

# *Field & Stream* ESTB 1871



**TRADITIONS: FAMILY, CAMP, AND FIRST BLOOD**

MOUSING FOR TROUT • GOBBLER SLAMS • TARGET PANIC RX • CHILI NIGHT • OPENING DAY DUCKS | Vol. 131, No. 1

*Y. M. Miller*

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I’ve been  
hunting for.”

— RILEY GREEN



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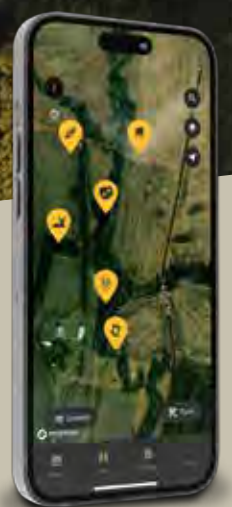
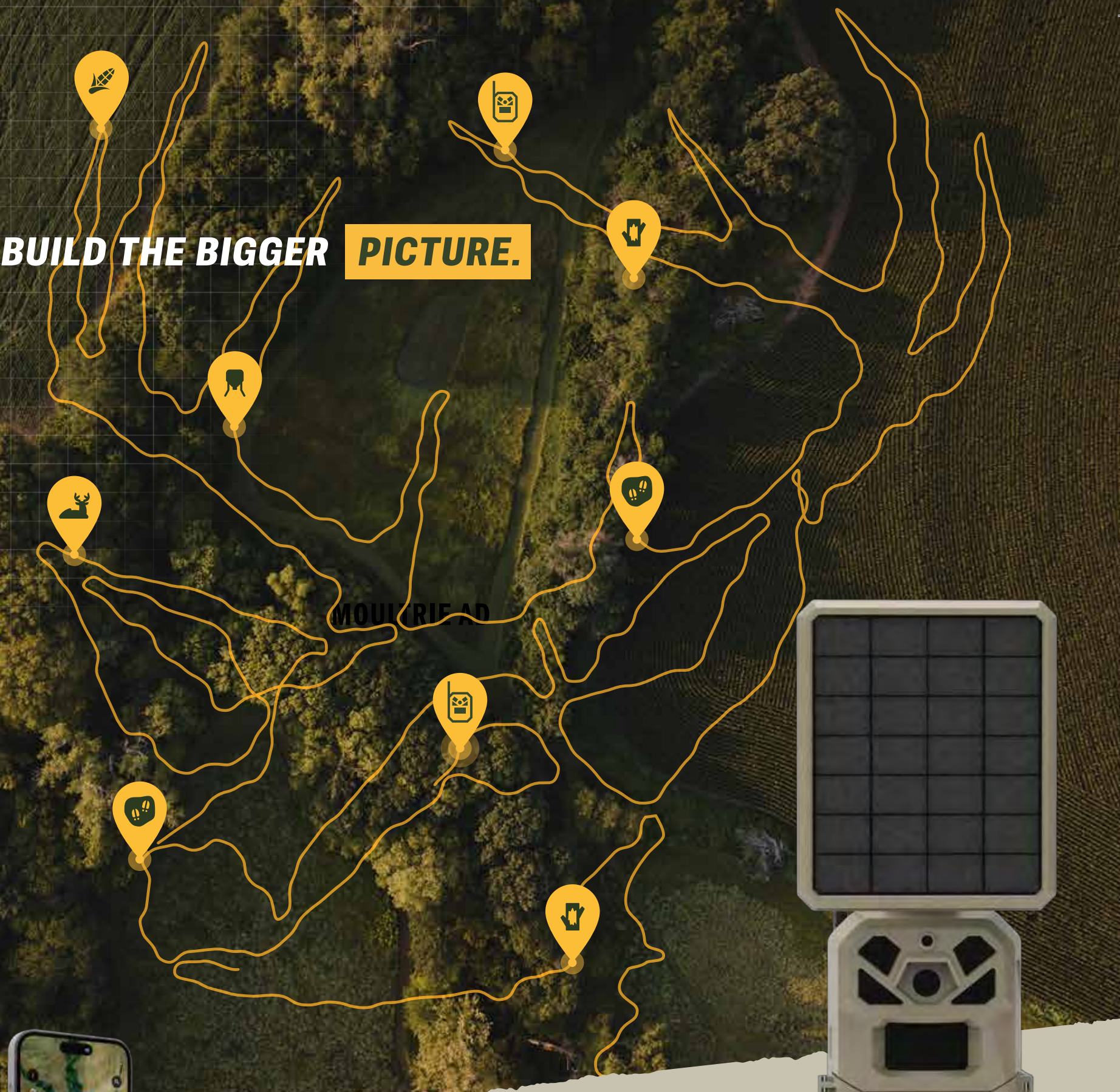
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Sea spray comes over the gunwale as we clear the leeward bank and catch the gale blowing down the channel. I can taste the salty mist coming off the water and open the throttle to get out of the chop. In the distance, the bay house appears.

—RYAN CHELIUS, "A BIT OF HEAVEN"

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from top: BRYAN DERBALLA, MIKE SUDAL



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—RYAN CHELIUS, "MASS PRODUCED"



clockwise from top left: PETER OUMANSKI; CHRISTOPHER TESTANI; JESSE BURKE



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# KEEP THE TRADITIONS ALIVE



illustration by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

I'M A SUCKER for the traditional. I prefer pocketknives with wooden or horn handles over modern plastic or tactical options. I'd rather dress in solid colors for a hunt than in camouflage. I still favor wearing a fly-fishing vest (see p. 56) instead of a hipper chest or sling pack.

Some think (and have, in fact, said to my face) that I'm old-fashioned. If that's true, I can live with it.

I'm an even bigger sucker for tradition. I rewatch Buster Keaton's masterpiece *Sherlock Jr.* every New Year's Day. I revisit Ted Leeson's timeless F&S essay "Red, White, and Bluegill" every Fourth of July. Each holiday season, Mannheim Steamroller's rendition of "Carol of the Bells" is the first Christmas song I listen to—a tradition for which I have my dad to thank. And this past February, after a snowstorm closed school for a day, my wife and I began a new tradition for our son: cinnamon rolls for breakfast on all snow days going forward. (I took Leo's enthusiastic request for seconds as his approval.)

The two traditions I anticipate most each year, though, both occur around the same time—and, fittingly enough, coincide with our putting the finishing touches on this issue.

The first begins in mid-March, with my annual reading of Norman Maclean's classic novel *A River Runs Through It*. I first read the book when I was 18. After that, my copy sat on a bookshelf for the

better part of two decades. Then, about 10 years ago, I felt the urge to return to it. I enjoyed it so much the second time that I made a pact with myself to re-read it every spring from then on. What amazes me about the book—and what speaks to Maclean's brilliance—is that, even though I now know the story like the back of my hand, there is always at least one sentence or scene that leaps out at me as if I were reading it for the first time. Without fail, the book teaches me something new about brotherhood, fishing, or life. The older I get, the more I find to love about the story—and the more I value this tradition of mine.

The conclusion of my *A River Runs Through It* reread flows into the beginning of my second spring tradition: I always go trout fishing on my birthday—and I always save the last few pages of the book to read during my train ride to the stream. That birthday trip is consistently one of my favorite days of the year, even though I've been skunked the last four or five times. I always have the river to myself, and I use that time alone to reflect on the past year and consider the goals I'd like to accomplish in the year ahead. It's also a good setting to dream up ideas for stories we can tell in *Field & Stream*.

It's those stories, I think, that make me such a sucker for traditions—because I find that traditions are synonymous with storytelling. Whether a tradition dates back to Saint Hubert's

time—first-century France (see p. 114)—or was born of a 2026 snowstorm, when you share the history of a tradition, you're telling a story.

And this issue, as you're about to see, is full of such stories. From a long-standing deer camp in an old Michigan schoolhouse to a duck hunt in a storied (and disappearing) location; from listening to ball games on a transistor radio alongside a steelhead river to the comforting, nourishing presence of a steaming pot of venison chili—these pages are steeped in tradition.

This issue also marks the beginning of a new tradition that I hope takes hold. We've created a section of the magazine called *Field & Stream Country* (see p. 13) that is for—and by—F&S readers. Our vision is that it becomes a place where you can share snapshots from your time in the wild, send dispatches from your hunting and fishing adventures, and tell the stories behind your own traditions. Please feel free to send them to me at the email address below. Till then...

Welcome to the Traditions Issue.



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*Field & Stream* ESTD 1871

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**History of F&S**

1871: *Gordon & Ferguson Merchandising Co. is formed in St. Paul, Minn. It later sold clothing under the brand Field and Stream.*

1895: *Northwestern Field & Stream: A Journal of the Rifle, Gun, Rod and Camera debuts.*

1896: *John R. Burkhard, former editor of sporting journal Forest and Stream, buys the monthly and renames it Western Field & Stream, then Field & Stream. Under his lead, F&S calls for stricter game laws, an end to market hunting, and a "universal gun tax or license" to fund conservation.*

1910: *F&S becomes the keeper of fishing records for decades with the launch of its fishing contest.*

1917: *F&S offers a subscription including a "field comfort kit" (pipe, tobacco, toothpaste, and gum) to send to WWI soldiers overseas.*

1924: *Ray P. Holland becomes editor-in-chief and forms the F&S Conservation Council, which pushes for a national waterfowl refuge system funded by hunters—aka the Duck Stamp Act of 1934.*

1942: *After Pearl Harbor, F&S introduces the Give 'Em Guns campaign to raise funds to buy rifles for American soldiers.*

1971: *F&S Conservation Award badges premier.*

2020: *FieldandStream.com becomes the premium digital destination for hunters, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts.*

2024: *New owners unite the publishing and merchandise arms of F&S, relaunching the print magazine and including the date 1871 in the new logo—a nod to the Gordon & Ferguson era, when the brand first came into Americans' lives.*

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## Kelsey Rae Morris

ILLUSTRATOR



We asked Montana-based artist Kelsey Rae Morris to paint a modern version of our classic April 1932 cover (see back cover of this issue), featuring a trout angler, knee-deep in a river, fighting a fish. Later we sat down with Morris to discuss the assignment and hear more about her process.

**F&S** How does it feel to paint a cover for *Field & Stream*?

**K.R.M.** My husband and I are big hunters and anglers, so getting the chance to combine my love for the outdoors and art in *F&S* is a huge honor.

**F&S** You paint a lot of Western landscapes and portraits. Was this fishing scene a new challenge?

**K.R.M.** Yes, it was totally different. We have a place in Alaska, so most of my fishing is for halibut, cod, and salmon. The equipment and the action of fly fishing were new to me. It was refreshing.

**F&S** How do you prepare to paint a scene like this?

**K.R.M.** I went all over Montana collecting reference photos for this project, from the Big Hole Valley to my hometown of Three Forks. I spent a lot of time on the river taking pictures.

**F&S** Your artwork has a vintage feel. Did that make this project a natural fit?

**K.R.M.** Definitely. We decorate our house with vintage outdoor magazine covers because we like that old-school art. I try to emulate that muted palette and vintage feel in my work.

**F&S** Do you have a place picked out on the wall for this cover?

**K.R.M.** Yes! I was pregnant with our first child (a boy) while painting this cover. I'd love to hang it in his room to inspire him to love the outdoors.



**Hal Herring**  
WRITER

Growing up in Northern Alabama, Hal Herring spent his youth hunting, fishing, and running trotlines. He started his journalism career in his early 30s and first sold a story to *Field & Stream* in 2000. Last year, he became the magazine's Conservation columnist. He reports on public lands and important environmental issues impacting hunting and fishing, like the proposed repeal of the Roadless Rule (p. 146).

Herring now lives in Montana, where he taught his two kids how to hunt, fish, and create outdoor traditions (p. 84).



**Jonathan Miles**  
WRITER

Jonathan Miles has been writing for *F&S* for over 20 years and became the magazine's Wild Chef columnist in 2004. He has also written four novels, including his latest, *Eradication: A Fable*, which the *Washington Post* deemed "an instant classic."

A lifelong outdoorsman, Miles has chased fish and game in locations from the Mississippi River to the Amazon Basin. Today, he lives in rural New Jersey. In this issue, Miles shares three mouthwatering recipes: pike and chorizo chili (p. 132), venison chili (p. 138), and smoked walleye (p. 156).



**James Stukenberg**  
PHOTOGRAPHER

Raised in rural Wisconsin, James Stukenberg grew up deer hunting on his family's land. He became interested in photography at a young age and went on to study film and photography at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Stukenberg now lives in Denver with his wife and three daughters, where he works as a full-time freelance photographer. His photos have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Popular Science*. For his first *F&S* assignment, he went to the Upper Midwest to photograph a classic deer camp (p. 92).



**Mike Sudal**  
ILLUSTRATOR

Mike Sudal started contributing to *Field & Stream* in 2008. He has created illustrations for *Outdoor Life*, *Salt Water Sportsman*, *Anglers Journal*, *Yeti*, *Orvis*, and *Cabela's*, and his work is part of the art collection at the American Museum of Fly Fishing. For this issue, Sudal illustrated scenes from an annual mousing camp on the Upper Delaware River (p. 86).

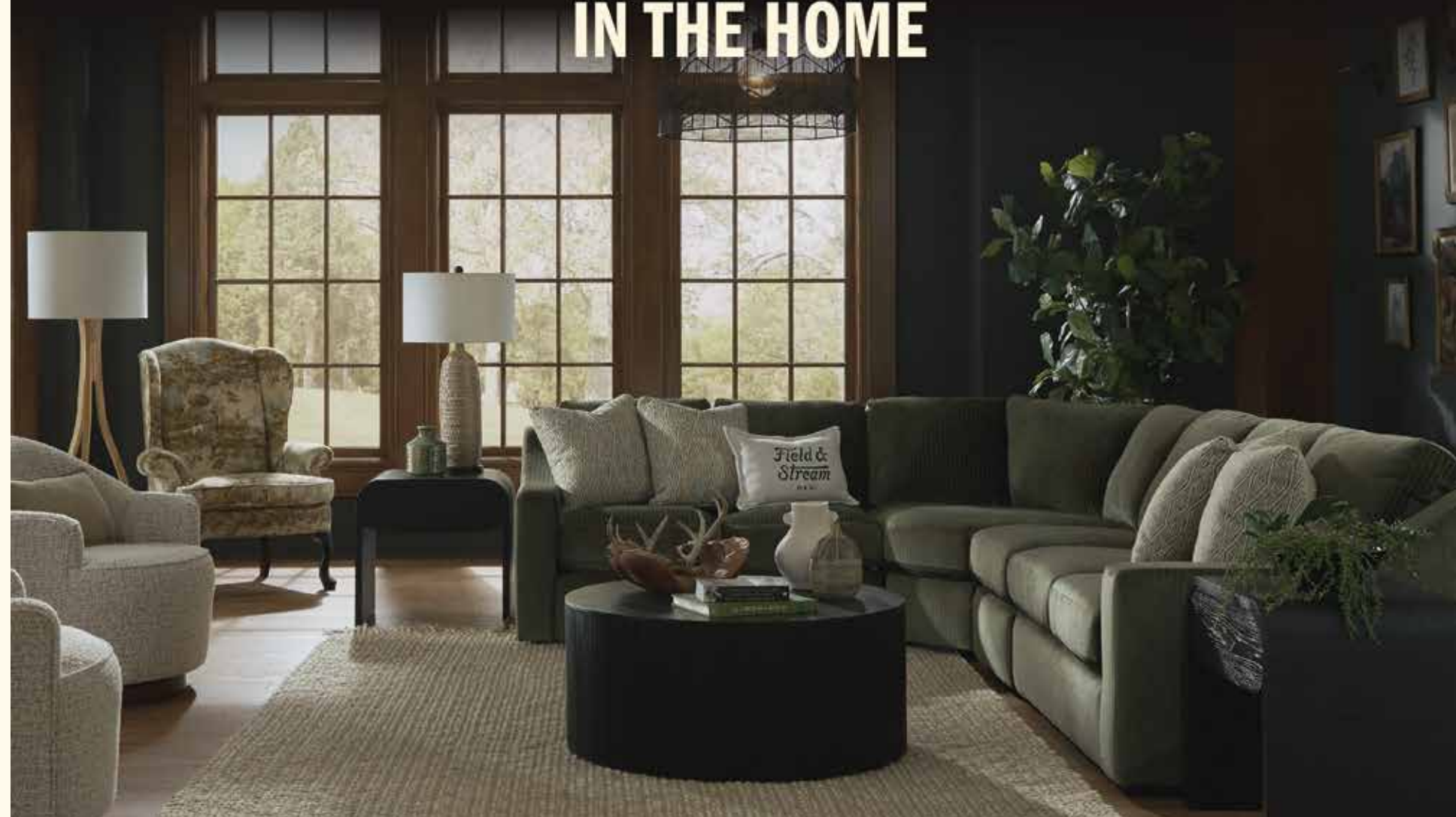
Today, Sudal lives on City Island in New York City. He is a surfer and fly angler who spends much of his free time chasing trout in the Catskill Mountains.

REBECCA STUMPH (Herring); courtesy of JAMES STUKENBERG (Stukenberg); courtesy of JONATHAN MILES (Miles); courtesy of MIKE SUDAL (Sudal)

# THE GREATEST STORIES HAPPEN OUTDOORS



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## FIELD & STREAM COUNTRY

**T**HIS PAST JANUARY, a remarkable photograph found its way into my inbox. In the image, a cowboy is standing next to his mailbox while reading the August 1906 edition of *Field & Stream*. There's a lot to love about this shot—not the least of which is the connection I (and probably all of you) made with this dude: 120 years later, I get excited about the arrival of my new copy of F&S in the mail too. I loved this photo so much, in fact, that it inspired an idea for a new section in the magazine: Field & Stream Country—a place where we'll share stories and snapshots for, and from, *Field & Stream* readers. —COLIN KEARNS

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GAME FACES



ERWIN E. SMITH COLLECTION OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ON DEPOSIT AT THE AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

We're trying something new here in Church Country. Instead of you hearing another story from yours truly—I would like to hear some stories from you. Now, don't panic. I'll be back with some hunting and fishing tales of my own later on. But for now, as a Legacy Steward of this iconic brand, I'd like to open up these pages to some true living legends—the readers of Field & Stream.

—ERIC CHURCH

## WHAT COUNTRY MEANS TO ME

OUR STORYTELLING CHALLENGE: WHAT DOES COUNTRY MEAN TO YOU? AS YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ, Y'ALL CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD THE ASSIGNMENT



by BRYCE BOTT

COUNTRY ISN'T DEFINED by a flag or lines on a map. It's the sound of my son Dawson's boots scuffing rough shale before daylight, the whisper of a bowstring whistling into a cold morning breeze, and the way the mountains make room for quiet lessons if you have made the effort to be out in the wild country that day.

He and I head out early during archery season, gone before the trailhead begins to wake up and chasing elk where the timber thins and the air smells like frost. I tell him we're going to get good and lost. Not reckless-lost, but far enough that the road noise fades and the compass matters again. Digital distractions stay in our pockets, and we read the ground like it was a story written the night before, just for us. I get to teach lessons passed on to me and learn new lessons, alongside my son, that the day sees fit to dole out to us. Out here, mistakes don't get smoothed over. A bad wind ruins a stalk. A rushed step snaps a twig. The country teaches patience, humility, and perseverance better than almost any sermon I know.

We climb until our calves burn and the world opens. We glass pockets of dark timber and sunlit landscapes. Sometimes the elk show, sometimes they don't. Either way, my son learns to read sign, mind the wind, and sit still when everything in him wants to move. He learns that success isn't always measured in inches of antler but in doing things the right way when nobody's watching.

Later, when winter sharpens the edges, we trade bugles for wingbeats and chase chukars on steep, rocky hillsides. Dogs work hard, birds run uphill, and gravity never cuts you a break. We laugh when we miss and pick each other up when we fall. There's a rhythm to it—walk, breathe, climb, trust—that feels older than both of us.

Country, I've learned, is what you find after being lost enough times to know who you are. It's a deep gratitude for wild places that don't care about your schedule or your opinions. It's the freedom to hunt, to roam, to teach a boy how to carry himself with respect for the land and the life it holds.

When we shoulder our packs and head back toward the truck, tired and full in the right ways, I see it click for him. This is ours to love, not to own. A beautiful country, stitched together by mountains and memory, where a father and son can still disappear for a while—and come back better for it.

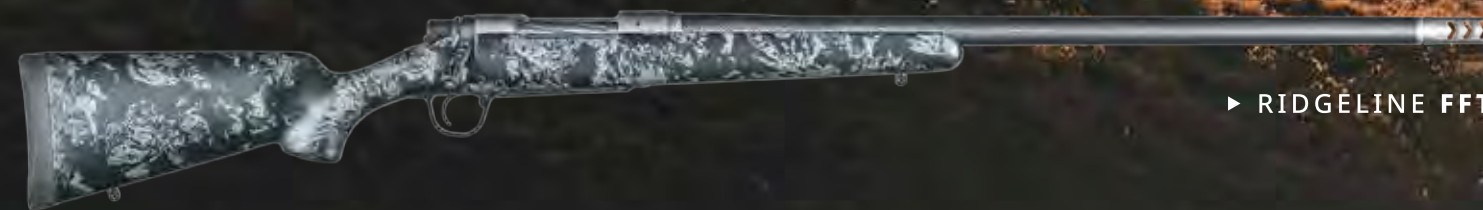
F&S reader Bryce Bott is a husband and a father of four. He lives in Utah.

BRYCE BOTT

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# CHEERS & JEERS



illustrations by PETER OUMANSKI

**B**ASED ON THE FEEDBACK we got from the last edition of F&S, the Gun Dog Issue, it's safe to say that you would agree "that dog can hunt." In addition to compiling our favorite reader responses from emails and shop reviews—plus, a few throwbacks from the F&S archives—we also want to share some enthusiastic feedback about our podcasts. As always, thanks for the kind words.

## THANKS—FOREVERYTHING

My parents were divorced when I was six months old, in 1950, and I grew up without a dad. *Field & Stream* was one of the magazines that taught me outdoor skills, such as camping, shooting, hunting, and fishing. Each month the magazine was a trusted friend to me.

I am nearly 76 now, and I look back on the years and the skills I obtained, and I'm thankful. I can't thank those writers now, but I would like to express my thanks to you and all the editors for keeping that alive in the young today.

Mike Pavik  
Fort Dodge, Iowa

## LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Like many have stated, I spent a lot of time browsing through the pages of *Field & Stream* as a youngster. I

just happened to be in Rayville, Louisiana, recently and spotted an issue. Wow! I love the format and the writing. I immediately subscribed. It's nice to have a true outdoor magazine with actual outdoor articles in print again. Thanks from the bottom of my heart.

Tommy Pullin  
via email



## ENCORE LETTER

It's me, Mike Pavik [see above], again. Keith McCafferty's Modern Classic article ("Silver Medalist") was spot on. I still have the Pflueger Medalist fly reel that I purchased in 1960, as an 11-year-old, from

Kautzky's Sporting Goods (yes, the makers of the Lazy Ike lure), along with a Garcia fly rod, with money saved from mowing yards and shoveling sidewalks.

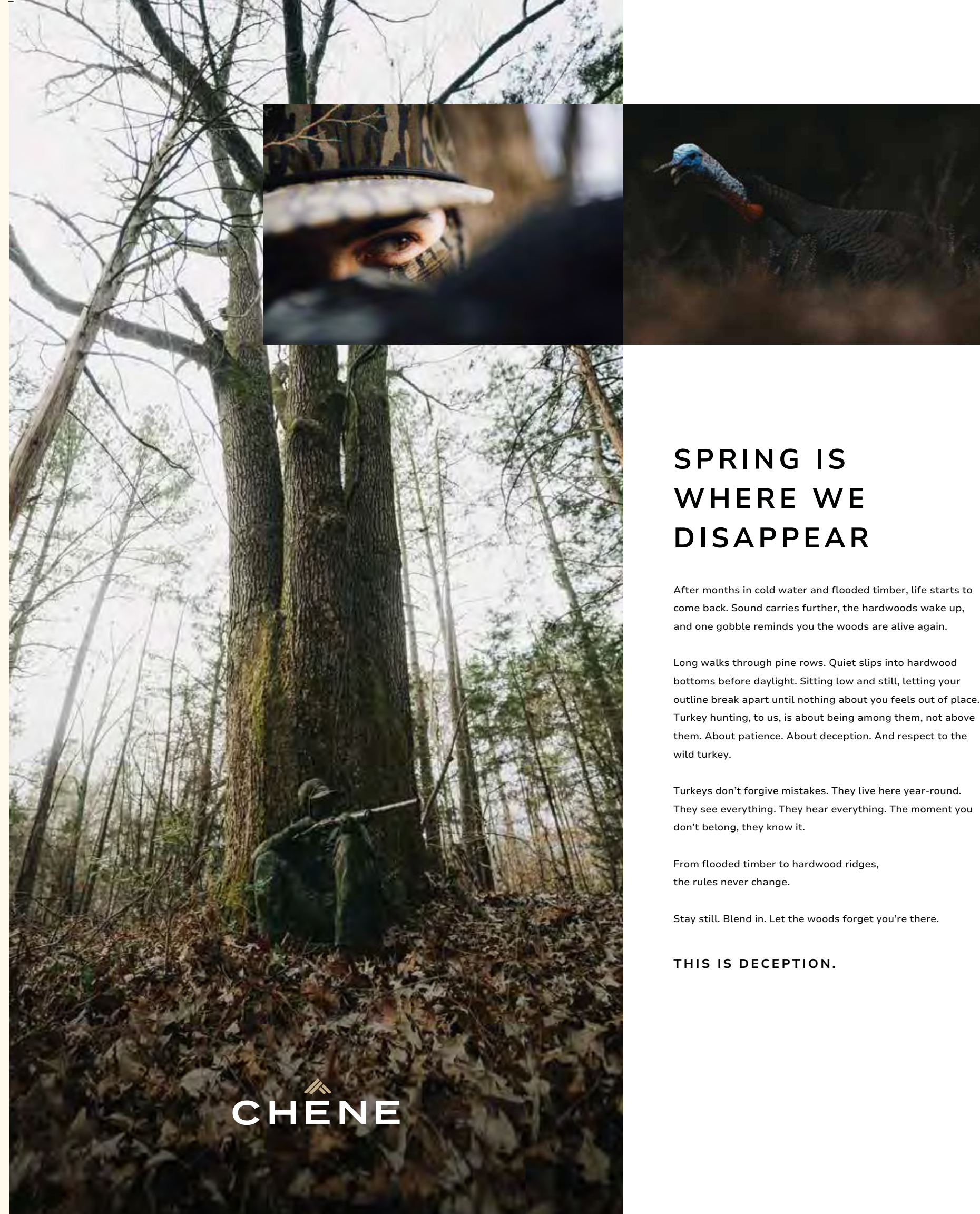
As I grew older, I was able to purchase additional spare spools. Some of the machining changed over the years so that the fit of the spare spools to the reel frame wasn't perfect, but it was still usable. I use it now paired with an 8-weight rod for bass.

I am so thrilled to have *Field & Stream* back in print. Way to go, and keep up the great work!

Mike Pavik  
Fort Dodge, Iowa

## SAM'S THE MAN

I was on a drive, found the *Legends of the Wild* podcast, with Sam Soholt, and I figured I'd give it a shot. I wound



## SPRING IS WHERE WE DISAPPEAR

After months in cold water and flooded timber, life starts to come back. Sound carries further, the hardwoods wake up, and one gobble reminds you the woods are alive again.

Long walks through pine rows. Quiet slips into hardwood bottoms before daylight. Sitting low and still, letting your outline break apart until nothing about you feels out of place. Turkey hunting, to us, is about being among them, not above them. About patience. About deception. And respect to the wild turkey.

Turkeys don't forgive mistakes. They live here year-round. They see everything. They hear everything. The moment you don't belong, they know it.

From flooded timber to hardwood ridges, the rules never change.

Stay still. Blend in. Let the woods forget you're there.

**THIS IS DECEPTION.**

CHENE

up listening for, like, six hours. I have never reviewed a podcast in my life, but I just had to stop and say this project is a gift to all who love the outdoors.

Sam Soholt is a storyteller at heart. He's done it well in film and photography and social media. All that said, this might be where he's at his best. His stories make you feel like you're around the campfire with your buddies. Stop reading this and start listening. You'll thank me later.

*Beck Easton*  
review on Apple Podcasts



#### ORAL TRADITION

The Campfire segment in the *Field & Stream Podcast* is exactly what hunting podcasts needed—immersive soundscapes that bring the story alive for you.

*Mclaugh19*  
review on Apple Podcasts

#### POWER OF PRINT

I grew up with *Field & Stream* magazines. I am very thankful that these new issues are available. Technology has its place, but there is something special about being able to experience a hard copy of these again.

*Chad G*  
review on the F&S Shop



#### LIMITED SCREEN TIME

I always knew about *Field & Stream* as a kid. From seeing the old magazine art to John Gustafson from *Grumpy Old*

*Men* mentioning the library of F&S in his bathroom, I'd always wondered what stories lay behind the captivating cover. What an amazing comeback it's been.

Family TV nights have turned into Dad reading an article from the magazine. Now my children get to grow up with what was once a legendary household name. Thank you, *Field & Stream*.

*Zach P.*  
review on the F&S Shop

#### THREE CHEERS FOR "TINKHAMTOWN"

*Editor's note: "The Road to Tinkhamtown" first appeared in the June 1970 issue and was reprinted in the most recent issue, in fall 2025.*



I am 16 years old and have lived most of my life in town, but I have been educated in the woods and on the lakes by my two wonderful grandfathers. After reading Corey Ford's "The Road to Tinkhamtown" they seem closer to me than ever. Mr. Ford pays a great tribute to the unspoiled outdoors of his day, and it seems to me that we owe it to him to keep things the way he loved them in return for all that he gave us in memories.

*Allen Boyd*  
Terre Haute, Indiana  
from the August 1970 issue

As I glanced through the opening pages of your June [1970] 75th anniversary issue, never stopping to check the contents page, I knew that there would be something which would make this issue really outstanding.

Just when I was about to

give up hope, I found "The Road to Tinkhamtown." For moments, while reading this wonderful story, I could see the members of Corey Ford's Lower Forty sitting around an old potbellied stove, listening as this story was told. I know I speak for many by stating that this story was a heartwarming and necessary chapter in your anniversary edition.

*Dick Sutcliffe*  
Northbrook, Illinois  
from the August 1970 issue

Your 75th anniversary issue was a dandy from cover to cover, but Corey Ford's story was the highlight. He is the sort one can say adios to, but never goodbye. Sooner or later all of us will have to take the Road to Tinkhamtown, and it seems a little easier somehow when we know that fellows like Corey Ford are hunting in those fields.

*Roy D. Collins*  
Austin, Texas  
from the August 1970 issue



#### REUNITED AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

I've really missed the printed *Field & Stream* and was so excited to find out it was in print again. Gorgeous photography and art. I just received an issue today and am looking forward to the stories. I am definitely subscribing.

*Carolyn S.*  
Review on the F&S Shop

#### ENCORE FOR "TINKHAMTOWN"

"The Road to Tinkhamtown" is the best bird hunting story of all time.

*Matthew S.*  
review on the F&S Shop

**From the time I first learned to read, I have been a great fan of *Field & Stream*. I have met many of my best friends fishing the waters that were mentioned in the magazine. They became great life-long pals, who were also driven by their love of the outdoors. Through your magazine I lived in a world where you could lose yourself in the best that this world had to offer. I just want to say thank you.**

—**JOHN D.**  
REVIEW ON THE F&S SHOP

#### HOW TO REACH US

Got a cheer (or jeer)? Send your thoughts on this issue to [editorial@fieldandstream.com](mailto:editorial@fieldandstream.com).



