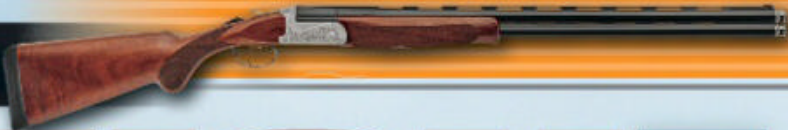


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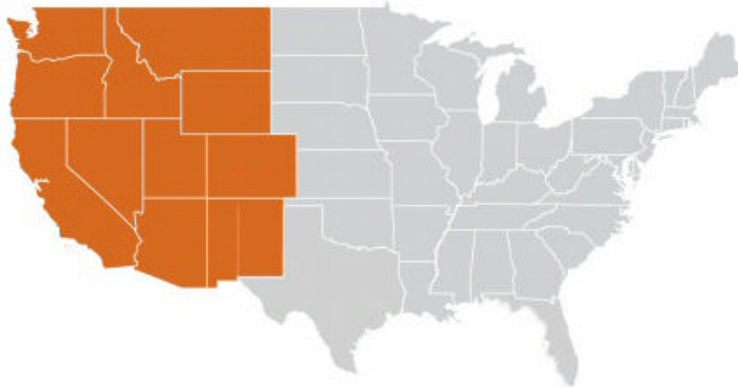
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GAME & FISH WEST

The Regional Outdoor Guide



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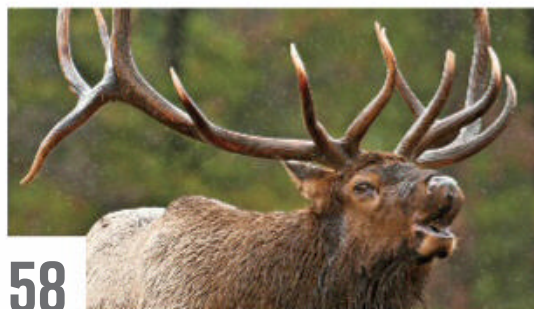
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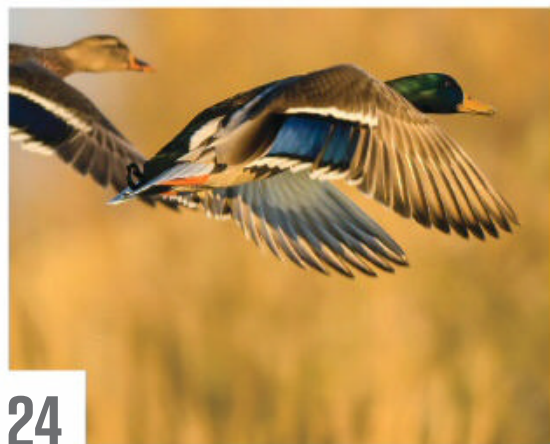
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HIGH ON HOGS

Depending on where you live and hunt, October is a month for whitetails, mule deer, elk, pronghorns, black bears, waterfowl, pheasants, grouse, squirrels or rabbits. But what about feral hogs? It may come as a surprise that in some states more folks hunt hogs than several of these other game species. For example, as Craig Boddington points out in his feature, “Hog Wild, Coast to Coast,” beginning on page 28, feral hogs have replaced deer as the most popular big game in California.

Boddington would know. He’s lived on California’s Central Coast for 30 years, an area where feral hogs long ago established a stronghold, and he’s well aware of hunting trends. Many of you recognize Boddington as an international hunter, television-show host and award-winning author. He regularly contributes to *Petersen’s Hunting, Guns & Ammo* and other titles in the Outdoor Sportsman Group family, but this issue is the first time in recent history that his byline has appeared in *Game & Fish*. He loves to hunt hogs. A piece about the current hunting opportunities offered by hogs across the nation is right up his alley, because he’s hunted them in many of the states where they roam.

It might be hogs’ wide distribution, albeit mainly in the southern half of the U.S. (at least for now), that makes them so popular. Hogs are available to hunt. In many states seasons are either liberal or nonexistent, meaning hogs can be hunted all year. Most deer seasons are short in comparison; some of us are lucky to get just a few weekends of deer hunting. Hogs, meanwhile, offer a chance to hunt at almost any time.

Hogs can be challenging, especially if they’ve been pressured, but in many cases they can be patterned and stalked easier than deer. Despite their reputation as pests, they are worthy animals for experienced and novice hunters alike. And, of course, wild pork is wonderful on the plate.

If you haven’t seriously considered feral hogs as a huntable species, you’re in the minority. Will hogs become more popular than deer across the U.S. like in California? That’s doubtful, but it doesn’t mean hogs don’t deserve some respect. They’re only increasing in number, and that may not be a bad thing for hunters and hunting.

Adam Heggenstaller
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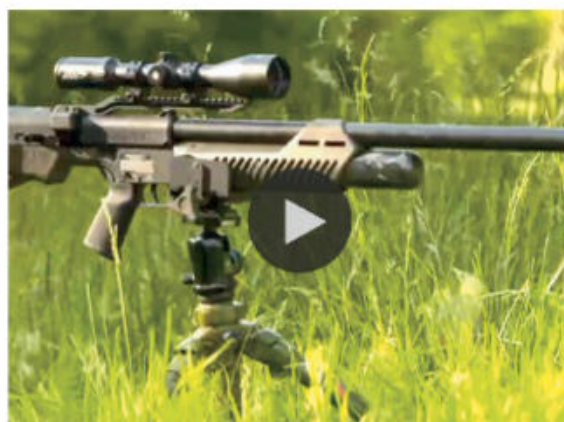
FALL FOR BASS

What do the pros throw for bass once autumn colors arrive? Get some great advice in “5 Best Baits for Bass in the Fall,” and be ready when the bite turns on.



TASTY HARVEST

As you fill your freezer this deer season, plan some awesome field-to-table meals with our recipe archive. “10 Most Popular Venison Recipes” is a good place to start.



SHOOT WITH AIR

Air rifles are no longer just for backyard plinking. In “The Modern Air Rifle,” Mike Seeklander puts them to the test, including the .50-caliber Umarex Hammer.



WHITETAIL WISDOM

Know how to make a mock scrape? Want to learn how to hang a treestand quietly? We can help. Find the “Whitetail” category to download deer-hunting knowledge.



DEER GEAR ... AND HOW TO USE IT

With advice you can turn to throughout deer season, “Gear Up & Hunt” highlights equipment, tactics and destinations for the hard-core whitetail hunter.



OFF-ROAD FIELD TEST

We took the new Polaris General XP 4 1000 Pursuit Edition through a three-month test drive to experience its power and creature comforts. It got muddy.

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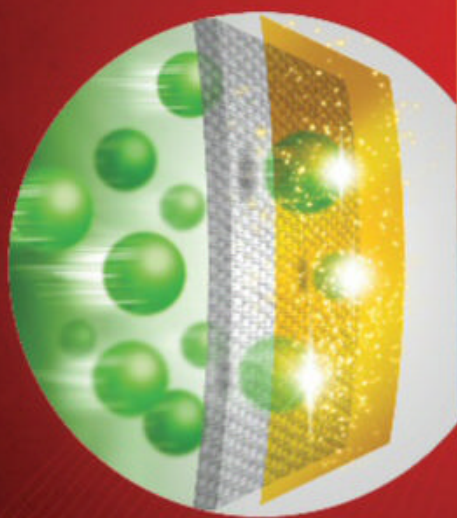
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SUN		MON		TUE		WED		THU		FRI		SAT	
19		20	FULL	21		22		23		24		25	
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OCTOBER 2021													
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NOVEMBER 2021													
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		11:18	11:42	12:06	12:30	12:54	1:18	—	2:06	2:30	2:54	3:18	3:42

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

Best Days	Good Days	Fair Days
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Maintaining contact between your cheek and the stock while obtaining a proper view through the scope is a key to precision.

CHECK YOUR CHEEK

FIND A RIFLE THAT PROVIDES A SOLID CHEEK WELD, AND YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO BETTER SHOOTING.

Story and Photos by Richard Mann

Spend time around hunters, and rifles will be discussed. Things like cartridges, actions, triggers, magazines, barrels, riflescopes and much more will be debated. But rarely will the discussion turn to cheek weld, which is the contact made by the shooter's cheek with the comb of the stock. This is partly because many hunters do not understand the importance of it.

There are several areas of shooter-rifle interface. One is where the hands hold the stock; another is where the stock rests against the shoulder. The placement of the index finger on the trigger is also a critical aspect of shooter interface. So, too, is the interface between the shooter's dominant eye and the sights. This is largely determined by comb height, and it is where cheek weld comes into play.

Up until the later part of the 20th century, sporting rifles were designed to be

fired with open sights. Their stocks had a lot of drop at the comb with even more drop at the heel. This profile worked for open sights; when you shouldered the rifle and placed your cheek on the comb, your eye would line up with the sights. As riflescopes became more popular, some manufacturers stopped selling rifles with open sights but did nothing to adjust the comb to allow for good cheek weld with a riflescope, which was mounted higher. Many rifles still require you to raise your head off the stock to see through a riflescope.

A solid and repeatable cheek weld is similar to an anchor point in archery; it helps you mount the rifle the same way every time. A good cheek weld that lines your eye up with the riflescope permits you to achieve sight alignment faster; you don't have to move your head around to see through the riflescope. It also makes tracking an animal through the scope smoother, and it makes finding an

animal in the scope after recoil easier and faster. Most importantly, as part of doing the same thing the same way every time, a cheek weld that consistently aligns your eye with the scope makes you more accurate.

So why has it taken so long for rifle manufacturers to embrace an ideal stock configuration for use with scopes? I'm not sure; they had the answer more than 35 years ago.

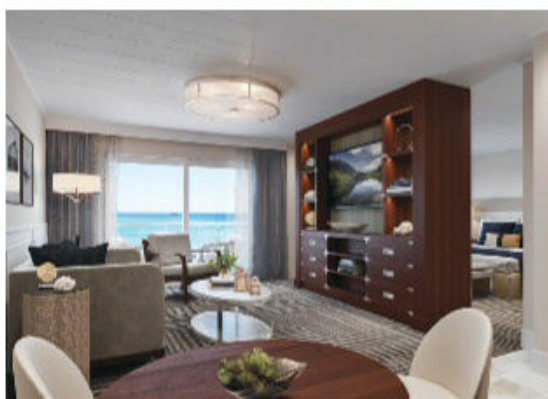
In the 1960s, a West Virginia teenager was given an air rifle. It had open sights, but he realized a riflescope would offer at least a 33 percent advantage because instead of looking at a rear sight, front sight and target, he would only have to look at a reticle and target. He mounted a riflescope to his Crosman only to find his cheek was no longer in solid contact with the stock when he fired. The visual advantage gained by the scope was lost in the physical disadvantage of not having a good cheek weld.



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A couple decades later this boy designed his own bolt-action rifle ideally configured for use with riflescopes. He did two important things to the stock. The nose of the comb was positioned 5/8 inch below the centerline of the bore, and the heel of the stock was positioned 1/4 inch below the same. This placed the comb so that with good cheek weld the shooter's eye would perfectly line up behind a riflescope mounted 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 inches above the bore centerline. The design also created negative drop to the comb so it would slide by your cheek as opposed to slamming into it during recoil.

The man was Melvin Forbes, and his company, New Ultra Light Arms, built the first bolt-action rifle with a comb height ideally situated for proper eye alignment with a riflescope while maintaining good cheek weld. (To be fair, Weatherby had tried this with its Monte Carlo stock design. It helped with cheek weld, but the excessive drop exaggerated recoil.) Steyr emulated Forbes' stock profile on its Scout Rifle, and Nosler used a similar design on its custom rifles. Kimber also followed suit but added a bit more drop.

Most bolt-action rifles made today still have stocks with a comb height better configured for open sights than a riflescope. Shooters often get around this by building up the comb with strap-on pads or even automobile body-repair putty. More recently, with the introduction of the precision rifle, we've seen the inclusion of stocks with adjustable combs. With its AccuFit system, Savage incorporates interchangeable comb sections that allow a shooter to precisely tune the stock to the height of the rifle-scope. The stock of the Benelli Lupo accepts Combtech cheek-pad inserts of different heights for the same reason. Ruger even offers stock modules with different comb heights for its American Rimfire line.

Regardless of whether you're shooting a conventional hunting rifle or more of a precision rifle design, having a good cheek weld will improve your shooting. Of all the considerations you make when selecting a new rifle, choosing one with a fixed, adjustable or replaceable comb height ideal for the riflescope you're using is one of the most important. 



The New Ultra Light Arms Model 20 (left) has a stock with dimensions designed specifically for scope use. The Savage AccuFit stock on the Model 110 Ultralite (right) permits users to adjust comb height via inserts for an ideal cheek weld with any scope.

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WHAT'S YOUR **BEEF?**



MOBILE MISSTEPS

IT'S NOT ABOUT MAKING A MOVE; IT'S ABOUT MAKING THE RIGHT MOVE, THE RIGHT WAY.

By Tony Hansen

Bowhunting isn't my only passion; I also love fishing small-mouth bass tournaments on the Great Lakes. I try to be a student of the game and have followed the careers, tactics and advice of some of the best in the business. Guys like Steve Clapper, Joe Balog, Mark Zona, Scott Dobson, Kevin VanDam ... these are the legendary anglers who pull giant brown bass from big water.

I've watched videos of all of them and have shared a boat with a couple of them. They make a cast, wait a bit and snap the rod skyward with a hard-fighting football of a fish on the other end of the line. They make it look easy, really easy. I have worked hard to mimic their success, and after a decade or so of spending a whole lot of hours on the water, I figure I'm roughly 20 percent as good as they are. And that's probably being generous with my assessment.

The simple fact is this: Folks who are pro-level good at something make success look a helluva lot easier to achieve than it is for the majority. This truth certainly applies to bowhunting. Let's talk about the newfound fad of mobile hunting. I bet you'll see the connection.

Spend some time surfing around social media, and you'll come across all manner of chatter about the virtues of

mobile hunting. You'll see gagger bucks that were taken in mobile fashion. You'll watch video after video of "aggressive" bowhunters taking the chase to the bucks and moving around as often as needed.

It looks pretty simple. Spot a buck. Make a move on it. Utilize ultralight gear that enables you to scale any available tree at a moment's notice (if you deem the use of an elevated perch necessary at all). If you aren't seeing deer, well, just keep moving around. You're bound to stumble onto a giant buck at any moment and the stalk will be on, or using your saddle you can swing into a tree just scant yards from the monster's bed.

In reality, it very seldom works that way. I'd dare to say such aggressive, mobile tactics aren't putting you one step closer to tagging a stud buck. In fact, they're likely moving you in the opposite direction.

CAN'T CUT CORNERS

There's no question that the mobile hunting trend is a fad borne of results. Some very good deer hunters have perfected the art of taking the action to the deer, and they make it look much easier than it really is.

Keep in mind that on social media, you're typically seeing only the summation of success. What you aren't seeing

are the days, weeks and years of failure that led to that success. Moving in ways that give you an advantage without giving critters an education is an art, and it is absolutely something you can learn. But what you can't do is cut corners. In my experience, that's where the road ends for a whole lot of folks.

Learning to be mobile and effective takes a ton of dedication. You must be willing to fail a lot, and you can't simply go faster or harder in an effort to shorten the learning curve. No amount of lightweight gear or high-tech fabric will change that. In fact, the very best mobile hunters I'm aware of don't worry about any of those things. Sure, they cut weight where they can and rely on quality gear where it really matters. But their primary focus is on knowledge and experience.

The more they encounter game, the more they learn. They spend a crazy amount of time in the field honing their craft. If you want to be a successful mobile hunter, are you doing the same? Or are you simply out there wandering around with the latest-and-greatest tree saddle?

ADDING TO THE PRESSURE

I've hunted public land for a long time, long before it was the vogue thing to do. I can say without hesitation that

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hunting pressure has increased exponentially over the past five to seven years. The quality of the hunting experience, however, has dwindled at a much faster rate over just the past few years. I attribute much of that decline directly to the mobile-hunting mantra.

Mobile hunting done correctly is a low-impact, low-pressure tactic. Done incorrectly, it's a recipe for driving out entire sections of ground in a hurry. I have seen it happen more than once.

I recall an incident I witnessed during late October in Nebraska. I was hunting a far corner of a piece of public ground. It wasn't terribly far from the road, maybe three-quarters of a mile, but it was the farthest from the access point that I could get. I wasn't there simply because of that; I had chosen the spot because a fence gap that the deer loved to use just happened to be in that location.

For the first two days of my hunt, I had the area to myself and I saw a couple of solid bucks just out of range. I'd seen enough to think that it was one of those "matter of time" spots, and I was very much looking forward to the rest of the week.

Then the duo arrived.

Two hunters, each sporting a tree saddle around his waist and one carrying a silhouette buck decoy, made an appearance along the road about 90 minutes before dark. I could tell they were glassing the crop fields and creek bottoms that wove through the property. No big deal. It was public land after all, and they were plenty far from me. I

watched as the pair split up and headed to nearby tree rows, where I assumed they'd settle into their saddles for the remainder of the evening.

I was wrong. About 20 minutes later, as a couple of deer entered the field in front of me, I saw the two hunters reappear. They'd also spotted the deer and were ready to get mobile.

Holding the decoy in front of them, they snuck up the tree row. The wind was hitting them somewhat in the face, but it was also blowing into the creek bottom past them. That creek bottom made a sharp turn, which apparently eddied the wind direction. Less than five minutes after the hunters started their approach, a big buck snuck out the backside of the creek bottom and headed for parts unknown.

The duo continued their stalk unaware. After covering about a quarter of a mile, they'd reached the end of available cover and had to skip across the field to another patch of trees. During that maneuver, a second good buck appeared. This time, the buck had simply laid low in the creek bottom and the hunters had walked right by it. I spotted the buck as it high-tailed out the other side of the bottom and over a hill.

All told, the pair ended up bumping four different bucks, one of which was a deer I had seen earlier that week and hoped to encounter in range. The hunters got within 100 yards of the deer they were looking at and never saw any of the other bucks. Those were the last deer I saw on the property that week despite hunting for three more days.

PROFESSIONAL PATIENCE

Being a mobile hunter can pay big dividends, but the mobile movement has the very real potential to place unneeded pressure on areas if it's done wrong. Intrusion and disturbance brought on by the tactic can have lasting negative consequences. In a lot of cases, I think the allure of being mobile is so great that folks tend to move around just for the sake of saying they're mobile.

I consider myself a hybrid. I'm not a spot-and-stalk kind of guy. I think tree saddles can be useful in a very specific set of circumstances, but in most situations, I'll opt for a quality hang-on stand. I can hang a set about as fast as I can go up in a saddle, and I'm more likely to stay put long enough to make a difference.

