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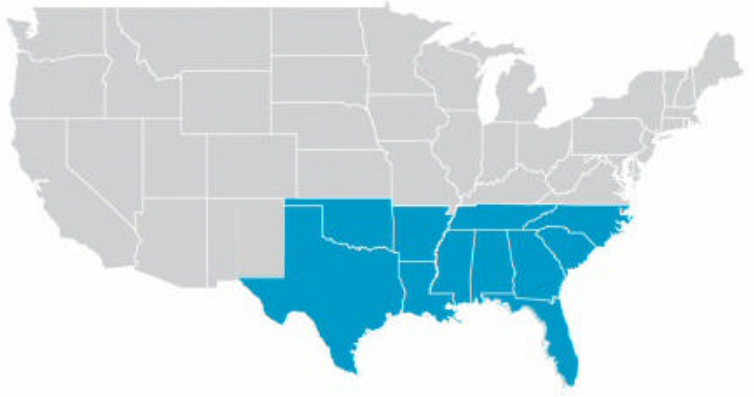


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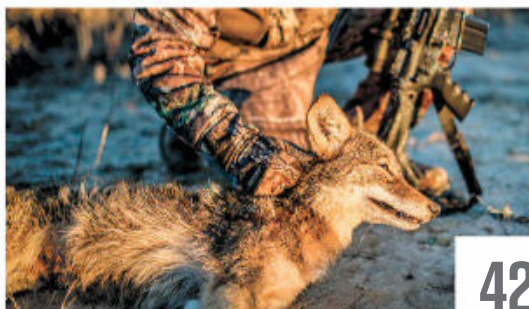
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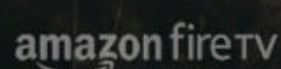
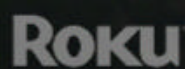
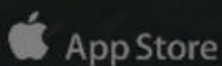
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MAKING MEAT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adam Heggenstaller
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GIANT '21 WHITETAILS

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



BEER FOR DEER

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



TRADESHOW SEASON

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



SHOOTING WITH AIR

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



GET READY FOR BASS

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



COLD & HUNGRY

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

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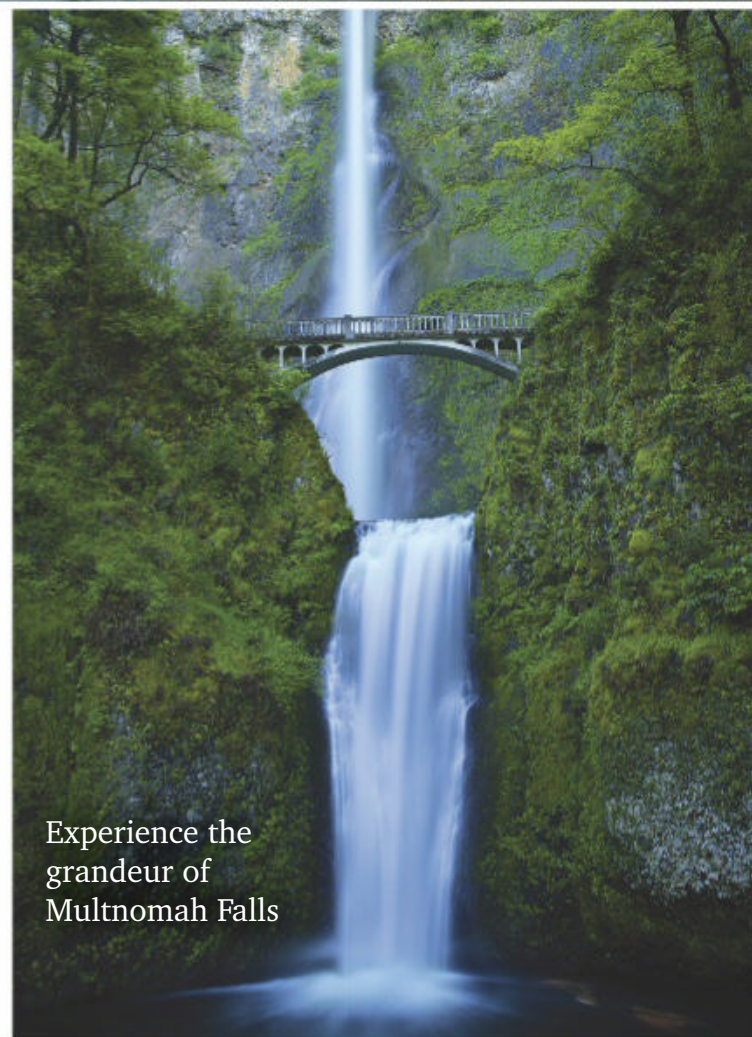


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SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
23 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42	24 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30	25 am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18	26 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06	27 am 7:30 to 9:30 pm 7:54 to 9:54	28 am 8:18 to 10:18 pm 8:42 to 10:42	29 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30
30 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	31 am 10:18 to 12:18 pm 10:42 to 12:42					

FEBRUARY 2022

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

MARCH 2022

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

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

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DAYS

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DAYS

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PROGRESSIVE

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

HEAR THE NOISE

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

By Richard Mann

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

The obvious action is to wear hearing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HEARING PROTECTION FOR HUNTERS

Devices made for the stalk and the stand

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

CHAMPION VANQUISH PRO ELITE

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



WILDEAR FIELDEARZ

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



TETRA MULTI-PURSUIT ALPHASHIELD

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





EARLY BITES

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

By Dr. Jason Halfen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SPRING FLINGS

Throw these baits during the first trips of the season.

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



PANFISH

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

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

Rapala Ultra Light Rippin' Rap

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

BASS

Z-Man ChatterBait

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



LiveTarget Sunfish Rattlebait

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

WALLEYES

VMC Moontail Jig

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



Rapala Rippin' Rap

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

GO SOFT ON PANFISH

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

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

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



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

GIVE BASS A FEAST

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

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

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

RATTLE UP WALLEYES

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

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

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

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



TRICKED OUT FOR TOMS

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

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

By Adam Heggenstaller

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

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

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

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

CHANGE THE CHOKE

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

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

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

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

IMPROVE AIM

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

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

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

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

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

STAY HIDDEN

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

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

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



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

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WOLVES AT THE DOOR

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

By Andrew McKean

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

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

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

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

SUCCESSFUL RECOVERY

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

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

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

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

ADEQUATE REGULATION?

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

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

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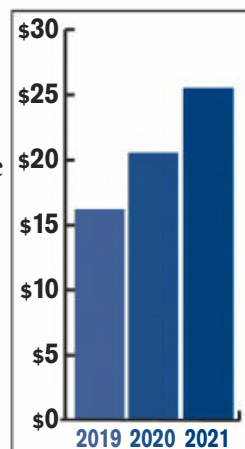
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Silver Trend Chart:
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establish aggressive population-control measures, using snares, night hunting and a compensation arrangement pioneered in Idaho. Under that provision, hunters can receive payments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

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

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

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

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

2020 WOLF POPULATION AND HARVEST

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

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

POPULATION POLITICS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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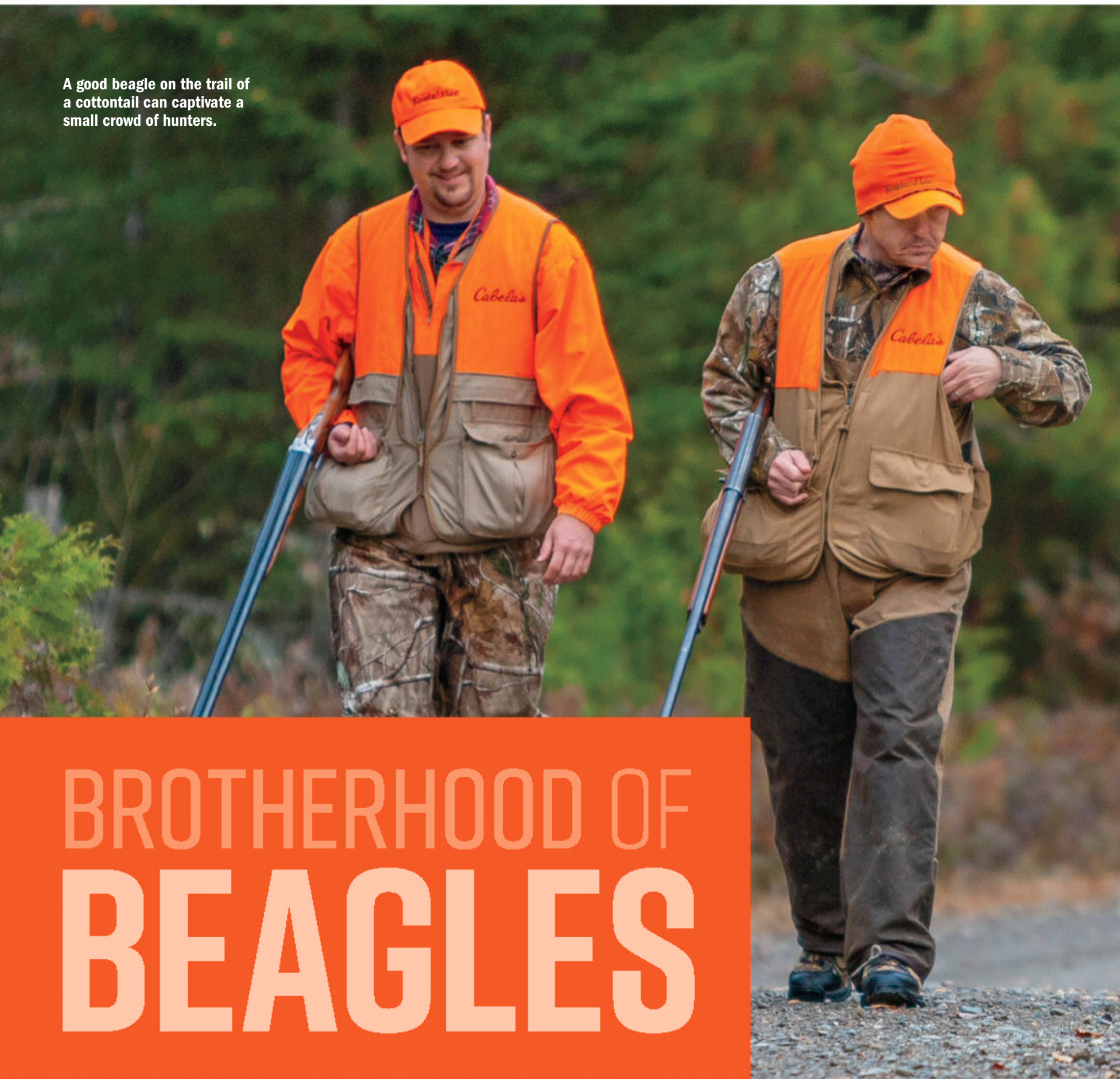


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A good beagle on the trail of a cottontail can captivate a small crowd of hunters.



BROTHERHOOD OF BEAGLES

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

By Brad Fitzpatrick

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

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

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



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

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

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

BORN TO RUN

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

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

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

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

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

A DOG FOR ALL SEASONS

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

ON THE HUNT

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

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

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

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

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

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

RABBIT GEAR

Beat briars, track beagles, bag bunnies.

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

BENELLI NOVA: The Benelli Nova pump shotgun is available in 12 and 20 gauge and features a steel frame with overmolded polymer. This durable exterior surface is perfectly suited for hunting in brush, thorns and heavy forest. With a push of the button you can unload the chamber without emptying the magazine, which is convenient when crossing fences or catching dogs. It's an extremely reliable gun that will serve hunters well in all seasons. \$449 to \$559; benelliusa.com



GARMIN ALPHA 10: Garmin's brand-new Alpha 10 is a compact handheld GPS tracking device that allows you to track and train up to 20 dogs at a range of up to 9 miles. It'll also lead you back to your truck if you get lost in the woods, and of course it works with a wide range of other Garmin products. Garmin also offers TT 15 Mini collar devices that are perfectly-suited to smaller dogs like beagles. \$399.99 (Alpha 10), \$299.99 (TT 15 Mini Dog Device); garmin.com

NITE LITE PRO 1,000 DENIER

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

LACROSSE ALPHABURLY PRO:

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

FEDERAL UPLAND STEEL

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

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

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

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

"That's Polly," Jason said.

