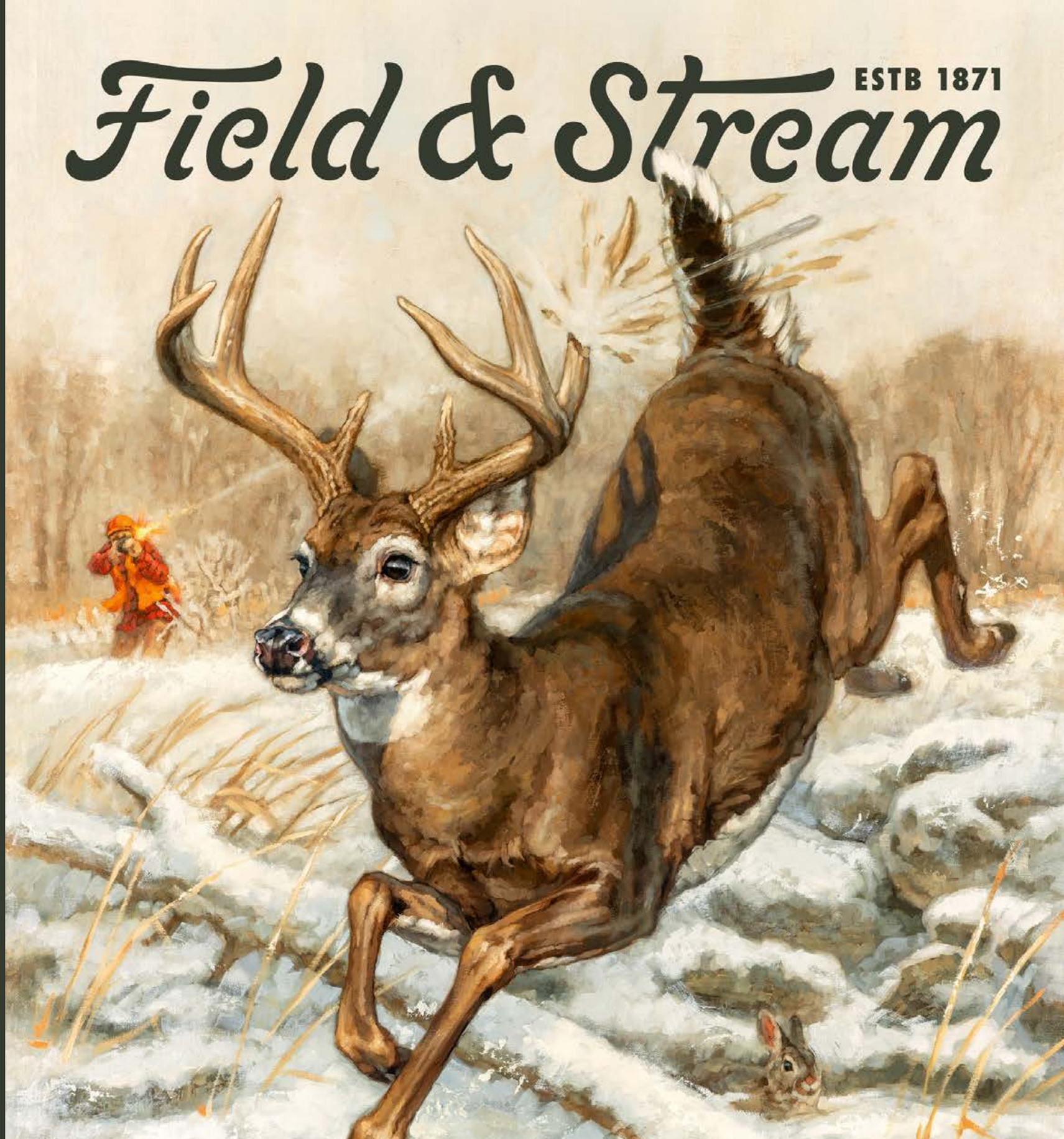
# Field & Stream

ESTB 1871



## DALL SHEEP HELL • TRACKING DEER IN THE SNOW

CHURCH COUNTRY – Eric Church vs. Chip Gaines for Texas Lunkers

OPENING DAY PHEASANTS • BEST KNIVES • THE FIGHT FOR GILA TROUT • NOODLING CAMP | Vol. 129, No. 2 • WILDERNESS

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"He's well over 200 pounds," Blood says. I feel a jolt of adrenaline, knowing the size of the animal we're after.... Blood reaches down and picks up some of the buck's scat. He crushes a pellet between two fingers, then looks at me like a commando about to put a dagger through a sentry. "We're right here with him," he whispers.

—MATTHEW EVERY,
"BLOOD ON THE TRACKS"

## FEATURES




TRISTAN SPINSKI (Hal Blood); MIKE BORCHARD (trout)

## REGULARS



## THE RANGE



## GEARING UP



## CAMPFIRE



When you make a fly rod—especially in the old-school, traditional way, starting with raw materials and making something that's functional and actually works on the water—it's an amazing, amazing feeling.

—BILL OYSTER, "AMERICAN SAMURAI"


CHRISTOPHER TESTANI (knife); PAUL KING (Bill Oyster)

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# WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

illustration by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

WELCOME TO the Wilderness Issue. I'm curious: What do you think of when you hear that word—*wilderness*? A nearly-neon explosion of wildflowers in a mountain valley, a parade of drake mayflies drifting down a tailwater, the ghostly fog of an elk's bugle at sunrise... Those examples spring to mind for me. But the remarkable thing about a word like *wilderness* is that it can go beyond mere descriptions of wild places and critters. It can capture emotions. It can be a state of mind.

•

About 15 years ago, I traveled to Wyoming on assignment for F&S. We had partnered with Trout Unlimited on a series of stories titled "Best Wild Places." The premise was simple: Visit iconic swaths of America's public lands, have the time of your life hunting and fishing there, then come home and share stories that celebrate those places and justify keeping them the way they are: wild.

On day three, we drove to a place of vast rolling hills. Far down from the gravel road, you could just see this garter snake of a creek winding its way through the area. It couldn't have been more than a few feet across at its widest point—but it teemed with Colorado River cutthroat trout. After a member of our crew finished telling us about the stream and some of its conservation issues, he said something along the lines of, "Enough talk. Let's fish."

That was one of the greatest days of fishing in my life. Cutts rose to hoppers on nearly every cast. But what I remember most fondly all these years later aren't the trout I caught. Instead, it's the school's-out-for-summer thrill I—an adult in my late 20s at the time—experienced as I rushed down that hill from the road to the trout stream, knowing next to nothing about the water I was about to fish, yet still believing that it was going to be nothing short of spectacular.

Only in wilderness can you discover that kind of joy.

•

Here's another, more recent, memory: A few years back, I joined some friends for deer camp in New York's Adirondacks, a 5,000-square-mile massif that is its own breed of wilderness—a setting that Dave Hurteau nails in his essay, "The Northwoods," in this issue (p. 72).

The first morning was cold but clear. I began my hunt by walking a trail for several miles until it ended at the shore of a lake. As I sat on an old stump by the lakeside, sipping coffee from my thermos, a light snow began to fall. To describe the scene as serene and peaceful is an understatement. By the time I'd trekked a mile back up the trail, the snow had intensified and a couple inches of fresh powder blanketed the earth. You couldn't have asked for better deer-tracking conditions. The farther I walked, the more tunneled my vision became—locked onto the trail for hoofed clues. Then, after I came around a bend, something told me to look up.

There, standing in the middle of the trail, less than 100 yards away, was an 8-point buck. A staring contest ensued. It seemed to last for minutes but surely was only a few seconds—more than enough time, though, for a shot. But I didn't take one. I never even raised my lever gun. Instead, I was overcome by the need to remain as still as I could to preserve the moment for as long as I could, until the whitetail bolted into the woods.

Only in wilderness can you feel so powerfully immersed in the natural world, so far from everything else.

•

In this space in the last issue, I mentioned how much I'd come to miss hearing from you all, and I encouraged you to send me your thoughts about the all-new magazine. I don't know if I've ever been more grateful to have been taken up on an offer.

The number of letters I received was astounding. I replied to them all and ended most of my responses with something like: *If you enjoyed this first issue, I think you'll really love the next one.* Now it's time to see if I was correct with that prediction.

Welcome to the Wilderness Issue.

*Colin Kearns*
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
*colin@fs1871.com*

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Field & Stream ESTB 1871

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PAPER
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Text: 70# Finch Opaque Vellum

## 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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# Matthew Every

WRITER-AT-LARGE

For this issue, F&S writer-at-large Matthew Every traveled to the vast timberlands of east-central Maine to hunt with legendary Northwoods tracker Hal Blood. Their goal: Find the hoofprints of a big-woods buck in the snow and follow them to their maker. His story, "Blood on the Tracks," starts on p. 82.

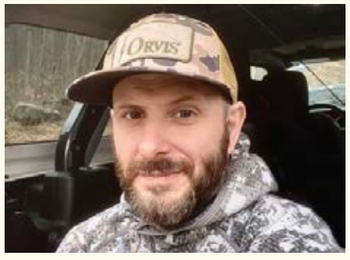
**F&S** Why did you want to do this hunt in particular?
**M.E.** *There's a mystique around big-woods tracking that I think fascinates deer hunters everywhere. It's a dying art that I wanted to experience for myself, especially with a master like Blood.*
**F&S** Was it all it's cracked up to be?
**M.E.** *It was one of my best deer hunts ever, and I didn't see a deer.*
**F&S** How's that possible?
**M.E.** *On most hunts, you only see the deer where and when it shows up. But when you track a buck, you see his whole day—everywhere he went and everything he did—in his hoofprints. It's so cool.*
**F&S** What impressed you most about Blood?
**M.E.** *What blew me away is his sheer determination and stamina. He's in his 70s and I'm in my 30s, and I could barely keep up.*
**F&S** What was the single best piece of advice you got from him?
**M.E.** *When you see deer sign, always ask, "Why?" The answer will tell you what to do next.*
**F&S** So are you ready to track down a buck on your own?
**M.E.** *I know I'm closer—and I know I can't wait for the first snowfall.*

## Will Brantley
HUNTING COLUMNIST

Kentucky native Will Brantley sold his first story (about catfish noodling) to *Field & Stream* in 2006. He became Hunting columnist in 2015 and is one of our go-to feature writers because after we delete all the cussing from his copy, we end up with stories like "Wild Child" (p. 94), in which a local camping trip becomes a wilderness survival adventure when seen through the eyes of his 10-year-old son, Anse. Brantley will hunt, fish, trap, and grab whatever is in season, but he's nuts for spring turkeys, squirrels, and catfish.

## Tristan Spinski
PHOTOGRAPHER

For his first F&S assignment, freelance photographer Tristan Spinski drove north from his home in coastal Maine to capture Hal Blood in action for the deer-tracking story mentioned above. A former oyster farmer, Spinski has worked for *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and *Audubon*. When he's not behind the camera, he's fishing, surfing, or bird-watching. "I loved this assignment," he told us. "I got to walk around Maine's Northwoods with someone who knows a lot more than I do, which was both fascinating and fun."




## Christopher Testani
PHOTOGRAPHER

When we need a photographer who can shoot anything—from stewed rabbit legs to vintage hunting knives and duck decoys—we call Christopher Testani, who has no fewer than 13 photos in this issue (see pp. 10, 41, 58, 64, 150, and 156). A longtime contributor to *Field & Stream,* Testani grew up hunting and fishing in Upstate New York and has since traveled the world on assignment for *The New York Times*, *Food & Wine*, *Travel + Leisure*, and others. He lives in Northern New Jersey with his wife and 7-year-old daughter.

## Roscoe Betsill
FOOD STYLIST

And when we need the food that Testani (at left) photographs to look as good as it tastes, we call on artist, chef, and food stylist Roscoe Betsill (Wild Chef, p. 156). After earning the Grande Diplôme (a prestigious culinary qualification) from La Varenne École de Cuisine in Paris, Betsill started a career in the food industry that eventually led to a styling gig. "That's when I knew I was home," he says. "*Field & Stream* was one of my first clients—nearly 30 years ago—and remains one of my favorites."

clockwise from top: courtesy of MATTHEW EVERY; CHRISTOPHER TESTANI; courtesy of CHRISTOPHER TESTANI; RYAN DAVID BROWN; ERIC RYAN ANDERSON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# CHEERS & JEERS


illustrations by **PETER OUMANSKI**

We took the liberty of claiming June 5, 2024, as *Field & Stream*'s own opening day—a day on which thousands of readers across the country could open and enjoy the first issue of the all-new F&S journal, the first print edition of *Field & Stream* in nearly four years. Based on the number of enthusiastic letters we got from all of you, it seems safe to say that you enjoyed celebrating opening day as much as we did.


### WATERWORKS

I just got off work and checked the mail—and to my happiness, the new magazine was in the box. Brought a tear to my eye. Welcome back for real!

*—Drew Cook*
*Marietta, Georgia*

### TOGETHER AGAIN

I received a *Field & Stream* subscription from my adult daughter 13 years ago, after I rediscovered the joy of trout fishing in my 50s, when my wife and I bought a small camp in north-central Pennsylvania. I began to connect with the writers and columnists as virtual fishing and hunting buddies as I read through each issue. While their personalities, as demonstrated through their writing styles, are clearly diverse, they seemed to share a common passion for the outdoors and the shooting and fishing sports. That passion was contagious, and I looked forward to curling up with each issue—the physical magazine—as there was no cell or internet service at camp.

I felt a little like I had lost friends when the print issue was discontinued. I'm thrilled that it's back—along with my kindred sportsmen and sportswomen who inspire and entertain me. The retro look and feel are icing on the cake. I could almost smell fish guts and Coleman fuel as I read through Vol. 129, No. 1.

I congratulate you, the owners, management, and staff on an excellent publication that is truly worthy of the legacy associated with the name *Field & Stream*.

*—Dan Frye*
*Canandaigua, New York*

### HEIRLOOM MEMORIES

I sat and went through the first issue as I did the Sears Wish Book in my youth. Amanda Monthei's article "Ervie's Mousers" (p. 52) brought tears to my eyes. I was reminded of treasured memories of my own: summers on the Black Warrior River, old tackle boxes, aluminum johnboats, and grandparents long gone.

May the joy Amanda's story gives be returned to her a thousandfold.

*—Mike Sides*
*via email*

### WELCOME TO THE CLUB

I was one of the naysayers regarding the return of *Field & Stream* magazine and the cost

of membership in response to an email I received earlier this year. However, I was given a copy of the first issue of the new version, and I must say that I was surprised, impressed, and blown away. It is an amazing piece of work—a tribute to the past, a testament to your commitment, and a monument to your future endeavors.

I can't say enough regarding the stories and articles presented. I enjoyed reading every single one of them. I look forward to seeing future publications as well as becoming a member of the 1871 Club, as you now have a believer.

*—Peter W. Charney*
*via email*


**WOW FACTOR**

Just received my 1871 Club premium membership package. Wow! The new magazine is damn near a masterpiece. It's my constant companion at work, in the truck, by the recliner, and even at my bedside. Holding it is like holding a work of art, and not by accident, I am sure, as evidenced through spotlights on Ryan Kirby's cover and Dave Constantine's wildlife art ("The Philosopher's Block," p. 38).

I echo editor-in-chief Colin Kearns's sentiments ("Homeward Bound," p. 7) when reading and rereading its contents: This issue is very much a family reunion. Seeing familiar old contributors such as *The* David E. Petzal and Mr. Bill Heavey takes me to a simpler time when all I cared to do was be in the woods or on the water. The writing is much improved over the retread whitetail-rut and summer-bass articles in the magazine's waning years. While I appreciated that content, I am enjoying the return to a classic style of writing and a celebration of the legacy that made F&S so popular.

Thanks especially to Eric Church and Morgan Wallen, who unquestionably saw the demise of *Field & Stream* as the loss of another piece of our country's heritage. Thank you, sirs, for bringing it back! Can't wait until the next issue.

*—Andy Winford*
*via email*

**PERSONAL CONNECTION**

Thank you for this new version of *Field & Stream*. I was a longtime subscriber but let my subscription lapse. The previous version had too many how-to stories and lacked the personal stories and adventures that brought me to F&S as a child. This new version—the images, the content, the *feel* of the pages—everything about it is perfect.

I especially want to thank Colin Kearns for "Fishing With My Father" (p. 78). That story should be archived as a classic. Tears welled up in my eyes multiple times as I read it. The piece brought me back—to my grandfather and the childhood experiences that had been pushed to the back of my mind.

Job well done. I can't wait for the next issue.

*—Kerry Whipp*
*Pingree, North Dakota*

**HATS OFF!**

Congratulations on the first print edition of the new F&S! I received mine over the weekend and have been carefully making my way from cover to cover. My dad and I have been fighting each other over it just about every day. You and your team have done an outstanding job, and I look forward to seeing all the new content coming down the line.

My dad loves the bandanna that came with our 1871 Club membership package, as he doesn't wear hats anymore. When we're at the range these days, he's now quite the character with his long hair, cargo shorts, work boots, and F&S bandanna.

*—Jordyn Smith*
*via email*

**TAKE ME TO CHURCH COUNTRY**

"Seed Ticks" (p. 16) was so good! Not only is Eric Church a great songwriter, musician, and entertainer—he is also an outstanding columnist.

*—Cheryl Coulter Preziuso,*
*via Facebook*

**"IT'S ALIVE!"**

First, I want to say thank you for bringing *Field & Stream* magazine back to life.

Just seeing that old-school-style painting on the front of an outdoor magazine brought back some awesome memories and made the world feel right again. The effort that you guys put into it really shows, and the nostalgic feel is amazing.

*Danny Sanchez*
*via email*

**FOR OUR NEXT TRICK...**

I remember flipping through my dad's old *Field & Stream* magazines 30 years ago, before grouse hunting trips in upstate Pennsylvania, his quail trips to Texas, or our fishing trips on streams.

When we stopped getting F&S in print, some of the brand's magic was lost. I am so grateful that you all restored some of that magic with the new print edition, and that my 6-year-old son gets to flip through magazines again, dreaming of fishing and hunting adventures.

*—Dan Kunze*
*via email*

**Damn, you folks have exceeded my expectations with your first issue, and I imagine many other readers would agree. I can easily see myself rereading this several times until the next one arrives.**

**—CHARLES ELK, DULUTH, MINNESOTA**

**HOW TO REACH US**

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

# Full Heart

**A QUAIL HUNT WITH HIS FATHER HELPED THE AUTHOR GET THROUGH THE UNIMAGINABLE**

by **WILL FLETCHER**

*In June, we held a contest asking readers to submit hunting and fishing stories about their father or a father figure in their life. In addition to 10 prize packages up for grabs, one winner would also get to see their story in the pages of* Field & Stream*. After reading through nearly 100 entries, we gave top honors to this essay from Will Fletcher.* —The Editors

I suppose I needed it more than Dad did, though I would've taken any excuse for a walk in the woods with him at that point. The last few months had been a bit of a blur, and I'd been yearning for some time away to clear my head—to claw my way out of the hell that we'd been through during the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. The birth of a child is supposed to be a joyous occasion, but that notion gets flipped when a team of doctors stands in front of you and your wife, just days after she gave birth to your first son, and explains what a coarctation of the aorta is and says that you should "be prepared for loss of life."

So when Dad asked if I wanted to go hunting while they visited us in Louisiana at Thanksgiving, I didn't hesitate. I needed a day to come up for air, to be outside, to feel alive again. Fathers have that innate ability to sense when their child needs help or space or love—or simply a walk in the woods. In this case, I needed all the above.

There was a WMA outside New Orleans that I'd previously hunted for woodcock and scouted for wild quail. While my English setter, Maggie, and I hadn't found any quail, the area looked promising and, at the very least, would make for a beautiful day in the woods. As Dad and I strolled along the logging roads and through the longleaf pines, I could feel the weight of the stress and pain from the previous weeks lifting off my shoulders. Dad's slow, steady pace and easygoing attitude brought my mind to ease, and I was reminded of how much I missed our regular hunts together.

As we made our way back to the car after several hours, Maggie went on point. Dad and I took our place on either side of her as we inched our way closer to the brush she was pointing. As we stepped closer, a covey of wild quail exploded in front of her nose and caught us both by surprise. I pulled the trigger, firing wildly into the covey. No birds. But Maggie remained on point after the covey vanished, and shockingly, another group of birds flushed. This time, I picked one bird and followed through on my shot. The bird crumpled.

My first wild quail. With Dad, no less.

At home, we were greeted by my wife and daughter, and my 3-month-old son. His shirt was off, and I could see the 8-inch scar on his back where the doctors had made an incision to repair his heart. I ran my hand over the scar and kissed him on the forehead. I then handed him to his grandfather. F&S

→ Three generations of Fletchers enjoy time outside—from nights at the beach to mornings in the woods.

courtesy of WILL FLETCHER (4)

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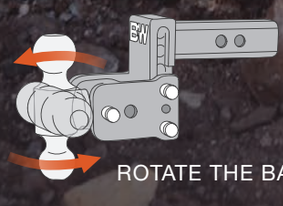
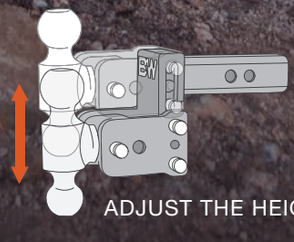

ROTATE THE BALL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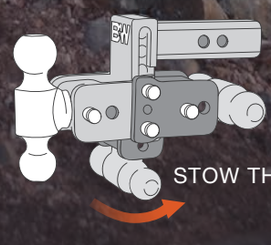
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01

02

03

04

# Game

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

01

## Small Game, Big Fun

A LIMIT OF RABBITS FOR DAD

Tyler Cowan got this shot of his dad, Anthony, during a hunt in Kentucky at a spot they call the Briar Belt. "It's a CRP field that's flush with briars and borders a soybean field," he says. "Prime rabbit habitat."

TYLER COWAN
Daufuskie Island,
South Carolina

02

## Hang Time

A SHOT THAT WILL AGE WELL

This moment took place after Daniel Smith punched his whitetail tag during a morning hunt. Admiring the deer is Smith's son, Garrett. "I thought it would be a great pic to have—my favorite hunting partner and the buck," he says.

DANIEL SMITH
Williamson, West Virginia

03

## Snack Break

BECAUSE THE GEESE CAN WAIT

For Cooper Lehman's first goose hunt, his dad, Jonathan, made sure to pack plenty of snacks. "Right before some birds came in, he opened a pack of Gushers," Lehman says. "When I saw him tucked in there, I had to take a picture."

JONATHAN LEHMAN
Tofield, Alberta, Canada

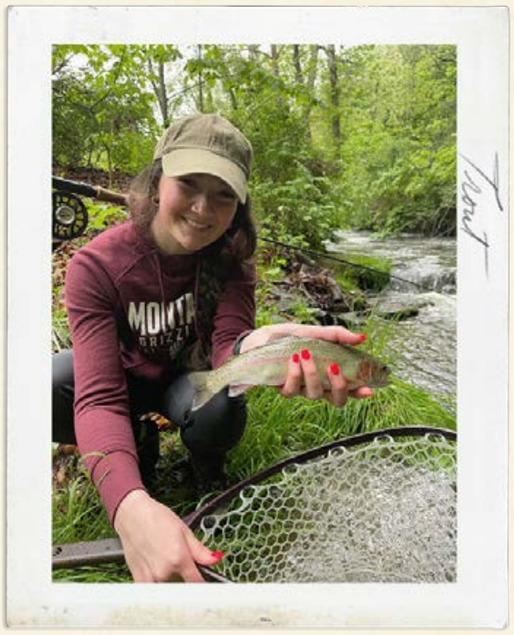
04

## Mother's Day

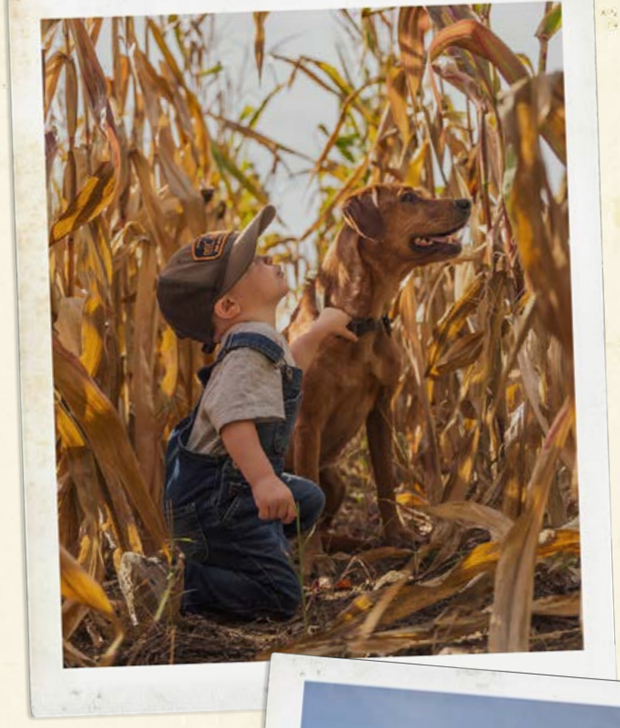
A SPONTANEOUS ADVENTURE

After Bree Mason's husband called her with a tip on a good buck he saw near their home, she quickly geared up. Her 2-year-old son, Rane, was at her side for the entire hunt. "Rane is always up for any kind of adventure," Mason says.

BREE MASON
Hill Spring, Alberta, Canada



05



06

07

08

# Faces

05

## Griz and Grin

AN EPIC DAY ON THE RIVER

During a fishing trip with her boyfriend, Lucy Wullenweber stopped at the first spot she came to. "I caught this rainbow on my second or third cast," she says. "The rest of the day was filled with so many more beautiful trout."

LUCY WULLENWEBER
Morgantown, West Virginia

06

## Tough Doves

BIRD DOGGERS IN THE CORN

The dove hunting was slow on this September evening, but Ty Hockett, his 2-year-old son, Owen, and their fox-red Lab, Moxie, still got a few birds. "Owen excitedly called out everything that flew within sight," Hockett recalls.

TY HOCKETT
Miamisburg, Ohio

07

## Old-School Hunters

A LETHAL TURKEY TAG TEAM

Lee Tadlock shared this photo of his grandpa and dad. "My grandfather was a proficient turkey hunter and probably killed this one with his A5," Tadlock says. "My dad didn't care much for it, but he was pretty good at voice calling."

LEE TADLOCK
Christiana, Tennessee

08

## Hats Off to You!

HITTING THE FLATS IN STYLE

Joseph Bernard snapped this pic of Brandon Thompson during a trip for reds on the flats of Mosquito Lagoon. "We couldn't have asked for better conditions," he says, adding, "Loving the hat. It's comfy and brings us a little extra luck."

JOSEPH BERNARD
Oak Hill, Florida

# BEST WEEKEND EVER

**HUNTING, WATCHING FOOTBALL, AND OUTFISHING YOUR FRIENDS...**

**WHAT ELSE COULD ANYONE ASK FOR?**

by **ERIC CHURCH** illustration by **CLAY RODERY**

EVEN WITH ALL MY DAYS ON THE ROAD, I'd never been to Waco, Texas. That's where Baylor University is—a fact I knew because the previous March, my Tar Heels had vanquished them in an overtime thriller on their way to a showdown for the ages against Duke in the Final Four. But now here I was, with my best friend and partner, Ben Weprin, and our wives on a plane touching down in heart of Waco to see the king and queen in their kingdom. By "king and queen," I don't mean Charles and Camilla, but two people much more likable and arguably more powerful: Chip and Joanna Gaines.

On the agenda were a hunt, a Baylor football game, and a friendly bass-fishing tournament. It was shaping up to be a weekend for the books—and a column for a cherished magazine.

On the drive from the airport, we were invited to Baylor's campus by one of the bass-fishing tournament participants, Coach Scott Drew. We watched practice, talked to the team, spent time with Coach, and got to see the national championship trophy they recently acquired after a storybook run. At Carolina, we have six similar pieces of hardware, and due to my upbringing, I couldn't resist commenting on how cute their one trophy looked sitting all alone. Coach Drew just grinned—then let me know he'd see me on the lake.

**TENNESSEE TWO VS. WACO WACKOS**

That night we attended a spectacular dinner hosted by Chip and Jo at their residence, along with Coach and his wife and a handful of close friends. It was picture-perfect, and I was taken with the people and the ambience. After an unforgettable day of hunting big game and hogs on day one, we awoke early the following morning ready for our next adventure—a fishing competition between two teams: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The Tennessee Two, consisting of Ben and me, and the Waco Wackos, represented by Chip and Coach Drew.

I was told we would be picked up, then we'd grab Chip and Coach en route to our fishing destination. So Ben and I grabbed a coffee and waited patiently by the front door, watching the driveway for our ride. Minutes continued to pass. Nothing. Not one vehicle. All quiet on the northern front. Finally, we got a text from Chip: *Your ride is arriving now.* I took a moment to answer nature's call, and soon after, the entire house began to shake. Then I heard Ben yell from the kitchen, "Eric, you're not gonna believe this!"

I went out to the driveway to find nothing—only to realize at the same moment that a helicopter was landing in the backyard. That's right: *Our ride was a &$%@^#! chopper!* I shook my head as the bird touched down. The vibrations woke up our wives, who both walked out from the kitchen, wide-eyed. The rotors stopped, and out popped a young pilot—looking like an ad for Ralph Lauren. Our wives commented, "He's cute."

Ben and I hated him immediately. I nicknamed him Air Wolf, but seeing as he had my survival literally in his hands, I considered giving him a pass—until, sensing my reluctance, he made the joke that he had been flying for weeks and really this chopper was so old that it kind of didn't matter who flew it.

Nope, it was official: I hated him. His smile let me know he was messing with me, so I unleashed a new flurry of expletives that even Ben found excessive.

This was going to be a long day.

We boarded and set off for downtown Waco. Admittedly, I'm not up to speed on FAA rules and local regulations, but I'm fairly certain we broke a few. My grandpa once said that choppers don't really fly; they just beat the air into submission. And we did just that. Ahead of our showdown, I couldn't shake the suspicion that Chip may have tipped the pilot a few extra bucks to give me some things to think about.

Have I mentioned that I hated this pilot?

We landed on a field in the middle of town and watched as Chip and Coach—aka team Waco Wackos—and Doug McNamee, our friend, president of *Field & Stream*, and the unofficial referee for our tournament, came walking across the ballfield to board our man-made bumblebee. Then we took to the Texas skies again on our way to a top-secret lake rumored to hold monster bass. On the way, we chatted into our headsets, talking smack about which team was about to pummel the other.

**Kelly's boat had a LiveScope sonar, and fishing with one was a first for me. It's like having a combination fish-finder and GoPro in real time. Using it felt like cheating. I loved it so much that I bought two when I got back home.**

### LET THE FISHING BEGIN

About 30 minutes later, our lake came into view. Wide open and with large areas of cover and varying depths, this lake was a beauty—and she was all ours. Air Wolf landed us softly beside the boat launch. There, by the ramp, sat two beautiful bass boats—one for each team—fully equipped with state-of-the-art rods and reels, tackle, sonar, and the cherry on top, two professional, world-ranked bass anglers to serve as guides: Alton Jones, winner of the 2008 Bassmaster Classic, and Kelly Jordon, a founding member of Major League Fishing and the Bass Pro Tour.

We said hello and picked our boats and the captain who came with it at random. The rules were established: Only fish weighing 1 pound or heavier would count, and the heaviest haul wins.

We set our time limit, called each other more names (my smack was more expletive-laced and, in my opinion, more creative than the others'), and shoved off. Ben and I got paired up with Kelly. No offense to Alton, but I was excited about this for two reasons:

1. He used traditional spinning rods and reels, not those bird's-nest-producing baitcasters that are all the rage with kids. (Yes, I'm old.)

2. Kelly's last name is Jordon. And while it's spelled a little differently, no Jordon or Jordan has ever let me down. All our team was lacking was the number 23 on our backs. The Tennessee Two were a lock. We had our chariots and our capes.

We got off to a quick start. I don't mean to rub it in, but General Custer had a better showing at Little Bighorn than the Waco Wackos had on this lake. My team was three fish up when I glanced in the distance and saw that both of our competitors' reels were, you guessed it, in bird's nests. Meanwhile, Ben and I were boating fish left and right. The sound of our reel drags buzzing filled the air.

Kelly's boat had a LiveScope sonar, and fishing with one was a first for me. It's like having a combination fish-finder and GoPro in real time. Using it felt like cheating. I loved it so much that I bought two when I got back home.

After we were well ahead, Kelly broke out an Alabama Rig, which, if you've never seen one, looks like a wire-rigged chandelier, but instead of candles at the ends, it has hooks rigged with swimbaits. Cast and retrieved properly, it simulates a school of small minnows swimming in unison. It was a killer. Now, instead of catching a fish on nearly every cast, we were catching two and three bass at a time. Like I said, Little Bighorn had commenced—and we were the Sioux.

I decided our lead was large enough that it was only fair to find out about the cooler's contents. Since we were catching everything else, I figured we might as well catch a buzz too. I'm pleased to report there was ample beer—and that it was ice cold. And while our adversaries did close the gap (marginally), in the end it was no contest: Team Tennessee prevailed. When both teams returned to the boat ramp, I wish I could tell you that the Tennessee Two won gracefully, but, well, I can't tell you that.

It was one of my favorite days ever on the water. Great fishing. Great weather. And great friends. Air Wolf got us back safely, and we wrapped the weekend taking in one of my other loves in life—college football. Hunting, fishing, and football. God bless America and everything she propagates.

It truly was a weekend for the books. F&S

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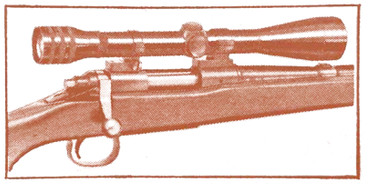


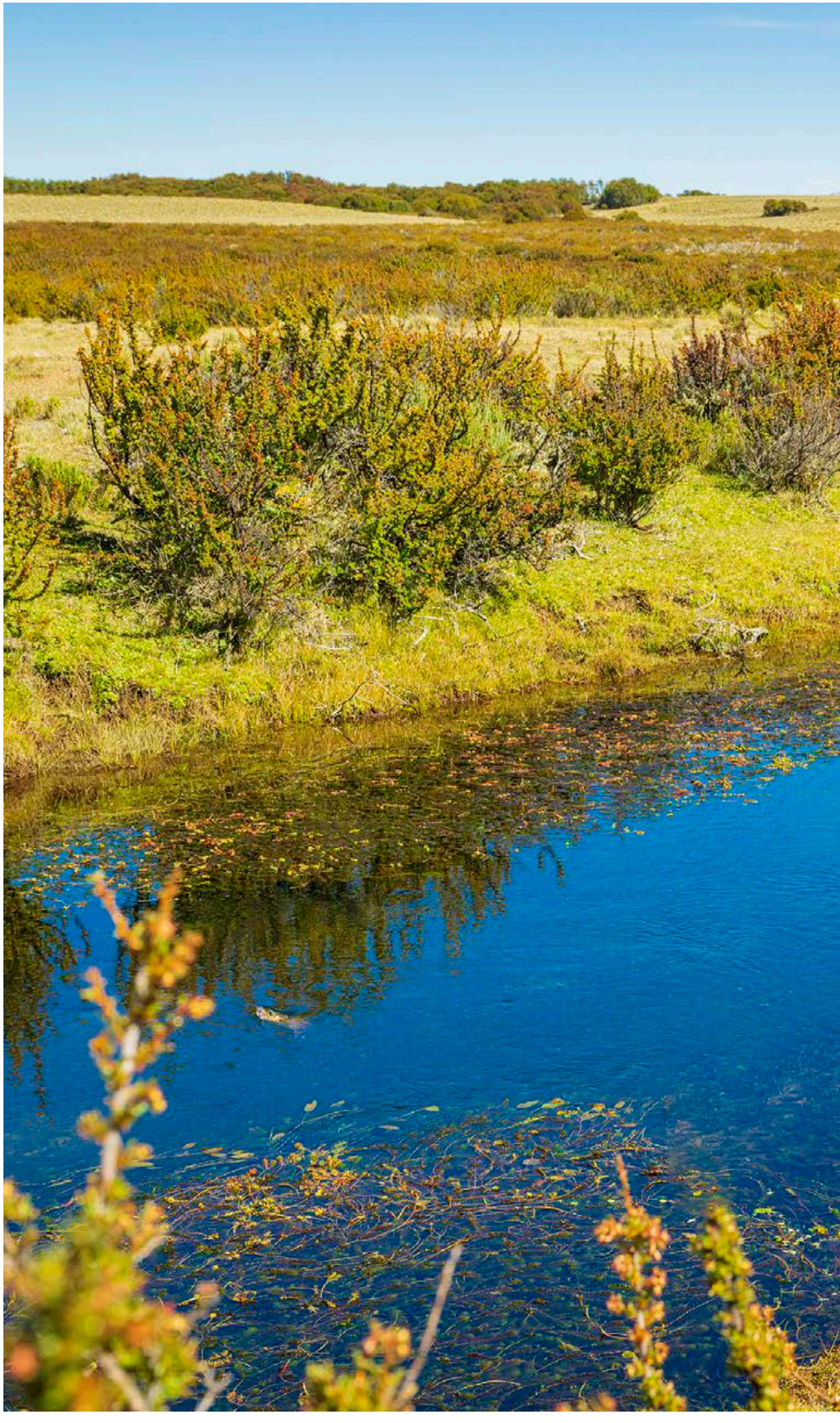
# THE RANGE



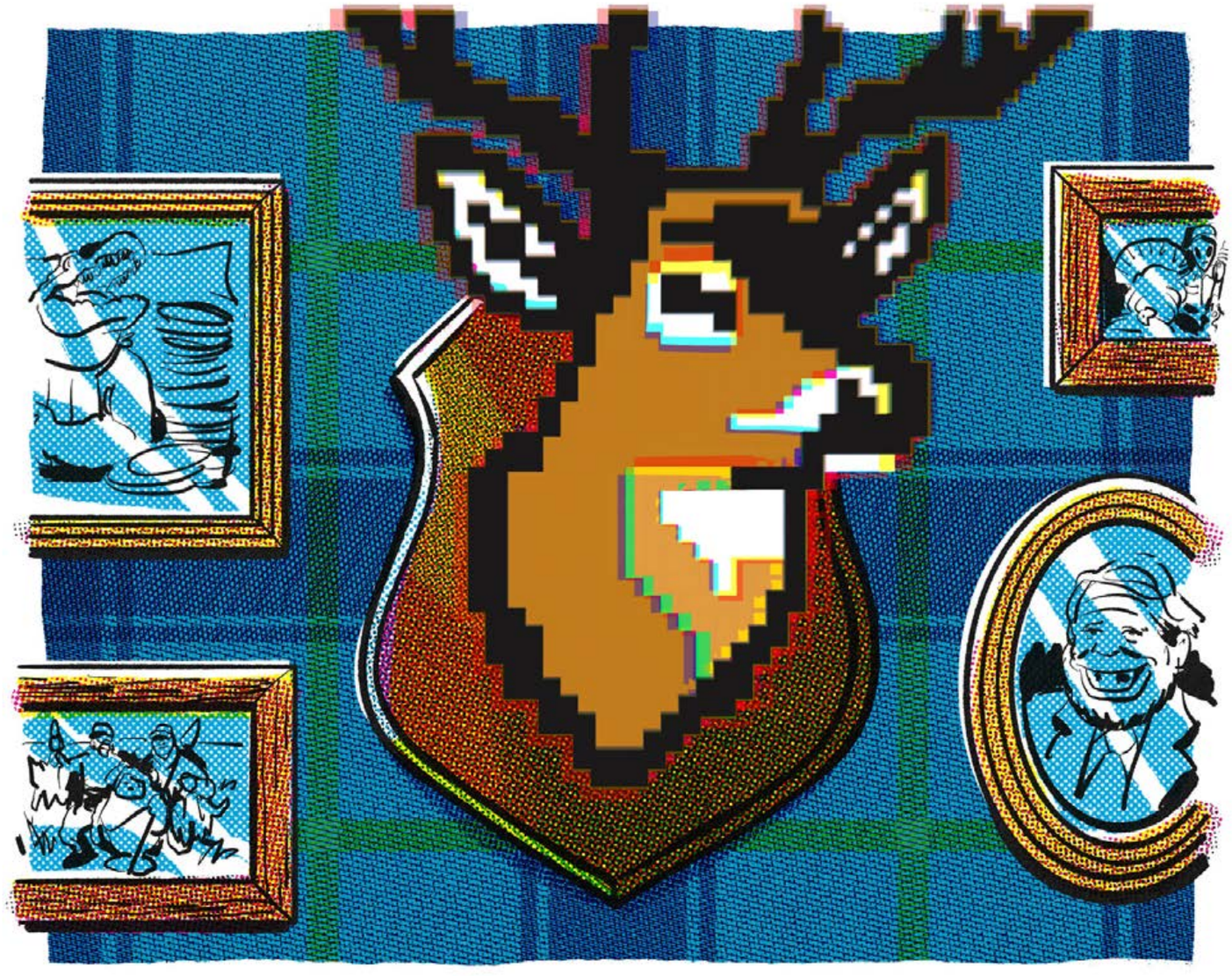
# FIRST SHOT

Photographer Brian Grossenbacher and angler Amy Trina found this large brown trout sipping pale morning duns. “Any fly that drifted into the zone was quickly inhaled,” Grossenbacher said. As he army-crawled into position, he said he could even hear the rises. Trina made a perfect cast—and landed the monster brown that taped out at an impressive 24 inches.

