

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

GAME & FISH

SOUTH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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MAY 2022

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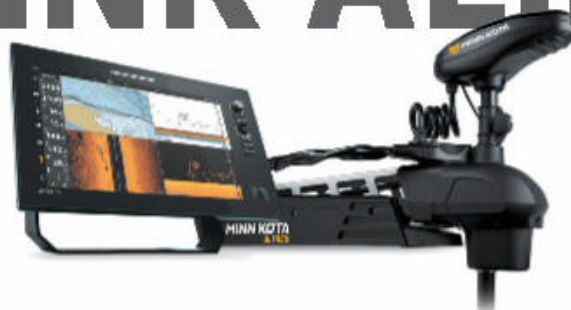
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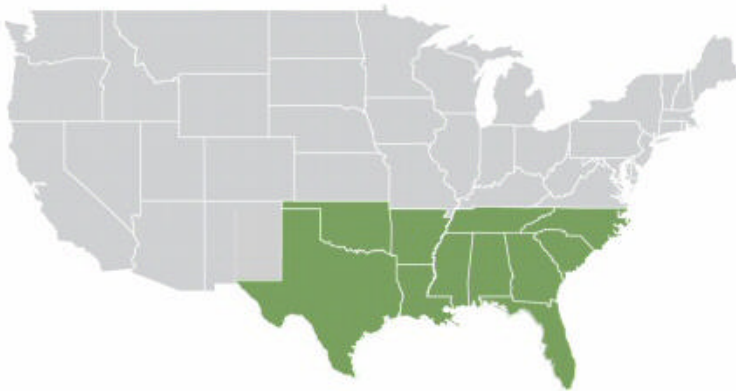
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GAME & FISH SOUTH

The Regional Outdoor Guide



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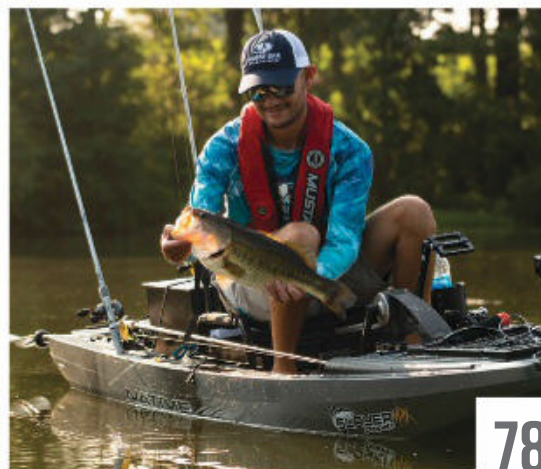
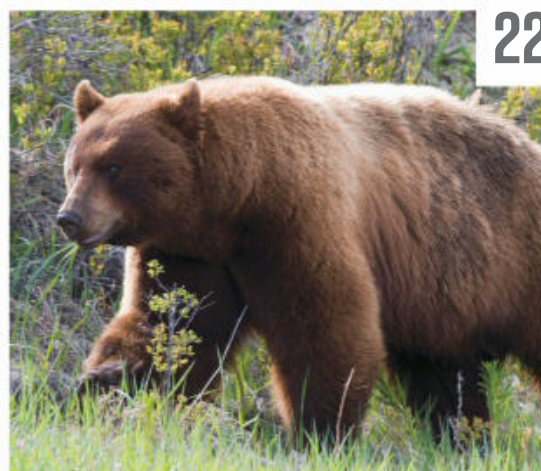
Consider these seven things to choose the right kayak for the water, fish and angling technique.

By Drew Warden

82 FISH FINDERS

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

By Outdoor Sportsman Group Staff



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PROVING GROUNDS

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

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

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

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

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

John Taranto
Editor



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

GAME & FISH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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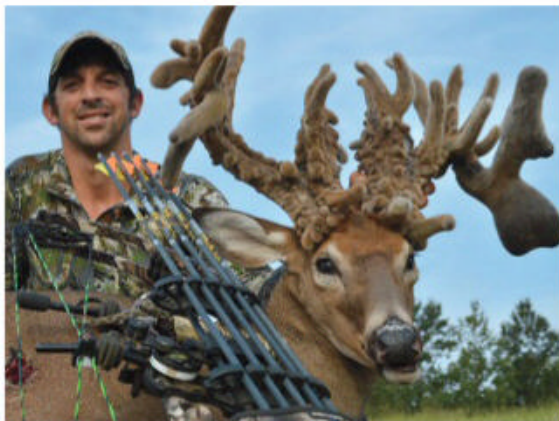
GREAT CATFISH BAITS

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



RECIPES BY THE DOZEN

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



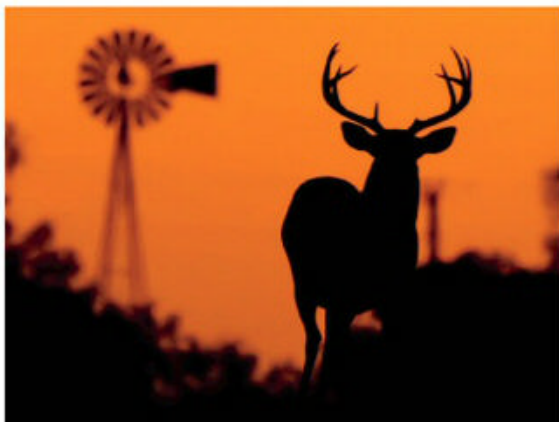
SPECIAL TREATMENT

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



TEXAS-SIZED BASS

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



DON'T GET NOTICED

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

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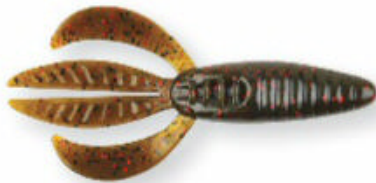
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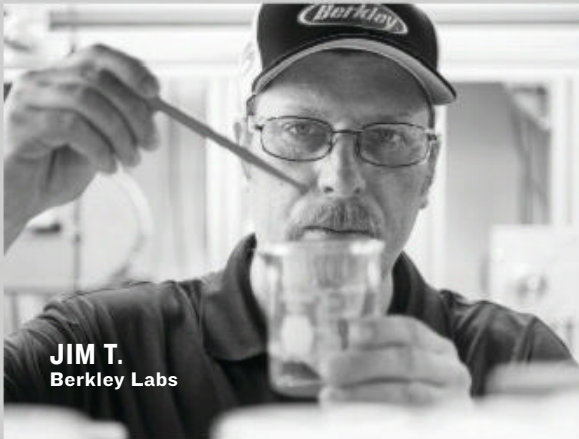


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17 am 12:30 to 2:30 pm 12:54 to 2:54	18 am 1:18 to 3:18 pm 1:42 to 3:42	19 am 2:06 to 4:06 pm 2:30 to 4:30	20 am 2:54 to 4:54 pm 3:18 to 5:18	21 am 3:42 to 5:42 pm 4:06 to 6:06	22 am 4:30 to 6:30 pm 4:54 to 6:54	23 am 5:18 to 7:18 pm 5:42 to 7:42
24 am 6:06 to 8:06 pm 6:30 to 8:30	25 am 6:54 to 8:54 pm 7:18 to 9:18	26 am 7:42 to 9:42 pm 8:06 to 10:06	27 am 8:30 to 10:30 pm 8:54 to 10:54	28 am 9:18 to 11:18 pm 9:42 to 11:42	29 am 10:06 to 12:06 pm 10:30 to 12:30	30 am — to — pm 12:06 to 2:06

MAY 2022

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

JUNE 2022

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

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

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GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SCOPE

AVOID MOUNTING MISTAKES AND APPLY SOME MATH TO BOOST EFFECTIVENESS.

By Richard Mann



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Range Change

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

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

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

Magnification Change

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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ACHIEVE PERFECT BALANCE

**CAST BETTER, WORK BAITS
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WITH TACKLE COMPONENTS THAT
COMPLEMENT ONE ANOTHER.**

Story and Photos by Dr. Jason Halfen

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

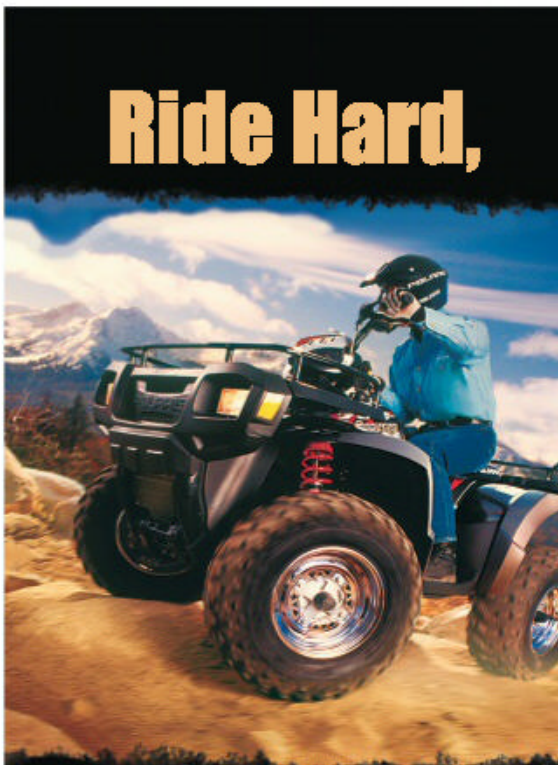
A rod must be balanced with a reel of appropriate weight, and the reel must have sufficient line capacity for the task at hand. A reel that is too heavy or too light for a particular rod will not only feel awkward in the hand, but also impact the casting, retrieving and hooksetting motions that we perform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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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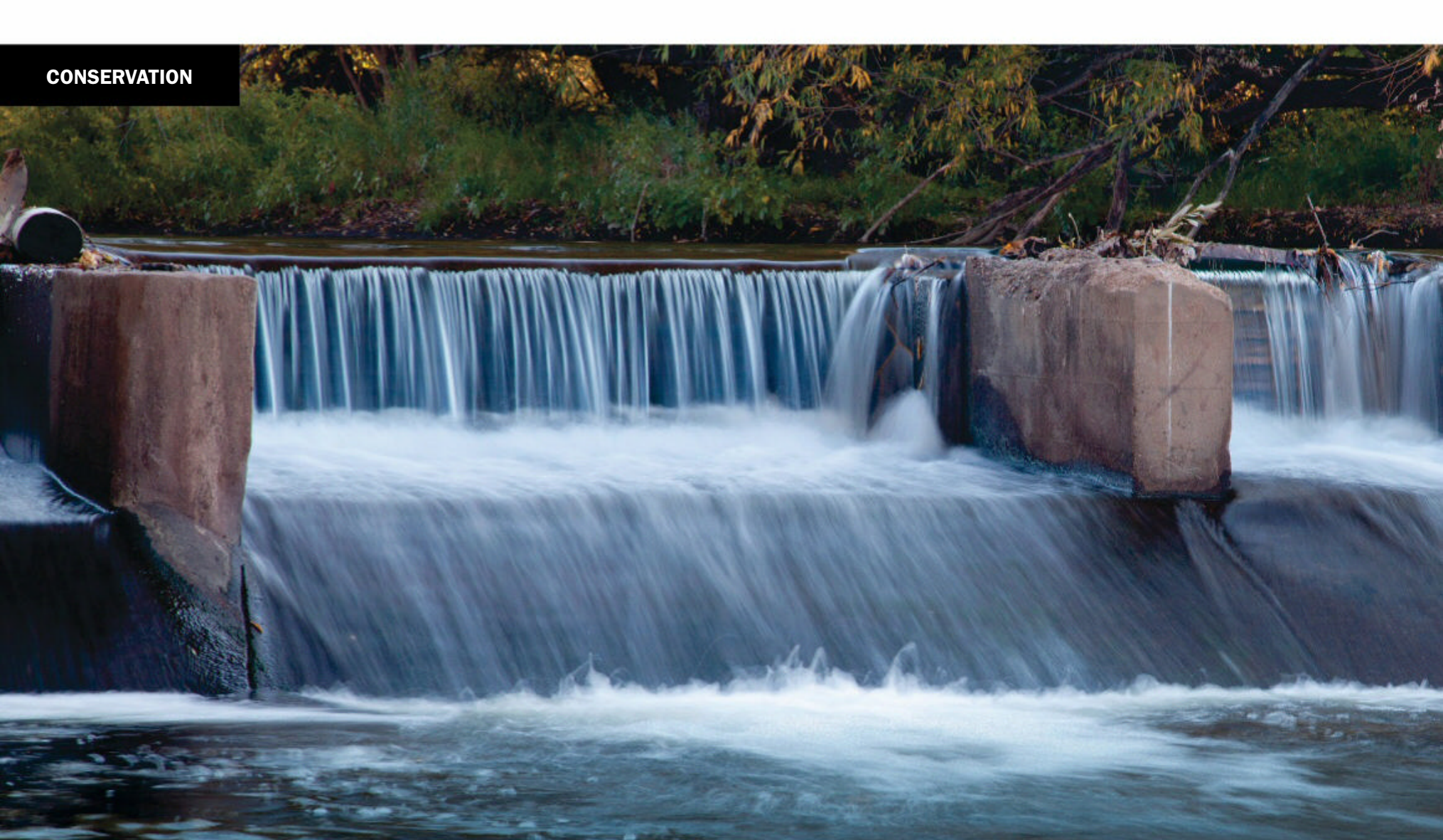
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DAMMED IF WE DO

