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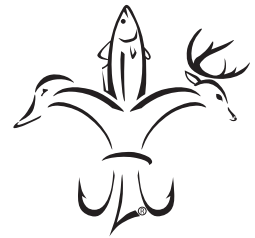
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51
WHEN THE
WATER FALLS...



21
FIND
DECEMBER
DEER



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PUBLISHER: Tony Taylor
EDITOR: Dan Kibler
MANAGING EDITOR: Alicia LaFont
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR: Bobby Cleveland
bobbyc7754@yahoo.com, 601.506.0739
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR: Jeff Caldwell
ASSISTANT PRODUCTION MANAGER:
Desiree P. Lewis
ART DIRECTOR: Kevin Orgeron
GRAPHIC DESIGNERS:
Jeff Cashio, Alissa Zeringue
CONTROLLER: Juanita Guidry
SALES DIRECTOR: Jay Forrest
225.278.0258/jayf@lasmag.com
ADVERTISING SALES:
Mark Hilzim (National Sales), Mark Boyd, Asa
Faulkner, Peter Church, Burton Angelle, John Cain
and Bret Holten
CONTRIBUTORS:
David A. Brown, Chris Bush, Bobby Cleveland,
Brian Cope, Jerry Dilsaver, Paul Elias, David
Hawkins, Bill Garbo, Phillip Gentry, Michael
O. Giles, Dan Kibler, Sammy Romano, Hal
Schramm and Don Shoopman
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR:
Ricky Naquin 985.859.7744/rickyn@lasmag.com

ADVERTISING INQUIRIES:
Contact Jay Forrest
email: jayf@lasmag.com/225.278.0258

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December is big-buck time across Mississippi. Ryan Church of Smithdale killed this trophy on Dec. 16, 2018, in Franklin County. The buck grossed 172½ inches and netted 164%.

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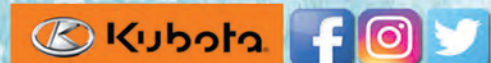
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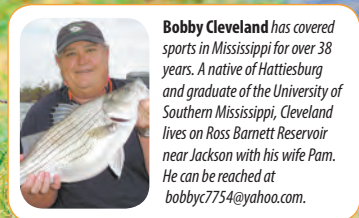
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Outdoor UPDATE with Bobby Cleveland



Bobby Cleveland has covered sports in Mississippi for over 38 years. A native of Hattiesburg and graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi, Cleveland lives on Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson with his wife Pam. He can be reached at bobbyc7754@yahoo.com.

FA-LA-LA-LA-LA, TIME TO GET OUTSIDE DECEMBER T'IS THE HUNTING SEASON TO BE JOLLY

Ho! Ho! Ho! Season's greetings to Mississippi's sportsmen, sportswomen and sportskids. It's December, which gives us Christmas and Hannukah, but its greatest gift may be the myriad of outdoor opportunities.

There are plenty of outdoor-related things to do this month in the Magnolia State, with so many hunting seasons open and fishing opportunities available that every day is a present, and we get to pick and choose what gift is in

for duck and dove, rabbit and squirrel, to name a few, are open.

Let this issue of *Mississippi Sportsman* be your guide for the month, as it is intended. On its pages you can learn:

- The basics of duck decoy setups;
- The importance of scouting and other preparations to be ready when migrating ducks arrive;
- Using scents to get inside a buck's curious mind;
- How to read the signs left by bucks to find the trophy you've been chasing;
- How to benefit from drawdowns in flood-control lakes to locate crappie.

There's lots more inside to both entertain and educate in this month's issue. Peruse the pages, scan our advertisers for gift ideas and, above all, have a great holiday season.

May yours be safe and may you find peace. ■



Low water in reservoirs this month shouldn't keep crappie fishermen on the couch.

store for each day. Deer hunting tops the list, of course, but it would be an epic oversight to simply leave it at that. Seasons

GOT PICS? We want 'em

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*Digital images must be sent in jpeg format. High-resolution images (taken on your camera's highest setting) will work the best. All images (physical and digital) become property of *Mississippi Sportsman* and cannot be returned.

GOTTA LOVE THE RUT; BUCKS SURE DO

Even the oldest, wiliest and most-stubborn bucks can't help themselves when it's time to procreate; all other concerns are tossed out the window. It is that short period of time — the rut — when they are the most vulnerable.

"From the moment their hormones and instincts start telling them it's time to procreate, bucks become more and more stupid," said Ronnie Jennings, a veteran deer hunter from Clinton. "From the first stages, when the bucks are establishing dominance and are subject to be called out of hiding, to the final days when does are in estrus, bucks feel an urge they can't resist.

"The best thing I can compare it to is last call at a tavern. Think of all the dumb things men do to woo a woman, and how that intensifies at closing time. Those last 30 minutes of desperation can make us stupid, and we are not limited to a week or two a year, like deer. A buck's window of opportunity is so short, making it so intense, that he'll willingly walk out of his comfort zone and right into trouble."

That's why a doe dictates just how stupid the buck becomes, Jennings said.

"Whenever she moves and wherever she goes, that's what the buck will do," he said. "She determines if their movements will be nocturnal. She determines if they will be in the open — food plots and such — or in thickets. She owns him 24/7 until she submits. That's why once I find a buck's core zone, I start scouting the does in his area."

Jennings has developed his own system for hunting his property in southwest Hinds County, a 100-acre tract composed of 50% fields, 25% planted pine timber and 25% hardwood creek bottoms. It has helped him fill a wall in both his office and his home with arrays of trophy bucks, all measuring between 130 to 160 inches.

"I move around a good bit in the bow season and early gun season, and I use that period to take a doe or two or remove an inferior buck," he said. "Mostly, I am tracking big bucks by camera or eyesight to pinpoint core areas and travel corridors. In 15 years, I have taken only one mature buck outside the rut. Now, I'll take a trophy any chance I get, but I'm saying it's so rare before the rut.

"Once I lock in on a buck or two I want to target, I turn my attention to the does in that area, learn as much as I can about them as fast as I can, and then I leave that area alone until the rut. I don't want to spook the does or the bucks. The really big bucks that I catch on my cameras, over 95% of the photos come at night. Why waste my days-off chasing them then, or risk busting them on the weekends and spooking them in their core area?"

Jennings puts all his eggs in one basket, so to speak, and that basket is the rut.



The pursuit of does is a chink in the armor of whitetail bucks, who are normally the picture of caution.

A GIFT FROM MDWFP

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks has leveled the playing field for all hunters by compiling a statewide map showing the mean date of conception in all areas. It is based on historical data collected through post-mortem health checks on does, which the agency has done for decades.

Consider it another gift of the season. You can find it online at <http://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/deer-program/deer-breeding-date-map.aspx>

"Every year, almost without exception, the does on our property come into estrus either right before Christmas or right after it," he said. "The last two weeks of the year, that's the window I save up most of my vacation time to use. By then, I want to know where and when the does are moving so I can be there when one brings a big boy out into the open. I prepare to hunt from daylight to dark, too." ■

CHANGING DEER SEASONS, REGS

While deer hunting is legal throughout December, hunters need to remember that there are several season changes during the month. Regulations vary between the different seasons.

December begins on the final day of the first gun season when running deer with dogs is allowed, but the gun/dog season ends quickly.

On Dec. 2, the primitive weapon season begins, at least technically. Hunters on private lands can still use any firearm deemed legal for deer, but on public lands they are restricted to primitive weapons as defined by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.

Weapons legal for use during the primitive weapons season are all archery equipment and primitive firearms. Primitive firearms for the purpose of hunting deer are defined as single or double-barreled muzzle-loading rifles of at least .38 caliber; OR single shot, breech loading, metallic-cartridge rifles (.35 caliber or larger) and replicas, reproductions or reintroductions of those type rifles with an exposed hammer; OR single or double-barreled muzzle-loading shotguns, with single ball or slug.

All muzzle-loading, primitive firearms must use black powder or a black powder substitute with percussion caps, #209 shotgun primers or flintlock ignition. A black-powder substitute is defined as a substance designed, manufactured and specifically intended to be used as a propellant in muzzle-loading or other black powder firearms, excluding modern smokeless powder.

DECEMBER'S STATEWIDE DEER SEASONS

Dec. 1: Gun/dog.

Dec. 2-15: Primitive weapon (weapon of choice on private land).

Dec. 16-23: Gun/no dog (still season).

Dec. 24-Jan. 22: Gun/dog.

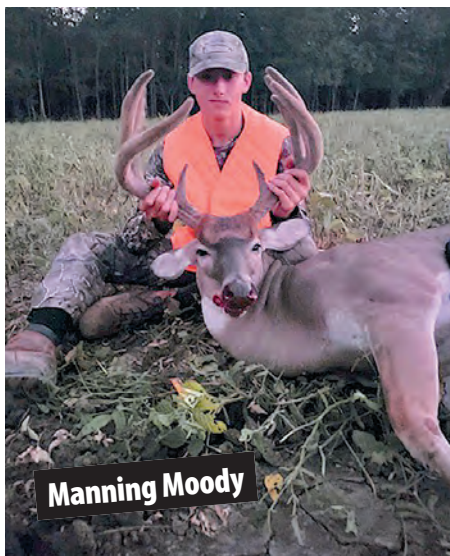
Metallic cartridges may be loaded with either black powder or modern smokeless powder (cartridges purchased at sporting goods stores). Telescopic sights are allowed while hunting with any primitive firearm during the primitive weapon seasons. A telescopic sight is defined as an optical sighting device with any magnification.

During any open season on deer with primitive weapons after Nov. 30, a person may use any legal weapon of choice on private lands only, if the person is the title owner of the land, the lessee of the hunting rights on the land, a member of a hunting club leasing the hunting rights on the land, or a guest of a person specified above. If the person is required to have a hunting license, the person must have a primitive weapon license, Sportsman's License, or a Lifetime Sportsman's License.

On Dec. 16, the season shifts to gun/no dogs, aka the still season. During this eight-day season (ends Dec. 23), and the preceding primitive weapon season, running deer with dogs is strictly prohibited.

On Dec. 24, the gun/dog season returns and will continue through Jan. 22. ■

Hunting/Fishing **SCRAPBOOK**



Manning Moody

Manning Moody of Wiggins harvested this 4 ½-year-old, 11-point buck that was still in velvet on an early season youth hunt on a WMA. It weighed 245 pounds.



Jonathan Spence

Jonathan Spence took this typical, 9-point whitetail on Jan. 14, 2016, in northern Marion County. He says he gives credit to his amazing father.



Joe Douglas

On Oct. 14, Joe Douglas was in Jackson taking his chemo treatments and he asked his son, Chris, when he was going to take him hunting in Texas to try and shoot a big deer. After a 10½-hour drive to Junction, Tex., they hunted for two days and were able to harvest two giants.



COME ON DUCKS! COME ON COLD!

Mississippi duck hunters are cautiously optimistic about the 2019-20 season. If the weather lines up, it could be a great one.

Burton Angelle

Another above-average waterfowl migration is in the forecast for the winter, and Mississippi duck hunters are excited ... well, maybe.

That excitement is somewhat tempered by the knowledge that the 2018-19 forecast was similar, yet it failed to produce a decent duck season in most areas of Mississippi's duck country, and that surveys show ducks continue to decrease in number.

"Two things happened, both related to weather, that messed us up," said Will Brown of Vicksburg. "One, it never got cold, like really cold, like what we need to force ducks down here to stay. Two, we had too much rain in the south Delta, way too much rain, as in it started flooding and provided too much water to concentrate ducks in any one area.

"The bottom line was that we had a below-average year. We didn't get a lot of ducks in here consistently, and when we had ducks, they were spread out throughout the Delta. It was just tough hunting the whole season, and really, really tough in December."

Surveys by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service estimated the 2019 breeding North American duck population at about 38.90 million, down about 6% from the 2018 estimate of 41.19 million, but still 10% higher than the long-term average. It is the fourth-consecutive year that the spring duck population has declined and the lowest total breeding duck population estimate since 2008 — the last time the estimate was lower than 40 million. Still, most duck species are at higher populations levels than long-term averages.

"There will be plenty of ducks in the fall flight, and I expect duck hunters — especially in the southern U.S. — to have a better season this year," said Dr. Frank Rohwer, president and chief scientist of Delta Waterfowl. "The fact that the numbers are down is a reflection of last year's dry conditions for nesting ducks. We know that production drives duck populations, so it's no surprise that after a year of poor production, the USFWS counted fewer ducks."

But we also know that winter weather drives waterfowl migration, and it is the National Weather Service forecast that causes concern. While the 2019-20 winter is forecast to be drier in the Southeast, it is predicted to be warmer than average in most of the Mississippi River Flyway.

"Well, that's not promising, not at all," Brown said. "The upper Midwest had some strong cold fronts early, in October and November, and that was good, but if they can't sustain it and turn into a total freeze-out early, then it will delay the migration. Our best years are when the northern tier states are frozen out in December, like two years ago. I had the best season of my life in the 2017-2018 season, and the December season was ridiculous how good it was."

Brown and thousands of other Mississippi waterfowlers are extremely happy about the latest change in season frameworks that for the first time will allow the season to run through Jan. 31, regardless of what day of the week it's on.

"This year, it means we get almost another whole week to hunt at the end of January, when the migration has had a chance to push ducks here," Brown said. "Under the previous schedule, the season had to end on the Sunday preceding Jan. 31, and this year that would be the 25th. With the new framework, we get to hunt until Friday, Jan. 31. It may not sound like much, but for a duck hunter, believe me, those five days are a true blessing." ■

2019-2020 MISSISSIPPI DUCK SEASONS

Season 1: Nov. 29-Dec. 1.

Season 2: Dec. 6-Jan. 31.

Limit: Six ducks per day, including no more than 4 mallards (no more than 2 females), 3 wood ducks, 2 redheads, 3 scaup, 2 canvasbacks, 1 mottled duck, 2 black ducks, and 1 pintail. The possession limit is three times the daily limit (including species limits).

Squirrel hunters across Mississippi have until Feb. 28 to target bushytails.

LOTS OF OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

While deer and duck seasons occupy most of the spotlight in Mississippi, hunting opportunities abound.

Goose season, along with coots and mergansers, mirror the duck dates throughout the state. Other migratory birds like snipe, rails and gallinules are open all month (snipe through Feb. 28 and rails and gallinules through Dec. 31). The last migratory bird season to open is woodcock, which begins Dec. 18 and runs through Jan. 31 with a limit of three per day.

Seasons on squirrel, rabbits and all other small game opened earlier in the fall and remain open through Feb. 28.

Dove hunters have reason to celebrate December's arrival. More days were pushed back into the third and final segment of the season to allow more hunting for migratory birds pushing in from the grain fields of the upper Midwest. In both the North and South Zones, the season reopens on Dec. 21 and runs through Jan. 14.

"I know that's important in the South, but don't overlook what that means for us in the Delta," said Ben Simpson of Grenada. "In the Delta, that means we get to duck hunt in the morning and then dove hunt in the afternoon from Dec. 21 to Jan. 14. I am really happy about getting to hunt to Jan. 14, because this will be the first year we get to really take advantage of the migrating doves.

"Those big fat Midwest doves provide a unique opportunity late in the season, which is perfect because food sources are few and far between. That concentrates them in certain areas where, regardless of hunting pressure day to day, they have to keep coming back to feed. It ought to be some of the best shooting all year." ■



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DON'T FORGET FISHING

AROUND MISSISSIPPI, PLENTY OF LAKES AND RIVERS OFFER DECEMBER ANGLERS EXCELLENT ACTION IN COLD WEATHER

As any Mississippi sportsman can relate, the winter weather in the Magnolia State can be freezing one day and three days later be too hot and humid to enjoy sitting in a deer stand.

"Go fishing," said Sidney Montgomery, an avid deer hunter and angler, who has learned to make the most out of what Mother Nature throws at him. "I can't tell you how many December days I planned to hunt that I wound up fishing instead, and the great thing about it is, that the late fall and winter provides some of the best fishing all year.

"Think about it; fish are extremely sluggish in cold water, especially shallow-water fish like bass. You give them a few warm days in a row that creates even a small increase in water temperatures, and they will race to eat everything they can find. Just a couple of degrees can trigger a bite you won't believe, even in the same water that two days before you couldn't buy a bite."

With that in mind, let's look at some traditional hot spots in Mississippi to try during the warm days of the cold season:



Redfish will hang out in deeper holes in the lower Pascagoula River this month; try to pick out a warm day and fish moving water.

NO. 1: BAY OF ST. LOUIS

The mouth of the Jordan River, which forms the bay, has always been a good late-fall and winter fishery, especially on the Highway 90 Bridge, where redfish, puppy (black) drum and sheepshead dominate the catch. Filling a cooler full of tasty fish won't take long and can happen quicker than you can get too cold to fish. Flip a bait shrimp with the smallest weight you can get away with on fluorocarbon leader against a piling and hold on. The key is keeping the bait close to the pilings, which are where the fish are hiding, ready to ambush whatever the current pushes past them.

NO. 2: OXBOW CRAPPIE

With fish-finding electronics able to locate big, suspended schools of fish, the winter crappie fishing at Chotard, Albermarle and Ferguson lakes has exploded. Even Eagle Lake is getting attention in December. The winter fishing has actually exceeded the productivity of other seasons, but only for those fishermen who can locate the schools and learn to troll through them with lures or minnows kept at a precise depth. A difference is at Eagle Lake, where piers can hold big black crappie.

