Field & Stream

ESTB 1871

BIGGEST BASS EVER • OUR 6 FAVORITE GAME FISH

BLOOD IN THE WATER: Eric Church Hooks into Something *Big*

MIGHTY MUSKIE LURES • SKUNKED IN MONGOLIA • GOBBLER GUNS • RED-HOT ICE FISHING • FROG GIGGING | Vol. 130, No. 1

Since 1829

Yuengling

OLDEST BREWERY IN AMERICA | WE BREW BEER FOR EVERYONE'S TASTE

98

There are probably 10,000 people here. There are food trucks selling cheese curds, corn dogs, deep-fried Oreos, and funnel cake, and for once they're being purchased by people who will burn all the calories just staying warm. There's even a tent bustling with people waiting to slurp down a shot of liquor with a minnow swimming in it.

—BILL HEAVEY,
"THE GREATEST PARTY ON ICE"

ACKERMAN + GRUBER (top); BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

FEATURES

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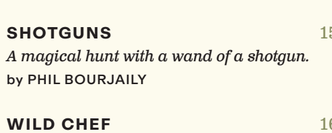
cover painting by **PAUL PUCKETT**

REGULARS

THE RANGE

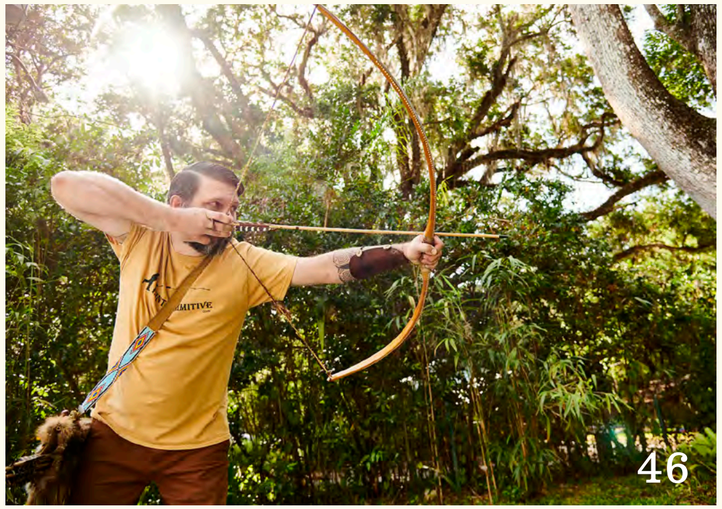
GEARING UP



CAMPFIRE

Fred Bear was my idol, not only for his hunting skill, but for what he did to popularize bowhunting. I want to be the primitive-archery answer to Fred Bear.

—RYAN GILL,
"STICKS AND STONES"



IAN ALLEN (top); STEPHEN DEVRIES

ALL FUN AND GAME FISH

illustration by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

MY BEST SPRING BREAK ever got off to a disastrous start. This was senior year of high school. While many of my classmates were packing for a week in the Florida sun, two of my best friends and I were gearing up for a week of trout camp in Kentucky. The drive from St. Louis took six or seven hours. The entire way, our spirits—and angling optimism—soared.

That all vanished on the first night.

We'd arrived with just enough time to set up camp and fish for an hour in the evening light. We struck out to fish three different stretches of the stream—and came back with the same report: None of us caught a trout. None of us even *saw* a trout. After dinner, as we sat around the campfire, we agreed to drive farther up the river the next day. We hit the sack, hopeful that things would improve on day two.

Things got worse.

During the drive to new water, our car broke down. Between the time it took for a tow truck to arrive and the wait at the repair shop, we lost an entire day of fishing. The unplanned expenses also left us broke. Fearful of not being able to pay for more repairs if the car broke down again (a real possibility), we decided to cut our losses. We packed up and drove home.

The next afternoon, as Joe, Andy, and I were unpacking the car, Joe mentioned that a neighbor of his had a farm in the country, about an hour from where we lived, and on that farm were two ponds.

"They're loaded with bass, crappies, and the biggest bluegills you've ever seen," Joe said. "We got the invite to fish there this weekend."

A pair of farm ponds were a far cry from the mountain stream teeming with wild trout that I'd envisioned as the setting for my spring break. But what else did I have going on?

"I'm in," I said.

Once you tallied all the kid brothers and rugrat cousins who were also invited, there were more than a dozen of us scattered around the banks of the two small ponds. Being the snob I was back then, I was the only angler casting fly tackle.

I didn't need long to figure out why the rest had chosen live bait. Within minutes of their first casts, everyone but me had hooked a fish or two. As the morning wore on, every time a kid hollered as he set the hook into another fish, I became more aware of my predicament: I was on my way toward getting skunked on a stocked farm pond. My desperation peaked when I saw the first bluegill that was reeled in. Joe wasn't kidding: It really was the biggest I'd ever seen. I'd have done anything to catch one in that moment...even steal a nightcrawler from the nearest kid's stash and stick it onto the hook of my Woolly Bugger.

The ploy paid off. On my first cast, I caught a crappie. But as I repeated the dirty trick on a few more fish, two things dawned on me: (1) No one was impressed that I was catching fish on a "fly." (2) Everyone was still having more fun than me.

I swallowed my pride and put down the 3-weight in favor of a spinning rig. I threaded a beefy nightcrawler onto a baitholder hook, cast into some vegetation, and waited for the bobber to plunge.

When it did, I couldn't hide my smile.

I must've gone through an entire Styrofoam box of worms that afternoon, catching one bass and panfish after the next. By the time we packed the cars to drive home, the Kentucky debacle was a distant memory. All it took for me to remember how much fun fishing could be was a trip to a farm pond, surrounded by kids giggling and erupting with glee over catching fish with worms.

Best spring break ever.

•

I often thought about that day while we put this issue together. As you read the stories, one thing that I hope comes through is just how much fun game fish can provide.

Don't get me wrong: I love the challenge that comes with tarpon, the thrill that's synonymous with steelhead, the solitude that a trout river provides. And you'll find all of that in the pages to come. But you'll also find stories that capture the joy of a bluegill strike, the euphoria of netting a lunker bass, and the hilarity that ensues when a bunch of rowdy ice anglers get together.

Welcome to the Game Fish Issue.

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

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Legacy Stewards

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Field & Stream ESTB 1871

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Shaye Baker
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Bethany Beathard
David A. Brown
Joe Cermele
Allie Conti
Steven Hill
M.D. Johnson
Sage Marshall
Keith McCafferty
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Travis Smola
Slaton L. White

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Tricia Kleinot
Brandon Loving
Peter Oumanski
Paul Puckett
Clay Rodery
Simon Sosa
Frederick Stivers
Pete Sucheski

Contributing Photographers

Ackerman + Gruber
Ian Allen
Eric Ryan Anderson
Bill Buckley
Austin Coit
Stephen DeVries
Russell Graves
Brian Grossenbacher
John Hafner
Donald M. Jones
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Anna Richardson

PARTNERSHIPS MANAGER
Callie Adams

Production

PRINTING
Quad Graphics
Cover: Burlington, Wisconsin
Body: Sussex, Wisconsin

PAPER
Cover: 130# Finch Opaque
Text: 70# Sustana Opaque

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.*

Bill Heavey

WRITER-AT-LARGE

F&S writer-at-large Bill Heavey traveled to Hole-in-the-Day Bay on Gull Lake in central Minnesota to attend the 35th annual Brainerd Jaycees Ice Fishing Extravaganza, a three-hour event billed as the biggest ice-fishing tournament in the world, with a quarter million dollars' worth of prizes on the line. His story begins on p. 98.

F&S What made you willing to travel north in February for this story?
B.H. *I'm a sucker for an extravaganza. Even one on ice.*

F&S How was the overall vibe there?
B.H. *The vibe was great. Everybody was euphoric at having survived another winter—or at least at the prospect of that.*

F&S Even tiny fish can win huge prizes at the tournament. Did it make you wish you were fishing?
B.H. *I didn't mind not fishing. About one angler in 10 caught a fish, and I know where I'd have ended up with those kinds of odds.*

F&S The event is known for serving minnow shots. Did you try one?
M.E. *I didn't. I felt bad for the minnows. None of them handled their vodka very well. But whoever invented peppermint schnapps should be short-listed for sainthood. He helped a lot of people that day.*

F&S What impressed you most about the folks there?
M.E. *Almost nobody took the free hand warmers. That impressed me.*

F&S What can you tell us about the winner that won't be a spoiler?
M.E. *The overall winner was smiling ear to ear. But she also couldn't quite believe it was happening to her, sort of like those minnows.*

John N. Maclean
WRITER

John N. Maclean is an award-winning writer. He spent 30 years as a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* before embarking on a second career as a book author. He has written five nonfiction books on wildfires.

His 2021 memoir, *Home Waters: A Chronicle of Family and a River*, is a companion book to his father's classic work, *A River Runs Through It*. The river at the center of both is Montana's Big Blackfoot River—which is also the setting for Maclean's essay, "Fishing into the Twilight," on p. 140.

Dave Karczynski
WRITER

Dave Karczynski has fished on four continents and written for numerous fly-fishing magazines, including *The Drake, American Angler, and The Flyfish Journal*. His third book, *Calling After Water*, a book of essays, was published in 2024.

For this issue, Karczynski penned a new essay, about brown trout, in "The Gamers" (p. 76). A recipient of the Robert Traver Fly-Fishing Writing Award, Karczynski lives in Michigan with his family and teaches writing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Tricia Kleinot
ILLUSTRATOR

Tricia Kleinot is an illustrator and designer based in Spokane, Washington, who has created art for the likes of Marvel, Spotify, Disney+, and now *Field & Stream*. Kleinot brought to life five of the fishing stories in "My Biggest Bass Ever" (p. 121).

"My favorite part of this assignment was translating the variety and humor of each story into the art," says Kleinot, who also happens to be an angler—one with a very respectable personal-best bass under her belt. "My biggest largemouth weighed 6 pounds. Not too shabby!"

Ackerman + Gruber
PHOTOGRAPHERS

Jenn Ackerman and Tim Gruber are a husband-and-wife photography team based in Minneapolis. We sent the couple to meet Bill Heavey at the Brainerd Jaycees Ice Fishing Extravaganza (see far left and p. 98) near their neck of the Minnesota woods.

"Like most of our assignments, our favorite part of this one was the people," Gruber says. "The icing on the cake for this one, though, was working in the fresh snowfall. It felt like we were working in a snow globe for most of the day."

clockwise from far left: ACKERMAN + GRUBER; CHENOA DWYER; DAVID KLEINOT; courtesy of ACKERMAN + GRUBER; AMBER KARCZYNSKI

CHEERS & JEERS

illustrations by **PETER OUMANSKI**

LAST FALL, the Wilderness Issue—the second edition of the newly relaunched *Field & Stream*—was released. And based on the feedback we got, readers went wild for it. Whether in letters emailed to the editorial team (editorial@fieldandstream.com), comments left on social media posts, or reviews penned on the F&S online shop, your compliments made our day, over and over again. Here's a collection of some of our favorites.

AS GOOD AS EVER

I joined *Field & Stream*'s 1871 Club a few months back and just got my first hard-copy issue. Fantastic!

I grew up here in Nebraska, and as a kid, after going duck hunting, pheasant hunting, or fishing, depending on the season, we would often get back in the early afternoon. Usually, my dad and grandpa would start a fire in the fireplace and sit down to catch something on TV, but both would fall right asleep.

Meanwhile, I would pick up the issues of *Field & Stream* we had around the house and read or look through the pages of the publication that I loved as a 10-year-old kid. Now that I'm 65, this magazine is still great.

Keep up the great work and writing. Love it, love it, love it!

Pat McClaughry
Omaha, Nebraska

HOOKED, AGAIN

As I began to peruse my first issue of this return of *Field & Stream*, I was beyond thankful that it is back.

When the print magazine was canceled, I was heartbroken and counted that reality as another casualty of the digital avalanche occurring everywhere. It also damaged my memories of having read F&S, compliments of my Grandpa, since I was 6 or 7 years old.

I was raised in a family that hunted eastern Iowa and fished the associated backwaters of the Mississippi River, so F&S also exposed me to outdoor opportunities beyond my direct experiences. I was hooked.

As a result—in retirement and before—I have often found myself in locations where the digital world does not exist or is unreliable at best. Nothing can replace a quality physical magazine during those times.

Having a printed *Field & Stream* in my hands represents a void delightfully refilled. I am grateful.

Dana Echelbarger
via email

LONGTIME READER, FIRST-TIME WRITER

I normally don't write letters to the editor, but I had to this time. I picked up a copy of the new F&S magazine, the Wilderness Issue, and I can't tell you how impressed I am.

I am 65, and I have been reading the magazine since the late '60s, and this is the best rendition of the magazine in a lot of years. And I hope it stays like this. I haven't enjoyed a magazine this much in years. I'm still an active hunter and fisherman. Keep up the great work, and thank you!

Steve Burton
via email

I'M WITH THE BRAND

I bought the Roosevelt T-shirt for my dad. Growing up, my grandpa had every *Field & Stream* magazine there was, and he used to leave the old ones up at hunting camp, where we would write notes to each other on a piece of paper inside the cover.

My grandpa is gone, but we still have those magazines. He was a true outdoorsman, but all his money went right to the church. The only spoils I ever saw him spend were on F&S magazines and chew.

My grandpa had a love for F&S that runs in the blood. My dad loved his new T-shirt and wears it every chance he can to remember his dad before him. The *Field & Stream* brand is more than a shirt or hat. It represents memories and a call back to the simple days. I will continue to buy these quality products.

Nick H.
review on the F&S shop

BLOWN AWAY

Honestly, as a print-media enthusiast, I was ecstatic to hear that *Field & Stream* was coming back to print! I am willing to pay for the thrill of having real pages to turn. I really didn't have any expectations. But when the issue came, I was literally blown away by the quality! I have shown it to multiple former magazine writers, and everyone is really impressed with the quality of the rag and the stories contained within. I am very happy to see it back in print and will be showing it off to as many people as I can.

Please keep up the good work and please, I beg you, never go back to digital! Digital is so impersonal and not good to read on the modern formats. Good job!

Jacob W.
review on the F&S Shop

SHORT AND SWEET

I'm overjoyed to see that F&S is back! Thank you!

Jeremy Watt
via email

THE GATEWAY GAME

I just finished reading Will Brantley's article "Own the Squirrel Season" (p. 30) and had to write to say thank you for publishing an article on a hunting practice that, in my opinion, has gotten lost in the past couple of generations.

Hunting small game was the gateway into hunting other game animals, and it culminated in the ritual known as deer camp. Back in the day, a person was considered skillful if they could knock out a bushytail with a 22 rifle and skin it in preparation for a pie. Ditto for rabbits.

This kind of writing shines a light on why the new version of F&S is becoming popular again. Now keep the momentum going by including a piece or two on crows and woodchucks.

Ed Cuneo
via email

EXTRA! EXTRA! F&S IS BACK

As a boy, when a new *Field & Stream* would come in the mail, I would eagerly thumb through the issue before going to the local hardware store to trade some of my newspaper-route earnings for the gear I would see in the magazine.

The new issue brings back such good memories of fishing with my dad. The digital edition of the magazine never brought out the same feeling in me.

Welcome back to print. I will certainly subscribe if only to support y'all.

Tim Robinson
via email

ADVENTURE ENVY

The recent Wilderness Issue made me jealous. An adrenaline-filled story of hog hunting, helicopters, private lakes, and top-of-the-line bass boats kicked things off ("Best Weekend Ever," p. 18). And while Eric Church's rock-star weekend of hunting, fishing, and football sounded fun, I wasn't all that envious in a realistic sense.

But the stories that followed—the harrowing tales featuring our wild public lands and waters, places owned by and accessible to regular dudes like me—I could practically taste those adventures.

To hunt alongside Hal Herring in the Selway-Bitterroot ("The Value of Wilderness," p. 96) or catch wild trout in the Gila with Sage Marshall ("Out of the Ashes," p. 124)—now *those* stories, those made me jealous in a very real way. And I can't wait for more.

Kevin Farron
via email

I was a longtime reader of the old print magazine and am thrilled with the new version. I read the first copy cover to cover and so have my sons—both of whom love to hunt and fish. The stories are great and remind us of why we love the woods (and the swamps, streams, fields…everything). Keep up the good work, which will inspire generations to come.

—VICTOR TERRIZZI
VIA EMAIL

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

GRIP AND GRIN
Kohl Agnew was 8 years old and all smiles when he bagged his first turkey, in 2023.

KOHL AGNEW — Floyds Knobs, Indiana

THIS SPREAD

1. LONE STAR DEER
JESSIE MERCER — Fort Worth, Texas

2. MUSKIE MAYHEM
GARY SHORE — Buffalo, New York

3. ROOSTER SEAT
MARK and BARRETT EVERS — Walnut Grove, Minnesota

4. ACTING SQUIRRELLY
CAYDEN SPAUR — Sparta, Tennessee

5. FISHING BUDDIES
PARKER WILSON and ROGER QUALMAN — Beaufort, North Carolina

6. TAKE A 'BOW
CHRISTOPHER WHITE — Sinks Grove, West Virginia

7. THE GOOD OLD DAYS
AL MIKEL SR. and AL MIKEL JR. — Chicago, Illinois

8. ON THE LOOKOUT FOR GREENHEADS
ANDREA URBANO — Woodbridge, Connecticut

9. MOMENT OF TRUTH
CLINT CHAPMAN — Shelton, Washington

10. TOMFOOLERY
SARA WAGONER — Flemingsburg, Kentucky

11. CAT BURGLAR
JACK NEWELL— Dayton, Ohio

12. A BOY'S FIRST BUCK
ROWAN JENKINS — Alexandria, Indiana

13. BLIND AMBITIONS
MATT and LARS PLEAU — Port Orchard, Washington

14. TOP GUN DOG
MAVERICK — Kansasville, Wisconsin

15. GREEN MACHINE
ED MULLINIX — Columbus, Nebraska

BLOOD IN THE WATER

A LEISURELY DAY ON A BASS LAKE WITH FRIENDS TURNS SERIOUS WHEN THE AUTHOR HOOKS INTO SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HE BARGAINED FOR

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

Some of the best friendships—and damn sure the best memories—are made on the water. There's something about the solitude, the rhythm, and the way the world slows down. Not long ago, another lifetime memory was made while friends and I were drifting in old wooden fishing boats on a warm late-autumn day, where the only thing louder than the splash of a lure was the laughter of good company.

The story begins with a phone call from Ben Weprin.

"Hey, Bo is in town and wants to go fishing."

"Jackson?" I replied.

"You know any other Bo?"

I told him not to be a smart-ass and then said, "LFG."

We called up our friend Seth to even out the boats, and I felt confident it was going to be one of those days I'd never forget. I didn't know it would also involve treble hooks, pliers, blood, and a severe case of hiccups.

Trust me—it'll all make sense soon enough.

•

I invited the guys over to my bass lake, located on the property I wrote about in my first column for *Field & Stream*—you know, the time when my then-girlfriend-now-wife, her father (aka Captain Q-tip),

and I came home after our first visit to the property covered with blood-sucking seed ticks. I arrived early to re-rig—and to reinforce—some of my fishing reels. Why? Because I've seen a thousand videos of Bo Jackson climbing outfield walls, throwing lasers 400 feet on a rope, splintering bats over his thighs, and breaking middle linebackers in two. *I bet he can cast a lure a mile,* I thought. So I added about 100 feet of line to each reel, not knowing which rod he'd select. I fully expected Bo to rear back and put a lure somewhere on the dark side of the Moon.

(And if he did so, knowing the Legend of Bo, he'd probably land a lunar lunker.)

After about an hour of spooling and five boxes of line, the guys arrived—first Ben and Bo together, then Seth shortly after. We said our hellos, and I immediately noticed Bo had a bad case of hiccups.

"You want some peanut butter?" I asked him.

"Why?" he replied.

"For the hiccups."

After he explained that it wouldn't do any good, I said to the crew, "Let's go fishing."

•

The four of us jumped into the boats and set sail on a pristine day. Ben and Bo went to the far side of the lake, while Seth and I decided to hit some nice structure near the closest bank. Seth was using a jighead tipped with a green-pumpkin worm, and I was throwing the same worm but wacky rigged. In no time, we were hooking bass. Three- and 4-pounders were hammering our baits as soon as we could cast them. Seth and I were having a blast—so much fun that you'd never have guessed this was our first time fishing together.

After we'd caught more than our fair share, I decided a topwater would be interesting to try. I tied on a double-treble-hooked Whopper Plopper and fired a beautiful cast next to a tree protruding from the bank. *Bam!* A big largemouth exploded on the surface, and I moved to set the hook—except I did so a fraction of a second too early.

Next thing I knew, Mr. Whopper Plopper was traveling back at Seth and me at the speed of sound—six razor-sharp hooks spiraling, like Edward Scissorhands in flight.

Next thing I knew, Mr. Whopper Plopper was traveling back at Seth and me at the speed of sound—six razor-sharp hooks spiraling, like Edward Scissorhands in flight.

Next thing I heard: *Thud*. Two of those six hooks had found their target—and buried themselves in Seth's arm.

I apologized profusely, then immediately became aware of two things: (1) Those hooks were *deep* in his flesh. (2) As the closest thing we had to 9-1-1, I would have to extract them.

I grabbed my needle-nose pliers, and as I started to pull and prod, Seth began to sweat and shake. I worked on removing those diabolical things from his arm for a solid 30 minutes but couldn't get the barbs to retreat even a millimeter.

I let out an exasperated breath. "I can't get it," I said. "I think we're gonna need a doctor to look at this." Seth nodded, so I started up the motor to go alert Ben and Bo about the situation.

•

I wish I could describe Ben's face when we pulled up beside their boat. He mouthed at me, "WTF?" and I just shrugged. "I think we need to go to the ER," I said.

Then Bo chimed in. "Nah, I can get that out," he said nonchalantly. "Give me those pliers." I tossed them to Bo and, shocker, he caught them.

After we docked the boats, Seth followed Bo into the cabin, where they first gathered some rubbing alcohol and bandages. Sensing some trepidation on Seth's part, Bo set him at ease.

"I got this," he told Seth. "This isn't my first rodeo on this kind of thing. This won't take but a second." Turns out, Bo knows first aid too.

They went into the kitchen, and Bo told Seth to put his arm on the counter. With the pliers in his hands, Bo said, "You might want to look away." After Seth turned his head, Bo told him that he was going to pull out the treble hook on the count of three.

"One...two..." *Hic.*

Of all the times for Bo to hiccup, it had to be at the exact moment when a person he'd known for only a couple of hours was trusting him to rip a bass plug out of his arm. We couldn't believe it. Bo took a breath, then he started over.

"One...two..." *Hic.*

"One...two..." *Hic.*

I kid you not. Hiccups kept interrupting Bo on the three-count over and over and over. At this point, Seth was understandably starting to get a little worried—but he kept his cool. Now it was his turn to set Bo at ease.

"Bo," Seth told him, "I got faith in you."

Everyone knew it was about to get serious when Bo told Seth to tighten the skin on his arm around the embedded hooks. He took a breath.

"One...two...three!"

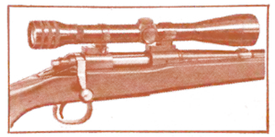
Bo yanked the Whopper Plopper out of Seth's arm, sending it flying across the room faster than a baseball leaving the stadium at the crack of his bat. The lure hit a wall and fell to the floor. Seth looked down at his arm, which was barely bleeding. Bo had removed the lure clean as a whistle.

"I told you," Bo said. "I got you."

Bo and I signed the lure (I added "sorry" next to my signature) and gave it to Seth. Just like that, Seth has the greatest souvenir in fishing history to go along with a good story and a scar I fully admit I'm jealous of.

Before long, we were back on the water. We weren't going to let a little detour keep us from those bass. I did, however, go back to using jigs.

I'll save the Whopper Ploppers for another day—when I'm fishing solo. F&S



THE RANGE

FIRST SHOT

→

Tom Martineau spent more than a week photographing grizzlies in Katmai. “I spotted this particular bear one afternoon after hiking several miles into the park and climbing up a large incline to get a better view,” Martineau says. “I wasn’t sure what I’d see, but this bear came out into the clearing and was just enjoying the beautiful day.”

Location: Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska

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**

Do you hunt turkeys? If not, why not?
—Brent Wheatley, via email

D.E.P. I don't hunt turkeys and have never done so. My wife has been feeding wild turkeys forever and has assured me that if I come home with a dead gobbler, my own violent demise will follow.

We had one enormous tom who knew that handout time was 4 p.m., and if the scratch wasn't on the ground, he would hammer on the kitchen door, all the fury of his dinosaur ancestors blazing in his eyes.

> "My wife has been feeding wild turkeys forever and has assured me that if I come home with a dead gobbler, my own violent demise will follow."

Ten years from now, will everyone be hunting with a suppressor?
—D. Irwin, via email

D.E.P. Ten years from now, suppressors will be as common as scopes. The added bulk aside, I'm all for them.

Winchester's new 21 Sharp is supposed to be better than my trusty 22 LR. Is it?
—Garrett Mitchinson, via email

D.E.P. I don't think it's better, necessarily, when you consider the awesome credentials of the 22 LR, but I do think it's one of the very few new cartridges for which there's a real need. I haven't tested the 21 Sharp yet, but Richard Mann has, and he likes it, and that's good enough for me.

If you had a motto, what would it be?
—J. Navarro, via email

D.E.P. As it turns out, I do have a motto, which I borrowed from the 309th Infantry Regiment, of which I was a member for six years. It's *Esse quam videri*, "To be rather than to seem." Or, "Don't just look good in uniform; know your s--t." Or, as the great gun writer John Wootters put it, "If I was going to write 2,500 words on something, I made damn sure I had 10,000 words' worth of information first."

Which game animal is the most regal, fascinating, beautiful, challenging, dangerous? One answer each, please.
—Sarah Ballaam, via email

D.E.P. Great question. Here goes. Regal: the African sable. Fascinating: the gray wolf, because of its tremendous intelligence and complex social life. Beautiful: I don't know if that's quite the word, but a big bull elk is as fine a sight as you can find in nature. Challenging: an old, wise whitetail buck. He's as skilled in the business of staying alive as anything you can hunt. Dangerous: a mama grizzly with cubs. She will attack you preemptively, and the results are likely to be very bad.

Enough with rifles. What's the best shot you've ever made with a shotgun?
—J.R. Bailey, via email

D.E.P. In August 1973, at my last trap shoot of the season, I had to go at least 96x100 to make it from C class to B class. I went 99x100. I missed the 76th clay but got the rest of them.

Would you like fishing better if you could do it with a rifle?
—Marlow Jones, via email

D.E.P. I like fishing just fine and have done a lot of it. It's just that I've never been near as good at angling as I've been at hunting.

My two deer rifles are in 35 Rem and 300 Savage. How long before I can no longer buy ammo for them?
—Henry Davis, via email

D.E.P. I can't imagine not being able to find 35 Rem and 300 Savage cartridges. However, what you want to do is take up handloading, which lets you control your own destiny, at least as far as ammo goes. Or inherit a lot of money and buy a ton of both now.

What is the best advice you've ever been given?
—Chris T., via email

D.E.P. While hunting sable, my PH and I surprised a bull elephant taking a dust bath. The jumbo resented the invasion of his privacy and came at us head down, ears back, and trunk tucked inward, all signs of a real charge, not a bluff. "I think we'd best bugger off now," said the PH, and bugger off we did. It was excellent advice.

Do you like anything besides bolt-action rifles and Marlin lever guns? Anything at all?
—Bill Jervois, via email

D.E.P. The list of things I like is practically endless, but you mean guns, so here goes: Smith & Wessons that were made in the 1950s. Ruger Super Redhawk revolvers. Freedom Arms single actions. The Model 1911s made by Ed Brown, Wilson Combat, and Les Baer. Italian shotguns, particularly those from Piotti and Rizzini. The A.H. Fox reproductions made by Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Company—if only they'd offer them in 12-gauge. Heym double rifles in serious calibers, such as .500 NE. How's that for a start?

What the hell is your problem?
—T.T., via email

D.E.P. I don't have a problem. The world has problems, and I report on them without fear or favor. As the philosopher Lyndon Baines Johnson said, "I may not know much, but I can tell chicken s--t from chicken salad." F&S

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

SPORTSMAN'S NOTEBOOK

TOM MARTINEAU/WILDFRONT IMAGES

LATE-NIGHT GIG

WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN AND THE CROAKERS START SINGING, IT'S TIME TO GRAB A FLASHLIGHT AND FILL A BASKET WITH AMERICA'S TASTIEST AMPHIBIANS

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

THERE'S NOT MUCH wholesome fun to be had outdoors after dark unless it's late May or June, when the air is hot and still and the bullfrogs are talking. Frog hunting is popular in much of the country, from New York to Florida and all through the South and Midwest. There are even avid froggers in California and Colorado, where bullfrogs are invasive and can be taken all year with no limits.

Most frog hunting is done in late spring and early summer, when wetlands ranging in size from koi ponds to oxbow lakes get rowdy with the sound of breeding frogs shortly after the sun goes down. A big bullfrog's hind legs are a third the size of a chicken's but better tasting, so a cooler full of them is a prize. Here's where and how to fill yours long before daybreak.

FROG WATER

Frogs love warm, still waters. Farm ponds, golf course hazards, and even lawn ponds with manicured banks are great places to see frogs and hunt them from shore. Swamps and backwaters choked with cattails, lily pads, and other vegetation hold plenty of frogs too, but you might need to wade or use a boat to get to them. Ponds full of big bass usually have fewer frogs for obvious reasons.

While I've had the best luck hunting clean, clear water, frogs are where you find them. When I was a kid, a buddy and a I gigged a limit out of a tiny lagoon that had been dug by a dog breeder as a place to dispose of rottweiler turds. That water wasn't at all clear, but the frogs loved it.

Even casual froggers will know about the obvious places, so be on the lookout for more remote waters—or those behind posted signs, where you won't get permission to hunt deer but might get the OK to gig frogs.

LISTEN UP

Though the American bullfrog is the star of the swamp, many frog seasons allow the take of green frogs too. The two species look similar and are equally delicious, but green frogs are a bit smaller and their love song is a single-note *bert*, compared to the bullfrog's deep, signature *barrummph*.

> Assume that for every noisy male frog you hear, a silent female is sitting nearby. To confirm the total number of frogs on a pond, scan the shoreline with a bright light and count the eyeballs.

Listening for those calls just after dusk is the best way to scout a frog hole. Male frogs do the talking once the breeding season gets underway, when water temperatures creep into the 60s. As you're scouting, assume that for every noisy male frog you hear, a silent female is sitting nearby. To confirm the total number of frogs on a pond, scan the shoreline with a bright light and count the eyeballs of the keepers.

How do you spot a keeper? From a distance, the eyes will glow bright and be slightly red, appearing to be roughly the size of pencil erasers and spaced an inch or so apart. The eyes of lesser amphibians such as leopard frogs, tree frogs, and toads will be small and twinkly, more like glitter on the bank. Up close, there's no mistaking the difference. The size of a mature bullfrog is almost startling, and in the dark, it helps to remind yourself that they don't have teeth.

CARL MONOPOLI/ALAMY

↑ Listen for male bullfrogs to start *barrummph*ing at dusk in late spring or early summer when water temperatures rise into the 60s.

FIVE WAYS TO BAG A FROG

IN MANY STATES, a fishing license is required for frogging, while in some you need a hunting license. In Kentucky, where I live, either will work if you use a gig or grab frogs by hand, but you need a hunting license to shoot them with a gun or bow and a fishing license to use a rod and reel. All those methods and tools can be effective, depending on the situation. Here's a rundown.

1. GIGGING

A lightweight, multipronged spear with barbed points is standard issue for most frog hunters. The idea is to have a buddy hold a bright light on the frog while you work into gigging range in the darkness outside the beam. Extend the telescoping gig handle the appropriate amount, and then slowly drop it into the light from behind the frog. I like to get the barbs to within 8 inches of my prey, then take a moment to aim and finally jab hard into the middle of the frog's back. Don't hoist the frog by the gig, though, as it may jump

One of the simplest and most fun forms of frogging is to just slip up quietly and grab them by hand. ←

right off the tines. Instead, reach into the mud with your free hand and hold the frog tight before lifting it up.

2. SHOOTING
Sometimes there's no gig long enough, particularly when shorelines are choked with vegetation and frogs are hard to see. In that case, an accurate 22 handgun can be a hell of a tool. High-velocity hollow points like CCI Stingers are preferable for anchoring tough bullfrogs. It's best to shoot frogs from the water toward the shore, either by wading or from a boat. Aim just under the glowing eyes and blast the critter up onto the bank.

3. BOWFISHING
In the right hands, a bow has as much reach as a handgun and the silence of a gig. It's a fun and challenging way to go frogging. I enjoy toting a lightweight recurve, since that means I don't have to worry about seeing sights in the dark or getting mud into cams. A barbed bowfishing arrow attached to heavy braided line and a bowfishing reel makes it easy to haul in shot frogs, as well as to retrieve arrows quickly after a miss. Which is good, because you'll probably do some missing.

4. ROD-AND-REEL FISHING
If a gig or lethal projectile is an option, then there's no practical reason to pick a fishing rod. (I'd say that that's a good life lesson in general, in fact.) But watching a giant frog gobble down a bass lure is admittedly entertaining. If you want to purposely catch frogs on a rod and reel, it's easy to do. Use a long, limber crappie pole to keep some distance between yourself and the frog. Tie on a bright gold cricket hook and tip it with a red plastic crappie tube (a piece of bright red cloth works too). Dangle it in front of a sitting frog's eyes and hang on. In my experience, it'll snatch it at least half of the time.

5. GRABBING
The surest way to ruin a good pond for next year is to take too many young frogs out of it this year. That said, gigs, arrows, and pistols are not exactly catch-and-release friendly. That's why every frogger needs to learn how to grab them by hand, just in case they see a borderline specimen. It's effective and fun. Hold your flashlight steady on the frog, slowly crouch behind it, and then ease your hand as close as you dare before pouncing, grabbing the frog around the belly, just forward of the hind legs.

