

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2015

# IOWA OUTDOORS

THE DNR'S MAGAZINE OF CO

IN THIS ISSUE:

**MIGHTY MINK**

MEET THIS POWERHOUSE PREDATOR: CUTE, SOFT AND SAVAGE







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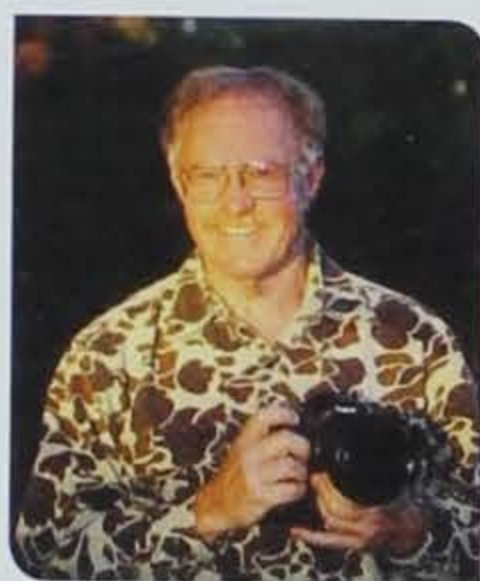




## WILLIAM PRICE

is a northern Iowa native. He is a writer and photographer whose passions include hunting, nature and philosophy. An

avid wildlife enthusiast, he spends much of his time in the great outdoors hunting, fishing and enjoying nature. He has adventured in the Spanish Virgin Islands, Italy and the Florida Keys. He currently lives in Clear Lake.



## TY SMEDES

Writer and photographer from Urbandale is published in dozens of magazines. He teaches photography and leads photo tours

to the Sierras and Africa. His book, *The Return of Iowa's Bald Eagles*, is sold at [iowan.com](http://iowan.com)



## BEN CURTIS

photographed Iowa's natural beauty for the DNR while serving in AmeriCorps. He holds a degree in environmental policy from Drake

and his work has appeared in publications such as *USA Today* and Drake's *Blue* magazine. He is currently in graduate school at the University of Iowa.



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is a travel and features writer based in Des Moines. Her work appears in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Frommer's Budget*

*Travel*, *Midwest Living* and *Esquire*. Her book, *Running Away to Home*, is available at [www.jennifer-wilson.com](http://www.jennifer-wilson.com).

# IOWA OUTDOORS

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To conserve and enhance our natural resources in cooperation with individuals and organizations to improve the quality of life for Iowans and ensure a legacy for future generations.

### EDITORIAL MISSION

We strive to open the door to the beauty and uniqueness of Iowa's natural resources, inspire people to get outside and experience Iowa and to motivate outdoor-minded citizens to understand and care for our natural resources.

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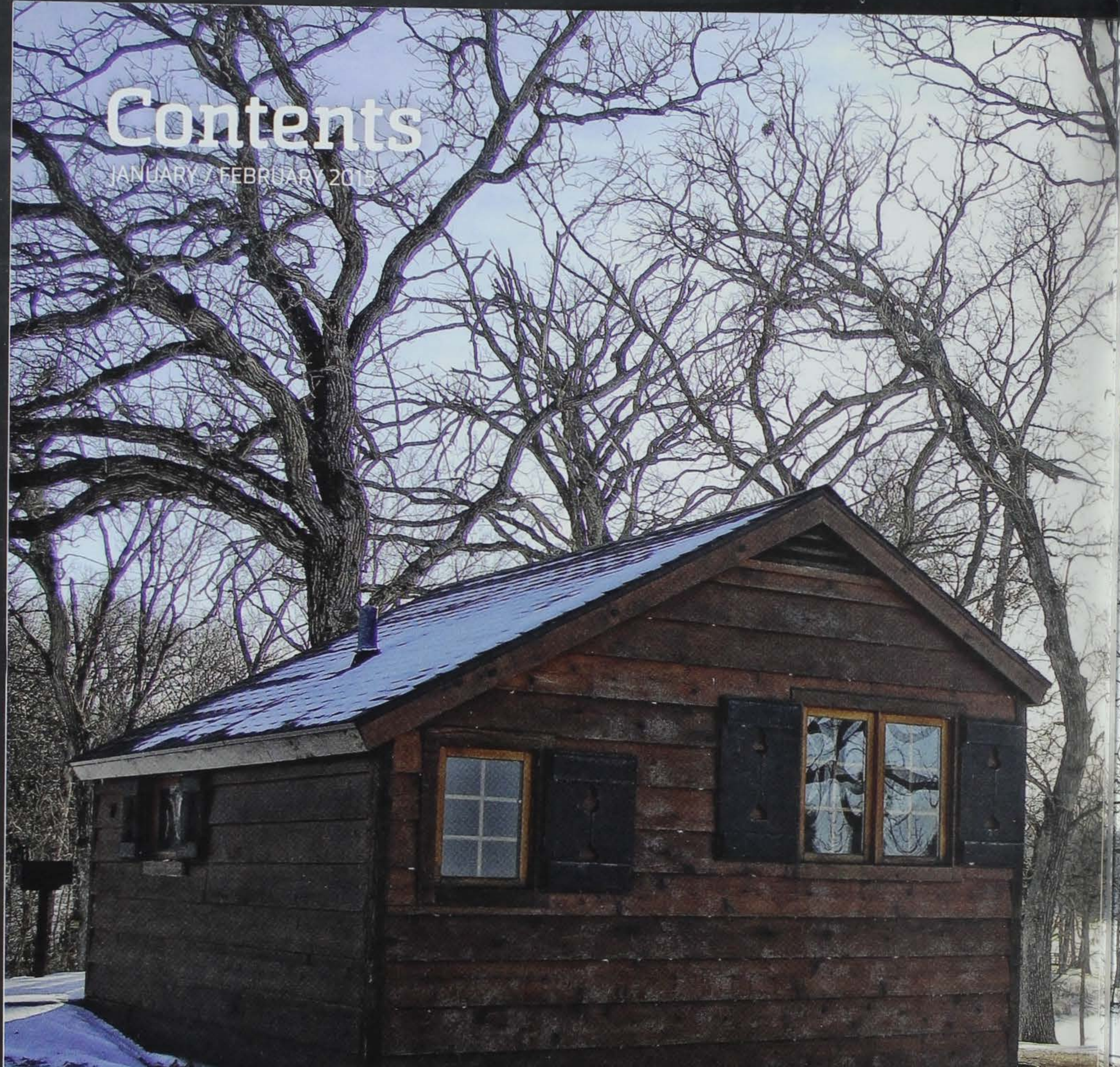
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# Contents

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2015



## ABOUT THE COVER

Mink are ferocious little hunters, but larger predators such as hawks, eagles, coyotes and owls prey upon them. As such, mink avoid open areas and dash in and out of logs and old dens. "It's best to observe mink near sunrise or just before dark at their favorite hunting sites along a stream or marsh edge," says photographer Ty Smedes. "When mink hold still, quickly squeeze the shutter, because they don't stay put. Mink are very fast and mouse-like in their actions so use fast shutter speeds to freeze quick movements. I end up with a lot of images out-of-focus or with a mink partly out of frame before I get a keeper."

PHOTO BY TY SMEDES



## FEATURES

### 24 A Blizzard of Snowmobile Trails

See how snowmobile clubs are working with the DNR to create and maintain more than 8,800 miles of trails for safer, exhilarating winter fun.

BY ALAN FOSTER

PHOTOS BY MINDY KRALICEK

### 28 Mighty Mink

Cute, feisty and savage predator sums up this elusive member of the weasel family known for its luxurious fur and vicious antics in marshes and waterways. Learn more about this pint-sized purring powderkeg and its territorial traits.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TY SMEDES

### 36 Texas Rags Iowa Style

Luring lesser snow geese with rag decoys is a Gulf Coast tradition, and these Iowa hunters bring it north to help reduce a population run amok.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

### 42 Palaces on Ice

Some ice anglers have given the heave-ho to sitting on a 5-gallon bucket. Think pizza, furnaces, and basketball games on HDTV while fishing.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY WILL PRICE

### 48 Mississippi M\*A\*S\*H

Biologists' on-boat surgeries are implanting radio tagging devices in northern pike to better understand and manage this popular game fish.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE WILKINSON

### 52 Stoked on Snow

We've gotcha covered with myriad wintry escapes and adventures to stay active, fit and have a heckuva hoot to boot.

BY MINDY KRALICEK

## DEPARTMENTS

### 9 Together

Wear your support for the Decorah eagles with a talon tee, craft traditional wooden snowshoes for use or display and create unique wood art using your favorite Iowa Outdoors photos with image transfer.

### 15 Outdoor Skills

Keep your optics fog-free with this simple trick; repurpose unwanted silica packs to protect outdoor gear; have more finicky-feeding walleyes on the ice; put the zip back in your zippers.

### 16 Lost in Iowa

When the hustle and bustle of the holidays are over, slip down to southwest Iowa's Lake of Three Fires where there is a whole lot of quiet going on.

### 58 My Backyard

Burn fuel, not funds, with simple home heating remedies.

### 62 Wild Cuisine

Two worlds collide when a Midwestern favorite—brats—meets an Asian staple—kimchi.

### 65 Flora & Fauna

Crinoids dominated the Paleozoic period. Meet this animal whose fossilized remains from Iowa are displayed in museums around the world.

#### ABOUT THIS PHOTO

We asked Americorps photographer Ben Curtis to capture photos on a record setting cold day (low -11°F). Being a rugged, all-around nice young man, he agreed. Being smart (currently in graduate school at the University of Iowa), he waited for temps to peak at 10°F to capture these long-shadowed afternoon images at Lake of Three Fires State Park near Bedford.



# Admiration & Legacy

BY JESSIE ROLPH BROWN

Find a volunteer project or post your own event at [www.iowadnr.gov/volunteer](http://www.iowadnr.gov/volunteer) or call 515-725-8261.



## LEAVE YOUR OWN LEGACY

**TURIN LOESS HILLS PRESERVE, TURIN**—You can protect Iowa's Loess Hills with a vital addition to a state preserve and wildlife management area

In the heart of the Loess Hills lies an expansive prairie remnant with sweeping views of the unique landform region, an area waiting to join the neighboring Turin Loess Hills Preserve and Wildlife Management Area for public use and enjoyment—and you can help bring it to fruition. Adjoining Monona County landowners, Virginia Mathison and Ron and Connie Christiansen, sold their land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to help create a 425-acre addition, which will add to 631 acres of currently protected wildlife habitat. The addition offers native prairie, mixed woodlands and bur oaks.

Additional fields onsite will be replanted to prairie, according to a 15-year management and restoration plan being put together by the DNR and INHF. The area will provide critical bird habitat along the Missouri River flyway and protect the fragile, unique and important loess topography. But before the land can transfer from INHF to the DNR and be available for public use, readers' help is needed. Volunteers can help inventory flora and fauna, remove invasive cedar trees from the prairie and harvest and redistribute prairie seed. While public funds and grants will cover about 90 percent of the \$1.7 million project, another \$50,000 is needed to complete the project. INHF will match private donations with dollars from the Mildred Acklin Fund. More information on volunteering or donating is available from INHF at 1-800-475-1846 or [www.inhf.org](http://www.inhf.org)

## PLANTING ROOTS

**DENNIS AND DONNA BLUMHAGEN, CASTALIA**

Couple retires cattle farm to conservation

Dennis and Donna Blumhagen's farm goes back to 1889, when Dennis' great grandfather settled there, and the Blumhagens want to preserve the legacy. For years, the Blumhagens raised cattle, hogs, chickens and sheep on their Castalia farm, but recently decided to get out of the cattle business and focus on conservation. "It was obvious to me we were sending a lot of soil down the river," Dennis says. Before, cows left 6- to 7-foot cutbanks along the stream. Since removing the cattle, there's an abundance of plants anchoring unstable banks, slowing erosion and keeping sediment out of the river. "It's amazing how fast wildlife comes back," says Corey Meyer, watershed coordinator at the local soil and water conservation district. The Blumhagens signed up for the Conservation Reserve Program to create a riparian forest buffer, working with Meyer to plant 49,000 trees on 70 acres, protecting 2.5 miles of the Yellow River stream corridor. Along with 16 other landowners, they've established more than 13 miles of riparian buffers that filter, trap and reduce the effects of runoff, sediment and nutrients. "Somebody has to make the first step or it never will be there," says Dennis. They also added sediment basins and terraces to decrease erosion. The Blumhagens' farm covers part of the Yellow River watershed, which means that decreasing runoff on their land reduces sediment reaching the Yellow River. "It's been a community effort," says Meyer. "In this area, people have a real tie to the land. They understand the value of the land." Dennis agrees. "If we don't take care of it, it's going to be gone," he says. "Not just for me and my family, but for everybody else. Everything we do affects a lot of other people. My policy is that hopefully I'll leave it in better condition than it was when I found it. I'm not done doing conservation work."



## LIVING BY EXAMPLE

**IRMA HOPKINS, CEDAR FALLS**

Senior citizen champions conservation

Irma Hopkins didn't donate a large tract of land for public use or undertake a large-scale land renovation. What she did leave behind when she passed away a few months ago at 87, however, was just as impactful—a vibrant example of involvement that anyone concerned about the outdoors can embody. A few years ago, Hopkins moved from Jesup to an independent living facility in Cedar Falls, where she became a resident of the Dry Run Creek Watershed, home to a watershed improvement project supported with EPA funds through the DNR's Watershed Improvement Program. Her son, Steve Hopkins, who works with the DNR's watershed improvement program, liked to lightheartedly remind his mother of her duty to protect the creek. "Even though she got around with a cane, keeping an eye on things and speaking her mind were no problem for Mom," says Steve. "Although Mom knew about Iowa's impaired waters list and that Dry Run Creek was on it, she didn't always remember the term 'aquatic life impairment.' Rather, she simply knew the stream needed to be cleaned up to improve the 'fish and bugs' that are supposed to be there." Irma would point out bio-retention cells just two blocks away from her home to Willowood residents and friends, educating them on how the cells soaked up polluted street runoff and reduced stormwater reaching the creek. She paid attention to local city council and county issues, attended meetings, wrote and called legislators, visited with her neighbors and fellow churchgoers about conservation practices and voted. She made financial contributions to organizations she felt were doing good work. "Community support, even among those who don't own or manage land in a watershed, is crucial for watershed projects," says Ashley Kittle, coordinator of the Dry Run Creek project. "It starts with people like Irma, and she's proof that no matter what your age or status, you can make a difference in your community and the environment."



