line and let the boat's forward travel briefly pull the line tight. When tight, let line off a second time until the weight again hits bottom. Now, put the reel in gear and it's ready to be fished in a rod holder or in hand with the rod tip near the water's surface.

Set up as such, the rig will cruise along near bottom, making contact

every few feet and presenting the trailing spinner rig just off bottom. Many anglers like holding their rods, but these rigs usually fish best with rods placed in holders near the boat's back corners. The vessel's natural rocking is all the action needed to consistently produce.

IN-LINE WEIGHTS

On many fisheries, walleyes eventually suspend in the water column to pursue pelagic forage species like emerald shiners, smelt, gizzard shad and alewives. Here, a different spinner rig is needed—one that utilizes in-line sinkers such as keel weights, rubber-core sinkers and clip-on-style weights.

Place keel weights and rubber-core sinkers on the line just ahead of the spinner rig. Tie this open-water trolling rig longer than those intended for bottom bouncing—48 to 72 inches long is good.

Anglers can use traditional two-hook rigs for open-water trolling. However, many swap the single back hook for a No. 6 treble hook, which often improves hook-ups in open water.

Clip-on-style trolling weights such as the Off Shore Tackle Snap Weight are also popular for targeting suspended walleyes with spinner rigs. The benefit of the Snap Weight is you can place it anywhere on the line, which opens up



Snap Weights are a solid in-line weight option for slow-trolling spinner rigs for suspended walleyes. They can be placed anywhere on the line and offer a good degree of flexibility.



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many rig and leader-length options. During a fight, the angler simply removes the weight when it reaches the rod tip. Most in-line-style trolling weights range from 1/2 ounce to 3 ounces in size—ideal for fish in 10 to 40 feet of water.

ALTERNATE APPROACHES

Bottom bouncers and in-line weights are the most common spinner rig additions, but anglers have other options that also work.

Diving Devices

Small divers such as the Luhr-Jensen Mini Dipsy and Jet Diver, the Big Jon Mini Disk and the Off Shore Tackle Tadpole Diver successfully get spinner rigs down to suspended fish. With these, the main line attaches to a tow point on the diver's front and the spinner rig attaches to the back of the diver.

Lead-Core Line

Lead core also gets spinners down. This sinking-style line is usually fished as a segment sandwiched between 200 yards of backing and a leader 20 to 50 feet long. Anglers predominantly use lead core for deeper-water walleyes in reservoirs and the Great Lakes.

Designated rods and reels must be pre-spoiled with the desired amount of lead core suitable for target depths. A typical six-rod lead-core spread includes reels with three, five and seven colors of lead-core line (90, 150 and 210 feet, respectively). This line comes in various break strengths including 15-, 18- and 27-pound test. For walleyes, 18- and 27-pound test are most popular.

Lead core anglers often troll faster (1.8 to 2.2 mph) and use willow-leaf-style blades. You can troll these blades up to about 2.5 mph without any line twist issues.

BETTER WITH BOARDS

Aside from the bottom bouncer, all nightcrawler rigs outlined here work better when combined with in-line planer boards. These are ideal for spreading out lines and covering water while also detecting light strikes. In-line boards permit fishing two, three, four or more lines per side of the boat. Consult local fishing regulations before running more than one line per person, though.

Flying Flags

Aftermarket flag systems for in-line boards can significantly help determine when fish are hooked. Spring-loaded flag designs will fold down when there's a fish on or if the line happens to foul

on floating debris. The Off Shore Tackle Tattle Flag is one such option, and it comes with an adjustable spring tension that's suitable for almost any lure type, trolling weight, diving device or trolling speed.

GEAR TO GET

Set up for spinner success with the right equipment.

Trolling crawler harnesses for walleyes is gear intensive. In addition to the items mentioned in the article, there are some other key things to consider.

LINE-COUNTER REELS

The ability to monitor lead lengths is critical with any trolling presentation. Line-counter reels have flooded the market in recent years, but not all make the cut.

Daiwa's SG27LC line-counter reel is the trolling reel against which I judge all others. Priced a little more than \$100, it's hard to beat for recreational anglers.

Tournament pros, charter captains and others who appreciate the best money can buy will find the low-profile **Daiwa Lexa LC 300** nearly perfect for all walleye trolling applications.

Others to consider are **Daiwa's Saltist Levelwind** series of linecounter reels, the **Shimano Tekota** and **Abu Garcia's new MaxToro DLC**.



ABU GARCIA MAXTORO DLC



BERKLEY TRILENE
BIG GAME

LINES

Most anglers who troll crawler harnesses prefer monofilament, co-polymer or fluorocarbon as their main line. These lines offer the perfect combination of knot strength and controlled stretch, are nearly invisible in the water and work well with most planer board line releases. Top options include **Berkley's Trilene XT** and **Big Game, P-Line CXX** and **Maxima's Ultra Green** in 10- or 12-pound test.



NORTHLAND TACKLE
RAINBOW SPINNER

HARNESSES

Factory-tied nightcrawler harnesses have vastly improved over the years. Harnesses tied using premium hooks, lines, beads, clevises and blades are widely available. Popular choices include the **Hildebrandt Hammer Time Walleye Spinner**, the **Northland Tackle Rainbow Spinner Harness** and the **Bait Rigs Big Water Rig**.



DAIWA
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TIE YOUR OWN

Want to tie your own custom crawler harnesses? **Eagle Claw's Trokar TK2VP and TK2VR Pro V Bend hooks** are some of the sharpest octopus hooks in the world and come in standard and red finishes. Meanwhile, the **Quick Change Clevis** is a plastic clevis that allows you to easily change blade sizes, colors or styles without cutting and re-tying the rig. It comes in sizes suitable for all spinner trolling applications. Finally, 10-, 12- or 15-pound test **Daiwa J-Fluoro Leader, Samurai Hidden Concept** and **Seaguar Blue Label** lines are perfect for tying your own harnesses.

TASTE THE ADVENTURE



TASTE OF THE WILD

On Monday nights, we're serving up incredible, wild adventures — with a gourmet touch. Taste of the Wild showcases the culinarily delights of fresh game and fish, expertly harvested and prepared by hosts Mike Robinson of *Fishing the Wild*, Daniel Vitalis of *WildFed*, Steven Rinella of *MeatEater*, and Tommy Gomes of *The Fishmonger*.

MONDAYS ^{BEGINS} 7P **Outdoor**

Letting Go

With boards, also consider whether you want a model that releases or one that stays fixed on the line while fighting fish. Those that release do so from the tow arm clip, and this stops the board from planing to the side, which makes reeling in fish easier.

For the best of both, try the “loop trick,” which allows the board to easily release while keeping it pegged in place on the line. First, set the lure the desired distance behind the boat. Then, before attaching the board to the line, wrap the line over your finger and create a few twists, forming a small loop. Place the twists of line between the jaws of the line release on the tow arm of the board, letting a loop of line about one inch long protrude from the release. Finish by placing the line in a second release mounted at the back of the board.

Rigged this way, the board is easily tripped. When a hooked fish pulls the board backward in the water, remove the rod from the holder. Then, with a

quick upward snap of the rod tip, pop the line free from the tow arm release while also pulling tight on the hooked fish. When the line pops free, the board won’t plane to the side. Instead, it’ll still be pegged in place on the line thanks to the second line release at the back of the board. This trick allows you to fish two, three or more lines on each side of the boat without having to clear lines to fight a hooked fish.

The loop trick works with monofilament, co-polymer and fluorocarbon fishing lines, but not fused or braided super lines. For these, the Silver Horde Pro Sam’s Release is the answer. With this release, the angler wraps the line around a rubber plunger pressed into a jettison bracket. A sharp snap of the rod tip on a hooked fish pops the plunger free, allowing the line to uncoil from the plunger.

BOAT CONTROL

Spinner fishing is generally a slow-trolling presentation. Troll with the wind so

the boat moves at a consistent speed and stays on course. This means that once the boat pulls through a school of fish, you must reel up all gear, motor back upwind and set up for another pass. Making many short passes works far better than trolling into the wind.

In the old days, walleye guys trolled spinners with their gasoline kicker motor. However, today’s bow-mounted GPS-guided electric motors are gaining ground. The beauty of these is that you can precisely control speed, and you can set them to follow a course heading for a truly hands-free experience. You can also program a GPS-driven electric motor to navigate to saved waypoints, which helps keep the boat on fish.

Right now is the perfect time to hit your favorite walleye water and experience one of the most consistent bites of the year. Whether you’re bottom bouncing in the early part of the season or targeting suspended fish with in-line weights later on, this pattern is one of the most effective of the summer. 

May’s rising temps see walleyes feeding aggressively throughout the day. Covering water by trolling spinner rigs is one of the best ways to find them.



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Honoring the 100th anniversary of the last year they were minted, the U.S. Mint struck five different versions of the Morgan in 2021, paying tribute to each of the mints that struck the coin. The coins here honor the historic New Orleans Mint, a U.S. Mint branch from 1838–1861 and again from 1879–1909. These coins, featuring an “O” privy mark, a small differentiating mark, were struck in Philadelphia since the New Orleans Mint no longer exists. These beautiful

coins are different than the originals because they're struck in 99.9% fine silver instead of 90% silver/10% copper, and they were struck using modern technology, serving to enhance the details of the iconic design.

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BAIT BOOSTS

**TAKE YOUR CHANNEL CATFISH BAITS
FROM GOOD ENOUGH TO IRRESISTIBLE
WITH THESE SIMPLE TRICKS.**

By Keith Sutton

Channel cats are feeding up at this time of year. While lots of baits work, small tweaks to your live- and dead-bait offerings can produce even more action with little extra effort.

RON SINFELT

Anglers use an amazing variety of baits to catch channel catfish. Natural baits including minnows, sunfish, shad, chubs, worms, frogs, crawfish and even grasshoppers work great whether dead or alive. Some superb enticements are even found in grocery stores—things like poultry livers, chicken breasts, shrimp, hot dogs, cheese and Spam. Don't forget stinkbaits, either, whether homemade or store-bought. They smell horrible, but catfish find the taste and aroma tempting.

You can usually employ these baits just by putting them on a hook, but smart anglers know they can customize channel cat baits to make them work even better. In many cases, all you need are some simple tricks to turn mediocre baits into cat-catchers extraordinaire.

GIVE A SQUEEZE ▼

A catfish's skin is covered head to tail with tens of thousands of taste buds. These help it find food, even in muddy water. When you're tempting channel cats with dead baits—whole dead fish like chubs and shiners—squeeze a big shot of tube-style stinkbait into the mouth and gills of each lifeless baitfish. Little Stinker Catfish Tube Bait (available in Liver/Blood, Rotten Shad, Blood, Chicken Liver and Catalpa Worm flavors) is one of the best for this purpose. Just cut off the very end of the squeeze tube, insert the tip in an orifice and give it a good squeeze. When the bait oozes out, you've got enough to amplify the taste and aroma of the dead bait and ring a loud dinner bell for hungry cats.



Positioning dead baits on hook bends increases visual appeal in current. Red hooks help complete the ruse.

BEND A MINNOW ▲

When fishing streams or rivers, make dead baits work better by adding some sight appeal. Hook each baitfish so it has a distinct bend in the body. The bend catches the current, and, instead of lying motionless on the bottom, the bait waves about and is more likely to catch the eye of a ravenous catfish.

You'll need a bait-holder hook with a barb on the shaft to make this work properly. Run the hook point through the baitfish's mouth and toward the tail, pushing it out one side about midway down. Leave the point exposed to increase hook-ups, and use a leader at least 3 feet long so the wavering bait has room to really flutter in the moving water. Then, prepare for action.

INFLATE A WORM ►

Live-bait anglers can gussy up offerings to make them more enticing as well. If you like fishing worms, consider investing \$3 or so in a worm blower, a little plastic bottle with a needle top (Lindy Fishing Tackle and Magic Products both



Tube-style stinkbaits are perfect for adding a little extra attraction to your dead baits. Dispense into the mouth and gills.

offer one). Use the blower to inject a shot of air into the bodies of the nightcrawlers and worms you use for bait. Worms often sink to the bottom, where they can be hard for catfish to find. The air shot causes the worm to float so it's no longer hidden in rocks and debris. Hungry catfish quickly zero-in on each tidbit.

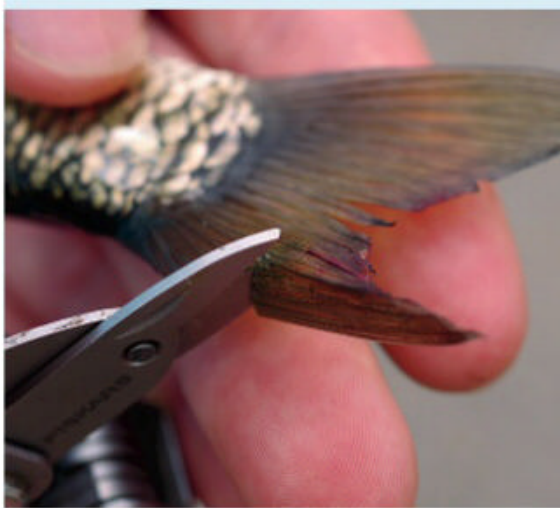
To make your worms even more visually attractive, try a very old trick that adds more flavor and color that catfish find tantalizing. First, buy a jar of pickled beets, eat the beets and save the juice. Next, drop 2- or 3-dozen worms in the beet juice and let them soak overnight. Not only will the worms toughen up so they stay on the hook longer, but they also take on a bright red color that's like

a flashing “Eat Here!” sign for channel cats. This works in much the same way as red hooks. To catfish, red signifies blood or an injury, and hungry cats are quick to dash in and gobble up an easy meal.

