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MARCH 2023

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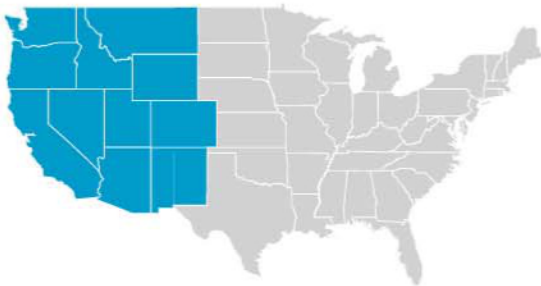
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The Regional Outdoor Guide



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LEARNING THE ROPES

I didn't start hunting turkeys in the spring till I was a sophomore in college. A fraternity brother who had years of experience with the birds took me that first season, yelled at me for moving too much, and on our third or fourth morning of hunting together called in a gobbler that strutted over the rocks in front of my wavering gun barrel. Somehow—and I'm sure it came as a complete surprise to my pal—I managed to sit still long enough with cramped arms and legs for the bird to swagger into range. When the longbeard flopped over at my shot, I don't know what made me happier: tagging my first gobbler or finally being able to stand and stretch.

During my rookie season, I learned three important lessons that have stuck with me ever since. First, be where a gobbler wants to go; a bird is more apt to approach your location if it likes the place where you're set up. Second, when you know a longbeard is heading in your direction, call sparingly—if at all. And third, whenever possible, take a few extra seconds to find a comfortable spot to sit down. Forty-five minutes later when a bird is still hung up out of range and you can't move, you'll be glad you did. I have my friend to thank for teaching me those first two lessons. Let's just say I learned the third one by the seat of my pants.

I've learned a whole lot more about turkeys and how to hunt them in the 25 years since my first season. And with every spring comes new lessons, either from the birds themselves or other hunters. This issue is dedicated to that kind of learning. We've packed it with turkey content just as seasons are about to start across the country. And while the writers we tapped to provide advice are among the best turkey hunters I know, you can only learn so much by reading their articles. Get out there and put their recommendations to use. Very few things are gospel when it comes to hunting gobblers; tailor the techniques you read in these pages to your woods and birds. Finally, I encourage you to share your lessons with others—especially young hunters. Thomas Allen gives you a blueprint for doing just that starting on page 64.

Best of luck this spring. Be safe, hunt smart and try not to move too much.

Adam Heggenstaller
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Spring turkey hunting is upon us, and before you start planning those early wake-ups, check out our tips and tricks to prepare for the season.



NEW GEAR IS HERE

Looking for a new bow or gun? We'll help you make a decision with in-depth coverage of the latest gear from this year's ATA and SHOT tradeshow.



TIME FOR LUNKERS

March is a great month for bass anglers to hook a wall-hanger. Our popular bass “Crash Course” video series will help you do just that.



CRAPPIE CENTRAL

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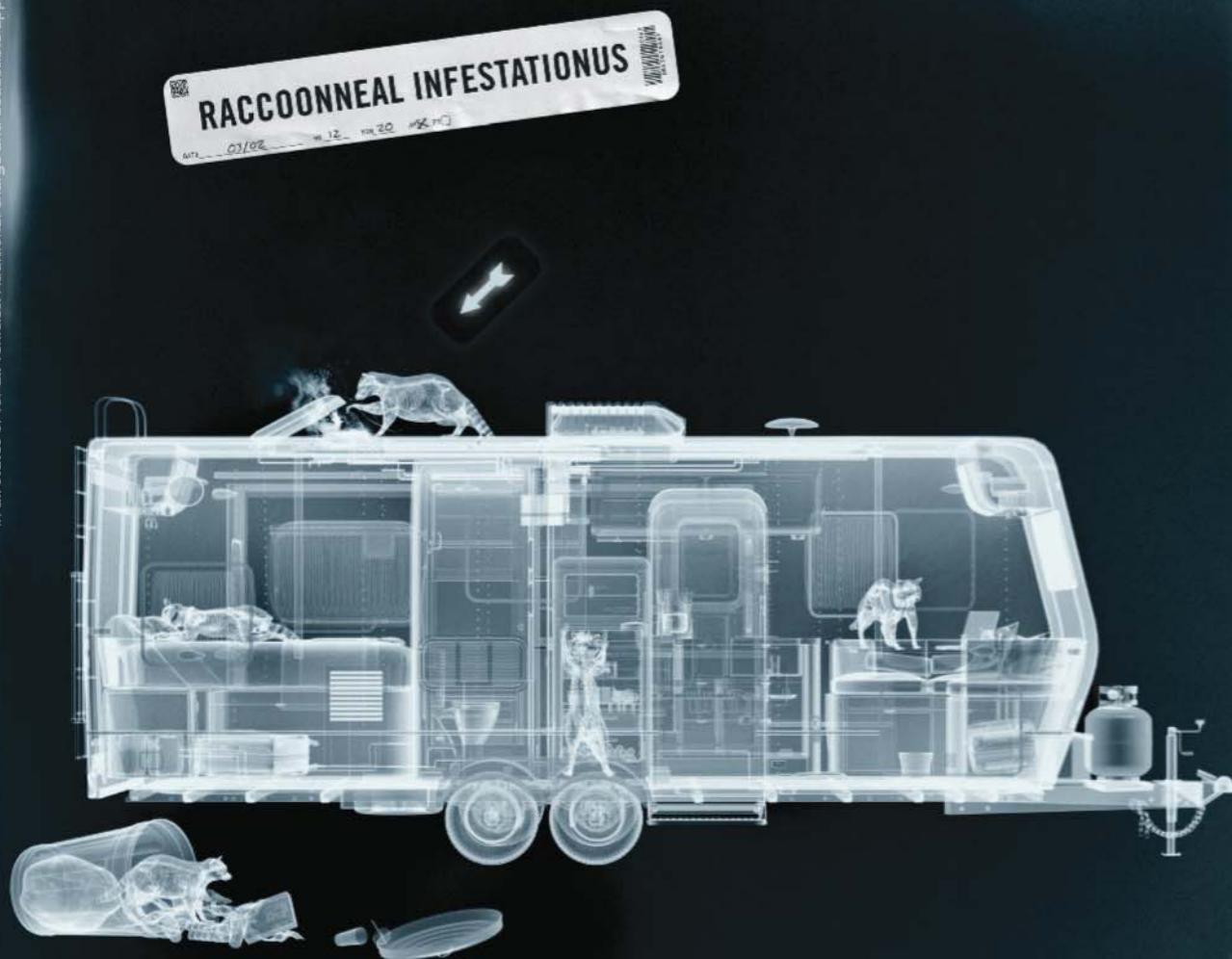
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SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
19 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	20 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06	21 NEW am 11:30 to 1:30 pm 11:54 to 1:54	22 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	23 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	24 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	25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

APRIL 2023

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

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THE PERFECT PLANE

TAILOR YOUR CHOICE OF RIFLESCOPE RETICLE
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INTENDED HUNTING PURSUITS.

By Richard Mann

Many hunters don't understand riflescopes. A riflescope is not a sight. It contains the sight—the reticle—and provides magnification, eliminates parallax and allows for sight adjustment. But, the reticle within the riflescope is the actual sight; it's what you use to aim. When hunters are considering a new scope, too often they overlook reticles or do not understand that they function differently depending on where they're placed within the riflescope. With variable-powered scopes, the reticle is either placed in the front or the rear of the erector tube, and the erector tube is what

allows for the riflescope's magnification—zoom function—to be adjusted.

FIRST FOCAL PLANE

If the reticle is in front of the erector tube, when the riflescope's magnification is increased, it not only magnifies the image but also the reticle. If you adjust magnification from 5X to 10X, the image and the reticle appear twice as large. Due to this, the subtensions of the reticle—its size in relation to the target—do not change with magnification. In Diagram 1 (see page 12), subtensions A and B would remain the same no matter the magnification at which the riflescope is set.

SECOND FOCAL PLANE

If the riflescope's reticle is at the rear of the erector tube, then the appearance of the reticle does not change as magnification is adjusted. This means the subtensions of the reticle—its size in relation to the view/target—do change with magnification. In Diagram 1, subtensions A and B would decrease by half with a magnification adjustment from 5X to 10X. Or they would double in size with a similar adjustment from 10X to 5X. This is simply because the image that you see through the riflescope is being magnified, whereas the reticle is not.



A second-focal-plane reticle best suits most hunters. Those who often take longer shots may benefit from a reticle in the first focal plane.

SOME HISTORY

For many years, scopes made in America or for the U.S. market were built with a rear or second-focal-plane reticle. But, European-made riflescopes were usually built with the reticle in the first focal plane. Most American hunters didn't like how the reticle in European scopes increased in size when the magnification was adjusted. So, about two decades ago, many European optics companies began building second-focal-plane riflescopes to appeal to Americans.

With a ballistic reticle positioned in the second focal plane, the subtensions for that reticle were typically set to equal

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a standardized trajectory or a specific mil or MOA measurement only at a single magnification. This was usually the scope's maximum magnification setting. Second-focal-plane scopes proved problematic in long-range shooting, specifically when the magnification needed to be adjusted due to mirage, distance or target size. When that happened, the subtensions of the reticle changed.

But, as long-range shooting became more popular in America—both for competition and hunting—so too did first-focal-plane reticles. This was because the subtensions of ballistic reticles—reticles with extra aiming points to match standardized trajectories, or with graduations in mils or MOA—positioned in the first focal plane do not change when magnification is adjusted. For example, if you need to make a 2-MOA correction with your reticle, the 2-MOA subtension always equals 2 MOA, no matter the riflescope's magnification setting. If the second aiming point below the center of the reticle is your aiming point for a 400-yard shot, that aiming point can be used at that distance no matter the scope's magnification setting.

WHAT'S BEST?

To answer this, first consider the type of hunting you'll be doing. Except for varmint hunters who routinely shoot at extreme range, most hunters rarely shoot at animals beyond 300 yards. In fact, most shots—successful shots—at big-game animals are taken much closer. In those cases, ballistic reticles are of no real value. And, when a longer shot is

required while hunting, you typically have time to adjust the magnification to maximum power to use a ballistic reticle in a second-focal-plane riflescope.

It's also common for big-game hunters to be in situations where the maximum shot distance can be very close, such as when hunting thick timber. Here hunters will want to turn the magnification way down. That way, if they need to take a shot, the animal will be easier to locate and the sight—the reticle—will be easier to position over the correct spot. With the first-focal-plane reticle, this can become difficult, especially in instances where the light is dim.

The reason for this is the exact thing that makes a first-focal-plane reticle great for use at extreme range. For a reticle to be adequate for long-range shooting, it must not appear to be overly thick as it relates to the target. Otherwise, precise aiming becomes difficult. And remember, as the magnification of a first-focal-plane riflescope is adjusted, the image and the reticle are magnified. So, when a first-focal-plane riflescope is set to minimum magnification, the reticle must be very thin. Otherwise, when the magnification is increased, it will become too thick. This is especially true with riflescopes that have a broad magnification range.

At minimum magnification, the reticle in a first-focal-plane riflescope can be so

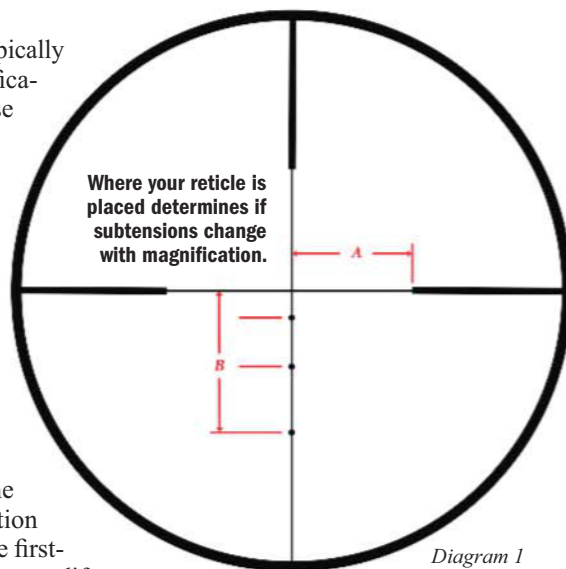



Diagram 1

thin that it is difficult to see. And the less light there is, the harder it is to see. If you must take a close shot in the darkness of the timber, you may not be able to clearly see the first-focal-plane reticle.

A first-focal-plane reticle might be nice if you often take long shots at big game. It may also be helpful if you're a varmint or predator hunter where long shots are common, and you're continually fine-tuning the magnification of your riflescope while hunting. Otherwise, a first-focal-plane reticle offers virtually no advantage to the hunter. For big-game hunters who like the first focal plane reticle's consistent reticle subtensions, consider choosing one that's illuminated—or that at least has an illuminated center dot. It'll be much easier to see at low power and in low-light situations. 

Left: A first-focal-plane reticle can be difficult to see at low magnification and in low light. **Center:** The same reticle can benefit from an illuminated dot or aiming point, especially in low-light scenarios. **Right:** The reticle at a high-magnification setting (16X) is much easier to see. Both the reticle and the target are magnified, though the reticle subtensions don't change.





GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE.



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INSHORE ANGLE

NOW IS THE TIME TO HIT THE SALT FOR **SOME OF THE BEST ACTION OF THE YEAR.**

Story and Photos by Dr. Jason A. Halfen

Inshore angling is the most common and popular way to experience the excitement of saltwater fishing. Whether pursued from the beaches or on the flats, in mangrove-lined lagoons or roseau cane marshes, prized inshore gamefish from speckled sea trout to redfish, snook, striped bass and tarpon beckon anglers to the shallows as the sun warms waters from their wintertime lows. Indeed, the fleeting weeks of spring are some of the best times to stretch a line in preparation for a long season ahead.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

During the cold winter months, many inshore gamefish gravitate toward creeks and deep-water areas with soft, muddy substrates. This general movement

occurs in part because the darker sediment will hold heat from the sun and create a slightly warmer environment for the fish. In addition, inshore gamefish diets frequently pivot away from baitfish, favoring crustaceans and other prey items that are concentrated in these areas.


As inshore waters warm in the spring, gamefish spread out from their wintering locations to invade the shallows as their metabolic needs increase and their aggressive, predatory instincts awaken. Emerging grasses, shallow rock, sand flats, oyster beds and prominent points that deflect near-shore current are all deserving of your attention now. During spring, inshore predator diets begin to include more finfish, and as a result, hard-bottomed habitats become more important areas than the muddy

sediments that concentrate fish during the winter months.

TACTICS AND TARGETS

Schools of aggressive speckled sea trout frequently use hard cover, including rockpiles and shell beds, as ambush points when hunting prey. Spring is a great time to target these nearshore trout with a flashy hard lure—such as the LiveTarget Sardine Twitchbait or a 1/2-ounce lipless rattlebait, which can be used to tempt trout throughout the water column.

Aggressive, start-and-stop cadences are effective at eliciting strikes from these toothy predators. Wading shallow sand flats can also be exceptionally productive for trout in the spring. Do a bit of scouting before getting your feet



As inshore waters warm, so does the bite as redfish and other predators begin prowling for baitfish.

FAVORING FORAGE

Like speckled trout, snook winter in deep areas within rivers and back bays. As waters begin to warm in early spring, these popular predators stage in predictable locations along the way to the passes and major river inlets where spawning will occur—starting as early as April in Florida waters. While snook are somewhat dormant during the cold winter months, the caloric energy needed to support this transition, and to finish the development of reproductive tissues, has these predators feeding heavily on baitfish.

Pilchards are a main forage food source for snook this time of year. The hatch bait from the previous summer is now 3 to 5 inches long and plentiful in spring around grass flats, inside the passes and key structures, such as bridges and reefs.

Lures that match the profile, action and size of the bait present is key to catching highly visual predators like snook, who spend much of their life cycles in the green-clear Gulf of Mexico waters.

The 3 1/2-inch LiveTarget Sardine Swimbait is an outstanding choice. Weighing in at 1/2 ounce, this exceptionally realistic soft-plastic swimbait supports long casts that put your bait in front of more fish per day and reduce the chances of spooking fish. Alternate between a slow, swimming retrieve and one with erratic snap-jigging action to trigger snook anywhere across the activity spectrum.

From the Outer Banks of North Carolina, down to Florida, across to the salt marshes of Louisiana and down the Texas coast, redfish hold the distinction of being one of the most popular and widely targeted inshore gamefish. Target early-season reds near shallow

grasses where fish are often seen tailing while foraging for crustaceans or along windblown points and shorelines where wave action disorients baitfish and gives reds a distinct feeding advantage.


Launching a 1/2-ounce bladed jig dressed with a soft-plastic trailer is a great way to comb water and locate actively feeding reds. Retrieve the lure at such a pace that you can feel the metal blade pulsating while still maintaining occasional contact with cover such as grass, shell beds, or even the sandy substrate on the bottom.

A slower presentation, like a soft plastic minnow or shrimp-imitating lure suspended beneath a popping cork, will put more fish in the boat after you've picked off the more active reds in the school.

GEAR UP

A 7-foot, fast-action, graphite spinning rod will get quite a workout when chasing inshore predators in the spring. Choose a medium-power rod when targeting smaller species like trout or flounder. A medium-heavy rod excels for puppy reds and snook, while a heavy-power rod is perfect for bull reds, oversized snook or even apex inshore species like striped bass or tarpon.

Equip the rod with a 3000- or 4000-series spinning reel, spooled with 30-pound-test braided line and finished with a 6-foot leader of 12- or 15-pound-test fluorocarbon leader. Join the main line to the leader with a compact, robust FG knot for exceptional performance as the union passes through the rod guides.

Spring is here, and just as the warm breezes and gentle showers awaken your yard and garden, rising temperatures awaken saltwater predators, too. 

wet, using bird activity to help you locate large pods of baitfish being pushed to the surface by hungry predators below.

Wading skinny waters provides you with the advantage of exceptional stealth in an environment where waves slapping against the hull or an errant dropped pair of pliers can scatter bait and trout alike.

Long casts are critical here, so launch a lively action soft plastic like Z-Man's 4-inch DieZel MinnowZ rigged on a 1/4-ounce Z-Man Trout Eye jighead. The ElaZtech polymer found in Z-Man soft baits is exceptionally stretchy and durable. As such, it easily withstands the array of sharp teeth found in hungry trout mouths, while the prominent, oversized eye found on Trout Eye jigs provides a highly-visible target to draw the attention of feeding gamefish.



Shallows featuring emerging grasses, rock, sand flats and current-affecting points are worthy of your attention now.

LIVE TO TELL ABOUT IT

STAY ALIVE IN THE OUTDOORS BY
BEING PREPARED AND AVOIDING DUMB DECISIONS.

Story and Photos by Scott Linden

Make note of distinctive land features when hunting in unfamiliar grounds to make it easier to find your way back to camp.

Like two bored cavemen, we poked at the dying embers of our fire, belching, scratching and wondering why that helicopter kept flying up and down the canyon. A confused-looking guy with a gigantic paper map exited the whirlybird, a puzzled look on his face.

"Can you tell us where we are?" he asked sheepishly. We spread the map on the dusty ground and showed him.

He thanked us, folded the map and trotted toward the chopper.

"By the way, what are you doing?" I asked.

"We're from the U.S. Geological Survey and we're mapping gold mines in the area," he said over his shoulder. Yeah, the guys who made the map were lost.

That time it was "operator error," but that map also had at least two inaccurate

place names. News flash: most mobile apps are based on the same data. If you can't count on the map guys, you must be able to count on yourself. Here's how.

BASIC PREP

"Ground truthing" is a start. Call everyone who might have knowledge of the route, your destination and local conditions. Mark your destination on your mobile app, handheld GPS and paper map. Share everything with a responsible party who cares enough about you to notify authorities.

Learn basic map and compass skills, at least how to use a catchline (see sidebar). I once tossed a compass into a seminar audience filled with beard-and-flannel types, asking them to show me south. Half showed me north. I hope they got home OK.

WHAT TO PACK

If you can't see your truck from where you're hunting, take these 10 essentials and you'll be able to spend a night in the deep, dark, scary woods without worrying about making it out alive: duct tape; map and compass (and the skills to use them); waterproof matches and fire starter; space blanket; multi-tool; water purification (tabs or filter); water container (or bottled water if there's little chance you'll find water in the field); whistle; protein bars; and a small flashlight. Add spare batteries or a power bank and you're a tish over the arbitrary 10, but who's quibbling when it comes to getting home in one piece?

Take your phone, too, of course, but don't count on it to get you out of a jam. It wouldn't hurt to buy and subscribe to SPOT or Garmin's InReach, either.

When facing dicey weather conditions, the best hunting decision can be to turn around and head for home.



CATCHLINE

Find your way back to camp.