**Location:** Patagonia, Argentina
**Creek:** Sworn to secrecy...



photograph by **BRIAN GROSSENBACHER**



# ASK PETZAL

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

by **DAVID E. PETZAL**
illustration by **BRANDON LOVING**

**Do you worry you'll be replaced by AI?**

*—Alec Macaluso, via email*

**D.E.P.** In keeping with the rest of humanity, I won't worry about that until it's too late. However, you bring up an interesting point. I think that soon you'll be able to ask ChatGPT to produce a photo of you with a trophy buck that you can show to your friends. This will save you the trouble and annoyance of actually hunting. No more freezing, no more sitting in a stand with a bursting bladder, no more gutting, no more dragging. You get bragging rights without the effort, and if anyone asks where your mounts are, you can tell them they're still at the taxidermist. It's a brave new world out there.

> “I most admire people who are cheerful and don’t complain. What I hate most is whining and bitching and hunters who envy other hunters.”

**Forget *best*. What is the *coolest* deer rifle you can own?**

*—Dustin Burgess, via email*

**D.E.P.** *Cool* means rare and tasteful. My choice is the original Savage Model 99E in 250/3000, which was made between 1922 and 1934. It is the quintessence of a deer rifle—a scalpel rather than a bludgeon. It can have modern iron sights instead of the awful originals, but no scope.

**I’m looking for a good gunsmith, but how do I know if someone is good?**

*—Eli Reed, via email*

**D.E.P.** First, pick a specialist. If you need work on a trap gun, you don’t go to someone who tunes Model 1911s for a living. Second, find where trap shooters congregate and ask who they use. A name will emerge. Third, if the work you want done is idiotic, you want a gunsmith who will tell you so and not take the job for the money.

**What is the quality you like best in a fellow hunter? What do you hate most?**

*—Adelyn Moore, via email*

**D.E.P.** I most admire people who are cheerful and don’t complain. What I hate most is whining and bitching and hunters who envy other hunters.

**John Wayne vs. Clint Eastwood. Who wins in a shootout?**

*—Reggie L., via email*

**D.E.P.** This is an unanswerable question and obviously the product of a mind with not enough to occupy it. Nonetheless, since I’m paid to unscrew the inscrutable, I’ll give a serious answer. Movies aside, neither man was much interested in guns, and neither showed any inclination to violence in real life. (Wayne, in fact, avoided serving in World War II.) The only Hollywood cowboy I would put money on in a real gunfight is Audie Murphy. He was not the fastest draw in Tinseltown, but he was an extremely accurate shot, and in World War II he became the most highly decorated soldier in American history. I would not want to buck the tiger against Mr. Murphy.

**Of all the hot new cartridges designed to shoot high-BC bullets into the next county, which are the best?**

*—Martin Sarkozy, via email*

**D.E.P.** I have no idea. Being able to hit at long range depends on your ability to interpret and compensate for what you see in terms of wind and mirage. You also have to be intimately familiar with your bullet’s trajectory, regardless of which cartridge sends them. The vast majority of military sniper rifles are still chambered for 7.62mm (up to 900 meters) and 300 Win. Mag. (up to 1,200). The services see no need for hot new cartridges, and neither do I.

**I’d love to shoot a bunch, but I don’t know how anyone can afford it. Do you?**

*—R. Torres, via email*

**D.E.P.** Yes. During the last Great Ammunition Shortage, I concentrated on 22 rimfire and military calibers (i.e., the 5.56, 308, and 45 ACP). Spend lots and lots of time online looking for bargains, and buy in bulk. Five thousand rounds of 22 LR will cost you some, but it will keep you shooting for a long time, as will 1,500 rounds of IMI 5.56 loaded with 77-grain Sierra match bullets, just to name two examples.

**How do you define a “trophy” animal?**

*—Chase Allan, via email*

**D.E.P.** It’s any critter you value for whatever reason you choose. One of my most prized heads is a spindly-antlered 6x6 elk that no conventional trophy hunter would give a second glance. But it was the first elk I’d ever taken, I had lost 30 pounds to go on the hunt, and the friend I was with killed an identical elk in the split second after I fired, making for an unforgettable afternoon.

**What do you think of the big trend away from camo and toward solid-color hunting clothes?**

*—JJ, via email*

**D.E.P.** I applaud it and have been anti-camo for years. Much of the latter appears to be the product of people who have done very little hunting, or none. Either go whole hog and wear a ghillie suit or stick to olive drab.

**Where can I DM you?**

*—S. Tonkovich, via email*

**D.E.P.** I speak English, not acronym. DM sounds vaguely perverted, like it will get you arrested if you do it in public. I assume it must have something to do with Instagram or Facebook, and since I’m not a teenager who cares intensely what his “friends” think on any given subject, I have no interest in either. F&S

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# SPORTSMAN'S NOTEBOOK

TOM MARTINEAU/WILDFRONT IMAGES

# OWN THE SQUIRREL SEASON

**KEEP THE BURGOO BUBBLING WITH THIS SEASON-LONG HUNTING PLAN, INCLUDING THE BEST TIMES TO HIT THE WOODS AND HOW TO FILL YOUR STRAP**

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

When you're waiting for the pheasant opener or the whitetail rut or late-season mallards, it's easy to forget that squirrel season runs from August or early September to as late as February in most states—which covers a hell of a lot of good hunting you might be missing. Of course, you don't have to hunt all of squirrel season to enjoy the best of it. You're not going to forgo your deer stand or duck blind all fall and winter, and neither am I. But there are times when you should get out there—and here they are.

## PHASE 1: THE EARLY SEASON

**TIME FRAME:** Aug. 17–Sept. 22

**GO-TO TACTIC:** Spot-and-stalk in mature timber

The first month of squirrel season is easily my favorite. Hickory nuts, beechnuts, and acorns are ripening on the limb, and squirrels feed on all of them before they fall. A dozen or more squirrels might gather in one good tree, and summer foliage makes it easy for you to sneak in close.

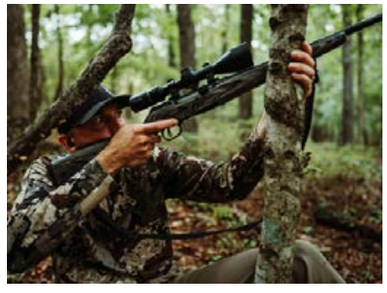
### GO NUTS

Hickories ripen first, and around here, two varieties—the scaly-bark and pignut—attract the most squirrels. Scout for clusters of these trees, drop OnX Hunt pins where you find green cuttings underneath, and start there at daylight.

Feeding squirrels give themselves away by shaking limbs and raining cuttings. Their commotion can be heard from 100 yards on a still morning, so locate them with your ears first, then slip your way into gun range.

Shotgun hunters have the luxury of shooting as soon as they see a squirrel, but rifle hunters must be more patient. I like to watch a tree for a bit before deciding where to set up. Squirrels will run all over a tree to find a tasty nut, but individuals will frequently return to the same spot to eat their prize, and several squirrels may use the same "traffic limbs" to get around. If you notice either, get a steady rest, sit still, and watch carefully. Sometimes you can fill your limit from one tree without moving.

Feeding squirrels give themselves away by shaking limbs and raining cuttings. Their commotion can be heard from 100 yards on a still morning, so locate them with your ears first.



JOSH DAHLKE

↑ Set up in one spot with a good rest for your rifle and then watch the canopy. At the right tree, you can fill your limit without relocating.

## PHASE 2: THE HEART OF FALL

**TIME FRAME:** Oct. 12–Nov. 8

**GO-TO TACTIC:** Hunting with squirrel dogs

The treetop action ends when the acorns begin falling, from late September through October. Squirrels descend from the canopy to forage for nuts on the ground. Sitting on an open ridge with an accurate rifle and shooting sticks is productive now. But this is the time of year many squirrel doggers enjoy most.

### DOG IT

Squirrel dogging is more popular than ever, and following a pack of yipping feists to a treed squirrel is a hell of a lot of fun. Fresh mast on the ground and mild weather make squirrels active all day, but the early rituals of the squirrel breeding season are also beginning to occur. It's common to see two or three boar squirrels chasing one female at this time of year, and a good dog might be able to tree all of them at once.

The action only gets better as more leaves fall and treed squirrels become easier to see. Although I'm a rimfire hunter to the core, shotguns are popular for hunting with dogs because squirrels don't sit still for long when dogs are barking and lead is flying.

## PHASE 3: THE SQUIRREL RUT

**TIME FRAME:** Dec. 1–25

**GO-TO TACTIC:** Handgun hunting

The squirrel rut is a fascinating ritual, and December is the best month to see it. One fact that never goes unnoticed or unmentioned at squirrel camp is that during the peak rut, a boar squirrel's testicles enlarge to up to 20 percent of its body length. (Just try to wrap your mind around that.) Squirrels breed twice per

year when habitat is good, and females typically mate with multiple males per cycle. Pups in the same litter often have different fathers, and biologists suspect that competition is the reason for the giant cods. Now that you know, you can bring it up at your next squirrel camp—and follow these tips while you're there.

### SPOT-AND-JOG

On cold winter mornings, sleep in and hit the woods after sunrise, as squirrels seem to be most active at this time of year from just after the frost burns off through midday, especially when it's sunny. Rutting squirrels will concentrate wherever the action is, so don't waste too much time watching a quiet hillside. Have a seat, watch for 15 minutes, and if you don't spot squirrels, move.

The frantic chases that rutting squirrels engage in make it easy for you to sneak close when conditions allow, like after a light rain dampens the forest floor or when a heavy frost melts. If you're stealthy and you time your movements just right, you can cover a lot of ground when squirrels run behind large tree trunks. Get eyes on them, wait until they circle out of sight, and jog toward them 10 yards at a time. Freeze when the critters pop back into sight. So long as they don't catch you moving, they won't pay much attention. I can't count the number of times I've quickly slipped to within 15 yards of squirrels like this, making it a great way to hunt with a rimfire handgun.

During the December breeding season, squirrels are most active from midmorning to midday.

LON LAUBER

## PHASE 4: THE LATE SEASON

**TIME FRAME:** Jan. 1–season end

**GO-TO TACTIC:** Sit, call, snipe

After the curtain closes on the final deer and even late-mallard and honker hunts, many squirrel seasons remain open. Deciding whether to brave the weather and go chase them on a late-season day is pretty easy: Do you want to go outside yourself? On frigid days when you'd rather be inside, squirrels aren't likely to leave their den trees. But they will get out and move around on those sunny 40-degree days that make you think about spring.

### SNIPE 'EM

If you have a squirrel dog, it's worth hunting whenever the weather is nice. But squirrel numbers are lower in the late season, and the survivors are savvy. Those that are treed by dogs now frequently hole up in dens. They won't tolerate your sneaking through the woods this time of year either.

As a result, a stationary approach with a magnum rimfire rifle is particularly effective. Set up in areas with a good vantage, where you can shoot to 75 or even 100 yards. Head shots are ideal but challenging to make at those distances; a hit behind the shoulder with the right bullet, like the CCI Gamepoint or Full Metal Jacket, does the job without destroying too much meat.

I don't bother with squirrel calls much during other parts of the season because they can put the critters on alert, but a barking call or a distress whistle can cause a squirrel to bark and give away his position now. If you're set up to make a long shot with a rifle, that might be all you need.

# My Squirrel Arsenal

photograph by **ERIC RYAN ANDERSON**

SQUIRREL HUNTING with anything is fun, but I'd rather bag a couple of bushytails with a rimfire than kill a limit of them with a shotgun. As luck would have it, highly accurate rimfires—especially rimfire rifles—are having a moment right now, so you should have no trouble getting set up for squirrel hunting. These are the three guns I count on all season.

**CZ 457 VARMINT 17 HMR**
This pet rifle of mine is one of the most accurate I've ever shot, and it's my go-to squirrel gun most of the year. It's a little heavy to carry, but I can kill squirrels with it out to 100 yards with a dead-on hold. With the popularity of long-range rimfire shooting, there are lots of equally accurate rifles to choose from.

**MARLIN MODEL 39A**
My favorite 22 Long Rifle for hunting farmland woodlots is a vintage lever-action that shoots as good as it looks and holds enough ammo to hunt for a couple of days—if I do my part. There's a lot to be said for stalking the squirrel woods with a cool old 22 that shoots, and you can find several good ones on the used market.

**RUGER MARK IV TARGET**
Up close, this 22 pistol will outshoot many rifles. It has a threaded barrel for a suppressor (I like the Silencer Central Banish) and is drilled and tapped for an optics base. As much as I like this one, a good semiauto 22 LR target pistol from Browning, Smith & Wesson, or Beretta would also do the job nicely. F&S


From top: CZ 457 Varmint 17 HMR, Marlin Model 39A, and Ruger Mark IV Target.

# MATT'S TIPS

by **MATTHEW EVERY** illustrations by **PETE SUCHESKI**

**SHARPEN A KNIFE ON THE ROAD, USE YOUR SHOELACES TO STAY ALIVE, AND TRY A TRICK FROM AN AFRICAN CAMP CHEF TO ENJOY THE TENDEREST VENISON YOU'VE EVER EATEN**

## No. 1

USING A PLASTIC water bottle to wash up in the field? Instead of opening the cap and pouring the contents on your hands, stab the cap with your knife, turn the bottle upside down, and squeeze. The higher pressure washes away blood or dirt more easily while using less water.

## No. 2

FORGOT YOUR WHETSTONE at home? No problem. Just roll down your car window. You can use the pane's rough top edge to sharpen a knife. It won't bring a dull blade back from the dead, but it can hone an edge on the spot when you need it in the field.

## No. 3

BRING A FEW nontoxic TSS turkey loads into the duck blind for finishing cripples. The turkey loads have more reach and a tighter pattern for hitting a duck on the water. Maybe best of all, they're expensive and so will encourage you to be more conservative with your shots in the first place.


## No. 4

LACE UP YOUR BOOTS with paracord. It's stronger than regular shoelaces and is made up of a sheath with seven strands of two-ply string inside. Two 36-inch paracord laces yield 42 feet of two-ply cordage should you need it. And you can still tie your boots with the sheath.

## No. 5

TRY A TRICK I picked up from a camp chef in Africa who served some of the most tender venison I've ever eaten. Her secret: Freeze the meat in a ziplock bag full of buttermilk. The buttermilk fills in any air pockets and has enzymes that tenderize meat and neutralize gamy flavor.

## TAP'S TIPS

A SELECTION OF TIMELESS TIPS
— BY —
**H.G. "TAP" TAPPLY**
*FROM THE ARCHIVES*
OF
**FIELD & STREAM**

### No. 1

RABBIT AND SQUIRREL tracks can look alike, but the squirrel plants his forefeet together, side by side, whereas the cottontail places one slightly ahead of the other. Or you can try the system my uncle taught me. If the rabbit tracks go to a tree and stop, chances are it's a squirrel.

### No. 2

YOU'LL NEVER LOSE the screw-on cap of a metal rod case if you attach it with a short length of heavy monofilament. Bore a 1/16-inch hole in the center of the cap and another near the top of the case; use small buttons inside the cap and case to hold the mono.

### No. 3

MUD OR SNOW in the bore of a rifle or shotgun can be dangerous. To prevent this from happening, stick a square of electrician's tape over the muzzle. It will keep the barrel free of obstructions while you're hunting. The tape breaks easily when you fire, so there's no danger.

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# How I Hunt: Pat Pitt

**FOUNDER OF L'ANGUILLE LOUNGE DUCK CLUB, BLUE-COLLAR HUNTER,**

**TAXIDERMIST, HEART-ATTACK SURVIVOR, GRANDFATHER**

interview by **COLIN KEARNS**
photographs by **HOUSTON COFIELD**

I WAS 16 YEARS OLD when I killed my first duck. Some guys I worked with sacking groceries at the store hunted with their dads, and they invited me along. They dropped me off in a little hole on the Tennessee River with a half dozen papier-mâché decoys. It was brutally cold. I was wearing hunting clothes I got from the army surplus store and my dad's pajamas. I heard something. A mallard hen had lit in the decoys. This was before the days of voluntary restraint, so I shot her on the water. I walked out to get her, and even though I was soaking and freezing, I just stood there and admired the patterns on her feathers. That's what got me hooked.

» I MOSTLY PICKED UP hunting on my own. I had some neighbors that duck hunted, and I'd asked them questions, and I used to read *Field & Stream* and *Sports Afield* cover to cover and try to pick up some knowledge. My dad once told me: "You got two eyes and two ears and one mouth. You need to look and listen more than you talk." So I would just observe the habits of these birds and where they were going and what they were doing and at what time.

» I'M FROM THE old school of work 'em close and get 'em closer.

» I HAVE AN aviary in my backyard. I call it my aquarium with feathers. I just like going out there and looking at the birds. I have some cool ducks there—like white-faced whistling ducks. It's helpful for my taxidermy too. I can go there and observe how the birds pose or posture, so I don't have to guess in my own work.

» I'VE DUCK HUNTED all over the world—Holland, Argentina probably 10 or 11 times, New Zealand, Iceland.... I like hunting Iceland. It's one of the cleanest countries you'll ever visit. So clean that hunting there is like hunting in church.

» I HUNT EVERY DAY of the season.

» *ONE AFTERNOON, back in 2011, my son Patrick and I went out to fix a blind that had a leak. Afterward, Patrick left with the four-wheeler, while I stayed back to hunt. I worked in a group of four or five mallards and killed a greenhead. The duck hit the ground at an angle, broke through the ice, and ended up under the ice. I walked out and broke the ice so my dog could pick up the bird. On the walk back, my left arm started going numb and I was sweating like I'd run a marathon. I got back to the pit, and the pain just got worse. I knew this wasn't a common cold. I called Patrick: "You need to come get me—right now."*

» L'ANGUILLE LOUNGE Duck Club started in 1992. Anybody who comes here to hunt finds out real quick that we're all just blue-collar people who love to duck hunt. We're in it for fun, friends, food, fellowship, and waterfowl. Not necessarily in that order.

» WE DON'T HAVE many rules at the club—and the ones we do have are just common sense. Pick up your empty hulls. If there's a decoy that's sunk, pick it up. If you make a mess, clean it up. Don't park in my space. Don't sit in my chair.

» THE TEAL POT we serve at camp is a favorite. We'll pluck 15 or 20 teal and put them in a big Dutch oven. I'll pour a can of Coca-Cola over them, chop up some onions and sausage, and throw all that in. The secret is to drizzle over some pancake syrup—or even some grape jelly or honey—which gives the teal a nice glaze and a little sweet taste. Cook the pot at 300 degrees for three hours.

» HEN MALLARDS AND hen pintails get killed on accident at our club from time to time, but we don't target them. If you shoot one, you pay a fine.

» *PATRICK WAS PASSING people on the shoulder on the drive to the hospital. When we got there, I opened the door to get out and dropped a shotgun shell. I tried to pick it up because they cost money, but before I could, nurses came out and loaded me up on this gurney and carried me into the ER. I remember they cut my waders off—a brand-new pair of waders.*

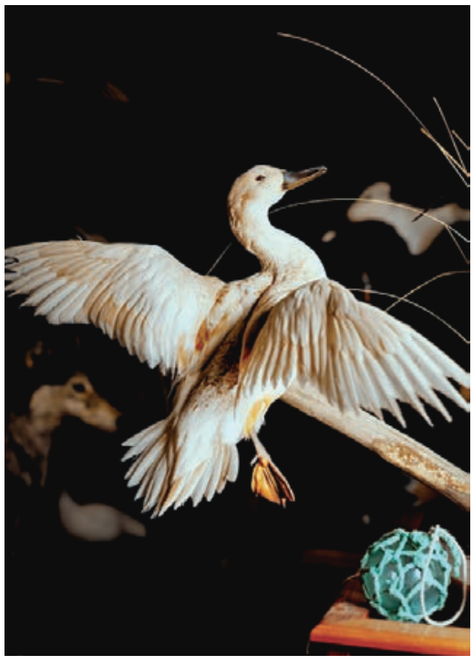
» I GOT A Super Black Eagle 1 when they were first imported here, and I must've put over 100,000 rounds through it. I wore that gun out. I still shoot a SBE 1. I have six or seven in my gun safe. As long as you've got a pocket full of parts, you can keep that gun clicking for a long time.

» IN 1999, I SAW the first spin-wing decoys hit the Arkansas prairie. I was hunting with my sons, and we could see another pit that had one spinning—and it was just sucking birds in. I told my boys, "Y'all are looking at the end of traditional decoying in Arkansas." Those decoys made duck hunters out of people who didn't know how to duck hunt. You could stick a spinner up in a birdbath in your backyard and kill a duck over it. I don't use them. I don't allow them in my club. I don't even want to talk about them.

» DR. CHUBBY ANDREWS and I were given the last case of shells that John Olin had given Nash Buckingham before he died—and we shot them through Bo Whoop II. Boy, that gun could kill birds. There was one duck that was 40, 50 yards in the air, and I shot it dead. Afterward, Chubby told me: "Mr. Buck was guiding that gun."

» PEOPLE PUT TOO MUCH emphasis on the wrong thing. There are so many hunters who, if they shoot a bird that doesn't have a band, they're disappointed. I've seen people come into restaurants with a lanyard full of bands, strutting like a peacock because they got

← Pat Pitt stands in his trophy room, holding one of his trusty Super Black Eagle 1s.



↑
Pitt, who dabbles in taxidermy, mounted this leucistic hen pintail that he shot in Mexico.


↑
A shrine to Pitt's former dog Ace—a Lab that was featured on an Arkansas duck stamp.

↑
For several decades now, Pitt has recorded every single retrieve his dogs have made.

all these bands on the lanyard. If I had all my bands on the lanyard, I couldn't walk upright.

» *AS I RECOVERED in the hospital, the lead nurse in the cardiac-care unit came in to check on me. She asked, "Who are you?" I introduced myself and said that I'm just a duck hunter.*

*"No. Who are you?" She said again. "You don't understand. The waiting room is total camouflage."*

*News travels fast, bad news faster—because several people, some of my dear friends, were there in the hospital. It made me realize that there's friends in small letters and then there's Friends in capital letters. And these were the ones in capital letters.*

» I LOOK FOR two things in a gun dog: drive and heart.

» I'VE LOST SEVERAL dogs. Some, I buried in special places. When I lost Jake, I broke into Wapanocca National Wildlife Refuge and buried him out in the middle of one of their cornfields. I had to cut a cable to get in there, but the statute of limitations is up now, probably. I've got one buried by the river at my duck camp. We've scattered the ashes of the last few dogs. I've had them cremated because my wishes are that their ashes get mixed with mine. Some will be scattered in Arkansas. Some will go to East Tennessee. Some are going to go to Alaska.

» SOMETIMES, I WISH I could work a flock of ducks and shoot two or three so the dog can retrieve them—then be able to release the ducks alive, like a 10-pound bass. I never thought I'd say that, but your mind and goals change the older you get.

**Yeah, wood ducks are pretty. Yeah, everyone loves a mallard. Yeah, the canvasback is the "king." But nothing stirs my soul like a big drake black duck.**

» *TWO WEEKS AFTER my heart attack, I was back in a pit for the last two days of the season. I got to watch Ace, my dog at that time, pick up his 7,000th bird.*

» I KEEP A RECORD of every one of my dog's retrieves. I'm on my ninth dog now. So, yeah, it's a pretty long list.

» MY FAVORITE PART of duck hunting now is watching my grandkids' eyes light up when we're working birds.

» BUT DON'T GET me wrong, I like to pull the trigger.

» I LIKE TEACHING PEOPLE who ask for advice and listen—the ones who want to *learn*. I've guided some folks who come on my turf and tell me how to do this or why I need to do that. And I'm like, "You need to listen to me. I'm calling the shots." It all comes back to what my dad used to say: Two eyes, two ears, one mouth.

» I'D LIKE TO BE remembered as somebody who cared for the resource, as a good man, and for my Friends in capital letters to remember me simply as Pat.

» I'M 77 YEARS OLD, and I'm still like a kid at Christmas. I've never lost a desire for waterfowl hunting. I mean, that's all I do. But I'm just as excited for this coming year as I was the first year I ever hunted. F&S

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-Addison, GUNNER® Founder

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*Addison and Gunner in Saskatoon 2019*


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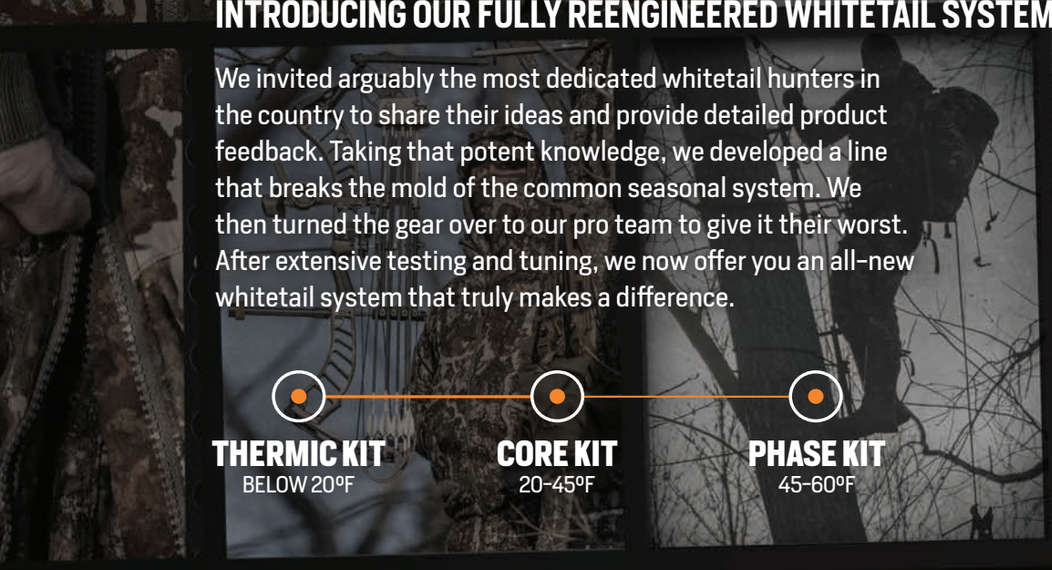

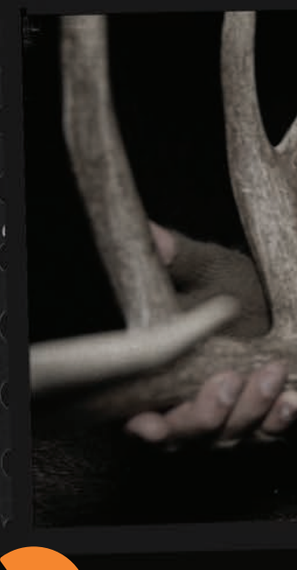

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photograph by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**

# GEARING UP

# DOOMSDAY MACHINE

**THE COLT PYTHON HAS BEEN REVERED BY SHOOTERS SINCE 1955, AND IT'S STILL A MUST-HAVE FOR DOUBLE-ACTION-REVOLVER FANS AND APOCALYPSE PREPPERS ALIKE**

by **WILL BRANTLEY**
photograph by **ERIC RYAN ANDERSON**

The Colt Python was cool long before any zombie apocalypse. Since its debut in 1955, the iconic 357 Magnum has been known as the Rolls-Royce of revolvers and has gained an unparalleled reputation among double-action fans. But that doesn't explain why today—when lightweight, affordable semiauto pistols are all the rage—a 3-pound, $1,500 wheel gun still makes Gunbroker's bestseller list. For that, you need mystique.

On Halloween of 2010, *The Walking Dead* debuted and became one of the most watched shows in television history. The protagonist, former lawman Rick Grimes, wields a 6-inch Python against bad guys, both living and undead. Gun bloggers went nuts about how Grimes held the gun incorrectly and how a high-capacity Glock would be a much better choice than a heavy revolver for fending off the zombie hordes. But it didn't matter. The Python became the good guy's tool in a world gone really bad. Not since Dirty Harry hefted the Model 29 has pop culture had a bigger impact on a sidearm.

It doesn't hurt that the Python is one hell of a gun.

Designed to be both a target handgun and the finest double-action revolver ever made, the original Pythons were hand built and hand tuned with only a few of Colt's most experienced gunsmiths allowed to work on them. The extra time it took to build Pythons meant they cost more than the competition, but they had a reputation for superior quality and exceptional accuracy.

The Python was built on Colt's large I frame. The cylinder, which rotates clockwise, was known for locking solidly into place when the hammer was cocked and the trigger pulled. The Python's barrel has a full underlug, a recessed crown, a ventilated rib, and adjustable target sights. The barrel has a 1:14 rate of twist, which is faster than most 357 revolvers. Some say these design elements add to the revolver's accuracy. At a minimum, they make for good sound bites when Colt fans are discussing the Python's superiority.

Back when revolvers dominated law enforcement, a few agencies, including the Colorado and Georgia state patrols, issued Pythons, but the guns were too expensive for most departments to buy in bulk. Yet many officers bought Pythons out of their own pockets where allowed. The big revolver was popular with outdoorsmen too. Handgun hunters and competition shooters alike favored the Python, and Colt sold a Python Hunter package, with an 8-inch barrel and a Leupold pistol scope, for a limited time in the early 1980s.

Colt discontinued the Python in 2005, due mostly to high manufacturing costs, but also because the handgun market was shifting away from revolvers in favor of semiauto pistols. But the gun came back in a big way in 2020. Bolstered by 10 seasons of *The Walking Dead*, the prices on used original Pythons hit astronomical levels, and to everyone's good fortune, Colt was paying attention. Although the company had been out of the double-action-revolver market for a while, it relaunched other classic "snake" guns, including the King Cobra, before reintroducing the Python in January 2020. I fired a few cylinders with one at that year's SHOT Show—and knew right way that I had to have one of my own. I ordered a 6-inch stainless version.

Aesthetically, the new Python looks and handles much like the original. But it's built with precision CNC equipment and modernized in a few of the right places, including in its transfer bar safety system and on the top strap, which has 30 percent more steel than the one on the original Python, making it a sturdier piece. New Pythons are now available in matte, stainless, and blued finishes, with barrel lengths of 2½ to 8 inches.

Full-size double-action 357 revolvers are like good iron skillets in that they're not perfect for everything, but you can use them effectively for a whole hell of a lot. And who doesn't love an iron skillet? With light 38 Special target ammo, a Python has virtually no recoil. Plinking and target shooting are a pleasure, and you can even pop a rabbit without losing too much meat. But my revolver hits its stride with full-power 357 Magnum hunting loads, which are too much for rabbits but excellent on whitetails out to 50 yards.

I can put a cylinder of 180-grain hollow-points into about a 2-inch group at 25 yards with my Python, given a good rest and slow single-action fire, and there's no doubt the gun is capable of better.

I hunt with my Python on occasion, and I do feel well armed whenever it's in my hand. If ever I looked up from my desk to see zombies staggering through the yard, I'd be glad to have my Python (so long as there weren't more than four of them, and they were moving slowly, and I also had a semiauto rifle handy and maybe an iron skillet too). But I didn't spring for a Python because I need it for the coming apocalypse—or even to shoot rabbits or deer or targets. I bought it because it's a Python. I doubt anyone needs a Rolls-Royce for a daily drive either. But those who have them probably smile when they're driving, and peek at them in admiration now and then when they're just parked in the garage too. F&S


PYTHON 357
357 MAGNUM

# AMERICAN SAMURAI

**IF YOU WANT ONE OF THE FINEST BAMBOO FLY RODS IN THE WORLD, YOU DON'T NEED TO GO TO EUROPE. INSTEAD, PAY A VISIT TO THIS SMALL SHOP ON MAIN STREET IN THE MOUNTAINS OF GEORGIA**

photographs by **PAUL KING**
story by **COLIN KEARNS**

AFTER ALL OF the splitting, sanding, and blowtorching, the filing, fitting, and gluing, the binding, varnishing, and engraving, there's still one more task before a bamboo fly rod is truly finished.

"We take the rod outside the shop, down to the grassy strip by the railroad tracks," Bill Oyster says. "And there, we give the rod its first cast. Until that moment, it's all still very unknown. You never know how the rod will perform."

Oyster and his wife, Shannen, are the co-owners of Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods, headquartered in a charming two-story workshop in Blue Ridge, Georgia. For 25 years, Oyster fly rods have been coveted by diehard anglers from all over the world—not to mention celebrities, royalty, and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. And it's easy to see why: Each rod is a masterpiece, handcrafted the old-fashioned way, right where the bamboo rod was born: in America.

"A lot of people mistakenly attribute the bamboo fly rod to the old-school European scene," Oyster says. "But those guys were all fishing with wooden rods."

When some of those anglers immigrated to the U.S., they discovered that their cumbersome sticks weren't suited to Appalachian brook-trout steams, so they started looking for a material to make a lighter, quicker rod. They settled on bamboo.

"The bamboo rod is our samurai sword," Oyster says. "If you want a real samurai sword, you don't go to Detroit. But if you want a bamboo fly rod, you come to the United States. We invented it. We perfected it."

This summer, Bill and Shannen Oyster welcomed us into their workshop so that we could get a glimpse at how the peak of that perfection comes together.


Oyster
BLUE RIDGE, GA
Bill
fine bamboo
Oyst
"Handmade with
ige, Georgia"

**Previous spread, left:** All the engraving—like the work on the ferrules shown here—is done by hand. "This relief scroll looks fancy, but it's our standard design," Oyster says. "We can get way more exotic."

**Previous spread, right:** The first bamboo rod Oyster ever made took him six months to finish. Once he finally fished with that rod, there was no going back. "I sold all my graphite rods and went on from there," he says.

↑ "There are like a hundred steps to making a bamboo rod," Oyster says. One step that comes early in the process is running a blowtorch over the bamboo to temper it and give it color.

> "When you make a fly rod—especially in the old-school, traditional way, starting with raw materials and making something that's functional and actually works on the water—it's an amazing, amazing feeling."
>
> —BILL OYSTER

↑
Oyster splits a cane of bamboo into ¼-inch strips. As for the tool he's using? "It's just a broken-off knife," he says. "We don't want people accidentally stabbing themselves in the eye with an actual knife."

↑
Oyster uses a card scraper to remove the enamel from the outside of the bamboo that blackened during the torching process. "You scrape away all the char to reveal the brown fibers underneath," he says.

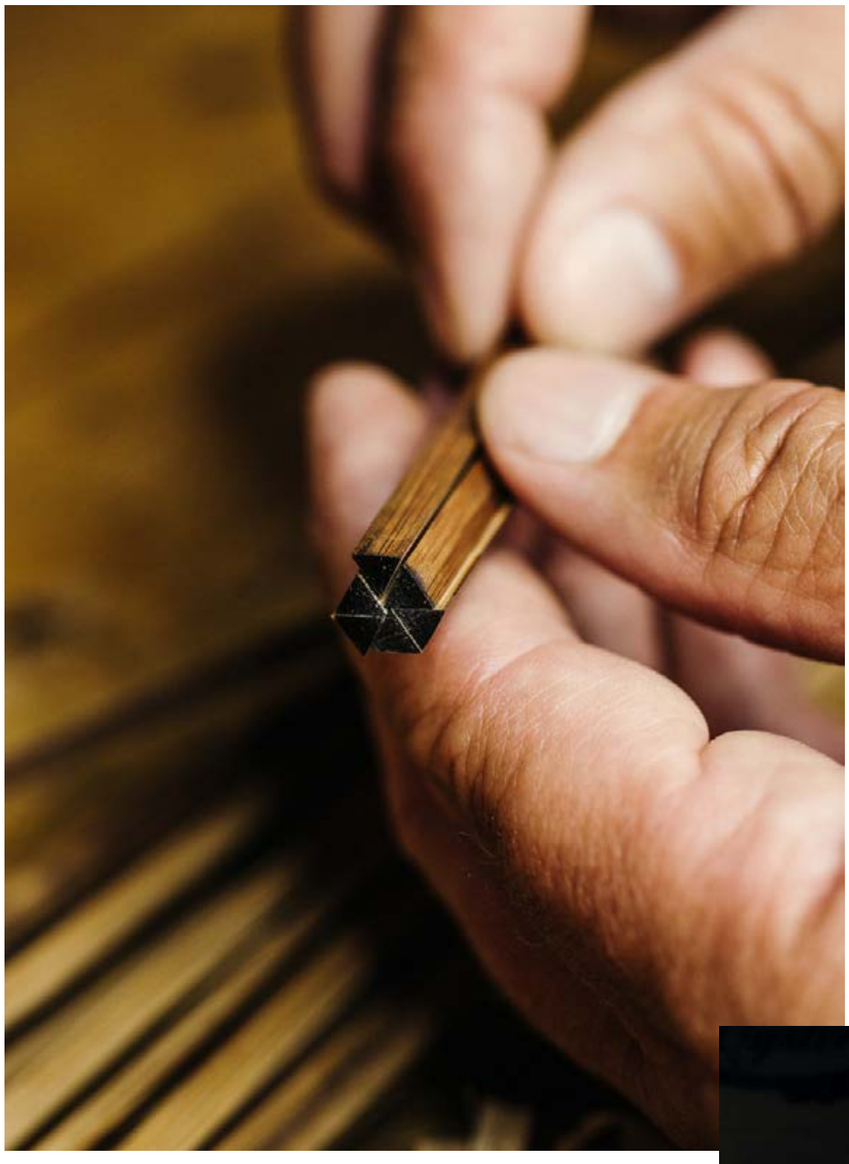
→
Once the bamboo is split into strips—and after those strips are filed, heated, and tapered on a planing form (see pp. 48–49)—you're left with triangulated and tapered strips ready to be made into a fly rod.


