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JANUARY 2022

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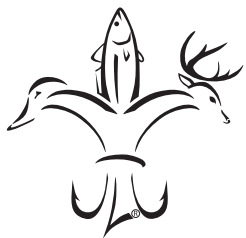
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**12**  
**JUMP INTO**  
**JANUARY BUCKS**



**32**  
**LIGHT BITERS, BIG**  
**FIGHTERS**



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Aaron Woodard was hunting at his family's Webster County deer camp on Nov. 26 when he arrowed this trophy 8-point buck. Photo courtesy Aaron Woodard

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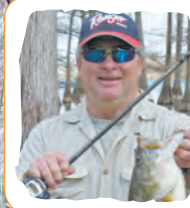
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# OUTDOOR UPDATE

with Mike Giles



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

## JANUARY MEANS BIG BUCKS, HOT SQUIRREL ACTION, MONSTER SMALLMOUTHS AND SHEEPSHEAD

**J**anuary is another month of transition with many veteran hunters harvesting late season trophy bucks as they become vulnerable due to late season secondary ruts, food shortages and daylight activity.

Jordan Blissett, a Primos videographer and successful hunter, shares a few tips and techniques on how to find late season bucks in "Jump into January bucks." Blissett hunts around the country videoing monster bucks as well as shooting a few. His love of deer hunting was established right here at home and he'll tell his own monster buck story and show you how

you can find and harvest your own trophy. "Puttin' on the dog" takes us into the woods with well-known Quitman dog trainer Gary Rodgers and shows us how he hunts squirrels with his famous Mountain

Cur squirrel dogs. Rodgers is an expert trainer and hunter who takes kids and first-time hunters and gets them hooked on the fast-paced, action-filled hunts with his cracker-jack dogs. I have hunted around the state with Rodgers over the last 25 years and can attest to how much fun can be had when you get into the squirrels during late season.

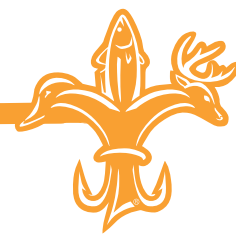
In late winter, big sheepshead gather around bridges, dock pilings and other barnacle-encrusted structures to spawn. Powerful fish, sheepshead can provide anglers with incredible action on light tackle. Find out more in "Light biters, big fighters" by John Felsher.

Want to fight ferocious smallmouth bass? Pickwick Lake offers some of the best smallmouth fishing in the South. "Small mouths, big action" by John Felsher will tell how, where and when to catch smallmouth bass in the winter.

"Bad weather for big bucks," by John Phillips, gives hunters a refresher in locating bucks during the late season. Rainy days, cold days and windy days are often times when hunters don't hunt. Phillips believes mature bucks know more about hunters than we've learned about those bucks – especially those 3 years old or older. In this article, he'll explain how to take advantage of the times when mature bucks are more likely to move during daylight hours. ■



**Manning Moody** had a great day fishing in Biloxi. The sheepshead were biting!



# BATTLE MONSTER BLUES AND FLATHEAD ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

**R**obert Stanley reared back and set the hook and tied into a fish that felt like a small whale! After an epic battle, Stanley finally wore the fish down and landed him with the help of Capt. Bob Crosby. The big blue cat was caught recently on the Big Muddy and it's indicative of the size of the fish that can be caught now.

"As the water temperature falls down to 50 degrees the big catfish start congregating in the deep holes," Crosby said. "I've been anchoring in holes 40-feet deep to 200-feet deep and we are catching lots of big cats. We're fishing the soft currents because the fish are lethargic in cold water and they're not holding in the swift current like they will during the warmer weather."

Stanley, of West Monroe, La., caught an 80-pound blue cat and his wife caught a 42-pound flathead on a trip to the Mississippi River near Vicksburg.

"We anchored over a submerged treetop that I had marked on my depth finder and caught the flatheads, too," Crosby said. "We caught a total of 15 fish that day, the two big ones and two more in the twenties."

Most of the traffic has left the river by January and February and it's not uncommon for anglers to catch catfish running from 20 pounds to 40 pounds, as well as an occasional 60- to 80-pounder. I've been on several trips with Crosby and have seen two, 80-pound-plus cats caught. I've caught a couple of 50 to 60 pounders myself. Another Mississippi River guide, David Magness, caught a 45-pound blue catfish while fishing with Crosby.

If you are looking for a unique fishing experience with the chance to catch a monster catfish on a rod and reel then look no further than Capt. Bob Crosby and take a trip with him to the Mississippi River near Vicksburg this winter. ■

Capt. Bob Crosby put the Stanleys on some giant catfish.



# BIG BUCKS BECOMING OLD HAT FOR HUNTER, 20

**I**t By Glynn Harris  
all started for Zach Jones of Sterlington, La., eight seasons ago, when at 12, he downed a trophy buck. Almost every year since, Jones's name comes up, as he has laid another big buck on the ground.

So it was no surprise when a photo appeared on Facebook in early November with Jones, now 20, posing with another wall-hanger, a 160-inch, main-frame 10-pointer with a characteristic split brow tine.

Jones's success has been due, in part, to the area he hunts. He and his father are members of Ashbrook Island Hunting Club on the Mississippi River, an area that is managed for trophy deer. In addition, Jones puts in the time locating and zeroing in on the big bucks in the area.

Jones has laid his rifle aside and hunts exclusively with archery equipment.

"I hunt with a Hoyt Defiance bow, Easton Full Metal Jacket arrows and Rage Hypodermic broadheads," Jones said. "This is the same equipment I have used the past three seasons."

Jones, a student at Delta Community College, will transfer after one more semester to Louisiana-Monroe, where he will major in construction management with a minor in Insurance.

"I have had trail-camera photos of a particular big buck since 2016," Jones said. "In his first pictures, I saw that he had a split G2, and that's the way I could keep up with him each year. We didn't run cameras in 2019, but I have had him on camera every other year. I got my first photo of him this year the day before bow season opened."

## TROUBLESOME HOG

The area where the buck had been hanging out featured a big thicket that bordered a 500-acre bottomland. The deer like to hang out and feed on numerous pecan trees and briars in the area. On the afternoon of Nov. 5, Jones mounted his Millennium lock-on stand around 2:45.

"I was on one side of a ridge where it meets the hardwood bottom in a briar thicket next to an L-shaped food plot; my dad was in a ground blind along the other leg of the food plot," Jones said. "Around 4, a big doe and her two yearlings came out and were feeding on the pecans that were dropping. Then suddenly, a big hog came up the ridge in a full run, ran out in front of me, and



Zach Jones once again downed a trophy buck. He harvested this 220 pound, 11-point buck at Ashbrook Island Hunting Club.

my dad texted me moments later that the hog had run by him at 15 yards."

## TARGET ACQUIRED

Jones' confidence level dropped after the hog had run through, assuming that the hunt had been spoiled. Two minutes later, however, he looked up to see a big buck 65 yards away on the food plot. It looked like the same buck he had seen three weeks before at 25 yards that he passed on because he wasn't sure it met the strict criteria that club has in force.

"I think the hog running through probably pushed him out of the thicket, because he stepped out only a few minutes after the hog ran through," Jones said. "When I saw the split G2 on the antler, I knew it was the one I was targeting. The buck worked his way in behind me and was feeding on pecans. I had to get down on one knee to shoot around a sapling blocking the way. I got on him and released my arrow at 36 yards. The buck ran about 25 yard and fell."

The buck's rack featured 10 points, plus the split brow tine. Aged at 6 ½ years old and weighing 220 pounds, the inside spread was 17 5/8 inches, bases were 5 inches with main beams measuring 22 and 24 ½ inches. The rack green scored at 160 1/8 inches. ■

# GRANDMOTHER DROPS NON-TYPICAL WARREN COUNTY BUCK

**C** By Mike Giles  
rystal Mahalitic made the long climb up into her tree stand one more time on Nov. 7.

Mahalitic, from Bovina, had been hunting a buck in Warren County for a couple of weeks and actually saw a couple of good bucks several times, but they never came in range. She was about to give up and was tired of climbing that ladder only to be disappointed.

"I was hunting high over a cut cornfield," Mahalitic said. "The corn had been picked, but my husband left the stalks up as cover for the deer so they would feel comfortable, and they were working the corn between two green fields. Finally, one of the bucks that I'd just seen come into the area a week earlier fed into range, and I shot him at 37 yards!"

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Mahalitic's buck sported 13 non-typical points that rose up 19 inches high and scored 127 inches. The rack was unique, and the buck was hard earned by this veteran deer hunter.

"I practiced every day for several weeks learning how to shoot my crossbow from a high stand," Mahalitic said. "I started hunting with a crossbow about three years ago since the rest of my family was able to get into the woods before I could. I had to wait until gun season, so I started hunting with my husband's crossbow."

The first year she hunted with the crossbow, Mahalitic said she couldn't hit anything, but she kept practicing and hunting. Last year, she killed two does and one small buck. This season, she wanted to go for a wall-hanger, and she was really after those good bucks she'd spotted nearby.

"I do a lot of praying in the stand," said Mahalitic. "I was praying

for my children and grandchildren and a lot of things. I also wanted an opportunity to get a shot at that buck in range. It's a challenge for sure because you have to get that deer closer than you can with a gun."

## ENJOYING THE OUTDOORS

Mahalitic has been hunting, off and on, for 38 years between raising children. She has 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

"After all the children moved out a few years ago, I started hunting a lot more," she said. "We can walk out of the house and go hunting anytime we want to, so it gave me more time to try out a crossbow. I'm 5-foot-3, 120 pounds, and I just couldn't pull back a bow, so the crossbow afforded me another opportunity to get outdoors and enjoy myself."

Mahalitic's husband, Edward, has had two neck surgeries, and he had a crossbow that he wasn't using due to work.

"My husband told me to shoot it and let him know how I liked it," she said. "After I'd killed a few deer with it and liked it, I told him that I needed to clean his bow and let him have it back. He told me that it was mine now, so I have my own crossbow!"

"Bowhunting and crossbow hunting is a good time to reflect on things and get back to nature," Mahalitic added. "I just enjoy getting outdoors no matter if I kill one or not, but it is really fun when you're able to harvest a good buck with the crossbow."

Mahalitic killed the buck of her lifetime with a Mathews Mission crossbow using Rage broadheads and they really did a number on the buck. If her recent success is an indicator of things to come, then she will be harvesting a lot more bucks from here on. ■



Crystal Mahalitic of Bovina harvested this 13-point non-typical buck with her crossbow in Warren County on Nov. 7.

# PISGAH ELEMENTARY STUDENT KILLS MONSTER BUCK

**C** By Mike Giles

Carson Rinehart, of Fannin, set his heart on killing his first buck this year. On opening day of youth weekend he thought he was going to finally realize his dream. The moment of truth came fast, and at 66 yards no less. A wide raked buck offered a fleeting shot for the youngster and he quickly aimed and fired.

Kaboom roared his rifle and the buck disappeared in a flash. His realization of a dream quickly faded with the obvious miss. They searched the area but never found a trace of the buck or a hit. Needless to say Carson was distraught and beside himself.

"You're going to miss plenty of deer in your life Carson," said Jonathan Rinehart, his father. "Just pray about it and you'll probably get another opportunity."

And pray about it the 10-year-old hunter did. In fact, he prayed every single day for another shot at that buck.

Opening day of primitive weapon season, Nov. 13, found them back in search of his first buck.

"We went to the combine stand," Rinehart said. "It was our 'go-to' spot to see does. It didn't take long before we got some activity as an 8-point cruised by at 300 yards just a little bit too far."

Thirty minutes later they heard something walking in the woods behind them and turned to see a buck go back in the woods.

"Get ready, something may come back out," Rinehart said. "He got ready, and I cocked the gun for him and two minutes later I turned and saw a buck in the middle of the field. I ranged him at 166 yards. I grunted twice and the buck never stopped so then I yelled, and he stopped. Carson pulled the trigger."

