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GAME & FISH

SOUTH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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SEPTEMBER 2022

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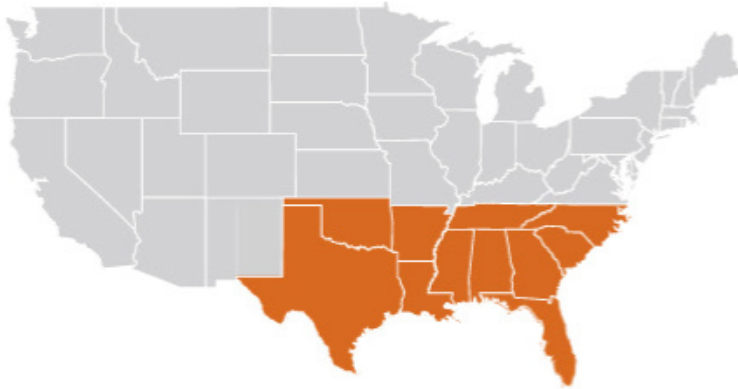
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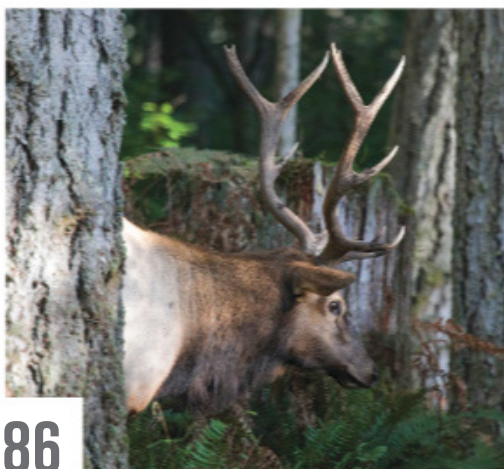
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FINDING VALUE

With fall on the way we all want to be in the woods and on the water more now than during the sweltering weather of the summer dog days. While the higher price of gas and products in general may cause us to cut back on trips, there are some things we can do to keep costs down while still enjoying our favorite pursuits. This issue contains three good examples.

On page 14, Tony Hansen lays out a plan for dealing with increased pressure when hunting public land. He gives some smart advice, and you may want to consider it instead of writing off that piece of public ground just down the road. Don't assume you can't find success there. Some homework and a smart strategy to avoid the crowd could make your season. Hunting close to home saves gas money.

A new season means new gear, but there are some things that we may be able to make ourselves instead of buying. In the DIY department on page 18, Scott Haugen outlines a plan for making a portable duck blind that's just as effective, and maybe more so, than commercial models. Total cost: less than \$30. That can save you \$200 or more when compared to a ready-made layout blind.

There are some things, of course, that we can't rig up ourselves, such as optics. Here's where it pays to spend time researching features and benefits and weighing them against cost. This is why we cover gear in every issue of *Game & Fish*: We want to tell you our experiences with gear in the field and at the lake, and let you know if the items we tested are worth the cost. Read Drew Warden's take on a new binocular from Covert Optics on page 100, and you'll get in-depth reporting on performance. This is the type of review that we hope will help you make smart buying decisions and get the most value from your gear.

Best of luck as hunting seasons begin across the country. When you consider how much joy and excitement we get out of a few months spent in the field, a hunting license may be the best value of all.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

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HELP FOR AUTUMN BASS

The summer heat was a drag, but there is relief with fall’s cooler weather and more active bass. Read “5 Best Baits for Early Fall Bass” to hook up this month.



RECORD CATCHES

Summer 2022 saw several state fishing records broken, including a 131-pound Mississippi blue catfish. Read about catches of a lifetime under “Records.”



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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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AUGUST 2022													
SUN		MON		TUE		WED		THU		FRI		SAT	
21		22		23		24		25		26		27	NEW
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7:42	8:06	8:30	8:54	9:18	9:42	10:06	10:30	10:54	11:18	11:18	11:42	—	12:06
to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to
9:42	10:06	10:30	10:54	11:18	11:42	12:06	12:30	12:54	1:18	1:18	1:42	—	2:06
28		29		30		31							
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SEPTEMBER 2022													
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11		12		13		14		15		16		17	LAST Q
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5:18	5:42	6:06	6:30	6:54	7:18	7:42	8:06	8:30	8:54	9:18	9:42	10:06	10:30
to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to	to
7:18	7:42	8:06	8:30	8:54	9:18	9:42	10:06	10:30	10:54	11:18	11:42	12:06	12:30

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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HEAD GAMES

PLACING CONSISTENTLY LETHAL HEAD SHOTS ON SMALL-GAME ANIMALS BEYOND 25 YARDS WITH YOUR .22 RIMFIRE REQUIRES MORE THAN YOU MIGHT THINK.

By Richard Mann

Wary squirrels present hunters with limited shot opportunities, and one of the best is a head shot. At 50 yards, a rifle and load combination must average less than 3/4 inch to make it.



When it comes to small game hunting, nothing beats a .22 rifle. Not only is it virtually recoil free, it's also not excessively loud. And, with the right ammunition, it's small game capable out to 100 yards or so. A major online retailer lists more than 100 different loads for the .22 LR. Obviously, hunters will be concerned with things like energy, bullet upset and penetration—especially depending on the animal being hunted. Conversely, if you're head-shooting squirrels, just about any bullet will do. What matters most in that scenario is how close the bullet will land to your point of aim.

TWO TESTS

I recently conducted a test to discover what the most precise-shooting .22 LR load was in my favorite rifle. I wanted to know which load would give me the best chance of head-shooting a squirrel out to around 50 yards. I tested 20 loads ranging in velocity from 947 fps to 1,740 fps. The most accurate load averaged .61 inch for five, five-shot groups at 50 yards. The least accurate load averaged 1.99 inches. The average for all loads tested was 1.09 inches. With the notion that any load averaging less than 3/4 inch at 50 yards would be sufficient, I found five of the 20 that met that standard.

However, even though the muzzle velocities for those five loads were very similar, they all had a different point of impact at 50 yards. This meant I would have to perfectly zero my rifle for just one of the loads and then stick with that load exclusively if wanted to be able to make consistent head shots on squirrels at that distance.

This got me to wondering at what distance ammunition selection—regarding point of aim verses point of impact—becomes critical with a .22 rifle. So, I conducted another test. Using my New Ultra Light Arms single-shot .22 rifle, I took those same 20 loads I'd already tested and fired groups at 25, 50



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and 100 yards. But each group at each distance consisted of only one shot with each load, for a total of 20 shots in each group. I also fired a control group at each distance with the CCI 40-grain Mini-Mag Segmented Hollow Point load, which was the load that had delivered the best precision in my rifle.

The primary question I wanted answered was, at what distance could I just grab any .22 LR load I had lying around and use my rifle to head-shoot a squirrel? The test answered that question, but I think what's just as important is how the test showed the wide variance in .22 LR ammunition point of impact versus point of aim at various distances.

RESULTS

25 Yards

A lot of plinking with .22 rifles is done at reasonably close range, generally around 25 yards. At 25 yards, the control group with the rifle measured .324 inch. The 20-shot group fired with 20 different loads measured 1.71 inches, with 95 percent of the shots (19 out of 20) grouping inside .806 inch. A single shot landed about 1.25 inches away from the center of that group. I'm not sure which load produced the outlier—it would be easy enough to find out—but for the purposes of this test, it really does not matter. Clearly, at 25 yards, differences in ammunition make very little difference regarding point of impact. I'd be confident grabbing just about any .22 LR load and attempting to head-shoot a squirrel out to around 25 yards with my rifle.

50 Yards

Most of my .22 rifle shots at small game range between 20 and 60 yards. At 50 yards the single control group measured .779 inch, which was 2.4 times larger than it was at 25 yards. The 20-shot group fired with 20 different loads measured 4.332 inches. Again, there was a single outlier that hit about 3.5 inches from the group center. That group was 2.53 times larger than the 25-yard group. Discounting the outlier, the remaining 19 shots grouped into 2.030 inches. Although this is not nearly enough precision for head-shooting squirrels, with my rifle I should be able to hit a pop can or poke an opossum through the lungs out to about 50 yards or so, regardless of the load used.



100 Yards

At this distance the five-shot control group measured 1.821 inches, which was 2.34 times larger than the 50-yard group. This is well beyond the distance of making a probable head shot on a squirrel. The increase in the size of the 20-shot group was nearly identical. It went from 4.332 inches at 50 yards to 10.5 inches at 100 yards. The 100-yard group was 2.42 times larger than the 50-yard group. It's readily apparent that if I intend to hit anything smaller than a two-liter soda bottle at 100 yards with my rifle, it must be zeroed for the load I'm shooting. And I must know the trajectory of that load at anything much beyond 40 yards or so.

WHAT IT MEANS

What can this data say about you and your rifle? I think one of the most important revelations from this test is how much group size will increase with distance. Conventional wisdom has always suggested that group size or precision increases proportionally to distance. For example, if your rifle shoots 1-inch groups at 25 yards, it should shoot 2-inch groups at 50 yards. Double the distance, double the group size, right? With allowances for human and ballistic error, this estimation proved to be close but not exact. In this test, when the distance to the target was doubled, group sizes—on average—

consistently increased by 2.42 times. Keep this in mind when shooting at distance with a .22 rifle.

Of course, you'll have to find the load your rifle likes. I shot five of the loads used in this test in three rifles, including the one (Rifle No. 1) I used to obtain the data. Rifle No. 1 averaged .81 inch for five, five-shot groups with all five loads at 50 yards. Rifle No. 2 averaged 1.50 inches, and Rifle No. 3 averaged 1.51 inches. The best-shooting load in Rifle No. 1 was the second-best load in Rifle No. 2 and the worst-shooting load in Rifle No. 3. Bottom line: Ammunition preferences vary a great deal between .22 rifles. They really are finicky creatures.

However, if you're shooting at about 25 yards with any .22 rifle, odds are that the ammunition you use won't matter that much. If your rifle delivers enough precision for head shots on squirrels at that distance with one load, it will probably do it with most loads. There's just not enough variance in point of impact to matter. On the other hand, if you're shooting at small targets at distances between 25 and 50 yards, you're probably going to have to pick one load and stick with it to get frequent hits. For shooting past 50 yards, not only will you need to zero for the load you're going to use, but you'll also need to be intimately familiar with its trajectory. **G-I**

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WINDS OF CHANGE

IT'S TIME TO ADAPT YOUR HUNTING APPROACH ON PUBLIC GROUND.

By Tony Hansen



I consider myself a student of the hunting game—as such, I am acutely aware of trends in our sport. One I’ve noticed over the last few years is the dramatic increase of interest in public land hunting. As most know, I am a big fan of public land hunting, having spent the majority of my formative years tromping there.

Another trend developing is the dramatic decline in the popularity of outdoor “television” and the way it is consumed. Most of today’s hunting programming is no longer delivered via traditional television, but to millions of mobile phone screens via video sharing platforms, like YouTube for instance.

Here, you will find no shortage of public land content rife with detailed how-to and where-to information. More often than not, the state being hunted is identified as are specific towns, counties and often times the actual hunt location. Of course, the result is predictable—increased hunting pressure in those areas.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m in no way “blaming” those content producers or saying anything negative about the YouTube movement in general. In fact, I’m a fan of many outlets there and think they’re doing a great job of portraying the reality of hunting for a lot of people (which likely explains the immense popularity and eager adoption of the content).

What I’m saying is that all of that readily available content has had a dramatic impact on the public areas I hunt, and I’ve had to make equally dramatic shifts in my hunting approach to find consistent success.

Here are a few changes I’ve made that have brought me more success on the evermore popular public lands I hunt.

BEST IS WORST

Before the days of smartphone apps that put aerial images and public land boundaries in the palm of my hand, I relied heavily on Google Earth images printed and filed into a binder to guide me when hunting on the road.



Your ability to make decisions that may seem counterintuitive often leads to being more successful on public lands.

Now, I simply drop waypoints on my laptop and those points sync automatically to the app on my phone. But the overall premise is the same: I'm e-scouting locations during the offseason and prioritizing them according to what locations I expect to be most productive.

Before the public land boom, the task was considerably simpler. I'd locate the best-looking public parcels, mark them and speed-scout them as soon as I arrived for a hunt. Today, those previous prime-looking locales seldom make my "must-visit" list. Why? Because I've learned a lesson the hard way, that the "choicest" parcels draw the most hunting pressure. I can pretend/hope/wish that weren't the

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case—but it is. Putting any stock in those properties that look like the real deal on an aerial view is typically a fool’s errand.

For the past several seasons, any time I’ve tried to make one of the top-end spots work, it was futile. Hunting pressure is something I try to avoid at all times and those large pieces of premium habitat attract hunting pressure in droves.

PASSING GRADES

Today, when planning my public land hunts, I use a grading system. “A”-type properties are those which appear exceptional on an aerial image. “B”-grade ground looks solid but may be a bit smaller or have limited access points. “C” ground is huntable but marginal in terms of habitat and may have other negative aspects at play. And, finally, “D” parcels feature little in the way of deer habitat. They’re huntable and can produce but they aren’t going to draw a lot of attention. Which, of course, is the entire point.

Now, I completely ignore the “A” ground, and perform a drive-by on “B” parcels to check for hunting pressure before even thinking about diving in. The “C” and “D” parcels have become my go-to. I’d much rather hunt marginal ground with little- to no hunting pressure than try and make a great-looking property work when it’s being pounded on a regular basis.

NOT PRIME TIME

The first week of November is typically the best time to hunt, right? Well, not necessarily if you hunt primarily on public ground anyway. For most hunters, the best time to take their “rutcation” (i.e., vacations taken during the rut) seems to be that first week in November. It was, at one time, one of my favorites, too. I still love it, but I no longer book my vacations around it.

Experience has shown me that my best chance at success comes when the deer I’m hunting don’t know they’re being hunted. This means targeting areas with the least amount of hunting pressure I can find. Today, that’s a tall order anywhere in the country during that first week of November.

Taking into consideration the additional rut-related pressure, I’ve adapted my calendar. I’ve never had much success in the earliest stages of the season but now, I focus more effort on late September and early October. My “rut” hunts are done in mid- to late November. In short, I try and work around the crowds when I can, and that means targeting times of the year that are less popular.

CEMENTED TO THE SEAT

“Mobile” hunting tactics have been the rage for a couple of years now and I don’t see that slowing down anytime soon. I’m a fan of those methods to some

degree but, as with most things, it can be taken too far, and I’ve seen plenty of evidence of that.

Today’s public land sees far more human pressure than in years past. A growing percentage of bowhunters are more willing to bounce around, sneak through cover and take the hunt to the deer than previously. Successful or not, this means more ground is disturbed and more deer bumped than when hunting stationary stand sites.

Like the majority of bowhunters, I love to hunt from an elevated position, and I have confidence in my ability to find effective ambush locations. So, I’ve doubled down on that. Rather than succumbing to my inherent lack of patience, I have taught myself to lock into an area I believe will be productive and to spend as much time there as possible.

As mentioned previously, these locations are selected due to a lack of human intrusion. Here, I practice low-impact hunting. That means making every attempt to slip in and out cautiously, play the wind, and hunt scent-free with minimal movement.

Needless to say, most other hunters don’t practice such good hunt hygiene. More often than not, they’ll push deer my way. And when they do, I’ll take advantage of their mistakes. Often times, on pressured public properties deemed less than desirable. **G-I**



The amount of information available to hunters now is dizzying and has changed the way we hunt public land dramatically.

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BUILD A DUCK BLIND FOR LESS THAN \$30

A panel blind in action, covered in camo netting. Note the dead grass atop the blind, which was prevalent along the dike being hunted on this day. The extended edges of mesh offer further side concealment.

STAY HIDDEN ON THE X FOR CHEAP WITH THIS EASY-TO-MAKE OPTION.

Story and Photos by Scott Haugen

Twice I hunted a prime spot last duck season and failed to fire a shot. I first tried an A-frame blind tucked into a tree line and then a layout blind in the open. The first blind was too tight to heavy cover, which ducks avoided. The second blind had a footprint that was too big and hard to conceal, so ducks flared.

As ducks continued to land in the flooded field by the thousands, my wheels kept turning. That's when I decided to build my own, single-panel, low-profile blind. On the first hunt with my homemade blind, I limited in 15 minutes. The following hunt I watched more than 700 ducks land in the decoys,

but I didn't shoot for the first five hours because I was seeking a Eurasian wigeon I'd seen while scouting. By season's end the little blind accounted for more than 20 limits. I had built it for less than \$30.

At a local farm store, I paid \$23 for a 4-by-8-foot cattle panel with 8-inch spaces. Using bolt cutters, I cut the panel in half to make a pair of 4-foot squares for two blinds. I made the center cuts against a cross-section of wire. The 8-inch protruding wires became the bottom of the blind. To make a second blind from the other panel, I cut the cross wire off the bottom, creating 8-inch protruding legs.

These legs can be bent by hand at an angle to accommodate the ground you'll

be sitting or lying on. On flat ground, bending the wires about 45 degrees is ideal; use less of an angle on elevated ground. How much you bend the legs and what angle you want the blind can vary from hunt to hunt. When hunting, wedge a 2-foot-long stick between the panel and ground for stabilization. Use a finished piece of wood from home or grab a dead branch from a tree.

Get a package of 8-inch, 75-pound-rated cable ties to secure camo to the blind. A pack of 100 ties can be picked up for less than \$10. It takes 16 ties to secure camo material the panel.

There are two options to cover the panel. One, wrap the panel in camo



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Wires at the bottom of the blind can be bent by hand and shoved in the ground at a desired angle to optimize concealment.

mesh and secure it around the edges and middle using the cable ties. I picked up a 5-by-10-foot section of camo mesh online for \$10. Burlap also works. Leave a foot or two of mesh hanging over the sides of the panel to round the edges, which will help hide you as well as your dog. This is my preferred camo method because it allows the blind to be transported easily and covered with natural vegetation once afield.

Another option is to use dry grass or brush, which can be secured directly to the panel. If going this route, be sure to match the blind cover with the habitat you'll be hunting. If choosing to secure grass to the panel, first cable-tie a foot or so of camo netting or burlap across the top of the blind. This strip will help conceal your face and hands when calling, which can be invaluable on sunny days.

Whichever camo option you choose to secure to the panel, avoid the urge to make it thick. You don't want the blind looking dark and blocky, as it will flare birds. Having space in the blind's camouflage scheme creates light and dark patterns,



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and it's this contrast that provides depth of field. Your camo form under the blind, combined with the ground you're sitting on, will create an even more realistic look.

At your hunting location, pull from natural vegetation and add it to the blind. Grab handfuls of green grass, brown grass or whatever brush the blind is situated in, and scatter it atop the mesh or existing grass on the blind. If it's dry and windy, you might need to get some of the vegetation wet so it stays in place.

Weighing less than 10 pounds, the panel blind is easy to carry. This is a mobile blind designed for moving to and hunting on the X. If the wind changes, the sun angle is wrong or birds start working the other end of a pond, slough or field, simply pick up the blind and move. Several times last season I moved two or three times in a morning to get to where ducks were working. I killed a number of geese from this little blind, too. Along with the blind, I usually take a dozen floater decoys and a few dozen silhouettes. Going light allows for quick and easy moves and adjustments to be made.

The biggest challenge when hunting from this blind is getting a shot. Because you're usually lying down, it can be hard to sit up, twist, turn and follow ducks. If it's muddy, a pad will help keep you from sliding around in your waders (I sit on my decoy bag). Covering the ground beneath you in grass or weeds also helps. Since your movement can be restricted, let the birds work into the decoys in front of you to maximize shot opportunities.

After every hunt I either take the blind and decoys with me or, if I'm going to return to hunt the same place, stash the decoys under the blind and cover it. I never leave the blind standing or the decoys out when I'm not hunting, as I don't want people—or birds—to see my setup. If hunting pressured public land, take it all with you when done.

Repair any holes in the blind and add cover as needed as the day and season progress. This small, mobile blind will put you on the X when roomy, fixed blinds fail. It's a bargain-priced project that you can complete in less than an hour and benefit from all season long. **G&F**



Cable ties hold grass or camo mesh tight to the panel. Once on the hunt, simply lay cover to the blind to fill in holes and create depth of field.



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CARP

CRUSADERS

ARMED WITH NEW DATA ABOUT THE LONGEVITY AND CONSERVATION VALUE OF AMERICA'S LEAST APPRECIATED FISHES, ADVOCATES ARE ELEVATING THE COMMON CARP AND ITS COUSINS.

By Andrew McKean



Given the technical angling required to catch carp, and their fighting ability once on the hook, many feel the classification “trash fish” does not apply.

