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The Regional Outdoor Guide

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FEBRUARY 2023

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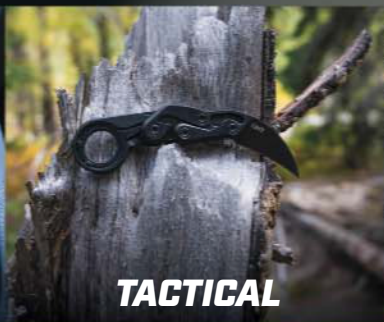
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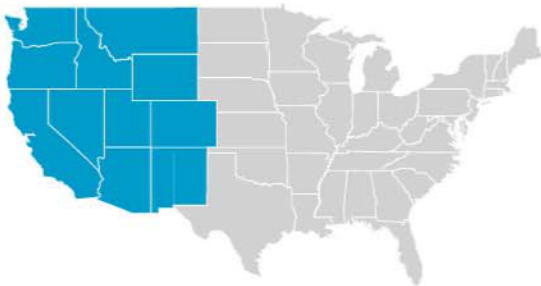
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TIME TO FISH

Right about now is when many folks either reconsider or seriously commit to their New Year's resolutions. I'm doing the latter. I promised my kids, and myself, that I would take them fishing more often in 2023, and I plan to follow through with it.

Shouldn't be that difficult, right? No, it should not, but I still expect some challenges. These come in the form of age (two pre-teens who some days act like they're going on 6 and other days like they're about to turn 16); sports (practice and games make it necessary to schedule time on the water in advance, which takes away some of the fun that comes with a spontaneous afternoon trip to the river); technology ("Get off your tablets!"); friends (hanging out with them is cooler than spending time with Dad) and probably a dozen other things that life will throw in the way.

But these are mere excuses to lump into the same category as it being too cold, too hot, too early or too late to fish. The reality is, today's world moves at a faster pace than ever for both adults and children, and we have to make a conscious effort to slow down. That's at the heart of my resolution: Show my kids how to slow down to fish, and how to fish to slow down—even if it is for just a couple hours on a glorious Tuesday afternoon when there is no homework or band practice.

I owe the credit to my daughter for making me realize we haven't been fishing nearly enough. "Dad," she asked late last year, "when am I going to get my own tackle box and when can I use it?" After the windfall of a birthday followed closely by Christmas, she now has that tackle box and a new rod and reel to go with it. She's clearly interested in catching fish, and judging by the questions she asked about the modest selection of lures I included in her tackle box, she's ready to move beyond the bait-and-bobber technique.

If you've been in the same spot as me, I'd like to hear your thoughts on what baits and lures your children or grandchildren or neighbor kids had the most success using. What did they catch, and how did you help them go about it? What lure did they think was the most fun to fish? Let's compare notes (my email address is at the top of the right column on this page). My daughter has a tackle box that needs filling before spring.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

GAME & FISH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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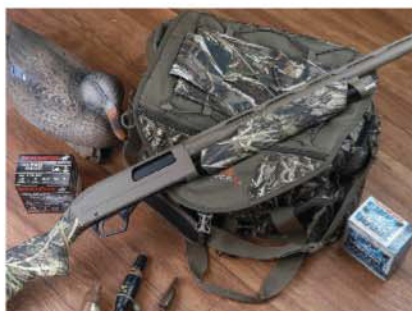
WHITETAIL GIANTS

Read about trophy bucks any hunter would be proud to tag in "Great Bucks Taken During the 2022 Deer Season," a roundup of slammers from every region.



FISH ON ICE

From tactics and gear to destinations, we have a wealth of ice-fishing info for middle-of-the-season success. Find it under the "Fishing" menu.



PROVEN PUMP GUN

Find out what makes Winchester's workhorse an exceptional value in "Winchester SXP (Super X Pump) Shotgun: Tested" by Brad Fitzpatrick.



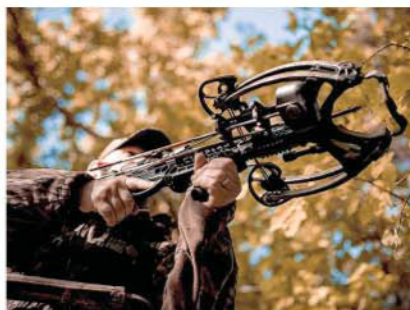
HOW SAUSAGE IS MADE

Whether it's sausage bread or brats, you'll find tasty from-scratch suggestions for this season's deer harvest in "17 of the Best Venison Sausage Recipes."



STATE-RECORD REWIND

We take a look back at notable record catches, including Gregg Gallagher's 10.15-pound smallmouth bass, in "Top 10 Record Fish of 2022."



NEW YEAR, NEW GEAR

Learn about new guns, bows, optics, ammo, accessories and more in our reports straight from this year's SHOT and ATA trade shows.

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COURTESY OF LAUREN PLUNKETT (TOP LEFT); NORTLAND TACKLE (TOP RIGHT); BRAD FITZPATRICK (MIDDLE LEFT); JEFF PHILLIPS (MIDDLE RIGHT); COURTESY OF GREGG GALLAGHER (BOTTOM LEFT); BARNETT CROSSBOWS (BOTTOM RIGHT)



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

FEBRUARY 2023

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

MARCH 2023

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

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

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COLD CALCULATIONS

HOW MUCH DOES TEMPERATURE AFFECT BULLET TRAJECTORY IN EXTREME COLD-WEATHER CONDITIONS?

By Richard Mann

Cold air is denser and increases bullet drag. Cold powder can reduce velocity. At less than 400 yards, though, these effects are minimal.

When most hunters work with their rifles in the off-season, they do so when the weather is good, and by good, I mean warm. Even if they test loads when temperatures are more moderate, it's very possible that when hunting season rolls around it might be much colder. I once deer hunted in Montana when it was 8 degrees below zero, and I've had a Saskatchewan deer hunt that was way colder than that! Most shooters have heard that when it's cold, ammunition performs differently. That's true, but the big question is: Is the difference enough to matter?

There are two ways that the cold can alter the performance of your ammunition. The first has to do with air density, and the second has to do with the gunpowder. Cold temperatures are the problem with both, but the cold works to increase your bullet's trajectory in two different

ways. So, let's start with cold air, then we'll look at cold ammunition, and finally we'll combine the effects of both to see if it matters enough to make you miss.

COLD AIR

When the air is colder, it has more density. This greater density increases drag on your bullet. As an example, let's look at Winchester's 125-grain Copper Impact load for the 6.5 Creedmoor. The first line in Chart 1 details the trajectory for this load with a muzzle velocity of 2840 fps at 75 degrees. The second line shows the trajectory for this same load at 25 degrees. The third line in this chart shows the difference between these two trajectories.

It's clear that the colder air increases bullet trajectory. However, with a difference of only about 2.5 inches at 500 yards, it's probably not enough to worry about if you're shooting at a big-game animal. On smaller targets, this may matter more.

COLD POWDER

When it is cold, gunpowder becomes harder to ignite. This can cause reduced burning temperatures, which translates to reduced pressure. And, when the pressure inside the chamber of your rifle is reduced, velocity is reduced as well. Unlike how we can predict how denser air will impact trajectory, it's not as easy predicting how the cold will affect gunpowder. This is because some powders are more resistant to temperature variations than others.

To see how drastic this temperature impact might be, I put a box of Winchester's 125-grain Copper Impact load in the freezer for a week. I then tested some of that load that was at a temperature of 75 degrees alongside the ammo that came out of the freezer at 25 degrees. The results are in Chart 2 and show the difference between the 2840 fps velocity of 75-degree ammo and the 2733 fps velocity of the colder ammo.

The 50-degree difference in temperature caused this load to lose 107 fps. That's on the extreme of what is common, and at 500 yards, the difference in trajectory could cause your bullet to miss the vital zone of a big-game animal. At closer distances, just as with air density, the difference is not enough to worry about.

COLD COMBO

Now, if you're hunting and your ammo is at 25 degrees, most likely the air temperature will be around 25 degrees, too. This means, in the real world, you must consider both the colder air and the colder ammo. Chart 3 details how these two combined will affect trajectory. As you can see, when the cold air and cold ammo are considered together, you might miss the kill zone of a deer at 400 yards.

As problematic as this might seem at first, some ammunition is hardly affected at all by the cold. This is usually because it's loaded with special powders. In addition to the Winchester load, I also tested a load from Hornady and another from Remington. The 50-degree colder Hornady load was only 7 fps slower than when it was at 75 degrees, and the Remington load was only 29 fps slower. This is not enough velocity loss to matter even if you're shooting at extreme distance.

All these loads were tested in a Nosler Model 21 rifle, and Chart 4 details their performance. It's worth noting that the Hornady and Winchester loads shot measurably better groups when cold than when warm. Both also had less velocity variation when they were cold than when they were warm. The Remington load was slightly less precise but statistically within the margin of error regarding maximum velocity variation and precision on target.

DECIPHERING THE DATA

So, what can we learn from all this data? Well, it's obvious that air and ammo temperatures matter. But it's also obvious that at sensible shooting distances—inside 400 yards—and when using modern cartridges like the 6.5 Creedmoor, it won't matter enough to make you miss a deer.

The challenge comes when you start extending the distance beyond 400—and especially beyond 500—yards. At those distances, large temperature swings can easily cause a miss. You should also keep

CHART 1: AIR TEMPERATURE					
TEMP/ VELOCITY	100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS	500 YARDS
75°/2840 fps	0	-3.54	-12.97	-29.31	-53.83
25°/2840 fps	0	-3.63	-13.35	-30.39	-56.25
DIFFERENCE		0.09	0.38	1.08	2.42

CHART 2: AMMO TEMPERATURE					
TEMP/ VELOCITY	100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS	500 YARDS
75°/2840 fps	0	-3.54	-12.97	-29.31	-53.83
25°/2733 fps	0	-3.95	-14.29	-32.15	-58.97
DIFFERENCE		0.41	1.32	2.84	5.14

CHART 3: COLD AIR & COLD AMMO					
TEMP/ VELOCITY	100 YARDS	200 YARDS	300 YARDS	400 YARDS	500 YARDS
75°/2840 fps	0	-3.54	-12.97	-29.31	-53.83
25°/2733 fps	0	-4.05	-14.72	-33.36	-61.65
DIFFERENCE		0.51	1.75	4.05	7.82

CHART 4: WARM & COLD AMMO, VELOCITY & PRECISION PERFORMANCE			
LOAD	VELOCITY WARM/COLD (DIFF) (FPS)	MVD WARM/COLD (FPS)	PRECISION WARM/COLD (IN)
REMINGTON 129-GRAIN CORE-LOKT TIPPED	2870/2841/(29)	36/46	1.26/1.33
HORNADY OUTFITTER 120-GRAIN CX	2860/2853/(7)	68/10	1.52/0.55
WINCHESTER DEER SEASON 125-GRAIN COPPER EXTREME POINT	2840/2733/(107)	81/16	0.83/0.52

Loads were tested with ammo temperatures of 75° and 25°. Column 1 (VELOCITY) shows the difference in muzzle velocity, column 2 (MVD) shows the difference in maximum velocity deviation, and column 3 (PRECISION) shows the difference in precision on target. Reported velocities were established by firing 10 shots over a chronograph, and the reported precision is the result of three, three-shot groups fired at 100 yards from a sandbag rest.

in mind that these variations go both ways. If you sight in your rifle when it's cold outside and then hunt when it's a lot warmer, your bullet can hit high.

Misses due to temperature differences can also happen when firing at smaller targets where minimal point of impact shifts are more detrimental. A temperature-caused shift of a few inches on a long-range shot at an animal with a smaller vital area like a coyote, for example, could be more consequential.

But, for most hunters in most situations, air and ammo temperatures aren't too concerning. If you're not sending bullets into the next ZIP code, worry more about keeping your feet, hands and body warm so you can hunt longer. A cold, miserable, shivering hunter will have far more impact on accuracy than will cold ammo and cold air. Warm hunters shoot better than cold ones. My advice is to buy warm boots, gloves and clothes for your extreme cold-weather hunts. 

GOING LIVE

**TODAY'S SONAR IS CHANGING
THE WAY WE FISH, BUT IS
IT TOO HELPFUL?**

By Dr. Jason A. Halfen

Professional anglers like Jeff Gustafson are using live sonar technology to find and catch fish that previously went unmolested.



Live sonar—which provides anglers with a real-time tool to find structure, locate fish, and even monitor their behavior as they interact with lures—is dramatically altering the way in which both recreational and professional anglers practice their craft. This technological marvel can be directed beneath the boat, broadcast in a wedge in any direction, and even directed forward of the boat's position to monitor a retrieved lure and any fish swimming in the live sonar beam's path.

Live sonar images from all three major marine electronics manufacturers—Humminbird, Garmin and Lowrance—reveal structure, lure motion, and fish behavior in remarkable detail. This

powerful tool allows anglers to readily distinguish between walleyes and crappies, or bass and bluegills, and impart strike-triggering lure actions when a fish is spotted chasing a bait.

Without a doubt, anglers equipped with live sonar have the technological upper hand, making it possible for them to catch more fish, in a much more targeted way, than ever before. But is this new, modern advantage in our angling toolbox truly a win-win proposition?

PRO SPIN

Professional angler Jeff “Gussy” Gustafson, a Bassmaster Elite Series champion and Kenora, Ontario-based smallmouth bass whisperer, knows how

to leverage modern technology to put fish in the boat and glittering trophies on his mantle.

By combining the strengths of advanced LakeMaster digital cartography, Humminbird Side Imaging, and the Spot Lock feature on his Minn Kota trolling motor, Gustafson continues to sack up winning bags of bass both north and south of the international border. Now, after a couple of tournament seasons with Humminbird's MEGA Live at his disposal, Gustafson shares some of his thoughts on live sonar's impacts on sportfishing.

“I fished on the Elite Series for a couple of years when a large number of anglers had access to forward-facing live



sonar from Garmin,” says Gustafson. “At that point, I really didn’t know what I was missing. My first experience fishing with this technology was during the 2021 Bassmaster Classic, when Humminbird mounted some of the first MEGA Live units on our boats to use during the rest of the season.”

Gustafson continues, “Now that I’ve spent extensive time with forward-facing sonar—during competitions, while guiding, or just fishing for fun—I would rank it as the most important advancement in fishing technology we’ve seen, period. It’s simply going to help you catch a bunch of extra fish out there every day. MEGA Live is by far the most important piece of equipment on my boat.”

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LIKE A VIDEO GAME

If you watch enough live tournament coverage on television or read enough post-event press releases, you will certainly hear touring pros describe—often in glowing terms—how forward-facing sonar has helped them to catch more and bigger fish, which ultimately leads to more wins and checks cashed. A skeptic might be inclined to dismiss some of that chatter as hyperbole, but that would be a mistake. Spend any time at all with live sonar on your boat, and you'll soon find yourself transfixed on the imagery, the likes of which seemed unimaginable only a couple of years ago.

Pull up to a brush pile 50 feet off the bow and start counting individual sticks. Watch crappies swarm the brush in real time, swimming into it, out from it, and all around it as you tie up a jig.

Cast into the school and watch fish react to the bait. Pull the jig away from a couple of smaller fish and position it in plain view of a supersized slab. Watch him eat, set the hook, and chuckle as you reel him in. This happens every day, every hour, perhaps every minute when live, forward-facing sonar is part of your repertoire.

Gustafson says, “Outside of fishing extremely shallow, where you can probably use your eyes, forward-facing sonar is going to help you in virtually every fishing situation. I use MEGA Live not only for seeing fish, but I also shine it around constantly, using it to spot boulders that are likely places to pluck a smallmouth. If I see a boulder, I might just pitch a Ned rig over to it—and if there is a smallmouth on it, I’m probably going to catch it. It’s just that easy.”

Gustafson scans the bottom in real time, but he also uses his live, forward-facing sonar for other applications.

“Obviously, live sonar works great for shining any kind of bottom structure to see if it’s holding fish—where they are, how high off the bottom they’re holding, and how they are relating to the cover. As someone who really likes to fish deep offshore, I love live sonar for vertical presentations—but even then, I’m constantly shining the sonar beam around looking for fish or cover to cast toward. Live sonar truly makes almost every other sonar method obsolete.”

TOO GOOD?

Technological advances are no stranger to the sport of fishing. Whether it’s a sonar tool like side imaging, a boat positioning feature such as GPS lock or a shallow-water anchor, or even a powerfully scented artificial lure, anglers are eager to embrace virtually anything that puts more fish in the boat—and live sonar is no exception.

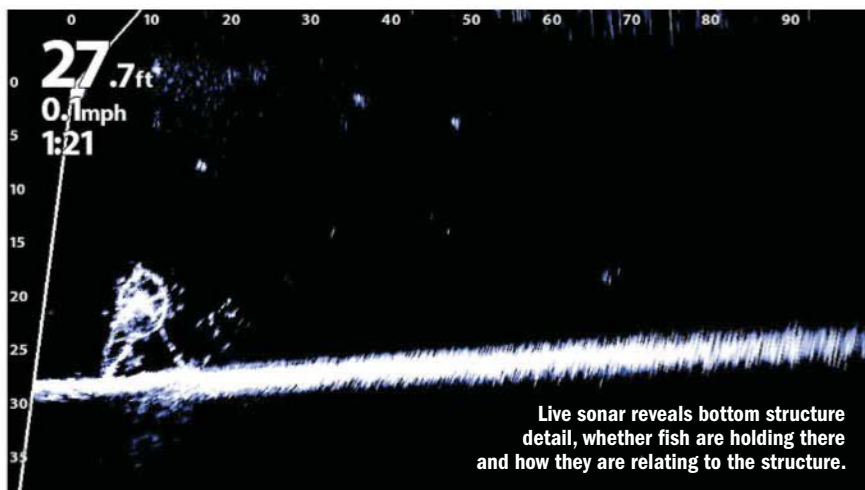
With that being said, it is important to recognize the potential impacts that live, forward-facing sonar may have on some of your favorite fisheries. While this all sounds great, there is a potential downside to live sonar.

“Live sonar has the potential to have a negative influence on some fisheries because it simply makes it so easy to find and catch fish in many situations,” Gustafson says. “For example, when schooling fish like crappies get out in main lake basins, those giant schools

are just so easy to find and then follow around, picking off fish virtually all day long. And it’s not just crappies, but really anything like bass, walleyes and even muskies.”

Naturally, Gustafson is a conservationist, concerned about the health of fisheries. “We all need to do our part to avoid exploiting the fish so much that we’re hurting the populations,” he notes. “Be aware of how deep you are fishing, keep a few to eat, and let the rest go. Give the school you’re chasing a break after an hour or two and go find another school instead. Believe me, it won’t take too long.”

Rest assured, live sonar technology is here to stay. Anglers should embrace both the positive impact that it can have on their daily catch rate, and the resource stewardship role that all anglers must play to ensure sustainable fisheries for the future. 



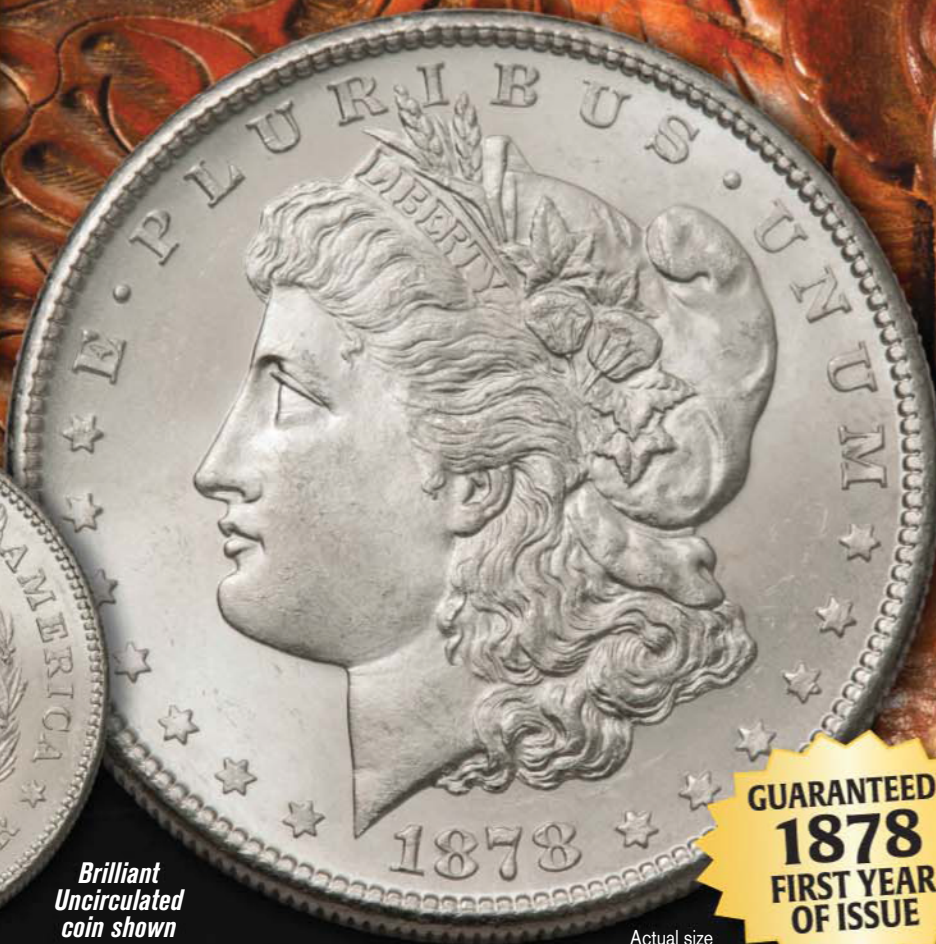
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Maybe you knew that the Morgan Silver Dollar is the most widely collected and traded Silver Dollar ever minted by the United States—in part because of its iconic design, and in part because it was the hard currency found in the saddlebags of cowboys and ranchers, and of course outlaws. It was the coin that helped build the Old West.

