Spring 2021

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BASECAMP

Nick Green, Editor

WELCOME TO MICHIGAN OUT-OF-DOORS

MICHIGAN'S PREMIUM OUTDOOR JOURNAL

Is it 2021 yet? I'm kidding. Kind of.

Last year brought with it hardships, learning opportunities and silver linings. And this year is already shaping up to be more divisive — at least if you follow the ongoing power struggle between Michigan's Democratic-controlled administration and the Republican-controlled legislature.

Nonetheless, outdoor recreation proved to be a shining star in the midst of one of our state's darkest times. Folks found respite through their ability to venture out onto state-owned lands and waterways. Whether they were hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, nature watching or just taking in fresh air, our public lands were frequented in 2020 by a cohort of Michiganders who may not have realized the gem they had in their backyard.

As with any good steward, though, I would be remissed if I didn't take the ruler to some knuckles. Too much trash was left on our public lands last year. I live across the road from a state game area (SGA). There are still numerous pop-up blinds and treestands set up in and around a field. Those are supposed to be removed by March 1, and I don't have much faith they will be.

My wife and I spent days picking up the litter that spilled from people's cars and was swept across the road into our yard — this is simply unacceptable.

And, to boot, I have to dodge a minefield of gut piles and human feces in the parking lot walking my dogs before I can even get to the state land. Please, don't leave your gut piles in SGA parking lots. Carry a small shovel with you so you can bury your feces, too.

With new users of our public lands comes a new responsibility for those of us seasoned veterans. We need to carefully and thoughtfully remind people about what being a conservationist and natural resources steward means. Together, we can help a broad set of user groups recreate and enjoy the waters, forests, grasslands and wildlife we all treasure.

Enough with the preaching, though. This season's cover feature represents something near and dear to my heart: the Boardman River and trout fishing.

Three years ago, I was fortunate to make friends with a gentleman and his family who reside on the banks of the Boardman. Naturally, we spent time fishing and floating the storied river. And ever since

Editor Nick Green casts for steelhead in January 2020. Photo: Abraham Downer

then, I make it a point to get there as much as I can.

Trout fishing, for me, is one of the most therapeutic outdoor endeavors there is. Whether it is stomping a "crick" for eater browns, casting an obscenely-large hex fly at dark for a 20-plus-inch brown or chasing the lake-runs that visit some of our watersheds, trout fishing can be done a million different ways in Michigan.

Also included in this issue is an in-depth look at the increase of new license buyers in 2020 vs. 2019, which was undoubtedly tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders.

Rounding out this season's magazine are features detailing springtime walleye tactics, MUCC policy victories through the last legislative session and turkey hunting.

So, wherever this spring takes you, please share stewardship ethics with new faces and new users if you see them. I hope you are able to get out in the woods or on the water to chase that gobbler, catch that trout or bring that walleye to hand for dinner. Save a piece for me, please.

Yours in Conservation,

MOMENTS *of* MEMORY

The bedrock of conservation is taking care of our natural resources so that they can be passed down to future generations. The natural resources that we conserve today were conserved for us by generations of conservationists preceding us, and these generations are ever-changing and ever-flowing. Here we honor the passing of one generation of conservationists to the next.

In memory of

Michael Lewis

from

Steven Tomasello, Laura & Lydia VanSweden, John & Katherine Hebner and Randy & Suzanne Mottl

In memory of

Stanley Earle Anderson

from

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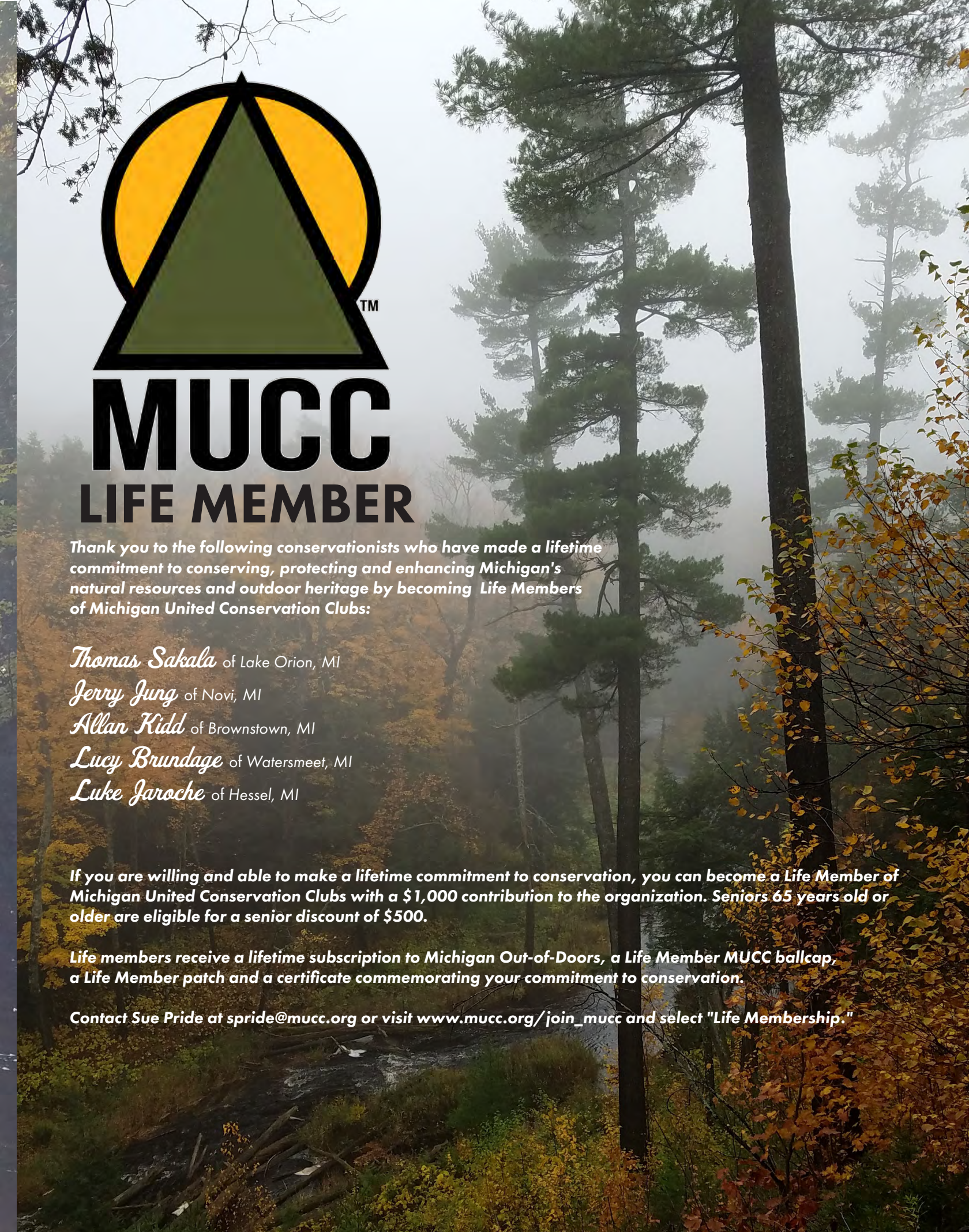
from

Scott, Tonya, Kennedy and Riley Shea

If you have recently lost someone you would like to honor here, please contact Sue Pride at spride@mucc.org.



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Thank you to the following conservationists who have made a lifetime commitment to conserving, protecting and enhancing Michigan's natural resources and outdoor heritage by becoming Life Members of Michigan United Conservation Clubs:

Thomas Sakala of Lake Orion, MI
Jerry Jung of Novi, MI
Allan Kidd of Brownstown, MI
Lucy Brundage of Watersmeet, MI
Luke Jaroche of Hessel, MI

If you are willing and able to make a lifetime commitment to conservation, you can become a Life Member of Michigan United Conservation Clubs with a $1,000 contribution to the organization. Seniors 65 years old or older are eligible for a senior discount of $500.

Life members receive a lifetime subscription to Michigan Out-of-Doors, a Life Member MUCC ballcap, a Life Member patch and a certificate commemorating your commitment to conservation.

Contact Sue Pride at spride@mucc.org or visit www.mucc.org/join_mucc and select "Life Membership."

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Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1937 by sportsmen's clubs from around Michigan to protect conservation from politics. Representing more than 40,000 members and supporters and approximately 200 affiliated conservation clubs, MUCC is the largest statewide conservation organization in the nation. MUCC members determine the organization's conservation policies through a robust grassroots process, which MUCC staff works to implement by working with elected officials, state and federal agencies, its members and the public. MUCC has published Michigan Out-of-Doors since 1947 and operates the Michigan Out-of-Doors Youth Camp in Chelsea, MI. Learn more about the full range of programs MUCC uses to advance conservation in Michigan and become a member at www.mucc.org.

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A Pandemic, Surviving and Wolves... Groundhog's Day 7.0?

Director's Desk

Amy Trotter, *MUCC Executive Director*

2020 is now done, but we are still dealing with the hangover from elections and a very difficult year for many due to the challenges threatening their mental, physical and economic health. All of this certainly made the outdoors a haven in 2020, as evidenced by the explosion of new hunting and fishing license buyers and public land users.

January 2021 was also a tough year (so it seemed), but we made it through that as well. While COVID continues to impact our return to "normal," we are excited to launch a few new initiatives and re-engage on some good ideas that got left behind.

In terms of old business, we left a few policy initiatives hanging in the winds of 2020 that we are looking to relaunch:

- Regulation and oversight of commercial hunting and fishing guides will be reintroduced to protect our novice hunters and anglers and ensure poachers are not allowed to stay in business.

- Continuing to fight to protect gamefish from commercial fishing nets in the Great Lakes. Protection of sensitive data on game populations from misuse

- Defending against new electronic tools of hunter harassment

In 2021, we are also stretching ourselves into talking more about renewable energy and mitigating the impacts on Michigan's fish and wildlife. While our members have differing opinions on climate change solutions, we feel it's in hunters' and anglers' best interest to have MUCC at the table. We are discussing the devastating impact that large solar arrays could have on habitat and hunting if they are eating up quality green space, but at the same time looking at how more households and even the DNR could benefit from smaller-scale solar arrays if they choose to utilize more marginal lands. MUCC and its conservation partners have been diving into the impacts of hydroelectric dams and seeing how we can encourage dam removal where it makes sense to do so to promote better fisheries habitat and stream restoration. And we are always looking for ways to make it easier, rather than harder, for habitat restoration to go forward by streamlining agency processes and funding.

Our education team is pivoting once again to make sure we can host the Michigan Out-of-Doors Youth Camp to celebrate 75 years in existence. Please make sure to tell any friends and family in the Chelsea, Ann Arbor, and Jackson areas about a great new day camp opportunity right down the road, and let's hope that in 2022, we can return to our normal, overnight fun. Also, stay tuned for how you can share your favorite camp memories with MUCC in a virtual forum.

On the Ground and On the Water are busy filling the calendars with events for the spring and summer, and while there may be fewer events than previous years, there will be lots of opportunities for volunteers to give back to the natural resources and public places we have come to rely on.

As for me, I have this quote now framed on my work-from-home desk that I have seen too much of in 2020:

"Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

In 2021 MUCC returns with a smaller team, which is the reality of COVID impacts on our funding despite our collective efforts. But thanks to the generosity of Bill Demmer and the Hal and Jean Glassen Memorial Foundation, we will be entering into a phase of strategic planning and training for the future with our board, business advisory committee and staff. We thank each and every one of our members, donors and affiliates for sticking with us through the hardships of the past, and we are ready to get to work on your behalf in 2021.

Yours in Conservation,

ON PATROL

In each issue of Michigan Out-of-Doors, we highlight some of the recent cases our brave Michigan Department of Natural Resources conservation officers handle. You don't want to find yourself on this list.

November 29 to December 12, 2020

Borrowing a deer license?

CO Steve Butzin received information from CO Todd Sumbera of an individual who may have shot a 4-point buck on a combination license.

CO Butzin conducted several interviews and found evidence that the individual did shoot a 4-point buck but had also bought her hunting license after she had already shot the buck. The hunter realized that she had mistakenly purchased a combination license which cannot be used on a 4-point buck, so she borrowed a single deer license from a family member.

A report has been submitted to the Delta County Prosecutor's Office requesting a charge of taking a deer without a license as well as loaning and borrowing deer licenses on the individuals involved.

A slew of violations

CO Chris Lynch was contacted by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) conservation wardens to assist them in interviewing several fish poachers they observed keeping foul hooked whitefish and over-limits of whitefish.

COs Lynch and Steve Butzin assisted the Wisconsin conservation wardens on what needed to be done in Michigan. In all, the COs interviewed three suspects who all confessed to keeping foul hooked whitefish and one who confessed to keeping an over-limit of whitefish.

During the investigation, the COs determined the first suspect they interviewed also was hunting deer in Michigan without a license and after legal shooting hours. The second suspect they interviewed shot an illegal 8-point buck in Michigan. The illegal 8-point and crossbow used to kill the deer were seized. The third suspect they interviewed shot at an 8-point buck after hours with a crossbow from his truck while holding a spotlight in his mouth and trespassing. He missed the deer. It was also determined that the third suspect was shining in November on someone else's property on a separate occasion. The crossbow and spotlight, with teeth marks in the handle, used were seized.

All three suspects confessed to their violations and a report will be submitted to the Delta County Prosecutor's Office for review of the violations committed in Michigan. The Wisconsin conservation wardens will be issuing citations to the suspects for the fishing violations committed in Wisconsin.

Carcass dumping

CO Duane Budreau investigated a RAP complaint in which a couple of deer carcasses, along with some other garbage, had been dumped in a creek along the side of the road. CO Budreau was able to recover the hunter's attached kill-tag from the leg of one of the carcasses.

After determining who the tag belonged to, CO Budreau responded to the owner's residence and questioned him about the deer he had taken. The hunter reported that he takes all his deer to a processor, he does not butcher any of his own deer.

After being shown a photo of the dump site, the man became somewhat angry, and after looking closer at the photo of the tag, he remembered giving that deer to a person in need.

After a couple of interviews, CO Budreau was able to obtain an

admission from a young female with an extensive history of DNR violations. She admitted that she had processed the deer for the individual the hunter had gifted the deer to. She was ticketed for litter and the hunter had already cleaned up the litter site.

Bobcat out of season

COs Sidney Collins received a complaint in Montmorency County of a bobcat in a foothold trap a couple days prior to bobcat trapping season. When CO Collins responded to the scene, she noticed the bobcat was gone.

However, upon closer inspection, she observed blood and fur in the catch circle. CO Collins was able to identify the trapper. The following day, COs Collins and Paul Fox contacted the trapper at his cabin.

Initially, the subject denied catching a bobcat. Upon further questioning, the subject stated he caught a bobcat, but released it. The COs asked if they could check the subject's freezer to confirm no bobcat was taken. The subject agreed then stated that the COs should just write him the ticket. Upon inspecting the freezer, the COs located a fresh bobcat carcass with the subject's kill-tag on it.

The bobcat was seized, and charges are being sought with the Montmorency County Prosecutor's Office for taking bobcat out of season.

Motors need oil

CO Quincy Gowenlock was returning from attempting an interview in Midland County, while low on fuel, he pulled into a gas station to refuel his patrol truck. While refueling, a car pulled in and parked along the edge of the parking lot.

CO Gowenlock observed a young woman get out and open the hood to her vehicle and looked distraught. CO Gowenlock noticed two small children in the vehicle and contacted the driver to see if he could be of assistance.

The driver stated she was on her way to Midland but while she was driving, she could smell burning plastic. CO Gowenlock checked the engine and upon checking the oil level, found that the dip stick was completely dry. This was causing the engine to overheat and getting the plastic cover hot, emitting the smell.

Because the driver did not have any money, CO Gowenlock offered to buy her some oil. Another patron stopped by advising he had some spare oil in his truck. The oil was added to the engine and the young mother and her children continued to Midland.

Sick and twisted

In Ionia County, CO Jeremy Beavers received a complaint regarding cruel and inhumane treatment of female deer by two subjects.

A video of the incident was included in the complaint. The video shows two subjects in an ORV who come across a sick or injured doe on the side of the road that was still alive. The passenger, who recorded the video, encouraged the driver to run over the doe. The video showed the subjects running over the doe, laughing the whole time. The video also showed the subjects double back after running it over leaving tire marks on the deer. The subjects then loaded the doe in the bed of the ORV while it was still alive.

They return to the party they referenced in the video and multiple people came out of a pole barn. At that point, the doe was standing and jumped out of the ORV. She then staggered for a few steps, appearing to walk away as the video ends. The video was then uploaded to Snapchat.

The subject who recorded the video's identity was provided in the complaint and CO Beavers was able to determine the identity of the driver using social media.

CO Beavers then contacted both subjects who admitted to the actions in the video. At first, the subject who recorded the video tried to mislead CO Beavers, by claiming the doe was already dead when they came across it. CO Beavers then informed the subject that he had the video and knew what occurred.

CO Beavers obtained statements from the suspects as well as witness statements from people who were at the party. All information obtained during CO Beavers investigation will be forwarded to prosecutors for review.

Drunk

CO Justin Muehlhauser was monitoring a field with a suspected hunter when a vehicle quickly approached from behind and swerved around the COs patrol vehicle.

The vehicle then rolled through a stop sign and continued west bound from the intersection. Another motorist approached the CO and advised that the vehicle needed to be stopped before he "kills somebody" and stated that he almost crashed three times going down Silver Lake Road in Argentine Township.

CO Muehlhauser caught up to the vehicle and observed erratic driving and conducted a traffic stop, it quickly became apparent that the operator was highly intoxicated. After conducting field sobriety tests, the operator was taken into custody.

The operator had a .23 blood alcohol content, nearly three times the legal limit. The operator was lodged at the Genesee County jail for OWI..

These reports are randomly pulled from the DNR Law Enforcement Division's bi-weekly reports.

MIKE AVERY'S OUTDOOR MAGAZINE RADIO

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Volunteer Hours

MUCC's award-winning On the Ground (OTG) program has been hosting volunteer wildlife habitat improvement events across Michigan since 2013. Volunteers participate in a variety of wildlife habitat projects on public land and are provided an opportunity to engage in hands-on conservation while learning about wildlife habitat needs.

More than 3,000 volunteers have improved fish and game habitat through weekend projects that involve building brush piles for small game, removing invasive trees, restoring grassland habitat through native flower and grass plantings, hinge-cutting trees for deer and snowshoe hare, installing wood duck boxes, regenerating aspen stands, performing river clean-ups and planting a variety of trees for wildlife food and cover.

This spring is shaping up to be a great opportunity for volunteers interested in wildlife habitat improvement. Please monitor MUCC and OTG social media for updates about the program and dates and details regarding upcoming wildlife habitat events.

For more event details and to register for upcoming events, please visit www.mucc.org/on-the-ground or contact Habitat Volunteer Coordinator Makhayla LaButte at mlabutte@mucc.org or 517-346-6456.

Changing Seasons and the Effects of Climate Change on Michigan Fish and Wildlife

By Drew YoungeDyke
National Wildlife Federation

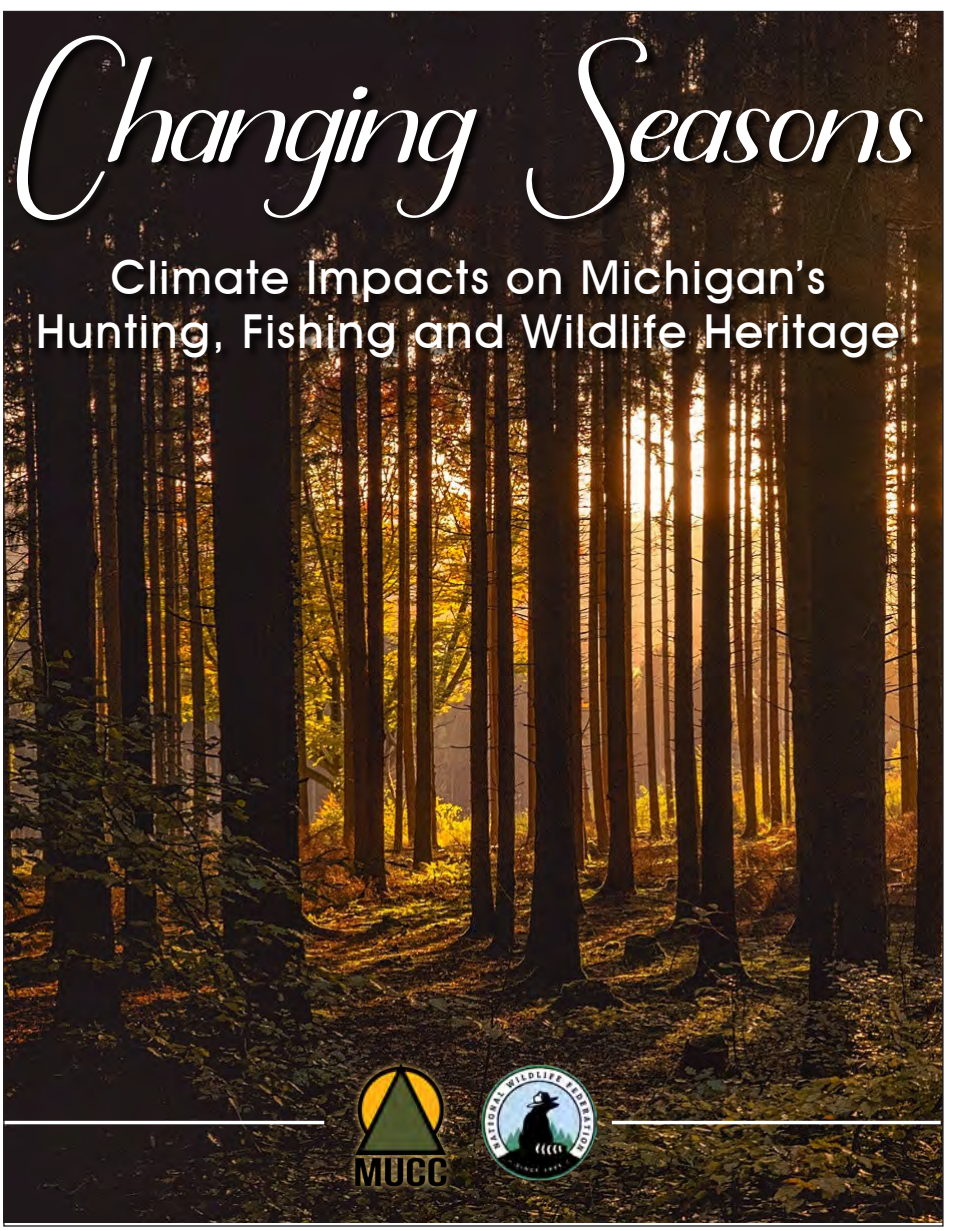
The old saying in Michigan is, "If you don't like the weather, just wait 10 minutes." It will change. Weather change we're used to, as are the fish and wildlife with whom we share our peninsulas. Climate change is different, though. It's not a short-term change in the weather: it's the long-term change in weather patterns.

Climate change isn't just about melting icebergs and polar bears in the Arctic Circle; it's about brook trout and salmon, white-tailed deer and moose, and waterfowl and ruffed grouse here in Michigan. Michigan United Conservation Clubs and the National Wildlife Federation have compiled a report on the impacts of climate change in the context of hunting and fishing in Michigan. Changing Seasons features the observations of hunters and anglers and real-world recommendations from biologists and conservation organizations on both policy solutions and how we, as hunters and anglers, can mitigate the impacts of climate change to fish and wildlife and help them adapt to the changes we can't mitigate.

Changing Seasons details how earlier warming periods and extreme swings from drought to heavy rains can increase the parasitic midges that cause Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) in deer, as it did in the 2012 die-off we experienced here in Michigan. It also explains how moose, a cold-weather species, lose range as they cannot cool themselves down amid warming summers.

Waterfowl migration patterns are being impacted by warming weather later into the winter, and habitat could be lost by a reduction in wetlands. Ruffed grouse nesting is impacted by droughts, and flooding and warming weather can increase the risk of mosquito-born West Nile Virus.

Salmon fishing opportunities are lost when increased extreme weather events create hazardous conditions more often on the Great Lakes. Recent research also predicts that climate change could



make the lakes more hospitable to Asian carp if we don't keep them out. Brook trout are particularly susceptible to warming steams, reducing their available stream habitat. Additionally, hotter summers reduce trout fishing opportunities for conscientious anglers taking the "70 Degree Pledge" to avoid overstressing trout already stressed by warming waters.

We're not helpless against climate change, though. Changing Seasons outlines actions that can help Michigan's fish and wildlife — and the people who depend on them — adapt to the climate change that is coming in addition to the broader policy recommendations to reduce carbon emissions on a larger scale. For instance, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund — which invests royalties from state-owned energy development rights into public land acquisition and outdoor recreation development — can prioritize deer wintering complexes to help whitetail deer adapt to extreme weather events, according to the report. Federal protections for existing wetlands can be strengthened to mitigate the impact to waterfowl from the ones that will be lost, and leveraging public and private investment in wetland restoration can help put some back on the landscape. Upland birds can benefit from active forest management, which promotes the growth of young trees and provides them better habitat. At the same time, reforestation of riparian areas along streams and rivers can help cool the water for brook trout to survive, along with investments in removing aging dams.

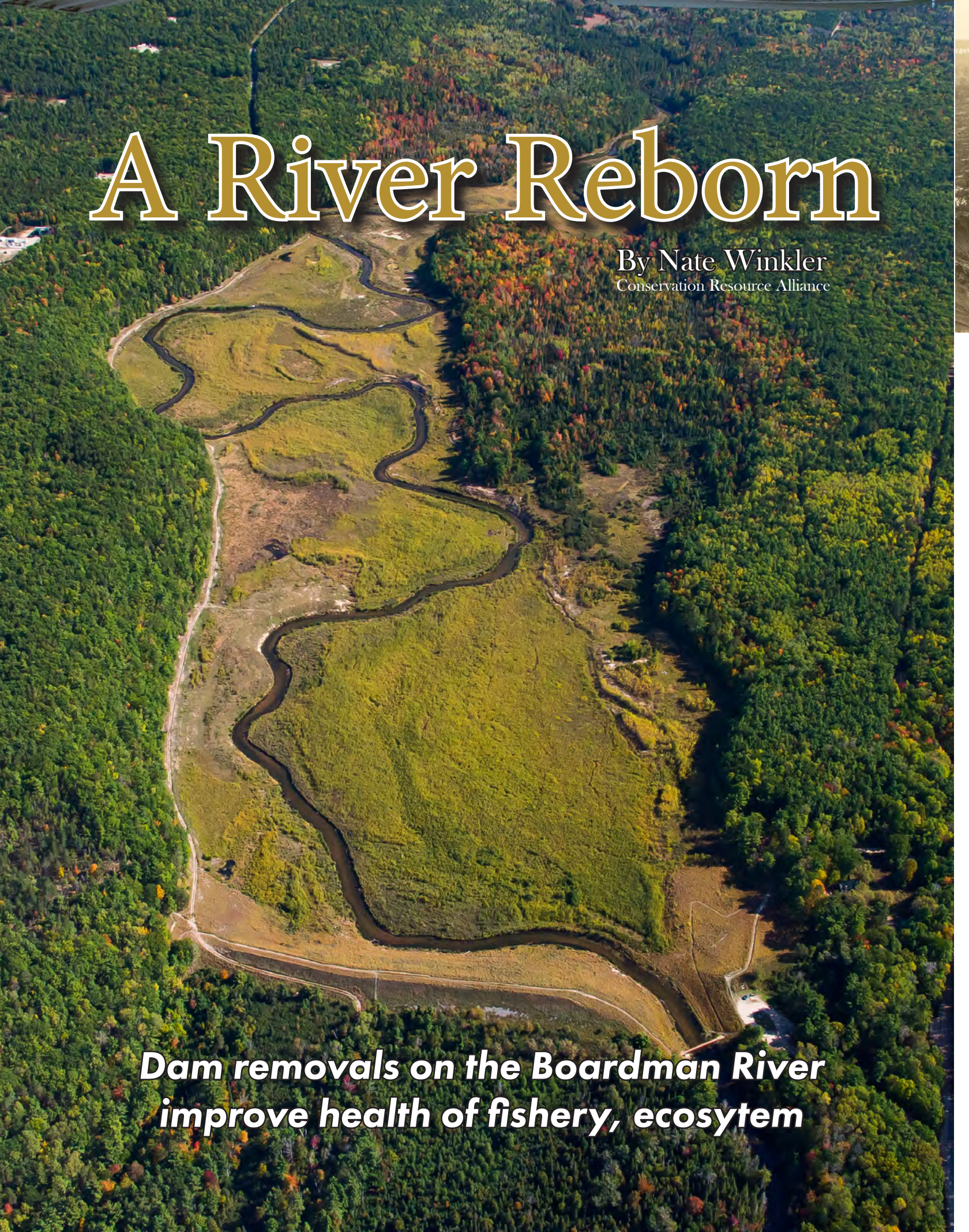
These are just a few of the recommendations in the report, intended for policy decision-makers but instructive to us all. Climate change is no longer just some potential future condition, and in addition to the fish and wildlife impacts, it affects us directly as hunters, anglers and outdoor recreationists.