Sean Manning admits the growth of his group, the American Carp Society, was slow to start. Founded in 2002 with concentrations of membership in California, Texas and New York, the group now has members in nearly every state along with a significant foreign membership.

Little wonder the rest of the world is interested in American carp angling. From eastern Europe to China, sport anglers pursue carp with the sort of intensity that their countrymen reserve for soccer. These international advocates have been mystified that the sport—or species—hasn’t taken hold in the U.S., which arguably has some of the world’s best carp waters and abundant public fishing access.

Manning hopes to change that by rehabilitating the image of the common carp, a non-native species that has been “naturalized” in the U.S. thanks to nearly 100 years of residence here. And his

advocacy includes a fresh perspective of the carp’s native cousins, the various species of buffalo fish.

“Carp and buffalo have been maligned by many here in the U.S., generally through misinformation, some of which has actually been passed down through the ‘scientific’ community, so there’s little wonder why the fish is viewed as somehow lesser,” says Manning. He’s referring to the derogatory term “trash fish” often used to describe carp and its cousins. He claims that slur helps perpetuate what he considers a monstrosity: dead fish being dumped in a field or left on the riverbank. Nearly as damaging is the lack of regulations governing limits or methods of fishing for carp and buffalo in most states.

From an angling perspective, carp have no peer, claims Manning. That won’t surprise anyone who has witnessed the intensity of dedicated carp anglers.

Happily, says Manning, the number of avid carp anglers is growing, and carp fishing competitions and conservation considerations are surging in many states.

“Carp simply possess far superior angling challenges, from our perspectives as lifelong anglers of all species,” says Manning. “They are superior in intelligence and fighting ability. We fish for sport, not for the table, and therefore target the species that is harder to catch and outwit and will give us the best fight and challenge. That’s the reason the carp is the foremost freshwater sportfish in just about every country in the world, with the current exception of the U.S.”

ANCIENT BUFFALO

Concurrent with heightened interest in carp angling, new research indicates that buffalo fish are among the longest-lived species in American waters. Research conducted by a team from North Dakota



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State University (NDSU), published in 2019 in the journal *Nature*, found that bigmouth buffalo can reach 112 years of age, more than quadrupling previous longevity estimates and establishing buffalo as America's oldest freshwater fish. The United States has five distinct species of buffalo, together considered the largest family of North American suckers. The most widely distributed species include the smallmouth buffalo, bigmouth buffalo and black buffalo, all of which can live for many decades and in a wide variety of waters, from main-stem rivers and large reservoirs to brackish backwaters and smaller tributaries.

The researchers found populations of bigmouth buffalo in Minnesota that were composed largely of individuals more than 80 years old, indicating a bottleneck in reproduction while also suggesting that indiscriminate harvest by bowfishing gear may include fish that are older than the bowfishers' grandparents. The NDSU team noted that many anglers and bowfishers fail to differentiate between invasive bighead carp, Asian grass carp,

common carp and the various species of buffalo, lumping them together as "trash fish."

"This imprecise term is used in much of the United States to lump many endemic, traditionally nongame fishes, along with unwanted invasive fishes, for the purposes of harvest regulation," the researchers noted. "This pejorative designation has led to the misconception by the general public of bigmouth buffalo as an 'invasive species' or 'a carp,' encouraging its persecution as a sacrificial or unimportant species."

Another carp group, which operates the Big Carp News website, suggests that the "invasive" label for common carp—native to Europe and Asia—should be revised. "Unfortunately, the carp's amazing ability to spread its range through floods and interconnected waterways has resulted in it being labeled 'invasive,'" the website notes. "Although, after 200 years, the term that is applied to other introduced species like brown trout—'naturalized'—is a more accurate term."

Indeed, Manning says one of the most common accusations leveled at

carp—that they stir up sediment, thereby making waters murky and warmer and displacing sport fish—is false. "Water-quality issues usually have more to do with poor watershed management, excessive deforestation and development," he says. "Add to that the increasing watercraft pressure on lakes and rivers in the U.S., which causes excessive turbidity. The fact that carp can thrive in those conditions is an indication of their hardiness, not that they created the conditions in which they thrive."

Regardless, Manning and his American Carp Society will undoubtedly swim upstream as they try to turn the conversation to a wider consideration of carp as sport fish. But size helps. Year by year, the number of outsized carp (and buffalo) caught by anglers rises. The number of 50-pound carp—the threshold for getting the attention of the national carp community—increases every year. And a growing number of those trophy-class fish are released, which is right in line with the European carp ethic. Most of the outsized carp in Europe are caught so often that they have earned names.



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There are five species of buffalo, including the smallmouth, that are native to the U.S. Recent research shows some species age to 100 years or more.



VALUE AS SPORT FISH

Manning notes that while there are many conservation battles to fight on behalf of carp and its cousins, the sporting value of carp will make more converts than all the conservation arguments biologists can offer. After all, big fish that present big challenges are the epitome of sport fishing.

“Invariably, if we look at why we all fell in love with the sport of fishing as a child, it was a desire to first catch any fish, and later to catch the biggest fish in the river or lake,” says Manning. “We had no biases on species unless they were taught to us. If you give a child a rod with a 10-pound bass or a 10-pound carp on the end, the carp is probably going to

leave [the kid] with a broken line or a bent hook. Now, take that to a 30-, 40- or 50-pound carp and magnify the experience. You never lose that feeling if you are an angler. The same goes for buffalo, especially when they get really large.”

Manning relates stories of anglers who were fired up by fighting a massive fish, not knowing what species was pulling their line, and then deflating when they learned it was a carp or buffalo. He suggests anglers remove any species bias and purely look at fighting ability and the challenge of catching these fish.

“There is no comparison,” he says. “Trying to catch a 40-pound carp or a 60-pound buffalo will challenge most anglers who say they fish for the sport of it more than any other species. It takes dedication, perseverance and a great deal of time. Talk to anglers who have tried to catch carp on the fly, and they’ll tell you. Carp are harder to catch on the fly than any other species, and when you’ve done it consistently, you’ve really done something. Our goal at the American Carp Society is to give anglers a chance to do that.” 

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A promotional image for the TV show 'Taste of the Wild'. It features five men and a goat. In the background, three men stand: one on the left with a beard and mustache, one in the center smiling, and one on the right wearing a black beanie and a jacket with 'AMERICA SERIES INC' on it. In the foreground, two men are seated. The man on the left is smiling and wearing a camouflage shirt. The man on the right is wearing a tan baseball cap and has a serious expression. A goat is positioned between them, its head and antlers visible. The entire image has a warm, golden-brown color palette.

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WITH ITS SHEER NUMBER OF BIRDS, MIXED-BAG OPPORTUNITIES
AND THE CHANCE TO HUNT TOTALLY UNPRESSURED DUCKS AND GEESE,
SASKATCHEWAN IS THE HUNT OF A LIFETIME FOR AVID WATERFOWLERS.

By Drew Warden



This was insanity. We'd just sat back down inside the blind after retrieving birds, and already a new group of 20 or 30 ducks was locked onto our spread and dropping down to make their approach. The birds sucked gently closer to our decoys, seemingly pinning themselves to some unseen board in the sky. Tyler Mann, our guide and the owner/operator of Saskatchewan Goose Company in north-central Saskatchewan, shouted the order to take them. The pea field erupted as eight of us popped out of an A-frame blind and released a barrage at the perfectly decoying birds. Mallard after mallard fell from the air.

It was the third such volley we'd unleashed on our first evening hunt in Saskatchewan, and an impressive pile of ducks was accumulating behind the blind. The late-October temperatures were relatively mild for waterfowl hunting, and I could barely comprehend the fun I was having. I had expected the hunting here to be incredible, but somehow it was proving even better than I'd imagined. We filled our eight-man duck limit on that pea field in less than two hours. The fast-and-furious field hunting had been unlike any I'd ever experienced in almost two decades of hunting stateside. At times that afternoon, it almost felt like cheating; hunting wasn't supposed to be this easy.



Saskatchewan is renowned for its world-class dry-field hunting. The province has an incredible number of often-naïve birds, as well as abundant agricultural fields.

The fields Mann hunts are some of the very first birds see after nesting in boreal forests, which makes them highly attractive. His retriever had no shortage of work.



As we picked up our decoys and blinds, ducks continued to swirl in the warmly lit skies, and I couldn't help but think how crazy it was. I'd been in Saskatchewan maybe seven hours and had hunted only two. Already, it seemed, it had ruined all other duck hunting for me.

A SPECIAL PLACE

Saskatchewan is a paradise for waterfowl. One of Canada's "prairie" provinces—along with Alberta and Manitoba—Saskatchewan sits at the heart of the celebrated Prairie Pothole Region, which, by some estimates, supports more than 50 percent of all North American migratory waterfowl. The

region boasts thousands of naturally occurring wetlands in small potholes nestled amongst mid- and tall-grass prairies that serve as prime nesting areas. Farther north, the province's boreal forests, which also possess plenty of water, offer additional nesting grounds.

On top of this, Saskatchewan—often called Canada's breadbasket—provides ample grains for birds that nest on the prairies and those making their first stopover after leaving boreal forests. Once combines start running in massive wheat, barley and pea fields in late summer, waterfowl of every species take notice and begin feasting in anticipation of their southward migration.

In short, Saskatchewan has everything that waterfowl need to survive and thrive. In September and October, millions of ducks and geese spend weeks feeding and loafing in central and southern portions of the province. And, until deteriorating weather or overwhelming hunting pressure pushes birds south, hunters can expect incredible action across the province's vast agricultural fields and the many ponds, sloughs and lakes dotting the area. If water stays open and unfrozen and waste grain isn't covered by snow, ducks and geese will stick around.

Because of its nearly universal appeal to all waterfowl, Saskatchewan also offers hunters one of their best



opportunities to harvest a mixed bag of birds. Mallards and pintails are the most common duck species to encounter; however, gadwalls, wigeons and even green-winged teal may show up, too. Geese of all persuasions abound. Big Canada geese, cackling geese, specklebelly geese, snows, blues and Ross' geese are all possibilities. Bag limits are also quite liberal, with hunters allowed 8 ducks of any species, 8 dark geese (only 5 of which can be white-fronted geese) and 20 light geese daily.

I first saw evidence of this incredible diversity as our group of outdoor writers and media representatives drove from Alberta through western Saskatchewan.

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GO-TO GEAR

If you're making the trip up to Saskatchewan, bring along the right equipment.

Weather can be variable in Saskatchewan in the fall, especially later in October. Having layers is important, and—when conditions deteriorate—so are warm and durable outer garments. On my hunt, I wore Final Approach's new Branta Bibs (\$300) and Wader Jacket (\$300). Both are lined with Primaloft Silver, are 100 percent waterproof and windproof and feature fleece-lined pockets. They also sport ample pockets for storage and a durable construction, with common failure points—like the elbows, forearms, knees and butt area—receiving extra reinforcement. Bring a pair of rubber/muck boots (insulated or not according to preference), too.

A good blind bag is also nice. I used FA's S.U.B. Blind Bag (\$90) in Saskatchewan. It pairs perfectly with A-frame style blinds, with a lid that clips to the bar on the blind for easy, constant-open access. Two mesh dump pockets are perfect for keeping shells readily available, and the waterproof bottom keeps contents dry. Throw in calls, too, if you're freelancing.

If you prefer bringing your own shotgun across the border, ensure it is reliable and patterns the load you use well. I used Weatherby's 18i Waterfowler in Mossy Oak Shadow Grass Blades (\$1,249). Its durable and comfortable polymer stock and time-tested inertia operating system served me well. However, any dependable semi-auto, pump or break-action works if it can fire the non-toxic loads you use and patterns well.

If you bring your own fowling piece, you'll need ammo, too. Pattern it so you know how it'll perform at different ranges. Distances can vary a lot. Our typical shots on ducks were close since birds worked well. Shots on geese, however, tended to be a bit farther. In any case, bring hard-hitting non-toxic loads that offer a consistent, lethal pattern.

I mostly used 12-gauge Federal Premium Black Cloud FS Steel (\$43) and Black Cloud TSS (\$61) loads. The Black Cloud FS Steel pairs a FliteControl Flex wad with a payload of 40 percent FliteStopper (ringed) steel pellets and 60 percent Premium steel pellets for tight, dense patterns that generate larger wound channels. The Black Cloud TSS, meanwhile, blends 40 percent FliteStopper Steel with 60 percent Heavyweight TSS pellets, which are more than double the density of steel and 50 percent denser than lead. It also utilizes a FliteControl Flex wad for consistent patterns from all waterfowl chokes.

If you're with an outfitter, decoys and blinds are likely covered. DIYers will want an assortment of honker field decoys (full bodies and silhouettes) and full-body mallards and spinning wing decoys for ducks. Layouts or A-frames can both work. Final Approach offers options in both categories, and plenty of great decoys, too.

Throughout the journey, it seemed every single lake, pond and ditch with water held some type of waterfowl. I saw mallards, pintails, various divers, Canadas, hundreds of snags that formed a giant white blob at the center of a lake.

We'd originally planned to hunt with an outfitter in Alberta, but someone in their camp tested positive for COVID, so Mario Friendly—the hunt's organizer and a vice president with Final Approach—re-routed us to Tyler Mann's

Saskatchewan Goose Company. I had no complaints. I was enjoying the views on our drive, and—as I was about to learn—Mann's operation is first class and located in a particularly productive part of Saskatchewan.



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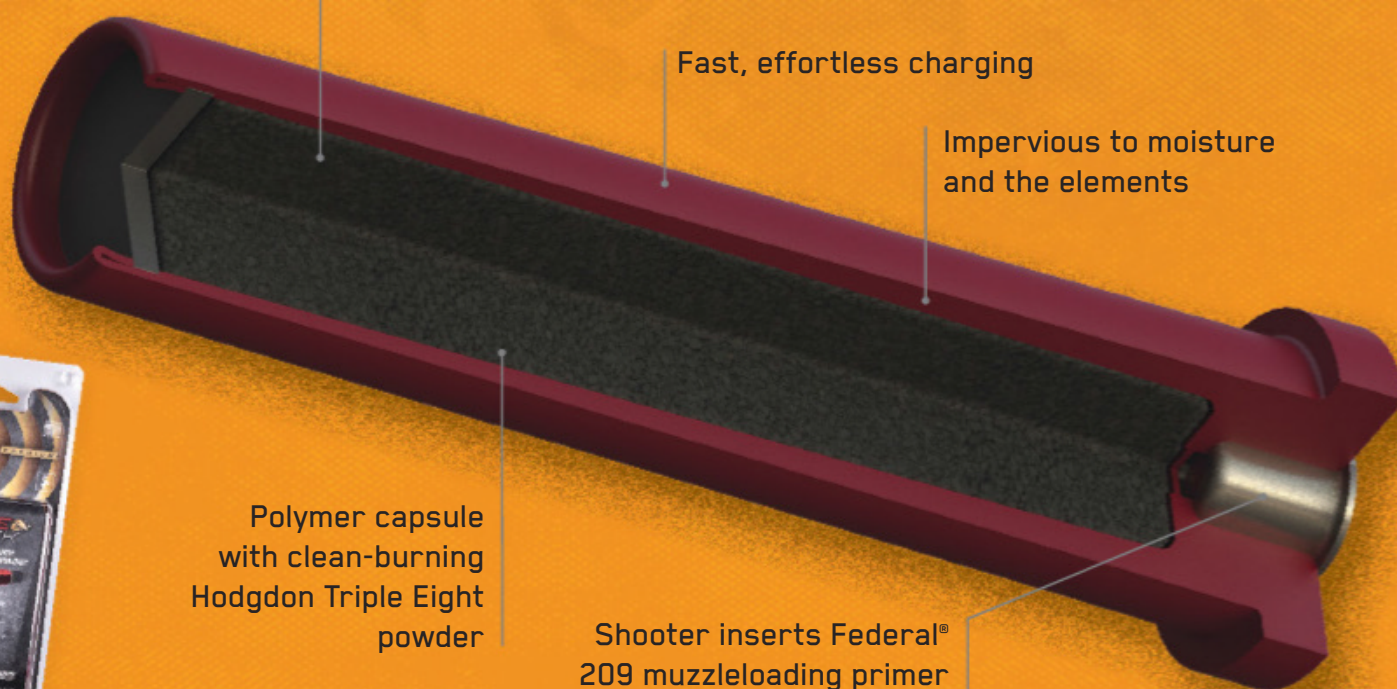
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The author and his companions hunted out of Final Approach S.U.B. X3 blinds, often set against a tree line or brush. These blinds were brushed in before each hunt.



FIRST PASS

The thing that surprised me most on my first afternoon duck hunt in north-central Saskatchewan was how ardently, and indeed recklessly, mallards wanted into the field we were hunting. Ducks were still trying to work even as we were picking up their fallen comrades. And when we weren't out retrieving birds, large groups of mallards bombed into our decoys with almost complete abandon. I'd seen this on a much smaller scale in my own hunting on occasion, but certainly not to the extent I witnessed here.

As Mann explained to me, there were a couple reasons for this. The first was that we were hunting a field he and his

staff had identified as one birds were consistently visiting. The second, essentially, was that many of the birds we were hunting had seen little—or even no—other hunting pressure. And this is very much a function of where Mann has chosen to establish his outfitting business.

In between the larger prairie region and the boreal forest to the north sits a transitional area referred to as aspen parkland. Made up of groves of aspen, poplar and spruce interspersed with prairie grassland, this area represents the southern boundary of the boreal forests and the northern edge of large agricultural fields. Mann's Saskatchewan Goose Company is strategically situated right along this

transition, and as a result, the fields that he and his clients hunt are often some of the very first that birds see after leaving the tree line behind. While he admits that some birds do jump past them, skipping ahead to fields farther south, most don't. They see those sprawling wheat, barley and pea fields and immediately want to fill their bellies.

This likely accounted for some of the insane action I experienced my first evening in Saskatchewan. And as I'd soon discover, it wouldn't be the last time I'd see wave after wave of ducks cupping their wings to land in one of our field setups. The next day's morning hunt proved equally productive. We limited



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out on ducks in a couple hours once again, then spent the next half hour watching mallards and pintails circle us, decoy perfectly and occasionally even land. It was an awesome second act after the events of the previous evening.

GOOSE GLITCHES

For the second day's afternoon hunt, we switched our focus to geese. We set up along the edge of a field lined by brush, which we used to conceal the profile of our A-frame blind. Then we set out a relatively small spread of full-body honkers and silhouettes and waited. We saw a decent number of birds, and while we got a few to work enough for some

TRIP TIPS

Keep these considerations in mind when planning a hunt in Saskatchewan.

Outfitted hunts are the most hassle-free choice. The province has tons of outfitters. In fact, Tourism Saskatchewan (tourismsaskatchewan.com) lists 56 that offer waterfowl hunting.

I may be slightly biased here, but it'd be hard to find one better than Tyler Mann at Saskatchewan Goose Company. The guy loves hunting ducks and geese and works hard to keep clients on birds. He's hunted them since he was 12 and has lived and guided in Saskatchewan the past 11 years, so he's established relationships with many area landowners. The fields he hunts are at the top of the Central Flyway where forest meets agricultural fields. The lodge is also top-notch, with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a comfortable lounging/social area and a kitchen that turns out delicious, hearty meals. Mann only hosts one group of eight hunters at a time, so you get total focus. He's also a member of the SCPO (Saskatchewan Committee of Professional Outfitters).

Ensure any outfitter you use is a registered member, too. You can hunt on your own or with a licensed outfitter, but don't get in trouble for using someone not licensed. This duty falls on the hunter, and a simple check for membership offers protection.

Freelancers should check out Tourism Saskatchewan, which has useful info to plan trips. The Canadian branch of Duck's Unlimited (ducks.ca) also provides details about their lands that offer hunting access. All hunters must have a Saskatchewan Wildlife Habitat Certificate, a game bird license and a Canadian migratory game bird hunting permit and stamp. The last two are

available at permis-permits.ec.gc.ca. As always, check the most recent regulations to ensure you're staying legal.

When we traveled to Canada, we dealt with various COVID testing and vaccination requirements. Some are no longer required, but as of this writing being fully vaccinated is still necessary. And you must input proof of vaccination and travel documents into the ArriveCAN app within 72 hours of your arrival.

To get a shotgun into Canada, you must fill out a Non-Resident Firearm Declaration (Form RCMP 5589) and pay a \$25 fee upon entry. Declare the firearm immediately to a border services officer, and another official will sign the form after payment, as will you. This document then acts as a temporary license for your firearm. Always keep it with you, including while hunting. For the U.S. side, you'll complete a CBP Form 4457 and have a Customs and Border Protection officer at a port of entry sign and affix a seal to it ahead of time to ensure a smooth return crossing with the gun.