BALL


↑
In this step, Oyster has secured a strip of split bamboo in a vise and uses a farrier's rasp to file down and flatten the node diaphragms that appear every couple of feet on the inside of the bamboo stalk.

←
After the nodes have been filed, Oyster holds the bamboo over an alcohol-burning lamp to heat the bamboo to the point where it becomes flexible. Then he'll secure it in a vise to straighten out any curves.

↑
Oyster runs a block plane over a strip that's been placed in a planing form—a steel bar with a groove in the middle that has a depth gauge, allowing rod makers to shave bamboo into triangulated strips that will fit together.



←
Six triangulated bamboo strips fit together to form the butt. All Oyster rods have three sections and come with a spare tip. So it takes 24 of these strips to make one rod.

↓
Oyster tightens 13 rings of cork together with a clamp. This compresses them and forces out any excess glue, resulting in a cylinder of cork for the rod grip.

→
After coating each bamboo strip with glue, Oyster uses fly-line backing to bind them. The tension of the backing is heavy at the rod butt but lessens on its way up the tip.

"We have to be extraordinarily accurate. We're dealing with thousandths of an inch on these rods. A human hair is about 3/1000 inch. Being off just that much will change the rod an entire line weight—from a 4-weight to a 5."

—BILL OYSTER


Bill


↑
Riley Gudakunst, the shop manager at Oyster, uses a strip of sandpaper to shape a cork grip as it spins in a lathe. A caliper is used to measure the widest part of the handle. The rest is done by look and feel.

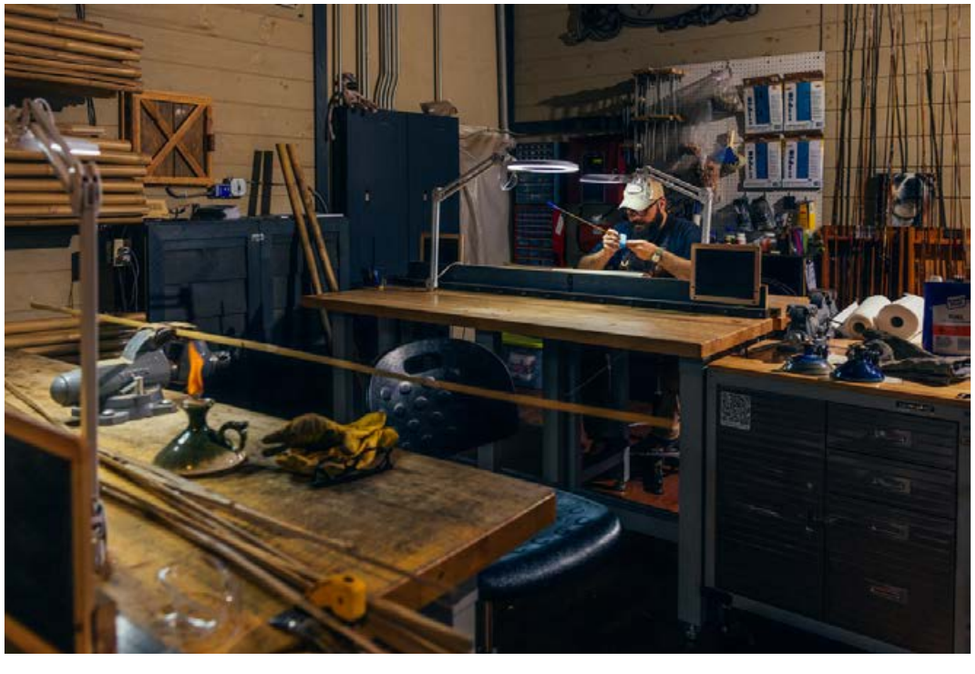

↑
Honoring history, Oyster fastens a guide using red silk. “People use nylon now, but back in the early days, silk was the way to do it,” he says. “And we often use red because, traditionally, that was the go-to color.”

↑
Gudakunst tends to rod pieces in varnish-filled tubes. Each piece has a string tied to it, which is attached to a bike wheel, which is moved by a motor to slowly extract the pieces at about 3 inches per minute, giving them an even, consistent coat of varnish.

→
Ryleigh Paxton, an engraver, assists Bill Oyster with the engraving, which is all done by hand, as is demonstrated on this reel seat. “We’ll use a felt pen to sketch things into place,” Oyster says. “Then we get in there and start cutting line by line.”


Oyster


8'5
WT

←
At Oyster Bamboo, style and aesthetics aren't limited to the fly rods—they extend to the dress code too: Gudakunst refuses to wear a company apron in favor of his broken-in leather one. Who can blame him?

↙
Alone in the workshop, Gudakunst sands a varnished rod. Each piece of every rod is varnished and sanded—again and again and again—until the Oyster crew is satisfied that the pieces have a perfectly smooth finish.

→
Meet Gudakunst's dog, Pepper. "She's our shop dog," Oyster says. "She's a sweetheart. We like to say that she lives at the shop, but she sleeps at Riley's house." F&S


Pepper
Bill

by **RYAN CHELIUS** photographs by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**

DAD SITS ON THE DECK of the stern of our 12-foot Higbee sneak box with his hand on the tiller, steering us toward Black Duck Creek—a nickname for one of his hunting spots. The whine of the 15-horse Mariner echoes through the bay as we enter the mouth of the creek in the dark. Dad throttles down, shifts into neutral, then lifts the small outboard into shallow drive as we idle through the skinny water. Every few yards, wings explode from the safety of spartina grass. The smell of low tide, Dad tells me, means the ducks will be feeding at first light. I can barely contain my excitement. My first-ever duck hunt is about to begin.

# Al's Decoys

**FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, THE HANDMADE DECOYS THAT THE AUTHOR'S FATHER HELPED CRAFT HAVE CONTINUED TO BRING IN DUCKS LIKE NOTHING ELSE**

But first we need to set the spread. When we reach the hole, I begin unraveling Dad's handmade decoys. One by one, I shove a giant slab of cork under my armpit and clear the 10 feet of line wrapped around the body. Next, I hand the 1-pound anchor and 3½-pound decoy to Dad, who places it in the spread, being careful to keep the line clear of the prop.

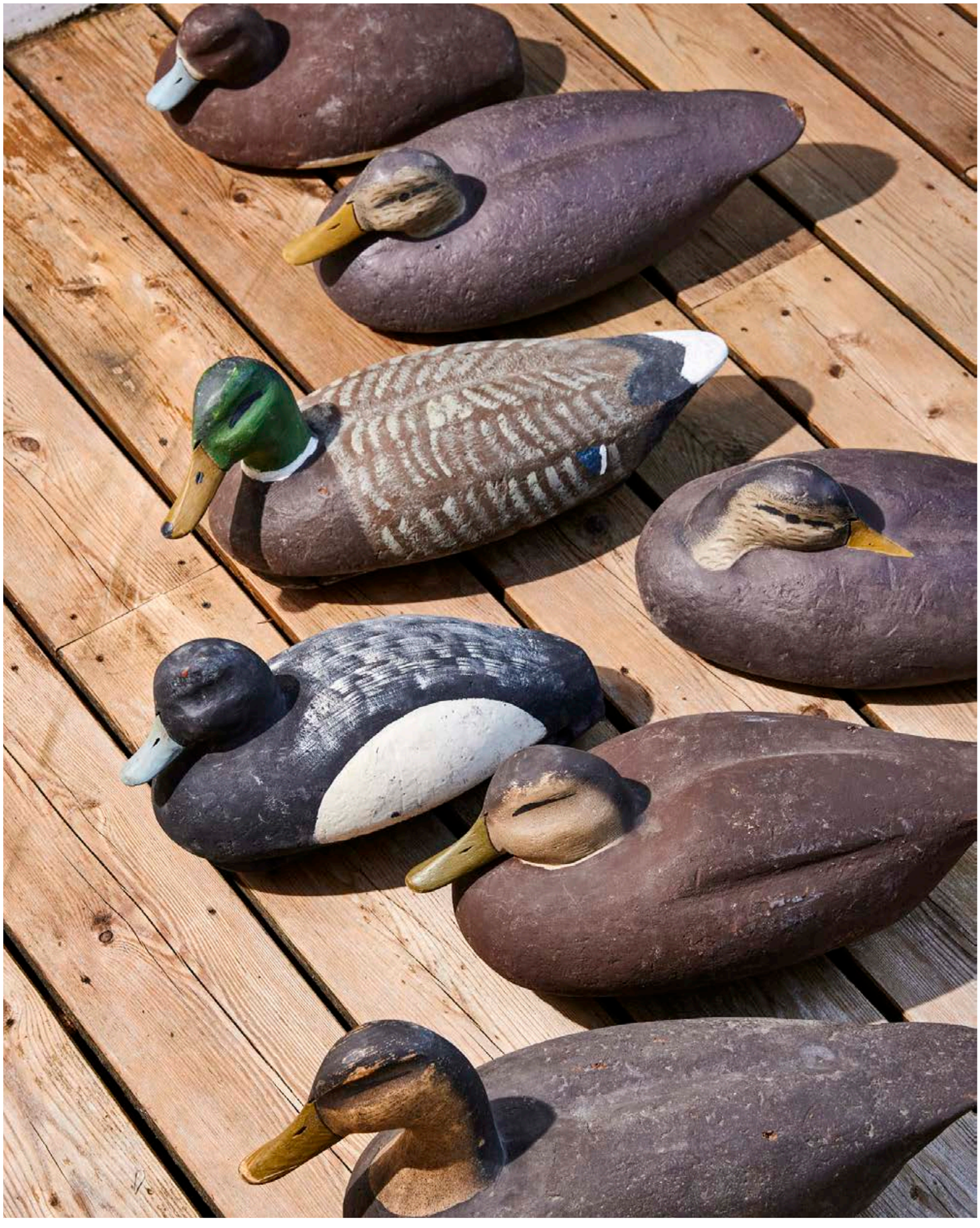
When we're finished, there are 12 decoys—all black ducks—in the spread. According to Dad, a dozen McCormicks are all we need.

## LABOR OF LOVE

Al McCormick, known as Mr. Decoy, was a legend among Long Island waterfowl hunters. I am too young to have ever seen him carve a deke, but my dad, like many other local duck and goose hunters in the 1970s and '80s, was lucky enough to watch Al sculpt fake ducks out of cork. In fact, my dad carved right alongside Al.

Back then, Al's decoys—especially his black ducks—were must-haves, as nothing drew in ducks better than a spread from Mr. Decoy. The few commercially made plastic decoys of the time were unrealistic looking and couldn't hold up in harsh saltwater conditions. Al's decoys, however, looked the part. He used to study ducks at local parks, observing their behaviors, postures, and coloring, which he replicated in his dekes. And the cork he used was not only durable, but it also forced the decoys to ride low to the water—even in heavy chop and strong tides.

→ A collection of cork-bodied duck decoys that the author's father helped make in the 1970s.



Al's decoys were so in demand that he could've charged a hefty price for them. Instead, hunters got them for next to nothing.

To get your own rig of McCormicks, you had to agree to Al's terms: First, you put your name on a waiting list. When Al eventually called, you went out and purchased enough cork for a full rig of decoys and took it to Al's workshop. And over the course of the next several weeks, you would carve your own set of decoys—with Al's help, of course. For Al, carving decoys was a labor of love. He was obsessed with making the *best* gunning decoys on Long Island, and his reward was hearing how well real ducks came in to a spread of his dekes.

"I waited for Al's call for weeks," my dad recalled. "When it eventually came, I remember walking into his basement workshop and being hit by the strong smell of marine varnish, solvents, and paints. The room looked like a mess—with piles of decoys in various stages scattered across workbenches. But Al had a method to his madness."

Often, my dad told me, there'd be several hunters at Al's shop at once, all completing different steps in the decoy-building process while Al would move about the room like a conductor—overseeing his "helpers" and correcting their mistakes. These hunters were given the grunt work: sanding cork, shaping bodies, gluing parts together. Al handled the fine details, such as carving the heads and painting the decoys.

"Al was meticulous about every step in the process," Dad told me. "If he felt that you weren't paying attention, he'd point his crooked index finger at you and raise his voice: 'Follow me now!'"

A completed McCormick decoy is a combination of blue-collar ruggedness and work of art. Each deke has a 3-inch wooden dowel drilled through the bottom and into the cedar head, pinned in place by a nail on each end. This prevents the head from breaking off. The tail features a Masonite insert to keep it from snapping off when the decoy is tossed around. There's a long lead weight screwed into a flat wood baseboard instead of a pronounced keel so that the decoy sits upright in mud during low tide. There are numerous head positions, all elegantly carved to match the various postures of ducks. Al painted the neck and head light brown with a black streak where the eye would be to match the dark slash on a real black duck. The top of the head features a dark black shading that blends into the lighter brown on the sides. The realism of the cedar heads was Al's signature.

As stunning as a brand-new rig of McCormick decoys was, the blocks were made to be used—they were purpose-built for heavy-gunning Eastern coastal salt-marsh hunters.

"I never viewed the decoys as collectibles," explained my dad, who had two

↓

Mr. Decoy at work. **Bottom:** A hunting pal of the author's dad with a set of McCormicks.


courtesy of TIM CHELIUS (3)

**"A rig of McCormicks stacked on the deck of a grass boat never went unnoticed. If you saw a hunter with McCormicks, you knew they were serious."**

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sets built—a black-duck rig and a broadbill (bluebill) rig. "I made the decoys with Al because they were the best in every aspect, and I believed I would kill more ducks over them. And that's all Al really wanted—for his decoys to be hunted with, not to be placed on a shelf and looked at. A rig of McCormicks stacked on the deck of a grass boat never went unnoticed at the boat ramp. If you saw a hunter or boat with McCormick black ducks, you knew they were serious."

## PASSING THE TORCH

By the time I started duck hunting, in 2010, McCormick decoys had become artifacts. My dad's friends—who'd carved their own sets of decoys alongside Al—retired their cork and upgraded to the latest "ultra-realistic" plastic ones. Not my dad, though. He was never convinced (and still isn't) that there are better salt-marsh decoys out there. "Nothing rides low to the water like a McCormick," he'd say. They were the only decoys I ever hunted with growing up. Until my senior year of college, I never even held another black-duck decoy.

As a 12-year-old, I couldn't understand my dad's loyalty to those cork decoys. He wouldn't even budge to my requests to add just *one* greenhead to the spread. He insisted that mallards would come in to his McCormick black ducks.

When I entered high school, and my duck obsession really started to take off, Dad finally compromised. I convinced him that the McCormicks needed a fresh look—and that I was the one for the job. I also talked him into allowing me to paint two of those decoys as drake mallards.

Unsupervised, I had total freedom with this decoy-restoration project—and that's when it hit me: *I must not mess this up.* The fact that I had no artistic sensibility only added to the pressure. So I took my time, and as I worked I began to notice, and appreciate, all of the detail and ingenuity that went into these decoys: The outline of the 3-inch dowel in the baseboard. The thin nail in the top of the head, covered by paint. The ridged outline of the Masonite tail. The two bolts screwed through the baseboard into the bottom of the body....

Al—and my father—had built these decoys to last forever.

The black-duck bodies were easy to paint since they were one solid color, but the heads were more difficult. The opposite was true for the mallards: The all-green heads were easy, but the bodies needed more detail. When I was finished, my dad said they looked great, even the mallards.

Looking back, I can't help but think that his allowing me to retouch his McCormicks was his way of telling me that these decoys were as much mine as they were his.

While black ducks were Al's specialty, he also made rigs of broadbills—aka bluebills.

## CHARACTER STUDY

At 18, I started to have enough money to buy my own hunting gear—and the first purchase I made was a dozen fully flocked black-duck decoys. Then I bought a dozen flocked mallards. Next, a set of gadwall and woodie dekes. After that, spinners and ripplers. In my mind—my youthful, naive mind—the more decoys I had, the more species I'd fool and the more ducks I'd kill. But the more I hunted over these newer dekes, the more I came to realize that my high-end plastic decoys had no character.

Up to that point, not only had I hunted over nothing but the same 15 McCormicks my entire life, but I'd made a connection to each one of those cork ducks: There was the Looker with the chipped bill, the Sleeper that was difficult to wrap line around, the High Head with a tail that looked like it was chewed by a dog....

My modern decoys all seemed the same—and if they got damaged via shot or abuse, they were usually destined for the garbage. If I lost one, I didn't care because I knew I had 100 more sitting in my garage. Not the McCormicks, though. Even after 50-plus years of hard use, those decoys continue to endure. Because they were made to last forever.

## BLACK OUT

Back in the marsh on my first duck hunt, Dad and I turn off our headlamps. Between the ambient light and the awakening sky, I can see well enough to make out some detail. Dad helps me out of the boat and into the coffin box—a fiberglass-plywood layout-style blind made specifically for salt marshes. He hands me my Remington 870 20-gauge. "Twenty minutes until shooting light," he says.

Looking out across the small creek, a dozen McCormick black duck decoys ride low to the water. Above them, the sky begins to fill with real black ducks. Eventually Dad whispers that it's shooting light, then lets out a soft feeding chuckle from his Sure-Shot Yentzen double-reed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a single black duck with its wings cupped, crossing into our spread. Without thinking, I mount my gun and fold my first duck. It drops right into the middle of the spread and floats belly-up next to the decoy that I would come to know as High Head.

Dad was right. The McCormicks were all we needed. F&S

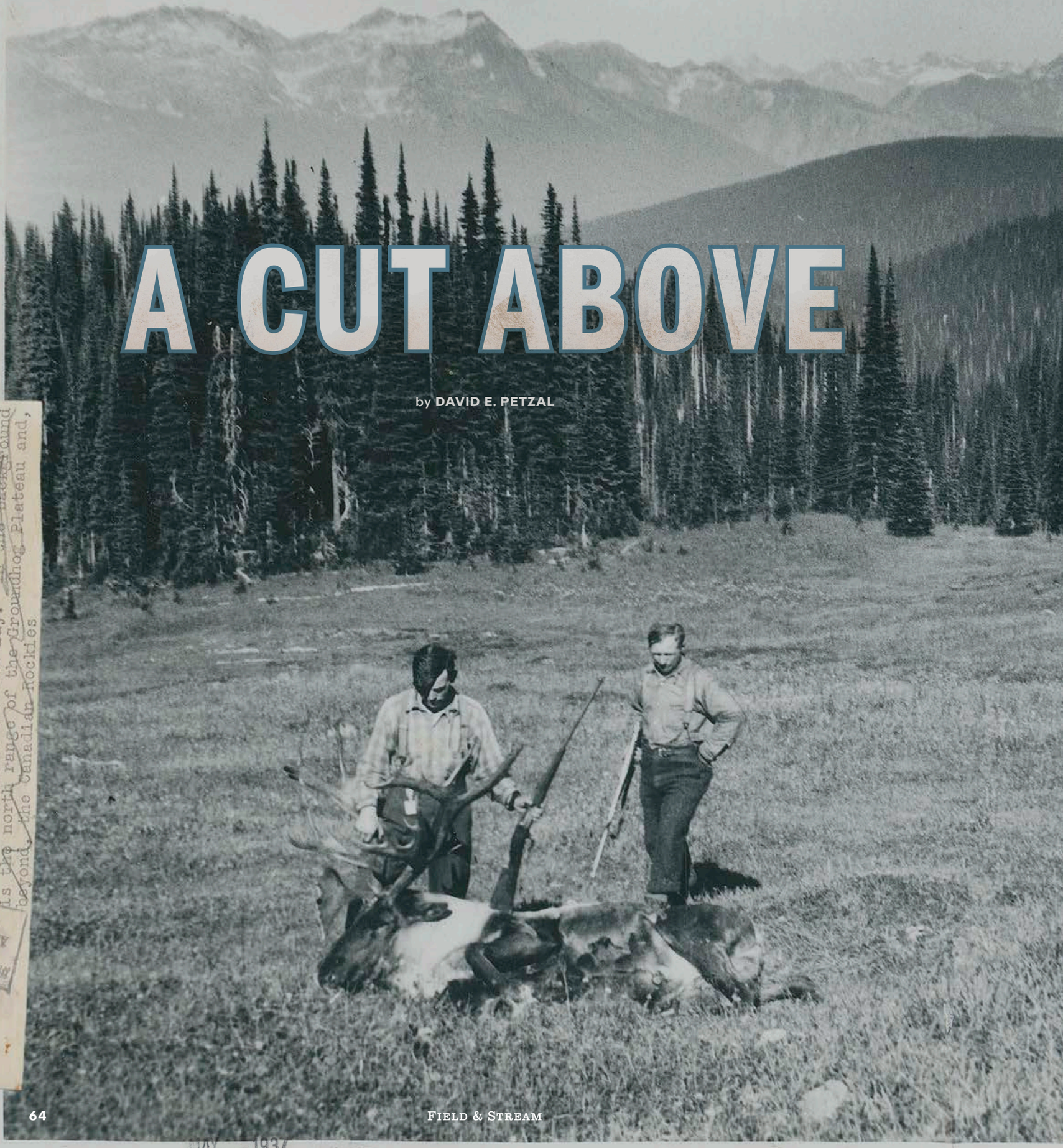
# BUILT BETTER

In 2021, Chêne was born out of the desire to build a better wader; one free of margin constraints and low-cost alternatives. A wader that could handle the paces we would put in through, and a company that would stand behind it should we push it beyond its limits. We have since expanded beyond waders, yet have stayed true to our core mission of building premium outdoor gear without compromise.

CHÊNE

# A CUT ABOVE

by DAVID E. PETZAL



# THE SIX BEST HUNTING KNIVES EVER MADE, INCLUDING A FEW YOU CAN ACTUALLY AFFORD

I'VE BEEN BUYING and using knives—all kinds, at all prices—since 1952. In that time, I've owned hundreds of them, and I would not be surprised if the number was north of a thousand. I drew on all of this experience to pick the six best hunting knives ever made.

There are caveats, however. Usually, *best* denotes "unsurpassed or unequaled," which in the case of knives means you'd have to dig very deep in your pocket to own it. But for this list, I decided to factor in price. Of the half dozen blades below, two are expensive, two are moderately priced, and two are bargains.

Price is important. Marble's Woodcraft was so inexpensive, for example, that in 1953, when I had just gotten my Boy Scouts Totin' Chip and was licensed to carry, I could afford one by saving up my allowance. Low price notwithstanding, it was, and is, a very good knife.

Also, none of my picks debuted fewer than 25 years ago. Why? Because to be considered one of the best of all time, you need time.

And so here are the Sacred Six. You are free to disagree, of course, but remember that no one knows as much on this subject as I do, except maybe Eddie Nickens, and I am taller than he is.

No. 1

## DIAMONDBLADE SUMMIT

CHARLES ALLEN, WHO FOUNDED DiamondBlade, got his training as a Texas game biologist and became interested in knives because he used them all the time. For his first foray into cutlery, he founded Knives of Alaska, a highly practical line of working knives made from D2 steel—tough stuff that holds an edge very well and is rust resistant.

> The steel is altered not to the molecular level but to the atomic level. As a result, it's impossible to break a DiamondBlade knife—I've seen someone try and fail.

Around 2005, Allen became intrigued with a technique that submarine builders use to construct hulls. A sub hull is made in three pieces, and the sections are rendered into a single unit by a kind of welding-on-steroids that employs otherworldly amounts of heat and pressure.

Allen learned that doing this to a D2 blade gives you a spine of about RC 40 and an edge of RC 65 to 68, which is off the charts. It is differential tempering with a vengeance. The steel is altered not to the molecular level but to the atomic level. As a result, it's impossible to break a DiamondBlade knife—I've seen someone try and fail—and there's nothing in the world of knifery that I know of that can compete with it in edge-holding.

In the end, the Summit is nothing more than a very nicely made drop-point hunter—until you get to the edge-holding department, where there is not a close second ($249–$475 new).

No. 2

## GROHMANN D.H. RUSSELL CANADIAN BELT KNIFE

IN 1956, A HUNTER from Ottowa named Deane H. Russell wanted to buy a hunting knife that was made in Canada, eh? But to his chagrin, he found that there was no such thing. Russell decided to do something about it. He got in touch with Grohmann Knives of Pictou, Nova Scotia, and they ran a series of newspaper ads soliciting input from hunters, trappers, and outdoorsmen on what they actually did with their knives, and what qualities they valued.

FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (hunters); CHRISTOPHER TESTANI (knives)

Russell and Grohmann got a lot of very good information, and they listened very carefully. They put the D.H. Russell Canadian Belt Knife on the market in 1957, and now it is one of the most copied designs in the world.

The Belt Knife (about $130 new) has an elliptical 4-inch blade of either tool steel (yes) or stainless (no). The handle is offset, which keeps your knuckles out of whatever you're cutting. The basic handle is rosewood. If you would like, Grohmann will make you a more exotic handle, but I'd stick with the original.

Grohmann's sheath appears flimsy but is not. The Scandinavian design swallows the knife almost entirely, does not rely on snaps, and is just about loss-proof. And since it dangles, it hardly ever gets in your way.

No. 3

## LOVELESS DROP POINT

FROM THE EARLY 1950s to the early 1970s, Bob Loveless's knives were called Delaware Maids and were constructed in the conventional manner of the time. Then he revolutionized the way fixed-blade knives were made and became, along with Bo Randall, one of the most influential knifesmiths of the 20th century.

Unlike Bo Randall and everyone else, Loveless used full tangs rather than stick tangs, and he tapered them from hilt to butt. He held them in place with bolts, and he was one of the first smiths to epoxy his handles in place. This adds no weight to the knife and makes it far stronger than the older styles. His Drop Point is a minimalist masterpiece. The blade is ground from an exotic steel called 154CM, which is like 440C on steroids. It's at once harder, tougher, and much more resistant to rust than 440C. At the time, it was a revelation, and it's still first-rate. With Loveless's superior blade geometry (his deeply hollow grind has very little drag when you cut), it is a terrific combination.

As word of Loveless's knives got around, he became a celebrity. He was crusty, opinionated, and a wonderful interview. Eventually, serious collectors discovered him, and the prices of his knives soared. Good originals now go for $5,000 or more.

There's a story (probably true) that at a Knifemakers' Guild show, someone asked him why his Drop Point, which was then a legitimate $750 knife, was selling for three times that. "Simple," Loveless replied. "My name is on it."

No. 4

## MARBLE'S WOODCRAFT

MARBLE ARMS WAS FOUNDED in Gladstone, Michigan, in 1892, by one Webster Marble, an inventor, entrepreneur, outdoorsman, and manufacturer who turned out knives, compasses, match safes, and the like.

For most of the 19th century, there was no such thing as a hunting knife on the market. You used whatever you could lay your hands on, or you had a blacksmith or cutler build a knife to your specs. Then came Marble's Ideal Hunter, in 1899, and it was pretty nearly ideal. Its only drawback was that it was big and clunky for gutting, skinning, and caping, which are the three principal functions of a hunting knife.

In 1914, Marble was approached by one George W. Brooks with a design for a knife that would be called the Woodcraft. The blade, which is made of 1095 steel, is just a shade over 4 inches long, and its entire cutting edge sweeps in a continual curve from choil to point. The minimal hilt is brass, the handle is Marble's standard leather-washer design (though you could order something fancier back in the day), and the butt cap is aluminum held in place by a lock nut.

The Woodcraft was a hit. Its smaller size made it far better suited for hunters than the Ideal, and it cost very little. In 1952, a few years before I got mine, it sold for $3.25. As I recall, there was a Boy Scouts model, and that was what I bought. Today, on the used market, you can find a Woodcraft in pretty decent shape for under $50.


FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (hunters); CHRISTOPHER TESTANI (Marble, Randall, Schrade); courtesy of ARIZONA CUSTOM KNIVES (Loveless)

No. 5

## RANDALL MADE KNIVES MODEL 3 HUNTER

In the spring of 1937, a Florida hunter, fisherman, and citrus rancher named Bo Randall saw a man scraping paint off a boat with a knife whose like he'd never seen before. It had been made by an eccentric cutler named Bill Scagel, and Randall bought the knife on the spot. Then, since he was clever with his hands, he tried to figure out how to make such a thing. The results were so good that he started a full-time knife-making business in 1938.

Bo Randall began with just four designs, and he felt that the Model 3 was the best choice for a heavy-duty outdoorsman's knife. Because sporting knives used to be long-bladed by today's standards, the Model 3 has been made in 5-, 6-, and 7-inch lengths. Hunters are best served by the 5-incher.

When Randall went commercial, he adopted as his standard a tool steel called O1. It's a simple, high-carbon formula that takes to the forge readily, sharpens easily, and requires some care. If you want an exotic, space-age alloy, you will have to look elsewhere, as O1 has done Randall owners just fine for eight decades, thank you very much.

Randall Made Knives is still in business, with a third generation of Randalls working at the forge, along with 20 other people. They turn out about 800 knives a year, including the Model 3 Hunter, which starts at $485.

No. 6

## SCHRADE MODEL 125 OLD TIMER

At one of the last SHOT Shows I attended, I had the privilege of talking with writer J. Wayne Fears, who has done about everything you can legally do outdoors, including some truly hair-raising stuff, and lived to write about it.

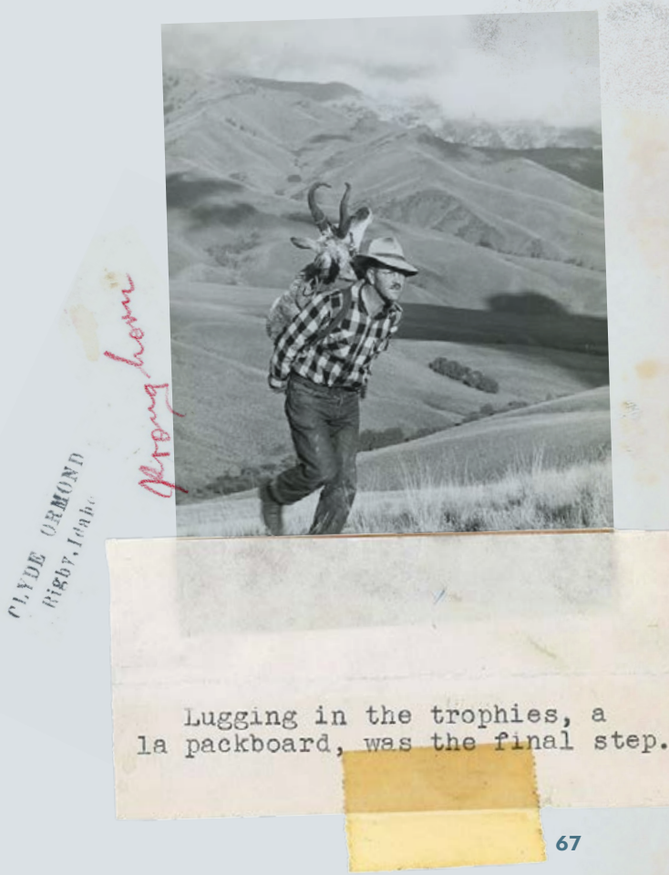
We got to talking knives, and he mentioned that for 50 years he'd relied solely on the Schrade Model 125 Old Timer, a liner-lock folder that Schrade gave him to try out in 1970. It's a plain working knife with a 4¼-inch sabre blade and a 5-plus-inch handle that's made of Delrin, which has been used for knife handles since the 1960s and is more or less indestructible.

The Old Timer's fit and finish are reminders that it was built to sell at a low price and be used hard. The blade is 1095 tool steel that takes an astonishing edge and can be restored very easily. The springs are all muscular. The leather sheath is no masterpiece, but it should hold up for a long time.

**The Old Timer's blade is 1095 tool steel that takes an astonishing edge and can be restored very easily.**

What I like about this folding hunter above all the others are two things in particular. When this sumbitch locks open, it really locks. Also, the handle is long enough for any hand. A great many folders, because they must by nature be short, have handles that leave you wishing you had more cutting leverage. Not a problem here.

The Schrade company is gone, and Old Timers are now made in China, with stainless-steel blades. So the original knives are increasing in price. But since Schrade made a lot of them, some have managed to survive with little or no wear, and they can be had on the used market at very reasonable prices ($20–$75). Act now; this is not going to last. F&S



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# FEATURES



photograph by **TRISTAN SPINSKI**

# INTO THE WILD

**FROM CYPRESS SWAMPS AND FOREVER GRASSLANDS TO CONIFER THICKETS AND THE TREELESS PLAINS OF THE FAR NORTH,**

**SOME WILD LANDSCAPES CAPTURE OUR IMAGINATION EVERY BIT AS MUCH AS THE ANIMALS WE PURSUE IN THEM. HERE ARE FIVE SUCH PLACES**

# The Northwoods

by **DAVE HURTEAU**

THERE'S A HARDWOOD ridge in New York's Adirondacks where a buck makes a line of scrapes under the spindly arms of tan-leafed beech saplings, and for the past few Novembers, I've grabbed one of my quick-handling woods guns—the Model 94 or one of the Remington pumps—and hiked 4 miles to that spot. It's a handful of little trees in a sea of bigger trees in an ocean of tree-covered ridges.

I might be the only person on Earth who knows about these scrapes, or the fact that they're here every fall. As for the buck who makes them, I don't know a thing. I only imagine things about him while I slip between the trunks, hoping to catch a glimpse.

Most of the wilderness areas I hunt hold just four or five deer per square mile, maybe one of which is a decent buck. Out of curiosity, I once called up a local forester and learned that, on average, this comes to about one decent buck for every quarter-million trees. Mine should be standing behind one of them. Theoretically. All hunting requires a degree of faith, but hiking into the vast sprawl of the northern big woods with a deer rifle in your hand means you're banking on a miracle.

Spotting a deer among all the trees is the hardest part right until it's not. If you're lucky, you'll have to make a shot at a buck that'll vanish as quickly as it appeared. Sometimes, though, after so much searching and tromping, the hardest part is just believing your eyes when you do see one.

A few winters ago, I followed a huge buck track for two days without a glimpse. As a rule, fresh hoofprints in the snow mean there's a deer up ahead, but if you follow them long enough, you begin to wonder. Toward dusk on day two, I began wondering if the buck ahead of me had only feet and no body, or if maybe he didn't exist at all in the corporal sense. Deep in a conifer swamp, his hoofprints fell closer together and began to meander, so I slowed down. I scanned the bank of young spruces rising to my right and saw nothing. Then I looked again, and there he was, standing on a hummock of spongy moss, in a fortress of deadfall, staring at me.

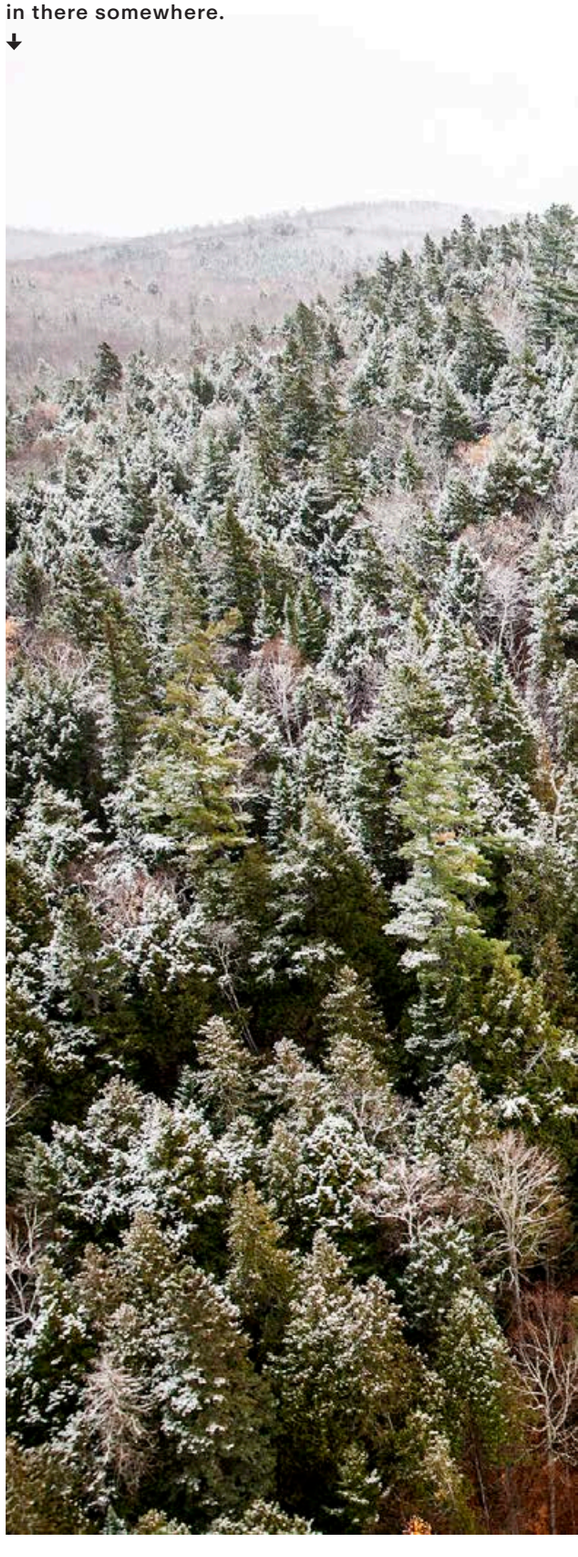
I just stared back until he vanished. If I'm honest, most times I've followed buck tracks to their maker, and a few times while still-hunting, I've been too slow with my quick-handling woods gun. I think of that scene in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* where he says to the four bluecoats stunned to find him outside a saloon, "Are you gonna pull those pistols or whistle 'Dixie'?" Well, I've gotten lucky and hung tags on several big-woods deer. But every now and then, I'm gonna whistle 'Dixie.'

