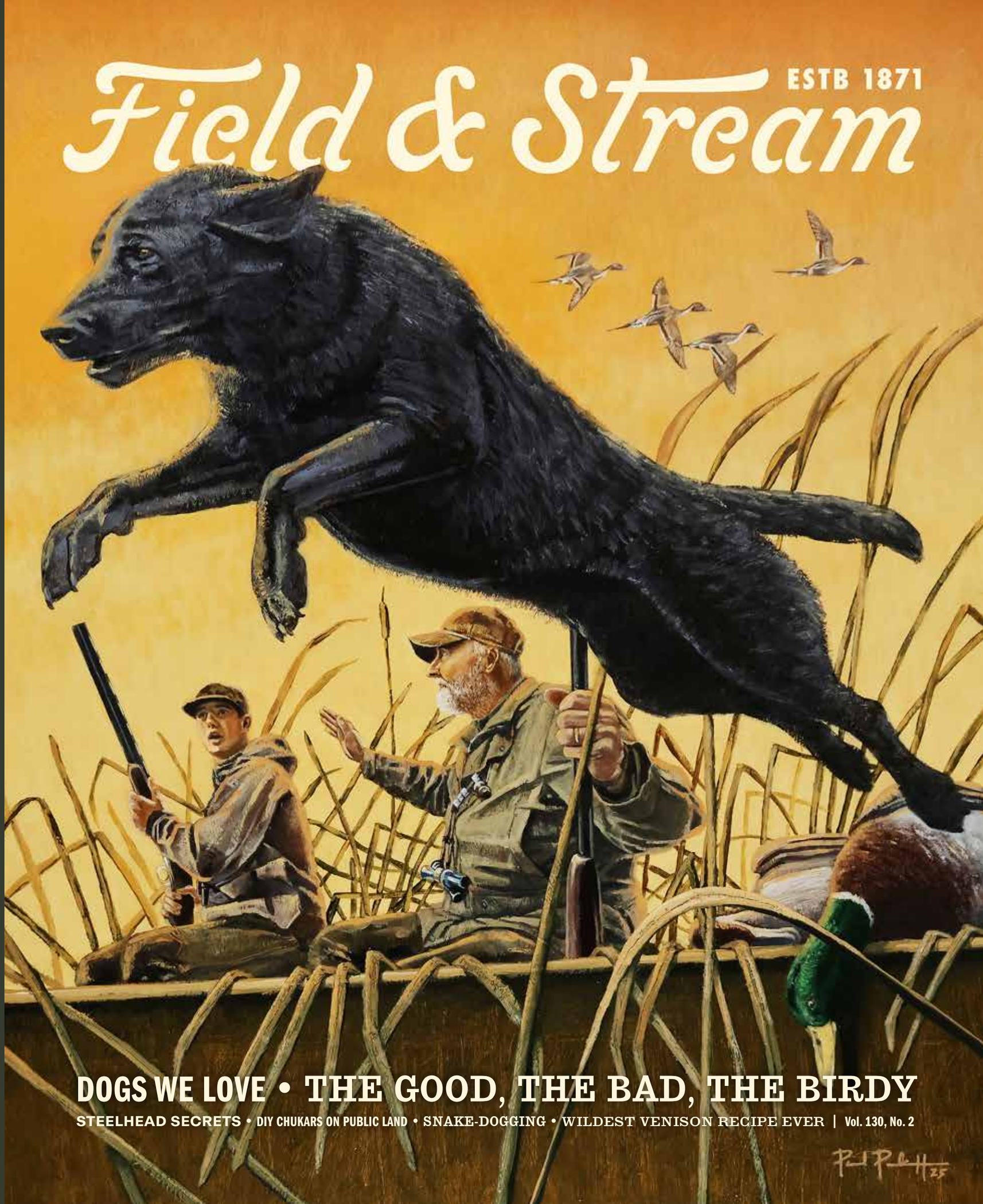
Field & Stream

ESTB 1871



DOGS WE LOVE • THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE BIRDY

STEELHEAD SECRETS • DIY CHUKARS ON PUBLIC LAND • SNAKE-DOGGING • WILDEST VENISON RECIPE EVER | Vol. 130, No. 2

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PAUL KING (dogs), FREDERICK STIVERS (hunter)

As we drove in a convoy through a maze of dusty roads at dawn, trucks loaded with hunters' dogs peeled off left and right.... A man called Raw Cat drove us to a deer trail that looked like an oversize rabbit hole in a wall of thorns and vines. When he opened the doors of his kennel, the hounds spilled out like cereal poured from a box and ran headlong down the trail. Then we waited.

—MATTHEW EVERY
"RACE AGAINST TIME"

FEATURES

cover painting by **PAUL PUCKETT**

REGULARS

THE RANGE

GEARING UP

CAMPFIRE

Today, Slusser's flintlock rifles sell for many thousands of dollars. But Slusser insists they all shoot. "They're fancy, but they're still hunting rifles," he says.

—BILL HEAVEY, "SMOKE SHOW"

PETER OUMANSKI (illustration); JARREN VINK (duck call); CHRISTOPHER TESTANI (rifle)

GOOD DOGS, GREAT STORIES

illustration by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

I'VE NEVER OWNED a gun dog. (The only canines in my life were a trio of basset hounds—Maggie, Molly, and Lulu—from my childhood. They were lovable and loyal, but I don't know if they would've excelled as hunters.) I suppose the next best thing to having a hunting dog of your own is reading tales about good ones. And in my 17 years at F&S, I've read plenty. In fact, some of the most memorable and enduring characters from many of the best stories we've ever published—both in print and online—have been hunting dogs.

PRITCHARD

The first dog I came to know at *Field & Stream* was Pritchard, a Boykin pup that belonged to my friend (and former boss) David DiBenedetto. Pritch and Dave were the duo behind *Man's Best Friend*, a dog blog that used to run on fieldandstream.com. Even though I never met Pritch, I still felt a close bond with her through Dave's chronicles of their journey. For example, it has been 16 years since Dave wrote this wonderful scene about one of Pritchard's first successful training sessions, but I still remember reading it for the first time as if it were yesterday.

When we pulled Pritch out of the kennel she was on fire. She was charging after the dummy and hitting the water with a crash. When we moved to an area of the pond with some downed timber, she had no problem swimming through it and crossing over floating logs. Finally, we tossed a dummy on the other side of a small finger of land that jutted out into the pond. Without hesitation, Pritch made the retrieve, crossing the finger both ways, and never losing sight of the mission. When she returned with the dummy, Pritch was prancing around like a field-trial champ.

"That's my dog!" I said.

Good dog, Pritch.

JED

Phil Bourjaily once wrote a story for the website in which he issued a challenge to readers: Come up with a name for my new GSP pup. Hundreds of names were tossed into the hat; only one stuck: Jed.

Through Phil's writing over the next decade-plus, I loved tracking Jed's progress in the uplands. Then, at the end of 2023, Phil wrote about Jed's final season.

There were plenty of birds that year, and there isn't much a pheasant can do that will surprise an old dog. Jed still had surprises for me, though. He always hated water, so when I dropped a pheasant into a deep creek one day, I assumed I was on my own to fetch it until I heard a loud splash and then a dripping-wet Jed clambered up the vertical bank with this bird in his mouth. We stayed on a roll together that year all the way through to a limit on the last day.

Good dog, Jed.

BEAR

Sometimes as an editor, you get lucky. In 2020, as we were putting together an issue of the magazine, I felt like something was missing—like an essay about an old gun dog. Problem is, those kinds of stories aren't exactly a dime a dozen. As a shot in the dark, I reached out to Hal Herring and asked if he'd ever had a hunting dog—and, if so, did he have a story?

Hal did have a gun dog once—a black Lab named Bear. And he did have a story—one of the most beautiful, heartbreaking pieces of writing we've ever published.

Looking back, I can only be so very grateful that we hunted so hard that fall of his third year. As I write this, memories tumble forth like photos stored in an old shoebox: Sharptails in a bog as a small covey flew in a perfect crossing shot through an opening, the lead bird tumbling in a burst of feathers as I fired, the retrieve, a portrait for the ages—background of frost-reddened and -yellowed willows, dark ragged spruce against a flawless cold blue sky, the sharptail's mahoganies and whites, the iridescent blue-black head and pale eyes of the greatest friend I had ever had.

Good dog, Bear.

•

I could keep going, but I'll end my reminiscing with these three. After all, there are plenty more great stories about good dogs for you to enjoy in the pages ahead.

Welcome to the Gun Dog Issue.

Colin Kearns
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
colin@fieldandstream.com

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.*

Paul Puckett

ILLUSTRATOR

For this issue, we asked renowned outdoor artist Paul Puckett to paint a reimagined version of our November 1957 cover (see back cover), featuring a black Lab leaping into the water. Later, we sat down with Puckett to hear more about the assignment.

F&S Most people know you for your fishing artwork. How was painting a hunting scene?
P.P. *Super fun and challenging. In college, I did quite a bit of duck art, and I always loved sitting in a blind and taking photos to reference for painting. It's been really cool to come back 20 years later and take a duck hunting scene very seriously again.*

F&S Did you tap into that duck hunting experience for this assignment?
P.P. *Absolutely. I still do a lot of quail hunting, so I haven't been totally disconnected from chasing birds. But working on this piece definitely tapped into old memories of duck hunting with good friends back in Texas. It even piqued my interest in waterfowl hunting again.*

F&S Does that mean you'll be in a duck blind this fall?
P.P. *Without a doubt. I've already reached out to a couple of people here in South Carolina to see if I can tag along this season.*

F&S Did you study any Labs before you started painting?
P.P. *Yes, I spent time with my buddy's black Lab, Tuco. The structure of the original painting stayed the same, but the face of the dog resembles Tuco. He was a great model.*

F&S Have you thought about getting a hunting dog of your own?
P.P. *Yes. My family wants to get a yellow Lab. Hopefully sooner than later.*

Sage Marshall

WRITER

Marshall interned for *Field & Stream* in 2018 before becoming news editor in 2021. After more than two years of reporting on conservation issues, Marshall left to pursue a master's degree in creative writing. He is still a regular F&S contributor and traveled to Florida for this issue to hunt with the Python Cowboy and his dog Otto (p. 94).

A Colorado native, Marshall has had his work featured in *Modern Huntsman*, *Men's Journal*, and *Backpacker*. He also debuted a poetry collection titled *Echolocation* in 2024.

Terra Fondriest

PHOTOGRAPHER

Growing up in Northern Illinois, Fondriest spent her youth exploring local forests. After college, she worked as a wildland firefighter, GIS mapper, and wrangler in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. She now lives in the Ozark mountains, where she started her photography career.

Her work has been published in *The Washington Post*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and *Courrier International*. For her first *Field & Stream* assignment, she photographed a squirrel hunt with Bill Heavey (p. 130) in her home state of Arkansas.

Ryan Chelius

SENIOR EDITOR

Raised on the South Shore of Long Island, Chelius grew up fishing for striped bass and hunting black ducks in the salt marsh. He attended college in Upstate New York, where he learned how to catch steelhead on a fly rod (p. 26).

Chelius joined the F&S team full-time in 2021, becoming senior editor in late 2023. He now lives on the Front Range in Colorado, where he hunts for whatever is in season and fishes for trout the rest of the year. But his real obsession is chasing ducks and geese throughout the country.

Brandon Loving

ILLUSTRATOR

Brandon Loving started drawing cartoons and comics at 10 years old. Today, he works as an illustrator, collaborating with publications such as *ESPN*, *Men's Health*, *Billboard*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Esquire*, and *Field & Stream*, as well as designing the occasional T-shirt.

Loving is our go-to illustrator for the fan-favorite Ask Petzal Q&A column (p. 24) and has been contributing to F&S for the past five years. He lives outside Kansas City, Missouri, and enjoys the outdoors through cycling, hiking, and running.

clockwise from far left: SIMON BARR; ISABELA BUCCIARELLI; AMELIA FONDRIEST; courtesy of BRANDON LOVING; MAX INCHAUSTI

CHEERS & JEERS

illustrations by **PETER OUMANSKI**

SINCE WE PUBLISHED THE GAME FISH ISSUE, the first edition of the F&S journal for 2025, notes from fans and 1871 Club members have come pouring in—through letters sent to the editorial team (editorial@fieldandstream.com), comments left on social media posts, or reviews penned on the F&S online shop. As always, thank you for the kind words. Here's a collection of some of our favorite feedback from the *Field & Stream* community.

DEAR "JOHN" LETTER

I just want to say THANK YOU, THANK YOU, and THANK YOU for returning to print! As a 62-year-old deer hunter and muskie fisherman, I have sorely missed the print edition to have and to hold—and, yes, to look at in the bathroom. Keep up the great work for another hundred years or so.

Gary Shore
Buffalo, N.Y.

ENCORE! ENCORE!

I just finished rereading the "Holy Waters" collection in the Waters Issue (Vol. 129, No. 1). It's among the best I have read. Keep up the great work.

David Thompson
via email

NOT FOR SALE!

I hike rather than hunt or fish, but I got the writing bug from reading your humor writer in the 1970s. I used to grab my father's F&S the minute it arrived to read his articles. Since that time, I've made my living as a writer for more than 40 years. So thank you (and him) for the inspiration.

I recently discovered associate editor Travis Hall's work and was so excited to see that you're getting the word out about the massive sale of public lands tucked into the budget bill. I've talked to friends and neighbors about it, and most have no idea about the sale or even believe it could be true.

Travis and your entire staff have a strong voice that can reach people who are unlikely to hear about it—especially if they limit their media consumption or avoid mainstream news.

Please make your voice heard loudly both through your magazine and across social media. I'm terrified it'll be game over before most of the country even knows this is happening. Thank you!

Vicki Mongan
Roseville, Calif.

I bought a subscription for myself for my birthday. At 25 years old, it'd been a long time since I'd felt that innocent, childlike excitement about a birthday gift! The stories are educational and captivating. Congratulations, *Field & Stream*. What a banger!

—ERIN C.
REVIEW ON THE F&S SHOP

PROUD DAD MOMENT
Hi, *Field & Stream* team. I'm a new member of the 1871 Club as of a few months ago, and I've really enjoyed the magazine—especially the gear reviews and stories that celebrate the outdoor lifestyle.

This Father's Day, I took my oldest daughter, Eleanor, fishing for the first time. On just her second cast, she caught a fish! At first, she screamed and ran away, nervous about the wiggling catch. But with a little encouragement, she calmed down enough to snap a few proud photos with her very first fish. We ended up catching three fish and had a blast together. They may have been small fish, but the memories are big—and lasting.

I'm a dad of three—two girls and a boy—and F&S has been a great source of inspiration to get my kids outdoors to try new things like fishing, hunting, and archery. Thanks for all you do to keep the spirit of the outdoors alive for families like mine.

Dustin Pack
via email

THREE FOR THREE
I have enjoyed all three issues of the new *Field & Stream* journal. I particularly enjoyed the Game Fish Issue (Vol. 130, No. 1) and read it cover to cover.

I loved all the bass fishing stories since that is my favorite game fish. I grew up on trout and walleyes while living in Central Wisconsin as a boy and young man in the 1960s.

After joining the Army, I discovered the joys of bass fishing. Since retiring from the Army and returning to Wisconsin, I have been pleasantly surprised to find some of the best bass fishing in the country in northwestern Wisconsin, where I now live.

I also enjoyed Bill Heavey's story on the Ice Fishing Extravaganza. It was a great issue.

Mike Yurk
via email

HEALING WATERS
I wanted thank Ryan Chelius for his story about his cousin ("Wilderness Retreat," Vol. 129, No. 2). It brought tears to my eyes. I can relate to the peacefulness when I'm fishing the Lehigh River.

Tim O'Shura
Allentown, Pa.

PRAISE FOR PETZAL
I wrote a nastygram to the people who took away the print magazine years ago. I told them I wasn't going to read my favorite magazine on a phone whilst on a camping or hunting trip. They replied telling me I "didn't understand the modern media market."

I think you have proven them to be the idiots that they are. All of your writers are great. Petzal is the Second Coming.

Michael P.
review on the F&S Shop

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

Game Faces

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

PREVIOUS PAGE

WILD RIDE
Jeff Mullinix took this shot after a goose hunt—the day after 2 feet of snow fell. "It was fun capturing the surprise on their faces as the truck lost traction," he says. JEFF MULLINIX — Columbus, Neb.

1. CHASING RAINBOWS
JASON TSCHIRKY — Charlotte, N.C.

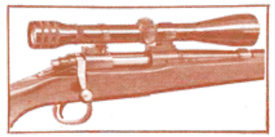
2. SHEEPSHEAD IN THE SURF
HENRY GERTH — Cincinnati, Ohio

3. WHISTLING DIXIE
PARKER DEAR AND DIXIE — Madison, Mich.

4. THE HONEYMOONERS
ZAC AND JACIE BROWN — Blackwell, Okla.

5. A BOY AND HIS BUCK
TYLER STAUFFER — Georgetown, Del.

6. COUSINS IN CAMO
ADALYN AND BRENLEY CARPENTER — Stockton, Mo.



THE RANGE

FIRST SHOT

Tom Martineau was driving along Alaska's Highway 1 in mid-September 2024 when he spotted a lone angler fishing the Matanuska River. He pulled over to capture the scene. "It was just epic—the light, colors, and the way the fisherman stood out in the water," Martineau says. "When I got home and reviewed the image, I noticed the fisherman was hooked up with a fish. Even better."

photograph by **TOM MARTINEAU**

ASK PETZAL

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

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

Have you ever shot a game animal by hunting over bait? If so, do you think you'll go to hell for it? *—T.J. Ward, via email*

D.E.P. I have hunted black bears over bait in a part of Alberta that was pure swamp. Not only was baiting legal in the area, but it was the only possible way to hunt bears.

I got two bruins in that bog. (The rest of my Alberta bears were taken where you could walk 5 feet without sinking.) Will I go to hell for the bog bears? Probably not. More likely, it will be for something else.

> "Despite the wretched state of humanity and the foreboding sense that it's all going to go to hell very soon—I'm doing quite well."

In hunting and fishing, when is it okay to lie? *—Ron Rivera, via email*

D.E.P. Lying about hunting and fishing is no more than improving on the truth, and therefore it's perfectly OK at any time.

What are the key things you look for in a hunting rifle? *—Ellis M., via email*

D.E.P. A good trigger, enough weight up front so you can aim the thing steadily, and consistent accuracy.

Taxidermy. Tasteful or tacky? *—Rebecca Wheeler, via email*

D.E.P. The good taxidermy I've seen qualifies not only as tasteful but also as genuine art. What I consider tacky is the folks who go on safari and kill something with the aid of several very brave, skilled people and then have a painting made of the scene showing only themselves and the dead critter.

What is your idea of perfect happiness? *—Pat T., via email*

D.E.P. Succeeding at something for which you've worked very hard for a long time. The satisfaction is vast and permanent.

What is your favorite work of fiction? How about nonfiction? *—J. Philips, via email*

D.E.P. Fiction: *The Killer Angels*, by Michael Shaara. To an extraordinary degree, the book takes you to the Battle of Gettysburg—sights, sounds, smells, what men thought and felt. Nonfiction: *The Perfect Storm*, by Sebastian Junger. He shows you exactly what it's like to die at sea through your own miscalculation. Read it, and you will be afraid to get in the bathtub, much less go out on the ocean.

I'm going to hunt Cape buffalo for the first time. Anything I should know? *—Kent Clark, via email*

D.E.P. Yes. First, make sure your buffalo gun works. Second, take the sling off and carry the rifle yourself—don't have the tracker do it. Third, be in shape to walk and run a lot. Fourth, crank down your scope to its lowest power, which should be less than 4X. Fifth, never walk up on a buff you think is dead with an empty or partly full rifle; reload first. Sixth, never use a solid for your first shot. Your critter is likely to be part of a herd, and the bullet can go through him and wound another animal. Seventh, if the PH tells you to use a shooting tripod, use it. Last, if things get very exciting, don't wet yourself.

Which is more exciting to you? The hunt? Or the shot? *—Steven Barbero, via email*

D.E.P. No contest, the hunt. The shot is only the sad but logical climax.

My cousin says my 270 is not enough gun for Canadian whitetails. Is he right? *—Peter Moreau, via email*

D.E.P. That's deranged. The 270 will drop any deer from any country. Avoid further conversation with your cousin lest you catch whatever he has.

As I get older, I find myself wondering if there will be hunting and fishing in heaven. What do you think? *—Leo Ralston, via email*

D.E.P. How do you know you're going to heaven? Have you hunted over bait? In any event, hunting and fishing seem like a fine way to spend eternity, but I hope that heaven is a place where celestial beings don't have to die.

How many Creedmoor cartridges do you think we'll end up with? *—Manford R., via email*

D.E.P. We'll stop when we get to 42. Then people will realize that only two or three of them are worth a damn.

What is your favorite hunting app? *—Aaron Johns, via email*

D.E.P. I fear you have misjudged me. I avoid apps of all kind as much as is possible in our age. In fact, one of the reasons I hunt is to get clear of apps and all their ilk. I would that hell get them.

How are you? *—T. Wilson, via email*

D.E.P. Thank you for asking. For many years, I would respond automatically to this question with, "Not well," just to make people uncomfortable, which was good sport. But now if I answer that way, people think I'm dying, which gets weird. So I would say that compared to the average 83-year-old—despite the wretched state of humanity and the foreboding sense that it's all going to go to hell very soon—I'm doing quite well. F&S

Send your questions to **askpetzal@fieldandstream.com**

SPORTSMAN'S NOTEBOOK

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER (2)

CHROMER CRASH COURSE

READY TO CATCH YOUR FIRST STEELHEAD? HERE'S EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO SCORE THIS FALL, WHETHER YOU FISH THE GREAT LAKES OR THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

by **RYAN CHELIUS**

FALL IS THE BEST TIME to catch steelhead. Of course, you can chase these migratory fish at other times of the year, but fall chromers have so much more to offer. For starters, you aren't breaking ice off your guides in single-digit temps or worrying about the water getting too warm from scorching summer heat. In the Great Lakes fisheries, autumn offers the year's biggest run of fish, while the West also sees good numbers of fall steelhead still in the river systems from the summer run.

Steelhead are split into two main categories—anadromous Pacific-run fish that spend years in the ocean before returning to coastal rivers to spawn, and adfluvial Great Lakes–run fish that spend years in freshwater lakes before returning to tributaries to spawn. Western anglers may argue that the Great Lakes fish aren't legitimately steelhead, but the fact is that both strains of fish are aggressive, jump when hooked, and will give you all the fight you can handle.

Fishing techniques are also similar for the two strains of fish, with some tactics being more popular in different regions. Below are the top methods for both, along with some expert advice for coming tight with a silver bullet this fall.

GREAT LAKES STEELHEAD

ALTHOUGH THERE will be a smattering of early-run steelhead in September, the big push of Great Lakes chromers starts in late October. Keep an eye out for a soaking rain, which will increase water levels and trigger huge pushes of fish into rivers. The best fishing is generally from mid-November to mid-January. Use one—or all—of the three techniques below to score.

SPIN FISHING

This is the most beginner-friendly way to target steelhead. Start with a medium heavy spinning rod in the 9- to 10½-foot range. Pair that with a 2500-size spinning reel spooled with 30-pound braid and a 10-pound mono leader that runs to a barrel swivel with around 2 to 4 feet of 8-pound fluoro tippet. Put a plastic egg-imitating bead about an inch above the hook. Then add a float and the correct number of split shot to get your bead in the strike zone.

To target deep runs, riffles, and pools, simply cast your float slightly upstream and let it drift through good holding water with the bail open. Once the float goes under, close the bail, set the hook, and hold on. Egg sacs are also good baits, but beads are the go-to.

> To target deep runs and pools, cast your float slightly upstream and let it drift through good holding water with the bail open. Once the float goes under, close the bail, set the hook, and hold on.

↑ Target tailouts in Great Lakes tributaries in early fall to consistently hook steelhead waiting for salmon eggs floating downstream.

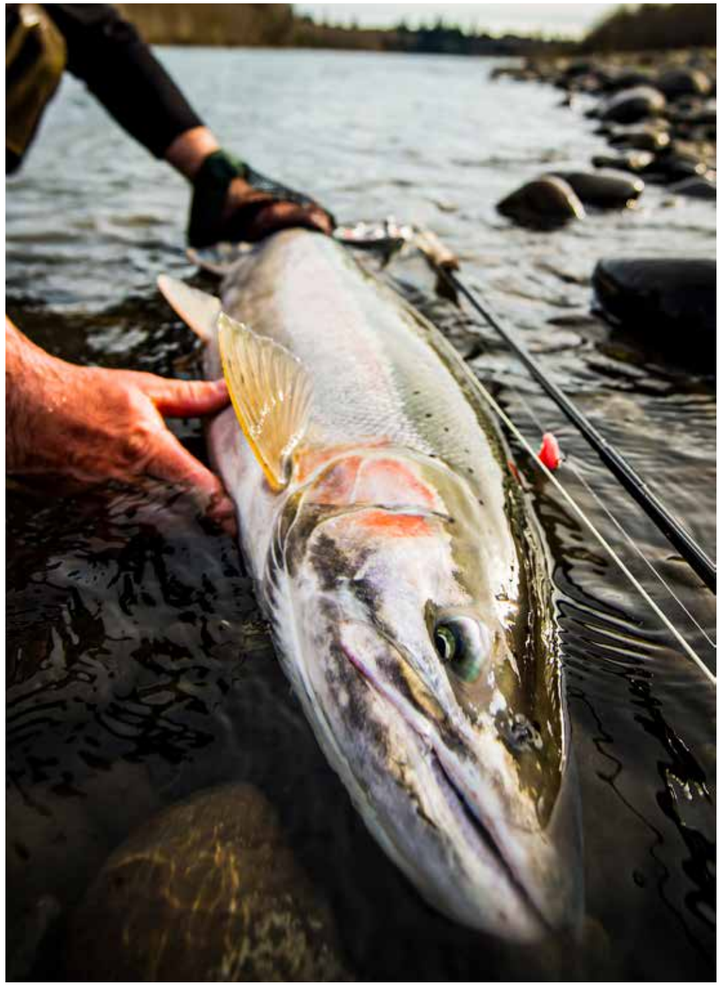
CENTERPIN FISHING

This is a technique that uses a float rig to perfect and maximize a dead drift. The setup usually consists of an 11½- to 13½-foot centerpin rod and reel. You cast this outfit the same way you would a spinning rod, using the weight of the rig to lob the bait out to your target. But the reel doesn't have a drag; instead, the line comes off freely as the current pulls the float and rig downstream, allowing you to fish each drift for as long as you can see the float.

Garrett Brancy, general manager of the Douglaston Salmon Run, has been centerpinning for steelhead for over 20 years and says that reading your float as it drifts downstream is the key to success. "If the float is bouncing up and down on the drift, the rig is too deep," he says. "Adjust your float and check again." Brancy likes to keep his bait 3 to 6 inches off the bottom. He also likes to rotate three main baits: beads, a pink rubber worm, and egg sacs. Switch baits until you find what the fish want.

FLY FISHING

In early fall, steelhead tend to be in fast-moving, oxygenated water. Then, as temps cool, they favor slower runs. Salmon River guide Derek Conant says he sees beginners making a few common



Egg patterns fished under an indicator excel at catching big fall-run chromers like this.
←

mistakes. "Guys always want to overcast, but a lot of these fish are within 20 feet of you," he says. "You want your drift to be moving at walking-pace speed at least 6 to 8 inches off the bottom."

Making too many false casts is another misstep. Conant's advice: "Master the roll cast. If you can learn to make consistent, accurate roll casts and manage your line properly, you're in the game."

On big rivers like the Salmon, Conant runs a 7- to 7½-foot leader to a barrel swivel and 3 or 4 feet of tippet. He recommends adding split shot above the swivel, depending on water level, to get the fly down in the water column, but not so much that it's dragging bottom. For rivers that have big salmon runs, egg patterns are the best bet. Stock your box with Sucker Spawns, Glo Bugs, and Nuke Eggs. Stonefly patterns, like Pat's Rubber Legs, are also deadly on many smaller Great Lakes tribs.

PACIFIC-RUN STEELHEAD

The Pacific Northwest doesn't get a fall run of fish, but autumn is still an excellent time to target summer-run steelhead still in the system. The techniques used in the Great Lakes states also work in the West. However, Spey fishing is much more popular on Western rivers. So if you want to catch a western chromer with spinning gear, a centerpin rig, or a single-handed fly rod, use the advice above. But if you want the biggest challenge in steelhead fishing, try swinging a fly for ocean-run chromers. Here's how.

SPEY FISHING

Also known as swinging flies, Spey fishing is a technique that employs a two-handed fly rod usually in the 13-foot, 7-weight range. It involves casting at a downstream angle and letting your fly swing through a holding area, but exactly how you go about it is influenced by the type of line you spool up with.

"Skagit lines are built to turn over bigger flies and fish sink tips, while Scandi lines are meant for a more delicate presentation in the top of the water column," says veteran Pacific Northwest steelheader Josh Mills. "When water temps are above 45 degrees, I fish either right on top with a skater fly or just below the surface with a wet fly. As water temps start to drop, fish are less likely to ascend through the water column. That's when you move to a Skagit-style setup to sink the fly lower in the water."

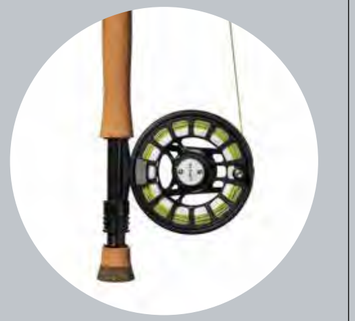
Popular fly patterns for two-handed swinging include Undertakers, Max Canyons, Purple Perils, Muddler Minnows, Intruders, and Hoh Bo Speys. Mills also recommends taking a casting lesson at a local fly shop to help with the learning curve on the river.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

Made for Steel

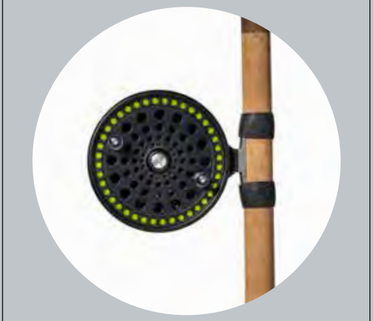
photographs by **JARREN VINK**

Since a first-time steelheader is unlikely to pick up a Spey rod, the gear, flies, and baits below are for use with the more popular techniques. But any of these setups will work for fishing both the Great Lakes and the Pacific Northwest.



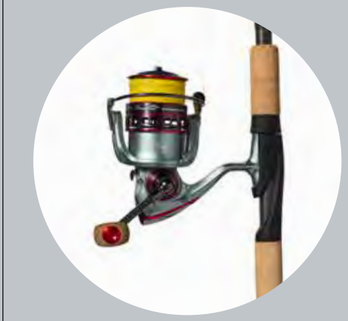
FLY ROD AND REEL

The Orvis Clearwater is one of the best-value fly rods available. The 5-weight model won F&S's Best Budget Rod award in our 2025 fly-rod shootout. The 8-weight version, pictured here, is just as good and perfect for beginner steelheaders. Pair it with the Hydros reel, and you won't need a new outfit for years to come.



CENTERPIN ROD AND REEL

The Douglas LRS Centerpin rod comes in multiple lengths, but the 13½-foot version is the one you want for steelheading. Pair it with the Kingpin Imperial reel, and you'll be ready to fish. There are cheaper options out there, but a quality setup like this one will help you pick up centerpinning faster.



SPIN-FISHING ROD AND REEL

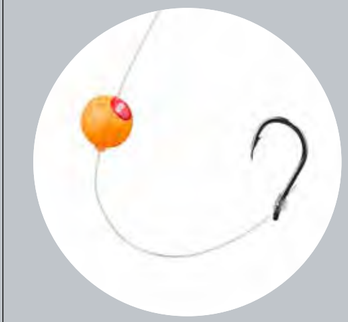
You don't need to get anything fancy or spend a bundle to get started spin fishing for steelhead. The Fenwick Eagle Salmon & Steelhead rod matched with a size 30 Pfleuger President XT will run you about $250 and will serve you well for years. After that, all you need is line and a box full of beads.

FLIES

Any egg pattern will get the job done for fall steelhead, but the Sucker Spawn is my favorite. Stock your fly box with a bunch of different patterns, but go heavy on natural colors like cream, tan, and peach. Other popular fall steelhead flies include Glo Bugs, Nuke Eggs, Estaz Eggs, and stoneflies.

WORMS

What can't a pink worm catch? Berkley PowerBait Floating Trout Worms in the bubblegum color are excellent fall steelhead baits for centerpinning. Pinch the worm into 3-inch sections and hook it through the center so the ends flutter. But keep some egg sacs and beads in your box in case the steelies snub the worm.



BEADS

There are few steelhead baits as versatile and effective as the simple bead. Fly, centerpin, and spin anglers all use them, but they are especially deadly when fished under a float on a spinning rod. Make sure the bead is pinned about an inch above the hook, and carry a few different color options. F&S

MATT'S TIPS

by MATTHEW EVERY illustrations by PETE SUCHESKI

MAKE A TREE-STAND SHOOTING STICK, WALK LIKE A DEER TO TAG A RUTTING BUCK, AND BE BETTER PREPARED FOR SURVIVAL SITUATIONS BY EATING MORE POTATO CHIPS

No. 1

WANT TO STEADY your rifle in a tree stand? Cut a 3-foot stick with a short Y on one end. Hook the fork into the rungs of your stand's platform. Grip the other end of the stick with your fingers and rest the rifle's fore-end in the web between your thumb and index finger. Rock solid.

No. 2

IF YOU'RE CAMPING in cold temperatures, put your phone and any other battery-powered devices in your sleeping bag overnight. Your body heat will keep the batteries alive longer. On airplane mode, an iPhone should give you a couple of days before needing a charge.

No. 3

HAVING TROUBLE keeping track of 209 muzzleloader primers? The best place I've found to store them is in a Tic Tac box. Inside, they stay dry during a hunt, and it's easy to flip the lid and select one primer from the bunch. Just make sure you don't chew on one by accident.

No. 4

DURING THE RUT, noisy leaves can work to your advantage—if you know how to sound like a deer instead of a human. Adopt a general *step-step-pause* cadence but mix it up. Occasionally stop for long periods, and hit a grunt tube or fawn bleat every so often to help paint the picture.

No. 5

PRINGLES CONTAINER LIDS fit perfectly on many 8-ounce soup cans. You can use this to make a waterproof survival kit. Fill an empty tin can with things like a pocketknife, tinder, a compass, and snare wire, then cap it with a Pringles lid and seal it with electrical tape.