NO. 3: DAVIS LAKE

This 200-acre lake just off the Natchez Trace about 30 miles south of Tupelo is the place to go for trophy bass. Don't go expecting to load the boat with limits. Go to get that one big bite, like Jeff Foster of Tupelo did five years ago when he caught 17.34-pound largemouth. The key, Foster said, is fishing slow and deep, near natural structure and cover like merging creek channels or stump fields. The two lures of choice are shaky-head worms or a jig 'n pig. Foster was using a shaky-head.

NO. 4: LAKE BILL WALLER

This 168-acre lake managed by the MDWFP is about 7 miles southwest of Columbia in south Mississippi and has always been a December hot spot. There is a big difference between Waller and Davis, and it relates to the depth that fishermen should target in winter. Waller isn't that big, so the fish are wintering near shallow water anyway. A soft-plastic jerkbait fished around cover is one technique that works, but you can always slow down and fish a worm or a jig.

NO. 5: PASCAGOULA RIVER

This is a place that both freshwater and saltwater fishermen can appreciate in the winter. The bass fishing can be outstanding in the upper marsh, while the speck and redfish action can be exciting on the southern end. You won't catch monster largemouth, but on warm days — on a spinnerbait or even a buzzbait — you can catch them by the dozens. Reds and specks are a lot easier to predict. Fish deep holes, looking for big schools of fish, but move up and fish hard structure and moving water along a bank.

NO. 6: OKHISSA LAKE, BASS

A key ingredient in patterning winter bass is deep water immediately adjacent to shallow areas, and Okhissa Lake has that in spades. In December, try a drop-shot or a shaky-head worm. Target the creek channel on the upper end of the lake where the channel comes nearest to the shoreline, and the drop-offs in the back ends of the coves.

NO. 7: COLUMBUS LAKE, CATS

Tight-lining deep holes with fresh cut bait can produce plentiful

numbers of "eating-sized" channel cats and big blues, and whole live bait could put a big flathead tabby in the boat.

NO. 8: TIPPDAH COUNTY, BREAM

This MDWFP state lake near Ripley is the place to try for winter bream, believe it or not. Most fishermen like to fish on the bottom in water 10 to 12 feet deep, on tight lines, with big wads of night crawlers. Hold onto or at least secure your poles, because this lake produced the state-record redear (chinquapin) at 3.33 pounds, and it also holds big bluegill. Who knows, with night crawlers, a feisty catfish may come calling.

NO. 9: LAKE WASHINGTON, CRAPPIE AND CATFISH

Recognized as one of the best crappie lakes in the country by many organizations, this old oxbow lake is amazing. Winter is just as good as spring, which is as good as summer, which is as good as fall. Drift-trolling in water at least 15 feet deep is important in winter, but that doesn't always mean fishing deep. Locals use electronics to find what depth the most crappie suspend, and then tip a jig with a minnow and slowly drift the area. Don't forget catfish, either. This is one lake where limb lines, also known as yo-yos, work wonders. A couple of hours on a pleasant winter day using prepared bait on yo-yos can provide a catfish dinner worthy of a Christmas gathering.

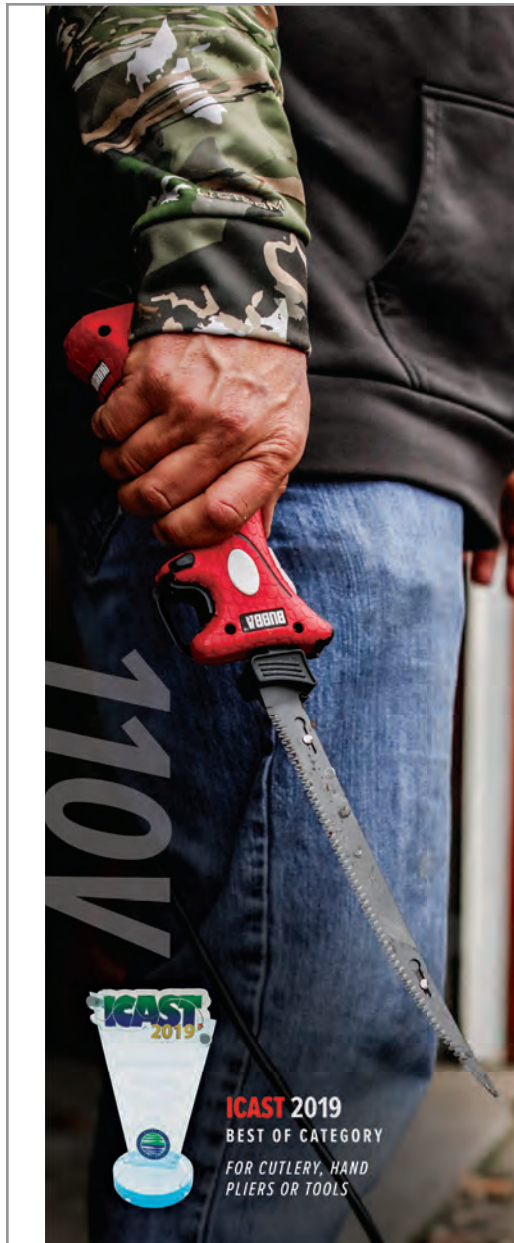
NO. 10: ROSS BARNETT, CATFISH

What makes this lake so good for catfish in the winter is that a sudden cold blast kills shad in shallow water, which is where they stay in the winter. Dead shad on the bottom brings catfish in by the hoards. They can be caught with long casting rods from the bank in many areas. ■



Tippih County Lake has a tremendous population of bream, and they'll bite in December.

Brian Cope



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HUNTER'S SECOND CHANCE NETS HINDS COUNTY 12-POINTER

By Bobby Cleveland

WHITTINGTON'S HUGE BUCK IS HIS BIGGEST WITH A BOW

Troyce Luke Whittington of Byram couldn't believe what he was seeing from his Hinds County deer stand on Oct. 22, and he knew he didn't want to mess up the situation — again.

He was looking at the buck of his dreams, a 12-pointer that measured 136½ inches, a buck he never thought he'd see again in a hunting situation, not after how he missed out on a chance to take the same trophy nearly two weeks earlier.

"Twelve days before, I had located the big buck I wanted to kill," said Whittington, 25. "He came in at 4 o'clock and was acting really spooky, because a 6-point had already busted me. I knew he was fixing to run off, and I was thinking I'd never see him again. So, I took a risky shot, and I shot right under his belly. I was sick. I felt like I was going to throw up."

Whittington trudged out of the stand, left camp and decided to let the area and its white-tailed inhabitants rest. He gave it 12 days, returning Oct. 22.

"I walked in that day to check my (trail cameras) and saw I had a few big bucks coming through the day before," he said. "I wasn't even planning to hunt, but once I saw the pics, I rushed home, got ready and was back in the stand at 3:57 p.m."

Fortunately, his hunting area is near his home, and he was able to get back to the stand before prime time.

JUST ON TIME

Whittington had an hour wait before things began happening in the hardwood bottom, but it got off to a promising start. The first buck in was an 18-inch, 8-pointer, big enough to get the hunter's full attention and challenge his nerves.

"I got settled in and was still looking at the trail pictures on my phone," he said. "I knew what time they had come in the day before (just before 5 p.m.), so I actually stood up and was ready. The big 8-point came in and stood in one spot, and my heart was beating so fast and so hard it felt like it was hitting the tree

Troyce Luke Whittington's 12-point buck, measuring 138½ inches, was killed Oct. 22 in Hinds County.

behind me, being that I've never killed a good one with my bow. I was definitely planning to smoke that one, until...

"I looked up and saw my big buck, the one I was after, coming in from the left side," Whittington said. "I couldn't believe it. I waited until he came walking in, but he wouldn't turn broadside."

DÉJÀ VU

Causing him more anxiety was what he saw walking in with the big buck: the same 6-point that had busted him and messed up the hunt 12 days earlier.

"It was that same 6-point, and he was coming around behind me, fixing to wind me," Whittington said. "I decided to take a shot that I knew would kill the buck but would make it hard to find. He was feeding, head down, facing me. My shot was down between the shoulders.

"I drew my bow and took the shot as he was standing, still facing me. When he started running, I could see about five inches of arrow sticking out. I knew I had smoked him, and the other bucks ran about 50 yards out and stopped. I'm pretty sure they saw me do my happy dance."

At that point, Whittington said, "I was freaking out and started calling everyone about it. I shot at 5:20, climbed down at 5:40 and went home and waited on the (blood-trailing) dogs. They got there at 7:30."

THE SEARCH BEGINS

This story simply can't end without more consternation for Whittington.

"We went and looked and couldn't find anything," he said. "I was fixing to cry. Seriously. The first dog that came had just been (neutered), and he wasn't able to do right.

"We gave it a little while longer and called another friend with two dogs, and he came and turned them out. They found the buck in 15 minutes. Hadn't gone 75 yards from where I had shot him. We had been walking all around him with the first dog."

The shot was excellent, given the angle. The arrow missed the spine but tore up a lung.

To say Whittington was happy was an understatement. His previous biggest buck with a bow had come at age 14 and was what he called a basket 8-point.

"Once we found this one, I had to back off and cry, I was so relieved," he said.

Considered a main-frame 10-point, the buck had 12 countable points, and is pushing the definition of typical to the limit. It had some character, to say the least.

"He has this one point, almost like a third main beam, growing right out of his right base," Whittington said. "He has a nice sticker point off his right G2, which turns in across his head, which is similar to his left G2 that turns right and points back across his head."

The buck also exhibits some palmation, mostly on the right main beam, where there seems to be something odd going on.

"I am proud of this buck," Whittington said. "I can't put it into words what it has meant to me." ■



CARTER GOES OLD SCHOOL FOR TROPHY

BASIC TECHNIQUES YIELD 133-INCH, 10-POINT BUCK FROM STONE COUNTY

By Bobby Cleveland

Kyle Carter is old school when it comes to deer hunting with a bow, and he deserves an “A” for both comprehension and application of the pure basics of the sport.

By finding the buck’s food source, identifying its main trail, and following the path to its bedding area, Carter was able to take one of the best trophies ever killed in Stone County.

And he did all this on public land in Desoto National Forest.

The 10-pointer, which Carter had hunted the previous two seasons as an 8, has a very tall, thick rack that green scores at 133 inches. If it holds that measurement through the 60-day drying period, it would be the highest-ranked buck taken by a bow — and No. 5 by any method — in Stone County, according to Magnolia Records. Stone County is not known for producing big bucks, and that it came on public land makes it even more of a trophy.

DESOTO NATIONAL FOREST

“I have been hunting Desoto National Forest for about 10 years, and it is 100% open to the public,” said Carter, who is from Pascagoula. “There’s not a lot of foliage out there for the deer to eat, being as how it’s mostly pine and briars with a few scrub oaks. I always look for muscadine and persimmon trees producing during bow season.

“This year, I found a good food source and set up multiple cameras on different trails leading to that food source. I got a picture of the big deer, and I believed it to be the same big 8-point I have been trying to kill for a couple of years. He turned into a 10-point (with four stickers) this year.”

After finding the muscadine vines and persimmon trees, Carter moved in, only to find he had more work to do.

“I set up on the food sources, but he wasn’t moving and feeding in daylight,” he said. “So, I pinpointed his main trail and was able to identify his bedding area.”

Analyzing camera data, Carter said he was able to precisely pattern the buck.

“I found which trail he was using, and that started the domino effect that allowed me to find his bedding area,” he said. “I was hoping to get as close as I could to his bedding area without disturbing him so I could get a shot at him in good shooting light.”



Photos courtesy Kyle Carter

THE HUNT

On the afternoon of Oct. 23, Carter spotted the buck on its main trail, which ran through a bay bottom between two pine ridges. He heard the buck long before he saw it.

“I got in the stand at 2:30 and shot it at 5:35,” he said. “I could hear it coming from my left, loud footsteps coming down the ridge. When I was finally able to put motion to the sound, all I could see was antlers over the top of gallberry bushes. It looked like a rocking chair upside down going over the bushes.

“That bottom is so thick, you can’t see through the gallberries. It took a long time before I could ever see hair. All I could see for a long time was antlers.”

Carter liked what he saw — big tall tines rising above the brush — but he was able to control his emotions.

“When he came in, he moved so cautiously and nervously that it took him 30 to 40 minutes to go about 50 yards,” he said. “On the first good shooting lane, I drew back on my bow, but he staged up behind a tree. All I could see was his head. I had to hold full draw for six or seven minutes until he turned his head so I could collapse.

“I took some deep breaths and recollected my thoughts. There’s a small creek ditch running through the bottom, and when he cleared that, he wasn’t as nervous and came on up toward the ridge where the food sources were. I drew the bow the first chance I got, lined him up in my peep (sight) and let it fly. It was a 42-yard shot.”

And, it was perfect.

THE RECOVERY

“The shot felt good, but, due to how high I was in my tree, the steep angle made the arrow exit his stomach cavity, even

Kyle Carter took this tall, thick 133-inch, trophy buck in Stone County on public land in the Desoto National Forest.

though it entered his lungs," Carter said. "I got in touch with Cindy and Vaughn King, and they brought two of the best blood-trail dogs in the Southeast: Blue and Chief. They made quick work of the track and found my deer within 5 minutes. He had gone between 130 and 150 yards."

Carter was using a Hoyt Maxxis 35 bow with 80-pound limbs. He shoots Easton Carbon Bow-fire arrows with 100-grain, 2½-inch Grim Reaper broadheads.

Carter has killed two bigger bucks, both with primitive weapons and both at another public area on Sunflower Wildlife Management Area in the Delta.

"I like hunting public land; it's like a passion," he said. "Up there, I have taken a 140-inch 9-point and a 135-inch 8-point, both in the primitive weapon season they have at Sunflower around Christmas."

Carter said he hasn't always been the conscientious hunter that he has become.

"When I was younger, I was bad about taking a bucket of corn out and spreading it, then sitting and watching it and waiting," he said. "Then I learned to hunt and I have found out that if you do it right, hunting natural sources and working to pattern a deer, you will see a lot more deer and bigger deer." ■



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Kenneth Wallace dropped this 220-pound buck, which scores close to 150 inches, on a four-day, permit-draw hunt on Natchez State Park WMA.

NATCHEZ WMA DRAW HUNT PRODUCES GREAT BUCK

LINCOLN COUNTY MAN DOWNS
220-POUNDER WITH CROSSBOW ON
LAST DAY OF HUNT

By Andy Douglas

When Natchez State Park is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is big bass, and rightly so. The biggest largemouth in Mississippi history, weighing 18.15 pounds, was caught in Natchez Lake in 1992.

But there's also close to 3,000 acres of WMA land available as permit deer hunting for the few hunters lucky enough to be drawn.

Kenneth Wallace and his son, Garrett, from Lincoln County were fortunate enough to draw a four day Natchez State Park WMA archery partner hunt, Oct. 31-Nov. 3. Everything came together, with a good high-pressure system, cool temperatures, red acorns falling and, most important, a 220-pound, 13-point buck falling.

The Wallaces intended to reach the WMA by noon on Oct. 31 but were running late. They arrived, scouted an area and hung climbing stands 150 yards apart on the same ridge. They got in the stands early the next morning. Kenneth Wallace saw a couple of does and took a shot, but didn't connect.

After a lunch break, they headed back to the woods early, scouting another area. Not seeing anything to change their plans, they headed back to their climbers. On the way, they spotted deer. Kenneth tried cocking his crossbow as quietly as he could, but there was no shot opportunity, so they made their way to the stands.

Garrett Wallace took a shot at a doe and missed, while his father had a nice 8-pointer with a 15-inch spread come in and present a shot at 17 yards. He tried to take the shot, but his crossbow wouldn't shoot, and the buck meandered out of sight. He realized that when he had cocked it earlier, trying to stay quiet, he had failed to completely cock it.

Family obligations kept them from hunting the next day, so they pulled their stands and headed home, returning the afternoon of Nov. 3, the first day after the change from daylight savings time. They made their way to the WMA, knowing dark would come an hour earlier.

FAMILIAR 8-POINTER

Carrying their climbers in, they spooked a nice 8-point — the very same one Kenneth Wallace had failed to get a shot two days earlier. He went back to the same ridge as before, and he climbed a tree about 12 yards from his original position.

After a 30-minute sit, Kenneth Wallace heard deer walking



behind him. He got up to take a shot; it was four does. One of them gave him a shot at 12 yards. Wallace made a good hit and heard the doe crash down the hollow. Deciding to stay in the stand and let his son finish his hunt, he re-cocked his crossbow and nocked another bolt — just in case.

Another 30 minutes passed, and he heard more deer behind him. He turned and could see legs and tips of antlers at 25 yards, a buck eating acorns; he thought it might have been the same 8-pointer they'd already seen.

"The buck took another step or two, got where I could see him better, and raised his head," Wallace said. "I realized, 'Oh my gosh, this isn't that 8-point.'"

A BIG SURPRISE

It was a beast of a buck and within range, but it was facing Wallace, behind his stand and to the right, offering no shot opportunity. The buck moved towards the stand and turned to the right even more, dodging a downed tree. There was nothing Wallace could do but let him come in close, hoping for a shot passing by at 5 or 6 yards. He lost sight of the buck momentarily but could hear him walking. Then, he heard the buck jump and start bouncing away. It's over — he's gone, the hunter concluded.

