

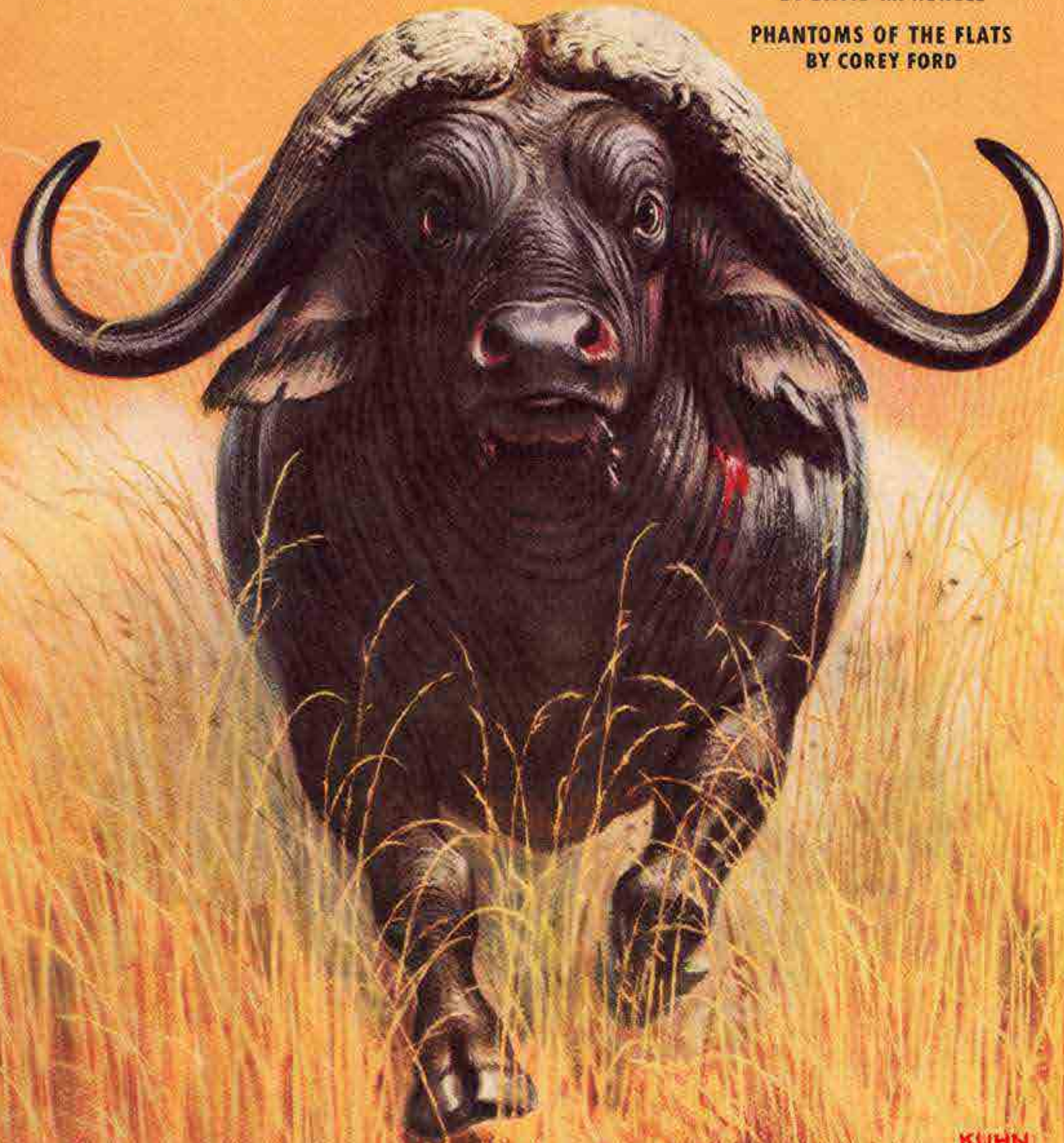
Field & Stream

JANUARY 1954 25¢

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THE FISHIN'EST MAN
BY DAVID M. NEWELL

PHANTOMS OF THE FLATS
BY COREY FORD



KUHN

Vol. 131, No. 2 • DANGER

Field & Stream

2026

Field & Stream

ESTB 1871



DANGER: CLOSE CALLS, DOUBLE GUNS & MAN-EATERS

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112

Thousands of them kick up at our approach, flushing into a mass of black specks I've never seen before in my years as a duck hunter. They're greenwing teal, and the way the flock warps reminds me of a murmuration of starlings.

"Welcome to Planet Great Salt Lake," Chad Yamane yells.

—SAGE MARSHALL,
"THE GREAT SALT STAKES"

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from top: MATT NAGER; STEPHEN ANDRADE

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—DAVE HURTEAU, “THE BIG TIME”



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A detailed illustration of a Weatherby Magnum rifle, specifically the Mark V Deluxe model. The rifle is shown in profile, facing left, with its long barrel and distinctive bolt action. The stock is made of dark wood with a checkered pattern on the forend and a smooth finish on the buttstock. The background is a dramatic, fiery landscape with a large, jagged mountain peak and a bright, glowing sky.

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NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES



illustration by **FREDERICK STIVERS**

AS WE WERE putting this issue together, I was struck by all the fond memories I have at *Field & Stream* that are connected to danger.

I remembered dozens of near-death tales I reported on when I was just starting out at F&S. Off the top of my head, I recall penning stories of hunters and anglers who were gored by elk, struck by lightning, impaled in the eyeball by a Lefty's Deceiver, bitten by rattlers, spiders, and sharks, trapped under a flipped ATV, lost in the wilderness and at sea, skewered by marlin, and mauled by grizzlies. Those stories included their share of nasty and gnarly details—but none of them compares to the horrors captured in the series of “Close Calls” (p. 62) in this issue.

I remembered when Keith McCafferty, early on in our writer-editor partnership, in 2008, recommended that I read a book, a favorite from his childhood—Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. Memories of staying up late with that book and being riveted by the nail-biting hunts Corbett recounts in such remarkable detail came flooding back as I read Scott Haugen's thrilling collection of modern-day man-eater stories (p. 86).

I remembered when I was still brand-new to F&S, and David E. Petzal suggested I familiarize myself with the archives and read the dangerous-game stories written by the likes of Robert Ruark, Bob Brister, and Warren Page. Years later, in 2016, when Petzal told me he would soon travel to Africa for what he assumed would be

his last safari, I had those classic stories in mind when I asked him if he'd like to write about his adventure after he returned home. The story he would eventually file, “Ghosts of Africa,” first ran in the December 2017–January 2018 issue and was an instant classic. Editing that story was a career highlight for me, and I'm thrilled to republish an excerpt (p. 128) in this issue.

I remembered being inspired by the men and women F&S celebrated in our Heroes of Conservation program, which lasted for 10 or so years before it ended, in 2012. These heroes were hunters and anglers who fought to protect wildlife and wild places through grassroots conservation.

This past June, I invited associate editor Travis Hall and contributing writer Hal Herring to be guests on the *Field & Stream Podcast*. Any reader of F&S will recognize those two as the voices behind all the conservation reporting and commentary we publish. Leading up to that episode, it had been a rough year conservation-wise (spoiler: things haven't gotten any smoother). I was able to draft a list of 10 conservation stories about issues—from public-land grabs to mining projects to the elimination of thousands of jobs—that pose an honest-to-goodness danger to hunting and fishing. With so much bad news out there—such constant threats to conservation, to our sporting heritage—I asked them what gives them hope for the future. “The awakening,” Herring said.

Specifically, he was talking about an awakening from a complacency by hunters and anglers who, for too long, just assumed everything was going to be OK. Now there is a new wave of outdoorsmen fighting and advocating for access and wildlife and clean water—for the future of hunting and fishing.

I was inspired by Herring's answer—and it left me even more convinced that now is the time to relaunch the Heroes of Conservation program (p. 16) with this issue of the magazine. Starting in September, we'll honor a new Hero of Conservation every month on *FieldandStream.com*. If you'd like to nominate someone you think is deserving, shoot me a note at the email address below.

•

Funny how a word like *danger* can conjure up so many happy memories. And with everything you're about to encounter in this edition of F&S—death-defying survival stories, man-eating critters, heart-stopping hunts, real-life heroes—I hope you'll find plenty to remember too.

Welcome to the Danger Issue.

Colin Kearns
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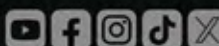
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Scott Haugen

WRITER



Scott Haugen has spent decades traveling the world to hunt down man-eating tigers, lions, bears, crocodiles, and other problem animals. For this issue, he shares four of his experiences tracking man-eaters in the wild (p. 86). We sat down with him to find out more about hunting the world’s most dangerous game.

F&S What is it like to come face-to-face with a man-eater?
S.H. *It's the most intense experience I've ever had. You're hyperaware of everything around you because one mistake could mean the difference between life and death.*

F&S What makes tracking a man-eater different from any other hunt?
S.H. *When you're going after predators that can kill you, and they already have a history of being aggressive, you're hunting a fearless animal. You don't know what the animal is going to do at any moment—that's where the adrenaline rush comes from.*

F&S Does hunting down man-eaters make a difference in people's lives?
S.H. *Absolutely. People live in fear around man-eaters, and communities are always grateful they can go back to safety after one is killed.*

F&S What did you think when you got the call to hunt a pride of man-eating lions?
S.H. *I love hunting man-eaters, but I didn't sleep on the flight to Africa. I didn't know what to expect, and with man-eaters, you quickly realize they often have the upper hand no matter what gun you carry.*

F&S If you got the call to go after another man-eater, would you do it?
S.H. *Immediately. I'd be on the next plane out. My wife is used to it.*



Clay Rodery
ILLUSTRATOR

Clay Rodery first contributed to *Field & Stream* in 2020 and has become a go-to feature illustrator in the new print journal. He has also done work for *National Geographic*, *The Atlantic*, *The Texas Observer*, HBO, and the British Film Institute. For this issue, Rodery illustrated six Cape buffalo scenes to go with a collection of classic F&S safari stories (p. 124).
“The animal conveys a kind of psychological weight that makes for genuinely interesting pictures—dangerous, ancient, and not remotely interested in being understood,” he says.



Travis Hall
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Travis Hall became a full-time associate editor at F&S in 2022, shortly after he sold his first news story to the magazine as a freelancer. He is a top conservation reporter, focusing on threats to public land and political schemes to remove habitat protections. But for this issue, Hall reported on hunters’ and anglers’ close calls in the wild (p. 62). “It was different from traditional reporting,” he says, “because of the narrative structure. Landon Clement’s story stood out to me the most. His ability to think on his feet as a grizzly mauled him was remarkable.”



Kim Cross
WRITER

Kim Cross started writing in high school while interning for the *Northwest Florida Daily News*. Since then, she has become a *New York Times* best-selling author and has had bylines in *Southern Living*, *Garden & Gun*, ESPN.com, and *The New York Times*, among others.
Cross won a National Magazine Award for a story about the journey of a salmon from Bristol Bay, Alaska, to a consumer’s plate in the Lower 48. Read her first F&S story, about the luck brought by her father’s long-forgotten belt buckle, on p. 42.



Matt Nager
PHOTOGRAPHER

Matt Nager won a statewide photography contest as a high school student by using an alternative developing process for a photo of a beach. Since then, his work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Smithsonian*, and *Men’s Journal*.
For his first F&S assignment, Nager traveled to the Great Salt Lake to photograph a duck hunt in this threatened wetland (p. 112).
“I had no idea most of the lake was so shallow,” he says. “In many areas I could ‘walk on water’ to get angles that I otherwise wouldn’t have been able to capture.”

TAMMY TAM (Rodery)



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

—ERIC CHURCH

WHAT COUNTRY MEANS TO ME

ANOTHER WINNER OF OUR ESSAY-WRITING CONTESTS CAPTURES THE IMPORTANCE THAT COUNTRY PLAYS IN HIS LIFE



by ERIC VIALL

COUNTRY FOR MANY PEOPLE is an escape from the concrete jungle, manicured lawns, and office cubicles—a dose of wide-open spaces, mountains, lakes, and streams. However, for a lucky few, country is something deeply rooted. Country is the place where core experiences shaped the men and women they are today.

Country is my earliest memories on the farm “helping” my dad and grandpa change the shovels on the cultivator one spring. Dad told me not to touch the nut he had just heated, but I didn't listen and burned my hand. Another time, I lost the gas cap to the old Ford dump truck and caused a traffic jam while executing a 35-point turn on the county highway.

Country is early driving lessons. First in an old 1984 GMC. I was under 10 years old and too short to reach the clutch pedal. Another time, at 11 or 12, I had a cop follow me while I was helping Dad move a tractor. I was pretty nervous.

Country is learning to shoot with a single-shot 410 with a sawed-off stock. I remember taking clay pigeons out of the sky with that little gun. Long walks for pheasants and deer. It is finally connecting on a sharptail grouse in flight one Saturday in September. It's Dad bragging about my first deer and my getting congratulated by everyone in town.

Country is long, hot summer days in the fishing boat waiting for the walleyes to bite. Endless hours spent at the local pond catching yellow perch on pieces of worm. Cold, windy days of ice fishing, waiting for the bobber to dance in the hole. No matter the season, we fought the prairie wind in search of fish.

Country is harvest meals brought to the field, eaten in lawn chairs and served off card tables. We'd take a round or two in the combine after. Driving a grain truck for hours and learning to unload on the go. Dump into a grain bin and then repeat.

Country is a community coming together to help my family when Dad died. The church was packed for the funeral. It was an outpouring of food and visits. It meant everyone coming together for one day in September to get Dad's last crop off. The day finished with about 10 combines on one field.

Country is the place where I grew up. It's where my grandparents and parents worked to build a life. It's where Dad and my grandparents are buried. Country is where I moved back to in order to raise my family. It is where I teach the next generation at my old high school. Country is more than an escape. Country is home.

F&S reader Eric Viall lives in Ray, North Dakota, with his family. He is the author of The Moose: A Story of Survival.

courtesy of ERIC VIALL



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THE LAND MAN

HOW DOUG DUREN IS SHARING HIS LAND WITH CONSERVATION-MINDED HUNTERS AND ENCOURAGING OTHER LANDOWNERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO DO THE SAME



interview by TRAVIS HALL

A FAMILIAR FACE in the outdoor world, Doug Duren is the managing partner of his family’s 400-acre farm in the rolling hills of southwest Wisconsin’s Driftless Area. Duren has spent a lifetime stewarding the property and sharing the land with visiting hunters and other conservation-minded folks. In recognition of his commitment to conservation in the Driftless Area and beyond, we’ve named him a 2026 Hero of Conservation. We caught up with Duren at his farm last spring to learn about his unique approach to land management and his nonprofit, Sharing the Land, which he formed with cofounder Lyndsey Braun.

F&S *Why have you dedicated so much of your life to conservation?*
D.D. My father, Vincent Duren, always wanted to do the best he could for the land, and he instilled that in my brothers and sisters and me. When I was 16, the school librarian handed me *A Sand County Almanac*, and that became my guiding star. Aldo Leopold said we abuse land because we see it as a commodity instead of a biotic community of which we are members. That resonated with me. Today, my mantra is: *It’s not ours, it’s just our turn*. We aren’t just managing only for ourselves but for future generations.

F&S *How long has your family owned the farm?*
D.D. For 125 years. We didn’t live on the farm, but I grew up with it: working, exploring, and learning. Years later, when my brother Matt died tragically in a car accident while living in the farmhouse, the surviving siblings formed Matt’s Last Tree Stand LLC in his honor and to protect the family’s legacy. The legal structure of the LLC has a succession plan and removes financial incentives for members to sell their share, so the farm will remain in the family for future generations.

F&S *How did Sharing the Land come into existence?*
D.D. The inspiration came from Leopold’s Riley Game Cooperative, where hunters donated labor and supplies to farms to improve habitat in exchange for access. Access to private land is a growing impediment for hunters, foragers, and other recreational access seekers. Like many landowners, I needed help managing the property. We have bountiful, game-rich land, and I thought, *Why not share this opportunity with members of the public?* So we modernized the Riley model.

F&S *How has it grown since its inception?*
D.D. We proved the concept on our farm and others over three years using simple intake forms and interviews with access seekers. But it evolved into something bigger, and now we’ve earned nonprofit status. We’ve connected more than 60 landowners across 15 states with close to 2,000 access seekers, and we have partnered with dedicated corporate sponsors like Can-Am, OnX, and Vortex.

F&S *What’s your overarching philosophy when it comes to land management?*
D.D. Previous generations cared about the health of the land first and foremost. We try to carry that ethos forward. We’re doing native habitat renovation to help species like red-headed woodpeckers, migratory songbirds, and pollinators. Game species benefit from that holistic approach.

F&S *The Driftless Area is famous for fly fishing. How have the trout benefited from your approach to land management?*
D.D. When I was a kid, the creek on the property was wide, muddy, and abused by a hundred head of cattle. We never had trout. When we implemented lighter pasturing and put the land into permanent perennial cover through the Conservation Reserve Program, the creek healed. Now, it’s a Class 1 trout stream where brown and brook trout reproduce naturally.

F&S *How does it feel to be named a Hero of Conservation?*
D.D. There was always a copy of F&S around our house when I was growing up. My dad was a mail carrier, and he always had a subscription. He looked forward to those magazines. If he were alive to see this, it would blow his mind. Thinking about that brings a little tear to my eye. F&S

courtesy of DOUG DUREN



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CHEERS & JEERS



illustrations by PETER OUMANSKI

WELL, JUDGING BY THE FEEDBACK we received from the most recent edition of F&S, the Traditions Issue, there’s no denying that you value hunting and fishing traditions just as much as we do. What’s more, we’re consistently amazed, and flattered, by the notes from returning subscribers who’ve recently discovered that the print magazine—arguably the most storied tradition in *Field & Stream* history—has returned to homes and camps. We’re so glad to have you all back.



NAILED THE ASSIGNMENT

Put simply, “The Schoolhouse Boys,” by Bill Heavey, is why I read *Field & Stream*. As a life-long Michigander, I place a high value on stories that add to the rich canon of tradition that defines our conservation and sporting culture as a state. It’s our way of life, and it has to be written down for that tradition to be expanded and passed down to the next generation. Here’s to deer camp!

Calvin Floyd,
via email

OLD MEETS NEW

Your magazine has been a staple of the outdoors for as long

as I can remember. It was always on a coffee table, or its art was displayed in hunting rooms or cabins. I love the new issues with the vintage cover on one side and a new rendition on the other. A perfect blending of new and old. Thank you for keeping this going for future generations.

Seth Pieper
via email

MAIL BONDING

I was talking to my hunting buddy today at work about how awesome it is that *Field & Stream* has a printed magazine again. We got into a discussion about how we both used to take those magazines to high school and read them rather than do our homework. I am glad F&S is back in my mailbox.

James L.
Billings, Montana



POWERFUL PROSE

Mr. Kearns’s story on the Editor’s Page could have been an account of my own traditions. I was especially taken by his habit of rereading a prized book (*A River Runs Through It*) whose author describes, so touchingly, the spiritual underpinnings in those of us who find it necessary to be with nature. Norman Maclean did so, and, for me, so did C. W. Gusewelle in *The Rufus Chronicle: Another Autumn*. My friend Charles passed a few years ago, but I read that book every fall at the onset of quail season. At 84, my best hunts are vicar-

ious now. I suspect I am not alone. Thanks for devoting an issue to the traditions that live within us all.

Paul Thomson
via email

COLIN KEARNS RESPONDS: Thank you for the kind words. I’ll add Gusewelle’s book to my reading list. And please, call me Colin.

WELCOME “HOME”

I just subscribed to the magazine and picked up the Waters Issue (Vol. 129, No. 1) while I was at it. I’m a newer angler (about two years of fly fishing and spin fishing here in my home waters of Ohio and surrounding areas), and I just read Colin Kearns’s Editor’s Page, “Homeward Bound,” and I’m already feeling inspired. I’m excited to see what the future of F&S looks like.

Joe Braizer
via email

BACK IN BUSINESS

I wanted to say how pleased I am that I just discovered your magazine is once again being published in print. I grew up with *Field & Stream* and have many copies from the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s still on my bookshelf at my cabin. They continue to provide me with wonderful reading and memories.

I’m sad to say that when *Field & Stream* dropped from print, I dropped my subscription. But I’m happy to say that upon hearing the good news, I am renewing my subscription and am looking forward to receiving the magazine again.

Jeff Kavanagh
via email

HOW TO REACH US

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



COMPACT

WITHOUT COMPROMISE



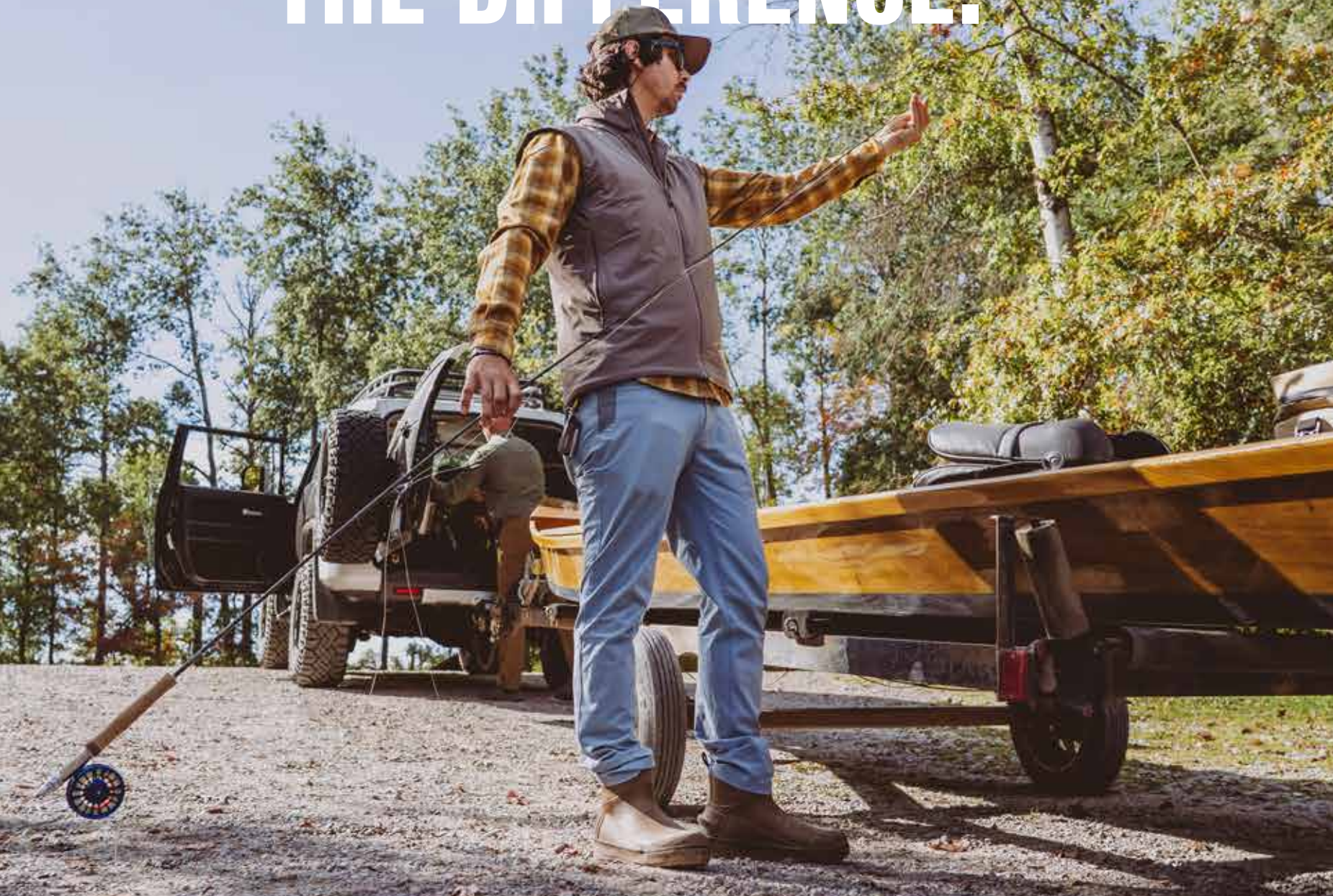
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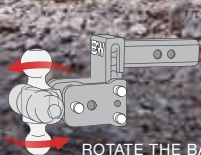
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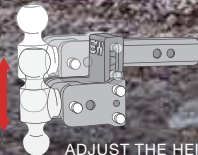
BUILT FOR THOSE
WHO KNOW
THE DIFFERENCE.



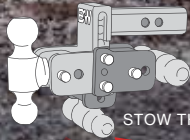
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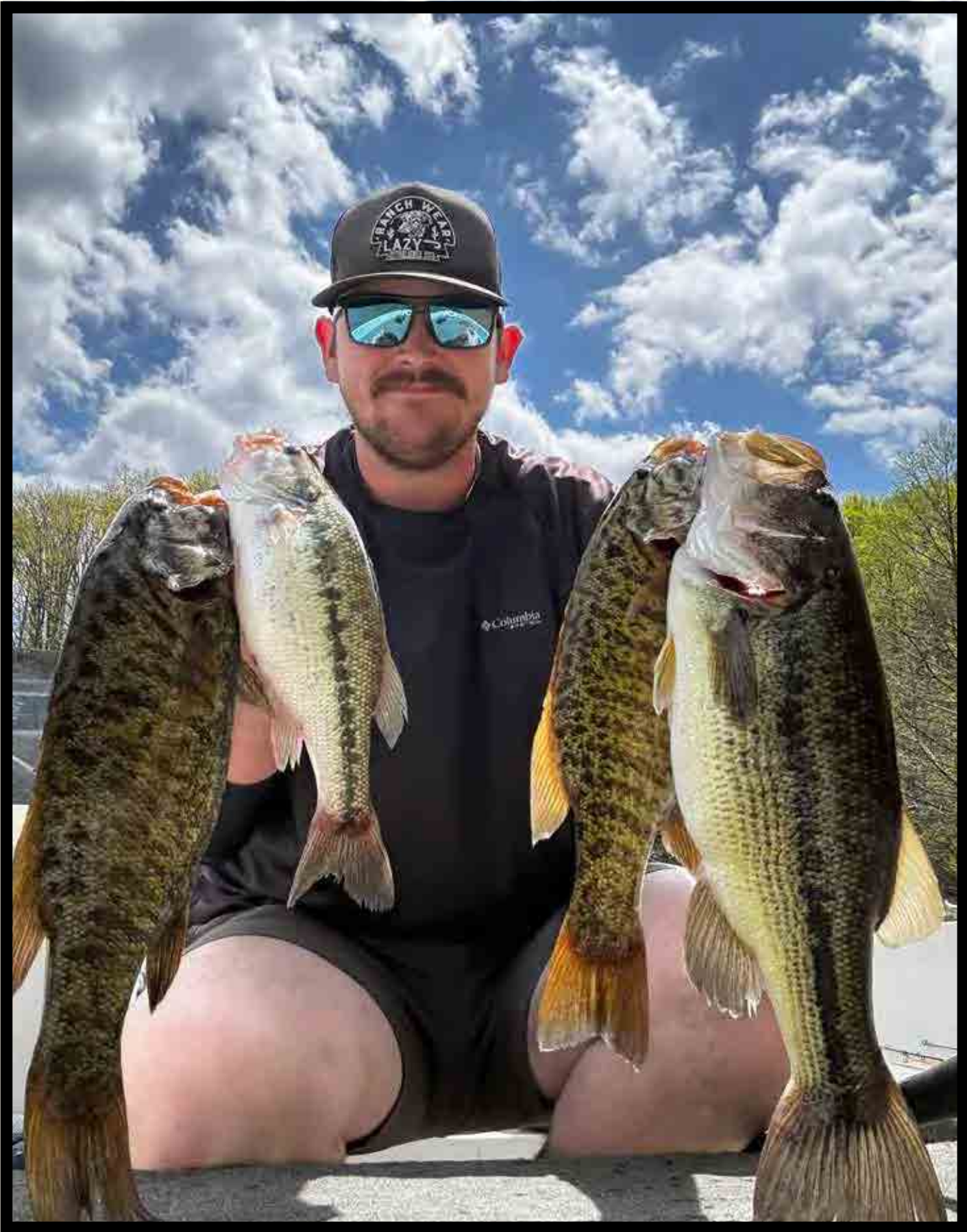


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A COLLECTION OF OUR FAVORITE READER
PHOTOS, FROM THE FIELD AND THE STREAM

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PREVIOUS PAGE

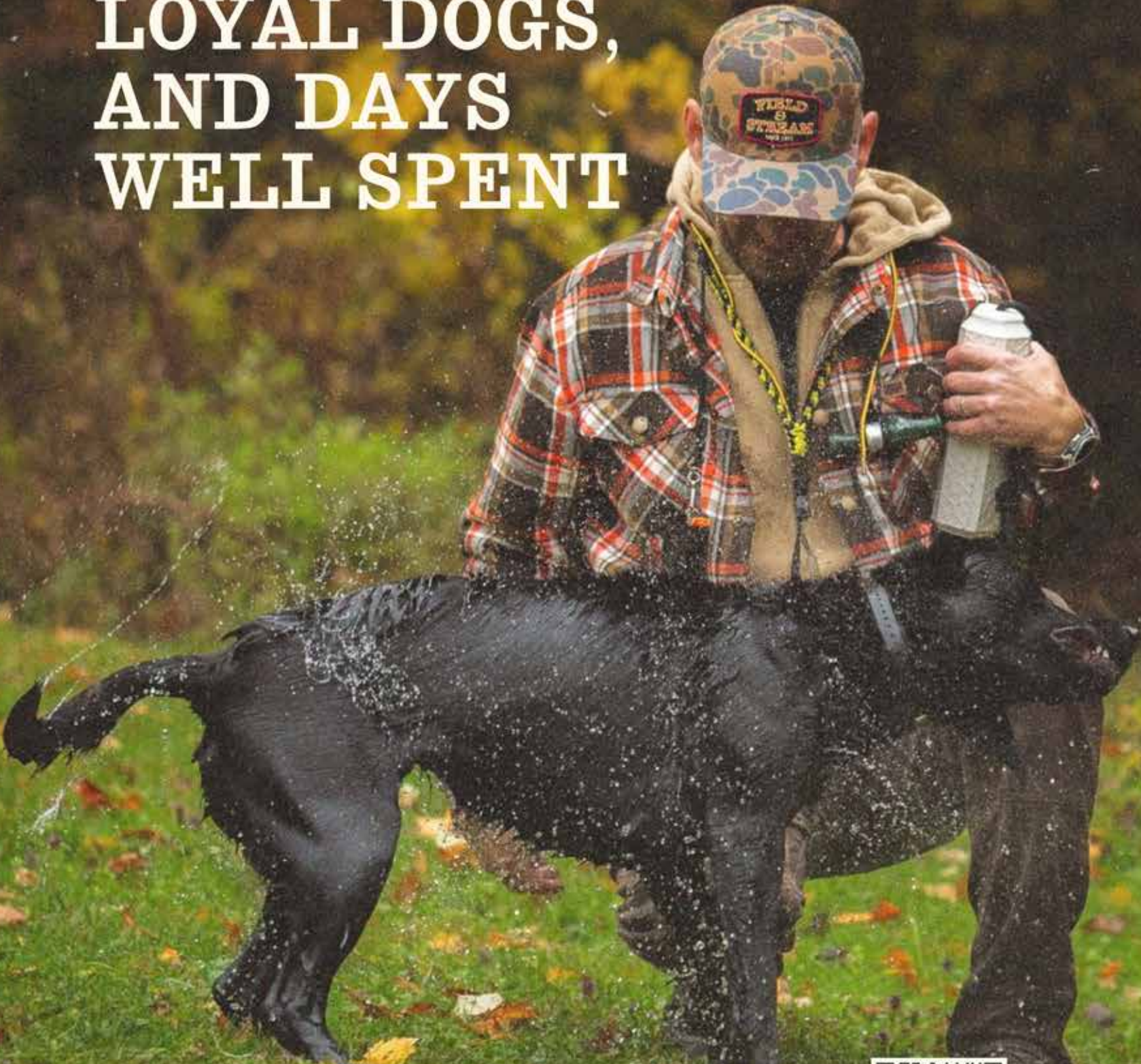
BASS MASTER
Blue skies and big bass made for an amazing day of fishing in East Tennessee.
WYATT BENNETT

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JARED CULLEN
- 2. AXIS MARKS THE SPOT
SARAH JENKINS
- 3. A BOY AND HIS BLUEGILL
HEATHER SLOAN
- 4. TIME MACHINE
KIRK GITTINS
- 5. BROWN BEAUTY
KAREN ROSER
- 6. PAN(FISH)DEMONIUM
DAVID LEIGH



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AND DAYS
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THE RANGE

24
FIRST SHOT



Hunter BJ Walle takes a shot at a chukar in the Hells Canyon corridor of the Snake River in Idaho. The wingshooting here is famous for its wild birds and rugged terrain.

photograph by **BRIAN GROSSENBACHER**

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A BUCK GETS A FRESH COATING





ASK PETZAL

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

by DAVID E. PETZAL
illustration by BRANDON LOVING

If you could be reincarnated as any type of game animal in your next life, what critter would you want to be and why?

—Annie T., via email

D.E.P. I would be a bull hippo. Reaching adulthood is chancy, I admit, but once you're there, you have no natural enemies, no one nags you about your weight, and if something annoys you, such as a boat or a crocodile, you just bite it in half.

I have the deepest respect for the 35 Rem., but the 45-70 seems to punch above its weight. You pull the trigger and down they go.

How can we become more like you?
—Richard Santucci, via email

D.E.P. God forbid. Legions of my failings, errors, and weaknesses hoot and gibber at me in the darkness. Colossus in *Deadpool* had the right idea when he said, "Over a lifetime, there are only four or five moments that really matter. Moments when you're offered a choice—to make a sacrifice, conquer a flaw, save a friend, spare an enemy. In these moments, everything else falls away."

What is the best rifle cartridge that never became popular?
—Aaron Proctor, via email

D.E.P. The 280 Remington. It was introduced in 1957, during a period in which Remington had a genius for screwing up the marketing of some very good cartridges, such as the 7mm-08 and the 244. The 280 will do anything the 270 will do and just about everything the 30-06 will do, and it's a mild kicker to boot.

Is the 257 Weatherby Magnum still relevant given the latest and greatest cartridges?
—Charles Becker, via email

D.E.P. The 257 Weatherby dates to 1944, and while it's way too much for varmints or predators, it's hell on big game: very flat shooting, very accurate, and very little recoil given its power. If a cartridge works, it works; that remains true whether something new comes along or not. Probably a dozen of our most popular and useful cartridges have passed the century mark now.

Do you prefer to keep one or both eyes open when using a scope?
—Timothy Sullens, via email

D.E.P. Both eyes. Using both improves depth perception, boosts situational awareness, and reduces eye strain. You'll probably find that it takes some practice to not close one eye, but it's well worth the effort.

What is your favorite game meat?
—Randy Cornman, via email

D.E.P. I like moose best, followed closely by caribou. Cape buffalo is good, but you have to add fat of some kind, since running away from lions and humans makes a buffalo steak very lean.

I'm close in age to you. Do you think we get grumpy just because we're old or because the years inform us how stupid so many people are?
—Ronnie Cundieff, via email

D.E.P. My deepest sympathies. Old people get grumpy because (a) everything hurts, all the time; (b) the everyday tasks that you used to do with no effort are now difficult to impossible; (c) your old and irreplaceable friends are dying and there will be no new ones. And then, as you said, there's the realization that people *don't* learn from experience. They do the same dumb shit over and over and over, and all you can do is hope that it doesn't affect you.

What is the greatest outdoor-related innovation you've seen in your lifetime?
—Craig S., via email

D.E.P. Gore-Tex. *Outdoors* used to mean soaked by the rain and snow and frozen by the wind. No more.

I'm going to hunt Africa for plains game, and I'm going to treat myself to a new rifle for it. What caliber should I get?
—Perry Stevenson, via email

D.E.P. Get a 30-06. I've been on 11 safaris in five African countries and hunted all manner of plains game with everything from a 270 to a 375 H&H. The '06 can handle the whole menu without beating your brains out, and if I were starting over, that's what I'd use. Take no bullets lighter than 180 grains, and only strong bullets like the Swift A-Frame or the Barnes X.