RUSSELL GRAVES

The Perfect Frogging Kit

photographs by **ERIC RYAN ANDERSON**

LIGHTING
A compact tactical flashlight works well for any frogging where you don't need a long-range beam, like on smaller ponds. I use a Crimson Trace CWL-300. Capable of producing 200 lumens, it's enough to shine for eyes on nearby banks and then hold frogs in the beam as you work into range, and it only requires a single CR123A lithium battery.

GIG
The lightweight gigs sold at Walmart work fine, but don't expect them to last more than a season. A heavier, more rugged fish spear is deadlier and easier to resharpen. Collapsible aluminum poles make the best handles. You can keep them collapsed in the bed of your truck and then extend them when it's time to reach out and stick a frog.

HANDGUN
Stainless steel is almost mandatory in the mud and muck, and this is a job for a revolver. My go-to frog gun is Smith & Wesson's Model 63 J-Frame 22 LR Kit Gun with a 3-inch barrel and adjustable sights. It'll fit in the pocket of a pair of shorts, but it rides best in a lightweight holster. I like high-velocity hollow points best for popping frogs.

BOW
Just about any bow and arrow will work for frogs, but recurves are lightweight and handy for close-range shooting. I carry this vintage 40-pound Bear Kodiak with a spincast bowfishing reel mounted to the riser. A newer bowfishing rig that's designed to be used around water and mud is an even better choice.

ROD AND REEL
A limber 7- or 8-foot rod with a lightweight spinning reel spooled with 4- to 6-pound-test, or lightweight braid, works well. A longer rod is even better, since it allows you to keep more distance from the frog to avoid spooking it. Crappie rods are ideal, as they come in lengths of 14 feet or more.

FISH BASKET
A wire fish basket lets you keep count of frogs and prevents them from escaping. If you're catching frogs by hand, you can easily cull out smaller ones, should you stumble upon some trophies with chicken-size drumsticks. Tie a glow stick to the basket so you can leave it on a pond dam in the dark without losing it. F&S

MATT'S TIPS

by MATTHEW EVERY illustrations by PETE SUCHESKI

MAKE A FLOATING KEY CHAIN WITH AN OLD WINE CORK, START A CAMPFIRE WITH A BIT OF BOOZE, AND RIG BAIT ON A FLY HOOK TO FOOL MORE TROUT

No. 1

MAKE A LANTERN from a headlamp and a clear-plastic water bottle by tightening the lamp strap around the bottle with the beam pointing inward. Nalgene bottles and empty 1-gallon jugs light up a tent or camp table nicely for you to play cards or cook by.

No. 2

KEEP YOUR WINE corks. You can turn them into floating key chains for boat keys, poppers for bass fishing, or makeshift bobbers. They're also handy in a tackle box. Stick hooks or jigs into them for storage. If one goes overboard, no worries. It floats.

No. 3

A SCOTCH-BRITE PAD is what you want for conditioning slate turkey calls. Sandpaper is better for crystal and glass. So make the perfect two-in-one pot-call conditioner by gluing a sheet of sandpaper to a Scotch-Brite pad. Let it dry, then cut it into little pocket-size squares.

No. 4

IF YOU'RE PLANNING to pack some whiskey for your next overnight fishing and camping trip, do yourself a favor and make sure it's over 100 proof. You can always water down the booze a bit for sipping, but at full test, you can use a little to start a campfire.

No. 5

TROUT NOT BITING? Do what the Mealie Master, Matt Wettish, does. Thread a mealworm onto a tiny fly-fishing hook so that all that's sticking out is 2-pound-test line and the tip of the hook. Add a split shot or two and bounce it along the bottom. Trout will gobble it up.

TAP'S TIPS

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

No. 1

A SMALL JAR of petroleum jelly belongs in every outdoorsman's kit. It can be used as a lubricant, rust preventative, medication for insect bites, water repellent, even as a floatant for flies and fly lines. The man who invented Vaseline even ate the stuff.

No. 2

IF YOUR DOG keeps tipping over his water, use a large one-piece angel-food cake pan, which has a hole in the center. Just place the pan over a wooden stake driven securely into the ground. The stake anchors the pan firmly so that even the most excitable dog can't knock it over.

No. 3

OF THE MANY ways to prevent the mesh of a landing net from becoming entangled in brush, twigs, and barbed wire fences, this is the simplest: Slip a heavy rubber band over the handle of the net and tuck the tip end of the net bag under it.

courtesy of WILL PRIMOS

How I Hunt: Will Primos

GAME-CALL MAKER, TV SHOW HOST, CONSERVATIONIST, FAMILY MAN, 16-GAUGE CONNOISSEUR

interview by **COLIN KEARNS**

THE FIRST CALL I ever made was when I tried to duplicate my Uncle Gus's duck call. When I was 11, he took me hunting to a place called Fighting Bayou, and I was just enthralled when all of those ducks came streaming down those big old trees. When I got home, I asked him if I could borrow his call so I could make my own. My daddy helped me make the barrel on his wood lathe, and I learned how technical the parts like the stopper and soundboard were. I made the reed from a plastic milk jug. When I was finished, the call sounded more like a deer than a duck—but I tried. That was the beginning of something that would stay with me for years and years.

» THE 16 IS my favorite shotgun gauge. When my daddy got out of World War II, he bought a double-trigger side-by-side A.H. Fox Model B in 16, used, at a hardware store for $10. That's *my* gun now. I recently got back from Arizona hunting with it. Still shoots great.

» HUNTING IN THE green timber, standing in 12 inches of water, and you've got ducks circling the trees and calling back at you, then you see them move their wings and come down through the trees—ain't nothing better....

» *HARVEST* IS THE perfect word for the crops you gather after you've grown, watered, and fertilized them. But when you hunt an animal, you must *kill* it if you want what that animal can give you—the meat, fur, hide, etcetera. Hunters partake in the cycle of life, and it is important to do our part in respecting the life taken by using what has been given with the kill. I believe you are copping out, and not in reality, if you don't use the word *kill*.

» I WAS 11 WHEN I made my first turkey call. I was just good at figuring things out, so I used tin snips to trim beer cans for the frame. Then I used double-sided carpet tape to line the frame and insert the reed—which I got at the service station. I'd go into the restroom and buy rubbers for 25 cents. I had to wash them off, of course, because they were lubricated. Then I'd cut them into reeds. Again, I didn't know what I was doing—but I was trying. And eventually people liked what I was doing.

» GETTNG THE RIGHT wind and calling in a bull elk—ain't nothing better....

» I DON'T CARE if you're a hunter or an antihunter—you're a consumer of this Earth, and we all need to consume it wisely. That means using science-based research and facts to make the decisions that affect habitat and wildlife. Let's put our emotions to the side and stop listening to what I call the "barbershop biologist," who thinks he knows everything when he really knows nothing.

» I STARTED MY collection of Purdey double-barreled shotguns in 2013. The first one I got was the 16-gauge, in honor of my daddy's Fox. When I bought that gun, I reserved consecutive serial numbers for four more—a 12-, 20-, and 28-gauge, and a 410. At the time, Purdey didn't have plans to make a hammer gun in 28 or 410. I told them, "If y'all want the money, you need to start on the plans." There's not a set of guns like them in the world. They're worth over a million dollars, and later this year we're putting them up for auction—and all of the money is going to conservation for a new campaign called the Truth About Conservation. The money will be split between Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, and the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. All these organizations were a huge part of my life. They *were* my life. I made my living hunting, so it's only fitting that I do something to try and give back.

» EVERY DAY BEFORE my feet hit the floor, I say, "Morning, Lord. Thank you."

» TURKEY HUNTING is like playing chess. And if you don't make the right move at the right time, you're not going to get the interest you want—or you're going to give yourself away.

» SOME PEOPLE SAY Merriam's are dumb. Yeah, they can be. But they can also be *bad*.

» I LOVED HUNTING with those Purdeys. I mean, I *loved* hunting with them. I used them to hunt ducks, quail, whitetail deer, turkeys, even squirrels. I have this picture of me holding a limit of squirrels and the gorgeous 16-gauge that I killed them with. I sent the photograph to a friend who's a big hammer-gun shooter, and he started giving me a hard time. "You have defaced that gun!" he joked. "You have ruined the value of that gun by hunting squirrels with it! They are beneath that gun!" I couldn't disagree more!

» SITTING DOWN IN the Mississippi River bottom on a turkey hunt, and you've got your gun up but you're wondering why that turkey hasn't said anything in the last 10 minutes, and all of a sudden he surprises you with a gobble—ain't nothing better....

» MY MOM AND DADDY were married for 74 years. One time, I said, "Daddy, do you know what the greatest gift you ever gave me was?" I assumed he was going to say the 16-gauge Browning he gave me for my 11th birthday, but he said, "I don't know. What?" I said, "Daddy, the greatest gift you ever gave me was your love and devotion to Mama."

» MY MOTHER IS 98 years old. She's prayed for me every day of her life.

← Primos killed this deer with No. 1 buckshot from his 16-gauge double-barreled Purdey.

↑
Primos (right) and Boyd Burrow tagged this turkey—nicknamed Tricky Dick—in 1986.

↑
His collection of Purdey shotguns will be sold at auction to benefit conservation.

↑
Primos stands behind a trophy elk that he killed on a filmed hunt for *The Truth II: Big Bulls*.

» I LOVED HOLDING those Purdeys. I loved closing them. When you closed those guns, they'd go, *Ding!* They're just so perfect. And so beautiful. All of the hammers are engraved with the Purdey dragon.

» IT WAS NEVER about me. Great leadership never worries about who gets the credit. It's about making a great product, and sharing that product so others can enjoy it.

» AND WHEN A hammer falls, the dragon breathes fire.

» THE NAME FOR our TV show, *The Truth,* came to me after the first year of filming. Me and Ronnie Strickland were editing all of the hunts we'd shot, and I said, "What are we going to call this?" And Ronnie, talking about how we filmed real hunts of real people, says, "All I know is it's the truth." And that was it. I said, "Man, we'll call it *The Truth*!"

» I WAS IN BOISE, Idaho, one time, giving a seminar on elk hunting. A man in the crowd had a question for me, which was something along the lines of, What do I—a redneck from Mississippi—know about elk hunting? I told him, "Here's what I know: In Mississippi, we used to have a whole lot of elk. But we killed them all." The crowd roared.

» ONCE YOU LEARN to shoot double triggers, it's like riding a bike. You can pick it up, and it's like you never set it down.

Every time I hear a gobble or a mallard or an elk, I'm so grateful.

» THE TURKEYS ARE beautiful. The elk are beautiful. The big mature deer, wild quail, big bass on topwater. Or is it the flight of greenheads, cupped to decoys in green timber? All can be exceptional. But day in or day out, it is the sunrises and sunsets that I cherish most.

» MY WIFE, MARY, is one of the best elk callers you ever heard. This one time in Montana, she was calling for another hunter. I was uphill from her and I watched this elk come running across the meadow to her calls. The bull put his head down, got his antlers stuck in the ground, and he flipped over. He got up and was rutting like crazy, screaming and urinating all over himself. After the hunt, I asked, "Mary, what did you say to that bull?" She just smiled and said, "Will, I know what you guys are all thinking." A woman's intuition knew exactly what to say to that bull.

» BEING OUT ON the lake and casting a topwater out there to a lily pad, and *boom!* an 8-pound bass just blows it up—ain't nothing better.

None of these things happen unless you care about what all of these critters need and you take care of the habitat.

» I'M SO GRATEFUL that God has chosen me and he's forgiven me and he's guided me. I'm grateful I have health. I'm grateful for my family. I'm grateful for my mom and my daddy. Oh my gosh, am I grateful for my wife. I don't deserve any of it. And to be able to figure out enough stuff to make a living in the outdoors and then to be able to do well enough to give back—I'm thankful and I'm grateful. F&S

→
Scan this QR code to learn more about the Truth About Conservation.

courtesy of WILL PRIMOS (3)

How I Fish: Evan Snow

LIFELONG OUTDOORSMAN, SALTWATER FLY-FISHING GUIDE, TARPON ADDICT, PROUD COMMUNITY MEMBER OF KEATON BEACH, FLORIDA

interview by **COLIN KEARNS**
photographs by **AUSTIN COIT**

I'M FROM BROOKS COUNTY, Georgia, which is about an hour and a half north of where I live and fish now, in Keaton Beach, Florida. My childhood was real typical for kids who grow up in the outdoors. I'd go hunting with my dad, and I fished the pond in our subdivision all the time. And because the Gulf Coast wasn't too far away, I got exposed to saltwater fishing at an early age. I can remember slow days on the water when I'd get in the cooler and play with the bait or mess with the fish we'd caught, and I can remember days when we caught a bunch. I loved it. But it never dawned on me till later in my life that I could make a living on the water.

» I STARTED GUIDING full-time in 2017. Before that, I worked at a plywood mill, operating machinery. I hated that job. *Hated* it. I worked 12-hour shifts, and one week I'd work five days and the next week only two days. Never being one to sit around the house, whenever I had all those days off, I'd pretty much spend them all on the coast duck hunting or fishing. I'd take coworkers and friends fishing, and we'd consistently get on fish—to the point where my friends would tell me, "Man, you could probably make a living as a guide." It made me feel good to take people out and have fun on the water with them, so I got my license and started guiding on the side. Eventually, I got to the point where I could quit my job at the mill and guide full time.

» IF THE ANGLER on my boat is excited, then I'm excited.

← Evan Snow has been guiding inshore anglers for seatrout, redfish, and tarpon since 2017.

» I STARTED OUT guiding for redfish and seatrout on conventional gear from a center console—but I've kind of morphed into a skiff-style guide. And now I'm focused on sight-fishing, on poling fly anglers to redfish and tarpon.

» I LOVE HOW VISUAL redfish are—whether it's their tails or their wakes you see. And tarpon…I don't know, man. I just love how big and powerful they are. When I think about the thrill of casting to those big fish, their power, and how regal they look in the water—that's what really gets me going. Tarpon are my favorite thing.

» YOU LIVE ON THE Gulf Coast, hurricanes are just a reality you live with.

» I'M PRETTY LAID-BACK. I don't get super worked up, and I try to practice positive reinforcement with my anglers. If I see them doing something wrong, I don't jump on them. I've been on boats where the guide has done that to me, and it just adds too much pressure. I just try to calmly relay direction and guidance to my anglers. And when they do it correctly, I give them some encouragement.

» TARPON FISHING CAN BE like buck fever. The first time you see one of these big fish out there, it's so nerve-racking that your casting goes awry. But as you get settled in, and do it more and more, it gets easier.

» WHAT I LIKE about sight-fishing isn't just that you're stalking fish, it's how engaging it is. You're not out there just drifting or trolling or casting at nothing, talking or bs-ing. You're locked in—looking for fish, poling, and thinking. Some days, I'll look down at my phone and be amazed that four or five hours have passed without my knowing it.

» KEATON BEACH IS very rural. It's not what a lot of people who come down to Florida expect to see. There are maybe 20 households with full-time residents, so it's basically just a little fishing village. The coastline is underdeveloped, but the water is clean and the fishing is great.

» FISHING FOR TARPON doesn't get old, because the fish are all different. They bite and fight different. Some will grab the fly and just sit there and you almost have to stomp on the boat to get them to go. Some will immediately freak out. Some jump like crazy. Some hardly jump at all—just burn and rip line. I live for them all. I try to savor them all.

» I DON'T EAT a ton on the boat, but Uncrustables are the perfect fishing snack. I'm a grape guy.

» THE THREE MOST common mistakes I see new tarpon anglers make are: (1) They set the hook like they're fishing for trout. (2) If they *do* strip-set, they don't do it hard enough to get the hook into the fish. (3) They don't bow to the tarpon on that initial jump. But I can't blame them for these mistakes, because when I first started tarpon fishing, I messed up too. I mean, it never crossed my mind to bow during a jump. When you have your first tarpon on the line, there's so much going on that it's sensory overload. You're just a spectator.

» EVERY YEAR I'VE lived here, I've had to clean out the house and do the hurricane-prep thing. When I saw Hurricane Helene coming last year, I evacuated a few miles inland. I knew it was going to be bad, but when I returned to Keaton Beach the next morning, it was so much worse than I could've imagined.

» THE MORE TIME you spend on the water, the more you're going to learn.

» EVERY DAY ON THE water is different. A good angler accepts that every day is different, and does whatever they can to make that day a success.

» THERE'S A LOT that goes into being a good tarpon fisherman. Being able to see the fish is key. So is being able to read their movements in the water, so that you can understand how they're about to track in the feed zone. I tell people all the time: "You don't have to be the strongest

↑
Snow shows off a Dave's Fleeing Shrimp—an effective pattern for spooky redfish.

↑
The spotted tail of a feeding redfish is one of his favorite sights while fishing.

↑
Capt. Snow motors one of his anglers to the redfish flats off Keaton Beach.

caster to catch a tarpon. You just need to get the fly out there." Once it's out there, it's more about how you manipulate it in the water, sliding it into the feed zone. But the number-one thing is just to come mentally prepared. Because tarpon fishing is not easy.

» PRESENTATION IS REALLY different depending on the species you're casting to, but the basic goal is the same: Get the fly in front of their face.

» I HATE WHEN people show up and start hammering beers right off the bat. Halfway into the day, they're loud and out of it. We're not out there to party. We're out there to fish.

» WHEN I RETURNED to Keaton Beach after Hurricane Helene, it was total destruction. I mean, it was like a bad dream. My house was gone. My neighbors—all of the people I know and deal with on a daily basis—their houses were either gone or in a state of complete disrepair. We're still licking our wounds. Five months later, people are just now getting back. But we're a tight-knit community. That's one of the reasons I love it here.

» MY FAVORITE WAY to end a day on the water is probably just cranking up the Turtlebox, running in some slick water, and, with whoever I'm with, talking about the scenes of the day.

» WHEN A TARPON comes to the boat after the fight, I get almost as jacked up about going to grab it as I do about catching one. It's almost like you're getting ready for a fight. You can't tiptoe into it. You just have to go in there and get him under control because you don't want him jumping and sloshing around. It's a brawl.

As soon as you think you've figured tarpon out, they'll humble you.

» IN THE FIRST FEW weeks following Helene, the fishery was a sanctuary for me. I would take my boat out and see some floating debris or some downed trees here and there—but for the most part, the water was just beautiful. And the fishing was fantastic. It felt so good to be out there, and to be busy. Not one of my anglers canceled a fishing trip, and a lot of folks booked new trips to show their support. Until something like that hurricane happens, you don't realize how many people there are out there who just want to help.

» FISHING IS WHAT I do. Fishing is what I've dedicated my life to. Fishing is my craft.

» I TRY TO LEARN something new every time I go out on the water. When I think back to when I started guiding eight years ago, I'm amazed at how much I know now versus back then. These fish are a puzzle. You're looking for them, trying to figure out where they go, where they're coming from. Sometimes, it's not as easy to figure out as you might think—but every time you unlock one of those puzzle pieces, you're better off. If I can keep up this incremental approach to learning, 10 years from now, how much more of that puzzle will I have figured out?

» BE GOOD TO PEOPLE, and keep them on fish. F&S

→
Scan this QR code to watch a short film of Evan Snow fishing his home waters.

GEARING UP

photograph by **IAN ALLEN**

THE AUTO-YELPER

M.L. LYNCH'S FOOL PROOF SINGLE-SIDED BOX CALL HAS BEEN TRICKING SPRING GOBBLERS FOR MORE THAN 80 YEARS—AND IT'S AS SIMPLE AND DEADLY AS EVER

by **WILL BRANTLEY**
photograph by **IAN ALLEN**

SOME OF THE FINEST turkey hunting I've ever seen was in a reclaimed strip mine in western Kentucky, where the creeks ran orange from acid drainage but the spoil banks were thick with mayapples and morels come spring. And crawling with turkeys too. The old mining roads made it easy to slip around quietly until you struck a bird. But the hunting wasn't easy.

Often I found myself calling across the cuts, from the rim of one "high wall" to gobblers on the rim of another. Eastern wild turkeys are notorious for refusing to step over a small ditch or around a fallen log when they're responding to a call. You'd think it'd be just about impossible to lure one across a massive excavated pit. But I did just that one morning, thanks to the sweet sounds of a Lynch Fool Proof Model 101 box call.

I was 15 at the time and had gotten the call as a Christmas gift a few years earlier. What set the simple mahogany box apart from others at the time was its no-brainer, single-sided design. Open the lid, close the lid, and a yelp comes out. Every time I'd pull it from my vest, I'd read the inscription on the side, which said: *It's fool proof. It's set for the yelp, cluck, put, whine and cackle. It is semi-automatic. Read simple instructions. Patents pending. This box made and tested by M. L. Lynch Co., World's Champion Turkey Caller and Manufacturer, P. O. Box 377, Liberty, Mississippi.*

My call from 25 years ago was essentially the same as the original ones M.L. Lynch started selling in 1940—and little different from the Fool Proofs you can buy today at Walmart for about $50. A house builder from Homewood, Alabama, Mike "M.L." Lynch was an expert turkey caller who was making calls long before he ever sold one. The single-sided Fool Proof Model 101 was one of his company's two flagship products, along with the two-sided Model 102 World Champion, and one of the first box calls ever mass-produced.

As you'd expect from any call made in large quantities, some Fool Proofs sound better than others. The call I had was magic. The gobblers in the strip mine that day—there were two of them—had sounded off at about nine in the morning and, sure enough, they were on the other side of a wide cut. Dad and I had been slipping up a mining road on our side when they gobbled.

"No damn way those turkeys are coming off that high wall," he said. But we sat down to try anyway, Dad ahead of me with his Browning A5 pointed at the mining road and me 15 yards behind him with the Fool Proof.

I yelped, and the turkeys immediately gobbled and strutted into sight on the edge of the opposite high wall, swollen and shiny as a pair of ripe plums. I yelped again, and they gobbled and strutted along the edge, hung up, as you'd expect.

But then one of the turkeys cocked its head sideways and looked down, as if trying to gauge how bad the fall would be. Turkeys are surprisingly graceful in flight, and these could've easily set their wings and glided across the wide cut. Instead, they leaned back on their feathered asses and slid off the high wall, down the steep slope, as Dad and I watched in amazement.

> **Like demons emerging from hell, the turkeys charged straight up our side of the cut and onto the mining road.**

I yelped again, and they roared back from the bottom, out of sight. Then, like demons emerging from hell, they charged straight up our side and onto the mining road. Dad killed the biggest one at 20 steps, and he had to stand up and shout to stop the other one from thrashing its dead companion. Such was the power of the Fool Proof's song that I carried it for 15 straight seasons after that day, in multiple states.

I eventually sat on the call one morning in Kansas or Nebraska—I don't remember which—and broke it. I've had other box calls that were more expensive and to my ear sounded better, but none that has called another gobbler off a high wall. F&S

→ M.L. Lynch crafted the first Fool Proof box calls out of mahogany in the early 1940s.

STICKS AND STONES

FLORIDA ARTISAN RYAN GILL CRAFTS HUNTING TOOLS FROM WOOD, STONE, AND SINEW—AND USES THEM TO TAKE DEER, GATORS, AND BISON

photographs by **STEPHEN DEVRIES**
story by **SCOTT BESTUL**

When Ryan Gill was 13 years old, his father gave him a stave—a long stick—from a black locust tree, along with a single wood rasp. By the time his dad got home from work that evening, Gill was standing over a mound of wood shavings and holding a primitive-looking bow in his hand. Using a string taken from a Bear recurve, they strung Gill's first bow and shot it long into the night—launching a lifelong obsession, Gill says, to re-create and hunt with the tools of our Stone Age ancestors.

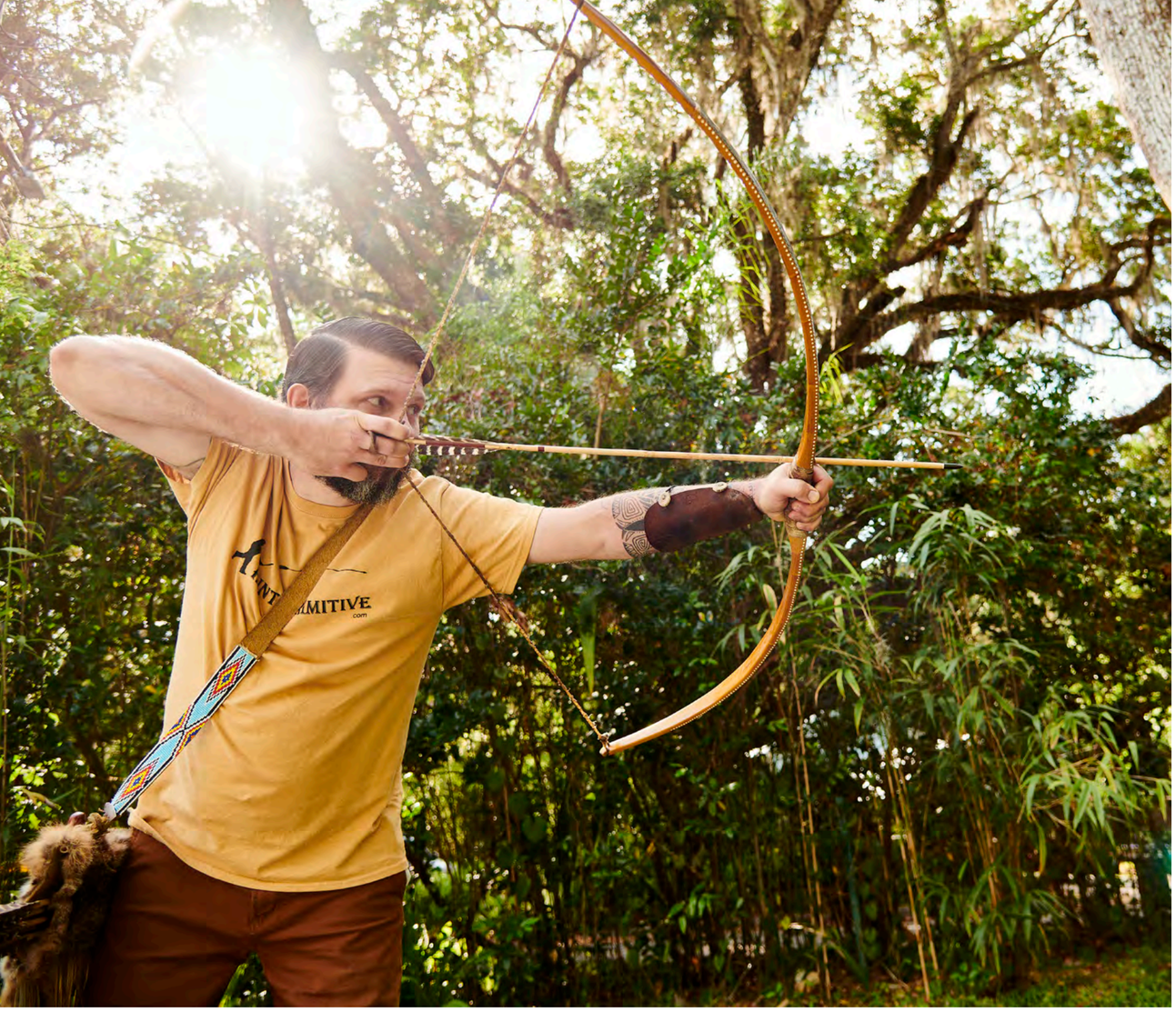
By the age of 21, he'd become so proficient at crafting primitive hunting gear that he began selling his handmade tools and teaching others to build and hunt with their own. "Fred Bear was my idol, not only for his hunting skill, but for what he did to popularize modern bowhunting," Gill says. "I want to be the primitive-archery answer to Fred Bear."

Today, Gill is the owner of Hunt Primitive, a family business that he runs with his wife, Kelly, who manages the office, and with the help of their two sons, Donnie and Dalton. Gill spends most of his waking hours building self-bows and atlatls and crafting wooden arrows, spears, and knives tipped with stone points he knaps by hand from flint and obsidian. When he's not making these tools, he's hunting with them, often filming his outings for his HuntPrimitive YouTube channel.

Gill has taken more than 70 game animals using his own primitive gear, from pigs and deer to alligators and bison. He's tried using modern equipment, but he says that it's the most basic tools, and the art of making them, that let you completely immerse yourself in the hunting process and get the most out of it.

Above
Gill used the arrowheads at bottom right to take his first bison, the atlatl spear sections at center to take his second, and the stone knives to butcher both.

Opposite
Crafted from Georgetown chert, this point will start as a knife blade and become a spear point and then an arrowhead as it wears down.



Above
Gill shoots one of his hunting bows. “My dad taught me to shoot a bow just like a primitive hunter would have instructed his son. ‘Just go out and shoot,’ he told me, and I did.”

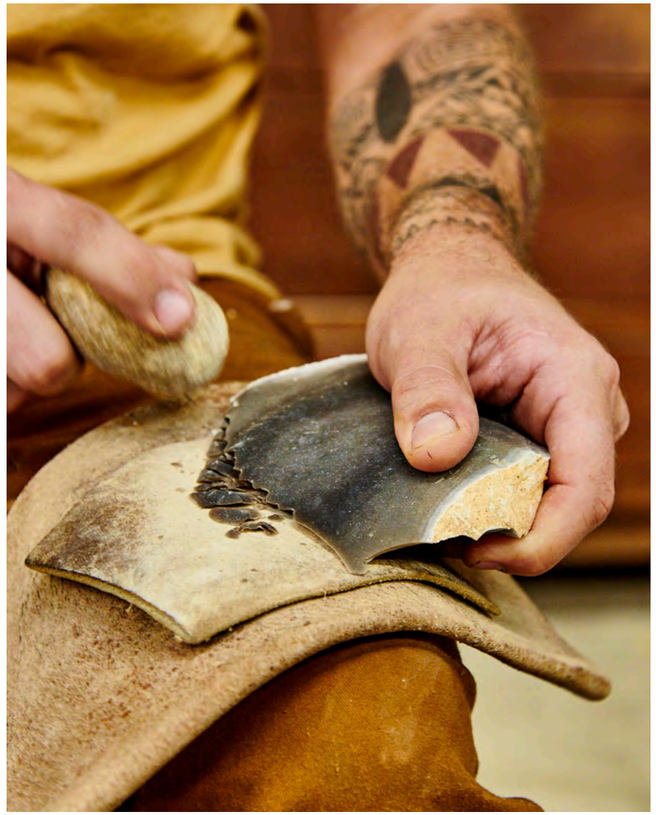
Right
One of Gill’s primary hunting bows and a quiver. Made of leather and bobcat fur, the latter holds stone-tipped arrows, a stone knife, and other essentials, including an extra bow string and arrow repair kit.

Below, top
Cords used for bow strings and harpoons hang from the antlers of a skull mount in Gill’s workshop. Many of the unspooled ropes were painstakingly twisted by hand using materials collected in the wild.

Below, bottom
Early on, Gill learned how to make bows using nothing but stone tools. “I’ll be honest. It’s pretty tedious and sucks,” he says. “Doing it with a few simple metal hand tools is plenty difficult enough.”

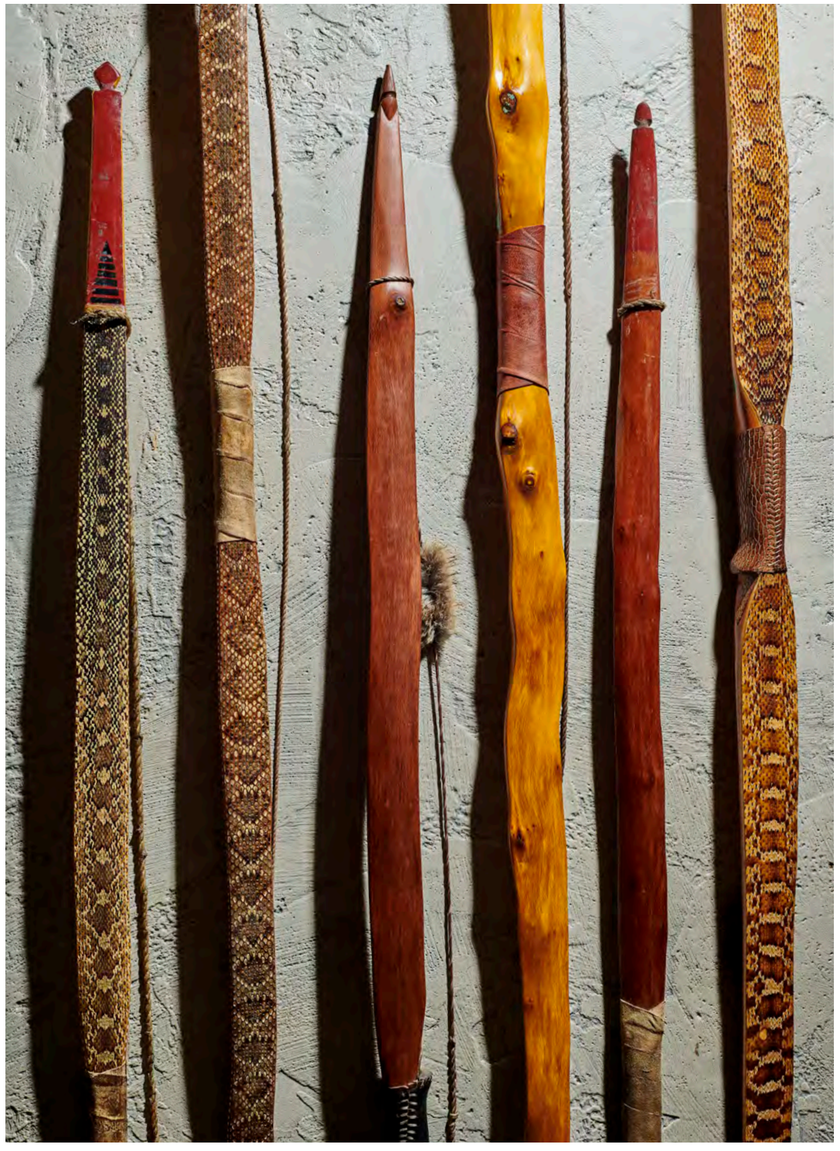
“I wasn’t nearly as nervous hunting gators as I was when I hunted bison. If you can take a bison with primitive gear, you can take anything.”

—RYAN GILL



Opposite, from top
Gill uses a rock hammer to strike a “mother stone” of chert, separating a large flake, or spall, that will become a finished point.