TURIN PRESERVE PHOTO COURTESY OF IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION; BLUMHAGEN PHOTO BY BRANDON HALLMARK; IRMA HOPKINS PHOTO BY STEVE HOPKINS



## ACTIVITIES, TIPS AND EVENTS FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY



# Talon Tees

The craze continues in northeast Iowa at the Decorah Fish Hatchery, gathering point for thousands of visitors annually who tour the hatchery, feed the fish and more commonly, view the famous Decorah eagles. Now you can contribute to the international fervor as the hatchery morphs into a mini educational center.

The Friends of the Decorah Fish Hatchery was created in 2009 to support and improve the services offered at the hatchery. Proceeds from members' fees, T-shirt, prints and fish food sales support the volunteer group, whose first major project was building a modern restroom and gathering area to replace pit latrines built in the CCC era almost a century ago. Future plans call for a series of self-guided educational kiosks covering hatchery history, how watersheds work, karst topography, rearing trout and the uniqueness of coldwater streams. The group hopes to bring in more fish food dispensers—a magnet to kids thrilled with watching trout attack pelleted food and an additional revenue source. An educational trail through adjacent prairie is also on the wish list.

The Friends group teamed with Bob Anderson and the Raptor Resource Project, and local and national artists, to offer three T-shirts. Show your support proudly with the "I'm a friend of the Decorah Fish Hatchery" shirt, available in baby sizes to 3XL. Prices are \$18 to \$20 depending on size. Shirts come in different colors. Artwork was donated by Decorah native Arrilla Tyrell.

Verdayle Forget, an artist from Washington state, donated two designs; "2012 Decorah Eagles" (\$25 in sizes adult medium through 2XL) and "In Memory of D12 and D14" to memorialize sibling eagles electrocuted within a few months of each other (sizes medium through 2XL, \$30). Shirts are 100 percent preshrunk cotton.

Renowned Decorah artist Mary Ann Gloc captures the beauty and majesty of the avian family in their nest in her watercolor painting "Decorah's Royal Family." Unmatted prints are: 5.75 by 9 inches, \$20; 6.625 by 10.5 inches, \$26; 9.5 by 15.375 inches, \$38. Prints come on acid-free paper with foamcore backing.

Shipping and handling not included.



### GET INVOLVED

Interested in joining the group? Become a Friends member for as little as \$10. For instructions on how, or to order a T-shirt or print, go to [decorahfishhatchery.org](http://decorahfishhatchery.org). For more hatchery information, go to [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov) and search "fish hatcheries," or call 563-382-8324; 2321 Siewers Spring Road, Decorah.

For more about the Friends group, go to [decorahfishhatchery.org](http://decorahfishhatchery.org).

To view the eagle cam, visit [raptorresource.org](http://raptorresource.org).

The modern restroom funded by Friends of the Decorah Fish Hatchery.





## ADVICE FOR THE SNOWSHOE NOVICE



Snowshoe styles and options are varied, and choosing what's right depends on intended use. Here's how to decide:

First, there are two broad categories—Traditional or Modern.

### BEAUTIFUL AND FUNCTIONAL TRADITIONAL WOOD STYLE

Wooden-framed snowshoes are traditional, silent when walking and have crafted appeal. They may need periodic varnishing to keep them slipping over the snow. Styles include:

**Ojibwa** snowshoes are useful for walking across open areas. The long length and upturned toe provides extra support and stability. The pointed toe helps cut through hard, crusty snow or push away undergrowth when walking in brush. The tail acts like a rudder to track in a straight line as you step. However, a tail reduces maneuverability.

**The Huron** is the best known shape. It's suited for distance travel in open forest or fields, very adaptable and good for family recreation. Its tail allows the snowshoe to stay straight with each step.

**Bearpaws** are ideal in dense woods or places where turning often is needed. The round, shorter snowshoe drags snow with each step, but forest workers, trappers and hunters prefer them.

**Alaskans** work well on open ground and in deep snow. They are slightly rounded at the toe and slightly turned up to float on fluffy, powder. Like Ojibwas, they easily slide on hard snow.

### ATHLETIC, LIGHTWEIGHT MODERN SNOWSHOES

Aluminum snowshoes squeak and the neoprene decking can make a slight whomping sound on the snow, but they are lighter than wood and as strong and durable. Some are powder coated in a variety of colors. Styles include:

**Recreational** models designed for casual use on gentler terrain.



**Hiking** models for the frequent user wanting flexibility to walk in a park and hike local trails with terrain. Backcountry or mountaineering snowshoes for those thrilled by challenge, whether it is icy slopes, steep terrain or extreme conditions.

**Running** snowshoes are narrower and lighter weight with bindings for use with running shoes. An extra cleat under the toe adds traction.

**Poles** are not necessary, but useful for balance while ascending hills, walking flats or getting up after falling. Some people use only one pole. Telescopic poles can be height-adjusted to match snow depth or terrain.

**Footwear** Use a thin synthetic sock against the skin to wick moisture and reduce friction. Cover with a synthetic or wool sock for warmth. Special boots are not needed. Waterproof boots are good for wet snow. For powder, any comfortable boot will do. Wear running shoes with running snowshoes.

**Clothing** A base layer of synthetic long underwear wicks moisture. Wear windproof pants, an insulating layer of synthetic fleece or wool, and a windproof and water-repellent shell jacket. Remove or add layers as activity level produces excess heat. Keep your head and hands covered to prevent heat loss and protect from sunburn. A wool or synthetic hat, headband or balaclava retains heat. Waterproof ski gloves or mittens keep hands dry and warm. On cold days, combine shells with fleece mittens or gloves. On warmer days, glove liners may be used. Sunglasses and sunscreen protect from UV rays reflected off the snow.

**Water** Dry winter air saps moisture. Carry a leak-proof water bottle. On very cold days, invert the bottle so ice forms on the bottom, keeping the opening from freezing shut.

### Beginner Tips:

- Snowshoe width forces you to swing each foot around in a semicircular motion.
- Lurch forward on every step to let the snowshoe sink into the snow to grip for the follow through step.



## Snowshoe Building

The Ojibwa style snowshoe has been used in North America for more than 6,000 years. They are great for beginners and a good choice for flat and gently rolling terrain and shrubby spots. Classes in the art of weaving Ojibwa snowshoes are offered over two evenings, Dec. 11 and 18 from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and Saturday, Dec. 20, from 9 a.m. to noon at Wickiup Hill Learning Center, 110260 Morris Hills Road near Toddville in Linn County. With some time invested at home, kits can be completed around New Year's. Additional evenings needed for varnishing. Register and pay by Dec. 8. The \$185 class fee includes cost of snowshoe kit, binding set and varnish. Call Chuck Ungs at **319-892-6485** to register. Project requires manual dexterity of someone high school age or older. Class size limited to 15.

## Build a pair at Wickiup Hill Learning Center

Call **319-892-6485** to find out when the next class is offered by the Linn County Conservation Board. Class size limited to 15. The fee is about \$185 and includes cost of a snowshoe kit, a set of bindings and varnish for each participant. Three lacing sessions and varnishing session provided.



- To turn, kick straight out sideways with the leg. Then twist the torso 180 degrees with that leg and follow through with the other leg. Poles help with turns.
- Ascend or descend a hill in a zigzag pattern. If steep, place one foot in front of the other, sit on the back snowshoe and slide down.

## Craft Your Own

It's satisfying to trek across fresh snow in quiet wooden snowshoes you made yourself. There's a special connection to history and tradition in weaving Ojibwa

snowshoes—used in North America for more than 6,000 years. They're great for beginners on flat and gently rolling terrain and shrubby spots.

Country Ways (<http://snowshoe.com>) kits come with finished and assembled white ash frames, tubular nylon snowshoe lacing and directions. Alaskan, Huron and Bearpaw style kits are also available, as are a child's Huron style kit for age 4 to 80 pounds, and a youth Ojibwa kit for children age 8 to 110 pounds. Bindings are purchased separately and available from Country Ways or other suppliers.



Together HALF DAY ON \$50

# CREATE WOOD ART

## From *Iowa Outdoors* Magazine Photos With Simple, DIY Image Transfers

BY LISA WALTERS PHOTOS BY BEN CURTIS

### Materials

- 9x12 craft wood plaque (from craft store) 3/4-inch thickness
- Magazine photo copied on color copier onto regular printer paper (Use a favorite *Iowa Outdoors* magazine image.) Inkjet copiers do not work.
- Mod Podge glue
- Paintbrush
- Spray bottle with water (or water in bowl)
- Paper towels/towel
- Wood gouge carving tool / small beveled carving tool for detailing
- C-clamp
- Wood burning tool (optional) with flat tip used for shading
- Drill and 3/32nd or other small drill bit
- 20-inch piece of branch or driftwood
- Annealed wire (from floral or craft store)
- Owl image from Jan./Feb. 2014 issue. Order *Iowa Outdoors* magazine back issues for \$5 at [515-725-8200](tel:515-725-8200)



### Steps for Image Transfer

**1** Copy magazine image from your favorite nature photo onto regular printer paper using color copier. Photos with solid outlines will cut and trace best for relief carving. You may want to reverse the image so the finished product faces the same direction as the image—vital if text is present. Enlarge or reduce as needed to fit on wood.

**2** Cut out image. Place face down on wood. Trace lightly with pencil around your image.

**3** Paint medium-thick layer of Mod Podge onto wood inside of the outlined area.

**4** Place image face down onto glue. Smooth out bubbles with hand or straight edge and ensure image is secured to wood. Let dry 24 hours.

**5** Thoroughly spray image with water or use wet paper towel. Let soak about two minutes. Rub finger

on image in circular motion to break up paper. Rewet and rub until paper is removed to uncover the image. Do not scrape as it removes the image.

**6** When dry, see if more paper removal is needed as image will be cloudy. Continue to apply water and rub off paper until you have a clear image. Lightly sand edges to create blended, rustic effect.





### Relief Carving (if you choose)

Use c-clamp to hold wood to non-slip work surface. Use gouge tool to carve with the grain, around image edge with a scooping motion. Work out from the image edge. Also carve about 1/2 inch from edge of plaque, working inward. Work in small sections. Carve as deep as desired to achieve preferred effect.



### Wood Burning

Add another dimension with a flat wood burning tip used for shading and lightly char the outer plaque edges. The longer you go over an area, the darker the effect.

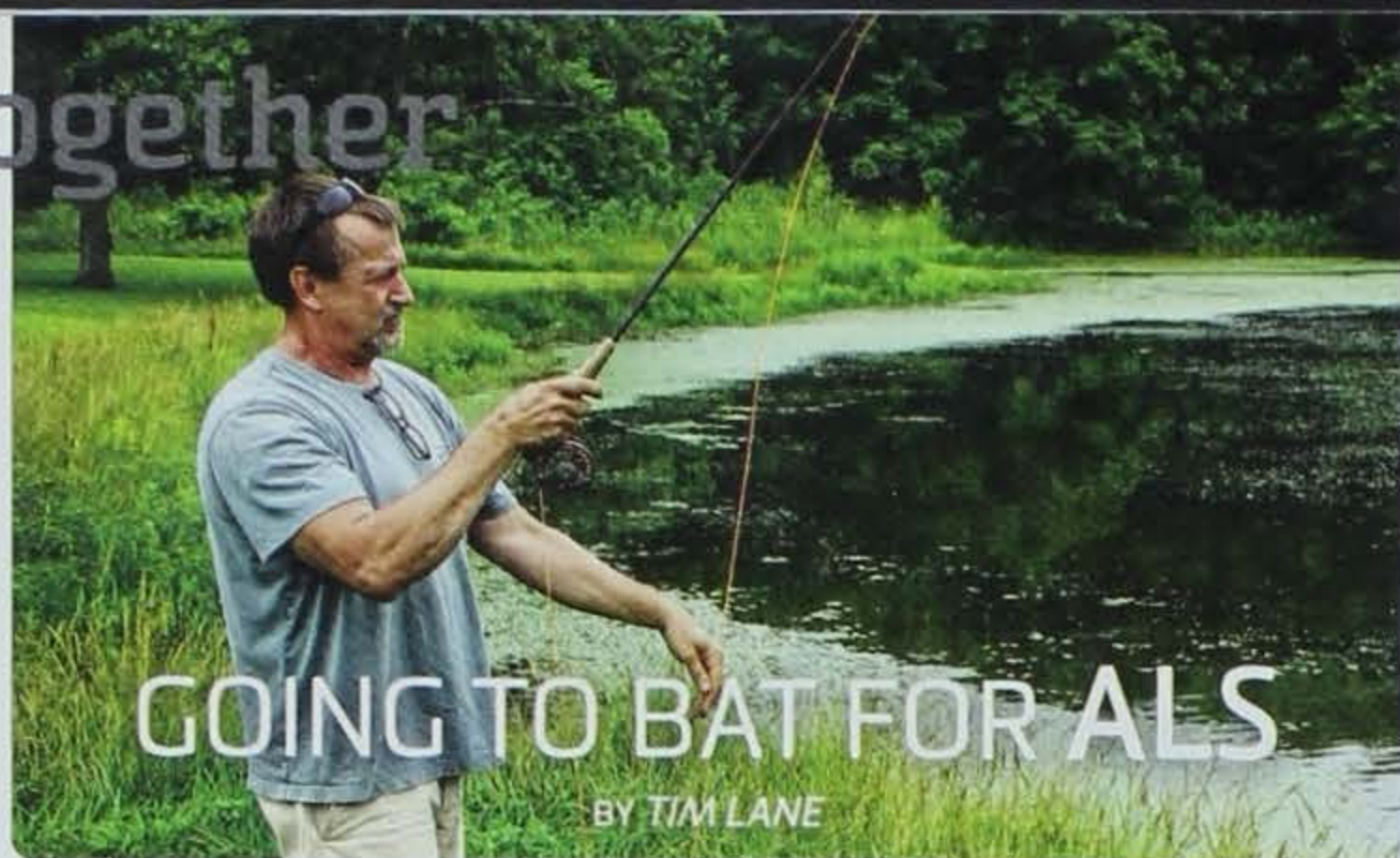
### Attach Branch and Hanger

**1** Laying branch above plaque on work surface, mark two spots with pencil on branch and two on plaque that correspond vertically and horizontally for placement. Drill through each mark. Cut two sections of wire about 6 to 7 inches longer than the distance between the branch and plaque. Put wire through holes on plaque and wrap several times. Insert remaining side of wire into the branch from the backside. Twist wire into a flat spiral and press against front of branch. Repeat on other side.