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

By Andrew McKean

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SHUTTERSTOCK



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

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

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

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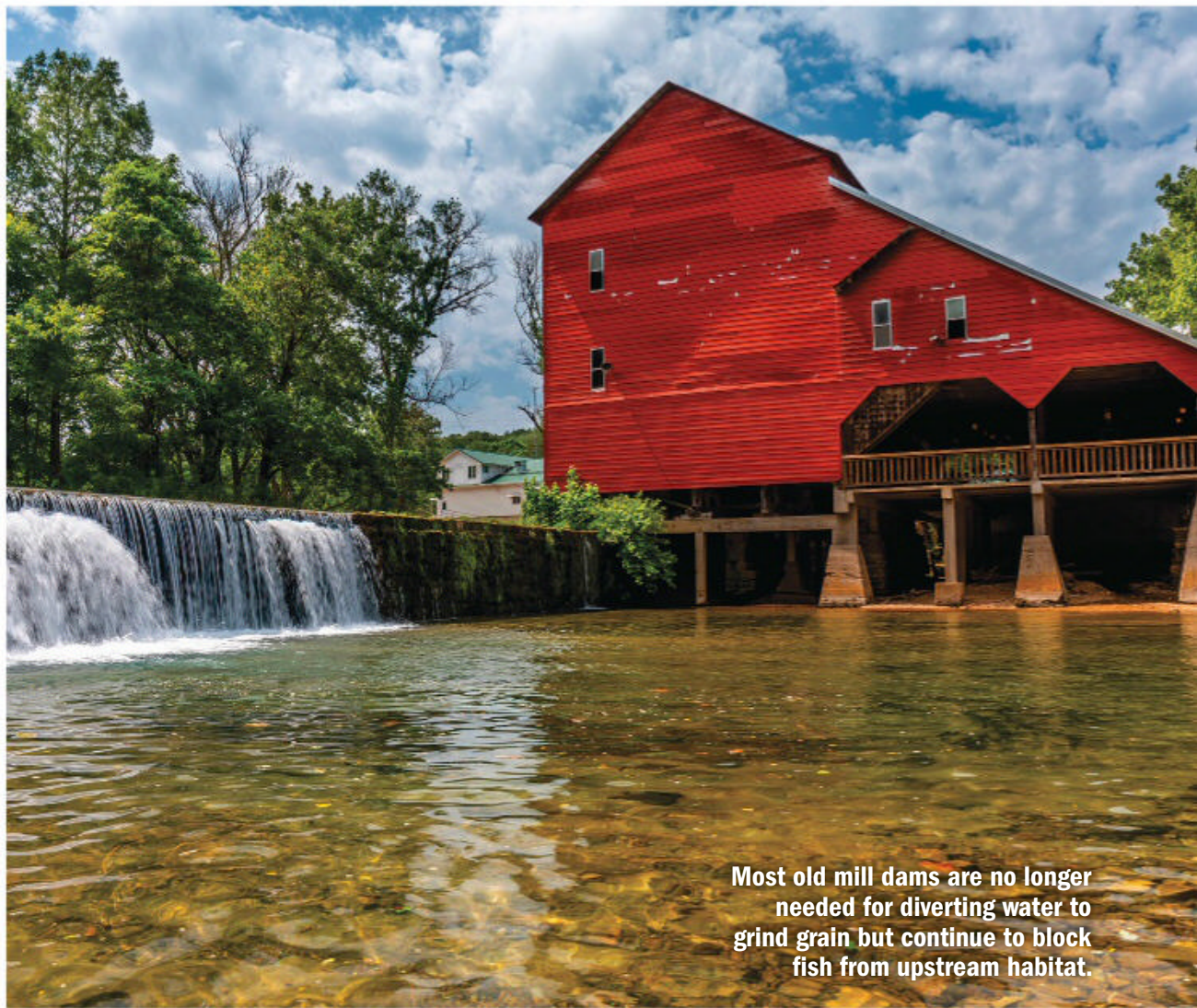


C.

water over the summer to grow alfalfa and watermelons.

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

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



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

TOP THREATS TO CONSERVATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Adam Heggenstaller



SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); COURTESY OF LEUPOLD (BOTTOM)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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FLYING COLORS

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

By Jim Zumbo



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

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

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

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

WHY AND WHERE

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



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

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

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

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

THOUGHTS ON BAITING

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

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

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

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

THE GUARANTEED BEAR

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

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

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

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

READING SHADES

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

BAITING BEST PRACTICES

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

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

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

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

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

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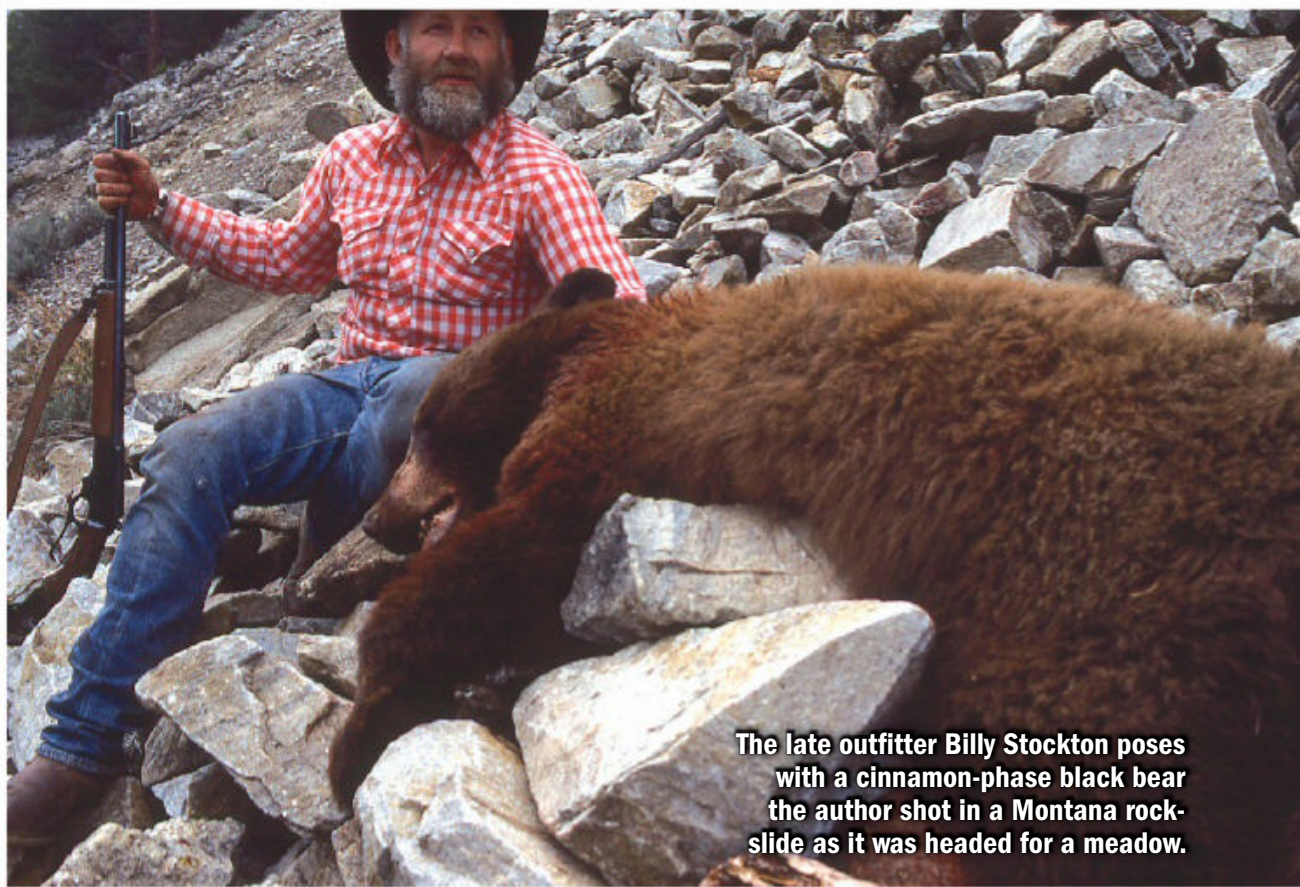
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bears are seen the last hour of the day. It makes sense to remain at the stand as long as possible, though I can tell you it can be a harrowing experience walking out of the dark woods knowing bears are prowling about.

SPRING AWAKENING

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

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



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

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

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

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



A CAMPGROUND PEST

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

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

JIM ZUMBO (TOP); LON LAUBER (BOTTOM)

HUNTING WITH HOUNDS

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

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

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

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

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

BRING THEM RUNNING

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

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

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

BUY THAT TAG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DREW WARDEN

WILD, WILD WEST

TWO BUSTED SETUPS SET THE STAGE FOR UNEXPECTED REDEMPTION.

By Drew Warden



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

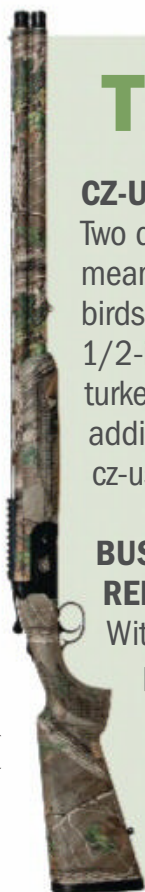
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DREW WARDEN (TOP)

LAST-HOUR LONGBEARD

RIOS DON'T ALWAYS COME RUNNING TO THE GUN.

By Adam Heggenstaller

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOM TOOLS

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

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

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



When gobblers don't respond to calls, the only option is to wait. Be sure to pick a comfy seat because it may take all day.

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

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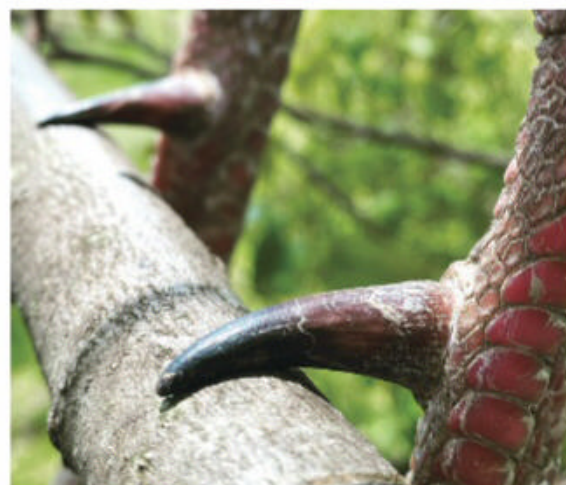
 **Outdoor**



HUNG-UP HYSTERIA

PATIENCE CAN DRIVE ANY GOBBLER—OR HUNTER MAD.