Tic-Pow, roared the .308 rifle! The buck disappeared behind a large tree and never came out the other side.

## **FAMILY TRADITION CONTINUES**

"We got down from the 2-man ladder stand and walked over to the area," Rinehart said. "The fields were just tilled up in preparation for a winter wheat crop and we got to the top of the hill, and we could see him laying there 30 to 40 yards over the rise."

The 240-pound buck sported 12 points with a drop tine and scored 145 5/8.

Ironically, young Carson couldn't use his 7 MM 08 rifle as they couldn't find ammo, so he used a .308 Handi-rifle that his father and all the members of his family had used to kill their first deer with.



**Carson Rinehart, 10, harvested his first buck on the opening day of primitive weapon season. The Pisgah Elementary School student shot the buck near Benton in Yazoo County.**

"All my family killed their first deer with that rifle," Rinehart said. "That was a really cool experience and just added to the lifetime memory of Carson harvesting his first buck."

"Carson was yelling up a storm after we got to the deer and then we FaceTimed everybody to let them know about the big kill. Carson killed the buck on my wife Kayla's grandparents land. Aubrey Johnston was 78 years old when he passed and my boys were really close to him. He was one of the godliest human beings you'd ever meet. I felt like her grandfather was right there with us."

This was the first deer killed on the property since Johnston passed away. It was a very emotional moment for the family. ■

# OWENS NAILS ADAMS COUNTY TROPHY BUCK

**S** By Mike Giles

tacy Welty Owens, of Covington, La., has been hunting the last 15 years, but a recent trip to family land near Natchez proved to be her most exciting hunt ever.

"Our land borders a National Refuge and most of it is open woods where you can see for a ways," Owens said. "I was hunting a stand overlooking a small food plot during the youth weekend and my husband, Jacob Owens, had taken our son hunting on another stand. Does came out from my right and crossed over the narrow food plot to my left."

Owens was hunting with a Ravin crossbow, so she decided to shoot one of the does.

"I'd practiced a lot the day before, so I was ranging the four does at 25 yards," Owens said. "I looked to the right and there he comes, just like on the Outdoor Channel and I'd never seen one that big before. All I saw was horns! I shot a 128-inch buck the

year before but this one was so much better."

## FIRST CROSSBOW BUCK

This buck, a main frame 9-point with a kicker, green scored 167 inches, had a 20-inch spread, was aged at 5 ½ years old and had a lot of stickers around the bases. Ironically, Owens had never shot a deer with a crossbow before, but she was more than up for the task and harvested the buck of a lifetime.

"This was the first time we had seen this buck," she said. "We've been trying to educate ourselves about hunting deer and learning patterns of deer travel and hunting by the wind. I had a great wind for this stand that day and he came across upwind of me and never suspected a thing."

"When I saw him coming from the right all I saw was horns and I knew that he was a shooter and didn't look to count the points or admire the rack anymore. He came on a mission, and he came

up to my left side and stopped and I couldn't find him in the scope. I'd forgotten to take the lens cap off so I flipped the lens cover off and he turned broadside. I squeezed the trigger, but it wouldn't shoot. I calmed down, squeezed the safety off, put the 30-yard pin on him, and fired."

Thwack!

## CELEBRATING WITH FAMILY

"When I heard the arrow hit him like a baseball bat, I knew I'd made a good shot on him," Owens said. "I saw blood gushing out as he ran about 50 to 60 yards and stopped, then leaned to the right and fell over. I called my husband and told him that I'd just shot a monster and seen him drop. This was about 4:45 with plenty of daylight left before the time change. When my husband got over there we walked over and found him lying on his side with the rack sticking way up high off the ground."

"As we walked up to the buck my husband said, 'Oh My Goodness, what a buck!' It was super special, extremely special to kill a free ranging buck while hunting with my husband and son. He just didn't imagine the buck was such a monster. We also have a lot of family and friends that hunt there so that made it really cool, too."

The Owens' respect the wildlife and teach their children about harvesting deer and being grateful for the opportunity.

"Since it was youth weekend my son wanted to go to the bottom and I was going to go to another stand in their area, but something just didn't feel right," Owens said. "I really wanted to go down to this stand and I didn't know why but I just felt like I needed to go down there so I went with my gut instinct, and it paid off." ■



Stacy Welty Owens of Covington, La., took this 9-point buck with a crossbow on a trip to family land near Natchez on Nov. 14.

# AARON WOODARD ARROWS WEBSTER COUNTY **TROPHY BUCK**

**A** By Mike Giles  
fter lunch on Thanksgiving Day, Aaron Woodard of Gluckstadt headed to his family's Webster County deer camp near Lodi. The next morning, he killed an 8-point buck that weighed 190 pounds. The deer's antlers were made up of 8 long points, a long drop tine, and two kickers.

"I was walking in before daylight and got about 100 yards from my stand when a deer jumped up and went crashing through the woods and across the creek," Woodard said. "I was hunting a white oak bottom that formed a funnel with a pine thicket and cutover to the north. We usually do pretty good there when the acorns are dropping.

"It started getting daylight and I was watching the hardwood bottom funnel when a 4-point came and crossed in front of me about 25 yards. It went out about 100 yards in front of me eating acorns and I watched him 15 to 20 minutes. To my left I saw the body of a bigger deer in the woods, and he fed out towards the other deer. I'd only got a couple of other deer on the camera this year and I'd never seen this one before. He pushed the 4-point around and they were heading back toward that funnel, and they got out there about 25 yards and he gave me a quartering shot without a pass through."

## THE SEARCH BEGINS

After the deer ran about 65 yards, he stopped for a minute and went into the thicket. Woodard lost him.

"I sat about another 45 minutes and went out there and didn't find blood or hair, so I went back to camp to wait a couple of hours before going out," he said. "I walked over to where I'd seen him last and found a spot of blood and walked to the thicket and there he was about 10 yards into the thicket just laying there. I walked up to him and saw the drop tine for the first time."

Woodard figured the deer must have been moving through due to the cold front because they didn't have that deer on camera the last couple of years.

Woodard was bow hunting from a

lock-on stand when he harvested the trophy buck.

"This is my third buck with a bow and it's a lot more fun just watching them up close," he said. "Last year I shot my first buck with a bow and I liked it so much that it's about all I'll hunt with now."

Woodard harvested the buck with a Mathews bow with a Rage Hyperdermic 2-blade broadhead. Though he was hunting with a bow during open gun season, Woodard was up to the task and enjoyed the challenge. In the process, he harvested a trophy the hard way, with a bow during open gun season. It just doesn't get much sweeter than that! ■



Aaron Woodard, of Gluckstadt, was hunting at his family's Webster County deer camp on Nov. 26 when he took this trophy 8-point buck.



# HUNTING/FISHING SCRAPBOOK



Aiden Laird of Raleigh took this Smith County 9-point on opening day of the youth season with his Winchester .270.



Jagger Juneau was fishing in the Pascagoula River in October when he hooked his first bass.



Jarrette Gunn of Brandon killed this monster hog on family land along the Pearl River on Nov. 16.



Miles Barber, 4, proudly displays the 1-pound, 13-ounce bass he caught from a private pond in Franklin County.

## GOT PICS? We want 'em

Email images to: [images@ms-sportsman.com](mailto:images@ms-sportsman.com)

All images will be considered, but those taken on the water or in the woods will have the best chance of being featured.

\*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.

TAKE THESE TIPS FROM A VETERAN HUNTING/  
VIDEOGRAPHER FOR GETTING CLOSE TO BIG  
BUCKS LATE IN THE SEASON, AND YOU MAY  
PUNCH A BIG TAG THIS MONTH.

# JUMP INTO By Mike Giles JANUARY BUCKS



# Jordan Blissett is a talented hunter and videographer for Primos Game Calls who travels the country searching for deer **AND HUNTING BIG BUCKS.**

He hunts in the Midwest every year, but he also hunts at home in Mississippi, and he's learned a few things about finding and harvesting late-season bucks. In the process he's harvested some spectacular deer.

"I had a deer on camera in August last year, and it disappeared in bow season," said Blissett. "Around the end of November, I started hunting his core area, which was about 40 acres. This area was about a 15-year-old cutover area with (agricultural) fields surrounding it."

Blissett got the break he needed over the Thanksgiving holidays. "I saw him at 210 yards and squeezed off a shot at him," Blissett said. "The buck disappeared, and I didn't find any blood. I hate wounding a deer and losing him, so I got my dog and searched and searched for the deer or blood but didn't find a trace."

Blissett searched for many hours and put out cameras throughout the core zone, but he never caught another glimpse of the buck, which disappeared from his radar screen. He knew he'd either gone off and died or left the area. Blissett was just sick about possibly wounding the deer and causing his demise.

"I was sure I made a good shot, but I just never found any evidence that I'd hit the buck," he said.

## **BIG BREAK: HE'S BAAAACK! >**

Jordan Blissett recently harvested this monster buck while hunting in Iowa this season. The buck scored 178 B&C before deductions but just failed to make the record book.



## BIG BREAK: HE'S BAAAACK!

"On Jan. 20, I got a picture of him back in the area, and I was really excited," he said. "It had been a really good late season for acorns, as the water oaks and Nuttall oaks were bearing heavily. We had some floods, and when that happens in there, the water pushes all of the acorns out of the 100-acre hardwood swamp bottom to the edge of the hills."

Conditions were just right when the big bruiser showed back up on camera.

"That makes a really great hunt," Blissett said. "The acorns are pushed up along the hillside about 3 feet wide and 300 yards in a line. The bucks just feed down the acorn line, and they'll travel awhile, feeding, and you can pinpoint where they're going to come from and where they're feeding, too."

Blissett and Troy Ruiz made a beeline for the woods after they spotted the buck on camera via a cell-phone app and quickly set up their climbing stands so that Ruiz could film the hunt.

"We got in there about 2 p.m. and saw a couple of young

bucks," said Blissett. "About 4:30, Troy said, 'There's that buck coming straight towards us. He was walking with a slight limp!'"

As the buck fed into an opening, Blissett squeezed the trigger slowly.

Tic-Boom! Blissett's Savage .308 roared, and the buck collapsed in a heap.

The deer was a trophy by any standards in Mississippi. It sported a wide rack with an 18-inch inside spread, and it scored in the 140s, tremendous for an 8-pointer.

## HUNT REGULARLY

Blissett hunts around the country more than 100 days a year and learns more about deer and hunting bucks by spending a lot of time in the woods. He hunts a wide variety of places, watches a lot of bucks and learns more by watching bucks than by pulling the trigger upon the first sight of them. But you must be selective if harvesting a mature buck no matter where you are hunting.

## LATE-SEASON: FOOD, BEDS

"During the late season, I want to hunt areas where the food and bedding areas are close together, where the deer don't have to travel far," Blissett said. "You are upping your odds if you are hunting close, because that buck will be worn out from chasing does and tired from the rutting activity. He won't move far to find food, so he's going to bed up as close to the food source as possible."



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



Jordan Blissett of Gluckstadt harvested this Madison County buck last year in the waning days of the season.



This year, Blissett has already had success, and he recently filmed Ruiz shooting a 130-class Mississippi buck with his .308.

"I put in a 3-acre food plot that was surrounded on two sides by a 5-year-old pine plantation," Blissett said.

"The deer can bed down in the thicket and stand up and walk 30 yards and enter the food plot. We watched 30 deer, and Troy shot the buck about 4:30. This was our first year to hunt this 900-acre lease, and we're already seeing a lot of deer with just a little preparation.

"I'm looking for 3 things during the late season," Blissett said. "Since late season success is dependent on finding food, I want a good food plot, abundant native browse (and) late-dropping acorns."

## CREATE YOUR SPOTS

Blissett gets to work on establishing hunting properties geared to producing deer and quality bucks, and he's continually helping change the landscape to make an area better for the deer and other game as well as for the hunters.

