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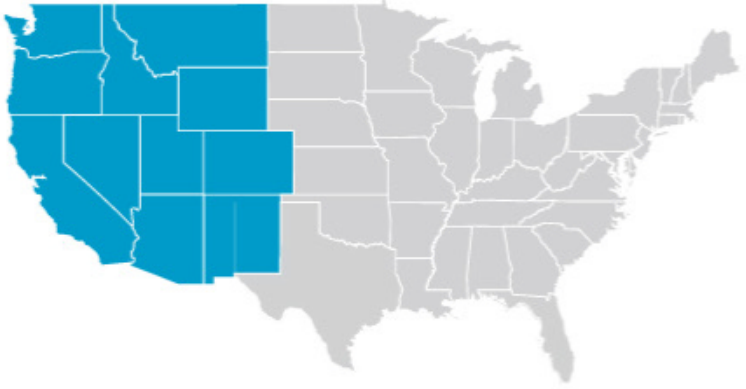
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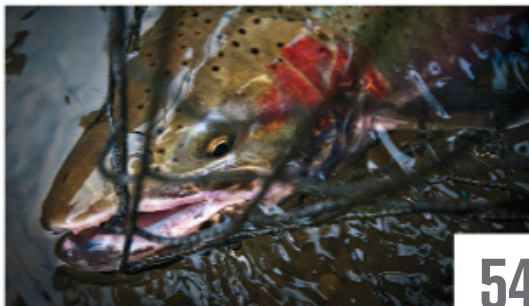
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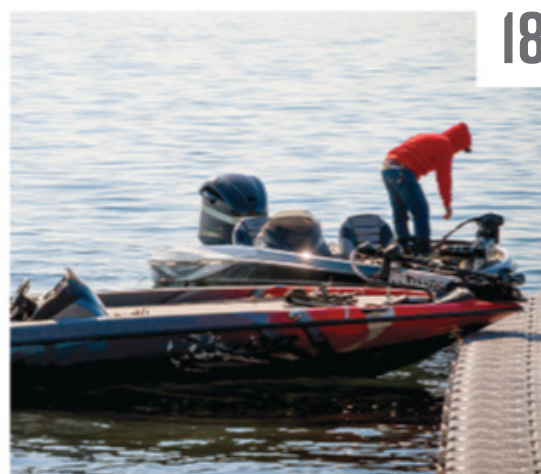
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Yia Vang is the host of Outdoor Channel's "Feral."

DINNER PLANS

The holidays bring memorable meals with friends and family: perhaps an elk or deer roast, a few geese or pheasants, or a ham if you still haven't filled a tag. But can you imagine gathering around a table with a delicious iguana on the serving plate? How about a pile of python? Before you dismiss this fare as inedible at best, consider culinary arts explorer Yia Vang.

Vang is a James Beard Award nominee, master chef and host of Outdoor Channel's new original series "Feral." He's also an avid angler, hunter and traveler, and his training and passions come together in the series as he targets invasive species and then puts them on the table. Each 30-minute episode features Vang arriving in a new location, identifying an invasive species and coming up with a plan for catching or bagging it and then cooking it. Local experts sometimes guide him on his quests—and help him through some mistakes—as he strives to create an amazing and unusual meal by the end of every episode. The menu includes iguana, lionfish, Burmese python, carp and, of course, feral hogs.

Born in a Thai refugee camp, where he lived until his family resettled in central Wisconsin, Vang started his career working as a dishwasher. He knows his way around a kitchen and a restaurant, has competed on "Iron Chef" and has been named Best Chef in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) multiple times. Vang's goal is to change how people think about food by considering the influences in each bite. If he can make python palatable, I'd say he's well on his way.

"Feral" will air on Outdoor Channel on Monday nights during the "Taste of the Wild" programming block at 9 p.m. Eastern beginning Nov. 28. If you can't serve up iguana for your crowd, at least you can get some tips on the best way to do it.

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BIG-BUCK ROLL CALL

We highlight huge whitetails bagged this season all over the country in our “Big Bucks” report (under the “Special Collections” menu on our homepage).



TREAT THE MEAT

The steps taken from field to plate are critical for delicious venison. Start by studying “Best-Tasting Venison: Tips for Proper Handling, Storage and Prep.”



HARD-WATER HOW-TO

It won't be long till winter's fishing frenzy arrives. Find tips, gear, destinations and more to get prepared on our “Ice Fishing” pages.



SHOW TIME

With January comes a first look at new hunting gear unveiled at the ATA and SHOT shows. We'll bring you coverage straight from manufacturers' booths.



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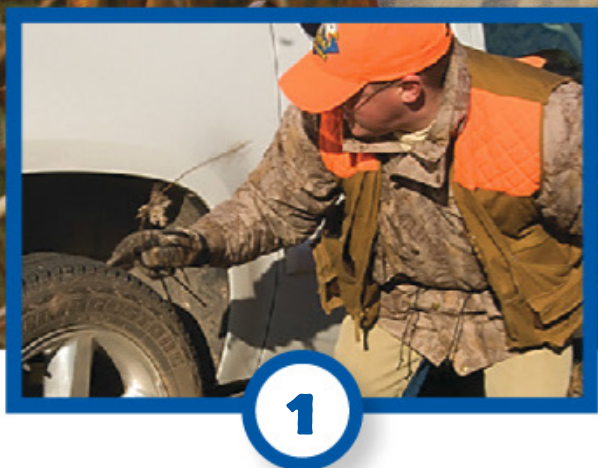
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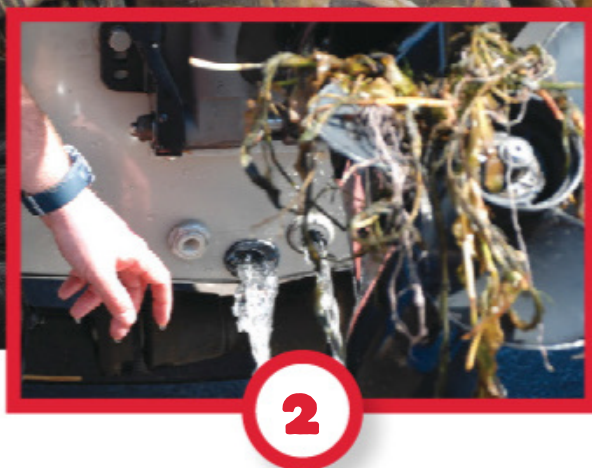
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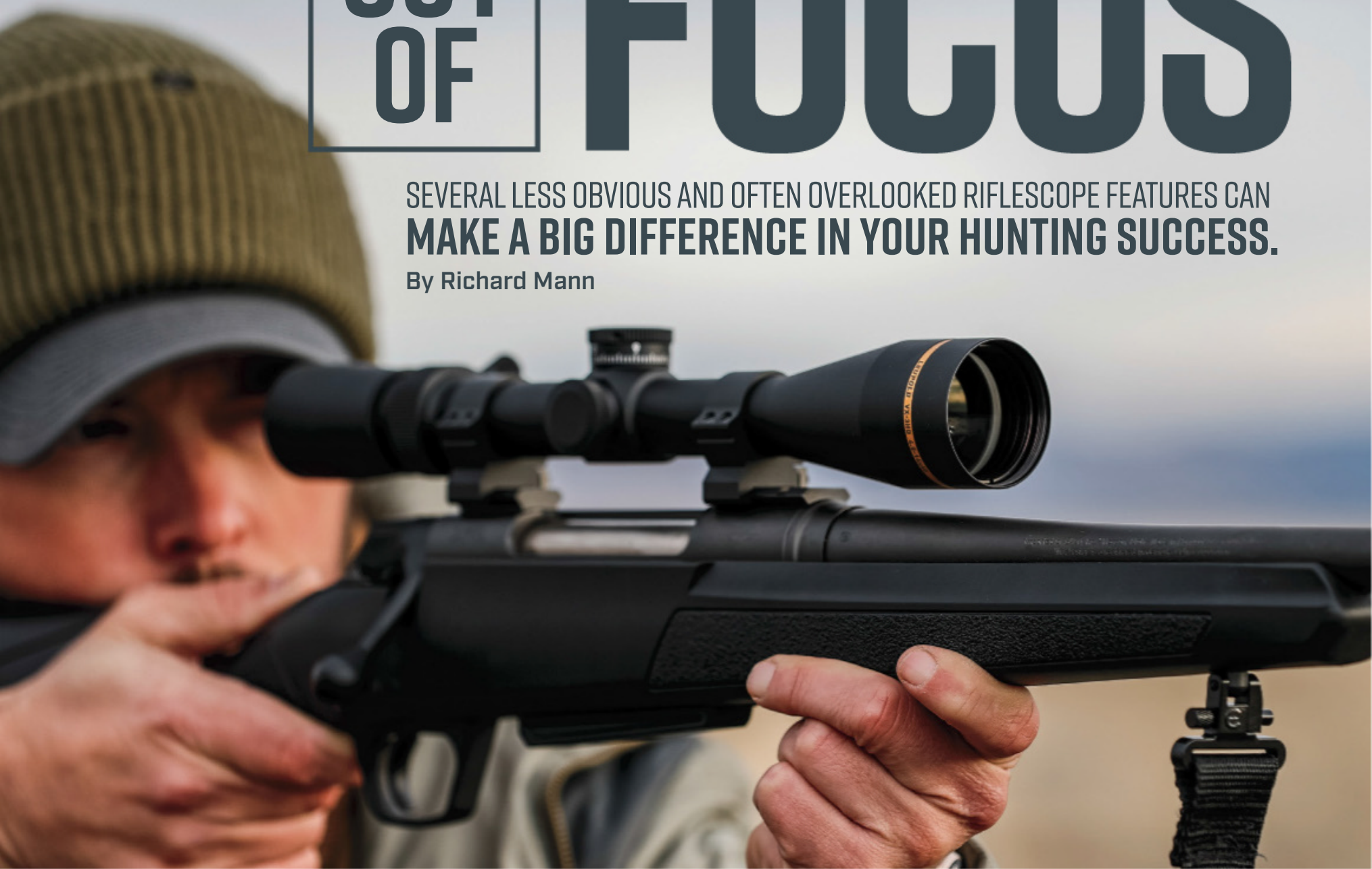
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SEVERAL LESS OBVIOUS AND OFTEN OVERLOOKED RIFLESCOPE FEATURES CAN
MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN YOUR HUNTING SUCCESS.

By Richard Mann



Not all that long ago, when a hunter was considering a new riflescope, magnification was the only real concern. However, the riflescope has since evolved. It's no longer just a magnifying tube with an "X" in the center. Modern scopes are marvelous optical sighting devices. Now things like objective lens diameter, exposed target turrets, click adjustment value, zero stops, illuminated reticles and trajectory- and wind-compensating reticles are all popular considerations when selecting a riflescope. Some modern options even have an integrated rangefinder or an interface with a separate rangefinder, and then provide you with a shooting solution.

All these things matter when choosing a riflescope. However, in trying to pick the newest, best, brightest and smartest

scope, some other key features often get overlooked. Below are five things you should not ignore when evaluating riflescopes. Depending on your rifle and what and how you hunt, some characteristics may be more or less important than others. Just ensure you don't discount any of them entirely.

MOUNTING SPACE

I believe this is the most overlooked riflescope feature. By mounting space, I mean the available space on a scope's tube where rings can be placed. It's the unobstructed space behind and in front of the saddle at the riflescope's center where the adjustment turrets are located. This space determines how far you can move the scope in the rings; it's how you adjust eye relief, and eye relief is a key part of user interface with riflescopes.

I recently tested a bunch of new riflescopes, and the available mounting space ranged from as little as 5 inches to as much as 6 3/4 inches. For bolt-action rifles chambered for cartridges like the .308 Winchester, you need at least 4 1/2 inches of mounting space, and for long-action cartridges like the .30-06, you need about 5 inches. Those measurements are just to mount the riflescope; to adjust for eye relief, you'll need more mounting space. If your rifle has a rail-type scope base, mounting space is usually not an issue, but for non-railed rifles, it is an important consideration.

OCULAR HOUSING SIZE

The ocular housing, or eyepiece, is the rear portion of the riflescope that contains the ocular lens. It's the end of the scope you look through. Large ocular lenses are

The proper amount of eye relief is key when using a scope. The main tube must have enough mounting space to adjust accordingly.

nice because, to some extent, they are like a big-screen television. However, with bolt-action rifles, the bolt handle must clear the ocular housing when the bolt is cycled, and larger ocular housings require higher rings to accommodate this. Higher rings can make it difficult to look through the riflescope while maintaining a good cheek weld on the stock.

At only 1.56 inches, Leupold's VX-3HD riflescopes have about the smallest ocular housings available. In comparison, the eyepiece diameter of many modern riflescopes is about 1 3/4 inches.

But eyepiece diameter is not the only concern. Many riflescopes have even larger magnification adjustment rings, and the bolt must clear that as well. Some, with a raised power setting bump or indicator, can exceed 2 inches. This means the riflescope must be mounted even higher

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for bolt clearance. Also, magnification throw levers are becoming very popular, and quite often they, too, interfere with bolt operation, especially when set at maximum magnification.

RETICLE INSTRUCTIONS

A riflescope feature that has really evolved is the reticle. Many of today's reticle styles offer additional aiming points to compensate for trajectory and wind. To use these reticles properly, you must know what the spaces between these aiming points subtend to. For MOA- or mil-based reticles, this will be in MOA or mil increments. For some ballistic-style reticles, these subtensions are proprietary to the reticle design.

Most riflescope manufactures detail their reticles online, giving all the necessary information. But some, like Vortex and Meopta, provide detailed reticle instructions in the box with the riflescope. However, I've also seen riflescopes where the reticle information must be classified because you simply cannot find the data anywhere. If you must, you can work this out on a target with grids at 100 yards, but data from the manufacturer is most appreciated. Look for information on the reticle before you spend your money.

WEIGHT

Because of long-range shooting's popularity, large and heavy riflescopes are trendy right now. For that shooting discipline, weight isn't critical. However, for hunters it can be.



It's not just the size of the eyepiece that matters; magnification rings can also get in the way of proper bolt operation.

The new Zeiss LRP S5 3-18x50 is a spectacular long-range riflescope, but it weighs 2 pounds. Add it to Nosler's excellent Model 21 rifle, and you're now carrying around 9 pounds. For those who hunt out of shoot houses, that's not a big deal. If you're climbing mountains or walking prairies, it matters.

By comparison, Leupold's VX-3HD 4.5-14x40 riflescope weighs less than a pound. And, with its Custom Dial System (CDS) that can be tuned to your ammunition, out to 400 yards or so, it's just as effective as the larger and heavier Zeiss. The point is, don't over-scope your rifle; a heavier riflescope doesn't make you shoot any better. Find the features you need for the hunting you like to do, and don't overlook riflescope weight in the process.

PARALLAX

Parallax is a very important but often misunderstood aspect of riflescopes. You can check for excessive parallax by resting your rifle, so it is fully supported, and then looking through the riflescope and moving your head from side to side. If the reticle moves in relation to the target, parallax is present at that distance.

Some riflescopes—especially long-range riflescopes—have adjustable parallax, and it's a must for a big-game riflescope intended for use at extreme ranges. Riflescopes without an adjustable parallax have their parallax set at a specific range. In most cases it's between 100 and 150 yards. This means that out to around 400 yards or so there won't be enough parallax to drastically impact your shot on a big-game animal.

Parallax is very important for rimfire riflescopes, especially for small-game hunting. A riflescope with the parallax set at 150 yards might show as much as 1 1/2 inches of parallax at 50 yards. A shot that's 1 1/2 inches off on a big-game animal usually isn't a big deal. However, if you're trying to head-shoot a squirrel, your own head will need to be perfectly positioned along the center line of the riflescope to eliminate the parallax.

Thus, most rimfire scopes have the parallax set at 50 or 60 yards. However, if that's the case, you can expect excessive parallax at 100 yards and beyond. As with a long-range big-game rifle, a riflescope used on a rimfire rifle for small-game hunting can benefit from an adjustable objective. 



Adjustable parallax is handy in certain scenarios. If it's fixed, ensure the setting is practical for your hunting conditions.

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HUNT THE FOOD?

IT'S THE LATE SEASON AND YOUR DAYS TO TAG A BUCK ARE DWINDLING. REST ASSURED, THERE'S HOPE.

By Tony Hansen

Most “experts” are willing to offer their advice on how to hunt late-season whitetails. Just be careful how much of it you take to heart.

If you ask 10 top whitetail hunting experts for their advice on punching a late-season tag, you’ll invariably hear “hunt the food” from a majority of them. They will claim that applies to both getting that last doe for the freezer or grounding a trophy buck.

Admittedly, it sounds like solid counsel and is often applicable to general, late-season hunt scenarios. However, it is very limited in real-world applicability. In areas where most folks hunt—places that have been overhunted—it

doesn’t apply. It’s also limited advice that, at best, doesn’t tell the full tale. Or at worse, applies only in those special circumstances where you’re hunting an area that saw limited hunting pressure during deer season (especially during gun seasons) and has been managed so standing agricultural food sources are still in the food plot.

Or, you get incredibly lucky, and something occurred during the standard fall harvest season that left those fields unpicked. Let’s dive in and separate the “half-truths” from the realities.

REALITY 1: There are fewer bucks left to hunt in the late season.

I live and hunt in southern Michigan, which is the most heavily hunted area in one of the most heavily hunted states in the nation. We can argue later over whose state really has the most pressured deer, but we can certainly agree that deer that have run the gauntlet of a 16-day general firearms season (in which about 500,000 hunters participate) followed immediately by another two weeks of “special” gun seasons puts a

COURTESY OF MEDIA DIRECT

serious hammer to buck populations. In short, the odds of you seeing a buck, let alone a mature buck, are as slim as they have been all year. This is not an opinion. This is a fact.

Even in states where hunting pressure is more moderate and season timing is a bit more favorable to the survival of older bucks, this holds true. Late-season hunters are dealing with fewer bucks than existed at any other time of the year.

HALF-TRUTH 1:
The “best food source” is your best bet for harvesting a late-season buck.

In general, I’ve found this to be an accurate statement. The half-truth portion comes into play however when you apply the words “your best bet.” This is false.

Unless you have access to a property with those special food sources that have the potential of drawing in a high percentage of deer from the area, your best bet is not an excellent food source when you don’t have access to hunt that food source.

This comes into play often when hunting big timber areas. There often is not an obvious “go-to” food source in this situation, aside from the occasional ag field that may or may not be within your reach. Instead, many times you’re dealing with vast areas of cover that have a scattering of available food, and none of those food sources are concentrated in a manner that makes targeting them quite as simple as just setting up on the inside corner of a soybean field.

Greenbrier, remnant acorns, locust pods ... these are all prime late-season food sources that can draw deer in areas of heavy timber. They’re also food sources that are sporadic and require that deer develop a true browsing behavior rather than a bed-to-feed routine where they can gorge on waste grain in a crop field.