CLIP A FIN ▼

Whenever you’re fishing with live fish—sunfish, shiners, suckers, chubs, carp, minnows, etc.—as bait, carry some sharp scissors to clip off a portion of the baitfish’s tail and fins. The little scissors in multitools work great for this purpose. You don’t have to remove much—perhaps a corner of the tail or the tips of the spiny fins.

Hook the clipped fish just behind the dorsal fin and rig it for fishing beneath a bobber. Then, cast to a good-looking spot and let the befuddled baitfish dart about beneath the float. Catfish will likely taste and smell the blood trail it leaves, and they’re certain to give their attention to the injured fish, which looks like an effortless meal.



TWEAK THE GROCERIES ►

There’s no question that grocery store baits like chicken livers and hot dogs work. However, there are many ways to jazz up these items so they’re even more attractive to channel catfish. Let’s use livers as an example.

The blood that oozes from a piece of fresh chicken or turkey liver is one of the best catfish attractors there is, even without enhancements. But many anglers like to dust the pieces with cheese powder to give them extra catfish-attracting flavor and scent. The cheese from packets in boxes of macaroni and cheese work great. Also

good are Velveeta cheese sauce, garlic powder and the juice from packages of tuna.

Hot dogs are excellent grocery baits, too, especially cheaper types made with pork and poultry parts. You can slice them into bite-sized pieces and use as is, but marinating the chunks adds attractiveness. Put pieces in a zip-top freezer bag and add one packet of unsweetened strawberry Kool-Aid, three tablespoons

minced garlic and enough water to cover. Refrigerate overnight. The garlic flavor and blood-red color will coax bites from catfish every time.



KEITH SUTTON (3)

ADVANTAGEOUS ACCESSORIES

Gear to help catfish anglers fishing live, dead or other baits

LINDY WORM BLOWER

This handy, easy-to-use, inexpensive item (\$2.49; lurennet.com) helps you get your worms up off the bottom and into a catfish’s line of sight.

FRABILL UNIVERSAL BAIT STATION

This soft-sided cooler (\$59.99; frabill.com) provides live-bait anglers with a durable yet portable bait management system. It is insulated, watertight and holds up to 8 quarts of water, ice or soil, making it suitable for whatever type of bait you’re using. There is a side-mounted, battery-operated aerator with a hose and stone for keeping baitfish alive and fresh. Up top, a quick-access bait door permits easy bait retrieval. It also makes for a good cooler or a tackle bag capable of holding up to four 3600 StowAway utility boxes.

MAGIC PRODUCTS WORM FARM

If fishing worms is on your agenda, you need a way to properly store them. Magic’s Worm Farm kit (\$15.99; magicproducts.com) contains a 1 1/2-pound bag of Magic Worm Bedding, a 4-ounce bag of Magic Worm Food and instructions, all within a handy bait bucket. The 8-quart container’s polystyrene

construction prevents rotting or worms eating through it, and a new internal ventilation system keeps the bedding appropriately aerated. Due to its height (12 inches), you can place an ice container atop the bedding to keep worms cool.

SPRO 9-INCH SPORTSMAN SCISSORS

A quality pair of fishing scissors is handy for any number of reasons, but they’re really useful for clipping a baitfish’s fin to make it more attractive to cats. These scissors (\$11.19; spro.com) are stainless steel and sport a double serrated edge and oversized non-slip grips. They also have a built-in bottle opener, fish scaler and nut/claw cracker.

LITTLE STINKER CATFISH TUBE BAIT

If you’re fishing a whole dead bait and want to spice things up a bit, squeeze some of this stuff (\$3.49; acmetackle.com) into the mouth or gills. It comes in five popular scent options, and each tube holds 4.5 ounces of bait. The company recommends trying it with their Tear Drop Glitter Lure (\$3.49), which has tiny holes that gradually release the injected scent material into the water. —Drew Warden

Colorful jigs or flashy spinners paired with minnows and other live baits fished around structure and cover can work wonders on cats.



◀ PAIR A BAIT AND LURE

In some situations, anglers may benefit from combining live bait and lures, just as crappie and walleye anglers often do. For example, a minnow or chub soaked on the bottom or beneath a bobber will eventually get eaten by any catfish that tastes or smells it. But bites will likely come quicker if you tie a colorful jig or flashy spinner on your line first. Run the lure hook through the lips or eyes of the live bait, then work the bait/lure combo around cover and structure where catfish are likely to be lurking. You can drag the same jig head-and-nightcrawler combinations that northern walleye fishermen use across the bottom to entice hungry catfish around rocks, stumps and other hideouts.

ADD SOME PLASTIC ▼

Finally, here's a helpful hint from Tennessee catfish angler Bob Holmes, which Chris Altman shared in his book *Catfishing*. Holmes places half-inch pieces of plastic worms on his bait hooks to provide a splash of color.

"The piece of plastic worm makes the bait a bit more buoyant," Holmes says. "But I believe it functions most effectively as an attractor to the catfish, something to get the fish's attention. We have done informal studies on the technique and, invariably, the angler

using the piece of plastic gets a bite more often."

Holmes' favorite color is red, but he also uses blue worms in clear water and chartreuse ones in muddy water. Test your favorite colors to see how well they work. 

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DRIFTLESS DREAMS

THE UPPER MIDWEST'S DRIFTLESS AREA HAS THOUSANDS OF MILES OF COLD-WATER STREAMS FOR ANGLERS TO EXPLORE IN SEARCH OF TROUT FISHING NIRVANA.

By Jen Ripple

I was 38, sitting in a Trout Unlimited meeting, when I first heard the word “Driftless.” New to the group, I was caught off-guard by the electricity in the air as planning ensued for a fishing trip to the “Driftless Area.” As a Wisconsin native who grew up 40 miles north of Milwaukee, I was a bit embarrassed to learn of its proximity to my hometown. Phrases like “world-class trout water” and “7,000 trout per mile,” caught my attention that day. However, it wasn’t until I drove up a hill and gazed down

on this area that the glaciers missed that I realized what I’d been missing.

Unless you’re familiar with the region, you might have visions of flat farmland when you think of this part of the Midwest. That’s fair, as much of the Midwest is just that. As an angler, you’re likely familiar with the great warm-water fishing nearby. However, the Driftless Area is something altogether different and unique for this portion of the country. It’s an assortment of cold-water fisheries nestled amidst the farms—a trout angler’s unexpected paradise.

FINDING A BASECAMP

During the last Ice Age, as the glaciers were hard at work flattening the Midwest, they left behind sediment and debris called “drift.” However, the glaciers receded before flattening an area where the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois meet—a region now known as the Driftless Area. Comprising approximately 24,000 square miles, the landscape is characterized by deeply carved river valleys, steep hills and vast forested ridges. Among its beautiful terrain you’ll find spring-fed

COURTESY OF TRAVEL WISCONSIN



With around 13,000 miles of spring creeks holding trout, the Driftless Area is an angler's paradise. The author especially loves the area around Viroqua, Wis., for its streams and charm.

waterfalls and 13,000 miles of spring creeks, all teeming with trout. While the entire area boasts remarkable trout fishing, the majority of the Driftless Area is found in the state of Wisconsin. Work done by Trout Unlimited chapters from Wisconsin and Illinois has greatly improved the water in the Badger State, and the Wisconsin DNR has worked hard with landowners to create public access throughout that area of the Driftless. Because of these two factors, it is my opinion that if you're traveling to the Driftless Area to fish, you should focus

your efforts on Wisconsin, particularly the tiny town of Viroqua.

A stroll down Viroqua's Main Street will bring you to a co-op full of locally harvested produce, a fine selection of local beer and wine and even a great little sandwich counter where you can order up lunch for your day on the water. While the downtown area boasts small and unique shopping of all kinds, my first stop is always The Driftless Angler. This small fly shop is chock full of everything you'll need to be successful fishing the Driftless. Mat and Geri, the

fly shop's owners, are quick to open a map, show you where the fishing is hot and offer up fly selections.

The entire area is wade-fishing only, and you can easily plan out a DIY trip on your own. However, I suggest hiring a guide through the shop on your first trip, even if it's for half a day. Because the area has so much accessible water, it is the perfect location for anglers of all ages and all levels, but some areas are more technical than others. In addition, because of the sheer amount of fishable water, it can be overwhelming when you open the gazetteer for the first time. Hiring a guide helps you be successful at the start, and from there you'll be able to do it yourself for years to come.

Brown trout are prolific throughout the area, so expect to find some beauties. While the typical size of Driftless browns is 8 to 12 inches, you can find some monsters lurking in the deep holes and in undercut banks. There are also possibilities for rainbows and brookies, as well as a rare tiger trout, but you'll probably put more browns in the net than anything else.

CHARTING A COURSE Timber Coulee

So many great streams surround the Viroqua area that it's difficult deciding what to fish first. You can stay for a week and never fish the same stretch twice. My journey usually finds me donning my waders and heading to an area called Coon Creek, home to the fabled Timber Coulee Creek. Located straight north of Viroqua and at the meeting points of La Crosse, Vernon and Monroe counties, this stretch of water holds 7,000 trout per mile.

That may sound like an exaggeration, but take one step too close to the stream and you'll see the bottom change color as trout scatter. While most of Timber Coulee is privately owned, the Wisconsin DNR has leased access from landowners along the stream. As a result, anglers can fish almost the entire length.

Timber Coulee can be fished by any number of methods. I've had success with dry flies, wet flies, streamers and nymphs. If you love top-water action, the bug hatches throughout the Driftless are prolific in spring and summer, especially at Timber Coulee.

I've found that rigging up two rods—one with a dry fly and one with a streamer—has suited me well. I like dead-drifting an attack midge pattern in purple through the stretch first. Then, I follow it with a yellow fox streamer once I've covered the water thoroughly. I always drift the dry fly first to avoid spooking fish by ripping a streamer through the hole.

The West Fork

From Timber Coulee, I normally head southeast to the West Fork of the Kickapoo, affectionately known simply as the West Fork. Located just outside the hamlet of Avalanche, this is the widest of all the area's streams. Finding a parking spot along the West Fork should be easy. Because of the stream's size, expect to catch bigger browns here, often in the 12- to 15-inch bracket. It's also probably your best bet at a tiger trout, but don't hold your breath.

Because of its width, the West Fork makes for easy wading. You can also catch more fish in a smaller area, meaning you don't have to cover a lot of water to find a great day of fishing. This is perfect if you have difficulty walking a long way. The width also makes casting easier, so this stream is great for newer anglers.



Stealthy approaches and careful fishing are often required on Driftless Area streams. Fish sometimes hold tight to the bank, and the water can be very clear.



The Wisconsin DNR has leased access to lots of land bordering Driftless Area streams. Follow regulations and pack out what you bring in.

On the West Fork, the Pink Squirrel, a locally created and tied fly, never disappoints. Grab one at the local shop and tie it on under a hopper. It's a killer pattern here.

Bad Axe

I usually end my day on the South Fork Bad Axe River, southwest of Viroqua. The Bad Axe is my favorite place to fish into the evening hours. At night, I turn on my headlamp and head to the riverbank with a mouse pattern. Popping a mouse off the shore in the dark is a surefire tactic for big browns. Just check out the section you intend to fish during daylight hours so you know where to park and enter, and look for any obstacles that might trip you up in the dark.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

As stated earlier, many of the stream banks in Wisconsin's portion of the Driftless Area have been improved. While this makes for spectacular fish habitat, it also means you should be aware of the

COURTESY OF DRIFTLESS ANGLER (ABOVE, OPPOSITE); JEN RIPPLE (LEFT)

TRIP PLANNER

Where to stay, eat and explore around Viroqua

LODGING

If the Wisconsin Driftless is calling your name, there are many places you can call home for the duration of your trip. The Driftless Angler has a large apartment above the shop with all the comforts of home, including a kitchen, two large bedrooms and a big living room. It's perfect if you're bringing the family because it's conveniently located near great shopping and dining, and you can hang out at the fly shop.

For those who love a good ol' Wisconsin supper club, a stay at Old Towne Inn and Supper Club down the road from Viroqua in Westby is the ticket. While not the fanciest of stays, it's clean and warm and within walking distance of the best supper club in town, complete with great steaks, a huge salad bar and a good Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned.

If camping's more your speed, nice campgrounds throughout the area offer a spot to pop your tent. A favorite is the West Fork Sports Club. This members-only campground will set you back a whole \$30 per year to join, but it offers spots for motorhomes and tents and even has cabins for rent at reasonable prices. It's right along the West Fork of the Kickapoo, so you can literally walk out your door and fish. In recent times, this area has been prone to flooding, so check the weather before you book your stay or be prepared to stay in town should the weather look wet.

ACTIVITIES

Depending on the time of year you visit, Viroqua offers plenty of events, from flea markets to farmers markets and even the county fair. There is a abundance of Amish furniture stores and markets to visit as well.