TAP'S TIPS

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

No. 1

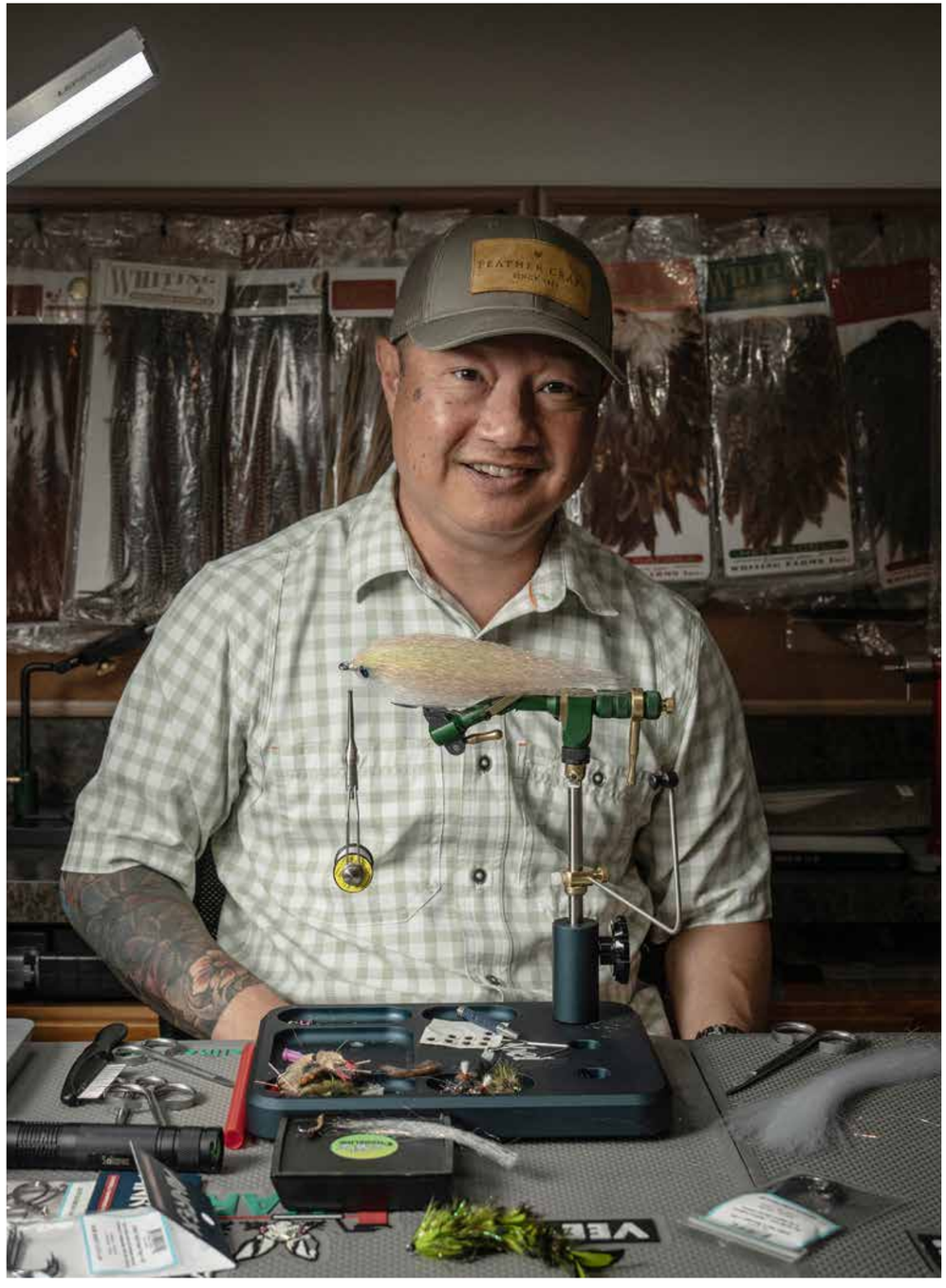
ALWAYS SNEAK UP on a pothole from the upwind side—that is, with the wind behind you. Ducks invariably flush into the wind, so they will start your way as they get off the water. Even if they turn immediately, you will gain a few precious yards in which to get off a shot or two.

No. 2

FORGET YOUR GUIDE is a hired hand. If you meet him on equal grounds, he may turn out to be the best friend you ever had. And chances are that you'll experience a brand of sport you've never thought possible.

No. 3

FLY TIERS PRIZE the barred and black-tipped side feathers from drake wood ducks, so if you shoot a male woodie this fall, be sure to save these feathers and give them to someone who ties flies. He'll be so grateful he'll probably force some of his creations on you.



How I Fish: Son Tao

MASTER FLY TIER, FISHING GUIDE, VETERAN, IMMIGRANT, MENTAL-HEALTH ADVOCATE

interview by **COLIN KEARNS**
photographs by **CHRIS CRISMAN**

CATCHING A FISH on a fly you tied never gets old. It's like the end state—where the beginning is the time behind the vise, then you accomplish your mission by having hooked a fish on that fly.

» I WAS BORN in a small town in Vietnam so far south that the war basically skipped over the area. But as the communists eventually were making their way south, my parents decided to leave the country so they could, one, provide a better life for their kids and, two, not take the risk of my father being captured and executed for having served in the military.

» THE JOURNEY FROM Vietnam to Malaysia is not that far—but when you're traveling on a small banana boat, it becomes a very long journey. There was a lot of disease and dysentery, and as a 5-year-old, I was exposed to bodies being thrown overboard—a lot of elderly people, but children too. What wound up saving the rest of our lives on that boat were Thai pirates. In exchange for personal valuables, the pirates provided the ship with water. At that point, everyone on the boat was dying of thirst.

» WE MADE IT to Malaysia and lived in a refugee camp for about a year and a half. My parents applied for political asylum in countries all over the world, but they all denied us—until Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, selected our family out of hundreds of thousands and agreed to sponsor us and help us with the paperwork to move to the United States.

» WE LANDED IN California and stayed there for about six months before we eventually reached Pennsylvania. As immigrants, we were very poor, so I didn't have access to all the toys and stuff most kids had. But what I did have access to was the Conestoga River. It was less than half a mile away from our home. Our neighbors had given me a spinning rod that they weren't able to sell at a garage sale. I'd dig up worms or catch crayfish and fish all the time. That's what my childhood was like—a lot of fishing.

» TROUT—especially wild trout—don't live in ugly places.

» WHEN I STEP into the river, it almost feels like I'm home because it's my safe place. I have no responsibilities. I'm just there to be able to enjoy that moment.

» AFTER COLLEGE, I worked as an engineer. The pay was good, and I had the freedom to take trips to hunt ducks or go fishing for muskies or pike or whatever I wanted. Then 9/11 happened. I felt there was a debt that my family needed to pay back to the U.S. for allowing us to come here and experience freedom—and as the oldest child, it was my responsibility to pay it. I resigned from my job, enlisted in the service, and shipped off to basic training in October 2001.

» MY PLAN WAS never to make the military a career. I'd serve my four years, then go back to doing what I was doing. But I thoroughly enjoyed my work because I thought I was making a difference.

» IN WAR, you lose people who had become blood brothers and sisters. But it goes beyond just other soldiers dying. Insurgents would basically use civilians as bait to kill U.S. soldiers. I remember there was a mentally handicapped child who would sell cigarettes and cola to the soldiers at the marketplace. We got to know this child very well—and over time, we learned to trust her. One day, the insurgents rigged her with explosives and detonated her inside the perimeter, killing soldiers as well. That's stuff that you never see on the news.

» THERE WAS ONE deployment in Iraq that was really bad. When I came back to our base in Hawaii, I couldn't sleep and was trying to forget some of the stuff that I saw, so I started drinking more than ever. I would frequent this one bar, and there was an older Korean War vet who took notice of me. He tried to talk to me several times, but I blew him off—not knowing at the time that he was just trying to help me. Eventually, though, he asked if I wanted to go fishing—and that kind of woke me up.

» HE TOOK ME to some nearby flats. I had never fly fished before, but he knew the area well and told me to just lob my line out there as far as I could. So I did, and I caught a bonefish. That fish was on fire. Not knowing anything about playing a fish, I chased that bonefish a hundred yards down the flats. Somehow, we managed to land it. It was *huge*—probably 14 pounds. That was the only fish I caught that day, but later that night, after fishing and being out in the sun, I had the first good night's sleep I'd had in a long time.

» ONE DAY, as I was driving, I heard an ad on the radio about a sports and outdoors expo. I decided to stop and check it out. I was dressed in my uniform, and when I walked past the Project Healing Waters booth, they flagged me down. A couple weeks later, I showed up at a fishing outing of theirs. I was there for maybe 10 minutes before I tried to hightail it out of there. Like anyone who has PTSD, I don't deal very well with strangers. But the program leader caught up with me and eventually got me to come down to one of the ponds. He put a fly rod in my hand, and we started catching crappies.

» AFTER THAT DAY on the crappie pond, I visited a fly shop near my house. One of the guys working there helped me find a beginner rod and reel that fit my budget. Then he led me to the back room where they had some old stuff that had been donated to the shop. One of the items was a Renzetti vise, which he gave to me, along with some tying tools and a book called *The Founding Flies*. I looked at the photos of classic fly patterns in that book and I thought to myself, *I could do this*.

← Son Tao, one of the most respected tiers in the fly-fishing industry, works on a baitfish pattern in his studio.

↑
Bonefish are Tao's favorite game fish to catch on the fly. Here's a look at his flats boxes.

↑
Tao changes patterns while fishing a small trout stream near his Pennsylvania home.

↑
This is just one corner of the extensive—and enviable—room where Tao stores his gear.

» AS A KID, I was an avid painter—drawings, sketches, pastels, you name it. When you combine that with my engineering background and my soldier's mentality, it all really worked well together when it came to fly tying. *Nobody* chooses the Ginger Quill—one of the most difficult Catskill patterns—as a beginner fly, but that was my first fly. I must've tied 120 of them before I got it right. Over the course of 10 months, I tied every fly in that book. I was spinning deer hair and tying the Irresistible Adams, learning about thread size, thread control, tension—all these things that no one had taught me. I wouldn't necessarily recommend following my approach if you're new to tying, but it did accelerate my learning curve. In less than a year, I was tying dry flies that it takes other tiers five or 10 years to master.

» GETTING ON THE RIVER clears my mind. Tying is therapeutic. They've become my medication.

» MY FAVORITE FLY to tie is the Stimulator. So many different tying techniques go into that fly, and you can tie it in so many variations to the original pattern. You can go with a dubbed body, a floss body, or tinsel body. You can add rubber legs or change the color to mimic a caddis or stonefly or cicada. It's a very technical fly, but once you get it down, a well-tied Stimulator is something to be proud of.

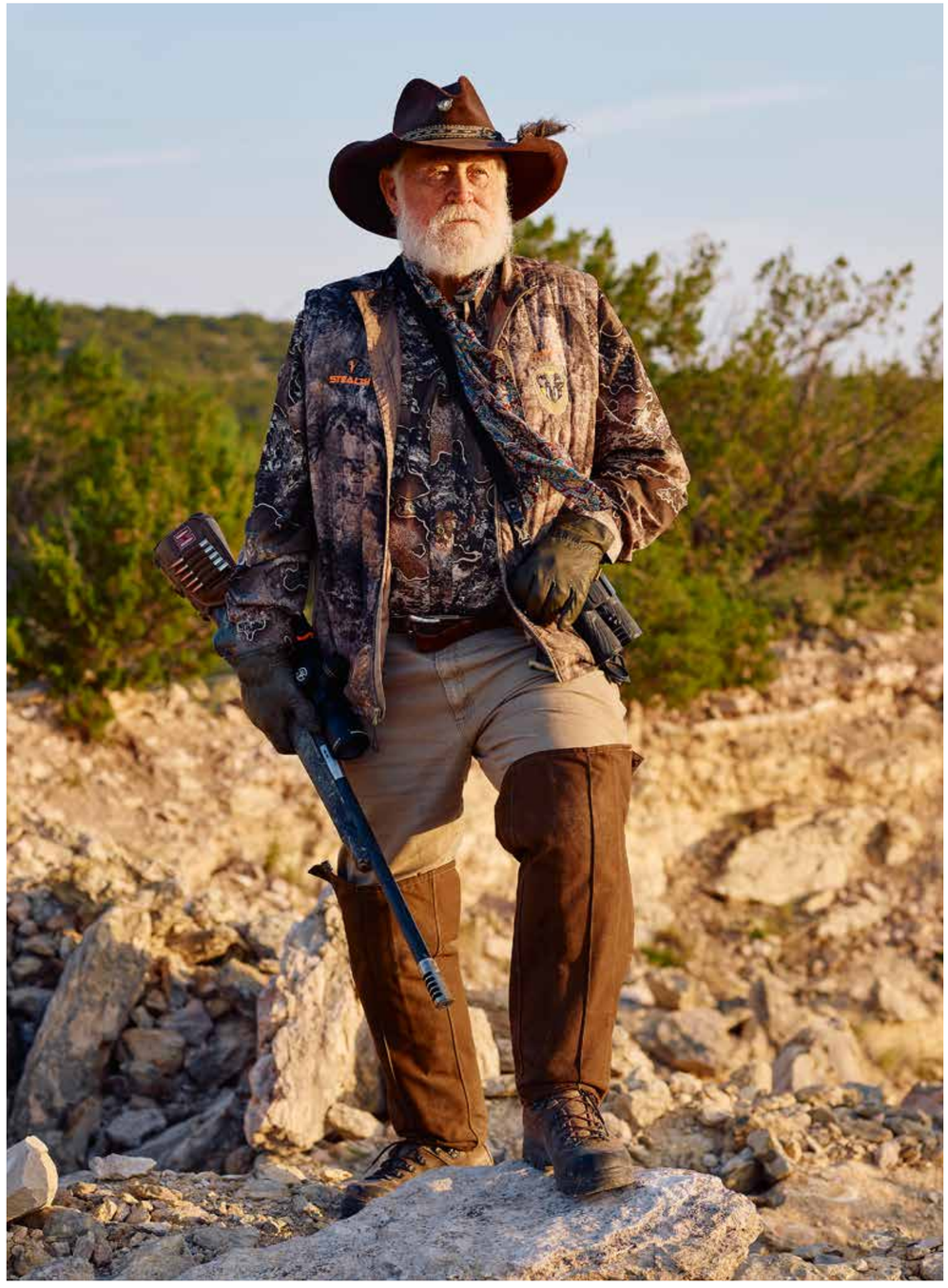
» I QUICKLY LEARNED that fly tying and fly fishing provided what I call a "singular focus." It's tunnel vision. You're so focused on just one aspect of whatever you're doing—applying thread tension, reading the water—that your brain naturally tunes everything else out in order to give that one subject your undivided attention. And when you do that, all the noise of life—all the bad memories—goes out the window.

» IT'S FUN to let your kids sit in your lap while you tie, but eventually they'll want to do it themselves. I would stick a pencil eraser on the hook point so my kids wouldn't poke themselves—then I let them tie whatever they wanted. You'll see that they have that same singular focus to where they don't even want to blink. Fly tying develops amazing traits down the road. My daughter started tying when she was 4. She's 12 now and she paints, crochets, draws. You can't teach creativity, but you can encourage it. Fly tying is a great avenue for that encouragement.

» IT REALLY DIDN'T dawn on me until I was a lot older what my parents did to give us a better life. What they endured as immigrants in coming here with nothing on their backs and working long hours to try to make a better life for their kids... *Grateful* would be the word. Grateful for the sacrifices they made, but also grateful for my childhood of spending so much time outdoors. Looking back, I think that made me into a better person because I was very appreciative of the environment and gained an early understanding that conservation is important.

» FLY FISHING has become a higher calling. I know what it has done for me and what it can do for others. It takes me back to my days in the service. A new soldier would show up not knowing a thing, but I'd teach them the necessary skills and help them grow into leaders. That sense of accomplishment is what kept me in the service for 23 years. I get the same feeling when I see somebody who is also reaping the benefits of tying or fishing and how they're healing themselves.

» IF THERE'S ONE THING that I would like for people to remember about me, it would be that I loved to help others. F&S



How I Hunt: Larry Weishuhn

DEER HUNTING LEGEND, WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST, GAME-CALLING PIONEER, CONSERVATIONIST, HANDGUN HUNTER, TEXAN

interview by **COLIN KEARNS**
photographs by **MATTHEW JOHNSON**

I GREW UP in rural Texas in a little German-speaking community called Zimmerscheidt. I'm so fortunate to have grown up in the country and to have had a mother and dad who really understood how much I loved the outdoors. Whenever I wasn't doing chores—and I had *a lot* of chores—I was out hunting or fishing. When I first started going to school, I thought I'd died and gone to hell because all the sudden I couldn't spend as much time outside anymore.

» THE MOST MAJESTIC DEER—no, I take that back. The most majestic *animal* in North America is a 30-plus-inch mule deer. When he stands on a ridge and turns his head, he doesn't turn his head. The world revolves underneath him.

» MY FAVORITE PLACE to hunt is the next place I'm going to.

» FOR A LONG TIME when I was a child, my dad worked in the oil fields and got home late. At night, my mom would read to me from the pages of *Field & Stream*, *Sports Afield*, and *Outdoor Life*. I knew then that somehow I wanted to make a living in the outdoors.

» THE VALUES I LEARNED from growing up hunting and fishing, in a word: *life*. I learned very early to respect firearms and to respect life itself, because we pretty much ate most of everything we took. I learned about being honest and being truthful and being respectful.

← Larry Weishuhn is considered by many to be one of the greatest deer hunters of all time.

And when you get right to it, respect is the greatest thing. Respect for the habitat, the plants, the nongame species, the game species, the people you deal with, the food you eat. A respect for life.

» A LOT OF THE RESEARCH I did as a wildlife biologist benefited me as a hunter. I learned more about the habits of game species—the food they ate, where they moved—and a lot about their behavior. When I was at Texas A&M, we had a pen of about 30 or 40 deer behind the vet school, and I used to go there to sit and listen to the vocalizations of the bucks and the does. When I started talking about their grunting, people laughed at me. Eventually the first grunt calls marketed to hunters came out, but by then I'd been grunting to deer for probably 10 years.

» I LOVE MY old brown hats. They've traveled the world with me. They've been with me when it was good. They've been with me when it was bad.

» THE THRILL OF being able to match wits with an animal on its own ground and entice it to show himself or herself is still there for me. Makes no difference if it's a doe, a spike, or a Boone and Crockett buck—there's still a great satisfaction in being able to communicate with a deer. It's like the guy who's getting ready to shoot his first deer and he's so excited that he's shaking.

» I HAVE SIX or eight of the *Field & Stream* Honor Badges—all whitetails, maybe a mule deer as well. They all go back to the original contest the magazine used to do. I can look at each one of them and, even though they look the same, tell you how I earned that particular badge with that particular animal. They're special to me.

» TO THIS DAY, one of the things I love most is to rattle. Rattling is so much fun because of the interaction that you get out of bucks. Some come in slowly out of curiosity. Some charge in and will try to fight you because they're so jacked up on testosterone. Does it work all the time? No. But when it does work, it's such a great experience.

» I GREW UP in an era when cowboy was king, which is probably why I've always loved handguns. And I've always been interested in this perceived idea that they're not accurate enough for hunting. A handgun is just like any other gun—even a 28-inch-barrel rifle. Where the barrel is pointed when the trigger is pulled is where the bullet goes. Hunting with a handgun takes a bit more time to get used to, but they're extremely accurate. They have limitations, but so do bows. I just love hunting with handguns. And even though I know I can take an animal down very cleanly at 100, 150 yards, I still love the challenge of getting within 20 yards if I can.

» MY OFFICE ISN'T very big, but I probably have 40 heads in here. I can look at any of these mounts and remember every little thing about that hunt—who I was with, what way the wind was blowing, what I was thinking. They all tell a story and, to me, they're a way of showing respect to the animal.

» I TELL PEOPLE all the time: If you want to learn about whitetail deer, go sit in a mall or someplace crowded and watch people go by. Some people talk a lot. Some people are quiet. Some people are loners. Others are more gregarious. Some people react to certain stimuli—like when a good-looking lady comes by, one of them will whistle. We, as a human species, are very similar to whitetail deer, because whitetail deer are very individual too. Everyone says you have to hunt deer in cold weather. Well, I've killed some really big bucks when it was really hot out—and it's probably because those deer just happened to be ones that liked when it was hot. When you get right down to it, deer are as individual as the horns they wear on their heads.

» FOR RATTLING, I like old-style antlers. I mean *real* antlers. The ones that

↑ Weishuhn treasures the F&S Honor Badges he earned from deer he tagged years ago.

↑ Weishuhn's background in wildlife biology informed his approach to calling in game.

↑ His go-to rattling antlers came from a whitetail he killed in the Texas Hill Country.

I use now are at least 30 years old, taken off a 10-point buck from the Texas Hill Country. I like antlers on the bigger side, because you can make a lot of noise. On windy days, that louder sound will carry just a little bit farther.

» THE BEST ADVICE for a hunter is *go hunt*. Don't look for excuses not to hunt. I'll be in a hunting camp and hear, "Well, it's raining. I'm not going to hunt." Or it's too cold. It's too hot. It's too windy. It's too this. It's too that. You can stay back and watch hunting videos or read books on hunting—but there is nothing that equals going out and learning from and listening to the sounds of the Earth. Go hunt.

» THANK GOD THAT I'm in a profession where age is not as important as it is in others. Because I can't wait to get up in the morning and go to work, whether it's in my office to write or on the road for something else. To me, it's about the continual search for knowledge. I want to learn more every day. I think that's what keeps me relatively young, more than anything else.

» SUCH A CRUCIAL part of hunting is trying to introduce other people to the sport, to help them gain an understanding of why hunting is so very important—not just for our own sake, but to understand why habitat must be conserved and used wisely so that we not only have deer but butterflies and songbirds and squirrels and the proper number of predators. To help them learn about being able to commune with nature, so that you can get out there and lose yourself and think about almost anything you want to—even some problems.

When opportunity knocks, open that door. Don't be afraid to work hard and don't be afraid of hard work.

» AND NEXT THING you know, you see a deer and you forget about all those problems and realize maybe they weren't so important after all.

» WHETHER YOU'RE TALKING about grizzly bears, wolves, or other game species, there are two terms that come into play: preservation and conservation. Preservation kills. Conservation promotes life. Preservation aims at only one species—like wolves or grizzly bears—at the expense of everything else that's out there. If those wild animals were properly managed, then all the other species and the habitat itself would be in so much better shape. Conservation is the wise approach.

» WHAT'S TEXAS? If you're in Europe and you approach somebody and they say, "Where are you from?" If you're from Texas, you answer, "I'm from Texas." That's Texas.

» OH, MY GRACIOUS! Watching the world come to life and watching the sun go down. I've seen beautiful animals, beautiful mountains, and all kinds of things—but I dearly love sunrises and sunsets. Those are the two most beautiful things I can think of.

» MY IDEA OF the best way to end a day of hunting is to gather around a campfire with two or three friends. Maybe have either an adult libation or a strong cup of coffee, and just sit there, exchange some stories, kick the fire, and watch those little embers of prayers going to the good Lord. F&S

ADVENTURES BEYOND THE PAVEMENT

SHYANNE ORVIS

At almost 8,951 feet elevation, there's a rugged 4x4 road that crawls along one of my favorite high alpine creeks in Colorado. Getting there takes skill and the right vehicle, but it's worth the journey. The water is fast, with pockets of small pools tucked behind boulders and fallen branches, but the cutthroat and brook trout are plentiful. As the creek climbs past the tree line, the trees begin to open up.

My son, Colter, was only three weeks old, and it was the first fishing trip we went on together. I strapped him onto my chest, rigged up my fly rod with a simple parachute Adams pattern, and caught a small, vibrant brook trout almost immediately.

I grew up in Flint, Michigan, with family ties to Ford factories. I inherited my passion for fishing from my mother. Nature, particularly being on the water, grounds me. It's a place for reflection and self-discovery, especially when I needed it the most.

For more than 11 years, I have guided others, sharing my knowledge and encouraging them to disconnect from their phones, emails, social media, and daily lives, finding the same meditative space that's drawn me to the outdoors all my life. Guiding, for me, is about helping attune people to sacred wilderness and the sound of the river.

For our adventures, I rely on my 2025 Bronco Badlands, which I outfit with a rod vault and rooftop tent. As a mother exploring remote sites with young Colter, a trustworthy vehicle is essential for navigating gnarly terrain and helping to ensure our safety. I need to feel confident in my vehicle, whether going to school or on an adventure.

The Bronco is our home base for every adventure and an essential part of our journey. It connects me to my roots and fuels our spirit of exploration. Most importantly, it ensures that my son and I can create countless memories together, inspiring him to embrace the wild and the adventures that lie ahead.

Shyanne Orvis is a Team Bronco Ambassador.

Paid for by Ford Motor Company.

Ford From the Road »

DARRYL MOORE

As a kid, my grandpa and I would load his old Ford truck for daily summer fishing trips. He reveled in my catches, sharing stories at church. He later taught me hunting, emphasizing respect for the land and enjoying every outdoor moment.

Today, I live this life full-time, hunting, fishing and filming for 24.7Hunt. My mission is to show everyone — especially kids and underrepresented groups — that the outdoors is for everybody.

Ford has been with me every step. My 2024 Ford F-150 Lariat powers my entire outdoor experience, literally.

Last year, chasing elk out West, I drove 28 hours from Camden, Arkansas, to McCall, Idaho, pulling a trailer. My ProPower Onboard provided heat and AC in the trailer, even powering Starlink for calls home. Being miles off-road, a reliable, four-wheel-drive truck was crucial. After 17 days without an elk, I returned, then went to Colorado and finally harvested a 298-inch bull. It was a surreal, emotional moment, fulfilling a lifelong dream inspired by my grandpa.

The F-150 is central to our family life. It comfortably fits all three car seats for my 1-, 2- and 3-year-olds. We took an 8-hour beach trip, and the kids watched movies and enjoyed looking out the twin panel moonroof.

My older sons often ask to go fishing. We visit the pond weekly, backing the truck to the water so they can fish from the Pro Access Tailgate.

These moments are special, echoing time with my grandpa. Catching fish is a bonus; the real joy is the time spent together.

Darryl Moore is a Ford Truck Ambassador.

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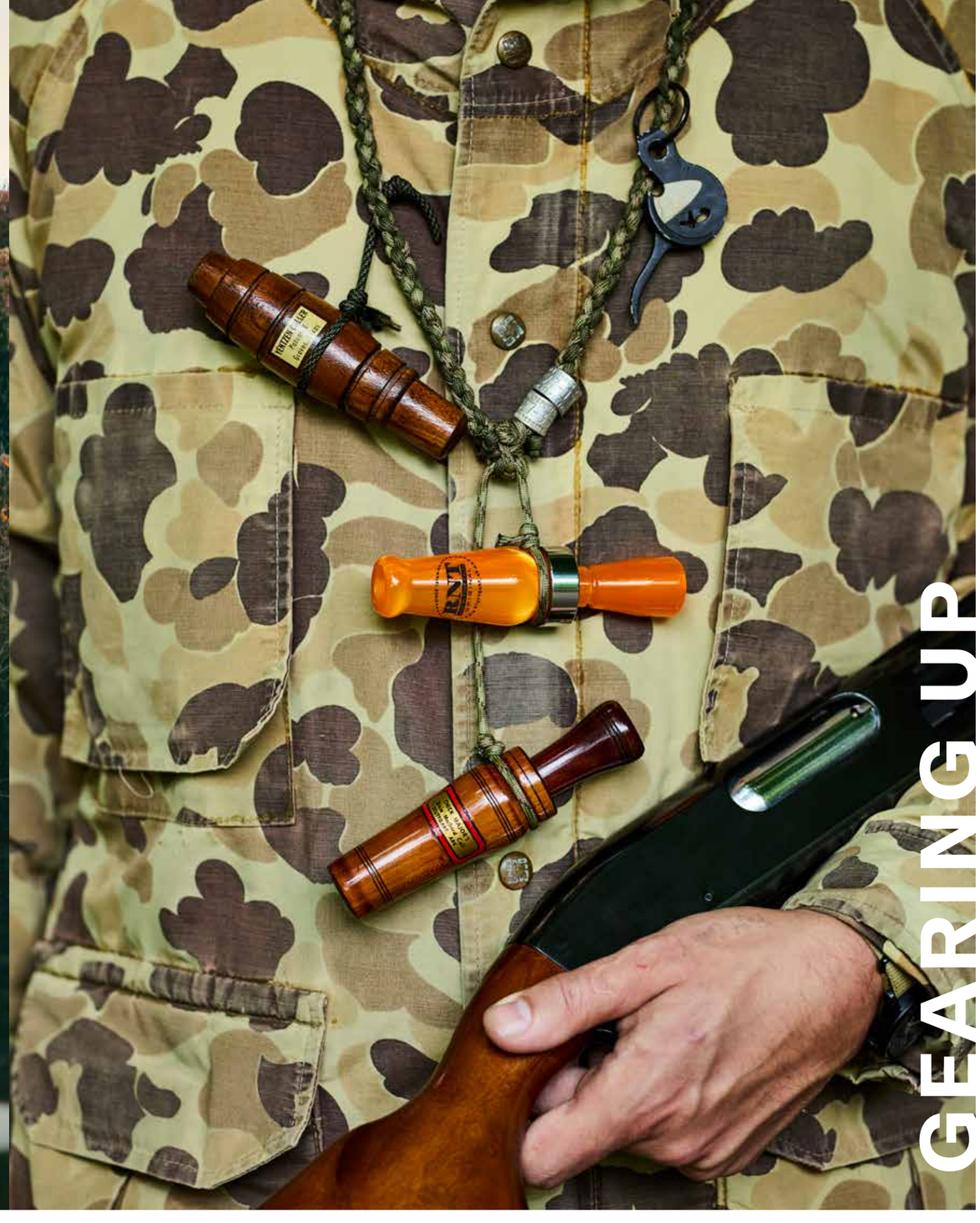
TEAM BRONCO AMBASSADOR



GEARING UP

photograph by **JARREN VINK**

THE SILVER MEDALIST

FOR NEARLY A CENTURY, THIS STYLISH, AFFORDABLE, AMERICAN-MADE FLY REEL HAS BROUGHT COUNTLESS FISH TO THE NET

by **KEITH McCAFFERTY**
photograph by **JOHN TOOLAN**

When it came to fishing gear, my father was not a man to leave well enough alone.

He would sharpen a fillet knife until its blade was thin as a razor. He would take a tip section of a broken fly rod and marry it to the butt section of another. Nothing was immune to his attentions. Holes were drilled into bass plugs, then filled with buckshot to change the balance point. His Jitterbug was rendered weedless by switching the hook from the bottom of the lure to its back. His Hula Popper got a new skirt and popped louder after a little loving care with some 220-grit sandpaper.

So it came as little surprise that the first fly reel he gave me would bear the marks of his obsession. It was a Pflueger Medalist—that iconic, affordable, simple, and nearly indestructible workhorse of a fly reel that has been in almost continuous production since the early 1930s. If it has not helped bring more trout to the creel than any other American-made fly reel, I would be greatly surprised. The model my father gave me was the 1495, a little too big and heavy to balance with the trout rods I fished and on the light side for the steelhead and salmon that I aspired to catch.

But you fish what you have, and the old Pflueger—I called it the Silver Medalist because nearly all the finish had worn off—had to be whatever the day called for. One evening, I might ask it to anchor a 4-weight double-taper rig with a 5X tippet to present size 20 mayfly duns. The next morning, I would clip into place a spare spool with a shooting head to cast streamers into the next zip code.

Like many fishermen whose pockets got a little deeper with maturity, I eventually swapped out the 1495 for its equivalent in Hardy's lightweight series, to which the Medalists were often compared. The British reels were lighter weight, relied on a similar smooth click-and-pawl drag, and had closer tolerances than the Pflueger, although this last virtue was of questionable merit if you fished in freezing water. Both the Hardy and the Medalist would eventually seize up on a 10-degree day, the spool freezing to the rim. You would have to de-ice the reel by dunking it into the river if you wanted to continue casting. In this case, the Pflueger was not only the less expensive option, but it was also the better choice.

Aesthetically speaking, many anglers believed that the Hardys were less clunky and sang a sweeter song when a fish was taking line. This smacks of snobbery, but small pleasures can be no small matter when your fishing is so seldom interrupted by fish.

Speaking practically, their performance was similar, at least for freshwater fishing. Let's be honest: Despite what the purveyors of fishing tackle would have you believe, an expensive reel is not always necessary. For trout and bass fishing, a reel is little more than an ornament on which to spool line.

It is in saltwater where most reels meet their Waterloo. This is not only because of corrosion. It's the strain on the drag mechanism as a strong fish powers away. My Medalist found its first true challenge fighting a 30-pound king salmon shaped like a bomb and so freshly minted it still carried sea lice under its tail. True, I finally landed the salmon—a quarter mile from where I hooked it—but for the last half of the fight, the reel was in free spool with the handle broken off.

That fish put my father into his MacGyver mode, trying figure out how to add drag to what was basically a click-and-pawl system not designed for saltwater abuse. He experimented at some length, finally using a saw to remove a section the size of a sand dollar from the reel's back plate. The cutout addressed the weight issue while allowing the angler to press his thumb or fingers on the revolving spool, creating drag. This practice was never popular, although I've heard it had its adherents with striped bass anglers along the Atlantic coast.

Dad eventually hit upon the idea of attaching a small tab of leather to one of the reel pillars. The tab could be pressed against the spool as a fish ran, adding resistance without banging the knuckles. All that was needed was a fish to test his theory.

This came in the form of a tarpon while I was fishing from a rental boat in the Key West harbor. There were about 20 rolling in a school just out of casting range, looking to be 60 to 70 pounds apiece. Better tackle busters have never been made. I cast ahead of the lead fish, then was tight to it. A bar of brightest silver flashed on the horizon as the fish jumped, then the sky and the tarpon turned gold as evening fell. Forty or more minutes later, it was rolling regularly to gulp air, a sign I took to mean it was fatigued. For a few long minutes, the impossible verged on being possible. Then the line went limp.

I reeled in 100 yards of backing, expecting to find the springs sprung or the spindle frozen from oxidation, pieces of metal scattered on the ocean floor. But the reel was still in working order. The shock tippet had been worn through by the fish's giant maw, that was all. The postscript of many a tarpon encounter.

The old Silver Medalist would never again accompany me when I went after such a big fish. But the reel is not entirely retired. It has lived to fight again and again and still does on occasion, usually well into the fall, when the browns are running.

I pair it with a 7-weight bamboo rod.

One classic deserves another. F&S

A Pflueger Medalist attached to a trout rod will never go out of style.

A BILL SLUSSER FLINTLOCK IS THE GUNMAKER'S ART IN ITS HIGHEST FORM—AND IT WILL DROP A DEER AT 100 YARDS TOO

SMOKE SHOW

photographs by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI** story by **BILL HEAVEY**

Bill Slusser's path in life became clear to him when he was 11 years old, on the day he fired his first muzzleloader. "I fell in love with black powder," he says. "I thought, *This is what I want to do with my life.*" And that's exactly what he's done. He took three years of metal shop in middle and high school, and then he went to gunsmithing school. He built his first custom gun for himself, a .36-caliber flintlock made to shoot in matches. "It was kind of rough," he remembers, "but it shot good."

Today, Slusser's flintlocks sell for many thousands of dollars. Many go straight into collectors' safes. Each is unique, with engraving painstakingly done by hand, often on a religious theme and incorporating brass, silver, and gold. But Slusser insists they all shoot. "They're fancy, but they're still hunting rifles," he says.

Like many artists, Slusser is not what you would call a savvy businessman. I once asked if he'd ever reckoned how much he earns from making world-class firearms. "Put it this way," he said. "I'd probably make more money working at McDonald's. But the way I figure it, if God gives you a talent, you're supposed to use it."

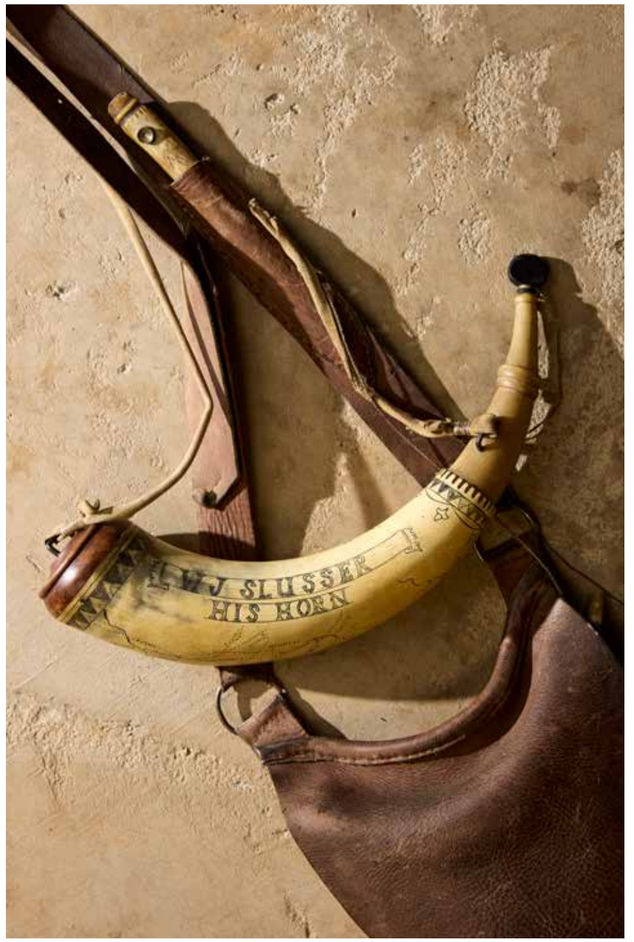
He produces no more than five or six flintlocks a year, sometimes just one or two if the work is especially demanding. The current average wait time for a Slusser flintlock is six years. The hardest part of the process for him has been learning patience. It took a little more than two years of 14-hour days for him to complete the masterpiece he calls the Revenant. "Once that rifle was finished, I realized that I'd had the skill to do it long before I had the patience to do it."