Before you make a move in strange country, grab a map and identify a stream, road, ridgeline or other long, relatively straight feature in relation to where you start. That's your catchline. As long as you know what direction you've gone in relation to the catchline, you're home free.

Example: I'm camped along a river that runs north-south. I hunt away from camp to the east. When I want to head back, I simply walk west until I reach the river. Camp is either left or right along my catchline. Be the cool uncle by overshooting camp on purpose (say, to the north) so you know to walk south when you hit the stream.

WATCH THE WEATHER

Research search-and-rescue callouts and you'll find that you're likely to stay alive if you: tell someone where you're headed and when you'll return; know where the nearest highway or town is; pack your 10 essentials; don't buck snowdrifts going uphill—there will be more; and stay with your vehicle.

When I go out for dinner and leave the pets in the house, I tell my wirehair, "Don't do anything stupid." It's good advice for outdoorsmen, too.

I kiboshed a hunting trip last season because the weather forecast was iffy for the tail end of a deep foray into the darkest corner of the lower 48 states. Slick, muddy roads, arctic cold, no cell signal and no roadside assistance were just a few of the deterrents, not to mention mountain lions. Anglers should always look at upstream weather with an eye on the potential for flooding. The point is, get out or cancel before things get dicey.


GETTING FOUND

In the event you become lost, hunker down, start a fire, build a shelter, signal searchers and stay put. Try your phone; texts often get through when calls won't. You might be stressed when rescuers find you, but you'll be wrapped in a space blanket as helpful volunteers tend to your needs.

If you must leave your rig, post a note in it with your departure time/day and where you're headed. Usually, the best plan is to walk downhill, re-tracing your original route. Or head downstream, and when two streams meet, follow the "arrow" created by their juncture. Knowing how to find the North Star might help if you are familiar with the country or have your map. And mark your truck and camp as waypoints on a GPS for a compass bearing and maybe directions to a known location.

Need more motivation? I was following my bird dogs off-trail behind

my house (OK, it was 3 miles behind my house) when pea-soup fog rolled in as the sun sank below the horizon. I could see the newspaper headline: "So-Called 'Outdoor Expert' Rescued in Own Backyard." My go-to catchline is the forest service road to the west, and I had a compass on my phone. After a little brush-busting, we eventually caught the rutted gravel. I was striding into the yard as my wife poked her head out the door, a worried look on her lovely face.

"When's dinner?" I asked nonchalantly. She shook her head, but at least she didn't have to call the newspaper. 



The smart backcountry hunter knows basic map- and compass-reading skills can save the day when high-tech options fail.

CRITTER CLUBS

WE CAN CREDIT WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS FOR MANY OF OUR CONSERVATION SUCCESSES. NOW, HOW CAN WE APPLY THAT MODEL TO ADDITIONAL SPECIES IN NEED OF OUR ATTENTION?

By Andrew McKean



Mountain goats are among the most imperiled native big-game species on the continent, yet they aren't backed by a national conservation organization like those for elk, ducks or trout.

Love to hunt turkeys? You can thank the National Wild Turkey Federation for much of the restoration of turkeys across the continent decades ago, and for improving turkey habitat—and hunting opportunities—ever since (see page 26).

Fan of elk? Tip of the hat to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) staff and members for conserving entire landscapes and ensuring hunting access to herds that have grown in number and distribution because of their habitat work.

You can trace that same origin story of many species-specific conservation groups, born of a poverty of animals and members' collective determination to bring them back to abundance. Waterfowl, mule deer, ring-necked pheasants and ruffed grouse have all benefited from organizations with members who

have sweated and advocated and fund-raised on their behalf.

If you doubt the effectiveness of the model, then simply look at the prosperity of species that have an acronymic organization associated with their name. Ducks Unlimited. Trout Unlimited. The Bass Anglers Sportsman Society. Quail Unlimited. Wild Sheep Foundation. We have their totemic species in relative abundance. OK, maybe not quail, but they're working on it.

EXPANDING THE MISSION

One reason these "critter groups" have been so effective is because their mission has been fairly narrowly focused on the species in their names. These groups created a positive feedback loop. They provided avid sportsmen and sports-women a club that promised to create

more opportunity. Those members raised money and resources that fulfilled the club's mission. The more successful the organization, the more members it attracts and the more work it can do on behalf of the species. The creation and replication of these critter groups has been one of the brightest stars in the history of the North American conservation movement.

Interestingly, the most effective of these species-specific organizations are broadening the scope of their work, not narrowing it.

Ducks Unlimited (DU) leaders rightly recognized that wetlands are the limiting factor for waterfowl, and that by conserving marshes and waterways all along their migration routes, they could create conditions for a bumper crop of ducks and geese. That's why it's accurate to describe DU as a water-conservation organization

as much as a waterfowl-conservation organization. Pheasants Forever might have been born out of a singular focus on roosters, but it has since broadened its mission to the larger topic of promoting conservation practices in modern farming methods to the degree that it can now be called a grasslands organization as much as an upland-bird club.

Similarly, the RMEF can be considered a Western landscapes conservation group just as much as it is an elk organization. The Mule Deer Foundation is interested in improving habitat for the wide spectrum of sagebrush and mountain-foothills communities as much as its namesake species.

All these organizations have amplified the support and resources of their members by tapping into federal and state-agency funds and personnel to conserve entire landscapes, rather than property-sized projects.

THE LEFT-BEHIND SPECIES

Given the outsized success of this non-governmental conservation movement, it's natural to ask: What about species that don't have an advocacy group behind them? Are they somehow less worthy of our attention and support?

I'm thinking of our prairie grouse species—sharpshooters, sage grouse and prairie chickens—that were here long before shotgun hunters, but whose populations are either in trouble or could use a boost. I'm thinking of mountain goats, a trophy big-game species whose high-mountain alpine habitat is shrinking by the year as our climate warms. I'm thinking of moose, whose populations from the Northeast to the Rocky Mountains are suffering from disease, tick-loads and habitat loss. Maybe we can't hunt it, but I'm also thinking of the monarch butterfly, whose populations are in a free-fall, but which are an indicator species for a tapestry of flowered habitats that our game birds and deer depend on.

And I'm thinking of the pronghorn, one of the most iconic native species of the Western plains. Pronghorn populations are steady, but surely they could benefit from the same promotion and advocacy that elk and mule deer receive from their namesake organizations.

Why is there no Pronghorns Unlimited? Or Moose Forever? Or Monarchs Matter?


To be clear, there is a conservation group for mountain goats. It's called the Rocky Mountain Goat Alliance, and it does great work on behalf of mountain goats. But there are few opportunities to attend a fundraising banquet or to get involved in field projects that benefit one of the most imperiled native big-game species on the continent. Same with the North American Grouse Partnership. This is an organization that advocates for all 12 species of grouse and their habitats across the continent, yet how many grouse hunters have heard of the group, let alone joined it? And the conservation practices promoted by Pheasants Forever do benefit prairie grouse species—as well as pollinator species like butterflies—but there's no denying that it's roosters that dominate that organization's priorities.

Given the finite quantities of time, money and attention we have, it's unlikely that we'll create a new conservation organization with the scale, resources and influence to revive sage grouse or moose populations. But those of us who cherish sharptailed grouse, or Hungarian partridge, or dusky grouse, or Shiras moose, or even mountain lions, and who want to ensure that we manage those species so we have a huntable surplus, need to

make sure that existing groups include these species in their missions.

If it's living up to its promise as a Western landscape organization, then the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's habitat work should include improving conditions for moose. The Mule Deer Foundation should make sure projects that benefit mule deer also boost pronghorn and grouse habitat.

All this raises the question: is broader better? There's something to be said for the singular focus on an indicator species, which is why I want to pitch the idea of Cottontails Forever. Start a chapter in your town. Commission a fundraising print. Raffle a .22 rifle. As long as we have healthy rabbit populations, and young hunters to learn field skills with a .22 rifle or a .410 shotgun in hand and maybe a beagle on a leash, then we'll also have healthy whitetail populations. And hunters to chase and cherish species up the experiential ladder.

This is the real value of our critter clubs: they create support systems and advocate for the wider world of wildlife. As long as citizens support hook-and-bullet conservation, our water will be cleaner, our forests healthier and our human communities stronger. 




Cottontails are often the first species beginner hunters are introduced to, paving the way to the pursuit of a wide range of other game animals.

THE MIDDLE OF SOMEWHERE

TURKEYS, TENTS AND TRIBULATION IN THE SANDHILLS OF NEBRASKA

By John Taranto

An aerial photograph of a vast, flat landscape in Nebraska. The terrain is a mix of green grass and brown, dry earth. Several small, irregular ponds are scattered across the landscape. A dirt road or path winds through the fields. In the lower right foreground, a cluster of trees, mostly without leaves, surrounds a small campsite. The campsite includes several white tents or trailers, a few parked vehicles (a white van, a white car, a dark car, and a red car), and some smaller structures. The background shows a flat horizon under a pale, overcast sky.

Elsmere, Neb., was the center of the turkey hunting universe for the author and nine friends for a few days last spring.



There isn't much in or around the town of Elsmere, Neb. In fact, the nearest place where a turkey hunter might get a few stitches after taking a chunk out of a finger while cleaning a gobbler is Ainsworth (pop. 1,655), approximately 40 lonely miles to the northeast. I know this from experience, but we'll get to that part of the story in a bit.

Indeed, as far as I can tell, the only business currently in operation with an Elsmere address is Goose Creek Outfitters, run by Scott Fink and his wife LaCaylla. And it was on their land, which, remarkably, has been in Scott's family since his great grandfather homesteaded there in 1904, where a group of friends and I set up a wall tent turkey camp last May.

AN AMERICAN ICON

The canvas wall tent is perhaps the most iconic and indelible symbol of wilderness hunting and adventure. From the Rockies to the Adirondacks, the sight of a glowing, ochre-colored tent, a ribbon of wood smoke curling from a stovepipe rising from one corner, instantly evokes a sense of warmth, security and camaraderie in those of us who live the most rewarding hours of our lives in the outdoors.

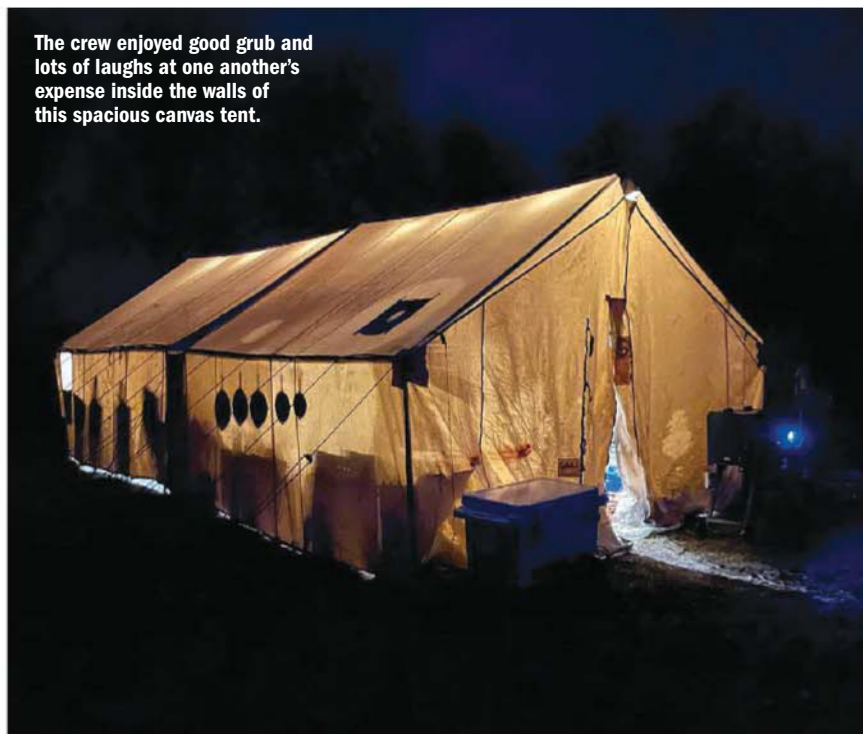
While a wall tent is most often thought of as the wilderness domain of the big-game hunter, it makes a fine shelter for the spring turkey hunter, too. It was in just such a wall tent, nestled in an island of oaks and cedars in a sea of sprawling ag fields, where my friends and I convened for the sixth week of Nebraska's 2022 spring turkey season.

Despite the late stage of the season, hopes were high that we would fill at least a few of the tags we were allotted, especially after two of the guys punched tags before the tent was even erected. For what Elsmere lacks in viable commerce, it more than makes up for in numbers of turkeys.

SLOW START

The first morning of my hunt found me in a ground blind set on a flat overlooking the Dismal River, about an hour's drive south of Elsmere. Within minutes of entering the blind and unzipping the windows, I spied a lone hen following the course of the meandering stream below me. I was bolstered by the prospect of working gobblers cruising the river bottom, but that hen turned out to be the only turkey I saw all morning. Occasionally, I'd answer a distant gobble with a few friendly yelps, but none ever resulted in a cooperative longbeard.

The crew enjoyed good grub and lots of laughs at one another's expense inside the walls of this spacious canvas tent.



Later in the day, I sat with Matt Church, a close friend of the Finks, on a steep bluff overlooking an oxbow of the Dismal. It wasn't long before a gobbler alerted us to his presence in the bottom. After scanning with our binos, Church finally spotted him strutting on the wrong side of a barbwire fence.

Undeterred, we picked our way down the bluff and set up against a cottonwood tree. We called and the gobbler answered for the better part of half an hour, but no amount of pleading would convince the bird to cross the fence. Once he moved on and we were confident we could ex-fil ourselves without him seeing us, we called it a day and headed back to camp. There, some of the more successful members of our contingent regaled us with tales of hard-won birds over a dinner of tomahawk chops and glasses of whiskey.



When in Nebraska, eat as Nebraskans do ... or as Nebraska's cattle ranchers would prefer that you do, anyway.



Wherever grown men gather in a circle, the odds are high that there's either a dead animal or a grill at the center.

GOBBLER GEAR

The gun, load and glass I used in Nebraska

SHOTGUN: If the length of the name of the **Benelli Super Black Eagle 3 Turkey Performance Shop** shotgun doesn't stop you in your tracks, the price very well might. But before you dismiss a \$3,000-plus turkey shotgun as overpriced, realize that this might be the *ultimate* turkey shotgun. For starters, it comes fully cloaked in Mossy Oak Bottomland and is adorned with an oversized bolt handle, oversized bolt-release button and the company's SteadyGrip pistol grip. It features Benelli's inertia system, which handles heavy turkey loads with aplomb. The barrel and a full complement of chokes are cryogenically treated to improve pattern density and uniformity. And each gun receives performance-enhancing customization from Rob Roberts, one of the nation's foremost shotgun gunsmiths. To top it all off, Burris' excellent FastFire II red dot sight is included. (\$3,399; benelliusa.com)

AMMO: Prior to a couple years ago, I never imagined I'd kill a mature tom turkey with No. 9 shot, but we are now living in the Age of Tungsten, when loads like **Hevi-Shot's Hevi-18 Turkey** make such feats possible. Granted, my bird didn't offer an opportunity at long-range testing, but it didn't flop much either. The product's name is in reference to the density of the pellets (18 grams per cubic centimeter), which are 48 percent denser than lead. This translates to a higher pellet count and greater lethality compared to lead. (\$91.99/5 rounds; hevishot.com)





BINOCULAR:

Whether you hunt turkeys in the great wide open or in thick timber, a good binocular is invaluable. And regardless if you rely on your glass to size up a tom strutting across a pasture several hundred yards distant, or to help pick apart dense brush in search of turkey movement, it's hard to beat the good old 8x42 configuration. Many turkey hunters opt for a compact bino anymore to save a few ounces, but in doing so they typically sacrifice objective diameter, magnification power or both. However, **Maven's B1.2** offers all the benefits of an 8x42 in a 5.7-inch frame that weighs less than 2 pounds. (\$950; mavenbuilt.com)



COURTESY OF JOE ARTERBURN (2)

Bad to the Bone

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THINGS GET WESTERN

A combination of said whiskey and forecasted rain prompted us to sleep in a bit on day two and enjoy a leisurely breakfast before heading out. It was still overcast and drizzly when I hopped in Fink's truck to head to a piece of leased ground—a nearby ranch—where he'd recently been seeing a fair amount of turkey activity.

The first spot we checked was a cattle pasture separated from the gravel county road by a windbreak of conifers. As the truck crawled past an opening in the break, we could see several turkeys on the far side of the field, roughly 150 yards away. Using the windbreak to screen my movement, I hopped out of the truck, grabbed my gun and a hen decoy and crawled through a thick tangle of branches until I could see the flock of turkeys. Among their ranks were at least two good strutters.

I waited until the birds disappeared behind a rise in the field before easing up to the barbed wire fence and staking the deke at the edge of the pasture. Fink, Church and my buddy JJ had backtracked to the far end of the break to watch what would unfold ... which ended up being not much. The gobblers, apparently content with the makeup of their flock,



A cattle panel makes a better gun rest than a background for a turkey grip-and-grin.



The author's tom sported a 1 1/8-inch spur on one leg and a 3/4-inch nub on the other.

hardly looked my way. After 20 minutes or so, the birds disappeared into the trees on the far side of the field. Occasionally, one or two would pop out, but it was always hens. The toms had moved on through the trees to an adjacent field.

When I heard Fink's tires on the gravel behind me, I gathered my things and crawled back out to the road. We weren't far from the driveway that led to the barn and other ranch buildings. People were operating tractors and skid-steers there, so we figured it'd be safe to drive up a lane that had been cut from the driveway into the stand of trees that separated the field where the turkeys had been and the one we thought they had moved to.

After a hundred yards or so, Fink put the truck in park, and he and I slid out of the front seats. He carried a tail fan in front of him as he moved slowly up the lane. I followed closely behind. We were about 50 yards from a cattle run that connected the two fields when a turkey appeared from the second field, heading

back to the first. It was clear this was a big tom, and when he cleared the brush on the far side of the run, I raced up to one of the panels that comprised the chute. The bird was 25 yards out into the field when I covered the back of his head with my red dot. The hunt didn't exactly play out like you see on TV, but a dead gobbler is a dead gobbler all the same.


AMATEUR HOUR

With a second tag burning a hole in my pocket, the plan was to go back to camp, get my bird on ice, maybe grab a quick lunch and then head back out. Unfortunately, the only other blood I would draw that day would be my own.

In my haste to clean my bird and get back to hunting, I committed a cardinal sin of knife handling and pulled the blade back toward my off hand when separating the breast meat from the sternum. I managed to slice from the pad of my middle finger around to the nail bed, with a slight dogleg in the incision just



to make things interesting. Once I got it to stop bleeding long enough to examine the wound, it was agreed upon by all in attendance that it likely wouldn't heal correctly without stitches.

If our tent had been staked out at 10,000 feet, miles deep into a vast Western wilderness, there's a strong likelihood that I would be typing this story with a deformed left middle finger. However, although Elsmere may feel like it's in the middle of nowhere, it's just 40 miles from the Ainsworth Family Clinic. 