As of late January 2021, the Great Lakes were experiencing record-low ice cover. While year-to-year ice cover is variable, this is part of a decades-long trend in decreasing ice coverage. That means, very simply, less opportunity for ice fishing. Of course, fishing can still be done on open water, but that's little comfort if you've invested in ice fishing gear, an ice shanty and developed a love for the pursuit. Similarly, Michigan has seen the lowest snowfall totals in some areas since the Great Depression. Particularly in a year when a pandemic has significantly reduced options for getting out of the house, this hits hard for those who've invested in snowmobiles, cross-country skis, and snowshoes as a way to stave off cabin fever.

We've adapted to snow and ice in the winter by learning to ice fish, building shanties, and buying snowmobiles, skis, and snowshoes. While we can adapt our outdoor recreation pursuits with the equipment we buy, fish and wildlife have no such luxury. As conservationists, its incumbent upon us to take the actions we can both individually and on a policy level to help them adapt to the changes already imminent and reduce our contributions — whatever they may be — to the changes that we can still avert.

A River Reborn

By Nate Winkler
Conservation Resource Alliance



Dam removals on the Boardman River improve health of fishery, ecosytem

Left: An aerial view of the Brown Bridge area shows what the river looks like restored to its natural channel. Photo courtesy of CRA | Above: Two historic construction photos of Brown Bridge Dam circa 1921. Photo Courtesy of the History Center of Traverse City

If you stand on the Supply Road Bridge over the Boardman River and look upstream, you'd see through the cedars the confluence of the river's north and south branches that provides its place name "the Forks."

More creeks than otherwise, the branches merge to create the small river you'd see on the other side of the bridge, flowing north for approximately 18 river miles to Traverse City and West Grand Traverse Bay. The clear water displays the color of weak reddish-brown tea as it runs over sand, gravel and downed cedars. This water held the extirpated Michigan grayling before overfishing, deforestation, log driving and competition from non-native trout caused their demise. But more importantly, the river was a lifeline for the Odawa and Ojibwe people that lived in this region before European settlement. In fact, before Harry Boardman arrived in 1847, the river went by the name "Ottaway" in reference to the first people to live here.

The little river flows through a North Country landscape bordered by high ridges clad in oak and pine, growing in size continuously via numerous tributaries, eventually attaining suitable volume for hydroelectric power production. In the late 1800s, the construction of five dams on the mainstem was undertaken to supply electricity for Traverse City, which was transitioning from a sawmill town to a regional fruit production hub. Concurrently, and in spite of the industrial fragmentation by the dams, the river began to heal from the wounds of the logging era to become a popular fishery for locals and visitors alike — having been stocked along the way with brook, brown and rainbow trout. Ernest Hemingway was said to have stopped to fish the river during one of his youthful junkets, and Len Halladay, a local angler from nearby Mayfield, tied a dry fly in 1922 which was first fished in the "Adams Hole" by a judge from Ohio (who went by the surname Adams). Bob Summers has built cane fly rods within a long cast of the river since the early 1970s, shipping them to anglers around the world. Kelly Galloup, western guide and fly pattern innovator, grew up fishing and snorkeling the river, essentially going to school on its trout before packing his outfit and moving to Montana. And over the years, local bait and gear fishing legends have taken some remarkable catches

An amphibious trac-hoe works on excavating the relic channel through the former Sabin Pond. Photo courtesy of CRA

Michigan Out-of-Doors Editor Nick Green poses with a 22-plus-inch trout he caught on the Boardman River below Brown Bridge in June 2020. The trout was released after this picture. Right: Green poses with a brown trout he caught on a dry fly during a yellow sally hatch. This fish was caught within a half mile upstream from where Brown Bridge Dam used to be. Photos courtesy of Abraham Downer

of trout while many youngsters (including the author's parents) have caught their first little brookie on an angleworm or grasshopper in the numerous tributaries.

While fishing can be more important than life and death, at a certain time in Michigan's history, dams were seen as a way of putting a river to work — a pragmatic solution for supplying energy, either for lighting bulbs or the physical energy to convert sawlogs to dimensional lumber. Less was known then about the need for aquatic organisms, especially fish, to have un-fragmented habitat, but even if much thought had been given, it likely wouldn't have been an impediment to dam construction. Fish in rivers rely upon continuity to access different habitat for seasonal changes in foraging, spawning, and early-life requirements. Besides the effect on fish of habitat fragmentation, dams also negatively affect fish by altering the natural temperature regime by impounding the river into artificial lakes, warming water that should otherwise be very cold. On top of habitat and thermal considerations, other negative effects on fish populations and overall river health are realized through the discontinuity of sediment, nutrient and woody debris — adding up to a refutation of the contradictory term "clean energy" used by dam advocates.

The most contemporary dams are now gone, including Brown Bridge, Keystone, Boardman and Sabin, and they were situated in that order from near the Forks down to the lower half of the mainstem where a relatively high gradient begins at Beitner Road. Keystone, Boardman and Sabin dams were in very close proximity to take advantage of this gradient which persists until the river reaches the influence of Boardman Lake, a natural lake partially within the Traverse City limits. Ranging in age from 90 to more than 100 years old, the dams had become an inefficient and unfunded liability to the owners. To explore options, a feasibility study was initiated in 2005, which culminated in a 2009 decision for removal, not entirely predicated on the anticipated environmental benefits, but that was fine with river advocates who were happy to see the river run free for any reason. Keystone Dam went out on its own accord during a 1961 flood, leaving three dams for a multi-disciplinary team composed of local, tribal, state, and federal stakeholders and officials to remove. Deconstruction took less than 10 years (2009 to 2018), but channel and riparian restoration work are ongoing as the reborn river adjusts toward equilibrium.

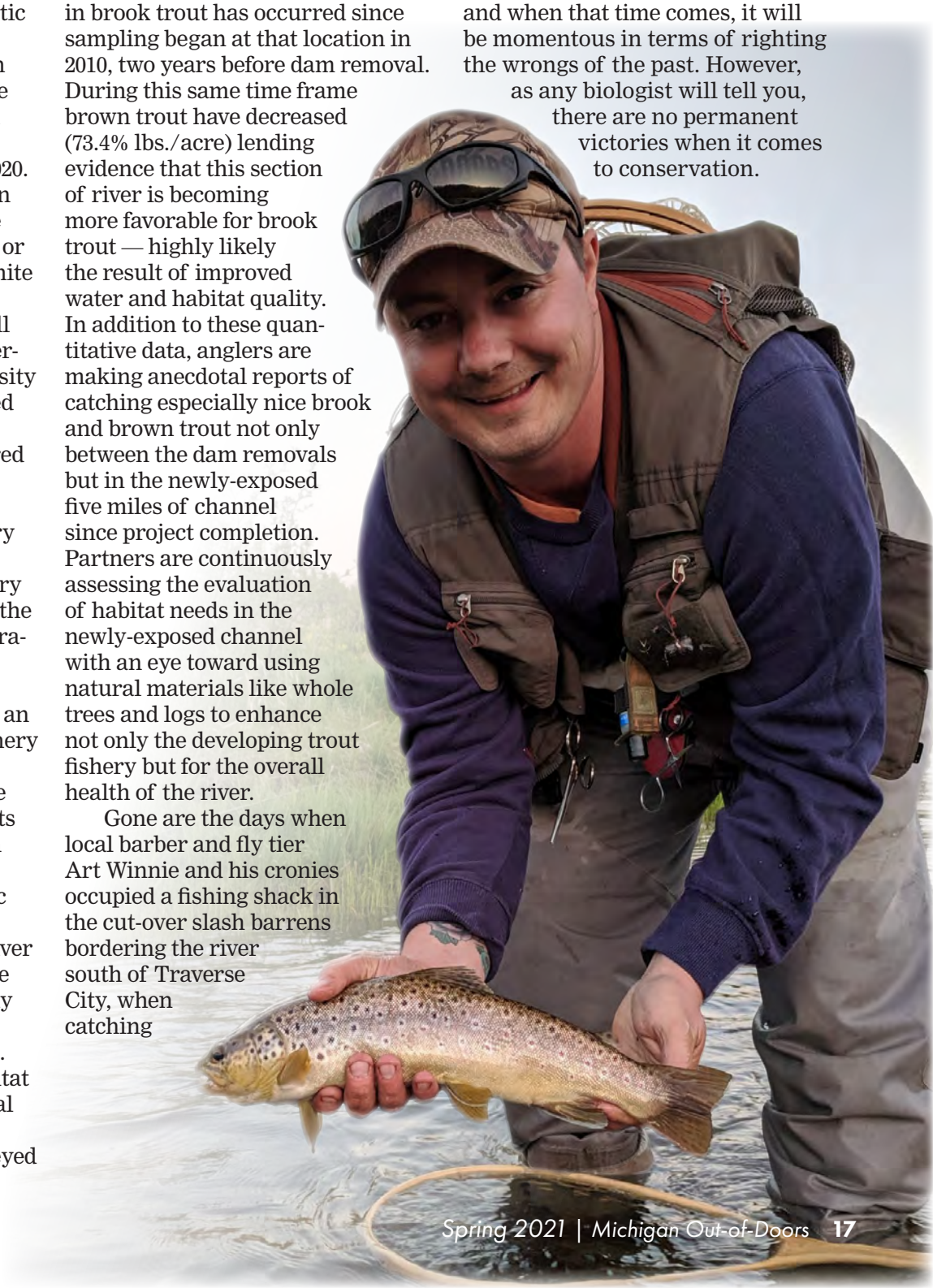
"Continued diligence will be required on the Boardman River to protect the gains made from dam removal against threats posed by suburban development of the watershed and overuse of inherently finite resources provided by the river, reborn."

Because this is an article ostensibly about fish and fishing, we should consider the impact of the dam removal project on the current and future fishery. But that can't happen first without talking about the foundation of any Michigan stream's food web — the primary producers (photosynthetic algae) and macroinvertebrates. Macroinvertebrate monitoring in the Boardman River preceded the dam removal project and carried through past its completion; the last survey was wrapped up in 2020. What the researchers found when comparing a reference site above the dam removals to sites within or between the removals was a definite and expected negative impact during the project, but almost full recovery afterward of macroinvertebrate species diversity and density even as those data are confounded by the presence of New Zealand Mud Snails, which were discovered in the river around 2013.

This is an important trend to recognize as a robust trout fishery depends on many things, and a steady supply of insects is primary among them. Coupling this with the resulting decreased water temperatures when the impoundments were removed (up to 8 degrees colder down to Boardman Lake), an already decent resident trout fishery can only get better. Additional benefits to the fishery include the creation of more complex habitats for insects and fish alike through the restoration of sediment and wood transport. The fine, organic sediments provide time-released nutrients to a nutrient-starved river and, at the same time, provide the media in which burrowing mayfly nymphs make their home and aquatic vegetation may take root. And wood not only provides habitat diversity for fish but an additional substrate on which primary producers may colonize to be preyed upon by insects.

Brook and brown trout populations have historically been found to skew in favor of the brown trout in the Boardman River, but recent fisheries data acquired by MDNR below the former Brown Bridge Dam have indicated a shift. A marked increase (713% lbs./acre) in brook trout has occurred since sampling began at that location in 2010, two years before dam removal. During this same time frame brown trout have decreased (73.4% lbs./acre) lending evidence that this section of river is becoming more favorable for brook trout — highly likely the result of improved water and habitat quality. In addition to these quantitative data, anglers are making anecdotal reports of catching especially nice brook and brown trout not only between the dam removals but in the newly-exposed five miles of channel since project completion. Partners are continuously assessing the evaluation of habitat needs in the newly-exposed channel with an eye toward using natural materials like whole trees and logs to enhance not only the developing trout fishery but for the overall health of the river.

Gone are the days when local barber and fly tier Art Winnie and his cronies occupied a fishing shack in the cut-over slash barrens bordering the river south of Traverse City, when catching trout necessitated artificial stocking. Since the 1960s, the Boardman River has been a wild trout fishery owing to its ability to heal. But there's a ways to go before the river once again carries grayling and bears the name "Ottaway." Both instances are on the horizon, and when that time comes, it will be momentous in terms of righting the wrongs of the past. However, as any biologist will tell you, there are no permanent victories when it comes to conservation.



A Piece of Michigan's Fly Fishing History

By Blake Sherburne

I have a bad habit. Well, I have many, but this is one to which I will admit. I have a tough time sticking to a budget. Instead of finding equipment that will fit into my wallet, I find outdoor gear that I fall in love with and shoehorn my desires in. My Bob Summers bamboo rod is no different. Being a Northern Michigan boy, it has always been on my wish list especially since my dad bought one in the early 2000s.

Dad and I have had a good relationship with Bob Summers since dad bought his six weight almost 20 years ago. I think he took a liking to dad, who is very easy to get along with, all those years ago and the idea that he owned and operated a Christmas tree farm. We made it a point to stop by his house to buy raffle tickets every time he built a rod for the local chapter of Trout Unlimited and occasionally would see him at social events where he would often join our table to hear about our Hex fishing season and how the farm season was going.

Bob Summers, a Michigan native and world-renowned bamboo fly rod builder, casts a four weight that he built for the author at his home in Traverse City.

Two years ago, I realized the dream of ordering and owning a Summers-built bamboo fly rod by convincing myself that I had the extra money. It would be a tight fit, but I would find a way to cram it into my budget. Mr. Summers was gracious enough to take my order, and he was surprised that I wanted a four weight. "I know what you guys do down there," he said. "What use do you have for a four weight?"

Dad's rod is a six weight. It has made more than a few Hex fishing trips with us, and he has used it extensively with smaller flies, too. I can remember at least three different instances where he popped lighter tippet on the hook set on bigger fish. His six weight may be bamboo, but it certainly is not lacking when it comes to power. So, with the big gun already in our

The author poses with his Summers-built bamboo rod and a 20-inch brown trout he caught on a Hex fly.

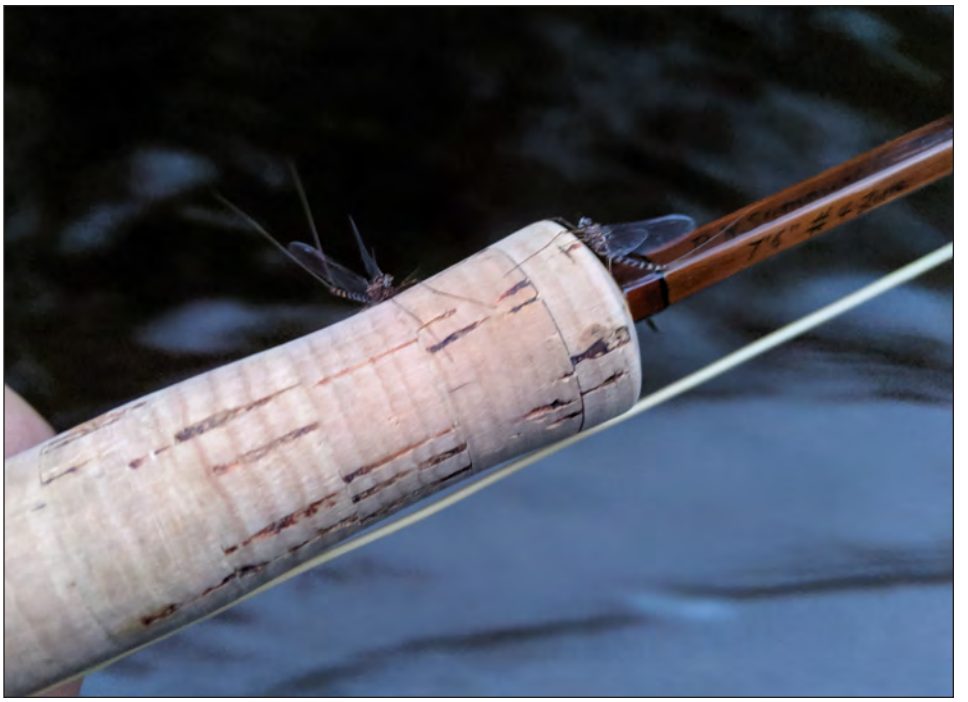
quiver, I wanted something that would do double duty. Something that would work well on the smaller Drake hatch that often precedes the Hex hatch on warm June and July evenings, and it would work well with smaller flies and lighter tippets, maybe even some light crick stomping on our smaller, local creeks.

Just a few short months later, the call came. My beautiful Summers-built bamboo fly rod was finished. Dad and I hustled up to Bob's house, nestled on the banks of the Boardman River, only a short distance from where the Adam's dry fly was created. We knew that a trip to Mr. Summers' house meant at least a two-hour conversation, and we were looking forward to the occasion.

Bob met us outside, and after the customary pleasantries, invited us, once again, into his workshop. Every time I have been there, I have been amazed that something so beautiful can come out of a shop like his. It gives me hope for my own workspaces. It is not that his workspace is dirty. On the contrary, it is as clean as one would expect a shop, especially one that deals in minute tolerances and the perfect finishes that high-end bamboo requires, to be. It is just that it is not large. Small is almost an overstatement. And it is full. Full is an understatement. There is barely room for Mr. Summers to turn around in his own shop, let alone maneuver around my dad and someone with my, ahem, stature. According to his website, Summers has been building rods since 1956, and his shop contains the detritus that life seems to acquire, plus all of the necessary parts and pieces and equipment for him to do his job for the last 64 years, art though it may be.

He had my rod at the front of the queue, no doubt because of our impending meeting. It was still encased in its handmade rod tube, however, and I could not wait to get my hands on it. We stepped outside before removing the rod from its tube and rod sock, much to my pleasure as I could envision myself smashing the tip against the low ceiling of his workshop. It was just a quick vision, but something of which I know that I am quite capable. Mr. Summers removed the rod from the tube, saving me from destroying it before even getting it home, and fitted it together.

The first lesson included taking the rod apart, as brand-spanking-new steel ferrules do not separate quite as easily as the graphite we



Mayflies hang out on the cork of the author's four-weight Bob Summers rod before the "big show."

are all used to. This fact, actually, is one of the primary reasons that dad's rod has not gotten quite so much use as he would like. The force required to separate the sections at the end of the night is enough to make one cautious about even putting the darned thing together. Mr. Summers put the rod together and took it apart several times to show us different techniques, including one where he put the rod behind his knees, gripped both sides of the ferrule and used the strength of his legs to separate his hands, a process I am not sure I will ever have the confidence to attempt.

Finally, I got my hands on my new rod. I flexed and wiggled it in Bob's yard, the way we all have while trying a rod in a fly shop, an exercise which really tells us nothing. Mr. Summers exclaimed that he had not prepped a reel with a four-weight line, so we went on an excursion for one, a trip that included a jaunt into his basement, where Dad and I had never been before. His basement was exactly reminiscent of his workshop. Bamboo fly rods of every make, weight and lineage, and rods in tubes and socks and naked lined the walls in racks.

This was the collection of a great, of the greats. Every big name was represented. I could see my dad's fingers twitching, his itchy trigger finger calling him to take every rod down from the walls and test them on the grass of Bob's backyard. Mr. Summers smirked, admitted that maybe he owned too many, and found a reel with a four-weight line, and we stepped back out into the early May sunshine.

Bob rigged and strung my fly rod while I stood idly by, trying to keep my hands from flapping the way my little sister's would when she was young and excited. He laid the first few casts out on the lawn, stretching out maybe 20 feet of line before handing the rod off to me. Bob Summers, dad and I cast that little four weight for the next half hour or so, reaching for different targets in Bob's backyard. Of course, bamboo casts differently from the graphite we are all used to now, but the rod performed admirably with a short line and a slow stroke and held up to middle and longer distances well. My first surprise was how "fast" the rod seemed to be. I tend to be a powerful caster, and there was not really anything I could do to overpower it. At longer distances, I could feel it flex all the way down to the corks. As long as I live, one of the highlights of my fly fishing life will be casting a rod built by a living legend with that living legend in his own yard.

The next stop was The Northern Angler in Traverse City to find a reel that would fit the diminutive handmade reel seat and a line to go along with it. As much as bamboo seems to be a thing of the past, try uncasing one, especially one built by a name amongst names, in a fly shop and see if you do not draw a crowd. Brian Pitser, the owner of The Northern Angler, was more than happy to show me every reel in the store until we found a good fit. Getting the rig wet was next on the to-do list.

The first trip it made with me was to one of the same places I watched my father pop off all those big trout with his Summers rod all those years ago. This river is notorious for being stingy with its hatches, but Yellow Sallies were coming off nicely and I had a few Elk Hair Caddis in my box. The first fish to fall to the new rod was a Brown of about 10 inches — no trophy but a lot of fun on a four weight. Throughout the evening, I worked my way back down to the parking lot. A few more single- and low double-digit trout fell to my Elk Hair Caddis, and the two fish of the night were a brown and a rainbow that both measured about 15 inches.

A few weeks later, the rod accompanied me on a Hex fishing night with my buddy Kenny, who I

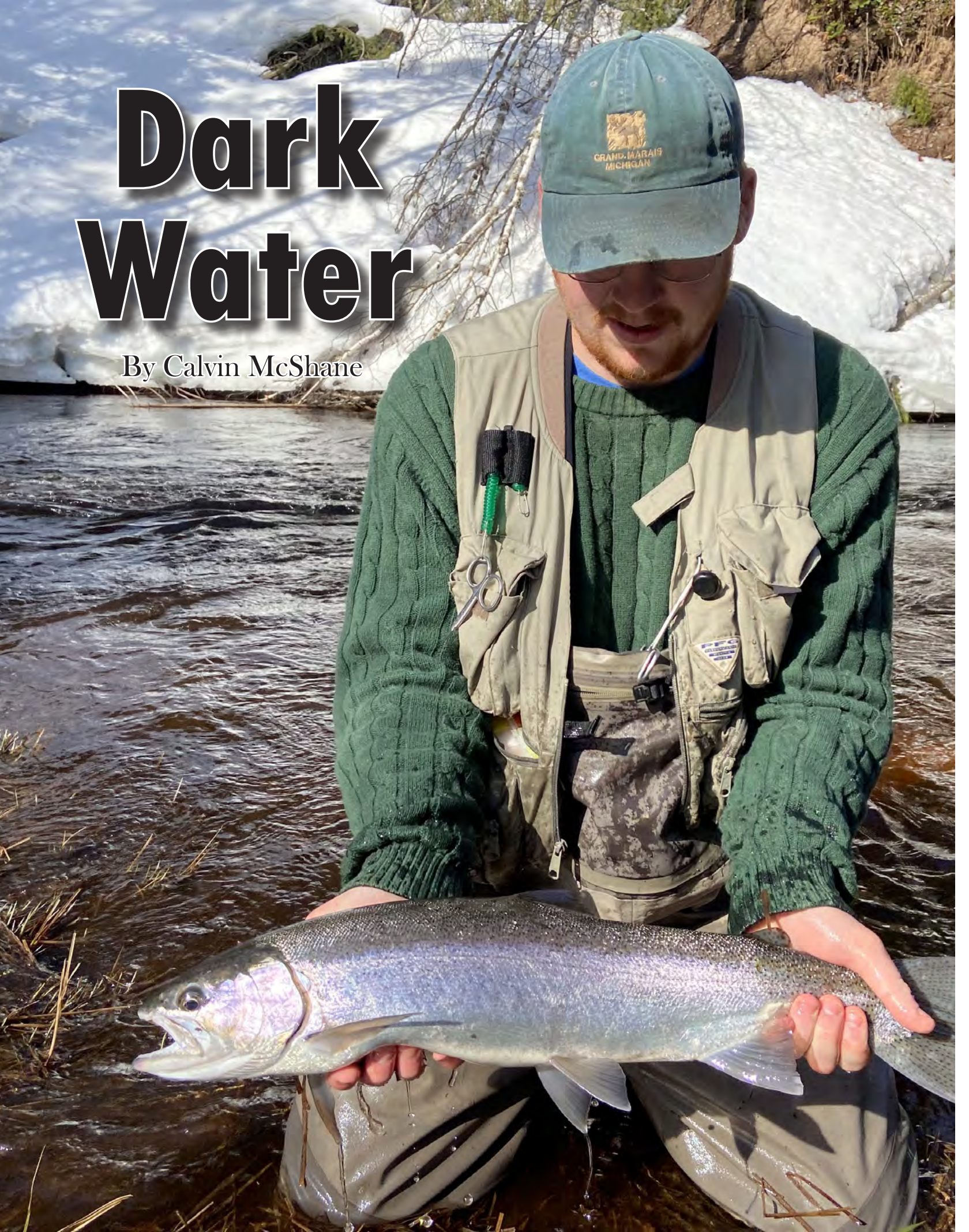
have mentioned in this column many times before. We set up on a fish, and it was Kenny's turn. It was an easy cast to a perfect, short seam that the trout was working, and Kenny made the cast. The brown was quickly in the net, and before we had it back in the water, another fish was feeding in almost the same spot. I still had the little Summers four weight out, and the fish that was feeding did not seem big, so I tied a Hex on the bamboo rig and hooked into the trout just a couple short casts later. It was immediately apparent that the fish was bigger than his rise form had indicated. My rod flexed down to the cork as the Brown shot under the boat and jumped on the other side. In my imagination, I could see the bamboo splinter as I put on enough pressure to slow the trout down, but it held strong, and soon enough, a brown that measured almost 20 inches was in the net. The little Summers four weight was more than officially broken-in.

I have an entire wall in my pole barn dedicated to my various fishing rods, both fly and conventional. The small, rubber-coated, screw-in hooks that I think are actually bow hanger hooks make a perfect storage and presentation wall for my ever-growing collection of fishing rods. As much as I would dearly love to have the little Summers rod on display where I could admire it daily, it and another bamboo rod that my uncle gave me are the only pieces of fishing equipment I own that live full time in my fireproof gun safe. The day I left Bob Summers' house with it, it became worth more than what I paid for it. His used rods fetch a higher price than his new rods — a function, I think, of many people not being patient enough to order one and wait the 12 months to two years to get their hands on it. I hesitate to call it an investment unless I'm talking to my wife, though. Technically, it is that, but my situation would have to be pretty dire before I could even stomach the thought of parting ways with it.

The beautiful little four weight has now caught fish for Kenny, my dad, my sister and brother-in-law and even the editor of this magazine. A thing this perfect needs to be shared. I promised Bob I would fish it, and fish it I shall.

Dark Water

By Calvin McShane



I consider myself a deep-thinking man. Besides making my parents wince and my friends laugh, my bachelor's degree in philosophy has equipped me well to do an awful lot of thinking. The unfortunate part of all the thinking can be the despair one can spiral themselves into when steelhead season is months away — when your life revolves around being sure to shovel the driveway only after the plows have come by. The best part of winter, though, is that it ends with spring. The snow, grey skies and days when the sunlight is only visible long enough to snap your fingers are tolerable in necessity only. Thankfully, the meekness gives way to rising rivers, fresh fish, getting your ass handed to you, drag screaming, water spitting from your line running so far and away and fast there's no hope — but, who cares? Hiking rivers, exploring new water, revisiting familiar water, searching and searching and searching, and finally, wrestling with fish implanted with the vigor of Lake Superior: these are the things that ease the lows of pandemics, elections and fussy snowblowers.

I come to the same conclusion every year — I ought to fish more, and inevitably, as priorities become magnified in madness, steelhead are delegated particular importance. There's no such thing as an angler that dies without the desire to have seen more water and more fish. Such is our fate. An angler lives somewhere between this innate urge to explore water, driven with enthusiastic joy, all the while knowing you're never going to see it all. It's that gnaw of missed opportunity that I can't handle.

It's better now than later to slip away. I tell myself it's time to get some writing done along the river, but as I always come to find out, rivers render words meaningless.

Not all the trips are great, but the great ones are sublime. I like to arrive early, check out the river and, depending on conditions, fish. It's a shame to pass up good water. Good water, to me, is a river that is rising or dropping but within a range where the fish could be anywhere. Like a Finlander once told me, a wad of chew bursting out of his bottom lip, brogue so deep it rattled your chest, "I like when all da' water is dark water — black water." But if the river is a little too high, which it always is, because inevitably I'm over-eager, I spoil in setting up camp. It culminates with arranging the sleeping corners, tucking away a book and my fishing log under the pillow and sitting on the cot to admire the fresh smell of freedom that comes with a tidy camp. Once I've got the campfire hot enough to cook dinner, I always throw on some more wood for good measure and run down to the river once more before it's too dark to see.