Above
The lock of the Revenant, Slusser's most ornate flintlock to date. In this case, the Revenant is not Leo DiCaprio but Jesus Christ, returned from the dead to lead mankind out of sin. The engraving, as on all of Slusser's rifles, is done entirely by hand, with hammers, chisels, and engraving tools.

Opposite
Slusser transported his log home from Pennsylvania to Kentucky, where he renovated it. At his feet are the skulls of two bucks he took with the rifle he's holding. He tanned the deer hides hanging from the rafters himself.

"I'd probably make more money working at McDonald's. But the way I figure it, if God gives you a talent, you're supposed to use it."

—BILL SLUSSER



Opposite
Three Slusser rifles. He made the middle one for his wife; it's lighter than many traditional guns and features a 37-inch "swamped" barrel, which is thickest at the breech, tapers in the middle, and gets slightly thicker at the muzzle.

Left
Slusser's powder horn, patch knife, and possibles bag, all made by him. The bag holds balls, powder, and a tow worm—the rough chaff of a flax plant that was the 18th century's equivalent of steel wool, used for cleaning a rifle.

Above
The final step of loading a muzzleloader: Slusser uses a wooden ramrod to push a patch and round ball down the barrel.

Above
The patch box of a .50-caliber hunting flintlock built for Tom Mills of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The patches are made from pillow ticking. Slusser says that fabric was scarce on the frontier, so shooters used whatever was handy to make patches.

Opposite, top
A leather pouch containing flints and tools of Slusser's own making. The brush, top, is made with heavy-duty wear-resistant fibers. It's concave so that it can clean the difficult-to-reach corners of the breech. He says it reduced his cleaning time from 45 minutes to just 10.

Opposite, bottom
Slusser's copy of a 1780s gun made by Peter Neihart in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. The hunter's star inlaid on the stock represents the four major and four minor points of the compass. It was said that a man with a hunter's star would always find his way home.

Left
In a cloud of smoke and a shower of sparks, Slusser fires one of his flintlock hunting rifles. It may look quaint, but in Slusser's hands, the gun can shoot 1-inch groups with round balls at 100 yards.

Above, top
This Lancaster-style .50-caliber flintlock is a work in progress on his bench. The stock is what a gunsmith calls "white," meaning unfinished. Like all of Slusser's guns, the lock will be hand-inlaid and custom fit.

Above, bottom
A close-up of the lock, trigger guard, and stock of Slusser's .54-caliber hunting flintlock. "This is my favorite deer rifle," he says. "I built it exactly 20 years ago, and this last fall I took my 15th deer with it."

“The difference between a master and a journeyman is that the master has made that mistake a thousand times and knows how to fix it.”

—BILL SLUSSER

Opposite, top
Slusser inlets a swamped barrel into a blank stock. He favors curly maple stumpwood, which is actually the part of the tree below ground, the root ball. Such wood is extremely hard to cut, much less carve, as it will often chip first. “It’s harder to work with, but it has wonderful grain and figure,” he says.

Opposite, bottom
Using a hammer and a small chisel, Slusser works on a freehand engraving. He says it’s impossible to do error-free engraving. “The difference between a master and a journeyman is that the master has made that mistake a thousand times and knows how to fix it.”

Above, left
He makes many of his own tools, including this hammer and two chisels. But even a master craftsman needs Altoids tins. This one is full of different engravers, including an onglette used for cutting borders and inlaying. His only power tools are a band saw for shaping stocks and a drill press.

Above, right
Slusser prepares to inlay a decorative figure of an eagle with an olive branch in one talon and a sheaf of arrows in the other. It was first used on a Massachusetts coin in 1776 and incorporated into the Great Seal of the U.S. in 1782. Once finished, it will sit flush with the wood’s surface.

Above, left
In his shop, Slusser holds what he calls a "fairly fancy" rifle; it has nine inlays in silver and gold.

Above, right
Cast parts of the lock for a flintlock that he custom files, drills, taps, hardens, tempers, and fits to complete the lock before it's installed. "A hand-built lock is more precise than any kit lock," he says.

Opposite, top left
The butt plate of the Revenant, depicting "Jesus returning for his people, riding a horse, with a silver sword coming from his mouth and eyes like fire," Slusser explains. "He initially came as a lamb but returns as a warrior king to vanquish Satan and his angels."

Opposite, top right
The breech of the Revenant. The acanthus-leaf pattern Slusser designed is typical of the work done on guns during the Baroque period. The relief is carved directly into the barrel rather than an overlay. This one took him 10 days working 16 hours a day.

Opposite, bottom
The business end of the same .50-caliber rifle's 44-inch barrel has engraving around the muzzle, around the handmade silver-bladed front sight, and on the nose cap, and there's a gold-and-silver "wedding band" just behind the muzzle.

The patch box of the Revenant, depicting St. Michael defeating Satan and casting him and his fallen angels out of heaven. Satan is depicted as a dragon, just as he is in Revelations 12:7–9, the verse number inlaid here on the patch-box cover. F&S

by **MATTHEW EVERY** photographs by **JARREN VINK**

Grandpa's Gun

A BATTERED AND USELESS SAVAGE 99 LEVER GUN GETS A NEW LIFE IN THE DEER WOODS—AND STILL CARRIES THE LESSONS OF A YOUNG MAN'S LOST MENTOR

AFTER I SHOT MY FIRST DEER, Grandpa acted differently toward me. I was 16, a little late to start hunting, and he took me out whenever he could that season. It was the most time we'd ever spent together, and on a gray November morning, I shot a doe. Before that fall, Grandpa had always given me a hug when he saw me. But that Christmas, he shook my hand.

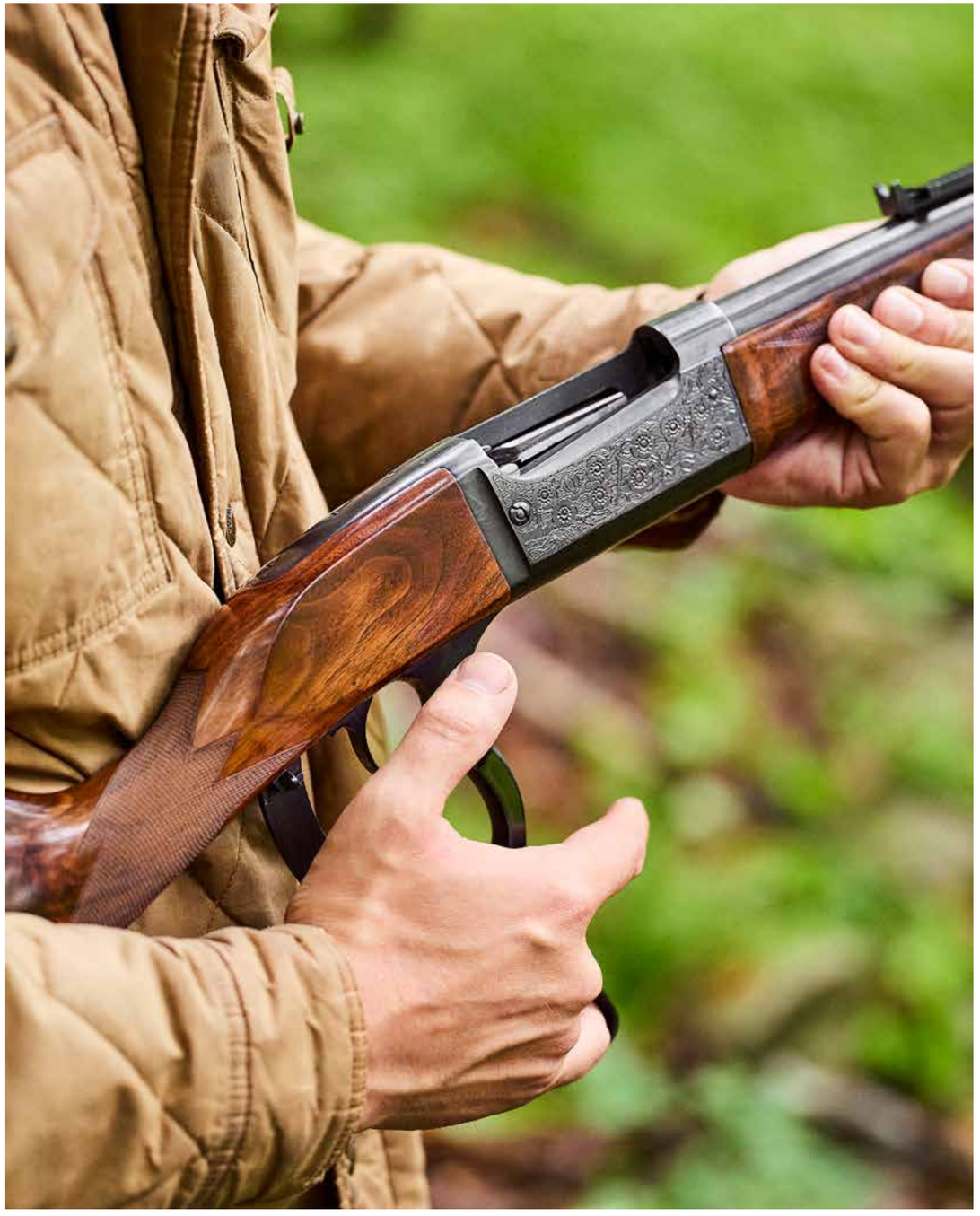
One day during the following summer, I went to see him at the garage where he worked, and he said we should go for a ride. He drove us to his house, where we went upstairs, and he pulled something wrapped in a blanket from the top shelf of the linen closet. Unfolding the fabric, he revealed an old Savage Model 99.

It was unlike any deer rifle I'd seen before. Every tool or vehicle my grandpa loved looked like hell, and by those standards, the Model 99 was an object of true affection. Its bluing was gone. The stock had dents from rocks and branches. Somewhere along the line, the 32-40 barrel was re-chambered for 32 Special and cut down to about 20 inches. The sights were aftermarket, and there were extra holes drilled in the tang where someone had tried to add a peep sight and failed.

Aside from its condition, the rifle was light and lively. When I threw it to my shoulder, it seemed to point naturally wherever I looked. I worked the lever action over and over and tried the trigger. In between the clicks and clacks, I heard my grandpa say, "I want you to have this rifle, Matt."

The Model 99 had been my grandpa's meal ticket. He grew up during the Depression with six brothers and sisters on a hardscrabble farm in the Catskill Mountains. They didn't have electricity until the 1940s, and they lived mostly on venison and squirrel. I once asked him how they refrigerated the deer they killed, and he told me that they ate the meat so fast they didn't have to.

I wrapped the 99 back in the blanket, thanked Grandpa, and rushed home to shoot it. But at the range, I couldn't get the gun to hit a 10-inch target consistently at 75 yards, and every other



→ The author works the action of his grandfather's refurbished Savage Model 99 lever gun.

It was as if the rifle had just come off the assembly line at the Savage factory.

ejected case came out cracked at the neck. Still, I was proud to have it. Even if it had no practical value, it seemed to me like a totem that carried the knowledge Grandpa gained while he used it. I told myself that one day I'd get it repaired so I could take it hunting. But it ended up in the back corner of my safe, where it sat for a long time.

In 2021, my grandpa died in his own bed, surrounded by family who loved him. He was in a fever dream the last time I shook his hand. I put my palm to his and wrapped my fingers around the back of his thumb like you would in an arm-wrestling match. He was on his back, eyes closed, with a furrowed brow and an outstretched arm. I felt his padded fingers grip around the back of my hand and loosen again the same way they always did. He told me to have fun hunting, and then he was gone.

NEW LIFE

Grandpa and I had stopped hunting together years before he died. It wasn't that he was sick. He just couldn't walk the mountain anymore. During that time, I bought, sold, and worked on a pile of deer rifles, trying to find the right one for the kind of hunting he'd shown me. But nothing ever felt as right as the Model 99. The day after the funeral, I dug out the rifle and snapped it up to my shoulder. It felt lively and balanced, the same as the day he'd given it to me.

At first, my gunsmith, Jim York, didn't want to fix the rifle. It was the dead of winter, just after deer season, and his small shop was crowded with hunters who had nothing to do anymore but hang out in a room full of guns until it was time to hunt turkeys. "It's just not worth repairing," he said. "It would be better as a wall-hanger."

His reluctance probably factored into his price, which was far more than I'd ever spent on a gun. But the Savage meant more to me than anything else I owned. I regretted that Grandpa never got to see his old gun in the woods again. I told York I'd spend whatever it took. We came up with a plan, and I put down a small deposit.

The gun needed a new barrel, a new stock, and a new fore-end, plus new sights and a few replacement springs. The action's metal was badly pitted, so it would have to be polished and blued. And while we were at it, I decided to rechamber the rifle in 30-30 Winchester.

At first I wrestled with the decision to get the receiver engraved. For one thing, I'd need to find someone else to do that. Also, I knew I'd be erasing the years of wear my grandpa had put on the rifle. But my grandfather was not a

↑
The engraving on the 99's receiver reflects the apple blossoms abundant on the author's family farm.

courtesy of MATTHEW EVERY

↑
The author's grandfather in 1949, leaning against one of the cars he used to race in his youth.

All I could think of was how I'd spent 30 minutes 50 yards from the biggest buck I'd seen in three years, and I'd blown it.

nostalgic man. He fixed things that were broken and moved on—so that's what I wanted to do.

It took almost two years to finish. Along the way, I checked in with York and contributed more cash to the deposit. I found an engraver who could hand-hammer apple tree branches and blossoms—like the ones on Grandpa's farm—into the receiver. I bought a set of Skinner iron sights, and one weekend, I drove the stock and fore-end two hours to have them hand-checkered by a master. Then one day, just before deer season, York called me to his shop.

He pulled the Model 99 from a rolled-up blanket, just like Grandpa had all those years ago. This time, though, it was as if the rifle had just come off the assembly line at the Savage factory—only better. The bluing was deep black and flawless. The wood had a hand-rubbed oil finish. The checkering looked like frosted glass, and the engraving was everything I wanted it to be. I took the rifle to the range, loaded five 30-30 cartridges, and shot them all into an 8-inch steel plate at 100 yards. It was time to go deer hunting.

GUIDED HUNT

During my first two seasons with the rifle, I wondered if I'd ever shoot a deer. It wasn't for lack of opportunity. I took the gun all around the country, as well as to all the old places where Grandpa and I had still-hunted together in the mountains. Carrying the 99, with its iron sights and short-range chambering, presented new challenges for me. Every time I'd see a buck, I'd find I wasn't close enough, or I'd lose my chance at a shot at the last second. It was demoralizing, but it was also changing how I hunted deer in the big woods.

By the end of the second season, I found myself moving more slowly, just like Grandpa had. I was also more aware of things, like the sound of the leaves under my boots and the way a deer relaxes before it lets you take one more step toward it. I knew it would be easier to shoot a buck from a box blind or a stand at the edge of a field. But every time I took out the Savage, I found myself wandering in the woods the way Grandpa used to do.

On opening day of my third season with the Savage, I went back to the farm where I'd shot my first deer. I got there about midmorning on a windy day and walked along the old cow pasture at the edge of the woods, then through a briar-choked swamp and over old stone walls my ancestors had built one rock at a time. Eventually, I came to a field at the base of the mountain where I sat for a half hour, watching a patch of goldenrod and small cedar trees.

When I stood to move up the mountain, a buck jumped up 50 yards in front of me. He'd been bedded down with a doe the whole time, and I'd never seen him. I swung the rifle up and noticed that what should have been a heavy-racked 8-pointer—judging by his one antler—had broken off the other side.

I tracked the buck with my rifle, leveling the sights on his body, waiting for

him to turn broadside. But in two bounds he was gone, and I felt the familiar pang I'd endured with Grandpa's old rifle the past two seasons. I wanted to at least learn something from the moment, to try to keep my spirits up. But all I could think of was how I'd spent 30 minutes 50 yards from the biggest buck I'd seen in three years, and I'd blown it. Maybe the Savage was just a wall-hanger after all.

•

Whenever I visit the farm, I eventually make my way up the mountain to where Grandpa left a plastic chair in the woods for me to sit on and wait for deer. It's where my dad and brother and I spread his ashes. When I'm there, I half expect to see him sauntering toward me in his down vest and plaid flannel shirt, rifle slung over his shoulder. I hadn't been to the farm or the chair in a while, and after losing the buck, it's where I wanted to go to sit and think about what had just happened. When I got there, I tipped the chair up on its legs and sat down with the rifle in my lap.

I'd been through a lot since Grandpa died. Our family had fractured, with one side not talking to the other after the funeral. My father was in the middle of cancer treatment, and I was in the middle of a divorce. The whole time, I'd been running to the woods all over the country with his rifle to get away. I missed the man who seemed to possess the gravity that kept my family together. And as I sat in the chair, I told him that.

When I got up, I decided to make one last loop down the mountain and back through the field where I'd lost the buck, as if my returning there might somehow conjure the deer back. Picking my way over deadfalls and around shale outcroppings, I came to a series of benches that step down and end at the farm fields below, and it was from one of these flats that I caught a flash of a single antler bobbing in the woods 150 yards away.

The buck was too far off to chance a shot with iron sights, but he had no idea I was there. With the wind in my face, I crouched low and crept along the bench above the buck. I noticed he was behind a doe, and she was leading him up the mountain toward a grove of beech trees in front of me.

I got there ahead of the deer but lost sight of them for a moment behind a fold in the terrain. Dropping to a knee, I rested the Savage against a tree trunk and waited. The doe came over the rise first, closed the distance to just 20 yards, and stopped. I knew I had only seconds before she pegged me. The buck's one antler came into view next, then his nose, scenting the air, another 20 yards behind the doe. When I saw his neck, I knew I wouldn't get a better shot.

I slid off the Savage's safety and buried my front sight just below the white spot under the buck's throat. When the trigger broke, the deer tumbled backward and out of sight. I found him not 100 yards down the mountain, lying in the leaves. And I finally saw up close where his antler had broken off just above the brow tine.

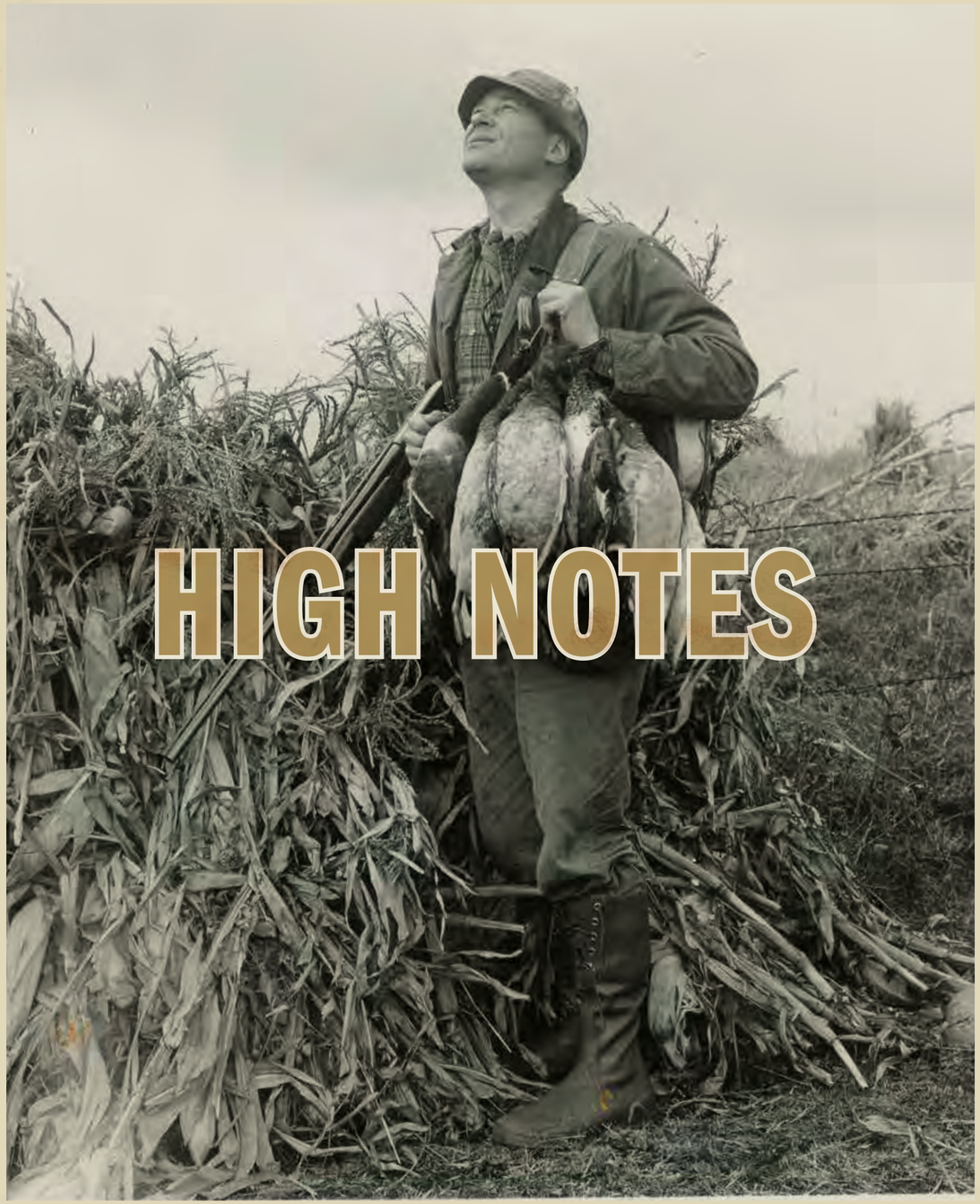
I laid the Savage across the buck's flank and sat on the ground to take it all in. I'd always felt that my time in the woods learning from my grandpa had been cut short. I still feel that way. But in the moment, it occurred to me that three seasons of hunting with the rifle he gave me had taught me some of what he couldn't.

I also realized, looking closer at the buck's bladed brow tine, that I'd seen the deer a few weeks earlier while I was squirrel hunting. He'd had both sides of his rack then, and I was puzzled as to how he could have lost the one. I didn't know of another deer on the farm big enough to challenge him. As I field dressed the buck, I thought about looking for the other half of his rack to piece him back together or at least to put on the mantle. But then I had another thought that has stuck with me since. In the same way I imagine that Grandpa was walking with me that day, leading me back to the buck, I can't help thinking that he has the other half. F&S

From left: The author's grandfather with a buck he took in 1998; the brute the author took last fall with his grandpa's gun. ↓

courtesy of MATTHEW EVERY (2)

by PHIL BOURJAILY



HIGH NOTES

FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES; JARREN VINK (calls); courtesy of TIM CHELIUS (Sure-Shot Yentzen call)

THESE SIX DUCK CALLS HAVE BEEN BRINGING BIRDS INTO DECOY SPREADS FOR DECADES—AND EVERY ONE CAN STILL PUT GREENHEADS ON THE STRAP

THERE IS NO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP for setting decoys or building duck blinds. There is, however, a world duck-calling championship. Calling to ducks elevates the hunt from a mere watery ambush into a magical realm where you talk to the animals. Since the middle of the 19th century, call makers have turned cane, wood, acrylic, and polycarbonate into instruments that can bring ducks out of the clouds and into the decoys.

In 1863, market hunter Fred Allen of Monmouth, Illinois, took out the first patent on a duck call. It resembled a modern duck call, but its metal insert could freeze to your lips on a cold day. Duck calls, a uniquely American invention, evolved from there, especially in the southern Midwest. While hunters in the Atlantic Flyway focused on decoys and how to rig them, those in the bottom half of the Mississippi Flyway developed calls—and this region became the country's cradle of duck-call innovation.

A good duck call is a Pied Piper's flute, while a bad one sounds like a kazoo. Each of these six calls falls into the Pied Piper category. Not only because they can still put ducks on the strap, but also for the influence they've had on call making and duck hunting. Like any great Hall of Famer, these inductees set the bar for newcomers, and all have cemented a legacy in the history of duck calling.

No. 1

P.S. OLT D-2

IN 1904, PHILIP S. OLT of Pekin, Illinois, invented what may be the most popular call of all time: the P.S. Olt D-2. Earlier calls had flat tone boards and reeds that curved up slightly to make room for vibration. Curved reeds bent out of shape easily, making calls hard to keep in tune. Olt's call, however, had a flat reed and a curved tone board. The reed stayed in tune and was easy to change in the field. And Olt's calls were made of hard rubber, which was more stable and moisture-resistant than wood. Later models were distinctive for the keyhole shape of their exhaust channel.

After live decoys were banned, in 1935, Olt's business exploded, and he started selling more than 50,000 calls a year. When he died, in 1950, his sons took over the business, which closed in 2002. Olt's place in duck-call history would already be assured even if his calls weren't so easy to modify. But hunters discovered they could file the hard rubber to change the tone and take their calling to the next level. The best-known hot-rodded D-2, dubbed the Cutdown, has its tone board filed back to make the call louder and raspier. Cutdowns are now commercially produced (there's even a World Cutdown Duck Calling Championship), but a lot of people like to make their own, and original D-2s are sought after for that reason. "People say they wish they'd bought Microsoft early, but I wish I'd bought a truckload of D-2s when they were $5 apiece," said a hunter friend. "I'd sell them for way more, and everybody who bought one would cut it down."

No. 2

SURE-SHOT YENTZEN DOUBLE REDD

IT TAKES AN EXPERIENCED CALLER to make a single-reed call sound ducky, but anyone can sound like a duck with a double reed. The twin reeds vibrate together to make a raspy sound all by themselves. That's why so many beginners start with a double reed. The first-ever double-reed call looked a bit like a slimmed-down grenade and came from Texas: The Sure-Shot Yentzen.

Baker, cab driver, and duck hunter, George Yentzen lived in Nederland, Texas, a town so far east it's practically in Louisiana. He began tinkering with calls on a lathe in the '40s, and in 1950, he patented a double-reed duck call. Yentzen made a dozen or so calls a year, and his double reed might have died with him in 1958 had he not previously met a highly energetic young duck hunter named Jim Fernandez, whom everyone called Cowboy even though he was a salesman for Gulf Coast Utilities. Fernandez made some improvements to the call, and then, in 1959, Cowboy swaggered into Stuttgart, Arkansas, and won the World Duck Calling Championship with his double reed.

Fernandez traveled to promote his call. He and others kept competing with it successfully, and soon he was making thousands of calls a year. The Sure-Shot was the only double

reed available until its patent expired, late in the 1960s. While it hasn't won a world championship for many years, it will still call ducks almost all by itself. Sure-Shot still produces a collection of Yentzen calls today, including a replica of the original.

No. 3

HAYDEL'S DR-85

Unlike a more demanding single reed, the Haydel's DR-85 sounds like a duck no matter how you blow into it. I like to think of the DR-85s as the people's duck call: cheap, easy to use, and made in the hundreds of thousands annually. They work when wet and they're easily tuned. Say "hut" into one end of the call, and it comes out "quack." It's that simple.

After finishing his Air Force service at Barksdale AFB in Bossier City, Louisiana, in 1961, Eli Haydel stayed in town, playing in local bands and working on a duck call. He settled on plastic because it would work when wet. It was a double reed, so anyone could use it, and the skinny call needed little air to blow. At first, he could make only six calls a day, but demand grew quickly, and he moved production to a factory that has made as many as 500,000 calls a year.

The DR-85 is not a call for loud highballs at distant birds. It's a great call for novices and for anyone who wants to make soft, raspy duck sounds. For years the DR-85 sold for $10. Now they're all the way up to $22.95, and that's still the best twenty-plus bucks you can spend on your duck hunting.

No. 4

DIXIE MALLARD

In the flooded woods of Arkansas, the duck call is everything. There is no blind other than the trunk of a tree, and no decoys other than the ripples you kick in the water. It's the call that brings the ducks banking and fluttering through the pin oaks, and the Dixie Mallard laid the groundwork for the Arkansas-style call. Darce Manning "Chick" Major is said to have been hunting ducks with a friend whose cane call was giving him fits. Major looked at it, and not long after, he whittled a call of his own out of walnut. He sold them out of a neighbor's garage until too many customers' parked cars started to block traffic. Then he moved to a shop of his own.

Major's calls featured a flat, hard-rubber reed in place of then-common metal reeds, and a curved "J-frame" tone board. In the right hands, the single-reed Dixie Mallard became a versatile instrument that could go loud or quiet and make the full range of mallard sounds. The call worked in the flooded woods and on the main stage at the World Duck Calling Championship in Stuttgart. The Dixie Mallard influenced call making throughout Arkansas, both because the entire Major family racked up world titles with it and because Chick would always take the time to help other call makers improve their craft.

No. 5

RICH-N-TONE ORIGINAL

With practice, you can make the RNT Original do anything you want a duck call to do, from loud hails to quiet quacks to soft feeding chuckles. The Rich-N-Tone Original is Arkansas duck-call royalty, descended in a straight line from the Dixie Mallard. At 8 years old, Butch Richenback of Stuttgart started hanging around Chick Major's shop, sweeping floors, doing odd jobs, and learning how to make calls from the master.

Richenback was winning calling contests at 11 and became a World Champion in 1972. He waited until his mentor passed before going into business on his own, in 1976. His call was more than a copy of the Dixie Mallard. The mouthpiece was shaped like the lip of a Coke bottle, so it felt right when you raised it to your mouth. The reed was mylar, in place of hard rubber, and Richenback downsized the call so it would fit in a shirt pocket. Sold at the original Mack's Hardware, which became Mack's Prairie Wings, the Rich-N-Tone was a hit.

> The Rich-N-Tone Original is Arkansas duck-call royalty and can do anything you want a duck call to do, from loud hails to quiet quacks.

Richenback was also among the first to turn calls out of acrylic. Nowadays, you can buy your RNT Original in wood, for a softer, warmer sound, or you can get it in the harder, louder acrylic, like the call pictured above. No matter the material, every RNT Original is made at the company's shop in Stuttgart, where hunters today can watch the call-building process. And just as Richenback learned from Chick Major, current RNT owner John Stephens took calling lessons from Richenback and did odd jobs at the RNT shop as a tween. He keeps the original in the line today not just out of respect for his mentor but also because it's one of the greatest duck calls ever made.

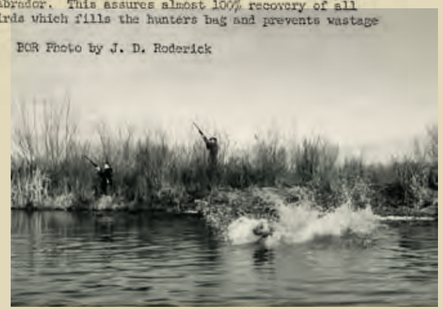
JARREN VINK (3); courtesy of SPENCE WILSON JR. (Dixie Mallard call)

No. 6

EARL DENNISON METAL REED

Earl Dennison was the Duck Call Man. He grew up hunting and guiding on Reelfoot Lake, and he learned to make calls from the great Tom Turpin. Dennison's calls were hand-carved at first, with a flat tone board and a curved metal reed. Some people think metal reeds sound more realistic. Everyone agrees they're loud. This type of call suited Reelfoot hunters, who had plenty of competition for the ducks looking for a safe haven among the lake's cypress stumps. At Reelfoot Lake, you either go big or you don't bother going. Blinds there are like houses, spreads have over 1,000 decoys, and when you need to scream at ducks that are mere specks in the sky, you reach for a metal-reed call. They're tricky to tune—so plastic ones are far more popular—but they last for the long haul.

Dennison carved calls for himself, then started making and selling them to the hunters he guided. Eventually, he went into the call-making business full-time. Throughout the 1930s and into the '40s, Dennison traveled the country promoting his calls in a car with *Earl Dennison, the Duck Call Man* painted on the doors. His line included basic hunting calls, small timber calls, and high-end checkered and laminated calls. He died in 1967, and his son Tom ran the business until 1992. If you're lucky, you might find one for sale online. If you do find one, buy it, because the originals are rare. F&S



JARREN VINK (call); FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (3); courtesy of RYAN GRAVES (Earl Dennison call)

FEATURES

Otto, a German wirehaired pointer, was a local legend in Florida, where he was known as *the* python dog (p. 94). He died this past July.

photograph by **AUSTIN COIT**

GOOD DOGS

FIVE STORIES OF LOVABLE HUNTING COMPANIONS WHO THRIVE IN THE FIELD, AT CAMP, AND AT HOME

photographs by **NICK CABRERA**

TOM DAVIS (dog photograph)

EMMYLOU

by **TOM DAVIS**

THERE WAS NOTHING not to like about Emmylou. Everything about her was simply *right*, which, paradoxically, makes it a little hard to describe her.

Emmylou—named for the country music icon Emmylou Harris—was a 38-pound tricolor English setter. She had black ticking on her body, an asymmetrical mask that was more extensive on the right side of her face, and flecks of caramel on her muzzle, feet, and eyebrows. Her smoky brown eyes expressed deep intelligence. She wasn't a big dog, but because her proportions were so balanced, she didn't strike you as small. She moved beautifully, her tail swishing just above the level of her back, like a cane cutter; on point, she shape-shifted from poetry in motion to living statuary, her intensity absolute, her flag held like a battle standard.

Emmy, as I typically called her, was friendly to all but obsequious to none. She appreciated attention but didn't go out of her way to seek it. She was comfortable in her own skin: calm, unflappable, professional. Whatever the situation or environment, she adapted to it. On the rare occasions when I had to rebuke her for some infraction, she took her medicine—and then went about her business. She never sulked or held a grudge. She had an independent streak, to be sure, but I'm convinced that's a trait shared by all great pointing dogs. Without it, they wouldn't possess the initiative and improvisational genius that enables them to do the jaw-dropping things they do.

Better a flawed brilliance, goes the old saying, than a perfect mediocrity.

Emmy was the most natural bird dog I ever saw. I didn't train Emmylou; I just took her hunting, put her on as many birds as I could, and let her learn from her mistakes. Once the instincts and abilities she was born with began to kick in, the best (and smartest) thing I could do was stay out of her way. To the extent I deserve any credit for Emmy's becoming the dog she became, that's where it lies.

The rest was all Emmylou.

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There was a public hunting area near my home in northeastern Wisconsin that reliably held woodcock, and the September Emmy turned 7 months old, I started running her there. At first, I carried a blank pistol, firing it whenever she flushed and chased a bird, as puppies inevitably will. Then, once I was satisfied that the sound of the pistol had no effect on her, I graduated to my 20-gauge side-by-side, firing it in the air when she bumped a bird.

Eventually the flushes began to be preceded by points. Eventually she began to hold these points long enough for me to scrape through the thick stuff and flush the bird myself. Eventually some of these encounters resulted in a dead woodcock. After a few iterations of that circle-closing experience, the lesson was learned—forever. When Emmylou went on point, you could take it to the bank. She wouldn't move unless the bird did.

When Emmylou went on point, you could take it to the bank. She wouldn't move unless the bird did.

When she had her first opportunity to point a ruffed grouse—the bird generally considered the toughest of all for a pointing dog to handle—she nailed the son of a bitch. She was 8 months old. When she was 9 months, I took her pheasant hunting in Iowa, and I can still scarcely believe how magnificently she performed. It was as if she'd been matching wits with ringnecks all her life—and winning more duels than she lost.

There was this too: From the beginning, Emmy would back another dog's point from as far away as she could see it. Choosing to err on the side of caution, she would also back the occasional sun-bleached stump, dog-size rock, or windblown sheet of newspaper that had hung up in the grass. Again, it was nothing she'd been taught or trained to do; it just came naturally.