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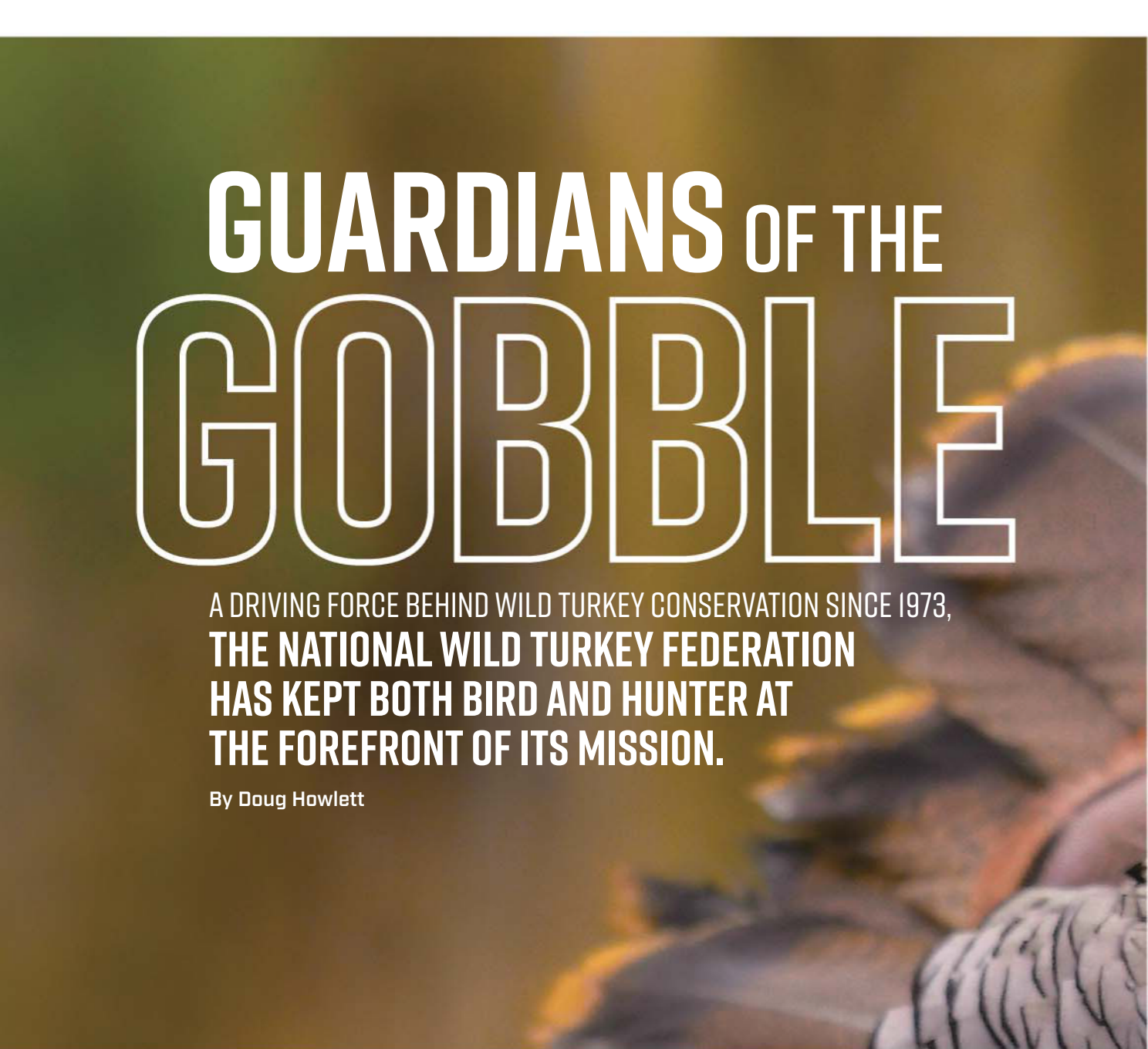
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GUARDIANS OF THE GOBBLE

A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND WILD TURKEY CONSERVATION SINCE 1973,
**THE NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION
HAS KEPT BOTH BIRD AND HUNTER AT
THE FOREFRONT OF ITS MISSION.**

By Doug Howlett

The words are simple and bold: “Dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting heritage.” We could also say they’re timeless. The words that make up the National Wild Turkey Federation’s mission statement have guided the organization from its earliest days and continue to steer it half a century later as leaders and volunteers look toward a challenging, yet exciting, future. To be sure, it’s a future with a lot of promise.

When the organization was founded in 1973, there were an estimated 1.3 million wild turkeys in North America. Many

populations had been extirpated from their traditional forested ranges of the 1800s as a growing nation cut timber for farms and killed the birds for food and market. Today, through coordination with state and federal wildlife agency partners, combined with volunteer and corporate support, the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) has helped boost the population to more than 7 million birds in our nation’s fields and forests. Huntatable populations can be found in all 48 contiguous states, as well as Hawaii and parts of Canada and Mexico.

At the same time, the NWTF’s commitment to hunters has never wavered.

While there have long been plenty of sporting groups that served hunters in various capacities, at the time of the NWTF’s founding there were no national conservation organizations that so boldly pronounced the objective of supporting the growth of hunters and hunting opportunity like the NWTF, which put it in its mission statement. That was revolutionary for its time. Back then, and even now, some organizations soft-sell their support of hunting to walk the tightrope between sportsman and wildlife watcher, hoping to draw funds from both camps.

The NWTF’s early leadership, made up largely of diehard turkey hunters



With huntable populations of wild turkeys now in 49 states and parts of Canada and Mexico, it'd be easy for the NWTF to rest on its laurels. Instead, the group views the next 50 years as just as critical as the last 50.

before there were really a whole lot of turkey hunters anywhere, recognized it was going to be likeminded people—those passionate about hearing a gobble on a spring morning and trying to call a bird in close—who would work the hardest to help grow turkey populations. Indeed, it has been these very hunters who have made up the ranks of the organization's most ardent supporters throughout its history, fueling the state and local fundraising efforts so critical to a national organization.

The NWTF grew from a mere 1,300 members in 1973 and migrated its headquarters from Fredericksburg, Va., to

its present-day location in Edgefield, S.C., courtesy of some coordination by the late, longtime South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, who hailed from Edgefield. Along with the success of more game departments bolstering their state's turkey populations, turkey hunting enjoyed a surge in participation, and with it came more interest in supporting the one organization dedicated to the sport. The 1990s saw an upswell of new hunters join the turkey hunting ranks.

As deer and waterfowl hunters went afield and began to see turkeys, a "new" hunting opportunity—especially one that could primarily be enjoyed in the spring

when other seasons were closed—was too good to resist. For these hunters eager to learn, the NWTF provided the resources, information and network to fast-track their wild turkey education. These included a magazine, *Turkey Call*, dedicated to the sport; an annual national convention that boasted hundreds of exhibitors selling everything from turkey calls to camouflage and offering seminars on how to hunt the birds; and at the time, the first television program dedicated to showcasing the turkey hunting heritage in *Turkey Call TV*. From the start, NWTF fed the minds of legions of new devotees.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

As interest in turkey hunting and the NWTF exploded, an entire industry sprang up around the sport. Early-day turkey hunters were left to roam the woods sporting brown canvas Duxbak coats and pants, using homemade mouth calls or crudely crafted box or slate calls, and shooting No. 4 buckshot or high-brass No. 6s more suitable for squirrels, rabbits and pheasants (don't get me wrong, those hunters tagged plenty of turkeys outfitted like that). The turkey hunters of the 1990s and 2000s, however, were gifted a world of hunting innovation.

Federal Ammunition, which celebrated its 100th anniversary last year, Winchester and Remington began to develop specialized loads with premium ballistic performance just for turkey hunting. Today the offerings from these and other ammo makers is mind-boggling. In addition to ammunition, innovation in shotgun design—shorter barrels, pistol-grip stocks, camo finishes, tighter chokes, adjustable sights and compatibility with mounted optics—saw a host of turkey-specific scatterguns line the racks of gun shops as every spring approached.

The hunter camouflage revolution led by the then-new brands Trebark,

Realtree and Mossy Oak also found a ready audience among the growing numbers of turkey hunters, who saw an advantage to blending in with their surroundings better. And, of course, almost anyone with an interest in stretching a latex reed over an aluminum frame or crafting a better friction call was opening shop as a call maker.

It was at this time that companies like Lynch Calls and Perfection Turkey Calls (two of the earliest mass-production call makers) enjoyed an expanding customer base, and brands like Lohman, Primos, Knight & Hale, Hunter Specialties, MAD Calls, Quaker Boy and many others were born and became household names. Many of these companies continue to flourish even as the market has become increasingly crowded by countless custom offerings.

Guns, ammo, camo and calls were just the essentials of the hunt. Decoys, seats, seat cushions, turkey vests, turkey packs, boots, blinds, call carriers, ratchet cutters and a plethora of other products designed to make a turkey hunter's day afield more successful have come and gone. The truly useful ones still find favor among the camo-clad masses, and new product development hasn't stopped.

Through it all, the NWTF was often consulted or its name and endorsement sought to help move product. In turn, these companies quickly became some of the most ardent supporters of the organization, donating product and offering financial support to help fundraising efforts. Many of these efforts continue today.

50 AND FORWARD

It was on a very un-springlike morning that the NWTF's Pete Muller and I waded across a shallow creek in the dark and started working our way to a powerline where he had heard some birds while scouting the day before. Pete is communications director for the organization, but he's built more like a lumberjack and seemed to have the fitness of one. We had walked a steady 300 yards and every step of it had been uphill.

"I thought Ohio was flat," I gasped between deep breaths of air. "No one told me about this part."

It was my first time hunting the Buckeye State, and we were in the south-east near Beaver, where Appalachia apparently spills well across the borders. We were hunting with NWTF supporter and call maker Bob Fulcher, who had worked



Thanks in part to ambitious trap-and-transfer efforts, North America's wild turkey population has grown more than five-fold since the NWTF's founding in 1973.

out arrangements for us to stay in the lodging at Whitetails Only Outfitting. It was the perfect base of operations; since the place was “whitetails only,” we had the camp to ourselves in late April. I reveled in some of the most turkey-looking country I’ve ever hunted: huge ridges of oak framed by creek bottoms and dotted with grassy pastures for gobblers to strut and bug.

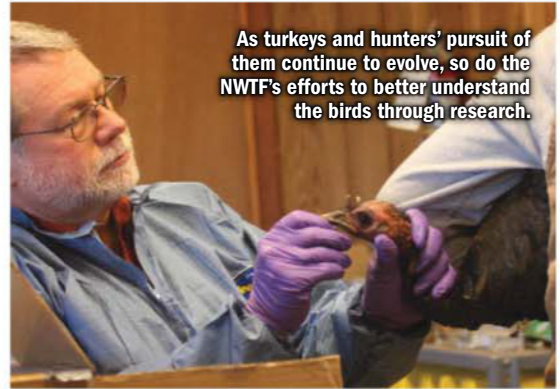
The mid-spring cold spell that hit the area about the same time my rented Hyundai showed up made the turkey hunting tough, though not for everyone. JJ Reich, who works for Federal and was touting the company’s 100 years of innovation, was there to let us put some of the ammo maker’s newest turkey loads to use. Instead, he showed us how well they worked as he drew first, and what would be the only, blood of the hunt with a nice gobbler on the first morning.

That said, we had a couple of close calls in our three days of hunting, but the birds always seemed to spot us first or go silent. Sign was everywhere. We spooked a pair of longbeards from a pasture. We worked a couple of gobblers

our direction before confirming they were jakes. The locals we ran into all had stories of turkeys heard from their homes. Some even offered to let us hunt their properties.

But there’s always a silver lining to a slow hunt, and that is often more time to visit with the people sharing camp. For me, a former NWTF employee who served as managing editor and then editor of *Turkey Call* magazine from 1998 to 2004, and Pete, representing the new guard, it was a chance to share stories. I also learned more about how the organization has changed since I left Edgefield almost 19 years ago.

Although the NWTF has obviously evolved, its core values have remained the same. Consider the bold



As turkeys and hunters' pursuit of them continue to evolve, so do the NWTF's efforts to better understand the birds through research.



COURTESY OF THE NWTF. (3)



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goals NWTf leadership has set for 2023 to commemorate the historic milestone: achieve 250,000 adult members (membership currently is 185,000-plus); raise half a million dollars for wild turkey research; positively impact 1 million acres of natural lands; dedicate \$1 million to education and outreach programs; raise \$5 million to modernize IT infrastructure and invest in people; and raise \$5 million toward building a \$50 million endowment. That's a lot for a year, but as Muller points out, it's not all measured in dollars.

The National Turkey Hunting Safety Task Force was first convened in 1991 to complement hunter safety efforts already underway and tailor them to the unique challenges and practices of turkey hunting. The NWTf brought together state agencies, as well as hunter safety leaders from other organizations such as the International Hunters Education Association and the National Rifle Association, to share ideas and come up with recommendations. Many of the safety practices established by that task force are still followed today. Without question, the efforts have made turkey hunting safer. The task force has met three times since its initial gathering and will do so again in 2023.

"The task force will be convening again to examine the issues turkey hunters face today as well as the different ways people are turkey hunting," Muller says. "Practices evolve over time so it's important to stay up on trends and keep abreast of the latest scientific findings. As long as the NWTf and the industry can look at things from a scientific angle, we can refocus safe practices to meet the needs of today's hunters and keep them safe without hurting hunter success or turkey populations, either."

ALWAYS MORE TO DO

As this issue went to press, the NWTf was eagerly putting together the final details of this year's national convention in Nashville in February. Naturally, it was shaping up to be one of the biggest celebrations in the organization's history. But one thing that remains true is good work is always rewarded with more work. Turkey conservation is no different. There is always more that needs to be done.

One of the organization's earliest goals was to work with game agencies to help restore wild turkey populations

to all suitable habitat. While it's clearly debatable whether every square mile of suitable habitat has turkeys, the common perception among many sportsmen seeing huntable populations in 49 states is "mission accomplished." Now what?

I've heard some hunters express that the organization no longer has a mission. But as NWTf Co-CEO Jason Burckhalter notes, nothing could be further from the truth.

"In many areas there are plenty of birds, but in some pockets, there is still a need to understand why birds aren't doing as well as they should be, or find out what is hindering better population growth and health," says Burckhalter. "Turkey populations, like any species, are dynamic and always changing so there's still plenty of need to fund additional wild turkey research to determine how to improve populations in those areas where they may not be doing as well as in others."

That was a big reason why last summer the NWTf announced it was putting \$360,000 in funding toward seven new research projects in six states designed to

address the needs of healthier wild turkey populations. Throughout its 50-year history, the NWTf has dedicated more than \$8 million to wild turkey research.

Meanwhile, there's also no shortage of issues facing hunters—that other part of the organization's mission. In fact, helping hunters led to the creation of the organization's boldest initiative to date. Faced with maturing or unhealthy forests, shrinking hunter numbers and what some believe to be the top issue facing hunters today, access to hunting land, the NWTf launched the "Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt." initiative.

The organization announced it in August 2012 with a 10-year goal of conserving or enhancing 4 million acres of critical wildlife habitat; recruiting or retaining 1.5 million new or lapsed hunters; and opening access to 500,000 acres for hunting and outdoor recreation.

How'd the NWTf do in meeting its goal? In expected fashion, the group overshot it. Since 2012, the NWTf has conserved or enhanced 5,216,914 acres of wildlife habitat; recruited or retained 1,534,819 new or lapsed hunters, a num-



Part of the NWTf's success has come from outreach and education programs like JAKES, which is dedicated to fostering appreciation for wild turkey conservation in youth.

COURTESY OF THE NWTf (2)



Since launching its "Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt." initiative in 2012, the NWTf has conserved or enhanced 5.2 million acres of wildlife habitat.

ber that included Families Afield participation, another NWTf program focused on creating outdoor opportunities for everyone; and opened 700,041 acres of land for hunting and recreational access.

"For any organization dealing with changing populations and evolving landscapes, there's a danger in saying the work is done," Burckhalter says. "The work for the wild turkey

same time hunter numbers seem to be dropping, it's getting harder for people to find a good place to hunt. That's a real problem for many hunters or would-be hunters regardless of how many make up part of the total population.

"With 'Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt,' we opened more than 700,000 acres for outdoor recreation," he continues. "That has a real impact."


and supporting our nation's rich hunting heritage is never done."

Muller echoes this view.

"This work is definitely never done," he says. "It's important to not overlook the hunting component of this argument. People will debate whether hunter numbers are shrinking or not because, at the

At the same time, Muller stresses that as a greater percentage of our country's population does not hunt, it's important to craft programs that expose these people to hunting in a positive light, so they at least understand the issues and why hunting is important. Without effective outreach programs, the sporting community stands to lose at the ballot box.

With the changing landscape of turkey hunting, and hunting in general, where is the NWTf headed in the next 50 years? Burckhalter is quick to answer.

"The core mission has not changed and will not change," he says. "Healthy wild turkey populations and supporting and promoting hunting remain the key parts of our mission. We recognize that hunters are the backbone of our organization. But our messaging has and should continue to expand to highlight some of the additional aspects of conservation that provide benefits for all wildlife and for anyone who cares about clean water and healthier forests. Our work achieves all these benefits, and who can argue with that?" 

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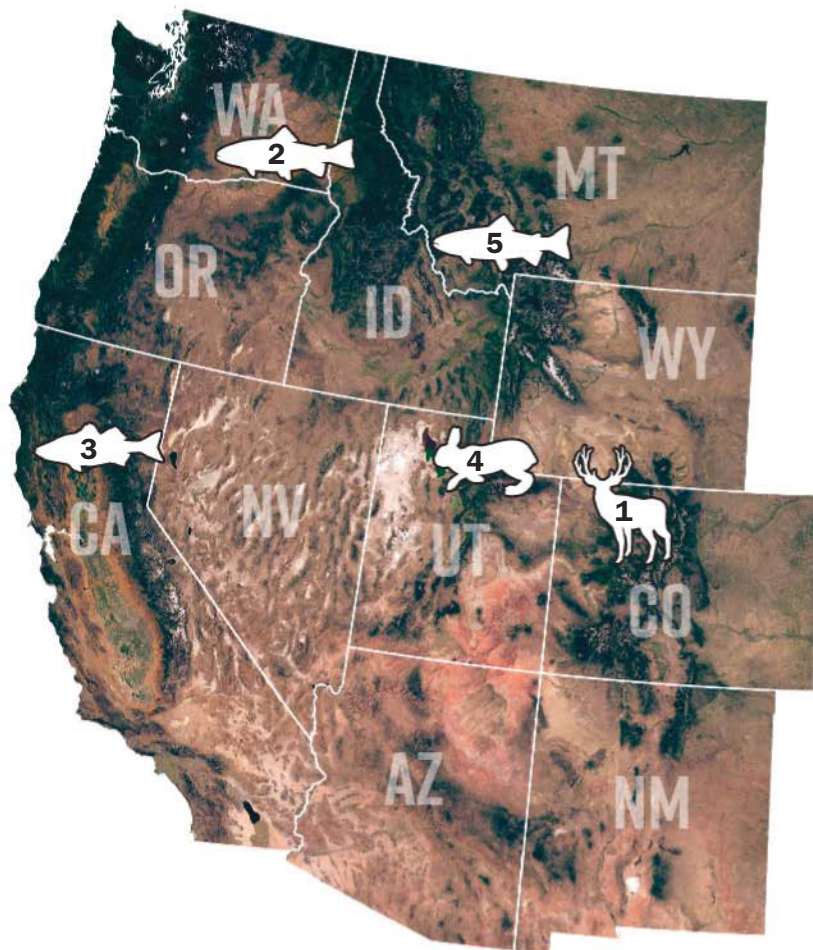
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AROUND THE WEST

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

By Andrew McKean



There's no reason to sugar-coat it: This month stinks for most sportsmen. Big-game hunting seasons are on hiatus. Fish have lockjaw in deep holes, conserving their precious energy for the warmth and mayfly hatches of April. But the reward for those hardy souls who venture out in the vastness of the West this month are empty streams, truckless trailheads, and fish and mammals that have relaxed their prodigious defenses and can be as surprised to see you in their habitats as you are to catch them unawares. There are still plenty of coyotes to call to their doom, and for those with restless dogs and a yen to swing a shotgun on fur rather than feathers, rabbits abound. So, shake off those cabin blues and get out there.



SHED HUNTING

Get a jump on the drop and scour winter range for the cast-off antlers of deer and elk. Beware seasonal restrictions on public land in many Western states, but find the earliest sheds on a mix of public and private land on the BLM flats north of Craig, Colo., and on lower-elevation Forest Service land around state-managed wildlife areas in Oregon, including the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest around Enterprise. In Montana, the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge is closed to shed hunting, but some of the biggest and best bone is collected on BLM land adjacent to the refuge.



SKWALA STONEFLY ACTION

While western Montana's Bitterroot River usually gets the headlines (for good reason: It's the most consistent March hatch river in the West), there are plenty of other spots to find big skwala stoneflies this month. This is the first big-bug hatch of the year in the West, and trout that have been sipping PMDs and winter midges are eager and careless in their takes of these big, splashy stoneflies. Washington's Yakima River, Oregon's Owyhee River and parts of the Snake River through Idaho's Swan Valley will all produce winter trout on skwala imitations the size of your thumb. Many junior-varsity streams in the region host skwala hatches this month. The key is to fish rushing, well-oxygenated water lined with rocks about the size of a golf ball.



SAC DELTA STRIPERS

Get yourself to the public stretches of the Sacramento River now to intercept bright, feisty striped bass heading upriver. Miller Regional Park, Discovery Park and Matsui Waterfront will all produce good action on line-stripping bass this month. Upriver of the metro area, hit Colusa Levee Scenic Park and Colusa-Sacramento River State Recreation Area from mid-March on.



MARCH RABBITS

Despite the fact that rabbits need a better publicist, they're doing just fine, ranking third behind deer and turkeys as American hunters' favorite game to chase. That might surprise those of you who haven't hunted cottontails since you were a bantam, but rabbits occupy brushy habitat in almost every Western state. Here are the best spots to hunt them this month:

- **Canyon Ferry WMA, Montana:** Hunt the south and east shores of this lake for cottontails hiding underneath Russian olive and cedar stands.
- **John Martin Reservoir SWA, Colorado:** The Fort Lyon portion of this state wildlife area is good for bunnies, as are brushy shorelines all along the south shore.
- **Wasatch Front, Utah:** Find sagebrush in Tooele, Box Elder, Juab and Millard counties, and you'll probably find cottontails.
- **North Cascades, Washington:** Cottontails and blackberry brambles go hand in hand, and there's no shortage of either in the Arlington, Darrington and Sedro-Woolley areas.



