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DEMANDING MORE

Heading into spring, the biggest question among hunters and shooters isn't about turkeys, or whether next month's match will be held, or even the year's new guns. It's "Where's the ammo?" I've heard it dozens of times at my local range, at the gun shops I frequent, via text messages, and over social media and email.

We're finding bare, or nearly bare, shelves where boxes of cartridges and shells used to be stacked, and we're concerned. Some of us are scared. Others are angry. But just like when dealing with any other issue, we should not let emotion override facts. Conspiracy theories only make things worse by distorting reality and driving panic.

Here's what is not happening. Ammunition manufacturers are not sitting on stockpiles of inventory to control supply and prices, or because the government is subsidizing a lack of supply to consumers. Companies are making and shipping ammo at their fullest capacity.

"We promise we are shipping everything we can," said Jason Hornady, vice president of Hornady Manufacturing. "The stuff that goes out today was literally put in a box yesterday. There is no government conspiracy; no one is paying us not to ship."

Further, said Hornady, the company is making ammunition at record levels. Increasing capacity to meet demand is not as simple as just adding employees, but Hornady noted the manufacturer is dedicated to producing as much ammunition as possible.

"We've made one-third more [ammunition] than we did last year," said Hornady. "Unfortunately we don't have an extra factory laying around or anything else. We've got X number of people. We're certainly trying to add as much capacity as we can. Everybody here is working as hard as they can to make sure we ship as much as we can."

Jason Vanderbrink, president of Federal, CCI, Speer and Remington Ammunition, said those brands have recently hired hundreds of employees to try to meet demand. That fact, however, has become lost in misinformation and rumors.

"Every day I hear something new, and it's simply not true," he stressed. "We are indeed making ammunition, we indeed are shipping ammunition, we're not storing it in secret warehouses. … We are doing everything we can to meet this demand."

If ammunition manufacturers are doing their jobs, why can't consumers find ammo? Just like we saw with toilet paper and hand sanitizer at the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, there is unprecedented and immediate demand for a highly desired product. Consumers are buying ammunition as fast as it appears on shelves, and they're buying more of it.

Social unrest, the pandemic, the results of the presidential election—all have contributed to increased demand, and it started more than a year ago. The mentality of many hunters and shooters I've talked to has been, *better buy all I can get when I can get it*. Folks who would normally purchase two boxes of ammo have been buying 10 or more. As supplies of common cartridges and loads began to dwindle, consumers turned to anything they could get their hands on. One guy at my local gun shop told me he had bought a .300 WSM just because he found 27 boxes of ammo for the rifle.

On top of that, there has been a huge number of new shooters joining our ranks. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates 8.4 million people bought a firearm for the first time in 2020. Plus, last year saw a record number of background checks by the National Instant Criminal Background Check System for the sale of a firearm—a total of 21 million. An increase in gun sales drives an increase in ammo sales, particularly in the case of new shooters who are also buying ammunition for the first time.

Ammo manufacturers are scrambling to catch up. They cannot meet prolonged, extraordinary demand overnight or over a few months or perhaps even over a year. But they will keep trying, and that's a fact.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

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GAME&FISH
The Regional Outdoor Guide

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DREW WARDEN (MAIN); SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP LEFT)

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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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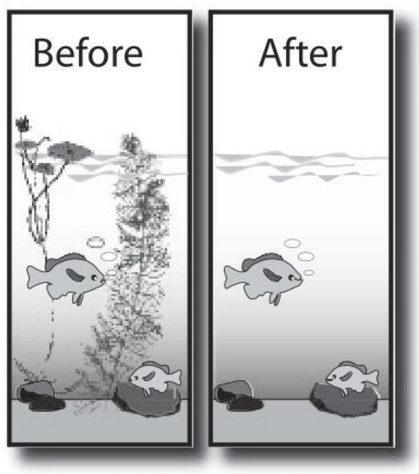
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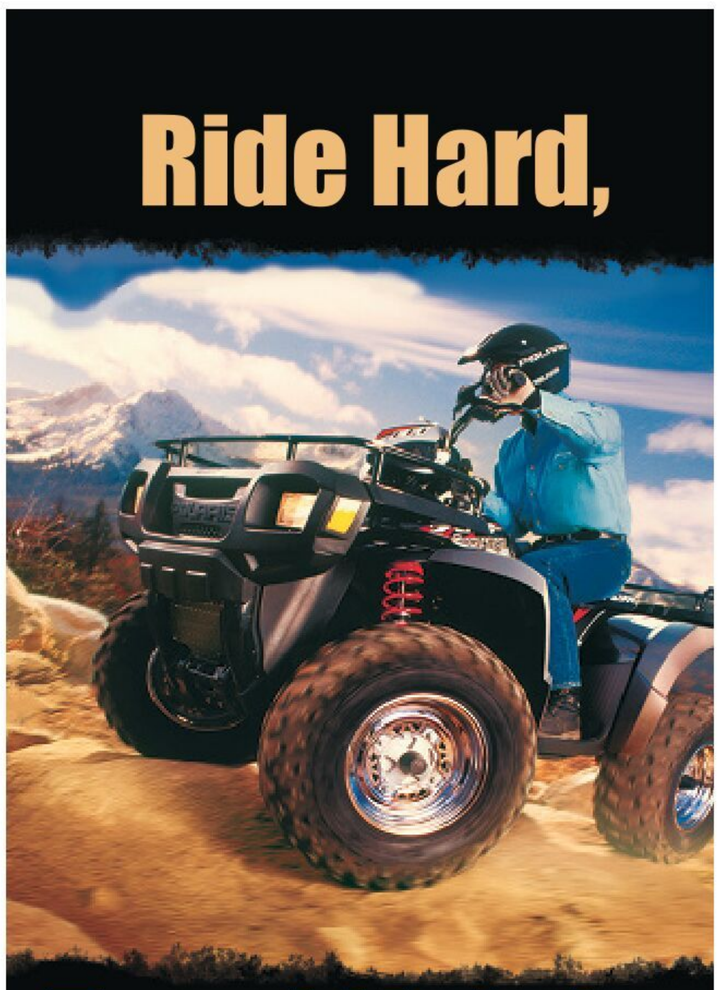
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21 am 6:42 to 8:42 / pm 7:06 to 9:06	22 am 7:30 to 9:30 / pm 7:54 to 9:54	23 am 8:18 to 10:18 / pm 8:42 to 10:42	24 am 9:06 to 11:06 / pm 9:30 to 11:30	25 am 9:54 to 11:54 / pm 10:18 to 12:18	26 am 10:08 to 12:08 / pm 10:30 to 12:30	27 FULL am 10:42 to 12:42 / pm 11:06 to 1:06
28 am 11:30 to 1:30 / pm 11:54 to 1:54						

MARCH 2021

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

APRIL 2021

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

RED-DOT OPTICS CAN EXCEL FOR FAST SHOOTING AT SHORT DISTANCES, BUT HUNTERS SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THEIR LIMITATIONS.

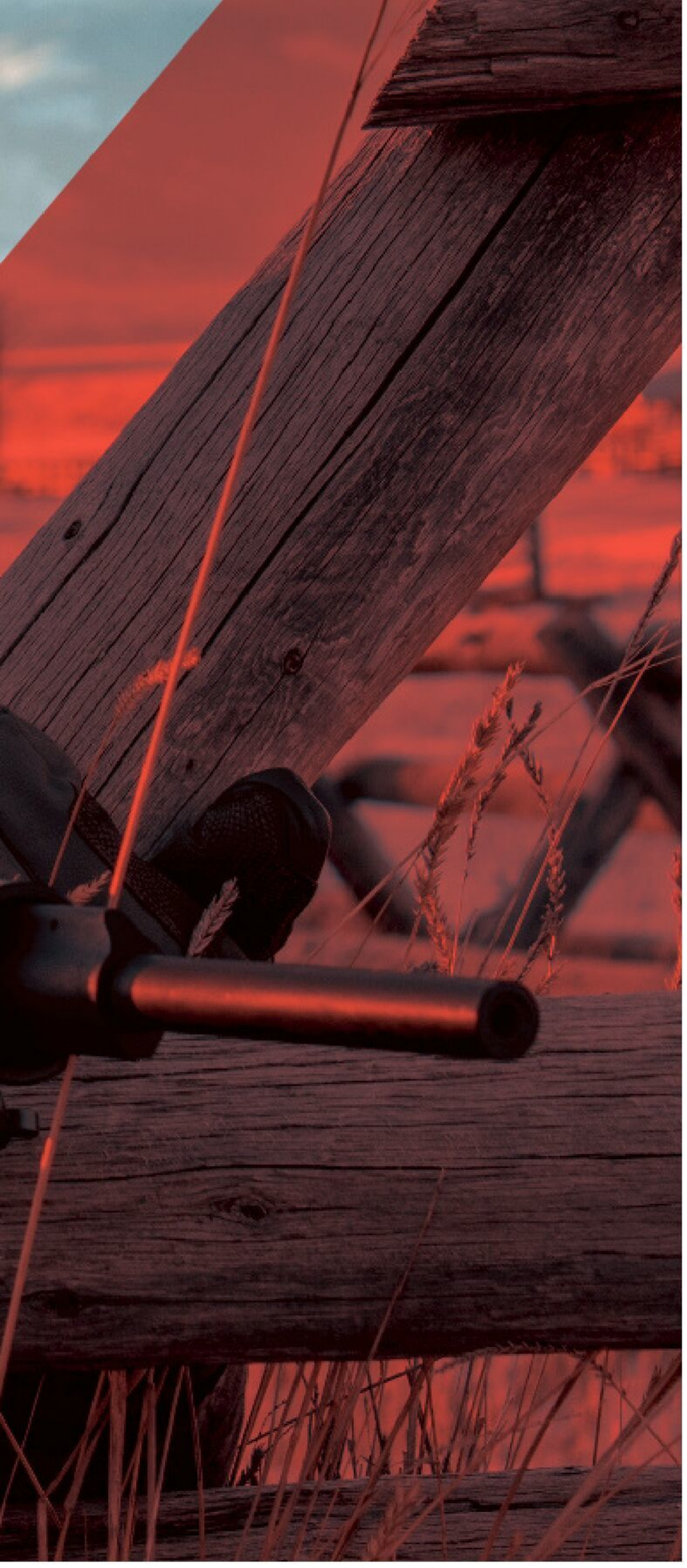
By Richard Mann

Although their popularity has increased considerably, the electronic sights that collectively have become known as red-dots are not new. Zero-magnification sights that present an illuminated red dot as an aiming point have been around for almost 50 years. However, they did not become common on hunting rifles until the turn of the 21st century. As more hunters started using AR-style rifles, particularly for feral hogs, the red-dot sight became an attractive option. About the same time, high-quality red-dots became reliable and affordable enough for that purpose.

What many hunters do not understand is that there are several kinds of sights generally called red-dots. There are prismatic sights, reflex sights and holographic sights. All provide an illuminated red (or other color) dot for the shooter to use as an aiming point; they just do it in different ways. Most do not magnify the target, and most permit comfortable, both-eyes-open shooting. This is the primary advantage of these sights and one of the reasons they're popular with the military and law enforcement. Likewise, those who enjoy feral hog hunting have found red-dots well suited to that application.

The ability to swiftly place the aiming point on the target has lots of appeal in certain hunting situations. A red-dot sight might make it easier to shoot feral hogs from a helicopter or to shoot several at a nearby feeder, when the position and angle of the targets are constantly changing. However, the nature of the red-dot sight can become a hindrance in others. When distances get much beyond 75 yards, particularly in cover or timber, red-dot sights are not the best option. Hunters using red-dots may gain a false sense of their capabilities on a range where targets are in the open, well lit and easy to see.

RICHARD MANN



If your hunting typically involves only close-range shots, especially in open areas where an optic with magnification is not needed to resolve intervening brush or to enhance low-light resolution, a red-dot sight can be ideal. Besides feral hog hunting, dangerous-game hunting for buffalo, hippo and elephant qualifies. Other species and situations may also warrant a red-dot, but in each case the animal being hunted, distance of the shot and topography will come into play. For those who hunt with a handgun, where the shots are generally at close range, the smallest red-dot sights—reflex sights—are well suited to the task.

I recently outfitted a Marlin 1894 CSBL chambered for .357 Mag. with a Leupold DeltaPoint Pro, which is a fantastic reflex sight. My purpose was to set up the little carbine as a home-defense gun that I could also use for hunting. Along with installing the reflex sight, which was simple because Leupold

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POWER UP

Magnifiers make red-dots more versatile.

For general hunting applications, the primary weakness of red-dot sights is their lack of magnification. A solution to this issue is the magnifier, an optical device that mounts behind the red-dot sight. It magnifies the image you see through the sight. Depending on the model, a typical magnifier may offer anywhere from 3X to 6X magnification.

You might be thinking, *If I'm going to get a magnifier for my red-dot sight, why don't I just get a variable-power riflescope?* That's a good question. The Aimpoint 6XMag-1 magnifier weighs about 8 ounces and costs about $1,200. Add that to a $900 Aimpoint Micro H-2 red-dot sight that weighs 3 ounces, and the setup is heavier than a Leupold VX-3i 1.5-5x20mm riflescope that costs about $1,500 less.

Of course, there are less expensive options. The EOTech HHS III package combines the company's 518-2 holographic sight with its 3X G33 magnifier. The combo retails for about a grand and weighs about 25 ounces.

Vortex offers the 3X VMX-3T magnifier, and it can be paired with the company's SPARC AR red-dot sight. Together they weigh about 19 ounces and retail for around $500. All these systems work perfectly with AR-style rifles, and in some cases you can mix and match magnifiers and red-dots.

The advantage most magnifiers like the 6XMag-1 offer is a mount that lets you flip them to the side and use only the red-dot sight, with no magnification, for aiming. This is a popular setup in military and law enforcement circles where engagement distances can change rapidly. In some hunting applications the same situation exists.

Combining a magnifier with a red-dot works well on AR-style rifles, but not so much on conventional bolt-action rifles that don't offer as much mounting space. For those who like to hunt with ARs, the combination of a red-dot sight and a magnifier is a versatile option.

offers a base plate that attaches to the rifle, I added the companion rear sight accessory. It attaches to the rear of the DeltaPoint Pro and provides a bladed sight that can be co-witnessed with the red-dot aiming point. This means if the battery in the reflex sight dies, I still have a useable sight.

On the range I found that I could deliver kill-zone shots out to about 150 yards with relative ease. That is, as long as the targets were very visible. When I placed brown cardboard targets in the woods, seeing them with enough clarity to shoot with precision much past 50 yards became impossible. I've had the same experience with virtually every non-magnifying red-dot sight I've used. Additionally, low-light performance was poor when compared to a conventional riflescope with magnification. These drawbacks are why magnified optics tend to be the best option for hunters, particularly variable-power scopes with 1X to 3X minimum magnification. By presenting a clear, magnified image, they allow you to better see what you intend to shoot.

Given my intentions for the Marlin, however, I did not want a traditional optic. I wanted a sight that allowed for lightning-fast acquisition and the ease of both-eyes-open shooting—a sight that would perform exceptionally well at short engagement distances. I ended up taking the rifle on a hog hunt to put some pork in my freezer. While I was watching a field, a big boar came out at around 60 yards. With both eyes open I tracked him as he sauntered across the open ground. When the red dot found the right spot, the hammer dropped and so did he. G&F



RICHARD MANN



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TODAY'S FLUOROCARBON LINES ARE BETTER THAN EVER,
BUT WHAT MAKES THEM SO SPECIAL?

By Dr. Jason Halfen

Contemporary anglers have three distinct options when spooling line onto reels: monofilaments, braids and fluorocarbons. Each is fundamentally different from the others and possesses its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Many of these differences are rooted in the unique chemistry and manufacturing processes used to prepare the three line varieties, making each particularly well suited for specific presentations.

In recent years, advances in fluorocarbon line design and engineering have dramatically enhanced the scope of its applications in both fresh- and saltwater angling. Let's explore the factors that make fluorocarbon a must-use line option whenever you hit the water.

Fluorocarbon line traces its origins to 1971, when chemists and engineers at Kureha—a Japanese specialty chemicals firm—first extruded fluorocarbon fishing lines from raw polyvinylidene fluoride resins and launched the company we now recognize as Seaguar. Early users of fluorocarbon quickly recognized many of its unique properties—attributes that helped them hook and land more fish—and these advantages have continued to build over the past 50 years.

One of the first things you'll appreciate when using fluorocarbon is that it's nearly invisible underwater to anglers and, more importantly, fish. This is not hype and hyperbole, but science and fact. The extremely low subsurface visibility of fluorocarbon is rooted in the optical property of refraction, which describes the speed of light as it travels through a particular medium. Because the refractive index of fluorocarbon (1.42) very closely matches that of water (1.33), fluorocarbon is quite difficult to see beneath the waves. By comparison, traditional nylon monofilament line has a much higher refractive index (1.58), rendering even clear monofilaments much easier to visualize, by both anglers and fish, in the water.

"One of the reasons that fluorocarbon use has grown explosively during the past decade is that anglers have recognized the advantages of an extremely low visibility line," says Seaguar General Manager Gerry Benedicto. "Many lakes and rivers across the country have gin-clear water that allows fish to see basically everything, so when you have a line that is virtually invisible underwater, it's game on!"

The polymers used to prepare fluorocarbon lines impart other unique physical and chemical properties to these fishy filaments. Specifically, the fluorine-rich nature of their synthetic starting materials

DR. JASON HALFEN (TOP, OPPOSITE)

render fluorocarbon lines uniquely water-repellent and resistant to the damaging effect of exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun. These properties stand in stark contrast to those of nylon monofilaments, which can absorb as much as 10 percent of their weight in water, and lose up to 20 percent of their original strength after 100 hours of exposure to ultraviolet light. If you want to fish with a line that's designed to stand the test of time, fluorocarbon is the obvious choice.

What else will you notice when you start fishing with fluorocarbon? First, unlike mono and braid, fluorocarbon lines sink in water, a result of their density (nearly 1.8 g/ml) being substantially higher than that of the water (1.0 g/ml) we cast them into. This means your baits, especially lightweight finesse presentations like the Ned rig, will fall into the strike zone faster and stay there longer.

In addition, fluorocarbon lines offer just the right amount of stretch, positioned between nylon mono, which can stretch up to 25 percent of its original



Fluorocarbon line isn't only for finesse presentations; its abrasion resistance also makes it suitable for toothy fish like pike.





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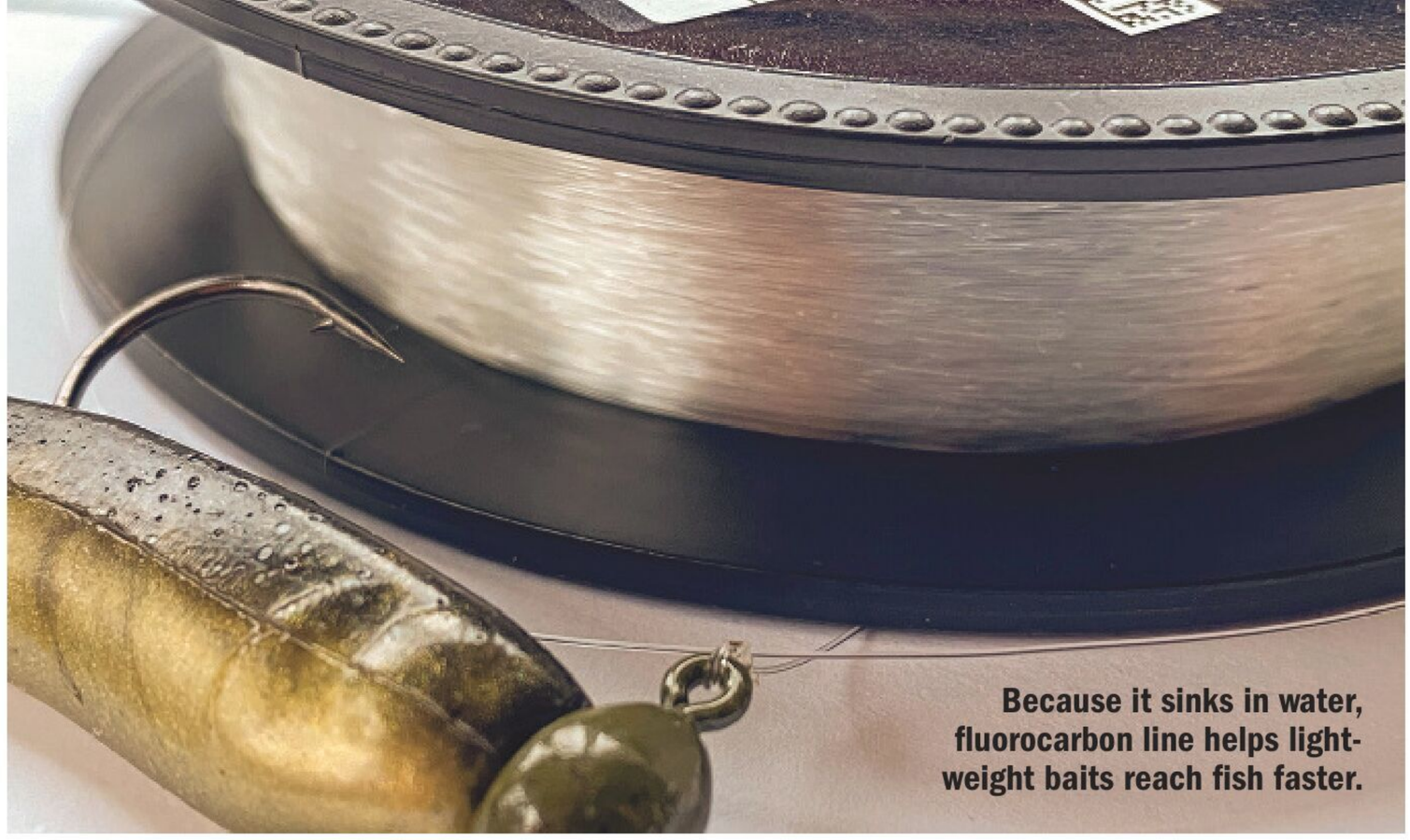
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Because it sinks in water, fluorocarbon line helps lightweight baits reach fish faster.

length, and completely no-stretch braided lines. As a result, fluorocarbon will yield positive hooksets at long distances, while still providing a measure of trophy-saving shock absorption when a big fish makes a powerful run at boat side.

Anglers fishing with fluorocarbon have two options when spooling up: running straight fluoro or using a braided main line linked to a fluorocarbon leader. If you plan to use a fluorocarbon leader in this way, learn to tie a quality braid-to-fluoro knot so you can quickly add a fresh leader should yours become damaged during the heat of battle. The FG, double-uni and Crazy Alberto knots are all good ones.

Many bass anglers will fill a baitcasting reel with 12- or 15-pound-test fluorocarbon when presenting crankbaits, taking advantage of fluoro's significant abrasion resistance (another beneficial consequence of all of those fluorine atoms) to protect their line's integrity as the bait deflects erratically off rocks and wood. At other times, spooling up with a silky-smooth, eight-strand braided line in 20-pound test and finishing with a 4-foot leader of 8-pound-test fluorocarbon can launch lightweight presentations into the stratosphere and reach hungry fish that other anglers cannot tempt.

One of the unique attributes of fluorocarbon lines is that their properties are completely dictated by the specialty resins used in their manufacture. "The quality of fluorocarbon has evolved so much over the last 10 to 15 years," notes Benedicto. "Older formulations of the line were stiffer, making line management challenging and knot tying less forgiving. But now, fluoro is much softer allowing for better castability and sensitivity. At Seaguar, we even have custom resins that can be formulated to create fluorocarbon lines that cater to different fishing applications and techniques. With fluorocarbon, the sky truly is the limit."

ADAM HEGGENSTALLER



GET UNSTUCK

THE UNOFFICIAL FIFTH SEASON KICKS OFF THIS MONTH: MUD SEASON. USE THESE TIPS TO KEEP YOUR VEHICLE'S WHEELS MOVING FORWARD.

By Joseph Albanese

I attended college in one of New York's more rural counties. Just off campus was a vast network of seasonal and fire roads that allowed me to easily log 100 miles without touching pavement. Scouting turkeys one April morning, I was crawling up a steep, ice-covered hill when the frozen crust gave way and my old Jeep was instantly buried to the frame in mud. It took every trick I knew to extricate the vehicle from the hole that swallowed it.

Hunters and anglers spend a lot of time past the bounds of blacktop, chasing blue lines or pushing deep onto public land in search of their next trophy. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to avoid getting stuck or damaging your vehicle on these adventures.

TRAIL TIPS

For starters, shift into four-wheel drive before you encounter an obstacle, not after you become stuck. Deflate your tires slightly by letting out 10 to 15 psi, which will help you "float" over soft surfaces such as mud or sand and will increase traction on slick surfaces.

Drive with your windows open and listen to your tires. If you hear them suddenly start to spin faster, immediately back off the throttle. Drop down to a lower gear or put the transfer case into low range if possible. If the RPMs start getting up there, your tires will bury you. Travel slowly but maintain momentum. Avoid obstacles such as rocks and deep ruts whenever possible.

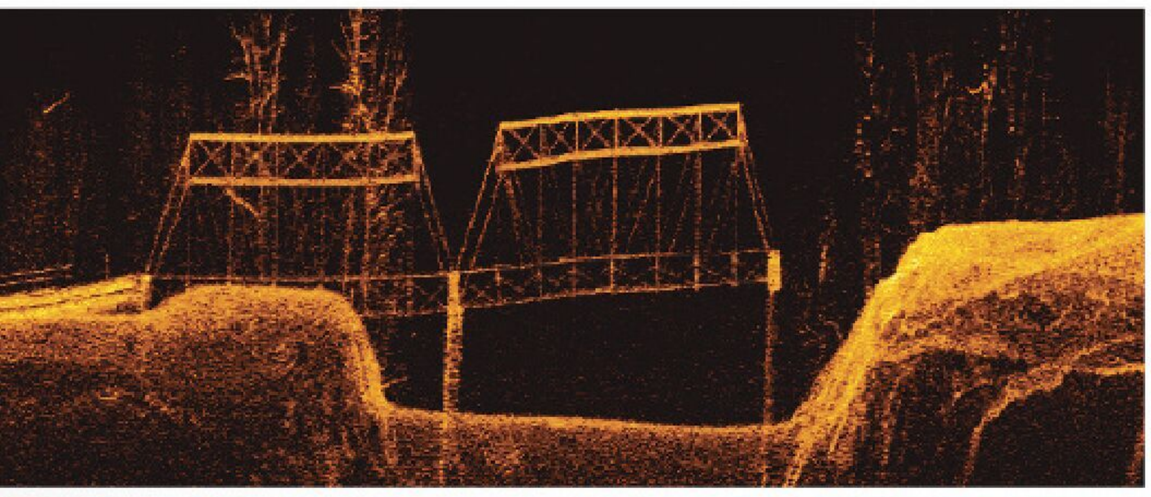
Travel backroads long enough and you'll eventually find yourself buried in the mud—usually outside of cell service. If you sense that your vehicle is starting to get stuck, immediately take your foot off the gas. Exit the vehicle and perform a walk-around to assess the situation, looking for objects that would impede progress, then map the most likely way out.