DINING

There are 200 certified-organic farms in Vernon County alone and The Driftless Café—located just off Main Street and within walking distance of The Driftless Angler—utilizes those farms to craft a menu that changes nightly. Foodies will appreciate the creative, seasonally focused menu concepts, and all will love the cozy interior. Belly up to the bar that has a trout inlay on top and order a local cocktail while you wait. Get reservations early, though, because The Driftless Café can be difficult to get into during peak season.

riverbank. In some places, fish hole up just a foot or two under the bank's edge. Tread lightly when you approach the stream, or you'll spook fish you want to target.

Many streams have yellow signs that say "Public Access Fishing Only." You'll see breaks in the fences created for anglers to enter. Be courteous. Pack in and pack out so farmers continue allowing access.

Many dairy farms also allow public access. Unless a sign says "Bull in Pasture," you should be safe walking to the river near cows. No doubt they've seen hundreds, if not thousands, of anglers grace their pastures. Use caution all the same.

Also, consider donning long sleeves and pants or waders when fishing the Driftless, even during the heat of the summer. Wild parsnip is abundant and is phototoxic. If you brush against the yellow flower when the sun is shining, it will cause blisters. Avoid this by fishing in the spring or fall, or by covering yourself from head to toe.

ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES

The Driftless Area has so much water that it would be impossible to cover even the highlights in one article. Instead, I suggest simply experiencing it for yourself. Once you do, you'll be planning yearly trips.

After you arrive and get your wading feet under you, crack open a locally-brewed Spotted Cow, take some time to appreciate the scenery and consider what the world would be missing had the glaciers continued just a little farther. 



The West Fork of the Kickapoo holds lots of 12- to 15-inch browns. The Pink Squirrel is a great fly to throw here.



2022 TACKLE TEST

THE *GAME & FISH* TACKLE TEST TEAM PUT **THE YEAR'S BEST NEW BASS GEAR** THROUGH THE **GRINDER** AT ONE OF FLORIDA'S TOP LARGEMOUTH DESTINATIONS.

Story by Dr. Todd Kuhn | Photos by Brad Richardson

Awet, soupy fog hung over the phosphate pit, socking us in and rendering the big outboard useless. The trolling motor, however, whirled away, churning up a silty cloud as we eased off the muddy, makeshift ramp. Our guide, Dean Jackson, gestured with two fingers toward open water.

“We’re going to target bass in the deep grass beds. Cast as far as you can, let it sink to the bottom, jerk it up then crawl it back,” he said.

The baitcaster sang as the braid hummed through the guides, the black-and-blue bladed jig racing out then plopping down. The bait fluttered on the fall before settling in the vegetation 25 feet down. I snapped the rod to attention, breathing life into the vibrating bait. Three turns into my first retrieve, the rod shuddered.

I wrenched down on the drag and leaned into the fish, bracing for a tussle. The spool slipped as a thickly muscled largemouth challenged the drag’s resolve. Soundly buttoned to the bass and hunched over the boat’s gunwale I couldn’t help but think this was going to be a special trip.

This year, for the fourth-annual *Game & Fish Tackle Test*, we traveled to Florida’s Bienville Outdoors, a legendary fishery with a vibrant bass population. Here, over the course of four days, our team of experts put the newest bass gear through its paces, in search of the best rods and reels the industry has to offer.



The Berkley Stunna jerkbait was among the lures Bienville’s bass found irresistible.

THE ARSENAL

Some of the go-to gear and lures used during the *Game & Fish Tackle Test*

Pure Fishing and Z-Man generously provided our test team with a selection of lures and baits to use during testing. These were some of our favorites.

Berkley’s PowerBait Speed Boss Worm is a large-profile bait that the Bienville bass inhaled whether fished weighted or unweighted. The twin, turbo-style tail emits a large amount of vibration, drawing fish to investigate. We fished the big worm at depth in grass beds and up top over emergent grass.

With a large population of shad at Bienville, a jerkbait is a must. The **Berkley Stunna** was designed and tested by back-to-back Bassmaster

Classic champ Hank Cherry. With its unique single-tungsten-weight transfer system, the Stunna casts like a bullet while offering a slow sink and a shimmy and shake that draws aggressive strikes.

The **Z-Man ChatterBait** burst onto the tournament scene nearly 20 years ago. Since then, it has helped bass anglers everywhere catch more fish, thanks in part to its incredible versatility. Test team members fished the bladed jig on straight, slow retrieves in open water, over deep grass beds and through weedy patches.

Bass love swim jigs, and our jig of choice was the new **Berkley PowerBait**

Swim Jig. The PowerBait jig lineup features silicon skirts infused with scent, which is released into the water column to attract fish and make them hold on longer once they bite.

Additionally, control reels were installed on rods not paired with a test reel. **Abu Garcia Jordan Lee JLEESP30** and **Lew’s TLC2000** spinning reels, and **Abu Garcia Jordan Lee JLEE-HS** and **Lew’s KVD** baitcasting reels were utilized for this purpose. All reels were spooled with **SpiderWire UltraCast x8** 30-pound braid and a variety of **Berkley Trilene 100% Fluorocarbon** line.

KISTLER ARGON



Trey Kistler is a Texas-based rod builder who has a knack for designing and building high-performance, lightweight rods

that ooze quality, and the new Argon follows in this tradition. The radially-wrapped Japanese Toray blank and intermediate modulus produce a rod that is a highly efficient caster. The moderate modulus offers great flexure without

rendering the blank so brittle as to be prone to breakage.

The Argon (\$200; kistlerrods.com) is rated for 10- to 12-pound-test line; however, we fished our test rod with 30-pound braid and found the Argon more than capable of handling it. We fished a variety of baits, from heavily weighted worms to bladed jigs and 1/4-ounce lipless crankbaits, and the rod performed admirably with all of them.

The Argon's ability to snap hooksets impressed testers, too. This is a function of the synergy between the lightning-fast

BAITCASTING RODS

tip, blank lay-up geometry and modulus. The minimalist cork grip fits the hand nicely and is sized just right for both one- and two-handed casts.

Generous rod wrap resin and a Texas-style hook keeper both offer insight into the attention to quality and detail. The Argon is hand-built in Magnolia, Texas, and carries a 5-year warranty.

BOTTOM LINE: The Argon is an American-built rod that offers exceptional performance in a perfectly balanced package.

ST. CROIX BASS X



St. Croix builds some of the best high-end rods in the business and has a solid following of fishermen who demand top stuff.

The Bass X line offers anglers a bit of that legendary St. Croix performance at a very reasonable price.

Our 7-foot-1-inch medium-power, fast-action baitcasting rod was loaded with high-end features, including St. Croix's SCII carbon fiber and proprietary resin system, SeaGuide aluminum oxide

guides, a SeaGuide XCMS reel seat and a Kigan hook keeper.

When first handling the Bass X (\$120; stcroixrods.com), we quickly appreciated the comfort of this rod, due in part to the perfectly shaped premium cork handle that nestles beautifully in hand. The reel seat hood also adds a level of comfort, as it is ergonomically shaped and allows the user to get a full, secure grasp of the reel while palming. This is very important when working cadence baits like a jerkbait or topwater. The rod's trigger and split grip work in perfect concert, offering comfortable one- and two-handed casting.

When fishing the Bass X, we were impressed with both its versatility and sensitivity. Rated for 10- to 17-pound-test line and 1/4- to 5/8-ounce lure weights, the Bass X has a subtle tip capable of flicking small baits easily, and enough mid- and lower-blank stiffness to throw baits at the weightier end of the scale. It handles heavy bladed jigs with ease and was perfectly adept at throwing unweighted worms.

BOTTOM LINE: Bass anglers, rejoice. You can now own and fish a legendary St. Croix rod for a price normally found on inferior offerings.

LEW'S BB1 PRO



Lew's completely reimagined its popular BB1 Pro for 2022. The result: A feature-packed cranker that universally impressed our test

team to earn our Editor's Choice award.

The reel we tested featured a 7.5:1 retrieve ratio—a speed that has become widely accepted as general-purpose for baitcasting reels. Our BB1 Pro (\$200; lews.com) was fast enough to burn baits back to the boat, yet powerful enough to grind big crankbaits down to deep ledges.

The matte black BB1 Pro, devoid of any unnecessary frills or contrivances, is a study in the minimalist approach to design engineering. The modest casting controls are straightforward, operating with no appreciable learning curve.

All of the molded and machined surfaces are rounded, offering a delightful ergonomic interface. An extended top palming plate and contoured palming side plates meld into the hand for stress-free fishing.

The dual casting controls (friction and centrifugal braking) work flawlessly, both indexed with audible clicks so you know the amount of tension being dialed in without looking. The spool also

clicks as drag pays out or when wound against a too-loose drag. The line guide is mounted noticeably forward on the level-wind gear, thereby smoothing line flow, reducing friction and resulting in demonstrably longer casts.

The reflexed handle is quite long and provides leverage and extra cranking power. The handle paddles have been redesigned, too—a tad thicker than traditional Lew's paddles and with just the right amount of tack to offer a firm grip whether dry or wet.

BOTTOM LINE: The BB1 Pro offers a no-nonsense design and exceptional performance in a sublime package.



The Lew's BB1 Pro, strapped to the Kistler Argon (left); Abu Garcia's Max Pro, paired with the St. Croix Bass X.

ABU GARCIA MAX PRO



Pro impressed the team with both its performance and value.

The white, 7.4-ounce Max Pro (\$85; abugarcia.com) is sort of pedestrian at first blush; however, once in hand and out on the water, the Max Pro's ability shines through. The reel, with its 7+1 bearings, is as smooth as any baitcaster at any price. This is due in part to precise

Finding a good, rugged baitcasting reel that's priced right has become more difficult in recent years. Abu

Garcia's new Max

CNC machining on the brass main gear and tight build tolerances.

In fact, this reel is exceptionally tight, with no discernible slop in any of its components. This is an incredible feat for a reel priced well under \$100. Typically, tolerances this tight fetch much higher prices.

Our 7.1:1 test reel swallowed 28 inches of line per turn, with a braid capacity of 145 yards of 30-pound-test line. Engineers reduced the overall weight with a one-piece graphite frame that was flex-free under load when fighting fish. Graphite side plates further lighten the build.

When first operating the reel, we couldn't help but notice the co-molded

handle knobs, with a hard outer skeletal frame and a soft, pliable interface surface. This design adds rigidity to the soft core while providing structural strength to the knob, resulting in a very comfortable handle meant for hours of fishing.

The drag offers plenty of power for any bass fishing application and performs without any perceivable stuttering or chatter during initial payout something common in less expensive baitcasting reels.

BOTTOM LINE: The Abu Garcia Max Pro offers outstanding performance at a ridiculously reasonable price.

BAITCASTING REELS



LEFT TO RIGHT: Kistler Argon, Lew's 3XD Cranking Series, Abu Garcia Zenon, Profishieny Krazy, Dobyns Maverick, 13 Fishing Envy Black, Abu Garcia Fantasista, Shimano Curado, Denali Lithium Pro, G.Loomis GCX, Halo Rave III, St. Croix Bass X

13 Fishing Envy Black

The Envy Black blank has the tightest radial wrap (46-ton Toray fiber) we've seen. This compresses the carbon fiber, in turn minimizing resin use, lightening the blank and increasing both strength and sensitivity. The AAAAAA-grade Portuguese cork handle transmits bait data flawlessly, while Fuji K-Series guides with zirconia inserts manage the line. A 10-year limited warranty should ease your mind a bit when flipping fatties over the gunwales. (\$325; 13fishing.com)

Abu Garcia Fantasista X

The Fantasista X, much like its cohort, the Zenon, is an ultra-high-end casting rod built using a 3M resin—in this case, Powerlux 500. The Fantasista X is an ultralight build, with a long, split-grip handle for two-handed casting. The EVA grip is sized well for one-handed casts

should you fish in close quarters, like around docks. The rod balances nicely in hand and is rated for 1/4- to 5/8-ounce baits. (\$330; abugarcia.com)

Abu Garcia Zenon

The Zenon was the highest-priced rod in the test, as well as the lightest. It was also arguably the most sensitive. 3M's proprietary Powerlux 1000 resin system, combined with a carbon handle, enables the rod to flawlessly transmit bait and bite data back to the user. The rod is fairly nondescript in appearance, with a matte finish and sleek, understated graphics. (\$430; abugarcia.com)

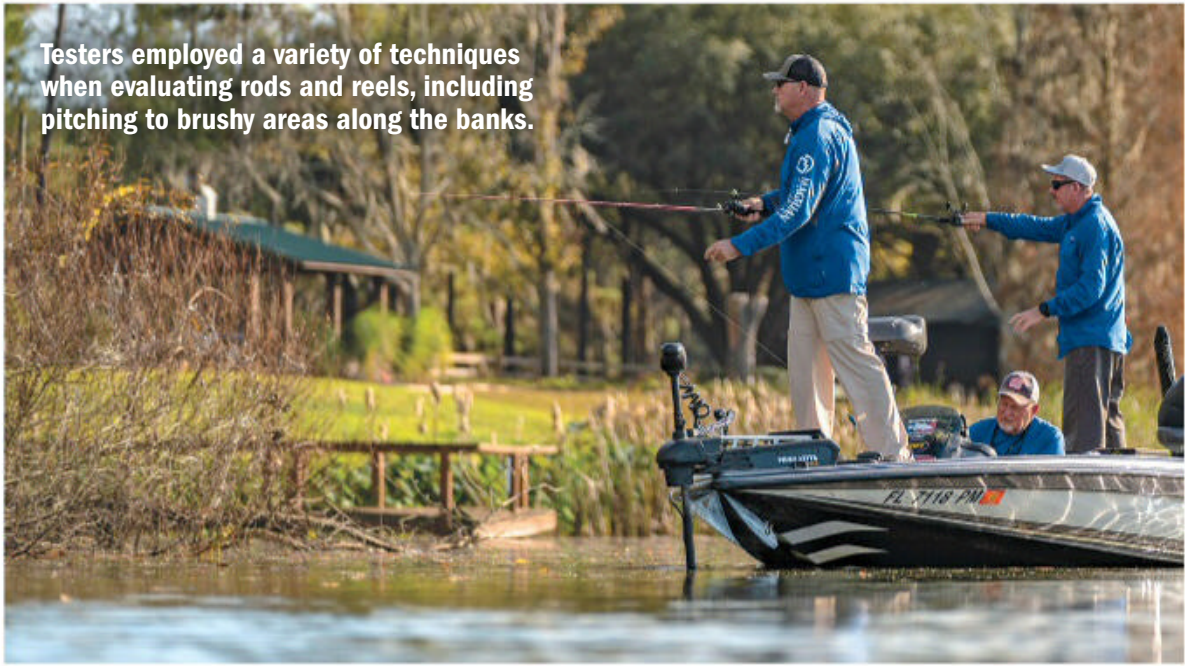
Denali Lithium Pro

Denali updated its Lithium line with the addition of the Pro. The technique-specific rods weigh an advertised 20 percent less than the original Lithium.