SPRING-CREEK TROUT

Hit the region's abundant spring creeks this month, where oxygenated water supports abundant insects and the trout that feed on them. Here are some of the best places to stretch out your whisper-thin 7X tippet:

- **Paradise Valley, Montana:** Book a guided trip to the legendary Armstrong, Nelson and DePuy spring creeks just south of Livingston. Once you get your fill (and frustrations) of drifting tiny flies to giant trout, you'll be ready to catch buckets of whitefish in the Yellowstone River just across the highway.
- **Spring Creek, Nevada:** The name of this town south of Elko is no accident. There is good fishing here in March. You can also try McCutcheon Creek if the larger stream doesn't give up trout (or, surprisingly, bonus channel catfish).
- **North Platte River, Wyoming:** OK, this isn't technically a spring creek, but this public water sure fishes like one. Fish the Grey Reef-to-Lusby section for 20-inch trout that are suckers for a size-20 Trico or a size-18 PMD.
- **Chama River, New Mexico:** Similar to the North Platte, this big-fish river is regulated by a bottom-release dam, but it will give up big rainbows ahead of the April spawn.



HAWAII TURKEYS

It may not be on our map on the opposite page, but Hawaii hosts the region's earliest turkey season (the opener is March 1), and the Big Island is your spot. You'll find abundant, stupid turkeys on the western coast from Captain Cook north to Hawi, but the very best hunting is inland. Check out the volcanic foothills of Manua Kea, the dome that presides over this tropical—and hunter-friendly—island.

TRAIL CAMS FOR TURKEYS

TAKE YOUR UNDERSTANDING
OF TURKEY BEHAVIOR
TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

By Scott Haugen

By positioning a trail camera low to the ground, pointing down a trail on video mode, you'll get a close look at the beard and feather colorations of toms, and the sounds will amaze you.

March is prime time to scout for spring turkeys, and if you can't physically be afield searching for birds, trail cameras will make a big difference. Trail cameras are your eyes and ears in the woods; set up properly they'll reveal a lot about turkey behavior, population densities, even sounds turkeys make.

THE BENEFITS

March is when a great deal of breeding takes place among turkey populations throughout the West. Being able to see when the turkey rut commences and how it progresses is just one benefit of running trail cameras.

Another plus is that trail cams show what time of day turkeys are moving, when they stop to preen, what new toms show up and what predators are in the area. I've had a number of hunts not come together as planned, only to learn from trail camera videos that coyotes and bobcats were in the area. Predators can put turkeys on edge and change their daily routines.

As the month progresses, trail cameras will make known the number and age class of toms in an area. Two springs ago, I had 13 trail cameras on a 1-mile

by 3-mile wooded ridge. I was picking up just one lone tom for a solid month before the season. I called that tom in on opening morning and filled a tag, but another tom I'd never seen came in with it. I returned in the heat of the day to check all my trail cameras and found seven new toms had moved into the area in the previous 24 hours. I filled my two remaining tags on subsequent days.

ROLL CAMERA

I run trail cameras year-round for all kinds of wildlife, and I always set them on video mode. My camera of choice is a Stealth Cam DS4K Ultimate, as it records in 4K and performs perfectly in a range of extreme conditions. Being a former science teacher, I base much of my hunting not only on sightings, but also the sounds animals make. A 10-second video clip of a hen walking up a trail might seem trivial, but crank up the volume to hear her purring and offering soft yelps, and gobbling toms responding in the distance off camera, and you'll be a believer.

When setting trail cameras for turkeys, I like hanging them about a foot off the ground and pointing them straight down a game trail. If a trail makes a

turn, hang two cameras on the tree, one pointing each direction since turkeys sometimes exit trails on the corners. If there's no tree on the edge of a game trail, get a rock or a chunk of wood to strap the camera to and set it there.

If multiple trails branch off and you know turkeys are in the area, run cameras on each one, even though they might only be a few feet apart. Toms don't always follow hens down a trail, often skirting to the side, strutting in silence, and multiple cameras will capture this.

The number of toms I get on trail camera spitting and drumming every year always surprises me. These toms might not be in frame, but either a hen or jake triggers the camera when a tom was within inches of it.

Another reason I like hanging trail cameras so low is because they allow a close look at a tom's beard and a closer look at its plumage, which helps identify it on a hunt. There's one tom I've been chasing on a ridge for two seasons. It always shows up during the first two weeks, then vanishes. This year I'm hoping to outwit the longbeard, as I continue expanding the number of cameras I'm using and where I set them based on the bird's movement.

BLANKET COVERAGE

I often saturate horizontal ridgelines with trail cameras so I don't miss anything. One spring, I caught a very light plumed Rio hen in early March. Two weeks later she was nearly 3 miles away on another trail camera, likely moving to higher ground to nest. Nine weeks later she was back at the original spot with nine poults. Interestingly, none of the toms that were with the hen followed her to where she nested. Instead, they stayed on the initial ridge, strutting and gobbling. I eventually tagged two nice toms there.

If predator numbers are high, I'll move my cameras into timber and thick cover. I've found many toms quietly lurking all day in timbered habitat when predators are near, rather than going out in the open to strut and gobble.

Since I hang trail cameras so low, I take a machete and clear the trail, as I don't want ferns, berry vines or other foliage blowing in the wind and triggering the camera. I don't use cellular cams for turkeys because I want to be in the woods every two to three days, checking the cameras. Forcing myself



By the time opening day rolls around, you should have multiple toms located, and trail cameras will help you do just that.


to head afield allows physical scouting to be done, and I do a lot of listening and learning at that time.

I might check cameras early Monday morning, midday on Wednesday and late in the afternoon on Friday. As I hear toms or see hens in different areas at different times of day, I'll add more cameras or move some that aren't producing.

When spring temperatures heat up, setting trail cameras near creeks and under shaded trees where turkeys take dust baths is wise. Many newly arriving

toms head to water and shade. I'll also target food sources like grass and clover in my hunting areas.

Turkeys don't always use primary deer and elk trails. They'll walk through thick brush, so look for loose feathers or scratch marks on the ground and set a camera there.

If you're serious about learning all you can relating to turkey behavior, run trail cameras. Not only will you receive an education, you'll know exactly where to be on opening day. 

CELL LOW

Two cellular trail cams that won't break the bank

Pity the hunter who rushed out and bought the very first cellular trail cam ever to hit the market. Like all things tech, cell cams have exponentially increased in quality and innovation, while decreasing in price, since they were first introduced a few years ago. One of the most welcome innovations is multi-network connectivity, which enables a camera to operate on either AT&T's or Verizon's network (instead of one or the other) depending on which carrier's signal is strongest where the cam is hung.

Two such cams that I've been running for the past year are the SpyPoint Flex and the Moultrie Edge, both of which are operated by excellent, intuitive, feature-rich phone apps. Each has a wide range of plan options, but both represent excellent value for the digital turkey scouter.

SPYPOINT FLEX



MOULTRIE EDGE



SPYPOINT FLEX

If there's one knock on this camera, it's that its 0.3-second trigger speed is too fast. Critters often trip the trigger before the whole of their body is within frame. You can accommodate for this by increasing the frequency at which the camera snaps photos, ensuring that a second shot is captured before the animal moves away, but that also means you'll be swapping batteries more often than if you set the delay to, say, 5 minutes. Otherwise, this is a very solid cellular camera, with a 100-foot flash and detection range, that produces high-quality 33 MP images and videos up to 1080p resolution. (\$109.99; spypoint.com)

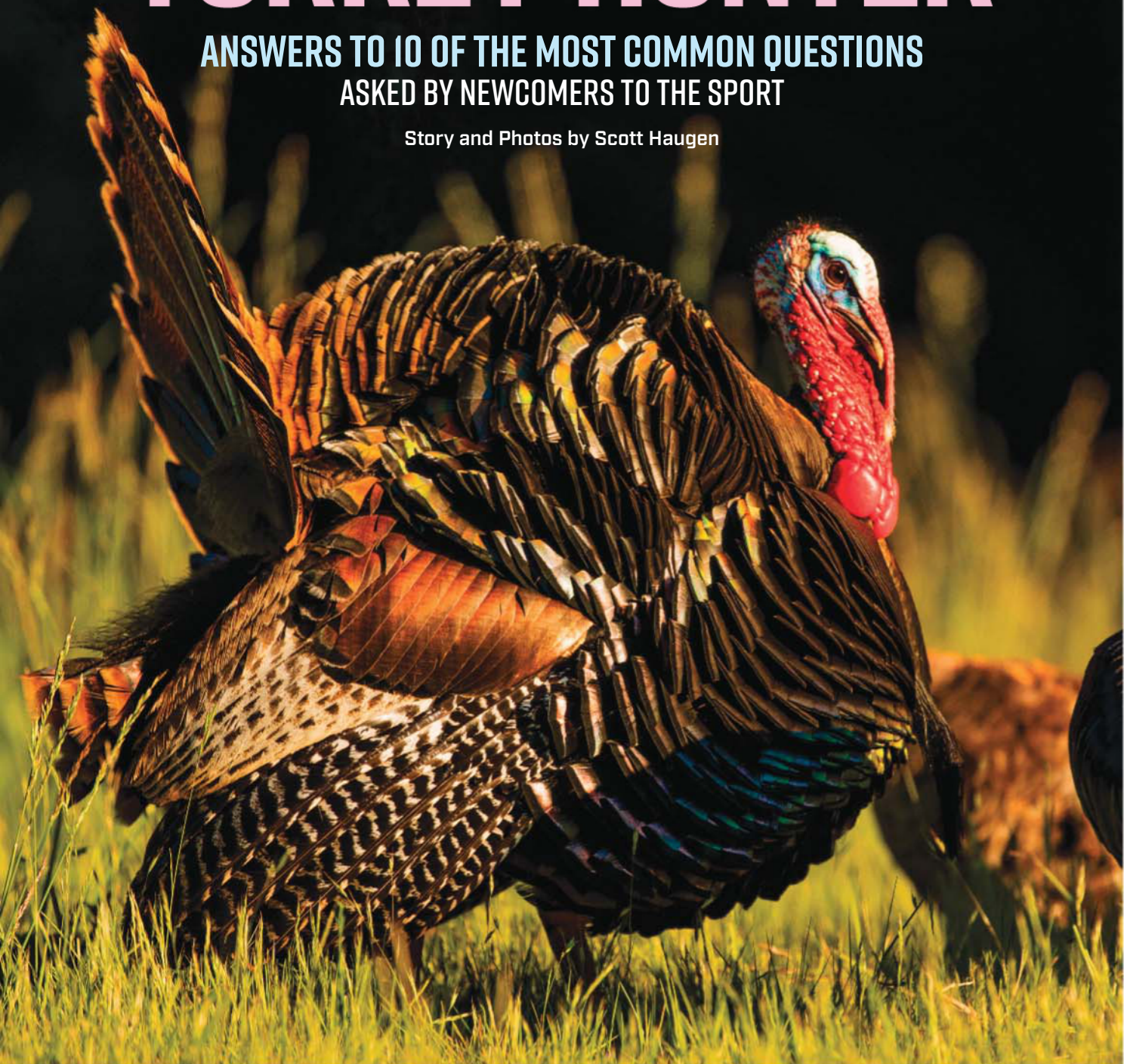
MOULTRIE EDGE

Moultrie has been in the cellular trail cam game for several years, and that experience has enabled them to learn a lot about their products' capabilities and to better understand their customers' desires. The Edge cam boasts built-in memory (no SD card required), an 80-foot detection range and a 0.85-second trigger speed, which results in more animals being centered in frame. Photos are 33 MP, like the Flex, but video resolution is just 720p. (\$99.99; moultriefeeders.com) —John Taranto

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A TURKEY HUNTER

ANSWERS TO 10 OF THE MOST COMMON QUESTIONS
ASKED BY NEWCOMERS TO THE SPORT

Story and Photos by Scott Haugen



Turkey hunting can be difficult to master. Some knowledge can be learned from other hunters, but most is gained through experience.

Last spring, I mentored a veteran waterfowl hunter in the turkey woods whose waterfowl wisdom is vast and surpasses my own. I figured turkey hunting would be a cinch for him, but when he started asking questions about his first turkey hunt, they opened my eyes.

This is my 37th year of turkey hunting. I've delivered seminars around the country on turkey hunting the West, wrote a book on the subject and have called in countless toms over the decades, both when hunting and photographing them. If you're new to turkey hunting, these are my answers to the 10 most frequently asked questions I hear from novice gobbler chasers.

1

WHAT SHOTGUN DO I NEED?

The most common questions I get are on shotguns and loads, usually in the form of, "Will the shotgun I have work?" My answer is always, "If you can shoot it accurately and with confidence, it'll work."

Turkey guns, chokes and loads have greatly advanced in recent years, but don't feel that you have to spend a fortune to hunt turkeys. Two seasons ago I broke out my very first shotgun from the 1970s, an old pump-action 20-gauge I shot my first ducks and upland birds with. I called a tom into 15 yards and killed the bird with it.

My father-in-law loved my story and gave me his first shotgun, one he bought for \$37 in the early 1950s. It

was a single-shot that was rusty and had a broken stock, but patterned well. I shot a nice tom at 12 yards with it. The following day, I filled my last tag using a .410 that'd been in my family for generations. That shot came at 9 yards.

By using calls, a decoy and even a ground blind, you can get toms close enough to shoot with any shotgun. Make sure you pattern the gun and know your effective range before the hunt, though.

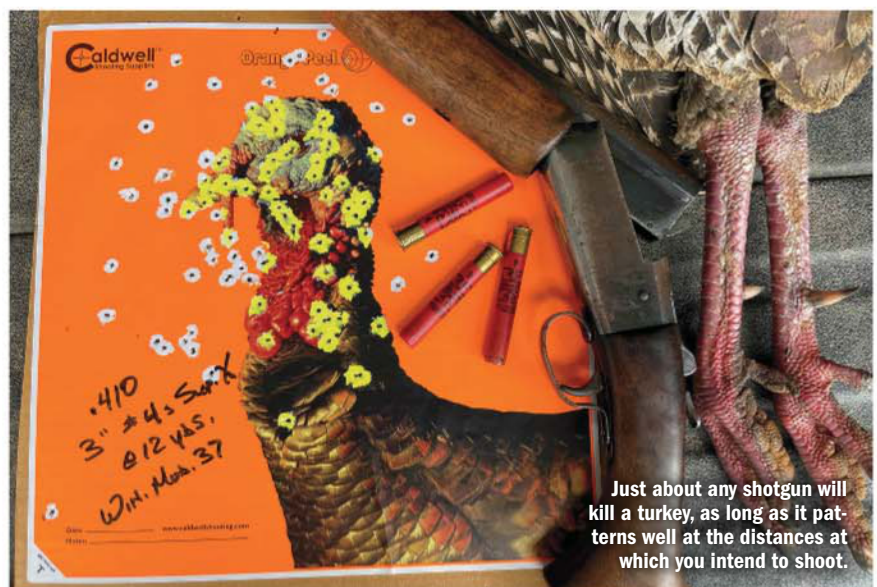
A payload of No. 6 lead shot through a modified or full choke is good, as you want a dense pattern for a turkey's small head. I suggest trying both in your gun to see which offers the best pattern with the load you'll be shooting. If you want to pull a tom in close for a shot, a full choke can throw a very tight pattern, and I've seen many people miss because of this, so a modified choke could be a better choice.

2

SHOULD I USE A DECOY?

Decoys aren't necessary to fill a turkey tag, but they're nice to have. A decoy captures the attention of approaching toms, taking their focus off you. Also, a decoy can be placed at a specific distance so you know the exact range at which your shot will come.

A hen decoy is all you need. When bowhunting, I like placing a hen decoy 5 yards from my blind. When hunting with a shotgun, 20 yards is good, but you can position it closer or farther depending on how your gun patterns.



Just about any shotgun will kill a turkey, as long as it patterns well at the distances at which you intend to shoot.

3

DO I NEED A BLIND?

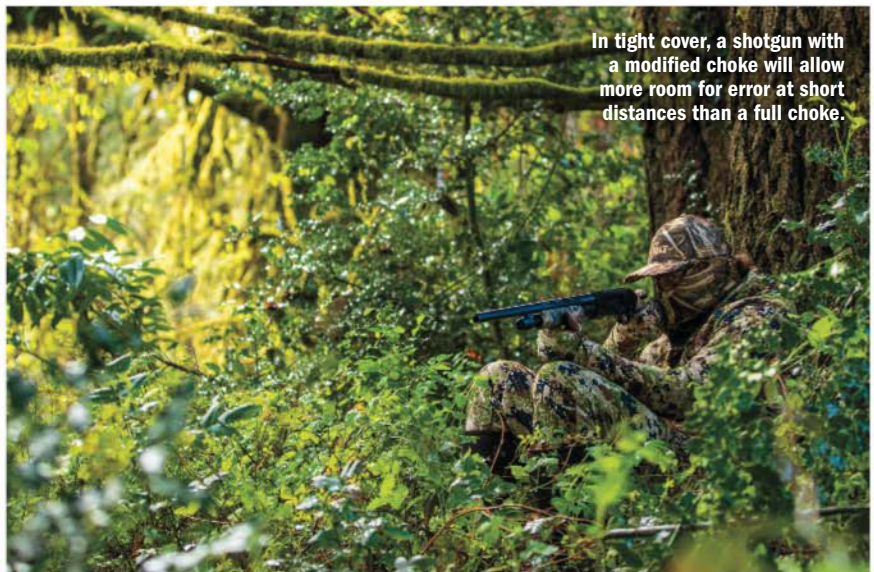
This question is usually answered with another question: “How long can you sit still?” If hunting an open field or meadow, you might see a turkey 300 yards away. Sometimes turkeys come sprinting to the call and decoy; other times it takes them hours to close within range. If you’re comfortable and can sit still, you won’t need a blind. But if you move around when your backside goes numb and birds approaching silently from a different direction spot you, the hunt is over.

If you can see a turkey, it can see you. Turkeys see in color and have vision comparable to an 8-power binocular. However, because their eyes are set wide on their head, they have poor depth perception. This explains why a turkey will sometimes walk right up to you as long as you’re sitting still, or will brush up against your pop-up blind. It also confirms why they can bust you at 200 yards if you so much as lift a finger.

4

WHAT CLOTHES DO I NEED?

Because turkeys have acute vision, proper camo is important. So, too, is the comfort and functionality of your clothes. Last spring, my protégé and I hunted in river bottoms of the



In tight cover, a shotgun with a modified choke will allow more room for error at short distances than a full choke.

Coast Range and Cascade Mountains. Mosquitos were bad, and due to all the rain, the foliage was dense and lush green. He chose to get Sitka’s Equinox clothing, which is impregnated with Insect Shield. It blended in well and he didn’t get a bug bite.

He also chose rubber boots because morning dew made for wet walks. The boots he picked—LaCrosse’s AeroHead Sport—are lightweight and have good ankle support, ideal for hiking short distances. They’re also tough, and stood up to all the briers we pushed through.

5

SHOULD I HAVE A TURKEY VEST?

The more you turkey hunt, the more gear you’ll acquire. A turkey vest is nice because it allows you to organize all your gear and have it readily accessible. Turkey vests have pouches for slate calls and strikers, box calls, diaphragm calls, extra shells, gloves, clippers and more. They also have a cushioned seat, which is invaluable.

However, a little pack is all you need to get started. Heck, even a jacket with a few large pockets works. One season, I was set on using only one type of call on each hunt. The first hunt I took two diaphragm calls. The second hunt I took one box call. On hunt number three I had a slate call with two strikers. I filled tags on each hunt. The only extra gear I carried was a decoy and a cushion to sit on. Simple still works.

Most hunters start with a box call, which is easy to work and makes great hen sounds. Basic hen yelps bring in most toms killed by hunters, and these sounds are easy to learn to make.

Pack water and a snack, as a quick turkey hunt can often turn into a half-day afield.



A ground blind is a good choice for turkey hunters who find it difficult to sit still for extended periods of time.



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6

WHEN SHOULD I START SCOUTING?

It's never too early to scout. Many serious turkey hunters start scouting in January, when birds are in big flocks. When conducting preseason scouting, look for large flocks of hens and bachelor groups of toms. The hens will eventually split, and toms often follow. It's nothing for a hen to travel 15 miles from her wintering habitat to a nest site. Hens often nest in the same place every year.