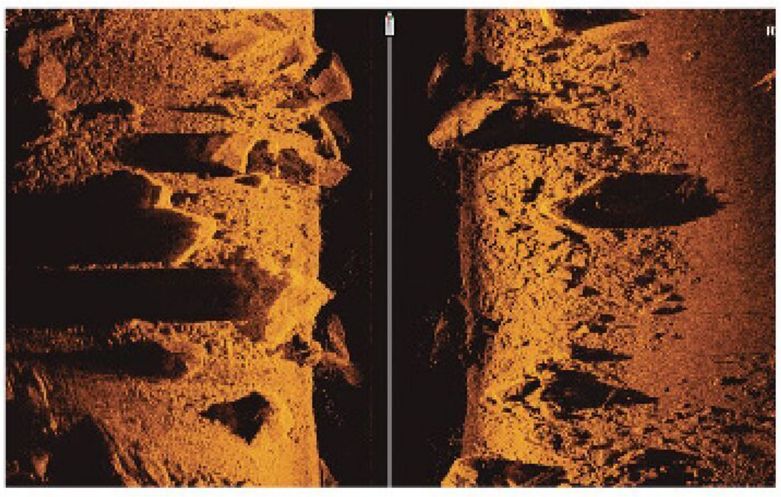
You may be able to rock your way out by shifting from forward to reverse in an effort to regain momentum. If this doesn't get you out quickly, give the vehicle a minute or two to cool down. The rocking action, coupled with the lack of cooling airflow, is enough to cause transmissions to overheat. The transmission fluid could eventually boil

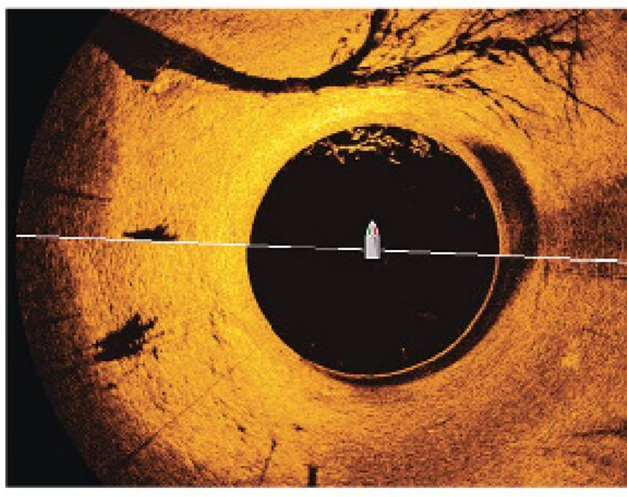
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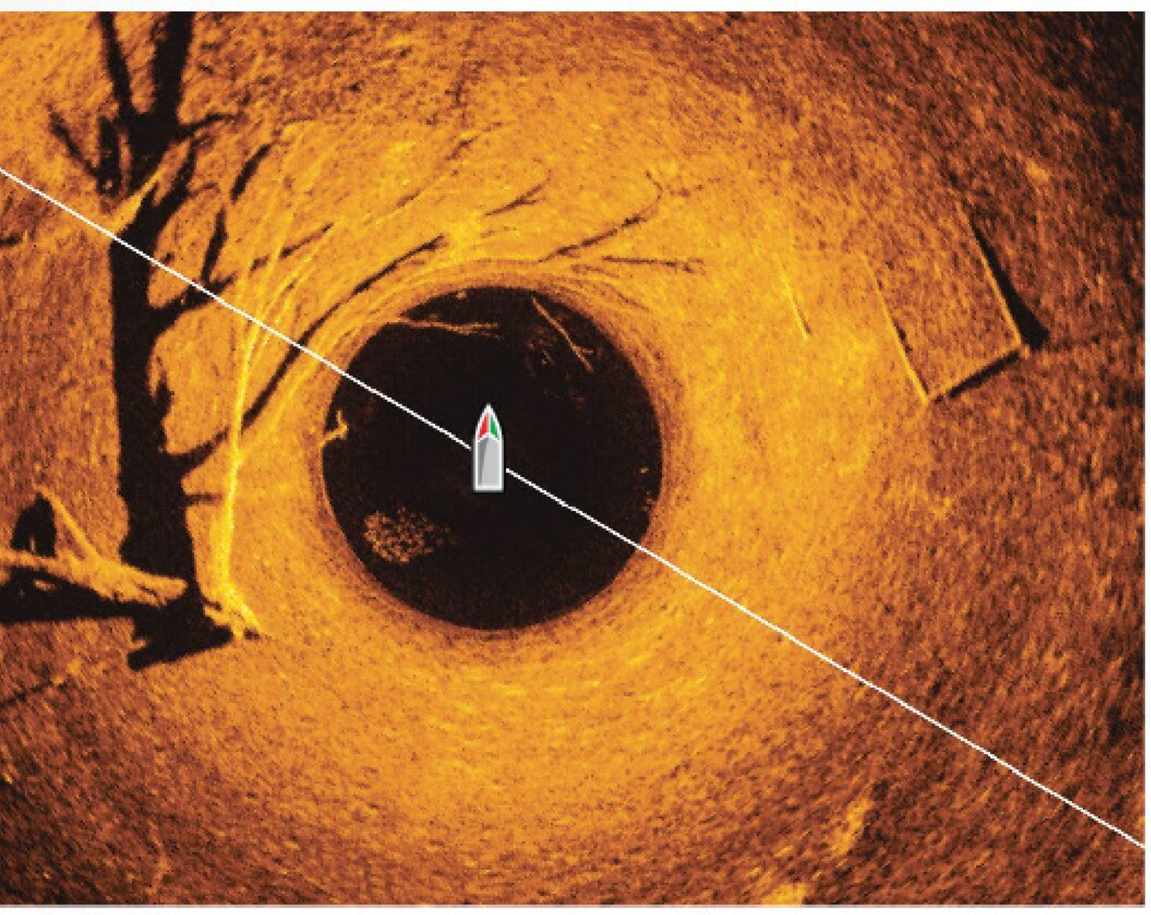
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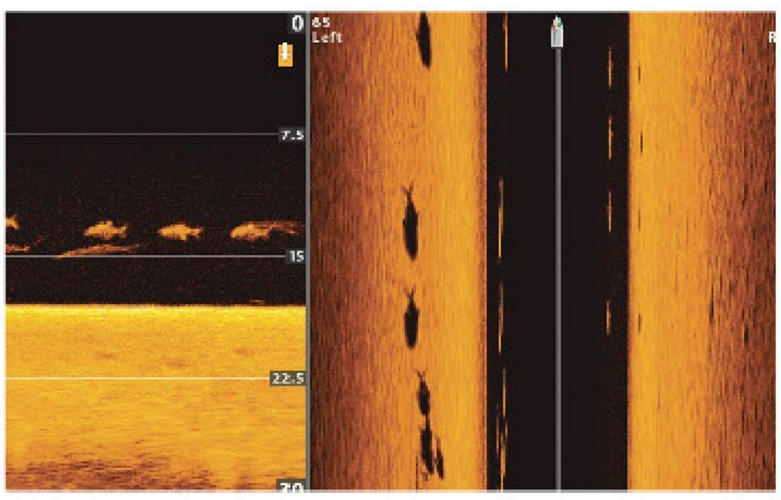


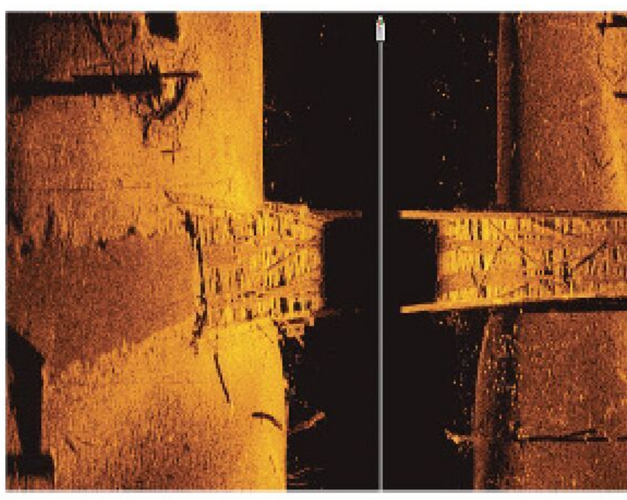




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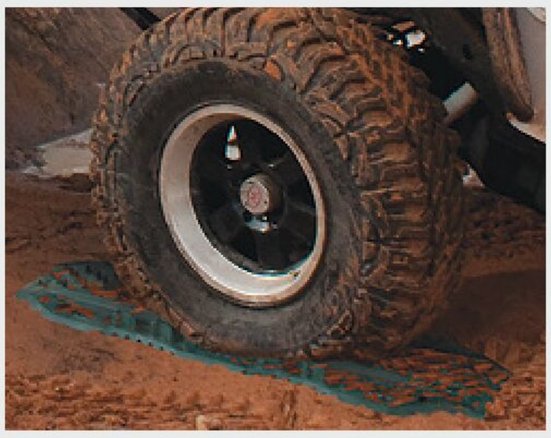
BACK ON TRACK

Three recovery aids that will have you on the road again in no time

If you've ever watched a desert truck race, you've probably seen a set of recovery tracks strapped to the side of a well-equipped Land Rover. These innovative tools get vehicles moving again quickly by spreading the vehicle's weight over a larger area and giving tires something to bite. While you could use a pair of two-by-six boards to help get you out of the mud, there are a number of higher-performing aids on the market that are durable and lightweight.



MAXTRAX (from $199; maxtraxus.com) were among the first molded plastic recovery boards available on the market, and many off-roaders believe they're still the best. The large, aggressive cleats sink into both the tire and the terrain to get you unstuck fast.



SMITTYBILT ELEMENT RAMPS ($150; smittybilt.com) can support up to 7,700 pounds, despite being made of lightweight nylon-reinforced plastic. They come with a heavy-duty nylon carry bag to keep muddy ramps from mucking up your interior.



OKOFFROAD EXPEDITIONS SAND LADDERS (from $229.95; okoffroad.com) are made from aluminum plate and dimpled for strength and weight reduction. Their solid material allows the boards to be used for bridging gaps or as ramps.



Recovery tracks are effective on all kinds of surfaces, including sand.

and spill out of the vent, and could ignite if it comes in contact with the vehicle's exhaust.

GET A GRIP

If you have some sort of traction aid in your vehicle, now is the time to retrieve it. The simplest of aids are the floormats right under your feet. Sometimes, placing them on the soft ground in front of or behind your tires can provide enough flotation to get you out of the hole you've dug.

Floormats are less than ideal, though, so you should carry another solution. Recovery tracks help by distributing your vehicle's weight over a wider footprint and giving your tires something more substantial to grip (see sidebar). Place these in front of or behind your tires, and slowly drive out.

Devices that strap over your tires can also help you regain momentum, acting like a paddle to propel you forward. If you're not totally buried, these will usually have you back on your way in no time. One word of caution: They can dig you in as quickly as they can dig you out. Use the lowest gear possible and go easy on the throttle. If you don't get moving again quickly, shut it down and think about another approach.

Jacking up the vehicle and filling in the holes created by the tires is an excellent way to get yourself out of a bind. This is often easier said than done, however, as you'll need to clear away the mud by your vehicle's jack points. You'll also need some sort of hard surface such as a 2-foot square of 3/4-inch plywood to prevent the jack from becoming buried under the weight of the vehicle. Once you have the space needed, jack the vehicle up until the tires are above the surface and fill in the ruts, compacting the loose material with the back of the spade as you fill.

Sometimes, nothing but elbow grease will get you out. Carrying a full-size shovel makes digging out easier, though it's never a pleasant task. If you find yourself mired to the frame, use the shovel to create gradually sloping paths back from your tires. You'll need to create clearance underneath the vehicle as well, making sure that nothing will get hung up when you apply the throttle again.

JOSEPH ALBANESE (MAIN)



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CAN WE UNITE FOR DEER?

THE NEW NATIONAL DEER ASSOCIATION AIMS TO BRING ALL DEER HUNTERS TOGETHER AND GIVE THEM THE ADVOCACY THEY DESERVE.

By Andrew McKean

America's deer hunters are a notoriously cantankerous lot. We find a way to squabble over methods and management, our expectations of what makes a good hunting season, and even what qualifies as a worthy buck. Our fractious nature is one reason deer hunters have been unable to get behind a common approach to deer conservation, even as species-specific efforts have successfully advocated on behalf of other critters from wild turkeys and ducks to ring-necked pheasants and elk.

The Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) changed some of that by coalescing whitetail hunters around the idea that if we carefully manage herds, we can help Mother Nature produce older and larger bucks. But the QDMA was mainly limited to the South and never escaped the perception that it was a club for large landowners, who had adequate acreage with controlled hunting pressure to enact management strategies.

Whitetails Unlimited has its roots in the Midwest and claims more than 114,000 members nationwide, but it functions mainly on the local level. The group hosts fundraising events and awards grants that support county and state conservation projects and educational programs rather than advocating for national deer policy.

Then there was the National Deer Alliance, which was born in 2015 out of a recognition that individual deer-advocacy groups don't have the national clout that America's 11 million deer hunters should wield. The Alliance was created to be the voice on policy issues of the QDMA, Whitetails Unlimited and the Mule Deer Foundation.

That's all a backdrop for the biggest news in whitetail country since Jim Crumley introduced his Trebark Camo in 1980: the establishment last fall of the National Deer Association (NDA), created out of parts and pieces from the QDMA and National Deer Alliance. It's noteworthy because the new NDA knows what it wants to be—a membership-based deer-advocacy organization that remains lean and focused on threats to deer hunting, deer health and deer habitat.

We sat down with Pennsylvania deer hunter Nick Pinizzotto, the president and CEO of the NDA, to learn what the organization is, what it is not, and how it intends to give America's deer hunters the voice they deserve.

Game & Fish: How is the new National Deer Association different from the National Deer Alliance? They have pretty similar names.

Nick Pinizzotto: Their names are similar, but their missions are different. The Association was formed from QDMA and the parts of the National Deer Alliance that realized America's whitetail hunters need a voice. While there's no doubt the QDMA was 100 percent focused on whitetails, the National Deer Alliance was always concerned with all North American deer species on a policy level.

The National Deer Alliance was 100 percent policy-focused whereas QDMA focused more on education, boots-on-the-ground conservation and hunter recruitment through the Field to Fork program. The other difference was the National Deer Alliance did not have a paid membership and instead considered anyone who signed up for its e-newsletter to be a member. The new organization brings the best of both groups together.

The merger makes the new NDA an organization for all deer, but we retain a lot of the boots-on-the-ground work from the QDMA, including Deer Steward certification, the Field to Fork hunter recruitment efforts, a focus on healthy habitat, etc. We think that's right, because we have the Mule Deer Foundation working on deer issues and habitats in the West.

G&F: Why do we need a National Deer Association in the first place?

NP: Seven out of every 10 hunting-license buyers in America pursues deer. No other species is close. The money generated by deer hunters when it comes to license sales alone is impressive, and when you consider how much deer hunters spend on items that support the Pittman-Robertson Act, which benefits all wildlife, then it becomes clear that

SHUTTERSTOCK

deer hunters are funding most wildlife conservation in America. And that's just in terms of dollars.

Now think about what an increasingly educated deer hunter is doing on the ground. We're doing conservation on private lands at a scale that's unprecedented, and I'm not talking about putting in a food plot here and there. Hunters are improving the landscape for all wildlife, even if their motivation is deer and killing big bucks.

G&F: That's great, but you still haven't convinced me that deer hunters need a National Deer Association in order to continue our work.

NP: Good point. Deer hunting is more than grip-and-grin photos over cranker bucks. When you are hunting, you might not appreciate all the work that put that deer in front of you. It's decades of work by people to establish seasons and educate non-hunters to support the system that allows hunters to fund our own passions, through hunting licenses and federal excise taxes on sporting goods. We can't take that for granted.

We need a National Deer Association to continue to lead education efforts so we have more of the above, not less. Equal to our impact on education is our impact on policy that affects deer and deer hunters. Diseases like chronic wasting disease, habitat impairment and anti-hunting sentiments are all issues that affect our ability to hunt deer, and all are topics that we're actively fighting every week.

G&F: Don't state agencies advocate for deer hunters?

NP: State wildlife agencies do a great job, but we know through research and reality that groups like ours are more trusted by sportsmen and -women than state or federal agencies. These agencies are less effective at reaching sportsmen or policy makers than we are, and going forward I see us doing more of their work, simply because we are trusted more than they are.

G&F: Why does the policy level matter to an ordinary deer hunter?

NP: I'm not asking all deer hunters to become experts on policy matters, but they should at least be aware and be willing to make a phone call or send a letter on things important to them. They need to learn about chronic wasting disease in particular and understand what they can do to help slow its spread, while also listening to the guidance of their state wildlife agency. They should also know that there is an increasing problem with deer hunters being elbowed out where they can be helpful, particularly on the edges of cities and in the suburbs where local officials are turning to things like vasectomies and contraceptives instead of hunting. It's not just happening in the big urban areas like most would suspect. I see unwillingness to manage overpopulated herds through hunting in my own community, and I live in a rural western Pennsylvania county where you'd least expect it.

G&F: How can a deer hunter make a difference in these issues?

NP: We want to make it as easy as possible for them to act. We use a grassroots advocacy program that allows people to send letters to their elected officials with just a few clicks of a mouse, or even their phones. We also provide weekly policy updates and other important information in our free weekly newsletter, which you don't have to be a member to get.

Our long-term goal is to create a movement for deer to raise awareness of their importance to all wildlife conservation, and also to educate people about how hunting is an important element. I said early on during our merger process that we are a conservation organization and we should endeavor to have people join us who may have no intention to kill a deer themselves. The caveat is they have to support hunting and understand why it's important. When people think about deer, we want them to think about us.

G&F: How will you know you are successful?

NP: In terms of big-picture success, we want policy wins annually and we want to have more educated elected officials. We're already making progress there. Five years ago I doubt you could find five congressmen that knew what CWD was and probably half of them couldn't pick a whitetail out of a lineup. But I don't ever want our success to be measured by how many paying members we have. Our mission is to ensure the future of wild deer, wildlife habitat and hunting, and our progress toward that is what's most important.

G&F: We started talking about all the things that deer hunters disagree about. What do we agree about?

NP: A love for deer. It's our most iconic game animal. Hunters lead the way in that regard and I'll always argue that nobody cares more about deer than hunters do. But we're a passionate group. We can become easily divided when it comes to hunting methods, population goals, antler-point restrictions and what camo pattern is the best. We stay out of those arguments and stay focused on the biological and political science so we can educate as many hunters who are willing to listen. When someone decides to become a member I want them to consider that they've just made a decision to be more informed about the issues that impact deer and hunting, and I hope they plan to take it even further by participating in our mission.

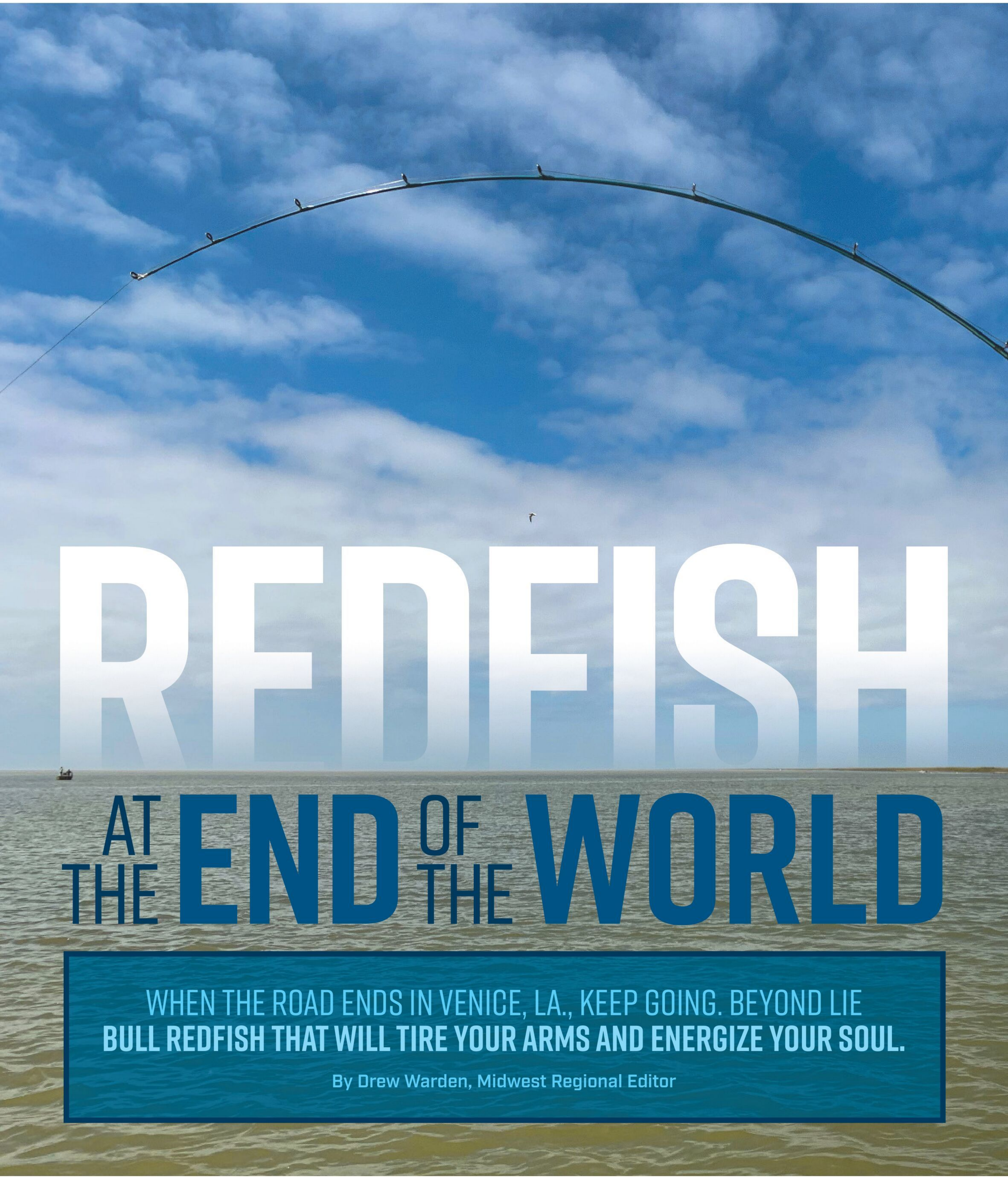
Editor's Note: *For information on joining the National Deer Association, visit nationaldeerassociation.com. Annual membership dues are $35.*



"Deer hunters are funding most wildlife conservation in America."

—Nick Pinizzotto, *National Deer Association president and CEO*

WINDIGO IMAGES



WHEN THE ROAD ENDS IN VENICE, LA., KEEP GOING. BEYOND LIE
BULL REDFISH THAT WILL TIRE YOUR ARMS AND ENERGIZE YOUR SOUL.

By Drew Warden, Midwest Regional Editor



CAPT. MIKE FRENETTE

"YOU THINK IT'S THE COLOR I HAVE ON HERE?"

I posed this question to Capt. Mike Frenette as he leaned over the side of his boat to rinse fish slime off his hands in the warm, turbid Gulf waters southwest of Venice, La. It was our second day of fishing—my first with Frenette—and in the short time we'd been on the water, he'd already brought three big bull redfish to the boat. Meanwhile, I had yet to hook one, and I simply wanted to know if the fish gods were displeased with my offering.

We were both throwing a 3/4-ounce Strike King Red Eyed Shad. Mine had a little bit of color, while Frenette's was mostly silver. He said that the slight difference shouldn't matter, but he offered to swap lures anyway, and I went ahead and took him up on it. Naturally, a few casts later, another bull pummeled the bait I'd just traded him and started peeling line off his reel.

"Guess it wasn't the color," I laughed to the sound of his drag screaming.

He just smiled and shook his head. Sometimes in fishing that's how things go.

Thankfully, about 10 minutes after he landed his third fish, I ended my schneid. I bombed a cast off the starboard side of the boat toward the distant shore, slowly turned the reel handle five or six times and felt something hammer my bait, nearly wrenching the rod from my hands. I was finally tied into my first big redfish of the trip. It would not be the last.

GATEWAY TO GIANTS

Situated on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the small community of Venice represents a terminus of sorts. It's the last town accessible by vehicle along the Mississippi. The Great River Road—a collection of state highways and local roads tracking the course of the Mississippi through 10 states—concludes here. It dead-ends unceremoniously at a loading dock on the edge of a canal, and a humble sign announces the spot as the "southernmost point in Louisiana." About 20 miles southeast of there, however, is the real last stop of note: the mouth of the great Mississippi River emptying into the vast Gulf of Mexico.

These attributes have led many to refer to Venice, perhaps unflatteringly, as "the end of the world." While it might offend residents, it's not a totally unjustified moniker.

Driving toward Venice on Louisiana Highway 23, you can't help but feel a certain liminal quality about the area, a vague sensation of passing through the remnants of one world and teetering precariously on the edge of another, wilder one. The Mississippi River delta's flat greenery extends mystically into the horizon to the west, while the river itself runs parallel to the road on the eastern side, often obscured by a levee. It seems the farther you put New Orleans in the rearview on 23, the closer you feel to leaving.

Of course, Venice goes by several other epithets, and the one that probably draws most anglers to town each year is the much more exciting "Redfish Capital of the World." If there's any correlation between the amount of love people have for something and the number of nicknames they give it, Sciaenops ocellatus, or the redfish, has a devoted following. Alternatively called red drum, channel bass, puppy drum, spottail bass, pumpkins, swamp donkeys or simply reds, redfish are popular inshore targets from the coast of Virginia to south Texas. However, they are especially cherished and elevated to legendary status among the southern reaches of Louisiana.

While locales in other states also claim "Redfish Capital" standing, Venice represents one of the most highly regarded destinations to pursue big bulls, usually describing fish more than 27 inches or 10 pounds. What makes this fishery particularly special, however, is that giant reds can be consistently caught here year-round.



Capt. Frenette's Redfish Lodge has been a fixture at the Venice Marina for many years, and it serves as a great base camp.