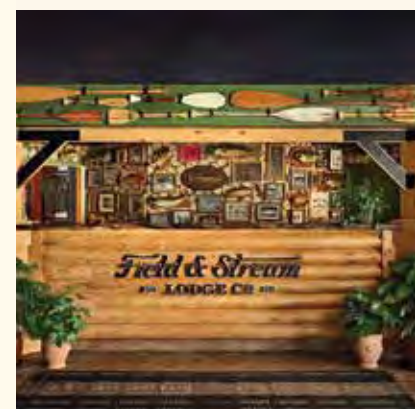
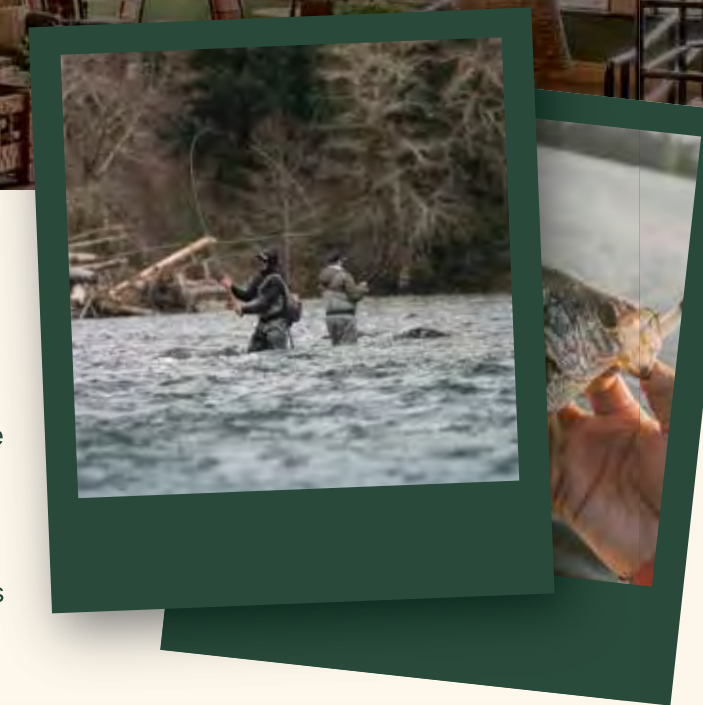
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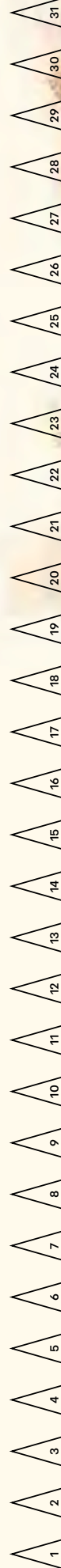
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## GAME FACES

A COLLECTION OF OUR FAVORITE READER PHOTOS, FROM THE FIELD AND THE STREAM

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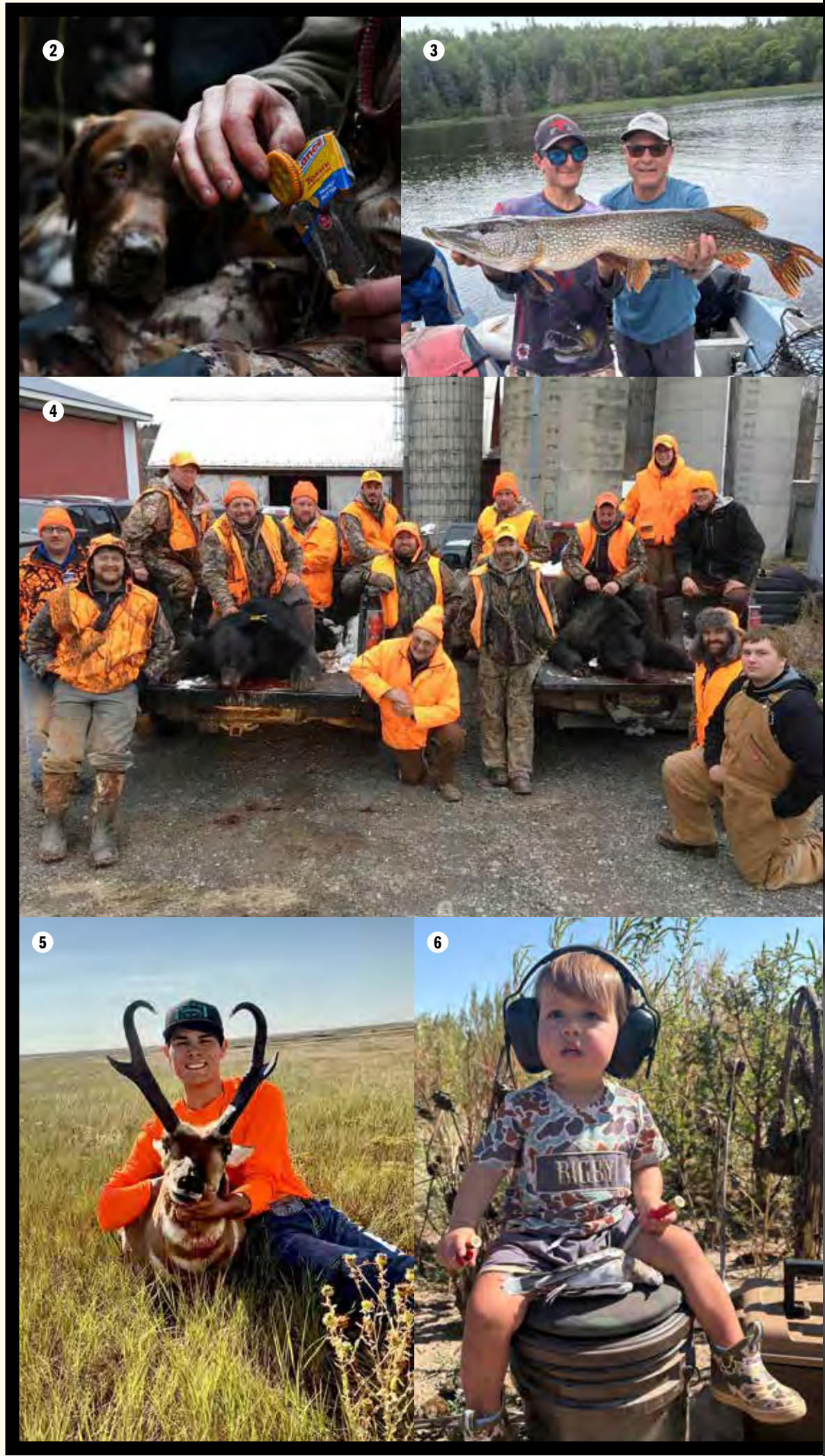


PREVIOUS PAGE

**YOUNG GUN, OLD BIRD**  
Camden Wynn, 12, tagged his first longbeard—an Osceola in Florida on public land.  
CHAD WYNN

THIS PAGE

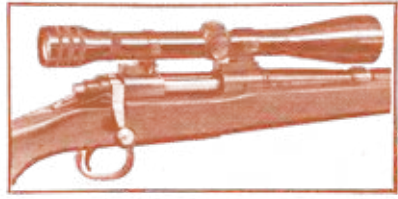
- 1. KISS AND RELEASE**  
TAMMY MORRISON
- 2. GUN DOG WANT A CRACKER?**  
LAINIE V. PACHALL
- 3. PIKE'S PEAK**  
DON GRINT
- 4. BAND OF BEAR BROTHERS**  
ROGER STROBRIDGE
- 5. SUPER SPEED GOAT**  
JAMIE R. DUCHENEAUX II
- 6. DOVE BUG**  
CALLIE BLAKE RODGERS



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# THE RANGE

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## 24 FIRST SHOT



As smoke from the Pole Creek Fire began to clear in the region, an angler scanned for rising cutthroats on Sparks Lake in Oregon.

photograph by **ARIAN STEVENS**

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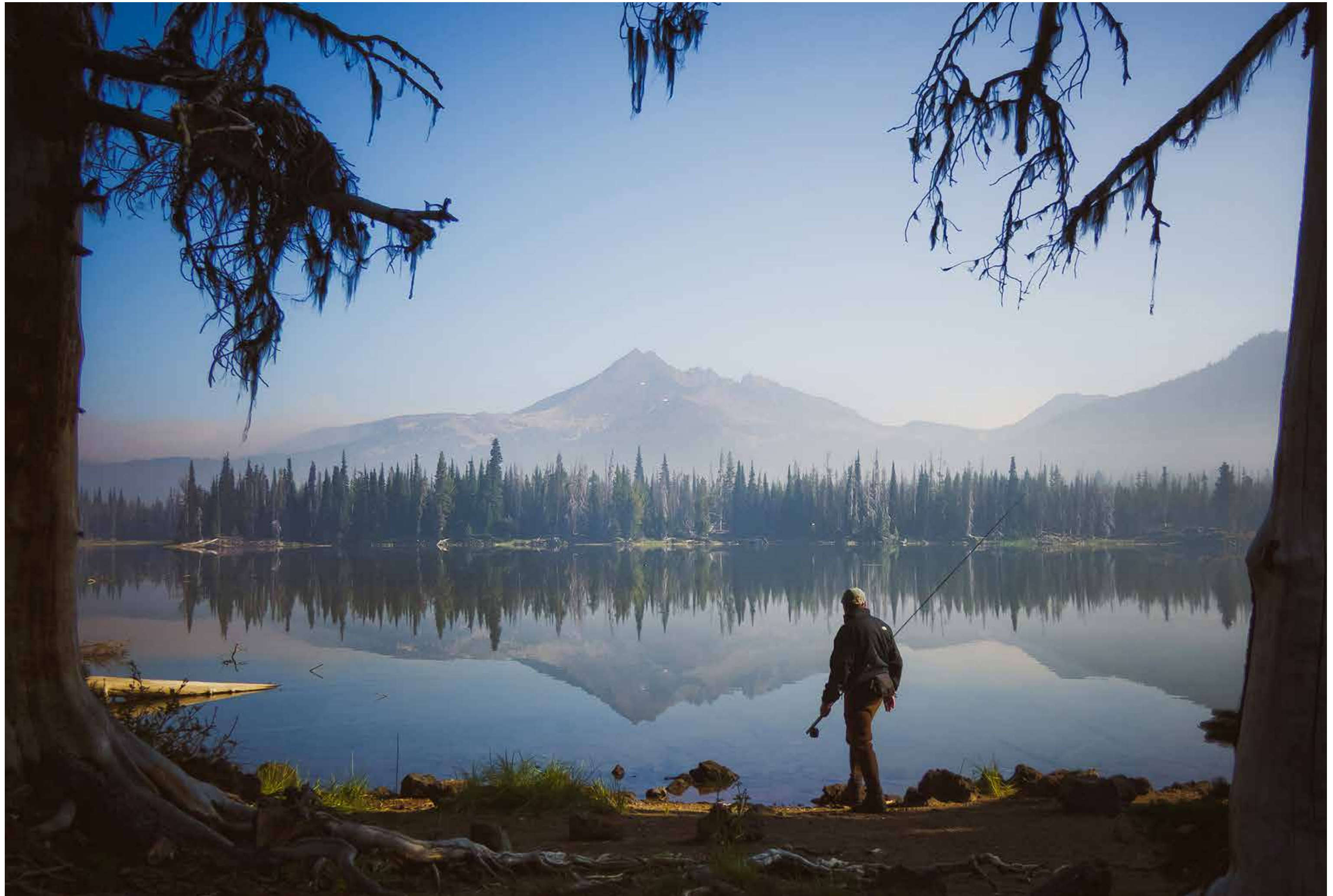
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## ASK PETZAL

OUR LEGENDARY RIFLES EXPERT ANSWERS YOUR MOST PRESSING QUESTIONS—LIKE IT OR NOT

by DAVID E. PETZAL

illustration by BRANDON LOVING

**If you could make one iron-clad rule for deer camp, what would it be?**

—Frank H. via email

**D.E.P.** If you snore, you bunk in your truck.

**How do you feel about snakes?**

—Riley Sauter, via email

**D.E.P.** I detest them one and all, big, little, venomous and nonvenomous alike. That being said, I find the world's most dangerous serpents fascinating.

It will be revealed that .29 is the diameter of ballistic perfection, and that reducing 308 slugs by .018 inch is the way to bullet nirvana.

**First, you are my hero for telling it like it is. Second, have you ever hunted white-tail deer from a tree stand in the South?**

—Tim D. via email

**D.E.P.** Thank you. I am my hero too. Aside from that, I've done a lot of whitetail hunting from Southern tree stands, mostly in South Carolina. Watching the sun rise on a Dixie beanfield is an experience not to be missed.

**Do you trust bear spray?**

—Strait Hill, via email

**D.E.P.** Yes and no. On the one hand, it has a 90 percent success rate deterring bear charges. On the other hand, I don't know how it would work on a sow grizzly if there were cubs involved. On the third hand, if you're not carrying a rifle, it's better than being chewed. On the fourth hand, if you are carrying a rifle, it's better than having to kill the animal.

**When it comes to triggering a rifle, should the shot come as a surprise or not? I've heard conflicting advice.**

—Brad McGrath, via email

**D.E.P.** You should know, down to the millisecond, when your gun is going to go *bang*, and the more precisely you have to aim, the more important this becomes. The "surprised by the shot" technique assumes that you can hold a rifle perfectly steady for as long as you want, which is not possible.

**I think Hemingway is overrated. There, I said it. What say you?**

—E. Berry, via email

**D.E.P.** I say there's Hemingway, and then there's Hemingway. No one writes at the same level for their entire career. He produced both masterpieces and yawners. But he remains the most influential American writer of the 20th century, and he won a Nobel Prize in the process. We are all pissants standing in his shadow.

**Who is your favorite country singer?**

—Dakota T. via email

**D.E.P.** I have no one favorite. I like old country music, and here are some names that make me pull over to the shoulder and turn the radio up to Stun so I can hear them: Jimmy Wakely, Hank Snow, Hank Locklin, Patsy Cline, Linda Ronstadt (yes, I know she's not country, but she's Linda Ronstadt), Merle Travis, the Sons of the Pioneers, and the young Roy Rogers.

**What's the worst excuse you've ever heard for a miss?**

—Nick Herrera, via email

**D.E.P.** The two worst are the two most common: "The gun wasn't sighted in" and "The bullet must have hit a twig." My responses are: "Well, why wasn't it sighted in, dumbass?" and "If all the twigs that hunters think deflected their bullets were collected in one place, you'd have a heap of timber the size of the Brazilian rainforest."

**Over the span of your life, which rifle cartridge have you shot the most?**

—Dom Barone, via email

**D.E.P.** Without doubt, the 308. When I enlisted, the Army had just converted to the 7.62mm M-14, and I got to shoot an M-14 a

lot in the years that followed. Later, I spent 10 years competing in the NRA Mid-Range program and fired between 1,500 and 2,000 rounds of 308 ammo every summer.

**Why is there no .29-caliber cartridge?**

—Ryan M. via email

**D.E.P.** Because ammo makers are saving the .29 for the next miracle caliber when the .26 fever burns out. It will be revealed that .29 is the diameter of ballistic perfection, and that reducing 308 slugs by .018 inch is the way to bullet nirvana. There will follow a whole series of .29-caliber cartridges, reviewed in breathless prose by worshipful gun writers.

**Which are better, cats or dogs?**

—Creek T. via email

**D.E.P.** *Better* is not the right word. Dogs are more useful, except for the step-on varieties. Cats are not especially useful, but they have strange and unexplainable powers that we cannot fathom. Also, every cat is eccentric. Let's say cats are more interesting and leave it at that.

**What's your best advice for an aspiring outdoor writer in the digital age?**

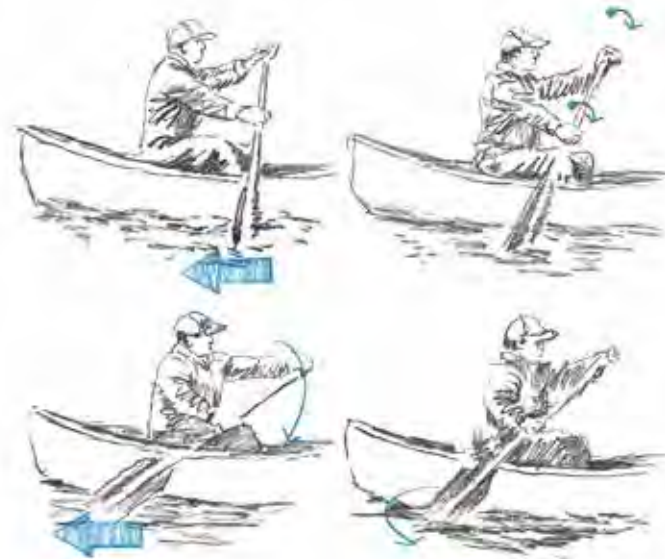
—Mac White, via email

**D.E.P.** There is only one rule for writers in any age: Be *right*. Before you write for money, get enough real-world experience that you can figure out what's true, because the Internet exposes you to unlimited nonsense, twaddle, rumor, hearsay, exaggeration, and flat-out bullshit, and if you're taken in by it, you're going to have a short career. F&S

Send your questions to [askpetzal@fieldandstream.com](mailto:askpetzal@fieldandstream.com)

# PADDLE YOUR OWN CANOE

THIS ESSENTIAL SKILL WILL ALLOW YOU TO FISH HIDDEN WATERS ON YOUR OWN TERMS



by T. EDWARD NICKENS

**F**ISHING SOLO from a canoe gives me complete control: I can go when I want, where I want, and stay as long as I want. The trick is knowing how to control a canoe as a solo paddler—then how to successfully fish from its squirrely platform. First things first.

To paddle a standard tandem canoe all by your grown-up self, first turn the boat around and paddle from the bow seat. An even more effective position is to kneel behind the center thwart, which weighs the bow slightly so it won't catch as much wind. If you're really feeling sporty, shift a touch to your strong paddle side to lean the boat over a bit. You'll have more room to manipulate the paddle for a J-stroke.

Which is not the J-stroke many employ. Too often, paddlers think the J-stroke means to literally carve a J in the water, with a last-second reverse back-paddle to correct the canoe track. But that effectively puts the brakes on forward momentum. Instead, a true J-stroke is a little combo that has more to do with hand positioning than the path of the paddle, combining a forward and a pry stroke in a seamless maneuver. Place the paddle blade forward as in a standard stroke, and dig in. Your top hand on the paddle grip—the control hand—should be nearly above the gunwale during the stroke.

As the paddle approaches your knee,

## 1-MINUTE NATURALIST DID YOU HEAR THAT?



If you hear a chirpy bird-like call while traveling in mountain lion country, you might want to go on full alert. The big cats chirp for several reasons—among them, to keep in touch with their cubs while they're in dense vegetation and to let other lions know they're in the area. Whatever the reason, hearing a mountain lion chirp means you are in close quarters, so consider moving out of the area. —T.E.N.

give it a twist. Literally. Turn the control hand so your thumb points straight down. Meanwhile, loosen the grip on your lower hand so the paddle can rotate, with the power face of the blade turning away from you and perpendicular to the boat. Now brace the lower hand against the gunwale of the boat and lever a short pry stroke away from the hull to straighten the boat's track. Do this with every stroke, and the boat will track straight, and you'll never have to break pace to switch sides.

Once you're within reach of where you want to fish, it's time to break a paddling rule, especially if you're fly fishing. You can fish more effectively standing up. Most general-purpose canoes have sufficient stability for an angler to stand up in and cast, especially if you make a few technique modifications. Since you're paddling solo, you already have the boat turned around ass bow-wards. When you stand up, place your feet evenly on each side of the keel line, or midpoint, of the hull. If you cast with your right arm, shift your left foot slightly forward and brace the back of your right calf against either the boat's middle thwart or the seat. Vice versa if you're a lefty. That extra point of contact allows you to rock slightly forward and back to compensate for your casting motion, and it works wonders for your ability to balance in the boat while casting. Not to mention catching. F&S

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## RULE THE ROOST

GETTING A GOBBLER TO FLY DOWN AND WALTZ INTO YOUR SETUP ISN'T AS EASY AS IT USED TO BE. HERE'S HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN ANYWAY

by DAVE HURTEAU

**T**HE SAYING “Roasted ain’t roasted” was in use when I started chasing spring gobblers in the late 1980s. But at that time, if you’d put a bird to bed, you could reasonably dig the roasting pan out of the cupboard. These days, you might want to hold off.

Today’s toms don’t seem to gobble as much on the limb or come running to our calls as readily after fly-down as they used to. Some speculate that hunters have weeded out many of the big-talking, hard-charging birds, leaving mostly finicky birds on the landscape. Whatever the cause, the classic roost hunt has gotten tougher to pull off.

But you can still do it. You can still have those perfect mornings when a tom plays the game just right—when he hammers on the roost and clatters down into your lap or beelines to your clucks and purrs, pausing only to strut for you every few steps. To pull it off, you may have to tweak your tactics, work a little harder, and sleep a little less. And while you can keep the roasting pan in the cupboard for now, you should definitely know where it is.

### DAWN PATROL

First off, let’s define what a roost hunt is. It’s when you set up close to a tom that’s gobbling on the roost at dawn and call him in to your first setup. If he doesn’t come in and you have to relocate, it’s not a roost hunt anymore.

Naturally, there are exceptions and provisos and gray areas. If you switch setups before the tom flies down, it’s still a roost hunt. And while you have to set up “close” to a gobbler for it to count, no one can tell you exactly how far you can stretch that. So let’s just say that the classic roost hunt should happen pretty quickly after fly-down, often with your shot ringing out while there’s still some gloom hanging in the sky, and with plenty of time to get to the local diner before it gets crowded.

DAVID MCGLEAF

**On our roost hunts, we’d slip in so close we risked getting our hats splattered. And it worked.**

### FOUR MODERN ROOST-HUNT TACTICS

**F**ANNING, REAPING, and hyper-realistic strutter decoys weren’t things yet when I started hunting turkeys. And while you could occasionally strike a midmorning bird and get him killed, the roost hunt was your best bet—because it so often worked. I have fond memories of eager toms pitching off at dawn and sailing over ravines and waterways and clear across open meadows to land in my lap. Now they’re more likely to stay on the limb until they can spot a hen scratching in the leaf a little below them.

So while the same basic roost-hunt tactics that worked a couple decades ago can still be effective, they require some modern twists. The plans below aren’t new as much as they are improved, to help you deal with today’s finicky toms.

#### 1. GET CLOSER

Back in the 2010s, I hunted in Louisiana with well-known gobbler guru Mike Miller, the Turkey Killer. He’d earned his nickname hunting throughout the South, tagging the country’s toughest toms. And the way he did it was by being the boldest, sneakiest turkey hunter I’d ever seen. On our roost hunts, we’d slip in so close we risked getting our hats splattered. And it worked.

Miller was ahead of his time because with today’s toms, one of the best ways to pull off a roost hunt is to already be in range, or nearly so, when your gobbler hits the ground. Put your bird to bed the night before, doing your best to pinpoint the roost tree. Then get in super early the next morning, like an hour before first light, and sneak as close to the roost as you dare. The goal is to put yourself inside what another well-known Southern turkey hunter calls a tom’s “bubble.”

“You want your soft tree yelps to be the first ‘hen’ a gobbler hears. If you can do that, there’s a great chance he’ll fly



Got a roosted tom that likes to fly down into an open field? Try backing off the roost and pulling him in with a realistic strutter decoy.



down and come to you first,” says Philip Vanderpool of The Virtue TV, who has taken more than 100 gobblers with a bow. “Also, if you know the tom’s habits, putting yourself between his roost and where he usually goes after fly-down can make all the difference.”

## 2. WAIT FOR IT

Another great option, surprisingly, is to do more or less the opposite. Instead of sneaking close and setting up before fly-down, you can hang back and wait for a gobbler to touch down before making your move. This is one of my favorite

tactics when I haven’t put a bird to bed the evening before or when I get to the woods a little late—and it works best in rolling, wooded terrain.

The plan here is to strike a roosted tom in the morning and move in close enough that you’ll hear him fly down but not so close that you risk busting him. Don’t set up yet, and keep your hen calls stowed. If you need to make the bird gobble to keep tabs on him, use a locator call. Otherwise, just wait—and listen closely. As soon as you hear the clatter and thump, or you can tell by his gobble that he’s on the ground, you want to

Set up close enough that a roosted tom thinks you’re the nearest hen, and he may walk right to you.



keep him gobbling. If he’ll answer your locator call, great; otherwise, call as aggressively as you need to make him talk. If he comes in, even better. But what you’re usually trying to do here is figure out what direction he’s going to go in. Then it’s time to shut up and circle out ahead of him, using terrain to stay hidden, and set up to call. Once you’re settled in, try to stay stock still and keep the calling subtle. He’s apt to have hens with him, but if you’re on the birds’ line of travel, he’ll often come find you.

## 3. BACK OFF A BIT

Remember I said there are gray areas? Well, this is one. If you back off a roost far enough, at some point it’s not really a roost hunt anymore. On the other hand, if you’ve done your scouting and you know that a tom flies down and walks a short way to a field edge to strut and gobble, then it totally counts. And you couldn’t ask for a better situation.

You’ve got two good options here. You can set up close to where you’ve seen the gobbler enter the field, or you can set up across the field and pull him over with a decoy or two. Either can work, but if you go with option one, I’d start off decoy-less. It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that any field setup has to have a decoy, but I’ve watched too many gobblers fly down, waddle into the field, spot my decoy, and bolt before I could shoot. You can always try the decoy gambit from the other side of the field on a subsequent hunt.

## 4. LOOK HARDER

Today’s toms may be smarter, but that doesn’t mean there are no dumb turkeys out there. They’re just fewer and farther between than they used to be. You can find them if you’re willing to hike longer or travel to new areas where, believe it or not, flocks are still getting established. There’s a place I hunt in New York’s Adirondack Mountains where finding a tom can take a day or two, but once I do, the odds of him marching straight in off the roost are darn good.

TES RANDLE JOLLY

# Roost-Hunt Gobbler Gear

You don’t need special tools to pull off a roost hunt, but it can really help. Here’s what I like.



## MOSSBERG SA-20 TURKEY SHOTGUN

I hate lugging a club when I’m trying to slip in close to a roosted tom. This affordable Turkish-made semiauto is perfectly set up for close-quarters woods hunting. It comes with a turkey choke and sports good gobbler-specific fiber-optic sights as well as a Pic rail for mounting an optic. What I like best, though, is that it weighs just 5.5 pounds with a 22-inch barrel.



## SLAYER SEDUCTIVE HEN SLATE CALL

If you don’t like using mouth calls—or if you just want to mix things up a little—a low-volume natural-slate pot-and-peg call is not just ideal for a classic roost hunt, but it also makes the hunt more classic. Before I got decent with a mouth call, this was all I used, because nothing pours out soft, perfect-sounding clucks and purrs like a slate.



## 20-GAUGE WINCHESTER LONG-BEARD XR AMMO

Roost-hunt shots are usually close, which means you don’t need to pay for TSS. Longbeard XR is the best affordable lead-shot turkey ammo there is, and the 20-gauge load is deadly out to 40 yards, which is as far as I’ll shoot on most roost hunts. (OK, I do keep one TSS load handy for when I think a longer shot is likely.)



## SITKA EQUINOX TURKEY VEST

I think the best vest for a roost hunt is no vest. Ideally, I’ll put two mouth calls in a shirt pocket, three shells in a pants pocket, and go. But if you want a place for snacks and a Thermacell and you like a seat cushion, you can’t beat the Sitka Equinox. Snug-fitting and lightweight, it’s the closest thing to not wearing a vest while still having a way to carry extras.



## DEAD END ROADKILL BATWING 2 MOUTH CALL

You should have a go-to mouth call made specifically for soft talk, such as tree yelps, clucks and purrs, and little whines and whistles. For most callers, this will be an easy-blowing double reed. I like this one from Dead End, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you try several to find out which one you call best with.



## KUIU PRO PANT

Do I think it matters what pants you wear on a roost hunt? Nope. But I’m going to tell you about these anyway because I absolutely love them. They are stupidly overpriced, but they are the most comfortable, well-designed, and rugged turkey hunting pants I’ve ever owned, and the built-in knee pads are perfect for crawling close to a roosted tom. F&S

# MATT'S TIPS

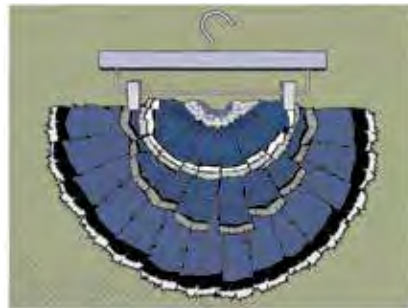
by MATTHEW EVERY illustrations by PETE SUCHESKI

**RAID YOUR CLOTHES CLOSET FOR HELP DRYING A TURKEY FAN, TAKE LINE OFF A REEL THE EASY WAY, AND ADD A HOOK KEEPER TO YOUR FISHING ROD IN SECONDS**



## No. 1

IKEA DOESN'T KNOW this, but its big blue tarpaulin shopping bags are practically made for outdoorspeople. In spring, the waterproof totes are perfect for transporting wet waders and wading boots. During fall hunting season, they're ideal for hauling decoys in and out of the marsh.



## No. 2

NEED TO SPREAD OUT a turkey fan for drying? Nothing works better than a pants hanger. Open the fan, attach the bottom feathers to the hanger's two clips, add salt or borax to the fleshy area, then hang in a cool, dry place. Probably not your clothes closet, though.



## No. 3

THE BEST TOOL for taking old line off a fishing reel is an electric drill. Chuck a dowel into the drill, put a few wraps of line onto the dowel, and pull the trigger. An added bonus: Cleanup is easy. Just throw the dowel and line away when you're done.



## No. 4

DESICCANT PACKETS, like those found in boxes of electronics, toys, and other goods, can help keep your gear from rusting. Recharge them in your oven on the lowest setting, then toss them into your tackle boxes, ammo cans, and gun cases to keep moisture at bay.



## No. 5

ALWAYS KEEP a few zip ties handy. They're great for attaching tags to turkey legs or as a quick fix for a busted shoelace—or to add a hook keeper to any rod that doesn't have one. Thread a zip tie through a small split ring to secure it to the base of your rod blank.

## TAP'S TIPS

A SELECTION OF TIMELESS TIPS

— BY —

H.G. "TAP" TAPPLY

FROM THE ARCHIVES

OF

FIELD & STREAM



## No. 1

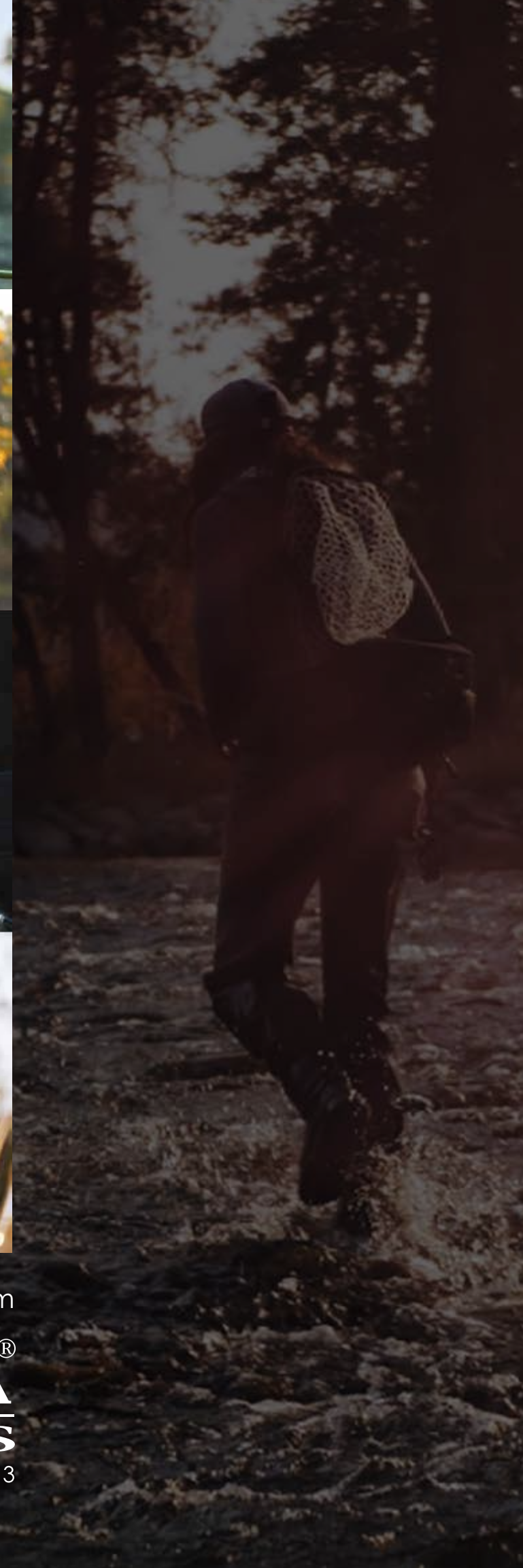
TWO TIPS for keeping rod ferrules from sticking: One, don't lubricate them, because oil or nose grease collects dust and dirt. Keep both ferrules dry and clean. Two, take the rod apart as soon as you quit fishing so the metal can't oxidize and lock.

## No. 2

SMALL LEAKS and briar pricks in boots or waders can be plugged temporarily by melting the end of a plastic worm and smearing the hot goo over the hole. The plastic hardens in a few seconds and sticks well. (Suggested by Mark Knight, Kansas City, Mo.)

## No. 3

AN OLD (but not broken) ski pole makes an excellent staff for wading heavy water. Remove the basket at the bottom of the pole and attach a cord to the thong at the top so you can let go of it when you have waded into position to fish.



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## PARTING SHOT

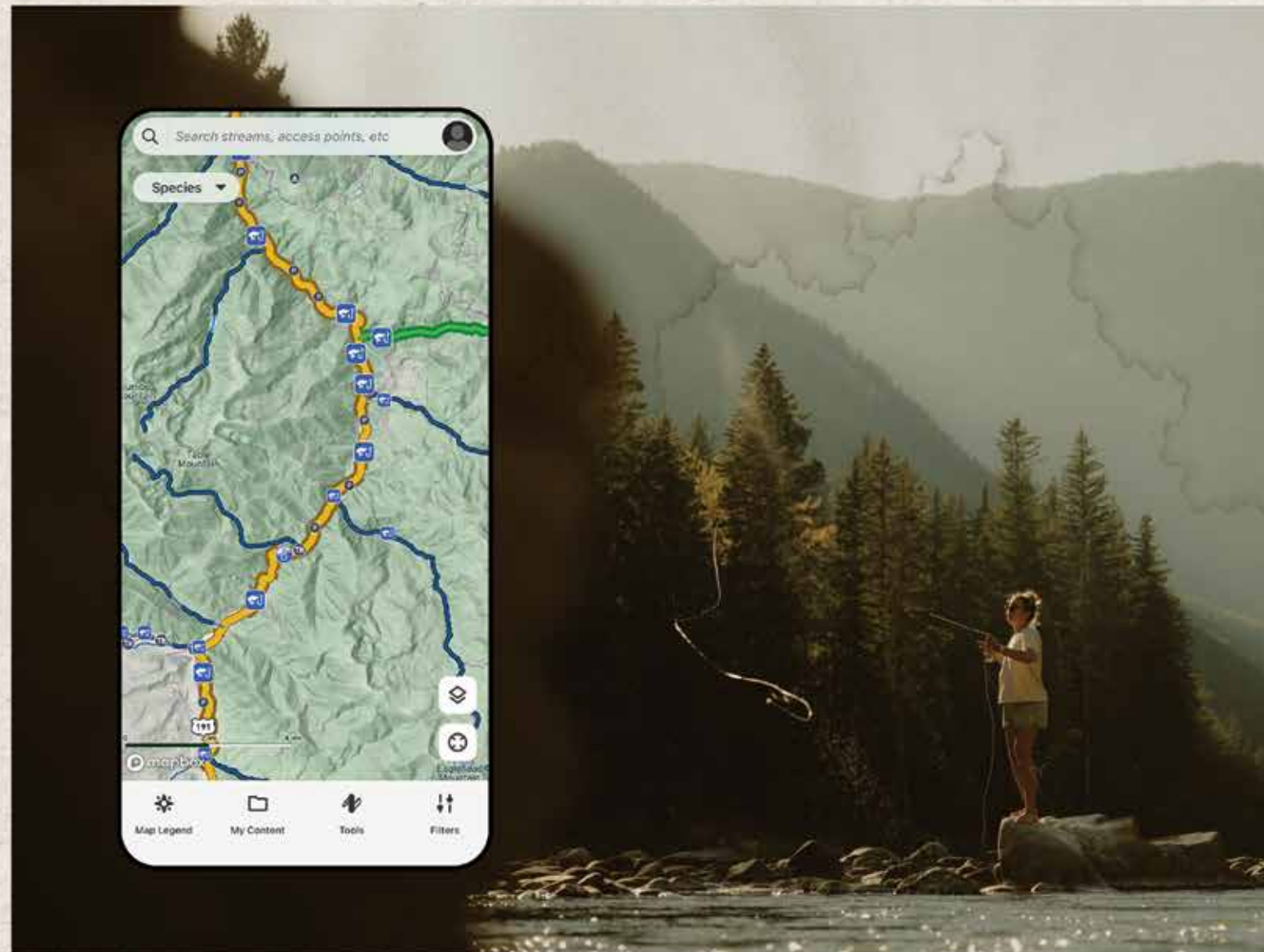
"To be blunt, I got very luck with this one," says photographer David McCleaf. This Osceola hen landed within 10 yards of the live oak where he had set up.

photograph by DAVID McCLEAF



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GEARING UP

## THE WICKED WOBBLER

EVERY PIKE ANGLER HAS A DARDEVLE IN HIS BOX, BECAUSE WHEN THE FISHING GETS TOUGH, YOU NEED A LURE YOU CAN COUNT ON

**Y**EARS AGO, when I was just starting out as an outdoor writer, my editor phoned to say he'd be in northern New York and maybe we could get together to fish for a day. "You can show me some of those St. Lawrence River northerns that were in your article," he said with a laugh. I was as terrified as I was thrilled. The fishing had been lousy of late. What if he left thinking I was some sort of fraud?

On the day of the trip, I got to my skiff early to throw out the empty beer cans and scrape up the soggy detritus. Probably good if it didn't look like I'd been sleeping beneath the docks and living on fried muskrat. As I futzed with my gear, I noticed a collection of Dardevle spoons peeking through my clear plastic tackle box. Suddenly I felt a little calmer. 'Cause the devil was on my side, I thought, in the words of singer Delbert McClinton. Somehow Dardevles have always come through for me.

I'm not alone in that. For more than a century, the Dardevle spoon has been a fixture in every pike and muskie angler's arsenal and remains the second-oldest American lure still in production. It was invented in 1906 by Michigan angler Lou Eppinger,

by **WILL RYAN**

photograph by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**

Eppinger Manufacturing offers 16,000 varieties of Dardevle spoons in a host shapes, sizes, and colors.

The Dardevle's popularity took off after an ad blitz in *Field & Stream* during the early '20s. The promotion featured stirring testimonies—and no small amount of machismo. One 1921 ad proclaimed that "if you're one of the kind of birds that like to sit and commune with nature and contemplate the beauties of an evening sunset," then you should stick with the lures you already have. "But if you're a regular he-man with hair on your chest," then a Dardevle is for you.

What really mattered was that the spoon caught fish. Early versions had a black or red face, a white stripe, and a silver back. Eppinger's innovation involved hammering the spoon until it became thinner in the middle than on the edges, which caused it to wobble in a way that mimicked a prey fish trying to right itself—and acting like lunch in the eyes of any *Esox* species.