Flying presents further challenges in the form of individual airline regulations regarding firearm and ammunition transport. Know all rules pertaining to firearms and ammo for each airline you're flying with—especially if you have connecting flights in Canada—as there's no guarantee that airline personnel will. And leave yourself plenty of time between your initial port of entry and any connecting flights. If you find an outfitter (like Saskatchewan Goose Company) that offers shotguns for clients to use and you're comfortable doing so, you'll avoid much hassle.

Tyler Mann, owner/operator of Saskatchewan Goose Company, is a diehard waterfowler. His relationships with many area farmers help him and clients gain access to productive fields.





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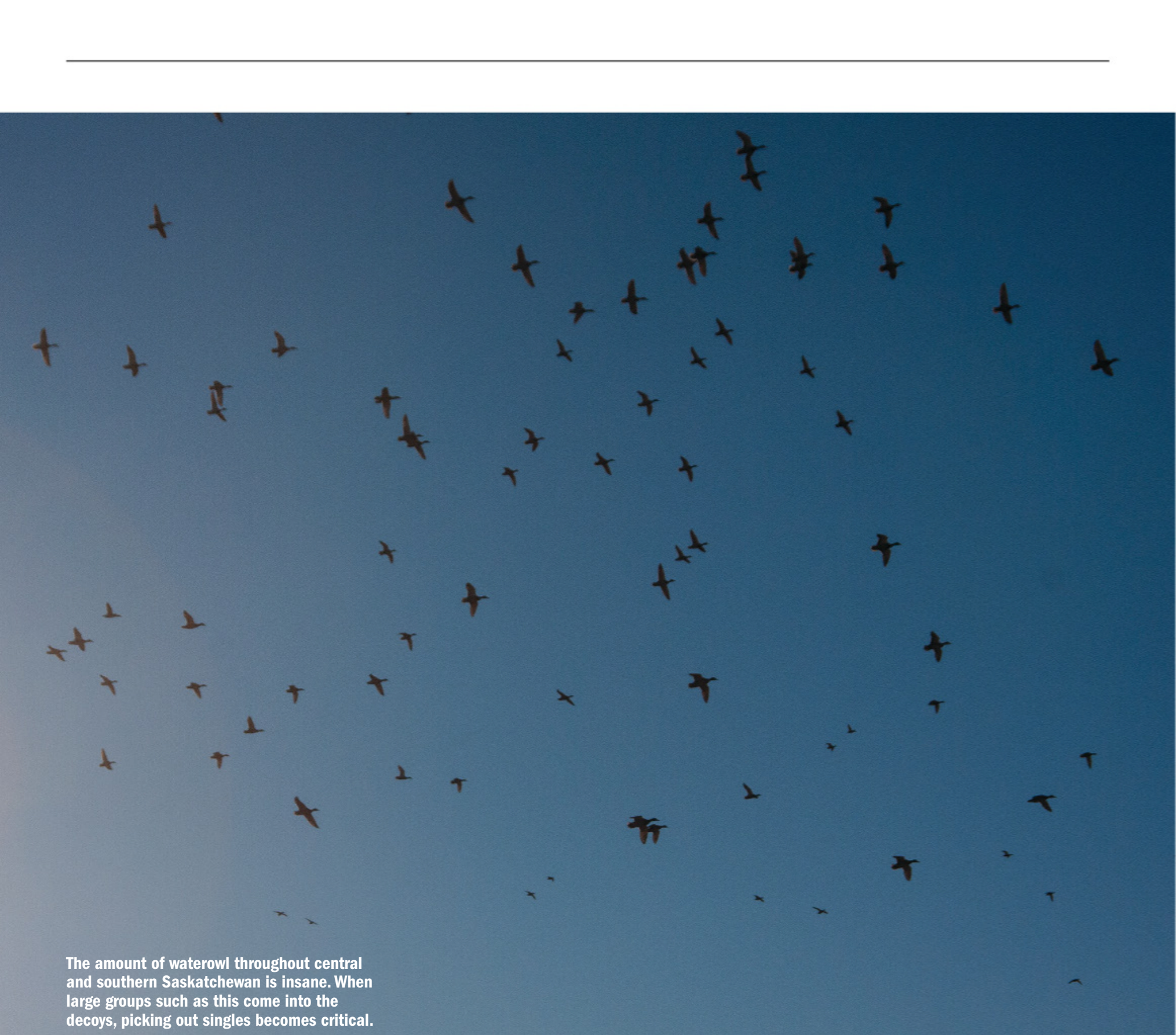
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A large flock of waterfowl, likely Canada geese, is captured in flight against a clear, deep blue sky. The birds are silhouetted, showing their characteristic V-shaped wings and long necks. They are scattered across the frame, with some appearing closer and larger, while others are small specks in the distance. The overall impression is one of a massive, coordinated movement of birds.

The amount of waterfowl throughout central and southern Saskatchewan is insane. When large groups such as this come into the decoys, picking out singles becomes critical.

shot opportunities, it was nothing like the morning or the previous evening's hunt. Still, we managed to chip away at the birds and ended the evening with some Canada geese and one random snow goose for good measure.

Just as our first evening hunt set the tone for how the duck hunting would go in Saskatchewan, the second evening's goose hunt established the pattern for later honker efforts. Over the next couple days, we'd knock out duck limits with relative ease and struggle to get opportunities at geese. We still shot birds, but we had to work for them. Ironically, the week before, another group encountered the opposite problem, slaying lots of

geese and having to put in a little extra effort for ducks. Waterfowl hunting could be strange that way sometimes, and I thought nothing more of it.

It was certainly a departure from the norm in that part of Saskatchewan, which typically sees loads of Canadas—including the giant ones—as well as snows and sometimes cacklers and specks. However, it was a little later in the season, which may have had something to do with it. Mann offers guided trips from Sept. 1 through late October, which he says is their prime time. In fact, they had just run their last group of clients through the previous week. In September and most of October, Mann and his crew

hammered geese, which is closer to what many hunters can expect hunting Saskatchewan in the early season.

GET UP THERE

Without question, Saskatchewan represents a dream hunt for most waterfowlers. From the edge of the tree line in central Saskatchewan to the sprawling prairies and agricultural fields of the south, the province offers a bounty of duck and goose hunting opportunities. The dry-field hunting can be phenomenal, whether you're targeting ducks or geese.

This style of hunting is also accessible for many hunters. You don't need waders, and—this time of year—you usually

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While the geese proved a little difficult for the author's group, the ducks worked into the decoys beautifully. The result was quick limits on most of the duck hunts.

don't need giant decoy spreads, either. On our hunts we never ran insanely large spreads. We put out smaller setups, which Mann says were more natural for that time of year. And we typically set up on field edges, tree edges or next to islands of brush in the middle of fields to mask the appearance of our A-frame blind. A competent freelancer who's willing to seek out permission from landowners or hunt public areas might easily do the same.

We used Final Approach's HD Full Body Honkers (\$180/four-pack) and Last

Pass Canada Goose Silhouettes (\$80/12-pack) for all setups, and then added in Live Full Body Mallards (\$300/12-pack) and a spinning wing decoy or two when specifically targeting ducks. On the blind side, FA's new S.U.B. X3 (\$400) got the nod; however, layouts also work.

As with all waterfowl hunting, spotting remains the key. Scouting well and setting up in the right place trumps jumbo spreads every time. With an outfitter, that's taken care of for you. DIYers will need to carve out time for scouting when birds are moving.

"It's the same strategy all the time," Mann says. "Do your homework. Don't just set up where you see birds. Watch them for a little bit. See what they're doing, and then imitate it."

However, the main thing Mann stresses is to simply come up and hunt.

"The consensus should be, if you're a duck and goose hunter and you've never hunted Saskatchewan, you should get here," he says. Even if you don't go with him, he adds, he thinks the hunting here is something everyone should experience as part of their waterfowling career. 

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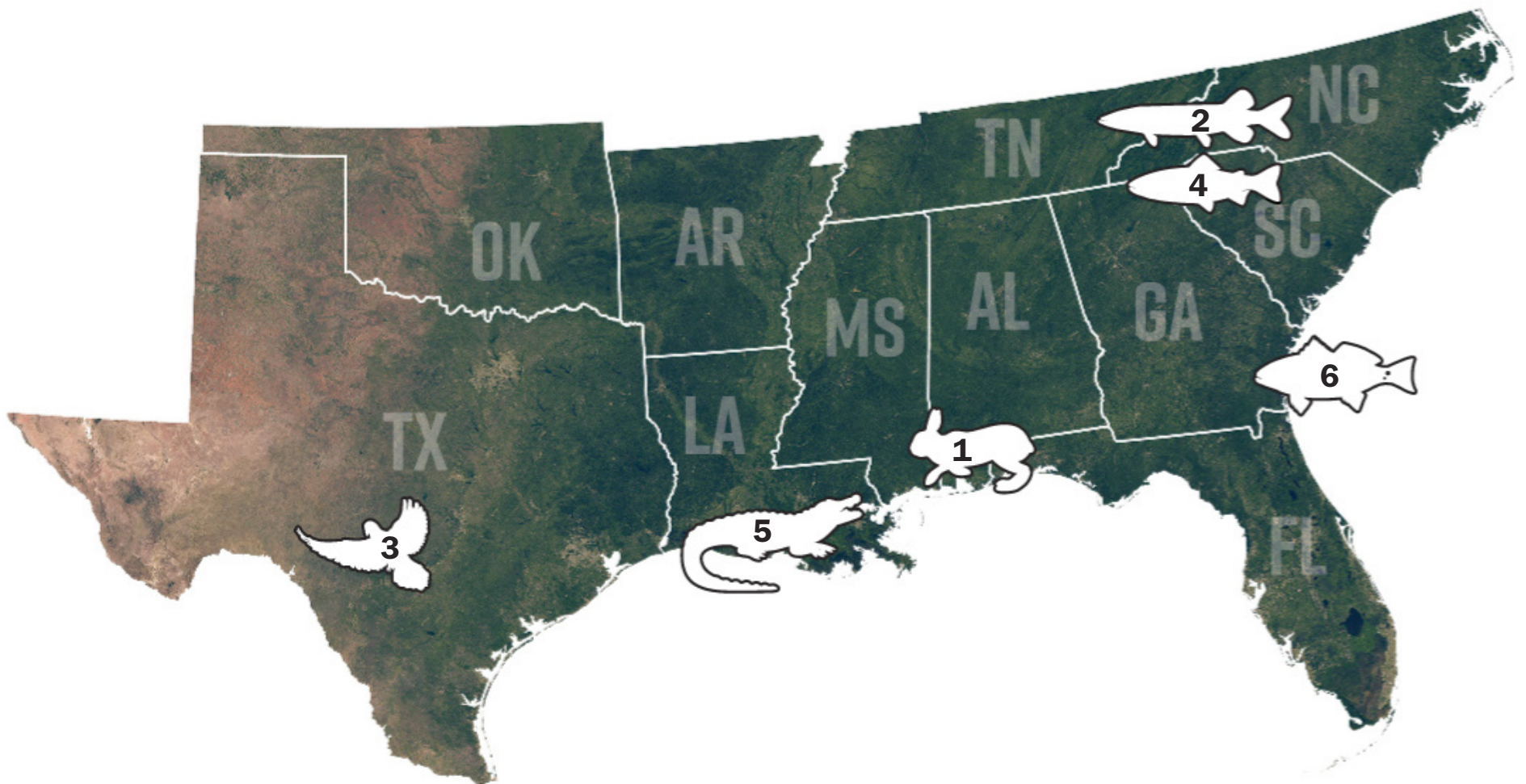
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AROUND THE SOUTH

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

By T. Edward Nickens

September is the itchy month, the twitchy month, when the first cool mornings give you the feeling that you just can't stand it indoors a moment longer. It's time to flee the hardtop and the AC; pick up a rod or gun; hit the woods, water or swamp; and get outside. Summer is in the rear-view, autumn is coming fast and these picture-perfect days won't last. Big game, small game, saltwater, fresh—it just about doesn't matter now that it's September. Time to scratch the itch.





'BAMA'S FIRST-CRACK RABBITS

While many rabbit seasons in the South don't come in for another month or two, Alabama's bunny opener is in early September. If you love chasing dogs chasing rabbits and listening to a chorus of hounds on a hot track, you won't even notice the heat. Big woods pocked with fallow fields and timber cuts abound on many wildlife management areas, such as Choccolocco, Sam R. Murphy and Skyline, and that's where you'll find cottontails. For their bigger, badder kin, the cunning and wary swamp rabbit, try the WMAs in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.



TARHEEL MUSKIES

The musky may be known as the fish of 10,000 casts, but it won't take that many before you know if you—and your shoulders and arms—are worthy of this dinosaur of the Southern Appalachians. The French Broad River pours across ledges and falls, is stitched with whitewater and is lined with boulders and blowdowns—all top-shelf habitat for monster muskies. They don't eat often—you wouldn't either if you could down a duckling in one mouthful—but cooling weather and water kicks them into a higher predatory gear. Book a trip, then double up on the pushups.



TEXAS WHITE-WINGED DOVES

Seasons for three species of Texas doves open this month. In addition to the well-known mourning dove, Lone Star hunters can target white-winged doves and less-common white-tipped doves. A significant range expansion of white-winged doves has pushed the bird farther north. Many Texas hunters now bag as many, or more, white-wings as mourning doves. There's even a special South Texas white-winged dove season in early September, giving shotgunners a head start at stocking up on popper meat.



SOUTH CAROLINA MOUNTAIN TROUT

The Palmetto State might not get the five-star reviews of other Southern mountain regions when it comes to trout fishing, but what it lacks in river mileage it makes up for in diversity and splendor. This is a fine month for fishing, with cooler temperatures putting fish on the feed. Hit the gorge of the Middle Saluda in Jones Gap State Park, hike into the wild Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area, or pull metal behind a motorboat in the high-mountain gem, Lake Jocassee. But go now before the falling leaves of autumn threaten to tangle practically every cast.



BAYOU GATORS

Louisiana alligator hunting is a visceral, gritty, bare-knuckled sport. It's also heavily regulated, with different rules for residents and nonresidents, and tags tied to specific land parcels. Nonresident landowners can hunt on their own lands as long as they carry an alligator hunting license and harvest tags. Nonresidents who don't own land must hunt with a licensed alligator hunter who holds appropriate tags. "Sport" hunters must be accompanied by a licensed hunter or the holder of a "helper" license. Once you're legal, you can chase the toothy reptiles with firearms (no shotguns, though), bow-and-arrow or hook-and-line.



GET SHRIMPY IN GEORGIA

A bucket of live shrimp is your ticket to an all-day, all-tides saltwater smackdown on the Georgia coast. Redfish, flounder, spotted seatrout and sheepshead will all feed on fresh, live shrimp. Suspend the bait under a popping cork or adjustable cork and twitch it or drift it slowly along the bottom. And have the ice ready—this is your best chance at bringing home the fillets.



Hooks designed for Texas rigging feature an offset just below the eye that allows the plastic bait to swim straight in the water.

TO THE POINT

SELECTING THE RIGHT HOOKS FOR SOFT PLASTICS IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT TO BOATING MORE BASS.

By Frank Sargeant

Soft plastics are remarkably effective for bass in a wide variety of situations, but since they're mostly fished on single hooks, choosing just the right hook is critical for success. Sizing the hook correctly means not only selecting the right numeric size, but also the right gauge of steel. Bass hooks range in size from 1 to 7/0, from the very heavy wire designs used in flipping hooks to the very light—but very quick to penetrate—designs used for wacky rigs, Ned rigs and dropshotting.

A hook that's too big or too heavy kills the action of a soft plastic, while one that's too small and too short won't hook fish. That said, the right shape or style of hook is probably the most important factor of all. Here's a basic primer on which designs work best for various rigs.

TEXAS RIGS

Most hooks shaped for fishing a conventional plastic worm have an offset or “dog-leg”—a straight shank and a round bend—just below the eye. This allows a worm rigged on one to run straight, with the point of the hook just under the “skin” of the worm on the upper side, rendering the lure amazingly weedless.

Thread the worm on them correctly and you totally bury the eye and the knot inside the plastic of the head while the worm lies straight from head to tail. Offset hooks shine for keeping the worm on the hook even when fished in the thickest cover.



BERKLEY FUSION19

One of many good ones is the Berkley Fusion19, which is dead sharp out of the package, has a “SlickSet” coating for easier penetration and a stamped bend for the added strength you want after the hook is set.

SWIMBAITS

For bulky baits like bluegill and shad imitations, frogs and other swimbaits, extra-wide-gap (EWG) hooks provide the bigger bite that's needed to punch through the wider-profiled baits and into the fish's jaw. Traditional round-bend soft plastics hooks need not apply for these wide-bodied baits, as their bend profile is simply too narrow to work well.

The “wide gap” means extra leverage on the bend, so most quality wide-gap hooks, like Owner's Wide Gap Plus, are made from extra-strong steel. VMC's

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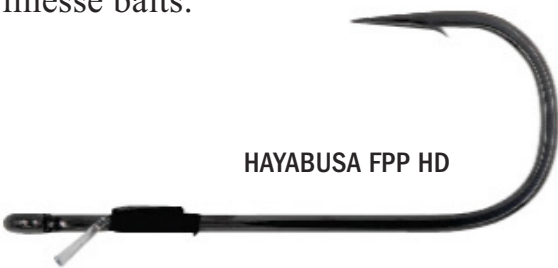


Heavy Duty Wide Gap has a bead of resin sealing the eye, making doubly sure that thin braid can't slip out. And Berkley's Fusion19 Weighted Swimbait hook includes a spiral spring keeper on the eye and comes in sizes to 7/0 to handle even the largest swimbaits.



NEKO AND WACKY RIGS

Finesse hooks suitable for Neko and wacky rigging are all made of fine wire like drop shot hooks and designed to be fished on lighter lines and lighter action/power rods. The light-gauge wire hooks have sharp points and penetrate better than heavier gauge hooks. This is a must when fishing morsel-sized finesse baits.



Sizes range from 1 to 2/0, with the smaller hooks being best suited for the smallest of finesse baits and for a slower fall. Larger hooks are used for larger baits and a faster fall. Gamakatsu's Cover Neko is a wide-gap that includes a 90-degree keeper wire and a swivel to prevent line twist. The wider gap design gives a better shot at penetration as a fish grabs the sinking bait.

The short shank makes a more compact and less obvious attachment than a standard longer-shank hook of similar size. And the Mustad KVD Weedless Wacky has a wire weedguard to allow fishing through most brush and weedy cover.

FLIPPING AND PUNCHING

Specialty hooks made exclusively for flipping and punching, like Hayabusa's FPP HD and the Berkley Fusion19 Heavy Cover, are usually straight-shank and made of much heavier, heat-treated wire than standard bass hooks (up to three times stronger). These hooks are for close-quarter battles with big fish and must be super stout. The straight shank provides a more mechanically strong hook design than extra-wide-gap flipping hook designs.

These hooks must withstand the pressure of jerking fish and weeds straight

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Most major brands now offer chemically sharpened hooks as part of their lineup.

Most hooks are made of drawn high-carbon wire that's shaped and then heat-treated to around 1,200 degrees before being quenched in an oil bath. This process drops the temperature almost instantly and creates a very "stiff" steel that is resistant to bending. Hooks are then mechanically honed to sharpen the steel. But many of the preferred hooks these days get one final step—chemical sharpening.

After conventional honing, the hooks are briefly placed in a corrosive solution that eats away at the metal. Since the point has the least amount of metal, removal of a few bits here makes the hook even sharper.

upward with a broomstick-stiff, 8-foot rod and a short length of 65-pound-test braid. They typically have a composite bait holder near the eye to keep lures in place, and a closed eye to keep the braid secure. 



There is a seemingly unlimited number of soft plastic baits, and each requires a specialty hook to maximize its performance.

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DISSECTING ON-THE-WATER EVIDENCE IN REAL TIME.

By Larry Larsen

The attentive angler solves the fish-catching calculus by inputting as many visible clues into the equation as possible.



JESSICA HAYDAHL RICHARDSON

A few years ago, I was pre-fishing a couple of small lakes with my tournament partner in preparation for a local bass club event. Neither of us had ever fished either lake. There were no marinas on them to promote the fishing. The remote lakes had received little acclaim and were far from major highways. They had a combined total of about 3,000 surface acres, which is a substantial amount of water to thoroughly cover in 4 or 5 hours. My partner and I reasoned we needed to do some on-the-water investigation to locate prime bass spots.

The first lake had an irregular, grass-lined shore. It was connected to the second lake, which was deep, circular and lined with bulrushes. Upon close inspection, I noticed the height of the rushes varied at different points around the perimeter of the second lake. Motoring around with eyes on our sonar unit, we noticed a slightly deeper drop at the edge to the taller rushes. We then noticed fish moving about within those plant beds and bumping into the stalks. It seemed like an ideal place to start our practice session.