Our 7-foot medium-heavy action test sample was built on an IM8 blank with 13, 304 stainless Royal Duraloc semi-micro guides. The contoured split grip with AAA-grade cork handle is nice, making for easy two-handed casts and providing control when plinking in confined spaces. (\$220; denalirods.com)

Dobyns Maverick

The Maverick series is a technique-specific line built using quality Mitsubishi blank materials. It features SeaGuides and a 10 1/2-inch split, high-density EVA handle. Guides are anchored with Kevlar wraps and generously epoxied. The Maverick is light and balanced particularly well for a rod at its price point. Our 7-foot medium-heavy rod was well-suited for most general applications, but its sweet spot seemed to be worm rigs and jigs. (\$100; dobyns.com)



Testers employed a variety of techniques when evaluating rods and reels, including pitching to brushy areas along the banks.

G. Loomis GCX

Like its spinning cousin (see page 72), the GCX baitcaster is a beefy build with high-end components like SeaGuide Hero One guides and a Fuji reel seat. The full-length AAA-grade cork handle and reel seat nut are fantastic. Both offer anglers the ability to carefully monitor baits on the retrieve. The GCX has power to spare, with a stout butt section that enables single-hooked baits to be driven home with ease. (\$250; gloomis.com)

Halo Rave III

Produced by American Baitworks, makers of Netbait lures, our Halo Rave III casting rod was a medium-action model

designed to handle line weights of 8- to 17-pound test and 1/4- to 3/4-ounce baits. Testers appreciated the rod’s comfort, with its oversized EVA handle, ultralight weight and delightful balance. The blank is finished with gloss epoxy for a visually appealing package. Ten stout SiC semi-micro guides handle line management duties. The extra-large hook keeper makes stowing lures quick and easy. (\$75; americanbaitworks.com)

Lew’s 3XD Cranking Series

The 7-foot-4-inch 3XD is a purpose-built rod designed primarily for crank-bait duties. However, our team felt the rod would be well-suited for a variety

of other baits. Rated for 8- to 14-pound test, the rod’s action can accommodate heavier lines due to the 11-count, large-diameter SeaGuide X-Frame guide train. The extra 4 inches of length provides anglers additional leverage when fishing search baits on extra-long casts. (\$150; lews.com)

Profishieny Krazy

The Profishieny Krazy comes wrapped in a kooky color combination best described as a “eclectic pastel camo.” The 7-foot-2-inch medium-heavy casting rod has a stout action best suited for spinnerbaits, medium-size swimbaits, worms and jigs. A relatively short (9 1/4-inch) cork handle keeps the working end of the rod decidedly forward. Cork is somewhat surprising on a rod at this price, though welcomed. The rod is built with a 30-ton blank and Fuji reel seat. (\$80; profishieny.com)

Shimano Curado

The 7-foot-2-inch Curado has a bi-directional radial blank wrap for exceptional strength and structural integrity no matter the direction the rod is flexed. The first four Fuji FazLite guides (stripper and following three) are full-footed, providing extra stiffness in the butt section. The top five guides are single-footed, allowing the relatively stiff action to load nicely for long casts. (\$170; fish.shimano.com)

THE SCORES

BAITCASTING RODS	PRICE	DESIGN	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	VALUE	OVERALL
KISTLER ARGON AR702M	\$200	94	97	96	94	93	92	94.3
ST. CROIX BASS X BAC71MF	\$120	94	95	93	94	88	97	93.5
LEW’S 3XD CRANKING SERIES	\$150	92	93	94	95	92	92	93
SHIMANO CURADO CDC72MA	\$170	93	91	92	96	94	90	92.7
13 FISHING ENVY BLACK EB3C71M	\$325	93	94	94	96	99	79	92.5
G.LOOMIS GCX 843C MBR	\$250	93	92	92	95	90	85	91.2
DOBYNS MAVERICK MK703C	\$100	90	90	92	91	87	93	90.5
ABU GARCIA ZENON ZENC70-5	\$430	94	92	90	94	95	75	90
PROFISHIENCY KRAZY MHB720	\$80	90	88	92	88	85	94	89.5
HALO RAVE III	\$75	87	91	89	87	86	92	88.7
ABU GARCIA FANTASISTA FNXC70-5	\$330	92	93	91	91	87	74	88
DENALI LITHIUM PRO LP703WJ	\$220	84	92	92	88	75	77	84.7

Products are scored by each tester from 60 to 100 in six categories; the scores are then averaged to determine the Overall score. The product with the highest Overall score earns our Editor’s Choice Award. DESIGN: The efficiency and ease of operation of the mechanical features. ERGONOMICS: The efficiency and comfort of the product’s man-to-machine interfaces. FISHABILITY: How well the product performs under real-world conditions. CONSTRUCTION: The quality of the materials, and the overall fit-and-finish and build quality. AESTHETICS: The degree to which the product is appealing to the eye. VALUE: The perceived value of the product with regard to its price. The product with the highest Value score earns our Great Buy Award for its category.



LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP ROW: Shimano Curado MGL 150HG, Kistler Series 1, Quantum Smoke X, 13 Fishing Concept Z2, Fitzgerald FX8, Academy Tac-40; MIDDLE ROW: Profishency Krazy, Dobyns Maverick, Abu Garcia Jordan Lee, Abu Garcia Max Pro; BOTTOM ROW: Duckett Jacob Wheeler, Lew's BB1 Pro

13 Fishing Concept Z2

The engineers at 13 Fishing consistently offer imaginative designs that advance reel technology. The eerily smooth Concept Z2 is immediately recognizable with its distinct fluorescent orange handle paddles. A dorsally mounted lever operates the internal magnetic casting control, making on-the-fly friction adjustments easy. It should be noted that the lever is recessed enough to prevent any unwanted activations while palming the reel. Carbon is used throughout the design to keep the assembly light. (\$275; 13fishing.com)

Abu Garcia Jordan Lee

Designed and tested by back-to-back Bassmaster Classic champion Jordan Lee, this reel is packed with features found on higher-priced offerings. Ten stainless steel bearings (plus one roller bearing) and a

heavy-duty brass main gear ensure years of trouble-free turning. A large carbon handle (3 1/2 inches) is equipped with very comfortable co-molded paddles for a tight grip no matter the conditions. The carbon disk drag provides a significant 20 pounds of stopping power. (\$110; abugarcia.com)

Academy H2O XPRESS Tac-40

The Tac-40 comes with a long list of standard features found on a lot of name-brand reels, but without the related name-brand pricing. Ten sealed stainless bearings, all-aluminum frame and carbon side plates all contribute to this reel's value. The 7.3:1 gear ratio will work well for anglers who desire to throw a variety of baits on a single reel. The Tac-40 is noticeably light, due in part to the build materials and the carbon handle. (\$100; academy.com)

Dobyns Maverick

The Maverick has none of the gimmicks and trappings found on reels designed to catch fishermen and not fish. A whopping 11 bearings are included, as are precision-cut gears that result in a smooth-turning, quiet reel. The magnetic casting control is big, allowing for easy adjustment. A large handle and top-shelf knobs round out the design. (\$100; dobyns.com)

Duckett Jacob Wheeler

The Wheeler has eight onboard Japanese bearings to keep it turning tightly. The drag system, with carbon drag washers, offers a generous 20 pounds of max resistance, which pays out seamlessly. The dual casting controls make dialing up the perfect cast a cinch. We liked the ease of access to the spool from the side plate just in case you need to work on a bad backlash. (\$200; duckettfishing.com)

Fitzgerald FX8

The FX8 has a graphite frame and side plates that keep things light. The reel is armored for use in saltwater, a feature anglers looking for a crossover casting reel will appreciate. A 16-pound max carbon disk drag will stop just about any bass or inshore fish that swims. A deep, machined spool holds 130 yards of 12-pound-test line. The FX8 is particularly compact, making it comfortable to hold during long days on the water. (\$130; fitzgeraldrods.com)

Kistler Series 1

The Series 1 is a baitcaster chock-full of amenities. The all-aluminum frame anchors the design and promises flex-free performance. Notable features include an oversized (4 inches) carbon handle for cranking power, an audibly indexed drag (precluding you from reeling against the drag while battling a fish), line size dial, zirconia line guides, a line tie port on the spool for easy reel filling and a solid brass pinion gear for strength. Ten bearings keep the Series 1 slop-free. (\$200; kistlerrods.com)

Profishency Krazy

“A creative, new brand that will offer anglers superior quality and performance for a fraction of the cost of its competitors” is the mission statement of startup Profishency. Our test reel was built



Kistler's Series 1 reels are loaded with top-notch features, including a 4-inch carbon handle and a solid brass pinion gear

like a tank and had an industrial feel. The Krazy is offered in both 6.6:1 and 7.3:1 gear ratios, and the spool holds 135 yards of 12-pound-test monofilament. The cork handle paddles are a nice touch, though the color scheme is one you'll either love or hate. (\$100; profishency.com)

Quantum Smoke X

Quantum has been building its Smoke lineup for several years now. The X is a line extension that offers anglers a solid, easy-to-operate casting reel. The 8.1:1-gear reel inhales 27 inches of line per turn, making it fast enough to run search baits without the angler breaking a sweat. The carbon-fiber/ceramic drag

works perfectly, as does the magnetic casting control. A line memo is built into the handle to remind anglers of the pound test they have spooled up. (\$160; quantumfishing.com)

Shimano Curado MGL 150HG

Billed as the “lightest Curado ever,” the 150HG is smooth, like all of its predecessors, due to the attention to manufacturing detail Shimano puts into high-end reels. The tolerances are tight, and the reel is an ergonomic treasure. All of the user interface surfaces have been rounded, and the side plates and extended hood offer a pleasing palming profile that sits comfortably in the hand. (\$200; fish.shimano.com)

THE SCORES

BAITCASTING REELS	PRICE	DESIGN	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	VALUE	OVERALL
LEW'S BB1 PRO PRO1SH	\$200	96	93	95	92	93	86	92.5
SHIMANO CURADO MGL 150HG	\$200	94	90	95	90	89	87	90.8
ABU GARCIA MAX PRO MAX4PRO	\$85	88	92	90	88	87	93	89.7
13 FISHING CONCEPT Z2	\$275	93	88	88	91	97	80	89.5
PROFISHENCY KRAZY	\$100	90	91	93	87	85	90	89.3
DOBYNS MAVERICK	\$100	90	90	86	89	85	92	88.7
ACADEMY H20 EXPRESS TAC-40	\$100	93	90	90	85	79	92	88.2
ABU GARCIA JORDAN LEE JLEE-HS	\$110	87	90	88	80	91	84	86.7
DUCKETT JACOB WHEELER	\$200	87	83	87	86	85	76	84
QUANTUM SMOKE X	\$160	81	85	84	85	90	76	83.5
KISTLER SERIES 1	\$200	84	86	83	85	80	78	82.7
FITZGERALD FX8	\$130	77	84	85	74	72	76	78

Products are scored by each tester from 60 to 100 in six categories; the scores are then averaged to determine the Overall score. The product with the highest Overall score earns our Editor's Choice Award. DESIGN: The efficiency and ease of operation of the mechanical features. ERGONOMICS: The efficiency and comfort of the product's man-to-machine interfaces. FISHABILITY: How well the product performs under real-world conditions. CONSTRUCTION: The quality of the materials, and the overall fit-and-finish and build quality. AESTHETICS: The degree to which the product is appealing to the eye. VALUE: The perceived value of the product with regard to its price. The product with the highest Value score earns our Great Buy Award for its category.



The Duckett Paradigm, mated to the G.Loomis GCX (left); Dobyns' Maverick 2000, lashed to the brand's new Maverick rod.