Even here in southern Michigan where the landscape is classic Midwest farm country and ag fields abound, there are absolutely defined pockets of food sources that draw deer heavily but are simply inaccessible to me because I don’t have permission to hunt them. Thus, the statement that you simply need to “hunt the food” is a half-truth.



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REALITY 2:
Your real best bet at killing a late-season buck is the place where you can hunt one.

It's no secret that I've spent the majority of my hunting career chasing whitetails on public land. It's also no secret that, over the past five years or so, the public-land hunting game has changed dramatically and not necessarily for the better in terms of mature buck opportunities and the ability to hunt less-pressured deer.

Public lands are busier than ever. However, that activity drops like a stone once Thanksgiving hits (aside from states where gun seasons happen to take place in December).

This is a real opportunity for tagging a late-season buck. I will never have access to as much private land as I have access to public land.

During the late season, we're hunting a time of year when mature buck numbers are at their lowest. To hunt one, you have to find one. The more acres available for the search, the greater the odds of finding one.

For me, trail cameras are far and away the most effective and efficient manner of searching. Yes, I target those cameras on food sources but, again, I likely will not have access to a mega-plot that's drawing every deer in the neighborhood. Instead, I'm seeking out areas of natural, preferred browse that I feel may have seen less hunting pressure throughout the year. The more of these areas I find, the more cameras I can utilize, and the greater my odds of finding a good buck.

HALF-TRUTH 2:
Late-season hunts should be limited to evenings only.

This is another common topic when discussing late-season hunts. Again, it's kind of true. If you're targeting deer hitting a primary food source, you should do everything you can to avoid disrupting those deer.

When deer are flooding into a corn field by the dozens every evening, it's likely just a matter of time before a good buck joins the fray. However, most of us aren't hunting in those types of situations. I'm certainly not and thus I will hunt

late-season mornings. This is particularly true if I've found an area in heavy cover that's well-away from any destination-type food source (like a big ag field) and contains browse-type food sources. In this situation, deer can't load up on food in one small area. Rather, they must browse to fill their bellies and that means they have to cover some ground to do it.

A sunny, warm(ish) day is ideal for a morning hunt. And you'd be wise to stick it out until the sun is pretty high in the sky. I've seen the majority of my late-season morning deer activity well after sunrise, typically around 9 or 10 a.m.

I believe deer are bedded during the last few hours of the night and wait for the sun to rise and warm things up a bit before they get up and begin a mid-morning round of browsing. They'll feed along ridges as they move toward south-facing hillsides to bed up for the rest of the day.

Be there when they move through, and you just might find that old adage about hunting the "best" food source isn't exactly wrong...but it's not exactly true either. 



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BUYING A USED BOAT

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING A BIG PURCHASE

By Shane Beilue



Buyers looking for a used boat can make several visual checks before seeking an inspection from a mechanic at a boat dealership.

The COVID pandemic stressed the supply chain in almost every industry, with the bass-boat market being no exception. Add to the fact that during the pandemic lockdown, demand for new and used boats soared from participants new to the sport, as well as existing anglers with added time on their hands wanting to upgrade their bass rigs. The lack of new boat inventory caused consumers

to try to fill the demand from the used-boat market, driving up the prices for used boats as well.

Brian Hughes is a senior sales associate for Fun-N-Sun Boats, with two locations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The Hurst, Texas, location is the largest bass-boat dealership in the country for boats 20-feet and longer, and is the largest Skeeter dealer in the U.S. He explains the current state of the bass boat market.

“We are starting to see some relief in new boat inventory becoming available again,” Hughes said in October. “About 18 months ago every boat that came off the delivery truck was already pre-sold. Now when I get a delivery truck, two of those boats may be pre-sold and I can place the other two on the showroom floor.”

Hughes notes that prior to negotiating a final price and handing over the check, a prospective buyer of a used



bass boat would be wise to make sure the investment is sound by having a list of pre-checks to inspect. Hughes has the following advice for prospective buyers of a used boat.

PROFESSIONAL CHECKUP

Hughes' advice for inspecting a used boat begins with the following: "If you're buying a used boat and have identified a strong candidate for purchase, my best

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advice is to take it to a nearby boat dealership, pay them the required fee [likely \$250 to \$500] and have them check it out as if they're trading for it. They can perform checks the average consumer cannot, such as opening the lower unit and checking cylinder compression in the engine."

From the mechanic's inspection, Hughes notes that the compression on all the engine cylinders should be within about 10 pounds of each other. "If you get too many variances, that's an indicator that the entire power head may be ready to give way, which can cost as much as \$16,000 on a 4-stroke Yamaha outboard," he says.

Before seeking expert advice regarding the internal condition of the outboard, Hughes says a prospective buyer can avoid costly repairs later by making some visual checks as he or she inspects the boat, beginning with the prop shaft.

"Just look straight down the shaft, give the prop a spin to see if you detect any wobble," he says. "If it doesn't wobble at all, you're probably good. If you detect a little wobble, there's a slight bend to the shaft. But here's the thing, a small bend can often be more destructive to a lower unit than a significant bend in the shaft—those are easy to detect because it disrupts operation of the motor. The minor shaft bend may not be noticeable to the driver, but it's causing stress to the

lower unit gears and likely damaging the seals to the lower unit."

Hughes notes that a new prop shaft runs about \$1,500, and a new lower unit can run \$3,500, so you could possibly be looking at a \$5,000 repair with that slight wobble in the prop shaft.

LOOK FOR CRACKS

Further boat inspection should focus on the condition of the fiberglass, looking for cracks and gouges.

"Superficial cracks actually don't worry me all that much, depending upon the age of the boat," Hughes says. "If you have cracks on a relatively new boat, then that's a problem; but cracks on a 15-year-old boat are probably not that big of a deal. It really depends upon where those cracks are located. If you see deep stress cracks around the transom, that's worth exploring further. Stress cracks around the console on an older boat really aren't going to hurt anything. If you see gouges in the gel coat that reveal the fiberglass mat, then that needs to be addressed as well; either the seller needs to fix it before you buy, or you need to be prepared to fix it once you take ownership."

Hughes points out that there's always going to be normal wear and tear on any used boat, but you really want to look for cracks and gouges that indicate abuse.

Transom damage was a common issue in the past when manufacturers

used fiberglass-encased wood; however, today's bass-boat transoms are composed of composites that are much stronger and not prone to water damage should the transom have a crack in the fiberglass. Nevertheless, significant cracking around the transom could indicate abuse or significant impact damage to the motor.

ACCESSORIES AND TRAILER

Hughes points out that accessory items like graphs, trolling motors, bilge pumps, etc. should be checked by simply turning them on to see if they power up.

"It really is buyer beware because if any of these items fail after purchase, there's nothing you can do about it because it's a used boat, and equipment eventually fails," he says.

The final point of emphasis from Hughes is to thoroughly inspect the boat trailer.

"Check every connection point on a trailer, meaning you need to visually inspect each weld seam to make sure there's no cracking," he says. "Also look at the axles to ensure they aren't twisted or bent. Check to see if the bearings have been greased—even hook the boat to your truck and pull the boat for a few hundred yards and listen for any grinding noise in the bearings. Also make sure to check that the trailer coupling and brakes are working properly, as these are critical safety items when towing a boat." 

All used boats, depending on age, will show signs of normal wear and tear. Signs that indicate potential abuse are cause for concern.



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RECONSIDERING CONSERVATION FUNDING

**THE RECENT ATTEMPTED ASSAULT
ON PITTMAN-ROBERTSON FUNDING
SHOULD SIGNAL THAT WE NEED TO DO
A BETTER JOB OF EXPLAINING THE
BENEFITS OF THE ‘GUN TAX.’**

By Andrew McKean



It's been called the only tax we're happy to pay, the excise fee that each of us shells out every time we buy a new gun or the ammunition to feed it. Because this federal tax—it is 11 percent on most long guns and all ammunition, 10 percent on pistols and revolvers—isn't displayed on price tags or sales receipts, it's easy to overlook.

But this revenue, which is collected by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and then redistributed annually to state fish-and-game agencies to be used for everything from wildlife management to hunter education materials to land acquisition, is the engine for most of our wildlife successes in America, and can be credited for creating the shooting and hunting culture that most readers of this column belong to. This self-taxation (it includes archery products) has collected and then reinvested more than

\$15 billion in wildlife benefits since the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act was passed by Congress in 1937. By any measure, it's been wildly successful.

But, as your grandmother might say, no good deed goes unpunished. The benefits of “P-R,” as Pittman-Robertson funding is often called, have been downplayed while the alleged tyranny of the tax has been amplified.

Welcome to the confluence of guns and public policy in America, a place that's especially thorny these days as guns take on an outsized role as agents of polarization. Just this past year, P-R funding has been “weaponized” both by anti-gun activists and by lawmakers who suggest either redirecting the fund or mining other sources of revenue for wildlife investment in America.

The rhetorical raid on P-R funding started, as so many trends do, in

California. Hoping to tap a funding source to address the societal cost of gun violence and also to impose additional burdens on firearms buyers, state legislators introduced a bill that would hit firearm and ammunition sales in the Golden State with an extra 10 percent to 11 percent tax on top of the P-R tax. While scholars debated the constitutional merits of the bill—which ultimately didn't gain legislative traction—the U.S. Congress got involved, floating an equal and opposite bill that would repeal the P-R tax.

You might have heard of this congressional effort to abolish P-R, officially known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration fund. Introduced last June by Georgia congressman Andrew Clyde and ultimately co-sponsored by more than 50 House Republicans, the RETURN (it stands for Repealing Excise



Target shooters helped push Pittman-Robertson Act funding for wildlife and shooting projects to more than \$1 billion in 2021.

Tax on Unalienable Rights Now) Our Constitutional Rights Act, HR 8167, would repeal the federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment and replace the dedicated P-R funding with annual appropriations from the U.S. Treasury and revenue from offshore oil and gas leases. It would also reduce—but not abolish—a similar tax on fishing equipment that serves the same purpose for aquatic habitat and fisheries management that P-R does for terrestrial wildlife.

Nearly every conservation group in America came out in strong opposition to Clyde's bill, which many interpreted as virtue signaling.

"It has zero chance of getting far down the legislative process, but was a way to express opposition to the California bill and to further make the point that this sacred cow of conservation funding might not be all that sacred," said one

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



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

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

Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and purchased it for our *Sedona Turquoise Collection*. Inspired by the work of those ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features a unique, one-of-a-kind matrix surrounded in Bali metalwork.

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conservation leader who has been active in quashing the bill but didn't want to be named out of concern that it might diminish his influence. "But it should get our attention because it represents the first time that the American system of conservation funding has been attacked."

It's also a sign that this wonky system is poorly understood by most gun buyers, who might not see the benefits of a fund that puts more deer in the woods and more elk on the mountain.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF GUN PURCHASES

When the Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Act was passed, in the dark years of the Great Depression, fish and wildlife populations were plummeting after years of unregulated hunting and habitat loss. The fund was imagined as a "user-pays" model in which those who would benefit from wildlife restoration would pay for the hard work to bring back deer, turkeys, pronghorn and trout to America's woods, prairie and waters.

While the fund didn't differentiate between firearms purchased for hunting,

target shooting or personal defense, the vast majority in the first decades of P-R were bought by hunters for hunting. The feedback loop worked even better than its creators might have intended. The more guns Americans bought, the more money was available for wildlife restoration, which created more hunting opportunities and more sales of guns to hunters.

But starting in the early 2000s, with the rise of AR-platform rifles and recreational shooting, the balance of guns sold to target shooters versus hunters has been tilting. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which administers the P-R account, between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, the fund generated \$718 million annually on average. But the mix of firearms has changed remarkably since 1937. The Service reported that ammunition sales accounted for 32 percent of P-R revenue in the 2016-2020 time frame, while pistols and revolvers accounted for 31 percent of revenue. Firearms (meaning rifles, shotguns, and other long guns) made up 30 percent of the revenue stream, while archery equipment accounted for only 6 percent of revenue.

Recreational skeet and trap shooters make significant contributions to the Pittman-Robertson Act, which also funds projects not directly tied to hunting.



In the two years since that report, P-R revenue has spiked. Last year alone, these excise taxes generated more than \$1 billion in funding to assist state wildlife agencies in fulfilling their missions, according to the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.

P-R UPDATE

The rise in recreational shooting activities has left some target shooters and those who use guns for purposes other than hunting feeling like the P-R model could use an update. They've made some gains, the most recent of which is the 2019 "Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act," which allows funds to be used for hunter and shooter recruitment efforts and to build shooting ranges across the country. The idea of that legislation, which was signed into law by President Trump, was to both expand and broaden the base of hunters and shooters, and to recognize the significant contributions to P-R by recreational shooters.

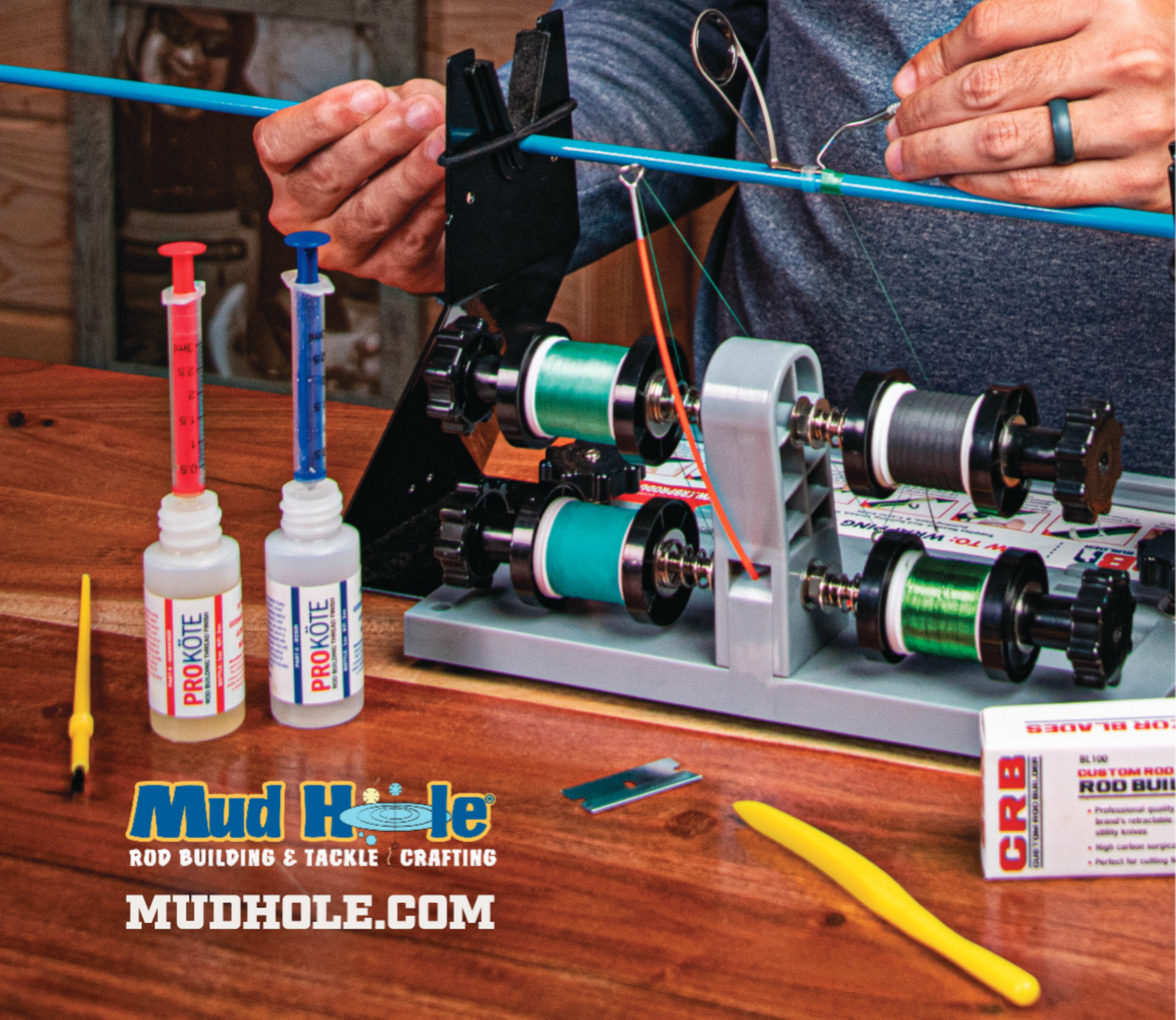
"If you think about it, the updates to Pittman-Robertson funding eligibility are the same as they were back in the 1930s and 1940s," says the conservation leader. "We're still funding the seeds and rootstock that grow our community, only now we are including new hunters and shooting ranges in our definition of rootstock. If we take care of those elements, then we'll continue to grow our community of hunters and shooters in America, which is the original idea of the Pittman-Robertson Act."

The conservation leader noted that recreational shooters have a valid reason to expect more P-R funds to be used for non-hunting-related infrastructure.

"These are the folks who pushed the annual balance above \$1 billion," he says. "All those ARs and personal-defense shotguns and pistols, and all that ammunition that folks were buying during the [COVID-19] pandemic generated record amounts of excise tax. Just as we built wetlands and deer habitat during the early days of P-R, we now need to be building community shooting ranges and trap clubs and making sure that we're growing our ranks. If we can continue to support more shooters and hunters, then they can expect to have places and opportunities to pursue their passions. Because they paid for them." 

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SNOW SHIFT

WHEN DUCK SEASON ENDS IN ARKANSAS, HUNTERS AND GUIDES
SWITCH FROM FLOODED TIMBER TO OPEN FIELDS
IN EXPECTATION OF WHITE TORNADOES.

By Alan Clemons

A semi-auto shotgun with an extended magazine is a popular choice during the Light Goose Conservation Order season. Regs do not limit magazine capacity.



MARK SIDELINGER

Until you've experienced it, nothing can prepare you for the whirling, spinning, mind-blowing cacophony of hundreds or thousands of snow geese over your spread. It's intense. You might get pooped on. You'll get amped when the first handful lights in the spread, but don't shoot just yet. More are coming. Just hang on a little bit longer.

"Wait ... wait ... let 'em land ... wait," urged Keaton Kelso, hoarsely giving us instructions. He was quiet enough to not spook the geese on the ground but emphatic in expressing that trigger time was nigh. "They're still coming. Wait ... some more of them will come down and bring in the rest."

Finally, thankfully, we and Keaton's quivering Labrador retriever were given relief. At the command of "Take 'em!" we unloaded our guns. After hunting waterfowl for 40 years it's crazy to think about an unplugged magazine that holds 10 rounds. A couple of us emptied the guns, just because we could, to see what it was like. All of us hit geese, their white-and-black bodies shuddering at the impact of the 3- and 3 1/2-inch Kent steel ammo. They thudded to the warm soil, falling amid the socks and rags and hardshell decoys. The flock turned and lifted higher, their dissonance disappearing as we flung a long shot here and there, identified stragglers for the Lab to go after, and lay in the field in awe.