"I'll usually establish a couple of food plots near prime bedding areas," he said. "Sometimes, we'll go into a new place and establish a good bedding area by just leaving 40 to 60 acres alone so it can grow thick. We have one new place just like that where we let tall switch grasses grow, and it's provided the deer with a core bedding area close to the action."

Access to a good location is a key when it comes to hunting a big buck after you have located him.

"If you can access your stand without alerting the bucks, or without them knowing you've gotten into the stand in their bedroom, then you are much better off," Blissett said.

"During the late season, we don't hunt a lot during the mornings — just late afternoon — to take the pressure off them.

"If you go in there every day and hunt morning and afternoon, they will know it and adjust accordingly. If you put too much pressure on the mature bucks, they'll relocate. It all boils down to hunting pressure the way we hunt. We want to hunt deer that haven't been pressured, even though that's hard to find during the late season."

Catching bucks unawares during December means getting on the downwind side of the food source or food plot. While some hunters try to fool bucks with scent killers and coverups, Blissett hunts strictly by the wind.

## THIS SEASON'S MONSTER ➤

<p><b>MARCH</b></p> <p><b>WATER LILIES PLANTED</b></p>	<p><b>JULY</b></p> <p><b>ADULT LILIES FULLY GROWN</b></p>	<p><b>OCTOBER</b></p> <p><b>POND FULL OF DUCKS</b></p>	<p>"My son and I followed Mr. Hills' instructions for planting the shipment of banana water lilies...And within 5 months, we had new ducks feeding in our pond" - Chris B.</p>
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A food plot that provides good, green forage during January will be a hot spot for late-season bucks.

## THIS SEASON'S MONSTER

This season, Blissett hunted an area that had good deer, but he didn't catch a glimpse of a buck after nine days, so he went home and let the area rest.

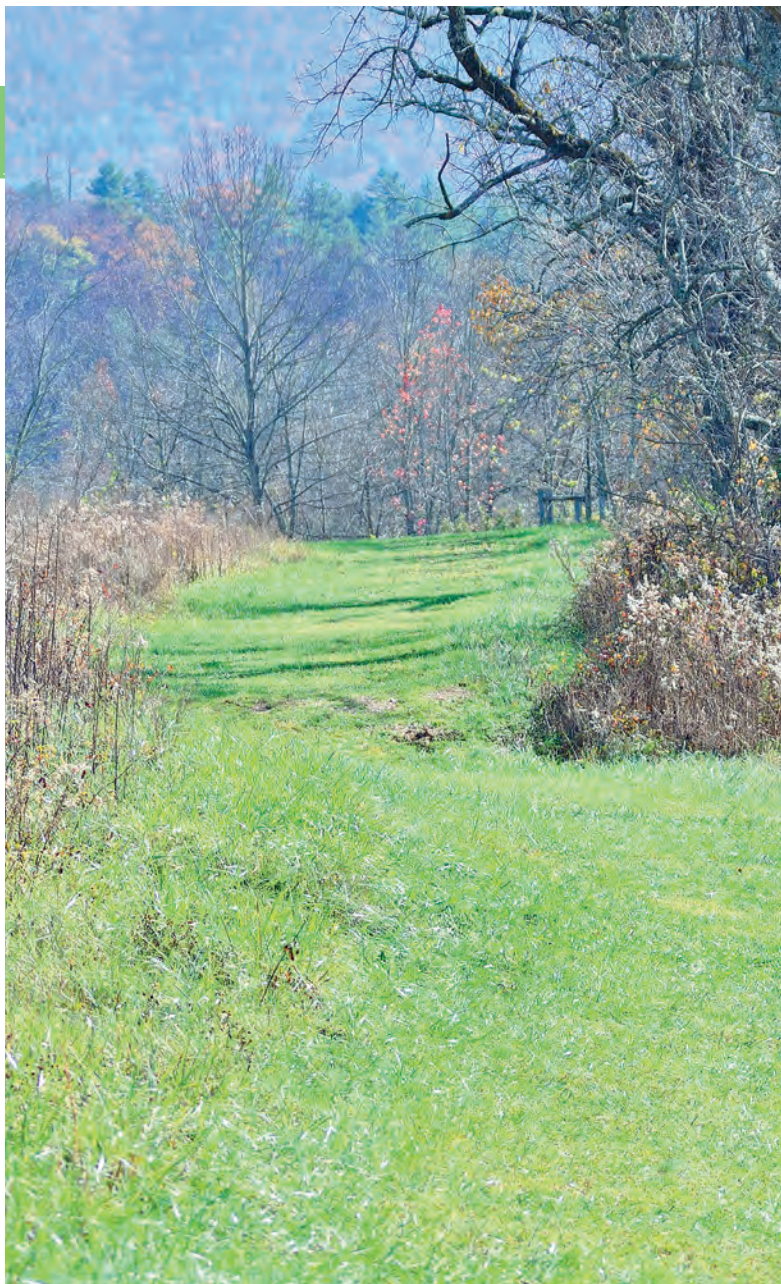
"I was hunting an area in Iowa that had a lot of rolling agriculture, as well as timber draws," said Blissett. "After laying off a couple of weeks, I went back to the same area and caught the buck following a hot doe on my first day back in the woods.

"In fact, there were six to eight bucks following that doe, as well as a fine 9-point. I'd been hunting all day, and about 2 p.m., the buck followed a hot doe into range, and I nailed him."

That buck green-scored 178 inches but fell just short of the Boone & Crockett Club after deductions were factored in.

## LATE-SEASON FOOD PLOTS

By the end of Mississippi's deer season, bucks that have survived are rundown and hungry from all of the rutting activity, which includes fighting other bucks, breeding does, evading hunters and eating very little. Primos was one of the forerunners in food-plot mixes for different soil types and seasons, so



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Blissett has a lot of experience to draw from when determining what to plant for late-season food plots.

"We're going to plant a base of wheat, oats and cereal grains, about 150 to 200 pounds per acre," he said. "At Primos, we have a fall mix of wheat, oats, brassica, clover and a couple other things. But what I like to do is I'll use that and come back and overdress purple-top turnips, seven-top turnips, triticale and Daikon radishes. I'm a big fan of Daikon radishes; deer will use them at different times of year. We'll plant some white and red clover as well, and they'll last through the spring and sometime through summer. I've got a smorgasbord of grass and we'll fertilize it with Triple 19, which has nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium." ■

## OKUMA HAKAI DT BAITCASTING REEL

Okuma has had a series of low-profile baitcasting reels on the market for years. But its latest offering, the lightweight Hakai DT, is a reel that was literally built from the bottom up.

The LiteCast magnesium frame and a corrosion-resistant coating on the frame and side plates gets things started. The reels start at 5.9 ounces with a 6BB+1RB precision stainless-steel ball-bearing drive for smooth casting and a Quick-Set anti-reverse bearing for solid hooksets.

Okuma introduces its Flite Spool with patented Flite Shaft hollow, stainless-steel main shaft and C-40X carbon injected star, offering the ultimate in free spool and castability.

Six of the 10 models in the Hakai DT line have gear ratios of 6.2:1, 7.3:1 and 8.1:1. Two additional pitching reels come in at 6.2:1 and two finesse reels with an 8.1:1 gear ratio. A universal line diameter indicator lets you know what line you have on the reel at all times.

**MSRP: \$169.99-**

**\$184.99**

**For more info, visit:**

**[www.okumafishingusa.com](http://www.okumafishingusa.com).**



## DAIWA J-FLUORO SAMURAI FLUOROCARBON

Fluorocarbon is here to stay. There was good reason for the line's explosion on the market. Saltwater anglers were first to discover its advantages over mono, including smaller diameters, improved sensitivity, abrasion-resistance and invisibility. Freshwater anglers piled in for the same reasons.

Daiwa has jumped into the market with its J-Fluoro Samurai fluorocarbon, which comes in 13 different sizes between 2- and 25-pound test, for anglers chasing anything from bream to bull reds.

Line from 2- to 12-pound test was formulated stouter for better sensitivity, while 14- to 25-pound test was formulated softer for better spool management.

The 220-yard filler spools are marked with a DVEC sticker at the midway point, giving you an exact count when spooling two reels.

J-Fluoro Samurai main line brings invisibility, strength, reliability, and unrivaled overall performance to anglers of all walks.

**MSRP: \$20.99-\$23.99**

**For more info, visit: [www.daiwa.us](http://www.daiwa.us).**

## SPRO POCKET TAIL MINNOW

Lots of soft-plastic swimbaits look alike, but the similarities end there.

SPRO has offered fishermen a unique, boot-tail swimbait, the Pocket Tail Minnow, which is a great choice to thread onto the back of a jighead or fished on a weighted swimbait hook.

At 3¾ inches long, the Pocket Tail Minnow comes in 16 colors and is made from a highly resilient elastomer and infused with Amino Bite Scent, which mimics the smell and taste of a baitfish and creates a scent trail that bass, redfish, speckled trout, snook and flounder can key on.

The hard-thumping tail contains a small pocket that provides a different sound profile than any other lure. And the heavily ribbed body pushes a ton of water. So it calls fish from a distance, in clear water and dirty water alike.

**MSRP: 5-pack, \$6.99**

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# BAD WEATHER FOR BIG BUCKS

**WHEN STORM  
CLOUDS APPROACH,  
MAKE SURE YOU'RE  
READY TO GET IN THE  
WOODS AND TAKE  
ADVANTAGE OF DEER  
MOVEMENTS THAT  
ARE DICTATED BY  
THE WEATHER.**

■ By John E. Phillips

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Ronnie Strickland is pictured with his buck that weighed 245 pounds and scored 209-5/8 inches.

# TO TAKE AN OLDER AGE-CLASS BUCK IN JANUARY,

especially in regions with high hunting pressure, you must hunt:

- Where no one wants to hunt or has hunted;
- When the fewest hunters are hunting; and
- Where an older age class buck will walk past your stand.

“The weather app on your cell phone is one of the best tools to predict when and where a buck will move,” said veteran hunter Preston Pittman of Pickens. “I’ve found that my best chances of taking a mature buck when the pressure is on are immediately after a rain or during nasty, bad weather in January. Most hunters will remain at camp then.”

Pittman leaves camp about an hour before the rain should stop so that he’s on his stand the instant the rain quits.

“I’ve learned that the first 30 minutes after the rain will be the most productive for seeing deer,” he said. “The hunters at camp

who don’t leave until the rain ends may spook deer they want to take or reach their stands after the deer have stopped moving.

“Today’s hunters have access to quality rainsuits, portable, waterproof ground blinds and tree umbrellas to attach above their tree stands that cover a hunter while the rain’s pouring down than ever have been available before.”

Pittman said hunting pressure will be the least on cold, windy, rainy days.

“A critical factor hunters often overlook is that a buck, 3 years old or older, probably patterns hunters more effectively than hunters pattern him,” he said. “Deer have learned that hunters don’t like to hunt in bad weather, enabling them to move more and with fewer chances of getting shot than at any other time.”

## TAKING A BAD-WEATHER BUCK >



John E. Phillips

## TAKING A BAD-WEATHER BUCK

Ronnie “Cuz” Strickland, the vice president of media and public relations for Haas Outdoors in West Point, has spent thousands of hours hunting deer. There’s a huge buck with a monstrous rack on the wall in his home, and he shared the story of how he took the buck.

“I’d worked 21 days in 1981 without a break,” he said. “I drove to an old school bus some buddies and I were using as a camp-house to hunt less than 1,000 acres in Jefferson County. When I arrived, a terrible rainstorm hit.”

Before deer season opened, Strickland had hung a climbing stand less than a ¼-mile from camp, about 200 yards from the landowner’s house, overlooking a clear-cut with a skid road through it. He had never hunted the stand, but thought he’d hunt it the next morning. When he woke up, the rain was still

pouring down.

“I’d made the decision the night before that, regardless of the weather, I was hunting the next morning, since I’d not been able to hunt for so long,” he said.