In 1918, Lou and nephew Ed Eppinger changed the lure's name to Dardevle in honor of the Devil Dogs—a nickname for a World War I Marine brigade. They worried that the word *devil* would be perceived as irreverent, so they tweaked the spelling. In 1950, Eppinger added an illustration of Satan's face to go with the lure's demonic moniker—a perfect match, in many pike anglers'

eyes, for a fish thought to have evil intent of its own.

I can report from the field that the spelling of the lure's name didn't fool everyone. Like my grandmother, for instance, who prayed for the souls of 8-year-olds everywhere and mine in particular. I remember showing her my first red-and-white Dardevle. Lucifer's visage stared back at her. "Oh dear, this is terrible," she said, drying her hands on her apron. "But it's almost better that he's in plain view. The Devil is always there, even when you can't see him. Remember that."

Twenty-some years later, as my editor came walking down the dock toward me, I needed my Dardevles to come through. I clambered out of the boat and introduced myself. Some of what I said came out in sentences, I'm pretty sure.

We started at my favorite bay and combed the scattered weeds with spinners and spinnerbaits. Nothing. A clearing wind swept down from Canada. The fishing felt impossible.

Over lunch, the editor perused my collection of Dardevles. The Crackle Frog color had been his favorite bass lure when he was a kid. We agreed that Eppinger spoons (no knockoffs!) could be trolled, retrieved, and jigged successfully for any and all species. Afterward, we moved out to a deeper weed-line and trolled a crankbait along the edge. Then we tried drifting and jigging. Nothing.

Just when I'd about given up hope of touching a fish, we hit a couple of small northerns over some deep weeds—on Hammered Nickel Dardevles that we cast ahead of the boat and retrieved in sweeping motions so that they fluttered through the depths. After releasing one 20-inch pike that was mostly eyes and teeth, the editor wiped his hands on a rag and said to me, "I know that was not much of a fish, but I do like catching them on the same spoon I've been casting for 40 years."

Then he hooked a bigger fish that held the bottom and surged in short bursts of drag. He kept it away from the prop, and I scooped it into the net. The editor smiled down at a 10-pound pike thrashing in the net. The glittering silver Dardevle winked back at us through the mesh. In the flurry, I couldn't see the face of the devil. No matter. I knew he was there. F&S



A Dardevle spoon rests on the page of a classic F&S article about—what else?—pike fishing.



BAY STATE LURE MAKER GARY SOLDATI  
CRAFTS GIANT SALTWATER PLUGS DESIGNED  
TO CATCH MONSTER STRIPERS

# MASS PRODUCED



photographs by JESSE BURKE story by RYAN CHELIUS

**T**HE ROLLING HILLS OF western Massachusetts—a two-plus-hour drive from the ocean—are an unlikely place to find the best handmade striped-bass plugs on the East Coast. But that's where Gary Soldati has been building, sanding, and painting his Giant Pike lures for more than two decades. "I started tinkering in my garage in 2004," Soldati says. "At the time, I thought the concept of big bait, big fish might be good enough to start a business around." Turns out, he was right.

It's not just the size that makes Soldati's plugs so popular. The precise detail in the scale patterns, the fishlike profile, and the excellent swimming action make these plugs highly sought-after by both serious anglers and collectors. "One of the biggest parts of developing a plug is perfecting the swimming action," Soldati says. "It's a tedious but necessary process—and

I love it. I take great pride in seeing them swim correctly."

Throughout the course of the year, Soldati makes anywhere from 800 to 1,000 plugs. He builds them in batches of 80 to 100, transforming a block of northern white cedar into a functional piece of art. Once completed, he sends out a newsletter to let his fans know when a sale is happening on his website. Typically, his lures sell out in one to two minutes.

While some customers purchase Soldati's Pikes to display on a shelf, the majority of buyers are striper fanatics, just like Soldati. Even at 74 years old, he still gears up in a wet suit and swims out into the ocean at night to barnacle-covered rocks with a rod and plug in the name of research—and fun. Last fall, he welcomed us into his workshop to watch him do what he does best.

#### Above

An 8-inch pike (aka pikie) plug in a blue-fish pattern. This was one of Soldati's four signature colors when he started out. His plugs were immediately successful because they swim well in rough water and grab the attention of giant bass.

#### Opposite

Soldati, wearing a leather apron, gloves, and a face shield, poses in front of his shop. The outfit helps protect him while he melts lead and pours the toxic liquid into the plugs for added weight.





“When the collecting market was at its highest, people would line up two days before a trade show just to get one of my plugs.”

—GARY SOLDATI



**Opposite**  
Soldati sits at his workbench in his one-car-garage workshop. When he’s gearing up for a sale, 14-hour days—and nights—here are common.

**Left**  
A small batch of painted plugs hang from wires while waiting for a coat of epoxy. Soldati carefully brushes the epoxy on the plugs before placing them on a spinner for eight to 12 hours to cure. When dry, the epoxy enhances the color of the plugs and protects them against harsh saltwater conditions.

**Above**  
Soldati uses a drill press to make holes for hooks and weights in unturned blocks of wood before putting them on the lathe to shape the lure.

**Opposite, top**

Soldati melts small lead ingots in a pot before pouring the liquid into the body of the plug. He overfills the weight holes and hammers the excess down while still hot to tightly fill the space. The added weight increases the plug's versatility and improves its action.

**Opposite, left**

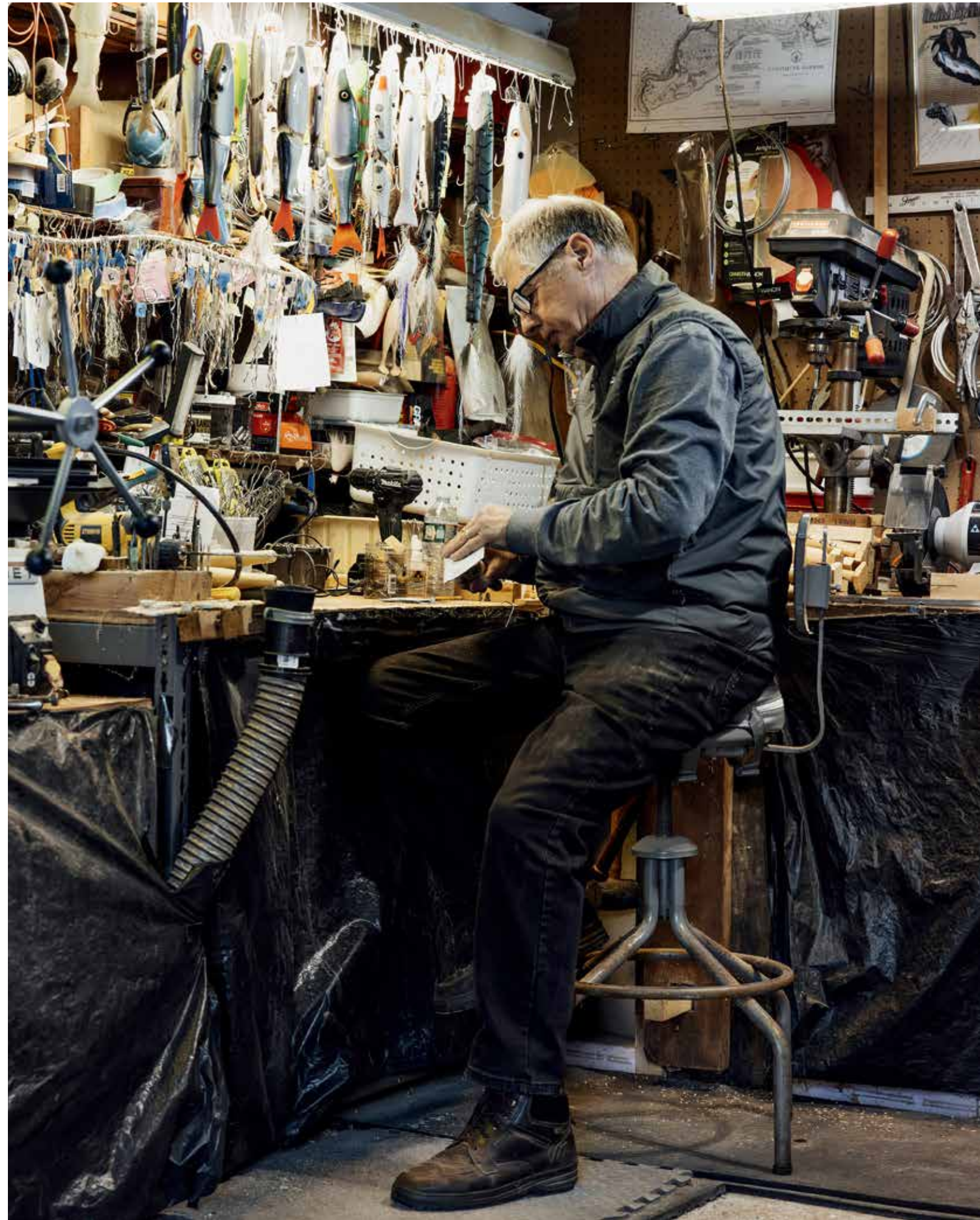
A roughly turned blank sits in the lathe, ready to be sanded. Soldati built a Plexiglas cage around the dust-collector hood to shield himself from the lead dust and any lead slugs that come loose while the blank spins at 3,400 rpm. The shield is a crucial safety feature.

**Opposite, right**

After turning and sanding the blanks, Soldati uses two calipers to check the thickness in the belly and tail of each plug. Precision and consistency are key to ensuring each lure swims correctly and produces the action he's looking for.

**Above**

Soldati drills a plug's eyeholes by hand after he's finished turning it on the lathe. This is faster and easier than using a drill press because the eyeholes are off-center. He makes each eye-hole just under ¼ inch deep with a marked drill bit.

**Opposite**

After cutting the square ends off each plug, Soldati creates a slope on the head with an orbital belt sander. Next, he sands the plug by hand to take off any sharp edges and fine-tune it to his liking.

**This page, top**

Soldati widens the eyeholes with a ball rasp on a rotary tool to finish the eye sockets. The ball rasp has been used so much that it's become compacted with wood and now smokes during the process.

**Middle**

Using a drill jammed upside down on his workbench, Soldati feeds a plug into a long drill bit. This creates a hole through the length of the plug for a wire that Soldati will use later to handle the plug while painting.

**Bottom**

Soldati presses a glass eye into the socket of a painted plug like a thumbtack. He wears rubber gloves during this stage to protect the paint from any natural oil on his hand, which can cause skips or flat spots.



“I’ll drive down to the coast and catch the last ferry to Block Island at 7:30 p.m, fish all night in the surf, and take the first ferry back to the mainland at 8 in the morning. Then drive back home.”

—GARY SOLDATI

**Opposite, top**  
Soldati sits at his paint station in the cellar of his house. The Sheet-rock ceiling and walls are painted white to increase light and are covered in pictures of old plugs for reference. He paints the lures in front of a vented fan that removes the toxic fumes.

**Opposite, bottom left**  
A stack of more than 50 different paint colors that Soldati uses to get precise patterns on his plugs. His wife helps with mixing paints to get the specific colors and shades Soldati is looking for. He’s painted plugs in more than 200 different colors and patterns.

**Opposite, bottom right**  
Soldati clamps a mesh fruit bag around a lure with binder clips. This helps him achieve intricate scale patterns with an airbrush. In the early days, he and his wife would eat a lot of cherry tomatoes to get the bags, but now his local grocery store sets aside several sizes for him.

**Above**  
Soldati holds out one of his Giant Trollers in a mackerel pattern. It’s his biggest plug to date, measuring 16½ inches and weighing 16½ ounces. This massive lure has landed two 50-plus-pound stripers in the rips of Boston Harbor. Over the years, he’s made 40 Giant Trollers. They sell for \$350 each.

**Above, left**

Soldati keeps rough and smooth blanks with square ends on his workbench. These samples allow him to compare measurements, be consistent, and get a feel for a plug as he builds it. He labels each blank to keep track of the exact model.

**Above, right**

A Giant Troller and Sand Pike sit on the workbench in Soldati's shop. The smaller, 8-inch pike features his Block Island green pearl pattern with copper rings. It has no lip and a single belly hook. The V-jointed Giant Troller is more than twice the size and features a custom lip.

**Opposite, top**

Soldati ties a tail at his vise for one of his plugs. Each of his pikes has a long tail that helps add length without adding weight. The tails also improve the swimming action of the plugs. Soldati uses clear nail polish to hold the tails together and then hangs them above his desk to dry.

**Opposite, bottom**

A photo in Soldati's shop shows him hefting his biggest striper ever. He landed the bass from the surf in a raging storm. It measured 53 inches and weighed 51 pounds. It even had a 2½-pound lobster in its stomach. He caught the fish on his Giant Pike in a dark-olive iridescent scale pattern.





**Above**

A dozen or so finished plugs hang in front of a window by Soldati's workbench. These are plugs that Soldati is currently fishing with and swim testing. He makes more than 70 different versions for different situations and conditions.

**Opposite**

Soldati forges out into the surf off the coast of Rhode Island during a storm. The wet suit lets him reach offshore rocks from which he can cast into deeper water and get his plug in front of big bass. He hopes to be surf casting in the ocean into his 80s. *R&S*



by COLIN KEARNS photographs by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

**M**Y FIRST FLY-FISHING VEST carried a lot of weight. I shopped all over town for the right one, having no specific style in mind other than wanting something with a lot of pockets. To be taken seriously as a fly angler, I assumed, you had to wear a loaded vest.

Eventually, I found the right one at an Orvis shop. It cost \$100—a small fortune to a 17-year-old who part-timed at a popcorn shop—but I was betting big on fly fishing at the time. My parents had suddenly separated, and I didn't have many friends. Fly fishing, I hoped, would become a new passion—or a distraction—to fill those voids.

# Charms

A COLLECTION OF ITEMS THAT WERE JUST INTENDED TO BRING GOOD LUCK ON THE WATER HAVE

BECOME CONNECTED TO THE AUTHOR'S HEART

The night before my first fly-fishing trip, I stayed up late organizing my vest. As soon as I thought I had everything just where I wanted it, I'd get an idea for how one thing could be more accessible... and would empty all the pockets and start over. I was having the time of my life. The only problem was, for as much gear as I had assembled, there was still one empty pocket after I (finally) had everything just right. I wouldn't stand for that. As I racked my brain for what else to carry, I noticed the hand-drawn birthday card my little brother, Mike, had made for me, taped to the wall above my desk. That gave me an idea.

I gathered gifts from everyone in my family. I already had the card from Mike. From my mom, I picked a letter she'd written to me when I was in junior high. I chose a souvenir token Dad and I had

made together, on which I'd misspelled my teenage nickname, as well as one of his AA coins. I added another letter and sobriety coin from my oldest brother, Brian. And from my brother Patrick, I chose a pewter figurine he'd bought for me at a truck-stop diner when I was a kid.

The more items I gathered, the more enthused I became to add more. I found an old photo of me with three of my best friends from grade school the morning before a mountain-biking trip. I found a small American flag sticker, given to me by a friend back in fifth grade, that I had taped to the tongue of one of my soccer cleats. I found a prayer card from Pop's



A collection of letters, coins, and other trinkets have stayed in the author's vest for nearly 30 years.



funeral. Satisfied with the collection—what I hoped would be good-luck charms—I sealed the items in a plastic bag and stashed it in the inside-left pocket of my vest.

Twenty-eight years later, I've never stopped adding new charms. One of the remarkable things about this bag is the time-capsule quality it has assumed. I can remove it from my vest, empty the contents onto a table, and sort them into phases of my life.

**1999:** The Kairos cross on a braided lanyard was given to me at the end of a retreat by the close friends I eventually made in high school.

**2000, 2001, 2006:** My other grandparents took on a presence in the bag: prayer cards from the funerals for Gram and PawPaw; a letter from Nonny in her exquisite handwriting.

**2010:** I kept the teal cancer ribbon pinned to my vest during the period when the mother of my fiancée, Amanda, was battling ovarian cancer. I moved it to the charm bag, where I could be more certain it wouldn't get lost, after she passed away in the winter.

**2013:** The red paratrooper was a small gift from a pal. At midnight on New Year's Eve, on a whim, I dropped it from the roof of our apartment building into the street below. A couple of days later, while walking home from work, I spotted the toy stranded at the curb. I can't explain why, but I took it as a sign that it should be kept. I rescued the figure, took it home, and placed it in the bag.

**2015:** Amanda lost her father in the spring. As we were sorting through his belongings, I found a small antique tin of split shot at the bottom of a safe box.

"Can I have this?" I asked her.  
"Of course," she said.

**2021:** For a *Field & Stream* story, I had the opportunity to interview John N. Maclean, whose father, Norman, wrote my favorite book, *A River Runs Through It*. That conversation sparked a friendship, and early on in that bond, we wrote

each other letters. The arrival of a note from John was always a big deal, and I usually tore into them immediately. But there was one that I decided to save and read on my home waters.

I remember releasing a brown trout before taking a seat on a boulder in the middle of the stream. I removed the letter from my vest and, after reading it, folded it and placed it inside the charm bag.

**2022:** My son, Leonard, was born on October 16. Early on, I decided that my phone couldn't be the only source of photos of him. So, in true Dad mode, I purchased one of those photo holders that fits into a wallet. When the insert that kept the holder in my wallet broke,



Every item in the charms bag has its own story connected to a family member or friend.

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I knew exactly where to store the miniature album of my sweet boy.

**2024:** After devastating news about Aunt Peggy's cancer, I retreated to my home river. Even there, where I feel untouchable, I was out of sorts: When a trout snapped my line, I felt so lost that I could've sworn the water pouring around my legs had begun to flow backward.

I came home from Aunt Peg's memorial that spring with yet another prayer card for the bag.

Last December, Mike and his wife, Britt, hosted the family for Christmas dinner. A pile of wrapped presents rested beneath the tree. For me, though, the real gift was the trio of family photo albums on the coffee table. Over the last year, Mike had been going through boxes of snapshots that had been

stashed away at Dad's apartment and sorting them into albums. Occasionally, he'd send me a text with a photo—a sort of sneak preview. I couldn't wait to go through the finished books.

The albums were organized chronologically by the birth of the four sons: Brian, Patrick, me, and Mike. It was a trip to see my older brothers as little boys—in the arms of our grandparents, in the rooms of our old homes. And as I flipped the pages to when Mike arrived, it was touching to see us as a complete family, if only for a handful of photos, before things changed and there were fewer and fewer of us in each image.

Of all the photos in the albums, though, the ones that captivated me most were a three-shot grouping taken on the first day I went fly fishing. In them, I'm wearing a green Adidas hat, a white T-shirt, my brown Hodgman waders, and the Orvis vest that I'd stayed up late organizing the night before.

One photo shows me posing on the bank. Another has me framed in profile as I peer at my fly on the water. The final

shot captures me standing in the middle of a deep pool where there is no current. Coils of chartreuse fly line float around my waist like snakes. The bottom pockets of my vest are partially submerged in the stream. It looks like I'm being weighed down. My face is blurry, but I have no doubt my expression is one of frustration and disappointment as reality sunk in that I was not going to land a single trout that day.

While my eyes and memory penetrated that image, what I found myself wanting was to travel back in time and reassure that version of myself that it's okay he didn't catch any fish, that fly fishing *would* become the passion he hoped it would be, that fly fishing is actually going to change his life.

Since I cannot do that, I resolve to do what feels like the next best thing: I will have a copy of this photo printed, and I will add it to the charm bag that I keep in the inside-left pocket of my fly-fishing vest, the pocket closest to my heart.

Twenty-eight years will take a toll on a bag filled with papers and trinkets. The words on my mom's letter have bled through the paper so heavily that it's impossible to tell the front side from the back. Rust has gathered on the coins. The stick-man anglers Mike colored on the birthday card look as if they've melted.

I now keep the charms double-bagged. But I know that water, and time, will never stop finding their way into the bag—just as I know that the collective weight of the memories the charms contain, and the messages written upon them, will always bring me hope and company every time I step into a river.

*Happy birthday Colin I hope you are happy with your fishing rod... The next few years are going to be ones of great challenge... He would have been so proud of his grandchildren... Until we meet again... I love you and hope you keep this coin with you always... Until we meet again... Big Dogg... Courage to change the things I can... Our family has its share of problems, but there is a lot of love and support... Home waters are a place you go back to, season after season, for personal reasons until it lodges in your heart forever... Take a boy fishing today... These are the things that are most important.* F&S



↑ The cross above was given to the author after a retreat in his junior year of high school.



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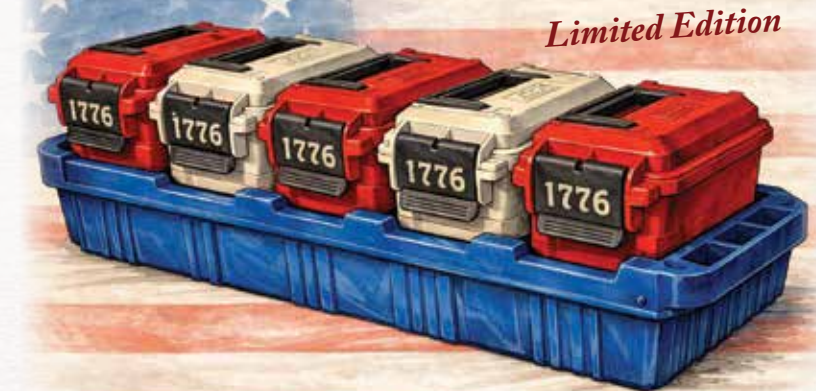
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# PUT TOM'S ON YOUR RADAR

IN EASTERN TENNESSEE, THIS SPOT DOUBLES AS A BAIT SHOP AND A COMMUNAL GATHERING PLACE FOR BASS ANGLERS

by ANDREW GREENE photographs by DAVID COX

I GREW UP IN Nashville, but each summer, I got to stay with my grandparents in Morristown, Tennessee, for a month. The suburbs didn't really suit a feral kid like me, and Morristown felt like fishing paradise. My Papaw and I would get into his red 1990 Ford Ranger, which reeked of fish and tobacco juice, and drive to Douglas Lake or Cherokee Lake and fish for crappie and bream all day long. It was the best.

And, of course, any day we went fishing meant that we first got to make a stop at what was my idea of Disney World: Tom's Sporting Goods.

I vividly remember the very first time I went to Tom's. I couldn't have been much older than 4. Basically, I've been going there for as long as I've been able to hold a fishing rod. I didn't know how to fish with anything except crickets, minnows, or night-crawlers. But then I stepped into Tom's and saw all those lures—and my brain just started to spin. And then there was the wall with photos of big bass and stripers. I'd never even caught a bass before, but there I was looking at a photo of a 7-pounder. Not only that, but one of the lures at Tom's could catch that fish. I wanted to figure out how.

As I got older, I did start to figure it out. I kept learning

and could go into Tom's with a better understanding of how to catch bass and what questions I needed to ask to keep improving as an angler.

I went to college in East Tennessee and was on the bass fishing team. Tom's was our team bait shop—because we knew we'd always be able to find what we needed there.

Twenty-five years later, Tom's has been a constant in my life. Everytime I step inside, I know what I'm going to find. There's that familiar smell of salt and plastisol, dead minnows, and a bit of somebody-just-finished-a-cigarette-before-walking-in-here.

There's Radar, the owner, standing by the front of the shop, who always greets you with a smile and a "Whatcha say, buddy?" Anybody who knows Tom's knows Radar. When you're in his shop, he'll make you feel like family. He's one of a kind. The best kind.

There's the tackle—tons and tons of tackle. "Organized chaos" is how I'd describe it. The front of the shop is for stripers and crappie; the back is for bass. Hard baits on one side; soft baits on the other. Not to mention the used-tackle section. Radar will buy the old baits or tackle that folks bring in.

There must be close to 2,000 used lures.

And there's the community. At Tom's you're with your *people*. And those people come to Tom's to share their wins and their losses. They'll even share the local news: who passed away, who got a new boat.... It's not just fishing. It's life.

I've fished all over the country and been to a lot of bait shops. Sadly, there just aren't many places like Tom's left. When I was in the shop recently, Radar kept telling me, "Buddy, this is the last of its kind."

Who knows, if I hadn't walked into Tom's when I was just 4 years old and experienced that sense of wonder as I gazed at all the lures or felt inspired by the big-fish photos or listening to other people talk about catching bass, would I even have stuck with fishing for the rest of my childhood? Would I have gotten a scholarship to fish in college?

I can't say for sure—but I know that Tom's definitely played a factor in helping me cultivate my dream to make a career out of fishing.

Tom's is a very special place to me. To this day, every time I go there, I feel like a kid again. F&S

I stepped into Tom's and saw all those lures—and my brain just started to spin.

Lowell "Radar" Lakes bought the shop from his brother-in-law, Tom, in the early '80s and kept the name.





**Top**  
Tom's is a mecca for anglers who love lures. The pegboard dividers were custom-built to maximize bait inventory.

**Right**  
Tennessee bass anglers know they'll be able to find what they need—like virtually any size jig-head in any color—at Tom's.

**Far right**  
This customer, who brought along his pet parrot, just proves that you never know who you'll run into at Tom's.



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**Top left**  
Radar is a constant presence at Tom's. He's owned the bait shop for about 45 years.

**Top right**  
Even the location of Tom's Sporting Goods—on the lower level of an apartment complex—is unique.

**Left**  
Along with the brag board of fish pics, mounts of locally caught trophies inspire anglers here.

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Field & Stream senior editor Ryan Chelius gathers a few birds taken during a duck hunt on Long Island's salt marshes (p. 120).

photograph by BRYAN DERBALLA

# KEEPING THE



WHY DO OUTDOORSPEOPLE HAVE SO MANY TRADITIONS? TO REMEMBER WHAT WE CHERISH ABOUT THE PAST, TO STRENGTHEN THE TIES THAT BIND IN THE PRESENT, AND TO PASS A TORCH FOR THE NEXT GENERATION TO CARRY INTO THE FUTURE. BELOW, SEVEN WRITERS SHARE THEIR OWN OUTDOOR TRADITIONS

# FLAME



BRIAN GROSSENBACHER (right)

# HOME AWAY FROM HOME

by RICHARD MANN photograph by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

**L**OOKING OUT THE WINDOW next to where my bed used to be, I remember how if I rested my chin on two pillows, I could stare out into the darkness and watch for headlights. I usually went to camp early with my mom and grandparents. My father would make the six-hour drive late Friday after work, often arriving around midnight. When I saw his headlights bouncing up the long dirt road, I'd climb, barefoot and in my pajamas, down the ladder that led from the second floor to the first and rush to the front porch to be there, waiting, when he arrived.

Two years before I was born, my family bought 100 secluded acres bordering public land near West Virginia's South Branch Potomac River and built this small, two-story cinderblock camp with a tin roof that roars during a rainstorm and a fireplace big enough to roast a mastodon in. Not a year has gone by since 1965 that I haven't come here.

Each spring, we would cut firewood and stack it to dry for fall, and on Easter Sunday we'd gather at the big table for a feast. During Labor Day weekend, we'd work on the road and in fall we'd hunt raccoons. Lying under the stars, listening to the hounds sort out a cold raccoon track, my grandfather would say, "I wonder what the poor folk are doing," meaning that we were the richest folks in the world, and he was right. But I never felt it more than during the firearms buck season, which was always the big event.

Everybed in camp was full, rifles hung from nails driven into the second-story floor joists. My grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins were all there, heading out before sunrise, coming back after sunset, sometimes dragging deer but more often dragging their asses. I'd sit by the campfire surrounded by the scent of Hoppe's as they cleaned their guns and boot grease as they weatherproofed their footgear in the evenings. In the mornings, the smell of coffee and bacon would wake me up, and I'd watch the hunters file out the front door, longing to join them in the

**I joined the service, left the service, became a cop, moved houses, married, remarried, raised a bunch of kids, and sent them out into the world. But with all of life's changes, all the good and bad that 60 years of living can bring, there's been one constant in my life. This hunting camp has always been here for me.**

woods until I was finally old enough to go.

Sixty years of coming to deer camp has taught me what my grandfather's words really meant—and lately, I can see my grown son, Bat, coming to understand them too. There's something about a camp in the wilderness and a walk in the woods with a rifle that helps a boy grow up and lets a man find solace in a rat-race world. Bat wasn't always a regular at deer camp, but in the last several years, the place has become special enough to him that he's begun to set down his own traditions.

The first thing he'll want to do when he gets here is find our resident black snake's dried-up, hollow rope of a shed skin. About five years ago we noticed fewer mouse turds in camp, and the discovery of a shed skin under the staircase explained why. Now each year when we arrive, we look forward to finding the latest shed skin to see how much the camp serpent has grown. At last measure, it was 5-plus feet. We saw him lurking out in the attached storage shed once, stone-cold still and as black as a coal mine. He looked at us with contempt for disturbing his hunting grounds.

Bat will bring steaks too. Tired, I suppose, of eating our usual slop, he

started buying heavily marbled, grass-fed rib eyes every time. He buys them locally, from the Mountain Steer Meat Company in White Sulphur Springs, and throws them in a cast-iron skillet to turn out a butter-smear beefy goodness that about makes your eyes roll back. Grandpa would say we've climbed above our raising, and we probably have.

Before we leave, Bat will gather us together for a group selfie. He started this tradition, a product of the modern, digitized world, some time back, and it's grown on me. Our selfies aren't for clicks or likes on social media, though. They're just a way to memorialize our latest adventures inside those handheld devices we've all become so tethered to.

During the last 60 years, a lot has changed in my life. My grandparents died, Mom and Dad moved off the family farm, and they passed too. I joined the service, left the service, became a cop, moved houses, married, remarried, raised a bunch of kids, and sent them out into the world. But with all of life's changes, all the good and bad that 60 years of living can bring, there's been one constant in my life. This hunting camp has always been here for me.

Walking away from the window, I head downstairs and out to the campfire where billowing smoke and the ghosts of my elders surround me. I take a long look at the place, situated in this 100-acre woods, in the shadow of a boulder-strewn and laurel-covered mountain I've climbed a thousand times, bursting with more memories than my head can hold. A whippoorwill calls, and I raise my eyes to see headlights bouncing up the long dirt road to camp. I walk as fast as I can with my aching knees over to the front porch so I can be there, waiting, when my son arrives.



Shed antlers, snake skins, selfies, and old snapshots from the author's West Virginia hunting camp.



# FLAMINGOS ARE FOREVER

by WILL RYAN

**B**ACK IN THE MID-'80S, seven or eight of us, with some of our kids, started an annual trip to the West Branch Penobscot River in northern Maine to fly fish for landlocked salmon. One year early on, Chucky, who was 13 at the time, walked back to the campsite with a plastic lawn ornament he'd found in the woods. He placed it on a picnic table in front of his father.

"Good job," his dad said, as he turned the plastic pink flamingo in his hands. "I wanted to bring your mother back something nice, and there's not a scratch on it. It can be from both of us."

"You're sick," Chucky said, grabbing the flamingo. He pushed it into the ground at the edge of the campsite, right on the riverbank. "There," he said. "It'll help you find your tent."

A week later, as we were breaking down camp and packing up to leave, Chucky uprooted the flamingo and hurried off into the woods, returning 20 minutes later without it. He wouldn't say

where he'd left the ornament. "Think of it as hibernating for the winter."

When we arrived the following June, the first thing Chucky did was retrieve the flamingo from its hiding place and set it up on the edge of camp, in the same spot along the bank of the Penobscot. It became our opening ritual. Like raising a flag. At some point, we gave the flamingo a name—Floyd, of course.

Fishing the West Branch is physically demanding and occasionally breathtaking. Driving Floyd into the ground proclaimed that yes, we were doing this again. We were still willing and able to fight the current and take the occasional dunking. One night Chucky said, "You know what will suck? In 30 years, I'll still want to catch more salmon, but you guys will all be too old to drive up here, let alone wade this river."

"I'll still be here," Jim said from the other side of the fire. He was the only one of us who lived in Maine. "Before I die, I want to become the first man to wade

the West Branch with a walker. You can be my ghillie."

We all laughed, but in truth, the idea of time passing back then just flowed by, as if carried off by the river. Each June Floyd would be at his post, garish and glossy as ever, encouraging us to wink at the year gone by. The same car-size boulders, mountains, and northern wilderness made our West Branch world feel immutable. And for a week every year, we did too.

Then, to our surprise, we started getting old and dying. The great landlocked salmon expedition dwindled to an end. As to Floyd's whereabouts, well, they remain a mystery. One of the guys, Shawn, supposedly knew, but he is no longer with us. I recently asked Chucky, and all he would give me was that Floyd is "probably still hibernating in those woods downstream from our old campsite."

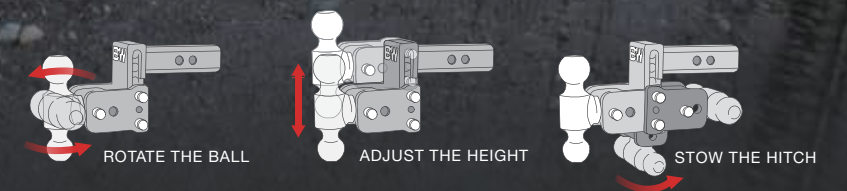
Waiting, I hope, for a group of fishermen with all of their salmon still in front of them.



CHRISTOPHER TESTANI (flamingo)



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MICHAEL DVORAK (brook trout)

## FIRST FLY

by NOAH DAVIS

**A**LTHOUGH THREE caddis have already floated through the riffle, and I've seen one disappear in a brook trout's splash, my fingers pass the dozen elk-hair imitations lined neatly in the box. Instead, I pinch a gaudy Royal Wulff from the foam.

My dad didn't fly fish, but my barber did. After school, my brother and I would walk the half mile to Joe Martin's barbershop on Main Street in our little Pennsylvania town for our once-a-month haircuts, \$10 including tip. If he wasn't with a customer when we opened the door, Joe would be hunched over his vise on the counter, tying a fly, his ginger beard draped to mid-chest.

"Davis boys!" he'd exclaim as we ditched our bags on a chair and looked closer at the fly in progress. Loose dubbing and stray moose hairs mingled on the floor with trimmings from the day's clients. "Been doing any fishing?"

We'd share photos of the fallfish and sunnies we'd caught, give a play-by-play of that last bass of the season that hit a Heddon popper. Then we'd listen to Joe's stories as he flicked an imaginary cast across the waiting room to a trout sipping emergers under the shampoo sink.

I wanted to learn to fly fish. I saw the mayflies when they hatched in the spring, witnessed trout rising in bubble lines as they ignored my depth-charged worm. After a winter of my asking, Joe agreed to take me to a small stream on the first warm day of March with his 6-foot 6-inch 2-weight in hand.

"This is a Royal Wulff," Joe said, holding up the hook dressed in

red thread, peacock herl, auburn hackle, and white calf hair. "There's nothing really hatching now, but these brookies don't mind. They'll eat this eight months out of the year."

With the trees empty of leaves, Joe taught me how to make short casts into a pool where the high-riding fly drifted through a slick where the current slowed. The loud colors of the Royal Wulff were easy for my novice eyes to track on the dark water.

Sheets of snow still clung to the north-facing slope above us as we moved up the hollow from pool to pool. Joe offered instruction on my fly placement and backcast but not as much as he commented on the wild space the creek carved through the mountain. He noted the turkey sign where the birds had raked away the leaves and the white ribs of a deer that hadn't survived the winter scattered under a rhododendron.

"Brookies live in the prettiest places," he said.

In a long pool that hugged the mountain's slope, the Royal Wulff finally disappeared in a swirl. I lifted the rod instinctively and watched as the red-bellied male fought against the clear current and then into my numb hand.