G.LOOMIS GCX



For decades, the G.Loomis name has been synonymous with top-level quality and attention to detail, and the brand's new GCX rods, handcrafted in Woodland, Wash., continue that trend.

The GCX lineup comprises 23 different casting and spinning models, each intended for a specific technique. Our 7-foot-1-inch extra-fast rod (\$250; gloomis.com) was designed for jigs and worms, and features an understated look,

with clean lines and a simplicity of design that many anglers will appreciate.

The first thing we noticed when fishing the GCX was its cozy feel. An oversized cork foregrip wraps around the reel seat, offering a large area to grab while either casting or exercising baits. The dense cork adds to the rod's sensitivity, enabling anglers to discern subtle worm bites. The rearward positioning of the reel seat helps keep the foregrip uncluttered, accommodating any number of handholds.

Rated for 1/8- to 3/8-ounce lures, the jig-and-worm spinner, with its stiff lower section, offers plenty of leverage

for solid hooksets. In fact, we fished fat, 7-inch worms with 5/0 hooks and had no issue driving the heavy-gauge hardware home.

An 8-guide train managed line duties without any hiccups. Interestingly, the top five guides are positioned rather closely together, allowing the rod's blank to load efficiently with light baits and transfer energy down the blank to its midsection when applying hooksets.

BOTTOM LINE: The GCX is a finely crafted fishing machine that will provide years of dependable service under the harshest of conditions and use.

DUCKETT PARADIGM SS3000



The Duckett Paradigm is something of an outlier in this field in that it is designed for saltwater use.

However, it more than holds its own against bass, and with components designed to withstand the rigors of the salt, the Paradigm (\$149; duckettfishing.com) will be a favorite among bass fishermen who also chase inshore species like redfish and seatrout.

This is a decidedly rugged build, more so than most ultra-lightweight spinning reels. It features a forged aluminum frame that is devoid of any flex. A cold-forged, CNC-machined aluminum spool with an amazing 420-yard capacity (20-pound test) is standard. With such a generous payload, bass anglers will want to back their SS3000 with cheap monofilament, then top it off with their favorite braid or clear line.

Ten sealed Japanese stainless bearings keep the Duckett turning effortlessly and without any rotor slop. An oversized

drag knob is easily manipulated during the heat of the fight—a must-have when battling salty foes. The carbon-fiber drag has a wide range, with a solid low-end for bass and a stout top end for the salt.

The reel's chassis is sealed to keep the nasties out of the gear complex. A cold-forged, CNC-machined handle and large EVA knob, which is easy to find after the cast, provide excellent cranking power.

BOTTOM LINE: The Paradigm offers high-end performance at a great price and is a highly capable crossover reel.

DOBYNS MAVERICK 2000



The Maverick line is Gary Dobyns' first foray into the reel market. Typically, it takes a new manufacturer several years to get its

designs and manufacturing right, but the Maverick (\$100; dobynsrods.com) bucks that trend. This little workhorse checks all the boxes right out of the gate.

The 2000-series reel, with its 5.2:1 retrieve, is an ergonomic delight. All the external edges have been rounded, the wide reel stem offers a comfy

man-to-machine interface and the EVA handle paddle is sized right and an easy grab.

A beefy bail promises durability against harsh use. Meanwhile, the reel's internal articulating surfaces turn smoothly on 6+1 bearings. Oddly enough, the Maverick, given its low retail price, was one of the silkiest spinning reels in the test—a testament to the level of thoughtful engineering and quality of manufacture.

The line capacities are laser-etched on the upper spool lip, making them readily available when re-spooling. The graphite reel chassis is perhaps the

stiffest we've ever tested, and the spool is non-descript but functional. The drag has enough power to stop big bass in a hurry, and the drag knob is large and protrudes above the spool, making it easy to find in the heat of battle.

The Maverick converts from right-to-left-handed retrieve and holds 130 yards of 12-pound-test line. It's available with red, blue or green color accents to coordinate with your favorite spinning rod.

BOTTOM LINE: Buy a couple of these before word gets out and Dobyns raises the price by \$100.

DOBYNS MAVERICK



There are five spinning rods in the Maverick series, each designed for a specific technique.

Test team members felt our 7-foot medium-fast action rod was best suited for stick-style soft plastics, whether weighted or unweighted, and shaky heads. The Maverick excelled at handling finesse baits down to the rated 3/16 ounce; the wispy tip loaded nicely and motivated lightweight lures without a whimper.

The radially wrapped blank offered plenty of flexure—the kind needed when fishing light lines and light baits. The rod is rated for 8- to 17-pound test-line, and we felt the rod's sweet spot is in the 10- to 14-pound range.

The budget-priced Maverick (\$100; dobynsrods.com) features quality SeaGuide guides that are lashed with Kevlar and finished with a generous coat of resin applied to the wraps. The satin finish of the rod blank is a smart feature that will be appreciated by finesse fishermen who spend all day staring at their rod tip and line, especially on sunny days.

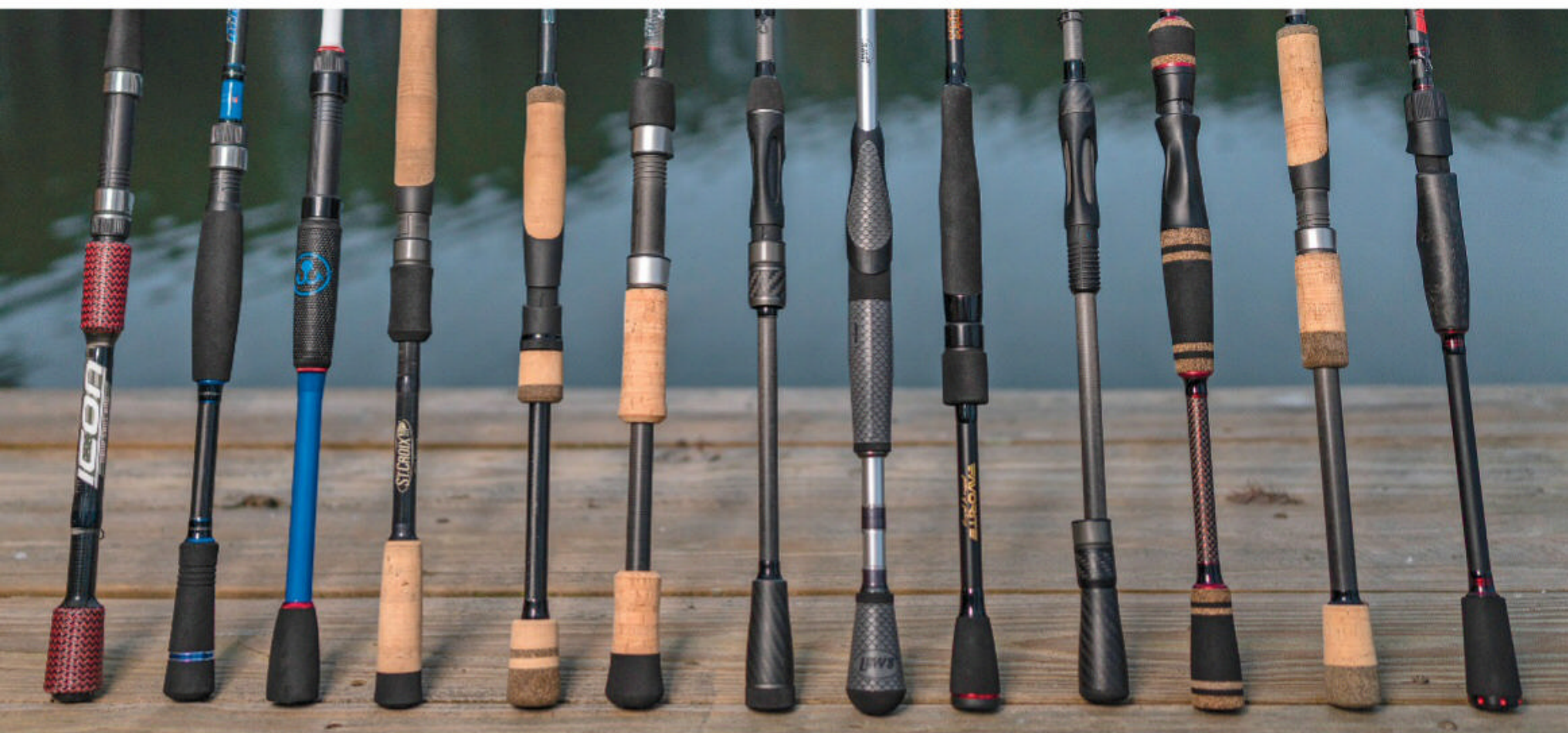
The abbreviated 11-inch split grip, made of high-density EVA foam, makes this rod fish longer than its 7-foot length. The short handle puts the majority of the working blank out front, which is key for light baits and precise presentations.

An aft-positioned hook keeper is nice for hanging lures and stays out of the way for finesse anglers who like to choke up on the rod blank for extra sensitivity when fishing light baits deep.

BOTTOM LINE: A super rod that fishes finesse baits as well as any spinner out there—but at a very palatable price.

SPINNING REELS

SPINNING RODS



LEFT TO RIGHT: Cashion ICON John Crews, Dobyns Maverick, Duckett Jacob Wheeler Pro, St. Croix Victory, 13 Fishing Envy Black, Kistler KLX Dropshot, Abu Garcia Fantasista, Lew's Signature Series Mark Zona, Favorite B.Lat Sick Stick, Abu Garcia Zenon, Halo HFX, G.Loomis GCX, Abu Garcia Vendetta.

13 Fishing Envy Black

The Envy Black is a beautiful spinning rod. Our 6-foot-9-inch spinner was one of the two lightest spinning rods we tested (Abu Garcia's Zenon being the other). Every component is top-notch, from the 46-ton Japanese Toray graphite blank to the beefy, single-foot Fuji K-Series guides with Alconite inserts. The reel seat is genius, with the fore and aft portions mating seamlessly when the reel is mounted to form a solid grip surface. While the price is substantial, a 10-year limited warranty should help take a bit of the sting out of it. (\$325; 13fishing.com)

Abu Garcia Fantasista X

The Fantasista X shares the Fuji reel seat and handle assembly of the higher-priced Zenon spinning rod, but with an EVA foregrip instead of carbon. The guide train is titanium alloy with zirconia inserts. The Fantasista fishes nimbly, with a delightful balance in part due to the lightness of the blank. (\$330; abugarcia.com)

Abu Garcia Vendetta

The Vendetta series is Abu Garcia's economy-performance line. The spinner features a rugged 30-ton multidirectional

blank. The 30-ton rating means it will be sensitive without being so brittle that it breaks easily. The Vendetta has a stiff butt section that makes sharp hooksets possible. The Vendetta will find favor with those who like to fish weightless soft plastics (think flukes and wacky worms) and other light baits on spinning gear. (\$80; abugarcia.com)

Abu Garcia Zenon

Like its casting counterpart, the Zenon spinning rod is built using the 3M Powerlux 1000 resin. Premium carbon blanks and this advanced resin results in a spinning rod that is incredibly lightweight and sensitive. The Zenon is built for the feel, with a grip hump, four large cutouts in the reel seat and a carbon foregrip. Combined, these features offer the angler unprecedented access to the blank for staying in-tune with the lure. (\$430; abugarcia.com)

Cashion ICON John Crews

Cashion builds all of its rods in its U.S. factory, including its in-house formulated blanks. This 7-foot-4-inch rod is designed to throw a wide variety of bait weights (weightless to 1/2 ounce). American Tackle Microwave guides manage the line. The blank has plenty

of flexure as one might expect, being that it's designed specifically for drop-shotting with mosquito hooks. A hard, webbing-wrapped handle offers excellent sensitivity and a unique, custom look. (\$245; cashionrods.com)

Duckett Jacob Wheeler Pro

This medium-power spinning rod is one half of the Duckett Jacob Wheeler Freshwater Spinning Rod and Reel Combo. The eye-catching spinning rod has eight guides and a general parabolic bend; that is, the blank bends from tip to butt. This translates into a rod that will easily throw most bass baits across a wide range of weights. The rod is built ruggedly, seemingly designed for the bumps and bruises most beginners dish out. (\$100 for the combo; academy.com)

Favorite B.Lat Sick Stick

Designed by MLF pro Brian Latimer, the Sick Stick has a 24-ton blank with a unique solid tip. This blank configuration offers dramatic flexure without fear of breakage. The solid tip adds mass to the end of the rod, loading for long casts even when throwing light baits like small hair jigs. A long foregrip offers significant hand-forward purchase. The short rearward split grip lets users work

baits with precision with an out-front rod balance. (\$130; favoriteusa.com)

Halo HFX

The HFX features a high-end Japanese Toray graphite blank. We were impressed with the tough single-foot, stainless steel guides (with zirconia inserts), which work well with either braid or clear lines. The reel seat features a comingled EVA/synthetic cork material formed into a comfortable, full-length split grip. Rated for lure weights of 1/8 to 5/8 ounce, and 6- to 14-pound-test lines, the HFX performed best with baits from 1/8 to 3/8 ounce, which is right in the sweet spot of most spinning applications. (\$150; americanbaitworks.com)

Kistler KLX Dropshot

Hand-built in Texas, the KLX features a KC8 100 percent carbon-fiber blank laid up at a 45-degree angle for added strength. Its medium-light power is designed specifically for finesse applications like Ned-rigging, weightless wacky-worming and, as its name implies, drop-shotting. This rod fishes considerably longer than its 7-foot length (due to the taper profile) and is a capable caster even with aerodynamically awkward baits like hair jigs. We liked the full-size guides, which add to the rod’s casting ability. (\$300; kistlerrods.com)

Lew’s Signature Series Mark Zona

The 7-foot-2-inch Lew’s Signature Series Mark Zona Tube Crackin’ Special is designed for fishing tubes, though we felt, given its length, the rod would accommodate many more spinning applications. The extra-fast action will throw most any soft plastic. Winn Dri-Tac grip material covers the entire handle, including a reel seat hump, which testers felt was an oddity and a distraction. A noticeably short split grip allows users to work the rod much like a casting rod when finessing baits. (\$190; lews.com).