This page, from top
He begins shaping the point with a small stone and will finish its final edge by “pressure flaking” with a thin antler tine or copper shaping tool. Little by little, the initial spall goes from a raw flake of stone to a roughly shaped triangular point to a deadly hunting tool.

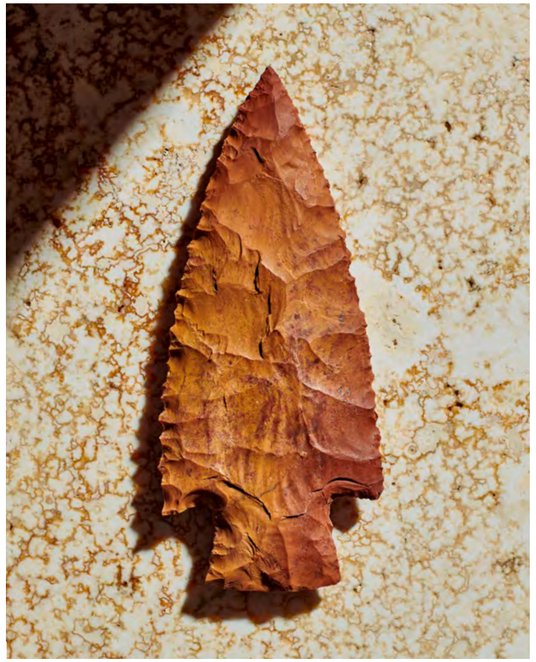


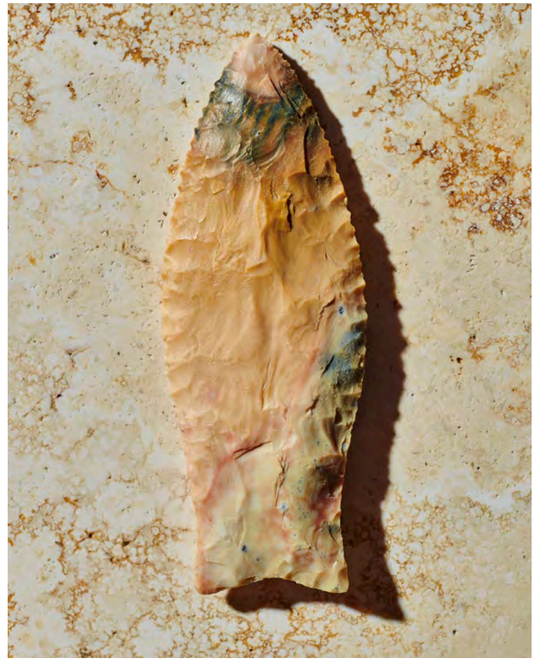
Above
Gill has built hundreds of bows, all crafted from a single piece of wood, using only basic tools. He used the far-left bow to take his first bison and the one next it to kill several deer and a hog. The others are for sale.

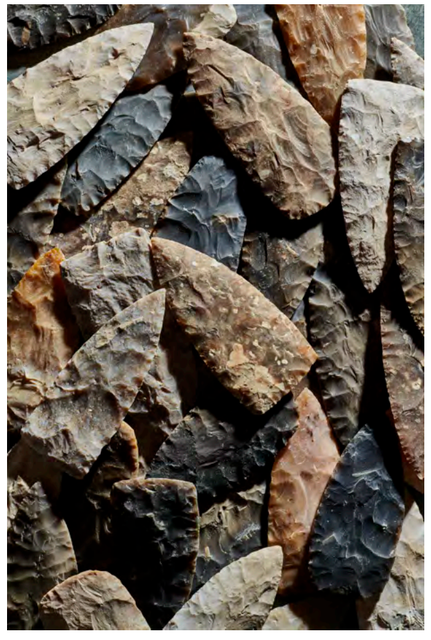
Above
For years, Gill knapped points with nothing but the materials shown here, the same sort of rocks and bones Stone Age hunters used. But it was so hard on his hands that he recently added a few simple metal tools.

Left
A striking stone arrowhead Gill knapped, affixed to a river-cane shaft with sinew, and used to take a whitetail deer.

Opposite, clockwise from top left
A stone point knapped from Pennsylvania jasper, a material popular 7,000 to 9,000 years ago; a gray Edwards chert head in the Dalton style, common in the late Paleo era, about 12,000 years ago; a head made from Florida agatized coral, reflecting the Simpson style in use 12,000 to 15,000 years ago; and an exaggerated Dalton-style head knapped from Flint Ridge chert from Ohio.



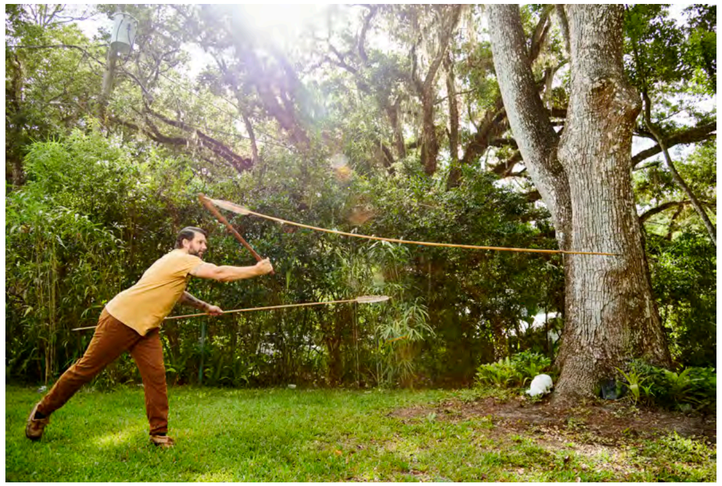




Above
Surrounded by bows he's made and game he's taken, Gill stands in the living room of the family home (and business). The tattoo on his left arm he did himself, of course. "I used the old stick and poke method."

Opposite, top
Stone knives with antler and wood handles, finished, sheathed, and ready to be shipped to customers. Gill's knives are not just for display; they are purpose-built and intended for real work.

Opposite, bottom
A pile of stone points, most of which will start out as knife blades. It takes Gill 45 minutes to an hour to knap a finished point, and he'll make between 300 and 600 of them in a typical year.

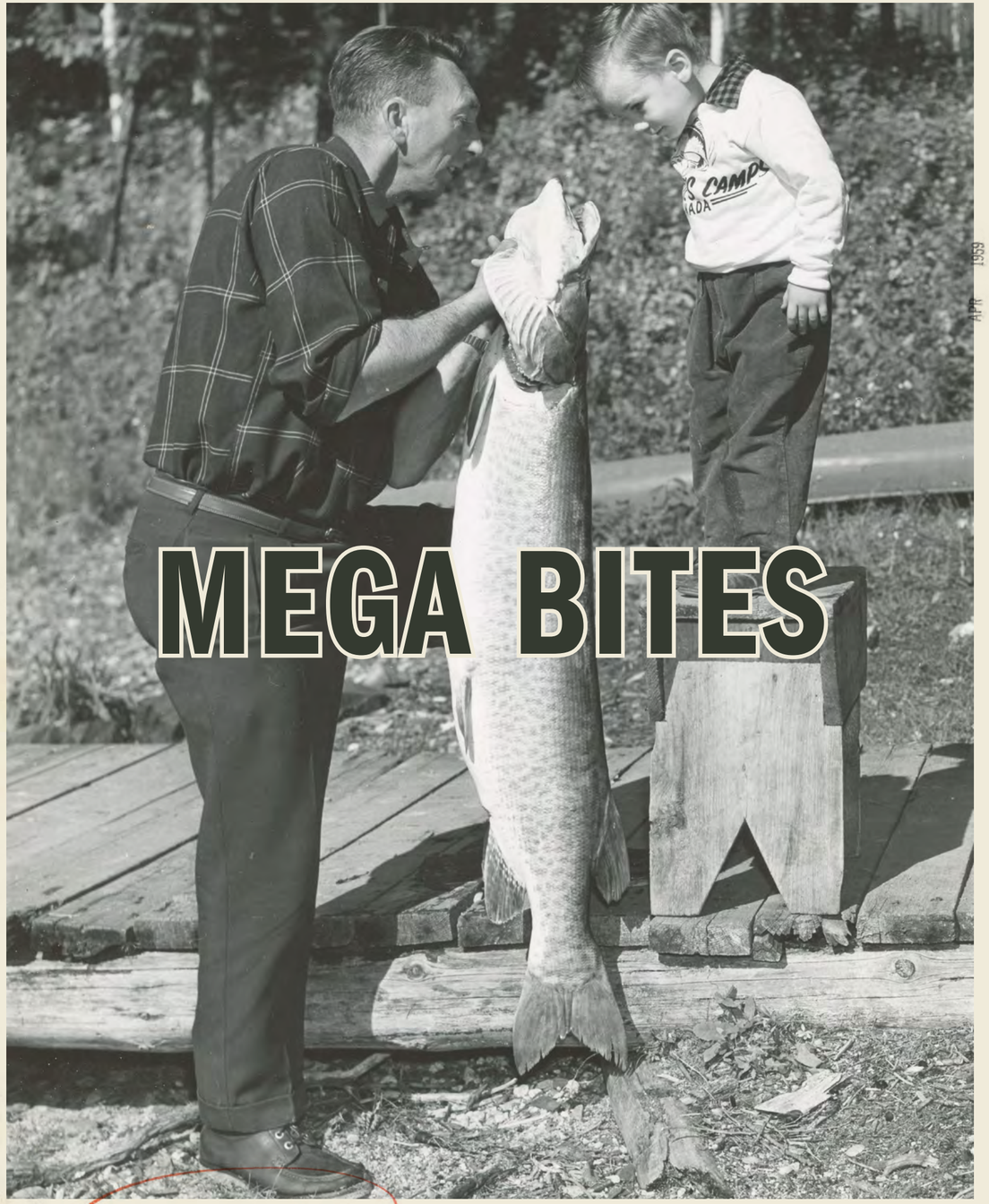


Top
A collection of arrowheads, atlatl points, and harpoon points attached to wooden shafts and used by Gill to take a variety of big-game animals.

Bottom
Gill launches a spear with an atlatl. "I can teach a person to be proficient with an atlatl in a few lessons, and you can be hunting with one in a matter of days."

Opposite
Gill used this harpoon point to spear an alligator in 2019. The point rotates off the spear to stay in the animal, leaving the cord for hauling it in with. F&S

by DAVE HURTEAU



MEGA BITES

FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (angler); IAN ALLEN (lures)

THE SEVEN GREATEST MUSKIE LURES OF ALL TIME—EVERY ONE STILL MADE AND STILL LIGHTS-OUT

AN OLD MUSKIE HUNTER I ran into while fishing Canada's Lac Seul years ago said to me, a little strangely, that "if you make 9,999 casts without catching a muskie, you should check the end of your line to make sure you're not fishing with a cucumber." Which brings to mind another vegetable-related muskie quote from Ottawa River expert John Anderson, who told a reporter from *Outdoor Canada* that "muskies are smart if you're comparing them to cabbage."

Both were getting at the same thing—that the storied fish of 10,000 casts aren't really so hard to catch, especially if you're using the right lure.

So, what is the right lure? Or better yet, what are the greatest muskie lures of all time? To answer that question, we asked our friends at The World's Largest Musky Shop in Minocqua, Wisconsin, to act as our selection committee. They surveyed staff and associates to come up with the list of iconic lures below.

Are there other muskie baits that belong among the all-time greats? Sure. But think of these seven as unanimous, first-ballot Hall of Famers. Each has been fooling muskies for at least 25 years; all still put monsters in the boat; and not one is a cucumber (or even a cabbage).

No. 1

EPPINGER DARDEVLE HUSKY SPOON

THE EPPINGER DARDEVLE SPOON is the second-oldest commercial fishing lure still in production. The first, by two years, is the Hildebrandt spinner. But how many of you have a Hildebrandt spinner in your box? By comparison, every pike and muskie angler has a Dardevle, or three, or seven. Even if you never tie one on, you have one. It's more or less required.

What is likely the world's most recognizable fishing lure got its start in 1906 when Michigan taxidermist Lou Eppinger set out to make a spoon heavy enough to be cast with the new-fangled baitcasting reels of the day. He found that pounding the metal thinner in the middle and heavier on the sides gave it a unique wobble, and in 1912 he put his new spoon on the market, calling it the Osprey. At the end of WWI, he renamed the lure to honor the 4th Marine Brigade that fought so fiercely at the battle of Belleau Wood that the Germans dubbed them "Devil Dogs."

The Husky Spoon is just a muskie-size Dardevle, and while red-and-white is the classic color, muskie anglers have always favored the Five of Diamonds. All told, the number of Dardevles sold is well into the tens of millions, and while no one's counting, it's a good bet that no lure has put more pike and muskies in the net. Which is why, 113 year later, it's still in everyone's box.

No. 2

ORIGINAL WEIGHTED SUICK THRILLER

LEGENDARY WISCONSIN MUSKIE ANGLER Frank Suick was bored with dragging suckers behind his rowboat on Pelican Lake. He longed for a more exciting way to fish. As the owner of a trout hatchery, he'd happened to notice that while dip-netting sickly or injured fish, the stressed trout would dive a foot and a half or more to escape the net and then pop right back up to the surface. He noticed something else too—that this yo-yoing action drove bigger, more predatory trout crazy.

In the mid-1930s, Suick started whittling prototype artificial baits out of cedar, trying to replicate the action he'd seen in his trout ponds. One day his pocketknife slipped, slicing off the back end of the lure. When he replaced it with a flexible metal tail that could be tuned to adjust the lure's depth, the first and greatest-ever muskie fishing jerkbait was born.

Suick now had a lure he could cast and retrieve with jerks and pauses to impart a dive-and-rise action he was sure would trigger explosive eats. As the legend goes, he soon proved it by catching 30 muskies in 30 days with the new lure. He dubbed it the Thriller because "it thrilled the muskie and you."

Suick's great-grandson now runs the business, which still carries the original lure, should you like some thrills of your own.

No. 3

MEPPS GIANT KILLER

If you're wondering why there are no modern bucktails on this list, it's because there would be no modern bucktails if it weren't for the Mepps Giant Killer. The very first bucktail lures, in fact, were not spinners at all. They were, as you might guess, the tails of whitetail bucks boned out, preserved, impaled on large hooks, and trolled through fishy-looking coves and bays. Savvy muskie anglers eventually added trailer hooks, wire, trebles, and crude blades.

Mepps, meanwhile, already had a wildly successful spinner dressed with animal fur in its iconic Aglia. That lure was invented in France by Andre Meulnart in 1938 and imported by Todd Sheldon, who started selling it in Wisconsin in 1956. The Giant Killer is essentially a XXL deer-hair Aglia with a willow-leaf blade and heavy-duty 5/0 hooks. It debuted in 1963, and like the Aglia, it just worked—so well that, along with the similar Muskie Killer, it became the prototype for every in-line spinner bucktail to come.

Bucktails have changed so much since, with their double blades and Flashabou, that some younger anglers don't even call the Mepps a bucktail anymore. Doesn't matter. It still works. When finicky muskies turn away from modern bucktails, in fact, the smaller and deeper-running Giant Killer can often make them eat. The simplicity and effectiveness of this lure is what makes it one of the all-time greats, but you have to give the Mepps marketing department some credit too: Is there a better name for a muskie lure than Giant Killer?

No. 4

BONDY BAIT ORIGINAL

Ontario-based muskie guide Jon Bondy was casting bucktails on the Detroit River when he noticed that on cloudy days, he could move fish with shallow baits all day. But when the sun burned bright, he couldn't get a sniff after around 8:30 a.m. As a former Elite Series bass pro and walleye angler, he knew all about bottom-bouncing and plying deeper waters with soft plastics. He got his hands on some heavy jigs, tried them, and started getting bites when no one else was. But they weren't quite perfect. So in the late 1990s, he formed a blob of Bondo car-repair filler into a rough minnow shape, added a 3-ounce weight and stainless-steel wire, and finished it off with a small blade at the tail—creating the Bondy Bait Original and opening a whole new frontier of muskie fishing.

At the time, hunting muskies was almost entirely a shallow-water game. What Bondy did was discover a midday deep-water pattern that no one else was aware of—and he invented the perfect lure to take advantage. It worked immediately. On day one of vertical-jigging his new bait for sulking muskies, Bondy hammered a 30-pounder, and the lure has won at least 36 tournaments since. His initial technique was to vertically jig the bait in deeper current, but the lure has proven surprisingly versatile. You can bottom-bounce it along structure with near-perfect control, in open water or in creek channels, with or without current, and as shallow as 5 feet or as deep as 30 or more.

Bondy himself has called his invention the most unattractive lure ever made—a bar of soap with hooks. True enough. But the fact that he's sold so many butt-ugly lures tells you all you need to know about how well the Bondy Bait Original works.

No. 5

JOE BUCHER TOPRAIDER

In 1978, Wisconsin muskie guide Joe Bucher reimagined the in-line bucktail, moving the deer hair off the treble and making it more modular so you could swap out damaged hooks. His Buchertail racked up big fish, word spread, and the tying vise at his kitchen table turned into a lure-making business.

In the mid-1980s, Bucher introduced the bulletproof, hard-plastic Depth Raider, which still sets the standard for muskie-plug durability. It wasn't until the early 1990s, however, that the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame angler gave us the bait he is best known for among today's muskie nuts.

The TopRaider was not the first rotating-tail prop bait, but it was (borrowing from the Depth Raider) the first durable plastic one, and it solved the blade-tuning problems common to similar lures. The TopRaider's tempered blade comes pre-tuned and never has to be re-tuned. Bend it, and it springs right back. Bucher's topwater was also the first to use shrink-tubing to hold the rear treble hook extended straight off the back. This prevents it from tangling with the rotating blade and keeps it in the tail's wake, making the lure more weed-resistant.

In the end, Joe Bucher's TopRaider is everyone's favorite topwater muskie bait because it always works, it'll last for ages, it's a no-brainer to use, and there's nothing like hearing that frantic-duckling *slap-slap-slap* of the rotating blade and then watching your TopRaider disappear in a toothy whirlpool.

IAN ALLEN (lures)

No. 6

CRANE 207 CRANKBAIT

Like any engineer, Bill Crane figured he could build a better mousetrap. He was known to tinker with existing lure designs and had grown frustrated with having to constantly dislodge casting baits from woody cover in the shallow creeks and backwaters he fished in rural West Virginia. So he got to work, making a new lure from balsa wood instead of cedar, with flatter, sanded-down sides and less metal than similar models, like the Pflueger Mustang. The result was a lighter, sleeker crankbait that deflected off timber instead of getting snagged in it.

The Crane 207 Crankbait turned out to be more than just a solution to a problem, though. It was a muskie magnet. As Steven Paul, a Tennessee guide and family friend of Crane's, told me, "There's nothing else like it. It's as if muskies can smell the balsa wood in the water and just gravitate to that bait." Crane introduced his 200 Series crankbaits in the late 1970s, and they quickly gained a cultlike following. By the 1990s, the 207 had gone mainstream. Crane cranked them out at his West Virginia shop, with his wife, Sharon, doing the painting.

The couple still makes the 207 in small batches, so it can be hard to find, but it remains a must-have for anyone who casts for muskies in shallow woody cover. Burn it, twitch it, or bring it back with a steady retrieve, and sooner or later, a big muskie is going to smell that balsa wood and attack.

No. 7

GRANDMA CLASSIC

John "Jake" T. Santonica, a welder and expert muskie angler from Jamestown, Pennsylvania, invented the Grandma Classic lure in 1960. What separated it from so many of the open-water trolling plugs of the time was that the body of the lure was injection-molded and both it and the lip were made of high-impact plastic instead of wood. This did two things. First, it made for a lure that could be chomped and thrashed by one razor-mouthed muskie after another and keep right on working. Second, it provided what similar lures of the time often lacked and what is so important for trolling—consistency.

One Grandma Classic was just like another, and you could bank on the thin body and pronounced lip of each and every one to produce the same tight wobble that muskies seem to love, and that no other lure seems able to replicate.

Like the Crane, this one started as a regional phenomenon and went mainstream in the '90s. And while the Grandma Classic can be cast and retrieved, it has been and remains *the* go-to trolling plug. The one you start with. The one you count on. Run it between 2½ and 4 mph and wait for it to get smashed. Then do it again. This lure can handle it. F&S

It can be chomped and thrashed by one razor-mouthed muskie after another and keep right on working.

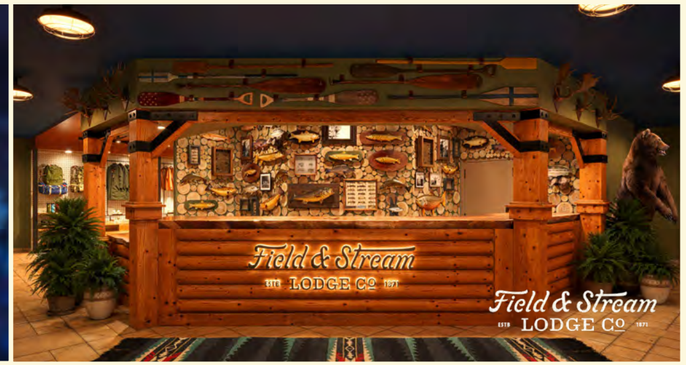
IAN ALLEN (lures); FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (angler)

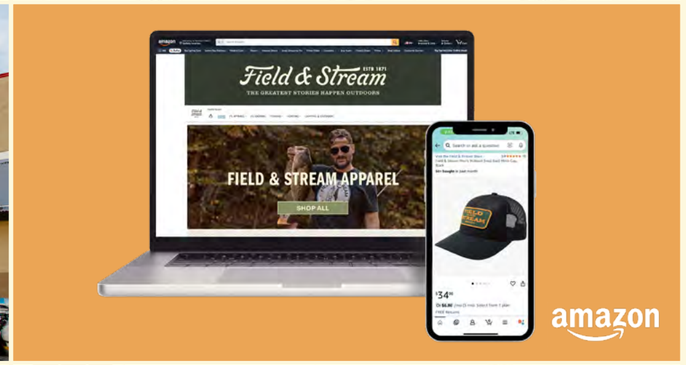
THE WORLD OF FIELD & STREAM

On the heels of a successful brand relaunch in 2024, Field & Stream is positioned to become the premier outdoor lifestyle brand by leveraging our history and authority in the outdoor space to serve a growing audience.

Along with the flagship product—the redesigned, 160-plus-page, best-in-class print journal—we will bring a range of high-quality products and apparel to the outdoor community through new partnerships with Tractor Supply Co. and Amazon. Product collaborations with Best Home Furnishings, Yuengling, Gokey, and Sugarlands will also be available for fans of the brand.

This year will also debut branded experiences, headlined by the Field & Stream Music Fest in the fall and the opening of the Field & Stream Lodge Co. this spring. Field & Stream Excursions Powered by BirdDog provides guided hunting and fishing trips for those looking to get outdoors.





PARTNERSHIPS & EXPERIENCES

FIELD & STREAM MUSIC FEST

In partnership with Southern Entertainment, Field & Stream will host a music festival unlike any other. Join us in Winnsboro, South Carolina, on October 3–5, 2025, to experience a weekend of live chart-topping country music, fishing and hunting expos, expert demonstrations, and workshops.

TRACTOR SUPPLY CO.

Spring 2025 marks the launch of our partnership with Tractor Supply, which will feature a selection of outdoor products, including safes, deer blinds, trail cameras, and more. Pet products arrive in fall 2025, and an exclusive line of apparel in 2026.

AMAZON

Field & Stream's all-new collection of performance fishing and lifestyle apparel officially launches on Amazon in spring 2025 on the Field & Stream storefront. In addition to apparel, the online store will offer the F&S print journal, gift guides, and curated gear.

FIELD & STREAM LODGE CO.

We are thrilled to debut a modern and affordable lifestyle lodge in the heart of Montana. The first of the line of Field & Stream Lodges opens in Bozeman in spring 2025 and is poised to become a year-round base camp for outdoor adventures.

BEST HOME FURNISHINGS

A collaboration with Best Home Furnishings features a line of Field & Stream–inspired indoor furniture that caters to anyone who appreciates a modern rustic aesthetic. This unique furniture collection brings the best of two American heritage brands into the heart of the home.

YUENGLING

America's oldest brewery has paired with Field & Stream to tell great stories and toast the outdoors with an online content hub and a limited-edition beer can design.

BIRDDOG

Field & Stream Excursions Powered by BirdDog is an experiential brand extension providing unparalleled access to guided hunting and fishing excursions.

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FEATURES

photograph by **BRIAN GROSSENBACHER**

THE GAMERS

SIX PROFILES OF GAME FISH THAT, AT DIFFERENT TIMES, LEAVE US FEELING GRATEFUL, HUMBLED, AND HAUNTED

STEELHEAD

by **KEITH McCAFFERTY**

LAST FALL, my car was T-boned in a horrific crash with a truck. A guardrail and a twist of fate were all that saved me from an icy death on the riverbank below. I remember the metal-on-metal collision and the deployment of the side airbag that almost certainly saved my life. Somehow, I managed to crawl out and was retrieving my Spey rod for safekeeping when the medics arrived. They couldn't believe that I had survived unscathed, or, for that matter, that I was clutching a rod case to my chest, as if it were the priority.

This was not the first time a river, or a road alongside a river, had tried to kill me. I have fallen into the drink in two Canadian provinces and at least a half dozen states—once on purpose when I hooked into a fish that ran below a bridge and I had to dog-paddle around a concrete support to follow. I lost the fish, emptied my waders, and built a fire on the bank. It was November. I was young.

The common thread that weaves through all these currents are the fish that have returned to them to spawn, swimming up to 100 miles to complete the wheel of their oceanic journeys: Pacific steelhead. I would never go to such lengths or deliberately place myself in peril to catch any other fish.

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Like many of my fellow anglers, I have sat before a roaring campfire while arguing the merits of the world's great game fish. To my mind, the first criterion is money. A fisherman should not have to sell his mother to enjoy his pursuit. That eliminates permit, perhaps the most difficult fish to fool with a fly. I have a friend whose piscatorial ambition is to catch as many permit as his age. He is 74 and has to date caught 72. I have known him to hire a guide for a month at $850 a day, not including tips. Do the math.

Staying in saltwater, tarpon and bonefish are strong candidates for gamest fish, although, with rare exceptions, tarpon require a skiff and a guide, wearing a face mask against the sun and looking like a bank robber, to get you close. Bonefish are strong way out of proportion to their size, but bonefish don't jump—a prerequisite in my opinion.

Were it not for needing to travel halfway around the world, I might well vote for the golden mahseer of India—a fish whose scales gleam like golden coins, that fights like a runaway locomotive, and that grows to 70 pounds in brawling snowmelt currents. All that, not to mention that the tracks you follow from the tent to the sandbar were left only minutes ago by a tiger.

Steelhead are caught so rarely that each strike comes as a miracle. They are the possible impossible dream.

Closer to home, almost anywhere you call home, are largemouth bass. Largemouths can be fished for in a dozen ways, and they jump, but they don't fight hard. Or they could fight hard but aren't given the chance, as most bass equipment is scaled toward fish that are much larger than even a trophy bass. Smallmouths are a different story. Way back in 1881, James Henshall wrote that smallmouth bass were "inch for inch and pound for pound, the gamest fish that swims." I'd be inclined to agree—if they packed on more of those pounds he was talking about.

Which brings me to trout, rainbows being first among equals. They jump high and often, are challenging to catch, and can be fished for in pleasing ways and in the most beautiful environs on Earth. It is along one trout stream or another that I pitch a tent with friends each summer and fires crackle to emphasize our arguments. One of my own strikes against trout is that a big one is 15 inches, whereas a big steelhead is 15 pounds and carries the strength of the sea.

What about Atlantic salmon? They can do anything steelhead can do and often run bigger. True enough. But Atlantic salmon fishing is not called the "sport of kings" without reason. Last I checked, I am no king.

No, steelhead will continue to get my vote for gamest fish, as they have since I caught my first, in Washington's Toutle River, back before Mount St. Helens blew its top, causing the river to run without hope and without apparent life. To be considered a great game fish, there must be fish to fish for, and it would be negligent to overlook the alarming decline of Pacific steelhead due to many factors, including dams, commercial and tribal overnetting, rising ocean temperatures, and hungry predators, including smallmouth bass, pikeminnows, seals, and sea lions. But steelhead are nothing if not resilient. They have returned to the Toutle and other rivers, including Idaho's Clearwater, which is seeing better fish counts than it has in more than a decade. The most notable success story is in California with the removal of four dams that had stood like tombstones to block the progress of salmon and steelhead up the Klamath River, historically one of the world's most prolific salmon and steelhead fisheries. Now, for the first time in nearly a century, anadromous fish can find unencumbered passage to a vast spawning basin, some 400 miles of prime habitat, making this story a celebration of hope rather than a document of despair.

Steelhead, even in rivers with healthy returns, are caught so rarely that each strike comes as a miracle. They are the possible impossible dream. When you have caught one and watched it shimmer back into the depths, you have traveled to a place far away and have made a memory that recedes even as you try to grasp it, so that the only way to recapture the moment is by catching another.

Steelhead are worth falling into a river for.

An angler releases a stunning steelhead. Catch one of these, and you'll understand the steelheader's mantra: *The tug is the drug.*

DAVID McCLEAF (previous spread); ARIAN STEVENS

TARPON

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

I'VE NEVER CAUGHT a monstrous tarpon. Never a brute north of 120 pounds. Not even a 100- or 80-pounder. All my tarpon have been juveniles or young adults. A bunch of Gen Z silver kings. Maybe 60 pounds, tops, but full of piss and vinegar, like 20-year-olds on spring break. If you were to ask, I'd say that's just fine with me. That I like the frantic jumping of baby tarpon, the wild runs, and releasing a fish quickly so I can catch another. And who wants the ordeal of fighting a man-size fish until your arms quiver from a lactic-acid overload? I would tell you that I'm good with not yet cracking the 100-pound mark.

But, of course, I'd be lying.

I've subsisted on a solid diet of middling-size fish, and if that's all I could ever catch—if tarpon grew to only 40 pounds—I would probably chase them just as fervently. But they don't grow to only 40 pounds. The world all-tackle record, caught in 2003 off the coast of Guinea-Bissau, weighed 286 pounds.

One day, I'll hit the century mark and know how it feels to bow to a silver-scaled, 100-plus-pound missile arcing toward the sun. Until then, I'll chase even the bantamweights around Florida, the Bahamas, Belize, and Puerto Rico. More and more are showing up as far north as my neck of the swamp, in North Carolina. I'll catch tarpon until I'm tired of catching them.

Then I'll likely try to catch a few more.

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When Michelangelo painted the ceiling of Rome's Sistine Chapel, his fresco of Jonah included a large Atlantic tarpon nibbling at the knee of the reluctant prophet. It's an odd and striking part of the painting, with Jonah recoiling in a flowing robe, cherubim looking on, the chiaroscuro of the curved ceiling lending movement to a scene painted so long ago. But the tarpon steals the show, with the black maw of its mouth and the giant eye probing from on high the souls of spiritual seekers for half a millennium.

Scholars have pondered what in the world prompted Michelangelo to depict a tarpon instead of a whale, but the original Hebrew used in the Old Testament texts was *dag gadol*, meaning "great fish." It could have been a whale or a shark that swallowed the hapless Jonah. It wasn't until the King James version of the Bible was introduced, in 1611, that the sea creature was regularly referred to as a whale.

But tarpon anglers gazing up at the painting could hardly be surprised to find

The tarpon rushed the fly. The rod tip tipped over, and I thought, *Holy freakin' cow, I've stuck him.*

a tarpon in the story. Michaelangelo's tarpon might not have been large enough to swallow a full-grown man. But the fish has had no problem at all swallowing whole the hearts and minds and vacation days and wallets of anglers in the centuries since the wet plaster dried in the Apostolic Palace.

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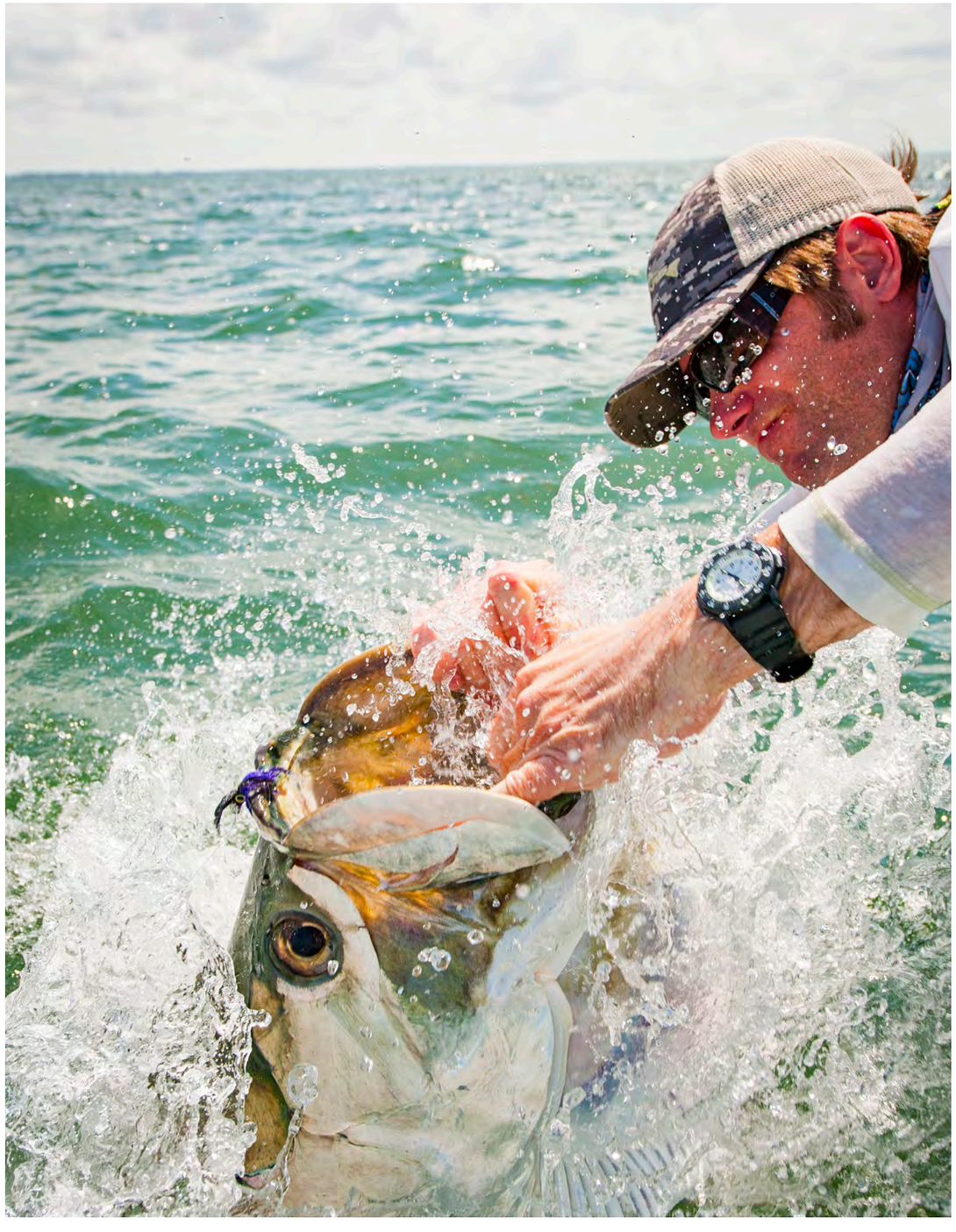
I've lost one really nice tarpon. A *very* nice tarpon. Possibly 100 pounds or slightly north of that. It was at the end of a magnificently tarpon-less day—nine solid hours running from the old Everglades Rod and Gun Club through Whitewater Bay and toward the Shark River. My guide, Capt. Mark Cherney, had been poling to the point where sweat was trickling out from his beard, and I started to feel bad. Like he was working too hard. But like most guides, he wanted it all to come together as badly as I did.