At night, a steelhead stream's mystery starts to glow. The roar in daylight fades to a hum when only whispers of pink hover behind the burrows of pine trees. It's tempting but forbidden. So many fish, or maybe not, moving where? Right here? Or maybe further downstream? I find it helpful to stand around

"It wasn't until I allowed myself to be intimidated and scared, wading out into dark water with only the studs on my wading boots to keep me upright, that I realized this isn't about me."

the river for a while with a beer while the sun sets. I tell myself I'm gauging how fast the water is falling or rising, passing the time coming up with writing ideas, but it's just because I'm in love with being around water. To be truthful, I don't think about much of anything until darkness sets in, and I realize I better get back to the campfire.

This is when I'm supposed to head into the tent and put pen to paper, but that rarely happens. I'm anxious, out of my skin. I want to be fishing. I don't want to be writing about fishing. Scenes filter through my mind: possibilities, opportunities, the hope for moments of madness. I said it before, but I'll say it again, that's why anybody is in this game of steelheading — or at least it should be. Anyone lucky enough to spend a morning on a steelhead stream, in solitude or company, should be happy enough to do that with or without fish. The fish brought us to the river, but over time, our affection turns to the water. I am there in some way to worship the river. Trees fall, gravel moves around, sand shifts, drifts, in the

high water of spring, move about the river in psychedelic clouds, bubbling and rising along. The river, stained and thundering, is nearly one long piece of holding water. Riffles slow to pools, seams stretch for yards and yards, and every drop of water feels fishy. These are the sorts of days when one moment your line subtly pauses and the next moment flashes of silver dance downstream with a pull so hard it can only be described as violent. The anxiety that comes with the anticipation of steelhead is a time to bask in being alive.

Daylight never comes soon enough. I know because I usually wake up at 5:30 a.m., sit by the fire, sip coffee and go back and forth on when I should put my waders on. The pine branches are coated in wet snow; the kind of snow that clings to every inch of your body in the form of water. Before I reach the river, I look like I've taken a swim. I love it. Hiking into a steelhead stream is one time when I know for absolute certainty that I am on the right path. I savor the hike in — observing and feeling the wetness, smelling the fog, looking for signs of deer, coyotes, wolves and stopping when there's a good view of the river just because. If only the rest of my life felt as aimed and purposeful as it does while walking in waders, a fly rod in my hand, a river on my mind.

When the fish could be everywhere, that doesn't mean they are everywhere. Actually, it makes the game a whole lot harder. Finding fish, hooking fish, and landing fish, we just turned the pot from simmer to boil. I love the difficulty. I immerse myself in the particularity. With each cast, I'm painting a picture, each stroke a tick of my split shot. It doesn't take long, maybe 10 minutes, until I start to feel like a fixture of the wild. Dark, frigid water pounds at my thighs, subtle seams to my back, just in front of my feet, but the sweet spot, the seam, is a coarse bubble line hugging an undercut bank. Switchgrass and alders sag over the water from winter's snow load, steelhead using the shade and depth as thoroughfares headed to places I wish I could see.

Every fish that comes across the terminal end of my fly rod is different—some bulldog right where they are.

You pull back on the cork, the tension climbs up the line, through the rod and into your veins. Other fish blow up like a grenade thrown into the water. No amount of reeling, wading, high-sticking seems to counter the moves of wild fish. When they break water, I wish time would stop. During those milliseconds, I'm ready for the apocalypse — what could be better than this? Inevitably, I end up much further downstream than I daydreamed about in my cot the night prior. These fish, especially the Lake Superior breed, don't quit. The harder they pull, the more I become torn. I so badly want the fish in hand, to hold it, to look at it, to take photos of it, to submerge its head in the cold water and feel its power when it's tail turns and six pounds of muscle bullets back to the dark water. On the other hand, I don't feel like a winner. I want to lose. For as many daydreams as there are of fish, pulsing in inches of water, the sun casting a purple hue over their gill plate, there are more daydreams of fish I never get to see. Steelhead that are hooked and gone, in such a wicked flash it feels like an uppercut to the gut — those are the fish I'm after.

The past year has felt like one giant gut punch. The reaction has been an onslaught of haymakers from every direction . The senselessness of it all is as confusing as it is disgusting. My hope for the spring of 2021 is that of rebirth, and for myself, a renewed sense of truth. Not the truth about who is right and who is wrong; That sort of crap is temporary. I want the kind of truth that points in the directions far away from egos, power and greed. A steelhead's only desire is to carry about their business. And for a long time, I thought it was my duty as an angler to interrupt that business. It wasn't until I allowed myself to be intimidated and scared, wading out into dark water with only the studs on my wading boots to keep me upright, that I realized this isn't about me. In the midst of the river, all of its eternal power, one cannot help but be overwhelmed with the truth. Steelhead are a fish for the deep-thinking angler. They are the fish of tidy camps, coffee at dusk and dark water.

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Honor the Hunt

By Robert Kennedy

"Honor in the hunt and conservation doesn't wait for those that wait for moments, but rather it's for those that live every moment with consequence."

It was an early morning start, and I should have known with my shotgun's malfunction first thing that it was a prelude to how the rest of the day would go. The malfunction in my turkey gun had left it unusable for the day, but thankfully my cousin Ryan brought his shotgun for me to use. With a foggy and disgruntled mind from the early morning and gun failure, Ryan, our friend Derrick and I piled into the pickup truck to head to our turkey hunt location.

After arriving at our hunting destination and parking the truck, we concocted a plan to head towards a section of the woods where Ryan had roosted a turkey tom the evening before. It was fairly dark with the sun still not visible, though its rays of light started to shine behind the leafless treetops. I uncased and loaded the shotgun, Ryan threw on his turkey vest, Derrick grabbed the video camera to capture the hunt and together we started to quietly edge our way to the wood line through the cool morning air.

While walking, the excitement started to build in me as the songbirds started to sing around us. We could hear a rooster pheasant cackle in the distance, feel the damp morning dew on our necks and see each other's smiles on our faces as we reveled in the camaraderie that was taking place. We stopped our approach as we neared the edge of the woods and proceeded to let out a couple owl hoots to check to see if the tom was still in the same area where Ryan had heard him the night before. The locator call yielded no response in the area we had expected, so we brainstormed about our next option.

I leaned on Ryan for his guidance. Turkey hunting multiple times in the past, I was used to an alternate way of hunting. I would either spot and stalk a tom I would see in a field or get as close as possible to their roosting tree and wait for them to fly down at morning's first light. Though the two methods I usually used can be exciting, I had never attempted to master the art of calling birds from a distance. On the other hand, Ryan was a skilled and proficient turkey hunter that had taken birds in multiple fashions, but he was noticeably adept at calling and mimicking a hen turkey.

As we stood in silence in the grey light of the morning still trying to figure out what to do next, Ryan was able to hear a faint gobble of a tom nearly half a mile away. The echoing gobble in the far distance answered the question of what to do next. We quickly

gathered ourselves and proceeded in the direction of the gobble. We hot-footed it through mud, briars and down a hill to where we found ourselves on the edge of a grass field. The gobble had come from the timber opposite of our field location, so we marched across the grassy terrain and positioned ourselves on the edge of the timber.

The concealment of darkness had now left us. We quickly picked out our positions and cleared the leaves beneath our feet to make our surrounding areas quiet if we needed to shift positions. Ryan pulled out his decoys and placed them 24 yards out from us in the open view of the field. It was a beautiful display of a jake and hen decoy that glistened in the dewy grass and looked as authentic as anyone could ask for.

More gobbles started to ring throughout the timber. A few quiet yelps from Ryan's call let the tom know where the love he was searching for was at. As we sat listening, we could hear the large wings of birds fly down onto the forest floor from where they were roosted. At that point, after the sounds of heavy wing flapping, we realized things were about to get interesting. Thunderous gobbles projected through the open timber from not just one tom but three, and they were all headed our way.

I started to feel my heartbeat in my chest, and the adrenaline began to creep along my skin. I had never been this excited on a turkey hunt, but the entire setting was formulating in my mind to be picture perfect. With the excitement starting to boil, I made sure I was in a good shooting position and checked with Derrick, who was off to my side to make sure camera gear was rolling to capture the moment.

The toms popped into the field opening in single file order, and after a brief moment of observing our set up, they started to sprint for the jake decoy. I had no preference of which one I wanted to shoot and whispered to Derrick that I would take a shot at the first one that separated from the group. The toms circled the jake decoy, beat it a couple of times with their spurs, pecked at it and unceasingly vocalized fighting purrs that sounded soothing to the ear.

They were circling tight to the decoy 24 yards away from me. One made a slight break away from the group with fans displayed as it was circling the decoy, and I squeezed the trigger at the opportunity. The gunshot echoed through the grassy field valley, and during the reverberation of the shot, one bird flew away.

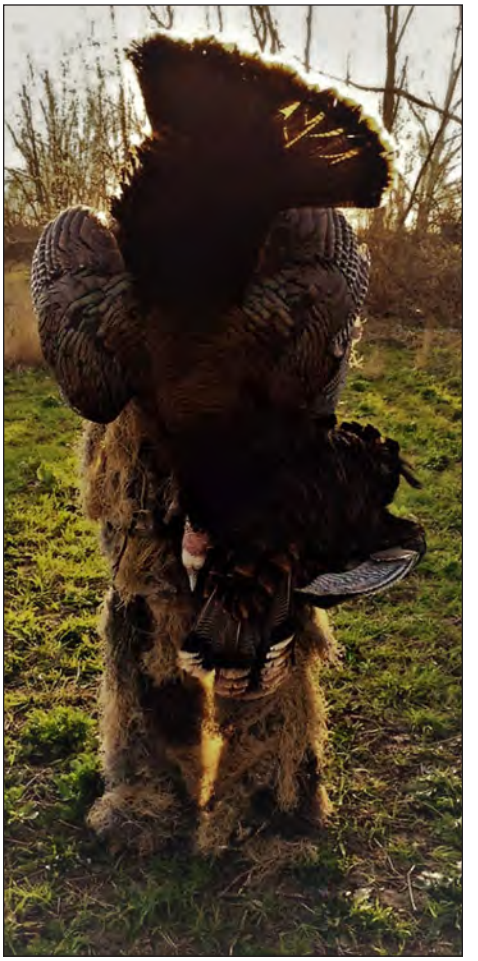
I found myself staring at two dead tom turkeys while my friend Derrick filmed the incident

in disbelief. The picture-perfect moment I had been anticipating came to an abrupt halt from an error of my own doing.

In replaying the shot repeatedly in my mind, I couldn't find a reason for what had just unfolded before me. From my angle, there was separation, but upon a replay of the footage, the unintended target had circled into the furthest stray BB of my shot pattern. I loomed over the two beautiful birds in grief thinking of the many things I could've done differently: I should've been more patient; I should've tried to take the bird when it first entered the field or I shouldn't have shot through a few stray blades of grass. With all the thoughts of what I could've done differently or what could have aided in the misfortune, I knew I had to do something to try and rectify the moment.

I pride myself on attempting to be the most ethical and morally sound hunter possible, but I found myself a violator of regulations in my haste. Instead of trying to rectify the situation, I could have easily hidden the error. I could have stripped away the respect I held for the bird and buried it in a nearby ditch or kept it to consume with the other tom. But, in doing so, I also would have relinquished the pride and honor I hold as an outdoorsman. With honor on the line, I decided to make the call to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

As modern-day outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen, we are guided in conservation through state regulation. These regulations that guide us are put forth using the best available science at hand and without anecdotal data. The regulatory conservation efforts are meant to stabilize populations and to further the longevity of our hunting heritage. Who am I to hold myself above conserving our natural resources that bring us joy? With this in mind, it was a clear indicator of my moral compass to make the call and self-report the incident.



The author carries out a turkey knowing that a visit from a a conservation officer is due.

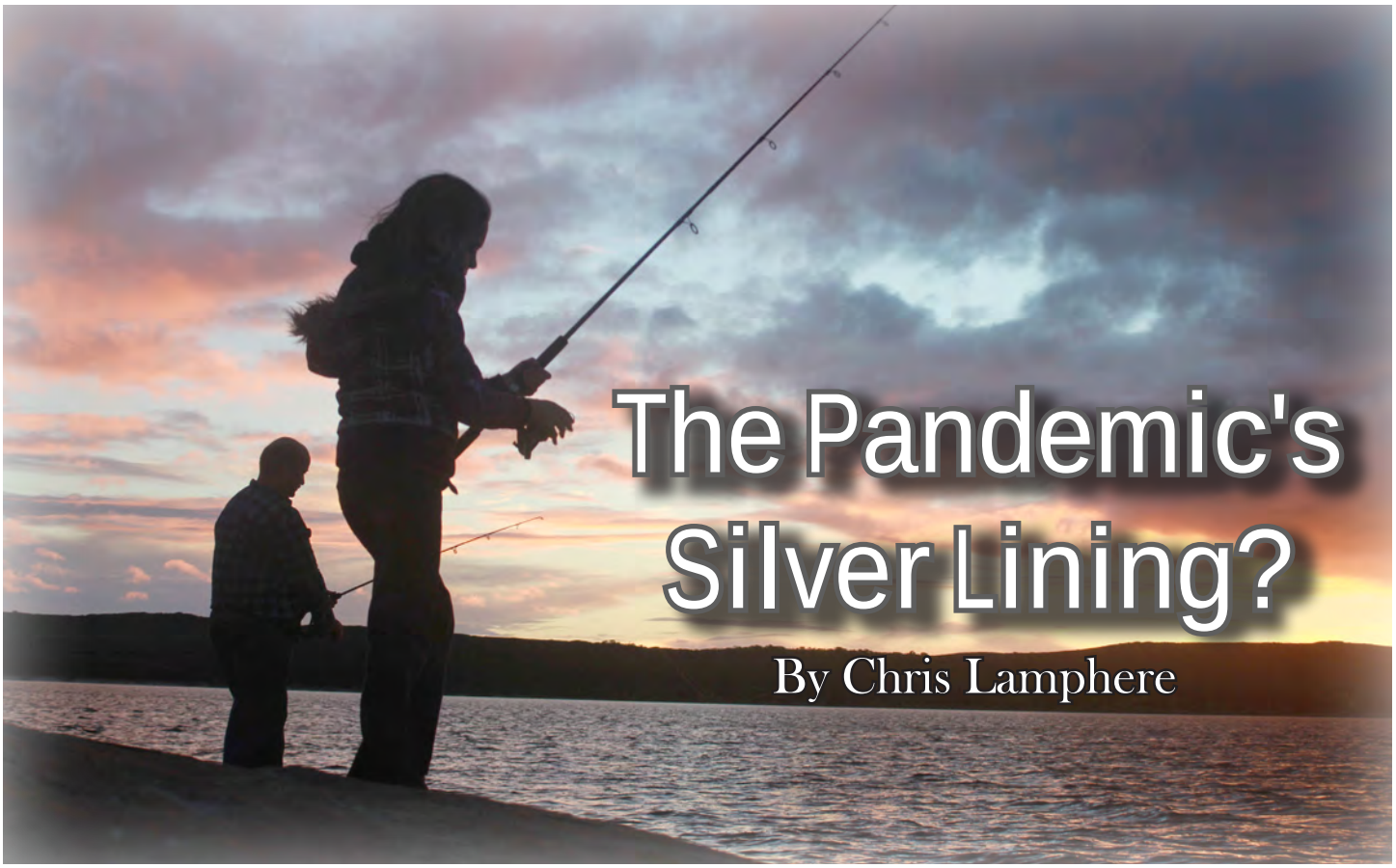
We gathered up the birds and headed back to the house to meet the conservation officer. After arriving at the house, we sat on the tailgate of the truck with both birds in silence. There was a fair amount of anxiety still in my system until the officer pulled in my drive and conversations started. I explained what happened, showed him the video and expressed how, at the very least, I didn't want the bird to go to waste.

After a short period of time talking about our hunt, the group of us spent over an hour conversing about other hunting experiences. The officer even shared with us his rendition of unintentionally shooting two turkeys at the same time. It turned out to be a very pleasant experience, and after our friendly exchange, the officer gathered up the un-tagged bird to be processed and donated to a food bank.

I was grateful the bird was going to be used to feed someone and I was especially grateful I wasn't reprimanded in any manner, but I was still disheartened for the plight I had caused. Even so, I seized the opportunity to not allow my integrity be tainted. I practiced my morals by self-reporting and was able to stick to my principles, which others throw by the wayside all too often. I consciously looked at the repercussions of my choice and focused on the honorable thing to do. If I hadn't made the call, I would have perceived myself a blatant poacher and never again could I have held my head high.

For how the hunt began with the malfunctioned gun and the tough decisions made throughout the day, it turned into a great learning experience. I was finally able to experience the excitement of turkey hunting that I had heard so many talks about, and I was able to experience that with a group of my closest friends. Though the moment of success was tainted by misjudgment, we were still able to hold fast to our moral standings and our footprints in the woods did not lack honor.

Generalizing, we live in a society where a large fraction of people give little thought to the choices they make and at times throw integrity by the wayside in their actions. As outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen, we are constantly held under a magnifying glass regarding our motivations in the outdoors. Continually, we must take responsibility for ourselves to make sure we are held in the highest esteem. Reasons we enjoy the hunt, respect towards the animals we pursue and the honor in our heritage should never be questioned by onlookers. Honor in the hunt and conservation doesn't wait for those that wait for moments, but rather it's for those that live every moment with consequence.



The Pandemic's Silver Lining?

By Chris Lamphere

DNR, conservation groups brainstorming strategies to engage 2020's bumper crop of new outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen

Conservationists in Michigan and elsewhere have been trying to figure out how to get more people involved in outdoor activities for a couple of decades now.

Unlike most of those efforts, which have had minimal success at best, and dismal success at worst, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed people outside in droves.

Of course, this isn't news to anyone who paid attention to trends in hunting license sales in 2020; what to do with the sudden influx of new customers, however, remains a crucial question.

It's a question that Dustin Isenhoff, specialist with the Marketing and Outreach Division of the Department of Natural Resources, thought a lot about last year and will be spending a good chunk of his time thinking some more about this year.

"It was an obvious departure from what we've seen in recent years," Isenhoff said. "We hope (participation) will stay up, and we're going to do everything we possibly can to understand these new customers."

Looking at license sales data from 2020, a few things stand out.

For one thing, it wasn't just hunting that saw an increase: fishing had a 9% jump in total unique customers from 2019 to 2020, which is significant but not too surprising, as fishing hasn't experienced the same level of decline as hunting since the mid-1990s.

Looking at the hunting data is somewhat more revealing: certain demographics saw huge jumps in participation — demographics that have been identified as particularly important to the future of hunting and, consequentially, future efforts to fund conservation-related activities in Michigan.

From 2019 to 2020, every age category saw an increase in new hunters (defined as someone who hadn't purchased a license in the last five years) but none more so than those who are teens and younger: In the 0-9 age range, there was a 54% increase, and in the 10-16 age range, there was a 70% increase. The categories with the smallest increase in new participants — 39% and 28% — were those in the 17 to 64 age range and those over 65 years old, respectively.

Isenhoff said young people comprise a largely untapped group of potential hunters. With so many competing interests vying for their attention, however, they remain a demographic that is prone to "erosion" — or loss of interest — as they age.

Another group that is vital to the future of conservation are

females, who have been one of the few demographics that has increased in hunter participation in recent years, with 2020 being no exception.

According to the data, there was a 14% increase in hunting licenses sold to females and a 21% increase in fishing licenses sold from 2019 to 2020.

"We're looking at this as a great opportunity," Isenhoff said. "We want to do whatever we can to keep them engaged for years to come."

In order to accomplish this goal, Isenhoff said they'll be sending surveys out in the spring to people who purchased hunting and fishing licenses for the first time (or for the first time in five years). The purpose of these surveys is to learn about what motivated them to get into hunting and fishing, as well as what would compel them to remain active.

Kristin Phillips, chief of the Marketing and Outreach Division of the DNR, said she has a number of ideas on how to keep new hunters and anglers coming back to the outdoors after the pandemic is over.

Trevor Levesque examines the ice fishing gear he and his father, Aleo, brought along on their trip to Lake Cadillac in late January.

One simple thing they can do right away is include information in their messaging and programs that would be useful to a beginner rather than catered solely to the experienced outdoorsman or outdoorswoman, who have been the traditional focus of marketing efforts.

Along these lines, Phillips said she'd like to build onto programming that presents easy-to-digest information for any number of activities. For instance, a "10 easy steps to learn to deer hunt" campaign, or "easy information for someone that doesn't have a hunting mentor."

Auto license renewal is another idea, where a hunter or angler can sign up to have their license renewed automatically rather than having to take the time every year to go buy one in person. This program currently is being tried for the first time with fishing licenses, and Phillips said they'll likely expand if they find it to be successful.

"Wherever they are in that spectrum of outdoorsyness, we want them to take that next step," Phillips said. "We want to give them the tools to come back next year."

2020 New Hunters

Ages 0-9

↑ 54 %

Ages 10-16

↑ 70 %

Ages 17-64

↑ 39 %

65 and over

↑ 28 %

compared to 2019

Once they learn more about the information consumption patterns of those new to hunting and fishing, Phillips said they'll also be able to relay their messaging through those mediums, whether they be email, social media or other online content. Having a better understanding of new customers also will allow them to identify and reach people that might have similar interests.

In coming months, Phillips said she's also planning to work with visitors bureaus and convention centers to develop marketing campaigns aimed at broad segments of the population that may be interested in regional outdoor opportunities such as hiking, biking and camping as opposed to more narrow demographics interested primarily in hunting and fishing.

While the core marketing message is yet to be crafted and will depend largely on information they receive from the surveys, Phillips predicts there will be a focus on reminding people about the joy they experienced being outside, away from the banal stresses of their everyday lives, particularly if they were able to spend time with family.

Phillips said she's encouraging groups and organizations to give her a call if they're interested in collaborating with the DNR on this type of campaign.

One group that is excited to learn more about the experience of new hunters and anglers is Michigan United Conservation Clubs.

MUCC Executive Director Amy Trotter said even if the bump in outdoor activities is ephemeral, the brief exposure might be enough to create a whole new cohort of passionate conservationists.

Reiterating Phillips' comments about the importance of making it easier for people to stay engaged, Trotter said ensuring people don't "fall out of the system on accident" should be a priority. She pointed to the automatic license renewal system as an example of such an effort.

"You never want it to be that someone doesn't hunt or fish anymore because they just didn't feel like buying a license or that we didn't communicate the opportunity to purchase that license," Trotter said.

Given all the new faces that will be filling the woods and waterways during 2021, Trotter said perhaps the most important duty of MUCC and other conservation groups moving forward will be to help facilitate a culture of inclusion and mentorship for newcomers.

"Instead of grumbling about parking lots being full, we should welcome other outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen and take new users under our wings so they have a positive experience," Trotter said. "There's not a very good cookbook out there on how to do this, but every one of our hook and bullet groups are looking at it differently."

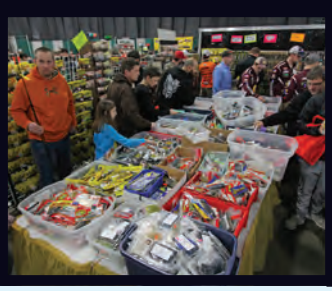
Left: A dad teaches his son aspects of turkey hunting while afield. Below: A youth duck hunter takes aim at decoying ducks during the youth duck season. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

FISHING BOATS

FISHING TRIPS

FISHING TACKLE

ICE FISHING VILLAGE



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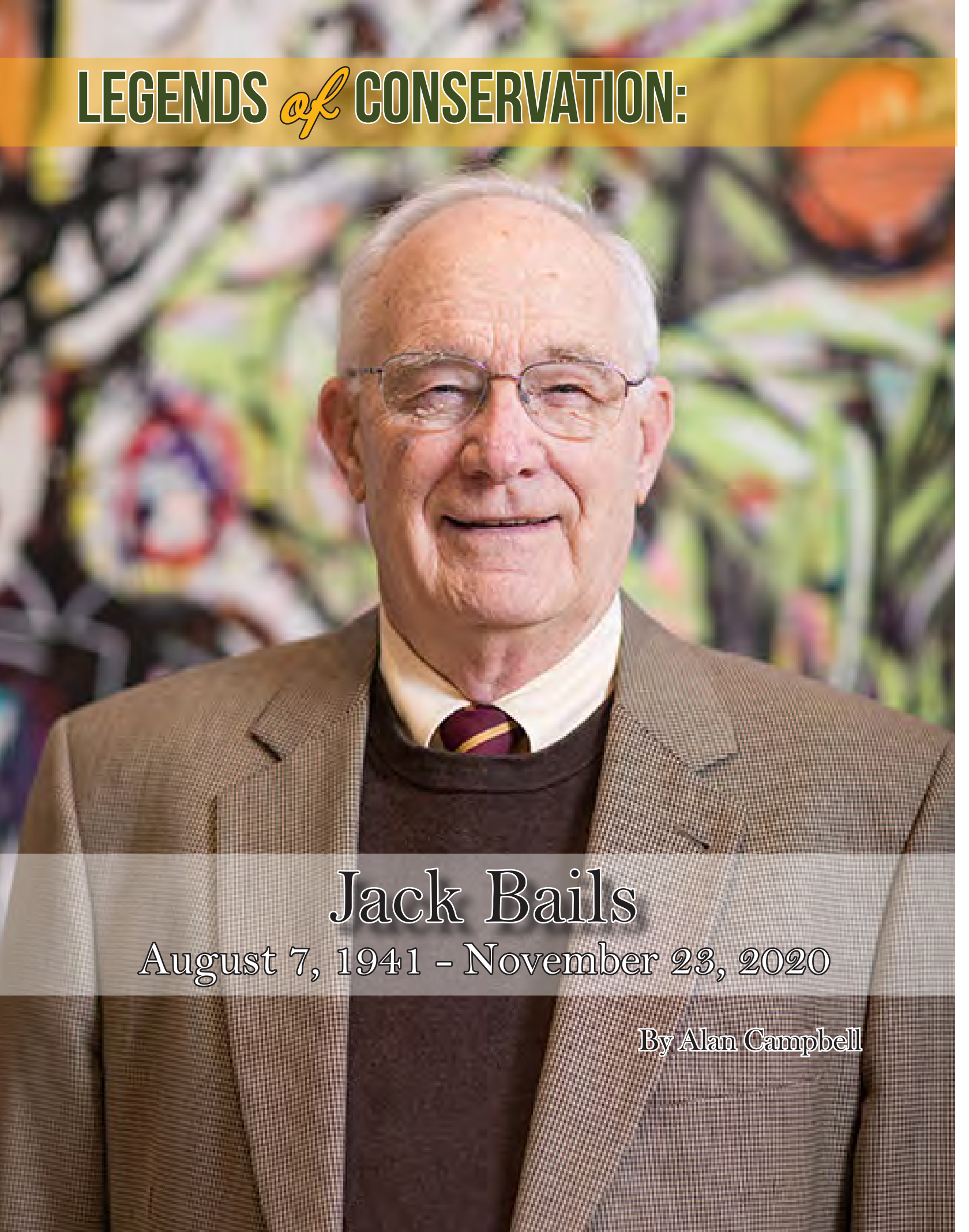

Jack Bails

August 7, 1941 - November 23, 2020

By Alan Campbell

The heart of Jack Bails can be found every time a kid tosses a worm into Black Creek from a universally-accessible fishing platform at Lake St. Clair Metropark.

Or when a mayfly hatches from a reclaimed gravel run in the upper East Branch Au Gres River, where improved road-stream crossings reduce sediment by approximately 15.4 tons per year.

And in scores of research projects needed to reinvigorate and protect the fisheries of the Great Lakes.

Bails, a former deputy director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), fought the good fight against pancreatic cancer for 14 months. He passed on Nov. 23, 2020 leaving behind a loving family, a bevy of admirers and a legacy of conservation accomplishments for Michigan's freshwater.

"It was a unique career," said Mark Coscarelli, a senior policy fellow at Public Sector Consultants. "Being the tireless individual he was, Jack kept on working until three, four years ago, and he died at 79. That's pretty amazing."

Bails was one of those rare individuals able to push positive policy for natural resources from within and outside of the MDNR. When politics stalled his near-certain path to the department's directorship, he retired in 1992 and continued advocating for the health of the Great Lakes as vice president of Public Sector Consultants.

He played integral roles in developing management plans for the Rouge River, Muskegon River, Saginaw Bay, Boardman River, Portage Lake — and his home waters on Bear Lake, where he taught his kids to fly fish for bass on a dock behind the family cabin. But he's best remembered as a young architect in the introduction of salmon to the Great Lakes to offset an explosion in the alewife population and as a key player in the creation of the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust (GLFT).