**Northwoods bucks never seem real until you're shooting at one—and sometimes not even after.**

This never happens, by the way, on my farmland lease or in the Midwestern ag country where I travel to hunt. But the Northwoods are different. It's said that any buck you encounter here has probably never seen a human before. That's true, but also: *You* have never seen the buck. You don't know his core area or where he beds or feeds. You had no idea he even existed until he materialized out of nowhere. People don't refer to whitetail bucks as "ghosts" as much as they used to, for obvious reasons. (Ghosts don't show up on trail cameras as a regular thing.) But in the Northwoods, the bucks are still ghosts—and it can be hard to know what to think or do when you see one.

Of course, I know they're real. I've put my hands on a few of those ghosts, and I've felt that sense, when you hike deep into the wilderness and come out

A sea of mixed timber, tinged with frost, rises and falls for as far as you can see. There's a buck or two in there somewhere. ↓



GLENN OAKLEY/CAVAN IMAGES (previous spread); TOM FOWLKS

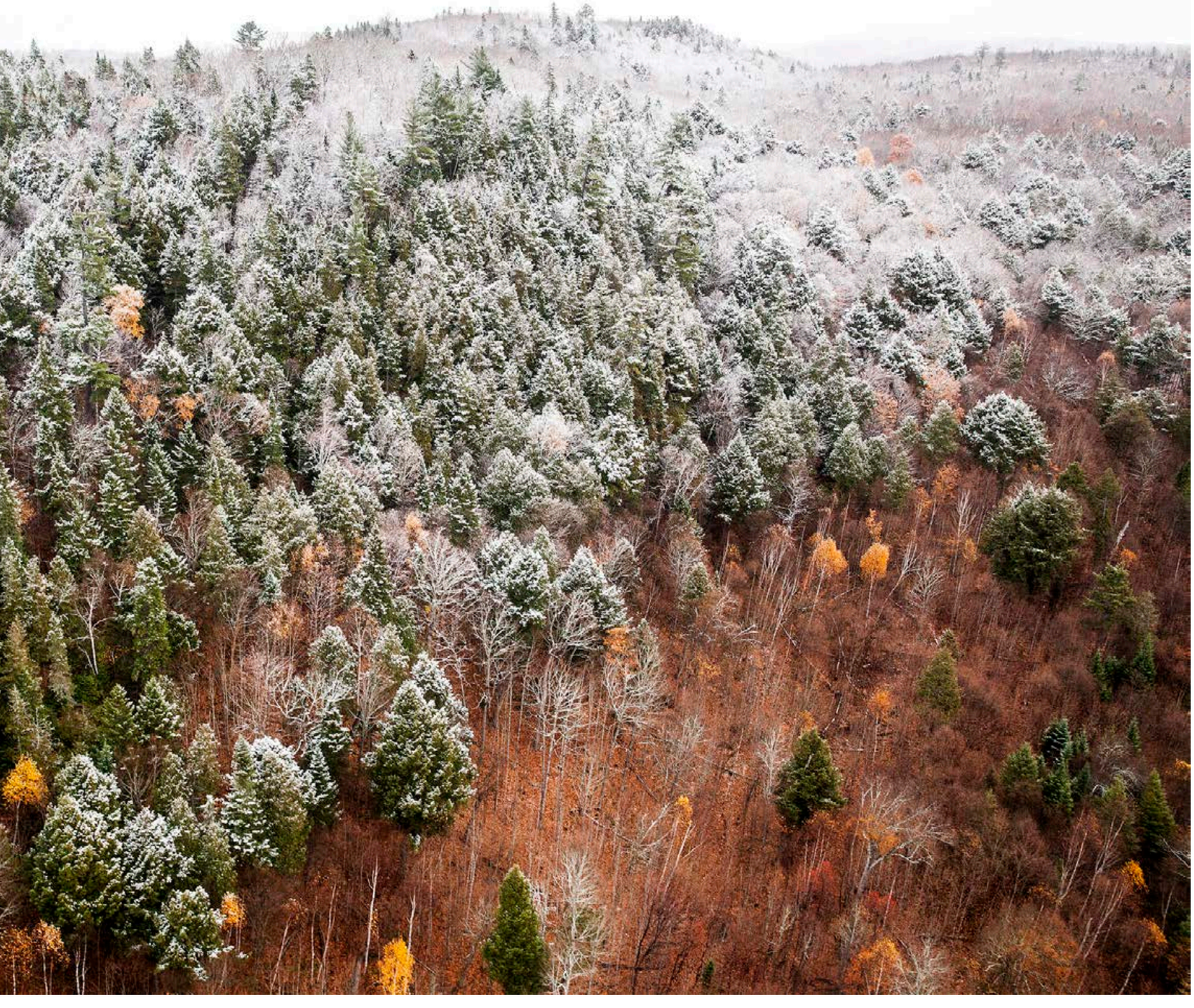
dragging a buck, that you've stolen something tangible from another realm. Still, Northwoods bucks never seem real until you're shooting at one—and sometimes not even after. Once, while still-hunting an oak-and-hemlock ridge, I caught a buck snuffling acorns obliviously. It was a rare easy shot, and I made sure of it. I took a rest, squeezed it off...and didn't cut a hair. While I searched for blood and never found a drop, the idea that my bullet passed harmlessly through him seemed more than plausible.

Over the last couple of decades, the giant bucks of the heartland have ruled whitetail deer hunting. That's fine. I like hunting giant bucks on the farm. But the Northwoods' monotony of trees and mountains offers something that's very hard to find anywhere else these days. It's a place where the deer have no names. Where whitetails are still a mystery.

And I'd really like to solve the case of those beech-sapling scrapes.

I'll go up there again this November and slink from tree to tree—maybe sit against a boulder for a while—and imagine things about the buck that lays down the sign year after year. I'll picture him moving up from the spruce-and-fir lowlands, where he's all but invisible, and onto the hardwood ridges, where the line of his back or a jet of steam between the tree trunks might give him away. Probably, those images are all I'll go home with. But wouldn't it be something if he materialized along that scrape line and walked into my sights?

Really, it'd be a miracle.



# THE SWAMP

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

On a cold fall morning, I ease into a swamp, rippling the still surface of the water where stars are spangled in a mirror image of the dark sky. As I pull each wader-clad boot from the muck, I can smell the dark landscape around me. To my nose, it is neither rank nor foul. Yes, there's a tinge of rotten-egg smell, that sulfuric odor that speaks of decay. But that's not what hangs in the nose. To me, a swamp smells clean and full of life, of lives lived and gone and lives yet to come. It promises a sunrise through fingertips of bare cypress and water oak that cleanses the soul. I'm in a place where time binds each element—mud, water, shrub, tree—like mortar between bricks. The passage of time is felt in every downed tree I almost trip over, in every gurgle from the mud. Time for rotting and renewal. And it's almost time for the ducks to show.

"Boy, you love a swamp like Peter loved the Lord," said my farmer pal one day after I told him I'd found a new beaver pond on his property, small and tucked away so deep in his woods that I bet he didn't even know it was there. I think he meant it as a compliment. I took it as one.

It may be that my love for swamps is rooted in my earliest years as a duck hunter. I didn't grow up on a river, or on the coast. I didn't have access to duck impoundments or duck clubs. I had no private land to hunt on, no pals with duck boats. I did, however, have nearly 90,000 acres of public land nearby, surrounding three large public lakes, and those lakes were fed with tributary streams where beaver dams could run one after the other for a mile. I had good knees and a strong paddle stroke and no aversion at all to getting a face full of spiderwebs or the occasional run-in with a copper-mouthed rattle moccasin. I had no way to hunt ducks but to find ducks, and nowhere to do that but in the gnarliest, hardest-to-get-to swamps on the landscape.



CARTER MORBY

The sight of a drake wood duck and his mate is one of the gifts of hunting a beaver swamp—one that deserves a double-take.

**A bird splashes down and I freeze. Then the wood duck has second thoughts, and all I see is a froth of water as it takes to the sky.**

I nearly killed myself getting into some of these places. Mile-long hikes down railroad tracks, the crossties of which seem purposefully designed to make it impossible to step from one to the next while wearing waders. Death marches through clear-cuts. Only once, in hundreds of duck hikes, was I injured, and that was a doozy, requiring surgery to stitch a tattered knee back together again. But blood, sweat, and cartilage tears were a small price to pay for the gifts of a swamp.

•

When the ducks do come, they come too early, of course. They are ducks. They know the rules. I hear a screeching whistle up the creek, like a door on a rusty hinge, and move the shotgun muzzle toward the sound. It's not too early to shoot. But in a small swamp ringed with tall trees, it's simply too early to see. Duck-like shapes streak overhead too quickly to track with the gun. A bird splashes down, nearly close enough to touch. I freeze. Then the wood duck has second thoughts, and all I see is a froth of water as it takes to the sky. I throw the gun to my shoulder, but the duck vanishes in the treetops, like a phantom of winged smoke.

I slow my breathing and calm my nerves. There are rarely two or three wood ducks in a swamp. There are either none or there are 10 or 20 or 50. Which means there are likely more coming. The light is rising, like the air of a warming morning. The tops of the cypress trees aren't yet on fire with first light, but the scales are starting to tip in my favor. I can make out the horizontal line of the beaver dam at the head of the pond. If a bird dips below the treeline, it will not disappear. There is more squealing. I hear wings in the flooded woods behind me, and a pair of woodies barrel in. No mere shapes now; I can pick out the crest of the drake and track the duck with its feet splayed. This time the shotgun comes up smoothly and with purpose, and I pull the trigger on my own terms.

Morning in a wood duck swamp, and you can see it all coming. But here's the paradox: In a place fashioned by the passage of time, there's really not much time at all. Twenty minutes, maybe a half hour, and the wood ducks are mostly done. I'll linger for a while, with fingers crossed. I've shot mallards, black ducks, bluewing teal, gadwalls, northern shovelers, ringnecks, wigeon, and a dump-truck load of big, fat Canada geese in beaver swamps, but for sure the dawn wood duck flight is the typical game.

So I move behind a standing tree and wait. There is nothing in this world like a duck swamp at dawn. More ducks or no more ducks, it doesn't seem to matter much. I tell myself: *I think I'll give it a bit more time.*

# THE PRAIRIE

by **HAL HERRING**

AT FIRST SHOOTING LIGHT, my daughter and I are hunkered down behind a low bit of rimrock, trying to stay out of the prickly pear and glassing the expanse of sage and shortgrass prairie below us. As sunlight floods the landscape, a small herd of pronghorn comes into view about a mile away under a pair of distinctive buttes. In the first rays, individual antelope stand out against the dun-colored grass in shades of deep ocher and brilliant white. My daughter had drawn an either-sex pronghorn tag, and we're on a mission to fill it, far from home and camped out at a little stock pond, the scent of sage heavy in the warm afternoons and the grandeur of the Milky Way shining at night as frost builds on our sleeping bags.

It's early October on Montana's northern glaciated plains, in a brief last triumph of second summer. The days seem to belong to the raptors—ferruginous hawks, Cooper's hawks, harriers. We even see a big redtail lumber by, wings audibly pounding the thin air, a bull snake coiled in its talons.

The American grasslands here are an austere place of sun and wind, treeless and parched by relentless heat in summer, dried and frozen by Arctic winds in winter. We are hunting federal public lands abandoned by homesteaders who tried and failed to make a go of it here in the early 20th century. As the settlers learned, only the most well-adapted or most mobile creatures have ever thrived here.

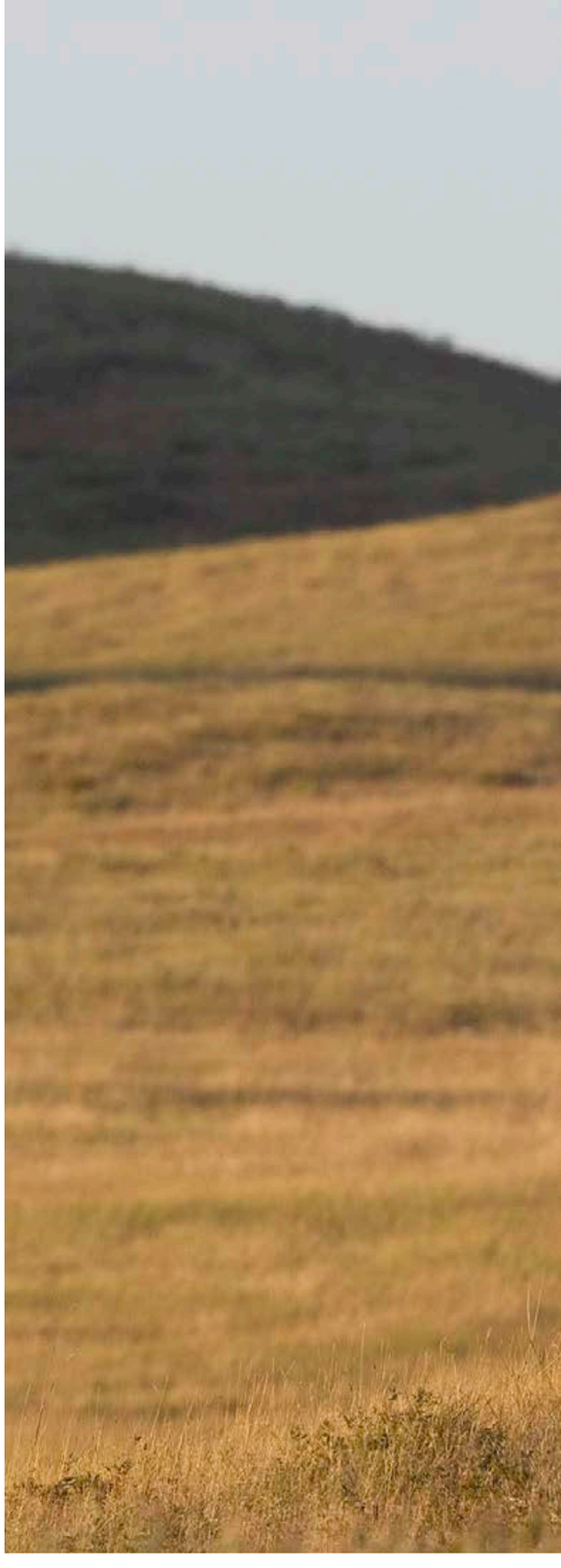
Pronghorn are one. These strange animals have lived on this prairie since the last of the Laurentide ice sheet melted away 15,000 years ago. I've never been able to pick a favorite big-game animal to hunt (how could anyone do that?), but the American pronghorn is one of my favorite animals, period. It tickles me to no end that these creatures shared this yawning plain with giant sloths and dire wolves, saber-toothed tigers and ancient bison that weighed 4,000 pounds and had horns that spanned 7 feet. All are long gone, and yet the pronghorn remains—essentially the same ultra-fleet-footed animal that gazed with the same huge, almost insectile eyeballs at the first wild-haired human hunters coming from the north, and then outran both them and the now-extinct American cheetah.

The antelope outrun us too, at sunrise. So we hop in the truck and drive a two-track across a wide pan of cracked alkali-crusted gumbo. The faint road leads through greasewood and stunted sage, then climbs onto a plateau from which we can see to the ends of the Earth. On the elevated flat, where native bunchgrasses hold out, serpentine coulees that have captured wind-driven snows are full of snowberry and buffalo berry. We slow the truck to let a covey of sharptail grouse run ahead and cross. Then, from our vantage, we see a small band of antelope traveling, but not running, several hundred yards away.

We park the truck in a low, hidden place and take off on foot, running hunched over through the sage. The idea is to get ahead of them and have my daughter ambush one as they hit the coulee where they seem to be headed. It's a good plan. But there are unforeseen variables. The first is a prairie-dog town we hadn't spotted from the truck, a wide-open plain of bare earth that offers no concealment. The second is a sudden cackling all around us, followed by the explosive flush of sage grouse, big as turkeys, that soar into the skies like zeppelins and cannot have been missed by the antelope unless they're all blind. They are not.

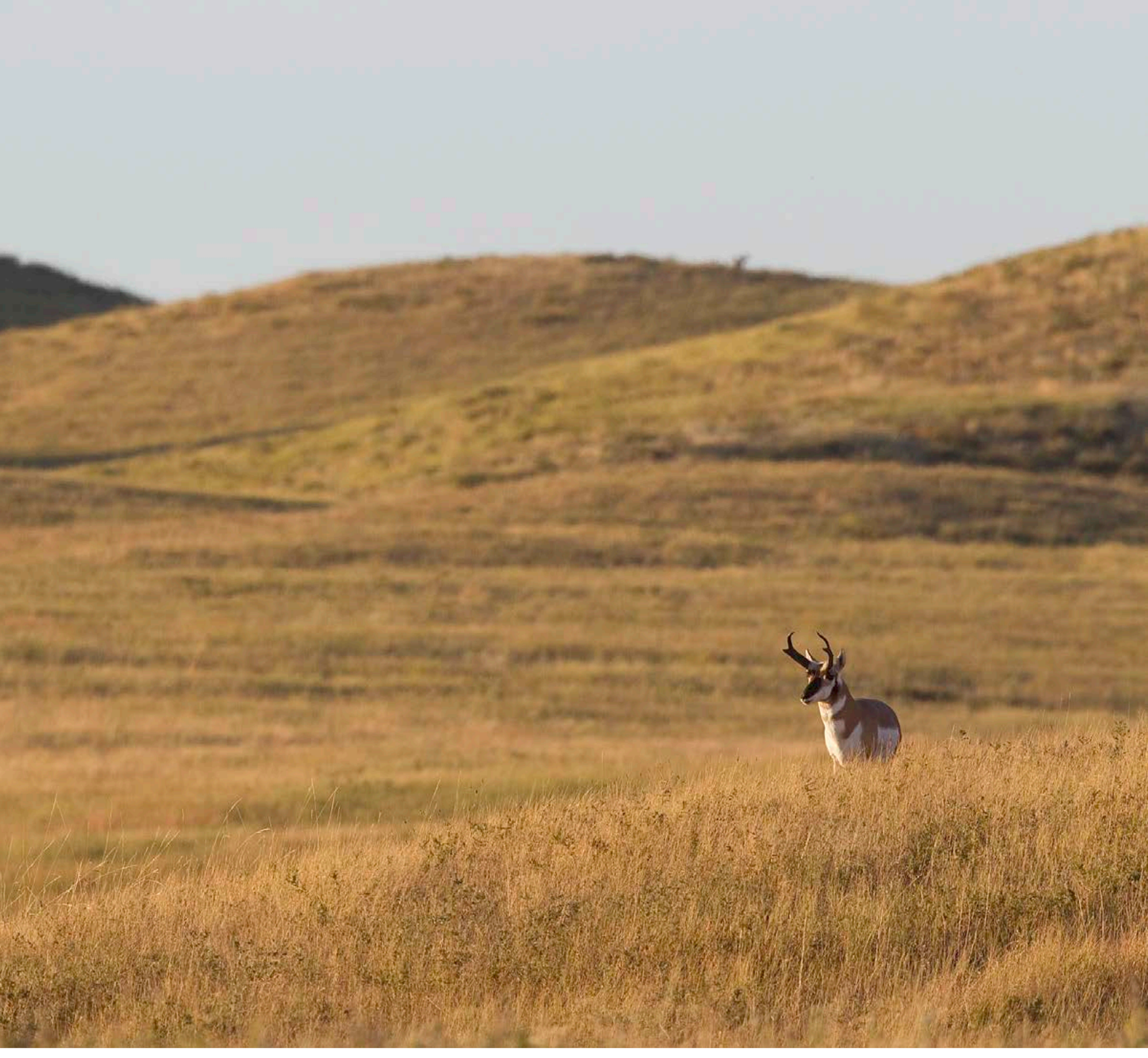
When we next catch sight of them, the lead nanny is staring in our direction with an intensity of suspicion a million years in the making. We huddle, hoping the herd will forget about the grouse. What happens next I wouldn't tell anyone who knows this place, because

**The antelope see the mule deer buck too and flee as if the Devil himself has shot up from the prairie in a geyser of smoking evil.**



DONALD M. JONES

↑ A rutting pronghorn buck, searching for company, looks out across the sweeping expanse of sunlit rolling prairie grasses.



they wouldn't believe me. As we wait for the pronghorn to settle, on this public ground where any mule deer is a rarity, a buck with a rocking chair for antlers and gray-faced with age heaves himself from the sage not 20 yards away and bounds off across the plain. The antelope see him too and flee as if the Devil himself has shot up from the prairie in a geyser of smoking evil.

We don't mind. We stand up and watch the big muley go, drop-jawed at the sight of him.

My daughter did fill her tag on a yearling buck a couple of days later. In the years since that hunt, she has grown to love our American prairies and grasslands and sagebrush steppes, and all the life that depends upon them, as much as I do. Less than 1.5 percent of our native grasslands have any kind of long-term protection. We can do better by these ancient lands, and by ourselves and our descendants by restoring and preserving them. I wouldn't want my children or grandchildren to live in an America where there are no sage grouse to alert their antelope, no bounding mule deer to run them off, no hawks to fly overhead ferrying wriggling snakes under a sky that goes on forever.

DONALD M. JONES

# The Dark Timber

by **KEITH McCAFFERTY**

"Are we lost?" my son asks.

"I wouldn't use that word," I say.

"Then where are we?" Tom knocks snow off his hat. We forded the Gallatin River at dawn and have been climbing through a light snowfall in black timber ever since. As I have been lost in four states and on any number of occasions, his question is legitimate.

"Well..." I consider my answer, which depends upon just how big a lie I'm willing to tell. "We're up Burnt Creek. Or maybe we've crossed into the next drainage south."

"Then we're lost."

"In a manner of speaking."

I open the topo map that is folded to show the upper drainages of Montana's Lee Metcalf Wilderness. It is a vast sea of forested ridges and open parks that fit into the sides of the mountains like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

"Here, I think," pointing with a gloved finger. "Just off the edge of this map."

I tap at a thin blue line that marks the progress of a jump-across creek. Tom shakes his head. He can't understand why I don't rely on GPS like everyone else.

I tell him you learn a lot more about navigating wild places with a map and compass than with any satellite system. Besides, it's character building to get lost once in a while. Old Joe Gutkoski had taught me that. He'd said if you can get comfortable with being lost, or as he put it, "turned around," then you have an edge on hunters who won't go into country that they don't know. Those are the guys you see hiking the ridgelines hoping for a long shot, both figuratively and literally, because they are reluctant to drop into the timber.

"Just follow the tracks," Joe would say. "Go where the elk take you. You can worry about getting unlost later."

The country we are turned around in is a forested basin that goes unnamed on maps. I first tracked elk here the year that Tom was born. I had backpacked into the basin only two weeks before my wife was due to deliver. The plan was that my father would drive up the canyon and shoot off a shotgun if Gail went into labor. It sounded like a good idea at the time, though not so much in her eyes. I did make it back, but just under the wire, and it remains a transgression for which she has never entirely forgiven me.

I start to tell Tom, but he's heard it before—just like most of my stories. "So what now?" he says.

"We'll climb to the ridge and hope to cut a track."

"What if we don't find tracks? Do we just wander around?"

"Pretty much," I admit. "But I've shot a lot of elk in this basin by just wandering around."

*A lot* is an exaggeration. *A couple* is more accurate. But the lesson is valid: Sometimes it doesn't matter how good the game country is or how good you are at finding the game. You just have to put in the time.

Tom is the veteran of several hunts now and killed his first elk last winter at age 13. But I have never taken him here before, perhaps because the basin represents what I hunt for and have a hard time expressing. I discovered it by chance while I was bowhunting on the road side of the river. Walking out on a rock promontory, I heard several bulls bugling from below and across the water. To me, an elk's bugle is the song and the lure of wilderness. I can no more ignore it than I can watch a trout kiss the surface of a river without feeling my chest tighten.

The fact that I did not shoot one of those bulls is beside the point. It's what the elk represented to me—a landscape unfettered by the encroachment of man's so-called progress. I wanted to convey to Tom the feeling of insignificance and mortality that hunting in true wilderness engenders.

"Up," I tell Tom. "When in doubt, go up."

This turns out to be the right decision, because just before we top out on a side ridge, we find ourselves standing over clods of earth and snow flung from the hooves of a small band of elk.

"Did you hear them go?" I ask Tom.

He shakes his head. They must have winded us.

For most this would be the end of the hunt, at least as far as this particular band was concerned. The popular wisdom, which I subscribed to until experience taught me better, is that spooked elk go miles before stopping. But I have put elk out of their beds three or four times before catching up and getting a shot. *Always give the elk a chance to make a mistake* is an axiom to hunt by. *Never leave elk to find elk* is another.

By midafternoon the sky has cleared, and the temperature has dropped by at least 10 degrees. Our boots squeak on the snow. Tom is dragging a little. So am I. The country where we have followed the elk to is much steeper than the country where we found the tracks.

A pine cone strikes me, the signal that the following hunter has seen something the leader missed. I turn my head. Tom points up the slope.

At first I see nothing but splashes of tan. Then the elk resolve into focus. The clearest shot is at the last in the line, but I can't tell which direction is head, which is tail. I drop to one knee for a different angle and see a window to shoot through—if the elk takes one more step. It does and is down and kicking as the shot echoes.

The band explodes, cracking through deadfall. Then silence. We climb into the elk's scent, to where it is lying on its side. It is a yearling cow. As a meat hunter, I couldn't do much better. But standing over it, that is not what I'm thinking. Each year it gets harder to climb here. But each year it seems important to try, to touch base with a person I was once, one who carried a rifle into the timber without asking so many questions about himself.

Tom kneels and pats the elk, smoothing its coat with his palm. "Good elk," he says. "Good elk."

He straightens and we look across the basin, the ridges lifting over each other in an undulating roll of wilderness. All the country is seized in that vast northern stillness that seems so profound.

Tom smiles. "So are we still lost?"

"I prefer to say 'unlost.'"

←

A 6x7 bull elk has dropped down from the ridges, where the hunters are, and slips between the fire-blackened trunks of conifers.

by **DAVID E. PETZAL**

# The Tundra

IT WAS WHILE caribou hunting on the Canadian tundra that I spent one of the single most enjoyable days of my life, at a riverbank camp. First, I got to throw supplies from a low-flying plane to hunters below. (You have to lead them a lot). I heard the loudest human fart I've ever heard. And our group enjoyed a kind of seclusion that you can't experience anywhere else.

Caribou are creatures of the tundra, except for the boreal, or woodland, variety, which lives in Canadian forests. *Tundra* is derived from the Finnish word *tunturia* and can be translated either as "barren wasteland" or "when is the next plane out?" Tundras are biomes, which are complete ecological systems, and they are the coldest biomes on the planet. Caribou hunting takes place in August and September. If you're still there in October, they'll find your body in the spring.

Because tundras are located near the poles, they get hardly any heat, and the land's underlayer is always frozen, which is called permafrost. There's just enough rain and snow at a time to soak you, and no more. What does fall can't be absorbed into the ground, nor can it move anywhere. Thus, the tundra is pocked by uncountable potholes, ponds, and lakes. It's a bog, beginning to end. In summer, such as it is, you could not walk out of it, and in winter, you'd freeze to death trying.

About the only thing that can grow is lichen, which does so in profusion and blazing with color. Here and there, a random dwarf spruce searches for company and finds none.

Tundra caribou have much to recommend them to hunters. They have spectacular antlers, as well as some of the best steaks and chops you can lay fang to. Where I used to hunt them in northern Quebec, they roamed the tundra in stupefying numbers along migration routes that never varied, until a few years ago when their numbers inexplicably plummeted. However, in the northern reaches of central and western Canada, and in Alaska, the barren-ground subspecies still roams the tundra in large, sprawling herds.

My caribou hunts, if you discounted the awful weather and the impossible walking conditions, were pretty easy affairs. If the migration came through your camp, you could sit on a deck chair and pick out your trophy as it trotted by. On my very first hunt, my friend and I, both ignorant of the way things were done, whined at our Inuit guide when he insisted that we sit by a river in the rain and wind, waiting for a herd to cross. Finally, he'd had enough and led us on a death march straight up the face of the cliff behind us and on and on across the plain above it. Thereafter, when the guide said sit, I sat.

Two remarkable inventions helped grow the popularity of caribou hunting on the tundra. One was the French-made Zodiac boat, an inflatable, rigid, nearly-impossible-to-sink raft that can go anywhere it's wet. You'll hear a Supreme Court justice admit to being on the take before you'll find a caribou camp without a Zodiac.

The other blazers of tundra trails for modern hunters are the de Havilland Beaver and Otter bush planes. The Beaver was first, arriving after World War II and designed at the request of pilots who wanted "a flying pickup truck." They got it. The Otter is a big Beaver and is, if possible, even more highly thought of.

Flying over tundra has always been an adventure. Compasses don't work in much of the Far North, and GPS, which appeared in 1983, doesn't fare much better. To navigate, pilots fly low enough to pick out familiar bushes, or ponds, or whatever landmarks stick in their minds. Officially, a bush plane isn't supposed to cruise lower than 500 feet. I'd bet that of the miles I've flown over tundra, most have been under 200.

One of the reasons to hunt the tundra is that you get to see creatures you would not get to see otherwise, including Arctic wolves and wolverines and, of course, the caribou themselves, marching across the fields of lichen. For something like 30 years, I hunted them off and on, mostly on, and count myself very lucky indeed.

The tundra is probably the very last unspoiled wilderness left on Earth. Look overhead and you will not see an airplane contrail. You will not encounter a dirt road that will lead you to a paved one that will take you to a gas station. Your handheld device will go dead and stay dead. Nor is any of this likely to change anytime soon. But it may change. We know that the permafrost is thawing, which will change the tundra's makeup and character.

The tundra is a vanishing natural treasure. It will probably outlast my lifetime, but maybe not yours. None of us will be around long enough to see what takes its place next. I doubt that it will be half as wonderful as the tundra still is today. F&S



→ Bulking up for the very long winter ahead, a prime barren-ground caribou bull grabs a mouthful of lichen on the vast tundra of central Alaska.

MARK RAYCROFT

by **MATTHEW EVERY** photographs by **TRISTAN SPINSKI**

# BLOOD ON THE TRACKS

**There aren't many deer hunters left who can routinely cut the tracks of a big-woods buck and follow them to their maker. Legendary Maine Guide Hal Blood is one of them**

EVERYTHING I KNOW about walking in the woods is telling me not to wear the rubber boots. I'd seen the mountains yesterday from the road. Rounded at the tops and tree-covered, they looked almost gentle, but I know better. I know if I wear rain boots, I'll come back with two sore ankles. But I don't really have a choice.

This morning, I'm in Jackman, Maine, hunting with Hal Blood. The master deer hunter has enough bucks on his wall to prove he knows everything about tracking whitetails in the big woods, right down to the best boots and socks, and the little piece of electrical tape he puts on the end of his gun barrel to keep the snow out. We're heading out to find a buck's tracks in the snow and follow them until we get a shot or lose daylight. Nothing can slow us down, including my choice of footwear.

I think about this as I pull my pant legs over my boots and duct-tape them fast around the ankles, like Blood does, to keep out the water. Wherever our buck goes today, we're going to follow, and that might mean crossing a river. Blood stands at the stove, transferring flapjacks to our plates.

"Where's my boy?" he says, seemingly to no one. "Where's my boy?" And in from the other room flies his pet crimson-bellied parakeet, Archie, who perches on his shoulder and stays there through breakfast. Above us, the mounts of bucks you'd swear were shot in Midwestern cornfields line the walls.

"There's no use going out until it gets light," he says casually while I eat like I'm headed for the electric chair. For me, hunting with Blood is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that may well come down to a split-second shot at a running deer. For Blood, it's another Tuesday morning in October. And from what I've heard about him, I'm going to need every calorie I can consume to keep up.

I clean my plate and start loading up a fanny pack with snacks and water. "You're not going to need that," Blood says, gesturing to my water bottle. As Archie hops from one shoulder to the other, I half expect him to squawk: *Not gonna need it!* Blood hands me an empty sandwich bag instead. "Put that in your pocket. We'll find water in the woods."

**Previous spread:** Blood peers through the iced-over windshield of his Dodge Ramcharger before heading out to cut buck tracks.

A fresh snowfall creates perfect conditions for finding sign. ↓

## DAY 1: KEEPING UP

First and foremost, a buck tracker needs snow, and as we walk to one of Blood's favorite spots, we've got plenty. There's a fresh 4 inches on the ground and more coming down on and off—perfect conditions for finding and following a buck's track. But after five full hours of trudging through conifer swamps and scaling hardwood ridges, we haven't cut a single track. Instead, we're soaking wet, hungry, and thirsty.

I don't doubt Blood's ability. He's a legend in the Northwoods. His books on buck tracking are considered classics, and he maintains a loyal following through his YouTube channel, podcast, and website—and not for flashy catch phrases or showmanship, but for consistently killing mature big-woods bucks.

"Hand me that sandwich bag," Blood says as we come to a creek at midday. He dips it into the flow, filling it with clear, ice-cold water, and then he brings it up to his frost-covered beard to take a long pull. Then he hands it to me, and I drink while Blood breaks off and assembles pine boughs for us to sit on. We stay only long enough to finish our sandwiches, then we're off again.

Today is a deer-killing day, according to Blood, owing to the blustery weather and the snow cover. The wind hides the sound of our walking, while swaying branches make it hard for a buck to pick up our movement. The only reason we are not finding tracks, Blood says, is because it's the first snow of the year. "The first big storm throws all animals off their rhythm for a day or so," he explains.

With no deer tracks in the high country, Blood leads us lower, into a beaver bog where we find a few dimples in the snow. "Old tracks," he says. "Way too old to follow."

He pulls out his phone to check his OnX map. On the screen, our steps from the day make a giant circle around the mountain. It's no coincidence. "Any deer that lives on that mountain will eventually go up or down," he explains. Looping around it is the best way to cut a fresh track. The truck is only a mile ahead of us as we begin losing light, and we hunt our way back to it. All told, we've covered about 8 miles through virtually trackless wilderness. Tomorrow, we'll do it all over again. But I take comfort in knowing I can keep up. Now, all I have to do is shoot a deer on the run.

## DAY 2: ON THE TRACKS

I've brought a Remington Model Four that I fitted with a shotgun stock and a Skinner Big Woods Bucks Tracker peep sight for this trip. Open sights are the choice of many deer trackers, as are Remingtons, with pumps favored over semiautos because they're lighter and more reliable.

Blood cases his own 30/06 Model 7600 carbine and slides it onto the seat of his 1980s-vintage Dodge Ramcharger as it idles in the cold. It's the same rifle pictured on the cover of his book *Hunting Big Woods Bucks, 2nd Edition*. After years in the woods, the rifle has reached maximum patina. There's a carving of a jumping buck on the stock and a deer track on the fore-end. But the wood finish is dulled. On the receiver, there are

↑ Blood holds his tracking rifle—an open-sighted Remington Model 7600 carbine in 30/06. Get a closer look at where his fingers have worn the bluing off the receiver on p. 87.


Photos and memorabilia line the walls of Blood's deer camp.


A huge Maine buck stretched across the hood of the Ramcharger.

three finger marks worn through the bluing where Blood's hand usually rides. He doesn't use a sling, and he only shoots Core-Lokts.

The heat is blasting in the truck as Blood runs through the gears on the standard transmission. I'm half asleep when he slaps the dashboard with his open palm. He stops the truck and swats something out the door like he's brushing out a mosquito. "Mouse," he says. "Must have gotten in to eat some crumbs last night."

We drive to the base of a different mountain on paper-company land this morning, where we see other hunters cruising in pickups, hoping to cut an easy track on the snow-covered road. Blood isn't concerned about the competition. He plans to get far away from these guys, and he knows that for every buck that crosses the road, there are 10 more that don't.

We turn onto a narrow dirt road that's almost consumed by willow branches. Blood explains that the state took out more than 100 culvert pipes along the road, leaving deep trenches in their place. He and his buddies call it "the roller coaster," and it would be the end of the road for most vehicles, but Blood's Charger, with its lift kit, short wheelbase, and 35-inch Super Swamper tires, eats it up. We drive on the roller coaster for about an hour and then get out, far from any other hunters, or humans for that matter.

The night before had been bright and starry. Then the clouds rolled in like someone pulling a bedsheet over the world. The temperature dropped and humidity rose, delivering a raw Northeastern kind of cold. Blood says this is good. It will keep the snow from melting off the trees and soaking through our clothes.

The woods seemed devoid of life yesterday, but today it's the opposite. Shortly after getting off the road, we strike two sets of tracks—a buck and a doe. He studies them, breaking the ice in the bottom of the buck track with two bare fingers.

"What are you after, a big one or just a buck?" he asks.

"Just a buck," I say.

"Well, this is just a buck, and we can catch up to him today."

Most serious Northwoods buck trackers try to follow deer they think will weigh over 200 pounds. Blood believes this one is just under. "A bigger, broad-chested buck will have a wider track," he says, with the front and rear prints not overlapping perfectly but skewing slightly side by side. In Maine, he explains, a 3x3-inch track belongs to a mature, heavy buck. Ours isn't that big, but I'm not picky. I haven't shot as many tracked deer as Blood has, and by that, I mean none.

At 6-foot-3, Blood lopes through the woods with long strides. Most hunters wear out their boots, but he has worn out his feet. He's had two spurs—a result of hiking in the woods—removed from his big toes. He says we shouldn't take our time now because this deer is hours ahead of us. He can tell by how frozen the snow is in the bottom of the track and how far apart the deer's hoofprints are in the snow. Eventually, we find one of the buck's beds—a large kidney-shaped spot of bare forest floor. The deer slept under a fir tree at the edge of a small creek, then got up, peed, and kept moving. Blood picks up some of the yellow snow and smells it. "His perfume," he says with a smile.

We find rubs on trees with bark shavings on the fresh snow below and newly worked scrapes with dirt and leaves kicked all over. Blood eventually points out that the tracks are getting closer together and dragging a bit in the snow—meaning the buck is slowing down. There are droppings too, and he squeezes them to see how fresh they are. He slows down, and I match his pace, creeping through a fortress of deadfalls and slash perched on a rocky bluff. Then he stops.

"He's gone," Blood says, pointing to jumping tracks that clear several logs, then scale a 6-foot vertical cliff. The deer had been standing in the cover and probably saw us approach. "Let's have a sandwich."