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

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



GARMIN ALPHA 10

NITE LITE PRO 1,000
DENIER BRIAR BIBS



LACROSSE
ALPHABURLY PRO

FEDERAL UPLAND
STEEL SHOTSHELLS



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

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

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

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

FAMILY TIES

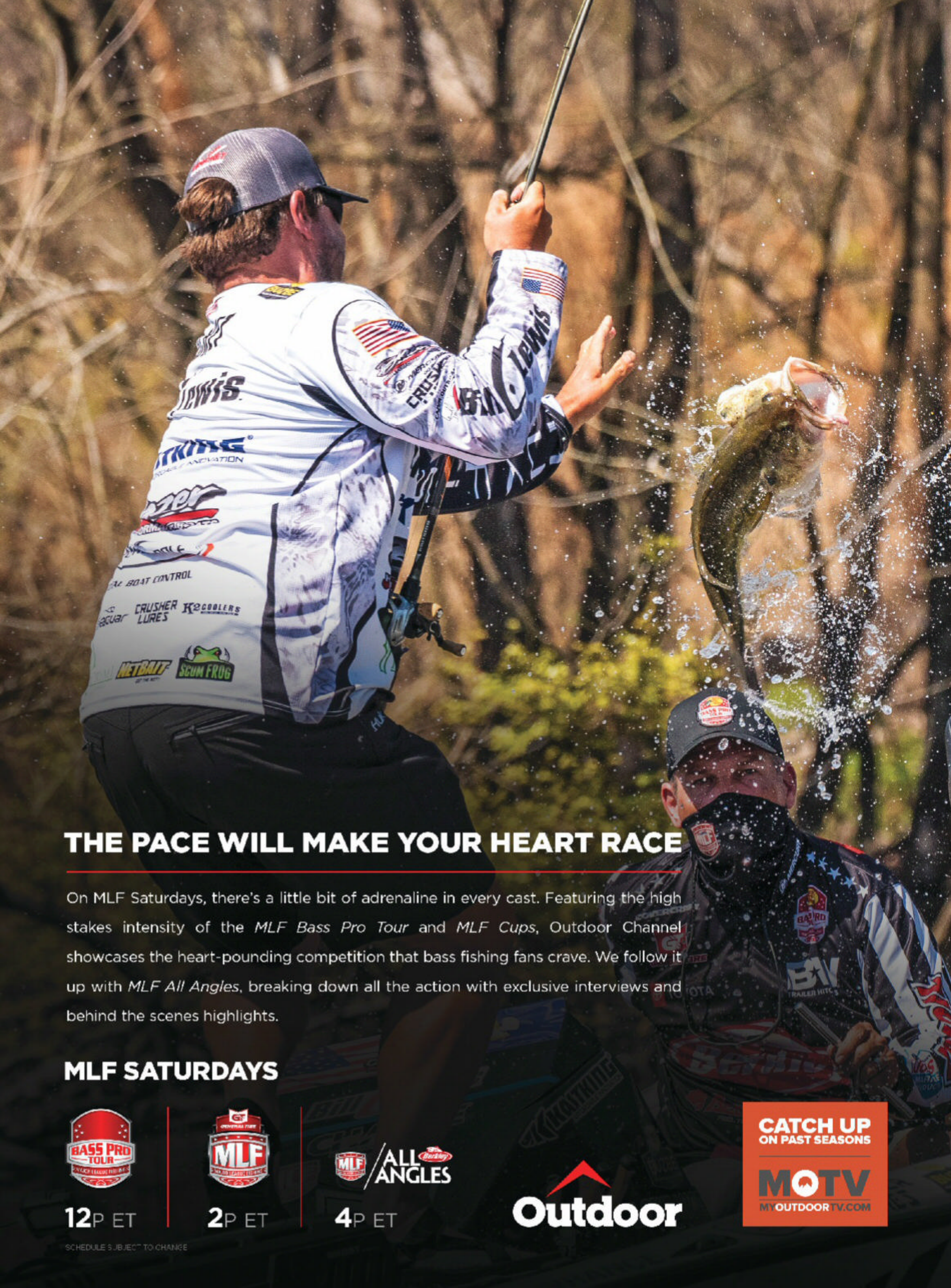
Three years later I purchased two of the dogs we'd hunted that day, Cash and Apollo. I also made fast friends with the Olingers and we've hunted together a handful of times since then whenever our schedules have allowed. Shortly after that first hunt Jenny gave birth to their first son, Colton, and he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

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

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



LON LAUBER PHOTOGRAPHY



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SCHEDULE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

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



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

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

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

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



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

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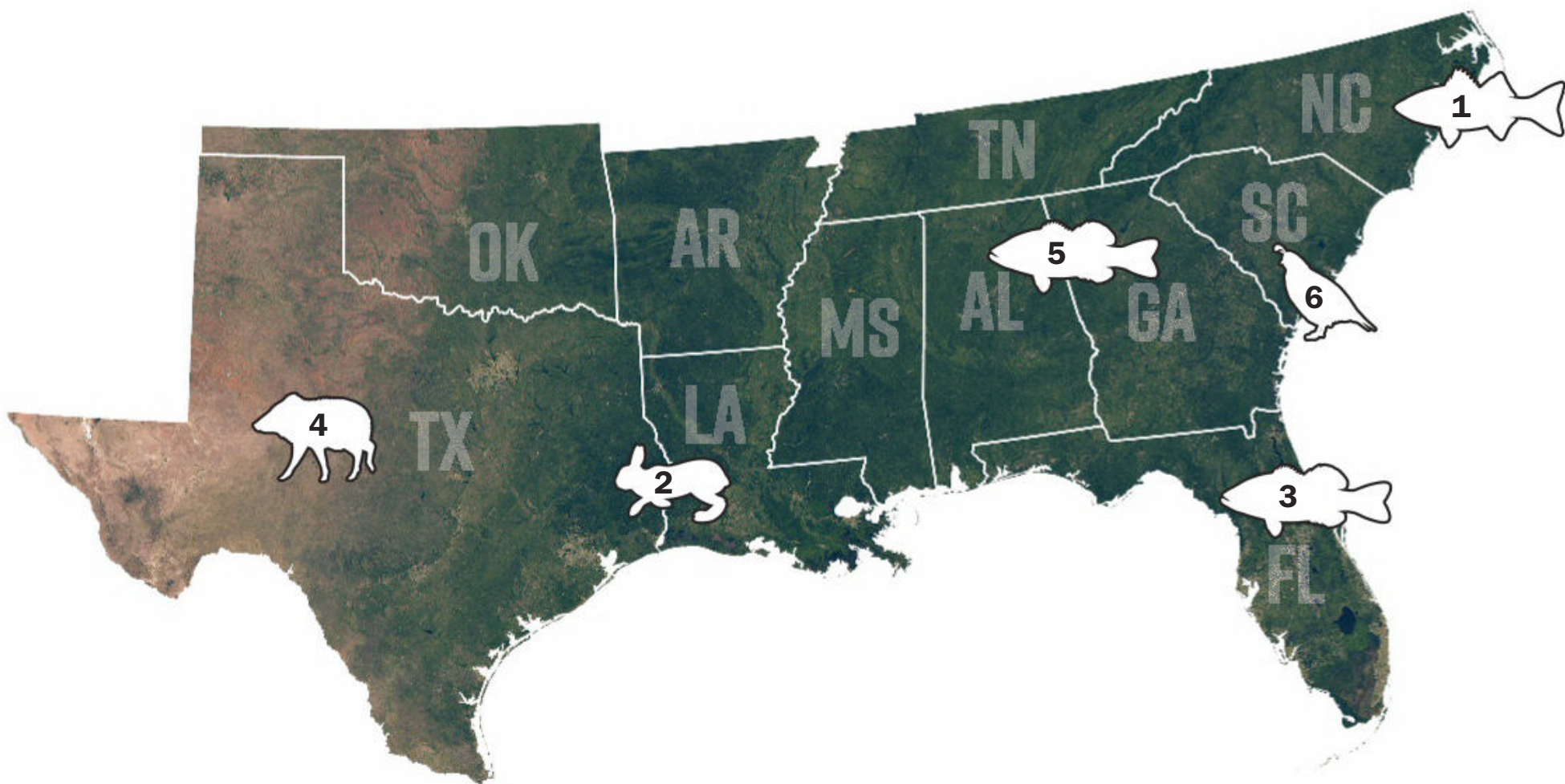


AROUND THE SOUTH

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

By T. Edward Nickens

To some folks, so-called “shoulder seasons” are for second-rate experiences while waiting around for the main event. Not so in the South, where the in-between weather of February can bring out the best in both fish and game. There’s nothing cut-rate about a herd of Hill Country javelina staring you down over the scrub, or a school of blitzing striped bass turning the surf zone into a feeding cauldron. So pack it all—long johns, short sleeves, heavy coats and sunscreen—but don’t fritter February away. It’s neither too late nor too early for some the hottest action of the year.





CAACKALACKY STRIPERS

When the striper fishing heats up along the North Carolina coast, you'll want to show up with every pair of gloves you own. It's a run-and-gun strategy: Course along the beaches and inlets to find big flocks of gannets feeding on menhaden schools, and mix it up with topwater plugs as the stripers attack the drop-off bait balls from the outside in. You'll be casting big baits in seas that can range from "slick calm," as they say around here, to rocking in a winter blow. No matter the weather, when the big schools of stripers show, you've got to find yourself on the "X" of the action. Guides are plentiful from the northern Outer Banks south to Cape Lookout, so don't wait to join in.



BE THE BEAGLE

Eastern cottontail, marsh rabbit, swamp rabbit, desert cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit—there is no shortage of bouncy things to chase in the South. Rabbit seasons just about everywhere are open throughout February, so hunters can stay in the woods long after deer season is a memory. The classic approach involves rabbit dogs and a small crowd of pals, but plenty of hassenpfeffer is made with a dogless DIY hunt. Home in on smaller patches of cover and fingers of woods that extend into fields, and shake, rattle and roll across blowdowns and briar patches to put bunnies on the run.



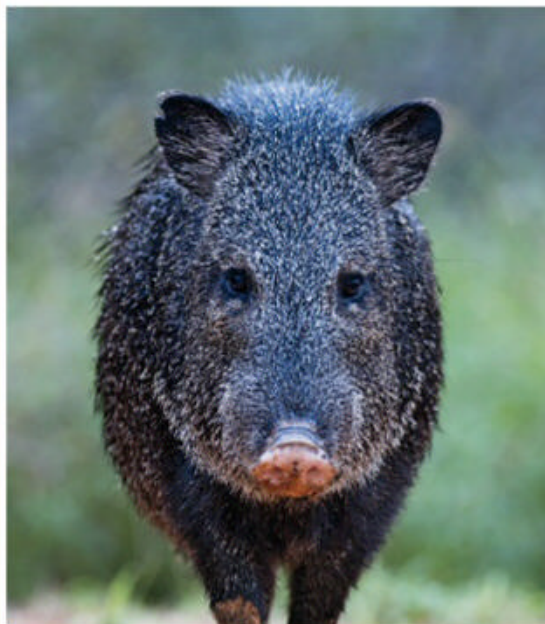
FLORIDA B.A.S.S. KICKOFF

It's a Florida double feature for the Bassmaster Elite Series this year, with two events kicking off the largemouth rodeo. Anglers hit the St. Johns River in Palatka from February 10 to 13, and then the Harris Chain of Lakes in Leesburg from February 17 to 20. The St. Johns opener is becoming something of a tradition. This will be the fourth straight Elite Series opener on the stunning river, with alligators, manatees and gorgeous Spanish moss-draped forests almost stealing the thunder from whopper Florida-strain bass.



TEXAS TUSKERS

Also known as "collared peccary," javelina range as far south as northern Argentina, but only barely make it into the U.S. Although they'll pass for a pocket hog, peccaries aren't true pigs. Still, their rooting, roaming and tusk-bearing ways make them a bucket-list target for hog hunters and deer hunters who aren't quite ready to shelve the rifle or bow. The season for these pint-sized porkers in South Texas runs year-round, while open dates in the north zone that extends like a belt across the middle of Texas closes at the end of February.



ALABAMA LAKE BASS

February in the South can be a Jekyll-and-Hyde affair. The Appalachian Mountains might be sheathed in snow and ice, while on big Southern lakes like Guntersville, warming water in the shallows has the largemouth bass in full spring mode. To get in on some of the earliest action—which happens to be some of the best fishing of the year—prowl the skinny waters. Find grass and weeds close to steep bottom drop-offs or creek channels, and nudge the boat along the cover while drifting large live shiners. It's a classic way to target roaming fish looking for an easy meal.



SOUTH CAROLINA WILD BOBS

In the Palmetto State, a statewide initiative to boost wild bobwhite quail populations is paying dividends. Established in 2015 to restore quail populations to early 1980s levels, the South Carolina Bobwhite Initiative (SCBI) works with agency and non-governmental groups to support prescribed fire and quail-friendly forest management. Public lands within the SCBI regions include the Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge, Sumter National Forest and the Webb, Palachucola, Hamilton Ridge and Oak Lea wildlife management areas. Drop the tailgate there for your best chance at public-land bobwhites.

GIVE A

FLIP



WINTER WEATHER SHOULDN'T KEEP YOU FROM HONING YOUR FLIPPING SKILLS.

By Colin Moore

Retired professional bass angler Denny Brauer has won many national professional bass tournaments and Angler of the Year titles over the years. Ask Brauer what has been the fundamental driver behind his success and he's quick to credit his ability to flip.

Brauer wasn't born with the ability to flip jigs and other baits accurately, nor did he gain the skill simply by going fishing as often as possible. When he was growing up in southeastern Nebraska, and through his early years as a profes-

sional bass fisherman, Brauer developed a practice regimen that helped him keep his flipping talent sharp regardless of the season.

"The best way to practice flipping is to go fishing. But when I was a kid, a lot of times in the winter we didn't have open water to fish," says Brauer. "So, when I was just starting out, I would make myself a practice course. Like a lot of other skills, you have to practice flipping regularly to get good at it. Then, you develop confidence in yourself that helps when you do get to go fishing."