AROUND THE WHEEL

A trip to Venice for redfish had been on my list for a while, and last March—just before the COVID-19 pandemic began unfolding in the U.S.—I had an opportunity to make it happen and fish with a great group of fellow anglers. After a flight to New Orleans and an hour-and-a-half drive through the lowlands, I came upon the entrance of the Redfish Lodge of Louisiana. Owned and operated by Capt. Mike Frenette and his family, the lodge has been a part of Venice lore in some capacity since the late 1980s. The most recent iteration, a neat little double-decker home connected to the Venice Marina dock system, has been around since 2005, after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the previous lodge.

Frenette has guided here since the early '80s, but he started fishing Venice about a decade before that. His extensive experience and knowledge have led him to quite a few professional redfish, and offshore, tournament successes. During that time, he's also guided clients to four world-record fish and to 28 others that have claimed top 10 spots in the Louisiana state records. Frenette has worked hard at his passion, becoming a highly respected guide, and something of a Venice legend, in the process.

While the Redfish Lodge would be home for the next three nights for some of our group, another couple houses on stilts in the marina would serve as auxiliary sleeping accommodations for others, including me. I unpacked and quickly ventured back to the main house where we all chatted and started getting gear ready for tomorrow's fishing. In the meantime, Frenette and his wife, Lori, were busy readying a crawfish boil, a perfect Cajun welcome to kick off two days of redfishing.

DREW WARDEN (2)

Early the next morning, I stepped onto the balcony of the house I was occupying and into the crisp March air. Bad news greeted me. Overnight, a dense fog had rolled in and settled over the delta. The hazy mist cloaked everything in obscurity, and from my elevated position, I could barely make out boats docked in the marina about 50 yards away. This was less than ideal.

At the main lodge, Frenette and the rest of our group were sitting comfortably in easy chairs or kicking back on couches while chatting and drinking coffee. Their relaxed demeanor confirmed what I already suspected: We weren't going anywhere anytime soon. In fact, as it turned out, we'd be waiting two more hours for the fog to lift so we could safely depart.

I'd spend the day fishing with Blair Wiggins, a former Florida fishing guide and current television-show host. While the others would check out the action downriver, our plan was to fish Venice's famed "Wagon Wheel" west of the marina.



Fog delayed fishing, but anglers still managed to catch quite a few big reds once it evaporated around midmorning.

Clearly distinguished on a map by its visual similarities to—you guessed it—a wagon wheel, this area takes its strange appearance from a circular network of canals dredged back in the '50s and '60s. Drilling operators at that time were exploring around the edges of a circular salt formation called the Venice Salt Dome. They were searching, naturally, for oil. Today, this area is a maze of dredged canals and roseau cane where anglers can easily get turned around, or run aground, if they aren't careful.

After Wiggins and I made our way along the main canal, we tucked into some shallower water and started exploring. We remained at idle speed in most places to ensure we didn't go too shallow or run into one of the many oil company pipes tracing across the marsh like veins. Often, we'd reach a shallow impasse, requiring us to back out and search for a new route to our destination. Fishing proved difficult as a result, but even just experiencing this unique area was incredible. The mental image of fishing vessels navigating an expansive marsh alongside pipes and other oil infrastructure almost perfectly captures the two industries at the heart of Venice.

In all our exploring, we did manage to catch one fish. As we drifted through water a few feet deep and came upon a pinch-point opening into a larger pool, Wiggins said he saw a fish tailing. He called out the direction, and I dropped a popping cork with an artificial shrimp along the edge of a swath of cane. After waiting a moment, I gave the cork a single pop. Moments later, it plunged below the surface, and I was hooked into my first redfish of the trip. Wiggins pegged it at about 26 inches, meaning it fell within Louisiana's 16- to 27-inch slot limit—a nice fish, but not exactly what we were looking for in Venice.

Unfortunately, some unexpected boat trouble that day sent us hustling back to the docks, so we didn't get a chance to investigate the Wagon Wheel much further. But I was still satisfied in experiencing a beautiful place full of remarkable plant and animal life. It was interesting to hear Wiggins, who hadn't fished the Wheel for several years, talk about just how much the area had changed since he'd been away from it.



Capt. Mike Frenette caught this bull redfish on a Strike King Red Eyed Shad (inset). The author discovered that the bait's color didn't seem to matter to the fish.

RUNNING OF THE BULLS

While day two brought with it the same fog as the previous morning, it also contained more promise. As Wiggins and I were struggling around the Wagon Wheel, the others had been catching big bull reds farther south near the mouth of the Mississippi. And that's exactly where we'd all be fishing on this day. Each angler swapped boats, and I climbed aboard with Frenette.

As the fog began dissipating, we idled out of the marina and through a canal, and started buzzing down the churning waters of the Mississippi River. I was grateful I had a comfortable jacket, as the ride downriver proved a little cold. That is, until suddenly it wasn't. Almost out of nowhere it seemed, we hit a palpable wave of warmer air that overtook the chill.

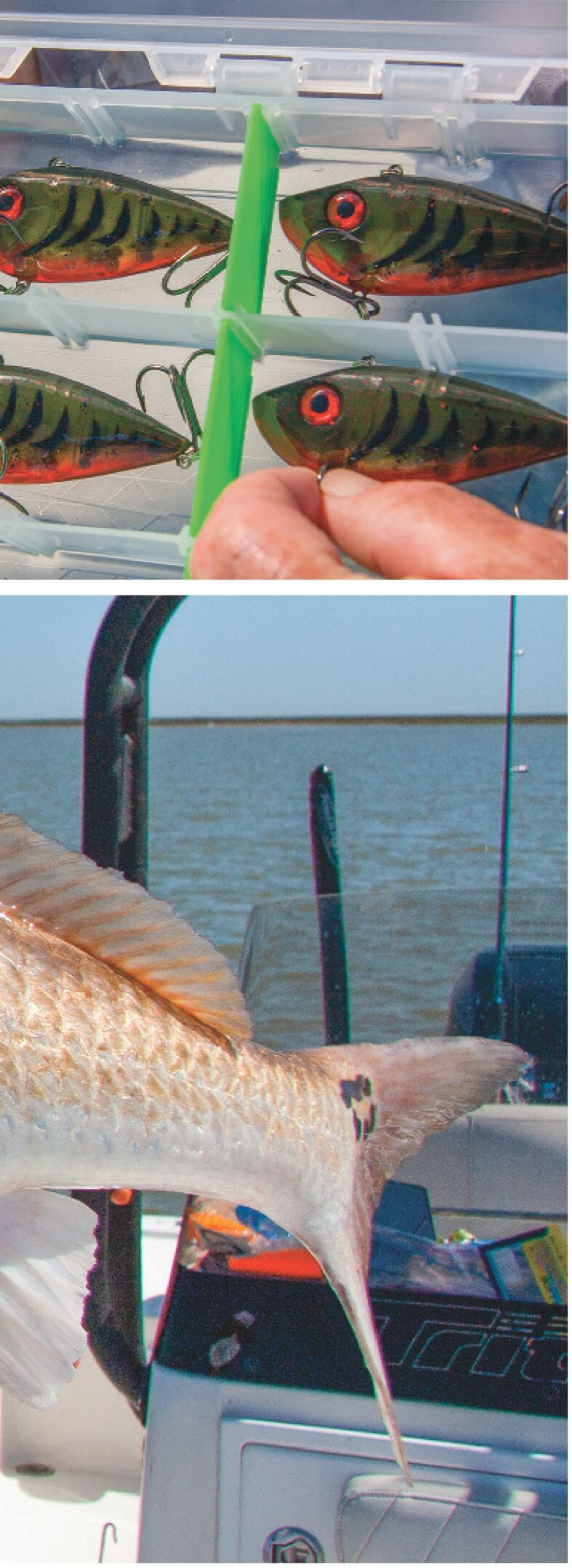
"What is that?" I asked Frenette. "Is that the Gulf?"

He nodded in reply. He said that at this time of year in particular, the Mississippi runs cold due to melting snow and runoff in the northern states upstream. This explained the sharp temperature increase we felt upon hitting Gulf waters, which must've been at least 10 degrees warmer. We would, of course, experience the opposite—a burst of frigid air—coming back at the end of the day.

After following the river to its conclusion, we pulled off and motored a quarter mile or so to our immediate left and started a drift several hundred yards from shore. We had apparently arrived at our destination.

Over roughly an hour, I proceeded to watch Frenette catch three big bull reds, each one seemingly more impressive than the last, before I'd get on the board myself. When I finally hooked up, it was spectacular. Although reds are not, generally speaking, fast-moving fish, when they decide to grab a bait, they

DREW WARDEN (2)



seem to do it while summoning every ounce of aggression and energy they possess. I didn't even get the chance to set the hook into my first bull red. It handled that for me, striking with authority and making the first and longest of several runs.

As I brought the fish to the boat and we were able to get a grip on him, the slight disappointment of the previous day melted away in an instant. The fish was around 36 inches long and hefty. We took some quick photos, and then I held him beside the boat until his powerful tail thrashed in my hands and sent him back down into the stained waters.

Sacred Stone of the Southwest is on the Brink of Extinction

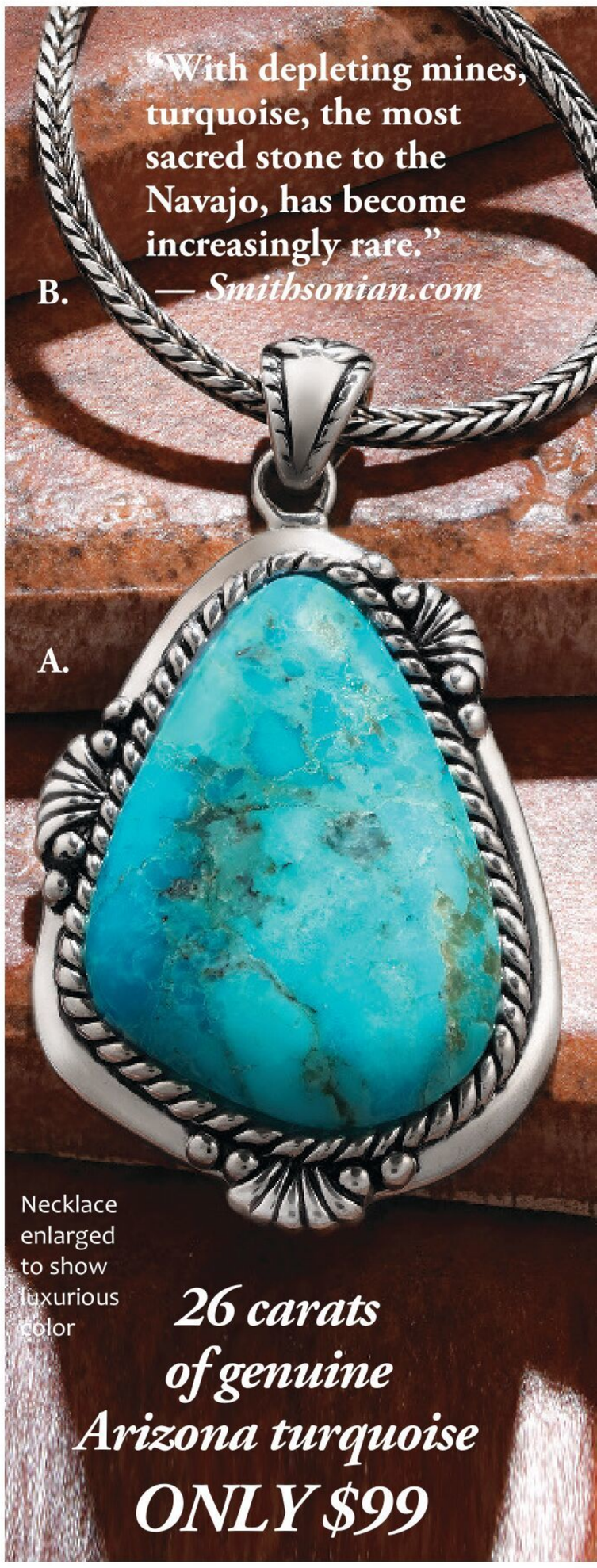


Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest–– but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

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The author was awed by the mammoth proportions of Venice's reds. Fishing may be best in the spring and fall, but big bulls can be caught year-round.

TOOLS FOR BULLS

Take tough gear to Venice.

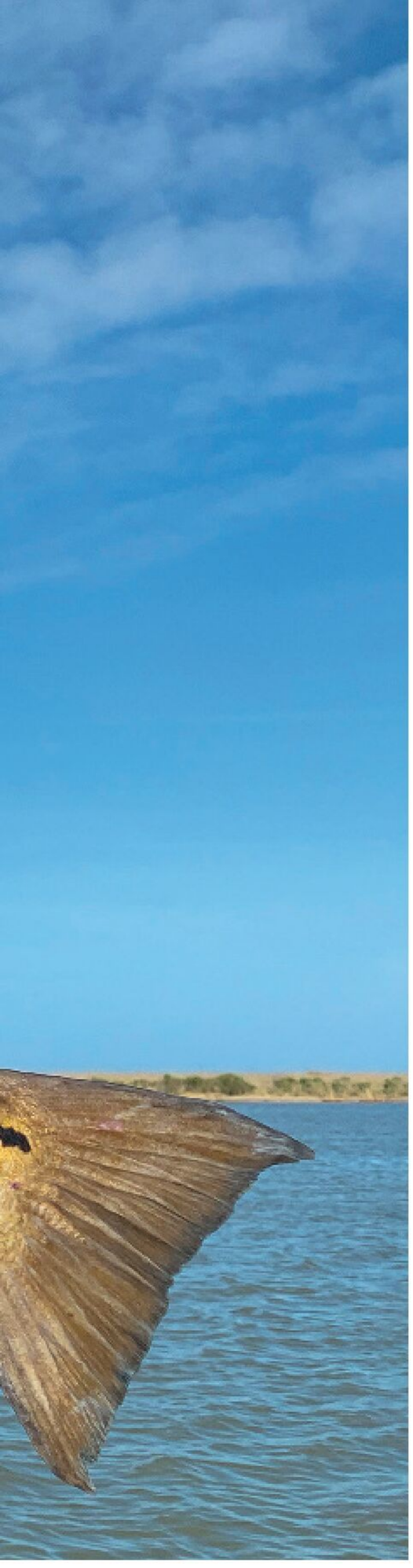
Big bull reds in the salt are tough customers. Because of this, anglers need similarly tough gear to get—and stay—in the game. While fishing around Venice, I used both baitcasting and spinning rods from Lew's Inshore Series Speed Stick line ($139.99; lews.com). You need a solid backbone in your rod to turn big, stubborn redfish, and the premium HM40 graphite blanks these rods utilize proved up to the task. The rods' durable stainless steel guides with aluminum-oxide inserts also stand up to corrosive saltwater.

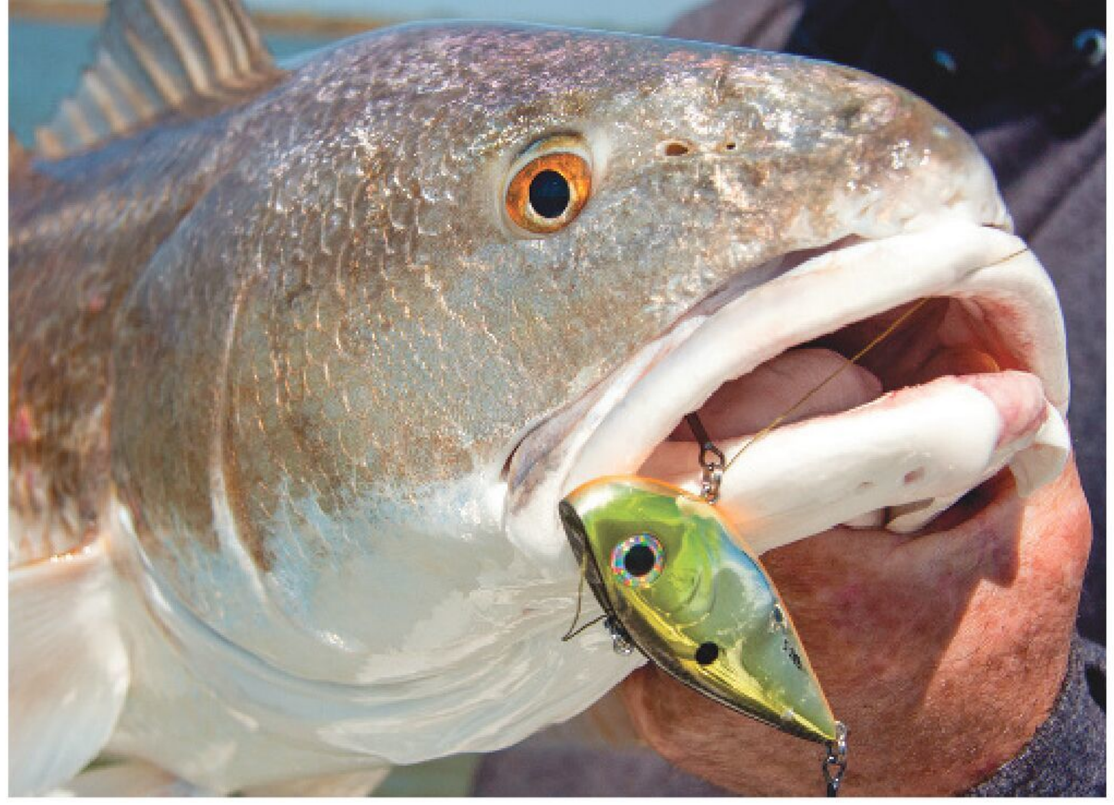
Baitcasting and spinning models both incorporate Winn Dri-Tac material to ensure comfort and, perhaps most importantly, a solid grip for fighting strong saltwater fish. Spinning rods use Lew's patent-pending CT-1 ComfortTouch grip with an extended foregrip for added leverage over fish, which I benefitted from several times on the water. Meanwhile, baitcasting rods utilize the patent-pending G-Clutch handle system with Midas Touch, which offers direct contact with the blank for improved sensitivity, balance and a more compact profile.

With spinning rods, we used Lew's Custom Inshore Speed Spin Series spinning reel ($129.99). We paired baitcasting rods with the Custom Inshore Speed Spool SLP Series baitcasting reel ($199.99).

The Speed Spin performed admirably in Venice, courtesy of its saltwater-ready attributes—premium stainless steel bearings, a flush-and-drain port, a sealed carbon-fiber drag system and precision-cut Speed Gears with a passivation treatment for corrosion resistance. The drag system, capable of generating up to 24 pounds of drag, worked perfectly on the big reds we encountered. The Speed Spool SLP, likewise, has a sealed corrosion-resistant stainless steel ball-bearing system (with 10 bearings), and it features a Zero Reverse one-way clutch bearing. Casting is smooth and controlled due to a Multi-Setting Brake dual cast-control system with both an external adjustment for the magnetic brake and an internal centrifugal brake with four individually disengaging brake shoes. Both reels use Winn Dri-Tac material on handle knobs for added grip.

CAPT. MIKE FRENETTE (TOP LEFT, MIDDLE RIGHT); DREW WARDEN (TOP RIGHT)







Reds home in on noisy baits in Venice's stained waters. Hefty bulls are dogged fighters that require sturdy tackle.

We would spend the next few hours catching several more, each of which seemed just as big, if not bigger, than the first. All provided a dogged fight that had me eager to toss out the next cast.

While we caught most of the fish by blind casting off either side of the boat—the water was too deep and too murky for sight-fishing—there was one instance in which I cast toward a specific spot. I had seen something break the water quartering off the right side of the boat about 60 or 70 yards away. By the time I was ready to throw out, the disturbed water had calmed, and I had to guess a bit on placement. Somewhat desperately, I fired off a cast close to where I thought I had seen it. I must've guessed well, though, as I had barely turned the reel handle twice before I was tied into another big redfish.

In roughly four hours of fishing, I caught a number of bulls, all more than 35 inches, as well as one smaller speckled trout. Frenette bested that effort by a fair margin. Even with a shortened fishing day due to the morning's fog, it was a striking display of the exceptional action possible in Venice. After returning home, it would be several weeks before the excitement of the trip would dissipate. However, the desire to tangle with Venice's big bull reds … I'm not sure that will ever go away.

We spooled up with Strike King's Tour Grade Braid and Fluorocarbon ($29.99 to $79.99; strikeking.com). We ran 30-pound braid as the main line with a 3-foot leader of 17- or 20-pound fluorocarbon. In terms of baits, Frenette and I almost exclusively used the 3/4-ounce Strike King Red Eyed Shad ($8.49 to $10.49)—either the standard version or the Tungsten 2-Tap. It proved enticing to the many big bull reds we found and durable against repeated abuse. Other anglers on the trip caught fish on Strike King's new Thunder Cricket ($13.99) and the company's time-tested Redfish Magic Spinnerbait ($4.99). If you're planning a trip to Venice, consider bringing along these baits or something like them, and make sure you pair them with a quality rod and reel and appropriate line.



Lew's Inshore Series Speed Stick Casting Rod



Strike King Tour Grade Braid



Lew's Custom Inshore Speed Spool SLP Series



Strike King Red Eyed Shad



Strike King Redfish Magic Spinner Bait

18+

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SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); WINDIGO IMAGES (BOTTOM LEFT); SCOTT HAUGEN (BOTTOM RIGHT)

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GAME & FISH WEST
The Regional Outdoor Guide

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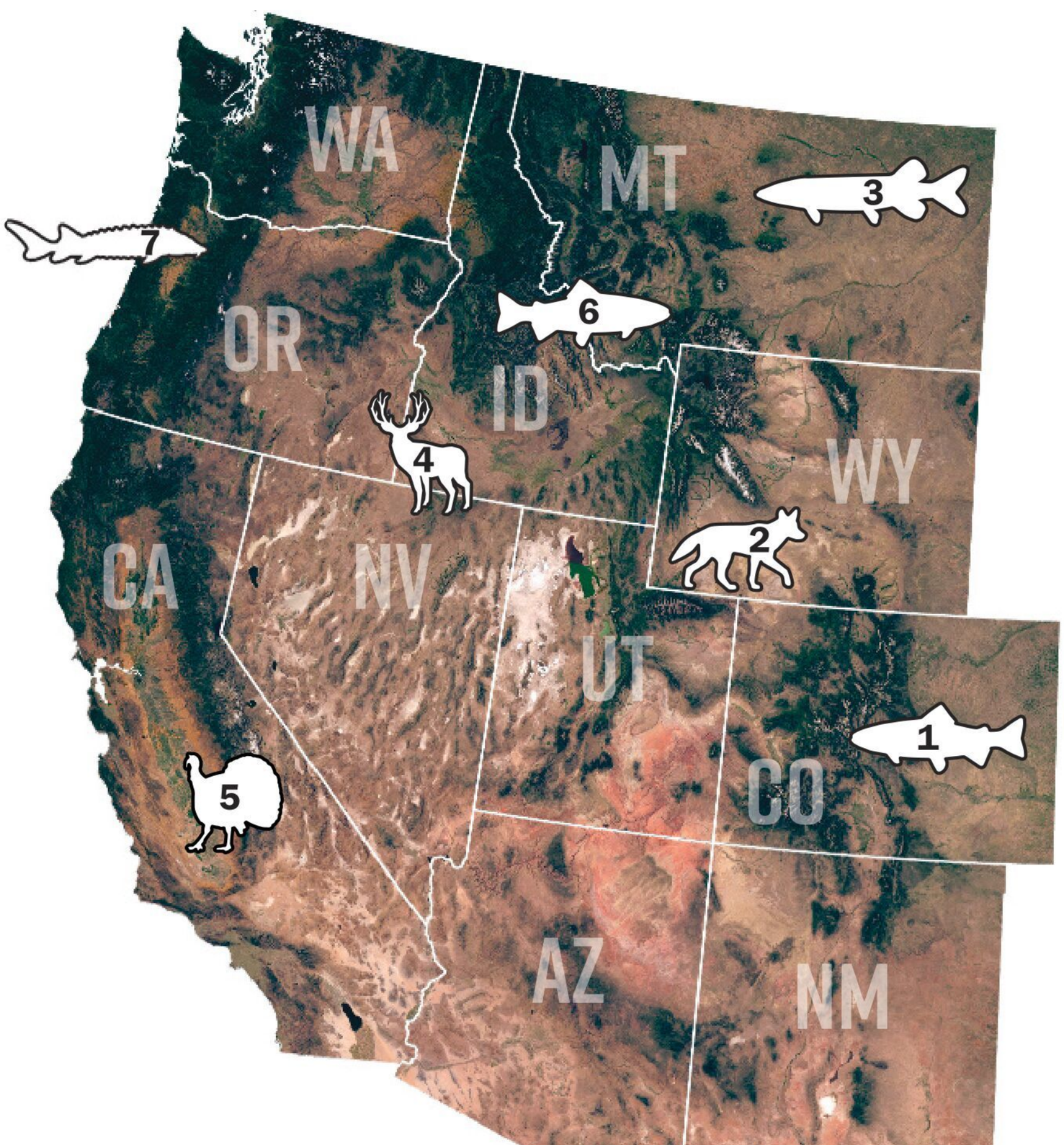
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AROUND THE WEST

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

By Andrew McKean



To call this month a shoulder season doesn't do enough justice to its disregard for your interest in getting outdoors. It's more accurate to call it a cold-shoulder season. Frigid winds cut and sunny breaks never last long enough to melt ice. Spring turkey and bear hunting seasons are still a month away, and even coyotes seem worn down by the long winter. But it's a great season for tying flies, reloading rifle cartridges, planning trips for the sunnier months and burning firewood. Or for getting outside for the activities we detail here. So, give March the cold shoulder and make the best use of the worst month.

1

FRONT-RANGE ICE TROUT

You don't have to go far from I-25 this month to find a combination of reliable ice and hungry trout. Eleven Mile State Park and reservoir, in the shadow of Pikes Peak west of Colorado Springs, is probably your best bet. The local favorite is as gastronomically questionable as it is effective at luring both cuttbows and stocker rainbows: a garlic-flavored mealworm or waxworm on either a jigging spoon or curly-tailed lead-head jig. Aurora Reservoir can have sketchy ice conditions, but check with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (303-326-8425) for updates. Then go catch limits of 12- to 14-inch stocker rainbows. Pretty much the same prescription goes for Chatfield Reservoir in Chatfield State Park.

2

COYOTE RUT

Mid-February through the first week of March is breeding season for coyotes throughout the Rockies. Early in the "rut," young males are especially susceptible to come-hither howls. By early March, challenge howling can unlock the oldest and smartest adults of both genders. A typical scenario right now is to get coyotes to respond to howls, then work in on their location and prepare for a long shot as they stand their ground. Pelt quality can be questionable this late in the season—most coyotes are starting to "rub," or lose the guard hairs that make them prime—but as long as you're not expecting to get top dollar from fur buyers, you should get in plenty of shooting.



