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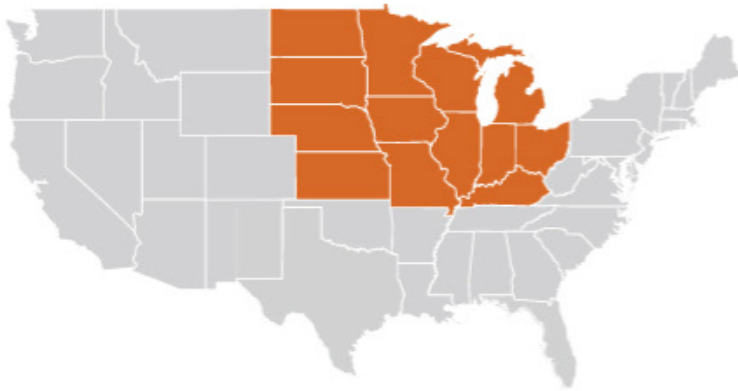
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REGIONAL EDITOR: Drew Warden, Drew.Warden@OutdoorSG.com | COVER IMAGE: Ryan Yoder | [@GAMEANDFISHMAG](https://www.instagram.com/GAMEANDFISHMAG) | [FACEBOOK.COM/GAMEANDFISH](https://www.facebook.com/GAMEANDFISH)

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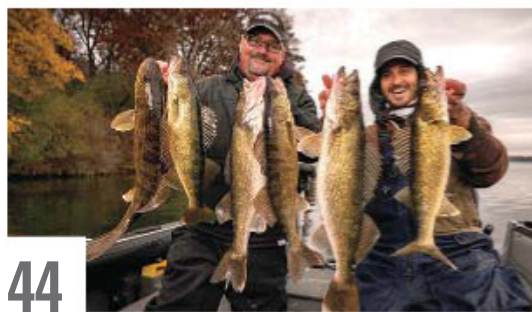
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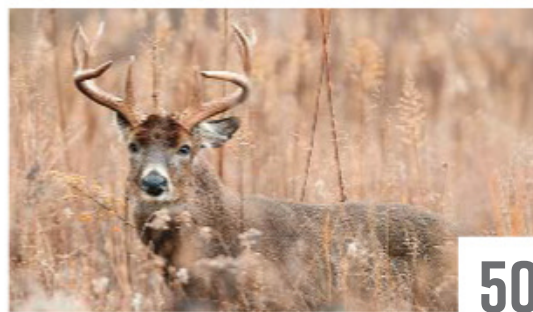
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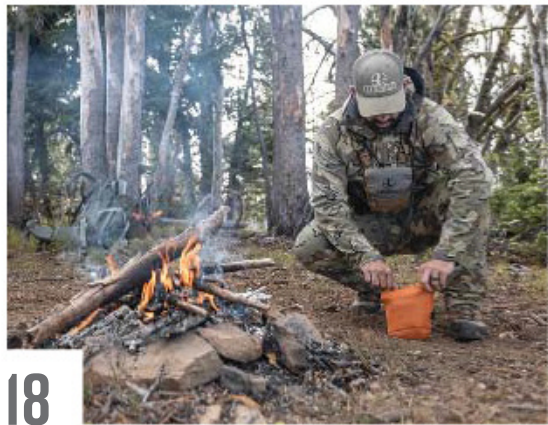
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HUNTING FOR PESTS

Hunting season had an early, and unlikely, start for me this year. Rather than shooting doves in September, I was chasing an invasive insect called the spotted lanternfly in August. A charge of table salt fired from an air-powered Bug-A-Salt gun is an adequate load, though the effective range for guaranteed one-shot kills is no farther than 3 inches. Spotted lanternflies have yet to adapt to hunting pressure and it's not difficult to approach them to nearly contact distance. I found, over weeks of trial and error, that it's best to direct the salt to the insect's softer underbody. Shooting its multi-colored wings merely results in a wound. There is no daily or possession limit, which is a good thing because my family and I took hundreds of them.

Kidding aside, the spotted lanternfly is no joke. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that the pest, native to China and first reported in Pennsylvania in 2014, could seriously impact the country's grape, orchard and logging industries because it feeds on a wide range of fruit, ornamental and woody trees. Killing its egg masses, which look like small splotches of gray putty on tree trunks and other hard surfaces, is the most effective way to control the insect's spread.

The spotted lanternfly is just the latest invasive species to threaten our woods and native wildlife. Thanks to the Wild Spotter program, a new initiative launched by Wildlife Forever in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and the University of Georgia, hunters and anglers can help stem the impact of invasives on our public lands. The public awareness and volunteer initiative aims to map and monitor the presence of invasive species on all 174 national forests and grasslands.

Identifying and mapping infestations is critical for land managers to adopt strategies for prevention, control and eradication. Wild Spotter (wildspotter.org) utilizes a free mobile mapping app that provides tools to help locate, quantify, map and report invasive infestations.

"This program has tremendous appeal and ability to engage citizen scientist volunteers, friends' groups and the entire conservation community into taking action against America's greatest threat to our public lands, invasive species," said Pat Conzemius, president and CEO of Wildlife Forever.

As hunters and anglers, we spend more time in the woods and on the water than many other groups of folks. We often come face-to-face with invasive species, though we may not even know it. Wild Spotter can equip us to recognize these enemies and join the battle against them. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some egg masses to smash.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

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The Regional Outdoor Guide

PUBLISHER

Michael F. X. Cassidy

EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Adam Heggenstaller
Adam.Heggenstaller@outdoorsg.com

EDITOR

John Taranto
John.Taranto@outdoorsg.com

REGIONAL EDITORS

Dr. Todd A. Kuhn
Chuck Smock
Drew Warden

ONLINE CONTENT EDITOR

Scott Bernarde

ART DIRECTOR

Brian Judge

ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Andrew Tuchscherer

PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Melissa Williams
Melissa.Williams@outdoorsg.com

ADVERTISING

NATIONAL ENDEMIC AD SALES

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

WESTERN REGION

Hutch Looney
Hutch@HLooney.com

MARINE/FISHING ADVERTISING

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

MIDWESTERN REGION

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

NATIONAL AD SALES

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR DETROIT OFFICE

Kevin Donley | (248) 798-4458
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Carl Benson | (312) 955-0496
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EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS
Derek Sevcik

VP, CONSUMER MARKETING
Peter Watt

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Deb Daniels

SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION
Connie Mendoza

DIRECTOR, PUBLISHING TECHNOLOGY
Kyle Morgan

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Tim Neher

DIRECTOR, DIGITAL EDITORIAL
Jeff Phillips

For questions regarding digital editions,
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GAME & FISH MAGAZINE EDITORIAL OFFICE
6385 Flank Drive, Suite 800, Harrisburg, PA 17112
(717) 695-8171 | Fax (717) 545-2527

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REGIONAL RUT *UPDATE*



From pre-rut to post-rut and all the excitement between, we're covering the action this fall. Beginning Oct. 20, "Regional Rut Update" is an exclusive weekly report from the field with timely information on whitetail activity, big-buck kills and how to tag a trophy in the East, Midwest and South.



ULTIMATE ADVANTAGE

Check out our "Ultimate Season" collection of hunting articles and videos, including "How to Make the Most of Every Shot" by Adam Heggenstaller.



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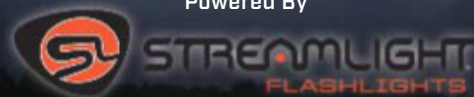


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OCTOBER 2022

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
23 am 10:54 to 12:54 pm 11:18 to 1:18	24 am 11:18 to 1:18 pm 11:42 to 1:42	25 NEW am — to — pm 12:06 to 2:06	26 am 12:30 to 2:30 pm 12:54 to 2:54	27 am 1:18 to 3:18 pm 1:42 to 3:42	28 am 2:06 to 4:06 pm 2:30 to 4:30	29 am 2:54 to 4:54 pm 3:18 to 5:18
30 am 3:42 to 5:42 pm 4:06 to 6:06	31 am 4:30 to 6:30 pm 4:54 to 6:54					

NOVEMBER 2022

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

DECEMBER 2022

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

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

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THE DEER-KILLING DRILL



**KNOW YOUR EFFECTIVE LIMIT FROM ANY SHOOTING POSITION
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Story and Photos by Richard Mann

Hunters often obsess over minute details regarding their rifles and ammunition, but many seem to think their marksmanship is beyond reproach. It's almost like they think because they're a well-equipped hunter, they can always hit whatever they want. The truth is, you can have the best rifle, optical sight and ammunition ever made, but if you can't place the bullet where you want it, you might as well be using a squirt gun. Don't get me wrong, your gear matters. But to be an effective deer hunter, you gotta know how to use it.

Practice is the key to shooting success, and there are many ways to train—with and without ammunition. I think most rifle hunters overlook how much dry-fire training can help them become a better shot. Then again, practice is one thing. Understanding your real-world capabilities is another. You must know your limitations so you don't attempt shots you'll likely miss, and so you can put yourself in situations to take the shots you can make.

That's why I devised the Deer-Killing Drill. While you can certainly use it for practice, it's intended for evaluation, not

training. At its heart, the deer-killing drill is designed to help you discover your maximum practical effective range.

WHAT YOU NEED

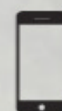
To begin, you'll need a 100-yard range, a shot timer and at least three rounds of ammunition for each position from which you want to shoot. You'll also need the means to simulate the shooting positions you expect to use when you're in the field hunting. This might be just a rifle sling, but it could also be shooting sticks or something to replicate firing from a rest like out of a shoot house

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window or off a rock or tree limb. If you don't want to walk downrange after each shot, a spotting scope is handy, too.

You'll also need some Thompson Target True Blue targets. I helped Thompson Target design this several years ago. It's very visible in all lighting conditions, and it's excellent for zeroing a rifle or testing ammunition. It has several other uses, but it's ideal for this drill because of the different size circles on its center bull.

HOW IT WORKS

Hunters shoot from basically four positions: standing, kneeling, sitting or prone. Now, you might also shoot with a support such as a tree, a fence post or a bipod or shooting sticks. But unless you're some sort of Zen yoga master, you'll be in one of those four positions when you break the shot. Which position(s) do you shoot from for this drill? Any. Or a combination of the positions you expect to shoot from when hunting.

Start the drill with either both feet on the ground or with one knee down. Pick the start position that allows you to get into the shooting position you want to use the fastest. When the shot timer beeps, assume the shooting position of your choice—with or without support—just like you would while hunting.

Once in position, fire one shot and then return to the start position. Time stops when the shot is fired, and the goal is to fire in less than 8 seconds. Repeat this two more times. You must use one target and fire three shots for each position you want to evaluate. Write down the time for each shot then check your target(s).

HOW IT'S SCORED

The target has five circles radiating out from the center. There is a 1/2-inch circle, 1-inch circle, 2-inch circle, 3-inch circle and 6-inch circle. They're worth 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 point, respectively.

Total your points on each target, then divide the total by three. The result, or quotient, multiplied by 100 is your maximum practical deer-killing range for the position associated with that target. If you scored a 5, 4 and 1 on a target from the sitting position, the total would be 10; 10 divided by 3 is 3.33. Multiply that by 100 and your maximum practical deer-killing range from the sitting position would be 333 yards.



Targets with five concentric circles, like the Thompson Target True Blue, are essential for the Deer-Killing Drill.

The timer is there to provide stress and replicate reality. Deer don't stand around all day waiting on you to shoot them. Add the times together for all the shots at one target and subtract one point for every full second your total time was over 24 seconds. For example, if it took you 9, 7 and 12 seconds (28 seconds) to fire three shots at one target, you would subtract 4 points (28 minus 24) from your point total before dividing by three.

WHY IT WORKS

The concept here is threefold. First is the practical assumption that your shot precision will increase proportional to distance. In other words, if you can hit a 1-inch circle at 100 yards, you can hit a two-inch circle at 200 yards. This would also suggest you could hit a 6-inch circle at 600 yards.

However, while bullets might fly like that, shooters don't shoot like that. Testing has shown that with most of us—because of shooting and aiming error—at distance, bullet dispersion increases at a rate closer to 2.2 times as opposed to 2.0 times when the range is doubled. Therefore, a shot inside a 1-inch circle at

100 yards would most probably translate to a shot inside a 2.2-inch circle at 200 or roughly a 5-inch circle at 400 yards.

Second is the concept of reduced-size targets to simulate distance. Many hunters don't have frequent access to long-range facilities for practice. The military has been doing this for many years. If you only have a 100-yard range and want to simulate shooting at 200 yards, just shoot at a smaller target.

Finally, there is the stress induced by time. If it takes you more than 8 seconds to assume a position and make a good shot, you're likely uncomfortable with that position. It means you need to practice.

What this exercise does not consider is trajectory. If you're going to try to hit a target at 400 yards, you'll have to make some sort of ballistic adjustment. This test assumes you know what that adjustment must be, and that you'll make it correctly.

The Deer-Killing Drill is not perfect (it doesn't consider your ability to make wind calls at distance, either). But, if you only have a 100-yard range to work with and want to know your maximum practical effective range from a certain position, this drill is a good place to start. 

A person wearing camouflage pants and a tan tactical vest is shown from the waist down. They are holding a rifle with a camouflage-patterned stock. Binoculars are visible in a pouch on the vest. The background shows a blurred natural setting with trees.

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TAKE A STAND

HERE'S A PLAN TO
**MAKE STAYING
IN THE WOODS
(ALMOST) ALL DAY
MORE ENJOYABLE.**

By Tony Hansen

If I were in charge, I'd have a fairly long list of things I'd like to see changed. At the very top of that list ... the month of November. Specifically, the month is far too short. The greatest of deer hunting months should last at least three times as long.

But, of course, I'm in charge of almost nothing, so we are left with but a few short weeks to take advantage of this deer hunting nirvana. Sadly, like just about every other bowhunter, I have to work for a living and, for me, that's essentially a 9-to-5 gig plus as many side hustles as I can fit in to cover the cost of college for two kids.

BUTT HURT

Vacation time is limited and weekends never last long enough. But that's the time I have and that's the time I put to use. To complicate things a bit, I am seldom content to simply hunt the bucks that hang around where I live. No, I want to pack as much into November as possible, so I'll typically juggle time between several states.

My approach is simple: Spend as many hours in a productive hunting location as I can. All-day sits are hardly a new concept in the hunting world and there is no denying that bucks are roaming during the midday hours when the rut is really rocking.

Staying on stand all day is also one of those things that sounds much easier to do than it really is. I get bored easily. Yes, even when hunting. November makes me antsy. I know my best option and opportunities come in November and I know the window of opportunity closes quickly.

When I'm not seeing deer, I see that opportunity slipping away. It makes it hard for me to stay put in a location. It makes me want to force the issue and bounce around. That almost always results in time lost and a less than effective outcome.

The rut isn't about sustained periods of action. It's often hours of inaction interrupted by moments of chaos. The



The best way to ground a great rut buck is by being in the woods. Boredom and impatience are hurdles to success.

magic about November is that those moments can come literally at any time of the day. Being in the woods every minute of daylight maximizes my time and opportunity. But it is hard to do. So, I've adopted an "almost-all-day" mantra that keeps me in the woods while still maintaining a level of fun.

FIRST HALF

If feasible, I'll be in my stand about 45 minutes prior to legal shooting hours. Once settled in, I have a set "stop" time. That time can be extended, but it cannot be shortened. That's the key to this whole thing. I cannot give myself the option of leaving because, if I'm not seeing deer,

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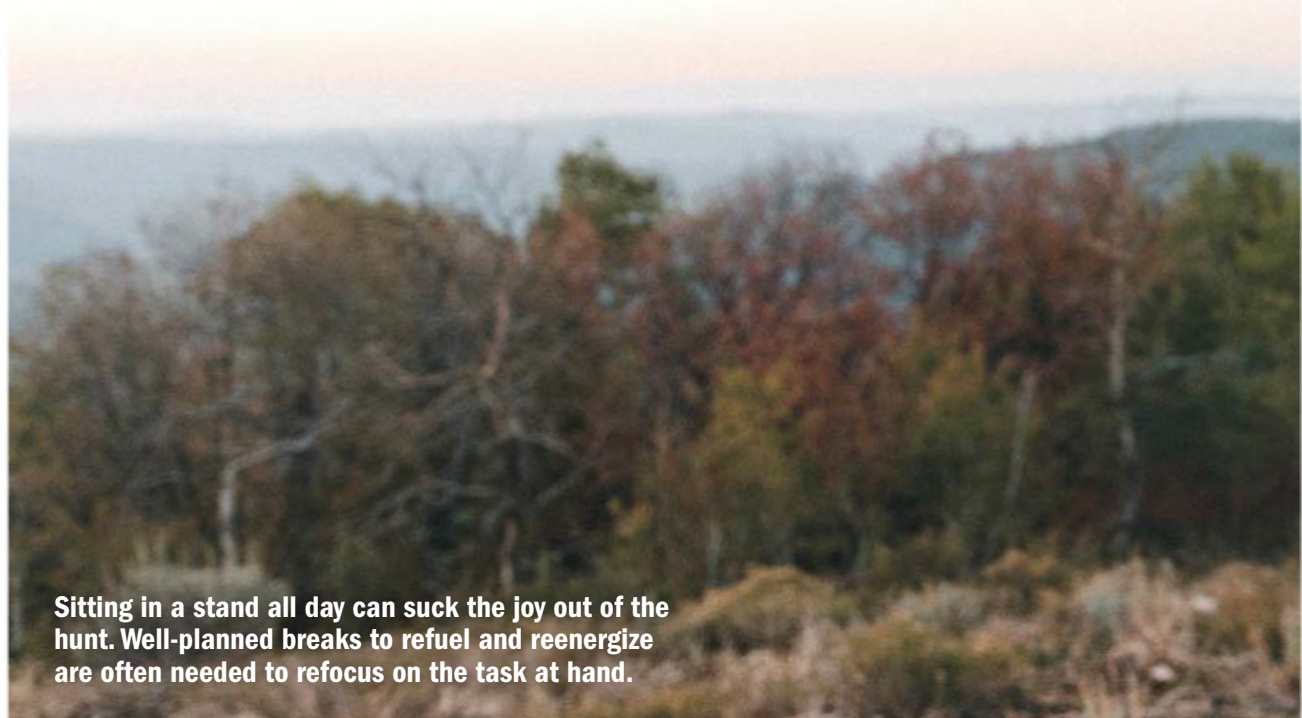
I will bail. Time and time again my lack of patience has cost me and by making a set timeline for the day, I can manage the hours more effectively.

I know from experience that once 10 a.m. hits, the next few hours can be very slow indeed. That's exactly why most hunters leave the woods by 11 a.m. I set a hard deadline of 1:30 p.m. I can't leave prior to that time. If I'm seeing deer activity or there is a reason for me to stay longer, I can extend the timeline, but never shorten it.

HALFTIME

When 1:30 hits, I bail and head for my vehicle. It's time for a break and a reset. Just the quick change in venue is enough to get me focused again. If it's cold, I warm up in the truck and dry gloves, socks, or whatever is needed on the dash vents. And, of course, I dive into whatever food I've brought along.

Make no mistake, I will bring food. In fact, I keep a well-stocked cooler in my truck throughout the month, so I'm always prepared. The goal here is a quick diversion to break up the monotony and



Sitting in a stand all day can suck the joy out of the hunt. Well-planned breaks to refuel and reenergize are often needed to refocus on the task at hand.



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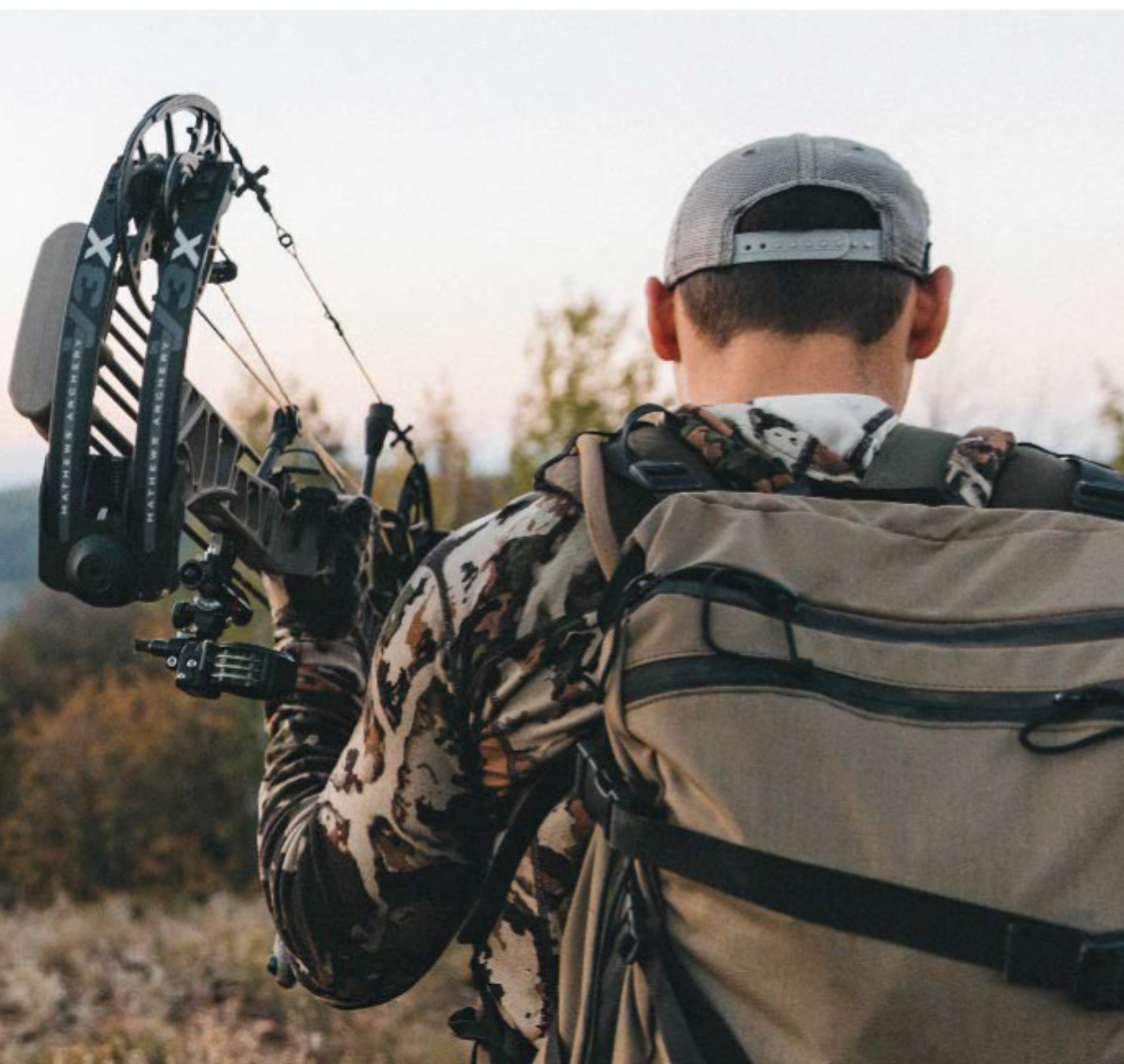
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get myself looking forward to the rest of the day. I'll be back in a tree no later than 3 p.m.