I choose stand sites by evaluating sign, terrain and opportunity. If I chose the location, I feel confident it can produce, so why would I need to keep moving? That said, I do not anchor myself in one location if that spot isn't the right one. I have zero hesitation in adjusting my setup when I see something that tells me I need to move.

My advice is to have a mobile mentality but with patience. Give a location time to produce and the game in the area the opportunity to show you how it travels, then take that information and make an educated decision. Think before you move. Determine whether a move is advantageous and based on information that points in the direction you're considering. Being mobile for mobile's sake likely hasn't filled many tags. Executing at a pro level has. 



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THE ELECTRIC EDGE

CONSIDER UPPING YOUR HUNTING GAME WITH **PURPOSE-BUILT E-BIKES.**

By Drew Warden

Quiet, comfortable and, above all, useful, electric hunting bikes increase the amount of ground a hunter can cover in less time and simplify the process of getting game out.

Technology affects everything that we do, and hunting is no exception. Every year hunters benefit from developments in optics, firearms, bows, remote scouting tools and other gear items. Electric bikes, or e-bikes, are one such innovation becoming increasingly popular. While similar to a standard bicycle, e-bikes use an integrated electric motor that assists with propulsion. This motor allows users to travel farther and faster with less effort than pedaling alone.

With recent advances in lithium battery technology, e-bike manufacturers have been producing models specifically tailored to hunting. Powered by reliable, long-lasting batteries, these e-bikes sport premium components, sturdy frames, rugged fat tires and powerful motors to tackle tough terrain. As with any new technology, e-bikes have their detractors, but their benefits can't be ignored.

A LEG UP

Probably the two most compelling reasons to invest in a hunting e-bike are added distance and speed. Whether scouting or

simply heading to your stand or ground blind, an e-bike covers more ground, faster, than walking alone. And it requires less effort than a standard bicycle.

In the West, where land tracts stretch for many miles and demand extensive travel to scout, this is a gamechanger. However, e-bikes are useful anywhere. If you're hunting unfamiliar land in the East and want to set out a bunch of trail cameras near and far, an e-bike is the perfect tool for the job. Older and mobility-impaired hunters everywhere may likewise appreciate the extra power and range these bikes provide.

Another advantage is the level of stealth offered by electric bikes. This past spring, I used QuietKat's Jeep and Apex e-bikes while hunting Illinois turkeys and never once worried about spooking game as I scouted field edges or open terrain. I can't say the same about a gas-powered ATV or UTV. With e-bikes, you also avoid leaving scent on the ground, which isn't guaranteed when walking or traveling in an off-road vehicle.

If you're loaded down with gear or heavy clothing, an e-bike can be equally

useful. Most manufacturers offer accessory trailers, racks and packs for their e-bikes, and these make bringing in gear—or packing out an animal—much easier. This is especially true if you're far from a road or in an area where ATVs or larger vehicles can't access due to terrain or restrictions.

If there's one caveat with e-bikes, it's price. Quality hunting models usually run from \$2,000 to \$8,000 or more. While that's less than many UTVs and ATVs, it's certainly not inconsequential. Usually, added cost is associated with high-quality components, so you at least get what you pay for here.

POWER POINTS

Most hunting e-bikes offer three means of propulsion: user-powered with the pedals, a mix of user- and electric-powered with pedal assist, and fully electric-powered with the throttle. I prefer using pedal assist, but the throttle is handy when starting with a heavy load or when facing difficult terrain. Many models have multiple pedal-assist modes for additional performance or conserving battery life.

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Obviously, the higher the pedal-assist setting or the greater the use of the throttle, the faster the battery will drain.

Motors on current hunting e-bikes range from 500 to 1,500 watts or more. The majority are mid-drive designs, but some bikes use a hub motor inside the rear wheel. Located between the pedals and encased in the frame, a mid-drive motor directs power through the bike's crank and is typically favored over the hub style because it offers more torque. Generally speaking, the more powerful the motor, the more expensive it is. Top-of-the-line mid-drive bikes with torque sensors are most expensive, followed by standard mid-drive models and hub-motor types. Bikes described as all-wheel drive use two hub motors, one in each wheel.

Good e-bikes will have a quality lithium-ion battery, preferably featuring cells from Panasonic, Samsung or LG, which are all highly regarded in the e-bike community. Ideally, the battery will also have a large capacity, which is typically measured in watt-hours (Wh) and greatly influences a bike's range. Most estimates suggest you use about 20 to 25 Wh for every mile traveled. So, an e-bike with a battery capacity of 1,000 Wh might have an expected max range of 40 to 50 miles. Actual range could be much more or much less, however. It depends on factors like rider and gear weight, terrain, how much the motor is assisting you, temperature, tire pressure and others.

Be wary of outrageous range claims, and when manufacturers don't provide Wh, multiply voltage by amp hours (Ah) to calculate it yourself. If you don't have

at least two of these values, you cannot find the third. You generally want a battery with high voltage and high Ah for quick acceleration, solid climbing and long-distance capabilities.

E-BIKE EDICTS

Electric bike regulations represent a good news/bad news situation for hunters. The good news is that many public lands and trails do allow e-bike access, and efforts are ongoing to expand opportunities and make regulations more uniform. The bad news is that others don't permit e-bikes, and those that do may have policies that vary widely by state and even by individual area. In many places, e-bikes are treated like traditional bicycles; in others, they're viewed like motorized off-road vehicles.

Some states can't even agree on a definition for an e-bike. Several use different names, or varied speed or output restrictions, to define them. And, while most states don't require e-bikes to be registered, licensed or insured, a handful mandate one or more of those things—or an operator's license—particularly for the higher-powered bikes.

Luckily, many states are adopting the e-bike industry's standard classification system. This breaks e-bikes into three categories based on how the motor assists users—as the rider pedals or via a throttle—and at what speed it ceases to provide assistance. Recent pushes at the national level have set out to increase e-bike opportunities on federal public lands. Still, your best bet is fully reading and understanding e-bike regulations for the state, and any local area, you intend to visit. 



ALPHA PREDATOR

QuietKat's Apex e-bike dominates rough terrain and expands a user's hunting grounds.

Good e-bikes scale steep hills, travel long distances and support heavy loads. QuietKat's 2021 Apex (\$4,999 to \$5,599; quietkat.com) does this and more. It has a 750-, 1,000- or 1,500-watt mid-drive motor to climb difficult terrain and take users farther. The 750-watt Apex serves as a Class 2 e-bike, with a throttle-actuated motor that stops assisting when the bike hits 20 mph. Users can remove the thumb throttle to make it Class 1 compliant, too.

Bikes use a lithium-ion 14.5 amp-hour (Ah), 48-volt (V) or 17.5 Ah, 52 V battery, depending on the model. I hunted with the 1,000-watt Apex last spring, and it easily tackled everything from steep hills to soggy marshes. And the color display made viewing pedal-assist settings and remaining battery life simple.

Other features include fat, 26-by-4.5-inch Kenda Juggernaut tires, an inverted 150 mm air-suspension front fork, a 12 mm rear thru-axle and sealed bearings in front and rear hubs. A wide-range 11-36T cassette and SRAM nine-speed drivetrain multiply the mid-drive motor's power, and Tektro four-piston hydraulic disc brakes help control steep descents.

The Apex comes in a large, medium or small frame. It weighs 71 pounds, with a 325-pound carrying capacity. For 2021, it has an integrated pannier rack. The Apex is compatible with all QuietKat cargo trailers, making it perfect for transporting gear or harvested meat.



E-bikes are equally handy for anglers. Some of the best fishing spots are often far away from public accesses, and you can carry more gear farther with an e-bike.



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DROUGHT IN THE DUCK FACTORY



WATERFOWLERS MAY BE DISAPPOINTED IN THIS FALL'S FLIGHT, BUT **AS LONG AS HABITAT REMAINS INTACT, BOOM TIMES WILL RETURN WITH RAIN IN THE PRAIRIES.**

By Andrew McKean

Come waterfowl season, you will likely notice the effects of a drought gripping the Northern Plains. You may see fewer birds in the marsh, and they may be maddeningly reluctant to pile into your decoys. Maybe you'll hear chatter at the café or the boat launch about this being an "off" year compared with the last several.

None of that will surprise Dr. Johann Walker, director of operations for Ducks Unlimited's Northern Plains office in Bismarck, N.D., and a well-regarded waterfowl biologist. When we talked in the summer, he couldn't help but look ahead to how drought conditions in the Prairie Pothole Region, the "duck factory" of the Central and Mississippi flyways, might affect the fall flight.

"It's dry. Really dry. Especially in North Dakota," said Walker. "We have widespread extreme or greater drought conditions, and it's really been building since the winter. It's as dry as we've seen it in 25 years, since the last really profound drought back in the 1980s. As a result, we can expect to see fewer and older birds in the migration."

Weather forecasters and statisticians confirm the crippling drought. National drought monitor maps in late summer

showed an area the size of Ohio centered on central North Dakota, the deep magenta of the map indicating "exceptional" drought. Farther west and north, "extreme" drought covered most of the Dakotas, the eastern half of Montana, and the southern third of Canada. Drought conditions started with negligible snowfall on the Northern Plains last winter and continued through the spring, with only an inch or two of rain falling on areas that normally would receive 10 times that amount.

Shallow wetlands across the Dakotas, eastern Montana and southern Canada that would normally be teeming with ducklings throughout the hot, sticky summers were dry and dusty in July. The renowned Prairie Pothole Region, an area the size of Texas, has the capability in a non-drought year to pump out millions of ducklings. Conservation efforts here that have preserved wetland and adjacent grass cover for nesting are largely responsible for a bumper crop of ducks over the last 20 years. The last census of ducks, in 2019, pegged the continent's flock at about 38 million birds.

Walker, along with state and flyway waterfowl managers, expect this fall's flight will be smaller in size than in

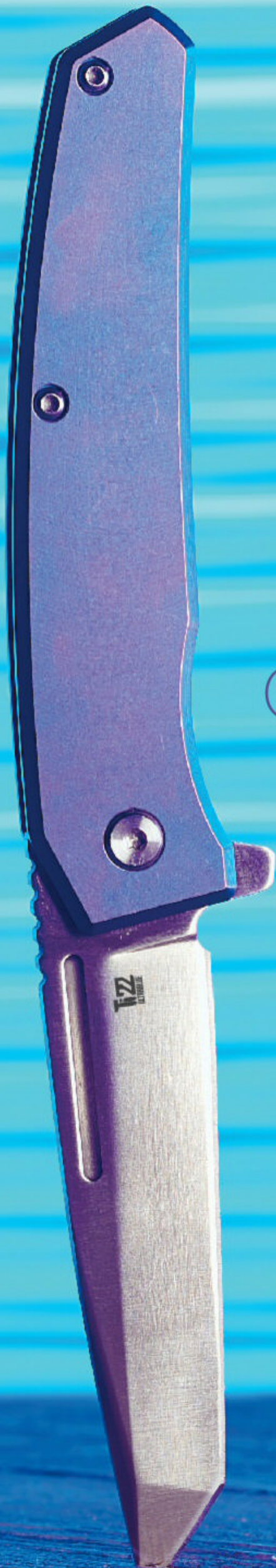
recent years, and ducks will be older on average. That means they'll be harder to fool into decoy spreads.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Compounding the complications of the drought is a lack of knowledge about how ducks may respond. For the second straight year in 2021, biologists weren't able to conduct surveys of breeding grounds across Canada.

This is highly unusual. Ducks are among the most intensively studied of our wildlife, thanks to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual Waterfowl Population Status Report, which has been conducted nearly every year since 1955. But the 2020 and 2021 surveys were canceled because the U.S. pilots that fly them weren't allowed to enter Canada due to COVID restrictions.

The annual population surveys are used by flyway managers to establish bag limits and season structures. Last year's season-setting work was fairly easy, even without the breeding-pair survey. We had a near-record number of ducks entering the breeding season, and water and wetland conditions were fairly normal across the prairie and boreal forest. Waterfowl managers made an assumption—since



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they couldn't rely on data—that the fall flight would be fairly normal. While some hunters complained about fewer ducks in their particular areas last fall, most indications showed it was a typical year.

But this year, waterfowl managers are worried. They approved liberal packages based on an expectation of a bountiful fall flight before the grip of the drought tightened on the prairie. There's widespread concern that duck hunters this fall may overharvest the drought-impaired population of southbound migrants.

"It's not ideal to have two years without data," said Walker. "We're flying a little bit blind. But we do have North Dakota's breeding-pair survey, which gives us some indication of trends."

Those trends are not good. North Dakota's 2021 survey noted that water indexes were down 80 percent from the previous year and 68 percent below the long-term average. Biologists estimated North Dakota mallard numbers are down 49 percent from 2020, and pintail numbers are off 68 percent.

Assuming U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists can once again enter Canada this coming spring and conduct the annual continental breeding survey, Walker and other managers think the 2022 season could be tightened, with lower bag limits and shorter seasons, in order to give drought-impaired flocks a chance to recover. That assumes drought conditions won't linger across the prairies, as they did the last time we had severe drought conditions in the 1980s.

KEEP THE TABLE SET

Back then, in the years before the Conservation Reserve Program and other conservation-minded provisions of the federal Farm Bill, farmers capitalized on drought conditions to drain wetlands and maximize the amount of tillable acreage. Walker doesn't expect that to happen this time around.

"Mainly, because those wetlands are dry now, there's little incentive to drain them," he said. "Second, we have a number of mature conservation

programs designed to create alternatives to 'swamp busting.'"

Walker noted that there's a broader recognition of the resilience of the potholes now compared to 25 years ago.

"One of the things that's true of the classic prairie pothole system—the complex of shallow wetlands—is that they thrive on cycles of wet and drought," he explained. "Wetland productivity tends to decline through extended wet periods. Drought is a useful reset, especially if it doesn't last too long."

He said waterfowlers—no matter where they hunt—need to speak up to ensure that the prairie pothole habitat remains intact so that when the water returns, so will the ducks.

"We have to keep the table set, intact nesting cover and intact wetland basins," Walker stressed. "As long as they're there, when we get wet, ducks will recover regardless of harvest. Drought reminds us that habitat affects duck populations more than anything else." 

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It was spring gobbler season in Georgia, a beautiful sunny afternoon, but I wasn't hunting turkeys. Just before sunset I saw movement on the edge of the woods as three hogs stepped carefully into the food plot. That's what I was there for, so I put my binocular aside and slowly reached for the rifle. All three were red, nice size but no giants. Crosshair on the shoulder of the largest hog, I pressed the trigger as soon as it stopped. I expected the animal to drop, but you never know with pigs. It ran down the field as if nothing had happened. I was just about to fire again when it rolled into the ripening grain.

Another spring day several thousand miles west, Chad Wiebe and I jumped a

big boar in tall, sloping barley. The hog went through the stalks like a torpedo, but we didn't get another glimpse until he was across a steep bottom and working his way up the next ridge through thick wild mustard. I was on sticks, waiting him out, a shot looking unlikely. Then, just below the crest, he slowed and the mustard thinned. I held forward at the top of the shoulder, and at the shot he vanished into the yellow flowers. He was probably my best California boar ... and a shot I'd just as soon not repeat!

THE AMERICAN WILD BOAR

Free-range hogs aren't new in North America. Seafarers released swine to provide a meat source for passing ships. Populations in Florida and California's

Channel Islands are believed to hail from Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

Homesteaders often let domestic swine roam free, establishing feral populations; there are horrific Civil War accounts of wild hogs scavenging battlefields! All North American wild hogs are some mix of domestic swine, but there were historic introductions of pure European wild boar. George Gordon Moore released some at Hooper Bald, N.C.; William Randolph Hearst did the same on California's Central Coast. More recently, various game ranches have introduced European stock to improve the "look" of local hogs.

The pure Eurasian wild boar is an imposing animal, tall at the shoulders, body sloping down to the hips, with

SHUTTERSTOCK



Feral hogs have inhabited some parts of the U.S. for more than 500 years, and they have expanded their range greatly.



THE U.S. IS NOW HOME TO 9 MILLION FERAL HOGS, AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE NATION ARE TOO GOOD TO IGNORE.

By Craig Boddington

grizzled hair and sharpened tusks. However, domestic hogs and the real Eurasian deal are the same species, *Sus scrofa*. All North American wild hogs are non-native feral animals. Depending on the original stock, hogs can be belted, spotted, and any color from white to red and brown to black. A hog's color certainly doesn't influence the quality of meat, and it doesn't relate to tusk or body size.

We hunters tend to place a premium on dark hogs that are visually "closer" to the Eurasian strain, especially big boars with long teeth. The Central Coast, where I've hung my hat for 30 years, is the epicenter of California's feral hog range. Hearst's introduction a century ago still exerts influence. My experience is that

the pure European strain is dominant; some percentage of our hogs still look Eurasian, but we also have spotted and belted hogs and all colors.

After a couple generations in the wild, domestic swine change. Males always grow tusks and develop a cartilage shield to protect their neck and chest. With both sexes, tails and ears straighten, shoulders become more powerful and hams become less prominent. I find this fascinating, but it has nothing to do with America's pig problem.

PEST OR RESOURCE?

Wild hogs are among the most prolific of all animals. Sows breed young and produce large litters. Under ideal conditions, two litters per year are possible.

Population growth is thus exponential. America's feral hog population is now estimated at 9 million and annually causes \$2 billion in agricultural damage.

After whitetail deer, the feral hog is America's second-most numerous large animal. The primary hog population is found from Oklahoma and Texas eastward to the Atlantic, plus California, where feral hogs occur in all counties. Once a breeding population gets going, it's difficult to get rid of hogs. States that don't have breeding populations are working hard, in conjunction with the feds, to keep them out. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), not U.S. Fish and Wildlife, has responsibility for invasive species, and the feral hog surely qualifies.



Feral hogs thrive around agriculture, taking advantage of food and water provided by crops and irrigation, and causing \$2 billion in agricultural damage annually.

I have a little farm in southeast Kansas, 15 miles from Oklahoma, where an estimated 900,000 hogs reside. I expect hog damage, but so far, we've never seen one hog on the farm. For several years, a team of USDA hunters has done a heroic job of holding the line. Where hogs are established, it's almost too late to get that genie back in the bottle. Kansas doesn't want a hog problem!