ANDREW MCKEAN (3)

3

FORT PECK PIKE

Call it "Norwegian TV" if you like, but for spear fishers who can tolerate hours of staring at a hole in the ice, March is payoff. On Fort Peck Lake in northeastern Montana, die-hard spearers double their intensity this month because this is when record-class northern pike are cruising the shorelines in a pre-spawn migration. Pike over 25 pounds are possible now, along with bonus walleyes and lake trout.



4

GO SHED HUNTING

Mule deer started losing their antlers in mid-February, and by early to mid-March, elk will be dropping theirs. Start looking along the edge of receding snow, especially on south-facing slopes, but be aware that many states have recently implemented shed-hunting seasons, and you must be especially careful to not disturb winter-weakened herds. That means enter foothills and winter-range habitat only after the former owners of the headgear have moved on. It also means that if you live in much of Wyoming, Colorado west of I-25 and parts of Montana, you won't be able to collect sheds at all until April or May at the earliest. Check with your state or regional fish-and-game agency for details.

5

CALIFORNIA'S TURKEY OPENER

While in most of the West, spring turkey seasons don't begin until April, California gets a jump start with its March 27 opening day. Daily bag limit is one bearded bird; season limit is three.

6

BITTERROOT SKWALA HATCH

The first—and to some dry-fly anglers, the best—stonefly hatch in the Rockies starts this month on the Bitterroot River south of Missoula, Mont. These are big bugs, matching size-8 to size-12 flies, and the skwalas will emerge on calm afternoons from the first week of March all the way through the beginning of runoff season in early May. The trigger is water temperature. Watch the USGS river gage, and when the river hits 43 degrees for a couple days, tie on your Rastaman Skwala, Plan B Skwala or a Peacock Double-Bead nymph, and hit the river below Stevensville.

7

OREGON STURGEON

Head to Tillamook Bay and soak cut-bait for bottom-dwelling sturgeon. You'll have to release the largest fish of your angling career—in most waters you can't even lift sturgeon out of the water for a hero photo—but the action is worth the sacrifice. Other good March destinations include Siuslaw and Yaquina bays.



PROVE IT

EXPERIMENT WITH TURKEY LOADS AND CHOKES UNTIL YOU **GET THE BEST OUT OF YOUR GUN.**

Story and Photos by Bob Robb

A pair of big Merriam's gobblers quietly ambled down the old logging road.

"Here they come," I whispered to my wife, Cheryl. We'd been soft-calling the birds for more than an hour, and they finally decided to come find that seductive hen that was playing hard to get.

When we set up, I'd used my range-finder to take readings around us, mentally marking rocks and tree trunks at 40 yards. If the birds stepped inside that distance they'd be in trouble. I knew that because I'd spent hours testing different load and choke tube combinations until I'd found the magic mix that produced a tight, even pattern out to 50 steps. And because Cheryl is a deadly shot on gobblers.

Big, wild turkeys are tough. To put one down on the spot, you have to hit the brain and/or spinal column with multiple pellets that retain enough kinetic energy.

The best way to ensure that you'll hammer the bird when you take a shot is to pattern your shotgun at the range to determine the best load-and-choke combo for it.

WHY PATTERN?

The performance of an individual shotgun can vary significantly from one shotshell load to another, even when both loads are high-quality products. A load that may be best for your buddy's gun might not work well in yours. Changing one aspect of the gun—the choke tube or the barrel, for example—can affect a load's performance. Shot material, wad desgin and pellet size are other factors that can play a role in performance variations from one load to the next. Until you test, you won't know what works best for your gun.

What you are looking for is a shotshell that delivers a dense, uniform pattern at the distances you'll use it to kill turkeys—and, obviously, the center of the pattern should be where your gun's sighting system is aiming when you pull the trigger. Also, you will want to make sure that the pattern is wide enough to be effective on shorter shots at a turkey that may be moving, as well as tight enough on longer shots so that the turkey stays down when you shoot him.

BEFORE YOU SHOOT

Given the price of shotshells and choke tubes, and the volume of each on the market these days, it's possible to spend a significant amount of money doing exhaustive testing. But it's not necessary that you empty your savings account to find a good, effective turkey load for your gun.

Start with your favorite gun the and fullest choke you already have. You'll want to try a few different shells, and the most cost-effective way to do that is to test with a couple buddies so you can split the cost. It's unlikely that you will test every load and every choke on the market—that would take an unrealistic amount of time and money. But a tight budget does not have to be the enemy of finding a better pattern.

Another thing that will streamline the process is to take careful notes on how each combination performs at varying distances. Keep the targets that show the best patterns—notes attached—so you can quickly refer back to them in coming seasons. The goal is to find the one load/choke combination that performs best so you never have to go through the patterning process again.

Finally, shooting a heavy-recoiling turkey shotgun over and over again will hammer your shoulder and rattle your brain unmercifully. To mitigate that, use a recoil-absorbing rest like the Caldwell Lead Sled or Champion Premium Shooting Rest. A heavy-duty rest will last the rest of your hunting life and will be handy any time you sight in a rifle or pattern a shotgun in the future. If you don't have a recoil-absorbing rest, plan to spread your patterning efforts over multiple sessions.

THE PROCESS

1. Gather Your Gear: This includes the usual range gear—eye and ear protection, cleaning equipment, targets, etc.—and as many different loads and choke tubes as your budget allows. Plus your shotgun, of course.

2. Get Solid: Shoot from a bench or table and use a solid rest. If you don't have a Lead Sled or similar, use sandbags so you can get your sights where they need to be. Consider padding your shoulder with towels, a soft gun case or whatever else might help absorb the recoil. This isn't a tough-guy competition.

3. Use the Right Targets: I use an inexpensive rifle target with a low-recoiling trap load to make sure my sights are on, realizing that turkey loads will impact a bit differently and my sights will have to be adjusted as the process continues. Once the pattern is centered to the shotgun's point of aim, I do my serious pattern testing using head-and-neck gobbler targets that show the spine and brain. Birchwood-Casey, Primos, Champion, Hunters Specialties and TruGlo all make good ones, or you can download turkey targets for free from the internet.



Matching the ideal load to your gun in controlled testing gives you the confidence to knock down turkeys when the moment of truth arrives.

4. Shoot More Than Once: You should shoot each load multiple times to confirm your pattern. Be prepared to adjust your sights if the pattern's center is way off during the testing process.

5. Shoot at Multiple Distances: Shoot each load/choke tube combination at 20 and 40 yards. Study each target carefully, looking for point-of-impact changes, holes developing in the pattern and whethe the pattern suddenly falls apart. I'm always amazed at how a pattern that is super-tight and consistent at 20 yards can sometimes mysteriously open way up at 40 yards.

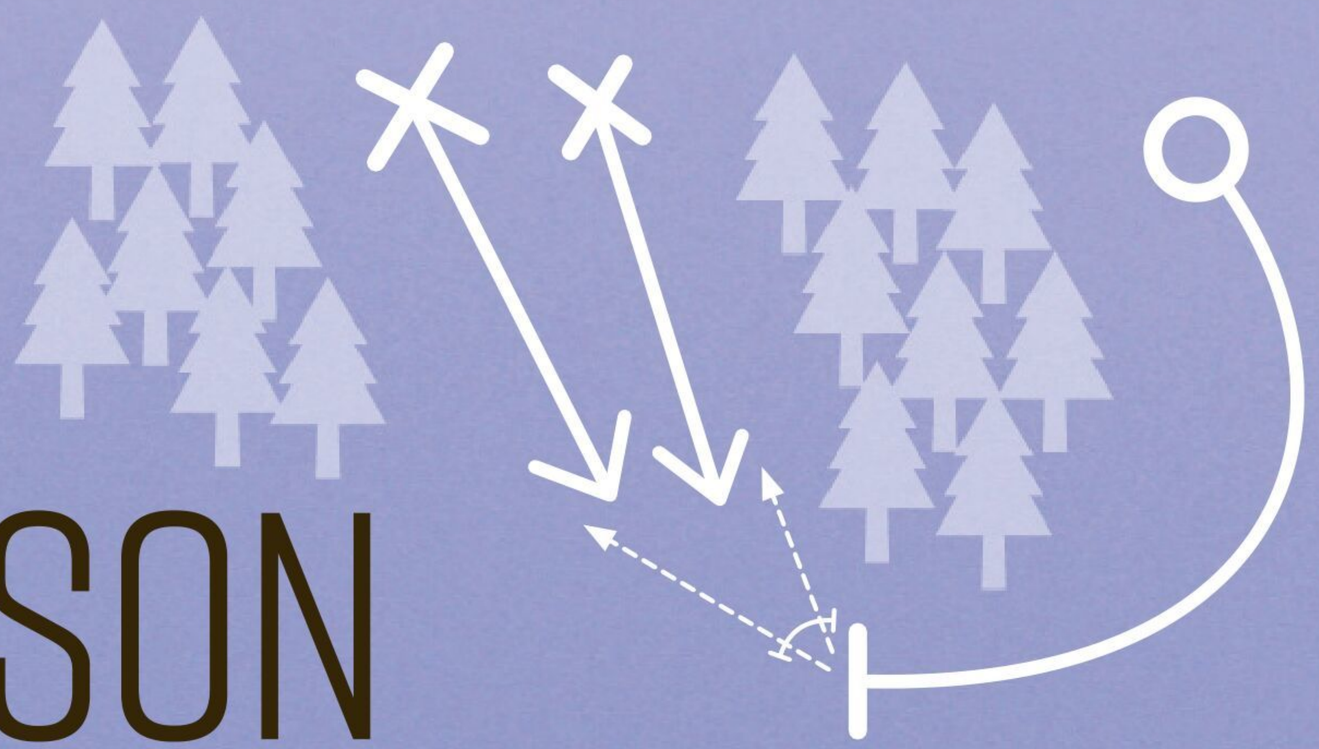
6. Winnow the Field: As the process evolves, you'll be able to eliminate several load/choke combinations. When I find the ones that pattern best at 20 yards, I shoot them again at longer ranges to see which ones stay tight and even enough to hunt with. This will also give you an idea of a load/choke combo's maximum effective range.

7. Keep an Open Mind: Don't go into pattern testing with preconceived notions about results. The proof is in the pudding, so let the actual testing determine the right load/choke combination for you.

8. Take Notes: During the patterning process, record the results of each combination tested. File them away for future reference. I save my best targets with notes taped to the target face so I can quickly refer to what works best for a particular shotgun before each hunting season begins.

9. Have Patience: Depending on how many load/choke combinations you're testing, the process can require two or three range sessions. But it will all be worth it because once you've settled on the right combination for your shotgun and hunting style, you'll be good to go for many seasons to come.

At the end of the day, you're looking for the load/choke tube combination that produces the tightest, most even pattern at both close and long range and allows you to hunt with confidence. That doesn't necessarily mean the winners will be the newest, most hyped or most expensive shotshells and choke tube in your test.



PRE-SEASON GAME PLAN

A SUCCESSFUL TURKEY SEASON **STARTS WELL BEFORE OPENING DAY.**

By Scott Haugen

WINDIGNO IMAGES



Hunters who find established strutting areas increase their odds of taking a longbeard early in the season.

As it had done most days over the previous two months, the lone tom strutted and gobbled its way along the ridge. This time was different, though, as it was opening day of spring turkey season.

A logged unit separated us by 200 yards, and at the bottom of the cut I had a pair of Dave Smith decoys in place. Tucked into a briar patch 20 yards from the decoys, I let out a soft yelp on a diaphragm call, then watched as the tom quickly stacked its wings, sprung into the air and coasted downhill, sticking a landing by the decoys.

In less than five minutes of hunting my tag was filled. "That didn't take long," wrote a commenter on a social media post I made about the hunt. I smiled and thought, "If you only knew."

I first learned of that big tom four months before the season, when I set up trail cameras on the ridge. By opening day I had logged dozens of hours scouting this bird. The hunt didn't take very long because the work went into it before the season even started.

FLOCK DYNAMICS

As a former biology teacher, I approach my hunting from a scientific angle. With turkeys, this means locating birds in large winter flocks and tracking their movements and behavioral shifts with each passing day.

In March, turkey behavior is rapidly changing. Toms go from tolerating one another in bachelor flocks all winter to establishing dominance through posturing to fighting in an effort to gain breeding rights. Throughout the West, snow, rain, high winds and sunshine that can roll across the landscape on any given day can impact turkey behavior.

Of course, at some point in the spring a tom's mind is consumed with breeding. Hens are also intent to breed, and once they start laying eggs, they turn reclusive.

The turkey's urge to reproduce, combined with the behavior turkeys display in response to breeding season, is what makes spring turkey hunting so special, but hunters must not forget that the birds will continue to eat, drink, take dust baths and roost during this period. One of the biggest mistakes I made when first getting into turkey hunting was focusing too much on the breeding cycle and ignoring the birds' daily survival needs.

In many western states, from the Coast Range into the Rockies, turkeys move to higher elevations as spring progresses. Hens head to high ground to nest in seclusion, and toms always seem to follow them. At the same time, where the habitat is right, many turkeys are year-round residents in low elevations where food is easy to get, especially if predation is light. Pre-season scouting reveals if you're hunting homebody birds or turkeys on the move.

Because toms follow hens and hens have a keen eye for food, cover and the safe nesting sites they will soon need, hunters should focus their scouting on the ladies.

In many western states, the height of turkey breeding is about one month prior to the start of hunting seasons. However, peak breeding can see delays, largely due to weather. Keeping track of daily tom and hen movement is important now, as is tracking the behavior shifts among toms from passive to aggressive.

Exactly how a turkey behaves and when behavioral changes occur can vary from year to year, even from drainage to drainage. I used to think turkey behavior shifts were dictated by photoperiodism, as with big game, but after years of experience afield I believe much of a spring turkey's behavior is dependent upon weather conditions. Many years I've seen the height of the breeding season delayed when conditions were cold and wet; in warmer and drier years I've seen it well underway in late February.

SCOTT HAUGEN

In your scouting, try to determine how far along turkeys are in their breeding season where you are hunting; don't assume they'll be doing the same things at the same time they did in any previous year. Let them tell you where they want to be and hunt accordingly.

READING THE SIGN

When scouting, you don't have to see turkeys in order to succeed. A good place to start is with tracks. A mature tom's track will measure up to 5 inches from the back toe to the tip of the long middle toe. A hen's track will be about 4 inches; jake tracks fall in between. The size of a turkey's track changes with age—the older a tom, the bigger and thicker its feet become, often revealing swollen knuckles.

Loose feathers on the ground also tell a story. The breast feathers of toms are edged in black, while a hen's breast feathers are tan or off-white on the fringe. Tom and hen droppings differ, too. The droppings of toms are usually in a J-shape, while a hen's droppings are typically coiled and may contain more white coloration. Find signs of toms and you'll know where to focus hunting efforts.

If you come across a hen and tom track together, look closely. If there are no drag marks that would be made by the tom's primary wing feathers while strutting, follow them. If they're traveling in a fairly straight line with little sign of pausing, you've likely found a hen



Finding turkey sign on a path between probable roosting and bedding areas will help you choose the best ambush sites.



TURKEY GEAR PREP

Make sure your calls and dekes are in good working order.

Scouting is just one piece of the pre-season turkey puzzle; gear preparation is another. If your turkey calls have been sitting in your vest since last season, now's the time to dust them off and get them dialed in.

Clean all friction calls of dust and replace rubber bands as needed. If box or push/pull calls have springs, make sure they're working smoothly. Condition box calls with chalk or rosin, and sand the tips of your slate call strikers to clear any residue buildup in the pitted ends.

Diaphragm calls can be cleaned with warm water or soaked in mild mouthwash. If any latex edges are tattered or torn, replace the calls.

Don't overlook your decoys, either. Make sure no grime or mud from last season is caked on, and that tail fans are spruced-up and paint jobs are crisp. Turkeys have exceptional eyesight and see in color, so attention to detail is important.

Remember that all of the scouting and preparation that goes into getting ready to hunt on opening day is built around the hope that you find an eager tom. Make sure that when that hope is realized, your gear is ready to close the deal.

WINDIGO IMAGES (SIDEBAR); SCOTT HAUGEN

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Even during breeding season, both hens and toms spend part of their day eating. If you don't kill a bird off the roost, look for them near food sources later in the day.

temporarily away from her nest in search of food accompanied by a tom. Once that hen goes back to her nest, there will be a lone tom eager for companionship.

By nature, toms visit the same strutting area day after day, gobbling and calling to attract hens. Strutting grounds are great places to focus hunting efforts. When you take a mature tom from a strutting area, you should consider returning later in the season if you have another valid tag, as another tom will have likely taken over the location. The first tom probably chose that area because hens were nearby, and those hens can see and hear him when he struts and gobbles there. The area will continue to have those characteristics even if the first tom is killed.

Strutting grounds, roost trees and pathways connecting the two should be pinpointed while scouting. Locating multiple toms is wise in case you need a backup plan or have multiple tags.

One of the biggest clues to help fill tags (in states where multiple tags can be had) is inspecting the crop of the first tom you take. See what it's been eating and hunt those food sources. Early in the spring you'll often find grass and clover. Later in the spring the diet shifts to grass seeds and insects. Pre-season scouting will reveal where these food sources will be.

SCOUTING TOOLS

Trail cameras are your eyes in the woods when you're not there. Wherever I can, I use trail cameras year-round for turkeys, always setting them on video mode. Still pictures allow you to count birds and size-up toms, but photos miss a lot of what's happening.

Capture a photo of a lone hen and that's all you see. But get a 10-second video of a hen and you might hear multiple toms gobbling behind the camera, or notice birds moving in the background. The best trail cameras I've used are Stealth Cam DS4Ks. I like hanging them 4- to 6-feet high and pointing them down as much trail as possible.

The second-best scouting tool is a spotting scope. A spotter, or high-power binoculars, will allow you to locate, size-up and study turkeys from afar.

By the start of the season you should have multiple toms located and strutting grounds marked; know the whereabouts of jakes for future seasons; be aware of where hens are; and understand what's happening in the courting, breeding, feeding and roosting behaviors of birds. Scouting reveals a lot about turkeys. Once the season starts, the last thing you want to do is waste time looking for birds to hunt. That should be done well before opening day.

Editor's Note: *Scott Haugen is the author of* Western Turkey Hunting: Strategies for All Levels, *available at scotthaugen.com.*

SCOTT HAUGEN

A MATCH MADE IN WHITETAIL HEAVEN

From their farm in the woods of eastern Iowa, Lee and Tiffany Lakosky have built a world-class whitetail paradise. Don't miss the heart-pounding action as they pursue their passion for big game bowhunting — at home and across America.

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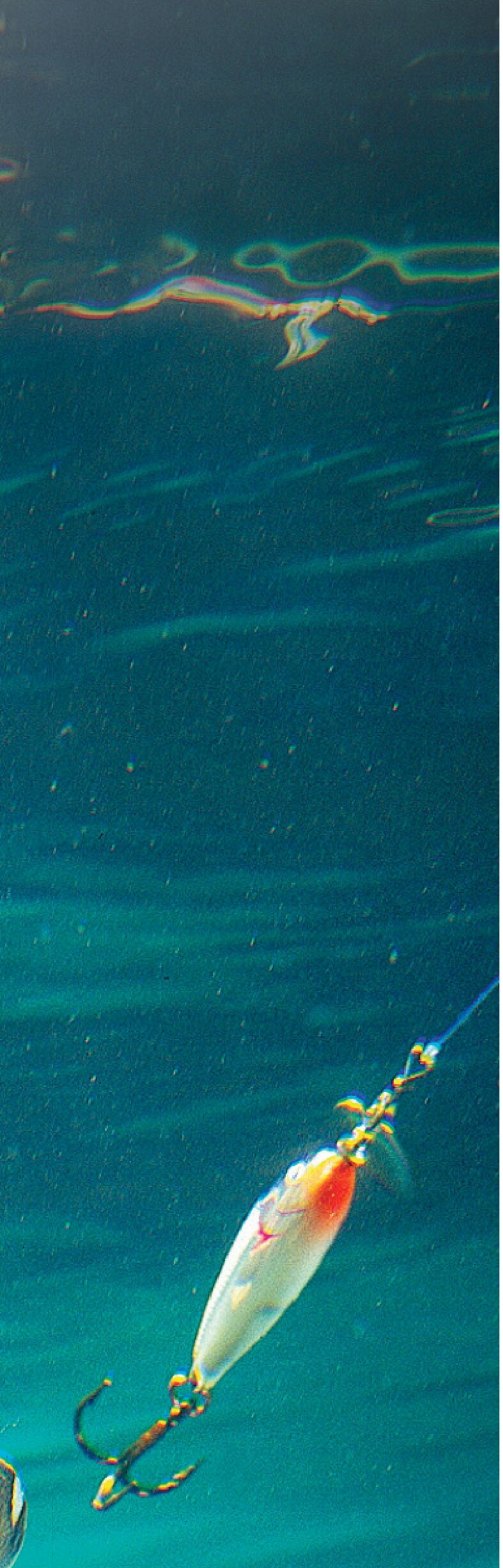
SPIN FOR THE WIN

EARLY-SEASON CONDITIONS OF TROUT RIVERS AND RESERVOIRS **FAVOR THESE SPINNING GEAR TACTICS.**

By Gary Lewis



WINDIGO IMAGES



Holdover trout become more active as spring waters warm. They'll chase offerings that represent a big meal, and spinning gear is perfect for presenting such lures.

For trout anglers in most of the West, April cannot get here fast enough. For most of your life, you were programmed by the departments of fish and wildlife to look forward to the opening day of trout season like it was Christmas. But over the last few years, a bit of deregulation has occurred in many places, leading to fishing opportunities in March.

To give anglers more opportunity throughout the year, many lakes and reservoirs and even some rivers open early or are open year-round. March conditions are still cold throughout much of the West. Lakes are often clear, but rains and snowmelt can swell late-winter flows. Smaller trout are likely to be most affected by the water temps, while bigger fish are less sensitive to the temperature. This is a great time of year to target those bigger fish with a spinning rod, which allows for subtlety, finesse and the ability to get the right offerings in the right places.

STALK THE SHALLOWS

In lakes and ponds in the early part of the year, trout feed in the shallows where spring sunlight first penetrates, weeds begin to grow and bugs begin to move. The trout's metabolism tells it it's time to eat; however, as a cold-blooded creature, it won't move very far or quickly to do so. Therefore, we need to position our bait or lure where a trout can reach it with a minimum amount of effort. For instance, if the water is 3 to 6 feet deep, the trout are probably holding 12 to 20 inches off the bottom. That's where your offering should be.

In some waters, scented offerings or those infused with "digestible" scent components are considered bait, and in artificial-only areas they may be illegal, so check the regulations. But, assuming bait is legal in the water you're fishing, use this simple rig to get it in front of the fish. Start with a sliding bullet or egg sinker knotted above a swivel. For the leader, tie on 12 to 24 inches of 4-pound-test monofilament, then terminate at a No. 14 to 18 treble hook or a No. 8 to 10 egg hook.

Some of the most effective scented plastics to put on that hook include Berkley Gulp! Pinched Crawlers, Berkley PowerBait Floating Trout Worms (red, pink or natural) and Floating Mice Tails. For a complex, hotter scent when the fish have been pressured, add a shot of Pro-Cure's Rooster Tail Garlic Plus or Trophy Trout blend.

Make the cast, let the weight settle to the floor of the lake, put the rod into a rod holder and gently reel up the slack to force the weight up against the swivel. Then, open the bail or pull out about three feet of line as a buffer. Watch the rod tip and the line, and wait for it to move before picking up the rod. There's no need for a hard hook set—just start reeling.

FOLLOW THE ICE

In my part of the West, that magical moment when the ice recedes from the surface of a trout lake to create that first patch of open water can happen anywhere between March and early May. For a day or two or five, the ice marches back and trout take shelter beneath it, emerging occasionally to hunt and feed, sometimes with reckless abandon. The open water provides a surge of food after a long winter, while the ice protects the trout against predation by ospreys and other raptors.

This is the moment when I turn to small wet flies or very small jigs with my spinning outfit, using what we might otherwise consider crappie tactics to target rainbows and browns. Think 1/16-ounce-and-smaller lures like the Natural Science Road Runner, Trout Runner and Original Marabou Road Runner, all from TTI-Blakemore. My absolute favorite is the Road Runner Gold Series in blue fusion color.

But I don't just think of these as jigs; I sometimes fish them like swim baits. This is a flexible form of fishing, allowing you to change presentations until the trout tell you what they like. For example, these lures can be cast and retrieved or fixed beneath a clear plastic float to keep the bait at the right depth in the water column. The latter way is my preferred method. Cast, tighten up the line, but let the lure rest for a couple of heartbeats. Then, start reeling with an erratic start-stop action. Keep the rod tip low and be ready for a long hookset sweep.

To increase the attractiveness of these lures where bait is legal, tip the hook with a PowerBait Crappie Nibble or spray it with Pro-Cure's Trophy Trout spray. The added scent will at least double the amount of strikes you get, and fish tend



This fish was fooled by a slowly trolled minnow imitation that maintained neutral buoyancy as it moved under the surface.