SECOND HALF

Oftentimes I'll change locations for the second half of the day. Again, there is no time to waste. The places deer hang around during the first half of the day are usually the same ones they hit when moving from the spots they frequent in the evenings.

Changing locations offers a change of scenery that can rekindle enough excitement to stick it out for the long haul. (Admittedly, when it's really slow I'll sometimes hunt one stand until about 10 a.m. then jump down and hustle to a second stand until 1:30 p.m.) The goal is to spend as much time in the November woods as possible. While there, I will stay focused and alert if I'm able to battle back boredom and know that I'm in the most productive areas I have to hunt.

This is accomplished by planning my days and spending my time in the woods wisely. Breaking the day up is enough to keep things fresh. **64**

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GET STOKED

TIPS FOR BUILDING THE PERFECT CAMPFIRE

By Scott Linden

A campfire brightens a hunting or fishing trip with heat and light and promotes camaraderie among all who gather in the warm circle of its inviting glow. Cooking over an open fire is a ceremony that imparts a literal taste of the outdoors. It's also a connection to our primordial past, presenting the opportunity to stare into flickering flames and wonder what our ancestors did before the invention of matches, lighters and other modern conveniences that take most of the rough out of roughing it.

Along with tying a square knot and changing a truck tire, building a fire is an essential skill. In the old days, if you couldn't start a fire, you were a cave bear's next meal. Now, there's no excuse. Here's how to build a blaze the right way.

THE SCIENCE

Heat. Oxygen. Fuel. The proportions are critical. Too much air and your fire wastes fuel. Too little, and your fire peters out in a puff of smoke. Jazz great Miles Davis said it's the space between the notes that makes music so cool. The same holds true with a campfire. Build your pile of sticks artfully, so the flames have the space to breathe.

MATERIALS

Tinder catches your first flame. You can use crumpled paper from home,

but a real man lives off the land. Gather twigs, grasses, birch bark, pine needles, leaves. If it crackles, crunches or snaps when you crush it, it's tinder. Collect three times as much as you think you'll need. You want it to go *whump* when you touch a flame to it. But don't do that yet.

Kindling consists of small pieces of wood, about the diameter of a pencil. Ever tried lighting a pencil on fire? That's why you gathered so much tinder. Splinter larger kindling into thin pieces. Their rough edges catch flames better than smooth, rounded twigs. Three big bunches are a good start because kindling has a big job.

That job is motivating hefty pieces of fuel wood to crackle into flame. Fuel wood is wrist-to-forearm-thick branches, chunks of split log and such. Get plenty so marshmallows don't languish at the end of sticks, drooping like the corners of a child's frown.

Your best source for all your fire's ingredients? Dead, dry, downed leaves, grass, twigs, branches and small logs. Seldom do you need to—or should you—pull out your shiny new chainsaw. Save the massive logs for that cabin you'll build someday. The crack of dawn comes early, and staying up with the owls to poke at the dying embers of a log the size of a railroad tie will kibosh plans to seize the morning bite.

“Mise en place” is a French culinary term for having all your ingredients prepared and staged prior to cooking. It applies to fire building, too. Set up all your stuff in neat, separate piles within easy reach.

ARCHITECTURE

Location, location, location. The theory works for real estate and fires. You don't want to burn anything besides the tinder, kindling and the fuel wood you collected (and an occasional hot dog), so use or build a fire ring or clear the ground to bare soil. One of the worst places to build a fire is under a tree—it's full of firewood. A good spot is against a boulder that has a surface that will reflect heat.

The construction of the base structure for your fire is up to you. But don't worry because you'll keep out one long, straight, stout stick to poke with, so you can always remodel later. A teepee structure resembles the protective enclosure it was named for. Ditto for the log cabin base. I like a two-wall cabin, which gives me ready access for adding tinder and kindling and allowing in plenty of air. It's stable, too, so fumble-fingered kindling reloads don't topple it.

When Mother Nature rears her ugly head, build your fire ring taller on the windward side, using earthen chinking in the openings between rocks if needed. In rain, ask friends to lean over the

TEEPEE



CABIN



TWO-WALL CABIN



fire-in-the-making or hold up a small tarp. Fashion a “roof” of fuel wood to shelter your piles of tinder and kindling. In snow, clear as much as possible, lay a thick foundation of rocks or logs, and build your fire on that.

Frame up your fire with an exoskeleton of fuel wood. The space inside is filled with that massive wad of tinder. Kindling is laid across the tinder, ideally leaning against the “walls” as vertically as possible to channel flames upward to bigger fuel. Finish by gently placing more fuel wood in the path of the kindling’s flames, and you’re ready to light.

Many fire-building mistakes result from wet or wimpy matches, a lighter that won’t work in cold temperatures or a gust of wind. Just remember: Pouring white gas on fuel wood is frowned upon by

most campfire purists; real sportsmen rub two sticks together (just kidding!). Seriously, use your first match to light a stout candle. Play its flame along the upwind side of your tinder, then offer

a caress of breaths—sustained, gentle puffs—to encourage the fire to spread. As flames rise, maintain the air-heat-fuel equilibrium by offering more kindling, then fuel wood only when your masterpiece is crackling cheerily.



PUT IT OUT

A bed of glowing embers means it’s all over but the howling at the moon, right? Nope. A responsible fire builder is also a fire killer. Don’t be that guy who stumbles to the tent while logs smolder. Water-dirt-water is the recipe for putting out your campfire. As Smokey Bear taught us, pour water onto the coals, stir with a stick, then check by touching your hand to the cold, wet ashes. If you’re unwilling to do that, your fire might come back to life while you’re dreaming of a big trout or bull elk. **W**

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PERSONAL CODE

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN SENSE OF WHAT'S RIGHT AND WRONG IN THE FIELD.
BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GRAY AREAS?

By Andrew McKean



Knowing the maximum range at which you can cleanly take an animal and abiding by it, whether on the first or last day of the season, is an exercise in wildlife stewardship.

My late dad was a Western cowboy trapped in a Midwestern farmer's body. He had worked on a cattle outfit out of Belle Fourche, S.D., as a younger man, and he longed to leave the soybeans and feeder pigs of our little Missouri farm for the big sky and the open range.

When I moved to Montana, the first thing we did together was hatch plans for him to come elk hunting. We hunted a few general seasons for public-land bulls before we reckoned cow tags had shorter odds of both drawing and filling. He drew them, all right, but had trouble with the filling part. Finally, as I noticed that mountains and even hills were getting steep for him, he drew a cow tag for the Missouri Breaks near my eastern Montana home.

I knew the country, and, even better, I knew Kelly Burke. He's a good friend who runs a big-game outfit out of a wall tent deep in the relatively gentle Breaks, and Kelly told me that Dad and I could use

his camp for the first week of the season. It appealed to the Western romantic in my father, and boosted my hopes that finally Dad would put his hands on a wild-West cow. Dad was shooting his .30/06, and told me that he was good to 300 yards. A couple of range sessions confirmed age hadn't dulled his shooting skills.

We were in elk nearly every day, but just couldn't quite connect. Our last night at camp was crisp and clear, and in our cots, we were thrilled to hear bulls bugling in the little meadow below our tent. We got up early, and being careful not to clang coffee cups or spoons, we walked out from camp and posted up on the rimrocks above the meadow a good hour before legal light. As the sun rose, we made out a couple of raghorn bulls sniffing around a herd of maybe 30 cows. Problem was, they were all of 600 yards across the basin, but as the sun peeked over the ridge, they started drifting toward us. My rangefinder confirmed 460, then 400, then 350. Dad was steady on

a leather glove laid over a rock, tight to the scope. A lone cow grazed our way, then hung up just below us.

"OK, Dad, there she is," I rasped. "Three-hundred-twenty. Broadside."

Nothing. No sharp inhalation, flinch or shot. I glanced over at Dad, stoic behind his scope. The cow worked on a clump of tumble grass, then drifted away from us, back into the herd. The moment was gone, along with Dad's final chance at his first elk. He died the next year.

"Why didn't you shoot?" I needed to know.

"I told you, my limit is 300 yards," he said as we walked back to the tent. "That's a bright line, not one that I can extend when it's convenient."

PERSONAL ETHICS

I've thought a lot about Dad's line in the years since. Most of us hunters have those action thresholds—distances or situations that flash yellow. But for most of us, they're advisory. If conditions are

just right, or maybe the animal is big enough, I'll extend my demonstrated proficiency with my bow beyond my personal boundary of 40 yards just as I'll reach beyond my comfort zone of 400 yards with my rifle, because I know my gear and my skills are up to the challenge.

But that's a problem.

Shooting at animals, especially ones we've dreamed of hunting for years and spent our lifetimes revering and even glorifying, shouldn't be a challenge. When we release an arrow or a bullet, it should be because we are absolutely certain we're delivering a quick and humane death.

Even when we have demonstrated our proficiency at shooting inanimate targets well beyond the limits we set for hunting, we can't control many of the variables that influence our shots at twitchy animals. What's the wind doing at the target? How much does your projectile drop in the final 50 yards? Is there another animal you didn't see just behind your target? And in the half-second it takes your bullet to reach its target, even a short step can turn your one-shot kill into a gut-shot rodeo.

In archery, the unknowable variables of drop and yaw compound with every yard that your broadhead loses lethality.

I've come to recognize that my father's "bright line" wasn't negotiable, just as I've come to appreciate all the sharp-focus memories of our last hunt together. My dad, as we were packing up camp, told me something else that's stayed with me. I can admit now that I scolded his decision not to shoot, but he was calmly philosophical about the matter.

"You ambush your enemies," he said. "That cow had no idea we were there or that I was hunting her. I always thought that hunting was about the relationship between predator and prey."

I've mused on the meaning behind those words in the years since. Along the way, I've come to realize that he had no intention of shooting that elk, because we weren't in her bubble of awareness. And I've thought about the implications of his statement.

If the highest form of hunting is to achieve a relationship with your prey, then you are doomed to disappointment.

Once you alert your prey that it's being pursued, everything that comes next is impossibly complicated. You can't be sure of your shot, because the animal is hyper-aware. You can't even guarantee that the animal will remain in your proficiency envelope, because it's doing everything it can to evade you. And alerting an animal of your presence and purpose unravels all the skills we've learned as hunters: to be quiet, scentless and camouflaged.

But lifting our cloak of invisibility was precisely my dad's point. A life-long whitetail hunter who whiffed on countless opportunities at elk, he was curiously calm about the outcome. It was less important for him to fill his tags than it was to have a relationship with the one species that defined hunting for him.

For a Missouri farmer who never heard the term "fair chase," my dad was practicing the pinnacle of hunting: He was giving his prey more chance to escape than he had to kill it. I realize that, in hunting as well as so many other measures of success, I'm still trying to live up to my father's expectations. 



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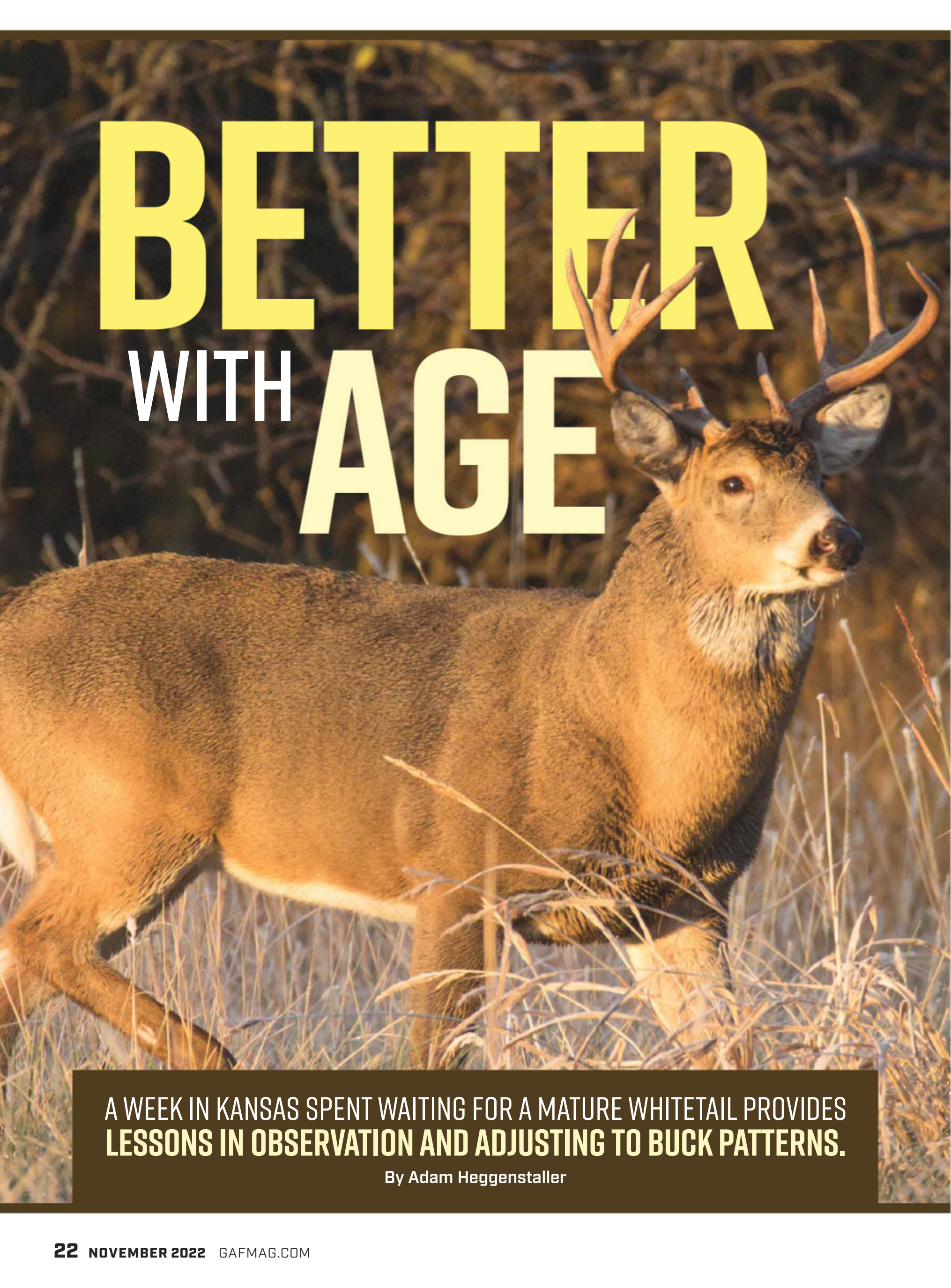
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A photograph of a mature whitetail buck with large, velvet-covered antlers. The buck is standing in a field of tall, dry grass, looking towards the right. The background is a dense thicket of trees and shrubs. The title "BETTER WITH AGE" is overlaid on the top half of the image in large, bold, yellow and white letters.

BETTER WITH AGE

A WEEK IN KANSAS SPENT WAITING FOR A MATURE WHITETAIL PROVIDES
LESSONS IN OBSERVATION AND ADJUSTING TO BUCK PATTERNS.

By Adam Heggenstaller



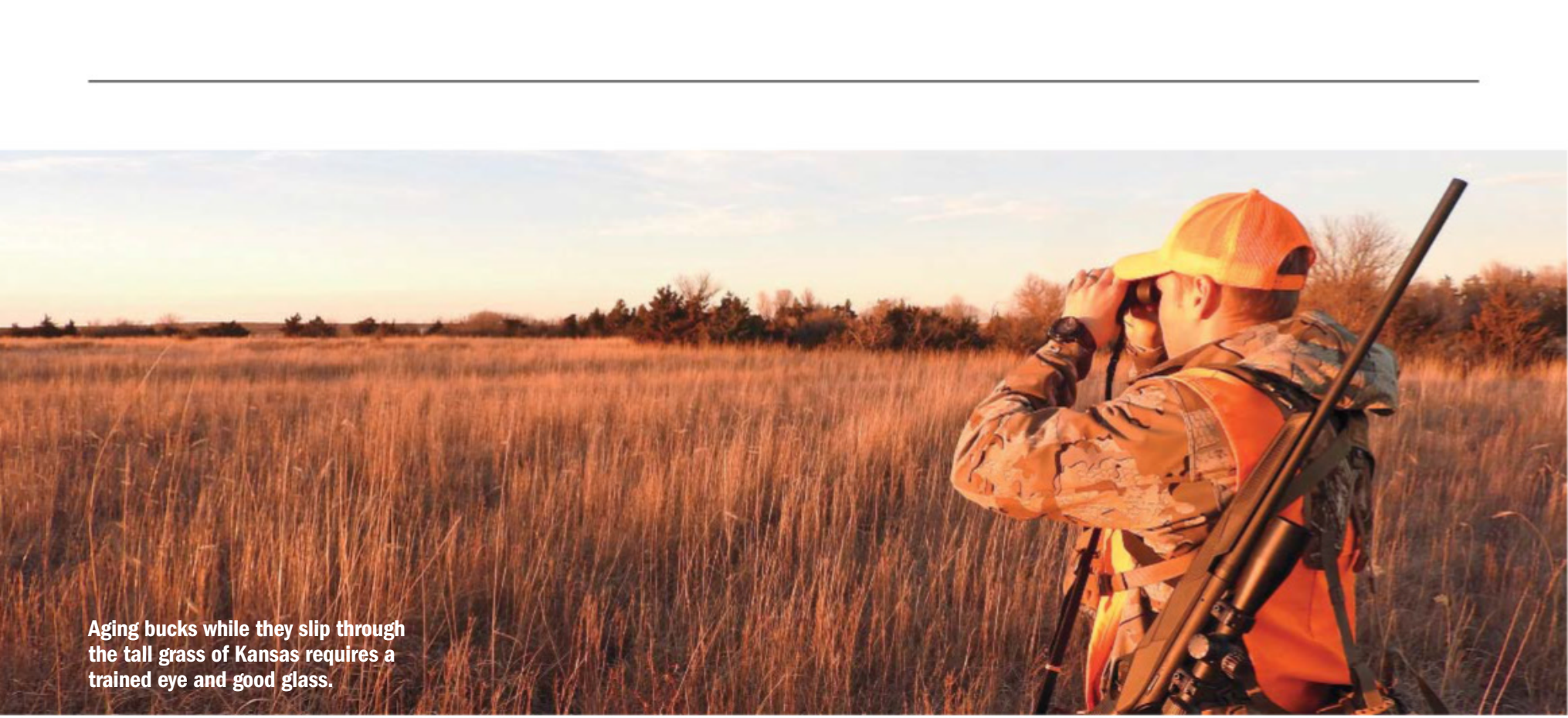
A freezer full of venison has always been a badge of honor among most deer hunters, and although lately there has been even more emphasis on hunting for meat, I still suspect every whitetail hunter at some point in life wants to kill a big buck. We may proclaim that we can't eat antlers, but our dreams aren't filled with huge hindquarters. I don't know any hunters who have ever regretted shooting a buck because it had too many points or its spread was too wide, tines too tall, rack too heavy. We'll take as big a buck as we can get, and we either apply skill and effort in an attempt to find a trophy or hope luck puts one in our shooting lanes. Either way, if we're honest, size matters. It may not be the focus of the hunt, but it matters.

The question is, what defines a big buck? The answer varies among hunters, and the assessment can be relative. It can also change depending on experience level, prior success and location. I grew up in Pennsylvania, where during my first 10 years as a hunter I considered any buck with 8 points and a spread as wide as its ears to be big. Just about every one of my friends did, too. It was a straightforward set of measurements, and bucks of that size were not common, at least not to us. Now that we're older (much older, judging by the various shades of gray under our caps) and have taken a few deer in that class, we've gone on to complicate things by considering such details as tine length, antler mass and even estimated Boone & Crockett score.

A 130-inch 8-point still gets my attention, and last fall while one fed 80 yards from the blind in which I sat, I had to convince myself that it didn't qualify as big. I was no longer in Pennsylvania, where I almost surely would have already shouldered my rifle. In southwest Kansas, hunting an area that had produced bucks above the 180-inch mark, I needed to adjust my definition. And to throw a twist into the situation, antler size wasn't the factor that decided whether I should shoot.

MATURITY LEVEL

When I had pulled into the lodge at Ross Trophy Outfitters near Bucklin the day before, another hunter was unloading a beautiful buck he had just taken that afternoon. With 10 high tines, long, thick



Aging bucks while they slip through the tall grass of Kansas requires a trained eye and good glass.

beams and a spread that looked better than 20 inches, the buck was a trophy by any standards in any state. The hunter, Austin, had been in the stand for only a short time when the buck appeared, and he didn't hesitate.

"I knew he looked big," Austin said, "and I thought he was old enough. But then after I shot, I started to second-guess myself. I didn't have much time to age him."

Turned out Austin was right; the buck was old enough to meet the minimum age requirement set by outfitter Perry Ross. Knowing that bucks can grow to gigantic proportions on the properties that he hunts, Ross wants to give them every chance to reach their full potential and pass on their genetics. To be a shooter, a buck must be at least 5 1/2 years old.

"We want to kill mature deer," Ross told me later at dinner. "Score doesn't matter, as long as the buck is mature, but most old deer are going to be big deer."

Ross cautioned me that it doesn't always work the other way, though. He had seen 3 1/2- and 4 1/2-year-old bucks that scored in the 160s and higher. I would need to consider other factors when evaluating a buck, as rack size wasn't a clear indicator of age. I wouldn't be able to rely on body size, either, as fields of corn, milo, soybeans and other grains stretched to the horizon, providing the deer with plenty of food to bulk up. These Kansas whitetails would be larger in the body than what I was used to seeing in my home state, but Ross assured

TIPPED, TESTED

Remington Core-Lokt Tipped makes an impact.