Considered primarily a warm-weather technique, flipping shines almost anytime fish have moved into the slop.

Most of the year, fishing with a flipping outfit poses no problem in the South, but there are the occasional times when bad weather or bitter cold can make it impractical. Likewise, flipping shallow cover during a long cold snap in early spring might not be on an angler's menu when the water temperature is cold and the fish are just starting to move up from offshore.

However, it's to an angler's advantage to prepare for the upcoming fishing season, especially when the bass are holding shallow, by developing his or her presentation skills whenever and wherever possible. As Brauer learned long ago, practicing indoors helps an angler focus solely on flipping and refine his or her expertise. Here's some practical advice from the flipping maestro himself.

GIVE YOURSELF SPACE: Don't try to practice in a room with an 8-foot ceiling. Given that most flipping rods are in the 7 1/2-foot range, it just doesn't work. Better options include a house with a cathedral ceiling, a pole barn, a tractor barn or anywhere else there's plenty of room to maneuver. It's best to practice where it's warm, too, because cold temps will affect your concentration.

GET OUT OF THE WIND: It's OK to practice outside if the weather's mild and the wind isn't blowing a gale. Otherwise, it's hard to develop consistent accuracy if the wind is pushing on you and whatever you've got tied on. If you can practice outside, put your targets under lawn chairs or other obstacles. That way, it's like you're going down a row of docks, and it gives you a level of difficulty that will help you on the water. If practicing indoors, flip at targets that are under tables and chairs.

SET PLENTY OF TARGETS: Set up 20 targets or more. Coffee mugs or foam cups that have been weighted work pretty well. You want an opening of about 3 inches across, because sometimes that's about your target size when flipping weed mats, docks or bank cover. The fisherman who can hit the smallest targets quickly, consistently and quietly is the one who usually catches the most fish when flipping.

SPACE THEM OUT: You don't want to set up a straight line of targets. They should range from close to fairly far away (whatever distance you feel comfortable flipping out to) because that's the way flipping targets are on the water. You can arrange them in a horseshoe pattern or even haphazardly. Move the targets around from time to time to challenge yourself. Use pieces of tape or other small objects to mark the spot where you'll stand as you make your rounds. While you're at it, you might as well practice pitching, too, if you've got the space.

GEAR UP: When practicing, use whatever you're going to be fishing with. The baits and their weight will change some, but otherwise stick with the same rod-and-reel outfit and the same line. Also, use the same pound-test line you'll fish on the lake.

This winter, when the weather turns nasty or cabin fever hits, set up an indoor course and practice your flipping. You'll be glad you did when the flipping bite turns on this summer. 



Pro angler Denny Brauer is a fabled flipper who credits his impressive skills to his commitment to practice early in his career.



Beating a hog's nose through situational awareness is critical to success. While their eyesight is suspect, they have an acute sense of smell.

PRESSED PORK

HUNTING WILD PIGS—ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT HAVE ENCOUNTERED OTHER HUNTERS—IS TOUGH, BUT CERTAINLY NOT IMPOSSIBLE.

By Colin Moore

Hog hunting is a popular recreational pursuit throughout the South, but it's also an ecological necessity. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), every state in the region has too many feral swine and the damage they inflict on croplands and natural habitat costs in the millions of dollars annually.

However, feral swine have a knack for making themselves scarce when hunted. Hogs might not look too bright, but looks are deceiving in their case. Those who have hunted them on a regular basis know they're no pushovers, and it doesn't take a lot of hunting pressure to put them on guard. Here are a few tricks to help you track them down.

STALK THE SKITTISH

Hogs, especially the younger ones, can be downright careless until they start getting targeted by hunters—then they wise up fast.

“When hogs start having human encounters fairly frequently where I hunt, they spend less time in the open and move way back into the woods, swamps and off the beaten path,” says Don Hammond, a retired marine fisheries biologist who lives near Charleston, S.C. “Then—at least in the daytime—they like to hang out in the swamp edges



Hogs are diurnal creatures and will move either during the day or at night depending on the amount of pressure they receive.

where it's so thick you can't see more than 20 yards around you.

"When they get that skittish, I've found it's better to slow-stalk the swamp edges into the wind," he says. "I take three or four steps and stop and listen awhile before moving on. Stalking pigs is a solo deal, though. I have never had any luck stalking pigs when guiding another hunter. Someone is always going to move or make a noise at the wrong time."

Hammond likes to stalk close—he's shot multiple pigs at less than 10 yards—but sometimes pressured hogs are so near that a hunter can't help but walk up on them. Occasionally, noise works in the hunter's favor. A hunter might hear hogs rooting or fussing at each other. For the most part, though, they stay quiet and careful as they forage in swamplands or lay up during the heat of the day.

Wild hogs multiply seemingly exponentially. Sows are sexually mature at six months and often breed twice a year.



HOG HIDEAWAYS

Groundblinds are an excellent option for mobile hunters.

If the terrain allows, a ground blind can provide the perfect concealment for a hunter who has to move around in deep cover to find wary wild pigs. Here are some budget-priced blinds that can pull double-duty in turkey and deer seasons.

PRIMOS DOUBLE BULL SURROUNDVIEW STAKEOUT HUNTING BLIND

The Double Bull Stakeout allows you to see out without critters seeing in. The two-hub, two-panel blind is 37 inches tall and measures 59 inches from corner to corner, with three windows that open and close. Swathed in Mossy Oak Greenleaf camo, the blind weighs just 4 1/2 pounds. (\$124.99; primos.com)

BASS PRO SHOPS PURSUIT SPRING STEEL GROUND BLIND

This blind is bargain-priced but roomy enough for a solo hunter (58 by 58 inches and 5 feet high). The Pursuit is made of a 150-denier material and has three large, zippered windows with mesh coverings. (\$69.99; basspro.com)

AMERISTEP CARE TAKER

This is a robust blind (13 1/2 pounds) that's designed for prolonged sets. Featuring nine mesh windows, the Care Taker provides plenty of visibility. All of the closures are quiet, and the Mossy Oak Break-Up Country camo keeps you concealed. (\$109.99; ameristep.com)



While stalking is a good option, stand hunting can also pay off. Hammond, who hunts hogs and deer alike with a .270 Win. and 130-grain spitzer-type bullets, has trail cameras and stands strategically positioned around his feeders, mainly to pattern whitetails.

Deer season on private lands where he hunts opens in mid-August, and hogs aren't pestered much until deer hunters show up in numbers. When the shooting starts, however, hogs gradually begin to shy away from feeders except at night, and even then, their comings and goings are more sporadic and less predictable. Hammond doesn't waste his time setting up on feeders until "dark-thirty," as he puts it.

"It's also important to approach your hog stand from a different direction than the hogs normally use to get there," says Hammond. "It's like deer hunting, and if your scent is going to drift over to where the hogs are feeding, don't hunt there that day."

"Go to another stand where the wind is right," Hammon continues. "Hogs really won't cut you much slack if they get your scent. They don't see and hear as well as deer, but never underestimate their sense of smell and how they'll react if they catch wind of you. They'll be out of there and you won't even know they're gone."

COURTESY OF MISSISSIPPI TOURISM (TOP)



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SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

SPORTSMAN

GO LONG

If you don't think Jay Coleman is serious about keeping hogs away from his fields near Yazoo City, Miss., check out his arsenal of nighttime pig-popping rifles. The trio includes a Sig Sauer .300 Blackout (with a Pulsar Trail Imaging RXQ30V thermal scope), a .300 Win. Mag. made by NEMO Arms (usually paired with a Trijicon REAP-IR 35mm thermal scope) and a LMT 5.56 teamed either with an Eotech laser illuminator or the Trijicon. For general low-light hunting, Coleman might swap out one of his thermal scopes for a Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x42mm mounted on the NEMO rifle. Another useful tool for spotting hogs after dark is his ATN PVS 7 night-vision goggles mounted on a Chase Tactical light helmet. The small, light and versatile REAP-IR is Coleman's favorite thermal scope, but all his rifles and scopes are interchangeable.

Where feral swine are hunted only occasionally, their feeding and family habits don't change much. As soon as they feel threatened, however, hogs quickly learn how to stay out of harm's way. When they do, Coleman makes himself less conspicuous by putting as much distance as he can between himself and the pigs.

It took a lot of range time, but Coleman became an excellent long-range shot. A 300-yard poke in the daytime is a gimme for him, and Coleman sometimes takes shots of more than 800 yards. His practice target near his home is set at 1,350 yards.

Hogs are diurnal by nature, meaning they have no preference when they move around and go about their daily routine, but hunting pressure will turn them into night prowlers. Coleman is prepared for that eventuality when his daytime supply of hog targets dries up. He typically first locates hogs by driving around his property and looking for sign, or by mounting cellular cameras on trees and fenceposts.

"Once hogs wise up that you're after them they become super careful," he says. "It might be midnight with the wind in your favor, but if one hog in a bunch senses or suspects that something's not right, it'll take off and the rest of them will scatter in all directions."

WATER IS KEY

"Sweating like a pig" is a term sometimes used to describe one's reaction to being outdoors in hot weather. But it's one of the most inaccurate phrases there is when applied to wild hogs. You'd think that feral swine, whose ancestors originated in tropical locales, would be genetically equipped to handle hot weather better.

As odd as it seems, however, porkers don't sweat much at all and consequently suffer from high temperatures more than most critters. Because pigs lack major sweat (or, eccrine) glands, they'll stick around shady water holes on the hottest days and visit them often. Scouting will reveal hog wallows or where they pass through to and from water holes on a

regular basis. The hotter the weather, the more often porkers will visit out-of-the-way wallows to avoid hunting pressure. The best scenario is to set up on fresh sign with a ground blind or screen and hunt hogs when the temperature is pushing triple digits. Focus on thick cover in the backcountry with several escape routes. And mud is a must-have.

"Pigs prefer to feed around wet areas where the ground is soft and their wallowing areas aren't far away," says Hammond.

"When I go into a new area, the first thing I look for is where water is standing and where there is thick vegetation—mostly palmettos—all around. Then I'll skirt the water's edge and move very slowly, paying constant attention to the wind direction."

MENU SWAP

Who doesn't get tired of the same old grub? Wild hogs have an abundance of natural food sources, such as native vegetation, worms, acorns and what they can root up in a farmer's field. But once in a while they appreciate a change in their diet. If the sign says they've all but used up the main food sources they've been focusing on, or have grown wary of approaching the same bait piles or fields because of hunting pressure, try different food.

A variety of attractants are available through online mail-order outlets, farmers' supply stores and wherever hog-hunting accessories are sold. Old-timers swear by strawberry gelatin poured over shucked corn set within range of a ground blind or stand. Another option is to use a post hole digger to dig a hole about 4 feet deep and fill it with kernels of soured corn. Hogs will practically stand on their heads in the hole to get at the corn.

To make soured corn, pour kernels into a 5-gallon bucket until it's about half-full. Then, cover the corn with water or a mixture of beer/water and put the lid on the bucket (it doesn't have to be tight). A tablespoon of baker's yeast can be substituted for the beer, depending on how you feel about supplying hogs with your beer. Within a few days, the concoction will have transformed into terrible, stinking mess—just the right treat to tempt some pressured pigs within range. 



Wild hogs come in many shapes and sizes, but they all have a destructive impact on habitat and crops.