Using trail cameras to scout for turkeys reveals the number of birds in an area and shows the progression of breeding. As breeding peaks, more toms will usually arrive to an area. Good locations for hanging cameras include on game trails, on the edges of fields and pointing down fencelines.

If you're looking to hunt on private land, seek permission early, not the day before the opener.

7

SHOULD I HUNT EARLY IN THE MORNING?

Early in the season, hunting can be good all day. Early mornings are usually best, but if hen densities are high, starting a hunt around 9 a.m. isn't a bad idea because once hens head to their nests for the day, toms will cover more ground.

When hens tend their nests full-time, about midseason, early-morning hunts are better. This is because toms are looking for hens as soon as they leave the roost, and there are few real hens around to distract them.

Late in the season, afternoon and early-evening hunting (where legal) can be good as toms spread out to feed prior to heading to roost. Grass seeds become a primary food source.

8

SHOULD I WAIT FOR A SUNNY DAY TO HUNT?

Sunny days get toms fired up, but if you wait for sunshine, you might never get into the woods. The turkey breeding season is based on photoperiodism, not sunshine and warmth. As daylight hours increase, the turkey rut progresses.

Later in the season, hot, sunny days can send toms to shade by midmorning, meaning you'll want to hunt in the timber and amid cover.

9

WHAT IF IT'S WINDY, COLD OR RAINING?

One spring I hunted in a snowstorm at nearly 4,000 feet in temperatures in the teens. I called in a tom that came in gobbling and filled my tag. When conditions are cold and wet, head to protected areas like deep draws and the leeward sides of hills.

Turkeys are tough and can survive incredibly harsh conditions, but they're smart. They head for protection, out of the elements, and that's where you want to hunt.

10

WHAT IF I SPOOK A TOM?

If a tom busts you, wait two or three days before trying to hunt that bird again. Sometimes you can get on the bird the same day, but often it will only further educate it. Instead, back out and head to another location.

If embarking upon your first turkey season this spring, keep things simple. The more you hunt, the more turkey encounters you'll have and the more you'll learn what it takes to find success. Above all, make it a point to have fun along the way. **Gf**

A properly placed decoy gives an approaching tom something it expects to see, putting the bird at ease.





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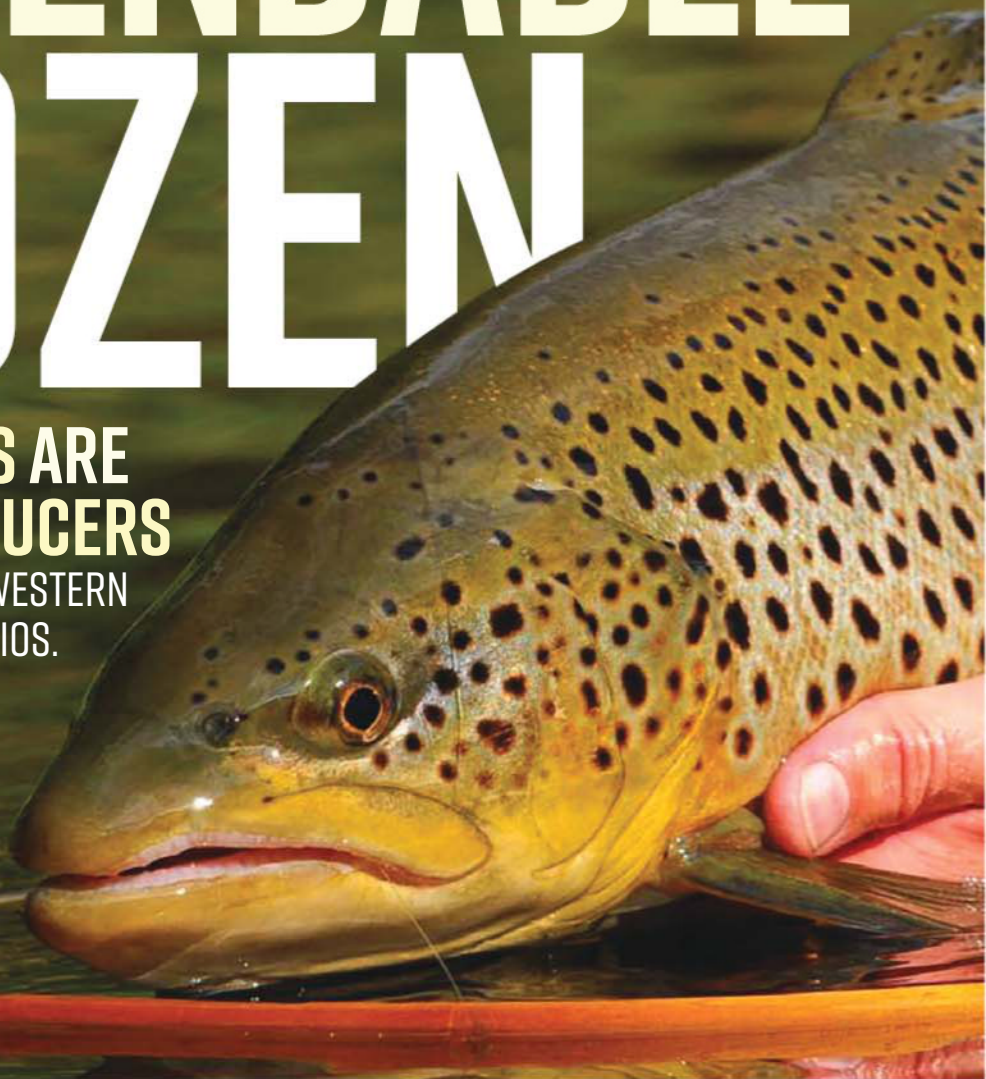
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THE DEPENDABLE DOZEN

**THESE 12 FLIES ARE
PROVEN PRODUCERS**
FOR A WIDE RANGE OF WESTERN
TROUT FISHING SCENARIOS.

By Mike Gnatkowski



If you're like me, you probably carry way more flies in your trout vest than you'll ever use on any given trip to the river. Truth is, there are about a dozen go-to patterns that I end up tying on when there isn't an active hatch happening. When you're forced to downsize your fly-box selection, like with a pack-in trip or a quick evening session, and space is limited,

there are some tried-and-true favorites you shouldn't be without. Many don't imitate anything in particular, but simulate a variety of insects and other creatures trout eat. Most can be fished in a variety of ways, making them both productive and versatile. Some are favorites because they are easy to tie with inexpensive materials, and they flat-out catch trout.

WET FLIES

It's commonly believed that about 90 percent of what a trout eats is taken under the surface of the water. It's logical then that a good portion of our Dependable Dozen consists of wet flies, nymphs and streamers. You generally can't go wrong if you have a fly that sinks on the end of your tippet.

B&C BECK



Simplify the fly-selection process by reducing the number of patterns you carry and loading up on a versatile collection of bugs trout love.

Subsurface flies are tied either with no weight at all, with lead wire wrapped on the hook under the body or with a bead positioned at the head of the fly to allow it to sink quickly, which is important in swift mountain streams or when you want the fly to get deep in still waters. Beads come in brass, copper and tungsten, and a variety of sizes. Even heavier cone-head

versions can be added to streamers and nymphs to dredge bottom. The beads not only add weight, but also flash that gets the attention of hungry trout. Additionally, there are anodized beads available in a variety of colors. Using a bead on a classic pattern, like a Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear or Prince Nymph, adds a bit of pizzazz.



Pheasant Tail Nymph

About the only improvements that can be made to the classic Pheasant Tail Nymph (PTN) is to add a flashback and a beadhead. The rust and olive colors of a pheasant feather give the fly a natural, realistic tone that matches a variety of aquatic insects. The PTN does an good job of imitating a mayfly nymph, but can simulate a variety of bugs trout eat. The fly is a great searching pattern when there's no visible hatch to match.

Adding a copper ribbing to the fly gives it a bit of subtle flash, adds durability and gives it a segmented, buggy look. The Mylar flashback simulates a wing case of a nymph and the air bubble trapped as it emerges. The fly can be fished on a dead drift or with subtle twitches that imitate an emerging or escaping nymph.

The most popular and productive sizes of the PTN are 16 and 18, but you'd be wise to have patterns in sizes 10 through 20 in beaded and un-beaded versions.

Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear

The Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear (GRHE) has a buggy profile and coloration that doesn't imitate anything specific, but to a trout it looks like something good to eat. A fatter pattern than the Pheasant Tail, the GRHE is to nymph anglers what the Adams is to dry-fly anglers.

In smaller sizes, the GRHE suggests a mayfly nymph, caddis pupa or freshwater shrimp. Larger versions imitate stonefly nymphs and larger caddisflies. Because the GRHE does such a good job of imitating a little bit of everything, it's a go-to fly. Try the GRHE in sizes 10 to 16.

The most effective color for the GRHE is the standard brown/tan color of the hare's mask, but olive or darker tones can be effective, too. The GRHE can be dead-drifted or fished with small twitches to imitate more active insects.



Zebra Midge

Simple to tie, the body of the Zebra Midge is nothing more than tying thread ribbed with fine gold or silver wire and a small bead head. You can substitute a dab of Antron yarn or peacock herl for the bead if you want to fish it just under the surface.

You wouldn't think trout would be too interested in a morsel as small as a midge larvae or pupae. But chironomids are one of the most important food sources in still waters and they can represent 25 to 50 percent of a trout's diet. Generally, the largest chironomids emerge during the spring and will decrease in size through summer and fall. Right after ice-out, midges become active and trout gorge on the newfound smorgasbord in the lake shallows.

You'll want to have the midge in sizes 16 to 22 in myriad colors including black, olive, red and even blue.



Pat's Rubber Legs

The easy-to-tie Pat's Rubber Legs is similar to classic patterns like the Bitch Creek and Girdle Bug, but is tied in several colors with black/brown and orange/black being proven favorites. The rubber legs do a good job of simulating legs and antennae on stonefly nymphs in sizes 6 and 8. Pat's Rubber Legs is so productive because it imitates stonefly nymphs that are so prevalent in Western waters and it can be fished year-round. Stonefly nymphs live for two or three years in the stream before they hatch, so they're always available for the trout and they're used to seeing them.



Copper John

Invented by Colorado angler John Barr more than two decades ago, the Copper John is actually a combination of three other very productive flies. It has the goose biot tail of the Prince Nymph, the wire body of the Brassie and the thorax, wing casing and head of the Flashback Pheasant Tail. The Copper John is another one of those flies that doesn't imitate anything in particular, but imitates a little bit of everything. The bead head and wire body help it sink quickly, so it's a go-to fly when fishing fast water or when you want to dredge the depths. By simply changing the wire color you have a variety of color options. The Copper John is a must-have in sizes 14 to 20.



Prince Nymph

The Prince Nymph can be traced to brothers Don and Dick Olson of Bemidji, Minn., but Doug Prince of Monterey, California, made the fly popular in the West. Along with the PTN and GRHE, it's one of the must-have nymphs that no Western fly-angler's box should be without.

One of the attractive qualities of the Prince Nymph is the peacock herl body. The green/blue/purple herl gives off an iridescent shimmer that makes the fly look alive. The goose biot tail and wing casing add to its allure.

Depending on the size, weight and how it's fished, the Prince Nymph is much more than just a simulator, it can be used as a bead-head to work the bottom, crawled along the rocks to imitate an emerging stonefly and fished as an excellent dropper pattern. You'll want to have some in sizes 10 to 20.



Soft Hackle

The classic Breadcrust is the original soft-hackle fly, and similar patterns have become staples in the West. Soft hackles imitate both a cased and a free-living caddisfly.

The original Breadcrust required the tedious task of preparing a red-phased grouse tail feather quill for the body. Larva Lace and similar products make a good substitute. Larva Lace produces a buggy, segmented body and is extremely durable. The hackle can be hen hackle or soft, mottled feathers from a grouse or Hungarian partridge.

The soft hackle used for the collar undulates in the current and gives the fly a life-like appearance. It can be fished on a dead drift or stripped in short spurts to imitate an emerging caddisfly.



DRY FLIES

Many anglers prefer the simplicity of fishing dry flies and the thrill of seeing a trout rise to take the delicate offering. While not as productive as wet flies in many situations, dry flies are fun to fish and give the angler the added challenge of trying to match the hatch when bugs are emerging from their nymphal stage or returning to lay eggs on the water's surface.

Parachute Adams

Some consider the Adams to be the world's most recognizable dry fly, and for good reason: It catches trout everywhere it's used. The parachute version is the most popular in the West because of its profile and visibility in choppy water. The mixed brown/grizzly tail and hackle have a natural buggy look that imitates mayflies very well, but it's also a great searching pattern. You'll want to have the Adams in sizes 12 to 26. It's that versatile.



Elk Hair Caddis

The Elk Hair Caddis is easy to tie, uses readily available materials and flat-out catches fish. In the West, it's a proven pattern because it imitates the caddisflies and stoneflies that are so prevalent in the region. With the elk-hair wing, the fly floats like a cork and simulates the folded-wing profile of the caddis and stonefly. It does a great job of imitating these flies when they are hatching, but it's also a proven pattern to tie on when nothing is working the surface. The original calls for a peacock herl body, but rust, tan or olive can be substituted to match the hatch. You'll want to carry this pattern in sizes 12 to 20.

Parachute Madam X

The Parachute Madam X can look like a caddisfly, stonefly or grasshopper. The Antron yarn post makes the fly highly visible. The original calls for white rubber legs, but colored, speckled legs make the fly even more appealing. Sizes 14 to 16 imitate caddisflies while sizes 6 to 8 work as stoneflies and hoppers.

STREAMERS

Streamers can be fished on a dead drift to imitate a nymph, stripped in quick jerks or swung downstream to imitate a fleeing minnow, or crawled to look like a leech or crawfish. That's why they fool so many trout.




Woolly Bugger

Very easy to tie, a Woolly Bugger can be enhanced with some Krystal Flash fibers in the undulating marabou tail, a crystal chenille body and/or a matching dyed grizzly saddle for the palmer hackle. Tie the webby base of a saddle hackle behind the head to simulate gills. The most common color for the Woolly Bugger is black. Popular sizes are 10 to 12, but larger size-6 and size-4 Buggers are deadly on trophy trout.



Muddler Minnow

The original Muddler Minnow was created by Dan Gapen from deer hair, turkey tail and squirrel tail to imitate a sculpin. About the only improvements are to add some marabou and Krystal Flash to the wing. Versions tied on long-shank hooks from size 10 imitate hoppers and stoneflies; size-2 bead-head versions tempt big trout. Regardless of size, the Muddler Minnow deserves a place in your Dependable Dozen. 

FREE **FOR ALL**

**THE FREE RIG IS THE HOTTEST
NEW WAY TO CATCH
PRESSURED LUNKERS
IN CLEAR WATER.**

By Shane Beilue



The free rig employs a heavy drop-shot weight and a lightweight soft plastic. The bait sinks at a tantalizingly slow rate behind the sinker, thereby attracting bass.



BRAD RICHARDS/GETTY IMAGES

When veteran bass angler Courtney Copley relocated from the East Coast to Arizona, he tried bringing his familiar power tactics for bass with him. While there were occasional windows of time in which the old standbys of bulky jigs and fast-moving spinnerbaits would work, the ultra-clear and heavily pressured waters around his home near Mesa, Ariz., required a change of tactics for consistent success. What would ultimately benefit Copley's need for change was being refined halfway around the globe by Japanese anglers facing very similar conditions: intense fishing pressure and extremely clear water.

One of those Japanese tactics that made its way to the U.S. market—and eventually into Copley's bass boat—was the free rig, which involves running the fishing line through a heavy cylinder or bell-shaped drop-shot sinker and tying a worm hook on the terminal end, similar to a Texas-rigged worm.

"The free rig is just a new and better way of the old tried-and-true Texas rig, but the line slides through the wire loop of a heavy drop-shot sinker much easier than a Texas-rigged slip sinker, giving the worm a unique action as it settles behind the heavy weight on slack line," Copley says.

LIFT AND DROP

Copley, who is an avid tournament angler and owner of Liar's Korner Tackle in Mesa, attributes the success of the free rig to the sudden separation of the heavy 1/2-ounce weight quickly plummeting to the lake bottom upon entering the water. Once the sinker is on bottom, the soft plastic settles behind in a near weightless and more natural descent, closely imitating a struggling or dying baitfish.

Copley is quick to emphasize the "secret sauce" to consistent success with the free rig is to allow the weight to drop on mostly slack line so the sinker can separate properly and slide away from the soft plastic. As the free rig enters the water, Copley will lower his rod tip to impart the slack line approach, allowing the weight to descend vertically. Once on bottom, he maintains just enough slack in the line to allow the worm to suspend above the weight for a few seconds, then aggressively pops the rod tip to shoot the weight from the bottom

CLEAR FAVORITES

Western lakes where the free rig excels

Since the free rig is most often paired with small finesse soft plastics, it's preferable for the bass to have a clear line of sight to find the bait from afar. Therefore, water clarity of at least 2 to 4 feet is optimal. Though the free rig can excel along any bottom composition, the heavy sinker banging against a rock or gravel bottom is an added attractant for bass. Clear water and rock, of course, are hallmarks of many Western impoundments in the U.S., making the free rig a prime choice for finding bass in these types of waters.

To highlight just a few examples, northern New Mexico has **Ute Reservoir and Conchas Lake**, offering adequate water clarity most of the year, but also holding both smallmouth and largemouth bass. The free rig is custom-made to pursue both species by hopping and dragging it along the many gravel bars and rocky outcroppings common to both impoundments.

Arizona **reservoirs like Mead, Havasu and Powell**, with their rocky bottoms with scattered brush or manmade brush piles, are prime spots

for using the free rig. The weedless method of rigging the soft plastic allows the free rig to come through any submerged brushy cover cleanly.

Farther west, Northern California offers many opportunities to work the free rig, with noted examples being **Shasta and Oroville lakes**, where the free rig can be an ideal choice for spring bass staging on gravel and rock points. Consider, too, that the free rig excels when hopped around boat docks, such as those found along the shorelines of **Clear Lake**.



a couple of feet to start the soft descent of the worm all over. The rig is worked back to the boat with this aggressive lift-and-drop manner.

LET IT SLIDE

The free rig can be considered a blend of power and finesse tactics, as it allows an angler the benefit of covering water quickly with the aggressive lift-and-drop retrieve, yet also features the subtle action from the soft plastic as it slowly settles toward bottom.

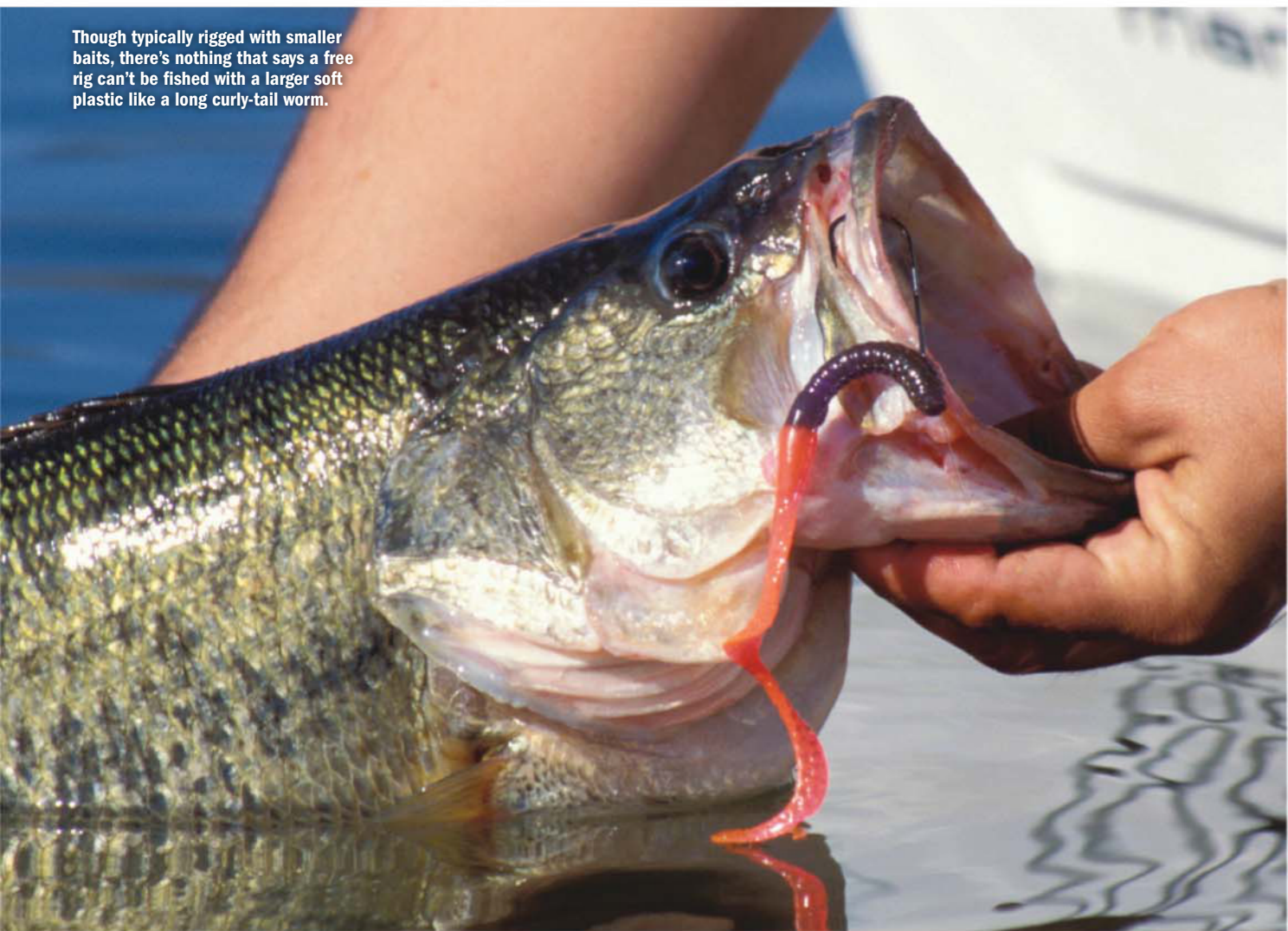
Copley provides the background for his adoption of the free rig.