Helping to create the salmon program, hailed as a savior of the collapsed Great Lakes sports fishery, must have been fun compared to the wrangling required to create the GLFT. The trust, like much of Bails' work, operates with little notoriety. But the projects it underwrites — from the construction of popular fishing piers to underwriting academic studies required to create solid natural resources policy — greatly benefit the Great Lakes and those who recreate in them.

Mike Moore, former MDNR director, recalled the contentious process to create the GLFT, which today has about $10 million in assets and annually doles out $2.5 to $3 million in grants. It started in the 1970s when a power-generating plant in Ludington built by Consumers Power Company was proving highly-efficient at electrical generation.

"The concept was pretty

Jack Bails, shown holding some of the first salmon in Lake Michigan to return for spawning, was a young architect of a program that saved sportfishing in the Great Lakes.

good," Moore said. "It's almost like tidal action. But when they were pumping the water up, they drew in a lot of fish with it. You were balancing cheap energy with that fish resource in Lake Michigan."

Negotiations among the state, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Consumers Power, Detroit Edison and other players for fish-lost compensation dragged on and led to a lawsuit. Bails, then working with Public Sector Consultants, knew political and corporate players. He led negotiations down a path that continues to benefit from a settlement reached in 1996.

"I'm sure (Consumers and Detroit Edison) went to the governor. And the legislature. They didn't want to correct what they were doing or pay penalties, but they had to in the end. Jack's role was significant in my estimation. He was the right guy for the time," Moore recalled.

Janice Bails said life with her husband led to a succession of adventures involving the outdoors. "On family vacations, we visited a lot of state parks and fish hatcheries. One time, we went to Alaska and stayed at a bed and breakfast, and by chance, the gentleman who owned the placed was a fish biologist. I learned a lot and the kids learned a lot, and all of them have an appreciation for the outdoors," Janice said.

The couple lived in Washington D.C. for one year while Jack represented Michigan in a networking program to combine state and federal efforts to implement the U.S. Endangered Species Act. However, while out of state, MDNR leadership changed, and with that, his position in Lansing was eliminated.

Bails made lemonade.

"One thing he did was to participate in the first conference on endangered species. Then, when he came back to Michigan, he didn't know what his role would be. There wasn't a job in fisheries, so he started on writing the (Michigan) Endangered Species Act," Janice said.

So why have you never heard of Jack Bails? Because he quietly worked his magic.

"He never was comfortable with a lot of praise. He would just as soon work behind the scenes. He worked well with many people. And he mentored people, too. I'm getting notes from people who he mentored and had an impact on," said Janice, a retired reading instructor at Verlinden Elementary School in Lansing.

One of those people influenced by Bails was Matt McDonough, director of the Discovery Center Great Lakes in Traverse City. McDonough, who interned at Public Sector Consultants under Bails, oversees a budding waterfront community of nonprofits with Caribbean-blue Grand Traverse Bay at the center of their missions. While a student at MSU, McDonough applied for a position at PSC that he admittedly was not qualified to hold. "He just took time to explain how to be a better interviewee. He said to be sure to research the position and organization you are applying for and make sure to have as many questions as your interviewer has for you. I've since done the same with folks I interview. He was a really neat guy. He was more than well respected; he was a thoughtful leader in the conservation movement," McDonough said.

Moore, too, recalled Bails' impact. "There is no question that Jack was a major player in that time frame from 1970-1990 while in the DNR. And then it continued for another 20 years or longer after that," he said.

Bails was a "strong Democrat," Coscarelli said, whose public career had an artificial ceiling. Few public servants could so easily have changed employers while retaining their missions.

"As the agency got more political … it was simply time for him to leave," Coscarelli said. "Jack was a visionary, but Jack was methodical. He started with a goal in mind. He could quickly size up a room and determine what the organizations needed to win and move them in the same direction. He was a deal maker. He was a master at leading from behind."

Added Janice, "He just enjoyed being outside and being near the water. He was very concerned about future generations."

Former MDNR deputy director Jack Bails spent his career bettering Great Lakes fisheries. He's shown here at the mouth of the Boardman River.

Bails' Legacy: The Great Lakes Fishery Trust

The Great Lakes Fishery Trust (GLFT) doles out millions of dollars annually for projects that protect and promote what many consider Michigan's greatest resource: our freshwater. That's not quite on a scale of giving that rivals the better-known Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) — but it's certainly impactful.

Perhaps it's time sportsmen and sportswomen got to know the GLFT.

Both funds rely on energy sources for their existence. While revenues for the MNRTF are generated from oil and gas leases on state-owned lands, GLFT income stems from one place — the Ludington Pumped Storage Facility.

The highly efficient plant, whose four-year construction was completed in 1973, earned the Outstanding Civil Engineering Award from the American Society of Civil Engineers.

While the plant's design is superlative, it's concept is simple. The facility draws on unused energy generated mostly from nuclear power plants during low demand to pump water from Lake Michigan to reservoirs. Turbines turn the stored water into electricity during peak demand, negating the need to supplement Michigan's electrical grid with power from more power plants. The facility also supplements the intermittent work of wind and solar farms.

While the project represented a huge win for the needs of humans, it came with a drawback for natural resources. Fish caught in the turbines were killed by the thousands. Plant operators Consumers Power Company and Detroit Edison Company built barriers to slow the slaughter, but they could not stop it.

Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) joined the National Wildlife Federation in suing the power companies. The conservation powerhouses eventually partnered in court with state and federal governments and several Native American tribes. What emerged after ten years of litigation was a comprehensive settlement reached in 1996 that has proven as enduring as the plant itself. By all accounts, former MDNR deputy director Jack Bails deserves much of the credit.

"The vision of the trust is rather than divide the spoils to the (litigants), why don't we pull the resources so the parts will be more than the whole?" explained Mark Coscarelli, science advisor for GLFT. "To Jack's credit, he wanted to keep (settlement funds) out of the legislature and the administration."

The fund was started with $5 million in seed money and the transfer of 10,000 acres owned by Consumers Energy, most of which was eventually sold. The settlement required Consumers and Edison to install a 1.5-mile seasonal fish barrier and pay for scaled-down future fish kills. The barrier mitigated fish mortality by 90 percent.

A nonprofit corporation, the GLFT board includes leaders from within and outside of government. The board of directors consists of officeholders from the MUCC, three Native American tribes and the National Wildlife Federation; the state attorney general; and the director of the MDNR who serves as chair.

The job of the GLFT, simply put, is to steward a pile of money provided to protect and improve the Great Lakes.

The fund, which peaked at $26 million, came with an end date — 2019, when the original license to run the plant expired.

"Instead, the fund was tweaked to exist at least through the life of a new license, which is 2019-2069," Coscarelli said. "Public Sector Consultants was hired to manage the trust, which has no employees or assets other than its portfolio."

The fund portfolio now has about $10 million.

Included among 14 GLFT grants approved in 2020 were:

$150,000 to improve Flint River access at the confluence of Swartz Creek;
$166,370 to finalize plans to improve access to the Grand River through a universally accessible outdoor space at the Grand Rapids Public Museum;
$295,000 to begin the transformation of the old coal dock in Traverse City into a recreational amenity;
$68,000 to replace road culverts on the Days River in Delta County;
$30,000 to improve trout cover in the Little Manistee River;
$100,000 to bolster support for stopping Asian carp from reaching the Great Lakes;
And $252,000 to study potential health hazards posed to Great Lakes fish from PFAS contamination

Not so Fast...

By Shawn Stafford

"One does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted… if one were to present the sportsman with the death of the animal as a gift, he would refuse it. What he is after is having to win it, to conquer the surly brute through his own effort and skill with all the extras that this carries with it: the immersion in the countryside, the healthfulness of the exercise, the distraction from his job."

JOSE ORTEGA Y GASSET

I took up turkey hunting a little later in life but have been stricken with the bug quite ravenously, nonetheless. The early years of my trek into turkeys were unsuccessful, but just hearing them gobble and some up-close encounters with a hen or two were enough to keep me wanting more.

Two years ago, I was able to take my first turkey and be back eating breakfast by 8:30 a.m. That hunt went as scripted. Last year, however, was a different story.

Jumping a couple turkeys while squirrel hunting late in March on my property got me excited for what the spring would hold. I had a choice to make, though, and either hunt my spot for the first time or take up my uncle's invite to try and thin his flock. After all the pictures he kept sending me and the texts almost daily about all the feathered traffic at his place, I have to admit I took the "sure" thing and opted for a long weekend at his place.

As was usually the case, I loaded up the family and north we went. I had been in close communication with another uncle who so graciously set up a popup blind complete with chairs and decoys. He showed up well before dawn to pick me up, and with a little hitch in my gitty up, I hopped in. We parked in the dark and met up with my other uncle to discuss plans before heading to the blind. The three of us were so confident I'd have my bird and be back for coffee 20 minutes after daylight. I have to admit I am not generally this optimistic when it comes to hunting, but all the indications had me set up for a repeat of the previous year.

I upgraded to tungsten loads, allowing me to downsize my shot but maintain velocity due to tungsten's extreme density. In other words, I had more shot in a given pattern with plenty of energy in comparison to lead. Many will say the use of tungsten allows you to shoot turkeys at further distances than with lead. Physics says yes, but for me, it was more about putting more pellets in that ten-ring at the same 40-yard mark, thus upping my odds of a good, clean

kill. Oh, and tungsten is considered non-toxic per the latest MI DNR Waterfowl Digest if you're into environmentally-friendly things.

What turkey hunting has taught me recently is it's not just about shooting and killing. Hunting is about the experience. Some may suggest that's what bad hunters say to make themselves feel better. I sincerely beg to differ. As I was alluding too previously in this article about my uncanny success two years ago, I felt just as much gain from the banter leading up to the hunt, the time in the blind with my uncle and all the strategizing, talk and laughter of that day. Truthfully, that is 99 percent of the hunt. Pulling the trigger is only a means to an end.
The grey dawn slowly crept upon us as we drank coffee and snacked on cheap gas station donuts.

Most of the time, I'd be swelling with anxiety, but I had managed to keep things under control this morning. Then the first gobble lit off. And another. And another. They had flown down from the roost to the east and would come out on the same trail from the northeast corner of the field they did the previous year. I played the scene through my head over and over, waiting for them to pop out. I was envisioning waiting till the gobbler was well within range and carefully placing the bead just over halfway up his neck. Then my uncle threw out a gobble and was immediately answered. A couple purrs and clucks from the push-button call and our lone hen decoy would do the rest. It was déjà vu when a couple of hens appeared, followed by a puffed-up gobbler. At this time, I was all wound up waiting for them to make their approach. Let's just say they wanted me to suffer and took their sweet time making their way to the set. However, as the hens meandered in my direction, the gobbler couldn't help but follow suit.

Easy as pie. The ladies finally got within range with the ole tom in tow. This is where the scenario departs from all that I had dreamt it to be.

The author's uncle uses a box call to try and coax a hung-up tom turkey into the decoys.

There might as well have been a tom-proof fence at 50 yards encompassing our blind. That gobbler strutted back and forth for a good hour but wouldn't commit. He was in the wide-open field, and his hens would come into the decoy, leave, come back, wander around and generally not pay the blind or decoy much attention. The tom, however, just would not come in. I lost count of how many times I raised the gun or got positioned to shoot out of different windows only to experience false alarm after false alarm. To spare you the details, hens, jakes and gobblers spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon parading back and forth in front of the blind between 50 and 60 yards away. While I considered it to be my misfortune to not get a shot on my first morning, it was really a gift to be allowed to return in the afternoon.

The morning was frigid, and when we climbed out of the blind at 1:00 p.m. so my uncle could get to a prior engagement, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to warming reprieve.

The problem was that upon returning to my other uncle's garage, I had to listen to his continual badgering as to why we didn't kill anything that morning. He had been watching the turkeys march back and forth across the field all day from his back porch. We couldn't believe in our lack of victory that morning either. After seeing so many birds in our first sit, I remained upbeat and truly excited to have gotten to observe the beautiful creatures. I would be hunting solo the rest of the weekend, though, so my calling would be put to the test.

After warming up a bit and a

power nap, I returned to hunt the late afternoon. As I worked my way towards the blind, I walked down a path with thick pines to the right and an agriculture field to the left. Once I got to the end of the pines, I slowed and peered off to the southwest, noticing what appeared to be a turkey. Dropping low and belly crawling through an overgrown portion of ground between two fields, I reached a series of small pines. Raising my binos, I confirmed that indeed it was a turkey, along with two of his buddies. From my position, there was no way I could get set up to call and shoot without being spotted.

I retreated back towards the stand of pines. I put out my decoy and backed up to the base of one of the evergreens.

Once settled, I couldn't see the turkeys any longer but trusted my setup and hit the call. Eventually, I could see them working my way, which created quite a sense of accomplishment for me as this was my first solo attempt at bagging a bird. They once again disappeared and I waited. And waited. And, well, you get the point. Just when I wanted to try and take a peak, I heard something behind me.

Busted. Rather than approach my decoy from the front, the group had swung around and caught me from behind. That was how my day ended.

Amazed at all the turkeys I had seen in one day, I went to bed that night eagerly awaiting the morning. The problem was I had a tough decision to make. Hunt from the blind again or try and move closer to the corner they seemed to gravitate to. I opted for the blind, thinking that the birds were just finicky the previous morning. By placing a second hen decoy, this time, they wouldn't be able to resist.

Well, it was like playing the morning before in reverse. The turkeys came from the southwest corner and spent the morning in the field taunting me at a distance.

Multiple gobblers, jakes and hens put on an amazing show for me. I was grateful for the chance to watch. I did my best to watch behaviors and soak in as much as possible, waiting for them to begin their final approach.

After some time, they did finally start moving deliberately in my direction. Once again, the male turkeys would not break that 50-yard barrier. It was almost uncanny — smart animals, to say the least. Then they wandered to the back corner and out of sight. Had I abandoned the blind, which was now obviously spooking the gobblers, and picked a spot near the field corner, I would have filled my tag. Lesson learned: be adaptable!

"I would sleep well that night knowing that I had hunted hard, not leaving anything on the table. I learned a lot, was humbled and left hungry for this spring."

Now I was down to my last afternoon, and at the recommendation of my uncle, I switched it up to the other end of the property where he had been frequently observing birds.

He was right. I saw a ton of birds. With the exception of one sneaky hen, none bothered to come even remotely close to shooting range. I based my sit completely off the scouting report and didn't even put out a decoy thinking maybe they were on to me. Eventually, the turkeys headed to their roost, and it was time for me to conclude my trip. Talking with my uncle that evening, I felt good about going home empty-handed. Sounds strange, I know. I had thrown everything I had in my repertoire (which is fairly limited compared to more experienced folks) at the turkeys. I was able to hunt with my uncle in the blind. I spot, stalked and called them in. I switched up my decoy set. And lastly, I completely changed my location and abandoned the decoy. I would sleep well that night knowing that I had hunted hard, not leaving anything on the table. I learned a lot, was humbled and left hungry for this spring.

I hope you can spend some time this spring coaxing in, or maybe not coaxing in, some longbeards. Even better yet, spend that time with someone else: a friend, a loved one, a stranger or best of all worlds — a new hunter. I believe you will get more out of the hunt than you could have imagined.

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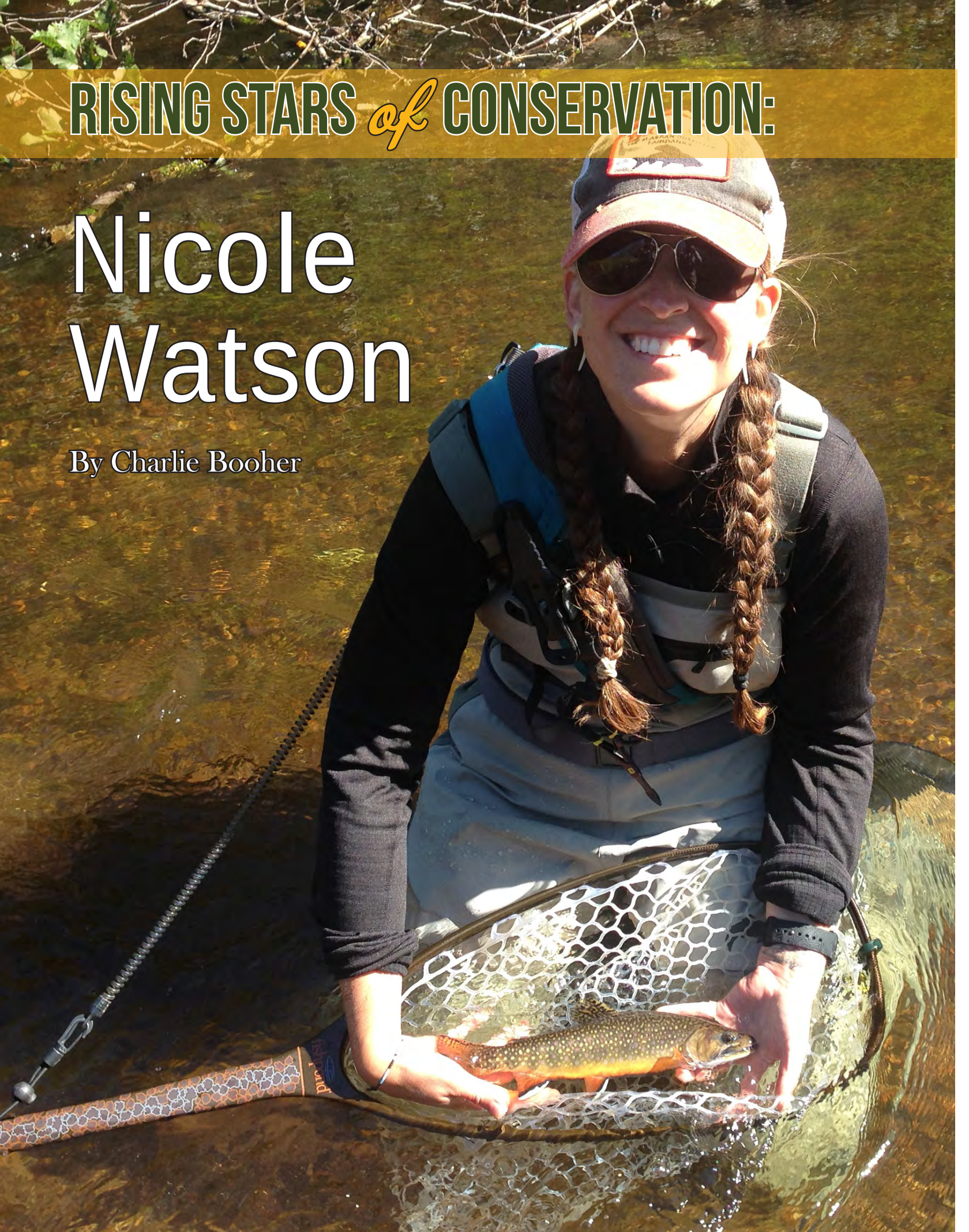
RISING STARS *of* CONSERVATION:

Nicole Watson

By Charlie Booher



In response to Alan Campbell's Legends of Conservation column, the Michigan Out-of-Doors editorial staff sought to highlight individuals who might someday make their way into those pages. The Rising Stars in Conservation column seeks to introduce readers to the next generation of natural resource conservation professionals, sharing their experiences, their voices, their ambitions and their outlook on the future of the field. Leaders today look different, hold different positions and have been trained differently than traditional conservationists and they are worthy of an introduction.

In what might be described as a typical Michigan childhood, Nicole Watson's early years were hallmarked by trips "up north." Growing up in Southeast Michigan, like more than half of all Michiganders, Watson and her parents frequently sought to escape the region's urban sprawl in favor of a small cottage on the Au Sable River, just east of Grayling. As a young child, Watson spent time fly fishing the banks of this storied river, exploring the unique ecosystems of the Northern Lower Peninsula and soaking in the beautiful, complex places that make Michigan such a special place. In this way, Grayling – both the town and the fish that it is named for – became critically intertwined with a fisheries biologist's life.

"Grayling was just such a special place for me and my family growing up," Watson said. "Now, my husband and I, along with our dogs, enjoy those same waters and woods today."

Like so many conservationists, Watson's career path did not start out in the direction of fisheries biology. While studying biology and chemistry at Eastern Michigan University with plans to pursue an education in equine medicine, she fell head over heels for an ichthyology course. The study of fish, their ecology, behavior and population dynamics led her to rethink her graduate degree program to focus on fish. The love that began on the banks of the Au Sable and the shores of Lake Erie and Lake Huron was coming to fruition.

From spending weeks at a time on deepwater research vessels in the Great Lakes to circumnavigating Lake Michigan on four separate occasions and traveling to interior Alaska to gather breeding stock of arctic grayling, to partnering with a distillery to help fund her PhD, Nicole Watson has certainly enjoyed quite the adventure in the early years of her career.

After her undergraduate training in Ypsilanti, Watson took a two-year contract position with the U.S. Geological Survey doing work on deepwater communities. As she researched microorganisms deep in the Great Lakes, she sought to understand better the factors that underpin the entire lake ecosystem: forage. The lake's base trophic level (eventually) feeds everything from minnows and baitfish to salmonids and other aquatic species.

"I fell in love with the work, and with the fish, but I always found myself more curious about streams, rivers and other flowing waters," Watson said. "The movement of water across the landscape tells a strong story about the creatures that inhabit it for all or part of the year, as well as the land that the waters flow through."

Watson got just that in her first round of graduate work at Central Michigan University. While working in Mt. Pleasant, Watson conducted research on native steelhead species in tributaries of Lake Michigan. Her work entailed four trips around the lake, electrofishing every day for weeks in a row. On 42 small streams in Michigan and Wisconsin, Watson used a backpack-mounted electrofishing array to stun spawning steelhead,

Nicole Watson releases a grayling she caught in Alaska. Watson's research with Michigan State University is centered around reintroducing Arctic Grayling to Michigan waterways. Photo: Tom Watson

often working with a small team of researchers.

After collecting the small age-0 and age-1 juvenile fish out of knee-deep water, Watson would carve out the otolith, or ear bone, of each individual. Using this small piece of bone, she could track the tributary where that fish had been born. Back in a chemistry lab on campus at CMU, Watson spent much of her time performing laser ablations on nearly 3,000 otoliths.

The laser precisely removes material from the otolith. These dust particles are instantaneously moved from the ablation chamber in carrier gases (helium and argon) to the mass spectrometer, where they are transformed into an ionic plasma. The plasma is then sorted by element mass and quantified to obtain the otolith signature. The otolith elements act as a sort of journal and can be used to interpret the story of any given fish – where it was born, where it spent its early years and the conditions of those places. As a whole, these data told Watson and her colleagues a great deal about the importance of certain Lake Michigan watersheds to steelhead.

This is especially important in the context of stocked fish, which, at the time, were not being clipped or tagged. This meant that state fisheries agencies and other organizations could not track which bodies of water were most or least productive. Possibly more notable is what they could do with that information — efficiently and effectively target conservation and management efforts. Her research is still being used to help manage these habitats and fisheries today.

After a few years at CMU, Watson worked to gather funding, mentorship and support to pursue a Ph.D. in Fisheries Ecology at Michigan State. As a proud Spartan, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that Watson turned down a position at that other school in Ann Arbor and drives by that campus every time she comes to campus in East Lansing. The state, and my alma mater, are better off because of that choice.

Currently, Watson spends her time conducting research on interspecific predation and competition, water choice and imprinting that might impact the reintroduction of arctic grayling into Michigan waters. In short, what might restrict the success of grayling eggs when they are dropped into a Michigan river. Obviously, there are plenty of challenges. Young fish face predation and competition from other species, while also facing a behavioral inclination to travel towards water of a certain temperature and chemical composition. Someday, she hopes to play a leading role in bringing sustainable populations of grayling back to Michigan to further enhance the robust fisheries of her home state.

Nicole Watson hikes up a mountain in the Western United States in pursuit of native salmonids. Photo: Tom Watson

To get to this point, she has worked with members of the research community at Michigan State and managers with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to build artificial streams. In a building on the south side of campus in East Lansing, Watson and her team feed and study thousands of juvenile grayling, brook trout and brown trout every day. She studies how they interact with one another and respond to different water sources. To gain a better understanding of how this might look, Watson has spent time with native grayling populations in interior Alaska. These interactions, mostly done through an underwater camera, gave Watson a view into the world of grayling — helping to determine how they make their way in this world and, specifically, how they might make their way back into the waters of Michigan.

Her initial research suggests that grayling will readily coexist with native brook trout but have a complex relationship with nonnative brown trout. This is fairly unsurprising, as brook trout and grayling once cohabitated in Michigan's Jordan River. Previous attempts at grayling reintroduction have resulted in the rapid outmigration of juveniles. Researchers and managers in Montana experienced

similar issues but were able to overcome these challenges by introducing the fish at the eyed egg stage of development. Watson and other collaborators believe that this technique might be applied with similar success in Michigan's fisheries. All of this information will help managers and other researchers to better understand what it might take to perform a successful reintroduction and, potentially, for anglers to catch grayling on the rivers near the town that bears their name.

All of her travels and time spent in and on the water gave Watson a deeper understanding of her research subjects and the habitats in which they reside. This experience, combined with a strong knowledge of statistics, population dynamics and spatial ecology, make Watson a particularly well-equipped fisheries scientist. A soon-to-be alumna of three of Michigan's public universities, Watson looks forward to a future career here in the Great Lakes State. However, her journey has not been without trials, including a robust travel schedule and often living in a different town than her campus.

"I frequently find myself being one of only a few women in a room of fisheries biologists," Watson said. "I strongly believe that we continue to need new, diverse faces in this field to bring in novel ideas and holistically improve the work that we do for Michigan's fisheries."

The future of fisheries biology is not without its challenges, too. Invasive species, warming stream and ambient temperatures, and increased human development all pose risks to Michigan's native fisheries. However, despite many challenges, Michigan's fisheries leaders continue to think towards the future to craft thoughtful, adaptive management regimes.

"When we think about salmonid diversity, places like the Western U.S., Oregon, Washington and Alaska often come to mind," Watson said. "These places have many different species of salmonids and non-game fish, but research suggests that fisheries diversity is declining globally and can be attributed to invasive species and human impacts on ecosystems. Unfortunately, many species are still being lost today. We want Michigan to have a flourishing ecosystem and to make this happen sustainably, but it is complicated and will certainly take a great deal of time, energy and foresight."

Michigan's fisheries are in need of stewardship and care from thoughtful, creative individuals like Watson, but they also require collective action. These wild rivers and streams need public attention from anglers, paddlers, nonprofit organizations, government agencies and academia. They also need knowledgeable young advocates to help along the way.

The future of fisheries conservation is bright with people like Nicole at the helm, but it is also a thankless, difficult pursuit. Our world, and the field of Michigan's most fragile ecosystems, is changing, but future professionals are well-adapted to use rigorous research to solve future problems. Watson works every day to make the world a better place for native fish — and plans to continue to do so long into the future.

Nicole Watson and her husband, Tom, upland hunt with their English setters, Flint and Sally, from Firelight Bird Dogs. Photo courtesy of Lynn Dee Galey

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Policy Victories

2019-2020 Legislative Session

By Charlie Booher

Crafting natural resource policy is a slow, tedious process. At the Natural Resource Commission (NRC), in the state legislature, in Congress and within federal agencies, Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) has been at the forefront of policy developments that impact our fish, wildlife, natural resources and public lands. 2020 brought forth an increasingly challenging year with the onset of COVID-19 and divisive, often toxic, politicking. However, conservation remained a point of bipartisan cooperation for our state and federal leaders.

Policy is made in many venues and jurisdictions, but MUCC members and staff work at the local, state and federal level to push for important conservation rules. However, these processes can be very, very confusing. Folks frequently break down changes to these laws in terms of a variety of metaphors — one of my favorites compares policymaking to the butchering of a side of beef (or venison, if you'd rather). In the end, you likely want a number of different cuts of steak, pounds of hamburger, some sausage or jerky, a few roasts and (for some) the organ meat.

Each of those pieces require different skills and tools to carve out — in this case, different modes of policymaking. While Congress or the state legislature might get a chainsaw or a hatchet, a commission can use a boning knife and agencies only get a scalpel. To further the metaphor, imagine that the federal government can only work on the front shoulders, while the state can only work on the back hams — and nobody has really fleshed out who gets to work in the middle, so both work on cleaning up the ribs and the loins, sometimes stepping on the toes of municipal or county governments in working on what are frequently considered the best parts. It is equally important to note that every customer (member of the public) likes different things and has a different opinion about the results and how they might get there. MUCC and groups like it work to guide the carvers' hands to best manage policy formulation holistically — coordinating local, state and federal actors to most efficiently and effectively craft desired results. Of course, we are not the only ones in the room, and we occasionally find ourselves offering suggestions that aren't taken into consideration or defending the process against those who might try to degrade it.