After a half hour, Blood puts us back on the same track. We find that shortly after the deer jumped and ran, it slowed

**AFTER ABOUT 200 YARDS, WE FIND HIS BED IN THE SNOW IN A GROVE OF FIR TREES—AN OVAL OF BARE GROUND THE SIZE OF A CLAW-FOOT TUB. I FIT MY WHOLE RIFLE INSIDE IT WITH ROOM TO SPARE.**

Blood's deer-tracking uniform is a green buffalo-plaid jacket and green pants to blend in with Maine's ubiquitous conifers. Both are made of wool, which is quiet and stays warm even when wet.
←

Blood points to a set of fresh buck tracks in the snow. As a rule, he says, a 3x3-inch hoofprint belongs to a mature, heavy buck and is one you definitely want to follow.
↓

to a walk. "We didn't spook him too bad," Blood says. The tracks take us to a plateau covered with young conifers, witch hobble, and wispy beech saplings. It's maddening to walk through the young forest, and after a few hours we realize that we're back in our own boot prints.

"Well, we got off of the roller coaster and onto the merry-go-round," Blood says. The buck had taken us in a big circle, followed our tracks for a while, then walked straight down one of the steepest patches of ground I'd seen since I'd gotten here. I pause. It looks like we'll need parachutes to keep following him. Then I notice Blood is sliding down the mountain on his rear end. We follow the buck until sundown, then head home empty-handed.

**DAY 3: A SOUVENIR**

"People don't know road etiquette," Blood says as he passes a jeep that's been in front of us for about a mile, moving at a crawl, road-hunting for deer. Blood wants to get into the woods and so do I. I know the drill now. It's the final day of our hunt, and Blood made a last-minute choice to hunt a piece of ground he hasn't been on in 30 years. At a trailhead, we carefully cross a beaver dam and soon find ourselves in a grove of pine trees.

"They had a party in here last night," Blood says.

The ground looks like a sheep pasture, with tracks everywhere. Blood sorts out the small from the big and the fresh from the old before finding a buck track that looks absolutely huge compared to the others. We get on it right away, weaving between the lower dead limbs of fir trees and then crossing into another heavily trafficked area. If I were alone, this would be the end of my hunt, but Blood circles the mass of tracks and in about two minutes finds where our buck exited. "There he is," he says. And we're off again.

After that, we don't rest or eat or drink. We just keep walking and observing, matching our pace to what Blood sees in the tracks. As the prints weave between patches of fir trees and recent cuts, he stops and tells me to get ready. We're in a perfect spot to kill the buck. There's enough cover here to hide us, and there are enough openings that we might see him before he sees us. The only problem is that there's no wind, and we can't help the noise we are making. Dead branches on the ground snap like matchsticks underfoot, and the saplings and witch hobble scrape against our boots.

Judging by the tracks, the buck is feeding, meandering and browsing on everything from old-man's beard to mushrooms and leaves. The tracks zigzag along the edge of the cut, then dash into the conifers. After about 200 yards, we find his bed in the snow in a grove of fir trees—an oval of bare ground the size of a claw-foot tub. I fit my whole rifle inside it with room to spare.

"He's well over 200 pounds," Blood says. I feel a jolt of adrenaline, knowing the size of the animal we're after. Even though I haven't seen him, I can picture every move he's made along the track we've been following all morning—making scrapes and rubs, stopping to browse, looking for a doe.

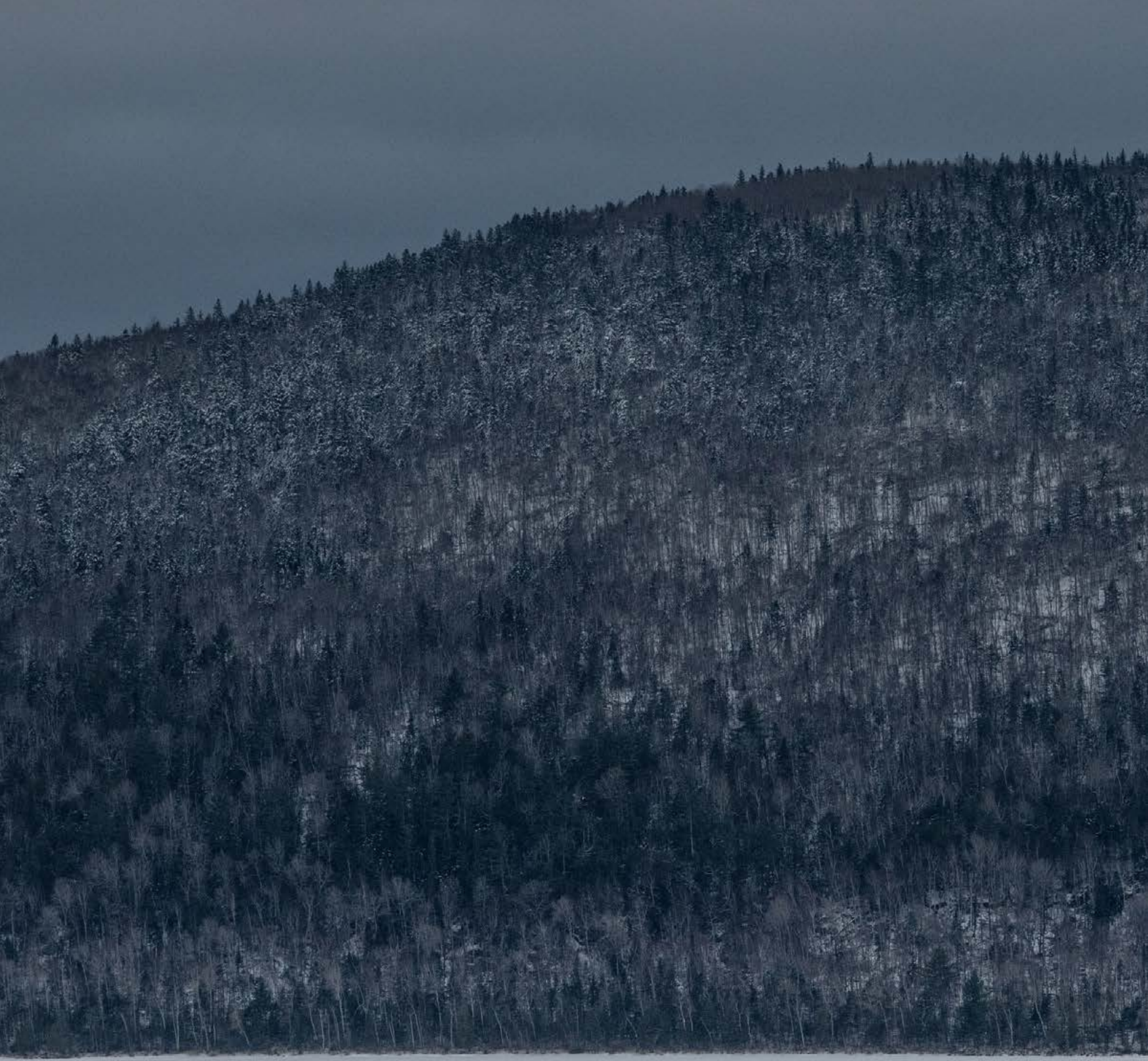
The hoofprints leaving the bed tell us the buck isn't running, so we haven't bumped him. He's likely just feeding in the next cut over. We push on slowly and find a tree he's rubbed. The tracks look fresher now, with defined dewclaws and wet snow in the prints. Blood reaches down and picks up some of the buck's scat. He crushes a pellet between two fingers, then looks at me like a commando about to put a dagger through a sentry.

"We're right here with him," he whispers. "We're going to have to put the creep on."

I feel the same way I do when a big buck walks under my stand—nervous as hell but also hyperalert. From here on out, every step has to be perfect. I need to keep my head on a swivel. It could be in an hour or it could be in five minutes, but when the time *(Continued on p. 93)*


↑ Ready to roll. Blood's hunting vehicle is one of the keys to his success. With its lift kit and custom, oversize tires, the Ramcharger gets him to places that are inaccessible to most other hunters.

→ For Blood, a day of tracking often starts by walking a wide loop around one of Maine's countless wooded mountains in order to cut the fresh tracks of a buck moving up or down one of the slopes.



*(Continued from p. 89)* comes, I'll probably have to shoot fast.

I hold my rifle at the ready, with my finger on the safety, as we ease along the buck's track. Before long, we come to a wide-open spot where an old logging road dead-ends. It is the kind of place you dream about shooting a deer in. If he runs, I can swing forever to follow him, and if he stands still, I can just hold the bead on him and squeeze the trigger.

But there is no buck. Instead, his track has worked into a run of moose tracks. Blood takes the time to sort it out while I keep watch, looking for an ear flick or an antler tip in every square inch of brush. I am as switched-on as I've ever been on a hunt. Then I hear the worst two words you can hear when you're on a buck track.

"He's jumping," Blood says.

The feeling of perfect alertness leaves me as quickly as it came. I feel the ache in my feet and legs again and the soreness in my back and shoulders from carrying my rifle. In my mind, I run back through every step I took, every branch I felt break underfoot, and every leaf I might have rustled on our way over here. It could have been any one of them that told the buck something was wrong. I never laid eyes on him, yet I feel like I've just sailed an arrow over his back. This is the closest I've come in three days and nearly 25 miles, and somehow I've screwed it up.

"He must have heard us walking through the brush," Blood says. "It's just too quiet out here."

The leaping tracks lead to a sea of saplings that look like hair growing out of the ground. Blood and I both know we don't have a prayer of being quiet in there with everything else being so still. The buck is gone forever. Walking back over his tracks, Blood stops at a blowdown and pulls something from the rough bark—a tuft of gray and white belly hair from a deer.

"A souvenir," he says, handing it to me. I put it in my pocket. Then we keep walking to find another buck track. But we never do.

## EPILOGUE: THE END OF THE TRAIL

I'm back home when my phone lights up. It's a text from Blood with a picture of a dead buck. *Right where we left off*, the message reads. Instead of texting him back, I give him a call to hear the story.

"I cut the track at about 8 a.m. on a side road used for tapping maple trees," he says. "It was a good buck track, and I knew it was made towards morning because it wasn't frozen up bad."

The buck had headed west, laying down scrapes and checking doe tracks through the hardwood timber, then he dropped down the mountain, fast. Blood was afraid he'd eventually hit the low country, where the snow had all melted.

On the way down, Blood found patchy snow and could sort the tracks out for a little while, but not after he reached some fir trees and a beaver bog where the snow had melted. "I decided to back out of the softwoods and see if I could get into some snow again," he said. Hoping to cut the buck's track coming out of the bog, he started to circle uphill and ahead.

"I looked up, and there he was—on a shelf, standing at about 100 yards. I had to make a split-second decision. I could see that one beam was solid, and his body was square, like a sheet of plywood."

Blood was 90 percent sure the buck he was looking at was the one he'd been tracking, and 100 percent sure it was a shooter. The deer disappeared for a minute, then Blood caught another glimpse of him walking right to left, heading for a small gap between two maple trees. "He hit that opening, and I let a shot loose," he says.

The buck dropped immediately, but by the time Blood had climbed the hill, the deer had gotten up and was standing in a thicket with his rear end toward Blood. The brush was too thick for another shot, so Blood shifted his position, found another gap, and finally shot the buck in the neck.

Blood walked 5 miles out to where he had enough service to call a friend, and then the two of them hiked back in and dragged the deer out on a jet sled. The buck weighed 197 pounds.

Blood tells me he doesn't think it's the same buck we tracked on our last day. Which reminds him: "You know, in all the years I've been doing this, I've never shot a buck that I'd seen before. That's the mystique of it. They're the most difficult animals in the world to hunt. I truly believe that."

After getting off the phone, I look out the window of my home at a long view of New York's Catskill Mountains spreading off into the distance. Maine's rifle season is more than half over, but mine has just started—and there are 4 inches of snow in the forecast. F&S

"YOU KNOW," BLOOD TELLS ME, "IN ALL THE YEARS I'VE BEEN DOING THIS, I'VE NEVER SHOT A BUCK THAT I'D SEEN BEFORE. THAT'S THE MYSTIQUE OF IT. THEY'RE THE MOST DIFFICULT ANIMALS IN THE WORLD TO HUNT. I TRULY BELIEVE THAT."

courtesy of HAL BLOOD

Success! Blood poses with the buck he took only a fews days after the author left for home. The 8-pointer weighed just shy of 200 pounds.

# Wild Child

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LOCAL CAMPING TRIP AND A WILDERNESS SURVIVAL ADVENTURE IS A 10-YEAR-OLD BOY'S IMAGINATION

by **WILL BRANTLEY** illustration by **TIM McDONAGH**

I DON'T MIND CAMPING IF IT'S FOR A PURPOSE. I've spent many nights sleeping under the stars because it's what's required to reach the critters I'm hunting. But as a result, I've concluded that given the choice, a cabin with a bed and a stove beats a sleeping bag on the ground and a Jetboil every single time.

This past summer, my 10-year-old son, Anse, told me he wanted to go camping. He's been hunting, fishing, trapping, and generally bumming around with me in the woods since he could walk—but he'd never slept even one night outside, on the ground. I figured he was old enough to learn a new life lesson, that camping just for the hell of it is miserable.

The forecast called for a three-day stretch of 80-degree highs in early June, which is about as pleasant as it gets in southern Kentucky in summer. Anse and I loaded my johnboat with a two-person tent, sleeping bags, a fire grate, and a few other primitive-camp essentials. The kid, who is a fan of *Alone* and *Naked and Afraid*, insisted that we depend solely on the river and the land to feed us. Unlike contestants on the shows, though, we could bring whatever gear we wanted. So we packed spinning rods, jigs, and nightcrawlers, plus bowfishing rigs, limb lines, a frog gig, a 22 pistol, and a whole sleeve of CCI Stingers. Though I kept it secret, I also stashed some emergency rations, including chocolate and marshmallows, just in case.

We launched from a ramp on the Tennessee River late in the afternoon and ran south for a few miles, then crossed the river channel and beached on a gravel point that offered a calm, protected pocket on the lee side. We set up camp just inside the trees, under the shade of a hickory but still on gravel, and we gathered a few large rocks for building a fire ring.

Satisfied with our work, Anse and I sat back and took in the scene from our campsite. A green canopy of oaks and hickories spread in a dome over our heads, with the river stretching out in front of us to rolling, wooded hills in the distance. It all felt very familiar to me, but judging by Anse's expression, you would have thought he'd been dropped off by a production crew at a glacier in Patagonia or on the shore of Great Slave Lake.

With only a few hours of daylight left, I told Anse we'd better get to work catching dinner. We started out casting for the white bass we'd seen chasing schools of shad. When that didn't work, I put a worm on a drop-shot rig and caught a keeper bluegill on my first cast—and then we didn't get another peck.

Under normal circumstances, Anse can make it maybe 45 minutes without eating anything, and he expects a full supper at about 6 p.m. With the shadows getting longer and lunch a distant memory, I asked him if he was hungry, and he said no. But I knew better. I could tell he was worried about sleeping on the ground with an empty gut. He fired another cast with a curly-tail and reeled it in slowly. Nothing.

But we were fishing in a familiar bay, and I knew of a rock in the shallows that I'd found flathead catfish under before.

"Boy, you want to drop anchor and see if we can grab a flathead out from under that rock?" I asked. Anse nodded, wild-eyed and predatory. He stashed his rod, shucked off his shirt, and jumped into the water. I jumped in as well, and soon we were both floating on the water on our stomachs at the edge of the rock.

"You think there's one in there?" Anse whispered, as if a catfish might hear him.

I took a breath, dropped below the surface, and slithered my arm into the hole up to my shoulder. It was like a grenade went off inside. A flathead hit me with a vicious bite that engulfed my entire hand. I grabbed the fish's lower jaw, squeezed as hard as I could, and began pulling it toward me. The fish shook its head like a bass trying to lose a crankbait, and my knuckles were paying the price. But this was dinner, and I couldn't let go.

I lifted my face to the surface, sputtering for a breath, and yelled for Anse to get a stringer.

"Hang on to him, Deeds!" he called, and I saw a braided yellow rope unfurl. Back underwater, I worked a second hand into the fight, but I wasn't alone. The kid's bony arms worked in tandem with my own, carefully guiding the point of the stringer through the catfish's mouth, out the gill plate, and back to the water's surface. We pulled the fish out together, then he wrapped the stringer around his arm and ran for the bank, dragging behind him a fish that was a third of his body size and covered in mud and slime.

"We got enough for supper now and breakfast too!" he shouted. I knew he was under the illusion that we'd be cooking the fish on green sticks without any salt, so I figured it was time to fess up.

"Guess what I snuck into the dry bag?" I asked. He shrugged. "A skillet, some oil, fish batter, beans, instant mashed taters, and s'mores. You sure you're not hungry?"

He smiled like I'd told to him school was canceled indefinitely.

•

We built a hot fire with driftwood and cleaned the catfish over a log. I told Anse I'd handle the cooking if he wanted to get a few casts in before dark. He grabbed a rod and was soon out of sight.

I fried the catfish to golden brown in the skillet, with instant potatoes and a can of beans bubbling around the edges. There was just enough daylight to see it all cooking and a breeze off the water steady enough to carry the smell of a fish fry down the point. Anse came walking back into camp as if a dinner bell had rung, and he sat on a rock to eat his catfish. Then we cleaned up, stoked the fire, and watched the sun fade over the water. When it got dark, we eased around the calm pocket with the trolling motor to gig frogs. It was only after the day's second round of blood and slime was washed away that we finally settled into our sleeping bags.

He wrapped the stringer around his arm and ran for the bank, dragging behind him a fish that was a third of his body size and covered in mud and slime.

"Hey, Deeds," Anse said in the dark. "Will we be able to come back here one day? Camping was awesome."

Of course it was. In my eyes, we hadn't gone out there with much of a purpose, but in Anse's, we sure as hell found one. That night, on a bed of gravel, I slept soundly. F&S

# THE VALUE OF WILDERNESS

by **HAL HERRING**
photographs by **REBECCA STUMPF**

I had set up a solo camp just inside the boundary of Montana's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, on a long ridge that connected south-facing grasslands with a vast expanse of alpine country to the west. The ridge was a major travel route for the bands of elk that spend their summers in the high basins, but it had been profoundly empty well into fall, as day after day of warm sunshine bore down and turned the aspens buttery gold. I needed weather to move elk from high to low. With only 10 days left in the season, the weather came, starting as rain and turning to sleet, then, as temperatures plummeted, becoming a blizzard, with snow driven in hallucinatory whirls and waves by a merciless north wind. I hiked back to my camp during the thick of it and hunkered down in my tent, sleepless and knowing that this was my last chance.

Sometime before dawn, the wind quit entirely. I left camp in the dark and struck the sign of elk on the move—churned snow, stains of urine, and all the droppings in a line instead of a pile. I stood and waited for more daylight, breathing in the animals' rich odor hanging in the stillness. They were so close.

The winds had piled a wave of snow along the edge of the ridge where it dropped away to its south face. Following the sign, I eased into the snow, waist-deep, and wallowed forward until I could see over the crest. Below me were 15 or 20 elk scattered along the slope, grazing and bedding. I think there were three bulls among them, but I only remember one—a 5x6 that was standing broadside to me, head down, about 75 yards away.

At the shot, the bull bolted downhill and fell, skidding in the snow. It took me three days to get it out, packing the hide and antlers last. The kill site was at the far edge of what I could manage without a horse, even then, when I was in my 20s. I slept in the camp the last night, exhausted and ecstatic, grateful to the elk and the magnificent country where they lived, little changed since the first fur-clad hunters coming off the ice walked these same game trails.

I look back at that hunt now, and others like it, and am astonished at how powerful these experiences are, how wild places can inhabit you, become a part of who you are, forever. I never killed another elk on that ridge. But because it's within the boundary of a public wilderness, I know it will always be

**NO OTHER COUNTRY HAS SET ASIDE SO MANY WILD PLACES WHERE ITS CITIZENS CAN HUNT, FISH, HIKE, RESTORE, AND LEARN TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT. IN MANY WAYS, IT'S THIS BIRTHRIGHT THAT MAKES US AMERICANS**

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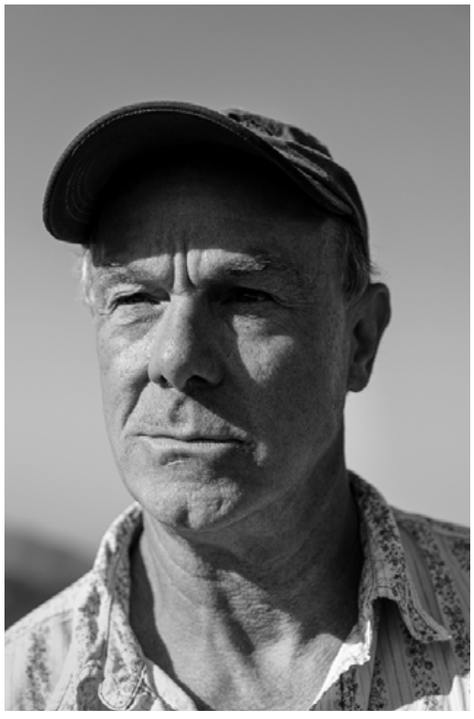
A fossil-rich stone laden with traces of ancient ocean life.

The author looks out onto the Continental Divide from a spot near his home in Montana.



there. Because some visionary Americans took the trouble, long ago, to protect it, my great-grandchildren will be able to go there and pass that unmarked spot where their great-grandfather, in the full powers of his youth, connected with a bull elk on that long-ago day one November.

•

I speak for wilderness, and the idea of wilderness, because I have to. I owe the places, and the people who protected them for me and for all Americans, a debt. I burned the last of my youth hunting the Selway-Bitterroot for elk, mule deer, blue grouse, and snowshoe hares. I chased elk deep into the Anaconda Pintler and dodged grizzlies on a 40-mile traverse in the Washakie in Wyoming. I learned to fly fish for native brook trout in North Carolina's Shining Rock Wilderness and paid homage to the Big Tree (a massive old-growth tulip poplar) in the center of Alabama's Sipsey Wilderness. I watched my son and daughter learn to hunt and camp, ride and pack horses, and walk forever distances in the Bob Marshall, west of where we live now. The American wilderness has made my family strong and provided a refuge from the nonsense, the muck and mire, of what we call civilization. It's the basis of my fierce patriotism, the essence of my experience of freedom.

It was an excess of civilization that first gave us the concept of preserving wilderness on federal public lands. For the first 100 years of American history, wilderness was viewed as a desolation, an illness to be cured with ax, rifle, and plow. The goal was to inhabit as much of the land as was possible and make it work for mankind. The assumption was that there would always be more.

It took the near extermination of the bison, pronghorn, and elk, the end of the white pine and then the longleaf pine, and the collapse of open-range livestock grazing for Americans to realize that what had seemed like boundless abundance was being exhausted at a rate never before seen by humankind. By the early 1920s, a decade before the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl, the frontier, with all its hardships and romance and anarchic freedom, was all but gone.

In 1924, Aldo Leopold was working as the supervisor of the Carson National Forest in New Mexico. Having witnessed the heavy hand of civilization encroaching everywhere on the last wild lands there, he proposed a radical new idea—that certain isolated public lands were not just supply houses of timber or minerals, but also of recreation, adventure, and solitude for the American public.

Wilderness itself was a resource, a place where Americans could hunt and fish and hike and appreciate country left in its natural state, where the works of man were nowhere to be seen. Such an area would have to be set aside by deliberate choice and policy, Leopold argued, or "the steam roller" of roads and short-term economic development would destroy it all. "This country has been swinging the hammer of development so long and so hard that it has forgotten the anvil of wilderness which gave value and significance to its labors. The momentum of our blows is so unprecedented that the remaining remnant of wilderness will be pounded into road-dust long before we find out its values."

On June 3, 1924, thanks to Leopold's vision, the Gila Wilderness (see p. 124) became the world's first designated wilderness area—559,310 acres of spectacularly rugged and isolated country, beloved by hunters and anglers and seekers of solitude, challenge, and natural grandeur. (If you are the kind of person who demands a reason beyond this for preserving public lands in their natural state, know that the Gila Wilderness also protects the headwaters of the Gila River, which irrigates almost 100,000 acres of farmland and provides much of Phoenix's drinking water.)

With the Gila as a kind of template, Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. Among the first areas protected then remain some of our most valuable hunting and fishing grounds today, including the Bob Marshall in Montana, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota, and the Bridger and the Washakie in Wyoming, to name a few.

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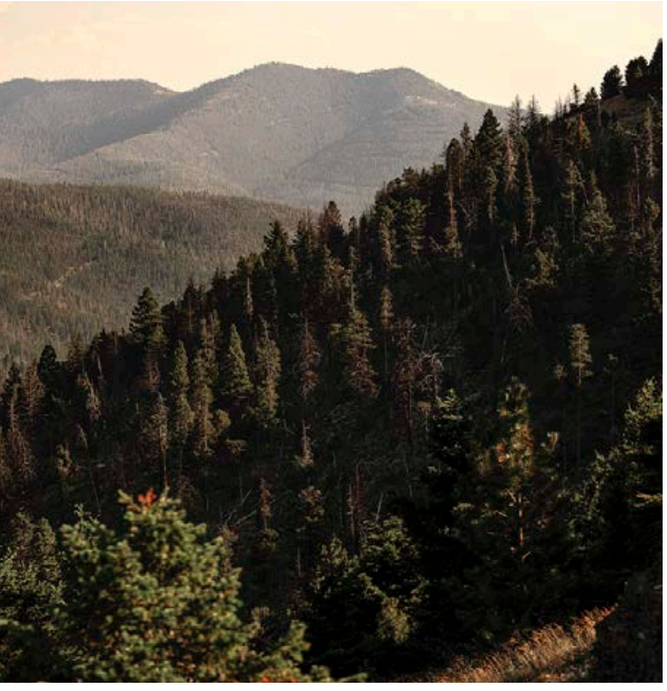
The millions of us born in the U.S. since 1964 have never known an America without designated wilderness, from the 5.5-acre Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida to the sprawling 9 million acres of glacier, alpine forest, and raging rivers in Alaska's Wrangell–St. Elias. We have over 109 million acres of designated wilderness scattered across 44 states and Puerto Rico. It's horse packing and backpacking and runs with our dogs. Elk and deer and mountain goats and wolves, grizzly bears and rattlesnakes. Roaring creeks to wade in and cliffs to fall from if you are not careful. It's an invitation to self-sufficiency—learning to read a map and tote a rifle from dawn to dark and sleep outside in the heat and the cold. It's a place to breathe, to reawaken the soul, and to remember how to live on nature's time, and by nature's rules. No other country on Earth has anything like it.

The deliberate action to conserve these lands has become a part of what it means to be an American. As New Mexico Senator Clinton P. Anderson said in 1963, "Wilderness is an anchor to windward. Knowing it is there, we can also know that we are still a rich nation, tending our resources as we should—not a people in despair searching every last nook and cranny of our land for a board of lumber, a barrel of oil, a blade of grass, or a tank of water."

There are beautiful words and poetry, and there is federal policy dry as dust, and there are choices to be made

by nations, and by their citizens. Choices guided by experience. After a childhood shaped by the harsh weather and terrain of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, my son became a horse packer and wilderness-trails worker for the U.S. Forest Service. Two seasons ago, my daughter, a hunter molded by that same wild country, was home from college in a teeming city. They went together into the backcountry on foot to kill her second mule deer buck. They packed it out in darkness and got home very late, and in the morning, I drank my coffee and looked with vast pride at the quarters hanging from the old lodgepole rafters in our barn.

I have a few years left to explore more wild places on our public lands, but I have already explored, perhaps, more than my share. Leopold wrote, "I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in." If we hunters and anglers, and all of us who love the outdoors, hold fast to our hard-won heritage of respect for wilderness, every young American in the storm years of their physical powers will have these mountains to climb, rivers to fish, creeks to swim in, game to hunt, and dark skies in which to ponder the real mysteries of our universe. Wilderness is freedom, and freedom is dangerous and sometimes uncomfortable, and we wouldn't have it



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Timbered ridges rise one after another into the distance in Montana's vast Scapegoat Wilderness.

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The author (also pictured opposite) carries his Remington Model Seven, with homemade cheek pad.

→
An elk track in the dirt. There are bulls to be had in these public lands, but you'll have to work for one.

**If we hunters and anglers hold fast to our hard-won heritage of respect for wilderness, every young American will have these mountains to climb, rivers to fish, game to hunt, and dark skies in which to ponder the real mysteries of our universe.**

any other way. It is no coincidence that America is the birthplace of the idea of protected wilderness—the same mix of caution, boldness, and self-reliance that's required for success in untamed country is what makes it possible to keep a democratic republic alive and thriving.

Now let me tell one final story. There was a time, two winters ago, in the Bradwell Bay Wilderness in the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida...or wait, was it that blistering hot day trudging the endless dusty trail out of the Scapegoat in Montana when we plunged into the ice-cold pool under the waterfall...or the night I learned to believe in ghosts in the Dark Canyon Wilderness in Utah...? Okay. Enough of my stories.

The American wilderness is all out there for you to find and experience for yourself. Hunt it, roam it, fish it, camp in it, take your kids and their friends, your cousins or the neighbor. Revel in the freedom and the challenge, be honed by necessity, get rained on, sunburned, refined by Earth, if only for a day or a week. Never let any jaundiced and shrunken soul tell you that it has no value. Celebrate it and be willing to fight to keep it for us all, because it is something larger than the sum of us all, a chance to touch, if only briefly, the eternal. We are going to need that in the coming years. We have always needed that. F&S

The author looks for elk—and stops to admire a subalpine variety of yampah, a native wildflower akin to wild carrot.


HONORING
THE
MOMENT
FOR 25 YEARS
Every arrow you've sent down range has helped shape who we are. Here's to continuing the journey together. Thank you for 25 years of dedication and inspiring every single innovation.
BOWTECH

# The COVER STORY

**OUT OF HUNTING'S DARKEST DAYS CAME SOME OF THE GREATEST ARTWORK TO GRACE THE COVER OF *FIELD & STREAM***

by **DAVID E. PETZAL**

THE CAMERA CAN SHOW YOU only what is. An artist's brush can show what you long for. That's why this group of *Field & Stream* covers was born on canvas. They dealt not in reality but in dreams, and there was a reason for that. By 1900, most game animals were nearly gone. Hunting was a matter of faith overcoming reality.

Traveling to where there still was decent hunting took so long that it put the sport out of reach for nearly everyone. So the editors of *F&S* sold the only thing they had to sell—adventure, and the hope for better times.

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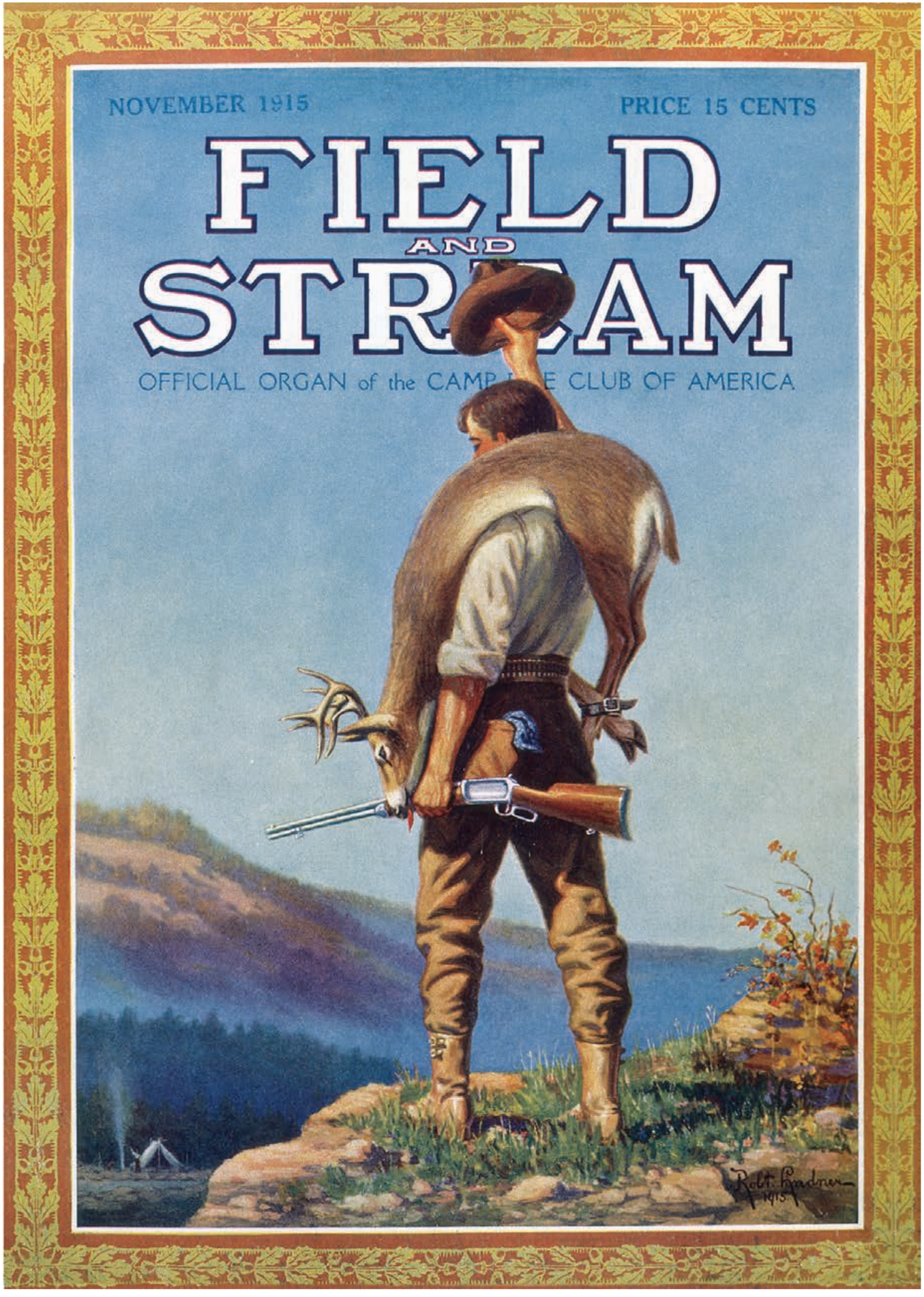
November **1915**

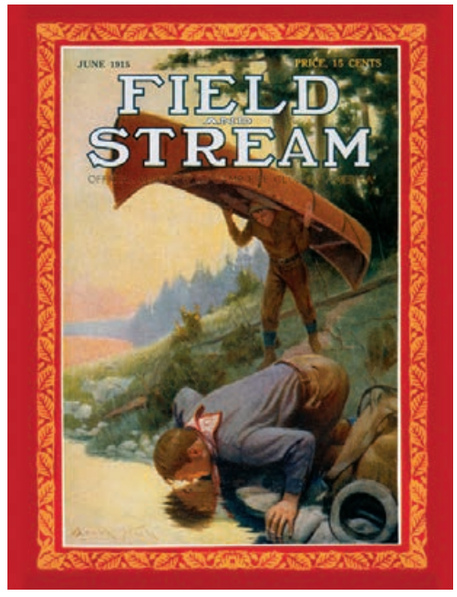

NOVEMBER 1915
PRICE 15 CENTS
FIELD
AND
STREAM
OFFICIAL ORGAN of the CAMP
E CLUB OF AMERICA

# Backcountry Campers

If you're going to lay down your head in the wilderness, you must expect the unexpected. What you see here is the high end of the experience. I've sacked out in the back of an International Harvester Scout. There was a cabin available to us, but the guy who lived there had done time for manslaughter. I've also stayed, uninvited, in a timber cruiser's shack when the occupant was not at home, a junked Airstream trailer whose ceiling collected water that dripped incessantly, and on the bare ground in a blanket roll. (That's two blankets held together by giant safety pins, and, yes, you will freeze your ass off.) No matter; there have also been camps that were wonderful, and half a dozen that were perfect.

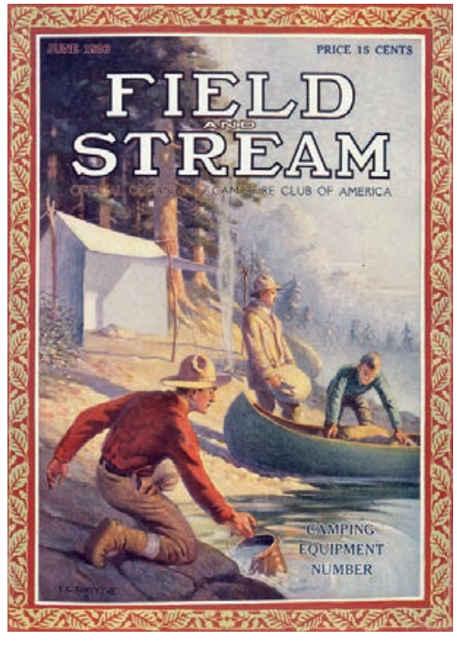
I have two favorite covers here. The first is from June 1910. I think the artist who painted it must have spent time in the outdoors, because everything in it rings true, and it conveys a wonderful sense of tranquility.

The other is from June 1915. It's the end of a portage. The young man trying to drink the lake dry has been carrying the packs and bags, and his friend has been lugging the canoe. Where they are now is their camp by default, because they're too beat to go any farther. Tomorrow, at least, they can paddle.