"Well, that was pretty freakin' incredible," one of us said before we broke into "Did you see ..." and "I thought that one was going to ..." and other tales. The Lab continued to bring in geese as we watched the massive flock separate and fly hither and yon. Some landed in an adjacent field; they toyed with us a couple of times. Keaton and his brother, Kendall, assessed the decoy spread. Kendall went to make some adjustments on the edge where the snows had knocked things akimbo.

With snow geese, you shoot the snot out of 'em and then get ready for more, because you never know when the next group of 20 or 2,000 will decide to come in.

FROM DUCKS TO GEESE

Many places claim to be the capital of something. Stuttgart, Ark., a town about as big as a flock of snow geese,

Large spreads of assorted decoys attract larger flocks of snow geese and help hide hunters in open fields where birds graze.



claims to be the duck hunting capital of the world. It's a boast made for almost 100 years, thanks to several factors: rice, water and timber on the southern end of the Mississippi Flyway. By late autumn when the rice fields have been harvested, and the pin oaks and other mast trees are dropping acorns, and the ducks are arriving from their trek down from Canada's lovely summer, hunters are eagerly and anxiously waiting in Stuttgart like high water pushing against a dam. For many hard-core duck hunters, it's a rite of passage to make a trip to hunt there, to visit Mack's Prairie Wings and at least see Bayou Meto, and to drive around at sunset watching the skies.

The dam breaks in November each year. Stuttgart transforms from a small, quiet, unassuming Grand Prairie town to a nonstop grind of muddy, four-wheel-drive pickups holding occupants with soaring expectations. Other small towns in Arkansas are the same way. Gas stations, cafes, outdoor retailers, big chain stores ... all thrum with a

camo-infused vibrancy. Everything is at full tilt. Hunters often arrive late on Thursday night, driving from nearby states after work to their leases, to hunt three mornings and then scamper home before doing it again four days later.

The afternoon I arrived in Stuttgart before our goose hunt, duck season was ending. One day remained, the last hurrah of the three-month camo beatdown. Two trucks in the hotel parking lot exhibited giveaways: mud, decoys, a dog box in the back. But that was it. The hotel was quiet. Downtown was quiet. No lines at the gas stations or fast-food drive-through lanes. The Mexican restaurant had locals at the tables, but no one wore camo or boots or weary expressions. Technically, one day remained in the season but Stuttgart already had reverted to its quiet, usual routine that would revolve around farming for the next nine months.

Goose hunters like Kendall and Keaton were the notable exception. They were in geeked-up scouting mode for the snow goose season. Officially it's known

as the Spring Light Goose Conservation Order, which provides hunters with the chance to use unplugged shotguns and electronic calls with no limits under generally relaxed regulations. The federal and state agencies won't be so blunt about it, but they want hunters to kill as many snow geese as possible every year. The problem is, even with all those allowances, it doesn't make a dent in the population.

Stuttgart, and the rest of the Arkansas prairie through which the snow geese migrate, valiantly attempts to do its part. But by the last Sunday in January, when duck season closes, the duck hunters pretty much are done. They're either wiped out, tired, ready to end it, or they simply don't care about snow geese. Duck hunters can boat into the timber and lean against a tree in waders, crouch when a gang of mallards is lighting, chuckle softly, kill them in a bag-of-decoys spread, and then go home. It is neither easy nor incredibly difficult; the exhaustion comes from the elements and doing it for days on end.

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With snow geese, though, you're looking at hundreds of rags and socks and shells and decoys, a flying decoy contraption run by batteries, chairs to sit in, bags with ample ammo and gear, calling devices and more batteries, and all of that must be put out before sunrise in some arrangement you hope will attract the geese. Your truck has to be moved far enough away. Anyone hunting with

you must be decked out in white. Dark blotches amid white decoys are a no-no. If the shells are on stakes, the stakes must be set correctly so the shells bob instead of lean over like a drunk fan after the big football game. Wind and weather can be friend or foe. If the geese don't come, you might have to gather all of that stuff and move it to a new area, put it out again and hope for the best.

"It wears on you, for sure, after a few weeks," Kendall said. He and Keaton have been chasing geese for about 40 years starting as kids in Iowa. As owners of K&K Outfitters (duckandbuck.com), they have guided hunters for 25 years for snow geese in spring, and for deer in autumn and winter in southeast Missouri and western Kansas. When geese begin migrating from Louisiana in early spring,



There's a lot going on when a flock of snows drops into the decoys. Each hunter must establish a safe shooting lane and stick to it.

SAFE, SUCCESSFUL AND STRESS-FREE

Keep these things in mind for a great hunt.

Snow goose hunting is a lot of work, but when things work out right, the shooting is fast-paced and furious. Up your odds for having a banner day by bringing good gear and enlisting the help of an expert or two. Most importantly, put safety first when a flock descends.

SHOOT IN YOUR LANE: This should be a no-brainer, but it's critical to remember and emphasize to your hunting party. You're likely hunting from the ground or chairs. Everyone should know their shooting lane and stay in it. No swinging hard left or right, no crossovers to "help with the one getting away" or anything like that. Shoot in your lane and be safe.

RELIABLE GEAR: Snow goose hunting requires a lot of decoys, a shotgun that can hold up during prolonged fire and good clothing to keep you warm, dry and comfortable. Spring weather can be weird. Be prepared with proven and properly maintained gear, and have tools or replacements on hand. A good blind bag helps keep stuff organized.

STAY CONCEALED: White pants, coat and toque, or a white jumpsuit, and you're good to go. Gloves might help but aren't necessary. It's not like the entire ground is white. Just blend in. Your boots, hands and face aren't going to cause a problem unless you're moving them around. Hunker in, chill out, watch the birds, and stay still until it's time to shoot.

HUNT WITH GUIDES: I'd have to be really committed to hunting and chasing snow geese to buy everything needed to do it right. All that money can be used to go hunting with guides who already have almost everything you need. You show up with your clothes, gun, ammo and whatever else they recommend. They take care of the rest. For what you save by not buying gear you might be able to do two or three trips a season. Pay your guides, shake their hands, enjoy the trip and create some memories.

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they load their trailer and trucks to chase them north through Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, maybe Illinois or farther north. They put out 500 to 1,000 socks, full-body decoys, shells, rags and mechanical flying decoys, often in a “dog bone” or “fat X” shape, with a glob in the middle to obscure them and the hunters.

They’re obsessed, even if it wears them down physically.

“There’s nothing like it,” Kendall noted, after our monster volley proved to be the highlight of the day. Warm temperatures and fickle birds—typical for snow goose hunting—had them scattered.

“Just like you saw this morning, we got these decoys set out last night hoping the birds that were in that other field, and whatever birds had been feeding here, would come in,” he continued. “Some did, and then finally that giant group did, and it’s just mesmerizing. We’ve seen that kind of thing with two or three times as many birds swarming, landing, lifting and hopping over and over, and it’s just amazing. It got in our blood years ago and we love it.”



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Dogs can really get a workout on good days during the Conservation Order season. It's an opportunity for training, reinforcing good habits and enjoying a Lab's efforts.

MARK SIDELINGER

SNOW BIOLOGY 101

Snow geese breed and rear their young each summer from Russia across the Arctic to western Greenland, migrating in autumn through the four North American flyways. Most of these are lesser snow geese, weighing from 7 to 10 pounds, while the greater snow geese are a bit bigger and are found primarily in eastern Canada and parts of the northeastern United States.

Hunters will find snows from the Carolinas to California. Their haunts are changing, and have changed. Thirty or 40 years ago it was cool to head to south Texas to chase snow geese around Katy and all the open agricultural land around there south of Houston. That's all developed now. The geese have moved east and west, to Louisiana and other parts of Texas and the Central Flyway. The ones now east move back up to Canada via the Mississippi Flyway, following the rivers and the flyway's ample fields of rice, beans and corn in Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, western Kentucky, Iowa and Minnesota.

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GREAT GOOSE GEAR

Grab these items when the snows start to fly.

1 ALPS OUTDOORZ SNOW GOOSE CHAIR

This comfortable chair (\$249.99; alpsoutdoorz.com) features the same ergonomic seat as the ALPS Zero Gravity Layout Blind but without the blind panels. Elasticized lacing that ties the padded assembly to the frame minimizes torso and leg pressure. The headrest keeps the head ideally positioned. Adjustable backpack carry straps are integrated into the chair. Bonus: The chair makes it easy to take a mid-morning nap if the geese aren't cooperating.

2 STOEGER M3500 SNOW GOOSE SHOTGUN

Specifically designed for hunting snow geese, this version of the M3500 (\$899; stoegerindustries.com) features an inertia-driven action, extended 10-round magazine tube, 28-inch barrel and 3 1/2-inch chamber. The stock and receiver are finished in Distressed White Cerakote. The gun handles and shoulders well, offers a fine sightline to the target and rips off 10 rounds with ease. A couple of us intentionally loaded 3 1/2-inch ammo to test recoil, which wasn't any more recognizable than with 3-inch loads. While this shotgun is made for snow geese, it would be great for hunting coyotes or hogs, too.

3 DRYSHOD NOSHO ULTRA HUNT BOOTS

If you're a big ol' boy, you appreciate sturdy boots with ample insulation and a wide, adjustable gusset in the back for your calves. DryShod had you in mind with its NoSho Ultra Hunt boots (\$214.95; dryshodusa.com). They have seven layers to defeat the cold from the tough exterior and rugged, gripping sole to the soft internal lining that breathes but keeps your tootsies warm. In total there's 11 mm of insulating layers; you might get by with a thin, wool running sock, like I did during our goose hunt.

4 ALPS OUTDOORZ PIT BLIND BAG

Finding a good, durable blind bag for your gear is a must if you're a waterfowl hunter. The ALPS Pit Blind Bag (\$89.99; alpsoutdoorz.com) fills that need. It has a wide-mouth pop-open compartment with a removable divider so you can separate ammo from gear, for example. Multiple pockets hold everything from licenses and phone to tools for repairs. The deep, large interior features a pocket to hold a thermal beverage container or other gear. (Choose the beverage.) The handles and zipper will withstand rugged use, and a waterproof, molded bottom keeps your stuff dry.



Federal officials estimate a population of about 17 million light geese, which include snow and Ross' geese, with a significant number of those being juveniles. Adults are smart, learning quickly about hunting scenarios and where to go or avoid. Juveniles stay with their parents the first year, migrating and learning. Snow geese use traditional areas each year; it takes loss of habitat, like in southeast Texas, to push them elsewhere. Juveniles learn these migration routes, and the cycle continues when they, after a year, disperse to rear broods while their parents tend to another clutch of three to seven eggs.

It's a tough situation, though. Hunters aren't killing enough juveniles (or adults) to reduce the population significantly enough. Loss of habitat on breeding grounds eventually will hit a tipping point, pushing birds to seek new areas. And despite the lack of regulations—snow geese essentially are feral hogs with wings—hunters don't and won't go out to kill hundreds of birds every day. The population will crash due to something, perhaps avian flu or another disease, or natural mortality and habitat changes will eventually keep it in check. The other scenario is snow goose numbers will expand to the detriment of habitat and other species. None of these are pretty pictures.



Flocks can hold thousands of snow geese and strip a field of green forage in a couple days.

IT ALL DEPENDS ...

The Kelso brothers work like a well-oiled machine, setting up decoys and plotting strategy with hardly a blink of an eye. Has the wind shifted or is something else making the geese act weird over the spread? The two guides identify it and adjust accordingly. Has it been hours without a sighting? Time to pack up and move, or leave things for the next day if they have a good feeling about the spot.

Driving the roads around Stuttgart, you'll see snow geese in fields. It may be a small or large group. The birds may not appear to have any rhyme or reason in how they move along in the field. Seeing others come in, landing in certain areas, doesn't always offer clues about why they picked that spot. In fields with larger groups, you'll see a hopscotch game break out: 40 to 50 geese suddenly lift, fly ahead and land. Moments later, another does the same.

"They're feeding and trying to get ahead of the other birds to the best food," Kendall says about the hopping maneuver. "They're always trying to get as much as they can. They're voracious. You'll see a field one day, and come back a day or two later and it's been grazed to the dirt."

We begin taking up our gear and all the decoys. Our crew is scrambling to beat a potential ice storm bearing down on the region in a couple of days. The

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spread begins to disappear, piled into neat stacks to be loaded a specific way into the enclosed trailer. Kendall and Keaton are heading north, likely to Missouri for a few days, if not more. I ask about what they've learned over the years with the decoys and watching the birds.

"Full-body decoys are time consuming, and it adds a lot more work to it," Kendall admits. "But the realism to it ... those big decoys that are fingered out on the ends, you can't beat that. They just

look so good. If you see big flocks in fields, they'll often have a long trickle tail where the birds are landing and walking up to the flock. Those full-body decoys help with that.

"We probably ran 1,200 to 1,400 decoys back in our younger days," he remembers. "It didn't really seem to change the game, though. I'm sure in some situations it might have helped to have more, but overall, we didn't see it. Probably 400 to 500 is the minimum. You can't mass enough of them in the center

to adequately hide you in the chairs, I think, unless you have at least that many if not more. Now, if you use a pit and are completely ground level and hidden, you might be fine with that or maybe even fewer. Blending into the flock [of decoys] is so critically important. If you do it right, by the time you're lying there in your white coat or jumpsuit, you're all blocked in. But it all depends on the birds and what they want to do."

As always with waterfowl hunting, it all depends on the birds. **G&F**

With dozens and sometimes hundreds of birds within range, bagging doubles and even triples is not uncommon during the spring snow goose season.



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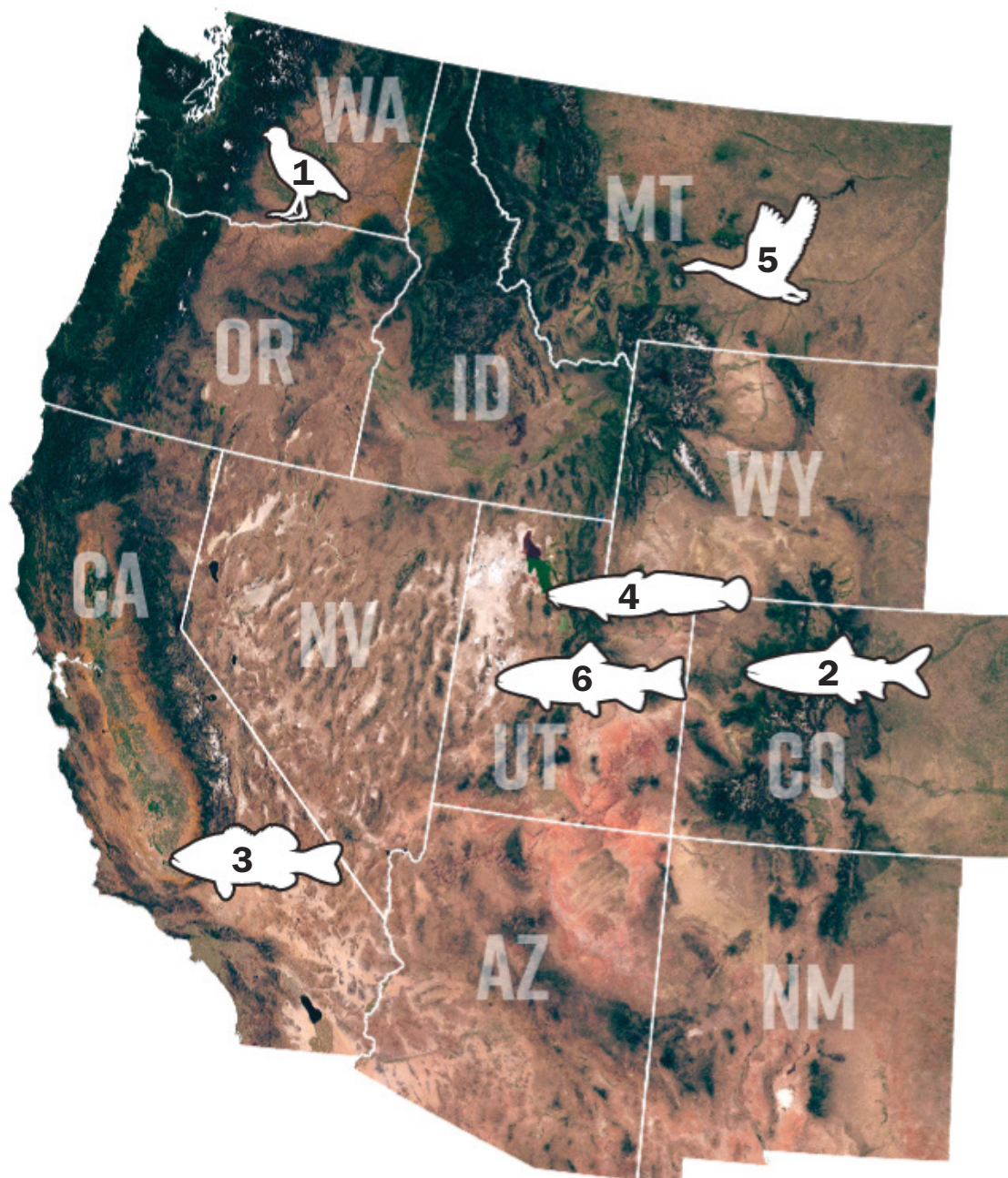
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AROUND THE WEST

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES RIGHT NOW

By Andrew McKean



These short days and long nights of winter put a premium on both field time and socializing, and there's no better way to accomplish both than by entering one of the many ice-fishing tournaments being offered around the West.

Sure, there's money to be made in many of these derbies, but the real payout is spending time with your neighbors, maybe learning a new angling skill or tackle trick. With thickening ice on many reservoirs, it's also the best time to catch fish that are still energized with oxygen and moving widely under the new cover.

Also, waterfowl and upland bird seasons are winding down, and pre-spawn bassing is ramping up from Phoenix to Sacramento.



WASHINGTON CHUKAR

Utah and Nevada get the headlines (and the crowds) but for good action and relatively little pressure, take your chukar game—and a hard-hunting dog or two—to eastern Washington. The season extends through Jan. 31, and the high ridges above the Yakima River south of Ellensburg can offer multiple coveys and limits in a leg-searing, but ultimately rewarding, day.



SOUTHWEST BASSING

The clear waters of winter are the best time to size up and slow down your offerings for 10-pound-and-better California and Arizona largemouth. It's swimbait season, and trout-imitating Castaic, Huddleston Deluxe and \$90 Triple Trout models are all good choices on California's Casitas, Perris and Isabella lakes. In Arizona, Havasu, Patagonia and Alamo lakes are all worth checking out for magnum bass. The best time to fish is on a dropping barometer ahead of a winter storm.