Hunting in Kansas gave me an opportunity to test Remington's new Core-Lokt Tipped ammunition, and the bullet performed well on the range and in the field. Core-Lokt Tipped loads feature a new bullet that adds a green polymer tip to the conventional Core-Lokt design. The traditional Core-Lokt is typically a pointed-soft-point bullet, and the polymer tip offers several advantages, particularly at longer ranges. For one, the Core-Lokt Tipped has a higher ballistic coefficient (BC) and experiences less drag as it travels

downrange. This reduces bullet drop and wind drift. The 150-grain Core-Lokt Tipped bullet loaded in the .30-06 rounds that I used in Kansas has a BC of .415, while the BC of a Core-Lokt pointed-soft-point of the same weight and caliber is .314. A polymer tip is also more consistent in shape than a lead tip, which aids in accuracy, and the tip helps initiate expansion as velocity slows at extended distances. The .30-06 load I tested averaged sub-MOA groups at the range, and it took only one shot to drop a big Kansas buck.



ADAM HEGGENSTALLER (2)

me there were telltale characteristics of an old buck's body shape that would make him recognizable.

"A mature buck will almost look like he doesn't have a neck," said the outfitter, who had been hunting the area for decades. "His chest is like a big wedge that runs to his head. He'll have a blocky body and his legs will look short. When you see a mature buck, you'll know it."

The next morning as I watched the 8-point through my binocular, I realized the buck didn't have any of the features that Ross had described. There was clear separation between the deer's chest and head, and though he didn't look like a sleek youngster, he wasn't stout, either. I aged him at 3 1/2 years old and sighed. Nice buck, but not a shooter here, and the call wasn't tough to make with less than 100 yards separating me from the deer. It would become more difficult as the week went on.

GLASSING GRASS

Mature bucks, even in Kansas farm country on private land where hunting pressure is light, don't just wander around in broad daylight most of the year. Early-season muzzleloader and archery hunters can catch them on a bed-to-feed pattern at dusk or vice-versa at first light, but opportunities are often limited to a window as short as 30 minutes. The rut gets big bucks moving more during the day, but most of that activity is over by the time the regular firearm season kicks off.

The old bucks were holed up and recovering from breeding when I was there during the second week of December, but my guide, Robert, was optimistic. Winter was coming, and the deer needed to feed to replace weight lost while roaming and fighting for does.

"They're lying low, but they have to eat," he said. "This late in the year most of the crops are gone so the deer are looking for leftovers. They'll find some food along the river, and it's also a travel route they use to reach the areas where they're feeding. That's why we put our stands and blinds there."

With food getting scarce and nothing growing to produce more of it, hunting near feeders or scattered bait was the strategy. But while the handout was undoubtedly attractive to the local white-tails, it was far from irresistible to mature



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River thickets provide a secure place for mature bucks to hang out, and the waterway serves as a travel route to food sources.

bucks. After sitting a full day and half of another within view of a feeder along the shallow river that ran through the area, I had seen only the 8-point and a second buck that didn't meet the age standards either, along with several does.

It was time for a change in location, reasoned Robert, and I couldn't disagree. The guide took me to a huge expanse of grassland between rolling hills and the river bottom, a much more open area that afforded views of nearly a mile in two directions. A couple hundred yards from the river—really more of a marshy slough—the ground rose slightly to form a low ridge, and near the top was thicket of wild plum 4 to 5 feet high. It was the perfect place to hide a pop-up blind. Robert helped me stake and tie it down to guard against the wind, and then he was off to do some more observation of his own.

To my left and right I could glass for more than 1,000 yards, a wide corridor deer would cross when moving from the hills southeast of the blind to the river toward the northwest. Robert said

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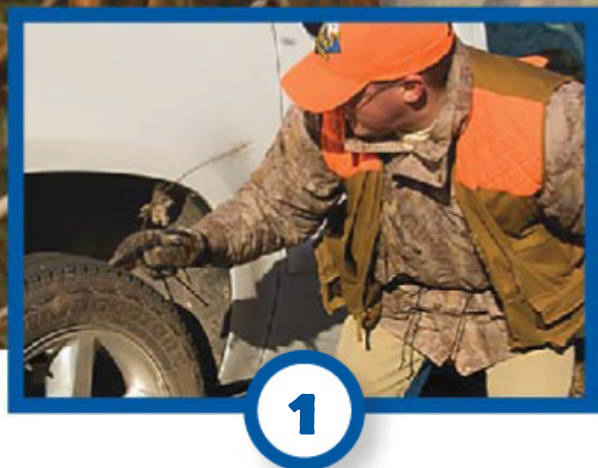
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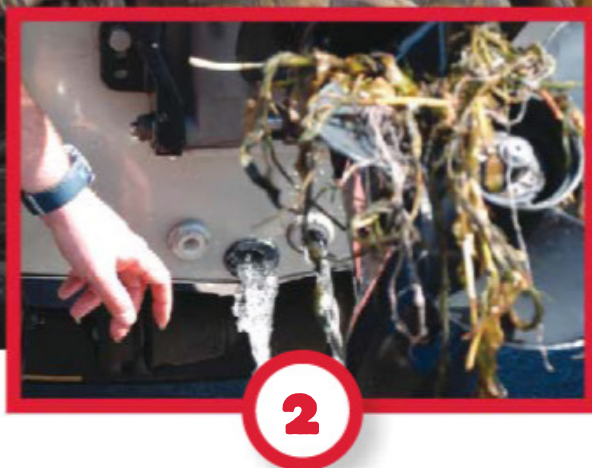
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most deer in the afternoon would come out of the hills, but he advised me to keep an eye on the river behind me as well. My head was on a swivel, but it wasn't until the last hour of light when I spotted deer.

A few does were the first to emerge from the hills some 500 yards distant. Soon another group appeared farther away and then a third group materialized from the tall grass closer to the blind. Although the land between the blind and hills looked flat from a distance, it was pocked with shallow depressions. Coupled with the grass, the terrain hid deer well.

Later I saw two bucks in the grass below the hills. One, a narrow-necked 8-point, clearly wasn't mature. The other I could not be sure about, as I caught just a glimpse of him before he disappeared into a fold about 300 yards from the blind. I realized that I would have to be alert and focused, as I'd need every available second to scrutinize a buck in these conditions.

THE RIGHT CALL

As I sat in the dark blind the next morning, now facing the river, I could hear deer moving around me. It was calm and clear, and their hooves made the occasional thud as they moved over the uneven ground. As it got light, indistinct shapes became a group of does feeding in my direction. They passed within 30 yards of the blind and made their way into the hills undisturbed.

For the first couple hours I swept hundreds of yards of thicket bordering the river with my binocular, scanning for more deer in the trees and brush growing along the banks. Occasionally I'd train the glass on the hills, and the third or fourth time that I directed my attention to them I was surprised to see a line of a dozen deer along their edge. One buck, two bucks, three bucks—and a pretty good one at that—spurred me to rotate in the blind for a better view. Either they had crossed the grassland without me seeing them, certainly

possible given the expanse of land I was trying to cover, or they had come out of the hills instead of the river.

I studied the largest buck carefully, but he was more than 500 yards away. Thick chest, yes, but thick enough? He was blockier than the other two bucks, but even with the aid of the 10X Leupold, I wasn't confident in making the call. It was a moot point anyway; the wind had picked up and I wasn't going to shoot that far. I watched him and the other deer for about a half-hour before they all disappeared into a gap between two hills. A short time later, I saw another group of deer, including a buck, cross the grassland and enter the same gap.

When Robert picked me up around noon, I had a plan to run by him. I trust guides for their knowledge of game patterns earned by constant scouting, but I couldn't ignore what I had witnessed that morning.

"Let's move the blind into the hills by that gap," I suggested after giving



The abundant grain crops of southwest Kansas provide cover and food for bucks recovering from the rut.



ADAM HEGGENSTALLER (2)

Robert the report. "They might come out this afternoon the way they went in this morning. I can't shoot to that spot from here in this wind."

With fresh intel on deer movement and a forecast that called for even more wind in the afternoon, Robert agreed. But we wouldn't move the blind; we'd keep it anchored in case the deer returned to their typical pattern and we'd set up a second one near the gap. It turned out to be quite a chore when we returned a couple hours later, fighting wind gusts that topped 20 mph. When Robert volunteered to sit in the blind with me to hold it in place, I welcomed the help and the second set of eyes. We spotted a few distant does coming out of the hills that afternoon, but with the wind constantly whipping the blind and the deer seeming to hunker down out of the gusts, it was a disappointing sit. I hoped I hadn't made the wrong call.

The gusts subsided overnight to a steady 10 mph and the temperature

Deer move from distant hills to the river and back again, giving hunters a chance to intercept them in the open.



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The author's Kansas buck has antler mass that only comes with age. Outfitter Perry Ross estimated the buck to be at least 7 1/2 years old.

dropped, giving us hope the following morning that we'd see more deer. Robert and I bundled up and settled into the blind, and just as dawn was starting the break my guide had deer in his bino. It was a group of does, feeding a couple hundred yards from the blind, and a good start. With more light came more does, one and two at a time, and then a pair of young bucks. All were traveling from the river to the hills, but none of them entered the gap where we were positioned.

Everything but the wind died down after the first hour of light, and our faces and fingers were starting to become numb from glassing into the stiff breeze. I remained hopeful, remembering it was close to 9 o'clock when I had seen the deer near the gap the morning before. We had about an hour to go till that time when a horrendous screeching noise pierced the wind, emanating from a farm on the other side of the river. It sounded like a belt on a piece of equipment was loose, and it started a near stampede of deer from the thicket along the riverbank.

Several groups of does and a few bucks headed for the hills to escape the racket. The noise was grating but it sure

got the deer moving, although none of the bucks were shooters. Robert and I were watching a 10-point emerge from the river with a doe. There was another deer behind them in the brush, Robert reported, but he couldn't tell what it was.

"OK, get your gun," he said a couple seconds later. "That's a big old buck."

I put the rifle on the shooting sticks and poked its muzzle out the blind window before returning to my bino. The deer were more than 600 yards away, and I wanted to get a good look at what my guide had declared to be a mature Kansas whitetail.

The first thing that stood out, even at that distance, was the buck's mass. He looked twice as heavy as the 10-point.

"Look at those bases," Robert said. "He's built like a bull. Definitely a shooter."

The doe started across the grassland, but the two bucks didn't seem to want to leave the security of the river. They stalled a short distance from the brush, but as the screeching from the farm continued and the doe began to pick up the pace, the bucks broke into a trot.

"Get ready," said Robert. "They're coming."

I was on the gun and watching the big buck through the scope. His antlers grew more massive the closer he came. The bucks were heading directly toward the blind but had gained speed in their flight.

"They're going to run right in front of us," Robert hissed. "When they start to pass, I'll try to stop them. Shoot whenever you have a good chance."

The bucks were no more than 60 yards away when Robert gave them a quick "hey." The older of the two paused for a couple seconds, and the crosshairs of my scope found his shoulder quickly. My bullet hit him solidly, and he dropped in the grass.

Neither of us could take our eyes from the mass of the buck's rack. When I knelt beside him to raise his head for a better look, my hands wouldn't fit around the antler bases. The mass continued along the main beam and up the tines, one of which, the right G2, was snapped a couple inches from the beam. He was an impressive, mature buck, the kind that I had traveled to Kansas to hunt. I didn't know what the buck would score, and it didn't matter. I only knew that he was big—and old—enough. 



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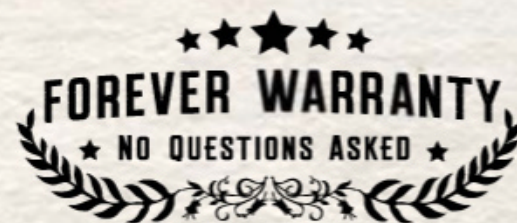
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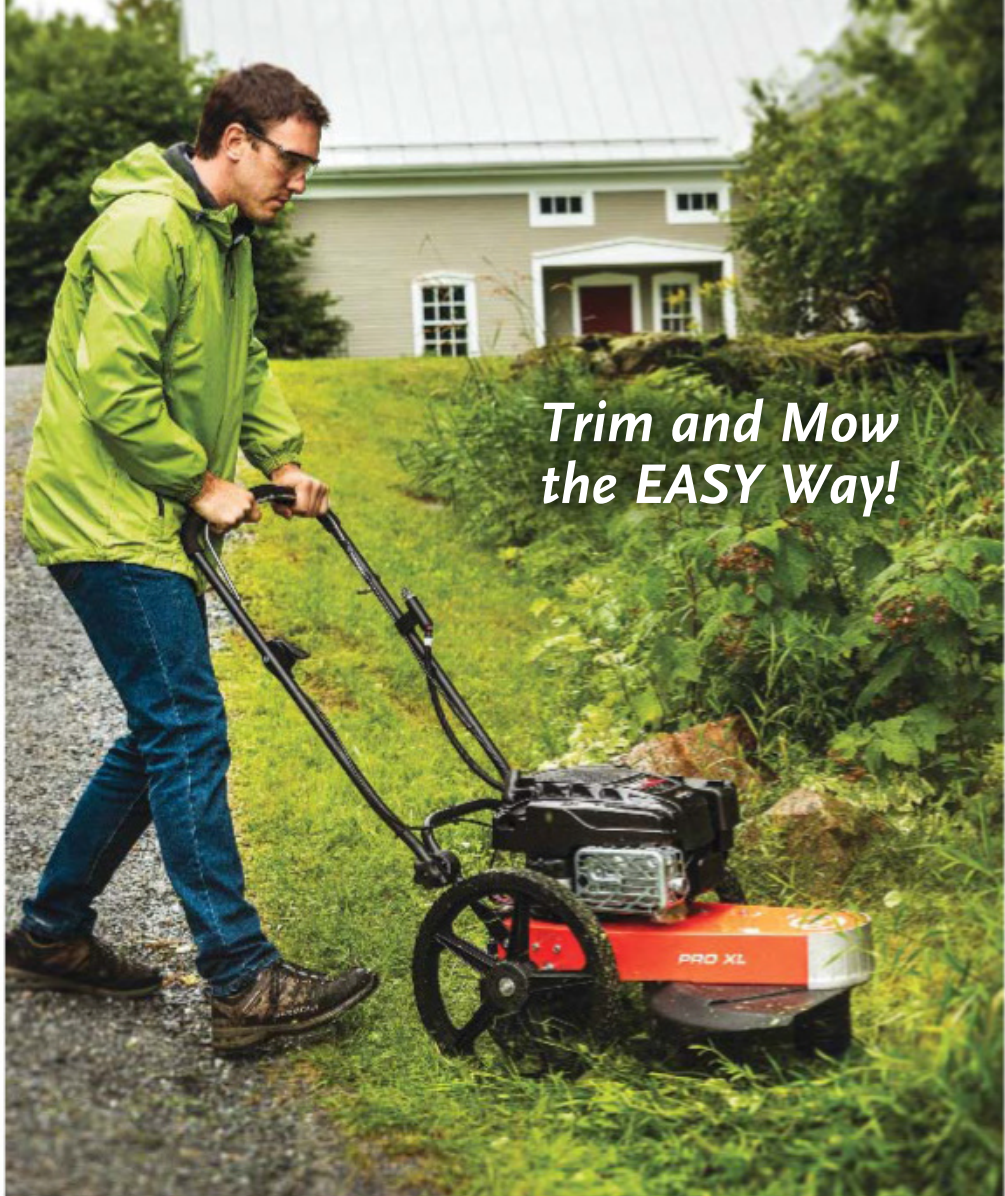
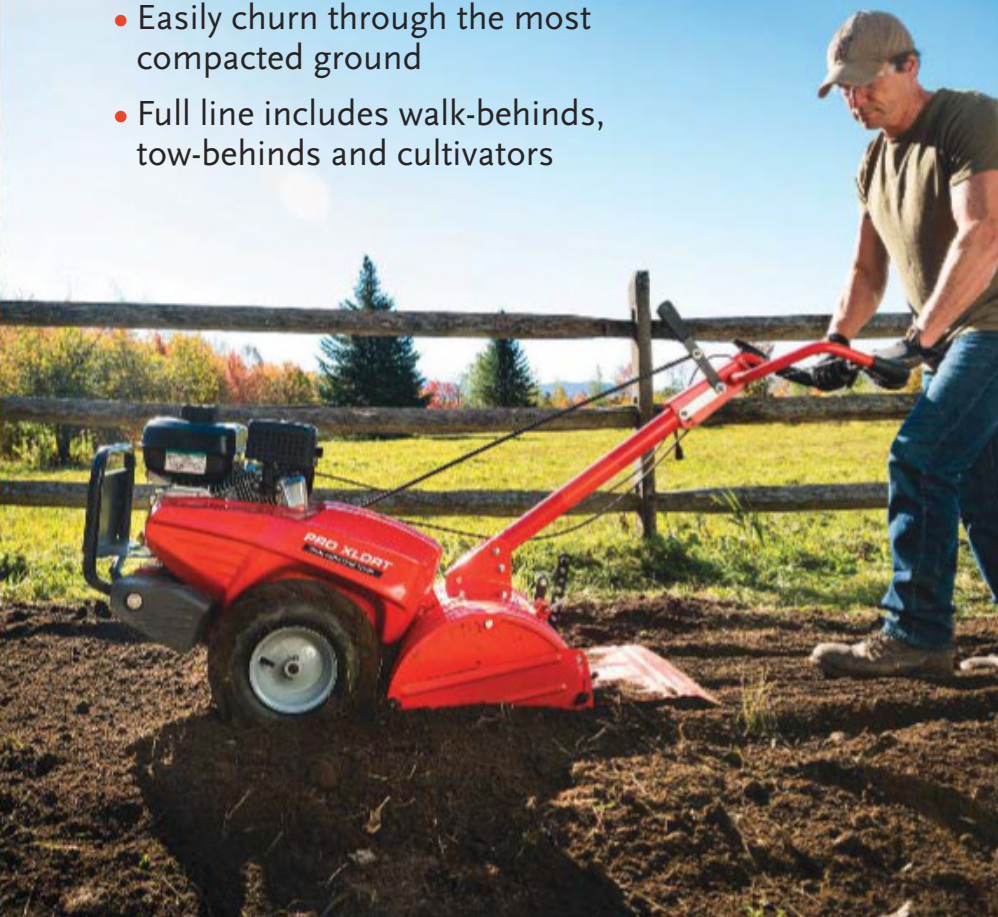
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AROUND THE MIDWEST

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

By Brandon Butler

November is the month in which we set aside a special day of giving thanks, and hunters sure have plenty to be thankful for right now. Firearms seasons are open for deer in most states, while turkey, upland bird, waterfowl, predator and small-game seasons are all overlapping, too. And the fishing isn't half-bad either. While ice starts forming up north, open-water anglers to the south are busy filling freezers with crappie and walleye fillets. In short, appreciate all the incredible outdoor opportunities you have right now—winter will be here before you know it.





SODAK TURKEYS

Turkeys don't see much pressure from hunters in South Dakota during the fall season. In fact, fall turkey hunter numbers are declining across much of the country. But South Dakota is home to two sub-species of wild turkey—Easterns and Merriam's—making it an ideal state for adding a species to a slam. Fall turkey permit application deadlines were Sept. 9, Sept. 26 and Oct. 12, but any licenses left after the third drawing will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. The season opens Nov. 1 and runs through the end of January. The Black Hills offer vast expanses of public lands teeming with wild birds.



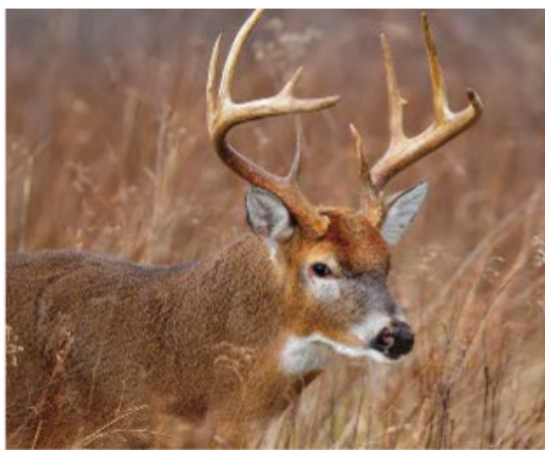
OHIO STEELHEAD

Action in Steelhead Alley, a 200-mile stretch along Lake Erie from Sandusky, Ohio, to Buffalo, N.Y., kicks off in November, with anglers flocking to rivers and streams where the chrome rockets spawn. Cooler weather and rain trigger the fish's return from Lake Erie. Ohio steelhead average 25 inches and weigh approximately 5 to 6 pounds, but fish over 30 inches and 10 pounds are not uncommon. The Vermilion, Rocky, Chagrin and Grand rivers and Conneaut Creek are stocked with steelhead each year and are top destinations for catching these hard-fighting anadromous salmonids.



SHOW-ME DEER

When your neighbors are Kansas, Iowa and Illinois, it's easy to be overlooked by deer hunters, but make no mistake: Missouri is a top deer-hunting destination. It ranks seventh in Boone and Crockett entries and is also a top-10 state in Pope and Young entries. The state has more than 1 million acres of public land available as Conservation Areas, and deer tags are sold over the counter. Giant bucks are killed here each year, many of them in the giant expanses of forest found in the Ozarks. For a rifle hunt in a wooded wilderness, explore the 40,000-plus-acre Sunklands Conservation Area.



EL DORADO WALLEYE

El Dorado Reservoir in Kansas is known for monster walleyes, and November is a prime time to hook into one as they feed aggressively ahead of winter. This centrally-located reservoir near Wichita is no secret to anglers, but with 8,000 surface acres there is ample water to explore. The Department of Wildlife and Parks reports a density of 2.33 walleyes over 15 inches long per acre, with the largest recent fish surveyed weighing 7.95 pounds. Hundreds of thousands of walleyes have been stocked in El Dorado in the past two years. Walleyes must be 21 inches to keep, and there's a two-fish daily limit.



