

TIED TO NATURE

strung

magazine



THE BIG GAME ISSUE

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“I arrange my flies on the oval-shaped hotel room table. I place the shrimp flies in one pile, the crab imitations in another. My girlfriend in Colorado sends me a message expressing her firm unhappiness with the way things are going. She says she wants me to mail her my copy of the key to her house. It’s just a few days after New Year’s, and champagne is on sale at the CVS for six bucks. I buy two bottles and stash them in my hotel room at the Blue Marlin. This isn’t how I wanted the new year to begin, but when plying the world for fish and trying to pass yourself off as a sportswriter, you get what you get.”

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From the whitetail woods to the prairies to the mountains we depend on our gear to keep us in the hunt. Our gear list is always evolving and has changed many times over the years because of the continual innovation and ingenuity of the hunting community. This is our favorite gear we’ve been using recently. Every item comes highly recommended.

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92 **GHOST IN THE LAKE** by Reed Knappe photos by Val Atkinson
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“In covering the wide swaths they manage, the gauchos have also developed a keen sense of the stag populations and their behaviors. Naturally they have taken on the dual roles of gaucha and guide. In true Patagonian form, the gauchos, who have perfected the art of raising cattle on vast tracts of varied land, have also perfected the art of spot-and-stalk hunting.”

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“Montana’s winter waterfowl season doesn’t truly arrive until the temperature drops well below zero, freezing up all the water in the state except for spring creeks and tailwaters. Although not for the faint of heart, if you can find open water this time of the year, chances are you’ll also find some amazing hunting.”

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Chris Hood	

COVER

"The true trophy hunter is a self-disciplined perfectionist seeking a single animal, the ancient patriarch well past his prime that is often an outcast from his own kind. [...] If successful, he will enshrine the trophy in a place of honor. This is a more noble and fitting end than dying on some lost and lonely ledge where the scavengers will pick his bones, and his magnificent horns will weather away and be lost forever." — Elgin Gates
Photo: Chris Hood

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letter from the EDITOR

This September I headed west with my brother-in-law to hunt elk with a bow in Idaho. In terms of hunting purity, it would score high—over the counter, public land, DIY, archery hunting. Even after 1,300 miles of driving, I couldn't help but feel the same instinctual magnetism that hunters have felt for thousands of years when the mountains came into view. Whether it's looking over an immense mountain vista for sheep, calling September elk, or spending long hours in a tree stand hunting whitetails, big game hunting is just so irresistibly romantic—rugged country, long days, timeless sunsets, the lowest of lows, and the highest highs.

Over the course of our hunt we experienced all of this, but we also experienced the less glamorous realities of big game hunting; miles of hiking, hard climbs, bumping into other hunters, swirling winds, and elusive elk. A few days felt less like hunting and more like long, off-trail hikes where we happened to be carrying bows.

Each morning started the same way. The predawn alarm, stirring from the tent, a quick breakfast, a cup of coffee, and setting out with the words, "let's go kill an elk." We came close on several occasions. One afternoon we scrambled up a steep incline, dropped into a bowl-shaped basin, and were immediately greeted by a bugling elk. We set up quickly and within minutes an enraged six-point bull was coming towards us, incessantly bugling as he approached. He stopped at 50 yards to rake a tree, thrashing it for several minutes. Then I felt the wind on the back of my neck and the bull's demeanor completely changed. He turned and walked away.

The next evening, we exchanged bugles with what was likely the same bull, only to have him round up his cows, taking them higher and higher up the basin until he disappeared over the ridge. We got within 100 yards of him on two occasions, but he gave us the slip both times. After ten days in the mountains it was time to head home empty handed.

Of course, the pleasure of hunting comes more from the process than the product, but the thud of empty coolers hitting my garage floor as we unloaded them from the truck was the unmistakable sound of defeat. Still, as Edward Abbey wrote, "Anything, any excuse, to get out into the hills, away from the crowds, to live, if only for a few days, beyond the wall. That was the point of hunting." Now that my blisters have healed and time has dulled the feeling of defeat, I look back on our hunt, and the whole thing still seems so damn romantic. I'll be back next year.

I hope you enjoy *Strung's* first Big Game Issue and that it becomes something you look forward to reading each year. I hope it reminds you of hunts gone by and inspires you to go on the hunts you've been dreaming about your entire life. More than anything, I hope it relates what we all love about hunting—how it gives us our closest acquaintance with Nature and reminds us how fortunate we are to live in a world so perfectly made and astoundingly beautiful.