FLAMING GORGE BURBOT BASH

Another entry in destination ice derbies, the Jan. 27 to 29 Burbot Bash (burbotbash.com) on the Utah side of cross-state Flaming Gorge Reservoir is equal parts winter carnival and prejudicial fishing. The thousand-plus competitors are trying to rid the fishery of invasive ling, also known as burbot. Last year, a 32.2-inch burbot won \$2,000. In all, some 2,400 fish were caught, earning anglers more than \$60,000 in cash and prizes. This is primarily a nocturnal bite, so bring headlamps, a heater and buddies, because the best prizes—and generally the best success—go to three- and four-person teams.



YELLOWSTONE HONKERS

Any time from Christmas through the end of goose season in mid-January will produce quick 5-bird limits of brawny Canada geese that descend on Montana's lower Yellowstone River by the thousands. Access is tight, so plan to hunt with an outfitter or pay a trespass fee to landowners with irrigated cropland. But big spreads and bitter weather go together here; the worse the wind, the hotter the shooting.



GRANBY ICE-FISHING DERBY

While you're prospecting waters west of the Front Range, plan to take in the 3 Lakes Ice-Fishing Contest, slated for Jan. 27 to 29 in Granby, Colo. Thirty-five years old this year, it's the longest-running ice derby west of the Mississippi and takes place on Lake Granby, Shadow Mountain Reservoir and Grand Lake. You can enter a single day or all three and compete for tens of thousands of dollars in cash and prizes. Besides that, Granby is a pretty good spot in January for all sorts of winter sports, from snowmobiling to skiing.



MILLSITE ON ICE

If you can't wait until late January for a monster ice-fishing derby, head to Utah's Millsite State Park Jan. 13 to 14 for the seventh-annual Millsite On Ice tournament (millsiteonice.com). Entry is \$50 per adult and \$25 for kids, with a huge payout. Last year, organizers gave out \$20,000 in swag, cash and prizes to the 360 contestants. Fishing can be very good for a mix of rainbow trout, splake (hybrids of brook and lake trout) and tiger trout (hybrids of brown and brook trout), but chronic dewatering means whopper fish will be scarce.

SOLO MISSION

TIPS FOR BAGGING A LIMIT OF DUCKS IN A ONE-MAN SKIFF

By M.D. Johnson

Day was just beginning to tinge the eastern sky a reddish orange as I made the final adjustments to the spike-grass covering the Aquapod skiff and settled inside the hull, my Remington across the gunwales. In front of me, 18 mixed puddler decoys rocked in the cool coastal breeze, which was slight just then, but would pick up with the tide change. So, too, would the morning flight. Or so I hoped.

My first cup of coffee was interrupted by the sharp sound of pinions cutting the air behind me. There was a flicker of movement to my left as a dozen wigeons cut the edge of my sheet-water puddle and spun into the wind. I hardly had time to put my hands on the autoloader before a big, white-capped drake began to slip into the spread, followed by three more. No sense in waiting, I thought, rising and shouldering the 12-gauge. The boom echoed off the tall firs out front as the drake crumpled and crashed to the

water, one of his wingmen meeting the same fate a split-second later.

Twenty steps out, 20 back, and I had both birds laying breast-down next to the Aquapod. Climbing inside the skiff, I was again stopped short by the sound of wings. A seven-bird limit didn't take long, and I was headed back over the Coast Range before 10 a.m.

What was the recipe for success that morning? Plenty of birds in the area helped immensely, as did a good breeze that worked to push birds off the nearby salt bay and put them on the hunt for quiet water. A realistic decoy spread, on-the-water motion thanks to a jerk cord, and calling in moderation filled in some of the remaining variables.

But the biggest thing in my favor that morning was my small fiberglass boat. Just 14 inches tall and 10 feet long, the Aquapod served initially as an equipment transport, gliding easily, even though full, over 3 or 4 inches of water. Once unloaded and with her grass-and-burlap

camouflage freshened up a bit, the 'Pod morphed into a high-and-dry aquatic layout blind that was not only comfortable, but apparently all but invisible, despite the short-cropped pasture and occasional clumps of spike-grass surrounding my puddle.

THE BOAT

Boats are nothing new to the tribe of waterfowlers. But little boats? One- or two-man skiffs? These have come a long way from the shaky, unstable aluminum canoe your grandpa had leaning up against the barn. They're mostly made of materials like roto-molded plastic, fiberglass and aluminum, but some traditional wooden duck skiffs are still in service throughout all four flyways.

There's a little more to a good, small duck skiff than simply something that floats, however. I like a boat that can serve as a mode of transportation and a blind, or simply a means of getting me and my gear from Point A to Point B.

COURTESY OF OLD TOWN (TOP); M.D. JOHNSON (OPPOSITE)



A canoe can serve as transportation or as a way to tow gear—and hopefully a limit of ducks—through shallow water.

BLIND

As stated, my Aquapods are roughly 14 inches high when sitting on dry ground, but only sit about 8 inches above the water when loaded and camouflaged. They're incredibly low-profile and water-tight, meaning I can use them not only to take me from my launch site to the "X," but can then use them as an effective blind once there. Similar to the Aquapod is Mallard Marine's Marsh Rat, the Momarsh Fatboy DP and the Four Rivers Migrator, all of which ably serve the aforementioned double duty.

NO BLIND

I hunt a little tidal marsh near the Washington coast that's as pretty as they come. There, I use my Old Town Discovery 119 canoe just to get me out to a long, thin island studded with scrub trees. After I set the spread, I beach the 119, cover her with anti-aircraft (AA) netting and sit in the bushes. Retrieval is done on foot. Birds in hand, I'll load

the canoe—hopefully just a few minutes after a 12-foot high tide—and head in. Here, the skiff is purely a means of transportation; I'll either use a natural blind or take what I need to make a temporary hide. My Jackson Kayaks Kilroy works well in these situations, too, as would something like the Alpaca Raft Mule inflatable/packable canoe.

GEARING UP

Whether you're using the skiff as a blind, for transporting gear or for floating a local stream in hopes of jump-shooting a quick limit after work, these small boats lend themselves to a minimalist approach due to their weight ratings and available capacity.

Let's say I've decided to float a winding tributary to the Lower Columbia River. My skiff of choice for the day is the Old Town Discovery 119, which is rated for 298 pounds, 200 of which is me. That leaves 98 pounds for gear, but I neither need nor want nearly 100 pounds of stuff in the boat with me. So, I downsize and take the following: a small blind bag with shotshells, calls, extra gloves and toilet paper; double-bladed kayak paddle; personal flotation device; eight puddler decoys; tightly rolled AA netting; and my Thermos, lunch and water. Outfitted as such, I can stay on the move in search of birds for the better part of a day.

SMALL-SKIFF STRATEGIES

There are a couple ways to hunt a small flowage in a small skiff, one being to float until you find birds, then throw out a small decoy spread and wait a bit for them to return or others to show. Ducks on moving water are in specific sections for specific reasons, including a lack of current, a food source or security.

Alternatively, you keep the skiff moving, hugging the insides of bends with shotgun at the ready, in hopes of surprising a loafing flock of mallards as you round the corner. Navigable feeder creeks and small, shallow backwaters can be excellent places to investigate as you work your way downstream. Beaver activity on the main channel could mean a backed-up pool off to one side or the other. Those definitely deserve a look, or maybe even a brief sit over half a dozen decoys.

Safety on the water and common sense go hand in hand. The utmost care needs be taken when combining loaded shotguns, water and small skiffs. First of all, always wear your PFD when traveling on the water. Add a retriever, no matter how experienced and well-behaved, and safety concerns are further elevated. Finally, always file a float plan detailing where you're going, what you're doing, where your vehicle will be parked and when you expect to return home, and then leave it with someone you trust. 



Low-profile, one-person skiffs double as effective hunting blinds when camouflaged with natural and man-made materials.

WIGEON

QUEST



WITH THEIR NUMBERS SPIKING, THERE'S REASON FOR
HUNTERS IN THE PACIFIC FLYWAY TO GET EXCITED ABOUT THESE DUCKS.

By Scott Haugen

Sitting in a blind, my frustration escalated. Wigeon were funneling into a flooded field 500 yards away, but I couldn't pull a single bird to me.

The next morning, I moved. With my dogs and a small, single-panel blind, I tossed out 10 floating wigeon decoys in a U shape. Ducks looked at the spread but wouldn't commit. Then I opened the U, creating two rough lines with openings on each end.

Over the next 20 minutes, wigeon flocked into the spread—hundreds of them. In short order I'd secured a limit of wigeon—all drakes. And that was just the beginning.

More wigeon arrived over the course of the last six weeks of the season, culminating in the best duck season I've ever experienced. It wasn't just me. Friends and fellow hunters throughout the Pacific Flyway were elated with the wigeon hunting last season—actually, the last two seasons.

It reminded me of the great wigeon hunts I had back in junior high and early high school in the late 1970s. And the numbers don't lie—back then or now.

THE NUMBERS

"Ten years ago, we were concerned about wigeon numbers," says Chris Nicolai, waterfowl scientist for Delta Waterfowl. "But they've rebounded in the last eight years. It's interesting, the comparison you make with hunting wigeon now and back in the '70s, as that was the last noted spike in their population."

Nicolai shared how challenging it is to get accurate wigeon counts, as they are boreal nesters and span from Alaska across much of northern Canada.

"When it comes to duck counts, the big focus is on mallards, which nest primarily in the prairies, so I bet a fair number of wigeon get missed since the boreal region isn't in the survey," he says. "Wigeon come down [south] in a huge fan, not in a narrow band like pintail or green-winged teal. Roughly one-third of the wigeon migrate over the ocean, one-third over mountainous terrain like the Cascades and Rockies and one-third over the prairies. That's a wide span for any migratory waterfowl, and when their numbers are solid, hunters notice it."

Having hunted wigeon for decades, and talking with fellow waterfowlers

who've done the same, we've reached similar conclusions. One is that early-season storms push migrating wigeon from the Pacific Coast into valleys. Another is that with the mild winters, more wigeon are wintering where we can hunt them. And third—also in association with warming trends—more wigeon are starting their spring migration—heading back north—sooner than usual, putting more birds on the hunting grounds late in the season.

I shared these observations with Brandon Reishus, migratory game bird coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife.

"Since there are no more wintering ground surveys conducted by the USFWS, it's tough to draw firm conclusions, but we do see a noticeable pulse of wigeon in late August across much of the state," Reishus says.

WIGEON ADDICTION

"Last year we saw more wigeon in the valley than ever," says avid waterfowler Richard Kropf, who hunts Oregon's Willamette Valley all season. "And with them have come more Eurasian wigeon."

Widespread halfway around the world from their American cousins, most Eurasian wigeon winter from Iceland to Great Britain, across northern Europe, into southern Russia and Japan and farther south. Some make it into the flyways along the West and East coasts of the United States each year. Drakes have reddish-brown plumage on their heads and necks, gray bodies and white wing patches.

For more than 45 years I sought Eurasian wigeon. I never shot one until last season, when I got three. Meanwhile, a buddy took his son and his friend duck hunting on the Columbia River. It was



Late in the season, when birds become educated, the author transitions from large floating decoy spreads of multiple species to less than a dozen floating wigeon decoys.

the friend's first duck hunt, and he shot a dandy Eurasian. He shot another one on their next hunt a few days later. I know of dozens more taken last season.

"If I could have every drake wigeon I shot shoulder mounted, I'd be pumped!" says Austin Crowson, another hardcore waterfowl hunter in the Pacific Northwest. "All the variations and colorations never fail to make each hunt more and more exciting. Not to mention the thrill of hearing their whistles and wingbeats. Wigeon hunting truly never gets old. It's what I live for."

Serious wigeon hunters love the bird's tendency to drop aggressively into the decoys, and the fact you don't have to be a great caller.

"I like using a wigeon whistle, but honestly, once they turn their head to a mallard call, I shut up and let the decoys do the work," Kropf says. "I think too much calling can work against you, especially when they're circling overhead late in the season when they're wiser."

One morning I was hunting with Kropf and Crowson in a slough off a big river.

"Did you hear that?" Kropf asked as we set decoys in the darkness and a flock of wigeon passed overhead. "There's a Euro in there."

Euros have a distinct call, and we all heard it. We couldn't get the decoys set and tucked into our blind fast enough. We shot limits that morning, mostly wigeon, but no Euro. And though we didn't see a Eurasian, Richard's brother, Brent, got a dandy two days later from that exact spot.



Eurasian wigeon are distinguished from their North American cousins, in part, by their distinct reddish-brown head plumage.

DECOY SPREADS

A great trait of wigeon is they'll come to any puddle duck decoy spread. But in recent years, as wigeon numbers have continued to build in multiple areas where I hunt, I've been experimenting and have learned a lot.

Early in the season, I like running a mix of mallard, pintail, shoveler, teal and wigeon floater decoys. Around mid-November, when coots start showing up, I'll introduce coot decoys—old duck decoys I painted black. Amid the coot decoys I'll place wigeon decoys, as wigeon are notoriously opportunistic feeders that gobble up vegetation brought to the surface by coots, geese

and swans. I'll even include a few floating honker decoys on the edge of my duck spreads, with wigeon placed next to them.

In late December when I've found where wigeon are flocking in by the thousands, I'll switch to a simple spread. I'll go with 10 to 12 floating wigeon decoys and situate them in two uneven lines so approaching wigeon have plenty of places to land as wind directions change.

As hunting pressure increases on local wigeon, I add silhouettes. I learned this from Kropf and Crowson, who use 15- to 20-dozen mallard and pintail silhouettes in their late-season duck spreads.

When I observed wigeon responding so well to decoys of the same species late in the season, I tried going exclusively with wigeon silhouettes. It worked. I ordered five-dozen Big Al's silhouette decoys, and from day one they were a game-changer. The first place I used them was on a small point surrounded by water, where I put out all five dozen. Wigeon dove into them for three weeks straight.

In late-season flooded fields where wigeon graze, I spread out the silhouettes on both sides of my blind. Some are standing in water, others in tight feeding position in green grass around the blind. One morning when I was searching for a drake Euro, more than 600 ducks landed in the silhouettes by noon. I went home that day with a limit of drake wigeon, but none with red heads.

Wigeon can commit to decoys from a long distance away. This tendency makes tight silhouette spreads very effective.





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BUST A MOVE

Another thing I learned from wigeon addicts Kropf and Crowson is the importance of scouting a lot.

“These birds move around, and I like having them in one place for about three days before hunting them,” Kropf says.

“Some of the areas we hunt along the coast and in the valleys, you’ll see wigeon every year, but sometimes their location changes, too,” says Crowson. “I spend more time scouting for wigeon than hunting them.”

Being mobile is key to consistent wigeon hunting success. Big, stationary ground blinds might work early in the season, but once birds grow wise, they might never come to the decoys. This is where being able to move is a must. You might move 500 yards from where you usually hunt or 50 miles.

One day we watched more than 6,000 wigeon flock into a field we were refused permission to hunt—right next to a field we could hunt, which the birds ignored.

Having a small, simple blind that affords mobility, like a panel or A-frame, is important. On stormy days don’t be afraid to set decoys in a tight wad, simulating birds feeding and hunkering together to combat the elements. On clear days, spread out the decoys to create a relaxed feeding situation.

Keep things simple but hunt smart, and you’ll discover how fun and rewarding wigeon hunting can truly be. 



The author (kneeling) has enjoyed many great wigeon hunts with brothers Richard (left) and Brent Kropf, including this one in a flooded creek.

WIGEON MAGNETS

Some bodies of water seem to draw the ducks year after year.

Wigeon aren’t a species you can say, “Go here every year and you’ll shoot limits.” They can move with storms, hunting pressure, changing water conditions, food and seasons.

However, bays along the Washington and Oregon coasts are typically prime locations. These states, along

with California, also offer hunting opportunities on refuge lands.

Oregon’s Summer Lake and Klamath Marsh are good early-season wigeon spots. Utah’s Great Salt Lake and Nevada’s Lahontan and Ruby valleys, along with Humboldt Sink, are also worth checking out.

Hunting fields from layout blinds with a large spread of decoys of various types and species is an effective way to target inland wigeon.



MIKE CLINGAN (BOTTOM); SCOTT HAUGEN (TOP)

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HUNT THE

WHEN IT COMES TO PREDATOR HUNTING, COYOTES ARE TOP DOGS. BUT DON'T OVERLOOK BONUS FURBEARER OPPORTUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE WEST THIS WINTER.

By Scott Haugen

With a fawn decoy next to an electronic speaker, I settled into cover 50 yards downwind. The decoy was on a semi-open hillside at the intersection of four game trails that emerged from timber. A cougar I'd been catching on game cameras traveled each trail.

Seconds after sending a fawn distress call on the remote, a cry rang out to my right. I knew what it was, and soon a gray fox came sprinting in, followed by another, then a third.

All three foxes yipped and barked at

the decoy, then left. The shot would have been easy, but I was holding out for a lion. A few minutes later, a coyote came in, which I passed on. After an hour of calling, no cougar showed. I returned to the area the following morning and called in two more gray foxes and a bobcat. The cat was too good to pass up.

While coyotes are often the target species when predator hunting the West, you never know what might come to a call. One of the biggest thrills is that a bobcat, gray fox, red fox, cougar, badger or even a bear, can show up at any moment.

LON LAUBER PHOTOGRAPHY (LEFT); LINDA FRESHWATERS ARNDT (RIGHT)



Part of the thrill of predator hunting in the West is knowing that any calling set could result in an encounter with a variety of species.

HUNTERS

THE MINDSET

When multiple gray foxes, a coyote and a bobcat came into my sets intended for a cougar, I wasn't surprised. What did surprise me was that more coyotes didn't show up. The number of trail camera shots I had of all these predators, especially coyotes, in recent weeks left no guess as to what lived there. I was frustrated that the cougar never showed, despite seven straight days of calling.

Trail cameras play a big role in determining where and how I hunt predators. They reveal what predator species lurk

in an area, when they move and what direction they're heading, and they provide an idea of how many animals are out there. Trail cams are your eyes in the woods and deliver valued information that helps establish a mindset to target multiple predator species at once, not just coyotes. I hang cameras on fence lines, game trails, secondary logging roads and the corners and edges of farm fields.

I run my cams on video mode. What you learn by watching the behavior of predators, and hearing what goes on out of frame, will greatly influence how

you hunt an area since video with sound reveals much more than a string of still images. I hang cameras lower for predators than I do for big game, and often position them on fallen trees that create paths of travel.

Supplement the intel you glean from cameras by also searching for sign. When traveling roads and trails, look for tracks and droppings from predators. Look for fur on fence posts, on trees near trails and where trails cross under barbed wire fencing. Take note of well-worn trails, as predators are creatures of habit.

GO IN PREPARED

While coyotes are the cornerstone predators of the West, many other species coexist in the same habitats. By being aware of the habitats of predators such as bobcats, foxes, badgers, cougars and even bears, and preparing, setting up and calling based on what you know is out there, you'll be on the way to expanding your predator hunting experience.