By Adam Heggenstaller



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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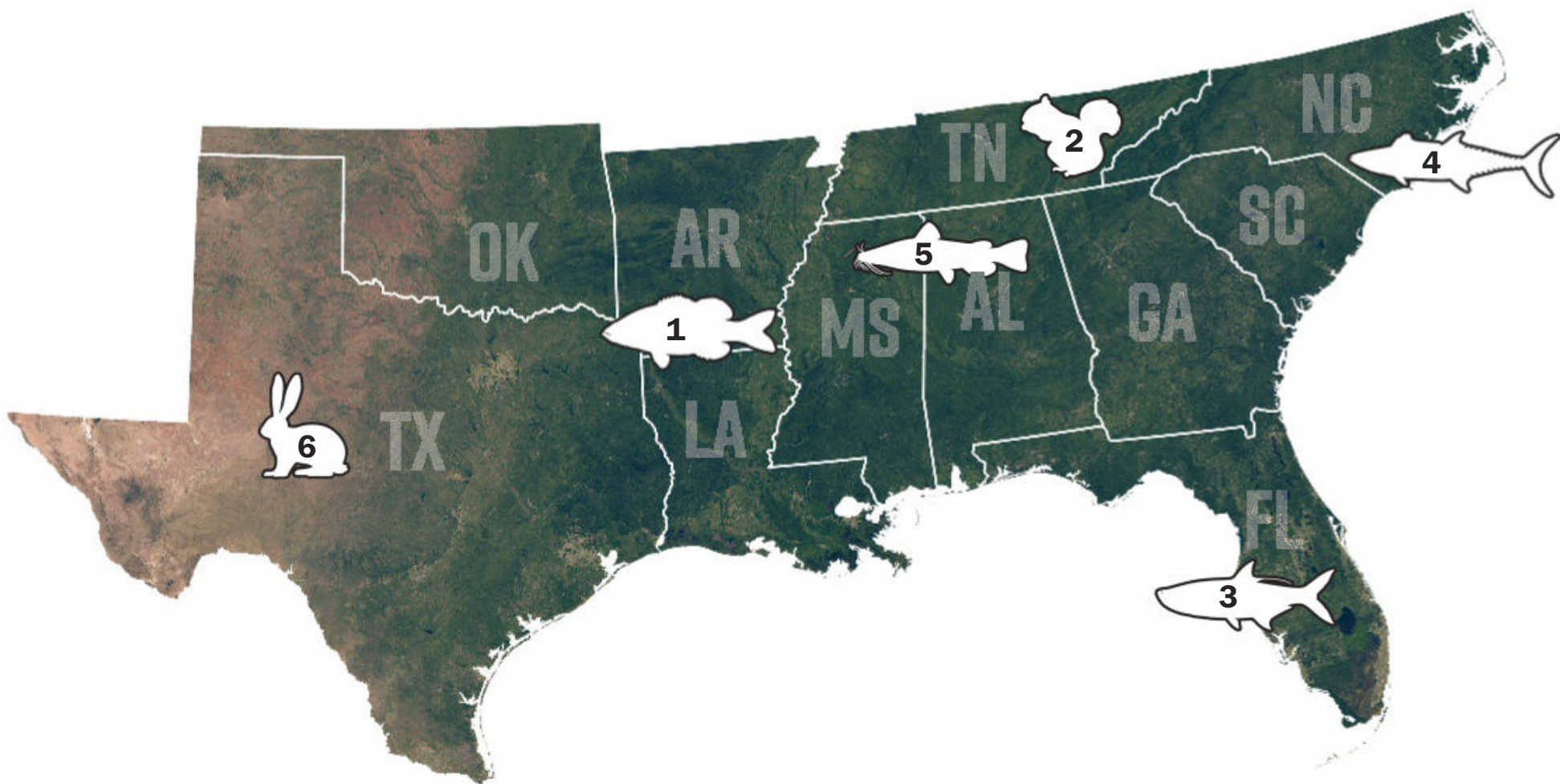


AROUND THE SOUTH

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

By T. Edward Nickens

Unlike April, there's nothing wishy-washy about the month of May. Spring has sprung for real, and it seems like every critter out there is just as stoked about the weather as you are. There are some funky options for hunting still on the table, and spring fishing is going off like a five-alarm fire. If you've been holding back brownie points, it's time to cash in. Spring in the South is as good as it gets.





ARKANSAS SMALLIES

The Ozark and Ouachita mountains are trellised with clear-water streams cobbled with rock and boulder and studded with logs. Canoes are an ideal way to fish here, throwing spinnerbaits or casting deer-hair poppers. If you like small water and larger-than-average fish, head for Crooked Creek. The Ouachita River is also known for stud bronzebacks. And big-water smallie hunters are drawn to the Buffalo River, the first national river designated in the country. Try the short stretch between Buffalo Point and Rush for a day-long float trip with plenty of time for fishing.



TENNESSEE BUSHYTAILS

If you need to scratch the hunting itch with something other than wild turkey, the spring squirrel season in Tennessee is the ticket. The statewide season opens May 14 and runs for a solid month, a heritage that harkens back to when farmers had to whittle down tree rat numbers in order to blunt the losses from squirrels swarming freshly planted cornfields. Given spring foliage, it's a toss-up as to whether you're better off with a rifle or shotgun. This time of year, squirrels forage heavily on and near the ground for berries and mushrooms. But they take to the treetops, too, to munch on tender, early-spring growth—especially maple buds.



FLORIDA TARPON

From top to bottom, Florida goes tarpon crazy this month. Throughout Tampa Bay, schools of silver kings flood across passes and beaches, inshore and offshore. There are 40-pound residents and 200-pound migrants, and sooner or later they'll hit just about every Florida landmark. Anglers are lined up for their chances at Boca Raton and Homosassa. Across the Keys, sight fishing only gets better the deeper you get into May. Tarpon fishing across Florida this month is a little bit of Crazy Town, and if you miss it, fear not. June can be just as good.



TAR HEEL MACKEREL

A 6-pound Tar Heel Spanish mackerel will land you a "citation fish" document from the state of North Carolina, and if you fight it on a flyrod, a searing memory, as well. May is prime time to target boss macks in nearshore waters, but it won't last long. Schools of heavyweight Spanish will dissipate as the larger fish mix in with the smaller summer mackerel, and hordes of trollers will make it tough to stalk topwater schools. For now, top your boat off with fuel and get away from the trolling fleet. Cruise until you see working birds and breaking fish. Approach softly and carry wire bite tippet or hard Mason line. A quarter-acre of busting citation Spanish is a sight to behold and not to be missed.



ALABAMA FLATHEADS

The 10 impoundments along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway all cough up bruiser flathead catfish in a landscape that varies widely. In addition to the primary impoundments, there are old, flooded beaver dams, cypress swamps and weedy sloughs, all of which hold pugnacious flatheads. All told, it's 234 miles of possibility. Bring a good bottom finder to hunt down scour holes and submerged timber, plus a cast net for live bait. Flatheads are ambush predators, so sinking a highly active baitfish to the bottom structure is as close to a guaranteed catfight as you're ever likely to have.



TEXAS JACKRABBITS

It's not entirely fair that jackrabbits have a bad rap as table fare. They gorge on cactus shoots, mesquite beans and young tender grasses, which is pretty much a recipe for yummy. It could be that Dust Bowl jackrabbit drives lent the hare—which is not a rabbit at all—its unsavory reputation. But this is a great time to snipe a few Texas jacks and decide for yourself. There are no bag limits, possession limits or closed seasons on black-tailed jackrabbits in Texas, and a spring plinking session is a fine way to take a Texas walk before the baking heat of summer.



GRUNT WORK

EARTHWORMS HAVE
NO PLACE TO HIDE
WHEN WORM GRUNTERS
ARE ON THE HUNT.

By Colin Moore

There was a time in the South when “grunting” earthworms was more of a serious undertaking and less a curiosity around which to build tourist festivals. Not counting the folks who grunted—or “fiddled” or “charmed”—up a few worms at a time to go fishing, hundreds of others supplemented their household incomes by supplying worms to fish camps and bait shops.

Arguably the best worm grunTERS nowadays work their magic in the Florida Panhandle. North Florida isn’t the only place worm fiddlers can practice their quaint craft, however.

From the Carolinas to Texas, any place with the right recipe of porous dirt, humus and moisture will work, be it a piney woods, along a river swamp



Decades spent in the grunting fields have made Gary Revell the king of the Florida Panhandle worm fiddlers.



or in an open cattle pasture. There are a lot of different types of earthworms, but the ones that Southern fiddlers favor are the *Diplocardia mississippiensis*. These 6- to 10-inch worms are succulent delicacies to the catfish, shellcrackers and bluegills that inhabit the South’s rivers and lakes.

The general approach to fiddling is to drive a wooden stake, called a stob, into the ground several inches until it’s firmly embedded, then saw back and forth across the top of it rhythmically with a leaf spring or other 2- to 3-foot length of flat metal. Within a couple of minutes, earthworms should appear at the surface; otherwise, the fiddler moves on to the next likely spot.

It’s usually a two-person job, with one participant fiddling and the other gathering the worms that pop up. Nobody knows with certainty why fiddling works. Maybe earthworms are reacting to the vibrations because they perceive they’re made by a predator; maybe it’s just because the vibrations drive them nuts and the only quick way out for them is up.

Most of the best grunTERS are particular about the type and thickness of the stob they use. The stob might be made of oak, hornbeam or some other readily available local hardwood. Heart of pine wood is another choice.

Likewise, the “rooping iron,” as the metal strip is called, must be of a certain

COURTESY OF SOPOCHOPPY PRESERVATION AND IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION (ABOVE)

MAKE 'EM SQUIRM

WIGGLER WIG OUT

Theories abound on what causes earthworms to come above ground when the grunting begins. Some believe they are escaping a perceived danger while others posit that the vibrations drive the worms mad.

ROOP IT UP

A “rooping iron” sends the good vibrations into a sharpened “stob” that’s typically fashioned from locally available hardwood.

THE RUB

All great grunters have their fiddling idiosyncrasies. Sawing rhythmically across the hardwood stob five or six times at a 20-degree angle—followed by a pause—is the generally accepted starting point.



1. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION:

“Consider the terrain and how much rain the area generally gets or how dry the ground is. Earthworms will move up or down or sideways according to the weather and how much rain there’s been. In general, grunting produces best when the soil is moderately moist from recent rain or a heavy dew.”

2. LOOK FOR CLUES:

“When the ground is all worked up by hogs or armadillos, that’s an indicator that worms are around. The tunnel mounds of moles hunting worms will show up, too.”

3. BE PATIENT:

“Earthworms aren’t going to come popping out of the ground as soon as the gruntin’ starts. Give them a few minutes to show up before pulling out the stake and trying somewhere else. Depending on how long you plan to stay out and how much work you want to put into it, it’s best to have somebody with you who can spot the worms when they come up. When worms get scarce, move on.”

4. FIDDLING STRATEGIES:

“I prefer an oak stob of about 2 1/2 feet long. I drive it into the ground about a third of the way with a heavy hammer. As I grunt and put some weight on it, the stob will work itself down a bit more. Within two or three minutes I’ll can tell what’s there. The iron is sawed across the stob five or six times with a relatively slow, steady rhythm, then paused. Then the process is repeated. After that, I decide whether to move a lot or a little, but you have to give it some time before relocating.” 

thickness. Actually, there’s no perfect setup as long as the worms get annoyed. Ask 10 grunters what they use, and you might get 10 different answers.

Nowadays, Gary Revell, 69, of Sopchoppy, Fla., is the guy regional news media usually write about or video when it’s time to do their annual pieces on the Sopchoppy Worm Gruntin’ Festival in early April (wormgruntinfestival.com). Revell employs a custom-made rooping iron and wooden stake in his grunting enterprises.

“I don’t know where the practice originated,” says the worm-grunting maestro. “Back when I was a kid it was just something the locals did to get fish bait. It wasn’t just around here, either,

but also in parts of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, or wherever there are a lot of earthworms. Grunting was and still is the quickest way to get worms. When we were young, my wife Audrey and I could get thousands and thousands in a morning. There’s not as many worms as there used to be, but still enough to make it worth your time and effort if you know what you’re doing.”

Mastering the fiddling technique isn’t nearly as difficult as finding earthworm hangouts in the first place. The best time to fiddle is spring and early summer, which is when worms are most active, and which also coincides with peak fishing season. Here are some of Revell’s secrets.



Grunting up a pile of bait is a great way to get kids excited about fishing.