**2** To create hanger, drill holes 2 inches in from each end of the branch. Cut about 30 inches of wire. Stick one end of wire through each hole from the back side and wrap up and around to secure. Repeat on other side.



# Together



## GOING TO BAT FOR ALS

BY TIM LANE

Recently, there has been a pretty interesting phenomenon arising—people dumping buckets of ice over their heads or having others do it for them. In addition to getting soaked, they and associates pay for the activity by donating funds to ALS research.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis was the condition that affected Lou Gehrig, and ever since has borne his name. It is a neurodegenerative process affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. The degeneration of motor neurons in ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, leads to loss of control, paralysis and ultimately death.

In Greek, amyotrophic means no muscle nourishment. When muscles have no nourishment, they atrophy, and waste away or cease to be muscle. "Lateral" identifies the areas in the spinal cord where portions of the nerve cells that signal and control muscles are located. As this area degenerates, it leads to scarring or hardening (sclerosis) in the region.

My first reaction to the "ice bucket challenge" craze was not to douse myself, but to immerse myself in researching the relationship between ALS and physical activity. Sure enough, I found a study that looked at both exercise and ALS. Dr. Kelvin Jones has conducted research in Canada showing that activity may slow the disease. It is just one thread of research, and it does not show evidence of a cure or prevention. But for those dealing with ALS, it may impact quality of life...which can be huge.

It is not appropriate to make recommendations based on so little data, but I can based on other research. In the process of looking at ALS data, I came across new and more plentiful data on Alzheimer's disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, "One in three seniors die with some form of Alzheimer's or dementia, and... is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. In 2013, Alzheimer's cost the United States \$203 billion, with an expected increase to \$1.2 trillion by 2050."

That is of course bad news, but once again, the good news is nature and activities are good interventions. Research published in the *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease & Other Dementias* indicate "long-suffering dementia and Alzheimer's patients are known to have decreased symptoms following time in gardens or being exposed to horticultural therapy." After countless studies I would have been surprised if there had not been some innate value or other positive outcome.

The same week I reviewed those articles, I was informed by conservation officers that few folks are taking advantage of the camp site nestled on the South Skunk River at Chichaqua Bottoms and grasslands, a site that also features a clean shower house adjacent restored prairie. The same was true for a camp at Yellow Banks Park on the Des Moines River midway between Des Moines and Runnells. This site has a mini-shelter, toilet facilities, showers and restrooms.

Such reports remind me of the wide variety of resources available to us in Iowa that is only surpassed by the wider array of benefits associated with use of those resources. Surely there are underused natural areas near you. When you bike, hike, canoe or camp, think of it as nourishing your muscles.

**TIM LANE** is a nationally recognized authority on public health and physical activity. He is president of the Iowa Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

## But Why?

Helping adults answer children's nature questions

BY A. JAY WINTER

A. Jay Winter educates up to 20,000 Iowa children each year as the DNR's training specialist at the Springbrook Conservation Education Center.

MINDY, AGE 7, IN WARREN COUNTY ASKS:

### Why don't water towers freeze in winter?

Water towers can freeze, but usually not solid. When water is stored in a tower in cold temperatures, ice can form on the water surface, sometimes several feet thick. Ice can freeze to the roof or upper walls of the tank and stay there as the water level in the tank rises and falls throughout the day as customers use water and the tank is refilled, says Jennifer Bunton, a DNR environmental engineer in the water supply section. "As water freezes, it expands, and this expansion can put pressure on the tower and cause it to leak," she says. Water professionals use a variety of means to help keep towers from freezing, including heating and insulating the riser pipe that fills and drains the tower, adding fresh (warmer) water more frequently and adding recirculation systems to mix cold layers of water with warm layers. All of these means can help keep ice from forming. If the worst happens and the riser pipe freezes and cuts off the water supply, a contractor must be called in to thaw the blockage with heated water or steam. If a town loses its use of a water tower, customers can be affected and fire departments would have difficulty fighting fires during an emergency.



PHOTOS BY STUDIO Z



TIPS, TRICKS AND MUST-KNOWS TO ENHANCE YOUR OUTDOOR FUN

## Wintry Tips

While focusing and composing shots, hold your breath to prevent frosting the camera viewfinder. After outdoor use in cold weather, protect sensitive digital camera electronics by placing them inside sealed plastic bags before entering a warm house. The bag allows cold optical and electronic gear to warm up while condensation forms outside the bag. If viewfinders fog on cameras, binoculars or scopes, use commercial antifog spray and microfiber cloths. They are available for under \$10. The cloth is good for lens cleaning, too.



## Desiccant Packs

Repurpose silica desiccant packs that come with shoes, leather goods, medicine bottles and toys to protect valuable outdoor equipment from moisture and mildew. Throw a couple packs in camera bags, gun cases, tackle boxes, ammunition storage or where clothes or photos are stored. Toss several in gun cabinets. Store unused packs in a resealable bag for future use.



## Walleyes

Walleyes can be finicky feeders, no more so than during winter. Fish jigging lures within 18 inches of the bottom. Jig the bait, being ready for the subtle bite as the spoon drops to the bottom. If the bite is lite, tip the spoon with a small minnow, minnow head or piece of fish belly meat. Use the lightest line, weight and bobber to minimize resistance. Resist the temptation to set the hook immediately; walleye often "mouth" the bait before swallowing.



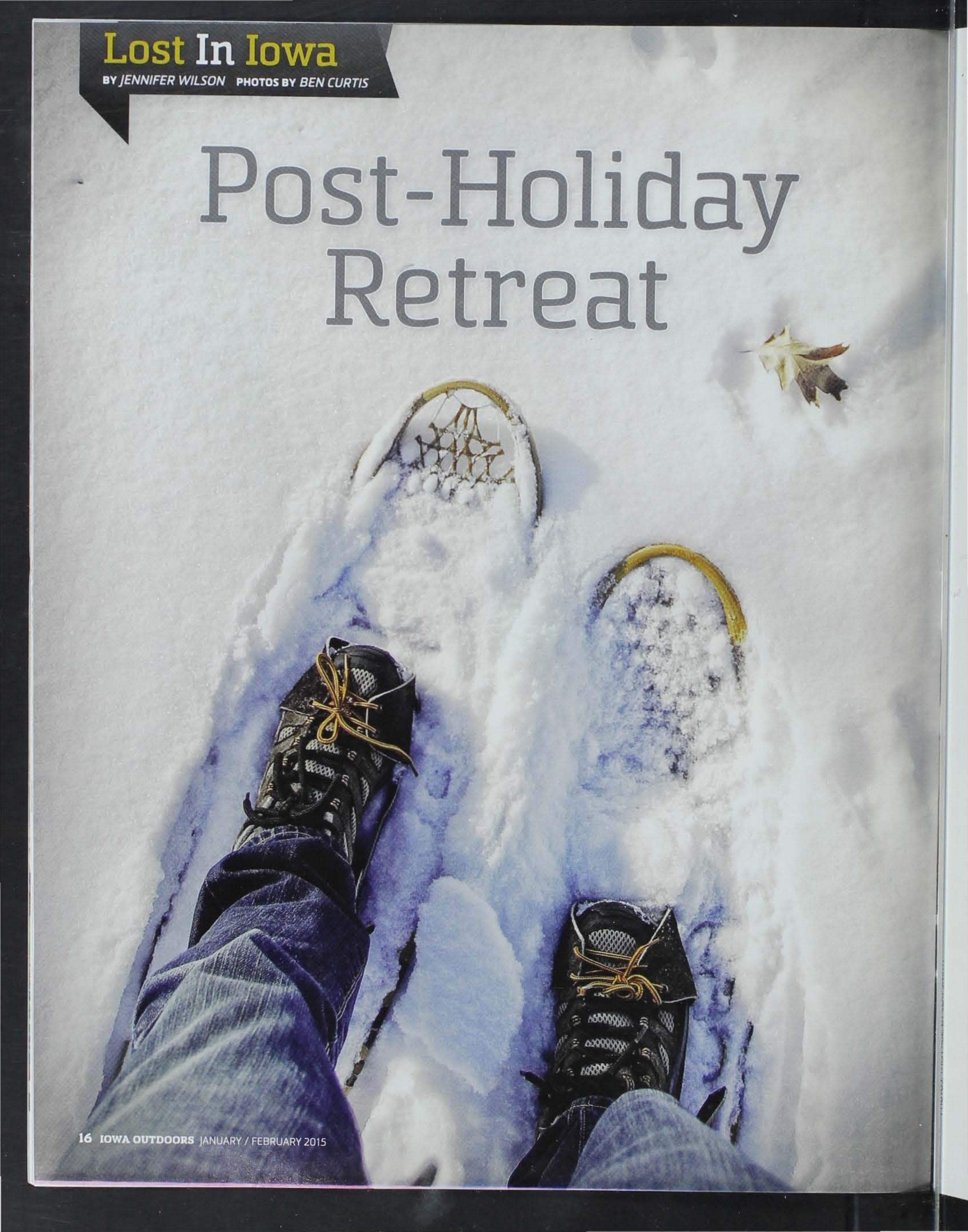
## Zipper Repair

Repair winter coats, mittens, boots, backpacks, tents, sleeping bags or anything with a fouled zipper by finding where the zipper is stuck. If the malfunction is caused by an obstruction such as hair, fabric or threads, remove it. Lip balm aids as a lubricant. Straighten bent or misaligned teeth with a knife or tweezers. Heavy-duty zippers may need needle-nose pliers to repair bent teeth.





# Post-Holiday Retreat





# At Lake of Three Fires State Park in southwest Iowa, there's a whole lot of quiet going on.

A delicate slipcover of snow blankets Lake of Three Fires State Park in winter. It's the perfect sound-muting mantle for a group of moms recovering from the noise of holiday chaos with some quiet ice fishing and a wide-open weekend for the first time in months.

"No one's calling, no one's needing anything," says Susan Fleming of Des Moines, surveying the ice. "My only purpose here is finding the right spot, drilling the hole, choosing my bait, dropping a hook. There's no agenda right now beyond catching fish."

Standing on 15 inches of ice on 85-acre Lake of Three Fires, a pile of crappie and bluegill in the snow next to his rod, DNR fisheries technician Dray Walter adds: "Out here, everything stays the same. It's the fish that come and go."

For a weekend getaway with friends, where nothing will interrupt relaxation or quiet connecting, this southern Iowa park, 25 miles east of Clarinda, is ideal.

## A warmer side of Iowa

Beyond his bright blue eyes, Dray Walter has the mind of a fishing aficionado. He'll tell you exactly how to snag some crappie, bluegill or bass on this lake, so the angling is as productive as the weekend is laid-back.

It doesn't hurt that the guy giving advice is also named like a character from a romance novel, and he looks just the slightest bit like Mark Wahlberg in *Carhartts*. "Out here, you've got good odds," Walter says. "Go to the DNR website to see all the habitat. Basically, we put fish where you want to fish. We make it easy for you."

Near easy-access points like docks and boat ramps,



DNR fisheries technician Dray Walter with a nice catch.