To be honest, I didn't really *lose* this tarpon, because I never really had it on the reel. But I had that sucker on the hook. Sort of. It was like the fish mouthed the Tarpon Toad, or maybe just licked the fly, as I *tick-tick-ticked* it past his snout. But I felt the flesh of that fish. For a split second, I felt the hook point snag into something alive, and the tsunami of adrenaline that flooded my body in a nanosecond was like nothing I'd ever experienced. If only for a blink of an eye, I had a really nice tarpon on the fly rod.

We'd spotted the fish laid up in a mangrove cove, a dark shape in dark water, and we didn't have much time before the skiff's tiny bow push would wash over the fish and send it bolting. In the moment, we couldn't really tell which end was which, although in a hurried conference on the skiff deck we agreed it looked like it was facing to the left, so to the left I cast. One cast, a perfect cast. There has never been a more surgically precise cast at a tarpon's tail than mine, and as I stripped the fly back, the fish felt the disturbance and turned to take a look. And that's when I saw it in full, the whole tarpon, turning like a train coming around a bend in the tracks, revealing itself over time.

The blurple Toad gurgled slightly underwater, and the tarpon rushed the fly with its mouth open like a bucket and sucked it in. The rod tip tipped over, and I thought, *Holy freakin' cow, I've stuck him*, and then he was gone in a great swirl of caramel water and foam, and the line was limp in my hand.

I stood on the bow of the skiff with every synapse in my body snapping and popping like mosquitoes in a bug zapper. Because I knew what had happened. I hadn't really lost that tarpon, despite the dangling weightless line and Cherney's held breath. Instead, that was the moment that the idea—and the quest—of catching a serious tarpon caught me.



BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

→ If you're skilled (and lucky) enough to hook, battle, and bring to boatside a giant tarpon, the fight still isn't over—not by a mile.

LANCE KRUEGER

Bluegills aren't just for kids. Fly anglers know that slabs and lightweight tackle are a dynamite duo.

BLUEGILL

by **JOE CERMELE**

I ADMIRE THE MOXIE of the little fish. The moment the popper hits the glassy surface, the *plop* draws them instantaneously. It's like a bluefin tuna blitz on a micro scale. The water around the bobbing chartreuse fly boils, as one fish after another swipes and nips at the bug. The next hopeful flashes below it, grabbing the end of the feather tail and pulling the popper under for a second. In short order, though, the small bluegills—all unable to get the hook—tire of the pursuit. That's when I give the fly the slightest nudge, just enough to make its rubber legs quiver. This time the bug disappears, and I rear back on my little fiberglass 3-weight rod.

I'm usually not a huge fan of fiberglass, but for panfish, its soft action is like a splash of malt vinegar on a hand-cut french fry. It makes the palm-size bluegill on the other end, the lurker that let the youngsters have a go before moving in for the kill, feel like a 5-pound bass.

We don't give bluegills enough credit for their strength and tenacity—something I didn't fully recognize myself until I started seriously fly fishing for them. It took me almost 30 years to truly understand why they're such remarkable fly-rod targets. Hopefully, it doesn't take you that long, because they have so much to offer.

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The first fish I ever targeted and caught on a fly rod were bluegills, but that wasn't out of a passion for the species. At 10 years old, all I cared about was catching something, anything, on my snazzy new Eagle Claw 4-weight. I had gotten the rod for Christmas, and by April I was ready to see it bend. I had no idea how to cast, and my non-fly-fluent dad wasn't much help. But you only needed to get about 5 feet of line on the water at Rosedale Lake to be squarely in the bluegill zone. I didn't even own a popper at the time, because fly fishing, to me, meant trout, which is what I really wanted to catch and was why Santa Claus went with the Kmart selection of nymphs and dry flies. I tied on the Bitch Creek Stonefly, because it looked like a bumblebee, and cast. The bug wasn't in the water for two seconds before a little bluegill gobbled it up. After just a few trips to the lake, I decided I'd mastered this fly thing enough to move to flowing water and stocked trout.

As I got older, my view of bluegills became what I'd call typical. It's not that I had anything against them; I just wanted bigger, badder fish. I also couldn't see putting more effort into catching bluegills than casting a worm and bobber. Why would I spend time at the tying vise and waste my expensive materials on a fish that would eat a ball of Wonder Bread as fast as an aquatic insect? Like so many anglers, however, I lumped all bluegills together: *All the fish in this lake are in the same place regardless of size. I can catch them whenever I want. Getting a big one is just the luck of the draw.* It took an accident for me to see just how wrong I was.

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I'd found the tiny park on Google Maps while searching for new morel haunts. The pond was so small that I didn't even notice it on my computer screen. When I walked down to the bank, however, I was shocked: The water was crystal clear and loaded with vibrant green vegetation. There, swimming without a care in the world, were some of the biggest local bluegills I'd ever seen. Within days, I was back with my 6-year-old son and our tub of worms, but something unexpected happened: Hardly any fish would eat the bait. It dawned on me that the fish must get so bombarded by nightcrawlers that they've learned not to eat them.

Two weeks later, on a warm May afternoon, I blew the dust off the 3-weight buried in my fly-rod collection, tied a handful of tiny poppers, and returned to the pond. On my first cast, a bluegill, big and fat enough to make a Katz's Deli–caliber fish sandwich, wolfed it down.

On my first cast, a bluegill, big and fat enough to make a Katz's Deli–caliber fish sandwich, wolfed it down.

I had so much fun that afternoon that I kind of became obsessed with fly fishing for bluegills—mostly because I recognized that doing so with foam poppers weeded out the nippers. Sure, the dinks would take their cracks, but only the biggest and most aggressive fish would truly commit. I couldn't help but notice that color mattered too, with one shade clearly outshining the others, depending on the sky, water clarity, and hues of the dragonflies zipping around.

All these little lessons, I realized, could have made me a better trout fly fisherman as a kid if I'd only made the effort to focus on finding the right bluegills instead of opting into the first one willing to scarf down a tan Hare's Ear.

The little pond, of course, was almost too easy, so I took the show on the road. Even on larger bodies of water where the fish weren't so concentrated, the bulkier poppers thwarted tiny fish. Play this game long enough, and you'll recognize which hits are worth setting on and which are not. You can milk one cast for five minutes just by imparting subtle twitches to make a leg kick or a tail shimmy, like a bug in the throes of death. It's tactical yet simple, which is great for new fly casters.

I'm a pack rat, so I'd never gotten rid of that Eagle Claw 4-weight. It became my son's first fly rod, and he's already better with it than I was at 10. When he graduates to trout, he'll already know how to set on a dry-fly eat. He'll understand how to give a fly a twinge of life without overdoing it. He'll know when to put a fish on the reel versus strip it in.

I never learned any of that from bluegills as a kid, but I look forward to learning a lot more from them as a grown-up.

BROWN TROUT

by **DAVE KARCZYNSKI**

IN THE LAST HOUR, the sky above the river corridor has gone from blue to marble, and there's a hint of moisture in the air that makes the world around me smell stronger, better. I've been floating since morning, dropping anchor to fish each good spot on my favorite beat—switching between streamer rod, nymph rig, and dry-fly stick. But now, with evening coming on and the mayflies massing overhead, it's time to push. Actually, it was time to push 30 minutes ago.

I grunt the boat forward with full-bodied heaves. *There'll be a spinner fall again tonight,* I think to myself. *You'll get another shot if you're quick.* The river, black as a sealskin now, slides below the raft in long sheets with every stroke. I should be tired. I should be hungry (my last meal was a mayfly's lifetime ago). Instead, I cover the last mile of river in record time, trailer the raft with NASCAR speed, and take off along the river road. The plume of dust I raise will still be hanging when I jump back in the water 5 miles upstream.

There'll be no boat this time and just one rod—the way you fish when you've got a score to settle.

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It's a particular breed of madness, this chase. But then the brown trout is a particularly maddening fish. On one hand, it tells us that the world is a system with rules—that if you pick the right beat at the right time, fish it the right way with the right bug, you'll be gifted the prettiest thing that swims. But the brown also instructs in chance, too willing to grant fish-of-the-year honors to your pal. Who casts a gas-station Muddler. During his first trip to your home waters. While you're rowing.

Within its range, the brown trout is everywhere and everything—a big-water fish that's also a small-water fish, one that'll eat in large gulps and tiny sips and do so every month of the year, day or night. A fish this generally available might get a little boring, but then the brown trout's other trick is to convince you that it barely exists. The fish appears and disappears so quickly and resolutely that it feels less like it's flashing out from an undercut, more like it's snatching out of some other dimension—a gap in the joint where the daily and divine abut. The species' beauty and paradox and challenge bring you to strange places: There you are, sitting in a riverside hut in the Carpathians, waiting out the rain. There you are, somewhere in South America, motoring over water two shades bluer than the sky. There you are, on a logging road in Northern Michigan, hauling ass to keep fishing after you've been fishing all day.

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I walk the deer trail through the cedars, arriving at my spot just as the sun drops below the cloud line and sends one last flare into the treetops. I'm in the heart of a long riffle, 100 yards of broken water upstream and 200 down. There's a clot of fallen cedars on the far bank, blanched as old bones, and the pileup scours the bottom and cuts a long current break that you can reach only with an accurate and lengthy cast. As big-fish lies tend to go, this one is tough on the angler: not much space to set up a drift with the wood in the way; no way to close the distance with the deep channel thwarting. And the feeding seam is so hard—heavy water and backwater just a few hand-widths apart—that even the best cast will drag before long. But it is here that for 20 minutes I had watched a fish I couldn't catch.

It was an unusual trout—rising without any sort of rhythm, sometimes nipping three bugs in quick succession, sometimes chewing one so long I thought it was done. Try as I might, I could not get it to eat. In the glut of spinners coptering past, the fish was only eating half-spents, those specimens still writhing and sputtering in their death throes. In all my boxes, I didn't have a good imitation, so that morning I had tied a few at camp, bending each hook shank to imitate the gyring bodies of the naturals, adding a few turns of oversized hackle to create the illusion of beating wings, trimming every errant fiber on the undersides so they lay flush in the film. When I hold one up to the sky, the silhouette is uncanny, frightening, perfect.

ARIAN STEVENS

↑
A spectacularly speckled—not to mention large—brown trout swirls on the surface of the Beaverhead River in Montana.

The old cedars glow brighter as dusk settles. Overhead, the bugs are milling tighter but not yet falling. A wave of mosquitoes presses in, but I won't risk any movement—not this close. I listen to the peepers. It's a familiar interval, holding still as a carving at last light, waiting for the bugs to drop, and I wonder if this is the inevitable conclusion of any sporting life taken seriously—that you end up with the same life as your quarry.

It's a particular breed of madness, this chase. But then the brown trout is a particularly maddening fish.

I see them in my peripheral vision first, yellow mayflies falling in a squirming rain, as if hit by a can of Raid. The fish—my fish—is on them at once, snouting piggishly, its dorsal fin and tail wriggling in the film. The distance between its fins makes my whole body hesitate. *This is it,* I think to myself. *He'll either eat it or he won't.* I unpinch the fly in my fingers and send it whipping behind me. The whole day, a whole life, has tapered down to this moment, this perfect contest where all that matters is letting your best shot fly, your best shot now drifting downstream, with nothing but your very soul behind it.

SMALLMOUTH BASS

by **WILL RYAN**

DETECTING A STRIKE on a weightless Senko can be tricky, but a large bass leaping from the water next to the boat offers a solid clue that something is afoot. From the back of the boat, my friend Stan spat out a string of curse words, the gist of which was to wonder whether I'd seen the size of that bass. I told him that not only had I seen the size of that bass, but that the %@*$# bass was currently on my line.

Up to this point, the quickening September day had left us feeling like we were late to the party. The only sign of aquatic life in New York's pellucid St. Lawrence River had been the squadrons of small perch escorting our Senkos back to the boat, as if to tell us we were wasting our time.

That %@*$# bass changed everything. To tell you the truth, I'm a little hazy on the particulars, but that's only because a fight with one smallmouth is a lot like every other—hard. Once Stan had the glistening green fish in the net, though, I felt myself grinning like I'd just stepped into a pair of new sneakers.

The bass had come from a weedy point littered with boulders and pocked with gravel patches. A pattern maybe? Stan started the motor, and we headed downriver to find out.

The first point turned up nothing. Same with the second. But the third gave up two thumpers. And so went the day. We'd glide up to a weedy point and start casting. We'd fish until we concluded the bass weren't there, or—just before concluding—the spot where one of our lines entered the water would slide an inch one way or the other. And we'd have our hands full.

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Figure 'em out, hard fighting once you do has always been the hallmark of smallmouth bass, that along with a hardy constitution. The warming waters that doomed brook trout in the Northeast in the late 1800s and through the last century made perfect smallmouth habitat. They rode the wave of progress. Locomotives delivered them to new waters initially, and then, in 1928, smallmouths became the first fish transported to new homes via airplane. Once stocked, they took hold. Today, smallmouths range from the broad waters of their natal home in the Great Lakes to the pastoral streams of the upper South and brawling rivers of the West to the spruce-lined ponds of Maine and the arterial waterways of the nation's biggest cities. Among legions of anglers, fly fishers, and bait drifters alike, the smallmouth is rightly famous as the gamest freshwater sport fish in the land.

Like all celebrities, smallies tend to play things up, as if they enjoy an audience. When my friend Chuck's kids were little, he used to hand them rods and sit them down on the lawn in front of his camp. Then, with a mask and a snorkel, he'd swim their lines far out beyond where the kids could cast—to where the glamour fish lurked. Once he spotted some smallmouths, he would drop their tube jigs in front of the fish and twitch them a little (which was legal in Vermont). "Then I raise my hand," he told me at the time, "and that's the signal for them to start reeling."

I watched him do this one day. The kids had their Zebco 33s, and when Chuck raised his hand—like the starter at a race—they'd set their hooks and lean back like they were Zane Grey laying into a marlin. There was this delicious moment as we all waited while 200 feet of line levitated above the water and ended in a leaping bass so far out in the bay that it looked like a comma escaping the page.

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For Stan and me, with all the shoreline cottages closed, the smallmouths were shallow, generally within a few yards of boat docks and retaining walls, as if guarding winter's top hotspots, like bouncers at the bar. The bass that day were bruisers too, who owed their muscle mass to the most recent Great Lakes invader—the round goby—which the smallmouths have turned into a superfood. The 2.0 version of *Micropterus dolomieu* has ballooned to an almost unnatural size, with a small head that looks more like a goiter. Occasionally, when we spotted the gravel patch too late, we'd flush one of these bulked-up bass. It didn't dart off so much as slowly turn away. *What are you doing here? It's almost October for Chrissake. We're closed.*

Among legions of anglers, the smallmouth is rightly famous as the gamest freshwater sport fish in the land.

We ended the day at a weedy point next to the boat launch. Stan had switched to a surface plug, and he fired his first cast as we drifted past some boulders. The wind was down, and the Tiny Torpedo chirped across the surface. A fish boiled and Stan set the hook, which seemed to stick, but then the little plug came flying back at the boat. As we ducked, the bass, all 5 or 6 pounds of her, jumped anyway.

"Well, that was uncalled for," Stan said.

We don't mind losing a smallmouth, and in fact we'd ordinarily give a nod to one that outfights us. It's all part of why we love these fish so much.

But nobody likes a show-off.

TOM MARTINEAU/WILDFRONT IMAGES

→ An angler in central Minnesota brings a tank of a smallmouth bass to hand—after an epic battle, of course. Nothing fights harder than a slab-sided smallie.

NORTHERN PIKE

by **COLIN KEARNS**

LOOKING BACK, the moment I fell hard for pike—not just for the savage strikes and tough fights they pack, but for the mean SOBs they are—is when I looked down at my aching hands after a morning-and-afternoon fishing marathon and saw blood. I'd never had other game fish fight back like that.

I've jumped tarpon in Mexico and swung streamers into the maws of steelhead in the Pacific Northwest. I've popped jumbo bluegills on hidden farm ponds and trophy smallies on the famous Susquehanna. I've netted big brown trout all over the country. I've chased every one of these game fish more times than I have pike—and I enjoy going after at least three of these species more than pike.

And yet, none of those fish has left a more lasting mark on me than *Esox lucius*. In more ways than one, it's the only game fish I've had visions of after I close my eyes and try to fall asleep.

JUNE 26, 2015

On the last day of my first pike adventure, in Manitoba, I committed to casting only a fly rod and was hunting for big fish. In the three days prior, I'd landed hundreds of smaller pike, as well as a 43-inch trophy that I hooked on a trolled Five of Diamonds. I'd never seen a fish put a deeper bend in a rod than that pike did. During the fight, whenever the fish made a run or shook its head, the movement transferred up the line, through the guides, and ended in the rod butt buried in my stomach, delivering literal gut punches. That pike had a head as big as mine, and as I held it, my arms trembled—not so much from the weight as from the rush of having caught something so large. The only thing that could've made the fish more impressive, in my book, was if I'd caught it on a fly.

After our floatplane landed on that final morning and we boarded the aluminum boat, I stepped up to the bow—a 9-weight clenched in my right hand, lasso-size loops of fly line coiled in my left—as I searched for big targets in the clear water. As we drifted along a cove, I spotted what I mistook for a large branch that had sunk to the bottom. "No," my guide said. "That's a big pike."

I couldn't believe it. The northern looked at least 50 inches long and as thick as a cattle-fence post. It lay there motionless as I fired a cast. Nothing. I cast again and again with the same results. As my guide watched me continue to strike out, he informed me that he'd never seen this fish take a fly in all his years of guiding here. I accepted the challenge by changing flies and casting again.

> This pike seemed less interested in eating that animal than in killing it.

The fly landed on target and sank next to the pike's head. I made a short strip… and the fish turned to eat. *This is it!* I thought. I stripped again…and the fish returned to its monument pose. The biggest northern I'd ever seen, and maybe ever will, never moved toward my fly again.

That's the pike that haunts me.

JULY 17, 2019

On the first day of my last pike adventure, in Saskatchewan, I was still committed to fly fishing and still hunting for big fish. After a two-hour ride up the Cree River, our guide killed the engine in an open bay, then told my friend and me to begin casting. The strikes came instantly.

The first several fish for both Jesse and me were all under 30 inches, but it was impossible not to admire these fish. They were gamers that hit hard and bowed rods designed for far bigger fish. The teeth on even those small pike were nothing to mess with: A fly had a lifespan of two, maybe three, fish before it was shredded beyond recognition.

Soon, the pike got bigger. Jesse netted a 39-incher. A 40 and a 41 followed. Our guide moved us into a bay protected from the wind and strewn with structure. The perfect topwater spot. Jesse and I hurled meaty flies that popped and gurgled, leaving appetizing wakes. Nothing moved at first, but it wasn't long before pike emerged from the shadows. Clouds of mud billowed from where these predators had been hiding. The nearest was 20 feet from the boat. I lobbed my fly at it.

Rises from trout to mayflies seem almost cute compared to what I watched the pike do. The pattern I was casting wasn't a bug; it was an animal—in this case, a large frog. And this pike seemed less interested in eating that animal than in killing it. I made two small strips. The northern stealthily rose in the water, opened its razor-edge jaws, and vacuumed up the fly.

That fish hit the tape measure at 42 inches. But it wasn't the biggest of the day.

The biggest pike came as I was launching a streamer and bringing it back with erratic retrieves. The fly was 10 feet from the boat when a white streak flashed across the darkness of the water and T-boned my fly. "Oh," my guide said. "That's a big pike."

During the 10 minutes of tug-of-war, it felt like the pike was going to rip the rod out of my hands. But I held on. The fish measured 47 inches. Was it the biggest I'd ever seen—bigger than the one in Manitoba? I can't say. But it's the biggest pike I've ever caught, and maybe ever will.

That's the pike that I dream about. F&S

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

← A big northern pike thrashes at the surface. Whether you're using flies or lures, expect violent takes and hard fights with these fish.

PIPE DREAMS

BY KEEPING A PROMISE HE MADE TO HIS FATHER, AN ANGLER FINDS HIMSELF HAUNTED ON ANY WATER WHERE HE WETS A LINE

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

EDITOR'S NOTE: *We'd like to introduce The Cover Story. For this piece, we presented Keith McCafferty, longtime F&S contributor and novelist of the acclaimed Sean Stranahan series, with a collection of classic covers from our archives and asked him to choose one, then write a piece of short fiction—yes,* fiction*—inspired by the artwork.*

The cover McCafferty selected first graced the August 1940 issue. As far as we can tell, this story is the first work of original fiction to be published in Field & Stream *in many decades. But it won't be the last. There will be another edition of The Cover Story in the next issue too. Until then, we hope you enjoy "Pipe Dreams."*

AS THE YEARS PASSED, images of people he had known began to furl at the edges like old sepia photographs. The enduring picture that Sean Stranahan carried of his father was of a fisherman in silhouette, wearing a fedora. His dad was standing in a midnight river that burbled as it parted around his thighs. The cherry glow of his pipe blinked in the darkness.

That pipe acted as a beacon in the firefly summers of Sean's youth. Every year the family would pitch a tent on the banks of the Au Sable River in Michigan, and as evening fell, Sean would follow his father downstream, wearing waders that were held up by diaper pins, with their patched rubber legs accordioning comically around his own.

It was on one of those evenings, waiting for the giant mayflies to complete their mortal dance and float spent-winged on the surface, that Sean's father coaxed from him a promise.

"I won't be around forever," his father began. "That last one," he knocked the ash from his pipe and tamped a wad of rough cut into the bowl, "took about half of my ticker. I don't need a doctor for a prognosis." He struck a match against his thumbnail.

"Mom says you shouldn't smoke."

"I just fire it up to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Once in a blue moon, that's my limit. Besides, God has plans for me. I can't go just yet."

"What's a blue moon?"

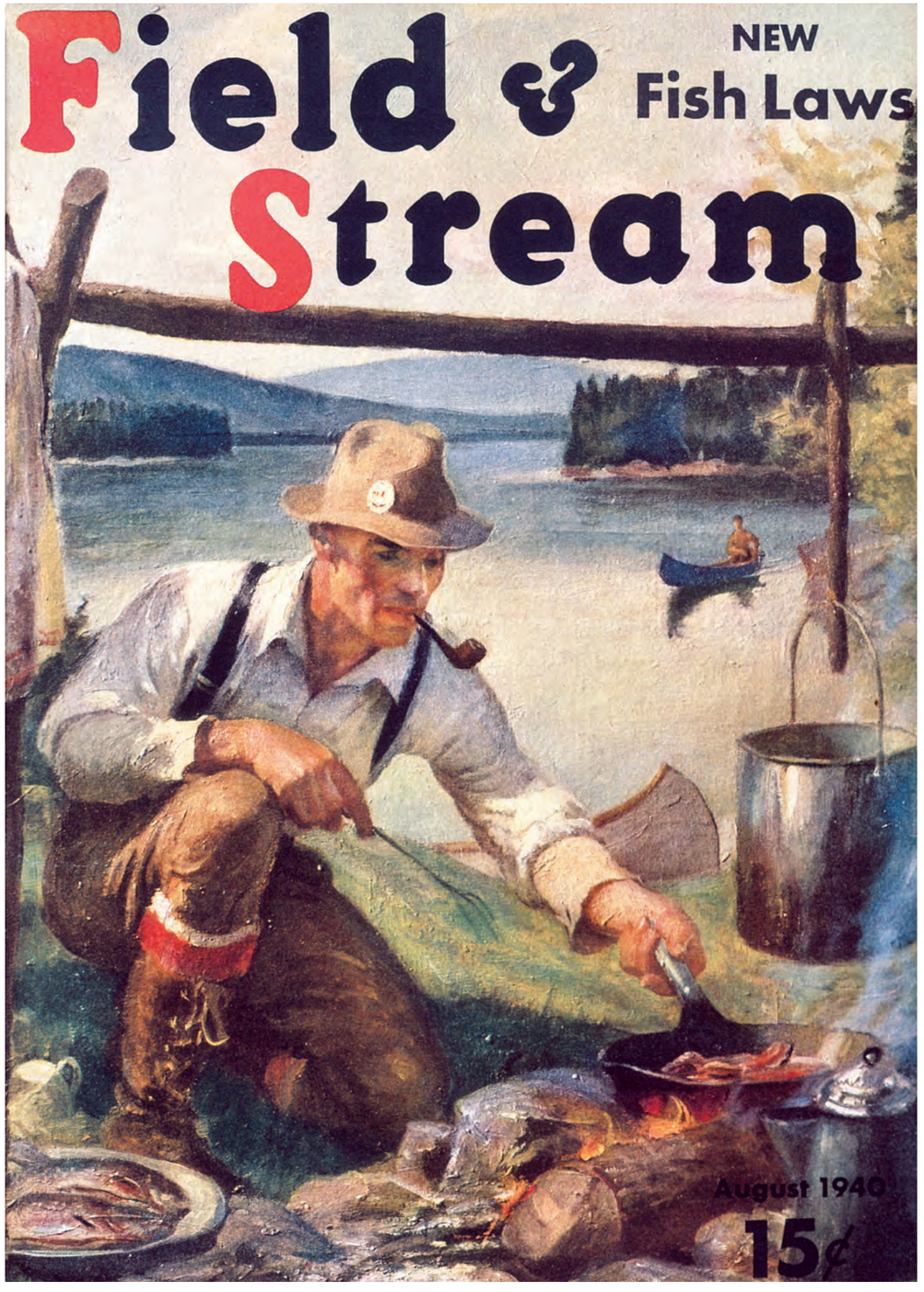
"You know, I don't rightly know."

Silence fell then, Sean not knowing quite how to respond. His father was a man of rough edges and short sentences, though he became more relaxed while camping than at any other time. It was almost as if he were two men: One led Thoreau's life of quiet desperation, the roots of which Sean would never fully understand but knew had something to do with fighting in the Second World War, a period of his life that he never talked about. The other man was friendly and soft-spoken, a man with a bit of a dreamy look in his eyes.

"Do you remember," Sean's father began, "how we used to sit around the fire and talk about places we'd like to fish?"

Sean nodded, then realized the gesture wouldn't register in the dark. "Yes," he told him.

"Well, what I'd like you to do is after I'm gone, you go to some of those places we talked about. Put up a tent. Scatter a



August 1940

few ashes. Maybe make a couple casts. Some places will be old hat. You'll have been there before. Others will be new to you—a few will be new to me." He waved the pipe. "Not that I'm in a rush for you to get started. What do you say? Could be an adventure. Tell you what. I'll draw up a list, leave it with your mother. When the time comes, it will pass to you. You want to take up the trail, that would be great. There's no time limit, no need to keep to my order. Who knows? Maybe that 20-inch trout I never caught will be waiting for you at the end of the trail."

His father rewarded Sean with one of his rare smiles.

Now, some 20 years later, Sean sat in his car where an inlet stream married waters with Nesowadnehunk Lake in northern Maine. This was the final destination on the list, and Sean had saved it for last. He was so exhausted from the final leg of the drive that had begun two days earlier that for a time he just sat there, too tired to even step out of the car. As he listened to the engine tick down, he fingered the list from his shirt pocket, the paper coffee-stained and worn thin in the creases. There were 10 destinations, each followed by a set of numbers that, according to the instructions penned on the list, indicated the best time of year to make a trip. Some entries merited a more detailed notation, or a sentence or two of personal remembrance.

Sean refolded the list and began to recite the rivers and lakes from memory, for the words had become a mantra to be savored and repeated, the currents insistently taking him back through time.

•

The first destination was the Madison River in Yellowstone National Park. This was his father's most favorite piece of trout water in the world, the autumn current such a deep blue it was almost purple, the aspen leaves fluttering like strings of golden coins. The numbers were *101079*—October 10, 1979. The notation read, *Caught a rainbow below the junction, an otter took it off my line.* Here Sean had scattered the first of the ashes, slowly lowering them in cupped hands into the water, where they eddied like the metallic flakes in a snow globe before settling to the bottom.

You picked a good one to start with, Dad, he thought.

The Missouri River in Montana had been next. This one was dated mid-April—a great month for dry-fly fishing. After Sean's mother's untimely death, his father had moved from Michigan to live on the Missouri for the last years of his life. After scattering more ashes, he surprised himself by talking aloud, conjuring his father's spirit to catch him up on family travails and personal ambitions. "What a silly thing to do," he told himself. Had there been a response? There was nothing from Earth or sky to suggest it. At least, he thought, no one had been present to witness his embarrassment. Still, he had felt a life force that seemed palpable.

Several years passed before Sean, by now deep into fatherhood himself and becoming somewhat lost in his marriage, found enough time to drive to the Grande Ronde River in Oregon, the third destination on the list. Pitching his tent in a spectacular canyon where bighorn sheep grazed on the mountainsides, Sean caught his first steelhead—a bar of chrome with a sash of pink, a fish as perfect as God ever made. After the steelhead shimmered away, he took down his fly rod and spent a long evening picking up the thread of the imagined conversation he had begun with his father on the Missouri. They broached subjects Sean usually kept to himself—money problems, a feeling of isolation, and being trapped in an increasingly strained marriage in which no one was right and no one was wrong, just a loss of words to say.

"Conversations on a log," as Sean came to call the talks with his father, sitting so close that Sean could touch him with his rod tip, and not there at all.

The night after he returned from the Grande Ronde, Sean had made the error of telling his wife about the trip. It was surreal, he had said, almost like his father, or at least his energy, was sitting on the log beside him. It was nothing he could explain with logic.

With this she'd been in agreement. She had stood up from the dinner table. "I knew what I was getting into when I married you," she'd said. "A fishing widow, I can take. A fishing widow whose husband talks to the dead—rest your father's soul—that I'm not so sure about."

Further conversations with the spirit of his father on waters farther down the list—Rock Creek in Montana, the Kisaralik River in Alaska, the Kispiox in British Columbia, where the steelhead were as long as your leg—would go unmentioned in his wife's presence. Twenty years after inheriting the list, Sean lashed his father's old Adirondack guide boat to his utility trailer, and over his wife's continued objections, started the long drive to Nesowadnehunk. He had been there once on a family camping trip when he was 10 years old, had seen his first moose at the inlet, caught his first brook trout, witnessed a total eclipse of the sun while standing hand in hand in the chill

darkness with the daughter of the campground hosts. His first crush.

•

Sean was startled from his reverie by the sound of knuckles rapping on the car window. A woman with streaks of gray in her hair smiled broadly. She wore a necklace with a pewter pendant in the shape of a moose. “Caught ya,” she said. She flipped open a steel clipboard and ran a forefinger down the page.

“You’re Stranahan, right?” She tapped the eraser on her pencil on her front teeth. “You reserved a lean-to for four nights. I’m just thinking where to put you. Maybe A-4. That’s closest to the water. I see you brought your own boat, so you won’t be needing a canoe rental. The fella came in Monday, he already paid for your canoe.”

Sean shook his head. “I’m not here to meet anyone. I just came for the fishing.” But even as he said the words, he knew they were only partly true.

The woman shrugged, “Hey, I’m just the one who owns this camp. What would I know?”

“What was his name, this fella?”

Again, she drew a finger down the page. “Jason McKenzie, from Perry. That’s over to Bay of Fundy. Ring a bell?”

Sean shook his head.

The woman glanced up from the clipboard. “He’s a regular, comes once or twice a summer," she said. "Sometimes drops off a trout for me.”

“And he knew I was coming here, that I’d be here on this date?”

“Why else would he rent the canoe?”

“Do you know where I might find him?” Sean asked.

“Now there I may be able to help. He asked me where he could camp that was more secluded. I directed him to some paper-mill land on the north bay. Nothing but bears and beavers up there. He said to point you in that direction.”

Sean unloaded his gear into A-4, and the host helped him wrestle the guide boat off the trailer. “I haven’t seen one of these since I was in pigtails,” the woman said. She pushed him off at the dock and waved goodbye as if he were undertaking a journey. Perhaps he was.

It was a long lake but the flexible, tapering oars made it shorter, and it wasn’t 20 minutes before Sean spotted smoke in the distance.

He dropped the oars and just floated, trying to make sense of what the woman had said. With the exceptions of her and his wife, Sean had had no contact with anyone regarding the trip. Maybe the answer to the mystery was in the smoke that furled above the water.

As he approached shore, Sean saw a man squatting before a fire. His back was to the lake, and he only turned when he heard the bow scrape bottom. If he was surprised to see Sean, it didn’t show.

“I’m glad to see the old boat’s still afloat,” the man said. He wore black suspenders over a long-sleeve white shirt, the better to spot mosquitoes on before they bit. It was a distinctly Maine touch. He pushed up the brim of his fedora, which sported trout flies stuck in a patch of sheepskin. *All but the pipe,* Sean thought, *and he could be my father.* Except, of course, that he couldn’t be.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” the man said.