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PEDAL POWER



USE THE QUADS GOD GAVE YOU TO EXPAND YOUR HUNTING RANGE.

By Scott Turo

Over the years, I have chosen to ditch the truck and use my 15-year-old mountain bike to increase my success and create a “backcountry camp” experience during Western hunting seasons. Using a converted kid-carrying trailer as a gear and meat hauler, I start each morning from a well-stocked, comfortable camp far away from the dusty roar of hunters traveling from their vehicle-based camps before daylight.

My camp is about a 1 1/2-mile ride that includes an honest climb preceded by a cross-country stretch to a nondescript shady spot in the lodgepole pines. It’s a two-track road where the grazing permittee comes through once

a week to fill stock tanks for his cattle and mend the electric fence protecting the main meadow complex. This camp in the lodgepole was chosen many years back due to a fallen tree that grew in a forked pattern leaving a perfect space to nestle in a large locking plastic tote.

Covered with forest litter and logs, this weather- and rodent-proof capsule remained hidden for a decade and provided a solid place to cache water and other supplies, such as canned goods, before the season. Fresh TP, stove fuel, rope and a quality camo tarp gave it a bug-out stash feel when supplies remained there for long periods. The bike and trailer unloaded were my backcountry pickup truck.

TRAVEL MANAGEMENT

Motorized closures for roads are one tool used on public lands to protect wildlife and their habitat. In some cases, closures have been used to create a buffer between public and private lands to reduce crop damage and slow the retreat of game animals to the safety of private lands before opening day. Whether it’s a permanent or seasonal closure, the road remains open for administrative uses, but is closed to general motorized traffic. Many e-bikes are considered motorized and are currently not allowed in non-motorized closure areas on U.S. Forest Service lands. Although they might be allowed on some trail systems alongside pedal bikes, motorized ORVs and even

SHUTTERSTOCK



A mountain bike and a bike trailer can help you hunt deeper into back-country areas with road closures that prevent motorized vehicles.

hikers, there is little room for debate about their use in non-motorized wildlife protection areas.

Elk movements in relation to open roads show a buffer preference or all-out departure to adjacent private lands as hunter traffic increases in late summer. Many private timberlands have gates and walk-in areas where pedal bikes might be allowed. Camping might be restricted in these areas, so know the rules. State wildlife managers have developed various ways to manage hunters and wildlife through programs where open road use during the deer and/or elk seasons might be limited. Maps and signage designate those main roads that are open while many other interior roads are closed,

creating larger non-motorized areas during the high-pressure hunting seasons. I've always seen these various closures as an advantage given my hunting style, but understand some hunters don't like gates and closures on perfectly good taxpayer-built roads.

BIKES

Any off-road bike will work. Older styles will have 26-inch wheels. I like the newer 27 1/2- and 29-inch models because the larger wheels make rolling over uneven ground and obstacles easier. The older 21-speed bikes with three chainring drivetrains are a thing of the past. I upgraded to the newer drivetrains that use one ring at the pedals and up to 12 customizable gears on the rear wheel. This drops weight and improves efficiency with a wider range of gears operated on one shifter. Disc brakes are preferred over caliper styles when hauling heavy loads and trailers. Front shocks seem to be on most bikes these days. They're not required, but they do offer a smoother ride.

TRAILERS

For \$25 at a yard sale, my wife purchased an old yellow and blue Schwinn kid trailer with a sling seating system that we used a few times. Removing the seats and securing a few boards with zip ties made a sturdy floor that supports a sizable plastic tote. The aluminum trailer frame extends above the tote like a roof rack, allowing oversized items to be secured with straps. Burley currently makes a flatbed model that should hold a tote just fine. Stay away from the one-wheel trailers. As you stack gear higher on their limited beds, they tend to get tippy.

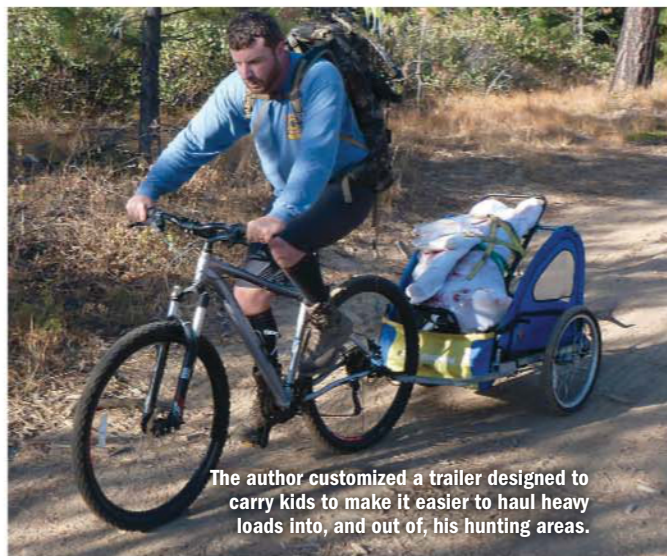
The most important part of the trailer besides the two wheels is the hitch. The one on my Schwinn uses a locking pin to secure the trailer arm into a solid mount on the lower rear frame of the bike. A large spring built into the connection absorbs shock during travel.

ACCESSORIES

Must-haves include a set of U-shaped, rubber-coated gun or bow mounts used on ATVs for your handlebars. Pack a socket wrench for the bolts, along with a general all-purpose tool/repair kit. You will appreciate a quality bike headlight for riding dirt roads in the dark. Using a headlamp in conjunction with a bike headlight lets you scan your surroundings without taking light off the trail. Self-sealing bike tubes are essential. Carry one spare and a patch kit that gets replaced each season. Matched with a good pump, you will be well-prepared. Fill the trailer tire tubes with green Slime, a product that will instantly seal most punctures. Trust me on this one. It's also worth having a trained bike technician tune the trailer wheels and fix any loose spokes. Your use will exceed any product-testing standards noted during development.

When I started bringing my son along to operate decoys and help call, the rigid tote made packing efficient. Two tents could be laid flat on the bottom and compressed almost paper-thin. Strapping sleeping bags, pads and chairs to the top left room for meals and gear inside. At camp, the tote is used as a table. Topped with camo plywood it's a safe place to operate the stove and serve meals.

On my son's first bike-in hunt, we stopped to warm our hands and listened to the elk on the hillside above, not knowing he would call one of them in later that morning. That's the kind of memory a bike rig can create. 



The author customized a trailer designed to carry kids to make it easier to haul heavy loads into, and out of, his hunting areas.



QUIETLY INFLUENTIAL

THE CONGRESSIONAL SPORTSMEN'S FOUNDATION MIGHT BE THE NATION'S MOST SUCCESSFUL
ADVOCATE FOR HUNTING, FISHING AND SHOOTING SPORTS YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF.

By Andrew McKean

You need not be a member of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation to benefit from its work. If you hunt, fish, shoot a gun or draw a bow, then you've already been influenced by this group that works with Congress, governors and state legislatures to protect and advance hunting, angling, recreational shooting and trapping.

The CSF is part of an ecosystem of groups that advocate on behalf of sportsmen and sportswomen. There's the Sportsmen's Alliance (SA), National Rifle Association (NRA), Safari Club International (SCI), Boone and Crockett Club (B&C), Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) and Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA), to name a handful of the dozens. That's not even mentioning the policy work that each "critter group" such as Ducks Unlimited (DU), the Rocky Mountain

Elk Foundation (RMEF), Mule Deer Foundation (MDF) and National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) engages in.

Most of these groups work either together or separately, but compatibly to either advocate for or against legislation that influences our ability to access public land and water, or to engage in traditional outdoor activities, or to ensure that sportsmen's investments in conservation funding remain intact.

The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation cuts through this wilderness of acronyms by working with and supporting caucuses made up of elected officials who collaborate to advance sportsmen policies. It also advocates for moderate, sustainable policies that often are supported by both major political parties. Examples include revising Sunday hunting bans, confirming the continued use of traditional lead-based ammunition on our public lands, and ensuring critical

funding from the Pittman-Robertson excise tax that helps fund wildlife management across America continues.

If centrism sounds impossible in this hyper-partisan, bickering, contentious age of politics at both the national and state levels, then you're nearly right. Members of some of these caucuses might disagree about social issues, or squabble over fiscal policy, or get downright nasty about limitations on gun rights, but they generally agree to work together on conservation issues.

In many ways, that reflects both the personality and the centrist orientation of the CSF's leader, Jeff Crane, but also the middle-of-the-road, solutions-finding pragmatism of his staff and the organization's mission.

"We're not interested in picking sides," Crane told me last year prior to the CSF's annual banquet, well-attended by senators and representatives of both



Representatives from the CSF work with politicians at the national and state levels to further and protect the rights of outdoor enthusiasts.

parties. “We’re interested in getting the work of the American sportsman and -woman done, and unfortunately it often gets done on Capitol Hill and in state houses, places that hunters and anglers don’t regularly visit.”

Crane is one of the most influential non-elected voices in Washington, D.C., and is the longest-serving member of the Hunting and Shooting Sports Advisory Council, a group of conservation leaders appointed biannually by the secretaries of interior and agriculture. The group advises the agencies on issues related to land, wildlife and fisheries management.

GOOD POLITICS

With nearly 250 members of the 535 total U.S. representatives and senators, the bipartisan Congressional Sportsmen’s Caucus is the largest bipartisan caucus on the Hill. Members share a background and interest in outdoor recreation and

conservation, but they’re united by an even stronger belief that hunters and anglers are a critical component of their constituency.

In short, it’s good politics to be supportive of conservation. That you are a darling of politicians might not be immediately obvious to you, but here are some of the reasons.

- Hunters and anglers are the original conservationists. We tend to be politically conservative, but supportive of policies that are championed by progressives: clean air and water, healthy habitats, open spaces and recreation economies. Politically speaking, we’re centrists.
- Many Democrats are OK with guns when they’re used for hunting and recreational shooting, a fact that makes hunters and recreational shooters key swing votes for politicians with sizable blue-collar and rural voters.
- We’re engaged. Those groups you belong to—those with all those acronyms—do a good job of informing members about legislation that affects them, and they have mechanisms in place for members to communicate with elected officials. I’m happy to report that many of you do just that, making you and the groups you belong to important factors in close votes.

- We are problem-solvers. Hunters and anglers tend to be pragmatic, supporting solutions rather than political impasses that have defined government gridlock, especially at the national level.

CONSERVATION BY CAUCUS

Many of those qualities are found in members of CSF’s Sportsmen’s Caucus network, which extends to the state level. The CSF reports 30 governors in the Governors Sportsmen’s Caucus plus some 2,000 state legislators from 49 states in the National Assembly of Sportsmen’s Caucuses. That’s a lot of caucusing, but these groups are a real mechanism to “facilitate the interaction and idea exchange among state caucus leaders and the outdoor community,” according to the CSF.

Caucuses serve as a conduit to promote policies that benefit hunting, fishing, trapping, shooting and outdoor

STAY INFORMED

CSF offers several ways to learn about issues affecting the outdoors.

The Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation provides multiple resources to keep you informed on CSF activities and help you stay on top of issues across the country, including a weekly newsletter called “The Sportsmen’s Voice” and an interactive service called “Tracking the Capitols.” Subscribe to each by visiting the CSF’s website, and check out CSF’s social media channels for real-time updates on key issues.

recreation, but, just as critically, they work to kill bad legislation before it becomes law. That’s an important effort, says Crane, who points out that bad legislation often leads to messy, expensive battles in the courtroom.

“CSF is focused on working through the legislative process on policies that have yet to become law,” says Crane. “Whether it’s good or bad policy, CSF is at the forefront working with legislators to help them better understand how their decisions can impact our outdoor traditions.”

But the CSF isn’t in the business of actively recruiting grassroots members. It leaves that to the organizations that actively partner with the foundation. The CSF is also funded by individuals who donate handsomely in order to ensure that the CSF has the means to do its work at the state and national levels.

Because CSF personnel aren’t soliciting you for memberships or badgering you to attend a fundraising banquet, their visibility remains below those of their peer groups. But that doesn’t mean they’re not active. You have only to look at their legislative successes (you can find a link to their work at congressionalsportsmen.org) in order to know that CSF is the most influential group you’ve never heard of. And they’re just fine staying below the radar and getting the important work of conservation done with quiet effectiveness. **GF**



MOMENTS OF TRUTH

A HUNT ON THE HISTORIC CUMBERLAND PLATEAU

STRENGTHENS FAMILY
TRADITIONS AND PRESSES
ONE MAN TO FACE HIS
DEEPEST FEARS.

By Brian Reisinger

Feral hogs are gnarly beasts with tusks that they may use to defend themselves while escaping hunters.

We were deep in rural Tennessee when the rain came. It was light and so quick that the sun was still out, and it danced in the sunlight as we drove. With the rain coming and going, it was easy to imagine we were traveling through different pockets of a land unique in their own secrets. That land was the historic Cumberland Plateau, and we had come to this high wooded country to hunt wild hogs.

“Almost there, buddy,” I said to my 12-year-old nephew, Steven, riding shotgun on his first road trip.

I wondered as my pickup traced the curving back road through the rain—then sun, then rain again—what lessons this hunt would hold. Hunting aggressive game with a young sidekick in unfamiliar woods, I knew, was not for the careless or the faint of heart. Ensuring a safe and successful hunt would take all the discipline I could teach him. But little did I know that the lessons on this hunt in America’s original backwoods would

BUT NOW THE STAKES WERE HIGHER THAN I HAD PLANNED IN THIS HISTORIC BACKWOODS, AND RISING FURTHER STILL WITH EACH STEP...

come from him and would force me to confront fears I didn’t know I had. They were deep fears that I had buried and would only be able to find on a special hunt, in a special place.

COMING OF AGE

As we ventured into the woods the next morning with our guide Roger Matheson and his hounds, we confronted a new reality: hunting angry hogs on foot. Roger told us a stand would be no good during the heat, so we’d be on the ground, stalking animals sometimes known to charge hunters as soon as run from them. Unlike some TV hog hunts with night vision and semi-autos, my young nephew and I were doing it old school with bolt-action deer rifles and daytime effort.

I had planned for our hunt outside Crossville, Tenn., to be more than the usual proving ground all hunts are. Steven had already shot several bucks during gun season—a rite of passage in our native Wisconsin—and was at that age when emboldened hunters develop good, or bad, habits. We were in the perfect place for an adventure 700 miles from home. The plateau, which spreads west from the Cumberland Mountains, had been home to Native Americans for centuries, according to state and local histories, and remained distant to most settlers until the 1770s. That’s when the frontiersman Daniel Boone birthed his legend, leading a wagon train over the mountains to fully open pre-Revolutionary America’s 13 colonies to western lands.



The Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee are full of deep, wooded ravines where hogs thrive.



The terrain of the Cumberland Plateau includes creeks and mixed forestland, offering hogs plenty of places to find food and water.

But now the stakes were higher than I had planned in this historic backwoods, and rising further still with each step over winding woodland trails, across creek beds and past plunging ravines. The intermittent rain from the day before continued as we walked, not falling anew but dripping through the heavy forest as yesterday's water worked its way from treetops to dirt. These woods resembled the mixed forests of home but seemed wilder with taller trees and deeper ravines. We watched Roger's redbone hounds run ahead in the sunlight slanting through the trees, their noses grounded in search of sign. Eventually, they disappeared.

Although we didn't say it, Steven and I were both thinking of danger. It was bothering me more than it normally would as the day-old raindrops tapped the ground.



Shortly before our trip, Steven had lost Buster, a blue heeler cattle dog he'd grown up with. Buster had a secret tumor so big it broke his back. While Steven saw memories of Buster on our journey, I found that the farther I got from civilization's distractions, the more I saw my dad, fighting a bad case of COVID in our backroom between hospital visits months earlier. He'd made it, but I'd felt strangely stretched ever since by a hectic day job, endless writing projects and worries over our family farm navigating tough times. As it would turn out, there were more tests to come.

INTO THE FRAY

We broke from the trees into an open field and heard the sudden grunt of a wild hog. Steven looked at Roger. One bark from the hounds, then another,



BRIAN REISINGER (OPPOSITE ABOVE), ADORÉ STOCK (BOTTOM)

For the Man Who Gives Everything and Expects Nothing



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and we followed the sounds across the clearing into the woods beyond. Through the trees to our right, we saw the dogs flash brown-red then a rough black color plunging through the underbrush. Who was chasing whom was unclear.

We readied our rifles and strode toward the sound of the dogs. I kept one eye on Steven and whispered tips to him about remaining ready—and safe. The hogs on the Cumberland Plateau often have Russian lineage, Roger had told us, though their forebears also include other varieties of pigs that went feral generations earlier. Mature boars and sows grow to more than 200 pounds. They'll eat anything, including their own, and hunters and biologists agree that their rapid breeding means they endanger other game and local habitats.

I thought of what Roger had told us to do if a hog turned on us and there was no time for a shot. Sometimes the dogs would divert a charging hog. If one got past, he advised we step behind a tree. Hogs have keen hearing and smell, but poor eyesight, so a hunter stepping behind a tree disappears from their view momentarily. I'd shot deer, elk and bear with my .270, but it seemed a thin defense now, easing through these wild woods with my young nephew.

Soon we saw them on the main trail, clustered atop a hill: two rough black hogs, wheeling and grunting at their captors. I looked at Steven, ready to let him shoot, as my dad had done with both of us for two generations. He shook his head.

"You shoot," he said.

"You don't want to shoot first?" I asked.

"No."

He shook his head again, and I saw in the honest emotion on his face that he meant it.

Turning, I sighted the hogs, uphill nearly 70 yards away. We'd often taken deer at hundreds of yards, but part of me didn't blame Steven. He was uneasy shooting uphill, and this was offhand with potentially hostile targets. Another part didn't understand. We'd traveled all this way, and this could be his only chance.

I settled my crosshair on the muscular black beast on the left, and waited for Roger's signal that the dogs were out of the way. He gave it and I shot, the clear crack of my rifle searing through the forest as the hog dropped to the ground.



The hogs living on the Cumberland Plateau often exhibit the traits of their Russian ancestors.

SHUTTERSTOCK



After his nephew passed on the shot, the author downed the first hog of the trip at about 70 yards.

The other hog bolted and we eyed its path as we approached mine, a Russian sow, mortally wounded behind the shoulders. I finished it, and we turned toward the second, a mixed Russian boar tearing downhill through the woods. Steven

didn't hesitate as he had a moment earlier, but I watched him and remained ready. If he was going to shoot this hog, it would be fast.

The boar doubled back and ran our way, not a direct charge but a cut in

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The hills of Tennessee are rich in American frontier history, and it was not difficult for the author and his nephew to imagine they had taken a step back in time.

our direction, once then twice. Roger yelled for us to get out of the way. The first time we scrambled to our right in unison to grant the hog a wider berth. The second time I saw a tree just to my right and slipped behind its thick trunk.

I told myself, for a moment, that I could shoot more effectively from there if the hog charged. Then I thought of Steven, and it was behind that tree that I learned from him. Just as he had admitted he wasn't ready to shoot, I sought honesty from myself. Was I

behind this tree because I was afraid? I looked out and saw Steven on the trail, and I knew the answer was yes. I stepped clear of the tree and strode toward him and Roger.

I wondered as I reached them what I'd have told my sister if the hog had charged in the instant I had spent behind that tree. But there was no time to dwell on it. The hog plunged back into the woods, and we started after him. I touched Steven's shoulder to let him know I was there, and then we saw the

hog huddled against the trees. Steven got down on one knee, and I held my rifle ready as he raised his. He'd only have a moment, once the dogs were clear, to shoot before the hog might move again—running off or finally charging, we didn't know which. Roger yelled, and Steven shot.

We got to the hog, down but still moving. When Roger told us to finish it with his knife, Steven asked me to do it. I patted his back and attended to the hog on the forest floor.



THE TRAIL AHEAD

Meadow Park Lake extended in a smooth plane of water in front of us before dropping, slick and stark, off the dam. With our quarry down we were exploring the Cumberland Plateau, fishing from a dock that may as well have been the end of the world.

It was natural to feel at the edge of our experience in this place. The first settlers of what became nearby Crossville had followed a woodland path known as the Walton Road, cut by Capt. William

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It was a perfect late autumn day in the northern Rockies. Not a cloud in the sky, and just enough cool in the air to stir up nostalgic memories of my trip into the backwoods.

This year, though, was different. I was going it solo. My two buddies, pleading work responsibilities, backed out at the last minute. So, armed with my trusty knife, I set out for adventure.