Susan Fleming of Des Moines enjoys the solitude and serenity at Lake of Three Fires



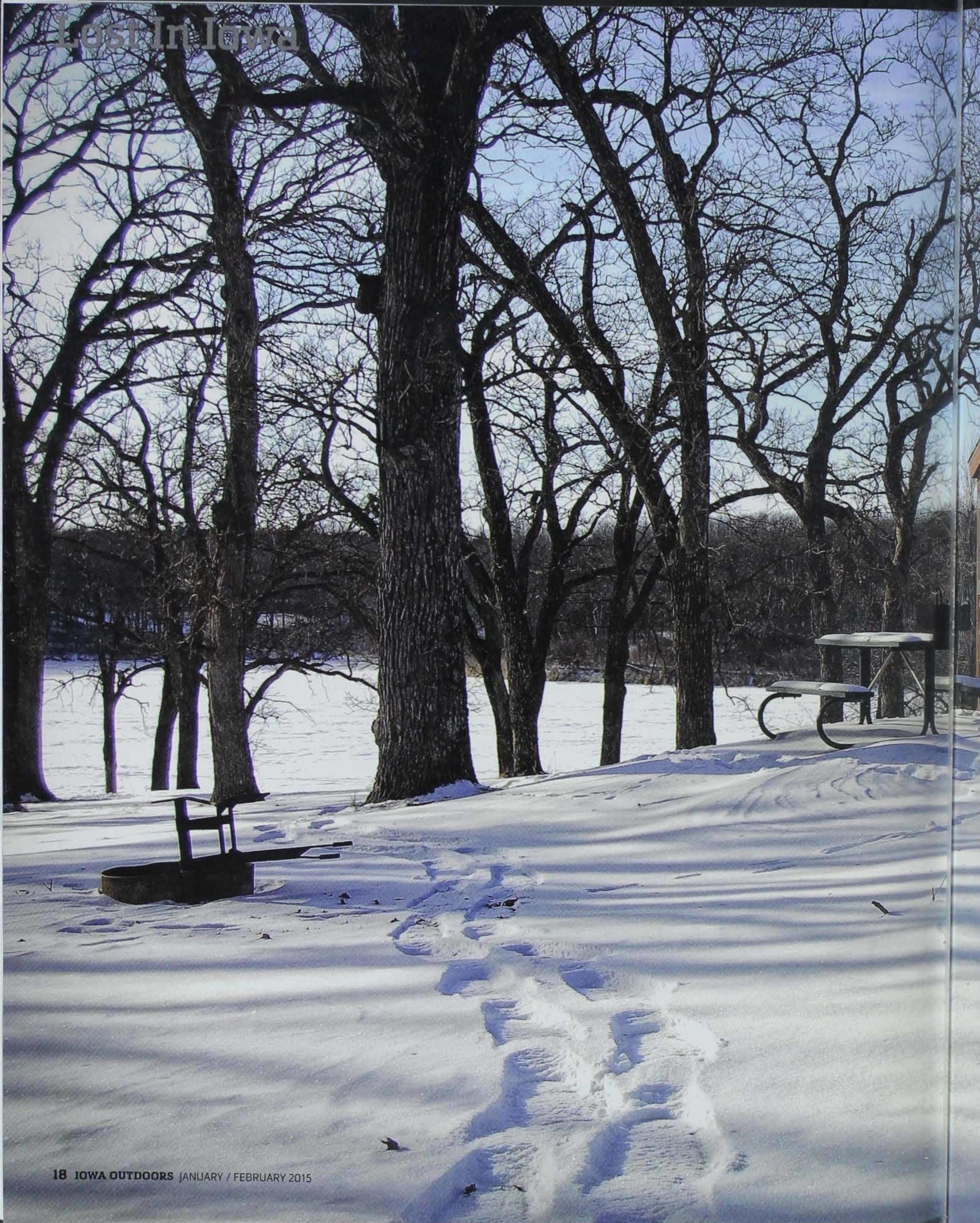
Walter and staff install fish mounds, stake beds, cedar tree piles, rock mounds and reefs to make perfect hide-outs for the fins-and-gills set, but they can't resist darting out for the waxworm or minnow on your hook. The DNR website lists GPS coordinates for all. "You park and you walk right out here and start knocking holes in the ice," says Walter.

Green Valley State Park and Twelve Mile Creek Lake, nearby, are more popular, says Walter, and the fishing is phenomenal there—for you and the 30 other icehouses ganging around every cedar tree pile on the ice.

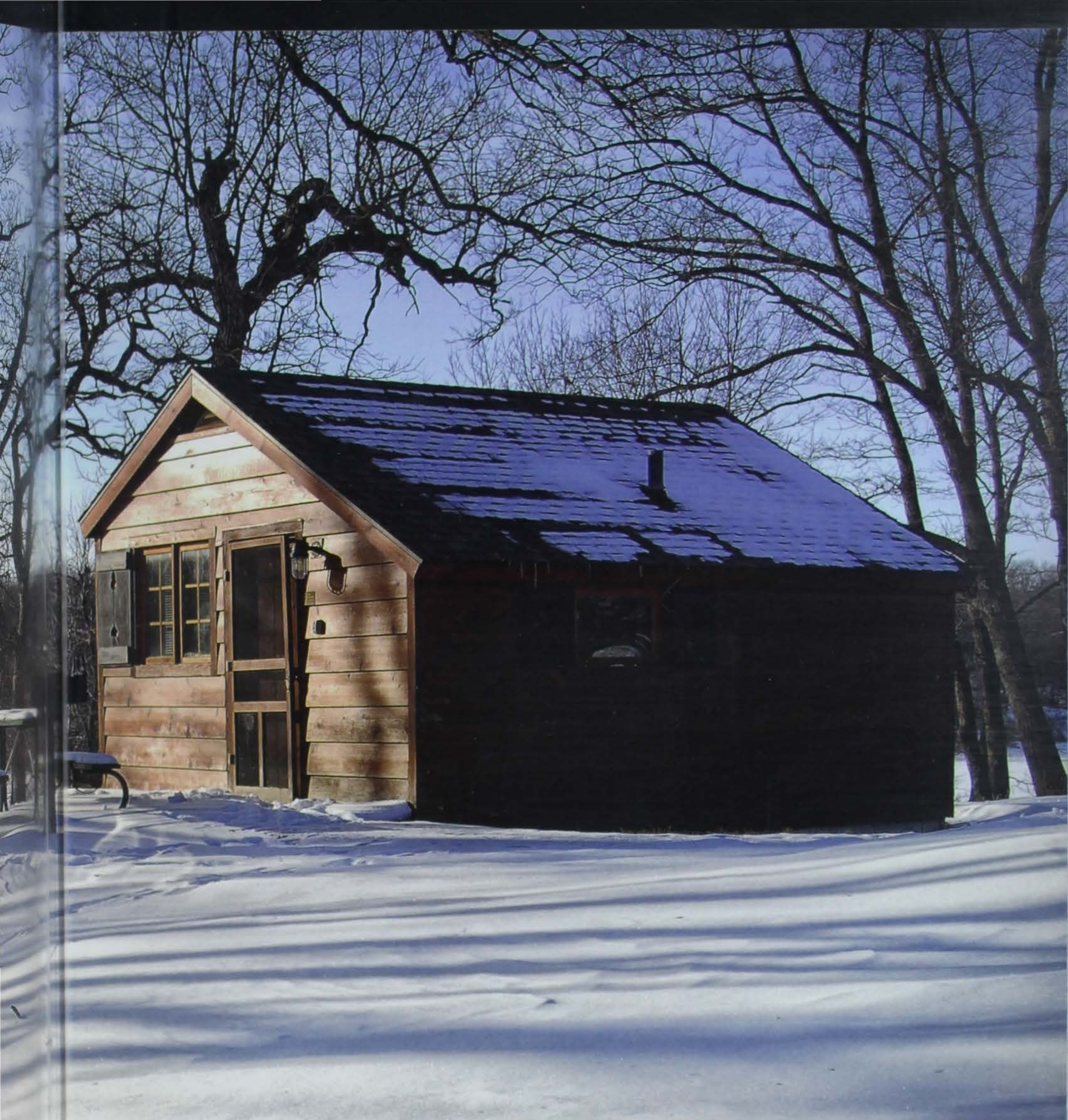
At Lake of Three Fires, he says, "to get away and be by yourself, this is the place that you want."

Plus, those parks don't offer lakeside cabins, heated in winter, where you can sip from a Thermos and chat up your friends like the old days. It's generally warmer in









What's behind the park name Lake of Three Fires? Legend has it the Native American Pottawattomi tribe, known as the "Fire Nation," roamed southern Iowa, joining forces with two other tribes for protection against invading tribes in a loose confederacy known as "Three Fires." It is believed the three tribes held a council meeting to form the alliance. Three fires, held atop the highest hills, signaled the exact location.



# Lost In Iowa

southern Iowa than most other parts of the state—not a tropical island, but not bad for a budget getaway—and you can venture out to a nearby town for a civilized side trip.

## Outside explorations

Just a few minutes from the park, Main Street Bedford has seen better days, though a few gifts and antiques shops remain. Zeb's Smokehouse is the shopping spot of the moment here, with a steady flow of traffic pulling in to buy custom smoked meats, venison and honey from Dray Walter's own bees.

The Junction Café serves a gut-busting supper, and you won't be the one cleaning up the dishes from a decadent meal that's mostly house-made, including brisket and old-fashioned chicken dinner on gravy and biscuits—skip the over-touted strawberry shortcake for fresh pies and cobblers.

In Clarinda, start a morning with solid coffee and lots of cozy chat nooks at Garrison Coffee House, serving locally loved donuts made in nearby Shenandoah, plus house-made sandwiches, salads and desserts in an interesting atmosphere tricked out with architectural artifacts such as a tin ceiling bearing a chandelier from the old Younkers Tea Room in Des Moines.

"There's not a TV screen in here," says owner Caroline Miller. "This place is about communicating. It's a lost art. Just listen."

Miller waves her hand around the spacious room with weathered hardwood floors. It's abuzz with groups catching up together.

"It's not rushed. It's a place to connect and have fun."

Clarinda visitors might also breakfast at Vaughn's Café on the pretty town square with the big courthouse building at its center, but you won't eat locally-sourced fare as you will in Garrison's. After filling the tank, Clarinda has quilt and antiques shops, a clothing store, and the nicely done Glenn Miller Birthplace Museum, in the town where the "Moonlight Serenade" composer was born in 1904 before his family moved to Nebraska.

"We present a great history of dance music from the Big Band era," says Walt Pritchard, museum board member for 25 years. "This is active music, whether it's Lawrence Welk with waltz, or Xavier Cugat with rumba. At the museum, you'll learn all about this participation-led music."

## Running among the owls

Lake of Three Fires is the quiet base at the heart of all this. There's a gentle appeal to the lack of action, after the frenzy of the gift-opening and the meal planning and, well, the relatives.

At this park, birdwatching is a major sport.

Park manager Doug Sleep notes a barred owl calling as he hikes along one of the eight miles of trails. "I've seen a pileated woodpecker recently," he notes. "You're not going to get disturbed by lots of traffic through the park. And the ice fishing and cross-country skiing are great."

Sleep recently had a woman check in to one of the cabins—which you'll have little trouble booking—to sit around all week, just reading books. The Bedford cross-country team runs the trails, which are short and looped. Bikers and walkers hit the near-deserted country roads surrounding the park, where every rusty windmill is a photo op. Public areas north and south of Lake of Three Fires set aside land for rabbit hunting habitat that might put some wild game in the slow cooker for supper.

But, says Sleep, overlooking the lake as Dray Walter reels in yet another bluegill, it's not the action that makes Lake of Three Fires State Park a winter repose. It's you, and your blissfully open agenda.

"The solitude is really worth a lot to people," he says. "Especially this time of year."

For Susan Fleming, she's mapping out a dreamy day. A short hike to the lake, sketching the winterscape, journaling, taking some time with light and composition while photographing the empty countryside. She'll have time for a trail run, hopping over roots and puddles, feeling alive, listening to her heart beat. Next it's a shower and a beverage, a fire outside, chatting over a slow cooker meal, ending the evening in a cozy bed with a good book.

"The key is that it's not time-driven," she says. "No watches, no clocks, no cell phone, no Internet. Time stopped at this park. There are no rules or things you have to do."

"It's a short distance to travel to leave the world behind."

## Trip Notes

**Lake of Three Fires State Park.** Bring your trail shoes, sketchbook, camera, slow cooker, a conversation starter game. You won't be inundated with activity—and that's a good thing. Eight miles of trails, cabins, campsites, a lake and a lodge. 2303 Lake Rd., Bedford. **712-523-2700**; [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov)

**Zeb's Smokehouse.** We challenge you to find better jerky on the planet. In Bedford. [Zebssmokehouse.com](http://Zebssmokehouse.com); **712-523-2526**.

**The Junction Café.** Recently sold but remains tasty and a must-stop in Bedford. **712-523-2454**

**Garrison Coffee House.** Sandwiches, salad and conversation, plus best coffee in the area. Clarinda, **712-542-3777**.

**Glenn Miller Birthplace Museum.** Open Tues-Sun 1-5 p.m. in Clarinda. Admission charged. [glennmiller.org](http://glennmiller.org).