The wind howled, the rain poured down and the trees swished back and forth in the wind. Strickland bundled up in his rain gear and headed for his stand. He knew the noise of the wind and rain would cover any noise he made. The rain quit at 8:30. He heard an ATV on the other hunting club’s property, across the clear-cut, at 9:15.

“A big buck bedded out in the clear-cut got up and started to move when he heard the 3-wheeler,” said Strickland, who heard the deer coming and realized he’d only get a quick shot once it stepped into the skid road.

He saw a spike but didn’t shoot. He heard another deer



moving and spotted tall tines coming through the brush. He mounted his .30-30 lever-action rifle and cocked the hammer. The buck stepped into the skid lane about 20 yards away.

"The big buck looked straight at me," Strickland said. "I aimed with my iron sights and squeezed the trigger."

The 4½-year-old, 245-pound buck, which sported a 27-point non-typical rack that scored 209%, went down instantly.

## GREEN FIELDS IN BAD WEATHER

Pittman has several green fields planted on his property. He doesn't hunt two of the green fields, treating them as sanctuaries for both bucks and does until the rut arrives.

He fertilizes his green fields three times a year, before and during the season, to provide nutritious, palatable food in January.

"Most hunters plant their green fields in the early fall and put out lime and fertilizer to get their crops started but never fertilize (them) again until the following year," Pittman said. "I fertilize my green fields before deer season starts and twice during the season. I believe these green fields taste more delicious to deer than other green fields having less fertilizer. These green fields enable me to pull mature bucks from a large area to my sanctuary green fields before and during the rut."



**John E. Phillips** has been a fulltime outdoor writer who travels throughout the South, gathering information on hunting and fishing and other outdoor pursuits.

## COLD-WEATHER BUCKS >

You may take a buck that other hunters may never see or take, if you hunt when no one else does on bad weather days. **RIGHT:** Preston Pittman says that bucks pattern hunters better than hunters pattern deer and he has found that cold, wet, nasty days are some of his favorite days to hunt.



John E. Phillips



John E. Phillips

## COLD-WEATHER BUCKS

Dr. Larry Marchinton, a retired wildlife researcher at the University of Georgia, thinks that deer seem to move less during severely cold weather than they do in more stable conditions. “I don’t have any scientific research to back this theory. However, I do know from my own experiences that I see fewer deer moving on cold days than I do when the weather’s mild.”

“Deer will bed in thick cover closer to a food source in cold weather than at other times,” Pittman said. “Then, they don’t have to travel far from their bedding places to their feeding areas. A buck may spot you before you’ve seen him if you set-up too close to the bedding area. Instead, take a stand between the bedding place and the food source.”

## HUNTING IN THE RAIN

Rain has various effects on deer. A light rain doesn’t seem to impact their movement. A heavy rain often forces the deer into thick cover. The rain may prevent most hunters from hunting, resulting in less hunting pressure. Here are some other reasons to hunt deer on rainy days.

“The rain hides much of a hunter’s movement when stalking and washes away his scent,” Pittman said. “Then, you can hunt the same region more than one time a day. Also, on rainy days, determining which way the wind’s blowing is easy because of how the wind is pushing the rain. The deer can’t smell me as long as I’m walking into the wind. The rain also will help wash away my human odor. The sound of the rain and the wet ground will muffle the sound of my movement. I can move in closer to a deer without being detected.”

Mississippi’s long season and the state’s average of 257 frost-free days annually means many hunters will decide not to hunt on bad weather days, instead waiting for nice days with no rain, little wind and warmer temperatures. The lack of hunting pressure on bad-weather days may cause deer to move more with fewer hunters afield.

## HUNT BEFORE A STORM

Hunting pressure generally will be extremely light or non-existent 12 to 24 hours before a storm. Weather apps and hunting apps on cell phones help hunters today to see an approaching storm. Weather-savvy outdoorsmen can more accurately



John E. Phillips

predict when a storm will occur where they hunt. Deer also can predict when a storm will hit; that's why they will feed and move like there's a sale on groceries 3 to 4 hours before a storm. Hunters on their stands will have better chances to take mature bucks than the hunters who quit hunting several hours before a storm.

Deer hunting tactics like still-hunting, stalking and hunting from a tree stand pay off before storms. You must define the target areas where the bucks are most likely to be before a storm approaches. Stalk close to bedding areas or trails leading to bedding places during the last 1 to 3 hours before a storm arrives. These places are where deer go, seeking shelter from the storm, before the weather turns bad.

Deer hunters who get out before, during and after bad weather can increase their odds of taking bucks, especially in the late season. ■

**STICKS & STRINGS ➤**

A buck that's 3 years old or older probably has patterned the hunters trying to take him better than those hunters have patterned that buck. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Most hunters will remain in camp and tell hunting stories rather than face the elements to try and bag a buck, when the weather's cold and rainy with blowing wind.



John E. Phillips

**HUNTING SEASONS**

SPECIES	SEASON DATES	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION
<b>Doves</b>	Sept. 4-Oct. 17(n), Sept. 4-19 (s) Oct. 30-Nov. 28 (n), Oct. 9-Nov. 7 (s) Dec. 25-Jan. 9 (n), Dec. 19-Jan. 31 (s)	15	45
<b>Quail</b>	Nov. 25-March 5	8	
<b>Rabbit</b>	Oct. 16-Feb. 28	8	
<b>Squirrel (fall)</b>	Oct. 1-Feb. 28	8	
<b>Squirrel (spr)</b>	May 15-June 1	4	
<b>Raccoon</b>	July 1-Sept. 30	1 raccoon per party	
<b>Rac/Opp/Bobcat</b>	Oct. 1-Oct. 31 (food/sport) Nov. 1-Feb. 28 (food/sport/pelt)	5/day, 8/party No limit	
<b>Rails</b>			
King & Clapper	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	15	45
Sora & Virginia	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	25	75
Gallinules	Sept. 1-Oct. 3, Nov. 26-Jan. 1	15	45
<b>Snipe</b>	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28	8	24
<b>Crow</b>	Nov. 6 - Feb. 28	No limit	No limit
<b>Woodcock</b>	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31	3	9
<b>Wild Turkey</b>			
Fall season	Oct. 15-Nov. 15 (permit, selected counties)	2 per season (may be either sex)	
Spring season	March 15-May 1	1/day, 3/season, longbeards only	
Youth season	March 8-14	1/day, 3/season, bearded birds only	

**WATERFOWL SEASONS**

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
<b>Duck</b>	Teal only: Sept. 11-26 Nov. 26-28, Dec. 3-5 Dec. 9-Jan. 31	6 6
<b>Geese</b> (Canada, blue, Ross, white-fronted, brant)	Sept. 1-30 Nov. 12-28, Dec. 3-5, Dec. 9-Jan. 31	5 Canada 3, Brant 1 Snow/blue/Ross 20 White-fronted 3
<b>Light Geese conservation</b>	Oct. 1-Nov. 11, Nov. 29-Dec. 2 Dec. 6-8, Feb. 1-4, Feb. 7-March 31 Feb. 8-March 31	No limit

**DEER SEASON**

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
<b>Northeast</b>	Oct. 1-Nov. 19 Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon) Jan. 20-31 (archery/primitive weapon)	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs) Dec. 16-23 (no dogs) Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-19 (youth)
<b>East Central</b>	Oct. 1-Nov. 19 Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon) Jan. 20-31 (archery-primitive weapon)	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs) Dec. 16-23 (no dogs) Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-19 (youth)
<b>Southwest</b>	Oct. 1-Nov. 19 Nov. 8-19 (antlerless primitive weapon) Jan. 20-31 (archery-primitive weapon)	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs) Dec. 16-23 (no dogs) Dec. 24-Jan.19(dogs) Nov.6-Jan. 19 (youth)
<b>Southeast</b>	Oct. 15-Nov. 19 Jan. 21-31 (either-sex arch-primitive) Feb. 1-15 (archery-primitive bucks only)	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec. 1 (dogs) Dec. 16-23 (no dogs) Dec. 24-Jan. 20(dogs) Nov. 21-Feb. 15 (yth)
<b>Delta/South Delta</b>	Oct. 1-Nov. 19 Nov. 9-20 (antlerless primitive weapon) Jan. 20-31 (archery primitive weapon)	Dec. 2-15	Nov. 20-Dec.1 (dogs) Dec. 16-23 (no dogs) Dec. 24-Jan. 19(dogs) Nov. 6-Jan. 19 (youth)



## MY FIRST RECURVE DEER: THE CULMINATION OF ONE YEAR'S HARD WORK

I remember when I first started bow hunting over thirty years ago like it was yesterday. Deer were scarce, and compound bows didn't have near the technology that they do today. It was difficult enough to take a deer with a compound bow, and I scoffed at the thought of going into the woods carrying only a bare wooden bow and a few arrows. It has been said that time changes everything, and that is certainly true in this case. Over the last thirty years, not only have deer populations increased significantly, but I've been blessed to take many animals with my compound bow, including some nice bucks.

The next step was that I found myself wanting to increase the challenge again and tip the odds more in favor of my quarry. Regular readers of this column know that in an effort to do so, a little over a year ago I picked a recurve bow up with the goal of taking a deer with it. This is the story of my journey down that rabbit hole, or should I say deer trail. Hopefully it will inspire some of you to do the same, as well as shorten your learning curve compared to mine.

Working in the archery industry afforded me the opportunity to meet many incredible people and be invited to hunt some amazing places. Many of my

closest friendships have been formed through archery.

Two years ago, my buddy Scott had me order him a recurve bow and, in the process of setting this bow up, I rediscovered how much fun they are to shoot.

In fact, I enjoyed the simplicity so much, that I purchased one of my own and began playing around shooting it in our range. Scott dug in and got it done on a nice 10-point buck at his place up in Arkansas later that year from the same stand that I killed a beautiful 9-point buck out of with my Mathews bow in that November. This was when I made up my mind that I was going to do this thing! Although I shot that bow fairly well, I just wasn't consistent enough to feel confident taking it into the woods.

One Saturday in August of 2020, a friend brought a Black Widow bow in and I was able to try it out. The following Monday I was on the phone with the factory ordering one of my own.

My new Black Widow bow arrived in January of 2021. I was able to become



The author's first recurve kill was this doe taken in Arkansas.

accurate with this bow very quickly, and in early February I made a quick evening hunt in the marsh close to home. I saw several deer, but the only one in range was a young buck that I elected to pass. Even though I was accurate most of the time, I still would have the occasional "Where the hell did that go?" flyer. Scott and my other friends were having similar problems, and none of us could explain these misses. This led us to search for answers, and the solution was a weekend archery clinic in March with Rod Jenkins,



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.

a three time world champion and world class coach. Rod was quickly able to put us on the path to proper form and increased accuracy, probably saving us years of struggling. In late spring I buckled down and put in my time doing drills and then practicing each morning for at least 30 minutes. Traditional archery requires you to put in the time almost daily to maintain both the strength and form required for consistent accuracy.

A great way to keep out of the woods is to run an archery shop, and this fall was no exception. Early bow season was even busier than usual, and it was looking like I wouldn't have the opportunity to hunt until late in the year again. A last minute invite to Scott's property in Arkansas was extended, and I jumped at the opportunity. It was going to mean a lot of driving for only three sits in the stand, but I didn't mind at all. The first evening, I only had a cull buck come in and I elected to pass him hoping one of the younger hunters would get an opportunity at him. The next morning I saw several bucks and does, but the only deer I had a shot on was a young spike buck. I practiced hard the entire morning and early afternoon, as it was all coming down to this last evening hunt.

We went into our stands early because many of us bumped deer on the way in the evening before that were on their feet early due to the full moon. I was hunting from a ladder stand on the edge of a 15 acre wheat field. As soon as I settled into the stand, deer began popping out into the field. Although I saw a bunch of deer including two really nice bucks, at 5:15 p.m. none of them had been within range yet. I was thinking my hunt was over and reflecting on how great both my time in the tree and camp had been when I spotted a lone doe standing 40 yards down the field edge.