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Well, what I found was a whole lot of trouble. As in 8 feet and 800-pounds of trouble in the form of a grizzly bear. Seems this grumpy fella was out looking for some adventure too. Mr. Grizzly saw me, stood up to his entire 8 feet of ferocity and let out a roar that made my blood turn to ice and my hair stand up. Unsnapping my leather sheath, I felt for my hefty, trusty knife and felt emboldened. I then showed the massive grizzly over 6 inches of 420 surgical grade stainless steel, raised my hands and yelled, "Whoa bear! Whoa bear!" I must have made my point, as he turned tail and headed back into the woods.

Our Grizzly Hunting Knife features stick-tang construction, you can feel confident in the strength and durability of this knife. And the hand carved, natural bone handle ensures you won't lose your grip even in the most dire of circumstances. I also made

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Walton. He'd come to Tennessee, according to state and local histories, by way of the Cumberland Gap, through which Daniel Boone had blazed a trail. The land we traveled was perhaps not unlike the hunting grounds frontier families encountered as they searched for new territory in colonial America.

In my head, I kept turning over our own journey in those storied woods, knowing there was a lesson deeper than disciplined hunting. Certainly we'd learned many times there is no triumph without trial. But this lesson was more subtle and powerful, and it settled over me by that dam at the end of the world. Steven had taught me the lesson of admitting vulnerability. As a child—one becoming a young man before my eyes—he had not yet learned all of the reasons adults hide their vulnerabilities. Without the honesty that follows facing your fears, Steven might have never mustered the courage to take on that second hog, and I might have never told myself to get out from behind that tree.

The rain was intermittent again, the sun still shining from behind the clouds as it fell, and I thought of other



WITHOUT THE HONESTY THAT FOLLOWS FACING YOUR FEARS ... I MIGHT HAVE NEVER TOLD MYSELF TO GET OUT FROM BEHIND THAT TREE.



Twelve-year-old Steven remained calm in a quickly changing situation and downed this boar with a single shot from his deer rifle.

vulnerabilities. I was burnt out. I was worried about losing the life I was building with my young wife. I was concerned I wouldn't accomplish all I wanted to before we had kids, and that those thoughts would make me a bad father. And I realized, then, the impact of seeing my dad's mortality during his COVID fight, of checking his breathing at night, of rushing him to the hospital, of watching to make sure he didn't fall as we tested his recovering lungs. The pandemic had bred fears for so many: isolation, loss, uncertainty, economic fallout. Mine was that I was running out of time.

We fished and talked, and the rain kissed the water and our skin, and we began to plan our journey home. My dad and sister had found Steven a new puppy he wanted to meet, and I had fears to face—some the kind a man can shed in the backwoods of the Cumberland Plateau, others the kind that take longer. As I looked up from the dock at the sun, I thought it might shine brighter soon enough, even if that strange Cumberland rain kept on falling. **GT**

BRIAN RESINGER (2); LON LAUBER PHOTOGRAPHY (OPPOSITE)



Feral hogs deserve respect when encountered on their turf, and hunting them can teach lessons in discipline and courage.

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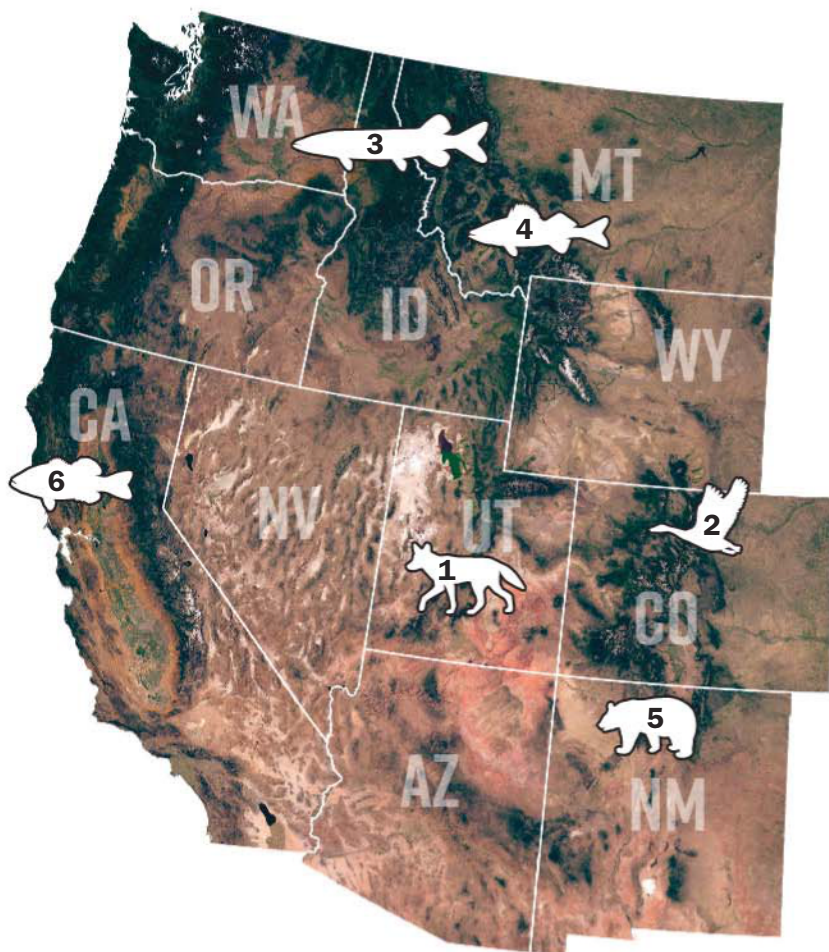
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AROUND THE WEST

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

By Andrew McKean



For those who think February is all about tying flies for May trout, or sharpening your knives and turkey calling, there's a wide variety of prime action—and thickness of Thinsulate—for just about every interest. This is prime predator season, with coyotes starting to roam widely. For ice anglers, there's no shortage of destinations filled with panfish, trout and predatory fish. In California's San Joaquin and Sacramento river systems, double-digit hawks will hit baits all month.

In case the wind chill sends you indoors, it's also outdoor show season. The biggest of 'em all is the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo, Feb. 2 through 5 in Salt Lake City.



UTAH COYOTES

Shoot a 'yote, buy some ammo. Utah has one of the most established predator-control programs in the West, paying a bounty of \$50 per coyote that hunters turn in at reimbursement centers. Officially called the "Mule Deer Protection Act," the bounty aims to reduce predation in the state's deer range. Hunters must record the GPS coordinates where they killed the coyote and then submit the ears and lower jaw to authorities. Last year, the state paid some \$250,000 for about 5,000 coyotes. Deer units with the highest coyote take: Fillmore B, with 8.7 percent (450 coyotes); Beaver, with 6.6 percent (341); Oquirrh-Stansbury, with 6.7 percent (349); and West Desert, Tintic, with 5.8 percent (299).



COLORADO SNOW GEESSE

The last best waterfowling of the season is on tap right now on both the Arkansas and North Platte rivers, where snow geese will stack up on grain fields. It's a fickle abundance, though, so your best bet is to be in touch with an outfitter who specializes in this late conservation hunt. When you get the call that the birds are in, hustle to the rendezvous with cases of shells and empty coolers. There's no limit on these birds, and no magazine-capacity restriction, either.



IDAHO ICE-FISHING

Northern Idaho's Panhandle has a winter fishery for just about every interest and jig size. Perch-jerkers will find hot action on Fernan, Cocolalla, Twin, Gamblin and Avondale lakes. Kokanee salmon will be available for ice anglers in Spirit Lake; if the bite goes cold, move over to Mirror Lake. For those who want to tangle with a toothy predator, soak smelt for northern pike in the Coeur d'Alene Chain of Lakes, the north end of Hayden Lake and both Benewah and Chatcolet lakes in Hayburn State Park. Even legendary Priest Lake might have some bays capped with fishable ice, in which case dropping big jigs for lakies is worth your while.



CANYON FERRY ICE ACTION

This big impoundment of the Missouri River roughly between Helena and Townsend, Mont., is the site of one of the most popular winter fisheries in Big Sky Country, and it's hosting Ducks Unlimited's annual ice-fishing tournament on Feb. 18. Jig for burbot (ling) in deep water, work rocky drops for walleyes or try your luck just about everywhere for perch. A couple spots to focus on are The Silos on the western shore and Confederate Bay on the eastern shore. Check the shallow water near the river inlet for walleyes, though be aware that the ice conditions could be sketchier here.



APPLY FOR BIG-GAME TAGS

'Tis the season to apply for special hunting permits in most states. If you get this issue in late January, don't dawdle—Wyoming's non-resident elk application deadline is Jan. 31. It's Feb. 8 for Arizona elk and pronghorn; Feb. 9 for New Mexico black bear; Feb. 10 for Oregon spring bear; Feb. 15 for Idaho spring bear; Feb. 22 for Utah cougar and bear; Feb. 28 for Wyoming moose, sheep and mountain goat; and March 3 for Utah bucks, bulls and once-in-a-lifetime permits.



CALIFORNIA BASS

Take your pick between Berryessa and Clear lakes, both in northern California in a triangle formed by Sacramento, Santa Rosa and Ukiah. Fish are active in their pre-spawn feed, but water is clear, so finesse presentations are the rule. Double-digit lunkers are not out of the question, but you can catch numbers of 3- to 6-pounders, and a 20-pound trophy is possible in either water. On Clear Lake, work the tule reeds or Shad Rocks with a Lucky Craft Pointer Minnow, spinnerbait or unweighted wacky worm. Berryessa, in Napa County, will produce largemouths, smallies and spotted bass. Paradise and Markley coves are the hot spots here for anglers dead-sticking kokanee salmon and trout imitations.

FLY-FISHING 201

A DOZEN NEXT-LEVEL TIPS TO BECOME A MORE EFFICIENT FLY-ANGLER

By Scott Linden

Successful fly-anglers take time to read new water and identify what items trout are feeding on before ever making a cast.

If you've been fly-fishing for a couple of years, you've probably learned a few tricks along the way. But what if a little tweak, a tiny adjustment, a simple change could put one more trout in the net? I learned these lessons the hard way, over many years of trial and error, so you don't have to.

1

Sure, we can hide behind a bush or tree, stealthily snaking a cast to a wary rainbow until the trout moves. But instead of forcing yourself to cast around something, break up your profile by hanging in the shade or kneeling in front of a tree, boulder or shrub.

2

We all know river trout face upstream, into the current. But what about when "upstream" and "current" diverge, say, in a back eddy? Take a moment when you see an eddy and remember that fish are sucking up hapless insects riding the swirling current, even when it's counter to the stream's downstream course. Cast. Mend. Strike.

3

How do you know if that guy downstream is a successful angler? If the knees of his waders are threadbare, he's getting closer to trout and ensuring a

better drift when he casts. Long casts equal inaccuracy and are a breeding ground for drag. If the first 20 feet of your line show more wear than the next 20, you're probably catching more fish than anglers who take too much pride in their ability to lay out a lot of line.

4

A breeze is both a nemesis and a friend. If you're limited to a roll cast due to obstructions behind you, having the wind at your back could help. Pay out a lot of slack line, then, when you "roll," end your cast higher so the breeze catches more line and your fly. Help it along with a punch mend, lifting more line



off the water. For shorter casts, simply lift your line off the water and let it fly like a flag. Gently drop it where fish are hiding; no backcast required.

5

Trout are like most elected officials, doing as little work as possible in pursuit of reward (in this case, a meal). Food usually floats to trout on the current. Being smarter than most politicians, trout hang in adjacent, slower flow rather than “jogging in place” directly downstream of the goodies. Current seams and drop-offs are popular staging areas. Other, more subtle versions include submerged rocks and logs where

fish can rest in the slack water behind them, looking up or sideways for food. The upstream side of rocks and logs also have a small but significant padding of soft water. Friction slows water along stream banks, so make a few casts there, too.

6

When fishing new water, instead of blithely strolling from truck to bank to riffle and settling waist-deep in a fishy-looking pool, pause to assess the surroundings. Take a moment to look at the available cover. Look for rises. Pick up a couple of rocks and look for nymphs. Plan your approach for maximum stealth. Then go fishing.

7

Not catching fish? Consider this flow chart: smaller-lighter-longer-deeper. If you believe in your chosen fly and aren't catching fish, use a smaller size and/or opt for a lighter tippet. Still skunked? Extend the length of your tippet—it'll be less “draggy.” When all else fails on top, tie on a subsurface fly. Add tippet or weight and start bouncing the bottom. If none of those work, it's probably happy hour somewhere.

8

It may seem counterintuitive, but slack line is often the ticket to hooking finicky trout since it minimizes drag and gives you more of a dead drift. One way to get a nice, neat puddle of leader is to simply move so you're more directly downstream of the trout. Casting from that position, the current will help push the fly into the leader, creating more slack instead of taking it out.

9

What to do when the bank is covered with fly-grabbing obstructions and rising trout are too far for a roll cast? Turn so you can make your false cast parallel to the stream bank, then pivot to the fish as you launch your money cast.

10

Many beginners compensate for a wimpy backcast by punching their forward cast like it was their little brother's arm. That can lead to a “crack” and lost fly behind, or a bull-in-a-china-shop splash of fly line on the water in front. Instead, work on equal energy applied to both the backcast and forward cast for a nice, straight line that floats gracefully to the water.

11

To catch a rising river trout, you have to mark it first, but that can be harder than it sounds. We fixate on the rise ring, which is drifting downstream. As a bird hunter, I've learned to use fixed landmarks to retrieve the few birds I actually hit. It works on the stream, too. See the rise, then look to the bank for a recognizable feature. Make your next cast based on a known location, not a wild guess. Keep in mind that many rises come at the end of a long, backward drift by the trout, so cast a few feet upstream of your landmark.

12

In skiing and mountain biking, you look where you want to go, not at what you want to avoid crashing into. In fly angling, focus on where you want your fly to go. Don't let streamside distractions take your mind off your mission. You know where your cast should go. Make it so. **64**

If you think you've chosen the right pattern but aren't getting strikes, switch to a smaller version of the same fly.



THE JIG IS UP

THREE TECHNIQUES THAT PUT
BIG FISH IN THE BOAT ...
EVEN WHEN IT'S COLD.

By Ken Duke



A surprising number of the world's problems can be solved with the right jig. No, it's not a medical cure-all, and it won't bring peace where there is strife, but if you're trying to unlock the mysteries of February bass, the venerable jig is the key. You just have to pick the right one.

Depending on where you live in the West, your bass could be anywhere

along their seasonal spectrum, from late winter (in the northern parts of the region) to post-spawn (farther south). With such a wide range of possibilities, it helps to narrow things down by answering a simple question: What's the water temperature on your favorite bass water?

The warmer it is, the more likely you'll find fish shallow and active. But

whether the water temperature is in the 40s or the 70s, a jig is very likely the best tool for the job—not just for numbers of bass, but also for lunkers.

COLD OPEN

Since February can run the gamut from winter to post-spawn—and we have to start somewhere—let's begin with late winter and then cover warmer options.



Available in a variety of styles and colors, jigs offer a versatile way to target winter bass at all levels in the water column.

Many anglers tend to underestimate where the bass are in their annual cycle, especially at this time of year. Though it might be cold, and the fish can seem lethargic, the power of the spawn and the annual mating urge is considerable and should never be ignored. Even in areas where the bass are two or even three months away from laying eggs, at least part of the bass population is

already being influenced by the need to spawn, by the moon phases, by the lengthening days and by whatever else tells a fish that it's time to procreate.

That means that even though most of the bass are deep, they'll typically be in water quite near their eventual spawning grounds. Of course, "deep" is a relative term, and what's deep in one lake or reservoir might be considered

shallow in another. On some waters, 15 feet is deep; on others, it might be 50 feet or more. Water clarity is another factor that impacts what is considered deep. Generally, the clearer the water, the deeper the bass will go in winter.

And when you know the bass are deep, a football jig with a soft-plastic chunk-style trailer is tough to beat. The football jig is a great design for crawling

through rocks and other cover, while the chunk trailer is subtle—just right for bass when their metabolisms are slow. At this time of year, if the fish are deep, you don't want your bait to have a lot of action. That would be unnatural. Instead, you want to crawl and drag it around main-lake and secondary points near spawning grounds. Slower is usually better under these conditions. Bites can be subtle, and because the water is often clear and the fish are getting a good look at the lure, try to “match the hatch” as best you can.

Your jig can emulate anything from a crawfish to a baitfish, depending upon the color you select and the retrieve you give it. Green pumpkin and other natural colors are usually best. Stay away from the gaudy stuff unless you know the area forage is garish. Retrieve your jig across long points, starting deep—where the point intersects a channel or drop—and gradually work your way shallower. When you get a bite, make note of the depth and stick with it. There's likely more than one fish there.

There are plenty of great football jigs on the market. Berkley, Jewel, Missile, Strike King and Z-Man all make fine models. Choose your weights based on the depths you'll be fishing (usually 3/8 to 1 ounce), but err on the heavy side to ensure you maintain good bottom contact.

Maximize your angling efficiency by using a rod, reel and line that are suited for the type of jig and technique you're fishing.



THE RIGHT STUFF

Rod and reel choices for fishing with jigs

Every type of fishing is made easier and more productive with the right gear. And while the ideal jig gear can vary from waterbody to waterbody and cover type to cover type, some general parameters will help.

A good swim-jig outfit will include a 7-foot to 7-foot-6-inch, medium-heavy-action graphite casting rod with a fast tip; a smooth baitcasting reel with a gear ratio of 7:1 or faster; and either 30- to 65-pound braided line (in heavy vegetative cover) or 15- to 20-pound fluorocarbon line (for clear water or around wood or rock). Such a combo is capable of long casts and solid hooksets.

A similar combo is usually best for football jigs or swing-head jigs, but you should probably forget about the braided line; fluorocarbon is a better choice.

For flipping and pitching, beef up to a 7-foot-6-inch to 8-foot medium-heavy or heavy casting rod and a casting reel spooled with 20-pound fluorocarbon or, in heavy vegetation, 50- to 65-pound braid.



Carry jigs in multiple colors, and try to “match the hatch” by selecting one that mimics the prey species bass are keying on in a given area.

COVERING WATER

For decades, many of us thought of jigs as slow-moving lures to be dragged across the bottom, emulating a crawfish. Well, that works, but jigs can do a lot more. Over the past 30 years or so, swimming a jig has become a thing as we realize the extraordinary versatility of what must be one of the oldest lure types ever devised.

You can swim any jig in your tackle box, but you'll likely have more success if you use one that's made for the job. A good swim jig is balanced so that it swims straight through the water; has a good weed guard to fend off snags; carries a quality hook—heavy gauge for heavy cover and lighter wire for open water; and has a good trailer keeper since the trailer must provide a lot of the action.

Swimming a jig has at least three great benefits. First, it allows you to cover a lot of water relatively quickly

MIKE CLINGAN (TOP); COURTESY OF BERKLEY (BOTTOM)

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Choose your jig trailer wisely. In cold water, opt for models with more subtle action. Switch to plastics with appendages once water warms.



since it's a cast-and-crank technique. Shaking the rod tip as you reel will add some action that often draws strikes, but that's usually best in water temperatures of 60 degrees and warmer.

Second, a swim jig can cover all levels of the water column—from inches below the surface to 20 or 30 feet down—though it's most effective in water less than 10 feet deep. Just adjust your jig weight and retrieve speed until you zero in on what the bass want at that time.

Finally, the swim jig can emulate virtually anything on a bass' diet, from crawfish to shad to bluegills to anything else that swims. All you must do is adjust the color and retrieve.

With the swim jig, your soft-plastic trailer is almost as important as the jig itself. And in February, when water temperatures tend to be on the low side, you'll generally need to opt for a trailer without a lot of action. Forget the craw-style trailers with big appendages that

flop around. Instead, try a paddle-tail swimbait or chunk trailer that's more subtle and in tune with the metabolism of the bass.

Davis Bait Company, Dirty Jigs and Berkley all make fine swim jigs. Keep an arsenal of three or four colors (white, green pumpkin and black-and-blue, for instance) in sizes from 1/4 to 1/2 ounce to cover the bases.

GO IN AFTER 'EM

When your buddies are telling you that the bite is slow and all the fish are deep, nod in agreement and get your flipping and pitching gear ready. The conventional "wisdom" they're spreading is probably wrong.

Fact is, there are always some bass in shallow water. It's the nature of the beast. And if you can find them, they're usually ready to bite. The key to putting them in the boat is the proper presentation, and that usually means flipping and pitching.

For this style of fishing you want—you guessed it—a flipping jig. This usually means a bait with an Arkie-style head and heavy-duty hook that will stand up to jackhammer hooksets with heavy lines and stiff rods.

Target heavy shallow cover (less than 10 feet deep) and put your jig and soft plastic chunk right in the heart of it. Don't dilly-dally around the edges hoping to draw fish out; you're more likely to spook a bass holding in the densest part of the cover than you are to accomplish anything else. Most of your strikes will come on the initial fall, but hop the jig a time or two before lifting it out and presenting it to the next target.