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June **1910**

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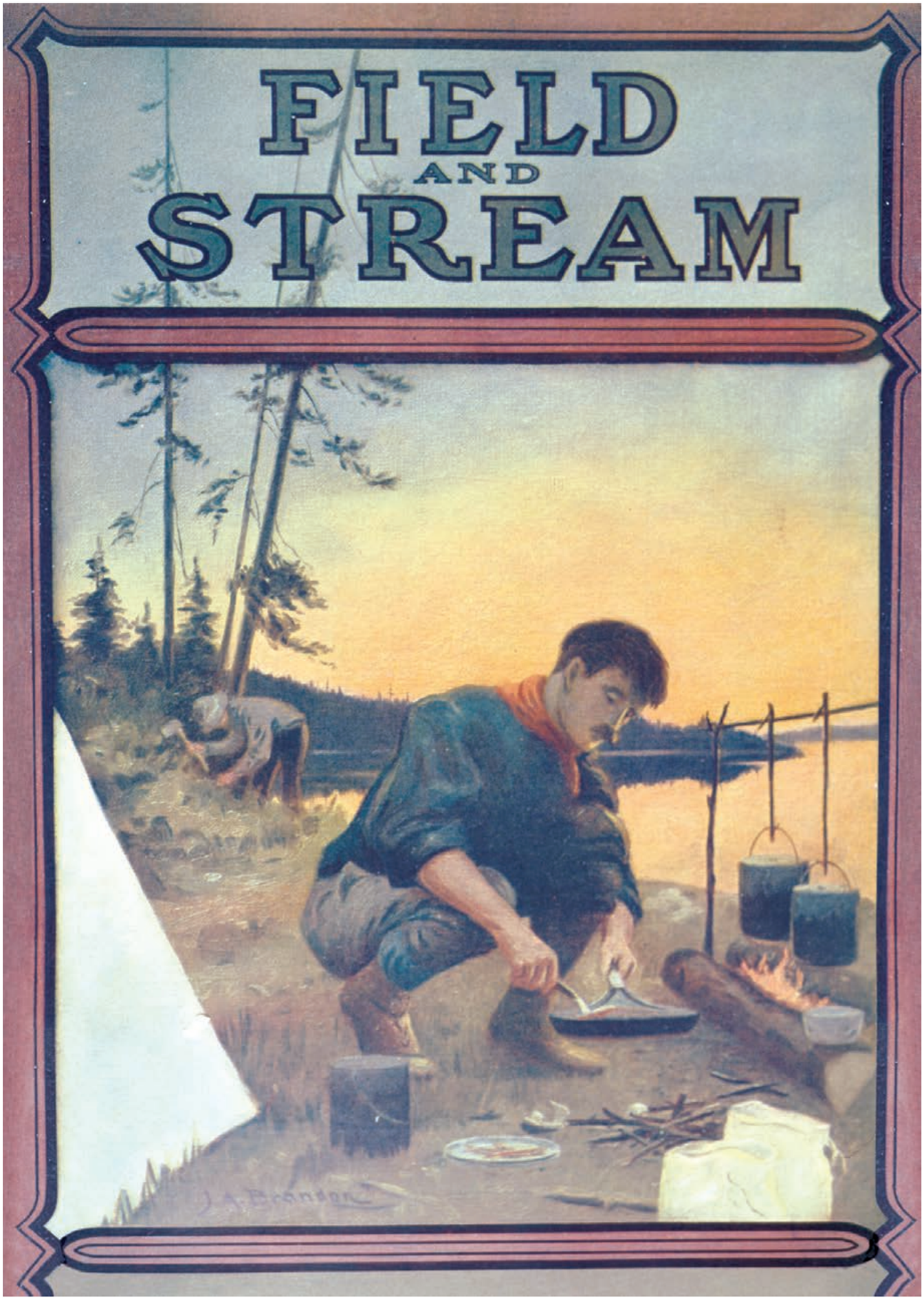
April **1967**
July **1923**
June **1911**
June **1915**
December **1968**
June **1916**


FIELD
AND
STREAM

# Cowboys and Cowgirls

"My heroes have always been cowboys," sings Willie Nelson—his, and everyone else's, including mine. Let us not omit the cowgirls or, as I've heard them referred to, ranch gals. If, somewhere, there's harder work to do than what gets done on a ranch, I'm not aware of it. It's also dangerous. I know of a cowboy who, running a winter trapline, fell from the saddle many miles from the ranch, with his boot remaining in a stirrup. His horse dragged him to death at a walk. "But he was a *hand*," his anguished friend told me, *hand* being the term for someone who was really good at the trade, to whom accidents shouldn't happen.

This brings us to my favorite cover in this group, from August 1915, which shows a cowboy riding down a wolf that has been killing stock and is probably one of the last wolves in that part of the country. If you'd like to do something really dangerous while riding for the brand, try a chase like this on a horse that's already panicked, over country that should never be taken at a gallop. "Run on four, walk on two," goes the cowboy saying. In other words, if your horse breaks a leg, you get to shoot it and then walk home—if you can walk.

As it is, the cowhand will try to shoot the wolf who, in desperation, will chew its way through the dogs. On an elk hunt in Colorado, I watched this exact scene take place, but with a coyote. The rider roped the animal and broke its neck before the dogs could get ahold. It was a brutal business.

→
August **1915**

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September **1914**
March **1918**
October **1912**
November **1922**
February **1920**
February **1933**






COACHING THE WINGSHOT—by Charles Askins


TROLLING FOR BLOCK ISLAND TUNA—by Charles K. Stillman

# The Big Gamers

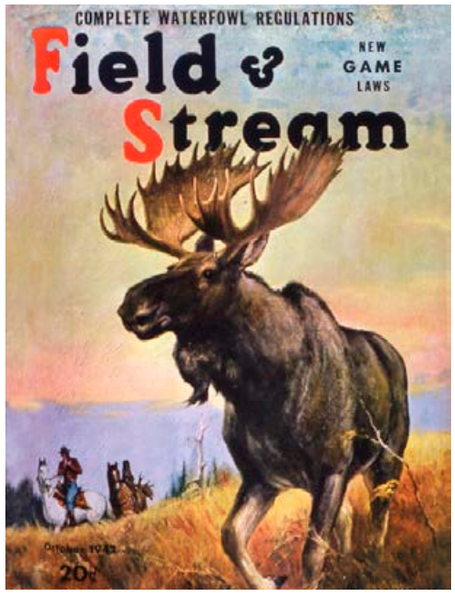
So far, most of these covers have kept a pretty tight grip on reality. In this category, that grip loosens.

On the September 1956 issue, two hunters are driving down a mountain trail in a Jeep with what appears to be a caribou tied across the hood. Why are they in a Jeep on a trail like this? Why a caribou? Caribou don't live this high; sheep do. Is it an elk? Elk don't live here either.

The July 1927 cover shows a hunter about to be attacked by a polar bear that's down on its stomach. Why is the polar bear on its stomach? Polar bears will get low when they're out on sea ice, sneaking up on a seal's breathing hole, but this isn't sea ice. Why is the man's hat flying off like that? Where are his snowshoes? Where can I get a parka like his?

For February 1910, a hunter has gotten himself onto a ledge that offers scarcely enough room to stand and is about to shoot at something that has to be a mountain goat, because this is mountain goat country, on an adjoining mountain. If he hits it, our hero will have to climb all the way down, one-handed, because he doesn't have a rifle sling, butcher the critter, and pack it out…how? Because he doesn't have a pack frame.

My favorite here is from February 1913. This looks like a subsistence hunter who has gotten his winter moose. He's packing the head out last because the meat is much more important, and he doesn't want the wolves to get it. The painting is suffused in the anemic sunshine that you see in the Far North. The scene is stunning.



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January **1919**

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|---|---|
| September **1956** | October **1942** |
| September **1954** | July **1927** |
| February **1913** | February **1910** |


THE LARGEST NET PAID CIRCULATION IN THE OUTDOOR WORLD
FIELD AND STREAM
AMERICA'S MAGAZINE FOR THE OUTDOORSMAN
"DOC"
By
ROBERT H. DAVIS
JANUARY 1919
20 Cents
H. S. WATSON
FIELD AND STREAM PUB. CO., Publisher, E. J. Warner

# The Deer Slayers

THE WHITETAIL IS KING. Thus it will always be. But it was not always so, because whitetails nearly vanished.

Before Europeans arrived in what is now the United States, it's estimated that there were between 15 million and 30 million deer. When most of these covers were painted, that number had shrunk to 300,000, and there were six states that had no deer at all. Unregulated hunting and habitat loss did the trick. The editors could not say *How to Get a Monster Buck* on the cover because all the monster bucks had been killed by market hunters, their carcasses sold for a dollar each.

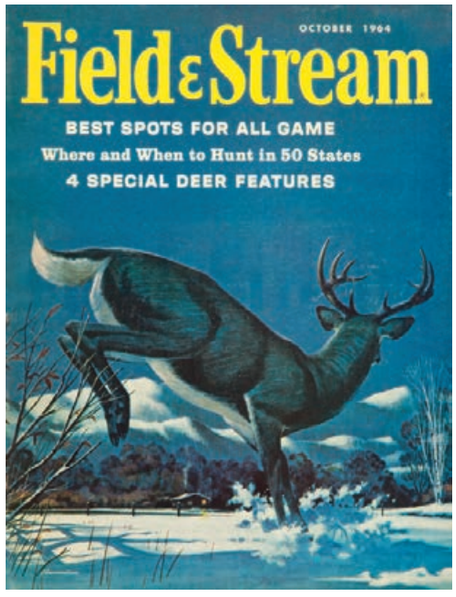
A West Virginia friend of mine put it eloquently: "When I was a kid in the 1950s, if you saw a deer track, you got your name in the paper. If you actually saw a deer, you got your picture in the paper."

I have one favorite here. It's from December 1949. The central figure is not wearing safety orange or camo because the former did not arrive until the 1960s, and the latter, not till 20 years after that. In his pockets are a match safe, a sandwich, and a few extra rounds. He's not carrying binoculars or a rangefinder or a battery of calls or a GPS. He hasn't consulted a trail camera before heading out. Sitting in one place all day would not occur to him.

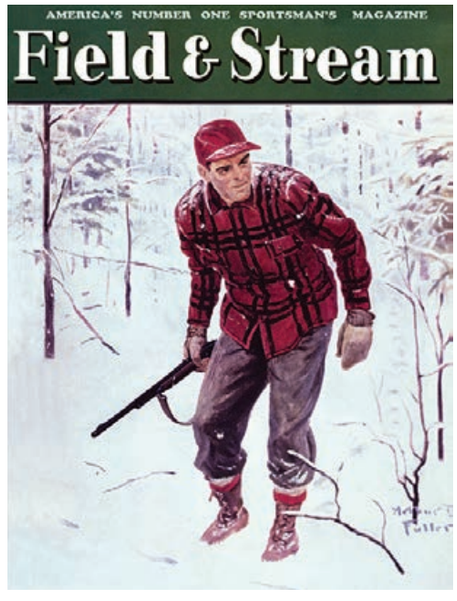
He has snow to work with, and he's just spotted a track. He'll pause for a moment to consider where he is and where this all might lead, then he'll follow the trail quickly, shifting his eyes every few seconds to whatever lies ahead.

I knew people like this when I took to the woods with a rifle for the first time.

They were called *hunters*. F&S





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December **1908**

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October **1964**
December **1916**
January **1912**
November **1956**
December **1949**
September **1929**


DECEMBER 1908
PRICE 15 CENTS
FIELD AND STREAM
XMAS NUMBER
LYNN BOGUE HUNT

For serious big-game hunters, Alaska's ANWR is a bucket-list destination.

# THE OLD MAN *and* THE MOUNTAINS

A SHEEP AND GRIZZLY HUNTING ADVENTURE IN THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE—WHERE YOU PAY FOR BAD DECISIONS WITH YOUR LIFE

by PHILIP CAPUTO


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This classic feature originally ran as a two-parter in the February (pictured) and March 2004 issues. It has been edited here for length.

TO THE UNAIDED EYE, it was a white boulder, poised on a knife-edged ridge a mile or more up the canyon, but Benson didn't recall seeing it there when he'd scanned the ridge only moments ago.

"We have sheep, a ram," he said, adjusting his binoculars. I raised mine and saw the animal, legs tucked under his body, his head with its whorled horns held utterly still. He seemed to be studying us as intently as we were him. Certainly, he was capable of seeing every twitch we made—the Dall sheep of Alaska has eyesight almost as keen as the 8X lenses we were looking through.

Moving with exquisite care, Dave Marsh crept to his spotting scope. It revealed that the ram's horns were only three-quarter curls, meaning we could not shoot it. Only rams with full curls are legal game. The news was not entirely a letdown. There was no way we could have approached the wary animal without alerting him. Besides, it was only the first day of a 12-day hunt, and the first day of any hunt is like the first day of a honeymoon—disappointment seems impossible.

"He could have others with him, higher up or on the back side of the ridge," said Marsh, who was guiding Benson and me. "No point in spooking him. If he gets spooked, they'll all be gone. We'll head up that way tomorrow and see."

We were in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, in the easternmost Brooks Range, America's ultimate mountains—ultimate in the sense that it is the last mountain range in the country. Like a bent rib, it runs at a right angle to the spine of the continent, curving east to west for 600 miles across far northern Alaska.

The Brooks are the wildest mountains you will find anywhere. Through their canyons and high passes, the last great caribou herds on Earth make annual pilgrimages to the coastal plain, gathering in such numbers that the tundra itself seems to be in motion. Moose browse among sparse willows fringing nameless creeks; the barren-ground grizzly lumbers across alpine meadows with an imperious tread; the gray wolf howls beneath the boreal fires of the northern lights; and Dall sheep graze on pastures that look almost vertical.

I had tramped and rafted through the mountains for three weeks in 1995, exploring and fishing for salmon, and had returned the next year to hunt with three Alaskan friends. I shot a bull caribou, and two of my companions bagged grizzlies, but sheep eluded us. On our second-to-last day, we saw a sight that would live with us always: snow geese marshaling for their migration to wintering grounds in California and New Mexico. In wedges so thick as to resemble low-flying clouds, they soared over us for hours, their calls as much a melody of wilderness as the wolf wails we'd heard earlier in the trip. I had been looking forward to a bath and shave after two weeks without either, but the Brooks Range had cast its spell. I promised myself that I would return the next year.

Everything from work to family obligations to money (or lack of it) kept me away. Finally, as the century turned, I called Marsh, asking to book a Dall sheep hunt for the following season, when I would turn 60. It was going to be a landmark birthday present to myself. Sorry, Marsh replied, he was booked up till 2003. I hesitated. By that time, I would be 63, an official, card-carrying Geezer. I had learned something about hunting mountain sheep in Alaska: It is a younger man's game. I gave Marsh my answer: *Yes*.

On a mid-August morning, I met up in Fairbanks with Trey Benson, a trim, athletic 43-year-old from Dallas. He and Marsh had been high school classmates in Kentucky, had lost touch with each other for many years, and then were reunited at a gun and trade show, where Marsh had set up a booth advertising his outfitting company. He had no trouble talking his old friend into booking a trip. Benson earns his living as a salesman for an employment screening firm, but hunting is his avocation.

I was a little nervous about spending nearly two weeks in the bush with a stranger, and I'm sure my partner was too. We were pleased to discover that we hit it off right away. Benson was my kind of hunter—he loved wild country and had a naturalist's curiosity about it.

We flew from Fairbanks to the Gwich'in Indian settlement of Fort Yukon, where we were picked up by Kirk Sweetsir, a voluble bush pilot with a master's degree from Cambridge University. An hour and a half later, having passed over 200 miles without seeing a town, road, or fence, the Cessna touched down at Marsh's base camp—a cook tent and three one-man mountain tents pitched on a tundra fell above a river I'll call Kate Creek.

There, we took care of preliminaries. Marsh set up a target to make sure our rifles were properly sighted in to hit 3 inches high at 100 yards, which puts

USFWS PHOTO/ALAMY (previous spread)

them dead-on at 300, roughly the average range at which sheep are shot. That done, we were issued our hunting tags—sheep for me, sheep and bear for Benson. A lecture on how to use the satellite phone and radio—in case Marsh met with a mishap—was followed by a dinner of pork chops and rice. Next morning, we set off toward our first spike camp, a 4-mile trek to a willow bar.

## THE MYTHIC KINGDOM

Four miles in Alaska is worth 10 anywhere else. With some 48 pounds on my back, I felt every yard and staggered in 15 minutes behind my companions. At Marsh's urging, I had conditioned myself for several months prior to leaving: sit-ups, push-ups, and long hikes three times a week carrying a 40-pound pack and an 8-pound length of pipe to simulate a rifle. It should have been enough, but there comes a point in life when you're not as old as you feel but as old as you are. Therefore, I had to ask myself, *Why are you doing this?*

The answer lay in an observation once made by John Voelker, alias Robert Traver, author of *Anatomy of a Murder* and *Trout Madness*. Asked why he fished for trout, Voelker replied that he liked to be where trout were. So I was hunting sheep because I wanted to be where sheep were.

The second morning brought a dense fog, and because you can't shoot what you can't see, we hung around camp until it burned off. Over an austere breakfast—coffee and a cup of oatmeal with raisins—Marsh entertained us with tales of his adventures. I should point out that he guides in Alaska about three months of the year—one month in the Brooks Range for sheep, caribou, and grizzly; the other two in the southern part of the state for brown bear and moose. He spends the rest of the year managing a family farm in Kentucky. A wiry man in his early 40s with curly brown hair and glasses that make him look more like a high school teacher than a grizzled sourdough, Marsh is a colorful storyteller, spicing his narratives with sound effects. His terrifying tales of going in after brown bears wounded by clients were punctuated by imitation snarls, roars, and gunshots.

The fog lifted around 10. Shouldering rifles and packs, we tramped some 2 miles up a drainage paved with more rocks than there are stars in the heavens: big rocks, small rocks, smooth rocks, sharp rocks, round, square, and triangular rocks, rocks upon rocks, an ankle-bending ordeal. The braids of a nameless creek twined through the geologic rubble, disappearing underground for a spell, reappearing farther on, the canyon narrowing as it climbed between scree-swept slopes, the slopes rising toward crags and spires that, partly veiled in mist, looked like fortress walls guarding some mythic kingdom. Finally, we reached the base of the ridge where we had seen the ram with the three-quarter curls.

A short but steep climb brought us to a low rock face, the scaling of which provided some mild adrenal stimulation. We then crossed a moss-covered meadow striated by caribou trails. It ascended gradually toward the rim, with fields of shale sliding away on both sides and gorges plummeting below those. The consequences of a misstep being obvious, I took care about how and where I placed my feet. Some three hours after leaving camp, we came to the spot that had been occupied by the young ram. We saw his tracks and droppings, but not him.

> The bear came shambling across the tundra beneath the knoll, its light fur shining so that it looked as if it were illuminated from within.

Having consumed roughly 200 calories for breakfast and burned 10 times that much apiece, we pounced on a lunch of brick cheese, candy bars, and pemmican. The bones of a moose that we'd come upon in the drainage below were the topic of discussion. What had a moose been doing in that canyon, where there was nothing for it to eat? "Probably trying to get out of a winter gale," Marsh speculated. "He figured he'd get out when the weather broke. Maybe it didn't break, and he starved to death, or wolves got him. This country doesn't forgive bad decisions."

I didn't consider his and Benson's next decision, to climb to the rim for a look-see, a bad one for them, but it would have been a bad one for me. I was whipped and, figuring I ought to save myself for the next two days, elected to wait. The east wind had a bite to it. I took shelter behind a granite slab and glassed the surrounding hillsides, and basked in the silence and solitude, the forbidding beauty of unclimbed peaks stabbing broken clouds.

In time, I began to hallucinate sheep. An estimated 30,000 Dall inhabit the Brooks Range, and one-third live within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. You would think I would see at least one ram.

## HARD TIMES

Sheepless still, we struck out for a new spike camp to the south. Bears appeared in the distance—a sow and two large cubs, ambling across a tundra fell. The sight of grizzlies always brings a certain tingling to the scalp and spine, and given the female grizzly's reputation for defending her young with awesome ferocity, it was just as well that those three were well over a mile away. The sow was a beauty, with honey-blond fur that glistened in the sunlight, but she wasn't fair game.

Over the next three days, we felt as if we were filming an episode for *Survivor*. A chill rain blown by a hard wind turned to sleet, the sleet to snow. Six inches fell one night, the sky cleared in the morning, then another storm rolled in. We crouched around willow-stick fires that gave off only a little more heat than a cigarette lighter. We slept shoulder to shoulder, three men in a tent built for two. We stalked up river basins that seemed to invite us into the mountains, while the mountains themselves seemed to warn us to keep out.

We returned to base camp to find the cook tent and our mountain tents collapsed under the weight of ice and snow. After setting things to rights, Marsh told me that my bottle of Scotch had been knocked off the table and smashed on a rock. Then, as I looked like a man informed that his dog had died, he produced a metal shot glass brimming with whiskey and had a har-har at my expense.

## DEATH VALLEY

The sun came out, the sun vanished, and freezing rain lashed across the Kate Creek valley. In such weather, the Brooks Range becomes a formidable place. Soaring abruptly from the river basins, peaks as gaunt and sharp as flint arrowheads frowned through the enshrouding mists and talked to me: *You, little man, travel here on my terms, not yours, and I can kill you any time I choose.*

← Dall sheep make their home among the granite cliffs, scree slides, and talus slopes of the Brooks Range.

As we trudged up a slope to glass for game, Marsh observed that I was struggling and offered some advice. "You're fighting this country," he said. "You've got to roll with it because you'll never win. Best you can do is break even." I wanted to tell him that it wasn't the country I was fighting—it was my years, another battle I couldn't win.

We saw ewes and lambs grazing on a mountainside across the valley, but no rams. Our one reward in the game department was a lone musk ox bull, a fairly rare sight. Exchanging our rifles for cameras, we stalked down to the creek and managed to creep within 40 or 50 yards before he knew we were there. I don't think he'd ever seen a human being, for he simply stopped to gaze at us with a kind of curiosity in his dark eyes.

With his hide a deep brown, his mane a pale brown, his shining horns curving down the sides of his head like a pointed helmet, he looked prehistoric out there among the low willows in the long Arctic twilight. I imagined the first Ice Age immigrants to America gazing at such a beast and felt privileged to have gotten so close.

The weather decided we'd had enough of the soft life and changed the sleet to snow once again. Hypothermia is the killer that stalks the Alaskan bush, and Marsh cautioned us to keep ourselves and our gear dry. "You do not want to get behind the eight ball out here," he added for emphasis. "That's how you lose instead of break even." Then he regaled us with uplifting stories about hunters whom blizzards had buried alive in their tents.

## DEATH MARCH

Trey Benson spent a restless night, waking every hour on the hour to knock the slush and snow off his tent. I slept well for whatever reason, dreaming of game. I dreamed about bears, but no sheep appeared to my sleeping mind. In the morning, I spoke of my visions and told Benson, who had a grizzly tag, that I believed he would get his bear, and I was right.

At noon, a bright sun broke through, warming bodies, lifting spirits, and we packed up to head for our third spike camp—a 13-mile trek up Kate Creek, then 2 more up a side drainage. Marsh yarned about the sheep that previous clients had bagged in this area, and frankly I was getting irritated. *Next thing,* I thought, *he'll be telling us we should have been here last week.* I wasn't desperate yet, but with the hunt past the halfway point, I was getting there. Three moving white specks on a far slope to the north brought on a revival of hope. The spotting scope gave us another boost: They were rams, but so far away and so high up it was difficult even for Marsh to judge the curvature of their horns.

"One of them might make it," he said cautiously, and then planned the stalk. A ridge topped by crenellated rocks rose between us and the rams. We would use it to mask our approach, then climb it and let it be our shooting platform. We dropped our gear beside a narrow stream and began.

This stalk nearly proved to be a death march for me. First, we had to cross half a mile of tussock tundra. To do that, you must hop from one unstable tussock to the other, frequently slipping into the muddy crevasses that separate them. Higher up, the soil grew firmer, but then the ridge loomed at a pitch resembling the roof of a Swiss chalet and to a height that brought two dread words to mind: *cardiac arrest.*

Marsh went up as if, in years of hunting sheep, he'd absorbed some of their DNA. Benson was just at his rear, but I fell way behind. My companions reached the top when I was only two-thirds of the way there. My heart rate was well into triple digits. Gasping for air, my legs quivering. I sat down as a precaution against ending up in the obituaries. The view was stunning: Kate Creek far below, running on amid its gray gravel and green willow bars, snow-crowned mountains to the south, as nameless as when they were sculpted by the hand of God.

I stood and had climbed another 50 yards when Marsh came hopping back down, waving his arms to tell me to stay put. No good, he said. The rams had moved out of range in the hour it had taken us to make the stalk, and the best one wasn't quite legal anyway—a seven-eighths curl. I was actually relieved.

"Dave," I gasped.

"Yeah?"

"I'm beginning to think I've bitten off more than I can chew."

He slapped me on the back, whether to agree with me or to encourage me I didn't know. Nor did I ask.

## THE BEAR

In deference to my fatigue, Marsh decided not to press on to our original destination, but to pitch camp where we'd left our packs. While we set about our domestic chores, we spied the three rams, plodding single file up a gray mountain, up and up until they vanished into the clouds, the incarnation of all that is unattainable and all the more desirable for it.

The decision to stay put proved lucky for Benson. In the early evening, displaying an energy I found astonishing, he slogged to a knoll about half a mile away to glass for bear. Marsh had told him to signal if he spotted one. He'd been gone less than an hour when we saw a bright orange panel appear on the hillside. Marsh went off to join him, while I stayed behind and had a ringside seat for the unfolding drama.

DONALD M. JONES


(Part 1)

The Old Man and the Mountains

A sheep- and grizzly-hunting adventure in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—where you pay for bad decisions with your life

by Philip Caputo

The original magazine story opened with the grandeur of ANWR and one of the hunters glassing sheep.

The bear came shambling across the tundra beneath the knoll, its light fur shining so that it looked as if it were illuminated from within. Marsh and Benson were crouched low as they moved behind the willows picketing a creek bed. With the wind in their favor, they made a textbook-perfect stalk before they got into position, 60 to 70 yards from their quarry. The bear wasn't aware of their presence. Benson rested his 300 Weatherby Magnum on his pack, laid atop the creek bank.

The grizzly ambled along, pausing to scrape the tundra for roots. Willow bushes between it and the two men were blocking a clear shot. It was some 400 yards from me, and I could see its face clearly through my binoculars, its striking blond fur mixed with an array of darker browns. It was a beautiful animal.

Twenty minutes passed. The bear turned broadside to Benson. *Now, shoot now*, I thought, and wondered why he didn't. As I found out later, Marsh had told him to wait until he, Marsh, made some judgments about its size, the shade of its hide, and other factors that affected its qualities as a trophy. Also, he'd observed it was a sow, and he needed to estimate her age, to make sure she wasn't in her prime breeding years.

Twice during this wait, the bear faced the concealed hunters and half rose to her hind legs, as if she sensed danger but wasn't sure. At last, she turned broadside, and I saw her fall hard onto her belly a fraction of a second before I heard the shot—a flat, echoing crack. The sow whirled around, lunging with her forelegs toward the thing that had struck her from out of nowhere. Even through binoculars, I could sense her rage and shock. Benson fired a finishing shot. The bear went down again, thrashed for a second or two, and then lay still.

## DESPAIR COMES CALLING

Dall ram country is hard, remote, and almost inaccessible, because only in such terrain does the ram feel safe from wolves and bears, who aren't willing to climb treacherous slopes for a meal. Only armed *Homo sapiens* are dumb enough to endure what it takes to kill a ram. With only two days left, the winds of despair were beginning to erode the soil of my optimism.

We hunted hard, covering some 10 miles up and down three canyons that spread out from the main drainage like the claws of a chicken's foot. Marsh had never been in those parts, so we were likely the first human beings to set foot in them.

The region was as desolate as it was remote—granite mountains almost entirely bare of life, hardly a patch of moss or lichen. The bones of fossilized fish were painted like rock art on the boulders of the riverbeds. Streams of black shale poured down the sides of ridges that crested out in sheer, broken cliffs resembling the skylines of ruined pueblos.

"How would you describe this?" Benson asked me.

The adjectives that came to mind were: Barren. Lifeless. Bleak. Austere. Disheartening. Harsh. Stark. I answered, "All it needs to be another planet is an unbreathable atmosphere."

The final day brought a sky innocent of clouds and a warm sun. Our socks and boots had gotten semidry beside last night's fire. Marsh spied a pair of rams high up on a mountainside, under a pinnacle that looked a little like the Statue of Liberty. One wasn't legal size, but he wasn't sure about the other because its head was hidden in the pinnacle's shadow. For an hour, hugging the canyon side to stay out of sight, we moved closer, pausing to glass the rams, waiting for the second to show himself. I felt a stab of irrational hope. After a long stalk and a long wait, Marsh got a good look at the second ram—a three-quarters curl. I gazed at the bad news through the spotting scope. The rams did make a splendid sight, aloof and aristocratic, surveying their domain, but how I wished they were a year or two older.

"I knew it would be fairy-tale stuff to score on the last day," I said.

The long march back to base camp, conducted the following day, left me feeling like a washout from Navy SEALs BUDS camp. Disappointment warred with relief that it was over. In my memory flashed images of the two rams resting 1,000 feet above us; of the three filing into the clouds. Next year, one or more might be legal, but would I be capable of hunting them? I was aware of a fragility that hadn't been in me on my last journey through the Brooks Range, seven years ago—a sense that my body was offering diminishing returns.

A grand bull moose showed up at twilight. Marsh estimated his rack at 5 feet, and he stood 7 feet at the shoulder. Moose aren't legal game in those mountains, so we made a stalk just to get a closer look at him. Perhaps mistaking us for a wolf pack, he changed direction, passing within yards of camp, then splashed into the willows bordering Kate Creek and continued his solitary pilgrimage to God knows where.

An hour later, the northern lights came out over the mountains to the south—trembling curtains of pale green. I watched them and thought about the moose and the musk ox and the bear that had stood before me and the rams in their high dominions and figured all that would have to do. And it did just fine. F&S

# WILDERNESS RETREAT

**After the loss of a cousin who was more like a brother, the author begins to put his life back together on the river**

by **RYAN CHELIUS** illustrations by **CLAY RODERY**

THE SPRING WEATHER—cold, wet, and gray—fit my mood. When the rain finally lightened, I left my car and hiked to the river. This was the first time in more than a year that I'd visited this stream, and the first time I'd left my apartment, aside from going to class, in the past three months.

When I reached the water, I sat down on a boulder that overlooks the Bridge Pool—the spot where I'd caught my first-ever trout three years ago. The spring opener had taken place nine days earlier, and I had the entire river to myself. But I hadn't come to fish. I had come to get away, and knowing I could probably be alone here, I thought this spot seemed as good a place as any. As the rain fell, I just sat on the rock, staring through welling eyes into the swirling pool of water where a brown trout once rose to eat my caddis fly, thinking of Joe, my cousin. Today would've been his 25th birthday.

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On January 13, 2019, I got a call from home. When I answered, my mom, dad, and brother were all on speaker phone. Mom asked, "Ryan, where are you?"

I could tell something was wrong by the sound of her voice. "What happened?" I asked.

They told me Joe had died unexpectedly in his sleep the night before.

"Joe who?" I asked, never imagining they could mean my cousin. I'd just hung out with him over Christmas break. I'd just texted him a few days earlier. Nothing was wrong. He seemed fine.

"Ryan," my mom said, "your cousin Joe died."

Two hours later, I was on a train to Long Island. When I got home, the house felt hollow—empty of joy, happiness, or hope. An uncomfortable silence filled the space. It was so maddening I practically didn't recognize where I was. The 10-minute drive to Joe's house, one I'd done thousands of times in my life, was oddly unfamiliar too. The golf course was still there, the pizzeria was still there, the train tracks were still there. But Joe wasn't. I found that without him, I didn't know where I was.

Two weeks later, when I returned to school in Syracuse, the disorientation persisted. I didn't know what to do with myself or my time. My world was shattered, but everything in the outside world kept going on as if nothing had happened. Feeling alone, I retreated. I started missing class. I slept all day. I avoided my friends. Now and then people would ask how I was doing, and I'd give them some generic answer: "I'm doing all right" or "I'm hanging in there." But I wasn't.

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The morning of Joe's birthday—87 days after he'd died—I woke up and thought to myself, *Enough*. I needed to get outside, to escape my apartment, if only for a short while. That's how I wound up at the river where I'd caught my first trout. As I sat there on a rock, crying in the rain, I couldn't help but notice the slow, swirling water. I could see the seam where my first trout rose to take my caddis. I remembered how focused I was on making a good cast, the excitement I felt when I set the hook into that 8-inch brown, and the joy of netting that fish.

It was unlikely a trout would take a dry fly in today's conditions—but if there *was* a fish down there, it might strike a streamer or a nymph. The cast would have to be a little upstream of the pool and made at an angle, followed by a good mend. *If only I had my fishing rod with me*, I thought.

I looked downstream and began picking apart more water. Even without my 4-weight, reading the water was familiar and comforting—the kind of distraction I didn't know I needed until that moment. For the first time in three months, I wasn't dreading the day ahead. Just the opposite, in fact: I couldn't wait to return to the stream.

## A NEW NORMAL ON THE RIVER

A few weeks later, I hurried down the trail, carrying my rigged fly rod. It was warmer and sunnier than it had been on Joe's birthday. This time, I came with all my gear and a box full of flies. It had been four months since I'd last gone fishing, and stepping into the moving river, with the water rushing against my waders, felt restorative. As I began to nymph a short run, my thoughts turned to Joe.

He and I grew up 10 minutes apart on the South Shore of Long Island. I have two older brothers, but I'd always considered Joe—who had three younger brothers of his own—my third older brother. He had always watched out for me, whether we were playing sports or hanging out, or while I was going through a new life phase. For instance, at the start of my freshman year of college, Joe would often check in on me, asking how things were going and what I was up to. He told me that he knew how hard moving away for school was—that he had struggled with it at my age—and that he was always there for me if I needed to talk.

Joe and I did so much together. We vacationed together. Watched Yankees games together. And with our birthdays just one day apart, we even celebrated together. As we got older, and life took us in different directions, we never failed to fall right back into our groove when we saw each other. More than anything, we laughed together. Which was the last thing we ever did together, on Christmas, three weeks before he died. I had made jalapeño pheasant poppers for appetizers, and Joe refused to try one because he said he didn't want to eat a pheasant I had shot. We joked about it all night.

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I began to nymph that first run, and it didn't take long for my indicator to disappear. The culprit was a small brown trout. Whether the fish was wild or stocked didn't matter to me. All I cared about was that I was back on the river, regaining a crucial part of myself that had disappeared during the darkest period of my life. I released the fish and landed a few more trout before taking a break.

The banks were still bare from winter, making it easy to find a comfortable spot to sit down.

"How's it going up there?" I asked Joe. I waited for an answer, a sign. "We miss you down here."

Farther upstream, a submerged tree diverted water into a promising-looking run. I crossed the river, doing my best not to spook any fish along the way. I was confident the spot was holding trout.

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The more I fished, the better I felt. On the water, it didn't seem like time was standing still as much. I craved going to the river more than ever before, but for a new

reason: These solo trips were less about catching fish and more about clearing my mind. The best moments were when I wasn't thinking, because I was too locked onto a particular run, riffle, or pool. The sound of the river deafened the noise in my head. For those brief, precious moments, I had to focus only on what fly to throw and where to cast.

There were also times on the water when I felt my strongest connection to Joe since he had passed—when I heard his laugh or his voice again, when I felt his presence. I would ask him questions: *Why did you leave us? How am I going to move forward? What's it like there?* I'd close my eyes and imagine him on a baseball field, wearing a Yankees jersey and smiling. Or my mind would drift to images of us as kids during the summer, having a catch in the backyard. There was no dialogue—only the soundtrack of our childhood: cicadas buzzing in the background, cardinals singing in the trees, the *pop* of a baseball hitting a leather glove.

Eventually, after spending enough time alone on the river, I felt rejuvenated enough to fish with friends again. To me, it felt like a crucial step toward finding a new normal—one still filled with friends, laughter, and joy.

## A CHANGE OF SCENERY

In July 2022, I moved from Long Island to Golden, Colorado. There were many reasons for this—not the least of which were more rivers, bigger trout, and endless wilderness. Golden was also a place where I could get the outdoor experiences that I wanted without giving up the opportunities that come from being close to a city—the best of both worlds.

A few months before I left, a coworker asked me why I chose Colorado. I gave him all the reasons above and meant it. I was going to Colorado to become a better outdoorsman while still being able to catch some baseball games in the city. But that question stuck in my head. *Why was I* really *going to Colorado?*

At the time, I was dealing with unexpected health issues that had sent me into an immobilizing depression. Doctors were unable to diagnose the sharp pain I was experiencing throughout my body. I lost 35 pounds from anxiety and fell back into the place I'd fought so hard to escape. It was terrifying. And just like when I lost Joe, I had stopped fly fishing altogether.

Deep down, I suspect that I wanted to move because I wanted a new start. I wanted to go to a place where I hadn't experienced so much loss and pain. I was sick and tired of bad things happening, and Colorado seemed as good a place as any.

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Colorado, of course, has no shortage of world-class trout water, and one of the first things I did when I got to my new home was head to the mountains with my fly rod. I started out taking trips with my roommates. We explored some rivers and caught a couple of trout. They weren't the size fish I had moved across the country for, but at least I was fishing again.

A few weeks later, on a solo trip, I turned off a small highway onto a side road that eventually led to a gravel parking lot for public-fishing access. It was a perfect summer day, and mine was the only car there. I wadered up and tied on a Golden Stonefly and Duracell nymph. The path to the river was so steep that I had to get on one knee and carefully slide my way down to the water. When I got to the bottom and looked across the river, I saw a giant boulder on the far bank—an obvious hiding spot for a trout. I went downstream before wading across the tailout to the other side, then walked back upstream. I slowly crept toward the boulder, and once I was close enough to cast, I crouched down so as not to spook any fish.

My first cast missed the mark, but the second landed true. I made a big mend upstream, and the indicator disappeared as soon it entered the hole. After I set the hook, I knew immediately that it was the biggest trout I had stuck since moving here. The head shakes were fierce, and my 4-weight was doubled over in a stalemate. With a 6X tippet, I couldn't horse it in. The trout made a run toward the boulder, and I held the rod low to the water, maneuvering the fish into the shallow riffles. That's when I saw the buttery yellow flash. The fish eventually tired, and I netted it beside the bank—a wild 16-inch brown trout with evenly spaced red and black spots and a small blue patch on the gill plate.

After releasing the fish, I started to work my way downstream, hitting the riffles and pools along the way. A wave of calmness began to wash over me as I narrowed my focus on each consecutive cast. All my worries about my health and doubts as to whether I'd made the right call in moving to Colorado faded for the time being. Soon I began to think about Joe again, and how he would have been so excited to hear about my move west. He would have been one of the first people to visit me.

My indicator sank again, and I set the hook. This fish was a beautiful rainbow, just over a foot long. I held it over my net before gently releasing it back into the river. Then I stood up and started to reset my rig for the next cast. I took relief in knowing there was so much more water to explore.

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When I had been gearing up in the parking lot, I decided against bringing my ultralight rain jacket to save room in my pack. I began to regret that once I noticed the wall of pitch-black clouds moving toward me. I was too far from the car to go back for my jacket and return to the spot, so I had to decide: Do I start walking back now and maybe only get a little wet? Or do I fish this next stretch of riffles and get drenched? I kept fishing.

The next run was fast and shallow. At the end of my third drift, I let my line swing out as far as possible, and another rainbow crushed my nymph. My click-and-pawl reel screamed as the fish bolted. By then, the rain had increased from a drizzle to a downpour, but I didn't care—not with a fish like this on the end of the line. I held my rod in the air as if I were fighting a steelhead and chased the trout downstream to avoid breaking it off. I finally got it into my net. The chunky rainbow sported spectacular colors and measured 15 inches.

After I released it, I made my way over to the bank to take cover till the storm passed. The rain had picked up so much that I couldn't see farther than 50 yards upstream or down. As I sat there, cold and soaked to the bone, I began to laugh. I couldn't help myself. It was one of my best days of fishing in years, and there was nothing else to do but sit there and laugh.

"You didn't have to make it rain this hard, dude," I said from the bank.

**The more I fished, the better I felt. On the water, it didn't seem like time was standing still as much. The best moments were when I wasn't thinking, because I was too locked onto a particular run. The sound of the river deafened the noise in my head.**

### A PLACE TO HEAL

At one of my first Colorado Rockies games, I caught a home-run ball during batting practice. I was in the right-field seats, just like when I caught my first baseball, with Joe, more than a decade earlier at Yankee Stadium. I immediately thought of him and of how excited he was for me then.