TAKE A SPIN

WHEN IT COMES TO CATCHING PANFISH,
**NO LURE OUTPERFORMS
THE VENERABLE SPINNER**
IN ALL ITS FORMS.

By Keith Sutton

Safety-pin spinners like Johnson's Beetle Spin are easy to use, even for novices. Simply cast, retrieve and get ready for action.

Few fishing lures have stood the test of time like the spinnerbait. In America, it's generally thought that "Big John" Hildebrandt put the first spinner on a shaft in the late 1800s when he fashioned a thin dime and one of his wife's hairpins into a workable lure. The commonly used safety-pin spinner appeared in the early 1950s, and the Blakemore Road Runner—the first horsehead spinner—came along in 1958.

The reason for their everlasting popularity is simple: Spinners catch fish everywhere. They work equally well at almost any depth from top to bottom, with almost any retrieve and in cover and open water alike. They're among the deadliest and most foolproof lures around, and if you're chasing panfish in May, you'll be doing yourself a favor if you tie one on.

Spinners exhibit vibration, flash and motion, all of which attract a panfish's attention. Small versions are fun for shallow, spawning bluegills and excellent for fan-casting to roving white bass and crappies. Yellow perch fall for spinners, too, especially in-line spinners that sink quickly to the depths where perch often feed.

Spinners are available in a mind-boggling array of styles and colors, so it's easy to get confused when trying to figure out which will work best. Fortunately, we can divide spinnerbaits into three major categories—inline, safety-pin and horsehead—and discuss the different applications to which each is best suited.

GET IN LINE

Inline spinners are built so the spinner blade turns around a straight wire shaft. Below the blade is a heavy, metal body that can be almost any shape, color or size. Popular examples include the very popular Mepps Aglia, invented by Andre Muelnart in 1938; the Panther Martin Spinner with its concave/convex blade (more than 125 million made); Worden's Rooster Tail, introduced in the 1940s by Yakima Bait Company; and the venerable Luhr-Jensen Shyster, with its no-line-twist eyelet and instant-spin blade.

Because they're usually fitted with a small treble hook, in-line spinners can easily snag in any type of cover. They work best, therefore, when cast to more



Don't be fooled by their size. Small in-line spinners are deadly on panfish of all sorts.

open-water structures where panfish might be lurking—places like bridge pilings, riprap, rock outcroppings, boat docks, underwater points and submerged humps. Inlines also can be effectively fished along cover edges. Cast and retrieve along the outside borders of weed beds, willow thickets, brush piles and other panfish hideouts, avoiding the dense cover within.

Some anglers like trolling with in-line spinners, but if trolled too fast, the lures tend to spin and twist the line. A better tactic is to drift-fish with a light breeze that moves your boat slowly across the lake, or use an electric motor to keep your boat barely creeping along. Forward movement should be just fast enough to turn the lure's blade. The Rooster Tail

and Panther Martin both excel when trolled or drifted since their blades turn with little to no effort.



WORDEN'S ROOSTER TAIL

Fishing for big crappies? Some of the best in-lines for these tasty panfish are versions like the Mepps Comet Mino and the Blue Fox Vibrax Chaser that have a plastic minnow body in which the hooks are set.

BEETLE MANIA

Many people remember Virgil Ward for his popular fishing TV show. Few realize he was also a lure inventor.

Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Famer Virgil Ward invented what is now known as the Johnson Beetle Spin, one of the most popular spinners ever produced. In the Amsterdam, Mo., plumbing and appliance shop where Virgil and his wife Cleda lived with their family after World War II, Virgil started the Bass Buster Lure Company.

The marabou jig and the fiber weedguard that revolutionized weedless jig fishing were two items he created to help him catch more fish in the Ozark streams he loved to float. Then, in 1948, he combined a Colorado blade,

a round jig head, a soft-plastic body and a safety-pin spinner design to create the Beetle Spin, a classic lure for catching bluegills, crappies, rock bass, white bass, yellow perch and other panfish. A simple, steady retrieve with a Beetle Spin will catch almost any fish that swims. Smart anglers carry several styles, colors and sizes every time they go fishing.

JOHNSON BEETLE SPIN WITH SOFT-PLASTIC BODY



SAFETY FIRST

The spinner part of a safety-pin-style lure consists of a V-shaped wire frame with a small line-tie loop at the point of the V. A small spinner blade is attached to the end of one arm with a swivel. At the end of the other arm is a small clip (like a safety pin) to which you attach a jig, grub or other lure. Well-known versions include the Johnson Beetle Spin and Northland Tackle's Mimic Minnow.

Safety-pin spinners are great search lures. If you're not sure what type of structure is beneath the water you're fishing, or if you're just trying to figure out where panfish are, take a little safety-pin spinner and fan-cast it in a big circle or semicircle to find fish. As you retrieve the lure, work it over, through and beside woody cover and

other hideouts. Another advantage of safety-pin spinners is they don't require much expertise to use them.

Fishing tiny jigs on a long pole requires a great deal of finesse and patience, and if you lack these virtues, your lure will catch more snags than fish. Safety-pin spinners, on the other hand, are relatively weedless. A youngster or inexperienced angler with little casting experience can fish them successfully. Just cast and retrieve. The lure's thumping, fluttering action will do the rest.

More fish will be caught if you retrieve the lure as slowly as possible and run it close to the fish. When fishing shallow brush, blowdowns, weeds and other visible cover, cast beyond the cover and bring the lure through it or alongside it. It pays to live dangerously

and bump the cover with the spinner, as this often excites panfish into biting.

If the jig or grub clipped to your spinner isn't producing, remove it and clip on a lure of different size or color. Some anglers even clip on flies like those used to catch trout, which, under the right circumstances (during a spring mayfly hatch, for example), make extremely effective panfish catchers.

When panfish are really finicky, you can also remove the grub or tube body from a safety-pin spinner and replace it with a small live minnow hooked through the lips or head.

You'll have to retrieve the lure-bait combo extremely slowly so the minnow doesn't pull off, but this small change may substantially increase the number of fish you hook.

Panfish can't help themselves when it comes to spinners. The vibration and flash the lures create drive these fish to strike almost any time of year.





White bass find it hard to resist a slow-moving Road Runner passing nearby.

Bert Hall, the Missouri Ozarks stream fisherman who invented the Road Runner, often said, “You can’t fish a Road Runner wrong if you fish it slow.” In many cases, he’s right; slow is undoubtedly best. But there’s no reason to fish Road Runners at just one speed. Depending on water conditions and the mood of the fish, this famous panfish catcher can be fished slow, fast or in between; deep or shallow; vertically or horizontally.

The simplest method, perhaps, is casting the lure and reeling it in just fast enough that the blade spins. You also can spider-troll with Road Runners on multiple poles, or drop one beneath your boat and fish different depths with little hops and twitches that attract attention from white bass, yellow perch and even pan-sized catfish. The variations are endless, making this one of the most versatile panfish lures in any angler’s arsenal. 

HORSING AROUND

Many have attempted to duplicate the incredible Blakemore Road Runner, but TTI-Blakemore owns the patent for this lure with the pony-shaped lead head. All lures like it (referred to as “horsehead spinners”) are knockoffs of this revered panfish catcher.



BLAKEMORE
ROAD RUNNER

What makes the Road Runner really special is the fact that the spinner is attached directly beneath the big-eyed head where it’s more easily seen by fish. The blade seldom gets tangled with your fishing line like blades on safety-pin spinners tend to do, and thanks to its unusual positioning, it won’t interfere with hook-ups either.

Horsehead spinners are available in several body styles (marabou, buck-tail, curly tail, etc.), two blade styles (Colorado and willow), weights from 1/32 to 1 ounce. In other words, you can find a Road Runner for every species of panfish, from small-mouthed bluegills and white bass to big-mawed warmouths and slab crappies.



Stick to smaller versions of spinners when targeting small-mouthed panfish species like bluegills.

TRIGGERED TROUT

SOMETIMES YOU'VE **GOT TO FORCE-FEED**
BIG SEATROUT TO GET THEM TO EAT.

By Frank Sargeant



COURTESY OF PURE FLATS

Spring is prime time for hooking up with monster trout as they congregate in accessible, nearshore locations.



Large speckled seatrout—aka “yellowmouths,” aka “gators”—are an elusive fish. Once trout get to about 20 inches, their diet switches from shrimp to mostly fish and they move out of deep, grassy bays to prowl shallow flats, docks, piers and the open beach.

Big trout also become extremely spooky, rivaling bonefish in their tendency to take flight at the bump of a push pole or the wave of a rod. Seatrout are caught from the Carolinas to south Texas, and because they’re found in so many types of habitats over hundreds of miles of coastline, there are a lot of different tactics for catching them.

The muddy, high-flow tidal creeks from North Carolina through St. Augustine, Fla., are live-bait country, while the clearer, sand-bottomed bays and beaches of the rest of Florida allow success with artificials. Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana have more murky water in general, and the high fertility of it produces fatter trout than those found in most of Florida. Anglers in these states opt for artificials when the waters clear, but often rely on live baits when things are churned up. Texas has clear tidal lagoons and lots of grass flats like Florida, and artificials are the optimal offering here, too.

Wherever you chase lunker trout, the best bet is to offer them baitfish and baitfish imitations rather than real or fake shrimp, as studies of food preferences in trout have shown the larger fish feed

mostly on finfish like croakers, pigfish, pinfish, scaled sardines and finger mullet among others.

MOVING IN

Spring is a great time to look for trophy-class trout. The adults gather in near-shore locations, typically just off the edge of a large grass flat or in an area where flooded marsh and tidal creeks are nearby, but in water 4 to 8 feet deep. This is where they’ll spawn at night, often on the days around new and full moons from May through July.

Where there are large gathering of these spawners, you can actually hear them drumming on a calm night, particularly if you’re in a thin-hulled boat like an aluminum skiff, a kayak or canoe. It sounds a bit like the distant croak of frogs—a sort of “choom” sound. They don’t feed particularly well in these schools—they’ve got other things on their minds—but during the daylight hours the larger fish will spread out on nearby flats and pick off baitfish, and this is where some very interesting angling opportunities arise.

Large trout are known for occasionally pushing into water less than a foot deep to feed. They often follow schools of jumping mullet, which is one way to find them in areas you don’t know well. Although the mullet are adults and far too big for the trout to eat, their passage stirs up small baitfish, crabs and shrimp that the following trout pounce on.

NET GAINS

A quality, knotless landing net that can help save fish.

Traditional landing nets can be injurious to the fish you catch and intend to release. Non-rubberized, abrasive, knotted netting is very hard on delicate fish and can remove their slime coating, ultimately killing them.

Frabill Conservation Series landing nets (\$69 to \$189; frabill.com) are one-piece and devoid of knots. The net is a rubberized material that does not damage the fish. The knotless design keeps hooks from tangling or snagging in the net, which promotes a rapid release of fish by reducing the amount of time it takes to remove them from the net.

The net’s flat bottom keeps fish from rolling in the net and supports its entire length, further reducing the chances of harming it. An advanced hoop design removes the netting material from the leading edge of the frame (on some models), eliminating the potential for harm when a fish contacts the hoop.

Frabill’s excellent Conservation Series nets help anglers return fish, unscathed, to their homes with little or no damage so they’re ready to bite—and fight—another day. —Dr. Todd A. Kuhn



Big trout also settle into prop scars in the shallows, as well as sand holes surrounded by grass or shell bottom. These fish rely on their camouflage to hide from prey, so they often hang motionless in the shadows at the edge, ready to rush out and grab any pinfish or mullet that comes swimming across the open water.

In clear waters like those found throughout south Florida and up the coast to Big Bend country, as well as in the bays along the Panhandle coast and in Texas' Laguna Madre, it's possible to sight-fish these big trout when the sun is high. It takes a silent approach, good eyes, polarized sunglasses and long casts to get them, but it's the ultimate in fishing for gators.

Trout are far less visible than redfish because their spots and silver gray coloration allows them to blend with the bottom, but you can often pick out their shadow on light-colored sand like that found around lower Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, or on limerock bottom like that found from Bayport to Steinhatchee.

On Texas' Laguna Madre, the trout are sometimes found in water too shallow for anything but a "flats scooter" kayak or airboat, and wadefishing is the prime way to get within range of them.