At our Adirondack deer camp, roughly half the members use rifles chambered for the 45-70 and the rest use 35 Rem. Which group would you be in?
—Alfred Laprairie, via email

D.E.P. I'm in the 45-70 camp. I have the deepest respect for the 35 Rem., but the 45-70 seems to punch above its weight. You pull the trigger and down they go.

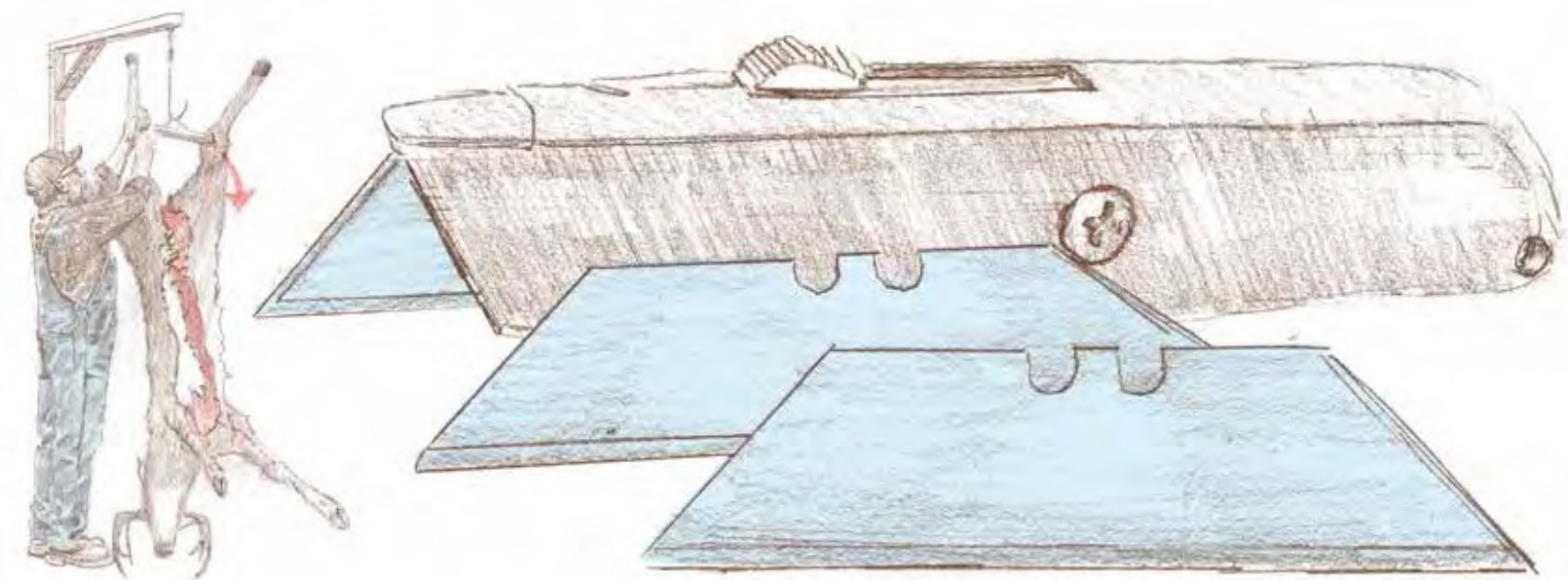
Would you rather have a hundred-dollar rifle with a thousand-dollar scope, or vice versa?
—D. Donaldson, via email

D.E.P. A hundred-dollar rifle is going to be a piece of junk, and the thousand-dollar scope will not make amends for it. On the other hand, a thousand-dollar rifle is going to be a pretty good rifle, and even with a cheap scope, it's going to do very well by you. F&S

Send your questions to askpetzal@fieldandstream.com

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

LEAVE IT TO A LEGEND TO SHOW YOU AN INGENIOUS WAY TO SKIN A DEER



by T. EDWARD NICKENS

I'M A FAIRLY SERIOUS knife snob. Thus, it nearly pains me to share this little deer-skinning trick. Despite its low-tech nature, it has three redeeming qualities: First, it works very well. Second, it utilizes what might be the cheapest knife on the planet. And third, it was shown to me by Flip Pallot.

The initial skinning cuts for a big-game animal, such as a deer, are pretty standard: For a deer hanging head-down, you first encircle the rear legs at the gambrel, then run an incision down the inside of each leg to join at the genitals. Next, you extend that cut down the belly and chest. Then you create another Y of cuts along the inside of the front legs that run to the knees. It's critical to make these initial cuts shallow, so you cut through just the hide and don't pierce any organs in the abdominal cavity or slice up good meat. It's also important to minimize how much hair you snip while making these cuts. I've seen deer so carved up they looked like a shedding goldendoodle. The less hair you cut, the cleaner the meat.

The standard approach to making these first skinning cuts has been to turn the knife blade edge up, which prevents the blade tip and edge from digging into the entrails and reduces the amount of cut hair, since the blade is cutting from the inside of the hide. It takes some tricky knife gymnastics, espe-

1-MINUTE NATURALIST SPIDER SAILS



The first time I saw spiderlings soaring across a cornfield, I had no idea what I was looking at. Turns out those are baby spiders “ballooning” in the breeze to disperse to new habitats. The spiders find an open perch and shoot silk from their spinneret until the thread catches a breeze and carries them to parts unknown. Since then, I've seen this phenomenon dozens of times on warm fall deer-hunting days.

—T.E.N.

cially with those cuts around the legs, but this has been the approach since man invented sharp rocks.

The first time I saw Flip rip through a deer, I was gobsmacked. For starters, it took him no time at all. But the big surprise was Flip's choice of blade. He used a utility knife. A lowly box cutter. Perhaps the most utilitarian, most unartful—if efficient—cutting tool ever designed. And cheap. I just checked. You can order one from Harbor Freight for \$2.49.

The next time I hunted with Flip, I shot a nice Texas 8-pointer, and he tossed me my own shiny new box cutter. I gave it a go. For those initial cuts, I extended the blade so it protruded from the box cutter housing a single click. That kept the cut shallow. When I'd made all the cuts, I went back to trace the belly and chest cuts a second time to cut through the abdominal wall. To start, I cut a hole through the hide above the abdominal cavity at the point of the sternum, hooked a finger in the hole with the crook of my finger pointing away from the belly, and lifted the skin from the buck. The box cutter cut through the abdominal wall all the way to the genitals without ever coming close to the guts.

“Shitskers!” as Flip would say. It worked like a charm. I still use one of my fancy-pants knives to complete the skinning and gutting process, but I've been on Team Box Cutter for the initial cuts for five years now, and I'm not going back. F&S

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HAYDEN DOBBINS

THE BIG TIME

IF THERE EVER WAS A REASON TO ABANDON THE FIELD FOR A BIG-GAME FISHING OPPORTUNITY, FALL MUSKIES IS IT

by DAVE HURTEAU

AS A HUNTER MYSELF, I can understand if some of you need a really good reason to leave your deer stand or duck blind in the fall to do something else, like go muskie fishing. So I asked some top muskie guides to give me their best reasons to be out on the water now, and they said: The fish are concentrated, the fish are aggressive, and the fish are huge. If those reasons aren't good enough, Tennessee guide Steven Paul summed it up like this: "There is simply no better time to put a 50-inch fish in the boat." That sounds pretty good, right? I mean, there's no way you're going to shoot a 50-inch duck, and if you're like half the guys at my hunting camp, you won't shoot a 50-inch deer either. The muskie nuts among you don't need convincing, but read on, because our experts are going to share their best secrets. For the rest of you, take a break from scanning the skies and listening for steps in the woods this fall—and go land the fish of a lifetime. Just think of how surprised your hunting buddies will be when they get your text.

WHY FALL?

This is a great time to target muskies for all the reasons the pros listed above, so let's drill down on each, one at a time. First, the fish are concentrated because they're hunting schools of fall-spawning baitfish—ciscoes (tullibees), whitefish, shad—stacked up off inlets and gravel shoals. "Those condensed baitfish schools pull in muskies that nomadically roamed the entire lake earlier, making them much easier to find and target now," says Minnesota guide Kevin Cochran. Second, they're aggressive because winter is coming and they need to fatten up while the getting's good. Third, the fish are huge. OK, they're not all huge. But with most of a lake's muskies concentrated in a few key spots, the biggest ones are there to be had. And in fact, they *are* bigger than usual. "Fall mus-

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

"Fall muskies pack on as many as 10 extra pounds compared to their summer weight. This is *the* time to catch a giant."
—Guide Doug Wegner



↑
A fly angler does a boat-side figure eight, trying to tempt a follower on a rainy-day fall muskie adventure in south-central Tennessee.

kies pack on as many as 10 extra pounds compared to their summer weight," says Wisconsin-based guide Doug Wegner. "This is *the* time to catch a giant."

FOUR EXPERT TACTICS FOR FALL MUSKIES

1. FIND THE ZONE

"Fishing hard breaks off deep points with big rubber baits is my jam now," says Doug Wegner of Next Gen Muskies (nextgenmuskies.com). The breaks are transition zones from deeper soft-bottom areas to shallower hard-bottom spots. As baitfish move back and forth through these zones at night to spawn over shallow pea gravel, muskies lie in wait, usually in depths of 15 to 25 feet. "I position my boat on the deeper, soft-bottom side and cast perpendicularly toward the shallower hard bottom," Wegner says. He favors big tube baits fished on 100-pound braid with an 18-inch, 130-pound wire leader. The retrieve is a mix of 2- to 3-foot pulls and 2- to 3-second pauses. "The fish will hit it on the pause, so keep a taut line so you can feel it, react, and make a good hookset."

2. SWEEP THE DEEP

"My No. 1 tactic now is slow-rolling plastic baits in deep, open-water basins adjacent to shallow tullibee spawning grounds," says Kevin Cochran of Northwoods Muskie Authority (kevincochranguide.com). "I'm focusing on 30 to 50 feet of water, which may sound like a lot, but our lakes are 120 feet deep." Like most of the experts I spoke to, Cochran uses side-imaging sonar to locate schools of baitfish. Then he'll have his clients cast out to sweep the corresponding basin with Zilla Baits Gladiators, Chaos Tackle Medussas, and big paddle tails. "It's almost like vacuuming a floor. You cover the area and move on." Most of the muskies are suspended at 10 or 20 feet, and he'll adjust the weight of the bait



to get the depth just right. “With the paddle tails, you want a slow, steady retrieve. With pull-pause baits, expect strikes to come on the pause.”

3. FOOL THEM ON THE FLY

Nick Gellerstedt of Musky Fool (muskyfool.com), a Wisconsin outfit dedicated to catching muskies on the fly, loves to fish moving water in fall. “Targeting these fish in a river is more straightforward. I look for overwintering spots, where the deepest holes meet fish-holding structure.” As the season progresses, muskies will slide downstream in a pool. “They start out tight to the fast water at the top, then move to the middle, and when it gets really cold, they’ll favor the tailout—both for warmth and because that’s where suckers stack up.”

Gellerstedt has the angler in the bow of his drift boat cast quartering downstream with a buoyant, gliding, walk-the-dog-style streamer, while the angler in the stern casts quartering up, dead-drifting a weighted streamer.

“If you can see the eat, give the fish a second,” he says. “Watch it close its mouth

and start to turn—then strip-set. Otherwise, when you feel the weight of the fish, strip hard, two or three times. And keep the rod low throughout the fight. Chasing muskies on the fly can seem crazy, even a little dumb, but when you land a big one, it suddenly all makes sense.”

4. DOUBLE UP

Steven Paul (tennesseemuskyfishing.com) has a mantra for anyone who wants to keep fall muskie fishing simple: “When in doubt, follow the forage.”

As water temps dip into the 50s and 40s, baitfish migrate in and out of the shallows along structural edges, he says. Ciscoes, whitefish, walleyes, suckers, and even pike become prime muskie targets. “To find the baitfish, you need to look at environmental factors—wind and weather, air and water temps—but modern electronics are a huge help too,” says Paul. Side-imaging sonar reveals the size and density of baitfish schools, and LiveView shows their activity level. “As a general rule, the more active the baitfish, the more aggressive you can be with your presentation, and vice versa. But remem-

↑
Wherever you find fall-spawning baitfish, expect big muskies to be waiting in ambush nearby.

ber that making your bait stand apart can sometimes trigger bites too.”

As for the muskies, they don’t waste energy chasing moving baitfish. “The big ones love to ambush prey at transitional structure in the 8- to 15-foot zone. Look for steep breaks, points, humps, and saddles, and work the open-water edges first, as muskies often patrol the deeper perimeter of these spots.”

Paul targets these fish with big swim-baits that match the forage and cover plenty of water. “The key is to dial in the depth, lure profile, and speed. You want your bait to be the most vulnerable-looking forage a muskie will see that day—the gazelle at the back of the herd.”

When muskies are shallow, Paul goes to a dive-and-rise jerkbait. “This bait punches down into the weeds to get the attention of muskies, and then it floats back up—which is when a big fish will usually hammer it.”

HAYDEN DOBBINS (muskie); JOHN TOOLAN (Stealth Bomber, Gladiator)

Big Bites for Monster Muskies

I asked each of our experts what lure or fly they would choose if they had to fish all fall with just one, and why. They all obliged, but some couldn’t resist naming more than one. So here are six killer fall muskie baits.



RED OCTOBER 10-INCH MONSTER TUBE BAIT

“This is an amazing bait all year, but the ability to cast or vertically jig a large tube bait is what makes it my No. 1 now,” says Wegner. He adds a small blade at the back for more flash and vibration and to slow the lure’s fall for autumn water temps.



TROPHY SYSTEMS BAIT CO. 12-INCH STEALTH BOMBER

“I love the versatility of a big paddle tail now,” says Cochran. “I can speed it up and make it rise in the water column to trigger a strike, or creep it painfully slowly to target deeper, inactive muskies.” He prefers natural colors that mimic baitfish.



ZILLA BAITS GLADIATOR

If you find that fall muskies are swallowing rubber baits too deeply, Cochran points to this bait as a great alternative. “Muskies are less likely to choke on a hybrid [hard-and-soft-body] bait like the Gladiator compared to one made entirely of rubber.”



URBAN FLY CO. DOUBLE RIVER PIG

“Unlike most muskie flies, the River Pig is weighted, which lets you fish a wide range of water depths,” says Gellerstedt. “It rides hook-point-up for fewer snags, and it has a slow, headfirst fall that muskies seem to key in on as water temperatures cool.”



LIVINGSTON LURES 8-INCH TITAN

“The dive-and-rise action of this bait is perfect for probing shallow cover in fall, and you can customize the Titan on the go,” says Paul. “It has a replaceable soft tail to get the ideal profile and an adjustable weight system for dialing in the perfect depth.”



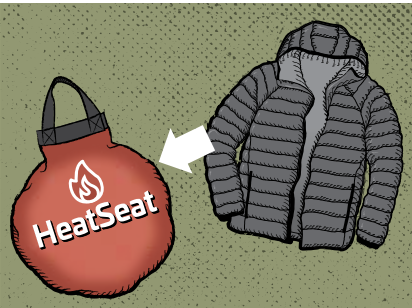
LIVINGSTON LURES MAGNUS

“This is my go-to for covering water in deeper transition areas,” says Paul. Like the Titan, this Magnus swimbait has an adjustable weight system, and a replaceable soft-plastic tail that allows you to adjust the lure’s length or create different color combinations. F&S

MATT'S TIPS

by MATTHEW EVERY illustrations by PETE SUCHESKI

MAKE A PUFFER DO DOUBLE DUTY, GET SOMETHING USEFUL FROM ELECTION SEASON, AND DUNK YOUR LINE FOR LONGER CASTS



No. 1

IF YOU USE a stuffed hot seat in the woods to keep your butt warm, take the stuffing out and replace it with an old puffer jacket. It works just as well as the stuffing for keeping your backside toasty, but it will be handy if you need an extra jacket on a cold day.



No. 2

HAVING TROUBLE fooling ducks? Watch closely how they fly past your blind. If they circle like they want to land but then peel off, the problem lies within your decoy spread. If they come in hot and flare at the last second, the problem is your blind—or your face sticking out of it.



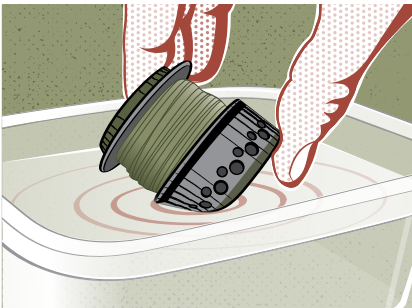
No. 3

THIS TIP COMES from Maine deer tracker Hal Blood. If you hunt in rubber boots, put your pant legs over your boots and duct tape them around your ankles. This makes for quieter walking, and the tape helps keep water out if you need to cross a stream.



No. 4

WHETHER YOUR CANDIDATE wins or loses this election season, it's the perfect time to make some silhouette decoys. Corrugated-plastic election signs are rugged yet easy to cut and paint. A single sign will make one duck or goose silhouette or several pigeon and dove decoys.



No. 5

YOU CAN TAKE the memory out of monofilament line by soaking the whole spool on your reel in warm water. Just detach the spool from the reel, dunk it in the water, reassemble, and cast. If you're really in a bind, a warm thermos of coffee will work too.

TAP'S TIPS

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



No. 1

WHEN YOU ARE stop-and-go hunting for upland birds, plan to "go" quickly through the thickets and "stop" in the openings. Birds usually flush during the "stop," so pausing when you are in a clearing puts you in a better position to get off a shot.

No. 2

DENTS CAN BE REMOVED from gunstocks by covering the dented area with a damp cloth and pressing it with a hot iron. The steam lifts the dent to the level of the wood. If the dent is deep, several steamings may be needed.

No. 3

ANYTHING YOU HANG over your shoulder has an annoying habit of slipping off. You can keep your gun sling, camera strap, or binocular strap in place by sewing a large button on the shoulder of your shirt or hunting coat.



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PARTING SHOT

“As I approached this buck, the weather turned ugly without warning,” John Hafner says. “The wet, heavy snow blanketed me and the buck within minutes.”

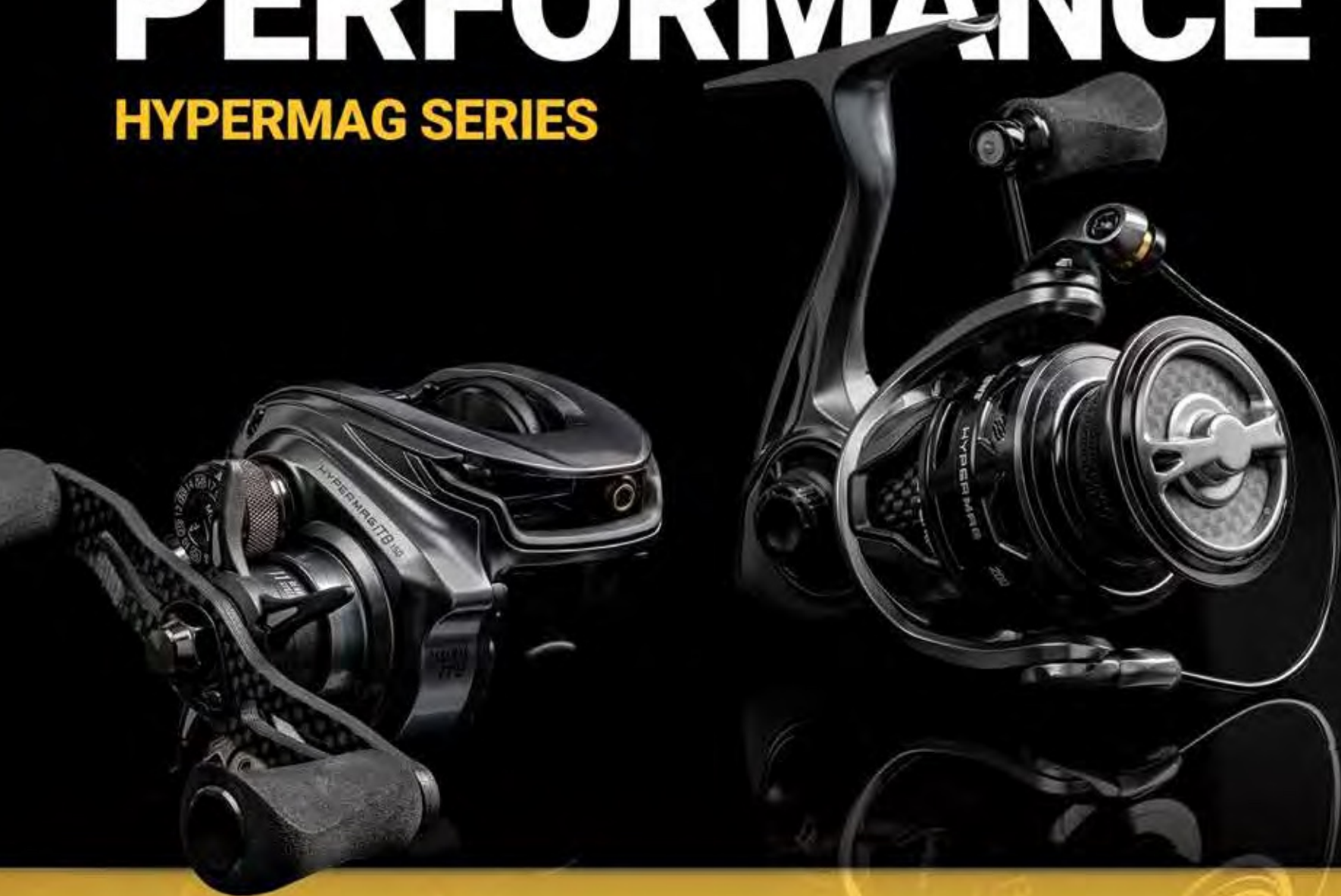
photograph by JOHN HAFNER



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GEARING UP

photograph by **IAN ALLEN**

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40 MODERN CLASSIC **42** THE HEIRLOOM **48** HALL OF FAME **54** THE SHOP

39

KROMER DOME

THIS CAP MARKS YOU AS A SERIOUS HUNTER AND A PERSON OF TASTE. EVERY OUTDOORSPERSON SHOULD HAVE ONE—OR FOUR

HATS MAKE a statement about who you may be. If you wear an eight-pointed cap (starched and blocked) called the utility cover, you identify yourself as a United States Marine. If you wear one, are not a Marine, and encounter a real Marine, they will make you take it off. If you wear a baseball cap, you may be a baseball player. However, the odds are good that you're not, and if you wear it backwards, you may simply be brain damaged.

If you wear a Stormy Kromer, you may be a Yooper, which is a person from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which is part of the Kromer Cap's home turf. You may even be of Swedish or Norwegian ancestry, which is what many Yoopers are. Or you may simply want a hat that stays on and keeps your head warm, which Kromers do to perfection.

The Stormy Kromer cap was invented by Ida and George "Stormy" Kromer, the latter of whom was a railroad engineer and semipro baseball player who lived in Kaukauna, Wisconsin. He got his nickname on the diamond because he was a bad-tempered catcher who was inclined to get in the occasional debate that involved fists. In 1903, while perched in a locomotive cab, he stuck his head outside to check the tracks ahead for cows and hobos, and the breeze tore off his cap, leaving him both cold and irritated, because this was not the first time it had happened.

He presented the problem to Ida, who was very good with a needle and thread, and she sewed a fold-down earflap around a six-panel wool baseball cap. The earflap laced together in front, so you could loosen or tighten it as your skull required. It worked, and not only did it make George happy, but all his co-workers wanted one. Stormy's cap became so popular with the railroad set that it became something of a membership badge.

In 1905, George and Ida began commercial production, sewing the hat at home and calling it the Kromer Blizzard Cap. It became an icon of the northern Midwest. Business boomed. The enterprise's name was changed to the Kromer Cap Company, and then George and Ida opened a factory in Milwaukee in 1919.

The Kromer Cap Company continued to do well, but there was a problem looming. The hats didn't wear out. Once you bought one, you didn't need another, and there was no effort to broaden the market or introduce new models. In 1965, George sold the factory (Ida had passed away in 1960) to a businessman named Richard Grossman, who kept things going until 2001, when sales dropped to such a level that he saw no course but to shut down the factory.

Enter Bob Jacquart, a Michigan outdoorsman and owner of Jacquart Fabric Products. He was looking to expand his business when he heard that the

cap company was about to fold. Jacquart bought the rights to the Kromer Cap design and set up a factory in his hometown of Ironwood, Michigan, where, today, Kromers are made by local people to the same standard that George and Ida set more than a hundred years ago. But they make a lot more of them. There are now 116 fabric and color combinations, and a total of 1,200 SKUs associated with the name Kromer. And the hats sell all over the world, not just in the Upper Midwest.

Ah, yes, you say, but do *you* own one? No, I retort, I own six. I can lay hands on five right now, and there's a sixth in hunter orange that I loaned out and never got back but that I still count as my cap.

There are many Kromers you can buy, but there are four that you need. There's the Original Stormy Kromer Cap, which is ideal if you're going to be working hard outside and it's not bitter cold. If it is freezing, you want the Rancher, which has an extra-long fleece-lined ear band and a nice heavy wad of Thinsulate in the crown. This is what I use for sitting in a deer blind in Maine in November. If cold rain or sleet is falling, there's the Waxed Rancher, which is similar to the Rancher but has a waterproof shell of waxed cotton duck. (And if you're looking for one cap to take you through the whole winter, that's your huckleberry.) The fourth is the Waxed Cotton Cap, which is not insulated, so you can wear it in summer when you get tired of the rain soaking through your useless baseball cap.

All of these caps are guaranteed for life, but I doubt you'll need the guarantee because, as mentioned, they don't wear out. I've had my Original Kromer for more than 20 seasons and worn it all over the place, and it still looks new.

At this point, it's customary to end on a lyrical note about whatever you've just finished praising. With a Kromer, that's impossible. The Kromer is as lyrical as denim overalls—blue-collar down to its last stitch.

But I can do appreciation. Some years ago, I was invited to Texas on a hunting trip with several other outdoor writers. It was November, and I knew that the area's cold winds come up around then. Blue northerners, Texans call them. They arrive with no warning, and they'll freeze your nasties off. I brought warm clothes, including my Original Kromer. Some of the group froze. I did not. I caught envious glances cast at my head, which remained warm while the heads in baseball caps turned to blocks of ice. All thanks to my Kromer. A hat can't do better than that. F&S



The Original Stormy Kromer Cap is available in 10 colors, including classic red-and-black plaid.



by KIM CROSS photographs by IAN ALLEN

WHEN MY FATHER DIED, he left me saltwater rods, seven guns, and a shoebox of odds and ends. As an only child, a girl who tried hard to be the son he never had, I found myself the steward of an arsenal I lacked the skills to use.

He'd raised me on a fishing boat, trolling the Gulf, but insisted on rigging my rod for me and never got around to teaching me how to clean a king mackerel. I grew into my own kind of angler, casting fly rods over trout streams, so I gave the saltwater gear to my three male cousins, who slay the swells and bayous of North Florida.

The Talisman

AN UNEXPECTED ITEM LEFT BEHIND IN A BOX OF TREASURES TURNS OUT TO BE A GOOD-LUCK CHARM IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

The guns would go to my only child, born a year before my father died. The boy would never get to hunt or fish with his grandpa. I'd teach him how to fly fish. My husband didn't hunt but carried a pistol on backpacking trips in case of bear encounters. He could teach our boy how to shoot.

I kept the shoebox, which was filled with curious treasures: Six pocketknives and a money clip. A pole-vaulting medal from a 1953 high-school meet. Three college diplomas (the first in his family) and a Cross fountain pen I'd given him when I earned the first of mine. A half-evaporated can of Billy Beer, promoted by Jimmy Carter's brother. A pocket-size copy of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution. Two cassette tapes of my toddler self singing into a dictation machine. There was one object I didn't recognize—a brass belt buckle depict-

ing a buck and a doe leaping over a log, framed by two antlers. It was heavy and pleasantly cool in my hand. I flipped it over: BERGAMOT BRASS WORKS, 1977.

I'd never seen my dad wear it. It wasn't even his style. I pulled out two pocketknives and put the buckle back in the box. The box went into a closet. For a time, it was forgotten.

•

A few years after my father died, my husband learned how to hunt. Eddie cleaned Dad's 30-06 Remington 700—Ducks Unlimited Edition—and sighted it in. A

→ The brass belt buckle that belonged to the author's father.



The guns would go to my only child. The boy would never get to hunt or fish with his grandpa. I'd teach him how to fly fish. My husband could teach our boy how to shoot.

friend took him to a private hunting club in Alabama, where they sat in a shooting house until a whitetail appeared in a field and grazed itself broadside.

Eddie took his first doe with one shot from Dad's rifle. He followed the blood trail across the field, then hoisted the deer into a pickup. He let his hunting buddy smear blood on his cheeks.

Too restless to sit in a shooting house again, Eddie planned an expedition, studying a map of the Talladega National Forest—his eyes tracing the draws where there might be water, the spots where there might be food. His instincts proved sound, and he brought home his first buck, a small whitetail with a 4x4 basket rack.

The next two hunts yielded two more deer—another doe and buck. He was by now brimming with confidence. Hunting pals listened to his tales with knowing nods and subtle side-eyes. There must have been times when Eddie went into the woods and came out empty-handed. I was too busy scaring up venison recipes to notice them. In his first five years of hunting, my husband killed six deer—three does and three bucks—with precisely five bullets and one arrow.

The Alabama whitetail skulls survived our move to Idaho, where we had to invest in a deep freezer. Rifle hunts began to feel tame, so he bought himself a compound bow. On his very first archery elk hunt, he killed a bull elk on public land.

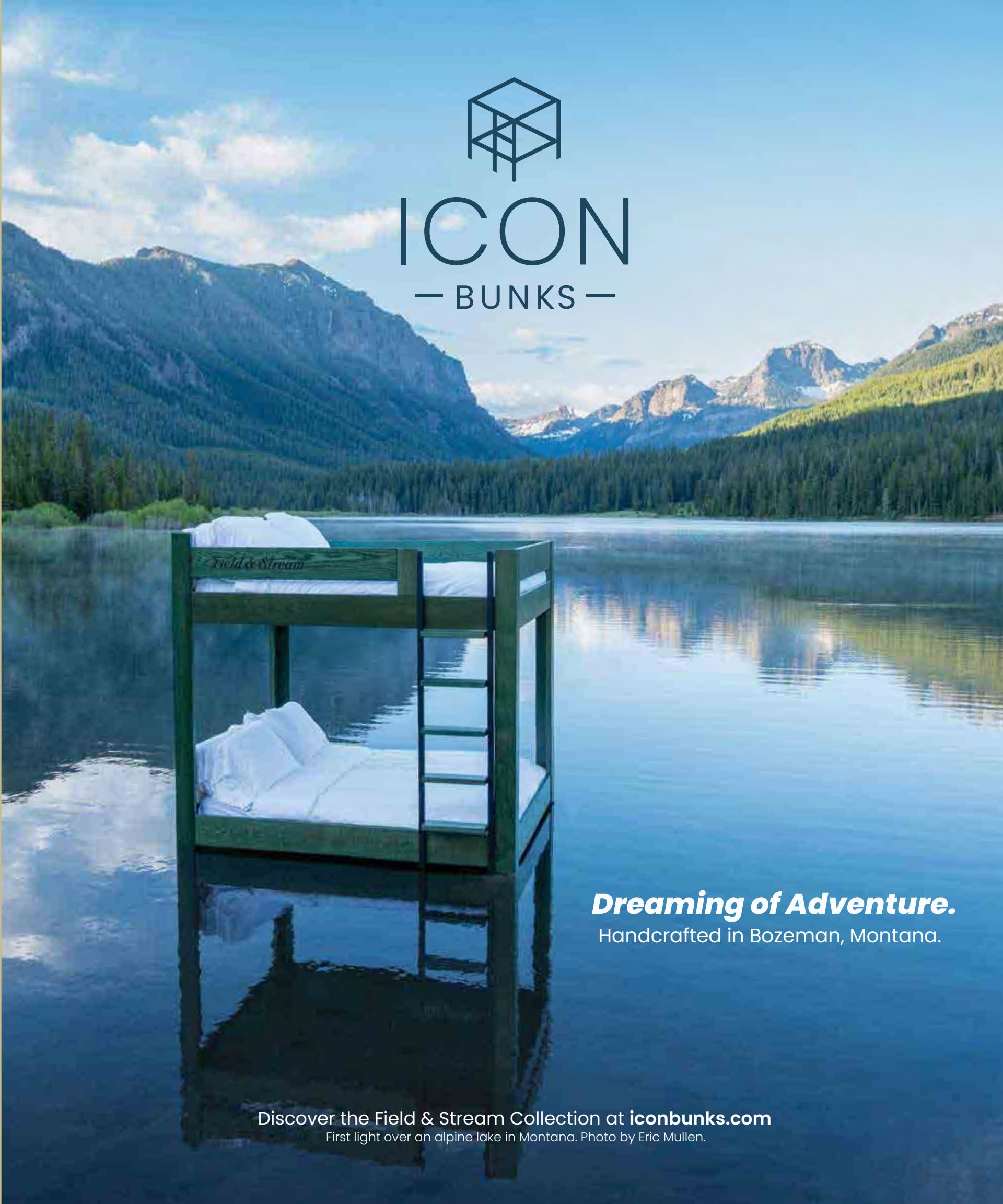
Then the dry spell began.

It was the year he pursued a trophy bull obsessively, hunting every chance he got. His confidence was eroded by disappearing blood trails, missed shots, and malfunctioning rangefinders. "Staring at trees" summed up other trips. Tail tucked, chin down, hands empty, he'd come home to an elk herd bedded down in an empty lot two blocks from our house. Some nights, we could hear the elk bugling. It sounded a bit like laughter.



↑
Aside from the belt buckle, the author inherited a collection of other small treasures from her father, including

pocketknives, cassette tapes with recordings of the author singing as a kid, and a can of Billy Beer.



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First light over an alpine lake in Montana. Photo by Eric Mullen.

As they packed for the hunt, I wished my dad were still around to join them or hear the tales. “Why don’t you take Grandpa’s belt buckle?” I said. “Maybe it will bring you luck.”



When our son turned 12, he began to prepare for a father-son elk hunt. Austin had shot a button buck and a feral hog in Alabama, but I wondered if he was stout enough for elk hunting in Idaho. Packing out meat might be too much for his knees and his resolve. Days of staring at trees might inspire him to take up other pursuits. As they packed for the hunt, I wished my dad were still around to join them or hear the tales. Maybe that’s what made me remember the belt buckle. I went to the closet and rummaged it out of the shoebox. I held it for a while, running my thumb over the leaping deer, feeling the brass grow warm in my hand.

“Why don’t you take Grandpa’s belt buckle?” I said. “Maybe it will bring you luck.”

On a cold day in October, Austin and Eddie settled into the snow on some Idaho mountain. After two days of bumping bedded-down cows and spooking good-

size bulls, they were glassing the hills in the day’s last light and getting ready to head to camp.

That’s when they saw it. A stirring at the bottom of a hill.

“There’s a bull!” Eddie whispered. “Get ready!”

The elk emerged beside a dead tree they had used for rangefinder practice. So they knew: 200 yards. Eddie’s cow call caused the bull to pause broadside in an opening. Austin took aim and held his breath.

After the muzzle flash, after the adrenaline rush, after placing his young hand on warm fur in a tearful moment of gratitude, Austin remembered the buckle. He held it up for a photo and smiled, knowing his mama would want that.

From that moment, the buckle was a talisman they carried on every hunt.

Eddie had it three days later, when he brought home a good-size mule deer. And the following month, in Arizona, when he bagged a 6x6 bull elk with his bow. A year later, in October, Austin brought home his second bull. Four days after that, the boy watched his uncle bag his first elk. Five days after that, Eddie killed the bull of a lifetime in New Mexico. Three bulls in nine days. All with the buckle.

Seasons came and went. Austin got a driver’s license, a race bike, and a girlfriend. He outgrew all his camo. Eddie began commuting to work in Australia and spent less time at the range. Seasons passed with fewer hunts. The buckle—its finish now worn in spots after so much use—was forgotten. The hunters came home sullen and the freezer cache thinned out.