About the only quality Emmy seemed to lack, in fact, was much of a desire to retrieve. But when I sent her to professional trainer Bob Olson for force-breaking, it was as if he tapped into a reservoir of retrieving ability that had been waiting to bubble to the surface. Emmy became not just a reliable retriever, but an all but unstoppable one—as long as the object to be retrieved was a bird, that is. Try to throw a bumper for her, and she'd look at you as if to say, "Are you effing kidding me?"

Emmy's only real stumble came in her second season, when we trekked to the sprawling grasslands of South Dakota in search of prairie grouse. As they do to a lot of pointing dogs on first contact, those uncompromising birds took her to school. She just couldn't get them dialed in. But it was a temporary aberration: Once she cracked the code, she had their number. They could run, but they couldn't hide.

Back in South Dakota a couple of years later, Emmy gave two friends and me a morning's work on prairie chickens and sharptail grouse that we lacked the language to describe. Sailing across that sea of grass like a ship with a bone in her teeth, Emmy put on a show for the ages. Limits for all three of us in no more than an hour and a half, every bird taken over a thrillingly stylish point. What was there to say? We could only look at my happily panting dog, who by her lights had done nothing more, and nothing less, than what she was supposed to do, and shake our heads in disbelieving awe.

A few months past her thirteenth birthday, when Emmy's health began to fail, she faced it with the stoic dignity that was altogether in character for her. And while there were a lot of places where I might have scattered her ashes, I decided on that sea of grass in South Dakota, the place where she took our words away.

← Emmylou, an English setter, shined in the uplands and grouse woods for more than a decade.

LEVEE

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

I HAD NO CHOICE but to get out of bed, fetch a 22 pistol, and go shoot the armadillo. It was 2 a.m., and Levee had long since crossed over into madness, baying nonstop, which is the way he gets when he's found an armadillo in the middle of the night.

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Levee is a Catahoula leopard dog, overweight but handsome, and a terrible animal by all measures. Sometimes I believe that Levee dreams of nothing except catching and killing nine-banded armadillos. I've always kind of wondered what he'd be like around a wild hog.

After all, that's what Catahoulas are mostly bred for—hog hunting. They're the state dog of Louisiana, and legend has it that the earliest ones were the result of interbreeding between Native Americans' dogs and red wolves. Michelle, my wife, simply had to have one after a hog hunt in South Florida years ago. One of the dogs in the pack we followed was a giant blue merle named Thor. Catahoulas are typically bay dogs, but Thor was a catch dog—the one that rushes in and chomps down on an enraged wild boar's face and holds it in place long enough so you can kill it with a knife. Thor's owner warned us not to be fooled by the dog's good looks. "I wouldn't recommend that anybody get a Catahoula," he said.

Indeed, the motto of the National Association of Louisiana Catahoulas is *Not everyone needs a Catahoula*. Catahoula lore says that you must actually be gifted one in order to own one. That has changed, though; most reputable Catahoula breeders expect $700 or more, cash, before "gifting" you a puppy. But they are selective in who they'll sell to, requiring prospective owners to submit a resume of sorts to prove that the dogs are going to an outdoorsy home with the space they need and, ideally, a job to do.

We wanted a blood-tracking dog—and a loyal protector. And so we got Levee. Our son, Anse, was 2 years old when we brought the puppy home, and the two of them became fast and rowdy buddies that Michelle and I dubbed The Boys.

I'm sure that I messed up with Levee right out of the gate. I simply don't have the patience to be a good dog trainer, particularly with a dog as independent and hardheaded as Levee rapidly proved himself to be. I worked with him in the evenings, setting up fake trails with deer blood that I'd saved in the freezer, and he seemed to catch on quickly. So when he was 7 months old, I put him on his first real track—a heart-shot doe that I saw fall dead from the stand. Levee found the animal in less than 30 seconds. I field dressed the deer and tossed him a little chunk of flank meat for a reward. *This is easy enough*, I thought.

During that deer season and the next one, Levee seemed to hit his stride as a tracking dog, finding one deer after the next. At home, he went through a dog-loving family's typical progression of nicknames. He has at times been Lev-O, Houla, Hoolie, Hoola-Bear, and Big Red Bastard. Good as he was at tracking, he seemed to excel at another job—being by young Anse Brantley's side at all times, where he has been unfailingly gentle and loving but also fiercely protective.

> I shined the light on him, and a pair of blood-red eyes shined back.

As Levee matured, he became increasingly difficult to deal with in the deer woods. His immense strength made holding him on a 20-foot lead a challenge, particularly when he was ripping through a blackberry thicket. He found deer easily enough but would often growl at me as soon as I moved in to take possession. We had him neutered, and that settled him down—but then he absolutely would not load back into his dog box.

All the while, I realized that tracking was cutting into my hunting time. Many of the really good trackers I know don't even hunt deer themselves. They're dog people, in other words, and God bless them for being there. Me? I'd rather hunt. So Levee and I retired from blood trails.

Anse told his grandparents, "Levee got mean, so we cut his two balls off and now he's just fat." He's not wrong. Above all else, Hoola-Bear enjoys table scraps and sleeping in the sun. He's 8 years old now, with a gray muzzle. But he is still damn good at catching armadillos.

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I walked off the porch in my gym shorts and Crocs, a Streamlight in one hand and a Smith & Wesson in the other. Levee's barks and snarls on the hillside hearkened back to caught pigs in the palmettos, long spears, and a blue merle named Thor. I thought, *You'd have been good at that too, you Big Red Bastard*.

I shined the light on him, and a pair of blood-red eyes shined back—a sight that would've been straight out of a nightmare if I hadn't known the dog was also grinning wildly. "What you got, buddy?!" I yelled in a childlike voice. Levee yipped and dug at the armadillo with his front paws, but you'd have needed a backhoe to dislodge the creature so long as it was breathing. I suspected this particular varmint was the same one that had been digging holes in the yard, and besides that, I was ready to go back to bed. The 22 cracked in the darkness and the barking stopped, although I could hear massive jaws—a catch dog's jaws—crushing the shell out in the brush.

The armadillo was lying on the back patio the next morning. Levee was stretched out on his back on the living room floor, feet pointed at the ceiling and jowls sagging in a goofy grin. Anse was on the ground next to the dog, revving him up to wrestle. Michelle was on the couch with a cup of coffee, smiling at The Boys.

→ Levee, a Catahoula leopard dog, started as a blood-tracking dog—but he's long since retired.

WILL BRANTLEY (dog photograph)

PHIL BOURJAILY (dog photograph)

ZEKE

by **PHIL BOURJAILY**

ACCORDING TO THE GPS, there's a dog on point right here. I mean, *right here*, three or four steps in front of me, but I can't see it in the tangle of reed canary. Old-school pointing dogs hold their tails low—a reminder that before guns, hunters threw nets over birds and dog alike. Zeke points in the modern fashion, his tail held up as a flag to make him easier to find. The problem is that he doesn't have much tail. The German shorthaired pointer's docked stub is nowhere as easy to spot in the tall grass as the long whip of an English pointer's tail, or the feathered arc of a setter's.

He's crouched and half buried in thick cover when I do find him. Hoping the bird doesn't make a hasty exit, I break open the gun, fumble for my phone, and snap a quick picture. Zeke and the bird hold still as I drop the phone in my pocket, close the gun, and kick the grass. The rooster catapults into the air.

Even through the blurred focus of that snapshot, Zeke's intensity on point is clear. He is a great bird finder. That's one way I'll want to remember him—although at age 6, he's nowhere near done. The other way I will remember Zeke is on my lap, as he is right now while I write this, all 60 pounds of him curled into a tight ball. Shorthairs are known to be Velcro dogs, eager to be near their people. Zeke's Velcro skills are next-level: He can worm his way onto my lap on a desk chair, on the couch, or as he demonstrated once last fall, on a barstool, which I would never have thought possible.

While he's the only lap dog I've ever owned, he's easily the best bird dog. After a lifetime of hunting over friends' dogs, borrowed dogs, bargain-priced dogs, and even free dogs, I put my name on a waiting list with the best breeder in the area. Like many Americanized shorthairs, Zeke has had some versatility bred out and style and range bred in. Originally, German shorthaired pointers hunted birds, retrieved waterfowl, tracked stags and boar, killed vermin, coursed hares, and guarded their families. Zeke strips the idea of versatility down to two basics: bird dog and couch potato. It's hard to say which job he does better.

I've hunted over the genuine, versatile, plodding German shorthair. For a few seasons when I was between dogs, Alex, my cousin's dog, was mine to borrow whenever I wanted. Alex had an all-liver coat and a bowling ball of a head. He worked close, with no style at all. You only knew he was on point because his feet had stopped moving, but I shot a bunch of birds over Alex. True to his roots, Alex was death on any furry animal we ran into during a pheasant hunt. He ran rabbits, reserving a special yip of glee he broke out only for the sight of a bunny rolling in front of him after the shot. It often fell to me to put whatever possum or raccoon Alex tore up out of its misery too.

He also lost a short fight with a squirrel once. This level of wimpy is exactly the way I like my bird dogs to be.

My first dog, Sam, represented the other extreme. From shoot-to-retrieve field-trial stock, he was an uncontrollable rocket in the field. Sam was a year-old gift horse I should have looked in the mouth, but instead I said, "Thank you very much," and took my new dog to my mom's farm for a run in the woods. He trotted in front of us for a bit, then blasted off, as he would do almost randomly throughout his life. Ten minutes later he came careening back and slammed into Mom's knees. She swayed, like a tree in a high wind, then crashed to the ground. This was my introduction to bird-dog ownership.

An e-collar worked wonders with Sam. Health problems ended his career at age 8, but for a couple of seasons, he was breathtaking. I'd turn him loose, then follow the sound of his gigantic, battery-eating 1990s beeper, then shoot the bird.

Zeke runs halfway between those extremes. His usual range tops out at about 100 yards, although he's pointed and held birds at longer distances. He has speed and style, he's biddable, and he wants to know where I am all the time, making him a joy to hunt with. He has no interest in chasing deer or hunting fur, although every couple of years he'll point a raccoon, then dive into heavy cover after it. There's a brief ruckus of snarling and growling before Zeke pops out, looking badly shaken, and we go on our way. Not only is he winless against raccoons, but he also lost a short fight with a squirrel once. This level of wimpy is exactly the way I like my bird dogs to be. It keeps them out of trouble.

Pointing wild pheasants is not as easy as Zeke makes it look. Pheasants like to run, and pointing dogs are supposed to make them hold still. It takes a deft touch to pin a bird without bumping it. I usually think that if you can shoot half your birds over points, you're doing well. There have been years with Zeke when almost every bird I've shot has been pointed. I am not going to turn into one of those annoying purists who only shoot pointed birds (although I could almost see it), and Zeke will never be perfect either.

Who knew, when we chose him out of that writhing mass of 8-week-old puppies, that we had unerringly homed in on the one of 12 that hated having birds in its mouth? Learning to retrieve is a lifetime project for Zeke. Now, halfway through life, he has made, by my count, 3½ retrieves, which is not very good. He tracks cripples and roots wounded birds out of heavy cover, though, and subdues them until I get there. I'm not exactly sure what goes on, but the birds are alive and unbitten, if usually lacking in tail feathers, and sometimes some other feathers, by the time I arrive to take custody. The truth is, Zeke does the pointing part of his job so well that most of the birds I shoot over him don't go anywhere. For that, he earns his dog food, and his place on my lap.

← Zeke is the third German shorthaired pointer—and the best hunting dog—the author has owned.

JACKSON

by **MATTHEW EVERY**

They named him Duffy at the pound. I changed his name to Jackson as soon as I signed the paperwork and plopped him on the bench seat of my truck. He was a skinny 6-month-old mutt with floppy ears, black-and-white spots, and a little howl that sounded like a middle schooler's voice breaking.

I was about 25 at the time and living alone after going through a breakup. Jackson had been found on a farm in Arkansas and, at first, he was suspicious of everything life at home had to offer. Whenever the phone rang or the microwave beeped, whenever I opened a creaky cabinet door or when someone came to visit, he'd voice this suspicion with a howl.

One day, I decided to put that howl to good use. I noticed Jackson was fascinated by squirrels—a trait he and I had in common. His nose was also uncanny, and the more I watched him investigate the woods behind my house, the more I thought of training Jackson to hunt.

I had no idea how to train a hunting dog—but I did know how to shoot squirrels. My plan was to shoot a bunch of them, tan the hides and tails, and use them as training aids before putting Jackson in front of the real thing. Jackson took to my program immediately. I'd kill a squirrel, turn it into a dog toy in my basement, then drag it around the yard before hiding it in a tree. I'd let Jackson out, and he'd run, nose to the ground, howling and scratching all the way up to the tree. Before long, Jackson was a crack squirrel finder, treer, and howler.

I couldn't believe my luck. It was time to put the whole picture together.

•

Out of the truck at my squirrel hunting spot, Jackson was sniffing and wagging his tail. I spotted two squirrels running in circles around an oak in a big field and decided to shoot Jackson a gimme. I sniped the first one off the tree's trunk and the second one two limbs higher, then told Jackson to go in for the retrieve.

He didn't budge.

After watching both squirrels hit the ground, all the joy left his body. Tail tucked, he hid behind my legs, and I practically had to drag him over to the squirrels. When we got there, Jackson looked at them, then at me with the most confused expression on his face. We kept going, bagging more squirrels, but Jackson went into a deeper funk. On the last shot of my limit, he ran off and hid behind a bush. It took me nearly an hour to find him.

•

If you've ever trained a hunting dog, you've probably noticed that one of the many mistakes I made was not properly introducing Jackson to gunfire. Over the next year or so, I put it all together: If Jackson was outside off leash and heard a gunshot, he'd run as far as he could to hide. It got so bad that he would cower at just the sight of a gun. By then, I knew he'd never be a hunting dog—though that was hard to swallow. At the time, I was working as a guide, and not having a gun dog seemed like a shortcoming. That, combined with his overall nervous disposition at home, made me think of starting from scratch with a puppy. But I couldn't give up on Jackson.

In the same way that every hunting camp needs a dinged-up coffee pot, a 22 rifle, and a deck of cards on the kitchen table, it also needs a dog.

My guiding jobs took us both on the road, from Idaho to Kentucky to California. If Jackson and I weren't on the highway, we were living in a camp—and it was in those camps that I got to see Jackson come into his own.

Hunting clients would come into our lives for only a week or so, but they would always leave missing Jackson. In camp, they'd treat him like their own dog, and Jackson would respond in kind. Instead of missing home, Jackson made camp his home and our clients his best friends. And through all that travel and all the new faces, Jackson became less suspicious of the world around him, eventually learning to embrace it. In doing so, he became the perfect camp dog.

In the same way that every hunting camp needs a dinged-up coffee pot, a 22 rifle, and a deck of cards on the kitchen table, it also needs a dog. That dog doesn't need to hunt; he just needs to be there. And Jackson has always been there. You can keep your German shorthair who can't sit still outside of a kennel or your English Lab who wouldn't last five minutes without begging for a pat on the head. Jackson couldn't keep up with either in the field, but he'll outclass any gun dog back at camp.

He takes table scraps like a gentleman, without a nip or a slobber, and never begs for a treat. He licks plates clean after dinner and minds his manners around a skinning shed. He'll sleep on the floor when you ask him to and jump up into bed when it's allowed. His nose is good enough to find a lost deer or a pack rat living under your trailer. And whether you have a good day or a bad day in the woods, Jackson is always happy to see you.

Jackson never really lost his trademark howl, but today he reserves it for more important things—like bears rifling through the trash or strangers creeping around our truck at a rest stop. In return, he's never really asked for much except a scratch on the ear, which practically makes him melt. No matter where we've gone, he's been the camp mascot, comedian, security guard, and janitor. But to me, he's always just been a good friend.

→ Jackson showed early promise as a squirrel dog—but his true role turned out to be loyal camp dog.

MATTHEW EVERY (dog photograph)

ANDREW McKEAN (dog photograph)

NELLIE

by **ANDREW McKEAN**

LABRADOR RETRIEVERS are the last of the blind believers. Their fuel, besides astonishing quantities of food, is faith. The best of them will heave into the unknown, their only navigation their owner's inspired cast and maybe a lingering scent trail. These dogs seek until they find and then return with your bird, hand it over, and wait, empty-headed and wagging for the next retrieve.

I've had a succession of talented retrievers, but my current yellow Lab, a quarter horse–size female named Nellie, is especially devoted to the cause of finding. But hers is a qualified service. If she sees the bird flutter and fall, or even sail wobble-winged out of sight, she'll chase it down, root it out, vault fences, swim rapids, and ruin her health to bring me a bird.

Maybe she descends from a line of Show-Me Missourians, because if Nellie doesn't witness the bird going down firsthand, she's pretty sure it never happened. She'll go to look for it if asked, but it's a half-hearted effort, with each successive cast shorter and more performative than the last, with plenty of over-the-shoulder looks to communicate her skepticism.

I've adjusted my hunting style to accommodate Nellie's shortcoming. Instead of tucking her back in the cattails or a blind, I put her out front, where she can see struck birds either drop or sail. On upland hunts, I'll keep her in the short cover where she can see flushed grouse and pheasants rise and fall.

But this see-go-get progression deprives Nellie of her greatest talent, that of a brush-busting flusher with a prodigious nose. Once, in a North Dakota pasture so full of pheasants at the end of a push that it was hard to decide which cackling, sky-climbing rooster to shoot, Nellie brought me a limit of hens that she had pinned down and rousted out of the thatch. Each was wild-eyed and trembling as she handed it over to me, but they were otherwise unharmed. Nellie struggled to understand why I liberated the birds, their chestnut feathers slick with her slobber.

•

If Nellie lives to give, she also dies to thieve. She came into my life as a 10-week-old, a squirmy puppy located somewhere inside a bag of lemon skin, and from the start she demonstrated an appalling love of the putrid. Nothing out of the ordinary for a Lab there, but Nellie's particular vice is ill-gotten gore. She'll sometimes disappear to our corrals and return wretchedly bloated, full of rotting cow afterbirth that she dug up in the calving yard.

She once came home with a mummified calf's head that she had exhumed somewhere on the prairie. She'd still be parading the nightmare around the yard if I hadn't asked her to hand it over.

If Nellie doesn't witness the bird going down firsthand, she's pretty sure it never happened.

Her boardinghouse behavior descends to the next level on the few occasions when she's in town. Early on, she learned to associate round black dumpsters—the type found behind every restaurant in every Western town with both a Dairy Queen and a stoplight—with food. On road trips, every outing with her confirms the old saying about her breed: You never realize the whole world is edible until you take your Lab for a walk.

•

It's natural to underestimate Labradors as melon-headed simpletons wired simply to retrieve and sleep. It's taken me nearly 9 years and a thousand birds in her cavernous mouth to comprehend the complexities of Nellie, who lives to alternately follow and to break rules. Her duplicitous nature generally expresses itself after a period of almost beatific calm and obedience. I might mention casually to a buddy how she's the gun dog of a lifetime or I might rub her belly and deliver the words that chime in her floppy ears: "You're a good girl!"

Then, almost too soon after that beaming pronouncement to be coincidental, she'll do something appalling—roll in fresh poop during a lull in a hunt or nip off all the ripening tomatoes in the garden or bring home a gelatinous fish carcass from the river.

She knows exactly what she's done, and for an hour or a day, depending on the severity of the crime, she'll avoid direct eye contact. But then she'll bring me a stick or a bumper and slowly work herself back in my good graces.

Nellie will turn 9 this grouse season, and it occurs to me that in our years together I've taught her only a handful of things. On balance she's taught me a good deal more, not only about how to hunt big-river geese or how to corner late-season roosters but more enduring lessons of tolerance, forgiveness, and love.

Along the way, she's also taught me her language. Every retrieve is a story told in small acts and chapters. Some are expressions of dormant knowledge, like when Nellie adjusts her trajectory halfway across an ice-slushed river to intercept a duck. Others reveal surprising determination and drive fueled by instinct, intelligence, and unquenchable faith.

Even her possession of an ill-gotten morsel or scrap tells me that to Nellie, getting away with theft is a tiny rebellion to remind me that her presence in my life and household is voluntary and that at any time she wanted she could shuck her collar and lope away, happily trading regular meals and a bed for a life of scavenging and raiding.

But then I strap on her e-collar, uncase a shotgun, and she's a good girl again, ready to turn the Earth inside out to bring me all the birds. F&S

← There are two sides to Nellie, a yellow Lab: a capable retriever and an unapologetic rule-breaker.

BAD DOGS

EVEN THE BEST DOGS CAN ACT UP NOW AND THEN. AND THE MEMORIES OF THEIR MISBEHAVIORS MAKE US LOVE THEM EVEN MORE

illustrations by **MATT ROTA**

SAM

by **PHIL BOURJAILY**

FRED

by **TOM DAVIS**

BARON

by **SCOTT BESTUL**

BUCKLEY

by **SAM HOLCOMB**

In the beginning, Sam would take off at some point during almost every hunt. His departures were completely random, and not unlike those scenes in science fiction movies when a ship makes the jump to hyperspace. He'd blast off in a straight line at top speed, turn into a liver-and-white streak, and then disappear.

Sometimes he would come back after a few minutes. Other times, I'd find him on the steps of our farmhouse, waiting for me when I got home. Even after he outgrew his random bolting, Sam never accepted the fact that he couldn't catch birds once they were airborne. His worst offense came one November afternoon when I took him on a short hunt behind the house.

The best cover was in the creekbottom, and we were almost there when I heard the whine of an engine above and behind us. I looked up to see a single-engine plane passing overhead, several hundred feet up. Sam saw it too—and was gone.

The fields were fall-plowed, making it easy for me to track Sam's progress until he was a tiny white speck against the black dirt. I yelled. I blew the whistle. I may have thrown my hat. Sam stopped only after a three-quarter-mile chase because he ran into the line fence. Otherwise, he would have kept after that plane until it landed.

On his way back, as I was about to start yelling at him again, Sam bumped a rooster. Realizing that the pheasant was flying right to me, I hid behind a tree. When the bird got close, I stepped out and shot it. The pheasant crashed at my feet. Sam arrived an instant later to point it dead where it lay. I picked the bird up and patted Sam on the head. "Good dog," I told him.

What else could I say?

The Loess Hills of western Iowa are home to some of the most challenging quail hunting in the state. We'd made a morning of it, parking in the farmyard at first light and hunting our way out and then back through the scratchy cornfields and along the tangled margins of the timber.

By the time we returned, it was getting on toward noon. We went inside to eat, and while Bob and George crated their Brittanys, Dave left Fred, his big yellow Lab, loose. He also leaned his empty Browning Superposed against the side of the house—an act so unremarkable we thought nothing of it, if we noticed it at all.

Later, on the verge of food comas, we staggered out into the sunshine and were stunned by what we saw: Fred, lying on the winter-brown lawn in a kind of trance, gnawing on the stock of Dave's Superposed, grinding away at the round-knob grip that's one of the hallmarks of a Belgian-made Browning. My guess is that Fred was attracted to the grip because of the salty sweat impregnated there, in the same way that porcupines are irresistibly drawn to ax handles and the grips of canoe paddles.

Dave was a blustery guy, but for once he was at a loss for words. For several seconds, he was struck dumb. Finally, he sputtered, "F-F-F-Fred... F-F-F-Fred... If I didn't need you, I'd kill you!"

Fred detached from his prize and licked his lips. Sitting there with downcast eyes, knowing he'd done wrong, he wore the most defeated expression I've ever seen on a dog. Eventually, though, Fred was forgiven and went on to live a long, happy life. Dave got the Superposed re-stocked and, in a stroke of genius, had a lamp made from the one Fred worked over. On certain winter evenings, Dave could be caught studying Fred's toothmarks by the lamplight and laughing out loud.

Baron was the only singing dog I've owned. My dad, who sang quietly (and off-key) in church, conducted an almost nightly concert with our golden. He'd sit on the floor with Baron in our family room, lay his head on the dog's chest, and sing old country western songs in an exaggerated twang. Baron would wiggle, wag his tail, and then join in with a mournful falsetto.

One November, I was prepping for my annual Wisconsin deer hunt and decided to sight in my slug gun at a familiar farm before taking Baron out for birds there. Not wanting to make two trips, I put Baron in the back seat of Dad's station wagon. A cream-yellow Oldsmobile, it was the first new vehicle my dad had ever purchased. He loved like it was another child.

I left Baron in the Olds while I shot a full box of slugs. Afterward, when I opened the back door, Baron sprang from the Olds—and I slumped to my knees when I saw what he'd done. Swaths of faux leather were peeled back in sheets, chunks of foam covered the floor, and there was a crater in the back seat I could have stuffed my dog in. Apparently, while I shot slugs, Baron decided that the most likely means of escape was to dig a hole through the seat and exit from the bottom of the vehicle.

Our hunt was less about finding pheasants than it was about delaying the ride home. Dad loved that dog, but he'd also been raised on a meager farm, where useless or belligerent animals were disposed of. After dinner, Dad called for Baron and disappeared down the hall. It seemed like forever until I received a clue to Baron's fate—a faint, tremulous howl. I raced to the family room and saw Dad's head on the chest of my retriever, who was wagging his tail and howling along as Dad warbled, "Why, Oh Why, Did I Ever Leave Wyoming."

Buckley was my first gun dog—a combined 18th birthday–high school graduation gift. Two days after I finally brought him home after a year of training, I took Buckley duck hunting. At the first shotgun blast, he broke off and ran down a levee. It took me an hour and a half to track him down.

By the next duck season—after more training and a lot of bonding—Buckley was no longer gun-shy. He was tough and loved to retrieve. One weekend, a friend invited me on a hunt and told me to bring Buckley. This hunt was going to be our redemption.

Five minutes into the shoot, Buckley was asleep in the blind. All hunt long, he moved slowly. I practically had to toss him out to retrieve the ducks we shot. Afterward, when I opened the back of the truck, I saw a regurgitated duck bill and a couple of feet. I looked at my friend: "Dude, I think my dog ate a spoonbill and threw it up back here." I wasn't exactly sure where he could've eaten the spoonie, but I figured that was why he was so lethargic.

For the rest of the day, though, he couldn't keep down food. I eventually took him to the emergency vet hospital. The doctor came in with the X-rays of Buckley's stomach and hung them up in front of the lights. "You're a duck hunter, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yessir," I said. "How'd you know that?"

He circled two blobs. "Those look like two ducks to me."

In addition to the spoonie, he'd eaten two teal. Then it dawned on me: The day before, my brother and I had had a good duck hunt. I'd accidentally left a few of the ducks in the garage—and Buckley had helped himself. Buckley got a shot of something that helped him break down the ducks, and soon he was good to go.

After that, Buckley never ate another duck. In fact, he wound up being a phenomenal gun dog. The best I've ever had. F&S

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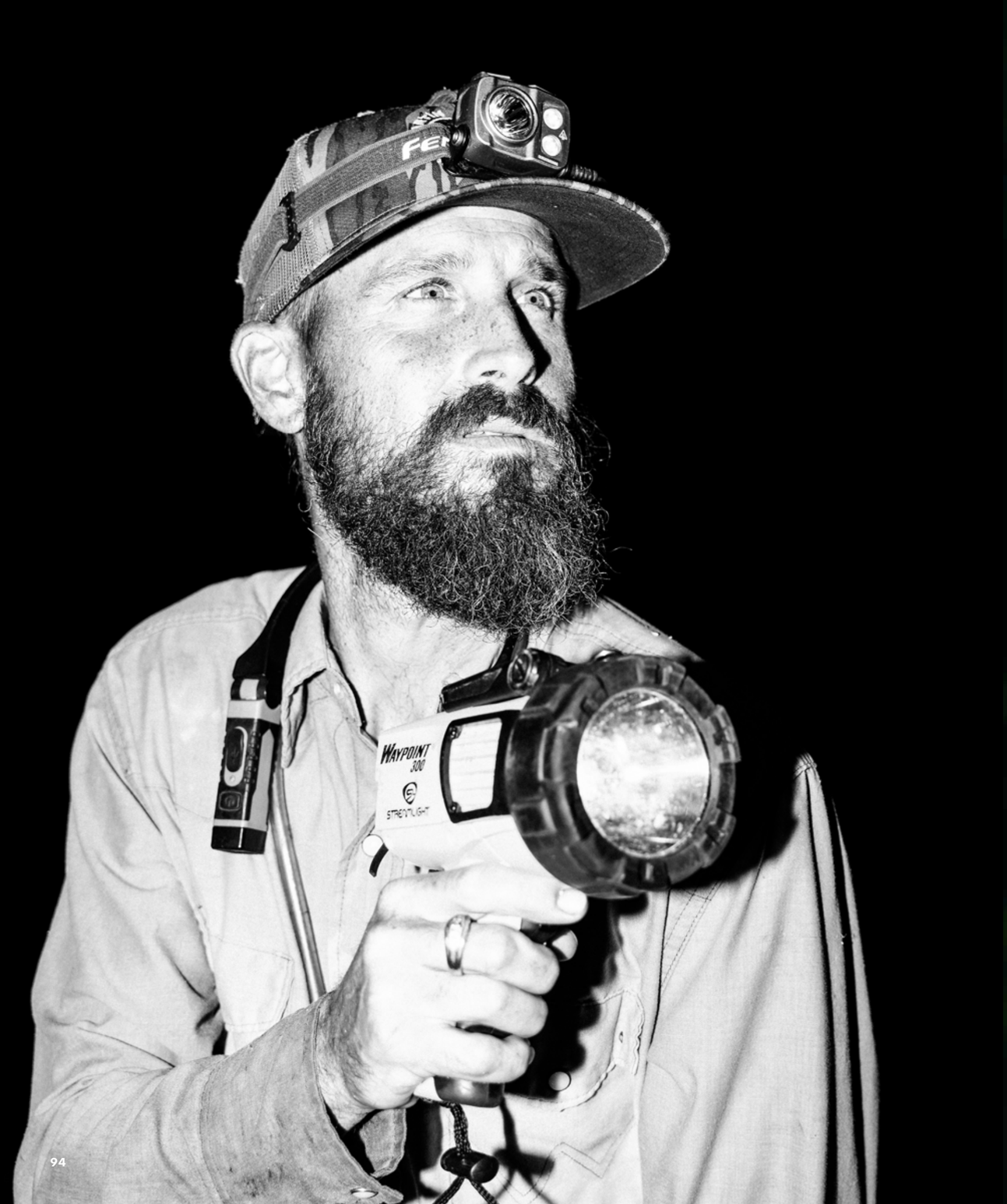

IN THE HEART OF THE EVERGLADES, A HUNTING GUIDE AND HIS SCRAPPY GERMAN WIREHAIRED POINTER ARE FIGHTING THE PYTHON INVASION ONE SNAKE AT A TIME

THE SNAKE CHARMER

by **SAGE MARSHALL**
photographs by **AUSTIN COIT**

A 12-foot gator lurks in the water when I meet Mike Kimmel at a boat ramp on the edge of the Everglades. The sun has already set, and darkness is falling fast. Part of me wants to bail and go back to the comfort of my hotel room instead of heading out into one of the world's largest and wildest swamps to hunt snakes in the middle of the night—but that's what we're here to do. While I'm not particularly scared of snakes, the thought of encountering one in the pitch-black night isn't exactly as enticing as a grouse hunt back home in Montana.

"Hop in," Kimmel hollers from the helm of his aluminum boat. He's wearing a button-down Wrangler shirt, a trucker cap, and a scraggly beard. "Let's get after 'em!"

I get in with Kimmel, several of his buddies, and some paying clients from Texas who want to hunt invasive Burmese pythons, which they say they're deathly afraid of. Then they tell me how important it is to face your fears. They drink liquid courage—a lot of it—on the boat ride out. Kimmel blares country music from a Turtlebox, jumps the boat on plane, and takes off down a channel. As the air blows against my face, my nerves ease.

Then we reach the first island.

It's nearly 10 p.m. The outline of the saw grass, poison oak, and other brambly vegetation looks dark, thick, and nearly impenetrable. The task at hand strikes me as brutally difficult if not impossible.

While python hunters flood the internet with trophy shots of big snakes, I don't know of anyone who hunts them the way Kimmel does. Most slowly drive along levee roads, spotlighting for snakes that are on the move. Kimmel, though, chases them on foot across the wild islands that are interspersed among the Everglades' 1.5 million acres of wetlands.

We spread out in a ragged line on one end of the island, using headlamps and small flashlights to illuminate the night. I've never experienced a setting quite like this. It's like we're hunting on another planet. Nocturnal dragonflies dive-bomb my headlamp. Giant rats scamper along tree limbs. Fist-size spiders hang suspended in webs that stretch across the game trails that we follow. Between these critters and the low light and thick vegetation, I soon become disoriented—so much so that the idea of locating a snake in all of this feels as likely as finding a needle in a haystack.

Which it would be were it not for Kimmel's lucky charm and secret weapon on snake hunts: Otto the python dog.

CATCH-ALL DOG

Otto is a 55-pound German wirehaired pointer—a versatile breed that can point upland birds, retrieve waterfowl, and track small game equally well. But Otto may be the first one that can also hunt snakes. He has a black and white coat, the stringy hair that's synonymous with the breed, and a beard that's nearly as long as his owner's. His eyes are foggy from being clawed at by wounded iguanas—another invasive species here—as he retrieved them. Now, as we hunt, Otto is a dark blur, zigzagging ahead of us, following his nose like any good bird dog would do while working thick cover for pheasants.

Python hunting is serious business. On the boat, Kimmel smiled and joked, but his demeanor changed when we started hunting. He's alert and serious, staying as close behind Otto as he can, regularly checking a GPS tracker when the dog gets out of sight. Otto has a high prey drive and not a whole lot of caution—two traits that allow him to be successful here. But they also mean he can run headfirst into danger, from gators to black bears and panthers to the pythons themselves. Kimmel tries to keep Otto nearby so he can call him back if he gets into a sticky situation.

"I have to be careful," Kimmel says as we walk. "I've had Otto find 16-foot pythons, and he's sitting there banging it up while I'm trying to get to him. If he's not careful, that snake could grab him, wrap him up, and strangle him."

Kimmel tells me there are two ways Otto alerts him to pythons: When he smells one but doesn't see it, he'll point. Or if he gets eyes on it, he'll bark and bay it like a coonhound—which is what Kimmel means when he says the dog was "banging it up."

We move quickly across the island, and by the time we approach the other side, I start to get more comfortable in the strange environment and less nervous about checking the underbrush for any snakes Otto may have missed. I've just about written off this island as a bust when I hear two sharp barks followed by some rustling.

"It's a monster!" Kimmel shouts.

IN THE BAG

I rush over. My whole body is tense. In my head, I'm picturing one of the giant serpents I've seen on Kimmel's social media, maybe one of the 16-footers that are known to swallow deer whole. I'm slightly disappointed—but also relieved—to find that Kimmel was being facetious: The python is no "monster." It's 4 feet long.

"Be careful," Kimmel says, as I approach. "It's the small ones that will bite you. They're not venomous, but their bites do hurt. This is what we would call a yearling. It's about 8 months old. It just goes to show how fast they grow."

Kimmel crouches beside a bush, holding the python by the tail. It occurs to me how improbable it would have been to spot such a small specimen without Otto's scenting it. The snake alternates between writhing its body to escape and trying to strike Kimmel. Otto stands a few feet away, stomping his paws and barking excitedly. He's obviously leery of his quarry—and I don't blame him.

When Aly, one of the clients, reaches us, Kimmel coaches him on how to grab the thick part of the snake's head in one quick motion. Aly pounces on the snake and vise-grips its head. The snake flashes its fangs and curls its body around Aly's arm. While it's small for a python, it's still one of the biggest snakes I've ever seen.

I'm hesitant to hold the python—but this is what I came here to do, so I go in. The skin is warm, a result of the hot summer weather, which makes reptiles especially active. It's also dry, which surprises me; I'd assumed it would be wet because of the way its scales shine. The snake coils around my forearm.

"Listen to these instructions, because you're going to get bit if you don't," says Kimmel, holding out a cloth game bag. He'll keep the snake alive to bring home. Then he'll shoot it in the head with a 22 when he's ready to make leather products out of its skin. "Unravel him first, then chuck that head toward the ground."

The snake is strong for its size, but

Opposite
Otto, a German wirehaired pointer, leaps over the bow of the boat as Kimmel pulls up to an island in the Everglades.