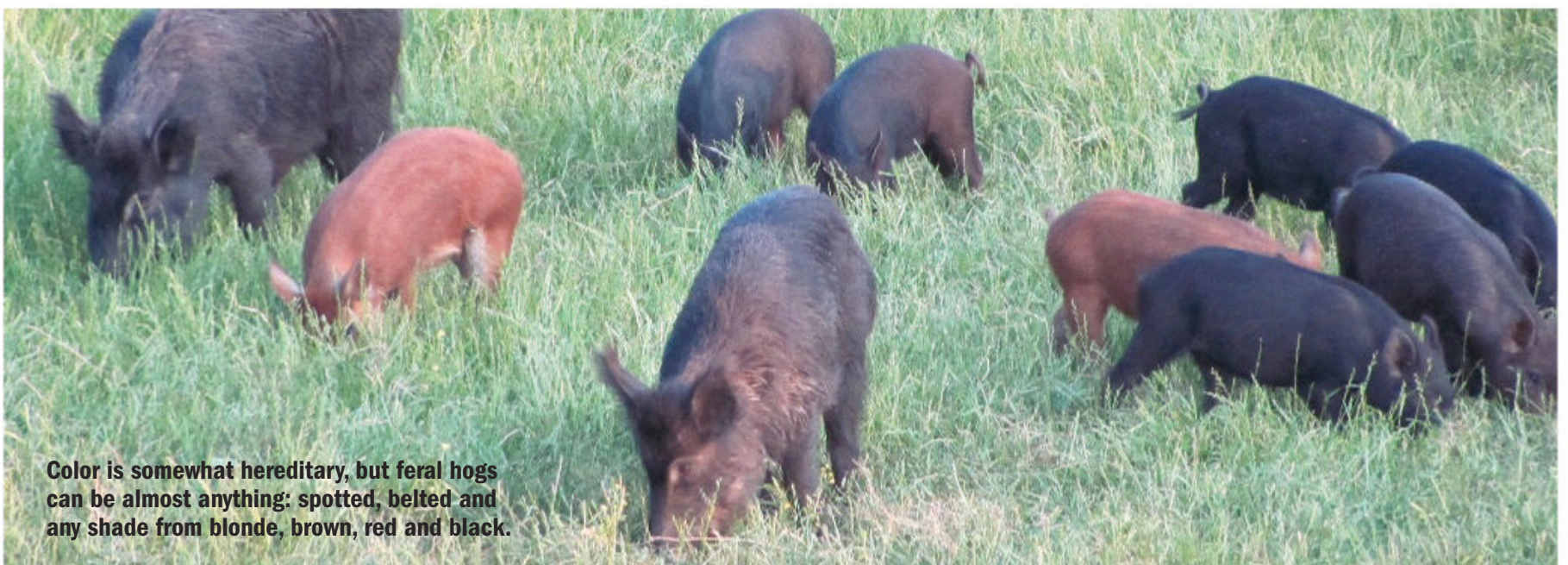
On the other hand, hogs have changed America's hunting culture perhaps

for the better. They can be hunted year-round, yield good pork and provide lots of excitement. Success is high, in part because any hog is legal. Sows are tastier and therefore often targeted. If pig hunting were "boars only" the game would change, but that would be silly because taking sows is essential to population control. Mature boars are a small percentage of any population. Pig-hunting regs are often relaxed because the intent is to control the population. Baiting and

night hunting (including using thermal and night-vision devices) are often legal. Texas, with the worst pig plague, even legalized helicopter gunning.

Still, by most accounts, the pigs are winning! They have added a new dimension to American hunting. In California, feral hogs long ago surpassed deer as the most popular big game.

Nonetheless, in most places wild hogs are viewed as a nuisance, which is why traditional hunting rules such as methods



Color is somewhat hereditary, but feral hogs can be almost anything: spotted, belted and any shade from blonde, brown, red and black.

CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)



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Sows breed at a young age and can have up to two litters per year, leading to population explosions in some areas.

of take, shooting hours and bag limits are often relaxed. Most states require a basic hunting license, but Texas even did away with that (for hogs only, and hunting permission is still required).

Kansas (and some other states that don't want hogs) took a different approach. Hoping to avoid a repeat of Oklahoma's rapid hog proliferation, Kansas made it illegal to possess, own, hunt or transport feral hogs. (Realize that in some states, feral hogs exploded because short-sighted people dropped off truckloads of pigs so they could hunt them or sell hog hunts.) I can shoot hogs 24/7 on my farm, although I've yet to have that chance. However, if one of my deer hunters sees a hog, he or she cannot shoot—unless we go to the nearest Parks and Wildlife office and I make the hunter an “agent” for pig control.

As a hunter, I wouldn't mind encountering the occasional hog on my farm. Problem is, there's no such thing as “occasional.” Once they are here, we'll have too many of them, along with all the damage they bring and the negative impacts on our deer and turkeys.

Almost everywhere hogs occur, local outfitters deal with them as an extra profit center, and why shouldn't they? California, however, recognizes them as a resource. Declared a “big-game animal” back in the '80s, all rules apply: There are shooting hours and regs that outline methods of take, including the prohibition of baiting. A basic hunting license is required, plus a pig tag. This seems onerous, but I love pig hunting and I always have a tag. The season is year-around, and I can buy as many tags as I like. Central Coast pig hunting is just plain fun, spot-and-stalk in rolling oak ridges.

To folks in Texas and the Southeast, where every pig shot is to the good, this licensed and regulated approach likely sounds insane. The difference is California hogs aren't a major problem (unless it's your barley field that gets ruined). Because of periodic drought, the region's hogs are sort of self-limiting. They come back strong with good rains, but numbers drop off quickly in dry years. This is altogether different from Texas or my buddy Zack Aultman's

place in Georgia, where pigs must be shot constantly.

POCKETS OF PIGS

There have been feral hog sightings in all 48 contiguous states. Boars in search of sows can wander long distances, and groups of pigs come and go. Concentrations are well known, but there are scattered smaller populations, sometimes closely guarded by local hunters. Despite extreme efforts, Kansas has isolated breeding herds. There were feral hogs in southeast Colorado, but this appears to be the rare successful eradication. Nebraska has hogs in a couple of counties, with efforts ongoing to contain them.

There are isolated populations in Arizona and New Mexico, Oregon and Washington, the Upper Midwest, Canada and along Mexico's Gulf Coast. Pigs are long-established in Hawaii and Puerto Rico, but to my knowledge there are none in Alaska.

I have no interest in seeking out hidden hotspots, but I like pigs enough that I've hunted them from Florida



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to California and many places in between. In some areas, like buddy Zack's Georgia pines, and often in Texas, it's a matter of helping control numbers. In California, I don't mind buying the tag, but I usually wait till we're low on jalapeno-cheddar sausage, or I have a gun or load I want to use.

Either way, I'm usually not looking for a long-tusked boar. A big, mature boar is an awesome beast, uncommon, tough and potentially dangerous. Seeing one gets my blood going, but in many circumstances, I'm just as happy to leave him for someone who will appreciate him properly.

However, being an unabashed pig hunter, sometimes I can't control myself. Tucson gunmaker John Lazzeroni and I had been planning a hunt that



A hog's body size mainly depends on food availability and age. The author and his wife, Donna, took this large boar in Texas.

CRAIG BODDINGTON



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got scotched by the pandemic. John claimed he knew where to find pigs in New Mexico. Sounded unlikely, but we were desperate so I headed to Arizona.

With a full-size freezer in John's big truck, we masked up and drove east, braving a potential lockdown. We hit the jackpot, finding hogs in arid ranch country where I'd least expect them. To my eye these were pure feral hogs: spotted, belted, rainbow, oddly co-existing with cattle on big irrigation pivots, fat and well-fed. At least at that moment, there was an unusual concentration of massive boars. In just a couple of days we used several of Lazzeroni's fast short magnums, filled his freezer to the top, masked up again and headed back to Arizona.



Spot-and-stalk is the author's preferred method of hunting hogs in California, where a red-dot optic suits the terrain.

Closing the distance on a hog isn't particularly difficult, although the wind must be favorable.



CRAIG BODDINGTON (2)



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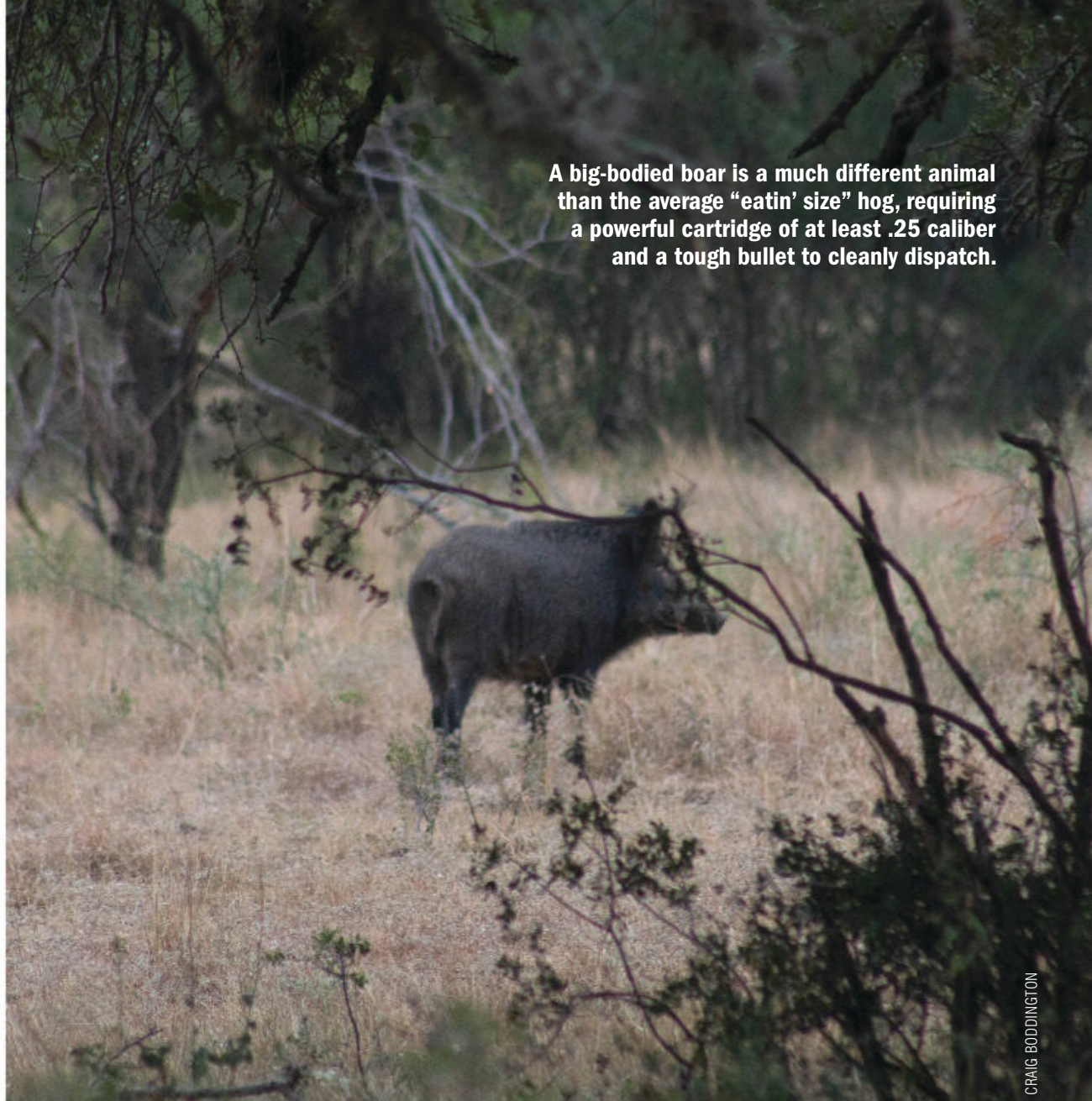


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LOAD UP

I've had ready access to good California hog hunting for 40 years, and I've also hunted them a lot in Georgia and Texas. Collectively, they've been a prime cartridge and bullet-testing laboratory, so I've hunted them with just about everything from handguns and .22 centerfires on up to elephant-capable big bores, along with archery equipment. Whenever I write about guns and loads for hogs, I'm sure to get emails from hunters who respond, "I head-shoot all my hogs with a .357 revolver (or .223 AR) and never have any problems." Sure you do; I don't doubt it can be done. Recently I shot a good-sized Texas hog with a .22 Hornet. The bullet impacted near the base of the ear at about 60 yards — end of story. But



A big-bodied boar is a much different animal than the average "eatin' size" hog, requiring a powerful cartridge of at least .25 caliber and a tough bullet to cleanly dispatch.

CRAIG BODDINGTON

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PURPOSE-BUILT TO HUNT.

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In many states, hogs can be hunted year-round with a variety of equipment, making them popular among bowhunters. The author used a crossbow to take this hog in Florida with Hoppy Kempfer of Osceola Outfitters.

absent a dead-certain brain shot at close range, that's not enough gun.

There's a big difference in body size (and toughness) between a meat hog and a big boar. However, to some extent, ideal guns and loads depend on methodology. Houndsmen often use large-caliber handguns: The range is short, and pistols are handy. It's a different story if you shoot your hogs over bait. Where you set up controls the distance, and you can also ensure a steady rest. Spot-and-stalk hunting is the common technique with California hogs, and it's a different deal. Out there, we take the shots we get. Long shots are rarely needed. Often, we can get within archery, handgun and iron-sight range ... but sometimes we can't. For sure, we can't always close to dead-certain head-shot range.

Intent also matters. I don't have hogs on my property so, even where they're legally a nuisance, I think of hogs as

big-game animals. I hunt them, and arm myself, accordingly. I do a lot of hog hunting with lever-action rifles because I love them. The great old .30-30 is a wonderful hog gun, plenty powerful, and with enough range for most shots. I love the .45-70 and have a lifelong thing for the .348 Winchester, both real hog-thumpers.

However, you don't need something over .30 caliber to hunt pigs. You also don't need a fast magnum or a lever action; there are good hog cartridges in all action types. You do need to put a good bullet in the right place, and although I like to hunt hogs a lot with iron sights, a low-power scope or red-dot sight on any platform greatly extends its versatility.

Regardless of range, I'm not comfortable with body shots on big boars with anything below about .25 caliber. Above that, any decent, scoped deer rifle makes a pretty good pig gun. However,

sometimes we don't give hogs proper respect. I've never been touched, but I've had more genuine close calls with hogs than any of Africa's big nasties, almost always from a mere moment's disrespect. Not long ago, we shot a big, toothy boar on friend Tony Lombardo's place. The hog went down and looked dead, so Tony went to check, absent rifle. Seconds later he came scrambling back, the angry and very agile boar right on his heels. Tony got clear and the .348 solved the problem ... too close.

We don't have pigs everywhere from coast to coast, nor throughout the land from Canada to Mexico, but we've got them in a lot of places. They aren't going away. We don't yet know their long-term effects on native flora and fauna, so I'm not in favor of hog proliferation. I am in favor of hog hunting, however, an exciting, interesting and relatively recent development in the U.S. hunting tradition. **G&H**

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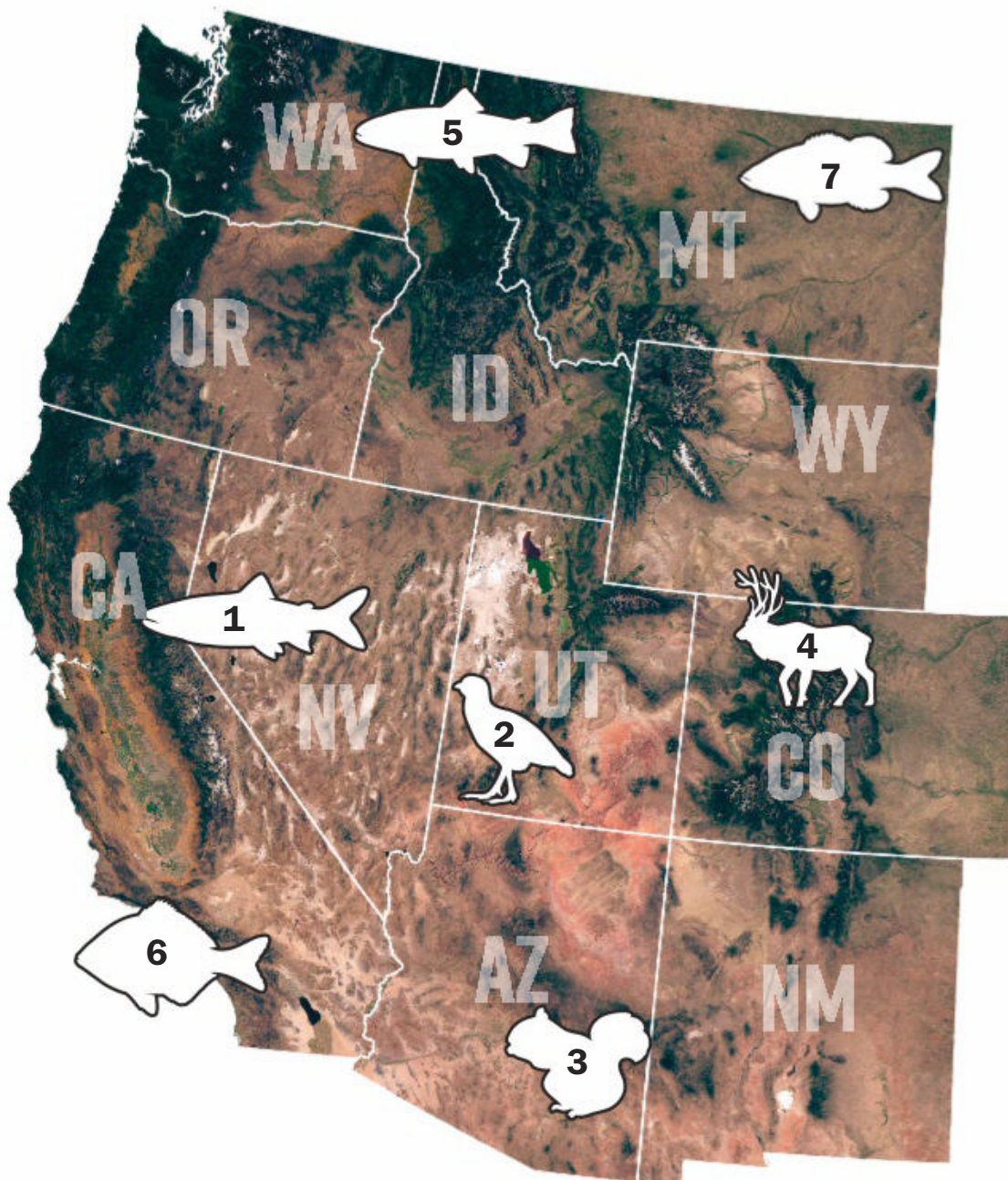
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AROUND THE WEST

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

By Andrew McKean



Across the West this month, the hunting table is set with deer and elk seasons and side dishes of antelope and upland birds. But it's worth noting a couple of changes. This is the first year that youth hunters in Utah can buy unlimited numbers of bull tags, and Idaho now has a cap on nonresident hunters, which means that residents will have more opportunity, especially around backcountry destinations. If you don't have a spot to hunt, read on. And while most of the West is distracted with terrestrial and avian game, it's a great month for anglers, too.