BERKLEY
FLIPPING JIG



Strike King, Medlock and Berkley are all known for their excellent flipping and pitching jigs. Models weighing between 3/8 and 1 ounce will tackle most any job. **BT**

A man with a beard and blue eyes, wearing a grey and black camouflage wetsuit, is smiling and holding a large, orange and brown crab. He is standing on a boat, with a rocky coastline and water in the background.

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TAKE IT TO THE BANK

RELY ON THESE TACTICS TO
INCREASE ENCOUNTERS WITH
BIG WINTER RAINBOWS
WHEN STALKING THE
RIVER'S EDGE.

By Gary Lewis



PATRICK CLAYTON/ENGBRETTSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Slowly stalking the bank of a river with spinning or fly gear is a good way for anglers to try different tactics during the winter months.

Winter weather can be a good thing. When it's too cold for many anglers to bother sliding their boats in the water, there's more river for the rest of us.

This is when life is better walking the edge of a stream, reading the water for the best lies with a fly or spinning rod (or both) in hand. Rig a couple of rods in advance and employ these tactics from the bank of your favorite trout streams this February and March.

MICRO JIGS

Consider the ultra-small, head-heavy, deep-running micro jig for probing deep slots in fast-moving water. Tied to mimic traditional trout flies, a new line of jigs is meeting a need for anglers who are comfortable fishing a deep-running, fly-style presentation on a spinning rod. The ideal rod is about 7 feet long with 6-pound-test monofilament mainline or a comparable braid. Look for water that moves at walking speed and averages 5 to 8 feet deep. The jigs are heavy, tied on No. 12 to 8 hooks with short tails, short legs and collars. Colors and patterns are infinite, but a well-stocked box has staples like an egg-sucking leech, orange head with black body, brown, olive/black, rusty orange (crawfish imitation) and white.

Winter trout are more opportunistic, but they have not forgotten how to eat crawdads or sculpin. Use a fixed or sliding float and mend or otherwise slow down the presentation to the speed of the water sliding along the bottom.

If micro jigs are hard to come by, stop by a fly shop and look over the selection of Tungsten Balanced Leeches, sculpins and assorted Woolly Buggers.

If the water is too fast to run a micro jig close to the bottom, add weight to the line. Sometimes one split shot can make all the difference between catching a limit and going home empty-handed.

CRAWFISH PATTERNS

After a heavy rain, a tributary stream will blow out and trout might back down out of the dirty water. Down in the main river, holding off the creek inflow, they are likely to stage along the edge of the muddy current and pick off food that washes down. This is an excellent time to put a crawfish pattern to work.

It's harder than it looks to get a weighted crawdad imitation down on the bottom. Any good fly shop is going to offer at least a dozen crawfish patterns, but the trick is getting them deep. Tied on a jig hook so the point rides up, and with tungsten "eyes," a crawfish pattern can go deep fast.

One good option is the Mack's Roadkill Craw from Rainy's Flies. Cast upstream, let it sink, then retrieve it in small increments through the boulders. To fish it right, it must bump the bottom and move in small spurts. When it snags, you know you're fishing it correctly.



**MACK'S
ROADKILL
CRAW**

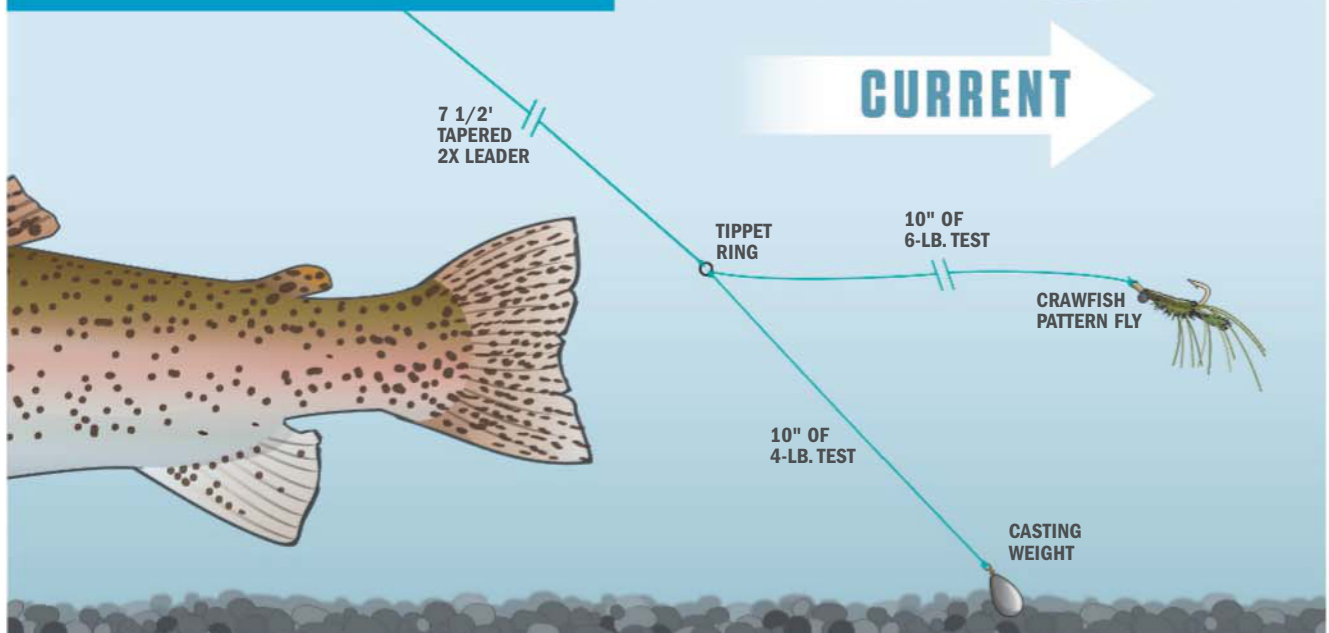
The copper scale and burnt orange Mack's Smile Blade Fly is a winner when fished down in the boulders, but it takes weight to drag the neutrally buoyant attractor down.

A drop-shot rig works well for light-weight craw patterns (see diagram below). Dress it with Pro-Cure crawfish scent for added attraction and let that crawdad hunt.



The author banked this chunky winter rainbow with a fly rod, but using spinning gear with fly-fishing techniques will also put fish in the net.

DROP-SHOT CRAWDAD



GARY LEWIS (TOP); ILLUSTRATION BY PETER SUCHESKI

MINI SPINNER BAITS

At certain times of the year, a spinner is the best choice when searching for trout; a run-and-gun approach can pay off with more strikes. But on a slow-moving river or when casting from the shoreline over deeper water, it makes sense to experiment with various depths and retrieve rates. Cast, count to five and retrieve. On the next cast, count to 10, and so on. Stand in one place and fan-cast the area using the countdown system. When a trout strikes, try to get the lure to that same depth again.

One of my favorite trout lures over the last year has been a little bass-style spinner bait sized down for rainbows from Trout Wizard Lure Company, based in Bend, Ore. I found them on Instagram and started fishing their lures early in the season last year, with good action from late February into early April.

For searching really big water, I like the small, stealthy Realis Spin from Duo International. It's a wide-area search bait that casts a mile and is super-easy to fish with a simple retrieve. It sinks fast and its tail blade makes it look like a furiously moving baitfish from the back, while the body gives off an erratic side roll at the slightest slowdown.

PLASTIC WORMS AND MINNOWS

Plastic worms tend to produce as many fish as natural baits now. Rig up to drift the edge of a seam with just enough weight to tickle the tops of the rocks. Jeff Warner, founder of XFactor Tackle, relies on three main colors in cold winter water—hot red, fluorescent pink and natural worm.

Adapted from steelhead drift fishing, the best rig starts with a 6-pound main line tied to a barrel swivel. A sliding sinker on the main line is a good way to get the bait down, but another option is to leave a tag on the main line knot and crimp on removable split shot. The leader should be 20 inches long and terminate at a No. 10 or 8 single egg hook.

Warner's go-to for brown trout on his home water is a 1/16-ounce jig head on a No. 4 hook and an XFactor Teaser minnow. He fishes without a float.

"In my experience, it is better to allow the bait to do its work as an injured baitfish," he says. "I don't want a natural drift, I want violent rips and jerks. It's why I like the lightweight jig. I don't

need it to be down on the bottom. It lets the bait look more erratic than it does with a heavy jig head."

Warner's favorite color on a bright, sunny day is motor oil with red flake. Warner recommends casting a plastic minnow in tailouts and along seams and ripping it back.

"I like to cast it upriver and then 'work the clock,' so to speak," he says. "Even cast it straight downriver and twitch it. If I don't catch a fish after that, there ain't one in there."

The bite can be hard to detect. Keep your index finger on the line to stay in touch with the rocks; set the hook at the slightest tug that signals a grab.

FLY-ROD BEADS

With whitefish spawning in Western rivers in February, we have a bait to match. Trout keying on whitefish spawn get used to gobbling the yellow eggs, and it's why some fly-anglers have success on yellow wet flies in February. Summer steelhead might also be spawning in February, in which case the trout will be eating orange eggs. In any case, small beads and tiny yellow worms can turn a rainbow's head this month.

Go for a stealthy presentation in clear water with a bead about 2 inches above the hook. This can be accomplished several ways. One easy method is to attach a piece of clear mono to the leader with a nail knot 2 inches above the hook, where it acts as a stop. Set the indicator (a good one is the easy-to-cast plastic Thingamabobber), put split shot above the tippet knot (or swivel) and set the float about the depth of the water.

When the trout bites the bead, the angler reacts with a short upward lift,

which tends to pull the bead through and pin the hook in the outside corner of the fish's mouth.

SOFT-PLASTIC EGGS

A squishable, scented roe imitation tumbled along the gravel with a drift-fishing rig or a bottom-walking drop-shot setup can turn a lot of heads. One of the greatest moments in drift-fishing is to watch a trout peel away from its holding lie, follow a soft orange egg downstream, then crush it.

A Daiichi Salmon Egg Bleeding Bait hook in sizes 12 to 8 is a good choice for most trout water. Again, the soft egg is best positioned 2 inches above the hook, which can be accomplished by using a nail knot, a blood knot, a sequin or a similar bead stopper.

One of the mistakes we make is using an indicator in shallow, clear water. If the fish and the bottom are visible, dispense with the indicator and just watch for the take.

Another mistake is allowing the weight to control the movement of the egg. This is why a sliding sinker is sometimes the best choice. A drop-shot weight with a tag end of a surgeon's knot used to splice on a bit of 4-pound fluorocarbon is another option.

In February an angler can find clear water before the snows start to melt and lift the rivers. This time of the year, you're never up a creek without a paddle. It's a time to walk the edge of the river with your favorite pair of polarized glasses and a couple of rods rigged to anticipate a trout's appetite. Big rainbows are on the move this month, and they are hungry. You can bank on that. 



This rainbow fell to a Mack's Smile Blade Fly in crawfish colors fished along the river's bottom.

BROKEN-COUNTRY

COYOTES

USE TERRAIN FEATURES AND VEGETATION FUNNELS TO
CALL COYOTES RIGHT INTO YOUR LAP.

By Andrew McKean



In corduroy country, with its endless ripple of ridges and coulees, the terrain calls the shots. Climb high, where you have plenty of visibility, and the wind can send your scent into the nose of an incoming coyote. If you stay low, where wind is more consistent, you lose the advantage of sight.

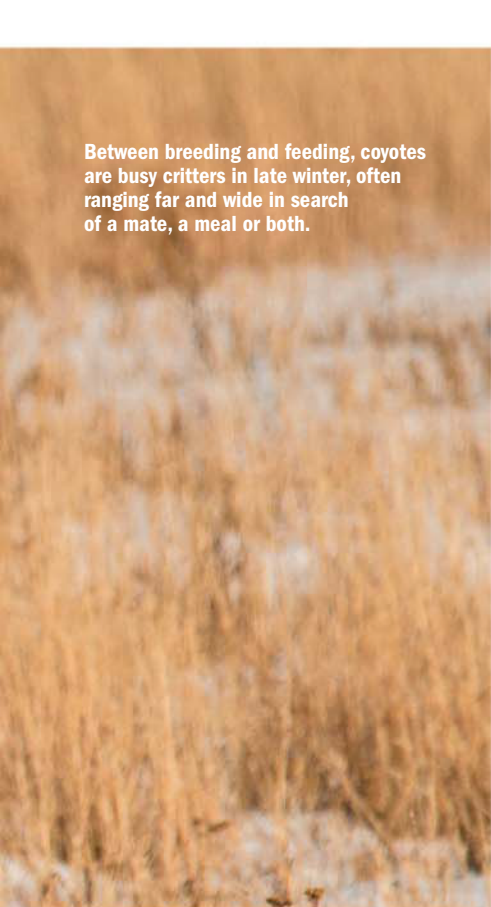
The best broken-country coyote hunters adjust to a mix of landscapes and employ a handful of setups to specific terrain features and weather conditions. That versatility is key, because anywhere you find coyotes in the West—that is to say, everywhere—they thrive in some

variation of broken country, whether river breaks, timbered foothills, arid bench-and-canyon land or even farm country that's broken up by fences and homesteads. If you have only one go-to set, then you're going to miss out on a lot of callable coyotes this month.

Coyotes are particularly susceptible to calling in February, when juveniles are wandering in search of mates, adults are territorial in this breeding season and every coyote is especially vocal. This is the month to stack fur, and in broken terrain you'll do it with a mix of hand and electronic calls and with

a long-range rifle and a close-quarters shotgun. Depending on the terrain, you might have to reach out for a distant shot or take an incoming coyote at turkey range.

Because every piece of ground is different, routinely successful coyote callers must rely on a wide variety of tactics and adjustments to specific conditions. Entire books have been written about variations on these themes, but we're going to give you four sets that cover nearly every type of terrain, from the Utah scablands to the wheat fields of eastern Montana.



Between breeding and feeding, coyotes are busy critters in late winter, often ranging far and wide in search of a mate, a meal or both.

CLIMB HIGH AND GLASS

In unfamiliar country, this is by far the best way to both learn the landscape and read the responses of distant coyotes. Last year, I employed this strategy in the breaks of Wyoming's Powder River, hiking or driving to the tops of ridges and promontories, then tucking into cover and spending the next hour picking apart the landscape with my optics.

When hunting new ground, I might make some low-volume calls, just to strike an answer from any nearby coyotes, but this is mainly a watch-and-wait game, dissecting the landscape with discipline and patience. If I spot a coyote within earshot, I keep my optics on it—here's where a tripod-mounted binocular pays off—and blow a series of loud hail calls. Generally, I'll send a short interrogation call to see how they react. If they're too far away to hear, or if the wind snatches my sound, then I'll either get closer or blow a high-pitched call that punches through the wind. Normally, an unsuspecting coyote

will raise its head and respond. That's a killable dog. If it tucks its tail and runs the other way, the only way you'll kill it is by ambush.

I like to move in fast on those curious coyotes, making sure to keep my profile off the ridgeline and the wind in my face or on my cheek. I'm no purist; if I can get within rifle range to pick off an oblivious coyote, I'll take the shot. But the pinnacle achievement is making a kill set and calling that coyote I saw from on high right into my lap.

Think of this approach like a bass angler casting to nesting bass. You can throw a bunch of different calls (or lures) at your quarry and adjust depending on their response. Regardless of the season, I generally start with a pup whine and yelp. These are non-aggressive vocalizations that neither alarm nor invite. They simply alert, and will set up a coyote for the next sequence.

If a coyote comes, keep up the whining. If it lifts its head and stand its ground, transition to your go-to prey-in-distress



When hunting new turf, get up high, tuck into any available cover and use your optics to pick apart the surroundings to spot coyotes.



The author likes to call coyotes in close, but he won't hesitate to use call-and-stalk tactics to set up longer shots.

call. For some of you, that's a jackrabbit. For others, it's a fawn or a magpie. If your appeal to their stomachs doesn't work, go back to vocalizations—a challenge bark or an interrogation howl. After all, it's February, and if you stroke the right sequence, you can have a bristled-up male come charging to your call.

TUCK INTO TIGHT COVER

This is the antithesis of the spot-and-call approach. It's all call, and it's a deadly tactic if you know the terrain. My buddy Cory Peterson lives by this, killing an average of two dozen coyotes every winter in the same Wyoming pasture, all inside 100 yards.

Peterson plans his sits on wind direction and barometric pressure. With a rising barometer and a wind in his face, he'll tuck into the boughs of a low-slung juniper or cedar and watch his downwind side. For Peterson, a Nebraska outfitter, this is strictly a distress play. He relies on an electronic caller to send a variety of fawn-in-distress calls.

It's worth noting that Peterson mostly wields a shotgun with an extended full choke. He's comfortable taking shots out to 75 yards, anchoring coyotes with No. 4 buckshot.

The location of the set is critical. Peterson sets up near game trails where he's routinely seen coyote tracks, but

'YOTE GEAR

Solid options to round out your coyote-hunting bag of tricks

OPTICS

Broken-country tactics put a premium on visibility. The best all-around Western coyote optic I've experienced is **Maven's 12x50 C.3 binocular** (\$500; mavenbuilt.com). It has the magnification to pick coyotes out of distant terrain, and it easily mounts to a tripod, so your hands are free to call and to shoot.



CALL

The best open-country coyote call I've blown is Zepp's simple **Fox-Bobcat-Coyote Getter** (\$25; markzepp.com), a closed-reed, crazy-loud hand call that can mimic coyote vocalizations. It's at its best, though, with low-volume squeaks and moans that define the most realistic prey-in-trouble sounds. It blows easily, even in sub-zero temps.

SHOOTING STICK

I'm a big believer in a simple, versatile shooting stick to minimize movement of your gun when a coyote is in the red zone. The easiest to deploy is **Primos' Gen3 Short Tripod** (\$139; primos.com), which adjusts from 18 to 38 inches—perfect for a seated coyote caller.

SHOTGUN LOAD

My choice is **Federal's Vital-Shok buckshot in No. 4** (\$19/box of 5; federalpremium.com). The copper-plated pellets deliver consistent patterns and reach to 70 yards, depending on gauge and length.



where cows and deer also lay down sign. Coyotes are comfortable traveling well-trod trails, and because Peterson knows they'll come in on these established routes, he doesn't have to guess about direction or distance.

He rarely gets a vocal response to his calls; instead, these coyotes come on a string, generally running flat-out on the trails and then trotting or even walking when they get inside 100 yards. This close engagement puts a premium on camouflage and lack of movement.

Get your gun up on a knee or bipod even before you begin your calling sequence. When this approach works, things happen so fast that you won't have time to get set up before coyotes are coming on a string, heads up and looking for any movement or glint of skin or gun.

RUN THE RIDGES

This is a tactic borrowed from my late-season turkey book. Find a long, timbered ridge that commands a ton

of lower country and simply walk the spine, calling into drainages on either side. Set up against a big tree trunk every 200 yards or so and keep your eyes peeled for silent coyotes sneaking into your location. That's an important consideration, as only a quarter or so of February coyotes will respond to your calls. Especially in the middle of the day, plan to shoot coyotes that don't make a peep as they investigate your calls.

The upside of this is that you can cover several square miles in a day, so



In February, many coyotes won't vocally respond to a call but will instead approach silently, especially in the middle of the day.



A dependable semi-automatic rifle and high-quality scope is a proven combo for longer shots on wary coyotes.

payout for a predator, and because these low-elevation areas are often full of foraging deer at night, it's not a stretch for coyotes to assume that one of those alfalfa-gorging deer has run into a fence or gotten clipped by a car.

This is an approach that's best executed with a partner. One of you can work the call and spot while the other sits upwind with a gun on a shooting stick, ready to swivel and squeeze off a shot when the coyote shows itself in the dense cover.

The biggest takeaway from this set, just like the others, is that hunters should keep a close eye on their downwind side. That's almost always where coyotes will approach from, trying to get a whiff of their prey before they show themselves. **GAF**

you're peeling coyotes out of the low country that would never hear your calls if you stayed only at the trailhead or head of the ridge.

It's a tactic that depends a ton on wind direction. That makes it a good mid- to late-day option, when February winds are a little more directional than they are before noon. And it's one that puts a premium on stealth. Stay close to cover to hide your form, keep your eyes peeled and do whatever it takes to see an incoming coyote before it sees you. In February, it's also a good chance to snow-track coyotes, which will often move along the same ridgelines that you're working.

CALL UPHILL

Lastly, use terrain features to call coyotes into the confluence of a web of drainages. This is a very good approach as winter weather pushes wind currents downhill, and it's the best way to cover many square miles of cover with a single set.

It's also a very good ag-country approach, since many Western terrains drain into irrigated bottomlands. Coyotes will feed at night on voles, mice and birds in the highly productive bottomlands, then filter up dry drainages to bed down for the daytime. By setting up in the cover-rich ag area, you can appeal to coyotes' daily routines and use a wide variety of prey-in-distress calls.

My favorite for this terrain is a fawn-in-distress call. Fawns—whether white-tails or mule deer—offer a huge caloric



Hunt the bottoms of brush-choked canyons, where coyotes often use deer and cattle trails to make their daily rounds.

AUDREY WICKEN '21

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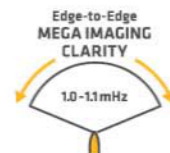
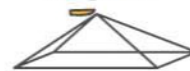


A gar and crappie
suspended in a fallen tree.