When setting up to call coyotes, we usually do so in open, elevated terrain where we can see them approaching from a long way off. But if you know gray foxes, bobcats and cougars are around, and want to target all of them at once, move your setup into cover. Old logging roads closed to vehicle traffic, game trails, thinned habitats and even the

PREDATOR CALLS

Add a variety of sounds to your bag of tricks.

When hunting a mix of predators, having both an electronic call and mouth calls is important. I use many different electronic calls, but I like the remote-operated **Mojo Triple Threat E-Caller** (\$240; mojoooutdoors.com). In addition to the 80 high-quality sounds that are included, you can customize it with your own. I like how the tripod legs get the movable decoy up where predators can see it.

For mouth calls, I'm a fan of bite-down, open-reed calls, as they allow for a range of sounds, from fawn distress to rabbits to birds. I'm loving the new **Slayer Calf External Call** (\$26; slayercalls.com). Though it's designed for elk, it reaches a good volume for calling predators in expansive habitats and thick forests alike. I also like Slayer's line of diaphragm calls.



An electronic call with a moving decoy is ideal for pulling wary predators into the open for a shot opportunity.

edges of logged units and meadows are places to focus calling efforts if you're looking to bring in a mix of predators.

If you want to call red foxes or badgers, do so on the fringe of brushy habitat, as well as in open terrain like sage brush flats and agricultural fields. Red foxes and badgers often occupy more open habitat than cats and gray foxes, but not always. Red, cross and silver foxes thrive in river bottoms and riparian zones, too.

On a recent coyote hunt, I called into a dry gully amid a high-desert setting west of the Rockies. In less than two minutes, three coyotes came sprinting in. Only two left. I kept calling, and a few minutes later a gray fox came slinking in; 25 minutes after that, a bobcat. Three species in one set, all responding to jack rabbit distress sounds.

When targeting multiple predators in one spot, be prepared to sit. While coyotes and gray foxes often approach within the first two minutes, cats and bears can take an hour or more.

If you're hunting coyotes, bobcats and gray foxes in sagebrush country and you want a badger, a change might be necessary. Badgers are the one predator I've had to specialize my approach with when calling in areas where multiple predators thrive.

If I can see a badger, I'll try to get within 100 yards before calling. I'll often start with rodent distress sounds. If that doesn't work, I'll move to soft cottontail and jackrabbit sounds. I don't call too loudly, as I don't want to scare them off.

SCOTT HAUGEN

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In brushy country, having a shotgun on hand allows for quick close-range shots on predators slinking through the thick cover.

I think it brings in more predators than the electronic calls I've used. I do use electronic calls, I just don't place them very far when calling in places where bobcats and cougars are. Cats can hang back in the brush before making a move, and I want to be able to see them."

When calling in brushy country, many predator hunters carry both a rifle and a shotgun. Having

the rifle set in shooting sticks and the shotgun by your side is a great approach. If you catch movement of a nearby predator in brush, grab the shotgun.

Often, when hunting where a mix of predators live, you never know what will come in. Do your homework, cover country, and don't be afraid to tuck tight into cover before calling, especially if seeking cats and gray foxes. Be sure to check furbearer regulations in states you'll be hunting and have the proper license and tags.

Western predator habitat is big, but don't let that intimidate you. Find habitats that are home to multiple predator species, offer up a range of prey sounds and cover ground. With so much land to hunt and so many places for a range of predators to be, taking your sounds to where they live will find you bringing home more than just coyotes. **Gf**

Badgers are continually moving, digging and sniffing, and it can sometimes take them a while to hear your sounds. If you're confident a badger can hear you but isn't coming out of cover, try switching to bird distress sounds, which can work when nothing else will.

SOUNDS AND SHOTS

Not all predators approach calls in the same manner, but they will respond to the same sounds. My good friend Brandon Ayres of Arrowhead Outfitters is a noted big-game guide in the Pacific Northwest who loves predator hunting. He's called in every species of predator where he hunts.

"I like mimicking the food sources in the area I'm hunting, and mixing them up," Ayres says. "We've had good luck with every sound over the years, from all kinds of rabbit distress sounds, fawn distress calls, even rodent sounds."

I'm a firm believer in having a range of bird distress sounds at your disposal. I've used bird sounds to coax in coyotes, badgers, bobcats, raccoons and black bears. I like using open-reed mouth calls for this, as they allow for a great variety of sounds to be generated. I also like electronic calls, as some sets can grow long. Mixed-bag predator success simply comes down to being within earshot, then offering them a sound they can't refuse.

"I like using mouth calls," says Ayres. "I have better control of the sounds, and



Using a mouth call enables predator hunters to control the sounds they are making, which can complement an electronic call.

SCOTT HAUGEN (TOP); WINDIGO IMAGES (BOTTOM)

THE GAME KEEPERS OF MOSSY OAK

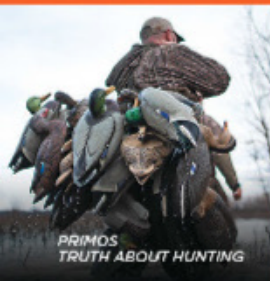
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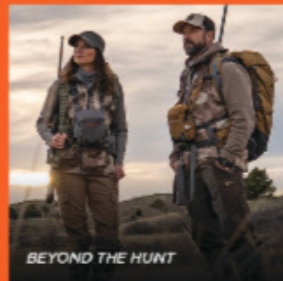
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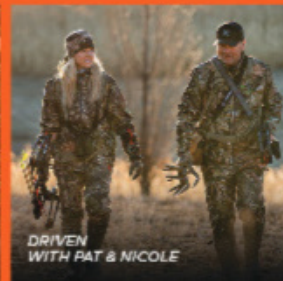
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WINTER STEEL

TIPS FOR CONNECTING WITH THE SEASON'S SEA-RUN RAINBOWS

By Scott Turo

Landing a winter steelhead is an accomplishment by any angler's standards. Connecting with them consistently throughout the season is mastery of the sport. To reach this level, you need to understand

steelhead and their rivers. In order to zero-in on a spot where you can connect with a winter steelhead this season, first, you must find a river with fish. Next, you need to identify the fishable flows. Finally, you must employ the right technique.

With a migratory life cycle that reaches the shores of Japan, many unknowns remain in our understanding of North American winter steelhead. For eons, ocean-going rainbow trout have returned to the coastal rivers of their



Finding a river that is holding fish is just the first step to catching a winter steelhead. You must also be able to identify fishable flows.

birth to lay their eggs. These runs now number from a few hundred to a few thousand steelhead, with a few larger systems sometimes seeing more than 10,000 fish. These are rare trophies no matter how you figure it.

WINTER STEELHEAD LANDSCAPE

Oregon and Washington have winter steelhead runs in most coastal rivers and lower Columbia River tributaries west of the Cascade Mountains. California has fishable runs north of Cape Mendocino.

State fishing regulations limit the fishable water to those river miles downstream of spawning areas and during the migration period.

Consider fishable steelhead to be present from December through April. Runs

in smaller systems peak during January and February, with larger systems seeing new fish entering through April. Hatchery steelhead runs designed for angler harvest usually peak in December and January, with wild steelhead generally returning later in the season. Hatchery stocks are known to race for home during high-water periods, offering little opportunity for anglers. This prompted the creation of programs in which fish are “recycled” and brought back downstream for another run through the fishable stretch of river below the hatchery.

To address declining angler opinions related to hatchery steelhead fishing opportunities based on run timing and the speed of their in-river migration, Oregon implemented wild brood-stock programs. A progressive shift in hatchery philosophy was to improve angler opportunity and minimize the potential genetic impact of hatchery fish on wild stocks. This method of production involves local guides and anglers who collect wild adult steelhead from throughout the run that are propagated and released separately from traditional hatchery stocks. The belief is that wild steelhead move slower through the system in search of their spawning area and return over a longer period of time. Around 100 adult steelhead are used to produce about 100,000 ocean-ready smolts for release into the river.

KNOW YOUR FLOW

River flow is a large factor in your success. Being able to “know the flow” at which different spots fish well is crucial. As your skills improve, success will come at a variety of river flows. You will learn where fish are located and what techniques work under different conditions. Tracking this flow data over time, you will find the optimum flow for each of your spots.

Flow is the volume of water measured in cubic feet per second (cfs). When you get home after a day of fishing high water, you can tell your spouse you caught one in 10,000 cfs to sound tough. Stage height is the river level measured in feet from a known elevation, usually the lowest point on the streamflow gauge. The stage, or height, of the river is then calculated into a volume and reported as flow.

Searching the internet or eavesdropping at the local watering hole might get

you in the zone by knowing, for instance, that 4 to 6 feet on the Sasquatch River gauge is when it’s fishy. Searching the online gauge data, you will find the river stage height reported to the second decimal place, i.e. 5.35 feet. This

doesn’t mean the river is 5.35 feet deep. It means that the river is 5.35 feet above the bottom of the gauge at that spot in the river. If the river rises to 6.35 feet overnight, that means the river rose 1 foot overnight and might be rising out

DREAM STREAMS

A bucket list of rivers for serious steelhead anglers

There are two distinct races of steelhead found in the Pacific Northwest: winter-run and summer-run. The difference is that winter fish arrive sexually mature and ready to spawn in late winter and early spring, whereas summer fish arrive immature, then overwinter and spawn the following spring.

Winter steelhead can be found in coastal and some Cascade Range mountain rivers. Summer steelhead are found in some Cascade Range rivers and many large tributaries of the Columbia River extending well into central Idaho and north-central Washington. Anomalies to this general pattern exist in places like Washington’s Olympic Peninsula, where some coastal rivers fed by glaciers support small runs of native summer-run steelhead. In general, winter-run fish use coastal rivers where seasonal rains fill the channel and habitat, while summer-run fish make long migrations into the snowmelt rivers of eastern Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

The following are some steelhead rivers you should currently have on your radar.

SUMMER-RUN

Klickitat River (June to Nov.)

Originating high on Mount Adams in southwest Washington, this glacial-fed, medium-sized river has good runs of both wild and hatchery summer steelhead, plenty of access and a wild feel in the deep canyons.

Deschutes River (July to Nov.)

The consistent flow of the Deschutes, north through central Oregon to the Columbia River, makes it a steelheader’s dream. Flies, spinners, plugs and jigs all produce memories for walk-in anglers.

Umpqua River (July to Oct. and Jan. to March)

Famous for its 30-mile, fly-fishing-only stretch near Steamboat Creek on the North Fork in western Oregon, the Umpqua produces miles of consistent fishing for strong runs of summer and winter steelhead alike.

WINTER-RUN

Smith River (Jan. to March)

Flowing through towering coastal redwoods and feeding into the Umpqua near the Oregon coast, the Smith has bright steelhead returning throughout the winter. Guides make two trips through the popular water below the Forks when the fishing is good.

Sol Duc River (Jan. to March)

A rainforest river famous for its rapids and big steelhead on the Olympic Peninsula, the Sol Duc is a gene-bank river for the preservation of wild steelhead. If you’re a serious steelheader, you need to fish the Sol Duc.

Chetco River (Dec. to April)

Located in southwest Oregon, the Chetco has strong runs of wild and hatchery steelhead. Biologists collect wild steelhead adults for broodstock to support a healthy hatchery run that peaks in January.



FOOD STAR YIA VANG
IS THE FERAL GOURMET

FERAL

Python, anyone? If it's invasive or feral, it's probably delicious. James Beard Award nominee and food star Yia Vang relishes a challenge — and his all-new series *Feral* is the ultimate culinary adventure. From iguana and snails to silver carp and venomous lionfish, *Feral* will serve up some of the world's craziest creatures.

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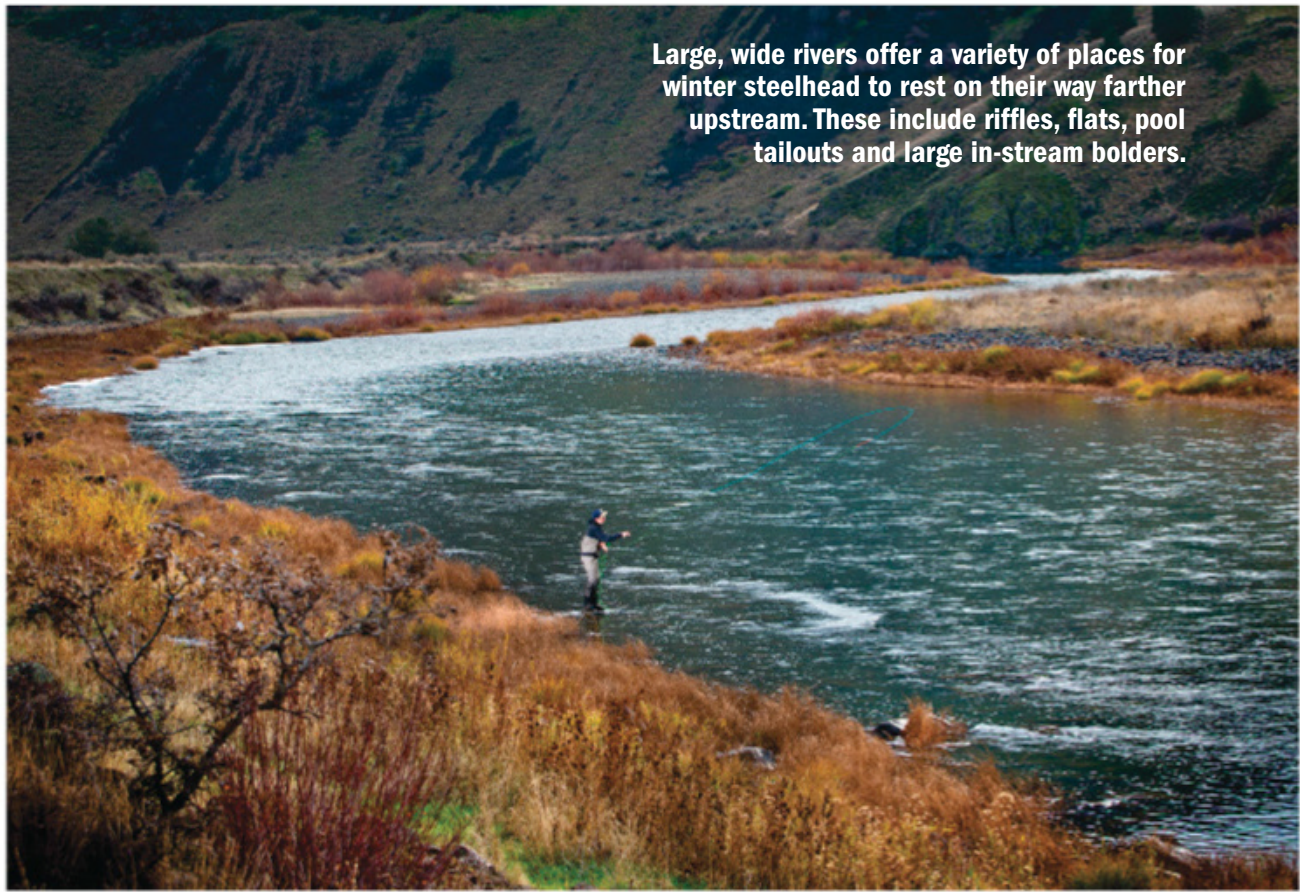
of the fishable sweet spot. One foot of water across a 200-foot-wide river is a lot of flow, or volume, in cubic feet per second. To become a successful steelhead junkie, you will learn this stuff or have a good fishing partner who does.

Type “[your state] river levels” into your web browser and select the USGS result. Here, you will find rivers listed by basin. Clicking on a station number will usually provide two graphs—one of the river flow and another of the stage height.

RUN TIMING

Fresh fish usually enter the river during gentle (not stormy) seas and when flows are up or on the rise. Steelhead already in the river move during these increased flows as well. It’s these new and moving fish that anglers are after. Traveling upriver, these steelhead are looking for

Large, wide rivers offer a variety of places for winter steelhead to rest on their way farther upstream. These include riffles, flats, pool tailouts and large in-stream boulders.



a place to rest before moving on. This behavior puts them in shallow riffles, flats, boulder-strewn seams and pool tailouts. Concentrate on water with 2 to 7 feet of depth and a walking-speed pace. As the river level drops, steelhead seem to move into deeper hangouts, appearing to rest until flows rise again.

My favorite flow scenario is when a river has been “blown out” for weeks, allowing fresh steelhead to pile in and move upstream, followed by a gradual drop for a few days that leaves 2 to 4 feet of visibility when I arrive. This scenario allows me to use the stage height prediction graph to pick the first day the river is going to hit my optimum level. This tactic should put me on fish that have not been recently hooked or bothered. It’s true that a lot of stars must align for things to turn on, but that’s why I always watch the gauges and monitor all the factors that lead to good fishing.

CONNECTING WITH FISH

Part of your e-scouting will involve finding access. Even if you have a boat, you’ll want to survey the put-ins and take-outs. I separate river valleys into two types.

“Confined valleys” are the canyon water stretches. They are tough in high flows, but hold fish in lower conditions due to depth. Access is typically via steep trails, and the number of casting stations is usually limited. Preferred

Use information found online to track river flows and determine when they will be at levels conducive to the best fishing.

ARIAN STEVENS (TOP); SCOTT TURCO (BOTTOM)

techniques take depth into consideration and include drift rigs with bait or a bead suspended above a weight on the bottom, or a classic rig comprising a jig under a slip bobber to control the depth of the presentation. Fish the seams, ledges and boulder pillows. Access to these sites is well-marked by muddy turnouts when fishing is good.

“Unconfined valleys,” where the river has room to roam across the floodplain, usually have long, broad runs suitable for swinging flies and casting spinners and spoons. On some river systems, these conditions go on for miles, while

on others there are just short stretches. To find fish, look in the heads of long riffles, broad pool tails and the deeper seams along steeper bank lines. As flows recede slightly from their peak, these locations offer optimal conditions to swing flies like the Fish Taco on 8 to 12 feet of T-11 sink tip. With a spinner or spoon, cast quartering downstream like with a fly and allow the lure to reach depth before slowly swinging it across the holding water. Take a step or two downstream then rinse and repeat. Cover all the fishable water to find chrome lightning.

A few years back, on a quest to get my son his first steelhead, we hit a milk run of spots inside Olympic National Park I had located using the techniques described above. Flows were low after a cold snap, so I opted for a spot with a large boulder located in a long, slow run that had produced before. On the first morning, and the third cast, a respectable steelhead took a well-presented nightmare-colored Aerojig under a sliding bobber, just as we had discussed it would the week prior. That fish proved that planning can have a positive influence on luck when done correctly. 



ARIAN STEVENS

Releasing wild steelhead is essential to the future of the sport. Doing your homework is key to catching them in the first place.

THE SLOW APPROACH TO WINTER BASS

NOW IS THE TIME
FOR CATCHING
BIG FISH ...
AND FOR FISHING
WITH PATIENCE.

By Gary Lewis



Using spinning gear and finesse tactics to hop a jig and soft plastic bait slowly along the bottom is a great way to catch winter bass.