Fortunately, the buck stopped, and Wallace could see him at 17 yards. The deer was still too far to the right of the tree, hindering a shot. The buck turned and angled left, and Wallace leaned as far out as he could to keep his bow from making contact with the tree.

The buck took three more steps and presented a shot at 12 yards. Wallace was ready and drilled the buck through the vitals. It hunkered and ran down the ridge and into a hollow. Everything got quiet.

NATCHEZ STATE PARK WMA

Natchez State Park WMA is about 10 miles north of historic Natchez. The state park covers 3,425 acres, with 2,457 acres available for hunting. Deer hunting is by permit-only, and the application period to apply starts Aug. 1 and ends Aug. 31. Only Mississippi residents are eligible for the youth, primitive weapons and archery draw hunts. There's also a handicapped draw hunt where anyone can apply. According to the DMAP report for Natchez State Park, during the 2018-19 season there were 40 deer harvested: 27 does and 13 bucks. Check online at MDWFP/wildlife-hunting/wma for all the regulations.

Kenneth Wallace's Natchez State Park WMA buck had 13 scoreable points and three more barely shorter than an inch.



It was 40 minutes before dark, and Wallace texted his son and told him what happened. After dark, the two took up a good blood trail, following it down the hollow, finally coming upon him lying in a ditch 2 feet wide and 3 feet deep, about 70 yards from where it had been shot.

"He was almost totally hidden in the ditch," Wallace said. "It would have been hard to find him without a good blood trail."

With the help of a close by nephew the hunters got his buck out and recovered the doe that had been shot earlier.

TALE OF THE TAPE

Wallace hasn't had the buck officially scored but did a rough score on him himself. The 220-pound monster has a 19¼-inch inside spread, main beams that were 22¼ and 23¾ inches long. It has 13 scoreable points and three more sticks not quite but close to an inch long. He is roughly scored at the high 140s, he may even go 150. Wallace said it's his biggest buck to date and also the biggest one he's ever seen while hunting. ■

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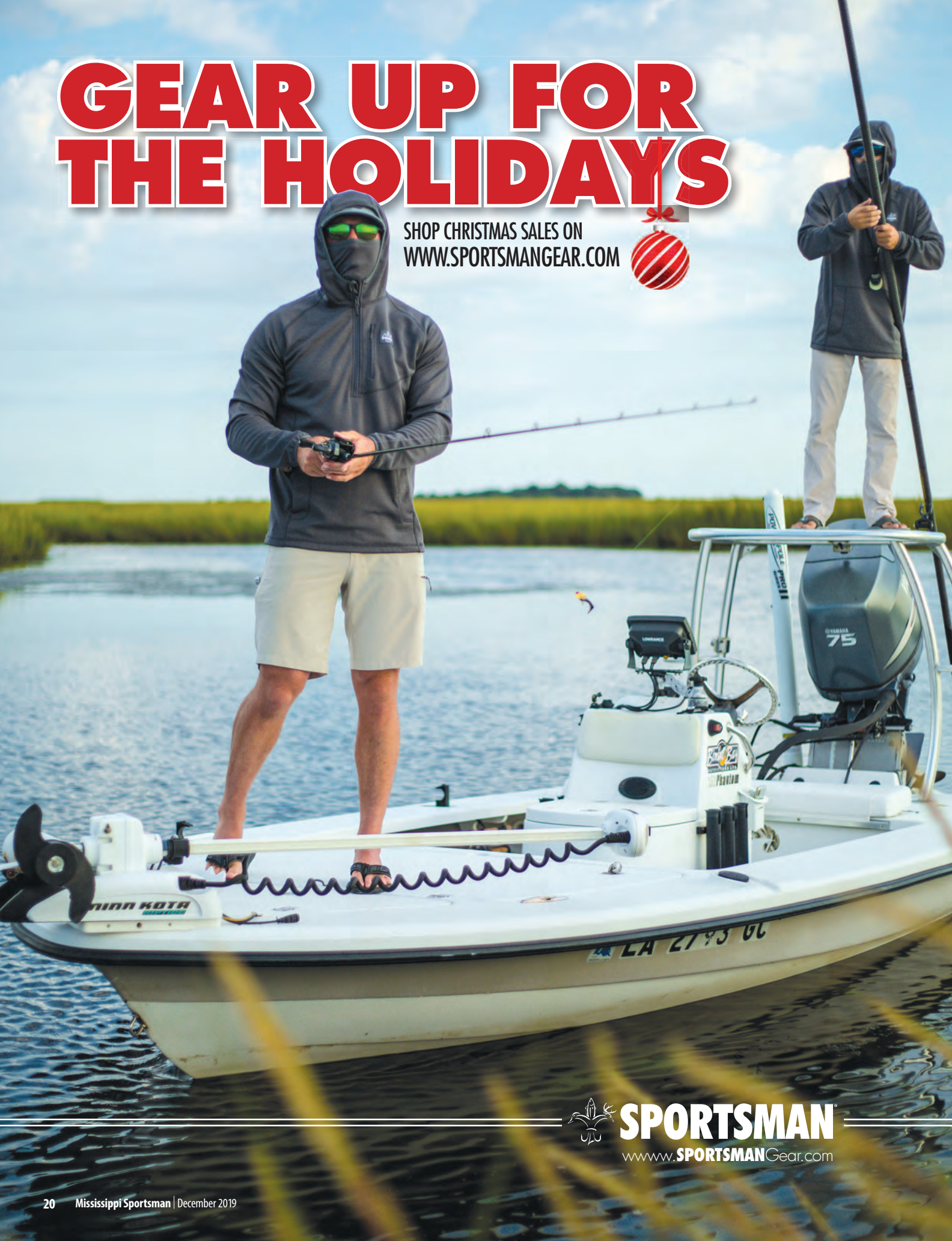


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FIND DECEMBER DEER

FIND AN ACTIVE EDGE, REVISIT SCRAPE LOCATIONS, RIGHTS-OF-WAY AS PEAK OF DEER SEASON ARRIVES WITH CHRISTMAS ON THE HORIZON.

■ By David Hawkins



Two very special events happen in December: Christmas and the whitetail rut.

Deer hunters look forward to both with unbridled enthusiasm.

The rut is a time when mature bucks lose their senses and go in search of breeding does. It is the one time during the hunting season when bucks will let their guards down and move about in broad daylight.

“The rut starts and ends at different times across the state,” said biologist William McKinley, the deer-project leader for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. “Biologists have compiled dates and zones, and that chart is posted on the MDWFP website (mdwfp.com). Those dates may vary a day or two one way or the other where you hunt, but they are a good point of reference.”

Unless you are a deer-hunting rookie, you know the basics of the rut. Deer create rubs, scrapes, licking limbs and the like to notify the opposite sex they are ready to procreate. Often, those signposts are along transitional areas. This can be where a field meets a forest, forests of two different types join or where a man-made or natural event has altered the terrain. Creeks and ridges also come into play as places where scrapes may be found.

So how does this assist the deer hunter?

First, you have to put some boots on the ground and do some serious walking and looking. Whether on private or public land, here are a few of the edges to investigate.

CUTOVERS

Young cutovers — those where treetops and grass are waist-to-chest high — are deer bedding magnets. There usually is some palatable browse, and deer feel safe that they are concealed. This terrain presents two problems a hunter must decipher: where to place a stand and when to man that stand.

Trails leading in and out of cutovers are usually pretty easy to spot. Look for fresh tracks and deer droppings as evidence a trail is getting used regularly. If you have authority, walk the entire perimeter, not just a side or two. Avoid busting through the middle of the cutover. Hunting

season is open, and deer are already feeling some hunting pressure. Busting through cutovers is what others, such as rabbit and quail hunters, have done since their respective seasons opened.

Note the trails that lead to feeding areas, such as cropland or bottomland hardwoods where mast crops may still be present. Once located, you have solved one of the first puzzles of deer hunting — establishing trail from a bedding area to a feeding area.

Now it's time to look for scrapes. Most likely, as you have circled the cutover, you have already encountered deer sign. Now look for a location to place a stand, preferably 15 to 25 yards off the edge of the cutover. Never place a stand directly over a scrape.

CROPLAND

“In 50-plus years of deer hunting and with over 300 deer kills logged in my hunting journal, I have never seen a scrape in a cornfield or any other crop, for that matter,” said hunter Tommy Hemphill of Rankin County. “But hunting family owned land and deer-camp leases, I can testify



Deer will use thickets or cutovers as places to get away from hunting pressure as the season progresses. Hunt trails that enter and leave such areas.



You may not see a buck in an open agricultural field like this one, but you might catch him on a trail heading to a field he's using for feeding.

that deer will use the same trails to and from cropland on a perennial basis. For more than 30 years, there has been a scrape line between our hardwood bottom and the field where we plant corn, milo, wheat and beans. That edge has been good for several 150-class and better bucks over the years.

“There was a scrape the size of the bed of a pickup under a sweetgum tree, and a low-hanging limb was licked chewed annually. I know of at least four generations of bucks that have used that same location. That tells me deer use the same signposts every year as long as the terrain doesn't change.”

The lesson here is to revisit past scrape locations. Generational overlaps could keep one place favored for years.

There is no scientific evidence to prove any carryover behavior. If the area has a balance of bucks and does, and they use that parcel of land, they should use that parcel until the habitat necessitates change.



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PUBLIC LAND >

PUBLIC LAND

For hunters on public land the same holds true. Edges of property or changes in terrain seem to enhance deer travel and the possibility of taking a December trophy. Where power transmission lines make a break in the forest, look for scraping and rubbing activity, especially where active trails cross the power line right-of-way. Treat these as you would a cutover.

Unless the right of way has been chemically treated, it will be mowed and allowed to regrow for several years before it requires mowing again. In this interim time period, the browse and grasses will re-emerge, making prime bedding and foraging location.

Try to avoid placing a stand right on the edge of the right of way. Rather, place it just a few yards inside the tree line near and active trail. If fresh tracks appear on a trail between winter rains, consider the trail to be active.

Bucks will be roaming, looking for does during the rut, reworking and checking scrapes. Hunters need to look for intercept spots



Fresh tracks after a rain are an indication that a deer trail is being actively used.



Remember, bucks are searching for does, and does are like girls sitting alone in a singles bar; they want to be found.

Some public land in central Mississippi is home to natural prairie of varying acreages. These prairies have soil too acidic to grow many varieties of deciduous and even evergreen trees. Red cedar and sage grass is sometimes all that grows in the black prairie soil.

Deer find the edges of these patches dandy travel routes. As with other locales, seek active trails to feeding areas along ridges and creek bottoms. Deer will use the natural grassy areas as bedding areas.

LEASED LAND

Timber companies own vast tracts of Mississippi woodland, and most of these companies offer it to hunting groups on an annual lease basis. Being managed for timber production, cutovers, thinning and chemical applications are a way of life for the deer that call these areas home.

Thousands of acres may change drastically in a matter of a few years. Still, edges exist, and deer like to travel those edges.

One such edge is the stream set-aside. That being the ribbon of trees the timber company is required to leave along streams, creeks and ditches. Where possible, the leaseholder should open a trail between the set-aside and the cutover at least as wide as a bush hog.

Deer don't like walking in dense cover any more than people do. Over time, these trails will become highways for deer, and scrapes will begin to appear as early as the first year they exist. These trails, which make ATV and foot traffic easier for hunters, also allow deer new travel routes.

The same goes for those areas where timber stands have been thinned. In addition to allowing some sunlight into the forest floor to foster the growth of forbs and grasses, deer travel routes may change. It just takes scouting trips to discover these new routes.

So there you have a tip for December deer hunting. Hunt the



Rick Small

Bucks, and deer in general, will travel edges, like this fenceline separating big woods from open ground.

edges of fields and forests, create your own openings along these edges if possible, and spend as much time in the singles bar for bucks as possible.

This is their time to be prowling, and your lucky time to bag a buck for Christmas. ■



David Hawkins is a freelance writer living in Forest, Miss. He can be reached at hawkins2209@att.net.

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Brent Allen of Brandon scanned the woods around his stand and kept an eye open for the flick of a tail or the glint of an antler. Suddenly, his peripheral vision caught movement, and he quickly made out the form of a buck. Allen knew what to do; he quickly picked an open spot and touched the trigger just as the buck turned and looked away.

TIC-BOOM!

The rifle roared, and the buck collapsed in a heap, never aware of what had happened. The 190-pound trophy was worn down from

the rigors of the rut, but he sported a tall, 14-point rack with double brow tines that scored 160 after drying in the Magnolia Records scoring session.

The exciting hunt occurred during last season's rut in central Mississippi.

"I like to use Paul Meek's doe-n-heat scent while I'm walking to the stand and while I'm on the stand," Allen said. "I'll apply some to my boots and leave a scent trail walking in to the stand and then apply some around my stand location when I get there, too."

Allen is a firm believer in using Meek's scents for one reason: they work. He likes to spray some fresh scent during the hunt to keep it wafting in the air to entice any bucks to come take a peek at that hot doe, and many bucks do answer the call of the Meek scent.

"I'll spray some of Meek's Super Heat or Super Blend every so often just to get their attention," Allen said, "and it's hard to argue with the success I've had. I usually take off a week during the peak of the rut, and we see a lot of activity."

GIVE THAT BUCK ANOTHER REASON TO MAKE A MISTAKE. THIS IS THE TIME TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HIM LETTING DOWN HIS GUARD.

By Mike Giles



MAKE SCENTS DURING

THE RUT





Last year, Allen stayed in the woods during the rut and harvested two great central Mississippi bucks that came to him like they were on an invisible string.

They were being pulled by an invisible deer attractant, a scintillating aroma.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that those bucks came to me because of (the scent),” Allen said. “The last few years, it has worked to bring in big bucks for me.”

SECRETS TO SCENT SUCCESS

“Over the years, the peak of the rut has moved back, but our seasons haven’t changed to adept to the new normal,” Paul Meek said. “When it’s 97 to 100 degrees in October, most folks just lose bow season, because (neither) the deer nor hunters like to move much in that weather. So it seems to me that the whole process gets moved back as the does come into heat later, which brings the bucks out of hiding much later, also.”

However, whenever the does start coming into estrous, the bucks will be ready and start running wild. Therein lies their weakness, according to Meek.

“People think that all the bucks just start rutting during a certain time,” Meek said. “It’s a big misconception, though, because those bucks are ready to rut when those horns come up on their head. When the does come into heat, the bucks start chasing them, and you see rutting activity. In my way of thinking, if you are the only doe in heat in the woods, then all of the bucks in the area will start chasing you; that’s just common sense.

“My favorite scent is the Super Blend,” Meek said. “It’s one-half doe-n-heat, one-quarter buck-n-rut and one-quarter tarsal scent for good measure. That mixture is a good pre-rut, rut and post-rut concoction that will work at any time because it excites that old buck’s breeding instinct.”

While bucks may be attracted by a whiff of the doe in heat scent, they’ll be challenged when they smell some of the rutting buck scent and the tarsal scent, which makes them think another buck is already on the scene and courting the female.

And you know what happens when guys start chasing the same female. Everybody vies for her attention, and it’s the same with bucks. One whiff, and they’re hot on the

Scents can be used to make a buck think there’s a receptive doe in the neighborhood; in most cases, the buck will be on the lookout for her. **OPPOSITE:** Big bucks rarely let their guard down, except when breeding overtakes their natural defenses.

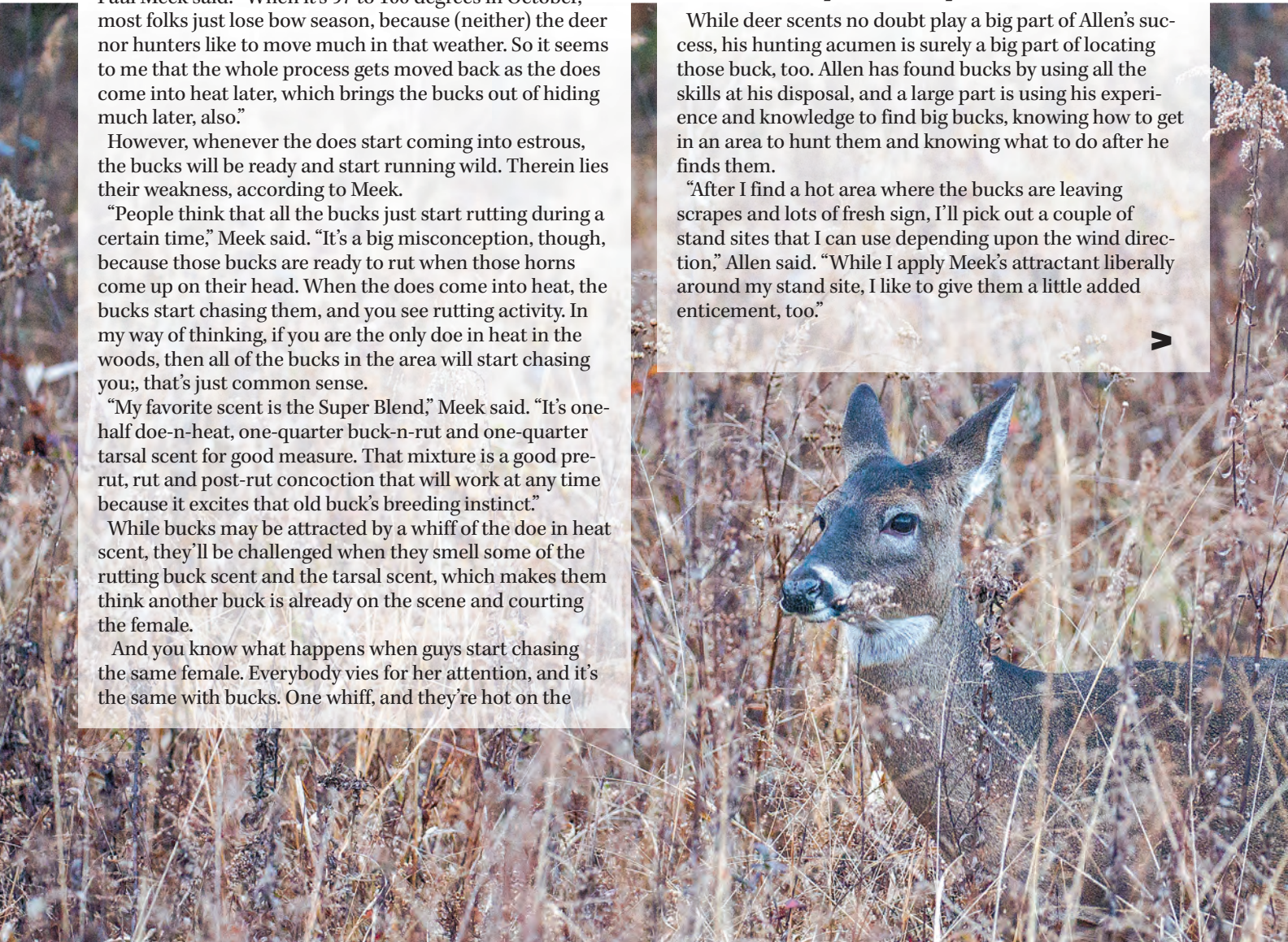
trail, and they don’t want to share the romance. The ensuing battles will be hard for all concerned, as big bucks will almost fight to the death trying to be her No. 1 guy.