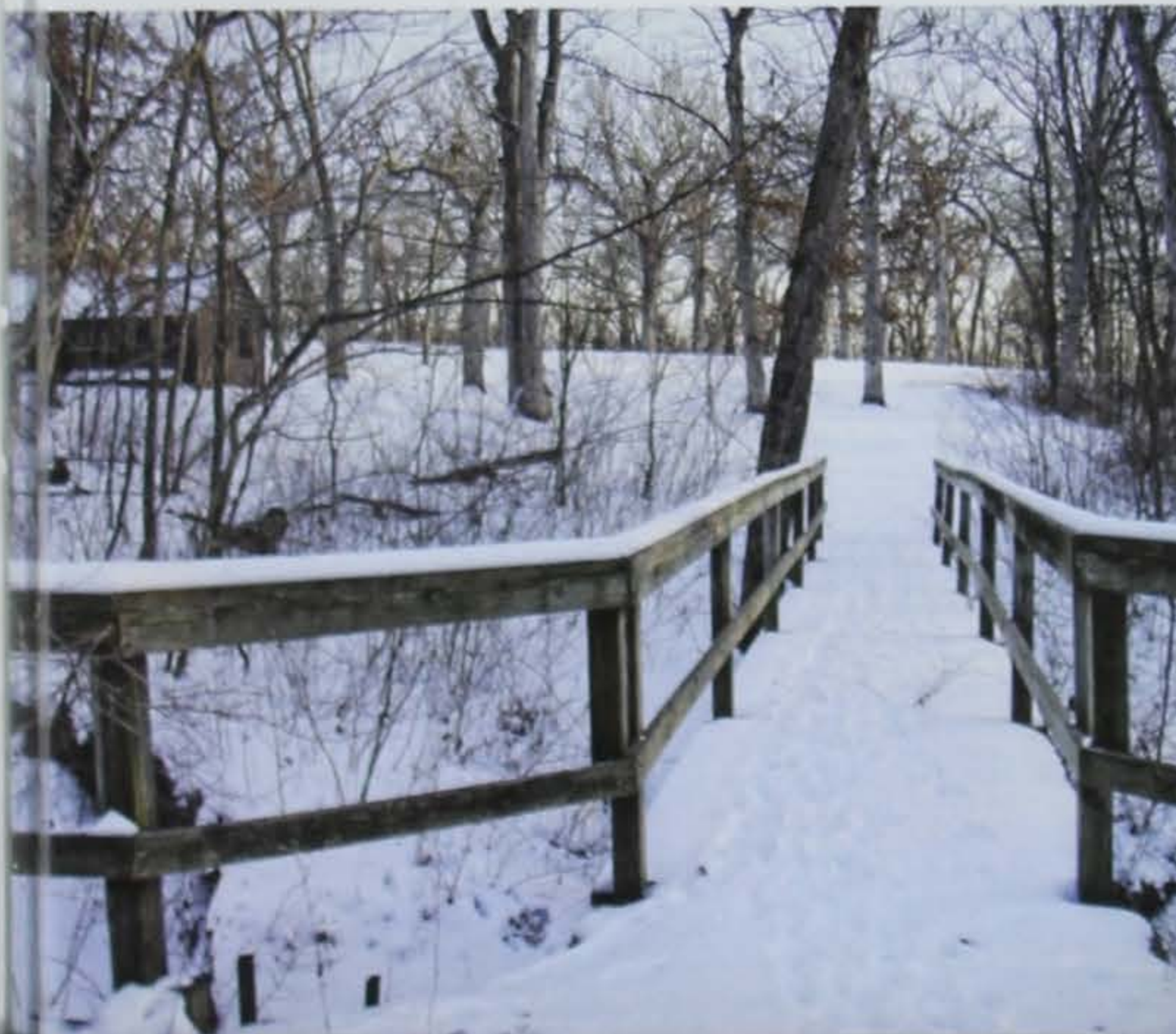
**Ice House Restaurant and Sports Bar.** Pastas, steaks, sandwiches and seafood, plus plenty of sports on the screens as the owner circulates to make sure everything goes smoothly in this family-friendly Clarinda joint.

**712-542-4010**; [clarindaicehouse.com](http://clarindaicehouse.com).





Lake of Three Fires is a great place for a family getaway. Two modern cabins located a short distance from the lake comfortably accommodate four. Roughly eight miles of marked trails cater to hikers, snowshoers and snowmobilers. Some 380 acres of public hunting surround the park. The 85-acre lake is nearly a mile long and a half-mile wide, which plenty of scenic inlets, providing ample fishing opportunities.





# Lost In Iowa







Solitude and beauty envelops those that venture here in winter. Whether hunting 380 acres of public land adjacent the park, fishing the nearly mile long, half-mile wide 85-acre lake or wandering 691 acres of picturesque woodlands—winter here provides ever-changing sights.



# SNOWMOBILE





# SNOWMOBILING

BY ALAN FOSTER PHOTOS BY MINDY KRALICEK

**D**on a helmet, clip on a kill switch cord and throttle a heavy sled on the trailhead all the way around Rathbun Lake, returning to the door of a rented, cozy Honey Creek Resort State Park cabin. Whether here or on any one of the thousands of miles of snowmobile trails in Iowa, feel the rush of scooting almost effortlessly across snow or ice in what is becoming an increasingly popular wintertime recreation activity—snowmobiling. Established trails are making the difference, says DNR Off Highway Vehicle program coordinator David Downing, who says in the past, travel was required to find a safe, groomed track.

“Ten years ago there were only about 4,000 miles of designated snowmobile trails in Iowa,” says Downing. “Today there are more than 8,800, and 13 state parks have designated trails.”

Downing offers advice to sledders, who more and more are turning snowmobiling into a family event:

- Make sure you have registration, user permit and liability insurance.
- If you are 12 to 17 years of age, have your valid safety certificate.
- Respect the mix of city, county, state, federal and private property you will ride.
- Stay on the trail or stay home.
- Stay away from delicate ecosystems, like wetlands, preserves, bogs and riverbanks.

## NEW RULES FOR THE SEASON

- Minors under 16 may operate a snowmobile under the direct supervision of an adult.
- Operators under 12 years old do not have to have an education certificate. (Learn more at [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov)).
- Operators 12 through 17 must complete a snowmobile education class and possess a valid certificate. ([iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov))
- All registrations can be made through the county recorder's office beginning Sept. 1.
- Snowmobiles manufactured before 1984 can be registered an antique by providing a bill of sale.

## SUPER GROUPS

Most trails are in the northern half of the state, although eastern Iowa has a good number of trails (In fact, of the 30,000 registered sleds in Iowa, Linn County has the most). With thousands of miles of established trails and more added each year, someone has to maintain them. That's where the 52 volunteer snowmobile clubs in the state come into play.

“There is no other volunteer base like these people,” says Downing. “They groom, install signs, repair damage, lay rock trails—even build bridges when needed. They are a wealth of personal and professional resources.”

While many trails wind through highway ditches, more and more are moving toward established trails on public and private property, Downing adds.





Find snowmobile clubs and trail maps at [iowasnowmobiler.com](http://iowasnowmobiler.com) or [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov).

Have questions about state rules and regulations governing snowmobiles? Search snowmobiles at [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov).





## PAY TO PLAY

Iowa's snowmobile program is funded entirely by machine registration and user permit fees, required when operating on public land, ice or designated trails. These fees are \$17.75 each. That equates to roughly \$1 million annually, Downing says. Most is returned to snowmobile clubs as grants to purchase groomers, drags, fuel, equipment repair, signs and trail liability insurance. Additional funding for snowmobile clubs comes from membership fees.

"There's probably another \$4 to \$5 million in in-kind volunteer work," Downing says.

## BY THE NUMBERS

- Nearly 30,000 snowmobiles are registered in Iowa.
- Iowa has 50 grooming machines that use more than 25,000 gallons of fuel during a good snow year.
- An estimated 11,300 families in Iowa snowmobile.
- Iowans spend more than \$76 million annually on snowmobile equipment and activities, two-thirds of which is spent in the state. Iowans ride more than 15 million miles annually, for a household average of 1,340 miles.
- Iowa snowmobilers buy 1.65 million gallons of gasoline per year, roughly 60 gallons per machine.

## TAKE A WINTER SPIN AT OHV PARKS

If you are more of the two- and four-wheel fanatic, give Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) parks a look this winter for an extra challenge. Although some accommodate snowmobilers, most cater to ATVs, off-road motorcycles (ORMs) and off-road utility vehicles (ORVs). Often hilly, with bumps and jumps, these tracks aren't always best suited for snowmobiles. Contact the supervisory club or organization to see if they allow snowmobile use.

Make sure to follow all DNR and park rules. Registrations must be current and carried, and decals must be displayed. Helmets required. All machines must have working brakes. Comply with all posted signs, and operation while under the influence of drugs or alcohol is prohibited. Parks are generally open year-round, with hours sunrise to sunset, unless track conditions warrant otherwise. Go to [lowadnr.gov/ohvparks](http://lowadnr.gov/ohvparks) for details.

### OPEN to ATV, ORM and ORV use:

**Lakeview**—Located in Johnson County north of Iowa City. Tracks available for beginner to advanced; Marck Dudrey, 319-841-2024; Conservation Officer Erika Billerbeck, 319-330-9710.

**Tama County**—Located south of Tama on highway 63; 300-acre park with tight, wooded trails, some hills and a 15-mile perimeter trail; 13 primitive and 10 electric campsites available. [clubsporttama.com](http://clubsporttama.com); conservation officer Brett Reece, 641-751-0931.

**Nicholson-Ford**—Located in northeast Marshalltown, this 110-acre park has nearly 20 miles of tight, river bottom, wooded trails. [lowariverohvclub.com](http://lowariverohvclub.com), conservation officer Tyson Brown, 641-751-5246.

**Rathbun**—Located in Appanoose County on the southwest arm of the lake off highway 142; 120-acre riding area on Army Corps of Engineers land. [scdrrohv@gmail.com](mailto:scdrrohv@gmail.com); conservation officer Jacob Fulk, 541-777-2164

**River Valley**—200-acre park located along the Missouri River in Council Bluffs off the highway 275 bridge. [Rvtr.org](http://Rvtr.org); 402-478-8701; conservation officer Richard Price, 712-520-5570.

**Gypsum City**—Located southeast of Fort Dodge in Webster County. This 800-acre park has 15 miles of rolling hill trails, 1.5-mile MX track, .4-mile kids track, a beginner and safety training area, day-use areas, mudding area, fishing ponds, 24.1 miles of ATV trails, 34.6 miles of ORM trails and 15.1 miles of ORV trails. [Fortdodgeiowa.org](http://Fortdodgeiowa.org). Conservation officer Dakota Drisch, 515-571-0127; park manager Darren Herzog, 515-576-4258.

### Open to ATV and ORM use:

**Bluff Creek**—Located in Mahaska County southwest of Oskaloosa. This 350-acre converted coal mine features 20 miles of trails, steep hill climbs, deep pits, as well as four motocross tracks. One track dedicated to beginning/novice riders; one track—the "gravity cavity"—is extremely challenging. Andy VanMaren, 641-969-4214; conservation officer John Steinbach, 641-660-0741.

**Riverview**—Located on Hawthorne Street in Waterloo, this 180-acre park is surrounded by the Cedar River, with riverside trails. Variety of riding, including two motocross tracks, a 4-mile perimeter track and a "pee wee" track. [Trailblazersoffroadclub.com](http://Trailblazersoffroadclub.com); conservation officer Mike Bonser, 319-240-5034.

## RULES OF THE ROAD

- Avoid non-motorized trails marked with cross-country ski signs. Snowmobiles ruin ski tracks.
- Do not harass or endanger wildlife. Protect winter wildlife populations by viewing animals from a distance, maintaining a constant speed and staying on your sled when animals are present.
- Slow down and give the right-of-way to skiers, hikers, snowshoers and dogsledders.
- Keep to the right on the trail.
- Operate in a safe and courteous manner.
- Give trail groomers the right-of-way.
- Reduce speed when encountering oncoming traffic.
- Give uphill riders right-of-way when traveling downhill.
- Do not exceed posted speed limits for an area and obey all other trail signs.
- Do not pull over on a curve or turn. If you need to stop on a trail, pull to the right on straight stretches only. 🐾





Mink occupy areas near rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and marshes. Often preyed upon by larger predators, including owls, bobcats, fox and coyote, they seek safety and shelter in logs or hollow trees.

The mink has a long, sleek body about 2 feet long. This shape allows it to enter burrows in search of prey, but is also hydrodynamic underwater. As skilled tree climbers, they can jump tree-to-tree as well as descend trunks head first.





# The mighty Mink

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TY SMEDES

As a resident of Iowa's wetland and creek-side habitats, this elusive member of the weasel family is a savage little predator—feared by many animals its size or smaller.

**I**t's afternoon in late September, and central Iowa's drought is well into its second year. A quiet pool, carved deep by an adjacent culvert's flow, still holds water. It's a calm day with nary a breeze in the woods, but an odd rustling of leaves catches my attention. A small dark form emerges, and a weasel-like animal quickly scurries to the edge of the pool, bouncing onto a log that protrudes into still waters. It's a little animal, with short dark fur and long slender body. Pausing for a moment, it slips into the depths of the pool

and reappears a few seconds later with a minnow clenched between its teeth. After quickly consuming his catch, the fierce little hunter swiftly returns to the water and reappears with a minnow. Again and again he executes his routine, each time emerging quickly with another small fish. The pool is a honey-hole, teeming with refugees from the drought—including crayfish, frogs, turtles and many species of minnows and larger fish. This little carnivore is an American mink (*Neovison vison*), a savage predator, member of the weasel family and a common Iowa resident.





**FISH STICKS:** To catch fish, mink are wonderful underwater swimmers using an undulating body motion for propulsion. Capable of diving as deep as 16 feet and swimming underwater up to 35 yards, most fish catches occur after a short chase. Its soft, thick fur is covered with oily guard hairs that make a waterproofed coat.



## A Hunter With a Large Catch

It's a warm day in early December, and I'm hunting deer from a neighbor's tree stand, no more than 100 yards from Beaver Creek just south of Granger. It's another one of those quiet days, and in the distance a rustling of leaves and a slight movement catch my attention. It's a mink—and he's struggling mightily—dragging something ever closer to my position. His progress is labored, and as he draws closer, I'm finally able to determine the identity of the animal he is so determined to carry off. It's a catfish, and it's nearly as big as him. The valiant little predator continues towards me, panting heavily, and pausing to catch his breath before trudging another 20 to 30 feet to his next rest stop. As this wildlife spectacle continues to unfold, his route brings him directly beneath me. With mouth agape and tongue hanging out, he again struggles to catch his breath. Continuing past me, he eventually lugs his prey towards a distant embankment, where he most likely has a den.

As I watch the determined little predator drag his prize into the distance, I can only marvel at the strength and tenacity of this feisty little hunter. Today, my camera is at home, but my disappointment is mild. I've been left with memories of this special day, and a special little animal.

## Mighty Mustelid

The American mink is a mustelid and belongs to the weasel family. Mustelids include 65 species (and 25 genera) of weasels, badgers, ferrets, fishers, martens, otters, minks, wolverines and more. The earliest mustelids appeared during the early Oligocene Epoch, roughly 35 million years ago. Built much like its larger relative the otter, the mink has a long, sleek body about 2 feet long. It has short, stubby legs, a long neck, small ears and eyes and a long, thick tail. In fact, one third of the mink's length is tail. It has brown to black fur with white on its chin and throat. Its fur is soft, thick and covered with oily guard hairs that make it waterproof. This little mammal is an accomplished swimmer with slightly webbed feet to nab underwater prey.