Things quickly shifted into overdrive as she started to walk my way. I readied myself for the shot and everything was going smoothly until she spotted a rice bran pile put out earlier that afternoon. She immediately stomped and began to "stiff leg" away. I was able to quickly crouch and find a hole in the limbs on a branch in front of me. I drew back, focused on her

quartered away vitals and let the string slip smoothly off of my fingertips. As soon as the arrow left the string, I knew it was a perfect shot.

I heard that satisfying "whack" sound, and as the doe wheeled around to run off, I could see my turkey feathers sticking out of the back of her ribs. She made a mad dash across the wheat field and into the woods where I heard her pile up! After a bit of blood trailing we recovered a beautiful doe. All of my hard work over the past year had paid off when it counted most. Because of this, this deer was one of my most satisfying bow kills ever! If you enjoy the process and challenge of bow hunting, traditional archery enhances both of these elements.

You owe it to yourself to give it a try. ■

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By Mike Giles

Gary Rodgers turned loose his prized squirrel dog, Faith, who quickly started working the hardwood bottom and treed just minutes into the hunt. Several hunters surrounded the tree, and the action started fast and furious as the treetop came alive with squirrels running, flying and soaring through limbs as they tried to evade the hunters.

Boom, boom, boom, roared the shotguns as the hunters tried to catch up to the squirrels. When the action was finished, multiple squirrels had met their demise in one tree.

From humble beginnings with Faith, to the present day, Rodgers, who lives in Quitman, has built a legacy and established a unique breeding system that continues to produce some of the world's best treeing dogs. Pound for pound, his dogs are second to none.

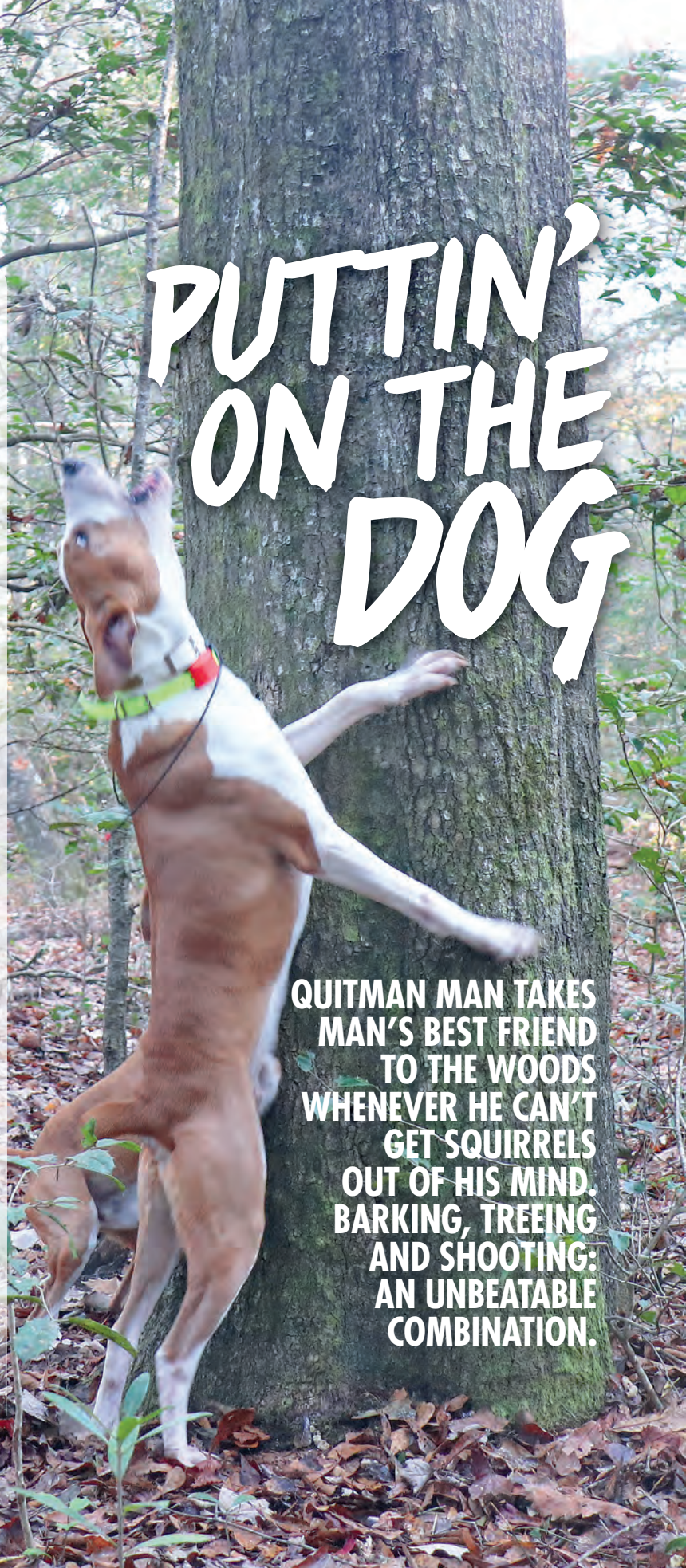
"You've got to love it and put in the time and effort to build a breeding system," Rodgers said. "Faith was my main dog, and I started breeding naturals, dogs that start treeing on their own and just have that ability deep inside. I just put them out there, and then we breed the best to the best."

Rodgers once had a man travel from South Carolina to breed with another of Rodgers's dogs, but he wanted to check him out before sealing the deal. The first squirrel was treed only minutes after the dogs were released, and they made four successful trees in the first 25 minutes. Needless to say, the South Carolina hunter was sold, and the breeding took place shortly after they returned to Rodgers's kennel.

"When you have a dog with more desire to tree than breed, then he's pretty special," said Rodgers.

You can't teach desire; that's something that comes from the dog, and Rodgers has been fortunate to recognize which ones have it and work them into his breeding line and rotation. Coz, one of his prized Mountain curs, was well known around the country and was as close to a sure bet as they come. His puppies started treeing around the yard from 3 to 6 months on their own, and most were treeing regularly by one year.

# PUTTIN' ON THE DOG



**QUITMAN MAN TAKES  
MAN'S BEST FRIEND  
TO THE WOODS  
WHENEVER HE CAN'T  
GET SQUIRRELS  
OUT OF HIS MIND.  
BARKING, TREEING  
AND SHOOTING:  
AN UNBEATABLE  
COMBINATION.**

## TAKE A KID SQUIRREL HUNTING

Faith and Coz were special dogs, fun to hunt with and watch. They were really good for kids, because they hunted hard and kept the action going when Rodgers was introducing children and new hunters to the great tradition of squirrel hunting with dogs.

Once upon a time, almost every country boy in Mississippi had a squirrel dog, but times have changed, and many don't know the joy of hunting squirrels with dogs or the fast-paced action you can have while chasing squirrels with top-notch dogs. But it's still the same thrill every time you go on a good hunt.

"It's all about the camaraderie with friends, and I enjoy seeing a pup get started and watching them get better every time out," Rodgers said. "One year, I shot over 100 squirrels while training Digger, one of my younger dogs at the time. There's just no substitute for spending time in the woods with your dogs or kids."

These days, Rodgers spends most of his time in the woods, taking kids and others squirrel hunting. There's no need to sit still and be quiet like you have to in a deer stand. You can have a great time following the dogs and get in on the action when they tree. Kids can burn up some of that excess energy while

learning about the outdoors, hunting and getting in on the fast-paced action when the dogs tree. There's nothing more exciting than watching some young hunters trying to shoot squirrels flying through the treetops.

"Kids, the more the merrier," Rodgers said. "I love to introduce kids to squirrel hunting with dogs and watch them have fun learning how to hunt and shoot squirrels. It's definitely not like sitting in a deer stand being quiet and not experiencing much action."

"My uncle, Lavoid Rascoe, took me hunting when I was 6 or 7 years old; he's the reason I love it to this day. I didn't know it then, but that was his main reason for hunting — to take me and get me interested in the outdoors. He had a friend by the name of Houston who picked me up every time we got to a mudhole to keep me from getting wet and muddy and in trouble with my grandmother."

"Uncle Lavoid stayed with my grandmother in Stonewall after my grandfather died, and he would pick me up from Scott Mountain, Ala., on Fridays; I'd stay the weekend and hunt with him during the fall and winter."

**BEST TIME TO GO** ➤

Gary Rodgers and Zach Mosley with Rodgers' crackerjack Mountain Cur squirrel dogs, Judd and Digger.



## BEST TIME TO GO

Rodgers typically waits under after cold weather arrives and tree limbs are bare of leaves before hunting with his dogs.

"I wait until the rattlesnakes have gone into their dens," Rodgers said. "It's not worth losing a dog or getting a child bit, so we wait until it's cold and the squirrels are more visible in the trees, too. It's not about numbers anymore, although we've killed lots of squirrels over the years, it's about having a good time and taking others who will enjoy it too."

## BEST PLACES TO HUNT

Rodgers prefers finding areas with hardwoods and pines mixed for variety. If squirrels are there, he'll hunt them, but some areas just hold more squirrels and present more opportunities to tree and harvest those squirrels.

"I like to hunt in areas that have some ground cover," he said.

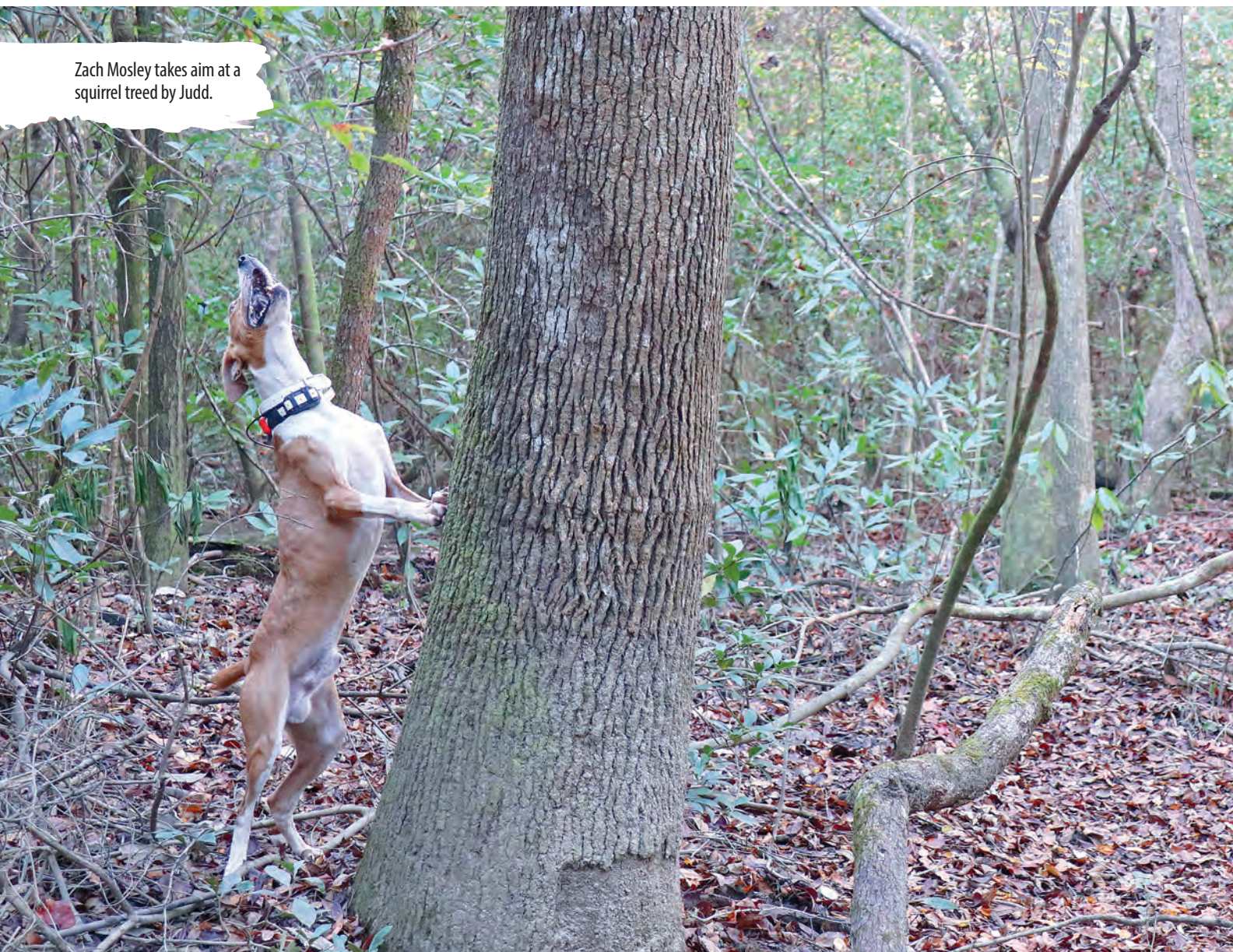
"I prefer hunting in short timber when training a young dog and taking kids, because you can see the squirrels easier, and the kids can find them and get some shooting in, too."