Two hours later, my partner and I had caught and released 10 fat, aggressive bass and shook off several more as we tried to avoid hooking the fish. On one cast I set the hook lightly and ended up battling an 8-pounder all the way to the boat.

As I was about to drop it back over the side and watch it swim off, something in its mouth caught my eye. A couple of tiny feelers from a crayfish projected out of its throat—interesting and revealing evidence. I didn't know if the crayfish was one of many forage species in its stomach or just the last morsel to become part of its meal plan. I released the fish hoping it would be just as hungry a week later.

After a few more casts, my partner and I each caught another fat bass. With their bulging bellies, it was easy to see that these 12-inch-long largemouths were stuffed, yet they continued to strike our lures.

When a fat 2-pounder came up bleeding from a deep hookset, I asked my partner if he would like it to eat. I suggested we fillet it at the ramp and check out its stomach contents. When we examined its bloated stomach, we found 18 tiny, light-brown crayfish. The bass' preference for the inch-and-a-half crawdads was irrefutable. Needless to

say, we stocked up on replica lures, and the following weekend we won the tournament with a big limit.

VEGETATION COMPARISONS

When scouting for bass, the astute angler makes observations, and one of the most important things to investigate is habitat. On our tourney lakes, we found most shallow to mid-depth areas had adjacent stands of trees and vegetation communities.

It is always wise to compare the height and color of the same type of tree on different shorelines or on the same flat. Taller and/or darker green trees (those getting adequate sunlight) usually suggest a more fertile area and abundant bass. Many anglers in that tournament fished the shorter rushes and failed to locate many bass.

My partner and I confirmed that the taller plants held the most and biggest fish. Those rushes were growing in more fertile soil, which attracted the entire food chain, from algae and minnows to crayfish and sportfish.

While one of the keys to success is noticing the height of the vegetation relative to other similar communities on the same body of water, color is also a factor. If a group of plants is dark green, that generally indicates the plants are growing in soil that offers a good amount of nutrients. Lighter green vegetation is often in need of more nutrients.

On some lakes the color variation really stands out. Dense, dark-green plants may grow on one side of a lake in an area that often receives heavy run-off through a watershed with abundant fertilizer. Plants on the other side of the lake in a rocky area with low nutrients may be light green and sparse. One lake near my house offers such a significant difference. The bass are always more abundant in the areas with a high nutrient base and dark-green plants.

WATER QUALITY AND BOTTOM COMPOSITION

Some plants do well in soil that is a mixture of clay, sand, peat and dirt. It may be fertile soil; however, the depth, geologic composition and surrounding emergent cover and trees may enhance or limit the productivity of such waters. The muddier the water column, the less inviting it may be for bass. Water with high

The types of trees growing in and around bass habitat lend clues as to water depth and bottom composition.



KEY HABITAT CLUES

Pay close attention to trees and topography to find more fish.

Trees offer a tremendous amount of information to the alert angler. The species, height and location where they are growing offer clues to their surroundings. Here are some things to look for next time you're on the water.

1. Cypress trees tend to grow in low, predominantly wet areas. Low areas are typically shallow with slowly tapering bottoms.
2. Pine tree-lined banks are usually on higher ground, denoting deeper channels adjacent to their root system. Low, marshy areas seldom sustain large trees or provide quick drop-offs.
3. Large trees (like oaks) growing along a bank are usually a good indication of stable water conditions. Firmer bottoms and sharper drops can be expected.
4. Swampy shorelines have water levels that often fluctuate and do not allow most types of large trees to thrive. Sparse brush or small trees in such areas rarely hold as many bass as denser stands of trees will.
5. Check out the tops of trees along the shoreline for broken limbs, which may reveal submerged brush below that is not visible to the casual observer. Look for "notched" banks (where a tree's roots once were) along moving waters. This most likely indicates the presence of a submerged "laydown" due to erosion or storms.

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quantities of suspended particles and reduced visibility generally offers less productive fishing than tannin-stained waters. Often, the muddy bottom in swampy areas produces a weed bloom that can “suck” the oxygen from the adjacent water.

Sandy soil is normally the best bottom composition for the most attractive bass habitat in lakes with adequate nutrients, as bass usually have a broader selection of forage and habitat. Any investigation of the water should identify water clarity, sediment (both on the bottom and in the water column) and the soil type.

Bulrushes may prosper in the sandy soil on one side of the lake, while only undesirable aquatic weeds can be found along the opposite shoreline. For example, bulrushes usually grow in deeper,

sand-based waters and attract more bass than cattails growing in shallow, muddy areas. Sediment in the water column is usually minimal and the water clarity is typically optimal around plant communities growing on a clean sand or marl bottom.

WIND, CURRENT, DEPTH

Your on-the-water analysis should also identify predominant winds, any subsequent current movement caused by those winds or by an inflow of a tributary and other environmental factors.

Waters with muddy soil, while potentially high in nutrients, may be easily affected by a strong wind with no nearby natural wind block. Predominant winds also often push the algae that forage fish—such as shad and shiners—feed

on to the windward side of the lake. As the plankton becomes denser, schools of forage grow larger and the bass move into that specific area more frequently to feed.

Most anglers realize that high banks usually indicate relatively deeper water and flat banks with minimal gradient denote shallow adjacent waters. Heavy aquatic vegetation growth that ends abruptly may mean a quick drop in depth—and a very productive edge to locate active bass. A less dense plant community that gradually “sinks” below the surface could denote a minimally tapered, shallow bank having less attraction to feeding bass.

Next time out, pay attention to the clues and analyze them. It just might help you catch more and bigger bass. 



The growth and relative health of aquatic vegetation speaks volumes about the quality of the water it inhabits.

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GO IT ALONE

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS FIND A BUDDY TO TAG ALONG ON A DOVE HUNT. HERE'S HOW-TO MAKE THE MOST OF A SOLO SESSION.

By Keith Sutton

As dove season progresses and deer season nears, many hunters opt for other activities, leaving fields wide-open for the diehards.

During the opening days of mourning dove season, almost two million people in 38 states take to the fields to hunt these beautiful, delicious, fast-flying game-birds. More than 40 million doves are killed each year—most of them on opening day.

After the first few days of the season, though, the large groups of hunters seen pursuing doves throughout the South seem to disappear, and you may have to go it alone if you want to continue dove hunting into the later weeks of the season.

That's not as easy as it might sound, however. When six or eight hunters work together, surrounding a big feeding field at safe distances from one another, they can keep doves flying almost constantly. This allows others to see and kill (if they're good shots) many more birds than they might if forced to hunt alone. The solo hunter, on the other hand, must have some tricks up his or her sleeve in order to bag a limit.

PRE-HUNT PREP

The first key to dove hunting success is being in the right place at the right time. This is especially true when hunting by yourself because you can't depend on other hunters in your party to keep the birds moving. It's critically important to choose a stand where dove activity is high and shooting opportunities are abundant.

Fortunately, doves are predictable birds, and the solo hunter can use this fact to his or her advantage. Doves start the day by flying from night roosts to watering holes shortly after dawn, before quickly moving to feeding areas where they stay until midday. They loaf at perching, watering or graveling sites near the feeding area for an hour or two around noon, then return to the feeding area for the remainder of the afternoon. Before going to roost, they stop to drink again. Scouting before each hunt allows you to determine the time and locale of these activities so you can ascertain the best hours and places to hunt.

Do this by driving or walking slowly through a likely area, stopping now and then to scan with a binocular. When you locate birds, spend 15 minutes watching for more doves in the air and on the ground. If birds are plentiful enough, you've found a potential hunting site. A visit to see the landowner will hopefully enable you to obtain hunting permission and narrow the choice of hunting stands even further.

THINK SMALL

Chances are good that the hunting sites found while scouting cover several hundred acres each. That's great if you're hunting with friends, but when you'll be going it alone, smaller is better. When you visit the landowner, ask if he or she has smaller fields or offset corners of fields where dove foods like sunflowers, corn, wheat, oats or millet are grown—something about 1 to 5 acres in size. Many will have these spots and will gladly show you on a map or in person where you

When hunting alone, it pays to scout a field carefully to determine which areas are most heavily used by doves.



can hunt. You may also identify smaller plots like this during your scouting forays.

When you first arrive to hunt, take a half hour or so to watch dove activities. This allows you to determine how doves are entering and exiting the fields so you can choose a proper stand. Field corners often funnel doves in and out and make good sitting spots. Likewise with low points in timber bordering a field. Other reference points doves follow include side ditches, edges between crop stubble and plowed ground, fence lines, rows of tall trees and ridges in otherwise flat fields. Take a stand near such features whenever possible.

WALK 'EM UP

Sometimes, traditional pass-shooting methods prove unproductive, or shooting slows as the hours pass. A drizzly rain or high winds may also keep doves grounded, with shooting opportunities at a minimum. These are good times to see if you can flush feeding or resting birds from the ground, a tactic often

MUST-HAVE GEAR

Dove season is coming in hot. Here are a couple of items you may want to pick up before the season starts.



AVIAN-X POWERFLIGHT DOVE DECOY

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Doves drink water twice a day, and prefer spots without any vegetation around the edge.



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called jump shooting or “walking them up.” This is actually one of my favorite ways to hunt solo because shots tend to be at slower-moving birds at close range, especially in fields that still have stubble or short grass that helps hide your approach.

If you see several doves light on the ground out of range, mentally mark the spot and then see if you can hunker down and move in slowly and quietly with your shotgun at the ready.

Doves are hard to see on the ground, so the birds will frequently surprise you when they finally take to the air. You think they are over here, but they flush over there. This makes it important to ready yourself for snap shots. If you do connect with your shot, mark the spot where the bird fell and retrieve it immediately before targeting other doves.

WATERHOLE HUNTS

Watering holes are also ideal for go-it-alone hunters. As mentioned before, doves like to drink twice daily, and if you can find spots where they’re watering, you can get set up to intercept them as they come and go.

The best way I’ve found to locate good watering holes is to watch for doves perched in dead trees or on power lines early and late in the day. They like to fly to these spots so they can check the area around each waterhole for danger before flying down. Then, after watering, they almost invariably fly back to the perch to preen before flying to feeding fields.

When I see these perching birds, I use a binocular to observe them and see if they fly down to a drinking spot nearby. Or I’ll walk through the surrounding area and look for watering holes. The ideal site is a pond with low water and a broad swath of open, vegetation-free ground around the edges. Here it’s easy for birds to land as well as to flush if confronted with danger. Doves also drink in similar locales adjacent to lakes and streams.

Watch for patterns as the birds come and go. For example, one pond I hunt is 200 yards below a ridge-top highway. Running alongside the highway is a telephone wire. Birds watering at this pond light on the wire before flying to the pond. I learned long ago to sit by a bush about 20 paces uphill from the pond to ambush doves as they begin to slow down and drop.



Wind- or battery-powered spinning-wing decoys set in front of your shooting position can greatly increase your number of in-range shots.

Not all watering holes are as easy to figure out as this one, but every productive locale has birds coming and going the same directions day after day. Determine when and where doves are flying at the site, and you can enjoy red-hot gunning even when hunting alone.

DECOYS

No matter where you decide to take a stand, consider adding several dove decoys to your solo-hunt setup. Doves have keen eyesight and will quickly alter their flight path if they see what they think are other doves on perches, on the ground or fluttering down to feed or water. As a result, birds that might have passed by out of shooting range are drawn closer, so the lone hunter has a better chance of connecting with his shots.

When hunting in a crop field, placing a battery- or wind-powered spinning-wing decoy in front of your hiding spot can double or even triple the number of in-range shots you get. These decoys add motion—flickers of fluttering white wings—that grab the attention of flying doves over substantial distances. The strobe effect of the spinning wings convinces doves that others of their kind

are landing in a spot where they feel safe and secure. In turn, the real birds head toward that spot to join the flock. The hidden hunter waits to ambush them.

It’s a good idea to place several static decoys on the ground around your spinner and several clip-on dekes on nearby fences or dead trees. Fence decoys should be about a foot apart on the top strand of wire. Tree decoys should be placed as high as possible, back from the ends of limber branches.

When hunting doves as they come to drink, place several decoys on bare ground along the water’s edge, plus a few more on nearby perching sites. Face all decoys in the same direction—into the wind. Doves take off and land into the wind and quickly spot phony birds that have been positioned improperly.

It’s certainly nice when you can convince some friends to continue hunting doves with you after opening week. But if those folks are doing something else, there’s no reason not to go it alone. A single dove hunter can still enjoy success, and when your hunting cronies hear you’ve been killing birds without them, chances are good you’ll soon have friends tagging along with you again. 

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RED HOT

HOW AND WHERE TO CATCH THE BIGGEST REDFISH OF YOUR LIFE THIS FALL.

By Frank Sargeant



It's odd that we call jumbo redfish "bulls" when you consider that they are all females. Be that as it may, the best time of the year to catch one throughout the Southeast is from August through October.

The fish show up en masse around beach sloughs, passes, inlets and the deep edges of the flats as they move in from offshore waters to spawn. Hit it right and it's not uncommon to see a "redfish wave" build on the edge of the

flats as a school of 20- to 30-pounders pushes along at speed looking for mullet.

At the jetties and inlets, fish to 50 pounds cruise and feed on menhaden and whatever else comes in front of them. Sometimes they actually give the water a reddish tint.

During this time of year, catching big redfish is a matter of finding the right spot—once you locate the schools, you can hardly avoid catching big fish. But, as always, finding the right spot is the

trick. If you're fishing new waters, a Google Earth session is a good place to start.

Rock jetties that jut into deep water are pretty much always worth checking. So are visible sand bars, small islands or other long sand points found in or near large passes.

Bridges that choke the flow of a pass are also a favorite spot for big reds to hang out as they wait in the eddies behind the groins at the edges or behind



While smaller redfish are shallow now, the bulls lurk near the deep edges of flats, large passes, jetties and inlets.

large pilings to feed. These locations are always worth several casts on the down-tide side.

While small reds may move far back into shallow flats, the adult fish less frequently do—they're more likely to be found on the first half mile of flats near any large pass or inlet. Areas where a clearly defined edge or shallow bar runs along water that quickly drops to 4 feet or more will be likely.

Of course, anywhere you can see large

numbers of sizeable baitfish milling around is also a blinking red light that screams, "FISH HERE!"

It is important to keep one thing in mind above all others when searching for big bulls: They are more than likely to be keyed-in on mullet and menhaden 8 inches and up. It is now when these giants want big meals—and plenty of them.

If you can't spot the bait on the surface, a scanning or sideview sonar can

be a big plus, not only for sketching out the bait schools, but also the reds underneath them.

STRIKE ZONE

While there are not many lures big reds won't eat when they're schooled tight and in feeding mode, a 3/4- to 1-ounce jig head with a triple-strong 5/0 or larger hook rigged with a 6- to 8-inch paddle-tail soft plastic like the Z-Man Mag SwimZ is pretty much a can't-miss offering. The

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Half the battle of catching a monster redfish is crossing paths with one. Here are some of the best spots to do so across the South.



TEXAS

One prime spot in the Lone Star state is the “big jetties” at Port O’Conner (portoconnorfishing.com), where the ship channel feeds deep water from inside Matagorda Bay into the Gulf of Mexico and bait swarms around the rock jetties. They also show up just inside the island on the south side at times. The fish can be there on any tide, but the bite is

best on falling water. Live menhaden is the winning bait usually, but big swimmer-tail soft plastics on 1- to 3-ounce jigs with triple-strong hooks also get ‘em.

LOUISIANA

You can pretty much throw a dart and hit great bull redfish country anywhere south of New Orleans, but Southwest Pass, easiest to reach out of Venice (venicemarina.com), is consistently the go-to spot. I’ve seen five miles of the river here black with mullet in fall, and big redfish don’t ignore a treat like that. The only problem is there are lots of juniors with them at times. Use 8-inch mullet and up for bait to weed out the smaller fish. Nearby South Pass is also good.

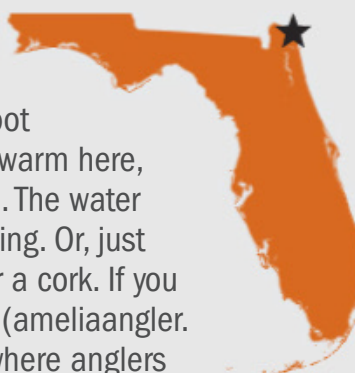


ALABAMA

Dixey Bar at the mouth of Mobile Bay is a legendary spot for bull reds. The fish are there almost year-round, but they truly swarm in fall both here and at nearby Sand Island. Large chrome spoons or big soft plastics on 1- to 3-ounce jigs are the ticket. The bite is best on the falling tide, though it can get very rough then if there’s a south wind. Numerous good charter operations run out of Dauphin Island. One I like is Bobby Abruscato’s A-Team Fishing Adventures (ateamfishing.com).

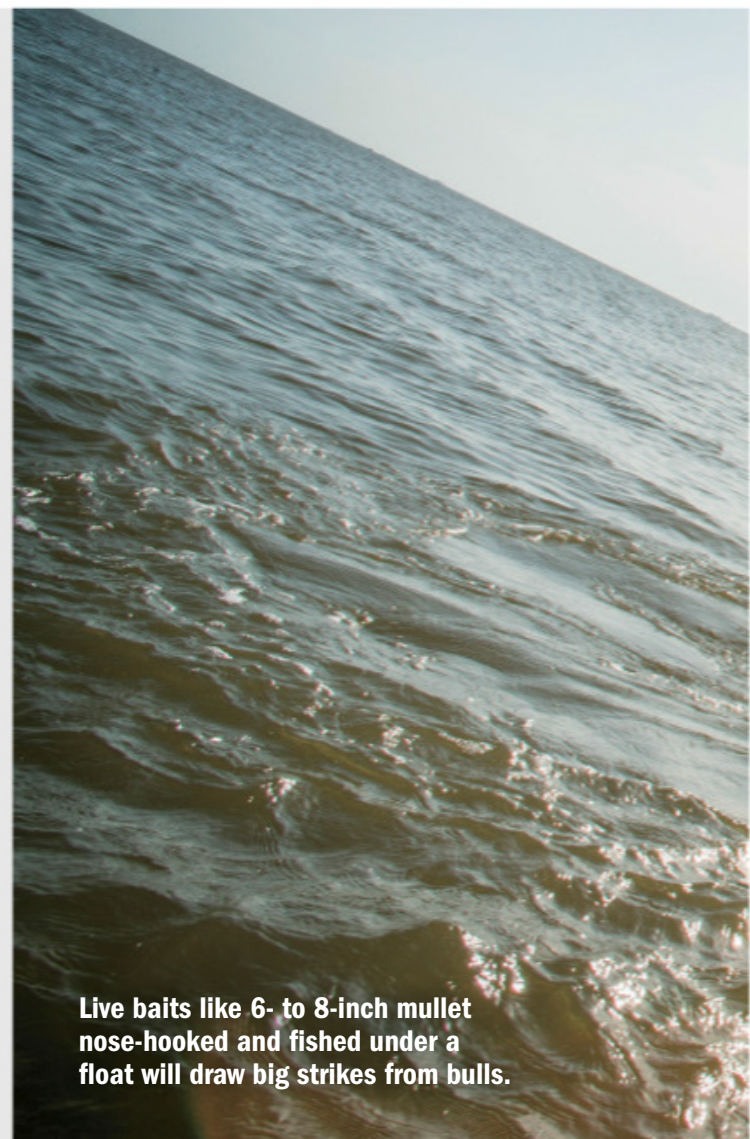
FLORIDA

Florida has multiple spots, but the jetties at the mouth of the St. Mary’s River on the Georgia border is hard to beat for lots of giant fish in fall, and this is the spot for a legitimate 50-pounder. The menhaden and mullet swarm here, and the fish stack up in schools of hundreds to eat them. The water is frequently murky, so a big, flashy spoon is a good offering. Or, just drift a chunk of cut mullet or menhaden to the fish under a cork. If you want to hire a charter, check out Amelia Angler Outfitters (ameliaangler.com). Another hot spot is the mouth of Pensacola Bay, where anglers sometimes hook up with giants from shore or from the public pier at Fort Pickens Beach Point.



GEORGIA

The north tip of Cumberland Island where the Satilla and a prong of the East River flow into the Atlantic is a prime area. Sometimes the fish here are in “the hole,” an 80-foot drop just outside the inlet; sometimes they move up into Jekyll Sound. The north tip of Jekyll (jekyllisland.com) is also very good, with the major arm of the East River and the Brunswick flowing into the sea. A fishing pier on the back side of the island sometimes allows shore-bound anglers to score.