Right, top
Kimmel runs a 20-foot aluminum boat. During cold fronts, he uses the poling platform to locate pythons sunning themselves along the shore.

Right, bottom
Otto wears a Garmin GPS tracking collar in the field. During the summer, Kimmel and Otto hunt pythons at night, when they're most active.

it's not strong enough to make uncoiling it difficult, though I can imagine how things could get hairy quickly with a bigger snake. I do what Kimmel says. Once the snake is bagged and we're back on the boat, I take a deep breath. Only then do I realize how hard my heart was beating from all the excitement.

ISLAND HOPPING

Minutes later, we arrive at another island. I'm buzzing with nervous energy, thinking it'll be an action-packed night after getting off to a hot start. "We've been getting into a lot of pythons lately," Kimmel says.

In the dark, it's hard to tell this island apart from the first one. I concentrate on making my way through the foliage as I try to keep up with Kimmel and Otto. After seeing the first python, I'm primed to see another—and mistake countless gnarled branches and even lichen-splotched rocks for one. But I remain hopeful and strain my ears for Otto's barking.

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, there are between 100,000 and 300,000 pythons in the Everglades. The wide range highlights how hard it is to keep tabs on the invasive species' spread, which began in the 1980s with snakes that escaped or were freed from the exotic-pet trade. The population skyrocketed in the early 2000s, and the pythons, which have no natural predators here, decimated native mammal populations.

While it's now far too late to eradicate the species in Florida, officials have tried several tactics to manage the population, including paying professional hunters, which is how Kimmel got his start, and encouraging recreational python hunting.

Kimmel says python hunting is the hardest pursuit he's found—and the challenge is one of the reasons he likes it. "Pythons are cryptic predators that hide to ambush their prey," he says. "They have really good camouflage. There are thick spots on these islands. You could search an area for 20 minutes and there might be a python there, and you still won't spot it."

Otto helps Kimmel maximize his time and cover more ground. Kimmel trained the dog by praising him when he scented a python and using stimulation from a training collar to discourage him from going after other critters.

Otto also has a knack for finding pythons. Kimmel went from finding a snake on just 25 percent of his outings to finding at least one on nearly every hunt because of the dog. This fact gives me hope that we'll find more tonight—even though we wash out on this island and the next. I stay alert, half excited, half trepidatious, knowing Otto could strike the scent of a true monster at any moment.

PIPE DREAM

"Holy hell!" shouts Jarrod Buzbee, one of Kimmel's buddies. "It's a big one."

Then: "That's got to be one of the biggest cottonmouths I've ever seen!"

I start to make my way toward Buzbee—but he stops me before I get too close. "Stay back!" he shouts. "I've got eyes on the snake. Just catch up with Kimmel and make sure Otto doesn't come over here."

I follow his direction. Thankfully, Otto's already well past the cottonmouth.

Opposite
Kimmel moves into position behind Otto and shines a flashlight into the bush as they locate the first python of the evening.

Below
Kimmel's family members help him transform python skins into leather products, such as shoes and boots, wallets, and key fobs.

Once the snake is bagged, I take a deep breath. Only then do I realize how hard my heart was beating from all the excitement.

But he hasn't caught the scent of any pythons. We've now struck out on a series of islands, and they're all so similar they blend in my head.

Back on the boat, I learn that Kimmel isn't the first to train a dog to detect pythons—Auburn University researchers did it in the 2010s—but he is the first to regularly hunt over a python dog. And Otto is his first success. Kimmel initially tried to put his cur, Moose, on snakes, but the dog couldn't get over his aversion to them. Otto, the hard-running pup of two drahthaars, could.

In between islands, we spend some time spotlighting iguanas along the canal. A couple of them dangle like neon orange and green Popsicles at the tips of branches. Kimmel sidles the boat close and directs his clients to try to grab the big lizards, which stay still until the very last second before scrambling away, just beyond the grips of the Texans' hands. Otto barks madly, and we laugh each time. It's fun, but we know it's just a diversion. With the potential to find a 16-foot constrictor at any moment, it's hard to focus on lizards.

Eventually, we come upon an island that is different from the others—it's more open, with power lines running through the middle.

"This is the money spot," Kimmel says. "I once found five pythons out here."

I walk with more pep, and soon Otto starts barking. My heartbeat surges. But when I reach him and Kimmel, there's no snake in sight—only a massive abandoned industrial pipe, half of which is embedded in the ground.

"Is there a python?" I ask.

"There's got to be one around here somewhere," he says. "Otto's going nuts."

The dog alternates between barking at the open end of the pipe and circling some tall grass nearby. Kimmel and I peer into the pipe—and Kimmel even sticks his head inside for a better look. Nothing. Otto tries to scramble into the pipe too, but he doesn't fit. We search the vicinity thoroughly. Nothing.

"With how Otto's acting, I know there was something here tonight," Kimmel says. "But it's gone now."

AN ENDLESS HUNT

By 1 a.m., the hunt has become a downright slog. We keep hitting similar islands with no success. The battery of my headlamp is dying, so I borrow a flashlight from Kimmel but find myself more reluctant to squint into the underbrush than I was at the beginning of the night. I'm tired and discouraged and ready to get back to the hotel for a cold shower.

But Kimmel and Otto don't fade. Although Kimmel jokes around and Otto begs for snacks when we're on the boat, they hunt each island thoroughly. Kimmel walks steadily at a brisk pace while Otto runs back and forth. I listen for his panting above the buzz of insects. At some point, it strikes me that maybe the slow hunting is a good thing. Perhaps it means that Otto and Kimmel are making a difference. I mention this to Kimmel, and he agrees—though I can tell he wishes we were having more action.

"Before I started using Otto, there had maybe been five nests ever found in Florida by all the hunters combined," says Kimmel, noting that breeding females lay 40 to 100 eggs each year. "In the first season of using Otto, we found 22 nests.

"I don't think we'll ever get rid of the pythons, but better management is definitely possible," he adds. "In the areas where we focus, we've seen the native wildlife starting to bounce back. At the end of the day, that's the main goal."

Kimmel tells us the next island will be the last one for the night. But when we strike out there, he motors to another island: "Just one more." He's like a fisherman promising one last cast over and over. And each time we move on, there's Otto, standing with his front legs perched on the edge of the boat, hair slick from swamp dew, tongue lolling, nose to the sky, ready to catch the scent of the next python. F&S

Editor's note: A few weeks before this issue went to press, we learned that Otto had passed away. Our thoughts are with Kimmel and his family, and we're grateful that we had the chance to watch Otto do what he loved best—hunt.

Opposite, top
During the early 1900s, officials constructed an extensive system of canals in southeast Florida for flood prevention and water storage.

Opposite, bottom left
There are hundreds of thousands of invasive iguanas in Florida. Kimmel targets the lizards with an air rifle—and Otto retrieves them.

Opposite, bottom right
Kimmel poses with a 12-foot python that he and Otto caught several nights before the author's arrival.

Above
The author bags a 4-foot python, considered a yearling, that Otto located on the first island of the night.

The Road To Tinkhamtown

THE TALE OF FRANK AND SHADOW—BIRD-HUNTING PARTNERS AND BEST FRIENDS—TAKING THEIR LAST WALK THROUGH THE WOODS TOGETHER IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR, AND BELOVED, STORIES EVER TO BE PUBLISHED IN THE PAGES OF *FIELD & STREAM*. IT REMAINS AS MOVING AND POIGNANT AS EVER

by **COREY FORD**
illustration by **HOWARD TERPNING**

IT WAS A LONG WAY, but he knew where he was going. He would follow the road through the woods and over the crest of a hill and down the hill to the stream, and cross the sagging timbers of the bridge, and on the other side would be the place called Tinkhamtown. He was going back to Tinkhamtown.

He walked slowly at first, his legs dragging with each step. He had not walked for almost a year, and his flanks had shriveled and wasted away from lying in bed so long; he could fit his fingers around his thigh. Doc Towle had said he would never walk again, but that was Doc for you, always on the pessimistic side. Why, now he was walking quite easily, once he had started. The strength was coming back into his legs, and he did not have to stop for breath so often. He tried jogging a few steps, just to show he could, but he slowed again because he had a long way to go.

Doc used to argue that what's over is over, but he would insist Doc was wrong. The past never changes. You leave it and go on to the present, but it is still there, waiting for you to come back to it.

It was hard to make out the old road, choked with alders and covered by matted leaves, and he shut his eyes so he could see it better. He could always see it when he shut his eyes. Yes, here was the beaver dam on the right, just as he remembered it, and the flooded stretch where he had picked his way from hummock to hummock while the dog splashed unconcernedly in front of him. The water had been over his boot tops in one place, and sure enough, as he waded it now his left boot filled with water again, the same warm squdgy feeling. Everything was the way it had been that afternoon, nothing had changed in ten years. Here was the blowdown across the road that he had clambered over, and here on a knoll was the clump of thornapples where a grouse had flushed as they passed. Shad had wanted to look for it, but he had whistled him back. They were looking for Tinkhamtown.

He had come across the name on a map in the town library. He used to study the old maps and survey charts of the state; sometimes they showed where a farming community had flourished, a century ago, and around the abandoned pastures and in the orchards grown up to pine the birds would be feeding undisturbed. Some of his best grouse covers had been located that way. The map had been rolled up in a cardboard cylinder; it crackled with age as he spread it out. The date was 1857. It was the sector between Cardigan and Kearsarge Mountains, a wasteland of slash and second-growth timber without habitation today, but evidently it had supported a number of families before the Civil War. A road was marked on the map, dotted with X's for homesteads, and the names of the owners were lettered beside them: Nason, J. Tinkham, Allard, R. Tinkham. Half the names were Tinkham. In the center of the map—the paper was so yellow that he could barely make it out—was the word "Tinkhamtown."

•

He had drawn a rough sketch on the back of an envelope, noting where the road left the highway and ran north to a fork and then turned east and crossed a stream that was not even named; and the next morning he and Shad had set out together to find the place. They could not drive very far in the jeep, because washouts had gutted the roadbed and laid bare the ledges and boulders. He had stuffed the sketch in his hunting-coat pocket, and hung his shotgun over his forearm and started walking, the setter trotting ahead with the bell on his collar tinkling. It was an old-fashioned sleighbell, and it had a thin silvery note that echoed through the woods like peepers in the spring. He could follow the sound in the thickest cover, and when it stopped he would go to where he heard it last and Shad would


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Howard Terpning, an artist known for his paintings of Western scenes, did the illustration for the original "Tinkhamtown" layout.

Right
"The Road to Tinkhamtown" was published in June 1970—an issue that celebrated the 75th anniversary of *Field & Stream*.

He still remembered the little things about Shad: the possessive thrust of his paw, the way he false-yawned when he was vexed, the setter stubbornness sometimes, the clownish grin when they were going hunting, the kind eyes.

be on point. After Shad's death, he had put the bell away. He'd never had another dog.

It was silent in the woods without the bell, and the way was longer than he remembered. He should have come to the big hill by now. Maybe he'd taken the wrong turn back at the fork. He thrust a hand into his hunting coat; the envelope with the sketch was still in the pocket. He sat down on a flat rock to get his bearings, and then he realized, with a surge of excitement, that he had stopped on this very rock for lunch ten years ago. Here was the waxed paper from his sandwich, tucked in a crevice, and here was the hollow in the leaves where Shad had stretched out beside him, the dog's soft muzzle flattened on his thigh. He looked up, and through the trees he could see the hill.

He rose and started walking again, carrying his shotgun. He had left the gun standing in its rack in the kitchen when he had been taken to the state hospital, but now it was hooked over his arm by the trigger guard; he could feel the solid heft of it. The woods grew more dense as he climbed, but here and there a shaft of sunlight slanted through the trees. "And there were forests ancient as the hills," he thought, "enfolding sunny spots of greenery." Funny that should come back to him now; he hadn't read it since he was a boy. Other things were coming back to him, the smell of dank leaves and sweetfern and frosted apples, the sharp contrast of sun and cool shade, the November stillness before snow. He walked faster, feeling the excitement swell within him.

He paused on the crest of the hill, straining his ears for the faint mutter of the stream below him, but he could not hear it because of the voices. He wished they would stop talking, so he could hear the stream. Someone was saying his name over and over, "Frank, Frank," and he opened his eyes reluctantly and looked up at his sister. Her face was worried, and there was nothing to worry about. He tried to tell her where he was going, but when he moved his lips the words would not form. "What did you say, Frank?" she asked, bending her head lower. "I don't understand." He couldn't make the words any clearer, and she straightened and said to Doc Towle: "It sounded like Tinkhamtown."

•

"Tinkhamtown?" Doc shook his head. "Never heard him mention any place by that name."

He smiled to himself. Of course he'd never mentioned it to Doc. Things like a secret grouse cover you didn't mention to anyone, not even to as close a friend as Doc was. No, he and Shad were the only ones who knew. They had found it together, that long ago afternoon, and it was their secret.

They had come to the stream—he shut his eyes so he could see it again—and Shad had trotted across the bridge. He had followed more cautiously, avoiding the loose planks and walking along a beam with his shotgun held out to balance himself. On the other side of the stream the road mounted steeply to a clearing in the woods, and he halted before the split-stone foundations of a house, the first of the series of farms shown on the map. It must have been a long time since the building had fallen in; the cottonwoods growing in the cellar hole were twenty, maybe thirty years old. His boot overturned a rusted ax blade and the handle of a china cup in the grass; that was all. Beside the doorstep was a lilac bush, almost as tall as the cottonwoods. He thought of the wife who had set it out, a little shrub then, and the husband who had chided her for wasting time on such frivolous things with all the farm work to be done. But the work had come to nothing, and still the lilac bloomed each spring, the one thing that had survived.

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Shad's bell was moving along the stone wall at the edge of the clearing, and he strolled after him, not hunting, wondering about the people who had gone away and left their walls to crumble and their buildings to collapse under the winter snows. Had they ever come back to Tinkhamtown? Were they here now, watching him unseen? His toe stubbed against a block of hewn granite hidden by briars, part of the sill of the old barn. Once it had been a tight barn, warm with cattle steaming in their stalls, rich with the blend of hay and manure and harness leather. He liked to think of it the way it was; it was more real than this bare rectangle of blocks and the emptiness inside. He'd always felt that way about the past. Doc used to argue that what's over is over, but he would insist Doc was wrong. Everything is the way it was, he'd tell Doc. The past never changes. You leave it and go on to the present, but it is still there, waiting for you to come back to it.

He had been so wrapped in his thoughts that he had not realized Shad's bell had stopped. He hurried across the clearing, holding his gun ready. In a corner of the stone wall an ancient apple tree had littered the ground with fallen fruit, and beneath it Shad was standing motionless. The white fan of his tail was lifted a little and his backline was level, the neck craned forward, one foreleg cocked. His flanks were trembling with the nearness of grouse, and a thin skein of drool hung from his jowls. The dog did not move as he approached, but the brown eyes rolled back until their whites showed, looking for him. "Steady, boy," he called. His throat was tight, the way it always got when Shad was on point, and he had to swallow hard. "Steady, I'm coming."

"I think his lips moved just now," his sister's voice said. He did not open his eyes, because he was waiting for the grouse to get up in front of Shad, but he knew Doc Towle was looking at him. "He's sleeping," Doc said after a moment. "Maybe you better get some sleep yourself, Mrs. Duncombe." He heard Doc's heavy footsteps cross the room. "Call me if there's any change," Doc said, and

closed the door, and in the silence he could hear his sister's chair creaking beside him, her silk dress rustling regularly as she breathed.

What was she doing here, he wondered. Why had she come all the way from California to see him? It was the first time they had seen each other since she had married and moved out West. She was his only relative, but they had never been very close; they had nothing in common, really. He heard from her now and then, but it was always the same letter: why didn't he sell the old place, it was too big for him now that the folks had passed on, why didn't he take a small apartment in town where he wouldn't be alone? But he liked the big house, and he wasn't alone, not with Shad. He had closed off all the other rooms and moved into the kitchen so everything would be handy. His sister didn't approve of his bachelor ways, but it was very comfortable with his cot by the stove and Shad curled on the floor near him at night, whinnying and scratching the linoleum with his claws as he chased a bird in a dream. He wasn't alone when he heard that.

He had never married. He had looked after the folks as long as they lived; maybe that was why. Shad was his family. They were always together—Shad was short for Shadow—and there was a closeness between them that he did not feel for anyone else, not his sister or Doc even. He and Shad used to talk without words, each knowing what the other was thinking, and they could always find one another in the woods. He still remembered the little things about him: the possessive thrust of his paw, the way he false-yawned when he was vexed, the setter stubbornness sometimes, the clownish grin when they were going hunting, the kind eyes. That was it; Shad was the kindest person he had ever known.

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They had not hunted again after Tinkhamtown. The old dog had stumbled several times, walking back to the jeep, and he had to carry him in his arms the last hundred yards. It was hard to realize he was gone. He liked to think of him the way he was; it was like the barn, it was more real than the emptiness. Sometimes at night, lying awake with the pain in his legs, he would hear the scratch of claws on the linoleum, and he would turn on the light and the hospital room would be empty. But when he turned the light off he would hear the scratching again, and he would be content and drop off to sleep, or what passed for sleep in these days and nights that ran together without dusk or dawn.

Once he asked Doc pointblank if he would ever get well. Doc was giving him something for the pain, and he hesitated a moment and finished what he was doing and cleaned the needle and then looked at him and said: "I'm afraid not, Frank." They had grown up in town together, and Doc knew him too well to lie. "I'm afraid there's nothing to do." Nothing to do but lie here and wait till it was over. "Tell me, Doc," he whispered, for his voice wasn't very strong, "what happens when it's over?" And Doc fumbled with the catch of his black bag and closed it and said well he supposed you went on to someplace else called the Hereafter. But he shook his head; he always argued with Doc. "No, it isn't someplace else," he told him, "it's someplace you've been where you want to be again." Doc didn't understand, and he couldn't explain it any better. He knew what he meant, but the shot was taking effect and he was tired.

He was tired now, and his legs ached a little as he started down the hill, trying to find the stream. It was too dark under the trees to see the sketch he had drawn, and he could not tell direction by the moss on the north side of the trunks. The moss grew all around them, swelling them out of size, and huge blowdowns blocked his way. Their upended roots were black and misshapen, and now instead of excitement he felt a surge of panic. He floundered through a pile of slash, his legs throbbing with pain as the sharp points stabbed him, but he did not have the strength to get to the other side and he had to back out again and circle. He did not know where he was going. It was getting late, and he had lost the way.

There was no sound in the woods, nothing to guide him, nothing but his sister's chair creaking and her breath catching now and then in a dry sob. She wanted him to turn back, and Doc wanted him to, they all wanted him to turn back. He thought of the big house; if he left it alone it would fall in with the winter snows and cottonwoods would grow in the cellar hole. And there were all the other doubts, but most of all there was the fear. He was afraid of the darkness, and being alone, and not knowing where he was going. It would be better to turn around and go back. He knew the way back.

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And then he heard it, echoing through the woods like peepers in the spring, the thin silvery tinkle of a sleighbell. He started running toward it, following the sound down the hill. His legs were strong again, and he hurdled the blowdowns, he leapt over fallen logs, he put one fingertip on a pile of slash and sailed over it like a grouse skimming. He was getting nearer and the sound filled his ears, louder than a thousand churchbells ringing, louder than all the choirs in the sky, as loud as the pounding of his heart. The fear was gone; he was not lost. He had the bell to guide him now.

He came to the stream, and paused for a moment at the bridge. He wanted to tell them he was happy, if they only knew how happy he was, but when he opened his eyes he could not see them anymore. Everything else was bright, but the room was dark.

The bell had stopped, and he looked across the stream. The other side was bathed in sunshine, and he could see the road mounting steeply, and the clearing in the woods, and the apple tree in a corner of the stone wall. Shad was standing motionless beneath it, the white fan of his tail lifted, his neck craned forward and one foreleg cocked. The whites of his eyes showed as he looked back, waiting for him.

"Steady," he called, "steady, boy." He started across the bridge. "I'm coming." F&S

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RACE AGAINST TIME

IN THE CAROLINAS, AMERICANS HAVE BEEN CHASING DEER WITH HOUNDS FOR MORE THAN 200 YEARS.

THE SPRINGLE FAMILY WANTS JUST A FEW MORE BEFORE IT ALL DISAPPEARS

by **MATTHEW EVERY**
photographs by **PAUL KING**

THE DOGS KNOW WHAT TODAY IS ABOUT. A pair of truck-mounted aluminum kennels can't keep in their cries, as steam from their breath rises from the bars and mixes with idling tailpipe exhaust. It's a cold December morning in North Carolina, and beyond the smoldering vehicles, hunters drain coffee cups and wolf down sausage biscuits at the Adams Creek Club's central meeting place—a large pavilion tucked into a breastwork of booming southern pine trees.

After breakfast, we all form a circle around Robert "Heavy" George and bow our heads, as the dogs, in their boxes, continue to yip and howl.

"Lord, I thank you for the fellowship we have," he says. "It ain't all about killing deer. It's about fellowship and taking care of each other. I ask that you bless us all individually, one by one, and bless us as a group. I ask that you keep us together. In Jesus's name, amen."

With our response, the place comes alive with activity—hunters grabbing food for the road and tossing gear into their vehicles. In a matter of minutes, the pavilion and the surrounding woods are virtually empty, and for the first time all morning, it's quiet. My host, Davis Springle, calls over to me from the driver's seat of his pickup. The engine is running, our guns are in the back, and judging by the urgency in his voice, we can't wait around here any longer. We need to get to our spot before 30 dogs hit the deer woods.

RELEASE THE HOUNDS

Unlike everyone else here, I have never hunted deer with hounds; until now, I'd never even met someone who had. A couple hundred years ago, that would have put me squarely in the minority. This was the way Americans hunted whitetails during colonial times and for years afterward. But for these hunters, the world is closing in. Their sport has fallen out of favor, not only with the public but also with many other hunters. Dog hunting, as it's known in the South, is outlawed in most of the country—and where it isn't banned, it is barely holding on.

Springle himself doesn't match my preconceived notions of what a dog hunter should be. At 35, he's young, clean-cut, the president of a duck decoy carver's guild, an upland bird hunter, and a family man with two young kids. The cab of his truck is filled with children's toys, storybooks, a car seat, and, today at least, loose rounds of ammo that rattle in the cup holders as we drive deeper into the club's lease.

"We have dog hunts here pretty much every Saturday during deer season, and during the week if members can make it," he says of the 60-member club. According to Springle, joining a club like Adams Creek is one of the few ways to do dog hunting right. Clubs can lease large enough tracts of land for the sport, which keeps the dogs from running amok. At Adams Creek, they have 11,000 acres to roam, though a lot of it has become a patchwork as development encroaches.

For the Springles, hunting anything is mostly about the dogs. Davis's brother, Ryan, and father, Ashton—who are both here today—raise everything from duck dogs to deer hounds, and if Springle's 7-year-old son, Camden, follows in their footsteps, he'll represent the family's third generation of dog men at Adams Creek.

Along the edge of a dirt road, Springle stops the truck and we get out. He grabs his 243, slings a GPS unit around his neck with a lanyard, and clips a marine radio to his briar-proof coveralls. A thick curtain of brush and vines flanks the dead-end road, but beyond that, the woods open up and palmetto fronds spread in the shade of oak

Previous spread
A pack of Walker hounds set loose on a gravel road race to find the scent of a fresh deer track.

Below, left
White-coated July hounds push their pink noses through the bars of a truck-mounted kennel.

Below, right
A hunter called Raw Cat puts a GPS collar on a Walker hound before the morning's hunt begins.

trees towering above us. It's a rare piece of ground in a pine plantation. Walking in, I spot a tree stand and a trail camera before we stop at a slight elevation overlooking 75 yards of open timber.

"Any dog hunter will tell you that it's harder to kill a deer over hounds than it is sitting in a stand," says Springle, who also hunts from tree stands and ground blinds during part of the season here and on another lease. "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time with dog hunting, the deer gets away."

Contrary to popular belief, the dogs are not trained to run the deer back to the hunters. The deer goes where it wants, nose to the wind, and it goes there very fast. The hunter's job is to anticipate where the deer is going and intercept it without getting winded, working things like pinch points and cover breaks—exactly the sort of things Springle has considered in choosing this spot for us to take a stand.

So far, the woods are quiet except for errant low-volume crackles from the radio—no howls or barks in the distance yet. By now, Springle's brother and father have turned the dogs loose, and the hounds are likely scouring the woods for deer scent. When they find it, they'll follow until they jump a doe or a buck, and they'll stay on that deer at first. But most likely, they'll end up breaking off and chasing other deer. With 30 dogs on the ground, it may seem like certain chaos. But for the moment at least, I'm struck by how tame today's hunt feels compared to yesterday's.

DEER DOWN

I came to North Carolina to hunt with Springle and his family, but on my first night, he brought me to a friend's farm where we were invited to join the neighboring Back Creek Club in the morning for a hunt. Members there had scouted a big buck in a square chunk of land that abuts a canal. To go after the deer, several dog handlers fresh from a field trial had assembled 80 hounds that, to my surprise, would all be released at once.

As we drove in a convoy through a maze of dusty roads at dawn, trucks loaded with hunters' dogs peeled off left and right to surround the block. Springle and I had joined a man called Raw Cat, who drove us to a deer trail that looked like an oversize rabbit hole in a wall of thorns and vines. When he opened the doors of his kennel, the hounds spilled out like cereal poured from a box and ran headlong down the trail. Then we waited.

Above
Davis Springle, left, and the author share a laugh as they wait for hounds to run a deer past them.

Opposite, top
Springle and the author drive a gravel road to get into position before the dogs are set loose again.

Opposite, bottom
Trey Hardy carries his gun and a buddy's through the vines and thorns that scratched his face.

"There are three parts to a race," Raw Cat told me. "The first is called trailing. You'll hear one or two howls when the lead dogs find a track that the deer walked the night before." As if on cue, we heard a faint bark and howl in the distance.

"The next is tracking," he said. "The scent gets stronger as they get closer to the deer. More dogs will chime in." Raw Cat then looked to the woods, listening for confirmation—and soon got it.

"Third is a full cry. That's when the dogs catch up to the deer and jump him."

In a matter of minutes, all of Raw Cat's hounds erupted in a crescendo of violent noise. It sounded like a roar, almost like an engine revving to full bore. The other trucks full of dogs had already been emptied, and on hearing Raw Cat's pack, every other dog changed direction and joined the race.

We sped down a dirt road in Springle's truck to get ahead of the pack and arrived at a cutover. Springle told me to grab my rifle and gain a vantage point. I could hear the hounds in the distance getting closer. I imagined them nipping at the heels of a big buck, but Springle explained that a deer can easily outrun the dogs and will probably be far ahead. In other words, I might get a shot at the buck at any second.

But then the unified cacophony became several smaller ones, and the image on Springle's GPS took the form of a spaghetti swirl. The buck, apparently, was running the pack in circles, through other bedded deer. Dogs broke off, ranging farther away, with some "going overboard" into the canal after a swimming deer. What started as one race, as they call it, had become several.

For the hunters here, running dogs is mostly about the race and whose dog is the fastest and most driven. To keep track, the owners, except Springle, had dyed their dogs' flanks with a number or put a jersey on them. The chatter on the radio sounded like an announcer at a stock-car race, as the hounds tore across clearings and logging roads. "That's 532 out front, then 419, 333, and 289, and there's a white dog bringing up the rear." Around midday, over the sounds of barks and howls and radio updates, we heard a shot.

Raw Cat, who'd split off with a hunter named Trey Hardy, had gotten ahead of a small group of hounds, and Hardy took a shot at a whitetail crossing an open field. The deer bolted into a maze of brush, and both hounds and hunters followed. As Springle and I drove to meet the rest of

the Back Creek club members in a large clearing, we learned via the radio that the buck had bayed up before Hardy delivered the final shot, and Raw Cat had gone in to wrangle the dogs.

Hunters in the clearing honked the horns on their trucks and yelled to help guide Hardy and Raw Cat to the open ground. Eventually, Hardy emerged from the most unforgiving cover I've ever seen, face bleeding from briars but dragging a 6-point buck. It wasn't the deer we started out after, but it was still a buck.

The dogs were exhausted, and so were the hunters. Club members traded dogs they'd found until they were all in the right box and accounted for. Some of the hounds lay curled up on straw, while others lapped water from bowls strapped to the bars in their crates. This was the third time the Back Creek Club had tried to get that big buck on the canal and come up short. The consensus was that the buck had swum to safety. They'd patterned him down to the trail he was using to go from breakfast to bed, but he still got away.

FULL CRY

Today's hunt at Adams Creek is far more mellow. Rather than speeding along logging roads trying to circumvent the pack, Springle and I are on foot and in the woods with the dogs. It's a bit like a traditional deer drive, with the dogs acting like the drivers and hunt club members posted at known funnels. But instead of pushing deer in one direction, the dogs stir up the woods generally, potentially giving at least one of us a shot opportunity.

Eventually, Hardy emerged from the most unforgiving cover I've ever seen, face bleeding from briars but dragging a 6-point buck.

Opposite, top
The author, far right, swings on a fast-moving doe as Springle and his son, Camden, look on.

Opposite, bottom left
A Walker hound sorts out a scent trail. Most of the time, the deer runs well ahead of the pack.

Opposite, bottom right
Jeremy Cahoon hands off a side-by-side shotgun so he can help drag a buck from the brush.

Above
Members of the Adams Creek Club pose with Walker hounds before the day-two hunt begins.

The hardest thing about dog hunting compared to other types of deer hunting is that you're letting the deer know that you're there. If you don't run dogs, you'll likely never hunt a deer that's as actively engaged in avoidance—and there's no telling where that deer might seek refuge.

Although the paper company lease at Adams Creek is huge by most deer hunters' standards, the club has recently lost ground to development, much of it broken into 10-acre lots for housing.

"It's changed the way we run dogs," Springle says. "Some landowners are cool with us doing this, and some aren't. Because of that, we won't create a situation where dogs can scatter near private property—though, I'll acknowledge, it can happen. By and large, if you can give us a minute of understanding, we'll get them out of there. I don't want to be on someone's land getting hollered at any more than they want me there with my dog."

Standing with Springle in the woods reminds me of the sort of deer hunt I would do back home without dogs—low key and quiet. But I'm shaken out of that thought with the telltale sound of a full cry in the distance.

"We can shoot bucks or does here," Springle whispers. "If it's a buck, just try to make sure it forks over the ears. If it's a doe, I'd prefer not to shoot a small one or one with a yearling."

I hear the hounds casting wide and coming closer as they circle in the woods. It sounds like someone playing with the volume knob on a stereo. At one point, they sound so loud I expect to see them right in front of me. Instead, I spot a doe moving between the palmettos at 75 yards.

She's still well ahead of the hounds, looking back every two or three steps. I mount my rifle and follow her with my crosshair, and I can see up close that she doesn't look as stressed or exhausted as I expected. I wait for her to stop trotting so I can snap off a shot, but before I can, a second doe leaps from the cover and bounds directly between me and Springle. We both flinch and try to get a bead on the deer as it runs away, but neither of us can pull it together before both are gone.

A few minutes later, the hounds arrive, and it's the first time I've seen them working in the woods. They move in a wave like a pod of fish, surrounding us and filtering through the palmettos as if we aren't even there. Their brown, black, and tan coats make it seem as though the ground itself is moving.

Some howl, while others quietly sniff and track. It isn't the mayhem I'd pictured when we heard them all sound off earlier. They're methodical, patient, and driven, searching for the two deer we only saw glimpses of. Some dogs briefly acknowledge us with sideways glances as they snuffle past. Some want nothing to do with us and focus on their work. A few younger dogs straggling behind stop to give us a look that says, *Boy, am I glad to see you. Which way did that pack of dogs go?*

"That way," Springle says with a laugh, pointing in the direction of the pack.

PASSED ON

The hounds eventually lose the deer, and we gather them to find another block of woods in which to set them loose. On the way out, Springle and I talk about some of the challenges dog hunters face and the idea that, one day, you won't hear full cries in the woods anymore.

"I think the idea of hunting anything with a dog can fade away pretty quickly," he says. "Part of dog hunting is preserving the heritage, and that goes for any kind of hunt that involves a dog. If you take away deer dogs today, there's precedence. Next, it's bear dogs, then raccoon dogs, and then even bird dogs. Decades, even centuries, of developing breeds would just vanish."

Back in the truck, we catch up with the other hunters and form a loose plan to regroup. In the process, we pick up Springle's son Camden who's been riding with his grandpa, Ashton. At our next and last spot for the day, Camden puts on his dad's orange vest, which drags on the ground, and he bops along behind us as we skirt the edge of a dry creek bed. Camden asks lots of questions, from "What kind of track is that?" to "What kind of poop is that?" to "Can we go to McDonald's after?"

Springle stops each time to answer, showing Camden the difference between fresh deer tracks and old ones, pointing out raccoon poop and turkey poop, and letting him know that McDonald's is a solid maybe, but only the drive-through.

Eventually, we find ourselves in a mature pine plantation. The rows of trees reach to the sky, and the sun comes through the branches to the forest floor like light from a cathedral window. Again, we hear the hounds off in the distance, and I set up next to Springle, looking down between two long rows of trees.

I hear a twig snap, and a doe materializes in front of us. She bounds from the pines, putting all four feet on the ground and springing upward again. Springle says to shoot, then says to hold off. We both swing with the deer as she sails through the air 20 yards in front of us. Her next leap has her into the brush and gone.

"She wasn't a yearling, but she was right on the edge of being too small," he says. "We probably could have shot her, but I didn't have enough time to make the call." Springle shakes his head, then adds: "A lot of folks think that when you're running deer dogs, you're killing indiscriminately, and that's not true. You can care about the same things every other deer hunter does and run dogs. You're just hunting the deer in a different way."

In that moment, I'm struck by the idea that I wouldn't hesitate to do this again. The dog hunting that Springle and his family have shown me is challenging, exciting, and brings deer hunters together in a way that modern deer hunting is leaving behind. But what surprises me most is that it's as aesthetic as chasing upland birds with English setters. Even if you don't get a deer, you get to take part in a great choreography of animals and hunters and split-second decisions.

Back at camp, the hunters are packing up and the hounds are finally quiet. Springle is over at his truck, swapping his 243 and deer dogs for his over-under shotgun and 4-year-old GSP. He wants to do a little woodcock hunting before driving home. Camden has run off with a friend, and with their blaze caps and jackets, they look like two orange dots in a sea of pine trees. Sitting in the pavilion, I'm joined by Ashton and a man named Howard Whitley.

Whitley has been bringing his dogs to Adams Creek for more than 40 years. He lives in a North Carolina county where running deer hounds is no longer allowed, so he drives 2½ hours each Saturday to come here. He doesn't carry a rifle nowadays; he just wants to listen to the dogs.

We're quiet for a bit, watching the kids play in the woods. Ashton and Whitley are from a generation that got their families into dog hunting. I ask if they think they'll also be around to see it disappear.

"We thought it would be gone by now," says Ashton. "There's going to come a time when we won't be able to do this, when Camden can't run hounds. We're just thankful for every day we have." F&S

Left
Adams Creek members Howard Whitley and Preston Justin meet up on the morning of the second hunt.