PYRAMID LAKE CUTTHROATS

Fishing season for the largest cutthroats in the world, the Lahontan cutts of this windswept lake near Reno, opens October 1 after a three-month closure. The weather is generally decent—and far better than in January when the shoreline fishing is almost worth the frostbite. Bring float tubes and small boats to target trout to 20 pounds on big streamer patterns. Contact Pyramid Lake Guides (pyramidlakeguides.com) for details.



UTAH CHUKARS

While Oregon's lower Deschutes and John Day rivers get headlines for chukar hunting, there may be no state with more public-land upland habitat than Utah. Island mountain ranges in the entire southwestern quarter of Utah can produce good chukar hunting. Start with the low-slung ranges around Delta.



ARIZONA SQUIRRELS

Early October may mean elk and mule deer for most Westerners, but it's also the long-awaited squirrel opener for die-hard small-game hunters in Arizona. The state has more species of tree squirrels than any other state, from Abert's and Kaibab squirrels in the White Mountains and Kaibab Plateau, to Apache or Chiricahua fox squirrels in the southeast.



COLORADO RIFLE ELK

This is the second year of Colorado's new elk and deer season adjustments, and judging by last year, the second rifle elk season running October 16 to 20 will be a doozie. In the past the first and second rifle elk seasons were divided by only two days, which meant unrelenting pressure on the state's sizeable elk herd. Now there is a nine-day rest period before the second five-day season begins, meaning elk have time to redistribute and relax a bit, so public-land hunters have a better shot at success.



PEND OREILLE KAMLOOPS

Another oversized trout, the Gerrard-strain rainbows of this northern Idaho lake are shaped like footballs. Twenty-pound footballs with turbochargers that roam depths from 25 to 200 feet below the surface, that is. These are some of the hardest-fighting freshwater fish you'll encounter. October is the gateway for the year's best fishing, whether trolling the local Frisky Jenny streamers or traditional flasher-and-squid presentations. Hit up guide Rich Lindsey (theidahofisherman.com) for a day you'll not soon forget.



SOCAL SURFPERCH

This is a prime month for Southern California's surfcasters, deploying long rods and possessing casting arms like MLB pitchers to lob egg sinkers and bait into incoming surf at any of the state's public beaches. The best time is an hour before sunup or an hour before dusk on an incoming high tide that dislodges crabs and other invertebrates in the sand. Savvy anglers cast to "white-wash" chop beneath flocks of feeding birds. Yellowfin croaker, corbina and California halibut are bonus species on top of regular surfperch action.



MONTANA SMALLMOUTHS

It's tempting to name just one or two reservoirs where you can take voracious cooling-water bass, but Montana has a trio to consider. Fort Peck Reservoir gave up the new state-record 7.84-pound smallie last October (hit the rocky points upstream of Hell Creek State Park). Or travel to far northwestern Montana and work rocky ledges for chunky Noxon Reservoir smallies and the odd largemouth to 5 pounds. Or take a break from antelope hunting and jig the rock drops on Tongue River Reservoir in southeastern Montana for a mix of smallmouths and hand-sized crappies.





Several variables come into play when choosing the ideal choke-and-load combination for a successful bird hunt.

LOAD TIP

NEW RULES, NEW OFFERINGS AND CHANGING HUNTING CONDITIONS CAN MAKE CHOOSING THE RIGHT SHOTSHELL FOR UPLAND BIRDS COMPLICATED—YET CRITICAL—FOR MAXIMUM SUCCESS.

By Bob Robb

Adjusting your shotgun choke-and-load combination to meet the conditions at hand will help you bag more upland birds. Today's choke options and the better and more varied shotshells available present opportunities for hunters to take matching the right load to the bird to another level.

First, remember that patterning is essential in determining the maximum effectiveness of your shotgun/choke/load combination. Without patterning, you'll be hunting without knowing both your maximum effective range and shot pattern, or even if your shotgun shoots to point of aim. It may take several loads

and chokes to find the ideal setup. Be sure to pattern both improved cylinder and modified choke tubes.

There is no one "perfect" upland load because effectiveness depends on several variables, including wind, thickness of cover, average shot distance and time of season, among others. And, of course, if you are in a place where you can hunt two or more different bird species in a single trip, shotshell and choke selection will depend on the size and toughness of the two target species.

In general, pheasants, quail, grouse and other upland birds that dwell on heavily hunted public lands become more cunning and tough to bring down

as the months go by (think thicker winter plumage). Lighter shot that produces great pattern density for killing birds that hold tight to cover and flush at close range might be a top choice for opening day. But later in the season, when these birds become track stars after the initial wave of early-season hunters, they will run and flush at greater distances. It takes "more gun" to cleanly kill them as the season progresses and pressure mounts.

Regardless, I never go cheap when buying hunting shotshells. If lead shot is legal, I prefer copper- or nickel-plated pellets. They are less likely to deform, helping them fly more uniformly and penetrate deeper than uncoated shot.

PHEASANTS: Mid- to heavyweight payloads containing 1 1/4- to 1 5/8 ounces of No. 4, 5, 6, or 7 1/2 shot sent off at relatively high velocities are ideal, the exact load being determined by the conditions. Generally speaking, I go with smaller shot early and larger shot late in the year. Early in the season, try Federal Hi-Bird 12 Gauge, (1 1/4 oz. No. 6 lead shot; 1,330 fps) or Winchester Rooster XR (1 1/4 oz. No. 6 shot; 1,300 fps).

Later in the year when the birds can be really wild, carry some Federal Prairie Storm FS Lead 12 Gauge, which sends 1 1/4-ounces of No. 6 shot off at 1,500



When hunting quail in heavy cover, opting for fast loads of No. 7 1/2 shot over No. 8 will help prevent cripples.

NON-TOXIC ALTERNATIVES

Top performance without the lead

On many state and federal lands, and in all of California, the use of lead ammunition is illegal. Today, there are several non-toxic shot options that, while pricier than lead shot, will do the job quite well. These include shotshells filled with steel, bismuth-tin or tungsten pellets.

Remember that non-toxic shot performs differently than lead. Generally speaking, I find that in 12- and 20-gauge shotguns, steel 3s and 4s do well on pheasants, while steel 6s and 7s work well on quail and grouse. Extra velocity is required with steel since it's lighter than lead and doesn't carry as much energy downrange. Conversely, bismuth-tin and tungsten shot are denser and heavier than lead, meaning you can drop down in shot size, all other things being equal. Here, 6s and 7s for pheasants and 7s and 9s for other upland species are good choices under most conditions.

There are also non-round pellets, such as the cube-shaped steel Hex Shot in **Winchester Blind Side Magnum Pheasant**. As is the trend with modern turkey loads, there are now combination upland load offerings. One is **Hevi-Shot Hevi-Metal Pheasant**—duplex payloads of tungsten-based Hevi-Shot pellets stacked atop standard steel pellets. Another is **Federal Prairie Storm FS Steel**—a 50/50 mix of regular, round steel pellets and banded Flitestopper steel pellets.



Later in the season, loads that travel in the 1,500 to 1,600 fps range are vital for dropping cagey, far-flushing roosters.

fps, Federal Upland Pheasants Forever High Velocity 12 Gauge (1 1/4 oz. No. 5 lead shot; 1,500 fps) or Winchester Super Pheasant (1 3/8 oz. No. 6 shot; 1,450 fps.). For non-toxic requirements, Federal Prairie Storm FS Steel (1 1/8 oz. No. 4 shot; 1,600 fps) is good stuff.

QUAIL AND GROUSE: While some like No. 8 shot in a target load for early birds, I prefer No. 7 1/2 shot sent off at a velocity of at least 1,200 fps. A big reason is that in heavy cover you don't want a crippled bird to be able to burrow and become tough to find. Bigger shot and higher velocities will hammer them.

Late in the season, No. 6 shot can be a better choice. Federal Game Load Upland Heavy Field (1 1/8 oz. No. 7 1/2 shot; 1,255 fps) and Winchester Super Sport Sporting Clays (1 oz. No. 7 1/2 shot; 1,250 fps) are great all-around upland loads. For non-toxic requirements, Federal Upland Steel 12 Gauge (1 1/8 oz. No. 7 1/2 shot at 1,400 fps) and Winchester Super Sport Steel Sporting Clays (1 oz. of either No. 7 1/2 or No. 8 shot; 1,400 fps) are solid choices. 

PRO TIP:

Carry extra choke tubes and a couple of different loads in your vest in case conditions change and you need to change with them on the fly. For example, if the afternoon wind kicks up, it may necessitate going to a larger shot size and/or a tighter choke for those turbo birds riding a stiff breeze.



BIG-COUNTRY BIRDING

PREP YOURSELF AND YOUR DOG FOR A FULFILLING SEASON OF
CHASING SHARPTAILS AND PHEASANTS.

By Andrew McKean



There's a labyrinth of coulees and buffaloberry draws that spill off a wheatland bench not far from my home in north-eastern Montana that I hit every upland season, largely because I can bag multiple species of birds there. Also, I hunt it because it's open to public hunting through the state's Block Management access program.

Pheasants hold tight in the heavy cover—spring-fed cattails and slough grass—in the bottom of the draws. Sharptail grouse are often loafing in the shade of the mid-slope thickets of

wild plum. Fast-flushing Hungarian partridges, always a bonus bird for any prairie hunter, can be anywhere from the wheat stubble to the fuzz of crested wheatgrass along the top of the bench.

The place has been a classroom of sorts for 20 seasons, in which some species are abundant and others are curiously scarce, but it's a reliable spot both in years when the cover is lush with summer rains and when it's brittle with drought. The place has also taught me plenty about dog handling, as well as the hazards this prairie landscape can dish up to a hard-working dog.

SHARPTAIL WISDOM

Let's start with sharpies, the durable prairie birds that may be the ultimate public-land species for a Western upland hunter.

Sharptails are the adaptable middle children of the upland tribe. They tolerate agricultural land, though they prefer the margins of native range. They can handle either drought or abnormally wet conditions, and they will endlessly surprise you, sometimes flushing close to grain bins and other times exploding into the air miles from the nearest farmstead.



Public-land pheasants often run to evade dogs. Move quickly to close ground, and be prepared to make longer shots. Tiger chokes are often a good call for these birds.

For a traveling hunter, sharpies are reliable, existing in huntable numbers across much of the interior West, from northern Utah and southeastern Idaho up through much of Wyoming and into Montana. Of all the states in the region, Montana's sharptail populations are the most robust and most widely distributed.

No matter where you go, if you're reading a landscape for early- to mid-season sharptails, look first for islands of security cover. It might be a thicket of wild plums or a stand of Russian olive trees in the middle of the prairie. It might be a shelterbelt of caragana or ash

trees or just a brushy draw that threads between wheat fields. Sharpies like that shade- and food-providing cover, but they don't want too much of it. And they want reliable food like wheat or lentils, but only in proximity to wide-open escape cover. They like water, but don't need to be too close to it.

You might read that to mean that sharptails can be absolutely anywhere on the landscape, but they will readily be near the confluence all those things: small grains, native berries, food-bearing shrubs and grassy vales. Late in the season, especially after snow drifts and

crusts the ground-level forage, look for sharptails in Russian olive and ash trees where they will feed on berries and seeds.

Hunting sharptails is an exercise in exercise. You need to cover lots of ground to find coveys. I've had days when I've logged nearly 10 miles for a 4-bird limit, and you have to figure that your dog covers at least two to three times that distance. So pick your days and pace yourself. I generally like to hunt sharptails in the cool of a frosty September morning or on overcast days with a sip of moisture in the air to help carry scent and cool overheated dogs.

IN PRAISE OF PHEASANTS

If sharptails love the sprawling heart of this open country, pheasants tend to prefer the edges. You are unlikely to find a rooster in the unadorned middle of an open prairie, but you'll definitely flush them on the margins: brushy fencelines, overgrown shelterbelts, sinuous cattail sloughs, grassy irrigation ditches, as well as pockets of rose bushes and standing grain.

As non-native generalists, pheasants can usually thrive in a wider diversity of cover than native grouse, which evolved in fairly specific habitats. You'll find roosters in hemp fields of Oregon's Willamette Valley, aspen draws in eastern Washington, irrigated alfalfa in eastern Montana and in the cattle feedlots of rural Colorado.

That diversity of cover means there are any of a dozen ways to hunt pheasants, from pushing huge blocks of sunflowers or irrigated corn to busting cattail sloughs and reservoir shrubbery to walking miles of fence lines, ditches and shelterbelts. There are, however, a few constants to help you identify pheasant cover and allow you to focus your efforts on the most productive parts of an expansive landscape.

For starters, look for ragged edges. That sounds uselessly vague, but it's not. In fact, it's the key to consistent limits of public-land roosters. They might not be found in a mile of razor-straight fence lines, but you'll often bust a rooster in that specific place where the fence

Pheasants love edge habitat like fence lines, shelterbelts and ditches. Sharpies prefer cover in the midst of large, open areas that offer easy escape.

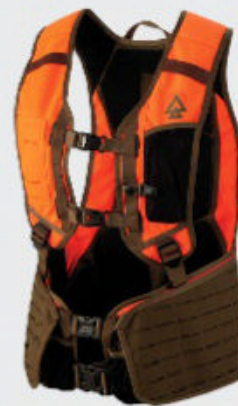
BIRD GEAR

Outfit yourself for a long day afield.

A prairie grouse or pheasant hunt can be over in a few minutes if you find pockets of close-holding birds, but more typically it's long, warm days covering miles of country. That puts a premium on both mobility and your ability to pack plenty of water. Good boots, a lightweight gun and a vest that can carry plenty of groceries will stand you in good stead.

CHIEF UPLAND OVER/UNDER VEST

This is a serious vest for all-day hunting. The pockets are modular, so you can attach them to the MOLLE webbing however they fit your style, and you can add pouches for water, electronics and sundries. An ergonomic, front-loading bird bag; rugged hardware; and capacity for plenty of water, shells, snacks and multi-tools make this a hard-wearing companion to cross-country hunts. (\$172; chiefupland.com)



CZ BOBWHITE G2 PROJECT UPLAND

CZ's popular Bobwhite shotgun has been reimagined by the followers of Project Upland, and the result is a nimble, tastefully appointed prairie rig. This new iteration of the side-by-side Bobwhite, available in 12, 20 and 28 gauges, borrows from elements of CZ's Sharptail model. The 20 gauge runs 5 1/2 pounds. (\$1,429-\$1,529; cz-usa.com)



DANNER PRONGHORN

These boots were designed for big-game hunting, but they are among the best early- to mid-season upland boots on the market. Comfortable, supportive, breathable and waterproof, the 8-inch Pronghorn offers plenty of protection and comfort for prairie birders. If you're worried about briar thorns and snake fangs, you can opt for the 17-inch, side-zip model. (\$230-\$310; danner.com)



zigs or zags or corners, and where the inside bend holds just a bit more cover than the rest. You may not find a single bird in a wheat field, but at the ratty end, where there's a bit more cover and maybe a few unharvested stalks of grain, you'll likely find roosters. Ditto the unruly margins of center-pivot irrigation wheels.

Pheasants also like water much more than native grouse do. You'll often find roosters in the brush along riverbanks, in irrigation ditches and in dense grass in the bottoms of coulees and draws, but if there's a stock pond or water tank farther down the draw, the chances of finding pheasants there tend to skyrocket.

DIFFERENCES FOR DOGS

For upland hunters who run either pointers, setters or Labs, there's an important differentiator to note between sharptails and pheasants. Sharpies aren't much for running. Instead, they prefer to hold tight and rely on their camouflaged feathers, and they covey-flush to evade predators. When you find one sharpie, you're likely to find more, and even if you don't get a shot at the first covey rise, be prepared—you're likely to pick off the stragglers.

Pheasants, on the other hand, will often run from danger before they fly, juking through the densest cover away from dogs. And they're much more likely to flush both wild and in singles.

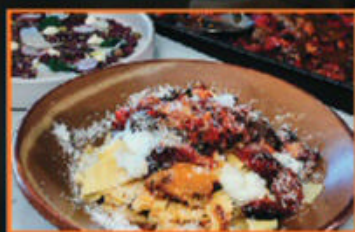
ANDREW MCKEAN

A man with a beard and a baseball cap, wearing a tactical vest, stands in a forest. He is holding two antelope heads with large antlers over his shoulders. The background is a blurred forest.

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WITH MARIO KALPOU



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CANINE CONDITIONING

Get your dog ready for open-country birds.

The transition from backyard loafing or weekend bumper work to a full-on prairie bird hunt can be tough on even younger, fit dogs. It can be downright unpleasant or even fatal for older or out-of-shape hounds. Jerry Havel, who works with Eukanuba as a field expert and runs Pineridge Grouse Camp (pineridgegrousecamp.com) where he hunts with English setters and a favorite Lab or two, describes the pre-season work to get your dog in shape as a gentle slope.

"It's not really a transition so much as an increase in conditioning a little every day," says Havel. "You're laying

the foundation for fall hunting season, so consistency is very important."

Havel hears all the time from traveling hunters who worry that their pointer that is an ace on plantation quail won't be able to scent wild prairie grouse. Nonsense, he says.

"If a dog is well-bred and has the basics, it will figure it out," says Havel. "A bird is a bird. After a few contacts with a new upland species, my experience is that they will work it out."

In terms of physical fitness, Havel escalates the workload during pre-season training, and he starts

feeding a performance blend—he likes Eukanuba's 30/20 mix—in July to increase both stamina and endurance. But he can easily tell the difference between those hunters who feed a premium line and those who don't in their dogs' ability to bounce back from a hard day.

"You might not see it in the first couple days, but if you're out for a week, I can tell the dogs that are on a diet of premium feed versus those that are getting their regular rations in the first half-hour of a hunt," he says. "Dogs that are getting energy from their food are spending it on their hunts."

That puts a premium on tighter chokes and longer shots, and also for your ability to move fast to put up a runner, or to employ blockers to cut off the escape routes of these leggy birds.

The surest way to short-stop this running, which is most pronounced in hard-hunted public-land roosters, is to work into the wind. Dogs that get a nose-full of fresh pheasant scent don't need much convincing to flush the errant bird. But if the wind is at your back, that job of scent-trailing a running rooster is doubly hard.

I mentioned hazards of sharptail country. They include rattlesnakes, though you're far less likely to encounter a snake in wheat country than in the sunbaked scablands where sage grouse live. A more frequent liability is porcupines, which occupy those native-berry thickets in surprising abundance. The other is environmental: It's dry almost anywhere you hunt sharpies in the fall, so bring plenty of water and give your dog good measures of rest between walks, especially on those fall

days when the afternoons turn surprisingly hot.