Prior to and after the spawn, big trout also sometimes school up in the surf where the water is not so clear as to make them easy targets for bottlenose dolphins. This happens roughly from



When fishing clear water, long cast are essential to keep from spooking big, wary fish.

Orange Beach westward, particularly around the barrier island beaches of Dauphin, Ship, Horn and the Chandeleur islands, as well as in Texas from Port Aransas south.

It's basically a matter of wading out to the first bar, then retrieving a walking

topwater like the Rapala Skitter V or Heddon Spook, or a swim jig like the Z-Man Flex Jig rigged with a Z-Man Swimmin' Trout Trick or Slick Lure along the length of the bar and just off the drop. Hang on, though—you might also hook a 20-pound redfish or jack.



Big seatrout cruising the shallows in search of an easy meal can be fooled by a topwater like the Rapala Skitter V.

LIVE-BAITING

Big-trout experts agree it's hard to beat a pigfish or a croaker 4 to 5 inches long as a bait for trophy trout. The drumming noise these baits make on the hook draws yellowmouths from long distances. Pinfish also work, but not quite as well as the noisemakers.

All three can be caught by setting a wire baitfish trap baited with shrimp tails or chopped baitfish chum on the flats. They can also be sabikied around rip-rap causeways and bridges.

The baits are typically fished with a Kahle-style widegap hook in size 3/0 or so behind the dorsal. They can be free-lined in the surf or on the flats or fished under a popping cork to keep them out of shell and rock bottoms. They're deadly around deep docks and piers, luring out fish that ignore artificials.

COURTESY OF RAY MARKHAM (TOP); FRANK SARGEANT (BOTTOM)

GEAR UP

My favorite setup for seatrout is a 2000-size reel on a medium-light, 7-foot spinning rod. The reel is loaded with 8-pound-test SpiderWire Ultracast braid, which is just slightly thicker than a strand of spider webbing and allows me to throw a 1/2-ounce lure into the next county.

I use Seaguar Gold Label 15-pound-test fluorocarbon leader beginning just outside the reel, which allows me to catch the fluoro with my finger when I cast. It's tied in with a double uni knot trimmed close, with a drop of nail polish to smooth the flow through the guides.

This long leader not only acts as a stiffener to keep treble hooks from tangling in the more flexible braid, but also acts as a slightly stronger handle to control fish when I get them close. The long leader also allows repeated lure changes without having to retie a new leader.

When fishing docks and piers, move up to 15-pound-test braid and mono—otherwise you'll break off a lot of trophies.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Because of the seatrout's high reproduction rate, it does no harm to overall populations to keep fish for the table within the limits imposed by the various states. However, NOAA Fisheries reports that close to 80 percent of seatrout caught are now released. Whether those releases result in the fish surviving and growing

larger depends entirely on the angler's handling of them. Trout are among the most delicate of coastal species and are easily injured to the point they won't survive for long after being let go.

If you opt for multi-hook lures when fishing for lunker trout, it's a good idea to flatten the barbs on at least the rear treble. This allows easy release of those rare trophy females so that they may spawn...and perhaps even pay you a visit again next year when they're a pound heavier.

The best way to release a seatrout is to keep the fish in the water and use your long-nose pliers to perform a no-touch dehooking. This is far easier with single-hook lures than plugs with trebles. Remember that the fish is basically holding its breath the whole time it's out of water, so the dehooking and photographing should all be done in a minute or so if the fish is going to survive.

If you must handle the fish to get the hook out, it's best to first scoop it up with a rubberized landing net or snap a small BogaGrip on the jaw, which will allow you to control the fish without putting the death grip on its shoulders and gill area. Wet your hands to avoid stripping the slime coat—a trout with a damaged slime coat usually does not

survive, researchers say. Though it may swim off, bacteria sets in after a few days and soon kills it.

If you hold the fish up for a grip-and-grin, put one hand under the head, the other just ahead of the ventral fin and support it horizontally. This not only makes a more impressive photo, but also puts less stress on the fish. Avoid lipping a trout as bass anglers sometimes do. For starters, you'll get a puncture wound in your thumb from the teeth, and you may dislocate the fish's relatively delicate jawbone.

If you're wadefishing, a great photo can be made by getting down to the fish's level and lifting it just above the water as the picture is snapped. If a fish flops out of your hand and slams down on a boat deck, there's no point in releasing it; instead, cut the throat latch, bleed it out and put it on ice. And if you get into an area where cormorants or bottlenose dolphins have learned to prey on released fish (there are lots of these areas in southwest Florida), it's best to crank up and find another school of trout. Otherwise, every fish you release will wind up as instant critter lunch. 



One of a trout's favorite meals is finger mullet. Big, soft-plastic swimbaits mimic these, and when worked like a crippled baitfish, they are hard to beat.

FREE FOR ALL

BASS FISHING IN MAY MEANS UTILIZING A WIDE VARIETY OF TECHNIQUES AND BAITS.

By Ken Duke

For bass anglers, the month of May is wide open. In the South, no other month offers the opportunity to catch bass on such a wide assortment of baits, using a variety of techniques at a range of depths in such an expanse of cover types.

In fact, May's biggest challenge is often just hacking through the chaff to get to the good stuff. With so many available options, breaking them down to a few simple yet productive choices can quickly make us far more successful. It's a classic example of how less can be more.



Swimming a jig is a productive technique during the bluegill spawn, and it's hard to beat a green-pumpkin trailer.

TRANSITION TIME

One reason that May options are so broad is that the fish are in a transition period. The spawn is over, as are the post-spawn doldrums across most of the South. Summer has yet to settle in, with its oppressive heat and innumerable pleasure boaters that can often be a challenge to both fishing and boating.

It means that bass can be nearly anywhere on your favorite body of water, from the extreme shallows to considerable depths. Fortunately, because of high water temperatures, they're feeding aggressively, so we typically don't need to slow down to catch them.

That's great news. Bass are active. Bites can come fast and furious. It's a great time to catch numbers of fish—if you cover water quickly and efficiently. Some of the fish you catch will be larger than average, too.

But how do we best cover water quickly and efficiently? It's not hard, but it is work. Each member of the tantalizing trio of lure types we're about to recommend is very different from the others because each excels in a different part of the water column, but they also have some things in common: They can be worked quickly and they can generate both feeding and reaction strikes.

TOPSIDE TAKEDOWN

It doesn't get much more "old school" than topwater lures like the Heddon Zara Spook, Cotton Cordell Tail-Weighted Boy Howdy or Lucky Craft Sammy. They're commonly called "walking" baits because of the sashaying, side-to-side action they have once you zero-in on the right cadence. When retrieved correctly, they move like a dog on a leash that's exploring a sidewalk from edge to edge.

These baits are a great choice in May for a couple of reasons. First, they can be retrieved quickly to cover a lot of water. Second, they're big, heavy baits

Bass are transitioning from the spawn to their summertime pattern now and feeding heavily, typically up and down the water column.



COURTESY OF JOHN MOBLEY



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that can be cast long distances and attract big fish. Third, although we plan to fish them fast, they can be paused or even deadsticked if necessary. Lastly, they move a lot of water, so they get noticed. On clear-water reservoirs like Lake Lanier in Georgia, Alabama's Smith Lake or any of the mountain lakes in Arkansas, Tennessee or North Carolina, it's common for bass to travel 20 feet or more—even vertically—to smash topwater baits.

And while bass, especially spotted bass, will go a long way to hit a walking bait, pulling fish up from such depths is rarely your best bet. These lures excel around boat docks and laydowns, over shallow vegetation and along riprap banks. They are anything but subtle, and bass will attack them all day long, not just early and late or under cloudy skies.

Colors like bone, silver and perch are typically best. Try to match the hatch with your local forage or go with a bold, solid color that stands out and will get noticed.

SWIM A JIG

The jig may be the oldest lure in bass fishing. Native Americans caught bass hundreds of years ago by “jigger poling,” which is nothing more than dangling a jig under a long pole and lifting it up and down in hopes of triggering a fish to strike. But while jigs have long been known for their effectiveness when dragged or hopped across the bottom, it's only been in the past couple of decades that swimming a jig has gained popularity.

Truth is, you can swim any jig. All you have to do is cast and crank. But, depending upon the cover you're fishing, a jig that's specially designed for the method can save you some headaches. Berkley, Booyah, Freedom Tackle, Jewel, Strike King and others all make fine swim jigs.

Because you'll be swimming the jig rather than hopping or dragging it, you don't need crawfish colors. In fact, because it's May in the South—typically a time when bluegills are spawning—you don't need any color other than green pumpkin or a bluegill skirt pattern matched with a green pumpkin trailer like the Strike King Rage Twin Tail Menace Grub, Zoom Fat Albert Twin Tail or Berkley Powerbait Boss Grub.

Make the rig even more bluegill-like by using a chartreuse marker or some

USE THE RIGHT RIGS

Walking baits, swim jigs and Carolina rigs need specific setups. Here are top combos for each.

The three techniques covered in this article require somewhat specialized gear for the baits to realize their greatest potential. None of these recommended combos will break the bank, and your May fishing will be easier and more enjoyable with the right tools.

TOPWATER TACKLE

Walking-style topwaters beg for a 7-foot, medium or medium-heavy casting rod and high-speed casting reel spooled with 14- to 20-pound monofilament line. If you prefer braid, spool up with 30- or 40-pound test, but be sure to add a short mono leader of 2 or 3 feet, or else the braid will sink below the lure and tangle in the front treble.

If you're looking for a great topwater combo, try the new **Abu Garcia Veritas Low Profile Combo** (\$299; abugarcia.com). A 7-foot, medium-heavy Veritas rod is paired with a ZATA V baitcasting reel (7.1:1 gear ratio). Spool it with **Berkley Trilene XT monofilament**. The rod is just right for long casts that cover a lot of water or for precision casts that pick the cover apart.

JIG RIG

Swim jigs function best on a 7-foot to 7-foot-6, medium-heavy casting rod and high-speed casting reel spooled with 17- to 20-pound-test fluorocarbon line or braided line of 30- to 40-pound test.

For swim jigs, consider a 7-foot-1, medium-heavy **Daiwa Tatula** casting rod (\$149; daiwa.com) paired with a 7.3:1 **Daiwa Tatula 200** casting reel (\$169) spooled with **30- or 40-pound Daiwa J-Braid x8 line**. It's a silky-smooth combo that allows for long, nearly effortless casts.

CAROLINA CASTER

The Carolina rig demands a long, medium-heavy casting rod and high-speed casting reel spooled with 20-pound-test fluorocarbon and a leader of 12- to 20-pound-test monofilament. (Fluoro is not an ideal leader material for the C-rig because it sinks.)

A terrific combo for Carolina rigs is the 7-foot-2 **Lew's Mark Rose Ledge** casting rod (\$269; lews.com) with an 8.3:1 **Lew's Custom Pro Baitcast Reel 2nd Gen** (\$279) filled with **20-pound-test Strike King Tour Grade Fluorocarbon**. The rod allows for long casts and moves a lot of line on the hook set. The fast reel saves time by when retrieving line once out of bassy cover.



ABU GARCIA
VERITAS LOW
PROFILE COMBO

LEW'S
CUSTOM PRO
BAITCAST
REEL 2ND GEN

DAIWA TATULA
CASTING ROD



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HOOD

JJ's Magic Dippin' Dye to lightly splotch the trailer. If you've ever seen a bluegill in clear water, you know there's a touch of chartreuse in their coloring. Just be sure not to overdo it. A little chartreuse dye goes a long way here.

Even though you're swimming the jig and using it to cover water down to about 10 feet, don't fall into a trance and simply chunk and wind. That only works some of the time. Most of the time, you'll be better served by targeting cover like brush, weeds, rocks and boat docks. Throw beyond the "stuff" and bring your lure past so closely that it bumps the cover and ricochets off.

Or reel it up to the cover and "kill" it, allowing the jig and trailer to fall several feet before you resume the retrieve. That's when most of your strikes will come. If you can find that cover near main-lake points or in creeks and pockets with some deep water (more than 10 feet), so much the better.

BALL AND CHAIN

The Carolina rig seems to have fallen out of favor over the past 20 years or so. It was relegated to the back burner when drop-shotting became all the rage, but it deserves a better fate—especially in May.