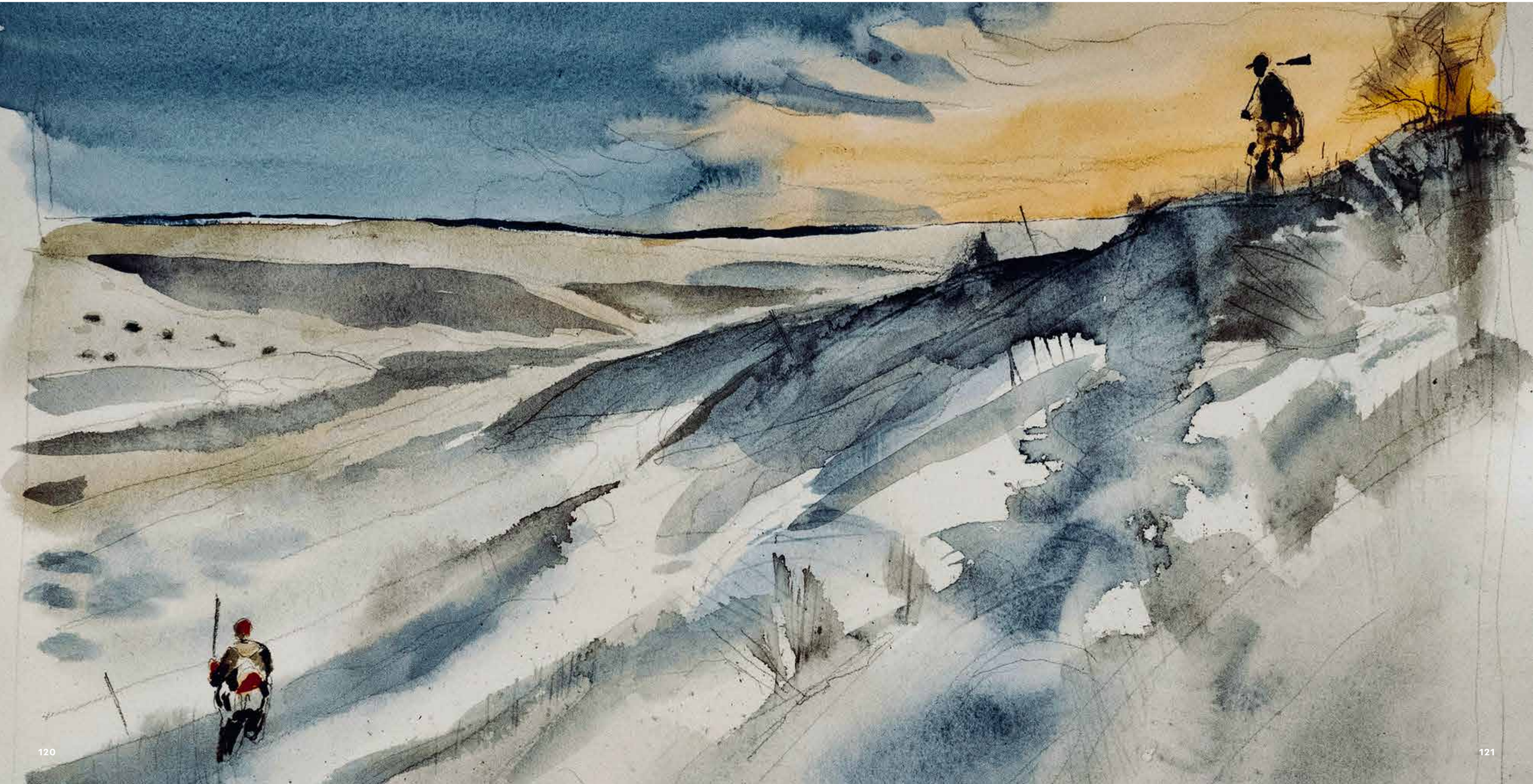
Opposite, top
For some dog hunters, it's all about the "race," complete with numbered jerseys on their hounds.

Opposite, bottom
Raw Cat and one of his Walkers have a face-to-face reunion at the end of an action-packed hunt.

THIS HARD LAND

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**
illustrations by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

THREE FRIENDS AND A PACK OF DOGS EMBARK ON A DIY UPLAND ADVENTURE. THEY ROAM REMOTE AND UNFORGIVING PUBLIC LAND FOR CHALLENGING AND UNPREDICTABLE BIRDS. THE HUNTING ISN'T EASY—WHICH MAKES THEIR SUCCESSES ALL THE MORE REWARDING



GLENN STOPS AND TURNS INTO THE WIND. We see this from 200 yards away and know there are birds, so we quicken our pace. It's open country, but rough country—rangelands of big sagebrush, Indian ricegrass, and western wheatgrass; ridgelines armored with rock and sandy slope wash where you could turn an ankle in a heartbeat. We need to get there quickly, but we don't want to push the dog. We don't want him to pick up on the slightest whiff of distrust, because he's young and learning, and at his age, confidence is fragile. We don't want to crowd him. But we do want those birds.

Now Glenn sails through the tawny grasses, slim-waisted and coat glowing like only a Gordon setter's coat can. He's not as tall as the other bird dogs we have in the trucks, but I like how he uses the high spots to gain a vantage, halting on the rises for a quick look and a deep sniff.

"He's figuring it out," his owner, Frederick Stivers, says beside me. "I'd like to see his head up a bit more, smoking the pipe. But he's on his way."

Which seems to be a theme for this bird-hunting trip, chasing chukars and Hungarian partridge. Our intentions are unfixed: We have no expectations other than to have our boots on the ground, put the dogs on birds, let the old ones teach the new ones how it's done, and watch the new ones take it all in.

There are swirling winds, broken ground, and new perspectives. And somewhere in the mix is the pure scent of the hunt. We know it's there. Like the dogs, we have to find it.

HARD ACTS TO FOLLOW

We struck out from Bozeman, Montana, in a direction I won't divulge, headed for big open country that is, for now, as much yours as mine. I'm the sidekick in the group. John Hudgens is as serious a bird hunter and dog trainer as I've ever met, despite an angling-heavy CV. He holds a degree in wildlife biology from the University of Montana and ran the South American program for Yellow Dog Flyfishing for a decade. He's now the director of Anglers Academy on Idaho's Henry's Fork River—a sort of graduate school for fly fishing held on one of the most challenging trout rivers in the country. That suggests something about the man: Hudgens works hard at having fun, and he takes outdoor skills very seriously.

Stivers, a pal of ours, is a St. Louis–based artist and architect for whom locked-up bird dogs and fly-hooked tarpon are both aspiration and inspiration. In the company of these two, I was outgunned in the upland bird game, but I did arrive with my standard ace in the hole: I brought the country ham and stone-ground grits. We had two trucks and six dogs, guns and all the fixings, a reservation at an Airbnb on the edge of a town I'd never heard of, and four days in the uplands.

Our mission was to explore some of the wildest land left in North America and consider what remains true and pure about one of the oldest sporting pursuits on the continent. Bird hunting is going through tremendous change, whether the bird of choice is quail, grouse, pheasant, woodcock, or marsh hen. More people are moving to the edges of wild places. There's more pressure on public lands. More pressure for resource extraction. More ways to access remote areas, from digital navigation to e-bikes.

And then there are the dogs. People have gone crazy for bird dogs. You can't swing a hazy IPA these days without smacking three German shorthaired pointers on the snout. Many owners purchase these dogs with little intention of hunting, but then they change their minds. They see the cool YouTube videos. Who wouldn't want to try that?

It can all lead to conflict, so we wanted to go somewhere so far away and so wild that there wasn't much out there other than what has always been out there: wild birds and breezes. And to be honest, I've always enjoyed hunting with folks who have nice bird dogs, as they often don't care how many times they pull the trigger. "It's all about the dogs," they say.

Which is fine by me, because I like to pull the trigger.

HARD-EARNED BIRDS

Underfoot, sooty rocks clack like castanets as we top out on a long, vertebral run of gray cliff. The flanks of the ridges, awash in early yellow light, are peppered with outcroppings and ribbed with exposed stone. Leroy, a white-and-orange setter, courses ahead, ignoring the pronghorn antelope that scatter into a downwind draw. Leroy is 3 years old and "coming along real good," Hudgens says. He looks like he knows what he's doing.

I gaze around. Between me and the snowcapped peaks 20 miles distant, there is nothing but open ground. In the opposite direction, to the west, 40 miles of more of the same. A hawk flushes a dozen chukars from a rock outcropping. Leroy stops to consider. The presence of a hawk is a good thing; if there are hawks, there likely are birds. But those birds are far away, and now far gone. Leroy puts his head down and moves into the wind.

This open country provides a massive canvas through which the dogs can run, and most of the time you can keep your eyes on them. Four hundred yards away, the setter seems to be swallowed up by the perpetuity of everything around him, a single pixel of cream in a landscape so vast that time and space lose their mooring. But even at that distance, I can sense the intentness with which he moves. A cheetah on the chase is all-in on speed, and you can see the commitment in its giant, loping flights over the ground. On the run, Leroy seems to hold part of his focus in reserve, ready to deploy the moment he hits scent. Now the birds are on the run, as chukars often are, and I observe how Leroy is moving in and out of varying levels of scent intensity—gauging how quickly he can move by how close he is to the birds. When the scent dissipates, he makes great, looping 50-yard sprints to get upwind of the birds. Then he hunts: Three steps, stop. Twenty steps, stop. Reposition. Belly crawl through the greasewood.

Damn, I think. *That is one smart dog.*

And when he goes on point, it happens so quickly that it can't be his brain at work but a few million years of trial and error distilled into a pinprick of pure instinct. The moment seems transcendent. Kinetic energy transferred instantly to stasis. Motion to immobility.

Transcendent or not, what happens in country like this when a dog like that goes on point doesn't change: Here we go. He's done his job. Now we have to do ours. When I get to Leroy, I am huffing deep and ragged breaths. I slow for the last 50 yards to settle both my head and my heart.

If the last half decade has shown us anything, it's that fresh blood in hunting brings new possibilities.

What happens next—the flush, the shooting, the retrieve—is less important than what comes after that. Hudgens and I gather by the dog, smooth the feathers on the birds, and unselfconsciously consider the moment.

"A lot of people might look out across this and think it's a bunch of brown ugly," Hudgens says. "But I think it's beautiful. Just raw and open and beautiful. And for a bird hunter, this is as good as it gets. Period. You may love chasing bobwhite quail or think you'd rather go after grouse, sharptails, or whatever. But probably not. Once you've done this, probably not."

Every day and every covey is different, he explains. Some days you'll point 20 coveys and not get off a shot. The next day, you might get your limit in an hour. Huns are conducive to sticking tight. The dog could be locked up at 500 yards, but if the dog doesn't make a mistake, the birds will most likely stay right there. Chukars are different. Closing the distance is where the story gets told.

"When you get 100 yards from the birds, do they stay?" Hudgens asks. "Do they go? You don't ever know. And that's what makes it so much fun."

He stops for a moment, reconsidering his words. He seems to stumble over that word, *fun*, as if it doesn't fit with what's swirling around in his head, as if he wishes he could suck it back in and replace it with something with a bit more gravitas. "This is raw country," he continues. "It's shortgrass country, and you look at it and you think that there's not much there, but it took a million years to make this. And you can't remake it. You can't remake it once it's gone."

I'm not sure if he's talking about the land, or about the experience of hunting this land.

HARD TRUTHS

These vast Western landscapes may appear static and unyielding, but the bird-hunting game is evolving here. I'm beginning to understand that its hard-to-find, hard-to-move-through nature is one of the appeals of this place to Hudgens. If there's a place for as pure an expression of Western bird hunting left, it's here. Even if "here" is a circle 80 miles wide.

We talk about this one night with a couple of Hudgens's friends. After dinner and in the middle of a round of whiskey, we huddle around an iPhone in the cabin dining room. Hudgens wants Stivers and me to hear from two of his most respected bird-hunting pals, Dan "Rooster" Leavans and John McIltrot—men he learned from and whom he respects. Drilling down into the spiritual center of chasing wild birds in big, wild country seems like the right place to muse about the future.

"I've been lucky to find myself in good company throughout my hunting life," Leavans says, his voice graveled through the phone. "And there's a lack of mentorship in the upland bird world that's having some negative effects."

McIltrot, who runs Seranoa Kennels, out of Roundup, Montana, agrees. A falconer and field trial pro, McIltrot explains that he "was mentored not just in the how, but in the why. And that came from being steeped in these traditions, and I worry that's not happening anymore."

It's a fact that many new hunters are learning the ropes from social media and YouTube, not from oldsters with creased faces and worn chaps. They're missing out on hearing from the folks who have been there and hunted that and know that when you pass a parked truck, "you don't go 100 yards down the road and start hunting," Leavans says. "You go 5 miles down the road, because that's how we walk in this country."

Sipping my whiskey, I recognize the danger of sounding like a covey of gout-stricken codgers huddled together against the strong wind of time. We are all from an era when nearly everyone drank from the same fountain of bird-hunting lore and tradition. And it's a fact that modern gear and modern technology can take some of the rocks out of the road to being a bird hunter. But if

When he goes on point, it happens so quickly that it can't be his brain at work but a few million years of trial and error distilled into a pinprick of pure instinct.

you skip the fundamentals, in McIltrot's words, hunting "becomes nothing but equipment and locations."

Hudgens gazes into the glass in his lap. "The dogs take time," he says. "Learning the land takes time. Learning the local customs takes time. But no one has time anymore."

But silver linings require a cloud, and if the last half decade or so has shown us anything, it's that fresh blood in hunting brings with it new possibilities—and skill sets sorely needed in these times. Truth is, many younger hunters didn't enter the sport through a mother or father or aunt or uncle or some old coot from church who kept a dozen dogs behind the house. Few can quote chapter and verse from Charles F. Waterman or Robert Ruark. But they can digest a 38-page legislative bill or suss out the hidden agendas in a budget amendment. And they wait for no one to act. Younger hunters have formed the backbone of the current movement to protect public lands. A different bedrock, perhaps, but no less firm.

Perhaps that's the shared ground between bird hunting's past and present: Hunters who don't let happenstance guard the future.

HARD TO PUT INTO WORDS

I'm not from this world of big-running, big-country bird dogs, but I've felt its pull in every Charlie Russell painting I've seen and every Louis L'Amour novel I've read. And the next day, I catch the scent of what that late-night dinner-table confab was all about. Hudgens, Stivers, and I are working across the top of a long, broad mesa where every footstep is as likely to land on bare rock as open ground. We've just started to descend the lip of the mesa when I catch sight of five mule deer standing in a notch in the ridge rock, their black ears flared, heads up, eyes alert. They look like they have been chiseled from the same stone as the crags and cliffs, and over their backs the land falls away to a deep valley that stretches for miles. I stare back at the deer, rooted in place, and I miss the fact that Leroy is on point 50 yards distant.

I'm brought back to the present only when I'm startled by a rabbit bolting from a rock outcrop. Hudgens is to my right, and when I catch his eye, he darts his head forward: *Move. Move!* I take five steps, quick and purposeful, and the mule deer vault away, snorting, and the birds come up—six or seven first, then four, then five, then who knows. I knock one down with my first shot and miss with the second barrel. I break the shotgun and fumble for shells. More birds are flying. Another hit, another miss, and I'm on the move to clear the ridgeline in case I have a crack at another bird, and I almost need to lock the brakes to keep from tumbling over.

Hudgens had fired at some point and is looking for his bird. The muleys post up on the next piece of high ground, maybe 100 yards away, and look back at us with unsettled curiosity.

Every wild element is there. Nothing is missing. There was the ridgetop and the sagebrush and the long view down the drain to a cottonwood-lined creek two miles in the distance. As I made it to the last few steps to the ridgeline, the snow-capped mountains beyond rose like a sunrise. In my bones, I feel the prick of a certain awareness, and it's a sensation I've only had a half dozen times or so: *Would I ever experience anything quite like this again? Would it all ever line up just so—the landscape and the mule deer, the notch in the cliffs, the snow, the rock, the dogs, the birds, even the rabbit that shocked me out of the sort of dazed reverie that I'd found myself in?* I felt a sense of gratitude that I knew I would struggle to put into words. A bit later, the artist in our group captured it for me.

After another two-hour push, with Huns and chukars on the tailgate, Hudgens, Stivers, and I take a much-needed break from the miles. Hudgens picks up a Hun and gently smooths the feathers. "A high-grade skin like this might bring $45," he says. He plucks a hank of marabou feathers from the Hun and holds it in the sunlight. "I could tie 12 dozen flies out of this one bird."

"What I don't understand," Stivers says softly, "is how someone can come out here and do this one time and not dedicate the rest of their existence to doing this as much as possible."

HARD LESSONS

One of the most memorable moments of our four days of Western upland bird

hunting didn't involve a shotgun at all. Instead, it was a scene I witnessed from a distance, with a conversation I could only imagine, but I'm confident I'm pretty close.

Stivers and I were headed downhill, toward a dry creek draw that rose into scattered greasewood and sage. Glenn was sailing across the far slope, 100 yards away, and bumped a covey of chukars. Half the birds flushed, and the dog skidded to a stop and stood still for a moment as if he were hoping the rest of the covey would forget he was there. They did not, and another eight or 10 birds clattered from underfoot.

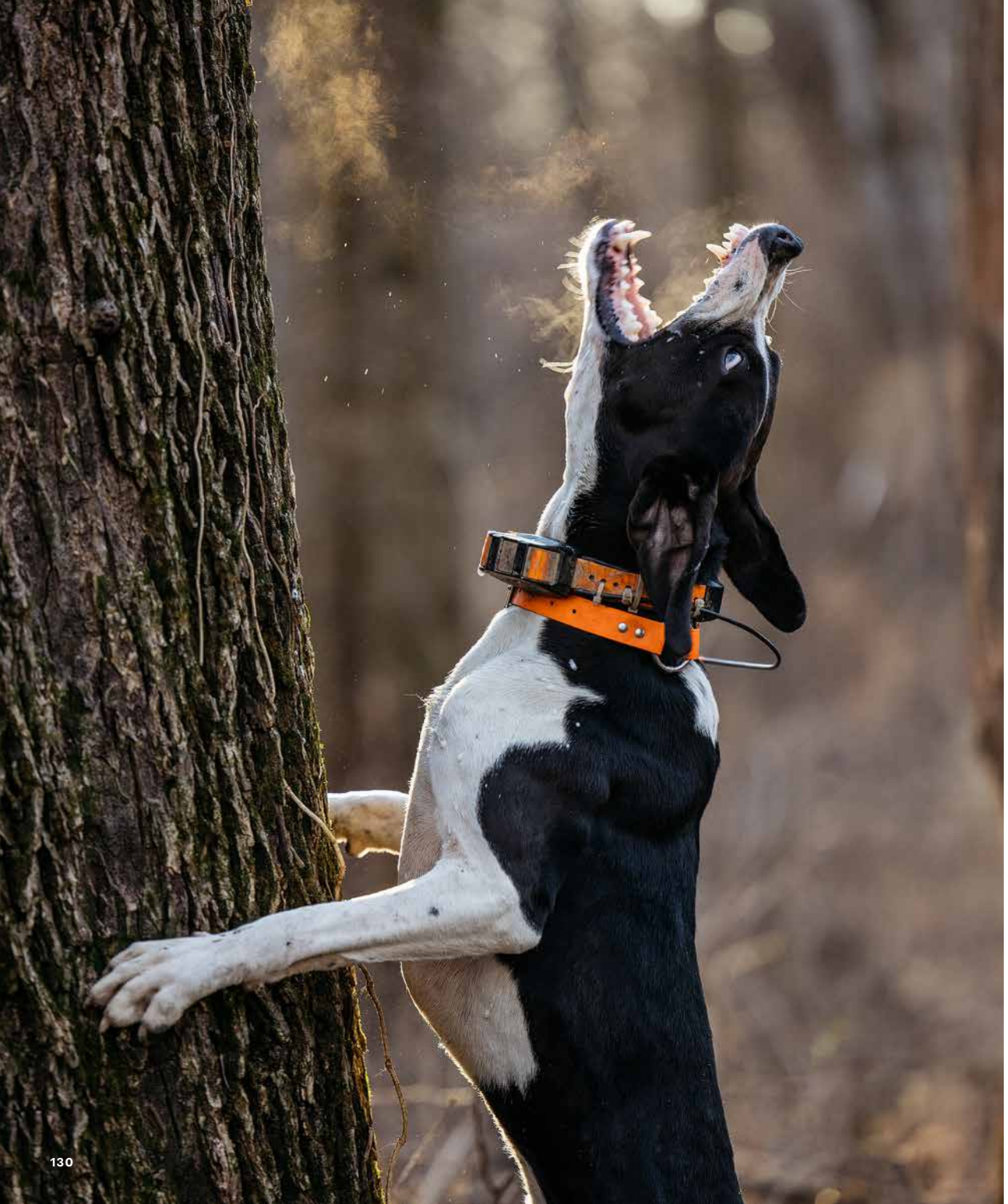
Stivers chewed on his lip and worked out the next play.

He whistled Glenn in, and the dog vaulted up the draw and ran to his side. Stivers went down on his knees, rubbed the dog's belly, and then stood up with Glenn in his arms, his shotgun held fast in one hand. He walked the 80 yards to where the birds broke wild without speaking a word. Then he placed Glenn on the ground, tucked the shotgun under his arm, and went down on his knees again.

He held Glenn steady and brushed the dog's tail upright with his hand. "Whoa," he said soothingly. "Whoa." Glenn's flanks quivered. "Whoa. Whoa." The message was clear: *This is what I want you to do. This is what you were born to do.*

Stivers rubbed the setter's flanks, tousled his ears, and never loosened his gentle, steady hold. Glenn caught his breath and calmed. Stivers rubbed and scratched and patted, soothing the young dog's pent-up energy. "Settle down, buddy," he said. "That was a lot of birds, wasn't it? I know you were hungry for it. But there's a better way."

Then Stivers released the dog, and Glenn turned to heel. They walked upslope, into the wind and the wild future that awaits them both. F&S



RUNNING DOGS FOR SQUIRRELS MIGHT SEEM A LITTLE NUTS,

BUT YOU ONLY NEED TO DO IT ONCE TO WANT TO DO IT AGAIN

BARKING MAD

by **BILL HEAVEY** photographs by **TERRA FONDRIEST**

DICK, THE BIG BLACK-AND-WHITE CUR, takes off and disappears down the dirt road the moment we let him out of the box. Joey Travis looks pleased. "Now, it's not like raccoon hunting," he says as we follow in the four-wheeler. "He won't bawl on the track like a hound. You won't hear him until he's got a squirrel up the tree."

As if to demonstrate, Dick chooses this moment to sound off. It's a steady hack, and each bark turns over into a kind of fell, almost mournful hysteria. It sounds otherworldly, as if originating from a place older than dogs or men. It's ferocious and primal—the sound of a predator closing in on its prey.

"There he is," says Travis as he accelerates the buggy toward the barking. "He's got one."

We are in something of a primal place ourselves, inside the levee system of the Mississippi River in eastern Arkansas. Down here the river gets the last word. Between the levees lie thousands of square miles of the most fertile cropland you'll find in the country. Just don't try to get crop insurance on it. When the river floods, as it does routinely, the only way to get to Jackson Point Hunting Club is by boat. We're lucky that we were able to drive here.

All three of the four-wheelers in our party converge at a big sycamore. Our host, Joey Travis, 57, owns an insurance agency and is the secretary of Jackson Point, where he's hunted raccoons, rabbits, and squirrels since the club started, in 1984. Clay Young, also 57, grows cotton, corn, soybeans, and wheat on his family's 9,000-acre farm.

"Me and Joey were in first grade together," he tells me. "I hunted with him and his grandfather when we were kids." And there's my buddy Thomas Shurgar, 50, whom I met a decade ago when I was doing a story in Arkansas. At first, I thought Shurgar was just a big, dumb redneck with a finance degree. Later, I realized my first impression was spot-on, but by then we'd already become friends.

My initial thought as we start the hunt is that these guys are all crazy. I can't understand why anyone would need a pack of dogs to hunt squirrels or would go to the trouble of owning and training them for such a small prize. But it seems like they wouldn't have it any other way, and they're eager to get at it.

We all grab shotguns and walk 150 yards into the woods to where Dick is bawling and trying to claw his way up the smooth bark of a 70-foot hackberry tree studded with strange, bushy growths called witches'-brooms. We don't see the squirrel, but Dick seems pretty sure about it.

"That squirrel found himself a hole," Travis says. He moves forward, grabs a handful of the thicker vines snaking up the tree, and starts shaking. As he does, he explains that rattling the vines will sometimes, not always, unnerve a holed-up squirrel into making a run for it. Which is exactly what happens. The squirrel bolts from his hole, climbing madly for the top of the tree, when Young, who has drifted silently to the side away from all the commotion, knocks him down with a shot from his 12-gauge.

The squirrel falls to earth from the topmost branches. Dick pounces on it, and then Young eases it out of his mouth.

"That's one!" Travis cries, slapping Young on the shoulder, releasing a little

The squirrel drops. But when it's finally brought to hand, it turns out to be a rat. "You know, I wondered about that hairless tail," Young says.

round cloud of dust. It's been dry lately. The dust covers the windshield and our guns and our clothes. "Good boy, Dick!" says Travis. "Let's get on another'n."

TREE RAT

I've been hunting long enough to be wary of a day that begins with immediate success but say nothing. Back in our four-wheeler, Travis gives me Dick's background. He's three-quarters treeing Walker and one-quarter English pointer, and he's registered as a treeing cur.

"Treeing Walkers are hounds used mostly for hunting raccoons," Travis says. "Got that strong prey drive, a good cold nose, and they're smart. They can be hardheaded, now—I won't sugarcoat that—but on the whole, they want to please. And those English pointer dogs, I tell you what, they're tough." English pointers are a mix of early Spanish pointers crossed with bloodhounds for scenting, greyhounds for speed, and bull terriers for tenacity. As near as I can tell, what all this means is that Dick, like most of us, is a mess, a purebred mongrel. But he's the exact kind of mess you want to chase squirrels.

The history of the cur in America is basically the history of early American mountain people, who mostly just wanted to be left alone. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they pushed down the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia into the Carolinas. They crossed the Appalachian Mountains on the Wilderness Trail and spread into Kentucky and Tennessee. Some pressed on to Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. They didn't want the bother of having one dog to hunt, one to herd livestock, and another to protect property and the family. They wanted one dog that could do it all. It needed a superior nose. It had to be tough, smart, and adaptable. And it had to be brave, tenacious, and absolutely loyal. If a dog could be all that, it didn't much matter who its grandparents were.

Travis registered Dick under the name Prophet after the registry people vetoed his first choice, which was Showstopper Panty Dropper. This strikes me as real shame, because Showstopper Panty Dropper is the best dog name I've ever heard. They also nixed Travis's second choice, Tricky Dick. So he settled on Prophet, although nobody seems to call the dog that. Dick also goes by the name 36, which comes from the fact that there were three guys who went in on shares for him, and one of the guys was adamant that his third of the dog should come to 36 percent.

I tell Travis that I'm impressed with Dick's drive, citing his attempt to climb the tree after the squirrel. He winces a little. "Actually, that's called jacking the tree, and it's not a desirable trait," he says. "If you've got more than one dog, the one jumping can fall back on one of the others and start a fight."

I ask if that's why they hunt only one dog at a time. "No," he says, "it's because of the chaos." These dogs aren't trained to hunt as a pack, so what you end up with is dogs scattered all over hell and beyond. Occasionally, they'll loose several dogs at once, which Travis calls a wholesale dump. It's usually done at the end of a less productive day, if it's done at all, but sometimes it works. "You've got more noses working, so it can up your odds," Travis says, but it can make younger, less-experienced dogs start barking just because they hear an older dog sounding off. "Dogs are just like people, you know. They have a lot of pride and don't like to be left out. What you want is for that younger dog to learn for himself. You only get a dog's full potential if you hunt it solo."

Dick soon trees another squirrel, this one just 40 yards into the woods, which are fairly open, mostly hackberry, oak, hickory, and sycamore. We gather around the tree, and this time Young rattles the vines. Shurgar fires and the squirrel drops. But when the critter is finally brought to hand, it turns out to be a rat. "You know, I wondered about that hairless tail," Young says. I have zero knowledge of tree-dwelling rats, but if Travis is embarrassed, he doesn't show it. "Well, it's not a squirrel. But old Dick got right on that critter. Let's get."

Previous spread
Dick, a cur also known as Prophet and 36, barks wild-eyed at a bushytail he's treed.

Above
Host Joey Travis chauffeurs the author and Shine, as Dick sets out to find another squirrel.

We box up Dick to give Belle, a 7-year-old feist, a try. "Look at that dog," Travis says, watching her trot down the road ahead of us. "Looks like a fat little rhino with a bent ear." In truth, she does. Something about that bent ear isn't working for Travis, though. "I know it shouldn't bother me, but it does. The other thing is that she's hardheaded. She'll hunt with me but not *for* me. You want a dog that adapts to how you hunt, not the other way around."

We get on another 10 squirrels or so and bag about half of them. It's a fairly slow day for them. "I've never found any logic to why some days are better than others," Young says. "But some days they move and some days they don't. We'll get 50 squirrels one day and five the next, and I couldn't tell you why."

SQUIRREL CAMP

Back at Travis's cabin, we get busy cleaning squirrels. Later, Shurgar dishes up a spread of sheepshead he caught on a recent fishing trip to Louisiana and fried squirrel, along with acorn squash, potatoes, salad, and just enough happy hour cheer to keep everybody talking at once. Travis is telling us about his houndman grandfather, who mostly chased raccoons and rabbits. At one time, the two of them owned 25 dogs together.

"He was hardcore before there was such a thing," Travis says. "He'd always make me carry his rabbits. And when you're only 6, two or three wet swamp rabbits is a heavy load. He'd put me up on his shoulders when the dogs went after raccoons in the water. Sometimes he'd hold a branch back and let it hit me in the face." He smiles at the memory. "I think he thought it'd toughen me up."

"Did it?" I ask.

"Well, it made me mean as a snake," he says. But this is a joke. You realize in the first five minutes after meeting him that Travis is a big softy.

Young and Travis were childhood hunting buddies. But then Travis transferred to a rival school after fourth grade, and the two were on different teams in a football-crazy state. Each figured you couldn't be friends with a boy on the team of your archrival. They straightened it out in college and have been like brothers ever since.

We're a happy crew and over dinner express our camaraderie by insulting one another. Shurgar accuses Travis of being a backward hick who relies on his sense of smell to discover new restaurants. Travis counters by observing that living in the booming metropolis of Hot Springs has turned Shurgar into a yuppie liberal who doesn't think his car is parked until he has paid somebody money.

But as always happens with dog people, the talk turns to the hounds. As for fast dogs versus slow ones, Travis says it's not a question of good or bad. "Fast dogs find squirrels that slow dogs don't and vice versa. A fast dog might get on a squirrel before it can den up. That's great. But a slow dog might work a scent harder and find something you'd otherwise miss."

There are dogs that like to run the road, like Dick, and others that prefer to work the woods, like Shine, another treeing cur. Is one better than the other? Well, it depends on where the squirrels are that day. "Some people are big on barks per minute as a mark of a good dog. That's b.s.," Travis says. "I couldn't care less about that. It's about how he hunts, you know?"

Young recalls a time when the two of them were hunting, and Travis was trying to teach a young dog to come when called. "This was back before we had collars. Anyway, I went to the truck to get something, and I look back to see Travis on all fours biting that dog's ear. I'm serious!"

Travis just smiles. "Works great with kids too," he says, winking.

WHOLESALE DUMP

Travis chooses Shine the next morning. Like Dick, she's gone from sight as soon as she hits the ground. "She's real fast," Young tells me. "Got a great mouth, you can hear her a good ways off. A lot of drive, hunts wide open all the time. She'll get on that tree and stay there. She's a bit more mixed than Dick—got a little Stephens cur in her."

I ask about her faults. "Well," he says, "she can get a little hardheaded. Sometimes she'll bump other game if it's slow, but..." He shrugs. No dog is perfect. "Sometimes you'll see a guy giving a correction to a young dog for getting on game other than squirrels. That's a mistake in my book. You can straighten out a dog that runs other game. But if you correct 'em too young, you risk dampening that dog's drive, that hunting instinct. You never get that back if you squash it when they're young. Same as you wouldn't with a boy."

We get on a few squirrels, including one that bails out of a tree from 30 feet up;

Above
In a frenzy, Dick tries to climb closer to his prey, a common fault called jacking the tree.

Opposite, top
Jeff Wisener spots a squirrel with binoculars while Gerald Parker takes aim with a 22 pistol.

Opposite, bottom left
Clay Young doesn't mess around with a rimfire. He stands ready with his 12-gauge semiauto.

Opposite, bottom right
Parker is also known as The Shed Man, because he'd just as soon look for bone as for bushytails.

I've seen squirrels launch themselves out of trees before but never from so high. It hits the ground and disappears before we can redirect Shine, who seems confused at being called off the tree.

In the afternoon, Young and Travis confer for a bit before announcing that they're going to dump all the dogs at once so I can see what it looks like. Out go Shine, Dick, and Belle. What ensues is something you don't need to be a dog man to recognize as chaos. Dick and Belle go into the woods on one side of the road, and Shine takes the other. Soon, Dick and Belle are barking at one tree and Shine is on another. They're 400 yards apart on Travis's GPS. Travis, Shurgar, and I take off after Dick and Belle, while Young goes after Shine. The two dogs sound frantic from a distance but seem less sure when we get there. They bark at one tree, but it's not long before that turns into barking less enthusiastically at a number of different trees. "I think there was one here, but he's gone now," says Travis. "Let's see if Clay did any better."

Young is smiling and holding a squirrel by the tail when we meet him back at the four-wheelers. "It was like one of those damn YouTube hunts," he says. "She was back in the woods a good ways, barking her head off, and the squirrel was watching her from a limb 50 feet up. All I had to do was shoot." He tells me it doesn't often happen that way, but it sure is fun when it does. It takes half an hour to get the other two dogs back in the box. "That's why we don't do it that often," Travis observes. We end the day with a meager haul by typical standards but enough to keep us busy and fed for dinner.

I've been told that squirrel hunting with dogs is having something of a resurgence. I'm not sure how you measure that, but assuming it's true, I can see why. As a deer hunter, I've taken to squirrel hunting with dogs with all the zeal of the late convert. Instead of silent, solitary time on stand, you're covering ground and joking with your buddies. Instead of waiting for the game to come to you, the dogs go find it for you. Squirrels don't spook at the slightest intrusion, they have the good sense to den up at night, and they don't disappear when the season opens. More than anything, hunting them, especially with dogs, is just plain fun. Of course, Travis and Young have known this since they were kids. "It's just the way we've always done it," Travis tells me, "and I suspect we'll die before we quit." We've had two days of comparatively slow hunting, and I can only imagine how much fun it would be on a good day.

Travis calls me a week later to check in, and I ask how the hunting has been. "We went out and got 40 yesterday on the same roads we hunted," he says. "It's just squirrel luck, buddy. The secret is learning to just roll with it. Otherwise, you'd go nuts, and I figure we're crazy enough already." F&S

Above, left
There's no need to rise before dawn for squirrel hunting. You can wait until the sun hits the treetops.

Above, right
Slipping to the far side of a tree, opposite the barking dog, is a great way to spot more squirrels.

Opposite
Shine, a treeing cur, stands next to a stringer of fox squirrels after a successful morning's hunt.

OLD JACK

by **KEITH McCAFFERTY**
illustrations by **SIMON SOSA**

A MISSTEP DURING A LATE-SEASON RABBIT HUNT LEAVES A HUNTER INJURED, STRANDED, AND AT RISK OF HYPOTHERMIA. AND EXCEPT FOR THE COMPANY OF ONE WILD DOG, HE'S ALL ALONE

EDITOR'S NOTE: *For this piece, we presented Keith McCafferty—longtime F&S contributor and novelist of the acclaimed Sean Stranahan mystery series—with a collection of classic covers from our archives and asked him to choose one, then write a piece of short fiction inspired by the artwork. The cover McCafferty selected comes from the January 1950 issue.*

IT WAS A THREE-DOG NIGHT, 10 below zero and falling, and anywhere he looked it was white. No, not exactly *white*, but that pearl luminescence of a winter's evening sky, where the sun is faint and provides no warmth, only false hope for the lost, the injured, or the dying.

No, the man told himself. *Don't go and get maudlin about this. You're hurt, but you're neither lost nor dying.*

It was just hard luck was all, tripping over the tail of one snowshoe with the toe of the other while hurrying to cross an old stone fence without testing his footing first. The rabbit had bolted from the rocks, followed by the dog that jumped it, and as the man swung around for a shot, he had slipped and fallen awkwardly, one leg crossed over the other, and heard a sound like the crack of a small-caliber rifle.

Shrugging off his pack as he got to his feet, he felt such a searing pain in his left leg that he screamed. He glanced up at the firmament, soon to be shot with stars, and for the first of many times asked aloud how he had gotten himself into this predicament.