LAKE GENEVA CRAPPIES

Don't let the mansions surrounding Wisconsin's Lake Geneva fool you—it's definitely a fishing hot spot. The 5,400-acre lake offers a mixed bag of fish, but quality crappies are highly sought after now, with slabs measuring 14 inches or more showing up regularly. By November, crappies have moved back out of the shallows and are associating with brush and structure. Jigs tipped with minnows fished vertically produce. Look for crappies in 15 to 20 feet of water. There is no minimum length limit, and the daily bag limit is 25.



MICHIGAN PHEASANTS

It may not be the Dakotas, but don't overlook the Wolverine State for wild pheasant hunting. Numerous state properties are managed for ringnecks, and the Hunter Access Program (HAP) opens private land to the public. To hunt HAP lands or any public land in the Lower Peninsula, a new \$25 pheasant license is required for all pheasant hunters 18 years of age and older. Michigan has three pheasant zones, but Zones 2 and 3 (the Lower Peninsula) are the only ones open in November (Oct. 20 to Nov. 14).



MAKE YOUR OWN MOTION

USE A DIY JERK CORD
TO ADD SOME ACTION TO
STALE DECOY SPREADS.

By M.D. Johnson



On calm days, floaters rarely produce enough motion. Place jerk-cord decoys where they add the most movement to the spread.

If you've hunted ducks for any significant amount of time, you've no doubt encountered this scenario. You have set out 2- to 3-dozen mallard decoys on a perfect little out-of-the-way pothole, but there's not a whisper of wind. Your setup—arduously scouted and carefully crafted—unfortunately looks exactly like

what it is: 30 plastic ducks sitting on the surface of a mirror.

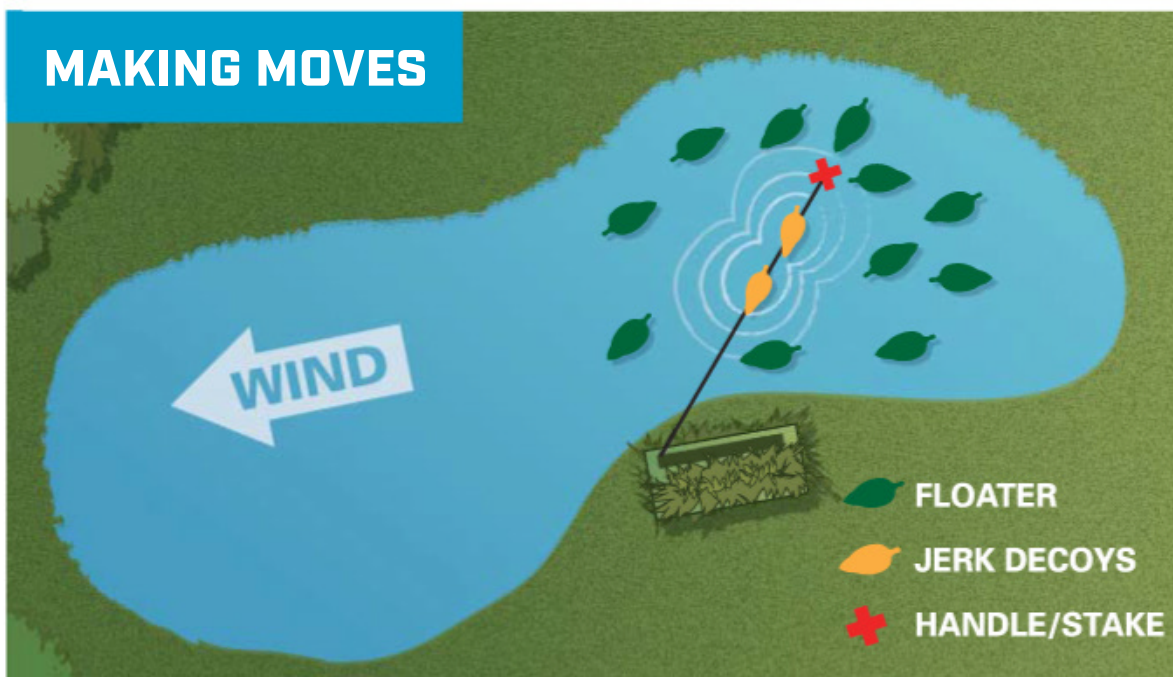
The quickest fix for these frozen-in-time decoy spreads is the addition of a jerk cord, which is little more than a length of stout cord anchored in the spread and stretching back to the blind, with a few lightweight decoys attached to it. With a yank on the cord, the decoys

bounce, creating ripples and waves and the illusion of on-the-water motion made by living, breathing ducks.

Commercially crafted jerk cords are, of course, available. But it's also easy and inexpensive to create your own—and quite satisfying when the stars align and you fool birds with your handiwork. Here's the DIY approach to get it done.

LEE THOMAS KJOS/THE RAW SPIRIT

MAKING MOVES



MATERIALS LIST

- Old broom handle or 1-inch-by-1-inch pole of 2 to 6 feet (depending on your typical water depth).
- Circle-eye screw (1/4 inch by 3 inches)
- Small stainless carabiner clip (1 1/2 inches)
- Two large snap swivels
- 18 to 24 inches of 1/4-inch bungee or shock cord
- 100 feet of 550 paracord in brown, green or black
- Cordless drill with 1/8-inch bit

NOTE: The majority of my non-tidal waterfowling takes place on water less than 24 inches deep, so my DIY cord handles are often 48 inches long. It's simple, however, to adjust the length/height of the handle to your own hunting situations.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1) Drill a 1/8-inch pilot hole in one end of the broom handle or pole and insert the circle-eye screw.
- 2) Using the improved clinch knot, attach one end of the bungee to the screw eye. Make a small loop in the opposite end of the bungee. A single overhand knot works well here. Attach the carabiner to the loop.
- 3) Again, using the improved clinch knot, tie one end of the paracord to the carabiner. At 16 inches and 20 inches from the carabiner, attach the large snap swivels to the paracord with simple loop-style ties (see illustration).

USING IT

Once on the water, I decide where to set my spread, then build it around the jerk cord, which is positioned first. I do make a point of placing my jerk cord decoys close enough to some of my anchored decoys so the jerk rig imparts motion via ripples and waves to as much of the spread as possible. Don't worry about creating too much motion. As long as the motion is natural or realistic, it's virtually impossible to have too much of it.

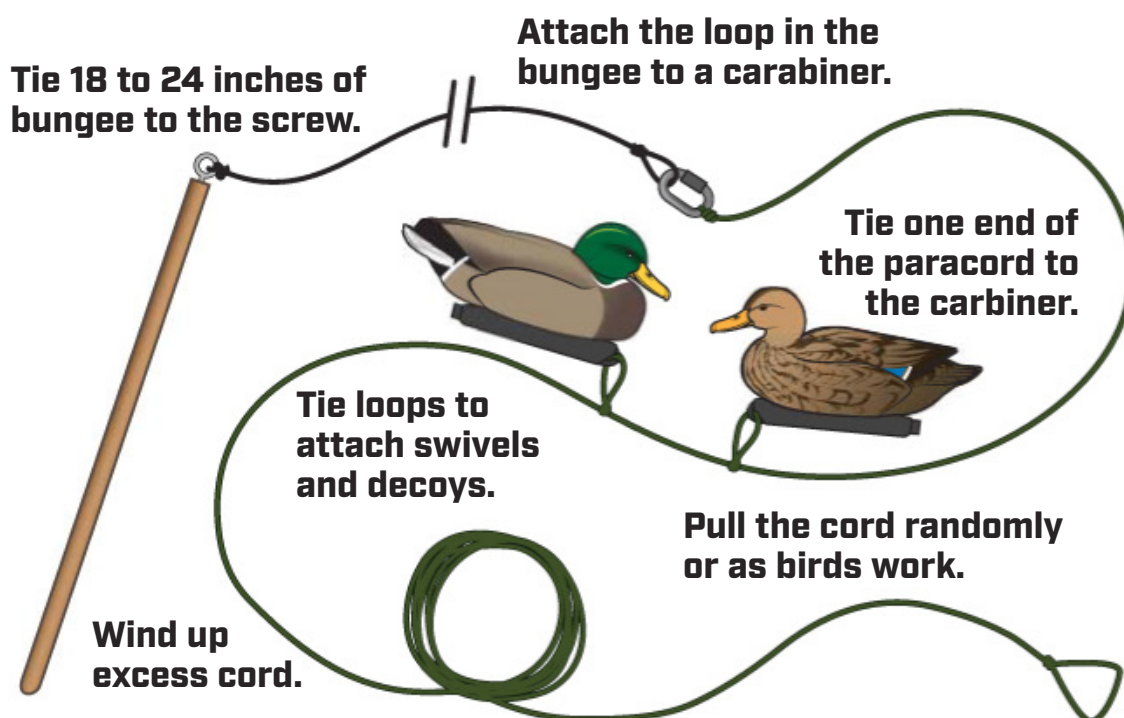
To begin, I push the broom handle or pole into the bottom with the screw eye as close to the surface as possible. If the water I'm hunting is shallower than my stake is long, I'll angle the pole into the water.

Next, I clip the carabiner to the loop on the bungee, then clip an ultra-light-weight water keel green-winged teal decoy to each of the large snap swivels. Finally, I pay out enough 550 paracord to comfortably reach the blind location, toss out my floaters and settle in for the hunt.

When do I put the jerk cord into action? Occasionally, I'll operate the rig randomly—that is, when I'm not actually working birds that I can see. Flying ducks can see the ripples a jerk rig generates at a great distance. It attracts them much in the same way that waves made when a hunter's mucking around in the spread do. More often, though, I'll run the cord in conjunction with a call when a bird or birds are actively working the spread. However, I'm also very careful to conceal the movement I make when I'm operating the jerk cord.

ANCHOR OPTION

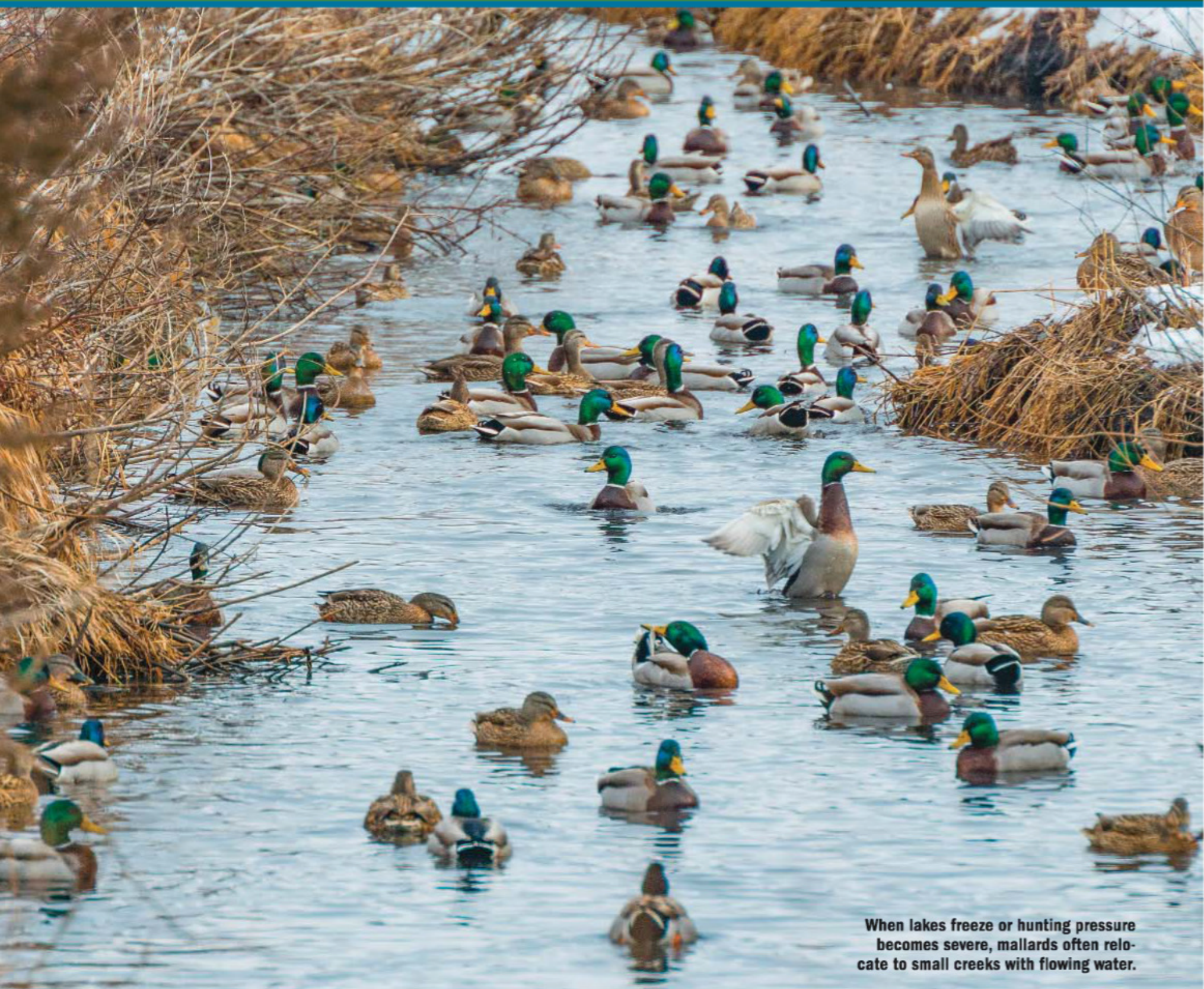
An alternative to the broom handle—one that doesn't limit the water depth hunted to the length of the handle—is to use a 1- or 1 1/2-pound folding grapnel anchor like you might use with a canoe or kayak. The step-by-step instructions remain otherwise the same. A short section of bungee/shock cord is tied to the anchor, followed by the carabiner and 550 cord to the blind. If you want to get fancy, a paracord winder (\$3 to \$5; paracordplanet.com), along with a small drawstring mesh bag, make quick work of deploying, retrieving and stowing the jerk rig. 



SMALL-SCALE MALLARDS

WHEN HUNTING PRESSURE MOUNTS ON BIG WATER, SET UP AT SMALL, OUT-OF-THE-WAY CREEKS AND HOLES TO TEMPT WARY GREENHEADS.

By Brian Lovett



When lakes freeze or hunting pressure becomes severe, mallards often relocate to small creeks with flowing water.

Autumn's peak mallard migration might be one of the few natural events that prompts equal amounts of awe and despair.

The awe component is obvious. Watching thousands of full-plumage greenheads circle in tornado fashion above a stubble field or lift off en masse from a refuge can take your breath away. However, despair creeps in when you realize you can't always set a layout blind under that tornado or hunt anywhere near that duck-choked refuge. In fact, although ducks seem to be everywhere, hunting can be tough.

Don't let the big picture bum you out. Although migrating mallards concentrate in huge numbers at refuges, roosts and hot feeds, they also assemble in smaller flocks at small, remote waters that offer food and security. Even better, those tiny honey holes can produce exceptional hunting if you approach them correctly.

CREEKS AND STREAMS

Better known for producing wood ducks, small creeks, streams and rivers can offer surprisingly good mallard hunting. Mallards use moving water frequently, especially if a creek or stream connects to a marsh or lake that receives substantial hunting pressure. Further, many streams feature acorn-laden flats, duckweed-choked backwaters and substantial overhead cover, making them ideal loafing and feeding spots for wary, pressured ducks.

The toughest part of hunting moving water is deciding how to approach it. In some situations, jump-shooting might



Narrow streams may require jump-shooting tactics, but those with large flats or backwaters are perfect for decoying mallards.

be the best option. In others, decoying birds works better. The choice depends on how mallards are using the area.

For example, if ducks are packed tightly in narrow, winding stretches of river where decoy hunting might be impractical, it's usually better to jump-shoot them. But if ducks congregate or pass over larger flats or backwaters, decoy hunting can produce good results. Remember that jump-shooting a creek might provide one great day of action but blow ducks out of the area for a while, whereas decoy hunting might limit your impact somewhat and allow subsequent hunts.

Stealth is critical when jump-shooting. Streams with relatively hard, stable bottoms allow you to wade, reducing your profile. On deep or muck-laden creeks, a small watercraft such as a skiff or canoe

offers a silent approach. Either way, be as quiet as possible when approaching likely areas, using streamside cover and bends in the creek course to hide your movements until you're almost within range of birds. Be ready to shoot the instant you see ducks, as they will flush almost immediately. Further, ensure you quickly mark and retrieve downed ducks.

When decoy hunting, strive for a natural, low-impact approach. Set out a handful of decoys—eight to 12 is often sufficient—in a realistic spread, with a few ducks tucked near shore and some in the open for visibility. Find good concealment, too, because streams and creeks often produce close-quarters action. Tuck into streamside brush, trees or cattails, keeping the sun at your back, and sit on a stool or marsh seat to eliminate your profile. Shoot ducks as efficiently as possible, then retrieve them and leave quickly to minimize your impact. Spooking fewer birds might result in good second or third hunts at that spot.

SMALL HARBORS AND MARSHES

As mentioned, migrating mallards love big water for roosting and loafing. They can see potential danger for long distances, and hunters rarely bother them in such situations. When the wind blows, however, mallards and other ducks often abandon the crashing, rolling waves on open water and tuck into leeward cover in or near small marshes, backwaters or harbors. Identifying those spots and taking advantage of ideal situations can produce great hunting.



In extreme winds, mallards often leave larger, turbulent roosting and loafing waters behind for nearby marshes that offer protection.

Lots of windshield time and observation is needed to find such locations. After all, mallards might only use open water at night for roosting or between feeding flights when they loaf at midday. If possible, glass from good vantage points to find groups of ducks on big water or watch for flocks flying to and from fields or smaller waters to feed at dawn and dusk. Then, note how birds use the area during various conditions and predict how they might react when the winds change. Timing is critical, as it won't pay to hunt small spots off big water unless conditions are ideal. Without the right wind, birds can simply land shy of your decoys and swim off.

Several years ago, I noticed a good-sized group of mallards congregated near a secluded harbor on a large lake. Most days, I could only watch the ducks, as they were too far from shore to hunt and would've spooked and left had we tried to set up near them in open water. However, I guessed that the birds would likely seek shelter in the harbor or along the shoreline when a northeast wind blew.

When the conditions seemed right, I set up along the shoreline near the harbor and waited. Sure enough, as wind began whipping the lake into a froth, mallards poured in from open water. An hour later, I was on my way home, giddy at having experienced a great shoreline hunt. Such situations might only manifest once per season, but you should always be ready when they do.

SPRINGS AND ICE HOLES

In many areas of the Midwest, late-season duck hunting means ice. Many folks assume that a deep freeze forces ducks south, and they're largely correct. However, mallards are among the heartiest fowl, and they often stay in Northern climes even when ice and snow cover much of the landscape. Frigid conditions typically congregate birds in the last remaining areas of open water, including springs and spring-fed creeks. When you find ducks crammed into those tiny spots, you can really cash in with exceptional action.

As with hunting creeks, how you approach freeze-up hunts on streams and springs is critical. And, like hunting small spots near big water, timing can be tricky. First, long before freeze-up, identify areas that might remain open and

GO-TO GEAR

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You don't often need a ton of gear to successfully hunt small pockets of water, especially if you're jump-shooting birds in areas where decoy setups are impossible. However, here are a few items that can help on any November duck hunt.

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One of the most comfortable waders I've tested in recent memory, LaCrosse's Alpha Agility Select Waders (\$590; lacrossefootwear.com) pair lightweight boots with a breathable, abrasion-resistant, 100-percent waterproof nylon upper. The boots feature 1,600 grams of Thinsulate Ultra Insulation, and the upper has a zip-out quilted liner that you can add or remove as weather dictates. A built-in waterproof pocket with electrostatic technology allows you to check and use your phone without taking it out of the sleeve. There's also a model with a front zip (\$690).

HEVI-SHOT HEVI-XII

By now, most hunters know the benefits of tungsten and other heavier-than-steel non-toxic loads. New HEVI-XII (\$84/25-round box; hevi-shot.com) is one example, offering tungsten shot that's almost 54 percent denser than steel for roughly double the downrange energy. By dropping down in shot size without losing any lethality, you get around 28 percent more pellets on target. I saw the power of HEVI-XII firsthand on hunts in Louisiana and Kansas, with several long shots dropping birds dead.

TETRA HEARING ALPHASHIELD

I've used these for three seasons now, and they've become the first thing I pack in my blind bag before a hunt. The TETRA Hearing AlphaShield devices (\$1,099; tetrahearing.com) isolate and enhance key waterfowl hunting sounds like mallard quacks, whistling wings overhead and calling. Meanwhile, they protect your hearing from gunshots by shutting down and instantly recovering after loud noises; more sustained sounds, like loud calling, are reduced to hearing-safe levels. Your hearing is important, and the AlphaShields offer protection without disrupting other key sounds.

ONX HUNT

The onX Hunt app (\$30/year for Premium/one state; \$100/year for Elite/50 states and Canada; onxmaps.com) is an incredibly powerful tool. It clearly depicts public- and private-land boundaries and includes ownership info for private parcels, which comes in handy when seeking hunting permission on out-of-the-way honey holes. With topographic and 3D maps, hundreds of custom map layers and the ability to save maps for offline use, there's virtually no limit to the app's functionality. You can also track your route and set waypoints, among many other features. —Drew Warden



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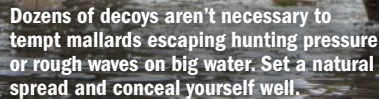
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Ideally, you want to hit them the day after most waters freeze, which forces mallards to relocate. I carefully watch the weather forecast for low temperatures and wind conditions that will likely freeze most lakes and marshes. When I see lows dip to the mid-teens with calm



Choose your approach—decoys or jump-shooting—as you would for hunting a creek. If an area is large enough, go with decoys. In tight, twisting quarters, jump-shooting might work better. In either case, be ready to take full advantage of the first few opportunities. Even freeze-up mallards won't stick around long after being pressured.

When big numbers of mallards hit your area this autumn, don't be afraid to go small. Maybe you won't land 100 green-heads in your decoys, but, really, you don't need that many. Maximize your opportunities on small-scale hot spots and you can pull plenty of ducks within range. I guarantee no one will care whether that full strap came from a 500-acre cornfield or a tiny feeder creek.

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GO LIVE

WHEN WATER TEMPERATURES TUMBLE IN LATE FALL, SWAP ARTIFICIALS FOR LIVE BAIT AND PREPARE FOR SOME OF THE BEST ACTION OF THE YEAR.