Live baits like 6- to 8-inch mullet nose-hooked and fished under a float will draw big strikes from bulls.

bait’s super-tough plastic will withstand multiple fish. In deeper water or high current, the head weight might need to be 2 to 3 ounces.

Big chrome spoons like the 1-ounce Huntington Drone also work well this time of year. Or, for real excitement, throw a big topwater, like the 5 1/4-inch Yo-Zuri Mag Popper, when the fish are on a jetty or bar (flatten the barbs first for easy release).

Work the bait aggressively, keeping it moving and thrashing. Strikes will come close to stopping your heart, as sometimes three or four fish at once will rush the bait.

Reds sometimes run the edge of the flats looking for pinfish, crabs or anything else they can eat. Keep an eye out for a fast-moving V wake as they push water just outside the bar.

Don’t be shy to use your equipment to your advantage. By all means employ your trolling motor to get ahead of the fish, then let them come to you. Avoid trying to catch up with fish, as this almost always leads to spooking them.

You should attempt to stay as far back as possible while remaining at the edge



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of your best casting distance. Remember, keep a wide buffer zone between you and the fish.

As the reds approach, a long cast about 10 feet ahead of the lead fish with a soft-plastic jerkbait, an artificial shrimp or crab or a topwater is pretty much an instant hookup, as long as you stay at maximum range and don't make noise

in your approach. Once one of these fish is hooked, the others in the school most often will spook. But don't panic; once you've landed your fish and released it, watch farther down the bar, as the school will often move in again and restart their feeding run. Get ahead of them once more and repeat. There are times, even when the fish are gathered in

large fall schools, when they can be a bit lethargic. At those times, "old reliable" may be a better bet: Nose-hook a live 6- to 8-inch mullet or 6-inch menhaden on a 6/0 wide-gap hook and cast where you see reds or suspect them to be. This tactic usually turns a slow day into one to remember.

Reds also feed by scent. A 2-by-3-inch chunk of fresh-cut mullet or menhaden, either fished on bottom or drifted to where you spot fish on sonar, will turn on the bite. Again, size your tackle accordingly—a 5/0 to 8/0 triple-strong circle hook will do the job and hopefully keep the fish from swallowing it too deeply.

RELEASE 'EM RIGHT

Most conservation-minded anglers use single-hook lures—jigs, spoons or topwaters with trebles replaced with large single hooks—so that the fish can be easily released.

Also, don't bring a knife to a gunfight. Twenty- to 30-pound-test braid on a stout 7- to 8-foot spinning rod or a stiff baitcasting rod is what you need to whip these fish before a shark shows up to put an end to the fight.

You'll also want a heavy-duty landing net like Frabill's Deep Knotless Conservation Net, with its 54-inch hoop depth, to control the fish at boatside. Alternatively, use a Rapala Digital Fish Gripper Scale or BogaGrip in the jaw and boost the fish by jaw and tail aboard for dehooking and photos.

Harvest of the big breeders is limited to one per year in Texas, one over 27 inches daily in Louisiana, one over 30 inches per year in Mississippi, one over 26 inches daily in Alabama, none over 27 inches in Florida, none over 23 inches in Georgia, none over 23 inches in South Carolina and none over 27 inches in North Carolina.

The goal, of course, is to keep more of the big breeders in the water, producing more baby redfish. It helps that the giant reds have coarse flesh and are not nearly as tasty as the smaller fish.

Reds are hardy, but be ready with the camera, boost your catch quickly with one hand under the head and the other under the tail and get that trophy grip-and-grin that proves you caught your biggest bull ever. Then send her back to keep the cycle going. 



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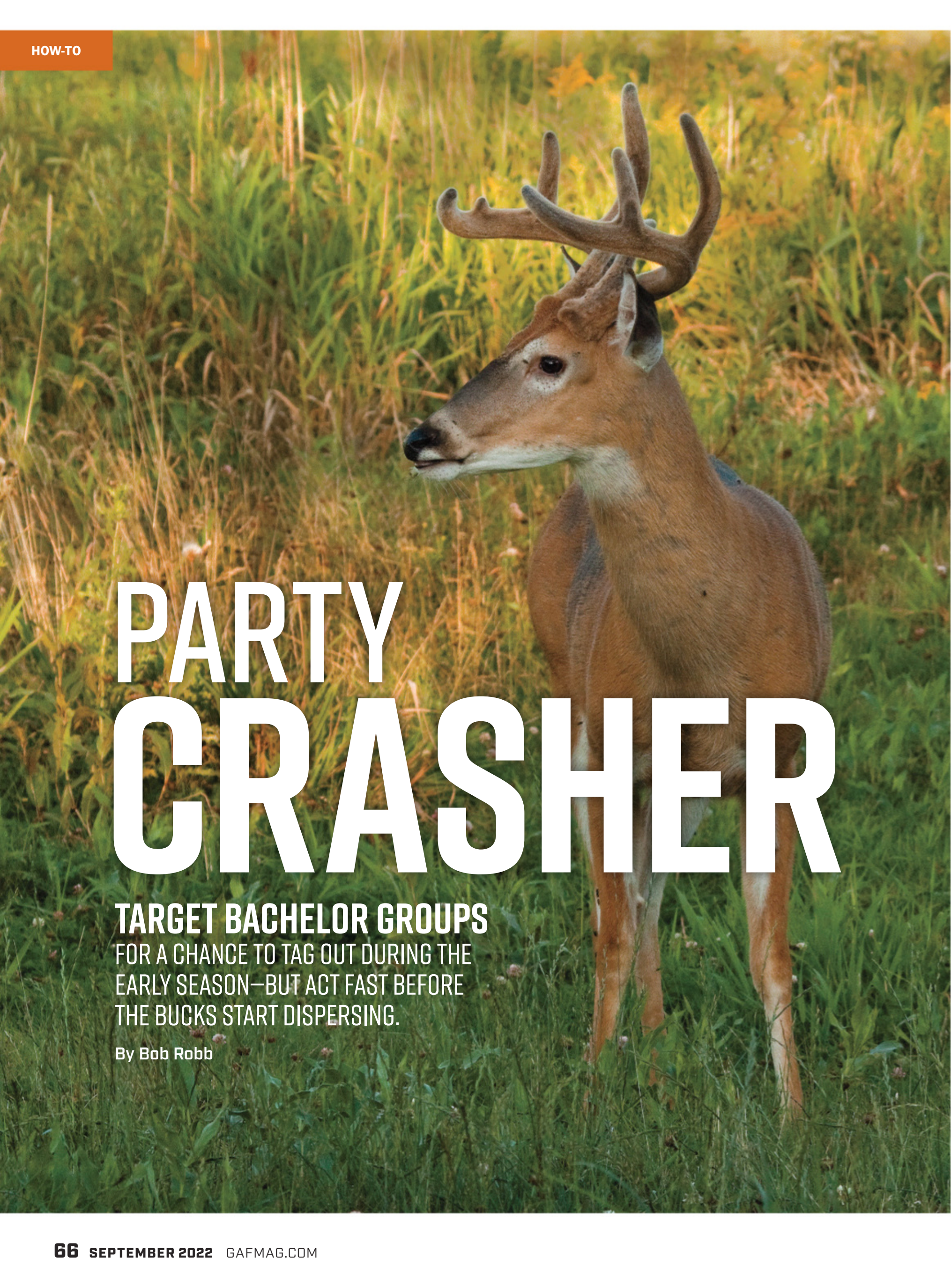
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A photograph of a buck with large, velvet-covered antlers standing in a field of tall grass and wildflowers. The buck is facing left, and the background is a soft-focus field of green and yellow vegetation.

PARTY CRASHER

TARGET BACHELOR GROUPS
FOR A CHANCE TO TAG OUT DURING THE
EARLY SEASON—BUT ACT FAST BEFORE
THE BUCKS START DISPERSING.

By Bob Robb



Bachelor groups typically have two to four bucks. If you see more than that at once, it's likely several groups hanging together.

LINDA FRESHWATERS ARNDT

The “Summer of Love” is what the media called the summer of 1967, when hippies converged on San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district and “sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll” became a part of the nation’s vernacular.

I was in high school not too far from the Haight back then, and I think back on those days every summer when I start scouting whitetails. In the deer world, every summer is a summer of love, with bucks and their velvet antlers hanging together in what are commonly referred to as “bachelor groups.”

Once the velvet comes off and the hormones kick in, they won’t be able to stand one another any longer, but for now the bromance is strong. If you understand this dynamic and learn how to use it to your advantage, the early bow seasons that kick off this month can be a great time to harvest a mature buck.

Here are eight key points about bachelor groups to keep in mind, and how to ultimately improve your chances of punching your buck tag during the earliest part of the season.

1. YOUR NUMBERS MAY VARY

Most bachelor groups are small—anywhere from two to four bucks—but this is not a hard-and-fast rule. Yearlings seem to like to travel in pairs, and mature bucks hang in groups of up to four, but I once watched a group of seven hang together for about a month. A group of 20 bucks or more appearing in a huge field at once is probably several smaller groups convening in the same place at the same time.

According to biologist Matt Ross of the National Deer Association, one reason bucks form bachelor groups is to show strength in numbers.

“This might aid in predator avoidance at a time when bucks are relatively defenseless, when antlers are growing and vulnerable to damage,” he says.

2. PEER GROUPS

Bachelor groups are generally segregated by age class, though the ages within a group may vary by a year or two, and the bucks are usually not related to each other. Bachelor groups form when antlers are starting to grow and testosterone levels are at their annual low point. And while bucks in bachelor

groups get along well and even groom each other, now is when they begin to establish a basic pecking order within the group. This hierarchy becomes more defined as the amount of daily sunlight decreases, antlers harden and the velvet gets rubbed off.

“This early pecking order establishment may allow bucks to establish a basic dominance hierarchy through mild forms of aggression, which may reduce the amount of serious fighting necessary later in fall as the rut approaches,” Ross says.

Interestingly, there are times when an old buck—5 years of age or more—may choose to hang with younger bucks that he allows to accompany him through his daily routine. In September 2006, Ohioan John Schmucker shot just such a buck—a massive 36-pointer that scored 295 3/8. The buck had hung out with three younger bucks all summer, and was with them when John’s arrow found its mark.

3. LAID BACK

Bromance bucks tend to bed very close to their preferred food sources, often within the length of a football field. They need to conserve their energy for their growing bodies and antlers. So, if you’re hunting a food plot or ag field where you’ve seen these bucks regularly, remember when accessing your afternoon stand that they’re probably bedded close by. Move slowly and quietly, watch the wind and be careful not to inadvertently bump them as you get set up.

4. BOYS ONLY

With the exception of yearling bucks, you’ll notice that bucks and does have little to do with each other during the bachelor group period. Does have pretty much already kicked their year-old bucks out of the house.

So, when hunting this time frame, if you see a pod of does and yearlings, keep searching. The bucks will be someplace else. That someplace might be a different area of the same large field, or it may be a spot back in the timber where a preferred summer food, and water, is plentiful.

5. SLAP FIGHTIN’

Even though they’re hanging together, keep an eye out for early sparring sessions. With antlers encased in velvet, bucks won’t lock horns. But sooner or

later they will pin their ears back, flail hooves, raise the hackles on their backs and necks and stiffen legs, all in a display of dominance. When this happens, you know that the breakup period is not far away, so plan accordingly.

6. THE BREAKUP

Depending on where you live, the testosterone level in all bucks begins to rise as the days start to get shorter, which triggers the hardening of the antlers and velvet shedding. This is when you will see a noticeable change in bucks’ behavior, as they begin to move from summer to fall patterns. Bucks hang in open fields when they’re in velvet for several reasons—premium eats, fewer

biting insects and predator avoidance among them—but one key reason is they just don’t like whacking those soft, fuzz-covered antlers on low-hanging brush. Once antlers harden, heading back to thick cover is not an issue.

At this time, they begin getting more aggressive toward each other, sparring and dominance displays get a bit more serious and dispersal begins. Scientific dispersal studies have shown that after velvet shedding (generally late August to mid-September), some of the bucks within a group might move a mile or more to fall and winter ranges, but other bucks will hang tight in the core area where they live year-round. You should be able to hunt at least one mature deer,

BOLTS-A-BLAZIN’

TenPoint’s Nitro 505 is the world’s fastest crossbow.

Searching for the ultimate in crossbow speed? Look no further than TenPoint’s new Nitro 505. With an advertised initial arrow velocity of 505 fps, this top-of-the-line crossbow uses reverse-draw limb and cam technology to produce a walloping 227 foot-pounds of initial kinetic energy using the included Pro Elite (400-grain) carbon arrow.

The Nitro features a two-stage, zero-creep trigger with a consistently crisp, 3 1/2-pound pull. A unique arrow track minimizes arrow-to-track and string-to-track contact, thereby increasing arrow speeds and improving string life.

The Nitro uses TenPoint’s time-tested ACUslide system for easy cocking and de-cocking. An EVO-X Marksman Elite Variable Speed Scope is included on the Nitro, which measures 30 1/2-inches long and 6 1/2-inches wide when cocked (12 inches uncocked). The bow has a long, 17-inch power stroke, weighs 7.9 pounds and has a 300-pound draw weight.

The Nitro is obviously blisteringly fast, but what does this speed translate to in the field? At 500-plus fps, the Nitro sends arrows downrange at typical hunting distances—say 30 yards—with significantly less drop than slower bows.

At 30 yards, the Nitro has 7 inches of arrow drop, while a bow shooting 300 fps experiences 18 inches of arrow drop. At 40 yards, the Nitro drops just 12 inches, while some of its counterparts drop a whopping 34 inches. The difference in arrow drop makes the margin of aiming error considerably smaller for the Nitro over slower crossbows—or compound bows for that matter. (\$3,049.99–\$3,149.99; tenpointcrossbows.com) —Dr. Todd A. Kuhn



Bachelor groups are usually established by age class. Bucks groom each other before pecking orders are established and antlers harden.



and likely more, right there in the same fields, edges and strips where you've watched them this summer. They may remain in small bachelor groups of two to four bucks of the same age class, though studies have shown that some of the younger bucks may travel with mature ones well into October.

7. SAY CHEESE

Now is the time to aggressively use trail cameras. Set these up on trails leading away from the summer core area to other areas where fall activity will occur, including hardwood ridges, oak motts and other preferred food sources.

Trail cameras will often reveal where some of the bucks have gone, and they can also show you which have stuck around. But don't be surprised if, once you see the velvet start to come off, some of these bucks vanish overnight. It can

be a here-today-gone-tomorrow thing as the bachelor groups begin breaking up, so make the most of it while it lasts.

8. HUNT 'EM UP

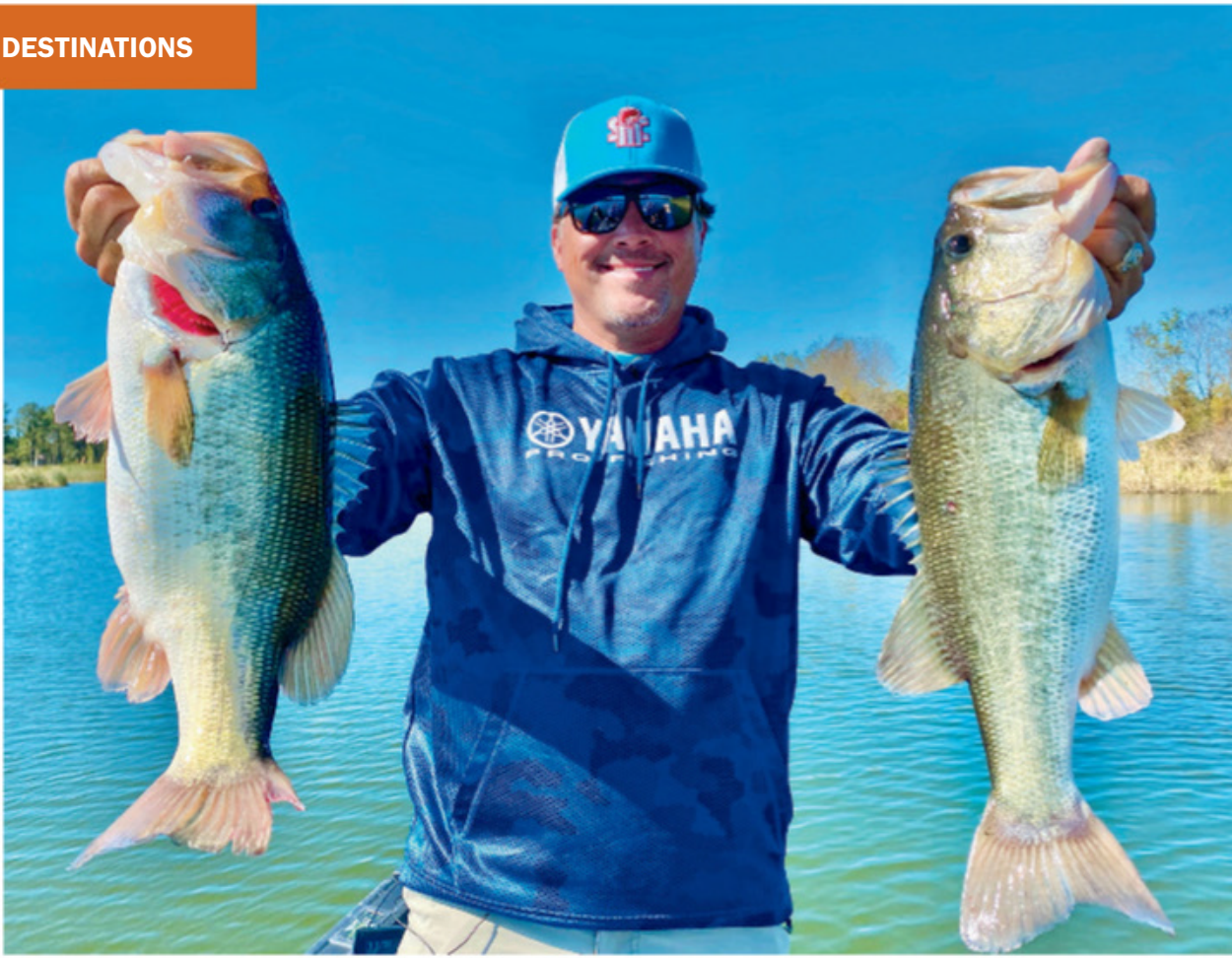
If bow season is open and you find the bucks are still in bachelor groups, try to get out as soon as possible. You won't find bucks easier to pattern at any other time of year. Use your knowledge of the property in conjunction with maps and scouting apps like HuntStand and onX to stake out likely travel routes between bedding thickets, water and where you see the deer enter the fields on a regular basis.

Choose ambush locations that will keep you both downwind of the anticipated field entry spots and in the afternoon shade, with the ideal tree being a few yards off the field edge so you'll have additional cover.

While I prefer to hunt elevated, I often build myself a simple little brush blind and burrow into the thick field edge cover. Then, I wait for deer to appear much like I do with turkeys in spring. Sometimes I have to wait an hour or more after dark to be able to sneak out without spooking deer, but that's okay. It gives me maximum flexibility, which can be a real bonus.

Another thing to keep in mind now: The early season is hot, and deer need water. Bucks will often stop to get a drink on their way from the beds to the fields. Isolated waterholes can be great ambush sites.

As bachelor groups start to break up, you'll begin to see fewer and fewer bucks in agricultural fields. Don't panic, though. There are always one or two that still live right where they've been all summer long. 



COURTESY OF BIENVILLE OUTDOORS (5)

BIENVILLE BOOM TIME

THIS SPRAWLING FLORIDA COMPLEX COMBINES
OUTSTANDING FISHING WITH SOUTHERN CHARM AND HOSPITALITY.

By Ken Duke

Bienville Plantation is now Bienville Outdoors, but that's just the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to the changes at this north Florida lunger bass destination. After decades in the spotlight as America's premier private trophy factory, it now seems that Bienville's future is even brighter than its glorious past.

The 11,000-acre property is under new ownership that clearly has its sights set on regaining some of the luster lost in recent years when previous ownership put a spotlight on things other than fishing. New owners Adam Baker and Chris King *are* focused on the fishing, and priority number-one is making the 18 lakes on the property as productive as they can be. To that end, they're making all the right moves.

The two are working with fisheries biologists to make sure the lakes are healthy, that the bass are plentiful and that the forage is balanced and prolific. There's no doubt Bienville's bass have the right genetics to grow large, and managing the fisheries and fishing pressure is the key to getting them there.

Site manager Tim Rode has overseen the resort for more than 20 years, so he's seen some ups and downs, and he's never been more optimistic about the direction Bienville is going.