To start with, he had not tuned the radio to the weather channel before leaving the cabin. Had he known how bad the storm would be, or how soon it might break over his head, he would never have left the hearth and the crackling fire, nor the book that waited to be read, nor the whiskey that wanted to be sipped. No, it wasn't the forecast or the lack of it that had led him to this point. It was the dog.

•

The dog had no name he knew of, no collar, and was of no discernible breed. He was a volunteer—one of those affable, eager, half-wild beasts that lurk around Forest Service trailheads and adopt hikers for a few hours or even a day. This one was of medium size with a lineage that suggested promiscuity. Obviously, there was some hound in him—maybe beagle given that happy face and wet kisses—and some border collie or Aussie shepherd thrown in for energy. All told, not as unhandsome a mix as it sounds.

Though the man had been up this trail several times, he had never before encountered the dog and had tried to discourage it from following him, but to no avail. The dog had accompanied him from the turnaround where he had left his truck all the way up the trail that followed the rock wall where he had fallen. Before leaving, he had noted one other rig parked at the access—a rusted-out Sierra Classic that had seen better years, better decades. There was a very good chance the dog belonged to the driver of that truck, an elk hunter like as not. Whoever's dog he was, the beast had no quit in him. He cast back and forth ahead of the man, then behind him, at times completely swallowed by snowdrifts.

When it became clear that the dog was not turning back, the man had said aloud, "Go on. Catch me a rabbit," and had dropped two shells into the Parker double.

After all, the dog looked somewhat like a rabbit hound, and it had been ages since the man had eaten rabbit—a childhood delicacy where he had grown up in the rural Midwest. His wife didn't share his taste, but as she'd driven into town for a long weekend with her sister, he was free to hunt and cook whatever he pleased. Whether the dog would turn on a rabbit track, should they cross one, was yet to be determined. Then the rabbit had bolted and the dog, showing his colors, had given chase, and the man, swinging the gun, had gone down hard with his left leg bent. What started as an evening's leisurely snowshoe trip had become something far more sobering.

The man looked around for the dog, but it had chased the rabbit out of sight. Now the weather was changing, and the snow that had begun as a dark promise in a cold sky was beginning to fall, limiting his visibility.

The dog's welfare did not overly worry the man. But the man had counted on following his backtrack to the trailhead, and the snow was washing out the imprints of the snowshoes almost as soon as he made them. That was a worry—that and his leg—and for the first time he felt fingers of cold dread run down his spine.

Ahead now he could see the dog's tail wagging, the only part of him showing above the snowdrifts. "There you are, boy," the man called out. Abruptly the tail dropped from sight, the snow bulged, and in two bounds the dog was upon him, all but knocking him down again.

"That's my boy." He rubbed the dog's head. "Getting to be time. You put up the only rabbit on the hill. Call it a night, eh?"

The dog whapped its tail against the man's legs. He grimaced. "Whoa, now," he said. "Gotta stop that. You're hurting me."

The dog dropped down. Three times, he ran in a circle around the man, who was bent over with his hands on his knees, then he came up and urged him to stand straight with the prodding of his muzzle. "I'm sorry," the man said. He patted the broad head. "I'm doing my best here."

He ventured a step—more of a hop—with most of the weight on his good leg, but even so, the shock of pain caused him to cry out. He didn't dare put any pressure on the leg again. A stressed bone could fracture if it had not already, and the jagged bone ends could cause internal bleeding. Where would he be then? "Dead." He said the word aloud. "I'd be dead."

It was the first time he'd acknowledged the gravity of his situation, and he

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tried to bolster his courage by injecting a note of levity into his voice. Even if his was an audience of one.

"OK, boy," he said. "My fault entirely." He briskly rubbed his gloved hands together. "All right now, here's what we'll do. Build a fire. Nothing to it. Build a fire and hunker down, wait for someone to find us. Can't be too long now."

Or could it? He was thinking of the truck at the turnaround. The other man's tracks showed that he had followed the main trail only a short distance before breaking off to the north. A lot of lost country up there. He could be to hell and gone by now, or already back at his rig and halfway home. Or maybe he'd also been caught in the storm and was riding it out—with luck, within earshot of the man's 20-gauge. He checked the two shells in the chamber and dropped a third into his pants pocket. He had three more shells beyond that. He'd shoot three now and save the other three for the morning, should he still be alive.

"OK now," he said. "Fold your paws over your ears."

In the heavy air, the three shots, spaced evenly at 10 seconds apart, rumbled into echoes that left in their wake a profound silence. The man waited. No answering shots. Just the dead silence of the northern night.

"Where are you, boy?"

He looked around, but the dog had bolted at the first shot. Nothing to see but the eerie light of the sky and rivers of spindly pines that cast shadows at the perimeter of his vision. The closest trees were perhaps 50 yards away. If he could get to their shelter, he figured he had a chance of surviving the night. But unless his shots had been heard and interpreted as the SOS he intended, he could expect no help from the mountain. And the timing couldn't have been worse. Tomorrow was the last day of elk season, and there was no reason for anyone to come here after that.

Nor could he expect help from down the mountain. His wife wasn't due back for several days. He had no cell phone, and there was no landline in the cabin if he somehow made it that far. The satellite phone she had insisted on renting for him was in the glove compartment of his truck. After all, it was supposed to be just an hour in the afternoon, a short jaunt on snowshoes to get the blood moving, with the possibility of a rabbit for his stew.

"Blame it on you, boy," he said, as the dog came back to greet him. "Wasn't for you, I'd be back at the cabin and sipping my whiskey." But he knew that he could only blame himself.

You arrogant fool, he thought. *You broke the cardinal rule of the mountains. Never travel alone.* He'd also ignored the second. *Always prepare for the worst.*

Who was it who'd said that there was no bad weather, only a poor choice of boots? A wiser man than himself, he thought. He tried curling his toes to bring blood to them but felt nothing.

His laugh was bitter.

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At the near edge of the pines stood a giant spruce with spreading limbs that dwarfed the second-growth lodgepoles of the forest. The man's grandfather would have called it a wolf tree. Back a hundred years and more, farmers clearing fields would deliberately spare one or two of the native giants to serve as shade for laborers and cattle. How this particular wolf tree had escaped the teeth of the saw was a matter for speculation. What was important was that the tree could provide a windbreak and possibly save his life.

It would be a long vigil by a small fire that asked to be fed like a starving bear. But the man didn't care. Fire was life, simple as that.

But could he make it that far, dragging one leg in the snow?

Don't overthink it, he told himself. *Just do it.*

He unbuckled his snowshoes, planting one in a snowbank, where it would be visible to anyone coming in this direction. Then he got down on his knees and began to crawl forward, using the other snowshoe as a shovel and stopping to draw breath every few yards. It was hard slogging—his lungs burning in the cold air, his cracked lips tasting the frost on his beard. Already his nose felt frozen, and it had been a long time since he could feel his feet. The frostbite he could endure. Who needed that many toes, anyway? It was his fingers that were the worry. He would need dexterity to build a fire, and wolf tree or not, he would need fire.

"Hey, boy. Where were you?" He heard the dog come up from behind. It began nipping at the heels of his boots, seemingly trying to herd him toward the trees.

"I'm heading there, buddy."

He kept his head down, not wanting to know how much longer he had to crawl. It seemed like forever. But then he was there, after all. The giant spruce stood undaunted before him, its limbs not even bent by the prevailing wind. He parted the overhanging branches, immediately registering that he was not the first visitor. Cracked and blackened stones and chunks of charcoal betrayed where someone had made a fire weeks or perhaps months ago, and he could see where the flames from a long-extinguished forest fire had licked at the trunk.

Under the branches was a ground cover of spruce-needle duff and pine cones. The recess under the tree was almost high enough to stand in. The man had gotten warm from his efforts to get here, but he knew it would bleed away minute by minute, degree by degree. Then what? He had no flashlight and would have to gather as much wood as he could before the curtain of twilight dropped.

But first things first. He had not eaten since leaving the cabin and knew he needed to bolster his strength. He dug a ham sandwich from his pack. It had the consistency of tool leather, and he had to let bites melt in his mouth before chewing them.

"Here, boy," he said, tossing the dog a corner of the frozen sandwich. Watching him wolf down the meat brought to mind a quote by Jack London, who had written tales of adventure in the frozen North that had enthralled the man when he was a boy.

"A bone to the dog is not charity," London had written. "Charity is the bone shared with the dog when you are just as hungry as the dog."

It was London who had also written "To Build a Fire," the classic cautionary tale of life and death in the Yukon. In his story, a prospector who chose to disregard the power of the wild dies after twice failing to sustain a fire. The first effort had seemed a success, until his fire was snuffed out by snow melting and falling from the upper branches of a tree.

"I won't be making that mistake," he said to the dog.

He clenched his fists in his gloves and used them to scoop away the scant snow cover under the tree limbs. Then he pushed the blackened stones and charcoal into a rough circle at the edge of the

canopy, where snow melting from above would be less of an issue.

He now had a base for the fire. That was the first step, to insulate the fire from the frozen ground. He found that as long as he was doing work toward a specific goal, he remained clear-headed. The second step was to gather fuel, starting with the matchstick-size twigs that quilled the lower trunk of the spruce. Bigger sticks followed, then whatever heavier wood his arms could gather. Too much wood, an old hunter had once told him, is never enough.

Here he had his first real luck of the day. Crawling through the snow outside the spruce in search of firewood, he found a mound of snow that looked out of place. Using his snowshoe as a shovel, he unearthed a cache of branches that a previous visitor had gathered but not burned.

It was near dark by the time he tried to strike a match to the twigs and the baggie of wood shavings he had brought for kindling. All he needed was a lick of flame to ignite the tinder. But try as he might, he could not strike the first match. Or the second. Or the one after that. He tried sticking his fingers into his mouth to warm them enough to function, then took the notion a step further by shoving his icy hands under his shirt and armpits. The hands began to warm but quickly lost function as the cold returned.

He felt the cold in his core now, and for a while he just sat on some pine boughs he'd gathered, waiting for death. It isn't such a bad way to go, hypothermia—those minutes of calm and grace when the shivering stops and then, finally, the heart. Or so he had heard.

I'll just sit here a little longer, he said to himself. *What harm is there in that?*

Just as he was drifting away, he heard the dog whimpering and had an inspiration. If he could get it to lie down beside him, maybe he could stuff his fingers under its belly and legs to thaw them enough to start a fire, and by hugging himself against the dog, bring up his core temperature.

"Here, boy." The dog looked up but didn't come closer. "Come on, boy."

The man had saved the crusts of his sandwich and now, with a shaking hand, offered them to the dog, who took them eagerly with nipping teeth. And so, with a little coaxing, the dog offered his warmth to the man by lying down beside him. The man's fingers burned as the blood returned to them, and the match that saved his life was finally struck.

It would be a long vigil by a small fire that asked to be fed like a starving bear. But the man didn't care. Fire was life, simple as that. As long as he had it, he would survive the night. Already the wind was dying, the snowfall beginning to lessen.

"You just keep going," he told the dog. "The mountain is indifferent to human plight. It doesn't care if we die, but it doesn't care if we live either. So we'll just keep trying."

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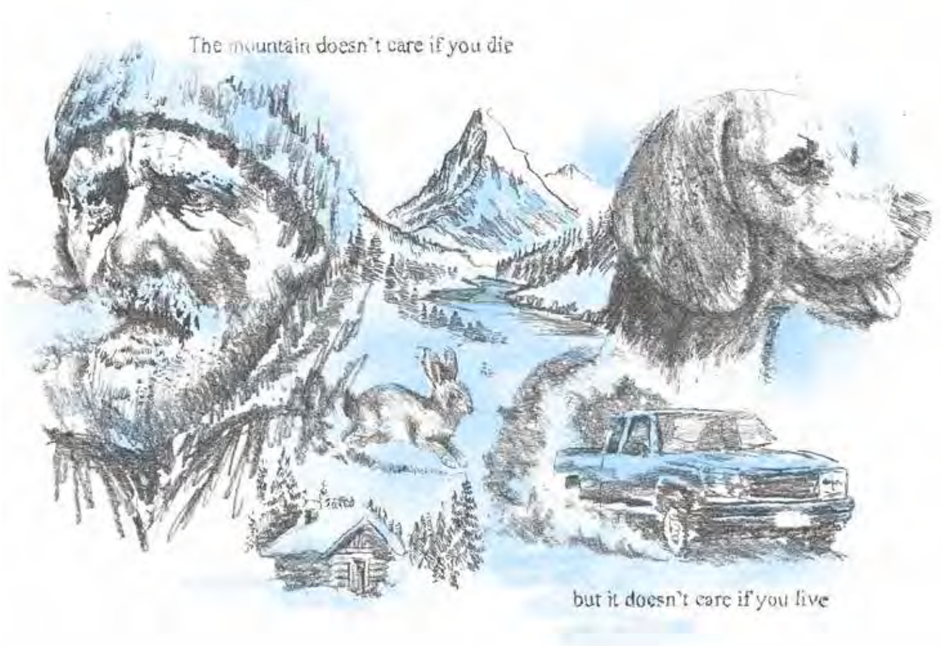
The stars were shards of ice in the darkness when the coyotes began to sing. The first chorus sounded far away, the next, closer. The dog quivered, its back pressing against the man's chest. A long few seconds passed. Then the dog jumped up from the fireside to let out an answering howl, bolted from under the tree, and vanished into the night.

For upwards of an hour, the man cocked his ear to the intermittent song of the coyotes interspersed with barking that had to be the dog. Then, silence.

Surely, he thought, *the dog must be dead.* He found himself wiping away



tears that had frozen on his cheeks. He had entered a dream state—half in and half out of consciousness—and was siting in front of the coals of his fire when he heard a rustling noise as the dog brushed past him. It flopped down on the bed of pine boughs and panted lightly.

"You smell to high heaven," the man said. Then he lay down and shut his eyes, finally finding the sleep he had been fighting, afraid that if he ever really slept, he would never awaken.

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He did wake, though, and in dawn's half-light was building back the fire and wondering if he could somehow improvise a splint when the dog began barking and disappeared down the hillside.

"Hey," the man shouted after the dog. "Come back here." Then he heard what sounded like a human voice. Below him, a man came trudging into view. He was pulling a child's red sled, the dog sitting in it like the captain of a ship.

The man was tall and broad-chested, with copper ringlets of hair down to his shoulders. He was wearing an orange vest that painted him as a hunter, but he carried no rifle.

"You look like you got yourself in a pickle," he said.

"That would be the case," the man admitted. "I'm sure glad to see you. I think I broke my leg. I'm lucky to be alive."

"So you are."

The hunter's story was soon told. As the man expected, he owned the pickup down at the trailhead. He'd shot a bull elk the day before and had managed to field dress it and hike back to the trailhead before the storm hit. He hadn't heard the man's SOS shots, and he'd slept through the night in the camper on his pickup. He was going to bone out the quarters and sled out meat loads today. But he had no more than started from the truck when he saw a blanket of smoke from the ridge above and decided to investigate.

"I was fixing to sled out 80 pounds of elk," he said. "But now my first load's got to be your sorry ass." He smiled, showing canine teeth that looked sharp as a wolf's.

"I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"Then why did you break that leg?"

"Fair enough," the man said.

As they talked, the dog jumped down from the sled and ran circles around them, ranging up beyond the old stone fence where the man had fallen the evening before.

"Do you know whose dog this is?" the man asked. "He followed me up to that big spruce up the slope."

"He followed you or you followed him?"

"I'm not sure, but if he hadn't stayed with me, I doubt I'd be talking to you now."

"They call him Old Jack," the hunter said.

"You know him?"

"I suppose, as much as anyone knows him. He's a one-dog adoption agency, follows most anyone anywhere."

"Then you've seen him before."

"A few times. Never spent the night with me though, or gone traipsing off with coyotes."

"He doesn't look old."

"It's just what people call him. Bit of a blessing to you. Or a nuisance. Depends how much you care if a dog spoils your hunt." He extended his hand.

They bumped fists, the man looking up and considering the opulence of the sky, pink over robin's-egg blue.

"God's little lie, that color sky," the hunter said under his breath. "Gonna snow some more. Count on it."

And it did snow, but they beat the worst of the weather down the mountain with the hunter pulling the sled with a rope, the man riding on it, and the dog following—a caravan of fools, as the hunter put it.

That brought a short laugh from the man, who well understood how close he'd come to dying, and that were it not for a mongrel dog, a red-headed stranger, and the welcoming arms of a spruce tree, his spirit by now would have left Earth.

It was late afternoon before they arrived at the trailhead, where the man was surprised to hear that the hunter intended to go back in for a load of meat.

"Not enough punishment for one day?" he asked.

The hunter laughed. "You think I might have learned. But it was you who did the learning. Next time Old Jack might not be around. Or me, for that matter."

"I'm indebted to you."

"That you are. Sure you can operate the clutch on that truck of yours?"

"It's an automatic transmission."

"Then I'll be going. That elk isn't going to walk off the mountain by himself."

The hunter turned to leave, the dog following, soon invisible except for its tail.

After watching them out of sight, the man drove down the valley to a health clinic, where his self-diagnosis of a broken fibula was confirmed. For several years after, he would hear rumors from one trailhead of a dog following hikers, or from another, a dog singing with coyotes. Sometimes he drove to these trailheads on the off chance of finding the dog. If he did, he thought, he would put a collar on him. But then, this was not a dog for the hearth. He belonged to the wild and the wild belonged to him. The man counted his blessings and thought of the dog often. But he never saw Old Jack again. F&S

SAM AVERETT

CAMPFIRE

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

THE NAME GAME

DEDICATING AN ENTIRE DEER SEASON TO ONE BUCK WITH A RIDICULOUS MONIKER ENDS IN DISAPPOINTMENT—AND A STRANGE YEARNING TO DO IT AGAIN

I'VE NEVER BEEN keen on naming deer. Sure, I've designated certain bucks as the Big 10 or Split Brow because it's easier than saying, "The big buck, the one with 10 points, that lives in the bottoms." But for the most part, I've avoided the cutesy and over-the-top hit-list monikers like Fred and Bullwinkle.

It's not that I have some righteous opposition to naming a critter I intend to kill and eat. Just last summer, a buddy of mine raised two blue-eyed piglets that he dubbed Tender and Loin. They were adorable shoats, and once Loin got to about 100 pounds, we shot him in the head with a 22, scalded all the hair off him, and smoked him whole with an apple in his mouth. I haven't given Loin a single thought since, until I sat down to write this and recalled that he was fatty and delicious.

No, my biggest problem with naming deer is that I can never come up with a good name. Also, naming a buck can imply that you're targeting him to the exclusion of all others. That's never been my modus operandi (and neither, for that matter, has been using Latin phrases). I like to shoot big bucks as much as anyone else, and I've gotten a few over the years. But sometimes I get bored out there and decide to shoot a little buck instead.

Then along came Rizzler.

CHANGE AGENT

Rizzler is a buck to which I not only gave a ridiculous name, but that I also hunted exclusively all last season. He came into my life at kind of a tough time—like a grunting, lip-curling midlife crisis with a white tail. I admit that I've noticed some changes about myself since turning 40 a few years ago. I started hunting with a recurve bow and an over/under shotgun, for example. Not always, but sometimes. Hell, I even took up trout fishing. The fact that red worms are my favorite bait doesn't alter the fundamental facts. Some of my buddies have asked where this "streak of yuppie" has come from. I figure my tastes are just maturing with age.

↑ A brute of a whitetail—the sort you might be tempted to name and chase obsessively—walks the edge of a cut cornfield during the peak of the rut.

LANCE KRUEGER

Rizzler never showed, except for one morning at 8:08 a.m., when he chased a doe right past the blind in chip-shot range. I happened to be working that day.

I got my first photo of Rizzler last August, when he was still in full velvet and without a name. I could see easily enough that he was a spectacular animal, with sweeping main beams and 10 long, symmetrical tines, one of which sported a 3-inch kicker. He was the kind of deer that taunted me on my trail cameras, always showing up near my favorite stands and blinds and willing to hold still for crisp images that showed every detail of him.

"You need to call that buck Rizzler," my son, Anse, said as we were looking through trail-camera photos together early in the season.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because that deer's got *the rizz*."

"What in the Sam Hell does that mean?"

"Oh, I think you know, Deeds."

Then Anse winked and walked away, leaving me alone and puzzled and feeling old. I looked around to see if anyone was watching before I Googled the word *rizz*. I learned that it's slang for "charisma." Evidently, some kid about Anse's age looked at a camera in a certain cool way, and then someone posted the video online. The kid was dubbed Rizzler by a viral audience, and he became a multimillionaire influencer because of it.

I called Anse back and told him that his entire generation is screwed, but that Rizzler is a good name for a deer. I also decided that because I'd killed plenty of whitetail bucks in my day, and because my tastes were maturing with age, it was worth holding out for this buck. He'd be easy pickings anyway, as regular as he seemed to be on camera.

CLOSE CALLS

My first test of willpower happened one October morning when a chocolate-racked 9-pointer near the Pope and Young minimum ambled past my tree at 15 yards. I had my compound bow instead of the recurve, and I clipped the release to the string. But I let the buck walk because I'd gotten pictures of Rizzler the previous day in the same place. And walk he did, right over to the neighbor's property, where he was double-lunged over a corn pile with a crossbow.

I saw Rizzler again the very next morning but spooked him while trying to draw. Trail-cam images of him fizzled for a while, but I wasn't worried. Gun season and the rut were coming, and my neighbor was tagged out. I waited for Rizzler in a box blind for five days straight with my 30-06 in hand. During that time, I had an ancient 8-pointer, a trophy by any measure, chase a doe past me at 50 yards one evening. I also rattled up two slightly younger 8s, both with impressive antlers. Still, I held fire. But Rizzler never showed, except for one morning at 8:08 a.m., when he chased a doe right past the blind in chip-shot range. I happened to be working that day.

Even as the December late-bow season arrived, I figured I still had time. I decided to crossbow hunt for a few days before the late-muzzleloader season opened mid-month. On my first sit, during a cold, dreary evening, Rizzler stepped into a cut cornfield with five minutes of legal light remaining.

He was 80 yards away, and I was in a box blind with the wind perfectly in my favor. But he stared into the window of that blind as if he knew I was inside—and never came a step closer. The wind swapped directions the next evening, so I bundled up and sat on the ground in a drainage ditch 30 yards downwind of the trail where Rizzler had appeared the night before. He waltzed into the field at 3 p.m., but this time on a different trail, 20 yards from the box blind and 120 yards from where I sat. He never so much as looked in my direction, and when a doe appeared at the other end of the field, he galloped toward her, kicking his heels and acting giddy as a button buck on his first frosty morning.

Late-muzzleloader season came, and I sat for days on end in what seemed like perfect conditions. I saw a few bucks too, all of which were busted, weary-looking survivors of a long season, which finally ended in mid-January. Rizzler never showed again.

I looked for the buck's sheds in the early spring, but finding cast antlers on purpose is tough in this part of the world. I figure they were sitting somewhere that was at once obvious and yet invisible, like Rizzler himself. For the first time since I was 11 years old, I ended an entire Kentucky deer season without punching my buck tag, and I can't say that I found much fulfillment in any of it.

And yet, I'm pretty confident Rizzler is out there right now, in full velvet, with a new deer season about to begin. I figure I've killed plenty of whitetail bucks in my day. The thought of chasing this one in particular, all over again, into January if necessary, puts a smile on my face and makes me think: *I really should start naming more deer.* F&S

FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT!

GREED MONGERS HAVE BEEN TRYING TO STEAL OUR PUBLIC LANDS FOR DECADES. WE STOPPED THEIR LATEST ATTEMPT THIS SUMMER. BUT THE BATTLE IS FAR FROM OVER

by **HAL HERRING**

IF YOU ARE EXHAUSTED by your cubicle job in Dallas, stupefied by the heat in Atlanta, sick of the suburban sprawl around you, or bored to tears in your tiny town, you are free to pack your bags and wander in a way that is utterly unique in this modern world. A tank of gas and a bag of groceries, some time off work, and you have 640 million acres of public lands to explore, where you can swim in a cold river or soak in a hot spring; watch the stars, catch native brook trout, or chase wild turkeys; go on a dream hunt for mule deer, elk, or pronghorn; or just take the kids down the road for a night of whippoorwills and lightning bugs instead of glowing phone screens. You can shoot your rifle at Alabama's Uchee Range in America's smallest national forest—the Tuskegee, at 11,252 acres—or pack your gear and head for southeast Alaska's Tongass, the biggest of them all, with 17 million acres of dense forest and glaciated peaks, plus berries, bears, blacktail deer, and rushing rivers choked with salmon, Dolly Vardens, and sea-run cutthroat trout.

It's all ours, and you can do any of this, whether you're a millionaire or a pauper or anything in between, because you are an American citizen. There is nothing like our public land anywhere else on Earth. And like anything of irreplaceable value, these lands—this liberty—must be constantly safeguarded from those who would steal them.

A BIG WIN

In May, American outdoorsmen and -women rallied to kill a plan inserted into a House of Representatives budget bill that would have forced the sale of over a half million acres of public lands in Utah and Nevada. Bowing to the will of the people, expressed through a storm of emails and phone calls and social media posts, lawmakers stripped the proposed theft from the bill that went to the Senate. But like a zombie in a horror movie, it leapt back to life when Utah's Sen. Mike Lee, the most ferociously anti-public-lands politician in Washington, announced that the sell-off would be reinserted into the bill, and days later, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources sextupled the amount of acreage up for grabs.

This attack was so brazen that, at first, it almost seemed like a joke: Lee was calling for an end to our system of public lands, and a massive privatization of the American West. Never mind that since 1976 there has been a clear process for selling federally managed public lands—our lands—that ensures taxpayers get fair market value for acreage needed for urban expansion or infrastructure. What made this latest attempt to take what is ours especially shameless is that these politicians wanted our land for free. It wasn't a plan to aid communities with land for affordable housing, as it claimed to be. It was a heist, and one designed to set a precedent for ongoing heists.

↑ A pair of anglers take in a stunning view above East Rosebud Creek in southern Montana's roadless Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. JIM KLUG

Again, American outdoorspeople responded. We mounted the largest campaign of its type in U.S. history to fight this attack. And we stopped it. Senator Lee may have even done us a favor, energizing us to step up to our roles as citizens and face the fundamental questions: What do we believe in? Are we willing to drop our petty grievances and political distractions and fight together for our public lands? We were. And we are. Which is good, because the fight is far from over.

Senator Lee and his allies remain committed to selling off America's public lands. The next attack will be stealthier, defunding land-management agencies, firing federal employees, undermining access, and increasing industrialization by private corporations in an effort to make the American people, who own the lands, unhappy with federal management.

Freedom, as the saying goes, isn't free. The eternal price for liberty is eternal vigilance. Exhausted yet? Too bad. Those of us who inherited this greatest American birthright of land and liberty are charged with safeguarding it for future generations. It is not going to be easy. Nothing truly worthwhile ever is.

OLD NEWS

You can take some solace in knowing that this type of assault is not new and that similar attempts have been thwarted before. President Benjamin Harrison established the Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve in Wyoming in 1891, and by 1893, during a financial panic, the Wyoming legislature demanded that it be abolished, insisting that the economic downturn could only be solved by resuming the uncontrolled logging, market hunting, and land fraud that had led to the creation of the reserve in the first place. The Yellowstone Timber Land Reserve survived to become the Shoshone National Forest, the first of its kind in the world, and world-famous now for its abundant wildlife and world-class hunting and fishing.

During the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover attempted simply to give away most public lands to the states. Western governors, knowing the lands were financially unproductive, declined.

In January 1947, Bernard DeVoto, the foremost historian of the West, warned of a scheme by politicians to privatize all of our national forest and Bureau of Land Management lands. He wrote these prophetic words in *Harper's Magazine*:

The immediate objectives make this attempt one of the biggest land grabs in American history. The ultimate objectives make it incomparably the biggest. The plan is to get rid of public lands altogether, turning them over to the States, which can be coerced as the federal government cannot be, and eventually to private ownership.

This is your land we're talking about.

It would get even hotter in the late 1970s and 1980s with the first Sagebrush Rebellion, when ranchers in Utah and Nevada, upset with new multiple-use policies they felt impacted their ability to graze livestock on public lands, threatened revolt. They found allies in President Ronald Reagan and his notoriously anti-conservation secretary of the interior, James Watt. But the rebellion fizzled when many of the ranchers realized that Reagan's ultimate plan was to sell off the public lands to offset the national debt—and that they, in fact, would have been the suckers in a scheme that enabled the theft of their own assets.

NEW SCAM

The movement to sell off public lands has only grown since, with the rise of anti-government fury. The idea that the federal government can do no right and can't be trusted has fueled a desire to transfer the lands to the states, and ultimately to privatize them. We can still fight, of course, but we'll need new strategies and a renewed American unity to win this time.

The current land-grabber movement is now supercharged by political polarization, creating the perfect conditions for conspirators to use a tactic called affinity fraud to make public lands private. Simply put, affinity fraud can arise within groups who share a common belief and therefore feel overly trusting with one another, to the extent that scams and frauds become easy to perpetrate. Modern land-grabbers have convinced many of us outdoorsmen and -women that our public lands, because they are owned in common and managed by the federal government, are an example of a socialist outrage, one that only people who identify as liberals could support. The soaring successes of public-lands management—wildlife restoration; watershed protection; timber, mineral, and energy production; hunting and camping and fishing; our freedom to roam—are ignored while conflicts and failures are emphasized. The land-grabbers, skilled in affinity fraud, know that if enough Americans can be convinced that support for our public lands is somehow associated with liberal politics, many of us will give up our land without a fight.

What made this latest attempt to take what is ours especially shameless is that these politicians wanted our land for free.

We cannot fall for it. We cannot let politics divide us on the issue of the American public lands. Hunters and anglers on the left and on the right, Americans of every stripe who love the outdoors, must stand together now. If we fall for this scheme to steal our land and freedom, we leave for our children and grandchildren a diminished nation where only the wealthiest will get to experience hunting and fishing and American wildlands.

We are the beneficiaries of the toil and blood of our forebears who held on to these lands for us and refused to allow America to become like the degraded serfdoms of old Europe, where the subjects were banned from hunting, fishing, or owning weapons and could be dispossessed of their freedoms at the whim of any foppish lord or king. Americans can and must carry this fire of liberty. Continue to contact your representatives, express your support for keeping our public lands in our public hands, and take an active part in the honorable and hard-won role of citizen who has inherited the greatest asset on Earth: land and the freedom to use it. F&S

SHARPEN YOUR MIND

HONING A KNIFE ON AN OLD-FASHIONED WHETSTONE IS THE PERFECT WARM-UP TO HUNTING SEASON

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

↑ The best knives have stories to tell. This knife first belonged to the elk hunter's grandfather—and he still uses it on every hunt.

PETER BOHLER

"WHAT KIND OF knife is that?"

The question comes from over my shoulder as I open up the belly of a deer, or slice through the wing of a goose, or sit on the tailgate and simply shave slivers from a hunk of hoop cheese. I assume the inquiry is about the brand of knife, or perhaps which model.

What kind of knife?

As if the deer unzipped its belly or the wings fell off the goose whenever I pulled the blade from its sheath and the brand name revealed itself. It's the kind of knife I obsess over, which is pretty much every knife. For as long as I can remember.

THE STONE AGE

As a kid, I would spend hours sharpening Fred Bear Razorheads—$7.95 a dozen, straight from an exotic-sounding place called Grayling, Michigan—despite having nothing to shoot them at. Sharpening an Old Timer Sharpfinger taught me to lift the handle as the curve of the blade steepened, to keep a consistent angle on the stone.

Sharpening modern pelletized steels with high hardness values taught me patience and new ways to curse. Through it all, the soundtrack of a knife blade on stone has remained a constant, mind-centering refrain: *Scheeerup. Scheeerup. Scheeerup.* There is nothing to replace the soul-satisfying act of sharpening a knife by hand.

Today, I own a world of knife-sharpening tools. I own things that are spring-powered and battery-powered, things that plug into a wall socket. I use them all, occasionally, but they can be abused. I was once at a duck camp where a young man had just received an electric knife sharpener. He was loving his gadget, and gathered a small pile of blades from others at camp with the offer to whip them into shape. I handed mine over, despite a gnawing in my gut that this might not end well. I got back a fairly sharp edge and a knife tip now as sharp as the end of a banana. The fellow was pleased as he could be. I bit my tongue. Like tightening the coupler on your trailer hitch, sharpening your knife is one of those tasks that you should never allow someone else to do.

And to be blunt: You should learn to sharpen a knife on a whetstone. You should do this because it's one of the few skills remaining that will connect you to hunters and anglers across all time and all space. And you should do this because, if you are living your life correctly, you will regularly find yourself in a place without a knife-sharpening aid and, better yet, without electricity.

These days, I mostly use an Arkansas stone and a smear of honing oil. It's as old-school as you can get, and as effective an approach as there is, as long as you learn the ropes. Because there is no mystery to sharpening a knife, but there is mastery. Of all the factors that go into making a knife sharp—the type of steel, the blade's grind, the angle of the sharpening stroke—one aspect is most frequently ignored: Time. Simple as that. It takes time to get proficient with any sharpening method, and while it is not a lot of time, it has to be focused, dedicated time.

SENSORY OVERLOAD

I have a couple of tricks to make it easier to dial in on the sharpening angle, probably the most challenging aspect of the process. Take a single piece of paper and fold the bottom left corner so that the sheet bottom lines up with the right edge. You've created a 45-degree angle. Fold the creased edge again to the right edge. Now you have a 22.5-degree angle, which is very close to the 20 degrees at which many working knives are sharpened. Use that DIY angle wedge to line up your blade, then drop the spine just a hair to knock a few degrees off the angle. You're in the sweet spot.

To ground-truth your work, paint the knife's edge bevel with a solid stroke from a permanent marker. Now you can monitor how closely you follow that edge bevel: Make a few sharpening strokes. If ink remains along the bevel edge, the angle is too acute. If the ink is removed at the shoulder of the bevel, away from the edge, the angle is too shallow. If all the ink is removed, you are in the sweet spot, Goldilocks. You are sharpening the knife correctly.

From here on out, it's a slightly monastic mindset. Every stroke the same angle. Time and again. *Scheeerup. Scheeerup. Scheeerup.*

Count down the strokes. Fifty on each side, to 30 to 20 to four or three. *Scheeerup. Scheeerup. Scheeerup.*

Each stroke and pass requires the focus of fly casting or sighting in a rifle. Every sense is activated—by the sound of the whetstone's melody, the smell of metal under friction, the sensation of the blade traveling on the stone, felt in the fingertips, like braille. Each pass of the blade is an opportunity to create a better future.

I make a dozen sweeps, then pull the blade edge between my thumb and forefinger so I can see the smudge of sooty swarf on my fingertips. Barely visible, and invisible, things are happening. To both metal and spirit.

It's like removing sin from the soul. "Iron sharpens iron," as the Good Book says. There are times when it's hard to tell whether it's the knife or the knife holder that is taking an edge.

"What kind of knife is that?"

It's an easy question to answer, because there's only one good answer.

"The sharp kind." F&S

If you are living your life correctly, you will regularly find yourself in a place without a knife-sharpening aid and, better yet, without electricity.

JULIEN JARRY

↑
A schoolie striped bass comes to hand at daybreak in a calm backwater bay.

Hidden Gems

KEEP ONE EYE ON THE WATER AND THE OTHER ON THE ROAD. YOUR NEXT HONEY HOLE MIGHT BE WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT IT.

by **JOE CERMELE**

I'M NOT SURE I've ever been haunted by waters the way Norman Maclean was, but I've certainly been distracted by them. How I've avoided front-end damage because I'm sizing up a stream or fixating on a drainage basin in the Walmart parking lot instead of watching the road is a miracle. I consider myself a pretty good driver, but even now, at 42, my eyes wander while crossing a river or skirting a lake, triggering interjections of "Brake lights!" and "Dammit, Joe!" from my wife. If you covet that annual safe-driver insurance discount, this behavior might make you clutch your pearls—but if you're a diehard angler, you get it. You do the same thing.