Hazards to dogs in the West's pheasant country don't stop at the snakes, porcupines, brush and heat. Pheasant hunters must also watch that their dogs don't get caught or cut in errant fence wire or sprayed by a skunk hunkered in heavy cover. And, especially later in the season as cattail sloughs and beaver ponds begin to freeze, hunters need to ensure their dogs don't chase roosters onto thin, treacherous ice. 

Get your dog in good physical shape ahead of the season, then be aware of other hazards to its health like rattlesnakes, porcupines and especially dehydration while in the field.

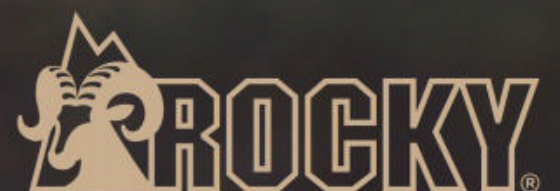




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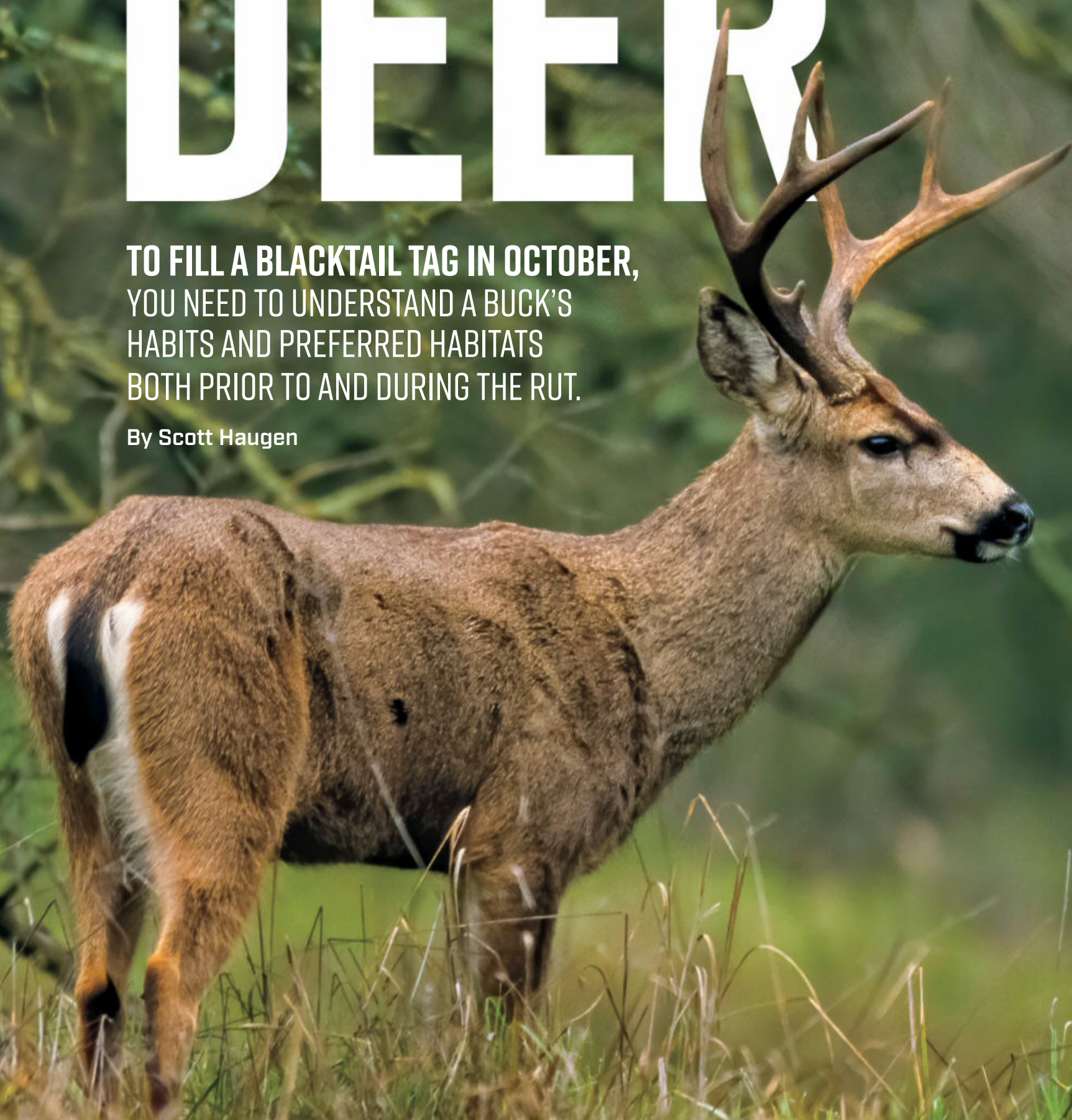
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DIAL IN A DEER

TO FILL A BLACKTAIL TAG IN OCTOBER, YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND A BUCK'S HABITS AND PREFERRED HABITATS BOTH PRIOR TO AND DURING THE RUT.

By Scott Haugen



During the pre-rut, a blacktail buck tends to stick to its core area, typically a place with safe bedding cover and food nearby.

The text came from my hunting buddy, Chris Stewart, and all it said was “I got it!” I knew exactly what he was talking about. For two years, Stewart had been hunting a specific blacktail buck, and it appeared he’d finally connected with it.

Then another text came through: “I totally misjudged it, though!” This was his way of saying he underestimated its size. When I caught up with him later that day, the 154-inch rack more than commanded my attention.

“He wasn’t 200 yards from where I’d been watching him all summer, and less than 100 yards from where I saw him one time last season, but couldn’t get a shot,” he said.

Stewart is one of the most successful blacktail hunters I know, and he and his family have taken many big bucks in October, as have a number of devoted blacktail hunters who’ve figured out these elusive deer. Here are the tactics that punch buck tags.

PRE-RUT BEHAVIOR

Having hunted big game throughout the West for more than four decades, I rank tagging a mature Columbia blacktail buck year after year to be the most challenging pursuit. Part of this is due to the varied habitats these deer call home, each of which can present specific practical challenges for a hunter. Another part relates to how these deer live within their respective habitats.

Wherever you hunt blacktails, the October pre-rut and the peak of the rut, which starts later in the month, are important to understand. The moment a buck strips its velvet in late August or early September, testosterone levels start increasing and the first, early changes in pre-rut bucks begin. At this time, you’ll see big bucks start letting smaller bucks move well ahead of them when going to feed and bed. You’ll also see mature bucks using different trails than younger bucks.

A buck’s number-one goal in early fall is to stay alive by avoiding predators and

eating nutritious foods. In early to mid-October, the movement of a mature buck is largely restricted to its core area—a place where it beds during the day that is usually surrounded by brush with multiple escape routes. Core areas can hold food, too. In semi-open habitats, bucks sometimes bed on a vantage point, and they’ll often utilize one of several beds depending on wind-driven thermal direction and intensity.

During roughly the first half of October, when the bucks’ primary focus is food and safe bedding cover, you want to spend more time glassing than walking. You want to discover not only where bucks are, but understand their relationship to food and bedding areas. If summer scouting reveals a couple good bucks in an area, glass all day long, sometimes for days in a row.

Glassing from a distant vantage point is wise because bucks are inclined to move mostly at night in early October, yet if they find themselves near a good



Glassing is essential in early October. Many times, bucks will be in bedding areas near the food sources they frequent. Be patient and you may catch one on the move.



Before and after windstorms and during heavy rains are prime times to be in the blacktail woods, as deer often move in the cooler temps.

food source come daylight, they might bed right in it. Coastal and valley blacktails are prone to this because some of the most common cover in and around feeding areas—Himalayan blackberry patches, tall grass, stands of fireweed and Scotch broom thickets—are tall enough and heavy enough to hide deer that are bedding. They are ideal habitats to glass for bucks.

If the sun comes out, it will often expose bedded bucks, so stick with your glassing. Also, deer in bedding areas periodically stand up and change positions, so even if they are hidden while bedded, a patient hunter glassing the area will eventually be able to spot them.

RUT MOVEMENT

In mid-October, blacktail patterns begin to change. Bucks are no longer focused on food, but instead begin to seek does, and in doing so they move more. Personal experiences lead me to believe the blacktail rut starts sooner in the Coast Range than in other habitats. I've seen big, swollen-neck bucks chasing does as early as October 14 and have inspected the empty stomachs of rut-crazed bucks between the 15th and 20th. An empty stomach indicates a buck has quit feeding and is focused on finding does.

October 15 to 22 is what I consider the peak of the pre-rut. This is when mature bucks cover ground searching for the does they'll soon breed. At this point, most of the does are not ready to stand for the bucks, but the bucks

are actively checking. Focus hunting efforts on horizontal ridges—places does must pass through from their elevated bedding areas to low-elevation feeding zones.

Bucks check primary doe trails running up and down ridges—often multiple times a day—to see if a doe slips into estrus. Bucks can cover a lot of ground when maintaining the same elevation. It's an energy-saving way of covering ground that works as well for you as it does for the bucks. A buck is looking for where does have urinated. He uses smell to sense estrogen levels. As the buck cruises, he may not follow the doe trail itself. Cutting across the trail or moving downwind of the doe trail, feeding area or bedding site is usually enough to give him the information he needs. Thus, bucks will often move horizontally along a hillside to cut across multiple doe trails.

Once a buck finds what he likes, he'll follow the doe's tracks to her, hoping for a chance to breed. Specifically, a buck follows scent left by the doe's every step, identifying odors laid down from the interdigital glands. These glands are located between the split toes of ungulates, and are one way they identify each other. The brushier a blacktail's habitat, the more I think they rely on pheromones to identify and track one another.

I speculate that the slightest spike in estrogen levels results in a more intense pre-rut and an earlier occurrence of the rut in the jungle-like Coast Range. Next comes the Cascade foothills, where

bucks in the 1,000- to 2,500-foot elevation range really grow active by October 22. Mature bucks living on the valley floor are the toughest to find, as they live year-round with the does they'll breed and the bucks they'll fight, meaning they don't have to travel to see what's happening.

ON THE HUNT

While the first two weeks of October find me glassing for bucks, from the 15th to the 21st I'm covering ground on foot. My goal is to find bucks on the move and locate as many does as I can. Once does are located, I plot their location on a map. Bucks are tracking these does and checking on them, sometimes multiple times a day. If you know where the does are, you know where the bucks are bound to turn up.

Around October 22, things change. This is when I start rattling and calling because at about this time bucks begin to be more aggressive toward other bucks that are competing with them to breed does in the area. Bucks that have identified doe groups are more and more likely to stay near those does, and because of that they move less than they did previously. They've found what they're looking for. Now they're waiting for does to come into heat and are ready to fight other bucks for breeding rights. This is when rattling can give you an advantage.

Halloween is when I've seen the most and biggest bucks during the general rifle season. From then until season's

SCOTT HAUGEN

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QUALITY OPTICS

Get good glass for blacktails.

October is a time of searching for big blacktail bucks. To do this effectively, invest in the best optics you can afford.

A 10x42 mm binocular is ideal—something you can look through and hike with all day. If you really want to take your glassing game to the next level, a spotting scope is a must. Go with the highest magnification and glass quality you can afford and a style that's comfortable. A well-built tripod is vital, especially when glassing on windy days or from soft ground. If you want to study bucks closer, consider a digiscoping adapter.

My binocular of choice is Swarovski's 10x42 EL Range. My spotting scope is also a Swarovski, an ATX with a 65 mm eyepiece and 65, 85 and 95 mm lenses. It's atop a stable, lightweight Swarovski Professional Carbon Tripod with matched Compact Carbon Head. I rely on Novagrade's Double Gripper smartphone adapter for my digiscoping duties.

end, anything can happen. I'll often rattle from multiple setups at this time, especially if the weather is miserable.

The harder it rains and the colder it is, the better for big buck movement. While photoperiodism dictates hormone levels, cooler temperatures make it more comfortable for a buck to cover ground. On wet, windy, cold days, hunt all day long.

Hunting before and after windstorms is a must, as deer tend to feed more during these times. After the storm, in particular, they'll be on the move looking for mosses and lichens—foods they've not had for months—that have

fallen from trees. If the does move more to feed, the bucks move more to stay with them.

This season, pay attention to deer and watch how their behaviors shift throughout the month. Devote serious time to glassing the first half of the month, and don't be afraid to hit the brush the second half.

When it comes to blacktails, there are no written rules. Just when you think you have them figured out, something changes. Every time you hit the woods, however, you'll learn something, and that's the best way I've found to consistently fill tags. **GAF**

Oregon hunter Chris Stewart spent two years hunting this 154-inch Columbia blacktail before finally connecting with it on opening day.



SCOTT HAUGEN (2)

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ELK

OCTOBER IS A TIME OF TRANSITION FOR ELK THROUGHOUT THE WEST. **KNOWING WHAT MOVES TO MAKE—AND WHEN—CAN HELP YOU FILL YOUR TAG.**

By Scott Haugen



Calling isn't necessarily meant to bring a bull running. Simply getting one to respond and give up his location is sometimes all you need to close the distance for a shot.

Setting up in the shooting sticks, I was frustrated. The figure eights my scope drew around the bull grew larger, no matter how hard I tried to control my breathing. The hike up the rugged mountain of the Snake River Valley was tougher than anticipated, taking me nearly two hours. I decided I'd need a more solid rest and went prone on a nearby rock. The scope steadied as my breathing slowed.

I sent one last bugle, stopping the bull. It turned broadside, bugling back. That's when I took a deep breath, let out half of it, held the crosshairs behind the bull's shoulder and pressed the trigger. The report of the Nosler .325 WSM caught me by surprise, which is a good thing. The AccuBond found the mark, and it was time to get to work.

It was the third week of October. Temperatures were projected to be in the upper 60s, and with no shade I wanted to quickly break down the bull and get it off the mountain.



Washington offers an early-October muzzleloader hunt in the southern Coast Range. The vegetation is thick and the land rugged, but the elk are rutting and well worth the effort.

I first spotted the 6x6 tossing sod in a dry wallow earlier that morning. Dust, rather than mud, emanated from the site, and as the cows started moving up the mountain, the bull followed. He was more than 800 yards away at the time, and my only chance of catching up was to slow him down. Over the next two hours I bugled dozens of times as I clawed for elevation. The bull replied every time. It was enough to slow his and the cows' progress, ultimately leading to a shot opportunity I'd have otherwise never had.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN SURPRISE

Without a bugle and a cow call, there's no way I could have caught up with that bull. Incessant calling is what slowed the entire herd, giving me a broadside shot at 305 yards.

It was my second Rocky Mountain elk hunt in as many weeks and as many states, and both tags were punched thanks to calling. With warmer-than-usual falls in recent years, there has come a noticeable delay, or perhaps an extension, of elk rutting behavior throughout the West—something hunters can use to their advantage.

"We're often calling all season," says Idaho guide Matt Craig (bouldercreek

outfitters.com). "We're not calling to necessarily bring in bulls. Rather, we want to locate them so we can make a move. Many times this approach has slowed elk moving from feeding to bedding areas, allowing hunters to close in for a shot. It's something not a lot of hunters think about doing in October. But they should."

I've talked with other outfitters and several hunters throughout the West who echo the same thoughts. They're calling all through the month of October, and often getting bulls to come in.

Recently on a mid-October hunt in the Rockies I called in 6 bulls in one day, including a nice 5-point and a 6x6. On a late-October hunt in Wyoming, I located a big bull by bugling. Not only did my calls get the bull talking, they fired him up enough to cause him to start fighting with another bull. I later closed the deal on the big 6-point.

In general, if you see bulls with cows any time in October, there's a chance of using calls to your advantage. The fact bulls are still with cows at this time means they're thinking there's a chance to breed. The cows themselves are also aware that other cows are still breeding. By using bugles and even excited cow calls, it's very possible to not only

catch the attention of bulls, but cows as well. This means you have the ability to influence the behavior of an entire herd, something that can be a big advantage when it comes to slowing their pace as they move toward hard-to-reach bedding areas.

Calls can also be used to locate solitary bulls or bachelor herds in big canyons and on timbered hillsides. The goal here isn't to call them in, but rather get them to give up their whereabouts by answering your call. Once you know where a bull is, you can plan your approach and shot far more effectively than if you hunt the area blind.

While the usefulness of calling lasts longer into October than many hunters realize, at some point breeding stops and even the most ardent bulls that have been chasing cows hard for two months turn to the task of finding enough food to survive the rapidly approaching winter. When your scouting reveals that bulls have begun to migrate, calling rapidly loses effectiveness. Migrating bulls are in survival mode, looking for food to gain needed calories prior to winter's onset. They could care less about breeding possibilities. Once a migration begins, spot-and-stalk is the go-to approach.

CALLS AND CAMS

Key gear for October elk

Aside from comfortable clothing, a quality pack and an accurate rifle, the most important tools for October elk hunts in the Rockies are calls. I like sharp, crisp, loud bugles and cow calls that will carry through big country and penetrate bad weather. You can influence entire herds with calls, but delivering very aggressive sounds is often the key. Don't be afraid to use loud bugles, grunts and chuckles. Estrus calls can also be effective.

As for Roosevelt elk gear, few things have taught me more about these animals in recent years than trail cameras. I run **Stealth Cam DS4K Ultimate** cameras on video mode to see and hear how elk are behaving. I've had DS4K Ultimate cameras get pounded with rain for months and covered in snow for weeks and they come out performing just fine. The clarity of the video and sound these cameras capture makes them one of my most important hunting tools.



ROOSEVELT ENCOUNTERS

For Roosevelt elk hunters in the Coast Range and Cascades of the Pacific Northwest, calling can also work as the season progresses. Due to the dense habitat these elk call home, calling usually functions as a means of locating a bull in the thick draws and hillsides of the coastal temperate rain forest, not to bring in a charging bull.

Oregon's general Cascade rifle season is shifting to early November this year, and while calling may work, trail cameras might be a better tool.

I monitor multiple cams year-round for Roosevelt elk, both in the Coast

Range and the Cascades. Last summer and fall I caught one 6x7 in the Cascade foothills that regularly showed up with two different herds of cows 9.3 miles apart. The ground separating the cow herds was far from flat, yet that bull, like many others, thought nothing of covering the distance to breed and feed.

"The bulls on the coast are more home bodies," says noted guide, Jody Smith (jodysmithguideservice.com). "During the archery season we get new bulls showing up, but they don't stick around long. Most of the bulls we kill in the first and second Coast hunts in November are bulls I've been watching

on trail camera all summer long. They don't travel far, only separating from cows a short distance by November."

Smith notes that a lot of coastal bulls he's seen over the years move only 500 to 800 yards from cow herds when feeding and bedding.

"You'll see bachelor herds feeding 800 yards from the cows, but where cows often bed in open, logged units, the bulls almost always bed in thick timber. If you see cow herds, thoroughly check the surrounding area for bachelor bulls."

Smith strongly encourages hunters to be comfortable shooting long distances, though that's a relative term in this terrain.