## Find Mink across Iowa from Mighty Rivers to Creeks and Marshes

Mink can be found in most of the United States and Canada, excluding Hawaii, Arizona and parts of several other western states. In Iowa, it makes its home near most any marsh or river, including even the tiniest meandering creeks. I have spotted them bouncing along



the narrow creek that flows beneath our Urbandale driveway, and along the backwaters of Beaver Creek just northwest of Des Moines. They love a marsh environment, and I've been visited by mink in the doorway of my duck blind. They have been spotted crossing from one island to another in the Mississippi River, and popping out of small culverts beneath suburban bike trails. Road-killed mink have even been spotted along the Des Moines freeway, near downtown. A primarily nocturnal animal, they are most active at dawn and dusk to avoid human detection.

## All for a Mink-Sized Meal

The mink is a carnivore, and preys upon mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, frogs, crayfish and even muskrats and rabbits as large as itself. It kills prey by biting the neck, and sometimes stockpiles extra food in its den. It occasionally feeds upon carrion. Mink often use empty riverbank dens, abandoned by beaver or muskrat, or a hollow log. Its dens often have more than one entrance and are typically located close to water. It never uses the same den for long. A mink spends a lot of time in or near water, hunting its next meal. It's an excellent swimmer and can dive as deep as 16 feet and swim under water up to 35 yards. It's a skilled tree climber and can jump from tree to tree, as well as descend trees head first. Like the skunk, the mink sprays intruders with a foul-smelling liquid. However, unlike the skunk, the mink can't aim its spray. When a mink is happy, it purrs like a cat. Males are very



Excerpts from the classic nature writing of famed Iowa State University wildlife biology professor Paul L. Errington (1902-1962) in *Of Men and Marshes* published in 1957. Order at [uiowapress.org](http://uiowapress.org) or 800-621-2736. 178 pages. \$22

"I like to watch minks as much as any of the marsh dwellers, although opportunities for direct observations of minks are variable.


One may spend day after day for months on a marsh without seeing a mink, then see minks every day for several days. Sights of minks may be only of an animal running along the shore or sticking its head out of a hole in a muskrat lodge. It is more of an event when a mink stands erect on hind feet to look, or maybe to approach out of curiosity, alternatively running back and returning. To that extent, it shows its kinship with the weasels, but I never have known any mink to be quite as curious and bold as the weasels.

The most boldness a free wild mink ever showed me was to snatch from my hands some of its food I was examining at the entrance of its den. In another instance, a screaming mink jumped toward my face as I looked into a hole in the top of a muskrat lodge.

The minks are specialists in seeking and exploiting dead creatures. They are adept at detecting the scent of the dead as it penetrates to the outside from snowdrift or muskrat lodge or burrow. They are also sufficiently good diggers to break through many frozen surfaces and they can eat away the accessible flesh of coots, ducks, and muskrats partly imbedded in ice."







**HEAVY MEAL:** Mink prey upon muskrats, mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, frogs, crayfish and even rabbits and birds. They are very active—seemingly in perpetual motion. Like the skunk, mink spray aggressors with a foul-smelling liquid. But, unlike skunks, are unable to aim the spray. When content, they purr like a cat. Very territorial, they mark turf with scent, and fight other mink that invade their area.



territorial, marking their home range with scent, and fighting other males that invade their space.

### The Making of the Next Generation

Female mink reach sexual maturity at about one year, but males are not mature until around 18 months. Mating occurs January through April, with kits born April through June. The female uses delayed implantation, with fertilized eggs not implanting in the uterus or developing right away. Although embryo development takes just 30 to 32 days, gestation may span 39 to 78 days, becoming shorter during warm weather, with increased



temperatures. Females give birth to a litter of three to six young in a fur-lined nest. Babies are weaned when 5 to 6 weeks old, learn to hunt at about eight weeks and stay with their mother until fall. Their life-span is three to four years in the wild.

### Prized for its Luxurious Fur

Mink fur has historically been prized for use in clothing, with fashionable mink coats fetching between \$2,000 to \$7,000. According to DNR records, "The proportion of mink in the total Iowa fur harvest has remained relatively constant since the 1930s. Mink harvests reached a high of 60,397 during the 1946-47 season as a result of a sudden increase in value from the previous season (\$6.75 to \$28.16 per pelt). During World War II, European demand for furs collapsed, and within two seasons, Iowa mink harvests fell dramatically to 16,571. Mink harvests

stabilized in the early 1950s and averaged around 16,000 through the next four decades. Since the mid-1990s, harvests have remained below the long-term average. Harvests in the early and mid-2000s showed steady decline, although the 2010-11 harvest topped the five- and 10-year averages at 11,262."

The 2012-13 mink harvest was just 7,609, a significant decrease from the previous season despite nearly identical season dates. "Dry weather conditions were likely the main reason for the recent decline in the mink harvest," says DNR furbearer biologist Vince Evelsizer. The average mink pelt price in Iowa was \$15.91 (\$9.20-29.00), which was higher than the 2011-12 price (\$12.62).

Mink hunting and trapping have been somewhat replaced by mink farming, although "the pulse of mink farming in Iowa has greatly subsided," says Evelsizer.

### Surviving Disease, Flood and Drought in Today's Wild Weather

As a smaller predator, mink occasionally become prey for owls, bobcats, fox and coyote. According to Evelsizer, "CRP habitat helped mink a lot. Conversely, recent reductions in CRP acreage have hurt mink populations in Iowa. There was a pulse of mink ranching in Iowa's past, although there aren't many mink farms left today. Aleutian disease is also a concern." First recognized in ranch-raised mink in 1956, the disease came by its name because it was initially found in mink with the Aleutian coat color gene, having a gun-metal grey pelt. It was assumed that the disease was a result of poor genetics, but was later found mink with other coat color variations were also susceptible to the disease—despite a lower mortality compared with Aleutian mink.

Recent research shows domestic mink escaped from mink farms that have hybridized with wild mink, can potentially spread the disease to wild mink populations. The disease reduces fitness in wild mink by reducing the productivity of adult females and survivorship of juveniles and adults. Extreme weather events can also affect populations, and Evelsizer says "a spring flash flood can drown kits caught in a den as waters rise quickly. And drought conditions severely affect and diminish much of their food source, as streams and wetlands dry up. They are well adapted to handle these adversities and have done so for thousands of years, but I think what's perhaps different now than in the past is that the flashiness and dynamics of our weather and altered landscape increase these kinds of events, which does likely affect their ability to grow their numbers."

And for the mighty mink, this might be their greatest challenge yet. 🐾





**LEFT:** Mink dig dens along river banks or use hollow logs or abandoned beaver or muskrat dens. They rarely use the same den for long. Females have litters of three to six kits in fur-lined nests. Kits are weaned at five to six weeks, learn to hunt around eight weeks and stay with their mother until fall. Youngsters take to the water as soon as they begin hunting with their mother.



# Texas Rags Northern Style

Provide  
Classic Iowa  
Goose Hunts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY *LOWELL WASHBURN*





The origin of Texas rags is said to have come from that southern state in the 1940s when hunters discovered newspaper sheets, and later white cloth, would attract snow geese. Today they are made of plastic or cloth and resemble wind socks. Hunters wear white overalls to blend in with the spread.



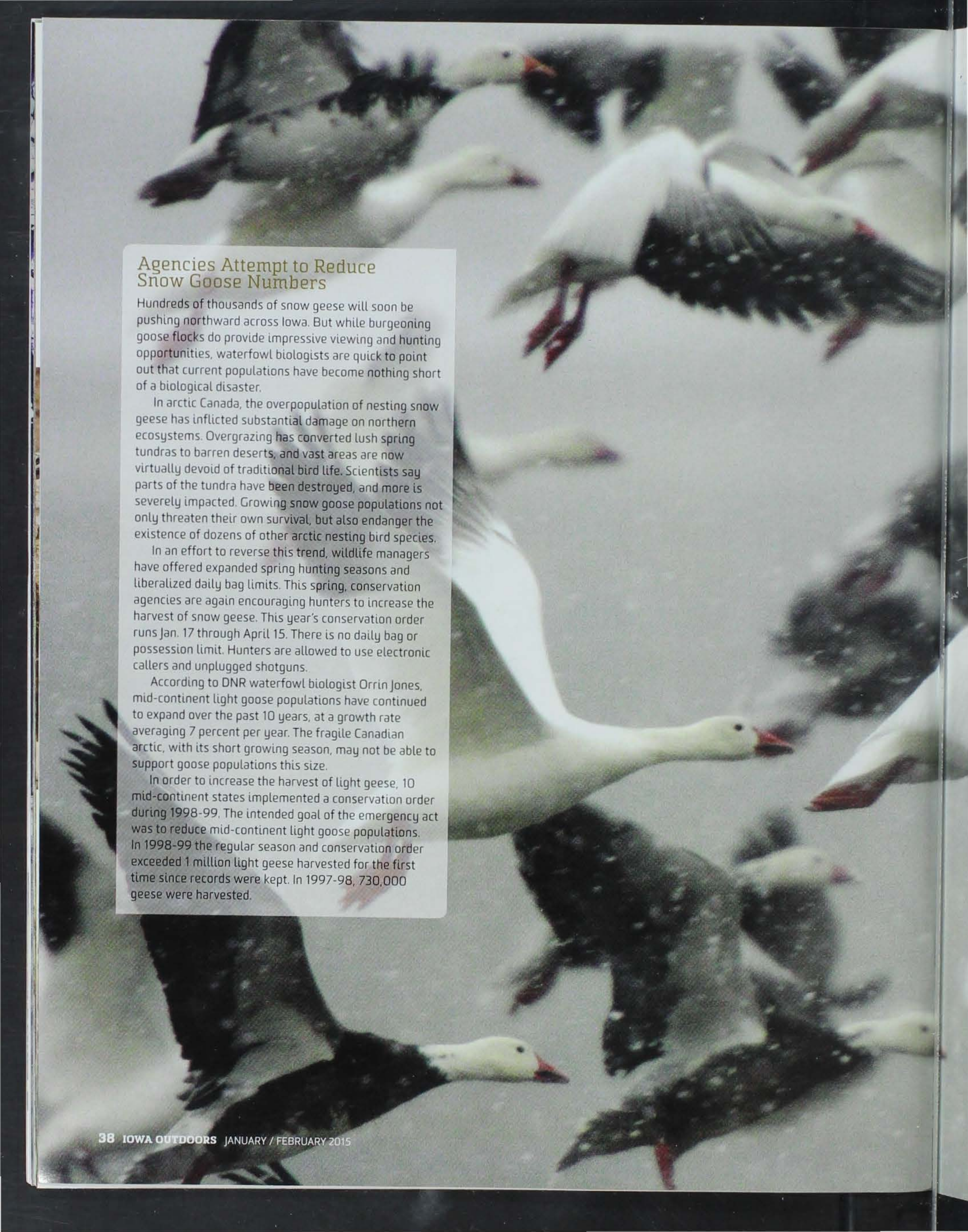
**T**here are a lot of ways to hunt lesser snow geese. They can be chased, pass shot, sneaked or toiled over water to a rig of floating decoys. All will put geese in the bag. But for those waterfowlers who succumb to tradition, there is simply no substitute for the time-honored method of luring migrating snows to a Texas rag set.

Texas rags originated along the southern Gulf coast region where most of America's mid-continent snow goose population spends the winter. As the name implies, Texas rags are nothing more than squares of white cloth.

When spread in large numbers on Iowa's harvested grain fields, the cloth squares become instant decoys. From a distance, the rags do resemble feeding snow geese. However, when viewed up close, they look—well, they look ridiculous. Phony or not, Texas rags do have an uncanny ability to attract and deceive lesser snow geese. In the opinion of some veteran hunters, it is a tactic that is unrivaled.

Although common sense suggests a Texas rag set should be as effective at the top of the flyway as at the bottom, comparatively few hunters use the spreads north





## Agencies Attempt to Reduce Snow Goose Numbers

Hundreds of thousands of snow geese will soon be pushing northward across Iowa. But while burgeoning goose flocks do provide impressive viewing and hunting opportunities, waterfowl biologists are quick to point out that current populations have become nothing short of a biological disaster.

In arctic Canada, the overpopulation of nesting snow geese has inflicted substantial damage on northern ecosystems. Overgrazing has converted lush spring tundras to barren deserts, and vast areas are now virtually devoid of traditional bird life. Scientists say parts of the tundra have been destroyed, and more is severely impacted. Growing snow goose populations not only threaten their own survival, but also endanger the existence of dozens of other arctic nesting bird species.

In an effort to reverse this trend, wildlife managers have offered expanded spring hunting seasons and liberalized daily bag limits. This spring, conservation agencies are again encouraging hunters to increase the harvest of snow geese. This year's conservation order runs Jan. 17 through April 15. There is no daily bag or possession limit. Hunters are allowed to use electronic callers and unplugged shotguns.

According to DNR waterfowl biologist Orrin Jones, mid-continent light goose populations have continued to expand over the past 10 years, at a growth rate averaging 7 percent per year. The fragile Canadian arctic, with its short growing season, may not be able to support goose populations this size.

In order to increase the harvest of light geese, 10 mid-continent states implemented a conservation order during 1998-99. The intended goal of the emergency act was to reduce mid-continent light goose populations. In 1998-99 the regular season and conservation order exceeded 1 million light geese harvested for the first time since records were kept. In 1997-98, 730,000 geese were harvested.