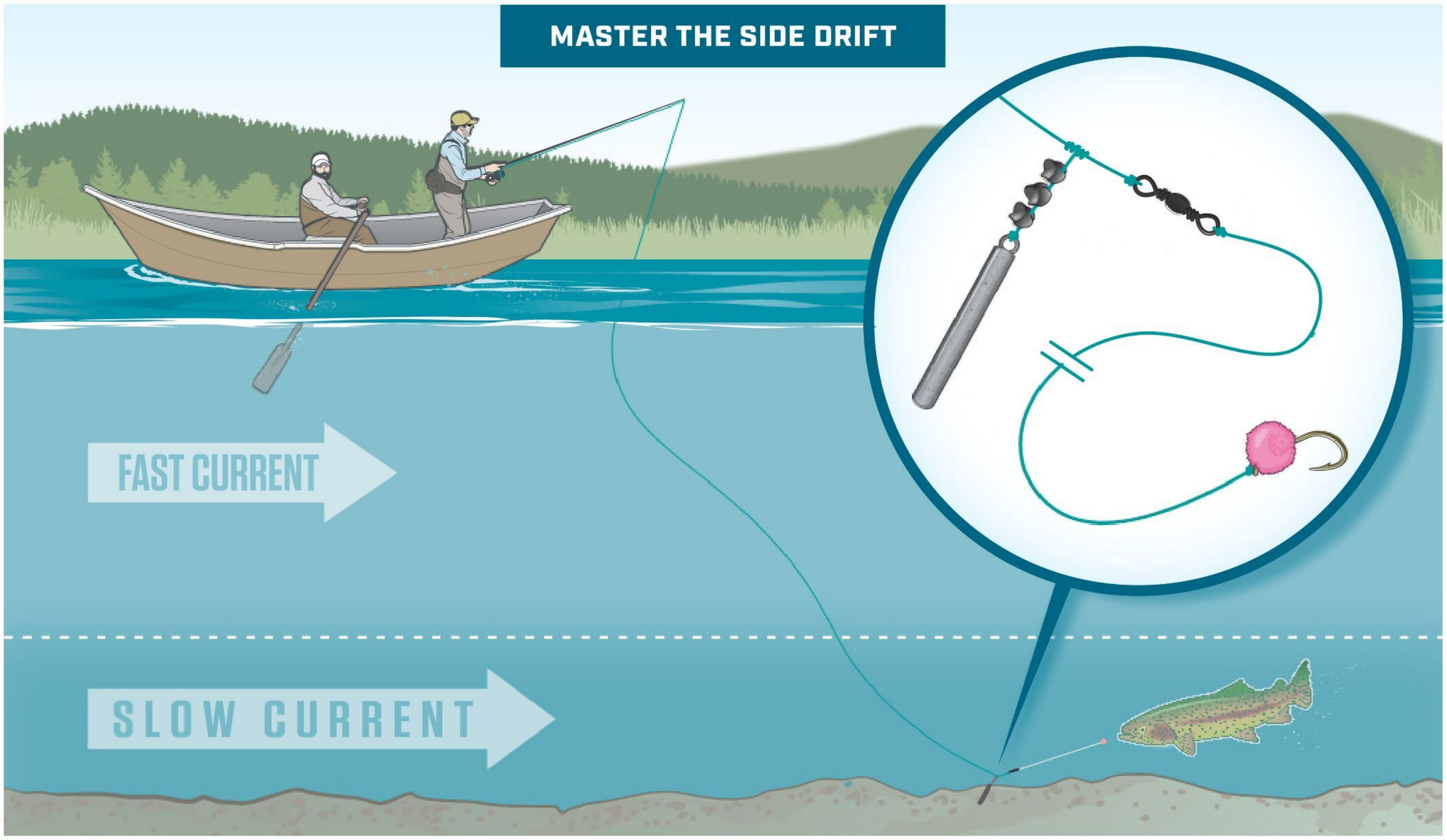
to hold on longer when they're following a scent trail. The most aggressive fish will bite and bite again.

SIDE DRIFT A RIVER

Side drifting was developed by boating anglers fishing rivers and is deadly for rainbows, cutthroats and browns. The idea is to keep the bait in the best holding water for the longest possible time. The boat operator keeps the boat moving at or just under the speed of the current so every angler on the boat can keep their bait in the best water for the duration of the run. Lures that perform well with this tactic include Glo-Bugs (tie them or buy them at a fly shop) and scented plastic worms like Xfactor's Miracle Worms.

Rigs are simple. Tie a Glo-Bug yarn fly trimmed into a ball on a No. 6 egg hook or wacky-rig a plastic trout worm and knot the hook to 30 inches of leader. An inch or inch-and-a-half of pencil lead keeps the rig touching bottom every five to ten seconds.

Look for classic drifts with the water moving at the speed of a fast walk and with a little bit of cover along one side. As the sun goes higher, the fish tend



To employ the side-drifting technique, the boat enters the run stern first. The oarsman then slows the downstream progress of the boat to allow for a longer, drag-free drift of the weighted terminal tackle through the optimal holding water, typically near bottom where the current is slower.

PETER SUCHESKI (ILLUSTRATIONS); GARY LEWIS (PHOTOS)

to move closer to cover; cast right up against the bank or the side of the slot where fish may be holding.

The rearmost angler (often the boat operator) should make the first cast, placing the line upstream at a 45-degree angle. As soon as that line touches the water, the next angler casts. Both anglers reel up any slack. If their tackle is matched, there should be no tangles.

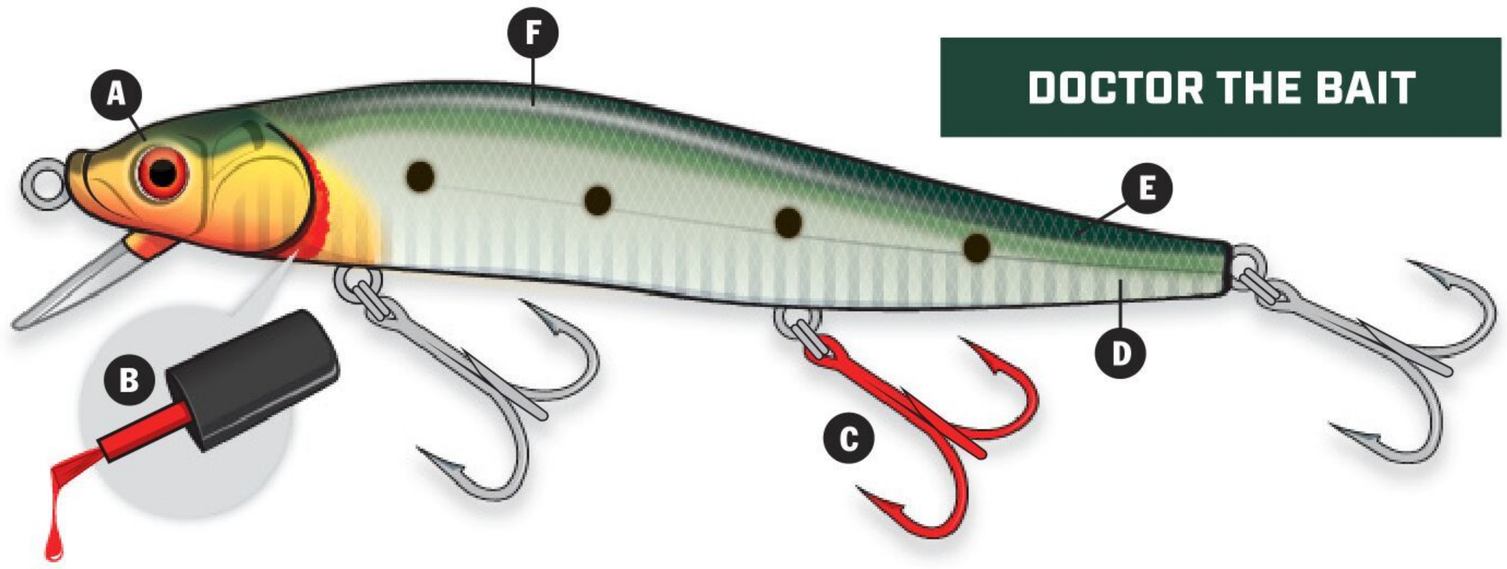
Using the kicker or the oars, the boat operator makes slight adjustments to keep lines taut and the baits fishing in line. Make sure that the anglers keep their rod tips up at a 45-degree angle. When the fish grabs, the weight pulls the hook into the corner of its mouth.

This technique is also dynamite for fishing small plastic tubes (try fluorescent green, pink or red) and plastic minnows.

TROLL A RESERVOIR

In the spring, in reservoirs I know have brown trout in them, I opt for bigger lures, using the rule of thirds as it applies to predatory trout and char. If I'm after a 30-inch fish, a 10-inch lure is a good choice. If the local browns are more in the 16- to 18-inch range, as they are at one of my favorite lakes, a 6-inch bait is a better choice.

For most of the year, the best fishing for big brown trout happens very early in the morning and very late in the day.



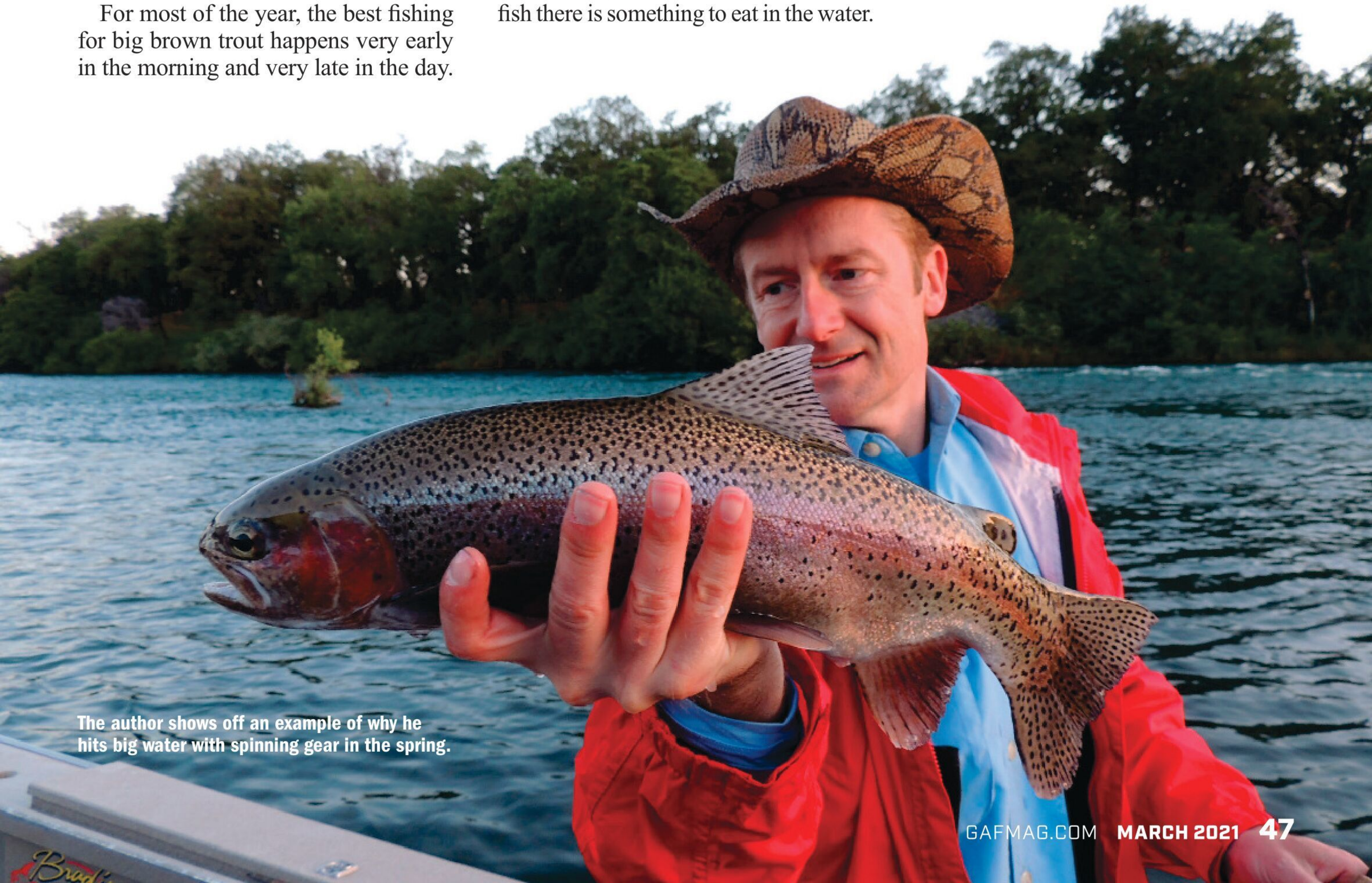
When trolling for brown trout, choose a lure with large eyes that suggest vulnerability (A). Apply red nail polish to the gills (B) and swap the middle hook for a red one (C) as additional triggers. Optimal lures will feature a rattle (D), be neutrally buoyant (E) and have a pattern to match local baitfish (F).

But in March the best time to fish might be during the middle of the day. It can be freezing cold at dawn, but an increasing temperature through the morning—even if that increase is just a couple of degrees—can heat up the bite.

In choosing a lure, start with a color and a pattern that matches the local baitfish, then focus on strike-trigger details. Small forage fish have big eyes that suggest vulnerability. You can modify a lure by using glue-on stickers or 3-D prisms to increase eye size. Another strike trigger, particularly in murky water, is a rattle that allows the trout to zero in on your lure even when visibility is poor. Feeding fish flare their gills, which signals to other fish there is something to eat in the water. A dependable trigger color is that dark, bloody gill-flash red.

Whatever the triggers, the lure should be a floating or suspending one that runs 6 to 10 inches below the surface. Plan the trolling route in advance to keep the baits in and out of the shallows and over the transition zones where trout hide to ambush baitfish.

With rods in rod holders, the boat operator should try to maintain a slow trolling speed, between .9 and 1.4 miles per hour, with an aggressive zigzag pattern. At every turn the inside bait slows down while the outside bait speeds up. GAF



The author shows off an example of why he hits big water with spinning gear in the spring.

PERSONAL BESTS



NOW'S THE TIME TO **CATCH THE BIGGEST BASS OF YOUR LIFE.**

By Ken Duke

Technically speaking, the first month of spring starts in winter. In March, there's usually a chill in the air and the water alike. Depending on how far north you live and fish, there might even be some ice.

The third month of the year is not when most dedicated bass anglers expect to catch great numbers of fish. Bass can be finicky and the weather unpredictable. Little things can prevent fish from biting in big numbers. Maybe the water's too cold. Maybe it's dirty. Maybe melting snow has caused levels to rise.

Even so, March is still the best month of the year to catch your personal best largemouth bass. Big fish get big by surviving better and eating more than other fish. Lunkers feel the urge to feed and to procreate, and they're leaving their deep-water haunts to do so. That benefits the intrepid angler willing to brave chilly weather, fish hard between bites and go after these giants when they're shallow and most vulnerable.

To help put that fish of a lifetime on the end of your line, we sought the advice of three top bass pros who know their way around western trophy waters, and who count on March to produce some of their biggest bites of the year. Jared Lintner hails from California, Josh Bertrand calls Arizona home and Luke Clausen is from Washington. They're all standouts on the Bass Pro Tour, and they all have a passion for and insight into March lunkers, whether they're fishing Southern California, deep desert impoundments or the lakes and rivers of the Pacific Northwest.

LOCATE A LUNKER

Once you've put yourself on a body of water capable of producing a new personal best, it's time to zero-in on the spots most likely to hold such a fish. The farther south you're fishing, the closer your bass are to spawning and the greater the influence the mating ritual will have on them.

"March is the major pre-spawn month for us in California," says Lintner. "It's the time to focus on secondary points and the outer edges of shallow flats and bays. I'll spend my time looking for big fish in 5 to 15 feet of water with little or no current. You might find smaller bass up shallower, but the big females will be out a little deeper."

Bertrand agrees. On the desert impoundments where he does much of his March fishing, he believes everything this month is related to the spawn. He targets similar areas to those favored by Lintner.

Farther north, Clausen notes that some waters will likely still have ice on them in early March. But by late March, water temperatures take a turn that leads to lunkers.

"The bass will start to move from vertical structure, like bluffs, to nearby flats," Clausen says. "If you can find some isolated wood and a dark, muddy bottom, you know you're in the right

WINDIGO IMAGES

Just before they spawn, roe-laden female bass crowd into the shallows to feed on forage in woody cover. Their position and willingness to bite can give anglers the edge.

place. That stuff will warm up over the course of the day, and the bass there will get active."

BAITS FOR BIG FISH

Because March is not yet spring with a capital "S," Clausen, Bertrand and Lintner opt for lures that can cover water, but not for high-speed retrieves. They all choose baits that offer action at slow speeds and that work down in the water column.

For Clausen, that means a tandem spinnerbait like the 3/8-ounce Z-Man SlingBladeZ (Colorado and willow blades) or Power Finesse (Colorado/Indiana) in chartreuse and white with a 4-inch white DieZel MinnowZ trailer. The former Bassmaster Classic and Wood Cup champion likes to slow-roll the spinnerbait and bump it into cover to trigger a strike.

If he suspects that the spinnerbait is not slow enough for the cold-water conditions, Clausen reaches for a 3/8-ounce Dirty Jigs Compact Pitchin' Jig or 1/2-ounce Tour Level Pitchin' Jig in black-and-blue with a matching Z-Man Goat Twin Tail Grub as a trailer. As with the spinnerbait, a slow retrieve is usually best.

Because the water in desert impoundments is usually quite clear, Bertrand generally has to go deeper for his March bass. As with Clausen, he likes the jig, but prefers a 1/2-ounce football jig in green pumpkin or brown with a matching Berkley Chigger Craw trailer.

"I also like a deep-diving crankbait like the Berkley Dredger 17.5, 20.5 and 25.5 in Sexy Back or Irish Gold," Bertrand says. "The crankbait has a lot of drawing power, especially when early-season runoff has turned the water dingy."

And in the world-class trophy bass waters of California, Lintner never hits the water in March without a 1/2-ounce Z-Man Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer in a dark color. He'll crawl it on or near the bottom so it impacts every piece of available cover.

Lintner's other March favorite is his go-to in dirtier water. That's where he likes a Jackall TN/70 lipless crankbait in a reddish hue. Between the rattle and the vibration, it gets the attention of bass and triggers strikes as it bounces off cover on a slow, steady retrieve.



As big bass move shallow before spawning, hefty jigs pitched around shallow cover can be the ticket to a personal-best fish.



Warm, overcast days draw big largemouths into the shallows.

SHUTTERSTOCK (2)

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A RECORD-SETTING MONTH

Three Western state-best fish caught in March

Nationwide, six state largemouth records have been set in March, including top bucketmouths in California, Nevada and New Mexico—plus one fish that nearly obliterated the world record.

NEW MEXICO: On March 24, 1995, Steve Estrada used a black plastic worm to set the Land of Enchantment's record at 15 pounds, 13 ounces. He caught the fish from Bill Evans Lake, which measures just 62 surface acres—proof that it doesn't take big water to produce the biggest bass.

NEVADA: Michael R. Geary set the Battle Born State's largemouth record on March 8, 1999, on Lake Mead. His giant weighed 12 pounds even.

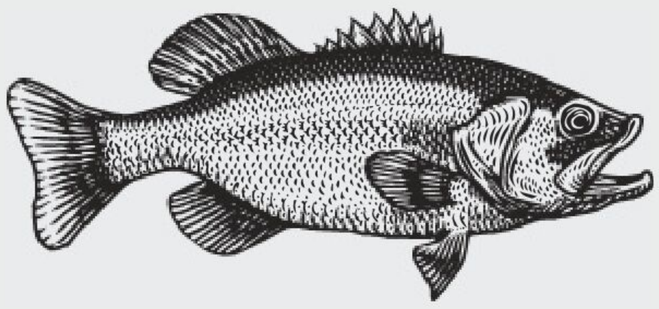
CALIFORNIA: Though larger bass have been recorded in the Golden State, California's official largemouth mark is 21-12, taken on March 5, 1991, by Michael Arujo from Castaic Lake. A week later, Bob Crupi caught a Castaic bass that weighed 22.01. It would be the state record, but Crupi released the fish without getting it certified because it was several ounces short of the world record he was seeking and he didn't want to stress the trophy by holding it through the official certification process.

March's biggest monster came in 2006. That's when Lake Dixon in San Diego County produced a 25-1 for Mac Weakley. The fish, a popular and elusive target that local anglers had named "Dottie" for a distinctive mark on her gill plate, exceeded the world record by nearly 3 pounds. However, Weakley unintentionally foul-hooked the fish on the side of the head rather than in the mouth, making the catch ineligible for record consideration.



Baits that get down in the water to plunge off creek channels and other vertical structure will find big bass.

SHUTTERSTOCK



BIOLOGY & BIG BASS

How much heavier is a pre-spawn female?

How many times have you or a buddy caught a post-spawn bass and said, “She would’ve weighed 2 pounds more before she spawned!”?

Well, don’t bet on it. A roe-laden bass—even one that looks ready to pop—is only 5 to 10 percent heavier than she is without the eggs. That’s probably enough to get your 9-pound, 8-ounce fish into double digits, but it won’t make a 10 pounder a “teener.”

The real reason so many state- and world-record-class fish are caught during the pre-spawn has little to do with the eggs and everything to do with the spawning ritual and how anglers respond to it. As bass prepare to spawn, they feed aggressively and—more importantly—they move into the shallows, where anglers are more comfortable, more adept and more numerous. It’s no wonder so many big fish are caught in the early spring.



March doesn’t produce the fastest action of the year, so catching a personal best requires the ability to remain focused on fishing effectively until a big bass hits.

SHUTTERSTOCK

REGIONAL HOT SPOTS

When it comes to best bets for a March lunker in his home region, Lintner recommends Clear Lake, the California Delta and Diamond Valley Lake. Bertrand points to Lake Havasu and the Salt River chain of lakes. For Clausen, it’s Lake Coeur d’Alene in Idaho and Newman, Silver and Liberty lakes in Washington.

Just about any bass water in your area could produce a personal best if you get out there in March and follow our experts’ advice, but genetics can really put things in your favor. If a fishery has Florida bass (Micropterus salmoides floridanus) genetics, the bass will have a greater propensity for growth than pure Northern-strain largemouths. Florida genetics have had a greater impact on producing record-class bass than any other factor. Check with your state fisheries office to see if there have been any Florida bass stockings in waters near you.

FINAL ADVICE

All three of our experts agree that timing can be everything in March. Just because a spot doesn’t produce in the morning doesn’t mean it won’t pay off in the afternoon, especially after it’s had a chance to warm up.

“Sometimes you can find big bass in super-skinny water late in the day,” says Clausen. “But even if they’re not extremely shallow, it’s likely they’ll be more active late.”

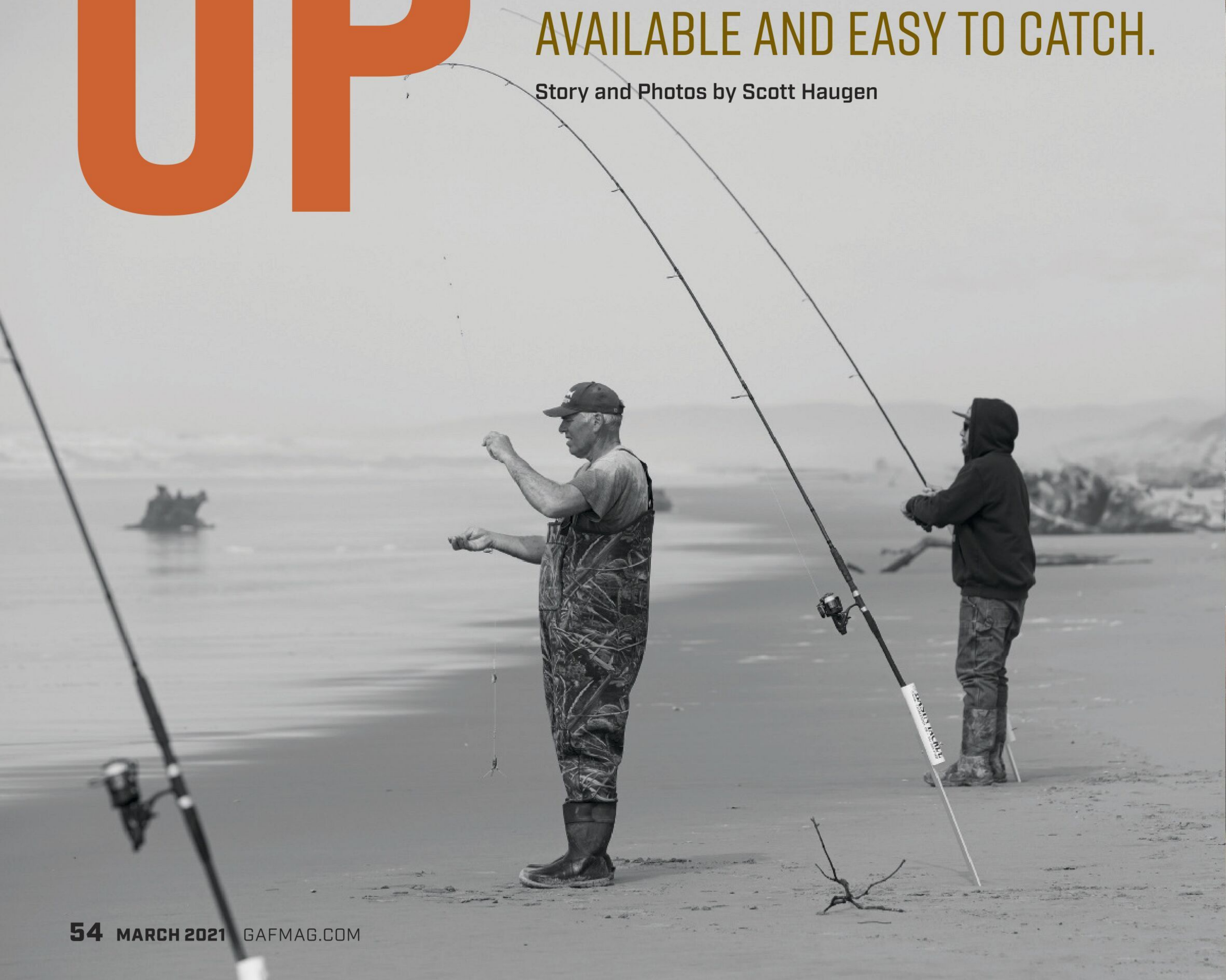
“If you have a spot that looks like it should hold pre-spawn bass, it probably does,” says Lintner. “You just need to keep cycling back through to find them when they’re active. That’s often between noon and 4 o’clock p.m., when the water is warmest.”

HOW-TO

SURF'S UP

ALL ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST, **TASTY SURFPERCH** ARE WIDELY AVAILABLE AND EASY TO CATCH.

Story and Photos by Scott Haugen



Easy access and great-tasting fillets are just two reasons why surfperch are a favorite of coastal anglers.

As I walked the beach, a wave surged passed my legs and revealed what I was looking for: small crustaceans called mole crabs—a favorite food of surfperch.

"Here they are," good friend Jody Smith shouted over the rush of water 20 yards away, confirming he, too, had found mole crabs. "This is the spot."

Smith and I stabbed the sand with our rod holders and were soon raking bait. Raking is a fast way of gathering mole crabs, which are also known locally as sand crabs or sand fleas. Aside from being gathered by anglers' rakes, mole crabs can be knocked loose from the sand by waves, so surfperch eager for a meal crowd into the shallow surf where the crabs are common.

That's what the perch were doing where we found our bait. On our first casts I pulled in a triple while Smith yarded in a hefty pair. Perch anglers routinely use two- or three-hook rigs because the fish feed in roving schools, and catching multiple fish at a time is fairly common once you've found a big school. We had our limits in short order and were headed to the cleaning station.

Smith and I were fishing the central Oregon coast in early spring, a time when many anglers like to target surfperch. But up and down the California, Oregon and Washington coasts, they can be pursued along ocean beaches year-round. No matter when you fish for them, these tips will help get you started.

SURFPERCH GEAR

Smith has been fishing for perch for more than 40 years and guiding for them for the past three (541-643-6258; jodysmithguideservice.com), and is amazed at the recent surge of interest in them by anglers.

"People really want to learn how to catch surfperch. Once they taste them, they want them even more," he says.

While surfperch fishing isn't complicated, Smith says there are two important factors many anglers overlook: a 3- to 4-foot-long ground spike to hold the rod and the rake used to gather mole crabs and sandworms to use as bait. On cool days, waders can help you access more water comfortably.