Allen actually killed another 8-point buck that weighed about 195 and scored in the mid-140s. On Christmas day, he rattled and grunted up yet another nice 7-point and harvested him as well.

FIND ‘EM, SET UP, BRING ‘EM IN

While deer scents no doubt play a big part of Allen’s success, his hunting acumen is surely a big part of locating those buck, too. Allen has found bucks by using all the skills at his disposal, and a large part is using his experience and knowledge to find big bucks, knowing how to get in an area to hunt them and knowing what to do after he finds them.

“After I find a hot area where the bucks are leaving scrapes and lots of fresh sign, I’ll pick out a couple of stand sites that I can use depending upon the wind direction,” Allen said. “While I apply Meek’s attractant liberally around my stand site, I like to give them a little added enticement, too.”





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That added enticement is actually a grunt call that he uses in conjunction with the scents. Allen likes to use the grunt tube and grunt every so often to attract the buck's curiosity. While they can smell the scent from quite a ways, bucks that don't run into the scents may respond to grunts. It's been a winning combination for him.

Allen is a believer in hunting during the rut, as bucks will appear from their nocturnal world of thickets and hideouts for a brief period of time as their mating urge becomes too strong and overrides their survival instincts.

Allen is aware that his best chance of success at harvesting trophy bucks comes around the rut, and he's taken quite a few. Knowing where to hunt and locating big bucks is a critical component of harvesting one, but you must know what to do in order to outwit the wise old warriors.

THICKETS, SMZS, POWERLINES, CUTOVERS

Being in the right place at the right time is the key to locating bucks and harvesting the big boy. As my grandfather, J. P. Nolen, often said, "You've got to go regularly and be in the right place at the right time."

The way to be in the right place at the right time is to go often, and sooner or later, you'll find yourself in the right place at just the right time.

As an avid deer hunter with more than 40 years of experience, I've found several key locations that allow me to spot bucks chasing does during the rut. While hunters will occasionally catch a buck following a doe into a green field, most of the time you won't be so lucky.

In highly pressured hunting areas, most bucks are nocturnal and will spend their days in seclusion and time their arrivals to the green fields just after dark. Intercepting them on the way is a tried-and-true technique of many successful hunters.

By hunting power lines and cutovers, I've been successful at catching bucks trailing does through and across them. Many times, these areas will offer a little cover, and they can only be hunted from



The author likes to hunt streamside management zones, cutovers and powerline rights-of-way during the rut because they'll frequent them in their travels.



A dominant buck prepares to breed a receptive doe — a common occurrence when the peak of the rut arrives in Mississippi.

an elevated stand. Get up high and spend time in the stand when the rut is on, and you'll probably see a lot of activity during the day.

Two other areas are favorites of mine: thickets and stream-side management zones (SMZs). Bucks will travel in the middle of the thickets and secluded SMZs where there is not a lot of activity. Place your stands in these areas in the summer or early fall and stay out until the rut kicks in and the time is right. When you get a favorable wind, slip in and spend some time in the stand, but take every precaution to go in undetected — without leaving your scent. Many times, a trophy buck will be killed on the first time a hunter hunts the stand. They don't get old and big by making mistakes. ■



Mike Giles of Meridian has been hunting and fishing Mississippi since 1965. He is an award-winning wildlife photographer, writer, seminar speaker and guide.

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A slightly quartering-away shot yielded perfect shot placement on this buck a few weeks ago, resulting in a short, easy to follow blood trail.

SHOT PLACEMENT IS NO. 1 CONCERN

Sammy Romano

LEARN YOUR TARGET'S ANATOMY, PRACTICE SHOTS FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES TO MAKE THEM ALWAYS FATAL

At least once a day this time of year, a customer walks into the archery shop and asks “Which broadhead that you sell is the most deadly?”

My answer is always the same: “There is not a broadhead on our shelves that won’t kill a deer quickly with proper shot placement, but by the same token, none of them will kill quickly if at all with poor shot placement.”

In our modern world of high-tech gizmos and gadgets, we have come to expect easy fixes and instant gratification. When it comes to clean humane kills, however, there is no magic bullet that will make up for a poorly placed shot.

One of the hardest skills for a beginning bowhunter is to transition from shooting dots on a target to shooting at a live animal. Learning how to “pick a spot” when there is no clear aiming point is very different from aiming at a well-defined bulls’-eye. Even with a perfectly placed shot, an animal often travels some distance, but better shot placement leads to a much shorter and easier to follow

blood trail. Understanding how an arrow kills, as well as a thorough knowledge of your target’s anatomy, are keys to proper shot placement and therefore a successful outcome to your hunt.

Unlike a bullet, which often kills by shock, an arrow kills by hemorrhage and or suffocation. Because an animal usually runs out of oxygen more quickly than it bleeds to death, the best shot placement is always a double-lung shot. Animals shot through both lungs quickly expire and are usually found within 75 yards of the shot location.

FIND THE LUNGS

The lungs also offer a much larger target than most other vital organs, with the heart and liver are in close proximity for arrows that are slightly off their mark. Single lung shots are often fatal — but not always — and with one lung still working, the animal can travel a long way before expiring. For this reason, it is best to shoot at animals that are broadside or slightly quartering away from the hunter. These angles offer the largest profile of both lungs, resulting in higher-

percentage odds for a quick, clean kill. Lower stand heights also provide a much larger profile of the lungs.

The heart on a white-tailed deer is situated just behind the front leg and low in the chest cavity. Heart-shot deer will often travel 75 to 150 yards after the shot, but they usually leave an ample, easily followed blood trail. The liver is just behind the diaphragm and is a vital shot, but deer through the liver often take much longer to expire.

One area to avoid is just below the spine. This “no man’s land” will result in a steady blood trail that gradually dries up, and although the animal often survives, it isn’t much comfort for anyone involved. Because of a deer’s tendency to flinch down at the shot, I typically aim at the top of the heart. That way, if the deer doesn’t react, I hit the heart and lungs,



Sammy Romano is a lifelong hunter who has worked in the archery industry for more than 25 years. His expertise includes compounds and crossbows. He can be reached at samboka31@aol.com.

and if it does, I hit it through both lungs. Either will result in a short blood trail.

THINK IN 3 DIMENSIONS

Angled shots, whether due to a quartering animal or an elevated shooting position, require the archer to think in three dimensions. A good rule of thumb is to always think of where you want the arrow to exit the deer. This requires a bit of visualization since you cannot see the other side of the animal, but it will always result in proper shot placement. On broadside or animals quartering away very slightly, I always aim to exit behind the offside shoulder. This usually guarantees a complete pass-through yielding a much better blood trail. On animals that are quartering away at a larger angle, I shift my aim to impact the offside shoulder itself as the angle increases. While this usually prevents a pass-through, it increases the likelihood of a double-lung shot providing an even better angle on the vitals.

Before heading into the field, every archer should practice shooting at a 3-D deer target from different angles to become comfortable and proficient at proper shot placement. Be honest with yourself about the potential lethal nature of your practice shots. Practice until you are certain you can make a double-lung shot for a quick, clean kill.

As bowhunters, we answer to a higher standard, and we owe it to the animals we hunt to make the best shots we possibly can. If you have any question about a shot or just don't feel confident, let down and "live to hunt another day." There's always next time. ■

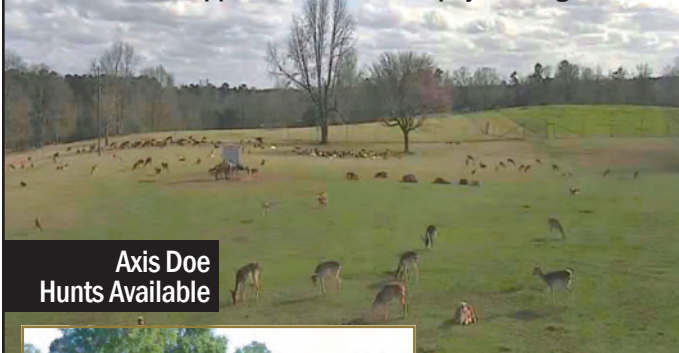


Shot through both lungs at a quartering-away angle, this buck killed by the author didn't go far and left a good blood trail.

Sammy Romano

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The author shot this doe under a Nuttall oak he internet scouted first.

INTERNET SCOUTING FOR NUTTALL OAK TREES

FIND POTENTIAL HUNTING HOTSPOTS BEFORE YOU EVER GET INTO THE WOODS, EVEN JUST TO SCOUT

I spend several hours every week looking at maps online, because when I'm not in the woods, it's the next best thing. Learning how to find oak trees from the internet is a trick that can be learned by carefully studying aerial maps. My passion of map hunting has resulted in harvesting many deer and hogs under specific trees I've first found on my computer or phone.

Before I take any trips to new areas, I always study the official maps for boundaries and public roads. Then, I scour the area using Google Earth or the satellite feature on Google Maps for potential hunting locations such as pinch-points, funnels, logged areas, ridges, water holes and sloughs. Most important, I compare and contrast the tree tops and their colors to locate food trees.

NUTTALL OAK TREES

My favorite riverbottom tree to hunt is a Nuttall oak, *Quercus nutallii*; Nuttalls are large red oaks that drop large, striped acorns throughout the fall and winter

and even into the spring. Deer visit various food sources at the start of the hunting season, but as these food sources dwindle, the Nuttall acorns become a favorite snack for all woodland critters.

Several years ago, during my first year of online tree hunting, I spotted two isolated Nuttall oaks using Google. They were in a section of woods I had never visited. After an initial scouting trip — I found many chewed up acorns — I knew it was the perfect spot for a hunt.

TWO HOGS

Later that winter, I climbed up next to those two oaks for the buck's-only season toting my .454 Casull revolver and rifle. Just minutes into the hunt, a big hog came out from behind me to feed on the tasty striped acorns. I filmed smoking that big pig with the pistol.

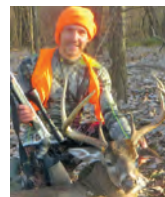
An hour later, I saw a deer moving through in the distance. I zoomed in with my scope and noticed it was just a spike. While watching him walk off through the scope, I heard a noise and spotted

another hog under the other Nuttall. I quickly blasted that boar with my .270, and it dropped in its tracks.

I was testing new copper bullets in both my pistol and rifle. Both made huge holes, passing through the hogs' thick shoulder plates. I had more than 400 pounds of pork using non-toxic ammo. To this day, the bones from those hogs remain under that big Nuttall tree where I cleaned them.

MAP SCOUTING

Finding Nuttalls online is fairly easy once the correct shade of lighter and brighter green is found on treetops that look taller and fuller than nearby trees. The bright, green color shows best on aerial photos taken during winter since most Nuttalls hold their green color much later into the



Joshua Chauvin is a health-focused ultramarathon runner who goes on solo manual-powered public land adventures focusing on hunting big game and large fish by using challenging methods and weapons. He enjoys self-filming and sharing the tactics and details from his expeditions to help others learn from his unique techniques.

year. This makes them pop into view when most trees nearby are bare of leaves or have dull colors.

The historic feature on Google Earth allows users to view older maps from different times of the year. Some of the older maps don't have great detail, but it's useful to see how river levels and drought conditions affect an area. Also, seeing when a cutover was logged allows me a good estimate of its age.

The easiest way to learn a specific type of tree is to stand under one of interest and then see what that treetop looks like on your phone, next to your location icon. Next, correlate historical map dates to find any distinguishing details to find others of that tree type.

I search maps, seeking lone, isolated Nuttalls or small groups of them near a cutover or natural funnel. Then, I translate the GPS coordinates into Garmin's GPS format and plug the points into my unit before a scouting trip. I can walk directly to each new tree, so I can visit more planned locations in less time. When not using a GPS unit, I use my phone in satellite map mode to track my location as I walk towards a desired treetop on the map.

IN THE FIELD

These trips are exciting to see all the spots I have found online really look like. Boots on the ground is the only way to know for sure if a tree is worth being hunted. Some years, a Nuttall will be full of tasty acorns, and other years, the deer and hogs won't be feeding at the same tree even though it's dropping many acorns. Even if the spot isn't productive one year, acorn crops rotate in cycles, so it may have a better acorn crop in the future.

continues >



This aerial map shows an isolated Nuttall tree circled in red, the author's first step in his scouting process.

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APEX PREDATOR

continued

When the acorns are numerous on a ridge filled with dozens of Nuttalls, careful inspection of each tree will reveal the best one to hunt. The animals will prefer a few particular trees to eat under. To figure out which has the tastiest acorns, I look for mostly cracked shells, turned up leaves and numerous animal droppings under one tree. A hot oak will be filled with deer droppings, old and fresh.

I have my best action under large, giant oaks or small, young oaks near or in previously logged areas.

A DOE

Two seasons ago, I visited a new patch of small Nuttalls I saw on the internet in a place I hadn't hunted before. My wife went stalking hogs, while I grabbed my bow to scout the area. I toted in my climber, unsure if I was going to use it or not.

After seeing the ground around one of the smallest Nuttall trees filled with animal sign and turned-up leaves, I knew I had to get elevated right there. The only problem was, the best tree to hunt from was a tiny honey locust only 10 yards downwind. I remember getting all poked up and bloody as I climbed that tree to sat at an uncomfortable downward angle.

The author took these two hogs hunting near the base of the mature Nuttall oak tree he's leaning against.



The discomfort didn't last very long. An hour later, a group of does started making their way to me from the thick cutover nearby. They were coming in to feed at that hot tree. I was able to down the biggest doe from the group with a 15-yard shot.

My wife shot a hog, and was wondering why it was taking me so long to get back that night. I had cleaned and quartered my animal in the woods, so I didn't have to make two long hikes to that new deep spot. That was a good thing since we still had to look for her pig.