Some of the best areas of Mississippi that he's hunted had palmettos. If you have palmettos or bushes, it gives squirrels some ground cover to hide from owls and hawks. They're bad on squirrels if the woods are open and clean, which makes it a good area for predators — not necessarily for the squirrels.

Contrary to popular belief, old-growth, mature hardwood timber is not the perfect place to hunt squirrels with dogs.

"The old-growth timber usually has a lot of den trees, hollow trees and holes where the squirrels can hide after the dogs have treed," Rodgers said. "One time we hunted up at Panther Swamp in some really good-looking hardwood swamp bottoms. We got some action, and most of the guys killed four or five squirrels, but we left a lot in the trees because the squirrels went to the dens."

Zach Mosley takes aim at a squirrel treed by Judd.





## KIDS IN THE PALMETTO BOTTOM

“We took a couple of kids near a hardwood bottom filled with palmettos on a hunt, and they had a ball,” Rodgers said. “They got in plenty of shooting, with fast-paced action and just had a great time, too. That’s why I do it these days: to get kids started and to introduce them to a different type of hunting where they can have fun and see some action, too. You’ve got to put the odds in their favor or they’ll get bored, and you will lose the opportunity to get them hooked on hunting.”

Rodgers loves hunting thick woods or areas that have thickets, since it also gives the squirrels a better chance at surviving owls, hawks and other predators. Some of the best hunts he’s had over the years were in areas that were thick and had ground cover. Streamside management zones usually have a concentration of hardwoods and thickets in cutover areas along creek bottoms; those are good places to find squirrels concentrated, and it makes for some really good hunting if plenty of mast-producing trees are present.

“First and foremost, you want to make sure the kids have a good time when you go,” Rodgers said. “That’s really what this is all about. So remember to save your best places and best efforts for them. The future of hunting is now, and it depends on what you and I do right now to pass it on to the next generation.” ■

Gary Rodgers takes a squirrel from his Mountain Cur Judd on a recent hunt near Quitman. **BELOW:** Rodgers’ Mountain Curs Judd and Digger tree a squirrel and try to climb the tree.





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**POWERFUL SHEEPSHEAD  
OFFER INSHORE ANGLERS  
ALONG MISSISSIPPI'S  
GULF COAST SPECIAL  
OPPORTUNITIES,  
ESPECIALLY DURING  
THE WINTER.**

■ By John N. Felsher

**Light  
biters, BIG  
FIGHTERS**

# Just as the old boat pulled up to the bridge, something flashed in the greenish water.

The object hovered just a few feet beneath the surface, right against a barnacle-encrusted piling before it disappeared.

“Get a live shrimp and stick the hook under its horn,” the old man instructed, slipping the motor into reverse to stop the momentum and then cutting the engine so the vessel floated as close to the piling as possible. “Don’t use any weight. Just drop that live shrimp down next to the piling and feed out a little line at a time.”

The boy did as coached. Soon, the line stopped moving.

“I think I’m hung on the piling or something,” the boy whispered. “I didn’t feel a bite, but the line just stopped.”

“Set the hook!” the old man said adamantly. “You might be hung on something, but I don’t think it’s the piling.”

Moments later, the light rod bent into a horseshoe as the boy struggled to fight the huge fish, which didn’t run like a redfish

or rush to the surface, shaking its head, like a speckled trout. It just headed to the bottom and stayed there, daring him to overpower the toothy behemoth.

Eventually, the boy brought a 6-pound fish to the surface, where the old man netted what looked like a dinner platter that had just escaped from an old-time jail, still wearing its black and white stripes: a sheepshead.

Sheepshead usually don’t receive as much attention from saltwater anglers, most of whom probably would rather pursue speckled trout and redfish. In fact, sheepshead traditionally rank low on the desirability scale on Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, but these powerful and challenging barnacle-busting beasts can mangle the toughest tackle and provide outstanding sport for any angler.

**NO ATTENTION-GETTER >**



Lon Porter shows off a sheepshead he caught. Sheepshead eat barnacles and typically stay near any hard structures, such as rigs, wrecks, reefs and bridge or dock pilings. Throughout the Biloxi area, anglers can find numerous structures that hold sheepshead.

## NO ATTENTION-GETTER

“I think sheepshead is an underutilized species in our recreational fishery,” said Matt Hill, finfish bureau director for the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources in Biloxi. “For most recreational fishermen, it’s a by-catch while they’re trying to catch speckled trout or redfish.”

Most sheepshead range from 1 to 4 pounds, but they can exceed 20. The Magnolia State record stands at 19 pounds, 10 ounces. With powerful jaws meant for crushing shells and a mouth bristling with teeth, large sheepshead can bite through most lines and even some hooks.

“We’ve caught sheepshead exceeding 10 pounds,” said Robert Brodie with Team Brodie Charters in Biloxi. “On light tackle, that’s quite a challenge to bring in such a powerful fish.”

Abundant, easy to catch and powerful fighters, sheepshead make exceptional sport for young or novice anglers. They allow anglers to catch big fish without spending a fortune heading offshore. In fact, anglers commonly catch sheepshead off docks, seawalls, jetties and other places where anglers without

access to boats can fish. The best fishing for the pugnacious porgies usually occurs during the colder months when pre-spawn fish reach their greatest weights.

“We have a very robust sheepshead population,” Hill said. “Fishing success starts to pick up in the fall each year and continues through the spawning season. In January and February, they are staging. They’re still inshore, but (they) move offshore in a large congregation when ready to spawn. They usually spawn from February to April, with the peak in Mississippi waters from late March to early April.”

## STRUCTURE RESIDENTS

Whether spawning or just going about their daily lives, sheepshead normally like to stay near hard structure. They often congregate around reefs, wrecks, shell piles, jetties, rip-rap, platforms or any other solid structures where they eat one of their favorite foods: barnacles.

“When we’re fishing for sheepshead, we re-rig a lot because they are notorious for hanging around the roughest structure,”



John N. Felsner

said Sonny Schindler of Shore Thing Fishing Charters out of Bay St. Louis. "Anyone fishing in a good sheepshead spot will lose some tackle."

Sheepshead especially like bridge and dock pilings because they can move up and down in the water column but stay close to structure. Anglers frequently see them hovering at various depths munching barnacles.

"Sheepshead are extremely easy to catch around most of our structures," Hill said. "They'll get up next to the concrete and wood pilings to eat barnacles. Many people go up to the pilings and scrape the barnacles off with a shovel or something. That's legal to do in Mississippi. Scraping the barnacles off the pilings gets sheepshead in a feeding frenzy."

Besides barnacles, sheepshead particularly love crunching shrimp and crabs. They also eat clams, squid and other morsels, as well as live minnows and fish pieces, but they prefer crustaceans, with fiddler crabs at the top of the list. They occasionally strike artificials, like spoons, spinners, flies, soft plastics or other lures, but most people entice them with natural baits.

"Crabs make outstanding sheepshead baits," Brodie said. "We pull the top shell off and break a blue crab in half or quarter it. For a big crab, we cut each half into three or four pieces. Fiddler crabs are like candy for a sheepshead."

#### **FISH CLOSE TO COVER ➤**



**John N. Felsher** is a professional freelance writer and photographer with more than 1,700 articles in more than 117 magazines to his credit. You can contact him at [JohnNFelsher.com](http://JohnNFelsher.com).

**“”** *We've caught sheepshead exceeding 10 pounds. On light tackle, that's quite a challenge to bring in such a powerful fish.*

The state of Mississippi built numerous artificial reefs all along its coastline to provide cover for fish, like this one in Mississippi Sound near Pass Christian, Miss. Sheepshead eat barnacles and typically stay near any hard structures like these artificial reefs. They also hang around jetties, seawalls, bridge and dock pilings and other hard objects.



## FISH CLOSE TO COVER

Sheepshead usually stay very tight to cover. For fishing vertical structures like pilings, quietly approach as close as possible. Vertically drop a jighead tipped with a shrimp or a live-bait rig to the bottom. If nothing bites, pull it up a couple feet. Experiment with different depths to find fish. After spotting a fish hovering near a piling, free-line a shrimp or crab piece down next to the piling.

Even the largest sheepshead typically just nibbles on a bait. Almost timidly, it might examine a morsel before using its human-like teeth to snip the bait right behind the hook. Anglers might not even detect subtle strikes.

“Sheepshead can be tricky to catch,” Brodie said. “They are sneaky. I like to use a smaller shrimp with a smaller hook to fool them. They engulf those smaller shrimp more quickly. Sometimes, people almost need to anticipate the bite to catch them. When we feel a little subtle downward pull, we set the hook and hang on.”

When hooked, sheepshead immediately head for cover and try to rub the line against sharp barnacles to break it. Built for power, not speed, these scrappers declare a brutal tug of war and never give up.

“When fishing for sheepshead, we beef up the tackle,” Brodie said. “I keep special rigs ready with 65-pound Power Pro braid, a 100-pound black swivel and 18 inches of 80-pound test monofilament leader with a 2/0 live bait hook on a Carolina rig with a 1-ounce weight. We need that extra strength to get big fish out of structure before the barnacles pop the line.”

John M. Felsher

## BRIDGE THE GAPS

In Mississippi waters, some of the best sheepshead fishing occurs in the Biloxi Bay area. The US 90 bridge connecting Biloxi to Ocean Springs always produces good action, as well as the old railroad trestle nearby. People can also fish around numerous piers and hundreds of other small and large structures. Fish-cleaning stations on docks make especially good places to fish because people toss scraps into the water, and that attracts crabs.

“The easiest place around Biloxi Bay to catch sheepshead is to fish the bridges, which concentrates the fish and makes them easier to catch,” Hill said. “The Bay St. Louis bridge and nearby train trestle is another good place. In the Pascagoula River system, people can find several bridges where sheepshead congregate.”

Throughout Biloxi Bay, anglers can use their electronics to find small structures that few people know exist. Over the centuries, uncountable storms scattered debris all over the bay. Many people call these small pieces “katrinkets” after Hurricane Katrina.

“The bay is full of structures,” Brodie said. “Wherever anglers can find an old pier or pilings encrusted with barnacles, that’s a good place to fish. We catch some sheepshead around the bayou mouths, especially ones with oyster reefs, ledges or other types of nearby structure. In the winter, we catch a lot of sheepshead up the rivers. We look for areas with sudden drop-offs next to a shelf.”



Capt. Robert Brodie of Team Brodie Charters shows off a sheepshead he caught near Biloxi, Miss. Anglers can find abundant structures in the form of bridge and dock pilings and other hard objects where they can find sheepshead. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Kendra Maness shows off a sheepshead she caught. Abundant, widespread and hard-pulling fish, sheepshead provide exciting action all along the Mississippi coast.

John N. Felsher



Anglers can also fish numerous artificial reefs the state established along the coast. Katrina Key sits just outside the mouth of Biloxi Bay. Composed mostly of old bridge spans, the reef stretches about a mile and sits in about 9 feet of water.