The buckle was in our dresser drawer the day I broke down my first deer. Two houses down, in a yard with a trampoline, a deer that had attempted to leap over a metal fence came up short. Our neighbor, a mom with five kids, called me, knowing my boys would know what to do. “I’d hate for it to go to waste,” she said. “Do you want it?”

Austin was at school. Eddie was on a work trip, but he had deputized a hunting pal to serve as my backup fixer. “I’ll be there in an hour with my kill kit,” he said. He coached me through the process in my garage. I worried I would gag or cry or puke. Instead, I felt wonder. The tendons and muscles guided my knife. All the parts fit together just so.

I cooked the backstrap for dinner. Then I processed the rest by myself.

Before, I’d had no desire to hunt. I loved that my boys were hunters, but it wasn’t for me. Something changed with that deer.

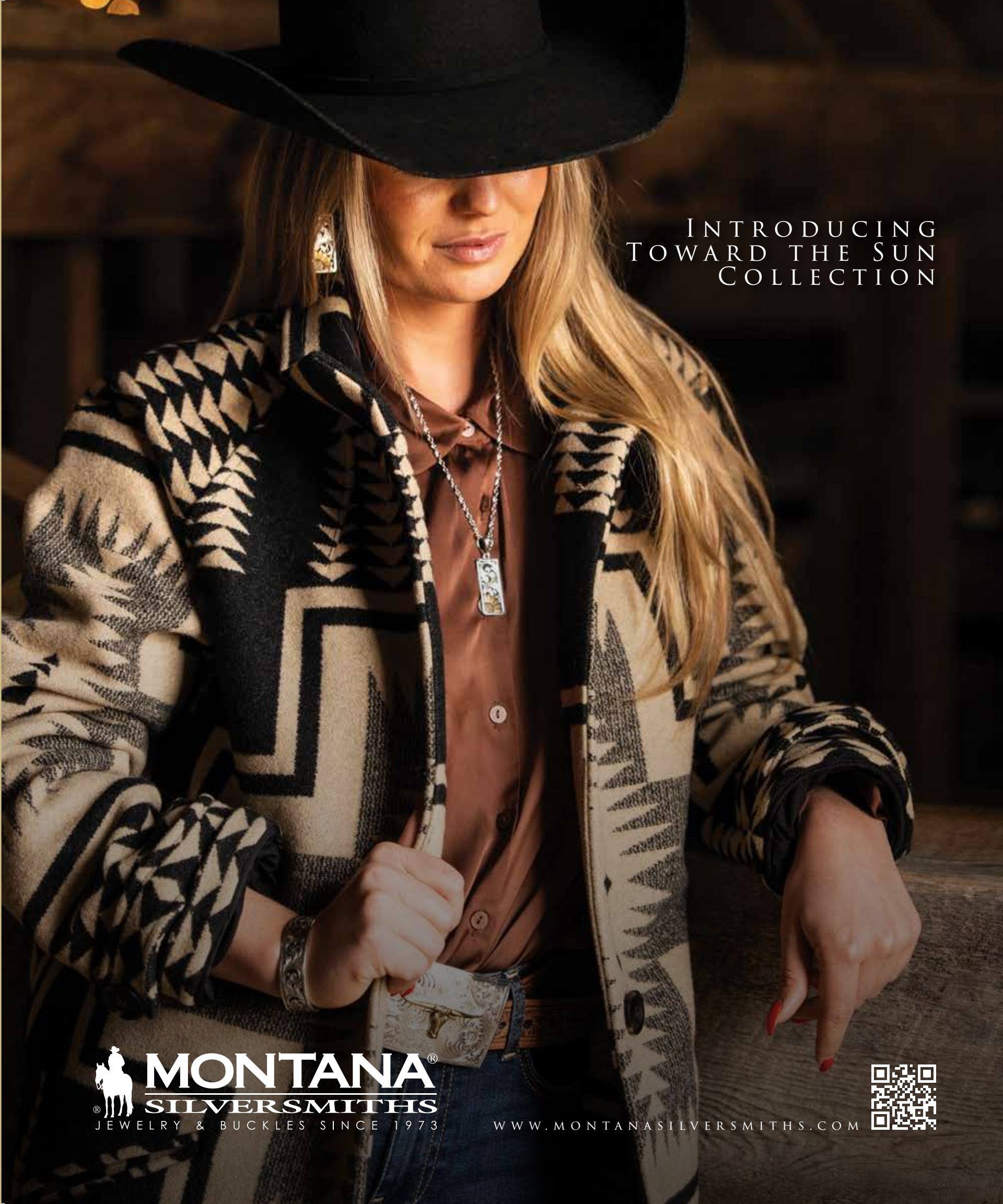
“Maybe next fall I’ll learn to hunt,” I told my husband.

He surprised me with an unexpected gift: my father’s rifle. He’d restored it with a lovely walnut stock and a riser sized for high cheekbones.

“It’s got your dad’s soul,” he said, “with a modern touch from me.”

We’re taking it to the gun range soon. I plan to wear a belt. F&S

courtesy of KIM CROSS



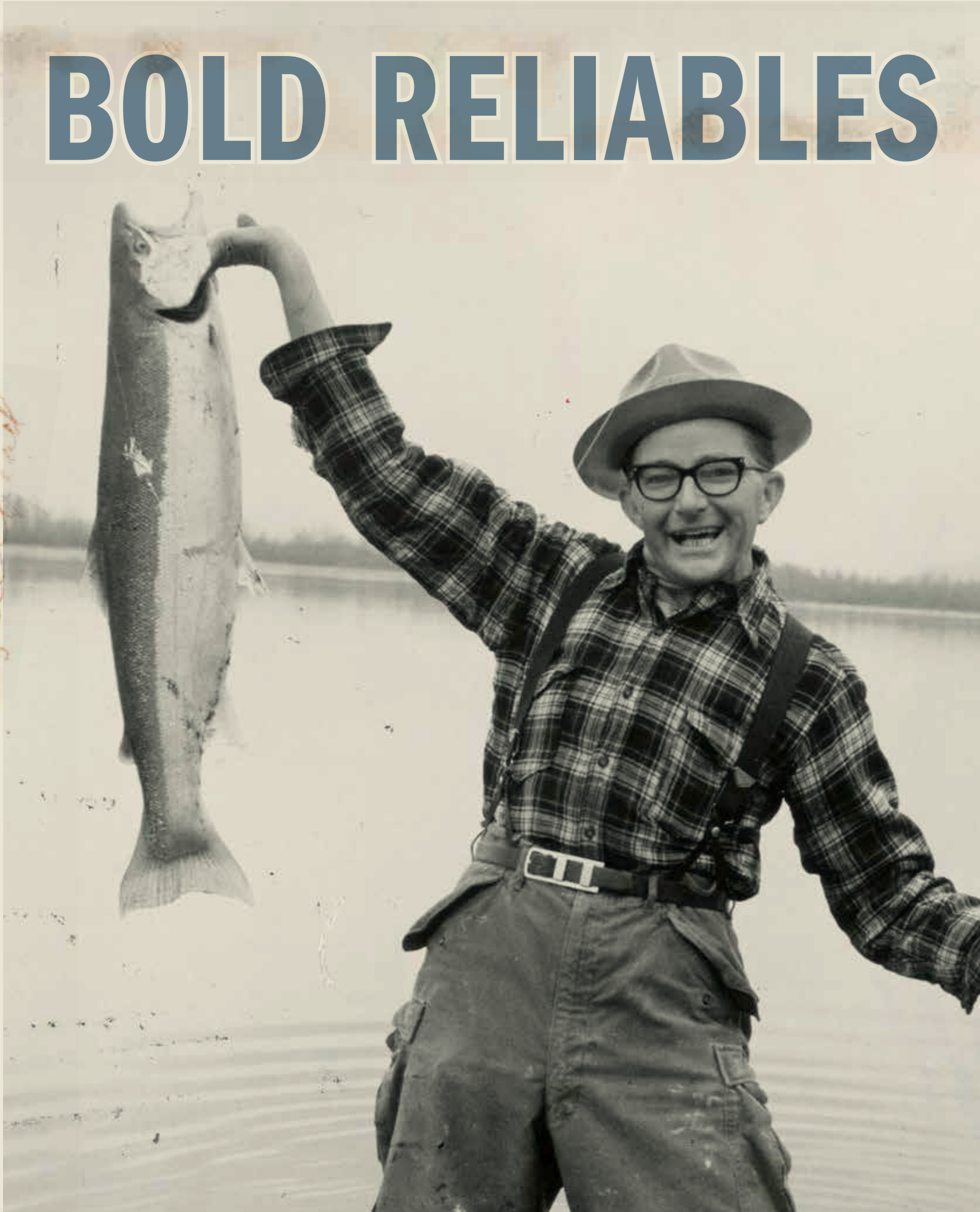
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↑
The author’s son, Austin, flashes the belt buckle for a photo after tagging his first elk.



FIELD & STREAM ARCHIVES; JOHN TOOLAN (flies); ELIAS CARLSON (angler)

STEELHEADERS WADE IN RIVERS OF DOUBT. ABOVE ALL ELSE, THEY NEED FLY PATTERNS THEY CAN BELIEVE IN. HERE ARE SEVEN COLORFUL CLASSICS YOU CAN TRUST

SELECTING A FLY from a steelheader’s fly box is an exercise in faith, for steelhead, with rare exceptions, do not feed once they’ve left the sea for sweet water. Returning to the cradle of the river that spawned him, a 20-pound buck steelhead—the holy grail of the angler’s pursuit—is just as likely to strike a colorful leaf as an exquisitely tied Skykomish Sunrise, or, more frustratingly, strike nothing at all. Still, it matters what you tie on. If precise pattern or exact imitation isn’t critical in a steelhead

fly, and as a rule it isn’t, the right combination of size, silhouette, color, movement, and, above all, presentation can make all the difference in the day’s tally. Confidence is half the battle anytime you step into a river, after any fish, but for steelhead anglers, who embrace almost masochistically low odds, believing your fly has a prayer is what keeps you in the game. The seven patterns here can be fished with faith anywhere Pacific steelhead are sought.



No. 1
COMET

NO FLY BOX IS COMPLETE without a few Comets in different colors and sizes. The pattern is beyond simple to tie, its secret being the bead-chain eyes that sink the fly to the proper depth. In winter fishing, that is usually just off the bottom. I prefer the eyes tied on top of the hook, which causes the fly to swim upside down, hook point up, minimizing hang-ups.



No. 2
FREIGHT TRAIN

FEW RIVERS HAVE SPAWNED as many popular fly patterns as the Deschutes in Oregon, a monstrous frothing snake of white water that pauses to catch its breath every quarter mile or so. That’s where steelhead as long as your leg lie in wait. God help you should you tie into one of the older and later-migrating

B-run fish that can go to 30 pounds. Fly tier Randall Kaufmann developed several well-known Deschutes patterns, including the Signal Light, Coal Car, and Mack’s Canyon, all inspired by the locomotives that run up and down the west bank of the canyon. None is more famous or trusted than the Freight Train. This pattern has a white, purple, or black hair wing with matching turns of hackle and bodies of chartreuse, purple, orange, or any combination of the three. Add a wing of gaudy Flashabou to the Freight Train and call it a Street Walker.

For steelhead anglers, who embrace almost masochistically low odds, believing your fly has a prayer is what keeps you in the game.



No. 3

GREEN BUTT SKUNK



THIS SIMPLE HAIR-WING FLY combines a black body with a white wing that makes it stand out over a wide range of water conditions, the kicker being the chartreuse butt intended to evoke a response from otherwise indifferent fish. The Skunk has probably brought more chrome to the net than any other commercially available fly pattern, though at the vise, I will often trade the green for orange, for no good reason. But then, that is the attraction of steelhead flies. You don't need to stick to the script to catch fish. In my experience, natural skunk outfishes white bucktail, and a lifetime's supply can be peeled off the closest blacktop road.

No. 4

INTRUDER



INTRUDERS ARE THE COCKY BAD BOYS of modern steelhead fly design, measuring up to 6 inches long and usually tied on tandem hooks with long strands of ostrich herl and marabou that make the flies wriggle like eels. Intruders do not closely resemble anything in nature, unless your idea of nature includes a half-cooked prawn fresh from the barbie. Some anglers are understandably put off by the Intruder's garish design, but the fish like them. With Intruders, violent takes are the norm, as steelhead may well see the fly not so much as prey but as an interloper in their territory.

I have caught more big steelhead on spider flies than on all other steelhead patterns I've tried combined.

No. 5

MARABOU SPIDER



I HAVE CAUGHT MORE BIG STEELHEAD on spider flies—which are nothing more elaborate than a couple of marabou stork feathers palmered over a bare hook—than on all other steelhead patterns I've tried combined. You can accessorize a marabou spider by adding flash or cementing a bead on the head, in which case it becomes an Egg-Sucking Leech, or by tying on a trailer hook to catch short strikers. I like black over blue, black over purple, red over yellow, and lavender over orange or yellow. For winter runs, go pink or go home.



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No. 6

MUDDLER MINNOW



DON GAPEN DEVELOPED HIS MUDDLER MINNOW in the late 1930s for brook trout on Ontario’s Nipigon River. It has since shed its Canadian skin to become one of the most recognizable fly patterns on Earth. What sells is its versatility. Fish it deep as a sculpin imitation, or fish it on top as a hopper, or anywhere in the water column to imitate any number of other forage species for trout, smallmouth bass, and more.

If I could have only one fly pattern for catching steelhead on the surface—the most exciting way to fish that I know—it would be a purple Muddler tied to the leader with a half hitch behind the clipped-deer-hair head. The hitch makes the fly cut a V on the surface as it swings across the current, triggering fish that otherwise wouldn’t stir a fin. Why? Who knows? It’s like what Churchill said about Russia: “A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

If I could have only one fly pattern for catching steelhead on the surface—the most exciting way to fish that I know—it would be a purple Muddler Minnow.

No. 7

PURPLE PERIL



DESIGNED IN THE 1940s by Northwest anglers for Washington’s Skykomish and Stillaguamish rivers, the Purple Peril is my first choice for a follow-up fly after a steelhead has tugged at a bigger, brighter offering but failed to commit. It is a comparatively somber fly and follows a maxim I’ve heard on many rivers: “Any color is good as long as it’s purple.” (Go to another river, and you’ll hear the same said about black.)

In a general sense, the rule is dark water, dark fly; bright water, bright fly. But the seasons also have weight, with winter-run fish favoring reds, pinks, and other bold offerings, while summer-runs, having spent more time in headwater streams, are often moved to strike at muted-color flies that suggest the aquatic insect life in the tributaries where they were reared. For these steelhead especially, the Purple Peril is the perfect back half of a bait and switch. F&S



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ON THE WATERFRONT

ON THE SHORES OF LAKE GUNTERSVILLE, THIS FAMILY-RUN SHOP HAS ANY FRESHWATER BAIT YOU'LL NEED—AND SERVES A MEAN BISCUIT

by ANDREW GREENE photographs by WES FRAZER



SOME PLACES simply mean more. Maybe this is something hunters and anglers understand better than most because of how much time we spend in the outdoors: Every so often, if you're lucky, you'll encounter a place so special, so unique, that you just know, almost instantly, it will be a part of you for the rest of your life. For some, it could be a section of flooded timber—a cathedral of ancient oak trees that welcome flocks of green-heads every winter. For others, it could be a hidden creek—a mere thin blue line on a map to most, but a brook trout treasure chest to the anglers who discover it. For me and many other bass anglers, I suspect, a bait shop near Lake Guntersville,

in northern Alabama, is such a place. I checked Guntersville off my bucket list 10-plus years ago. But before I hit the lake, I needed gas for my boat. I pulled into what looked to be a typical rural filling station. The name of the place was written in big yellow letters: WATERFRONT. Intrigued, I stepped inside. Little did I know that my life was about to change. I can still remember the scent of steaming coffee and freshly cooked bacon that hit me as I walked through the doors. And as my eyes gazed at the pegboard-covered walls, all packed with an assortment of hard and soft baits, I knew that I was in a very special place—a

place that would come to mean much more to me than your typical bait shop. **BAIT AND GRUB** I can't remember exactly what baits I purchased on that first visit to Waterfront Bay Grocery & Tackle. Because my visit was in mid June, I'm guessing it was something like a pack of Zoom Ol Monster worms in Red Bug or a deep-diving crank-bait for probing the miles of Tennessee River ledges that draw so many anglers to Guntersville in the first place. What I *do* remember buying then—and what I'll never forget—is the fried bologna biscuit. Waterfront isn't just a tackle shop. It has a full kitchen right next to the register

Waterfront isn't just a tackle shop. It has a full kitchen right next to the register and serves up some of the best breakfast I've ever had.

and serves up some of the best breakfast I've ever had. In the years after that first visit, every morning I fished Guntersville, I got a fried bologna biscuit. That was my go-to order—until I went fishing with two-time Bassmaster Classic champion Jordan Lee. He put me on to the bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich—with mayo. His pro tip: Order two. One to eat with a coffee in Waterfront's dining room, and one to save for lunchtime out on the water. If a cold breakfast sandwich for lunch isn't your cup of tea, don't worry. Waterfront has a killer lunch menu that includes cheesesteaks, burgers, and my personal favorite, the chicken-bacon-ranch wrap. The shop is within walking distance of one of the most popular boat ramps on Lake Guntersville. I can't tell you how many times I've stopped in for breakfast and then pulled my boat back up to the dock later in the day to walk over for lunch. **FAMILY BUSINESS** If you know about Waterfront, you know about Paul and Jana Ponder. They're the owners, and are two of the best people you'll ever come across—the kind of people who'll do just about anything for you. A few years back, I had launched my boat at the ramp near Waterfront, then fished my way up to North Sauty Creek, where the Ponders have another store. My boat was having some motor issues, and I couldn't get back to the boat ramp. I asked Paul if he could give me a lift back to my truck. Without hesitation, he said, "Jump in." We spent the entire drive back to Waterfront talking about fishing and life. I shared with him how I dreamed of moving down to Lake Guntersville one day. "I would love to see that happen for you," Paul told me before he dropped me off at my truck. "You let me know when you move down here." What's stayed with me most about that day is the fact that Waterfront is about more than baits and biscuits. It's about family. It's about the Ponders and the fishing community they've cultivated through their store—whether they're helping a kid find the right bait to catch his first fish with, congratulating a fisherman who just won a life-changing tournament, listening to fish stories over coffee and breakfast, or giving an angler with a busted motor a lift back to the boat ramp. Waterfront is one of those places that simply means more. F&S



Top Jana and Paul Ponder, the owners of Waterfront, have cultivated a close-knit fishing community.

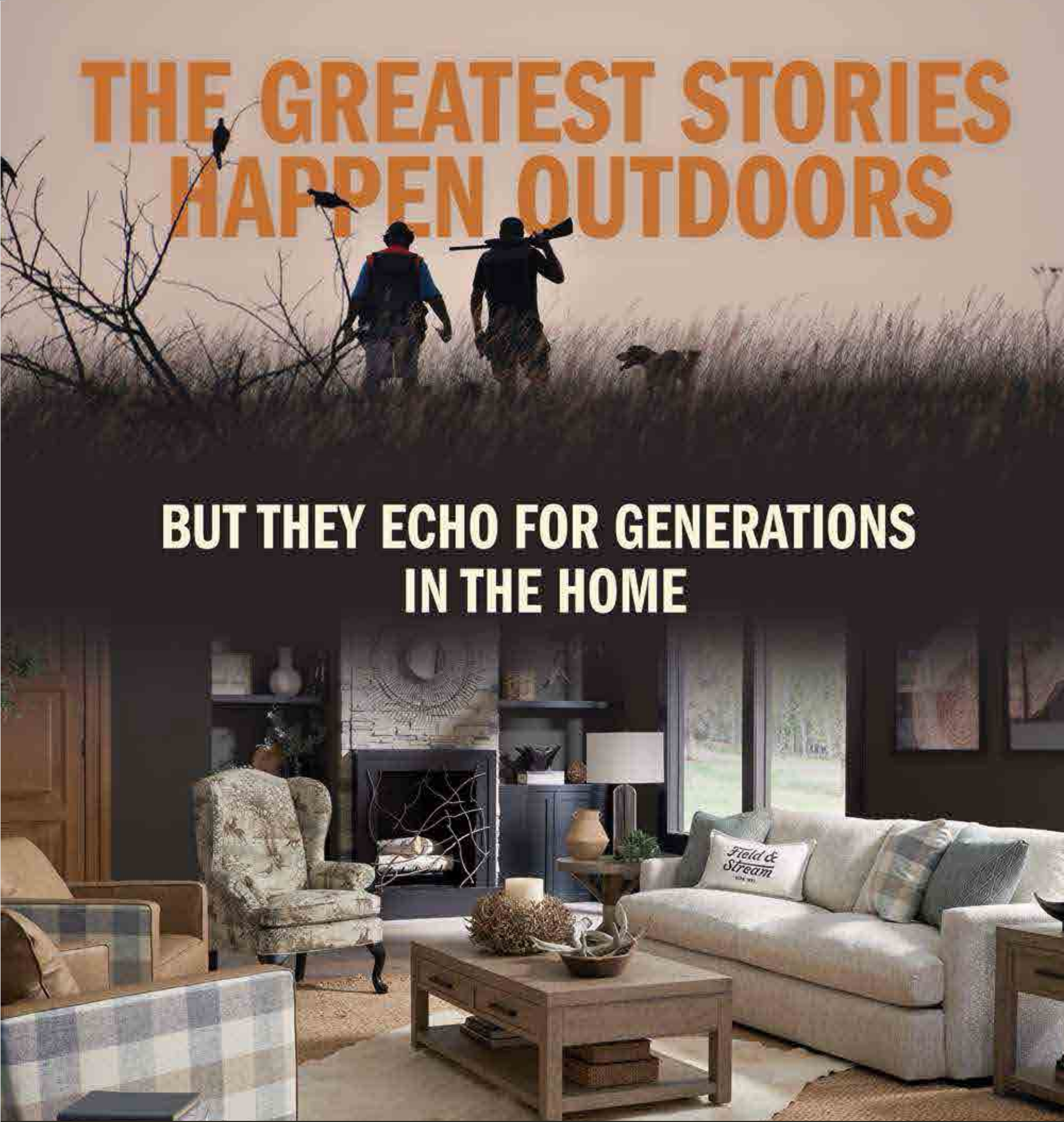
Bottom After purchasing bait or tackle at the cash register, customers can order food from the kitchen (left).



Top
Whether you're after bass, crappies, or catfish, you'll be able find the lure you need at Waterfront.

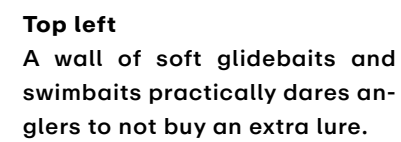
Right
You can buy soft baits in seemingly every color of plastic that has ever been poured.

Far right
No harm in a touch of tasteful potty humor. After a meal in the dining room, anglers can feel "reel relief" in the "bass room."



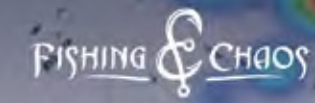
Explore the American-made furniture collection inspired by the great outdoors and built for generations reminiscing on every trophy story, fish tale, and all the ones that got away.

Field & Stream
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Top right
Old sheds, autographed lures, and even some fan art all contribute a little something to Waterfront's welcoming vibes.

Left
Waterfront doesn't sell only lures. Guntersville anglers can fill their live wells with fresh bait here too.



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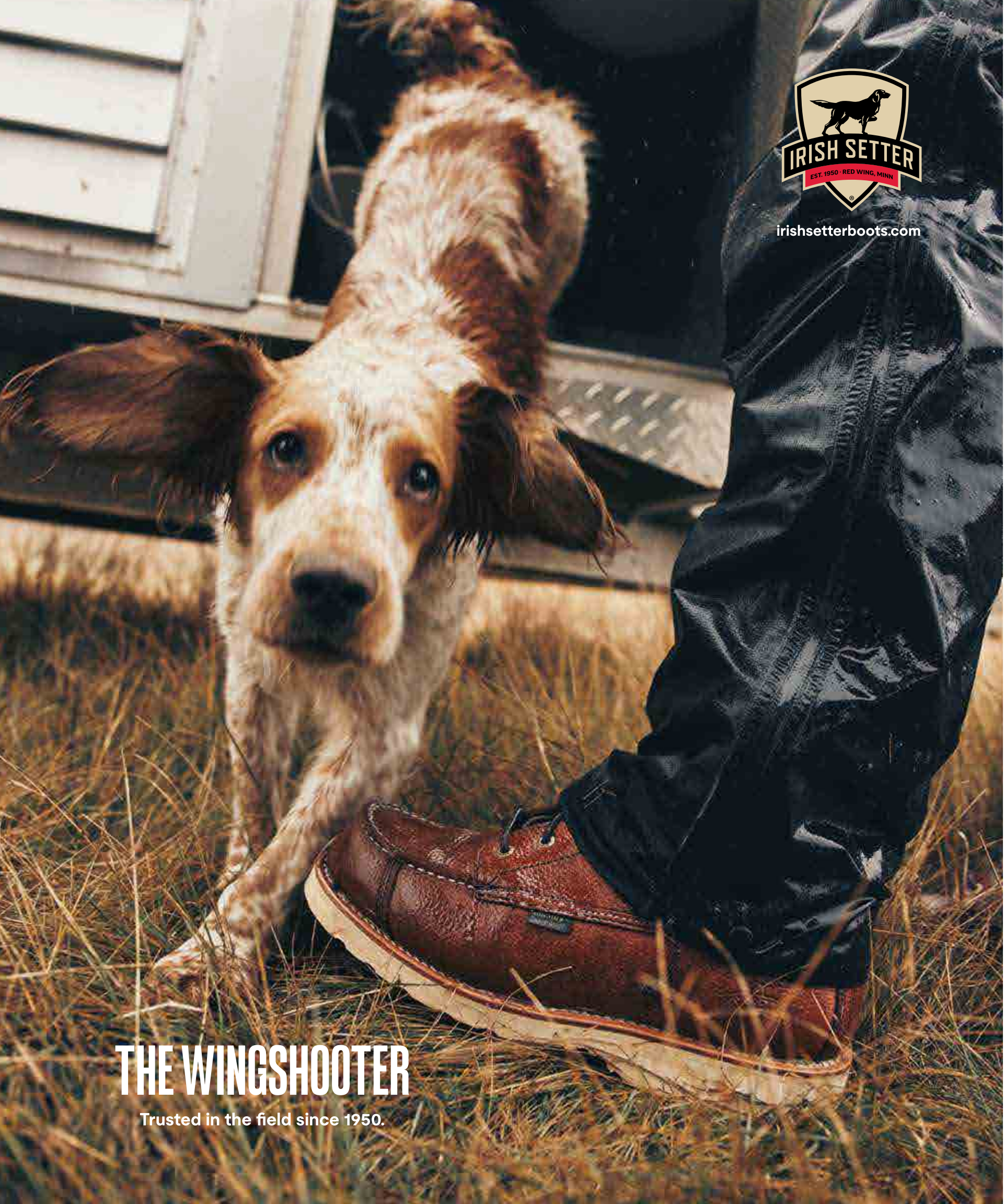


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FEATURES

photograph by STEPHEN DeVRIES



Masterful scrollwork surrounds an engraving of a lion on a William Evans Webley Patent Model 1902 underlever single-shot rifle made in 1916, when British dangerous-game guns defined the state of the art in rifle making (see p. 94).

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ONE MINUTE THEY WERE HUNTING ELK, CALLING TURKEYS, FISHING FOR MARLIN, REDFISH, OR TROUT. THE NEXT, THEY WERE FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES. IN THIS COLLECTION OF TRUE SURVIVAL STORIES, FIVE HUNTERS AND ANGLERS RECOUNT HOW THEY FACED DEATH IN THE OUTDOORS AND LIVED TO HUNT AND FISH ANOTHER DAY

illustrations by STEPHEN ANDRADE

CLOSE CALLS

STRUCK!

MY HEAD was clear when I came to. From the jetty, I could see to the other side of the Halifax River and the condominiums full of people, but there wasn't a soul nearby. I was pissed off at whoever had started my heart back up. It felt like half of my body had been blown off. I was yelling, to no one, "Why did you wake me up for more of this?"

It was January in Port Orange, Florida, and the redfish were running. I'd prepared my tackle and rigged my rods the night before. The forecast called for only a slight drizzle, but a cold front was moving in from the north, mixing with warmer air already sitting on the coast. That meant the fish would be biting.

A cold front like that can produce strong lightning, far stronger than the heat lightning we see around here in the summertime. I'd had close calls on the Ponce Inlet jetty before. I'd ducked under rocks and watched bolts rain down way too close for comfort. But there was no sign of lightning that morning until I grabbed a rod and reached back to hurl the big lead weight and live shrimp out into the water.

Just then, a deafening boom busted both of my eardrums, and everything was covered in a brilliant white light. A bolt of lightning had connected with the lead weight, and electricity coursed through my fishing rod, burning my eyebrows and half the hair on my head. It shot into my right hand, instantly melting two of my fingers, then it traveled into my torso, burning up my insides. The sheer force of the bolt threw me 5 or 6 feet across the jetty.

When I regained consciousness, I looked down and saw my toes. I was relieved they were still there and that I could wiggle them. I felt my right arm hanging by my side. I had two choices: I could lie there and die, or I could find the will to survive.

I used my whole body to swing my right arm back and forth until I worked up a strong enough rhythm to flip myself over onto my stomach. That's when I saw

the hole in the side of my torso. The bolt had liquefied my insides. Everything that had been inside was now gushing out, but there was no blood because the heat had cauterized the wounds.

I needed to get to my tackle box to reach my phone and call 911, but it was 6 feet away. Without the use of my arms or legs, I wormed my way over to it, leaving a trail as I went. When I got there, I used the force of my body again to flip my arms up onto the box's lid. That's when I realized the two fingers were gone. Meat and the bones from my right hand were falling all over the top of the tackle box.

Somehow, I managed to unlatch the box and grab my phone. It took a long

**ELECTRICITY COURSED
THROUGH MY FISHING
ROD, BURNING MY
EYEBROWS AND HALF
THE HAIR ON MY HEAD.
IT SHOT INTO MY RIGHT
HAND, INSTANTLY MELTING
TWO OF MY FINGERS,
THEN IT TRAVELED INTO
MY TORSO, BURNING UP
MY INSIDES.**

time to enter the lock code and dial 911. It was the dispatch lady's first day on the job, and I was her first call of the morning. "I'm at the Ponce Inlet," I told her. "I just got hit by lightning."

I explained to her exactly where I was located and said that I was getting tired and wanted to go to sleep. "Don't go to sleep," she said. "Stay awake for me. Help is on the way."

About 15 minutes later, I saw lights on the beach and, eventually, a medic approaching. He told me later that smoke was still rising from the hole in my side

by JAMES CHURCH, as told to TRAVIS HALL

and from my right hand. "We can't get the gurney out here," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

I said, "Grab my shoulder and drag me out of here!"

He pulled me 260 feet to a golf cart waiting near the end of the jetty. Because of the severity of my burns, they had to take me to the Orlando Regional Medical Center—a full hour away without traffic.

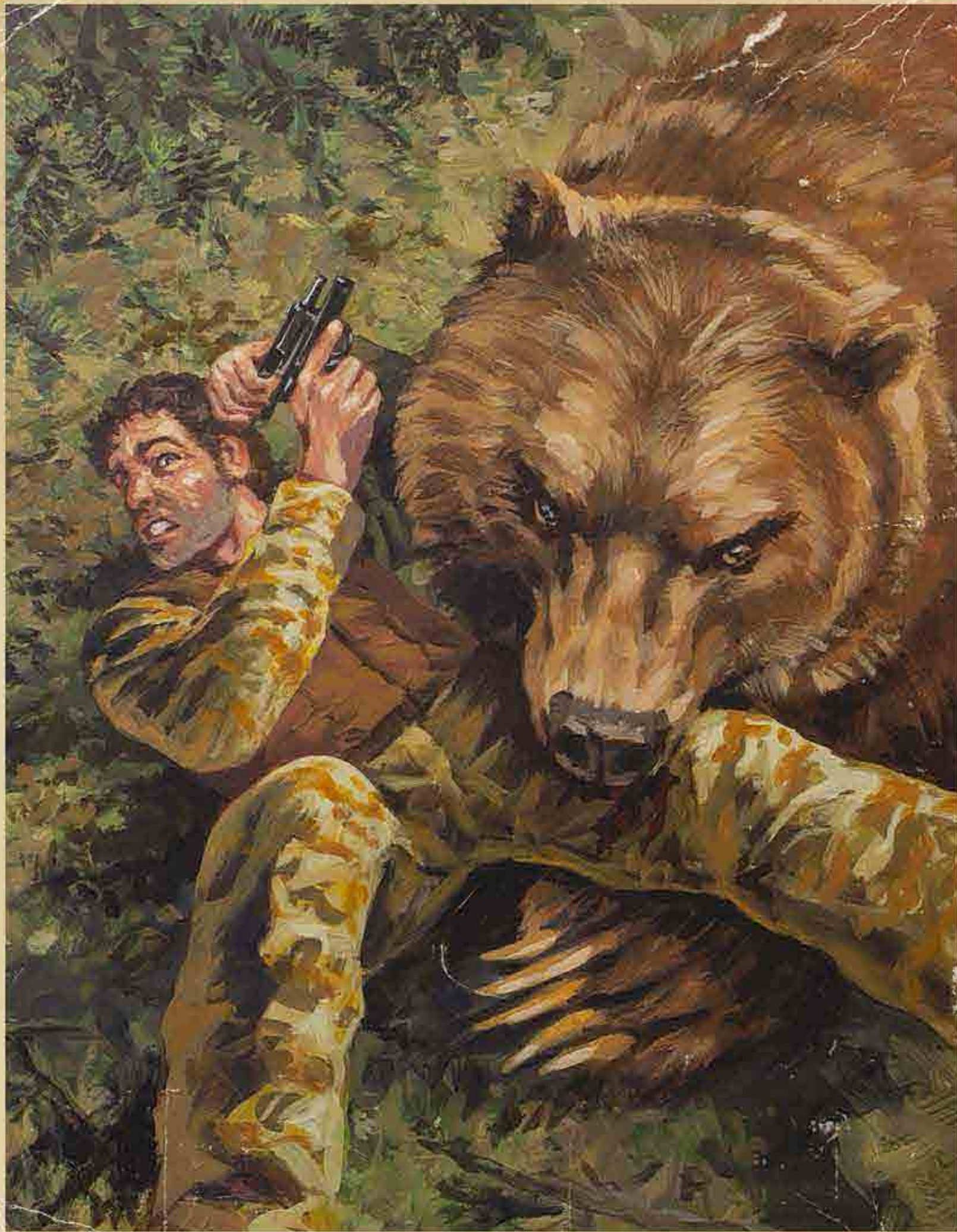
When we got there, I lay on a gurney in the emergency wing for two hours waiting for the surgeons to show up. Finally, two specialists arrived. They cut me open from the top of my ribs all the way down past my groin. Then they took my guts out, laid them on a platter, cut away everything that was cooked, and sewed back whatever was still good. I lost half of my large and small intestines and half of my colon. My lungs collapsed during the operation, so I had to relearn how to breathe using techniques I'd picked up in my martial arts training. After nine days in the hospital, I went home to my family.

I had a lot of help that day, and I believe it wasn't just from the rescue team and the medical professionals. When the lightning hit and I was covered in that bright white light, I had a vision in which I could see my grandparents as clear as day out on the horizon. They were smiling and looking back at me. I'm convinced that they caught me by the back of the neck after the strike and gently laid me down perfectly face-up on the ground. It was my grandparents who started my heart back up, I'm sure, and they gave me the will to survive. They're the reason I'm alive today.

I still fish the Ponce Inlet jetty every year when the redfish or the black drum or the sheepshead are running. I'll never give that up. These days, I can feel the lightning coming. It starts as a dull ache in my wrist where the bolt went in. They say that once you've been hit by lightning, you're charged, and you can survive future strikes.

I'll take their word for it.





MAULED!

by LONDON CLEMENT, as told to TRAVIS HALL

THE GRIZZLY was straddling me with her head hovering just inches above my body, so close I that could feel her growls resonating inside my chest. Her stench was overwhelming. I don't know how she didn't crush the bones in my leg when she clamped down. I put the muzzle of my 10mm pistol against her massive skull and pulled the trigger, then against her neck and pulled it again—but the gun didn't go off.