Seeking new hunting spots is always more fun than hunting the same boring locations each season. With millions of acres of public land to scout, online tree hunting has endless possibilities making it a type of sport in and of itself. ■

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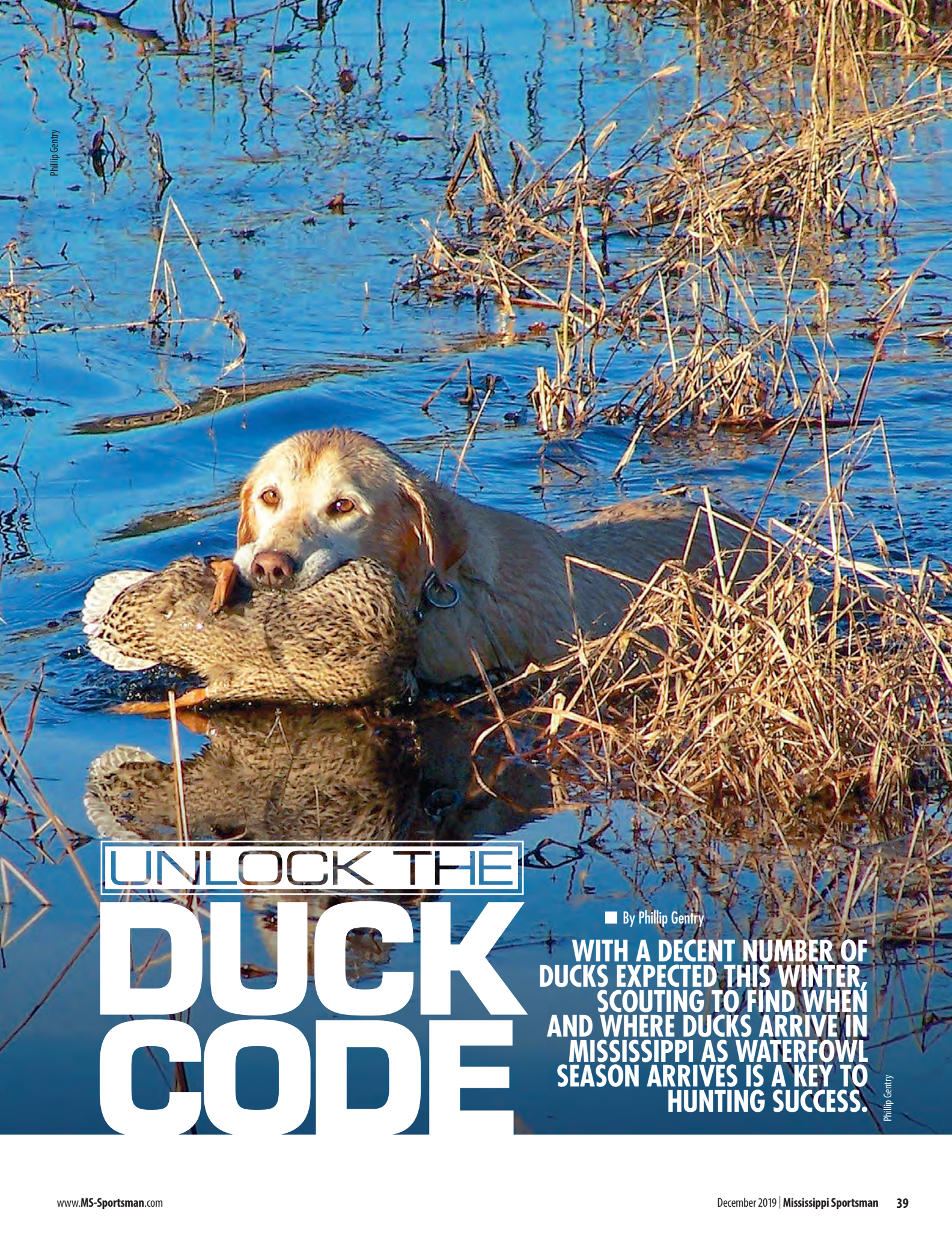
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UNLOCK THE

DUCK CODE

■ By Phillip Gentry

WITH A DECENT NUMBER OF DUCKS EXPECTED THIS WINTER, SCOUTING TO FIND WHEN AND WHERE DUCKS ARRIVE IN MISSISSIPPI AS WATERFOWL SEASON ARRIVES IS A KEY TO HUNTING SUCCESS.

B

ased on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's waterfowl population status report, released several months ago, hunters in Mississippi and along the Mississippi Flyway are forecast to have slightly lower numbers of ducks this season compared to last season, but still slightly higher numbers than the long-term average.

The biggest indicator was wetter-than-average conditions across the duck breeding grounds up north that historically supply the Mississippi Flyway. No one who lives or works anywhere near the Mississippi Delta would argue with that, but now that conditions have returned to relative normal, it's safe to say hunters have hope for a "typical" year — at least from a 10-year perspective.

Of course, hunters in the Magnolia State who plan on killing limits of ducks this year still have a lot of work in front of them to make sure they are in the right place at the right time.

Phillip Cagle of White Oak Hunting Services in Tunica County said that once ducks begin making their way down the Mississippi Flyway, scouting is probably the No. 1 key to unlocking the duck code.

What separates his efforts from those of the average duck hunter is that he puts plenty of scouting time in before the season opens and between hunts to insure he stays in contact with migrating flocks of birds.

"I burn up a lot of diesel in my truck checking all the holes that I know are likely to hold ducks," he said. "Scouting from a distance is great. You don't bother the ducks, and it gives you a view of the big picture. You can see where they are coming from and where they are going to."

Cagle said he doesn't have the luxury of viewing his green-timber hunting spots from afar. He can't see the forest for the trees, so to speak, and what's worse is, he can't see the birds for the trees.

"You gotta go in the timber to find ducks," he said. "The bad part is, if you go in there on the afternoon before the next morning's hunt, you'll blow them out, and they may not get back in time for you to hunt them."

Veteran hunter Torch Tindle from Coahoma said it's extremely important to have a number of different areas to hunt, because not all areas will hold birds, and not all areas will hold birds the entire season.



It's more difficult to scout small, secluded duck holes in timber that wood ducks frequent, but it's still a good idea.



Phillip Gentry

Unlock the duck code

Bluebird days are definitely better hunting days as bright sunshine helps conceal hunters from eyes above.

“We hunt what I call the ‘local birds’ the first couple of weekends,” he said. “Mostly gadwall, late-season teal, and a few mallards will stay in some of our deep-water timber holes year-round. Then, right before Christmas, we’ll start to get the migratory greenheads once the fronts start pushing them down. Later, we’ll get some pintails, redheads and an assortment of just about everything.”

Tindle hunts places ranging from flooded crop fields to standing timber swamps, plus a variety of sloughs, breaks and ditches.

“It’s like fishing,” said Tindle, who’s also an avid crappie fisherman. “There are places they’re going to be and places they aren’t. The key is figuring out where they want to be and go there.”

Rusty Shaw of Crowder, who runs a part-time water-fowl guide service, said the available food sources for ducks that are migrating south come from local agriculture production. Rice and soybeans are produced locally, as well as some other grains that ducks use. Shaw’s strategy is to set up in locations between these feeding areas to catch ducks moving back and forth.

“Most of these sloughs or brakes are narrow and may be less than 100 acres in size,” he said. “It creates a good resting space. Ducks go out and feed in the early morning or feed all night, then they’ll come into these breaks to rest.”



Phillip Gentry

Current weather patterns are also at the top of Shaw’s list in importance. It takes cold weather up north to move ducks south, but local weather is also a factor.

Shaw said that the difference between hunting a cloudy, drizzly day and a bright day is that ducks can see better in overcast conditions. Cloud cover tends to make them fly a little lower, but it also makes it hard for ducks to see his spreads. Bright sun shining off the water highlights decoy movement as well as blinding the ducks from picking out hunters.

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Even small areas can be great duck holes for birds moving between feeding sites.

Phillip Gentry



“On a bluebird day, you don’t have to limit your movement,” he said. “The trees are creating shadows, and the ducks can’t see you as well. On a cloudy day, they can see everything. The least little movement, they can see it.”

An interesting note not officially reported in the USFWS counts was a bumper crop of wood ducks in Wisconsin observations. While wood ducks aren’t known for making predictable migrations similar to other ducks, having 25% more wood ducks than normal should be an indicator than more than a few will find their way down the flyway this season. ■



Phillip Gentry is a veteran outdoor writer who catches everything that swims but specializes in crappie, catfish and striped bass.

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Unlock the duck code

Creating a duck impoundment that can be planted and flooded is a great way to bring the ducks to your shotgun.

BUILD YOUR OWN DUCK HOLE

Hunters who own or lease land but have no water can remedy that situation by creating their own duck impoundment.

The first step is testing the soil to see if it will hold water rather than allow it to seep back into the ground. The U.S. Geological Survey website has an online reference guide available, or landowners can take in samples for testing. Then, after reviewing a topo map of the area to determine how to lay the impoundment out, it's just a matter of deciding how big you want to go.

Mark Shepherd owns Aquatic Weed Management, a company that specializes in the construction of ponds and small impoundments; he has completed a number of projects for landowners wanting to create their own duck hunting spots.



Phillip Gentry

"We use a basic setup of a 3- to 5-foot dike on the lower end, then dig a ditch around the interior outline of the pond," Shepherd said. "Some hunters don't like having a ditch, but it makes it much easier to drain and dry so you can plant it. We mark crossovers so nobody steps in a hole while hunting, and having a ditch makes it necessary to pump water."

Shepherd uses a pump-and-well system to draw water to flood his impoundments. The water fills the perimeter ditch, then spills over into a field that he prefers to plant with rows of corn and chufa. It is possible to borrow water from a nearby creek, but it's not as reliable a water source as the well system.

"There's nothing like going into the pump house and flipping a switch in late October," he said. "You can go from dove field or deer stand to duck pond in just a few days."

A private impoundment also provides the luxury of building permanent blinds. He said calling birds is more habit than necessity since ducks are coming to eat and his blinds are right in the middle of the flooded crops. Interestingly, Shepherd relies on decoys more before the season than after the shooting starts.

"We use a bunch of decoys to get them to notice our pond when they first get down to our area," he said. "After that, we'll move them around before each hunt. (On) most of these impoundments, we'll also have a couple hundred birds drop in and roost here every night. The trick with them is to try to get hunters around the pond and set before those ducks leave at daylight — if one guy steps foot in the pond before legal light, he'll run all of them out before a shot can be fired." ■

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As hunters huddled in the frosty blind, a flock of gadwalls rocketed high over the reclaimed catfish pond and circled, deciding whether to land or not.

Surely, the 150 mallard decoys that had been spread over every square inch of the pond since late October would attract these birds.

The ducks circled again, scrutinizing the decoy spread before kicking in afterburners without committing to land. Seeing something they didn't like, they flew over the old fallow field and eventually settled into a soggy pothole in the corner of an adjacent field.

Disgruntled hunters cursed their luck and asked each other, "What happened? Why didn't they lock up to land?"

Too often, similar scenarios play repeatedly during duck season. After running a gauntlet of gunfire from Canada to the Gulf Coast, migrating waterfowl learn to recognize every tantalizing decoy spread imaginable. Mallards, pintails, gadwall and wigeons don't grow old by acting stupid.

Today, with fewer ducks and more hunters competing for limited hunting territory, successful waterfowlers need to reach deep into their decoy sack of tricks to fool sharp-eyed old birds.

DECOY SPECIES MATTER >

USE THESE TIPS TO KEEP DUCKS FALLING INTO YOUR DECOY SPREAD, EVEN AFTER THEY'VE BEEN EDUCATED BY HUNTERS FARTHER UP THE FLYWAY.

By John Felsher

DECOYS 101



DECOY SPECIES MATTER

For starters, consider the decoy species. On any given day, hunters might lure in a few birds with just about any type of decoy, but the most-successful sportsmen pick the species known to inhabit that particular area. For instance, in flooded timber, sportsmen might use more mallard, green-winged teal and wood duck decoys; in marshes, rice fields and ponds, bring gadwalls, pintails and wigeons decoys, while diving-duck dekes should be used in large lakes or coastal bays.

“Where we hunt, we get a good variety of ducks,” said Jacob Sartain of Madison, who hunts the Mississippi Delta near Greenville. “I like to mix up my duck species, but that mostly depends upon what I find in scouting. I use decoy types that correspond with the types of birds I see when scouting.

“If I see a lot of mallards in an area, I’ll use mallard decoys. If I see mostly gadwalls in an area, I’ll come back with mostly gadwall decoys, but I may use some other decoys, as well, just to give the spread some diversity.”

Across North America, a majority of hunters probably use mallard decoys. Since so many people use them, ducks might equate bobbing green heads with death. Varying the species of decoys can help. A few teal might reassure spooked ducks.

Even if birds cannot discern the paint job from high altitude or in low-light conditions, they can detect size differences between mallards and teal.

In coastal marsh pot holes, sportsmen might want to use mallard hen decoys to simulate mottled ducks instead of greenheads. Mottled ducks generally stick to themselves and typically travel in pairs. They might land on the opposite side of a pond but typically won’t land in the middle of a decoy spread. Supplement the main spread with two or three pairs of mallard hens placed next to each other at diverse places in the pond.

Although many sportsmen hold spoonbills or shovelers in low regard, decoys representing these species can work effectively. Since so few people use shoveler decoys, ducks learn to associate flocks of these birds with safety.

“People laughed at me when I started putting out shoveler decoys, but they are colorful ducks,” veteran guide Charles “Hammertime” Snapp said. “Birds can see the colors and

their big, wide bills. Ducks aren’t used to seeing shoveler decoys. All kinds of ducks come to shoveler decoys.”

COLORS MATTER

Other decoys with splashes of white — pintails, canvasbacks or wigeons, for example — provide good flash in the spreads and stand out when birds lock up on final approach. Ironically, though, darker colors create more silhouettes, making them highly visible from long distances over rice fields or marsh country.

“White decoys like pintails are highly visible up close, but from a distance, ducks can more easily see black decoys than white ones,” Sartain said. “Black has a lot more reflection power off the water at a distance; that’s why I like to use dark decoys, like hen mallards and gadwalls, but I also use some whiter decoys to give ducks more comfort up close.”

Sportsmen can add more color to mallard decoys. Few floating duck decoys come with feet, but from the air, those big, orange, webbed mallard toes glow like beacons in clear water. Glue a 3- to 4-inch strip of orange ribbon to each side of a mallard decoy to simulate legs kicking in the water. A small weight added to the end of the ribbon will keep them down.

WHERE THEY GO

Next on the list of tricks is effective decoy placement. Many old-time, traditional hunters suggest setting decoys in V, Y, J, L or I patterns. That works, but don’t fret so much over the shape. In the wild, ducks group in pairs or clusters and constantly swim back and forth, obliterating any tidy patterns.

Instead, arrange similar species together in small bunches or pairs. For instance, place several teal in a tight, little wad off to one side, close to the grass. Put some gadwalls on the other side of the blind. Add a few diving ducks in open water at extreme range to serve as shooting markers. Regardless of pattern, leave enough open water in the best shooting zone to give newcomers a place to land,



Group decoys by species in small clusters and leave plenty of spots for incoming birds to land, not in any particular pattern.



Mallards may be among the most-popular species for duck hunters, but don't let them dominate your decoy spread.

right at optimum range.

"I like to build two different blocks of decoys with a landing zone in the middle where the hunters hide," Sartain said. "I put decoys in the shape of a V or a Y so I can work the ducks right into the landing area where the hunters are in position."

"I always like to position some decoys in shallow water right near the shoreline so it looks like ducks feeding near the grass. We'll string the decoys out from there to lead the birds into the landing zone."

Ducks typically land facing into the wind, so put decoys downwind of the blind or leave a zone where birds can land into the wind. Whenever possible, set up spreads so incoming birds must look into the rising or setting sun behind the hiding sportsmen. The sun turns hunters into silhouettes and forces birds to look elsewhere — outside of the blind!

LAY OF THE LAND ➤

HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
Doves	Sept. 1-Oct. 6 (n), Sept. 1-15 (s)	15	45
	Oct. 19-Nov. 16 (n), Oct. 5-Nov. 6 (s)		
	Dec. 21-Jan. 14 (n), Dec. 21-Jan. 31 (s)		
Quail	Nov. 28-March 7	8	
Rabbit	Oct. 12-Feb. 28	8	
Squirrel (fall)	Oct. 1-Feb. 28	8	
Squirrel (spr)	May 15-June 1	4	
Raccoon	July 1-Sept. 30	1 raccoons per party	
Rac/Opp/Bobct	Oct. 1-Oct. 31 (food/sport)	5/day, 8/party	
	Nov. 1-Feb. 28 (food/sport/pelt)	No limit	
Rails			
King & Clapper	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 22-Dec. 31	15	45
Sora & Virginia,	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 22-Dec. 31	25	75
Gallinules	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 22-Dec. 31	15	45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28	8	24
Crow	Nov. 2 - Feb. 28	No limit	No limit
Woodcock	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31	3	9
Wild Turkey			
Fall season	Oct. 15-Nov. 15 (selected counties)	2 per season (may be either sex)	
Spring season	March 14-May 1	1/day, 3/season, longbeards only	
Youth season	March 7-13	1/day, 3/season, bearded birds only	

WATERFOWL SEASONS

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
Duck	Teal only: Sept. 14-30	6
	Nov. 29-Dec. 1, Dec. 6-Jan. 31	6
Geese	Sept. 1-30	5
(Canada, blue, Ross, white-fronted, brant)	Nov. 11-24, Nov. 29-Jan. 1, Dec. 6-Jan. 31	Canada 3, Brant 1 Snow/blue/Ross 20 White-fronted 3
Light Geese conservation	Oct. 1-Nov. 10, Feb. 1-7, Feb. 9-March 31	No limit

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
Northeast	Oct. 1-Nov. 22	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 23-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 11-22 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 17-31 (archery/primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 22(dogs) Nov. 9-22 (youth)
East Central	Oct. 1-Nov. 22	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 23-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 11-22 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 17-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 22(dogs) Nov. 9-22 (youth)
Southwest	Oct. 1-Nov. 22	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 23-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Nov. 11-22 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Jan. 17-31 (archery-primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan.16(dogs) Nov. 9-Jan. 22 (youth)
Southeast	Oct. 15-Nov. 22	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 23-Dec. 1 (dogs)
	Jan. 23-31 (either-sex arch-primitive)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	Feb. 1-15 (archery-primitive bucks only)		Dec. 24-Jan. 16(dogs) Nov. 3-Feb. 15(youth)
Delta*	Oct. 1-Nov. 22	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 23-Jan. 1 (dogs)
	(See www.mdwfp.com Nov. 11-22 (antlerless primitive weapon)		Dec. 16-23 (no dogs)
	for details on special Jan. 22-31 (archery primitive weapon)		Dec. 24-Jan. 22(dogs) Nov. 9-22 (youth)
	Oct. 15-Jan. 5 South Delta Season)		

LAY OF THE LAND

Geography often determines decoy patterns. For instance, hunters on large reservoirs completely surround their blinds with several hundred decoys. On rivers, islands and sandbars can block the current, creating eddies where ducks can land. Place decoys in slack water downstream of islands, points or other obstructions.