"The reservoirs around Mesa are some of the most heavily pressured lakes in the country," he says. "I had read and heard about the success of the free rig from Japanese tournament pros competing in professional circuits in the U.S., and realized that might solve some of the challenges I was facing locally."

The versatile free rig allows anglers to switch from tubes to flukes to crawfish imitations quickly and easily.



Though typically rigged with smaller baits, there's nothing that says a free rig can't be fished with a larger soft plastic like a long curly-tail worm.



His hunch was correct.

"In the spring of the year when the bass are moving up shallow, it can be one of the deadliest tactics I've ever used," he says. "It's almost mind-blowing the size of fish we've caught the past couple of springs with this rig."

Copley details what's become his bread-and-butter free-rig setup.

"A 1/2-ounce cylinder drop-shot weight is ideal, but you need one with an enclosed loop for the line to run through cleanly," he says. "If you're using the type of weight that pinches the line with a wire clip, you can take a pair of pliers to open the clip so it doesn't grab the fluorocarbon. If the weight can't slide freely up and down the line, it won't work."

"I like 14-pound Sunline Shooter [line] because it's a little stronger fluorocarbon. Keep in mind, we're fishing

this rig through submerged brush, trees and rocks, so I need the line to be light enough to not inhibit the action of the worm as it falls, but heavy enough to get the bass out of the cover."

Copley prefers a 1/2-ounce Woo Tungsten drop-shot weight and a No. 2 light-wire Gamakatsu EWG hook. The light-wire hook is key, as it allows the soft plastic to settle more slowly than a traditional heavy-gauge hook. For the specific soft plastics, Copley mixes it up, with fluke-style baits being a consistent choice due to their subtle fluttering action on the fall. Another popular soft-plastic choice for Copley's free rig is the Z-Man TRD CrawZ, which is a floating soft-plastic crawfish imitation that actually rises away from the lake bottom on slack line. He's also found consistent success for finicky spring bass with a floating

soft-plastic tube that works in a similar fashion to the TRD CrawZ.

SUBTLE BITES

Copley notes that the free rig can be effective any time of the year; however, he's found great success in the spring on staging bass as they begin the migration to the shallows. Copley focuses on working the free rig around main-lake points in late winter and early pre-spawn months, then transitions to secondary points leading into spawning coves as the fish approach their spawning destinations. Once the bass move onto the shallow flats immediately prior to the spawn, the Arizona pro continues to find success with the free rig by casting and hopping it across shallow flats with the same 1/2-ounce weight he uses in deeper water. The bite can be subtle.

“A lot of times you never even feel the bite—you just lift the rod tip slowly and it’s a mushy feeling, which means the bass has it,” he says. “If you feel no resistance, pop the rod tip to make the weight shoot off the bottom a couple of feet, and the worm will settle all over again.”

Ultra-clear water can pose challenges for bass anglers, as the bass have a heightened awareness of anything artificial. However, Copley notes the free rig helps address this frustrating issue due to the small profile of the soft plastic rigged on the small No. 2 hook. On those days when the bass are still reluctant to eat, Copley is willing to downsize his plastic and hook even more to get wary bass to commit to the lure.

The success of the free rig in heavily pressured reservoirs is attributed to the unique action of the worm shooting off the bottom and settling back slowly.


“It’s a technique that gives the bass something they don’t see very often. They just don’t seem to get conditioned to the movement of the soft plastic shooting off the bottom and then slowly descending,” he says. “It has the look of an easy meal for the bass. We’ve consistently caught bass around other anglers that aren’t catching them, so that tells me there’s something special about the free rig.”

Additionally, the free rig can be advantageous for better hook-ups, as the bass feel no resistance when picking up the lure as it suspends above the lake bottom.

“Once they bite the worm, they [hold on] since it feels like their natural forage,” Copley says.

Finally, another hidden benefit Copley has discovered about the free rig approach is its ability to quickly convert to a Carolina rig.

“I’ll slide the weight a couple of feet above the worm and secure it with up to three bobber stoppers between the weight and hook to hold the weight in place,” he says. “I don’t have to retie anything to quickly convert the rig to a Carolina rig, and I can easily change the length of the leader by simply adjusting the bobber stoppers and weight.”

Copley notes that to convert the Carolina rig back to a free rig, he simply slides the bobber stoppers back down the line near the eye of the hook. 



Bass are naturally spooky in clear water. Combat this with a free rig tied with a small-profile soft plastic that looks more natural to bass.

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KOKES ON ICE

LANDLOCKED SOCKEYE SALMON
ARE EXCELLENT TARGETS FOR ICE-ANGLERS
LOOKING FOR A TASTY MEAL.

By Mike Gnatkowski

What kokanee salmon lack in size, they make up for on the end of the line as well as on the dinner table.

SCOTT HAUGEN

Kokanee salmon fill a niche in many Western reservoirs. While rainbow, brown and cut-throat trout occupy the relatively shallow waters, and lake trout take up residence in the depths, kokes reside in between. Because the diminutive salmon feed on suspended pods of zooplankton, they have no effect on a reservoir's baitfish population. In fact, kokes often become baitfish themselves for gargantuan lake trout and giant northern pike that call the reservoirs home.

These landlocked sockeye salmon are popular with anglers, too. Although the salmon feed on tiny organisms, they readily bite lures. Kokanee salmon are common in Washington, Oregon, California, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming.

While many anglers target kokanees in open water, there's a smaller cadre who fish for them through the ice. Schools of winter kokanees are usually made up of silvery, immature fish that shadow pods of zooplankton, feeding actively even in the dead of winter. The salmon are more concentrated now than they are at other times of the year, and the flesh of the spunky salmon is bright orange and delectable on the table.

FINDING FISH

Winter kokanees will often be concentrated in schools 30 to 60 feet down in water that's 100 to 150 feet deep. It's just a matter of spotting several lines in that plankton zone to determine the best depth, which varies with the current because the current carries the plankton. Often, a cloud of plankton will be visible on your graph. The key is to find the right plankton level and then just fish around it or above it. Eventually, the kokanees will show up.

Finding suspended schools of kokes has gotten easier with the new-and-improved side-scanning technology, like Garmin's Panoptix, Lowrance's CHIRP and Humminbird's Side Imaging. Side-scanning electronics make the job of searching for salmon straightforward and less time consuming.

It would seem like finding concentrations of kokanees might be hit-or-miss in a large reservoir, but there are ways to narrow your focus. One is to use a device known as a jigging machine. The jigging machine uses a 12-volt car battery that

is attached to a windshield wiper motor and a windshield wiper arm, but instead of having a wiper blade, the arm is fitted with a pinch pad-type downrigger release. The release is used to attach and hold a string of large, reflective spinner blades. The spinner blades are lowered anywhere from 10 to 60 feet below the ice and then attached to the release. Once activated, the arm moves up and down in an arc causing the spinner blades to flash and flutter as they're

manipulated. The action simulates a feeding school of kokanees and draws salmon into the area. Gargantuan lake trout that feed on the small salmon are also attracted to the commotion.

ON THE WATER

There was a hint that spring was around the corner as we negotiated to find a way onto the ice. While the ice in the middle of the lake was still more than a foot thick, a widening gap along the



Keeper kokanee salmon range in size from 1/2-pounders to 2-year-old fish that can weigh more than 2 pounds.

shoreline where the ice was beginning to melt presented a challenge.

After probing several access spots, we finally found one that guide Robby Richardson ([facebook.com/robby.richardson.14/](https://www.facebook.com/robby.richardson.14/)) thought we could traverse. Luckily, it turned out someone else had left us a 2-by-12 board to span the gap. Robby bounced on the board a few times and didn't fall in. Sliding our sleds across the board was easy. Getting ourselves across the crevasse was a little more precarious.

Once on the ice, we struck out down the reservoir to the deeper part of the basin. Robby and his friends Steve Harris and Mike Williams are used to running-and-gunning when ice-fishing. They had no problem pulling their jet sled behind and sitting on the open ice. I was interested in a little more comfort, so I elected to drag my Frabill Trekker shanty filled with gear, including a

Mr. Buddy Heater. By the time I got on the ice, the three were tiny figures on the horizon. I threw my jacket on the shanty, unzipped my bibs and took off my cap in preparation for the mile-long hike. It wasn't long before the thin, cold mountain air caused my lungs to scream.

Robby, Steve and I set up on the kokanee grounds while Mike headed for structure he hoped would hold a giant lake trout. Once holes were drilled and my shanty was set up, Robby turned on the jigging machine. Soon, schools of kokes could be seen flitting in and out of the cone of the LCG sonar.

It wasn't long before Steve connected and Robby caught a pair of salmon. The kokanees were fat, silvery 2-year-old fish that nudged 2 pounds and seemed to have an affinity for pink.

"A pink-and-white 1/8-ounce PK Flutter Fish is one of my best baits for

kokanees," Robby said. Northland's Rattling Buck Shot is another exceptional spoon for kokes.

Robby iced a couple more kokanees in short order on the Flutter Fish. I had a couple of half-hearted strikes, but had a hard time hooking up. I switched to one of my favorite ice-fishing spoons—a hot-pink Swedish Pimple—and added a couple of wax worms to the treble.

I saw a school of fish on my Humminbird Helix 5 graph and I tantalizingly danced the spoon above the marks while slowly raising it. This time there was no doubt about the hit, and seconds later my first winter koke was flopping on the ice.

Mike returned from his foray for lake trout and announced he'd had a couple bites but didn't hook up. He set about jigging a rainbow-trout-colored tube jig the size of a banana a short distance from us. Big lure, big fish. Mike hoped



A bonus for ice-anglers when fishing for kokanees is the chance to tangle with large lake trout, which often work the edges of schools of the smaller salmon.

MIKE GNATKOWSKI (3)



GO FISH

A few places to try your luck for kokanees on ice

Friend Dave Bryant targets winter kokes on **Dillon Reservoir** in Colorado. Unlike the immature kokes that were our objective, Bryant keys in on mature salmon that are collecting off the Snake River inlet where it feeds the reservoir. The salmon spawn successfully in the river. The mature kokes are much different than the immature fish. The males have a pronounced kype and turn a brilliant red with an olive-colored head. The flesh is not as orange, but is still firm and edible.

Bryant says he slays the kokes before anyone usually realizes there's fishable ice. Because of the elevation of Dillon Reservoir, Bryant says it's a ritual to hit the ice around Thanksgiving. High-mountain lakes in other Western states provide similar opportunities.

Look for outstanding winter kokanee action in Idaho lakes like **Dworshak, Hayden, Pend Oreille, Deadwood and Lucky Peak reservoirs**. Utah offers plenty of opportunities for kokanees in **Strawberry, Flaming Gorge, Causey, and Porcupine reservoirs and Moon Lake**. Anglers in the Cowboy State will find exceptional winter koke fishing in **Hattie, Rob Roy and Flaming Gorge reservoirs**.

Another friend, Jim Wallack, chases winter kokes regularly near his home in Kalispell, Mont., usually after dark. He uses a light in the water to attract zooplankton, which in turn attracts the salmon.


the jigging machine and the kokanee activity might attract a big trout.

Shortly after, I heard a commotion outside my shanty and flipped it back to see Robby and Steve standing over the hole where Mike's rod was bent double. About the time he gained a little line, the giant trout would head for bottom again and he'd start all over. This went on for 15 to 20 minutes before he got the trout close to the hole. As it passed beneath the ice, there was some doubt whether it would even fit through the 10-inch hole.

After the leviathan dove for bottom a couple more times, Mike gingerly steered the fish's head into the hole. Steve got his hand under the laker's gill plate and pulled it through the hole. Mike cradled the giant while Robby took a quick measurement. The goliath stretched over 35 inches and weighed in excess of 30 pounds. Mike held the fish's head in the hole until it showed signs of recovery and the giant tail slipped from his hand.

GEAR UP

Tackle for kokanee salmon is similar to what you'd use for crappies or walleyes. Medium-light spinning outfits work well. Length depends on whether you're fishing in a shanty or on the open ice. The 24-inch models are perfect in a shelter; long, 36-inch sticks are more forgiving when making a sweeping hook set. Opt for 1000- or 2000-size reels. Micro-spinning reels and their smaller spools cause too much line twist. Load the reels with 4- to 6-pound-test monofilament or fluorocarbon. Add a barrel swivel and a short leader to prevent line twist. Between the blustery conditions usually encountered and the crystal-clear waters typical of Western reservoirs, braided lines don't seem to work as well.

Kokes are spirited fighters, twisting and bulldogging right up to the point you pull them through the ice. If the battle isn't reward enough, the meat will undoubtedly be a treat for your taste buds. 

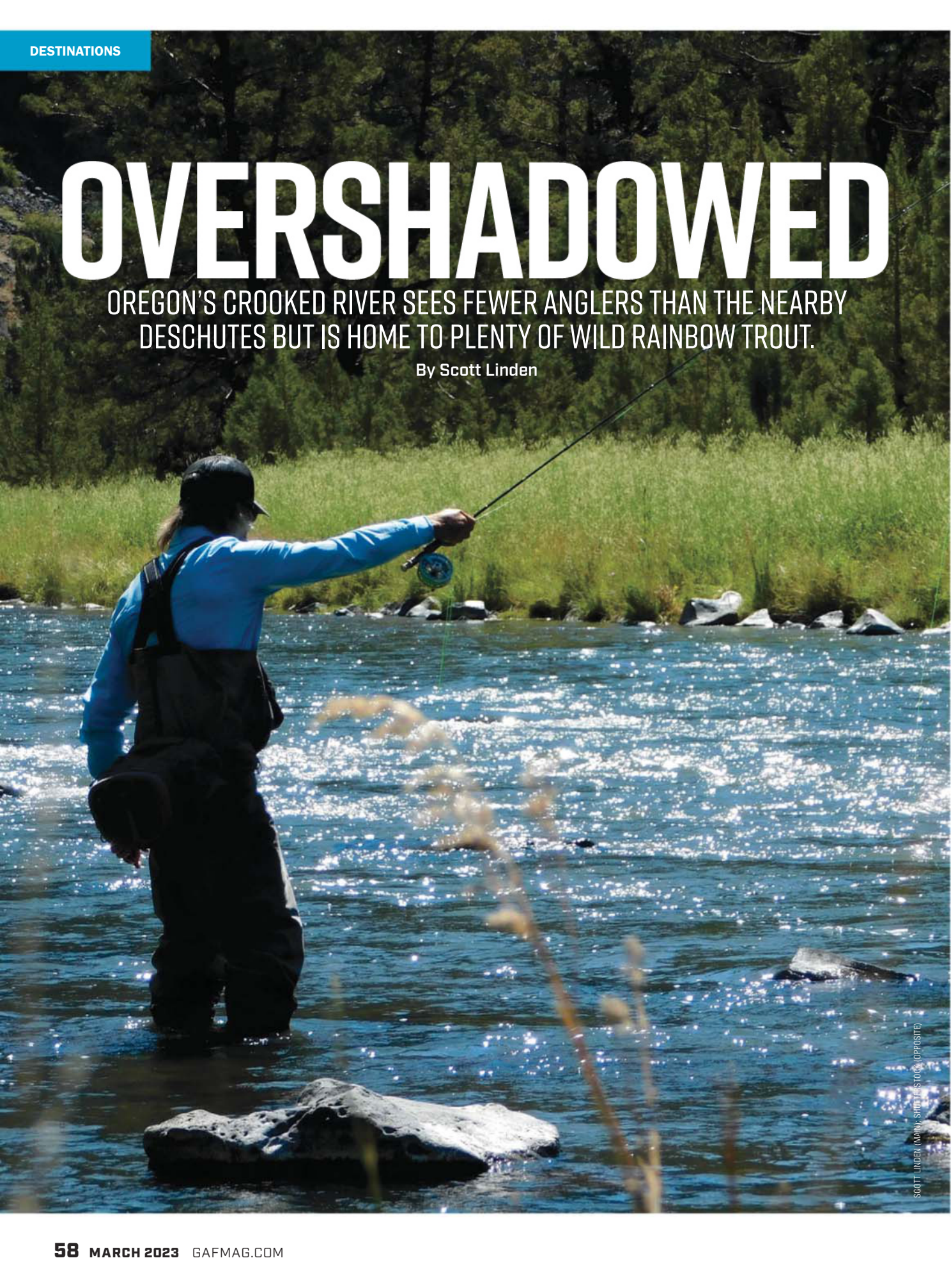


A jigging machine uses a 12-volt car battery with a windshield wiper motor and arm to jig a string of large, reflective spinner blades that attract schools of kokanees.


OVERSHADOWED

OREGON'S CROOKED RIVER SEES FEWER ANGLERS THAN THE NEARBY
DESCHUTES BUT IS HOME TO PLENTY OF WILD RAINBOW TROUT.

By Scott Linden



SCOTT LINDEN (MANY SHOTS IN STOCK) (OPPOSITE)



The Crooked River will give up trout to high-sticked nymphs during the middle of the day.

A treasure chest of trout waters, Oregon boasts legendary fly-fishing streams that include the lush, emerald-green Rogue, the sparkling McKenzie and the mysterious, back-of-beyond Owyhee. The rough-and-tumble Deschutes has its fans, too, especially among the steelhead crowd. But seldom do you hear much about the Deschutes' ugly cousin, the Crooked River. It's my personal favorite of the Beaver State's trout streams, and it sits atop the list in part because the hordes are understandably put off by its outward appearance. The Crooked is a tributary of the storied Deschutes, sharing its volcanic origins and stark desert context, with some runs through canyon country.

This prototypical desert trout stream offers a different sensory experience for most of us: tang of juniper, towering ponderosa pines, pastel whiff of volcanic ash and wedding-cake layers of basalt walls. It also has one off-putting characteristic that keeps away the wimps and dabblers.

The Crooked River's watershed is full of volcanic silt that's so fine it never settles—even with the help of its major impoundment, Prineville Reservoir. The stream trickles from the bottom of Bowman Dam the color of a coffee shop latte. That murky water feeds a bumper crop of algae that vexes and infuriates a nymph, first thinking he's got a hookup only to discover the green, slimy stuff is all over his lovingly crafted fly.

Get over it and go fishing anyway. Like your first car, the Crooked is far from perfect, but will inspire stories you'll relate to fishing friends for years. And spring is a fantastic time to probe its riffles and pools.

THE FISH AND THE FISHING

The trout are a unique strain of interior Columbia Basin redband rainbows that leap like Alaska salmon fresh from the salt. If a fish clears the water by its own body length, it's worth a long drive. If



The Crooked River passes through craggy canyons in Smith Rock State Park on its way to the Deschutes River.

a 12-inch rainbow vaults 3 feet in the air, I'll put up with water the color of chocolate milk. Cool, alkaline, insect-rich water gets the credit for breeding these firm, bright, wild fish. In a good year, there are thousands per mile; in a bad water year, it'll still have more than most Western streams.

March and April are notable for blue-winged olive hatches. The bugs dance above the riffles and are picked off by aggressive rainbows. If you're in the right riffle or tailout at midday, be ready for nonstop action.