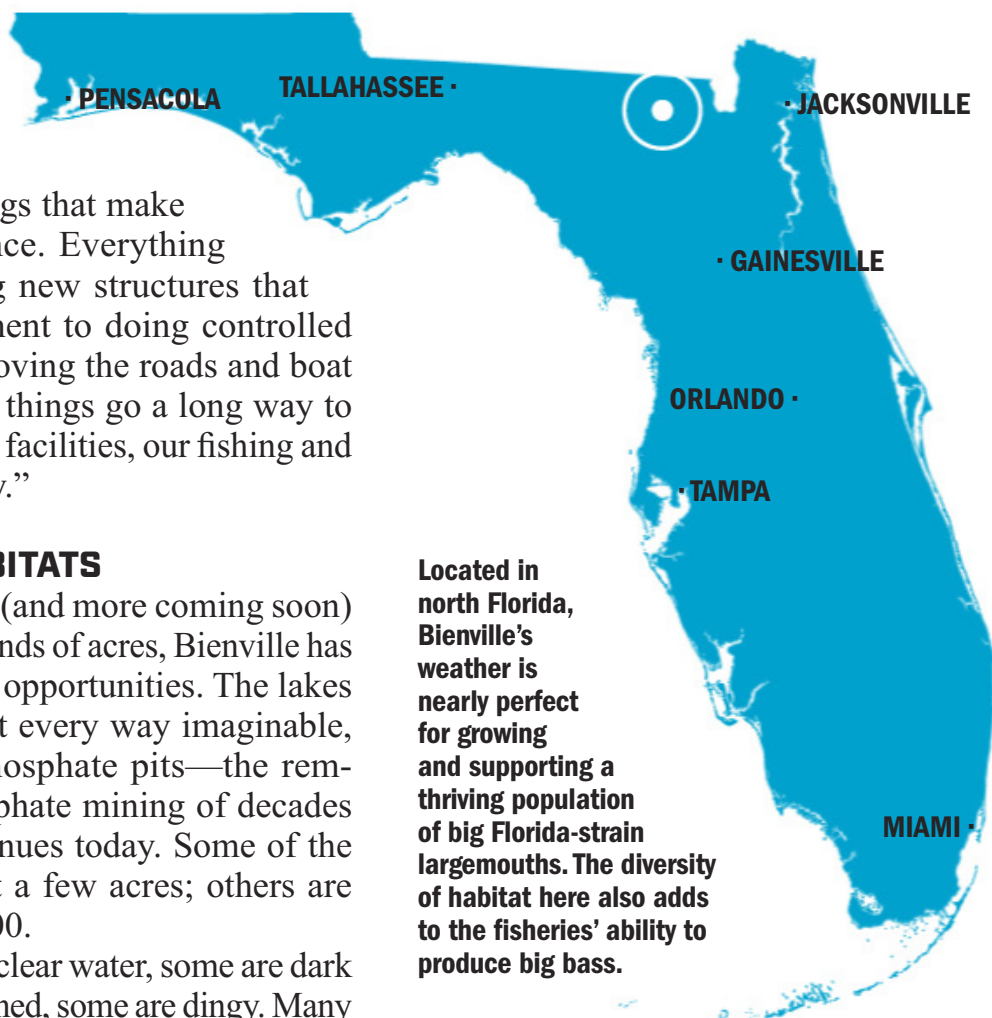
"It's great to see the owners investing in the property and showing such a long-term commitment," Rode says. "Adam

and Chris are here almost all the time and are doing the things that make a big difference. Everything from building new structures that house equipment to doing controlled burns to improving the roads and boat ramps—these things go a long way to improving our facilities, our fishing and our hospitality."

VARIED HABITATS

With 18 lakes (and more coming soon) totaling thousands of acres, Bienville has lots of fishing opportunities. The lakes vary in almost every way imaginable, but all are phosphate pits—the remnants of phosphate mining of decades ago that continues today. Some of the "pits" are just a few acres; others are well over 1,000.

Some have clear water, some are dark and tannin-stained, some are dingy. Many of the lakes have prolific aquatic vegetation while others have little or none. All have plenty of shallow water, but many drop to 20, 30 or even 40 feet deep, which is extremely unusual in Florida. Some lakes are new and have huge populations of fish up to 4 or 5 pounds; others are well established and regularly produce double-digit largemouths. All have their quirks, their best-producing colors and their advocates. If you ask five Bienville



Located in north Florida, Bienville's weather is nearly perfect for growing and supporting a thriving population of big Florida-strain largemouths. The diversity of habitat here also adds to the fisheries' ability to produce big bass.

guides to choose their favorite lake, you'll almost certainly get five different answers.

It's that unexpected diversity that keeps Bienville interesting and enormously productive. If you didn't catch them on one lake in the morning, you can bet that someone slayed them on another lake nearby. And with the lakes just minutes apart, it's easy to switch from one to another in search of the best bite.

BY THE SEASON

Late winter and early spring are great times to visit Florida and target the bass of a lifetime—especially if it means you’ll be escaping winter’s grip in the North—but that’s also when Bienville draws its biggest crowds, and guest space fills up. The weather can be spotty, and Florida bass (*Micropterus salmoides floridanus*) are notorious for shutting down after cold fronts, which roll through almost weekly at this time.

Nevertheless, if you catch it right, Bienville can be at its best from December through February. That’s Dean Jackson’s favorite time to target a trophy. Jackson has been guiding at Bienville for almost a decade. He’s also a scuba diver and has seen many of the lakes from a perspective few ever get.



Bienville has ample space to accommodate large groups—such as corporate retreats—with several levels of service that can be tailored to meet individual visitors’ needs.



Anglers fish against the backdrop of an active phosphate mining operation.

HIT THE PITS

Bienville’s lakes are former phosphate mining pits that have been converted to prime bass waters.

When the first European explorers reached Florida in the 16th century, they came looking for gold, silver, even the Fountain of Youth. What they found was alligators, snakes and humidity—no precious metals or mystical waters. After a few hundred years, Florida was basically written off by treasure seekers.

Then, in the early 1800s, the British realized that phosphorous promotes growth in both plants and animals. They used bones (which contain phosphorous) as an agricultural fertilizer.

Later, scientists discovered that phosphate rock is a more abundant source of phosphate. But where to find it? It turns out that Florida is rich in phosphate, and the state now supplies about 80 percent of the nation’s phosphate needs and about 25 percent of the world’s phosphate demands.

The mining process for phosphate requires a lot of digging and refining. Sometimes the holes reach 50 or more feet below the surface. If not filled in with soil, they will eventually fill with water—and bass that grow very large.

“December through February is my pick for catching the bass of a lifetime,” Jackson says. “Cold fronts can affect the fishing, but the females are full of eggs and feeding heavily.”

The news only gets better. Because it’s Florida and usually warm, Jackson catches a lot of big bass at this time on topwater baits like the Smithwick Devil’s Horse and Rapala X-Rap Prop. If they won’t eat on the surface, he opts for a weightless Yamamoto Senko, Zoom Super Fluke or Z-Man ChatterBait.

And again, since it’s Florida, winter and early spring don’t last very long. Summer comes early, but that’s not bad. In fact, it’s the most stable and consistent time of the year if you’re focused on fishing. It’s also Ron Ryals’ favorite time to chase lunkers.

Ryals has been guiding on Bienville for more than a decade, and has a one-two, shallow water-deep water approach for hot-weather bass.

“In the mornings and evenings, I like to throw big topwaters and look for a big bite,” Ryals says. “My favorites are a buzzbait, the Rapala X-Rap Prop and—if I’m fishing around a lot of vegetation—a hollow-bodied frog. If the fish are active, I should see some bites quickly. If they’re not, I’ll change locations or even lakes in search of more active fish.”

Once the sun gets up on the water, Ryals changes gears. That’s when he picks up his punching outfit—a St. Croix rod and a casting reel spooled with



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Gear that hunts

65-pound braided line. His go-to punch bait is a Missile Baits D Bomb behind a tungsten sinker weighing an ounce or more. He'll pitch the bait into hydrilla or hyacinths or around whatever heavy cover he can find. It's a great way to put the odds in your favor when targeting a Florida giant.

But punching is an acquired taste, and not every client is comfortable with such brute tactics. That's when Ryals opts for a traditional Texas- or Carolina-rigged worm measuring 6 to 10 inches, dragging the baits around points and drops into deep water. He says any color is fine, as long as it's black or junebug.

Ryals' best advice applies to all Florida bass fishing.

"Slow down," he says. "Florida bass are lazy. They have plenty to eat and are generally not interested in chasing something. My clients are usually amazed at how slowly we need to move our baits to get bites, especially in the heat of summer."

That summer lethargy may be the reason Chris Heron's favorite season is early fall, after the first couple of cool fronts have dropped nighttime air temperatures below 60 degrees for the first time in months.

"That's when the bass start to group up and feed really heavily," he says. "I look for them on long points, around



Cabins are strategically placed to offer visitors spectacular views of the waters of Bienville.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Bienville offers a plethora of pursuits beyond catching big bass.

So, not everyone in your family is interested in catching giant bass? You say that piscatorial pursuits are not their personal priority, but they still want to be entertained? Bienville Outdoors has the answers for almost any visitor.

"In addition to the chance to see a lot of Florida's natural beauty," says site manager Tim Rode, "we have plenty of other outdoor activities that have recently been added to our mix."

These include volleyball, tetherball, pickleball, kickball, 16-inch softball (no gloves required), cornhole, horseshoes and a beautiful fire pit. Plus, it won't be long before Bienville adds camping, trail riding and even a small golf area.

However, visitors don't have to be outdoorsy to enjoy time at Bienville. The cabins are comfortable, with Wi-Fi and satellite TV, and the food at the lodge is fantastic.



The level of biodiversity on the Bienville property, which offers sanctuary to a wide array of wildlife, is astounding.

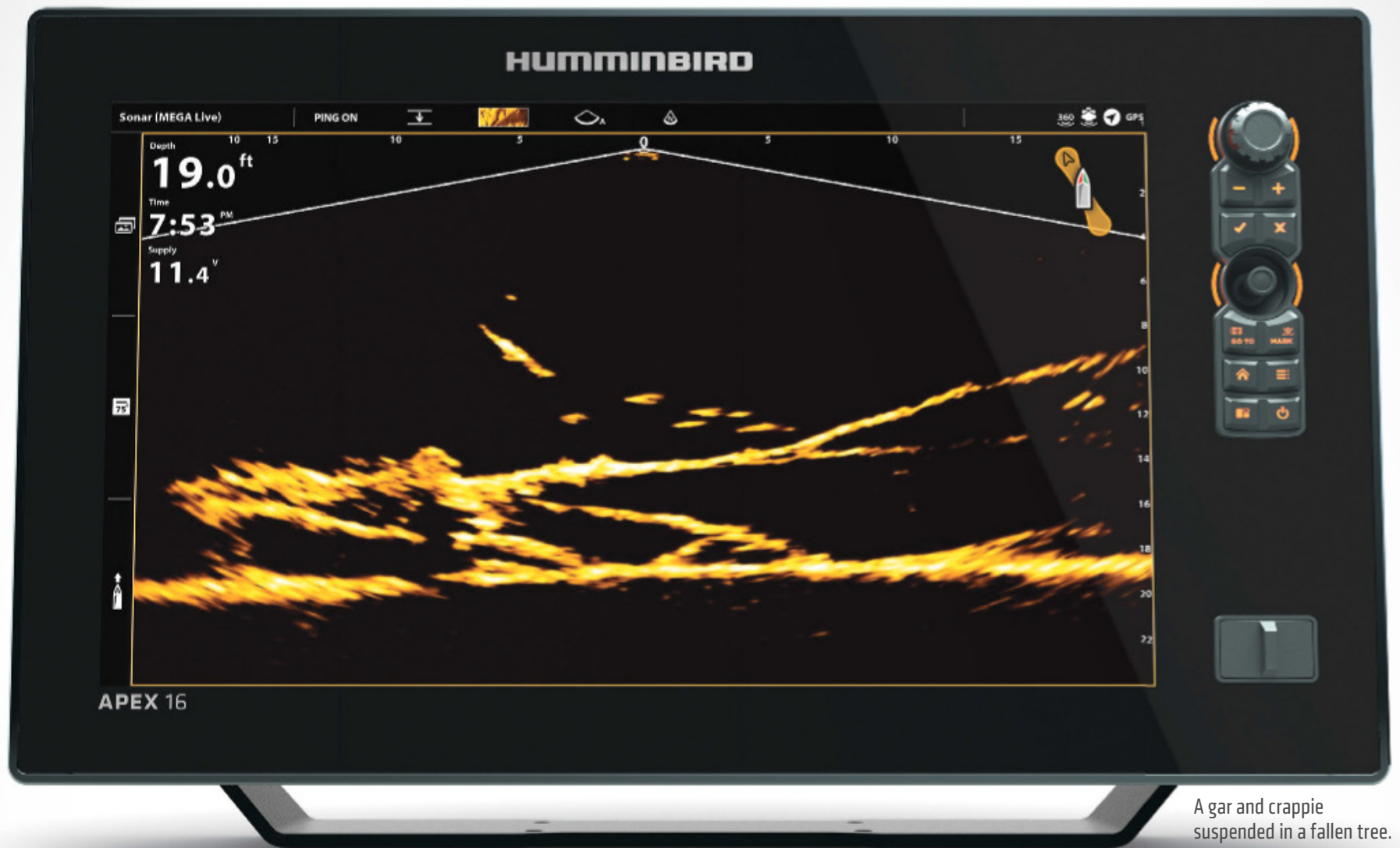
rock piles and drops. Sometimes they're suspended above grass or deep structure. It can be important to know your electronics and to look for those schools or pods of shad or other baitfish."

Heron has been guiding on Bienville since 2006 and has a reputation for finding big bass. In the fall, he'll try to draw fish to the top using a plover-type bait or walking bait like the classic Heddon Zara Spook. If they won't feed on top, he goes to a soft-plastic jerkbait, working it weightless just below the surface. Big hollow-body swimbaits and the Z-Man ChatterBait also come through grass well and catch lots of big bass.

Fall in Florida comes late most years, and it comes quickly. Heron advises any angler in the Sunshine State to get on the fall bite early—before others realize it's happening.

"By the time you hear about it," he says, "it could be too late!" 

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MAINE EVENT

FAR NORTHERN MAINE
FEATURES BIG WOODS,
**BIG BEARS AND EVEN
BIGGER ADVENTURE.**

By John Taranto

Sitting at a shooting bench, I slid a round into the chamber of my rifle as I prepared to check its zero. Over my shoulder, Rick Abbott, a guide with OMM Outfitters, offered our group some perspective on the bears we'd be hunting that week in northern Aroostook County, Maine.

"Ya gawtta undisstand," he said in a thick Boston accent, "These bayuhs have been shawt at moah times than the Kennedys."

Snorts, guffaws and chuckles abounded. I just smiled. Having grown up in New England, but now residing in the Midwest, I have a deep-rooted appreciation for the blunt, borderline-offensive sense of humor shared by many inhabitants of the Northeast. It was good to be home.

An hour later, I followed Abbott from his truck to a double ladder stand about 100 yards off a tote road deep in the North Maine Woods. As we eased our way along the trail, he stopped periodically to point out fresh bear tracks in the mud.

"They're definitely around," he whispered, nodding.

I climbed into the stand as Abbott righted the bait barrel, some 35 yards away, and topped it off with two 5-gallon buckets full of trail mix. OMM proudly baits with a mixture of nuts and dried fruit they get from a company called Nuts for Wildlife in Virginia. You won't find any doughnuts, bacon grease or rotten beaver carcasses in OMM's barrels.

As Nathan Theriault, owner of OMM, would explain to me later in the week, the decision to use only natural foods is one that benefits bears and hunters alike.

"This stuff is really good for the bears. It's high-energy feed," said Theriault. "Plus, we like to encourage our clients to eat the bears they kill. If the bears only eat natural foods, including the stuff they forage from the forest, that ensures their meat tastes like it should."

By the time I settled into my stand and the sound of Abbott's truck faded into the distance, it was almost 4 o'clock. For the next five hours, until it became too dark to see, I stared at that barrel, visualizing a massive black bear ambling toward the rusty drum, eventually standing perfectly broadside with its front paw forward to expose its vitals for a quick and easy kill. Alas, it was not meant to be that evening. Nor the next.



Fresh tracks spotted on the way to the stand site on his first evening in camp raised the author's hopes that activity at the bait barrel would be frequent.

A few things were conspiring against us those first couple days of the hunt. First of all, this was the fourth and final week of Maine's fall bear season. As such, the bruins had been hunted hard for three weeks straight, and the ones that had survived to that point were obviously smarter than your average bear. On top of that, the temperatures were unseasonably warm for late September, hitting the upper 70s during the day. Combined with a full moon to light the woods at night, there was no reason for the bears to be up and moving during daylight hours.

Well, except for one reason.

THE CHASE IS ON

The morning of our third day in camp found me riding knee-to-knee with friends and colleagues Joe Kurtenbach and Brad Fitzpatrick in the backseat of Robert Romm's pickup. OMM guide Ken Mayo rode shotgun.

Romm, an intensely passionate and knowledgeable 31-year-old houndsman from eastern North Carolina, had brought several of his prized dogs to northern Maine to run them on bears, and had succeeded in treeing several for other hunters in camp earlier in the week. Now it was Kurtenbach's turn.

As we pulled out of camp in the pre-dawn blackness, Doug Moreland's "Hunting Bear" blared from the speakers:

*Huntin' bear, huntin' bear:
Load that wagon, beans and bacon.
Saddle them horses,
Dogs are baying,
We're off to the mountains for bear.*

*Grab your rifle, holster your pistol,
Check your knife edge,
Kiss your missus.
Huntin' bear, huntin' bear,
We're off to the mountains for bear.*

The author stared at this 55-gallon drum for hours on end over three consecutive evenings before a bear finally appeared.

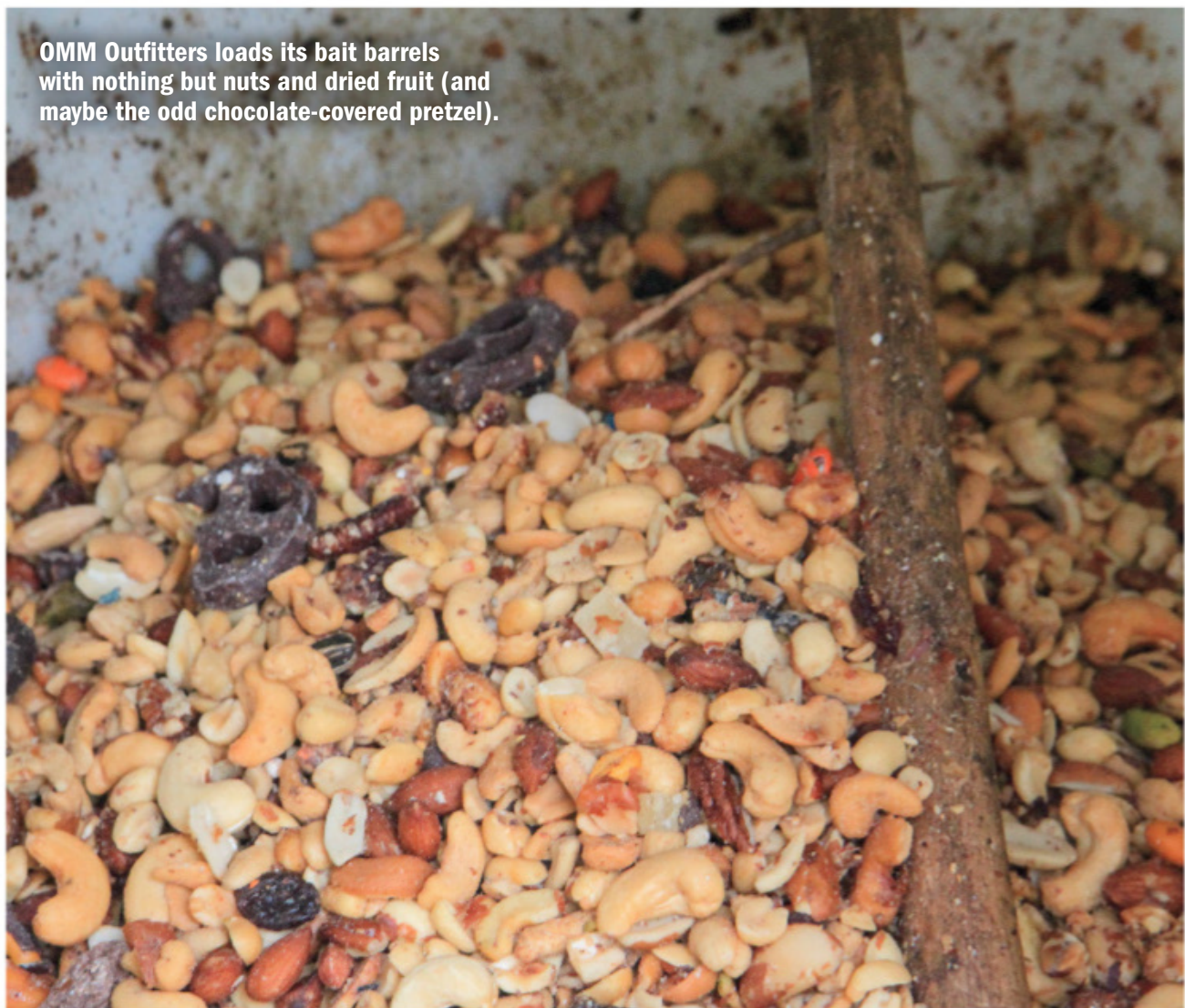
JOHN TARANTO (2)

We bounded down the two-track for several miles before arriving at a stand site where Mayo checked the SD card in a trail camera aimed at the site's bait barrel. Nothing.