Another favorite perch food is sand shrimp. These can be dug with a clam gun, but check local regulations to see

whether you are required to have a shellfish license before you dig them.

Smith also has great success with 2-inch Berkley Gulp! Sandworms in camo. Many anglers favor Gulp! because it stays on the hook well. Natural bait can be torn off the hook by the action of the surf or, of course, by the perch themselves.

Smith prefers a long spinning rod and a large-capacity reel spooled with 30- to 40-pound braid (see sidebar, right). The terminal gear setup starts with a 4-ounce sinker tied to the end of the line. Flat or pyramid sinkers work, but I prefer Sputnik sinkers as they hold well in the sand (see sidebar, below). Several single hooks, each spaced a foot apart, are tied to the mainline with leaders, which should be kept to 4 inches so they don't tangle in the surf. You can purchase pre-tied leaders or make your own with 20-pound monofilament.

Smith prefers circle hooks ranging from size 4 for up to 2/0; he uses the larger hooks in that range for large mole crabs.

"I like using three hooks with a single point, the most allowed in Oregon," Smith says. "The more baits the better."

LOCATING PERCH

"There's a lot of beach out there and not knowing where to cast is the number-one reason folks book trips with me," says Smith. "Gearing up is easy; being able to read the surf—the most important part of the equation—is not."

When fishing for perch in the surf, look for waves crashing close to shore. Waves break in relationship to the depth of the water, and waves close to shore indicate a depression. A sandy shelf pounded by incoming waves uncovers food, and that's where perch will be. Flats behind boulders and between islands are also good feeding areas to fish. If possible, study the beach at low tide when depressions and "troughs" are revealed. Surfperch move up and down beaches looking for food. When they find it, schools congregate; where there is no food, the perch move on. Consequently, spending the effort to find a good spot is a better use of you time than fishing stretches of beach that have no fish.

"Sometimes we spend more time looking for the right place to fish than we do catching our limit," says Smith.

Aside from the simple gear requirements, easy access to places to fish and a year-round season, the other angler-friendly characteristic of surfperch is that they are very close to shore. Many anglers have an impulse to cast as far out as they can when fishing

THE HARDWARE

Rod and reel considerations

Surfperch are not large, but the rod you use needs to have sufficient backbone to cast weights heavy enough to hold in the surf. My favorite rod for surfperch is also my favorite steelhead float rod—a 12-foot-3-inch G.Loomis STFR 1474 ($395; gloomis.com). It allows me to cast great distances when necessary, and when placed in the rod holder it keeps the line above the surf and the terminal gear in the strike zone.

My surfcasting reel of choice is a Shimano Ultegra Ci4+ 5500 XTC ($320; fish.shimano.com), which features an easy-to-use speed drag. Sometimes you might be wading 50 yards or more into the surf to cast before walking back to the beach to fish without having to stand in the waves. Having a reel that allows the line to come off the spool through light drag tension while you're walking back to shore means there are no tangles and you'll feel every bite. Spool it with a 30-pound braid—I like PowerPro—and you're set.



The wire legs on a Sputnik sinker keep baits in place in the rolling surf.

GET A GRIP

Sputnik sinkers make perch fishing easier.

The best sinker I've used for surfperch fishing is a Sputnik-style sinker. It's designed to dig into sand and hold the bait exactly where you want it, no matter how rough the surf.

A 4-ounce Sputnik is the one I use most often, but you can go lighter or heavier depending on the water being fished. The four wire legs of a Sputnik sinker lock into the lead body via plastic beads.

When the sinker hits the sandy bottom, the legs dig in, holding your bait in place in the heaviest of waves. When a fish strikes, or if you need to reel in for a bait check, simply give the rod a quick twitch and the wire legs collapse, allowing your gear to be reeled in without hanging up.



Perch rods must be stout enough to cast heavy terminal tackle.

surf. While, of course, there will be times you "reach out" to hit attractive troughs during incoming tides, spend some time resisting the temptation to always make a long cast. On an incoming tide, freshly dislodged food is right at the edge of the advancing water. Perch dart in and out of the shallows in search of that food. Smith says that he and his clients catch a lot of perch in 10 inches of water within 30 feet of shore.

Most anglers have spent their entire fishing lives setting the hook immediately when they feel a bite, but with a multi-hook perch rig, this is another temptation to resist. Perch travel in competitive feeding schools, so anglers who pause before setting the hook on the first bite often allow other fish time to hit the remaining baits, resulting in more multi-fish hook-ups.

HIT THE TIDES

Surfperch can be taken on any tide, but incoming tides inundate fresh beach and dislodge more food, so many veterans opt for them if their schedule allows. Smith will give an area about 20 minutes; if no bites come, he moves.

Smith also likes fishing a low tide, as it allows him to reach depressions he can't get to on a high tide. The low point in a tide also represents an exception to the "fish close to shore" rule: Perch may be gathered some distance from the water's edge, waiting for the tide to begin moving. This is your chance to give into temptation and make a longer cast.

At high tides, you'll want to find a high shelf where bait is plentiful but generally safe from being washed out of the sand by waves—except at the high tide you're fishing.

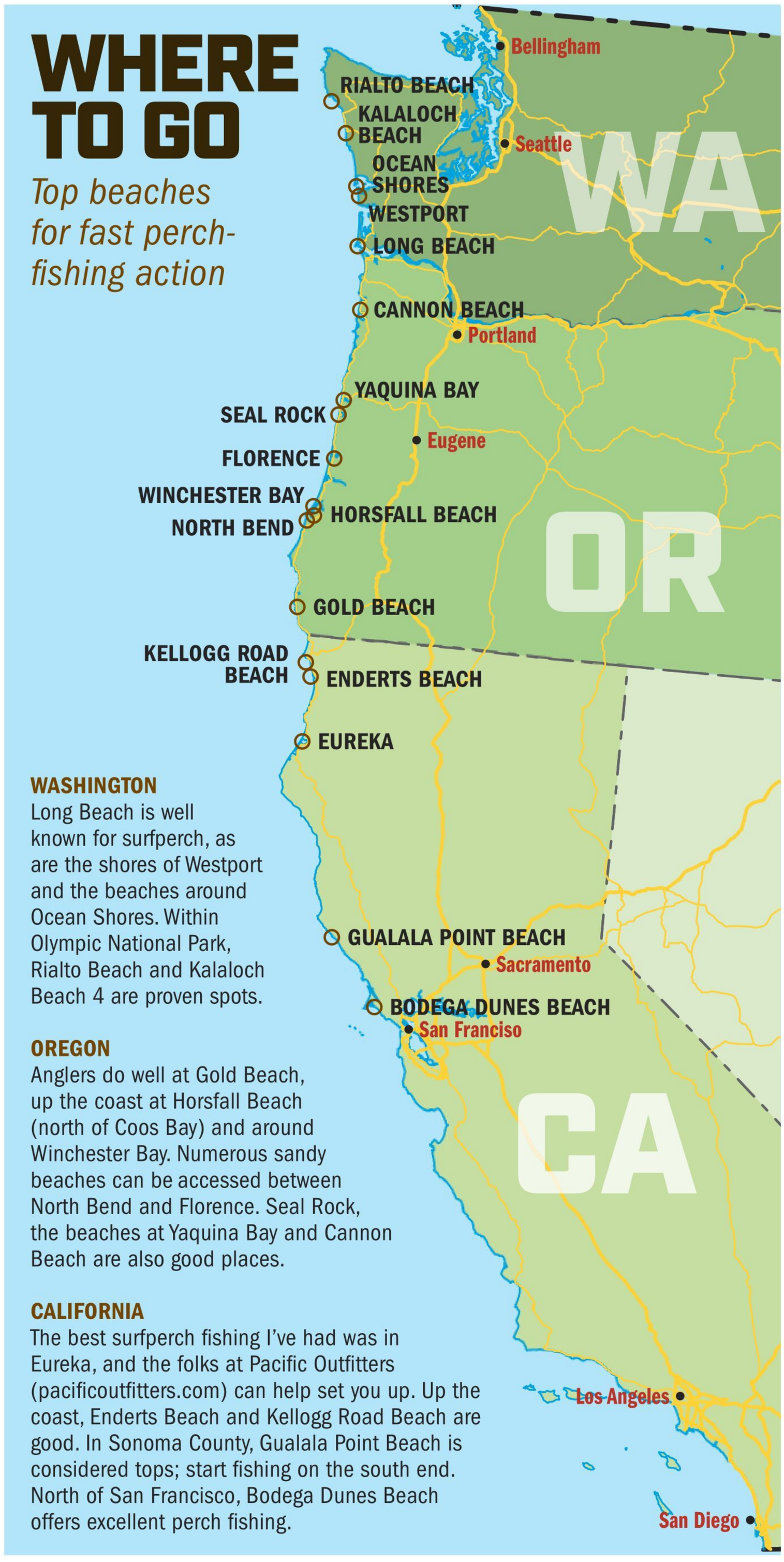
He warns not to get trapped when fishing an incoming tide, something he's seen happen more than once. Also, never turn your back to the ocean and always keep an eye on fishing partners.

Surfperch are among my favorite eating fish in the sea and catching them is a blast. With some basic gear, a plan of where to go and a license, you're set to experience one of the great fishing joys on beaches up and down the Pacific Coast.

Editor's Note: *For signed copies of Scott Haugen's popular seafood cookbook, visit scotthaugen.com.*

WHERE TO GO

Top beaches for fast perch-fishing action



WASHINGTON

Long Beach is well known for surfperch, as are the shores of Westport and the beaches around Ocean Shores. Within Olympic National Park, Rialto Beach and Kalaloch Beach 4 are proven spots.

OREGON

Anglers do well at Gold Beach, up the coast at Horsfall Beach (north of Coos Bay) and around Winchester Bay. Numerous sandy beaches can be accessed between North Bend and Florence. Seal Rock, the beaches at Yaquina Bay and Cannon Beach are also good places.

CALIFORNIA

The best surfperch fishing I've had was in Eureka, and the folks at Pacific Outfitters (pacificoutfitters.com) can help set you up. Up the coast, Enders Beach and Kellogg Road Beach are good. In Sonoma County, Gualala Point Beach is considered tops; start fishing on the south end. North of San Francisco, Bodega Dunes Beach offers excellent perch fishing.

LAND OF GIANTS

Trophy bass angler Bill Siemantel uses big baits, like Spro's BBZ-1, to catch California's plus-size fish.

THE BIGGEST BASS OF YOUR LIFE PROBABLY SWIMS IN ONE OF THESE CALIFORNIA LAKES.

By Ken Duke



COURTESY OF BILL SIEMANTEL

Most bass anglers know that California has produced some of the heaviest largemouth bass on record for decades. In fact, 20 of the top 25 bass ever caught by anglers anywhere in the world have come from the Golden State.

For a variety of reasons, the chances that a world-record fish is swimming in a California lake now are much lower than they have been in the past (see sidebar, page 61), but the state still remains the best bet for anglers in the West to catch a personal-best, double-digit largemouth.

For a bass to reach trophy size, it needs to live a long time, be in a habitat with a long growing season, eat a lot and have the genetic capacity to grow faster and bigger than most bass.

A high percentage of California lakes have that kind of habitat and that kind of bass. Largemouths are not native to California, but they were transplanted there a surprisingly long time ago—in 1879 in Crystal Springs Reservoir in San Mateo County. Their progeny were later distributed throughout the state.

They did well, but these were northern-strain largemouths, which means they were cold-hardy but didn't grow as large as the bass that have since made California synonymous with world-class fish. Until the late 1960s, the state record was in the low teens. But in the late 1950s, Florida-strain largemouth, which have a higher potential for attaining double-digit weights, began to be transplanted in the state.

Since then, two-dozen California water bodies have produced bass weighing better than 18 pounds, and about half of them are in San Diego County. Most of the extreme top-end fish came from small reservoirs, ranging from just 35 to 1,680 acres, the majority of which have or currently support put-and-take trout fisheries. Because big bass eat small trout, these are the kinds of lakes that anglers looking to catch the largest bass of their lives should focus on fishing.

Even if California doesn't produce a world record, it's still the place to go for big fish. We reached out to two experts who have spent years studying the best places to go to catch big bass across the state. The first is famed trophy bass hunter and Los Angeles firefighter Bill Siemantel, who has a 19-13 and two other bass over 18 pounds to his credit. The other is California Inland Fisheries Senior Environmental Scientist John O'Brien, who keeps tabs on population and size trends in the state's bass waters.

For anglers looking to put a double-digit bass in their boat, these are the fisheries they recommend.

SIEMANTEL'S PICKS:

The Delta: In California, "The Delta" means the Sacramento River Delta, which is a low-elevation floodplain

about 1,100 square miles in circumference. Much of the bifurcated river system here is low enough to be influenced by the tides. In some parts of the Delta, water levels can change 3 or 4 feet from tide to tide, so when the tide is going out (or coming in) the current should be a factor in your choice of where to cast.

Bass will seek slow-water ambush points close to current that washes food by them. The northern end of the Delta tends to have colder water that supports smallmouths; the best bets for largemouths are in the central portion of the Delta near Antioch, Stockton and Tracy.

Lake Amador: Amador is a classic California small-water, big-bass lake with several arms and adjacent points. It's southeast of Sacramento near Ione and is heavily planted with trout. There is a resort on the lake that rents boats, and many anglers target big bass at night here.

Don Pedro Reservoir: At the other end of the size scale for trophy bass water is Don Pedro's 13,000 surface acres, formed by a dam across the Tuolumne River in Tuolumne County. It's the state's fifth-largest reservoir. The lake features a variety of structure, from shallow to deep water, and hosts shad as an important food source for bass. Camping is available on public land surrounding the lake. Two marinas (Moccasin Point and Fleming Meadows) can offer tips for what's working best on the day you show up to fish.

New Melones Lake: This reservoir on the Stanislaus River in the central Sierra Nevada foothills spans the border of Calaveras and Tuolumne counties. Well supplied with bass forage, New Melones' spring bass chase everything from hefty swimbaits to Senko-style baits. The lake also supports smallmouths and some big spotted bass, so go prepared for a mixed bag.

O'BRIEN'S PICKS:

Lake Morena: This is a relatively high-elevation lake—3,000 feet up in the foothills of the Laguna Mountains approximately 60 miles east of San Diego—but its shallow, rocky shoreline gives bass plenty of structure and good spawning sites. The lake is heavily stocked with trout and has two campgrounds, although in low-water years, often only the South Campground is open.

Lake Cuyamaca: Also east of San Diego, and even higher in elevation, 110-acre Lake Cuyamaca is San Diego County's only year-round trout fishery. Lots of trout are planted here, and although the high-elevation cold slows the growth rate of largemouths, there are some 10-plus-pound fish caught in this lake.

Lake Casitas: A reservoir built for drinking water and irrigation in Ventura County, Casitas is one of the most storied big-bass lakes in California.

DIY TROPHY TACTICS

Big fish take big bites.



Large swimbaits that imitate stocker trout are a staple for California bass.

COURTESY OF BILL SIEMANTEL

On a big-bass lake, Bill Siemantel recommends focusing on channels, flats, humps, points and ridges—areas that will hold outsize bass year-round rather than just during the spawn or a particular season. He takes a "top-middle-bottom" approach to finding fish, choosing baits that allow him to cover the various strata. Big bass spend much of their time focused on food, particularly as waters warm in the spring and they gear up for the spawn. Large, rich food sources are what they are after, which is why lakes with trout, shad and crawdads produce big bass.

Siemantel has a reputation for catching giant bass on big swimbaits, particularly the 8-inch BBZ-1 he designed for Spro. He uses that bait and others up to 12 inches, in both floating and sinking models, to fish the water column from top to bottom.

"If you're looking for fish over 10 pounds, throw a bait much bigger than the norm," he says. "You have to be dedicated and committed to catch a trophy."

RECORD HOPES IN DECLINE

Why won't the next world-record bass come from California? Depends who you ask.

California remains the top big-bass state in the West, but most experts agree that in the last 20 years their hopes that the state would produce a new world record have dimmed.

For a bass to get to world-record size, almost everything has to be perfect for that fish: It needs the right genetics, the right cover and the right food. If anything isn't perfect, the bass might still be a monster, it just won't be a world record.

According to famed trophy hunter Bill Siemantel, one reason that a world-record fish is probably not swimming in a California lake right now is that the trout and kokanee salmon plantings in many fisheries have been sporadic for more than a decade. Instead of regular stockings of 8- to 12-inch rainbows, plantings became much less frequent. It seems the non-native trout were eating native species, and local authorities did not want to threaten those creatures.

Inland Fisheries Senior Environmental Scientist John O'Brien is not optimistic about California's world-record prospects either. We recently asked him if a world record currently swims in California waters.

"Based on survey and angling records this is not likely," was his reponse. But rather than point to trout stockings and access as the reason, O'Brien suggests that a shift in angling practices among bass anglers may play a role. Until about 20 years ago, it was common for anglers to catch, keep and eat some of the bass they caught. Now, virtually 100 percent of anglers release every fish. The result is higher bass populations in each lake, and the bass compete with each other. That doesn't mean that fish can't get well into the double digits—but they don't often reach the 20-pound mark.



Bill Siemantel knows a thing or two about big California largemouths. His personal best weighed 19 pounds, 13 ounces.

COURTESY OF BILL SIEMANTEL

Recreation is allowed, but prospective anglers should visit casitaswater.org/recreation for information on fees, reservations and other regulations.

Castaic Lake: Another of California's most legendary trophy bass waters is Castaic Lake in Los Angeles County. It should be noted that Castaic is under various regulations, including pre-launch boating inspections for quagga and zebra mussels. To see the regs, visit castaiclake.com. If you'd rather not bring your own boat, there are a number of guides who operate here.

By no means should this be considered an exhaustive list of lakes capable of producing the best largemouth bass of your life. In addition to the lakes above, Siemantel suggests that anglers also look to reservoirs in northern California that stock trout or kokanee salmon on a regular basis.

"The key times for the stockings are from October to April," he says. "If you can find a big largemouth that's just eaten a couple of trout, it'll be a giant."

For a list of waters that receive state trout stockings, visit nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FishPlants.

CHASING THE SNOWS OF

WATERFOWLERS DREAM OF **TRIPLE-DIGIT DAYS DURING THE SPRING SNOW GOOSE CONSERVATION SEASON,** BUT THEY DON'T COME EASY. **HERE'S HARD-WON ADVICE ON HOW TO STACK THE ODDS IN YOUR FAVOR.**

By Shawn Skipper

My dad, like so many other fathers born of a generation that long predates smartphones, the Internet and even color television, is the toughest guy that his son will ever know. I've seen him shrug off countless injuries that I was sure would fell lesser men, and never truly feared for his physical safety over the years, even as time has had its way. So you can imagine my surprise a few years back, when I watched a goose, of all things, nearly knock him unconscious.

SHUTTERSTOCK



SPRING

The northern migration of snow geese is on in March, but the trick is knowing exactly when large flocks will be flying through a given area.

It was a cold, foggy day of hunting in our home state of Delaware when a dozen or so birds dropped from the sky and gave us a close enough pass. Dad called the shot, everyone in the blind raised our guns, and the action was on. I'd slapped the trigger twice myself before coming to an abrupt stop when my father collapsed in the pit blind beside me. Fearing the worst, I threw my gun down and turned to check on him. When spring snow goose hunting is good, you've got to be careful: Somehow, some way, one of the first birds to get rolled on that pass had come crashing down on Dad's head, leaving him a little bloody and maybe even concussed.

Action like that—so fast, so furious that you'd better watch your head—draws more and more waterfowl hunters each year to spring snow goose hunting. Since 2000, a number of states in flyways across the nation have authorized what they call a Light Goose Conservation Order, which serves as an extension of the "light goose" hunting season beyond the existing migratory bird hunting framework. No one's hiding it: There are too many snow geese, they're having an adverse effect on the Arctic tundra that's critical to nearly every species of migratory gamebird, and nobody knows what else to do about it.

Enter hunters like you and me. Thanks to extended seasons that can run as late as March or April, incredibly large or uninhibited bag limits, loosened restrictions on the use of electronic callers and several other perks, Light Goose Conservation Orders present an attractive way to continue hunting and chase one of the legendary "tornadoes" that

can result in 100-bird days, or better, if you're lucky. I've spent my fair share of early spring mornings somewhere across America's Great Plains, chasing the next great snow goose hunt. If you're ready to embrace such an addiction, here are a few tips that will help you maximize your chances of success.

Dad recovered just fine, by the way. Always was a hard-headed old cuss.

LOCATION, TIMING AND TRAVEL

Decide early if you're going to use an outfitter. Spring snow goose hunts require a lot of gear, notably on the decoy side, which makes a bucket list hunt difficult to properly execute unless you're one of those guys who already owns an adequate rig. Local guides tend to have access to the best land in an area, too. They come at a cost, but when you're scratching hunts off your list, guides can be worth it.

With or without an outfitter, the trip-planning advice is largely the same. Just be prepared to drag around a lot of decoys and knock on a lot of doors asking permission if you're set on a true DIY experience.

The first step in planning any trip is determining the where and the when. Unfortunately, I only have a concrete answer to one of those questions. Let's start with the where.

Though snow geese can be found in all four of North America's major flyways (I'm currently planning a week-long spring snow goose hunt in my current home state of Oregon) you'll want to target the Great Plains, or prairie, portion of the U.S. to optimize your chances. Conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl report that, based on breeding ground surveys and population estimates using banding and harvest data, the Central and Mississippi Flyways have seen the greatest gain in light goose populations in the last few decades. Further, the 2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Population Status report placed more light geese in the middle of the country than any other region, and the numbers weren't close. Coupled with the fact that the flyover states have more farmers, more agriculture and generally less development than our nation's coastal regions, the two interior flyways are absolutely where you need to be.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identifies Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin as Mississippi Flyway states. Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas make up the Central Flyway. Many, if not all, of these states have light goose conservation seasons. They tend to open and close earlier in the South and later in the North, which tracks with the migration path.

More than anything else, selecting a state comes down to two key factors: When you want to go and how far you're willing to travel. Light goose conservation seasons open as early as February and run as late as April. When you're planning a trip you'll have to look ahead and decide when you might



SHUTTERSTOCK

be able to spend a week or so on the road. Once you've figured that out, think about how far you'd be willing to fly or drive. Driving is honestly the easier of the two options, given how much gear you'll probably be hauling with you.

With both pieces of information in hand, you should be able to start narrowing things down. Arkansas, for example, is always a hot state earlier in the migration, and a prime candidate for a February hunt. North Dakota, meanwhile, is near the tail end of the migration and could be your destination if you're looking at a late March or early April trip.

But what's the best state and time combo? If I could answer that I'd be selling hunts rather than providing advice. The reverse migration follows a general timeline, yes, but weather patterns and simple goose behavior can make hitting on the ideal week incredibly difficult, especially since you'll probably schedule your trip well in advance. I've hunted the Mississippi Flyway during weeks where the majority of birds had already passed through, and I've hunted the Dakotas when the birds just weren't there yet. Once I got stuck between two different storms in Illinois, which kept the hundreds of thousands of birds in the area from flying at all. The hail pelting my face in the layout blind was great, though. You can game the system a little bit, but it's still hunting.

There are ways to get inside help, however. If you're hunting with one, ask your outfitter when you should go. Outfitters want you to kill birds, spread success stories and re-book, so they'll tell you. Stay in touch with your outfitter as the hunt approaches. Reputable outfitters will level with you about where the birds are—or aren't. If they have flexibility, they may even ask if you'd like to change your trip to another set of dates if the ones you've scheduled aren't looking great.

If you're going to freelance your hunt, do your homework. There are migration reports published throughout the yearly waterfowl season, and they're available online. Ducks Unlimited (ducks.org) actively tracks the light goose migration. If you keep an eye on what's happening and are willing to go when the birds are where you need them to be, you'll maximize your chances for success.

When it comes to travel, how far you're going and what you're bringing with you will make all the difference. I've road-tripped from the Eastern seaboard to the Midwest several times, and it's a chore. But it was also far easier than flying, since we were dragging a half-dozen shotguns, five cases of ammunition and a golden retriever along for the ride. Hunting with a group of buddies and splitting things like drive time and gas expenses can also be a more economical option, and it adds some fun to the trip. An old-school road trip with the boys? I'll take it. Just remember to factor in all your costs, like gas, tolls, food, potentially a motel stay if you don't think you can make the trip in one long haul, etc.

If you're going to fly, note that TSA has limits on things like how much ammunition you can take with you (8 pounds, which equates to a couple boxes of shells), so you'll have to make arrangements to ship a significant amount of gear.



Snow geese travel by the thousands. Attracting that many birds into shotgun range requires setting a huge decoy spread and making lots of noise with an electronic caller.

GUNS, AMMO AND GEAR

Talking to a dedicated waterfowler about gear is a risky proposition; you may not be able to pull the ripcord on the conversation for a solid two or three hours. No hunting pursuit calls for more gear than migratory bird hunting. Sure, every niche has its fair share of gear-heads. But success on a waterfowl hunt simply requires more gear, which almost always means a heavier investment, right out of the gate. The good news is that, assuming you have some duck or goose hunting under your belt, you already own most of what you'll need to chase snows.

You probably have at least one shotgun you trust, and that's great. Hopefully you own two, and hopefully they're both semi-automatics. Why two guns? That's simple: redundancy. Your scattergun is going to spend all day in some sort of dusty ag field, either lying on the ground next to you or cuddling up with you in a layout blind. It's hopefully going to be emptying at least a box of shells a day. And you're hopefully going to be so gassed that you elect to skip your post-hunt cleaning procedure at least once or twice.

Point being, your gun is going to take a beating. I once saw a guy pull half of a corn husk out of his jammed action, which had mucked up his entire afternoon, and he had no idea how or when it got there. Having a solid No. 2 as a backup gun is just smart practice, and we're not even accounting for random failures that could just as easily occur when you're hunting your usual spot back home. The difference here is that a busted gun could end your hunt, unless a buddy has a spare or you're willing to throw down a few hundred bucks at the local sporting goods store. Come prepared.

Why semi-automatic shotguns? Simple physics: Pump guns typically produce more felt recoil than semi-autos, and you may be shooting an awful lot. I know you can run your Remington 870 as fast as anyone's semi-auto and that you wield it like Leonardo Da Vinci did a paint-brush. But after you put your shoulder through a case of heavy shells in just a few days, your shooting will look more like a Picasso. Run a semi-auto and thank me later. As for specific shotgun recommendations, just take something known for being rugged and reliable, and you can't go wrong. Properly preparing your shotgun for a snow goose hunt is another story altogether (see sidebar).

SNOW GUNS

Rig your shotgun for the storm.