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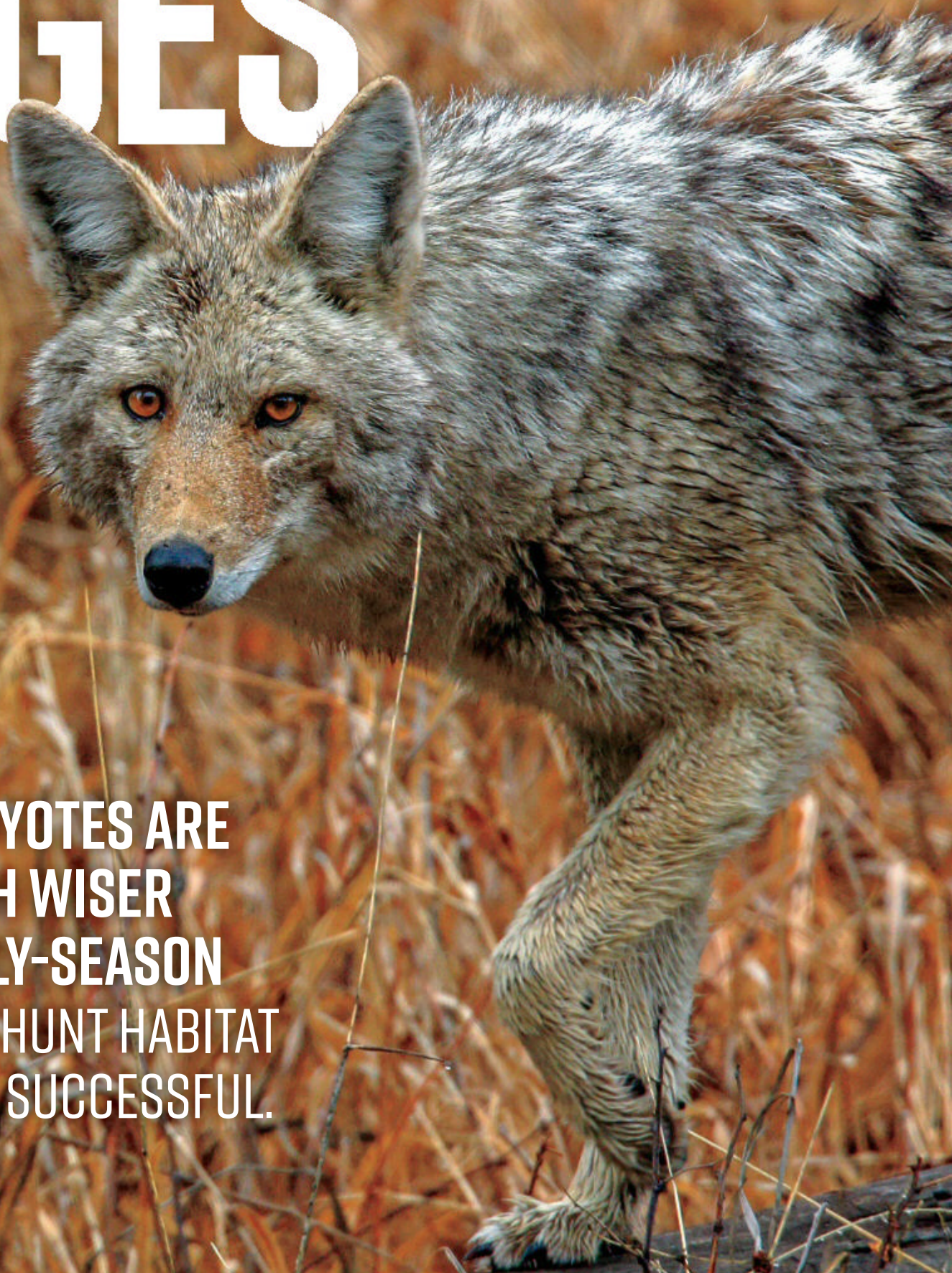
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AROUND THE EDGES

A close-up photograph of a coyote standing in a field of dry, golden-brown grass. The coyote has grey and white fur, pointed ears, and orange-brown eyes. It is looking slightly to the left of the camera. The background is a soft-focus field of similar dry grass.

**LATE-SEASON COYOTES ARE
OLDER AND MUCH WISER
THAN THEIR EARLY-SEASON
COUNTERPARTS. HUNT HABITAT
INTERFACES TO BE SUCCESSFUL.**

By Gary Lewis



In late winter, coyotes can be warier than ever. Stay on a set longer than at other times of the year, especially when hunting on small farms.

IMAGES ON THE WILDSIDE

February coyotes are flat-out hard to fool. The inexperienced and indiscreet among them have been shot or, if they survived, are now enlightened, having learned what they have to do to eke out a living. This month, coyotes are in the breeding mood. They're paired up, hunting together and searching out their dens, which will be home base for the next few months.

From the Carolinas to Texas, from December through April, a coyote's diet consists of deer, wild hogs, rabbits and mice, augmented by such delicacies as feral and less-than-feral cats, skunks, gray squirrels and cotton rats.

With their new level of late-season wariness, how do we hunt them? We go to the edges, scouting the interfaces where landscape gives way to greenscape. Where the forest meets the feedlot. Where "free range chicken" meets "wild turkey."

LATE HIDEOUTS

In January or February, female coyotes go into estrus, which is followed by a two-month gestation period. During estrus and mating, a coyote pair search out potential den sites and will scent-mark their favorite spots to announce their intentions to other coyotes. They will often reuse old dens, but if coyote numbers are high, or recent development has pushed them out of previously used den sites, they will excavate new digs.

When searching for den locations, look for changes in elevation where the soil is conducive to digging, but where it is also well-drained. A den can be in the hollowed-out base of a rotten tree, beneath a rock outcropping or expanded from a badger hole. Usually, the den is on the side of a hill, where water intrusion isn't a factor, with some sort of protective cover in front of it like logs, boulders or brush concealing the entrance.

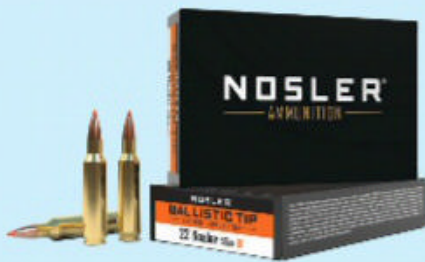
Dens may extend for 10 feet underground. The male and the female dig together and often there are multiple exits. For the hunter, finding the den is a starting point, but it must be coupled with figuring out the types of habitats and environments coyotes are using during the breeding season.

In urban and suburban environments, coyotes tend to hide out during the day; however, they will venture out in daylight during the pup season when there are more mouths to feed. In February,

COYOTE CARTRIDGES

A look at three of the hottest modern-day varmint loads

There is an ever-expanding selection of varmint-specific ammunition on the market. Here are some of the best.



.22 NOSLER: Approaching .22-250 Rem. velocities in a smaller package, the .22 Nosler has 25 percent more case capacity than a .223 Rem., making the round capable of pushing a 55-grain Ballistic Tip bullet up to 3,500 fps.



.224 VALKYRIE: An excellent round for hunting coyotes with AR-platform rifles, the .224 Valkyrie launched in the fall of 2017. One of the best loads for coyotes in this cartridge is Hornady's Varmint Express with a polymer-tipped, 60-grain V-Max bullet. Expect a muzzle velocity of 3,300 fps.



.300 BLACKOUT: A big advantage of the .300 BLK is the ease with which it is suppressed. One of Hornady's Black offerings is loaded with a 110-grain bullet that travels at 2,375 fps. Nosler offers a .300 BLK load with a 125-grain Ballistic Tip Varmint and a muzzle velocity of 2,250 fps.

coyotes typically hunt underdeveloped areas like ditches, greenscapes, culverts and open fields. Out in the countryside, in areas dotted with small farms and timber plots, coyotes tend to hunt when there is little likelihood of human or domestic dog interaction.

This became apparent to me when I tried to call in problem coyotes on several small 10-acre farms. The coyotes would come to the call, but on their own terms, meaning in the first and last hours of light.

While it is common to call coyotes throughout the day on large tracts of unused public land, urban- and rural-interface coyotes are more likely to rest up the balance of the day and become active from dusk to dawn.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

By early March, paired-up coyotes are in the den and will remain there through the end of April and beyond while pups are reared and territories are established. This is nesting time and the den is jealously guarded.

On occasion you will hear reports of people being "attacked" by a coyote when out walking their dogs. Pay attention to these reports. The dog walker got too close to the den and the coyote showed itself. Such a report can clue you into where a potential den is located—one

you may be able to hunt if in a location conducive to hunting. To elicit a similar response, bring your dog and keep it on a leash—or let it roam free if you trust it to stay in sight.

I used to hunt with a beagle that (mostly) came when called. One morning a pair of coyotes came to my calls and focused on the tri-colored hound, committing the fatal error of trying to run it off.

On the same hunt, another coyote came off the top of the hill just behind my partner, though he missed the 20-yard chip shot.

HANG TIGHT

When paired-up coyotes are hunting and pause to rest, they tend to position themselves on opposite sides of small hills. To communicate, they will use interrogatory (locate) howls. The hunter can mimic this with a howl, then go quiet for a few minutes. Next, introduce a food-source sound, like that of a cottontail in distress, a rodent sound or a chicken-in-distress sound, paired with coyote growling sounds.

Additionally, I recommend staying put a bit longer this time of year. Instead of spending 15 or 20 minutes at a stand, it is better to stay longer on each set, especially when calling on or near small farm properties.



Match your call sounds to the primary food sources in the area. Distress sounds of favorite prey animals will often bring hungry coyotes running.

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

BORN TO WEAR CAMO

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

MICHAEL WADDELL'S

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One February, I was calling on public land along a fence line next to private orchard grass fields. That day I called two coyotes on one stand, six coyotes on another and, at the last stand of the day, while perched in a tree, I called two others. I didn't get all those coyotes (I shot three), but they kept coming, even after the first shot.

The lesson was it often pays to remain in place after a shot is fired, even after a missed shot. Remain concealed, keep calling and finish the set, because another dog just may be on its way in. Often, gun shots don't scare coyotes as much as we think they do.

COWS AND CHICKENS

Cattle feedlots offer coyotes a ready food supply. Coyotes hang around the boneyards, eating ground squirrels, controlling the mice and watching for the carcasses of expired livestock. It is also not uncommon to see coyotes mingling among cattle in feedlots, either. During an early-season deer hunt, I had to drive through a feedlot twice a day for five days. Each time through the lot I saw coyotes lurking there. I made a mental note of that and circled back around and decoyed a couple of them within earshot of an Angus.

Poultry operations attract coyotes, too. Depending on the size, there will be numerous chickens that die and eggs that break. Many of these operations place carcasses in open holes and then top them with dirt when full. Here, coyotes will congregate looking for an easy meal. If you have access to such a place, it is well worth a close look.

HIDE, SEEK, CALL

Hunting coyotes is a tough tactical pursuit. They can and do appear out of nowhere. Many times, they do so without alerting the hunter of their approach or announcing their arrival. As such, there are several things you need to consider when setting up and calling late in the season.

Keep in mind that these coyotes have been hunted hard, so they have their eyes peeled for anything that looks suspect. When setting up to call, choose a spot offering the best concealment. This may mean sitting in front of a small tree, weedy clump or bushy fencepost to break up your silhouette. Facemasks and camo gloves are mandatory now, too. Prop



Even where the terrain is open, finding a backdrop—be it a tree or a clump of grass—is important for breaking up your silhouette.

the barrel of your shotgun or rifle on a boot toe, with the safety on, pointed in the direction from which coyotes will most likely approach.

When determining what calls to use, consider the primary food sources that are still available. Are there rabbits around? Deer, hogs, chickens or feral cats? All of these are easy distress sounds to replicate with just about any commercially available electronic call.

Start a call set with an interrogatory howl then stop and listen for an answer. If nothing calls back, give another howl, making it a bit louder than the first call. Keep in mind that most late-season coyotes typically won't howl back. They will either run in to fight or, more likely, sneak in and try to run off the interloper. If a coyote does howl back, give it a fight howl or a submissive female whine.

If no coyote shows up in 4 or 5 minutes, switch to a food-source distress sound. On the edge of the suburbs, a good call choice is a feral cat distress or mating sound. Then, take a hard right

turn and amplify the sound of scrapping coyotes. Use pup sounds or adult fight sounds—nothing makes a pair of denning 'yotes madder than other coyotes fighting on their home turf.

Out in farm country, wild hog sounds, or a whitetail-in-distress bawl, might be a better food-source choice. Call sets in urban and rural interfaces should last 20 to 60 minutes. Once, I used chicken sounds and shot a big coyote at dusk that waited an hour before stalking in.

If you're hunting with a partner, one person should watch the downwind side, as coyotes often approach from there. And, more than at any other time, late-winter/early-spring call sequences should utilize coyote and/or domestic dog vocalizations.

No matter where your predator pursuits take you this year, keep in mind that late-season coyotes have been hunted hard. They are now keenly aware of any intrusions into their world. As such, you must modify your approach to hunting them while keying in on the edges. 



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MAKE VERSATILITY

**LIPLESS CRANKBAITS CATCH LOTS OF FISH,
YET MOST ANGLERS DON'T FISH THEM
TO THEIR FULLEST POTENTIAL.**

By Ken Duke

There is a common misconception among bass anglers that lipless crankbaits aren't a cold-weather bait. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

JEFF GUSTAFSON



What's a lure that's been around for decades but still catches bass like it's new? What's the most ubiquitous hard lure in bass-fishing history, yet is one few anglers get the most out of? What lure can be so easy to use that even a beginner can fish it well? What lure is effective shallow or deep, fast or slow? What lure offers different applications on monofilament versus fluorocarbon versus braided lines? What lure both casts like a bullet and can be fished vertically?

The answer to all of these, of course, is the lipless crankbait. And while it's a safe bet you have one in your tackle box, it's even more likely you have 10 or 20.

All lipless crankbaits have four things in common: 1. They sink (though there are floating versions); 2. they vibrate when you crank them; 3. they have internal noisemakers; and 4. they catch fish.

These baits work year-round and under a wide range of conditions because they're versatile—more versatile than most anglers realize. And they catch bass in February even though few anglers are fishing them yet. Lots of your fellow bassers think it's too cold to throw a rattle bait in February. Don't think like them.

FEBRUARY OPTIONS

This is an unpredictable month. February can be unseasonably warm, unreasonably cold or anywhere in between. No matter the conditions you face, the lipless crankbait offers an option so strong you should always have one tied on.