Not a week later, as I was packing for a fishing trip, I looked up and saw the baseball from the Rockies game sitting on my desk. Without thinking, I grabbed it and tossed it into my pack. It fit perfectly into the pocket designed for a water bottle.

At one point during that trip, I took a break from the river and lay in the lush grass that lined the bank. I took the ball out of my pack and tossed it a few times toward the blue sky. Then I gripped it as if I was going to throw a two-seam fastball—a pitch Joe and I both loved to throw to lefties. Finally, I just held the ball in my palm as I looked across the valley that was as green as a freshly watered outfield.

"I miss you, Joe," I said.

Downstream, I could see ripples from a rising trout tucked along the cutbank. I put the baseball back into my pack and grabbed my rod. I could see the exact seam I needed to drift my grasshopper through for the brown to rise and take the fly. It was time to get going. F&S

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# OUT OF THE AS

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**THE AUTHOR JOINS A CREW OF CONSERVATIONISTS AND ANGLERS ON A WILDERNESS FISHING ADVENTURE IN THE FIRE-SCORCHED MOUNTAINS OF NEW MEXICO FOR ULTRA-RARE, AND VULNERABLE, GILA TROUT**

by **SAGE MARSHALL**
photographs by **MIKE BORCHARD**

The Whitewater-Baldy Complex Fire was the perfect storm. It began as two wildfires sparked by lightning strikes in May 2012, deep in the Gila Wilderness of southwest New Mexico. Soon, the fires collided and, together, burned nearly 300,000 acres of pristine country in what was at the time the largest wildfire in New Mexico's history. Among the flames were small streams that were home to one of the most imperiled trout species in the world: Gila trout. After decades of restoration work to bring the fish back from the brink of extinction, every single Gila trout stream in the wilderness area—the last stronghold of the species—was threatened by the blaze.

"It was like watching 25 years of my career go up in flames," says Jim Brooks, who was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's supervisory fish biologist for the region at the time. For the first six weeks of the fire, Brooks stayed in contact with the incident command team, an interagency group managing the emergency response, and surveyed the fire and its ongoing damage from a helicopter, noting which trout streams were at the greatest risk and determining which ones he would target once it was safe to go into the field. Brooks knew it wasn't the fire itself that would kill the trout, but rather the effects of the ash flushed into the streams during summer rainstorms afterward. There was still a chance he and his team could save some of the fish in the small window after the fire and before the rains.

In June, incident command finally gave Brooks the go-ahead. While the fire still burned in other parts of the forest, he and a team of scientists took mules to the West Fork of the Gila and up to Whiskey Creek, home to one of only five known lineages of Gila trout. What Brooks saw shocked him.

"It looked like a moonscape," he told me. "Everything was burnt to a crisp. Then we started seeing elk killed from superheated

↖ Upper Willow Creek, one of three New Mexico streams where you can target Gila trout, winds between the skeletons of fire-damaged trees.

down-canyon winds. A big magnum bull in velvet was dead in the creek with the hair slightly scorched right on its back."

The carnage continued as they rode farther up Whiskey Creek: Dead deer were being fed on by black bears, including one with third-degree burns on its paws that were so bad the bruin could barely walk. When they finally reached the stream, Brooks and his team were relieved to see the trout were still alive. They quickly got to work, electroshocking 80 trout from Whiskey Creek and loading them into a helicopter-towed tank so they could be transported to a hatchery, where they would be kept until some of them could be returned to the creek and others could be spawned.

They went to another stream and attempted to do the same the next day. And the next.... Ultimately, they were able to save fish from Whiskey, Langstroth, and Spruce Creeks, but nine others were either wiped clean or severely compromised. Years of back-breaking conservation work deep in this storied wilderness area was ruined. And the Whitewater-Baldy Complex wouldn't be the only megafire in recent years to ravage the remote Mogollon Mountains—and its native trout.

## A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

This past July, I traveled to the edge of the Gila Wilderness to meet with Brooks and other conservation leaders. We set up a base camp at a cabin next to Willow Creek, which has been a focus of recent habitat and fishery restoration efforts. It's also one of three streams in New

**On my first cast, a trout slashed at the size 16 Purple Haze but missed. On the second, the same fish took the fly. Moments later, I held my first Gila trout.**

Mexico where you're allowed to fish for Gila trout, which can be legally targeted only in waterways where they've been recently restored. I wanted to see firsthand the damage caused by the fires in the area and the work being done to save these fish. I also wanted to catch one.

As a monsoon raged outside on the first evening, we sat in the cabin and discussed the area's history over wild elk and oryx chili. The Gila became the first officially protected wilderness in the world at the behest of Aldo Leopold, then a U.S. Forest Service employee, in 1924. At the time, Leopold was watching much of his beloved Southwest be carved up by roads and overrun by cattle grazing, logging, and mining operations. In an open letter arguing for the establishment of the wilderness area, Leopold related the importance of the designation directly to hunters and anglers, writing that he believed every state "needs at least one roadless hunting ground, just as every city needs a factoryless park."

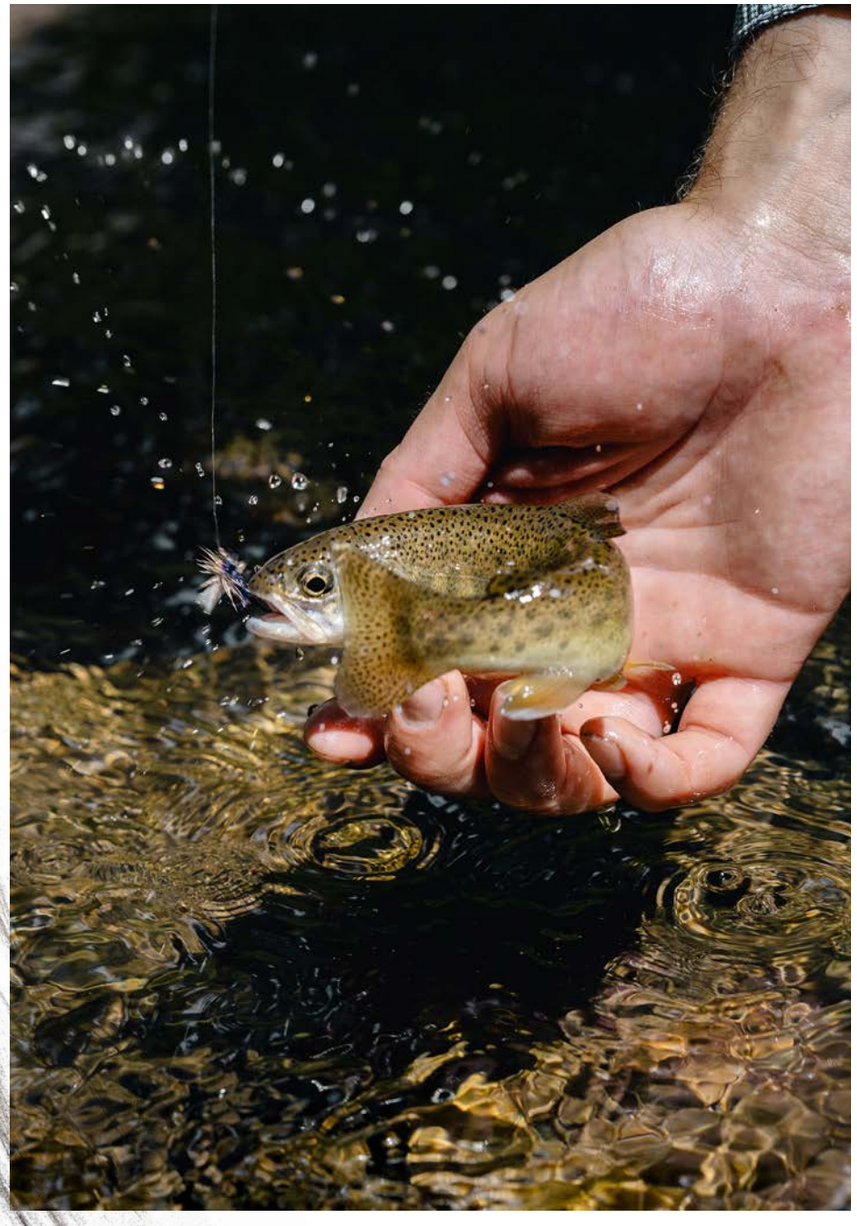
From the beginning, the Gila's rough terrain was part of the draw—and one of the reasons it was still undeveloped. "At every point where roads might enter is set a rugged mountain," Leopold continued in his open letter. "Wherever a foaming trout stream has cut its way through the mountain wall a jagged box canyon says 'They shall not pass.'"

The vast wilderness designation preserved one of the Southwest's best elk-hunting grounds—and proved critical in keeping Gila trout around. By stopping new roads from being built, the designation prevented managers from introducing nonnative fish throughout the entire area, as was common practice in the early 1900s (though they still did so in some of its drainages). It also limited negative impacts on the native fish from recreational development and cattle grazing.

Despite the area's protections, Gila trout populations declined steeply. The species had originally inhabited over 600 miles of high-elevation streams in New Mexico's Upper Gila River basin and Arizona's Verde River headwaters. But by the 1950s, when the fish was first scientifically described, habitat degradation as well as hybridization and competition with nonnative trout species had eliminated the Gilas everywhere but a handful of headwater streams.

Gila trout became one of the first species listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Years of recovery work ensued—and for a while, it worked. Biologists restored Gilas to key headwater streams in the wilderness area. In 2006, the species was downlisted from endangered to threatened. A path to removing Gila trout from the list entirely seemed plausible.

Then came the fires.



## A SMALL-WATER TROPHY

The next morning, I broke out my 3-weight to fish Willow Creek with Brooks, his 14-month-old German wirehair, Goose, and the rest of our crew. I walked stealthily upstream along the edge of the creek, looking for small pockets of deeper water. At the first hole, I kept snagging my dry fly in the thick willows. Eventually, I managed a couple of short drifts. Nothing.

I moved up to a pocket between two large rocks. On my first cast, a trout slashed at the size 16 Purple Haze but missed. On the second, the same fish took the fly. Moments later, I held my first Gila trout. Though the fish was only slightly longer than my palm, I felt the same excitement I had when I caught

←

**From left:** Jim Brooks, longtime fisheries biologist and conservation leader in the Gila, heads out to fish Upper Willow Creek with his German wirehair, Goose, bouncing alongside him. Any Gila trout is a trophy; the author fooled this gem with a size 16 Purple Haze.

**Top:** Brooks walks with Goose along the banks of Little Turkey Creek to survey Gila trout restoration work done by hand along the remote trickle.

**Middle:** Brooks busts out a classic aluminum fly box filled with his favorite Gila trout patterns and ties on a winner to dap and drift in the tiny pools and runs.

**Bottom:** After a morning of fishing Upper Willow Creek, the author gets a lift back to camp through a moonscape of fire-ravaged wilderness.

larger trophies. And I was stunned by the trout's beauty: The iridescent gold scales of its belly shimmered in the sunlight, the bottoms of its fins were a pale, translucent white, faint parr marks colored its torso, and small dots speckled its dark back. As much as I would've liked to continue admiring the fish, I knew I needed to release it quickly, which I did. Thankfully, the rest of the morning was similar. Though the willows made casting difficult, in the deeper holes where I could get decent drifts, small Gilas rose to my fly. Each fish was as beautiful as the first.

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Willow Creek, like much of the Gila, has been severely impacted by wildfire in recent years. The Whitewater-Baldy Complex ravaged its upper reaches, as well as tributaries like Little Turkey Creek. That afternoon, we walked through some of the burn scars. Though it had been 12 years since the blaze, the devastation was still visible: Charred trees littered the landscape, while the stream baked in the sun without willows to provide shade.

Much of the Gila looks like this. During most of the 20th century, firefighters rushed to put out every wildfire, even low-intensity burns that played natural and often beneficial roles in ecosystems in the West. Decades of these suppression tactics led to an abnormally high amount of burnable vegetation on the landscape. This, combined with recent drought conditions and hotter summers linked to climate change, resulted in larger and more intense fires on the Gila.

Starting in the early 2000s, the size of wildfires ticked up gradually. Then, in 2012, the Whitewater-Baldy Complex scorched an eye-popping 297,845 acres. The next summer, the Silver Fire burned over 135,000 acres near the East Fork of the Gila. In 2022, the Black Fire torched 325,133 acres, including the entirety of the neighboring Aldo Leopold Wilderness, which was within Leopold's original Gila Wilderness designation but later separated from it by a road. That fire wiped out Gila trout populations in Main and South Diamond Creeks, two of only five drainages where distinct Gila trout lineages had still subsisted without having been transplanted. Today, a satellite map depicting recent fire history

shows a patchwork of large burns that blanket almost the entire Gila Wilderness, including some places that have burned more than once within the past 20 years.

"It's remarkable how much the landscape changed," Brooks told me. "There's less water and smaller streams. We used to have fires, but they weren't these big 200,000- to 300,000-acre megafires. Right now, Gila trout are in worse shape than they were 20 years ago."

The repeated setbacks discouraged Brooks, who worked in the Gila Wilderness for nearly 40 years—first for Arizona Game and Fish, then for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and after leaving the agency in 2014, as an independent contractor and advisor. But he never lost hope.

"I busted my butt," he said. "I was over here all the time. We'd be gone in the middle of nowhere for weeks at a time. Losing a lot of that work was a tough pill to swallow, but you just keep punching away. That's all you can do."

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

The devastating Whitewater-Baldy Complex Fire had a silver lining: It wiped out nonnative trout that would hybridize and outcompete pure Gilas from entire stream systems, including Willow Creek. Though the stream is within the historic range of Gila trout, in the years prior to the Whitewater-Baldy Complex, it was full of rainbow and brown trout. In fact, the fishing for those species was so good that fisheries managers were hesitant to poison them to make way for Gilas. Additionally, the size of the stream system and the proximity of several grandfathered-in tracts of private land made it impractical to do so.

Then ash from the Whitewater-Baldy Complex killed those fish, opening the door for an exciting Gila trout reintroduction project. The recovery team built a fish barrier at the bottom of the creek in 2017 and began stocking Gilas into the waterway from Mora National Fish Hatchery. The goal was to get the stocked fish to reproduce on their own. But it didn't work. The Whitewater-Baldy Complex had damaged the habitat so badly that the stocked fish couldn't spawn. So during the past five years, the area has become a site for two types of riparian habitat improvement projects: those undertaken within the wilderness area's boundaries and those just outside it.

During my trip to the Gila, I surveyed both types of projects. The main stem of Willow Creek is just outside the wilderness designation, which means that heavy machinery can be used there. For those projects, government agencies have spent millions of dollars to hire contractors who use trucks and tractors to install massive rocks to create pools, plant thousands of willow trees to stabilize stream banks and provide shade, and deploy large logs to create underwater structures for fish while also reducing erosion.

The work conducted within the wilderness area on Little Turkey Creek, a critical tributary, has similar tactics but one key difference: It's all done by hand. The work has largely been led by Brooks and Trout Unlimited. With the help of volunteers and Conservation Corps groups, they used pack mules up at the creek to place over 100 erosion-reducing structures and rock dams, as well as plant more than 2,500 willow cuttings.

During my visit, as I marveled at all the work that's been put into the restoration efforts, it was hard not to think about how another fire could easily undo this progress—as past fires have done elsewhere in the wilderness area. But everyone I spoke to who's involved in the efforts said the potential positive impacts outweigh the risks.

And for Brooks, the work is personal. He grew up fishing Willow Creek with his father—but he could never catch Gila trout there.

Now he can.

## NEXT GENERATION OF GILA HEROES

I spent most of my second day here fishing with Eileen Henry, who has been the Gila National Forest's fish biologist for less than a year. She worked in the Gila first as a summer technician, from 2018 to 2020. She left New Mexico briefly for full-time roles in Alaska and Montana but jumped at the chance to return to her home state for this "dream job" when her predecessor relocated. Like Brooks, she grew up fishing Willow Creek with her father.

"I've always loved it out here," she said. "When I went to college and learned about Gila trout, I knew I wanted to work with them here. I want to be here for the long haul."

Henry's enthusiasm often reminded me of Brooks's, especially in the way her face lit up not just when she was talking about the fish, but also when she recounted the wilderness mule-packing adventures the job entails: "This country is very rugged. We do a lot of bushwhacking and hiking through burned areas. I've always been after the adventure this place has brought me."

Chatting at a cabin on Willow Creek, from left, are Brooks; Maribeth Pecotte and Eileen Henry, from the Gila National Forest; the author; and Jeff Arterburn, of Trout Unlimited.

Brooks makes a cast on Upper Willow Creek, with young willow clumps that he helped plant as part of the restoration work visible along the bank behind him.

I cast a Stimulator against an undercut bank, and a Gila trout jumped out of the water to take the fly. The action was nonstop for the rest of the afternoon. I fished until the fly unraveled.

Today's recovery efforts have a strong emphasis on fish genetics. There are currently five known remaining genetically distinct lineages of the Gila trout: Main Diamond, South Diamond, Whiskey Creek, Iron Creek, and Spruce Creek. Scientists like Henry are working to preserve the genetic purity of each lineage by transplanting them into multiple drainages with enough distance between them that any one fire won't wipe out an entire lineage. For example, the fish introduced in Willow Creek are from the South Diamond lineage, which was lost from its endemic drainage in the 2022 Black Fire. So Willow Creek serves as a "reservoir" for the survival of the Main Diamond fish.

This kind of work has proven easier with some lineages than others. Scientists have struggled to transplant trout from the Spruce Creek lineage into any waters outside the San Francisco River Basin, and they have yet to be successful spawning them in a hatchery. They haven't been able to figure out why this is the case, but because it is, one big fire could wipe out the entire lineage.

Meanwhile, scientists are attempting a novel research project on Whitewater Creek, which is the site of another Gila trout restoration effort that came on the heels of the Whitewater-Baldy Complex. Here, instead of preserving a distinct lineage, biologists are attempting to combine all five over the span of several generations. They don't know what will happen—or even if the genetically distinct fish will be able to continue reproducing—but they hope that the lineages will combine to create a more resilient "super" Gila trout that will ensure the long-term survival of the species.

"It's all about getting these fish to persist in their native landscape," Henry told me. "It would be great if we could just keep each lineage in its native stream, but with the threat of catastrophic wildfires, we probably don't have that option."

## A LAST HURRAH

On my final day in the Gila, I fished Whitewater Creek—the site of the project that's combining all five trout lineages. The main access point for Whitewater is a tourist destination known as the Catwalk for its suspended walkway traversing steep canyon walls. Near the parking lot, smoke from barbecue pits hung low in the canyon. Kids splashed in the deep pools of water, and sycamore trees mostly shielded the river from the day's bright sunlight.

Once I worked my way upstream of everyone else, I cast a Stimulator against an undercut bank, and a Gila trout jumped out of the water to take the fly. I pulled five more small fish from that hole, and missed five other strikes, before moving to the next spot. The action was nonstop for the rest of the afternoon. I fished until the fly unraveled, then I called it a day.

In the weeks following the trip, I savored those memories and reflected on the recovery efforts I'd observed. While I enjoyed catching Gila trout, I couldn't help but wonder whether—with setback after setback, and knowing more will come—all the resources and efforts were worth it to save such an obscure species of trout. Then I thought about something Brooks had told me.

"It's not just that they are beautiful," he said. "They're the only species of trout that have adapted to these conditions here. They're slightly more resilient to drought and the effects of wildfire than rainbow trout and brown trout. If we're going to have any trout here at all 50 years from now that can withstand the effects of climate change and catastrophic wildfire, it's going to be Gila trout." F&S

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# TOUGH OLD BIRDS

by **PHIL BOURJAILY** illustrations by **PAUL PUCKETT**

**ALL GAMEBIRDS ARE REMARKABLE, BUT WHAT SETS THESE SIX SPECIES APART ARE THE WILDERNESSES THEY CALL HOME—SETTINGS SO VAST AND RUGGED THAT THEY ELEVATE WINGSHOOTING TO AN ADVENTURE**

Wilderness birds inhabit big, rugged country. They need lots of space. The only way to find them is to put one foot in front of the other, repeatedly. Before I went Mearns quail hunting in Arizona, someone warned me. "I did that once," he said. "It was like a backcountry elk hunt." Granted, Mearns live at 4,000 feet, not 10,000, but to this sea-level-dwelling flatlander, the difference was academic. We hiked, climbed, slid, and fell all day. I hurt all over the next morning. When I finally dragged myself out of bed to go hunting again, the aches and pains only made the reward of another dozen-covey-rise day all the sweeter.

As modern agriculture does its relentless work on farm-country habitat, wilderness birds may soon be all we have left—whether they're savanna-loving Mearns, forest or prairie grouse, or imported chukars living on inhospitable rock. The birds are out there—each species uniquely adapted to the wild place it calls home—on land wide-open to anyone willing to put in the work to find them.

## RUFFED GROUSE

**HOME RANGE**
Northern U.S. and Canada, plus the Appalachian Mountains to north Georgia

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
Mixed-age forest, especially young second growth, with an affinity for aspen

When I asked a local why the grouse cover was called Ram Hollow, he said, "Used to be a water ram there. Now there's just a hollow."

Ruffed grouse thrive where wilderness reclaims land. As young forest sprouts, grouse and a whole variety of other birds and wildlife move in. The grouse feed on buds and berries, showing a special fondness for aspen. The thick stands of these skinny trees protect them from hawks. And in northern climes, which comprises most of their range, the birds can burrow and roost in the snow, which filters down through the thin aspens.

Ruffed grouse are most often associated with the Northeast, where urban populations boomed in the first half of the 20th century and abandoned farms grew over. The Great Lakes states, with their countless thousands of acres of public forest, are the favored destination now, and ruffed grouse are found coast to coast.

While most of their Great Lakes and New England habitat is flat to gently rolling, they can be birds of steep country and even high elevations.

I once hunted ruffed grouse at 10,000 feet, where there wasn't much in the way of oxygen—or grouse. Oddly, it was the overweight smoker in our group who shot the only bird. More often, you need to be in shape to hunt grouse, even at low elevations. Pushing through walls of skinny trees with a shotgun in one hand all day wears you out. For all that effort, you will hear more birds flush than you see. You will flush more than you shoot at, and you will miss more than you hit. When you hit one, you have claimed one of the uplands' greatest, and most delicious, trophies.

If you are used to released game-farm chukars, then you're in for a rude awakening when you hunt the wild variety.


# CHUKAR

**HOME RANGE**
The high desert and rocky slopes of the Columbia Basin, and throughout Nevada and Utah

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
High-elevation shrublands and sage, usually on steep, rocky hillsides

AN IDAHO DOG TRAINER once told me that he built a volcanic cinder run where his drahthaars could toughen their feet for chukar hunting. There was so much nearby BLM land that, he said, "I could hunt a different place every day of the season for the rest of my life." For those in shape for it, chukar hunting offers boundless opportunity.

First brought over from Pakistan in the 1890s and released in arid, high-desert land, chukars didn't take hold until subsequent introductions from the 1930s to the '70s. Well established now, they forage for native seeds as well as those from invasive cheatgrass.

If you are used to released game-farm chukars, then you're in for a rude awakening when you hunt the wild variety. The most common tactic is to start low and work your way up to where the birds are. There is nothing easy or fun about it. You'll slip on loose rock and your legs will hurt, and chukar flocks have a maddening habit of flushing just out of range above you, then flying downhill. Much of the shooting seems to take place as you're sliding on volcanic rock.

Of the misses over the years I wish I had back, the absolute gimme of my first shot at a wild chukar—a pointed bird that stood in plain sight on the end of flat outcropping—might be number one. After I whiffed that bird with both barrels, I spent the rest of the morning shooting off-balance at birds curving downhill from above me, and there were lots of other misses before I connected.


# WILLOW PTARMIGAN

**HOME RANGE**
Alaska, Canada, Scotland, Russia

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
Subarctic

*Ptarmigan* is a Gaelic word for grouse, and it's the name shared among the willow, rock, and white-tailed ptarmigan found in Alaska. The willow variety is the most numerous and the most popular gamebird among the three. It's the state bird of Alaska, it lives at the lowest elevations, and it's found throughout the state, apart from some of the wide interior valleys. As its name suggests, it's partial to willow—and alder—thickets and often inhabits creekbottoms, lakeshores, and other moist areas.

While the hens' color changes from dusky to white and back, the males wear a striking chestnut cape and red wattles with their white body and wings for the mating season. They make attentive dads and defend their territories and young aggressively.

Ptarmigan seasons open in August, and in many areas they run all the way through March. While willow ptarmigan feed in the open, they will seek shelter from hunters in willow thickets, and the best hunting is in and around those thickets.

Where you find one willow ptarmigan, you usually find many. They will hold for pointing dogs—although sometimes the better tactic is to surround a small willow thicket and send in the flushing dogs.

Either way, you'll often bust up a small flock and be able to mark down and hunt the singles. In some places, the limit is 20 or more birds a day. Ptarmigan have dark-red breast meat that tastes more like duck than grouse, and it should be cooked so it's pink inside.

# DUSKY GROUSE AND SOOTY GROUSE

**HOME RANGE, DUSKY (below, left)**
The conifer-aspen forests of the Rockies

**HOME RANGE, SOOTY**
Northern California, western Washington and Oregon, and north to the Alaska panhandle

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
Conifer forest

ONCE LUMPED TOGETHER as blue grouse, dusky and sooty grouse are now recognized as two separate species. Big for grouse, at around 3 pounds each, they are birds of the mountain conifer forests. Both are very dark gray, and the easiest way to tell them apart is by the color of the male's bare throat patches. The sooty grouse's is yellow-orange; the dusky sports a purple-red one. In general, both male and female duskies have more white-tipped feathers and a lighter appearance than the sooty grouse. Dusky grouse inhabit higher mountainous areas inland. Sooty grouse generally prefer lower elevations and live along the coast.

Duskies feed on fir needles, and you can often find them around mountain meadows near the drop-offs the birds use as escape routes. It's possible, if frustrating, to hunt them with a bird dog and a shotgun. They are likely to flush downhill, and if you spot them on the ground or get a point, you can position yourself below them for an overhead shot.

Or you can hunt them the easy, effective way: Spotting and plinking them off branches with a 22 in the tradition of hungry elk hunters.

During Alaska's unique spring sooty grouse season, the scoped 22 is the gun of choice for hunters combing coastal forests for male grouse hooting and displaying from their "signpost" trees. The hoot is a low five- or six-note call made from the shelter of a tall conifer. The birds can be hard to pinpoint, and some hunters like to climb uphill of the sound to increase their chances of spotting the bird in the branches.

# SAGE GROUSE

THE LARGEST NORTH AMERICAN grouse, and a genuine icon of the West, the sage grouse can weigh 6 pounds. Its feathers are a mottled gray-brown, to blend with sage habitat, and it has a black belly. The male wears a black collar above a white breast and has long, pointed tail feathers that spread into a spiky fan when the bird inflates the air sacs in its chest during its mating displays.

Sage grouse prefer brushy steppe terrain. Populations have declined from an estimated 16 million presettlement to 200,000 today. The problem is simple: Sage grouse need lots of room. It doesn't take much to fragment their habitat. Even a fence can clothesline low-flying sage grouse, but the larger landscape disruptions caused by energy extraction are the real problem. Invasive species, wildfires, and development are all chipping away at sage grouse habitat too.

There is still sage grouse hunting in the West, but it's limited to short seasons and/or lotteries. Given the huge territory they inhabit, your first step is finding birds. It's sometimes possible to spot them flying to feed morning and evening, giving you a starting place for the hunt. If you can, ask locals where they see birds. You can also look for the white flags placed on the top strand of fences to deter grouse strikes in areas with lots of birds.

After that, you're going to need to cover a ton of ground. Gun dogs are a huge help on a sage grouse hunt, greatly increasing the amount of ground you can cover. Be sure to pack plenty of water for yourself and the dogs, however, as sage grouse country is very dry and can be hot.

**HOME RANGE**
Eastern California through Montana and Wyoming, north to the Canadian border and south to parts of Utah and most of Nevada

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
Brushy sage country


# MEARNS QUAIL

**HOME RANGE**
Southern Arizona and New Mexico, south through Mexico

**PREFERRED WILDERNESS**
Savanna

As I started downslope to where the two white pointers stood motionless, my guide said, "Phil, wait a minute." I stopped. "Take it all in," he said, gesturing at the endless miles of rugged oak savanna on all sides. I could see Mexico from where I stood. It was February and 60 degrees.

And I was hunting quail.

A bird of piñon and juniper and oak and ponderosa-pine savanna, the Mearns quail of the Southwest has long claws adapted to digging up bulbs. The hens are drab, the cocks an almost comical study in contrast, with a masked face and a cape of white spots on black.

Rainfall, a scarce commodity in their arid habitat, greens up plants, encourages insect production, and is the key to a strong Mearns hatch. Males assist the females in hatching the eggs and raising the young, sometimes sitting on the nests themselves. Once the chicks are fledged, Mearns quail form small coveys of six to eight birds. Homebodies, they rarely move more than 50 yards in a day, instead content to putter about and dig for tubers, bulbs, and bugs in the soft dirt of their preferred habitat.

Mearns quail cover is pretty, with shrub oaks growing amid tall grasses. It is also quite rough, and the soft dirt gives way beneath your feet as you try to sidehill or climb. Mearns quail sit very tight. Pointing dogs with range will save you steps, and every step saved in Mearns country matters. Seasons run into February, and plenty of hunters make DIY hunts long after seasons close farther north. F&S

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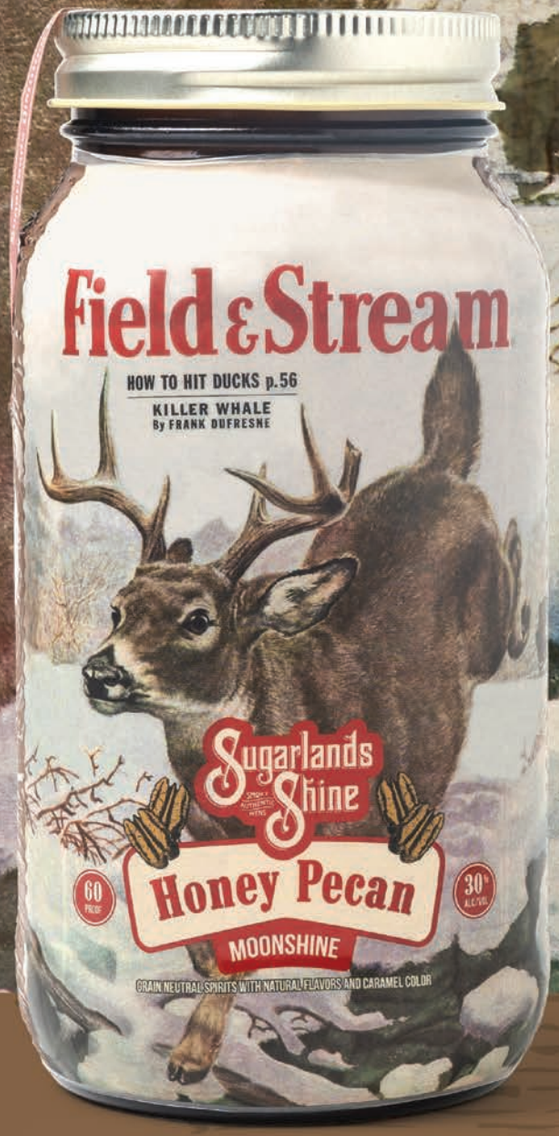


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# CAMPFIRE



BIANCA GERMAIN

# POINTS OF FACT

**THE SPEED, FEROCITY, AND ATHLETICISM OF A POINTER IN THE FIELD IS SO POWERFUL, IT'S SCARY**

by **TOM DAVIS**

When I was 14 or so, I spent a couple of days tagging along with a professional trainer while he worked his string of field-trial dogs in north-central Illinois. This was a horseback deal, and while I knew even less about horses than I did about dogs, I managed to stay in the saddle. I recall that my butt was awfully sore, though. Whatever variety of horse I was riding, a butter-smooth Tennessee walker it wasn't.

Although the trainer semi-specialized in Irish setters, he welcomed all breeds of pointing dogs. After working two braces of reds in the morning, he opened one of the boxes on his truck and brought out something completely different: a pointer. A young, compact female—all white save for a few flecks of orange on her ears and head—she could've been sculpted from marble; every muscle stood out in sharp relief. There was a tautness to her, a tension, as if she were cocked against an invisible spring. I'd seen countless black-and-white photos of pointers in the pages of *American Field*, the weekly field-trial newspaper, but this was the first one I'd seen in the flesh.

That dog made an impression.

The trainer had access to some hayfields, and when he turned the pointer loose, she instantly made the other dogs in the string look common. There was a qualitative difference in the way she moved that was obvious even to my crude sensibilities. She was faster, yes, but even more than that, she was impossibly light on her feet. She didn't run so much as dance.

And her tail! It was in constant motion—high and cracking, like a flicking whip. The effect was mesmerizing. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I'd read countless times about the qualities that

↑ AK, a pointer, lives up to the breed's fast-and-furious reputation as he scorches through the Alaskan tundra on a ptarmigan hunt.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

fine bird dogs are supposed to possess—qualities like style, animation, and, above all, class—but until then I had only a dim understanding of what those words really meant.

Now, watching this sinewy canine ballerina flashing through the grass, I finally understood.

## GOLD MEDALIST

That aha moment came more than 50 years ago, but my appreciation and admiration for the pointer have only deepened. The breed is truly the gold standard—the one that sets the bar by which all pointing-dog performance is measured. No breed runs faster, harder, longer, or with more tenacity. No breed covers more ground and finds more birds and looks better doing it.

I'd even go as far as to say that a pointer at the peak of her powers may well be the greatest athlete on the planet. When you consider the things that a pointer does—and the extremes of terrain, cover, and weather she does them in—the mind reels. The pointer combines a sprinter's speed with a marathoner's endurance; the agility of a gymnast with the supple strength of a climber; the toughness of a cage fighter with the exuberant joy of a freestyle skier. This is especially evident in the kind of big, open country where the pointer can put her magnificent gifts on full display. It is no coincidence that a friend of mine from West Texas—a flinty, take-no-prisoners quail hunter if there ever was one—liked to say, "Any breed but a pointer is a compromise."

No coincidence, either, that in the highest echelons of horseback field-trial competition—the major circuit, as it's sometimes called—the pointer has been the overwhelmingly dominant force for approximately forever. (This seems as good a place as any to address a small matter of nomenclature. The breed's name is *pointer*, period. Not *English pointer*, as it's commonly, but incorrectly, given. Feel free to use *English pointer* if you must, but know this: It's a tell.)

## HOT AND COLD

While no breed performs better in hot, dry conditions (see, again, West Texas), the one weak spot in the pointer's armor is that she's less tolerant of cold than other breeds—not surprising, given the dog's short coat and the fact that the typical pointer has about as much body fat as a professional long-distance runner. Over the years I've seen three dogs go down from hypothermia. All three were pointers, and on each occasion the venue was a late-season pheasant hunt on a bitterly cold day. Two of the dogs recovered quickly and completely. The other, despite receiving immediate veterinary attention, was never the same.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and state—with about a 70 percent confidence level—that pheasants are the bird worst suited to the pointer's style of hunting. There are times, and places, in the landscape of pheasant hunting where a slower, more methodical approach is called for—and the words *slow* and *methodical* aren't operative in the pointer's domain. For that matter, a lot of pointer hunters find the very idea of pheasant hunting offensive. I once asked a dedicated quail hunter and dyed-in-the-wool pointer man if he'd be interested in joining me on an Iowa pheasant hunt.

"I'm not going to waste my dogs' talent on a bunch of damn ditch parrots," he replied. "It'd be like hitching a Ferrari to a honey wagon."

In this same vein, I have observed that there are two kinds of bird hunters: those who think pointers are the only dogs worth feeding, and those who are scared to death of them. Among the bird-hunting rank and file, pointers induce a certain amount of fear and trembling. The stereotype, of course, is that the pointer is a bolt of white lightning that leaves scorched earth in its wake as it disappears over the horizon—only to be seen again straggling into a ranch yard in the next county.

Alas, there is some truth to that. For a lot of shoe-leather bird hunters, the pointer is simply too much dog. Still, in the same way that a Formula 1 car is capable of unsurpassed performance in the hands of a world-class driver, a pointer in the hands of a skilled handler is capable of things that will leave you wondering if you really saw what you think you saw.

Slamming into point so hard and fast they literally torque 180 degrees mid-stride... Locking onto a fugitive tendril of scent half a field away and following it to its source as unerringly as a laser-guided missile... Running to the limits of the country with ferocious intensity of purpose... Maintaining the kind of pace and range to which the only response is awe... For a pointer, it's all in a day's work.

**I have observed that there are two kinds of bird hunters: those who think pointers are the only dogs worth feeding, and those who are scared to death of them.**

## GOOD DOG

Another stereotype about the pointer is that she lives only to hunt and, as a result, is cold and aloof, lacking in personality and uninterested in displaying, or receiving, affection. Rubbish. In fact, pointers are loving goofballs that make wonderful family pets.

I had a pointer named Traveler—a big barrel-chested guy with the jowly mien of a pensioned British colonel—and he was never happier than when he was resting his head on my thigh. Except, that is, for when I declared a holiday and let him crawl onto my lap. F&S

# LOST AND FOUND

**ALONE IN THE DARK ON A BACKCOUNTRY ELK HUNT, THE AUTHOR FINDS THAT THE LINE BETWEEN ADVENTURE AND TRAGEDY CAN BE FRIGHTENINGLY THIN**

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

THERE WAS NO logical reason not to go elk hunting, but it was still unsettling to ride into the same mountains where a man had just gone missing. A hunter himself, Jim Shadid, 79, of Durango, Colorado, had set out five days earlier for a quick scouting walk while his wife waited for him in their car. He'd radioed at one point to tell her that he'd be back in 20 minutes, and then he was never heard from again.

My buddy Ryan and I had been planning our trip for months. We'd drawn Colorado muzzleloader tags and booked a September drop camp with outfitter Travis Reed, another buddy I've hunted with numerous times. When we arrived at the trailhead, the search-and-rescue mission for Shadid was active, and missing-person signs were tacked to trees.

A wildfire had ravaged the area a few years earlier, making it an easy place to get lost in. Deadfalls of charred pine crisscrossed the trails, which were swallowed by a thatch of saplings that had bloomed following the blaze. Our canvas tent was waiting for us at about 9,000 feet, in a quarter-acre clearing entirely surrounded by miserable jungle. Travis dropped us off and wished us luck before turning and disappearing into the growth with the horses.