I was 13 years old then, and I've been obsessed with finding wild trout in the prettiest places ever since. That it was Joe the barber and a Royal Wulff that unlocked such a passion still amazes me. Over the years, I fished with Joe, and he even made me a couple of fly rods. Eventually I moved away from home, but we kept in contact, trading stories and photos over email now and then.

What Joe doesn't know is that every spring since that outing, I've made a point of catching a native brookie on a Royal Wulff. There are other flies I use more often, but watching a Royal Wulff float down a run to be intercepted by a brookie helps me grasp, for a moment, the feeling of that first fish and my friendship with the man who tied flies in his barbershop.



# RADIO DAYS

by KEITH McCAFFERTY photograph by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

**Radio reception wasn't as clear as it would have been up the hill, but I managed to hear Freddie Freeman hit a walk-off grand slam to beat the Yankees in Game 1. "There is a God!" I shouted.**

NOTHING WAS LEFT of the boxcar but ash and a few bits of charred wood. If you didn't already know about it, and the wildfires that had claimed it, you'd have no reason to think a boxcar had ever stood here. I had heard about the fire through the steelhead grapevine and thought I was prepared, yet still I felt the loss.

For a half dozen years, my son and I had rendezvoused at the mouth of the Deschutes River in late October and pedaled bicycles laden with camping gear 7 miles into the canyon, where a 1930s boxcar stood on long-abandoned train tracks. We would pitch our tent on the riverbank, then climb up the steep hill to the boxcar, where we could cook dinner out of the rain or its ever-present threat. We'd play cards using a deck with pinup-girl artwork that someone had placed in the rafters.

Listening to the World Series on a transistor radio was a challenge, but it was mandatory to try, as the Fall Classic had become part of the ritual of coming here. There was so much static that we seldom caught a full inning—just a pitch count here, a run there—while the great white eyes of diesel locomotives thundered up the far side of the canyon, illuminating ghostly trees.

It was an annual late-October trip that had come to mean more than fishing, and Tom had looked forward to it as much as I did. He wouldn't say much, but he grinned every time he caught my eye, as if to say, *Life doesn't get any better*. The fact that he had once caught a 15-pound steelhead here might have contributed to his smile. Words weren't really necessary.

But this year he had unavoidable family obligations, leaving no one for me to commiserate with over the loss of the boxcar. Was its fate really the death of a tradition? Despite the charred landscape, an angler who stood with the blackened canyon walls at his back might reasonably assume that nothing had changed. After all, the river was still here, a roaring rope of rapids shot

through with bubbles and climbed by steelhead still silver from the sea. Those fish ran to 20 pounds. It was the fish that had first drawn me here, when having a son to share the water with was a far-off prospect, at best.

While I sat and thought about matters that are as deep as rivers, as I have a tendency to do, I felt the tickle of a praying mantis walking onto to my hand. I shook her off.

"Go kill your husband," I said.

I got up and hiked down to the tent I'd pitched on the way in. It was still evening, so I strung up my Spey rod for a few last casts before dark. Nothing doing, but this was steelhead fishing. If you needed to feel the rod bend with any regularity, then you'd chosen the wrong sport. *Sport* may not be an adequate word to describe what for some is an obsession, or a calling. Whatever your definition for a pursuit that spurs such devotion, the basic technique tends toward tedium.

Cast, mend, take two steps down-river, cast again. Try not to fall in. The steelhead shuffle, seldom interrupted by steelhead.

The plus side of bad weather and a low return on effort is that it clears the banks of fishermen who just want to enjoy a pleasant afternoon. It leaves the water for those of us who don't mind the silent stretches, who, in fact, are drawn to them. This includes a tribe of young Turks with their beadheads and bobbers, and a cult of old hippies who spend their

autumns painting masterpieces in the air with the waving of 15-foot rods, and who see nothing odd about resorting to the occasional mind-altering substance.

I had anticipated the loss of the boxcar's roof by packing a small tarp. Radio reception wasn't as clear as it would have been up the hill, but I managed to hear Freddie Freeman hit a walk-off grand slam to beat the Yankees in Game 1.

"There is a God!" I shouted, which started the coyotes tuning up on the far bank. Zipping up my sleeping bag, I had a good feeling, and in the morning, I was negotiating the slippery boulders that studded the run below camp when I felt a pluck. As the current was flowing with drowned leaves, any one of which could have snagged the hook, I didn't get my hopes up.

Protocol with a player is to make the same cast and then back up and tie on a smaller fly. Wait a minute or two, then work back down to where you felt the fish. Sometimes it works. This wasn't one of them. As Winston Churchill said of Russia, "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." He might well have been talking about steelhead.

"Tom, where are you?" I asked aloud. "I've got one all but wrapped up with a ribbon."

Children raise their own kids, make their own traditions, often not knowing they are traditions. It's the way life goes. My son could not be expected to drop everything to fish at his old man's beck and call. I had known that pedaling up the canyon. But with luck we would find other rivers on which to swing a fly, make shelters against other storms, even find sufficient reception to catch another ball game or two.

I tied on a fresh fly and sent it out across the river, searching autumn leaves for gold.



What better place to listen to the Fall Classic than on the banks of a storied steelhead river?



# “CHEERS, A\*#HOLE!”

by WILL BRANTLEY photograph by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

**M**Y FOLKS KEPT massive bags of cheap dog food in the furnace closet, and when we were little, my brother, Matt, and I were tasked daily with scooping up pounds of the stuff to feed our pups. All of the scooping was done with the same yellow Rubbermaid coffee cup, which was kept in one of the bags. I don't know where the cup came from; it was probably an antique then and is surely one today, now that Matt and I are middle-aged and enjoying a tradition of stealing the cup from one another, usually during deer season.

Dad's last bird dog died when I was in my early 20s, which was also about the time Matt left home for college. The yellow cup remained behind but moved mysteriously over the years, from the dog-food bags to the back of Mom's cabinet and then onto a table in our old and abandoned hunting cabin. It sat there for a decade, gathering cobwebs and mouse turds, as if awaiting a destiny.

One winter, maybe 15 years ago, Matt had driven in from his home in South Carolina to hunt the final days of Kentucky's late muzzleloader season,

a bleak and desolate time to be in the woods. He stepped into the old cabin to warm up and noticed the yellow cup sitting there, like a single vibrant object in an otherwise black-and-white painting. He walked over, picked it up, and stuffed it into his pack.

Later that night, back at my house, Matt produced the cup—which I assume he had cleaned out—and poured a splash of whiskey into it. I instantly recognized the yellow relic from our childhood, with its faint smell of Ol' Roy dog food

“Where in the hell did you find that?” I asked. Matt took a slow sip and smacked his lips, clearly pleased both by the taste of the liquor and the vessel that carried it.

“Brother, finding this old cup was better than killing a buck that you missed,” he said. “I'm taking it home.”

But he did not take it home because, after we'd both gotten a little liquored up, I swiped the cup from his pack. A couple of nights after he drove back to South Carolina, I poured my own splash of whiskey into the yellow cup, took a picture of it, and sent it to Matt with the caption “Cheers, asshole!”

The cup went missing from my cabinet the next time Matt was in for a visit during deer season, and then I stole it back when I went to visit him. Our game has rules, albeit fluid ones, including that the keeper of the cup has to use it in plain sight when the other brother is visiting, but also that the cup can only be stolen when the keeper is present but his guard is down. Since the cup is used almost exclusively for drinking straight bourbon whiskey, it's rarely a problem to catch the keeper's guard down.

I don't always enjoy being the keeper of the cup, though. Every time I see the thing, it reminds me that there are months between hunting seasons, that my brother lives a long way away, and that it's been a long time since we fed the dogs. On the other hand, the cup is bright and yellow and good at sitting there, for years if required, until it's needed for another toast.



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## THE BOYS FROM WEDNESDAY NIGHT

by SHAYE BAKER

**T**EN O'CLOCK on a school night is awfully late for a 10-year-old to be out bass fishing. But Mama couldn't take any more badgering and finally caved. As long as my grades didn't drop, I could go with Dad on Wednesday nights to throw \$30 in the pot and duke it out with his buddies at the Middle Pond.

Start time was 6 p.m., which in late spring and early summer meant roughly two hours of fishing in the sunlight and two hours in the dark. As a boy, I fared better in the daytime, only hanging up in a tree every third cast or so. Once it got dark, all bets were off. Still, Dad often caught enough to win the pot for both of us.

As I got older, I contributed more. Dad would often set me up with a big-fish bait and turn me loose to get one good bite, while he fished a variety of offerings for both size and number. My personal best at the Middle Pond came during a Wednesday tourney a few years ago—a largemouth a little over 8 pounds. Dad has caught several there that size, and even a few double-digit fish were weighed in decades ago.

But some of the most memorable things to happen had nothing to do with fish. One year, Tiny ran over a rattlesnake on his way to the ramp. Assuming the thing was dead, he tossed it into his boat to show us when he arrived. But once he got there, Lazarus the snake woke up and slithered into the bowels of his boat where we couldn't locate it.

Tiny, all 6-plus feet and 300-ish pounds of him, wasn't going to let that stop him. He set sail at 6 p.m. and fished clear through until 10, in the pitch black, without so much as a flashlight, to my recollection. After weigh-in, we finally spotted the snake deep in the bottom of Tiny's boat. Dad snagged the serpent with a treble hook and wrangled it out. We got home a little late that school night.

It may have been before or after that—I can't remember—when Tiny's arm was accidentally shot off. I mention it only because we had another one-armed Wednesday-nighter, Coach Waters, who had a coaching job of some sort at the

local high school and taught an elective on jig making—jigs, I'm pretty sure, he sold at our tourneys.

One night, Tiny and Coach had the bright idea to team up. Before they got started, Coach warned us: "If we have a good bag on the way in, look out, 'cause we'll be high-fiving and that means nobody's driving."

That was Coach. He's since passed, as have many of the old boys that started up the Wednesday-nighters. All but one, really. My dad. I get about as excited to go with him now, at 38, as I did when I was

10, the two of us waiting anxiously for the shotgun start, when all the boats drop the hammer on their throttles simultaneously. On the surface, we're all looking to win a couple hundred bucks and to bank some respect. But it's new memories we're all really after—memories to add to those that linger all around us as we idle at 5:55 p.m., brought back by the smell of two-stroke exhaust hanging in the air.

Even as I write this, I can't wait to go—to head out with Dad and meet the boys from Wednesday night. Hope to see y'all out there next week.



TOM MARTINEAU/WILDFRONT IMAGES (bass); courtesy of SHAYE BAKER (angler)

# FAMILY TIES

by HAL HERRING

**I remember waking up to birdsong there in the cool gloom of the cottonwoods, everyone still fast asleep, and feeling that all was right with the world, that the game had been won, at least for that moment.**

the Marias is famed for, shorts plastered with mud, mud castles and mud battles and mud games of tag and mud races, and mud dried to gray-white powder on the tanned skin of arms and legs and faces.

Nowadays when I remember those trips, I recall the slow fall of night on that mudbank, the white disks of light thrown by the hissing Coleman lanterns, the rods bowing slightly with the current. The three kids would try to stay up as late as they could but would descend, one by one, from youngest to oldest, to the earth, to fall asleep on beach towels or camping pads, warm in sweatshirts with the hoods pulled up, like exhausted gnomes. Above the lantern light, the stars emerged and flickered in the immensity of the heavens. At some point in the night, we'd pack up and drive to our base camp a few miles upriver, set up mostly by Holly with a table and chairs, a stove and cutting board and firepit, and a big tent with a luxurious and orderly array of sleeping bags and pillows. I remember waking up to birdsong there in the cool gloom of the cottonwoods, everyone still fast asleep, and feeling that all was right with the world, that the game had been won, at least for that moment.

The only constant in our lives is change. Traditions change. Children grow older. Places dear to us become forever altered. Things, as Yeats wrote, fall apart.

In the high-water year of 2011, floodwaters laid down a wide fan of fine gravel and mud where the Marias met the implacable force of the Missouri, and by midsummer, the mouth of the river was shallow enough to wade across. Fish became scarce. Frog Island disappeared. The dirt road we drove to fish what we called the Catfish Hole on the main Missouri River was gated and closed with a shiny new lock and chain. Downriver, an eddy that had produced some big catches for us was filled with cottonwood logs and other snags. After losing almost every sinker, circle hook, and crawler cast there, we gave it up. My nephew Will, coming into his teens, found new diversions and summer jobs. Harold and Carol Ann became more self-sufficient and had commitments of their own. Years came and went, and though I sometimes fished the Missouri and the Marias alone, the summer family camping trips were over.

Then, one summer not long ago, things changed again. Carol Ann was home from college. Harold was in Montana getting ready to move to a ranch job in Nevada. He'd been going back to the Missouri, exploring stretches of the river we'd only touched upon. And he was catching fish, on big spoons and swimbaits instead of the catfish rigs we used when he was little.

We loaded up two canoes with coolers, rods, and tackle boxes. Harold and Carol Ann took one canoe, and I took the other, alone. (Their mother decided to leave this voyage to the serious anglers of the family.)

We were on the river just after first light, and when it warmed up enough, we beached the canoes and wade-fished the eddies and runs along the bank. Carol Ann took the biggest smallmouth of the day, in a barreling stretch of deeper water. There were pike, a sauger, freshwater drum. No one asked for help with tangled lines, and when lures snagged among the many rocks, the angler swam out and retrieved his or her own. The kids handled their canoe with a kind of buttery ease, through chutes and around rocks and

standing waves, seldom missing a promising pocket of fish-holding water, as I struggled with upstream winds and went broadside on a minor rapid.

By the end of the day, light waning fast, I was happily exhausted and worried about how far it might be to the takeout. I quit fishing and started paddling.

"There goes Dad," I heard Harold say. "He's all done with the fun."

"Yep," my daughter said. "That's it, kids. No more fun today!"

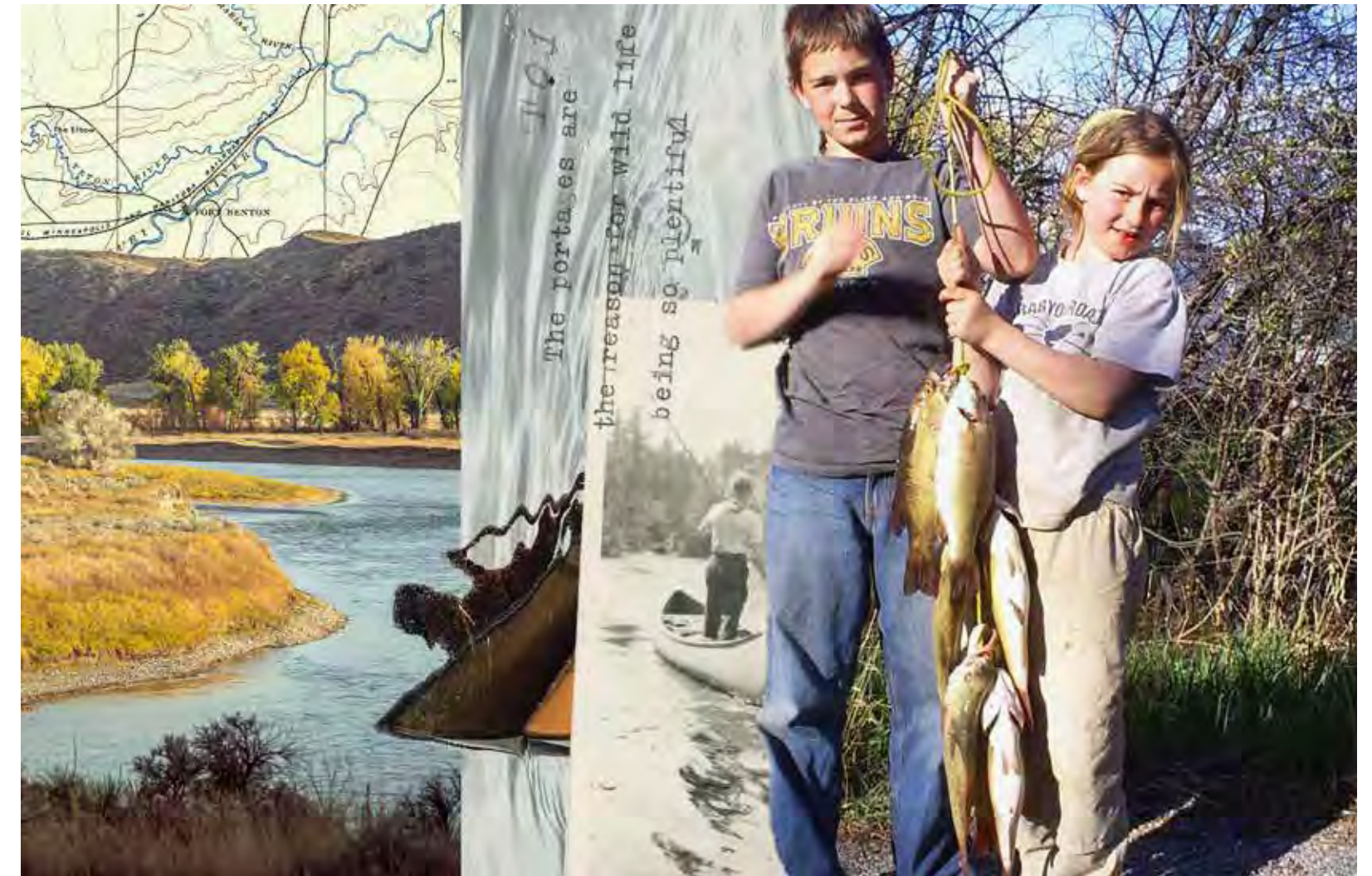
They dawdled, casting to what I admit were some awesome-looking eddies, and I could hear them laughing and shouting behind me as one of them hooked a fish.

It was long after dark when we met at the truck. The thickets of chokecherry and currants and cottonwoods along the

river's bluffs were spangled with tiny dots of luminescence—lightning bugs, thousands upon thousands of them, an extreme rarity in Montana. We marveled, tried to capture the phenomena on our phones. The Turnpike Troubadours blared from my son's truck as we tied down boats and stashed gear. The two of them were already planning another river trip, one of several days, and I was invited—but only if I could keep up, they joked. I thought of their children someday saying the same thing to them. I drove home alone, in happy silence, following their taillights through the night.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus claimed that "no man ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river, and he is not the same man."

Those words ring true to me. But there is a current that flows through our lives, too, whose beginning lies in childhood, like the wellspring of a mighty river. It begins when somebody shares what they love most in this world. In our case, my wife's and mine, it was the gift of rivers, of fish, night skies and freedom, and a life outside. Those summer days on the Marias when the kids were little and my wife and I were still young are gone. The islands we loved have long ago been swept away to form new land somewhere else; the channels we fished have been redrawn by scouring ice and cutting flood. But the traditions that we created there are not much different from the river itself—no matter how they change, they will outlast us all. *F&S*



TONY BYNUM (river); DORENE HOOKEY/CAVAN IMAGES (canoe); courtesy of HAL HERRING (kids)

# OF MICE & MADMEN



WHEN THE AUTHOR AND HIS BUDS FIRST STARTED MOUSING FOR BROWNS AT NIGHT, EVERYONE THOUGHT THEY WERE CRAZY. A DECADE LATER, THE PAYOFF ISN'T ALL THE HONKER TROUT THEY'VE LANDED. IT'S THE MEMORIES

by JOE CERMELE  
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HERE COMES A TIME in every man's life when he can no longer eat spicy Italian sausage with sautéed hot peppers at 2 in the morning. Or at least, he *shouldn't*. But the only way to confirm this sad milestone is to tempt fate one more time. So that's what I did in the summer of 2024. My head hit the pillow at 3:15 a.m., and by 4:30, I was rifling through cabinets by the light of my cell phone, stumbling around the guide shack of my friend, outfitter Joe Demalderis, desperate for Tums, Pepto—hell, even a box of baking soda—anything to counteract the battery acid boiling in my stomach and the fire charring the base of my throat. Eventually, I found an expired Alka-Seltzer that mostly quelled the violence, but it was a tossy-turny night at mouse camp.

Now, driving the last mile to Demalderis's place on New York's Upper Delaware River in August 2025, I'm still debating if it was worth it. The problem is that some of my fondest memories of the past decade are of those post-float cookouts. We'd return from the river bleary-eyed, often cold, starving, and teetering on delirium after hours of chucking mouse flies into the darkness and fog. Yet somehow we'd rally. I'd start the charcoal at 1 a.m. Demalderis would make a martini, and I'd crack a beer with whichever of our buddies happened to be with us that year. Some of the best conversations—rarely about fishing—happened in those early-morning hours.

But when I walk through the door for my 11th year of mouse camp, I suggest to Demalderis—at risk of missing out on more predawn memories—that we eat before we hit the river so we can go to bed as soon as we get back. He agrees. Part of the dynamic will now be forever changed, but not the part that matters most. It would take a lot more than heartburn to shut down our annual mousecapades.

#### NEW NORMAL

Demalderis and his guides have been fishing at night here for so long now that when we arrive at the put-in just shy of 9 p.m., nobody bats an eye. His shuttle driver is already here, accustomed to working a little later when a night mission is scheduled. The anglers taking out after a long daytime float give me a wave as I slide on my waders and strap on a headlamp.

"Mousing tonight?" one faceless voice in the dark asks.

"Yup," I reply. "Gonna give it a shot."

Pete Horger, a tall, mustachioed, quick-witted 29-year-old who is one of the newest guides under Demalderis's umbrella, is joining us. He runs plenty of mouse trips during summer, so he's com-

fortable rowing the West Branch of the Delaware in the dark. There is so much interest in this style of fishing these days that Demalderis needs a few guides willing to do it, but that wasn't always the case. The first time he and I ever made this trip, his shuttle driver said we were nuts. I questioned my own sanity at the time.

At 69, Demalderis, or Joe D., as I call him, is 26 years my senior, but his energy and drive to fish evaporate the gap. Since the day I first met him, in 2010, I've admired—and envied—his let's-just-see-what-happens attitude. Not once have I seen him rattled on a fishing trip, whether we were struggling to catch browns on streamers in the snow or his truck was buried to the axles in the swamps of Jersey during a pike trip. Unlike me, he is not prone to fits of rage and cussing over the slightest goof or obstacle. So in 2014, when I proposed we float the Upper Delaware in the dead of night, throwing nothing but mouse flies, *and* that we film the whole thing, he didn't hesitate.

"Only one way to find out if it'll work," he said. "I'm in."

Of course, brown trout have been eating mouse patterns on the surface since fly fishing was invented, but it wasn't a trendy thing to do at the time. In fact, when I popped into a local fly shop on my way to meet Demalderis that summer, the stoner kid behind the counter laughed out loud when I asked for mouse patterns.

"So, wait," he said. "You're going to put a drift boat on this river and run it in the dark?"

"That's the plan," I told him.

"Good luck with that," he said.

But I didn't need luck, because I had Joe D. He'd already been guiding the Upper Delaware for more than 20 years. He'd run the main stem and its branches so many times, he could do it with his

eyes closed. He also didn't baby his boat and didn't care if we bumped and scraped a little. So off we went, Demalderis on the oars; me and my good friend, Jim Fee, in casting positions; a camcorder; a cobbled-together pile of mouse flies, including mostly big, bushy patterns designed for largemouth bass; and a prayer.

The result was one of the most-watched episodes of *Hook Shots*, my old *Field & Stream* web show. Despite Demalderis's ability to navigate in the dark by looking at treetops and listening to the water, we still ran aground a bunch. We got bites but few connections at first. We fished from dusk to dawn, made up new mouse patterns on the fly, and fished past the point of exhaustion for three nights straight. But by the last, we'd gotten dialed—or maybe just lucky. The climax was all three of us wailing on 17- to 22-inch browns. It was so incredible, such an addicting bite, that Demalderis and I vowed to carve out time to mouse for browns at night every year—and we haven't missed one since.

#### DARK FORCES

As we shove off, still digesting our early dinner, Horger and I use the last glimmer of light to make a few warm-up casts. By the time we reach the first good piece of water around the bend, it's pitch black. Demalderis deftly eases us into the long pool as our eyes adjust. From here on out, we're casting from memory, using mental maps drawn over years to visualize the laydowns, cut banks, and soft pockets we know are out there but can't see.

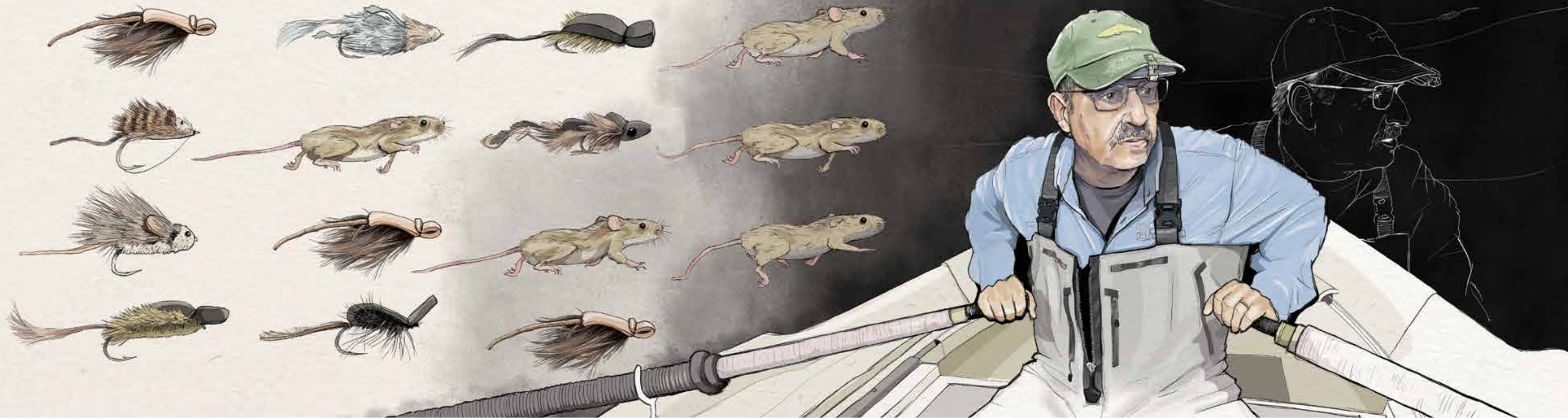
Within a mile of the put-in, I break the ice when an 18-inch brown slurps my fly along a steep bank. I hear the splash and feel the line jolt simultaneously. We flick on our headlamps and their beams cut through the dark. Seconds later, the fish is thrashing in the net. Since Horger is in the front of the boat and I'm in the back, I start giving him a hard time immediately.

"Did you not want this one?" I ask.

Sticking a trout right out of the gate—*any* trout—is key because it keeps you engaged for the rest of the float. If one fish is looking up, more should be, though it's never a guarantee.

A lot of what people think about mousing is wrong. It's sexy to sell the idea that if you commit to an all-nighter, you're increasing the odds of hooking the unicorn 28-incher that only comes out for a feed while fly anglers are nestled in their lodge beds. That's debatable and not





our motivation. It's more about the challenge. You're relying on feel and sound only. You're estimating your cast length to touch down close to the bank but not get hung. It's Jedi stuff, and if you're into using the Force, the reward isn't the caliber of what you connect to but simply making the connection. In 10 years of mouse camp, I've hooked only one fish on the Upper Delaware I couldn't stop. The hook ended up pulling, and I think about it every time we're in the pool where it happened. I try to convince myself it was an errant striped bass, but Joe D. has never stopped reminding me that it was likely the biggest brown of my life. More commonly, though, we're catching 16- to 19-inch trout and hoping for a couple that break 20 inches. That's the same thing you're after here during daylight—you and everybody else.

Like most great wild trout rivers, the Upper Delaware and its branches get pounded. The proximity to New York, Philadelphia, and all the 'burbs in between have always made it crowded, but then social distancing during COVID took it to another level. The joke now is that by late July, these trout know not only that your dry fly is a fake but also which shop you bought it from. When the sun goes down, on the other hand, and the dry-

fly hopefuls go home, the fish drop their guard. Suddenly, this world-class piece of water is all yours and the trout play by a different set of rules.

Not long after I catch the 18-incher, we drift into one of the most well-known pools in the system. Even from the road that flanks the river, the spot screams, "FISH!" Guides anchor their drift boats here day after day, looking for rising trout. It's a frustrating place because you know it's loaded, but it's often fickle. I could count on two hands the number of daylight sippers I've yanked from it in over a decade, but on the right night, it'll confirm what you've always guessed.

Horger pulls the next brown trout from the top of that pool. Seconds later, one slashes at my mouse fly but misses. As we slip our way down the stretch, there's no bad place to cast—any direction has potential because, as we learned long ago, fish that are holed-up during the day cruise around at night like great whites in seal territory. We leave the spot with four more browns to 20 inches in the net, then Horger plucks our last less than a half mile from the take-out. It's not a giant, but it backs up our faith in what's become "last-chance bank" on this stretch—if it was a grind, it's your final

hope, and if it was fire, you can almost always rely on a closer here.

The nights of drifting 8 or more miles before taking out have been over for some time. Now we float short and linger in hotspots, and if it plumb sucks, we're done faster. It bothers me that we engineer it this way now, but while the passion for catching browns at night is still strong, the willingness to *not* catch them all night has left the building. At least that's true for Demalderis and me. I'm sure young buck Horger would go till sunup.

#### NEW MEMORIES

At 43, I wake up at 7:30 a.m. whether I go to bed at 8 p.m. or at false dawn. So as with drinking, if I want to really get after it on the water now, I must accept that it will take me two extra days to recover. Demalderis is still comfortable rowing, but casting for too long wrecks his shoulder. Many of my old friends who used to join us are mired in midlife and can't break free anymore. As we get older, mouse camp changes with us. I've made a lot of great new friends, like Horger, over the years because there's an open seat, though, and what matters is that we keep stitching new memories to the long mouse-camp chain. Some revolve around fish, but increas-

ingly, it's the little idiosyncratic highs and lows along the way that stick in our heads.

There was the time we picked up guide Anita Coulton under a bridge at 10 p.m. She'd been eating at a local bar after parting ways with her clients from the day. Demalderis and I had already floated 3 miles without a touch. Coulton—casting from the rear position—wasn't in the boat 5 minutes before nonchalantly sticking a fat 22-inch brown. It was the biggest dark-ops trout she'd ever caught. Funny thing is, I can't tell you much about the fish; what I remember is how damned pumped she was. I have no recollection of what else happened that night.

Nor do I remember if the action was good or bad the first time our friend Mike Sudal came to mouse camp. All I can see now is the image in Joe D.'s side-view mirror of his trailer wheel about to wobble off at 1 a.m. as we returned to the shack. We left the boat at a shuttered gas station and carried on to the sausage, peppers, and brews. What else could we do at that hour?

On night two of our 2025 trip, we are only a few hundred yards downriver with guide Bill Longstreet in the back of the boat when he blurts out, "We might be sinking." One of the drain plugs hasn't been properly tightened, requiring a

quick shimmy to the bank and some heaving and strategic leaning to get the boat on an angle so it can drain.

By the time this summer's mouse camp rolls around, we probably won't even discuss the hefty 21-incher Longstreet whacks after we put back in, or the wide, hook-jawed 22-incher that smashes my fly right next to the boat. It'll be the drain plug. Or the random walleye that grabs Joe D.'s fly. Or our pulling over at a drop location where one of Longstreet's coworkers graciously stashed a bag of McDonald's because there was no time for him to grab dinner between saying goodbye to his clients and hopping aboard with us. His Quarter Pounder smells amazing, and Demalderis and I are sorry that we already ate. There's no more action during the rest of our second and final float, but I'm already wondering for next year whether a Grubhub driver would deliver to the river.

Back at the shack, Demalderis and I have one drink each purely out of obligation, and I instantly doze off in the recliner under a faded, dusty northern pike mount from the 1940s, which has become one of my favorite places to sit in the entire world. Eventually, I move to a bedroom where Demalderis has put

me up for years, and where I've enjoyed some of the most restful sleep I've ever had, tucked in a sleeping bag on an old bed with the window cracked open to let in the chilly Catskills air. At least, I did back when I could actually sleep in. Now I'm up early with Joe D., chugging cups of black Cafe Bustelo. Those used to go really well with cigarettes, but we both gave those up years ago, along with wondering if the trout would eat like crazy right before sunup.

The good cookout conversations just shift to good coffee-and-breakfast conversations, in between our groaning about sore joints and being so tired. I'll be even more exhausted when I get home later, but in a matter of days I'll start missing this place and longing to come back again. Much like the tradition of celebrating a holiday at a certain family member's house, mouse camp is not mouse camp without Demalderis and a stay at his guide shack, so I'm in as long as he's in. I'll just keep showing up every summer with Pepcid, Advil, and maybe my slippers, because even in summer your feet can get kind of cold, you know? Oh, and sausage and peppers. Turns out that as long as it's before put-in instead of after take-out, I can still eat them. For now. F&S



# THE SCHOOLHOUSE BOYS

FOR MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, THESE MICHIGAN MEN HAVE GATHERED EVERY NOVEMBER TO HUNT, TELL STORIES, FLASH THEIR DEER-HUNTING BONA FIDES—AND HOLD ON TO THEIR BOND FOR AS LONG AS THEY CAN



IT'S NEARLY NIGHT as I pull into the yard of a little house off a gravel road in central Michigan, two days before the gun deer opener. Ernie Chernoby and Pete Vanderloon, both in their 70s, are standing outside as if they've been waiting for me. Only they haven't. "We were just heading into town for dinner," says Ernie. "C'mon, let's eat." I offer to drive, and they pile into my rental, but Pete, who looks to be a good 6-foot-5, is seriously cramped even in the front, knees riding just below his chin. It's not a posture conducive to maintaining one's dignity. "Might take the truck next time," he says.

The pub, Schuberg's, is a classic that's been in business since 1933 and still has what must be its original wooden bar, worn and warped in a way that comes only from generations of elbows and

spilled beer. Like every soul here, Ernie and Pete are wearing jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots. But all eyes are on them the moment they enter the place. It's less than 60 seconds before a bearded man

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**A red buffalo-plaid jacket with a half century of hunting patches attracts attention.**

approaches to say he's a lifelong hunter too. Others just seem to want to slap them on the back. A woman on her way to the restroom stops behind Ernie and stares, for the better part of a minute, at his back, reading carefully. He's aware of her but says nothing. He knows the drill. A red buffalo-plaid jacket with a half century of hunting patches attracts attention. It's the price of fame.

**OLD SCHOOL**

After dinner, we head back to the house, a modest two-story clapboard building a few miles northeast of Big Rapids, a dwindling small town not to be confused with Grand Rapids, which is 25 times bigger and 56 miles south. The rest of the crew shows up by ones and twos throughout the next day—Ernie's brothers Jim and Nick, Bob Dalrymple, Tim Tolpo, and a few friends and relatives. There are six original members in camp this fall, down a few from recent years.

They call themselves the Schoolhouse Boys, because that's what the current house was when the county built it back in 1899. In the beginning, or as Ernie says, "Back when we had hair," he and some buddies would come up to this part of Mecosta County, camp out in Army-surplus tents, and chase whitetails. "Boy, it was cold some years," Ernie says. "You'd freeze your ass off. But we were young. We didn't care. Had a lot more deer then."

One cold day, Ernie approached the woman who lived in the old schoolhouse at the time. She was the grandmother of Casey, one of his hunting buddies and an original Schoolhouse Boy, who passed in 2022. The garage had a woodstove, and she said they could stay there and that she'd make them something to eat if they'd split wood for her. "Boy, she didn't have to ask us twice," Ernie remembers.