By Mike Pehanich

For the cold-blooded creatures living below the water line, quiet rules during the latter weeks of autumn. Winter is around the corner and lakes will soon don their hard hats. The same fish that crashed your crankbaits all summer transition to a slower tempo as the world around them slows to a crawl or yields to decay. Many anglers lament the season's end. They start performing their solemn rituals of winterizing boats and storing tackle.

However, for a hardy few, the game is far from over. These anglers bundle up in late-season layers in preparation for whatever Mother Nature might throw at them. They want just a few more chances at a final flurry of action and a legitimate shot at a trophy.

For many, this time of year means a time to simplify, streamline and—ultimately—dip back into the bait bucket. Indeed, this late-fall period is one of the finest times to reintroduce live bait into your angling playbook.

LATE-SEASON TRANSITION

Late fall is a time of clearing in our lakes and streams. Vegetation dies and decays, water clarity is at its best and fish can be anywhere.

Steve Everetts, who guides on southern Wisconsin waters through his Finseekers Guide Service (finseekers.com) says fish are comfortable shallow or deep after a lake turns over and re-oxygenates. However, he focuses deep in fall, usually on the deep edge of vegetation outside the decaying weeds. There is less cover here



Targeting steep drop-offs with live bait lowered straight down from the boat can be a surefire recipe for hot walleye action.

and cleaner water, and he feels sunlight, changing water temperatures and other factors affect these fish less, making it a high-percentage spot.

In general, locations that are deep and have a hard or rocky bottom attract a variety of predators. Cory Schmidt, who guided on Minnesota's fabled Brainerd-area waters before becoming a popular fishing journalist, suggests sharp drop-offs where the depth plummets from 10 feet down to 30 or even 40 feet are often good. These steep slopes regularly at-

tract walleyes and pike, and he says that once you find fish here, you want to sit over the top of them—if possible—and work them vertically.

Everetts, likewise, consistently works deep rock and transition areas for smallmouths. However, his prime locations are those where the bottom content shifts from sand to rock. In some systems, he commonly finds this in 15-foot depths; in others 22 to 30 feet seems to be the magic window. Schmidt's ideal depth range tends toward the deeper end of

Everetts', with his best luck—for both smallmouths and largemouths—in 26 to 30 feet of water. He adds that hard-bottom areas and points and humps rich with invertebrates and baitfish yield the best results, as well as some of the biggest bass of the year.

FORAGE FOCUS

Northern pike and smallmouth bass are Everetts' primary targets in the late season, and redbait or blacktail chubs are his go-to baits when he can get them. Due to their limited availability, however, he usually opts for suckers in the 4- to 6-inch range. Everetts says bigger suckers closer to the 9-inch mark may yield a big fish, but that comes at the expense of more bites from smaller fish. He'll also employ golden shiners when other baits are in short supply.

When possible, Schmidt prefers "going wild." He suggests wild-caught baitfish are 100 times better than bait shop minnows unless you get bait from the shop just as it arrives.

"Wild bait knows what to do when a predator approaches," he says. "The tail kick that makes a live minnow so good slowly fades away the longer those fish bang around in bait tanks. A predator is wired to attack when it senses that frantic desperation. Wild bait that you catch yourself is the best."

Schmidt prefers 4- to 6-inch redbait chubs and creek chubs, but finds redbait in dwindling supply due to stream siltation and overharvest. An overlooked and undervalued bait is the central stoneroller, which he says is one of the best big-fish baits out there. He adds that some anglers make the mistake of tossing them out when they accidentally get into the bait mix.

In states where it's permissible, using game species commonly on the predator menu can also be rewarding. Schmidt says live bluegills are exceptional baits for big bass, too, because they kick like crazy and bass go nuts over their frenzied action. He adds that this practice is banned in his home state of Minnesota, so anglers should check their own state's regulations, too.

Yellow perch are another great example, ranking equally high among Schmidt's baitfish preferences. However, their usage comes with the same legal caveat. He says perch are the single

most important forage for walleyes, and even pike and musky prefer perch over all else. When perch populations crash, so do those of the predators.

Like Schmidt, Everetts prefers using freshly-caught bait—especially wild perch nabbed from the waters he’s fishing.

“When you can fish them legally, perch will outfish store-bought live bait substantially,” he says. “In fact, almost anybody seriously fishing [Wisconsin’s] Geneva Lake in October or November for smallmouth is using perch. And they are catching pike, too.”

TACKLE TIPS

To make the most of autumn bite opportunities, arm yourself with tackle tailored to the task. You’ll want a combination of rod, reel and line that offers a little bit of give and feel to allow fish to take baits, but enough firmness to set hooks at depth.

Rods

Everetts builds his rod/reel/line combinations around long 7 1/2- to 8-foot rods with firm butt sections and moderate actions. (Schmidt favors a parabolic 8 1/2-foot “steelhead” spinning rod.) A soft

tip allows fish to take the bait against minimal resistance and cushions against strong runs from big fish.

“The last third of the rod is soft so I can reel down on the fish before I set the hook,” Everetts says. “That’s crucial. I reel until I hear the drag click, then set the hook.”

Reels

This time of year, Everetts uses both baitcast/trolling reels and spinning reels when fishing live bait. One key feature is a must, though.

“You definitely want a clicker system when using live bait,” Everetts says. “I’m extremely picky about that. It helps eliminate the practice of loosening the drag for the bite and tightening it down again before you set the hook.”

Clicker trolling reels (size 20) with a line counter are helpful when fish get finicky and depth and line length are critical. Everetts likes the Daiwa Lexa trolling reel for its small footprint and clicker. He also likes the Okuma Cold Water for its “soft clicker that’s ideal for live bait,” he says. He insists upon a “bait runner” click feature on his spinning reels, too.

Lines and Leaders

Everetts prefers light fluorocarbon leaders in front of braided line or a straight 14-pound monofilament for most of his live-bait presentations. For pike, he likes 20-pound leaders; for smallmouth bass, a 12-pound leader works. He keeps his leader choices on the high side, particularly when expecting a lake bottom sharp with zebra mussel shells. Schmidt takes a lighter approach, using 8- to 10-pound monofilament main line and a 6- to 8-pound mono leader.

RIGGING UP

Having multiple rigs on hand makes it easier to adapt to varying conditions. Each of the rigs listed below have a time and a place for their use in late fall.

Stealth Rig

Simple rigs pair nicely with natural baits. Cory Schmidt’s “stealth” setup begins with a 2/0 or 1/0 Gamakatsu Octopus hook secured with a snell knot, which he says presents a bait more naturally. A compact green pumpkin tungsten bullet weight and bead precede a small black ball-bearing swivel attached to a 6- to 8-pound monofilament leader and the hook. He keeps his leader short to maintain close contact with his bait.

Quick Tip: Schmidt suggests hooking your bait through the mouth and out the nostril to keep it alive and active.

Split-Shot Rig

An even simpler form of the stealth rig is a leaderless rig that features a split shot 1 to 3 feet above an octopus, Kahle or circle hook. Everetts uses a single weight when possible to reduce the risk of the rig hanging up in rocks. Like Schmidt, he favors octopus hooks from 1 to 2/0. He varies shot size according to the wind and the depth he is fishing. He says you usually want to maintain bottom contact even when you are long-lining, so the weight adjustment is key.

Quick Tip: Everetts says to position an adjustable tubular Lindy Snell float above the hook when fish favor an above-bottom presentation.

Float Rig

When fish are working higher in the water column, or bottom hazards favor an off-bottom presentation, floats (aka “bobbers”) that can handle big baits assist



Float rigs are good for fishing live baits in fall. Use a large float, like Thill’s Big Fish Slider, to support equally large baits. A 4- to 6-inch sucker often works well for pike.

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greatly in bait presentation. Tapered floats offering little resistance provide a distinct advantage. Everetts prefers the Thill Big Fish Slider (4-, 5- and 6-inch sizes), a slip float from Thill's Gold Medal line. He runs an egg sinker ranging from 1/4 to 3/4 ounce beneath his float and ahead of a 3- to 5-foot fluorocarbon leader to keep his bait at the desired depth.

'Gill Rig

On waters where fishing live bluegills is legal, Schmidt hooks one tine of a small treble hook (No. 4 or No. 2) through the bluegill's nose. He says it's basically employing the quick-strike concept. You set the hook just as you would if you were fishing a jig.

FEED 'EM RIGHT

Late-season predators can be a picky lot. Walleyes, largemouths, smallmouths and even northern pike and muskellunge can get very finicky about their food and how it's presented. However, if you give them a prime meal on a well-conceived rig, you just might boat a personal best before ice-up. 



Bass anglers should focus on points and humps that host invertebrates and baitfish now. While the ideal depth differs from lake to lake, 22 to 30 feet is a good place to start.

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THE RUT PERIOD IN THE MIDWEST CAN BE BOTH MADDENING AND FULL OF POTENTIAL.
**FOLLOW THESE TIPS TO ENSURE YOU'RE ON
THE WINNING SIDE OF THIS BOOM-OR-BUST WINDOW.**

By Scott Bestul

LINDA FRESHWATERS ARNDT



In his quest for does, a big buck is bound to make a mistake. Stay patient and persistent so you'll be there when he does.

As I do on any November morning, I walked to my treestand full of hope and excitement. I had a Kansas archery tag in my pocket, access to a gorgeous farm and a weather forecast that called for cool temps and high pressure. “Today is the day,” was my mantra as I slipped through the pre-dawn toward a stand that I’d hung the day before.

I never saw a whitetail that morning. Actually, I take that back. I spotted the ears of what had to be the area’s smallest fawn bobbing through waist-high CRP as the tiny deer cut across the prairie. I suppose seeing part of a little deer is better than a complete skunking, but when you’re hunting some of the Midwest’s best deer ground during the peak of whitetail rut, it’s a small victory indeed.

Sadly, this scene is far more common than outdoor TV, hunting videos and magazine articles would have us believe. After all, isn’t November that magic month when monsters fall? Well of course it is, but for every whopper buck that hits the dirt, there are hundreds of hunter hours spent, and it’s completely common for reality to dash our expectations.

Yes, it’s the breeding season, and yeah, giant bucks can make equally huge mistakes. However, deer are still deer. For every hunter who gets lucky, there are hundreds who are left scratching their heads, wondering what the heck is wrong with either the deer herd or their game plan. Well, assuming nothing’s wrong with the deer herd (there rarely is), here’s how to change your game plan and set up the best rut hunt of your life.

PREP FOR THE GRIND

Most hunters picture the rut as a time of high whitetail activity and hot action, with bucks banging antlers, tearing up scrapes and dogging does. Those activities make our mental highlight reel, but we typically forget the long hours separating that action. That’s no problem if you’re an eternal optimist, but many of us can grow discouraged and decrease our hunting effort. This obviously makes a poor rut hunt a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, settle in for the long haul. Make a game plan based on solid scouting and the latest camera intel, and then utilize sound hunting tactics. If the woods explode around you one morning, fantastic. Just don’t expect—or need—that to happen

to keep plugging away. All you need is one buck to make a mistake in a narrow window of time, and the only way to capitalize on that situation is to be out there every available minute.

For example, during the Kansas hunt described above, I went five consecutive days without seeing a mature buck. This is big, wide-open country, and even when I'm not enjoying spitting-distance encounters with good deer, I'll at least see one from afar. Not this hunt.

However, I kept grinding it out, having faith in my spots, and on the last morning of my trip, I hit the rattling antlers one last time. I still had the horns in my hands when I looked up to see a buck weaving through grass and brush toward me. The pretty 10-point stopped at 15 yards, then turned to

quarter away just as I drew my bow. After a week of enduring a complete drubbing, I arrowed a fine buck in just a few minutes. Sometimes, that's exactly how the rut goes.

CALL IT RIGHT

I've lost track of all the grunt tubes and can calls, as well as a killer set of rattling antlers, I've given to my dad over the years. And I'd bet a C-note he hasn't used any of those tools in the last dozen seasons. Oh, they're always in his pack—along with a list of excuses for why he's reluctant to call to a buck. Sadly, my father has plenty of company, and doubly tragic is the fact that anyone who isn't calling to deer at least some of the time is undoubtedly missing out on opportunities.

Deer are social animals that frequently talk to each other, and they constantly listen for other deer talking to them. Sure, sometimes they're not in the mood to socialize, and some of them are simply more timid or reluctant to respond. But just because all deer don't run to calls or horns, it does not mean calling doesn't work. It does, and the rut is one of the times it works the best.

To up your calling percentage on bucks, focus mainly on deer you can see. This allows you to gauge not only whether the buck hears you (wind, crunching leaves and distance can all prevent a whitetail from hearing you), but also his reaction. A buck that's been beaten in a recent fight may tuck his tail and scamper, but if he bristles up or cocks his head to look at you, he's probably coming.

Also, try to call from setups where bucks can't smell you. Unless you have a decoy out, the buck will invariably circle downwind to smell what he's getting into. Look for a hard barrier (a fence or creek bank) that prevents a buck from circling downwind. Even a soft edge (a field edge or open timber) that a buck is reluctant to enter can work. In these cases, chances are he'll cheat a bit and walk within range as he comes to the call.

SCENT CHECK

The power of the whitetail nose is well documented, and that sniffer is not reserved for smelling danger. It's also a powerful tool that bucks use to find does, as well as detect the presence of rivals in the neighborhood. Both those uses can be exploited to help arrange a meeting with a nice buck during the rut.

One of my favorite uses of scent is at a mock scrape. I create these in areas that bucks have traditionally scraped in the past, show signs of current use and are close to a good stand or blind site. I also hang a camera nearby so I can monitor buck (and doe) activity at the scrape.

Making a mock is super simple; just use a spade or rake to scratch out a 3-foot circle under a limb that hangs 5 to 6 feet above the ground. I add some commercial deer pee (or my own) to the dirt, then a buck lure to the overhanging branch. That's it. I'll often make a half-dozen mocks in a single day, then revisit every three or four days and check the cameras and sign to see which are being hit well.



When calling or rattling, focus on a buck you can see and look for his reaction. If possible, set up where deer can't easily circle downwind of you.

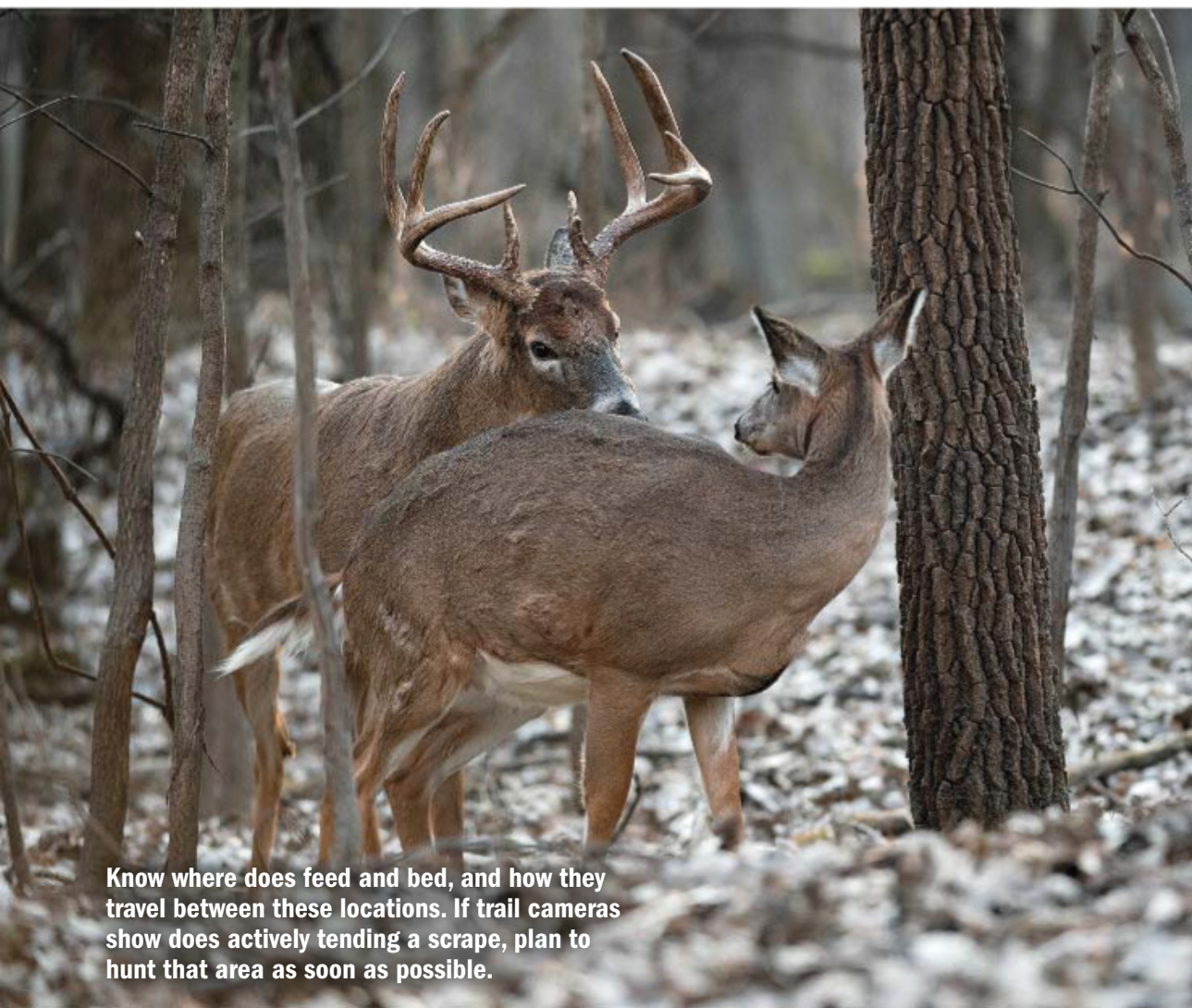
LEE THOMAS KJOS/THE RAW SPIRIT (LEFT, OPPOSITE TOP); MATT HANSEN (OPPOSITE BOTTOM)

Years ago, my friend Sam Collora, owner of Mrs. Doe Pee's buck lures, taught me the value of using drag rags during the rut. Sam ties one end of a rope to his ankle and a clean, odor-free rag to the other end of the rope. As he walks to his stand, he soaks the rag in doe urine, refreshing it periodically. When he arrives at his stand, he unties the rag from his boot and hangs it 3 to 5 feet high on a bush or tree limb within bow range of his stand. As one of the country's few hunters who's tagged three bucks over 200 inches, Sam is someone whose advice is worth heeding.

DOE PATROL

One of the most common mistakes hunters make in October and November is developing a severe case of tunnel vision. Usually, that means focusing entirely on bucks. We devote our attention to buck sightings, buck sign and trail cam pics of—all together now—bucks.

Unfortunately, outside of a narrow window in late October, when a buck is pretty faithful to running rub lines and checking scrapes in his core area, much of that focus can be misplaced. As the rut starts and builds, a buck's



primary objective is finding does. So, if we dedicate most of our effort to buck stuff, we'll be behind the proverbial 8-ball as breeding begins. Keep track of where does eat, sleep and travel, and you'll have all the buck action you can handle as breeding activity ramps up.

Luckily, monitoring does can be simple. If you've bowhunted in the weeks leading up to peak breeding, you likely know some of the most popular feeding areas for does. If not, get your camera on likely candidates such as food plots, freshly harvested corn and soybean fields and, of course, oak stands and clearcuts.

Keep cams on scrapes (both mock and real), too, and pay attention to those getting hit by nannies. When does are tending scrapes (and, yes, I have plenty of pics of this happening), you should be hunting that area. Finally, figure out doe bedding areas as quickly as possible, as bucks will cruise these throughout the rut. If you're not sure of these locations, hang cameras on trails leading to thick cover and you should figure out the hot bedrooms in a hurry.

FUNNEL FANATIC

If I had to choose one stand site to hunt the entire rut, I'd pick one overlooking a terrain funnel. Feeding areas are great, and bedrooms can be amazing, but making repeat trips to these sensitive spots can quickly burn them out. Think about it: Bedding areas and food sources are places where whitetails linger, typically for long periods. So, if you're there with them, the odds of them nailing you (through scent, sound or



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sight) rise exponentially. And once that happens, whitetails will either abandon those spots or quit visiting them during daylight. Obviously, I'm not saying to avoid these spots, just hunt them carefully and sporadically.

However, funnels—natural free-ways that bucks travel as they search for does—are not only high-odds stand sites, they can also be hunted with much greater frequency. Because whitetails cruise through funnels, the chances of them busting you plummet. Even better, funnels can produce through virtually any stage of the rut.

Bucks use them as they make rounds in their core area in search of the first hot doe. They also use them when they make yet another loop to find their next girlfriend. Heck, funnels are even awesome when hunting pressure builds and bucks are seeking sanctuary.

Funnels are relatively easy to identify. Just hop on your favorite mapping software or app to study terrain and vegetation types. Then answer the following question: When a buck moves from one cover type (or food source or bedding area), what is the easiest path for him to get there efficiently and quickly? If you can answer that, then you're on the way to becoming a great funnel hunter.