MUCC's grassroots policy process guided MUCC and staff through opposing or supporting many different policy priorities during the 2019/20 legislative session. Sometimes it sets priorities for state leaders to tackle, while other times it provides MUCC staff the guidance to respond to pressing issues. As the year came to a close, MUCC sat down to reflect on the progress that has been made through this process, as well as the priorities yet to be accomplished. Throughout the legislatures, commissions, agencies and courts, MUCC has been hard at work as the insiders for your outdoor traditions.

Michigan Legislature

Much of what MUCC's policy staff does takes place down the road from our headquarters on Wood St. at Michigan's Capitol in Lansing. While state legislators debate topics ranging from gambling and automotive insurance to healthcare and unemployment coverage, MUCC staff is there to ensure that conservationists' interests are represented. During the 100th session of the Michigan legislature, MUCC tracked more than 120 individual pieces of legislation. Some were shepherded through the process by our staff and our partners, while other bills that threatened fish and wildlife management were amended or scuttled by our efforts.

A policy resolution that passed at MUCC's 2017 Annual Convention called on MUCC staff to work

MUCC Executive Director Amy Trotter testifies before the Senate Natural Resources Committee regarding commercial fishing legislation MUCC has been working on for several years.

with our elected officials to start a pheasant release program in Michigan with a user-pay funding model. In the final days of the 2018 legislative session, the state legislature appropriated $260,000 for a two-year pilot pheasant release program administered by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The first year of that program saw vast success, with upwards of 50 percent of program participants saying they would not have hunted small game if it were not for the pheasant release program. Unfortunately, the second year of the program was subject to rescission due to COVID-19 budget adjustments and did not occur. However, during the 2019-2020 legislative session, MUCC served as a pivotal advocate in the passage of a Pheasant Stamp bill (HB 4313) sponsored by Rep. Gary Howell (R-North Branch). The now-passed bill requires hunters 18 and older pursuing pheasants to purchase a $25 stamp if hunting on public lands or Hunter Access Program (HAP) lands in the Lower Peninsula. The funds from the sale of stamps will go towards releasing pheasants on public lands across the Lower Peninsula to recruit, retain and reactivate hunters.

In the fishing world, MUCC worked closely with Reps. Julie Brixie (D-East Lansing) and Gary Howell (R-North Branch) to pass legislation to create a voluntary $2 youth fishing license. This bill is aimed at engaging new anglers in the role of fishing in conservation funding and make the purchase of a license a learning experience. Anglers are not required to buy a license until they turn 17 years old.

Beyond helping pass these pieces of legislation, MUCC also worked to protect Michigan's deer herd by defending the NRC rulemaking process. In the waning months of 2019, members of the state legislature tried to overturn a ruling of the NRC — one based on the best available science and rooted in a will to protect Michigan's deer herds — to ban baiting in the state. Governor Whitmer vetoed this legislation and left these decisions in the hands of the NRC.

Further, MUCC worked tirelessly to promote legislation to regulate the Great Lakes commercial fishing industry, license commercial hunting and fishing guides, reduce the use of the Freedom of Information Act to target wildlife, modernize Michigan's bottle deposit laws, increase funding for the outdoor recreation passport program and increase penalties for the poaching of sturgeon in the state, among many, many other bills. Unfortunately, these will remain on the table for the next legislative session.

Outside of the legislature, MUCC worked with a coalition of conservation and outdoor recreation organizations to pass a ballot measure to modernize the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF). Known colloquially as "Proposal 1," this ballot initiative removed the $500-million cap on the MNRTF, a fund used to purchase and invest in Michigan's public lands. This proposal also granted much-needed flexibility for managers to spend funds from the MNRTF. Previously, a maximum of 25 percent of funds could be spent on improving recreational development, with the remaining 75 percent or more dedicated to acquisition. With only so much land available for purchase — and only so many state managers to look after it — it was necessary to change this funding scheme. After the passage of Proposal 1, 25 percent of funds will be spent on improving recreational development, 25 percent on land acquisition and conservation and the remaining 50 percent being eligible for either category. This work will help Michigan's land managers better adapt to changing conditions and remain relevant to a broader public.

Michigan NRC

A great deal of MUCC's success comes from our work with the Michigan Natural Resources Commission — a body tasked with

MUCC Policy Coordinator Ian FitzGerald testifies in front of the Natural Resources Commission in February 2020 regarding transparency in NRC processes and changes to furbearer regulations.

the exclusive authority to regulate the method and manner of take of game and sportfish.

As a result of a policy resolution from an MUCC member, in October of 2019, MUCC successfully lobbied to change the spring turkey season opening days to Saturdays and gave hunters the ability to harvest turkeys from an elevated platform. Later in 2019, MUCC was successful in adding a number of furbearers to the list of species that could be hunted from elevated platforms. Beyond these wins, MUCC also worked closely with the DNR and the NRC on two packages of deer regulations, an updated furbearer regulation order and numerous fisheries orders, including one rather contentious rule relating to brook trout creel limits in the Upper Peninsula.

In the summer of 2020, MUCC endeavored upon making the NRC process a more transparent one. We were successful in having the minutes from the previous month's meeting linked in the agenda for the upcoming meeting. This way, members of the public could see when commissioners proposed amendments on a certain agenda item. As always, MUCC includes this information in our monthly NRC previews and recaps. While the NRC meetings have been in a virtual format for most of a year, MUCC will be ready to join the room with commissioners livestreaming the meeting on our Facebook page when the time comes.

The NRC rule-making process works best with a full slate of seven commissioners. In early 2020, two appointments from Gov. Whitmer were denied by the Michigan Senate. These seats remained unfilled for a period of almost 4 months. MUCC strongly advocated for the swift appointment of new commissioners, per a resolution that passed at the 2020 MUCC Annual Convention which states "that MUCC will encourage, and work with, the governor's office to fill vacancies on the NRC by appointment." Three commissioners were seated in July of 2020 after months of advocacy and work.

Throughout these processes, MUCC remained committed to simplifying rules and regulations wherever possible to make it easier for hunters, anglers and trappers to understand what they can or cannot do. After all, it shouldn't take a doctorate to understand the laws regarding hunting, fishing and trapping.

Federal Legislation

Despite some gridlock in Lansing, MUCC and our partners had a banner session in the 116th Congress: Starting with S. 47 (the John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act in the spring of 2019), climaxing with the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) in the summer of 2020 and wrapping up with the American Conservation Enhancement (ACE) Act just before the 2020 election, as well as a few big wins in an omnibus spending and stimulus package between Christmas and New Year's Eve.

The John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act was an omnibus public land and wildlife conservation bill, which provided for permanent authorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), as well as designated 1,300,000 acres of new wilderness area, set the stage for an awfully productive Congress. LWCF is often hailed as one of the most successful conservation tools for conserving fish and wildlife habitat, opening access to fishing and hunting opportunities and supporting the outdoor recreation industry — all from funds generated by royalties from oil and gas development on public lands and waters.

A little over a year later, Congress passed the GAOA, fully funding the LWCF — for the first time since the 1960s and addressing the deferred maintenance backlog on federal public lands. According to the Congressional Budget Office, federal land management agencies had accumulated a deferred maintenance backlog in excess of $19 billion. Considered debt by federal accountants, deferred maintenance often reveals itself as broken boat ramps, cracked concrete, overgrown trails and decrepit buildings. These deficits often make it more difficult for citizens to camp, hunt, fish, paddle and hike on public lands. For us here in Michigan, federal land management agencies have already begun to submit approvals for deferred maintenance projects eligible for funding under the GAOA, while the state and local governments have submitted a raft of proposals for funding through the LWCF. Many lawmakers consider the GAOA to be the greatest piece of conservation legislation in a generation.

Then, in the last days of October 2020, the ACE act reauthorized the North American Wetland Conservation Act, as well as provided additional funding for invasive species management and the National Fish Habitat Partnership. But this wasn't the finale.

Much like a high school (or college) student waits to do their homework until the deadline is nearly on top of them, congressional leaders usually keep negotiating right up until the last minute possible. Bound by the Senate's complex rules (often requiring a minimum period of debate), members of Congress consolidated their final actions of the year into a behemoth, 5,593-page bill. This piece of legislation, which "normally" could have been 15 or more bills, will fund the federal government through Oct. 1, 2021, while also authorizing a number of other programs.

Through this end-of-year legislation, Congress increased funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), a program that provides grants for actively improving Great Lakes ecosystems' health. Funding for GLRI will increase to $375 million in fiscal year 2022 and incrementally increase by $25 million until it reaches $475 million in fiscal year 2026. This increase in funding was led by the Michigan congressional delegation, with the help of organizations like MUCC.

Further, this legislation included the passage of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA; pronounced "WURD-ah"), which contained authorization of funds for a project at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam in Illinois. This construction project on the Des Plaines River is largely thought to be the last line of defense between the Great Lakes and invasive Asian carp in the Mississippi River system — and it is finally coming to fruition. Michigan's commitment to the Great Lakes' health led state leaders to help fund part of the pre-construction engineering and design (PED) phase of the project to the tune of $8 million in General Funds, vetoed first due to COVID and restored after the DNR and stakeholders worked with legislators on a supplemental bill. The agreement to begin the PED phase was signed in early 2021 by the non-federal sponsors of the project, the State of Illinois and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, marking the first real step towards construction. An investment in infrastructure of this magnitude will continue to pay dividends for decades to come. MUCC is proud to have been a part of both the state and federal negotiations for the projects and is excited to see it taking another important step forward.

MUCC looks forward to working with the new administration and the 117th Congress to keep conservation at the forefront of each and every conversation.

Rulemaking

Beyond legislation in Congress or in the statehouse in Lansing, federal agencies are frequently granted the opportunity to make fine-tuning adjustments to rules and regulations. In the world of fish and wildlife conservation, this frequently allows scientists and agency personnel to work together to make laws "work." As the scalpel of governing, agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have authority under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Endangered Species Act to manage certain species of wildlife. This agency is also one of four major public land managers in the country with control over the entire National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). Each time a federal agency wants to do something that might impact the public, they are required to publish it in the federal register — the newspaper of the federal government. Each time, they request public comments.

MUCC President Greg Peter, then vice president, explains the resolution process at MUCC's Annual Convention.

In the last two years, MUCC has submitted numerous letters and suggestions to the USFWS encouraging them to: take wolves off of the endangered species list in the Great Lakes region; create a permit program to facilitate lethal control of double-crested cormorants; and improve access for hunters and anglers on lands managed in the NWRS.

Each of these things have been accomplished in cooperation with the appointed and career staff at the USFWS. As of this writing, the State of Michigan has regained management authority over wolves, the DNR is eligible for a lethal cormorant control program and hundreds of acres of land in Michigan has been opened for hunting and fishing.

Moving Forward

Despite this progress, our agenda for the future is still full. Commercial fishing rules and regulations on the Great Lakes still merit an update, while commercial hunting and angling guides still need their own set of rules to keep customers safe. Dam owners ought to be held more accountable for maintenance, upkeep and, when necessary, removals to avoid massive floods as we saw in Edenville and Sanford Lake in the summer of 2020. As Michigan's utilities and cooperatives move towards renewable energy infrastructure, public land users ought to have a say in where solar and wind generation facilities are installed. It should be easier for private companies and nonprofits to restore coldwater streams and wetlands. Hunters need better access for testing for Chronic Wasting Disease, and anglers deserve to know whether or not their fish is safe to eat.

MUCC continues to be that voice in government. From Lansing to Washington D.C., MUCC has been the voice of concerned hunters, anglers, trappers and conservationists since 1937. If you want to add to that long list of priorities or have a say in how we go about those things, MUCC encourages you to bring a resolution to the next Conservation Policy Board meeting and come visit us at mucc.org.

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WOODROW BOTTOMS

One family's journey through habitat development,engagement

By Joe Schwenke

Of all the birds I pursue, the wood duck is forever in my top three. My first duck harvested was a wood duck — 14 years ago. I've come to love the places they go and the difficultly that accompanies accessing the holes they use to find seclusion and quiet.

The idea for Woodrow Bottoms started while the realtor was still typing up our offer for the property and home we now own. Standing amid the dead ash trees and surveying the small landscape, an idea began to emerge.

A stream bed, bayou, pond and swamp slowly changed into a habitat for all seasons. The name Woodrow Bottoms is derived from one of the wood duck's nicknames, Woodrow. Bottoms, we decided, added a Tolkien-esque feel involving a Hobbit's need for comfort, peace and good living.

While dreams start with a thought, they become realized through perspiration. In our case, it was chainsaw fuel and manual labor. Fallen logs, widow makers and dead trees, the aftermath of the Emerald Ash Borer, gave way to food, shelter, seclusion and quiet. A few nesting boxes hidden away in corners to shelter brooding hens, flooded brushy edges on the steam banks to hide ducklings, a flight path or two through the surviving oaks, maple, and hickory make our slice of heaven a home for Woodrow.

The addition of handfuls of hand-sewn millet scattered into the muddy depressions and dried edges in July's heat provides much-needed food for the fall migration and an attraction to the small flooding for hunting.

With nesting boxes in mind, we scouted and planned around the furthest corners and edges of our 10 acres — seldom disturbed places, masked by brush and away from human activity. We placed our five boxes two years ago in early spring.

It was a bigger production than necessary, but the boys at age nine wanted to help. The ice was already weakening, so our 17-foot canoe was enlisted as sled and transport for our equipment and, if needed, the boys. Into this conveyance went five pieces of electrical conduit, a sledge hammer, cordless drill, five duck boxes, cedar shavings, a canteen, snacks and any hardware I thought I might need. Pushing

and dragging all this over the last remaining snow and through the brush to the creek bed in waders was accomplished by yours truly and my wife, Shannon.

We learned the hard way that day and now do any work around there in January or February on sturdy ice. Some advice we were given about nesting boxes was to keep them far enough apart so that wood ducks frequenting them couldn't see each other. They also can't be too close to overhanging branches in case a predator decides that might be its way into the nest. Being over water helps keep predators from climbing up the pole to the box. We also learned that we needed to clean the boxes each year to help keep illnesses from affecting the nest.

After our first season hunting Woodrow Bottoms in 2019, we ventured back to the boxes to see what had happened. Two boxes showed signs of use. One had a failed nest of perhaps a dozen whole eggs, and another box revealed a handful of feathers.

Another year has come and gone. Another hunting season filled with thrills and occasional boredom has passed. In early January, we ventured back to those corners with kids in tow. While walking between the boxes the tracks of deer, squirrel and rabbit fostered curiosity in the boys and made perfect miniature lessons about life in winter for our backyard neighbors.

The tally for the 2020 nesting season improved. Three boxes showed use — a successful nest with lots of downy feathers mixed with eggshells. Another nest had a few eggs unhatched. One box, however, had 22 unhatched eggs. This is commonly called a dump nest. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) explains it best; here is their definition:

"Occasionally, you will find a nest full of unhatched eggs. Wood ducks frequently lay eggs in various nesting cavities..." according to the USFWS. "These sites for early egg-laying are called dump nests, and sometimes many hens will lay eggs in the same dump nest and you could find thirty or more unhatched eggs that were never incubated."

"Even more rarely, a duck will attempt to incubate the eggs in a dump nest and, while many eggs fail to hatch, she may hatch an extra large brood of 20 or so ducklings," the USFWS excerpt continued.

We will be adjusting the view and spacing of that box to prevent this in the future.

The boxes will be vacant when the boys slowly creep to the water's edge during the 2021 youth season, trying to spy into the flooded tree trunks and grasses holding their single-shot 20s. In those last weeks of October, we will gather again in the brush of the Bottoms and witness the sunrise and the blurry flight of first-light woodies. Beyond the decoys, we will occasionally catch glimpses of the weathered boxes in the swamp and wonder what we will find next time.

Left: The Schwenke's Labrador retriever, Bravo, stands tall after retrieving a wood duck and green wing teal from the "Bottoms." Above: The author checks wood duck boxes with his sons, Caleb and Eli, in February of 2019.

STANDING ON UNCERTAIN GROUND

By Makhayla Labutte

The Growing Challenge of Balancing Recreation and Resources

There's something timelessly alluring about the woods and waters of Michigan. They are where we go to pursue wild game to fill our freezers with healthy protein or to find peace and escape the demands of a busy everyday life through activities like hiking and kayaking. Many of us go into nature searching for a connection to the land — to something larger than ourselves.

It is no wonder, then, why the woods and waters of Michigan were so crowded in 2020.

A record number of people took to the outdoors to escape the dreary routine of quarantine brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic last year. Fueled by an unusual amount of free time and the idea that no place was safer than the outdoors when it comes to avoiding a pandemic, Michigan's outdoors was overflowing with new and seasoned recreationists.

Boasting more than 3,200 miles of freshwater coastline, more than 8 million acres of public land, 36,000 miles of rivers and streams and more than 13,000 miles of state-designated trails and pathways, few states are better equipped than Michigan to handle a mass influx of outdoor recreationists.

But even the Great Lakes state has its limits.

While this explosive growth in outdoor recreation is good news for Michigan's multi-billion-dollar outdoor recreation economy and has undisputed benefits to human health, there is a dark side to such demanding attention placed upon the landscape.

Aside from the obviously degrading impacts of the increased amount of trash left behind by millions of tourists and illegal dumpers on public land, larger problems are also beginning to surface as suffocating crowds of people seek to experience Michigan's iconic natural places.

Crumbling Infrastructure

While rustic and dated facilities may add to the charm of certain outdoor adventures, many of the dated roads, lodgings and latrines are unable to withstand the amount of use they are now receiving. This is a large problem at access sites, parks and camping areas across state and federal land in Michigan, as damaged sewers and roads result in expensive and often-delayed repairs being needed.

This, in turn, results in a backlog of maintenance on many public lands, as land managers with limited budgets scramble to identify which problems require immediate attention and which will have to wait to be addressed. Additional needs for public land

users in the form of updated road and trail signage, increased trash and recycling receptacles and more public land access points will also be critical in helping curb the negative impacts associated with Michigan's growing tourist population.

Legislation like the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act aims to help relieve the strain of this deferred maintenance crisis on many federal lands across the country, and it is expected that popular Michigan destinations like Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore will receive some of the funding when it is released. A variety of other maintenance projects in Michigan's national forests will also be able to occur as a result of this legislation.

While this prospective funding is good news for public land managed by the federal government, the need for updates to visitor facilities and other infrastructure across state land continues to be a concern. Until funding can be secured and projects can be completed, land managers will continue to struggle to keep up with the growing popularity of Michigan's outdoors.

There is a glimmer of hope for state-owned infrastructure, though. In November, voters took to the polls to approve the reformulation of spending percentages, among other things, for the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF). That voter-approved ballot question will allow the MNRTF board to consider current infrastructure maintenance a high priority for the fund into the future.

Multiple Users, Multiple Conflicts

Another issue that stems from an increase in public land usage is an uptick in user conflicts.

We all enjoy the outdoors in unique ways. From consumptive users that fish, hunt and trap to non-consumptive users that hike, horseback ride and nature-watch,

ORV users are sometimes involved in user conflicts with equestrians and hunters. However, the DNR tries to manage conflicts proactively by using signage and best-practice principles.

there are countless opportunities to pursue your interests on public land across Michigan.

However, the amount of public land available does not increase in conjunction with the number of recreationists looking to use the land for their hobbies. Thus, as more users turn to public land for their outdoor recreation, different user groups find themselves sharing already-narrow trails, degraded resource conditions and frequent interruptions to their experience.

ORV enthusiasts having run-ins with equestrians, mountain bikers and hikers utilizing state game area trails and interrupting hunters, jet skiers disturbing anglers and hunters crowding the same plots and ruining each other's pursuit of game are just a few examples of common user conflicts Michiganders have experienced on public land.

Through all this, we need to remember that this land is held in public trust. It is all of ours. Instead of seeing other users as an intrusion on our public lands, we should embrace one another, understand our differences and realize that we all care for the resource in different and healthy ways.

Changing Landscapes

Nature is not infinite, and it is not stagnant. It is subject to the same influences of time as we are. However, human use tends to exacerbate natural change in ways that degrade resources and negatively impact how we interact with the natural world.

Take soil erosion, for example. It's nearly impossible to visit a popular piece of public land that is lacking signs of soil erosion, especially those surrounding scenic overlooks and near water. We've all seen the abundant winding trails stemming off the main path, but there's a reason many naturalists and land managers beg visitors to stick to the designated trail.

The weight of millions of tourists carving new paths onto

the landscape often results in soil disturbance that can compound over time until entire patches of the land begin to erode away with new rain and wind events. This, in turn, contributes to a loss of native plants, fungi and insects as their habitat is trampled and sediment erodes away.

Eventually, the problem can expand to impact fish and wildlife habitat on a much larger scale. This includes the pollution of trout streams through the addition of sediment and accompanying bacteria and fungus to the water. An increase in the amount of sediment in the water can also result in more frequent algal blooms. In an effort to mitigate this kind of destruction, many land management agencies have little choice but to close popular trails and access points to the public.

Aside from soil erosion, problems in the form of wildlife displacement also exist. As more people venture out onto the lands and waters of Michigan, wildlife are being pushed to the limits of their already-fragmented habitat boundaries. This can result in damaging pressure being placed on wildlife populations and an increase in human-wildlife conflicts.

While recreation is certainly not the most destructive form of human interaction with the natural world, it does have a powerful impact that grows in tandem with the number of humans using the resource.

Future Considerations

There is much to be celebrated about a record number of people getting outdoors and enjoying their public lands. From an increase in hunting and fishing licenses to explosive growth in the number of people who identify as birders and wildlife-watchers, more people are investing their time and money in outdoor recreation in Michigan. The observations made above do not aim to diminish the benefits of this growth in tourism and recreation. Instead, we need to temper them with the reality that, now more than ever, our natural resources require increased conservation and protection.

In 1968, Garrett Hardin discussed the idea of a "tragedy of the commons." Thinking in terms of our natural resources as the commons, Hardin's concept acknowledges that one person's use of a shared resource diminishes the availability or quality of that resource for other users. We can observe this tragedy on local and global scales, but many who have studied this concept would argue that shared resource use does not always have to result in degradation and over-exploitation if users share in the responsibility of protecting the resource. Users can contribute to the protection of public land resources by picking up litter, volunteering time to improve local wildlife habitat, following state and federal land usage guidelines and practicing Leave No Trace principles when enjoying the outdoors.

Accommodating more people on Michigan's public lands while preserving the beauty and integrity of natural environments is not an impossible task, but it will take increased funding and a strong stewardship ethic from all who claim ownership of our shared natural resources.


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Habitat 101

Habitat 101 is a new column from Michigan hunter/habitat manger/podcaster Jared Van Hees – founder of the Habitat Podcast

"The wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must and we will."

Theodore Roosevelt

By Jared Van Hees

Do you ever sit in your tree stand during hunting season, waiting for a deer or your target buck to show up, and think about all the off-season habitat work you need to do on your property? It may seem bizarre, but I do this a lot. This all began when I transitioned from being a hunter to a habitat manager.

A simple definition of habitat management is "improving existing habitat and land to benefit wildlife of all kinds." I find this to be straight forward. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) defines habitat specifically as "a combination of food, water, shelter and space arranged to meet the needs of wildlife." Once I learned about the idea of managing land for the wildlife, the wheels in my brain wouldn't stop turning. I was bit with the bug and wanted to learn all about the practices one could implement — practices that would improve the habitat of the animals I pursue and even some I don't. I learned that once the improvements are made, the natural byproduct is increased wildlife. With increased wildlife comes better hunting. Since hunting is still an important part of this, I was onboard.

Where can I sign up?

My first foray into habitat management was food plots. This is where many of us start. I didn't own any ground at the time, but that didn't stop me. I was hunting some private land by permission, and I went to knock on the landowner's door. He answered and I asked if I could make a food plot. The blank stare I received was nerve-wracking. "Why don't you just bait?" was one of the first few questions I received, along with "You want to do all of this for deer?" I explained my goals and eventually gained approval.

The first food plot I planted, I planted with hand tools and sweat equity. My arsenal consisted of a rake, a machete and a cheap green seed spreader from the local hardware store. After clearing the ground of vegetation and leaf litter, I broadcasted the clover seed I purchased from the feed mill. After a rain or two, the clover seed mix germinated, and I had my very own mediocre food plot. The feeling of accomplishment was deep. Knowing what I know now, many years later, the soil was not amended and the food plot was in a terrible location for stand access. These issues, combined with a lack of sunlight, gave me less-than-average results, but it also gave me the determination to improve. I had officially begun my journey into habitat management.

Food plotting and soil health are a science and an integral part of habitat management, but not the only thing we need to focus on. This is where it gets fun and the rabbit hole begins. First, we need to identify our goals. We can tailor our management practices to benefit deer, turkey, pheasant, pollinators, waterfowl or all the above. What is nice about this is when you improve habitat for one type of wildlife species, others will naturally benefit. For me, being able to hunt a more mature class of whitetail is my No. 1 goal.

I focus my management efforts

From Hunter to Habitat Manager

on my property to provide everything a mature deer needs, while removing what they don't prefer. Timber management and forestry, invasive species removal, pollinator plantings, cover installation, fruit tree/mast production, and wildlife pond management are a few of the more popular responsibilities of us managers. Where I believe we should start after our goals are defined is cover, vegetation and mast trees. Springtime is a perfect time to be in your woods scouting and determining what you need to improve if you are going to step into the lifestyle of habitat management.

Cover and Early Successional Growth

Cover and early successional growth are factors I tend to strategize about first and foremost.

This is handy, as these things can take the longest to get established on your property. When you are walking your woods this spring, take a careful look around. How far can you see when standing at a deer's eye level? If your answer is greater than 40 yards, that is too far — in my opinion.

Whitetails need security cover here in Michigan most of all, due to our extreme amount of hunting pressure. Most of our land is broken up into small parcels like 10, 20, 40 acres, and each parcel seems to have at least one hunter on it, often more. If you can break up the deer's line of sight with cover, they will feel safer and use your property more than neighboring parcels with wide-open, park-like woods.

Jared Van Hees poses with a mature white-tailed buck he harvested on property he manages for wildlife in Michigan.

Jared Van Hees prepares a field for a food plot on his property in Michigan using an ATV and pull-behind sprayer.

You can achieve this cover by contacting and utilizing a forester and having a timber harvest. The newly-opened canopy above provides ample sunlight that will hit the forest floor and promote early successional herbaceous vegetation and forage for wildlife. Combined with the treetops being left in the woods post-harvest, this will birth a variety of side cover for deer and protection for up-and-coming saplings. You can direct your tops to be left in a certain area to steer deer trail traffic while putting money in your pocket from the harvest. I have had deer bed right next to my leftover treetops — obviously feeling safe in the cover. You can even push further with hinge-cutting some undesirable leftover trees for additional security to hide your access to your stand or to create bedding. Again, be sure to explain your goals to the forester you select before hiring him or her.

Mast Trees

The second practice I recommend launching is the planting of fruit and mast trees. There is an old Chinese proverb that states: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."

This holds true with any tree or shrub planting in my eyes and is something I did the week I closed on my ground.

I will first choose a tree nursery with the same weather conditions (climate) my property is in; this way I know the trees I plant can survive on my property. Then I look at faster-growing hybrid versions of oaks, apple, crab apple persimmon, pear, willow, dogwoods, etc. The reason for this is I want my trees to be producing mast as soon as possible. Next, I will do a new soil test for my tree planting and amend the soil to my tree selection's specific requirements. Lastly, when I plant, I will spend the extra time and money to protect my young investment. Deer, rabbits and mice can do damage to our new future food producers, and taking the extra steps of setting tubing or caging can save a headache down the road. There are many factors that go into tree and shrub planting, so be sure to do your research and count on your chosen nursery for advice in your area.

By now you have realized that I have a slight obsession with improving the habitat on my land and my client's properties. I even started a podcast on this very subject called the Habitat Podcast. My goal is to create healthier flora and fauna, better-quality hunting and happier landowners. We can all do this together while we become better habitat managers.

Don't get me wrong, hunting is still at the top of my list, but there are many compelling reasons to become a habitat manager. My plan is to educate and increase the amount of us out there on the landscape so that the wildlife, and subsequent hunting endeavors, are better off in the long run.

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Back to the Bog

By Greg Frey

The day Grandpa dropped the bomb, he was sitting in his recliner, overalls on, staring at nothing. He did that often after Grandma died.