Shirtsleeve days are ideal, and for anglers looking for respite from lingering winter conditions, there is no better place to be. But like a smile from across the room at a school dance, the BWO

hatch is ephemeral, so don't hesitate. Fiddle too long with your phone as you try and snap a photo of a freshly caught fish, and you might look up to find the bugs gone and the trout down deep.

WHERE TO START

The fishiest and most accessible section is the 6 miles downstream from the dam, where State Highway 27 parallels the river and parking and camping are abundant. From 50 to 100 feet wide, it's not that hard to wade, aside from the slimy algae that coats every pebble and rock you'll slip on. On the Crooked, every few yards there's something worth poking with a cast: boulders with resting places downstream, rock piles with slots, riffles, tub-sized pools. Even the grassy

bankside water is sometimes home to trout. Probe the shaded areas first, deeper channels any time and oxygenated bubbly water every time.

Occasionally, the Crooked can get crowded, especially in spring. Making lemonade from that lemon is one of my favorite strategies. Newbies not scared away by the water's color or dicey wading will hit the obvious spots before heading for the nearest craft brewery. I'll follow them, dropping a fly into the hidey holes they stumbled past.

Here's where the opaque water is your friend, letting you sneak in close, cast from upstream, high-stick from a nearby bank. While crossing the stream, I'll scatter casts to the four points of the compass, confident the cloudy water will

TRIP PLANNER

There's plenty to see and do in central Oregon when you're not on the river.

On the dry side of a wet state, a spring trip to the Crooked River is a no-brainer. It's a stone's throw east of the hub city of Bend, where, no matter what you like to do, it's probably in season. Spring skiing, golf and mountain biking are all a big deal in central Oregon. There are 25 craft brewers, several distillers and even a few wineries.

Re-stock your fly box at shops in Prineville, Redmond or Bend. Lodging of all types (plus riverside camping) is plentiful in spring. Oh, and if you just can't resist, the Deschutes runs right through Bend.



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cover me. If you can cast across your chest or back-handed, work in a roll cast or pull off a steeple, you'll multiply your chances exponentially.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Crooked is the redband rainbow's gregarious nature. Catch one in a pool and you might catch another. Most will be 8 to 12 inches of finny fury, but a well-sunk nymph in the right place might pound up a 20-inch—or a mountain whitefish. There are at least twice as many of them as trout, offering a microsecond of excitement on those slow days.

STRATEGIES

You parked, jointed your rod and found four other guys cheek-by-jowl in your spot. Bust out the wading staff and cross the river. You'll find virgin territory, a new perspective and no traffic. Tie on a couple nymphs with an indicator and high-stick all that untouched water. The first time I did that, I jumped a mega-covey of valley quail. Talk about a sign. Otters, coyotes and chukars have all shared the water with me on the far side.

Dig into your box for Beadhead Prince Nymphs with darkish bodies and some sparkle—peacock herl,




The murky water of the Crooked River, caused by volcanic silt, is off-putting to some anglers but not the trout that live there.

white wings, wire, tinsel. Check your fly often for weeds and algae. Pro guide Dave Hogan at Fin & Fire in Redmond likes a Duracell Nymph above a midge pupa dropper. Other fly choices include

Griffith's Gnat, the Zebra Midge and micro mayfly nymphs. Time it right and you might be blessed with a pale morning dun or caddis rise. Add weight if you're not getting hit; the big trout are shoulder-to-shoulder with the mountain whitefish, rubbing bellies on the gravel.

Once you've exhausted one spot, get in the rig and head for the next turnout or campground and try again. Risk a swim and wade to the big boulders in the middle and lob a nymph behind them. Sometimes you want shade, so drive until you find it. Other times, you want the sun's warmth to stir bugs and cold-blooded trout. Hit all the fishy spots, then try some of the long, glassy glides between them with a big black Woolly Buzzer.

When I started fishing the Crooked, back when beer came from Milwaukee, my fly of choice was an orange scud. It's now come back into favor. Chironomids and water boatmen are also on my short list. Back in the day, fellow anglers scoffed when you "settled" for a day on the Crooked. After all, the Deschutes is just down the road. These days, as they're jockeying for position at a crowded Deschutes boat ramp, they'd be wise to start planning a trip to the Crooked River instead. 



You'll drive past lots of fishable river miles to get to the Crooked River, but your efforts will often be rewarded.

New Libido-Powering Pill Helps Men Enjoy Long-Lasting Intimacy - At Any Age

Men across America are raving about a newly enhanced potency supplement that helps achieve healthy blood flow on demand

After age 40, it's common knowledge that performance begins to decline in many men. However, a new, performance empowering pill is showing that any relatively healthy man can now enjoy long-lasting, and frequent intimacy -- at any age.

This doctor-designed formula, created by leading anti-aging expert Dr. Al Sears, has already helped men overcome low and sinking libido -- and has recently undergone a potency-enhancing update -- with remarkable new results.

When the first pill -- **Primal Max Black** -- was first released, it quickly became a top-selling men's performance helper, promoting intimacy across America.

It worked by supporting healthy testosterone levels. However, Dr. Sears soon realized that this isn't the only challenge men face with performance. That's when he turned his attention to blood flow.

And this became **Primal Max Red**.

PROBLEM IS, RESULTS ARE MORE MECHANICAL THAN HORMONAL

Truth is, once blood flow slows down for men, no matter how exciting it is, it won't be enough without the necessary amount...

So enjoying intimacy without healthy blood flow becomes difficult for most men.

Luckily, a Nobel prize-winning scientist discovered the simple answer to help support performance strength and confidence -- by boosting vital blood flow --

and enhancing this essential performance function.

Using this landmark Nobel Prize as its basis, **Primal Max Red** enhanced healthy blood flow for untold millions of men around the world with the use of strong nitric oxide boosters.

While **Primal Max Black** helped maintain optimal testosterone, **Primal Max Red** tackles a lesser-known challenge.

Director, Al Sears MD, who has authored over 500 scientific papers and has appeared on more than 50 media outlets including ABC News, CNN, ESPN, Discovery, National Geographic, Lifetime, and many more say, *"Less than optimal blood flow can be part of a huge problem that affects a lot of men. And it needed to be addressed once and for all, so men would not dwell on it. Then, once we optimized it and had a great deal of success, we set out to see if we could do even better."*

The former formula had excellent results. However, new research showed that for even faster, anytime, anywhere results, increasing the dose of a key compound was needed.

So, one of the three nitric oxide boosters in the new **Primal Max Red**, L-Citrulline, was clinically boosted to 9000 mg, and the results were astounding. Which is no surprise considering that 5000 mg is considered a "normal amount" -- giving the new version nearly doubled the blood flow boosting power.

Men who had previously been unsure about their power and stamina were overjoyed to be back to their old selves and to get and maintain a healthy bloodflow when they needed



A new discovery that increases nitric oxide availability was recently proven to boost blood flow 275% - resulting in improved performance.

it.

BETTER BLOOD FLOW, STRONGER RESULTS

The best way to promote healthy blood flow throughout the body is with the use of **Primal Max Red**. By using it, when exciting signals leave the brain, blood flows much faster like it used to.

This critical action is how men across the country are enjoying full and satisfying performance at any age. No need to bother with testosterone-boosting shots, blue pills, or shady capsules that have no effect.

Primal Max Red can effectively promote healthy blood flow that most men can use for maximum intimacy. This is leading to more greater capacity and satisfaction, coupled with long-lasting performance.

"There was a time when men had little control when it came to boosting their blood flow," Dr. Sears said. "But science has come a long way in recent years. And now, with the creation of nitric oxide-boosting **Primal Max Red**, men can perform

better than ever, and enjoy intimacy at any age."

Now for men across America, it's much easier to stay at their performance peak as they get older.

HOW TO GET PRIMAL MAX RED (AND FREE PRIMAL MAX BLACK):

To secure free bottles of **Primal Max Black** and get the hot, new **Primal Max Red** formula, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at **1-800-379-0411** TODAY. "It's not available in retail stores yet," says Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship directly to the customer." Dr. Sears feels so strongly about **Primal Max**, all orders are backed by a 100% money-back guarantee. "Just send me back the bottle and any unused product within 90 days from purchase date, and I'll send you all your money back."

Call NOW at **1-800-379-0411** to secure your supply of **Primal Max Red** and free bottles of **Primal Max Black**. Use Promo Code **PMAXGF223** when you call. Lines are frequently busy, but all calls will be answered!

TEACHING TURKEY



For the author, his wife and their two children, turkey hunting is a family affair. Their success during the spring may require extra effort, but sharing the work and rewards is the point.

IF YOU'RE NOT HUNTING GOBBLERS WITH YOUR KIDS—OR ANY KIDS FOR THAT MATTER—YOU'RE MISSING ONE OF THE GREATEST JOYS THE OUTDOORS CAN OFFER.

Story and Photos by Thomas Allen



My boots weighed all of 94 pounds apiece, caked in gooey cornfield mud. I struggled to wave foggy breath from the beam of my headlamp while placing a Dave Smith jake decoy where I hoped dreams would come true. Beats mosquitos, I guess. My then 6-year-old son anxiously awaited in the blind about 20 yards back against the tree line. To be honest, I really wasn't sure where a gobbler might be roosted, but I knew the birds weren't far.

The objective? To deliver my boy his first successful hunt.

As fate would have it, a throaty long-beard broke the pre-sunrise darkness not 150 yards from our position, and I knew we were in the game. The Good Lord blessed us with a gullible one that morning. We watched the sky turn multiple shades of orange behind a fine gobbler marching across the field with feet just as muddy and heavy as my own. Just as the angry tom was about to hammer the decoy, my son folded him over like a 2-7 off-suit. I was elated to tears.

The following spring, his younger and highly competitive sister decided she was not to be outdone. She wanted to try turkey hunting, too. After some impressive bravery and a willing-to-learn attitude, she mastered the 20-gauge quickly and effectively. A week later, at 5 years old, she dumped her first gobbler less than a mile outside of the city limits. It was another dream come true for this once-young father.

To date, my kids have killed 13 and 12 birds respectively. Their success is a result of early tempered involvement, mild expectations, lots of snacks, boot leather and countless tanks of gas searching for the best spots and acquiring permission. It's a family activity we all look forward to each year, and the rewards include a lifetime worth of memories that have created unbreakable bonds.

PAYING IT FOWARD

During the spring of my junior year in high school, a buddy invited me to go turkey hunting and it changed my life. That very first sit in the turkey woods is one I'll never forget. To this day—26 years later—it was one of the finest gobbling mornings I've ever witnessed. Had I been even somewhat experienced, I may have knocked down

my first gobbler. My novice ways, however, bumped an eager tom back into the woods.

A couple days later, that same buddy interrupted an afternoon hunt to help put me on a trio of longbeards that were chilling out in a creek bottom. We relocated, and after a mouthful of seductive calls, I managed to lure one of those birds to 25 yards and handed out my first dirt nap. I was hooked. If not for my friend's invitation, I'd likely not be cobbling these words together today.

Since the day my children were born, I hoped we would enjoy the outdoors together. I thought spring turkey hunting would be a perfect way to introduce

them to hunting for a lot of reasons, but I kept a realistic expectation that they may not enjoy it like I do. I also knew it was important for them to experience a certain level of success early on if they were to desire continued participation. Young hunters need to know why they put in all the work. A flopping turkey is the culmination of that preparation.

You need to take the same approach when getting kids involved in turkey hunting. Set them up for success, but temper your expectations.

My goal here is to share the steps my family took together to help our children become lethal in the spring woods. It's my wish that you, as a father, mother,

grandparent or other relative, get to enjoy the fire in a kid's eyes when he or she is successful. It's truly one of the best experiences I've had as a father.

First, a word about telling the truth. I've been around a lot of parents that use tender terms when talking with their children about shooting a deer or turkey. That's a mistake. Society is doing a great job of humanizing animals, which in turn easily demonizes hunting and our way of life. If you want to have an impact, it starts with honesty in your own home. You're killing an animal for a primal experience that includes the consumption of healthy organic meat. Be straight about that.



Thorough scouting, a blind and a decoy all contributed to the author's son, Tommy, taking his first gobbler when he was 6 years old.



Sibling rivalry can sometimes be a good thing. The spring after her older brother tagged his first bird, 5-year-old Taylor proved she was up to the task, too.

In our house, we've made it crystal clear that the meat we eat daily was provided by a once-living-and-breathing animal. We found this an easy conversation to have, plus we added personal responsibility to the discussion. Each deer or turkey that occupies a spot in our freezer is labeled with the hunter's name, so our kids know who provided food for the family. When it's theirs, they beam with pride every time.

EMBRACE PRACTICE AND SCOUTING

This should go without saying, but practice as much as possible. The more time your kids spend around guns, safely and effectively shooting them, the more confidence and respect they will have—and that will lead to success. If you go through all the work to locate and call in a turkey, the last thing you want to see happen is your new hunter miss or wound an animal because he or she was ill-prepared. That's on you.

It's easy to make this part fun. We take out a stack of paper targets with a turkey head printed on them and a box of clay targets. Be sure to have quality eye and ear protection for you and your young shooters. The bang is the most likely thing to create target panic, so tempering that with percussion-reducing earmuffs will make shooting more comfortable.

Since my children were shooting 20-gauge shotguns, I stocked up on light 3/4-ounce field loads that produced minimal kick. These rounds were not to be used for turkey hunting, but they allowed our kids to understand where to aim at a gobbler and to take a number of shots without banging up their shoulder. I staged the clays at turkey-head levels in brush and on branches to give them visual targets to work with. When it was time to hunt, I slid a turkey round into the gun. During my kids' first hunts I didn't tell them, and they never knew; when the gun went off at a turkey, they didn't notice the extra kick.

We continue our practice regimen annually, and now it's no longer necessary for me to "hide" turkey loads from my kids when we're hunting. My family relies on Boss Tom heavy tungsten loads from Boss Shotshells, which add knockdown power with robust patterns at extended ranges. With the advancement of these loads, smaller-gauge shotguns have become very effective for turkeys. I suggest considering a 28-gauge or even a .410-bore for your youth hunter.

Our kids began turkey hunting with a scope mounted on the shotgun. I also suggest getting a shooting support of some sort. Early on we used the Caldwell Deadshot FieldPod and more recently a Bog DeathGrip. Both devices make it easy to keep the gun in position while minimizing movement.

It's important to devote time to scouting so you can locate and pattern birds. Of course, take young hunters with you when it's feasible. I glass strut zones and ag fields as often as possible, even before my workday starts. A couple hours on the road in the morning offers a fantastic view of the sunrise, coffee in hand. I generally make a few runs per week at least a month in advance of the season.

I'm a big proponent of quality glass—you get what you pay for. If you intend



A big smile framed by a longbeard's fan is one of the greatest sights a parent can behold in the turkey woods.



Finding areas that hold birds and are easy for kids to access is a key task. Locate gobblers by glassing then pattern them with game cameras.



KID DO'S

Take these steps to maximize fun.

1. Pack snacks. Keeping young hunters engaged starts through their stomach. If they are hungry, they'll get crabby and want to leave too soon. I know they're not super healthy, but Pop-Tarts and Goldfish saved a lot of hunts for my family through the years.

2. Leave your expectations at the truck. When your youngster decides the hunt is over, call it. The best way to kill desire is to force him or her to stay out there after the mojo is gone.

3. Let the kids call. Hunters are better callers than the birds themselves; it won't scare a turkey away if a call doesn't sound perfect. When a kid makes a turkey gobble with a call in his or her hands, the puzzle pieces begin to fall into place. Let that happen.

4. Find easy-to-access locations. Young hunters are not hard-core yet and need the experience to be as easy as possible. This means you need to do your homework to set the stage for an encounter.

5. Watch the weather, and dress for success. You can't really over-prepare here; an extra hoodie or even a blanket will help keep children comfortable longer. I've taken a small propane heater when the cold was unavoidable. If the weather looks really bad, pick another day.

to scout often, a good binocular will pay off big-time by reducing eye fatigue and providing durability. I scout with the Leupold BX-5 Santiam HD 15x56, which provides a comfortable view at long distances. When in a hunting scenario, I downsize to the Santiam 10x50. (I've been through a lot of unreliable binoculars over the years, but Leupold's models have proven tough as nails.)

Most of our hunts take place in Upper Midwest ag country, which allows for long-distance scouting. But our family lived and hunted in Alabama for several years where that type of scouting wasn't an option. Trail cameras are as valuable to turkey hunters as they are to deer hunters. Use what you believe in; there are several quality brands that offer standard digital and cellular cameras. I've had years of great experience with Moultrie, and most recently the new Moultrie Edge cellular series cameras are outstanding. The information garnered with trail cameras is critical to timing and setting up a successful hunt for your kids.

SET UP RIGHT

There is a standing—and quite silly—debate among turkey hunters about the use of blinds. Many members of the old school dislike them and say the only way to shoot a turkey is while sitting with your back to a tree. I won't get into the debate, but I've taught my kids to hunt both ways. For obvious reasons, we started out sitting in a blind with a small spread of decoys and still employ the tactic as often as a situation demands it. We have fun this way, plus it offers comfort for extended periods of time and blocks movement that young hunters may not be able to control.

We've also spent some time running and gunning, and both my kids have been successful this way. Your goal should be to teach them woodsmanship, and both methods can help instill that skill. One step at a time.

Set up a blind in a location where your scouting has revealed turkeys are frequenting. If possible, face the blind to the west in the mornings, as this position

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BEGINS
MONDAYS 7P **Outdoor**
SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Continued practice builds familiarity and confidence with a turkey gun. Optics often make it easier for kids—and adults—to direct patterns where they need to go for clean kills.

will eliminate sun in eyes and scopes. I speak from experience on this matter—long story.

Decoys are a necessary tool, but you'll find they work differently from one property to the next and from state to state. During our time in Alabama, we experienced mostly negative results with aggressive jake postures. We adjusted accordingly, and success followed. In the Midwest, we've experienced great results with aggressive jakes and even full-strut dekes. Let the data you collect during your scouting missions help determine what kind of decoy to use. Don't be afraid to experiment if something isn't working; changing your decoy setup might make all the difference.

The important part is placing the decoys at 20 to 25 yards. We like to bring gobblers close, but you want to maximize the killing potential of turkey loads while allowing for some margin of error. At 20 or 30 yards, the pattern will be wide enough to accommodate a nervous shooter but still plenty dense to ensure a kill.

KID DON'TS

Avoid these mistakes that ruin hunts.

- 1. Expect perfect results.** I can assure you that the best-laid plans will fall apart. I know it sounds like a cliché, but make the hunt about your kid. If your scouting was effective, an encounter will eventually occur.
- 2. Rely on digital babysitters.** One of the big reasons we introduce children to hunting is so they experience nature—and reduce their screentime. I know it's easy to just throw an iPad at them to make the hunt last. Trust me, kids will find other ways to entertain themselves, especially if they are learning to run a call or practicing their aim at a decoy. Bring a coloring book or something. And don't get glued to your phone, either.
- 3. Overstay your welcome.** If you know the hunt is likely over for the day, don't try to extend it. Head home, take a nap

and return for the next hunt when it makes sense.

4. Force a bad shot. It's a far better scenario to let a bird walk off if the angle is tough, or if one is hung up out of range, than to tell your kid to take a questionable shot. A wounded bird that escapes will hurt much worse than one you just let go. Perfect shot opportunities may not be common, but bad shots are easily avoidable.

5. Be negative. If the hunt goes wrong and your young hunter misses, or worse peppers the turkey and it escapes, do not get angry. It's easy to be disappointed when things go wrong, but it takes maturity to redirect the inevitable gut ache by explaining the reality of the moment. It happens, but it offers a good lesson on why we must keep trying.



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MOMENT OF TRUTH

When a gobbler commits, make sure your young hunter is in position and focused, relying on the confidence built during practice. It's crucial that you hold it together and be the rock as the moment of truth arrives. Guide the youngster quietly and confidently into a slow and steady trigger pull when you're sure the turkey is where it needs to be for a clean kill. When the gun goes off, prepare for a mixture of emotions, and don't let your emotions overpower what the child is feeling. If it's the kid's first kill, tears of joy are likely. Cultivate that.

If the unfortunate occurs and the turkey runs off unscathed (expect it to happen at some point) don't turn it negative. It is never the young hunter's fault if the hunt falls apart. Congratulate or console, and be happy in both situations. It is supposed to be fun after all. If there is a bird flopping in the decoys, let the celebration commence.

Finally, preserve the memory. Save the fan, beard and spurs, take awesome pictures and find a place on the kid's bedroom wall to remind him or her of the experience you shared together. When the time comes to prepare the meal your youngster has provided, highlight his or her contribution to the family's health and wellness. A young hunter might love that part the most.

Taylor's 12th turkey was the first she took while sitting outside a blind. As kids' skills advance, encourage them to try new tactics.