Ryan Sparks

Ryan Sparks
Editor-in-Chief

HOLD NOTHING BACK

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PREMIUM PERFORMANCE



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DENVER BRYAN

Denver Bryan is a former wildlife biologist and long-time outdoor photographer, primarily hunting and fishing, with over 500 magazine covers and several books to his credit. Nowadays, he's more retired than not, and lives by the motto, 'Less film.....more bullets, bows and flyrods.' For more on Denver's photography check out his website at www.denverbryan.com



CHRIS HOOD

Chris Hood grew up in the driftless area of southwest Wisconsin, home to some of the biggest whitetails and best fly fishing in the country. Chris has been a part of the outdoor industry from the very beginning, helping his father and uncle with their small camo company. Eventually taking a marketing role, Chris found his calling behind the camera. To put it simply, Chris tells stories. He specializes in wildlife and landscape photography. He lives to chase elk in the mountains in September and hunt whitetails on the family farm the rest of the year.



GONZALO FLEGO

Gonzalo Flego was born in Campana next to the Parana River, near Buenos Aires. When he was young, his father's work took him all over Argentina where he was introduced to fly fishing. Later, his passion for fly fishing led him to San Martin where he studied tourism and pursued trout with a fly rod. He is now the head guide for SET Fly fishing where he is actively involved in sales and marketing. His love of photography has paralleled his passion for fly fishing. He has a camera with him wherever he goes.



GUSTAVO HIEBAUM

Gustavo Hiebaum grew up in Bahia Blanca, a small town south of Buenos Aires on the Atlantic Coast. At a young age he developed a deep passion for fly fishing while on family vacations to Patagonia. Now, after almost 20 years in the fly fishing industry Gustavo's passion has only increased. He founded Andes Drifters, a fly fishing outfitter offering customized trips to Patagonia. Later, he partnered with Parana on the Fly to create SET Fly Fishing, a fly fishing travel company operating five lodges throughout Argentina that specialize in trout and dorado. He is continually looking for new ventures, training guides, and enjoying the lasting friendships made with visiting anglers.



JUSTIN MOORE

Raised on a cattle ranch in rural eastern Oregon and son to a longtime Fish & Wildlife employee, Justin spent his youth chasing cows, going on animal counts with biologists, and roaming one of the largest wildlife areas in the state. Since getting a camera for Christmas at the age of eight, he has rarely gone anywhere without one and has turned his passion into his profession. He now runs Dangersoup, his photography, creative, and PR agency full time while bringing up two young boys with his wife in central Oregon where they hunt and fish the same areas he grew up.



JUSTIN WITT

Justin Witt dropped out of the rat race in 2007 and took a lonely seven month walk up the spine of the Andes trying to figure out what came next. Turned out he was a fly fishing guide, and as such has been rowing rivers and poling flats ever since. His previous work has appeared in *The Flyfish Journal*, *The Drake*, *The Angler*, and a variety of literary journals that for the most part no one's ever heard of. These days when he's not wandering the Earth with his wife and five-year-old daughter in search of new water he can be found at home in Rio Pico, Argentina where he runs a lodge and helps anglers stick hooks into trout. To check out the incredible programs Justin runs around the world go to www.hemispheresunlimited.com



MIKE MCTEE

Mike McTee is a researcher at MPG Ranch, located in Montana's Bitterroot Valley. He has explored contamination issues at shooting ranges, studied the wound ballistics of rifle bullets, and now focuses on lead poisoning in wildlife. His research has landed in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* and *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, among others. Mike often connects the public to the science through his writings and speaking engagements, whether it be to a local group of hunters or a gymnasium full of middle schoolers. His freelance writing has appeared in various outlets, including *The FlyFish Journal* and *Bugle*.



PAUL DOUGHTY

Paul Doughty grew up on the water and in the field with his grandfather. He appreciates the natural settings where hunting and fishing brings him. He's an avid fly fisherman, turkey hunter, and photographer living in Charleston, South Carolina with his wife Stephanie, their three children, and yellow lab. His photography aims to capture the experiences and emotions that hunting and fishing evoke. He is a contributing photographer for several companies in the fishing industry and his work has appeared in *Tail* and *American Fly Fishing*. He is an avid surfer and all-around waterman who, when not fly fishing, can be found with his family on the water.