Roosevelt elk occupy dense habitat. Calling and aggressively moving in favorable weather conditions can be the key to filling your tag in this month.

“By long distance I mean 300 yards,” he says. “Many hunters think that because they’re hunting the Coast Range, shots are going to come inside 100 yards. More often than not, bulls are spotted across draws, canyons, even logged units, so shot opportunities can be longer than many people realize. If you’re not comfortable shooting long, don’t be afraid to use cow calls to cover your sound if stalking a bull through timber.”

In both the Coast Range and Cascades, private timber companies offer pay-to-hunt opportunities. While these aren’t for everyone, they’re worth serious consideration as elk numbers are high on many of these properties and the fee is a small price to pay when compared to traveling out of state or, especially, hiring a guide.

Whether hunting Rocky Mountain elk or Roosevelt elk, take advantage of shifts

in the weather. October snowstorms can force elk in the Rockies to hunker down, giving you the opportunity to move in. Heavy rains and high winds in Roosevelt country can knock down your scent and mask sound and movement, allowing you to get close.

This October, let your moves be what surprise the elk. By being prepared and understanding a bull’s behavior, you can increase the odds filling your tag. 🏆



Expert guide Jody Smith pursues Roosevelt elk in Oregon’s Coast Range. Smith relies heavily on trail cameras year-round to learn all he can about the bulls he hunts.

SCOTT HAUGEN

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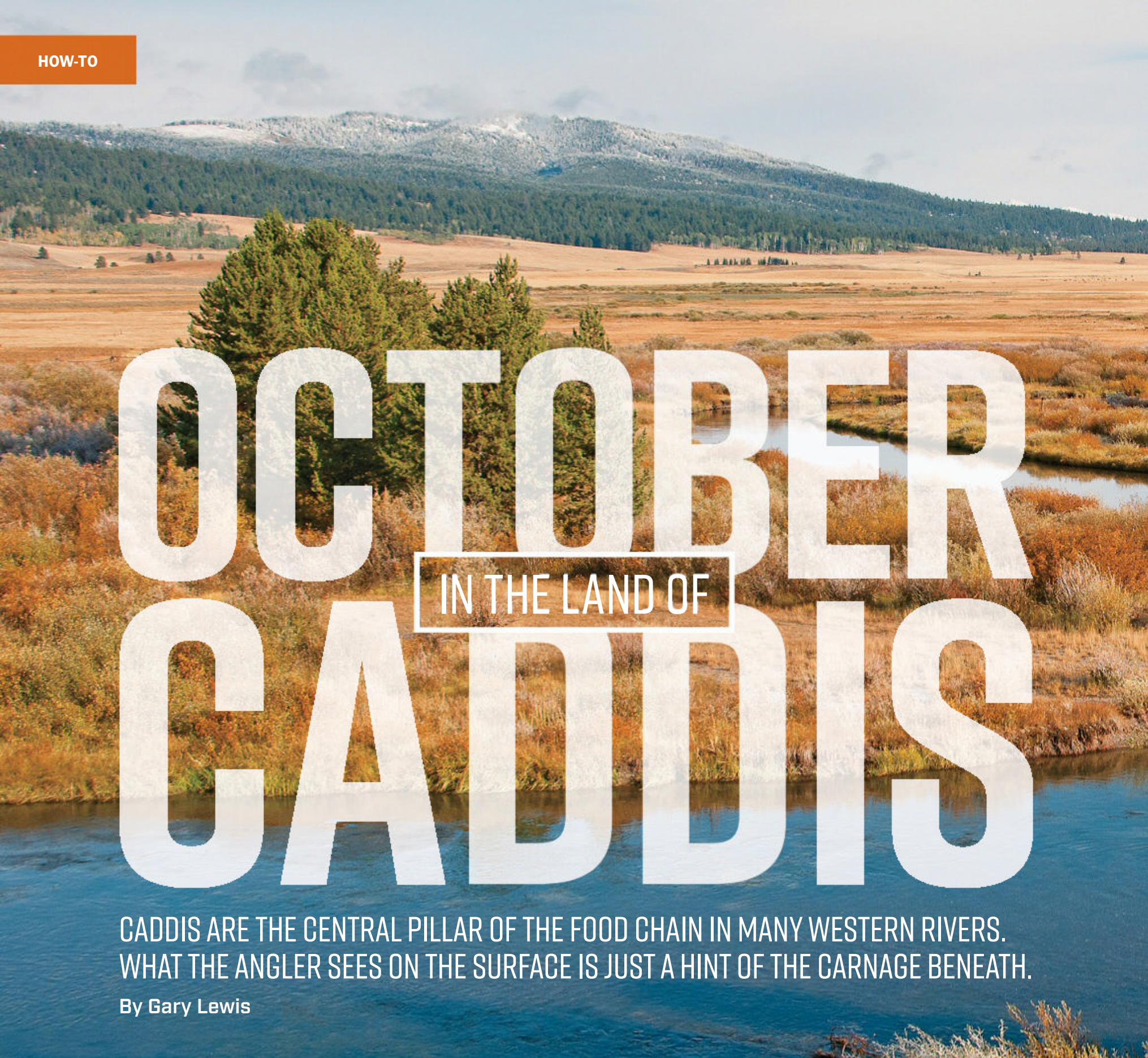


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OCTOBER IN THE LAND OF CADDIS

CADDIS ARE THE CENTRAL PILLAR OF THE FOOD CHAIN IN MANY WESTERN RIVERS. WHAT THE ANGLER SEES ON THE SURFACE IS JUST A HINT OF THE CARNAGE BENEATH.

By Gary Lewis

Growing up in and around the great rivers of the coastal West, every kid in jeans and soggy tennis shoes with a fishing rod in hand becomes intimately acquainted with caddis.

In the summer my friends and I marveled at caddis, how they constructed their little houses and clung to the plate-sized rocks in the riffles. We called them periwinkles because that's what our daddies told us they were, but we came to understand they were the same bugs as the big, tent-winged bombers we would see in October.

Everywhere the caddis occurs it is a favorite food of trout. For anglers along the coastal rivers, the relationship of caddis to sea-run cutthroats is well known. We look forward to the first sightings of cutts that we see tucked up against the banks on an August day.

Across the West, particularly in the inland streams of the coastal states, as well as in Idaho and Montana, the October caddis hatch really begins in September and hits its stride in the first weeks of October. Even into November, the big bugs can still be found above the river.

But the caddis hatch is more complex than the "all at once and then it's over" hatches of some aquatic insects. Caddis are such an important part of the trout diet that in many rivers there is a direct correlation between the number of caddis and the number of trout the river can support.

Interestingly, caddis larvae may live in a stream for up to three years before they hatch, and trout feed on caddis year-round.

Even in the midst of the hatch, there are good opportunities for trout to feed on subsurface caddis, and successful



Caddis occur in various stages in October. While a dry-fly bite might be exciting, know that much of the feeding occurs subsurface.

anglers recognize that the opportunity goes beyond the topwater bite, even in October.

TOO BIG TO IGNORE

Separate a caddis larva from its shell and what you have is a pale-yellow rock worm with a jet-black head and legs. Trout eat them shell and all, but the larva itself is the prized treat. Since the larva stores all the energy it'll need as an adult in the form of a fat body, the larva is like trout bacon.

Sometime in August the caddis begin their final transitional stage toward a brief

adulthood, similar to the process of a caterpillar enclosing itself in a cocoon. The caddis attaches itself to a rock and seals itself inside its case where it transitions from the larval stage into a pupa. When the time is right, the pupa breaks out of the case and begins to migrate to the edge of the stream where it crawls out upon a branch or a rock and dries its wings.

So even though trout feed on caddis throughout the year, they are suddenly more available and vulnerable in August, September and October.

Hatch timing is not as easy to mark as that of a stonefly hatch, for example.

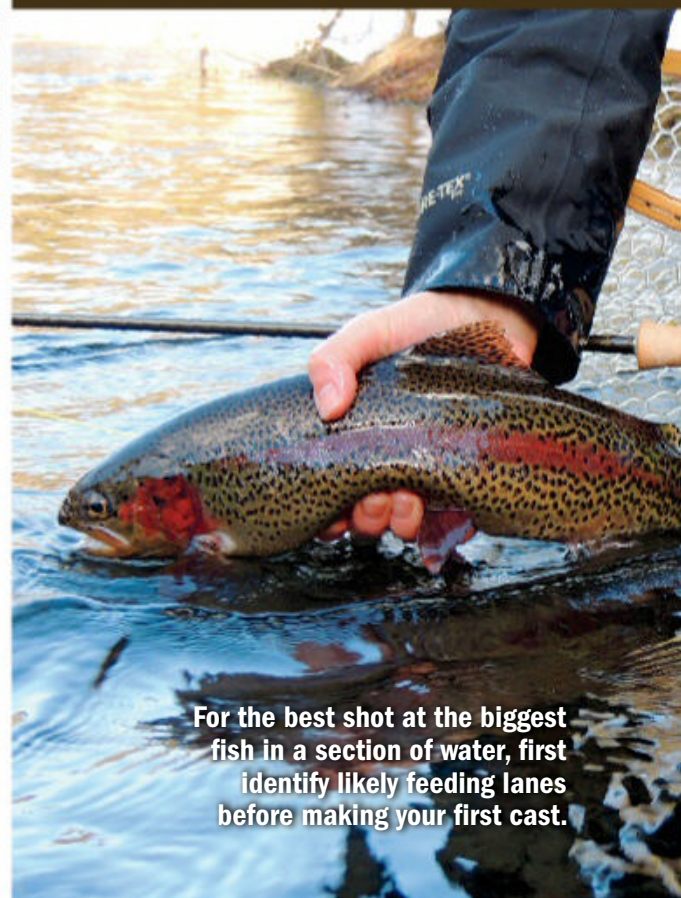
READING TROUT WATER

Separate the good from the bad.

Keep the rod locked and loaded when looking at a piece of water for the first time. Look for the edges where fast and slow water comes together. These are feeding lanes. Is there a line of foam? That's another feeding lane. If trout are rising, that's a good clue, but most feeding activity takes place beneath the surface.

Is there a shelf where the water is only 12 to 24 inches deep? Light penetration is good in such places and bug life will be abundant.

With practice, these first questions can be answered quickly when observing a new spot, but there is more to reading a trout stream. Pick up a few rocks, turn them over and look for caddis tubes, stoneflies and mayfly nymphs. Down along the water's edge, look for bugs in the tops of the grass, in the willows and in spider webs, too. Every clue connects back to the water.



For the best shot at the biggest fish in a section of water, first identify likely feeding lanes before making your first cast.

Much of the hatch can come off during night hours. In fact, it is safe to say that if you see even a single orange-bodied, tent-winged bug above the river, the hatch is on. To the trout's way of looking at the world, the party has started, and it's mostly below the surface.

LARVAL STAGE

The larval stage is imitated in both cased and uncased versions. The flies can be tied on scud-style on English bait hooks or on straight hooks sized No. 10 to 6 and 2X to 4X long. The fly should be heavy.

Beads, lead wire and copper ripping can all be used to make sure it sinks fast. To tie a passable cased-caddis imitation, peacock herl works as a good body base and may be overlaid with a rooster hackle to add depth to the body. The body of the worm can be tied to represent it partially out of the case, or not.

To be ready for an October caddis feeding frenzy, tie or buy John Hazel's Deschutes Cased Caddis, Oswald's BH Rock Roller and Peeking Caddis.

Now picture the worm free from its case. An imitation of this stage is good

fly to fish by itself anytime between the middle of July and into the fall. My favorite representations are tied in off-white, yellow and orange overlaid with clear latex. Heads and legs are completed with dark rabbit or muskrat with the guard hairs picked out. Some other good caseless larva patterns include Tan Caddis Larva and Rip Caddis.

For all intents and purposes, these flies should be fished on a dead drift. I learned to fish them with the rod in the high-stick position, but they can also be fished with a strike indicator. Trout tend to suck them in and spit them out just as fast, so it pays to set the hook at the slightest suggestion of a grab.

Paying attention is critical to successful caddis fishing. If you are dead-drifting in current and your line stops, set the hook immediately—neither your fly nor real-life caddis larva can just suddenly stop in the current.

As good as a larva imitation is by itself, the thinking fly fisherman knows that it can be improved dramatically with the addition of a pupa pattern on a dropper.

EMERGENT PHASE

Peak caddis hatch activity is most likely to take place on cloudy days from late afternoon until dark. Anticipating this can precipitate what I think is the most important and exciting stage of the hatch.

Exploit the "pre-hatch" phase with a tandem rig that includes a pupal imitation up top and a larval imitation down deep.

Fish the two-fly rig on a dead drift, then let the flies swing at the end of the drift. Accentuate this part of the presentation with a very subtle twitch or two by turning the tip of the rod in a small circle. Now your dead-drifted flies are mimicking emergents, and the trout are watching.

If a few naturals begin to hatch, it might pay off to tie on a dry with a pupa imitation on a 24-inch trailing dropper. Cast, dead-drift, swing, lift the rod, twitch.

Some of the better pupa imitations include the Tungsten Dirty Bird, Mercer's Tungsten October Caddis and Morrish October BH Caddis Pupa.

ON THE SURFACE—HATCHING

Fishing the dry is a lot like fishing in hopper season. Caddis hatches are unlike

Adding a skitter at the end of a dead-drift presentation with a dry fly will often trigger fish to bite, even from several feet away.





Photographer: Austin Hilgenberg

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most mayfly hatches; they don't cover the water like mayflies do. Thus, even in the heavy phase of the October hatch, caddis are not typically all across the surface with trout rising to attack them. But the flies are big—some of them fall into the water and trout will be looking for them.

At this stage of the game, the fly is trying to break free from the surface, get its wings dry and fly off. Some accomplish this with ease while others struggle. Since it is difficult to add motion to a fly that imitates the tiny struggles of the real caddis, it is usually better at this stage of the hatch to fish the dry on a dead drift.

After the natural has left the surface, it will not be available to trout again unless a strong wind drives it back to the river. At such times the fly may be wind-smacked, and a dead drift is again the preferable presentation. Instead of waiting for mayfly-like rising activity from trout all across the river, look for trout near banks and islands in 2 to 4 feet of water where grasses and willows overhang. These are spots where trout know they have a chance at grabbing freshly hatching caddis or the wind-smacked adults.

Some of the great October Caddis dry imitations include the Morrish October Caddis Dry Fly, Improved Orange Sofa Pillow and Orange Stimulator. This is also a good time to stay with the time-honored dry-and-dropper routine, with a small Rubber Leg Pheasant Tail, Emergent Sparkle Pupa (brown and yellow) or a yellow X Caddis in tow. Run the dropper about 24 inches back from the dry fly.

ON THE SURFACE—MATING

The next opportunity for the trout to eat the big bug is when the female returns to the water's surface for the egg laying dance.

When the adult female drops her eggs atop the water, she touches down, lifts off and touches down again. Sometimes the current pulls her under and she beats her wings to get back to the air, only to touch down again. Egg laying most often takes place from late afternoon until after dark, and the process will assuredly bring trout up off the bottom. Some trout get so engrossed in the ritual they will chase caddis out of the water, going airborne. Caddis are such a rich source of energy for trout that they get

far more calories in the bite than they expend in the leap.

Add a skitter to the end of a dead-drift dry-fly presentation with a quick mend to get most of the line off the water, then turn a small circle with the rod tip. If the fly lifts off the water and touches back down, even creating a bit of drag, it's okay. It is one of those relatively rare moments in a dry-fly fisherman's career when drag is a good thing.

Trout seem to materialize in the clear water and chase the bug for two, three, four, five feet across the surface. There is little else like it.

Look at the "hatch" of the October caddis not as a single event, but as a process when most cased caddis are involved. Is it August? It has begun. Is it September? It's on. Is it October? What are you waiting for? Now is one of the best times to be out there. 

GO-TO OCTOBER CADDIS PATTERNS

Three flies that should be in every serious angler's arsenal

BH October Caddis Bird's Nest

The Bird's Nest is a classic, and this version of it is purpose-built for late September and October when caddis may be found throughout the water column. Look for current seams and foam lines. Dead-drift this pattern beneath a strike indicator, or you can high-stick it and watch the leader. At the end of the drift, allow the fly to swing, then rise up in the water column. Add another emerger on a dropper to increase the effectiveness. Fish emerger caddis patterns in Nos. 12 to 14.



BH October Caddis Bird's Nest

Bird's Octoberfest Caddis

No amount of sloppy casting or cluster of 18-inch cutthroats is going to sink this pattern with its foam underwing and tail. The wing presents that caddis fly profile fish see as it lights on the surface, with the red hackle adding reality to the pattern. While an angler might opt for a parachute-style tie in calm water, it's a great pick for the ripples and tailouts where a fish has to make a quick decision or miss the meal. Fish it dead-drift in early afternoon, but as the shadows start to grow longer, try skittering the fly at the end of a drift or mending a "re-float." Fish this one in Nos. 10 to 14.



Bird's Octoberfest Caddis

King's Crane Candy CH

If I had to pick a caddis larva out of a lineup, it would look a lot like this one. While a lot of rock-cased October caddis go orange, many of them tend toward this shade of tan. And that blend of mylar in the dubbing adds sparkle. You know that bead is going to sink it, and fast. While tied to represent a crane fly larva, this pattern also imitates a caddis larva, which can be particularly effective for rainbows, sea-run cutthroat trout and steelhead, especially in August, September and October. Fish it deep on a dead drift with an indicator or use the high-stick technique and that sixth sense that tells you to set the hook when the unseen quarry inhales the offering.



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3 DAYS IN PARADISE

THESE THREE CENTRAL-OREGON TROUT RIVERS SHINE IN OCTOBER, AND ARE CLOSE ENOUGH TO ONE ANOTHER TO MAKE FOR ONE UNFORGETTABLE TRIP.

By Gary Lewis

ADAM STEVENS



Euro-nymphing small beadhead patterns with a 4-weight is the ticket for Crooked River trout below Prineville Reservoir in October.

High up in the Cascade Mountains, a trickle of water flows out of Little Lava Lake and makes its way toward the sea. In 252 winding miles, the Deschutes River drops from 4,739 feet to 186 feet above sea level at its mouth. Unlike most other western rivers, the Deschutes flows north. One of the great trout streams of the West, it gathers to itself the waters of the Crooked and Fall rivers, both excellent trout streams in their own right.

It is one of the great destinations with fly rod in hand, but a person should allow at least three days and plan the trip for those golden days in autumn when October caddis, blue-winged olives and midges can bring trout to the surface.

It is tempting to try to base a trip like this out of one town. Bend, on the banks of the Deschutes and within striking distance of the other two rivers, comes to mind, but to make the most of it, the intrepid angler is advised stay mobile.