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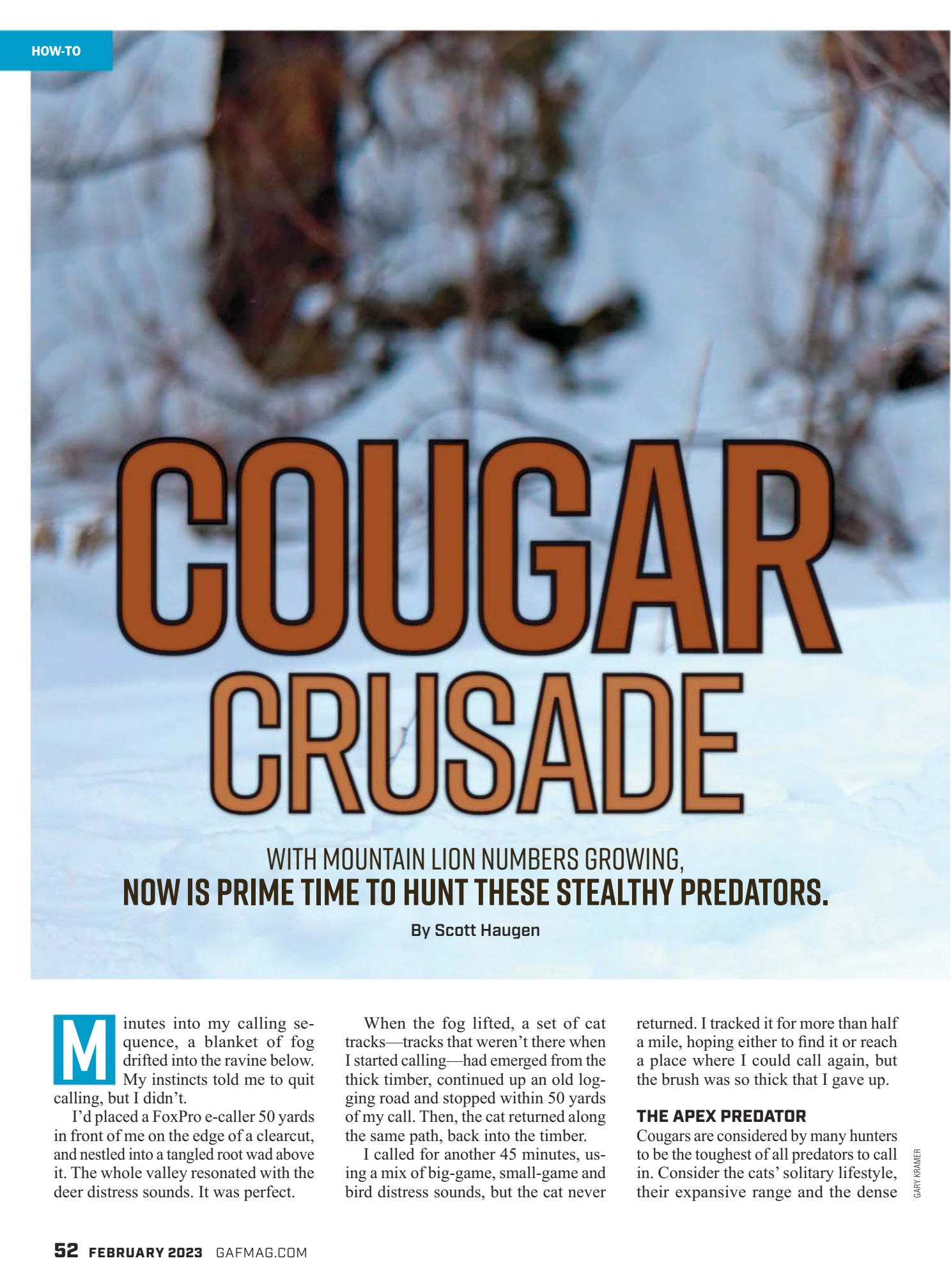
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COUGAR CRUSADE

WITH MOUNTAIN LION NUMBERS GROWING,
NOW IS PRIME TIME TO HUNT THESE STEALTHY PREDATORS.

By Scott Haugen

Minutes into my calling sequence, a blanket of fog drifted into the ravine below. My instincts told me to quit calling, but I didn't.

I'd placed a FoxPro e-caller 50 yards in front of me on the edge of a clearcut, and nestled into a tangled root wad above it. The whole valley resonated with the deer distress sounds. It was perfect.

When the fog lifted, a set of cat tracks—tracks that weren't there when I started calling—had emerged from the thick timber, continued up an old logging road and stopped within 50 yards of my call. Then, the cat returned along the same path, back into the timber.

I called for another 45 minutes, using a mix of big-game, small-game and bird distress sounds, but the cat never

returned. I tracked it for more than half a mile, hoping either to find it or reach a place where I could call again, but the brush was so thick that I gave up.

THE APEX PREDATOR

Cougars are considered by many hunters to be the toughest of all predators to call in. Consider the cats' solitary lifestyle, their expansive range and the dense

GARY KRAMER



A cougar can roam a home range of 100 square miles or more, making it one of the most challenging predators to lure to a call.

habitats in which they live, and it's no wonder cougars are the apex predator.

At about 2 years of age, cougars become sexually mature; however, they seldom breed until they are older and have established a home range. Toms live up to 12 years, females longer. Mating can occur any time of year, but most breeding takes place between October and May, with January and February

being the peak. Therefore, these are the prime calling months.

Male cougars can range 100 miles or more—much farther than females—when establishing territories. Males will mate with multiple females, and toms play no role in rearing the young. Cougars can be very vocal during breeding time, with females making eerie, wailing and blood-curdling screams. Cougars also hiss,

growl, cry and chirp—sounds hunters can emulate in an effort to call in a cat.

CALLING ALL COUGARS

Twenty years ago, I talked to a man who called in seven cougars in six weeks. He and his hunting buddies, who each had tags, killed every one of them. His approach was simple. He'd pull his truck to an elevated landing at the end of a

logging road, set two giant speakers on the hood of his truck and play cougar mating sounds as loud as he could.

He considered the peak of the breeding season to be January and February in the Cascades, and obviously knew what he was doing. He experienced success year after year.

The growing number of hunter-cougar encounters is rising throughout the West, along with cat populations. More than 80 percent of cougars are taken by hunters who are targeting other animals, mainly coyotes and elk. With so many cougars, and so much public land to explore, you'd think more hunters would find success calling them.

I've spoken with many hunters who have called in cougars and didn't know it until they left the call site. Upon leaving the area, they found where cats had moved in behind them, often lying down in the snow, trying to identify the prey or patiently waiting before moving in for the kill.

Many elk hunters are calling in cougars with cow and calf sounds intended to bring in a rutting bull in September and October. Late summer and early fall are when many kittens are mature enough to learn how to take down big game, meaning many cats are actively on the hunt.

One hunter I spoke with, Josh Knoebel, successfully and intentionally called in two cougars in recent years. He killed them both and earned each one.



When coming to a call, cougars often will bed down long enough to pinpoint the location of the distress sounds before sneaking in for the kill.



Cougars are fine-tuned predators, claiming an astounding number of big-game animals every year.

"The first cats I started picking up on trail camera were in August, at about 1,000 feet of elevation in the Cascades," Knoebel says. "I kept getting pictures of two cats, young females, through October, and once the pelts primed up, I started calling. I figured if I sat and called every day for several weeks, I'd have a solid chance of getting a cat. I was prepared to call at least two hours each time, hoping to catch the cats as they moved through."

On day three, Knoebel didn't need to call the full two hours.

"I let the fawn distress calls run for an hour on my Johnny Stewart call," he says. "Then I switched to fighting mountain lion sounds. Fifteen minutes into that sound, I noticed a brown spot in the brush. It just appeared right in front of me—no movement, no sound,

SCOTT HANGEN (2)

nothing. I stared at the spot, trying to figure out what it was, and that's when I saw a tail twitch."

Knoebel's heart raced, but he kept his composure, taking steady aim at the cat that stared him in the face 50 yards away. He dropped the female lion with one well-placed shot.

The second cougar Knoebel called in was also in November, this one at 4,500 feet in the Cascade Mountains.

"I got time off work, as we had a fresh snow," Knoebel says. "In one area, I cut three fresh cat tracks and I followed them over one and a half miles. I found where they bedded and urinated, then entered a clearing in the timber. That's when I set up my FoxPro and started calling."

Knoebel used a lost fawn sound. Nineteen minutes into the sequence, an orange-colored cat came charging out of the timber.

"Once she reached the opening and figured out where the sound was coming from, she went into stealth mode and started slowly stalking the call," Knoebel says. "That was an incredible thing to watch."

Before the cougar reached Knoebel's call, he filled his tag.

KEEP AT IT

Of all the cat hunters I've talked with over the years, they all agreed that dedicating a minimum of two hours to each calling setup is a must. They also agreed that the louder the calls the better, and that consistent calling with no breaks is important.

Deer fawn and adult deer distress sounds, followed by calf and cow elk sounds, seem to be the most productive for hunters targeting cougars. Bird distress and various mountain lion

vocalizations also account for a number of cats every year.

Many hunters advocate setting up on a fresh kill and calling as soon as possible, but those aren't easy to come by. One hunter set a coyote decoy on a fresh deer kill and used coyote sounds to bring in a cat, which demolished the decoy so quickly he didn't know what was happening. When the lion paused, the hunter filled his tag.

Of the many hunters who shared stories with me, it took an average of nearly one and a half hours for a cougar to come into a call. A high percentage of cats came in slow and timid, appearing in ghost-like fashion. For this reason, hunters advocate tediously studying the calling area for a few minutes prior to making any sounds so you can recognize when something in the habitat looks different.

"I honestly don't think what sound you use matters much," says Knoebel. "It's more about volume and consistency and being where a cat can hear you."

SNOW TIME

Some hunters have had good success tracking cougars in snow, too. The best results come with a fresh snow.

"If you look up into the hills and see that fresh snow fell in the night, call in sick and get after it," says Justin Smith. "When on the hunt, cats will go anywhere, but between hunts they often walk paths of least resistance like logging roads and game trails. Throw a pack on your back and follow those tracks as far as you can, and you might just catch up to one."

Of the hunters I spoke with about tracking cougars in the snow, most shared the observation that prior to killing a cat, they saw where it had lain in the snow, often multiple times. When you start seeing where a cougar has lain down, slow your pace and start glassing or begin calling.

Three days prior to writing these words, I saw the biggest cougar of my life. The massive tom crossed a logging road right in front of me soon after I'd finished calling. I tried calling again, and returned each of the next two mornings but had no luck. I'm not giving up.

If you want to call in or track down a cougar, spend serious time in the woods and don't throw in the towel. Success requires many things to come together when pursuing these apex predators. 



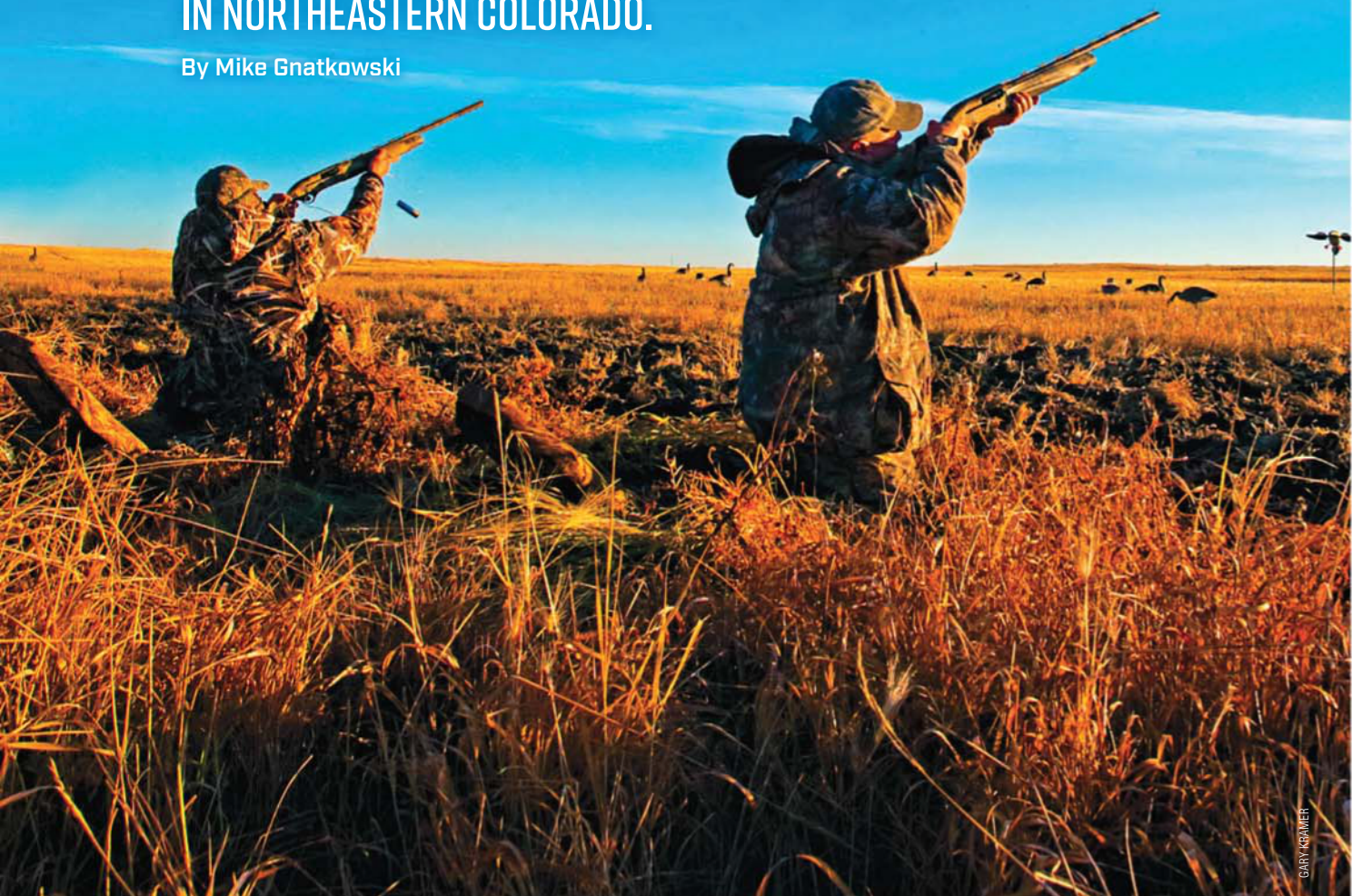
Cougars can appear from anywhere. Once you start calling, keep a watchful eye all around and be on high alert.

VIC SCHENDEL

LAST-CHANCE GEESE

AS THE SEASON WINDS DOWN, GOOSE HUNTING HEATS UP
IN NORTHEASTERN COLORADO.

By Mike Gnatkowski



GARY KRAMER



Hunters who pursue geese through the end of Colorado's season can experience some of the best waterfowl hunting of the year.

The last two weeks of the dark-geese season in northeast Colorado might be the best goose hunting of the year in the region. It's the one time when you're not going to get shafted by the weather when waterfowling. If it's nasty, giant honkers that have endured a long, cold winter will finally relent and slip down from Montana and Wyoming to more comfortable confines where food sources aren't covered in a foot of snow. If it's mild, snow geese, specklebellies and cacklers, the smallest subspecies of Canada geese, will begin filtering up from the San Luis Valley and points farther south to get a jump on the spring migration. It's one time when waterfowlers are happy regardless of what kind of weather they get, which is rare.

MIGRATION ROUTES

Colorado's Front Range is famous for its goose hunting. The lee side of the mountains has just the right mix of impoundments, private lakes and ponds, agriculture and a moderate climate to attract geese migrating south from Wyoming, Montana, Saskatchewan and the Arctic. A fair number of resident Canada geese find the environment equally inviting. Researchers estimate that during the peak of the migration, upwards of 150,000 geese take up residence on the Front Range, where the goose population attracts a lot of attention. There's steep competition for prime hunting property leases within 50 miles of Fort Collins, and landowners get top dollar for them. Public hunting opportunities are basically nonexistent.

By contrast, just 100 miles to the northeast a totally different population of geese exists. Like with the Front Range transients, the goose population here has been growing by leaps and bounds, but they aren't the same geese. Although there are giant Canadas in the mix that migrate through northeast Colorado, there's also an abundance of cacklers, white-fronts (specklebellies) and snow geese.

"There are a lot more white-fronts in northeast Colorado than there are on the Front Range," says Jim Gammonley, wildlife specialist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). "While it's rare to see a white-front on the Front Range, they're commonly found in the northeast part of the state. I have a feeling that those birds are spilling over from

the population that migrates though Nebraska's Rainwater Basin."

A major portion of the continent's white-fronted goose population passes through the Rainwater Basin, which isn't far from northeast Colorado as the goose flies. The specks are headed for Texas, Kansas, Louisiana and Arkansas in the fall, and Saskatchewan, Alberta and Alaska in the spring. A succession of drought years in the Rainwater Basin has made it likely that more and more specks and snows have been sliding to the west.

"More than likely, if you see a white-fronted goose anywhere in western Nebraska or northeast Colorado in February it's heading north," says Gammonley. "There's been a shift in the last couple of decades in where the white-fronts and snows are wintering, including the specks and snows coming through western Nebraska and northeast Colorado. I'm guessing the white-fronts are headed to southeast Colorado and John Martin Reservoir, the Panhandle of Texas, the Winchester Lakes region near Wichita Falls and the interior of Texas. Some may go all the way to Mexico or coastal Texas. Snow geese are likely headed to the same areas, with the exception of interior Texas."

Geese don't just migrate north and south. Much of the movement, especially in northeast Colorado, is from east to west and vice versa. The Platte River is a major thoroughfare for geese. The South Platte meanders through Morgan, Logan and Sedgwick counties. Geese follow the river and roost on reservoirs like Jackson, Riverside and Empire, west of Fort Morgan; Prewitt and North Sterling reservoirs near Sterling; and Jumbo and Julesburg reservoirs in the very corner of northeast Colorado.

PUBLIC LAND

One of the biggest differences between Front Range goose hunting and hunting in the northeast part of the state is public hunting opportunity. There are state wildlife areas and CPW Walk-In Areas that are managed for waterfowl hunting where you have a chance of shooting a few geese.

The 11,807-acre Tamarack Ranch State Wildlife Area offers some public hunting opportunities for geese along the South Branch of the Platte River, 25 miles northeast of Sterling. Reservations



Hunters can take snow geese in Colorado from Halloween through late April.

LATE-SEASON GOOSE GEAR

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You won't find a more reliable shotgun than Benelli's Super Vinci, capable of cycling rounds in even the most brutal conditions. Combining low recoil, thanks to Benelli's patented In-Line Inertia Driven system, and fast shooting capabilities, this lightweight, balanced shotgun is a favorite among hard-core waterfowl hunters. The Super Vinci reliably shoots a wide range of shells including 3 1/2-inch magnum loads. It is available in your choice of three finishes—black synthetic, Gore Optifade Marsh and Realtree Max-5. (\$1,399 to \$1,499; benellifirearms.com)



FIOCCHI FLYWAY STEEL SHOTSHELLS

End-of-season waterfowl have thick feathers and lots of fat, so you need ammo that packs a wallop. Enter Fiocchi Flyway Steel Shotshells. Fiocchi's Flyway Steel combines treated steel shot, protective wads and high-performance powders. Fiocchi's 12-gauge, 3-inch, 1 1/5-ounce load of No. 1 shot leaves the barrel at a blistering 1,550 fps and is ideal when targeting a hodgepodge of late-season geese, whether you're gunning over decoys or pass-shooting. (\$20 to \$28 per 25; fiocchiusa.com)



ALPS ZERO GRAVITY LAYOUT BLIND

Even if you've done your homework, there are times when you have to wait 'em out. You can do that in Alps Zero Gravity Layout Blind. Alps' patented chair design, combined with a padded headrest, offers the most comfortable layout blind seat on the market. The zero-gravity chair design keeps you off the ground while maintaining a low profile. The fabric body flares out on all sides to eliminate sharp corners for a more natural blend. The blind has a removable fabric outer shell. Stubble straps permit adding local vegetation so you can meld into any setting. (\$350 to \$400; alpsoutdoorz.com)



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Season dates and huntable areas for Colorado's dark and light geese

2022-2023 REGS

SPECIES	SEASON	AREAS	DAILY LIMIT
DARK GEESE	10/31/22 – 2/12/23	East of the Continental Divide, except in areas designated as part of special seasons. These include Northern Front Range, North Park, South Park and San Luis Valley.	5
LIGHT GEESE	10/31/22 – 2/12/23	Same as above	50
LIGHT GOOSE CONSERVATION	2/13/23 – 4/30/23	East of I-25	Unlimited

are available. Any unassigned positions are available on a first-come, first-served basis. For more details, contact the CPW office in Brush (970-842-6300; cpw.state.co.us).