With burgeoning snow goose populations and large migrating flocks, employing large decoy spreads can make the normally wary waterfowl less skittish. Texas rags allow hunters to set out hundreds—even thousands—of decoys easier, quicker and less expensively than hard-shell decoys. And they require less storage space. A pack of 100 Texas rags can be purchased for under \$30 and can be stored in a medium or large tote.



of the wintering grounds. By the time you get as far north as Iowa, they become a true oddity. Travel north of I-80 and no one uses them. Almost no one, except Marcus Majerczyk—one very successful exception.

Majerczyk lives on the east edge of Clear Lake and is best described as a super-dedicated, hard-core waterfowling enthusiast. He's also just about as serious about spring snow goose hunting as a person can get. When the birds are migrating, he'll most likely be found decked out in a white stocking hat and coveralls, lying in the middle of more than 500 Texas rag decoys.

Like most contemporary snow goose enthusiasts, Majerczyk has replaced traditional cloth rags with Tyvek wind socks. Even the slightest breeze fills the lightweight socks with air and instantly the whole rig waddles in place. The result is the highly effective visual illusion of 500 white geese marching across a picked cornfield. To passing snobs, it's an invitation too good to resist.

Majerczyk began assembling his spread in 1998.

During the years he has learned two undeniable facts—Texas rag sets are a lot of work and they are highly effective, even in northern Iowa.

Typically, it takes about two hours to lay out the spread, and slightly longer to pick up. But for a dedicated goose hunter, the rewards are well worth the effort. Majerczyk has yet to be skunked.

"I think a lot of hunters have the idea that rag sets won't work in a place like northern Iowa. People think in order to be successful, you need to stick to the huge goose concentrations that frequent the traditional areas farther south," says Majerczyk.

"I think that once you get away from the Missouri River, snow geese migrating across the interior of the state are a very under-used resource. Most hunters don't realize what they're missing, and I'm always trying to get more people involved in the spring hunt," he adds. "I feel that getting more people into the field generates additional enthusiasm for the sport of waterfowling while, at the same time,





Electronic callers are allowed only during the snow goose conservation order.

helping reduce the number of light geese.

"What I do is not really complicated. Typically, I like to set up in a cornfield near good marsh habitat with shallow water and lots of mud flats. Since we're hunting migrants, it really doesn't matter whether or not any geese have been using the area. I try to make myself as visible as possible by setting up on open flats or hilltops. If the location is high enough, I can pull geese from three or four miles on either side of the spread. I use an electronic caller which is very effective for bringing the birds all the way in."

One of the things that makes Texas rag sets so effective in nontraditional areas, such as Iowa's interior, is the lack of competition from live geese. On the wintering grounds or along Missouri River hotspots, snow geese can see other snow geese everywhere they look. Hunters soon learn it is nearly impossible for a number of decoys to compete with the 50,000 live birds feeding in the next field. But as fewer snows migrate

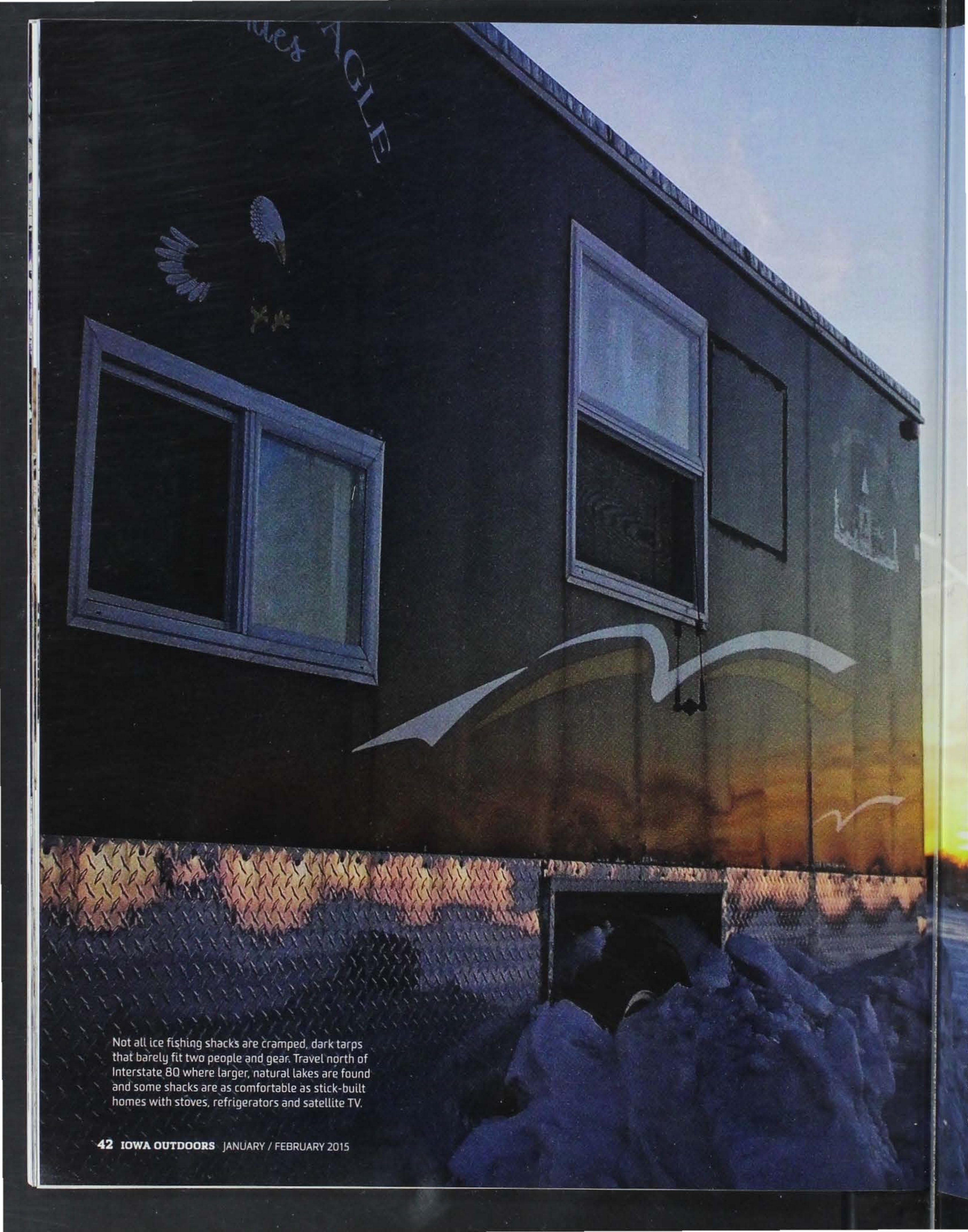
across more centrally located portions of the state, your decoys may be the only other "white geese" they see. One of the most exciting aspects of spring goose hunting, says Majerczyk, is no matter how high the snows are flying, it is still possible to pull them out of the migration pattern. Majerczyk can pull down flocks of geese migrating at around 2,000 feet above the land.

"When you do pull a flock out of the 'jet stream' it might take 20 minutes or more for the geese to come into shooting range. These birds have been hunted hard and they're extremely educated. When a flock does finally commit to landing in the decoys, it's a real thrill.

"The other side of the coin is sometimes a flock—including those containing 500 to 600 geese—will parachute right into the decoys on the first or second pass. You just never know what's going to happen.

"Even if we only shot one goose per day, the noise and excitement of bringing these birds to decoys would be well worth the effort." 🦌





ides HOPE

Not all ice fishing shacks are cramped, dark tarps that barely fit two people and gear. Travel north of Interstate 80 where larger, natural lakes are found and some shacks are as comfortable as stick-built homes with stoves, refrigerators and satellite TV.





# PALACES ON ICE THE FRONTIER OF COMFORT

STORY AND PHOTOS BY WILLIAM PRICE

**M**odern ice anglers suffer from a different cabin fever than most Iowans after a long cold winter overstays its welcome. For many, waiting blindly for fish to bite on a bucket while getting blasted by arctic winds over Iowa's frozen waters has become a part of history. This new kind of cabin fever is a good thing, offering a change of pace to old-school ice fishing on buckets.

Today's luxury icehouses offer all the comforts of home, while allowing unprecedented portability

for chasing fish to new depths and old haunts. These palaces on ice afford up to a dozen separate fishing holes, meticulously monitored by high-tech sonar finders sensitive to even the slightest movement below. Electric augers eliminate the need for clearing indoor exhaust fumes with icy air blasts, while fixed and flexible configurations of rod holders allow hands-free comfort with quick access for setting the hook. Forced air furnaces keep temperatures toasty enough for short sleeves and teeth-chattering-free conversation.

For the adventurer awaiting extended comfort, these





Gas-powered generators and solar panels keep the operation running smoothly, powering recessed LED lighting, microwaves, ovens and stovetops and flat screen TVs.

## Tom Hendricks' 8x17 foot American Eagle skiff evokes more the sense of Aspen

### Ice Thickness and Quality

The best time of the winter to fish is just after lakes and ponds freeze over and safe ice forms in early winter and just before thaw in late winter. These are also times when ice is the least reliable. Take time to double check ice thickness and take safety precautions. Before venturing out, drill a hole in the ice from a dock or shore to gauge thickness and quality. Four inches of clear blue ice or eight inches of black, honey-combed ice will safely hold an adult. Five to six inches of clear blue ice is needed for snowmobiles, four-wheelers, or groups of three or more people.

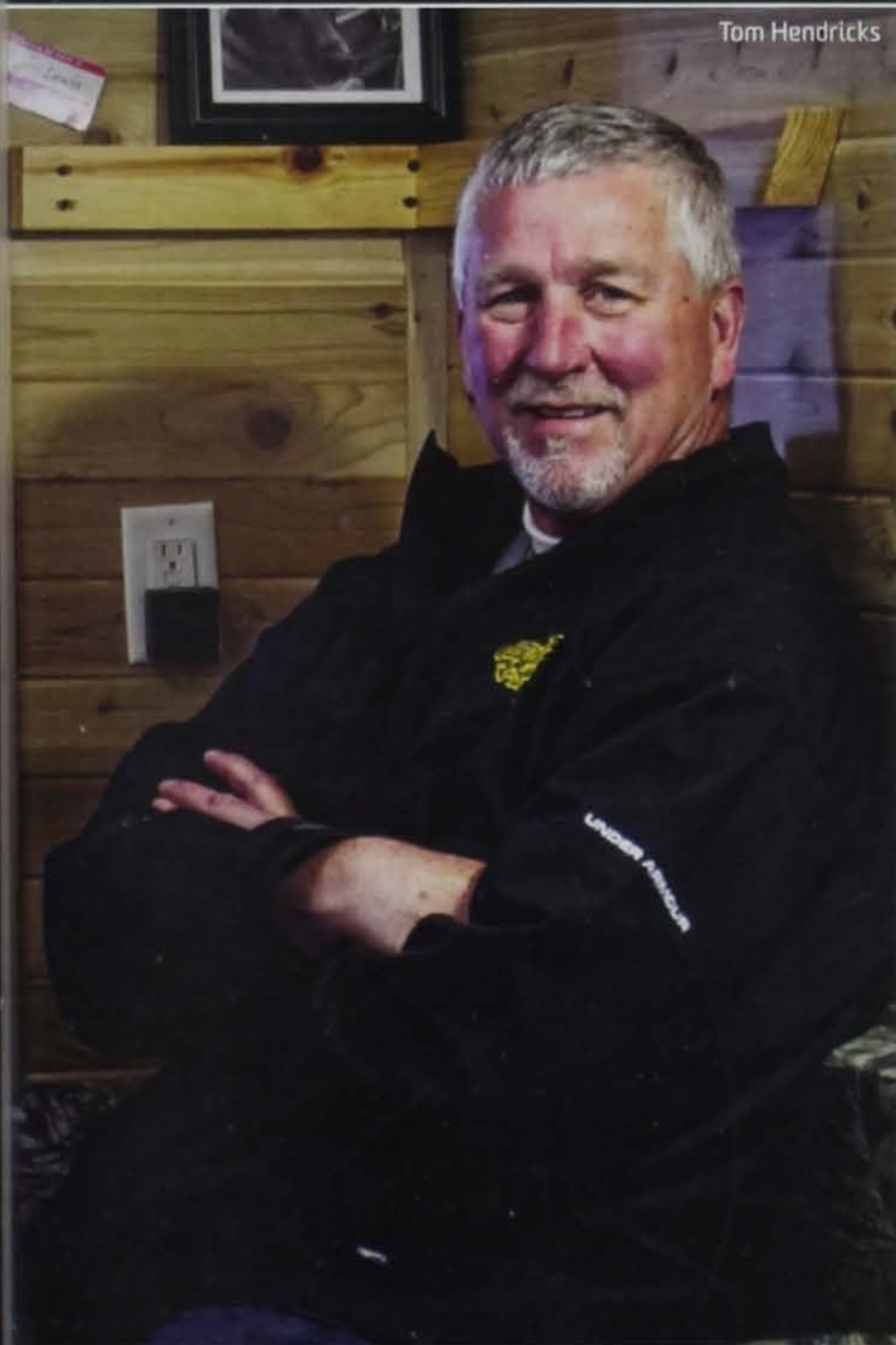






## can Eagle series Ice Castle fish house pen ski lodge than Grumpy Old Men.

Tom Hendricks



luxury ice shanties function as personal chalets—providing escape well beyond a Thursday night getaway. A rare troop of tundra warriors is on the frontier of a well-established Midwestern ice fishing cultural institution and are transcending barren, icy landscapes into a departure from conformity to fishing nirvana. And they can stay as long as they want—in style.

Gas-powered generators and solar panels keep the operation running smoothly, powering recessed LED lighting, microwaves, ovens and stovetops, flat screen TVs, videogame consoles, satellite dishes, stereos and even underwater cameras.