I was 17 and turning the corner on age and role reversal, which meant looking out for Grandpa instead of him looking out for me. Like a loyal dog, I lay on the carpet at his feet, thumbing through a magazine, hoping conversation would help take his mind off things. Deer hunting seemed a likely topic.

"So, where you going to sit on opening day?"

He shifted in his seat and paused, looking down as if noticing me for the first time.

"I don't think I'll go out this year."

My mind did a double-take. Excuse me, what? I thought it was a logistics issue or physical mobility as if he'd burden the rest of us.

"Well, you could sit with me. We could just sit together against the big oak tree along the creek bottom at the edge of the cornfield. It'll be fun. You can do the shooting. We'll walk down there together."

Grandpa smiled. "I just don't care if I ever shoot another deer."

I sat in numbed silence, trying to wrap my mind around this revelation. How could you not enjoy watching the sun come up over the hills and filter down through the dead, brown rustling oak leaves in the branches overhead? How could your heart not race and your mind not explode with anticipation as you heard the crack of a branch breaking under the weight of something big, something distinctly different from the usual scurry of squirrels.

And for cryin' out loud, this was Shotgun Leo we're talking about. The man who in one season killed four deer with as many shots from his Remington slug gun. If legend has it right, three of them were on the run.

I puzzled over that conversation for years, not understanding it. I think I do now. And that thought, more than any, scares me.

Fast forward 35 years. Grandpa's gone. There's a pandemic. The summer river guiding season is over, and I teach 40 sixth graders from home. Everything is new: every lesson, every video tutorial, every Zoom meeting. Days go by creating Google Forms, Google Docs, Google Slides. I share screens and virtual white boards. Feedback must be instant and embedded. I work from 7 a.m. until 9 p.m. with maybe a couple hours off to eat dinner with the family and take the dogs for a walk. The fly shop calls for an occasional Saturday guide trip. I laugh at them. Without 10 hours at the computer over the weekend, there are no lessons on Monday morning. I volunteered for this challenge because no one else would. (The other 30 teachers in my building are much smarter than I.) But I'm becoming a grumpy old man in a hurry.

That's when the text came in from Drew. It was a Friday night, and we were standing in a long line at the high school football stadium. The line was made longer by the fact that we were six feet apart, and it was made slower by the fact that everyone who entered the stadium had to register their name. Furthermore, there was no football game. But at least we were fortunate to see our daughter's

marching band show that narrowly escaped the cutting room floor of the pandemic. My phone buzzed, and I glanced at it, letting out a bemused snort.

My wife raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Drew wants me to go duck hunting. Tomorrow morning." It was 8 o'clock, dark already.

"You should go," Kristin insisted.

"I'd have to get a license, steel shot, I don't know where my decoys are, and, oh yeah - a Federal stamp from the post office." That was the deal breaker. No way that could happen overnight. (Ironically, all my virtual learning hadn't included buying a Federal stamp online, legally allowing you to hunt until the real one comes in the mail.) "Besides, I'm tired. I'd rather just sleep in and take a walk with you."

But after texting back a polite thanks and good luck, I felt bad. Drew had been reaching out all season like a puppy trying to get a cranky old dog up to play. Our guide team is full of really nice, energetic young guys who have no greater purpose in life than to go fishing and drink beer — not necessarily in that order. They live in a different world than me. But Drew is one of the kindest guides, and sometimes worlds collide, or at least overlap a little. Twenty years my junior, he belongs in a different era. He is red-haired, good-humored and has a round, boyish face, always smiling. He's the kind of guy who will correct you by saying, "You know, I think I read…but I could be wrong," and you both know damn well that he's 100 percent correct, and it kind of pains him to tell you that you're full of shit. If he lived in the 50s, he'd definitely live in Pleasantville, and you'd describe him as a swell guy because he's… well, just a really swell guy. And here he was, doing his darndest to get me away from the computer, and once again, I said no.

But there was an upside. Thoughts began stirring. I used to duck hunt — a lot. I had a boat

Photo courtesy of Drew Oliver

with collapsible cattail walls, an outboard motor painted olive green, bags of decoys, the whole kit and kaboodle. Hunting marshes near MSU in homemade float tubes in college, I graduated to the Straits of Mackinac, where big rollers came through under the bridge. Later, I stacked up flat chunks of limestone, hiding behind the rock walls as snow and ice and whistlers blew along the shores of Lake Huron. Paddling rivers for woodies, jumping teal from farm ponds, getting stranded on an island for 16 hours — duck hunting was a passion, not a hobby. When I graduated high school, my counselor gave me a tie tack in the shape of a mallard that said, "Quack." That was over a span of about 15 years, and that span ended 20 years ago. Now I bow hunt. And read books, usually at the same time.

The change had been gradual. There was never a moment of outboard-engine-failure rage — fingers blistered from the starter cord, face hot and sweating, waves crawling over the transom of the boat. Nor an accident — no one almost shot off my cap or blew a hole in the boat. Places to hunt lost to development or competition didn't explain it. And I certainly never got so successful as to master the game and thereby destroy the fun in playing it. It was more like time slowly wore down enthusiasm like waves smoothing the rough edges of a boulder until my subconscious said, "This duck hunting thing is a lot of work. There must be better ways to have fun." And when that happened, something was lost — something

not recognized as missing until Drew brought it back.

A couple weeks went by. Amid the stress of this 26th year of teaching, I decided it was time to go back to camp in October. Marching band competitions, after-school robotics clubs, football games, college visits, family travels to downstate friends and all the other activities that kept me from bowhunting at camp had ended this COVID year. So other than staring at a computer screen six days a week, there was very little to do. That's when the dots connected. Take Drew to camp! Instead of hunting deer, hunt ducks. It was a win-win. Treat a friend to something he loved doing. Share with him camp traditions built over the years with my father and my longtime deer hunting friend, Todd. Todd would bow hunt. Drew and I would duck hunt, and Dad would help us get rid of all the good appetizers, food and drink that we'd take to the cabin.

Suddenly, the clouds cleared. My feet felt lighter. Trips to town became a joyful excuse to get away from the computer. I scoured the bare shelves of Dunhams for a box of Browning Waterfowl #4s, standing on tiptoes and blindly sweeping my arm across the darkest recesses of the top shelf. For the first time ever, I cheerily stood in line at the Post Office. As I walked up to the counter, the lady asked how she could help.

"I'd like to buy a duck stamp." She frowned and leaned closer to the clear plastic shower curtain hanging as a divider over the counter. Thinking I hadn't spoken clearly through my mask, I turned up the volume.

"A duck stamp. I'd like to buy a duck stamp."

The frown wasn't going anywhere.

"Honey, we've got winter animals, trees, immaculate conception, stars and stripes…but no duck stamps."

Now it was my turn to be puzzled. "You mean you don't have any Federal duck stamps? They cost like $25?"

Then the light went on, and she actually laughed. I'm not sure if it was at herself or me. Probably me.

"Oh, you mean a Federal Waterfowl Stamp. Of course."

Of course. It never dawned on me that non-hunters might not associate duck and waterfowl as synonyms. Either way, it made the purchase of a duck stamp feel satisfying, like climbing Everest or solving a hard math problem. Carefully tucking the little piece of artwork in my wallet, I broke the rule of signing it and sticking it on your license. If a warden asked, it'd be present, but desecrating such a fine painting of a duck seemed like a crime against waterfowl artists the world over.

Last, but not least, a stop to the grocery to gather fried chicken, baked mac and cheese, sauerkraut, smoked sausage, giant soft pretzels, queso, German potato salad and a case of retro-styled 1970s Old Milwaukee – all the fixings to recreate our church's Oktoberfest dinner, another casualty of COVID-19. Essentials acquired. Check.

The week before the road trip brought with it dismal rain and occasional sleet. I worked overtime every day, trying to make up for the work that would be missed on the weekend. On Friday late afternoon, Drew and I drove across the state in a steady rain and fog. But my spirits soared telling him about the camp and the social dynamics between my father, a devoted liberal, and Todd, a staunch conservative. The fact that the two can coexist peacefully (mostly) is a testament to the camaraderie of a deer camp and the fact that nature trumps Trump.

Pulling into the clearing near the big oaks and dark balsam firs, we saw smoke rising from the chimney. A rusted tin Stroh's sign near the cabin's door said "Welcome to the friendliest place in town." As we stepped into the cabin, I was greeted by the familiar sights of home away from home. A barrel stove squatted in the middle of the kitchen like a fat and happy pig. Dad and Todd were likewise sitting around a small table filled with meats and cheeses. They were leaning forward and arguing animatedly.

"But don't you think –" Todd interjected. It wasn't a question.

"You're on mute!" Dad held up the wand lighter to Todd's face, brandishing it like a sword, and clicked on the flame. A rather clever invention from two guys who hadn't spent more than five minutes on Zoom in the past six months. "Let me finish!"

Drew followed me into the bunk room so he could unpack his gear.

"You thought I was exaggerating."

Sometime during the night, the rain stopped. The following morning dawned fresh and crisp. We stepped out of the cabin into a night sky so clean that you could smell the towering balsams surrounding the cabin. A short drive down a two-track through a cedar swamp got us to the edge of the back-forty. Gathering up stools, a burlap gunny sack of decoys and guns, we began our walk to the bog.

Dad had warned against following the old logging road to the bog. He and Mom had slogged down it to pick cranberries and struggled against the overgrowth, deep puddles and muck. He had a much better route.

"Just go to the end of the shooting lane and head north through the cedars until you cut the road."

Problem was, he has a lot of shooting lanes, and they're all narrow and full of hummocks. They're also all very dark at 5 a.m. Not quite sure how far we'd bushwhack before cutting the trail again, it sounded like a sketchy plan. The logging road may have been overgrown and full of boot-sucking muck, but it was familiar — a devil I knew well.

We began our trek through the darkness of the swamp. Drew followed, a captive audience as I pointed out everything interesting that ever happened. We passed the stump where the bobcat stood, the trail the badger once walked, the tag alder thicket where my old blind used to lean before the clear-cut took place, and the dark lane where the big ghost buck

faced down Bret, the one he shot in the chest but never found. As we neared the tunnel of cedars entering the bog, I heard a commotion and looked back to see Drew missing. He had gone down, taken out by a natural anomaly: a foot-tall anthill was hidden among cattails and switchgrass that reached our elbows. Why it was there, surrounded by 10 inches of water, was one of life's mysteries, but not to the ants that live in it. Drew laughed it off, collected his gun and stool, and we plodded on.

When we passed an old metal Carlisle canoe stashed at the treeline, we stepped out onto the open bog. Stars were quickly dimming, a sure sign we needed to get our decoys in the water and hunker down. We splashed across the 50 yards of spiky, brittle cranberry bushes following twisting deer trails that made the walking slightly easier (as if walking through knee-deep water on shifting, moving, uneven ground while thorn-like branches clawed at your shins could ever be called easy). Carnivorous pitcher plants tempted insects with their cupped red and green leaves. They'd soon regret it as they slipped down a one-way tunnel into a cauldron of digestive liquid. Bouncing slightly, the cranberry bog's root mass floated atop a mixture of water and mud somewhere between the consistency of wet concrete and pancake batter. I'd been stuck in it, chest deep in waders, 20 years ago. It's a frightening experience.

After breaking out of the tree line and crossing 75 yards of bog, we came to the edge of the river, moving so slowly as to give the appearance of no current whatsoever. While canoeing it and throwing Johnson' silver minnows into shallow pockets of reeds for hammer-handle pike during the summer, I had discovered that the riverbed itself is hard sand, covered by an inch or two of black muck. The middle of it holds knee-deep to waist-deep water. Relatively safe, really.

The trick is getting there. As you near the edge, the bog itself curls and begins to sink into the bottomless black slurry. It's like floating on an air mattress that is slowly losing air on one side. You try to slide down on your bottom, but as you settle onto the bog, you're sitting in 12-16 inches of water with nothing solid to hold onto other than brittle cranberry branches. Passing the point of no return, you slide off the bog and suck in your breath as the water rises toward the top of your waders. Simultaneously, your feet descend through the slurry, anxiously groping for hard bottom. By the time mine reached it, I was sporting two inches of freeboard and beads of sweat on my forehead.

Drew pushed the burlap sack of decoys toward the edge of the bog, the chosen half-dozen hand-picked for this morning's deception. A week ago, I had dragged them from the crawl space where they had slept for the last 20 years like castaways relegated to The Island of the Misfit Toys. I started with Queenie, an ancient pintail washed up on the shore of Houghton Lake at my grandparents' cottage 40 years ago. Why a decoy was named, and even more so named Queenie, is lost to time and the inner workings of a 10-year-old brain. The decoy was a connection with my grandparents, a portal to the summer day Queenie was found. A day of soft waves lapping the foam-laced shore, a maroon Johnson outboard and an aluminum rowboat filled with cane poles, bobbers and bluegills in a big wire fish basket. Then came the Flambeau lightweight water keel mallards, which were oxymoronically attached to 1-pound steel brownies cut by my high school shop teacher 35 years ago. Drew politely pointed out that fact, and I had to agree it made no sense.

"Sometimes it takes a pandemic and a change of normal living to come back to what really matters."

Ten minutes to legal shooting time. The sense of anticipation was palpable, like Christmas morning. I was giddy. There's no other word to describe it. When you're a 50-year-old curmudgeon, giddy feels good.

We settled onto our stools, Drew's taller than mine. His shoulders sat level with the cranberry bushes, and from a distance, one had to look carefully to spot him. I had brought a low-riding turkey lounger and could immediately see that I could not. It was effective if one's goal was to stay completely hidden until birds were over the decoys. But if one's goal was to watch the bog come alive and to enjoy the crimson and yellow maple hillside two miles distant, the turkey lounger was useless. Not to mention the fact my lap was underwater and my gun was kept dry by propping it across my knees. This would not do. How long should I suck it up and deal with it before caving to my OCD and heading back to the truck during prime shooting time to get a better chair? 10 minutes sounded about right.

Drew and I talked quietly yet excitedly if such a thing can be done. Suddenly there was a loud "Swoosh" and four large mallards flew right over our decoys, 20 yards in front of us. They had come in low, hidden against the dark water and darker wall of tag alders on the far bank. Before we reacted, they were gone.

There was a moment of silence. Drew said, "We probably should have shot at those."

"I think so." We felt foolish, knowing at the same time it just didn't matter. Such is the state of grace when hunting amidst friends who get it.

Another 10 minutes of silence. Frost glistened off the treetops as sunlight began to hit them. The

early risers had left the marsh, and not a breath of wind was stirring to bring ducks off Lake Huron, only a mile or two away. A headache came on from straining to see above the cranberry bushes.

"I'm going back to the truck to get a taller chair," I said.

Drew looked at me.

"I told you I had some issues."

Drew just shook his head. Grabbing my chair and gun, I was almost to the treeline when I heard two quick shots and turned to see a greenhead drop solidly from high in the sky. I gave Drew a thumbs up.

"I've got it," he hollered, then slipped hesitantly off the bog's edge as the water raced up to the top of his waders to greet him. Half an hour later, I returned with my other chair, sweating and exhausted but with a much better view of the marsh.

And the morning continued, as good as it had started. Every 20-30 minutes, we had ducks moving. Drew shot them. I missed them. Geese appeared downstream in a side-water slough. Unless you wanted to belly crawl through 12 inches of standing water in the cranberry bog, which amounted to swimming, not crawling, there was no way to touch them. They seemed to know that. They talked and splashed and spooked at our shots, leaving their honey hole briefly, returning 10 minutes later to settle back in.

A bald eagle soared overhead, dropping low to inspect the decoys, flaring when it saw us. Four sandhill cranes appeared like distant bombers, miles off the horizon. Drew, on a retrieve to pick up a bluebill, crouched under the tag alders until they got close enough to realize they were not geese.

Mid-morning, chortling came from upriver. We hushed, thinking it might be divers swimming along the edge of the bog. The chortling and grunting grew more distinct. They were not ducks, causing a great deal of guessing. The mystery was solved as a family of three otters dove and frolicked, searching for small clams and crustaceans along the river bottom. Sunlight crept across the entire bog, turning red holly berries into sights of wonder against the grays and browns of the marsh.

Slowly, my giddiness turned flat as I realized this weekend would come to an end soon — much too soon. Drinking in the colors and smells of the bog, knowing I might not make it back again this season, I tried to slow time, to somehow will it all to last a little bit longer. Soon all would be covered and silenced with winter's bitter white. It reminded me of Frederick the little mouse in a children's book who pissed off his hard-working buddies by not gathering grains in the fall. He was actually gathering up all the colors and memories of summer to share with his fellow mice during the dark winter. Frederick had it right, even if he was a lazy slug.

All of this, all of the memories of this most extraordinary morning of waterfowling, is something I walked away from many years ago. Thanks to Drew, I'd regained a passion. Life can be funny that way. Sometimes it takes a pandemic and a change of normal living to come back to what really matters. I had walked the same road as grandpa, and while I understood him, I had been offered a different path. One that I was glad I had taken.

Photo courtesy of Drew Oliver

Michigan marks a century of protecting, managing its waters, woods and wildlife

Photo Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Sponsored by
The Michigan Wildlife Council

One hundred years ago, the Michigan Department of Conservation – now the Department of Natural Resources – embarked on a mission to conserve, protect and manage Michigan's great outdoors.

Throughout 2021, the DNR is commemorating and celebrating its 100-year anniversary.

"This centennial marks a tremendous milestone for Michigan," said DNR Director Dan Eichinger. "It's a benchmark we can all be proud of, celebrating the work of countless men and women dedicated to ensuring our state's spectacular natural resources and recreation opportunities are available today and tomorrow."

Given the necessary restrictions on gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic, the DNR has scaled back plans from its originally envisioned centennial celebration.

"But we will invite people to join us in the outdoors as we continue to strive to make our woods and waters welcoming and accessible to all," Eichinger said.

Along with the DNR, hunters and anglers play an important role in wildlife management and conserving natural resources, Eichinger said. To increase public understanding of those efforts, state lawmakers created the Michigan Wildlife Council in 2013.

"Hunters are absolutely conservationists at heart," said Ashley Autenrieth, DNR deer program biologist. "For example, we rely on hunters to keep deer populations in check. Without annual deer harvests, Michigan deer would suffer from starvation and disease caused by overpopulation."

This philosophy isn't new.

In fact, hunting is an integral part of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, a set of principles that has guided wildlife management and conservation decisions in the U.S. and Canada since it was put forth in the late 1800s.

The model, the only one of its kind in the world, was developed following the near extinction of North America's bison population. This prompted hunters and anglers to reexamine their role in the stewardship of the continent's natural resources.

It has two basic principles: Wildlife belongs to all North American citizens, and it should be managed in such a way that populations will be sustained forever.

Since then, it's been applied to a wide range of native plant and animal species to ensure their continued survival in Michigan and across the nation.

The North American Model guides states as they set limits to protect wildlife from disappearing. It also incorporates the responsibility for managing wild habitats by outdoorsmen.

One of the model's biggest early proponents was President Theodore Roosevelt, who is often referred to as the "conservation president." During his presidency, Roosevelt helped establish 230 million acres of public lands, including 150 million acres that were specifically set aside as national forests.

He was also an avid hunter and took every opportunity to tout the benefits of hunting.

"In this day and age, where we're so far removed from our food

sources as well as from nature itself, it's easy for someone who doesn't hunt to say they're against hunting," Autenrieth said. "But if anything, hunters show more respect for forests and wildlife than anyone else. They're also the ones working and contributing financially to guarantee the future of many species."

MWC Chairman Nick Buggia points out that sportsmen and sportswomen also contribute financially to managing the state's public lands. Fees built into hunting and fishing licenses and related equipment like firearms and fishing gear are dedicated to state efforts to manage forests and waterways.

"Many people – including hunters – assume that habitat restoration and endangered species management is paid for by tax dollars, but it isn't. The majority of wildlife conservation dollars come directly from hunting and fishing," Buggia said.

"On behalf of the council, I congratulate the DNR on a century of good work on behalf of all Michiganders."

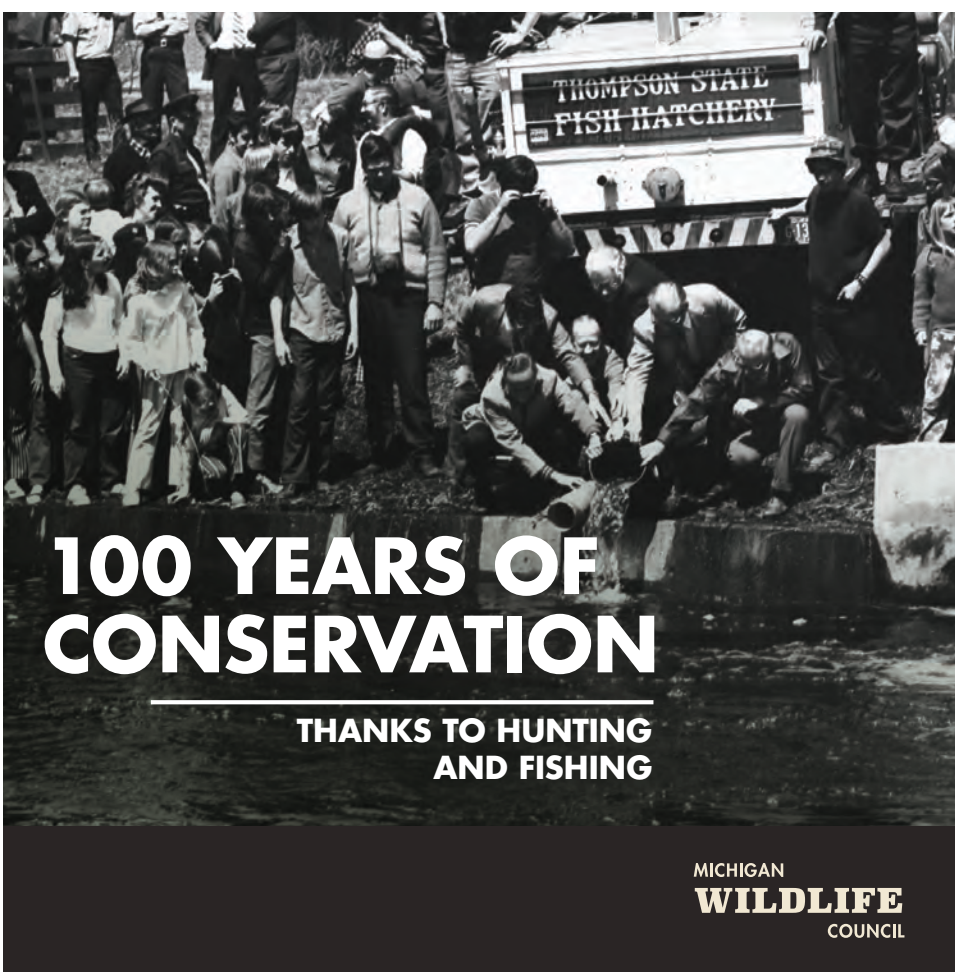
More information about conservation, including the role that fishing and hunting play in wildlife management, is available at hereformioutdoors.org.

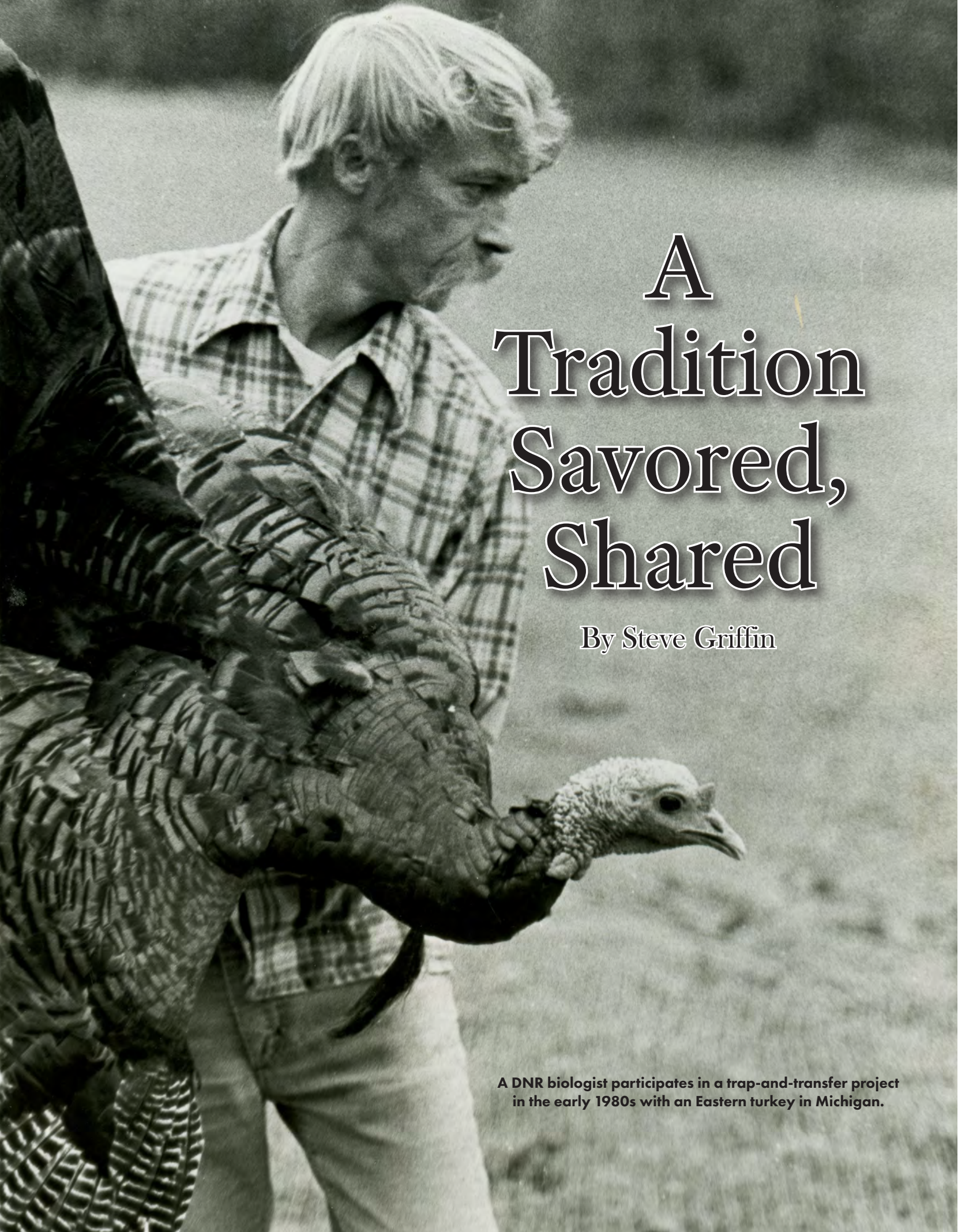
HUNTING AND FISHING ARE CRUCIAL TO MICHIGAN

Michigan's hunting and fishing heritage runs deep. Across the state, everyone benefits from these activities.

Every year, Michigan's 2 million hunters and anglers generate over $11 billion for the economy, as well as $61 million for wildlife conservation through their license purchases. The Michigan Wildlife Council's mission is to promote the tremendous importance of hunting and fishing to the great state of Michigan. Created in 2013 by the Michigan Legislature, the council seeks to build understanding among the state's non-hunting and non-fishing residents through a statewide public education effort – so that our outdoor heritage will continue to be here for generations.

Learn more at
HereForMiOutdoors.org





A Tradition Savored, Shared

By Steve Griffin

A DNR biologist participates in a trap-and-transfer project in the early 1980s with an Eastern turkey in Michigan.

Rick Craig grinned as we stood on the two-track trail under just-brightening skies.

This was bonus time: He'd scored on a gobbler the previous week, on this land of his in northern Midland County. Now, my longtime friend was a hunting partner and host, carrying a call but not a shotgun; I was borrowing his 12-gauge pump.

And no wonder he grinned. Even without a gun, he was turkey hunting again – and a couple of birds had just gobbled, a couple of hundred yards to the north.

Minutes later, we'd closed half that distance and settled into brushy cover at the edge of a small clearing. One of the birds gobbled again from about the same spot. We quickly and quietly consulted before rising and moving a bit closer, tucking down where the fading two-track ended in a faint turn-around.

At the base of a small pine, I rested the shotgun on my right knee and scratched a couple of times on a small slate call. Back to a medium-sized oak, Rick added a plaintive yelp on a box call — and the bird answered. Back and forth went the exchange three or four times, our yelps soft and seductive, the tom's response loud and lusty.

Was that love-struck bird this 'jake,' this adolescent tom head-bobbing behind the brush, maybe 30 yards away, stepping into the clearing, stutter-strutting toward, but not fixed upon, the hen decoy we'd quickly placed?