DUCKS ARE DUCKS



By Justin Witt Illustrations by Tim Ryan

The first person I speak to on my 40th birthday is a lawyer. This is unfortunate; I'm not much in the habit of interacting with lawyers, and there are other things I would rather be doing. Namely, cleaning ducks. That's the problem, though: The day before I woke with the desire to go out and shoot some ducks for my birthday dinner, but it didn't go well. Or maybe I should say it didn't *end* well.



Argentines in my area of Patagonia aren't much into bird hunting. Their infamous reputation for being hyper-carnivorous is fitting. It's hard to get most of them to try a piece of meat that isn't beef or lamb. Even chicken is considered more of a lunch meat than a dinner entrée.

When I moved to Argentina, I asked about the laws concerning waterfowl right away.

"Sure, you can shoot ducks," said our local game warden.

"When is the season? What are the limits?" I asked.

He thought about this for a few seconds and responded, "Winter. Five."

"Per day?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Five of each species, five total, or some combination of separate limits on different species?" I pressed.

"What do you mean 'species'?" he asked. "Ducks are ducks."

So I acquired a shotgun, admittedly through more efficient means than the legal route of a mountain of forms, psychological evaluations, background checks, and months

of waiting. Then I implemented my own resource management system, by which I mean that because there were always far more birds than I could possibly eat, I simply shot what I wanted when I wanted and never tired of eating ducks all winter long. No one had any interest in the birds, so it was easy to get permission to hunt, and I spent the next decade's worth of winters wandering happily through duck hunting heaven.

Back to the last day of my 39th year.

Disappointment Creek runs through a broad, flat valley nestled against the Chilean border 40 miles outside of Rio Pico, a town of less than a thousand souls, most of whom actually live on the outlying estancias in a province with a population density less than the Sahara desert. I'm the only foreigner who has ever lived here. The only people who don't know everyone else in the community are the police, and that's only because the government keeps them on a rotation of month-long stays in an effort to minimize corruption.

The stream appears as if by magic from springs sneaking to the surface beneath bogs that feel like waterbeds as you walk across them. Channels soon form but immediately spread out into a web of inter-connected rivulets that run for miles before again connecting and forming a

large stream that pushes to the Chilean border. It's a bit counterintuitive, but most of the drainages in the province actually run to the Pacific, cutting back through the Andes in deep gorges that for the most part humankind has never seen.

I'd had permission to hunt the place for years but still brought a box of pastries for the gaucho when I went. This year he was nowhere to be found, and when I noticed his big gray gelding was also missing, I assumed he was out riding the property. Parking the truck at the farthest corner of the property, I stepped out into a thirty-mile-an-hour wind with sleet blowing into my ears—a perfect day for ducks.

Thus began one of the most spectacular afternoons of wingshooting I've ever experienced. Teal, widgeon, and pintails were everywhere, flying down the water in darting passes. About ten ducks in, I started plucking my ducks so they wouldn't take up as much space in my backpack. I also wanted to slow the process down and savor the hunt. I knew I needed a lot of ducks for the party, but when it's that good, hunting can quickly cross the line into a shooting spree.

By the time I got a mile downstream from the truck, the bag was getting heavy and the sleet had turned to snow. The ducks kept flying through, more of them than I



I KNEW I NEEDED A LOT OF DUCKS FOR THE PARTY, BUT WHEN IT'S THAT GOOD, HUNTING CAN QUICKLY CROSS THE LINE INTO A SHOOTING SPREE.

had ever seen, and I was picking my shots carefully and passing a lot because there was no reason to take a chance on anything even marginally out of range.

Two hours in I'd shot a full box of shells—the only box I'd brought. I pulled each bird back out of the bag to rearrange things for the walk back and counted: twenty-five birds. Twenty-five shells. Never before had I accomplished anything near that and wouldn't expect anyone to believe me when I told them. I sat down, watched the weather, and let it sink in until I couldn't feel my feet. It was time to go.

Rounding the last berm before arriving

at my truck I saw another truck barreling down the dirt road toward me. This struck me as odd, but I assumed it was one of the neighboring estancia owners heading into his property. Wherever he was going, he was in a hurry.

I got close enough to see my truck—and the four others parked around it. That's when I noticed the men running through the marsh in combat gear and bulletproof vests with shouldered rifles. They were floundering in the mud and falling as they tried to plow across the canals. The scene was so out of place it took me a moment to realize that this might have something to do with me. When I put two and two together, I briefly



thought about turning around, burying the gun and birds, and coming out as if I'd been hiking.