We launched at 9 o'clock in the morning with a hint of breeze to push us downriver. At the end of the second set of rapids, we slid the drift boat into an eddy. I cast the float-and-fly combination into slack water while my buddy on the oars back-ferried to gain time.

The bite ticked the line as bronze scales flashed below the surface. Moments later, I lifted my prize—a 13-inch smallmouth that was not nearly as happy to see me as I was to see it. The next was 16 1/2 inches and the third was 14 inches—great fish for a river where 90 percent of the bass are 9 inches or smaller. Winter is big-fish time, but it is a finesse fishery that requires a focus on fundamentals.

As the day progressed, the sun slipped toward the horizon and the temperature dropped. Soon, the landing was in view. While my buddies loaded the boat on the trailer, I jogged downstream, remembering a spot where the water slowed over a couple of submerged humps.

I made an upstream cast, keeping the rod tip up, the line almost tight and my hand on the reel. Tick. I set the hook into something solid but alive. The fish surged, ripping line into the main current. After the end of the first run, I turned the big

smallmouth and got my first look. After two more runs, I guided the bass into slow water, where I reached down the line to take hold of an 18-inch bronzed beauty.

Winter fishing for bass is about managing expectations. It's about understanding and working the conditions with the hopes of catching a few big fish, not numbers of smaller fish that won't be as active as larger bass this time of year. Put it all together, however, and you can experience epic days on winter waters when other anglers are at home dreaming about warmer spring days to come.

RIVER CONDITIONS

Smallmouth bass anglers know the optimum temperature for fish activity starts at 52 degrees.

When water temps run in the mid- to high 40s, it is hard to tempt anything but bigger bass to the bait. Light penetration and midday sun can raise the water temps a degree or two, and that's when a bite can turn on.

David Swendseid is a lure designer for Duo Realis, and a professional bass angler with two top-five finishes in 2022. When fishing smallmouth rivers in December, Swendseid watches for runoff, which can happen several times per winter.



A suspending jerkbait is a good lure option now since it can be fished slowly and kept in the strike zone longer than other baits.

“When the snow cap melts, you get a colder and dirtier flow,” Swendseid says, which makes it harder to catch a bass. “Smallmouths tend to stay close to bait schools. They have to, to stay alive. That dirty, super-cold type of dispersion is difficult for those fish. If you are fishing a river with cold inflows, you want to fish as far away from that movement or turbidity as possible.”

On the other hand, lowland creeks might bring in warmer water, which can attract baitfish and the bass that follow them.

“In that case,” Swendseid says, “fish tight to the bank and also down the middle, parallel to the bank. If the warmer water does attract baitfish, bass will go to the banks to feed.”

LAKE TACTICS

In really cold water, yellow perch can hold right next to smallmouth bass and the bass won’t try to eat them. Then, when the sun breaks through, the wind starts blowing and the water warms a degree or two, the school of smallmouths will start eating those perch. Swendseid watches wind charts in hopes of divining such a change in bass behavior.

“Highland reservoirs turn on when the wind starts pounding those banks, creating a mud line,” he says. “These can be good days, especially for smallmouths and spotted bass, which are more nomadic. They really turn on. An angler can get bit on reaction baits like spinnerbaits or spy baits.”

Lakes and large reservoirs have currents created by submerged streams, the wind and other factors. Swendseid recommends anglers find the deepest, darkest holes and gradually work their way out of them. The bass’ tendency in cold, slow-moving water is to find a place where the current is slowest.

“Start deep and go up the slopes,” he says. “Blade baits are good. A long-lining, drag-bait technique like old-school split-shotting [with a soft-plastic worm or grub] can work. But baits should be small, and grubs should have a reflective finish like metal flake.”

If there is a mud line, try to fish just past the undercurrent. Swendseid regularly sees fish that have been holding in 18 feet of water come up into the stirred-up shallows to feed where wave action dislodges bait.

A deep-running crankbait on a slow retrieve in open water can sometimes draw a strike, and blade baits fished deep can also be good for a fish or two.

“Fish uphill,” Swendseid says. “And soak the baits [by fishing slowly and keeping the lures in the water as long as possible].”

Get the boat in 2 feet of water and cast out over a slope or along a point and then drag the bait uphill. Swendseid calls it “counting rock.” Use a Senko, a grub, a tube or a creature bait.

“Throw the bait down the slope, make it touch down, bang it around. Working it back uphill makes your job easier versus cranking downhill or cranking parallel. I want to keep in contact with the rocks the whole time,” he says.

It’s a technique that works year-round, but deeper is better in winter. In lowland lakes, shallow bays and flood areas, the deepest, densest cover will hold fish. The fish seek out the warmest spots. Rocks can capture heat, and if the water is clear enough and the sun penetrates, an outcrop can hold several fish.

DUCK TALES

A finesse bait that works equally well on fly gear or conventional tackle is a duck feather creation called a Float ’n Fly jig from Dale Hollow Tackle (dalehollowtackle.com).

The Float ’n Fly jig is made from craft hair and a couple of feathers from the underside of a drake mallard’s wing. The markings approximate the barring



Fly anglers tempt bass with patterns tied using duck feathers with barring that mimics the appearance of young salmon and trout.



Look for river smallies holding close to the bank and out of the current, where rocks are heated by the sun.

found on small salmon and trout parr. Collars are tied with blood-red thread, which is a proven strike trigger. Under a float, the feathered jig rides point-up and can be presented anywhere from 15 inches to 15 feet or more beneath the surface.

If bass are chowing on a particular type of baitfish, a feathered jig can mimic it. The Float 'n Fly comes in five patterns: Original Duck, Blue/Chartreuse, Red/Chartreuse, Rainbow Trout and Threadfin Shad. In cold, muddy water, chartreuse is a great choice. In clear water, purple, pink and red are good accent colors.

Start with a 6- or 8-pound-test main line and a float that rides on the main line. Smaller Styrofoam slip bobbers and adjustable floats, like those made by Beau Mac and Thill, keep the jigs suspended and are sensitive strike indicators that react to a subtle take. Tie on a swivel and 18 inches of 6-pound fluorocarbon. At the terminal end, knot on a 1/16-ounce duck feather jig.

In deeper water, use a threaded bobber stop, a small bead and a sliding bobber to allow for easier casting and a consistent presentation.

Tip the odds by adding scent. Pro-Cure's Bass Sauce masks human scent and exudes an enticing odor that can

attract fish in muddy water. Apply the scent to the head and collar only to keep from altering the action of the feathers.

At its heart, the float-and-jig or float-and-fly technique is a good way to suspend a feathered bait beneath a float and tease lethargic bass that are reluctant to expend the energy required to bash fast-moving baits.

TWITCH IT AND FORGET IT

Conventional thinking says in the wintertime you have to drop a lure on a fish's head, and that's not far off the mark. This can be a good time to pull a jerkbait out of the tackle box, but it should be a suspending bait that runs 4 to 8 feet down.

Swendseid describes his cast-and-sink technique as "piercing the water." The bait drops in its initial dive, but doesn't drift. Give it a couple of twitches and leave it for 30 seconds. Twitch it again and wait 30 seconds more.

In the summer, a bass might move 15 feet to grab a bait. With its metabolism slowed in winter, a bass is more likely to make a series of short moves to get there. Each twitch is erratic. The bait cuts and darts. It wobbles. But it should not run or drift out of the area. That's why a suspending bait is a good choice in December.

Year-round, many people fish too fast. For some, it's even more difficult to slow down when fishing cold water. As soon as the angler slows the presentation and stops moving the bait, the chances of hooking a big fish go up dramatically. Fish the slack water, the back eddies and the deep-water holes. Soak baits. Count rocks. Fish past the mud lines. A December day might only be good for a few bites, but they can result in some of the best fish of the year. **G-F**



David Swendseid likes to stay in contact with the bottom when fishing for smallmouths in cold water.

JUMBOS ON ICE

IDAHO'S LAKE CASCADE OFFERS WINTER ANGLERS SHOTS AT WORLD-CLASS YELLOW PERCH.

By Scott Mackenthun

When Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologists stocked yellow perch into Lake Cascade in 2003, they laid the foundation for what would become one of the best perch fisheries on the planet. Just over a decade later, state and world records were falling to the giant perch the reservoir produced. Fish

weighing more than 2 pounds—a rarity almost anywhere else—became common. Now 20 years into this grand experiment, Lake Cascade, located in the scenic mountains of central Idaho approximately 75 miles north of Boise on State Highway 55, attracts anglers from around the world as a destination for trophy perch.

Ice Team member and avid ice-angler Don Cox knows Cascade well. With family in the area, Cox has been targeting big perch on Cascade for several years, and makes an annual trip there with friends.

“This isn’t your ‘sit down on a spot and wait for a school to come to you’ type of lake,” says Cox. “You have to



Anglers from all around the world travel to Lake Cascade, hoping to do battle with the giant yellow perch that swim under the winter ice.

find the fish. If you start catching three-quarter pounders left and right, it is time to move. You have to keep moving until you find [big] fish.”

Cox likes to divide and conquer. He, his family and his friends will all disperse across the lake to find big perch, then come together when large fish are found hanging in an area.

“You have to start fresh each year,” he says. “You can’t fish memories—those old spots that produced last year. These fish act more like walleyes, with a big single fish here and there prowling their favorite areas. When you see lots of fish on your graph, [you’re most likely looking at] small perch—not the big singles that you want.”

FIND BIG FISH

Cox recommends examining a lake map to find probable ice-angling locations. Check out old bridges, tributary mouths and flooded timber. You can also find fish cruising flats on the north and south ends of the lake. Dropoff transition edges, valleys and gullies are all good funnels for perch to follow, and you will frequently

find schools in these areas, with large fish hanging on the perimeter.

“We like to make big moves to spots, then make small moves on the spot to find exactly where the fish are,” Cox says. “If you are fishing alone, set a timer on your phone. If you can’t mark a big fish in 15 or 20 minutes, it’s time to move on. It usually doesn’t take long to know if there are respectable fish nearby. Similarly, if you are catching small fish, it’s time to pick up and go. Big perch rule the roost

and usually are the aggressors in chasing baits and chasing off small fish.”

Cox uses medium- and light-power rods with fast or moderate actions.

“You want some power to handle the larger perch or the occasional rainbow trout or pikeminnow,” he says. “A stiffer action is useful for really stroking jigs and hard baits. But if things are slow, and some years the bite can be tough, then you want to finesse fish, and a little lighter action helps with bite detection.”

When fishing is slow and bites are light, try using a spring bobber or a noodle-tip style rod, or watching the line for subtle movement. Monofilament line in 6- or 8-pound-test works well, as does braid with a short fluorocarbon leader.

Cox looks for fish on his Vexilar flasher while his son graphs fish on forward-facing sonar in a circle around the group. With holes already drilled in a circle around a structure element, the team can work to pinpoint fish location,

IF YOU GO

Things to keep in mind when planning a Cascade perch adventure

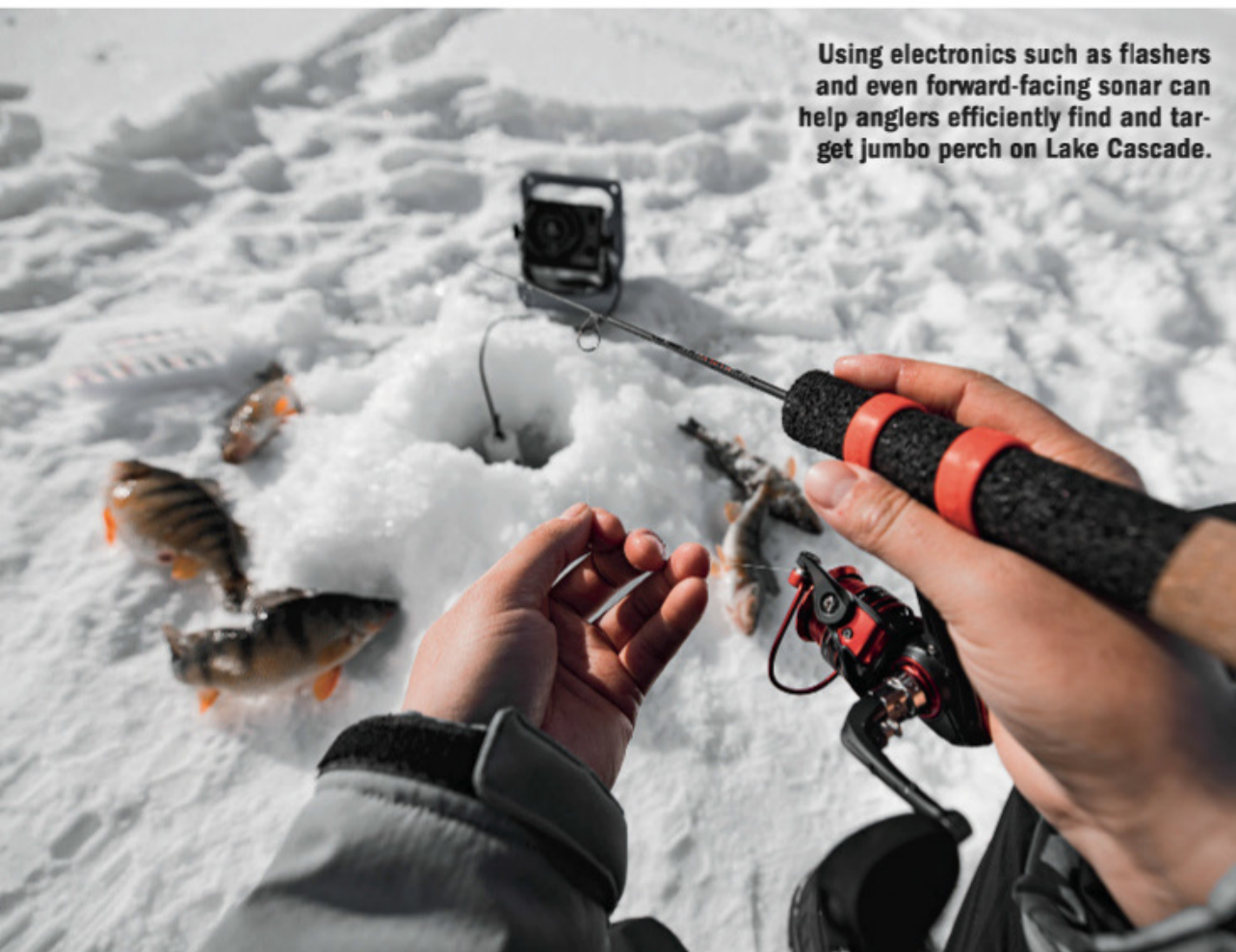
Lake Cascade can be challenging with its mountain climate. Snowfalls are heavy, and mornings are chilly and frosty, with fog typically hanging for a few hours before it burns off. Anglers are best served by using snowmobiles with long and wide tracks that can be counted on to deal with thick snow and slush.

“Most years, the slush is bad,” says Don Cox. “But every once in a while, you get lucky and the ice freezes well or the underlayer of slush freezes. Then you can use four-wheelers and chains. But you have to plan for snow machines.”

Anglers without mountain snowmobiles are serviced by rental opportunities in and around Cascade. Valley Bait and Tackle and Tackle Tom’s offer rentals, as does Mountain Meadow Adventure Rentals (208-325-1500; mountainmeadowrentals.com) in Donnelly, Idaho.

Visiting anglers will be comfortable in a variety of locations. Birch Glen Lodge & Motel (208-382-4238; birchglenlodge.com) offers a fantastic in-town option. Tamarack Resort (208-325-1000; tamarackidaho.com) is a more upscale choice. You also can find a number of places for rent through sites like Airbnb and VRBO, though be advised that many places fill quickly with visiting anglers and are booked as far out as one year.





Using electronics such as flashers and even forward-facing sonar can help anglers efficiently find and target jumbo perch on Lake Cascade.

then drop on top with flashers. In years with sluggish bites, the team works hard to find fish. Once they do, they fish with more subtlety and patience than when the bite is hot, looking for slight movements as bite indications.

For Cox, it's hard to beat the excitement of big fish on the bite.

"Some years, those fish are coming in and there is no doubt they are hitting," Cox says. "They might approach slowly, but they tend to really hammer the bait."

GO-TO BAITS

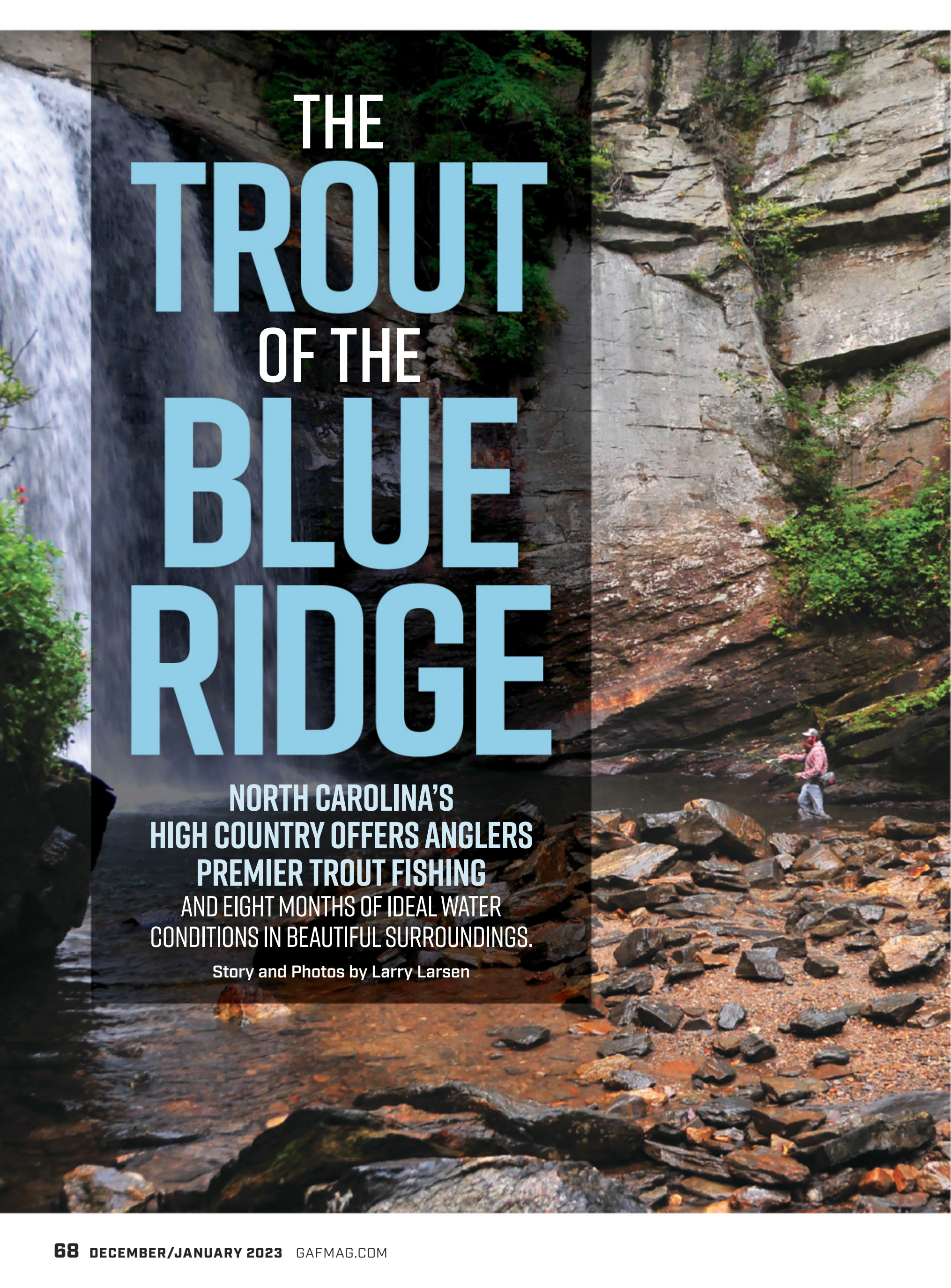
The diet of yellow perch on Cascade can vary, but historically it has been largely composed of young-of-year perch, commonly called "perch minnows." Some years, mayfly larvae are well-represented. Cascade fish, pulled from depths 20 to 35 feet down, often regurgitate their stomach contents, clueing anglers into what they are feeding on. Hard baits like the Calf Creek Customs Bucking Bronco in yellow perch or fire tiger, which can be found at nearby Valley Bait and Tackle, are good choices. You can also fish flutter spoons and jigging spoons in perch colors; fish big with Clam Tikka Minos and similar glide baits; or downsize on tough bites to Clam Dropkick jigs and small Pinhead Minos. Popular jig dressings include Clam Maki Plastic Scudi and Jamei bodies. Or tip your baits with waxworms or wigglers. Local anglers will often find fish and camp on structure, catching fish roaming through. Flagged tip-ups and Automatic Fisherman units are popular with red wiggler worms as bait.