What's so great about the C-rig? Plenty. With a heavy sinker (1/2 to 1 ounce), you can throw it a country mile and feel its every move across the bottom. A heavy sinker also allows you to work it fast while maintaining bottom contact.

Baits for a Carolina rig range from soft-plastic worms to lizards to fluke-style baits and even to hard lures like floating jerkbaits and twitch baits. Ultimately, it's tough to beat creature baits like the Zoom Brush Hog, the Berkley PowerBait Power Hawg and the Yum Christie Critter. They have big profiles that get noticed. Any color is fine now, as long as it's green pumpkin. But in Florida or where the waters are tannic, you might prefer junebug or black-and-blue.

The Carolina rig is your May tool for dredging deeper water—10 feet or more. Cover on points is your best target. Watch your sonar for stumps, large rocks, brush, a steep drop or anything else that's different. Start on main-lake points, but don't hesitate to shift to secondary points if the fish are not on the main lake. You'll find them eventually. 



Walking baits—with their dramatic “slash-and-splash”—draw both reaction and feeding strikes.

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LOCAL CHANNELS

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE FAVORED COVER, STRUCTURE AND FORAGE OF CHANNEL CATFISH IN VARIOUS HABITATS CAN **GREATLY INCREASE YOUR CATCH.**

By Keith Sutton

Channel catfish go on a feeding binge in May as they begin prepping for their impending spawning activities.

BRAD RICHARDSON/GET N BIT PRODUCTIONS



Channel catfish adapt better than most fish, allowing managers to stock them in many bodies of water outside their native range. Today, these popular sportfish swim in waters of all kinds, from little farm ponds and creeks to the Great Lakes and Mississippi River.

The types of waters where channel catfish are *not* found are relatively few. They rarely thrive in cold, fast-running streams where trout are abundant, and they don't do well in the cold lakes of the Far North. They don't like brackish water or saltwater, either, or waters that are polluted.

Almost everywhere else, thriving populations of channel catfish exist. Waters they love include big, fertile rivers; bayous; large, man-made impoundments; oxbows; creeks; water-supply lakes; sloughs; irrigation canals; ponds; backwaters; strip pits and just about anywhere else there's fresh water.

The behaviors exhibited by these whiskered warriors may differ greatly from one habitat type to the next, depending on what foods are available and the types of cover and structure present. But experience gained while fishing will enable you to learn key facts about the fish, their foods and their hideouts.

For example, channel cats in clear mountain rivers may gorge on native crayfish. Catfish in a big farm pond, on the other hand, may feed primarily on frogs and juvenile bluegills. Channel cats in big man-made reservoirs may favor hideouts like cavities in riprap or deep bottom-channel edges, while cats

in a clear upland stream might ambush prey from crevices beneath boulders.

The key to successful angling is understanding some of these differences and using your knowledge to zero-in on the best fishing locales with the best baits. A thorough understanding of the three common Southern habitats below will put you on the road to catching more channel cats.

THE MASSIVE IMPOUNDMENT

Catfish inhabit lakes throughout their range but typically reach their greatest numbers and largest sizes in large, warm, fertile lakes with plentiful cover near deep-water sanctuaries and shallower feeding areas. This includes many large Southern impoundments constructed by government agencies like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority. The month of May, just prior to spawning time, rates among the best times of the year for fast-paced cat-catching in these waters.

Catfish are ravenous feeders as they prep for egg laying and guarding, and many are easy to catch with well-placed baits like night crawlers, chicken liver and chunks of shad or skipjack. Some will follow bottom channels toward shoreline shallows where spawning sites like muskrat holes, undercut banks, hollow logs and riprap crevices are found. Others run up tributary streams searching for similar sites.

After spawning, catfish that ate very little while guarding eggs or fry will start moving and feeding again. Those in tributaries may move downstream

GOING COMMANDO

Abu Garcia's Catfish Commando Combo is a solid choice for price-conscious anglers.

Finding a good catfish combo—one with a matched rod and reel—can be tough. The engineers at Abu Garcia have taken the guesswork out of the process with their smartly priced Catfish Commando Combo (\$109; purefishing.com).

The 7-foot, medium-heavy rod has a durable composite blank with high-

density EVA handle and stainless-steel guides. The 6500-series baitcasting reel features a carbon matrix hybrid drag, six-pin centrifugal brake for efficient casting control and two stainless-steel bearings.



and back into the lake, or linger near the spawning area if good summer habitat is available. Cats that spawned in the lake usually return to deeper water, often hanging around cover near fast-breaking bottom structures such as humps and channel edges. Most will rest in deeper areas during the day and feed in shallower water at night.

Watch for quiet coves and backwaters with beds of green aquatic vegetation such as water lilies, water lettuce and elodea. Catfish love to lurk in shady holes or cruise weed-bed edges to feed on crayfish, shad, minnows and insect nymphs. All these make great baits in this habitat, but many anglers believe the best enticement is a fat frog hooked through a front leg. Cast the amphibian to an opening in the interior of the weeds and coax it to swim around with little tugs. Or just fish it along the outer edges of cover. With the hook through a foreleg, it still can swim well enough to garner the attention of any hungry catfish nearby.

When it comes to massive impoundments, two of our region's biggest and best are the Santee-Cooper lakes, Marion and Moultrie, in southeastern South Carolina. Spanning more than 170,000 acres together, these lakes produce big channel cats and lots of them. The current world record of 58 pounds was caught



Mark the location of any shell beds you see during low water. Cats will often gorge on mussels in these areas when the water rises again.

in Moultrie in 1964, and today, daily catches of 50 or more up to 15 pounds are common in both lakes.

A great way to catch these good-eating cats is fishing the lakes' many beds of small mussels. Locals anchor their boat near a bed spotted during low water, then cast commercial chunk baits or pieces of hot dogs. These are about the same size

as most mussels and are quickly gobbled up by eager channel cats. Big blue and flathead catfish often are caught in these hotspots, too, so 7-foot rods, heavy bait-casting reels, 25-pound-plus line and 5/0 to 8/0 Kahle hooks are typical. Drop a bait down, reel it up a little and you'll often have a big one on before you place the rod in the holder.

Clear, fast-flowing mountain streams are often overlooked as channel catfish hotspots.



THE CLEAR MOUNTAIN STREAM

We often think of broad, slow-moving, bottomland rivers when we think of catfish, but our whiskered friends channel cats, especially, are equally at home in clear, swift mountain streams. For example, cats are common catches in numerous flowing waters in the Allegheny, Blue Ridge, Cumberland, Great Smoky, Ouachita and Ozark mountains of the South. Eating wild-caught catfish here is as much a part of local life as river baptisms and Friday night football.

You can fish these waters from a canoe, johnboat or kayak as conditions allow. Once you're on the stream, though, you need to know where to look for catfish.

Among my favorite spots are eddy pools—areas of calm water that move in a circular pattern downstream from faster riffles and runs. These are like all-you-can-eat buffets for catfish. Crayfish, min-

KEITH SUTTON (2)

nows, insect nymphs and other creatures are drawn there, and the calmer water provides an ambush point for actively feeding cats.

Fallen trees that break the current also attract big catfish. The best of these will be in outside bends. Water eats away at the bank beneath trees, causing them to topple into a washout where catfish can hide. If a deep-water pool lies just downstream from the fallen timber, the area will be even more attractive.

Catfish also like to hold on the downstream side of boulders, watching for prey drifting past in the current. Big boulders usually harbor the biggest catfish, but even rocks no bigger than a football can hide eating-size cats, so don't overlook any possibilities.

The Buffalo National River in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas is a great example of a channel catfish stream of this type. It flows freely for 135 miles and is one of the few remaining undammed rivers in the lower 48 states. As you float in the shade of tall bluffs, try your luck for some of the 5-pound-plus channel cats swimming there.

One of the best techniques is simply casting to good-looking spots while you wade the shallows. Position your bobber

so the bait will hang just above, but not on, the stream bottom. Then allow the rig to drift naturally in the current, guiding it alongside catfish cover.

Bait choices run the gamut from minnows to chicken liver. I generally start out using live crawdads caught by turning leaves and rocks in shallow feeder creeks. Nightcrawlers also work extremely well, as do big live grasshoppers and small sunfish. Cast to a good-looking spot and allow your bait to sit for at least 10 minutes before changing locations.

THE FARM POND

Farm ponds frequently are stocked with channel cats. Their small size allows anglers to thoroughly fish them—a real advantage over larger waters. Most ponds also can be fished without a boat and without worrying about wind, current or other complications. Best of all, there are thousands of ponds throughout the South, so anglers everywhere can enjoy pond fishing for channel cats close to home.

I like to start by fishing in a pond's deepest water, usually a hole near the dam. On the first series of casts, the bait rests directly on the bottom. If that doesn't produce fish, I add a slip bobber

to my rig and present the bait at mid-depths. For the third series of casts (if a third series is necessary), I present the bait just a foot or two below the surface, changing the position of my bobber stop to achieve the desired depth. The depth at which I find catfish is the depth I will continue fishing.

In sizing up a pond, also look for rock piles, stick-ups, stumps, logs, trees, holes, humps and points. These are typical catfish hotspots and should be fished thoroughly. Any brush or submerged objects offshore deserve special attention, as do docks and piers, deep holes around in-flowing water pumps, cool spots beneath overhanging trees and green aquatic vegetation.

Ponds may not look like much, but they offer superb catfishing opportunities far out of proportion to their size. If you're a devoted channel-cat fan, ask your county extension agent to introduce you to farmers who might allow you to fish in their ponds, and after obtaining permission from those who will grant it, visit these bantam waters as often as possible. No other habitat type offers such excellent fishing in such a small area. Ponds are easy to find, easy to learn and easy to fish. **GAF**



Farm ponds can typically be fished either by boat or from shore, and are among the best producers of channel cats you'll find.

SPORTFISH SMORGASBORD

ALABAMA'S LAKE EUFAULA
OFFERS ANGLERS MUCH MORE
THAN JUST WORLD-CLASS
BASS FISHING.

By John Felsher



Lake Eufaula offers anglers a wide range of water depths, structure and cover from which to catch bass.



Created in 1962, Lake Eufaula garnered an early reputation as the “Bass Fishing Capital of the World.” Officially dubbed Walter F. George Reservoir, the impoundment covers 45,181 acres along the Chattahoochee River on the Alabama-Georgia border. Eufaula offers anglers about 640 shoreline miles with numerous shallow feeder creeks and deep, old river channel holes that stretch to depths of 60 feet and more in places.

Over the years, Lake Eufaula has produced many double-digit largemouths. The old lake still produces excellent numbers of bass in the 1- to 4-pound range, some 5- to 8-pounders and an occasional double-digit fish, with some topping 12 pounds.

“Lake Eufaula is well known for producing big bass and big stringers,” says Jack Tibbs, mayor of Eufaula, Ala., and owner of Strikezone Lure Company (strikezonelure.com). “Sometimes, it takes [a 5-fish limit of] more than 25 pounds to win a tournament here.”

Bass anglers can find good action all year long on Lake Eufaula. Spawning traditionally peaks during the full moon in March but extends into April and beyond. By May, anglers may still find some bedding bass, but most largemouths are now looking for something to replenish their energy reserves after spawning season.

“Eufaula consistently offers great fishing for a variety of species for anglers who know where to go on the big lake,” says Sam Williams of Hawks Fishing

Guide Service (hawksfishingguideservice.com.) “The foundation of the ecosystem on Eufaula is the terrific shad population, which feeds predatory fish and keeps the overall ecosystem and fishery healthy.”

WARMING WEATHER

As the weather warms, grass beds and native aquatic vegetation grow thicker. In late spring and early summer, vegetation begins to top out, forming mats. These mats are bass magnets, attracting every food source bass feed on.

Working this matted vegetation with unweighted soft plastics on top draws vicious blow-ups. Texas-rigged worms are particularly good when worked along the edges of weedlines. As the water and weather continue to warm, anglers target deep creek channels, humps and ledges with Carolina rigs, deep-running crankbaits and heavy jigs.