Some anglers also head out to fish the barrier islands where they might find sheepshead hanging around bottom structure or roaming the beaches. Sheepshead also hover around buoy chains and crab traps. They sometimes nibble the legs off crabs caught in traps.

Many anglers look down on sheepshead as food fish because it takes more effort to clean them. They come with large spines that can inflict pain. However, the meat is excellent table fare. Some places package sheepshead as artificial crab meat. Restaurants often serve sheepshead under the name of "bay snapper." ■

*For information on artificial reefs in Mississippi waters, see [dmr.ms.gov/artificial-reef](http://dmr.ms.gov/artificial-reef).*

*For information about Robert Brodie and Team Brodie Charters, call 228-697-7707 or visit [teambrodiecharters.com](http://teambrodiecharters.com).*

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Small mouths **BIG**

**ACTION**

## EVEN THOUGH THEIR BITE IS LIGHT, ANGLERS CAN CURE WINTER BLUES BY LANDING TROPHY BROWN BASS.

■ By John N. Felsher



**M**ost people consider smallmouth bass a “northern” fish since it likes colder water more than a largemouth, but the South offers some of the best trophy smallmouth fishing anywhere.

“Pickwick Lake is one of the premier smallmouth waters in the nation,” said Dustin Rodgers, a fisheries biologist for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks in Tupelo. “In Mississippi, smallmouth bass only occur in Pickwick and Bay Springs lakes. Those waterbodies have cooler water temperatures, so they can sustain smallmouth bass.”

Pickwick Lake spreads through 47,500 acres across parts of Alabama,

Mississippi and Tennessee. The lake runs from Wilson Dam in Florence, Ala., 53 miles down the Tennessee River to Pickwick Dam at Counce, Tenn. Near Wilson Dam, the lake still resembles the swift old river channel, but the lower portion in Mississippi widens into a more characteristic southern reservoir. Since the lake straddles the ranges of many northern and southern fish, anglers can catch many species in one day.

“We are a multispecies guide service,” Gary Harlan, from Tishomingo, said. “We’re all about whatever’s biting at the time. When fishing for smallmouth, we never know what we might catch. I’ve sat in one spot in the wintertime and caught largemouth, smallmouth, crappie, white bass, bluegill, catfish, and never moved the boat, all on a jigging spoon with the water temperatures in the 40s.”

The lake produced many smallies in the 5- to 8-pound range and some approaching double digits. Pickwick also produced monster largemouth with at least one hitting 14.50 pounds and many huge spotted bass. Thomas Wilbanks set the Mississippi state smallmouth record with a 7-pound, 15-ounce brownie.

“Pickwick is a dynamite lake for big smallmouth,” said Roger Stegall, a professional bass angler and guide from Iuka. “I’ve heard of some 10-pound smallmouth. I caught one about eight pounds. People can catch big smallmouth anywhere in Pickwick Lake. I’ve caught smallmouth in Mississippi waters weighing up to 7.25 pounds and many in the 6- to 7-pound range.”

Jimmy Mason, a bass pro from Rogersville, Ala., shows off a smallmouth bass he caught on a soft-plastic tube while fishing Pickwick Lake, part of the Tennessee River system that flows through Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama. A tube mimics a crawfish. When the water turns extremely cold, fish it very slowly. **INSET:** Jimmy Mason, a bass pro from Rogersville, Ala., shows off a smallmouth bass he caught on an umbrella rig while fishing Pickwick Lake. With an Alabama or umbrella rig, anglers can fish multiple baits simultaneously.

**T**he winter offers one of the best times to catch massive smallmouth in Mississippi waters. That's when big females swollen with roe reach their maximum size before spawning.

"Fishing Pickwick in the winter largely depends upon the water temperature," Harlan said. "That determines how active the fish are. As long as the temperatures are in the upper 40s to low 50s and up, people can catch smallies in Pickwick. When it gets colder than that, the smallmouth become less active."

Smallmouth like more current and cooler temperatures than largemouth. Like largemouth, smallies build nests on gravel bottoms, but typically a little deeper and earlier. Pickwick brownies usually begin spawning mid-March. Spawning continues through May.

"I've caught some big strings of pre-spawn smallmouth from mid-February through early March," Stegall said. "In the winter, fish closer to the main river channel. Look for smallmouth on gravel bars, drop-offs in about eight to 10 feet of water and ledges that come out off the bank where the current breaks around them. The upper end of State Line Island is a good place to fish for pre-spawn smallies. Behind the island, it has a lot of gravel bars and points."

Smallmouth eat anything that might tempt a largemouth and hit many of the same lures. Both love crawfish. Anything that mimics a crawfish could deliver exciting fishing on a cold day.

"For pre-spawn smallmouth, I fish on bottom with 3/8-ounce football head jig tipped with a 4-inch Berkley Powerbait Chigger Craw," Stegall said. "I like green pumpkin or blue craw. I also like a color called green pumpkin party. It has some gold, red, and silver glitter in it."

In cold water, work a jig extremely slowly. Lethargic cold-blooded fish won't chase anything. Also, they might grab a chunkier bait to gulp one big meal that will last them a while without expending too much energy doing it. Drag a jig a short way across the bottom and let it sit there a long time.

"One day, I got a backlash and the bait was not moving while I tried to get the backlash out," Stegall said. "When I got it out, I picked up my rod and a fish was swimming off with the bait. I started dead-sticking it. Often in the winter, the bite is so light, people don't even feel it. They might just see the line move. Hook sets are free. There's no 'three strikes and you're out' like in baseball. Swing on anything."

For probing deeper holes, work a creature bait with a Carolina rig. Use a 1-ounce weight. For the main line, Stegall recommends fluorocarbon because it sinks. Monofilament floats so use it for

the leader to give a temptation more buoyancy.

A chrome jiggling spoon or a drop-shot rig make excellent winter enticements, particularly for fishing deep current breaks, rock piles, humps and other underwater contours. Fished vertically, a spoon flutters down to the bottom quickly and resembles a dying shad. After a spoon hits bottom, jig it up a few times. With a drop-shot, just let it sit on bottom and twitch the line to make the soft-plastic lure wiggle subtly.

"When fishing gets tough, I go to a jiggling spoon," Harlan said. "In January and February, smallmouth are generally pretty deep. I've caught them as deep as 35 feet. I'll fish the outside of creek bends and where creeks meet the main channel. They'll hang around rocks and steeper bluff banks during the winter."



A smallmouth bass that hit an Alabama rig comes to the boat. With multiple baits, an Alabama rig, also called an umbrella rig, resembles a school of baitfish swimming through the water.

When temperatures drop too severely, it shocks or kills many shad. Sometimes, stunned shad appear dead and just flutter around in the current. In the winter, smallmouth key on those dead or dying sources of protein.

“If I don’t catch fish on a jig, I’ll throw a suspending jerkbait,” Stegall said. “I fish it with a slow ‘jerk-jerk-stop’ rhythm. When fishing in cold water, let it sit there a long time. Sometimes, I let it sit 30 seconds or more without jerking it. I run the jerkbait anywhere from four to 10 feet down on 10-pound fluorocarbon line. In the winter, I also like to slow-roll a 3/4-ounce spinner-bait through about 10 to 15 feet of water.”

An Alabama or umbrella rig is another hot bait for cold-water fishing. The wire harness that spreads in the water like an

umbrella frame allows anglers to fish several baits at once. Sweeten the rig with multiple swimbaits to simulate an entire baitfish school.

“At Pickwick in the winter, I fish an Alabama rig around the creek mouths,” Harlan said. “Before I pick it up, I look for shad in the slack water behind the points. That’s where the baitfish pile up when they release a lot of water from the dam.”

If the water warms a bit, try crankbaits. For probing the depths, use long-lipped baits. For running through rock piles, fallen trees and other cover, run a square-billed crankbait in reds, golds, browns and other crawfish colors through water eight to 10 feet deep.



**In** the winter, some of the best small-mouth fishing in Mississippi occurs in Bear Creek, Indian Creek and Yellow Creek. Almost like another lake, Bear Creek enters the system near the Mississippi-Alabama state line. The largest tributary of Pickwick Lake runs about 15 miles.

The Mississippi state record came out of Yellow Creek, birthplace of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. It flows into Pickwick near where the Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi state lines converge.

Magnolia State anglers can also fish Bay Springs Lake, the only waterbody entirely within Mississippi that holds smallmouth bass. The northernmost impoundment on the Tenn.-Tom, Bay Springs connects to Pickwick Lake through Yellow Creek via the 29-mile-long Divide Cut. The lake covers about 6,700 acres in Tishomingo and Prentiss counties.

“Bay Springs is a highland reservoir,” Rodgers said. “It’s really clear and much deeper than most other lakes in Mississippi. Bay Springs Lake is a great winter bass fishery, but anglers typically catch more largemouth and spotted bass than smallmouth. In the winter, follow the baitfish.”

Although Bay Springs doesn’t produce as many smallmouth as Pickwick, it does hold some lunkers. However, most people know



**John N. Felsher** is a professional freelance writer and photographer with more than 1,700 articles in more than 117 magazines to his credit. You can contact him at [JohnNFelsher.com](http://JohnNFelsher.com).

it for producing giant spotted bass. It also holds an excellent largemouth population.

“Bay Springs is more famous for its spots than smallmouth,” Harlan said. “In 2020, an angler caught a 7-pound, 1-ounce spot at Bay Springs. I’ve caught two or three spots in the 6-pound range. Any of the deep extended points, particularly the main lake part of Bay Springs, are key spots for smallmouth.”

With an Alabama license, people can fish the entire lake from dam to dam. Mississippi license holders can fish Pickwick a little past Bear Creek. They can also fish Bear Creek all the way back to the railroad bridge. Mississippi anglers can fish all of Bay Springs Lake with their state license. ■

*For booking trips with Roger Stegall, call 662-423-3869 or visit [www.Fishpickwick.com](http://www.Fishpickwick.com). For Harlan, look up Fishing with Capt. Gary Harlan on Facebook.*

### LUNKER LINES >

Roger Stegall with a smallmouth. Often in the winter, the bite is so light that anglers often don’t feel it. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Brian Barton, a Tennessee River guide, shows off a smallmouth bass (left) and a largemouth bass (right) he caught while fishing on Pickwick Lake near Florence, Ala.



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The bass you'll catch at Bogue Homa in January will be as large as they'll be all year long.



## BOGUE HOMA'S JANUARY BASSING

**C**atching bass in January is difficult. The fish's metabolism has slowed down, and you won't get numbers of bites. I've picked Bogue Homa because it's a shallow lake, it homes creek channels and deep water, and most of the bass will be pulling into the creek channels in January. You still can catch some bass in the shallow water, but the bigger bass will be out on the creek and river channels.

Large bass do move into shallow water once a warm front arrives, especially places with old lily pad stems where they'll spawn. The bass will be healthy, short and fat. I pay close attention to the Solunar Tables when fishing for January bass. I time my fishing trips to when the tables indicate the bass's major feeding periods

### FISH A JIG AND A SHAKY HEAD WORM IN EARLY JANUARY

I like a ½-ounce Mann's Stone Jig in black and blue with a black and blue trailer and a green pumpkin jig and trailer. The bass usually will be feeding on crawfish in January, and these jig colors imitate crawfish. I'll fish the jigs on a 7'7" heavy action FX custom rod with a 7.3:1 gear ratio ELS Bruin reel, spooled with 19 pound test White Peacock fluorocarbon line.

I'll fish these jigs slower than slow by casting the jigs out, letting them go all the way to the bottom and inching them along the bottom. I'll barely move my rod tip and pull that jig slowly to come over the top of any cover I encounter. I'll fish the exposed root systems of stumps along the edges of the creek and river channels. You need to wear quality sunglasses, like my Wiley X ones, to see the dark spots under the water that are underwater stumps. The channel bank usually is in 2-3 feet of water and drops off to 7-8 feet of water. The bank will be 7-9 feet deep on some of the main river channels and drop off to 15-18 feet deep.