I like benches on hillsides, a hog-back on a ridge, a brushy fenceline connecting two blocks of timber and creek and river bottoms to name just a few. Once I've identified some potential funnels, I slip in midday and check for trails, rubs and scrapes. I don't expect to find the same amount of spoor that I would on a food source edge or bedding spot, but that's OK. If there's a rub or scrape or trail (a junction of two or more is fantastic), I know I've got a killer stand setup. **G-I**



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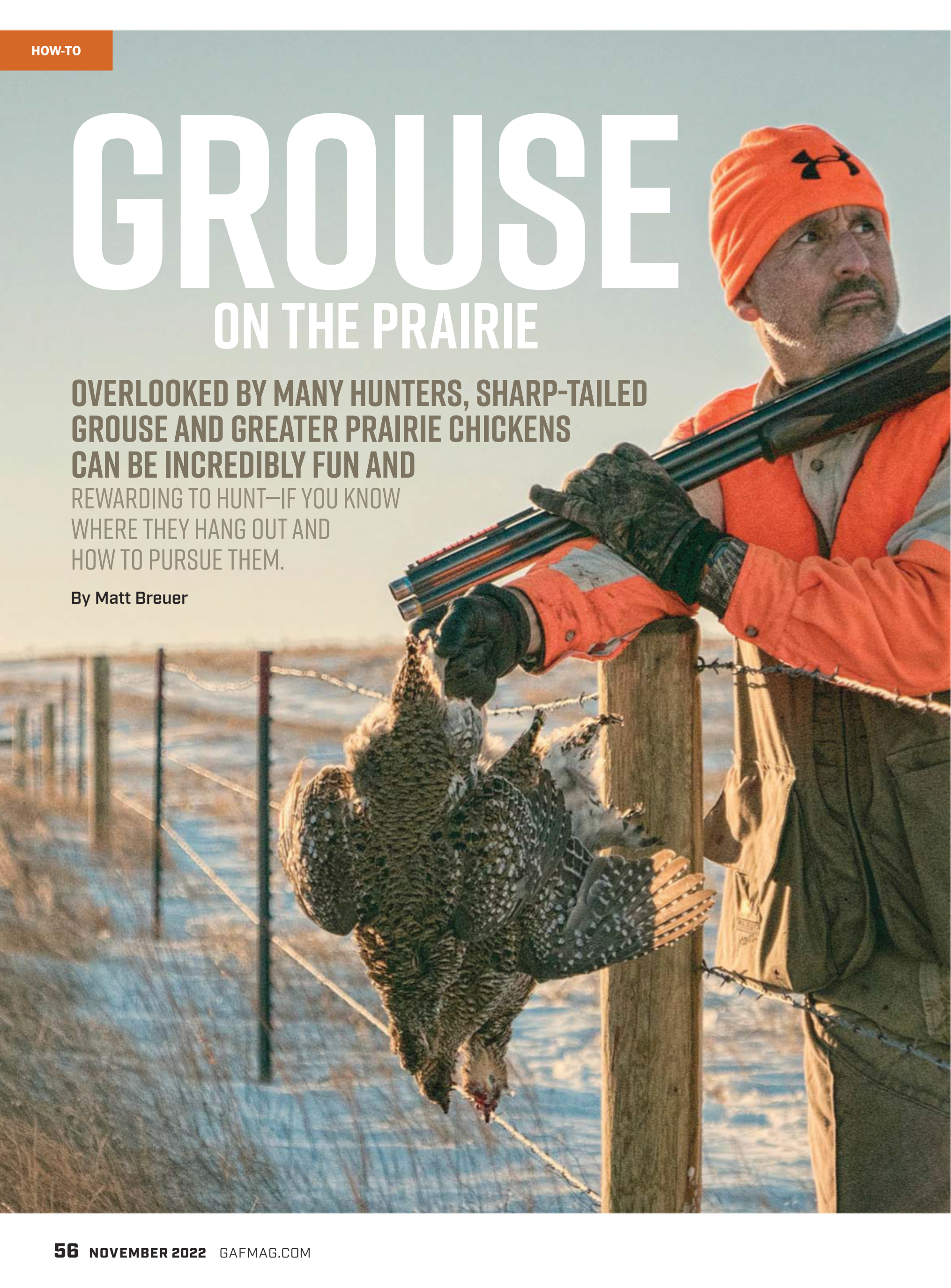
SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

GROUSE

ON THE PRAIRIE

OVERLOOKED BY MANY HUNTERS, SHARP-TAILED GROUSE AND GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKENS CAN BE INCREDIBLY FUN AND REWARDING TO HUNT—IF YOU KNOW WHERE THEY HANG OUT AND HOW TO PURSUE THEM.

By Matt Breuer



Sharptails prefer habitat edges, such as where open grassland or agricultural fields meet CRP land.



When most hear the word “grouse,” they envision the ruffed grouse, which many consider the king of game birds. I won’t disagree, but I likewise won’t count out prairie grouse as formidable contenders for this same title.

Today, Midwest prairie grouse mainly consist of sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens. Historically, lesser prairie chickens, heath hens and hybrids were also huntable. But with the loss of the heath hen entirely and only a non-huntable population of lesser prairie chickens left, we’ll focus on sharptails and greater chickens (and their hybrids). Similar in size and appearance, both are worthy game birds and fun to hunt. They also put on exceptional courtship displays. Let’s examine both species and discuss how to bag more prairie grouse this season.

SPECIAL SHARPIES

Named after its two long tailfeathers that rise above the rest of the plumage and create a sharp point, the sharp-tailed grouse is mostly white on the chest, but with patterned dark diamonds throughout. These features make them easy to identify in flight. The bird has a distinctive flush, in which its white, tan and gray colors all flicker, but the white dominates most of all. Long bouts of sailing often follow the initial takeoff, and this bird can fly and soar for miles. Once the most abundant game bird in much of the Midwest, the sharptail’s population and range have

taken big hits. But, they are still found in huntable numbers in several Midwestern states, including the Dakotas and portions of Nebraska, Minnesota and Michigan.

Often referred to as the “in-between bird” due to its affinity for habitat edges, the sharptail likes to be where agriculture meets CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) land, or where open grasslands meet a fresh timber cutting. In the fall, sharp-tailed grouse hang in coveys and hold well in cover for hunters with or without dogs. That said, a good bird dog is definitely beneficial, as you might walk several miles on open landscapes before finding where birds want to be. CRP near small-grain ag and low- to medium-height grasslands are optimal. Sharp-tailed grouse will tolerate some willow or aspen, but an overly brushy area won’t hold birds, and they almost never hang anywhere near conifers.

Sharptails are very wary, so one bird in the covey will always be on sentry. This can make sneaking up on them difficult. A sentry bird often looks out from a small rise or mound while its covey mates are feeding. Hunters must make their approach accordingly.

Upon flushing, sharptails make a very distinct “chuckling” noise, as if they are laughing. Try not to take offense when you hear it after a bad miss.

Less crucial to hunters, but worth noting, is the sharp-tailed grouse’s stunning mating ritual. In the spring, birds gather on dancing grounds—known as “leks”—and



The greater prairie chicken's spring mating ritual is a sight to behold, as male birds inflate their air sacs, raise their “ear” feathers, stomp their feet and spar with other males.

point their sharp tails high in the air while stretching their wings and looking down at the ground. Then they fill the bright purple air sacs on their necks, stomp their feet and *coo* and *click* while trying to attract a mate. It's a sight to behold.

As table-fare, the sharpie often gets a bad rap. It has dark, firm meat, and some unjustly refer to it as the "flying liver." However, seared or grilled properly, the sharptail is excellent. It's certainly a worthy pursuit both in the field and on the table.

CAPTIVATING CHICKENS

Greater prairie chickens aren't all that different from sharp-tailed grouse. With similar flight patterns, appearance and a spring ritual rivaling that of the sharpie, the prairie chicken can sometimes be mistaken for a sharptail. Named for its yellow, chicken-like legs and feet, the greater prairie chicken also has a mostly white chest, but with distinct dark bars that stretch horizontally across the white background and run throughout the entire bird. Overall, though, this bird is much

darker than the sharptail. In flight, the prairie chicken's flat, squared-off tail helps distinguish it from a sharpie, too.

The prairie chicken's range didn't always stretch into the Midwest's northern reaches, but as settlers moved north and agriculture developed, the birds followed. It now extends from North Dakota and Minnesota down to Kansas. However, like the sharpie, the greater prairie chicken's population is much smaller than other upland game birds (and its own historic population), which makes finding one a treat. Much less tolerable of timber, the prairie chicken thrives in open environs. Pure prairie, oak savannahs or glacial ridges are ideal for this upland bird.

The greater prairie chicken's spring mating ritual is just as spectacular as the sharptail's. On so-called "booming grounds," males surround a female and inflate their yellow air sacs and raise their elongated "ear" feathers, which look like horns. They coo and moan, stomping their feet and taking flight to attack other males in a fight for love.

During the fall, though, these birds can be found as singles, pairs or coveys. They generally like taller grass than sharpies, so they'll hold much tighter for a dog or someone kicking them up with their feet. With lighter meat than the sharptail, but still darker than most game birds, the greater prairie chicken is a versatile option for the meat eaters out there.



Bagging a limit of greater prairie chickens is a noteworthy achievement possible in a handful of Midwestern states.

PRAIRIE PARADISE

*In pursuit of prairie grouse bliss?
Look no further than these choice destinations.*

MINNESOTA

Minnesota's sharp-tailed grouse season opens in conjunction with the ruffed grouse season and boasts a three-bird limit. Look to northwest Minnesota for all your prairie grouse needs. The state's prairie chicken season is just over a week in length and requires a permit acquired through a lottery open only to residents. The limit is two birds, either sex, for the entire season.

SOUTH DAKOTA

The Mount Rushmore State has both sharpies and chickens. The daily limit is three birds (of any combination), and the possession limit is 15 birds, which may not be possessed until after the fifth day of hunting. With plenty of access and a lot of ground to work with, South Dakota doesn't disappoint when it comes to upland game.

NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota is probably the most popular place to chase early-season sharptails. With a daily limit of three birds and a possession limit of 12, and the season opening relatively early in September, the Roughrider State could be the premier spot for sharpies in the entire country.

NEBRASKA

The Cornhusker State offers the prairie grouse hunter ample options, with prairie chickens and sharptails on the menu. Limits vary depending on the zone you're hunting. In the West Zone, the daily limit is three and the possession limit is 12. East of Highway 81, in the East Zone, a free special grouse permit (limited to 400; first come, first served) is required. The daily limit is three, as is the possession limit.

PROBLEMATIC PAIRINGS

Hybridization between greater prairie chickens and lesser prairie chickens was not common when both had stable populations, but today that's rare. After losing so much habitat in the past century, many greater prairie chicken and sharptail populations are starting to overlap. This, in turn, sometimes causes hybridization to occur. Picture a sharp-tailed grouse with some barring on its body and yellow legs and feet. These birds are a neat creation born of unfortunate circumstances.

HUNTING TACTICS

As with any pursuit, check all applicable regulations for the state you're hunting in before chasing prairie grouse. With birds that are heavily protected, laws can vary from state to state, and even county to county. Once you know where you'll hunt, find areas with ample native grasslands for either species. Large, vast expanses

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RECLAIMING THE PRAIRIE

After significant habitat loss and population declines, several groups are working to restore prairie grouse to their former glory.

Throughout the 1800s, sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens thrived. With anecdotal reports of flushes “blocking out the sun” in states like Minnesota, the sharp-tailed grouse was the king of the Midwest. Even in the 1940s, sharptails were still very abundant; in Minnesota alone, the state harvest topped 150,000 birds.

Prairie chickens were once similarly abundant throughout much of the United States but are now limited to just a few states. As more modern agricultural practices—like tilling right up to the roads and removing key wind breaks and fencerows—spread across most of the country, chicken habitat disappeared. Today, most birds are confined to areas that were left alone or to homesteads and lands that were abandoned and became overgrown.

Now, conservation groups like the Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, The North American Grouse Partnership, The Nature Conservancy and even Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever strive to reclaim areas into native prairie, helping restore prairie grouse populations. Many states now enjoy stable populations, which is a huge success after the declines in the early to mid-1900s.

of mid- to tall-height grass that seem daunting to walk are likely where you want to be. Wear good boots and pack enough water for yourself and your dogs.

Although hunting prairie grouse without a dog is feasible, it’s not ideal. Birds often tuck into areas in the middle of nowhere, and without a dog, they can be nearly impossible to find. Pointing and flushing dogs work, but pointers allow hunters to cover more area. And, even if the dog points a covey a half-mile off, birds often hold until you can get there.

Shots range from right at your feet on tight holds to 60 yards away on wary, early flushing birds. A 12-, 16- or 20-gauge shotgun works fine, with heavy-brass No. 5, 6 and 7 1/2 shot reigning supreme. In

my experience, Federal Premium’s Prairie Storm loads, made for upland hunting, have worked great for prairie grouse.

If you’re shooting out of one barrel, a modified choke works for everything. For double guns, use an improved choke in one and modified in the other. During the first two weeks of the season, No. 7 1/2 shot out of an improved cylinder can work, as birds are often uneducated and many in the coveys will be young. Later in the season, use modified chokes with No. 5 shot. As with any upland adventure, bring various chokes and shot sizes.

GIVE IT A GO

Sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens are incredible birds to hunt.

They’re witty, resourceful, graceful, exciting and delicious. If you’ve never tried hunting them, I highly suggest it. If you don’t find success right away, at least you’ll have had some great exercise, enjoying the last remnants of the beautiful prairie that once covered so much of this country. Plus, you haven’t really felt true disappointment in upland hunting until you’ve been laughed at by a sharp-tailed grouse as it flies away. 

Dogs are almost essential for prairie grouse hunting due to the amount of ground you must cover to find birds.



STEVE OEHLenschLAGER

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By Brandon Butler

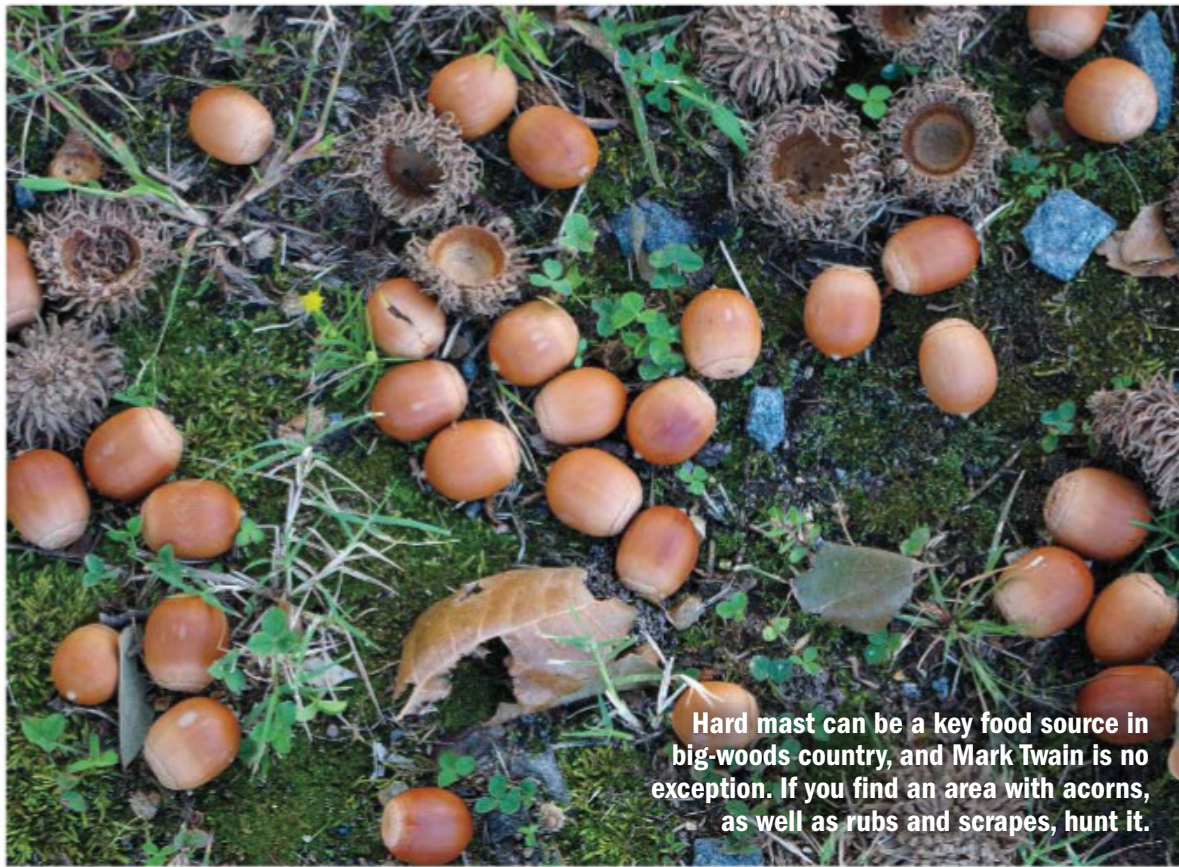
Bucks are on the prowl in Mark Twain National Forest this month. Look for them cruising funnels and near doe bedding areas.

MATT HANSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Mark Twain once said, “Buy land, they’re not making any more of it.” Deer hunters understand this reality all too well. While many whitetail hunters dream of owning land, most of us don’t own the ground we hunt. As development turns old hunting grounds into subdivisions and more property is leased each year, public land becomes even more valuable to hunters in the Midwest. One such special destination is Mark Twain National Forest in central and southern Missouri.

With its abundance of deer and over-the-counter licenses, the Show-Me State has plenty to offer, both in terms of deer numbers and big-buck potential. For instance, the Missouri Monarch, the largest non-typical ever recorded, was found dead in St. Louis County. Meanwhile, the Gibson Buck, the fourth-largest typical on record, came from Randolph County. Missouri also ranks in the top 10 states for entries in both Boone and Crockett and Pope and Young.

Many tend to associate northern Missouri with large deer, but the lion’s share of the state’s abundant public lands are in the southern half of the state. While numerous conservation areas lie in northern Missouri, these areas don’t compare to the 1.5 million-acre expanse of the Mark Twain National Forest scattered across the southern reaches of the state.



Hard mast can be a key food source in big-woods country, and Mark Twain is no exception. If you find an area with acorns, as well as rubs and scrapes, hunt it.

Northern Missouri conservation areas are rarely crowded, but you’ll still likely see other hunters. Conversely, some of Mark Twain is so remote that deer rarely encounter humans. The vastness of the forest allows hunters to spread out and bucks to grow large. And the notion that the Ozarks hold no big deer is flat-out false.

In short, the Mark Twain National Forest offers loads of room to roam and plenty of overlooked opportunity for quality deer hunting. Dedicated hunters

following a sound strategy will have good odds of dragging a nice whitetail out from the hardwoods.

MILES OF OPPORTUNITY

Far from contiguous, nine separate blocks of Mark Twain National Forest stretch through 29 counties, with most of the forest found in the south-central and southeastern portions of the state. Only the Cedar Creek section is located north of the Missouri River. Rolla, Salem and Poplar Bluff are the larger cities near



PLANNING POINTS

Things to keep in mind when plotting out your adventure in Mark Twain National Forest

Missouri’s 2022 regular firearms season runs Nov. 12 to 22. While Missouri is a two-buck state, only one buck may be taken during the firearms portion. Non-resident firearms any-deer permits cost \$265. However, once you purchase this license, you can add as many non-resident firearms antlerless permits as allowed per county (\$25 each).

Tech-savvy deer hunters should download the MO Hunting App. With this free, user-friendly application, you can purchase your license and telecheck your harvest from your phone. It also includes important information like

season dates, limits and sunrise and sunset times.

The Mark Twain National Forest encompasses 1.5 million acres spread across much of southern Missouri. Whether you use traditional paper maps or a digital mapping app like onX (left), be sure to put time into finding likely areas based on topography before you hit the ground.

The forest’s main office is in Rolla, with satellite offices in numerous smaller towns. For a complete list of offices where maps are available, or to buy maps online, visit fs.usda.gov/mtnf.



Bagging a nice Ozarks buck is possible if a hunter is willing to invest time and effort.

Mark Twain National Forest, but numerous other small towns like Ava, Bunker, Doniphan, Van Buren and Winona are scattered throughout, too.

Mark Twain has more than 750 miles of trails, including those designated for hiking, biking, horseback riding and limited motorized use. All motorized vehicles and mountain bikes require a permit.

Additionally, more than 350 miles of floatable water course through Mark Twain, making this hunting destination well suited for a little fishing, as well.

There are more than 63,000 acres of dedicated wilderness within the Mark Twain National Forest. Included in this is the Irish Wilderness, the state's largest wilderness area and one of the most special public lands in Missouri. It encompasses 16,277 acres along the wild-and-scenic-designated Eleven Point River.

No motorized vehicles are allowed in the wilderness areas, so you can enjoy the land in peace and quiet. Designated wilderness areas also remain completely undeveloped, and all of them are excellent for deer hunting and offer a special sense of privacy.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

The Ozarks are rugged, and in Missouri, this ruggedness generally increases as you head south toward the Arkansas border. Different sections of Mark Twain offer varied topographies. In the northern reaches of the national forest, you'll find rolling hills and more open areas. Cedar thickets among grass lands hide lots of deer. Farther south, most of the forest is dense hardwoods.

Hunting these thick forests is a substantial change of pace compared to the Midwest's many agricultural areas. This is big-woods territory, with serious elevation changes present. You must understand how deer relate to topographical features and use that to your advantage.

Here, you're not sitting in a box blind overlooking a picked bean field. You're hunting ridges, saddles, funnels, hollows, river banks and more. You need to be where the deer travel. Some say the hunting is harder, and it is in certain ways, but success is still common. Ripley, Reynolds, Texas and Wayne counties are perennial top deer-producing counties, and all are home to the Mark Twain National Forest.

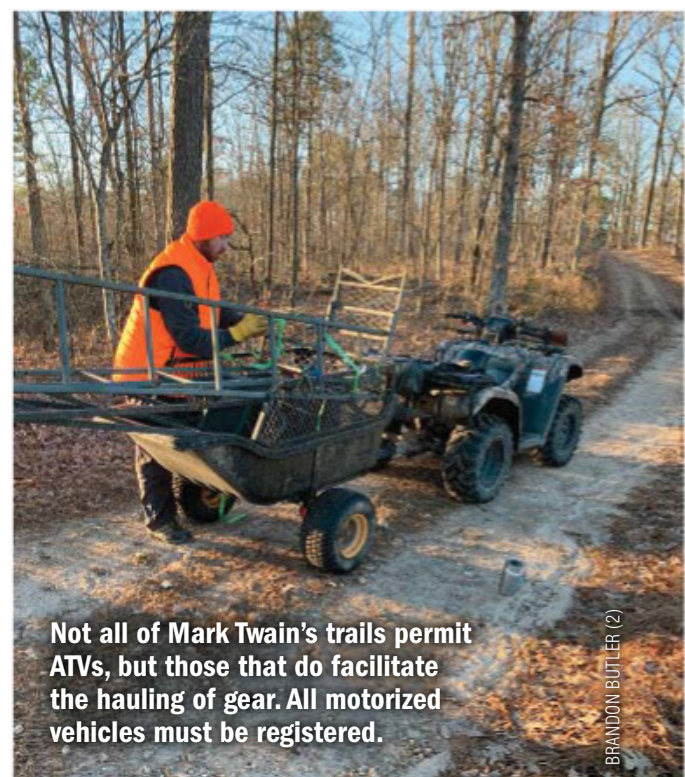
Due to its sheer size, the first step to a successful hunt in Mark Twain National Forest is choosing the area you want to hunt. You can't think of this as a complete 1.5 million acres. You must select a reasonably sized area and learn it. If you study a few thousand acres, you should be able to identify multiple good hunting locations. That way, if something happens and one location isn't panning out, you can move relatively quickly and easily to another.