When had I first spotted her, she was 70 yards away in an aspen grove, ambling down a game trail with her two cubs in tow. I pulled the pistol tight to my chest and tried to sink into a boulder, hoping to somehow conceal my outline. *Dear Lord, please let these things walk past me, I thought. Please let them keep going.*

She vanished into the forest for a moment, and I wondered if my prayer had been answered. But then she reappeared, standing just 10 yards away. Having caught wind of me, she stopped on a dime and stuck her nose straight up in the air. She moved her head from side to side, looking for the threat she'd smelled. I'd traveled to Wyoming from my home in north Georgia to bowhunt elk for the last five Septembers, and I'd had close calls with grizzlies before. But nothing could prepare me for what happened next.

She lunged and was on me in a millisecond. I fired my pistol as she came at me. I learned later that I hit her four times during the charge. She was unfazed.

As her cubs scattered for cover, she threw her shoulders into me. I couldn't feel the pain—my adrenaline was through the roof—but I could feel the force. It was like a freight train slamming into me, pinning me against the boulder in a seated position. Then she threw her head back. I can still see her opening her mouth, still picture her big white teeth gleaming as she came down and sunk them into my left thigh. She was like an enormous dog, and my leg was her chew toy. She'd shake me violently for a few seconds, then stop, shake, then stop. But the growling never

stopped. It was a visceral sound that still haunts me today.

After pulling the pistol's trigger four or five times to no avail, I realized it was jammed. *I'm about to die by grizzly bear, I thought. She's about to maul me to death.*

Then everything slowed down. I racked the slide over and over while she was tearing into my flesh. What must have been just a few seconds of trying to unjam the gun felt like an eternity. Finally, a stuck cartridge flew out, and a new bullet slid into the chamber.

I shoved the muzzle against her skull again and pulled the trigger. This time, the gun fired and she went limp. I felt all the pressure of her jaws release my leg

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at once. Then she flopped over and fell off me. That's when I started screaming.

I was screaming for help, for my dad and my cousin Chris and our friend Buzzy, who were nearby. With the bear lying there, I took off hobbling down the mountain. I made it 60 or 70 yards before I had to sit down again. My adrenaline was still surging. I still couldn't feel any pain when I spotted Buzzy coming up out of the woods.

He knew exactly what had happened from the screams and the gunfire. Chris and my dad weren't far behind. Chris used an old game bag to wrap my wounds tightly. Then he and Buzzy sprinted off

to get the side-by-sides, leaving me and my dad alone with the dead bear. That's when the adrenaline started to fade, and the emotions came flooding in. I don't have children, but I could tell it was hitting my dad hard. I buried my face in my hands, and we cried.

The guys parked the side-by-sides as close to us as they could, but I still had to hobble a full mile to get to them. Step by step, the pain became excruciating. Then we rode for an hour just to get to the trailhead and then another hour in the truck to reach the hospital in Pinedale. When I got there, the local sheriff and a USFWS agent were waiting with questions about the attack. They recorded my story as the doctors cleaned my wounds and stitched me up. I tried to recall the attack as best as I could while watching the medical team apply saline to the injury. They poured it on top of my thigh, and it dripped right through the wound channel and out the back of my leg. "Her teeth were just centimeters from severing your femoral artery," the doctor told me. "You're lucky to be alive."

The next day, I had to go back to the attack site with the USFWS officials. We approached the dead bear in a triangular formation with our guns drawn. The big sow was stiff with rigor and already beginning to bloat, but she was still lying in the spot where she'd slumped off after that last shot.

I had no ill feelings toward the bear. She was just following her instincts and protecting her offspring. To this day, I wonder if I could have done certain things differently. What if I'd stood up and started yelling when I spotted her at 70 yards instead of sinking back into the boulder in fear?

I don't know. All I can say for sure is that God was with me that day and gave me the wherewithal to do what had to be done in the moment. I still hunt elk in the Wyoming backcountry every September. But I have a newfound respect for grizzlies now that's hard to put into words. And I carry a new pistol that never jams.

SLAMMED!

by JACK CANADY, as told to WILL BRANTLEY

I DIDN'T even know that I was injured until I stood up. My face was bleeding, and I was disoriented. I couldn't get my bearings to find my way back to the truck on a farm I've hunted for years. I had to get my phone and check my OnX track to find my way out. I managed to get through the gate and drive home, but by then, I knew something was wrong with my neck. My wife drove me to the emergency room, and they did an MRI. Then the doctor came out and said, "We've got to get you to a neurosurgeon. Your neck is broken in two places."

I've seen a lot in 56 years of turkey hunting. I used to work for Knight & Hale and was a guide, and I've turkey hunted in multiple states every spring for years. I have called in some coyotes here and there while turkey hunting, but I've never had a close call with any of them. I've never stumbled onto a rattlesnake or anything else. In fact, I'd never even seen a bobcat in the woods before. But I saw this one, right before he jumped on me.

It was the spring of 2022, and I'd already been to Nebraska earlier and struck out. We had hard, high winds, frigid cold and sleet the whole time out there, so I was looking forward to getting back to Kentucky for our opening day. I got on a group of three gobblers the first two mornings, and on the third morning, it looked like it was finally going to work out. They gobbled early, still in the dark, when I was getting out of the truck, maybe three quarters of a mile away.

I took off toward them and got set up about 200 yards from the roost. As it started getting light out, I decided to adjust one more time so I would be in range of an opening I hoped the toms would walk through. I saw the first bird fly down right then. I called, real soft, and the gobblers hammered back, with their hens answering me too. Pretty soon, here they came, right up the edge of the creek and toward the opening I'd

picked out. The hens crossed in front of me first, about 35 yards away, and the gobblers were right behind them. It was perfect. I was easing my shotgun into position to shoot when I heard a little noise over my right shoulder.

I turned slightly to look, and the bobcat was already 3 feet in the air with his claws out. He'd gotten to within 36 inches of me without my ever knowing it. Before I could react, he hit me—slammed into my right shoulder and the back of my head, and we went to the ground. It was like being punched. I couldn't believe how strong he was.

I threw my hands up to block my face, and I could feel my elbow hit him, either

I TURNED SLIGHTLY TO LOOK, AND THE BOBCAT WAS ALREADY 3 FEET IN THE AIR WITH HIS CLAWS OUT. BEFORE I COULD REACT, HE HIT ME—SLAMMED INTO MY RIGHT SHOULDER AND THE BACK OF MY HEAD, AND WE WENT TO THE GROUND.

in his neck or his chest. We were on the ground, and he was wrapped around my head. He knocked my glasses off and cut my face and my nose. I screamed, and no sooner was he on me than he was gone. I caught a glimpse of him walking away through the woods. The whole thing didn't last more than a couple seconds.

I knew he probably wasn't coming back—but still, I was scared, to tell you the truth. I found my glasses, then took hold of my shotgun and sat there for 15 minutes. Those turkeys probably stopped flying by the time they hit

Mississippi or Alabama somewhere. I scared the fire out of them.

I pulled my facemask down and saw blood on my hand and in the mask. I touched my face to assess the cuts, and I didn't think they were too bad. But then I stood to leave—and that's when I became disoriented and didn't know which way to go to get to my truck. I took a good look at my surroundings but still couldn't figure out where I was. When I opened my GPS, I could see a pretty much straight line back to the vehicle, and I followed it out.

Once I got home, my wife took me straight to the hospital. I learned that the bobcat had broken the top two vertebrae of my spine. He never bit me, but he twisted my head to the left when he hit me, slammed me to the ground, and then twisted it the opposite way when he jumped off. I think that's how he broke it. The neurosurgeon at Baptist Health decided that doing surgery was too risky. I was glad of that. Instead, the treatment was to wear a full neck brace that kept me looking straight ahead for four months. The cuts on my face weren't deep enough for stitches, but the doctors did give me a tetanus shot.

I was lucky, because the bobcat could've gotten me in the eyes. He meant to kill me, but only because he thought I was a turkey, and he pounced when I moved. I don't hold it against him. He was a perfectly normal bobcat that was just following his instincts. But I promise you, he'd never heard a sound like the one I made when I screamed. Once he realized I wasn't a turkey, he changed his mind fast and was gone.

When I was in the neck brace, sitting on the couch and trying to heal, a lot of people asked if I'd quit turkey hunting over that. Nope. I'm 75 years old and have survived two bouts with cancer and now one bobcat attack. I can't turn my head to the left quite as far as I once could, but I still get around OK. I killed a turkey in both Illinois and Kentucky last spring, and so long as I'm able, I'll be out there next spring too.





SNAKEBIT!

by ZAIN SHAH, as told to DAVE HURTEAU

WHEN I looked down and saw this huge snake coiled at my feet—the diamond-shaped head and bone-white rattle—I couldn’t believe it. I *didn’t* believe he’d bit me, at first. It wasn’t until I spotted the two red fang marks on my leg that I kind of shit myself.

I was fly fishing for trout with my buddy Kevin Foley at Lost Cove Creek in North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest. We’d planned to camp for a few days last summer, ahead of our high school graduation. Before the trip, my dad was half sick with worry. He tells everyone to this day that he had a bad feeling—a premonition that something ominous was looming.

We reached the trailhead around 2:30 p.m. on June 2nd and set off hiking the 2 miles to the river, cell service waning as we walked. This was the spring after Hurricane Helene, and the watershed was strewn with blowdowns and debris. It was snake heaven, and we knew it.

But after glimpsing the first pools, then catching a few chubs on nymphs and searching for deeper holes that might hold trout, we started walking a little recklessly. Kevin yelled out, “Black snake! Big one. Watch your step.” After that I was looking down the whole time to avoid stumbling onto a copperhead or a cottonmouth, or any of the 10 species of snakes that exist around the river.

We fished the best spots—carefully—and I had a couple of takes but no hookups. Then we reached this one pool where Kevin said he saw a trout. I laid out a cast and a fish slashed at but missed my dry fly. That’s when I let my guard down. I became laser-focused on how to position myself for the best cast, concluding that I had to get across this one log for the right presentation. I stepped over it with my left leg, and when I planted my foot, I felt a sharp, super-quick prick above my ankle.

I thought it was a thorn poking me, and once my other leg was over, I looked back, expecting to see a bush with prick-ers. Instead, I saw a huge rattlesnake coiled under the log. I pulled down the neoprene sock of my wet-wading boot

and saw two little dots on my lower calf with drops of blood seeping out.

Looking back at the snake, it hit home that I was staring at an animal that could kill me. And it was staring back. A rattlesnake is a terrifying thing to see up close. Its face looks like a dragon’s. It’s mean looking. I get a shiver talking about it.

“I think this rattlesnake just bit me,” I shouted. “Those things are deadly, Kevin!” I showed him the bites, and his eyes got wide with an expression that I read as, *Oh my God, he’s going to die*. A wave of fear unlike anything I’ve ever felt washed over me, and all the unsettling details of our predicament rushed into

LOOKING BACK AT THE SNAKE, IT HIT HOME THAT I WAS STARING AT AN ANIMAL THAT COULD KILL ME. AND IT WAS STARING BACK. A RATTLESNAKE IS A TERRIFYING THING TO SEE UP CLOSE. IT’S MEAN LOOKING.

my head: *We’re 2 miles from the car. It’s getting late. The top of my phone says SOS.*

But Kevin was calm. Somehow he had enough service to call 911, and he’d brought a portable charger, which allowed us to stay on the phone with the operator the whole time. She confirmed the snake was a timber rattler and said I needed to sit down and wrap the leg loosely, to breathe deeply and keep my foot below my heart. A rescue team was gathering supplies, but there was no way to know how long it would take.

That was the hardest part, the waiting. First, I felt faint and nearly passed out. Then, about 30 minutes in, I started feeling a strange tingling in my appendages

that only got worse. The operator kept asking about my breathing, and I began to think, *I’m just waiting to suffocate on this stream bank*. I filmed some short messages on my phone to friends and family. They were sort of goodbye videos, but not quite that. I felt like I was going to cry.

For two hours, we just listened for the chopper. But what we heard instead were the voices of rescuers, coming through the woods on foot. I saw the first one emerge from the trees about 50 yards away, and the feeling of relief was indescribable. The first thing I said was, “Do you think I’ll make it?” And they said, “Yes, you’re going to be OK.”

Before long, I heard the *whup, whup, whup* and looked up. “Is that a Black Hawk?” I asked. They nodded, and I felt something almost like giddiness. *Not only am I getting out of here, but I’m getting a ride in a Black Hawk.*

With the chopper in position, two men rappelled down, put me in a harness, hooked me to a steel cable, and gave a thumbs-up to the pilot, and I started ascending to the sky. Black Hawk up! It was like being in a tornado. It was insanely high. But I’d been waiting for this moment for more than two hours, so it was just pure excitement—and relief.

Eventually I was taken to Johnson City Medical center, where at first the doctors didn’t think I’d need antivenin. But the tingling got so intense that they took another blood test and found that my liver function was failing and my platelets had dropped from 250K to like 60K. I learned then that if your platelets get too low, you can start bleeding out of your orifices. They ended up giving me 12 vials of antivenin, and by the time I left the hospital, my foot was swollen to about half the size of the log I stepped over before I got bit.

I’m lucky to be here. The first-responder network we have is amazing. They saved my life. I can’t wait to get back into the mountains with a fly rod. Kevin and I are even planning a trout-fishing road trip out West. I’ve been doing a lot of research on snake gaiters.

IMPALED!

WE ALL CROWDED around the small mirror in the bathroom below deck—the deckhand, my dad, and me. My neck was throbbing. I could barely make out the puncture wound in the back of my throat where the marlin's bill had gone in. It happened so fast. *That must be what it's like to get shot by a bullet*, I thought.

Before that, it had been a normal Saturday. We were fishing 80 miles off the coast of Louisiana in my boat, the *High Risk*. I hooked the white marlin on a top-water trolling lure at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I was using heavy tackle, and the marlin weighed only 65 pounds. He never took much line. I brought him in quickly, and he was still green.

My deckhand took the rod and sat down in the fighting chair so I could tag and release the fish. I leaned over the side and jabbed the marlin with my tagging pole. But it was thrashing wildly, and the tag didn't stick.

When I leaned back over the side to try again, I came face-to-face with the fish. That's when it reared up and speared me. The bill went straight through my mouth and into the back of my neck. It didn't touch anything else.

"Goddamn!" I yelled. It was like the marlin had just punched me in the face, then he was off the hook and gone. I stumbled back against the fighting chair. A searing pain tore through the back of my neck.

I tried to lie down in the cabin after seeing the stab wound in the mirror, but the pain was too much. There was no way I could endure it for a 4-hour boat ride back to the dock. I shoved an Aleve down my throat, careful to keep it out of the wound.

My dad called the Coast Guard, and they directed us to an offshore oil platform nearby. When we got there, I walked up to the bow of my boat and climbed into a basket that the oilmen lowered down from a crane. Then they pulled me 75 feet up into the air and onto the platform.

When the Coast Guard arrived and loaded me into their helicopter, I told them to take me to Terrebonne General in Houma.

"I called ahead," I said. "I have doctors there waiting for me."

The helicopter ride was long, an hour and a half at least. I spent most of it trying to convince them to take me to Terrebonne instead of the West Jefferson Medical Center in New Orleans. When we finally got to Terrebonne, the weather was so bad they couldn't land the chopper. They took me to the Houma Airport instead and rushed me to the hospital in an ambulance.

THAT'S WHEN THE FISH REARED UP AND SPEARED ME. THE BILL WENT STRAIGHT THROUGH MY MOUTH AND INTO THE BACK OF MY NECK. IT WAS LIKE THE MARLIN HAD JUST PUNCHED ME IN THE FACE, THEN HE WAS OFF THE HOOK AND GONE.

The doctors at Terrebonne didn't understand what was wrong with me at first. They put me through an X-ray machine, but nothing showed up. Then the CAT scan results came back, and the whole hospital started freaking out.

The images were unbelievable. The broken-off bill looked like an arrowhead embedded at the top of my spine. A nurse walked over and held my head still from behind. "Do not move," she said into my ear. "A piece of the marlin's bill is lodged between the base of your skull and your first vertebra."

That's when the fear started to sink

by BRIAN BARNHILL, as told to TRAVIS HALL

in. Up until then, I'd had no idea that a piece of the marlin was still inside my neck. *I might die here today*, I thought.

They brought my wife and my kids into the operating room. They told us I had only a 50 percent chance of surviving the operation—and a 90 percent chance of being paralyzed from the neck down if I even made it out alive.

They'd never seen anything like it. They used a cadaver to practice the procedure on before cutting into me. They hammered something the same size as the broken-off bill into the base of the cadaver's skull and through the back of the throat, then they tried to remove it. I guess they got a good-enough idea what they needed to do to me from that.

The bill of a white marlin is incredibly coarse. It had to come out precisely the same way it went in, or it would have severed one of the arteries or veins in my neck. I went under anesthesia then, but I know from reading the operation reports that when they tried to pull the bill out, my whole head moved with it. That alone could have killed me or paralyzed me forever.

On the third try, they removed a piece of it. That relieved the pressure between my skull and my vertebra. They went in a fourth time and got the rest. Later, they woke me up to see if I still had movement and feeling in my limbs. It was a miracle that I did.

The ICU nurses gave me spinal taps every day for a week to kill whatever bacteria the marlin's bill might have left in my neck. After that, I went home and made a full recovery.

Three weeks later, I was back out in the Gulf of Mexico fishing for marlin. There was an old man—a good friend and a retired neurosurgeon—who I fished with a lot at the time. He cried when I told him the story.

"You had a one-in-a-million chance," he said. "I can't believe you're alive." F&S



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by RYAN CHELIUS

photographs by DAVID COX

THERE'S NOTHING EASY ABOUT A KING EIDER ADVENTURE. THE OUTFITTER IS EXPENSIVE. THE TRAVEL IS BRUTAL. THE SHOTS AT BIRDS ARE CHALLENGING. AND THE HUNTING GROUNDS—TYPICALLY THE BERING SEA—ARE AS DANGEROUS AS IT GETS. BUT THAT'S WHAT MAKES A KING EIDER THE ULTIMATE WATERFOWL TROPHY



KING'S RANSOM

THE FORECAST IS already borderline unsafe for flying. High winds and poor visibility await us over the treacherous Bering Sea. Just the thought of encountering sketchy weather out here makes my stomach churn. I'm white-knuckling the armrests when one of our pilots climbs out of the cockpit to give us an update. "Gentlemen, we've lost our left generator," he yells over the engines. "We have to return to Anchorage. We do not fly over the North Pacific with one generator."



We're only 10 minutes from King Salmon, Alaska, where we're supposed to refuel before continuing two more hours over the Bering Sea to St. Paul Island—approximately 500 miles from the nearest point of mainland Russia—but our pilot turns the plane around instead. To calm my anxiety, I tell myself that this is why they have a backup generator. That thought doesn't help. *What if the other generator fails? What if we lose total power?* The 50-minute flight back to Anchorage is agonizing.

The obvious decision, to me, is to regroup and try again tomorrow. The pilots disagree and start preparing another plane. Hours later, we land in King Salmon, refuel, then take off for St. Paul. This time, I'm in the first row of an 18-seat turboprop plane. It's not a bush plane by any means, but it's also not a 737. Almost immediately, the door next to me starts emitting a high-pitched wail; I'm convinced it's about to blow off. "Don't worry about that," our pilot yells from the cockpit. "This is an older plane. It might make that noise the whole trip."

Eventually, we begin our descent into St. Paul, but 35 mph crosswinds and poor visibility make the landing dicey. "We only have enough fuel to make two attempts at the runway," the captain says. "We'll give it our best shot."

Attempts? Best shot? What the hell does he mean? I want 100 percent certainty that we can land. But in this part of Alaska, that's apparently too much to ask.

When we finally emerge through the bottom of the fog, the plane is only a few

hundred feet from the ground. Rain lashes the windows as if sprayed from a fire hose, but the real problem is the angle of our plane to the runway. The pilot is riding the heavy crosswind, and the Beechcraft 1900 is nearly perpendicular to the airstrip.

At the last second, he swings the plane straight and drops us perfectly onto the tiny, barely lit runway. Cheers and high fives erupt throughout the cabin, and someone blasts "Fortunate Son" over a phone speaker. Being on the ground feels like a small miracle. As we disembark, I thank the pilot and remark how impressed I am with his landing in such sketchy conditions.

"Son, that was nothing for Alaska," he says. "Welcome to St. Paul Island."

We step off the plane into gale-force winds and freezing rain. Three vehicles race up to the runway, and small groups of camo-dressed men jump out of each. A seamless transfer of gear from plane to truck and truck to plane takes place. This group of hunters is flying back tonight, and we're here for the last five days of duck season. I hop into the assembly line and start passing bags into a pickup so rusty that I can see internal parts hanging out of the undercarriage like the insides coming out of a freshly gutted deer.

"You made it!" says guide Owen Marsh as he hands me a large duffel bag.

"By the skin of our teeth," I reply.

His face is mostly covered by an oversize hood, and I can barely hear his voice over the rain pelting his jacket. "Tomorrow should be good, so be glad you did," he says. "Hop in and we'll get you to camp."

There are approximately 400 year-round residents on St. Paul Island. This 43-square-mile blip of land looks as if it broke off western Alaska and washed up on a shoal in the middle of the Bering Sea. There are no paved roads and not much life outside the small village besides the occasional Arctic fox that roams the barren land. The island, and the surrounding waters, however, are home to 203 species of birds, and I'm here in search of one specific type of sea duck—the king eider.

To venture onto the Bering Sea in the middle of January is nothing short of a death wish. Its relatively shallow depths help produce enormous waves capable of swallowing vessels in the blink of an eye. Cold Arctic air collides with warmer Pacific air over the Bering, spawning violent storms with little warning. Water temperatures average 34 degrees, and if you fall in, you have only a couple of minutes to be rescued if you're going to survive. All of this takes place in a forgotten corner of the planet where help is hours away by air. The Bering Sea is a shortcut to Davy Jones's locker.

The television show *Deadliest Catch* documented the dangers faced on the Bering Sea by commercial crabbers. The most productive fishing grounds lie off the Aleutian Islands, though some boats make the trek toward St. Paul in search of red king crab and snow crab. But the waters surrounding St. Paul are sometimes too treacherous for even the biggest boats. In 2021, the 105-foot fishing vessel *Summer Bay* fought to enter St. Paul Harbor during a violent storm that sent a massive wall of waves breaking over the

Previous spread, from left

Three drake king eiders flush off the water; a long line of eider decoys rides the swells just off an island in the middle of the Bering Sea. This setup doesn't include an anchor so the boat can stay in gear and navigate rough seas.

Opposite, from top

Saints Peter and Paul Church overlooks the village of St. Paul and the Bering Sea. Russian Orthodox traditions have been part of island life here for more than two centuries; two pairs of king eiders fly low over rolling swells with a handful of long-tailed hens in the distance.



bow at the mouth of the inlet. The attempt failed, and the boat turned back to sea but not before nearly capsizing after it half-rolled on a massive breaker. The footage is humbling, even from a couch. In 2017, a 98-foot crab boat named *Destination* sank in a vicious winter storm to the southeast of St. Paul. All six crew members died.

Now I'm here to take my chances in a 21-foot rubber dinghy.

BEST-LAID PLANS

There are only two places in the world where you can realistically target king eiders: Greenland and St. Paul Island. Of course, hunters occasionally encounter kings elsewhere, but there are no guarantees. Given how remote St. Paul is—and how limited king eider hunts are—I always considered it a dream hunt that would likely remain just that: a dream.

Then, while we were trout fishing, my F&S coworkers asked me, "If you could hunt anywhere in the world, where would it be?" That's when I told them about the king eiders on St. Paul—and they said to make it happen. I shrugged it off as being



nearly impossible. Everything changed last August when I caught wind of a cancellation during the final week of duck season with guide Jeff Wasley of Four Flyways Outfitters. Five months later, brothers Sam and Drew Holcomb and I landed in St. Paul to make that dream a reality.

Wasley rents a house from the local government for the season. It's nothing fancy, but it has electricity, heat, TV, and even Wi-Fi, thanks to Starlink. Meals are simple: nachos, pancakes, beans, soup, etc. On the first night as we eat chili, guide Mike Tappero gives us an idea of

what to expect.

"This is like a Dall sheep hunt," Tappero says. "You might get weathered out for two or three days and then finally get a chance at a king. You have to make it count." The room of 10 hunters is silent as we give each other looks that say, *This isn't going to be easy*. He finishes: "We'll look at the weather tonight and make a plan. In the morning, we'll scratch that plan because the forecast will have changed, and we'll make a new plan. When we head out at 9:30—the sun doesn't rise on St. Paul in late January until after 10 a.m.—

After a short run, we come to an idle. The intensity of this hunt is palpable—like the impending doom of an approaching storm in the backcountry. There’s the feeling that if you aren’t on your absolute A game, something catastrophic could happen.

Right
Jeff Wasley points down the rocky shoreline of St. Paul Island in the early morning light as the group makes a plan for a harlequin hunt.

Below
Owen Marsh and Mike Tappero stand at the helms of their RIBs while navigating 7 miles through the unforgiving Bering Sea.

Opposite
The author holds up a drake king eider in a 21-foot RIB off St. Paul Island. In late January, these birds display beautiful colors.



we’ll scratch the second plan because the weather will have changed again, and we’ll make a final decision.”

That was my first lesson about the North Pacific: You don’t determine the plans. The Bering Sea does.

CROWNING GLORY
In the morning, there’s a mix of excitement and uncertainty as we get ready to head out. Around 9, the guides walk in and give us the rundown. “The weather looks good enough to hunt from the boats today,” Tappero says. “We’ll split up into three groups.” Wasley turns to me, Sam, and Drew. “You boys are with me,” he says. “Wader up and meet me at the truck.”

The drive to the boat ramp across the street takes less than a minute. We are trailering a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) with a 115 Yamaha on the back. It’s the same style boat Navy SEALs use for intense insertion and extraction missions. The Navy defines the vessel as a “high-speed, high-buoyancy, extreme-weather craft.” The seriousness of this hunt matches that description, and I am glad to be in a RIB.

Old streetlights illuminate the slick boat ramp, and the damp air is choked with salt and the smell of low tide. Wasley, Tappero, and Marsh do a radio check as we putt away from the dimly lit harbor and point the bow toward the foggy inlet that looks like a black tunnel leading off the face of the Earth. A thought pops into my head: *This is some people’s worst nightmare.*

After we clear the jetties, we’re immediately greeted by stiff winds and big



swells. Wasley opens the throttle, and we launch over the waves. I’m holding onto the seat in front of the center console as sea spray explodes over the gunwale and crashes onto me. After a short run, we come to an idle. The intensity of this hunt is palpable—like the impending doom of an approaching storm in the backcountry. There’s the feeling that if you aren’t on your absolute A game, something catastrophic could happen.

The boat is rocking like a seesaw, and Wasley tells me to start passing decoys to the back. He clips each oversize eider deke to a long line before feeding it off the stern. Unlike a typical long line, this setup doesn’t have an anchor so Wasley can keep the boat in gear to navigate the treacherous water.

“The name of the game is to watch your zone and stay focused,” Wasley says in the rising light. “It’s easy to get distracted, but you get only so many chances at drake kings. If they come within 50 yards, there’s no sense in not shooting.”

The idea of taking a 50-yard shot at a duck is completely foreign to me. I’m used to 15- to 20-yard shots at decoying puddle ducks. Not a Hail Mary at a passing eider while being tossed around like a pinball in a rubber boat. But Wasley assures us that the TSS loaded in our guns will drop these birds stone dead at 50 yards. I believe him, but he’s never watched me try to break a clay at station 4 on a skeet field. This is going to be tough.

Daylight finally reveals our location, which seems to be a random spot in the middle of nowhere. But 100 feet below



us on the ocean seafloor lie clams, mussels, and sea urchins for eiders to gorge on. I can see St. Paul in the distance, and I focus on the land every now and then to ward off seasickness. The anticipation of just seeing a king is overwhelming. My head is on a swivel, scanning the rolling waves for ducks. Then, as if materializing out of thin air, a flock of eiders cross our bow at 80 yards. Too far for a shot, even with TSS. But I’m awestruck—the birds are huge, and the drake’s brownish-white chest and colorful head stand out against the blue water in surprisingly fine detail.

I shake myself back to reality and continue to pan the water for birds. “Starboard side,” Wasley yells. “Kill that drake!” I put a healthy lead on the bird, and when I pull the trigger, a large swell puts a wall of water between me and the eider. The bird disappears for a moment, and I fire straight into the wave.

“Reload,” Wasley says. “Stay focused and be ready.”

There’s no time to dwell on the miss, but there’s no denying that this is the toughest shotgunning I’ve ever experienced. I think to myself, *How the hell am*

I going to hit these ducks? Not 10 minutes later, I spot two kings 45 yards off our starboard again. This time, I don’t think or hesitate. I mount the gun, find the bird, and dump the drake into the Bering Sea. We scoop the king eider into a net, and I am beside myself with excitement. “Congratulations!” Wasley says and shakes my hand. “That’s a stud.”

The fully plumed drake has an oblong, powder-blue head. Below the eye, a dull green color blends with shades of black and white. Its big, bright orange-yellow lobe is outlined by black lines that sit right above a red bill. The bird is so spectacular that suddenly the sketchy plane and boat rides all seem worth it.

But we can’t celebrate for too long. Eiders are now trading back and forth all around us, and according to Wasley, once the initial flight ends, our chances for kings are slim. So we get reset, and not long after, Sam and Drew double on a hen and a drake. Then the action turns on fire. Another drake wheels off the port side and takes a line directly toward the boat, and I fold it.

Sam and Drew each kill another

drake, and just like that we’re halfway to our limit. In Alaska, nonresidents can kill four king eiders per year. And while we’re slated for five days of hunting, we won’t pass on any chances at kings.

“A pair of drakes off the bow,” Wasley says. “Kill those birds!”

I take the back bird, and Sam takes the lead eider. In a one-two punch, both kings tumble through the sky and crash into the sea. Later, Drew folds his third king, and we’ve got nine birds in the boat when it’s time to head in. We are all fired up knowing that days like today are extremely rare. Just getting good enough weather to hunt can be a tall order, let alone killing nine king eiders in a few hours. We all give each other a congratulatory hug back at the dock. “Everything from here on out is just gravy,” Sam says.

At camp, Wasley keys us in on the tentative plan for the next day. “If the forecast holds, we might have a chance to make a long run to some different feeding grounds tomorrow,” he says. “There are eiders, harlequins, scoters, and long-tailed ducks there. We just need the weather to safely make it.” I look over at



Sam and Drew, and we've all got the same smirk on our faces, knowing that tomorrow has the chance to be epic.

BONUS BIRDS

The next morning, all three boats idle out of the inlet toward the open ocean in the dark. Just past the jetties, we hang close together as Wasley decides whether to make the long run to the new spot. "It's your call, cap," Tappero's voice comes over the radio. "I think we can do it." Wasley stares off in the distance, weighing

our options. "OK, let's go," he finally says. Marsh and Tappero confirm over the radio with excited voices, and all three RIBs simultaneously go on plane.

Off our port side, I can see one of the other boat's running lights come in and out of view as we rise and fall with the massive swells. Beyond them, in every direction, is open ocean. According to Wasley, this is the best weather they've had all season—the type of weather you need to make a 7-mile run in the Bering Sea. But it's not hard to imagine how things can turn bad

fast. Out here, there's no out-walking, out-hiking, or out-running the sea. The ocean is in full control, and the quicker you understand and respect that, the better chance you have of returning.

Light is just starting to break across the ocean when we arrive at the feeding grounds a few hundred yards off an island. We immediately start clipping decoys to the long line before loading our guns. Sea ducks are buzzing the boat from every direction. That's when I catch a flock of long-tails crossing the stern, and I double on a drake and hen. The drake is fully plumed and has a gorgeous tail. Shortly after, we all bag our last king of the trip to fill our yearly elder limit.

My focus quickly shifts to harlequins. I wasn't sure if I'd have the opportunity at a harley, and I'm eager to make it happen. But the harlequins fly closer to shore, out of range of our boat. What seems like an easy adjustment is made difficult by the enormous breakers in the surf zone. I've never seen a display of natural force like this in my life. Every few seconds waves violently crash into the rocks, and water is thrown two stories high. It's terrifying.

"I'm going to nudge us a little closer in," Wasley says. "Be ready." The intensity quickly rises, and I catch myself switching between looking for birds and checking to make sure we aren't about to be washed away. Then I catch a flock of harlequins barreling down our starboard, 50 yards out.

"Kill the drake in the back!" Wasley yells.

I ring out two quick shots that are clean misses. Then I push my barrel so far past the bird that it feels wrong, and I fold the drake harley. Sam, Drew, and I

Left

A mature drake harlequin lies next to a knife on a rusty tailgate after a successful hunt. Small in size, drake harlequins sport striking slate-blue, chestnut, and white plumage.

Opposite, from top

The author takes a shot at a harlequin from shore as huge waves break in the surf; Mike Tappero motors out of St. Paul Harbor in the dark. This inlet is known for being one of the Bering Sea's most treacherous ports.



burst into celebration, but Wasley is laser-focused on the dead bird. He's watching the waves while looking for an opening to retrieve the duck. "Be ready with the net," he yells. "We only get one shot at this."

Wasley shifts the boat into gear and throttles up. I lean over the gunwale, scoop the bird into the net, and give the all-clear. Then he turns the boat, and we come over a building swell before safely clearing the edge of the surf zone. My heart is racing, and I ask Wasley what we'd do if we got caught inside the surf. He looks at me and shakes his head. It's the clearest answer he could give.

During the waning minutes of our morning hunt, a single drake oldsquaw locks its wings and flies directly up our line. Sam folds the best decoying bird of the trip to end the day. After picking it up, we make the long ride back to St. Paul. At one point, we are 40 yards from Marsh's boat. A hunter is hunkered down in the bow as sea spray washes over his body every few seconds or so. Between swells, I catch him smiling ear to ear—the unmistakable grin of someone on the boat ride of a lifetime.

WRITTEN IN STONE

Limiting out on day two of a five-day king eider hunt is a good problem to have. Especially when the guide tells you to re-book your return flight on the second night because a massive storm is rolling in, and if we don't get out tomorrow afternoon, we won't be leaving for another week. So we rearrange our travel and plan for one more harlequin hunt the following morning.

The wind ramps up overnight, so Wasley takes us to the north side of the island to hunt from shore. He parks the truck on a two-track road, and we gather in the dark to go over the morning plan. "Ryan, head a couple hundred yards down the shore

and pick some rocks to sit in," Wasley says. "I'll check in on you at midmorning."

My headlamp shines a path down to the rocky shoreline that is covered in huge, slick boulders. I get as close to the ocean as possible without the tide washing me into the surf and plant my butt up against a rock. It's just getting light as I press the bolt release on my SX4, and it slams shut. In my peripheral vision, I see two giant silhouettes rise from the rocks 50 yards away, spooking at the loud noise. They are standing 8 or 9 feet tall, and I remind myself that there are no grizzlies on the island. Finally, I have enough light to see they're two adult Steller sea lions. I don't know much about these mammals, but they don't look friendly. So I keep my distance and start looking for ducks.

A couple of small groups of harlequins fly past me out of range. Then, in a matter of minutes, the sea becomes angry, and a storm instantaneously pops up over the ocean. I can see a curtain of rain on the heels of 40 mph wind gusts closing in, and there's nothing to do but sit it out. It starts sleeting sideways, and I'm soaked in a matter of seconds.

After it clears, I spot a drake harley cruising toward me. I empty my gun, but the bird keeps going. Thirty seconds later, I hear shots ring out upwind of me, where Sam and Drew clean up my miss.

When we meet back at the truck, they have two drake harlequins to end the trip.

ROYAL WATERS

It's a scramble at camp to consolidate gear and pack coolers before heading back to Anchorage. When we get to the airport, our crew hangs out at the gate reminiscing about the past few days. Most of the guys here are chasing North America's 41 species of waterfowl, and our conversation reminds me of the second night at camp, when Drew asked the entire room a simple question: "What brought you here?"