Why are we willing to risk a police report to stare at water on the way to the liquor store? Because, whether we recognize it or not, we've been addicted to the mystery since the first time we ever wet a line. What's going to latch on to that worm? How big are the trout in there? Once you've got the sickness, you start wondering if anything worth catching swims in that urban creek loaded with car batteries and bike frames or if a 10-pound largemouth resides in the farmer's pond you glimpse from a country road. Wondering, of course, is one thing. Going back and trying to get the answer is another. There are countless reasons why we don't, won't, or can't, but if you do—win or lose—you'll come away a more knowledgeable angler. After more than a decade of wondering what swims in a stretch of polluted waters near my home, I finally got my answer.

The most solitude I ever experienced while saltwater fishing in my home state was in the most rat race–infected, industrial, populated portion of it.

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

I don't recommend taking an hour-and-forty-five-minute train ride to work and back every day, but I did it for 10 years. It just became routine after a while, and my move was to pass out wearing headphones within 10 minutes of leaving my home station. In very little time, my body programmed its internal alarm clock. I would wake up just as the train pulled out of Newark Penn Station, which was the second-to-last stop before it bored into the darkness of the tunnel under the Hudson River and arrived in Midtown Manhattan. Though there were barely 5 miles of track between Newark and the black hole, this was by far the most interesting leg of the mundane journey through New Jersey.

Everywhere you looked there was water. From reed-choked swamps to swirling creeks, meandering rivers to tidal lagoons, a vast network of H_2O created veins through what I can only describe as an industrial wasteland. In the early-morning light, these waters were eerie. Here was something natural weaving past crumbling remnants of bygone factories, behind acres of lots filled with shipping containers, around hulking warehouses, under spiraling networks of elevated highways, and over the twisted wreckage of ancient steel barges and rotted bulkheads poking through the surface. If you needed to get rid of a car—or perhaps a car and driver—this was the zone, and while I never saw anyone pushing a Cadillac over the edge, I did see a man in track pants and a white tank top launch a suitcase into the Passaic River. There was graffiti, but there were also ospreys, piles of discarded building material, and stoic great blue herons stalking the shallows where water bottles, Mylar balloons, and flip-flops collected. But what I never saw in 10 years—not on the bank or in a boat—was an angler.

Part of unraveling the mystery of a roadside creek is thinking about where it comes from and where it goes. Knowing all the water I pondered from the train drains into the mighty Hudson River, which runs into Raritan Bay and then the Atlantic Ocean, I assumed that gobs of striped bass, bluefish, weakfish, and even flounder would have staked claims here, at least historically. But did they still? Were there too many forever chemicals, heavy metals, and layers of toxic goo for them to thrive now? In 2015, I started working from home full-time, bringing my commutes to an end and leaving those questions unanswered.

STOCK FUTURES

Nine years later, on a frigid November morning, I marveled at the juxtaposition. There I was boarding a Ranger flats skiff, which belonged in the Everglades, at the public boat ramp on the Hackensack River in Secaucus, New Jersey—smack in the middle of that last train leg. At 6 a.m. on a Sunday, even the highway din was almost zero. There was only one other trailer in a lot that could hold twenty, and I listened to my friends Mike Carr and Capt. Zack Flake discuss which fly patterns to tie on first. This "wasteland" is 29-year-old Flake's milieu and, as I'd soon learn, his personal playground.

It's funny how your perspective changes once you're on the water versus viewing it from afar. Take the office chair, for example. If you saw one disintegrating in the water from the road, you'd likely dwell on how terrible litterbugs are, how much of an eyesore someone's laziness created. But from skiff level, you see the juicy curl the water makes behind that chair, how it forces more current to break on the little rocky point behind a mile of barbed-wire fence. My first striper of the day came from behind Chair Point, as we'd begun calling it. My second and third came from that break too. We also stuck some casting near a partially submerged mattress.

The week before, Flake had been hooking into 15- to 20-pound migratory bass, but a cold snap seemed to have sent them packing. Still, he had the place wired, running full throttle under low swing bridges, cruising up winding creeks, and, at one point, shimmying through a narrow slot under the New Jersey Turnpike to reach a distant marsh. Not once did we see another boat, yet roughly 20 miles south as the crow flies, hundreds of them would be fighting each other for a piece of the action on Raritan Bay. The irony wasn't lost on me that the most solitude I ever experienced while saltwater fishing in my home state was in the most rat race–infected, industrial, populated portion of it. Nor was the importance of the dozens upon dozens of 18- to 20-inch stripers that gobbled our flies that day.

What I learned from Flake was that these baby bass are residents, and these sheltered waters provide one of the most vital rearing and overwintering habitats on the entire East Coast. Put another way, the future of the striped bass population depends in part on the health of the fish in this wasteland. For a decade, all I wanted to know was what swims here, and now I know the answer is potentially the trophy striper my 7-year-old son might catch 20 years from now.

In some ways I felt foolish for taking so long to explore these waters, but in others, it was a refreshing reminder that there's always something new to learn or discover in your own backyard. I've returned to several roadside waters in my life, sometimes finding they're not worth hitting again, and at other times stumbling upon a new gem. But the reality is that nobody ever has enough time to hit them all, and that's okay. As long as you keep looking, wondering, and possibly denting your bumper, you know you haven't lost the hunger for the mystery of fishing. The day I drive by water and don't think about what's in it, at least for a few seconds, is the day I'll hang it up. F&S

PROVING GROUND

THE GREATEST AMMO-MAKING INNOVATION OF OUR TIME PASSED THE TEST ON AN AFRICAN SAFARI. BUT THAT'S ONLY THE BEGINNING

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

↑
In Africa, the author used a Christensen Arms Ridgeline FFT rifle loaded with Federal Fusion Tipped 175-grain 7mm Backcountry ammo.

JUST WEST OF a British fort left over from the Boer War, South Africa's longest river, the Orange, bends northward, joining the Vaal River. Its lush banks are a stark contrast to the otherwise flat and arid landscape. Kudu found a home in this country as it evolved from grassland to savanna after farmers killed off all the big cats, and there's a lone acacia-covered mountain ruggedly towering over the savanna that's littered with them. I've hunted free-range kudu there obsessively for more than a decade, sometimes wishing I had a rifle with a lot of reach. This year, I did—a brand-new 7mm Backcountry.

With the rifle resting on shooting sticks, I aimed at a 3-foot gap between two acacia trees. There was nothing special about the gap other than the fact that a mature kudu bull was standing behind the tree, to its left. Periodically, I'd glimpse an ivory-tipped horn, and for an hour and a half I waited, frozen, afraid to move. It was the middle of the rut, and a kudu cow finally lured the bull out of hiding. Horns spiraling skyward, he stepped into the opening, and I flipped off the rifle's safety.

My friend—professional hunter Geoffrey Wayland—and I generally hunt this area by climbing the mountain and glassing for bulls around its wooded base and out across the farmland that stretches away into infinity. But we spotted this gray ghost of Africa working his way up the mountain with a harem. When the bull finally materialized in my scope, Geoffrey whispered, "It's 248 yards." I held dead on, pressed the trigger, and watched the bull collapse before the sound of the bullet's impact reached us.

I didn't have to do anything but aim, shoot, and appreciate the result—with less recoil and noise to distract me.

THE PAST

When Federal introduced the 7mm Backcountry in January, I said that it could represent the greatest ammo-making innovation in more than a century. Now that I've extensively range-tested and hunted with the cartridge, learned its capabilities, and seen what it can do in the field, it's time to ponder that claim more closely. But to fully appreciate this new cartridge, we must look back before we look forward.

Since the introduction of the 7x57 Mauser, in 1892, hunters have been killing kudu and all manner of African game with 7mm bullets. Originally designed for military use, the 7x57 remains popular in Africa and around the globe, which is surprising for a cartridge that's older than the first airplane. Pushing a 175-grain bullet at 2500 fps, it allows for a dead-on hold on a 6-inch target out to about 255 yards. This was beyond sufficient for most big-game hunting until optical sights became more trusted and prolific.

Starting in the mid-1950s, with Remington's 280, a string of 7mm cartridges—Weatherby's and Remington's 7mm mags and then Remington's Ultra Mag and Nosler's 28—extended that 6-inch-target dead-on hold to and beyond 300 yards. All of these cartridges gained that additional reach by using increasingly larger cases and more gunpowder, which meant each kicked progressively harder.

It wasn't until Hornady released the 7mm PRC in 2023 that we found better downrange 7mm performance in a different way. Instead of boosting powder capacity, the PRC used a fast-twist barrel and gravity-defying, high-ballistic-coefficient bullets to deliver 300 yards of dead-on-hold reach without beard-searing muzzle blast or mule-kick recoil. As a result, the cartridge has become very popular. But as with all the other modern 7mm magnums, it needs a 24-inch or longer barrel to deliver on its promise.

THE PRESENT

That brings us to today, a time when we are seeing a major shift in hunting rifles. Modern hunters, more than at any time before, are embracing suppressors because they reduce muzzle blast, mitigate recoil, and spook less game. Compared to the hellaciously loud muzzle brakes often needed to tame those big seven magnums, a suppressor makes for a less obnoxious hunting experience. Just as important, it can save your hearing. Combined with some new technology, this shift paved the way for the 7mm Backcountry.

Working with the military, Federal started using steel-alloy cartridge cases, instead of brass, to boost the performance of the 5.56 NATO by allowing it to work at higher pressures. With lessons learned from that project, the company saw an opportunity to make a high-velocity big-game hunting cartridge that would perform with a shorter, more suppressor-friendly barrel—and that's how the 7mm Backcountry was born.

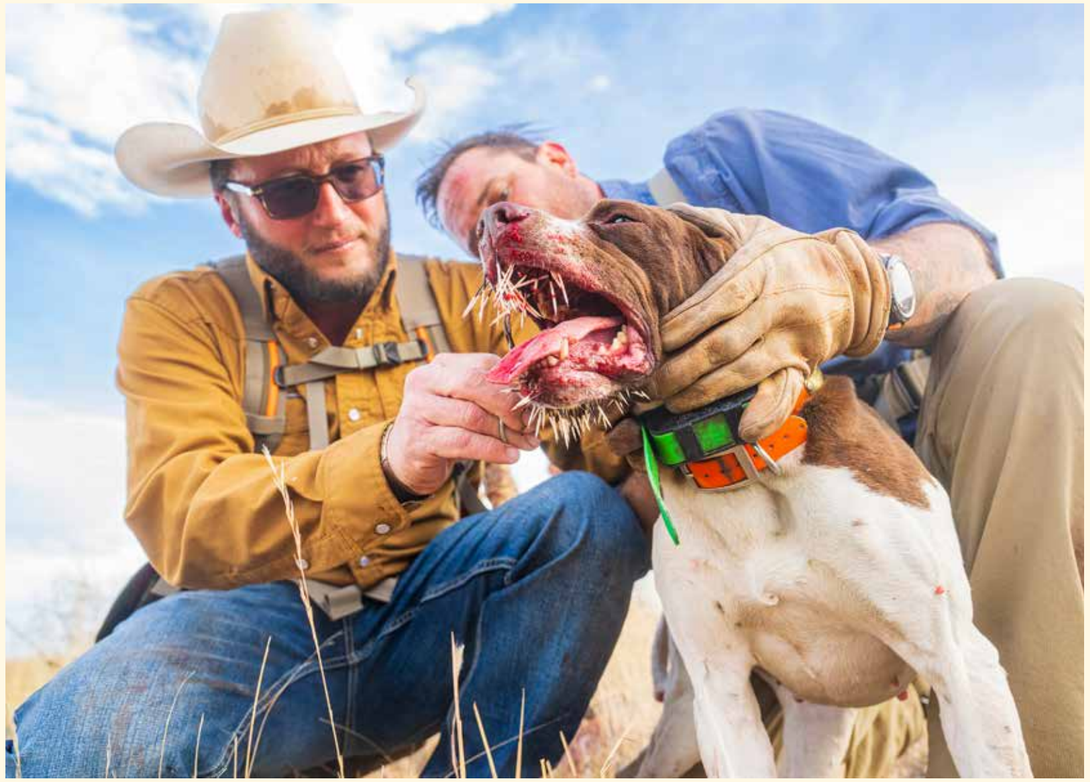
The Backcountry's unique cartridge case is similar in size to the 7x57 Mauser, but it can handle 80,000 psi of chamber pressure. By comparison, other 7mm magnum cartridges run at 65,000 psi and are as big around as a jumbo crayon. And instead of using huge amounts of slow-burning powder like other seven mags, the Backcountry's narrower and stronger case uses a smaller volume of faster-burning powder, which works better out of a shorter barrel, eliminating the need for one that's 2 feet long. With its 1:8 twist, the 7mm Backcountry can shoot the same high-BC bullets as the 7mm PRC. But if both are shot out of a 20-inch barrel, the Backcountry has a 200 fps advantage. And because its smaller volume of faster-burning powder produces less ejecta (all the stuff that comes out of the muzzle at the shot), the Backcountry doesn't kick any harder.

THE FUTURE

This puts the 7mm Backcountry in a class of its own, which is why I chose it for my African safari. Sure, I could've taken that kudu bull with the ancient 7x57 or even a 308 Winchester, but both would have required some trajectory compensation. Likewise, I could have hit the bull about as hard with any of the older seven magnums, but with a suppressor attached to the barrel, it would have meant wrangling a heavier, harder-kicking, half-a-foot-longer rifle through the African thorn and tangle.

Instead, I had an easy-carrying, short-barreled, suppressed rifle with 305 yards of dead-on-hold reach. I didn't have to do anything but aim, shoot, and appreciate the result—with less recoil and noise to distract me. That's about all a rifle hunter can ask for, and it's possible because of the 7mm Backcountry's unique high-pressure-tolerant, steel-alloy case combined with faster-burning powder and a fast-twist barrel.

The 7mm Backcountry worked marvelously on the kudu and several other animals in Africa during my field test. But what excites me the most is what potentially lies ahead. This reloadable, steel-alloy-case technology is the most significant advancement in ammunition since Paul Mauser created the 7x57 133 years ago. Federal has already applied it to the 5.56 NATO for the military, boosting its velocity by 200 fps. With the Backcountry, *magnum* now has an entirely new meaning for shooters. Just think what could come next. The future possibilities with steel-alloy cases interest me more than the 7mm Backcountry itself. Still, I might have found my new favorite rifle cartridge for hunting free-ranging kudu on that lonely mountain of rock and acacia in Africa's Northern Cape. My PH said it best: "It's a kudu-killing sumbitch." F&S



BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

↑ Unless you're in a remote location, your first move in treating a quilled dog should be a trip to the closest veterinarian.

THE DANGER ZONE ⇨

FROM PORCUPINES TO SNAKES, HEATSTROKE TO FUNGAL INFECTIONS, THERE'S A LOT WORKING AGAINST YOUR DOG ON EVERY HUNT

by **TOM DAVIS**

IMAGINE THE MORNING before a bird hunt. Maybe you're in a cabin or a campsite or a motel room. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones who can hunt from home. Wherever you are, the shape of your expectations remains the same: You have a vision of how the hunt will unfold—a scenario that strikes a balance between opportunity and challenge, effort and reward. You hope for crisp dog work, of course, and that you will hold up your end as the shotgun-toting half of the partnership. Looking forward to the drama and excitement of the upcoming day, you feel as if your nervous system is clamped to a car battery.

What you almost certainly don't foresee is the possibility of something catastrophic, even fatal, happening to your dog. The sobering fact of the matter, though, is that whenever we turn a gun dog loose to do what he's born and bred to do, we put him in harm's way and expose him to some degree of risk. This risk will be higher or lower depending on a host of factors, but it can never be eliminated.

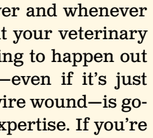
Sometimes there's not a damn thing you can do about it either. This is especially the case if your dog is a hard-charging upland hunter, the kind that shreds the cover and regards briars and thorns and their effect on his hide as trifling inconveniences. It's no coincidence that I've known two dogs that died as the result of colliding with iron-hard stobs of wood, and both were pointers—by and large, the hardest-running dogs of all. One was hunting the grouse woods of northern Michigan; the other was after bobwhite quail in the spiky mesquite of West Texas. Both suffered penetrating chest wounds—and no power in heaven or on Earth could have saved either of them.

Considering how forbidding grouse and woodcock cover is and how enthusiastically many dogs attack it, I'm amazed at how few serious injuries they suffer there. The worst thing that has happened to one of my dogs in the woods was the time my English setter, Tina, managed to ram a stick the diameter of a pencil underneath her tongue. Terrified that removing it myself might, on the finger-in-the-dike principle, release an unstanchable gush of blood, I drove a hundred miles to the clinic of my veterinarian (and hunting partner), Terry Barker. He evaluated the situation, grabbed the end of the stick with forceps, pulled...and it slid out without spilling so much as a drop.

As they say, it's easy if you know how.

Dr. Barker flushed the wound with water, checked to make sure there was no lingering debris, and pronounced Tina good to go. She was hunting again the next morning.

The other lesson, which applies universally to the dog-hunter partnership, is that you have to do the thinking for the entire team.



SNAKE COUNTRY

That episode with Tina illustrates how important it is, wherever and whenever you hunt, to know what your veterinary options are. Stuff is going to happen out there, and some of it—even if it's just stitching up a barbed-wire wound—is going to require a vet's expertise. If you're hunting in unfamiliar country, always identify vets in the area before you go and load their numbers into your phone. Try to find at least two, as many veterinarians in rural areas are primarily large-animal practitioners who spend a lot of their time "out of the office" at farms and ranches. The more vets you have to choose from, the better your chances of finding one who's available to help.

Deciding what constitutes a veterinary emergency isn't always cut-and-dried—but you should err on the side of caution. To put it another way: It's never wrong to seek veterinary assistance. There is, however, one instance in which I'm comfortable making the blanket statement that veterinary intervention is mandatory—no ifs, ands, or buts: When your dog is struck by a venomous snake.

While the severity of a given snakebite depends on a number of factors—including the species of snake, the placement of the bite, and the amount of envenomation—the bottom line is that you just don't know, and the last thing you want to do is make assumptions that might lead to a lifetime of regret.

So what should you do if you're out hunting—presumably some distance from civilization—and your dog is nailed by a snake? Only this: Get him to a veterinarian as fast as you can safely make the drive. As snakebite authority Dr. Michael Peterson told me, "The only 'snakebite kit' you need is your car keys. There's nothing you can do in the field that will improve your dog's outcome. You just need to keep calm and get him to the vet's."

FIELD MANAGEMENT

Geography and climate play major roles in the calculus of risk as well. What was undoubtedly the single deadliest hunting dog–related mortality event on record took place on opening weekend of the 2003 South Dakota pheasant season, when a lethal cocktail of temperatures that soared into the 80s, rank early season cover, out-of-shape dogs, and hunters whose judgment was clouded by the excitement of the moment led to more than 100 dogs (no one knows the exact number) dying of heatstroke and its associated complications. Many more suffered permanent neurological damage and other conditions that compromised their ability to perform in the field, if not their very quality of life.

You can take any number of lessons from this, but two seem to stand out: One is that an out-of-shape dog has no business being thrust into any kind of hunting situation, particularly one that forces him to contend with unusual heat. Some dogs have more built-in heat tolerance than others, but all else equal, a dog that's in excellent condition will be better equipped to handle the heat than one who's not. The other lesson, which applies universally to the dog-hunter partnership, is that you have to do the thinking for the entire team. It's your responsibility to exercise good judgment and make smart, sound decisions. In other words, to act as the field manager.

This means carrying plenty of water on hot days and staying vigilant for signs of hypothermia on extremely cold ones. This means steering clear of obvious environmental dangers such as steep cliffs, sketchy ice, fast-moving currents, fissured rock formations, porcupines waddling along on the ground, roadways of any kind, and areas where trappers are known to be working. This means being prepared to respond appropriately to injuries, accidents, and/or illnesses *when*—not if—they occur.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

In addition to the macro dangers I've already mentioned, there's a murderer's row of insidious micro stuff that hunting dogs—simply because of what they do and where they go—expose themselves to more than other dogs. This includes a suite of tick-borne diseases; the systemic fungal infection blastomycosis, which can lead to death or long-term disability if not diagnosed and treated promptly; and what are known as grass awns—the barbed seeds of certain grasses, including cheatgrass, spear grass, foxtail, Canada wild rye, and several others.

Whether they directly penetrate the skin or are ingested or inhaled, these little bastards can migrate through the tissues, leaving a trail of infection, triggering abscesses, and generally wreaking havoc. A grass awn that lodges in the chest cavity can lead to pyothorax, a devastating condition in which the cavity fills with a toxic brew of blood and pus, restricting the lungs' capacity to expand and the heart's ability to pump.

Not a pretty picture, obviously—but if you hunt pheasants, Huns, prairie grouse, or even chukars, there's not a lot you can do to minimize your dog's risk. You should check his eyes, including behind the inner eyelid, and flush out any seeds or other debris you find there. You should also check between the toes—another location where grass awns tend to accumulate. Beyond that, you just have to stay vigilant for the symptoms: labored breathing, lack of energy, sometimes a lump or other swelling on the body.

For hunting dogs, it's a jungle out there. F&S

Lucky Break

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A FRACTURED FOREARM TO HELP YOU SAVOR THE BEST DAYS OF AN EPIC PHEASANT SEASON

↑ Prime grassland habitat stretches to the horizon in front of an upland hunter and his two best friends.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

by **PHIL BOURJAILY**

A FEW DAYS after I tripped and fell in the field, the ortho physician's assistant showed me the X-rays of my fractured forearm. "With an injury like yours, we tell people not to lift anything heavier than a phone or a coffee cup for a few weeks," she said. It was not the news I wanted to hear with 35 days of pheasant season left.

I had to ask: "What about lifting a shotgun?"

She thought for a moment. "That should be fine," she said.

A younger, single me would have proposed on the spot. Older, happily married me drove home to tell my GSP, Zeke, that we were cleared for hunting.

Having once broken that same arm and missed most of a season, I counted myself lucky with this fracture. It was just enough of an injury to remind me to savor every one of the remaining days I might have missed without the PA's green light. They were all good. But a few stood out.

DECEMBER 12

On my first trip to the field after the ortho visit, I shot a rare quick limit. Afterward, Zeke and I sat in the truck waiting for my hunting partner, Rick, and his springer, Red, to finish their hunt. A Peekapoo trapped inside the body of a pointer, Zeke finds laps faster than he finds pheasants. He curled up and went to sleep. Stuck beneath 60 pounds of dog, I scratched his ears while texting pheasant-and-Zeke pictures to friends. We basked in the sunlight streaming through the windshield, and I wondered if anyone, anywhere, was having a better day than I was.

DECEMBER 13

Another fast limit. Zeke and I were done in under an hour. This was supposed to be a down year, but there were plenty of birds. I don't need to shoot a limit to be happy, but I don't mind doing it either.

DECEMBER 20

Rick, Red, and I were walking down a two-track next to a gully when I realized Zeke wasn't with us. I looked around. He was rooted to the ground, facing the creek, 30 yards behind us. "I have to go shoot this bird my dog is pointing," I said with exaggerated nonchalance. In truth, I suspected it was a false point, or a hen or rabbit, because Zeke was locked onto the tiniest scrap of cover. I kicked it anyway, because you're supposed to believe your dog, and an entire rooster came boiling out. I let it fly to where my gun's pattern could open up, and the bird tumbled on the far bank.

Retrieving is the gaping hole in Zeke's game. His brothers and sisters are all naturals. He is the backward child. To my surprise, he crossed the gully and picked up the bird. I cheered, I praised, I clapped my hands and called him. He turned my way with the pheasant in his mouth. As far as I could tell, it was actually happening. Then he fumbled the bird while trying to find a place to cross back over, and it fell into a little washout where he couldn't quite get his mouth around it. He gave up, dropped on his belly, and licked what feathers he could reach. I scrambled over to get the bird and tell him he was a good dog. Baby steps, I told myself, not that Zeke was anything close to a baby at age 5.

DECEMBER 22

A couple of days before Christmas, I stopped by a landowner's house with some chocolates to visit and say thank you. We hit the important subjects: when guns were made right (the '90s, we agreed); hunting (still some birds, but also, not like the '90s); and chocolate-chip cookie baking (his wife puts a couple of tablespoons of water in the dough. I'm going to try that).

I'd been there for 45 minutes when Rick stopped in, also on a landowner-appreciation tour. He's never without cheese at times like these. If you give him permission to hunt, you get a free year-round cheese subscription service. It's delivered in person, and you can never cancel. The $4 bricks of cheddar Rick brings back from his Wisconsin grouse trips get us onto a lot of land.

The landowner, Chris, thanked him, thanked me for the chocolates again, then said, "You guys don't have to bring me stuff. I like having you hunt here. It's a win-win: You get to hunt, and I get to hang out with you two."

I thought, *People pay money to get on places like this, and he's telling us cheese and chocolate is too much.*

DECEMBER 28

My younger son, home for Christmas, wanted to hunt. I asked him if he'd like to shoot his grandfather's Beretta. I was not prepared for the size of the lump that formed in my throat when I saw John carrying that gun at about the age I was when Dad gave it to me.

He missed a couple, ratcheting up the tension. When he connected, I was watching over his shoulder. It was the best bird of the year.

JANUARY 3

Dave, another landowner, had let me hunt his place a few times in the past. This year, he dug out a box of 4s for his old Ithaca Model 37 and asked if he could come along. He was eager to see Zeke run. Years ago, he used to hunt, and he'd had shorthairs.

We were on his brother's place, walking a strip of grass between soybean stubble and a creek, me by the creek, Dave along the edge. He could see coyote tracks everywhere in the beanfield. We had not yet found a bird. Dave called his brother and was telling him he had too many coyotes when he looked up, noticed Zeke getting birdy, and said, "I gotta go, we have a dog about to point here." Zeke pointed, then two birds flushed in front of me. I shot one, almost shot the other, then remembered my manners. Dave's bird fell dead on the stubble. Zeke had to dig mine out of the tall grass. By the end of the hunt, Dave was talking about the next time we might go.

JANUARY 10

I had hunted eight of the last nine days before the January 10 closer. My goal is always to hunt so much toward the end of the season that I am glad when it's over. Zeke and I had both lost about the same number of pounds. The weight loss looked better on me than it did on my skeletal shorthair. His pads were sore from running on frozen ground too, and he slept all the time in his crate when we were home. I knew, and he didn't, that he was about to get 10 months off when he reluctantly left his crate and got in the truck each morning. In the field, he hunted with his usual joy.

That final day, the three of us hit some very good spots and found nothing but hens. Our one chance came at the end of the hunt, as we flanked both sides of a wooded creek. I heard a volley of shots and some cursing. Then a rooster crossed the creek to my side. I missed with my first shot, a short left-to-right, and suddenly I was keenly aware that I had one shell left, an audience, and a pheasant—the last pheasant of the year—that was gaining distance, speed, and altitude. The unwelcome thought popped into my mind: *Don't miss.*

Sports psychologists will tell you that this kind of thinking only helps you miss. You're supposed to replace it with a positive thought. But there wasn't time for that. *Don't miss* was what I had to work with. I sent it. The bird went limp, perfectly centered, and fell in the snow. Zeke jumped on it, just in case.

Back at the trucks, we celebrated with our usual end-of-the-year beer and snacks on the tailgate in the cold. It had been one of the best pheasant seasons in recent memory, and the only bird of the day went home with me. Some people get all the lucky breaks. F&S

Suddenly I was keenly aware that I had one shell left, an audience, and a pheasant—the last pheasant of the year—that was gaining distance, speed, and altitude.

Venison Tartare

FOLLOW A COUPLE OF SIMPLE SAFETY MEASURES, AND YOU CAN ENJOY THE FRESHEST VENISON YOU'VE EVER TASTED

by **JONATHAN MILES**
photographs by **CHRISTOPHER TESTANI**
styling by **ROSCOE BETSILL**

WHENEVER YOU'RE EATING something raw, it's showcasing quality and freshness," says Houston-based chef Austin Waiter. Sushi is one example. Another is Waiter's bold, elegant riff on venison tartare. Waiter is chef-partner at The Marigold Club, which opened in 2024. He's also a devoted hunter and fly fisherman (he and his wife exchanged their wedding vows on the banks of Wyoming's Snake River), pursuits which often color the way he looks at food and cooking.

"When you hunt or fish, you gain an understanding of what you're taking out of the wild, and you gain respect and appreciation for it," he says. Another thing you gain, he notes, is full knowledge of just how the animal was harvested: "Where it came from, how it was handled, whose hands touched it."

That knowledge is crucial when it comes to serving raw meat. Waiter adds some deep sparkle to his tartare—a rich, golden, caper-spiked *sauce gribiche*, a classic French condiment; pickled mustard seeds for some acidic bite; and the textural foil of raw kohlrabi folded into the meat. But the spotlight is on the venison. Use tenderloin for this recipe, and dice it with a clean, sharp knife. (Freeze the meat first, for at least a couple of days, to kill any parasites or other hazards. If your deer was gut-shot, save this recipe for another deer.) And keep everything—the meat, the bowl you're mixing it in, even the plate it's served on—as cold as possible. With those precautions, there's nothing left to do but to enjoy the showcase: quality, freshness, respect, appreciation, and a wild burst of flavor.

> "When you hunt or fish, you gain an understanding of what you're taking out of the wild, and you gain respect and appreciation for it."
>
> —AUSTIN WAITER

INGREDIENTS

12 oz.	very fresh venison loin, finely diced
3	eggs
2	egg yolks
3 Tbsp.	lemon juice
1	clove garlic, finely chopped
1½ tsp.	Dijon mustard
3 Tbsp.	olive oil
1 Tbsp.	capers, chopped
1½ tsp.	fresh dill, chopped, plus a bit more for garnish
1 cup	white vinegar
¼ cup	sugar
3 Tbsp.	mustard seeds
4 Tbsp.	freshly squeezed orange juice
4 Tbsp.	sherry vinegar
6 Tbsp.	extra virgin olive oil
4	small kohlrabies or turnips, peeled and finely diced
	salt and freshly ground pepper
	red pepper flakes, for garnish (optional)

DIRECTIONS

DIRECTIONS

Serves 4

1

MAKE THE SAUCE: Place the eggs in a medium saucepan, fill with water, and bring to a boil. Cook for 9 minutes, then cool quickly under cold water before peeling and separating the whites from the yolks. While the whole eggs are boiling, combine the raw egg yolks, lemon juice, garlic, Dijon mustard, and about a teaspoon each of salt and pepper in a blender. With the motor running, drizzle in the olive oil until emulsified. Add the cooked egg yolks, capers, and dill, and pulse until finely chopped but not smooth. Transfer to a bowl. Finely chop the remaining egg whites and fold into the sauce. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

2

MAKE THE PICKLED MUSTARD SEEDS: In a medium saucepan, combine 2 cups of water with the vinegar and sugar and 3 tablespoons of salt. Bring to a boil over medium heat, then add the mustard seeds. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook for about 10 minutes. Let cool.

3

MAKE THE VINAIGRETTE: In a medium bowl, whisk together the orange juice, sherry vinegar, and about a tablespoon of salt until combined. Slowly rain in the extra virgin olive oil while whisking until it emulsifies. Reserve.

4

TO SERVE, combine the diced kohlrabi (or turnips) with the vinaigrette. Very gently fold in the venison. Spread about two tablespoons of the gribiche onto four plates, smoothing it into a circle, then place a quarter of the venison mix on top. Garnish with the pickled mustard seeds, some dill, red pepper flakes (if using), and a sprinkle of flaky salt. F&S

by BILL HEAVEY illustration by PETER OUMANSKI

Stage Fright

MY EVOLUTION AS A HUNTER HAS BEEN JUST LIKE YOURS, BUT WITH FEWER TROPHIES AND A LOT MORE ANXIETY AND GRIEF

NOT TO BRAG, but stories of my hunting career have been known to make other hunters weep. Oh, sure, they smile at first. They might ask, "You actually went hunting with no pants?" They may laugh and say, "That's some of the dumbest s--t I've ever heard." But eventually, they're dabbing at the tears in their eyes. Which is fine. I've always been a maverick, a guy who goes his own way. If it costs me my dignity, then that's what it costs. Initially, for instance, I followed the Buddhist approach to rattling, using just one antler, which made a noise very much like silence. I eventually learned that a pair of antlers was more effective, but not enough that I noticed a difference.

Still, in many ways, I'm just like you. I, too, have passed through the five stages of being a hunter. These are so well known as to scarcely need mention here, but they are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, eventually, acceptance. Sorry. Those are the five stages of grief. In hunting, the stages are shooting, limiting out, trophy, method, and sportsman (in which your cluelessness is so entertaining that you get a column). Actually, now that I see them side by side, I have to admit that in my case, hunting and grief seem to be close allies. They're a natural pair, sort of like skulduggery and patriotism. Anyway, here's how the stages broke down for me.

THE SHOOTING STAGE (DENIAL)

This is when newbie hunters want to shoot and kill things all the time. (Incidentally, some hunters precede this step with a namby-pamby stage, in which they say they "harvest" instead of "kill" game. I personally refuse to harvest wild animals because they are not turnips.) True, this stage rarely accounts for a hunter's finest moments. Maybe we should call it the unbridled-enthusiasm stage instead. In any case, I had a gun and bullets and a mad desire to shoot, and I did so at every opportunity. The denial part came when I noticed that my bullets failed to have any effect on my target animals. I say this because, like any man, I am a born marksman who has no need to practice. But many of the deer I shot immediately cleared 10-foot fences or ran hundreds of yards without so much as a hitch in their stride. This led me to double down on denial, a tactic that has served men well since Paleolithic times.

THE LIMITING-OUT STAGE (ANGER)

I tried this stage briefly but found it was having a terrible effect on my personal life. "How about we go out for dinner once in a while?" my girlfriend at the time would ask sarcastically. Then she would immediately say, "Oh, I forgot, we can't because you haven't limited out yet!" Out of anger, she ditched me. Then, also out of anger, I ditched the limiting-out stage. I've always viewed both anger and denial as superb crisis-management strategies.

THE TROPHY STAGE (BARGAINING)

Okay, I skipped this one altogether. If you look around my house, you'll notice a distinct lack of trophies, trophy photos, or taxidermy. High up on a bookshelf, heavily spider-webbed, is the rack of an 11-pointer I killed in Kansas. But it's less of a trophy, more the exception that proves the rule. The rationale I've settled on (back to denial) is that trophies are for men who need to prove their masculinity. In other words, not having trophies makes me the biggest swinging you-know-what of all time. I actually did have the rack of a nice Wisconsin 8-pointer. The outfitter said it would score just over 125. He might have been exaggerating, but I wanted a trophy so bad that I decided to never have it measured. If this seems to contradict what I wrote a couple of sentences ago, that's only because it does.

THE METHOD STAGE (DEPRESSION)

This is when the hunter, experienced in the typical ways of killing typical game, seeks out a higher level of challenge. The depression comes when they realize they've set the bar way too high. Hunting grizzlies with an atlatl sounds hardcore until you realize it's just a surefire way to die. In which case, the method stage will be your last.

Realizing too late that I should have saved the Buddhist rattling for this stage, I required instead that all my subsequent rattling sequences have the exact cadence of the challenging drum solo in "Wipe Out," the 1963 hit by the Surfaris. It makes deer run for deep cover, but I always had the sense they were headed there anyway. I also tried a flintlock, the most challenging kind of muzzleloader. I won't say I hunted with it, but I did go out in the woods and carry it around, marveling at how quickly the powder disappeared from the pan if the gun wasn't held perfectly level. Neither of these things had any noticeable effect on my success. I was every bit as deadly as I'd been with a scoped 30-06.

THE SPORTSMAN STAGE (ACCEPTANCE)

I entered this phase when, like a man lost at sea, I realized that it was useless to fight fate. This can be a comfort, but then you drown. Sorry. What I meant to say is that at this stage, you're more interested in the whole experience of hunting, which includes fellowship, ethics, conservation, and the desire to give back. As a result, you don't take as much game. It's true that I kill less these days, but I'm not at all sure it's because of personal growth, which has never been my strong suit. I think of it more as a kind of professional courtesy. Everything alive is both (a) holy and (b) headed for the Irish sports page sooner or later. Me, I'm not in any particular rush. F&S

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