Study areas of the forest you're planning to hunt with maps or aerial photography to save time and gas money. If possible, though, put boots on the ground before hunting season to better understand what you're up against. Some spots have steep topography, so it pays to be in pretty good shape. Doing this work of narrowing down productive areas ahead of time, however, will pay major dividends during your hunt.

ACCESS ADVICE

Maps also help you locate access points for the forest. If you want to avoid the likelihood of dealing with other hunters, move far from the road. Generally speaking, most public hunters won't walk more than 200 yards from their vehicle to their stand or blind. If you want to regularly encounter mature bucks on public property, put some distance between you and the crowds.

To avoid spooking wise, old bucks, you'll also need a good entry strategy. One way to slip into hard-to-access



Not all of Mark Twain's trails permit ATVs, but those that do facilitate the hauling of gear. All motorized vehicles must be registered.

BRANDON BUTLER (2)

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A number of rivers and creeks flow through the forest. These are useful for hunter access and they serve as funnels for deer, too.



areas within the Mark Twain National Forest is by water. Not many hunters access large chunks of the forest by river, and because some of these acres are a considerable distance from the nearest road, you can find yourself alone for miles. A canoe or jet boat can help you reach these spots. And with camping allowed in the forest, you can even make an adventure of hunting your way downstream over multiple days.

If you don't have a boat, you can also load a backpack with everything you need for a spike camp and spend a few days in a wilderness area. So many Midwestern hunters say they someday hope to go out West on a backpack-style hunt in places like Colorado or Wyoming. Well, that opportunity exists right here in the Midwest on National Forest land. Hiking in a few miles to hunt may not be feasible for a morning, but it works just fine for a weekend. You can simply make multiple trips to get your gear in and out.

Mature bucks are wary animals, especially on public land. They've lived to maturity by making good decisions, and some of these decisions might

surprise you. Big bucks find places to hide where hunters don't look; it's your job to uncover these spots if you're going to tag a trophy in Mark Twain.

A GOOD GAME PLAN

There are many factors to successfully hunting the rut in big, forested country. One of the most important is also quite simple: Stay in the woods for as long as possible. This time of year, bucks are running from dawn to dusk. There really isn't a prime time to be hunting. If you can stay in the woods, do it.

Pick a ridge and work your way along it. Stop in saddles, which are low areas along a ridge. Still-hunting works well here. Pack a lunch, take your time and wait it out.

While you can find a buck anywhere this time of year, two areas to key on are doe bedding areas and funnels. Bucks are looking for does, so chances are they're going to be cruising to and from as many bedding areas as possible. Power lines offer some of the only open, grassy areas in the forest, and does flock to these cuts. They can often be spotted milling about and grazing.

Bucks can similarly be caught crossing these open areas.

Funnels are top-producing spots in the Ozarks. If you can find a narrow strip of timber connecting two much larger wooded tracts, it's likely a buck will cruise through there at some point. An open field with a band of timber along a river is a prime example. Bucks reliably move along these riverbank timber strips. When I do find the right funnel, I like to hang two stands, with one on each side. This way, no matter what the wind direction is, I can hunt the area.

PUBLIC POSSIBILITIES

Too often, serious deer hunters overlook the Midwest's public land. Many believe this type of hunting is only reserved for those lacking private property to hunt. This line of thinking is a mistake. The truth is that millions of acres of public lands across the Midwest produce trophy-class whitetail bucks each fall. And the ground constituting Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest represents one of the best public-land opportunities to wrap a tag on a true wilderness giant. 

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OPEN CHALLENGE

**PRONGHORNS ABOUND ON THE ROLLING PRAIRIE OF EASTERN WYOMING,
BUT STALKING CLOSE ENOUGH FOR A SHOT PROVES TO BE ANYTHING BUT EASY.**

By Drew Warden



In my binocular I watched the tan-and-white speck loitering at the base of hill transform into a mature pronghorn buck. He stood perfectly broadside among a herd of 15 to 20 antelope some distance from the rise where my guide, Brian Schiermiester, and I were crouched. We'd glassed the

herd from another ridge about an hour earlier and had just put a stalk on them, army-crawling the last 100 feet.

"How far is he?" I asked Brian, who had swapped his bino for a rangefinder.

"About 450 yards," he whispered back.

My heart thumped. Ahead of this hunt in the vast, open country of east-central

Wyoming, I'd worried I might have to take a shot beyond my comfort level to succeed. Now it was happening.

While a reasonable shot for some hunters—and manageable with the Nosler Model 21 rifle and Federal Premium Terminal Ascent 6.5 Creedmoor load I was using—it still felt like a poke. As

JUSTIN MOORE



Between a pronghorn's acute eyesight and blazing fast speed, often the only way a hunter can get close to one is through careful navigation of the varying terrain.

a Missouri guy who spends more time hunting ducks than big game, most of my shots at whitetails have been inside 200 yards. In fact, the last time I'd shot at a deer beyond that, in western Nebraska, I watched my bullet kick up a cloud of dust and an excellent buck speed away forever.

Sitting below us behind the cover of the hill were our other hunting companions, Sam Forbes, from *Petersen's Hunting*, and a cameraman who was filming both of our hunts. Like me, Sam is not a Western guy, hailing from Virginia. It was the first time either of us had hunted pronghorns. Minutes

earlier, when Brian asked which of us was up first, we'd played an impromptu round of rock-paper-scissors to see who'd get the initial crack at a buck. I had come away victorious and was now up to bat.

Missing here would be embarrassing enough, I thought, as I surveyed

the buck in the distance. *But missing with an audience, with video evidence to boot ... that would be grounds for serious teasing back at camp.*

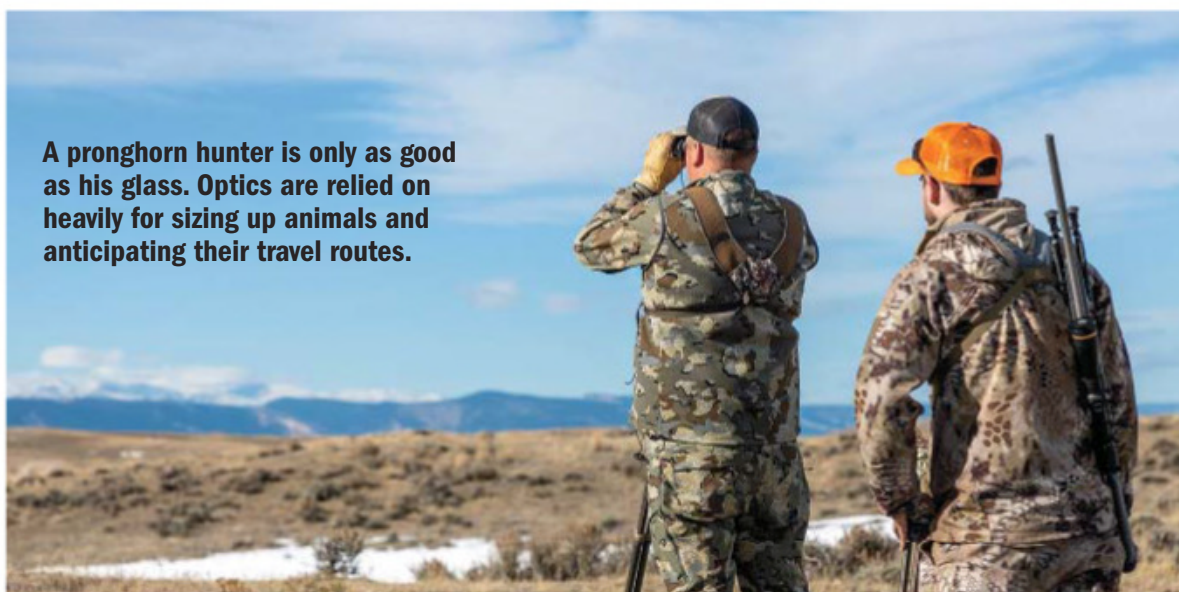
Then there was the even worse possibility of a poor hit. Before this trip, I'd read many pronghorn stories to understand what to expect. While most were tales of triumph, some felt more like horror stories, detailing misplaced hits, hours of tracking and follow-up shots. I did not want a similar outcome.

"I don't feel comfortable taking this shot," I finally conceded to Brian.

I asked if we could try for a closer opportunity, and he began surveying the terrain like a chess master examining the board and deliberating his next move. His face hinted that our options weren't ideal, but he eventually suggested we back down the hill and move down a draw to try gaining ground without spooking the herd.

Unfortunately, this didn't pan out. Nor did other stalks we attempted that morning. The pronghorns, with their exceptional vision, would catch us, or they'd move steadily enough across the plains that we couldn't intercept them. Around midday, we returned to camp to see how others had fared and to fuel up for our next attempt. We were discouraged, but with the afternoon and two more days of hunting, we were still in the fight.

A pronghorn hunter is only as good as his glass. Optics are relied on heavily for sizing up animals and anticipating their travel routes.



HOME ON THE PLAINS

Few places are as stunning in their sparseness as the rolling plains north of Kaycee, Wyo., where the 22,000-acre Schiermiester family cattle ranch lies. High ridges offer sweeping vistas of the abundant hills and the extensive sagebrush flats that extend for miles. To the distant west, the Bighorn Mountains rise gradually. It's an area that hints at a world before human influence.

Positioned on a flat stretch near a deep draw and bordered by rolling hills, our living accommodations for three days of hunting were equally impressive. Our camp included a large wall tent for meals and relaxation, four smaller tents for sleeping and a makeshift latrine. Inside half of the bigger tent, a wood-burning stove kept the chill at bay in the mornings and evenings. The other contained various Camp Chef stoves,

grills and ovens that Trevor Clements, the company's vice president of operations—and our personal chef for this hunt—used to create delicious meals.

A hearty lunch was just what we wanted as we rolled back into camp. Two pronghorn bucks already hung on tripod hoists, and hunters were busy processing them. As our successful companions detailed their kills, I was shocked by how easily our group was finding antelope. We saw them everywhere on the Schiermiester Ranch, whether we were walking to the main tent in the morning or bouncing along a cattle road in Brian's truck.

After the hunt, the affable guide would estimate his family's ranch held 1,000 or so pronghorns at any given time. This abundance should not have surprised me, given that Wyoming has averaged close to 400,000 antelope in recent years,

Where pronghorns are numerous, as they are on the plains of eastern Wyoming, the challenge lies not in locating animals, but in avoiding being spotted by the dozens of sets of eyeballs.



SAM FORBES (ABOVE), JUSTIN MOORE (BOTTOM, OPPOSITE)



After a day of hard hunting, nothing is more welcoming than the warm glow of a canvas wall tent and a hot meal.

with some studies suggesting the state holds roughly half of the world's total pronghorn population.

We were clearly in a target-rich environment, but as Brian would say, seeing antelope is rarely the issue. Finding your target buck and getting a shot opportunity in open terrain without getting caught by any of the herd's many eyes is the challenge. Soon we began game-planning our next spot-and-stalk session, and Brian had another area he wanted to glass. We didn't wait long before piling back into his truck for round two.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

Brian's intuition paid off, as we quickly eyed another decent buck at our guide's glassing spot. The pronghorn was moving right to left with a herd across a wide plain on the opposite side of a steep draw. We immediately made a move, walking along the draw's edge, intending to push ahead of the herd while staying out of sight.

In the process, we experienced two unfortunate realities of pronghorn nature: their tendency to wander and their speed. We reached the spot where Brian wanted to set up, but the target buck was

well ahead of where we had believed he would be and offered no shot. The antelope were continuously moving forward, and while their gait appeared unhurried, their pace remained brisk. We'd need to walk faster to overtake them.

I gathered my rifle and shooting sticks, and we made a beeline down a hill, continuing to press forward. At the bottom, we caught a glimpse of the buck, but he was skylined atop another hill. With no backstop and no knowledge of what was beyond the buck, it was an unsafe shot. Another bad break.

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We hoofed it again, moving beyond the draw into a series of more rolling hills. This time, we stopped at the base of a small rise adjacent to a larger hill. Brian whispered that the herd should soon appear from behind that larger hill and I might get a shot at the buck from atop the rise. Brian advised Sam and the camera guy to stay put, and he and I repeated the morning's drill of crawling on hands and knees toward the rise's apex.

"Go ahead and set up," Brian said when we could peer over the top.

I quickly arranged my shooting sticks and placed the rifle's fore-end firmly in the yoke. Then I waited, wondering if this might be the stalk where things would go as planned.

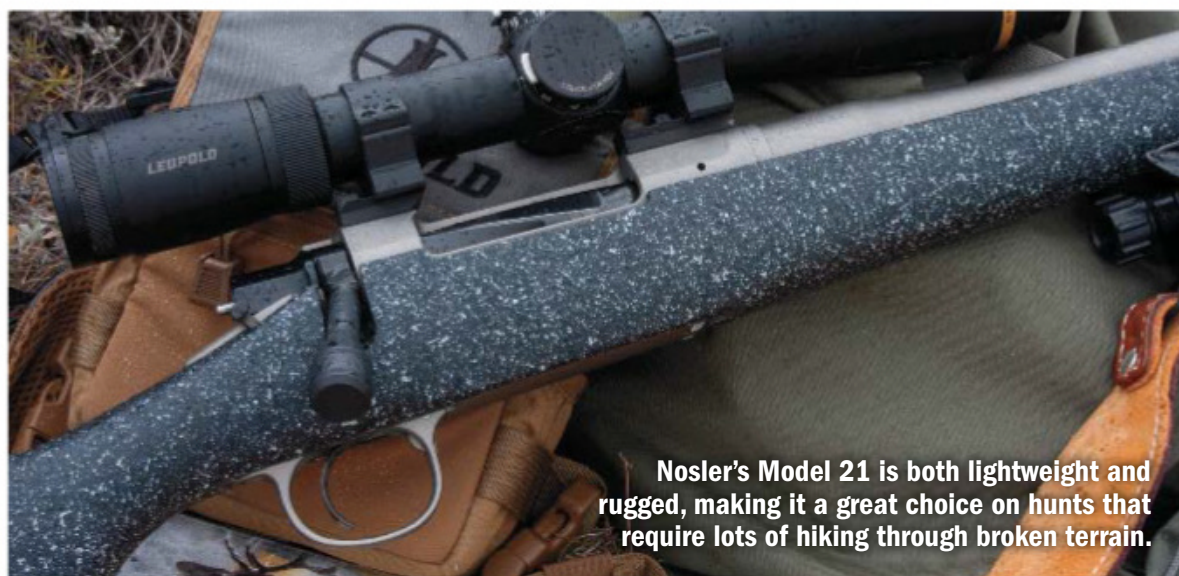
FLEETING CHANCE

It didn't take long to find out. Seemingly seconds after I had set up, the herd started clearing the larger hill and emerging in the open prairie to the left of it. The antelope were much closer than I'd expected—less than 100 yards—and suddenly they all began to run. Whether they saw Brian and me lurking atop the rise or began running for another reason, I couldn't say. I felt certain, though, that I was watching yet another chance at a pronghorn literally pass me by.

Brian identified the buck we'd been following near the back of the pack. While the herd slowed its pace to a gallop, I tracked the buck with my rifle, shifting uncomfortably on my knees and pivoting the barrel to the left in the shooting sticks. The pronghorn was still traveling too fast to shoot, and I had little faith I'd get a chance if he kept moving. More critically, because of where Sam and our camera guy were set up, I couldn't swing much farther without putting them in an unsafe position.

Inexplicably, the buck slowed, separating from the herd and finally stopping at about 200 yards. I flicked off the safety and lined up the crosshairs. My heart was pounding, my awkwardly positioned legs were strained in discomfort and my brain began the process of pulling the trigger.

Just as I was about to shoot, and in one of those instances where time seems to slow, I saw the buck lurch forward slightly as if to start moving again. In this high-stress situation, rushing to finally get a shot off at a buck, I committed a cardinal sin of rifle shooting. I fell



Nosler's Model 21 is both lightweight and rugged, making it a great choice on hunts that require lots of hiking through broken terrain.

PRONGHORN PICKS

Gear that got the job done in Wyoming

A lightweight, flat-shooting rifle is the ticket for spot-and-stalk hunting on the prairie. The new **Nosler Model 21** (\$2,795; nosler.com) I carried weighs less than 7 pounds in 6.5 Creedmoor and comes packed with features. Designed in collaboration with South Dakota's Mack Brothers, the action is blueprinted from birth on advanced wire EDM equipment. The one-piece bolt is spiral-fluted and can be taken down without tools, while the Trigger Tech Field trigger is user-adjustable. A threaded muzzle is standard on the Shilen match-grade barrel. The 100-percent carbon-fiber McMillan Hunters Edge Sporter stock further reduces weight.

Federal's Terminal Ascent (\$70.99 per 20 rounds of 6.5 Creedmoor; federalpremium.com) combines features of a match-style projectile with those of a quality hunting bullet, such as a bonded lead core and a long, solid copper rear shank. A secant ogive, small meplat and AccuChannel grooves on the shank enhance long-range ballistics. The SlipStream polymer tip resists heat deformation during flight and initiates expansion.

With its 6:1 zoom ratio, the **Leupold VX6-HD 3-18x44 mm riflescope** (\$1,799.99; leupold.com) offers long-range capabilities while providing low magnification for close shots. It comes with the CDS-ZL2 elevation dial, which has a zero-lock function and can be laser-marked to match the user's load and conditions. The company's **BX-4 Pro Guide HD 10x42 mm binocular** (\$599.99) rode comfortably all day in the **Pro Guide binocular harness** (\$99.99), and its open-bridge design made for comfortable glassing. It did great in the harsh daylight of the open plains, with no glare issues.

Camp Chef's Trevor Clements whipped up some of the best meals I've ever had using various **Camp Chef** products, including the **Pro 14 portable stove** (\$319.99; campchef.com). Camp-worthy features include two 30,000 BTU burners, matchless ignition and a three-sided windscreen. It accepts a ton of accessories, such as a griddle and a pizza oven.

My **Danner Recurve boots** (\$240; danner.com) handled every sort of terrain encountered. Taking inspiration from some of Danner's best hiking boots, the Recurve features a Vibram SPE midsole and a TPU heel clip to ensure comfort on long stalks for pronghorns.



DANNER
RECURVE



CAMP CHEF
PRO 14



For as much patience that is required when pronghorn hunting, things can happen quickly at the moment of truth, as the author discovered in Wyoming.

back on my wing-shooting instincts and ungracefully mashed the trigger instead of completing a careful press. My rifle fired right as the buck surged forward.

The pronghorn dropped out of my view through the scope, and I heard Brian and Sam cheer. The buck was down.

However, the result of the animal lurching forward and my poor trigger control quickly became clear. I had hit the buck far back. In a combination of fortune and misfortune, my bullet had at least rendered him immobile, allowing me to get in a better position and fire a second, killing shot.

It wasn't the outcome I had envisioned, and I was upset I hadn't given the buck a cleaner death. I also realized things could've gone far worse, and I was relieved I could end his life quickly. We walked up to the buck, and Sam and Brian congratulated me on my first pronghorn. While it wasn't a complete triumph, I was grateful for the opportunity to hunt this animal in such an incredible place, where both success and failure happen in the wide open. **G-F**

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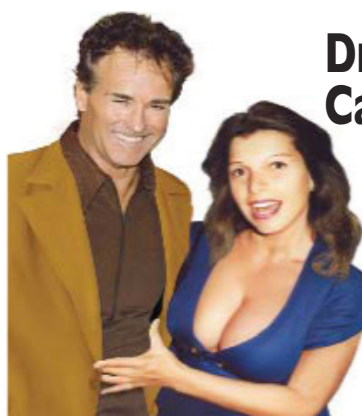
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LEUPOLD FREEDOM RDS

**THIS RED-DOT SIGHT IS IDEAL
FOR MAKING FAST SHOTS COUNT.**

By Adam Heggenstaller

The last I saw of the bear, it was heading right to my friend, who was posted at the edge of the clearcut. A group of us were pushing, or driving, the saplings and thick vegetation, hoping to move a bear to the rest of our gang positioned in more open woods. A few seconds later, a shot rang out in front of me. Then another, and another. The bear had passed by my friend, all right.

When I reached the end of the drive, popping out of the thick stuff 20 yards from the shooter, I couldn't wait to get the story. I figured for sure he had killed the bear, but the worried expression on his face gave me reason to think otherwise.

"It was so close," he said. "Too close. I couldn't get it in my scope."

Bear tracks coming down the muddy bank and the scuffed spot in the leaves

where my friend had been standing confirmed his report. Less than 5 yards separated the two. Even dialed down to 3X, my friend's scope had too much magnification to allow him to track the bounding bear and make the shot. We still tease him about it, but the incident continues to haunt him.

My friend isn't alone in his discovery that there are times when a magnified optic is more of a hindrance than a help. When game is close and moving, particularly in thick brush, a scope can make it difficult to aim. Iron sights are an alternative, but they require aligning three objects (rear notch or aperture, front post and target) to be effective. In situations such as this, a red-dot optic with no magnification shines, and the Leupold Freedom RDS is built for rough environments such as those often encountered in thick woods.

The Freedom RDS has a 34 mm main-tube machined of aluminum. It, and the electronics it houses, are torture-tested on a recoil-simulation machine Leupold engineers affectionately refer to as the Punisher. The optic is guaranteed to be **waterproof** and fogproof, and Leupold tests it to a submerged depth of 33 feet. Rest assured that hunting all day in the rain won't be an issue with the RDS.

Quality glass lenses are part of Leupold's Professional-Grade Red Dot Optical System, and the company treats them with coatings to maximize light transmission while reducing glare. The illuminated 1-MOA red-dot reticle is powered by one CR2032 battery, which is housed beneath a cover that includes the push-button illumination control.

There are eight illumination levels. When the dot reaches the highest intensity, it flashes five times. Subsequent

The Freedom RDS is built on a 34 mm maintube and is guaranteed by Leupold to be waterproof, fog-proof and shock-proof.



pushes will decrease the brightness of the dot. Similarly, the dot flashes five times when the dot reaches the lowest intensity, and then each press of the button increases the brightness. Holding the button down for two seconds changes the direction of intensity adjustment. For example, if you've moved from level 3 to level 5 and want to return to level 3, hold the button down for two seconds and intensity will decrease with each subsequent press.