When hunting a point, throw decoys on both sides and a few out front. With water on three sides, sportsmen can pick off birds attempting to land into the wind from various directions.

Sportsmen hunting flooded timber should scatter some mallard decoys around their positions. Put some decoys in the timber pothole and some greenheads back in the woods in heavy cover so incoming birds see ducks throughout the timber.

Hunters venturing onto large, coastal waters require immense spreads. In open water, diving ducks like redheads, scaup, ring necks and canvasbacks frequently congregate in huge rafts, so sportsmen need plenty of decoys to pull in birds from long distances.

"I usually put out about 150 decoys," said guide Robert Brodie, who often hunts the Mississippi Sound out of Biloxi. "I use about 40% redheads, 40% scaup and 20% canvasback decoys. Although we only shoot a few canvasbacks, the white coloration of the drake decoys is highly visible from long distances. I'll also use a few mallard, teal, pintail and gadwall decoys.

"I use a lot of magnum-sized decoys, extremely oversized birds that ducks can detect from farther off than standard decoys. I put these on the edge of the spread and include some big bufflehead decoys."

When setting out a decoy spread, put several out close to the bank to simulate ducks eating aquatic vegetation.



Shovellers are great ducks to include in a decoy spread, because most incoming birds won't be wary of their presence.

MOTION MATTERS

Whether hunting in the woods, a marshy pothole, rice field or open water, adding a little motion to a static spread can help bring in birds. More than a decade ago, the electronic decoy phenomenon swept the waterfowl world as companies scrambled to create battery-powered birds with spinning wings or swimming and diving motion. These devices worked, but perhaps lost some effectiveness as so many hunters started using them.

But motion decoys still have their place.

"Putting movement in the decoy spread is essential to convince ducks to land," Sartain said. "Ducks can fly by still decoys and figure out pretty quickly that they are not alive. Many people use spinning-wing decoys, but I'm not really fond of them; ducks see them from the time they leave Canada until they reach the Gulf Coast.

"Some days, I use spinning-wing decoys, especially when I'm using several hundred decoys. Spinning-wing decoys are very effective when hunting in the woods."

Always deploy a spinning-wing or other mechanical decoy off to one side out in the pond, never directly in front of the blind. The motion draws the attention of birds coming in to land, making them focus their attention away from the blind so they don't see any moving hunters.

To add realistic movement to decoys without placing mechanicals in the spread, some waterfowlers install small electric motors in select dekes to make them vibrate and send ripples across the water.

Other people deploy jerk cords, which consist of one or more decoys anchored to the bottom and tied to a string stretching back to the blind. Pulling the string makes the decoys bob up and down, creating lifelike rippling in the water.



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CONFIDENCE COUNTS

The presence of imitation shore birds like herons and egrets is a confidence builder for ducks coming into decoys.

CONFIDENCE COUNTS

Confidence decoys can complete the illusion of sanctuary. Place one or two heron or white egret decoys along a far shoreline to add color. Ducks get used to seeing herons and know they don't like to hang around people with shotguns. In places frequented by coots, a small raft of coot decoys in open water at extreme shotgun range might also bring in extra birds.

As the season progresses, large duck concentrations break up into small flocks. Except on big waters, massive rafts in late season usually mean decoys. As birds become more decoy shy, use fewer blocks and try to hunt puddlers in smaller places.

While hunters no longer use live decoys or trained birds, sportsmen today can still find many ways to fool wary waterfowl. Add a few surprises to the decoy spread this winter to keep ducks guessing. ■



John N. Felsler is a professional freelance writer and photographer with more than 1,700 articles in more than 117 magazines to his credit.



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WINTER DRAWDOWNS OFFER CRAPPIE FISHERMEN A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO CATCH FISH IN SOMEWHAT RESTRICTED AREAS OF FLOOD-CONTROL RESERVOIRS. HERE'S HOW TO GET IN ON THE ACTION.

■ By Phillip Gentry

Courtesy JH Guide Service

WHEN THE WATER FALLS...



CRAPPIE FISHERMEN

who spend time chasing their favorite quarry on flood-control impoundments understand that reservoir water levels are never the same on a year-round basis. Whether because of spring rains, periods of drought or manipulation by authorities, the water in a reservoir can be overflowing in the spring and nearly empty in the winter.

John Harrison of Calhoun City, a crappie-fishing guide on Grenada Lake, not only understands these changes, but he looks forward to fishing flood-control reservoirs during either extreme — in the spring when crappie go as far back into the woods as the water will allow them, and during the winter when the plug is pulled and nearly all the water drains out.

According to Harrison, getting to the fish during the winter drawdown is most of the battle. Before he can make a cast, he has to figure out how to get to the water. Dropping water levels, from drawdown and/or drought or both, make many conventional boat launches inaccessible. When he finds a place where he can put a boat in the water, he may not be able to navigate from Point A to Point B.

"I wear a good pair of chest waders, and I'm obviously fishing out of a smaller boat than I normally use during the spring, summer and fall," said Harrison, who runs JH Guide Service. "When that water starts dropping, it pulls the crappie out of the flat areas and draws everything into the lower areas — typically creek channels, ditches and the main-lake basin in front of the dam. But along the way, a lot of fish will get trapped in a deep hole or ditch. Those are the crappie I want to get to."

Crappie tend to follow one of two extremes during the winter drawdown, but there's both rhyme and reason to these movements.

"A lot of fish will go straight out in front of the dam," said Harrison (662-983-5999). "But here's what you need to understand about crappie this time of year: they're hungry, and they know they need to stock up before it gets real cold. At the same time, shad are attracted to moving water — water that's coming down the creeks. During the early part of the winter, crappie will gorge themselves on shad, and they'll either follow the bait upcurrent or they'll stick with them in deeper pools and eddies of the river and get caught when the water goes down."

To get to crappie trapped along a river channel, Harrison will motor as far as he can in his 15-foot john boat. Then, he may have to get out and pull the boat through shallow water that he can't navigate. In other areas, he may use a small pirogue or kayak and paddle the shallow-draft boat downstream, fishing as he goes. At other times, he may skip the boat altogether and use an ATV to drive across the mud flats to get to deeper holes.

When the water falls...

OPPOSITE: In order to get to crappie that may become stranded in a creek run, Harrison opts to fish from a smaller john boat over his regular spring and summer rig.

Once he reaches the crappie, the fishing is similar to catching fish in a barrel. While he may troll for crappie with multiple rods when the water is higher, during the drawdown, he takes only one or two poles.

"I'm vertical-jigging, I use an 11-foot B'n'M jig pole," he said. "I use 6-pound line and a 1/8-ounce jighead with a soft-plastic, paddletail body. The fishing area is reduced, so I want to make sure I put that jig in every place that might hold a crappie."

Harrison said most structure will be out of the water, but he said that a lot of the old stumps that line the river channel will be imbedded in the river bank. The roots and bases of the stumps will be in the water, where the current has exposed the wood — and that's where the crappie will be. Any other kind of wooden structure will also hold fish, and it's possible to catch three or four fish on each piece, then move on to the next one.

Philip Gentry



Philip Gentry

"I have been so far up the river that I couldn't fish a shallow spot from the boat," he said. "In that case, I also want to make sure I bring along a good casting rod that I can use to cast a jig under a cork and work the other side of the pool that I can't get to." ■

SHOOT DOCKS IN WINTER ➤

As the water recedes, crappie will be drawn off the flats and into major creeks and tributaries that feed the lake, often getting trapped in shallow runs. **INSET:** Harrison's bait of choice is a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce jighead paired with a paddletail body.

SHOOT DOCKS IN WINTER

In spring and summer, boat docks provide structure, cover and food in a variety of water depths in order for crappie to find comfortable water temperatures. Pro angler Kent Driscoll said the same in the winter, which is why he shoots docks so often.

While many of Mississippi's larger reservoirs are neither deep nor dock-fishing friendly, shooting is a great way to target crappie in both big and small lakes that feature boat docks.

The technique is simple. Using a light spinning rod, let out enough line that you can grasp the jig with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and use the index finger of the other hand to snub the line to the rod. Be careful where the point of the hook is near the reel and pull until the rod tip bows over. Aim at the spot and release the jig and line at the same time, "shooting" the jig back under the dock.

In the winter, Driscoll forgoes docks that span shallow water and looks for larger ones covering deeper water.

"Winter docks are definitely deep docks, depending on where you are and what lake you are fishing," Driscoll said. "When I say deep, we're talking 30, 40, 50 feet deep. The deeper docks are, honestly, a little bit easier to fish than the shallow docks. The fish aren't as spooky. I usually see the fish spend the winter in the deeper water."

Finding the right dock to fish in the winter doesn't mean checking every dock with multiple casts until you find crappie. Driscoll fires up his sonar unit and spends the first part of the day scanning boat docks. With today's side-imaging technology, half the battle is won simply by locating fish.

"The key with today's electronics is just scanning these docks," he said. "We've gotten to the point now we can ride by a dock, look under the dock and tell if it holds fish or not. I'll see exactly where those fish are, where they're positioned, how deep they are. Are they relating to the poles or the beams? Is there a boat lift? Is there structure underneath the dock? You can see it all."

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The advertisement features a large image of a duck boat with a thatched roof and a smaller image of a blue bass boat. The text is overlaid on the images in a bold, white font with black outlines. The background of the bottom half of the ad has a green, textured pattern resembling a crocodile's skin.

The same characteristics that make a boat dock attractive to a crappie in the spring and summer also apply during the winter for docks over deep water.

Once the angler locates fish, getting a bait to them with an appealing presentation is not as easy as it sounds. Most boat docks are considered fair game, free to fish from a boat, but likely trespassing if an angler steps onto or even touches the dock. That's where shooting docks comes in to play.

"Everybody knows the most-productive docks are usually the hardest ones to get to," he said. "It's kind of like bowhunting. Dock-shooting is all about being very precise and placing that jig in the right spot, getting it in the strike zone and keeping it there for the fish."

Driscoll suggests that anglers lighten up on their line size during the winter, especially when shooting docks.

"Lighter line makes the bait look more natural, and even when the fish takes the bait, using lighter line won't provide the normal resistance that often causes crappie to spit the bait," he said.

Driscoll said most crappie anglers use 6- to 10-pound test during the spring and summer; he suggests dropping to no more than 6-pound and even 4-pound test in the winter. ■



Phillip Gentry is a veteran outdoor writer who catches everything that swims but specializes in crappie, catfish and striped bass.



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GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm



Photo courtesy Rick Dillard, USDA Forest Service

CRAPPIE CATCHABILITY

WHAT YOU CATCH DEPENDS LARGELY ON WHERE YOU FISH

Mississippi lakes and reservoirs are home to black and white crappies, and there are a few naturally produced hybrids swimming in their midst. Hybrid crappie — the offspring of mating between black and white crappies — are being investigated as a potential fish for stocking in small impoundments. Here's what is known about catchability of these fish.

Catchability is measured by dividing the angler catch by the number of fish in a population. Let's say a lake has equal numbers of catchable-sized black and white crappies. If anglers catch twice as many white crappies as black crappies, white crappies would have higher catchability.

WEIS LAKE, ALA.

This 28,000-acre Coosa River impoundment has abundant populations of black, white and hybrid crappies managed with a 10-inch minimum length limit.

Hybrid crappies grow much faster than black or white crappies, and therefore, reach harvestable size sooner. If all three sub-species had equal catchability, harvest would tend to select hybrid crappies

because they would enter the fishery at a younger age and possibly result in long-term changes in the composition of the crappie populations and angler catch.

To assess their catchability, researchers at Auburn University compared the relative abundance of the three in trap-net and electrofishing samples — assumed to be reliable indicators of the actual abundance of the crappies — with the relative abundance of the three caught by anglers. Relative abundance is the proportion of each type of crappie in the catch with fishery sampling gears and in the angler catch. Genetic analysis was performed to ensure correct identification of each fish.

The proportion of black crappies caught by anglers was greater than the proportion in fishery sampling, and the proportion of white crappies in the anglers' catch was less than in fishery samples. The relative abundance of hybrid crappies in the angler catch was similar to the fishery samples. Thus, black crappies had higher catchability than white crappies, and hybrid crappies had intermediate catchability.

Despite the differences in catchability,

the survival rates of each type did not differ, and the angler catch did not appear to be affecting the composition of the crappie assemblage. This was especially informative, because a much-higher proportion of the faster-growing hybrid crappies were large enough to be harvestable. The lack of an effect of angling on the composition of the crappie assemblage may be due to only a moderate amount of exploitation in this large reservoir.

MISSISSIPPI LAKES

Mississippi's large reservoirs contain primarily white crappies, while Tunica Cutoff — a Mississippi River flood-plain lake with abundant flooded brush — contains mostly black crappies.

Or so say the fishery assessments. But Keith Meals, the Mississippi



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

OPPOSITE: Although infrequent, hybrid crappies have faster growth rates than either parent. Note seven dorsal spines, characteristic of a black crappie, but faint vertical bars and prominent black spot on the operculum, characteristic of a white crappie.

Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks' crappie guru and flood-control reservoir biologist, shared that the fishery assessments may be biased. Black crappies orient more to brush and cover; white crappies tend to occupy open water. Trap-netting and electro-fishing in flooded brush tends to catch more black crappies, but sampling in open water or where brush is scarce tends to catch white crappies. Thus, water level and where samples are collected can affect the catch rates of the two crappie species in the fisheries sampling, possibly providing an incorrect assessment of the relative abundance of black and white crappies.

The relative abundance of the two species in the angler catch also depends on how anglers are fishing, according to Meals.

"Any more, 80% of crappie anglers are trolling, which is biased for white crappies since they are more (open water) predators," Meals said. "Black crappies are more likely to hold on sunken brush and timber. If we see someone anchored near a marker buoy fishing a brush top, they likely have black crappies in the box."

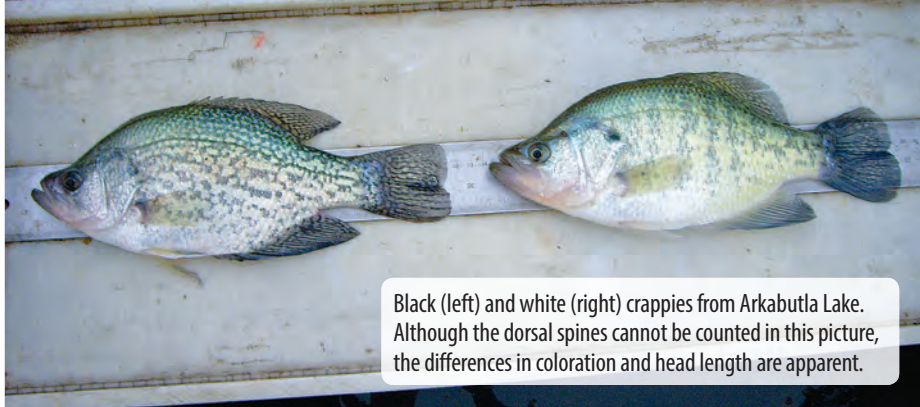
As elsewhere, hybrid crappies have a faster growth rate than black or white crappies in Mississippi waters, but they are less than 1% of the crappie community.

CATCHABILITY

Meals' observations about crappie habitat use presents potential problems for obtaining unbiased estimates of catchability for the different species of crappies and their hybrids. The Weiss Lake study was conducted in 1992 and 1993 before trolling became popular; nevertheless, when, where and how you sample crappies with fishery or fishing gear can affect estimates of catchability.

Indeed, crappie species may differ in catchability, but their inherent habitat-preference differences and angling methods strongly affect which crappie an angler catches.

What most anglers call "crappie fishing" is really fishing for two different species that often occupy different habitats and are caught different ways. Knowing what species of crappie you are catching may up your chances of filling the box. This can be especially important if the two species have different relative abundance or different population size structures. ■



Black (left) and white (right) crappies from Arkabutla Lake. Although the dorsal spines cannot be counted in this picture, the differences in coloration and head length are apparent.

Photo courtesy Keith Meals, MDWFP

WHICH CRAPPIE IS IT:

White crappies

- 5 or 6 spines in the spiny (front) part of the dorsal fin
- Lateral coloration (except for spawning males) dark vertical bars
- Prominent dark spot at top back edge of the operculum (gill cover)
- Head relatively long

Black crappies

- 7 or 8 spines in the spiny (front) part of the dorsal fin
- Lateral coloration (except for spawning males) scattered dark spots or spots in horizontal rows
- Black spot at the top back edge of the operculum (gill cover) faint or indistinct
- Head relatively short

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LURES AND TECHNIQUES FOR DECEMBER ON PICKWICK

AN ALABAMA RIG WILL PLAY A BIG ROLE IN LOADING THE BOAT THIS MONTH

The water is starting to cool off as December arrives, and the Alabama Rig seems to produce more bass in cooler water. Bass will be feeding heavily to prepare for the colder temperatures of January and February, and they may be suspended over deep water.

WHERE TO FISH IT?

The Alabama Rig is made of five different wires coming off a jighead that looks like a baitfish, on a device resembling an umbrella without its covering. The angler can attach a lure to each wire. Most often, I'll attach five swimbaits, but I'll also have an Alabama Rig ready to fish with a grub on each wire. The swimbaits and the grubs resemble a school of bait fish.