But it just wasn't going to go down that way. The cover story didn't seem plausible considering the weather, and besides that I've become something of a fundamentalist in my old age with respect to my admittedly anarchistic views. I whistled. They all stopped in their tracks and stared around eerily as if they were waiting for mortars to drop from the sky.

I whistled again and they zeroed in on me. Just like Pops always said: One shot, they have no clue where you are. Second shot, they know exactly where you are.

The commandos came running—most of them falling into the marsh along the way, one of them all the way up to his neck—and when they finally crawled out onto the trail they were soaking wet, freezing, and pointing their rifles at me.

"*Buenos tardes*," I said, risking a smile that could have been taken for mirth or friendliness. Most of the muzzles came down. Panting, the one in charge asked me what I was doing there.

"Hunting," I said.

"Hunting what?"

“Ducks.”

I wish I could have taken a picture of their faces.

It turned out they were searching for Chilean cattle rustlers who had stolen over a hundred head of cattle three days before; they had been patrolling the property 24 hours a day since. A gaucho on the neighboring property had heard my shots, assumed they were from the cattle rustlers, and ridden his horse to the top of a mountain where there was enough cell signal to call the police. Meanwhile I had been happily wandering through the marshes having a spectacular time with no idea about the cattle heist, the patrols, the gaucho with the cell phone, or the subsequent descent of a heavily armed motorcycle on my location.

Such is life in Argentina.

The cops seemed to feel that it was necessary to photograph the “operation.” This was a big sting. They laid the shotgun out on the tailgate of my truck with all the empty shells and all the ducks and my Argentine residency documents and my American driver’s license and my passport and my buck knife and pretty much everything else except my socks. They took pictures of everything: of me, of themselves with me, of all the birds, of me and them and all the birds, of the shotgun, of the truck, and of everything together.

They eventually got cold enough to decide it was time to go. So we got in the trucks and made the slow drive to the police station, where it seemed like half the town was waiting to watch us come in. I felt like they should have put a bag over my head to protect me from the paparazzi before they got me out of the truck.

Then paperwork and questioning began. After living in Argentina as long as I have, I was prepared for this to be a lengthy process. All of the steps were similar to

what they would have been in the U.S. except absurdly repetitive and inefficient. Lots of forms, all filled out on a mechanical typewriter. Each form required its own set of fingerprints; soon my hands were so caked in black ink they made me wash it all off with detergent so we could start again. During the interrogation the captain asked for such relevant information as my sister’s mailing address in the U.S., the maiden name of her mother-in-law, and my shoe size. I played dumb and complied.

Around nine o’clock that evening we neared what seemed to be the end, and I said, “Okay, what now?” The captain replied, “Well, we’re keeping the gun because you don’t have it licensed. I’m supposed to detain you for the night and then ship you up to Esquel tomorrow, but I talked with the judge there by phone, and we’ve decided to let you go home. We’ll sort out the rest next week. I’m doing you a favor.”

I thanked them, picked up my backpack of ducks, and headed for the door. That’s when the yelling started.

“*No, no--esos no*,” they hollered, pointing at the bag of ducks.

“What are you going to do with them?” I asked.

“We have to burn them.”

I took a deep breath and abandoned my dumb compliance. Sometimes there’s an advantage to playing along with the Argentine government’s silly rhythms, but there are moments when it’s necessary to pull out all the stops and hope for the best. This was one of those moments. I mean, we’re talking about *ducks*.

I stood at the door and in the loudest voice I could muster told them that in my entire

life I had never killed a bird I didn’t eat—that my family didn’t do such things, that I had been made to eat a red-headed woodpecker when I was five years old after having irresponsibly employed my BB gun, and that if these ducks had died in vain my father, his father, and his father before him were going to come back from the dead and beat me to within an inch of my life and do the same to every man in the room.

Again, I needed a camera.

“All right, all right!” the captain said. “You can take them; just don’t tell anyone.”

I thanked him, picked the backpack off the floor, and headed home. After stacking the ducks in the fridge, I thought about how things might have turned out had I decided to run instead of whistle. I shook my head laughing and went to bed.

After finishing my call with the lawyer, I notice there’s a lot of new snow on the Andes. My lawyer says he thinks I’ll probably need to beg the judge and pay a fine, and that we’ll get the gun back if we play our cards right. The coffee in my cup warms my bones, and the ducks piled on the counter are plucked, salted, and oiled for the grill and tonight’s festivities. I anticipate being the butt of many jokes and bearing the brunt of my friends’ laughter, but at least my 40th birthday dinner will be one to remember.