SCENARIO 1: ON THE BLUFFS

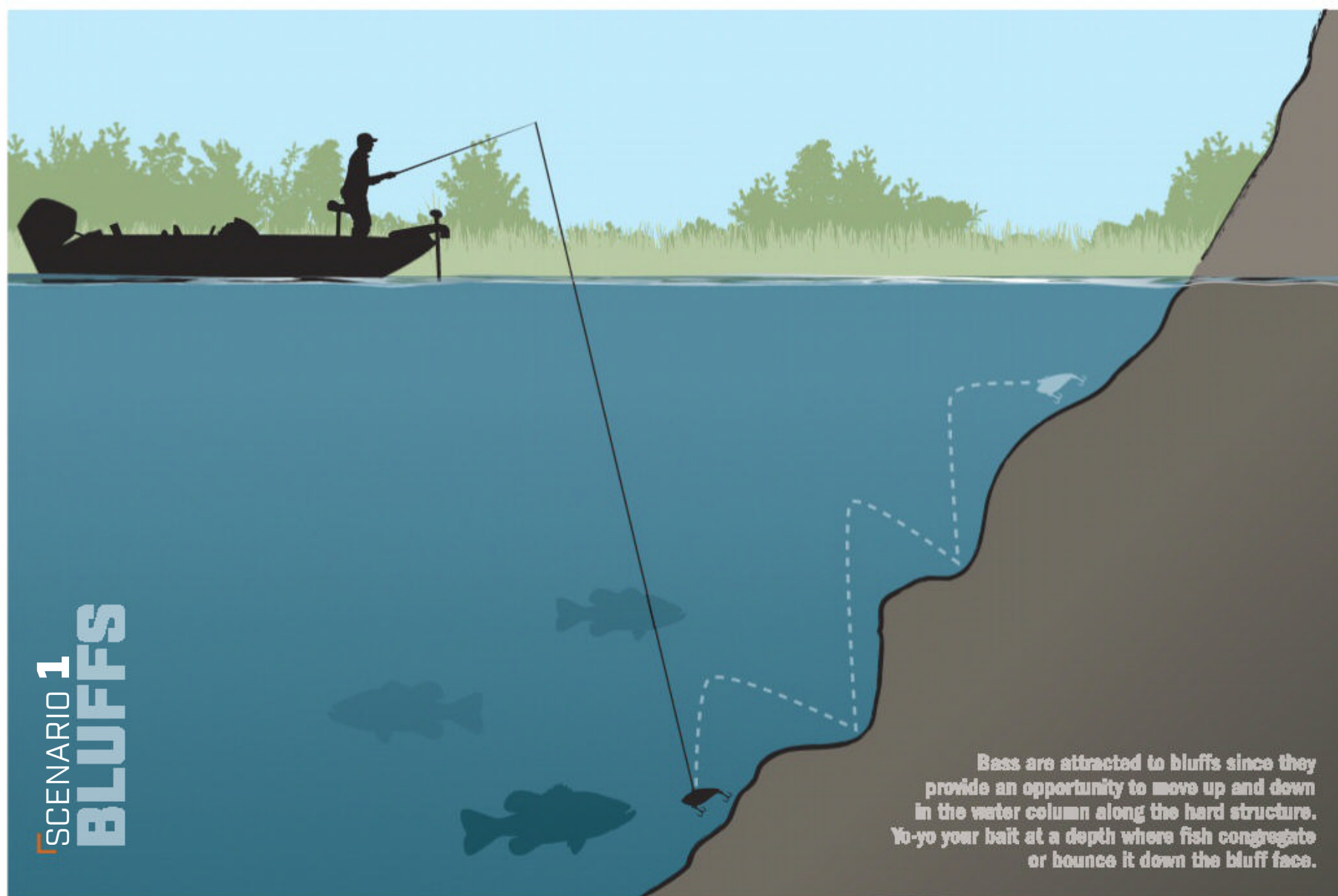
If you're fishing a deep, clear, rocky highland impoundment in February, it's likely that water temperatures are low and the bass are hugging bluff walls. These structures are attractive because the bass can easily move up to warm in the midday sun, move down to sulk when it's extra cold or move around the bluff to follow bait.

For these fish, your lipless crankbait can shine in two ways. First, you can make long casts along the bluff wall and count the lure down to the bass. Most lipless cranks sink at a rate of 1 1/2 to 2 feet per second.

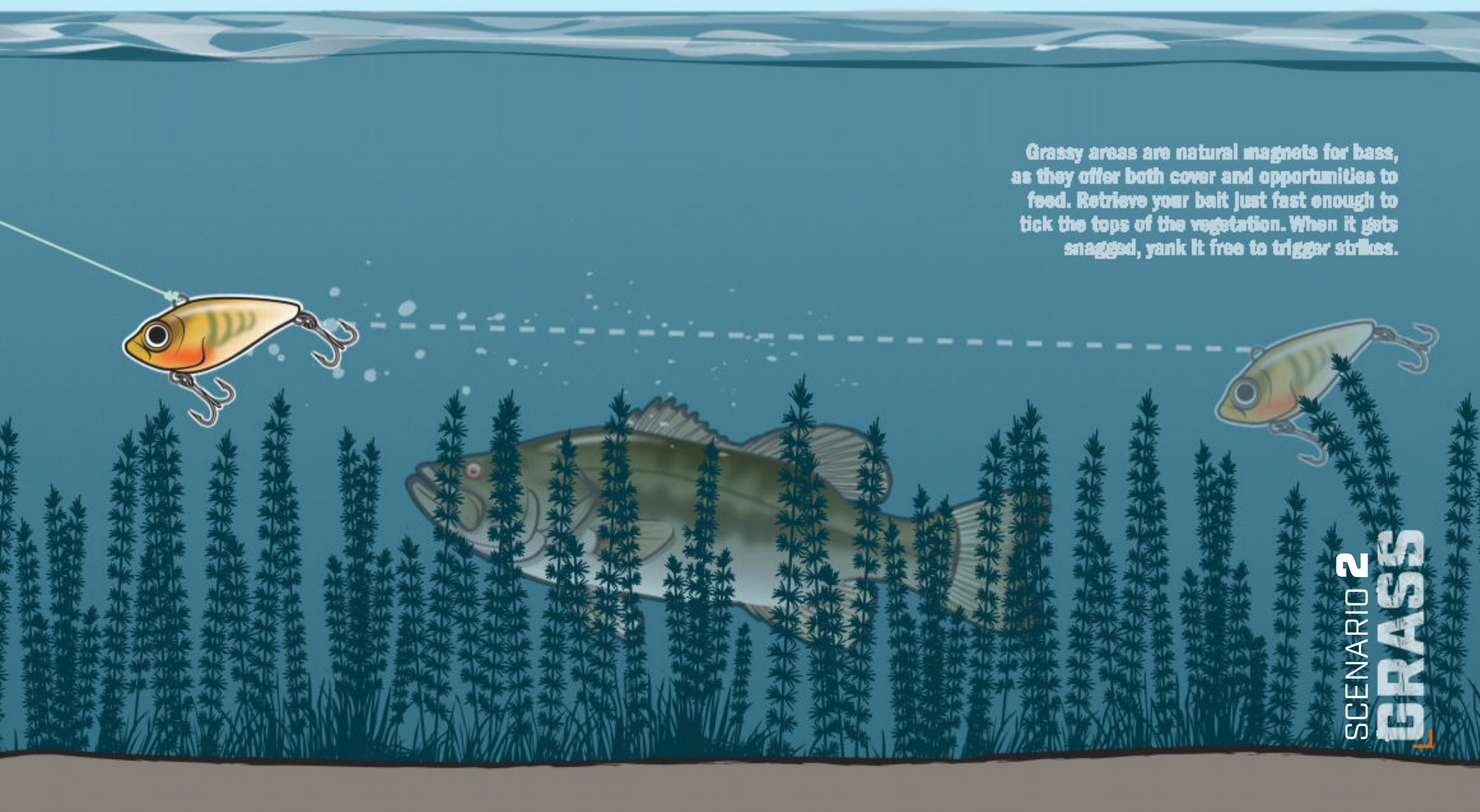
Generally, you want to retrieve your lure just fast enough to keep it in or slightly above the fish. If the bass re-



The beauty of a lipless crankbait is there's virtually no wrong way—or wrong place—to fish it.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER SUCHESKI; BILL LINDNER PHOTOGRAPHY (ABOVE)



Grassy areas are natural magnets for bass, as they offer both cover and opportunities to feed. Retrieve your bait just fast enough to tick the tops of the vegetation. When it gets snagged, yank it free to trigger strikes.

SCENARIO 2 GRASS

spond, you're in business. If they don't, maybe it's moving too fast for their metabolism. Try going vertical.

Position your boat directly over the bass, being careful not to cast a shadow over them that could spook them. Then, drop your lure to a depth just above the fish and yo-yo it.

Alternatively, you can bounce the bait down the bluff face, hopping it along as it falls. Watching the vibrating, rattling plug yo-yo up and down or bang along is often more than the bass can stand. Just be sure not to let the plug fall below the fish; you won't get any strikes there.

For this approach, use 10- to 12-pound-test fluorocarbon. In these scenarios there's typically little cover to contend with, and fluoro's near invisibility is an asset in clear water. Lipless crankbaits ranging from 1/2 to 3/4 ounce are typically best.

SCENARIO 2: IN THE GRASS

At the other extreme of February bassin' there's the possibility that the fish are in submerged vegetation on flats near a drop-off. It's a common scenario in the Deep South, as the water's warming

and the bass are moving toward their spawning grounds.

This is a perfect time to tie a 1/4- to 1/2-ounce lipless crankbait onto 14- or 15-pound-test monofilament and start making long casts that cover a lot of water. Experiment with your retrieve speed until you feel the bait just ticking the tops of the hydrilla or other vegetation.

If the lure occasionally gets hung up, that's even better. Snatch it out of the weeds with a forceful pull and then tense for the bite. When the lure slingshots out of the cover, it often spurs a reaction strike from nearby bass. Monofilament is ideal here because it has a lot of stretch. Nothing creates that high-speed slingshot effect quite like old-school mono.

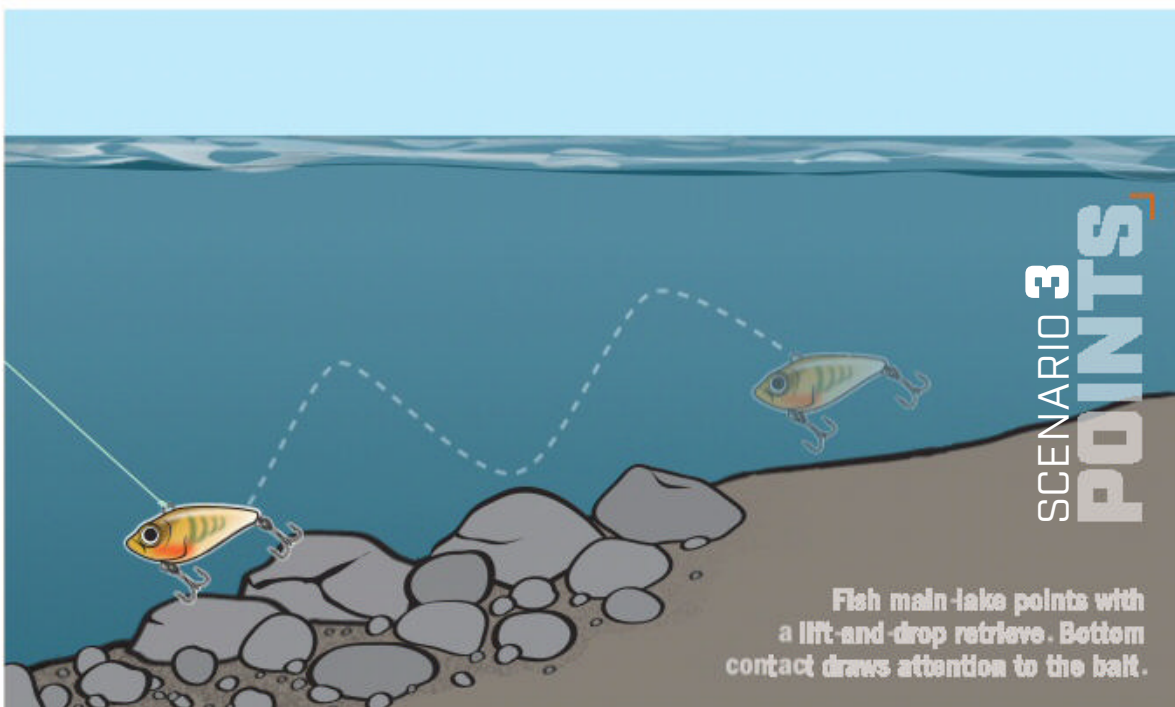
But, if the cover's really thick and you can't pull your bait free with the monofilament, switch to 30-pound braid. You won't get quite the slingshot effect, but you'll reclaim your bait more easily.

SCENARIO 3: ON THE POINTS

If you don't have bluffs or grass—or if you didn't find bass there—it's time to move to a main-lake point. These structures are just about the closest you can get to a sure thing when trying to

Use monofilament when running lipless crankbaits in grass. Its stretchiness allows it to slingshot through the weeds and trigger strikes.





establish the right depth for February bass. Use your electronics to find the “spot on the spot.” That may be a big rock or brush pile on the point or perhaps

it’s the sharpest drop-off on the side of the point. In any case, that’s a strong place to start. Pick a lipless crankbait that suits the depth (heavier in deep water

and lighter in shallow water) and make a long cast across the point so your bait contacts the target.

Here’s where a lift-and-drop retrieve will pay dividends. Use 30-pound braid to maximize your sensitivity, and expect the bite to come as the bait falls. If there’s a lot of rocky cover that could fray the braid, you may need to switch to 15-pound fluorocarbon, but nothing beats the sensitivity of braid.