Here Sean had scattered the first of the ashes, where they eddied like the metallic flakes in a snow globe before settling to the bottom.

“Do I?” Sean replied. “My wife thinks that’s exactly what I’m doing up here. Chasing spirits. ‘Ghosts of river’s past,’ as she puts it.”

“Do I look like a ghost?” the man said.

“No, but then I don’t know what one is supposed to look like.”

“Good point. Do I feel like one?” The man extended his hand. “Jason McKenzie,” he said. “It’s good to meet you, Sean, after all these years. You look baffled. It’s understandable, given the circumstances. How can I be of service?”

“You can start by telling me how you know my name. And how did you know I had plans to come here?”

“That’s two questions. I find that I think best with a rod in my hand. Let’s go fishing and I’ll explain, best I can. There’s a hatch of big mayflies coming off the water. We get a couple brookies, we’ll fry them up. I have an extra blanket in the canoe. If we stay up late, and I expect we will, then we’ll sleep under the stars.”

The fish cooperated, making thunking sounds as they rose to flies that looked the size of hummingbirds. They left dinner-plate-size swirls on the surface and went down easily with a can of potatoes, a can of peas, and a splash of whiskey in a tin cup.

McKenzie pulled a pipe from his pocket and lit it. The image Sean carried of his father was complete, even if the pipe was not the same one Sean had followed in his childhood. The pipe Sean’s father smoked had a longer shank on which Sean, in a well-meaning gesture, had carved his dad’s initials with his penknife. Sean’s father had come to cherish the pipe because of this personal touch, though at the time, his smile could best have been described as thin.

The man worked the pipe stem in his mouth and poked a stick into the fire.

“That guide boat was mine,” he said at length. “I met your father here at the lake—this was well before he moved out West and you were nothing more than a gleam in the eye. I'd bought it at a yard sale not knowing what it was and figured if I put it on the car top, someone would tell me. That someone turned out to be your dad. He knew the history of the boats, and we took it out on the lake. He made me an offer. I sold it for a song. But I got something more valuable than money in return.”

“What was that?”

“Friendship. Your dad and I, we met here many times over the years. The list that brought you to this lake, it was my idea. Your dad was a great guy, make no mistake, but he kept people at a distance. It came to me that you might get to know him better and feel closer to him by following his footprints along the rivers he loved. Or in this case, a lake. Obviously, it was successful, because here you are.”

“He talks to me,” Sean said. “It only happens when I go on the trips.”

“That I wouldn’t know about,” McKenzie said.

“One thing I can’t figure,” Sean said. “How did you know when I would be coming? I didn’t know myself until a few weeks ago.”

“On the anniversary,” he said. “It’s written on the list, isn’t it? We put a date on each river or lake to give you some idea of the proper season to visit, or in this case, the actual date. Today’s July 20. It’s the anniversary of the eclipse you witnessed when you were a kid.”

“So what is it you do? Come here every summer on the 20th? Just hope I’ll show up?”

“Yes," McKenzie said. "It’s become an annual pilgrimage. I’ve been wanting to meet you for years.”

For a long while they sat in easy silence, Sean's mind turned inward. "A nickel for your thoughts," McKenzie said.

"I like to think he'll keep talking to me," Sean said at length. "Now that I've finished the list. It's become something I look forward to. I need him in my life. You knew him. What do you think?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," McKenzie said.

•

It was deep in the night when Sean awoke. The fire was down to the embers. The stars of the galaxies made a sparkling pepper against the sky. As he watched, curtains of celestial colors—green and pink and lavender—marked an emergence of the aurora borealis. Sean had once read that American Indians believed northern lights to be the dancing of spirits, and as he looked up at the sky, he thought back to his conversation with McKenzie.

Sean had never doubted that his father loved him, even though he was of a generation that seldom spoke the words. Still, it would have been gratifying to know what his father thought of him as a man. "The best way to know someone is to walk in their footsteps," McKenzie had told him.

Sean had done that. They had led him from Alaska to the Florida Keys, from Montana to Maine. They had stopped here. But what had he learned along the way? That waters have the power to heal? That in searching for someone you sometimes discover yourself? Maybe it was as simple as that. Maybe that was enough.

McKenzie pulled a pipe from his pocket and lit it. The image Sean carried of his father was complete, even if the pipe was not the same one Sean had followed in his childhood.

Sean rolled to his side. McKenzie was gone. The blanket he had slept under was gone. The frying pan he had cooked the trout in was gone. Wisps of smoke from the campfire were dancing their last dance. The man had left without leaving a trace or making a sound.

It wasn't until the sun was up and Sean was packing the guide boat that he saw the pipe on the wicker bow seat. He turned it over in his hands. The engraving was a little worn, but the initials were still legible. He rubbed the burl bowl as if he was trying to conjure a genie to grant his wishes. "I know you are out there," he said aloud.

But no one responded and no answer materialized from the smoke, and Sean had to wonder if it had all been a dream. If so, it was a dream he would seek meaning in for the rest of his life, haunting one river and another, the pipe in his shirt pocket, smoked on the occasion of a blue moon. F&S

Anglers spread out on Gull Lake to fish and celebrate the season at the 35th annual Brainerd Jaycees Ice Fishing Extravaganza.

EVERY YEAR, THE JAYCEES OF BRAINERD, MINNESOTA, DRILL MORE THAN 10,000 HOLES IN FROZEN GULL LAKE AND THROW AN EPIC ICE-FISHING BASH, WHERE THERE'S A SHOT AT WINNING A NEW TRUCK—AND THE PROMISE OF SURVIVING ANOTHER WINTER

THE GREATEST PARTY ON ICE

by **BILL HEAVEY** photographs by **ACKERMAN + GRUBER**

Out on the open ice, the crowd is milling through a veil of blowing snow. It's an overcast day in the low 20s, with persistent flurries and a revolving wind that gusts to 30 mph, making it feel a lot colder. By local standards, it's a balmy day. The mood is celebratory. These folks know that winter isn't over, not by a long shot. But they know that if they've survived this long, chances are they'll make it. And they're ready to party.

The electronic leaderboard on the main stage shows that Siera Romine is currently in first place with a 5.85-pound walleye. Radio B93.3, Today's Best Country, has a jockey on-site and "Friends in Low Places" is thumping through giant speakers. Nearby, an entire pallet of free hand warmers sits unattended, so help yourself. I count 75 boxes, 240 packets per box, or 18,000 packs of warmers. Minnesotans come prepared, though, so there aren't many takers. I pass a dude dressed like a medieval wizard, in an long black-fur greatcoat with a pointed hood. It's an extraordinary sight, as if Gandalf himself has materialized out of thin air. The explanation is less mystical. "I needed a coat, so my grandmother sewed a bunch of acrylic fur onto my bathrobe," he explains. He shrugs. "It gets the job done."

Farther on, I almost bump into Bigfoot, or a guy dressed as Bigfoot, his long hairs flowing in the wind. It's cool, but Bigfoot sightings are common these days. He's often seen at car dealerships when they're having sales. So I'm not that surprised.

The Brainerd Jaycees Ice Fishing Extravaganza, which celebrated its 35th anniversary this year, is the biggest ice-fishing tournament on Earth. It lasts just three hours but pays out more than $250,000 in prizes, including a new pickup truck for whoever catches the biggest fish. The event is held on Hole-in-the-Day Bay on Gull Lake, where yesterday the Jaycees oversaw the drilling of between 12,000 and 14,000 holes. The goal was 16,000, but if they need more, they'll drill them. There are probably 10,000 people here, but it's hard to tell. The holes are about 15 feet apart, they stretch for as far as you can see, and there's an angler at just about every one, because you can't win it if you're not in it.

There are food trucks selling cheese curds, corn dogs, deep-fried Oreos, and funnel cake, and for once they're being purchased by people who will burn all the calories just staying warm. There is even a tent bustling with people waiting to slurp down a shot of liquor with a minnow swimming in it. No minnow survives

the encounter with vodka, but it probably dies happy. A lot of attendees keep their tags from previous years' contests on their coat zippers. Some have 10, even 20 stickers on display, the ice-fishing equivalent of a necklace made of turkey spurs. There are people dancing or doing something like it. They're so bundled up, it's hard to say. It's too early in the contest for anyone to be shivering hard, so I'm leaning toward dancing. At the very least, they're shivering rhythmically.

THE HOLE GANG

I donned ice cleats yesterday, having found out years ago that they're the only hope for staying upright on a frozen lake. I'd come early to observe the drilling, which started with a guy passing out lithium-battery-powered StrikeMaster augers and giving instructions to the group of volunteers. "Don't horse the drill," he told them. "The battery wears out ten times faster if you do." The trick is to let the auger eat through the ice on its own. "And treat it like it's yours, because we give these away as prizes. If you don't treat your own stuff good, treat it like it's ours."

Four-wheelers patrolled the ice with replacement batteries. "Just raise your hand and one will find you. You can get around 60 holes per charge if you know what you're doing," said the guy in charge. "Oh, and for God's sake, don't cool a hot auger by sticking it upside-down in the water. I shouldn't have to say that, but every year there's one guy who does it." Everyone in the group, including me, nodded their heads in a who-would-be-stupid-enough-to-do-that gesture. The truth of

Opposite
On the day before the big event, volunteers drilled between 12,000 and 14,000 holes through Gull Lake's 24 inches of solid ice.

Below
Corn dogs, beer, and ice fishing make a person proud to be an American. The Stars and Stripes are on display everywhere at the Extravaganza.

Left
Tucker Vetsch has been coming to the event wearing a 10-point whitetail deer mount on his head for five years running.

Below
The Jaycees award prizes for all sizes. This tiny yellow perch has as good a shot at winning a four-wheeler or an ice auger as any other fish.

the matter is that I would totally be stupid enough to do that. Then again, I'm the media.

Those who volunteer to drill holes get a free ticket to the contest, which otherwise costs $50 (with the proceeds going to charity). But nobody looked to be in it for the money, and there are much easier ways to make fifty bucks. Volunteers were advised to team up with a partner of similar height, but some worked alone. One guy had a sweatshirt that read, *Sometimes it's a fish, sometimes it's a buzz, but I always catch something.* I asked what had brought him out. "I forget exactly why I did it the first time, but then, you know, you do it because you did it last year," he said. "I'm on 25 years now."

When I asked why he was drilling alone, he shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I just like my own company. I fish alone too. The wife says, 'You've got friends you could ask,' but...you know." I was beginning to feel sorry for his wife. "The whole deal is just luck anyway," he continued. "You watch. Likely as not, the one who drives away the truck will be a kid or some lady who doesn't even ice fish." He shrugged again. For my money, the shrug should be the official state gesture of Minnesota. It's the nonverbal equivalent of saying that things are what they are, talking about them had never changed anything, and frankly, I don't see the point of this conversation.

WINTER SURVIVAL

Traffic for the tournament's noon start the next day was backed up a mile on Route 371 by 9:30 a.m., and the police were out in force to handle it. I'd been in line for half an hour before I realized that I'd left my ice cleats back at the hotel. The cop I explained this to understood immediately. He held up traffic so I could make a U-turn, after which it took me two hours to make the 8-mile round trip. All around me were cars with plates from Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota. There were even a couple from Canada. It was as if Hole-in-the-Day Bay had become a regional magnet for people desperate to drive a stake into the heart of winter.

According to the driver of the wooden trolley ferrying people from shore out to the festivities, the ice on the lake is 24 inches thick and that even though the folks from *Ice Road Truckers* on television won't roll on anything less than 36 inches, 24 is more than safe for us. The other anglers catching a ride were mostly younger guys in spiffy ice-fishing jackets with reinforced knees, reflective panels, and float-assist technology in case of a fall through the ice. They all had plastic sleds loaded with the day's necessities: rod cases, tackle, beer, electronic flashers, Bluetooth speakers, charcoal, way too much food, and extra layers. There was one guy old-schooling it in a Pennsylvania tuxedo—red-and-black plaid top and bottom. "Original Woolrich," he told me. "The jacket's mine. I inherited the pants from my great-grandfather." I asked if his ancestor liked to ice fish. "He sure did. Grammy always said the lake couldn't ice over soon enough for her."

One guy had a sweatshirt that read, *Sometimes it's a fish, sometimes it's a buzz, but I always catch something.* I asked what had brought him out. "You know, you do it because you did it last year. I'm on 25 years now."

Winter is a five-month deal up here, running from November through March and sometimes into April. Locals put in more hours behind their snowblowers than on their lawn mowers. They speak of the "shack nasties," a far more evocative term than the genteel "cabin fever." They talk of "second" and "third" winters, which come after temporary thaws trick the unwary into thinking that spring has arrived. It's a place where you learn not to get your hopes up because the disappointment is so bitter. And because Minnesotans know, especially in winter, that you take your recreation wherever you can find it, they ice fish.

For some 2,000 years before Europeans arrived, the Ojibwe fished through the ice on this lake, first with stone hooks, later with fishing spears and jigging decoys made from wood or bone. Modern ice fishing dates officially—and probably apocryphally—to the late 1880s, when an outhouse belonging to farmer Sven Stevenson got caught in a mudslide, slid down a hill and out onto the ice of Lake Minnewaska, just 100 miles from here. Legend has it that the friction of the sliding outhouse opened a hole in the ice, and Sven, being a diehard angler, decided to fish from the comfort of his outhouse. Other anglers noticed, dragged their own outhouses onto the lake, and a community of ice anglers sprang up. Unlike Stevenson, most pulled their structures ashore before ice-out, using horses with spiked shoes for traction. Sven's outhouse fell into the lake on April 12, 1889, an oddly specific date for such a questionable origin story. In any case, a new tradition was born.

FISH ON

Out on the ice, the tournament is in full swing, with anglers everywhere plying their chosen holes. Some take the nearest one or pick randomly, but others plan their spot weeks in advance, like the guy who shows me a detailed map on his phone showing structure, weedlines, and the marked locations of where he's fished for the last three contests.

Near the stage is a tall guy in aviator sunglasses and chopper mitts who's wearing a deer head with a 10-point rack and posing obligingly for photos. He is Tucker Vetsch, and he mounted the thing on a bike helmet *(Continued on p. 108)*

Right
Brian Anhalt gets ready to down a minnow shot. "Most people get vodka and the minnow dies right away," he says. "But I don't drink. I got Red Bull and mine was swimming all over."

Opposite, from top
Waiting for fish to bite can be exhausting, especially if you've been drinking since the night before, which was the case with these two.

What's a day of ice fishing without Busch Light and Jell-O shots? In truth, while alcohol has always been a part of ice-fishing culture, there are many more sober anglers here than not.

Successful anglers line up at the weigh-in tent. No fish is too small to win a prize, but it must be weighed in to be eligible.

Opposite, clockwise from top left
Nine-year-old Madison Sunderman shows off the .36-pound perch that won her a Striker Apex Ice Suit; young Armel Hodzic stays warm under his Spidey mask; a woman named Pierkku serves hungry anglers at the Hairy Pig Diner food trailer; David Tyler will have plenty of time after the event to de-ice his beard.

Above
Mark Braaten from South Dakota, aka the Alaska Bushman, poses for photos and collects donations for Alaska's Healing Hearts. His outfit consists of a hat that falls over his shoulders, arm-length gloves, and chaps, all made from musk ox fur. "Everybody wants to either pet me or give me a hug," he says.

A fair number of anglers fish from a kneeling position, which makes each one look like a supplicant promising his firstborn to the hole if it will only cough up a fish.

(Continued from p. 104) this year so it stays on his head better, which suggests that keeping it on was a struggle last year. The mount has clearly seen better days. The nose exploded somewhere along the way, and the eyes appear to have been drawn in with a Sharpie. The deer itself looks stunned, as if it doesn't know where it should be, only that it shouldn't be at an ice-fishing tournament. Yet it conveys a kind of weary resignation usually seen in waiting rooms on men above 60 years of age who are about to undergo their once-a-decade colonoscopy for the third time. Vetsch has been showing up at the Extravaganza dressed like this for about five years. You can understand why he keeps coming. There's something about a guy wearing a deer head on top of his own head that makes everybody who sees him smile.

Almost every fishing hole sports a flasher, with Vexilar being the brand of choice. The units start at $300 and go to $900 for an FLX-30BB Ultra Pack Combo with Broad-Band. I ask three different guys to explain how their flashers work. None succeeds, and I'm left to wonder whether this reflects my cluelessness, theirs, or a combination of the two. As near as I can tell, the five revolving colors represent the water column, the fish, your lure, and if you know how to read it, the status of a NASCAR race happening on Mars, plus the real-time locations of all eight of Santa's reindeer.

One guy tells me that he's using his buddy's flasher unit. He motions me closer so his neighbors won't hear. "I have no freakin' clue how to read this thing," he says.

Some people have cans full of burning charcoal they put over their holes to keep ice from forming. Others use ladles to scoop out new ice. They all sit with their backs to the wind, but the wind is variable, so chairs are frequently adjusted, often in unison. The effect is like what happens when a giant pod of beached walruses all scent a polar bear at the same time. They shift almost as one, and not one does it gracefully. A fair number of anglers fish from a kneeling position, which makes each one look like a supplicant promising his firstborn to the hole if it will only cough up a fish.

The vibe is so inclusive and communal that an angler sitting off by himself catches my eye and I wander over to him. Like so many of the other anglers here, he's sitting in a folding chair with a can of Busch Light half buried in the snow and a much bigger can of charcoal briquettes going. His name is Reggie, and he got up at 4 a.m. to make the 6½-hour drive from Green Bay. When the contest is over, he'll drive the 6½ hours back. For years he made the trip with his pal, Dan, but Dan got cancer and died, so now he makes the trip in memory of Dan.

"He gave me one of his ice-fishing rods," he says, lifting the tiny weapon. "That's what I'm using now. Dan never missed this. I've got a lure of his too, a Swedish Pimple." I ask if that's what he's fishing with. He reels up a blue-and-white Rapala Jigging Rap to show me and says, "I've never used Dan's lure. I might lose it." With that, he folds back in upon himself and resumes jigging. He's with the memory of his friend, and that's all the company he cares for right now. I walk away regretting that I've disturbed him and wondering if I'll ever be as good a friend to anyone as Dan was to him.

Above
Rows of portable toilets hearken back to ice fishing's origin story, in which one Sven Stevenson started fishing from his outhouse after it slid onto the ice.

Opposite, from top
Anglers pull sleds stuffed with tackle and gear to their fishing holes; who could resist a Finnish pasty or bobber chili from the Hairy Pig Diner?

BIG WINNER

Outside the weigh-in tent, there is a line of people with fish in water-filled plastic bags. Some appear to have lined up with bags full of nothing but lake water, but if you look hard, a fingerling reveals itself. Inside, there are people running five digital scales. It's here that I run into Siera Romine, who has a stunned but luminous smile after checking in the 5.85-pound walleye that leads the tournament. Behind her is a young boy with a yellow perch that tips the scales at .09 pound. "Okay, William," says the checker. "Go catch *(Continued on p. 112)*

Opposite
Siera Romine of Carver, Minnesota, beams as she holds up a bagged 5.85-pound walleye moments before heading into the weigh-in tent. As happy as she looks, she doesn't even know yet that her fish, taken on a Buck-Shot Rattle Spoon, will nab first place overall and win her a brand-new pickup truck.

Above, clockwise from top left
A young angler works a jigging rod, no gloves needed; father and daughter Andy and Elsie Vetsch show off matching '80s-style snowsuits; Navy vet Seth Thomas gets to his fishing hole via an Action Trackchair; Lori Guenther is bundled up in a coat she made from one of her mother's wool blankets.

(Continued from p. 108) another one!" Near the exit is a 3-by-5-foot trough cut a foot deep into the ice, with holes drilled in the corners that lead to open water below. This is where the fish go after they're weighed. A guy with a dip net says, "They swim around, and the smart ones go down a hole. The others we butcher for a nonprofit that gives them to people."

Most of the fish are, well, on the petite side. The top three—two walleyes and a northern—are over 5 pounds. Then come two 4-pounders (both northerns), two 3-pounders (more northerns), and four 2-pounders (mostly walleyes). Below 37th place, the fish are less than a pound, with scarcely enough meat to cover a piece of toast. But the Ice Fishing Extravaganza isn't about size, it's about where you place, which means it's mostly about luck.

Both the 15th place fish (a 1.22-pound tullibee, which is a herringlike fish that seldom tops 14 inches) and the 150th place (a .18-pound walleye) are good for a Polaris Sportsman 450, a four-wheeler that sells for a little over $6,000. The 100th place winner, Ghulam Ashiq, wins an Ice Castle fish house. Ashiq is from Los Angles and has come to fish with his friend, Tulio Alvarez, who has a lake house in nearby Nisswa. What does a Californian do with an Ice Castle? He leaves it here, naturally. "Now I've got real estate in Minnesota," he says.

As for first place, the prediction of my loner friend from yesterday's hole-drilling adventure is not far off. Siera Romine, who is practically a local, having driven a mere 140 miles from Carver, ends up winning the truck for her 5.85-pound walleye taken on a Buck-Shot Rattle Spoon in 15 feet of water. She has a look of gleeful bewilderment, as if struggling to understand the process by which a walleye turns into a pickup. Any angler who catches a big fish is presumed to have special knowledge, and I overhear a reporter from a local paper asking for her secret. Her answer: "Have a good husband who baits your hook and helps you bring it out of the hole." A winner who doesn't ice fish regularly pretty much nails the spirit here. It's not about winning. Or even much about fishing. It's about getting out of the house and onto the ice to party with your friends and celebrate the fact that you can sort of see spring in the distance if you squint hard.

The tournament officially ends at 3 p.m., but most people have cleared out by then. The sun doesn't set until 5:30, but it's overcast and somehow darker, as if the weather itself has packed it in for the day. The trolley is overflowing, so I join the army of people pulling sleds or cradling sleepy children in their arms and trudge toward shore. A guy a few yards behind me announces, "Make way, folks. We got a VIP with us." I look around and realize that he's talking about me. My media pass says *VIP* on it, although no one has mentioned that before now. But the guy has decided to run with it. "Sir, it was very nice of you to venture out here with us commoners, and don't think we don't appreciate it." A few people around me laugh, and I am tempted to answer him with a snarky remark. Then I look at the guy and realize that he's smiling and there's no malice in his teasing. So I wait for him, and we walk together toward our cars.

"You win anything?" I ask him.

"Not a darn thing," he replies. We trudge on some more. "But I tell you what: I been coming for 20 years, and I wouldn't miss it for anything."

We're in sight of my rental. "Well, you take care, buddy," I say.

"You too, brother. See you next year." F&S

Siera Romine ends up winning the truck. She has a look of gleeful bewilderment, as if struggling to understand the process by which a walleye turns into a pickup.

Below
An attendee looks out on the scene with a star-spangled blanket at the ready.

FRESH MONGOLIAN PRAIRIE DOG BAIT

WHEN YOU TRAVEL 6,500 MILES TO CATCH A MANIACAL FISH IN AN UNFORGIVING LAND, YOU HAVE TO BE READY TO PLAY DIRTY

I CAME TO MONGOLIA to fly fish for taimen, the legendary salmonlike fish that lives in its big rivers. When fly fishing didn't work, I tried spinning with lures. When spinning with lures got no bites, I tried half a dead lenok (another kind of fish). When the lenok was a bust, I went to the can't-miss bait: a prairie dog. And now, in the last hours of the last day, the dead prairie dog at the end of my line was mocking me.

by **BILL HEAVEY**
illustration by **RALPH STEADMAN**
lettering by **SUSY PILGRIM WATERS**

The idea of catching a sociopathic aquatic vertebrate like that on a gentlemanly 9-weight fly rod appealed to me. It would be like putting on a top hat and tails and going 10 rounds with The Rock in a phone booth.

Previous spread Legendary artist Ralph Steadman painted the gonzo illustration for this story.

Below, left "Fresh Mongolian Prairie Dog Bait" first ran in the December 2004–January 2005 issue.

Center Guide Andrew Parkinson holds a 50-inch taimen—caught, naturally, during a previous trip.

Right The Mongolian equivalent of a Woolly Bugger.

After five hours of continuous casts into the Delger River without so much as a nibble, the dog was both absurdly stiff and unbearably heavy, the twin effects of rigor mortis and being waterlogged. And even though it had been dead for almost 24 hours, it somehow stuck its stiff, black tongue out at me.

Sure, I'm dead, it seemed to say, *but you are one sorry-ass fisherman. You couldn't catch a taimen if you were both in the same bathtub.* "Shut up," I replied. "I may catch one yet." I took another step downriver and cast once more into the water and started another retrieve. I was so far gone by this point that it didn't even strike me as strange that I was conversing with my bait. Because the dog had a point. I had traveled halfway around the world on the trip of a lifetime, fished my brains out for six days, and been skunked.

THE JOURNEY FROM MORON

Looking back, there were signs—like the name of the Mongolian town from which I embarked on a six-day hunt for big taimen: Moron. But I was too pumped to be suspicious. After reading about taimen for years, I was finally going after one of the least known game fish on Earth. And after 48 hours on airplanes, I had finally made it to Mongolia, one of the most isolated and unspoiled countries on the planet. The fish that had prompted me to take leave of my senses is an evil-tempered, prehistoric critter that lives only in certain big, cold, fast rivers in Mongolia and Siberia, most of which flow into the Arctic Ocean. *Hucho hucho taimen* is a spotted fish that grows to great size (fish measuring more than 4 feet and 50 pounds are not uncommon).

Because taimen (pronounced TIE-men) live in such remote areas, they are little studied, and sport fishing for them is a recent development. The current all-tackle record, a 92½-pounder caught in Siberia in 1993 [*Editor's note:* As of this printing, the record is a 115-pound 8-ounce fish caught in Russia in 2021], is likely nowhere near the maximum size. There is, for instance, a report of a 231-pound commercially caught fish back in 1943. It is an ancient species, the ancestor of modern salmon and trout, equipped with an oversize mouth lined with rows of small, sharp teeth. And it is belligerence personified, cannibalizing its smaller brethren and happily murdering pike, salmon, grayling, small birds… and prairie dogs.

I'd read online that Mongolian nomads hook a dog, float it downstream on a shingle of wood, and then give the string a quick jerk. In a typical take, the taimen leaps clear of the water before attacking its prey, stuns it with a blow from its powerful tail, and then comes back around to finish the job.

The idea of catching a sociopathic aquatic vertebrate like that on a gentlemanly 9-weight fly rod appealed to me. It would be like putting on a top hat and tails and going 10 rounds with The Rock in a phone booth.

I booked a trip with guide Andrew Parkinson through WadersOn.com, a worldwide fishing resource based in the United States. And now I was bouncing over the Mongolian steppe in a van with him and three other anglers: Greg and Bruce (two Aussies on a six-week fishing trip to Mongolia, Alaska, and the Kamchatka Peninsula), and Steven, a Canadian working in Beijing. Even in my jet lag–diminished state, I was struck by the landscape. But it wasn't so much what was there as what was not.

There were no signs, no fences, no concrete—and just to keep things simple, no road. Only endless rolling grasslands over which our driver raced. Mongolia, sandwiched strategically between Russia and China, is a huge place, three times the size of France with a population of just 2.75 million, of whom 43 percent are nomadic. Herds of sheep, goats, shaggy yaks, and tough little horses dotted the land.

We passed ancient piles of stones, the altars of invaders who had come and gone as long as 4,000 years ago. Prairie dogs and big marmots streaked for the safety of their dens as they caught sight of the van. Overhead flew ravens and rare white-naped cranes, which number just 5,000 worldwide.

"Just hope Ganchuluun doesn't see a wolf," Parkinson said of our driver. "If a Mongolian in a car or on a horse sees a wolf, he goes a bit mad. And he won't stop until the car is broken, the horse can't run anymore, or the wolf is dead. Mongolians absolutely hate wolves."

We stopped to view deer stones, upright grave markers from the Bronze Age. They all faced south and were covered with stylized images of elk-like deer antlers. On one, Parkinson pointed out what he thought was a fishhook. Every few miles we came across *gers*, the traditional round, felt houses that nomadic herders have been picking up and moving every few months for centuries, forever in search of new grass.

A LOG WITH FINS

We finally got to camp, a series of gers along the banks of the Delger River, late that afternoon. Over dinner, Parkinson told us about the biggest taimen he'd caught. He and a friend had been prospecting a new river when they spotted a log in the shallow water at the head of an island. Logs being scarce in Mongolia, they inspected this one more closely and determined that it had fins. The friend tried to reach it with his fly rod and failed. Parkinson had a spinning rod and cast a mouse lure in front of the fish.

It made the classic taimen attack, leaping clear and clubbing the mouse with its tail. Unfortunately, it snapped the 20-pound-test line in the process. Parkinson next tied on a Rapala, and this time the line held. He fought the fish for over an hour as it leapt and raced seven times up and down a side channel of the river. His shoulder and arm went numb during the fight, and his friend massaged them whenever the fish went down to sulk.

At last they fought the fish into shallow water. Because it was too big for their net, they beached it. Parkinson's friend was an experienced angler, but he'd never tangled with a taimen, and Parkinson had to talk him into approaching. They measured it at 53 inches. It broke their handheld scales, which maxed out at 50 pounds. That was when Parkinson decided to chuck his job as a farming consultant back in England and move to Mongolia.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

The next day we started fishing. Taimen like big pools and long riffles, Parkinson told us, but since they could be picky, it was necessary to methodically cover every foot of water. We'd be fishing big gurglers, foam-and-bucktail flies that made an appropriately desperate sounding *plonk* when popped.

All of us piled into the back of an old Zil 31, a six-wheeled army truck that Parkinson said had "fallen out of the back of a Russian army depot" about the time the Soviets pulled out of Mongolia around 1990. We dropped the two Aussies and Edward, a friend of Parkinson's who had come over from England to guide on the trip, downstream. Steven and I got off with Parkinson a couple of miles upstream. During the next eight hours, we experienced a sampling of Mongolian summer: 50-degree swings in temperature accompanied by sun, rain, snow, hail, and winds that rotated through all four points of the compass.

The river was 100 to 150 yards across, but the current in most places was so strong that I found it impossible to wade past my knees. Even though the wind made for tough casting, I managed to work a long pool 30 feet out. The drill was to cast across, strip methodically, let the fly sit for a moment as it dangled at the end of its drift, move a step downstream, and repeat. Steven and I did that for three hours without so much as a rise. Then it was time for lunch.

When the truck rumbled up, Greg and Bruce were already in back, smiling. Each had landed and released a taimen. The bigger, Greg's, had gone 30 inches. "Just amazing, mate," he told me. "Hit it not 4 feet from me at the end of the retrieve and scared me to death. Vicious fish. Took me 15 minutes to land it, and 30 inches is a small one." He reported the teeth to be sharp and numerous and was glad he'd had Parkinson's biteproof fish-handling glove to remove the fly.

HOLD THE DOG

At lunch in the ger where we took our meals, Parkinson and some of the English-speaking locals he hires gave us a lesson in ger etiquette. Upon entering through the ridiculously low door, you move to your left, clockwise, so as not to impede the universal flow of energy.

You never step on the threshold, touch other people's hats, or use a knife to cut in the direction of any other person. If you spill any beverage, it is customary to immediately shake the hand of the person nearest you. It is considered rude to pass directly in front of an older person, point your feet at the stove, or put water or garbage on a fire, which the Mongolians consider to be sacred.

When approaching a traditional nomad's ger, the correct greeting is *nokhoi khor*, which literally means "hold the dog." A dog in this country is expected to earn its keep, which involves biting the legs off any unknown human. Nyamaa, a beautiful woman who helped around camp and spoke some English, further informed us that women, especially those who are pregnant, do not eat fish. Fish are the only animal that makes no noise, and the fear is that a woman who eats them may give birth to a deaf child.

WITCHCRAFT?

That afternoon, Greg and Bruce both caught and released small (25-inch) taimen. "I don't understand it," Greg said happily over a cold can of Chinggis beer. "I'm the worst caster in the lot. I think it's my lucky Filson hat." I smiled. I wanted that hat—I wanted anything that might help me nail a taimen.

The morning of the second day I spent fishing some beautiful water, a bend in a small gorge with very fishy-looking pools. Nyamaa was walking some distance behind to keep an eye on me. The Delger, like most rivers in Mongolia, has few particularly dangerous rapids, but on the other hand, it's big water, powerful in places, and cold. If you filled your

ANDREW PARKINSON (angler, prairie dog)

waders, you could get into trouble a lot faster than you could get out.

I had worked a long section and then walked back up to fish it again. Seated on a rock a little above me, Nyamaa watched in silence. As I passed her, I turned from the river for a moment and teasingly asked, "So what did you do with all the fish?" as if she'd somehow spirited them away. At that instant, as my fly lay motionless at the end of its drift, a taimen hit the lure like a baseball bat and disappeared. Frantic, I cast repeatedly, trying to draw another strike. No dice. I looked at Nyamaa, who was smiling enigmatically. Her poise at that moment was unnerving, almost as though she had known the fish would pick that moment to strike.

My intention all along had been to take the high road, fly fishing only. By the third day, however, I had begun to slide. I accepted Parkinson's offer of a spinning rod and a large, articulated black-and-silver Rapala rigged with two single barbless hooks. This way I could cover more water and fully expected another baseball-bat strike at any moment. Wading out as deep as I dared toward a bend where a glacier came into the river on the far side, I let fly. As the lure wobbled seductively in a foamy pool, another taimen came up and exploded. It did everything but actually bite the lure.

Again, my efforts to raise a second strike failed. Taimen were aggressive but wary. Parkinson was as disappointed as I was, the sign of a good guide. "My aim is to show every angler a meter-long fish," he said. "Usually, I can. We may have to resort to extreme measures." He gave me a version of his mouse lure, which, when wet, weighed several ounces. I actually threw it over the river and landed it on the glacier, from which I teased it into the water. Still no luck.

At lunch we found out that Greg had hit the jackpot, landing a taimen measuring just over 40 inches and so broad across the back that he couldn't grab it. "I've never seen a freshwater fish like it," he said. While trying to free his lure, he had reached into the fish's mouth with the protective glove. "It nearly crushed my hand," he said, "and bit through the bloody glove like it was paper. Lucky I only got this." He showed a small puncture wound on his finger. I wanted a wound like that too.