St. Croix Victory

St. Croix builds as solid a rod as you’ll find, using technologies the company has perfected over decades, and the 7-foot-1-inch Victory is no exception. With its medium-heavy power, 6- to 20-pound-test line rating and 3/8- to 3/4-ounce bait weight range, it will throw heavy baits that overload other spinners. The rod fishes heavy Texas-rigged

worms without breaking a sweat, offering bass anglers an alternative to baitcasting gear. A fantastic 15-year transferrable warranty backs up the Victory’s performance. (\$190; stcroixrods.com).



THE SCORES

SPINNING RODS	PRICE	DESIGN	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	VALUE	OVERALL
G.LOOMIS GCX GCX852S JWR	\$250	97	98	99	98	91	87	95
13 FISHING ENVY BLACK EB3S69M	\$325	96	96	95	94	99	79	93.2
DOBYNS MAVERICK MK703SF	\$100	90	95	97	94	79	96	91.8
ABU GARCIA ZENON ZENS70-5	\$430	95	97	96	92	96	73	91.5
ST. CROIX VICTORY VTS71MF	\$190	90	88	92	97	88	83	89.7
ABU GARCIA FANTASISTA X FNXS70-5	\$330	91	84	93	89	92	72	86.8
KISTLER KLX DROPSHOT	\$300	91	89	93	91	85	71	86.7
CASHION ICON JOHN CREWS	\$245	89	90	90	92	84	72	86.2
DUCKETT JACOB WHEELER PRO	\$100	84	84	88	85	85	82	84.7
FAVORITE B.LAT SICK STICK SKS-BLAT-711MH	\$130	87	87	87	87	75	85	84.7
ABU GARCIA VENDETTA 01E21BK	\$79	87	86	84	78	76	94	84.2
HALO HFX	\$150	80	82	83	84	77	80	81
LEW’S SIGNATURE SERIES TLS72MXFS	\$190	69	68	70	75	70	65	69.5

Products are scored by each tester from 60 to 100 in six categories; the scores are then averaged to determine the Overall score. The product with the highest Overall score earns our Editor’s Choice Award. DESIGN: The efficiency and ease of operation of the mechanical features. ERGONOMICS: The efficiency and comfort of the product’s man-to-machine interfaces. FISHABILITY: How well the product performs under real-world conditions. CONSTRUCTION: The quality of the materials, and the overall fit-and-finish and build quality. AESTHETICS: The degree to which the product is appealing to the eye. VALUE: The perceived value of the product with regard to its price. The product with the highest Value score earns our Great Buy Award for its category.



The new Jordan Lee reel from Abu Garcia is a substantial build that promises to hold up to years of fish-fighting punishment.

Abu Garcia Jordan Lee

The Jordan Lee spinning reel is built ruggedly, with its aluminum frame and beefy handle assembly. The distinctive yellow knob has a nice tack, remaining grabby even when wet. A structurally sound bail promises to take all the abuse anglers can heap on it. An adjustable side-mounted hook hanger is perfect for those who fish finesse baits. The radically tapered spool lip angle allows line to flow nicely on the cast, adding dramatically to casting distance. (\$100; purefishing.com)

Duckett Jacob Wheeler JW2500

The Duckett JW2500 spinning reel comes paired with the Jacob Wheeler Pro spinning rod. The red-white-and-blue reel is equipped with a 5.3:1 retrieve ratio and has a 160-yard capacity of 10-pound test braid. The reel presents a bit smaller profile (hence the 2500 in the name), offering fishermen a compact workhorse. We felt the combo would be well-suited

for beginners and weekend warriors not looking to invest a lot in their gear. (\$100 for the combo; academy.com)

Kistler Series 1

Known for building great rods, Trey Kistler also has a knack for producing excellent reels. His Series 1 spinning reel is a stout build, and its solid, one-piece aluminum frame is as flex-free a spinning frame as you'll find. The handle is beefy, too, and features an oversized paddle. The machined rotor is substantive, with a solid-brass line roller. The short, wide-diameter spool lets line flow smoothly for extra-long casts. (\$150; kistlerrods.com)

Lew's HyperMag Speed Spin

The first thing we noticed when handling the 11-bearing HyperMag Speed Spin was its extended handle that offers a long lever for quick line take-up. This feature will appeal to those who like throwing jerkbaits on spinning gear.

An extra-long Winn knob is an easy grab and soft to the touch. A convex, phenolic disk is mounted to the drag knob, offering a large surface for drag payout. (\$180; lews.com)

Penn Pursuit IV

The folks at Penn are known for making great saltwater rods and reels. Their 6.2:1 retrieve ratio Pursuit IV will appeal with anglers looking for a crossover spinner at a ridiculously inexpensive price. The reel has a very large handle that's great for battling redfish and big bass alike. Salt armoring and five sealed bearings protect against corrosion. The machined spool holds an impressive 240 yards of braid—plenty of line length for wearing down inshore fish. (\$60; pennfishing.com)

Pflueger Supreme XT

The XT is quite light (9.6 ounces) and has a pleasing look. Managing the line is a skeletonized, CNC-machined aluminum spool with a magnesium rotor and main frame. A sealed, 10-bearing system keeps the reel turning smoothly as it remains lubricated throughout its service life. The carbon handle, with its over-the-top machining, exhibits this reel's attention to construction detail. (\$170; purefishing.com)

Quantum Smoke X

The Smoke is Quantum's flagship line of spinning reels. Our test reel (25 series) featured a fast 6:1 retrieve ratio. This makes it a great reel for long-line techniques, like deep drop-shotting, where a quick retrieve of lots of line is required. The titanium bail wire is quite flexible, promising damage-free performance. The Smoke X weighs 8.3 ounces with 8+1 bearings. (\$160; quantumfishing.com)

Shimano Ultegra 2500HG

Shimano packs a great number of high-end features into an arguably budget-priced spinner with its Ultegra 2500 HG. The sleek package is assembled on a composite frame. The cold-forged main gear is tough and promises years of service. The spool is machined and shows a level of detail not seen on reels priced under \$200. Testers found the drag particularly good, managing payout duties easily. (\$150; fish.shimano.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Duckett Paradigm SS3000, Pflueger Supreme XT, Penn Pursuit IV, Quantum Smoke X, Duckett Jacob Wheeler JW2500, Shimano Ultegra 2500HG, Abu Garcia Jordan Lee, Kistler Series 1, Lew's HyperMag Speed Spin, Dobyns Maverick 2000.

THE SCORES

SPINNING REELS	PRICE	DESIGN	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	VALUE	OVERALL
DUCKETT PARADIGM SS3000	\$149	94	92	94	94	91	95	93.3
SHIMANO ULTEGRA 2500HG	\$150	93	91	94	95	94	91	93
LEW'S HYPERMAG SPEED SPIN HM300	\$180	93	93	95	95	85	86	91.2
DOBYNS MAVERICK 2000	\$100	92	90	94	93	79	96	90.7
PFLUEGER SUPREME XT SUPXTSP30X	\$170	89	90	88	88	94	90	89.8
ABU GARCIA JORDAN LEE JLEESP30	\$100	88	87	87	88	90	92	88.7
QUANTUM SMOKE X	\$160	90	90	87	93	90	81	88.5
KISTLER SERIES 1	\$150	88	84	83	94	85	88	87
PENN PURSUIT IV PURIV2500	\$60	75	82	82	82	80	92	82.2
DUCKETT JACOB WHEELER JW2500	\$100	82	87	81	79	79	84	82

Products are scored by each tester from 60 to 100 in six categories; the scores are then averaged to determine the Overall score. The product with the highest Overall score earns our Editor's Choice Award. DESIGN: The efficiency and ease of operation of the mechanical features. ERGONOMICS: The efficiency and comfort of the product's man-to-machine interfaces. FISHABILITY: How well the product performs under real-world conditions. CONSTRUCTION: The quality of the materials, and the overall fit-and-finish and build quality. AESTHETICS: The degree to which the product is appealing to the eye. VALUE: The perceived value of the product with regard to its price. The product with the highest Value score earns our Great Buy Award for its category.

Designed to handle large bodies of water with tides, currents and waves, the Old Town Sportsman Salty PDL 120 has a sleek, rounded hull.

KAYAK CONSIDERATIONS

THINK ABOUT THESE SEVEN THINGS BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO BUY A FISHING KAYAK.

By Drew Warden

Angler interest in kayaks has exploded recently, and so too has the number of kayaks tailored to fishing applications. With today's dizzying array of purpose-built fishing kayaks—and an equally overwhelming variety of features and characteristics—many prospective buyers don't know where to begin. However, there is a method to the madness.

Speak with a handful of industry experts on the kayak buying process, and several key considerations will come up again and again. If you're hunting for a new fishing kayak, keep the following items in mind.

1. INTENDED FISHING USE

Choose a kayak that fits the waters you fish and the type of fishing you do most often. Are you chasing bass or panfish on calm lakes and slow-moving rivers, or inshore species on flats or coastal bays? Do you fish large lakes or offshore, where wind and wave conditions are a factor? Where and how you fish should guide your decisions.

"It's important for someone to identify what type of angler they are and where they plan to fish," says Ryan Lilly, brand evangelist for Old Town Canoe and Kayak. "There are so many options on the market now that you can inadvertently

buy a kayak that was designed to do X when you're really going to do Y, and you won't be happy. Or you won't have the best experience."

The kayak you select should address your most common needs. If you're a hard-core bass angler and want a bunch of rods, tackle, electronics and a trolling motor, you need a large, stable, relatively flat kayak with adequate capacity. Lilly says Old Town's Sportsman Autopilot 120 or 136, Sportsman PDL 106 or 120, and Topwater 106 or 120 fit that bill. If you're fishing big, rough water, a model with a sleeker, more rounded hull and pronounced bow shape may work better.

Here, he recommends the company's BigWater PDL 132, Sportsman BigWater 132 and Sportsman Salty PDL 120.

As you'll notice, many buying considerations overlap and connect. The largest and heaviest boats are often the most stable with the greatest carrying capacities. Smaller and lighter boats hold less gear but are easier to transport and portage. Most decisions involve tradeoffs, but the result—your kayak solution—should always serve your intended fishing use.

2. STABILITY

Tyler Brown, COO of BIG Adventures, the parent company of Native Watercraft and Bonafide kayaks, notes that a top consideration for most buyers is stability. He sees it with new kayak anglers in particular.

"[Good stability] really allows somebody that's new to the sport to be confident, to feel comfortable doing it," he says. "If people who are new get into a boat that isn't stable, and they spend most of their time trying not to flip, and they're nervous, obviously, their experience is not very positive."

Stability concerns every kayak angler, though, not just newbies. You need a

stable platform to fish from, especially if you want to stand. Even if you don't, nobody wants to tip a kayak loaded with expensive gear.

A wider, heavier kayak is usually more stable than a lighter, narrower boat. You sacrifice speed and tracking ability the wider you go, though. It's also harder to paddle a wider kayak, but this is mitigated on boats using a motor or pedal-drive system.

Hull design affects a kayak's stability, too. Some offer more (secondary) stability in rough water and others provide greater (primary) stability on calmer waters. An entire article could highlight how hull shape influences stability, but for anglers not fishing big, rough water, so-called pontoon- or catamaran-style hulls often yield the best results. Brown suggests that the hybrid "cat" (catamaran) hull on the Bonafide SS127 and the wide, uniquely designed hull of the Native Watercraft Titan make them some of the most stable boats.

One last note on stability. Typically, the higher your seat sits in the kayak, the wider the boat should be to accommodate a higher center of gravity.

Wider kayaks, such as these from Native and Bonafide, offer more stability for anglers who want to fish while standing.



ESSENTIAL GEAR

Two items that keep you safe and keep you going

There isn't a lot of extra room on a kayak, and an inflatable PFD makes a lot of sense. The **Mustang Survival MIT 100** features a streamlined design for comfort and safety in calm water conditions. A manual inflation cord lets you deploy it by hand if the need arises. The MIT 100 provides up to 28 pounds of buoyancy and keeps the wearer face-up when inflated, and its simple one-fold design makes re-packing a snap. (\$139.99; mustangsurvival.com)

Lithium-ion batteries such as those from **Lithium Battery Power** are ideal for kayak power-supply needs, whether you're fueling an electric trolling motor, lighting up a sonar unit or recharging a cell phone. The weight savings over traditional lead-acid batteries is significant. Lithium batteries require very little maintenance (no water levels to check) and do not normally emit gases while charging or discharging. This makes them especially desirable in kayak applications where the battery is likely to be stowed in an enclosed hatch or accessory container. Lithium batteries are expensive, but they deliver an incredible number of charging cycles—multiple thousands of them. (\$1,092.50 for 12V, 100 Ah Premier battery; lithiumbatterypower.com)



**MUSTANG
SURVIVAL
MIT 100**

**LITHIUM
BATTERY
POWER
PREMIER**



3. CAPACITY AND FEATURES

Call this “gear-friendliness,” if you want. How much gear can a given kayak hold? Does it have ample storage space? And does it have features that make adding accessories like a motor, shallow-water anchor, fishfinder and other items easy?