If the lift-and-drop doesn’t pay off, try crawling the bait across the point, causing it to bump into any cover. Sometimes bass will strike so hard you’ll need to tighten the grip on your rod. Other times, you won’t feel a thing, but the lure will start to move to one side.

Ultimately, it’s difficult to fish a lipless crankbait incorrectly, but if you give these patterns and retrieves a try, you’re guaranteed to be fishing them correctly and in the right places. **64**

Professional angler Edwin Evers is a huge proponent of lipless crankbaits for covering large areas of water in search of hungry fish.



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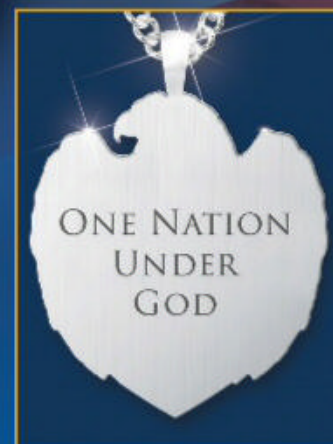
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TOOTH SOME

SHEEPSHEAD

OFFER GREAT INSHORE
SPORT THROUGHOUT
THE SOUTHEAST IN
FEBRUARY AND ARE
HARD TO BEAT ON
THE TABLE.

By Frank Sargeant

With a mug only a mother could
love, sheepshead have an affinity for
barnacles, oysters, crabs and mussels.

Sheepshead seem like the only inshore game in town around the Southeast as February rolls in. Most of the trout and redfish have either moved deep or have already been caught out of the coastal rivers, canals and potholes where they seek refuge from the cold.

Fortunately, loads of sheepshead move inshore in late winter and early spring to spawn on structure. These fish are tasty and usually not too difficult to fool, though it can take some know-how to find and catch them. And because they are abundant, limits are liberal compared to more targeted species—up to 25 a day in most Louisiana parishes; 15 in Mississippi and Georgia; 10 in Alabama, South Carolina and North Carolina; 8 in Florida; and 5 in Texas.

STRIKING PAY DIRT

Sheepshead are named for their sheep-like teeth, evolved for crunching up crabs and shellfish of all kinds, and they're most often found where these foods are plentiful. To find them, you simply need to locate barnacles, oysters, crabs or mussels on any sort of hard vertical structure in coastal rivers, bays and bayous. Jetties, piers, bridge pilings, oil structures, rocks and wrecks all attract sheepshead.

'Heads are not solitary fish, particularly in late winter and early spring—find one and you may find a dozen. The average fish is 2 or 3 pounds, but 5-pounders are common, and they get considerably larger. The world record, caught along a seawall in Louisiana's Lake Pontchartrain, weighed 21 pounds 4 ounces.

The trick in locating sheepshead is to run to a number of likely spots—a long row of barnacled bridge pilings, for example. Watch for fish roaming just a few feet under the surface, or use forward-looking or side-scanning sonar should your boat be equipped with one or both of these electronic marvels.

Anywhere you see fish, position via anchor well uptide and let the stern of the boat ease back to within casting range of the structures. A note of caution: If you plan on tying to pilings, take along plenty of fenders to protect the finish of your boat. In moderate winds or tide flows, a trolling motor with a GPS anchor can keep you within range at just the right angle.

RIG UP RIGHT

Sheepshead are known as bait stealers because they often nip the bait off with their sharp teeth rather than inhaling it whole. Sometimes they swim up and suck in the bait from below, slacking the line without any indication of a "bite." This leads to the old joke that you must set the hook just before the bite to catch them, but veteran sheepshead anglers rarely miss a fish because they rig right and know what to keep an eye out for.

Braided line in 15-pound-test is good for most sheepshead, though in areas where you may catch larger sheepshead and maybe bull reds, too, like around some of Louisiana's inshore rigs, 30-pound braid will give you a better chance around the structure.

Use 20-pound-test mono leader with 15-pound braid, 30-pound-test mono with the 30-pound braid. Most experts recommend using a dropper loop to tie

on the hook, with the weight on the bitter end of the leader. This puts you in direct touch with the hook when there's a bite—the fish doesn't have to move the weight to alert you that there's something going on below. Size 1/0 to 3/0 short-shank, 2X-strong hooks are preferred. Believe it or not, sheepshead can actually bite through the light wire hooks sometimes used for inshore trout fishing.

Another popular alternative is to use a bare jig, ranging from 1/4 ounce for structure in 8 to 10 feet of water and moderate tidal flow up to 3 ounces for depths to 40 feet and high current flow. Jigs with stout, short-shank hooks in size 1/0 to 2/0 are a good choice.

The Bottom Sweeper Jig (bottomsweeperjigs.com) designed by sheepshead expert Capt. Dan Schafer, in sizes from 1/4 to 3 ounces, is equipped with a 2X-strong, short-shank hook ideal for holding a crab and hooking sheepshead.

The Jail Bait Reef Jig has rubber bands for securing a live fiddler crab to the back.



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Jail Bait Reef Jig

The Jail Bait Reef Jig (eyestrike fishing.com), in 1/2- or 3/4-ounce sizes with a double hook, includes small rubber bands that allow you to secure a live fiddler crab to the back of the jig. This keeps a lively bait working for you until a sheepshead finds it.

BAIT UP

Live fiddler crabs are widely recognized as the optimal bait for sheepshead, and many baitshops in sheepshead country carry these crabs. Or you can round up your own on marshy shorelines at low tide—just run them down or punch a stick into a small hole in the mud indicating a burrow and the crab will scoot

out (a great activity for overactive kids). In some places they're so thick you can throw a quarter-inch-mesh castnet over the swarm and then pick them out of the mesh. You'll want several dozen to catch a limit of 'heads since, as mentioned earlier, the fish are good notorious bait stealers.



Berkley Gulp! Peeler Crab

If crabs are scarce, live shrimp catch plenty as well. Your best bet is to cut the tail off a 3-inch shrimp and make it into two baits. If you use a whole shrimp, you will typically just feed the sheepshead below.

TACTICS

You must master a few fine points of fishing if you want to catch sheepshead. First, you must keep a taut line. If you feel weight or if the line goes slack, set the hook—otherwise the fish will steal the bait.

If the bite slows, you can often turn it back on by using a spudding hoe to knock barnacles and mussels off the structures and create a chum line. Be sure to check your state's regulations before doing this with oysters, which are regulated in size and harvest dates.

In water less than 8-feet deep, the best sheepshead often anchor at the edge of casting range and throw their baits to the structure they expect to hold fish. This maneuver keeps from spooking fish that are shallow, particularly in clear water. In deeper water, it's common to tie directly to a piling or Spot-Lock next to one and drop the bait vertically, which gives a better feel for the often delicate bite of a sheepshead.



The Bottom Sweeper Jig is available in weights up to 3 ounces and gets baits down in deep water and strong currents.



The AFTCO x Boker slices cleanly through the tough scales and skin to reveal the white fillets beneath.

CUTTING UP

Sheepshead can be a challenge to clean. Try these tips the next time you're faced with filleting chores.

Having the right gear can make cleaning a pile of sheepshead a whole lot easier. You'll want a fine-edge fillet knife about 7 1/2 inches long or more. **Rapala's Fish 'N Fillet** (\$20.99; rapala.com) model with the wood handle is a classic in this genre.

Another great choice is the 9-inch **AFTCO x Boker Flex Fillet Knife** (\$69; aftco.com). For high-end knives, the **Bubba Lithium-Ion Cordless Fillet Knife** (\$119; bubba.com) with multiple interchangeable blades is hard to beat.

A pair of stainless-steel meat shears like **Ugly Stik's Marine Shears** (\$24.99; purefishing.com) is helpful for nipping off the dorsal spines before you start cleaning. If you're not an expert sheepshead cleaner, you may shed more blood than the fish.

To fillet a 'head, cut in just behind the gill cover and down to the backbone, then back along the backbone toward the tail. Leave a skin tab at the base of the tail, flip the fillet over flat and peel off the skin. Then, cut away the rib cage and you've got a fillet of boneless white meat.

Broiling is a great way to cook the fillets. Brush with a little mayo, shake on a little Montreal seasoning and place in an oiled broiler pan about 6 inches below the oven broiler. Cook just long enough that a fork can easily penetrate the flesh.



Rapala Fish-N-Fillet

Bubba Lithium-Ion Cordless Fillet Knife.

TOP SPOTS

Sheepshead can be anywhere, from oyster creeks only a couple feet deep to piers and bridges in 60 feet of water. Anglers on the coastal marshes roughly from St. Augustine, Fla., to Virginia sometimes catch them by sight-fishing sheepshead that prowl the tidal creeks like redfish. But, if you want to load the cooler, fishing around structure in deeper water is more productive.

In Charleston, S.C., the Mount Pleasant Pier adjacent to the U.S. 17 bridge on the Cooper River is a noted sheepshead spot, as is the Jekyll Island Pier on Saint Simons Sound at the northern tip of Georgia's Jekyll Island.

On Amelia Island, Fla., the George Crady Bridge Pier is a giant sheepshead magnet on Nassau Sound, while on the other side of the state, the 331 Bridge on Choctawhatchee Bay loads up not only with 'heads but with bull reds and large trout in fall and winter. Another noted Florida structure is the Sunshine Skyway Pier, both the north and south sides, on Tampa Bay.

On Mobile Bay, the numerous gas rigs not only have sheepshead-attracting pilings, but many have rock rubble at their bases that attract the fish. You can sometimes see the fish around the base of

the rig, and where there are 2 or 3 on top there may be a dozen below. Or visit the Dauphin Island Bridge—a crab drifted next to pilings there rarely lasts long.

In Mississippi, the pilings of big coastal bridges produce, including the U.S. 90 bridge across Biloxi Bay between Biloxi and Ocean Springs and the Bay St. Louis bridge, also on U.S. 90, near the Louisiana line.

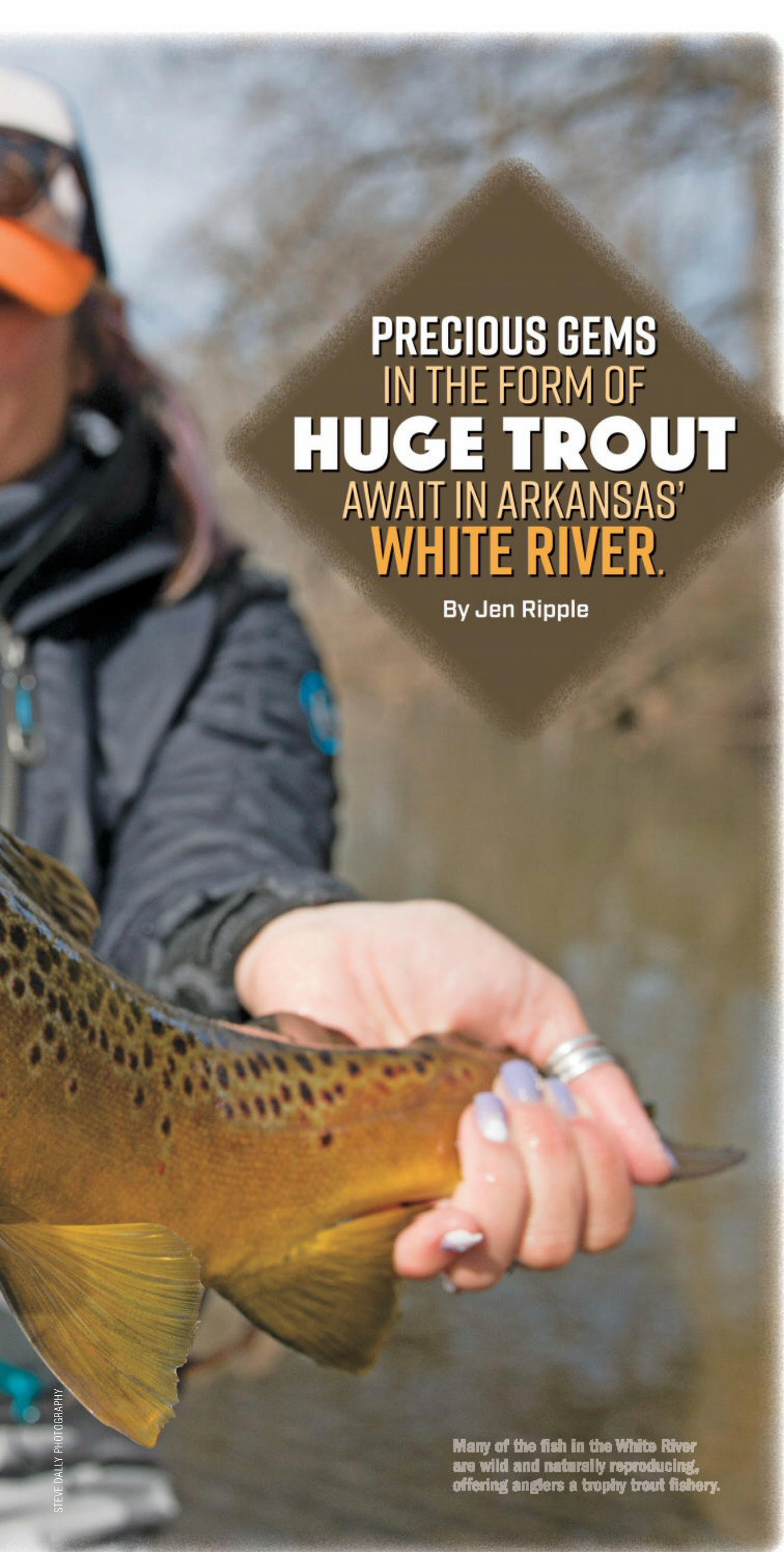
On the Louisiana coast beginning in February and through March, the in-shore oil structures are loaded with big sheepshead. These rigs don't require a long, open-water boat ride, either—many are within a few miles of the marsh and most stand in 15 to 40 feet of water. Some of the well-known areas include Black Bay, Breton Sound, East Bay and West Bay. **GI**

Sheepshead have strong, sharp teeth capable of chewing through both shellfish and wimpy hooks.