LUCK WITH LENOK

At lunch that day as we sat by the river eating sandwiches, Nyamaa urged me to have a beer. "It will make fish come. I am sure of it." I had the beer. When I woke up, I was lying in the grass and everybody had headed off fishing. Nyamaa was watching me. "You were really asleep. We tried shaking you but you would not awaken. So we take your picture. Did you dream of a fish?" I couldn't remember. She still had that unnerving smile. I got my rod and started casting.

In my obsessive hunt for taimen, I'd been passing up all sorts of other opportunities, from fishing for lenok and grayling to visiting a local village and the gers of nearby nomads. One afternoon, we went way upriver and crossed in a spot so deep that the water came up over the floorboards in the back of the truck and it appeared that we might be stationing a casting platform there permanently. As I walked back to the rendezvous point, I discovered Bruce casting in a pool with a little 5-weight. He offered to let me have a try, and within 15 minutes I'd landed two lenok and two grayling, good additions to the night's dinner. It was also the first tug on my line I'd felt since leaving home. I liked it. Lenok are quite good sport on a light rod, but I was a prisoner to my taimen-mania.

Parkinson, sensing my fixation and my despair, cut the smaller lenok in half and rigged the tail end on his spinning rod with a treble hook. I'd slipped from fly fishing to spinning with lures to heaving a bloody hunk of fish across the river. It wasn't the first time I'd thrown my dignity out of the boat to lighten the load, and it wouldn't be the last.

YOU SHOULDA BEEN HERE NEXT WEEK

On the evening before my last day of fishing, I saw two of the camp boys on horseback trotting swiftly back to camp carrying something hanging from a string. As they got closer, I saw that it was a freshly snared prairie dog. My heart soared. I was so happy I nearly dropped my beer. Prairie dogs are cute little things, and were it not for the fact that they are known to carry bubonic plague and dig horse-crippling holes in the ground, I might have regretted this one's demise.

Parkinson and the boys spent about an hour working on the dog, fortifying its spine and rigging the treble hook until the lure swam with a lifelike motion. They put a good dollop of Gink on the tail to make it float realistically. This, I was sure, was going to be one of those trips that is saved at the last minute with the catching of a tremendous fish. Mine would be a tale told around the campfire for years to come.

Only it didn't turn out that way. I cast that damn prairie dog until we both looked about equally beat up. I never got a bite. As the evening grew gray and the wind came up, Parkinson came and put a hand on my shoulder. "We know there are fish here. And you fished harder than just about anybody I've ever had on a trip." I turned and tried to smile.

The next day, we loaded up and left. The last image I saw of camp was Nyamaa and her benign, knowing smile. We said good-bye at the Moron airport as another group of anglers got off the plane we were about to board.

I got an email from Parkinson the next week. Fishing had turned fantastic right after we left. His four clients landed 18 taimen in five days. Each had one that measured at least a meter. I'm trying to be philosophical about it. I find beer helps. F&S

A fly angler (not Bill Heavey) admires a once-in-a-lifetime taimen that he caught on the fly (not on a freshly killed and spontaneously rigged prairie dog).

I'd slipped from fly fishing to spinning with lures to heaving a bloody hunk of fish across the river. It wasn't the first time I'd thrown my dignity out of the boat to lighten the load, and it wouldn't be the last.

Many anglers travel to the Delger River hoping to check off the taimen on their bucket list.

JIM KLUG (angler); SNAP T PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY (boats)

MY BIGGEST BASS EVER

FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES (angler)

F&S WRITERS TELL THE STORIES—AND READERS SHARE PHOTOS—OF THEIR HEAVIEST HAWGS AND LENGTHIEST LUNKERS

IN A SPIRAL-BOUND NOTEBOOK, AN OBSESSED TEENAGE BOY RECORDS EVERY DETAIL OF A TWO-SUMMER-LONG CAMPAIGN TO CATCH A LARGEMOUTH BASS WORTHY OF HIS WALL

by **WILL BRANTLEY**
photographs by **ERIC RYAN ANDERSON**

THE TALE OF LOCKJAW

THE TALE OF LOCKJAW

One day this monster bass swam by me. I was bluegill fishing at the time.

I cut off my bluegill rig & tied on an original Rapala minnow. It didn't take but 1 cast and 30 seconds to lose the Rapala & fish.

—April 1996

I WAS 13 YEARS OLD and had been waiting for a bluegill to sink my red-and-white bobber when the bass, nearly 2 feet long, swam down the shoreline by my feet. I could see it perfectly. Most strip-mine lakes are clear, and the Bass Hole—which was the name of this pit—was so clear that even the half-inch piece of nightcrawler dangling from the hook beneath my bobber, cast 20 feet out from the bank, was plain as day.

The bass was much closer, gliding through the water but somehow also seeming motionless, an ambush predator that had perfected her art. I'd never seen such a fish. It was only the previous spring that I'd gone to the Bass Hole for the first time and caught my first *real* bass. I'd hooked some little largemouths on worms while fishing for bluegills, but that had been kid stuff. On that debut trip to the Bass Hole, Dad had handed me a Rebel Crawfish crankbait and told me to tie it on, cast it out, and reel it in pretty fast, with a twitch now and then. I tossed it near a log, and as soon as the lure touched down, a 15-inch largemouth clobbered it. I begged Dad to get that fish mounted, but he said it wasn't big enough. We fried it instead.

But the fish now at my feet, I knew, was something for a taxidermist. I cranked in my bluegill rig about fast enough to start a friction fire and cut it off with a pocketknife just above the bobber, letting the whole thing—bobber, sinker, hook, flaccid piece of nightcrawler, and 3-foot length of 8-pound Stren monofilament—fall to the ground. I was standing on a point that was maybe 10 feet wide and one of only two good casting spots on the shoreline of the Bass Hole, the rest of the pit's bank being nearly vertical and lined thickly with trees. To my left, where the bank got steep again, was an old beaver hut, and I watched the bass turn and settle in front of it.

I had a few good bass plugs in my tackle box—a Rebel Crawfish, of course, as well as a Hula Popper and a 2-inch Rapala Minnow among them. I chose the Minnow and fired a cast toward the beaver hut, twitching the lure maybe twice before it disappeared in the white flash of a giant bucketmouth. I set the hook and watched as the bass swam nearly the same course along the shoreline where I'd spotted it earlier, just a bit farther out from the bank, with my lure stuck to her face.

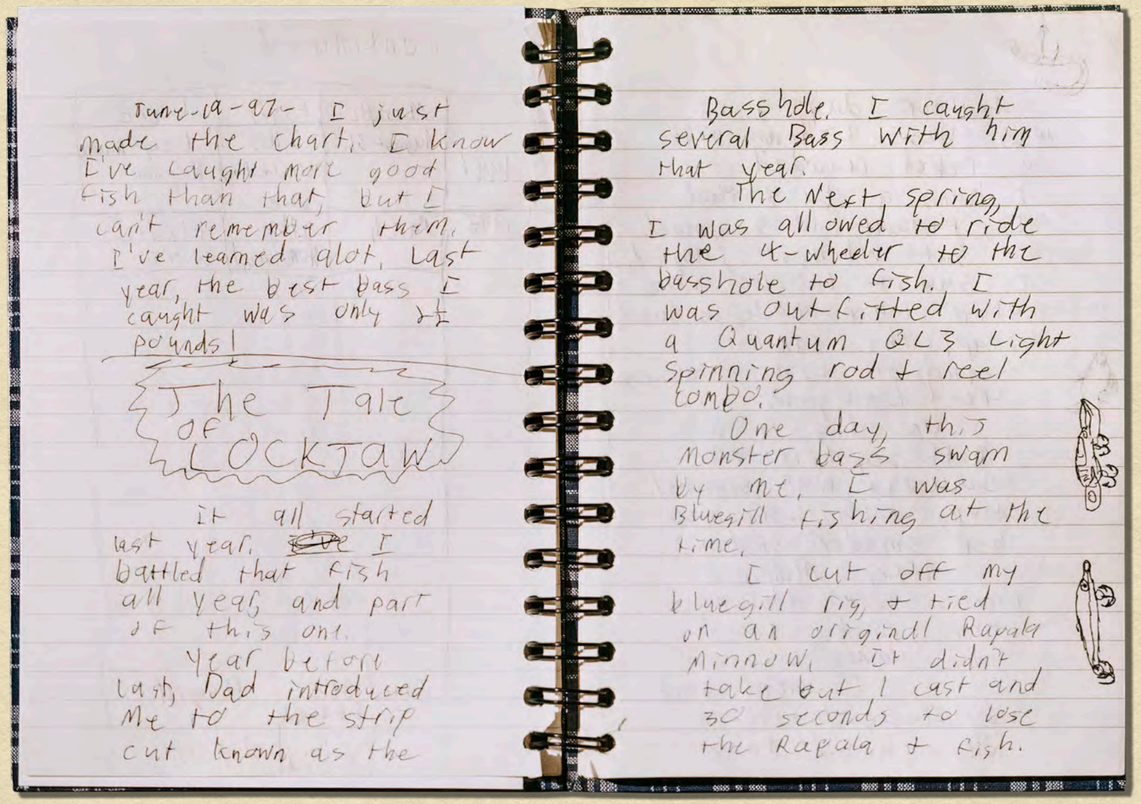
The fish didn't seem panicked in the least, though—more annoyed. Turning her slab body, the largemouth simply eased toward deeper water, loading my rod more and more as it went. I *was* panicked, so much so that I blew my chance almost immediately. I clawed for the reel handle and tried to turn it, only to hear a loud *crack*, almost like the report of a 22 rifle loaded with Shorts. The end of the rod rebounded as loose monofilament coiled on the surface of the water, like a bit of ash swirling after a hot fire. The bass and my Rapala Minnow plug were both gone.

I had Matt Seymore over and Lockjaw was sighted. Along with her was her smaller sister.

After multiple lures were thrown…I went back to bluegill fishing. Who should take my worm under but Lockjaw? Once again, she was saved by light line.

—June 1996

THE DETAILS OF most fishing stories get fuzzy with age—but even now, 29 years later, I have no doubt that the exact lure Lockjaw stole first was a Rapala Minnow, just as I'm sure the same fish broke off my Rebel Crawfish a few days later, when I was standing on the same little 10-foot flat and casting toward the beaver hut. There's no question, either, that



The author's notebook, in which he kept the details of his quest to catch Lockjaw.

I was "outfitted with a Quantum QL3 light spinning rod and reel combo" and that I understood just how ill-equipped I was to land such a huge fish.

I know all of this because the details are recorded in a journal that I used to keep, under a special entry that I penned in early June 1997 called "The Tale of Lockjaw." The story recapped a series of events that began in spring 1996, when the big bass broke off for the first time. I even drew pictures of the two lost plugs in the margin.

The journal, a blue plaid spiral notebook, has entries about my first spring gobbler and my first quail and a lot about the bird dogs I used to hunt with almost every day. I even drew maps marking where I'd found coveys of quail within walking distance of the house. Looking at them now reminds me of just how long ago it was. All of those birds have been gone for decades, and all of that land is long since leased up and posted.

An entry from January 31, 1999, reads: *Today was the last day of quail and rabbit season. This year sucked terribly. I may take up duck hunting next year.*

I had also drawn a map of the best small fishing lakes in the area. There was the Bass Hole and the Swimming Hole, plus the Trash Pit, Bud's Pit, Bobby's Pit, Pecker Bass Lake, and plenty of others, all located on reclaimed strip mines in western Kentucky, one of the state's top coal-producing areas. Much of the land was owned or leased by mining companies in those days, and the rest of it was owned by neighbors who, if I didn't know, I knew of.

I roamed the place on foot, with no cell phone and no survival gear beyond a Sam's Choice cola in my backpack, where I also carried my tackle. I had no concept of property lines out there, and neither did any of the other country kids I'd run into on occasion, sometimes out fishing themselves, but usually smoking pot and jumping off a cliff into the deep waters of the Swimming Hole. The cliff was actually a high wall left over from the mining operation, and some of the kids had spray-painted the words *Mount Bitch* onto the face.

I caught some nice fish at the Swimming Hole too, but usually I hiked on farther to the Bass Hole, where I almost never saw anyone else. After I'd broken off that huge largemouth, not once but twice, the decision of where to go fishing on any given day was easy. I had friends who would sometimes walk to the pit with me, and we'd argue over who would fish from which spot. My buddy Matt Seymore was with me the day that we gave the huge bass her name.

It never occurred to us at the time that the fish's smaller "sister" was probably a male bass, and that the two were likely spawning and therefore not interested in the crankbaits and spinnerbaits and plastic worms that Seymore and I pounded them with for 100 casts straight. We settled on "Lockjaw" before the fish finally pulled my bluegill rig under and snapped me off a third time.

After that, I would sit awake at night and obsess over that bass and how I might catch it. I'd have no sooner entertained the idea of there being another lunker in that pit than Captain Ahab would've contemplated several white whales swimming about in the ocean. As the heat of late summer baked in, the fishing turned slow, and before long, it was hunting season again. Still, over the long winter, I wondered why Lockjaw had hit the bluegill rig after ignoring everything else.

And then it hit me. It hadn't bitten the bluegill rig. It had tried to eat a little bluegill that was messing with my worm.

That summer came to an end. '97 rolled around.

I again was after Lockjaw. This time when she was spotted, I threaded a live bluegill on the hook.

—May 1997

IN EARLY MAY the following year, I started thinking about fishing again. Turkey season had just ended, and I hiked to the Bass Hole one afternoon, carrying my usual backpack with tackle, along with a Walmart sack in case I found morel mushrooms. I also had two spinning rods and a metal coffee can. I'd tied a bluegill rig to one of the rods and a 1/0 worm hook on the Quantum. As I filled a stringer with big, hump-headed bream, I also sloughed a few smaller ones into the coffee can, which I'd filled with pit water.

THE TALE OF LOCKJAW

All the while, I kept scanning the shallows, especially near the beaver hut. Soon enough, Lockjaw emerged from under the logs, and by the time I'd grabbed one of the bluegills from the coffee can and threaded it onto the worm hook, just under the dorsal fin, the bass was again at my feet.

I wasn't prepared for just how far a live bluegill can be cast on a long and limber spinning rod, so I overshot the bass by a good 20 feet. The bluegill hit the surface with a slap, and I pulled it toward Lockjaw. Instead of spooking, the bass spun toward the hooked baitfish and started writhing its fins, like a goldfish awaiting a pinch of food.

The bluegill had scarcely settled before that great white mouth flashed again. This time I felt ready, having adjusted my drag to slip. But when the fish made her run, the amount of line peeling off my reel startled me—and I tightened the drag back up. There was that familiar 22-esque *crack* again. Fourteen-year-old me would've never admitted to crying over a fish, not even to Matt Seymore, but that's exactly what I did. I sat on that flat and cried for a good while.

I am now convinced that spinning reels are evil.

—May 1997

OUR NEIGHBOR RONNIE was a close friend who'd grown up fishing many of the same pits. He also had a wall full of mounted trophy bass and would sometimes give me fishing advice: *Wintertime, you don't expect much, but you want to fish a hair jig with a piece of pig on the back. Mann's Augertail worm is always a good choice, especially when smeared with a gob of Smelly Jelly.* And *Son, in a pit like that, she's got to eat every day. If you want to catch her, you've got to keep fishing.*

After hearing that I'd lost the bass yet again, Ronnie asked what kind of rod and reel I was using. When I told him, he wasn't at all sympathetic, like I'd also told him that I still believed in the Easter Bunny. "Got-damn, son, it's time to grow up," he said. "You need to go look through your daddy's tackle and learn to use one of his baitcasters."

Dad indeed had some baitcasters that he never used because he always believed that you'd catch more fish with lighter gear. He was probably right, but he also had the patience to slowly fight a big bass on spinning gear, letting the drag do the work.

Lockjaw had proven that I had no such patience. I found pair of Ambassadeur 5000s on pistol-grip rods that were dusty and spooled with brittle old line. But Dad also had a fresh spool of 17-pound-test, and so I took one of the casting reels, wound on new line, and tied on a weight that I'd cut off a duck decoy, which I figured was more or less as heavy as a small live bluegill. Then I stepped into the backyard and practiced pitching it. Within a few tries, I learned to prevent overruns by thumbing the spool, and within 20 minutes, I could manage a 20-foot cast—which was all I needed.

I tied a bluegill rig onto my spinning rod and another big worm hook onto the baitcaster, and on May 18, 1997, I went fishing again at the Bass Hole with my backpack, as always, and the coffee can. I didn't have to wait long. I'd already put two small bluegills into the can when I spotted Lockjaw lumbering in the shadows of the beaver hut. I took the baitcaster, put one of the small bream on the hook, and scooted along the steep bank above the dam. I tossed the bluegill out, and as the ripples settled, I saw Lockjaw closing in like a black missile, and then the familiar white flash of her giant mouth.

This time, when the giant bass ran and the rod loaded, I pulled back, hard—and immediately spun the fish's head toward me.

Horsed Lockjaw from a beaver dam. I took her a good 50 yards up the bank. I then unhooked her.

—May 1997

THE BANKS OF THE PIT were so steep that I was afraid to set the fish down, worried that it would flop all the way back to the water. So I carried her off with both hands clasped tight to the lower jaw, whooping the whole way, like the kids bailing off Mount Bitch. I pulled the morel sack from my backpack, shoved the bass inside, and toted her all the way home that way, flopping in a grocery bag with me switching arms every so often because it was so heavy. Mom later drove me down the road so I could show the bass to Ronnie.

"That one will go 6 or 7 pounds all day," he said. Though I never actually weighed Lockjaw with a scale, I took Ronnie's lead—and a few liberties—in the journal: *She weighed in at 7 pounds 3 ounces. She is waiting for the taxidermist in my freezer.*

I still have the skin mount of that fish, which I brought with me to college and hung in my first apartment and in several subsequent offices in the years following. Sometimes my son, now just a little younger than I was when I caught Lockjaw, asks me about it. I tell him I haven't caught a bigger bass since—and that I'm not sure I'd ever want to.

From left: A Rapala Minnow and Rebel Crawfish, like the ones the author lost to Lockjaw; a big bass comes to hand.

LANCE KRUEGER

YOUR BIGGEST BASS EVER

AS THE SNAPSHOTS OF LUNKERS ON THIS BRAG BOARD PROVE, F&S READERS SURE CAN CATCH FISH

photograph by **RALPH SMITH**

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT FRANK CARVER, 17 IN. · BOB AND WESTON RYON, 11.7 LB. · LEA ANNE POWELL, 10.58 LB. · JACKSON HARVEY, 6 LB. · JACKSON FULLER, 10 LB. STEVE BUHLER, NO SIZE GIVEN · MICHELE PORTER, 5 LB. 8 OZ. · JIMMY ZACCAGNINO, 5.3 LB. · KERRY BARRY JR., 5 LB. 4 OZ. **MIDDLE ROW** BENJAMIN WEPRIN, 8 LB. 15 OZ. JAMES GERRITY, 4.68 LB. · KAYLA TOON, 9 LB. · CARALINE CURRIE, 4 LB. · BEN HAWKINS, 8.5 LB. · NATHANIEL MELTON, 22 IN. · WARREN HOLLAND, 9 LB. · JD ODOM, 12 LB. 2 OZ. →

KAMDEN M., 4 LB. · BOB GAINES, 8 LB. · MICHAEL MCILRATH AND "FUTURE BASS MASTER," 2 LB. **BOTTOM ROW** JOE COOGAN, 9 LB. 5 OZ. · SHANE BASKIN, 4.5 LB. ROBERTO NOVOA, 10.14 LB. · BRIAN LAIRD, 10 LB. · ANDY MALMO, 9 LB. 3 OZ. · ERIC CHURCH, 9 LB. · ART'OM RANK, 6.24 LB. · KALEY KINSEY, 19 IN. · KRISTEN BLANKENSHIP, 5.9 LB. MACKENZIE SANDERS, 7 LB. 12 OZ. · STEPHEN DALTON, 6 LB. · THOMAS MEYER, 21 IN. · ANDREW GREENE, 10 LB. 4 OZ. · MORGAN WALLEN, 9 LB. · VERN POLIDORO, 6.25 LB.

BANK BOSS

WHO NEEDS A FANCY NEW BASS BOAT WHEN YOU CAN CATCH 10-POUNDERS FROM SHORE?

by **SHAYE BAKER**

When I was in college and bass fishing as much as I could between (and sometimes during) classes, my dad and Uncle Jamie and I caught wind of a local summerlong big-bass competition to be held across the state of Alabama. The grand prize: a brand-new bass boat.

The rules were simple. You had to catch the bass somewhere in Alabama, from either public or private water. And you had to weigh the bass on certified scales at one of the designated weigh stations in the state.

The three of us entered the competition together with an agreement that if any one of us caught the boat-winning bass, we'd share the grand prize. Our strategy was to focus on some little farm ponds we had access to, and as a few of those waters were too big to cover from the bank, we dusted off my first bass boat, from when I was a teenager.

The OG was an 11-foot 3-inch Bass-Tender that my dad helped me buy when I was 14. He promised to kick in half if I saved up my grass-cutting money for the other half. His half ended up being closer to two-thirds, but, man, that thing was sweet. It had an aerated live well, a bilge pump, a casting deck, pre-run wires for a trolling motor, two pedestal seats, and a transom for a small outboard. It was a kid's bass-fishing Cadillac, all for only $1,100. But when we pulled it out of the shed for the contest, it looked more like a Volkswagen Beetle.

One day during the competition, I was sitting in class at Auburn University when Dad texted that he and my uncle were headed to a local farmer's pond to drop in the boat. I don't remember if I waited for class to be over or not, but I know I got there as fast as I could. They were already on the water in the Bass-Tender, and the dinghy that used to be big enough for a 14-year-old to run laps around looked to be at or beyond full capacity with the two of them in it. So I asked Dad to hand me a rod.

Sitting on the dam, I tossed out a big Texas-rigged worm. It was one of those rare moments when I was keenly aware of just how fortunate I was to be outside and not in the classroom. I wasn't worried about catching anything. Dad and Uncle Jamie had the pond covered. I was just there to be there.

Then, *thump*. I set the hook and pulled the fish to the top, not expecting much. But when the largemouth broke the surface, it about scared the mess out of me. The fish was close to 10 pounds—the biggest any of us had seen all summer. I yelled, and the duo in the dinghy buzzed over to help, but I wrestled her ashore before they got to me.

We loaded the fish up and took off for the nearest certified scale, which read 9 pounds 14 ounces. It was the biggest bass I'd ever caught then, and it still is. It also took the lead in the big-bass contest with only a few weeks left to go.

Not long after that, my uncle unseated me with a bass over 11 pounds, but at least Team Baker was still on top. Then in the last week of the competition, a woman caught a 12-pound 7-ounce bass out of one of Ray Scott's ponds and drove away with our would-be new bass rocket.

I won't lie. I was a little sour at the time. But then I'm not sure what my visitation rights would have looked like with a three-way ownership and me at the bottom of the totem pole. When all's said and done, after thousands of hours spent in bass boats before and since, my biggest bass still came from the bank.

> When the largemouth broke the surface, it about scared the mess out of me.

illustration by **TRICIA KLEINOT**

THE ACCIDENTAL LUNKER

WHAT SHOULD'VE BEEN THE FISH OF A LIFETIME WOUND UP FEELING LIKE SALT IN THE WOUND

by **JOE CERMELE**

Largemouths were not the intended target that day.

TWO FULL DAYS, from dawn to dusk; that's how long we'd been playing the game. In that time, we'd fished four different bodies of water—some still, some flowing—and put a couple hundred miles on my friend Bob Hawkins's SUV. By the third morning, my motivation to pick up the 12-weight rod was almost nil. That was partially due to the pain in my wrists, shoulders, and forearms, but mostly it was due to pessimism. I had come to accept that sticking a muskie on the fly just wasn't in the cards for me.

This was 2016, and Hawkins had been surfing a wave of notoriety in the muskie world. The year before, he'd landed a 57-inch Goliath on Minnesota's famed Mille Lacs Lake that was estimated to weigh over 50 pounds. It was (and remains) the biggest muskie ever caught on a fly. I didn't race to the Land of 10,000 Lakes because of that catch or because I thought Hawkins was some sort of guru. I'd known him long before he lucked into that behemoth. The first time I fished with him was in 2013. The two of us fished *hard*. We traveled all the way to the northern reaches of the Mississippi River. We floated miles of the St. Croix. We rowed endless circles around Twin Cities–area lakes. We stripped massive flies until our fingers bled.

All that, and I never even had a muskie follow let alone a grab.

So why did I come back? I guess to settle the score, but also because I'm easily swayed.

"Dude," Hawkins had told me, "come out here in October and we'll get you a muskie. October is the best."

October is also a transitional month in terms of weather. I arrived just behind a cold front that slammed Minnesota, leaving us with frigid, high-pressure, cloudless days. Nobody in Hawkins's phone chain was moving muskies anywhere. In the first 48 hours, we had exactly one half-hearted follow—but it was on my fly, so at least I was getting closer. The fish moved slowly and kept its distance; instead of reacting to my figure eight, it just slunk away into the weeds.

After spending so much time at what Hawkins considered high-percentage locations, he resorted to a Hail Mary on our final day. The cool thing about Minnesota is there are muskies *everywhere*, even in small suburban waters like Lake Johanna with its public beach and playground. Despite the nip in the morning air, three kayak anglers were already fishing when we arrived. They all wielded lighter spinning rods. *Good,* I thought. *They're not here for muskies.*

Hawkins puttered us around the corner from the ramp and into a cove with a mix of decaying lily pads and vibrant green milfoil. I cracked my neck and knuckles, picked up the broomstick rod, and mentally prepared for another day of struggle. On my third retrieve, it finally happened. The 14-inch white gym sock of a streamer zigged, zagged, and then disappeared behind a flash of silvery green. The strike was so violent, the water on the surface boiled. I never stripped so hard in my life, desperate to keep tight.

"That's it!" Hawkins cried. "Finally! That's it!"

But *it* wasn't it.

It wasn't a muskie.

It wasn't even a pike.

It was a monster largemouth bass that choked that gigantic streamer so hard I could barely see it in its mouth.

Neither of us had a scale, but in our befuddled state we agreed that the 7-pound range for the bass was a conservative estimate. Cue hysterical laughter at the irony of it all. Had this fish been landed by the kayak crew tossing Senkos and crankbaits, it might have ended up on a wall—the old, wise Lake Johanna denizen nobody could fool.

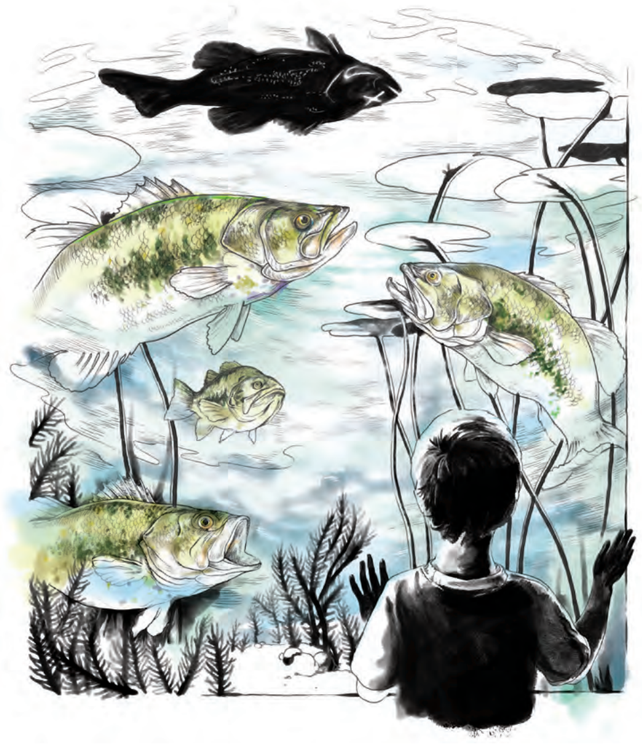
To date, that bass is still the biggest I've ever caught on a fly, but the feat will never be quite as glorious as it should be, because largemouths were not the intended target that day. Likewise, if I caught a muskie while fly fishing for bass, that wouldn't really count either—at least, not in my book. I'm just weird like that.

illustration by **TRICIA KLEINOT**

HAWG HEAVEN

A DREAM OF BIG-BASS GLORY HEADS FOR THE BIG AQUARIUM IN THE SKY

by **BILL HEAVEY**



I thought maybe this fish signaled a new chapter for me. Maybe I wasn't as clueless as everyone thought.

THE GUIDE DIDN'T like me. He was cordial enough, hiding behind the sort of Southern charm that Yankees often mistake for real affinity. But I could see the thought bubble above his head that read *clueless city boy*. It was true enough, but I felt like I deserved some credit for knowing his opinion of me and still trying to make the best of it. He was the real deal, alright, one of those country boys who probably made his own turkey calls out of cedar fence posts and bought his first car with money he made trapping.

We had exploded from the dock on the big Missouri lake at 8 a.m., skidding over the water in a candy-apple-red rocket sled. But the fishing was slow. It was the kind of merciless July day where if you don't catch fish early, you're probably not going to catch them at all. Still, we'd agreed on a half day, and we were going to fish it out. We threw shallow- and deep-running crankbaits, single- and double-bladed spinnerbaits, hard and soft stickbaits. The fish were not impressed.

It was getting on toward noon when we stopped at an underwater ridge out in the middle of the lake. He tied on a green pumpkin cut-tail worm on a ⅜-ounce sinker while I pondered my options. Four hours of not catching fish with a guy who doesn't like you can lead to a certain loss of focus. I knew that copying his lure selection would just confirm his impression of me, but being contrary just to be contrary seemed equally stupid, so I chose the same bait. We were throwing from opposite sides of the boat when I heard him grunt and turned to see him set the hook and hug the rod tight to his chest. His line went slack. He winced. "Missed him. But that was a big fish."

At that moment, my rod tip dipped. There was nothing tentative about the strike—a hard whomp followed by dead weight. Turns out, a big fish doesn't necessarily mean a memorable fight. It was like a 350-pound defensive tackle trying to gain a few yards after scooping up a fumble. Out of the water, the fish looked like a bass—only bigger. Twice the size of any largemouth I'd ever caught before, with a belly like Hoss Cartwright. You couldn't have stuffed it in a glove compartment on a bet. My partner congratulated me, but with a smile that was all mouth and no eyes.

It must have been annoying for him that a lunker had spat out his bait and taken mine, but we both knew that's what happened. Like the man says, even the losers get lucky sometimes. And no matter how it went down, the dumbass Yankee had somehow outfished the good ol' boy.

When my guide mentioned that the megastore he worked for was always looking for another big bass for their aquarium, I was all for it. Taxidermy has a way of ending up on the card table at a rummage sale, and I figured that having tourists gawk at you in an aquarium can't be a bad way for a giant bass to live out its days. It's not like they get self-conscious. So that's what we did.

I went home thinking that what had started out as an awkward day on the lake ended in a big success. When I told people the story, they said things like, "Not many people have caught a 10-pound bass," and, "You landed a fish that the bass pro couldn't?" *Well,* I shrugged in reply, *I guess I did.* Then I thought maybe this fish signaled a new chapter for me. Maybe I wasn't as clueless as everyone thought. And the living proof of it was a honker of a largemouth bass swimming around in a Missouri aquarium for anyone to see.

Then I got an email from the guide.

Sorry, Bill, your fish died.

I haven't caught a bass half as big as that one since.

illustration by **TRICIA KLEINOT**

MUD FIGHT

A BIG STRIPER IS TOUGH TO LAND ON THE FLY, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE WAIST-DEEP IN THE MUCK

by **WILL RYAN**

THE ONLY PEOPLE who lie more than fishermen are fishermen who are also writers. So I get why my buddies insist on photographic evidence of my "really big stripers." I've come to embrace the eely reputation, and so I keep my cell phone zippered in the top pocket of my waders. I'm glad I had it with me one night last October.

The stripers had been moving into a saltwater pond on Martha's Vineyard at dark to feed on the peanut bunker that milled along its marshy edges. The biggest problem was the wading, which could be, well, tricky.

From the parking lot, I could see the outline of my friend Chuck, already out there in the dusk.

"Fish on!" he sang out as I lurched across a maze of muskrat runs and deeper cuts. I was nearly to the open water when I missed the target marsh hump and ended up vacuum sealed in water and muck.

I tried to push myself up, but the marshy bog gave more than I could gain, and trying harder only forced water down the front of my waders. With nothing to do but wait in the dark for help from Chuck, I figured I might as well be fishing. I was planted adjacent to a tiny cove about the size of a dinner table and the peanuts were skittering across the cove mouth—bass sloshing right behind them, a rod tip away.

The water lapping at my waist reminded me of fishing from a float tube. I flopped my streamer out into the blackness and found myself attached to a striper boring away from me through the cove mouth with designs on parts unknown. Despite a lack of leverage, I was able to lean into the 20-pound fluoro enough to slow the train and wrestle the fish back into the little cove I'd come to call home.

The bass burrowed beneath the hummocks. Tossing my rod on the grass behind me, I leaned over, took in a bucket or so of water, and groped for the fish beneath the marsh. All I got was tail. I withdrew my arm and shook myself like a Lab after a retrieve. The whole thing seemed ridiculous, but there was nothing else to do but go back in, this time sliding my fingers down the leader to find the fish's mouth. Somehow, I clamped down on her jaw without impaling my thumb on the hook and hauled her back out into the cove. Finally, a fair fight. I stayed aggressive and went for a headlock, and she sent the grass and muck flying. As Johnny Cash sang, we were "kicking and a-gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer."

Chuck slowly made his way over and shined his headlamp down on me. "You could definitely use some goggles," he said, laughing.

"I might have swallowed a bunker," I said. But I also held the biggest bass of my life by the lower jaw. She was finning in place in the water, placid as a milk cow.

I dug out my phone and Chuck clicked an evidential pic of me embracing the fish. I released her, and then we set about releasing me. I pushed up with both hands, while Chuck kneeled and got his arms beneath my armpits and hauled. *Thwwuckk.* "Free Willy!" he cried.