Some guys said they needed to check the king eider off their list. Others couldn't tell you how many species they've killed; they came for the adventure. One hunter even said he was there because a group needed a last-minute substitute. When Drew looked at me, I didn't have a good answer. But by the end of the trip, it had become clear: I came to the Bering Sea to see if I had what it takes to kill a king. F&S

Below

Drew and Sam Holcomb and the author pose next to a crab pot with eight king eiders.



HOLD ON TO THIS.

CHÉNE



FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES, THE AUTHOR HAS TRACKED
MAN-EATING PREDATORS AROUND THE WORLD. HERE, HE SHARES FOUR
HARROWING ENCOUNTERS WITH KILLER LIONS, TIGERS, BEARS, AND CROCS
WHERE THE LINE BETWEEN HUNTER AND HUNTED WAS OFTEN
RAZOR-THIN

by SCOTT HAUGEN illustrations by DAVID HOLLENBACH

MAN-EATERS

POLAR PERIL



BOOT SCUFFS between the polar bear’s footprints atop the frozen snow left no doubt that the bear had dragged the man by his head or throat. Ahead, I could see where the victim had broken free, crawling on his bloody hands and knees before the bear regained control of him and continued hauling him into the pitch-black, frozen tundra. I loaded my 30-06, pointed my flashlight into the dark, and followed the gruesome trail toward a man-eating polar bear.

In the middle of winter, the North Slope of Alaska is consumed by 24 hours of darkness. Temperatures stayed below zero for 199 consecutive days in 1990, my first year as a teacher in Point Lay, home of the Iñupiat people. This tiny village sits on the coast just above the Arctic Circle, where the sea ice can be more than 10 feet thick. At the time, Point Lay’s population was less than 100.

As a resident, I was allowed to subsistence hunt, trap, and fish. I could take everything from moose and caribou to wolves and grizzly bears. Marine mammals, including polar bears, were protected under federal law, however. Only Indigenous peoples could hunt them—unless one attacked a person.

Polar bears normally hunt on pack ice, where they feed on bearded seals and other pinnipeds. But when bear populations are high, young males sometimes

venture off the ice looking for easier meals. On December 8, 1990, a lone bear wandered into our village and dragged a man toward the frozen Arctic Ocean.

Point Lay’s public-safety officer put out a call over the CB radio explaining the situation and asking if anyone was willing to help track the bear. I was the only person who responded. Shortly after, government officials swore me in over the phone, authorizing me to kill the bear, given the unique circumstances. As I set out, the public-safety officer insisted I not do this alone. I left anyway. Every second was crucial.

On the blood trail, past the initial boot marks, I found chunks of human scalp and hair frozen to the bloody snow. It looked like a homicide scene. Blood had sprayed in every direction. I felt oddly calm and took off my thick hood to see more clearly. The minus-42-degree air was a surprising relief. I briefly studied the scene and kept going.

I could see the man’s shredded jacket in the snow ahead. The collar and shoulders were riddled with puncture marks from the bear’s canines. The rest was covered in frozen blood; hair and flesh lay scattered in the periphery of my flashlight beam. Only 15 yards ahead, I reached a spot where the victim had broken free again. A long streak of bloody finger marks showed where the bear had

dragged the man back toward the pack ice. There was so much blood. It was then I knew this was no longer a rescue call but a recovery mission.

I spotted a snowmobile making its way down the shoreline in my direction. Someone else had responded to the call for help. In the distance, I could see the victim’s body in the machine’s headlights.

I ran to the man, knowing I was too late. The victim had been more than half eaten. His face and scalp were gone, as were most of his chest, arms, and leg muscles. The man driving the snowmobile stood there, stunned by the gruesome scene. Behind him, 50 yards away, I could see glowing eyes reflecting from the darkness.

“The bear is behind you!” I shouted over the engine’s noise. But the man didn’t respond. He was in still in shock. I pushed past him and moved slowly toward the bear. It looked at me and didn’t seem to care, then it turned and walked farther out on the pack ice. I quickened my pace and closed the distance to 30 yards before the bear stopped and looked back again. This time, I lifted my rifle and steadied the crosshairs in the flashlight beam, then fired.

The bear was mounted and now resides at Homer High School, where tourists can still come face-to-face with the giant man-eater.

JUNGLE CAT



SHORTLY AFTER moving from Alaska to Sumatra, Indonesia, in 1997, I was visited by local police asking for help with a tiger that had killed a woman. Since firearms were prohibited there, the authorities offered me a government-issued 30-caliber rifle to use.

Several members from a local government office and I drove an hour to a small village deep in the jungle. Then I walked with an officer down a narrow, well-used trail leading into a banana plantation. Amid the banana trees were two small huts built on stilts where the plantation caretakers stayed. We stopped at the base of a crude bamboo ladder lashed together with jungle vines.

“Look closely,” the officer said, pointing. On the rungs of the ladder were dried drops of blood, along with strands of long, black hair. A Sumatran tiger had climbed 8 feet up the ladder and grabbed the woman from her hut in the night. The huts were built on stilts for this very reason, to protect against aggressive tigers. But the woman had forgotten to pull up her ladder when she went to sleep that night.

Sumatran tigers are much smaller than Bengal tigers, with adult males weighing 200 to 300 pounds. Judging by the track, this wasn’t a mature Sumatran tiger—but it was still dangerous. I asked the officer to wait while I followed the

prints. In high-intensity moments like this, I prefer working alone. When tracking man-eaters, every sense is amplified to the highest degree. You see, hear, and smell things you’d otherwise miss. It takes days to come down from the adrenaline surge.

I followed the tracks a short distance down a moist dirt path. Judging by the continuous drag marks left by two feet, it was likely the victim was dead or unconscious. There was no place where it looked like she had kicked or grabbed at the ground. The tiger traveled in a straight line, free of resistance. Then I lost the track.

Backing up, I found an overturned leaf on the left side of the trail. I crouched down to a tiger’s eye level. Wiping sweat from my eyes on the 104-degree day, I studied the foliage. The light underside of overturned leaves, along with stretched vines, made clear the direction the tiger had taken. I followed. The overhanging jungle canopy grew dense, turning the midday light very dark. Soon I was surrounded by chest-deep vines and big, green leaves.

When visibility was reduced to five paces, I backed out. Figuring the victim was already dead, I returned to the officer and asked if we could get a pack of dogs to root out the cat and try to bay it up for a shot. If it had a full stomach,

the tiger wouldn’t have gone far. In less than 30 minutes, hounds were cut loose where my tracking had ended. I followed as best as I could, but I struggled in the tangled jungle. The houndsmen stayed behind me while the dogs ranged out in front.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The dogs screamed frantically and the shifting of the jungle cover intensified. Vines tugged at my legs as the dogs and the tiger fought. Moving closer, I couldn’t even see the dogs in the thick foliage, but I caught a glimpse of the tiger’s tail as it spun around fewer than 10 paces away. In the madness, I couldn’t distinguish the dogs from the cat. My rifle was ready, but I didn’t know if the tiger would charge or bolt in the opposite direction. I had no shot and no clear idea what I was looking at. It reminded me of a scene from *Predator*, where the invisible creature tears through the jungle unseen. I could only anticipate where the tiger might appear—but it never did.

Not even the dogs could keep up with the fleeing tiger as it took off through the dense cover. We never saw the cat again, nor did we find the woman’s body—only signs of where the cat had lain and fed. Although we didn’t kill the tiger, authorities later confirmed there had been no more sightings in the village. The man-eater never returned.

LION’S DEN



ANY CHANCE you can get here sooner?” Joel Hancock wrote in a fax. “They killed again last night.” Hancock was a problem-animal control specialist along the borders of Kruger National Park in South Africa. For weeks, he’d been hunting a pride of man-eating lions terrorizing a village. But the attacks had escalated in recent days. I landed in Johannesburg, rented a car, and drove north to meet him.

The two of us arrived in the Shangaan village of Matiyani at dawn. This remote community had no electricity and no firearms. The villagers lived in small huts that lions had been entering for easy meals. The people had tried to ward off the cats with small fires, but it wasn’t working.

A local ranger explained that people had smelled the putrid breath of the marauding lions before they heard or saw them. From what Hancock gathered, it was a pride of four lionesses that came out of the park at night, killed villagers and livestock, and returned to the protected land in the dark.

Man-eating lions, leopards, and crocs were Hancock’s specialty. He received multiple calls a week to deal with them. But the government prohibited him from tracking any problem animals into Kruger, even man-eaters. This meant we had to lure the lions out to

where we could kill them.

That afternoon we tied a live donkey to a lone tree in the middle of a hand-tilled field a few hundred yards from the park boundary. Hancock brought an electronic caller to help lure the pride into our setup. Since man-eaters rarely show themselves in daylight, our plan was to call them in at night.

We built a ground blind with sticks and brush 70 yards from the donkey and draped canvas across the front. It had one hole to shoot from and another for shining a flashlight. We settled in for the night and waited.

It was the middle of winter. I shivered as temperatures plunged into the low 20s. It didn’t take long before we heard a clan of hyenas shrieking in the distance. Eventually they moved off, and our e-caller continued to produce alluring sounds. Around 2 a.m., a thunderous roar erupted just feet from our blind. The cats had come in silently. One lioness sat next to the caller while the other three killed the donkey.

“Wait for the cats to settle, then I’ll turn on the torch,” Hancock whispered. When he illuminated the site, I buried the crosshairs behind a shoulder and killed one of the cats. The other three bolted. Minutes later, they returned to the call. This time I held the light while Hancock shot a second cat. The other

two took off again, but we called them back in, and I killed a third lion. The last lioness ran off and didn’t return, so we went after it on foot.

I held the flashlight while Hancock carried his .375 H&H as we pushed into thick, yellow, 5-foot-tall grass. We briefly saw the cat’s eyes reflecting in the beam of the flashlight before losing it.

“It’s trying to get behind us for a charge,” Hancock whispered. We hustled back to the 4x4 and drove into the grass to where we’d last seen the lion. Hancock was standing in the bed, looking over the hood, when he started pounding on the roof. I eased on the brakes, but before the truck stopped, two shots rang out. A few feet beyond the hood, a lion lay dead in the grass. The cat had charged the truck, and Hancock put a bullet between its eyes.

Around 2 a.m., a thunderous roar erupted just feet from our blind. The cats had come in silently. One lioness sat next to the caller while the other three killed the donkey.

KILLER CROCS



THE DAY AFTER killing the lions, Hancock and I received a message about a pod of crocodiles terrorizing villagers at a watering hole in Xigamani. “I took a big croc from a pond near this village last week,” Hancock said. “I just happened to be there when it killed a 16-year-old girl.” Since that incident, more crocs had moved in, targeting people and livestock that used the water.

In South Africa’s bush, water can be scarce throughout most of the year. But during the rainy season, waters flood the riverbottoms, sweeping crocs and hippos downstream. When the water recedes, the riverbeds are reduced to dust and stone. This forces the crocodiles and hippos into the nearest watering hole—sometimes the same pond villagers use to drink from and bathe in.

When that happens, crocodiles can become man-eaters. While you don’t hear about it often, attacks like this are common in remote parts of Africa.

“Any croc over 6 feet long, shoot,” Hancock instructed when we arrived in Xigamani. “That’s the size that commonly kills people and livestock.” The first one I shot was just over the minimum length. Shortly after, we spotted a bigger one sunning itself on a point.

Our plan was to stalk through the pond’s thigh-deep muck until we could get a clear shot. The water was black as

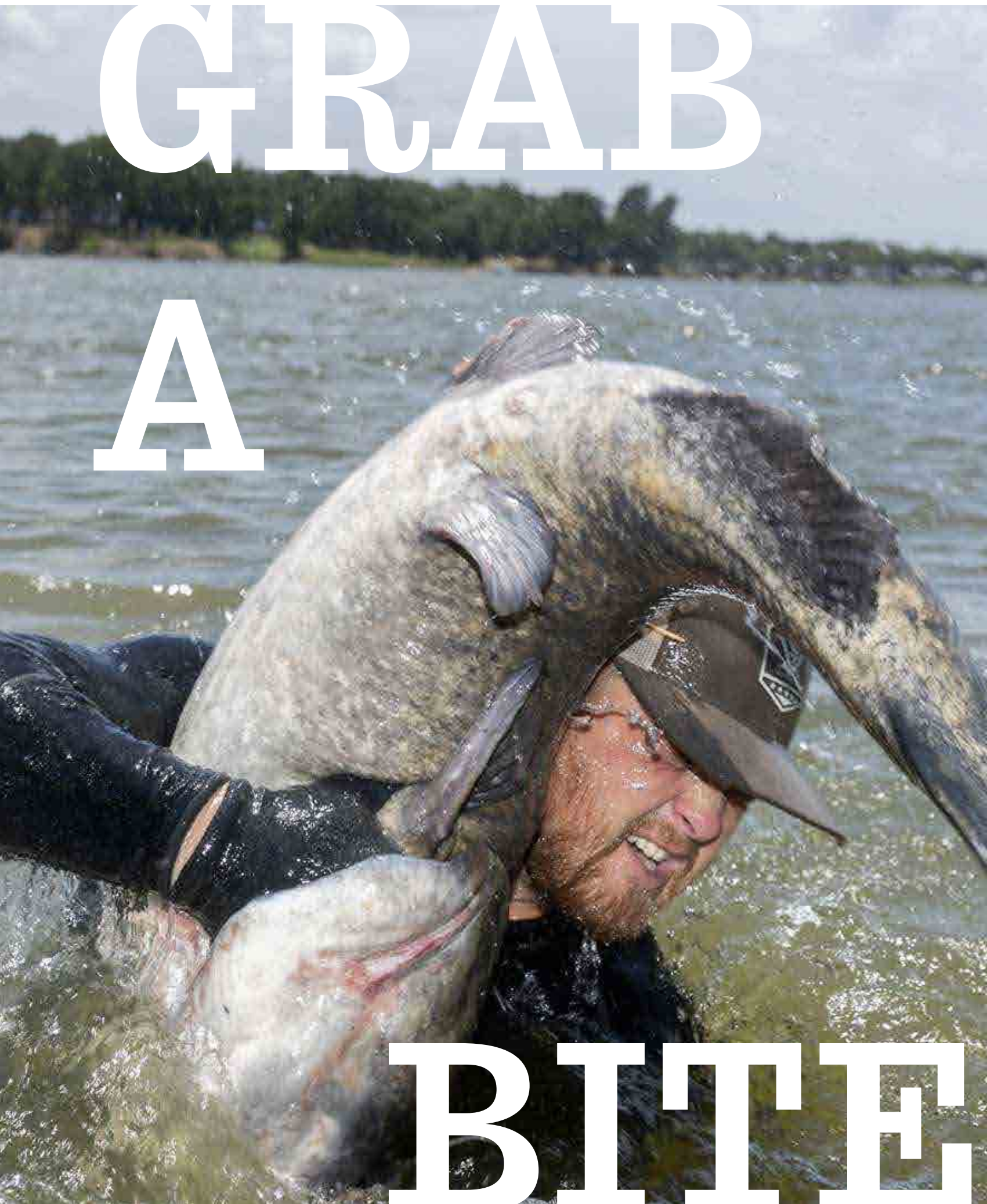
ink. We stopped every few feet to pick leeches from our legs and to give our bare feet a break from the sharp sticks and rocks that lay on the bottom. Hancock led the way, frequently probing the water ahead of us with a long stick in case any submerged crocs lurked below.

Hancock parted some tall grass in front of us. That’s when I spotted the croc, 110 yards away, with its back to us. It had its mouth open to regulate its body temperature, and its massive tail was slightly curled. Its scutes were dry and looked like a suit of armor adorning the big reptile. “When it opens its mouth wider, shoot it in the brain,” Hancock whispered. I eased into the tripod shooting sticks, put the crosshairs on the back of the croc’s head and waited.

I was focused, calm, and ready to take the shot. Moments later, just as Hancock said would happen, the croc opened its mouth wider to let more heat dissipate. That exposed the back of the head just enough. At the sound of the 223 hitting the croc’s skull, the animal’s upper jaw slapped shut, and its tail flinched once. The bullet had found the center of the walnut-size brain.

When we walked up to the 9-foot Nile crocodile, Hancock grew quiet. “This is exactly where the 16-year-old girl was killed,” he said. He pointed to the ground beside the dead croc. “Right here.” F&S

That’s when I spotted the croc, 110 yards away, with its back to us. It had its mouth open to regulate its body temperature, and its massive tail was slightly curled. Its scutes were dry and looked like a suit of armor adorning the big reptile.



THERE'S A DECENT CHANCE YOU WON'T GET HURT INVITING A GIANT CATFISH TO ENGULF YOUR ARM—SO LONG AS YOU DON'T COUNT CUTS, BRUISES, BROKEN FINGERS, OR TORQUED WRISTS

by WILL BRANTLEY

If you go catfish noodling, the snakes probably will not kill you. A lot of people assume it'll be the snakes. Sure, a water moccasin could tag you on the cheek. The odds of it happening are higher when you're noodling than when you're at Starbucks, but snakes shouldn't be your main concern.

Serpents have to breathe air, so they don't hang out long underwater in catfish holes. Same goes for snapping turtles, alligators, and beavers—the other stuff everybody seems to be afraid of. You certainly could shove your hand directly into one of their faces, and any one of them could shred your flesh and create a real shitter of a day. But your timing would have to be especially bad. In 20 years of wrestling flatheads, I've never had a close call with any critter that wasn't a catfish.

Now, the catfish themselves can create some problems. They are predatory fish that frequently steal crankbaits, jigging spoons, and the like from bass anglers. Those lures don't always unstick themselves right away. Sometimes, flatheads swim around with them all summer, the lures dangling from their noses and cheeks like piercings at Burning Man.

I heard a story of an Arkansas noodler who grabbed a flathead that had a Norman DD22—a chartreuse one, I believe—lodged in its jaw. The crankbait ended up stuck in the noodler's hand as well, conjoining him and the fish, albeit briefly. The flathead rolled and ripped the hooks out of the man's hand almost as fast as they'd been buried there. It's said that if you stand quietly on the banks of that Arkansas lake and listen, you can still hear the man screaming to this day.

RECREATIONAL HAZARDS

I've seen five noodling injuries worthy of medical attention. The middle finger on my left hand—the very same one I've depended on for years to greet tourists in pleasure boats—is permanently crooked. A few summers ago, I had gotten hold of a flathead, maybe a 40-pounder, that managed to shoot out from under his rock before I could get a good purchase on his head. I should've just let go of him. Instead, I held on while that fish rolled on

my hand, breaking my finger. It hurt bad enough for me to cry in front of my wife and kid, but they couldn't tell since we were in the water. The fact that the fish escaped didn't help the situation.

Another season, my buddy Tim grabbed a 90-pounder that torqued his wrist so badly that he had to spend the next three months in an arm brace. Tim chalked it up to getting old. My brother, Matt, had a channel cat bury its pectoral spine—which is barbed and about 2½ inches long—in his forearm clear to the hilt. We thought Matt was OK until later that day, when his arm swelled up and turned black. A nurse practitioner pumped a half cup of goo out of the wound at the ER. I took a buddy from Minnesota out noodling once, and he flayed his arm open on a piece of underwater rebar. Another buddy from Memphis got his eyes blackened and his nose smashed against the gunwale of my boat after a big catfish tail-slapped him in the back of the head.

But none of those injuries lifted more than an eyebrow, because they were all just a rung above the stuff catfish noodlers expect to endure. That your fingers, hands, and wrists will be cut, scraped, shredded, and mashed is a given. As the old saying goes, *If you ain't bleeding, you ain't handfishing.*

What scares me the most—and what strikes terror into the hearts of every noodler I know—is a drunk at the helm of a pleasure boat who has no business being there, even when sober. Noodling takes place in the heat of summer on Southern lakes and rivers that crawl with tourists. In many of these places, people who have never driven a boat can rent one with a 200-horsepower outboard, load up a cooler of White Claws, and head out on plane with no regard for the green or red buoys or the shallow-water alarm blaring on the boat's depthfinder.

NEAR MISS

One hot summer day, Tim—the same buddy who had his wrist torqued by the 90-pounder—and I were fishing under the remnants of a sunken bridge. My wife, Michelle, and my son, Anse, who was 2 years old at the time and bobbing around in water wings, were there too. Michelle had just climbed into our john-boat, anchored 20 feet away from the bridge, and I'd waded over to lift Anse up to her. On our home lake, you hear outboards and hollering almost constantly in summer, so I paid little attention to one that sounded close, until I looked up and saw it screaming down the bank, coming right at us. It was a large, white ski boat, 70 yards away, on plane, and no more than 10 feet off the bank. Michelle grabbed Anse by the life jacket and pulled him into the boat, and I flattened myself against the aluminum hull as the boat, piloted by an obviously crazy woman, passed between us and the bank, throwing up a rooster tail of mud and gravel behind it.

Tim was underwater, still probing the sunken bridge for catfish, and I was sure the boat's prop would hit him and kill him. It very nearly did. He surfaced just as the boat motor's skeg slammed into the very slab of concrete that he'd been checking underwater, missing him by only a few feet. The boat nearly careened onto the bank, but somehow the woman was able to turn back out into open water, the fiberglass transom split down the middle and the outboard billowing smoke. She ended up buying a boat from the marina that day, as I understand it, and got herself arrested in the bargain. Tim and I were more than happy to provide statements to a local game warden.

I only wish that I had gotten the chance to greet her with my favorite crooked finger. F&S

What scares me the most—and what strikes terror into the hearts of every noodler I know—is a drunk at the helm of a pleasure boat who has no business being there, even when sober.

ERICH SCHLEGEL

THE SHOWSTOPPERS

BRITISH DANGEROUS-GAME GUNS DEFINE AN ERA OF HAIR-RAISING HUNTS IN FARAWAY PLACES. THESE VINTAGE BIG-BORES ARE JUST WHAT YOU'D WANT FOR STARING DEATH IN THE FACE



photographs by STEPHEN DeVRIES

YOU CAN'T HAVE true romance without a little danger. And no objects embody this truth better than British dangerous-game guns. They are both beautiful and horrible, brutal and graceful, refined and tough as nails. Why do English guns capture the very idea of hunting scary animals in exotic places? Because the Brits practically invented dangerous-game gunning. At the height of the British Empire, colonies all across the globe became jumping-off points for safaris. As a result, the era's top U.K. gun-makers raced to create guns that fired big, powerful cartridges in ever more efficient ways.

Makers like Rigby, Westley Richards, Holland & Holland, W.J. Jeffery & Co., and Purdey may not be on the cutting edge today, but they were the Gunwerks, G.A. Precision, and Christensen Arms of their

time. Each scrambled to gain an edge, developing rifles that were both aesthetically and technologically refined. They did this work by hand, with chisels, files, and a level of craftsmanship that has all but vanished in the age of CNC machines.

While these rifles and the adventures they're built for seem like things of the past, you can still hunt with them today. However, as only a handful are built each year, it isn't often that many are in the same room together. That's why we called L.D. McCaa, co-owner of Gulf Breeze Firearms and U.S. agent for Westley Richards & Co., to put together a battery of vintage British dangerous-game guns. McCaa is an authority on English sporting arms and has traded some of the finest examples of these guns on Earth. From magazine rifles built on Mauser actions to luxurious doubles and single-shots, each of the following

story by MATTHEW EVERY

guns was optimized to shoot bone-splitting cartridges with unfailing reliability. They may look like expensive safe queens, but each of them has seen adventures most of us can only dream about.

Above

A postwar J. Rigby & Co. No. 5 Big Game magazine rifle in 416 Rigby. The gun and cartridge were immortalized by F&S writer Robert Ruark in his books *Use Enough Gun* and *Horn of the Hunter*. Ruark's PH, Harry Selby, carried a Rigby like this for 50 years.

Opposite

A rare engraved example of a Holland & Holland No. 2 hammerless double rifle in 500/465. The No. 2 was H&H's more budget-friendly double rifle and was renamed the Dominion after World War II.





TERRY ALLEN



Opposite

The buttstock of actor Stewart Granger's 577 Westley Richards double rifle. The gun was originally built in 1923 for a Polish count. Granger bought it later for hunting dangerous game in Africa. The inlaid hash marks represent the number of animals taken on his trips; the letter c indicates that the animal charged.

Above

The hand-detachable lock is a Westley Richards invention that allows the owner to service or replace a gun's locks without the use of tools. Westley Richards is the only company that makes "droplocks" today. It encourages its customers to purchase extra locks in the unlikely event of a malfunction.

Right

The four-leaf rear express sight on a 1912 Westley Richards Best Quality 425 Magnum Express double rifle. Each sight leaf was hand filed for points of aim out to 500 yards. This rifle was incredibly innovative for its time. It featured hand-detachable locks and was chambered for a rebated-rim cartridge.

"People covet these guns because of the stories written about them. We wouldn't know about a 416 Rigby if not for the likes of Robert Ruark."

—L.D. McCAA





Above
 These rifles show two examples of early take-down, or detachable-barrel, bolt actions. The Westley Richards in 425 Magnum Express, top, features a drop-box magazine, which allows the shooter to quickly reload via stripper clips. The Rigby has a threaded barrel and receiver for assembly and disassembly.

Left
 An original hang tag from a Westley Richards Detachable Rifle, framed by 425 Magnum Express ammo, the first major commercial rebated-rim cartridge. The tag would have come with the gun to instruct the owner how to break down the rifle for transport.

Opposite
 Rigby bolt-action rifles from before World War II (right) and after (left), both in 416 Rigby. The prewar Rigby was made on a commercial square-bridge No. 2 magnum Mauser action. The postwar model would have shipped with the Lyman sight and was built on a modified standard-length Mauser 98 action in the 1950s.





Opposite

A Westley Richards & Co. Farquharson single-shot (left) with a detachable barrel, made in 2014, next to a William Evans Webley Patent Model 1902 underlever vertical-falling-block sporting rifle made in 1916. The Westley Richards is the only single-shot the company has made since World War II.

Above

This A. Hollis & Son double rifle was built for hunting in India. The engraver embellished the side plate with a scene depicting Indian elephants, which can be recognized by the lump on the head and the small ears. Maharajahs were major buyers of British dangerous-game guns in the early 20th century.

Left

This J. Purdey & Sons Underlever Hammerless Express double rifle was used by renowned big-game hunter Bror Blixen. His wife, Karen Blixen, wrote *Out of Africa* under the pen name Isak Dinesen. The soldered “jungle-tin” 500/465 ammo boxes in the foreground kept out water and moisture.



Opposite, top

This magazine rifle is chambered for the mighty 505 Gibbs, which was introduced in 1911 and built to be used in bolt actions, rather than in more expensive double rifles. G. Gibbs built just over 75 original 505 guns, making the rifle pictured here one of the most sought-after English magazine rifles today.

Opposite, bottom

A trio of Westley Richards double rifles. From the top, a Best Quality droplock in 425 Magnum Express made in 1912; a Best Quality droplock in 375 H&H made in 1953 with an original Lyman Alaskan scope; and a No. 507 Anson & Deeley fixed lock in 425 Magnum Express completed in 1924.

Above

This rhinoceros engraving on a 1916 William Evans falling-block rifle may look rudimentary, but at the time, it would have been considered very fine work. English engravers in the early 1900s were likely working from illustrations of exotic animals rather than high-quality photographs or observation of the real thing.



Above
A row of J. Rigby & Co. magazine rifles. From the top: a 1913 Model No. 4 Take Down Mauser in 350 Magnum; a 1933 lightweight Big Game Mauser built on a square-bridge commercial action in 416 Rigby; a 1908 sporting rifle in 400/350 bore; and a 1952 Model No. 5 Big Game sporting Mauser in 416 Rigby.

Opposite
An exceptional 1932 J. Rigby & Co. 470 NE Best Quality Sidelock Ejector double rifle, with high-relief acanthus design. This gun was engraved by Henry Kell & Son. Kell, a pioneer of modern gun engraving, employed highly skilled craftsmen who could turn out superb work like this at a blistering pace. F&S



RUNNNNNNNNN!

SOMETIMES, WHEN IT COMES TO OUTDOOR ADVENTURES GONE AWRY, THE SMARTEST THING TO DO IS GET THE HELL OUT OF DODGE. HERE ARE SIX TIMES F&S WRITERS BUGGERED OFF, BEAT FEET, TURNED TAIL, AND SKEDADDLED

by PHIL BOURJAILY, JOE CERMELE,
DAVE HURTEAU, RICHARD MANN,
T. EDWARD NICKENS, AND DAVID E.
PETZAL

illustrations by **PETER OUMANSKI**

MOOSE CROSSING

I WAS THE huskiest guy in the trio and therefore already exhausted by the time we reached the stretch of the Colorado River my pals Tim Romano and Kirk Deeter wanted to fish. We'd navigated boulder fields, shuffled around sheer cliff faces by clinging to roots, and now, before I could make one cast into the soft edge of a Class III rapid, a moose was loose.

The young bull came tromping clumsily down the steep slope on the other side of the river. When it reached the water's edge, it dipped in a hoof as if testing the temperature. Deeter saw this and Irish-goodbyed it downstream.

"No way it's crossing," said Romano.

“No way,” I said, still catching my breath from the trek in.

We were so amused by the encounter that we didn't react at first as the bull bored into the churning river and began pushing across with the ease of a person wading through a rain puddle. That's when the amusement evaporated.

"Oh, shit. He's coming!" said Romano as his skinny, featherweight form ran past me, hopping across jagged rocks like a cross between a gazelle and a mountain goat.

He'd left me for dead. I started moving downriver as fast as my heavy frame and lack of balance allowed. The bull was on our bank of the river and closing fast. In a blink, it was 20 feet behind me. I was a goner. And then I wasn't. For no reason, the beast just lost interest and turned around.

When I caught up to the hysterical Romano and Deeter, all I could do was pant, "I hate you guys." Fifteen years later, I still remind them of the day they left me to the mercy of the moose—and that I still haven't forgiven them. —J.C.

ARACHNO- PHOBIA

IT WAS TWO in the morning in Mozambique, and I had to pee. I grabbed a flashlight, unzipped my tent, and stepped into an adjoining enclosed bathroom, zipping the tent flaps behind me to keep the bugs out. Standing there in my underwear, tinkling, I heard something behind the toilet tank, and when I shined the light, a monster emerged and scaled the wall. It looked like a cross between a spider and a crab and was just as black and just as large as a No. 9 cast-iron skillet.

With my flashlight on this beast—which had descended the wall and was now advancing—I wasn't about to turn my back to unzip the tent and escape. So for the next 30 seconds, I did my best near-naked version of the hillbilly two-

step trying to avoid it. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted an aerosol can of bug killer.

At first, I thought I'd crush the thing with the can, but I wasn't sure the can was up to it. So I sprayed the critter with a chemical I'm sure is illegal in the States. The creature reacted like the Wicked Witch of the West when Dorothy doused her with water. I swear it screamed. I emptied the can, broke into a profane rant, and then got back into the tent and mummified myself in blankets. I haven't been back to Mozambique since.

I found out later the bug was an amblypygid, or tailless whipscorpion, which is fangless and nonvenomous. Naturalists say they will not eat humans. I'm not convinced. —R.M.



IT LOOKED LIKE A CROSS BETWEEN A SPIDER
AND A CRAB AND WAS JUST AS BLACK AND
JUST AS LARGE AS A NO. 9 CAST-IRON SKILLET.

RAGGED HOLES FOR THE EYES

IN THE PLACE WHERE HER FACE SHOULD HAVE BEEN, THERE WAS NO FACE TO BE SEEN.

THE LADY IN THE BLACK MASK

WHEN I WOKE UP in the fisherman's parking lot and my truck wouldn't start, I realized a few things: I'd left the lights on; I'd napped way longer than I'd planned; I was stranded in the middle of nowhere with no cell service; and I had two choices. I could walk 5 miles in the rain to the nearest gas station or knock on the door of the nearest house.

New York's Catskills region is a lovely area on one hand, the birthplace of American fly fishing, dotted with quaint little towns full of cafés and Airbnbs. But just around the bend, in the deeper hollows and along the remoter stretches of famous trout streams, lurks a decidedly creepy side of the Catskills, where mannequins peer from the second-story windows of dilapidated clapboard houses and the people inside seem to come out only at night.

I'd been watching a

lot of *The X-Files* at the time, and after taking a quick look around, I decided I'd walk the 5 miles in the rain. But as it started coming down harder, I thought, *You're being ridiculous. I'm sure these are perfectly normal people who are just, er, into mannequins.* I stopped walking and took a deep breath. *It's the middle of the day, I told myself. Anyone who answers the door now is most likely not one of the Night People. Just suck it up.*

The house was a solid 7 out of 10 on the creepy scale, but there were no mannequins in the windows that I could see. I stopped at the stoop for another deep breath. *It'll be fine,* I repeated. But as I raised my hand to knock, the front door swung open and a woman came backing out of the threshold, hood up, oblivious to my presence. For a moment, I even worried that *I* would scare *her*, but then she spun toward me, and in the place where her face should have been, there was no face to be seen. Instead, she wore a black cloth mask with ragged holes cut out for the eyes.

We both let out little shrieks of horror simultaneously. She hopped in place once or twice and then went bolting back inside, possibly for backup. I stood frozen on her stoop for half a second, picturing myself ensconced in a giant spider web in the rafters of her attic. She ran first. I want to be very clear about that. But I ran farther. Quite a lot farther.

—D.H.

NO WAY TO DIE

HE WAS AN Ozark mountain man with a pit viper's glassy eyes and a mouthful of chompers worn down to the nubs. He wasn't foaming at the mouth yet, but the bubbles had to be forming. Unbuttoned shirt, cut-off sleeves, a rip of a scar across his belly. Problem was, he was also the front desk attendant at our pit stop for the night, a motel with Apple in its name, but the rest was a mystery. The letters in the sign had been shot out or rusted out or were otherwise long gone. But it was late, and we were whupped and on the back side of nowhere's middle, so photographer Colby Lysne and I handed over a credit card like we were saying goodbye to an old friend and took a key from grubby fingers that had once had fingernails.

In a room where a dresser drawer held left-behind tighty-whities, we took a hurried assessment of our predicament.

"Definitely some meth-lab vibes," Colby said. "I gotta get everything out of the car."

He was a little more worried than I was because he had a lot more to lose—thousands of dollars' worth of camera equipment. I could handle having a few notepads and ballpoint pens lifted out of a broken car window. We were on a *Field & Stream* assignment to report on a curious phenomenon. The federal government had recently passed a regulation making beer bongs and Jell-O shots illegal on certain Missouri rivers. When I read that news, I knew I had to go and witness what sort of shenanigans had led to Uncle Sam's laying down the hammer in the Ozarks.

I didn't have to wait long. We hadn't been in the room for 15 minutes when we started hearing shouts. When the first bottle broke, we bolted for the corner of the room and shoved the dresser against the door. It was getting heated outside. We piled a chair on top of the dresser, then another.

I'm not saying it was Cormac McCarthy-scary, but we were a couple of dudes with out-of-state IDs and enough

fancy cameras and electronics to support a county-wide rager if you knew the right pawnshop.

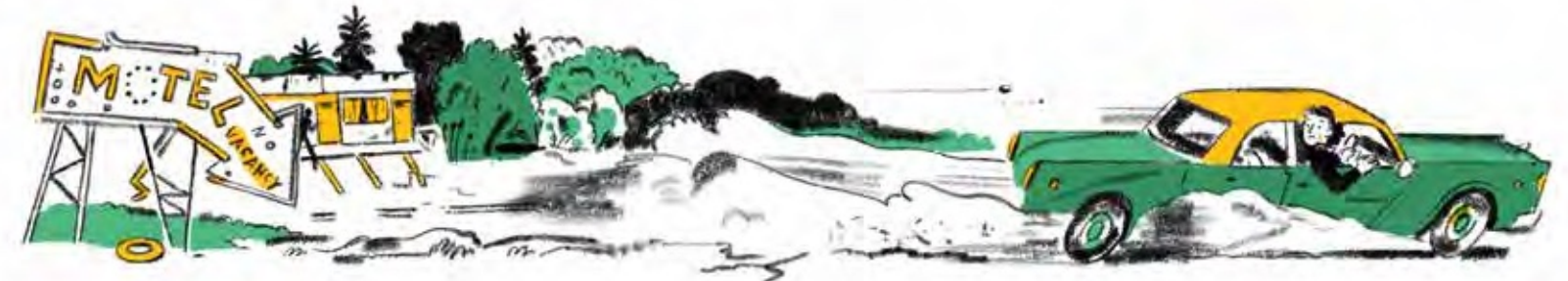
Hollering and cussing. Squealing tires. A shower of gravel against the door. Then silence. "We're out of here," I said.