Paul Elias will fish a shaky head worm in the same spots where he fishes a jig in the deep water on the lower end of the lake.

I'll start off fishing the deep water main creek channel that runs and bends on the lower end of the lake. I probably haven't fished the stumps with their exposed root systems there due to intense water skiing pressure in the spring, summer and early fall. The edges of the creek channels in this part of the lake receive very little bass fishing pressure during the warmer months.

I'll also fish a shaky head worm slowly on spinning tackle with a 7'4" medium action FX custom rod and 15-pound test braided line with 6-8 feet of 10-pound fluorocarbon leader. My favorite worm is a 6" Mann's June Bug Jelly Worm that I'll fish slowly, as I have the jig.

I'll still fish a shaky head worm on the creek channel bends on the lake's deep end. I'll barely ease the lure along the bottom but I do shake my rod tip to give the worm some action. The main ingredient for fishing the shaky head worm successfully here is to make sure the worm remains in contact with the bottom. I'll ease the worm over any structure it comes in contact with along the bottom.

I'm expecting a reaction bite to one of these baits that gets right in front of the bass's face. The jig pattern and the shaky head pattern on the lower end of the lake are the most productive during the first couple weeks of January.

## FISH BLADED JIGS AND LIPLESS OR RATTLING CRANKBAITS THE LAST TWO WEEKS OF JANUARY

The lake may experience a warming trend in January for several days. I'll go to the back of the east side of the lake where most of the lily pad stems are, primarily in 1-3 feet of water, if the lake experiences a warming trend. I'll fish a 3/8-ounce bladed jig in black and blue colors or fire orange, slowly in those stems. A lipless crankbait or a rattling crankbait in either gold or red colors will pay off too with bass bites, and I'll alternate fishing these colors.

The key to successfully fishing these three baits is to swim them slowly through the lily pad stems. Most of the time I prefer the bladed

jig rather than the lipless or the rattling crankbait because I can swim the bladed jig much slower. I'll fish the bladed jig on 30-pound bass braid on a 7'6" medium action FX custom cranking rod and use an 8:1 reel to keep the slack out of my line. I can crawl the bladed jig through the lily pad stems and bump them to get a reaction strike from the bass holding there.

Toward the end of January, the big females will pull up in those lily pad stems. You'll have the opportunity then to catch some of the biggest bass of the year. ■



**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.

**GETTIN' FRESH >**

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# YAMAHA

## GETTIN' FRESH

Hal Schramm

These proud anglers caught these bass 35 miles from the tournament weigh-in and release site. Recent science says they will swim back toward their capture site.

# DISPERSAL OF TOURNAMENT-CAUGHT BASS

## THE SLOW ROAD HOME

**F**isheries managers have long been concerned with “stockpiling,” the accumulation of bass near tournament weigh-in and release sites. Multiple studies have assessed the post-release movement of tournament-caught bass. The results have been inconsistent, some studies finding rather rapid dispersal, others finding bass languishing near release sites. A recent Canadian study compared the dispersal of tournament-caught largemouth and smallmouth bass across seasons.

### IS STOCKPILING AN ISSUE?

Biologists have been concerned about the continual addition of bass to a small area (the release site) for a couple reasons. First, while the tournaments may be catch and release events, harvest-oriented anglers can exploit the concentrated bass. This is an old and largely outdated argument. The increased adoption of live release reduces this

affect. However, tournaments are size selective — the anglers are trying to weigh in the largest fish they can catch. Thus, the bass released from the tournament are larger — sometimes much larger — than the average fish in the population. Even low removal by harvest-oriented anglers could reduce the abundance of larger bass.

A second concern is the depletion of forage fish by the increased density of bass and, in turn, impaired health of hungry bass. Because, as just noted, the released fish tend to be larger bass, this potential problem could become serious. Big bass eat a lot of forage.

### MEASURING DISPERSAL

The study was conducted in Big Rideau Lake, Ontario. Big Rideau Lake has a large main basin where the fish were caught. Weigh-in and release was at the north end of the lake approximately five miles from the main basin; this

five-mile section of the lake is narrow. Tournaments occurred in early June (water temperature 64 to 68 °F), late June (72 to 75 °F), August (75 to 79 °F), and October (54 to 57 °F).

Largemouth (average length 16 to 18 inches among seasons) and smallmouth (average length 16 to 19 inches) were implanted with sonic transmitters prior to their release after weigh in. Fixed receivers monitored the fish's movement beyond 330 yards from the release site and their return to the main basin where they were caught.

Some fish left the release site immediately. All largemouth had dispersed from the release site in four to forty days among the four tournaments. The more



Hal Schramm is an avid angler and veteran fisheries biologist.

mobile smallmouth left the release site in three to 18 days.

Return to the main basin was much slower. Fifty percent of the largemouth returned to the main basin in 3.6 to 7.8 months; all largemouth returned to the main basin in 18.5 months. Fifty percent of the smallmouth returned to the main basin in 13 days to 3.3 months; all smallmouth returned to the main basin in 20 months. Note that return to the place of capture was not measured.

All bass left the release site and eventually returned to the main basin. The return times differed between species and among seasons. Largemouth from the October tournament returned fastest, those from the August tournament had the slowest return. Most of the smallmouth returned faster than the largemouth, but the October tournament fish were the slowest to return.

## INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Scientific studies have found that both largemouth and smallmouth exhibit homing — the ability to return to a previously occupied area — so their movement back to the main basin where captured is expected.

The wide variation in the return times, which also has been observed among previous studies, doesn't really surprise me. As every angler knows, bass live where they have good habitat and good forage. They also know that at least some bass follow the forage. The long return times for some of the released fish can be attributed to the displaced, tournament-caught bass finding good habitat and abundant forage along their way home.

The conservation concerns of stockpiling of tournament-caught bass — increased harvest and local forage depletion — may have merit on some waters. But the increased practice of catch and release would reduce harvest of concentrated fish, and the bass' instinct to move to find forage would minimize the consequences of forage depletion, at least on the bass.

As an angler, I have an additional concern — removal and displacement from the area of capture. My observations on Pickwick Lake support certain areas “turning on.” Tournament anglers are quick to learn where the hot bite is. The



Good livewell care and releasing healthy fish will help them disperse from release sites.

fish are caught, transported many miles, and weighed. Most survive and disperse from the release site. But, according to the Big Rideau Lake results, it may take a year or longer for the fish to return to their area of capture. With well over 100 tournaments on Pickwick each year, it

is likely that some formerly productive areas become depleted of bass.

Fortunately, part of the fun and challenge of bass fishing is finding the bass. ■

**LURE REVIEW** ➤



Matrix Shad artificial lure manufacturing company gave saltwater and freshwater anglers a crossover design when the company made the Matrix Spin. The blade is on a clevis affixed to the shaft.

## NEW MATRIX CREATION LEAVES BASS, SPECKS HEADS SPINNING

**W**hen Chas Champagne took one of his artificial lure manufacturing company's newest creations for a spin, he really took it for a spin.

Actually, the prototype for the Matrix Spin was the star of the Dockside TV video released late last summer. The Matrix Spin video ([matrixshad.com/shop/matrix-spin/](http://matrixshad.com/shop/matrix-spin/)) was actually shot before the spinnerbait arm hit the market.

The Slidell outdoorsman and entrepreneur obviously enjoyed every minute of that fishing trip with the spinnerbait arm that has a different, albeit catchy, look.

"What we're showcasing today is the new Matrix Spin. Awesome little lure. Awesome design. ... Brand new to the Matrix family," Champagne said early in the video.

"It's a neat little design," he said as he showed the arm and a specially designed No. 3.5 Colorado gold blade. "Free motion at all times. It can slide back and forth and this clevis goes around and around. It gives perpetual motion of this blade no matter what the lure is doing. It's a really, really high-quality. Spins very easily and it's a fantastic bait."

Champagne proved the latter statement by catching multiple bass on it while fishing the shallow, windy, marshy areas off the Pearl River system.

"It's a fantastic fishery," he said.

"The spinnerbait is extremely effective and very easy to fish. When I reel it, it never binds up on me. It does a good job cutting through grass," he said later in the video, noting, "It's a very, very good lure for a beginner."

The spinnerbait's arm is the flagpole, you might say, for the blade on a clevis.

"Instead of (the blade) being clipped on the end in a fixed position, it can slide up and down the arm bar as it's attached to a clevis. The arm bar is relatively short



**Don Shoopman** fishes for freshwater and saltwater species mostly in and around the Atchafalaya Basin and Vermilion Bay. He moved to the Sportsman's Paradise in 1976, and he and his wife June live in New Iberia. They have two grown sons.

Chas Champagne, artificial lure manufacturer from Matrix Shad, lips a real chunky marsh bass he just caught on a Matrix Spin with a Golden Eye Jig Head.



to where the blade isn't a far distance from the hook. I find that gives it a better hookup ratio," Champagne said during a phone conversation while he was targeting speckled trout late in the year in and around a very fresh Lake Palourde. Hurricane Ida dumped 30 inches of rain on the immense lake, which had yet to get right and salty as of November, he said.

Champagne got the idea from a spinnerbait arm made by the late Rick Googins who worked at the bait shop at the marina when it was under Champagne. Googins, he said, liked to make spinnerbaits and had one with a different look for the blade placement.

Last year the artificial lure manufacturer followed up on it, sent a sample to the factory and got a prototype to fish with during the video.

"It's just we make anything," Champagne said. "Anything we like to use we make it here. I like spinnerbaits."

Champagne's Matrix Spin uses heavy wire that handles redfish but isn't too heavy for the bass that inhabit the marsh across coastal Louisiana.

"We wanted to make a lure that'll catch anything. We just don't have bass that big (average 12 inches) to have all the overkill," he said, explaining why the designers eschewed light wire.

He fished that day while the video was shot with the Matrix Spin on a ¼-ounce Goldeneye Series Jig Head. Because he was using a 3-inch long glow Matrix Shad, that 3/0-hook was perfect for the soft plastic paddletail swimbait.

"But if you're using bigger baits, you can put on whichever (size) jig head you prefer," he said.

For more information about the Matrix Spin and other Matrix Shad products, go to [matrixshad.com](http://matrixshad.com). ■

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The advertisement features a row of five Mississippi Sportsman magazine covers. The first cover shows a man holding a large fish with the headline 'BEST BEDDING BREEM'. The second cover shows a man with a large buck deer with the headline 'BIG BUCK TIME'. The third cover shows a man holding a large fish with the headline 'THE RED SPRING'. The fourth cover shows a turkey with the headline 'TURKEY'. The fifth cover shows a man with a turkey. Below the covers, the text 'Mississippi SPORTSMAN' is written in a stylized font. A large red box contains the text 'LIMITED QUANTITIES WHEN THEY'RE GONE, THEY'RE GONE!'. At the bottom, the text 'BACK ISSUES' is written in large, bold, white letters. Below that, the website address 'shop.sportsmannetwork.com/collections/mississippi-sportsman' is written in white.

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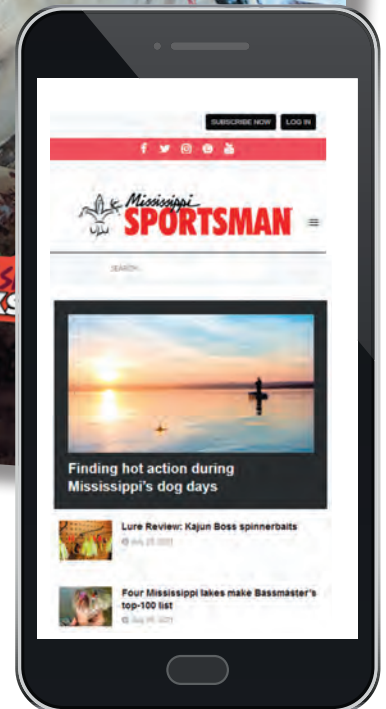
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