After a couple more stops, a cam finally produced a photo of a good-size bear—easily 200 pounds—that had visited the bait less than two hours earlier. It was decided that Romm would drop a couple of his GPS-collared Plotts—Goodnight and Cricket—to see if they could follow the scent to the bear.

The hounds dutifully took off through the thick undergrowth as we two-legged hunters climbed back into the truck to monitor the dogs' progress on a screen affixed to the windshield. We drove the serpentine logging roads, attempting to stay as close to the dogs as possible. The excitement in the cab escalated when it became obvious from the straight and steady course they were on that the dogs had jumped the bear and were in pursuit. Romm quickly drove around a large stand of timber to where he thought the bear and his dogs might cross a road.

OMM Outfitters loads its bait barrels with nothing but nuts and dried fruit (and maybe the odd chocolate-covered pretzel).



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By the time we arrived, the bear had already passed through, but Goodnight and Cricket were just coming up to the road. Romm and Mayo jumped out and dropped four more hounds—Sam, Trump, Chase and Little Magic—all too eager to join the chase.

As the Benny Hill theme played in my head, Romm kept one eye on the monitor and the other on the road. Before long, the icons on the screen that represented the dogs grouped up in one spot, suggesting they had either treed or bayed the bear deep within the timber.

The closest we could get to them with the truck was roughly a mile as the crow flies, and the first several hundred yards involved climbing up, over and around countless slash piles from previous cutting operations.

By the time we reached the tree line, a half hour had elapsed and we were drenched in sweat. Once we entered the trees, it took another hour of hiking through some of the thickest, gnarliest forest I have ever seen, sinking into the moss-covered ground or becoming entangled in a deadfall with every step, before we could even hear the dogs.

When we finally reached the chaotic scene, we saw the dogs had treed the boar and set to work grabbing the hounds, attaching them to leads and tying them



Aroostook County, Maine, covers nearly 7,000 square miles and is home to just 67,000 people.





Robert Romm (left) and Ken Mayo monitor Romm's hounds' progress as they track a bear deep within the timber.



The author filled his black bear tag with a Winchester XPR Stealth SR in .350 Legend.

LOADED FOR BEAR

A look at the rifle, ammunition and optic used on the hunt

THE GUN: No one in their right mind would ever call the Winchester XPR Stealth SR an elegant rifle, but no one in their right mind would ever take an elegant rifle bear hunting, either. Instead, the XPR Stealth SR is a workhorse—precisely what you need in the thick, nasty woods that Maine's black bears inhabit. The rifle features a forest-green composite stock, the bolt has a nickel-Teflon coating and the receiver and threaded barrel both wear a black Perma-Cote finish. A Picatinny-style rail comes mounted and optic-ready.

Aside from its ruggedness, what I appreciated most about the rifle was how nimble and handy it was, whether carrying it through dense cover or while in the cozy confines of a ladder stand. Weighing just 6 1/2 pounds, the rifle's overall length is 36 1/2 inches and the barrel (with a 1:8-inch twist rate) tapers at 16 1/2 inches. A long-range rifle it is not, but chambered in .350 Legend, my rifle proved more than adequate for quickly dispatching a 230-pound-plus black bear with a single shot inside of 40 yards. (\$719.99; winchesterguns.com)

THE SCOPE: Leupold's VX-5HD 3–15x44 is a true utilitarian riflescope that offers hunters a boatload of value. Its 5X magnification range allows the user to easily zero in on game from several hundred yards away to within 50. All scopes in the VX-5HD line sport exceptionally clear, bright, light-hungry glass. This was a major factor at the moment of truth in the waning moments of legal shooting light deep within the timber.

Of all the features of the VX-5HD that topped my rifle, the illuminated FireDot aiming point within the duplex reticle was perhaps the most crucial. If not for it, there's little to no chance I would have been able to discern the black crosshairs against the bear's black fur in order to make an ethical shot. With the FireDot, however, I quickly found my target and had complete confidence that my bullet would find its mark. (\$1,099.99; leupold.com)

THE AMMO: As more and more localities outlaw lead ammunition, the proliferation of copper projectiles continues its ascent. While Maine is not one of those places requiring the use of lead-free ammo, I was glad to have a potent, solid-copper load in my rifle's chamber for this hunt.

Winchester's new Copper Impact line includes several loads that existed previously in its Deer Season XP series, including the 150-grain .350 Legend load I used on my bear. With a listed muzzle velocity of 2,260 fps, and producing 1,212 foot-pounds of energy at 100 yards, this stout, straight-walled load is more than capable of dropping big game in close quarters. The monolithic Extreme Point bullet, with its outsized red polymer tip, expands quickly upon impact, penetrates deeply and retains nearly all of its weight to create a high degree of trauma and, ultimately, quick recoveries of game. (\$35/box of 20; winchester.com)





Three of Romm's prized hounds wait patiently in their kennels to be called into action.

to trees a good distance from the giant red oak in which the bear was perched some 50 feet up. Once all the hounds were cleared from the base of the tree, Kurtenbach stepped up and coolly delivered a fatal shot to the bear, which slid down the trunk and ran just a few yards before piling up. For a while afterwards, the only sound in the woods was a chorus of yawps from a half-dozen very proud dogs.

BACK TO THE STAND

With the thrill of Kurtenbach's hunt still fresh in my brain and bloodstream, Abbott and I headed back to the stand I'd hunted the two nights prior. Curious why I was returning to a stand that had produced no sightings of bears all week, and considering that OMM operates some 70 different stand sites across three townships, I asked Abbott if there was perhaps a different stand I might hunt out of.

"You haven't seen any bears, but that doesn't mean they aren't around," he said. "We've seen big tracks. The bait is getting worked. It's just a matter of time before one makes a mistake and shows up a little too early. Could be tonight."

The first four and a half hours of my third vigil played out much like the previous two had, with only squirrels and the distant honking of geese on Eagle Lake to keep me company. Then, with half an hour of shooting light left, a



OMM Outfitters operates out of a secluded sporting camp that dates back to the late 19th century.

BACKWOODS BASE CAMP

A remote location featuring rustic comfort and blissful solitude

Nathan Theriault's OMM Outfitters (the "OMM" stands for "Old Mill Marina") operates out of the historic Eagle Lake Sporting Camps, situated high on a bluff on the northern shore of the eponymous lake. Established in 1889, the camp was once a destination for titans of industry from New York and Boston and now hosts hunters from all over the country in pursuit of big Maine moose and bears.

In addition to several comfortable bunk houses, a separate building houses the kitchen and dining room where guests enjoy hearty, homecooked meals. A lodge offers a pool table, dart boards and other ways to while away time not spent chasing bears. Eagle Lake boasts good fishing for landlocked Atlantic salmon, lake trout and brook trout. OMM also offers excellent grouse hunting and will coordinate guided trips for muskies on the St. John River and guided goose hunts.

Six miles across the lake is the town of Eagle Lake, where a wild-game processor and taxidermist will handle your meat and trophy if you so desire.

If traveling by air, fly to Presque Isle and either arrange for OMM to pick you up at the airport, or rent a vehicle and drive the hour and 45 minutes to camp yourself.



Mayo checks a trail camera's SD card to see if any recent bear activity might warrant setting Romm's dogs loose.

large, black form materialized about 60 yards from my stand. Despite a shroud of brush and the fading light, I could immediately tell this was a large bear that I would be eager to shoot if given the opportunity.

The bruin, in no rush to get to the bait barrel, stood on its hind legs for several seconds and looked around before dropping back to all fours and disappearing behind a screen of dead branches. After a few tense moments, unsure whether it had perhaps caught a whiff of something it didn't like and retreated, the big boar appeared on the other side of the brush and slowly angled its way toward the drum. It never made it to dinner.

When it was a few feet shy of the barrel, perfectly broadside and with its front paw forward, I placed the reticle's illuminated dot over its vitals and squeezed the trigger. The bear instantly wheeled around and crashed through the trees, offering no chance at a follow-up shot. I lost sight of it in the gloaming, but breathed a sigh of relief when I heard what I believed to be the telltale death moan echo through the forest.

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The author's bear showed up just before the end of shooting light on the third night of the hunt. The big boar tipped the scales at 234 pounds.

JOHN TARANTO (2)

In addition to bears, OMM Outfitters offers first-rate hunts for big Maine moose.



TENSION MOUNTS

I radioed Abbott to let him know that his premonition had been realized, and before long he showed up with drag rope in hand and an “I told you so” grin on his face.

However, the recovery of the animal was hardly straightforward, as the blood trail dried up not 40 feet from the barrel—an occurrence not uncommon given black bears’ thick, mop-like coats at that time of year.

If you’ve never searched for a potentially wounded bear in the dark, you haven’t truly lived. The senses become heightened to such a degree that the eyes start seeing things that aren’t there; the ears perceive every faint sound as a charging menace of fur and claws and teeth. After an hour of painstakingly replaying the shot and what I saw and heard immediately after it in my mind—and second-guessing myself to no end—Abbott called out, “I got him!”

Fifty yards from the barrel, the bear had somehow crawled under a downed log not more than 10 inches off the ground and lodged itself amongst a deadfall. Abbott and I spent the better part of another hour extricating the beast—later weighed at 234 pounds—from its chosen final resting place and dragging it to the truck.

Maine is one of very few states remaining where hunters can bait bears and run them with hounds. Whether you kill one while it is up a tree or you are, the excitement, though different, is always worth the adventure. **G-F**

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A person's hand is visible on the right, holding a large set of elk antlers. The antlers are dark and silhouetted against a bright, hazy sunset sky. The foreground shows dark, silhouetted vegetation. The overall mood is dramatic and emphasizes the hunt.

ROOSEVELT ELK RELIVED

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST'S ELK
REMAINS THE TOUGHEST SUBSPECIES TO HUNT,
EVEN FOR DIEHARDS WITH DECADES OF
EXPERIENCE PURSUING THEM.

Story and Photos by Scott Haugen



In parts of western Oregon and Washington, general-season, over-the-counter rifle tags can be acquired for Roosevelt elk, and both states have plenty of public ground to hunt.

The herd of Roosevelt elk emerged from the mountainous timber, just as Dad said they would when he left me sitting there. Cautiously they walked single-file, broadside, 100 yards away. The little creek in the massive ravine separating us was overflowing its banks and roaring from recent rains, typical of the Oregon Coast Range in November.

The elk slowly moved along the trail, getting closer with each step. Intense rain bounced off the hood of my rain jacket, and my hands looked cold due to the death grip I had on the old .30-06 that belonged to my late grandfather.

I didn't feel cold or wet. Adrenaline alleviated any discomfort.

Six ... seven ... nine. I counted elk as they slipped from the dense Douglas firs, lining out one-by-one. Through the trees I could see the body of what I knew was a bull. It was larger than the cows, and its hair was white compared to their yellowish hides, just as Dad said it would be. The bull's head was in the trees, hiding its antlers.

My heart beat heavy in my throat, overpowering the sound of the driving rain. With a solid rest, I slid the safety off. Two more steps and I'd be able to confirm it was a bull. Then the lead cow barked loudly. The herd spun, quickly but quietly, and vanished into the jungle-like rainforest.

The year was 1978. I was 14 years old. It was my first Roosevelt elk hunt, and the encounter changed my life.

I sat alone, uncontrollably shaking. The rain fell harder, yet I felt hot and confined. I slipped my hood off. Rain ran down my orange cotton stocking cap, down my neck. It felt good.

When the shaking stopped, I regained my wits, curious as to what had spooked the elk. The heavy rain knocked down my scent, so they didn't smell me. Then I recalled moving the rifle a few inches higher on the fallen tree against which it was rested. When I made the move, I was looking at the bull through the scope, my left eye closed. I'd neglected the cows. The lead cow was 15 yards ahead of the bull. I'm sure she caught my movement. I learned a lesson that day, thus beginning my infatuation with Roosevelt elk.

A friend and his father killed bulls that afternoon. They were hunting together, a few miles from Dad and me. They shot

Simply getting a glimpse of a mature bull in the thick habitat makes for a good season for some Roosevelt elk hunters.



the bulls in the bottom of a steep, brushy canyon. The only way to get the meat out was to pack it on our backs. The four of us hauled out the last loads just after 3 a.m. the following morning. It poured rain the whole time. It was hard, demanding and instilled a work ethic that's synonymous with Roosevelt elk hunting.

WAITING ON BULLS

While I was growing up in Oregon's Willamette Valley, the only place we had to hunt Roosevelt elk was in the Coast Range. Then, in the 1980s, the elk began expanding their range into the valleys. They also became established in the western mountains of the Cascade Range.

In the early '90s the western Cascades held huntable herds of Roosevelt elk. For generations my family hunted black-tailed deer in those forests and never dreamed elk would one day thrive nearby. We had some memorable elk hunts. Today, I regularly see elk within a mile from our home, sometimes in our backyard.

The encroachment of Roosevelt elk over the years, so close to home, piqued my interest in them starting decades ago. Partly because I believe them to be North America's second-most challenging big-game animal to hunt (behind mature blacktails) and partly because I never dreamed of having these ghosts of the forest so near, I pursue them every chance I get.

Last November I joined good friend and noted guide Jody Smith on an elk hunt. I tagged along to help, as he had four hunters in camp during the first of two general seasons in Oregon's Coast Range. Smith is a sixth-generation resident of the little town of Elkton, Ore. We've hunted together more than 20 years, and he's one of the best all-around hunters I've seen. He knows Roosevelt elk extremely well.

One hunter filled his tag in the opening minutes of the season. No one else saw a bull. Rather than head into the timber and look for elk, Smith suggested everyone head back to camp for lunch.

"A lot of folks get in a rush and start chasing elk into the timber," Smith notes.



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“Once you do that, the bulls know exactly what’s happening and they’ll often head into the thickest, most rugged terrain, and you’ll likely never catch them. But if you’re patient and wait for them to feed into openings right before dark, you can get a shot.”

That’s exactly what happened that evening. Moments before dark a herd slithered out of the rugged mountains, moved through a patch of birch trees

and began grazing in a tiny meadow. There were more than 30 cows in the herd and, behind them, five bulls.

Two of Jody’s hunters were in place, and each filled a tag. It was a long night of skinning, quartering and packing.

THE RARE EASY ONES

I’ve elk hunted a lot with Smith. During our first public land archery hunt we called in a 5-point bull on the first setup.

We heard its footsteps drawing closer on the dry forest floor; it didn’t bugle once. At 12 yards I slipped an arrow behind the bull’s shoulder and instantly made loud cow calls. The bull stopped, looked my way and started coming back to the calls. It collapsed 3 feet from where I arrowed it.

Twelve years ago my wife, Tiffany, drew a prized early-season Roosevelt elk damage tag. Setting trail cameras,



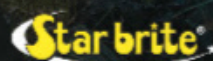
Hiking into the bottom of big canyons—and back out again—is the norm for Roosevelt elk hunters.

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Smith and I patterned a herd's movements through mountains and to a field they'd been pounding. This is easier to do in August, when bulls are in velvet, compared to weeks later.

The season opened Aug. 1. On our first hunt we saw no elk. A few days later we returned, and Tiffany made a perfect shot on a 5-by-5 that grazed in the field. It was the first and only velvet-antlered Roosevelt I've wrapped my hands around, and it was the best-eating bull we've ever had.

My bowhunt and Tiffany's velvet hunt were easy compared to most. Hunt Roosevelt elk long enough and you appreciate the easy ones when, and if, they come.

What makes these elk so hard to hunt is their secretive lifestyle, which takes place in some of the most densely forested, rugged land in the West. "This is a like a rainforest in the Rockies," a buddy once said upon seeing the Coast Range for the first time. He'd hunted big game all over the world, and at the end of the week-long hunt, he hadn't seen a bull on the Oregon coast. He found fresh sign, smelled elk and saw a handful of cows, but not a bull. He deemed it the most challenging public-land hunt he'd ever been on.

FLEETING ENCOUNTERS

I run trail cameras year-round for Roosevelt elk. In winter I monitor herds. In early spring I watch for antlers to drop. In late spring I track calf recruitment and follow the youngsters throughout summer, hoping the cougars, bears and coyotes in the area don't take their toll.

Once bulls start stripping their velvet in late August, they become challenging to keep track of. Two years ago I caught a big 6-by-6 on camera every few days in late August. Once its velvet was stripped, the bull appeared on another camera 9 miles away—as the crow flies—through the rough mountains of the Cascades. Three days later the bull was back where I'd seen it in August, and a day after that it was 9 miles away again, checking out a cow herd. That bull is still alive, having eluded many hunters. I've seen mind-boggling movement like this before, but it's something I wouldn't have imagined without the aid of trail cameras.

The author has packed out many Roosevelt elk, and rarely is it easy in the steep terrain of the Coast Range. Still, the challenge of hunting these animals is part of the allure.





Roosevelt elk are the biggest-bodied subspecies. The author's wife, Tiffany, took this bull in early August with a special-draw damage permit.

"I'm always amazed at the number of giant bulls that show up on camera only one time," shares Smith. "I run a lot of trail cameras and spend countless hours scouting, and there are so many bulls I only get one picture of and never see."

Every fall I experience exactly what Smith describes. A monster Roosevelt bull passes through in the middle of the night, never to be seen except in a trail-camera photo. I've witnessed these Houdini acts in September, October and November. It's frustrating, but at the

same time, it's what keeps Roosevelt hunters going.

A couple years ago I'd wrapped up a seminar on Roosevelt elk when a man approached me with a series of questions. He'd been hunting these elk for 12 years and had never fired a shot, but he was close many times. With Roosevelt elk, a good season isn't necessarily measured by how much meat is in the freezer. Instead, you tally how many close encounters you had, all the while knowing your chance will one day come. 



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Whether you're after elk, whitetails or small game, *Game & Fish* is teaming up with our fellow hunters at *North American Whitetail* and *Petersen's Hunting* to bring you the complete guide to finding success this fall. Ultimate Season '22, presented in partnership with Fram and Old Trapper, will showcase great new gear and offer a wealth of tips for the field through how-to videos and in-depth articles. You'll find Ultimate Season '22 content on our websites and social media portals, as well as on Outdoor Channel and Sportsman Channel. Visit UltimateSeason.com to kick off the best time of the year.