You can pick up bait and hot lures and get fishing reports and snow and ice conditions from a pair of reliable Cascade tackle shops: the aforementioned Valley Bait and Tackle (208-971-1453) and Tackle Tom's (208-382-4367). 



Yellow perch were first stocked in Lake Cascade 20 years ago. It didn't take long for the lake to start producing trophy fish.

COURTESY OF CLAM OUTDOORS (2)



THE TROUT OF THE BLUE RIDGE

**NORTH CAROLINA'S
HIGH COUNTRY OFFERS ANGLERS
PREMIER TROUT FISHING
AND EIGHT MONTHS OF IDEAL WATER
CONDITIONS IN BEAUTIFUL SURROUNDINGS.**

Story and Photos by Larry Larsen



A 60-foot-tall waterfall on Looking Glass Creek north of Brevard, N.C., is just one example of the spectacular scenery awaiting anglers in the Pisgah National Forest.

My wife, Rosie, made a dozen or so casts to a rock-strewn run before hooking up with a stout 15-inch rainbow. Her fish shot upstream through the pool toward a couple of large boulders as guide Debbie Gillespie looked on and readied her net. Seconds later another 'bow sucked in my nymph as the current swept it through the waist-deep riffle by a large rock. It, too, took off upstream, heading toward the women until I snubbed it. The trout leaped skyward. I turned the fish and continued the battle in the smaller pool closer to my position while watching the catch and release above me. Gillespie then headed downstream to put a net under my fish, a beautiful twin of the rainbow Rosie had just caught.

Rosie and I were dry-dropper fishing with 9-foot, 5-weight fly rods most of the morning. We used a terrestrial as our dry fly and fished a single nymph or squirmy worm underneath it. According to our guide, in the summer there are lots of larva that fall into North Carolina's Davidson River, such as inchworms, caterpillars and grubs. We added the tiniest of spilt shot in fast-current areas to keep the offering deeper in the water column.

The action in the catch-and-release section of the Davidson continued over the next 3 1/2 hours, and we ended the morning having caught and released 14 big trout, all rainbows. They averaged about 17 inches, and five were between 18 and 20 inches in length. I caught my last fish, a fat 21-inch rainbow, from the shallow center of the flow below a short weir. The low-water dam once provided an intake for a paper mill that went defunct during the 1960s. The waters were shallow there except for the pools on each side of the river. The 5 1/2 pounder was an appropriate finale to a great day on the water!

The Davidson is one of many rivers in the southern Appalachian Mountains that provide anglers with great trout action and lots of fond memories. The Blue Ridge Parkway running through North Carolina is the backbone of the highest portion of the scenic range that extends to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In North Carolina the parkway runs from Alleghany County at the Virginia line southwest to Swain County bordering Tennessee. Flows from the High Country in the western

23 counties of the state are impressive, and the legendary Davidson River in Transylvania County is one of the best.

The Davidson River is a freestone waterway with wild rainbow and brown trout, and an occasional native brook trout that washes down from a cooler feeder stream. From the Blue Ridge Parkway, the headwaters flow south from underground springs through the Pisgah National Forest toward Brevard, N.C. The smaller tributaries include Looking Glass Creek, Avery Creek, Cove Creek and Daniels Ridge Creek. A couple of the fishable forks average 15 to 20 feet in width.

The main Davidson River is public water that runs 13 miles through the Pisgah National Forest. All but 1 1/2 miles of that stretch are under catch-and-release regulations. The waters vary from shallow to 6 feet in depth. They are fairly rocky with large boulders, which makes wading a little difficult. The average fish are 12

to 14 inches in length, and a trophy is anything over 20 inches. The Davidson near Bobby N. Setzer State Fish Hatchery down to the mouth of Looking Glass Creek can be particularly productive.

We were fishing a couple of areas in the last 3 miles of the Davidson River before its confluence with the French Broad River. These are private-access waters offering riffles, small runs and deeper pools with some spots as wide as 40 feet. They are leased by Davidson River Outfitters (DRO), the premier fly-fishing shop and guide service in the region. The DRO section of river is fly fishing only, and the number of rods per day is limited. It offers anglers a slightly larger average size of trout than does the public water.

In the DRO stretch, small rocks along most of the bottom are scattered over gravel making for easy wading. A significant flood in August 2021 made the entire river shallower and left more sand

and sediment. The Davidson still stays fairly clear most of the year; even after a big rainstorm, the river clears in half a day, according to Gillespie. She has guided anglers nine years on waters all over the Blue Ridge area and has been named “Blue Ridge Outdoors Guide of the Year.”

RIVER FEATURES

There are several great trout waters in western North Carolina, notes Kevin Howell, owner of DRO. Howell, who was born in Brevard, began guiding for DRO when it opened in 1993 and became manager in 1996. In 1998 he became owner. He has fished all his life in most of the trout waters in western North Carolina and can boast of an 11-pound brown trout from the Davidson.

“The Davidson, North Toe and South Toe rivers, and Cane Creek are very typically classic mountain trout waters,” he explains. “They are 40 to 50 feet wide

Guide Debbie Gillespie readies the author's 5 1/2-pound rainbow for release back into the Davidson River.





Fly anglers do well with dry-dropper rigs on the Davidson during the spring and summer.

and have 70 to 100 cubic feet of flow per second. They have sections of catch and release and wild trout, and other sections that are hatchery supported. The waters within the Pisgah Forest are generally public fishing.

“Most of the wading in all these waters is mid-thigh depth,” Howell continues. “The geology of the region’s waters is similar. Draw a 2 1/2-hour radius around Asheville, and you’ll find most streams have a series of small granite rock bottoms, riffle shoals and pools, with maybe some sandstone and limestone rocks.”

The regulations on the waters in western North Carolina vary greatly from stream to stream and even from one section of a river or creek to another. Water designations include Hatchery Supported, Delayed Harvest, Wild Trout, Wild Trout Natural Bait, and Catch and Release Artificial Flies and Lures Only. Some of these streams are limited to unscented, single-hook flies and lures. In some hatchery-supported areas, you can use plugs and spinners with treble hooks.

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What are ideal characteristics of a great trout stream? Hatches on most North Carolina waters are similar across the regions and are relatively weak, Howell notes. They seldom generate big numbers of catches. Hatches are strong enough, though, to motivate the fish to feed on top and keep them looking at the surface. Timing of each hatch may vary by only a week or two from one end of the region to the other.

“Weather can have an impact on determining the best waters,” the DRO chief points out. “In general, the cooler, the better the fishing, and the more rain, the better the fishing year-round. The ideal water conditions are a rising water level from a rain shower. A tea-stained water color where I can stand in waist-deep water and see the toes on my boots is perfect.”

The temperatures of the trout rivers in western North Carolina typically vary from 35 to 72 degrees F. August is typically the warmest time of the year but during the week that Rosie and I fished, the Davidson River was 64 degrees, about 8 degrees cooler than normal. The ideal water temperature for catching trout is usually 45 to 55 degrees, and that occurs from mid-October to Christmas and then again from mid-February to mid-June, according to Howell. Most of the springs at the headwaters of the creeks in the mountains emit 55-degree water all year long.

“What I look for in any stream is strong current coming into a deeper pool,” Howell says. “In such a location, the fish can easily transition from feeding near the back of the pool to moving right up to the head of the pool where the current supplies the oxygen they need.”

The best public waters to catch rainbow trout currently in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains are the Watauga and Davidson rivers, according to the 53-year-old outfitter. Both receive heavy fishing pressure, and larger fish may be very spooky. Thus, he suggests a guide on those waters can increase success. The DRO owner believes the best rivers to catch a big brown trout are the Davidson and the cold-water South Toe River. He also suggests the best water to catch brookies is the Tuckasegee River due to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission’s heavy stockings.



At 2,280 feet of elevation, Chimney Rock offers 75-mile views of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains.

BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS TRIP PLANNER

See waterfalls and white squirrels in western North Carolina.

Davidson River Outfitters (DRO), located in North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest, carries a full line of gear, apparel, tackle and fly-tying materials (davidsonflyfishing.com). More than a dozen experienced guides fish a variety of surrounding waters within two hours of the DRO headquarters, and they can be booked for half, full or multiple days of wade- or float-fishing trips.

The best trout fishing generally occurs from October through Christmas and then again from mid-February through June, according to DRO owner Kevin Howell. The most successful fly casters use dry flies in the spring and dry-dropper setups in the summer. They fish streamers and nymphs the rest of the year. January and February are usually the slowest trout-catching months due to the cold weather. August is also normally slow because water temperatures are too warm and water levels fluctuate.

Howell’s guides have put clients on rainbow trout up to 30 inches and weighing around 10 pounds, brown trout up to 11 pounds, stocked brook trout to 24 inches and wild brook trout to about 10 inches. Advice on catching trout in area waters is always free from Howell and the DRO staff.

The regulations and lure restrictions on North Carolina trout waters vary widely. Anglers must pay attention to where they are fishing on each river and stream. For a full list of mountain trout fishing regulations, visit the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission at ncwildlife.org.

The Blue Ridge Mountains and Blue Ridge Parkway, as well as the Great Smoky Mountains, offer anglers and their families an abundance of outdoor activities and sightseeing opportunities when not chasing trout. There are myriad pursuits such as hiking, mountain biking, camping, photography, whitewater rafting, kayaking, canoeing and paddleboarding, plus unique natural sights such as waterfalls. In Transylvania County alone, there are 250 waterfalls to visit.

I saw for the first time a white squirrel in Brevard and soon learned this color variant is not uncommon in this river town. Brevard even has a white squirrel festival. Check out explorebrevard.com.

Other attractions from Asheville west include the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Chimney Rock State Park, Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, Oconaluftee Indian Village and Fontana Lake. Northeast of Asheville near Boone are Linville Caverns, Linville Falls, Grandfather Mountain and Blowing Rock.

BEYOND THE DAVIDSON

The Tuckasegee River running through the towns of Tuckasegee and Dillsboro in Jackson County is a northwest-flowing tailwater stream below a couple of lakes. Fishable tributaries include Greens, Savannah, Panthertown, Tanasee, Scott and Cullowhee Creeks. The Tuckasegee is about 80 feet wide and shallower than the Davidson. Float-fishing it successfully depends on favorable power-generation water releases. The schedules are posted online by Duke Energy.

The “Tuck” is hatchery supported with browns, 10- to 12-inch brookies and rainbows that may grow to 20-plus inches, according to Howell. DRO float-fishes the river in the Nantahala National Forest from mid-October through May. It has several access areas over 20 miles and receives fairly heavy fishing pressure with a mix of drift boats and wade anglers. The waters are stocked with 20,000 hatchery fish several times each year, which helps keep fishing productive.

Running about 70 miles, the French Broad River begins south of Brevard and continues through Asheville to the Tennessee border. DRO fishes the remote and rugged North and West forks, which have predominately wild brown and rainbow trout. They also have plenty of wild waters, Class III rapids and minimal access points. The East Fork of the French Broad runs along the road, offers easy access and is one of Gillespie’s favorite flows. It is a Delayed Harvest area with 10- to 12-inch rainbows, browns

and brookies. The Mills River and Cane Creek are also productive tributaries.

The South and North forks of the Mills River are scenic public waters in the Pisgah National Forest southwest of Asheville. The South Fork is a wild trout, catch-and-release fishery yielding rainbows of 8 to 11 inches and an occasional 18-incher. The waters are a little wider than the Davidson in some spots and have more volume. Preferred by 29-year-old DRO guide Zach Hart, the South Mills winds through a wilderness area and is primarily accessible only by hiking along a rough trail through the forest.

“Because it takes more effort to walk in, the remote South Fork is my favorite,” Hart says. “It doesn’t get hammered like a lot of rivers. South Mills is also cool because you can really get away from folks in there and catch some large trout from deeper pools. We’ve had great days and really bad days. On one day, you may not see a fish. The next day you may catch 20. It’s all about the weather and what the bugs are doing.”

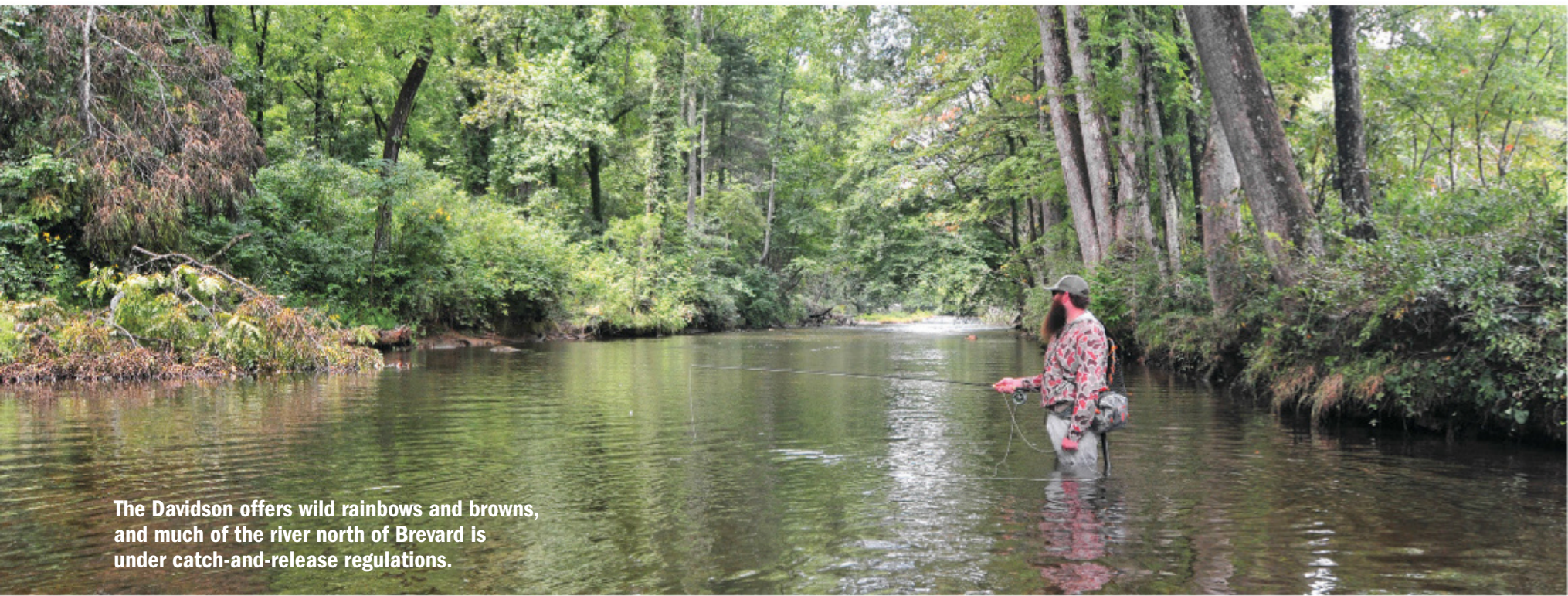
Eighty miles long, the Watauga River is a hatchery-supported waterway that runs through Avery County and into Tennessee. In the North Carolina section, the flow is 40 feet wide with moderate current across runs and shallow shoals with plenty of fish in the pools. There are several public access points, such as the Valle Crucis Community Park, located behind the historic Mast General Store. DRO only guides with rafts or drift boats on the Watauga section in Tennessee, which

is 90 minutes from the headquarters in Pisgah Forest. There, the river is a tailrace water that is 120 feet wide and very deep.

The Oconaluftee River in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Swain County is about 70 feet wide and has a high gradient with lots of rapids, a few pools and wild fish. DRO guides anglers inside the park. The river outside the park is private water in the Qualla Boundary, which requires a fishing permit from the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

Popular for whitewater rafting, the Nantahala River is located southwest of Bryson City. Fishing on the scenic river is controlled, and only a couple of guiding operations are permitted to fish it (DRO does not guide on the river). The narrow, high-gradient Nantahala has a delayed-harvest section that yields rainbows of 10 to 14 inches up to 22-inch trophies. It also has hatchery-supported upper and lower sections. Below Nantahala Dam, hydropower discharge can increase the water level 2 feet or so all at once, which can make fishing (and wading) difficult. Nantahala anglers often deal with armadas of whitewater rafters and kayakers.

Other rainbow trout waters favored by DRO guides are the West Fork of the Pigeon River near Waynesville; Tanasee Creek, which is also good for brown trout; the Chattooga River, mostly in South Carolina; and Looking Glass Creek above the Davidson. The rule of thumb is the more remote the water, the better the opportunity to make angling memories in the Blue Ridge Mountains. 



The Davidson offers wild rainbows and browns, and much of the river north of Brevard is under catch-and-release regulations.

SAVAGE MODEL 110

A COMPANY KNOWN FOR ACCURACY
CUTS NEARLY 1½ POUNDS
 FROM ITS VENERABLE BOLT GUN.