The Freedom RDS has Motion Sensor Technology to help preserve battery life. If the sight remains motionless for five minutes while the illumination is on, it will power down. When the sight detects motion, it automatically reactivates the illumination. Battery life is up to 1,600 hours when the dot is set to low intensity.

Windage and elevation dials offer 80 MOA of adjustment in 1/4 MOA clicks.

SPECIFICATIONS

LEUPOLD FREEDOM RDS

leupold.com

Type: red-dot optic

Magnification: none

Objective Lens: 34 mm

Maintube: 34 mm

Reticle: illuminated 1 MOA red dot, 8 brightness levels

Adjustment Range: 80 MOA in 1/4 MOA increments

Power Source: CR2032 battery; up to 1,600 hours

Eye Relief: unlimited

Overall Length: 5.43"

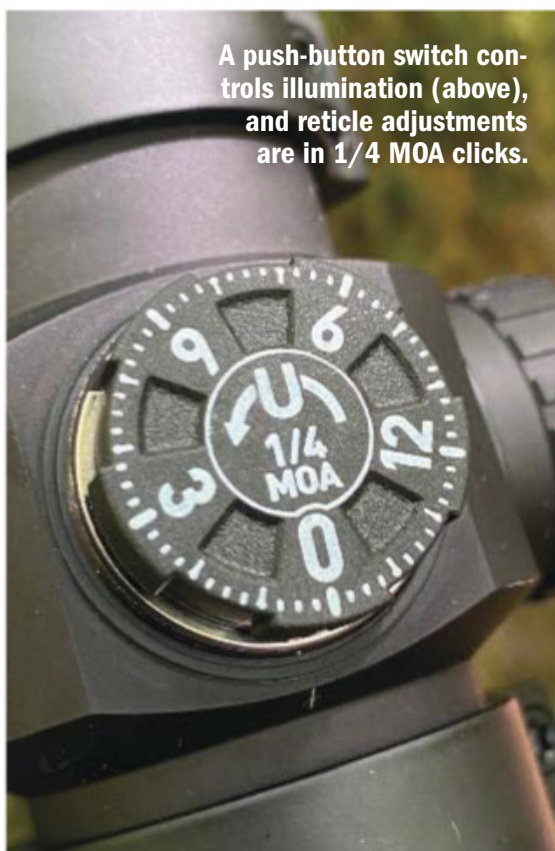
Weight: 6.9 oz.

MSRP: \$279.99

Turrets on the standard Freedom RDS are capped, but a model is available with an exposed elevation dial that is calibrated for .223 Rem. 55-grain loads, owing to the popularity of red-dot optics on AR-style rifles.



A push-button switch controls illumination (above), and reticle adjustments are in 1/4 MOA clicks.



The Freedom RDS is also available with a mount designed to fit a Picatinny-railed AR receiver. Hunters who want to use the optic on a bolt-action rifle, a lever gun or a shotgun will need to purchase separate 34 mm rings.

No magnification and an illuminated dot reticle make the Freedom RDS ideal for shooting with both eyes open. The technique increases peripheral vision and makes it easier to track a moving target. In addition, the optic has unlimited eye relief, which increases target-acquisition speed by maintaining a full field of view regardless of the distance between the shooter's eye and the optic. The Freedom RDS is tailored for hunting situations where shots come suddenly and at close range, such as when still-hunting or participating in a driven hunt.

For testing I mounted the Freedom RDS on a Henry Big Boy lever-action rifle in .44 Rem. Mag. This is a rifle that I carry when shots on whitetails come at ranges of 75 yards or less, and the compact Freedom RDS fit the fast-handling characteristics of the gun. On the range the optic answered adjustments precisely, which I appreciated when running loads with vastly different bullet weights and velocities through the rifle. Some loads had more than a foot of difference between their points of impact, but steadily clicking the adjustment dials of the Freedom RDS made zeroing each one quick and easy.

Red-dot optics certainly have their place in the woods, especially when shots are at short range and come at short notice. The Leupold Freedom RDS is built to handle these types of situations, whether the game is bucks, bears or boars. I have no qualms about leaving my rifles with magnified optics at home when the day's hunt is better suited for a sight like the Freedom RDS. 

RUT, CAMERAS, ACTION

KEEPING TABS ON ROAMING WHITETAILS
MAY BE MORE AFFORDABLE THAN YOU THINK.

By Game & Fish Staff

As the rut approaches and gets cranking, buck patterns can go out the window. Bucks on the search for does behave like they're traveling at random, making it difficult to predict where they'll be at any given time. Trail cameras that monitor buck—and doe—movement can help you make sense of what seems like chaos. Cellular models that transmit images remotely eliminate the need for you to spend time driving and hiking to your camera sets when you could be hunting. And these days, the amount of gas you'll save in not having to drive to a property for card checks could pay for the cost of a cell cam well before season's end. Here are three models at different price levels to keep you up to date on the rut this fall. **G&F**

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feradyne.com

RESOLUTION: 30 MP images, 4K videos

TRIGGER SPEED: .2 sec.

DETECTION RANGE: 80'

FLASH: IR

FLASH RANGE: 100'

POWER SOURCE: 12 AA batteries

SUPPORTED NETWORKS: AT&T, Verizon (one camera)

MSRP: \$269.99

PLAN RATES: \$4.99/mo. for 100 images to \$19.99/mo. for 20,000 images

FAVORITE FEATURE: Covert charges for high-res images and 5-sec. videos on a per-use basis so you only pay for the uploads you want.



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moultriefeeders.com

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TRIGGER SPEED: .75 sec.

DETECTION RANGE: 80'

FLASH: IR

FLASH RANGE: 80'

POWER SOURCE: 12 AA batteries, 12v external input

SUPPORTED NETWORKS: AT&T, Verizon (separate cameras)

MSRP: \$99.99

PLAN RATES: \$4.99/mo. for 100 images to \$34.99/mo. for four cameras and unlimited images

FAVORITE FEATURE: The convenient Moultrie Mobile app offers subject recognition (buck, doe, turkey, person, vehicle) with SmartTags for image filtering and custom alerts.



SPYPOINT FLEX

spypoint.com

RESOLUTION: 33 MP images, 1080p videos

TRIGGER SPEED: .3 sec.

DETECTION RANGE: 100'

FLASH: IR

FLASH RANGE: 100'

POWER SOURCE: 8 AA batteries, 12v external input

SUPPORTED NETWORKS: Multi-carrier LTE (one camera)

MSRP: \$169.99

PLAN RATES: Free for 100 images/mo. to \$15/mo. for unlimited photos; \$5/50 high-res photos or 20 full-HD videos

FAVORITE FEATURE: Two preactivated and installed SIM cards in each cam enable the Flex to automatically connect to the network with the strongest and most reliable signal. If the signal changes, the Flex will switch networks to maintain the best transmission.

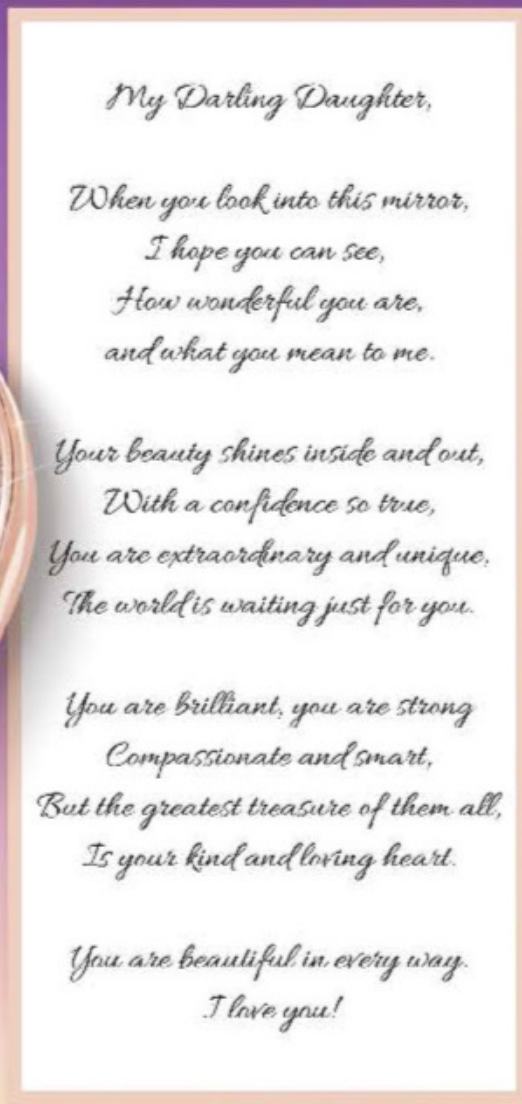


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FEDERAL

GAME LOAD No. 123

HUNTERS HAVE RELIED ON THIS SHOTSHELL FOR NEARLY A CENTURY.

By Adam Heggenstaller



In 1926 Ford Motor Co. announced a 40-hour week for its factory workers and the College Board administered the first SAT for university and college admission. That same year Federal Cartridge Corp. listed 12-gauge shotshell load No. 123, more commonly known at the time as the Federal Hi-Power Favorite, on its price sheet in various shot sizes for \$35.78 per 1,000 rounds. The company, then in its fourth year of business, recommended it for game from squirrels and quail to turkeys and wolves. Hunters have used load No. 123 in their escape from the grinds of work and school ever since.

The Hi-Power Favorite was a 2 3/4-inch, high-brass, paper-hull shell with 1 1/8 ounces of shot loaded to a medium velocity equivalent to that produced by 3 1/4 drams of blackpowder. The dram system was far from esoteric in those days, blackpowder still being used in some factory-produced hunting loads. (Federal's 1926 price sheet shows four.)

Today, Federal calls Product No. H123 the Game Load Upland Heavy

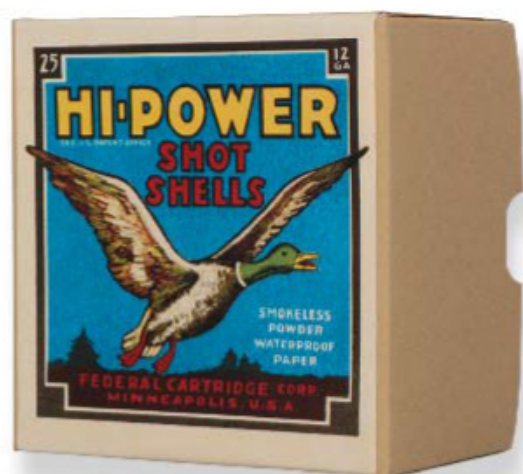
Field, forgoing the superlative for a more practical description and using a plastic hull and wad in the shell's assembly. Nonetheless, the round offers the same charge of lead shot at a moderate velocity of 1,255 fps, a potent load for a variety of small game and birds—if not wolves.

In its early years, the load became popular among sportsmen in part because of company president Charles Horn's marketing savvy. When Horn found it difficult to obtain display space on traditional ammo dealers' shelves, he distributed his shells through other businesses such as barber shops, pool halls and even dentist offices. According to company history, patients would come in to have a tooth filled and leave with an armful of ammunition.

Federal kept the ballistics of its standard No. 123 the same throughout the decades, although the company made periodic changes to the street name of the shell. In 1963 it was called Monark, "the choice of champions," according to a Federal ad from the period. It became the Field Load in 1973 and, more descriptively in 1996, the Classic Lead

Field Load. Perhaps wanting to underscore the shotshell's potency on game, in 2006 Federal referred to it as Game-Shok Heavy Field. For the last 20 years, Federal has sold the load in boxes that are predominantly blue. The color also appeared on Monark packaging with a mallard on the front, lead shot being legal for waterfowl in the 1960s.

Federal marks its 100th anniversary this year, a milestone that the company may not have obtained without the continued success of its shotshells. Steel loads at more than 1,600 fps and turkey loads of TSS get the attention today, but while most hunters don't refer to it as No. 123, Federal's standard 12-gauge game load has been there all along. **GF**



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HOW TO HOLD YOUR MOUTH

THE WRONG POSE CAN RUIN A PHOTO, ALONG WITH THE MOMENT.

On the first Saturday of November Shane and his father drove to the woods together but split up to hunt from their own stands. Like always when they met back at the truck, his father asked Shane what he had seen.

“A 6-point and a nice 8-point. It was awesome!” said Shane. “They walked right under me.”

“I don’t see any blood on your arrows,” replied his father. “You miss?”

“Nah, I didn’t shoot.”

“You didn’t shoot?” asked his father incredulously. “Why not?”

“Well, on TV the other day, I heard a couple of the pros talking about how we shouldn’t shoot small bucks because if we do, they’ll never get big. And I want to kill a monster like those guys.”

Shane’s father cocked his head for a few seconds while he gathered his thoughts.

“Whatever you want to do, son; it’s your hunt,” he said. “But you should realize that a lot of those guys on TV aren’t hunting just anywhere. Many of them hunt on exclusive farms and ranches, and they pay a great deal for the chance to kill big animals. I think you’re crazy to pass up an 8-point with your bow. You’ve only killed a few deer in your life, and trust me, you’ll need the experience for when a monster does show up.”

“Well, if I kill a small one, I know for a fact that buck won’t be getting any bigger.”

“That’s true, son. But if you don’t shoot him, our freezer won’t be getting any fuller.”

“So you think I should shoot small bucks, Dad? That goes against quality deer management. I saw a show about it.”

Shane’s dad chuckled.

“Kinda tough to manage 30 acres that aren’t even ours,” he said. “But look, buddy, you should shoot whatever you want, as long as it’s legal. Truth is, we will have enough food even if we don’t kill a deer. We’re here mainly for fun—America has given us that luxury—so it’s your choice.”

Shane thought about it a lot during the drive home. The following Saturday, the pair went out again, and by lunch Shane was waiting at the truck. Although he tried his hardest, there was no hiding his B&C-sized smile, nor the arrow that was missing from his quiver.

“Well! What’d you get?” asked Shane’s father.

“I got that 8-pointer, Dad!” crowed Shane. “He came in on the same trail, and I made a sweet shot. I saw him go down not 40 yards from where I hit him!”

“Oh wow! Congratulations, son!” said his father before listening to Shane tell the entire story from start to finish. Forty-five minutes later, while the hunters admired the deer together, Shane’s father pulled a camera from his pack.

“Now let’s get a picture of your biggest buck,” he said.

Shane readily got behind the deer and held the 8-pointer’s head up. But suddenly he took on a somber tone, almost a frown. His dad looked up from the camera.

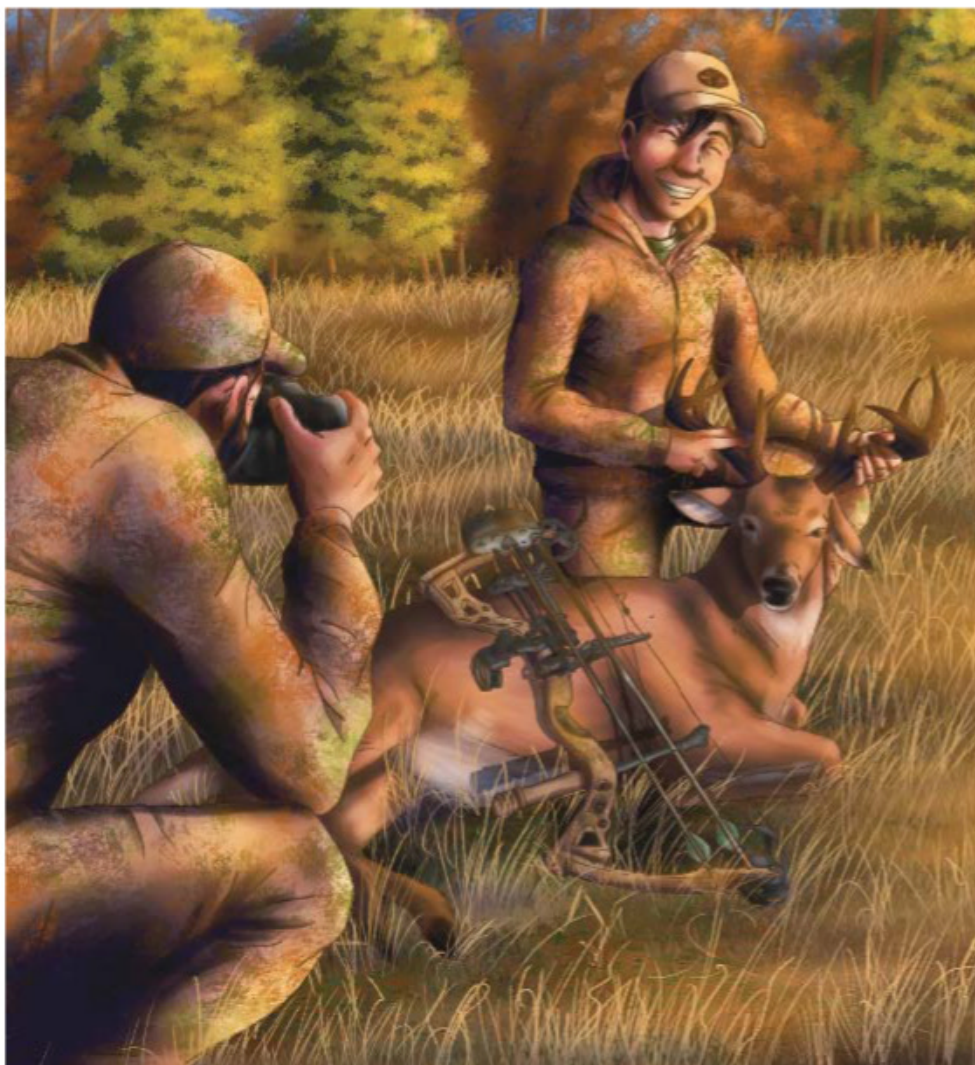
“What’s wrong?”

“Well, one guy on TV said hunters shouldn’t look all giddy when we take pictures. He said it makes hunters look like bloodthirsty hillbillies to people who don’t hunt—like we just enjoy killing.

So I don’t want to look too happy, because part of me is sad for killing this guy.”

“Son,” said his father, “you watch too much TV! You don’t have to hoot and holler like a lunatic if you don’t want to, but you also don’t have to act sad. You are a proud hunter who just made a fantastic shot and took one of the world’s wariest critters. You are happy, I know it. So just be natural. Be true to the animal and to yourself, and the picture will come out perfect.”

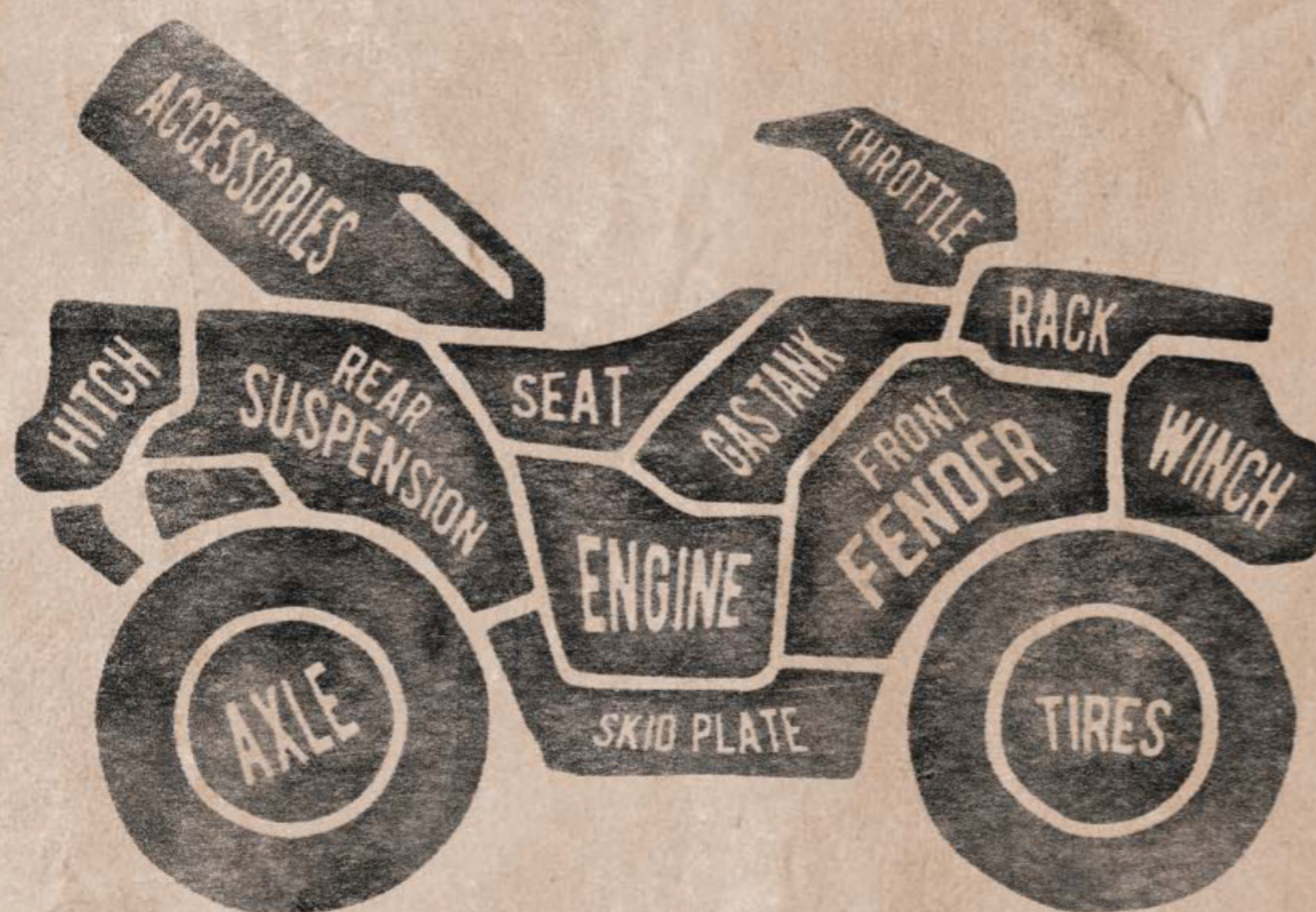
Shane looked at the deer and then the camera. His huge smile returned as he held his buck out for the whole world to see—even if in reality it would only be a few of his buddies at school on Monday. **G+**



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