“In May, the frog bite picks up, too. Bass can be caught on either soft-plastic buzz frogs or hollow-body frogs depending on the day and the mood of the bass,” Williams says. “Anglers can also throw spinnerbaits, buzzbaits and poppers. When fishing Texas rigs around the grass I opt for really light weights. This allows the bait to sink slowly and draw fish from the grass. I also like to throw flukes, especially when fish are in the thick cover, mimicking dying shad.”

Docks dot the shorelines of Eufaula, offering manmade structures that attract fish, especially when it warms up. Docks offer shade and cooler water temperatures,

Big cats prowl the 45,000-acre lake. To catch them, soak live or cut bait from 3 to 60 feet, depending on the time of year.



and many dock owners place secondary cover, such as brush piles for crappies, near their docks, which in turn attract bass.

“An angler can’t go wrong throwing jigs or square-bill crankbaits at docks any time of year on Lake Eufaula,” Tibbs says. “Swim either lure around and under docks, bumping it into the dock supports. As the bait bounces off the wood, it triggers bass to strike aggressively.”

MULTI-SPECIES DAYS

Some of the best fishing occurs in Cowikee Creek by Lakepoint Resort State Park. Many bass fishing tournaments run out of the park and release their fish in the marina. Anglers fishing around the marina commonly catch lunker largemouths and other fish. People visiting the park can also catch good fish right from the bank on a variety of baits and lures.

During one trip with Williams, we fished around the marina docks and the Cowikee Creek channel. Using shad-pattern lipless crankbaits and jerkbaits, we caught numerous species of fish.

“While Eufaula is best known for its outstanding bass fishing, visitors here can catch a wide variety of fish species on any given day,” Williams says. “May is a great time to catch multiple species. Anglers can catch largemouth or spotted bass, different kinds of catfish, crappie, hybrid striped bass and several species of bream. Yellow perch are really starting to appear with regularity here now, too.”

THE MAYFLY HATCH

From late spring through early fall, anglers should look for mayfly hatches. Mayflies spend most of their lives underwater as nymphs. After morphing

Guide Tony Adams hefts an average Eufaula crappie. Here, big slabs are in the 3-pound range.



into winged adults, the insects emerge from the water by the millions, triggering major feeding frenzies. Bluegills and other panfish swarm to snatch flies off the surface. Largemouth bass, in turn, feed on the bream.

“When mayflies get on low limbs, fishing gets crazy,” Williams says. “I’ve seen bluegills dancing on their tails knocking mayflies off the branches. When it gets like this, fishermen throwing beetle spins can absolutely slay all types of fish,” says Williams.

Once, while with a crappie client, Williams happened upon a particularly large hatch. His client had 4-pound-test line with a crappie jig tied on and caught a 6-pound largemouth.

PANFISHING

Most people fish for Eufaula’s crappies during the spring spawn in March and April, but anglers can catch them here year-round. After the spawn, many anglers troll for crappies or run spider rigs.

“Lake Eufaula has a strong population of crappie,” says Tony Adams, another guide who calls Lake Eufaula home (334-695-3003). “The lake produces good average crappie, and fish often get into that 3-pound range. I’ve heard of a couple fish exceeding 4 pounds, too.”

When targeting crappies and panfish, Adams focuses his attention on weed beds, rocks and the waters around the bridges. Bluegills and other panfish spawn later than bass and crappies. In a good bedding area, anglers can catch a load of panfish on fly tackle, small spinners or a traditional bobber with a cricket or worm dangling beneath it.

“Bream on Lake Eufaula bed most months,” Adams says. “We find them with our electronics in 3 feet of water and as deep as 12 feet. In May, we catch them in about 2 feet and right up against the banks, throwing any type of spinner.”

Redear sunfish (also called shellcrackers), spawn earlier and deeper than bluegills. They will hit flies, spinners and small crankbaits, but Adams feels the panfish definitely prefer natural bait.

Docks are plentiful on Eufaula, providing shady refuge during warm weather and a hiding place from which to ambush bait.





TRIP PLANNER

Things to do in and around Eufaula

While in the area, nature lovers should explore **Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge**. The 11,184-acre refuge straddles the Chattahoochee River and attracts many bird species, offering tremendous opportunities for photography enthusiasts and bird watchers alike. The refuge also offers hunting opportunities.

For history buffs, the town of Eufaula dates to 1816, three years before Alabama became a state. The town survived the Civil War untouched, and visitors can tour many original antebellum mansions during the annual **Eufaula Pilgrimage Tour of Homes** (eufaulapilgrimage.com). Each December,

the town hosts a **Christmas Tour of Homes**. Visitors may also visit the 1884 **Shorter Mansion** furnished with period antiques. Downtown Eufaula offers excellent dining in several restaurants, and a giant bass statue resides in the city's park.

Lakepoint State Park (alapark.com/parks/lakepoint-state-park) offers lodging in the resort hotel and cabins. The park operates a first-class restaurant and other places to eat. Boats are available for rent.

Since the lake straddles the Alabama-Georgia line, anglers can use a license from either state to fish most of the lake. For additional Eufaula area information, visit eufaulachamber.com.

“Shellcrackers usually start bedding around the end of April. They congregate on and around the banks and love any type of grass,” says Adams. “I look for a little structure around the edges of the bank. At first, we catch shellcrackers in shallow water. Then, they move out to about 4 to 5 feet deep. During the summer, they move into deeper water.”

THE CATS

Lake Eufaula produces good numbers of blue and flathead catfish in the 30- to 40-pound range, with some bigger ones caught on occasion. The lake also holds an abundant channel cat population.

“In May, we usually catch catfish in the creeks and where the creeks hit the river,” says Adams. “We fish from 3 to

16 feet deep. Later in the summer, we fish the channels almost exclusively. We use lines that go 20 to 60 feet deep.”

When plying for flatheads, Adams often opts to head up the Chattahoochee River north of Lakepoint. Flatheads favor live bait now, while channel and blue catfish opt for cut baits like mullet or skipjack. 



2022 TACKLE TEST

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

Story by Dr. Todd Kuhn | Photos by Brad Richardson

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

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

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

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

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



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

THE ARSENAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KISTLER ARGON



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

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

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

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

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

BAITCASTING RODS

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

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

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

ST. CROIX BASS X



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEW'S BB1 PRO



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

team to earn our Editor's Choice award.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

ABU GARCIA MAX PRO



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

Garcia's new Max

Pro impressed the team with both its performance and value.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BAITCASTING REELS



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

13 Fishing Envy Black

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

Abu Garcia Fantasista X

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

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

Abu Garcia Zenon

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

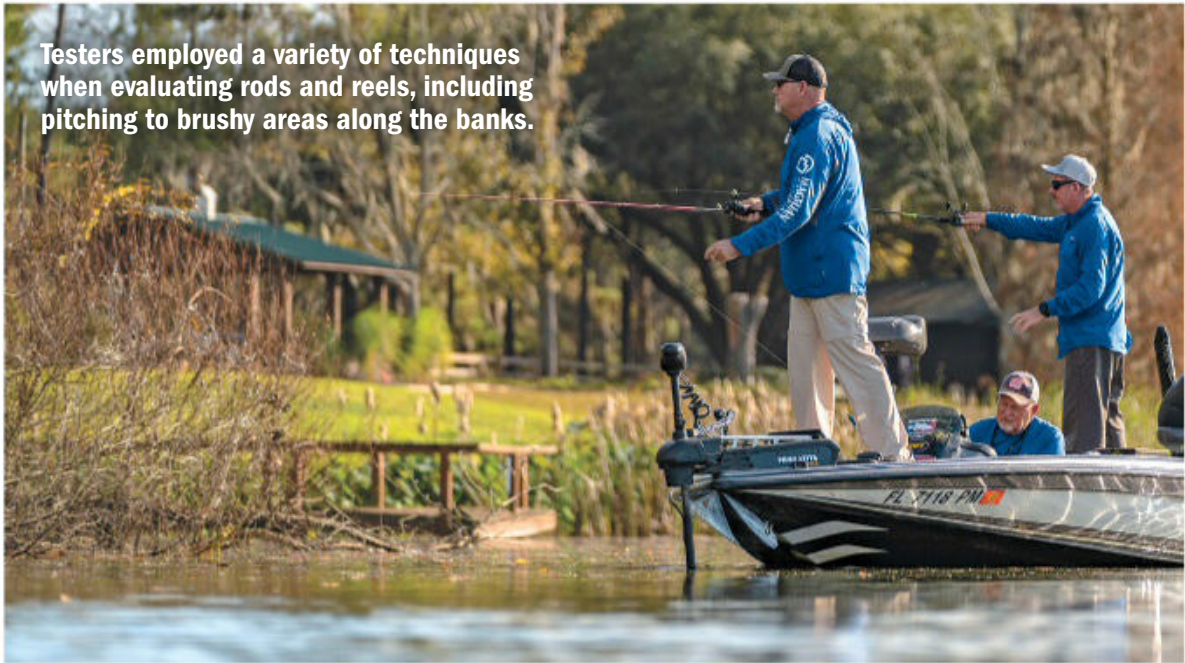
Denali Lithium Pro

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

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

Dobyns Maverick

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



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

G. Loomis GCX

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

Halo Rave III

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

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

Lew's 3XD Cranking Series

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

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

Profishieny Krazy

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

Shimano Curado

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

THE SCORES

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

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



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

13 Fishing Concept Z2

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

Abu Garcia Jordan Lee

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

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

Academy H2O XPRESS Tac-40

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

Dobyns Maverick

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

Duckett Jacob Wheeler

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

Fitzgerald FX8

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

Kistler Series 1

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

Profishency Krazy

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



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

Quantum Smoke X

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

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

Shimano Curado MGL 150HG

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

THE SCORES

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

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



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

G.LOOMIS GCX



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DUCKETT PARADIGM SS3000



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DOBYNS MAVERICK 2000



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DOBYNS MAVERICK



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

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

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

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

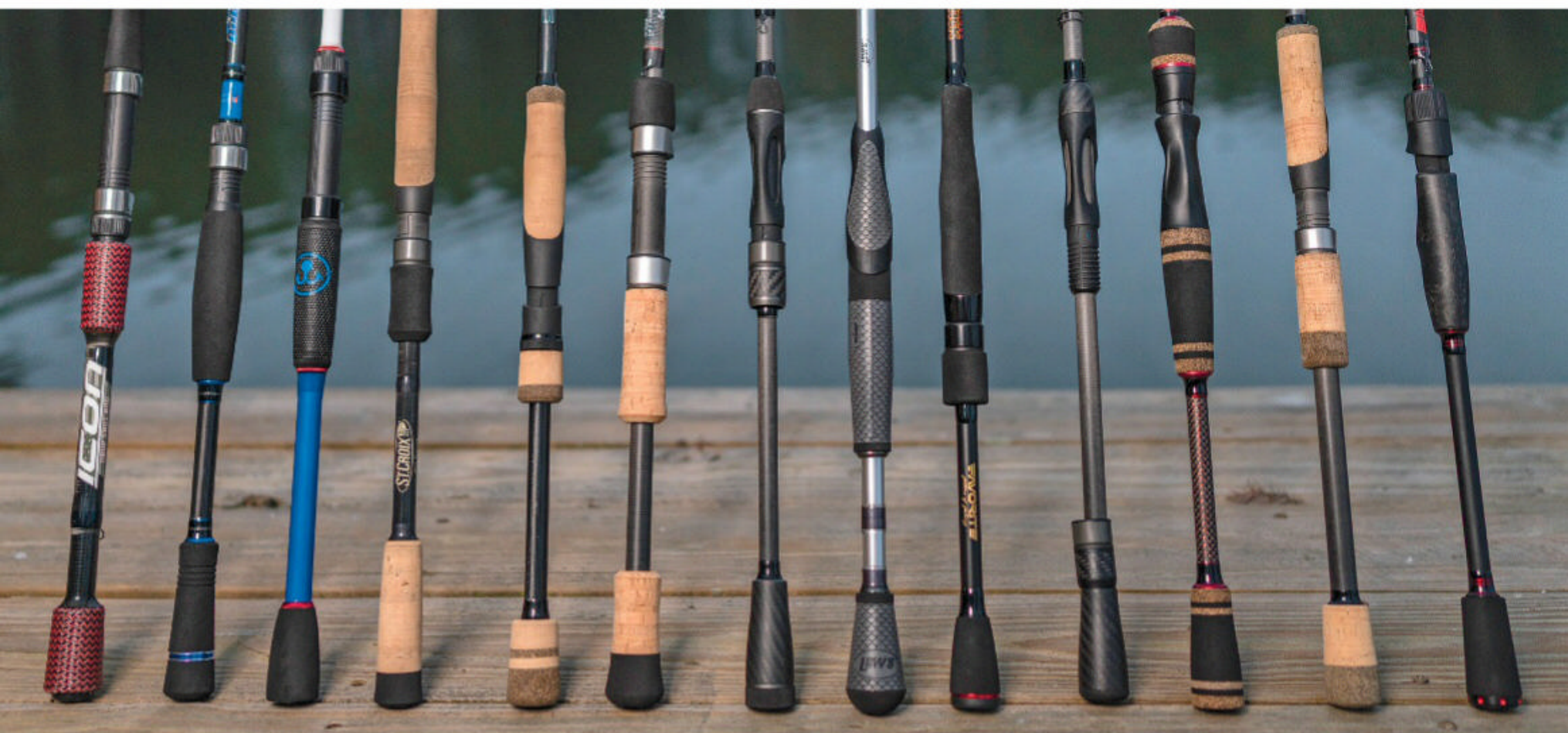
The abbreviated 11-inch split grip, made of high-density EVA foam, makes this rod fish longer than its 7-foot length. The short handle puts the majority of the working blank out front, which is key for light baits and precise presentations.