Your faithful scattergun is going to have to Hulk out a bit if you want to turn it into a true snow goose slayer. Light Goose Conservation Orders don't just open up bag limits and extend seasons, they take strides to make you more lethal by eliminating the requirement to have a plug in your shotgun. And while removing the plug will get an extra shell or two in there, we can do better. Not taking advantage of that is foolish and will cost you birds. Get your gun ready by boosting capacity and making a couple other upgrades.

ADD AN EXTENSION TUBE

A magazine tube extension can grant you up to five more shells, depending on what you're shooting. (Extensions vary in length based on your firearm and their manufacturer.) Snow geese are prone to dropping into your decoys in large groups, occasionally allowing you to shoot far more than the three shells you'd be sending on a regular hunt. More steel in the air is rarely a bad thing. Once during a hunt in Illinois I ran a shotgun for a day that simply had its plug removed. Never again. My companions got to shoot long after I was empty, because scrambling to reload while a white tornado is touching down is a lot harder than you'd think.

CHANGE THE CHOKE

The choke tube that's currently in your gun can and will do the trick. But if you're trying to optimize your pattern, consider an upgrade. Most choke companies are working with ammo manufacturers now, meaning you can probably get a choke that's matched to whatever shotgun load you settle on. It will be designed to produce a tighter, more efficient pattern for the shell. Trust me, this isn't marketing jazz. Load-specific chokes work and are worth the investment. Carlson's Choke Tubes (choketube.com) are a great place to start. The folks there are always tinkering with new chokes and have relationships with many of the popular shotshell manufacturers.

INSTALL AN AFTERMARKET SIGHT

Oh, I know. You haven't even seen the bead on your favorite shotgun for years, and you don't need anything there in order to hit a snow goose. I get it. But modern technology isn't a crutch, and aftermarket front sights like the magnetic versions from HiViz Shooting Systems (hivizsights.com) or the easy-to-install options from TruGlo (truglo.com) can make things a little easier on your eyes during long, potentially gray days.



In the heat of the action, reloading from a blind bag isn't easy. Maximize a shotgun's capacity with an extension tube.

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Semi-automatic shotguns and 3-inch loads are less taxing on the shoulder when a good day's shooting empties several boxes of shells.

When it comes to selecting shotshells, things get a little stickier. In a good week you'll shoot a lot. Avoiding 3 1/2-inch magnums and super-high-velocity loads, most of which are actually marketed as "snow goose" loads, might not be a bad idea. If you're like my dad, though, you only shoot 3 1/2-inch shells because nobody makes a 4. I'll leave that decision between you, your shoulder labrum and your orthopedic surgeon.

The more important thing is shot size. As with any goose hunting, good old No. 2s work great when the birds are decoying and BBs are your best friend on days when the birds don't want to finish. Pack a case of each on your hunt, and have at least a couple boxes of both with you in the blind at any given time. If the birds are doing what they're supposed to do, stick with the No. 2s. If they're not, you know what to do. Flexibility is key, and having enough shells to get you through your trip without having to make an emergency stop is a nice perk. Plus, it's not like they'll go bad if they wind up back in your ammo closet.

If you're going to add new clothing to your collection before the trip, make it white. If you wind up hunting in a pit or layout blind, any old camouflage that you're comfortable in will do. But adding some white duds to your collection will give you versatility. Some of the best setups for snow geese can end with you and your buddies lying on your backs among the decoys. When that's the case, you're better off blending in with the dekes around you than hoping your favorite jacket looks enough like the ground beneath you. Tyvek suits are great and will keep you dry if the ground is damp or you catch a little rain.

You're going to need decoys if you go the DIY route. Snow geese tend to travel in enormous groups come the reverse migration, and it behooves you to put out a grand decoy spread to entice flocks into giving you a good look. The most practical and economical way to do that on a road trip is to stock the truck and trailer (freelancing snows is probably going to require a trailer) with some style of silhouette or SilloSock decoy. They're lightweight, mobile and all you'll need for running and gunning on the prairie.

Most outfitters will recommend setting at least 500 decoys, but that's a bare minimum. You're probably looking at closer to 1,500 to 2,000 as a good starter set. I once hunted with an outfit that offered a 10,000-decoy setup, as long as you booked far enough in advance. You want to catch these birds' eyes as they're heading back north, and quantity can make a big difference.

Of course, no set of snow goose gear is complete without an electronic caller. Conservation seasons typically allow for the use of e-callers, and they're darn handy. This is a piece of gear that is an absolute requirement if you're going to hunt without an outfitter's assistance. Don't even worry about your favorite reed call; set up an e-caller and as many speakers as you can lug around, and get loud. Without it, you're just not going to get the birds to cooperate. Whether the caller is from Primos, Flextone or another brand, you want to have the sounds of a flock on your side.

SEEING IT THROUGH

Sometimes-forgotten items in all the excitement are things like lodging, meals and the like. If you're hunting with an outfitter, never forget to ask if there is a lodge. Many waterfowl outfitters don't have lodges since they spend significant parts of their season chasing the migration. Fortunately rural America is covered in hotels, motels and even houses for rent. Before you hit the road, make a few calls, read a few reviews and make sure you have a comfortable place to rest your head each night. It'll make a difference when you're lying on your back in a cornfield for 12 hours the next day.

Food's always a key consideration. A hunter has to eat and, again, not a lot of snow goose outfitters will offer the service. Be sure to ask, and then research local restaurants to see where you'll find sustenance. If you decide to drive, packing along a mobile cooking setup, like those offered by Camp Chef, is a great idea. A few years back we took a Camp Chef Pro90X grill to South Dakota for a week-long hunt. Each day we'd break for lunch, hike back to the truck and cook a hot meal. It was a lifesaver on some brutally cold days.

Other than that, just keep in mind that snow goosing is hunting and an imperfect science. Just like any bucket-list hunt, you're going to need a few things to break your way. To get one of those legendary 100-plus-bird days you're going to need the weather to be right, the migration to be right and the birds to be hungry. But they can and do happen, and you're never going to experience one from the couch. Make your plans and embrace a new addiction, because that's exactly what snow goose hunting is to those of us who do it.

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RACKED OUT

HUNTING AND FISHING ARE GEAR-INTENSIVE ACTIVITIES.

FORTUNATELY, THERE ARE MYRIAD PRODUCTS THAT SIMPLIFY GETTING OUR EQUIPMENT TO THE WOODS AND WATER.

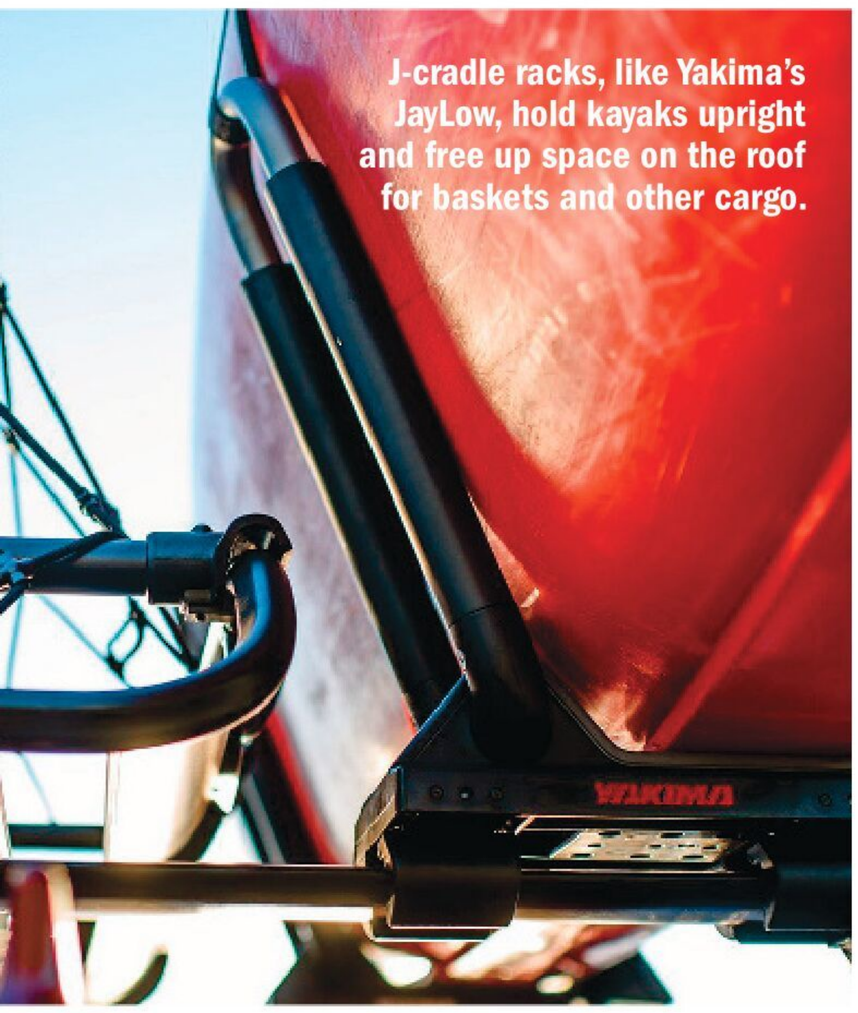
By Joseph Albanese

Whether you're headed to the whitetail woods or the fishing hole, odds are pretty good that you've got a bunch of stuff to take with you. Guns, treestands, canoes and fishing rods all take up space, and can max out a vehicle's capacity in short order. Adding the correct cargo management system to your vehicle makes taking it all with you easier and minimizes the chance of damaging your valuable equipment. And, perhaps more importantly, it will make loading up faster so you can spend less time packing and more time hunting or fishing.

CANOES AND KAYAKS

A trip to any river, pond or smallish lake will reveal the popularity of canoes and kayaks. But because of their size, getting these watercraft to your favorite fishing spot can be difficult. The simplest method involves throwing a few foam blocks between it and the roof of your vehicle and lashing it down. This will work, but it's time consuming and not necessarily the most secure way. A dedicated rack made for your vessel is faster and more secure. There are two basic styles: J-cradle racks and saddles. You'll need a roof rack on your vehicle already, but both styles install quickly.

J-cradle racks make the most of available roof space because they tilt the kayak on its side, so you can use the remainder of the roof rack for other equipment like fishing rods, bicycles or even an additional kayak. **Yakima's JayLow** ($199; yakima.com) works with nearly any factory or aftermarket roof rack and just about every kayak, be it sit-on or sit-in. The upright nature of these carriers creates drag on the highway even without a 'yak attached, and can create issues getting into parking



J-cradle racks, like Yakima's JayLow, hold kayaks upright and free up space on the roof for baskets and other cargo.



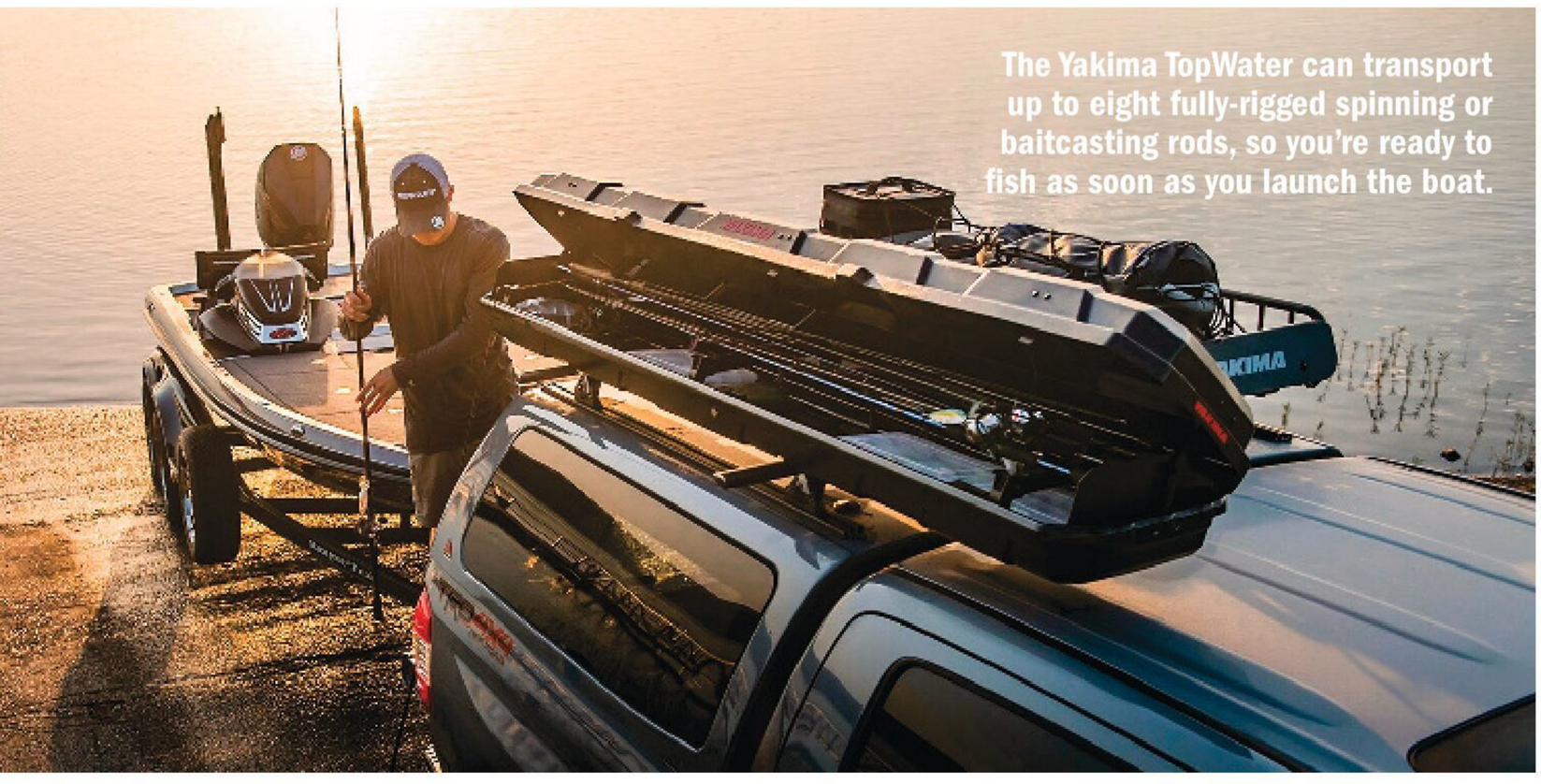
Saddle racks are easy to load, and most can accommodate a wide range of hull types. Yakima's SweetRoll is one option.

garages. Folding J-cradle racks, like **Malone's Downloader** ($170; malonautoracks.com) have a smaller footprint when not in use.

Saddle racks work with a wider variety of hull styles and make loading easier. To get your boat on the roof, simply rest it on the back and push it up and forward, eliminating the need to lift the entire weight of the vessel. **Yakima's SweetRoll** ($239) has a roller built-in to make the process even easier. **Malone's SeaWing with Stinger Assist** ($230) adds an extension to protect your vehicle's rear glass and facilitate loading. Canoe-specific saddles, like **Yakima's KeelOver** ($119) and **Thule's Portage** ($140; thule.com) are designed to protect the gunwales while preventing the boat from sliding from side to side.



Trxstle's CRC system serves double duty as a rooftop fly-rod carrier and a portable rod tube.



The Yakima TopWater can transport up to eight fully-rigged spinning or baitcasting rods, so you're ready to fish as soon as you launch the boat.

FISHING RODS

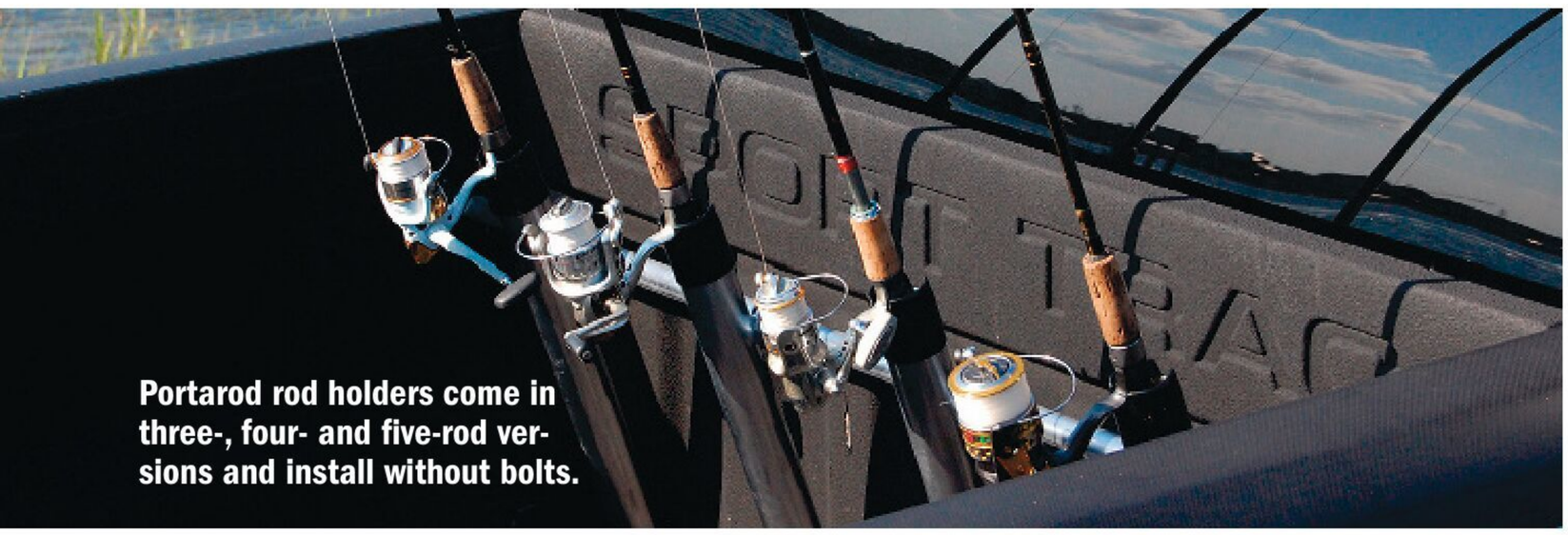
Because of their length and fragility, fishing rods present a unique transportation challenge. Storing rods inside the vehicle decreases the chance of theft and keeps them out of the elements, but you still need to secure them to keep them safe as you travel.

Racks like the **Rodmounts Rod-Up** ($199; rodmounts.com) keep your casting, spinning or fly rods tucked up along the roofline with a metal framework that won't wiggle free on even the bumpiest roads. If you'll be sticking to smooth thoroughfares, the **Rod Saver Vehicle Rod Carrier** ($35; rodsaver.com) is an economical choice. Just keep in mind that the nylon straps that keep the rods suspended will sway with each bump.

While many vehicles can accommodate rods up to 7 feet long inside the cab, anything over that becomes a challenge. If you don't have the room inside your vehicle to fit your rods, you'll need to transport them on the outside.

One option is the **Portarod rod holder** ($119 and up; portarod.com), which fits inside the bed of a pickup and securely holds rods upright as you drive.

Fly anglers hopping from hole to hole will sometimes tuck their rods under a windshield wiper and hope for the best. Obviously, this is a gamble—one sharp bump and your prized rod can be destroyed. To keep your rods in place as you motor upstream, use a carrier like the **Rodmounts Sumo** ($150). This two-part system attaches to the hood and the roof,



Portarod rod holders come in three-, four- and five-rod versions and install without bolts.

letting you strap your rods in quickly. Both suction and magnetic models are available, so the rack will work no matter what your vehicle is made of. The Sumo rod holder doesn't require any additional mounting equipment, and will work with other types of rods.

If you have a roof rack and want the ability to keep a pair of fly rods rigged and ready, the **Trxstle CRC System V2.0** ($395; trxstle.com) is an excellent choice. Unlike other rigid tube carriers, the CRC system collapses for storage. This lets you use the CRC as a protective case, safely storing your broken-down rods for airline travel or other rough passages. A pair of locking, quick-release clamps lets you install the carrier on a variety of racks quickly.

If you want to keep up to four fly rods rigged and don't need the portability of the CRC System, then **Yakima's DoubleHaul** ($699) fits the bill. This carrier stacks the rods on their sides, making the most of roof rack space. The reel box accommodates the butts of two spey rods, so you can store doublehanders up to 10 feet in length.

You can also get locking exterior storage for spinning and casting rods. **Thule's Rodvault ST** ($450) features the now-familiar tube-and-box construction of rigid fly rod holders, with an increased diameter for larger guides. **Yakima's TopWater** ($550) takes a different approach, completely enclosing up to eight fully rigged fishing rods in a weatherproof box.

If you have really long rods, such as surf, spey or centerpin setups, then you'll need an open carrier to accommodate them. **Racarod Rod Holders** ($245 and up; racarod.com) feature locking reel cradles and tip sections that gently sandwich your rods to keep them stable at highway speeds. These are built beefy to handle the heaviest setups.

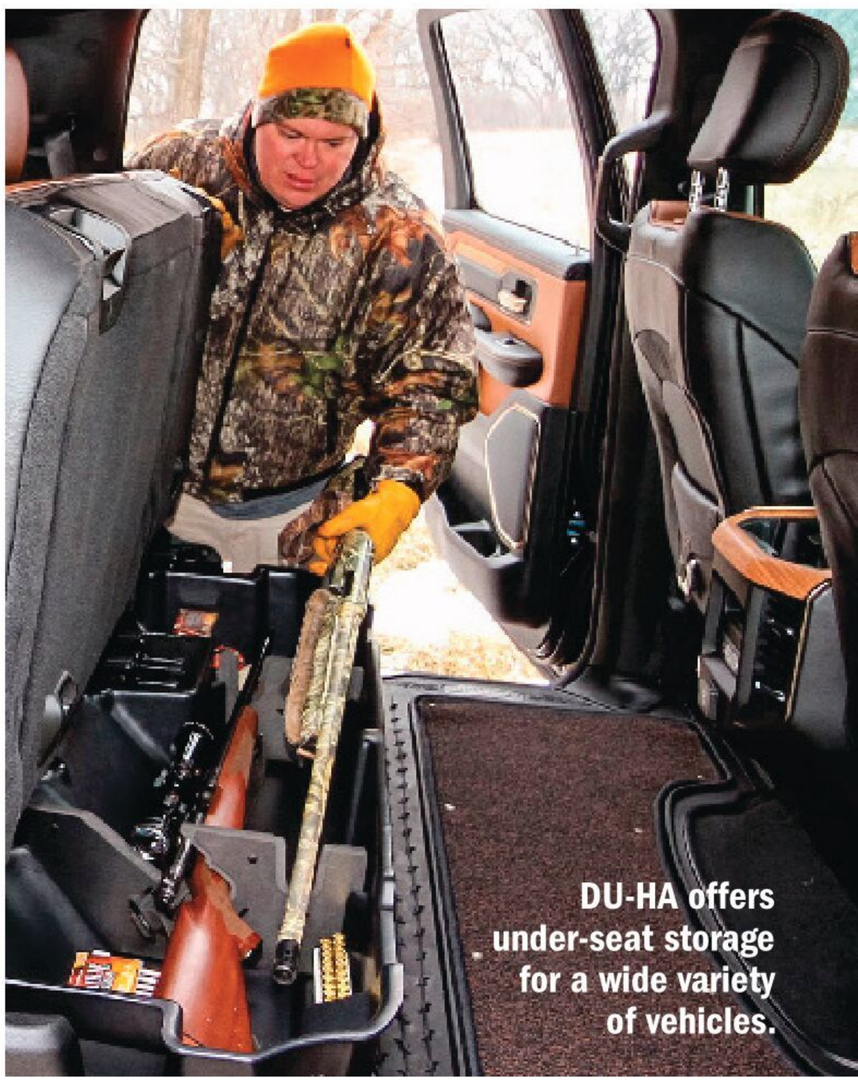
FIREARMS

Years ago, it seemed like every pickup truck had a gun rack in the back window. You can still get away with that in some parts of the country, but visible guns tempt thieves. Keeping guns locked up—especially when you're away from the vehicle—is the safest course of action.

One of the easiest ways to store handguns is to harden your existing console with a locking top. **Tuffy** makes a variety of locking console safes for handguns ($168 and up; tuffyproducts.com), custom fit to a number of vehicles. Prying eyes will only see the stock upholstery, so the addition won't let on that you have valuables in the car. If you don't want to give up your center console, you can utilize one of Tuffy's under-seat locking storage containers ($141 and up). These are also out of sight and won't attract any unwanted attention.

Rifles and shotguns are a bit tougher to store, but you can make use of the space under your truck's back seat. **DU-HA** offers custom-molded liners formed with slots to securely hold long guns ($179 and up; du-ha.com). These are available for most full- and mid-sized trucks. If you want something a bit more secure, there are locking versions ($299) for select vehicles.

If you'd prefer to keep your guns more accessible, you can install the **Great Day Center-Lok Overhead Gun Rack** ($195 and up; greatdayinc.com) in your truck or SUV. The Overhead Gun Rack is built similarly to the old-school window racks, but is designed to hug the ceiling, keeping your guns out of view of most passers-by. To retrieve your firearms, just undo a couple Velcro straps and be on your way.



DU-HA offers under-seat storage for a wide variety of vehicles.



Locking, under-seat compartments, like this one from Tuffy, provide a secure and discreet way to transport handguns.