The 1,300-acre Red Lion State Wildlife Area in Logan County is adjacent to Jumbo Reservoir. It features marsh, wetlands and open water that is open to public hunting. The area can be particularly good for pass-shooting when geese fan out to the south and return with a crop full of grain while bucking a strong headwind, headed for Jumbo

Reservoir. Boundaries for pass-shooting differ during the dark-geese season and the special late light-geese conservation season. Hunters should make note of these differences.

If you like to hunt geese over a spread of decoys, opportunities exist on Walk-In Access fields that are designated for waterfowl hunting. Typically, these are irrigated cornfields, but a prolonged drought might change that this year. At the time of this writing, the CPW was just finalizing Walk-In signups for 2022 and 2023.

"I assume they will be in, but until I get a signed agreement, that is just speculation on my part," says Ed Gorman who heads up the CPW Walk-In Program. "What we won't have is a quantity of non-irrigated corn stubble fields to hunt this year. Last year, we had our choice of as many non-irrigated cornfields as we wanted, particularly in Sedgwick County. Unfortunately, most of those droughted out this year, meaning they either won't be harvested because they didn't grow, have no kernels on the ears or they are being cut for silage, due to the severe drought we are in."

With less corn for food, geese might be forced to find wheat stubble fields on private lands. If that's the case, a phone app like onX Hunt will come in handy for identifying landowners to try to get permission to hunt.

Because Walk-In properties are foot-traffic only, decoy spreads need to be mobile. The logical choice is silhouettes or wind socks. Dive Bomb Industries offers five-dozen ultra-realistic silhouettes in a custom bag that fits perfectly in a jet sled. Get two or three buddies to each purchase a bundle and you can easily put out a sizeable, attention-getting spread. Throw your layout blind on top and your gun over your shoulder and you're in business.

What kind of decoys you choose is a matter of conjecture since you're likely to encounter a little of this or a little of that during the last two weeks of the season; cacklers, white-fronts and snow geese are not above comingling. Add a half-dozen fliers and chances are good you'll have opportunities at a variety of geese you won't find many other places this time of year. **GT**



To tempt the variety of geese you'll encounter late in the season in north-east Colorado, include multiple styles and species of decoys in your spreads.

EAST & FURIOUS

TAKE A JET BOAT OR RAFT THROUGH WEST VIRGINIA'S WHITEWATER FOR
RIP-ROARING SMALLMOUTH ACTION.

By Larry Larsen



LARRY LARSEN



Huge chunks of rock in the New River divert current and form countless places for smallmouth bass to lie in wait for a meal—or a lure.

From the launch ramp beneath Kanawha Falls, the scenery could not have been more spectacular. Guide Bobby Bower motored his jet boat past an old hydroelectric-power facility toward a series of several dozen mid-size waterfalls spanning the quarter-mile-wide Kanawha River. The bank-to-bank rock outcropping is a natural block to fish movement upstream, so the fish can pile up there at times, according to the West Virginia native.

“Cast to that foam line over there,” Bower suggested. I pitched my crawdad-resembling Big O crankbait to the edge of the foam. The narrow foam ribbon defined an eddy between two broad falls. The bait splashed down, and the current swept it toward our boat as I reeled it back, slowly but on a taut line.

“A little farther back where the foam lies against the boulder there,” advised the guide.

I complied and had an immediate hookup. The 2-pound smallmouth headed skyward through the bubbles. I quickly landed and released it. My wife, Rosie, connected with a smallie a few minutes later as we worked the eddies below most of the lower falls. Bobby maneuvered his jet boat around the boulder-strewn area, putting us in prime positions to toss our baits to the edges of the flow beneath the thundering threads of the Kanawha. We caught several more bass, plus a small walleye, taking time out to photograph the magnificent scenery.

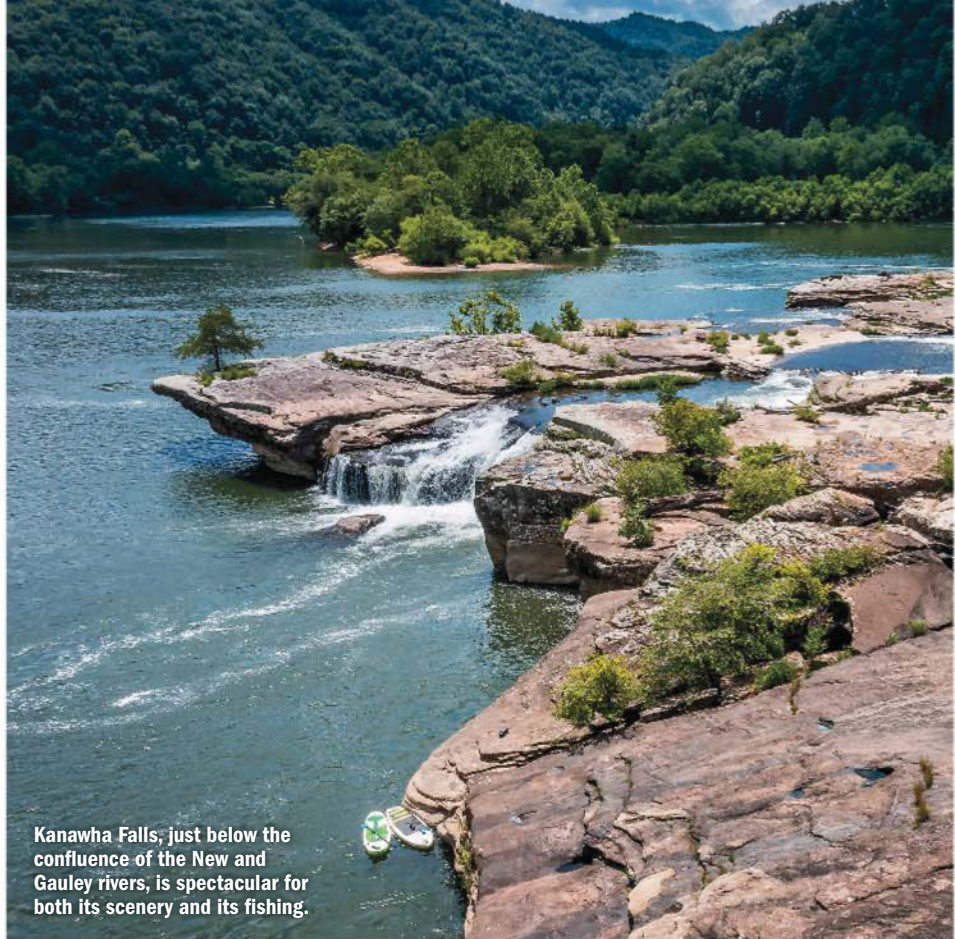
The water above the falls is West Virginia’s famous New River. It takes on the name Kanawha just after the New’s confluence with the smaller Gauley River near Hawks Nest State Park at Ansted and the Gauley Bridge. The park’s 270 acres encompass the Hawks Nest impoundment on the New River, operated by West Virginia’s Department of Natural Resources.

A low wing dam above Kanawha Falls and its rapids diverts some of the water through the power facility’s turbines on the north side of the river in the little town of Glen Ferris. Built in 1899, the plant on the shoulder of U.S. Route 60 is still operational. From the falls, the Kanawha River flows northwest through Charleston and into the Ohio River at Henderson.

The fishing above and below Kanawha Falls can be as amazing as the scenery. The smaller waterfalls stretch from about 30 to 100 feet in width and form a staircase arrangement over craggy boulders. Most falls offer a vertical drop of 6 to 12 feet, and the river's total drop is around 20 feet.

Bower has been guiding anglers from both jet boats and whitewater rafts on the New and Kanawha rivers for more than 34 years. He opened New River Jet Boats (newriverjetboats.com) in 1993 and Pro River Outfitters (profishwv.com) in 2007.

"We mainly run a jet boat on Hawks Nest Lake, the New River area at Gauley Bridge, and below Kanawha Falls and on downstream," he explained. "Downstream, the Kanawha shoreline is more industrial and commercial. There are cabins, houses and farming communities. We also utilize the jet boats for shorter evening fishing trips. The nice thing about a jet boat is you can get out when the weather is less than perfect pretty much all year long."



Kanawha Falls, just below the confluence of the New and Gauley rivers, is spectacular for both its scenery and its fishing.

NEW RECOGNITION

Gorge section becomes 63rd national park.

West Virginia's New River, previously designated as a national river, is now part of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. The designation was signed into law by President Trump in late 2020 and includes nearly 73,000 acres. It is America's newest national park.

For more than 10 million years, the tumbling whitewater cut its way through the sedimentary sandstone, forest seeps and rugged wetlands of the Appalachian Mountains, creating a spectacular canyon. The New River is one of the oldest rivers in North America. The Gorge portion within the National Park and Preserve includes more than 53 miles of fish-laden waters twisting and cascading between 500- to 1,000-foot-high cliff walls. Along the rim are many open ledges, a range of foot trails and craggy outcroppings that offer sightseers, hikers, climbers, repellers and campers exciting views.

Below, among the rushing, boulder-strewn rapids, are opportunities to catch smallmouth bass, rainbow trout and

endemic walleyes. There are numerous federal, state and private access points to put in boats along the river. The park's fishing and license regulations follow those of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (wvdnr.gov).

Accommodations near the great fishing and other recreational opportunities in the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve can be found in Fayetteville, Beckley and Glade Springs. Fayetteville sits at the northern end of the park just 2 miles from the iconic New River Gorge Bridge. Nearby is the Canyon Rim Visitor Center and Bridge Overlook, and 20 minutes away is Hawks Nest State Park and New River Jet Boats.

Fayetteville is also within 5 minutes of Adventures on the Gorge (adventuresonthegorge.com), an outdoor adventure resort. Adventures on the Gorge (AOTG) offers more than 100 cabins with hotel-style amenities, a handful of bunkhouse cabins and several rustic cabins, in addition to tent "glamping," RV campsites and vacation

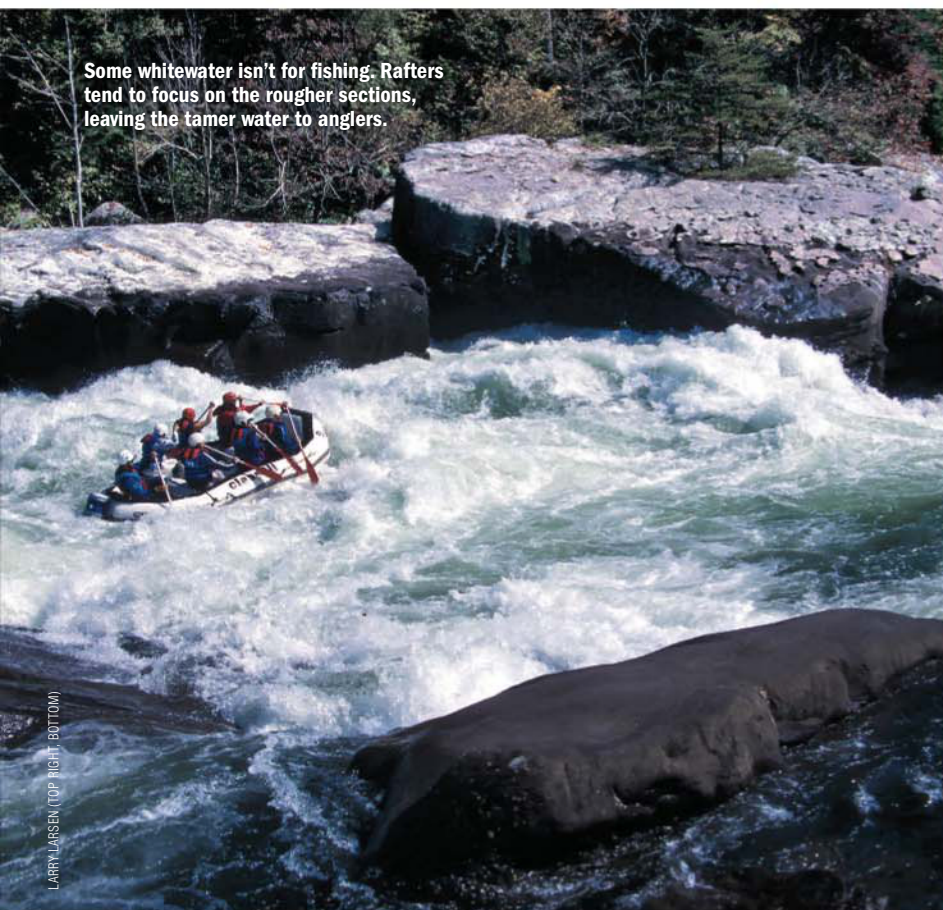
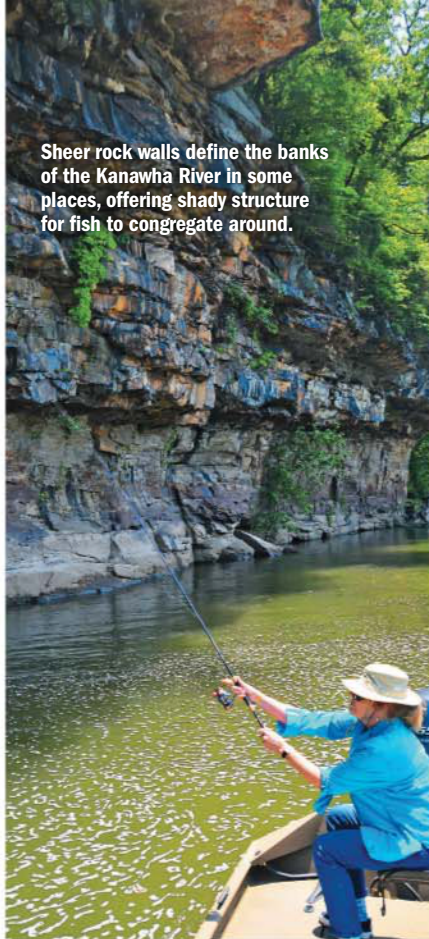


Adventures on the Gorge offers quaint cabins for resting up after a day spent on the New River.

COURTESY OF ADVENTURES ON THE GORGE (2)



Sheer rock walls define the banks of the Kanawha River in some places, offering shady structure for fish to congregate around.



Some whitewater isn't for fishing. Rafters tend to focus on the rougher sections, leaving the tamer water to anglers.

LARRY LARSEN (TOP, RIGHT, BOTTOM)

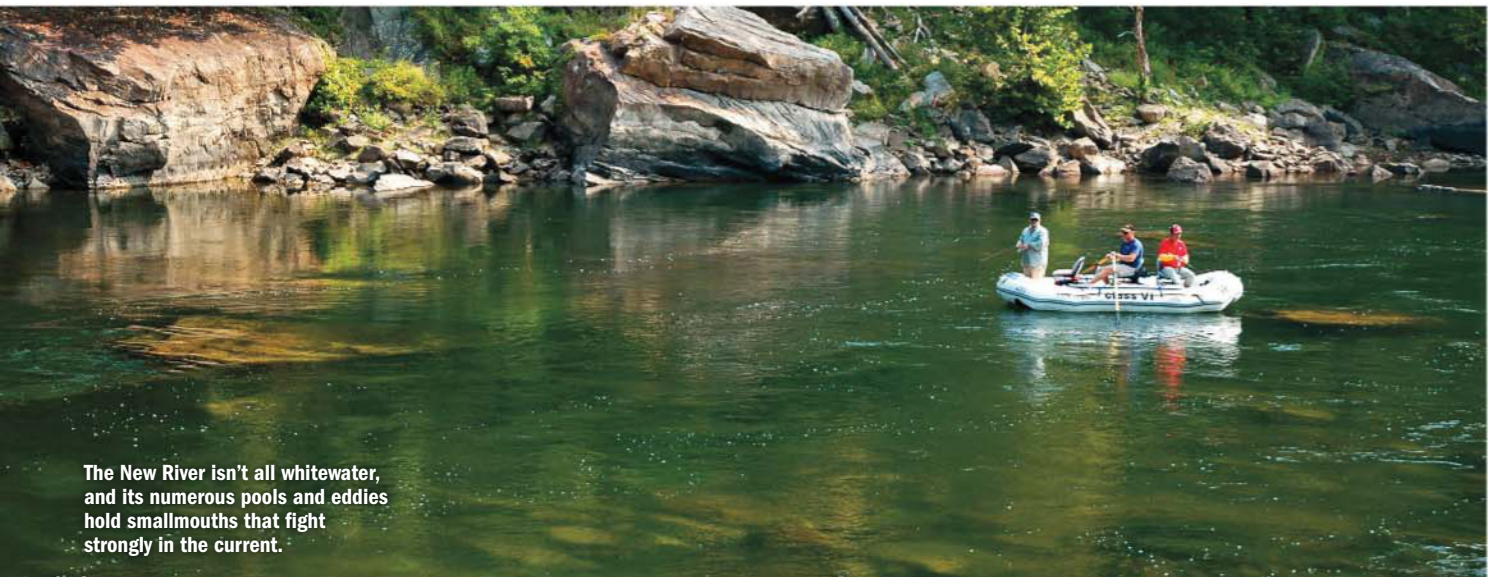
Bower's fishing boat is an 18-foot G3 powered by a 60-horsepower jet drive. It easily glides through shallow, moderate rapids and provides more comfort for anglers who are used to fishing from typical bass boats. (He also has two larger boats sporting Hamilton jet drives that are used for family and group tours.) Where Bower and his guides fish on any given day is determined by water level, clarity and flow parameters early each morning. They check flow-release schedules and water conditions online at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Whitewater Conditions Huntington District.

Bower's clients often catch big numbers of smallmouths and some sizeable ones measuring 25 inches long and weighing 7 pounds or more. He once fought a 30-inch smallie on his 5-weight fly rod that put on a spectacular tarpon-like aerial display before getting off. Bower noted that fish could have been a state record. He has seen walleyes up to 20 inches on a regular basis during the warmer months, and the largest walleye pulled into his boat in the past year measured 24 inches.

homes. The resort also has multiple dining options for all tastes. On many days, AOTG has around 800 "park and play" guests at its headquarters heading off to experience one of 50 different activities.

AOTG offers aerial, land and lake adventures, plus scenic outlook tours. Whitewater activities include rafting, fishing and kayaking. The largest outfitter in the Southeast, AOTG during the warm-weather season will generally take 40,000 people down the different sections of the New and Gauley rivers. Fortunately, the rivers are not crowded with anglers, and the rafters using the adrenaline whitewater routes through the big hydraulics seldom bother fish or those in pursuit of them.

Glade Springs Resort (gladesprings.com) in the small town of Daniels is a nice alternative at the southern end of the park. It has 200 guest rooms and suites, plus stand-alone villas and lodges. The beautiful resort has several lakes, a golf course, myriad activities and deer running all around its 4,100 acres of hilly woodlands. The town of Beckley lies about 23 miles south of the bridge, and it has a variety of lodging.



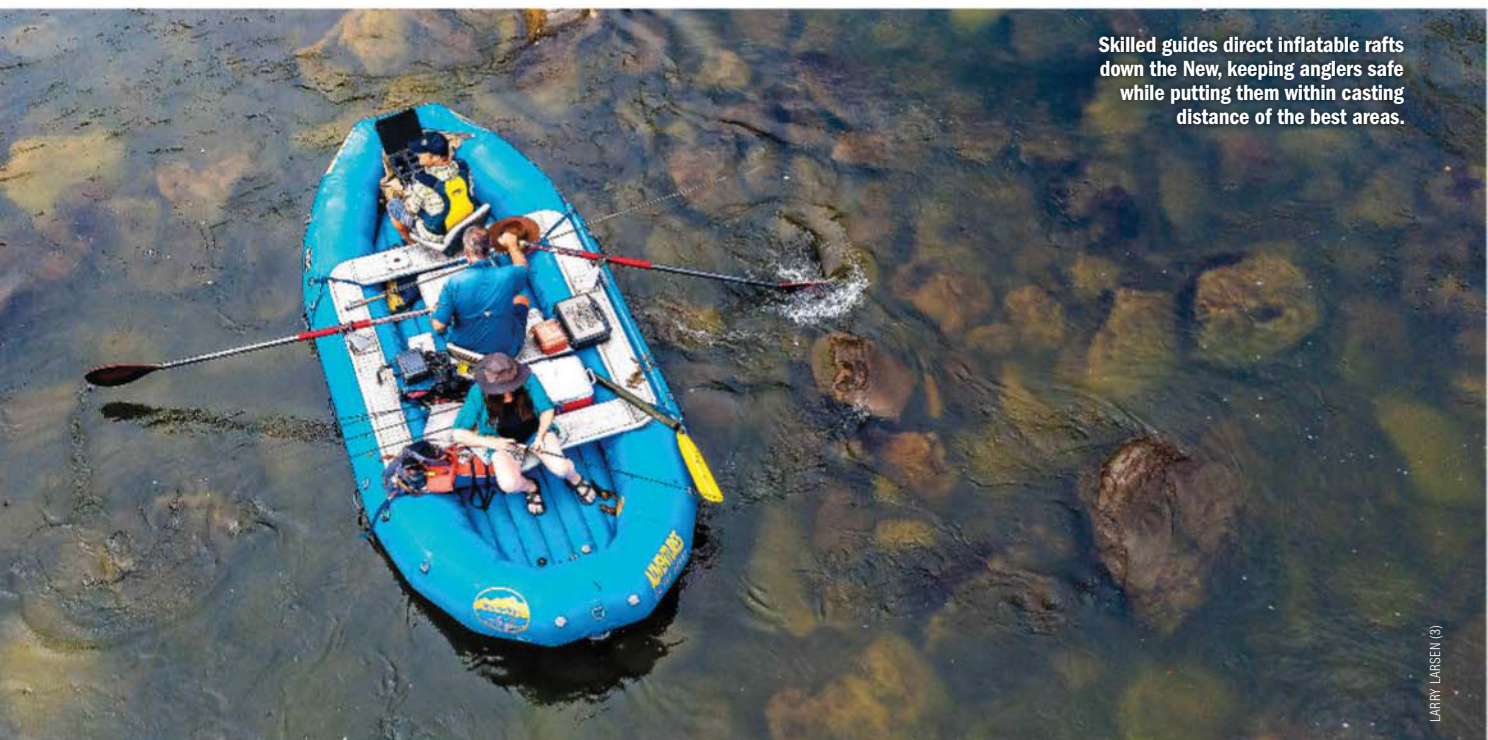
The New River isn't all whitewater, and its numerous pools and eddies hold smallmouths that fight strongly in the current.