After the woman passed, Ernie bought the house for \$13,000 so they'd all have a place to stay. He doesn't charge his buddies, but they usually chip in to help pay the taxes. The house has plumbing and electric now, but the original three-holer remains in the backyard. "I still use it," Pete says. "Leave the door open, take the middle seat, and wave to people as they drive by. Just for the nostalgia."

As each hunter arrives, he carries his patch jacket on a hanger, which mystifies me at first. Then I realize that they're not hunting jackets at all. They're really for public display on solemn occasions, such as a visit to a pub. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources started awarding the patches—rectangular, square, circular, triangular—to hunters back in 1972. Each one displays the year and the deer-themed design that won the annual competition. They grab your eye, for sure, but there's also something about the patches—maybe it's the embossed stitching—that makes you want to reach out and touch them.



**Previous spread**

From left, Pete Vanderloon, Ernie Chernoby, Jim Chernoby, Bob Dalrymple, Nick Chernoby, and Tim Tolpo show off their patch jackets and a wall full of trophy mounts at the schoolhouse deer camp.

**Right**

Ernie Chernoby, who bought the camp in 1992, steps onto the front porch on the eve of opening day.

**Opposite:**

Clockwise from top left: Jim Chernoby's jacket has 25 deer patches on the front alone; a 2018 "cooperator" patch; Dalrymple's jacket—he got a late start collecting patches, which just means plenty of room to add more; an up-close look at the embossed stitching.





Most of the patches read **SUCCESSFUL DEER HUNTER**, but for a few years the DNR pulled their punches in the name of political correctness, and the patches from those years read **SUCCESSFUL WILDLIFE COOPERATOR**. The guys—to the surprise of absolutely no one—aren't big fans. "Yeah," one tells me of his 2012 patch, "I cooperated the hell out of a 6-pointer that year." Back in those days, you had to earn your patch by checking in a deer, which allowed the DNR to gather data to monitor the herd. In Ernie's case, it took him five years to earn his second patch. That's why they matter. Nowadays you can order all the patches you want off the state website, at eight bucks a pop. When I ask Pete about this, his eyes close halfway and his head shakes side to side exactly once. It may be the most telling gesture I've seen in my life—the despair and resignation of an old-school man who finds himself adrift in a world run by morons.

The day before the opener is low-key, and we spend part of it trying to figure out the microwave. Four of us, all aged 70 or better, stand around pushing various combinations of its 24 buttons—from Delay to Start to Baked Potato. Our combined 280 years of technical know-how is no match for the thing. Finally somebody suggests trying Cook Time before pressing Start, and the machine jolts awake and permits us to warm coffee. It's a lucky guess.

Ernie has asked each guy to bring his best deer mounts for a group photo, and the garage is now completely full of heads. Many of the mounts are from other states, particularly Indiana, where many of the Schoolhouse Boys go when they get the itch for big antlers. There's a little good-natured ribbing about whose deer is biggest, but everyone knows that too much depends on luck for anyone to think his big buck makes him a great hunter.

The talk of antlers and luck seems to wake everyone up to the fact that tomorrow is the opener. After dinner, Ernie disappears and returns to hand me his Ruger 44 Magnum carbine. It's light, at about 6 pounds, and fast, with an 18½-inch barrel and the power to knock any deer down at modest ranges. Topped with a fixed 4X Bushnell scope, it's an American classic for heavy woods—basic, simple, unimprovable. "Got it for \$100 back in the day," he says. "They quit making them 40 years ago. Wish I'd bought a dozen."

"Cool gun," I say.

"Glad you like it," Ernie says. "It's yours to use in the morning."

#### BOYS WILL BE BOYS

At dawn, the 44 and I slip down the road all of 150 yards from the house, turn into the woods and stalk through a belt of pines in the dark. I cross an overgrown field and set up against a tree in some mixed hardwoods downwind of a couple of big scrapes. Over the course of the morning, I hear six or eight distant shots and see absolutely nothing. I feel like there are plenty of deer around but also like the local whitetail IQ is through the roof. It's pushing 60 degrees by late morning, which doesn't help. The afternoon hunt is the same, only warmer. It's not often the boys get blanked on the opener, but it's not unheard of. One of the upsides of a long frame of reference is that nobody seems bothered by this morning's skunking.

Back at camp, Ernie takes me through some of the hundreds of photos from over the decades, pinned up on bulletin boards, from which dangle several silver cartridges on necklace chains. "That's Casey," he says, pointing at an image. "Great guy. You would have loved him." After Casey passed, his daughter had some of his ashes put into pistol cartridges for the Schoolhouse Boys. He says it's not the same without Casey—or Billy and Johnny. Everybody loved Billy, he tells me. "We looked up to him as kids. He had hair like Elvis—you know, a big wave in it. Johnny was a diehard hunter. And Casey would eat Thanksgiving dinner early and fast, just gobble it up so he and his boys could get up here early and hunt that afternoon."

Tim Tolpo, a long-haired retired special-ed teacher, was the first to get a patch. "This was 1974, over near Newaygo where we used to hunt," he tells me. "My buddy says, 'Let me take your auto shotgun and you take my carbine, and I'll scare you up a deer.' So he goes down into the bottom and half an hour later here comes this buck, a 6-pointer." Tim bagged the deer, loaded it up, and left. "I'm driving down the road when I hear on the radio that the DNR will give you a patch if you bring your deer to the check station, which is pretty close by." So Tim gets his patch—with artwork showing an 8-pointer looking straight out of the yellow background, with the year in brown type—then heads back to the cabin. "All the guys immediately start giving me grief. 'We didn't think the Boy Scouts would let you in!' By the next year, there are two or three guys who've decided to



**Above**  
Ernie Chernoby's scoped Ruger 44 Magnum rests on a recliner on the schoolhouse's screen porch, ready to be carried into the deer woods.

**Facing**  
Ernie hands a 20-gauge slug to his grandson Clay Inman as the two load up before hitting the timber for an afternoon hunt.



become Boy Scouts too. It just snowballed from there. It's been a lot of fun."

Tim was also the first to bring a muzzleloader to the Schoolhouse. He was sighting it in behind the house when a guest asked to try the gun. "He sets up and aims at this old falling-apart trailer back in the woods. He shoots and there's this huge *boom*, scared everybody. Turns out that he hit a propane tank nobody knew was there, and the thing goes pinwheeling up into a maple and rips all the branches off. After that, nobody wanted to shoot that gun."

It's easy, hanging around these mild old men, to think they've always been this way. But then I see a yellowed newspaper clipping pinned up with the photos and Tim says, "Oh, that. December 24, 1966." What happened was that Tim, Jim, and Bob were in a car cruising around at night the way young men do. "It was a Chevy. Had one of those old *ah-ooga* horns, and this cop isn't crazy about it, so he starts to pull us over. But somebody tells Dick, the driver, to get the hell out of there, which he does." So the cop is chasing them

down a snowy highway, and they're going 90 miles an hour, approaching a train track, and the train is coming. "At which point, Dick decides to do a high-speed 180, which he mostly pulls off, except the train slices into the back of the car like a can opener." Eventually, more police join the chase, catch up to the boys, cuff them, and take them in. "But not before one of them punches me so hard that he knocks me out of my shoes and breaks my collarbone." Tim relates all of this like he's talking about driving to the drugstore.

Me, I'm flabbergasted. These guys are nuts, or were. I ask what happened after they were caught. "Not much," says Tim. Dick got fined \$100 and spent four weekends in jail. Jim and Bob were each fined \$44. "And I was just 16, a minor, so all I got was a warning and a busted collarbone." He shrugs. "We were just dumb kids."

#### ATTENDANCE RECORD

The next day is cooler, and Ernie and I go to a pull-off near the lake. We walk all of 25 yards before he tells me to hunt a spot where the road bends up a hill and there's

an overgrown field that borders a stand of heavier woods. "They can come from anywhere here," he tells me. "You can either sit tight or stalk." I pick out a tree, make a small pile of brush to break up my outline, and sit. Trying to stalk someplace I've never been before sounds like an easy way to get busted, so I stay put. I'm ready, with the carbine on my knee and good shooting lanes, but nothing shows. Ernie returns in a few hours and says he didn't see anything either.

We're about to head back to camp when Ernie checks in with one of the guys and hears that his son-in-law, Matt, has killed a doe near us. We walk over to see if he needs help dragging, which is mostly good manners, since Matt is stronger than the two of us put together. Back at camp, everyone is there to see the deer, pat Matt on the back, and hear the story. Which leads to more stories. Tim already told me about the group's first patch, so I ask the rest of the guys there to tell me the stories behind their first or favorite patches, or their favorite deer. Here's what they tell me:



#### Facing, top

Eric Vanderloon, Jim and Ernie Chernoby, and Eric's dad, Pete, relax at the kitchen table, discussing plans for the morning's hunt.

#### Above

A pegboard is plastered with photos, each one a memory from decades of outdoor adventures.

#### Right

Not every patch goes on a jacket. This lamp, made by Pete Vanderloon, has nine, plus a wooden base studded with shotgun slugs, rifle cartridges, and lead round balls.





### ERNIE

I was just down the road, not far from where you were hunting. Had a little pup-tent blind that I set up in the dark. About first light, I hear something coming through the corn behind me and crossing the road. Well, that deer started running, and danged if it didn't plow right into my blind and run off. It must've thought it was a bush or something. It stopped after 30 yards to look back, and that's when I put two shots into him with the 44 you had this morning. Nice 8-point too. Sometimes their own curiosity gets the best of them.



### JIM

My first patch was in 1976. I was hunting some gas lines with a lot of popple trees around. Pete saw a buck and shot but didn't hit it. But then another buck comes out of the trees. I had my 870 with slugs, just a 19- or 20-inch barrel. Improved cylinder. Anyway, I put a couple into him, but he ran off. So I ran after him, trying to reload on the run, dropping shells. Finally, he went down and I got two more in him. Ernie and Pete showed up saying they'd never heard so much shooting in their lives, but I got my buck.



### PETE

I got my first patch when I was probably 28, not long after the patches had come out. I was hunting thick woods with a .54-caliber Thompson Center muzzleloader that I'd built from a kit. As I'm walking out, a doe with a buck behind shows up. I can hear the doe eating. Finally the buck comes out of the brush to where I could put my crosshairs on its chest. I shoot, and it runs halfway up a hill and topples over. A 6-pointer. I had to drag it out of the woods by myself, and I was so exhausted I couldn't lift it into the car. I'd get it just about all the way in, and it'd slide out again. I finally managed it though.



### NICK

My favorite deer is my first. Our dad would take Jim and Ernie up to hunt my uncle's place. I was too young and would cry myself to sleep after they left. Finally, at 12, I was old enough. The three of us shared a twin bed in that house. I shot a spikehorn with my dad's Savage Model 99. Not knowing how to dress a deer, I cut a small hole in its stomach and started pulling out intestines. Then this other hunter comes along and says, "Whatsa matter? You never shot a deer before?" I said no. So he gutted my deer for me. That was 1968. It wasn't until '79 that I got my first patch—for a 3-pointer, from just across the road.

Bob isn't handy to tell his story after the second morning's hunt, but I catch up to him later. "I was kind of late to the show," he says. "My first was in 1984 or '85. Ernie's daughter, April, and I had gone out by the little lake across the street. It was getting dark when I saw this shadow out in front of us. I looked a bit longer, realized it was a deer, and dropped it with one shot. She got one the same size. And I got my patch."

It's obvious—and has been since I first arrived—that these men are proud of their patches. Each one is a trophy, but not in the way you might think. They're certainly not about giant deer, which are genetic freaks. The vast majority of deer, like the vast majority of people, are average, by definition. And the stories about them are rarely about stupendous hunting skill. Instead, they're about the persistence to keep going out and the patience to stay there when nothing is happening. Still, the patches are emblems of something exceptional that is rapidly dying out in this world. They're about brotherhood,

about men who get together to hunt every fall and who have known and cared about one another for some 60 years. To me, there's something stupendous about that.

The ranks of the Schoolhouse Boys are thinner these days. Some have passed; some have health problems. The desire to kill deer has cooled for some, but Ernie isn't giving up. "Maybe we're not as gung-ho as we used to be," he says, "but I'll still be out there when I'm 90." Some of the Schoolhouse Boys' kids and grandkids come up to hunt, but between sports teams and the allure of the digital world, hunting is no longer the main event the way it was in the Schoolhouse Boys' heyday. The younger hunters here clearly revere their elders, but nobody talks much about the club's future, at least not in front of me. That leaves the old men, the original boys, to do what old-school men know how to do best. Which is to keep showing up, keep the old stories alive, keep answering the bell for as long as their strength allows. *F&S*

**Below**

The scene that greets you as you return from an evening hunt. Some of the boys are already inside, comparing notes from the day's outing.



**Right**

Tucked into a blowdown, with a rifle and a set of shooting sticks, Ernie Chernoby looks to earn another Successful Deer Hunter patch.



# CAN OF WORMS



**FOR GENERATIONS, THE ULTIMATE GO-TO FISH BAIT HAS BEEN THE LOWLY WORM. BUT NOT JUST ANY WORM WILL DO**

by **WILL BRANTLEY**  
photographs by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**

**F**or this issue, the editors asked me to write about nightcrawlers. They said, “Is there anything more traditional than a nightcrawler on a hook?”

And I said, “Well, if you like catching fish, there is.”

Nightcrawlers are the afterthought fishing bait, what you buy when you’re going camping and are pretty sure the fish won’t bite, but you still want to have some bait along just in case. Channel catfish will bite nightcrawlers, but channel catfish will bite off-brand hot dogs and Ivory soap too. I’ve caught some nice walleyes that hit crawlers on harnesses trolled over open water in the Great Lakes. I doubt I’ll ever get bored enough to go walleye fishing again.

I’m not trying to disparage the nightcrawler; the big worms are more useful for catching fish than, say, a Copper John. But they’re not red wigglers, which are my live bait of choice anytime catching fish is the priority. Plus—not to get too pedantic about it, but editors are a pedantic lot—a regular *worm* on a hook is more traditional than a full-blown crawler.

Red worms are generally more difficult to obtain. If you’re shopping for bait in my neck of the woods, some of the gas stations and just about all the Dollar General stores sell crawlers. They’re hardy and ubiquitous creatures, the sort you’d expect to survive an apocalypse, like the one we’re about to have, same as the Dollar Generals.

But to get red wigglers, you need to shop at a more discerning bait merchant, like a Walmart. If it’s springtime and the shellcrackers are biting, you’d better arrive at the store early and stock up. When it’s your turn at the bait cooler, be sure to pop open the lid of each container and give the ball of worms inside a good push through the dirt with your little finger. This doesn’t accomplish anything—not one time in the thousands of containers I’ve opened have I ever

found red worms that failed to wiggle—but it is part of the process.

Pick up two containers and put them in your cart, then hold a third one in your hand as if you’re going to buy it as well before putting it back. You want everyone around you to understand that you expect to catch fish, and a lot of them, while signaling that you’re not greedy.

If the thought of spending \$6 for a day’s worth of fishing bait is more than you can stand, then you can spend six hours digging for, maybe, a comparable number of red worms yourself. Crawlers, being the inferior bait, are much easier to find. Look for them anywhere there’s poop and good grass, like a livestock pasture. Then dig up a scoop of moist earth, bust it open, and grab the crawlers that slither out, if you’re brave enough. When I was a kid, I dug up specimens from our horse pasture that could’ve passed for small snakes, and that probably spooked more fish than they attracted.

Red wigglers are more elusive. Turning over old concrete blocks, the kind that you usually locate with lawnmower blades, will sometimes yield a few. But even in a yard like mine, the number of concrete blocks available to turn over runs out quick. In six hours, you might not find enough red worms for even a full day of fishing. But then, you were probably going to Walmart anyway.

However you get them, the red worm’s value becomes apparent in several ways once you’re on the water. They are more pleasant than crawlers to fish with, for one. If you’ve ever looked at a plump, gleaming nightcrawler and thought it just might explode in a puddle of slime and poo as soon as you touch it with a barbed fishhook, then you’d be right. That’s exactly what a nightcrawler will do.

Red wigglers aren’t clean, but they’re also not bulging with a quarter pound of manure. In fact, when you stick a red wiggler with a fishhook, you’ll find that it’s cream-filled—not exactly like an éclair but not totally unlike one either; they’re full of a light, greenish goo that doesn’t smell good to me but is evidently delectable to game fish.

Shellcrackers often ignore nightcrawlers but will usually inhale fresh red worms. Wigglers work better than anything I’ve tried on big rainbow trout too. The Southern streams where I fish are stocked tailraces, where eating-size rainbows are easy to catch, but the big ones

with a few seasons on them definitely are not. One day last summer, while my family was drifting a tailrace on the Cumberland River for trout, my wife and kid were using Chunky Cheese Powerbait on slip-sinker rigs, which is always a good choice when the water is high and swift. But I wanted to see if something really big might bite, so I tipped my own slip sinker with a 2-pound fluoro-carbon leader, a mosquito hook, and a nice, fat red wiggler. Numbers-wise, my boatmates gave me a thrashing with their Chunky Cheese, but I landed a 21-incher—a Powerbait-snubbing veteran of the hatchery and my best rainbow trout to date.

Red worms work for just about everything else in fresh water too. Last spring, my wife caught a 4-pound smallmouth on one, and who knows how many nice largemouths, bluegills, catfish, and white bass we’ve caught on them over the years. Every now and then, you’ll even catch a crappie on a red worm. They work just fine fished under a bobber—maybe the most traditional rig—but I’ve had the best luck fishing them on the bottom with a slip sinker or on a drop-shot rig with a small bell sinker about 6 inches underneath the hook, either a long-shank Aberdeen for targeting bream or a small circle hook for catfish or bass. No matter the hook style, you need to keep your red wigglers fresh and thread them on so that they’re dangling from the hook and doing the red-wiggler dance.

Whatever you do, unless you’re after bullheads, don’t cram several red worms into a flaccid, lifeless ball on the hook. Hell, if you do that, you might as well be using nightcrawlers. **F&S**





FRED SILVERSTEIN HASN'T MISSED A DUCK OPENER IN 60-PLUS YEARS—A LEGACY HIS KIDS AIM TO CONTINUE

**F**OR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, things weren't looking good for Fred Silverstein's opening-day streak. Earlier that morning he'd borrowed a shotgun from the USO in Seoul, hitched a ride on an M35 deuce-and-a-half cargo truck, and whistled for a stop in the Korean countryside when he saw ducks dropping from the sky. Now he stood at the end of a dirt path, in front of a small stick hut, flapping his arms with his thumbs tucked into his armpits, and gesturing toward ricefields a couple of hundred yards away. The stooped, elderly farmer who'd answered his knock wasn't sure what to make of the skinny Tennessee boy in Army fatigues, holding a shotgun and quacking like a duck. That was in 1962, and Silverstein hadn't missed an opening-day duck hunt in 14 years.



# Family Trees

by T. EDWARD NICKENS

photographs by ANDREW HETHERINGTON

illustrations by TIM McDONAGH



**Previous spread, left**  
Silverstein works his way into a spot.

**Previous spread, right**  
Alex and Jimmy Robinson take a break by their Lab, Tucker.

**Above**  
Jimmy Robinson shows a drake mallard from an Arkansas hunt.

**Right**  
This story originally ran in the February–March 2016 issue.

**Facing**  
Clockwise from top left: H.T. Rice takes a seat; Jemison Rice listens for quacks; mallards from the morning's hunt are cooked for dinner; Silverstein, Jack, and Jimbo Robinson; Jimmy Robinson tries to call in a flock.

As a kid, he hunted with his dad on Tennessee's famed Reelfoot Lake. Through high school and college, he stalked the green timber and riverbottoms of west Tennessee and Arkansas. And as a soldier stationed stateside, getting a weekend pass to go home to duck country was no big deal. Then came the Bay of Pigs incident, and the 22-year-old Morse code specialist was shipped to the U.S. Army's base outside Anjung-ri, South Korea. Duck hunting got significantly more difficult.

"He had to wonder what this idiot was doing," Silverstein says, recalling that morning half a world away. "He pointed and said, 'Go.' At least, I took it as go, so off I went. No duck call, no decoys—but I was going to hunt. There was no such thing as a duck season over there, but it was opening day for me."

If you give Silverstein credit for his South Korea opener, then this soft-spoken grandson of German immigrants, businessman (he still runs a large bathtub and shower manufacturing enterprise in west Tennessee), and lay rabbi has hunted 65 opening days in a row. He may have the longest, deepest, and most historic résumé of green timber hunting in America, especially in the lauded woods of Arkansas. He has hunted most of the most famous pieces of timber—Hurricane Hole, Bayou Meto, TNT, Bayou DeView. He has leased duck ground from the Cache River to the L'Anguille to the Hatchie River of west Tennessee. Silverstein hunted timber before anyone called it *timber hunting*.

Before *Duck Dynasty*, \$200 duck calls, and spinning-wing decoys. Before flat ground in Arkansas was worth more filled with water and ducks than soybeans and corn. Before hunting green timber was duck hunting's big deal.

And at 74 years old, Silverstein is still hard at it. Most days during duck season, he's in the woods with his extended family. The man knows the past and present of green timber hunting like few others. It's the future that has him scratching his head.

#### AN INSTANT CLASSIC

In the gold light of dawn, Silverstein and I share a giant oak, leaning into the gray, fissured trunk, close enough to whisper but with enough room to swing the guns. When I think of flooded timber, this is the scene that comes to mind: A half-dozen hunters—sons, grandsons, in-laws—are tucked into the woods on the upwind edge of a timber hole 60 yards wide, knee-deep in the flooded forest. It's a classic piece of green timber, the kind that attracts hunters from around the world.

The first birds are high, flying over outstretched limbs and twigs 100 yards away, but they're close enough to work. While his black Lab, Slate, whines softly from a dog stand pushed into the muck, Silverstein's grandson, Jimbo Robinson, quacks fast and low, a teasing contact call to let the ducks know they have a decision to make, as if to say: *You guys are missing out. Pretty sweet spot down here.*

Six mallards bank and circle downwind, and the calling cuts a pair out of the



Silverstein carried a 20-gauge Winchester Model 12 with a Poly-Choke, but that was his only piece of serious duck hunting gear. He hunted in two pairs of flannel pajamas stuffed under blue jeans, three pairs of socks, and an old Army fatigue coat.

flock. Robinson has them hooked. The flock circles again, closer, lower, with the pair now right at the treetops. The four-some hangs back, unconvinced. This is the allure of timber hunting—this close, intimate dance with ducks, unfettered by a blind. I drill my eyeballs upward, looking for the birds but not daring to turn my face to the sky. Here they come. The drake scans the hole. I can see his head moving side to side.

Robinson's next calling sequence is slower, more confident, a series of hen quacks with a tailing-off *qwank qwank qwank* in a self-satisfied tone that should turn any bird. *Up to you, but we're fat and happy in this sweet timber hole.*

The pair commits on the third swing—wings set, feet out, skittering through branches and twigs like leaves in the wind. Their decision convinces the four other mallards, now parachuting down 15 yards above the pair. I want to take it all in, but I force myself to keep my head down. We've read the wind, we've fussed with the decoys, we've pressed our faces close to the tree trunks to complete the ruse, and now the ducks hang suspended 30 feet overhead, so close I hear the air rushing through their primaries. We drop the pair with three, four, maybe five guns going off all at once, then knock down two more mallards from the foursome as they claw for daylight. The flooded woods erupt in celebration, but Silverstein remains reserved. "There is nothing more beautiful than those ducks coming through the trees," he says. "I'd rather kill one mallard in the timber than 50 in a ricefield."

#### HISTORY LESSON

It's a long holiday weekend, so Silverstein's family duck camp, Snake Island Hunt Club, headquartered in an old country church 15 miles west of Stuttgart, is packed. Silverstein's son, Will, is here with his two young boys, H.T. and Jemison. There's a son-in-law, Jimmy, and three of his kids: Alex, in school in South Carolina; Jimbo, a regional director for

Ducks Unlimited; and 9-year-old Jack. Jack has Down syndrome, and the way the extended family folds itself around him—rising early to get him into his waders, taking him to the timber, helping him into the pits—is a defining motif of the club. Later this afternoon, wives, daughters, and other grandchildren will show up at camp. For Silverstein, duck hunting is family time.

That's obvious in the low roar of conversation at breakfast after the morning's hunt. The whole crew crowds around a wide plank table, working over biscuits, eggs, and sausage. There are stories of Silverstein's turning the ATV over in a flooded ditch, the morning his boat caught fire, the day the camp caught fire. "He's hunted through every phase of duck shooting you can imagine," Robinson says. "He was here for the point system; he hunted when the numbers were so low the season was down to 30 days and two ducks. He didn't care. He was going, as long as it was legal."

Silverstein loads his coffee nearly white with creamer and remembers his earliest duck trips. "All my first hunts were with my father, up on Reelfoot Lake, and it was just like you hear about," he says. In the 1940s and 1950s, there wasn't a more famous waterfowling spot on the planet than west Tennessee's Reelfoot. "I would walk into the big Samburg Motel with my dad and he knew all those famous guides—Sharpie Shaw, Elbert Spicer, the Hamiltons, the Bunches. I hunted with all of them." Silverstein carried a 20-gauge Winchester Model 12 with a Poly-Choke, but that was his only piece of serious duck hunting gear. He hunted in two pairs of flannel pajamas stuffed under blue jeans, three pairs of socks, and an old Army fatigue coat.

After breakfast, we move to the end of the table where Silverstein unrolls a large Arkansas map, the paper peppered with ink circles. He has marked the locations of all the clubs and leases he's had over the years. An accordion file is stretched to its limits, stuffed with plat

maps, notes, and photos of old leases and camps. He has three others just like it.

Arkansas's famed waterfowl grounds, he tells me, can be broadly divided into two regions: North of Interstate 40, complex river systems lattice the land—the Black, the White, the Cache, and L'An-guille Rivers. Winter rains flood the streams, and when they spill over the banks they inundate hardwood bottoms. South of I-40, bayous stitch the Arkansas Grand Prairie, land laced with drainage ditches that run for miles and feed many impounded timber plots. In the middle of it all lies Stuttgart, the epicenter of timber hunting.

"I started leasing land back in the '60s, and there was a pretty standard chain of events that happened over and over again," Silverstein says. He and his buddies would hunt a spot for a few years, then get run out of the place. The farmer would either clear the land for planting, or wind up leasing the water to some distant relative. "That was pretty typical for everyone. It was no big deal. We'd just find someplace else."

Those "someplace elses," however, are vanishing in today's new realities of Arkansas green timber hunting. Timberland is under increasing pressure to be used for agriculture, while more and more duck hunters are clamoring for the dwindling number of timber holes left. In the mid 1990s, Silverstein says, farmers figured out they could dig a hole in the ground and lease it for \$5,000 a year. "That's when it got crazy," he says. "The really big money just keeps coming in." For example: One duck club recently sold for \$8.5 million. This past year, Snake Island lost a hole to another club that offered the landowner twice what Silverstein's group was paying. "It's business, I understand," Silverstein says. "You get outbid. I've had landowners—good friends—call me to say, 'Fred, it's \$20,000 versus \$40,000. What do you want me to do?' So we're always looking over our shoulders. We know what can happen."

It takes an hour for Silverstein to tell



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me about all the lands he's hunted. He folds up the maps, then says, "Come on." There's a new place he wants to check out, and there's time to take a look before our afternoon shoot. This is what Silverstein loves most: driving, searching, talking, wondering. Hoping. "One thing hasn't changed in all these years," he says. "There's always a better duck hole somewhere."

#### DEEP ROOTS

In the afternoon we hunt a new piece of timber. Silverstein has glassed these woods for a decade, watching as ducks dump into the trees, but he was never able to secure hunting permission until now. After years of persistence, Silverstein has the OK, just this once, to get a sense of what's there and to feel out a relationship with the farmer. He's excited and a bit jittery. We cut our way through with machetes until the woods open up a bit, and then we push through the trees to find an opening that looks large enough to draw birds.

"This is short timber," Silverstein calls. "If the ducks are on the treetops, we're taking 'em."

Jimbo Robinson rings out a reply: "Counting your chickens already, huh?"

This short timber, willow and honey locust instead of the classic tall canopy of oaks and gum trees, is indicative of another challenge facing duck hunters in the Mississippi Flyway: Not only are timber leases harder to come by, but Silverstein worries that climate change is having an even more insidious and long-term effect. Compared with earlier years, water comes later in the season to his neck of the Arkansas woods, and stays longer, killing off the timber. Many of the most successful clubs pour fortunes into management—cleaning out the dead trunks and fallen limbs, fertilizing and pruning. When hunters find a new lease whose younger trees may not offer the traditional big canopy, they still jump at the chance to lock down a timber hole.

"You have to work at finding good woods all year long," Silverstein tells me, as he backs into the root ball of a fallen tree to break up his silhouette. He might have started timber hunting in an era when duck timber wasn't lit up with headlamps three hours before shooting light, but Silverstein isn't living in the past. He's as competitive when it comes to finding new duck ground as hunters a

third his age. "The first thing I do every morning is Google *duck lease Arkansas*." One farm that the club recently leased, Silverstein found on Craigslist.

For a guy like Silverstein, who cares about relationships as much as a heavy duck strap, working all the angles comes as second nature. Every Christmas, Silverstein delivers Tripp country hams, a west Tennessee staple, to his friends and contacts in the Snake Island community. Landowners, farmhands, the people in the general store—he hand-delivers a ham to anyone who has lent him a smile. If the recipient isn't home, Silverstein won't leave the gift on the porch or front counter. It'll sit in the duck club kitchen until he can hand it to someone, personally, and thank him for letting his family be a part of their community. And that's the real clincher for Silverstein: his family. He's killed a pile of ducks. He's gunned with famous hunters. But at Snake Island, he's found a place where the roots feel solid. He's watching his kids and his grandchildren, moms and daughters, learn to love what he loves. He is making plans to enlarge the camp and has a line—or three—on some new ground he might get the chance to lock down. He gazes at the hunters around him. "Look out there," he says. "I've got three generations that hunt with me right here. If I can hang on long enough, no reason I can't make it to four."

It's a long wait in the new timber, but a half hour before shooting light ends, the ducks start pouring over the trees 100 yards high toward some other piece of open water another 100 yards deeper into the swamp. We can hear them landing and quacking, but there's not enough time to move the decoys. Duck shapes dot the sky, buzzing past our spread, then drop into some not-so-distant opening. "There's a million holes in here," Silverstein says. But it's not a complaint. He's looking toward the sound of the ducks, smiling. A million duck holes that need figuring out is just the sort of problem he's happy to fix.

#### MORNING GLORY

I'll be honest: Our second morning in the big timber is a mess. We have quite a crowd. I count eight hunters, plus young Jack and our photographer. One child has already gone in over his waders, and his father has laid him out on a giant fallen tree. He strips off the boy's waders, pants, long johns, and sopping wet socks.

Then he removes his own socks, and puts them on his son. All better. There's a fair bit of joke-telling, laughter, and hollering around the timber hole—all in fun, but all quite loud. There's a wooden bench on the hole's shallow side, a good place to stow a pack, but it's mostly to give the kids a comfortable place to sit. Jack has claimed one end. He has his hat in his hand, his blond hair shining, and he's rocking back and forth, smacking the water with a stick, and singing the chorus of "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" at the top of his lungs.

The scene is barely controlled bedlam, and I know that during these most promising minutes of dawn, the odds of a duck dropping in are zilch. I couldn't care less.

Listening to Jack, I sag into a big tree 30 yards away, and my eyes well. The little boy has gone silent for a moment, and he screws his face up with concentration as if he's trying to remember something. Then suddenly it comes back to him, the pieces fit, and he throws back his head and belts out the rest of his homily to sunrise and duck wings and the family that loves him so much they wouldn't dream of not bringing him to the timber:

*I've got a beautiful feeling,  
Everything's going my way!*

I glance over at Silverstein on the far side of the tree. His head is slightly raised, his eyes fixed somewhere beyond the highest branches. The corners of his mouth follow his gaze toward the sky.

I don't say a word, don't move a muscle, afraid to break such a magical spell. There's something powerful about the presence of a man who has sown such a harvest of love, and lived so long and true. For Silverstein, the big questions have largely been answered. He's secure in his place in eternity, in both the spiritual and physical realms, and he knows where his ashes will be spread. They'll be mixed with those of his long-gone Lab, Jake, and scattered in the timber on some opening day to come. F&S

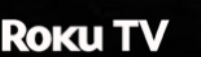
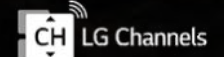
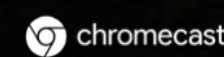
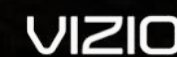


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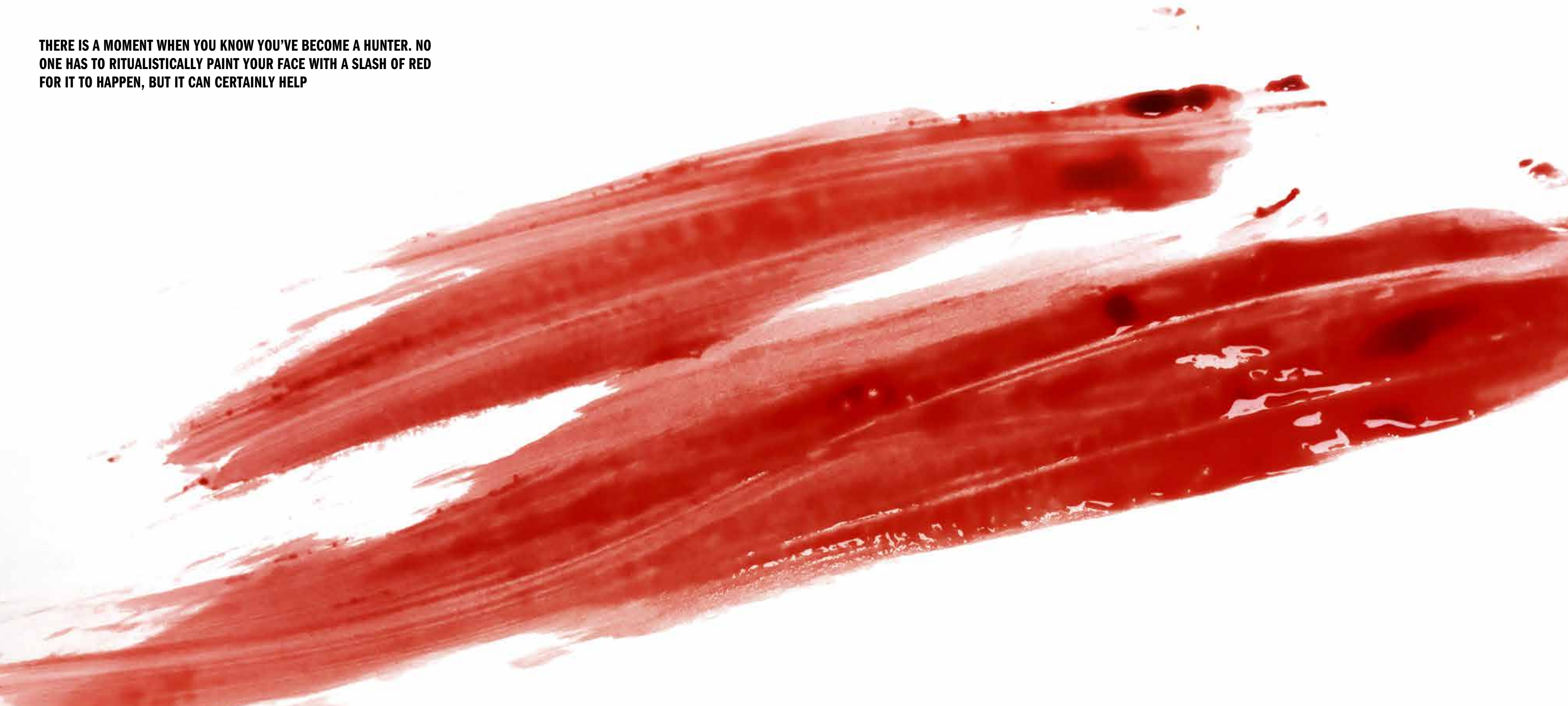


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# FIRST

# BLOOD



## DEATH MASK

The tradition of blooding a hunter was probably ancient when people painted on cave walls instead of canvas. It was a rite of passage signifying that the honoree is a successful provider of food, and is therefore a valued member of the community.