I've kept the picture of the striper and me, even though it looks foggy and smudged from water and muck on the camera lens. When I show my friends, to a person they say something like, "What a fish! Man, it must have been some fight."

And I say, "You have no idea."

illustration by **TRICIA KLEINOT**

ESCAPE OF THE 5-FOOTER

WHEN A GIANT LARGEMOUTH SWIMS OUT OF THE LIVE WELL, THERE'S NO TELLING HOW BIG IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

by **SCOTT BESTUL**

I WILL NEVER FORGET that first monster bass. My dad and I were casting topwater baits from shore alongside our neighbor Jim, the *plop-splash* of the lures audible as they hit the edge of a weedbed that calm June evening. The fish struck a green-and-yellow Hula Popper in a toilet-flush swirl, then broke the surface in a head-shaking leap. But the hookset was solid, and the line held. It was no Florida or Texas largemouth, but it was a behemoth for southern Wisconsin—the biggest bass I'd ever laid eyes on.

But I didn't catch it. That honor belonged to Jim, a teenager who'd joined my dad in mentoring me in the outdoors and whom I idolized. But as Jim hoisted the fish and my dad slapped him on the back, a dark cloud seemed to gather above me. I was 8 or 9 that summer, old enough to recognize jealousy but not mature enough to hide it. I would catch only one bass that day, a 12-incher that looked like a grass snake next to Jim's deep-bellied bruiser. Adding salt to the wound, my dad caught a solid bass too, smaller than Jim's but still a great fish. I sulked the whole drive home, in a deep and pathetic funk.

I'd been fishing just long enough that I'd graduated from the "numbers" stage, having piled up lots of bluegills and crappies. I felt it was time to focus on quality, like a serious fisherman. Like my cousin Dale, who, though only a few years older than me, was already regarded as such. Once, after returning from an outing on the Tomorrow River, a blue-ribbon trout stream that flowed near my grandparents' house, Dale held up a gold-bladed Mepps spinner with one of its treble hooks bent nearly straight and told us how a huge brown had whacked the lure, made a short run, then spit it so hard it came flying back at his face.

"That fish was at least 60 inches," Dale said flatly. "And that's pretty big for a trout."

These words, now embedded in family lore, convinced my young self that the best way to hook a true leviathan was to make sure there were no witnesses, since my uncles and grandparents seemed to accept Dale's story with sympathetic smiles. (I was too clueless to realize they were humoring him.)

Not long after my humiliation at the hands of Dad and Jim, I set out to redeem myself—alone this time—on a lake near my uncle's cabin. I tied on a green-and-yellow Hula Popper, like the one that had brought Jim so much luck, and I made two casts from the dock. On the third, the water exploded. A huge bass walloped my topwater, then tail-walked for what seemed like forever before diving toward a weedbed. Somehow, I turned the fish and was gaining ground when it struck me that there's no advantage to being alone when the fish is real. I yelled for my dad and uncle to come see the fish I was landing, but they were inside playing cards and couldn't hear me.

As I knelt to grab my prize, I remembered the fish basket. My uncle had showed me the contraption on my first visit—a submerged, wood-framed, chicken-wire trap fastened to the dock with a hinged door at the top, a pier-fisherman's version of a live well. I unhooked the fish, opened the door, slid the giant bass inside, and ran for the cabin.

"I caught a big one!" I gasped, bursting through the door. "Put it in that basket on the dock." Dad and Uncle Scott dropped their cards and ran with me to the lake. Finally, I was going join the ranks of lunker-landers. Falling to my knees at the end of the dock, I lifted the trap door and reached in to grab my prize by the lower jaw, ready to hoist it skyward like I'd seen on magazine covers.

Only there was no fish. I ran my hands through every corner of that little cage until I felt a small prick on the end of my fingers and spotted the peeled-back chicken wire and gaping hole at one corner. I couldn't hold back the tears as I looked up at the expectant faces of my dad and uncle.

"He was here," I said. "He was a giant. He must have found the hole and got out."

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure he was a great fish, son." I was on the verge of running into the woods and hiding, when I remembered Cousin Dale and his behemoth brown.

"Well, I can't say for sure that he was 60 inches," I said. "But he was pretty big for a bass." F&S

illustration by **TRICIA KLEINOT**

FISHING

INTO

THE

TWILIGHT

DURING A SOLO TRIP TO HIS FAMILY'S HOME WATERS, THE AUTHOR IS VISITED BY GHOSTS

by **JOHN N. MACLEAN**
illustrations by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

There's a particular stone on a high bank of the Blackfoot River where I often sit, as generations of my family have done before me, and wait for a fish to rise. It's a large, flattish stone that overlooks a variety of water patterns and possibilities.

Upriver, a rapid makes a graceful bend that sweeps into the near bank. Deep pockets along the bank can hold large trout, especially in the evening, when the glare is off the water and trout, feeling safer, move in to feed. Farther out, the rapid gives way to a deep, smooth stretch where trout establish feeding lanes during insect hatches and send rise forms rippling downstream. Taken as a whole, it's a beautiful piece of water that has produced many fine fish over the years.

Decades ago, a family friend and mentor, George Croonenberghs, introduced me to the stone. When I sat there, he told me, I would be doing what my grandfather, father, and others of our blood had done, each in their own turn. In the following decades, I would sit there when the action was slow and watch for a rise form—but more often, I worked along the brushy bank, casting to stir up a fish. All those linked to the stone when I was young are gone now, but the stone remains, despite flood, drought, and the passage of years. These days I spend more time on the stone and less time fighting the brush. I introduced my two sons to the ritual long ago and expect they'll carry on with it when I'm through.

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The challenges of fly fishing late in life are too easy to describe. Wading heavy water is an early casualty, and others soon follow. But rewards should be considered too. As time goes by, the fish seem to matter less, and the world that surrounds the fish—the river, the land, and the people connected to them—matters more.

In the present time, a warm October evening too early for a general rise, I settle myself on the stone. There's less of the river to watch after a very dry summer. Friends say the water got so low early in the year it was like having no summer fishing season at all. It's running now at barely more than half its normal flow. Most of the hatches have blown out, and there's hardly a bug in the air. I don't expect to see much action. This means fewer fishermen and boats on the river, however, and so I have the place virtually to myself. Except I am never alone on this river.

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Montana's Blackfoot River is family water. Over the decades, I have gone so often to the same holes, the same stretches of river, that I cannot go to those places now without seeing figures of the past embedded in the riverscape, so lifelike they shimmer in the mind's eye.

My mentor, George, making effortless casts nearly across the river with his heavy 8-weight rod. My father, Norman, as steady in his bearing as a minister in a pulpit, working the water with his beloved bamboo rod. My eldest son, Dan, stripped to the waist and bronzed from a summer of outdoor labor, standing in the river and making powerful casts into a heavy rapid. My younger son, John Fitzroy, a tall, slim distance runner, gracefully navigating a rocky bank, looking for a spot to cast to in the pools behind the rocks.

Looking across the river from my seat on the stone this October evening, a tall pine with a snag top—a perch for bald eagles for decades—makes a triangle in the landscape that draws the eye down to a line of brush along the riverbank, the same way triangles compel the eye in a painting. As my gaze settles at the point where the brush meets the river, a figure peers from around the brush, looking downstream: my father, returning from time past.

I cannot go to those places now without seeing figures of the past embedded in the riverscape, so lifelike they shimmer in the mind's eye.

Several hundred yards downstream from him, about opposite the stone where I'm sitting, I stand on the bank with George, almost half again as tall as me at that young age. George had been a railroad fireman, hand-shoveling coal into the boiler of a steam locomotive. One day, a newfangled diesel engine wouldn't start up, but George had studied the technology in a course he'd found advertised on a book of matches. He started the diesel and won promotion to engineer. George makes all our flies, small but sturdy works of art that improbably emerge from his huge hands at a tying vise.

George and I look tired and dejected. We had fished the deep, good-looking water in the lower section of the hole, and even George, who always ended the day with a heavier basket, had come up empty. From a couple of hundred yards away, though, we can see the joyous smile on my father's face. He is the son of a strict Presbyterian minister and a Scot of the old school for whom happiness is not a familiar companion. The occasions when he did find joy, however, often occurred when he had a fly rod in hand on the Blackfoot River. Seeing him now in my mind's eye, the image made more vivid by the workings of memory, I can piece together the causes of his joy on this occasion: the river, a fish, and a lovely young doe.

Drawn by the smile, George and I pick our way toward him along the rocky bank. He is bursting with news. He's caught a big cutthroat in the fast water at the bend in the river, but that isn't all. A university professor skilled at holding the attention of students, he loves an audience, and the long battle with the cutthroat had been conducted without one, to his frustration—or so he thought.

We didn't use nets in those days, as they were too dear and cumbersome, and when my father finally slid the fish onto the bank, he looked around to see if anyone was watching. And there, peering out of the brush, was a young doe. She didn't spook or turn skittish. She stayed calm and kept her big liquid eyes on him, radiating fond approval, as he stepped out of the river and dealt with his catch. Then she faded into the brush like a disappearing dream. He showed us the fish, the biggest and best of the day, and we gave it the admiration it deserved. He was pleased but happier, by far, with the memory of the doe's tender glance.

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I wait on the stone, surrounded by memories, until the light begins to fail. There will be no rise. I step away from the river, which is reflecting the last of the light, into the enclosing darkness of the willow brush, crunching the slim, dry leaves underfoot. Like the willows, my season is over. Until next time. F&S

CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

CAMPFIRE

SMASH HITS

WOULD YOU TAKE A PUNCH IN THE FACE IF IT MEANT NEVER MISSING A SPRING GOBBLER AGAIN? NO? THEN YOU'RE NOT AS HARDCORE AS MY WIFE

by **WILL BRANTLEY**

I TOOK MY WIFE, Michelle, turkey hunting for the first time decades ago, back when we were dating. She showed up with her dad's hand-me-down 12-gauge, a 3-inch 870 Express with a 22-inch barrel and hand-painted camo on the wooden stock. The gun was nicknamed Old Trusty, and if you pointed its barrel to the sky and hit the slide release, the action would pop right open from gravity alone. That's how worn it was.

But what really made the gun unusual, at least to me, was the Tasco scope mounted atop the receiver. I'd seen turkey scopes advertised in magazines but never in the wild. Deep down, I didn't believe anybody needed a scope to shoot a turkey standing still at 30 yards with a shotgun. But Michelle showed up at my door with that scoped 870 and said she'd be using it because it's what her daddy used. She was 18 at the time, and, truthfully, I'd have exhausted myself trying to call up a gobbler for her had she shown up with a Nerf gun.

GOBBLER GETTER

Old Trusty came through. Michelle shot one long-spurred gobbler with the 870 while hunting with me on that warm April afternoon and a second the next morning while hunting with her dad. And she filled all her turkey tags in much the same way for many springs afterward. Old Trusty threw fierce patterns, and you couldn't always find turkey guns like that then. Gobblers shot with it stayed shot, usually crumpling in a heap with minimal flopping. And Michelle just *never* missed with it.

Turkey-hunting ammo improved rapidly in the early years of our marriage—the timeline of new loads is sometimes how I remember important dates—and Old Trusty shot just as well with the new stuff as with the old, like an octogenarian who's curiously adept with an iPhone. Michelle loaded up with Winchester Long Beard XR for several seasons before switching over to Tungsten Super Shot, which made Old Trusty even more lethal.

↑ A big Eastern gobbler struts in circles as a pair of hens square off. You couldn't ask for an easier shot at a tom turkey, but that doesn't guarantee you'll make it.

MARK RAYCROFT

Michelle dropped the bird with Old Trusty, but she screamed before racking the slide. The scope had hit her so solidly between the eyes that they both blackened almost instantly.

While hunting, she'd sometimes hand me her gun before crossing a creek or fence, and I'd always remark on how heavy the thing was. "You'd save a pound and a half if you'd take the saddle mount and scope off this gun," I'd say. But she liked her scope almost as much as she liked pointing out that she never missed turkeys while I, shooting with a plain bead, sometimes did.

It was true. I didn't miss turkeys often, but I was hunting multiple states all spring long and would send a bucket of pellets over the top of at least one gobbler at some point during the campaign most years. When it happened, people knew because I'd always have myself a little cussing fit in the wake. I've screwed up shots on big bucks and bull elk and bears and all sorts of critters, but nothing is more painful to me than missing a spring gobbler. No one, I'd always assumed, hated missing turkeys more than me. But that didn't mean I'd be seen lugging around a shotgun with a damn scope on it.

HITS AND MISSES

Then one morning, Michelle's track record with Old Trusty changed. We'd belly-crawled to within 25 yards of a gobbler that was hung up on the crest of a white-oak ridge. When he spun our way and craned his gaudy head, I heard Old Trusty's safety *pink.* I figured that turkey was as good as fried nuggets. But instead, Michelle blasted a dogwood sapling 2 feet to the right of the bird, a shame because the white flowers on that tree were particularly pretty. She racked the slide and scrambled to the top of the ridge, looking at the empty ground as if the dead gobbler might appear there if only she paced enough. I didn't say much, but I was secretly delighted, because after 15 seasons, Michelle was due to miss a turkey at least once.

Back home, we set up a target in the yard and soon learned that the Tasco scope was finally giving out, its guts rattled to death by magnum 12-gauge recoil.

"It's time you lost this crutch anyway and just started using Old Trusty like a shotgun," I said. Michelle reluctantly agreed. That fall she had no problems wielding a scopeless Old Trusty on ducks and doves and rabbits, racking shells so fast you'd think the old pump was belt-fed—and hitting most of what she shot at too. But something changed come spring. I'd call up turkeys for her, and she'd take the safety off Old Trusty, aim with the straight bead, and flat miss them, not every time but as often as not. "I want my scope back," she said.

I got her a Weaver Kaspa turkey scope, a variable-power model with a 30mm tube that was of much better build than the old Tasco, but it was also about twice the size—both longer and heavier. With the new sight installed, Old Trusty would have made a useful boat anchor. But Michelle killed the first gobbler she shot at with it, and her confidence was restored.

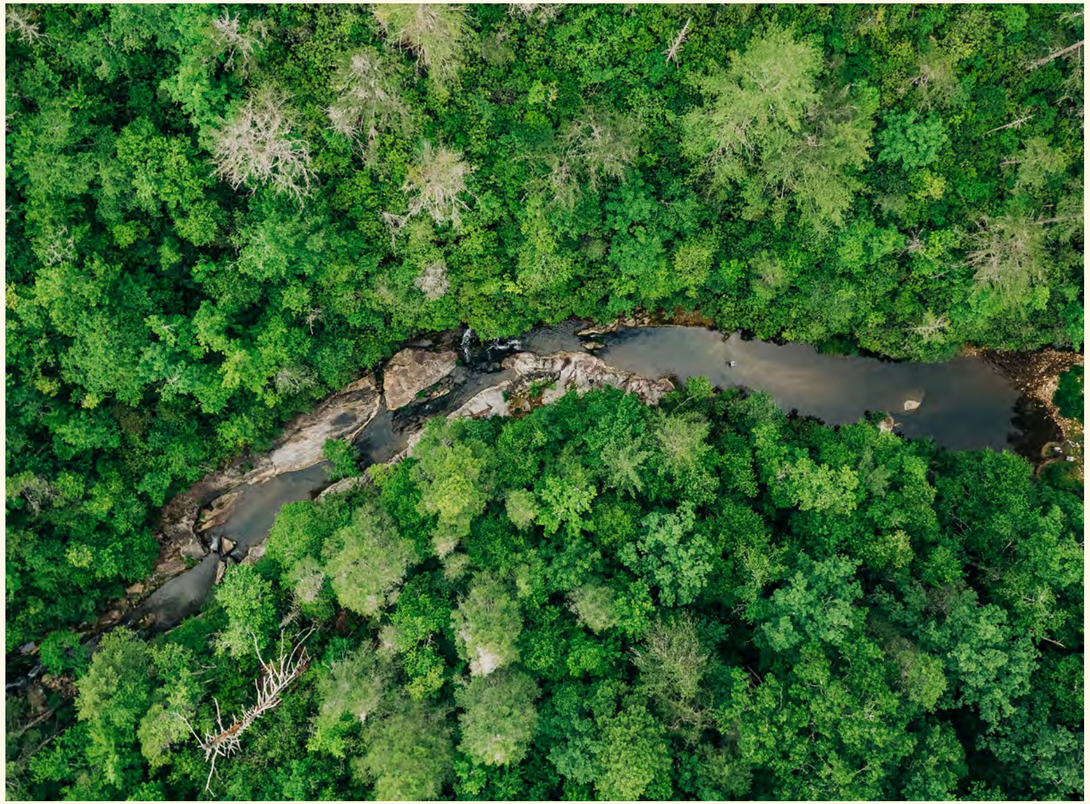
One afternoon, we found ourselves crawling behind a fan toward a big Tennessee gobbler that was strutting with a group of hens in a cut beanfield. (This was back before you'd go to hell for doing that.) We couldn't see the bird, but my buddy Kerry was behind us in the timber, calling to keep the tom talking so we could get closer. When we finally saw the gobbler, and the gobbler saw the fan, he came charging. Michelle leaned out and dropped the bird dead from the prone position with Old Trusty, but she screamed before racking the slide. The scope had hit her so solidly between the eyes that they both blackened almost instantly and stayed that way for weeks. That didn't stop her from filling the rest of her turkey tags, though.

A SIGHT BETTER

Next spring, down in Texas, Michelle decided to hunt one of her favorite spots alone on the first evening, near a live-oak bottom where turkeys often roosted. To hear her tell the story, she called up a nice Rio Grande gobbler that came in silently. She put the crosshairs on its neck, pulled the trigger, dumped the bird, and went starry from what felt like a right hook between the eyes. When she texted me to say she had a bird down, she didn't include a word about getting scoped again, but her two new black eyes betrayed her when she got back to camp.

"You're going to detach a retina shooting this gun with that scope," I said, hoping she might start practicing some more with a plain bead. Instead, she took the scope off one 870 and installed it on a different one, a 20-gauge that her dad had given her for Christmas years ago but that she'd never used for turkeys. With a Carlson's choke tube and TSS shells, it's almost as lethal as Old Trusty, and the heavy scope and mount help tame the mild 20-gauge recoil even more. She hasn't missed a turkey with it since.

Me, I spent all last season shooting gobblers with a plain bead, and I had a great time until a late hunt in Nebraska, when I airballed a big Merriam's tom at 25 yards. Per tradition, I had myself a cussing fit. Afterward, I had to admit—though certainly not out loud—that it would have been an easier shot with scope. Of course, I'm still not putting one on my gun. Turns out, I don't hate missing turkeys as much as Michelle does. F&S



LOVE IT OR LOSE IT

HOW DO WE PROTECT WILDLIFE AND CONSERVE WILD PLACES IN TODAY'S POLITICAL CLIMATE? SIMPLE. JUST ASK YOURSELF WHAT YOU CHERISH MOST IN THIS WORLD

by **HAL HERRING**

I DROVE NORTH on the little two-lane, the river on my right invisible in the hardwood bottomlands. As the road crossed tributary creeks, I imagined their courses through the woods and pastures to my river, wondering what kind of fishing must be at each of their mouths, where that powerful nexus of currents brings everything together—blue cats and largemouths, crappies and gar, redeye bass and redhorse. Who knew? White bass sometimes ran up from the Tennessee, stripers, maybe even saugers. Is there a finer mystery than a river flowing, connected to all the waters of Earth? With a light spinning rod and simple tackle to unlock the doors to that hidden realm?

I had just gotten my driver's license that April, and my parents had let me use a hand-me-down 1973 Opel Manta. The freedom was boundless. My goals at 16 years old were simple: work enough to buy gas, see new country, and fish new places. It was as if the world had exploded before me in a kaleidoscope of spring green, and a voice had spoken like thunder: "Go!"

The upper river was small and braided, shaded by massive sycamores, the shoals crowded with stands of water willow that shivered in the current. The fishing was fast, even if the fish were mostly small. Hand-size rock bass smashed my buzzbait as it swung in the current. In the slack water, shellcrackers grabbed at its plastic skirt. Only a few were big enough to take the upturned hook, but those that did were heroic fish, fighters all, thick behind the head, their colors as brilliant and exotic as anything in the Amazon or the Orinoco.

In the early afternoon, I ran the buzzbait along a sunken log, and a largemouth blasted it in an engulfing predatory assault. Compared to the hits of the panfish, it was like setting off an M-80 after a hundred Lady Fingers or Black Cat firecrackers. The bass barreled downstream, and I followed, eventually landing him on a bar of worn-smooth gravel and open mussel shells. I unhooked the fish and let him go, triumph all around me.

Looking up was like awakening from a dream, with no idea how long I'd been lost in the fishing. Birdsong came back—the haunting, repetitive call of a wood thrush, the croak of a rain crow—along with the rich, living smell of the river and the whispers of the water through the willows. The light had shifted, a thunderstorm building. I turned and started back upriver toward the car, thinking that I'd remember this day forever, which turned out to be true.

↑ A hidden river carves a path through deep woods, promising unforgettable fishing. Most of us have similar places that we hold dear.

LAWSON BUILDER

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What does this all have to do with conservation? Well, everything, actually. You couldn't place a value on that river to me, then or now. What I didn't know at the time, or in the decade or so afterward, when I fished it at every opportunity in spring and summer, is that my river had been channelized and dredged in the early decades of the 20th century. That it was so vibrant and alive and mine to enjoy and marvel at was thanks to the work of conservationists in the latter half of that century. It was also due to a change in mindset, a change in what we Americans wanted and expected from our lands and waters.

I was born in the 1960s. Federal environmental laws passed by Congress in the 1970s were so successful that, for most of my life, our waters have been getting cleaner, fishing has gotten better, and wildlife has, for the most part, become more abundant. Laws like the 1972 Clean Water Act did more than just penalize polluters for using our rivers and lakes as dumping grounds; successes led Americans to raise the bar of our expectations. We now expect clean drinking water, good fishing and hunting, and to be able to take our kids swimming in a river or lake without worrying they'll get sick or poisoned.

That's as it should be, but there's a corollary. The successes of our forebears who passed the laws and set aside the public lands and wildlife refuges and even figured out how to pay for it all has led many of us to imagine that we could never go back to the bad old days when rivers caught fire and wildlife and fish populations were in free fall. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Our progress in conserving lands and waters, and the future of the hunting and fishing that depends upon it, has slowed considerably in recent years. You can blame it on the current state of our politics, where a callow divisiveness rules, and even conservation and our public lands have been tossed into the feculent bucket of the culture wars.

If we continue to tie American conservation to politics, we will lose most or all of it, very soon. If we don't hold our commitment to wild places above our politics (a low bar to be sure), we will become more like much of the rest of the world, where fishing and hunting are the provinces of the very wealthy, and nobody sane drinks water out of the tap.

NEW RESOLVE

The time has come to ask ourselves what is really, irrefutably, important to us. Does any hunter or angler love arguing on social media or "owning" their political opponents more than they love their rivers and public lands and wildlife? Does counting political coup quench the thirst in the soul the same way a morning's fishing with a son and daughter can? Autumn in the high country? Whistling wings in the hardwood swamps? A whitetail backstrap on the grill, with friends and family and tales of the hunt?

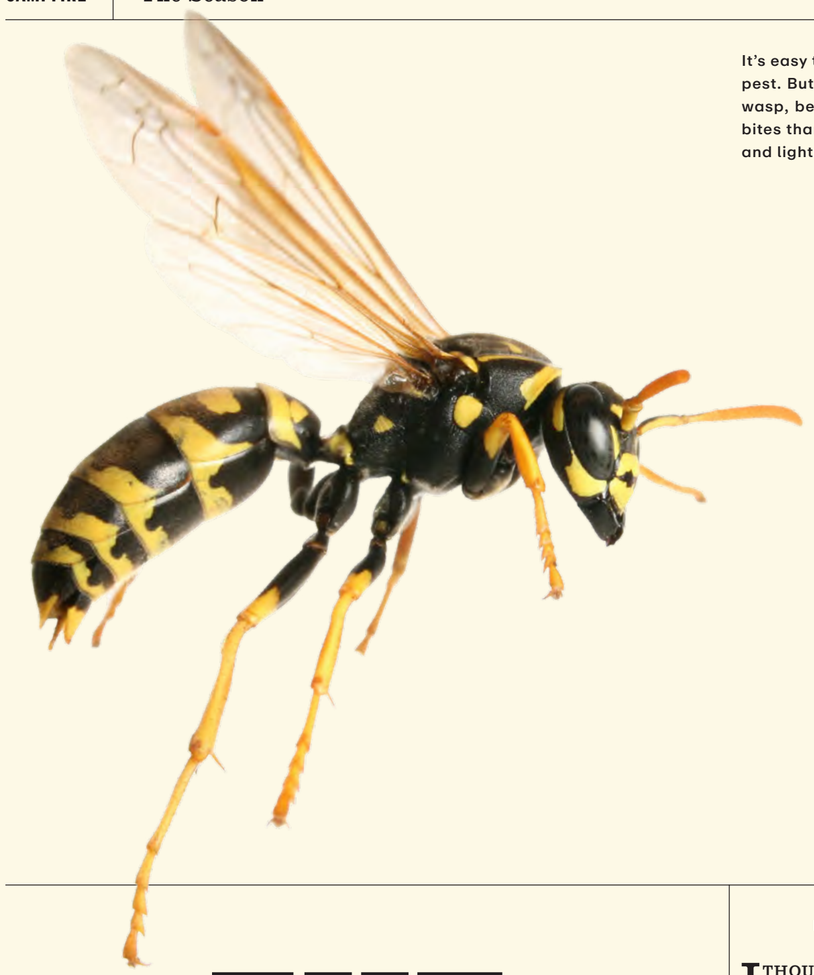
I trust that if you are reading this, you have your own memories, your own river, hunting ground, piece of land, public or private, that you cherish. Your own memories of days of wonder and triumph that you carry with you like a talisman through the storms and troubles of this life. You will probably agree with me that hunting and fishing are not really sports. We're not talking about golf or pickleball.

If we don't hold our commitment to wild places above our politics, we will become more like much of the rest of the world, where fishing and hunting are the provinces of the very wealthy, and nobody sane drinks water out of the tap.

We're talking about a way of life, and a way of seeing the world, a profound gift best enjoyed when shared with our children and friends, most powerful when passed on to the next generation stronger and healthier than when we received it.

My goal is to join with you—my fellow hunter, angler, woods wanderer, river runner, my American brother or sister—and together we'll make sure that these things we love will be around for another century and more. I don't care what your politics are. That we cherish the same things is firm enough ground to stand together on. And united, we will bring hunting and fishing, and the conservation and public access that makes it possible, out in front of our warring, absurdly performative political parties, and let them argue over how best to attain our goal. Not *whether* to attain it. But *how*.

Let's take a deep breath and remember what it is we love—and what we believe in. Then let's roll up our sleeves and work together to make sure it endures. F&S



It's easy to look at a paper wasp as a mere pest. But more people in the U.S. die from wasp, bee, and hornet stings and fire-ant bites than from bear maulings, snakebites, and lightning strikes—combined.

ANTAGAIN/GETTY IMAGES

THE STING

A NEAR-DEATH ENCOUNTER DURING A SCOUTING TRIP FORCES THE AUTHOR TO FACTOR IN SOME RISK ASSESSMENT FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

I THOUGHT IT WAS a tough strand of greenbrier that had raked across my chest. I was hacking my way through a thicket below some railroad tracks, macheteing a route into a duck swamp, with briers and vines scratching my forearms and face. No big deal. Part of the scouting game. Then, maybe a quarter mile from the truck, my butt started itching. Itching and burning like crazy.

What on Earth? I thought.

As I pushed through a stand of young pines, the itching and burning turned into a million pinpricks of pain. I dropped the machete, dropped my pants, and took a quick look at the situation back there. White blisters had formed on both cheeks.

Freaking fire ants, I thought. *I hate those things.*

"You were minutes from death," the doctor said. "Do something about this or stay out of the woods."

I pulled up my brush pants and pushed on toward the swamp. Up ahead, a pair of wood ducks bolted from the water's edge.

A good sign, I thought. *But what is going on with my unspeakable parts?*

Then the insides of my ears turned hot and itchy, and when I licked my lips, they were numb. I didn't have to wonder what was happening any longer. I was going into anaphylactic shock.

VANISHING ACT

When we think of danger in the outdoors, we tend to think of bear attacks and snakebites, tumbles over cliffs and lightning strikes. But on average, some 70 people die in the U.S. each year from bee, hornet, and wasp stings. Fire ants fell a few more. That's more than bear attacks, snakebites, and lightning strikes combined.

I have a long history of sensitivity to insect stings, and for many years I carried an EpiPen, or three, on backcountry trips. But it had been more than 20 years since the last bad encounter. I'd gotten careless. I'd quit carrying emergency epinephrine. And then the clock suddenly started over.

When my ears went hot, I did a 180 and headed back to the truck. I knew I was close to a hospital, and I figured I could get there quicker than the hospital could find me. I raced through the woods, hacking through thickets. By the time I got to the railroad tracks, my eyes were running and large hives had broken out on the inside of my elbows. A rule of thumb with anaphylaxis is that things go downhill fast when you have reactions in two different body parts. I was now at five. I clambered to the top of the tracks and bolted the hundred yards to the truck, ears burning and ass on fire.

"Get to the truck. Get to the truck," I repeated aloud. That was my mantra.

I got to the truck. In the rearview mirror, the lower part of my face sagged like melted wax. But I wasn't having respiratory issues, and in my long-ago reactions, I'd never had trouble breathing. I thought I could make it. I punched in the hospital on Google Maps, turned on the truck's emergency flashers, and peeled off down the highway.

Halfway to the hospital, I wasn't sure I could make it. I turned into a pharmacy, parked, and left the truck running. The kid behind the counter was wide-eyed.

"Benadryl," I croaked. He pointed. I drained half a bottle of children's Benadryl while the debit card authorized. I got back in the truck. *Almost there.*

When the ER receptionist told me for the second time to take a seat, I replied that I wouldn't. When the triage technician took my blood pressure for the third time and turned to the nurse to ask if there was another machine available because this one must not be working, the nurse asked for the reading.

"Fifty over thirty," the tech replied. Through droopy eyes I saw the nurse bolt upright like she'd pulled an ejection-seat lever. I passed out in her arms.

Epinephrine, Benadryl, cortisone, oxygen, albuterol, IV liquids. I came to, once, briefly, in a full-body sweat, to hear a doctor say, "Is he back? Are you back?" I counted five doctors and nurses around me. Then I passed out again.

TREATMENT PLAN

Obviously, I didn't die. That's the paradoxical thing about anaphylaxis: Once you get to the other side, you're good. I drove home from the hospital two and a half hours later. But I was a changed man. As I checked out, one of the doctors told me: "You were minutes from death. Do something about this or stay out of the woods."

Which is why I found myself in an allergist's office recently, having the first of what is planned to be more than 100 injections of diluted venom extracted from the glands of all the creepy-crawlies for which tests confirmed I am allergic: yellowjackets, honeybees, white-faced hornets, ground hornets, and pretty much any wasp on the planet. For my fire-ant allergy, since those little buggers are too small for venom extraction, I will get injected with a concoction of ground-up goo made from the crushed bodies of both red and black fire ants. In six to nine months, my response to future stings should be reduced to the population baseline level.

To be honest, I was rocked pretty hard for a month or two. When I passed out that second time, I had just enough clarity to try to force myself to stay awake. I fought the dimming in the room, the slow drawing in of my vision, like the aperture mechanism of a camera lens closing. But I couldn't stymie the dark. I was minutes from not waking up again. That messed with my head.

In hindsight, I probably should have called an ambulance instead of driving to the hospital. I definitely should have had an EpiPen with me. But wringing my hands over past mistakes won't change anything, and I'm a firm believer in looking forward. I don't want to die for my love of the outdoors, but I also know that really living requires, for me, time spent in places where life can go downhill fast. So I've been working on a bit of a risk assessment lately. Given what I love to do, and the sometimes remote places where I love to do those things, and the fact that I am no longer 24—or 44 or 54, and we'll stop right there—I've been asking myself: *What are my vulnerabilities, and how can I minimize them?* I now wear an inflatable PFD when I'm on my boat alone. I carry a satellite messenger for quick evacuation if needed. I keep a windlass tourniquet and bleed-control gauze in my hunting pack and pickup truck.

And I'm not complaining one bit about six months of weekly immunotherapy injections. Not because I'm suddenly scared, or overreacting. But because I plan on looking forward to future adventures, near and far, for a long, long time to come. F&S

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

Play to Win

NOT BEING AFRAID TO ENDURE A SKUNKING HERE AND THERE WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER ANGLER IN THE LONG RUN

by **JOE CERMELE**

I HAVE ABSOLUTELY no expectation of catching anything when I'm throwing a glide bait. I never do.

It's cold and drizzling. My feet are numb in my waders as I creep along the shoreline of a local lake, caught up in a rhythm: cast, make short, choppy retrieves, pause, repeat. Out there, just a few inches under the surface, the 10-inch bait darts, jackknifes, turns seductively, and—almost neutrally buoyant—hovers in place whenever I stop. Its size makes the lure unappealing to the piles of small bass and pickerel in this lake. If I do get a strike, it's likely going to be from a fish worthy of a photo. Most of the time, though, nothing happens—and that doesn't bother me. A willingness to fail in fishing, I've come to learn, is one of the best ways to get better and catch more fish over time.

↑ An angler eases a hefty largemouth bass back into the water. Glide baits can excel at catching big fish like this.

When I was 15, 25, or even 30 years old, you couldn't have convinced me of that. Back then, too many what-ifs ran through my head whenever I fished. *What if the trout bite stinks and I want to switch to smallmouths? What if I can't get the pickerel to eat my flies and I need to switch to lures? What if the bass aren't in the pads and I have to fish the deep water by the spillway?* The idea of spending a day on the water and getting skunked was too much to bear. As a result, fishing on foot meant carrying a backpack loaded down with 40 pounds of tackle. If I was fly fishing, I still carried a spinning rod. Or if I was spin fishing, I had a cased fly rod strapped to my backpack. I wasn't satisfied unless I felt ready for anything. I think a lot of anglers feel the same.