CROOKED RIVER BELOW BOWMAN DAM

The best trout fishing on the Crooked River is in the tailrace below Prineville Reservoir. Eight miles of river between the reservoir and the town of Prineville include stretches that are legendary: Big Bend, Poison Butte, Devil's Post Pile, Cobble Rock, Chimney Rock, Lower Palisades, Lone Pine, Greenwood, Still Water, Castle Rock.

The water, collected from the Prineville Reservoir, is colored silty brown. Insect activity includes year-round midges and blue-winged olives. Well-fed on snails and freshwater shrimp, the trout run 8 to 15 inches, but it is not uncommon to hear of an 18- or 20-incher caught and released.

A small rod can be delightful on the Crooked. Some anglers go as small as a 2-weight, but a 4-weight makes the most sense. Small beadhead patterns play well here, especially when applied with the latest Euro-nymphing technique. Waders are necessary, and be mindful of the slick rocks.

Access the river via Highway 27 south of Prineville. There are a number of small campgrounds in this section of the river. Good hotels are available in Prineville. From Sunriver to Bend to Redmond and Sisters, many fly shops are expert in serving the Crooked-bound angler.



Rainbows—both wild and hatchery fish—along with wild brook and brown trout are plentiful on the Fall River.

In Redmond, stop at Fin & Fire Fly Shop for the local intel and don't leave without buying a few flies and leaders.

FALL RIVER

The Fall River is in many ways the opposite of the Crooked River angling experience. A gin-clear spring creek flowing through tall Ponderosa pines, the Fall is one of those places where you stalk the fish and use shore cover to break your outline, taking care not to

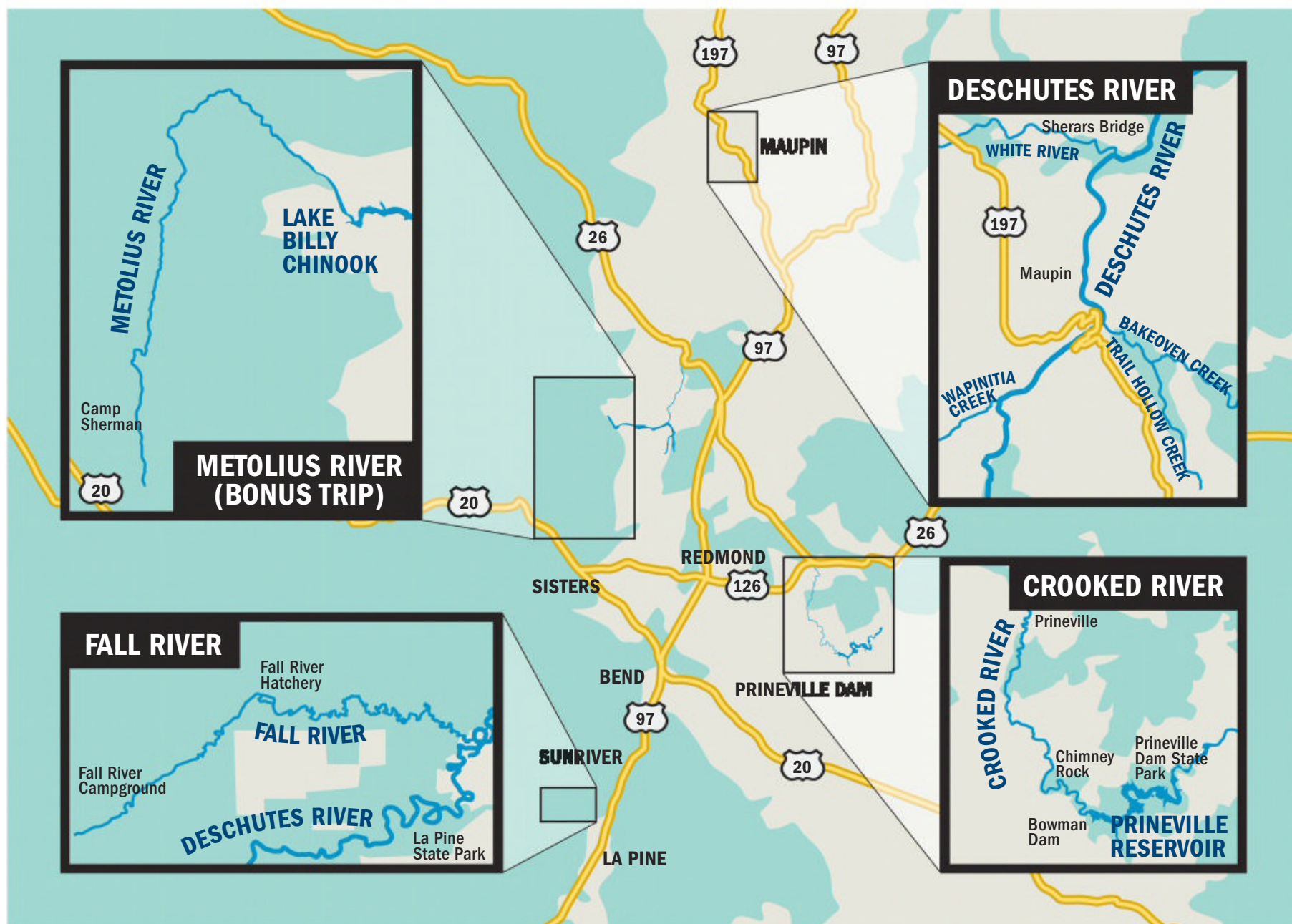
put the shadow of the rod on the water.

The trout are wild rainbows, brookies and browns, as well as hatchery 'bows. Although there may be a lot of trout to look at, they are notoriously hard to dupe on most days. Fish run from about 8 inches to 6 pounds. A 5-weight is a good choice. It helps to bring one rod set up for dry flies and another rigged for casting nymphs or streamers. Caddis are active in October, and when the hatch is on be ready to skitter a No. 10 dry on the top

current. Beadhead nymphs always work here, but try to match what the fish are used to eating. It's going to be small—think BWOs and midges. People often miss the streamer component on the Fall. Some of these big rainbows are chasers if you chug the right fly, with olive and white being productive colors. Waders are optional here, but this water is cold.

Most of the river is accessible, but there are places where private lands limit access. Eighteen miles south of Bend, leave Highway 97 and follow signs to South Century Drive and Forest Route 42. Plan to fish the headwaters as well as the section around the Fall River Falls (Forest Route 4360).

Camp on the river or stay in nearby Sunriver, Bend or La Pine. Good intelligence for the Fall River can be had at fly shops in Sunriver, like The Hook Fly Shop and the Sunriver Fly Shop or obtained in Bend from the Confluence Fly Shop, Bend Fly Shop, The Patient Angler, or Fly and Field.



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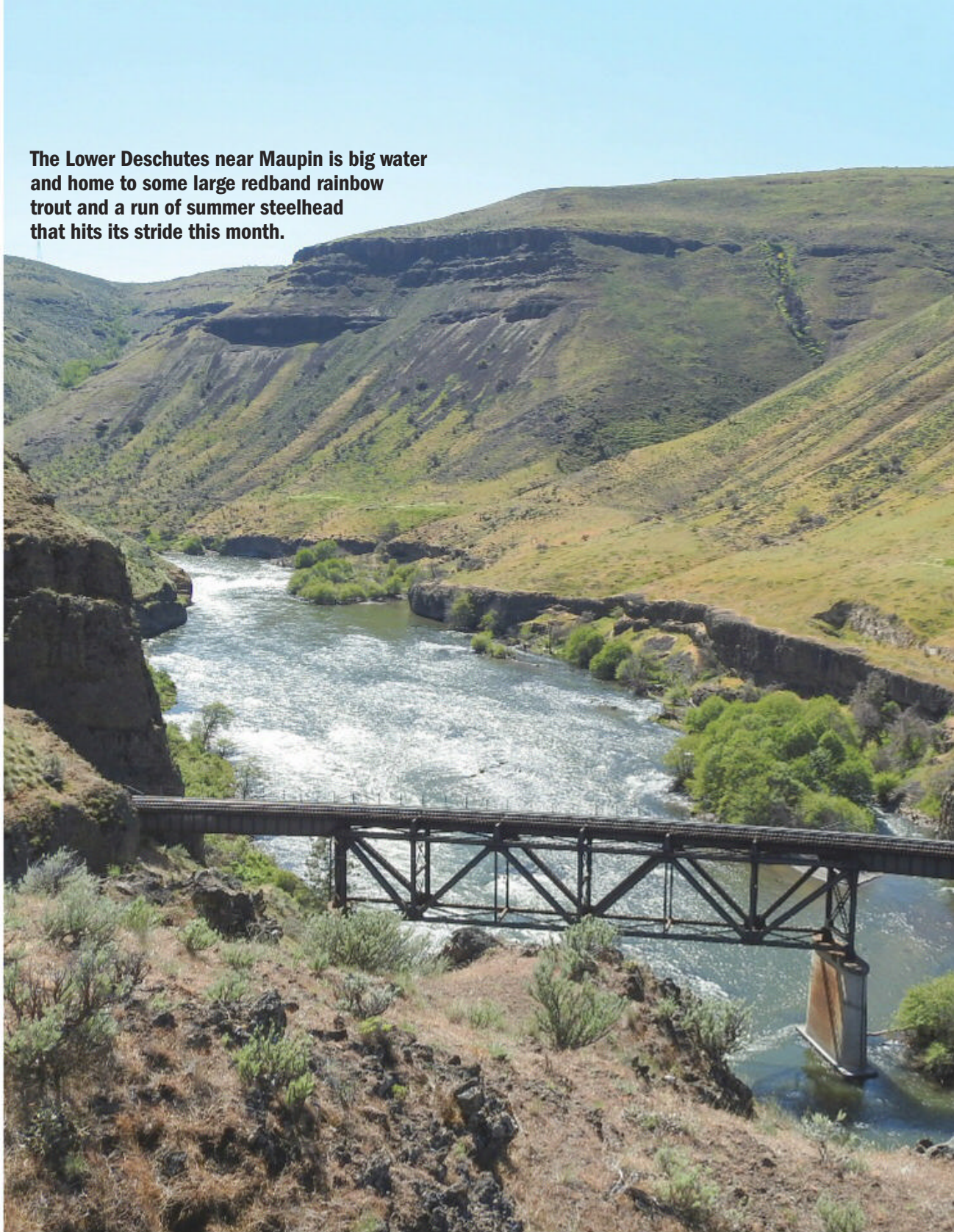
MAUPIN REACH OF THE DESCHUTES RIVER

With 252 river miles to explore, it is difficult to settle on one section of the Deschutes. But in October, you cannot find a better reach of the river than in that section around Maupin. This is big water where the trout come up onto shallow flats to feed and hang off the riffled seams. The trout can run from 10 inches to 5 pounds, and there are steelhead in this part of the river in October. The dedicated trout angler might stick to a 5-weight rod and regret it when a steelhead sips that Elk Hair Caddis off the surface. You are not over-gunned with a 7-weight on this part of the D. Waders are necessary and a wading staff should be considered required equipment.

A favorite way to plumb the river's depths is to use a two-fly rig. In October, that means October caddis in its various stages. The Deschutes may not be fished from a boat, so that means a bank angler will have the same chances as a drift boater who has to stop and get out and wade before making a cast.

Reach Maupin on Highway 197 from Highway 97 out of Madras or from The Dalles off I-84. There are plenty of places to camp. The Imperial River Company is a great lodging option with good dining right on the river. The Deschutes Canyon Fly Shop and Deschutes Angler Fly Shop are both owned and staffed by hardcore anglers who know their stuff. 

The Lower Deschutes near Maupin is big water and home to some large redband rainbow trout and a run of summer steelhead that hits its stride this month.



BONUS SIDE TRIP

Spend a fourth day on the Metolius.

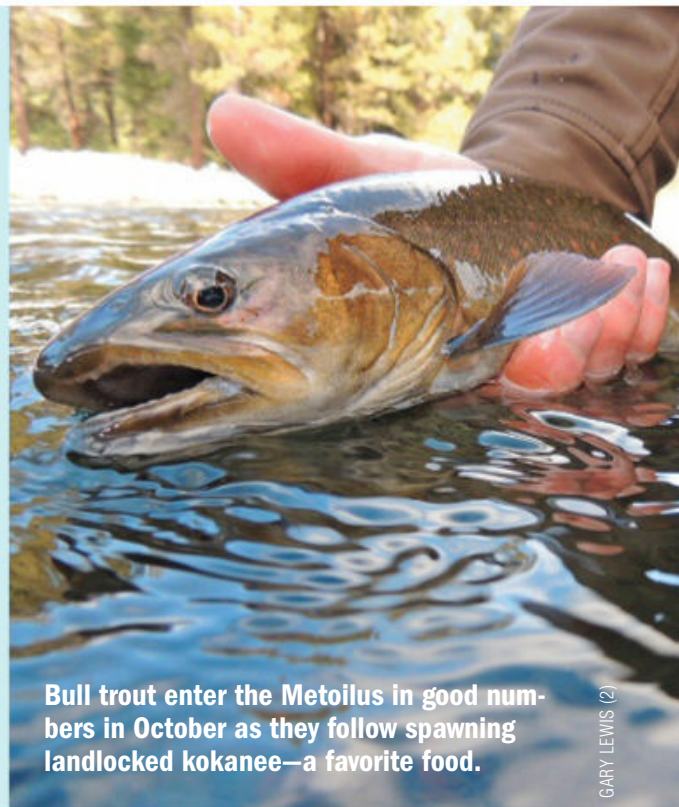
The Metolius River, also part of the Deschutes drainage, is a great place to extend your central-Oregon fishing trip. Arising near Black Butte near the community of Camp Sherman, the spring-fed Metolius, which literally begins by bubbling right out of the ground, is a wild trout stream home to gorgeous rainbows and bull trout that feed on whitefish and landlocked kokanee. The rainbow trout regularly run to 20 inches, while the bull trout are big enough to scare you.

Most anglers bring a rod rigged for rainbows—a 5-weight is a good choice—

and one set up for bulls. A 6-weight is a good minimum for bull trout because a few of them tip the scales at 15 pounds.

The river is managed entirely for wild fish. In October, several varieties of caddis are on the move, including the big October caddis. Bull trout, which can be present throughout the year, are more common than usual in October, as extra fish are in the river following the spawning kokanee up from Lake Billy Chinook.

Good intelligence on how to fish the extremely technical Metolius can be had in the Camp Sherman Fly Shop and at the Fly Fisher's Place in Sisters.



Bull trout enter the Metolius in good numbers in October as they follow spawning landlocked kokanee—a favorite food.

GARY LEWIS (2)

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FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX

HANDY AND HANDSOME, THIS 16-GAUGE OVER-UNDER IS A LIVELY, LIGHTWEIGHT OPTION FOR UPLAND GAME.

By Drew Warden

Lauded by some, mocked by others, unused by most, the 16-gauge shotgun has clung to life despite numerous obstacles over the years. It was given the cold shoulder in competitive skeet shooting in the 1920s, not receiving its own category when rules were devised. Throughout the 20th century, the 12 and 20 gauges stole more and more of its share of the shotgun market due to technological advances, like the debut of 3- and 3 1/2-inch shells. And when the switch from lead to non-toxic shot for waterfowl occurred in the late '80s and early '90s, the 16 gauge, with its smaller 2 3/4-inch shells incapable of holding as much of the larger steel shot required, fell even further from grace. With each hit, the 16 gauge's position in the shotgun world became ever shakier, and as a result, manufacturers devoted fewer resources to it.

The 16 gauge has always been an upland hunter's delight, and Franchi's new Instinct SLX lives up to that reputation.

DREW WARDEN

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Nevertheless, during its most respected days, many hunters—especially upland hunters—loved how the 16 carried and performed afield. Many still do, which is why it persists. The gauge patterns 1-ounce, 2 3/4-inch lead and bismuth loads very well, making it deadly on pretty much every upland gamebird one might have occasion to hunt. The often-discussed tendency of a 16 gauge to “carry like a 20 and hit like a 12” was what endeared it to hunters in the past, and this same rationale—and some degree of nostalgia—is why fans still love it today.

Despite this, few companies offer dedicated 16-gauge shotguns. As part of a recent resurgence in sub-gauge shotguns as a whole, though, a handful of manufacturers have bucked convention to add 16-gauge offerings to their lineups. One of these is the Italian gunmaker Franchi, which has debuted two 16-gauge over-unders in the past three years, the most recent being its new Instinct SLX.

The deluxe version of Franchi’s Instinct SL line, the SLX is a sweet shotgun decked out with features one would expect on a high-end over-under. The lightweight aluminum-alloy receiver has elegant floral engraving with gold inlays, the opening lever is cut out and engraved, and the trigger is gold plated. The gun also wears an AA-grade satin walnut Prince of Wales stock and a narrow Schnabel-style fore-end, both artfully checkered for grip and aesthetics. Barrels, meanwhile, are gloss blue.

There aren’t many manufacturers offering similar features on a shotgun priced around \$2,000. Even fewer furnish them in a 16-gauge model. The Instinct SLX stands out on those merits alone.

Still, while form matters—to some more than others—function remains foremost for the majority of hunters. If you want a 16 gauge that feels lighter than a 12 gauge yet packs a similar punch, it should be built on a dedicated 16-gauge frame. Historically, many manufacturers have introduced 16s that were little more than 16-gauge barrels placed atop 12-gauge frames. Hunters looking for a light field gun have, understandably, received these hybrids poorly, as they end up sacrificing power without shedding much weight. Instead of a gun that hits like a 12 and carries like a 20, they get one that hits like a 20 and carries like a 12—something no one wants.

Thankfully, this is not true of the Instinct SLX. The 16-gauge SLX is built on a true 16-gauge frame. Actually, every gun in the SLX line (which includes 12-, 20- and 28-gauge models) comes with a proportionate frame. The result with the 16 gauge is a gun light enough to be mistaken for a 20 gauge but powerful enough to handle any upland shot one might encounter. In fact, with its 5.8-pound weight, the 16-gauge model weighs about the same as, or less than, many prominent 20-gauge field guns.

In two days of hunting pheasant, chukar and Hungarian partridge at Pheasant Bonanza Hunt Club near Tekamah, Neb., I was able to experience the Instinct SLX’s lean form firsthand. While a couple full days of hunting with my 12-gauge semi-auto sometimes leave my arms a bit heavy, I experienced no such thing with the SLX. The gun was not only light, but the ergonomic design of the stock and fore-end made carrying it quite comfortable.