By Adam Heggenstaller

T



The Savage Model 110 bolt-action rifle has been serving hunters for more than 60 years. It's gone through numerous changes during that time, including changes in its manufacturer's ownership, and has been offered in hundreds of

variations and chamberings. The 110's original reputation was one of affordability, retailing for 20 percent to 30 percent less than competing bolt-action rifles in its early years. It quickly gained esteem for accuracy as well, and these two qualities combined earned the 110 high marks for value.

During the last two decades, Savage has advanced the 110 by including smart,

new design features while continuing to offer its flagship rifle at reasonable prices. One of the latest variations, the Ultralite, is a great example of the company's penchant for providing hunters with rifles having modern upgrades that remain within most budgets.

As its name suggests, the Ultralite is a lightweight version of the 110 made for backcountry pursuits or any hunt

MARK WEBB/MURRAY ROAD

ULTRALITE

rifle at the ready can lead to fatigue over time. I doubt this will be an issue with the Ultralite.

Weighing just 5.8 pounds in .308 Win., the 110 Ultralite is almost 1 1/2 pounds lighter than the standard 110 Hunter. Most of the weight savings comes from the Ultralite having a Proof Research carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel rather than a typical steel barrel. The Proof Research barrel starts as a 416R stainless steel blank, which is thinned between the chamber and the muzzle, reducing both weight and profile. Proof Research then rebuilds the barrel contour by wrapping the thinned area of the blank with high-strength carbon fiber bound with a proprietary resin. The resulting barrel is both stronger and up to 64 percent lighter. In addition, the carbon fiber improves heat dissipation and reduces harmonic vibration, which lessens shifts in point of impact. The barrel on the Ultralite has five-groove, single-point cut rifling, and the muzzle has 5/8x24 threading to accept a suppressor. It comes with a flush-fitting cap.

Another place where Savage reduces weight is in the receiver. Instead of the round contour of most 110 receivers, the Ultralite's stainless steel receiver is milled with flat sides having rectangular recesses where material has been removed. A durable, corrosion-resistant Melonite finish covers the re-

ceiver. Spiral fluting on the bolt further reduces weight, although to a smaller degree than the receiver cuts and the carbon-fiber-wrapped barrel.

Savage blueprints the receiver to ensure that critical surfaces are square to the receiver's center line. The barrel is secured to the receiver with Savage's hallmark barrel nut, which allows for precise headspacing, with the recoil lug sandwiched between the two. As with all Model 110 rifles, the Ultralite has a two-lug bolt with a floating head that permits the lugs to self-center in the barrel recesses to achieve ideal lockup. All these design features contribute to excellent accuracy.

where a day will add miles to your boots. Of course, you don't have to hike over half a dozen ridges to appreciate how easy it is to carry the Ultralite. A still-hunt, for example, when the best place for your rifle is in your hands at all times and not over your shoulder, is another situation where the Ultralite shines. You may only cover 300 yards in three hours, but keeping a heavy

SPECIFICATIONS

SAVAGE MODEL 110 ULTRALITE

savagearms.com

TYPE: bolt-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: .308 Win. (tested)

BARREL: 22"; Proof Research carbon-fiber-wrapped stainless steel; 1:10" twist rate

TRIGGER: AccuTrigger; adjustable for 1 1/2- to 4-lb. pull weight

SAFETY: three-position tang

MAGAZINE: detachable box; 4-round capacity

SIGHTS: none; receiver drilled and tapped for bases

FINISH: matte black Melonite

STOCK: synthetic AccuFit; adjustable for length of pull and comb height

OVERALL LENGTH: 42 1/2"

WEIGHT: 5.8 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,649

The Savage AccuTrigger helps hunters realize that accuracy. It's user-adjustable with a small tool (keep it somewhere safe) for a pull weight of 1 1/2 to 4 pounds. The rifle I tested came from the factory with the pull weight set at a little more than 2 1/2 pounds as measured with my digital trigger-pull scale. I detected no creep in the trigger pull. The AccuTrigger is one of those seemingly small upgrades that make a big difference when shooting at game from field positions. It's a whole lot easier to hit where you're aiming when you don't have to wrestle with a stiff or spongy trigger while trying to hold steady.

Another feature of the Ultralite that helps hunters shoot the rifle to its

greatest potential is the AccuFit stock. The composite stock comes with spacers and inserts that permit adjustments to length of pull and comb height. The polymer spacers nestle between the end of the buttstock and the recoil pad, and two screws secure them in place. Length of pull is adjustable from 12 3/4 to 13 3/4 inches in 1/4-inch increments by selecting one of the four spacers provided with the stock. Five comb inserts are also included. One follows the lines of the buttstock, and the other four increase in height in 1/8-inch increments. Find the one that allows you to achieve a solid cheekweld while maintaining a full field of view through the riflescope. You'll shoot the



The stainless steel receiver is finished in Melonite.



Four buttstock spacers allow length-of-pull adjustments from 12 3/4 to 13 3/4 inches. Five comb inserts increase in height in 1/8-inch increments.



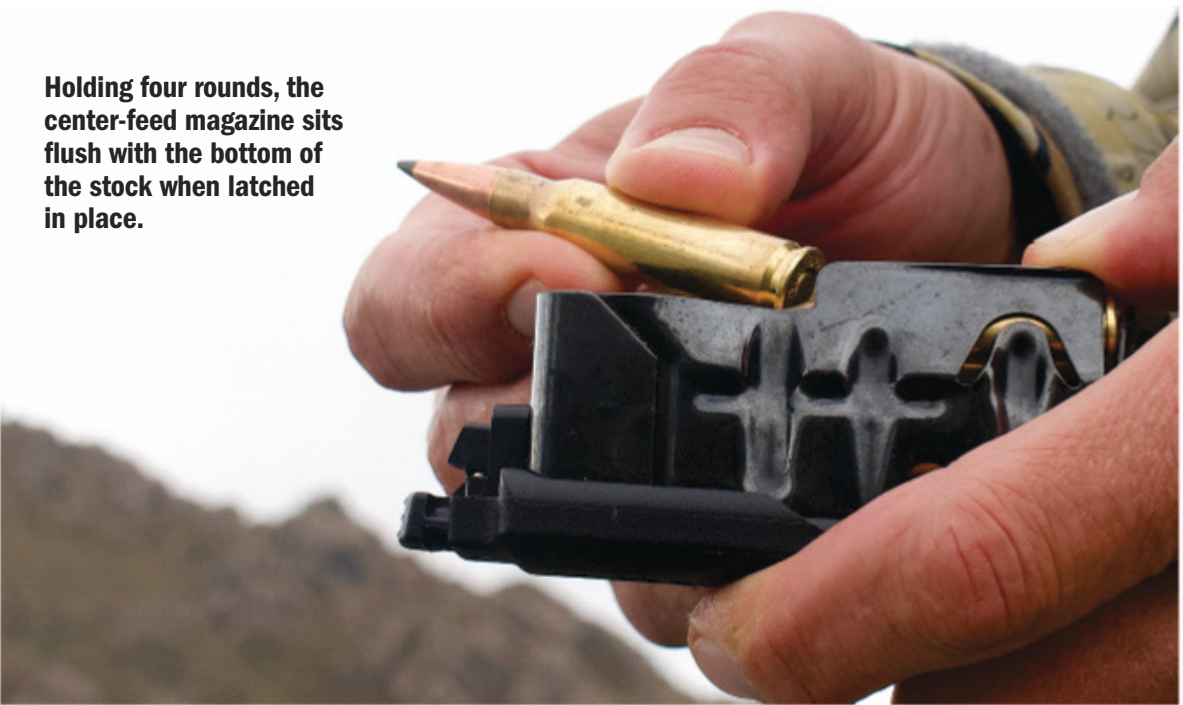
SHOOTING RESULTS

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LOAD Remington Core-Lokt Tipped
BULLET WEIGHT 150 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,761 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.03"

LOAD Federal Premium Terminal Ascent
BULLET WEIGHT 175 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,573 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 0.76"

Muzzle velocity is the average of 10 consecutive shots fired through a Caldwell G2 chronograph at 10 feet. Accuracy is the result of five consecutive, three-shot groups fired from a sandbag rest at 100 yards.



Holding four rounds, the center-feed magazine sits flush with the bottom of the stock when latched in place.



The Ultralite's carbon-fiber-wrapped stainless steel barrel is threaded for a suppressor and comes with a protective cap.

Ultralite better, and more comfortably, when it fits you and your natural point of aim. Switching spacers and comb inserts does not require any special tools, and tailoring the Ultralite to your body should take less than 15 minutes. It's time well-spent.

The fore-end of the stock is slim and, coupled with the rifle's light weight, makes for a gun that's easy to handle and point quickly. Overmolded panels on the stock's fore-end and grip improve purchase in dry, dusty conditions as well as rain and snow. The Ultralite's four-round magazine fits flush with the



belly of the stock and complements the rifle's streamlined form. The magazine requires some force to seat it within the well, but it latches tightly and feeds cartridges smoothly.

The three-position safety is located on the tang where it's easy to access without altering your grip on the rifle. The middle position unlocks the bolt for cycling a round from the chamber but does not permit the rifle to fire. In front of the trigger guard is a cylindrical button that serves as the bolt release.

Some lightweight rifles have a reputation for being difficult to shoot well. From what I've seen during testing on the range and while hunting with the Ultralite, accuracy is as notable as the rifle's weight. I fired a half-MOA group at 200 yards with my test sample—one of the best groups I've managed to get from a hunting rifle in quite some time. At 100 yards the Ultralite demonstrated sub-MOA performance with all three hunting loads I tested. Even better, on a recent trip to Alaska's Kodiak Island, I used the Ultralite to take two blacktail bucks and a caribou with three shots at ranges of 170 to 230 yards. That's the kind of accuracy Savage is known for and hunters will appreciate—especially when it comes in a rifle that weighs less than 6 pounds.

The Ultralite is available in a lefthand version as well as with a KUIU Verde 2.0 finish on the stock. With an MSRP of more than \$1,600 for the base version, the Ultralite is at the upper end of the Savage price range. But realize there are many rifles that weigh about the same as the Ultralite and retail for more than \$2,000. When you consider its features and weight, and compare them to other sub-6-pound rifles on the market, you'll realize that Savage is still committed to providing hunters with value. 

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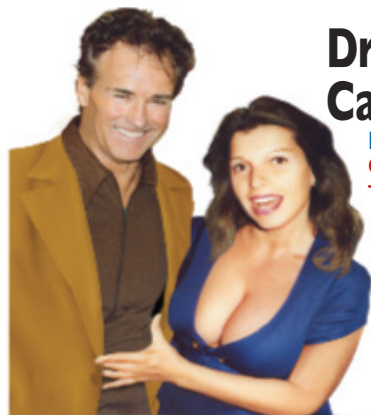
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V196

GREAT WHEN IT'S LATE

STAY COMFY TO THE
SEASON'S BITTER END
WITH GEAR THAT
TAMES THE COLD.

By Game & Fish Staff

Part of the challenge of hunting during the late season is simply showing up. Burnout may start to set in (*I've been trying to fill this tag for weeks so why would today be any different?*) and the weather doesn't help. The weather, however, is often the key to success, as game must move to feed when conditions turn nasty. Be out there to take advantage of cold fronts and pending storms, and remain focused to the final day, by dressing in clothing that helps you handle the elements. **G-F**

❶ BORN PRIMITIVE TUNDRA JACKET

A good puffy jacket keeps you so warm that wearing it is like wrapping your upper body in a tailored sleeping bag. The Tundra, from veteran-owned and -operated Born Primitive, has 200-gram synthetic insulation that makes it feel downright luxurious during cold days in the mountains. A drawback to most puffies is their lack of durability, but Born Primitive addresses this in the Tundra with a slick nylon shell that resists snagging and reinforced elbows. A fitted hood keeps body heat in, while zippered armpits let it out when you start to get too toasty. Front pockets have a soft, fuzzy lining, and two interior mesh pockets provide a place to stash snacks so they don't freeze solid. MSRP: \$229; bornprimitive.com

❷ KUIU PROXIMITY INSULATED PANT

No one wants to sit for hours in freezing temperatures only to spook a buck the moment a noisy outer layer drags across the rail of the treestand. That's just torture, and the Proximity line from KUIU is designed to prevent it. The pant's 160-gram polyester knit exterior has a brushed face to keep it quiet. A bonded SynthaCell open-cell foam membrane resists wind and is quieter than liners with the same purpose. Water resistance is afforded by a DWR coating. Body-mapped Toray 3DeFX+ synthetic insulation in 60- and 90-gram weights provides warmth without bulk, and its siliconized fibers further resist water. A raised back seals in heat, and full-length side zippers make the pant easy to put on and take off while offering ventilation. MSRP: \$259; kuiu.com

❸ PARAMOUNT OUTDOORS EHG ELITE THERMOWOOL JACKET AND PANT

Old-school wool gets a boost from synthetic insulation in this EHG Elite jacket and pant. Wool has a degree of natural water resistance thanks to its lanolin content and retains its insulative qualities when wet, but the addition of polyester adds warmth without weighing as much as its counterpart. A silver-ion treatment helps control bacteria that causes odor. The jacket has zippered handwarmer pockets and an inner chest pocket, while the pant has six, including two cargo pockets. A three-panel hood offers additional protection from the elements, while reinforced knees increase durability. MSRP: \$159.99, jacket; \$119.99, pant; paramountoutdoors.com



COURTESY OF LEUPOLD

4 DANNER VITAL BOOT

The problem with some heavily insulated boots is they make you feel like you're wearing clown shoes, which certainly doesn't promote stealthy or agile movement in the woods. You need not be concerned with clumsy clomping in the Vital, as Danner builds the 8-inch boot on a streamlined, athletic-style last and pairs it with 1,200-gram Thinsulate Ultra insulation. A waterproof Danner Dry barrier keeps moisture out but allows it to escape from inside the boot. Other comfort features include an open-cell polyurethane footbed and Plyolite midsole to absorb shock, multi-density foam in the upper to eliminate pinch points and a mesh-lined tongue to promote moisture management. MSRP: \$230; danner.com

5 FIELDSHEER PREMIUM 2.0 MERINO HEATED SOCKS

These aren't the electric socks with bulky batteries and heavy wires your father used to wear. Each sock is powered by a 3.7-volt lithium-ion rechargeable battery that's not much larger than a lighter, and the heating elements in the toe area are slim enough that the sock's cushioning keeps you from feeling them. You'll certainly feel the heat, though, as these socks have Bluetooth-enabled Mobile Warming technology that allows you to choose among four levels of output via the MW Connect app. Battery life on the low heat setting is 10 hours. The calf-height socks are made from a Merino wool blend with arch support and reinforced toe and heel areas. MSRP: \$134.99; fieldsheer.com

6 KUIU NORTHSTAR GLOMITT

Part glove, part mitten, glomitt is a goofy name for a design that keeps fingers together for more warmth but also facilitates dexterity by isolating the index finger and the thumb. The Northstar is packed with 340- and 170-gram Primaloft Gold insulation on the back and palm, respectively. The HDry membrane keeps moisture out, and the gauntlet-style cuff prevents snow, rain and wind from leaking into the jacket sleeve opening. Covered in Pittards OilTac leather, the palm offers a secure grip whether wet or dry. MSRP: \$139; kuiu.com

7 ALPS OUTDOORZ HAND WARMER

Stuff your hands into this fleece-lined tube with a couple heat packs and laugh at the icy wind. The neoprene exterior resists water and wind, and cuffs help retain heat. A waist belt is built into the back, and swivel clips permit waterfowlers to attach the hand warmer to waders. A hand warmer allows you to get away with thin gloves—or maybe none, which is a big advantage when fine motor skills are needed to slip off a safety and press a trigger. MSRP: \$39.99; alpsoutdoorz.com



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THE BIG BOOMER

MORE POWER DOESN'T MAKE A BETTER RIFLE.

Shane's first deer rifle was a Remington Model 700 in .243 that his father passed down to him. It wasn't particularly pretty with its plain stock and blued steel that now shone silver. But man, it was a tack driver. Shane had taken several deer and coyotes with it, and it had never failed him.

One night in early December, with the upcoming holiday on his mind, Shane found his father watching a football game. "I know what I want for Christmas," he pronounced.

"One minute, bud. Steelers have the ball with three seconds left," his father said, leaning toward the TV. Shane looked just in time to see a kick ... and a football sailing wide right. The kicker fell to his knees in agony while the Bills players ran wildly across the field celebrating.

"Dang it all," barked Shane's father in disgust. "Why put a rookie kicker in if he's unproven under pressure? What's a big leg if you can't send it between the uprights?" he mumbled.

Before his father could turn out the lights and head to bed, Shane spoke up again. "I want a Winchester Model 70 Classic in .300 WSM."

"Three-hundred Short Mag, eh?" his father said. "Perfect for elk, I read. But don't you think it's an awful lot of gun for our whitetails?"

"No," said Shane. "Its energy at 500 yards is tremendous!"

"When's the last time you had a 500-yard shot at a deer? In 40 years my farthest is 150 or so."

"Well I'm plannin' to hunt the powerline next year, and it's possible for a really long shot there."

Shane's father rubbed his chin, as if he was somewhat buying that logic, ballistically at least. Economically he had a different notion.

When Christmas came around, though, a long, narrow box appeared under the tree. It was a Model 70 in .300 WSM.



Sitting near it were two boxes of ammo.

"Dad!" Shane yelled. "Are you kidding me?! You said you couldn't swing it!" He opened one of the boxes of ammo to check out the short, fat-bodied cartridges and noticed a few were missing.

"You got really lucky, son. Last week Bob at the pawnshop called and said someone had brought in this rifle. Said the guy wanted something else. It's only been shot three times, but it's considered used so we got a great price on it."

After lunch was devoured, the two drove to the range and stapled a target at 25 yards to check the scope's zero. Shane concentrated on a smooth trigger squeeze as he aimed.

BOOM! The magnum erupted, flexing the tin roof of the shooting shed. When the concussion subsided, father and son could clearly see a .30-caliber hole in the bullseye.

"You nailed it!" said Shane's father as he turned toward his son in jubilation. Shane's hat was sitting crooked, and blood streamed around the corner of his right eye and down his cheek.

"And it nailed you. Are you OK?" Shane's father unfolded his handkerchief.

"It hurts something fierce," said Shane, a bit woozy. He held the cloth tight to his eye. After a couple minutes, Shane's father removed the makeshift bandage and took another look.

"Bleeding's stopped," he said. "Doesn't look too bad, though your mother will disagree. You wanna fire a couple more at 100 since we're here? Just don't cheat up on that scope so much."

"I guess," said Shane. He knew he had to shoot it again now. He hurriedly took aim at a steel target and pulled the trigger.

BOOM! No pinging sound of steel followed the report.

"You flinched big time," said his father. "Missed it by about three feet."

"This thing really kicks, Dad."

"I know! I can tell! Want to try again?"

"Not right now. Everything's still kinda blurry."

"OK, son, good idea." Then under his breath Shane's father mumbled, "What's a big leg if you can't send it between the uprights?" **G+**

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