## BULL SESSION

Ryan and I had GPS units, offline digital maps, and paper maps too. But in that tangle, it felt as if just stepping out to pee carried the risk of getting lost. Still, elk season opened the next day, and we were there to hunt. At sunset we hiked to a peak behind camp, sipped from a flask, and listened for bugles until dusk. The mountains were silent.

We decided to start in the drainage

↑ With fresh snow covering the high peaks in September, a heavy-racked bull stakes his claim on a harem of cows along the edge of an alpine meadow.

MARK RAYCROFT

**I sat next to the elk in the dark and the silence, comforted somewhat by the 45 on my hip, but also knowing that without my pack, I had no water, no way of starting a fire, and no GPS.**

behind camp in the morning. There was dark timber at the bottom, and Travis had mentioned a spring where he'd been on elk before. We worked our way down slowly, stopping to call and study elk sign, but there was nothing fresh. We eventually rested in a small meadow to cook some freeze-dried chili mac, and that's when the silence broke. The sound of an approaching helicopter grew from a distant hum to an overhead roar.

The red chopper flew over us, treetop-high, made a loop, then circled back, obviously flying a search grid. Ryan and I hiked back to camp, where we spotted movement on the opposite ridge. A search crew with dogs was picking their way through the brush and glassing back at us. "Seems like they think that fellow could be somewhere close to us," Ryan said. In the surrounding cover, he could've been 50 yards from the tent without us ever knowing.

We set out in the opposite direction that evening, which seemed to be a mistake initially, as the first half mile was a punishing crawl through a snarl of deadfalls. But then we stepped onto an elk trail and followed it to a stand of aspens where, almost immediately, we found fresh rubs and tracks. We sat to glass and listen, and as the shadows darkened, I watched two elk walk across a burnt hillside 1,000 yards away. They were out of sight by the time I could say *elk*, but both looked to be bulls, and they were headed in our direction.

We raced to crest the next ridge and looked down onto a green, open draw. Suspecting the elk were at the bottom of it, Ryan and I leaned against a pair of aspens, and I made a soft, whiny bugle. From across the draw, we were answered by a deep *glunk*. I cow called, and the bull responded with a full but distant bugle. He seemed forever away, with no more than 20 minutes of daylight left.

"This would be a good spot to be sitting in the morning," I whispered to Ryan. "I don't think he's going to get here before dark. Maybe we should ease out."

But we stood as still as the deadfalls. I pulled the cow call up and mewed again, and this time the answer was like someone screaming in my ear. I dumped my pack onto the ground and rested the fore-end of my muzzleloader against the aspen tree in front of me.

## CLOSE CALL

Ryan saw the bull first. "Right there," he whispered, lowering his binoculars. "Sixty yards, legal bull."

"Shoot him," I said, but Ryan couldn't shoulder his muzzleloader without the bull seeing him. I cocked the hammer on my gun, and when the bull clopped into my shooting lane, I aligned the open sights on the crease of his shoulder and fired. In the low light, the blast and smoke obscured everything, but Ryan said I'd hit the bull hard. I scrambled to fish out one of the two speed loaders I'd put in my pocket and poured powder down my barrel with shaking hands.

Leaving our packs behind, we took up the trail and found the elk bedded just over the hillside, 50 yards away, looking down the draw. He staggered to his feet with my second shot and absorbed a third from Ryan before disappearing into the draw behind a settling cloud of white smoke. I knew the bull was mortally hit, likely three times, but also that elk are incredibly tough and easy to lose in country like this. I fished the last speed loader from my pocket and topped off the rifle.

Ryan tossed me his own last speed loader and went back for the packs so we wouldn't lose them. I scrambled down the hillside and spotted the bull's rack, still upright, 70 yards ahead. He'd bedded again but was alive. I caught my breath and crept to within 30 yards of the bull before he stood. I did my best to hold on his heart and fired. Once again, the bull crashed down the mountainside, but this time he stopped and staggered. I was loading the last charge into my gun when he finally fell for good—with four .50-caliber holes behind his shoulder.

Ryan came jogging down the hill. "I was grabbing the packs when I heard that last shot, so I just grabbed bullets and powder and dropped a pin," he said. "Is he down?" I smiled and pointed ahead.

We worked our way over to the bull, took two quick photos, and then it was dark—in woods that could swallow you in the light. I notched my tag and worked on gutting the bull while Ryan hiked back up to get our packs. Once I'd propped the hind quarters open to cool, I sat next to the elk in the dark and the silence, comforted somewhat by the 45 on my hip, but also knowing that without my pack, I had no water, no way of starting a fire, and no GPS. I couldn't see Ryan's headlamp, either. Losing your pack, and then your buddy, is just the sort of thing that ends up killing you in a place like this.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. I stood up and paced back and forth, watching for the flash of a headlamp. Nothing. Ten minutes passed. Then 20. Could I find my way back to the packs without a pin? Was Ryan turned around now, looking for me?

"Ryan?" I called out, shining my flashlight. "Ryan!"

Nothing. I forced myself to stand still, wait, and be confident that he wasn't lost, just taking a while. Then in the dark, up above me, a limb broke, and I saw a flash of light.

"Hey!" Ryan yelled.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief and rushed up the hillside to help him, beaming my flashlight in his direction the whole way. In the mountains, it's not just the weather that can change on a dime. One seemingly simple mistake, and a hunt can quickly turn into a tragedy. We later learned that Jim Shadid, the fellow hunter who'd gone missing in the same area, and who had a lifetime of experience, had not been found—and still hasn't as of this writing.

Ryan dropped the packs at his feet. "I want you to know, carrying both those packs off that hillside at once is a chore," he said, spinning the top off his water bottle.

"Yeah," I said. "Wait till we start packing this elk back up it." F&S

# THE GUN AND THE GHOST

**WHICH RIFLES AND CARTRIDGES ARE BEST FOR DEER HUNTING? THE ONES THAT MEAN SOMETHING TO YOU**

by **RICHARD MANN**
photograph by **SABASTIAN "BAT" MANN**

THE HUNTER WAS on a mountainside, munching on an apple and watching the sun warm the morning. He was a long way from home and from his wife, who was pregnant with their first child. He spotted deer moving through the laurels, saw antlers, and shot. Thinking he'd missed, he cycled the rifle's action, and the magazine fell out. As he tried to find it in the leaves, a buck—the one he thought he'd shot at—spooked and ran off. But then he saw movement in the laurels, where another, bigger buck was trying to get to its feet. His shot had broken the deer's back.

That hunter was my father, and the buck was the biggest he ever shot. I was born a month later and grew up admiring that buck on our living room wall. Dad shot the deer with a borrowed Remington Model 760 pump in 35 Remington, and both the deer and the cartridge left a lifelong impression on me. Though I've never been a pump-rifle guy, I had my first custom deer gun—a featherweight bolt-action from New Ultra Light Arms—chambered for the 35 Remington. Together, we killed a hell of a lot of deer, but never one as big as Dad's.

↑ This Winchester Model 100, originally chambered in 243, belonged to the author's father. Now it belongs to his son.

**You can kill a whitetail buck with just about any rifle or cartridge you like, which is one of the best things about deer hunting.**

FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES

### GUN WORSHIP

A lot of deer hunters came up the same way as me, revering the rifles and cartridges of their fathers and grandfathers. Sometimes emotions can be more important than ballistics, but sometimes emotions are not all positive. I had an uncle by marriage who had such a vile personality that my grandfather threatened his life—and meant it—on more than one occasion. The loathsome uncle's constant championing of the 30/06 forever tainted any regard I might have had for that cartridge. He also drove a Ford truck and a Cadillac, which explained a lot.

While my uncle would sit around the campfire bragging about his "aught-six," my grandfather—I think mostly just to get away from his son-in-law—would take us boys to visit local farmers near our hunting camp in the Potomac Highlands. One year we visited old man Saville, who was laid up with cancer. His bedroom was empty except for a well-worn Savage 99 leaning in the corner. I asked what cartridge it fired, and the old man said, "Three hundred," as if the Winchester and Weatherby magnums didn't exist. I've never hunted with a 300 Savage, but I've always wanted a Savage lever gun like that farmer's, whose barn front was covered with deer antlers. Eventually I found a 99 in 250 Savage, and it was a hell of a deer slayer. Every time I hunted with it, I thought of my grandfather—and of old man Saville and the rifle he wanted close by as he lay dying.

Dad finally saved enough to buy his own deer rifle. It was a Winchester Model 100 in 243. Every season after that, Dad would drag deer into camp, and my uncle—the loathsome one—would remark that the holes going in and coming out were way too small, as if Dad's deer weren't dead enough. I remember Dad telling him that it wasn't the *size* of the holes that mattered. When you watch your father kill deer with a 243 for most your life, you develop an affinity for it. I've had several 243s and killed lots of deer with them, including my best West Virginia whitetail, which was even nicer than Dad's big 10-pointer. Sixteen years later, I gave that rifle to my son and damned if he didn't get it rebarreled in 6.5 Creedmoor. It still kills deer just like a 243.

### WHATEVER WORKS

When I came off active duty in the early 1990s and was working as a cop for the pittance of $8.50 an hour, I didn't have what most would consider a deer rifle. But I did have a 223 Remington, and I'd heard about a new bullet called the Trophy Bonded Bear Claw that was supposed to turn a 223 into a primo deer slayer. I ordered a box and loaded them up, but they never shot very well. So just before the season started, I bought a box of 223 Winchester Power-Points. On opening day, I shot a big-bodied 6-point buck that just fell over, graveyard dead.

I've learned over the years that you can kill a whitetail buck with just about anything, which is one of the best things about deer hunting. It means you can carry pretty much whatever rifle or cartridge you like. In fact, you don't need either. Back before Dad borrowed that 35 Remington or bought his 243, he hunted deer with the only gun he had—a 16-gauge Winchester Model 12. He told me he once stepped into an old pasture and saw a buck feeding at the other end. He lay down, put the bead just above the buck's back, and pulled the trigger. The deer raised his head, looked around a bit, and went back to feeding. Holding a little higher, Dad shot again and dropped the deer. He stepped off the distance at 160 paces. Just as surprising, the buck had two holes through him—one low, just above the brisket, and the other through the spine.

When I was in high school, I knew a fellow who killed deer with a 17 Remington. He carried a loaded cartridge in his pocket that he'd use to clean coal dust from under his fingernails. And as you may know, Wisconsin's Jim Jordan killed the highest-scoring typical whitetail buck ever taken in the U.S., in 1914, with a 25/20 Winchester. For deer hunting, if you can shoot, your cartridge and its ballistics just don't matter much.

### A DATE WITH DAD

I still have my 223, plus another 243, and a 35 Remington. I hunt deer with them all. But I've also killed deer with muzzleloaders, a 22-250, a 257 Roberts, a 7mm-08, and a 308 Winchester. I've taken deer with the 270 Winchester, the 30/30, and various other cartridges. I've also punched tags with the 327 Federal Magnum revolver cartridge, as well as 6.5mm, 7mm, and 300 magnums. I took my best whitetail—a broken-antlered Nebraska bruiser—with a cartridge I created called the 2Fity-Hillbilly, which is just a 6.5 Creedmoor necked down to 0.257 caliber. Conceptually and ballistically, that wildcat might be the best deer cartridge ever, but it doesn't kill whitetails deader than anything else. Its real downfall, and why I don't use it much anymore, is that it just doesn't seem to have a soul.

With deer season at the door, I'm thinking I might try something different this year. After Dad passed, I found a bunch of 16-gauge shells in his closet, and some were "punkin'" balls—slugs. I've still got them, but as I'm not much of a shotgun guy, Dad's Model 12 rarely sees the sunlight. The last time was several years ago, when my son used it to kill his first spring gobbler. On the other hand, since you can kill deer with damn near anything, and since I've killed deer with damn near everything, it might be time for Dad's shotgun and me to find an Allegheny mountainside and watch the sun come up. I don't think it'll matter much if there are any deer involved. That's another great thing about deer hunting—sometimes it's the gun and the ghost that matter most. F&S


# Suburban Legend

**LOCAL HEROES ARE IMPORTANT—EVEN WHEN WE REALIZE THEY'RE NOT QUITE AS FISHY AS WE ONCE THOUGHT**

by **JOE CERMELE**
photograph by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**

ED COMPAGNUCCI WAS a natural chain-smoker. He could have an entire conversation without ever touching the Marlboro stuck to his lower lip. It would just quiver in his mouth until reduced to a butt, and that dancing lung dart was the first thing I noticed when my dad and I turned into the pullout at the Pennington Dam Bridge on Stony Brook.

Ed was holding court with a few other hip-boot-clad anglers while leaning on the rear corner of his tiny, dent-riddled hatchback. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but the feverish rise and fall of his smoke led me to believe he was recounting the events that earned him the 5-pound brook trout dangling at his side on a tarnished metal chain stringer. At the time, it was the biggest trout I'd ever seen in person. Although colorless and board-stiff, the

↑ A pair of old Polaroids of Ed Compagnucci that the author has in his collection of vintage fishing photos.

brookie was still impressive. From the front seat of Dad's '89 Grand Wagoneer, I could count the teeth dotting its vicious hook jaw. At 9 years old, I was thrilled if I could put just one 12-inch trout on my stringer. I remember feeling like I wasn't ready for a fish like Ed's—that I wouldn't have been able to handle it.

*But someday*, I thought. Someday, I'd have the skills and knowledge necessary. Someday, I'd be Ed.

## MY EDUCATION

Ed was friends with the hard-partying (grown) kids who hadn't moved out of their home, next door to my family. He was about 28 years old. His voice was deeply graveled, and his sentences would often trail off with an awkward laugh. He had shaggy hair and hands dirty from nicotine, car wrenching, and manual labor. He was also a kind man. My dad took a shine to him and would pay Ed cash for odd jobs like wallpapering our dining room, painting the kitchen, or landscaping chores. From about the time I was 8 years old till I was 12, Ed floated in and out of my life—and whenever he was around, I loved to talk fishing with him.

That 5-pound brook trout was one of many "breeders"—the giants that would get stocked after years of egg production at the hatchery—Ed had on his résumé. At least once every trout season, my dad and I would bump into him on a local stream, and he usually had a heavy hitter shaking on his chain. The fact that he held both New Jersey *and* Pennsylvania licenses, for fishing both sides of the river, only elevated his angling prowess in my mind. It made him a far more serious trout angler than I could be at my age. I wanted to know all his secrets.

"What color PowerBait is your favorite?" I'd ask.

"Been gettin' 'em on pink," he'd say as he emptied the lawnmower bag.

"What's it like to fight a really big trout?"

"Them big ones fight pretty good," he'd tell me as he stood on a paint-splattered drop cloth, spackling the wall next to our stove.

The Sage of Stony Brook—right there in *my* kitchen.

## THROUGH THE RANKS

When I caught my first breeder at 15, I lingered in the parking lot on the Raritan River longer than my dad wanted to. There was nobody around, but I desperately wanted someone to see that fish. Even at that young age, however, I realized something: I didn't catch it because I'd finally accrued the necessary skills to unlock the secrets of the breeders. I caught it because I got lucky. My spinner got in front of the trout's face, and it ate the damned thing. Had someone shown up right before me, it would have likely been on his or her stringer. This realization made me think about Ed.

By the time I added that first breeder notch to my belt, Ed was long gone. He'd had a kid and drifted away from the boys next door. We stopped bumping into him on the water. And now, 29 years later, I have no idea whatever became of Ed Compagnucci.

What I do know is that the Ed Compagnuccis of the world are important.

As you grow older and wiser, you learn to do a better job of sizing people up. You can gauge a lot about them just through conversation. But as a kid, you take everything at face value. That leaves gaps in stories like Ed's, and gaps are what allow myths to grow. For example, the tackle-shop owner would tell you that the local "Ed" caught a 50-pound catfish last night on chicken livers—and before long, that story would morph into an epic battle that dragged him across the lake and nearly capsized the boat. Or another Ed would bring a 10-pound fluke to the shop—and it was just accepted that he made it happen because he knew all the secret spots.

Maybe he did. Or maybe he could just spend more time on the water than other anglers. Maybe his secrets weren't as mystical as you thought. Maybe he was just lucky.

## BEST OF LUCK

As for my Ed, it's likely that he paid closer attention than most anglers to the stocking schedule that Fish & Wildlife published every season. My Ed might have gotten there at 5 a.m. instead of 7:30 to make sure his PowerBait or spinner hit the prime lane before anyone else's. Knowing now that catching the breeder in a hole full of little fish is also a game of chance, I realize Ed could have just been luckier. It's also possible that he didn't catch as many breeders as I remember, but without knowing all the details and by splicing in my own to fill the gaps, the shaggy lawnmower man became my inspiration, my trout god.

**At least once every trout season, my dad and I would bump into Ed on a local stream, and he usually had a heavy hitter shaking on his chain. I wanted to know all his secrets.**

If you stick with fishing, you naturally become better at it over time, and eventually you figure out that the people you looked up to—whether that's your Ed or your uncle or your grandpa—might not have been the ringers you once thought. But that shouldn't diminish their legacy. Ed just fished a little smarter and—because I don't think the guy ever had a steady job—he fished a lot more. And that was enough.

Despite the lack of some weathered leather-bound journal full of deep fishing secrets and tricks you would never figure out on your own, the Eds of the world make us strive for something that will ultimately shape us into the anglers we become one day.

I still fish Stony Brook, now with my son, and I think of Ed every time I'm at Pennington Dam. I've caught lots of breeders since my first, but never there. Ed is still the king of that spot. F&S

# Open-Minded

**THE FIRST DAY OF PHEASANT SEASON ISN'T EVERYTHING IT USED TO BE, BUT IT'S AS SPECIAL AS EVER IF YOU REMEMBER TO TAKE IT ALL IN**

↑ A rooster pheasant, with a hen in tow, is a splash of color against a sprawling canvas of tan grassland.

DONALD M. JONES

by **PHIL BOURJAILY**

RICK ALWAYS RUNS LATE. It's one of the things I like about hunting with him. Everyone else I go with, even when I arrive early, gets there ahead of me. Rick hardly ever does. It makes me feel punctual and organized.

Today is different. I am sitting in a truck next to a field with pheasants in it. I don't care from punctual. I want to hunt. It's opening day.

Thirty years ago, when you said the words *opening day* in Iowa, people assumed you meant the pheasant opener. Back then, there were fields of pheasants everywhere you looked, and opening day was practically a state holiday. It's not exactly like that anymore.

## THROUGH THE PORTAL

For some, opening day was both the beginning and end of pheasant season. When I lived in the country, my neighbor would have all his corn picked and his fields plowed to black by late October. He would leave one long, wide strip of standing corn near his house. On the opener, his friends and family would push the strip. There was a short, eventful hunt and then grilled bratwursts and Busch Light afterward. By late afternoon, the strip was plowed under, and the season was over on that farm.

I worked Saturdays at the time, so my neighbor's season and mine didn't even overlap. I'd go Sunday morning. Once I started, I didn't want to do much else until the season ended. I'm still that way. No matter where I've been or how many ducks and doves I've shot before that first pheasant hunt, opening day still marks the beginning of the main event. It's like stepping through a portal into the place where I'll spend the next 70-odd days. I won't hunt every one of those days, and sometimes I might chase ducks and geese. But if I'm not hunting pheasants, I'm thinking about hunting them, wishing I were hunting them, looking for new places to hunt them, or getting work done so I can hunt them.

My phone buzzes, and I don't have to read Rick's text to know what it says: *Leaving my house now.* The step through the portal will have to wait.

It's pushing 8:30, and the new season started at 8. Years ago, someone came up

**It always surprises me, although it shouldn't, that dogs remember how to hunt after a long off season. When I let Zeke loose on opening day, he's into scent right away. He starts to point and creep, and we're off.**

with the widely repeated, if never verified, statistic that half the birds shot in a season fall during the first 30 minutes of opening day. There was probably truth to that once. In the years when hunters still came to this part of Iowa from all over, they lined the field edges on opening morning, waiting for the stroke of 8 a.m. to walk into the field. The ensuing gunshots sounded like popcorn popping.

I remember when every small town held pancake breakfasts for opening-day pheasant hunters, and you saw license plates from all over the country. People came here to see wild pheasant hunting at its best. Before social media, celebrity-hunter sightings—mostly major leaguers and country singers—were shared by word of mouth. Even then, in the CRP days of the '90s, the old-timers told us bird numbers were nothing compared to what they saw in the Soil Bank days of the '60s. Now, in the Ethanol Era, we have a few birds left, but the crowds go farther north and west to other parts of the state or to South Dakota. I feel like the last pheasant hunter standing here some days. I am still not used to it.

## UNFORGETTABLE OPENER

A couple of seasons ago, I hosted a friend for opening day. I took him to a set-aside field that I knew was full of birds. I'd cold-called the landowner. He told me to go ahead, then mentioned that a couple of other people had permission too, and that I might see them.

I was anxious, expecting to find trucks parked at the gate and orange-clad hunters and dogs milling around. The only signs of life were the pheasants lifting off and settling back into the field. I couldn't believe we had the place to ourselves.

I asked Joe: "It's Saturday, right?"

"Yep," he said, "opening day."

We parked next to the field, and as we were getting ready, a rooster pheasant flushed randomly out of the tall grass and landed on a bank not 30 yards in front of us. Opening-day birds have a reputation, sometimes well-founded, sometimes not, for stupidity. This one was a poster child for it. I sent Zeke to the bank, where he pointed the rooster. Joe had his first bird practically before the hunt even started, and we found the rest of his limit, plus one for me, in under an hour. Although it didn't feel like the opening days I remember, it was a hunt I won't forget.

## SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

At 8:32, Rick arrives, pulling up next to me and lowering his window. "Ahoy, matey! There be pheasants in them thar hills," he says. For Rick, every day is International Talk Like a Pirate Day. Even opening day. Especially opening day.

"Arrrr!" I reply. What else can I say?

We confer. We have chosen this CRP field as our first stop today because we know it has birds. Almost as important, the corn is down all around it. Standing corn is the nemesis of today's opening-day hunter, as it sucks pheasants out of huntable cover. I remember pushing the short, weedy cornfields of old. But modern varieties grow high over your head, and herbicides ensure there's nothing alive at ground level. Weedy cornfields are a thing of the past.

We're also hunting this field because the wind is right. Rick pays as much attention to wind as any whitetail hunter or waterfowler does, which is another thing I like about hunting with him. Today's southwest wind means scent will blow into the dog's noses as we approach the best corner of the field, where an overgrown food plot always holds birds.

The traditional way to hunt around here is to form a line abreast and march back and forth in passes, regardless of wind direction. We don't do that. While you can't hunt an entire field with the wind in your face, you can make sure to hit the good parts with it in your favor.

Rick and I also share the belief that the best size group for pheasant hunting is one to three people and their dogs. We won't try to stay together either. Rick has always had springers. I've always had pointing dogs. Rick and his dog, Red, check under every blade of grass. Zeke and I are about the big picture. Taking our varied paces into account, we hatch a plan. Rick and Red will take a direct approach to the corner along the south fenceline. Zeke and I will make a longer loop. If we time it right, we'll converge on the food plot from two different sides.

It always surprises me, although it shouldn't, that dogs remember how to hunt after a long off season. Except for walks and a little steadiness training, Zeke has been a couch dog since January. Yet when I let him loose on opening day, he's into scent right away. He starts to point and creep, and we're off. Zeke hasn't forgotten pheasant hunting. Neither have I. Opening day may not be the event I remember, but pheasant hunting feels the same as always.

I remember how long grass pulls at your legs enough to make any hill feel steeper. After a few hunts, I won't feel it anymore. On opening day, I do. I also notice I'm a year older.

I remember that few plans survive first contact with pheasants, even "uneducated" opening-day pheasants. Rick and Red find their first bird on the way to the food plot, but when our trap snaps shut, the flock blows out of the corner of the field before I'm quite in gun range.

But then Zeke gets birdy, and I remember the anticipation of walking in on a point, of hoping the bird is there, and the slight pause between the instant of the flush and the realization that it's a rooster and I can shoot. And the heft of a bird in hand, and the iridescent feathers I haven't seen up close for 10 months.

I remember what it feels like to be 23 again, because for as long as I've been hunting, the same giddy, awestruck thought I had on my first opening day pops into my head on every subsequent one: *I can't believe we get to do this.*

At the end of our opening-morning hunt, walking back to the vehicles through the tall grass with Rick and the dogs, I remember what it's like to have birds in my gamebag and a gun broken over my shoulder—and 70-odd more days to hunt pheasants. F&S

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

# TIGHTENING THE LOOP

**THE TRIUMPH OF BRINGING A TROPHY BONEFISH TO HAND STARTS BY CASTING TO WATER BOTTLES AT A PARK**

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

IT MIGHT BE DIFFICULT to tell at times, but I actually practice fly casting. A block away from the house is a large park with a lawn wide enough to lay out an 80-foot cast. At least in theory. I pull a picnic table to the center of the lawn, step off 30 or 40 or 50 feet, and stand a water bottle up in the grass. Then I climb atop the picnic table and position myself on one end. The table is a passable simulacrum of the front casting deck of a flats skiff, and I practice the entire sequence involved in slinging a fly toward a cruising fish: I stack stripped line at my feet, hold the fly in my line hand, and sweep the rod tip in a large circle to play out the first 15 feet of line. I allow myself no more than two false casts to dial in on the target and measure distance, then I send a hookless practice fly toward the water bottle.

↑ A fly fisherman takes advantage of a rare windless day on the bonefish flats and fires a cast.

**The guide had seen my brilliant, beautiful, perfect-conditions casts earlier in the day, so he knew I had the basic tools. But he also knew this: Dude needs to practice.**

Sometimes I'll put out three or four water bottles in a diamond pattern and walk the lawn perimeter, casting. That way, the distance never stays the same, and if there's wind, I have to fight it from various directions. It's like disc golf with a fly rod.

In the park, passersby walking their dogs aren't sure what to make of such a figure. I ignore them. I cast and watch the line arc over my shoulder to straighten out behind me, then slip into my forward vision as I power the rod toward the water bottle. On every cast, I'm analyzing the loop in the fly line. I want a loop that's 3 feet or less between the rod leg and the fly leg. I give myself instant feedback. *That's the loop I'm looking for. No, not that one. This one. Yes.*

A fly line in the air tells you most of what you need to know about your casting, as long as you know how to read it. A wide, open loop suggests that you are not stopping your rod tip on either the forward loop, back loop, or both. A tailing loop signals a dip in the tip of the rod, which can happen if you apply too much power at the wrong time. Sine waves in the line could mean your double haul needs to be smoother. Watch the line, and you can grade your skill in real time.

I started practicing, in a calculated and defined way, after I had my butt handed to me one afternoon on a bonefish-filled flat off Grand Bahama. On that memorable day, the morning winds were minimal, the seas were calm, the sky was clear, and we could practically see the fish coming over the horizon. I caught one bonefish after the other so quickly I couldn't break for lunch. But I paid for my time on easy street in the afternoon. The winds came up as we were stalking the beaches by foot. Strong winds blew—a solid 20 to 25 mph. The fish were still there, but not the skills to catch them. I made every mistake I knew not to make. I punched the rod with greater and greater force, which opened the fly-line loops even wider, so they had to push through even more air. My final delivery cast looked like the throw of a shot-putter; if I couldn't cast well enough to cut the wind, then I'd just throw the damn fly out there. The classic response of...a neophyte.

My frustration was only barely greater than that of my guide, who watched my casts welter in the wind 10 feet short of bonefish. He'd seen my brilliant, beautiful, perfect-conditions casts earlier in the day, so he knew I had the basic tools. But he also knew this: Dude needs to practice.

## PRESSURE POINTS

I'm not sure most people outside our sports fully understand how skillful even the average hunter and angler is likely to be at their favorite pursuit. Maybe it's the Andy Griffith effect: *If Opie could catch 'em with a cane pole, how hard can it be? Squirrels? Come over to my house, and you can scoop them up with a net.*

To thread an arrow through the honeysuckle or skip a plug deep into the shade of a boat dock is an athletic pursuit. To shoot a deer at distance—with confidence, knowing you've earned the right to take the shot in the first place—requires significant practice, an athlete's obsession with equipment, and an experienced understanding of how variances in the human body affect a bullet traveling at 3000 fps. And not one tiny whit of luck.

There's nothing wrong with being a beginner. We've all been beginners, most of us multiple times, and even at my age, I plan on being a beginner at a few more pursuits I have in mind. But let me vent for just a second on behalf of all of us who understand that a lot of what we do in the woods and on the water is on the same level as consistently sinking a 3-point shot or a 12-foot putt under pressure.

## SHOWTIME

One day at the park, as I was practically hanging ten on a picnic table, slinging 50 feet of line across the lawn, a little kid walked up. He was maybe 10 years old, wore baggy shorts and a striped tank top, and had a basketball in the crook of his elbow.

"Hey, man," he called. "What're you doing? You can't catch a fish here."

I laughed. "Hey, buddy," I said. "I'm doing the same thing you're doing."

I let that sit for a moment, to see what he might do with it.

"I ain't fishing."

"Me either. But like you, I'm practicing."

He didn't really know what to do with that either and started to turn away. He was done with this nutjob. So I helped him out a bit.

"Hey," I called out. "You want to play in the NBA one day?"

"Yes, sir."

At that, I rolled the rod tip forward, then let a long backcast go over my shoulder, and I could see his eyes follow the line. *That's a pretty good loop*, I thought.

My chances of ever being one of the world's great fly anglers are about as good as that kid's chances of ever sinking a 3-pointer at Madison Square Garden. Yet there we were. On the court.

"Me too, buddy," I said. "Me too." F&S

# Stewed Rabbit With Preserved Carrots

**A SOUTHERN CHEF SHARES A SLOW-COOKED SMALL-GAME MAIN WITH A SHOWSTOPPING SIDE**

by **JONATHAN MILES**
photographs by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**
styling by **ROSCOE BETSILL**

TO MAKE A GOOD MEAL in Southern Appalachia," writes the North Carolina–based chef Ashleigh Shanti in her new cookbook, *Our South*, out this fall, "you start with a successful hunting day in the woods. Later that night, you pull your best preserves out of the larder to complement your finds."

Exemplifying this is Shanti's pairing of wild rabbit legs, simmered in an early-autumn essence of apple brandy, cider, and apple butter, with old-timey preserved carrots, their flavors wildly concentrated after a couple weeks of curing. (Yes, this recipe requires some serious forethought. But pairing the rabbit with glazed or mashed carrots instead still yields a showstopper.) *Our South* is an homage to the region's Black culinary heritage, but also, in many of its recipes, to its age-old hunting traditions.

"To me, hunting and sourcing wild game for food is similar to the way we place a heavy emphasis on the utilization of our local produce here in the South," Shanti told me. "It's a slow and thoughtful process that commands respect and helps you appreciate what is before you. It signifies elevating a humble ingredient to bring glory to your dinner table and connectivity to your food that makes eating so much more thoughtful and meaningful."

Serve this dish with a dry cider. If you're in the Northeast, keep an eye peeled for Ironbound Farm ciders from New Jersey. For wine, try an off-dry German Riesling, an Oregon pinot gris, or an easygoing pinot noir.

> "It's a slow and thoughtful process that commands respect and helps you appreciate what is before you."
>
> — ASHLEIGH SHANTI

## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE CARROTS

- **3 lb.** carrots, tops trimmed
- **3** celery stalks
- **1** orange rind
- **3 Tbsp.** kosher salt
- **2 tsp.** coriander seed
- **2 tsp.** celery seed
- **½ cup** unsalted butter (1 stick)

### FOR THE RABBIT

- **8** rabbit hind legs
- **2 tsp.** kosher salt
- **1 tsp.** freshly ground black pepper
- **2 Tbsp.** canola oil
- **3** shallots, thinly sliced
- **5** thyme sprigs, tied together with kitchen twine
- **4** garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- **½ cup** apple brandy
- **2 cups** apple cider
- **1 cup** chicken stock, homemade or store-bought
- **1 Tbsp.** unsalted butter
- **¼ cup** whole-grain mustard
- **½ cup** apple butter, homemade or store-bought

DIRECTIONS

## DIRECTIONS

Serves 4

**1**

PRESERVE THE CARROTS: In a large bowl, combine the carrots, celery, orange rind, salt, coriander seed, and celery seed. Transfer to a vacuum-seal bag or a 1-gallon ziplock bag with the air completely pressed out. Refrigerate for at least 10 days and up to one month.

**2**

IN A SMALL SAUCEPAN, heat the butter over a medium-low flame until it becomes golden brown and smells nutty, 8 to 10 minutes. Using a spoon, skim off and discard the foamy solids that rise to the top. Remove the pan from heat.

**3**

TAKE THE CARROTS from the salt brine and rinse; discard the brine. Transfer the carrots to a blender and purée until smooth, slowly drizzling in the brown butter as you blend.

**4**

COOK THE RABBIT: Season the rabbit legs with the salt and pepper. In a Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed skillet, heat the oil over medium heat. When the oil is just starting to smoke, add the rabbit and cook until golden brown on both sides, 4 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer the rabbit to a plate.

**5**

REDUCE THE HEAT to low and add the shallots and thyme. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the shallots are soft and translucent, 5 to 6 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant and softened, 2 minutes. Add the apple brandy, cider, and stock and use a wooden spoon to scrape up any browned bits from the bottom. If you're feeling brave, tilt the pan just slightly toward the flame to allow the brandy to ignite—or turn off the heat temporarily and ignite the sauce with a barbecue lighter. The fire will go out after several seconds. Whisk in the butter, mustard, and apple butter and cook over low heat, whisking frequently, until the mixture emulsifies, 10 minutes more. Return the rabbit legs to the pan, cover, and cook for 45 minutes, until the meat is tender.

**6**

SPOON A GENEROUS PORTION of the carrot purée into the centers of four plates. Top each with two rabbit legs and spoon the pan sauce over the top. F&S


SOUNDS OF FALL
ALPHASHIELD COMPRESSION
MADE TO RESTORE THE SOUNDS OF THE HUNT - A REVIVAL AND AN EXPERIENCE THAT FOR SOME, HAS BEEN LONG FORGOTTEN... HEAR 'EM COMING.
TETRA HEARING
© Dustin Dattilio

by BILL HEAVEY illustration by PETER OUMANSKI

# Survive Anything!

**AND I MEAN *ANYTHING*. LEARN TO FIGHT OFF ANGRY ZEBRAS, OUTRUN HARD-CHARGING GLACIERS, AND TOTALLY OWN THE YOUTUBE JUNGLE**

THE EDITORS asked me to interview a well-known wilderness survival expert for this issue, so I found a time when I was available and could talk to myself. As my many subscribers know, I don't follow the herd, and I don't mind flouting conventional wisdom. For example, ask most people the single most important item to have in a survival situation and you'll get such cockamamie answers as a knife, matches, or—this one always cracks me up—a "survival mindset." Tell you what: Send me ten bucks, and I'll send you your very own personal survival mindset.

No. The single most important item to have is a bandanna.

Take it from a guy with millions of followers and endorsement deals for nutritional supplements that'll make your fingernails fall off: Nothing says "badass survival superstar" like a bandanna. I prefer one made from the pelt of a sea otter, which has the densest fur on Earth, up to a million hairs per square inch. Actually, otter fur is way too hot for a bandanna, but folks love that fun fact. The truth is, you can make a perfectly good bandanna out of your own undershorts, but maybe save this trick for true emergencies, like when your audience share is shrinking.

The second biggest priority in a survival situation is blood. Why? So you can smudge that mug. If you haven't killed anything yet, dirt is an acceptable backup. The bandanna-and-smudged-face combo is, quite simply, unbeatable in a video.

Another thing that solidifies you as the authority you're pretending to be is cambium, which is a wonderful word to say in a serious tone. This is because it sounds like both "pablum," a bland cereal for infants, and "Cambridge," an institute of higher learning. "Cambium," you tell the camera in your best now-I'm-being-serious tone, "is the layer of delicate meristematic tissue between the phloem—inner bark, for you non-survivalists—and the epidermis, or outer bark, of a tree. And it's a lifesaver, full of vitamins, carbs, and fiber."

Hell, cambium is basically a Kind bar that grows on trees. It also boasts the astringency of an unripe persimmon, the umami taste of asbestos insulation, and the mouthfeel of steel wool. So downplay those parts. Instead, cite the example of the indigenous Sami people of Scandinavia, hunter-gatherers who made bread from a mixture of birch cambium and rye flour. There is no hard evidence that the Sami ever ate the awful stuff, but they did give great quantities of it to missionaries offering their traditional gifts of Christianity, whiskey, and smallpox.

Remember, too, that media-savvy survivalists never pass up the chance to refer to a childhood in the woods they never had. Les Stroud was studying at Julliard before he got in the game. Dave Canterbury wrote cards for Hallmark. Personally, I was installing residential linoleum prior to earning my survival certification from an online school. That hasn't stopped me from recounting a youth spent almost completely in the woods.

Growing up in the hills and hollers of Greenwich, Connecticut, I developed a love for bandannas, face-smudging, and cambium. Pawpaw found it hard to get steady work as a hedge-fund manager, so we spent many a day tramping the woods and trapping critters to supplement whatever golden parachute he was blowing through at the time.

FOR MY FINAL episode of this season, I was flown to an unknown location last night, whereupon I was blindfolded with a bandanna made from my producer's undershorts. Now, after driving for hours, my crew is going to abandon me. Only then will I remove the blindfold to see where I am. I could be in the high Arctic, the scorching desert, or a jungle full of very angry zebras. My first words will be what I always say, even in Connecticut: "Yes, this is truly a land of stark beauty, but it's also a place of life-threatening extremes." Then the music will get all spooky....

What's this I see above my head? Danged if it isn't an abandoned weaverbird nest in an acacia tree. This just happens to be a favored haunt of the dreaded desert cobra. Naturally, I'll make my bed directly under it. I'm hoping to harvest one of these deadly serpents so that I may use its rotting skin as a canteen from which to drink my own urine. This is an old survival trick I invented 20 years ago with another celebrity survivalist one night when we were drunk and thinking up the grossest possible stunts for TV.

Before me lies the unquiet sea, which is full of nutritious narwhals that stab their tusks into the sand at low tide and obediently die. Strangely, they taste just like corn dogs. Behind me, I hear the moan of a glacier as it grinds its way down the slopes of an active volcano. I'll have to keep an eye on that, as glaciers have been known to rush forward to prey on the unwary. If that happens, I'll spend eternity in an icy tomb. Lava, by the way, while deadly, is also a great fire starter.

What's this? A desert cobra has just dropped down from the nest and is poised to strike! I pin the snake's head to the ground and decapitate it. Then I dance a jig of triumph, demonstrating that even though I'm a celebrity, I'm just like you. Be sure to hit the *Like* button so we can stay in touch. F&S

# SEE WHAT'S OUT THERE

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# Field & Stream®

HOW TO HIT DUCKS p. 56

KILLER WHALE
By FRANK DUFRESNE