"Better shoot," Rick Craig whispered from a COVID-19-appropriate six feet behind me that May day last year. My finger was already squeezing the trigger as if the Remington 870 resting on my knee were a rifle, not a shotgun.

The boom echoed through the spring woods and, after a few last wing-thrashes, the bird was mine. 6:41 a.m.

Fifty years or so after roaming Oscoda County ridges with my first turkey hunting license in my pocket, I was affixing a first filled kill tag to a Michigan wild turkey.

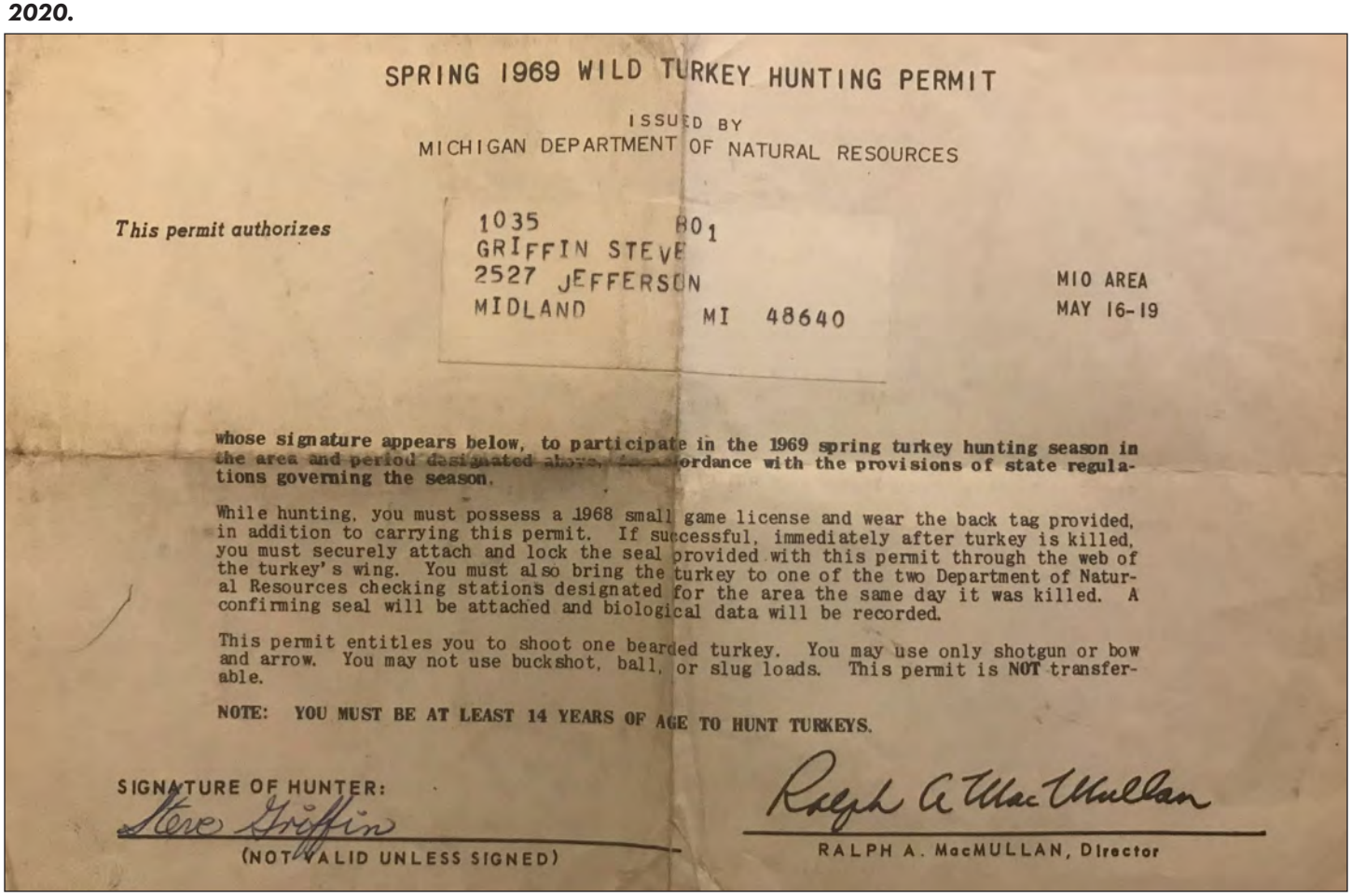
My hunt was over — but I wouldn't be surprised if Rick was already planning to get back out with another license-holder.

Given spring turkey hunting's one-bird limit, until you pull the trigger, your entire season is in front of you. When the shot echoes, it's likely concluded — unless you, like more hunters each year, return to the spring woods without a shotgun, to mentor another hunter, new or veteran, young or old, who carries one.

That's a plus to turkey hunting, most similar to that enjoyed by waterfowlers: you can share a gobbler hunt with a partner at your side or, if you're calling, one just ahead of you. You can share the tradition.

Yes, the sport I knew in its relative infancy now has tradition — in a way as surprising to me as

The author's turkey career started in 1969 with the purchase of this spring license. Griffin's first turkey tag was filled in 2020.



SPRING 1969 WILD TURKEY HUNTING PERMIT

ISSUED BY
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

This permit authorizes

1035 801
GRIFFIN STEVE
2527 JEFFERSON
MIDLAND MI 48640

M10 AREA
MAY 16-19

whose signature appears below, to participate in the 1969 spring turkey hunting season in the area and period designated above, in accordance with the provisions of state regulations governing the season.

While hunting, you must possess a 1968 small game license and wear the back tag provided, in addition to carrying this permit. If successful, immediately after turkey is killed, you must securely attach and lock the seal provided with this permit through the web of the turkey's wing. You must also bring the turkey to one of the two Department of Natural Resources checking stations designated for the area the same day it was killed. A confirming seal will be attached and biological data will be recorded.

This permit entitles you to shoot one bearded turkey. You may use only shotgun or bow and arrow. You may not use buckshot, ball, or slug loads. This permit is NOT transferable.

NOTE: YOU MUST BE AT LEAST 14 YEARS OF AGE TO HUNT TURKEYS.

SIGNATURE OF HUNTER:
Steve Griffin
(NOT VALID UNLESS SIGNED)

Ralph A MacMullan
RALPH A. MacMULLAN, Director

realizing that a cast iron Dutch oven I acquired brand new is now legitimately a 'vintage' piece of cookware. Hmmnn.

That Dutch oven would, in fact, days later contain my bird, stuffed with bread cubes, spices and sliced apple.

After eating a sumptuous, Thanksgiving-in-May meal and stashing chunks of leftover meat, we tossed the carcass into a stockpot with onions, celery, carrots and water, simmering it all for a couple of hours. We strained the broth, extracted more meat and veggies, and later added rice and more vegetables to the cut-up meat and stock for the single best soup — a gallon of it! — I've ever savored.

Nor were we done. Some leftover breast meat became the base for a pair of meat pies. More became topping for an exquisite homemade griddle pizza. Wing, tail and other feathers, borax-dusted, flew off to a fly-tying friend.

And, after consulting a couple of YouTube postings, I boiled clean a trio of bones from each wing – actually, just two from one wing because the third had been broken by #6 copper pellets – and from them crafted a pair of wing-bone callers to join the dozen other calls acquired over the decades. An inhaled kiss on the small end of the call produces a yelp as evocative to me as I hope it to be to next year's tom.

It will join in my turkey hunting bag my favorite, the palm-sized slate call made in the early 1980s by the uncle of famed conservationist Bob Garner, Elof Johnson, its striking surface from a McBain country school blackboard.

Each of my other calls has a story behind its sound, each a part of what is now my turkey hunting tradition. Turkey hunting, indeed, seems a wonderful stew of such sounds and stories.

Al Stewart, long the DNR Wildlife Division's upland bird specialist, has heard lots of them. Both a steward of wild turkeys and an evangelical hunter of them, he's helped Michigan walk the tightrope between the most widely available hunting and the lowest index of hunter crowding.

Author Steve Griffin with his first turkey, about 50 years after his first hunt.

I first met Al on late-1970s trap-and-transfer projects in northern Lower Michigan, on which surplus birds were captured for release in birdless but suitable habitat (the birds themselves revising the definition of suitable habitat).

On one of those trap-and-transfer operations, on a bitterly cold day on a farm between Mio and Fairview, I tagged along as biologists and technicians caught and boxed turkeys that would be Midland County's first, released on the private land of a man with a reputation feared by poachers; it was thought, correctly, that he would babysit the new little flock. I like to think that my bird last spring was at least in part a descendent of one I photographed, netted and boxed, in Oscoda County, long ago.

Elsewhere in Michigan, wild turkeys from other states were released in areas with suitable, unoccupied habitat. From burgeoning populations could be recruited 'volunteers' to pioneer additional new flocks.

It was repopulating rather than introducing because Michigan had a solid turkey population before it was decimated by habitat loss, over-harvest and other forces

that came with European settlement. Early conservation work established fledgling flocks near Allegan, Baldwin and Mio — the latter location where I first had my bumbling hunts in the late 1960s, at the very start of the modern turkey hunting area.

I still have my (unfilled) 1969 license. Unencumbered by knowledge, we wandered federal land southeast of Mio, squawking on a Roger Latham True Tone box call like most hunters carried and probably never waiting long enough for it to do us any good. I don't know that any of us had actually ever seen a wild turkey.

The turkey hunting workshops that would introduce thousands of hunters to the sport hadn't convened.

We had a series of wonderful spring hikes.

More hunts ensued, from time to time, as interest and license-lottery good fortune intersected. Most were uneventful. The exception was when my dad and I drew a bird within a dozen yards and dad, a former Army Air Force gunsmith and experienced shooter, shook so hard with excitement that he muffed the too-close, full-choke shot.

Turkey can do that to you.

But, spring's steelhead and panfish distracted me from turkey hunting, even as I faithfully covered turkey restoration and management programs.

Then came last spring, with its restricted travel and shrunken opportunities, and Rick's suggestion that I buy an over-the-counter license and hunt with him.

After my hunt, I sent a note to Al Stewart telling of my success, a half-century late, and my appreciation of what his agency — and he — had created for all Michigan hunters. Al replied — in an email festooned with thumbs-up and wild turkey emoticons — "I'm glad you enjoyed your experience. It has been one of the rewards of my 50 years working with the DNR to have been actively involved in the Michigan wild turkey restoration program. One of the top wildlife management success stories of all time."

This griddle pizza is topped with meat from Griffin's turkey, plus canned mushrooms.

When Al and I first met, it would have been hard to imagine emails and emoticons — or, for that matter, turkeys and turkey hunting across the length and breadth of Michigan.

In the 1970s, a few thousand hunters harvested a few hundred birds. In 2019, the last year for which figures were available, about 68,000 hunters bagged about 30,000 birds, an astounding 45 percent success rate. We're the state with the nation's fourth-largest harvest, says the National Wild Turkey Federation. Lotteries still award licenses for some popular hunts, but over-the-counter licenses are also available. Anyone who wants to hunt spring wild turkeys can.

And about three-fourths of Michigan turkey hunters rate their experience as good or better; more than nine in ten said they'd experienced little or no interference from other hunters.

Opportunity and hunt quality are well-balanced.

The DNR's Stewart once predicted unlimited-entry Michigan wild turkey hunting, and skeptics shook their heads.

Now, it's reality.

Meanwhile, what was not that long ago a novel new hunt has become a Michigan tradition. And like Rick Craig's grin after a friend bagged a first spring turkey on his land, one well-savored, shared.

Wild Steelhead

By Jim Bedford

It must have been quite a sight watching an old angler half running, half bouncing down the middle of the Grand River with his rod severely bent. The chase went on for about 400 yards, and I was the angler on the rod trying to keep a rampaging steelhead from spooling me.

Three times the steelhead had me well into the backing on my reel. I managed to keep from falling in and finally was able to corral the fish in my net.

Pretty sure I was more tired than the beautiful, 12-pound, wild hen cradled in the submerged meshes. The fish was bright silver and perfect — no flaws or missing scales and had given her all. I held her in slow current for several minutes before she swam off strongly.

Several fishing buddies scoffed when I told them that I had caught the strongest pulling steelhead of my life. After all, I have 55 years of hardcore steelheading under my wading belt and have landed steelhead from more than 100 different rivers in seven states and two provinces. Having caught many steelhead much larger than this silver bullet, it would seem that my claim is a bit dubious, but I don't think so!

In general, life has gotten tougher for our steelhead in recent years. The explosion of Quagga and zebra mussels have altered the food chain by greatly reducing phyto- and zoo-plankton levels in the lakes. These small creatures are the basis of life in the Great Lakes.

Steelhead and salmon smolts feed primarily on plankton and larval baitfish when they arrive in the big lakes on their spring migration. Alewives diet is primarily plankton throughout their lives, so their numbers are very depressed right now. With baitfish or prey fish numbers down, there are a lot of hungry predators at the river mouths when the smolts arrive in May and early June. And, guess what, adult steelhead and salmon have no problem becoming cannibals when baitfish are scarce.

Left: Author Jim Bedford releases a trophy buck with a prominent adipose fin — a sign that this is a wild fish. Above: Lynda Hayslette admires a large, wild steelhead.

Naturally reproduced steelhead smolts are hugely better at dodging predators and finding food than the hatchery smolts. These fish have spent two or three years in their natal streams avoiding predators and competing with other fish in order to find enough to eat. Conversely, hatchery smolts are fed daily and usually protected from predators. This easy life helps them grow to smolting size in just one year but has them woefully unprepared for survival in the wild. Luckily, virtually all of our hatchery steelhead have wild Little Manistee River steelhead as parents, so we don't have to worry about our hatchery-raised steelies affecting our wild steelhead's genetics when they spawn with them.

Starting in 2018, all hatchery steelhead were mass marked with an adipose fin clip by the states bordering Lake Michigan. Except for trophy steelhead that spent four growing seasons in the Great Lakes, we can tell with some certainty this spring whether the steelhead we just landed was wild or of hatchery origin. To learn more about the contribution of wild steelhead to our fishery, a program has been started that allows

anglers to report their catches of wild and hatchery steelhead. For more information and to register, check out www.GLanglerdiary.org. Questions can be directed to Dr. Dan O'Keefe of Michigan Sea Grant, who is leading the program, and he can be contacted via email at GLanglerdiary@gmail.com.

Steelhead are a fine table fish, whether eaten fresh or smoked. Like coho, Atlantic and chinook salmon, brown and lake trout, and splake, steelhead are stocked for a put, grow and take fishery. However, releasing some of your catch will help to maintain and improve the fine sport fishery in our Great Lakes. In fact, when fishing for wild trout and steelhead or any large predator fish, releasing most or all of your catch is the best idea in my opinion. With the likely continued decline of salmon in Lakes Michigan and Huron and increased pressure on other species like steelhead, catch and release will be even more important for a good fishery.

When you do decide to keep fish for the table, being selective can make for a better meal and help sustain a good fishery. Almost always, smaller fish will taste better than the trophies.

Let the big fish spawn and keep the smaller but legal fish for the pan. When harvesting steelhead, remember that the males can fertilize the eggs of several females. Producing the milt also takes less out of the fish than making the eggs, so the flesh of the males will be firmer. So keep a small male for the table or smoker and let the females go.

Successful releasing of fish begins with the catching.

Never fight a fish to exhaustion. Use sturdy enough tackle to subdue your quarry in a relatively short amount of time. Pressuring the fish from the side with your rod rather than lifting it to the surface will tire it faster and enable you quickly conquer large fish with relatively light tackle. When lifting fish with your rod, you are mostly fighting gravity and not tiring the fish.

A spring buck is caught on a plug by the author.

Always keep the handling of the fish to a minimum.

For smaller steelhead that you can control by lifting from the water or grabbing your line, simply grab the hook, fly or lure with your forceps and shake the fish free. If you need to handle the fish, wet your hand first and turn it upside down to quiet it before removing the hook. A net will greatly speed the landing of large fish. Use it as a corral and leave the net bag in the water to minimize any abrasion damage or protective slime removal. Nets are now available with mesh material that is easy on the fish. If you must "beach" a large fish, never drag it up on dry land. Find a shallow area where you can force the fish on its side but still have several inches of cushioning water. If you can't get to the fish from a large boat, plan on having a large cooler half full of water to set the net bag and fish in when you plan to release it.

Along with a net, a pair of sturdy forceps or needle-nose pliers should be a mandatory part of every steelhead angler's equipment. Trying to unhook a fish manually can be hard on the fish and, when fly fishing or using soft plastics, hard on your fly or lure. And, if the fish has sharp teeth like all members of the trout and salmon family, your fingers are likely to be scratched or punctured. Barbless hooks also help but even they can be stubborn at times, and sometimes it is hard to pinch down those barbs after a big fish has prematurely dislodged a lure or weighted fly.

There will be times when your lure or bait is taken deeply and the unhooking becomes more difficult. While it is important to avoid the eyes and gills when handling fish, there will be times when using the gill cover as a handle is the best way to unhook and release them. With a wet hand carefully slide your fingers along the inside of the gill plate and take a firm grip. The back of your wet fingers may graze some gill filaments but will do no harm.

Remember, these organs are designed to slough off sand and silt and other foreign objects suspended in the water that pass by and through the gills when the steelhead breathes. When you grasp the gill cover as a handle, the mouth will open up and let you see where the fish is hooked. Carefully push down to make room for the barb and then back out the hook. If possible, keep most of the steelhead in the water during the unhooking process, and if you are struggling a bit to remove the hook, give yourself and the steelhead a break by putting the fish back in the water (in the net).

Usually, your fish will be ready to take off after being unhooked but if it needs some resuscitation, always take time to do this. Gently cradling the fish facing into slow current is best. If you are fishing in a lake, slowly move the fish forward until it recovers. Moving the fish backward is counterproductive as the fish can't breathe when moved backward.

Releasing that steelhead of a lifetime can be tough to do, especially if you are fishing by yourself. The solution to being able to let trophy fish swim away is to shoot them first. A camera is always part of my gear, ready to capture a deer drinking at streamside, an eagle watching me fish, a sunrise or sunset on a lake, or a freshly caught beauty of a fish. Obviously, almost all of us are carrying a mobile phone with us now and, of course, they also take good photos. When taking a picture of a fish always have everything ready before you lift the fish out of the water. Of course, if you are taking a picture of yourself with the timer, this will be automatic.

Measuring the length and girth of the fish along with a clear side view photo will allow you to have a replica mount made of your trophy. While you can calculate an estimate of your fish's weight with these measurements, it is fun to know the actual weight. This is easy to do using your net. Simply hook your scales on meshes on the opposite sides of the fish and weigh it as your big steelhead is cradled in your net. Then subtract the net's weight or suspend the net rim with your other hand so that it is not being weighed.

As life gets tougher for steelhead in the Great Lakes, I think we should strongly consider releasing all of the wild fish we catch. In the states of California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska and the province of British Columbia, the release of wild steelhead is almost always mandatory and virtually all hatchery steelhead are marked. On the few rivers where wild steelhead can still be retained, the daily limit is one and the season limit of wild fish is three or four. Usually, the daily limit on hatchery steelhead is two with a season limit of 20 or less. Obviously, the three-steelhead limit on steelhead in Michigan is much more liberal. This angler is worried that our great steelhead fishery can't continue with such liberal limits along with the tremendous pressure the environment and dwindling food supply is putting on these great fish.

Releasing all the wild fish and keeping only the occasional male steelhead will go a long way toward preserving our steelhead fishery.

If you need another reason to release wild steelhead, it has long been known in the Pacific Northwest that wild steelhead bite better than hatchery fish. It probably is due to the fact that the wild fish had to forage for themselves and protect their space or territory in a stream for the first two or three years of their lives.

Releasing a large, wild steelhead is one of the most satisfying and rewarding things you can do as an angler!

Paul Vogel releases a wild buck he caught while fishing with the author.

SPRINGTIME 'EYES

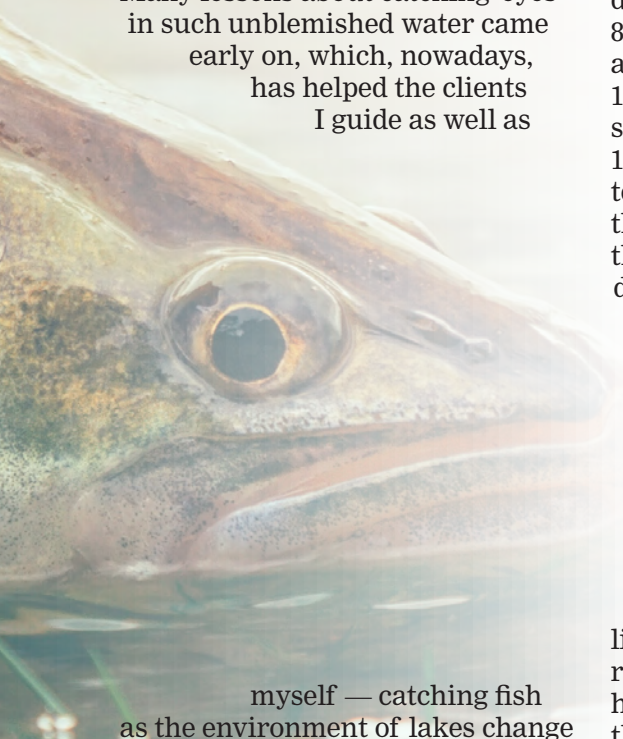
The answer has never been more clear...

By David Rose

The environment of lakes are changing, and so too the habits of walleyes

Imagine a world without walleye. Man, that would suck. Despite being one of the most fickle fish swimming within Planet Earth's freshwater, there's still a huge following of folks regularly targeting them, no matter how frustrating they can be to catch.

My first walleye was caught from Cheboygan County's Mullet Lake. I was 10-or-so years old. The lake's water was clear, even before the extreme-H2O-filtering zebra and quagga mussels started invading Michigan's waterways. Many lessons about catching 'eyes in such unblemished water came early on, which, nowadays, has helped the clients I guide as well as myself — catching fish as the environment of lakes change once invasive species overrun them.



Like most everyone, though, I struggle to catch fish when I become complacent in my ways. If anything firsthand experience has taught me, it's thinking, "This is how I've been catching fish for years, and, this is what I am going to do 'cause I know it works…,'" which often means I find myself headed back to the boat ramp with an empty live well.

Pay attention

Walleye camp is a tradition for my family and friends, and fishing the inland lakes and rivers in the Upper Peninsula has been our staple for decades during the opening days of the season.

The lakes we target were stained like tea from the tannic acid from cedars swamps that feed the systems, with visibility only about one foot. More often than not, pitching 1/8- to 1/2-ounce jigs tipped with soft-plastics and tied directly to florescent-colored 6- to 8-pound-test braided superline, as well casting crankbaits with 10-pound superline and clipped to a small snap (not snap-swivel) in 6 to 12 feet of water had been our go-to techniques. And the fish bit during the daylight hours versus only at the low-light periods of dusk and dawn.

Notice I wrote, "were stained like tea?"

About six years ago, our catch rates started tumbling. It was a couple of years later I finally realized I could see my baits much further in the water than ever before. I still hadn't put it all together (I'm a little slow sometimes) but finally realized zebra mussels had taken hold in many of the lakes; thus, their waters were getting clearer by the year. The shallow weed beds were disappearing and were now being found in deeper water. The waterways' forage — such as aquatic insects, minnows, suckers and chubs — had relocated, and the predator fish followed.

Changing my ways

Nowadays, we've started searching deeper water for fish in those once-stained lakes, say 15 to 35 feet, and have a few more tricks up our sleeves to get them to eat. While the occasional 'eye is still caught in the shallows when the wind roils the water, we also added live bait rigging and pulling crawler harnesses behind bottom-bouncers to our clear-water routines.

Jigs and crankbaits are still tied directly to superline because with pitching and casting techniques, the lures are being retrieved relatively quickly, and bites are reactionary, with fish striking the bait before it darts out of sight. When using live-bait rigs, however — when fish have time to study your offering for some time before eating it — it requires the lightest slip weights you can get away with, as well as long, light-power rods in 7- to 8.5-feet in length, and lengthy lightweight leaders and small hooks.

When the water's still cold early on in the season, a 4- to 6-foot (sometimes longer if the fish are really lethargic) length of 4- to 6-pound-test fluorocarbon leaders is the norm. We connect them to the mainline via a small ball-bearing swivel, with just enough weight above to keep the slip-sinker just ticking the bottom, not dragging it. And a size 8- or 10-thin-wire single hook with a lively minnow nipped just through the lips or leech just poked through its sucker end is the preferred bait this time of year.

In general, a very slow drift with the wind while using a drift sock (sea anchor) or by utilizing an electric trolling motor is best for live-bait rigging. Bites will be extremely light. When you get bit, open your spinning reel's bail or put a baitcaster into free-spool mode and let the fish take it for a while. And if you think it's time to set the hook, wait longer yet.

When the water warms up a touch, pulling crawler harnesses near the bottom is a slow,

methodical process as well.

A 6.5- to 8.5-foot medium-light-power rod is a must, as their tips are soft for detecting strikes, yet they have enough backbone for a decent hookset.

In general, superline for the mainline in 8- to 10-pound test is a good match. Crawler harnesses tied with 12-pound-test fluorocarbon and two or three size 12 single hooks are textbook. Similar to a live-bait rig, when you get bit, don't set the hook right away. Rather than opening the bail or free-spooling, however, just play tug-of-war with the fish while applying light pressure to the line. Walleyes don't tend to gobble up a nightcrawler with one flare of the gills like they do a minnow or leech but will swim along while leisurely eating the bait.

Similar to live-bait rigging, you'll want to use the lightest weights you can get away with. Never let your bottom-bouncer drag the lake's floor; rather, let line out or bring it in so the bouncer just tickles the bottom whenever you drop your rod tip a foot or so while trolling at .5 to 1.2 miles per hour.

Also, Indiana-style blades will spin the easiest when pulled at a creep.

The answer is clearer than ever before

Having trouble locating walleyes since the water in your favorite lake started clearing up? Look deeper and go lighter.

The long rods, lengthy leaders, light weights and small hooks of a live-bait rig will often be what it takes fickle fish to bite when the water's cold, while crawler harnesses pulled behind bottom-bouncing might just do the trick as the season progresses. Just don't get caught up in using the same ol' rigs in the same places as before when a waterway suddenly becomes clear.

Jeff Samsel with a walleye taken from a waterway that's been clearing up due to invasive species.

CONSERVATIONISTS *in* YOUR BACKYARD

Brian "Koz" Kozminski

By Alan Campbell

The resource comes first for Brian Kozminski, a Boyne City trout guide and consummate volunteer known simply as "Koz."

That's why after six years as president of his local Trout Unlimited chapter, he gave up the title but not the work.

"I was doing more guiding. And I didn't want to use the TU chapter as a prop for my guide business," Kozminski explained.

MDNR biologist Heather Hettinger, who works out of Traverse City, considers Koz a go-to source to energize programs benefitting inland fisheries.

"He's a super-active guy who has been a big component in the Miller VanWinkle TU (based in Petoskey) and their salmon in the classroom program — as well as the Friends of the Boyne River. He recently helped form an inland fishing guide alliance that has been much-needed. He's a well-rounded guy who travels freely in the bait versus hardware versus flies-only circle with ease," she said.

To those unfamiliar, there are fewer species of trout than divisions among their pursuers. When a fly fisher blurts out the words "meat dunker" as a worm drifts by, he's likely to catch a more colorful reprise.

But folks who keep the resource first can operate between tweed and ball caps. The unassuming Koz is one of them.

"When I take people fishing, it's more than catching fish. It's about having a good time; it's about learning something while you are out there," he reflected.

The salmon in the classroom program makes him smile. It begins with Kozminski driving to the Platte River State Fish Hatchery to pick up salmon eggs that hatch in mid-December. The fish are raised in an aquarium in Sheridan Elementary School in Petoskey that draws community attention.

"Our kids write diaries and track the growth of fish. At the end of the program, everyone gets to hold on to a fish and let them go. We have success by planting 200-plus salmon every year. I still get kids ten years later saying, 'Hey, that was the coolest thing,'" Kozminski said.

Not all salmon smolts live, of course. Floaters are used as specimens for learning autopsies.

"The students are just fourth-grade kids, so you have some who are squeamish. But by the end of it, they all think it's pretty cool," Kozminski said.

He's adjusted his career as time has passed. At one time, he was recognized as the top server among restaurants in northwest Michigan, guided on area rivers,and, with his wife, Lesley, helped raise about a dozen foster kids. He's now a factory representative for several conservation-conscience companies, including Temple Fork Outfitters, runs the True North Trout blog, a popular guide with a list of faithful customers and a full-time parent of the Kozminskis' daughters ages 15 and seven. Lesley manages a law firm in Petoskey.