FRANCHI INSTINCT SLX SPECIFICATIONS

Type: over-under shotgun
Gauge, Chambers: 16, 2 3/4" (tested)
Capacity: 2 rounds
Receiver: aluminum alloy, engraved
Safety: tang-mounted automatic with barrel selector
Barrels: 28"; vent rib; gloss blue finish
Sights: fiber-optic front bead
Stock: AA-grade satin walnut; Prince Of Wales

Length of Pull: 14 1/4"
Drop at Heel: 2"
Drop at Comb: 1 1/2"
Overall Length: 46 1/4"
Weight: 5.8 lbs.
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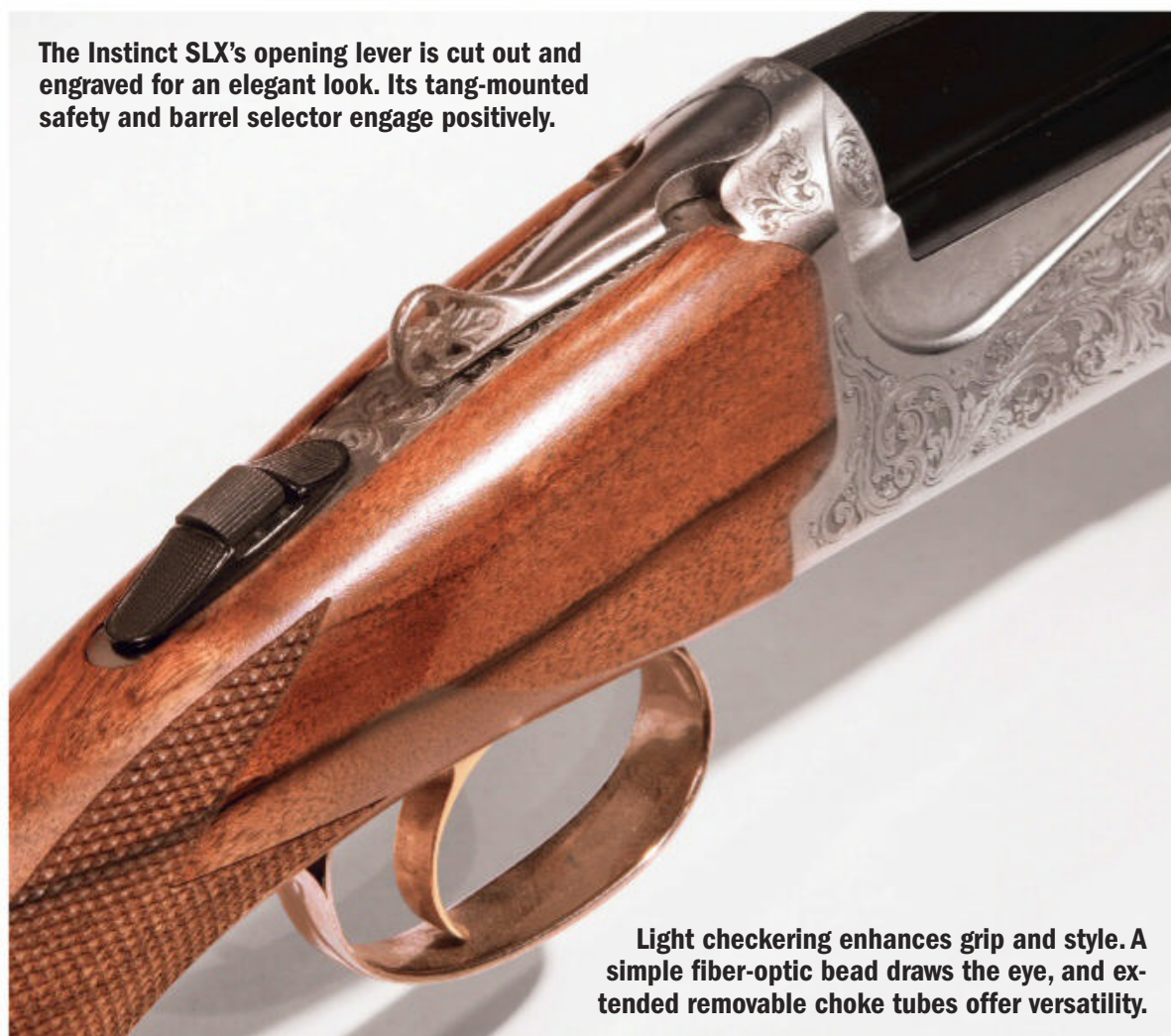
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The Instinct SLX's opening lever is cut out and engraved for an elegant look. Its tang-mounted safety and barrel selector engage positively.



Light checkering enhances grip and style. A simple fiber-optic bead draws the eye, and extended removable choke tubes offer versatility.



A gold-plated trigger and engraved receiver are just two of many aesthetic touches on the 16-gauge Instinct SLX.

Similarly, shouldering and firing the SLX also felt instinctive. The lightweight 16 was fast swinging, and the vent rib and red fiber-optic sight combined to offer an easy reference point without drawing attention from the target. Recoil seemed minimal, and a cushioned black buttpad helped mitigate what little there was.

The gun's mechanics and operation were likewise straightforward and effective. Being a new gun, the action was a bit stiff, but additional use will break it in more. The SLX's tang-mounted safety and barrel-selector switch functioned perfectly. Both the safety and selector engaged positively and audibly, making accidental changes to their status unlikely. The shotgun's all-steel automatic ejectors, meanwhile, spat out spent shells with force each and every time.

On the front end, the SLX comes with extended removable choke tubes. While some prefer flush-fit chokes, I like tubes that continue beyond the barrel. In addition to creating what I find to be a cool look, they also make it easier to quickly identify which chokes are in the gun.

Although ammo quality affects a shotgun's downrange performance, I feel confident in the Instinct SLX's capabilities. My hunting partners and I admittedly used some good ammunition on our hunt—Kent's FastLead and Bismuth Upland loads—and it did well with the gun. We were each able to drop birds with shots out to 40 or 50 yards. One of the guys had an incredible shot with the bismuth load that folded a pheasant at about 60 yards. Of course, the Instinct SLX also handled shorter crossing and flushing-away shots with ease, too. In short, I felt no less capable of making any shot with the 16-gauge SLX than I would have with my own 12 gauge.

That's more or less the entire point of the 16-gauge shotgun. It bridges the gap between the 12 and the 20 by combining attractive qualities of each: much of the 12 gauge's power and a good deal of the 20 gauge's lightweight feel. Technology advances have blurred the lines a bit; 12-gauges have become lighter, and 20-gauge shells have become more potent. But, the 16 still does everything it was intended to quite well, and guns such as the Franchi Instinct SLX only make this more apparent. If in the process the SLX manages to look good, too, what's wrong with that? 

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V167

OPTICS THAT UP THE ODDS



The Leupold VX-3HD is available in versions from 1.5-5x20 mm to 6.5-20x50 mm.

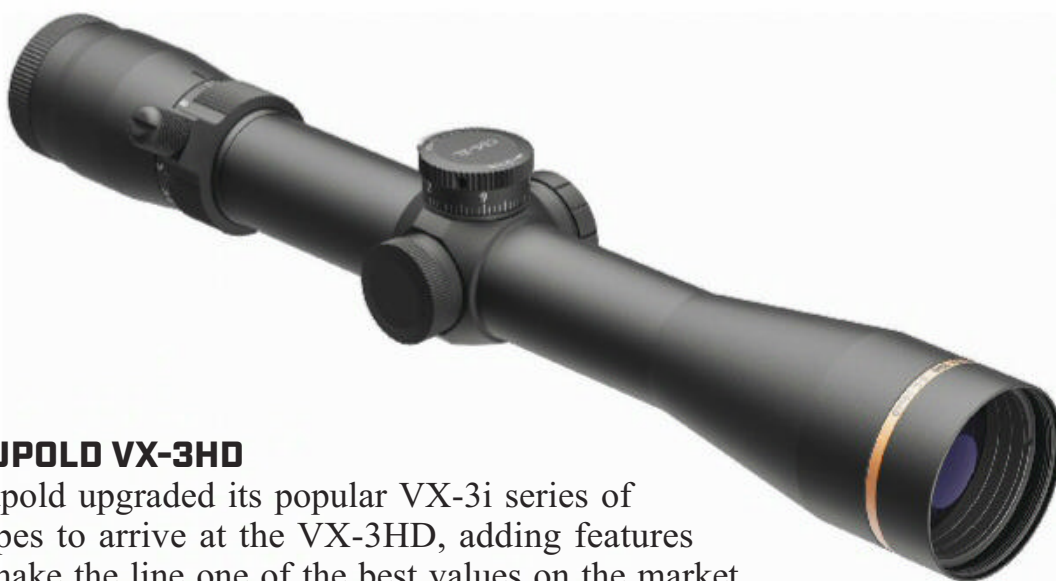
NEW TECHNOLOGY IN THE LATEST RIFLESCOPES AND BINOCULARS HELPS HUNTERS FILL TAGS.

By Game & Fish Staff

Being able to see a buck clearly in the final minutes of shooting light, quickly calculating the amount of elevation correction needed for a long shot, or simply remaining comfortable when spending long hours behind a binocular in search of game can make a difference when trying to put meat in the freezer. Quality optics enable these things, whether the task be finding an animal or precisely placing a shot. Here are six worth carrying on your hunts this fall that will help you do both. 

LEUPOLD VX-3HD

Leupold upgraded its popular VX-3i series of scopes to arrive at the VX-3HD, adding features to make the line one of the best values on the market. For example, all VX-3HD scopes come with the company's Custom Dial System and feature ZeroLock to prevent unintentional movement of the turret. A removable throw lever is also included to make quick magnification changes. The HD suffix means the scopes have Leupold's High-Definition lenses to maximize clarity, color and image quality throughout the field of view. Elite Optical System coatings reduce glare and promote light transmission, while the Guard-Ion treatment repels water and dirt. All VX-3HD scopes are waterproof, fogproof and shockproof. One-inch and 30 mm models are available, with the latter having illuminated reticles. Magnifications and objectives range from 1.5-5x20 mm to 6.5-20x50. MSRP: \$499.99 to \$999.99; leupold.com



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LEICA AMPLUS 6

Amplus 6 scopes offer 6X zoom, illuminated reticles and Leica's premium optics at an attractive price. Built on a 30 mm tube, the eight Amplus 6 models have second-focal-plane reticles with an extra-fine, illuminated dot for precision aiming. Illumination can be set to 10 levels of intensity. Leica combines high-quality glass elements with advanced coatings for bright, color-neutral views. The Amplus 6 scopes achieve more than 90 percent light transmission while suppressing stray light that can interfere with clarity. Each is designed to resist shock and weather. Models include 1-6x24 mm, 3-18x44 mm, 2.5-15x50 mm and 2.5-15x56 mm. The latter two configurations are offered with three different reticles. MSRP: \$1,199 to \$1,599; us.leica-camera.com



BUSHNELL RIMFIRE

Squirrel and varmint hunters who want to reach out with their .22 LR rifles will appreciate the two new scopes in Bushnell's Rimfire line. Both 3-9x40 mm scopes feature the DropZone 22 reticle with hold points out to 125 yards calibrated for the trajectory of a 40-grain .22 LR load. Each can be used with the Bushnell ballistic app to fine-tune holdovers based on individual loads and environmental variables. A model with an illuminated reticle is available, offering 10 levels of intensity with an off setting between each. The scopes have fully multi-coated lenses with EXO Barrier protection to ward off water, dirt and abrasion, and both carry an IPX7 waterproof rating. MSRP: \$149.95, \$179.95; bushnell.com



TRIJICON CREDO HX

If there is one word to describe Trijicon scopes, it's rugged. The company builds optics for the U.S. military and puts the same amount of attention into making sure its hunting scopes will stand up to hard use in the field. The Credo HX is one of the latest scope families to come from Trijicon, and besides reliability, hunters will find a host of notable features in the line. All Credo HX scopes have LED-illuminated reticles, which vary from duplex to holdover designs. They also come with a magnification lever that can be positioned to suit the user. Fully multi-coated broadband anti-reflective glass lenses provide excellent clarity and light transmission. Available with 30 mm and 34 mm tubes, the Credo HX line includes seven configurations with 4X, 6X and 8X zoom, from the 1-4x24 mm model to the 4-16x50 mm. MSRP: \$999 to \$1,799; trijicon.com





The Biggest Event In Silver Dollar History!

The American Silver Eagle has been the most popular silver coin *on the planet* since its introduction in 1986. Its beautiful, iconic design inspires collectors, and investors love it because it's struck in one full ounce of 99.9% fine silver, and guaranteed for weight and fineness by the U.S. Government. Now in 2021, for the first time ever, the coin's design is changing.

The Most Important Coins in the Modern Era

When President Ronald Reagan signed the Liberty Coin Act into law, he didn't know American Eagles would have the impact they've had, year after year. The coins were so popular that between 1986 and 2020, over 535 million were struck. That's more than HALF A BILLION coins, easily making Silver Eagles the most bought coins in the world. Hugely popular now, Silver Eagles may soon become even more popular!

Collectors Crave Firsts

Collectors covet coins with Key Dates. Key Dates mark significance in a coin's history...firsts, lasts, lowest mintage,

new finishes and new designs. Now, for the first time in over three-and-a-half decades, the Silver Eagle is getting a new design, leading to a historic "first" unlike anything we've seen. The iconic Heraldic Eagle reverse is being replaced by a beautiful new "Eagle Landing" design. This is arguably a bigger deal than even the actual introduction of the coin because there's so much more interest now than in 1986, with investors and collectors!

If You Knew Then What You Know Now...

If you'd had a crystal ball in 1986, you undoubtedly would have grabbed every Silver Eagle you could get. Those coins in uncirculated condition continue to be sought-after. Now you're getting another chance to land a big Silver Eagle first, a Key Date. Additionally, since these newly designed Silver Eagles are only being released during the second half of 2021, it's quite possible this will be one of the lowest mintages we've seen. That's significant because it could make 2021 a DOUBLE Key Date, with both a new design and a low mintage. Demand for these coins is already sky-high, but if that

happens, watch out! No one can predict the future value of silver, but many Americans are rushing to stock up, for themselves, and their loved ones.

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12	13 #DEER WEEK	14 #DEER WEEK	15 #DEER WEEK	16 #DEER WEEK	17 #DEER WEEK	18 #DEER WEEK
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No matter if you're breathing heavy, shaking or being hammered by wind, the Zulu6 will give you a clear, crisp view. The binocular contains SIG Sauer's Optical Image Stabilization technology, which employs an electronically stabilized, two-axis gimbal system to cancel out motion and vibration imparted by the user and the environment. Power comes from a CR2 battery. Lenses are treated with SpectraCoat ultra-wide broadband, anti-reflection coatings to maximize light transmission. LensArmor coatings resist scratches, while LenShield sheds water, oil and debris to ensure a clear sight picture. The Zulu6 is built on a polymer frame and has an IPX4 waterproof rating. It is available in 10x30 mm and 16x42 mm models. MSRP: \$659.99 (10x30 mm), \$769.99 (16x42 mm); sigsauer.com

ZEISS VICTORY SF 32

Hunters looking for a more compact, lighter-weight bino will find it in the Victory SF 32. The real surprise, though, is that Zeiss has optimized the field of view in both the 8x32 mm and 10x32 mm versions so that it includes up to 20 percent more observable area in comparison to similar models. The field of view for the 8x32 mm Victory SF is 465 feet at 1,000 yards, for example. Lenses are Schott fluoride glass with Zeiss T* coatings, a combination that produces 90 percent light transmission and high-contrast images. The SmartFocus wheel is positioned for easy and comfortable operation within the bino's triple-link bridge, and it requires just 1.6 revolutions to move through the entire focus range. Zeiss also redistributed the weight of the Victory SF 32, shifting it rearward so that the bino doesn't feel front heavy. MSRP: \$2,249.99 (8x32 mm), \$2,299.99 (10x32 mm); zeiss.com



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THE PASS

SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT TO TAKE THE SHOT.

One autumn morning Shane's father announced that the family would be visiting relatives in North Carolina in a few weeks. While there, he told Shane, they'd hunt bears.

In the time leading up to the trip Shane could scarcely sleep. Ever since he was a little boy he'd heard his father's stories about hunting bears in the Blue Ridge Mountains. "Let me tell you about the day I became a man," his father would often say before launching into an epic tale of canines, claws and calamity. Shane devoured every bear hunting article he could find and mulled over every scenario he could imagine. Would he hold his ground if a bear came at him? Would he make a good shot? Would he even see a bear?

The weeks flew by, and Shane didn't have the answers. On the night before the hunt, his uncle saw the need for some instruction.

"Once we turn them dogs out, there ain't no callin' timeout," said Uncle Ron. "The chase could last two hours or two days, but ya can't ever let up. If it's a big bear he may not tree, and if he don't tree, he'll take to workin' them hounds over. So ya stay near me, and when I say to shoot, ya give that ol' bear the bad news."

The next morning, Shane, his father, Uncle Ron and five Plott hounds set out on a winding mountain road with Ringo riding on a flat metal platform affixed to the truck's hood. Not even two miles had passed before the hound bawled shrilly.

"Ringo's done struck one!" shouted Uncle Ron.

The truck hadn't fully stopped before Uncle Ron

had the dog-box doors open and all bedlam broke loose. When Shane cornered the tailgate he saw the dogs trying to climb the trunk of a dead pine tree about 150 yards off the road. As he hurried toward the snag with Uncle Ron, Shane saw a furry black blob clinging to its top like a giant lollipop.

"Ya loaded?" asked Uncle Ron through the din of raucous bawls and scraping sounds as the pack tried to climb the tree. "Put one behind his shoulder!"

Shane raised the Marlin, but when he looked through the sights he saw the bear's dreamy eyes as if it were still groggy from a nap. Shane thought a bear would look scarier ... or bigger ... or something. He hesitated.

"Is this bear big enough?" stammered Shane, unsure.

"It's legal, I know that!" Uncle Ron hollered back. "It's a youngish male, but we've gotta get these hounds some satisfaction, and we may not tree another. So If ya ain't gonna shoot, I will."

Shane looked at his father, who shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Your call, bud."

After a few tense moments he handed Uncle Ron the rifle, who promptly took it, aimed and fired. The bear slid down the tree trunk and hit the ground with a thud. Instantly the hounds enveloped the dead bear and worried it for a few seconds before Uncle Ron began peeling them off.

Shane turned away and sat on a nearby log. Perhaps he was ashamed of his actions; perhaps he was sorry for the bear. Likely it was both. Then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder.

"Son, are we in danger of going hungry?"

"Huh?" said Shane.

"Is anyone starving here?" asked his father.

"No sir," said Shane.

"That's right; none of us is in need of food," said his father. "These days we mainly hunt for sport. So if something doesn't feel right about killing for any reason, don't do it. Stand by your decisions, son, and people will respect them. But you also must respect those of your fellow hunters."

"They say life's like a box of chocolates, but that's horse," added Uncle Ron. "I say it's more like a bear hunt. Ya never know what's gonna happen when ya turn out them hounds."

"That's for sure," said Shane, chuckling a little as he stood up to go check out the bear. 



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