ROWDY WATER

Pro River Outfitters often uses inflatable 14-foot fishing rafts in heavy whitewater sections of the New River between April and October. The guides frequent the New from Sandstone Falls, just above the Interstate 64 bridge and Sandstone Visitors Center, downstream through the New River Gorge. Extremely rocky rapids and fast currents abound throughout much of the 3,000-foot-wide gorge, and the wild waters teem with fish.

The thundering roar from Class IV and V rapids through the canyon get the adrenaline going as you scope out small pockets of calmer water between large boulders. The guide adeptly controls your ride through white-capped waves. These waters are for serious anglers with good casting skills. The fun starts when you hook a 2-pound smallmouth just before entering a tumbling Class IV rapid. You heave the smallie into the boat, drop your rod, secure the lifejacket and hang on!

Your guide searches for the safest approach and does everything he can to position the raft for the descent as the rapids seemingly suck your raft toward the huge waves. The raft is tossed about by the choppy waves and hydraulics, which provide the equivalent of a mechanical bull ride on high. The force of the river tests your grip on the raft straps and seat bracket. Your arm and shoulder muscles will get a short workout, and you may get wet. Fortunately,



Skilled guides direct inflatable rafts down the New, keeping anglers safe while putting them within casting distance of the best areas.

LARRY LARSEN (3)

there are only a few drenching rapids on the New that a good guide can't find a way around.

Ideal lures for the rowdy conditions are those that are easy to accurately cast, such as soft plastic flukes, grubs, tube jigs and swimbaits in light brown, tan or white hues. Road Runner 1/4- and 3/8-ounce Salt Runners and Classic Runners with a willow blade and soft plastic tail are favorites of mine. They are easy to toss and control, as is a 1/4-ounce jig with a 4 1/2-inch Hyperlastic Dartspin from A Band of Anglers. Small-billed crankbaits such as Cotton Cordell's Big O in crayfish or perch pattern, as well as spinnerbaits, may also be effective.

PLAN B

Don't overlook the nearby Gauley River.

While the New River is fishable more days each year than the Gauley River, the latter can sometimes be a good backup plan. The Gauley is an option for those days when the flow rate of the New in the Gorge is too high or when the water is too discolored for optimal fishing.

Unlike the north-flowing New River, the Gauley's smaller watershed drops out of Lake Summersville and flows from east to west. The lower Gauley section generally offers more fishable days per year than the upper. The river, which has a national recreation area designation, is one of the best whitewater fishing destinations in the country. It yields a variety of sportfish, including smallmouths to 7 pounds, walleyes to 17 pounds and muskies to 40 inches. You can also catch rainbow, brown and golden trout up to a pound or two, according to Dave Arnold, co-founder of Adventures on the Gorge.

"You never know what will come out of the water," he says. "Only 60 to 70 percent of your catch will be smallmouth. The smallmouth action doesn't heat up until water temperature is in the 50s. That normally occurs in June."

The water levels and flow on the Gauley fluctuate greatly due to runoff and may limit access at times during the summer. The fierce river can be very dangerous at most high-water levels, and an experienced guide is highly recommended.

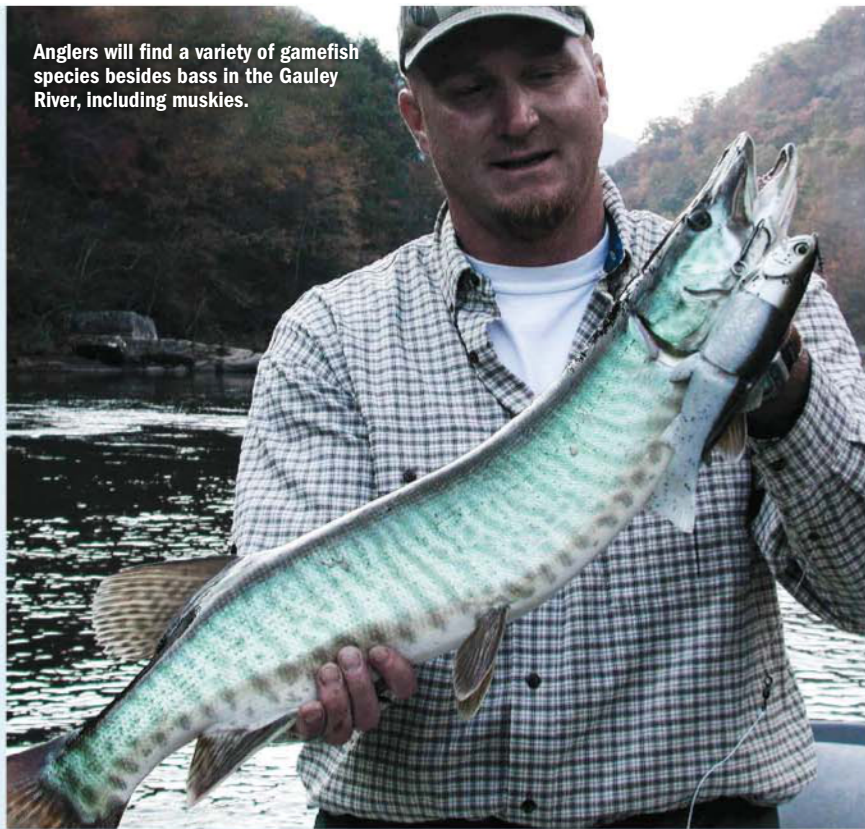
In the late 1800s and early 1900s, miners, lumberjacks, mountain men and moonshiners were scattered throughout what is now called the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. Steam-powered trains chugged along the waterways, and vehicles climbed switchbacks in and out of the canyons. Today, anglers, hikers, rock climbers and zipliners enjoy the New River Gorge, and armadas of whitewater rafters travel down the river's tumultuous rapids.

Most anglers on a guided fishing trip down the New River Gorge will see and hear lots of whitewater rafters. On my first trip 30 years ago through the beautiful gorge with pioneer raft operator and avid

angler Dave Arnold, we had several dozen whitewater rafts paddle feverishly past us. I still caught 50 smallmouths that morning during an abbreviated trip. Fortunately, the noise from hundreds of whitewater enthusiasts doesn't scare the fish.

Since then, I've fished the New River more than a dozen times, almost always catching 40 to 50 smallmouths. I have been fortunate to fish with Arnold several times. He estimates that all the area's fishing outfitters combined catch and release around 30,000 smallmouth bass in a year in the Gorge. That's based on a conservative average day of 20 to 30 fish per person. Fortunately, there is very little mortality.

Anglers will find a variety of gamefish species besides bass in the Gauley River, including muskies.



The Gauley can be divided into four sections. The first 10 miles is the isolated upper Gauley section where the coldest water comes out of the bottom of the Summersville Dam. It offers the greatest chance of catching trout and walleyes. It also has the most intense whitewater, up to Class V. At mile six, a major tributary, the Meadow River, brings in warmer water.

Section two encompasses the lower Gauley from Mason's Branch down to

Koontz's Bend. This 7-mile section of river is the most easily fished, and smallmouths are the primary quarry. The third section from Koontz's Bend 8 miles downstream to the town of Swiss has the second-most whitewater. This is the section where I caught my largest West Virginia walleye, a beautiful 10 1/2-pounder, on a crankbait. The final section in the lower Gauley is relatively flat to where it flows into the New River at the Gauley Bridge.

WEST VIRGINIA WALLEYE

A unique strain is native to the New River.

In the early 2000s, the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) discovered that the New River had a unique genetic strain of walleye, quite different than the walleye found in the Great Lakes and other common fisheries. The theory is that because the New River flows north, glaciers caused the walleyes in the New River to be isolated and develop different genetics.

West Virginia's Division of Natural Resources began working with the Virginia DWR to develop a program to reintroduce the native strain of walleye back into the New River, according to Mark Scott, assistant chief of fish management. Since then, West Virginia has passed special regulations for areas that hold the native walleye to protect the females and build the population.

"There's no real way to tell a New River walleye from any other walleye except by using genetics," says Scott. "But we have found that their eggs are about twice as large as other walleye and the fry are very aggressive feeders.

Anglers are catching some real trophy walleyes every year that are double digits in weight. The Kanawha River leads all waters with 53 percent of the trophy citations issued by us."

The prime time to catch the largest walleyes is during the early spring when they run up the rivers to spawn. On the New River, they run upstream toward Sandstone Falls. West Virginia, however, has made the spawning area there "no harvest" or catch-and-release for all walleyes to protect them when they are most vulnerable to angling, notes Scott.

"We have been stocking the native strain since the mid-2000s, primarily in rivers around the state," he explains. "We've seen a lot of success with anglers now targeting walleye on many rivers in West Virginia, and we currently have a genetic project going on with West Virginia University to look at the walleye genetics in all waters statewide. That should tell us where our stocking programs have been most successful."

Arnold has been in the rafting industry since 1974, when he taught whitewater kayaking to rookie guides. He quickly moved to guiding whitewater expeditions and started his successful Class VI River Runners company in 1977. Thirty years later, he joined with three other New River rafting companies to form Adventures on the Gorge resort.

While the best fishing on the New River takes place between May and November, it is productive for smallmouth bass throughout most of the year. The New has consistently fishable water levels and it, along with tributary Greenbrier River, produce many of the larger smallmouths caught in the state. The New yields quite a few smallies between 5 and 7 pounds. I've caught several around 4 pounds and dozens from 15 to 20 inches in length. I have also experienced tough days, but even when strikes have slowed, the ever-changing, beautiful scenery captures your attention.

KNOWING THE NEW

The North Fork of the New River meanders northward from its quiet beginnings in North Carolina, growing in volume and velocity to become world-class whitewater. The South Fork of the New River stretches from its headwaters at a spring near Blowing Rock, N.C., and the Eastern Continental Divide. It then flows northward along the northwestern face of the Blue Ridge Mountains through northwestern North Carolina.

The South Fork joins the North Fork in Ashe County, N.C., to form the New River. It continues running north through Virginia, into Claytor Lake, a hydroelectric-power reservoir, and into Bluestone Lake in the Mountain Lakes Region of West Virginia.

"The New is an artificially controlled natural river," Arnold pointed out. "The Claytor hydroelectric plant puts out a pulse flow, so when that flow gets to Bluestone Lake, it re-regulates the river into a more natural flow."

The New River Gorge National Park and Preserve land starts just downstream from Bluestone Dam and above its confluence with the free-flowing Greenbrier River. That gorge corridor twists through a series of more than 20 rapids that drop some 200 feet over 53 miles. It eventually flows into Hawks



Biologists believe glaciers isolated walleyes in the New River, leading to the development of a unique strain.



Two-pound smallmouth bass are common on the New, and the river gives up 5- to 7-pounders each year.

Nest Lake, which is the official end of the park and preserve. The majority of New River rafting and fishing trips take place starting about 30 miles downstream from the town of Prince. This most-active section extends to the New River Gorge Bridge, the Western

Hemisphere's longest single-arch steel span, at Fayette Station.

Due to the large number of access points along the rugged gorge terrain, there are about 10 different fishable sections of the New downstream from Bluestone Dam. Over the years, I've

fished most sections including the Lower New River from Cunard to Fayette Station. That is where the most aggressive Class IV and V whitewater exists, according to Arnold.

"This section is exciting, but it should be fished only during low to medium water levels," he warned. "Only fish it with a professional guide or one with lots of fishing expertise in Class IV and V whitewater. The angler and raft have to be constantly positioned for a near-perfect bait presentation adjacent the rocks and fallen trees."

From Hawks Nest Lake, the New flows 8 miles through "the Dries" and on to the confluence with the Gauley River. That area is fishable and has some great whitewater during high water levels. With new access in the past couple of years, it has yet to be fished much.

Be assured a fishing trip on the New and Kanawha rivers will live up to West Virginia's "wild and wonderful" slogan. After a float through the Gorge, white-water smallmouth anglers may want to add "wet" to that description, too. **64**

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SMALL

WONDER

A SKEPTIC LEARNS TO APPRECIATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
THE .410-BORE SHOTGUN DURING A MINNESOTA TURKEY HUNT.

By Joe Arterburn

The tom dropped as if poleaxed. By the time I hustled to where he had fallen, he'd futilely beat outstretched wings a few times and a dark spot of blood had stained the side of his red, white and blue head lying flat on the stubble-strewn ground. The bird hadn't moved more than a foot from where he'd dropped.

Cradling the broken-open single-shot over my arm, I unclenched my left fist and pulled the shotshell from where I'd squeezed it between middle fingers as a handy backup round. I tossed the thin .410 shotshell to Todd Gifford.

"Looks like I won't need this," I said.

To be honest, there was a lot more going on and the scene wasn't nearly that sedate. There had been whooping, yelling, laughing, hugging and high-fiving. Big smiles were hidden behind camo masks. We'd just scored a double about 17 minutes after shooting light on the first morning of our Minnesota hunt.

It had started with a quiet walk in the dark to a flat-topped ridge near Hastings, the ground like an elevated island amid a sea of farmland. After walking up the two-track lined with trees, we broke out onto 180 acres of flat, farmable land. The highway



The author dropped this gobbler at 38 paces, a testament to the .410 shotgun with modern loads.

a couple miles away was out of sight, out of mind and mostly quiet. Barely noticeable was the hum of occasional vehicles carrying early-morning drivers unaware of the drama playing out on the wooded ridge above them. We stood in darkness where the trail opened into the jigsaw-puzzle-shaped field ringed by Japanese elm, brush and grass.

"Let's slip around the corner so we're not silhouetted on the road," whispered Gifford, long-time turkey hunter, pest-control dude, crow and problem-bird eradicator (also known as Crowman) and all-purpose host/guide for Murray Road, the public relations agency for Savage Arms.

We tucked against some elms, quietly clearing places for our padded seats and flattening annoying bits of brush to open shooting lanes. I leaned against a tree. Jake Dahlke of Murray Road settled at my left shoulder on the same tree, a camera in hand. Megan Harten of Savage Arms was against a similar tree to our left; Gifford was somewhere behind us, rustling the carry bags off his Avian-X decoys. It was quiet, too quiet, as the saying goes.

We had been up here the night before as the sun went down. Gifford had tried an owl hoot with a cornstalk-choked call, producing what he later laughingly admitted was "a horrible attempt." Neither the squawking hoot nor more realistic crow caws produced the gobbling response we strained to hear, so we tiptoed down the road in the dark, Gifford still convinced this was the spot for the next morning. He'd heard turkeys up here while scouting, and the landowner reported seeing five strutters when he worked this field prior to planting.

The sky was graying when we heard the first gobble in front of us from about the 1 o'clock position. Then there were gobbles behind us, and soon more came from the left. Gifford let out soft clucks; the birds in front must have roosted in the trees about a thousand yards across the field. We needed to give them a reason to cross the field to where they could see the hen and jake decoys set fairly close, about 20 yards in front of us, in deference to the .410 shotgun I carried.

More gobbling. Right, left and behind. Turkeys were on the move. I sat up, shifting my left knee up to support the shotgun. One, then two, then three heads appeared over the low, rounded ridge



Even with TSS loads, patterning is critical to understanding a gun's effective range for turkeys.

SUB-GAUGE TACTICS

Make a tom come searching.

Close counts when hunting turkeys with sub-gauge shotguns, especially a .410. Keep your decoys closer than you would if hunting with a 12-gauge. About 20 yards is a decent distance. Most .410 TSS loads are deadly to 40 yards; a 20-yard decoy setup gives you a cushion.

TSS has been a game-changer, 30-year turkey hunter Todd Gifford says, but it's still critical to understand the effective range of sub-gauge shotshells. "There's a big difference [with TSS]," he notes, "but you want to keep the whole situation close."

For Gifford, that starts with scouting. In Minnesota, he generally begins to focus his efforts in May. That may seem late, but he says that before hens are nesting, turkeys are unpredictable. Once most hens are on the nest, toms will be in strutting lanes, more visible and more predictable. Gifford scouts for an hour every morning, beginning maybe a half-hour after sunrise, then again for two hours in the evening. He keys more on strutting lanes than on putting birds to bed in a particular tree.

"You got to know where they are, where they're going to be and some kind of timeline," Gifford explains. "I'll watch them heading toward roost and then we know, OK, they are going over in that woods. I rarely go messing with them, putting them to bed out here, because the woods are so small and spread out that we know they're in there."

Roosting is more important in early season, Gifford says. "It's less critical when we have them marked in strutting lanes," he notes. "We just try to get close to those strutting lanes and kill a bird."

During late season, toms are more likely to be running in bachelor packs. Most hens are on the nest and the toms, even jakes, begin to group together.

"After a week or two of searching for hens, and not finding any receptive ones, I think their testosterone goes down and they get in those groups," Gifford says.

Hunting them is a different game. Decoys can even ward them off.

During my May hunt with Gifford, he knew we were situated between two roosts. Once gobblers started sounding off, he used soft clucks, maybe six or eight times, just enough to attract attention.

"That's late-season hunting," he says. "You want them to come searching for you. You don't want to keep calling and give yourself away."

Let the decoys do their work, he stresses. Gifford believes a hen and jake decoy combination is more effective late in the season than gobbler decoys. He's seen toms spot a gobbler decoy and act "almost like they saw a ghost."

Whatever decoy setup you use, stay quiet. Give a tom a reason to come searching and get close.

across the recently planted, rain-pocked bean field. The heads bobbed as they walked, the boss gobbler sounding off behind two satellite toms. They cleared the rise and seemed to spot the decoys at the same time. Gifford was silent, letting the laydown hen and quarter-strut jake decoys do their thing. They were coming, the two subordinate toms leading, or more accurately, the boss tom holding back.

Through the Crimson Trace RAD Max sight, I watched them step and bob toward the decoys. Too close together to risk a shot, they moved right to left, angling toward our setup.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Dahlke whispered as he watched through the camera. I slowly moved the single-shot up and over the dang brush that had sprung back up. I hadn’t heard her, but Harten, aiming her 12-gauge Savage Renegade, had whispered, “I’m ready” and was anxiously awaiting my move.

The lead tom moved ahead a couple steps, the red dot in my optic jumping with my heartbeat across the base of his neck. I fired, the bird dropped. Harten fired then fired again, and Gifford whooped. We all jumped up and all heck broke loose. It was a genuine whoop-and-holler session, not a rehearsed or second-take celebration as portrayed on some outdoor shows. As we stumbled to our feet and tumbled out of the brush, the lone turkey survivor, the boss gobbler, skedaddled over the knob toward the far trees.



The pellets Fiocchi packs in its Golden Turkey TSS loads have a density of 18 grams per cubic centimeter, about 56 percent denser than lead.

THE TUNGSTEN TOUCH

Like anyone who as a kid hunted and plinked cans with a .410-bore shotgun, I was skeptical of what it could do on a full-grown tom turkey. But these were not my grandpa’s .410 shotshells. To be specific, they were Fiocchi Golden Turkey TSS, 3-inchers with 304 No. 9

pellets screaming out in a deadly swarm, each packing the denser-than-lead punch of tungsten. That’s 304 tiny but collectively lethal missiles, each adding to the fatal terminal impact in a pattern that held together well out to at least 40 yards. I’m sure longer kills have been recorded, but after patterning we



Place decoys at about 20 yards when hunting with sub-gauge shotguns like the .410. A tom that hangs up 10 yards from the decoys should still be well within range of TSS loads.



Megan Harten of Savage Arms took a bird with a 12-gauge Renegade just seconds after the author killed his tom.

decided the 40-yard mark was pretty much our limit.

I stepped off the distance from the dead tom to where I'd been sitting: 38 larger-than-normal steps, which for me translates to yards. Where popular lead-based turkey shells are loaded with No. 4, 5 or 6 shot, TSS shells can be packed

with smaller (No. 7 1/2, 8 and 9) and more pellets. With the added density, smaller TSS pellets can carry the same deadly mail as larger lead shot.

TSS (which, if you haven't heard by now, stands for Tungsten Super Shot) has the leg up on lead shot, especially at longer distances. Being denser allows

it to retain more energy than lead down-range, and being harder helps it maintain form and therefore a better pattern than lead. Put these advantages together, and the result is tighter patterns with more knockdown punch at longer ranges.