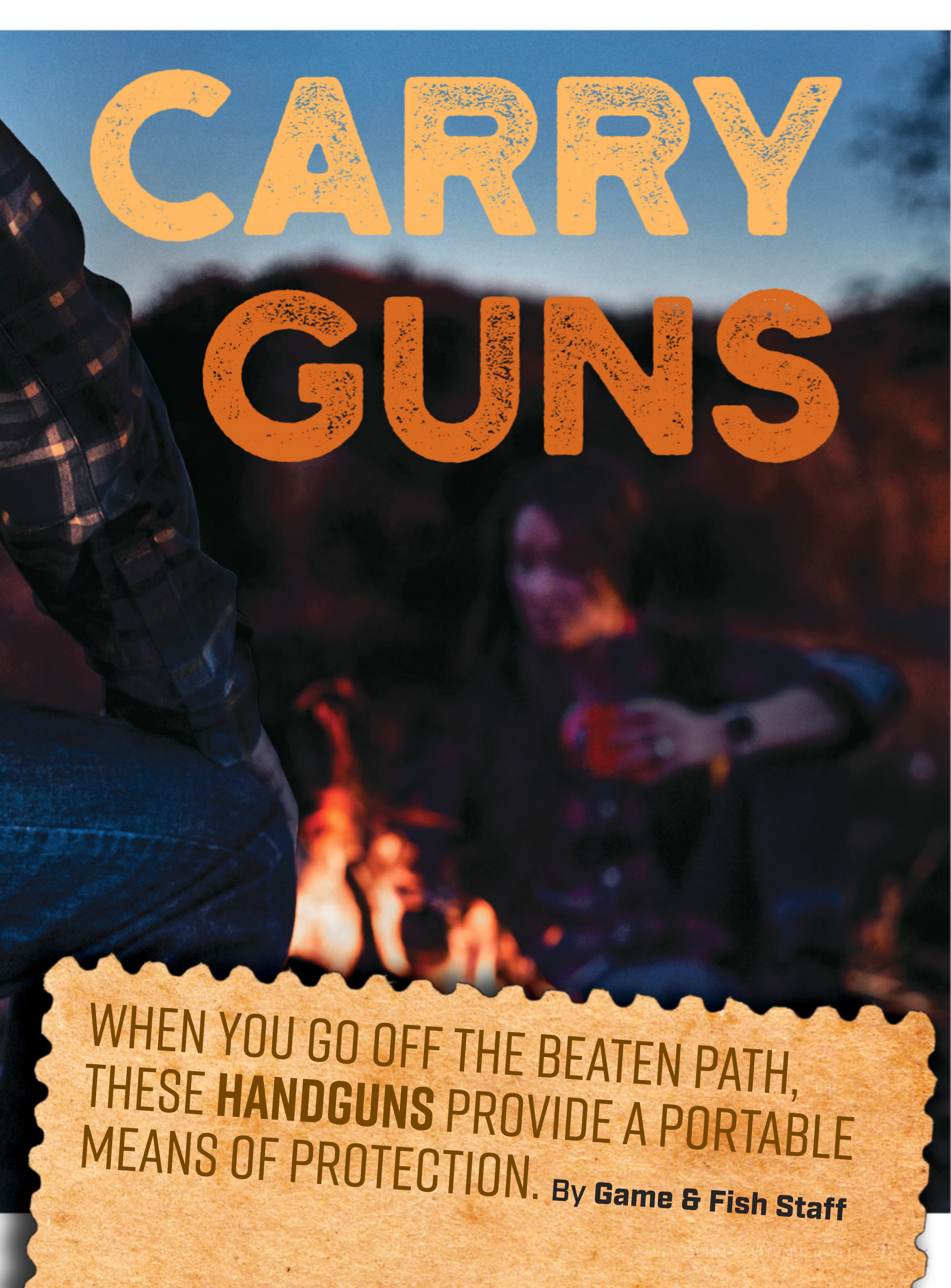


Big Roosevelt bulls are incredibly elusive, making a record-book animal like this one shot by Jody Smith a rare trophy.

BACKCOUNTRY

The Kimber KHX Custom/RL (01) is available in 10 mm and comes equipped with a Trijicon RMR Type 2 reflex sight.

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CARRY GUNS

WHEN YOU GO OFF THE BEATEN PATH,
THESE **HANDGUNS** PROVIDE A PORTABLE
MEANS OF PROTECTION. *By Game & Fish Staff*

BACKCOUNTRY CARRY GUNS

Those of us who venture into the backcountry typically recognize that we are responsible for our own safety. Having a way to protect ourselves against predators of both the four- and two-legged kind should always be part of our plan. Handguns often serve in this role for anglers, bowhunters and even rifle hunters who want a secondary means of stopping a threat. They are portable and potent, as long as we spend the amount of training

time necessary to become proficient with these tools.

We have a wide variety of options in handguns that are up for the task. From 1911-style pistols and polymer-framed models to revolvers, there is no question that today's handguns are rich in features for outdoor enthusiasts. Some, in fact, are designed with a strong nod toward keeping us safe on backcountry adventures. Following are six models that are especially well-suited for safety in the backcountry. 



Kimber KHX Custom/RL (OI)

Mini reflex sights are increasingly popular on carry guns, and that applies to handguns being carried into the backcountry. The precision and quick acquisition offered by reflex sights makes them preferable to iron sights in some cases. The KHX Custom/RL (OI) has a milled slide and comes with a Trijicon RMR Type 2 optic, with a 3.25-MOA dot, installed. The pistol also has a Picatinny accessory rail and Stiplex stippling on its frontstrap for improved grip and control.

Calibers: 9 mm, 10 mm, .45 ACP
Magazine Capacity: 8 rounds
Barrel: 5" stainless steel
Slide: stainless steel with KimPro II finish
Frame: stainless steel with KimPro II finish
Grips: Hogue Magrip G-10

Sights: Trijicon RMR Type 2 reflex sight; white-dot co-witness iron sights
Overall Length: 8.7"
Weight: 39 oz.
MSRP: \$2,230
kimberamerica.com



Springfield Armory 1911 Operator

The Operator is a no-nonsense handgun with upgrades in all the right places. For example, its Cerakote finish protects the slide and frame from corrosion and scratches. The scalloped G-10 grip panels from VZ Grips aid in purchase. And of course, the integral Picatinny rail makes it easy to add accessories like a light—never a bad idea when you're sleeping out.

Caliber: .45 ACP
Magazine Capacity: 8 rounds
Barrel: 5" stainless steel
Slide: forged carbon steel with Cerakote finish
Frame: forged carbon steel with Cerakote finish
Grips: VZ Grips G-10

Sights: Tactical Rack white-dot rear, tritium front
Overall Length: 8.6"
Weight: 42 oz.
MSRP: \$1,159
springfield-armory.com

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BACKCOUNTRY CARRY GUNS



Ruger American Pistol Duty

Thanks to its interchangeable grip modules, the American Pistol permits shooters to achieve the perfect fit for accuracy and recoil control. The firing system features a pre-tensioned striker that provides positive ignition without a heavy trigger pull. No need to be concerned about durability; the pistol has been performance-tested for sustained use with +P ammunition. Safeties include an automatic sear block, an integral trigger safety and the option of an ambidextrous manual safety.

Calibers: 9 mm, .45 ACP

Magazine Capacity: 10 rounds (.45 ACP)

Barrel: 4.5" carbon steel

Slide: stainless steel with KimPro II finish

Frame: one-piece, glass-filled nylon with stainless steel chassis

Grip: glass-filled nylon with wrap-around modules

Sights: Novak LoMount Carry 3-dot

Overall Length: 8"

Weight: : 32.5 oz.

MSRP: \$669

ruger.com

Smith & Wesson M&P M2.0

Here's an attractive combination of features: a polymer-framed, striker-fired pistol in 10 mm that is ready for optics. The M&P 2.0 slide is cut for compact reflex sights, while the pistol's magazine holds a whopping 15 rounds of 10 mm loads. An 18-degree grip angle is combined with four palmswell inserts so shooters can obtain optimal hand fit and trigger reach. Plus, a redesigned trigger with a flatter face promotes consistent finger placement for increased accuracy.



Caliber: 10 mm

Magazine Capacity: 15 rounds

Barrel: 4.6" stainless steel with Armornite finish

Slide: stainless steel with Armornite finish

Frame: polymer with stainless steel chassis

Grip: polymer with interchangeable inserts

Sights: optic-height 3-dot

Overall Length: 7.9"

Weight: 29.6 oz.

MSRP: \$665

smith-wesson.com



Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan

Those looking for the utmost in stopping power will find it in the Super Redhawk Alaskan, a beefy revolver chambered for .454 Casull and .480 Ruger. The revolver is less than 8 inches long, but its extended frame, which reinforces the topstrap, sidewalls and barrel-mounting areas, bring its weight to 44 ounces. That might not be a bad thing considering the loads it shoots; also noteworthy is the Hogue Tamer Monogrip that puts an internal recoil cushion under the web of the hand.

Calibers: .454 Casull, .480 Ruger

Cylinder Capacity: 6 rounds

Barrel: 2.5" cold-hammer-forged steel

Frame: stainless steel with satin finish

Grip: Hogue Tamer Monogrip

Sights: fully adjustable rear, ramp front with insert

Overall Length: 7.62"

Weight: 44 oz.

MSRP: \$1,459

ruger.com



Taurus Tracker 44

The medium-frame Tracker hits a sweet spot by offering the power of a .44 Mag. in a handgun that's not a burden to carry. Two features help cut felt recoil: the factory-tuned ported barrel with a gas-expansion chamber and the cushioning effect of the Ribber Grip. While the Tracker does sacrifice one round of capacity to accommodate the .44 Mag. in the medium frame, the tradeoff is worth it during long hikes.

Caliber: .44 Rem. Mag.
Cylinder Capacity: 5 rounds
Barrel: 4" stainless steel
Frame: stainless steel with matte finish
Grip: Taurus Ribber
Sights: fully adjustable rear, fixed front

Overall Length: 9"
Weight: 35 oz.
MSRP: \$654.17
taurususa.com

CALIBER CONSIDERATIONS

Whatever you choose, be sure to carry it with you.

Although we could spend pages arguing over what chambering is most effective for defensive purposes in the wilderness, that's a topic for another time. Put simply, choose the largest caliber that you can shoot controllably and accurately, in a handgun that you are sure to keep on your person. It does little good elsewhere.

And that brings up the subject of holsters. Belt holsters that position the handgun outside the waistband and behind the hip are traditional favorites, but they probably won't work when wearing a pack with a waistbelt or waders. Other carry styles, such as chest and shoulder holsters, may be more applicable. Consider your activity and what you'll be wearing before making a decision on a holster. And look over several options before deciding; an online retailer like midwayusa.com is a good place to start.

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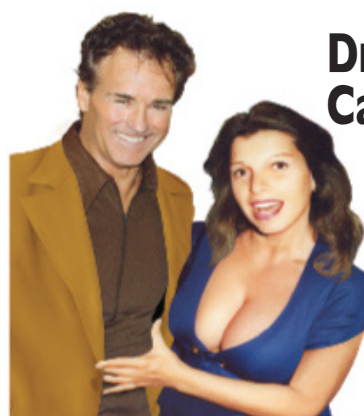
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COVERT OPTICS

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THIS WELL-BALANCED OFFERING PROVIDES
PERFORMANCE BEYOND ITS PRICE TAG.

By Drew Warden

The Covert Optics bino sports excellent glass and a durable aluminum housing covered with a rubberized exterior. In addition to the 10x42 version, an 8x42 model is also available.

I'm a skeptical guy. I don't know if it's my Show-Me State upbringing or just the experiences of my life, but usually when I hear a claim made, I find that I need to see it for myself to believe it. So, this past summer when Teri Quinn, marketing director for FeraDyne Outdoors, started talking up the new Covert Optics 10x42 binocular, I was somewhat reserved.

It was the middle of June, and we were in Texas hunting exotics—aoudad, axis deer, blackbuck and the like. We were between morning and evening sits, and the temperature was hovering right about 100 degrees. In all honesty, maybe I wasn't reserved so much as too lethargic to speak. In any case, Quinn described the bino as one of the best value-for-the-money offerings in Covert's line of new products. (You may be familiar with Covert Scouting Cameras; the Covert Optics line is an offshoot. FeraDyne is the parent company of both brands.)

As an editor for an outdoor magazine, I hear this or something similar quite often. As someone who likes having good glass, though, I was immediately

interested, even in the absurd Texas heat. I'd just need to get my hands on the binoculars myself.

Thankfully, I'd have a few more days of hunting in Texas—and ample time afterward—to do just that. And in that time, I'd come to see that Quinn was right. The new Covert Optics 10x42 bino offers quality, durable glass that any hunter can appreciate.

Featuring a closed-bridge, roof-prism design and a simple yet ergonomic rubberized exterior, the Covert Optics 10x42 seems unassuming. There's no flashy or over-the-top branding as on some binoculars, just a small brand name along the left side. The bino even comes in a nondescript gray color. But, as with most good optics, what's inside is what ultimately counts.

Internally, the bino features high-contrast BAK-4 phase-corrected, dielectric-coated roof prisms and high-quality extra-low dispersion (ED) glass, as well as Diamond Bright multicoating. All combine to create an excellent viewing experience for the user. The BAK-4



prism system limits light dispersion and minimizes diffraction, and the ED glass provides great color and clarity. This makes the bino perfect for spotting game in a variety of environments, including the mixed brush, plains and rolling hills of Texas' Hill Country. Meanwhile, the Diamond Bright multicoating helps maximize light transmission while reducing glare. This is critical for first-light and last-light scenarios when you need an optic to transmit as much light as possible for visibility, especially since game animals usually move more at these times.

Light transmission was key for our hunt in Texas. With the high temps, game was loathe to move in the brighter, hotter



portions of the day. We needed to see well in less-than-ideal light conditions as animals attempted to beat the heat by moving early and late, and the Covert Optics 10x42 bino proved up to the task. I had an easy time spotting and gauging the size and characteristics of animals with this binocular, even in low light.

Of course, the bino also worked quite well in broad daylight, too. Each morning, we'd sit in a ground blind until about 8:30 or 9. After that we'd devote the next couple hours to driving and glassing in the hopes of catching something moving in the open and putting a stalk on it. Here, the binocular did not disappoint either. The Covert Optics 10x42 offered clear, crisp viewing, which made it easy to pick out game animals in the Hill Country, and I experienced no eye strain during extended glassing sessions.

The binocular has adjustable eyecups, a straightforward but effective focus wheel, a diopter adjustment, two points for attaching a strap, a 1/4-20 threaded tripod

adapter with a cover and—naturally—covers for both ocular and objective lenses.

While the included neck strap attaches easily and works just fine, I opted to place the bino in a harness for the hunt. I also did not use the tripod adapter in Texas, or in the time since, but it is a welcome feature for hunters who spend long hours behind a bino and want a stable field of view.

I had no problem tailoring the Covert Optics bino to my eyes; the eyecups and the diopter were both simple to adjust. The focus wheel rotated easily as well—almost too easily. I was impressed with how close the bino was able to focus: down to 2 yards.

The 10x42 binocular measures 5.35 inches long, 5 inches wide and 2.2 inches tall. It weighs 24 ounces. This combination feels well balanced. The Covert Optics 10x42 seems to run a bit smaller than other 10x42 binoculars I've used,

SPECIFICATIONS

COVERT OPTICS 10X42

feradyne.com

FIELD OF VIEW @ 1,000 YDS: 330'

EYE RELIEF: 17 mm

FOCUS RANGE: 2 yds. to infinity

LENSES: fully multicoated ED glass

PRISMS: roof; phase-corrected BAK-4

LENGTH: 5.35"

WIDTH: 5"

HEIGHT: 2.2"

WEIGHT: 24 oz.

MSRP: \$499.99

which suits my hands just fine. Weight wise, it's comparable to other quality 10x42 binos; it's not the absolute lightest but it weighs quite a bit less than some options. Overall, it's a great size whether you're playing the spot-and-stalk game, or sitting in a treestand or ground blind. If you prefer a wider field of view, Covert offers an 8x42 model as well.

Durability is another key consideration for binoculars, and the Covert 10x42 seems capable here, too. Between the rugged rubberized exterior and the durable aluminum housing, the Covert Optics 10x42 should stand up to abuse. The bino withstood a couple short falls during my hunting trip and came out no worse for the wear. In addition to being shock resistant, the bino is also waterproof and fog-proof. It comes with a 3-year warranty.

With a price point around \$500, there's a lot to like about Covert Optics' 10x42 bino. The glass is very good for the money, rivaling optics costing quite a bit more, and the optical system is housed in a durable body that meets the demands of the field. The bino comes with a semi-hard case for protection, a neck strap and a lens cloth. Budget-conscious hunters looking for a workhorse binocular will find it in the Covert Optics 10x42. **G-F**



The 10x42 bino performed well in Texas, helping the author find axis deer in the shadows and during low light.

GAIN — AN — EDGE

**PICK THE
RIGHT BLADE
FOR THE JOB,
AND CUTTING
TASKS WON'T SEEM
LIKE CHORES.**

By Adam Heggenstaller

It's no fun to have just one knife, especially when there are models that handle specific duties much more efficiently than a general-purpose blade. A knife that makes short work of dressing a deer may struggle when cleaning a duck, and there isn't much sense in using a boning knife to skin a squirrel. It's always a good idea to match blade size and type to the task at hand for both safety and effectiveness. Following are three tasks all hunters must undertake at some point, along with three levels of knives that excel at these jobs. **G&F**



Task: DEBONING A CARCASS

Knife: BENCHMADE MEATCRAFTER

MSRP: \$300 (base model)

The Meatcrafter has Benchmade's proprietary 14-degree edge and just the right amount of blade flex for deboning, trimming and slicing. Every component of the knife can be customized from blade steel and polish to handle material and pivot ring, and each Meatcrafter is built to order at Benchmade's factory in Oregon City, Ore.

BLADE LENGTH: 6.08"
BLADE STEEL: CPM-154 or 440C
HANDLE: G10, Richlite or carbon fiber
OVERALL LENGTH: 11.06"
WEIGHT: 3.24 oz.
benchmade.com



Task: FIELD-DRESSING A DEER

KNIFE: BUCK 110 SLIM PRO TRX

MSRP: \$114.99

An updated version of the iconic 110 Folding Hunter, the Slim Pro TRX has a Cerakote-treated pocket clip and thinner handle scales, and uses Torx screws in its construction rather than rivets. It also features dual thumbstuds for one-hand, ambidextrous opening.

BLADE LENGTH: 3.75"
BLADE STEEL: S30V
HANDLE: G10
LOCKING MECHANISM: lockback
OVERALL LENGTH: 8.63"
WEIGHT: 3.3 oz.
buckknives.com



Task: CLEANING BIRDS AND SMALL GAME

Knife: BEAR & SON SMALL HUNTER

MSRP: \$65.99

Made in America, the Small Hunter is the ideal size for preparing rabbits and squirrels for the table. The clip-point blade allows for precise cutting, and its 440 steel holds a fine edge while being easy to sharpen. The nickel-silver finger guard lends additional control for tough cutting tasks.

BLADE LENGTH: 2.38"
BLADE STEEL: 440
HANDLE: rosewood
OVERALL LENGTH: 6.5"
WEIGHT: 1.9 oz.
bearandsoncutlery.com



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NO KNIVES

ALL CAMPOUTS ARE NOT THE SAME.

When Shane was in third grade, a representative from Boy Scouts of America gave a presentation during lunch, and Shane immediately signed up. The following Wednesday evening he attended his first Cub Scout meeting, held at the house of a classmate whose mom was the den mother.

After orientation and roll call, the boys began making bird feeders. Later the den mother mentioned a campout that would take place in the fall, where the boys would put to use all the skills they'd learned until then. Shane couldn't wait.

At the next meeting, however, Shane was somewhat disappointed when, rather than learning how to make a fire or build a lean-to, the Scouts resumed work on their bird feeders. The weather was gorgeous, and Shane dearly wanted to be outside rather than packed into a garage with 11 other boys messing around with glue and popsicle sticks. At the end of the meeting, there was more planning for the campout. The den mother asked for a show of hands to see who would be attending, and Shane eagerly waved his hand.

Another Wednesday rolled around, and again the meeting was conducted in the garage. This week the Scouts learned skits that they would perform at the campout. Eventually one of the boys' fathers joined the meeting and taught the group about knot tying, which Shane thought was very interesting while it lasted.

At the end of the meeting, the den mother asked for everyone's attention as she gave information about the upcoming campout. It was to be held at the Blue River Wildlife Management Area, and parents were encouraged to chaperone.

"All Scouts attending the campout are required to register at least two weeks in advance and pay a \$10 camping fee," she said. "All Scouts must bring the following items: sleeping bag or bed roll, two pairs of socks, one pair of long pants and one pair of shorts, Scout uniform,



insect repellent, canteen, towel, backpack, flashlight and hiking boots.

"And listen up, guys," she continued. "No knives or guns shall be allowed in camp, no exceptions, and that includes BB guns."

"No knives?" bemoaned one of the boys. "That's why I joined the Scouts—to get to use knives!"

"That's right," said the den mother. "We will learn about knives one day, and when the time is right you will earn your Totin' Chip that permits you to carry one. But for this campout, I think that everyone carrying a knife will pose too many unnecessary dangers."

"What if we need to slice potatoes for dinner? Maybe cut some rope for a tent? Or clean a fish?" asked another boy.

"The chaperones will have access to camp knives for those purposes," she explained.

The words felt like a blow to Shane's gut. He'd received a new Swiss Army knife for his birthday and was dying to

use it on a campout. Later that night, Shane reported the info to his father.

"I was an Eagle Scout, son, and I loved it," he replied. "Scouting taught me so many things about the woods, but more importantly, it taught me about responsibility. It sounds like your pack does things a little differently, but your leaders have to make sure all the boys are responsible enough to have knives on them. Some of them may not know how to use a knife safely like you."

"I know, Dad, but do I have to go to the campout?"

"Did you already sign up?"

"Yeah, but that was before I knew no knives were allowed," Shane said, dreading what his father was about to say next.

"Son, I have a strange feeling you're going to be sick that day. And I know just what will cure you."

"What?" asked Shane, perking up.

"A real camping trip with this old Eagle Scout and as many knives as we can pack!" **G+**

Shhhhh. No wake zone.



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