TRUCK BED SYSTEMS

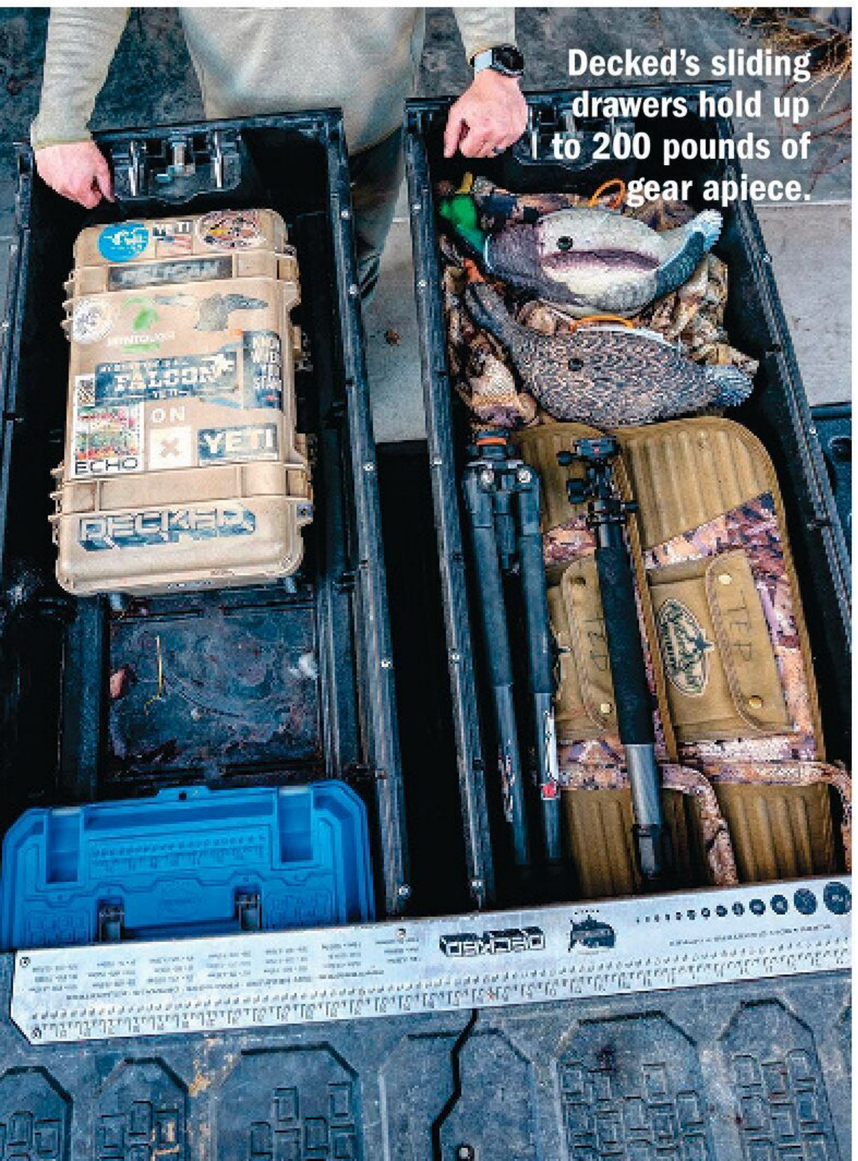
Many outdoorsmen and -women choose to drive pickup trucks because of their off-road prowess, load capacity and overall utility. You can make your truck even more useful by outfitting the bed with a drawer system. These allow you to carry cargo, such as ATVs, treestands or other bulky, heavy items, while creating an easily accessible storage area below. These systems are more complex to install than a kayak rack or rod holder, but you can get it done in a few hours with the help of a buddy.

Tuffy's Heavy Duty Gear Drawers ($2,472) provide organized, weatherproof storage in two locking drawers with a 2,000-pound load rating above. You won't have to worry about your gear walking off, thanks to Tuffy's automotive OEM-quality pushbutton locking mechanism that incorporates a 1/4-inch-thick steel security latch and all-metal construction. Even when the drawers are fully loaded with guns, bows or camping equipment, the precision-ground stainless steel sealed roller bearings ensure they pull out easily. Check with Tuffy to see if they make a drawer system for your truck.

Decked ($1,149 and up; decked.com) takes a distinctly different approach to truck bed drawers, manufacturing them out of high-density polyethylene with a metal skeleton. Despite the mostly plastic construction, the system has the same 2,000-pound payload capability. The drawers hold 200 pounds each, sliding over the existing bed on rubber casters. Decked has a variety of custom-made accessories designed to fit the drawers and keep your gear organized.

If you're looking for weatherproof storage that's less permanent than a drawer system, check out **Pelican's Cargo Cases** ($249 and up; pelican.com). These rotomolded containers are designed with mounting systems for truck beds and roof racks, so you can keep them loaded with gear and be ready to hit the road in minutes. Built with oversized handles for easy carry, the cases go from garage to truck to campsite easily. Sizes for everything from firearms to a couple weeks' worth of hunting or fishing gear are available.

Whatever vehicle you drive, outfitting it for your adventures will ensure you make the most of your available space, and that your stuff gets there in one piece. And with the proper gear to haul your equipment, you'll spend more time in the woods or on the water and less time packing. GAF

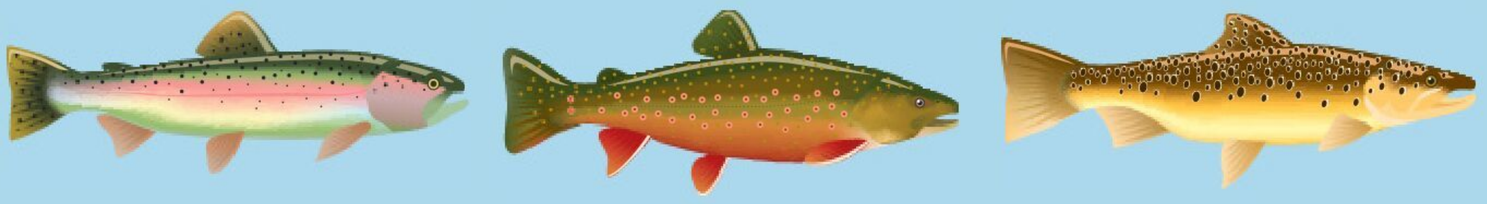


Decked's sliding drawers hold up to 200 pounds of gear apiece.



Tuffy bed storage systems feature all-metal construction. The unit boasts a 2,000-pound load rating atop the box.

BUDGET-FRIENDLY TROUT COMBOS



GET IN THE FLY FISHING GAME THIS SEASON WITHOUT EMPTYING YOUR BANK ACCOUNT.

By John Taranto, Editor

It's not difficult to drop four figures on a new fly rod and reel these days. Space-age materials, boundary-pushing innovation and highly specialized manufacturing don't pay for themselves, after all. And there's certainly a market for such tackle, as many hard-core anglers endeavor to build epitomical fish-fighting outfits for battling leviathan trout in far-flung destinations.

At the same time, it's never been easier to find a quality fly-fishing combo that'll get the job done just fine on your local stream. Besides, if you're just getting started in the sport, you probably don't want to go for the high-end gear right out of the gate anyway. That's like handing the keys to a McLaren 720S to a kid on the day he passes driver's ed. Instead, consider one of these ready-made combos that'll fit just about any budget.



White River Fly Shop Dogwood Canyon
LENGTH: **8'6"** | SIZE: **5 wt.** | BUILD: **2 pc.**
PRICE: **$100; basspro.com**

LEARNING TO FLY

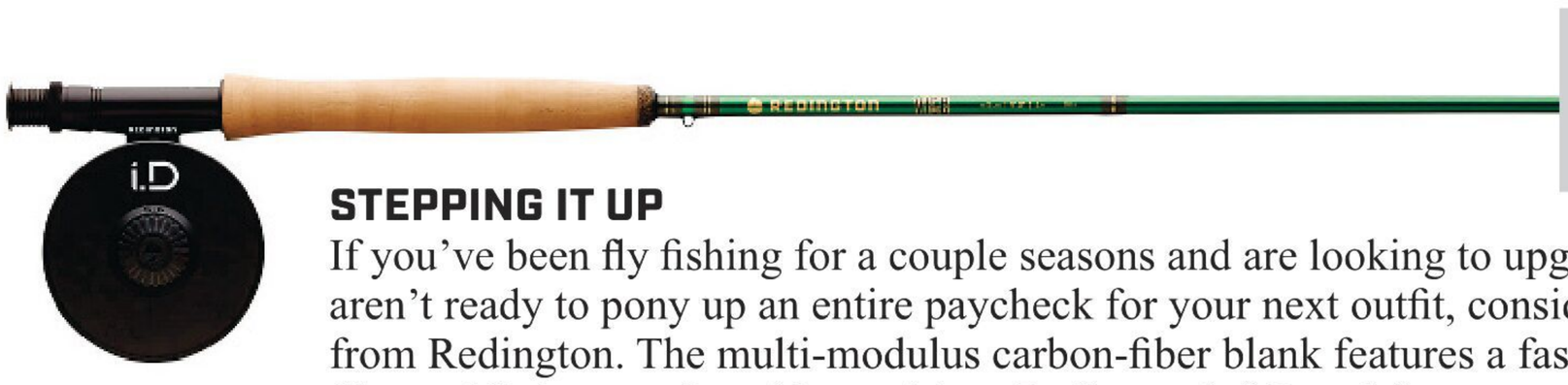
This capable, entry-level combo from Bass Pro Shops' house brand White River includes a two-piece, medium-action graphite blank with aluminum reel seat and a matching aluminum disc-drag reel. The reel comes pre-loaded with backing, weight-forward line and a tapered leader. This is a great option for newcomers looking to get their feet wet (pun fully intended), as many will find the 8 1/2-foot length easier to cast than a 9-foot rod. One thing to keep in mind is that being a two-piece rod, it won't break down for transport as compactly as a four-piece rod does. The combo comes with a protective rod sock.



Orvis Encounter
LENGTH: **9'** | SIZE: **5 wt.** | BUILD: **4 pc.**
PRICE: **$169; orvis.com**

UNMATCHED PEDIGREE

There's perhaps no more legendary name in fly tackle than Vermont-based Orvis. Indeed, the company's founder, Charles F. Orvis, invented the fly reel in 1874. The Encounter outfit is a very forgiving and versatile combo for any number of applications and presentations, and has been a favorite among fly-fishing neophytes for years. The combo includes a four-piece graphite rod (medium action) and large-arbor, disc-drag reel with backing, weight-forward line and leader. Some may be turned off by the composite plastic reel, but it's widely regarded as being quite durable. The Encounter combo comes with a Cordura carrying case.



Redington Vice
LENGTH: **9'** | SIZE: **4 wt.** | BUILD: **4 pc.**
PRICE: **$300; redington.com**

STEPPING IT UP

If you've been fly fishing for a couple seasons and are looking to upgrade your rod and reel, but maybe aren't ready to pony up an entire paycheck for your next outfit, consider this excellent intermediate combo from Redington. The multi-modulus carbon-fiber blank features a fast action and is adept at delivering dry flies and light nymphs with precision. Redington's i.D reel features cast aluminum construction, a Rulon disc drag and a large arbor, and rides snugly in an anodized, machined aluminum reel seat. The reel comes spooled with 100 yards of 20-pound backing, RIO Mainstream line and a 9-foot 5X leader. Also included are a Cordura rod tube and a lifetime warranty.

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TACKLING SPRING

HERE'S THE LOWDOWN ON TOP NEW RODS, REELS, BAITS AND OTHER GEAR TO **GET YOUR SEASON STARTED RIGHT.**

By Game & Fish Staff

A new year on the water calls for new gear. Whether you're adding a rod with a different action to your arsenal, spooling up with fresh line or stocking your boxes with the latest baits, there's bound to be a trip to the tackle shop in your near future. Indeed, picking new tackle is a rite of spring that's almost as fun as the fishing you plan to do with it.

Tackle manufacturers roll out their new offerings for the coming year at the International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST) show, organized by the American Sportfishing Association, in July. Although last year the COVID pandemic caused ICAST to be a virtual event rather than the in-person tradeshow typically held in Orlando, Fla., *Game & Fish* editors nonetheless received an advance look at new fishing gear from hundreds of brands.

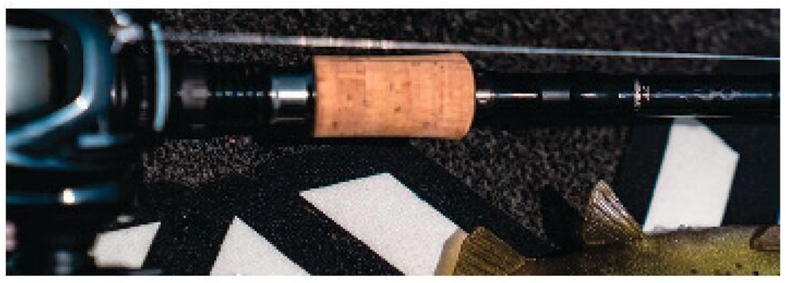
The tackle introduced at ICAST is now available on retailers' shelves and just waiting for a trip to the water. We compiled noteworthy products from several categories to give you a heads-up on what to look for and consider when planning your fishing strategy. Spring is here, and it's time to go shopping.

RODS

Lew's KVD Series

Kevin VanDam needs no introduction to bass anglers; he's one of the most successful professionals in bass tournament history. Lew's teams up with KVD to offer a series of casting and spinning rods designed to his specifications, all with powers, actions and lengths purpose-built for certain presentations. A casting rod made for dock skipping and swimming frogs, and a spinning rod designed for drop-shot and Ned rigs are just two examples. The entire KVD Series includes 10 casting rods and seven spinning rods, all with IM8 graphite blanks, and six graphite-glass composite casting rods to cover a wide range of fishing conditions. $99.99; lews.com

Daiwa Tatula Swimbait



Big baits call for big rods, and although swimbaits are heavy, Daiwa shows us a rod that can handle them does not have to be. The Tatula Swimbait rod has a heavy action, but the blank's carbon construction made with HVF Nanoplus Technology results in a stick that weighs less while remaining strong. Daiwa's X-45 Bias concept and fiber-braiding technology enables the blank to resist twisting when loading up, and Fuji FazLite Tangle-Free K-Guides contribute to long, accurate casts. The Tatula Swimbait is available in 7-foot-3-inch and 7-foot-9-inch lengths. $189.99 to $199.99; daiwa.com

Daiwa Dark Water



Engineered for East coast offshore anglers, the Dark Water series includes 21 rods with blanks specifically constructed for targeting kingfish, sailfish and other Atlantic species. Configured for conventional and spinning reels, Dark Water rods provide a range of lengths and actions to suit various techniques. Daiwa's HVF rod-building technology produces a lighter blank with a soft tip and strong backbone, and provides a slight parabolic bend during the fight. The rods' EVA grips ensure all-day comfort while handling the rigors of fishing the salt. $179.99 and up; daiwa.com

REELS

Lew's KVD LFS Casting and KVD Spinning Series



These reels, designed by Lew's with input from Kevin VanDam, show that pro-grade gear need not break the bank. The KVD LFS Series offers six casting reels set up for right- or left-hand retrieve, aluminum frames and spools, solid brass Speed Gears, a bearing-supported pinion gear and Lew's Multi-Setting Brake dual cast-control system. The KVD Spinning Series includes three reel sizes, all with an aluminum body, sideplate and spool, and a C40 carbon rotor. More durability comes from a stainless steel main shaft and solid brass pinion gear. Reels in both series feature a 10-bearing system for smooth casts and retrieves. $139.99 (casting), $89.99 (spinning); lews.com

Lew's Pro SP Skipping and Pitching



A super-shallow design enables the Pro SP's spool to start up faster and prevent deep-spool backlashes while skipping and pitching baits—a feature Lew's developed by working with pro angler Andy Montgomery. The externally adjustable QuietCast braking system includes a "skipping zone" to maximize cast distance while further reducing backlash. In addition, the spool has an innovative Knot Slot that recesses the spool knot so it doesn't interfere with line lay. An 8.3:1 gear ratio minimizes the time your bait is out of the zone. $199.99; lews.com

Daiwa Tatula 300



Here's a reel made for throwing fat, big-lipped crankbaits and meaty swimbaits with control. The Tatula 300's T-Wing level-wind system allows for less resistance on the line when the reel is out of gear, permitting longer casts. Anglers can also finely tune spool tension to reduce backlashes when throwing large baits with this 300-size reel. Daiwa's Magforce magnetic casting system is easy to adjust to suit wind conditions, rod characteristics and bait aerodynamics for hassle-free presentations. Larger gears in the reel are designed for handling hefty baits—and fish. $269.99; daiwa.com

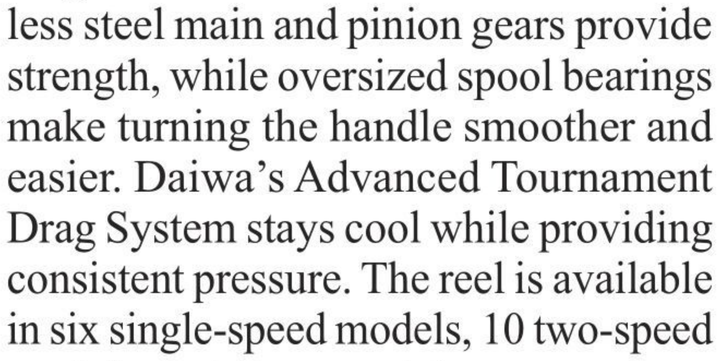
Daiwa Saltiga Lever Drag



The Saltiga Lever Drag reels feature frames and sideplates machined from a single piece of aluminum, which ensures the precise alignment of bearings and gears for increased performance during tough battles in the salt. Oversized stainless steel main and pinion gears provide strength, while oversized spool bearings make turning the handle smoother and easier. Daiwa's Advanced Tournament Drag System stays cool while providing consistent pressure. The reel is available in six single-speed models, 10 two-speed models and two special-purpose tournament-style sailfish designs. $419.99 to $699.99; daiwa.com

BAITS

Strike King KVD 100 Jerkbait



Working a jerkbait is one of Kevin VanDam's go-to presentations, and he teamed up with Strike King to offer a bait that has the ideal combination of roll, wiggle and flash. The bait's 3D eyes add realism, and black-nickel hooks keep fish secure. A proprietary weight-transfer system aids in casting. $8.99; strikeking.com

Strike King 2.75-Inch Ned Rage Craw



It may be a small bait, but the Ned Rage Craw produces big action. This finesse-focused soft plastic offers anglers Strike King's Rage Tail design in a more compact package, and features a flat end for use with jig heads typical of Ned rigs. It's available in 12 colors. $6.99; strikeking.com

Yo-Zuri 3DB Jerkbait 110 Deep and Pencil Popper



Whether you're fishing the middle of the water column or on the surface, Yo-Zuri has two new baits to cover both areas. The 3DB Jerkbait 110 Deep dives 8 to 12 feet while using Yo-Zuri's Wave Motion Technology to send out vibrations. A walk-the-dog topwater bait, the 3DB Pencil Popper features a deep mouth to spit water, 3D internal prism to reflect light and rattle to add sound. $9.99; yo-zuri.com

Yo-Zuri 3D Inshore TopKnock Pencil and Mag Popper



Surface strikes may be even better in saltwater than in freshwater, and Yo-Zuri introduces two topwater baits to bring the action. The TopKnock Pencil features Yo-Zuri's 3D Prism finish and a rattle in the back of the bait that adds casting distance and produces a knocking sound during the retrieve. The Mag Popper has the company's Magnetic Weight Transfer system to enable longer casts, while its bottleneck design and deep mouth create disturbance. $17.99 (Mag Popper), $8.99 (TopKnock Pencil); yo-zuri.com

LINE, TOOLS AND STORAGE

Daiwa J-Fluoro Samurai



Anglers know fluorocarbon line for its low visibility and long-lasting durability. Daiwa adds versatility with its J-Fluoro Samurai, offering the small-diameter line in strengths of 2- to 25-pound test. Developed and made in Japan, J-Fluoro Samurai is available in 220-yard filler spools and 1,000-yard bulk spools. $20.99 to $42.99 (filler), $59.99 to $159.99 (bulk); daiwa.com

Strike King KVD Tools



For pro anglers like Kevin VanDam, wins often come down to efficiency on the water. Good tools help make that happen. Strike King offers a set of tools developed by KVD to help rig baits and maintain gear with ease. The collection includes 5 1/2- and 8-inch scissors, 7- and 7 1/2-inch pliers, 5 1/2-inch split-ring/braid cutter pliers, a 6-inch fillet knife, 15-in-1 multi-tool, Ocho wacky-rig tool and lure wraps. $6.99 to $44.99; strikeking.com

Lure Lock Ultra-Thin and 3-in-1 Deep Boxes



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box is flipped over. Lure Lock calls it TakLogic Technology, and it prevents damage to baits and hooks during transportation. The company now offers an Ultra-Thin box that measures about 1 1/4 inches high, as well as a 3-in-1 Deep box that's 4 inches high and includes two divider configurations. $14.99 (Ultra-Thin), $34.99 (Deep); lurelock.com

Plano Edge Flex



Allowing complete customization, Edge Flex boxes come with 38 pre-cut dividers in four sizes that interlock to form compartments based on an angler's needs. One box will organize everything from tools to small weights. Edge Flex boxes are available in 3600 and 3700 sizes, and include Rustrictor rust-preventing technology, a Dri-Loc watertight seal and Water Wick desiccant dividers. A label system and clear DuraView lid make identifying contents quick and easy. $29.99 (3600), $39.99 (3700); planomolding.com

WATERCRAFT

Old Town Sportsman AutoPilot



The new Sportsman line from Old Town includes seven kayaks, but the most exciting may be the AutoPilot. Available in two sizes, the AutoPilot features a fully integrated Minn Kota saltwater-safe motor, which offers 45 pounds of thrust and GPS Spot-Lock anchoring. The motor is controlled by Minn Kota's iPilot remote, enabling anglers to control the craft easily while keeping their hands free to fish. $3,799.99 (AutoPilot 120), $3,999.99 (AutoPilot 136); oldtowncanoe.com

Old Town Sportsman Discovery Solo 119



Weighing just 56 pounds, the Sportsman Discovery Solo is ideal for reaching out-of-the-way places that may require a portage. Although it's shaped like a canoe, the Solo comes with a kayak-style seat and is easy to handle with a double-blade kayak paddle. Old Town's three-layer hull construction surrounds closed-cell foam with high-density polyethylene for durability. The Solo includes four rod holders, a forward accessory track, padded armrests with tackle trays and a tackle box. $999.99; oldtowncanoe.com

ELECTRONICS

Tactacam Fish-I



One press of a button allows you to capture your catches in HD video with the Fish-I. The compact, waterproof action camera records in a continuous loop, and you can save only the moments you want. It's light enough to attach to your body, a net or even a rod. The camera is compatible with a remote and the Fish-I app for more control when recording. Ultra-wide-angle and 2X zoom lenses are available. $199.99; tactacam.com

Hornady RAPiD Safe



The RAPiD Safe line includes several portable safes ideal for securing firearms, valuables and documents while on the boat or traveling to the water. Contents locked inside a RAPiD Safe are quickly accessible with touch-free RFID technology. Simply place the included RFID wristband, key fob or decal over the reader, and the safe opens instantly. The RAPiD Safe 2600KP will accommodate a compact handgun, the 2700KP will hold a full-size handgun, and the 4800KP has enough space to secure two full-size handguns. Each safe attaches to an immovable object with a security cable. $220.99 to $286.51; hornady.com

APPAREL

Fish Monkey The Blocker Gloves



These gloves are made for the damp, windy, chilly days of early spring. The 2 mm neoprene material keeps hands dry and warm, but it's not so thick that it impedes dexterity. A slit at the tip of each index finger allows tying knots and operating touchscreen devices without having to remove the gloves. The company's Griptanite non-slip grip design enhances purchase on surfaces no matter if they're wet or slimy. $29.95; fishmonkeygloves.com

Yooneek Gloves and Sleeves



The FIR-SKIN T+ fabric that Yooneek uses for its gloves and arm sleeves contains titanium fibers that reflect the body's far infrared ray (FIR) emissions for warmth and comfort. The technology keeps muscles and tendons performing well during long days of repeated casting. In addition, the thin, four-way stretch fabric blocks the sun's UV rays and has an SPF 50+ rating. $27.99 (half-finger gloves), $29.99 (sleeves); yooneekproducts.com

LEARN MORE

For a deeper look at new fishing gear, visit **gameandfishmag.com** to watch interviews with product developers and see rods, reels, baits and other tackle in action.

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RELOADING SAFETY TIP

Always start with the minimum load listed; *NEVER* deviate from listed loads.

BY JEFF JOHNSTON

THE ESSENTIALS

GEAR IS FUN TO BUY, **BUT SKILL ISN'T FOR SALE.**

Already in his young life Shane had accumulated a mountain of accoutrements designed to make the hunter more comfortable and more successful afield. He had more knives than a steakhouse and a closet full of camo. He had treestands, blind stools, calls, scents, scent eliminators, decoys, broadheads, backpacks, hats, handwarmers and just about anything else he could buy, borrow or convince his friends and family to get him for Christmas or his birthday. Shane dreamed of the day when he'd have a good-paying job, just so he could buy the best gear to make bagging big bucks easier.

One morning during bow season, Shane, his father and his father's friend, Jack, planned to hunt together at a nearby WMA. Jack Blackburn worked down at the plant with Shane's father. He was three-quarters Native American whose family hailed from the Chickasaw Nation. More important to Shane, Jack was legendary around town for being a keen bowhunter who'd taken many great bucks.

When Shane's father stopped outside his friend's house, Jack opened the truck door, put his bow and a plastic grocery-store bag containing his lunch on the seat and stepped in. Shane noticed he didn't have a backpack or much else besides an antler-handle knife on his belt.

"Mornin!" said Jack.

"Mornin'," said Shane's father.

"Don't forget your bino," offered Shane, trying to be helpful.

"Aw heck," said Jack. "I'm not much of a trophy hunter, so I don't really care for studying every last burr on a buck's horns. If I can't see what a deer has on his head with my own eyes, he's too far to shoot."

Shane nodded as if he'd never thought about it that way.



DAVID HOUSTON

"What kinda bow you shoot?" asked Shane as he peered over the seat. The bow leaning beside Jack looked ancient. Its string was frayed, and much of its camo paint had been worn off so it was mostly a dull gray color.

"That's an old Golden Eagle I got before there was wind or snow," Jack replied with a grin. "I don't even think they make 'em anymore."

"OK, but what do you think is the best out now?" asked Shane. "I've been reading a lot about parallel limbs and the new cams with 80 percent let-off. It's like holding air!"

"Well, bud, a wise man once told me that the best bow is the one you can hit with. And since this one ain't broken, well, I haven't looked at new ones in a coon's age," Jack said. "What do you know about 'em?"

Shane immediately launched into a long soliloquy about the advantages of high arrow velocity, drop-away rests, single-pin slider sights, mechanical broadheads and cam lean that's said to ruin accuracy.

Jack humored the boy and listened. He could tell Shane was a student of bowhunting and was thirsty for knowledge, just like he'd been when he was that age.

"What about camo?" asked Shane. "I see you're wearing green fleece, but surely you believe in camo that looks like trees and leaves, right?"

"I've found that the best camo out there is called 'Sit Still,'" said Jack. "It's been around forever."

Shane did his best to hide his growing frustration with Jack's over-simplification of everything, when he was hoping for hard-core hunting talk. Meanwhile, Shane's father hadn't said a word, but his smile hinted he was enjoying the conversation.

Soon after arriving at the WMA, the three hunters took off in different directions with plans to meet at the truck at 11 o'clock. Shane marked the location with his GPS before walking into the dark woods.

At 10:40 Shane arrived back at the pickup to find Jack lying in the grass under the shade of the tailgate. A heavy 8-point buck lay in the truck's bed, neatly field-dressed. Shane, amazed, began asking all kinds of excited questions that continued during the ride home.

"I can't believe it!" said Shane. "You didn't have anything the magazines tell you to use. No camo, no climbin' treestand, no rangefinder. Heck, you smoked a cigarette before you walked in!"

"Shane," said his father, finally joining the conversation, "what Jack has been trying to tell you is what I've been saying all along. It's the secret of hunting."

"Well, what's that?" asked Shane.

"It ain't the arrow that matters," replied Jack with a wink, "but the Indian." GF

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