My own blooding didn't involve a gun or bow. I didn't even kill anything. I rode in a classic fox hunt consisting of hounds, horses, and more than 400 years of British and American tradition, on Thanksgiving Day, 1956, when I was 14 years old.

Here's how a fox hunt works: It takes place on farmland where red foxes amuse themselves in henhouses. It's run by a master of hounds, who is aided by three or four whippers-in, who keep the dogs pointed in a useful direction. Said hounds—20 to 40 per pack and always hunted in matched pairs, or couples—are bred specifically for this sport. There are 20 to 30 riders.

The hounds are set loose in a vulpine area and mill around until they hit scent (a "find"). When they're certain of it (a "check"), they set off in hot pursuit until the fox panics, breaks into the open and runs, and the hounds see it (a "view"). If it keeps running, the dogs will often catch it and send it—very quickly—to fox heaven (a "death").

My horse on that day was a mare named Daisy. She was a chunky chestnut of no distinction. Alongside the Irish

hunters (bred for foxhunting, often with a good dose of hot, or thoroughbred, blood) and outright thoroughbreds, she was a delivery truck among Formula 1s. But Daisy was sure-footed, never refused to jump a fence, and had what English horse types call "bottom"—she had tremendous endurance and would gallop until she dropped.

As traditionally practiced, foxhunting is dangerous. Mounted astride an English saddle, you ride over broken country, usually at a hand gallop, which is faster than a canter but not a dead run. If a fence stands in your way, you jump it. If your horse refuses the jump, you can go over its head and land on the far side of the fence, or you can go over its head and into the fence itself. Or your horse can lose its footing and fall with you underneath. Or your horse can have a hissy fit while standing stock still and throw you so you land on your head on a hard road.

The only safety gear we wore was a hard hat, which was lined with cork and covered with black velvet. It worked. I once forgot to duck a tree branch and was smacked hard across the forehead. I didn't feel a thing.

No one was more aware of the risks than my Old Mom, who was not one bit happy about her son riding to hounds.

At the time I hunted, it was still the tradition to award parts of the fox to riders who had been fast enough to be at the death. First prize was the mask, or head.

**THE MASTER OF HOUNDS  
PAINTED MY FACE,  
LITERALLY. I WAS SOLID  
BLOOD FROM MY HAIRLINE  
DOWN TO MY COLLAR.**

by DAVID E. PETZAL

Second was the brush, or tail. Third was a pad, or paw, which was considered a lesser trophy and given to those who were not the fastest but who had ridden well. I got a paw. I would not have traded it for an Olympic gold medal.

This was not my first fox hunt, but it was my first trophy and, because of that, I was blooded. The master of hounds painted my face, literally. I was solid blood from my hairline down to my collar.


The hunt ended in the early afternoon, and I rode Daisy back to the stable, took off her saddle and bridle, sponged off her sweaty back, and put her in her stall. She lay down on her side and groaned. She had given me everything she had.

Then I went home to where the family was gathered at the Thanksgiving table. My mother beheld my blood-caked face and screamed. My father took a more reasoned approach and asked for the stuffing.

"Ma," I yelled above the racket, "it's not my blood. It's the fox's." And I waved the gory paw to show her. She screamed louder. Eventually she stopped, mostly because her voice gave out.

I was ordered to wash off the blood before I could sit at the table. I took that poorly. The paw went into the freezer. My mother threw it in the garbage when I was at school.

I never forgave her.



**I FELL FACE-FIRST INTO  
A RASPBERRY BRAMBLE.  
I AUGERED MYSELF OUT,  
WIPED MY BLOODY THORN-  
SCRATCHED FACE ON MY  
SKINNY ARM, AND CONTINUED  
TO THE FARMHOUSE.**

## IN MY VEINS

As I watched my teammates and coach leave the baseball field, I became increasingly sure that my parents had forgotten about practice and, by extension, about me. This was long before cell phones—before the days, even, when coaches had to stick around until every last kid was accounted for. All of which left me alone on a country ball field about a mile outside of Newtown, Missouri, and a long way from home.

Feeling puny and pitiful as the sun dropped lower in the sky, I gazed down the long, receding tracks of the Milwaukee Road, a railroad line that split our farm in two 4 miles off into the distance. Figuring it would be the quickest way home and would keep me from having to explain myself to concerned drivers along the highway, I shoved my ball glove in my waistline, scrounged up two cast-off railroad spikes for protection, and stepped onto the hot August tracks.

The way was clear, if daunting—two gleaming rails disappearing around the bend into a wall of timber that was dark and moody even in the sunshine. And I'd be walking the tracks at twilight, past scar-faced coons, half-buried bones, and creaking elms.

I was 10 years old, and up until this point in my young life, I'd been scared of most everything, even my own voice, which I kept mainly to myself. I couldn't conceive how I descended from the line

of square-jawed men—soldiers in uniform and hunters posing with bucks and birds—who looked down at me from framed pictures in the hallway. I chronically disappointed my dad, never more publicly than earlier that summer, when I was dredged out of a galvanized stock tank at the Newtown Fair. I had fallen in while overreaching for a you-catch-you-keep catfish, and Dad had to stop baling hay to come fetch me, wet, humiliated, and fishless.

The first mile of my walk was almost pleasant. The orange sun settled over tasseled cornfields and illuminated dust motes above rolling pastures, and I pictured walking through the door of the farmhouse, my relieved parents gushing at my grit and resourcefulness. But then the hardwoods swallowed both the light and my courage, and every tree frog and whippoorwill croaked with menace and meaning.

But somewhere along that railroad line, taking creosoted ties two at a stride, I felt big for the first time. I saw the moon rising through the timber not as a warning but as a companion. The train-squashed possums were just gross instead of diabolical. I pictured myself as a hunter of the wild edge. I stood up straighter at the sight of my moon shadow, the railroad spikes pistols, then meat-making knives. Still, I hoped a grain train wouldn't come along

by ANDREW MCKEAN

to expose me in its yellow light for what I was, a knobby-kneed Little Leaguer alone in the Missouri night.

After what seemed a month of trekking, I began to recognize the way in the moonlight and before long realized that our field crossing was just a mile ahead. I grew so confident, and hungry, that I took a shortcut but misjudged the right-of-way fence and fell face-first into a raspberry bramble. I augered myself out, wiped my bloody, thorn-scratched face on my skinny arm, and continued to the farmhouse.

My mom was on the kitchen phone with a teammate's mother, asking if I was at their house, if she'd seen me at practice. She hung up when I opened the screen door, but instead of hailing me as a wayfinder, she spun me around and swatted my butt, hard. How dare I cause so much commotion? Why hadn't I waited for her? What in the world was wrong with me?

My dad came into the room just as I was about to start crying. He looked me over, taking in the oiled ball glove still tucked in my pants, the ripped shirt, and the lacerated face. He wiped the caking blood away with his hard hands and studied it as if he recognized something. Then he reached out—not for a hug but for the railroad spikes. As I handed them over, I saw just the beginning of a smile on his stubbled face.



## BAPTISM OF BLOOD

They're in shirtsleeves now, the trees nearby hung with camouflage daypacks and blaze orange hoodies. It's hot work, dragging a deer, no matter the weather. The deer lies still between them. Bill Stoner holds the buck's hind leg, while his brother, Doug, unzips the belly, two fingers spreading the incision, knife blade turned edge-up in between.

The instant I stepped out of the cedar swamp, I could tell this was a moment for the ages. I'd heard the shot, the shuffling of footsteps, and the whoop of exclamation. I bolted from the base of a giant spruce to make my way toward the sounds. I had high hopes.

The 5-pointer is Doug's first buck. His first deer. They don't come easy here, on Drummond Island, off the northern Michigan shoreline. It's big woods and dense, sprawling country. But after eight years of trekking to his family camp, 8 dirt miles from the nearest blacktop road, Stoner has connected with a beauty. The buck came to a scent wick hung head-high on the branch of a spruce tree, and Doug dropped the deer with a single shot. Now he is silent with awe. His brother's presence is just icing on the cake: It's the first time they've ever hunted deer together.

This ritual of blooding—marking a hunter's face with the crimson fluids of a freshly killed animal—is rooted in the story of Saint Hubert, a first-century Frenchman who, before his religious

conversion, chased deer pretty much 24/7. On a particular Good Friday, while the rest of his village was at church, Hubert was afield, and as the stag his hounds had cornered turned to face him, he saw a crucifix illuminated between the antlers. The buck spoke with the voice of Christ, at which point Hubert's life turned on a dime. He entered the priesthood, eventually became a bishop, and died in 727. He is the patron saint of dogs, horses, forest workers, trappers, and hunters. For many years, a kill was marked with three crosses of blood on the forehead and cheeks of the hunter: One for the crucifix between the Christ-buck's rack, one for each of the antlers.


Honoring a kill with a solemn gesture of appreciation takes many forms around the world. I've seen hunters immediately take to their knees and offer a prayer of thanksgiving at the animal's side. One old tradition, from Germany, Austria, and other old-world countries, is the *letzte bissen*, or "last bite." A sprig of vegetation is placed in the animal's mouth as an offering to the animal in its afterlife. Some hunters cover the fatal wound with leaves or greenery. Yet another tradition involves the hunter plucking leaves or a small branch from the kill site and tucking it into their hat, both to announce success and to carry the spirit of a respectful kill back to their comrades. In many deer camps of old

(and a few old-school camps today), a hunter's missed shot at a deer resulted in the back of their shirt being cut off, with the name and date of the unfortunate deed scrawled across the fabric, which was then tacked to the outside of the camp wall—all in good fun, for the most part. But nobody wanted that kind of honor.

These particulars might be lost on the Stoner boys up in the Yooper woods, but they know of the ancient rite, and if ever there were a time and place, this is it. Bill steps over the deer's body, lying still on the forest floor, its flanks the color of birch leaves newly fallen. He drags his fingers through the blood pooling between the ribs. He then stands up and paints a single stripe of blood on his brother's forehead. No cameras. No empty platitudes. Doug nods slightly, looks down at the deer, and pats a shoulder—once, twice, thrice. A coincidence, perhaps.

From here on out, it's a pageant played out countless times in countless deer woods. There is the dragging of the buck, with hands grasping antlers, grunting through white pines and mossy birches. Doug Stoner will walk into camp with pockets bulging with the deer's heart and liver and his forehead smeared with blood, the swipe marked with his own brother's fingerprint. It will wash off, or wear off, in the days to come. On the outside, at least. F&S

by T. EDWARD NICKENS



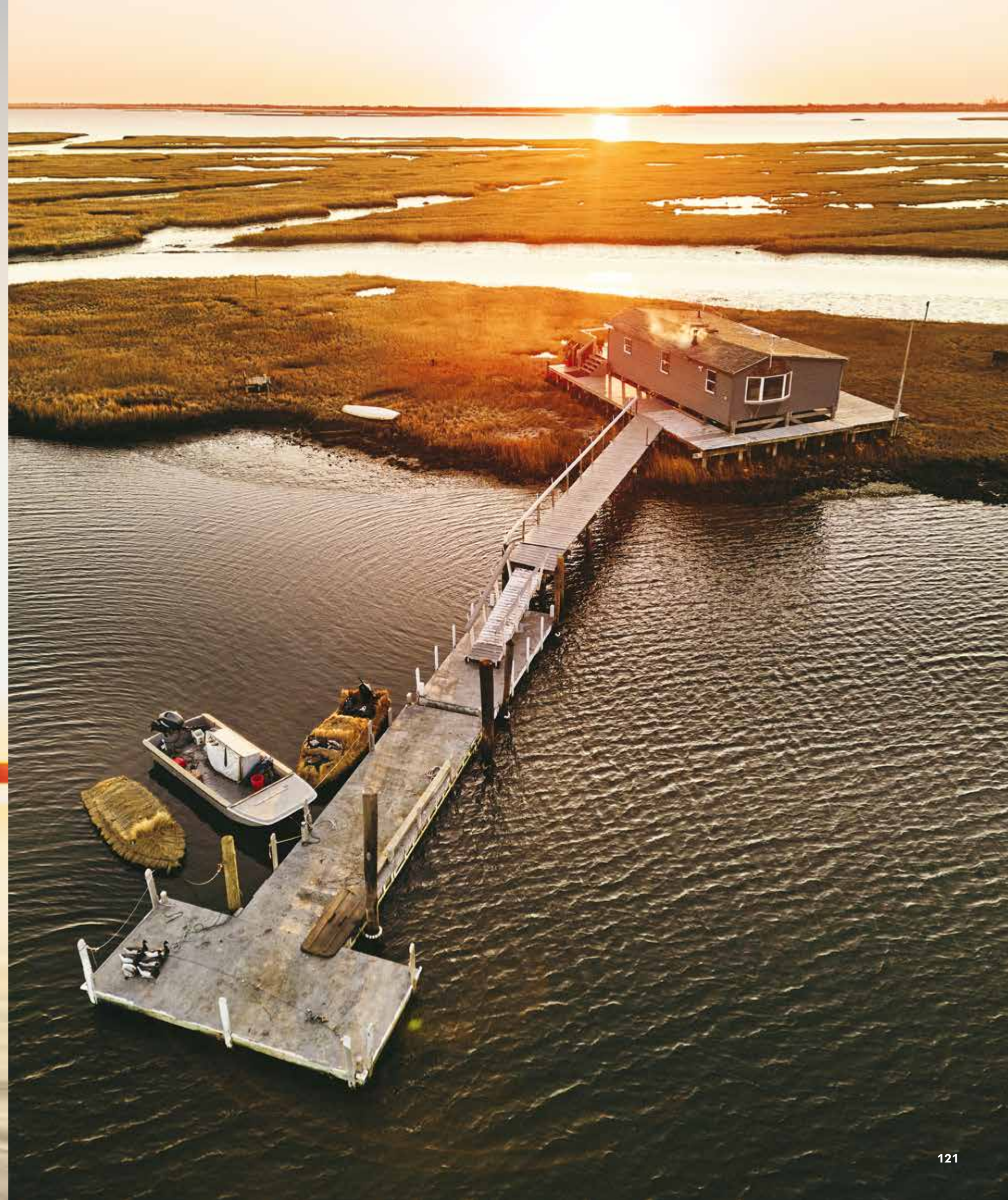
**HE DRAGS HIS FINGERS THROUGH THE BLOOD POOLING BETWEEN THE RIBS. HE THEN STANDS UP AND PAINTS A SINGLE STRIPE OF BLOOD ON HIS BROTHER'S FOREHEAD.**

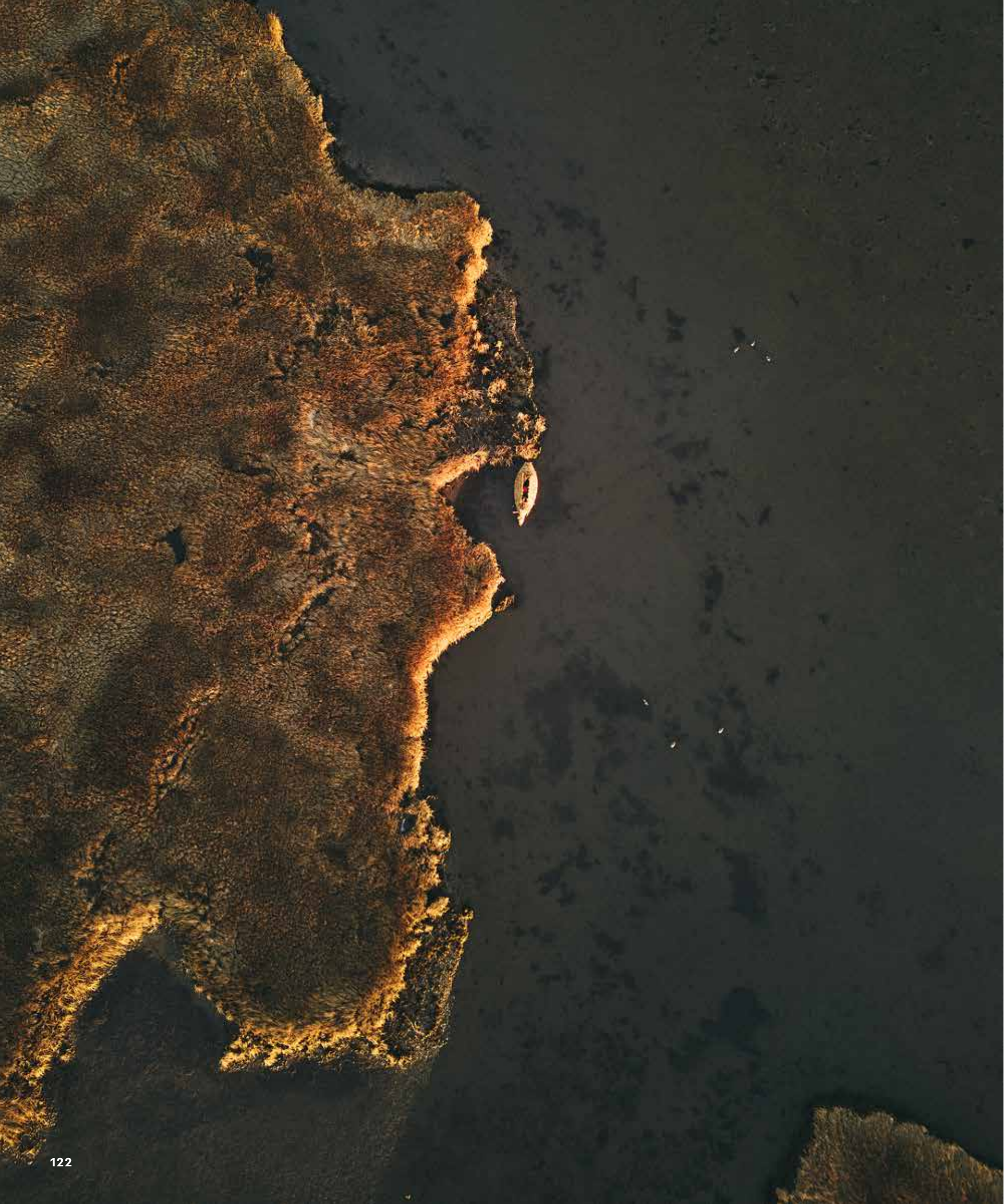
# *A Bit of Heaven*

FOR A FEW NIGHTS IN JANUARY, THE AUTHOR GOT TO EXPERIENCE DUCK CAMP

IN ONE OF WATERFOWLING'S MOST STORIED SETTINGS

by RYAN CHELIUS photographs by BRYAN DERBALLA





**Previous spread, left**

Ben Sohm pushes his grass boat through a shallow tidal creek with a 12-foot handmade shoving oar that he carved from white ash.

**Previous spread, right**

Chimney smoke billows from Little Stone Creek Bay House as the sun sets below the marsh.

**Opposite**

The author's boat anchored along the bank with two small groups of decoys in front. Because of big tide swings, hunters must be aware of changing water levels to make sure they don't get stuck when the tide runs out.

**T**HE GALE WARNING ISN'T UNTIL 5 P.M., but a northwest wind has arrived early and is forcing us to take the long way through the back creeks out to the bay. Small boats and big water are a dangerous combination, and we need to reach our duck camp on the marsh before it gets too rough. After loading the boats, we idle down the canal and turn at the bulkhead before going under the bridge. I'm steering my 14-foot two-man grass boat, and Paul Castelli is motoring 10 yards off my starboard in his sneak box. Up ahead, I can see where the creek turns south toward open water and empties into the bay.

It's mid-January—with only two weeks left of duck season. Castelli trailered his sneak box 130 miles from South Jersey, through New York City, and across Long Island for this hunt. Not so much for the birds but for the rare chance to spend two nights living in a historic bay house on the marsh. There aren't many of these shacks left. Most have been razed, vandalized, or destroyed by storms.

The whine of my 2-stroke puts up a huge flock of Atlantic brant feeding on a shallow mudflat. Castelli yells over the engines to get my attention and points to another small group of birds lifting off the interior of the marsh. "Black ducks!" I yell back. He gives me a thumbs up, and our outboards simultaneously rev as our excitement rises.

Sea spray comes over the gunwale as we clear the leeward bank and catch the gale blowing down the channel. I can taste the salty mist coming off the water and open the throttle to get out of the chop. In the distance, the bay house appears. It's small and weathered and imperfect from decades of saltwater abuse. The structure stands on a couple dozen algae-covered pilings and has a long, fractured dock leading down to the water where three grass boats are tied off. We made it.

**OLD SALT**

Ben Sohm, 82 years old, grabs my bow line and ties it to a cleat. He's draped in dirty Grundens fishing bibs and wearing white boots and muddy orange rubber gloves. Sohm has been hunting, fishing, and clamming these waters for more than 65 years, and he's been looking after this shack since 1990.

We unload our boats before shuffling everything up to the house. Inside, Sohm's wife, Kate, greets us and offers a quick rundown of the shack. There's a mudroom filled with gear, a kitchen, a big woodburning stove, a living room with three couches and three chairs that over-

look the marsh, and a small bunk room that barely sleeps four. I can't contain my excitement knowing we'll be calling this home for the next three days.

At one time, there were more than 300 bay houses scattered across the salt marshes on the western South Shore of Long Island. Today there are fewer than 30. Some of the original shacks date to the late 1600s. Back then, the bay houses served as a refuge for baymen—a place for clambers, fishermen, and hunters to seek shelter when the tides, wind, and ice prevented them from making it safely back to the mainland. Now, the remaining bay houses serve as places to get away from the populated metro area and enjoy the water.

But you can't simply buy a bay house, nor can you rent one for summer vacation because of legal restrictions. Sohm owns the physical structure but leases the marshland from the Town of Hempstead. He can only transfer the house within the family or to a designated caretaker who shares the lease. Since the houses are so difficult to maintain, and because of environmental concerns, shacks are destroyed when a family lineage ends. And for Long Island waterfowling, duck hunting from a bay house is a dying pastime.

"George Combs transferred the lease to me in 1990, and I asked Bill Powell to split ownership," Sohm tells me in the living room. "The agreement was for the house to stay within our families." Powell passed away in 2011, and Sohm has been maintaining it ever since.

This specific shack, Little Stone Creek Bay House, dates to 1912, when it was an oyster watch house. It's gone through four different ownerships, including Sohm and Powell's. The structure has also seen a number of renovations. But this isn't the first time I've heard of it. Longtime outdoor writer and *Field & Stream* contributor Norman Strung hunted from this shack in the late 1970s.



**Above**  
Sohm, 82, looks across the marsh as he motors to the bay house. He was a commercial bayman for decades who also ran killie pots, dug for clams, and fished to make an extra buck.

**Opposite, top**  
Anthony Babich mounts a Browning A5 from his newly refurbished 1928 Scooter duck boat.

**Opposite, bottom**  
The author throws a small rig of brant decoys into the water before the afternoon hunt. These big decoys add visibility to the spread and will attract brant and ducks.

He wrote a story about that trip for *Gray's Sporting Journal* titled "Bayman's Solstice" in which he referred to the shack as "a little bit of heaven." To many Long Island hunters, that story may as well be scripture, and for years people tried to find the famous hunting spot named Huckleberry Lead that Strung described in the piece.

The warmth of the shack is a nice break from the cold and gusting winds outside, but there's no opportunity to get comfortable. It's time to head out for the afternoon hunt. My friend

Anthony Babich, a Long Island native, walks into the mudroom already wadered-up and ready to go. "The birds are going to start moving soon," he says. "Get your gear on."

#### BACK TO BLACK DUCKS

Babich motors his way out of Little Stone Creek toward the channel. I follow behind and tilt my outboard into shallow drive until we reach deeper water. Even at high tide, navigating unfamiliar tidal creeks is tricky. But we just need to reach Fenwick's Point, less than 300 yards away on the far cove. It runs dry at low tide, and the exposed mudbanks are prime feeding grounds for black ducks.

After we cross the channel, we kill our engines and pole the rest of the way to the bank. I set a spread of eight brant decoys in deeper water where the birds like to trade back and forth. Babich places two small groups of cork black ducks to our left with a hole in the middle. Then we tuck our boats up against the bank and settle in for the last two hours of daylight. The air is thick with salt and mud; a cold northwest wind barrels down the coast.

"Two birds out front," Babich whispers. "Both black ducks." Black ducks are the predominate species on the bay. Occasionally a mallard, gadwall, shoveler,

or pintail comes in. But those birds favor the inland freshwater ponds. We're here for black ducks—hardy birds that live and feed in the salt.

The ducks are a couple hundred yards out, fighting the wind. They lock their wings and drop to the deck in seconds, then wheel to the marsh edge and take a line directly for our decoys. Now they almost look like divers, flying a foot off the water. I know we have them fooled.

The two jet-black silhouettes gravitate toward the three decoys in front of my boat. When their feet drop, I throw down the grass board and pick the closet duck, 15 yards away. It folds at the sound of my shot. The other bird opens its wings, catches the gale wind, and is pulled into the stratosphere by the time I can pump my gun. In our spread, a big drake floats belly-up. Babich motors over to retrieve the bird before the wind pushes it into deeper water. "A red-legger!" he says, meaning a mature late-season black duck. "We must have got a push of fresh birds on this front."

Babich resets his boat next to mine, and I notice the bow sitting in mud—an obvious sign the tide is dropping. But we should have just enough water to hunt until sunset and get back to the shack. "The birds will be looking to get out of this wind, just like those first two," Babich says. "I saw a few pintails on my last trip. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Two up high," I whisper to Babich. "Coming around on your side." Like the first pair, the birds lose elevation at an impressive rate and swing wide before setting up in front of Babich's boat. We pull up on the ducks, but the birds fly away unscathed, and we give each other a look as if trying to place the blame somewhere else.

"Reload—three more coming!"

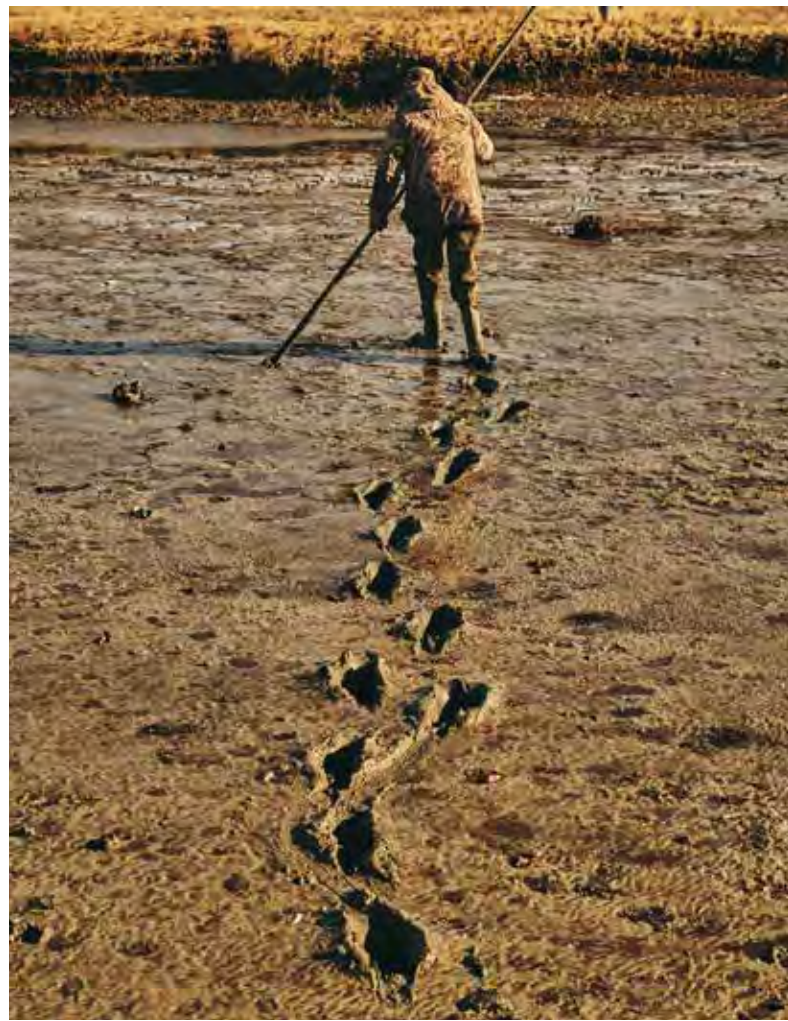
The sky is now full of black ducks, and by the time I shove the last shell into the magazine I hear Babich yell, "Kill em!" I put the bead of my 870 on the lead bird, but it crumples before I can pull the trigger. The other two ducks catch the wind, and I cleanly miss the only shot I get off.

"Another drake!" I yell. "Hell of a shot."

I toss the duck onto Babich's newly refurbished 1928 Scooter and jump into my boat. Six heavy, hand-carved Al McCormick cork decoys ride softly in the choppy water. Like my father, Babich's dad carved these birds under the tutelage of McCormick, also known as Mr. Decoy, 50 years ago. And like me, Babich keeps



Occasionally a mallard, gadwall, shoveler, or pintail comes in. But those birds favor the inland freshwater ponds. We're here for black ducks—hardy birds that live and feed in the salt.



the tradition of hunting over his family decoys alive.

“Big flock of brant to the east,” Babich says. “They’re going to do it.” Compared to puddle ducks, brant look as if they fly in slow motion—and this flock seems to be taking their time. Twenty or so birds work down the channel, lock their wings, and swing into the spread. I wait until the last bird separates from the pack and dump it to fill my brant limit of one bird.

Now the tide is dropping fast, and we still need two more black ducks. I’m watching a pair of birds to our far left when I hear Babich whisper, “In the decoys.” I look back, expecting a bird in the air, but see a duck swimming in the spread instead. I jump it and fold the black duck as it ascends to the sky. With 20 minutes of shooting light left, the ebb tide and stiff wind make the decision for us: It’s time to go. So we pick up our spread and putt back to the shack, where a warm stove and hot chili are waiting.

#### MATTER OF FACT

On the back deck, Sohm fires up the generator to power the lights until it’s time for bed. Inside, we sit around the stove. Sohm shares stories of the house and the bay and of past hunts. By today’s standards, his style of hunting is very traditional, but Sohm doesn’t think of it like that. It’s just how he hunts.

He even uses old-school East Coast waterfowling vernacular. For instance, he doesn’t go *hunting*; he goes *gunning*. He doesn’t *pole* his boat in shallow water; he *shoves* it. Hell, he doesn’t even have a motor on either of his grass boats. Sohm tows them out to the bay house behind his Carolina skiff and uses his handmade wooden *shoving oar* (not a *push pole*) to access the tiny creeks behind the shack. To Sohm, *bluebills* are *broadbills*, and out here on the salt, you gun the falling tide.

At 82, Sohm still has the drive, stamina, and love for gunning the bay. He never complains; everything is just matter-of-fact. He stokes the wood stove all night long, wakes up early to gun, weathers the elements, fixes things that need fixing, and tends to the boats depending on wind and tide. It’s a routine, and he has no plans to stop.

But this strong northwest wind has him concerned about the morning. “We’ll have enough water to get where we need to go in the dark,” he says. “But that wind will empty this bay at low tide, and we’ll be high and dry.” All night, he consults

a Post-It note with the tide times on it to plan for the hunt. Finally, he turns to me, “We’ll shove up toward Huckleberry Lead in the morning and gun there.” I can’t help but smile, knowing I’ll finally get the chance to hunt the same spot that Strung immortalized more than 45 years ago.

#### HIGH AND DRY

In the early morning darkness, Sohm announces that he has to get decoys from the “duck motel.” I follow him down the dock to his Carolina skiff where he lifts a flap to reveal the motel: a handmade 16-slot plywood decoy rack holding 15 cork black ducks and one mallard.

“Grab two decoys and bring them to my boat,” Sohm says. “All we need are eight or so black ducks.” I take two oversized L.L. Bean cork decoys that are bruised and beaten from 40 years of salt-water gunning. Like a kid, Sohm hops onto the bow of his tiny grass boat, then crawls on his hands and knees into the cockpit.

I wish Castelli and Babich luck as they untie from the dock and head northeast to hunt together. “This wind is too strong,” Sohm says. “You’ll have to tow me.” He’s right, there’s no shoving a boat in these conditions, even for a bayman as experienced as Sohm. I attach his bow line to my back cleat and point my headlamp west toward Huckleberry Lead. Sohm directs me on how to navigate the shallow water, and I listen to every word because nobody knows this bay better. We set two small groups of black duck decoys and pull the boats next to each other in a cut.

Eventually, sunrise reveals the back side of Huckleberry Lead, where 100 black ducks are feeding in the mud. “They beat us here,” Sohm whispers. “Those birds have been feeding all night.” Throughout the morning, birds continue to pour into the shallow mud across from us. Eventually, two black ducks feed down the bank into range. I jump them and miss. The big flock erupts. That’s the only action we get all morning.

By 10 a.m., our boats are high and dry even though low tide isn’t for another two hours. “Let’s walk back to the house and have breakfast,” Sohm says. “We won’t be able to get these boats out until the water comes back in this afternoon.” I struggle walking through the mud and muck, but Sohm strides across the marsh like it’s nothing. At camp, Kate has a hot breakfast on the table.

Castelli finally makes it back to the

#### Opposite, top

The author swings his Remington 870 on a flaring black duck during an afternoon hunt on the salt marsh.

#### Opposite, bottom left

Sohm walks across a tidal creek at low tide with the help of his oar. When the tide comes in, this mud will be under a few feet of water, and the creek will be accessible by boat.

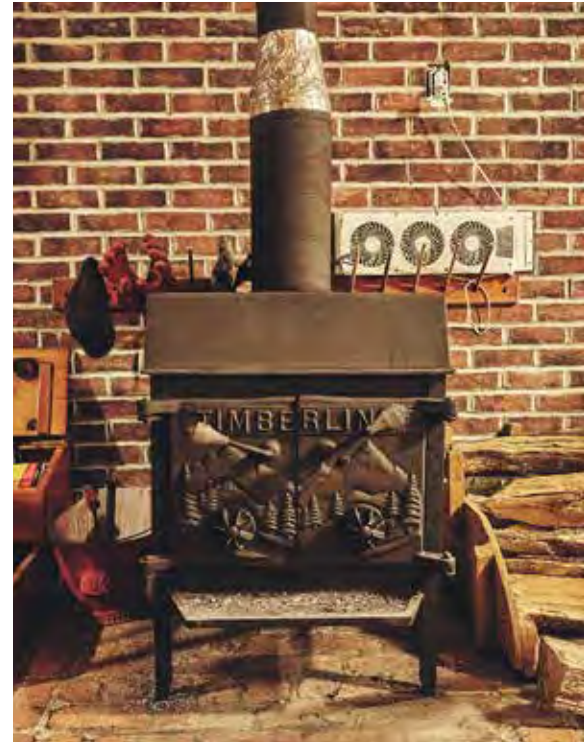
#### Opposite, bottom right

Three black ducks lay across the the author’s Remington 870 and Anthony Babich’s Browning A5 after a successful hunt.