The amount of gear a kayak supports correlates to its usable capacity. If you want to install many accessories or carry lots of gear, your boat should safely float it. Howie Strech, Hobie’s parts and accessories product manager, suggests how much weight capacity you need is largely based on how you fish.

“Are you a hard-core bass guy that takes a ton of gear or are you a minimalist type of person?” he asks. “The reason I love the Hobie Pro Angler 14 so much is just because I get that much extra boat. I can take everything I need to take, and there is a space for it.”

The tradeoff is a heavier kayak to support the weight. This often costs more, too, and so do features that make custom rigging easier. You must also consider how you distribute weight inside the kayak to avoid imbalances, especially with motors and batteries.

4. TRANSPORT AND STORAGE

We know a kayak’s weight and dimensions affect capacity, stability and tracking. Size and weight also influence portability and how easy a kayak is to transport and store.

Want a kayak that will ride atop your car or SUV? Pick a smaller, lighter vessel. Longer, heavier kayaks are better suited for trailers or truck beds, and you may need an extender for your pickup’s bed. Keep your physical capabilities in mind, too. Are you able to repeatedly lift a kayak onto your vehicle or a trailer, or do you need a device to assist you?

Similarly, choose a kayak for which you have adequate space to store. Anglers without much storage might consider a quality inflatable kayak, like Hobie’s Mirage iTrek 11. Strech says that while you can’t treat it exactly like a rigid-hull kayak, it’s plenty durable and gets you on the water.

“If you’re in an apartment, you may want a certain boat, and it might be the best boat for you once you’re out on the water,” says Jeffrey Fortuna, asset manager for Hobie. “But if you don’t have any way to transport it or store it when you’re not using it, then it completely changes your buying parameters.”

Weight matters for river anglers, too. If your fishing involves lots of portaging, a lightweight kayak you can comfortably lift or drag is ideal.

Hobie’s MirageDrive 180 uses fins to provide forward and reverse propulsion.



5. PROPULSION

How do you want to propel your kayak? You can paddle, pedal or use a motor. Consider your budget, and where and how you fish. The most affordable boats are usually paddle kayaks. Pedal- and motor-propelled kayaks are typically more expensive.

Paddle kayaks often have the edge on skinny-water rivers or on the flats, though certain pedal-drive kayaks can get shallow, too. Hobie kayaks, for instance, utilize Kick-Up Fins that retract on impact and allow you to “flutter kick” to navigate in inches of water. Other pedal drives allow you to raise the drive unit and paddle in the shallows. Most pedal-driven and powered kayaks excel in deeper, open water and in traveling long distances. However, the biggest advantage of pedaled and powered kayaks is hands-free operation.

“The best experience—at least for fishing—is when you’re able to retire that paddle and use a pedal or motorized system,” Lilly says. “That opens up a ton of opportunity, and a lot of your time is freed up where you normally have to be maneuvering yourself to make that cast. You’re able to focus completely on the pursuit.”

There are various pedal-drive systems on the market, but most fall into two categories: rotary pedal drives or so-called fin drives. Hobie’s venerable MirageDrive (MD)—the longest-standing pedal drive in the industry—dominates the latter group. The MD 180 permits forward and reverse propulsion, while the MD 360, as Strech says, essentially “turns your kayak into a giant trolling motor” offering maneuverability in any direction. On the rotary side, many options exist. Old Town’s pedal drives are widely respected, as is the Propel Drive used



The 28-pound inflatable Hobie iTrek 11 folds into a wheeled duffel for transport and storage, and comes with manual and electric pumps.

on several Native Watercraft kayaks and Bonafide's new P127.

Motorization has exploded in popularity, too. Old Town's Sportsman 106 Powered by Minn Kota, along with the company's Sportsman AutoPilot 120 and 136, come standard with Minn Kota trolling motors installed. The AutoPilot models feature Spot-Lock Technology to "anchor" kayaks in place.

Bonafide and Native Watercraft both offer turnkey bow mounts for a MotorGuide Xi3 kayak trolling motor, and they accept common stern-mounted motors like those from Torqeedo and Newport Vessels. Brown says the Bonafide SS127, Native Slayer Max line and Native Titan 12 are ideally suited for motorization. Hobie also has the Evolve motor for its kayaks, which drops down in place of the standard MirageDrive.

With any kayak, watch how the boat planes after installing a motor. Ensure it's safe and there's no excess water entering the kayak. Again, propulsion choices should always reflect your intended fishing use.

6. COMFORT

Get a kayak that feels good and fits you. You should be comfortable spending time in it. Dave Potts, operations manager for Mariner Sails, a large kayak dealer based in Dallas, Texas, can't overstate the importance of trying a kayak before buying.

"I would say that for probably 60 to 70 percent of people, the boat they think they want is not the boat they decide on," Potts notes.

He emphasizes a comfortable seat is crucial, and that a raised one helps a lot. Just ensure it's not so high it adversely affects stability. He jokes that there are "one-hour seats, five-hour seats and all-day seats," and if you have a bad back, you'll quickly know which one is on your kayak.

It comes down to body type and, again, the type of fishing you do. If you're a bigger individual, you'll need a longer and wider kayak. An on-the-water demo, Potts says, is a great chance to see firsthand if a boat will serve your fishing and comfort needs.

7. PRICE

What's your budget? Mariner Sails specializes in the rigging of kayaks, and Potts says he often sees people who know how much they want to spend on a kayak but fail to budget for accessories or any wiring and rigging work that must be done. This includes trailers, racks and other items, too. Know what accessories you require and factor them into the price, keeping in mind that most kayaks enable you to easily add more accessories later to fit your needs.

Your budget also influences the type of kayak you can buy and the features that come standard. Maybe you start with an entry-level kayak—a Hobie Passport 12.0, an Old Town Sportsman 120, a Native Falcon 11 or a Bonafide RS117—and progress to enhanced models. Or perhaps your budget allows you to go straight to a premium option—a Hobie Pro Angler 14 with a 360 Drive, an Old Town Sportsman AutoPilot 136, a Native Titan Propel 12 or a Bonafide P127. Price, along with intended use, is often a top consideration for buyers. 

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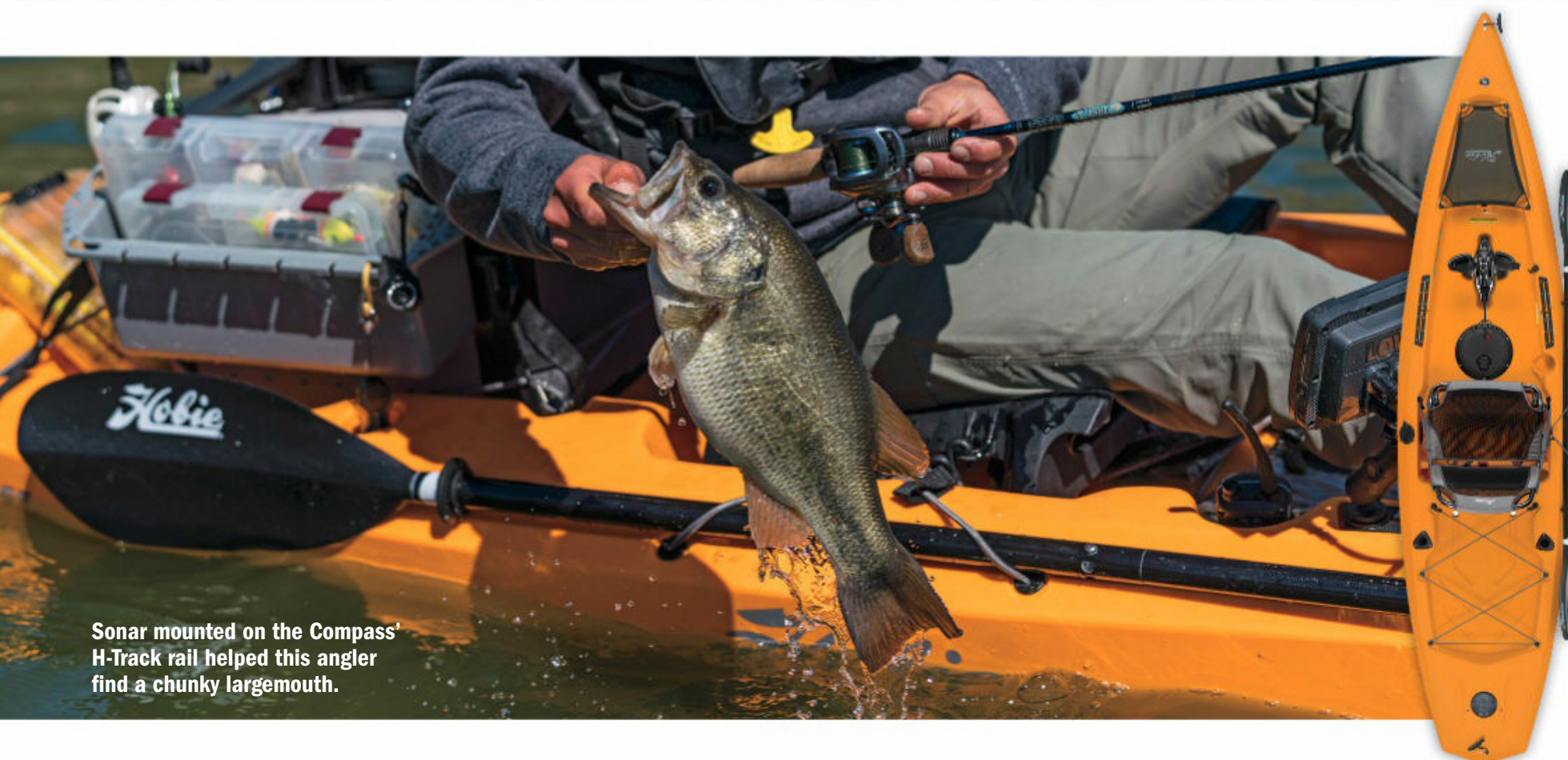
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BUILT FOR THE BITE

THESE KAYAKS ARE FILLED WITH FEATURES THAT
MAXIMIZE FISHING SUCCESS.

By Outdoor Sportsman Group Staff

Kayaks designed for anglers keep getting better as builders add more fishing-specific features to make time on the water productive and efficient. Let's not forget about comfort, either; improved seats that support the back and adjust for leg-room help us stay out there longer. Plus, pedal-drive systems get us to our spots faster and let us position boats even while firing off casts to prime structure. No doubt about it: Today's purpose-built kayaks are serious fishing machines. Our friends at Florida Sportsman recently put a bunch of the latest fishing kayaks to the test, and here are six that stood out for exploring a variety of waters. **GAF**



Sonar mounted on the Compass' H-Track rail helped this angler find a chunky largemouth.

HOBIE

MIRAGE COMPASS

LENGTH: 12'

WIDTH: 34"

WEIGHT: 87 lbs. rigged,
68 lbs. hull

OVERALL CAPACITY: 400 lbs.

PROPULSION: MirageDrive 180
pedal system, paddle

MSRP: \$2,599 Seagrass Green
and Papaya Orange, \$2,749 camo

HOBIE.COM

The Compass features a new seat this year, built of anodized aluminum, monomesh and ripstop nylon. The retractable rudder is mounted beneath the stern, where it won't snag lines or stand in the way of a Power-Pole Micro Anchor, which can be installed easily in the pre-fitted brass inserts. The rudder is a Kick-Up design, like the MirageDrive fins, meaning it folds up and out of the way automatically if it strikes something and then returns to position. H-Track accessory rails installed forward of the seat enable mounting anything from additional rod holders and camera booms to chartplotter and fishfinder

units. (Hobie designed its transducer mounting system and cable plugs for Lowrance compatibility.) Storage options include a forward net and a Twist and Seal hatch.

TAKE NOTE: The Compass Camo package features a pattern appropriate for duck hunting and comes with Kick-Up Turbo Fins.

USE IT FOR: This is a clean, beamy fishing kayak capable of tackling all kinds of waters. It's well-equipped as-is but also popular with DIY-minded anglers who wish to install custom accessories.

KAYAK KNOWLEDGE

For more reviews of kayak models and gear, plus tips on the best ways to rig and use kayaks for fishing in both freshwater and saltwater, **CHECK NEWSSTANDS FOR THE EXCLUSIVE KAYAK FISHING FUN ISSUE.**



The BigWater is loaded with fishing conveniences, and its hull has a lifetime warranty.



OLD TOWN

SPORTSMAN BIGWATER PDL 132

LENGTH: 13'2"

WIDTH: 36"

WEIGHT: 122 lbs. rigged, 95 lbs. with drive and seat removed

OVERALL CAPACITY: 378 lbs.