Mining **DIAMONDS**



A person wearing a grey jacket and a white cap with an orange visor is holding a large brown trout. The fish has a mottled pattern of dark spots on its side and a yellowish-orange tail. The background is a blurred river scene.

PRECIOUS GEMS IN THE FORM OF HUGE TROUT AWAIT IN ARKANSAS' WHITE RIVER.

By Jen Ripple

Many of the fish in the White River are wild and naturally reproducing, offering anglers a trophy trout fishery.

Arkansas may be the only state in the U.S. that produces diamonds, and diamonds may very well be a girl's best friend, but that's not why you'll find me crossing the state line. Open any map and the conspicuous ribbon of blue just below the northern border is what captures my attention.

Running roughly 720-miles through the great Ozark Mountains and down into the state's lower delta region is the fabled White River. As you'd expect from a river of this size, the water between its banks is home to many varieties of fish, including catfish, bass, walleyes and sunfish. But it's the four species of trout, and especially the monster predatory browns, that dwell beneath its surface that draw me in.

THE HISTORY

Trout are not native to Arkansas, and the White River wasn't always a world-class trout fishery. In 1941, *Life* magazine featured the White River as one of the Ozark's top tourist attractions, highlighting a 65-mile float trip in a wooden long-boat complete with overnight camping on gravel bars (also known as shoals) and some of the finest smallmouth bass fishing in the world. Fast forward two decades and five hydropower dams later, and hundreds of miles of bass habitat had been all but destroyed.

But, as they say, when life gives you lemons—in this case, when dams give you cold water—you stock trout, and that's exactly what the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission began to do in the 1950s. Just like that, 168 miles of cold tailwater trout streams were born, and soon the White River was one of the country's finest trophy-trout fisheries. Today, many of the trout are wild and naturally reproducing, and anglers from across the country come to the White to land one of these gems.

THE STRETCH

When anglers mention the White, most of the time they're talking about the 40 miles from Bull Shoals Dam to the city of Norfolk where the White and Norfolk rivers meet. For the sake of this article, we'll also focus on this section, which I find to be pure gold. This stretch has many areas of wadable water, innumerable boat ramps and a lot of public access. Many of the lodges, hotels and

rentals offer river frontage with fishing right outside your back door.

Gaston's White River Resort (gastons.com) just below Bull Shoals State Park is what many describe as the finest getaway in the region and the perfect setting if you're bringing the family.

If you're on a budget, you can easily find a nice place that won't break the bank. Gene's Trout Fishing Resort (genestroutfishingresort.com) on the Norfolk River offers cozy and affordable cabins and excellent access to wade fishing on the Norfolk.

If you like to camp, the Army Corps of Engineers has created a beautiful campground at the base of Bull Shoals Dam with all the amenities for those hardy enough to rough it in winter.

COME WHILE IT'S COLD

While I'm not normally a winter-weather, cold-water-fishery type of gal, the

White in February makes sense to me. Winters in the Ozark mountains are generally mild. In November, the fish start their migration toward the dams to spawn. There is no closed season on the river, but fishing during the spawn is highly discouraged.

I fish in February because the spawn is over, the fish are just beginning to move and they are hungry and eager to eat. There are also fewer anglers on the water compared to the summer months, which means less fishing pressure. Plus, it's easier to find a great place to stay, an open guide day and excellent fishing in late winter.

GO-TO TECHNIQUE

There are many ways to catch trout on the White at this time of year. Of course, indicator fly fishing is always productive and offers an opportunity to catch the fish of a lifetime, but I'm a



streamer junkie. I've caught my largest browns by stripping articulated streamers on sinking lines with a technique I was introduced to by renowned guide and professional fly tier Steve Dally (theoarkflyfisher.com).

Dally has dedicated his life to mastering this stretch of water and knows the runs by name. He has put me on more big browns than any other guide I've ever fished with. I was a bit skeptical of his unusual technique at first, but I'm now a believer.

Browns live in deep holes. If you don't get the fly to where they live, your chances of catching them are zilch. Dally's technique is to cast a fast-sinking line at a 45-degree angle to the bank. Once the fly lands, plunge the rod tip straight down into the water as far as you can to push the fly deep and create a straight connection

February fishing means uncrowded waters and trout that are coming out of their winter doldrums and are eager to eat.



between the fly and rod tip. Then, strip with reckless abandon. I have put more big browns in the net than I can count using Dally's technique. Yes, you need to be aware of the depth. Yes, it's physical. Yes, it sounds crazy. Yes, it works.

Often, we fall into the habit of strip-strip-strip no matter what fly we have on the end of our tippet. Always remember to "be the bait." If you have an articulated streamer on, remember that a dying baitfish will pause for a brief second, so adjust your strip to match that hatch.

THINGS TO DO

If you've been bingeing *Ozark* on Netflix, you know the family will have a lot to do in this area while you're fishing. Branson, Mo., with more than 100 live shows, numerous museums and great shopping, is a short drive away.

Even if you're not staying at Gaston's, its restaurant offers culinary excellence not normally found in fishing towns. Meals are prepared by Executive Chef Rick Gollinger and paired perfectly with wine offerings sure to please any palate.

If you want to take the kids fishing, Dry Creek, located next to the Norfolk National Fish Hatchery, is a catch-and-release area for kids 16 and under that will be sure to get them hooked on fishing for years to come.

VISIT THE FLY SHOP

Fly anglers love fly shops, and this area has a couple of good ones. I love Dally's Ozark Fly Shop because of its great women's area, guide-tied flies and even a section with art from local artist Duane Hada.

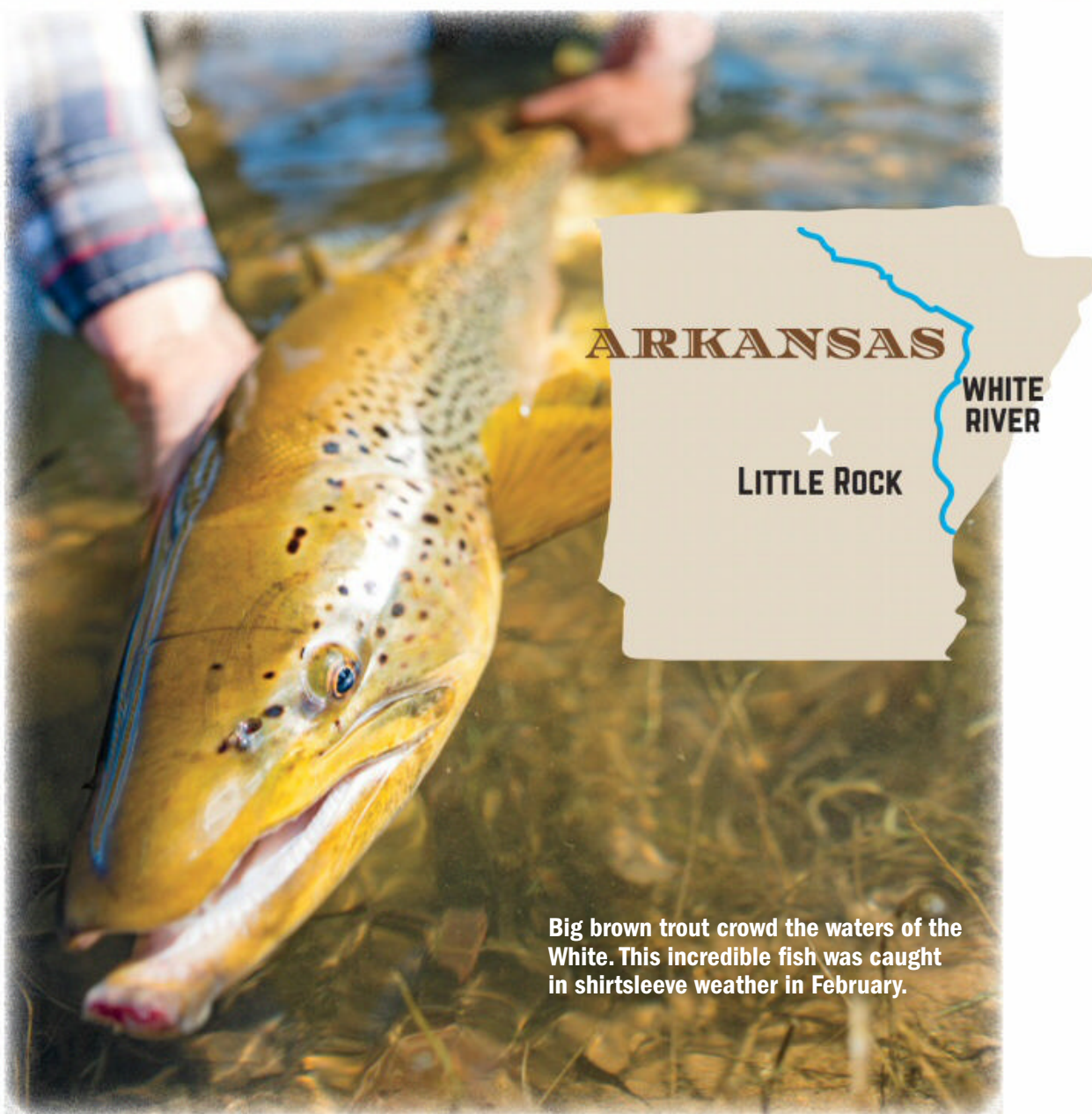
I distinctly remember one February trip to the White. It was 73 degrees the day before we arrived. That night, a freak snowstorm rolled in behind us. We woke to temperatures in the 20s and what seemed like more snow than I had seen in a lifetime. That day, at the end of the float, we had to use a blowtorch to free our fly rods from the rod holders in the drift boat.

It was miserably cold that day, but I caught a giant brown 10 feet from the launch ramp and the rest of the day was one for the scrap book. Maybe Arkansas isn't on many people's list for a winter getaway, but fly anglers in search of giant trout need to consider this diamond in the rough. 

STEVE DALLY PHOTOGRAPHY (4)

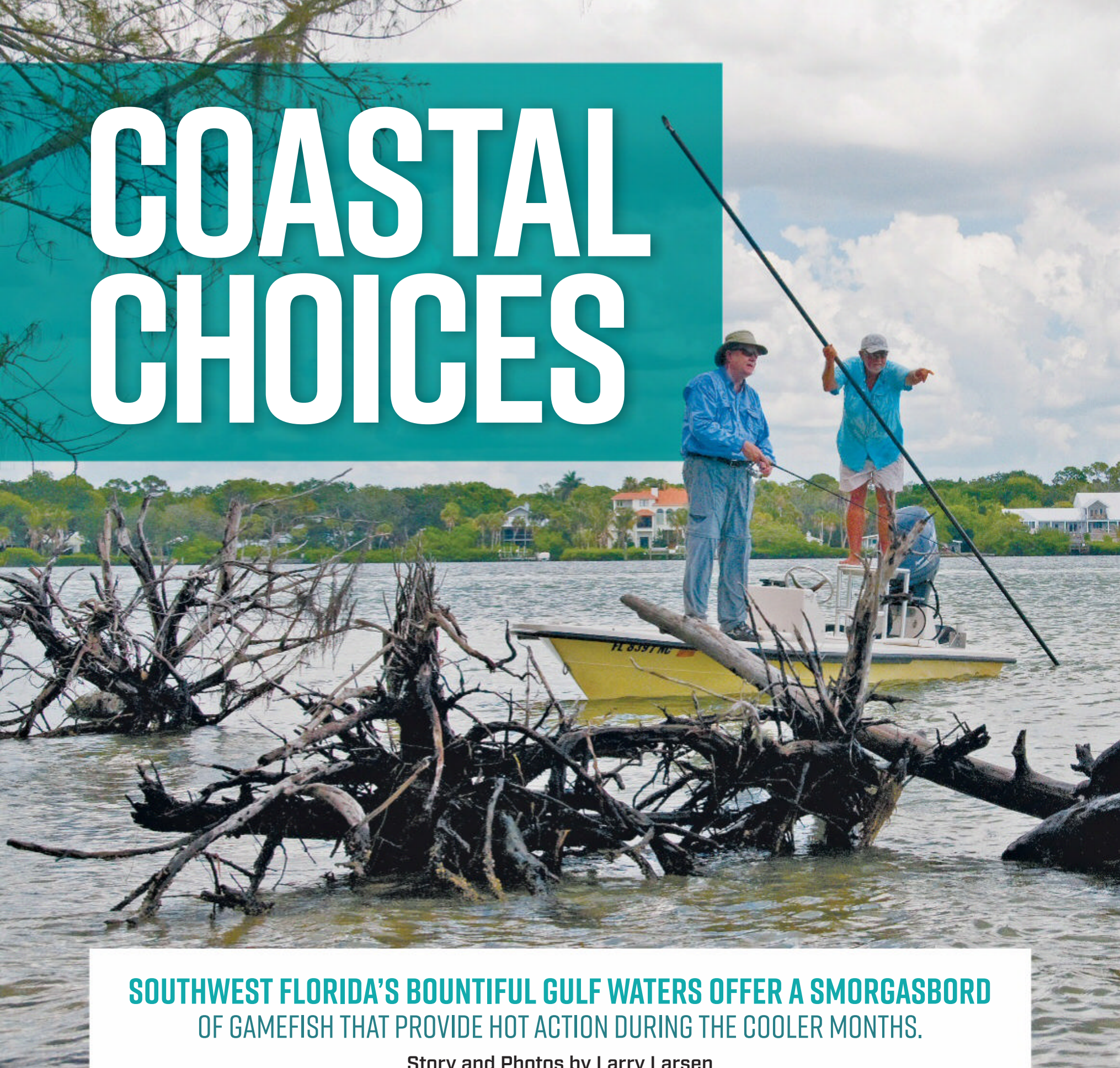


Be prepared for any kind of weather when fishing the White in winter, as temperatures can swing wildly.