"While the getting's good," Colby replied.

We pulled down the chairs that were jumbled up like the barricades in *Les Misérables*, cleared the door of bedroom furniture, and slunk out of the motel like cats running from a dumpster. Going down in the crossfire of a drug deal gone bad ranks pretty high on my list of Ways I Do Not Want To Die.

—T.E.N.

WHEN THE FIRST BOTTLE BROKE, WE BOLTED FOR THE CORNER OF THE ROOM AND SHOVED THE DRESSER AGAINST THE DOOR.



FOAMING AT THE MOUTH

A 10-FOOT PYTHON



ONLY IN TEXAS

DURING THE apprentice-hunter camp for kids, we did things at the exotic-game ranch that would have required signing stacks of waivers back home in Iowa. We held a 10-foot python. We got close enough to a camel for it to spit on us. We hand-fed a giraffe and an ostrich. (As we stepped off the bus, the naturalist said, a little too casually, “Remember, kids, these animals can kill you with a single kick.”) We hunted axis deer. By the last night, all the kids were still alive, so when a couple of the ranch hands asked if we wanted to go pig hunting in the morning, we thought that sounded fun.

The guides loosed the hounds early. We followed the tracking signal in open

jeeps. When the dogs caught a pig, we bailed out—me and a couple other parents and about 10 kids ages 9 to 14 following right behind the guides. As we approached the pig, it caught a second wind, broke free from the hounds, and ran right at us. It wasn’t a charge exactly, but it was a feral pig, with sharp tusks, coming fast.

“HOLY SHIT! RUN!” yelled the guide. He didn’t say it like “Run, kids! Get behind me. I got this.” No, he said it like a man who has realized that losing his job for letting a pig run over a bunch of kids was only the second-worst thing about to happen to him. We ran, and the dogs regrouped and latched onto the pig. This time it stayed caught. One of the older boys stuck the pig with a knife, and it seemed to deflate, dying instantly without further drama. The dogs that had been snarling, biting beasts a moment ago wagged their tails, tongues lolling, and let us scratch their ears.

This was years ago, and I don’t even know if the camp still operates. If it does, pig-sticking probably isn’t on the curriculum anymore. —P.B.

HE DIDN’T SAY IT LIKE “RUN, KIDS! GET BEHIND ME. I GOT THIS.” NO, HE SAID IT LIKE A MAN WHO HAS REALIZED THAT LOSING HIS JOB FOR LETTING A PIG RUN OVER A BUNCH OF KIDS WAS ONLY THE SECOND-WORST THING ABOUT TO HAPPEN TO HIM.

“BWANA, IT’S TIME TO BUGGER OFF,” SAID JOHN K., WHICH IS BRITISH FOR “LET’S GET THE FK OUT OF HERE,” AND HE RAN FOR THE LAND ROVER, LEADING ME BY A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE, AS WE WENT ROARING OFF IN A CLOUD OF RED ZAMBIAN DUST.**

BUGGERING OFF

IF YOU’RE GOING to run away from an elephant, it’s best to get a good head start. Elephants can’t gallop like a horse, but they can walk at about 25 miles an hour, which is Olympic-level-sprinting speed for a human. So if you can keep pace with Usain Bolt, the Jamaican gold medalist who was clocked at 27 miles per hour, you’re probably safe. But if you trip over a tree root or a forest cobra, you’re in trouble.

I ran from an elephant long ago in Zambia, where I hunted with a PH

named John K. He was petrified of elephants and made no secret of it. In his youth, an elephant hunt had gone south on him, and he found himself being chased through the miombo, which is a woodland, by an enraged pachyderm, which is an elephant, that was gaining on him very quickly. It seemed obvious how the situation was going to end, so in desperation he flung himself into a thicket and huddled there scarcely daring to breathe.

He could see the trunk searching for him, and by a miracle it didn’t catch his scent, but he never got over the experience.

On the day I hunted with him, we came upon a young bull elephant taking a dust bath, and I wanted photos, but we needed to get closer. Because John’s

Land Rover was fond of not starting, he left it idling, and we crept to picture-taking range. But the bull caught our scent and came boiling out of the donga, which is a gully, ears flat against his head and making no sound, which are the signs of a real charge rather than a bluff.

“Bwana, it’s time to bugger off,” said John K., which is British for “Let’s get the f**k out of here,” and he ran for the Land Rover, leading me by a considerable distance, as we went roaring off in a cloud of red Zambian dust. The last I saw of the bull, he had given up the chase and was tossing dirt in the air and making angry-elephant noises.

Not long after this, a PH with whom I had hunted with in Rhodesia was killed by a cow elephant, which put our sprint in a whole different light. —D.E.P. F&S



YOU’RE IN

TROUBLE



THE AUTHOR AND A TEAM OF WILDLIFE SCIENTISTS EMBARK ON A DUCK HUNTING ADVENTURE IN ONE OF THE WILDEST—AND MOST THREATENED—WETLAND ECOSYSTEMS IN THE WEST

by **SAGE MARSHALL**
photographs by **MATT NAGER**

AS WE EXIT the grassy marsh of Ogden Bay and begin motoring across the wide expanse of the Great Salt Lake, the sunrise tints the sky a deep orange, starkly contrasting with the snow-dusted granite peaks to the east. Elsewhere, the lake butts up against desolate brown foothills. The surface is glass-still, creating a perfect mirrored reflection of the stunning landscape. And then there are the ducks.

Thousands of them kick up at our approach, flushing into a mass of black specks in numbers I've never seen before in my years as a duck hunter. They're greenwing teal, and the way the flock warps reminds me of a murmuration of starlings.

"Welcome to Planet Great Salt Lake," Chad Yamane yells over the din of the airboat, which he's piloting from the seat beside me. His 7-year-old black Lab, Harley, sits at our feet, wearing canine earmuffs and occasionally peeking her salt-and-pepper face out from behind a protective plastic panel to watch where we're going. Yamane's quip doesn't strike me as hyperbole. This place really is otherworldly.

"The plan is to set up right where all those ducks were and pick them off as they come back," Yamane says.

A former outfitter, Yamane is currently the regional director of Ducks Unlimited in Utah. His face is weathered from years of braving the elements. I'm here with him and a team of scientists to hunt one of the most

Immediately, a group of teal whizzes by in front of us. They're small, fast-moving targets, and by the time we sit up to fire, they're already out of range. *Gotta be quicker, I think.*



significant—and imperiled—bodies of water in North America.

“In many places, the lake bed is hard, and it’s easy to walk on,” Yamane says. “That’s not the case where we’re going today, which is right where freshwater from Bear River Bay is flushing fresh sediment into the lake. I’ll drop the coffin blinds right from the boat. Once you get settled in yours, stay in it. If you take one wrong step in the mud, you’ll be up to your armpits in a second.”

Soon I’m lying in a coffin blind—a black plastic container very similar to a Jet Sled but coffin shaped—next to Coryna Hebert, a regional biologist with DU, who’s wearing full camo and gold hoop earrings and carrying a Winchester SX4 that’s splotched with mud and blood from recent hunts. Yamane has set large black silhouette decoys around us, essentially to brush us in. Smaller silhouettes are scattered in a large oval around us, and six teal Mojoes flash in front of us. It’s a smaller spread than that of your typical Great Salt Lake hunt because it’s too onerous to set up a full spread in this muck. Several teal flare off Yamane’s boat while we’re setting up, already trying to get back to the spot. My right knee shakes with anticipation as I lay back in the blind.

Yamane motors away. Immediately, a group of teal whizzes by in front of us. They’re small, fast-moving targets, and by the time we sit up to fire, they’re already out of range. *Gotta be quicker, I*

think. A flock of four flies to my side of the spread, giving us another chance. By the time I shoot, they’ve already realized something’s amiss and turned to depart, but I manage to drop one. It requires a follow-up shot to finish it off, and then I lie back down, only for a pair to quickly buzz in behind us. I pick off another.

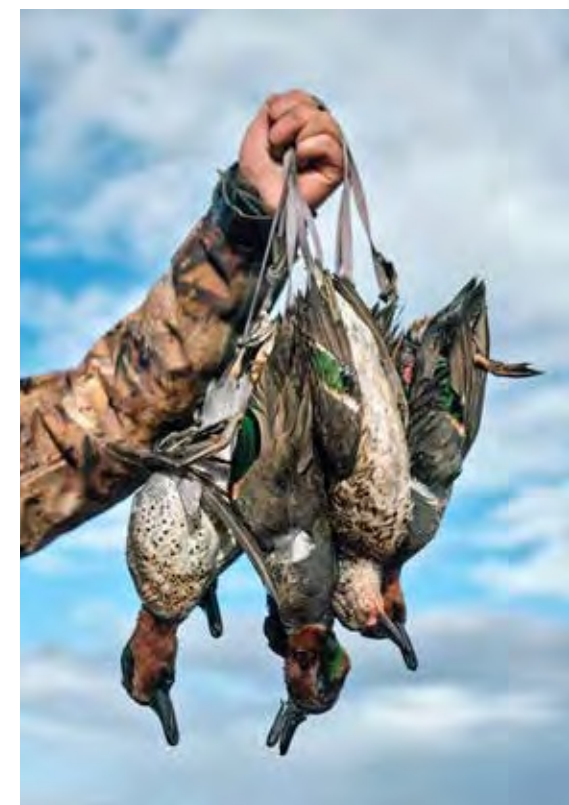
The action continues in small groups and pairs, often with the teal flying past us instead of trying to land in our spread, but when a flock of 10 birds finally does it right, it’s a sight to behold. They come from the left, wings cupped, swerving erratically from side to side as they drop from the sky right on top of us.

A NEW LOW

Within an hour and a half, I’ve shot my limit, though a bald eagle did swoop in and poach one of my birds. Yamane collects the rest of them from the airboat, then picks me up from the coffin blind and subs in another hunter, Patrick Donnelly—a research scientist from Montana. We ride a safe distance away in the airboat and watch the hunters through binos.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the hunting turned on now,” Yamane says. “Midday is usually when the teal do it really dirty.”

But almost immediately, the wind kicks up, and the surface, which had just been flat, is now roiling with whitecaps. With no structure around for us to hunter down in, we decide to pick up the



Previous spread

Thousands of greenwing teal jump off the Great Salt Lake due to the commotion of a hunting party approaching in an airboat.

Opposite, clockwise from top

A typical decoy spread on the Great Salt Lake consists of more than 200 black silos; a hefty strap of teal; hunters pass shotguns as they prepare to settle into coffin blinds.



hunters and decoys and head to a different spot.

The impact of wind on the lake is severe enough to shift shorelines by hundreds of yards in just a matter of hours because of how shallow it is. “The Great Salt Lake is not like a bathtub,” Yamane says. “It’s more like a dinner plate. A lot of it is just a foot or two deep.”

The shallow nature of the lake is part of what makes it such prime habitat for dabbling ducks and shorebirds compared to most other reservoirs, where waterfowl habitat is confined to the edges. It’s also, unfortunately, what makes the Great Salt Lake so susceptible to the impacts of drought. My hunt took place last fall. In 2022, the lake experienced record-low water levels, down 22 feet from its historic high, in the 1980s. The decline has resulted in the loss of nearly 1,500 square miles, or two-thirds, of the lake’s surface area, and significantly increased salinity levels. Scientists say the latter were so high that the water was on the brink of becoming completely inhospitable to the brine shrimp and fly populations that teal and other birds feed on. Additionally, the exposed lake bed allowed toxic dust to blow into the Salt Lake City metropolitan area, threatening the health of more than a million people. While a couple of good snow years bumped the water levels back up, the lake was again nearing record lows when I visited. At that point, the snowpack, which provides most of the lake’s water, was in dismal shape.

The next spot is less windy—at first. We hustle to set up another spread, but once again, just as Yamane and I drive off, the wind kicks up, this time strong enough to dislodge some of the silhouettes and send them pinwheeling away. To make things worse, we are caught in a deluge. Before long, we’re soaked.

“We’d better cut our losses,” Yamane says. “Let’s get out of here and go grab some food and talk about the bad life decisions that led us here.”

COMING TOGETHER

The Bear River—the Great Salt Lake’s most important tributary—winds through some of the last remaining agricultural areas near Salt Lake City. The river is swollen and muddy from December rain, and it flows slowly past steep cutbanks and brushy willows. Hebert is working the oars of a johnboat, and we’re hunting with her colleague, Mitch Jenkins, a res-

toration biologist. I’m kneeling on the bow with my shotgun. We’re hoping to jump-shoot some ducks.

While the Great Salt Lake is a world-famous waterfowling destination, relatively few people target birds on the Bear River, despite its integral role in the larger system of wetlands. In fact, what most people typically call “the Great Salt Lake” actually includes freshwater and brackish marshes and bays that derive from tributaries like the Bear, Jordan, and Weber Rivers, as well as smaller creeks. Historically, the freshwater wetlands flooded naturally, creating significant habitat as they merged with the saline water of the lake itself. As Salt Lake City was

founded in the mid 1800s and quickly began to expand, those marshes were at risk of disappearing because of competing water uses—agriculture and urban growth—as well as flood-control efforts.

The wetlands survived largely because of the waterfowl hunters who created now-historic duck clubs, such as the Chesapeake, founded in 1903, and prompted the development of public refuges along the eastern edge of the lake—from the Bear River Bay all the way down to the southern end of the lake. In doing so, they helped preserve one of three major wintering habitats for waterfowl on the Pacific Flyway, alongside California’s Central Valley and the Klamath Basin, which straddles California and Oregon. The Great Salt Lake is a migratory stop for more than 12 million birds of 339 species annually. It also provides important nesting habitat for local duck populations and a significant number of migratory cinnamon teal.



Opposite

Few duck hunters know the Great Salt Lake better than Chad Yamane, who’s been waterfowling here for nearly 40 years. A former outfitter, he’s now a regional director for Ducks Unlimited.

Above, from top

Coryna Herbert maneuvers a johnboat on the Bear River, the most vital tributary on the Great Salt Lake; the hunting party (including the 7-year-old Lab, Harley) pose for a group shot after a successful day.



Above

Harley takes a seat in the airboat while the hunters set the decoy spread.

Left

Salt grass sways on the Great Salt Lake. Another type of wetland grass—invasive phragmites—has compromised the lake's water supply.

Opposite

Yamane trudges through the muck to get a coffin blind into position for a teal hunt.

“This system is a hemispherically important resource,” Patrick Donnelly says. He’s the big-picture scientist who does the kind of research that guides much of Hebert and her colleagues’ boots-on-the-ground projects. “There are birds in Argentina right now that will be back here in the summer. And many of the birds that are here now will be breeding in the Arctic. So the lake connects the entire Western Hemisphere, and it’s the largest area of high-density wetlands in the Western U.S., bar none, by four or five times anywhere else. This is the crown jewel.”

But it might not stay that way. Over-allocation of water to agriculture and increasing urban development put the lake’s level on a downward trajectory. This has been magnified by persistent drought linked to climate change that has steadily led to lower snowpack in the Wasatch Mountains. Groundwater depletion, degraded water-delivery infrastructure, and invasive vegetation—particularly phragmites, a dense wetland

grass that offers no ecological benefits and uses excessive amounts of water—have further compromised the lake’s water supply.

But the potential for environmental catastrophe is even larger: The whole Pacific Flyway is at stake. According to Donnelly’s research, which uses satellite imagery, “semipermanent wetlands” are declining in the Great Basin and throughout the rest of the Pacific Flyway at a rate significantly higher than in the Great Salt Lake, which is an integral part of both. This makes saving its vast wetland habitats even more important.

The dire situation has prompted officials to act. In September 2025, Governor Spencer J. Cox announced the GSL 2034 initiative, a collaborative effort to return the Great Salt Lake to healthy water levels before the 2034 Winter Olympics, scheduled to take place in and around Salt Lake City. The charter includes \$200 million in pledged donations, with half of that coming from Ducks Unlimited to improve ecosystem resilience, invasive species

“The lake connects the entire Western Hemisphere,” Patrick Donnelly says. “This is the crown jewel.”

management, and land protection. Another \$100 million was pledged by Great Salt Lake Rising, a philanthropic coalition led by Josh Romney, the son of Mitt Romney. The charter has also garnered the support of conservation groups, such as the Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy—groups that have been working to acquire water rights and divert those flows directly into the lake.

Several of Ducks Unlimited’s projects are focused right here on the Bear River drainage, which Hebert describes as the aorta of the larger wetlands system. She and Jenkins are cataloging habitat conditions and creating plans to address invasive phragmites along the river. They’re also working with private landowners to reduce erosion, which flushes extra sediment into the lake, by restoring banks and updating critical water delivery infrastructure so that the full water allocations are delivered to the marshes when they should be. “It may not be glamorous work,” she says, “but it’s important.”

We round another bend, and on the right, there are thickets of bulrush with some open pockets of water. *There’s got to be some ducks in there*, I think to myself. Almost on cue, a pair pop up. I center the bead of my shotgun on the greenhead and drop it. As I hold the duck aloft, bright blood drips from its yellow bill. The beautiful bird, whose green head feathers are vibrant compared to the brown cattails and willows on the river’s shore, is a vital reminder of what’s at stake.

MAKING A CONNECTION

“We’ll give the big ducks a try this morning,” says Yamane, who’s again piloting his airboat. It’s colder today—around 25 degrees—and the wind from the airboat’s 30 mph pace numbs my face and pierces my clothes. A film of ice has formed on the surface of Ogden Bay, which Yamane says is a good sign for hunting “big ducks,” such as mallards, wigeon, and pintails. Yamane eyes a patch of phragmites and circles around it with the boat, reminding me of a teenager doing donuts with his truck in a snowy parking lot. He’s doing this to break up the ice so we can set out decoys. When the weather warms up enough to thaw the surrounding ice, he explains, the big ducks, which like freshwater more than teal do, will return from loafing in the unfrozen saltwater of the main lake.

We throw out a couple dozen floaters and tuck away in the dense vegetation.

I’m excited to experience another style of hunting here—and the shooting starts out hot. Two groups of wigeon dive in, and we pick off a couple. Hunting here, Yamane tells me, is all about understanding bird behavior—knowing where they’ll be, depending on the weather conditions. And he knows better than almost anyone. Before working at Ducks Unlimited, Yamane was in the fire service while also running a waterfowl hunting-outfitter operation for 12 years. “This is my backyard,” he says. “I love taking people out and showing them it.”

But the lake is vastly different than when Yamane first hunted it 38 years ago, when he was 12. He grew up in Syracuse, Utah, which was an agricultural community at the time; today it’s been subsumed by the urban sprawl of Salt Lake City. Back then, the lake was full, and Yamane and his buddies could simply walk 10 or 15 minutes down a causeway and start hunting. “We shot pintails at first light, and we were like, ‘What are those?’ We picked them up and brought them back to my friend’s dad, and he told us,” Yamane tells me. “That was the start.”

Yamane became a diehard duck hunter—one who would go on to witness firsthand the gradual decline of the lake, watching the shore recede and marshes be overtaken by invasive phragmites. The degradations made accessing hunting spots more difficult and concentrated the hunting pressure. This season, he says, is the worst he’s ever seen, and hunts like my first one on the lake have been rare. The poor hunting is partly because mild winter conditions throughout the West haven’t pushed migrators south in typical numbers or concentrated local birds on the lake by freezing up other areas. Still, Yamane is grateful for every chance to hunt it. “There’s still no prettier place to kill a duck,” he says.

After retiring from the fire service, Yamane knew he wanted to work in the outdoors. He’d also recently stopped guiding, so the transition to conservation work was natural. “As an outfitter, you utilize the resource and take from it,” he told me. “For me, to be able to give back to it later in life is awesome. And conserva-

Right

Yamane breaks through a thin film of ice on the lake, as he sets floaters ahead of a hunt for mallards, wigeon, and pintails.



I spot a flock from the distance. It still strikes me as surreal to be hunting ducks in such a wild and unusual landscape. Soon, the silhouettes of the teal are unmistakable, and they're coming on a beeline toward us.

tion here is easy to sell to hunters. They understand the landscape. It's the general public that doesn't care about the lake as much. They don't have any connection to it."

DO OR DIE

In the afternoon, we head back to the main lake. My back is sore against the hard-plastic blind, and my neck, propped up against my blind bag, feels kinked. The midmorning flight of big ducks never really got going, so we decide to try for teal one more time. We set up on a section with solid footing, so we're able to put out a typical Great Salt Lake spread—about 250 black silhouette decoys, 10 dozen teal floaters, and eight spinners. It's as close as we can get to imitating the large rafts of teal that are out on the lake.

I spot a flock from a distance. The birds fly low enough that it's hard to make them out at first against the foothills of the Wasatch Range. It still strikes me as surreal to be hunting ducks in such a wild

and unusual landscape. Soon, the silhouettes of the teal are unmistakable, and they're coming on a beeline toward us.

As I wait for the ducks to come in to the spread, I think back to something Patrick Donnelly told me earlier in the trip concerning the stakes of the Great Salt Lake's future. "It's getting closer and closer to decision time," he said. "Will we win or lose? There's a tipping point, and we're nearing it."

It's a worrying thought—but it's a fight I want us to win. Because after spending just a few days here, and despite the so-so hunting, I'm intent on returning to this otherworldly place. I want to see how great the duck hunting here can be. And I know how crucial the lake is for Pacific Flyway birds.

The flock of teal are on top of us now. The sound of the birds' cupped wings against the air sounds like paper being torn. They swerve as they descend into the spread.

We rise and take our best shots. F&S



Left
A hunter's-eye view, watching and waiting from a coffin blind for groups of teal to come into range.

Right
The author (left) and Hebert are all smiles after retrieving a hard-earned mallard on the Bear River.



MBOGO NYATI

No animal has been an object of obsession for more of our greatest storytellers than the Cape buffalo. Mbogo tested their limits, broke their spirits, and tried to end their lives. Nyati haunted their dreams and possessed their minds, calling them back to Africa for one more safari, time and again. Consequently, no animal has inspired more of our greatest storytelling than the Cape buffalo. Here are some excerpts from our pages

illustrations by
CLAY RODERY



FIELD & STREAM CLASSICS



He looked at me as if I owed him money. I never saw such malevolence in the eyes of any animal or human being.

SUICIDE MADE EASY

by ROBERT C. RUARK

SOME PEOPLE are afraid of the dark. Other people fear airplanes, ghosts, their wives, death, illness, bosses, snakes, or bugs. Each man has some private demon of fear that dwells within him. Sometimes he may spend a life without discovering that he is hagridden by fright—the kind that makes the hands sweat and the stomach writhe in real sickness. This fear numbs the brain and has a definite odor, easily detectable by dog and man alike. The odor of fear is the odor of the charnel house, and it cannot be hidden.

I love the dark. I am fond of airplanes. I have had a ghost for a friend. I am not henpecked by my wife. I was through a war and never fretted about getting killed. I pay small attention to illness, and have never feared an employer. I like snakes, and bugs don't bother me. But I have a fear, a constant, steady fear that still crowds into my dreams, a fear that makes me sweat and smell bad in my sleep. I am afraid of Mbogo, the big, black Cape buffalo. Mbogo, or Nyati, as he is sometimes called, is the oversized ancestor of the Spanish fighting bull. I have killed Mbogo, and to date he has never got a horn into me, but the fear of him has never lessened with familiarity. He is just so damned big, and ugly, and ornery, and vicious, and surly, and cruel, and crafty. Especially when he's mad. And when he's hurt, he's always mad. And when he's mad, he wants to kill you. He is not satisfied with less. But such is his fascination that, once you've hunted him, you are dissatisfied with other game, up to and including elephants.

The Swahili language, which is the lingua franca of East Africa, is remarkably expressive in its naming of animals. No better word than *simba* for lion was ever constructed, not even by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tarzan's daddy. You cannot beat *tembo* for elephant, nor can you improve on *chui* for leopard, *nugu* for baboon, *fisi* for hyena or *punda* for zebra. *Faro* is apt for rhinoceros, too, but none of the easy Swahili nomenclature packs the same descriptive punch as *mbogo* for a beast that will weigh over a ton, will take an 8.8-millimeter shell in his breadbasket and still toddle off, and

that combines crafty guile with incredible speed, and vindictive anger with wide-eyed, skilled courage.

From a standpoint of senses, the African buffalo has no weak spot. He sees as well as he smells, and he hears as well as he sees, and he charges with his head up and his eyes unblinking. He is as fast as an express train, and he can haul up short and turn himself on a shilling. He has a tongue like a wood rasp and feet as big as knife-edged flat-irons. His skull is armor-plated and his horns are either razor-sharp or splintered into horrid javelins.

The boss of horn that covers his brain can induce hemorrhage by a butt. His horns are ideally adapted for hooking, and one hook can unzip a man from crotch to throat. He delights to dance upon the prone carcass of a victim, and the man who provides the platform is generally collected with a trowel, for the buffalo's death-dance leaves little but shreds and bloody tatters.

I expect I have looked at several thousand buffalo at close range. I have stalked several hundred. But the terror never quit. The sweat never dried. The stench of abject fear never left me. And the fascination for him never left me. Toward the end of my first safari I was crawling more miles after Mbogo than I was walking after anything else—still scared stiff, but unable to quit. Most of the time I felt like a cowardly bullfighter with a hangover, but Mbogo beckoned me on like the sirens that seduced ships to founder on the rocks.

We had stalked up to a lot of mbogo before I ever found one good enough to shoot. We had broken in by stalking a herd that was feeding back into the forest in a marsh. Another herd, which had already fed into the bush and which we had not seen, had busted loose with an awful series of snorts and grunts and had passed within a few feet, making noises like a runaway regiment of heavy tanks. This spooked the herd we had in mind, and they took off in another direction, almost running us down. A mud-scabby

buffalo at a few feet is a horrifying thing to see, I can assure you. ...

But one day we got a clear look at a couple of bulls—one big, heavily horned, prime old stud and a smaller askari, feeding on the lip of a thick thorn forest. They were feeding in the clear for a change, and they were nicely surrounded by high cane and a few scrub trees, which meant that we could make a fair crouching stalk by walking like question marks and dodging behind the odd bush. The going was miserable underfoot, with our legs sinking to the knees in ooze and our feet catching and tripping on the intertwined grasses, but the buff were only a few thousand yards away and the wind was right; so we kept plugging ahead.

"Let's go and collect him," said Mr. Selby, the mad gleam of the fanatic buff hunter coming into his mild brown eyes. "He looks like a nice one." ...

I lurched up and looked at Mbogo, and Mbogo looked at me. He was 50 to 60 yards off, his head low, his eyes staring right down my soul. He looked at me as if he hated my guts. He looked as if I had despoiled his fiancée, murdered his mother, and burned down his house. He looked at me as if I owed him money. I never saw such malevolence in the eyes of any animal or human being, before or since. So I shot him.

I am going back to Africa soon. I do not intend to shoot much. Certainly I will never kill another lion, nor do I intend to duplicate most of the trophies I acquired on the last one. But I will hunt Mbogo. In fear and trembling I will hunt Mbogo every time I see him, and I won't shoot him unless he is a mile bigger than the ones I've got. I will hate myself while I crawl and shake and tremble and sweat, but I will hunt him. Once you've got the buffalo fever, the rest of the stuff seems mighty small and awful tame. This is why the wife of my bosom considers her spouse to be a complete and utter damned fool, and she may very well be right.

"Suicide Made Easy" was first published in the January 1954 issue.

HE WAS VERY BIG, even for a Cape buffalo (around 1,800 pounds) and very old (around 12 years) and very smart. But he was condemned to death by his hooves, which were also huge and which left an unmistakable track in the sandy soil of the Zimbabwean lowveld. When you leave a signature like this and have three people following you who can track the memory of a ghost over hard rock, the odds are not in your favor.

Or you could say that his death was caused by a book. In 1953, when I was 11, I read *Killers in Africa*, written by a professional hunter named Alexander Lake. It permanently scarred my youthful brain, and I developed a fascination with Africa that persists to this day. And so, having been on 10 safaris, I decided at the age of 74 to go to Africa again. ...

Why the hell am I here? My last three safaris I hardly pulled the trigger, and on one of them I spent three days sitting in a baobab tree above a water hole, watching animals and having a hell of a good time. I don't need to kill anything more.

When I was in college, I read *War and Peace*, and my professor made us all take a blood oath to reread the book when we were 65 instead of 18. We would appreciate it a lot more, he said. Perhaps that's why I came back to Africa; because at this age you don't take things for granted and you're running out of time in which to take them in any way.

My friend John Wootters told me that the last time he got to Africa he smelled the woodsmoke, which is one of the constants of life here, and got tears in his eyes, because he was *back*. John is gone now, so perhaps I'm here for him.

Or perhaps I'm here because I'm part of the last generation that will see something like this. Drought, and poaching, and pressure from human population will eventually drive the wild animals into zoos. In a national park nearby, there's a small pack of Cape hunting dogs of which perhaps 200 remain in all of Zimbabwe, and maybe 1,400 in all of Africa. Once they roamed in the many thousands, but distemper, and ranchers with rifles, took care of that.

Why Cape buffalo? Because there's always the chance that something will

go wrong. I think it's the same with people who skydive or race motorcars or climb mountains. It's the realization that no matter how prudent and careful and skilled you are, fate can intervene. I'm not afraid of buffalo; if you have a powerful rifle and are backed up by an even more powerful rifle, the odds are all in your favor.

What I am afraid of is an accident. On the first day I told my PH: "I'm a very experienced hunter. I handle guns all the time. But I'm an old man, and old men do dumb shit. Watch me."

•

Dugga is Shona for "mud." A Dugga Boy is an old buffalo bull that has been driven out of the herd by younger bulls, or has left voluntarily because he craves peace and quiet. He'll find a mudhole and make his home there, possibly accompanied by a younger bull or two for company. Dugga Boys are covered in mud. I don't mean they're spattered in it; I mean they are truly plastered. The body parts that are not coated in mud are covered in crap.

Dugga Boys have come to be the preferred trophies for enlightened hunters. It's healthier for a herd to have its prime breeding bulls left in peace and have the old-timers taken off to trophy rooms.

So, on the morning of the sixth day of hunting we cut the monster track of a big Dugga Boy, along with two of his friends. But he was too clever for us, and continually circled around, using the swirling wind to keep track of where we were. After an hour or so of dodging and dancing, it was close to noon, so we went back to camp to leave him alone and let him regain his inner tranquility and smear some more doo-doo on his nasty bits.

At 3 p.m. we picked up his track. There was no doubt it was the same bull. Now, the wind was blowing hard, but it was blowing in one direction; the swirling had stopped. He was alone this time, but he knew we were after him, and his tactic was to keep just out of sight until he figured out where we were and then let out a basso profundo grunt and go crashing off for a quarter mile.

We would circle around to where we

thought he would be, and almost always the trackers were right about this. Finally, it paid off. Nyati saw his namesake in a patch of brush 110 yards away. Buzz said it was the right bull, and quite a good one. The buff would not stay where he was; if he moved to his right we'd lose him again, but if he went to the left there was an open stretch of ground where I would have a second or two for a clear shot.

He went left. Buzz yelled. The Dugga Boy paused and looked toward us to see what the yelling was about. I held on the lower third of his shoulder and pulled the trigger. Buzz, who was watching him through binoculars, later said that the impact of my 416 bullet was so violent it sent a cloud of dust off his entire body.

Buzz looked at me: "Good shot?"

"Good shot," I answered.

Then, I turned my scope from 3X to 1X, because fatally shot buffalo often decide to get payback with their last minutes of life, and if he was one of these, he was going to come for us very fast.

We waited. Dying buffalo have a distinctive sound they make at the very end that goes *MMMMMMMMMMMMM-BAAWWWWW*. We listened for that, but what we heard instead were grunts and moans. It was his valedictory. After 15 minutes there was silence. Buzz and I, rifles at the ready, went to where we had last heard him. He was stuck between two trees, his rear toward us. He had run for 60 yards and in his desperation had misjudged the distance between them. Then he ran out of life. My shot had cut the top off his heart and shattered his lungs. He still lived for a quarter of an hour.

I shot him three times more behind the shoulder because it's the dead ones that get up and kill you. He was a huge bull, the biggest I had ever seen up close. He was also quite old, and if I had not taken him, before long he would have ended with the fangs of a male lion through his nose as lionesses gnawed at his spine. If the cats were really hungry, they would have begun eating him while he was still standing. Probably, a bullet was better.

"Ghosts of Africa" was first published in the December 2017 issue.

Buzz said that the impact of my 416 bullet was so violent it sent a cloud of dust off his entire body.





HUNTING SCARED

by THOMAS McINTYRE

SOMETIMES, IT WAS the roars that disturbed my sleep. Other times, I was awakened by rumbles and screams. Remembering where I was, I'd sit up in the dark under the mosquito netting and swing my legs out of bed, pausing to peer around for the silhouettes of scorpions before setting my feet down. Lifting the net, I'd cross to the tent flap and step into the cool August night air where bats swooped past my face and listen for the roars.

More frequently, though, from the Songo River flats below camp, it would be the screams, and under the Southern Cross I would see the moon-washed elephants bumping one another as they crowded around the salt lick. These were members of a healthy wild population of legally hunted elephants—a thing far different from the semi-narcoleptic attractions found at Africa's finer game parks and lodges. These were elephants that, in the words of Zimbabwean professional hunter Rory Muil, would “*stuffing* try to kill you”; and they weren't even my reason for being here.

Here was a million-acre hunting concession spread across the Tonga tribe's Binga Communal Lands up from the Kariba Lake shore in northwestern Zimbabwe. It was *nyati*, Cape buffalo, or rather a tragic addiction to them, that had brought me here to hunt with Rory. Not everyone necessarily gets hooked on nyati. In terms of side effects suffered, the first one is usually free. A hunter may get “lucky” and stumble onto a bull in open terrain, make a practically anticlimactic one-shot kill, and wonder what all the fuss was about.

Another hunter, after chasing snorting, stampeding buffalo around in the bush for days, may be so unnerved by the experience that he will happily make his first buffalo hunt his only buffalo hunt, and from then on stick to less distressing game, like grizzly bears. It is only after deliberately hunting Cape buffalo a second time, or a third, that a person makes a crossing to being something, and someone, distinctly different from whatever he was before.

Standing outside the tent, I didn't

know if being drawn to the hunting of Cape buffalo required a special darkness or a heart of clear radiance. The only thing I did know, after having hunted six of them in 28 years, was that it was unlike all the other hunting of all the other game I have given chase to in Africa. Buffalo seldom charge unless made to, but they never bluff. ...

Three days prior to my arrival, a poacher and several of his associates had gone down to the Sengwa, the area's main river, in order to spear a buffalo who had tangled a snare around his head and horns and had the poor manners not to strangle himself to death. As the spearmen approached what they took to be a harmless, neck-roped buffalo, the bull was filled with a surge of adrenaline and snapped the snare and proceeded to butt, gore, and stamp the poacher into the ground, while the poacher's cohorts fled. Then the buffalo walked off, still wearing his crown of wire.

“Hunting Scared” was first published in the April 2003 issue.

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SHADOWS IN THE BUSH

by PHILIP CAPUTO

ABOUT AN HOUR BEFORE DUSK, we resigned ourselves—the buffalo hunt was finished. Madebe, the driver, was radioed to pick us up. As the Land Rover approached, Fabian and Pius said in whispers that sounded like shouts, “*Nyati!*” and sprinted down the road. “An old bull!” Stanton said, jogging behind them. I took off and caught up with Fabian as he was setting up the shooting sticks.

He pointed down a hill. I didn’t see a thing that looked like a buffalo or any animal for that matter. “Look more to your left,” Stanton told me. Sixty to 70 yards away, the bull stood in the woods, staring at us. A moment later, he turned and moved off. Stanton and the trackers ran along the road, parallel to the buffalo’s line of travel. Fabian set up the sticks a second time. Resting the rifle, I followed Stanton’s directions, swinging the scope till I saw the bull, which had again stopped. He was facing me at about a 45-degree angle. “Aim for the left side of his chest and you should break his shoulder or hit his lungs.”