Tommy, 14 years old last spring, hunted turkeys without his dad for the first time. Years of careful direction prepared him for a morning he won't soon forget.




HUNTER EVOLUTION

I started with a brief story about my kids' first turkeys, and to close I want to illustrate their growing prowess. The spring season last year was one of my favorites. Like most adolescent boys, my 14-year-old son wanted some freedom and was insistent upon hunting by himself. After my wife and I talked it over, we decided to cut the cord and let him give it a try. He and I talked about where he wanted to hunt, his decoy setup, blind position and anticipations. He was in charge.

After I dropped him off, I stayed in the truck and scouted some other birds just in case we needed a Plan B. When my phone lit up with his incoming call, only an hour after daylight, I knew we'd be celebrating the flop over a piece of Casey's breakfast pizza. He sat through sideways rain and cold wind

to lure three aggressive longbeards into easy 12-gauge range and then made a perfect shot. Oh yes, he's graduated to a 12-gauge.

My daughter killed her first turkey outside of a pop-up blind last spring. We found a lone gobbler in a hay field, parked the truck and moved in. After a productive sneak that included some belly-crawling, we got into position and made a few calls. The longbeard showed up within minutes—just the way it's supposed to happen. She made a perfect 25-yard shot. We also enjoyed some breakfast pizza while admiring her 12th turkey in the gorgeous and warming May morning sunlight.

I'm beyond proud of my two turkey killers. Everything I've discussed above is based on how we made it work in our family. There may be unique scenarios in your youth-hunter dynamic that require a different perspective or approach. In any case, though, I firmly believe that the work you put in before the season will be the foundation on which success is enjoyed. 

LIFESAVER ACCESSORIES

Two pieces of gear that make springs easier

I complicate our efforts some by filming most of the hunts with my kids. We all enjoy reliving those moments in the woods, but capturing them adds gear and weight. Several years ago, I bought a two-gun shooting cart from Rugged Gear and converted it into a turkey cart. It cradles the blind, two chairs, camera and tripod, shotguns and decoys—all on a platform that's easy to push along field edges, down logging roads or across greenfields. It was an especially solid investment when my kids were small and incapable of carrying much of gear.

As we've started to hunt more without a blind, a low fold-up turkey chair has been an awesome accessory for my aging body. My back just can't take the hard ground coupled with a harder tree for very long. One of these

chairs adds hours of comfortable sitting. It also encourages good shooting form without having to deal with leg cramps of numb feet. We got our chairs from Cabela's, but there are many good options on the market.



A blind, a couple chairs, two shotguns, a bag of decoys, a camera with a tripod ... the author's converted shooting cart hauls it all when in pursuit of gobblers.

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MOSSBERG

940 PRO TURKEY

GOBBLER HUNTERS NOW HAVE A SHOTGUN OPTIMIZED FOR OPTICS.

By Adam Heggenstaller



That's a big distinction, and in part it drove the development of Mossberg's new 940 Pro Turkey.

It's almost counterintuitive to think of a scattergun as a precision instrument, yet precision is exactly what most turkey hunters desire. A gobbler's head and neck combined are roughly the size of a dove, and a turkey gun is charged with putting as many pellets into that zone as possible. Hitting any upland bird with several dozen pellets is almost unimaginable, but for turkeys, hunters these days are looking for well over 100 pellets in a 10-inch circle at 40 yards and beyond. Tight choke tubes, super

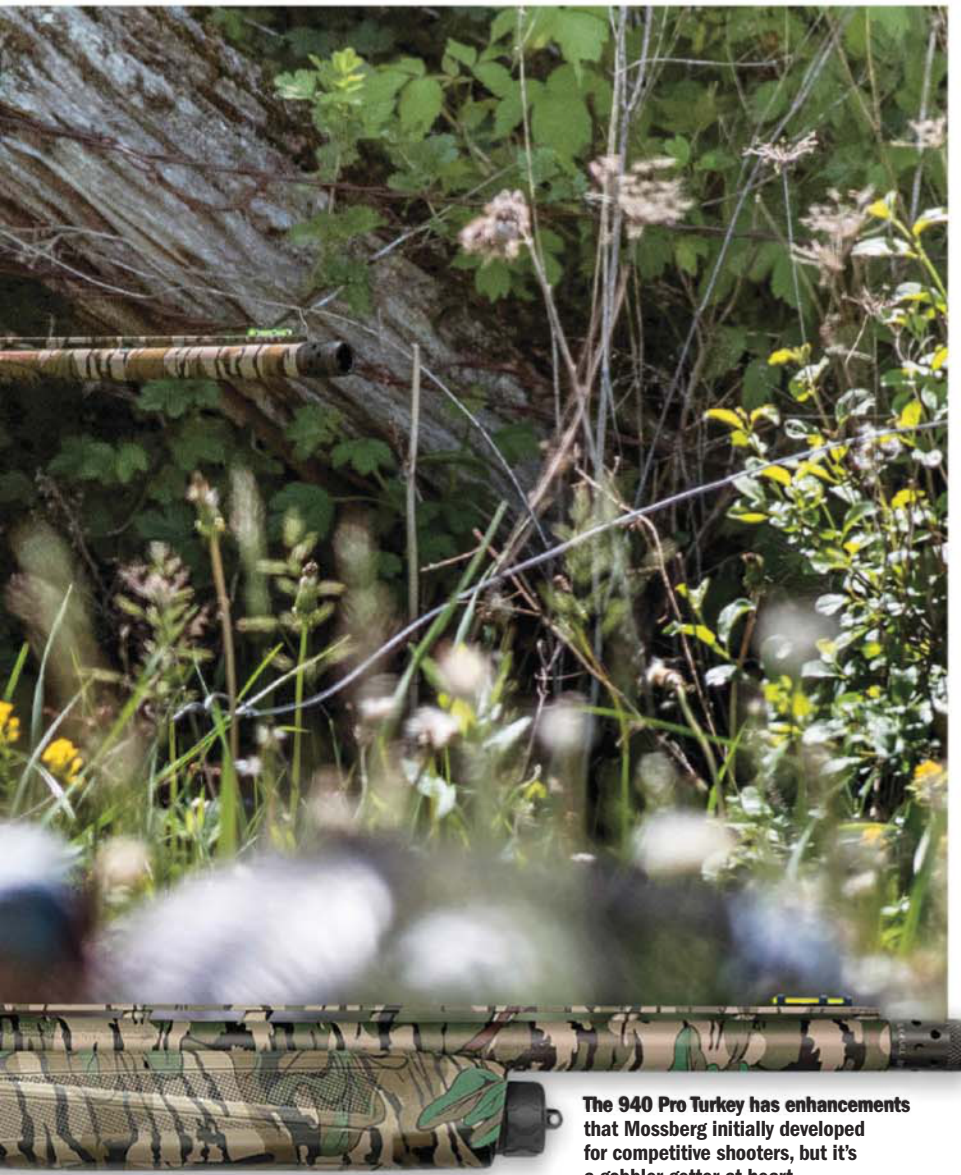
dense No. 7 and No. 9 tungsten pellets and optimized wad systems make it happen with 3-inch 12-gauge loads.

The tradeoff is less room for error when delivering the payload. I've shot some gun-choke-load combinations that put virtually every pellet, save for a handful of fliers, into the diameter of a softball at 25 yards. That's not much leeway for aiming at a target that hardly ever stops moving. Don't get me wrong; the performance of modern turkey guns and loads is a tremendous benefit, as long as you put the payload into a gobbler's neck and noggin. That requires careful aim.

Enter optical sights.

Single beads on modern turkey guns are rarer than 25-pound gobblers. There's a good reason for this: Aiming at a turkey's head with a single bead can be a

Turkey shotguns can be as purpose-built and specialized as the scatterguns used for the various clay-shooting disciplines. The major difference, besides appearance, is that shotguns designed for clays games are carefully tailored to deliver an evenly spread pattern of shot where the shooter looks, while turkey shotguns send a tightly packed swarm of pellets where the hunter aims.



The 940 Pro Turkey has enhancements that Mossberg initially developed for competitive shooters, but it's a gobbler-getter at heart.

nightmare at any distance beyond 30 yards. Adjustable rifle-style sights with fiber-optic inserts are much better, but even they have their drawbacks when shots stretch past 40 yards. They're big, especially the rear components that form the notch, and they obscure the relatively small target that is a gobbler's pate. It's difficult to precisely aim at something you cannot see.

None of these problems exist with optical sights. They present a thin crosshair or small dot that appears on the same plane as the target, which makes aiming easier. Low-magnification shotgun scopes were popular for a short time, but when red-dot sights with unlimited eye relief came along, it was a match made in heaven. The trend has evolved to where tiny reflex-style red-dot optics not much

larger than a hunter's thumb have taken over, and the Mossberg 940 Pro Turkey is designed especially for them.

Rather than having a conventional drilled and tapped receiver, which requires attaching a base or rail and then mounting the optic onto it, the 940 Pro Turkey's receiver is milled with a cutout that directly accepts micro reflex sights with the Shield RMSc footprint. Don't let that last part confuse you. It's simply a set of standards that specify overall length and width of the mounting portion of the sight, as well as the location of the holes that accept the screws used to secure the sight to the receiver. The footprint is named after the Shield reflex sight that introduced it (mainly as a way to attach the mini optic to subcompact handguns), and sights with the footprint

are available from Bushnell, Crimson Trace, Holosun, SIG Sauer and other manufacturers.

Attaching the optic directly to the receiver eliminates the middleman component of the rail. This makes the sight sit lower on the gun, which promotes a solid cheek weld on the stock while looking through the optic. Aiming a shotgun is much like aiming a rifle; maintaining consistent cheek-to-stock contact contributes to greater precision, and oftentimes a red-dot sight mounted to a rail sits too high for the shooter to achieve a good cheek weld.

The lower mounting system also permits use of the shotgun's HiViz fiber-optic front sight with the optic in place—a backup plan if a battery were to die while a bird is coming in hot. Of course, you'll

SPECIFICATIONS

MOSSBERG 940 PRO TURKEY

mossberg.com

TYPE: semi-automatic shotgun

GAUGE: 12

CHAMBER: 3"

CAPACITY: 4+1 rounds

BARREL LENGTH: 18 1/2"

OVERALL LENGTH: 39 1/4"

WEIGHT: 7 1/4 lbs.

STOCK: composite;
Mossy Oak Greenleaf

LENGTH OF PULL: adjustable,
13"-14 1/4"

DROP AT HEEL: adjustable,
2 5/8" factory setting

DROP AT COMB: adjustable,
1 3/4" factory setting

SIGHTS: HiViz fiber-optic front;
receiver cut for mounting optics
with Shield RMSc footprint

CHOKE TUBE: extended, ported
X-Factor XX-Full

MSRP: \$1,189

A plate covers the small cutout in the receiver that accepts a red-dot sight for hunters who do not wish to use an optic.

Removing the cover reveals the mounting holes that are compatible with mini reflex sights having the Shield RMSc footprint.

want to check where the pattern impacts when aiming with the front sight before relying on it to save the day.

The big advantage offered by the 940 Pro Turkey is the ability to pair it with a low-profile red-dot and zero a pattern for confident shots at longer ranges, but that's far from the only feature gobbler hunters will find appealing. The gun has the same semi-automatic operating

system Mossberg introduced in the 940 JM Pro competition shotgun, developed to run longer between cleanings than the company's previous semi-autos. The key component is a gold-colored spacer that reduces the movement required of the gas piston to initiate the action cycle. Thanks to its ribbed and ventilated design, the spacer moderates friction with the magazine tube. In addition, the

gas piston, magazine tube, hammer and sear are nickel-boron-coated and the return-spring plunger is hard-anodized aluminum to promote smooth operation. Mossberg reports that the system operates reliably with up to 1,500 rounds between cleanings.

Other upgrades the company has carried over from the competition gun should prove to be welcome features in the turkey

The 940 Pro Turkey comes with an extended, ported X-Factor XX-Ful choke tube.

The gold-colored spacer minimizes gas-piston movement and friction with the magazine tube.



An oversized bolt handle and bolt-release button are competition-gun upgrades that benefit turkey hunters wearing gloves.

A beveled loading port and redesigned shell catch make it easier to fill and empty the four-round magazine tube.



woods. The oversized and beveled loading port has a redesigned elevator and shell catch. These improvements were designed to allow competitive shooters racing against the clock to quickly stuff rounds into the magazine tube, but they also make it easier for turkey hunters to load up by feel before dawn. Similarly, the oversized charging handle and bolt-release button are a cinch to operate when wearing gloves, and easing the bolt forward by riding the charging handle allows a hunter to chamber a round quietly without alerting the roost.

The slim-profile fore-end cradles nicely in the hand, and its checkering ensures it won't slip against a glove. While the old-school Mossy Oak Greenleaf finish is just for the turkey woods, the adjustable stock is another nod toward competitive shooters that hunters will find beneficial. Spacers permit adjustment of drop, cast and length of pull from 13 to 14 1/4 inches. The trigger, too, is worthy of a gun developed for competition. In the 940 Pro Turkey I tested, it broke at a pull weight of about 4 pounds after a bit of take-up. Mossberg clearly understands

the importance of a good trigger in a shotgun meant to deliver precise patterns.

The 940 Pro Turkey is available with two barrel lengths: 18 1/2 and 24 inches. Both come with Mossberg's X-Factor XX-Full ported choke tube, which has a constriction of 0.670 inches. I much prefer a short barrel on a turkey gun because there is less chance of it hanging up in the undergrowth when I have to make a late adjustment to my position, so I opted to test the 18 1/2-inch version. I mounted a Holosun HS407K reflex sight to the receiver.

At the range, patterns with 2-ounce No. 9 Apex Turkey Tungsten Super Shot and 1 3/4-ounce No. 7 Federal Premium Heavyweight TSS loads were impressive. With each load there were more than 100 pellet holes in a 10-inch circle at 50 yards, and the patterns were even with no gaps that would leave a gobbler unscathed. Recoil from the 7 1/4-pound gun was stout but not punishing, the 940 Pro Turkey's gas system and cushiony recoil pad helping to reduce some of the kick. There were no failures to feed or fire, and I was able to load and unload

the gun smoothly. The redesigned shell catch, in particular, was much improved over other Mossberg shotguns I've tested, and removing rounds from the magazine tube was no longer a source of frustration.

I carried the 940 Pro Turkey for almost a month during seasons in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. A few of those hunts began before daybreak and stretched into the mid-afternoon, my mapping app showing that I hiked more than 6 miles on several occasions while trying to get away from other hunters on public land. There was no time during any of those hunts where I felt like the gun was weighing me down. It carried nicely on my shoulder, freeing up my hands to run calls and pick morels when the birds weren't talking.

I didn't kill a bird with the gun, but I had several close calls and passed on a shot at an estimated 60 yards. Having a gun with the capability to reach out is reassuring, but I didn't see the point in stretching it. The Mossberg 940 Pro Turkey will force you to make those kinds of decisions. **BT**

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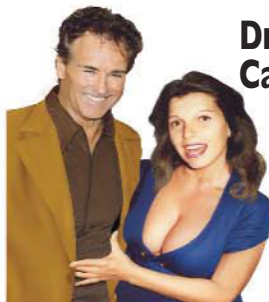
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WEATHER WARRIORS



THREE SETS OF RAIN GEAR AT THREE PRICE LEVELS
TO KEEP YOU DRY AND FOCUSED ON THE HUNT

By Adam Heggenstaller

Rain is a fact of hunting, especially in the spring. When you have limited time outdoors, you deal with it. Thankfully, advanced technology in waterproof membranes offers hunters many options to stay dry and comfortable when it's wet outside. Rain gear has come a long way in the last decade, and if you haven't updated your gear in a while, now's the time to get ready for spring showers—or downpours. 

COURTESY OF ENUMA OUTDOORS

BROWNING KANAWHA

MSRP: **\$99.99, jacket; \$99.99, pant**
browning.com

If you're looking to get into quality rain gear for less than \$200, the Kanawha jacket and pant are top choices. The two-layer polyester fabric is coated for water resistance and bonded to a waterproof, breathable membrane with a moisture vapor transmission rate that Browning says is on par with performance-leading garments. While I had no way of testing this scientifically, I chased bears with hounds around the mountains of Idaho last spring while wearing the Kanawha set and had no issues with rain or sweat. Fully taped seams kept water from finding its way inside, and the outer fabric stood up to crawling through the brush. The jacket has a three-piece, fully adjustable hood, while the pant has two-point articulation in the knee area and features side leg zippers that run from the ankle to the waist. Both pieces stuff into a pocket for packing.



KUIU KUTANA STORM SHELL

MSRP: **\$359, jacket; \$299, pant**
kuiu.com

Kuiu is known for high-tech fabrics, and the Kutana Storm Shell jacket and pant are loaded with them. The new Toray Entrant microporous hydrophobic membrane maintains breathability when activity level is low, keeping moisture from building up inside the garments when you stop to glass or wait out an animal. Stunner Stretch exterior fabric is lightweight—the jacket weighs 18.3 ounces and the pant 15.5 ounces—but durable and has a K-DWR treatment. The seams are fully sealed with a new tape developed to last longer. The jacket contains four pockets and pit zippers, and the pant has two zippered cargo pockets and a built-in belt. I pretty much lived in the Kutana pieces for a week while hunting in Alaska last fall, and they were both comfortable and tough enough to ward off alders, devil's club and abrasion from rocks while making stalks.



PNUMA 3L ELEMENT PROOF

MSRP: **\$260, jacket; \$240, pant**
pnumaoutdoors.com

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EXCUSES, EXCUSES

ADMITTING TO A MISS IS WORSE THAN THE MISS ITSELF.

Shane had practiced his calling, scouted thoroughly and knew he was ready to hunt turkeys on his own. After a couple more weeks of hunting together, his father agreed. The next Saturday morning he and his father drove to the woods well before dawn. When they heard two birds gobbling, Shane's father started after one bird while Shane headed toward the other.

He hadn't fully set up before he heard the bird double-gobble then fly down. Shane yelped lightly. Moments later he saw the top of the tom's white head bobbing through the oak forest, 75 yards out, as the turkey made its way toward him. At 60 yards the bird unleashed a thunderous gobble that stunned the young man.

Shane began to shake. His breathing turned heavy. He dropped his box call, and it hit the leaves with a squawk. But the noise only seemed to entice the big gobbler, strutting and now in range.

Shane fought his faculties to even raise his gun. He tried in vain to quietly slide its safety to fire. When it clicked, the gobbler with ship rope for a beard perked up, fully extending its head as it eyeballed him. That's when Shane fired.

Through the chaos of recoil he heard a whooshing sound and glimpsed the gobbler through the trees as it flew off. Shane had just missed the first and only turkey he'd ever shot at. Yet he couldn't believe what he'd just seen, so he walked to where the bird was when he fired. Finding no sign of a hit, the defeated hunter shook his head and sulked back to the truck.

Along the way his mind raced with thoughts. Most of them had to do with what he would tell his father, who no doubt had heard the shot.

I think my sights are off, he practiced. But he quickly realized that was no good, because the shotgun only had a brass bead and it looked fine.

Next, he tried to talk himself into a scenario where the gobbler bobbed its



head right as he pulled the trigger. But that reeked of an excuse, and he knew where his father stood on excuses.

As Shane exited the woods, he saw his father sitting on the tailgate of the truck with a huge smile on his face. It quickly melted into a look of concern when he noticed Shane wasn't carrying a bird.

"Well, where is he?"

"He flew off, Dad."

"Did you hit him at all? He's probably dead somewhere," said Shane's father. "Let's go get him."

"No," said Shane before his father could move. "I think I hit a branch, because I didn't find any feathers or anything." Now Shane was holding back tears, and that embarrassed him as much as missing the turkey.

Shane's father cocked his head. "Was it a tree or a branch, son?"

"A branch."

"What range?"

"Probably 30 yards," said Shane.

"A small branch is no match for a pattern of 3-inch No. 6s at that range. Are you sure you didn't just miss? You know,

sometimes it happens, especially when people get excited. Were you excited?"

Shane shook his head yes.


"Dad," said Shane while taking a deep breath, "after thinking about it, I think I just missed."

Shane's father ruffled his son's hair. "Truth be known, I missed a bird once, when I was even older than you are. I got so revved up that I just pulled the trigger. Don't think I even aimed. Biggest bird I'd ever seen, too."

"You never told me that story before," said Shane.

"Yeah, and there's a reason for it, son. A man can cry at times and even complain about his company on rare occasion. But he should never, ever, admit when he misses a turkey with a shotgun."

"So why are you telling me now?" asked Shane, wearing a hint of a smile.

"I'm trying to make you feel a little better today, because starting tomorrow, I'm going to poke fun of you. It's turkey hunting, not life and death, son. Sometimes we all need to be reminded of that." 

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