I like either a ¼- or ⅜-ounce head on my gray back/pearl sided swimbaits, depending on how deep I'll be fishing. The weight of the wires and the lures may be a total of 3 to 5 ounces. That's why I use a heavy action-plus, 7-foot-

10 FX custom rod, a 7:1 Bruin reel and 50-pound bass braid. Because the rod has a moderate-action tip, when you cast the Alabama Rig, the lure will go a long ways before it falls.

I'll begin fishing on the lower end of Pickwick around the dam, the lock and the barge tie-ups, and especially the ends and the sides of the lock walls. I'll use my Garmin Panoptix Livescope to spot bass that may be suspended. The lock wall goes all the way from the surface to the bottom. If bass are holding 30 feet deep, I'll cast, count it down to 10 and slow retrieve the rig. When bass are concentrating at 15 feet deep, I'll count to 5 and start slow reeling. My definition of a slow retrieve is somewhere between a very slow to a normal retrieve.

I like to fish the Alabama Rig in December because it produces some very exciting fishing, since you may catch five and perhaps six species: largemouth, smallmouth, spotted and white bass, stripers and an occasional catfish. You

also may catch two to three fish on the same rig at one time around the lock and dam. I've never caught five at one time, but I've caught four at one time. I recommend you use a dip net to get the fish in the boat and be very careful when unhooking them.

RIG THE RIPRAP

Next, I'll slow-roll the Alabama Rig and fish the dam's riprap, starting where the riprap ends on the bottom and moving to where the mud or the clay bottom begins: perhaps 15 to 20 feet deep. The bass may school where the rocks make a small underwater point or a big rock stands out from the other rocks on the riprap on the bottom.



Paul Elias of Laurel has fished 15 Bassmaster Classics with career winnings of over \$1 million, including one Bassmaster Classic Championship. Elias also holds the current record for a four-day BASS tournament weigh-in with 132 pounds, 8 ounces, on Falcon Lake in Texas.

FISH BLUFF BANKS

I'll fish several hours in the morning around the dam and the riprap with the Alabama Rig. Later on, I'll fish about 50 to 75 yards above the ends of the bluffs, slow-rolling an Alabama Rig around the bluffs and their ends and about 50 yards up in the creeks where the bluffs end.

Once the bite slows down, I'll fish a black back/chrome side jerkbait tied on a 6-foot-9, medium-fast tip FX custom rod with an 8:1 Bruin reel and 9-pound White Peacock fluorocarbon. I'll jerk the bait down and let it sit still for a 3 to 4 count. When I get the bait past the end of a bluff or the mouth of the creek, I'll reel the jerkbait in to where I'm fishing, but probably not all the way back to the boat.



Often, you'll find largemouth bass schooled up around the locks, the dam, the riprap and the bluff points at Pickwick in December.

I'll also have a drop-shot tied on a 7-foot-4, medium-action FX custom spinning rod with a spinning reel and 15-pound bass braid and a 10- to 12-foot section of 9-pound fluorocarbon leader. I'll use a ¼-ounce drop-shot weight on the end of my line and hook a watermelon red Mann's Jelly Bug 10 inches above that. I'll fish the drop shot from 5 to 20 feet deep on the ends of the bluffs.

In a day of fishing at Pickwick in December, I expect to catch 20 to 30 bass, but if you prefer to just reel in fish, you may catch 50 to 60 white bass and stripers and throw them back.

December on Pickwick is exciting and fun fishing. ■

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SPECKLED TRUTH

Chris Bush



TIME TO THINK BIG

IT TAKES A 'BIG' MINDSET, 'BIG' STRUCTURE, 'BIG' BAITS TO TARGET TROPHY SPECKS

It's no secret; I love big trout. Aside from talking about them, I love sharing pictures of them, but more important, I love targeting them.

A common question I get is, "What's the most important thing to know before targeting big fish?" As simple as that question seems, I could probably compose an hour-long dissertation highlighting the complexities of that pursuit, but I'll boil it down to two words: Think big!

Follow my logic for a second. I'm not just talking about lure profile, I'm also talking about mindset and structure.

BIG MINDSET

Mindset is first and most important, I believe. Having a "big" mindset helps manage expectation. It also helps frame the level of effort. I equate this to the BASS Elite Series, where the best anglers from around the world chase around for five bites in an 8-hour day. Knowing that

small fish won't win any money, they shift their mindset to target quality bites instead of quantity.

The same applies to fishing for trophy trout. If you're serious about looking for your personal best, you have to fish for your personal best. This often could mean fewer bites, but managing your expectations through a shift in mindset helps fill the void between fish. After all, it's about catching the one fish that could eat the other 25 you've been catching.

BIG STRUCTURE

The second point is structure. As we become comfortable fishing an estuary or location, it's easy to learn spots and become pleased with their productivity. From ledges and dropoffs to flats and bottom contour, it's easy to accentuate why some areas are more productive than others. The same holds true with big trout — but they don't want struc-

ture, they want "big" structure.

Think about your favorite fishing areas and consider why some spots hold bigger trout. It may be the time of year and the structure on the bottom (spawning). It may be a bayou draining into another bayou (current) or it may be something like dock pilings or a cement wall (structure/bait association).

To highlight my point, I'll use Mississippi's Gulf Coast as an example. Not only was I fortunate enough to call it home for many years, I got to see firsthand how targeting big structure can lead to big trout.

Mississippi's coast is unique: small but



Chris Bush is a U.S. Air Force officer and a licensed charter captain. He spends his time targeting big speckled trout and sharing knowledge on his website, *Speckled Truth*.

OPPOSITE: Big trout are out there for the taking, especially if you take measures to specifically target them.

very dynamic. It has rivers, beaches and I believe, most important, man-made structures. Gulfport Harbor, right in the middle of the coast, is an enormous man-made combine that provides not only structure but lots and lots of “big” structure. From steep, 20-foot drops to concrete pilings and large boulder banks, everything about it was larger than normal. In addition, it is on the fringe of the Mississippi Sound. This contributes to great tidal influence, impacting bait variations and abundance. In short, this is a small ecosystem in the grand scheme of it all. As a result, it’s no surprise this area produces such large trout.

In addition, Gulfport Harbor isn’t the only man-made structure on the coast. Casinos and shipyards litter its beaches from Louisiana to Alabama, and in full confidence, most of them produce larger-than-normal trout. So the takeaway from the second point is if you have jetties, bridges, rigs, etc., in your area, it’s probably not a bad place to start looking for big trout.

BIG BAITS

Last but not least, lures. This is probably, in my view, the least important, but it does hold weight when the other conditions have been met. Anglers notable for targeting big trout generally throw three things: a slow sink/suspend-style bait (Corky/27MR), a topwater, or a big soft-plastic, 4½ inches or larger. That’s not to say you can’t catch them on smaller, soft-plastic baits, but if you want to increase the size of the trout you catch, increase the size of your bait.

In the Dirty 30 and Trophy Trout citation data collected we see a noticeable increase in bait size as water temperatures begin to drop — a decline in small, soft-plastic baits and an increase in big, suspending or topwater baits. This tells us one of two things: first, that anglers are making a cognizant choice to throw larger plugs; or second, fish have shifted their diet to larger finfish, thus resulting in the action from No. 1.

Given slightly more thought, it makes sense because winters are harsh. More often, heartier forage can sustain the brutal decline in water temperatures, leaving them isolated and susceptible to larger trout we target. Also, the winter is the capstone for many of the fish that hatched in the spring. Over the course of those six months, fingerlings grew to a more-sustainable size, in turn leaving larger trout to target something bigger than what was incredibly abundant in the spring: small finfish and/or shrimp.

So as we progress into the winter and you’re looking for that trophy fish, just remember, everything about big trout is exactly that — big. ■

SALTWATER

STATE COASTAL WATERS REGULATIONS (0 - 3 miles)		
FISH SPECIES	Minimum Lengths	Creel Limit (per person)
Greater amberjack	34" FL	1/day
Blue marlin	99" LJFL	no limit
White marlin	66" LJFL	no limit
Sailfish	63" LJFL	no limit
Sharks (large coastal/pelagic)@	37" TL*	1/day or 3/boat
Sharks@	25" TL*	4/day
Cobia	33" FL	2 per day
Redfish (red drum)	18" minimum 30" maximum TL	3/day (1 over 30")
Flounder (state waters)	12" TL	15/day
Groupers (black and gag)	24" TL@	4/day aggregate
Hogfish	12" FL@	5/day
Red, yellowfin grouper	20" TL@	4/day
Scamp grouper	16" TL@	4/day
Speckled hind/Warsaw grouper	no minimum@	1/day each
Gray/schoolmaster/cubera/ mahogany/yellowtail/dog snapper	12" TL@	10/day aggregate
Mutton snapper	16" TL@	10/day
Queen/blackfin/silk/winchman snapper	none@	10/day aggregate
Vermillion/lane snapper	10"/8" TL@	20/day aggregate
Gray triggerfish	14" FL@	20/day
Golden/blueline/anchor/blackline tilefish	none@	20/day
King mackerel	24" FL@	2/day
Spanish mackerel	no minimum size@	15/day
Yellowfin tuna	27" CFL@	3/day
Bigeye tuna	27" CFL@	no limit
Tripletail	18" TL	3/day
Spotted sea trout (speckled)	15"	15/day

@ For openings and closings of federally regulated fish and updated size limits, visit gulfcouncil.org.

FRESHWATER

FISH Species (Inland waters)	Minimum Size Limit	Creel Limit (per day)
Crappie/Panfish #	%	30 crappie, 100 bream
Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass	%	10 in combination
Channel catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Blue catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Flathead catfish	No more than 1 over 34"	None +
Striped bass or hybrid bass	15"	6 in combination
Mountain Trout (Lake Lamar Bruce)	No restrictions	3
Sauger	%	10
Walleye	%	3
Alligator gar/paddlefish	No fish over 30" in creel	2

TL=Total Length; LJFL=Lower jaw to middle of fork in tail; FL=Fork Length (tip of snout to middle of fork in tail); CFL=Curved Fork Length (measure of a line tracing contour of body from tip of upper jaw to fork of the tail).

+ In Lake Okhissa, 5 per day, in ReCon Lake and all MDWFP lakes, 10 per day

% For lake-specific regs, see MDWFP's Regulations Digest or www.mdwfp.com/

In Lake Okhissa and Percy Quin State Park, the creel limit is 50 per day.

* Possession of certain species of sharks is prohibited.

COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

VENISON SAUSAGE, SHRIMP NACHOS

PERK UP A HOLIDAY GATHERING WITH THIS TASTY TREAT

As I get older, I can't deny that eating is a tradition on many holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas. You probably will soon or have recently sat down for Thanksgiving dinner, hopefully with your family and some close friends. I hope you enjoy this time and want to warn you that Christmas will be here almost before all the dishes are dried and put away.

This recipe is a treat anytime, but it seems to shine around Christmas and New Year's Day. It's a fun recipe, best suited as a snack for family gatherings and parties, but it really shines when served straight from the oven at halftime of your favorite football game.

December is a great time for sportsmen in the Carolinas. For the most part, the temperature is moderate and the weather good. Those last few days of vacation can be taken to hunt or fish almost anywhere. Somehow, Mother Nature and Old Man Winter seem to know when the calendar flips over to January and the new year begins with colder, rougher weather.

The bottom line for December is that Christmas is approaching, and a week later, we'll flip the calendar to begin 2020. However, in the meantime, there is plenty for sportsmen to do, time to be with families and celebrate the birth of Jesus, and folks are going to eat. Give this a try as a snack at a family gathering or while watching sports on TV. Most people have liked it and hopefully you and yours will also. ■



The author adds seasoning to shrimp that are sautéing in drippings from the venison sausage **INSET:** Make several layers of nachos, covering them with sausage, shrimp and Mexican cheese.



SAUSAGE, SHRIMP NACHOS

This recipe begins with venison sausage and shrimp, both of which can be gathered by sportsmen. Deer hunting is a favorite of many, and this is a great way to use some venison ground that's been into sausage. If you don't have any venison sausage or prefer the taste of pork, pork sausage works well here, too. I even have one friend who doesn't eat pork or venison but makes this with turkey sausage.

Hopefully, you caught some shrimp in a cast net this fall and put them aside in the freezer, or you can purchase some at your favorite seafood dealer. Use larger shrimp, at least 25 to 30 count, as you will be cutting them up. Don't use imported shrimp.

You will notice that jalapenos are listed as an optional ingredient. I like to chop a few and cook them with the sausage, then slice one or two to spread over the nachos. I made this batch for a gathering where no one else appreciated the flavor of jalapenos, so they were not used in the recipe. However, you can be assured I had a bowl on the side. I also only used a light sprinkling of blackened seasoning on the shrimp. As with any recipe, feel free to add or reduce any spice or ingredient to your personal taste. Some like it hot — and some not!

Use your favorite nacho chips, but I

recommend Trader Joe's Salted Tortilla Chips, made with stone ground white corn. Even though they are salted, they only have 50 mg of sodium in a serving of 10 chips. This is good, as there will be lots of sodium in other ingredients. These are thicker chips and don't get soggy as quickly with the queso and other ingredients as many tortilla chips. Some of my friends like to add a little salsa, and the crisp chips handle this much better.

You can cook this directly on the pan or a cookie sheet, but it can be a little messy and difficult to clean up. Covering the pan or sheet with aluminum foil helps greatly with cleanup and provides foil to wrap any leftovers to be warmed again.

Cooking the shrimp in the sausage drippings helps give them an extra burst of flavor. Be sure not to overcook them. Once the opaque is gone and they are pink, they're ready to go.

If you leave some of these nachos in a warmer for Santa, you might wake up Christmas morning with a lot of unexpected presents under your tree. Enjoy! ■

PREPARATION:

Peel and de-vein the shrimp and cut it into approximate 1-inch pieces. Chop the scallions and separate the white bottom from the light-green upper. I don't use the whole top, only the lighter green part. Chop the tomatoes; I only use the firm outer layer.

Brown the sausage and the white bottom part of the scallions. Sprinkle blackened seasoning on the shrimp pieces. Remove the sausage and save enough sausage drippings to cover the bottom of the frying pan. Sauté the shrimp pieces in the sausage drippings over medium heat, stirring often.

Cover a baking pan or cookie sheet with aluminum foil. Preheat oven to 325. Arrange a full bottom layer of nachos. Sprinkle sausage, shrimp and Mexican cheese on the nachos. Sprinkle lightly with tomato pieces and add several spoons of queso in different areas. This step will also include jalapeno slices if you are using them. Add a second layer of nachos and repeat the previous step. Add a third layer of nachos and repeat step the previous step again, using the remaining tomato pieces and queso, plus adding the green scallion slices. Bake on middle rack until the cheeses and queso have melted. This should take around 10-12 minutes. Be careful not to scorch the

tortilla chips.

Serve immediately. It will cool quickly. Have several types of salsa available for those who want to add it. Even if you make this without jalapenos, have some sliced jalapenos in a bowl for those who would like to add them. ■

INGREDIENTS:

1 pound venison sausage (loose or country style)

1 pound shrimp

1 large bag plain tortilla chips

2 large roma tomatoes

2 bundles scallions

1 container queso cheese

1 package mixed Mexican cheese (7 ounces)

Blackened seasoning

Several types of salsa

Several fresh jalapeno peppers (optional)



Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island, N.C., is a freelance writer, as well as a former national king mackerel champion fisherman.

Bucks use tending grunts when they're guarding a receptive doe just before breeding.



MAKE SOME NOISE: DEER MAKE PLENTY

UNDERSTAND WHY DEER ARE OFTEN VOCAL By Tommy Kirkland

Although vocalizations from white-tailed deer occur year-round, deer undoubtedly intensify their larynx usage as the rut gets under way.

The grunt is a very distinct form of communication used by rutting bucks. However, females can occasionally be heard grunting over social disputes or to locate each other.

Even so, the male's grunt is by far a trait to recognize bucks when foliage obscures your vision.

Bucks can also charge or trot toward a female and grunt once or even several times in sequence.

To establish and maintain dominance, bucks use grunts when rival bucks are sighted or scented. Their instinctive objective is to try and get the other buck to move on.

This grunt can also be followed up by a grunt-snort vocalization that is usually short and not as intense as the snort alert vocalization.

The grunt-snort is usually echoed once,

yet bucks really start displaying it more often when searching for estrous does.

CHALLENGING SOUNDS

But the most-intense and unique display during the rut is when bucks go all out with the grunt-snort-wheeze vocalization.

It is usually performed in a rapid sequence with a short grunt immediately followed by a quick snort and then a lengthy, drawn out wheezing sound.

The grunt-snort-wheeze tends to indicate that a buck is not going to tolerate an intruding buck and puts bucks on the edge for serious competitive battles.

Mature bucks can also charge and grunt-snort-wheeze at female deer as the rut heats up. This vocal really tends to indicate that it is associated with achieving dominance, and it is usually displayed in conjunction with aggressive body gestures.

When bucks use this vocalization, they usually swing their head and neck upward as they end the sequence with a drawn-out wheeze. This head/neck movement is

used to intimidate rival bucks.

Besides these common rut vocalizations, rutting bucks can also just exhibit a singular "wheeze" vocal with no grunt or snort. All in all, though there is usually a pattern to whitetail communication — the sounds described can be combined together or used just once, occasionally making deer calls erratic and unpredictable.