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

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

SPINNING REELS

SPINNING RODS



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

13 Fishing Envy Black

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

Abu Garcia Fantasista X

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

Abu Garcia Vendetta

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

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

Abu Garcia Zenon

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

Cashion ICON John Crews

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

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

Duckett Jacob Wheeler Pro

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

Favorite B.Lat Sick Stick

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

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

Halo HFX

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

Kistler KLX Dropshot

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

Lew’s Signature Series Mark Zona

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

St. Croix Victory

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

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



THE SCORES

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

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



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

Abu Garcia Jordan Lee

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

Duckett Jacob Wheeler JW2500

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

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

Kistler Series 1

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

Lew's HyperMag Speed Spin

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

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

Penn Pursuit IV

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

Pflueger Supreme XT

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

Quantum Smoke X

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

Shimano Ultegra 2500HG

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



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

THE SCORES

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

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

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

KAYAK CONSIDERATIONS

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

By Drew Warden

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

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

1. INTENDED FISHING USE

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. STABILITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



ESSENTIAL GEAR

Two items that keep you safe and keep you going

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

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



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3. CAPACITY AND FEATURES

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

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

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

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

4. TRANSPORT AND STORAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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



5. PROPULSION

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

6. COMFORT

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

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

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

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

7. PRICE

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

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

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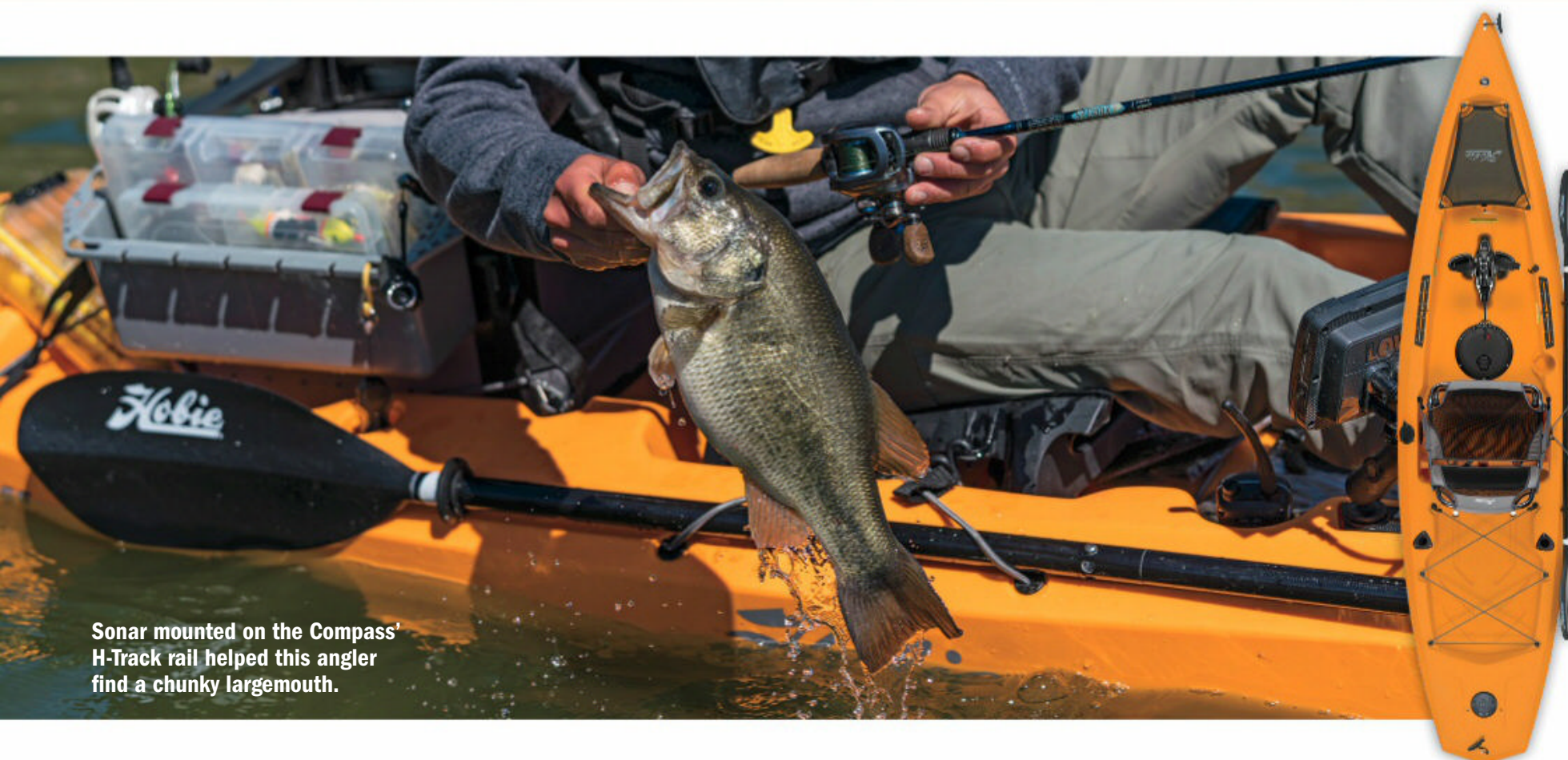
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BUILT FOR THE BITE

THESE KAYAKS ARE FILLED WITH FEATURES THAT
MAXIMIZE FISHING SUCCESS.

By Outdoor Sportsman Group Staff

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



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

HOBIE

MIRAGE COMPASS

LENGTH: 12'

WIDTH: 34"

WEIGHT: 87 lbs. rigged,
68 lbs. hull

OVERALL CAPACITY: 400 lbs.

PROPULSION: MirageDrive 180
pedal system, paddle

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

HOBIE.COM

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

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

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

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

KAYAK KNOWLEDGE

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



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



OLD TOWN

SPORTSMAN BIGWATER PDL 132

LENGTH: 13'2"

WIDTH: 36"

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

OVERALL CAPACITY: 378 lbs.

PROPULSION: PDL Drive pedal system, paddle

MSRP: \$2,899.99

OLDTOWNCANOE.COM

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

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

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

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

BONAFIDE

P127

LENGTH: 12'7"

WIDTH: 34"

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

OVERALL CAPACITY: 475 lbs.

PROPULSION: Propel Pedal Drive system, paddle

MSRP: \$3,099

BONAFIDEKAYAKS.COM

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



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

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

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

forward to access supplies or the battery and transducer wiring.

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



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

NATIVE

SLAYER PROPEL MAX 10

LENGTH: 10'

WIDTH: 34.15"

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

OVERALL CAPACITY: 400 lbs.

PROPULSION: Propel Pedal Drive system, paddle

MSRP: \$2,649

NATIVEWATERCRAFT.COM

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

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

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

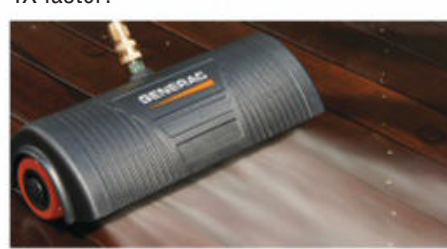
A bow hatch opens to reveal a battery compartment.

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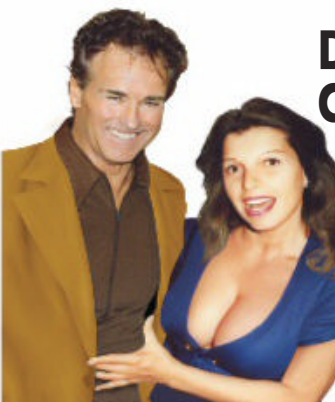
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Total From Other Side		\$
Shipping, Rush Service and Insurance \$20.00 VALUE ONLY		\$14.95
Total Enclosed		\$

NRS FISHING

KUDA 126

LENGTH: 12'6"

WIDTH: 38"

WEIGHT: 31 lbs.

OVERALL CAPACITY: 300 lbs.

PROPULSION: Paddle,
accessory motor

MSRP: \$1,495

NRS.COM

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

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

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

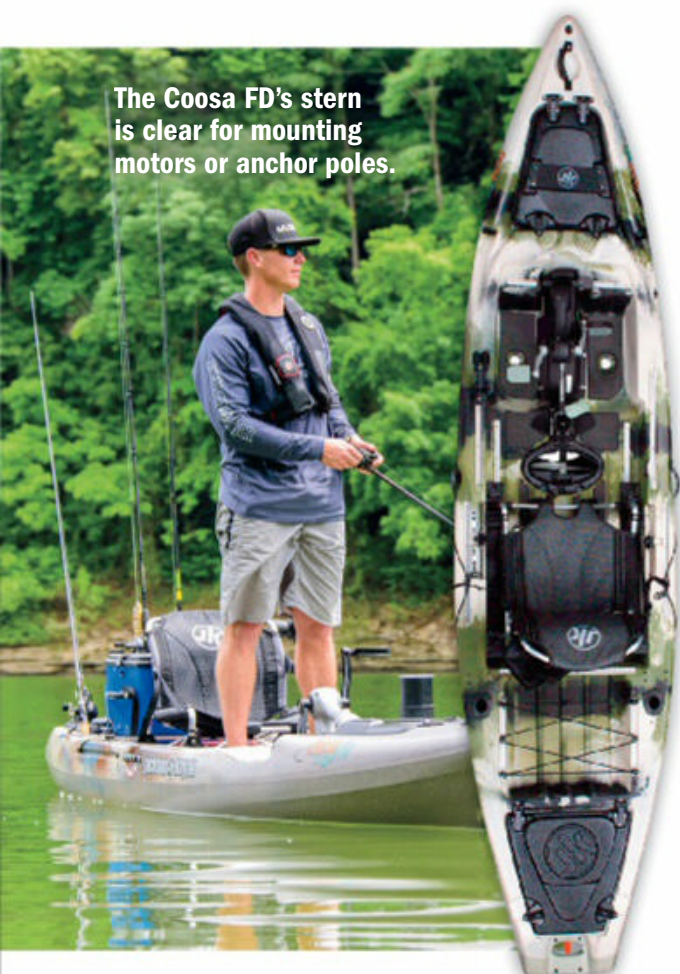
Gear mounts are preinstalled in spots where kayak anglers will want them.

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

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



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



JACKSON COOSA FD

LENGTH: 12'7"

WIDTH: 35"

WEIGHT: 107 lbs.

OVERALL CAPACITY: 450 lbs.

PROPULSION: Flex Drive 3D pedal system, paddle

MSRP: \$3,759

JACKSONKAYAK.COM

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

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

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

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

THE COMFORTS OF CAMP

TOO MUCH LUXURY CAN BECOME A BURDEN.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah," Shane hissed back.

"Get any sleep?"

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

"None," growled his father.

"Ready to try some fishing in the dark?"

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