The hitch in TSS shotshells is cost. I found prices ranging from \$8.60 to \$11.50 per round. On the other hand, we put time, effort and other expense (I traveled from Nebraska to Minnesota for this hunt) into turkey hunting, so why skimp when it comes to the all-important shot?

The TSS advantages really come to the fore in smaller gauges, the so-called sub-gauges, particularly .410, 28 and 20, which are gaining more devotees. Now, if you're shooting a 12-gauge out to 40 yards, most decent copper-plated lead loads or other variations of quality turkey loads should do. Still, though, 12-gauge TSS loads add all the benefits we just discussed.

The antithesis of the sub-gauge movement is the bigger-is-better school of thought. I've heard of hunters—including "practitioners of the doubtful trade of gun writing," to borrow a Jack O'Connor line—who pine for if not downright demand 12-gauge 3 1/2-inch shotshells. These same people say they want to be able to kill a bird out to 75 or 80 yards.



The Crimson Trace RAD reflex sight mounted to the author's Savage 301 Turkey allowed him to aim with precision as the bird approached the decoys.

Always Kneel For The Cross and Stand For The Flag



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That reminds me of another O'Connor line about sheep hunting, but I'll substitute "turkeys" where Jack used "rams." Long shots at turkeys come either from hard luck or from not knowing how to hunt them.

LIGHTER GUNS, LIGHTER RECOIL

My .410 experience makes the bigger-is-better side look silly, assuming we are good enough at turkey hunting to get turkeys into ranges of about half that unnecessarily distant and borderline unethical 75 to 80 yards. I used a Stevens 301 Turkey shotgun with a simple break-open action, 26-inch matte-black barrel, synthetic stock in Mossy Oak Obsession camo, recoil pad and extra-full choke tube. The unobtrusive Crimson Trace RAD (Rapid Aiming Dot) Max red-dot reflex sight mounted to the barrel added a significant measure of confidence at trigger-squeezing time.

The 301 Turkey weighs a shade over 5 pounds, or 2 to 3 pounds lighter than an unloaded 12-gauge semi-auto. It's light enough to hold out with a couple fingers and tote up and down hills without giving it much thought. Did I feel bad choosing the 301 single-shot, leaving Harten with the heavier 12-gauge Renegauge? I got over it.

Harten said Savage is selling the heck out of sub-gauge shotguns, including .410s to turkey hunters.

GROUSE FOR TURKEYS

A trade that boosted Minnesota's gobbler numbers

In the early days, the few turkeys found in southeastern Minnesota along the Iowa border were hunted and eaten by settlers, and otherwise eliminated by habitat loss. After that, wild birds didn't exist in Minnesota for nearly a century before reintroduction began in the early 1970s. It started with 29 adult birds trapped in Missouri and released in Houston County. Minnesota traded 85 ruffed grouse for the Eastern turkeys. Previous releases of pen-raised turkeys failed, as did releases of Merriam's turkeys, which are smaller than Eastern turkeys and considered less hardy.

The Eastern turkeys from the original and subsequent releases of more than 5,000 birds—some through funding from the National Wild Turkey Federation—at about 280 locations over the next four decades proliferated, and in 1978 the first modern hunting season was held. These days, wild turkeys are found throughout the southeastern part of the state and range as far north as Brainerd and the Detroit lakes.



Pockets of woodlands scattered among agricultural fields in southeastern Minnesota provided a proving ground for the .410-bore.



COURTESY OF MURRAY ROAD (3)



Doubling on gobblers during the first morning of a hunt is a rare event, but the Savage 301 Turkey was up to the task.



"It's also a good starter gun, without the kick," she said. "It makes it easy to take your kid out and not be so scary for

them. And it's much easier on you, too, both to shoot and to carry if you're on the move through the woods."

To find that comfort zone, patterning is the place to start. It will show the .410 in turkey hunting is not a gimmick. **G-I**

Dahlke said sub-gauges appeal to the minimalist trend, especially in younger generations that are "trying something out of the box, trying to do new things with turkey hunting." Gifford stressed the benefits of the .410's low recoil, which can help eliminate flinching caused by the anticipation of getting shoulder-punched by heavy 12-gauge loads.

Gifford has hunted with friends toting TSS-loaded .410s for a couple years now and has not seen any birds shot with these guns and loads get away. The main consideration, he said, is to set decoys a bit closer and count on them, and your hunting skill, to bring birds into a comfortable range.

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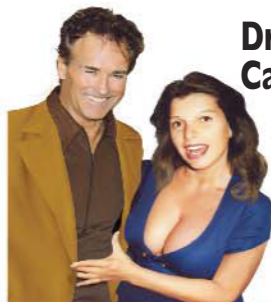
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V211

SILENCER CENTRAL BANISH BACKCOUNTRY

THIS COMPACT SUPPRESSOR IS **PURPOSE-BUILT FOR HUNTERS.**

By Adam Heggenstaller

Suppressors have rapidly grown in popularity over the last decade for good reason. Although suppressors are still misunderstood in some circles—they don't completely "silence" a firearm's report—hunters are recognizing the benefits of a device that reduces the harmful noise that emanates from a rifle when it's fired.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration notes that noise of 140 decibels is at the threshold of pain and can cause immediate, permanent damage. (Normal conversation reaches a level of about 60 decibels for comparison.) The noise made by firing a rifle varies depending on factors such as chambering and barrel length, but most centerfire models chambered for typical hunting cartridges like the .270

Win., .308 Win. and .30-06 Sprg. exceed 160 decibels. Magnum rifles are even louder, approaching 170 decibels.

Most suppressors reduce the noise of a rifle shot to less than 130 decibels. While on paper this doesn't seem like much of a reduction, decibels are measured on a logarithmic scale. A small change in decibels makes a big difference in the amount of noise and potential hearing damage.

Quality suppressors are precisely machined and assembled accessories, but they are quite simple in the way they work to reduce noise. Inside the suppressor is a series of baffles that trap propellant gases and slows their exit from the muzzle. By delaying the expansion and expulsion of these gases, the resulting noise is reduced. In addition to making a rifle quieter, suppressors also reduce felt recoil by the same principle.

Put less noise and less recoil together, and a rifle becomes much more comfortable to shoot. Not surprisingly, we shoot better when we're not anticipating a blast of noise and recoil, and we're able to recover for follow-up shots more quickly.

In addition, a suppressor allows hunters to stay more aware of the situation

immediately following a shot. There is less noise covering the sound of the bullet impact, which can provide feedback regarding the location of a hit—or miss. And since a suppressor reduces the noise of a gunshot to a safe level, there is no need for hunters to impede their hearing by wearing ear plugs or muffs when afield.

Suppressors are legal for hunting in 41 states. (Check state and local regulations, as seasons when suppressors are permitted vary.) With all the benefits that come with a suppressor, though, there are still two main hang-ups that cause hunters in suppressor-friendly states to give pause. First, suppressors are regulated by the National Firearms Act (NFA) of 1934, and purchasing one requires an approval process that includes a background check through the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE). The typical processing time for paper applications is eight to 10 months. Purchasing a suppressor also requires paying a \$200 tax. Hunters just don't want to deal with the hassle, plunk down money for a suppressor and the tax, and then wait for approval. The second downside is the length and weight a suppressor adds to a rifle.

Directly threading the Backcountry to a barrel saves the most weight, but a muzzle brake adapter is also available.





The Backcountry adds less than 6 inches and 8 ounces to a rifle, making it almost unnoticeable until a shot is fired.

The new Banish Backcountry suppressor from Silencer Central addresses the size issue. (More on how Silencer Central eases the application process later.) The number of baffles inside a suppressor correlates with how much noise it can reduce. More baffles trap gas longer, making the report quieter. But more baffles also add weight and length because there needs to be adequate space between each one to allow the gas to expand. Silencer Central's flagship Banish 30 is a .30-caliber suppressor with eight baffles that measures 9 inches long. It weighs 14 ounces. To reduce the size and arrive at the Backcountry, Silencer Central cut the number of baffles to six, resulting in a suppressor that is a compact 5 1/2 inches long and weighs just 7.8 ounces.

Notably, though, the Backcountry still manages to keep noise below the 140-decibel threshold. For example, it reduces the report of a .308 Win. to 135 decibels, a .300 Win. Mag. to 137 decibels and a .300 RUM (the largest cartridge for which it is rated) to 138 decibels.

The Backcountry is made of titanium, and while it is available with an optional muzzle brake attachment, weight savings

are best realized by directly threading it to the barrel. Silencer Central offers it with a number of thread pitches, including the 5/8x24 pitch common on .30-caliber hunting rifles.

I tested the Banish Backcountry on a recent trip to Kodiak Island, Alaska, where I spent a week hiking from the beach and into the surrounding hills for Sitka blacktails and caribou. The marches through the muskeg and alders and then up the steep slopes made me aware of every ounce I carried on the hunt. Yet at no time did I feel the Backcountry was a burden, and it was directly responsible for my hunting partner and I being able to double on caribou. Mike's rifle was also equipped with a Backcountry, and when he took the first shot, the report was mild enough that even though I was kneeling close beside him I didn't lose the view through my scope for a moment. The caribou herd we had stalked didn't move very far after his shot, seemingly confused about the direction of the sound, and soon a second one was lying dead.

The Backcountry Banish is a suppressor optimized for hunters. Perhaps even better, Silencer Central's stellar commitment to guiding customers through the

SPECIFICATIONS

BANISH BACKCOUNTRY

silencercentral.com

TYPE: direct-thread suppressor

CALIBER: .30 (up to .300 RUM)

SOUND REDUCTION: 30 decibels

MATERIAL: titanium

FINISH: Cerakote

LENGTH: 5.5"

DIAMETER: 1.6"

WEIGHT: 7.8 oz.

MSRP: \$1,099

suppressor application process—much of it completed online through BATFE's eForms system, which has the advantage of faster approval than paper filing—makes it easy to handle. Now the question is, if you live in a state where you can hunt with a suppressor, why wouldn't you own one? 

Combined with a Savage 110 Ultralite, the Backcountry accounted for two blacktails and a caribou on Kodiak Island.



The robust AccuPoint line includes numerous magnification ranges and reticle designs for 60 total variations.

TRIJICON ACCUPOINT

LOADED WITH PRACTICAL FEATURES, THIS SCOPE INCLUDES AN ILLUMINATED RETICLE THAT DOESN'T REQUIRE BATTERIES.

By Alan Clemons

The first riflescopes centuries ago used crosshairs—literal hairs or strands of a spider web—amid scallops of glass inside a tube. Over time those crosshairs, glass and housing tubes improved with knowledge and technology. We now have crystal-clear riflescopes (and other optics) with great magnification, and crosshairs etched on the glass or imposed digitally with lines, images or information about the conditions. Some riflescopes give you hold points for distance and wind, and sync with ballistics data on a phone to provide even more information.

Do you need all that to kill a deer in Alabama, or a mule deer in Colorado, or

a moose or elk or bison? Of course not. The first few deer I killed many years ago were with a Winchester Model 70 in .243 Win. and a simple 3-9X scope. I still have both. You can get by with plain old crosshairs, practice, knowing your surroundings and trusting your gut.

Hunters typically know almost immediately whether a target is worthy of a shot. At close to moderate ranges, sometimes it happens quickly enough that you throw up the rifle, adjust as you put the crosshairs on a spot and shoot. Other times, though, you may need more in that sleek tube of aluminum and glass.

Crosshairs can become lost or hazy against the background or in low light;

an illuminated reticle, even in daytime, is a benefit. Optics companies tout light transmission, clarity and other highlights. While a low-priced riflescope might be all you want or need while hunting open food plots in relatively bright light conditions, you get what you pay for. Putting that same scope to the test in dim light at 198 yards, or out West, or in the dark woods of Saskatchewan or Maine, may lead to disappointment.

In 2021 I hunted whitetails in Saskatchewan with Safari River Outfitters, which has two camps about three hours north of Saskatoon. Lance and Emily Robinson run an honest, top-notch camp with knowledgeable guides and



great setups. Hunting with Safari River involves day-long sits in brushed-up ground blinds in the woods. Bait is used, typically no more than 75 yards away. Hunters may have a longer shot but it's doubtful, as the woods are thick. There is rarely any need for a riflescope with a reticle that looks like a Christmas tree. An illuminated reticle is another matter, though, because it makes a big difference during dawn, dusk and days with heavy cloud cover.

The Trijicon AccuPoint 4-16x50 mm scope atop my Strasser RS Solo Evolution was one of 11 options the company offers in the 4-16X line. Trijicon has nine AccuPoint models, with more than 60 options in all, from the 1-4x24 mm to the 5-20x50 mm. I chose the standard duplex crosshair with green dot, which has thicker outer lines that get thinner in the

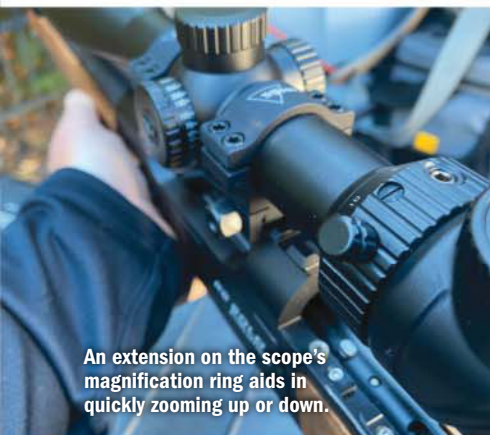
it's waterproof and fogproof, will hold up to extremely cold (-20 degrees) and hot (140 degrees) temperatures, and will retain zero under vibration and after a drop.

It was reassuring to not have to worry about batteries, as the AccuPoint's illumination power source is the tritium. As the tritium breaks down it emits a weak beta particle, an electron, from its nucleus. It is energetic enough to emit a glow that is transferred through the fiber-optic element to the crosshairs, post, point or dot in the scope. The AccuPoint allows you to increase or decrease the intensity of the illumination by rotating a cover that controls the amount of ambient light hitting the fiber-optic element. This is a helpful feature for both low-light and full-sun situations. The highest settings don't bother your vision, and the soft glow isn't visible from a distance.

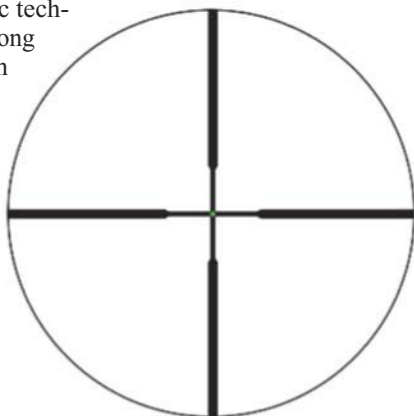
Adjustments for windage and elevation have a broad range of 70 MOA. The parallax-adjustment knob is a great addition, too, allowing hunters to eliminate any point-of-impact shifts due to this phenomenon. Again, no issue in the Saskatchewan woods but in open areas this is a bonus feature. With a 50 mm objective lens, the scope permits plenty of light transmission through the multi-coated lenses. It offered crisp, clear views out to 500 yards, which was the farthest distance at which I could evaluate the image. In bright daylight conditions or cruddy weather, a sunshield and flip-up lens caps offer protection from glare and moisture.

center. Having hunted in Saskatchewan before, I knew that would be all I needed. I was happy to have the AccuPoint's battery-free illumination—thanks to the bit of tritium and the fiber-optic technology, Trijicon's hallmarks—along with the magnification lever, an easily focused eyepiece for reticle definition, and ample windage and elevation adjustments with large knobs.

Trijicon is known for building rugged scopes utilized by law enforcement and the military, and the AccuPoint suits this reputation. The scope is tested to ensure



An extension on the scope's magnification ring aids in quickly zooming up or down.



SPECIFICATIONS

TRIJICON ACCUPOINT

trijicon.com

TYPE: variable-power riflescope

MAGNIFICATION: 4-16X (tested)

OBJECTIVE LENS: 50 mm

MAINTUBE: 30 mm

RETICLE: duplex with green illuminated center dot

ADJUSTMENT RANGE: 70 MOA in 1/4 MOA increments

POWER SOURCE: tritium and fiber-optic element

FIELD OF VIEW @ 100 YDS: 7.1' to 28.5'

EYE RELIEF: 3.1" to 3.8"

OVERALL LENGTH: 14.4"

WEIGHT: 26.8 oz.

MSRP: \$1,441

My regular deer hunting experiences involve targets usually within 150 yards, but I'm smart enough to prepare for shots longer than that. Thanks to the type of reticles, illumination and clarity offered by the Trijicon AccuPoint, hunters can be confident at longer ranges. This scope is not magic, though. We still have to learn, practice at the range and practice some more. It can pay off, because when that elk or mule deer is across a windswept ravine, or the whitetail of a lifetime steps out in a cut bean field at 294 yards, if you're comfortable with your scope then you can make the shot. **EF**

CLASS ACT

THERE ARE BETTER THINGS TO DO THAN ARGUE.

Like every evening at the dinner table, Shane's family was talking about the day. When there was a pause, Shane cleared his throat and recapped what had happened to him in school that afternoon.

"When the new girl in my class found out that I am a hunter, she spoke out against me," he related. "She said some pretty nasty things."

"What do you mean she spoke out against you?" asked Shane's mother.

"Mrs. Connolly encouraged her to speak out because it was civics class and our assignment was to argue for or against some political issue of the day," Shane explained. "I argued for hunting, and then Meagan argued against it. That was fine, but she got kind of mean when she pointed right at me and called me a murderer."

"I think her mother is the one that drives that little car with all the weird bumper stickers on it," said Shane's mother. "I heard they moved in from Philadelphia or somewhere like that. So it doesn't surprise me. But a murderer?"

"Yep. And a cowardly one at that."

"First off," interjected Shane's father, "the definition of murder is when one human kills another human. So she's just wrong. But what happened next?"

"She went on and on about how we don't have to eat meat to live and that hunting is barbaric, and I'm a cowardly murderer, and this and that and then she sat down. I think she was hoping for cheers, but none came. I think she thought most of the class would be on her side, but they're not."

"What did you do then?" asked Shane's mother.

"Nothing," said Shane. "Mrs. Connolly didn't call on me again, and then class ended. But it wasn't fair that I didn't get to argue back, so I'm going to—"

"Do what?" Shane's father cut him off. "Tell her off? It'll do more harm than good."

"Well then, what should I do?"

"Don't do anything," said his mother. "Who cares what she thinks?"



"I think you should give her a pie at lunch, but don't tell her it's a squirrel potpie until she takes a bite!" said Shane's little sister, Lucy.

Shane laughed. "That sure would be a good one!"

"I think," replied Shane's father, as he laid down his fork and rubbed his hands together like he were plotting a scheme, "you should offer to take her hunting."

"Yeah!" shrieked Lucy. Shane's mother just chuckled.

"No way I'm taking anti-hunting Meagan hunting," said Shane. "She'd probably slap me if I asked."

"Trust me, son," replied Shane's father. "Be nice, take the high road, and if she declines, she'll have to live with the fact that she's maybe not as open-minded as she probably thinks she is."

The next day Shane approached Meagan while she was at her locker.

"Meagan, I know you and I come from different places," he offered tentatively, "but I'd like to take you hunting sometime if you'd like to go."

Meagan just froze. Then she looked at Shane over her huge glasses. That's when Shane noticed she was kind of pretty. He'd never paid attention before.

"Me, hunting?" Meagan uttered in disbelief. "No way! Besides, my mom would never let me go anyway."

"OK, no problem," said Shane. "I just thought I'd ask. But just so you know, most times I don't kill anything when I go hunting, but I love to see the beautiful woods and animals anyway."

As he turned to leave, Meagan stopped him. "Hey," she said, "I suppose I can't really knock it till I've tried it. As long as you don't make me shoot any defenseless deer myself, I guess I could go."

"What about your mom?"

"Well, Mom always tells me how I don't have to do what society expects me to do, so she'll just have to get over it."

"How about Friday afternoon, then?" asked Shane.

"Sounds good. What should I wear?"

"Something green or brown, just not white."

"Why not white?" she asked.

"Because the animals will see you and run away."

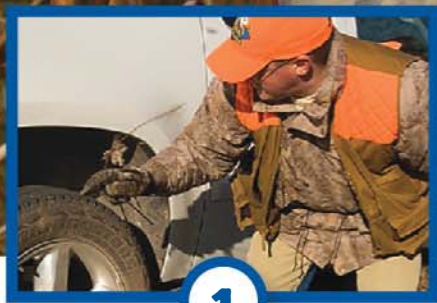
"OK, white it is," Meagan said, winking at Shane. "See you Friday!"

"Oh boy," mumbled Shane as he turned and walked down the hallway. "Father, what have you gotten me into?"

CLEAN. DRAIN. DRY.

STOP INVASIVE SPECIES

After a day out hunting, always remember to follow the Clean Drain Dry steps to prevent the spread of invasive species.



1

Clean all plants, mud and debris from trucks, trailers, gear and pets.



2

Drain all water from boats and recreational vehicles.



3

Dry boots/waders and all equipment for at least 5 days.



www.blm.gov



www.wildlife-forever.org



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