Big brown trout crowd the waters of the White. This incredible fish was caught in shirtsleeve weather in February.

COASTAL CHOICES



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

Story and Photos by Larry Larsen

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

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

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

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

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



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

COLOSSAL CHARLOTTE HARBOR

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

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

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

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



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

PICTURESQUE PINE ISLAND SOUND

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRIME INSHORE FORAGING FACTORS

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

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

Later in spring, the most productive

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



Cobia add to the variety found in Pine Island Sound.



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

INSHORE PREDATORS

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

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

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

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

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

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



SOUTHWEST FLORIDA SIGHTS

Attractions and activities both on and off the water

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WATER CHARACTERISTICS AND LOCATIONS

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

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

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

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

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



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

ACCESS TO THE FISHERIES

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

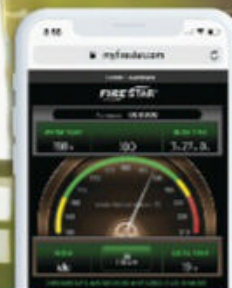
The southwest Florida area has tremendous facilities for visiting anglers, good boat rental places, kayak rentals and great boat ramps. Due to the vast variety of topography and habitat along the coast, hiring a guide who knows the area is a wise investment. An experienced guide will know where to go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

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

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STOEEGER M3500

SNOW GOOSE



BRAD FITZPATRICK

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

By Drew Warden

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

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

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

SPECIFICATIONS

STOEGER M3500 SNOW GOOSE

stoegerindustries.com

TYPE: semi-automatic shotgun

GAUGE: 12

CHAMBER: 3 1/2"

CAPACITY: 10+1 rounds

BARREL LENGTH: 28"

OVERALL LENGTH: 50"

WEIGHT: 8.2 lbs.

STOCK: composite; white Cerakote

LENGTH OF PULL: 14 3/8"

DROP AT HEEL: 2 1/2"

DROP AT COMB: 1 1/2"

RECEIVER/BARREL FINISH:
distressed white Cerakote

SIGHTS: red-bar front

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

MSRP: \$899



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

DREW WARDEN (2)



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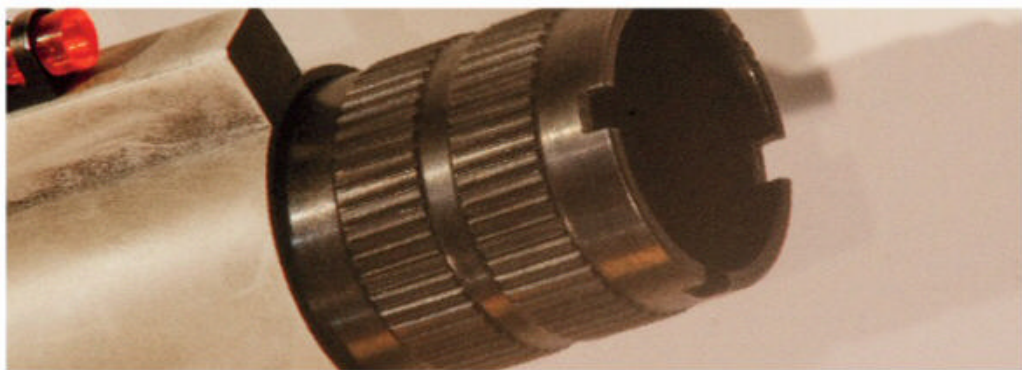
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LEFT: The gun comes with five extended choke tubes to meet the needs of hunters and the changing moods of wary snow geese. **RIGHT:** The cross-bolt safety and cartridge drop lever are standard sized on the M3500 Snow Goose.

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

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

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

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

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



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

DREW WARDEN (TOP); BRAD FITZPATRICK (BOTTOM)



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

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

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

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

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

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RIFLES FOR ALL CONDITIONS

**BAD WEATHER
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YOUR GUN.**

By Game & Fish Staff

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

BROWNING X-BOLT HELL'S CANYON MAX LONG RANGE

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

CALIBER: .300 PRC

CAPACITY: 3 rounds

BARREL: 26"

STOCK: fully adjustable composite

SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: Burnt Bronze Cerakote

OVERALL LENGTH: 46 3/4"

WEIGHT: 8.19 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,509.99

browning.com

NOSLER M48 MOUNTAIN CARBON

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

CALIBER: .280 Ack. Imp.

CAPACITY: 4 rounds

BARREL: 24"

STOCK: carbon fiber

SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: Tungsten Grey Cerakote

OVERALL LENGTH: 45"

WEIGHT: 6 lbs.

MSRP: \$3,140

nosler.com



RUGER HAWKEYE LONG-RANGE HUNTER

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

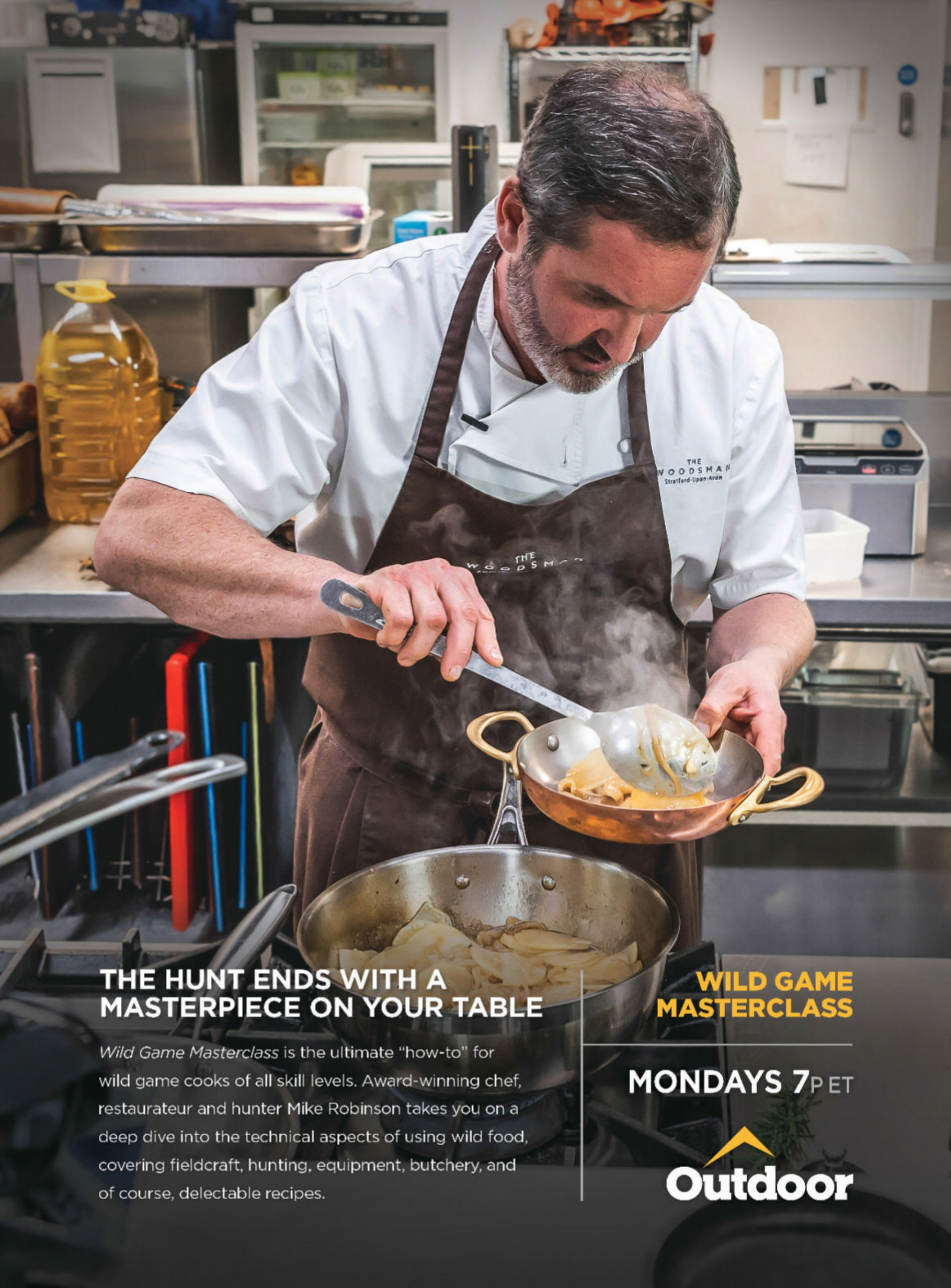
CALIBER: 6.5 PRC
CAPACITY: 3 rounds
BARREL: 22"
STOCK: laminate
SIGHTS: none; Picatinny rail included
FINISH: Hawkeye matte stainless
OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/4"
WEIGHT: 7.19 lbs.
MSRP: \$1,529
ruger.com

SAVAGE 110 ULTRALITE CAMO

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

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





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

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Outdoor

SEEKINS PRECISION HAVAK ELEMENT

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

CALIBER: .308 Win.

CAPACITY: 5 rounds

BARREL: 21"

STOCK: carbon composite

SIGHTS: none; integral Picatinny rail

FINISH: anodized black action, bead-blasted stainless barrel

OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/2"

WEIGHT: 5.5 lbs.

MSRP: \$2,795

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WEATHERBY VANGUARD HIGH COUNTRY

The Vanguard High Country is a dedicated backcountry hunting rifle, available in nine chamberings. The two-lug action and fluted barrel wear Flat Dark Earth Cerakote, and the Monte Carlo stock has an attractive, proprietary camo pattern. An adjustable two-stage trigger and a three-position safety are two more highlights. The included Accubrake ST helps tame the magnum cartridges for which the High Country is chambered.

CALIBER: .300 Wby. Mag.
CAPACITY: 3 rounds
BARREL: 26"
STOCK: Monte Carlo composite
SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases
FINISH: Flat Dark Earth Cerakote
OVERALL LENGTH: 48 1/2"
WEIGHT: 7.25 lbs.
MSRP: \$999
 weatherby.com

WINCHESTER XPR HUNTER

A rifle that can hang tough and look good doing it can also be affordable, as the XPR Hunter proves. Its receiver and button-rifled, free-floating barrel are treated with Permacote to resist corrosion and abrasion, while its composite stock is cloaked in Mossy Oak Elements Terra Bayou camo. Other notable features include Winchester's MOA Trigger System, a two-position safety with a bolt-unlock button and nickel Teflon coating on the bolt.

CALIBER: .270 Win.
CAPACITY: 3 rounds
BARREL: 24"
STOCK: composite
SIGHTS: none; drilled and tapped for bases
FINISH: Flat Dark Earth Permacote
OVERALL LENGTH: 44 1/2"
WEIGHT: 7 lbs.
MSRP: \$649.99
 winchesterguns.com

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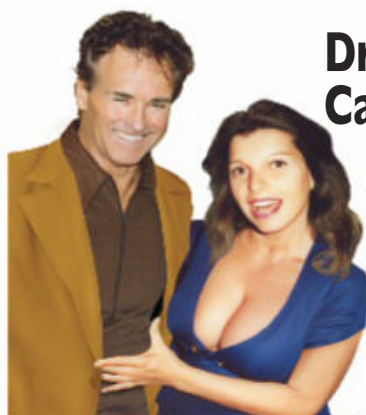
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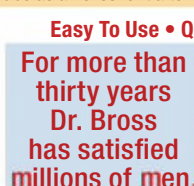
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V191

BIRD IN HAND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Yessir," said Shane.

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

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

"Hunting or killing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that?" wondered Shane.

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

"What?" wailed Shane in disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mmm, pretty good. What is it?"

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

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

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

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