Some of his fondest memories have been of wading a canoe of trash down the Au Sable during a river cleanup, with one of his daughters on the opposite side.

"Afterwards, we had cookouts with the Au Sable guides, and we met legends while they are still alive.," Kozminski said.

Through the years, you might have seen Koz selling tickets at a Back Country Hunters and Anglers banquet, sampling for invertebrates on the Maple River, mapping habitat for a stream crossing project or counting redds for a brown trout survey.

His inspiration comes from his father, a trout fisher, and his step-father, who cast for bass.

"I got the best of both worlds," Kozminski said. "It all starts with my father. Whether or not he could still fish or hunt — he had a muscle disease — he always donated to TU. I've wanted to give back in memory of him and also so my kids know. Our kids pay more attention to what we do than we realize."

"They will carry on what we do," he said.

Hey, You Dropped Something...

By Jack Ammerman

From the last week of September through sunset on January 1, my primary focus is staring into the woods and looking for deer. I can't be out in the forest every day, but I must confess that I've attended several business meetings while perched in a tree stand or tucked inside a hunting shack with an earbud in one ear and a cellphone in one hand. My life changes a bit when the hunting season ends. I seem to have time on my hands, and I fumble around while tackling the small jobs at home that fell victim to procrastination during hunting season. Something in my life is missing and it's an odd feeling, one that a friend of mine labeled "PHS" – post hunting syndrome. Spring turkey season can't arrive fast enough!

One activity that gets me back outdoors and roaming the woods is looking for white-tailed deer antlers that the bucks have shed. Most bucks lose their antlers sometime in the months between January and March. Unlike the velvet that the bucks actively try to scrape off in the fall, their antlers passively fall off without much fanfare or effort from the deer. After the rut, the buck's testosterone level starts to lower and osteoclasts (a type of bone cell that turns antler cartilage into bone) reabsorb into the skull plate. This weakens the antler at its base. By the time the antler is shed, only a small bloody patch remains on the deer's noggin. One side falls off first. Rarely are both sides found together. Most times, the two sides of the sheds are quite a distance from each other. In all my meandering, roaming, and searching, I've never found a matched pair of antlers. Some people have, most definitely, but that is a feat that I am still pursuing.

Years ago, I leased some land for deer hunting from a man that was rich in life experience but financially poor. This was well before baiting for deer was popular in Michigan. He had a large garden that was all fenced in to keep the deer out. On the outside of the fence, he had two bales of straw placed at about 45 degrees. He called it his "shed trap." He would throw corn on the ground between the two bales. The idea was that a buck would come in to eat the corn, poke his antler into one of the bales, and then lose the antler when he backed out if the shedding process had begun. I had never seen this work, but the man assured me that he had acquired lots of shed antlers throughout the years in that very spot. He said that he used bales of straw so that is would be easy for a buck to remove an antler if it wasn't ready to be shed. It was an interesting concept, but with the laws in Michigan disallowing feeding deer (for the most part), I guess this "shed trap" will have to be appreciated via his stories.

The author found this shed laying next to a fence where deer frequently cross.

Most shed hunters wait until March or April to look for the cast-off antlers. The weather is fairly pleasant, and some combine the hunt for sheds with the hunt for morel mushrooms. By that time, most of the antlers are on the ground, but there is a chance that other shed hunters — non-human — have found the discarded antlers. Mice, squirrels and porcupines crave the calcium, phosphorus and mineral salts that make up the antlers. These scavengers will have polished off most every antler shed on the forest floor by mid-summer. Well-traveled deer runs, bedding areas and food plot edges are all great places to look for shed antlers. Deer runs that traverse thick cover are perfect places to search. Like my friend's "shed trap," low-hanging branches will sometimes help knock the antler to the ground. A thick swamp with a good deer run is always worth investigating!

Although a good sunny spring day may help draw your eye to a shed on the forest floor, finding sheds in the snow can sometimes be even easier. New fallen snow will show fresh deer tracks that can be easily followed. One of the things that we, as hunters, do is continually look to see what's ahead of us. While shed hunting, it's more important to keep your eyes on the ground and neglect what might be seen up ahead. Keep in mind that the deer run that you are on will take you to some odd spots. Getting lost is easy when you are shed hunting, but at least with the fresh snow, you can always follow your own tracks back out. Shed antlers may be laying right on top of the snow or may have landed down in it with just a tip sticking up. I've never seen blood on the snow from a freshly-shed antler, but I have friends that swear that they saw the blood first and then looked hard before finally finding the shed.

I always get excited when there is a fence that forces a deer to go under it. Likewise, the spot where deer jump over a fence, or even a large log that requires a leap, is worth a close investigation.

A few years ago, my son and I were out shed hunting in late February. We came across a deer feeder that had long since stopped being filled by the hunter. My son eagerly approached the area in which the feed was previously distributed upon. "Wouldn't it be funny if I walked up, looked down and picked up an antler right here?" he sarcastically asked. Before I could answer, I heard him say with amazement, "NO WAY!" Looking up from my search, I saw him bend down and pick up an antler that was once on the head of a proud 4 point buck. Now, he closely checks deer stand areas anytime he gets near one. The hunters know where the deer are. Anywhere deer frequent, finding a shed antler is a possibility.

Some readers may now be thinking, "What do you do with an antler once you find one?" Well, if you're the crafty type, there are all sorts of projects you can make with antlers — everything from pocket knife handles to chandeliers. I have one friend that turns pieces of his antler finds on a lathe and is slowly creating a steak knife set by replacing the wooden handles of his knives with whitetail buck antler handles. As for myself, I am not a crafty type when it comes to this kind of thing. My finds are in a wooden box and just sitting on a small table. Any person that walks into the room and doesn't inquire about or fondle one or two of the sheds is obviously of questionable character. It's a good way to see just who it is that you associate with!

Antler shed hunting isn't like blueberry picking. You'll come up empty-handed more times than you will come home with a trophy. It gets you outdoors, though, seeing things that can't be seen on television or in a living room. And, if you're like me and suffer from post hunting syndrome, shed hunting will help ease the listlessness while getting your muscles some exercise, your lungs some fresh air and your mind back in the places that it longs to be.

By Paige Filice and Erick Elgin
Michigan State University Extension

Swift action is needed to stop the spread of invasive European frog-bit. It is especially important for hunters and anglers to clean, drain and dry boats and gear thoroughly after each outing to prevent its spread. European frog-bit thrives in slow-moving waters that have little or no wave action and in wetlands with vegetation like cattails and phragmites. It quickly forms dense floating mats that reduce native plant diversity, cause oxygen depletion in the fall and is a nuisance for hunters, boaters, anglers and swimmers.

Where European Frog-bit is found in Michigan

The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy is currently responding to infestations at popular fishing and waterfowl hunting lakes and wetlands across the state, including multiple state lands – Waterloo Recreation Area, Pentwater River State Game Area, Grand Haven State Game Area and Dansville State Game Area. It was first detected in southeast Michigan in 1996 and spread along the coastal areas of Lakes Erie and Huron up to the eastern Upper Peninsula by 2010. The first inland sightings were not until 2016, when it was discovered in Reeds and Fisk Lakes in Grand Rapids. Since then, it has been found in waterbodies in Oceana, Ottawa, Kent, Ingham, Jackson, Washtenaw and Oakland counties.

Do your part: Clean your gear

Infestations of European frog-bit are increasing; however, there is still an opportunity to prevent its spread. If you hunt or recreate in these areas, please remove all plants and mud from your gear. European frog-bit, like many invasive plants, can invade a new waterbody when the plant, winter buds or seeds hitchhike on watercraft or gear such as waders, anchors, hunting blinds, decoys and, potentially,

hunting dogs. It is against the law in Michigan to launch or transport watercraft or trailers unless they are free of aquatic organisms, including plants.

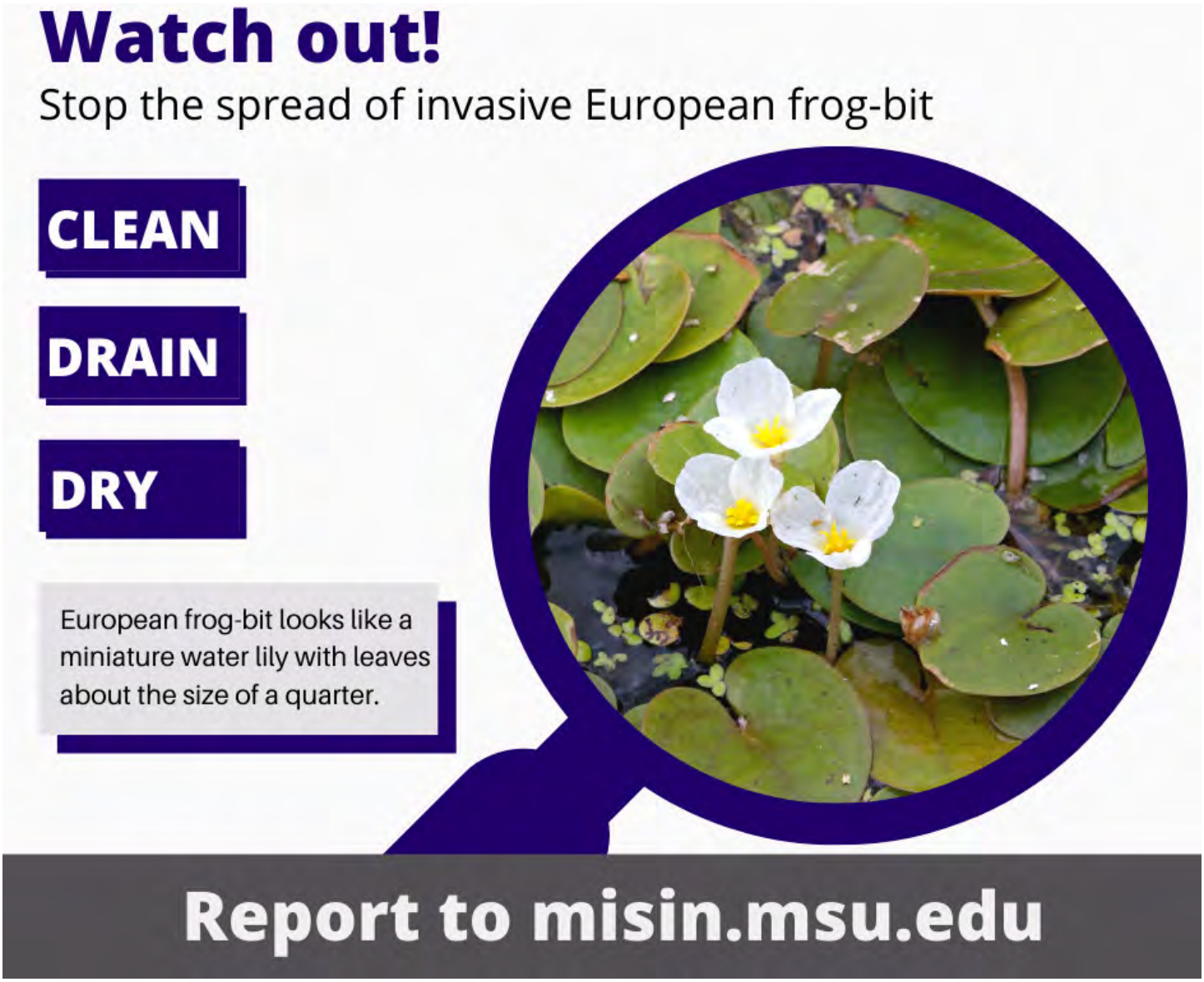
When European frog-bit is discovered in a waterbody, rapid response is key to its control and potential eradication. Hand-pulling and herbicide are common control techniques. For the greatest success, it is imperative to find European frog-bit before it is widespread. Currently, state agencies and conservation partners are responding to sightings to contain, control, and eradicate it if possible. However, if European frog-bit continues to spread into new waterbodies, eradication efforts may become ineffective. Therefore, it is extremely important to clean, drain and dry boats and gear thoroughly after each outing and to report sightings.

Report infestations

If you suspect you have found European frog-bit in your favorite hunting spot, please contact the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy Aquatic Invasive Species Program at EGLE-WRD-ANC@michigan.gov or 517-284-5593, or report it online at www.misin.msu.edu. Sightings reported to the Midwest Invasive Species Information Network are shared with Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Both agencies, along with local conservation partners, will respond to sightings. Photo documentation is appreciated.

To learn more about preventing invasive species and boat cleaning practices, visit the Michigan Clean Boats, Clean Waters website at www.canr.msu.edu/cbcw.

To identify European frog-bit, look for free-floating plants that resemble small water lilies. European frog-bit has small, heart-shaped leaves (0.5 – 2.25 inches) with a dark purple underside and white flowers with three petals and a yellow center (present in July and August, typically).



PHOTOGRAPHS *by* GRACE BOYD

Grace Boyd is a 17-year-old junior at Fowler High School. As an aspiring outdoor photographer, Grace hopes to take what she learns now and apply it to her career in the future. We hope you enjoy her photos as much as we do. We wish Grace the best of luck in the next chapter of her life.

CONSERVATION *Through* EDUCATION

Fishing Club Inspires School District

By Shaun McKeon
MUCC Education Director

Throughout the last decade, a youth fishing movement has been quietly growing. The popularity of bass fishing has always been high here in Michigan. However, until the last decade, there were not many outlets for groups of younger anglers to recreate together. Starting with collegiate bass fishing teams, opportunities for younger anglers began to grow. The sport has matriculated down to the high school level as well. Youth bass fishing tournaments have exploded in popularity and have gained traction as a high school club sport.

These teams are great for young people to compete for their school and as individuals, not to mention, learn from each other and travel to new parts of the state competing in fishing tournaments. If you have visited any of the winter outdoor shows such as the Detroit Fishing Show or Outdoorama, you will see an entire aisle of high school and college bass teams. They are easy to spot because they are usually wearing their team jerseys and move in schools from one booth to another, searching for the equipment that will give them the edge at their next event.

As interest in the sport grows, new teams and clubs are popping up all over the state. Some clubs focus strictly on bass tournament fishing, while others cast a broader net. One of the clubs that prides itself on multi-species fishing and conservation is the Anchor Bay Fishing Club.

Captain Shawn Elliott and his son Joey founded this MUCC affiliate in 2018. The mission of the club is to promote sportsmanship, conservation and angler skill-sets. Captain Shawn got into fishing due to the love his son Joey had for the sport. Seeing an opportunity by living so close to Lake St. Clair in the Anchor Bay School District, they decided to create a school club.

The Anchor Bay Fishing Club focuses on fishing for multiple species. Whether the kids want to pursue bass, walleye, freshwater drum or perch, from a boat, from shore or off a dock, all interests and abilities are welcome. The club is open to any student in sixth through twelfth grade in the Anchor Bay School District (New Baltimore/Chesterfield Twp. MI). Over the past few years, the club has gone from a handful of interested, budding anglers to consistently hosting meetings of 25 to 30 students every month. At a meeting last school year, they had 65 students and parents in attendance, along with members of the newly-formed Armada High School Fishing Club.

With inclusion and community

in mind, the club prides itself on working in the community and giving back to the school district. During 2020, the club was able to encourage and have kids participate in a variety of different events — from local fishing derbies and community outreach events to Joey and his partner Aidan Pihaylic making it to Tennessee for a national championship tournament.

2020 was a busy year for the club. Another highlight of the 2020 season for the club included being a part of multiple Halloween parades, where club members decorated a boat and passed out candy in their neighborhoods. These kids and their parents love engaging with their community and sharing their passion for fishing.

On top of competing in fishing events and being a welcoming environment for peers to teach each other, the club also has a focus on conservation. During the summer of 2020, the club took advantage of the surplus of returnable cans in most people's garages and started a weekly pop can drive. The Elliott family, including wife Linda and brother Davey, as well as several other club members, became regulars at picking up pop cans and returning them for the deposit. Sometimes as often as four to five times per week.

As part of this fundraising effort,the club was able to raise nearly $4,000. Using the money from the fundraiser, they were able to fund some small events, including a Christmas giveaway of gear to all of the club members. The bulk of the fundraiser dollars went to Anchor Bay Schools to create a tank for students to participate in the "Salmon in the Classroom" program through the DNR. With help from the DNR, project partner Mark Stephens (project FISH) and the Anchor Bay Fishing Club, there will be a new fish tank at Anchor Bay High School. Using this tank and equipment, students will raise salmon throughout the school year to grow releasable fry come springtime. Students throughout the school will have the opportunity to study the salmon journey from eggs to release and the tank and program will become another point of pride for the club.

As 2021 shifts from winter into spring, the club plans to continue to hold virtual meetings and in-person fishing opportunities as the weather and social distancing allows. The club is thankful for the support of the school district and surrounding communities. These students are also proud of what they have been able to accomplish for their school and region. Focusing on inclusivity, peer-to-peer learning and conservation will remain at the forefront of the club goals for 2021.

With dedicated parent volunteers and students like the ones at Anchor Bay Fishing Club, the future of fishing and conservation in the Lake St. Clair area is bright. For more information on the club, you can contact them at anchorbayfishing@gmail.com or you can find them on Facebook.

THE CAMPFIRE

Kids learning about maple syrup making at Hartwick Pines State Park in Grayling take a peek to see how the sap-collecting process is going. Their visit is part of the annual Maple Syrup Day at the northern Michigan park. All photos courtesy of the Michigan DNR.

By Max Bass
MUCC Camp Director

Spring is right around the corner, and it is my favorite time of the year. After months of cold weather and snow, the world around us will begin to wake up, and it is a truly magical thing to watch. March 20 will mark the first day of spring. It cannot come fast enough. When it comes to spring, the two things that I cannot stop thinking about are liquid gold and salamanders. Now, these might seem like a strange combination, but both of them scream springtime to me.

When I say "liquid gold," I do not mean actual gold. Well, not the heavy metal kind. What I am talking about is one of nature's sweetest treats, maple syrup. The process of turning maple sap into maple syrup is maple sugaring. Although making maple syrup at home is a little time consuming, it is a fun way to get outside and connect with the trees in our yards. Maple syrup comes from the sap of sugar maple trees. We use sugar maples because they have one of the highest concentrations of sugar in their sap. Even with the high concentrations of sugar, it still takes 40 gallons of maple sap to make 1 gallon of maple syrup.

As winter settles in and the temperatures drop to near or below freezing, the maple trees also begin to freeze. As they get cold, the trees recall sap from the root system. The trees are recharging themselves with liquid from the roots. When the long, cold winter begins to end and temperatures begin to rise during the day, the sap begins to flow back down the tree. This is the time to start collecting sap.

If you have never seen a bucket of fresh maple sap, you may be surprised. It is generally clear and looks just like water. One of

my favorite things about maple sugaring is being able to take a sip of the sap right out of the bucket. This first drink is one of the most refreshing things I have ever tasted. Collecting the sap itself can involve a little heavy lifting if you tap a whole slew of trees, but if there is just one sugar maple you have access to, that will provide you with plenty of sap. The maple-sugaring season ends when it gets a little too warm and the sap turns a yellowish color.

Once you have collected sap, it is important to keep it cold. Either in a fridge or outside in the snow. Experts recommend that you use the sap within a week of collecting it. So spend the week gathering as much sap as you can, and at the end of the week, it will be time to boil. Boiling your sap down to syrup can take a while and can be done outside. If you have a lot of sap, boiling it down outside probably makes the most sense. Once it has boiled down enough to fit into a small pot, you can bring it into your kitchen and finish it on the stove.

Making your own maple syrup is a fun way to usher in spring each year. It is also a great way to ensure your pantry stays full of delicious liquid gold. There are plenty of free online resources to get you started on your maple-sugaring journey.

Once the maple-sugaring season has come to a hopefully successful close, the snow will begin to melt. This will usher in the next phase of spring, which is what originally sparked my love for the outdoors. As the snow melts, it will leave our forests looking different from how we might have remembered them in the fall. Across our forests, we will start to see little pockets of unique wetlands. These wetlands are called vernal pools, and what makes them so unique is that they only occur during the spring and summer. Vernal pools are small, shallow, ephemeral water bodies that have no inlet or outlet. They form from snowmelt and spring rain. By the end of the summer, the vernal pools will have completely evaporated, and

Maple syrup may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about forest products, but Michigan is one of the top producing states in the country! Here, visitors watch as a DNR employee collects maple syrup during an event at the Hartwick Pines State Park interpretive center.

we will not see them again until the following spring. With these vernal pools also comes a variety of wildlife that we often cannot find in a dry forest, like salamanders.

Vernal pools are a phenomenal place to get children outdoors and excited about nature. These pools support a variety of species of animals that require temporary wetlands to survive. Species such as spotted salamanders, blue-spotted salamanders, wood frogs, spring peepers and so many more

rely on vernal pools. Doing what I call “nature splorin” in these areas is an absolute blast. Searching the surrounding areas near vernal pools allows you to find all sorts of cool critters — not just the ones that need the pools to survive but plenty that enjoy the damp forest floor. This is where you might also find some red efts, frogs, insects and maybe even a turtle.

The best way to start "splorin" is to carefully lift logs or rocks and take a peek at what is underneath. Make sure you bring a camera so that you can take pictures of all of the amazing creatures that inhabit our forests.

While these vernal pools are incredibly magical, it is important to remember that these areas are necessary for the survival of many different animals and plants, so we must be extremely respectful while exploring them. Whenever we lift a log or rock, it should always return the same way we found it. Remember, that log is still a home for living creatures.

Respecting the creatures themselves is as important as respecting their homes. If you find a super cool salamander, it can be tempting to pick it up. However, we kindly ask you not to handle any wildlife. The skin on an amphibian is super important to its survival, and touching them with human hands can be quite harmful. If you had to pick up an amphibious critter for its survival, please moisten your hands with some water before touching it. If you and your family find something cool near a vernal pool, feel free to share it with us on our camp Facebook page: Michigan Out-of-Doors Youth Camp.

Speaking of the Michigan Out-of-Doors Youth Camp, the summer of 2021 is going to look a little different. COVID-19 continues to challenge our program, but we still want to give our youth a chance to get outdoors. After much deliberation and taking into account the current state regulations, we have decided the safest way to run our program this summer is to operate only as a day camp.

Converting to a day camp allows us to greatly limit the risk of COVID-19 spreading among our staff, campers and families. If you or someone you know lives in Chelsea, Ann Arbor, Jackson or the surrounding area, check out our day camp program at www.mucccamp.org. We are also looking for PAID summer staff for our camp program. If you have any questions or want to know more about our plans for the program or summer job opportunities, please feel free to reach out to me at mbass@mucc.org for more information.

A blue-spotted salamander rests on a log to sun itself. Vernal pools are evident in the spring, and they are an important part of a salamander's habitat needs.

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MICHIGAN UNITED CONSERVATION CLUBS

For Kids!

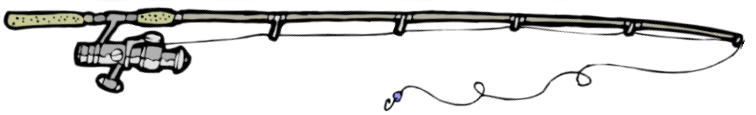
The Barred Owl

The barred owl is one of the more common owls you will find in Michigan. The scientific name for a barred owl is Strix varia. They are one of the larger owls you will find in Michigan and are very vocal. They are best known for their call. Many people would say the barred owl call sounds as if the bird is asking, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you aaalll?"

Barred owls are mottled brown and white overall, with dark brown-black eyes. Their underparts are mostly marked with vertical brown bars on a white background, while the upper breast is crossed with horizontal brown bars. The wings and tail are barred brown and white – this is where they get their name.

Barred owls roost on branches and in tree cavities during the day and hunt by night. These owls are territorial all year round and chase away intruders by hooting loudly. They are even more aggressive during nesting season (particularly the females), sometimes striking intruders with their feet. Pairs probably mate for life, raising one brood each year. Their nests are preyed upon by other large owls and hawks, as well as weasels and raccoons. Their most dangerous predator is the great horned owl, which eats barred owl eggs, young owls and occasionally adult owls!

One Last Cast



By Nick Green, *Editor*

Most of the time when someone finds out I work for Michigan United Conservation Clubs they are inquisitive. However, on occasion, someone lays into me about a policy stance the organization took based on its grassroots resolution process. And that's okay; it's my job to bear that brunt.

What is baffling to me about these interactions is how quick some folks are to throw the baby out with the bathwater, though.

Too often, folks assume they know all they need to about MUCC because we took an anti-deer-baiting stance or because we support a pheasant stocking program — both resolutions passed at our Annual Convention by a supermajority vote of our membership.

What people often fail to realize is that we aren't a single-issue organization. We work on and track more than 100 pieces of legislation each session, are at every Natural Resources Commission meeting and testify at most, and we work with national partners to effect policy change at the federal level.

Conservation isn't a one-issue endeavor. Sometimes it can feel like that, though, because we all get wrapped up in what we are most passionate about. The reality is that conservation takes a whole lot of partners with a whole lot of different interests rallying around a scientific approach to fish and wildlife management.

As hunters, anglers, trappers and, most importantly, conservationists, we need to broaden our thinking and actions to a macro level. We can't only focus on one issue, one species or one management tactic — we have to be diversified in our approach.

Diversifying your interest and engagement in conservation is what MUCC hopes you take away from our organization.

You don't like our policy on baiting? Change it. I can't do it for you — that's not how our organization is designed.

Ultimately, it is up to you to steer the MUCC ship. Staff directives are directly derived from passed MUCC resolutions at our Annual Convention. Those are our marching orders — they dictate our lobbying efforts and engagement.

The simple fact of the matter is that there is no conservation organization that is as good at doing what we do in Michigan in the space we work in. Period.

There is a reason legislators and policymakers look to us first for guidance on natural resources issues. That reason has been our mission since 1937: Uniting citizens to conserve, protect and enhance Michigan's natural resources and outdoor heritage.

When I landed at MUCC, to be honest, I had no idea what the organization really was. Sure, I had heard of Michigan Out-of-Doors and some references to MUCC throughout my outdoor pursuits. I wasn't fully aware of the breadth and depth of the organization's policy pursuits, though.

I didn't realize MUCC was instrumental in helping to implement the 10-cent deposit on returnables (coined the bottle bill). I didn't realize we worked to implement the usage of straight-walled cartridges in Michigan's "shotgun" zone during firearm deer season. And I didn't realize that we drove conversations surrounding the passage of Proposal G (Michigan Wildlife Management Referendum) — the basis of nonpartisan, scientific data driving the management of Michigan's game species. This is a shortlist of the thousands of policies we have worked to implement since 1937.

What's more important and often unrealized, though, is that we also actively oppose lots of bad conservation policies. Just in my time here since 2017, we were active and openly opposed to the draconian practice of sterilizing deer in Ann Arbor. We were successful in achieving a moratorium on that issue and creating a more transparent and thorough process by which the DNR issues "research permits."

MUCC fought and is still fighting to keep game fish out of commercial fishing nets and to keep invasive Asian carp out of the Great Lakes.

We have testified in support of predator hunting contests at NRC meetings — despite a slew of animal rights activists showing up to each and every meeting.

And we are there each and every time the idea of an anti-trapping or anti-bear-hunting bill gets thrown around.

MUCC sits on dozens and dozens of steering committees and councils that each have their own mission in the name of conservation — from the Michigan State Parks Advisory Council to the Wolf Management Advisory Council. There is no one else engaged in the Michigan conservation space like we are.

If you would like to learn more about our policy process, including how to write and introduce a resolution, please email MUCC Policy Coordinator Ian FitzGerald at ifitzgerald@mucc.org.

MUCC™

Michigan United Conservation Clubs

OUR HISTORY

Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) is the largest statewide conservation organization in the nation. With more than 200 affiliated clubs and 40,000 members, MUCC has represented millions of conservationists since 1937. Whether it's the halls of the Capitol or on your favorite stream, MUCC is the insider for your outdoor traditions.

OUR MISSION

Uniting citizens to conserve, protect and enhance Michigan's natural resources and outdoor heritage.

OUR FUTURE

MUCC protects our natural resources while educating the next generation of conservation stewards.

WHY SHOULD I JOIN MUCC?

- Receive one year of MUCC's official publication, Michigan Out-of-Doors.
- Support MUCC's education programs.
- Support efforts to conserve Michigan's natural resources.
- Support efforts to pass policy based on sound science.

☐ Yes! I'd like to become a member of MUCC!

Mail this to:
2101 Wood St., Lansing, MI 48912

Date _____

☐ New Member

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Name _____

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City _____

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Membership Categories

All members will receive a subscription to Michigan Out-of-Doors magazine.

☐ 1 Year _____ $35

☐ 2 Years _____ $60

☐ Life Membership (per person) _____ $1,000

Method of Payment

☐ Check enclosed (payable to MUCC)

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