I was a bit shaky from the run and had

trouble keeping the rifle steady, despite the rest afforded by the sticks. When the scope settled on the bull’s chest, the left side, I fired. I knew I’d hit him solidly, but he was running nevertheless. My blood was up, or maybe I was just feeling mean from all the heat and frustration and fly bites. At any rate, I dashed downhill after him, and this time it was Stanton and the trackers following me. The old bull was stumbling. I ran till I was broadside of him, then, from 20 yards, slipped a hasty sling around my arm and shot him through the lungs. It took a third round to bring him down for good.

Fabian and Pius began to clap their hands with a syncopated beat, singing some chant that contained the word *babu*. Walden, gun bearer Hassani, and driver Madebe took up the song, dancing in a circle.

“What are they doing?” I asked Stanton.

“They’re singing about you,” he replied. “*Babu* means ‘grandfather’ in Swahili. They’re singing about how the old grandfather killed the old bull.”

I looked at the buffalo. It was an old one indeed, with short but well-developed horns, a prominent boss, and a hide scarred from many battles with other males. I rested my hand on his massive neck.

“You needn’t feel any regrets about this one,” Stanton said. “He had about a year to go. Old age or the lions would have gotten him.”

It was full night by the time we returned to camp with the quartered carcass. Madebe had radioed ahead, and the whole camp was waiting for me, calling out, “*Babu, ahyay! Babu, ahyay!*” as I climbed out of the vehicle. Four men lifted me up in a camp chair and carried me to the fire, around which they and the others danced and sang. It was an elemental scene: the African rhythms of chant and handclap, the fire reflecting off the faces of the men, while the hippos chortled in the river and a hyena whooped, far off in the darkness.

“Shadows in the Bush” was first published in the July and August 2005 issues.

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ON THE WAY BACK to camp, we saw another buffalo cow that had stepped in the wrong place—a poacher’s snare. This one, however, had amputated her left foreleg halfway up.

Africa deals with the halt and the maimed in the form of lions and hyenas, which do not always bother with the formality of killing what they dine on, and though it would have been merciful to shoot the cow then and there, we couldn’t. She was only 75 yards away, but she was on another hunting concession. The only thing we could do was go back to camp, call the manager of the neighboring concession, and get permission. Then it would be a simple job to backtrack and shoot her.

“Of course,” said the concession manager, so back we went, and she wasn’t there. ... We began to track her.

There were six of us: Clive Perkins, my PH; Wayne Van Den Bergh; PH Theo Bronkhorst, who ran our concession; Willard Ncube, who tracked for Wayne; Elias Mathe, who tracked for Clive; and me. When you trail game, the trackers normally go ahead of the people carrying rifles, but when you follow a wounded Cape buffalo, the people with rifles stay up front. I was carrying a Jarrett Professional Hunter in 416 caliber—plenty enough gun, assuming I had the time to react. The trackers look for sign, and you keep your eyes forward, watching for a gray shape that will come hurtling at you with jackrabbit speed.

Her track led us out of the *mopane* woods where we began and into the open. She had gotten into a dry riverbed that was overgrown with waist-high grass. Elias shouted, and we got a glimpse of her head. She was cantering on three legs, moving much faster than we could, and there was no time to even snap a shot at her before she vanished into the grass.

We followed, and the grass changed to taller reeds, which soon were head-high. We were now trailing blind, and it was apparent that if we were tracking her, she was leading us. The reeds were so dense that if you thrust your arm into them you could not see your hand. Theo and Clive left the riverbed for the bank; if she came out of the reeds they would be

able to see her and shoot her.

Within another few hundred yards the reeds were 12 feet high and we were reduced to crawling through tunnels left by buffalo that used this place as a refuge during the day. Sometimes our quarry left the tunnels and pushed her way through standing reeds, and we were forced to claw our way after her.

That she was going to charge eventually was a given, and there would be no warning, no time to aim. If we got a chance to shoot at all it would be point, pray, and pull the trigger. Wayne made his way back to me.

“Listen,” he whispered, “if you have to shoot her off one of us, for Christ’s sake shoot upward so you don’t hit us.”

Our own rifles were as much danger to us as they were to the buffalo. A trigger can snag, or a muzzle can cross a human back, and that is as good as a horn through the chest. A PH with whom I hunted years ago, as careful an individual as you would want, shot a colleague while trying to stop a leopard charge. The man he shot lived but will never really recover.

Theo and Clive yelled at us to come up on the bank. We lurched out of the reeds and into the shade. A water bottle was passed around, and I took a couple of swallows, but it made no difference. It was like pouring water on a hot stovetop. There seemed to be nothing else to do, so the four of us prepared to wade back in.

“If she gets her head into you, grab her horns and twist,” Theo said. “She can’t stay on her feet with that missing leg.” I waited for him to smile and show he was kidding, but he was not. Back we went. By now we had crowded her into the end of the reedbed. She had perhaps 2 acres in which to maneuver, but all she had to do was keep a few steps ahead of us and pick her time to charge.

She did. There was no warning at all. There was simply a crash of reeds and a massive gray shape blotted out the sun. Wayne fired at it from a crouch; I shot across my chest while falling backward. Then the shape vanished. I could almost have touched it with my rifle barrel. There was a patch of blood on the ground and Elias was smiling.

“Did we kill her?” I asked.

“No,” he said, and I realized he was smiling because she had not killed him. I think the combination of nearly impassable reeds and the missing leg saved us. She could not keep her footing in that tangle, fell, scrambled up with possibly one or two bullets in her, and fled. If she had charged with four legs, she would have killed one of us.

We kept going, and after only a few yards Willard froze. “Shoot,” he said, pointing into the reeds.

I couldn’t see beyond my rifle barrel, but I fired.

“Shoot again,” he said, now pointing in a different direction, and I did.

“Reload,” said Willard.

We stumbled onward, and Wayne suddenly lurched back in agony. A reed stalk had speared him in his eye, and he was now down to one usable eye and one round of ammunition. Wayne, Willard, and Elias had a short talk in Ndebele, the sum of which was: “We’re not going to get lucky twice. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

We left the reeds, and Theo summed up our efforts perfectly: “That was stupid.”

There was only one thing left to try. Willard and Elias climbed an acacia tree while Theo and I stood on the roof of the truck. We would try to look down into the reeds and shoot from above. Clive blocked off the end of the reedbed, and Wayne, who has a wife and two children, borrowed ammunition from Clive and headed back into the riverbed.

We could see the reeds waving as the buffalo maneuvered, and Clive got a glimpse of her. He shot and was sure he had connected, but it was a standoff. She would not leave the reeds in daylight, and we could not go in after her. Theo called an end to it.

So be it. We failed. I would like to think that we got a few bullets into her and at least shortened her suffering. There is one thing more. I would like to think that somewhere in one of the nastier neighborhoods in hell there is a wire loop waiting for the foot of the poacher who snared her. F&S

“The Wire” was first published in the April 2009 issue.



All she had to do was keep a few steps ahead of us and pick her time to charge. She did. There was no warning.

Alerts

NATURE IS NOT OUT TO KILL YOU, BUT IT ALSO DOESN'T CARE IF YOU DIE. IF YOU FORGET THAT, YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF TERMINALLY DISAPPOINTED

JOANNA PINNEO/CAVAN IMAGES

by DAVID E. PETZAL

It's fashionable in some circles to treat the outdoors as a combination art exhibit–nature documentary–environmental classroom where we may visit, take out nothing but memories, and leave nothing but footprints. However, the outdoors is also the home of Nature, which is prodigal with life of all types and is perfectly willing to be prodigal with yours.

Nature is not intrinsically malignant, but neither is she benign, and the sports we pursue while in her clutches add an extra element of risk. Boats sink. Canoes capsize. Four-wheelers get in disputes with trees. Small planes vanish.

Ironically, the threat of one's demise attracts a lot of people. If you face it fearlessly, you can consider yourself brave. If you're scared to death, manage to hide your terror, and do what you must, you can still consider yourself brave. But then, Nature doesn't care how brave you are, either, and may prove it.

Here's a look at mortal peril of the outdoor variety, in its many shades. We'll start with some unfortunate souls who told Nature, "Here I am," and, in their last moments, probably wished they had kept their mouths shut.

MORTAL MISHAPS

Last summer in Maine, a father and daughter, experienced hikers both, were caught on top of Mount Katahdin, and it got very cold very fast. It was June, and neither was prepared for the low temperatures. The father made it just off the peak and perished from exposure. The daughter became hypothermic and died from a fall. For most of us, the weather is a banality, and even when it isn't, there are early warning systems in place. In the mountains, it can turn deadly on a dime.

Last fall, two young men who were hunting elk in the Rio Grande National Forest in Colorado were caught in a thunderstorm. They started back to their car, but a lightning bolt hit a nearby tree, traveled along the ground, and found its way to them, killing both instantly. Although only in their mid 20s, the men were highly experienced and made no mistakes, and it was still not enough to keep them alive.

In certain outdoor places, the smallest of mistakes can get you killed. A Texas wildlife photographer who was no stranger to Alaska decided to play the

hermit and found an isolated cabin in which to do it. This happened back in the early 1980s but still haunts me. The man, whose name was Carl McCunn, figured to live off the land, but the land had no intention of supporting him, and he began to starve. He had no radio, and he had not arranged for a "come look for me" date with a pilot.

Eventually, his friends persuaded the Alaska State Troopers to overfly his cabin, and there he was, still alive. But instead of giving the hand signal for *need help* (both hands held over your head in the shape of a Y), he got excited and pumped his fist in the air. The pilot took this as a sign that all was well and flew off. McCunn returned to the cabin and wrote in his diary that he had just signed his own death warrant, which proved accurate. Faced with death by starvation, and having lost all hope, he took his own life.

In 1978, I hunted in what was then Rhodesia with Allen Lowe, a rancher who was also a PH and one of the toughest, most capable individuals I've ever met. Two years later he tried to lead an enraged cow elephant away from a client and she killed him. No one was able to figure out how it happened. His loaded, unfired rifle was found beside his body. The eerie part is, he'd had a premonition he was going to die. He'd spent the days prior to the elephant hunt visiting with his friends and saying his goodbyes.

The Reaper awaits us all. Maybe not today, but soon enough to make things interesting.

DEAD CALM

There are two kinds of people who are beguiled by the chance of death in the outdoors. First are the genuinely brave. They're aware that something may do them in, but the thought carries no weight, and death just adds an element of intrigue. Then there are those who have doubts about their courage. They hope

they’re brave but are haunted by the thought that perhaps they are not. They want to know.

A friend of mine, now a very old man, is genuinely brave. He had the chance in the 1970s to hunt urial sheep in Iran. Like all sheep, urials live in mountains that suit them but not people. The friend and his guide spotted a ram and were working their way to within rifle range along a ledge that was perhaps a foot wide when they came to a gap that would have to be jumped. There was no way around it. If my friend missed the jump, he would fall through a thousand feet or so of chilly Iranian air, or he could back off and hope he got to see another urial.

He told me: “I figured there was a good chance I’d be killed and that my wife would like a photo of the place where I died.” So he fished out his camera and took a picture of the gap, then made the jump, and went on to collect the trophy. He hunted for another three decades, all over the world, was nearly done in several times, and always reacted with the same detached calm.

As for those who wish to find out if they are brave, it’s often best if there’s someone handy to talk them out of it. A leopard was involved in an incident of this sort in Zambia. The safari prior to mine included two married couples. One man shot a leopard through the guts, and the cat streaked off into the woods. Attempting to finish off a wounded leopard is the surest way I know to get shredded in Africa. If the animal can still draw a breath, it’ll use it to attack you. A leopard can hide in places that you would not dream could conceal them. And when it comes for you, it will be so fast that you’ll have no chance to react.

Almost invariably, a PH will tell his client to go back to the truck with a tracker while he deals with the cat. But sometimes, with one of the very few clients who has the guts, the PH may say, “Well, bwana, shall we go and sort him out?” (Should this happen to you, be aware that you’ve just received the greatest compliment you’ll get on this Earth.) But in this case, the PH did the job alone.

Thereafter, the other three sports fed the leopard hunter a steady diet of scorn, mockery, and derision for not going with the PH, who finally had enough.

“Listen, you bunch of bloody fools,” he said, “he didn’t go because I didn’t ask him to go. It’s not his job. It’s mine, and if I hear another word, I’ll drive you all

back to Lusaka and put you on the bloody airplane.” The PH was perfectly right. Sometimes, your job is to stand down and let someone else be a hero.

SCARED STIFF

Nature can unhinge you all by herself. The total quiet, the vast spaces, and the awareness of your own insignificance can rattle people who are brave enough in civilization. I once hunted the Bangtail Mountains with a Montanan who had grown up there. He was a consummate outdoorsman with a sense of direction that was positively eerie. The day was one of the coldest I’ve ever experienced. It was so bitter that we had to stop and build a fire. The forest was dark, gloomy, and somehow sinister, as though goblins might lurk behind the boulders.

“You know,” he said, “I love this country...but it scares the hell out of me.”

Sometimes, Nature gives you only a warning. Two friends of mine decided it would be interesting to overnight by themselves in a little backpacking tent in a Kenyan national park. No sooner had night fallen than a pair of male lions sat down outside their tent and began roaring, because lions enjoy that. The noise is thunderous. The two people in the tent assumed it was a prelude to their being eaten and went into a state beyond terror. But nothing happened. The two cats finally roared themselves out and wandered off into the night, and the two scared-witless, nearly deafened campers stuck to lodges from then on.

In terms of fear generated, snakes are special, in part because they kill more people than any other creatures except mosquitoes. Harry Selby, the most famous of all professional hunters, and the man who slapped a rhino across the face with his hat to make it go away, was petrified of them.

He had company. My late friend G. Sitton, a gifted writer who left us way too early, had feelings about snakes that the words *abject terror* can’t begin to describe. On a safari in Zimbabwe, he was taking his noontime nap in a thatched-roof hut when a very large snake that looked like, but was not, a forest cobra fell from the roof and landed precisely on his neck, around which it coiled. Gary thought he was having a nightmare until he awoke and realized there actually was a sizable serpent residing above his collar, at which point he ran through the door of the hut without bothering to

open it. He was tackled by the camp staff, who took in the situation at a glance. According to a reliable eyewitness, it took six of them to hold him down while they unwrapped the snake.

LAST WORDS

I’ve survived 70 years and change in the outdoors, across a good part of the world, and have come to several conclusions about death in the outdoors and the fear of it.

First, listen to the voice of your inner coward. If it says, *Hey, stupid, you could get killed doing this*, it’s because you could get killed doing this.

Second, don’t do dumb stuff. You don’t want people at your memorial service saying, “What could he have been thinking? He seemed smarter than that.”

Third, if you realize that you’ve screwed up big time, and that you’re now in mortal peril, give yourself a time-out. It’s the panic that follows a big mistake that puts you in the obituary column.

Finally, have your last words already picked out. Probably no one will hear them, but you may get a final Earthly dose of satisfaction by coming up with a fine valedictory.

“Mommy!” is from the heart but lacks originality, and she can’t help you now anyway.

“So far, so good,” is all right if you’ve just fallen and are still hurtling through space. Steve McQueen used it in a movie, but he won’t mind.

In my case, I’d like to be able to quote from Shakespeare, whom I’ve always admired greatly. In particular, Hamlet’s short speech at the end of the play, where he’s told the duel he’s about to fight is a setup and he has no chance to survive it. He’s finally quit whining, and what he says about his impending death shows both courage and acceptance of fate: “If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.”

In 425 years no one has done better, but it’s a little cumbersome if the ice on which you’re walking just gave way or you’re being eaten by a bear, so I’ll probably opt for the words of a small-plane pilot who crashed in New England a long time ago and whose last words were picked up by the control tower.

In a perfectly normal, conversational tone of voice he said: “Ahhhhh, shit.”

This seems to sum everything up perfectly. F&S

YVA MOMATIUK AND JOHN EASTCOTT/MINDEN PICTURES

NATURE CAN UNHINGE
YOU ALL BY HERSELF.
THE TOTAL QUIET, THE
VAST SPACES, AND THE
AWARENESS OF YOUR
OWN INSIGNIFICANCE
CAN RATTLE PEOPLE...

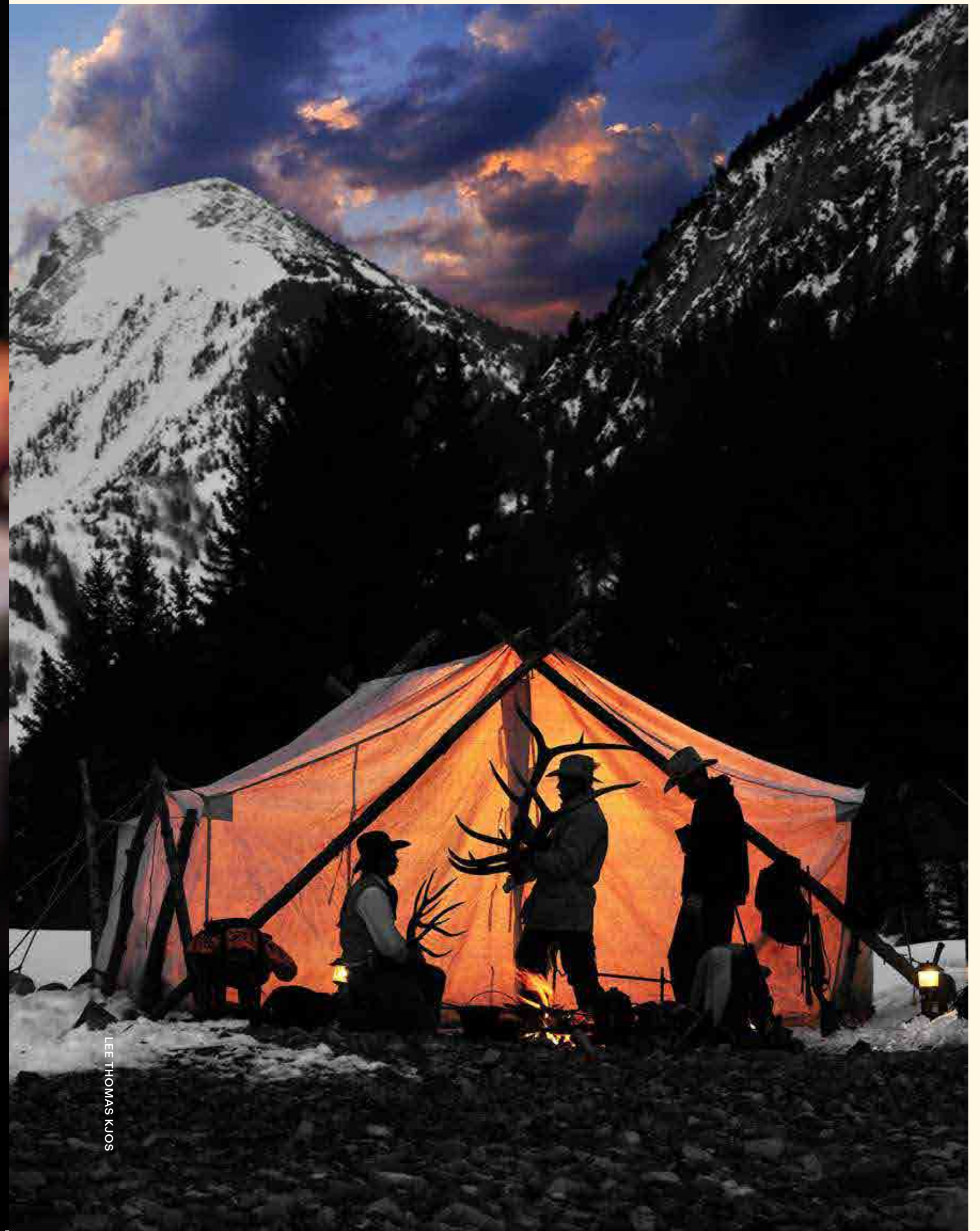
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CAMPFIRE

142 FISHING 144 SHOTGUNS 146 HUNTING 148 DOGS 150 CONSERVATION 152 THE SEASON 154 SHOOTING 156 WILD CHEF



by JOE CERMELE

THERE WAS A RHYTHM to the bite. At times it was as steady as a metronome. Cast a paddle-tail shad to the second bridge pylon, wait for it to hit bottom, give it two high hops as the outgoing tide swept it toward the blackened Atlantic, and on the third hop—*thump!* There were so many striped bass piled into New Jersey’s Shark River Inlet in the fall of 2001 that I almost failed American history. It was my only night class during the first semester of my freshman year at college, and though I didn’t want to waste my parents’ money, I also wasn’t about to waste the perfect night tides.

This was not long after the rebound of the striped bass, once so scarce they felt more mythological than real to me as a young kid. So after a few seasons of fumbling around the surf in my late high school years, picking up a fish here and

Rock of Ages

WHEN SLICK BOULDERS, BLOODY HANDS, AND STRIPERS IN POUNDING WAVES FELT LIKE HOME

↑
A surf caster makes his way off a jetty at Shark River Inlet as a massive wave breaks offshore. In fall, migrating stripers flood these waters.

For every night of glory, there were three of being soaked, freezing, or exhausted for one bite or nothing at all, yet a few diehard buddies and I just kept going back. Shark River felt like home.

there, I found Shark River jetty. And once I found it, I thought I would never leave. Twenty-five years later, a part of me is still there, though it might take a microscope to find traces of my blood and sweat in those granite boulders.

A SMASH IN THE DARK

The north jetty at Shark River is shaped like an L. One arm shoots straight east into the ocean and keeps the inlet from filling in with sand. A second arm juts north along the beach, bearing the brunt of incoming waves, stemming erosion so that, come summer, the “Bennys” (tourists from Bayonne, Elizabeth, Newark, and New York) have plenty of room to plop. On a calm, hot day in July, the elbow joining the two jetties creates a kiddie pool on the beach side for tots in swollen diapers to splash around in without having to hold mom or dad’s hand. In late October, the kiddie pool can become a cauldron of striper fury.

Shark River was incredible because it gave fish so many options in a confined area. Depending on the tide and wind direction, they might congregate at the eastern tip of the rocks. Or they might slide into the inlet for refuge during a hard northeast blow. The best, of course, was when they’d corral bait in the offshore pocket—the crook of the L. Pinned

against the wall, peanut bunker or sand eels had no escape. Sometimes you could hear the pops and slashes from the truck, and you’d slide into your foul-weather gear and strap on your rock cleats at a fever pace.

But then you had to make the call: Walk out on the elbow and risk your safety to get in prime casting position, or stay on the main arm and cast to them at a less perfect angle? Often, waves would be smashing the elbow so hard, or washing straight over it, that the danger was obvious. Other times you’d waffle—occasionally a real banger might hit, but you should be OK. I took the gamble many times until finally, while kneeling to grab a plug I had dropped, a massive wave exploded at the base of the rocks, the white water roared over my head, and I was clawing for anything I could grab as I got washed off the backside of the elbow into the churning kiddie pool. I sliced open my palms and chin on the barnacles and mangled my knee enough that I’d wear a brace for the next month. That was the worst punishment Shark River ever dished out to me, but not the only.

When you’re young and hungry, there’s so much you don’t care about. *Twenty degrees out tonight? We’re still going. Have to be in class at 8 a.m.? Screw it, we’re hitting the falling tide at 2 a.m. Wrong wind direction? Who cares, let’s go anyway.* I realize now it wasn’t a hunger for the fish that drove us as much as it was the rush we got from feeling dialed in and part of a secret society. It wasn’t uncommon for us to have the entire place to ourselves back then, and even if we did bump into another angler or two, there was little more than a nod between us—a quick recognition that just being here at this hour, sliding around on these snot-covered boulders, made us equals. For every night of glory, there were three of being soaked, freezing, or exhausted for one bite or nothing at all, yet a few diehard buddies and I just kept going back. Shark River felt like home. It felt like it was ours, but I learned the hard way I wasn’t even a renter, let alone a homeowner.

ALL THINGS MUST PASS

As a fledgling writer in my senior year of college, I made a rookie mistake. I wrote an article about Shark River for a local fishing magazine. After all, I was an expert, right? Wrong. In short order, I was

made very aware on popular surf-casting forums that I needed to keep my mouth shut about where I fished the surf and that I was a nobody—countless respected New Jersey surf casters had been fishing those rocks, figuring out those tides, and getting washed off that elbow for decades before I showed up. Though I don’t believe my piddly column in 2004 sent a flood of new anglers to Shark River, they’d show up eventually, which is part of the reason I left “home.”

Little by little I began spending more time fishing from boats with friends and less time on the rocks and sand. The problem with that is if you don’t use it, you lose it. This applies to many fisheries, but to surf stripers especially. If you’re not there regularly noting the patterns, you miss the changes. As my visits got less frequent, so did the number of fish I’d catch. If I was successful, it felt more like I’d been lucky than good.

It’s been more than a decade since I’ve walked onto the rocks at Shark River. Despite the conservation issues facing stripers now, there are still some to be caught there, though not like in the good old days. I can monitor the bite easily because it has become a favorite location of YouTube anglers with cameras strapped to their domes; what used to feel like a low-key spot seems crowded now almost every time I pass by on my way out of the inlet on one of my pal’s boats. Before sunup during peak season, there are a dozen or more anglers hurling plugs in every direction. In the evening, the after-work crowd is walking out for the night shift. During the day, those rocks are crawling with everything from tourists tangling lines in the bridge to the bucket brigade fishing for whatever wants to bite.

Each time I motor past, I give those rocks a little nod. I may not be a pioneering New Jersey surf caster—or even a “sharpie” for that matter—but although my time there feels like it was just the other day, it wasn’t. What I can say to those boulders is that I remember better times both for the fish and perhaps for my own far more carefree life. But that nod is also a thank-you. No matter the future of the fishery, or where or how I’m chasing stripers, Shark River put the fire for the species in me, and there’s not a wave seething out there in the darkness big enough to put it out. F&S



Band Behavior

GOOD HUNTERS CAN DO BAD THINGS JUST TO COLLECT A LITTLE JEWELRY FOR THEIR CALL LANYARDS. BUT THERE'S A SIMPLE SOLUTION

by PHIL BOURJAILY

AFTER THE BIRD stopped kicking in the dewy grass, it was bedraggled, sodden, and a little smelly, in the way of wet turkeys. Mark was thrilled with his first gobbler. I was thrilled for him, until I spotted the leg band gleaming above the set of serious spurs the bird had grown since its release. I insisted right then that Mark give it to me.

I had guided him. It was my farm. And being a serious turkey hunter, I told myself, I would appreciate the band more than a novice who might never hunt turkeys again would. Of course, the real reason I wanted the band was to wear it

on my lanyard and impress people. It took a week or so to grind him down. I knew I was being a jerk, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. That band, from a turkey I didn't kill, has hung on my crow-call lanyard for the last 35 years.

BIRD BLING

Bands can warp hunters into the worst versions of themselves. Waterfowl guides know how to discreetly shuck off bands with pliers or a quarter and pocket them as they pick up a client's downed birds in the spread. Several years ago, a well-known call maker was caught baiting geese with breadcrumbs in a local park and picking out the banded ones to shoot

with an air gun so he could add the bling to his lanyard. There's no need to break the law, though. You can buy your stolen waterfowling valor on eBay these days, where bands surprisingly bring only about \$40 a pop. For a few hundred bucks, anyone can look like an expert.

All these years after taking Mark's turkey band, I've collected a mere baker's dozen of waterfowl bands for my call lanyard, mostly from Canadas banded and



Having a lanyard full of bands is undeniably cool, but it's not worth losing your soul to get one.

LEE THOMAS KUOS

Anyone seeing those bands and mistaking me for some kind of waterfowl hunting authority changes their mind as soon as I pick up one of the calls around my neck and blow into it.



shot within 20 miles of my house. Anyone seeing those bands and mistaking me for some kind of waterfowl hunting authority changes their mind as soon as I pick up one of the calls around my neck and blow into it. In fact, I don't even wear the lanyard with the bands anymore. It hangs behind my desk as a keepsake. That the bands on it are relatively few is a blessing, because I can remember the story behind each one.

There's only one mallard band, which I collected while hunting with my friend M.D., who'd recently moved from duck-rich western Washington to my part of Iowa, which he considered an overcrowded, duckless wasteland. On a November afternoon, while we lay in sneak boats listening to a drumbeat of steady shooting on the far side of the lake, I kept lobbying to move, and M.D. finally relented. This required dragging the boats a long distance over dry land, and uphill. M.D. was experimenting with using a deer cart as a boat buggy, and the third or fourth time the boat fell off the cart, a season's worth of frustration boiled over. He picked up the 10-foot fiberglass sneak boat and threw it a surprising distance, as if the AquaPod toss were an Olympic event and he was the defending champion.

He calmed down, and after we loaded the boats in our trucks, we drove to the opposite side of the reservoir. Then we paddled across the river channel in a high northwest wind and set up in a good hole with a half hour of shooting light left. Within minutes, a lone greenhead dipped low over the spread, and I shot it. As M.D.'s Lab, Maggie, brought it back, I joked that it would be banded. To our surprise, it had been, four years earlier, in Saskatchewan. I was ecstatic. M.D. said, "That'd better not be the only damn duck we kill today." It was. M.D. is back in Washington now,

happily wallowing in waterfowl. I have the band to remind me of that day in 2004 when he threw his boat.

A lot of hunters hope to hit the jackpot with a neck collar or a reward band, but for years, the waterfowling trophy I wanted most was a band with a pellet dent in it. This is entirely because 11-year-old me saw the Western comedy *Support Your Local Sheriff*, in which the new sheriff (played by James Garner) is presented with a bullet-dented star.

"That must have saved the life of whoever was wearin' it," he says.

The mayor (Harry Morgan) replies, "Well, it sure would have if it hadn't been for all them other bullets flyin' in from everywhere."

My dented band (a BB fits into the divot perfectly) came to me on the last day of goose season in the year we all learned the term *polar vortex*, and my buddies and I ran around in the decoys between flights to stay warm. The cold had turned my semiauto into a single-shot. Fortunately, one shot was enough when the banded bird came in.

A couple of years later, again on the last day, I tripled on the only flock I saw that afternoon. The third goose hit the ground belly-up and feet kicking, so I could see the band from my blind even before I got out to pick it up. That put a perfect exclamation point on the season's end. For once, I did not feel one jot of withdrawal pangs, just a giddy buzz that got me all the way through the winter until it was time to start thinking about turkeys.

GIVE A RING

Last December, I joined some friends to hunt an ice hole late in the year. Five of us shot limits of mallards. I killed a bonus goose. It was a near-perfect day, except that we needed a better retrieval plan. At the hunt's end, three ducks lay on the ice

out of reach, and the water was too deep to wade into so we could break our way out to them. Chris, the youngest hunter in the blind by 25 years, told the rest of us to stay put and walked around to the far side of the 20-acre pond, where the landowner kept a fiberglass rowboat. Chris chipped a large block of ice out of the space between the stern and seat, but he couldn't get the ice chunk out of the bow, which made it even more impressive that he managed to drag the boat about 300 yards along the shore to a spot where he could launch in open water.

He paddled as close to the birds as he could, then worked his way across the frozen pond by jamming the oar handle straight down into the ice, pulling himself forward, then doing it again. I had done this once myself, years ago. It is not fun. Birds collected, Chris dragged himself back across the ice, paddled over to our blind, beached the boat, and sat down on the bank for a breather.

There were two hens and a drake in the bow, and I knew without a doubt that I'd shot the drake, since it came flying in alone and someone had said, "Hey, Phil, shoot that duck." I did, and the bird landed with a thump on the ice instead of the splash I was trying for. The drake was big and fully plumed, as late-season mallards are, and the band was tucked up high on his leg where I didn't see it at first. The band was also worn so smooth and shiny, it didn't register as a real leg band when I did notice it. (It's with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now, where the missing numbers will be recovered with acid). It was the band of a lifetime, a product of who knows how many trips up and down the flyway, and I said: "Hey, Chris! Look what you get to take home."

All I had done was stand up and shoot this duck when somebody told me to. Chris had put a lot of sweat and a little risk into paddling a tippy boat over a cold, deep pond. As I wound up to pitch the duck to him underhand, the only way out at that point was to pump fake the duck and yell, "Psych!" But I didn't know Chris well enough for that, nor did I want to do it, even if Evil Phil thought I should. Just before the duck left my hand, I wondered if I would feel a pang of regret. I didn't.

That night, I searched for Mark online until I found his work email—and wrote him a note asking if he'd like his turkey band back. F&S



by **WILL BRANTLEY**

EARLY LAST FALL, Michelle looked me in the eyes and said she didn’t want to hunt deer anymore. It wasn’t quite like hearing “I want a divorce,” but it was in the same vein, since quitting deer hunting would mean quitting the life we’ve known for our 27 years together. But a lot had changed. Larry, Michelle’s dad, passed away in November 2022. Mary, her mom, died last August. Cancer took them both.

You assume that when your parents go, you’ll have time to grieve. But nobody sets that aside for you, especially when you’re the executor of their estate. Michelle found herself with funeral homes and lawyers to pay, accounts to close, and an empty home to maintain. And all of it seemed to be just noise around one lingering fact: Mary and Larry were gone.

LARRY’S LEGACY
Michelle killed her first deer while sitting with me when she was 18 years old. But Larry was her hero, in deer hunt-

RETURN OF RIZZLER

THE REAPPEARANCE OF AN OLD RIVERBOTTOM BUCK CLOSES ONE CHAPTER OF A DEER HUNTER’S LIFE—AND OPENS ANOTHER

ing and everything else. A stern judge of character, he stood almost 6-foot-5 and was bereft of bullshit. But he was also kind to those he liked. From the start, he seemed to like me.

When Michelle and I were teenagers, I’d show up during deer season beaming over another young 8-point in the bed of my truck. Larry would listen to my stories and offer praise but always with the unspoken recognition that he didn’t shoot bucks like that. Larry was after the real trophies, the kind of deer you’d almost swear didn’t exist, except that he had shoulder mounts of four of them on his wall. The biggest was a 170-inch main-frame 8-pointer with a kicker on its G2, a deer that Larry always said was “an old riverbottom buck.”

The two years after Larry’s passing were especially difficult for Mary, his wife

↑
A 160-class whitetail buck peers through the trees on a sunny and cold early-November morning.

LANCE KRUEGER

Rizzler had been a ghost since the previous December—but then suddenly there he was, in a photo from September, in full velvet at midnight. He’d grown, too, from a big deer into a world-class one, a 10-pointer I guessed would score 180.



of 53 years. She was the town librarian, the bubbly sort who offset Larry’s stoicism, who sewed quilts and baked cakes and raised chickens and sold farm eggs for \$1 a dozen. But during those years, Mary barely left the house. She was too tired and too heartbroken. Michelle visited regularly and called every day. Sometimes Mary would answer the phone, but often she wouldn’t. We found out Mary had cancer, and she died three days later.

Michelle told me that perhaps she’d still go turkey hunting next spring, which could be enjoyed with company. In a deer stand, she was alone with her thoughts. Sometimes, she said, she’d just sit and cry, oblivious to any deer that might walk past.

About this same time, Michelle brought home two of Larry’s prized shoulder mounts, including the massive 8-pointer with the split G2. That mount was the only thing Michelle asked for specifically when she and her brothers and sister were divvying up personal effects from the house. She hung it near our fireplace, dusted it off, and said, “From the time I was a little girl, a deer like that has been my dream.”

“You’re never going to see one like that if you quit deer hunting,” I said.

RIZZLER OR BUST
Two falls ago, I hunted all season for a buck that haunted me, a tall and gorgeous typical 10-pointer that my son nicknamed Rizzler. I saw Rizzler three times from the stand that season, got a hundred pictures of him, and drew my bow on him once. But I never got a shot. I ate tag soup for the first time since I was 11 years old. I wrote about it in this column.

Only days after Michelle brought home her dad’s mount, I sat down to look

through the pictures on some SD cards I’d pulled from our farm’s trail cams. Rizzler had been a ghost since the previous December—but then suddenly there he was, in a photo from September, in full velvet at midnight, living right where I’d left him. He’d grown, too, from a big deer into a world-class one, a 10-pointer I guessed would score 180—and with a frame that eerily matched that of Larry’s riverbottom buck. I called Michelle at work and told her to check her email.

A few evenings later, I was in the yard shooting my bow, and Michelle stepped outside with her own Mathews in hand. She looked me in the eyes and said, “It’s Rizzler or bust. I better practice a bit.” I smiled and promised to stay out of her way.