Time on the water is precious, especially when you've got a job, kids, a home to maintain, and other responsibilities that detract from the hours you can spend fishing. So when you do get on the water, naturally you want to catch something. Over the years, however, I've come to realize that, in many scenarios, being able to multitask leads to worse results. If there are trout and smallmouths in the river, pick one. Otherwise, you run the risk of not fishing effectively for either. This, of course, is easier said than done, and the irony is not lost on me that it took one of the most complex niche lures ever created to convince me of the value of commitment in fishing.

COMMITMENT ISSUES

I arrived late to the glide-bait party. The modern versions of these specialty lures were developed—like many great things in bass fishing—in Japan in the early 2000s. Twenty years later, custom builders across the U.S. are now selling their glides for hundreds of dollars. Influencers, like my friend Oliver Ngy, have made careers out of using these massive baits to fool gigantic fish. Glide-bait anglers were, in many ways, an exclusive society within the larger fishing culture—one that I paid little attention to until a buddy of mine started making his own glide baits. After months of his texting me photos of the big bass, pike, and stripers that he caught on his lures, I finally caved and asked for one. A year later, I own about a dozen glide baits. Some are inexpensive, mass-produced models, others are from custom makers.

The reason I fell in love with these lures isn't because they're for "hardcore" anglers, or even the fact that they catch mostly big fish. It's the simplicity of approach you get for free when you commit to using glide baits. Having a full, dawn-to-dusk day to fish is a luxury, even for me. Most often, all I have is an hour here or a couple of hours there between errands or after chores around the house. Those little windows have become far more fun and relaxing now that I take one rod, two glide baits, and a spool of leader. That's it. Keeping my fishing this simple leaves no room for second-guessing. *Do I keep throwing this spinnerbait or switch to crappie jigs and head to another part of the lake? Maybe they're just not going to eat topwater, so I'd better switch to a Texas rig while I still have some time.* Having options like that can make short fishing trips frantic, whereas committing to one method can not only be a de-stressor, but also a better learning tool.

FOCUS POINT

This is not a pitch for you to run out and buy expensive glide baits, which can be a costly addiction. (On more than one occasion, I've had to go swimming to retrieve a pricey bait that I snagged in a tree.) Instead, consider this a nudge to focus your efforts. If what you feel like doing—or getting better at—is catching brown trout on big streamers, then fish them for the duration, win or lose. Don't commit for an hour, fret about time, and switch to a nymph. Whenever you deviate from the plan, you're no longer taking the time to figure out why one tactic isn't working. *Was it my cadence? If so, did I try altering it? Do I need a longer leader because the water is clear? Do I need a bigger streamer to turn heads? Smaller because the trout are skittish?*

Every time I fail with a glide bait, I make it a point to bank a nugget of knowledge that makes me better equipped to recognize when conditions are ideal—when I *should* get a bite. If I get bumped and don't connect, I analyze what I did wrong so I don't do it next time. I pay attention to the surface chop or lack thereof, always looking for correlations to productivity. This is infinitely useful, because sometimes being a good angler isn't about knowing what to throw but knowing what *not* to throw.

In just one season of committing to glide baits during my only-an-hour-or-two fishing trips, a lot has happened. I've caught 6-pound bass and giant pickerel in waters where I didn't know fish of that caliber existed. I've learned that these lures shine in water that's 55 degrees or colder, so when it's warmer, I know to break out my trusty Flukes and spinnerbaits. I've figured out, through repetition, where the fish big enough to take a swing move based on a variety of factors.

What matters most, however, is that I've had fun on every trip—whether that glide bait got touched or not. Using these baits is a visual style of fishing, and it's easy to get mesmerized by the rhythm of the lure. And on any cast, the shadow of a giant bass could ghost up behind the lure, or out of nowhere, it could get T-boned.

I've had the same feeling sitting in front of a video poker machine. You know you'll probably leave poorer, but you can't help but feed it one more dollar because the next pull could be the royal flush. F&S

If what you feel like doing—or getting better at—is catching brown trout on big streamers, then fish them for the duration, win or lose. Don't commit for an hour, fret about time, and switch to a nymph.

STAND AND DELIVER

REAL RIFLEMEN DON'T NEED HIGH-DOLLAR RIGS OR THE LATEST TECH. ALL THEY NEED IS A RIFLE—ANY RIFLE—AND SKILL

by **RICHARD MANN**

THE RUFFED GROUSE sailed over my head and landed on a high limb in a tall poplar. It was late muzzleloader deer season, and an Army buddy and I were taking turns pushing thickets for one another. As he emerged from the grove of pines the grouse had flushed from, he asked if I'd seen anything. I pointed at the perched bird and told him I'd have shot it if I knew how to cook grouse.

"You'd blow the thing all to hell with that smoke pole," he said, snickering. That's when I told him I would shoot the bird's head off. He laughed harder. "I'll tell you what," he said. "You shoot its head off, and I'll cook it for you." So I raised my rifle, licked my thumb and rubbed it across the front sight for a little extra glimmer, and cocked the hammer. I ate well that night.

I've always been a decent rifle shot, partly because I got started early and had plenty of opportunities to learn growing up in rural West Virginia. But also because my dad and granddad, cousins and uncles, and friends and neighbors all considered it a point of pride to be skilled with a rifle—to be able to shoulder a rifle, any rifle, and hit what you were aiming at, on demand, whether you were shooting offhand, from a knee, or from whatever rest was available.

↑ For hunters, there's often no time to find a rest, let alone get a firing solution. That's when you have to rely on raw shooting ability.

BILL BUCKLEY

As we neared, the birds flushed, banked left, and swept by us. Johnny threw up his pump 22, and the trail pigeon tumbled to the ground.

By contrast, today's shooting seems to come down to getting a firing solution from a ballistics app, turning some knobs, and then building the perfect rest so you don't get in the way of your rifle doing its job. It's like we are taking the rifleman out of rifle hunting.

COUSIN JOHNNY

The best rifleman I know is my cousin Johnny Walker, who has always been my best friend. I hung on every word of shooting advice he gave me, because I'd seen what he could do with a rifle—like the day we were out plinking and I told him about some pigeons I'd seen in Doc Freygang's barn. We decided to slip in and shoot them off the roost, but as we neared, they flushed, banked left, and swept by us. Johnny threw up his pump 22, and the trail pigeon tumbled to ground.

One of Johnny's lessons was to keep your head erect and not crawl the stock trying to get your eye closer to the sight. With open sights, that makes the rear notch too wide, and if you do it with a scope, you'll get a semicircle cut on your brow to remind you not to do it again.

I learned another lesson from watching him shoot a squirrel out of a 100-foot hickory. I asked why he shot so quickly after shouldering his rifle. He said that your first look at the sights is usually your best, and that the longer you hold your rifle, the harder it is to keep it steady: "If you hold long, you hold wrong."

That advice came in handy not long ago, on a mule deer hunt in the shadows of Chianti Peak, just north of Ojinaga, Mexico. I'd found a nice buck in a mesquite thicket and was struggling to settle the reticle. I paused, lowered the rifle, and took a breath. When I returned the rifle to my shoulder, I pressed the trigger as soon as the crosshairs found the buck's shoulder. He fell where he stood, heart-shot.

Once, I watched Johnny outshoot a passel of fellow riflemen at a muzzleloading match, and he explained his winning form afterward. He said he used his shoulder and support arm to hold the rifle on target, and his shooting hand for managing the trigger, not for squeezing the stock. Years later, during a scrape with a Cape buffalo in a Mozambique swamp, my initial shots had been embarrassingly bad and the buffalo had become perturbed with me. Several rounds into the fiasco, I remembered Johnny's advice and realized I'd been squeezing the hell out of the stock with my shooting hand. It was understandable, I guess, considering how close I was to being stomped into a blood puddle. But thanks to Johnny, it didn't come to that.

CAPPED OFF

Ancestors on Johnny's mother's side of the family were reputable rifle makers during the Civil War, before the Union Army burned their gun shop to the ground. Johnny followed in their footsteps, building Southern mountain-style caplock and flintlock muzzleloaders, hand-rifling the barrels the old way. For the last quarter century, that's all he's hunted with—and it hasn't diminished his game-getting, or the stories about his skill as a rifleman.

I'll tell one more story, as it might be the most impressive. Johnny was teaching attendees at a bushcraft fair how to load and shoot a flintlock. With the event winding down, a crowd gathered, and a haughty onlooker suggested Johnny prove himself by shooting the cap off a mushroom about 75 yards downrange. Johnny loaded his flintlock, then licked his thumb and rubbed it across the front sight for that little extra glimmer. Standing, head erect, he snapped the rifle to his shoulder and turned the mushroom into a stem.

That shot reminds me of "Morgan's shingle," a test used during the Revolutionary War by a Virginian named Daniel Morgan, who formed a company of elite riflemen. To qualify for the unit, a man had to hit a Colonial-era house shingle—a piece of wood measuring 7 by 10 inches—at 250 paces, offhand, with a single, cold-bore shot. The actual range was probably 15 rods—about 250 feet—which was a common distance for rifle competitions or turkey shoots in those days. Reports likely exaggerated the distance to frighten British soldiers.

But either way, Morgan's men were highly skilled shooters. For as much as riflery has evolved since, and despite how far we've stretched our effective range, I wonder how many of today's shooters could qualify for Morgan's company—let alone pull off Johnny's mushroom shot.

Our sport has become gizmo-driven, with things like ballistics calculators, rangefinders, and twisty turrets. Hunters are even carrying ultralight tripods and sandbags to the field so they can build a shooting platform. That's fine, on one hand. A good rifleman should use whatever is available to make the shot. My concern is that with all these cool tools at our disposal, we won't maintain or develop the sort of skills made legendary by the likes of Morgan's men—and, in my family, at least, Johnny Walker. Sometimes there's no time for gizmos, and real shooting skills are needed. Sometimes the shooter himself—his legs, ass, and elbows—needs to be the shooting platform.

A fair number of people witnessed Johnny shoot the cap off that mushroom. I'd like to think some will tell the story around a fire ring, probably stretching the distance to 100 yards. Not to frighten British soldiers, but because nothing deserves exaggeration like a great rifle shot, and because nothing inspires embellishment like a campfire. Someone listening will beg to know what kind of magical rifle Johnny must have used. Some folks just can't accept that real skill with a rifle wasn't, isn't, and never will be about the gear. It's always been about the shooter who can, on demand, stand and deliver. F&S

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

SAVING THE DAY

A GUN DOG COMING BACK WITH A BIRD YOU'D GIVEN UP ON AS LOST IS ONE OF THE MOST GRATIFYING—AND RELIEVING—SIGHTS IN WINGSHOOTING

by **TOM DAVIS**

MY HUNTING BUDDY Erik Forsgren has always had female golden retrievers. We refer to them, not without affection, as swamp collies, but they're the real deal—medium-size, ruggedly athletic, copper-coated all-day hunters that ooze functionality and are a world away from the ornamental goldens you see romping with their perfect families on TV. While the house manners of Forsgren's crew leave something to be desired—the case of the disappearing fried pheasant-breast sandwiches comes to mind—they redeem themselves with their reliably productive performances in the field.

They've all had that ebullient "where's the party?" golden retriever personality too—except for Sydney, who was all business, all the time, and has a special place in my affections. It seemed that whenever I hunted with Sydney, she invariably found a bird I was sure was lost forever.

One incident in particular stands out: We were hunting a piece of northern Wisconsin grouse cover we called, somewhat prophetically, the Land of the Lost. This was one of those backside-of-nowhere spots so exceptionally gnarly that sunlight barely penetrated there, and when I shot at a grouse hurtling across a gap in a green wall of conifers, I thought I'd missed. But then I saw a drift of feathers spiraling down.

"Hey, Erik," I called. "Get Sydney over here. I may have hit that bird."

We worked in what I thought was the general direction of the grouse's flight, and sure enough, Sydney got birdy near a balsam deadfall and put the bird up. It looked as if she'd catch it in the air—the grouse was clearly laboring—but instead it gained altitude and vanished into the depths of the cover. Sydney took off after it only to return empty-mouthed a minute or two later.

At that point I'd written off the grouse as lost—but I shouldn't have doubted Sydney's tenacity. After what felt like a long way for a wounded grouse to fly, we came to where the edge of the thick stuff butted up against open pole timber. I could hear Sydney's bell off to my left but couldn't see her. That's when Forsgren said, in the kind of flat voice you might use to announce the arrival of the mail, "Sydney's got your grouse."

"You're kidding!" I said and crashed through the brush in the direction of her bell. Sydney emerged from a woody tangle with the bird in her mouth. If I'd been any happier, Forsgren would have had to grab my ankles to keep me from me floating away. Recovering a bird you're sure you've lost—especially one as dearly won as a ruffed grouse—tends to have that effect on a body.

↑ Hunter Agustin Bustos receives a California quail from his GSP while giving his hunting partner a well-deserved pat on the side.

RECOVERY EFFORTS

Nash Buckingham famously observed, "The best long-range duck load is a well-trained retriever," and as someone who shot literally thousands of game birds of every description, Mr. Buck knew what he was talking about.

Simply put, your chances of recovering any bird that isn't stone dead are vastly improved when you have a good dog in your corner. For that matter, they're considerably better even for the ones you *do* stone, as birds have this nasty habit of falling into places where we humans—with our crude perceptions and limited ability to negotiate tight spaces—can't locate and/or retrieve them. (Hunting over water without a dog is madness. There's really nothing more to say about that.)

Over and above our ethical obligation to make every effort to recover wounded game, losing birds just hurts. It leaves a bad taste in your mouth. It feels like a referendum on your wingshooting skills. And it's not as if you can blithely assume you'll have the opportunity to redeem yourself, especially these days, when very few of us are wallowing in an overabundance of birds.

The bottom line is that birds don't come easy, which is why having a dog like Sydney—a dog ferociously committed to the recovery of dead and wounded game—is more important now than it's ever been. It's not overstating the case to say that it can literally save the day.

THE IMPORTANCE OF *HUNT DEAD*

Obviously, there are tremendous differences between breeds, and between individual dogs, in their ability to "hunt dead." Spaniels and retrieving breeds are generally stronger in this respect than pure pointing breeds—meaning pointers and the three breeds of setters—with the versatile pointing breeds occupying the middle ground. It's a reflection of what the architects of the various breeds were shooting for, and where they prioritized the production of game vis-à-vis its recovery. Some pointers and setters make such a blatantly token effort to hunt dead that it's as if they're saying, "Screw this s--t. This isn't what I'm here for."

Early training plays a huge role as well. An impressionable pup that learns the command *hunt dead* means he's going to find something exciting in the grass—even if it's just a scent-dosed tennis ball or a bumper with some wings taped to it—is going to retain that lesson all his life. The key is to make sure the pup is successful.

Then, if you want to amp him up even more, hide a wing-clipped pigeon in thin cover where the bird has room to move. Nothing cranks up a dog's prey drive like game that looks like it's getting away. This is a terrific off-season exercise for older dogs too.

WHAT A PAIR

Ultimately, it boils down not to what it says on the pedigree but to the drive and tenacity of the individual dog. On paper, Emmylou—a tricolor English setter who graced my life a while back—was an unlikely candidate for retrieving greatness, but she made two of the most jaw-dropping retrieves on pheasants I've ever seen. One was on a broken-winged Iowa bird she pointed in a strip of towering horseweed. The bird fell on the far side of the strip, and by the time I'd fought my way through, both Emmy and the bird had vanished. I stood there for a long time, blowing my whistle. Then I stood a little longer and blew my whistle some more. Eventually, Emmy emerged over a rise

Sydney emerged from a woody tangle with the bird in her mouth. If I'd been any happier, Forsgren would have had to grab my ankles to keep me from me floating away.

in a picked cornfield, the lively, but now largely tailless, rooster clutched in her tan-trimmed jaws.

The other was on the Fort Pierre National Grassland in South Dakota, where, against all odds, Emmy came up with a rooster, barely nicked by a hunting companion, that had sailed—I mean *really* sailed—into an enormous expanse of slough grass. The chances of finding it seemed so remote that we didn't even bother to look. So when Emmy made a big cast in that general direction (she hadn't seen the bird), I didn't give it much thought beyond hoping she'd find something to point.

Well, you can guess the rest: She'd been gone for a while—not out of character for her—when I glimpsed her in the distance. It was misting lightly, which obscured my view, but she seemed to be moving at a slower, more measured pace than usual. She was heading in my direction, and as she came closer the fuzzy picture resolved. I could see that she was carrying something.

When I met my friend again (we'd split up to cover more ground), I said, "Emmylou found something that belongs to you." He gave me a baffled look—until I pulled the lost rooster out of my vest and handed it to him. Then he broke into a smile as wide as the prairie horizon. F&S

Spellbound

WALKING THE NORTHWOODS' ASPEN FORESTS FOR GROUSE AND WOODCOCK IS EVEN MORE ENCHANTING WHEN YOU HAVE THE PERFECT SHOTGUN IN YOUR HANDS

↑ The Upland Gun Company Zeus is a surprisingly affordable custom-fitted side-by-side—and a heck of a grouse gun too.

RYAN SPARKS

by **PHIL BOURJAILY**

ONLY A FEW YELLOW LEAVES cling to the tops of the aspens. Lit by the late-afternoon sun, the trees turn into tall candles illuminating the long drive curving back to the house in the woods, which is covered in rough-hewn siding. Welcoming lights shine inside, and one of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes lies behind it. My friend Sam, in jeans and an orange vest, waits for me by his truck.

Although we've never met face-to-face before, we've been pen pals long enough that there's not much ice to break between us, and there's no time for ice-breaking anyway. We make it to the woods to hunt the last hour of the day, when grouse feed before roosting. Sam calls it the magic hour. Taking in the scenery, my whole northern Minnesota experience seems otherworldly before it even begins. It feels as if I've made a much longer journey than the 500 miles I'd put between me and the cornfields of home.

I brought some magic of my own: a wand. It's a 20-gauge Upland Gun Company Zeus side-by-side that I was fitted for more than a year ago and have yet to take hunting. It's long, slim, and lightweight, coming in at just an ounce over 6 pounds, with 30-inch barrels. I ordered it with a gold grouse feather inlaid in the bottom of the frame, since I'd planned from the beginning to bring the gun north to see what kind of spells I could cast with it in the uplands.

DOUBLE TAKE

It's not just tradition, nor is it snobbery, that makes so many grouse hunters pick side-by-side shotguns. No other game bird demands such quick reactions and instinctive shooting as a ruffed grouse in heavy cover. And no shotgun points as quickly and instinctively as a side-by-side. In its classic form, a side-by-side double is all that's left when you start with wood and steel and strip away everything that isn't a two-barreled gun. It's light, it sits low in the hands, and it points like an extra finger.

To work its magic, however, a side-by-side has to shoot where you look. And it's in this regard that the Upland Gun Company is doing something unique in our time: It builds guns to order, with custom stock dimensions, at off-the-rack prices. If you can resist the upgrades and options that add up fast, you can be out the door with a well-made gun, stocked for you, for $2,500 plus the cost of the fitting. The guns are built by the small Italian maker R.F.M., and the Upland Gun Company is run by Jerry Havel and Dan LaFond, former competitors as reps for Remington and Mossberg, respectively, in the Upper Midwest before they joined forces to indulge their shared love for side-by-side shotguns.

At my fitting during the summer before last, gunsmith Del Whitman handed me a try gun made from an old Miroku side-by-side, on which every part of the stock adjusts. I mounted and shot at a steel plate, and Del adjusted the gun. Together, we walked the point of impact onto the aiming point. When I was center-punching the target consistently, Whitman recorded the try gun's measurements.

Over the years, I've learned to fit myself to most gunstocks, so I was skeptical that the process would make a huge difference. When the gun arrived, I rushed to the range and instantly became a believer in Whitman's skill, as I made one clay target after another disappear—vaporized in the center of the pattern—as if I were sending them to another dimension.

THE GRADUATE

We park at a turnoff into the national forest. Sam releases his golden retriever, Nica, from her crate, and we walk a short way through mature woods and into a young clear-cut. Sam trained Nica, and she's as good a flusher as I've seen. She stops when Sam tells her "too far," she hups on command, she checks back constantly. As a bonus, she's taught herself to bark when she's on hot scent, warning you that a flush is coming.

Three years ago, Sam emailed me to ask for shooting advice, and he's been my very diligent remote student ever since. I took him all the way back to the beginning by having him shoot a Red Ryder BB gun with the sights cut off. Next, he moved to backyard clays with a shotgun, then trap, then skeet. He shot his first 25 straight this summer. Sam gets his chance to show what he's learned not long into our hunt. Nica barks, and a grouse flushes in the young growth. I have a clear view over Sam's shoulder as the bird quarters away and he makes a neat shot. Sam calls it his graduation grouse, and I'm not sure which of us is happier about it.

My turn comes a few minutes later. In the afternoon shadows, all I see is a fluttering blob, which I recognize about the same time Sam yells, "Woodcock!" It's dipping low, and I check for Nica out of the corner of my eye before locking onto the bird. It falls, shot through the bill, head, and neck, without a pellet in the body. Evidently, I looked in the right place, and my hands and the gun did the rest. Like magic.

The woodcock falls, shot though the bill, head, and neck, without a pellet in the body. Evidently, I looked in the right place, and my hands and the gun did the rest. Like magic.

ENCHANTED FOREST

The next morning, Sam explains his grouse-hunting philosophy: "We'll walk, then we'll walk some more, then we'll walk, then a bit more walking." The next two days, we put nearly 30 miles on our boots. Sam is a trail walker. Some hunters bust brush, some cover ground on trails. I've done both. Busting brush is walking into walls of skinny trees. Walking the trails of maintained timberlands is like run-and-gun turkey hunting. Knowing that you'll always flush more grouse than you see, and see more than you shoot at, it makes sense to cover ground to maximize flushes. Walking trails has another benefit. You can see the forest for the trees. This time of year, you get to walk those golden aisles of autumn the poets write about, and without a stick in your eye to block the view.

All told, we flush 20 birds, down from the peak of last year, Sam says, but enough to keep us alert. Even with a barking golden to warn you, you don't know exactly when a grouse might flush, and it's often here and gone like a jolt of electricity. My new gun breaks in like a good pair of boots, feeling more and more like a trusted companion in my hands—light enough to carry, heavy enough to swing smoothly should the need arise. The slim beavertail fore-end I ordered in place of the classic splinter had sparked a pang of buyer's remorse when I first held the gun, but it feels more natural in my hand with every step.

Somewhere around mile eight on the first full day, a grouse flushes not far in front of us, alights in a tree branch, quickly realizes its error, and blasts off. I take a high, going-away shot, and I've got my hands on my first ruffed grouse of the season.

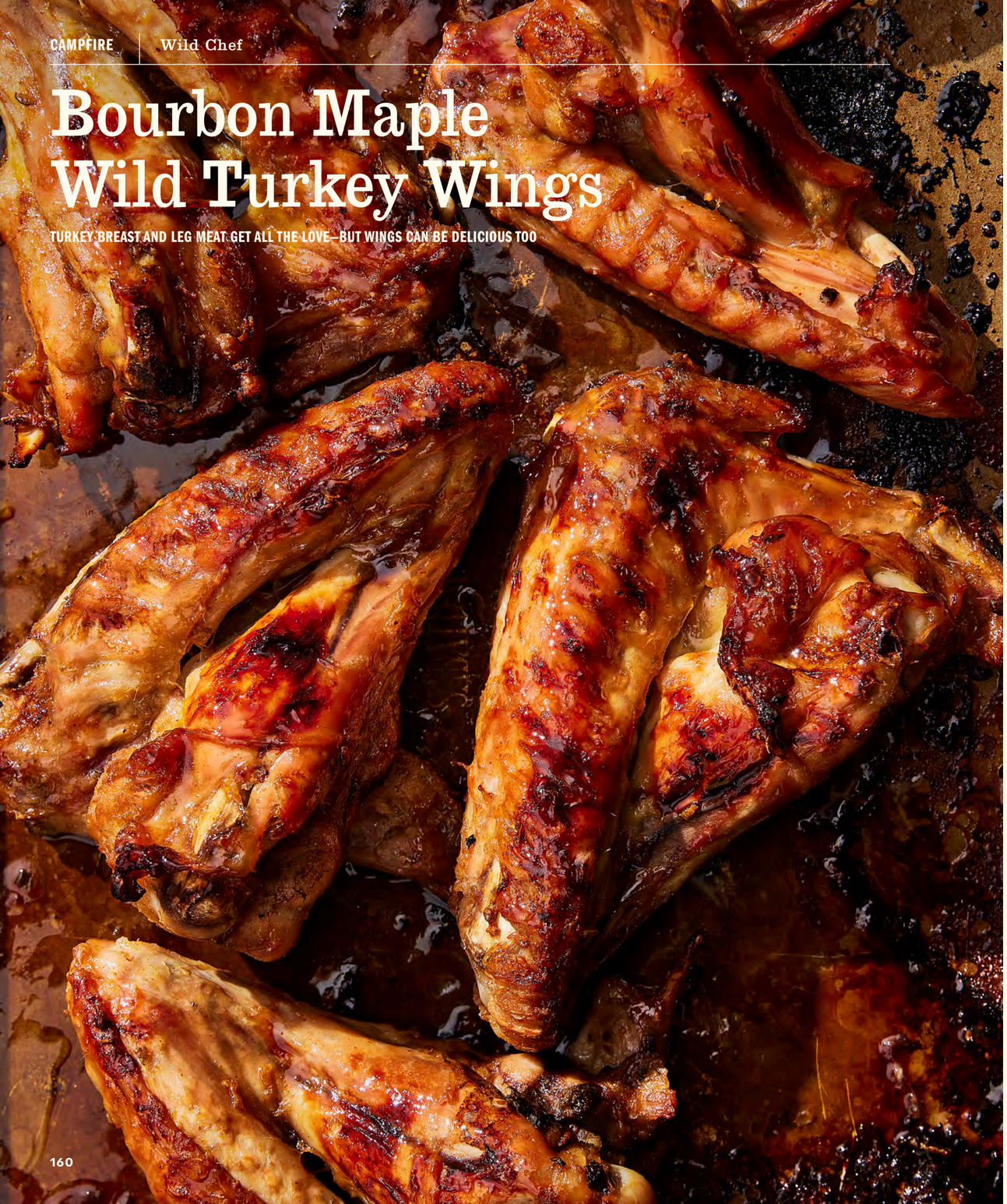
With 20 minutes of shooting light left on the second day, we take a last walk down a long, slightly eerie trail—maybe it's just the lengthening shadows—that runs ruler-straight and seemingly forever to drained bogs where, Sam tells me, you can still find migration trails left by the woodland caribou that lived here 100 years ago. There might be a moose, or maybe a spruce grouse.

Nica barks. A ruff flashes across the trail. Sam misses and reloads just in time for the next one to flush. This bird makes the mistake of flying straight away from us in the open. It's a long shot. I rush, making a mess of my gun mount. When Sam and I pull our triggers at the same time and the grouse falls, I'm certain that the student has surpassed the teacher. As shooting time ends, we walk back toward the Northwoods sunset.

A cynic might say my gun ran out of magic when it counted. I'd say that sometimes it's the wizard, not the wand. Besides, it was the gun that brought me here in the first place, and how can you ask for any stronger magic than that? F&S

Bourbon Maple Wild Turkey Wings

TURKEY BREAST AND LEG MEAT GET ALL THE LOVE—BUT WINGS CAN BE DELICIOUS TOO



by JONATHAN MILES
photographs by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI
styling by ROSCOE BETSILL

EDWARD LEE LIKES HIS BOURBON. No, scratch that: Edward Lee *loves* his bourbon. The Louisville, Kentucky, chef (610 Magnolia, Nami) and author of last year's *Bourbon Land* loves it in a glass, of course, but he's just as fond of it on the stove or in the oven, as a homegrown flavoring for his cuisine. Case in point: these bourbon-glazed wild turkey wings that Lee cooked up as a *Field & Stream* exclusive.

Wild turkey wings get a bad rap from many hunters, mostly because they can be a hassle to dry-pluck. But the flavorful meat is worth the minor effort. You can leave the wings whole, but separating them into flats and drumettes makes them more manageable on the plate.

It's important to note that the time and temperature specified here is for younger birds, such as jakes or fall jennies. For longbeards, the best practice is to lower the heat to 300 degrees, add some liquid to the pan (a can of beer would be great), and extend the initial cook time by an hour or more.

Lee declined to specify a brand of bourbon to use here, but the one with the turkey on the label would be fitting.

> "Wild turkey wings can be a hassle to dry-pluck. But the flavorful meat is worth the minor effort."

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE WINGS

6	wild turkey wings
2 Tbsp.	vegetable oil
1 Tbsp.	smoked paprika
1 tsp.	garlic powder
1 Tbsp.	salt
½ tsp.	ground black pepper
1 tsp.	sugar

FOR THE GLAZE

2 cups	bourbon
½ cup	maple syrup
½ cup	brown sugar
¼ cup	apple cider vinegar
2 Tbsp.	soy sauce
2 Tbsp.	hot sauce

FOR SERVING

1	scallion, thinly sliced
1	jalapeño pepper, finely diced

DIRECTIONS ⇨

DIRECTIONS

Serves 4

1

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a large bowl, toss the wings with the oil, paprika, garlic powder, salt, black pepper, and sugar. Let marinate for 30 minutes.

2

Place the wings in an even layer on a sheet pan. Cover with aluminum foil. Roast in the oven for one hour.

3

In the meantime, make the glaze. Whisk all the glaze ingredients together in a saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes, until the glaze has reduced to a syrupy texture. Let cool to room temperature.

4

Take the wings from the oven and remove the foil. Turn the oven temperature up to 450 degrees. Place wings back in the oven, uncovered, for 10 minutes. The meat should be tender at this point.

5

Remove the wings again, place them in a large bowl, and toss with the glaze. Reserve the remaining glaze but put the wings back on the sheet pan and return to the oven for 5 to 8 minutes, until the glaze has caramelized a little.

6

Arrange the wings on a platter and drizzle with the reserved glaze. Garnish with scallions and jalapeño peppers and serve. F&S

by **BILL HEAVEY** illustration by **PETER OUMANSKI**

Skunked Again

THE WORST THING ABOUT GETTING BLANKED ISN'T THE FRUSTRATION OR THE HUMILIATION—IT'S THE FAMILIARITY

I'M FLOATING through a section of the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry so classic it could be in one of those "How to Catch 'Em" magazine articles. Here, dear reader, are the boulders to target, don't miss that productive dropoff, and aren't these just the loveliest riffles and eddies you've ever seen? It is a beautiful day, and I'm working the water like nobody's business. And coming up total snake eyes.

Meanwhile, we pass boats raucous with the happy shouts of hooked-up anglers. Behind me, my partner yells, "There he is!" as he lays into another smallmouth. I work my lure through a fishy-looking pool and wonder if removing the hooks would help. "Go biggen up," my buddy says to his catch as he releases it. I decide that this is the stupidest possible thing to say to a fish. It's not like it can will itself to get bigger. And do fish even know what *biggen up* means? It's not that common a phrase. Soon, my partner hooks up again, and I decide that he is the stupidest person ever. Except maybe for me back when I asked him to be the best man at my wedding. All in all, there's a lot of stupid in the boat.

Getting skunked isn't personal. You'd have to be delusional to think you matter so much that the universe would single you out for punishment. No, the sensible approach is to buckle down and keep fishing until it passes. But I have never been burdened with common sense, so I personalize the failure, embrace the agony, make it a metaphor for my entire miserable life, and become mean, small, and petty. And then I suck on this bitterness like it's the last hard candy on Earth.

From Izaak Walton to Kevin VanDam, every man who fishes has endured the skunk. It's the tax we pay to call ourselves anglers. It's the fraternity we never meant to join. The cosmos reminding us that we're not in charge. Which is all fine, but this should need to be demonstrated only once every decade or so. Certainly not as frequently as I get skunked. There's just no call for that.

Yessir, you way in the back with your hand up? You say you always catch fish? Ah, there's always one guy who has never been skunked. We have a special term for men like you, sir: liars.

And no, having a fish on and losing it doesn't count. Regrettable, yes. But if something takes a swipe at your lure, at least you know the fish exist. Coming up goose eggs, on the other hand, is the kind of existential chasm that has no bottom.

I do claim a certain expertise in this area, having once traveled all the way to Mongolia to get skunked (see p. 114). On the bright side, readers loved that story. Nothing is funnier than another man's humiliation.

Not that I have to travel. I've been blanked just about everywhere you can be. Though there is one notable exception. I've never struck out at one of those pay-to-fish ponds where a diver—wearing a rebreathing apparatus so that he doesn't leave any bubbles—attaches a live trout to your hook. Getting skunked at a place like that is the sort of humiliation from which no angler returns. Which has always seemed like a sound reason not to risk it.

I will say that when you become as experienced as I am, you learn to make the most of it—or at least to marvel at its sheer awfulness. It's a singular, nearly mystical fusion of frustration, failure, and self-doubt. But the active ingredient, the thing that gives this cocktail its tang, is familiarity. You've stepped in this cow pie before. You loathed it, swore never to return, and did your best to expunge the memory. And damned if you haven't put your foot right back in it again.

Irish poet Seamus Heaney probably wasn't thinking about fishing when he wrote "The Tollund Man," which is about the miraculously preserved Iron Age corpse of a man who was hanged 25 centuries ago. He was found 7 feet deep in a peat bog in 1950, looking like he'd just fallen asleep, a plaited leather rope still around his neck. In the final stanza, Heaney assumes the man's identity and envisions his cart ride to the scaffold. Pondering his "sad freedom," Heaney imagines his final moments:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

"Lost, unhappy, and at home" is exactly how getting skunked feels. And it's that at-homeness, the déjà vu, that gives it its punch. I've got my version, and you've got yours. But everyone who gets blanked on the water knows what we're talking about.

Back on the Potomac, the river has widened and the fishing has slowed. My companion, naturally, continues to catch fish. Not many, and they're small, but enough that I'm still wondering why I ever spend any time with him at all. I try to console myself with the thought that anglers infinitely more skilled than me routinely get skunked here. This works about as well as you'd imagine. I try not to be sullen. I am sullen.

As we pack up, my companion says, "You're awful quiet. Anything I can do?"

"You wouldn't happen to know how to use a rebreathing apparatus, would you?" F&S

Field & Stream

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