PROPULSION: PDL Drive pedal system, paddle

MSRP: \$2,899.99

OLDTOWNCANOE.COM

A proven performer in the Old Town Sportsman lineup, this is a big boat that feels nimble and quick thanks to the com-

pany's innovative PDL propeller drive. The pedal stroke is rotational, intuitive and much like a recumbent bicycle. For reverse, simply backpedal. The PDL unit, with a 5-year warranty, may be removed for storage or tilted forward while beaching the boat. There are pre-installed fittings for mounting a shallow-water anchor, non-slip EVA deck pads and a universal transducer mount—all features once in the DIY domain but now standard on the BigWater. The seat is comfortable and easily adjusted for preferred pedal stroke length by lifting a tab and sliding fore or aft on a shuttle track. Gear management is also a strong suit, with sealed dry storage forward and a large stern tank well.

TAKE NOTE: The twin aft-facing BigWater rod holders are just where they should be for trolling or carrying, and the forward-facing single holder is in the perfect location for keeping a rod close for spot casting. Easily add more rod holders or other accessories via built-in track mounts on either side of the boat, both fore and aft.

USE IT FOR: Any water body where an angler might wish to cover lots of area, haul a lot of fishing tackle and spend several hours out there. Freshwater lakes, big rivers, saltwater bays, the open ocean—this kayak is built for comfort and the confident handling of waves, currents and winds.

BONAFIDE

P127

LENGTH: 12'7"

WIDTH: 34"

WEIGHT: 120 lbs. rigged, 100 lbs. with drive and seat removed

OVERALL CAPACITY: 475 lbs.

PROPULSION: Propel Pedal Drive system, paddle

MSRP: \$3,099

BONAFIDEKAYAKS.COM

The P127 is a hybrid catamaran-style hull tuned to accommodate the Propel drive and any added stern weight, such as from a motor. Hand-sewn and made in the U.S., the seat provides great back support along with fore and aft adjustability; it mounts in a relatively high position, giving the angler good visibility and ample space below for storing tackle trays and other gear. The Propel unit is the same design found on the Native Propel kayak models. Now in its seventh generation, it features a new integrated weedguard to go with the proven stainless gearing. Aluminum YakAttack GearTracs are mounted port



Long known for comfortable seating and standup stability, Bonafide now adds the seventh-generation Propel drive to the P127.

and starboard, fore and aft. Quick-draw rod stagers and covered areas for the tip sections are included. There's also a transducer recess with mounting plate.

TAKE NOTE: The bow hatch has Doubleheader hinges. If standing outside the kayak, as on the trailer or bank, swing the hatch back to slide rods inside the body of the kayak. If seated, swing it

forward to access supplies or the battery and transducer wiring.

USE IT FOR: Great capacity makes the P127 well-suited for larger anglers in freshwater and inshore saltwater conditions. The new rudder design retracts up and down, a benefit for anglers who traverse shallow water to reach deeper, rougher areas.



Bass anglers on small lakes and winding rivers will appreciate the maneuverability of the Native Slayer Propel Max 10.

NATIVE

SLAYER PROPEL MAX 10

LENGTH: 10'

WIDTH: 34.15"

WEIGHT: 97 lbs. rigged, 75 lbs. with drive and seat removed

OVERALL CAPACITY: 400 lbs.

PROPULSION: Propel Pedal Drive system, paddle

MSRP: \$2,649

NATIVEWATERCRAFT.COM

The Max 10 is similar in many (and good) ways to the company's fishing-specific Slayer Propel Max 12.5, only in a shorter package. The Propel pedal drive has a marine-grade aluminum body with stainless steel gearing, offering instant forward or reverse. A weedguard has been added to this latest (seventh) iteration. The seat is hand-sewn in the U.S. and may be positioned where desired, fore or aft, on a track. Lots of sturdy BMX-style lifting grips are provided for moving the kayak from truck to water and back. Pre-installed mounting plates for running switches and wires—without drilling into the poly hull—are a nice touch. Inserts for a powered stake anchor are included in the stern. The hull is derivative of the proven Native hulls, fairly flat with a shallow tunnel traveling the length, drawing 4 or 5 inches.

TAKE NOTE: The bow compartment is perfectly sized for installing a battery and running a transducer thru a scupper. The under-seat sliding tackle drawer is a feature found nowhere else on this side of the DIY world.

USE IT FOR: This boat is engineered for quick turns, making it ideal for working around twisty creeks and structure-laden ponds. Plus, it's small enough to easily slide into a truck bed or SUV.

A bow hatch opens to reveal a battery compartment.

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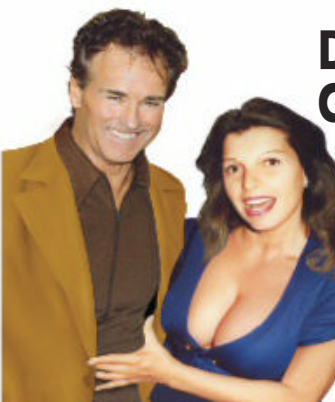
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NRS FISHING

KUDA 126

LENGTH: 12'6"

WIDTH: 38"

WEIGHT: 31 lbs.

OVERALL CAPACITY: 300 lbs.

PROPULSION: Paddle,
accessory motor

MSRP: \$1,495

NRS.COM

The Kuda 126 is a playful-looking rig, but NRS doesn't play around. This is a fishing-mission-equipped inflatable with rugged three-chamber PVC construction. The center chamber, or deck, is high-pressure drop-stitch, and the independent side chambers offer stability and confidence. Extremely durable, the material is built to withstand stress on boulder-strewn streams. The aluminum-frame, nylon-mesh seat is installed with four nylon straps and may be moved fore or aft as desired. Adjustable footpegs are included, a rarity for inflatable rigs. Five YakAttack base mounts are pre-fitted in strategic spots over reinforced nylon plates. EVA foam deck surfacing offers a non-slip standing platform, plus resists fin spines and other spiky stuff. Nylon D-rings and bungee fasteners are also included.

TAKE NOTE: At the bow is vulcanized rubber reinforcement to protect against anchor line chafing. The stern area is clear for mounting a Torqueedo or Power-Pole Micro Anchor (with two-part Stabond adhesive).

USE IT FOR: It's hard to beat an inflatable kayak for backwoods lake excursions. Shoulder the lightweight carry bag, hike or bike to the water, then pump up the Kuda and go! It's also a super option for fly-outs or packing on a powerboat for long-range voyaging.

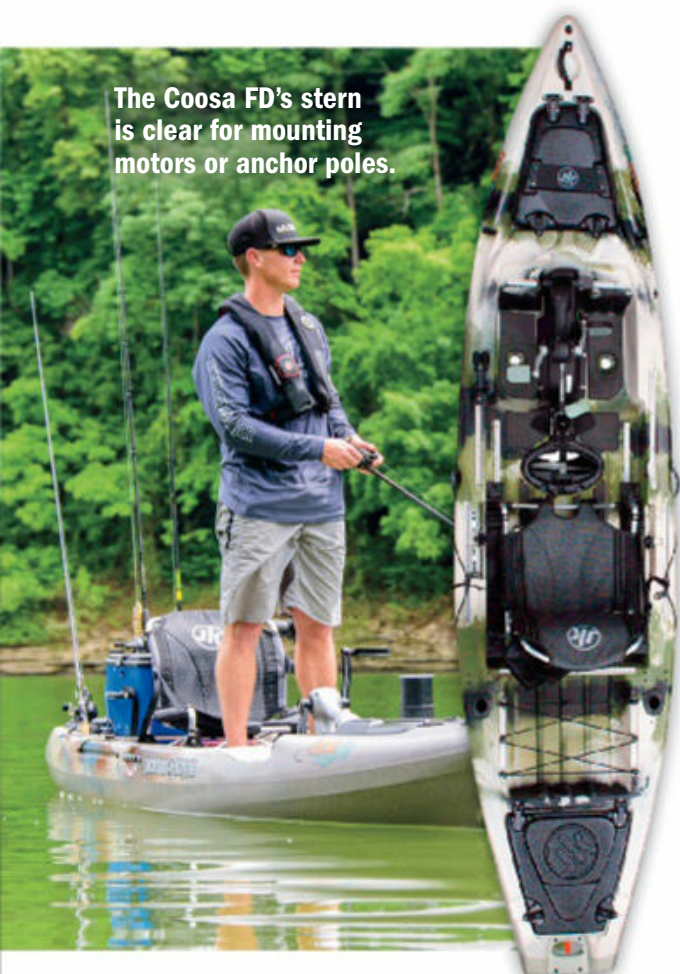
Gear mounts are preinstalled in spots where kayak anglers will want them.

The Kuda 126 inflatable's open deck features EVA foam surfacing to prevent feet from slipping and to enhance comfort.

Jackson, a longtime maker of quality performance and fishing kayaks, now has a well-equipped pedal-driven boat.



The Coosa FD's stern is clear for mounting motors or anchor poles.



JACKSON COOSA FD

LENGTH: 12'7"

WIDTH: 35"

WEIGHT: 107 lbs.

OVERALL CAPACITY: 450 lbs.

PROPULSION: Flex Drive 3D pedal system, paddle

MSRP: \$3,759

JACKSONKAYAK.COM

The Coosa FD's High Ergo Seat Frame with Molle system offers all sorts of options for adding accessories at the angler's workstation. It adjusts forward and back, up and down. A new pass-through system enables quick wiring for installing a fishfinder, and like many kayaks in this size and feature range, the stern includes inserts for the four bolts

used to mount popular stake anchors or Torqeedo motors. The forward hatch has a bin to keep stowable gear contained and a Hypalon belt on top to secure the paddle when it's not needed. Hinges have been reinforced, too. Integrated gear tracks are located port and starboard, fore and aft. The rudder comes with the boat, and there are controls for either left- or right-hand operation.

TAKE NOTE: The company's new Flex Drive 3D, deployed with the flip of a lever, offers forward and reverse operation and includes a unique articulating system for deep- and shallow-water navigation.

USE IT FOR: This is a boat for any fishing technique that demands copious volumes of gear and a stable, wave-taming hull with generous features for angler comfort and efficiency.

THE COMFORTS OF CAMP

TOO MUCH LUXURY CAN BECOME A BURDEN.

Shane and his father liked to camp in early spring while it was still cool at night. Their first time out they brought only the necessities, just as Shane's father said he'd done when he was a boy. They had a big plastic tarp for a lean-to and a couple wool blankets. In a single wooden trunk, they packed rope, an ax, coffee pot, lantern, fishing tackle and some onions, beans and potatoes to go with whatever fish they caught.

They set up camp in no time, gathered firewood and spent the rest of the afternoon catching fish. They cooked two channel cats over the fire that evening as they sat cross-legged on the ground, gazing at the stars and listening to the frogs until they got tired, which wasn't long.

But Shane got zero sleep. He swatted mosquitos all night and couldn't get away from the smoke of the fire. It didn't help that he'd unknowingly laid his blanket over a couple hidden rocks and a small colony of ants. Around 4 o'clock in the morning the wind picked up, and he and his father awoke shivering. They stoked the fire and sat rubbing their hands together until it was light enough to cast a line into the river.

"I love camping," said Shane, "but my bed at home is awful nice."

"You're too young to miss your bed already," said Shane's father, "but my back is killing me today."

By the following spring, father and son had significantly added to their camping gear. They had a nylon tent to keep the bugs out and down sleeping bags to keep the warm in. They brought a chainsaw to cut firewood, along with gas to fuel it, and they hauled two huge coolers, one for food and another just for ice and drinks. It took more time to set up camp that year, but they both slept significantly better.

Over the next several years Shane and his father acquired even more accoutrements. Now they had camp chairs, a propane stove, folding tables, sleeping



cots and foam pads, fishing rod holders, a 14-foot johnboat with trolling motor, and a bunch of other stuff such as extra propane bottles, a tool box, pots, pans, coffee creamer, flashlights, batteries, trash bags and enough cooking utensils to fill several plastic storage containers.

It took the pair a couple hours just to load it into the pickup and strap it down. By the time they finally got camp set up, it was too dark to fish. They were tired and savagely hungry from the day's labor, so it was a good thing they had the stove to warm up a few cans of spaghetti.

"Dad," said Shane, looking up from his reclining seat near the blazing fire, "camp sure has become a lot like home." He had his feet propped up on a log they had cut to the perfect height so that his plate rested comfortably on a TV tray in his lap. The hiss of the propane stove drowned out the frogs; the light from three new lanterns killed the stars.

"I was thinking the same thing," said his father. "You know, it's probably best

for a man to rough it for a while to appreciate luxury and then miss the simplicity of the outdoors while cooped up at home."

The next year Shane and his father went back to bringing only the basics. They set up camp in minutes and enjoyed hours of topwater bass fishing. They ate what they caught and went to bed shortly after dusk, all while listening to the singing of the frogs.

"Now this is livin'," said Shane, lying on his blanket.

"Doesn't get much better," added his father.

Early the next morning, well before the sun was up, Shane's father groaned as he rolled over.

"Son," he whispered, "you awake?"

"Yeah," Shane hissed back.

"Get any sleep?"

"Not a wink," said Shane, shivering. "You?"

"None," growled his father.

"Ready to try some fishing in the dark?"

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