Once females are near or in estrus and receptive to the breeder buck, a whole new set of sounds unfold.

The most common is the tending grunt. It is displayed when a buck stands guard of his mate and tends her — especially when other intruding bucks attempt to get in on the action.

The tending grunt is usually a softer, lower-sounding vocalization than the common grunt used by bucks on the move. It is usually drawn out in comparison to the common grunt.

This is also another whitetail vocalization that some hunters use to try and attract rutting bucks. ■

As the water temperature falls, speckled trout become a little less aggressive and needed to be targeted with a slower retrieve. **INSET:** Match your artificial baits to the size of the forage on which trout are feeding; they often throw up in the livewell to give you a clue.



Dan Kbler

SLOW DOWN!

DECEMBER TROUT NEED A PATIENT PRESENTATION

By Pat Bonin

With less and less daylight and cooler water temperatures settling in, slowing down your presentation is often key to catching December speckled trout.

"I'm always telling my customers, 'Slow is the way to go,'" said guide Mike Gallo of Angling Adventures, who regularly fishes the Biloxi Marsh area. "And if you're not catching anything, go even slower."

Trout move deeper as the water cools, so Gallo likes to target shorelines with easy deepwater access that also feature flats with clear, moving water and signs of baitfish activity.

"If the water temperature is 55 and above, they like shallow water close to deep water," he said. "That way, if we get a cold front, they'll just drop down into that deep water without having to go very far."

But this time of year, especially, Gallo takes his fishing cues from clues provided by the first trout he catches each day.

"If he comes straight to the surface and shakes his head, he's not cold," Gallo said. "But if you hook a fish, and he's fighting, but it's a lethargic fight and he never comes to the surface and never shakes his head, he's cold.

"So if I change my technique, I need to change in a slower direction, not in a faster direction. Lots of things can be determined by catching one fish."

LEARN FROM VOMIT

To that end, Gallo's first speck of the day doesn't end up on ice. Instead, it goes into the livewell to see if it will provide more clues that might turn an average day of fishing into a really good one.

"Every 10 or 15 minutes, I go and check the livewell, and I'm hoping he pukes something up: a crab, a shrimp or a baby fish," Gallo said. "Then, I get a clue on what he's feeding on, and I can mimic that."

If Gallo is fishing with a 3-inch Sparkle Beetle but sees that the trout in his livewell has spit up a 2-inch minnow, Gallo typically downsizes his lures.

"I'm going to go more in that 2-inch range, because that may be what's down there on the bottom," he said. "I happened to catch one, but if my lure really mimics what's down there I have a better chance of catching more.

"That's just matching the hatch. And if you can actually make out what it is they spit up — let's say it's a pogie — then salt-and-pepper is a great imitation for



matching a pogie."

He also pays particular attention to his electronics this time of year to identify the good, hardbottom that trout prefer. Being able to differentiate the bottom types is a matter of learning how the images display on the screen.

"Let's say you have one line showing the bottom that's 1/8-inch thick," Gallo said. "What that's telling you is the signal going down from your transducer and bouncing back up is bouncing back up quickly because that bottom is firm.

"But when it draws a bottom that's 1 1/2 inches thick and real fuzzy, it's telling you that's a soft, mushy bottom, and it takes a while for the signal to bounce back.

"So there are clues that you can see on your depth finder. Areas with a hardbottom and a gradual slope are gold mines for trout to hang out in." ■

A jig with a soft-plastic trailer is a great winter bass bait with dragged along a rocky bottom or fished around riprap.



WINTER BASS? TRY OUT THESE 5 BAITS

By Dusty Wilson

Many fishermen lead double lives in December, torn between their bass boats and tree stands.

For those who tag out early or tag what they want, the choice for cold-water bass fishing becomes clear. According to Dave Wolak, a retired bass pro who qualified for five Bassmaster Classics, the key to success is locating deeper fish and using just a handful of lures.

"Winter fish will retract from areas they spent a good deal of the year, while seeking deeper-water highways like ditches and channels, deep points and vertical cover with deep water nearby," said Wolak. "Rocky areas are generally better because they hold a good deal of residual heat from when the sun pops out."

Riprap banks are the best of both worlds, as they are generally constructed adjacent to deep water.

Wolak sticks with these five basic baits for most of his winter fishing.

• **Jig-soft plastic combo.** "Any jig combination works in winter, but they work best when fine tuned to the environment," Wolak said.

Football jigs are especially good when dragged around rocky bottoms and riprap, as the head design makes the bait stand up, and it's less likely to become snagged. Green pumpkin jigs with a crawfish trailer are a good winter combo, and a ½- to ¾-ounce head gets the bait down fast.

• **Jigging spoon.** "Vertical jigging smaller spoons will catch deep, suspended bass that may otherwise be considered untouchable," Wolak said.

After finding a school of bass on sonar, a ¼-ounce spoon is dropped into them. Using upward jerks of 1 to 2 feet, the lure is then allowed to flutter down on a slack line, but followed closely with the rod tip to detect strikes.

• **Rattling lipless bait.** "In cold water, its tough to beat this lure's ability to get a

reaction strike," said Wolak, who recommends pumping this bait around grass and deeper shoreline cover. These sinking baits can be fished with a yo-yo style retrieve. After the lure falls to the bottom, the rod is lifted so the bait vibrates and rattles, followed by another fall and lift.

• **Flat-sided crankbait.** "These baits have a subtle and tight wobble, making them perfect for bass that retreat to ditches in shallower dingy water," Wolak said. The tight wobble makes for a high-frequency vibration easily detected by winter bass, especially when this diving lure grinds along the bottom, kicking up gravel like a deranged crawfish.

• **Shad-shaped baits.** "The Shad Rap is the best example," Wolak said. "These baits have an even more subtle and tighter action, making them a great crank for clear to dingy medium depth ranges."

This lightweight balsa wood lure can be difficult to cast, but is deadly when bass are shadowing schools of shad. ■

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HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT JIGHEAD

MATCHING SIZE TO WATER DEPTH AND CURRENT IS KEY

By Patrick Bonin

According to Chas Champagne, choosing the right jighead to match water depth and current can be much more important than the color, size or shape of the artificial lure you're fishing.

That says a lot, because Champagne, the owner of Docksider Bait and Tackle's ultra-popular Matrix Shad and Vortex Shad soft-plastic paddletail lures, which come in a variety of colors that have become huge favorites for Gulf Coast anglers pursuing speckled trout and redfish.

Generally speaking, Champagne prefers to use the lightest weight possible that will get the lure to the bottom, but he said you're definitely safer going too heavy rather than too light.

"You're better off using a ½-ounce jighead in 5 feet of water and making that mistake than you are fishing in 15 feet of water and using a ¼-ounce jighead," Champagne said. "With the ¼-ounce, you will not catch fish if they're on the bottom.

"Whereas with the ½-ounce jighead, you're still in the strike zone in 5 feet of water. It's not that big of a deal."

Champagne pointed to bass fishermen, who successfully punch through grass and vegetation with heavy, 1- and 2-ounce bullet weights to seek out bass in shallow water.

"You're going to tell me that it matters if your jighead is too heavy?" he said. "Absolutely not."

Though there's no set formula to match water depth and current with jigheads, Champagne typically doesn't use a ⅝-ounce model unless it's under a popping cork, because anglers typically are fishing in depths deeper than 2 to 3 feet where that light weight is most effective.

"You can use it if you're casting and retrieving in 2 to 3 feet of water where the lure's tail is always moving and it doesn't have to swim down," he said.

The lure's action when swimming down is critical to using a paddletail, and how it moves with just a ¼-ounce jighead is key, he said.

"If you put a ¼-ounce jighead on a lure and let it free-fall to the bottom; if it swims and its tail moves, it's a good product with

good action," he said. "If it doesn't move, a lot of times it spirals down, and the aerodynamics aren't right. That's not good. You're getting no action. You might as well fish with a stick or a twig."

The bait falling naturally in the water by the pull of the jighead alone is key, he said.

"That's the whole reason to use paddletail baits: for the fall of the lure, for natural gravity to make it swim. That's the whole reason to use these things, because that's when the fish is going to hit it: on the fall."

POP AND DROP

One of Champagne's big theories in effectively fishing with soft-plastic paddletails is popping the lures and letting them rise and fall straight back to the bottom.

"When that jighead hits the bottom, it creates like a dust-cloud kickup," he said.

"That gets the fish's attention a lot of times, because shrimp will bury in the bottom, and when they come out, the fish see a dust cloud.

"So when we have that lure falling to the bottom, we want it falling as fast as it can and creating as much disturbance as possible when it hits the bottom," he said. "When we pop it, we don't reel in our slack so tight to where you're dragging it back to the boat. We pop it, reel in our slack real quick and let it fall straight to the bottom. You want it to plunk the bottom really

hard. That's a really effective technique."

While he favors a ¼-ounce jighead in roughly 2 to 5 feet of water, he bumps up to the ⅝-ounce jighead if he's sight-fishing for reds in the marsh where the water is shallow in ponds but gets 4 to 6 feet deep in connecting bayous.

"That way I don't have to re-tie or change poles," he said. "I just start jiggling the ⅝."

The ⅝-ounce is his choice for 6 to 20 feet of water, and it's his favorite for fishing the bridges in Lake Pontchartrain. But if the current is particularly strong, he'll bump up to the ½-ounce.

"That way it will fall and hit the bottom where you want near the bridge," he said. "If I'm fishing up against a bridge piling, the fish might be in a very particular spot.

"It's just like bass fishing — you want that lure to hit exactly where you want it."

But he stressed depth is just one factor to consider. Don't forget about the current, too.

"The current is really more important because if you're trying to pinpoint the lure hitting the bottom in a certain area, and it's got current and you're not using enough weight, it's just going to blow your jighead way out of the strike zone.

"So if you're trying to get it to hit the bottom in a certain zone, you need the heaviest weight that you can, to stick it right where it needs to be stuck." ■



How deep are you fishing? How big is the bait you're fishing? These are all considerations when choosing how big or small a jighead to use.

ASTRO TABLES

Astro Tables is far more effective than "moon tables," because it takes into account critical solar energies as well as lunar.

The "Best Days" column is based on the ever-changing positions of the sun and the moon, rating each day on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more solar/lunar influence that day is experiencing (see "Value" column or corresponding black bars). The two Primary periods (Moon Overhead and Moon Underfoot) vary in length from one hour to three-and-one-half hours, depending on a number of important lunar cycles, such as how close the moon is to the earth that day and how high its orbit is. The solar symbols alert you to when a Primary period overlaps a major solar period (eg: Dawn, High-Noon, and Dusk). The secondary periods of Moonrise and Moonset last about one hour each... 30 minutes before and after the listed time. (See key at bottom of each month for more detail.)

Astro Tables is a quick-reference version of its parent publication, the **PrimeTimes Wall Calendar**, which is recommended for those wishing more complete data on the best days and times to go fishing and hunting for the entire year (see "Available Products" below).

PrimeTimes' forecasts are based on solar/lunar research at a leading college of astrophysics and our own research pond/wildlife area. Annual data is supplied by the U.S. Naval Observatory. All times are adjusted to the center of your time zone and for Daylight Saving Time.

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2019 DEC	BEST DAYS				VALUE
	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	EXCL	
Sun 1					9
Mon 2					11
Tue 3					18
Wed 4					29
Thu 5					22
Fri 6					20
Sat 7					23
Sun 8					37
Mon 9					50
Tue 10					63
Wed 11					69
Thu 12					61
Fri 13					53
Sat 14					44
Sun 15					39
Mon 16					38
Tue 17					42
Wed 18					50
Thu 19					36
Fri 20					28
Sat 21					24
Sun 22					30
Mon 23					37
Tue 24					44
Wed 25					47
Thu 26					36
Fri 27					25
Sat 28					15
Sun 29					11
Mon 30					12
Tue 31					13

25 50 75
AVERAGE

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LUNAR PERIODS					
TIMES OCCURRING AT NIGHT ARE SHADED					
MOON RISE	PRIMARY MOON OVERHEAD	MOON SET	PRIMARY MOON UNDERFOOT		
11:28 am	4:05 pm - 5:11 pm	9:52 pm	3:44 am - 4:42 am		
12:06 pm	4:46 pm - 6:04 pm	10:49 pm	4:30 am - 5:36 am		
12:39 pm	5:25 pm - 6:53 pm	11:45 pm	5:11 am - 6:29 am		
1:09 pm	5:58 pm - 7:44 pm		5:50 am - 7:18 am		HALF & APOGEE
1:37 pm	6:32 pm - 8:34 pm	12:40 am	6:23 am - 8:09 am		
2:04 pm	7:06 pm - 9:22 pm	1:35 am	6:57 am - 8:59 am		
2:32 pm	7:40 pm - 10:12 pm	2:31 am	7:31 am - 9:47 am		
3:01 pm	8:14 pm - 11:04 pm	3:27 am	8:05 am - 10:37 am		
3:33 pm	8:54 pm - 11:56 pm	4:25 am	8:39 am - 11:29 am		
4:09 pm	9:37 pm - 12:53 pm	5:25 am	9:19 am - 12:21 pm		
4:51 pm	10:25 pm - 1:51 am	6:27 am	10:02 am - 1:18 pm		FULL
5:40 pm	11:18 pm - Midnight	7:29 am	10:50 am - 2:16 pm		
6:36 pm	Midnight - 2:50 am	8:30 am	11:43 am - 3:15 pm		HIGH
7:37 pm	12:16 am - 3:48 am	9:27 am	12:41 pm - 4:13 pm		
8:43 pm	1:17 am - 4:43 am	10:18 am	1:42 pm - 5:08 pm		
9:51 pm	2:19 am - 5:35 am	11:04 am	2:44 pm - 6:00 pm		
10:59 pm	3:21 am - 6:23 am	11:44 am	3:46 pm - 6:48 pm		
	4:21 am - 7:07 am	12:20 pm	4:46 pm - 7:32 pm		HALF & PERIGEE
12:06 am	5:21 am - 7:47 am	12:54 pm	5:46 pm - 8:12 pm		
1:13 am	6:20 am - 8:28 am	1:27 pm	6:45 pm - 8:53 pm		
2:19 am	7:20 am - 9:08 am	2:01 pm	7:45 pm - 9:33 pm		Winter
3:26 am	8:19 am - 9:51 am	2:37 pm	8:44 pm - 10:16 pm		
4:33 am	9:19 am - 10:35 am	3:16 pm	9:44 pm - 11:00 pm		
5:39 am	10:18 am - 11:24 am	4:00 pm	10:43 pm - 11:49 pm		
6:42 am	11:19 am - 12:15 pm	4:49 pm	11:44 pm - Midnight		NEW
7:42 am	12:14 pm - 1:10 pm	5:43 pm	Midnight - 12:40 am		LOW
8:35 am	1:08 pm - 2:04 pm	6:40 pm	12:39 am - 1:35 am		
9:22 am	1:57 pm - 2:59 pm	7:38 pm	1:33 am - 2:29 am		
10:02 am	2:41 pm - 3:53 pm	8:36 pm	2:22 am - 3:24 am		
10:37 am	3:20 pm - 4:46 pm	9:34 pm	3:06 am - 4:18 am		
11:09 am	3:57 pm - 5:35 pm	10:29 pm	3:45 am - 5:11 am		

ANY LUNAR PERIOD IS ENHANCED WHEN IT OVERLAPS A KEY SOLAR PERIOD. THE BEST OF THESE OVERLAPS ARE DESIGNATED BY THE SUN SYMBOLS:
 ☀ = DAWN ☀ = HIGH NOON ☀ = DUSK

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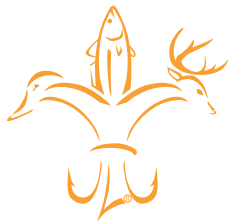


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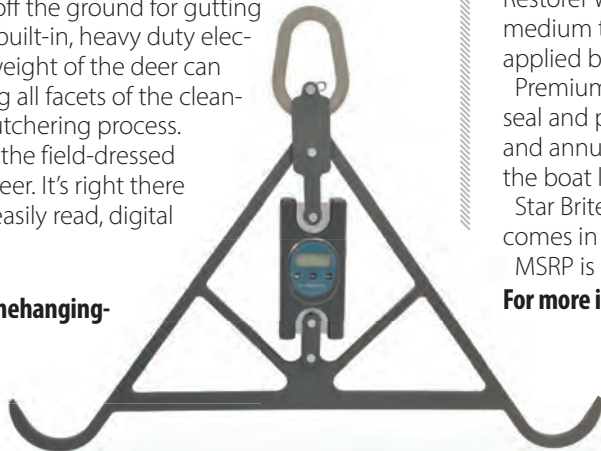
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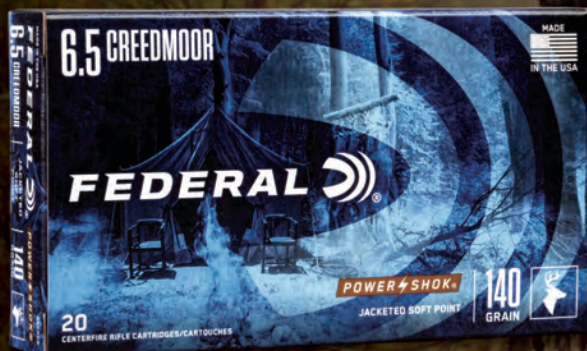
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