#### Below

Sohm built this 16-slot plywood “duck motel” decoy rack in his Carolina skiff to transport his dekes. Inside he keeps 15 cork black ducks and one cork mallard.





shack around 2 p.m. but didn't fire the gun all morning. We complain about the tide, wind, and lack of bird movement. Then the conversation turns to black ducks. "Everyone talks about the colors of mallards, wood ducks, and pintails," Castelli says. "But a mature black duck looks like

a gentleman in a tuxedo—they're classy." Black ducks are also extremely wary, and outings like today's are common.

Around 3:15, we make our way back to Huckleberry Lead in Sohm's skiff. "Who pulled the plug on the bay?" He yells over the outboard. "There's barely any water. The wind blew it dry." The afternoon yields another skunking.

That night, while eating seared black duck from the first afternoon, Sohm flips through an old photo album of the shack. He and Powell renovated it in 1990, then had to restore it after Hurricane Sandy damaged the house in 2012. The other shack down the creek, along with many other bay houses across the island, was washed away by Sandy, making Sohm's house the only one left standing in the bay after the hurricane.

"This house has seen some serious storms over the years," Sohm says. "But we've always been able to repair it. Ours was the only one in the bay for long time."

The wind finally dies down for our last morning—and with low tide being an hour later, we scoot a bit farther into Huckleberry Lead, closer to where we saw all the birds the prior morning. At sunrise, the only birds we see are flying high toward the refuge off Jones Beach to loaf. We sit it out for another couple hours, but the dropping tide eventually forces us to get back to the shack while we still have enough water. Another goose egg to end the trip.

It didn't really matter, though. We didn't come for limits of ducks. We came

to be in sync with the tides and winds, to match wits with the birds on their home waters. And for two hours on the first afternoon, we got a taste of the magic—sitting in grass boats over cork decoys with a sky full of black ducks. Most of all, we came for the bay house—and that was more than enough.

#### HOLY GROUND

Back at the shack, we start loading boats and closing camp. With the tide still being low, there's no rush, so we take our time. Eventually, Kate locks the house, and we get into our boats to head home. Sohm is leading the way in his skiff with two grass boats in tow. I'm next in line with my two-man boat, and Castelli is the caboose. We follow Sohm in a line as he navigates the shallow flats. Behind us, the shack fades into the horizon as we open the throttles in deeper water. Castelli and I wave goodbye to Sohm and Kate as we head west and they turn east.

When we reach the channel, I can see Fenwick's Point on the far cove—and that's when a memory of the first afternoon hunt comes back to me. The stiff wind blowing directly into our face as we idled into the mouth of Little Stone Creek toward the shack. The sky pink, our engines humming, three black ducks on the deck, and the marsh a crisp golden-brown in the fading light. A hundred yards out, chimney smoke wafted from the bay house as the sun dipped below the horizon. For that brief moment, I'd found my own bit of heaven. *F&S*

#### Opposite, top left

Little Stone Creek Bay House at night under a bright moon and a sky full of stars. Sohm uses a generator to power the lights until it's time for bed.

#### Opposite, top right

This wood stove is one of the only things that survived Hurricane Sandy after the storm tore through the bay house in 2012.

#### Opposite, bottom

Sohm laughs as he tells a story in the living room of the bay house while waiting for the tide to come back in.

#### Above

A flock of Atlantic brant flush at the sound of the author's outboard motor as he returns to the launching ramp on the mainland.

# CHILI NIGHT

NO MATTER IF YOU'VE PUNCHED YOUR TAG OR ARE COMING BACK TO CAMP EMPTY-HANDED, NOTHING'S AS NOURISHING AS THE SIGHT (AND SMELL) OF A POT OF CHILI ON THE STOVE

photographs by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI  
styling by ROSCOE BETSILL

# Pike and Chorizo Chili

by JONATHAN MILES

Serves 6

**N**O, THE WORDS *FISH* AND *CHILI* don't often meet. If they happened to be occupying adjacent stools at the same tavern, in fact, you'd be reluctant to introduce them. But the pairing isn't as incongruous as you might suspect. Think of Manhattan fish chowder or Mexico's *sopa de pescado*, two dishes in which fish swims in a tomato broth. For this recipe, we stole a trick from the Portuguese, who commonly throw pork and seafood together in a pot, by fortifying meaty chunks of pike with bacon and chorizo. A slurry made with masa harina, or corn flour, adds just enough thickness to distinguish it from soup, and a host of familiar flavors—cumin, garlic, chili powder, fire-roasted tomatoes—moves it squarely into chili territory. Consider this an ideal (if admittedly eyebrow-raising) dish for spicing up evenings at fish or even deer camp in the Upper Midwest, where there are pike to be caught. But less sturdy fish will also work nicely; just refrain from stirring at the end so the fish stays intact.

## DIRECTIONS

**1** COOK THE BACON in a large pot over medium-low heat until golden, about 8 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and reserve. Add the chorizo to the fat in the pan, plus a glug of olive oil if needed, and cook, stirring, until crumbly and browned, about 6 minutes. Transfer with a slotted spoon to the bacon and reserve.

**2** ADD 2 TABLESPOONS olive oil and raise the heat to medium. Add the onion and bell peppers, scraping up any browned bits on the bottom of the pan, and cook until limp and golden, about 10 minutes. Add the chipotle and garlic along with the spices and continue to cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the diced tomatoes and their juice and cook for another minute, until the liquid reduces some, then add the clam juice along with 6 cups water. Add the bacon and chorizo and season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and simmer for 15 minutes.

**3** MEANWHILE, heat the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil in a sauté pan over high heat. Add the cherry tomatoes and sear, stirring and shaking the pan occasionally, until blackened and blistered

and beginning to collapse, about 6 minutes. Add a glug or two of olive oil if the pan begins to dry. Stir in the corn kernels and season generously with salt and pepper. Cook for 2 minutes, then remove from the heat.

**4** MAKE A SLURRY with the masa harina by mixing it with some of the simmering chili liquid in a small bowl, stirring it with a fork. Stir it back into the chili and simmer for another 5 minutes.

**5** SEASON THE FISH CHUNKS with salt and pepper and add to the pot along with the cherry tomatoes and corn. Cook for just 3 minutes or so, until the fish just begins to flake (it will continue cooking off the heat).

**6** LADLE INTO BOWLS and top as desired with avocado slices and cilantro sprigs. Squeeze lime juice over the top and serve.

## INGREDIENTS

- 3** thick slices bacon, cut crosswise into batons
- ½ lb.** chorizo, casings removed
- 4 Tbsp.** olive oil, divided
- 1** white onion, chopped
- 1** red bell pepper, chopped
- 1** yellow bell pepper, chopped
- 1** chipotle chile in adobo, minced (add a second for more heat)
- 2** garlic cloves, minced
- ½ tsp.** ground cumin
- 1 tsp.** dried oregano
- ½ tsp.** chili powder
- ½ tsp.** ground coriander
- 1** 14-oz. can fire-roasted diced tomatoes
- 8 oz.** clam juice
- 1 pint** grape or cherry tomatoes
- 1½ cups** corn kernels (approximately), removed from 2 ears of corn
- 2 Tbsp.** masa harina
- 1¼ lb.** pike or other meaty fish, cut into 1-inch chunks
- kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- sliced avocado, cilantro sprigs, and lime wedges, for serving**





# Small-Game Pozole Rojo

by DAVE HURTEAU

Serves 8

**T**HE FIRST TIME I MADE THIS RECIPE, with squirrels, was for a wild-game dinner party we threw for 40 or so friends and family members, mostly nonhunters. I'd already made several less-adventurous game dishes, and while I was cooking this one, my wife said, "What are you doing? Nobody's going to eat squirrel." "Fine," I said. "More for me."

As the evening wore on, I made my way to the pot—clearly marked "squirrel," and it was empty, not one bite left for me. Just then, one of my wife's friends, who'd had a drink or two, came over. She announced that she'd tried everything—except the squirrel. She would never eat squirrel. "It was all so good," she said. "But I think this is my favorite," motioning to the not-yet-empty bowl in her hand. "What is it?"

"That, Amanda," I said, "is the squirrel."

She kept on eating—and I still didn't get one bite. Since then, this small-game version of the traditional Mexican stew has become my go-to for game dinners and at hunting camp.

## DIRECTIONS

**1** MAKE THE RED CHILE SAUCE: Put the chiles, onion, and garlic in a medium saucepan. Cover with 4 cups of water and cook at a simmer until everything is soft, about 10 to 15 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool, covered, another 10 minutes or so. Transfer the chiles, onion, garlic, and most of the cooking liquid to a blender. Add the salt and cumin. Then blend, adding water as needed until you have a smooth sauce the consistency of tomato purée.

**2** IN A DUTCH OVEN, heat the lard or oil over medium-high heat and brown the meat, working in batches to avoid crowding the pot. Adjust heat as needed to prevent burning. When the last batch is browned, reduce heat to low. Wait a few minutes, then pour the chile sauce over the meat. Be ready with a cover or splatter guard because it's apt to bubble and spit.

**3** ONCE THE LIQUID comes to a slow simmer, stir to deglaze the pan, and return any removed browned meat to the pot. Add enough stock to cover the meat and simmer on low heat for 2 hours, or until

the meat is fork-tender. Stir occasionally and add more stock if it gets too thick.

**4** USING A SLOTTED SPOON or tongs, remove the meat from the pot and set aside to cool slightly. Add the hominy to the pot and continue to simmer.

**5** USE A FORK to pull the meat from the bone, and chop it roughly, if necessary, into bite-size pieces. Return it to the pot. Add half the cilantro and simmer for another 10 minutes.

**6** TASTE AND ADD SALT as needed. Ladle the pozole into bowls. Serve with sliced radishes, lime wedges, the rest of the cilantro, and warm tortillas. (Also, no one in my camp is going to call you out for being inauthentic if you melt a bunch of cheddar cheese on top of your serving.)

## INGREDIENTS

- 20 dried red chiles (see note), stemmed and deseeded
- 1 medium onion
- 4 garlic cloves
- 2 tsp. salt, plus more, to taste
- 1 tsp. cumin
- 3 Tbsp. lard or oil
- 4 rabbits (or 6 squirrels), skinned and quartered
- 4–5 cups chicken stock
- 5 15.5-ounce cans hominy
- 1 bunch fresh cilantro, chopped and divided

Sliced radishes, lime wedges, tortillas, and cheddar cheese (optional), for serving

**Note:** For a basic, mild sauce, use all guajillo chiles. To add a little smoky flavor, swap in two or three ancho chiles. For more heat, add a few chiles de arbol.



# Wild Turkey Chile Verde

by JEAN-PAUL BOURGEOIS

Serves 6

**S**PRING IS THE SEASON of new life and thunderous gobbles. I love this recipe because it combines many of the ingredients that come out of spring—turkeys from the woods and vegetables from our gardens—into one flavorful pot that everyone at camp can gather around. This chile verde is hearty, zippy, and different enough to feel new. Even better, you don't need to be a trained chef to cook it. It's worth noting that this dish only gets better overnight—if there's any left over. I like to enjoy it for breakfast with a couple of fried eggs on top.

## DIRECTIONS

**1** SEASON THE TURKEY lightly with salt and pepper. In a Dutch oven, heat the duck fat and brown the meat over medium heat, working in batches to avoid crowding the pot. Remove the meat and set aside.

**2** MEANWHILE, roast the tomatillos on a stovetop or grill until soft and the skin is blackened. Remove the skin and discard; set the tomatillos aside.

**3** IN THE SAME POT used for the turkey, add the onion and fresh chile peppers (if using). Cook until soft and just starting to brown. Add the garlic and cook for another 30 seconds. Sprinkle in the flour and stir constantly for 2 to 3 minutes. You want it to be lightly toasted, not dark. Add

the cumin, oregano, black pepper, and salt. Stir and cook until fragrant. Add the green chiles and tomatillos. Stir together in the pot until everything is nicely coated.

**4** SLOWLY ADD THE STOCK and the beer, scraping the bottom of the pot as you add the liquids. Return the turkey to the pot, along with any of its juices. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a gentle simmer. Cover and cook for 1½ to 2 hours, stirring occasionally, until the turkey is fork-tender. (Add water if the chili gets too thick.)

**5** TASTE AND ADD SALT as needed. Stir in the lime juice and chopped cilantro. Ladle the chili into bowls. Serve alongside warm tortillas or rice.



## INGREDIENTS

- 2–3 lb.** wild turkey (breast or thigh meat), trimmed and cut into 1- to 1½-inch cubes
- 2 Tbsp.** duck fat or bacon grease
- 6** tomatillos
- 1** large yellow onion, diced
- 1–2** jalapeño or serrano peppers, seeds removed and diced (optional)
- 4** garlic cloves, smashed and chopped
- 2 Tbsp.** flour
- 2 tsp.** ground cumin
- 1 tsp.** dried oregano
- 1 tsp.** black pepper, plus more for the turkey
- 1½ tsp.** kosher salt, plus more, to taste
- 4** 4-oz. cans (2 cups) roasted diced green chiles
- 2 cups** chicken or turkey stock
- 1** light beer or water
- juice of ½ lime
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- handful of chopped cilantro
- tortillas or rice, for serving





# Venison Chili

by JONATHAN MILES

Serves 8

**H**ERE IT IS, FOLKS: the ultimate bowl of deer-camp cookery at its most streamlined and exquisite. Use your tougher cuts for this—meat from the neck, shoulder, flank, brisket, or shanks—and cube them rather than grind them for a meatier, stewier chili. The pork adds what venison lacks: fat, which enhances flavor. Using beans? Fine. Chili purists will grumble, but purists are always grumbling. Plus, beans are the number one source of deer camp humor. But cook your beans separately, ladling the chili over the cooked beans when you serve it. The beans will be more tender this way, and the beans' starches won't render the chili gluey. Gluey is bad, but so is watery; hence the slurry of masa harina, or corn flour, that we add to thicken it up. Best served with cold beer, good friends, and tall tales.

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 lb.** venison, cut into ½-inch cubes
- 1 lb.** pork shoulder, cut into ½-inch cubes
- 3 Tbsp.** flour
- ¼ cup** vegetable oil
- 4** garlic cloves, minced
- 6 Tbsp.** ancho chile powder
- 1 Tbsp.** dried oregano
- 1 tsp.** freshly ground cumin seeds
- 4–5 cups** game or beef stock (or low-sodium beef broth)
- 1 Tbsp.** masa harina
- cayenne pepper, to taste (optional)**
- 4 cups** cooked pinto beans (optional; drained and rinsed if using canned)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- lime wedges, for serving**

## DIRECTIONS

- 1** Combine the meats in a bowl and add the flour along with some generous dashes of salt and pepper; stir until lightly and evenly coated. In a Dutch oven or large pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat and add the meat. Cook, stirring frequently, until the meat is browned on all sides. Add the garlic and cook 2 minutes. Add the chile powder, oregano, and cumin and stir until the meat is well coated. Slowly add 4 cups of the stock or broth, stirring.
- 2** Simmer, partially covered, for 1½ hours, or until the venison is fork-tender. Keep an eye on the pot, adding more stock or broth as necessary to keep it from sticking or becoming too thick. Mix the masa harina with water to make a paste, add, and stir well to incorporate. Simmer for an additional 10 minutes or so. This is also when you want to add salt, pepper and, if using, cayenne. Add as much cayenne as desired, remembering to be sensitive to children and old people. If using beans, heat them now in a separate pot.
- 3** To serve, ladle some beans into the bottom of a bowl and top with the chili. Serve with lime wedges.

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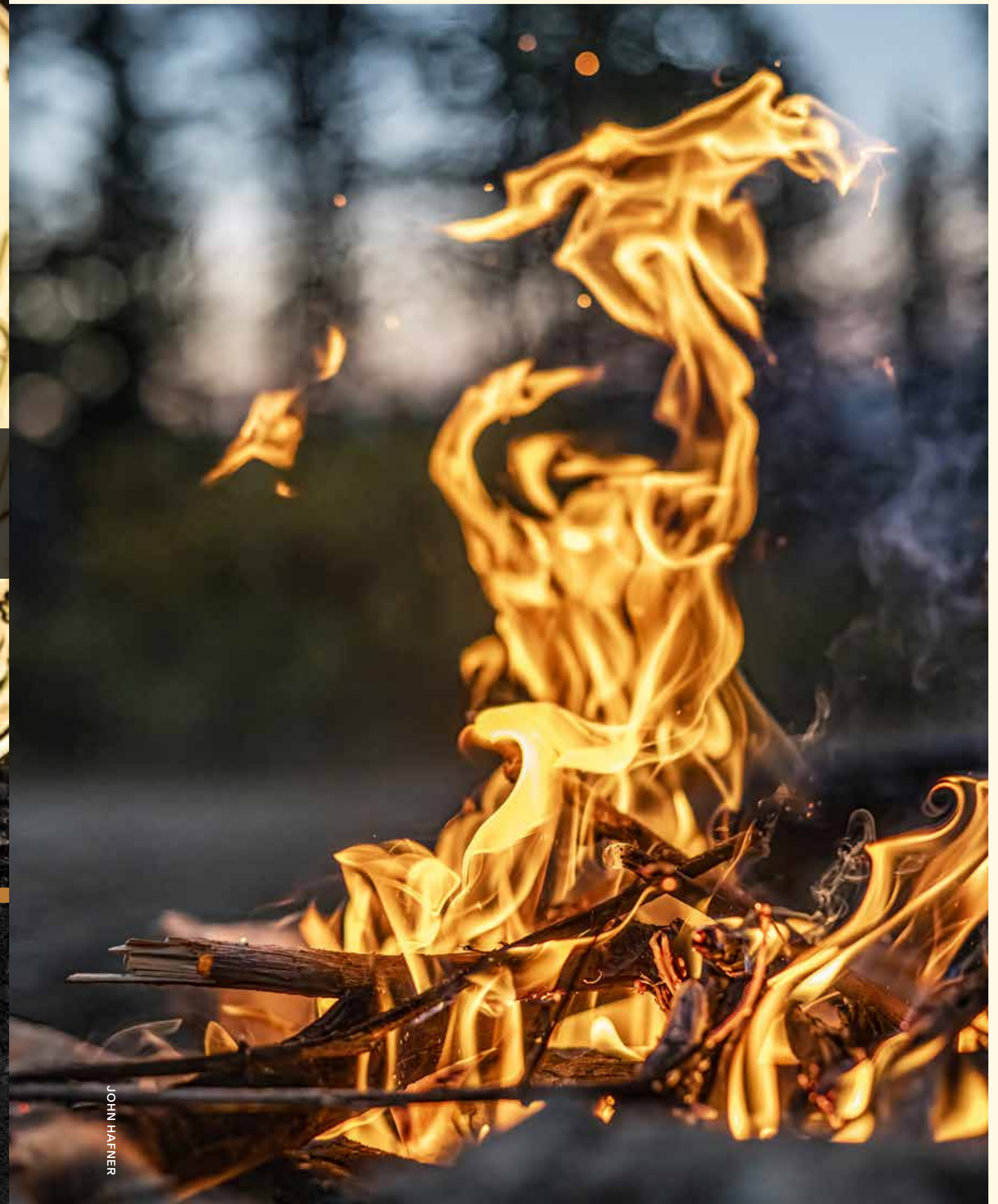
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JOHN HAFNER



## The Triple Crown

LAST SPRING, OUR SHOTGUNS EXPERT BECAME THE ONLY TURKEY HUNTER EVER TO CLAIM THIS ACHIEVEMENT. HE MADE SURE OF THAT

by PHIL BOURJAILY

FOSTER AND I, flat on our bellies in a picked beanfield on the South Dakota prairie, crowd behind a strutter decoy. Twenty yards away, nine jakes stare at us. For a moment, I think they might charge. They give us the side-eye as they walk past but decide not to take their chances with a 400-pound tom. When they're out of sight, we resume the stalk.

We crawl, crouch, hide behind trees, glass, and call. Using the tall banks of a creek for cover, we wade almost to the tops of my knee boots and over Foster's hikers. Ninety minutes after we spotted the tom, I tiptoe over a low rise and shoot

him at 12 steps, just as the first snowflakes of a coming storm drift out of the sky.

It's a trophy gobbler with long spurs, a thick beard, and the striking white-tipped feathers of a pure Merriam's. The way the legs dig into my shoulder on the hike back to the truck, I can tell that this turkey weighs every bit as much as a big Eastern back home. Foster and his guiding partner, Corey, insist I have the tom mounted. I tell them I'm not spending \$1,000 to have another thing to dust in my house. We make a deal: I give them my gobbler so they can have it mounted and then display it in their booth at sports shows. I will take home some donated turkey meat. It's a win-win. And I



A Nebraska Merriam's tom struts in a dewy field at daybreak, looking to lure hens from the early-morning gloom.

JOHN HAFNER

This tom is heavy, with beard rot and a broken spur, so he looks the part of the cranky big-woods hermit of my turkey-hunting dreams. He's perfect.



am leaving South Dakota with the first jewel in my Triple Crown.

### HOME (AND AWAY) RULES

Maybe you have never heard of it, but tagging gobblers in South Dakota, Iowa, and Indiana in a single spring season constitutes turkey hunting's fabled Triple Crown. I, too, had never heard of it until, with tags from those three states in hand, I made it up last March. Turkey hunters are always inventing slams, so why not a Triple Crown, I figured. Also, I made up oddly specific rules, retroactively, that assured I would be the only official Triple Crown winner in history if I could pull it off.

For instance, you need to shoot a borrowed 410 in South Dakota, and you can't hunt just anywhere. No, you have to do it the way we did: You stop at a convenience store for gas, snacks, and coffee somewhere far east of Rapid City. A local notices you in hunting clothes and asks, "What are you guys hunting?"

"Turkeys," you say.

"You should come hunt on my neighbor's place," he tells you. "It's full of turkeys. I'll give you his number."

You thank him for his kindness, call the landowner, and get the green light.

All of this has to happen, or it's not an official Triple Crown.

### DREAM BIRD

Indiana is the next stop on the Triple Crown trail. After an opening morning ruined by jakes, my friend Natalie takes me to a place in a national forest where we can walk for miles. We start at noon, both thinking what neither of us wants to admit out loud—that these afternoon hikes usually don't work. We'll trudge, calling into silent woods. It's something to do before the evening sit.

At the third stop, I yelp on a box. I cutt. I cutt louder. Silence. Already feeling as if this is futile, I yelp on a mouth call. And a turkey gobbles.

We set up, call, and decide the tom is not leaving his ridge. We back out to confer, and by *confer* I mean "argue." I suggest we loop left, then reconsider and say we should go right. Natalie says we should loop left. It's a deadlock until she wins with verbal jiu-jitsu: "We should follow your gut instinct and go left." This means: "I am right, you are wrong, but we'll pretend my idea was your idea."

Left it is.

The oak we find stands like an enchanted tree in a fairy tale, if there were fairy tales about turkey hunting. It's straight, wide, and hidden just inside the edge of the shadows thrown by a stand of pines behind it. A brook babbles past the tree just to make it more picturesque.

"There!" I say, perhaps too loudly, pointing. "We're sitting there." The right tree is very important to me. We sit, wait for a minute, and I call. We see the tom when it struts onto a sunny knob 50 yards away. When his head comes up at 40, I shoot.

Retroactive rule: To qualify for the Triple Crown, the Indiana turkey has to be the bird of your dreams, and it so happens that as a farmland hunter, I dream of striking up turkeys in big, public woods, which I have done only once before. This tom is heavy, with beard rot and a broken spur, so he looks the part of the cranky big-woods hermit of my turkey-hunting dreams. He's perfect. No matter what bird I get in Iowa, if I get one, this will be the brightest jewel in my Triple Crown.

### LAST LEG

Although I tag my home-state turkey pretty quickly, I don't make it easy. The

special retroactive Triple Crown rule for Iowa is: You've got to put the *clown* in *Triple Crown*.

Having sat in two different wrong places to hunt the lone gobbler on this farm two days in a row, I get up extra early to construct a small blind along a fence that should put me on his path. The rising sun reveals it to be an entirely inadequate hide, but it doesn't matter, because after two and a half hours, I've heard nothing. Cold and discouraged, I walk into the bare cornfield to look for the limb saw I lost the day before.

The saw is not there. Nor is my gun, which I left in the blind, so I am armed with nothing more than a Leatherman tool when the tom gobbles for the first time at 8 a.m. I run back to my blind, doubled over, learning along the way that doubled-over running is much more aerobically demanding than regular running.

In the blind, gun in hand, I wait until I stop wheezing, then I call. Nothing. As I'm kicking myself for running off the bird, he gobbles. When he gobbles again, I decide he's drifting away and that an end run along the wooded creek is my only chance. Halfway through the move, he gobbles twice more—on a beeline to where I'd been sitting.

There is no going back now. I plunk down by a tree along the creek. Having found no hen where there was supposed to be one, the tom is now on a mission. He cuts off my first call and comes in screaming. Turns out I had been playing 3D chess without knowing it. Also, I was playing 3D chess when checkers would have worked better.

The last few gobblers are loud enough to shake the woods in the creekbottom, except the woods aren't shaking. I am shaking. I spot the top of a white head. It disappears, then I see the tips of a fan. And then the bird is standing right in front of me, and I am steadying the red dot on its neck at the break between the warts and the feathers.

The turkey has a skinny 10-inch beard, which I should have mentioned is a requirement for the official Iowa bird. Lucky for me, it was the lightest turkey of the spring, which made it easier for me to bear the heavy, totally imaginary weight of the Triple Crown on the walk out. It is a weight you will never know, until you make up your own award. F&S



by WILL BRANTLEY

**M**ICHELLE, MY WIFE, came home early from work, slipped across the yard with the stealth of a wild cat, and stopped 10 feet behind me. I didn't know she was there because my eyes were closed. I was standing in the July sun, in front of a folding card table, on top of which I'd placed a bow target that I'd spray-painted black. I held my compound bow at full draw, eyes clenched. The scene could've passed for some meditative ritual.

I squeezed the trigger of my release aid and the bow fired—*cha-pop!*—burying the arrow in the target. The bow tilted forward slightly, and I held my form, being a little dramatic about it all, as some bowhunters are prone to do.

I opened my eyes, and Michelle slowly materialized in my peripheral vision. She was wearing large black sunglasses, smacking on a piece of gum, and smirking as if she'd been vindicated of something.

"What the hell are you doing, Will?" she asked.

## FULL-DRAW JITTERS

**THE IDEA THAT AIMING A COMPOUND BOW CAN TRIGGER FULL-BLOWN PANIC SEEMS CRAZY—UNTIL IT HAPPENS TO YOU**

"Working on my target panic," I said. Michelle, a bowhunter herself, narrowed her eyes and seemed genuinely puzzled. "I've always shot better with my eyes open."

I drew again, closed my eyes again, and anchored the string against my nose. I pushed with my left hand, pulled with the right, and the bow went off. *Cha-pop!*

It was the clear sound of emasculation.

### STRICKEN

Betting on me to hit a golf ball or strike out a batter would be a waste of your money. But I've always taken some pride in my ability with a bow and arrow. I killed my first archery buck 26 years ago and have filled my share of tags every bow season since. I've arrowed pigs, antelope, and mule deer, a Grand Slam of turkeys, and a dump-trailer-load of



When target panic strikes, it can take months of drilling before you're ready for the field again.

DAWSON RASMUSSEN/MATHEWS

The 10-pointer flicked his tail and stepped broadside into my best shooting lane, 16 yards away. I drew, and the pin hovered over the buck's vitals, not sagging at all.



rough fish. I've shot in a number of competitions and was the captain of *Field & Stream's* annual bow test for years.

I'd heard all about target panic, of course. I even had some hunting buddies—lifelong bowhunters, mind you—who had been terribly afflicted, to the point of ricocheting carbon shafts off trees while shooting at a 20-yard target. It was unthinkable to me at the time. How could anyone suddenly become afraid to aim a bow?

Then something strange started happening a couple of years ago. Sometimes when I'd draw my bow and anchor up, my sight pin would slowly sink below the spot where I wanted to shoot. When I tried to raise the bow to get the pin on target, it was as if the bottom limb was bungeed to my big toe, and as time went on, the bungee cord got tighter. Eventually, trying to aim my bow became like trying to stick the positive sides of two magnets together.

At first it was more of a problem on the range than in the woods. I like to hold a bit low on whitetails anyway, particularly from a tree stand. Then one evening in the fall of 2024, I shot right underneath a doe at 18 yards. I laughed that one off, but the next two deer I missed, both inside 25 yards, hurt. I still couldn't hit a golf ball or throw a baseball—but now it seemed like I couldn't shoot a bow either.

*I'm the damned hunting editor of Field & Stream, I thought. I'll practice my way out of this.* I hit the range every day—but it only made the problem worse. One afternoon, standing 20 yards from the target, I came to full draw and when my pin floated over the target, I lowered the bow abruptly and accidentally, without triggering the release. The arrow popped off the string

and landed in the grass at my feet, as if I were too much of a physical weakling to pull the bow back to begin with. I'd have gladly done more push-ups if I thought it would help—but I knew the problem was in my head and not in my arms. I also knew that I had no business shooting at another deer until something changed.

### FESSING UP

It's not easy admitting to a buddy that you've lost your nerve, but I knew my friend Keith Meador—a former state 3D champion, and an archery coach and bowhunter—would understand. He listened, agreed that it was horrifying, and said, "A lot of guys go through this," which didn't make me feel better. Meador believed that my symptoms were a result of focusing so closely on the spot I wanted to hit that my brain wasn't allowing me to cover said spot with the sight pin. Then he suggested some drills, starting with shooting at a very close target with my eyes shut.

"Also shorten your release aid and make your index finger into a hook so you're not tripping the trigger with your fingertip," he said, knowing that I prefer to shoot with a wrist-strap release. He told me to push the bow with one hand and pull with the other, letting that hook fire the shot. He explained that after a couple weeks, I'd be ready to open my eyes and shoot at a blank target. And after a couple weeks of that, I'd be ready to aim at something. "Unless you still feel panicked," he said finally. "In which case, you should start all over."

I spent weeks shooting with my eyes closed before slowly opening them, like a newborn, and then spent weeks shooting without aiming at anything. Next, I added 1-inch orange stickers to the

target face, drew and held on them, then lowered. I spent entire practice sessions just drawing and aiming, without firing an arrow, all the while trying to remember what a good shot I'd once been.

Finally, I did start aiming and shooting, at tiny spots the size of pencil erasers, from 5 yards away. In the weeks before last fall's bow season, I moved back to 10 yards, then 15, then 20. Sometimes the panic would start to creep in, but even the shots that didn't break perfectly were well within the margin of a deer's vitals. One evening, Michelle stepped outside when I was at full draw. I could see her in my peripheral vision, and my instinct was to become nervous with an audience. But I focused instead. *Push. Pull. Hold.* I threaded the arrow into such a tight group that a nock broke, and Michelle smiled and said, "Looks like the old-man jitters are getting a little better."

### STEADY NOW

I believe a whitetail buck is prettiest during the first 24 hours after shedding his velvet. Then his antlers will be smooth and stained a light pink, unmarked by fighting or cedar bark. His coat will be sleek and gray but streaked with the red remnants of summer. Bucks are secretive during this time, and it's really just us bowhunters who get to see them. It's exactly how the 10-pointer looked when I saw him rise from his bed and begin walking toward my stand on the second day of bow season.

I almost stood to get into position, but then I noticed the toady, a young 6-point that was hanging with the larger buck, already in range and getting closer. I was afraid I'd spook him by standing, so I planned for a seated shot instead. I adjusted my knees slightly to the right, held my bow ready on the left, and attached the release to the D-loop. The 10-pointer flicked his tail and stepped broadside into my best shooting lane, 16 yards away. I drew. *Push. Pull. Hold.* My index finger was a hook over the trigger, and the pin hovered over the buck's vitals, not sagging at all.

*Cha-pop!*

It was the clear sound of a perfect arrow. Seconds later, from my stand, I could see a white belly, lying still in the leaves, and I had the jitters again—but the good kind, because I knew there was no reason at all to panic. F&S



# ROADS TO NOWHERE

**THE ROADLESS RULE DOESN'T BLOCK OUR ACCESS TO WILDEST PLACES. IT BLOCKS GOVERNMENT HANDOUTS TO THOSE WHO WOULD DEFILE THEM**

by HAL HERRING

**I**N MY MID-20S, I taught myself to fish dry flies for trout on Rock Creek in western Montana. I'd fished several of the state's more renowned rivers with some success, but I needed a smaller river where I could see cause and effect, where I could toss a grasshopper into a narrow braid and study how it tumbles on seams

of current and circles in small eddies, and watch how a fish takes it. I needed an intimate look at a major hatch of bugs—caddis, in the case of my first Rock Creek trip, clouds of them pogo-dancing in shafts of summer sunlight, so many bugs that the murmur of the river was muffled by the electric sizzling of their wings, fish slashing at them as they dipped to lay their eggs on the surface.

I apprenticed myself to Rock Creek, starting with the upper forks then moving downriver, where everything gets bigger and wilder, to the lower reaches famous for early-summer salmonfly and golden stonefly hatches, insects that only thrive in the cleanest and coldest of our free-flowing waters.

Rock Creek is a gem of the American West, and anyone who loves it like I do, or who someday will, can be thankful that the high country where it's born is too steep and rocky to grow the big-timber trees that would have caused us to push roads into it, log it, and alter the perfection of its contours and aspects. These headwaters, by no accident, are conserved by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation

Rule, the same so-called Roadless Rule that the current administration is trying to rescind.

## RUNAWAY ROADS

From 1960 to 1989, logging companies contracted by the U.S. Forest Service produced between 10 billion and 12 billion board feet of timber every year, a harvest that required the constant construction of new roads to reach the timber and get it out. At the peak of the extraction, the Forest Service inventoried 370,000 miles of wilderness roads, enough to circle the planet almost fifteen times, enough to travel to the moon and halfway back. Such a road system costs a fortune to build and maintain—a fortune paid not from the windfall to private logging companies, but by you and me.

By the 1990s, most of our best public-land timber had been cut. The cost of



A sign marks the edge of 9.2 million acres of protected timberlands in Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

IAN ALLEN

pushing new roads in to access a diminishing supply of marginally valuable timber no longer made sense. Meanwhile, the vast network of increasingly unmaintained logging roads was eroding, dumping sediment into the headwaters of rivers, degrading world-class fisheries and water supplies that sustain Western economies. Looking for a solution, the Forest Service surveyed millions of acres, cataloging areas that were too steep to build roads and mapping critical watersheds that could be damaged. The result, after more than a decade of study, was the 2001 Roadless Rule. Of the 192 million acres of public land managed by the Forest Service, about 58.5 million were deemed unsuitable for the construction of new roads.

The Roadless Rule was subjected to rigorous review, during which the Forest Service received more than 1.6 million public comments, over 90 percent of which were in favor of it. Supporters ranged from traditional conservation groups like Trout Unlimited to fiscal conservatives like Taxpayers for Common Sense, who in a letter to then President Bush wrote, "Poor road maintenance and continued road construction have resulted in an estimated \$10 billion backlog for road maintenance.... [I]n addition to footing the bill for this backlog, federal taxpayers have already paid \$124 million over the last five years to subsidize the construction of timber access roads."

Chris Wood, the CEO of Trout Unlimited, who worked for the Forest Service during the years when the Roadless Rule was being created, told me recently that "the Forest Service was tearing its hair out trying to get into these backcountry areas, only to lose money on timber sales nobody in the community really wanted. These are some of the finest places to fish and hunt in the world. But the real reason we went forward with the Roadless Rules was the Rule of Holes. When you dig a hole that's too deep, and you can't get out of it, you put down the shovel. It was a conservative argument—if you can't take care of the roads you have, why would you build more?"