That weekend, Michelle went hunting and, for the first time in a while, came home with a smile on her face. She’s a school counselor with a rigid schedule, but she chased Rizzler throughout her fall break, adjusting stands and moving trail cameras and hauling corn. Once school was back in session, she took her personal days for rifle season, making the 1½-hour drive to the farm before daybreak and not moving from her stand until after dark. Our farm has no cell service, and so day after day, Michelle read novels and sipped coffee and watched for deer. Bucks came and went—8-pointers and 10-pointers, the sort of deer you’d normally be thrilled to shoot—but Michelle held off.

Rizzler remained a ghost, the sort of deer you’d swear didn’t exist. November passed without so much as a picture of him. Finally, on December 5, just before sunrise, Rizzler appeared on the camera, eating shelled corn 40 yards from Michelle’s box blind. He posed for more than a dozen photos, revealing a single

broken brow time but otherwise looking as big as ever.

Michelle took another vacation day—her last one for the year—and drove to her stand well before daybreak the next morning for her 27th sit of the season, chasing a deer she’d never seen. She sat until almost dark and then, with five minutes of legal light left, a shot rang out, a muzzleloader, from across the creek on the neighbor’s property. Michelle’s gut told her that Rizzler had just been killed.

With Christmas looming, she decided to sit one last time for the season. Just before dark, Michelle listened as a deer walked through the dry poplar timber behind her stand. A buck appeared—a heavy 8-pointer, a riverbottom buck, a trophy by any measure that would’ve been one of Michelle’s best whitetails to date. She watched through her scope as the buck walked past at 10 yards, broadside and oblivious. Michelle smiled and held fire. She’d gone an entire season and hadn’t pulled the trigger. We ran our cameras till the first of February but never saw Rizzler again.

NEW HOPE
Early last spring, just before turkey season and my favorite time of year, I was headed to the bottoms on my tractor to work up a new food plot when my neighbor stopped me on the road. “You guys kill any good deer down there this past fall?” he asked.

“We didn’t,” I said. “Chased a big one all season that we never saw on the hoof.”

“By God, one crossed the road in front of me back in the winter that would cross your eyes to see him,” he said. “It was January 5, and he was coming up out of the riverbottom. Giant 10-pointer. I’ll bet he’d go 180.”

“Just hold on a minute, would you?” I said. I shut off my tractor and began scrolling through the photos on my phone until I landed on the trail camera pictures from the previous December. “Is that him?” I asked.

My neighbor held my phone and nodded. “I’m going to say that it is. Biggest one I’ve seen in a long time.”

I started my tractor and smiled all the way down the hill, thinking about hunting deer with my wife next season, and knowing that once I had service, I’d get to call Michelle with the news.

Rizzler lives. **F&S**



SMELL THAT?

WHY THE NOSE ON A GOOD HUNTING DOG IS NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE

by TOM DAVIS		
MY FRIEND RON’S Uncle Jack was a pheasant hunter’s pheasant hunter. A cigar-chomping son of the prairies, he knew every birdy farm within striking distance of the country town where he lived. He shot a 16-gauge—the hallmark of an expert then—and his pointer, Bessie, was the kind of dog that made other dogs look common. Like a lot of bird dogs in those days, she rode in the trunk. “Whenever Jack opened the trunk of his car,” Ron told me, “Bessie would come running at breakneck speed	and jump in. To her, an open trunk meant, ‘We’re going hunting!’” And while the catalog of Bessie’s exploits is long, one feat stands head and shoulders above the rest: Uncle Jack made a long shot on a wild-flushing rooster that fell on the far side of a barbed-wire fence, and Bessie, to whom fences were mere inconveniences, jumped across to retrieve it. Then, with the bird in her mouth, she leaped back over the fence, <i>only to torque in midair and land on point.</i> “I couldn’t believe my eyes,” Ron says, an unmistakable note of awe in his voice. Even with a dead bird in her mouth—and	let’s stipulate here and now that no bird smells “louder” to a dog than a rooster pheasant—and while flying through the air, Bessie was able to detect the scent of a live bird and, at the same time, determine that this bird was close enough to warrant being pointed. Witnessing that made a deep impression on Ron, who was a teenager at the time, and gave him
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		Cooper, a pudelpointer, returns with a pheasant on an upland hunt in Western Montana.

JOHN HAFNER

If you unfolded the dog’s nasal membranes, they’d be roughly the size of a handkerchief. Ours? A postage stamp.



a lifelong appreciation for what a dog’s nose is capable of.

I had a similar youthful epiphany that, while perhaps less dramatic, made no less deep an impression. My dad knew some Brittany guys who specialized in chasing late-season quail in the Loess Hills of western Iowa, and one bright, cold January day he persuaded them to take me along.

An hour or so into the hunt, we marked down several singles in a grassy draw flanked by cut corn. One of the Brittanys snapped onto point, the other honored, and someone called, “Go ahead and kick up the bird, Tom.” When I eased in front of the intense little dogs, though, I saw that the shallow draw had been covered with snow. A few stems of grass poked out here and there, but by all appearances the dogs were pointing at snow. I was about to say something to that effect when there was an eruption at my feet...and a brownish projectile that I identified with some difficulty as a bobwhite quail whirred away through a halo of snow-glitter.

What the hell?

Those might not have been the exact words that flashed across my mind, but you get the idea. And that wasn’t the only bird that flushed from beneath the snow in that draw. If it was unbelievable to me that quail would do that, it was even more unbelievable to me that dogs could smell, and point, quail that did that.

It struck me as something like a miracle.

SUPER SCHNOZZES

Half a century and change later, it still seems miraculous. Actually, let me walk that back a bit: After witnessing literally thousands of points, flushes, and/or retrieves in the years that have passed

since those quail blew up out of the Iowa snow—and being continually amazed, often rendered speechless, and occasionally left bewildered by what I’ve seen—I’ve become convinced that the nose of a hunting dog is more than a miracle. It’s one of the wonders of the world.

Where we get into trouble when we try to wrap our heads around the mind-boggling power of the dog’s nose is when we try to think of it in relation to *our* puny sense of smell. A better comparison is to our sense of sight, which is why some say that dogs see with their noses. For people, sight is the primary means of apprehending and making sense of the world around us; for dogs, smell serves that purpose. What their nose reveals to them is unimaginable to us. As the great outdoor writer Charley Waterman observed, “No human can realize the impact of strong quail scent upon a pointer’s nostrils or mallard scent on a Labrador’s.”

In this same vein, I don’t think it’s at all far-fetched to assume that when dogs dream—which we know they do—scent is the stuff their dreams are made of. When you consider all the specialized equipment that comprises the canine olfactory mechanism, it could hardly be otherwise. For starters, the average Lab-size dog has around 200 million to 220 million scent receptors stuffed inside his snout—a human has around 5 million—and if you unfolded the dog’s nasal membranes, they’d be roughly the size of a handkerchief. Ours? A postage stamp.

Dogs also have a specialized scenting apparatus on the roof of their mouth, called the Jacobson’s organ, that enables them to taste what they smell.

Their olfactory bulbs—translator stations between the nose and the brain—are four times the size of ours, and it’s estimated that around 10 percent of a dog’s brain is devoted to processing olfactory information. In a human, the percentage is something like 0.01 percent.

Finally, when a dog exhales, the slits on the outside of his nose opens to direct the old, already-sniffed air away from the new, unsniffed air being inhaled through the main nostrils, ensuring an uncorrupted data stream. How cool is that? Shockingly, this was discovered only in the late-1990s, when the military, hoping to develop an artificial nose for explosives detection, studied the canine breathing process with high-speed photography.

The project was abandoned when it was determined that no device created in a laboratory could remotely approach the sensitivity of the real thing.

Hell, any bird-dog person worthy of his whistle could have told them that.

SIXTH SCENT

While it goes without saying that a gun dog needs a good nose to be proficient at his job, the noses of most well-bred dogs are more than up to the task. It’s a classic bell curve distribution, with the great majority falling in the middle and relatively few at the low and high ends. Dogs with poor noses will reveal themselves over time. If they’re members of the pointing-dog tribe, for example, they’ll bust birds without appearing to smell them at all, crowd birds they do smell into flushing before they can point them, and, when they do point them, end up standing right on top of them—not a recipe for success. Dogs with less-than-stellar noses also have trouble discriminating between game birds and non-game species and, as a result, tend to waste time pointing a lot of stuff they shouldn’t (although even the best dogs can be fooled on occasion).

And what of dogs with truly superior noses? Well, it’s only one part of the bird-finding equation. By itself, it’s not enough; it must be alloyed with tenacity, intensity, focus, and desire. These are the qualities that boil down to the thing that ultimately accounts for the success of athletes like Michael Jordan and Tom Brady: They simply want it more.

There are countless variables that affect scenting ability. A dog that runs cool and breathes easily has a distinct advantage over a dog that runs hot and breathes heavily. Most experienced dog people agree that the best scenting conditions occur on days when the barometric pressure is high (read: sunny or partly cloudy), the temperature is in the 30s or 40s, there’s frost or dew on vegetation at first light, and there’s a steady light breeze—just enough to move the scent around. If you think of game-bird scent as a vaporous emanation that reacts to environmental conditions the same way smoke does, you’re on the right track.

The thing is, it’s on those far more frequent days, when the conditions aren’t ideal, that the bird-dog cream rises to the top—and you count your blessings if you have a dog like Bessie. F&S



THE FIX IS IN

A PROPOSED OVERHAUL OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE MAY LOOK LIKE A SOLUTION TO GOVERNMENT WASTE. IN FACT, IT'S THE NEXT PHASE IN A SCHEME TO PRIVATIZE OUR PUBLIC LANDS

by HAL HERRING

OUR CREW WAS harvesting ponderosa pine cones on a contract with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in the Ekalaka Hills of southeastern Montana. These were hot, brilliant September days of incandescent sunlight, elk bugling in the cool early mornings, and wild turkeys ambling beneath us as we worked high in the trees. The seeds inside the cones would go to USFS nurseries to make new trees, ones with drought-tolerant genes for

planting on lands scorched by wildfire or where timber had been harvested.

We loved our work. The sun bore down on us, sweat leaving white starbursts of salt on hats and shirts. The wind cooled us. We were strong and fit, living outside, and making fair money doing work we believed in. All of us were hunters, anglers, mountaineers, citizens of the Rocky Mountains, and we understood that healthy forests were at the foundation of everything we cherished.

The black Cadillac Escalade eased off the gravel USFS road and came up the slope to where we were working in the trees. It was against the rules to drive offroad here unless you were a leaseholding cattleman. The Escalade was no cattleman's rig. The driver's side window came smoothly down. It was a man of late middle age, jowled and displeased. "Hey!" he yelled. "How are you guys wasting my tax money today?"

That was almost 20 years ago, and today the same sentiment seems to be what's behind a so-called sweeping reorganization of the USFS proposed recently by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To

anyone thinking, *Good* or *It's about time*, be careful what you wish for.

PLANNED DESTRUCTION

The USFS manages 193 million public acres on 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands, where more than 160 million Americans visit each year. For decades, I've heard a familiar refrain from people in the rural West who say the Forest Service—they often call it the "Forest Circus"—is a bloated agency wasting taxpayer dollars. It's little surprise then that some, from all parts of the political spectrum, seem to be welcoming the proposed overhaul. But if it goes through—and it will if we don't stop it—the result will be a classic case of the dog catching the car. A painful lesson of answered prayers causing more tears than unanswered ones.

The new plan for the USFS seems to be the brainchild of its chief, former



A pair of anglers ply the Ruby River for trout in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

timber industry executive Tom Schultz (the first USFS chief in history to have never worked at the agency) and his boss, Michael Boren, the undersecretary of agriculture for natural resources and environment. Undersecretary Boren is the cofounder of a Boise-based financial technology firm valued at \$5.5 billion. His recent experience with the USFS consists of clashes with the agency over an airstrip he had built on his ranch on an inholding within the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, an unpermitted cabin he built on one of his mining claims in the Sawtooth National Forest, and claims that he harassed a USFS trail crew with his helicopter and diverted a thermal spring onto his property.

Let's take a point-by-point look at the five main tenets of the administration's reorganization plan.

[1] The proposal would replace the current nine regional USFS offices with 15 "operational service centers" based in individual states and headed by political appointees. The original model of regional offices was specifically created, in 1907, to keep national forest management from being influenced by state-level politics. This move opens the door to offices led by loyalists appointed by state politicians, many of whom support the transfer of public lands to the states and/or the outright privatization of the national forests.

[2] The plan also calls for 57 of the current 77 USFS research centers in 31 states to be closed or evaluated for closure. The Department of Agriculture (the parent agency of the USFS) has stated that the USFS's crucial research will continue and be centralized in a facility in Fort Collins, Colorado, but the proposed budget for the agency calls for completely zeroing out the \$308,697,000 research budget. It's hard to conduct research with no money.

[3] The national headquarters of the USFS will be moved from Washington, D.C., to Salt Lake City, which just so happens to be the epicenter of the current anti-public-lands movement.

[4] The USFS workforce will be cut from 30,000 employees to around 12,000, and the proposed 2027 budget for the agency calls for employee salaries to be cut by 44 percent. The average annual salary for career USFS workers is less than \$65,000, which means no small number of full-time workers would be asked to live on less than \$37,000 per year.

[5] Finally, a new U.S. Wildfire Service will operate *not* under the USFS, which is renowned as the leading wildland firefighting agency in the world, but under the Department of the Interior. The USFS's \$2.4 billion wildland firefighting and fire mitigation budget is to be eliminated. It is not clear yet what will happen to that money.

Bill Avey, who spent 42 years at the USFS and is now the chair of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees, tells me that its members have been looking at this new plan very closely. "We don't understand why anyone would remove wildland firefighting from the agency, and moving the chief out of D.C. is just bass-ackwards. The chief needs good relationships with Congress." As for the closing of research facilities, Avey says he did not oppose it at first. "Consolidating some of these facilities could increase efficiency. But then we looked at the budgets and the plan. It's not consolidation. It's an abolishment of the research program. When you look at the totality—zeroing out the R&D, cutting salaries, reducing employment, slashing budgets, removing fire—you have to ask yourself, *What is the plan here?*"

SAME OLD SCAM

I will say what many professionals still hoping to work with this administration will not: The plan is to dismantle the USFS to facilitate the transfer of national forest lands to the states in preparation for their eventual sale to private interests.

This became obvious back in 2025 when the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) fired 5,700 USFS employees, and when President Trump issued a series of executive orders to ramp up logging and mining operations on national forest lands. Many USFS employees were rehired, but the damage was done: Wildfire work declined by between 35 percent and 44 percent during 2025. Trail work was down 22 percent. A report issued by the agency in December 2025 listed the challenges created by the DOGE cuts, including: "Districts lost up to 100% of trail staff. ... Hundreds of years of trail expertise lost. ... Widespread burnout and declining morale. ... Stalled and unfunded contracts...."

With the agency sufficiently weakened, this proposal is meant to be the killing blow. I began this column with my

With the agency sufficiently weakened, this proposal is meant to be the killing blow.

experience in the Ekalaka Hills because that encounter with the jowly man in the Escalade was one of many similar experiences. There's no shortage of fat cats who will howl about government waste so they can cash in.

Of course, the USFS is imperfect, as is every human endeavor. But consider where we would be without it. Had it not been established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 to battle overgrazing and uncontrolled logging, the world-class hunting and fishing in our national forests and grasslands today simply would not exist—and certainly would not be open to every American. That's nearly 200 million acres of some of the most beautiful public lands on earth, where we work and hunt and camp, fish, hike, and enjoy a freedom of access to wild nature unmatched on this planet.

And where will we be if this proposal is successful? Much farther down the road in the cynical political maneuver known as *defund and decry*—as in, cut the funding that enables the work, then point to the work that isn't done to smear the agency, furthering the case for transferring ownership to the states—and then to the fat cats. As Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the Forest Service, was quoted by historian Timothy Egan in his book *The Big Burn*, "The Forest Service stood up for the honest small man and fought the predatory big man as no government had done before."

Most of us who use and love our national forests (as 72 percent of big-game hunters in Western states do) understand that the USFS is in the crosshairs of this administration, not for reorganization but for annihilation. But we can stop it, as we've stopped similar thefts. The 2026 Consolidated Appropriations Bill, passed in an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote, contains language that can prohibit the forced relocation of federal employees and make it impossible for this plan to be shoved through. All our senators have to do is obey the very law that they themselves almost certainly voted to pass. And all we have to do is to remind them of their duty. Over and over again. F&S



SITTIN’ IN THE RAIN

THE THREAT OF GETTING SOAKED SHOULDN’T KEEP YOU OUT OF THE DEER STAND. ALL IT TAKES TO MAKE IT WORK IS AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

by T. EDWARD NICKENS

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A thick-racked white-tail shakes off a fresh coat of rain.

LANCE KRUEGER

IN A TREE STAND, you can smell the rain coming. It’s not your imagination. High-altitude lightning splits nitrogen and oxygen molecules into separate atoms, and a by-product of this atomic jiujitsu are molecules comprised of three atoms of oxygen, aka ozone. That’s the sharp nasal edge in the air as a storm rolls in.

Twelve feet high in a hickory tree, I smell the rain coming and I have to decide: Pull out the rain gear now or take my chances. Of course, I wait for the first drops. That way, I’m halfway soaked by the time I can get the jacket out of the pack and pull it on. Wet on the inside and the outside. Nice.

You would think I’d learn, because I love deer hunting in the rain. Sort of. I actually dread the *thought* of deer hunting in the rain because it sounds so uncomfortable. Afterward, you have to dry your gear and fret about rusted barrels, and if you do kill a deer in the rain, wrestling with a sopping-wet carcass is not the most fun you can have. But then the rain does come, and I quit playing the “is it gonna rain or is it gonna pass?” mind game. With bibs and a jacket on, I sit in the tree stand and think: *This is pretty awesome.*

ONE WITH THE RAIN

Now the rain is thrumming on my hat brim, and I tuck the riflescope under the hem of my jacket. You can’t hear much in steady rain, so you have to watch even more carefully. And critically. Leaves drip; branches dance. Movement is everywhere. It keeps me on my toes.

When an errant runnel of rain finds

its way inside my jacket and drips down the small of my back, the thought of a warm truck and a hot biscuit is tempting. But I remind myself that the two largest whitetail bucks I’ve ever taken were shot in rainy weather. One I took while the rain was still falling. The old boy parted a line of cattails and swamp scrub not 15 feet from my tree, and not 15 seconds after I’d decided that two hours in the rain were enough for the day. I’m glad I stayed put.

The other deer appeared as a steady downpour was going slack. I watched the buck, an old soldier, plod slowly across a fallow field—the broom sedge and dog fennel drooping over in the rain. Through binoculars, the world looked sodden and heavy, the buck’s hide matted and dripping, and he was slouching in the rain, as unhappy as Eeyore. The next moment, the sun burst through the clouds, and there were Jacob’s ladders of light in the sky and bursts of solar flare in the scope. The scene through the glass was so clean and glistening that it was a moment I knew I’d never forget. When the buck fell, it was also a moment I knew I’d forever rub in the faces of my pals who’d bolted early when they realized that rain was coming.

To shoot a deer when the rain stops requires a critical element: You must be there while the rain is falling.

GO WITH THE FLOW

In the stand, water drains from my hat brim in a steady cascade and pools under my thighs where they squish a seat cushion flat. I’d rather sit in a ladder stand or climber than a box blind or pop-up, but

the trade-off is a lack of protection from the elements. Hunting in the rain like this is a head game. Soon, everything is drenched.

On the plus side, I’m in good company. There’s an old white oak 10 feet away, and I’ve been watching a squirrel peer out from a dark hole in the trunk for the last 15 minutes. All I can make out are the glints of its eyes. In another tree, a brown-headed nuthatch has found shelter under a branch, and it can’t make up its mind whether it’s more comfortable hunkering down in the fissured bark right side up or upside down. I let out a laugh as the tiny bird shudders in the rain like a Lab shaking its coat dry.

And that’s when it occurs to me why I like to hunt in such conditions. It’s the difference between hunting in the rain, and hunting *with* the rain.

It’s more than semantics. Sitting *in* the rain seems adversarial: You’re toughing it out, grinding through it, making it to the other side. It’s you against the rain. Let’s see who can last longer.

But sitting *with* the rain makes you part and parcel of the elements. In that frame of mind, I feel a kinship with the squirrel and nuthatch and deer, fellow strugglers and strivers in whatever nature dishes out. A morning sit in a downpour is not exactly a marathon, but killing an animal shouldn’t be easy-peasy. A little discomfort helps me keep that in mind.

We’re all in this together, I think, *sitting with the rain*. The distinction makes me smile.

Or perhaps it’s a shiver. Either way, I sit with the rain a while longer. *F&S*





SAY HELLO TO YOUR NEW RIFLE

THE BIG-GAME RIFLE OF THE FUTURE IS ALMOST HERE—AND IT’S A LONG WAY FROM YOUR FATHER’S DEER GUN

by **RICHARD MANN**
photograph by **SABASTIAN “BAT” MANN**

WHEN I WAS 12 years old, my cousin bought a Remington 700 in 7mm Remington Magnum. I desperately wanted a gun of my own, but my dad couldn’t afford one, so I started delivering newspapers on my bicycle. During the two years it took me to save the money, I

pored over ballistics charts and decided that the 264 Winchester Magnum was the answer to all my problems. Trouble was, everyone else apparently thought the same, because I couldn’t find one anywhere and settled for a walnut-stocked Remington 700 in 270 Winchester. All the old-timers we hunted with carried lever guns or semiautos. My cousin and I became the talk of deer camp be-

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One thing is clear about tomorrow’s hunting rifles: They’ll be shaped primarily by the surging popularity of suppressors.

The evolution of the hunting rifle has historically been very slow. But it could soon hit warp speed, because three things are combining to create what looks like a perfect storm of innovation.

cause with our bolt actions we could shoot farther and more accurately than everyone else. This was in the 1970s, when the magnum, wood-stocked bolt gun became the epitome of the modern hunting rifle. Fast-forward three and a half decades, to when my son wanted his first hunting rifle. Considering that in that time we went from a bulky telephone wired to the wall of your house to a slim computerized one that fits in your pocket, you’d think his dream gun would be wildly different from mine. Hardly. The new-millennium hunting rifle my son wanted had a synthetic stock and corrosion-resistant coatings, but it was still a bolt action, and it was chambered for the 6.5 Creedmoor—a fast-twist, higher BC version of the 264 Win. Mag. that I lusted after. I say all this to point out that the evolution of the hunting rifle has historically been very slow. But it could soon hit warp speed, because three things are combining to create what looks like a perfect storm of innovation, poised to shake up rifle-making and rearrange our ideas of what a modern hunting rifle should be.

QUIET REVOLUTION
The first and most important force rattling rifle-making’s windows is the exploding popularity of suppressors. This started in earnest 15 years ago with the introduction of the 300 AAC Blackout rifle cartridge. Prior to that, suppressors were a rarity. But the success of the Blackout exposed droves of shooters to the tremendous advantages of noise reduction. Once folks learned that a subsonic cartridge and/or suppressor could save their hearing, spook less game, and reduce recoil—and therefore help them shoot better—just about everyone wanted in. Because subsonic cartridges have obvious power lim-

itations, most big-game hunters have now turned their attention to suppressors, and the industry has responded. Every day, the suppressor becomes increasingly mainstream among hunters. The second game changer is Federal’s 7mm Backcountry and what it promises for the future of hunting ammo. You could say this trend started with all the Creedmoor and PRC cartridges that introduced fast twist rates and high ballistic coefficients, but the 7mm Backcountry pioneered something more important: It uses a cartridge case made of the company’s proprietary Peak steel alloy instead of brass. This allows the Backcountry to withstand pressures 30 percent higher than the magnums of yesteryear. What’s more, the cartridge uses faster-burning powders that don’t need magnum-length barrels (typically 24 inches) to deliver magnum velocities. This makes the 7mm Backcountry the most suppressor-friendly high-performance rifle cartridge ever made. And the brand-new and similar 6.5 Creedmoor +Peak load from Federal is just the next step in the evolution of rifle cartridges. The third and final key to all of this is 2025’s One Big Beautiful Bill, which eliminated the \$200 federal tax on suppressors, effectively reducing their price by 25 percent or more. Suppressor sales were already on the rise, but this legislation sent them into orbit. And that’s not all it did. The bill also eliminated the \$200 tax on short-barreled rifles (SBRs). An SBR is a rifle with a barrel that measures less than 16 inches. This is important to the potential tornado that’s brewing because along with all the good things associated with suppressors, they do add length and weight to your rifle. But now you can get one with a very short and very suppressor-

friendly barrel without paying a \$200 tax on the suppressor or the gun. **AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE**
Put it all together—the popularity of suppressors, the steel-alloy case technology of the 7mm Backcountry, the new legislation—and we may soon find ourselves, or our kids, hunting with a suppressed bolt-action rifle that weighs less than a six-pack, measures less than a yard long, and is capable of delivering magnum ballistics from a steel-alloy-cased rifle cartridge no larger than the 308 Winchester. This would be the most notable advancement in the hunting rifle since we traded in our Kentucky rifles for lever actions. Of course, there’s a catch. The One Big Beautiful Bill did not eliminate the NFA requirements for suppressors and SBRs. You must still complete the same application process and wait for ATF approval for both. However, there are lawsuits in play that challenge this requirement, arguing that if there is no tax, an application should not be required. If the courts rule in favor these challenges, it’s all but guaranteed that the hunting rifle will evolve overnight. It will be lighter, more compact, and plenty powerful, and it will likely either come with a suppressor or have an integrally suppressed barrel. Trust me, rifles like these are already on drawing boards. We are on the brink of seeing the hunting rifle of the future. The perfect storm that will bring it about, however, is subject to legal and political winds. So it may take months or it may take years. But it’s coming. It’s probably not too early for today’s teenagers longing for their first hunting rifle to dream of something radically different from what their fathers and grandfathers hunted with. F&S



CAMPFIRE | Wild Chef

Wild Game Cassoulet

THIS DISH IS A TRUE LABOR OF LOVE. BUT TRUST US—WHEN YOU SERVE IT TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY AT HUNTING CAMP, THEY’RE SURE TO LOVE YOU EVEN MORE

CAMPFIRE | Wild Chef

by JONATHAN MILES
photographs by CHRISTOPHER TESTANI
styling by ROSCOE BETSILL

WE UNDERSTAND WHY SO many cooks are intimidated by cassoulet. The exalted French dish’s reputation as a multi-day, multistage, multi-meat cooking process is notorious—the French novelist Anatole France once wrote about a tavern where a single pot of cassoulet had been in the works for 20 years—and, adding to the sweat, the “correct” way to make the dish has been a source of bickering and brawling for centuries. But squint past all the hoopla and doctrine, and a truth emerges: Cassoulet, at its heart, is just a lofty pot of pork ’n’ beans. Thinking about it this way opens up the recipe to all sorts of improvisations, such as this wild-game version, in which venison, duck, rabbit and/or squirrel, sausage, and pork bubble in a lavish stew of beans. It’s the perfect vehicle for using up any stray bits in the deep freezer: that single squirrel, those two goose legs, that chunk of venison you neglected to label properly. The vat of beans welcomes all of it, transforming it into something lush and hearty that’s both rustic enough for camp and elegant enough for a candlelit dinner.

Cassoulet, at its heart, is just a lofty pot of pork ’n’ beans.

INGREDIENTS

1½ lb.

dried flageolet beans (or great northern, cannellini, or other white beans)

1 lb.

pork belly

4

duck legs

¼ tsp.

ground cloves

¼ tsp.

ginger

¼ tsp.

ground cardamom

¼ tsp.

coriander

¼ tsp.

smoked paprika

½ tsp.

ground nutmeg

1 bunch

parsley, stems only (reserve the leaves for another use)

2

bay leaves

3

large yellow onions

2

whole cloves

10

cloves garlic, peeled

6 Tbsp.

duck fat, divided (or more, as needed)

1

whole rabbit or 3 squirrels, cleaned

2 tsp.

dried thyme

½ cup

game or chicken stock

1 lb.

garlic sausage (or any other sausage, like bratwurst, kielbasa, etc.)

1 lb.

venison shoulder, roughly chopped

1

cup fresh breadcrumbs, from good-quality bread

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

DIRECTIONS ➞

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DIRECTIONS

Serves 8

1 One day before cooking, put the beans in a large pot of cold water to soak overnight. That same day, cure the pork belly and duck legs: Slice the pork into five or six streaky pieces, like extra-thick bacon, then place in a small saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for about 5 minutes. Let cool, then drain and rinse the slices and pat dry with paper towels.

2 Combine the cloves, ginger, cardamom, coriander, smoked paprika, and nutmeg with a tablespoon of pepper and 2 tablespoons of salt, whisking with a fork until blended. Place the pork belly and the duck legs in a deep, oven-safe casserole dish and season with the spice mix, rubbing it in vigorously. Refrigerate, uncovered, overnight.

3 The next day, drain and rinse the beans and return them to the pot. Add cold water to cover the beans by about 2 inches. Use kitchen twine to tie the parsley stems into a secure bundle and add to the pot along with the bay leaves. Halve one of the onions and remove the papery skin while keeping the root end intact. Press the whole cloves into the onion and add to the pot along with two teaspoons of salt. Transfer two of the cured pork belly slices to the pot as well and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer, skimming any froth that gathers at the top, and cook for 60 to 90 minutes, or until just tender. Let cool. Remove and discard the parsley and cloves; remove and reserve the pork belly slices and onion for later. Drain the cooking liquid into a container and reserve.

4 Tuck the garlic cloves between the duck legs and unused pork belly. If using wild duck legs, add a few dollops of duck fat to the casserole dish. (For farmed duck legs, there's no need to add fat). Place the dish into a cold oven, then set it to 300 degrees. Cook for 2 hours. Raise the oven temperature to 400 degrees and continue cooking for another 15 minutes. Remove and let cool. Transfer the duck, pork belly, and garlic to a container, leaving the fat.

5 Generously season the rabbit and/or squirrels with salt and pepper and the thyme. Place in the casserole dish, adding more duck fat if needed so that it covers the bottom of the dish. Add the stock, cover, and place in the 400-degree oven for 15 minutes. Remove the cover and continue cooking for another 15 to 25 minutes, or until done. Remove and let cool.

6 If using precooked sausages, roughly chop; leave fresh sausages whole. Heat a large Dutch oven on medium-high heat. Add about 3 Tbsp. duck fat (steal it from the cooling casserole if you have enough). Add the sausages and sauté for about 4 minutes for chopped precooked, or until golden and firm for whole (they need not be fully cooked). Remove with a slotted spoon and reserve. Add the venison to the pot, replenishing with duck fat as needed, and sear for about 3 minutes, until browned and sizzling.

Use a slotted spoon to add the venison to the cooling sausages. Peel and slice the remaining onions, including the half left over from the beans, and add to the pot. Toss in the pork belly from the beans, roughly chopped. Reduce heat to medium and cook, stirring, until the onions are golden and limp, about 10 minutes.

7 Set oven to 350 degrees. Add the beans to the onions along with the reserved venison and sausage. (If using whole sausages, chop them into bite-size pieces first.) Remove the meat from the rabbit or squirrels, in big or small pieces, and add to the pot. Add the reserved garlic and pork belly and then add just enough of the bean cooking liquid to make a soupy mixture, gently folding everything together. (Add stock or water if you need more liquid.) Finally, nestle the duck legs onto the top so that their skin is not submerged, and place in the oven. Cook for 1½ hours.

8 Toast the breadcrumbs in a sauté pan over medium heat, stirring or flipping the pan often, until they just start to color, then add 2 Tbsp. duck fat. Fry the crumbs in the fat, stirring until golden, and season with salt and pepper. Spread the crumb mixture over the top of the cassoulet, then continue to bake for another 30 minutes. Let cool for about 10 minutes before serving. F&S



Sweet as honey. Strong as a buffalo.



LIKE MANY ineffectual people, I come from good stock. Near as I can tell, the Heaveys left Ireland during the potato famine and found that our aversion to peaceful coexistence with pretty much anybody made us natural soldiers. Incidentally, there are two possible sources for the name Heavey, one of which means a “groaning or exclamation of disgust.” I feel both wronged by that but also—how to put this?—seen.

Five Heaveys have graduated from West Point since 1891, and I’m related to all of them. There was also a John Heavey who left Ireland and became a Roman Catholic bishop in Australia, but no family is perfect.

Three of the five made general, including my grandfather, whom I remember best for his habit of shifting his black Oldsmobile into neutral going down hills to save gas. Gas was extremely cheap in the early 1960s, but Granddad—and this is the mark of a true Heavey—was cheaper.

He had an enormous tarpon on the wall in his den. I’m pretty sure it was the only one he ever caught. It looked, as nearly all taxidermy fish do, stunned to have ended up there. At 8 years old, I could scarcely believe creatures that big and wild lived in the sea and could be captured. I wondered if I might ever catch one myself. It seemed unlikely.

Many years later, my grandmother, a severely proper lady, broke character once to tell me, “Your grandfather was a badass.” He fought in both World Wars and was awarded three Purple Hearts. His brigade made 82 combat landings in the Pacific. So, yeah, a badass.

Expectations for Heaveys were always high but never so crudely conveyed as to be stated aloud. But Dad knew, and rather than compete with Granddad’s shadow, he chose the Naval Academy rather than West Point. At 21 he found himself on a destroyer escorting convoys in the North Atlantic, where German U-boats were wreaking havoc. Once, off Venezuela, he was dispatched in a rowboat to rescue some shipwrecked sailors.

Letting Go

WHERE THERE ARE FAMILIES, THERE ARE FAMILY EXPECTATIONS. IF YOU’RE LUCKY, YOU’LL LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO CHUCK THEM OVERBOARD



Sharks had already eaten many of them. Maddened by the scent of blood in the water, the sharks attacked the boat’s oars. Dad shot them with his sidearm and set the remaining survivors to bailing the boat, mostly to distract them from the carnage. So, also a badass.

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My sister, Olivia, the last of my blood kin, died three weeks ago. Strokes don’t phone ahead. One minute she was slurring her words in a grocery store, the next she was in a hospital bed, paralyzed on her right side, unable to speak, swallow, or breathe on her own. We’d been estranged for decades. Liv was convinced that I had repeatedly cheated her and would steal the chair she sat on if I got the chance. Such are the mysteries of families.

She lay helpless in her hospital bed for two weeks. I visited every day, never mentioned the past, told her I loved her, and kissed her forehead. But she was getting worse rather than better. The doctors spoke of extensive brain damage and the need for a permanent feeding tube. Not happening, I told them. I knew my sister. We switched to hospice care, and Liv died two days later, on a Sunday morning.

Death and irony often share the same cab. Which explains how I—the

guy she feared would steal her furniture—became responsible for every stick of it. Blitzen, the dog she would never have entrusted to my care for a single night, lies at my feet as I write this.

Cleaning out her apartment showed that I wasn’t the only one still under the spell of the family legacy. In a closet, I found two of Dad’s Navy dress blue uniforms. It wasn’t like he was coming back anytime soon to claim them, but I get it. What I was less prepared for was what I found in the tub in one of her bathrooms—Granddad’s tarpon, chipped and broken from 65 years of being moved around, and still looking as stunned as ever. She couldn’t

let go. Standing there, I felt like we were the last two members of some vanishing tribe, two old speakers of an abstruse language that would vanish now that it was no longer spoken. The world must be full of such languages, such siblings.

I broke the mount over a knee and put the pieces in a trash bag. It was time to let go. I committed the uniforms to a charity clothing bin in a church parking lot on my way home. Maybe somebody could use a blue woolen jacket with golden eagles on it.

My life has not been marked by great heroism. I will never lead men into battle or rescue shipwrecked sailors beset by sharks. But come to think of it, I did catch a tarpon, one about the same size as Granddad’s. It was a hot, humid day on the Rio San Juan in Nicaragua. The battle was not epic. The fish sulked deep for 15 minutes and then came to the boat almost voluntarily. We gave it to some locals, who said they would scrape the meat off the bones to make fish cakes. Sometimes heroics aren’t on the menu.

But something lightened in me as I thought about that coincidence. Throwing out the tarpon didn’t take away its memory any more than death would take away the memory of my sister. But knowing that she and I shared the pride and the burden of our family’s past made me feel closer to her than I had in many years. F&S



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