Among the politicians now pushing to rescind the Roadless Rule, the answer is: To help their donors cash in, and their ultimate prize is Alaska's 16.7-million-acre Tongass, the largest national forest in the U.S. During the Tongass logging

boom of the 1980s, taxpayer money flowed like a fire hose into the pockets of a select few corporations that held monopolies on public timber. According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, between 1980 and 2019, the Forest Service lost about \$55 million per year on sales of timber from the Tongass.

Now the same interests are hell-bent on opening the 9.2 million acres of the Tongass currently protected by the Roadless Rule and getting that fire hose pointed back in their own direction. Estimates put the taxpayer cost of building new roads in the Tongass at half a million dollars per mile. Meanwhile, nobody seems to be factoring in the cost of cleaning up the mess from the last logging boom, which damaged salmon fisheries and resulted in the wide-scale collapse of blacktail deer populations.

## PICK A LANE

While the Tongass may be ground zero, we all have a dog in this fight, whether you live in Alabama, where there are 13,000 acres of roadless public lands, or Pennsylvania, with 25,000, or Montana, with 6 million. Yet we are not speaking as one voice.

When the Roadless Rule was written 25 years ago, it had widespread support from American hunters and anglers. Today, some are rooting for the rule's demise, imagining that some evil cabal of feds and enviro-meddlers are blocking their rightful access to national forests. They want new roads built into these last places so that they can drive there to hunt and fish. Never mind that many protected areas already have existing roads and/or ATV access. The bigger point is this: New roads will not be built for your benefit. They have only ever, and will only ever, be built for the benefit of private industry, which will surely defile the very places you want easier access to.

The power brokers clamoring to rescind the Roadless Rule don't care about hunting or fishing or wild places. This is about economics first, and the will of some to privatize their profits and socialize their costs by way of our public lands—leaving us to clean up their mess. You don't have to be an outdoorsperson to oppose the repeal of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. You just need to be an American taxpayer.

**The power brokers clamoring to rescind the Roadless Rule don't care about hunting or fishing or wild places. This is about economics first, and the will of some to privatize their profits and socialize their costs by way of our public lands.**



But we *are* outdoorspeople, and we have more than our tax dollars to protect. In a world increasingly paved and tamed, where electric lights drown out the stars, and the roar of our engines deafens us to the sound of birdsong and waterfalls and elk bugles, can't we agree to leave these last undeveloped public lands free of new roads? Isn't 370,000 miles of them on our national forest land enough? After all, we are talking about the last native brook trout streams of the East, and the redoubts of giant mule deer bucks and bull elk in the West, still available to anyone for the price of a hike. Isn't there value there, for ourselves and our grandchildren? Don't we want to pass on a world where clouds of caddisflies still buzz above Rock Creek's pristine braids, running as cold and pure as when I first fished them? We can do that. We can hand down the gift of truly wild places—but first we need stand together to preserve the Roadless Rule. F&S



# GROCERY FISHING

CATCH-AND-RELEASE HAS ITS PLACE, OF COURSE, BUT THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR THE SATISFACTION OF COOKING YOUR CATCH—PREFERABLY IN HOT OIL

by T. EDWARD NICKENS



An angler positions his raft close to the bank on the New River to cast for smallmouths.

NICK KELLEY

**M**Y BUDDY, Matt Maness, held up a smallmouth bass. It was on the short side, but we weren't fishing for monsters. We just needed some dinner fish.

"What do you think?" he asked

I eyeballed the smallie, nose tip to tail. Bigger would be better, but it was certainly worth a few mouthfuls. Pretty fat for its size. And the fins were in good shape. I like a fried fin like nobody's business.

We were on the New River in Virginia, in the middle of a three-day float trip, and we planned to eat what we caught for every dinner and maybe a lunch or two. Grocery fishing. We were catching a ton of smallmouth bass, but most needed a year or two to reach a respectable pan size. The thing was, we didn't really have a minimum size for the fish we would keep. Instead, there was a case-by-case analysis, with variables including how much longer we had to fish and how hungry we thought we would be come dinnertime.

What was the cutoff? Six inches? Seven? Longer than my hand's width with my thumb and fingers stretched out? Every fish got eyeballed.

"I don't know," I said. "I reckon we have all day. If it were 3 o'clock, maybe I'd feel different."

"Agreed," Matt replied. "We'll let it go." He slipped the fish off the hook, and it vanished in the flip of what should have been a very grateful tail.

I'm not one to anthropomorphize much, but I do think I saw a bead of sweat drip off the smallie's forehead.

## NEXT STOP: CRISCO COUNTY

I've spent a bunch of time lately firmly rooted in the catch-and-release world. Not because I'm against killing fish.

Hardly. But I've been chasing mostly saltwater fish with a fly or cutthroat trout in the West. Neither scenario typically leads to a fish in a frying pan.

But Matt and I were largely feeding ourselves on this trip. We pulled his drift boat to a friend of a friend's private dirt launch on the New River—where the water shimmies and snakes through cliff-armored valleys—and we pushed off with camping gear and fishing tackle, plus peanut oil, fried-fish breadding, and a shaker of Old Bay. We'd catch fish or go hungry. And we're not the sort to suffer hunger.

There was a certain pureness of spirit about it—pureness of intent: We needed dinner and planned to eat our catch, and while we certainly couldn't eat all the fish we caught, there was a certain size that a fish needed to attain to make it worth scaling on a river rock and frying in a pan.

I try my best to minimize my impacts on fish. I'm a full-on believer in best-handling practices. Save the slime. Don't drag them through the sand. Support larger fish horizontally. Smash down barbs—at least when I remember to do so. I've replaced most of the treble hooks on my trolling rigs. I've seen enough mangled fish faces on InstaFace for a couple of lifetimes.

But let a rod bend with a decent fish when I'm grocery fishing, and I have no remorse. String it up, because that fish is headed for Crisco County.

## PICTURE PERFECT

Bent over a rock in the river, I scale fish with the edge of a spoon. The river purls all around, braiding into channels, gurgling over the rocky flat by our gravel-bar campsite. The fish's scales

float downriver, pulled into tiny eddies and vortices that send them spinning around like miniature silver roulette wheels. A bald eagle crosses the river overhead. Jealous, I bet.

To be honest, I'd forgotten how much I enjoy standing in a river, cleaning fish, and frying them in a cheap pan. I throw the heads and guts in the water, as far as I can fling them, and stand up slowly. I'd also forgotten how creaky my knees get after a day in a boat.

In the pan are four cleaned and gutted smallmouth bass. They will be fried in sizzling oil, flipped once, and eaten with our fingers. I pull my phone out to snap a picture of the fish in the pan, the river unfurling behind, sunset colors in the sky and along the mountain ridge. It would make a solid social media post. But I never hit the shutter button. In the moment, posting on social media seemed more like boasting about my exploits than sharing a moment of simplicity and meaning. Had they the choice, the four fish in my pan would unquestionably rather still be in the river, living their best smallmouth bass lives. They deserved better than a hashtag.

As did I. The memories of the catch, the hot pricks of sizzling oil on the backs of my hands as I flipped the fillets with a metal fork, the taste of fried bass fins—all that and more I will carry around in the data center that resides above my two shoulders.

Matt stirred the campfire and cleaned his plate.

"More, please," he said.

I nodded. More rivers and sunsets, more camping under the stars, more simplicity, more long moments silent by the fire, more fish eaten with fingers. More of everything, please. FRS

In the pan are four cleaned and gutted smallmouth bass. They will be fried in sizzling oil, flipped once, and eaten with our fingers.





## DON'T MISS!

**OK, THE TRUTH IS THAT WE ALL WHIFF ON OCCASION, EVEN ON EASY SHOTS. BUT HERE'S HOW TO MISS A LOT LESS OFTEN**

by **RICHARD MANN**

**I** WAS 17 and hunting with a buddy at his friend's family hunting camp. Just at dawn, we were all standing on the porch readying our gear while the regulars told stories and I felt like the spare tire that I was. I stepped into the yard beside the house, and that's when I saw the buck. He had massive antlers and was

walking through a dew-covered hayfield in the morning haze, headed toward timber about 200 yards away. I hissed, "Big buck!" Then I dropped into a prone position and found the deer in my rifle scope.

One of the guys in the family had been my algebra teacher, and in a confident, claiming voice, he said, "I've got him." So I lay there like a good guest, with my reticle on the buck's chest, waiting

for the shot. Then I waited some more as the big deer neared the trees—and I kept waiting, until the buck finally stopped to look our way. I almost pulled the trigger. Instead, I looked over my shoulder and saw the mathematician, rifle rested on a porch post, fiddling with his riflescope.

With the sun warming the Appalachian sky, giving it the orange-red glow that signifies rain, the buck shook his head and massive rack, pointed his nose toward the woods, and resumed his morning stroll. Just as he quickened his pace to disappear into the trees, Einstein's 30-06 roared. It was a clean miss.

It rained all day and none of us saw that buck again, or any other. That night, the family gave my old teacher some hell about his whiff. He said he couldn't get his scope focused, that the buck wouldn't stand still, and that the porch post was too wobbly. I told him I figured he just hadn't done the math. Everyone laughed at that and gave no credence whatsoever to his excuses. They'd all missed deer before and knew exactly where the blame lay. Meanwhile, I was sure that I'd have made the shot and was madder than a wet cat. I ate my dinner, got in my truck, and drove home, cursing my grandfather and father for teaching me such good manners.

### WHIFF WISDOM

Of course, I've missed plenty too. I put an arrow right between the antlers of the first buck I ever shot at with a recurve. I could tell you that I was distracted by a squirrel cutting nuts above me in the tree, which isn't entirely untrue, but the real reason I missed was because I forgot to aim. I missed another nice buck

**There is absolutely no need to practice making up excuses for the shots you're going to miss, because there are two other kinds of hunters: the ones who've heard a lot of excuses, and the ones who've heard them all.**

without even pulling the trigger. The big 11-point stepped onto an old haul road about 30 yards in front of me. The seconds I spent counting his points I should have spent unslinging my rifle, and he disappeared into a mountain-laurel thicket. Maybe I didn't miss that shot, but I did miss my chance because I was walking around casually with my rifle slung on my shoulder.

I like to say that there are two types of hunters in this world: those who have missed and those who are going to. So, yeah, missing happens. But it's not dictated by fate; it doesn't happen randomly and for no reason. Missing almost always happens because we screw up.

Years ago, on my first safari with renowned professional hunter Geoffrey Wayland, we were standing by his Land Cruiser when a nice springbok ram walked up to say hello at about 60 yards. I'd just been telling stories—bragging—about my previous safaris, when Geoffrey told me to shoot the ram. So I shot, and the springbok ran off unfazed while Geoffrey looked at me like he thought I'd gone cross-eyed. I was jet-lagged from the 18-hour flight, and I'm sure I mentioned that to Geoffrey, but I missed because I jerked the trigger like I was yanking the lead of an overeager hound.

I could go on, but I'd rather get to the good news, which is that I rarely miss anymore because I started following two pieces of advice a wise old hunter once gave me that I'm going to share with you. First, when you do miss, make sure you critique the shot to figure out what you did wrong. Then don't do that anymore. Second, never take a shot that you're not sure you can make.

### PRACTICE, PRACTICE...

Following those two simple precepts will go a long way toward cutting down on your misses, but there is one other thing you have to do. It's something you know you should do but you probably don't do enough. Practice. Practice being ready so you always are. Practice focusing on the right spot so that's where you shoot. Practice not jerking the trigger like you're yanking a tick from your neck. And most important, practice enough so you know what shots, from what positions and with what rests, you are actually capable of making with a high degree of certainty.

There is absolutely no need, however, to practice making up excuses for the shots you're going to miss, because there are two other kinds of hunters: the ones who've heard a lot of excuses, and the ones who've heard them all.

Of course, even when you think you've practiced all the misses out of your system, it'll still happen (though less frequently). Just a few years ago, while whitetail hunting near the Four-Sixes Ranch in Texas, my guide spotted a coyote on the drive to the stand. I bailed out to take a standing offhand shot at about 80 yards, but I just couldn't steady the rifle, and I snatched the trigger when the crosshair passed over the animal's tawny body. The coyote ran off, I got back in the truck, and my giggling guide asked what had happened. By then I'd gained enough experience to know the worse thing to do was to give an excuse. So I said, "I just missed."

"And you did a damn fine job of it," he said. "It was one of the best misses I've ever seen." F&S

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A Texas rifle hunter pulls up on an 8-point buck that he rattled into gimme range. But in the heat of the moment, nothing is guaranteed.

LON LAUBER



by JOE CERMELE

IT WAS THE FINAL MILE, the edge of daylight, the last chance. In just a few hours, a March ice storm the local news warned could cripple southern Arkansas would start pummeling the Ozarks. We weren't sure we'd be able to drive from the motel to the nearest breakfast joint in the morning, let alone expect my friend and guide, Brian Wise, to launch his drift boat. So it was now or never.

I couldn't see much. I just cast the 7-inch black Double Deceiver wherever Wise said to as he rowed the tight North Fork of the White River in near darkness. I'd already been stripping for hours, rewarded by only a couple of grabs from smaller browns. Honestly, my head was no longer in the game. I was focused on how cramped my fingers were, unaware that my first real big-streamer moment was seconds away. It would redefine my

## Put Some Spin On It

WHY THE SECRET TO BETTER FLY FISHING MIGHT BE TO LEAVE THE FLY ROD AT HOME

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A streamer hangs from the mouth of a rainbow trout in shallow water. Big fly patterns like this are a great way to single out trophy fish.

FIELD & STREAM

Big-streamer tactics have very little in common with traditional fly fishing and everything in common with throwing lures. The proof is in the patterns.

was 2011 when I finally met up with Wise to fish the famed White River and its branches, which, thanks in part to him, were to streamer junkies what Graceland is to Elvis fans.

With a quarter mile left to the take-out on that chilly, windy night on the North Fork, strip two-thousand-and-change snapped tight, and somehow I didn't screw it up. The rod throbbed as the fish bucked and thrashed on the surface out in the darkness. That brown measured 23 inches and felt like it weighed 4 pounds. It was my first "real" one but not the last that would make me question what makes a fish "real" in the first place.

### WORD SPREAD

There was a dirty little secret hiding behind the big-streamer craze of the 2010s, something not many people really wanted to talk about. A lot of streamer guys—aka meat chuckers—fancied themselves cooler than old-school nymph and dry-fly anglers but not necessarily better. But if you showed up to the river with a spinning rod and a hard-plastic jerkbait, well, a lot of streamer anglers wouldn't give you the time of day. As someone who grew up fishing conventional gear for trout and who never went full "fly or die," I took issue with that mindset, mostly because I realized that big-streamer tactics have very little in common with traditional fly fishing and everything in common with throwing lures. The proof is in the patterns.



outlook on trout and ultimately rearrange my view of the relationship between fly and conventional angling.

### JUMPING ON THE MEAT WAGON

Wise didn't invent the drug, but he was one hell of a pusher. Around 2010, when the big-streamer craze was in its infancy, he had the foresight to start dropping well-made tying tutorials on his Fly Fishing the Ozarks YouTube channel. What I knew of trout streamers at the time was Zonkers, Muddlers, Buggers, and Mickey Finns. Then came the Butt Monkey, the Voodoo Squatch, the Hog Snare, and the Chubby Muffin, to name a few. It wasn't just the flies; it was the emerging counterculture that seemed to reject traditional fly fishing: *Forget your nymphs. Stuff your midges. We don't care how pretty that 14-incher is; we're here for the biggest, gnarliest trout in the system.*

During my first season messing with these patterns on some home waters, I was sold. I caught more big browns than I ever had before, but nothing crazy. It

Big streamers didn't fool big browns just because of their size. Creative tying, smart use of materials, and advances in synthetic materials harmonized to create flies with profiles and actions we'd never seen before. They darted, shimmied, wiggled, jackknifed, and breathed like no trout streamers of the past, which meant they couldn't have drawn much inspiration from old flies.

Instead, innovative tiers took a lot from the conventional swimbait craze happening at the same time. Michigan's Tom Lynch, creator of the insanely potent Drunk and Disorderly streamer, once told me its wedged head is modeled after the lip of a Rapala Minnow. Adding articulated sections to patterns helped these flies move like bass fishing's glide baits and swimbaits. Dumbbell eyes and internal weighting made flies behave like soft-plastic jigs. Even Wise once told

me that if you really want to get good at streamer fishing, leave the fly rods at home and fish gear. So, I took his advice and swapped my streamers for jerkbaits, swimbaits, and soft plastics.

Somehow, I convinced a fly-only buddy of mine to float one of our favorite Pennsylvania rivers with nothing but spinning gear. I sold it as an experiment: *We know where to throw streamers, but let's cover more water faster and find out what we're missing.* It turned out to be a lot. With the ability to make more casts in more places, we uncovered new lies, nooks, and crannies holding big, willing browns. In very little time, my obsession with tying big streamers morphed into custom painting my jerkbaits and playing with oddball soft plastics. It became a game of what *can't* we get them to eat? Of course, it's not surprising that fishing with gear upped catch rates, but it might be surprising that what I'm most pumped about now is sharing what I've learned with buddies who refuse to pick up a spinning rod.

### LET'S GET REAL

I can tell someone when to switch to a slow sink tip and unweighted fly. I can tell them when to cast a pattern with heavy eyes, when to throw extra mends before starting to strip so the fly gets to where it needs to go, and when to just twitch the fly as it swings versus swimming it back to the boat. I can tell them to throw one quick shot at a rock or pocket most people would float by like I did for years. I can give you a better shot at a trophy trout on a streamer because I was willing to put my streamer rod down after so many years of having it superglued to my hand, which brings us back to the question of what's "real?"

Size makes a fish real. To me, the method is irrelevant. I have a hard time saying catching a big brown on a Double Deceiver is a bigger achievement than getting one on a Smithwick Rattlin' Rogue because they're essentially the same things presented with different levels of efficiency. If that lack of efficiency with a fly is what makes your fish legit, I say more power to you. But if you can bring yourself to play on both sides of the fence and pick up a spinning rod now and again, you'll become a much better fly fisherman—and that's about as real as it gets. F&S

JIM KLUG



## HERE COMES THE IRISH

AFTER NEARLY BECOMING EXTINCT IN THE UPLANDS, THE IRISH SETTER HAS RECLAIMED ITS PLACE AS AN ELITE HUNTING BREED

by TOM DAVIS

WE WERE HUNTING sharptails in western South Dakota, not far from the place where the frontiersman Hugh Glass, savagely mauled by a grizzly and more dead than alive, began his 200-mile journey to Fort Kiowa on the Missouri River. There are no grizzlies in that country now, of course, but the landscape itself probably doesn't look

much different than it did in Glass's day: a sweep of tawny grassland unfurling to hazily distant horizons, cleft here and there by deep ravines and studded at irregular intervals by looming buttes and chalky spires.

It's an intimidating prospect but also a thrilling one. And now Oats, Nathan Dhuey's fine-boned Irish setter, was locked up on point. She was below us on the slope, down where it flattened out

into a kind of bench, and as we worked our way into shooting position, her posture and intensity told us that the birds were *right there*. A few moments later, as

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A stone-faced Irish Setter goes on point during a hunt for Hungarian partridge near Springdale, Montana.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

Once Dhuey turns her loose in the field, she morphs into the Red Rocket, flying over the prairies, tail cracking high, her mind on birds every step of the way.

if to dispel any lingering doubt, a couple of sharptails poked their heads up above the grass. I needed one bird to finish my limit—Dhuey had already filled his—and the sight of those heads, the feathers atop them crested in alarm, jangled my nerves.

That's the story I tell to explain my wildly errant first shot anyway.

Thankfully, I bore down with the second barrel and connected solidly. For Oats and Dhuey, who've collaborated on a lot of sharptail limits over the course of their partnership, the morning had been business as usual. But for me it seemed pretty damn remarkable. I'm old enough to remember when the Irish setter wasn't on the radar of serious bird hunters, who would tell you that the red dogs had had "the hunt bred out of them."

### LOST ART

The artist John M. Tracy, who painted virtually all of the important pointing dogs of the 1870s, '80s, and early '90s (he died in 1893), and who judged many of them in field trials, spoke for an entire generation of American sportsmen when he said, "The very best field dog I ever saw was an Irish setter. For those who shoot a great deal and work the same dog on a variety of game, there is no dog like a good Irish setter."

By the mid-20th century, though, "good Irish setters" had become relics of a fondly remembered past. As Dr. Charles C. Norris put it in his 1946 book *Eastern Upland Shooting*, "Ask half-a-dozen old-time gunners what was the best dog they ever shot over, and chances are that half of them will answer, an Irishman."

What happened to the red dogs over those 50 to 60 years? The simplest explanation is that breeders increasingly focused on beauty (read: the standards of the show ring) and ignored functionality. The qualities that had so endeared the Irish setter to sportsmen of Tracy's era inevitably atrophied. The tall, narrow, lustrously coated dogs that looked like a million bucks sashaying around the show ring looked like aimlessly lumbering doofuses in the grouse woods or the pheasant fields—and on the rare occasion when they pointed a bird, their attitude was so slack and unconvincing it could be hard to know exactly what they were up to.

A few breeders had continued to stick to their guns, striving to produce brainy, ruggedly athletic Irish of the "old" type, but as their numbers dwindled, finding a red dog with the right stuff for the field became intimidatingly difficult. The situation grew so desperate that by the 1940s many of the country's top dog writers—including Horace Lytle of F&S, who in the 1920s had owned Smada Byrd, one of the last reds to make a splash in field trials—warned that if a concerted effort weren't made to save the Irish setter, it was in real danger of passing from the scene as a working gun dog.

And that might have happened were it not for a group of sportsmen who banded together to found the National Red Setter Field Trial Club, dedicating themselves to what they called The Purest Challenge: the restoration of the Irish setter as a legitimate hunting dog capable of holding its own with the finest pointers and English setters in the land. Many contributed to this effort, but one man, W.E. "Ned" LeGrande of Douglassville, Pennsylvania, led the way. LeGrande scoured the United States for Irish setters that could hunt, find birds, and look good doing it, finding a few that satisfied his criteria but rejecting many more.

LeGrande's greatest discovery, bar none, was a smallish female with a white blaze on her chest named Askew's Carolina Lady. Acting on a tip that a farmer in Enfield, North Carolina, owned an Irish setter that was the best quail dog in that part of the state, he drove down to check her out. He initially had some reservations—she was already 5 years old, she had a mysterious lump on her neck, and a male would have been more

useful to his breeding program—but when he saw in her action, sailing over the broom sedge only to slam into a high-tailed point on the home covey, he knew he had to have her. Her owner drove a hard bargain but, as LeGrande recalled, they "sat down over a jug of cider" and came to terms.

Lady became the cornerstone of the breeding program at LeGrande's Willow Winds Kennels—and a game-changer for the fortunes of the hunting Irish setter in America. If her white-hot blood hadn't come along to revitalize the breed...well, that's something that the Irish setter faithful don't like to think about.

### BETTER THAN EVER

It didn't happen overnight, of course, but over time, as the architects of The Purest Challenge continued to breed the best to the best and to measure their results against the yardstick provided by the pointer and the English setter, they achieved something truly remarkable: They brought the hunting Irish setter back from the dead.

In the words of legendary professional trainer Sherry Ebert, "They're so much more consistent than they used to be. You used to get one or two good pups out of a litter; now every pup is good. A lot of Irish setters tended to be hyper too, and frankly, kind of dense. Not now! They're so much smarter and more trainable, and they have a better temperament all the way around."

After observing Oats for four years now on our South Dakota treks, I'd offer her as Exhibit A. Around camp, she's as calm and sweet-tempered as she could possibly be. She's Dhuey's bunkmate in the camper too, but once he turns her loose in the field, she morphs into the Red Rocket, flying over the prairies, tail cracking high, her mind on birds every step of the way. One morning last September, after we'd all circled back to the trucks, I asked Dhuey how many miles Oats had put on. He glanced at his handheld and smiled.

"Twenty-eight," he said. "Seventeen at the first place, eleven here."

He was carrying a limit of sharptails and a couple of bonus Huns, all of them shot over Oats's points. Until someone figures out how to teach a dog to clean birds, I don't know what else you could expect a dog to do. F&S

# Smoked Walleye

BRING RICH FLAVOR TO YOUR CATCH AND SERVE IT OVER A HEARTY PILE OF STEWED NETTLES AND BOILED POTATOES



## INGREDIENTS

- 1 walleye, 3–4 pounds (or 2 smaller fish)
- 1 cup salt, plus more for seasoning
- ½ cup light brown sugar
- 1 Tbsp. ground fennel seeds
- ½ lb. fingerling potatoes
- ½ lb. stinging nettles (or other hearty greens like watercress, mature spinach, or chard)
- 2 Tbsp. butter
- 1 onion, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 lemon, quartered
- flaky salt, for finishing

by JONATHAN MILES  
photographs by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI  
styling by ROSCOE BETSILL

**F**EW COOKS UNDERSTAND the primacy of ingredients quite like hunters and anglers. Fewer still pursue them with the intensity of Cincinnati chef David Jackman, who in addition to catching wild fish spends long days combing the woods for native berries, mushrooms, and herbs. Jackman's restaurant, Wildweed, has earned numerous laurels since opening last year. The reasons become clear once you cook this recipe Jackman developed exclusively for *Field & Stream*.

It's inspired by memories of fishing for walleyes and perch at his family's cabin on Lake Winnipeg, where the day's catch was inevitably, if deliciously, filleted and pan fried. "I love this recipe because it allows you to take the fish beyond the fillet," he says. "The smoking process lets the bones slide out right after cooking." Stinging nettles are a cinch to forage in early spring, before they flower. Wear gloves and use scissors to snip and harvest the tender top leaves. (Cooking neutralizes the sting.) If nettles are unavailable, watercress, spinach, or chard makes a fine substitute.

"I love this recipe because it allows you to take the fish beyond the fillet."

—DAVID JACKMAN



THE FISH GUYS (walleye)



DIRECTIONS →

## DIRECTIONS

Serves 4

**1 CURE AND SMOKE THE WALLEYE:** Gut the fish, remove the scales, and dry it with a paper towel. Prepare the cure by mixing 1 cup of salt, the brown sugar, and the ground fennel seeds. Pack the mixture into the cavity and around the exterior of the fish and let sit overnight, uncovered. Brush off the cure mixture with your hands, then dry the fish with a towel and allow it to air-dry until tacky, about 2 hours. Set the smoker at a low temperature—140 to 150 degrees—and add wood chips, preferably apple or maple. Smoke the fish until fully cooked (an instant-read thermometer will read at least 140) and flaky, about 2 to 4 hours. (If your smoker gets too hot, put a pan with ice inside to cool the chamber.) Remove the fish from the smoker and reserve.

**2 BOIL THE POTATOES:** Fill a medium pot with cold salted water and add the potatoes. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce to a simmer, cooking until fork-tender, about 15 to 25 minutes depending on their size. Drain the potatoes and allow to cool until you can handle them. Peel the skin and reserve the potatoes.

**3 MEANWHILE, PREPARE THE CREAMED NETTLES:** Collect and wash the nettles or greens. Bring a large pot of water to a boil and blanch the nettles for about 60 seconds. Drain, rinse under cold water to stop the cooking, then squeeze out any excess moisture. Melt the butter in a small pot over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring, until the onion is translucent. Add the wine and simmer until reduced by half, then add the cream. When it simmers, add the blanched nettles or greens. Simmer for 10 minutes, or until tender. Season with salt to taste, and keep warm.

**4 TO SERVE,** divide the fingerling potatoes among four bowls. Spoon the creamed nettles over the potatoes. Delicately remove chunks of the smoked walleye fillets (the bones will easily slide out as you pull off the fillets) and place them atop the potatoes and the creamed nettles. Finish with a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil, a squeeze of lemon, and a sprinkle of flaky salt. F&S



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## Just Fishing

**THROBBING PAIN, PROFUSE BLEEDING, AND NO CHANCE OF CATCHING FISH ARE HARDLY REASONS NOT TO HIT THE WATER**



I RECENTLY WENT BACK to a place that I last fished 20 years ago. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, back to a rock garden on the Potomac that I hit hard and often in my fish-mad days, when two hours without a bite was OK because there was always one brooding behind the next rock. The truth is that I never caught a honker there, or many fish of any size, really. But I loved the place—how the stones broke the river up into an endless series of fishy-looking terraces, how the water braided and separated endlessly, and how, working one pool after another, I would lose track of time and forget that I'd just bounced a check or that my car was pulling to the left or that Emma occasionally looked at her single dad as if to ask, "Is this really the best you can do?" Sometimes it wasn't until I looked up to find the light leaking from the sky that the spell would break and I'd come back to everyday life. And I'd feel that I was stupendously lucky to have had the experience.

It was the sort of outing that demands old clothes—pants by Goodwill Industries, a shirt my partner has tried to throw out twice, and sneakers that smell like mud turtles. I loaded up a spinning reel with 6-pound Stren and grabbed a few lures. OK, one lure—a 3-inch white Twister Tail grub on a 1/16-ounce lead-head jig. I have strong feelings about this bait. It's the girl that brought me to the dance, the lure that turned me into a smallmouth obsessive. I still don't know what it's supposed to resemble, but I believe in it. If there are hungry smallmouths around, they'll hit it. If not, it doesn't matter what I throw. It's neither a finesse lure nor a wacky rig nor a drop shot nor a Ned rig. It's obsolete and obstinate, like the old man in the Simpson's meme shouting at clouds in a way that I find absolutely inspirational.

The lock where I wanted to cross the canal to get to the river was blocked by a chain-link fence. The notion that any-

one could think they had the authority to block off moving water seemed absurd, so I started bushwhacking around the barrier. Eventually, I came to a sloped concrete berm that I needed to scale to keep going. I didn't think twice about it and started climbing as if I'd lost none of my agility in the last 20 years. But my sense of denial was stronger than my sense of balance, and I immediately found myself in midair with the vague feeling that things weren't going as well as I'd hoped. This sense became very distinct once I landed.

I was seriously shaken up and bleeding robustly through my pants at the left knee and through my shirt at the elbow. I'd scraped skin off my right palm and more off my left hip. I looked like I'd seriously botched field dressing an animal. It had been a fairly spectacular fall, and I almost found myself hoping that someone else had seen it and been impressed. It seemed a shame that such a spill had gone to waste, spectator-wise. The good news was that despite the blood, nothing felt broken. So I just lay there for a mo-

ment, pondering my mix of good and bad fortune.

I thought about going home but decided that minor flesh wounds were not a sufficient reason. Finding a way around the berm, I headed for the water. The sun was bright, the air was hot, and the river was running about 2 feet below normal. It was a lousy day for fishing, and I found the futility of the venture distinctly appealing. Stay with me on this. I have always admired the antiheroes in the works of Samuel Beckett, men up to their eyeballs in the absurdity and hopelessness of existence, who nonetheless keep going. It's not that they expect things to get better; they just can't bring themselves to give up. And this refusal to be reasonable somehow earns them a kind of grace. It was in this spirit that I fished the clear, warmish water. I knew that no smallmouth with half a brain would be holding in it. Which

meant that if there were fish, we would be perfect for each other.

I moved from pool to pool, hypnotized by the white fluttering of the jig. Again and again, it returned to me unimpeded, never raising so much as the shadow of a fish. I kept at it. Eventually, I found a couple of pools where the water deepened to 3 feet, but I got blanked there too. It was as if my task was to prove there were no fish, and I went at it hammer and tongs.

I looked up after a long time and realized that two hours had passed and that I'd been almost as engaged as if I'd been catching fish. For certain men, failure can be nearly as gratifying as success.

As the light slowly faded into the sycamore dark, I looked down to see a 3-foot black carp languidly cruising the shoreline. It passed right at my feet, in no hurry whatsoever, disappearing under a carpet of algae and weeds.

On the way home, I stopped to buy a soda. The clerk did a double-take when he saw my ripped and bloodied duds. "Hombre," he said, "what happened to you?"

"Ah," I shrugged. "Just fishing." F&S

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*Prize Fishing Contest—Conditions and Prizes in This Issue*

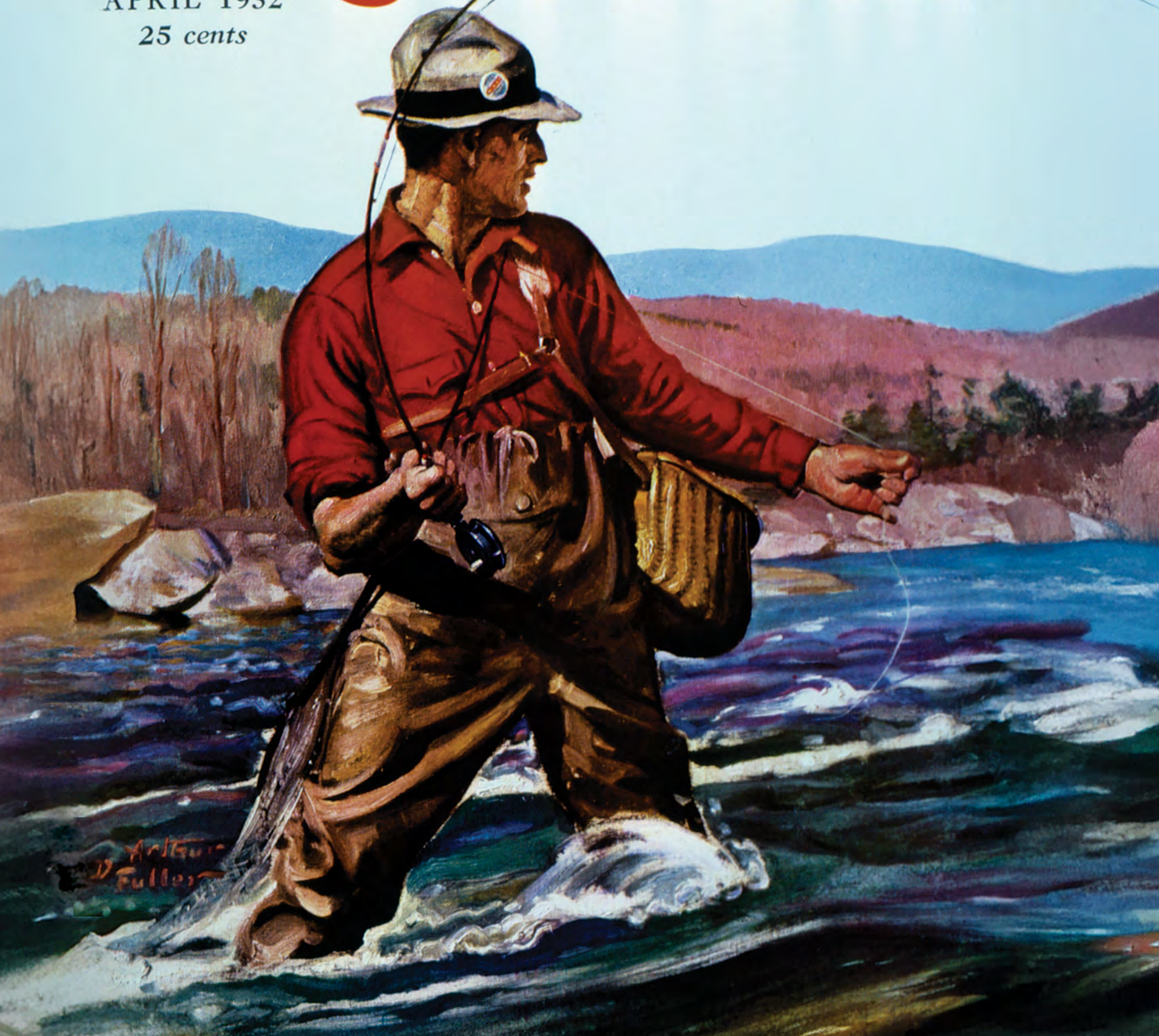
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