Wrapped in tongue-and-groove, custom-fitted cedar, the inside of Tom Hendricks' 8- by 17-foot American Eagle Ice Castle fish house evokes more the sense of Aspen ski lodge than *Grumpy Old Men*. Inside, the satellite streams Sportsman Channel, while a frozen pizza finishes baking—the crispy edge inspiring its “curler” nickname. The same weekend every year, a gang of Hendricks' old pals descends on Clear Lake for their annual half-week “mancation.” Easily handling 10 people, the scene is anything but mundane.

And escape to this luxury and comfort is as easy as a short drive and few-foot walk. When it's time to check the next GPS-mapped reef, a simple push of the wireless key fob enables the hydraulic lift, and Hendricks is ready to roll. Commercially, Ice Castle fish houses are among the most popular, selling more than 2,000 units in 2013 alone. Luxury icehouse sales have increased steadily the past few years, with forecasts to continue.



# Just switch the TV from underwater camera to PlayStation 3...

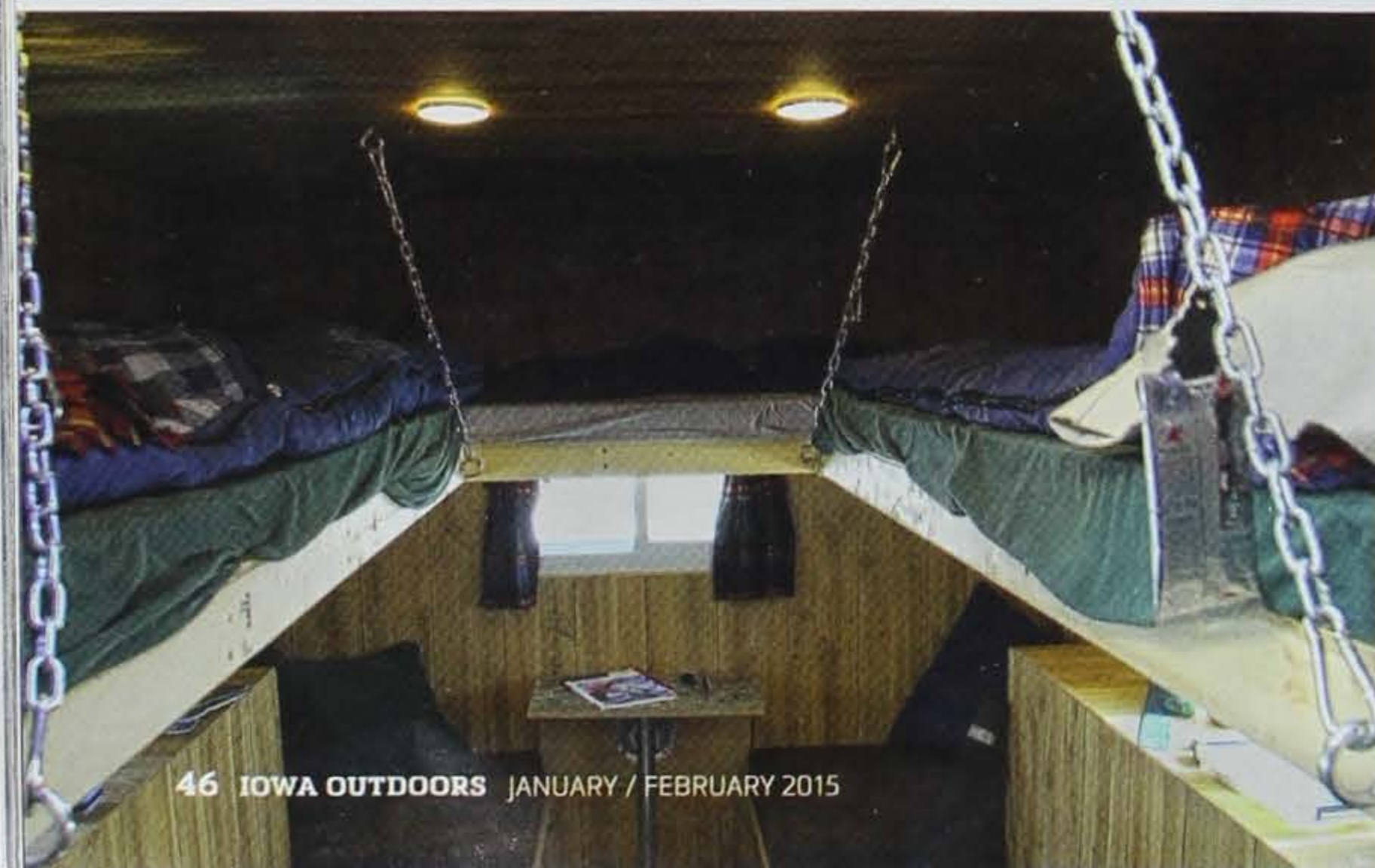
Buying isn't the only option, however. Pheasants Forever biologist Josh Divan opted to build his ice palace from the bottom-up. Miliona Blacksmith, located northwest of Minneapolis, has been custom-welding ice house frames for more than 25 years. Divan ordered the widest street-legal trailer frame available at 8 feet, and wood-framed the structure of his hut himself. Spray-foamed with double-paned windows for maximum insulation against the coldest temperatures, these basics were just the beginning of the head scratching that went into Divan's design.

Walking around with fishing pole in hand, his design progressed from deciding where to put the holes in the floor. More than two years later, the finished product is as functional as it is luxurious. Both Divan's parents

worked for Winnebago Industries, which he credits for inspiring unique features such as the massive skylight that helps ease winter blues.

Underneath a spacious permanent bunk in the rear of the cabin, the custom sitting area features an adjustable, removable table that converts into its own sleeping quarters. With two custom-designed fold-down bunks set at just the right height to deter claustrophobia, the house sleeps four comfortably.

When fishing slows down, the entertainment cranks up. Just switch the TV from underwater camera to PlayStation 3, watch your favorite DVD, or hunt the African plains with Cabela's most dangerous hunts. How about a hand of poker on the custom table?



INTERIOR IMAGE, LOWER LEFT, BY BEN CURTIS



## BASIC ICE FISHING STRATEGIES

Early ice offers an excellent chance for success. If fish are finicky, cut a series of holes and spend 15 minutes at each hole targeting active fish. Make sure to use small baits and light line. Fish behave differently in winter, so summer fishing tactics may not work. Many fish school, or form groups, in the winter and often retreat to the deeper parts of lakes or ponds, where the water is warmest. Sometimes fish of the same age class stick together. This means if you are catching small fish, you may need to change depth or location to find a school of larger or older age-class fish.



### Did you Know?

The most commonly sought Iowa fish in winter include: bluegill, crappie, perch, walleye, northern pike, trout and largemouth bass.

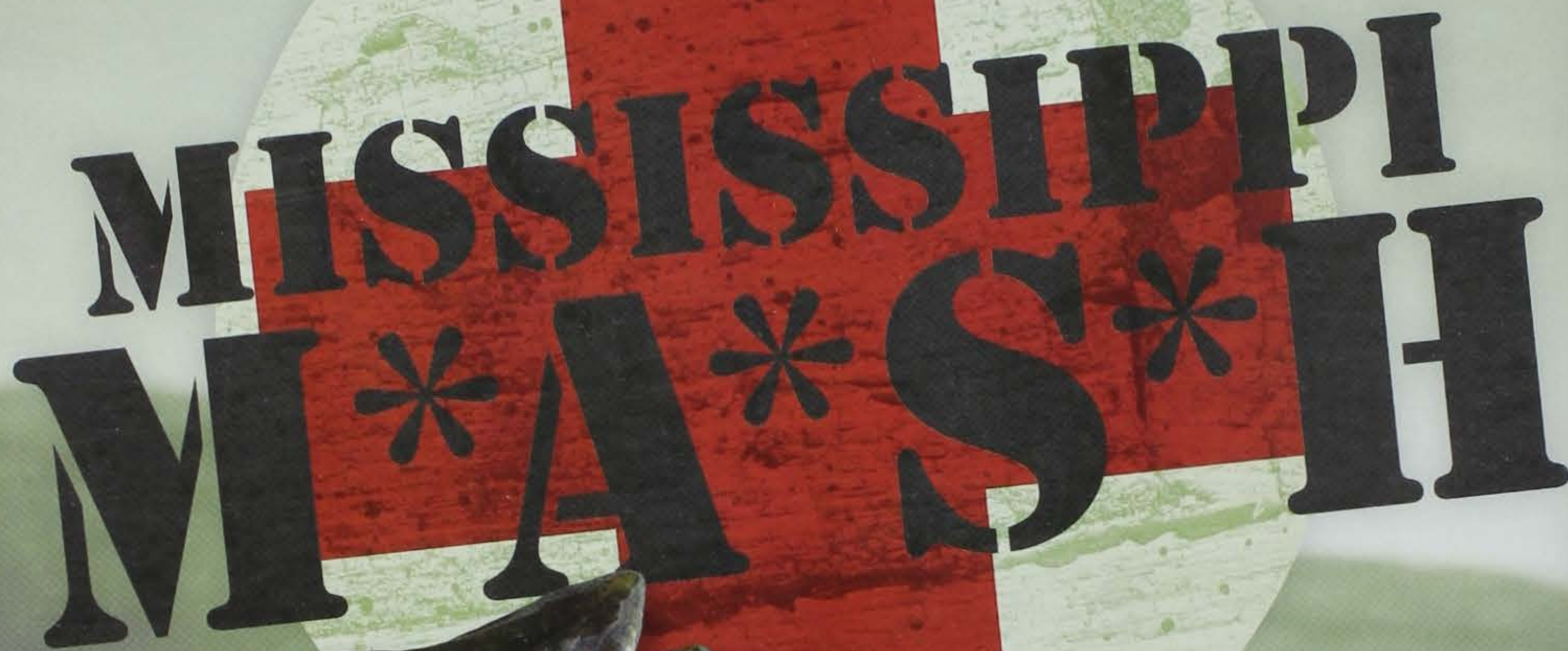
**"It's so easy, you just pull up and in no time you're ready to fish,"** Venske says.

Wayne Venske

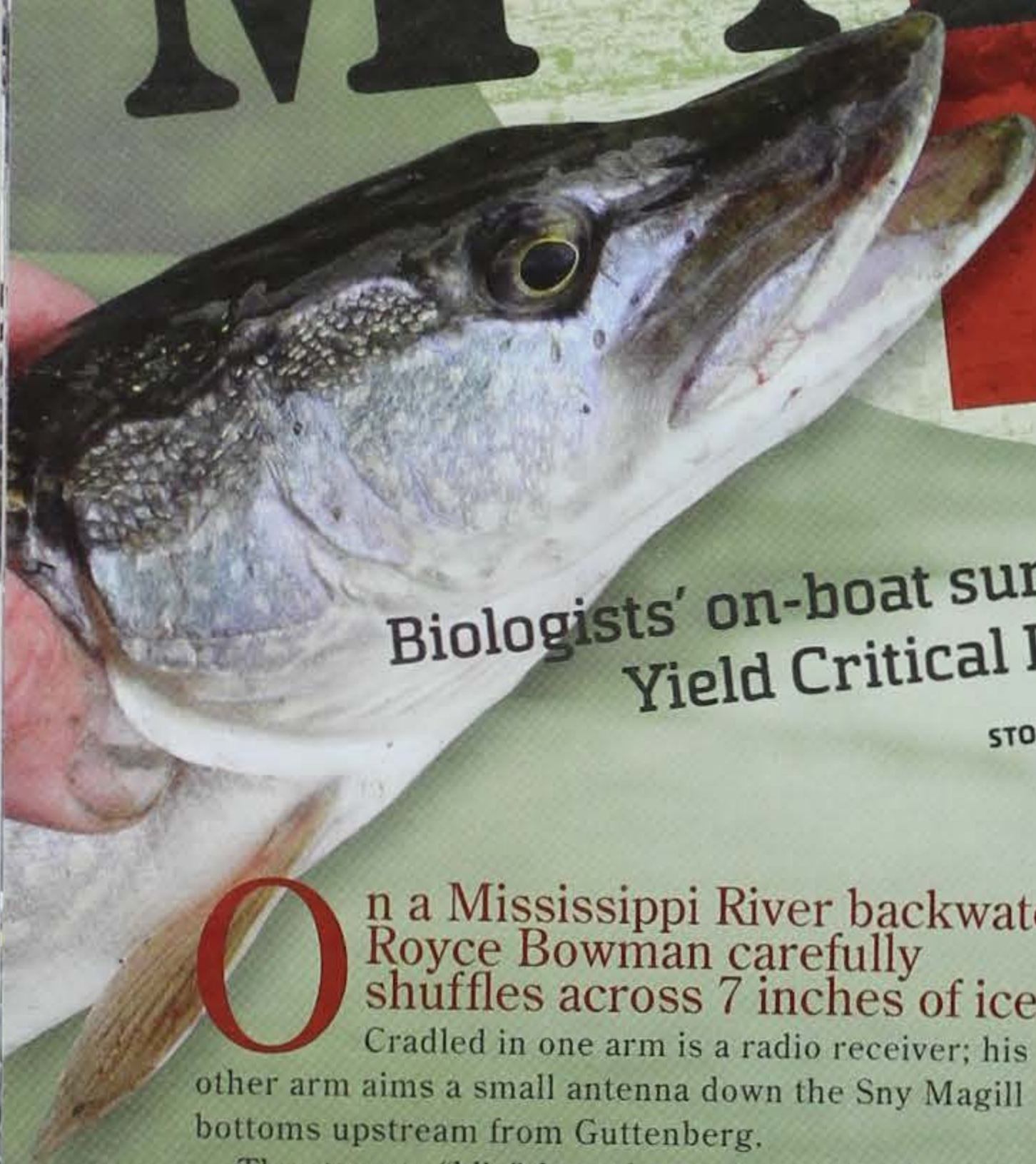


Wayne Venske, 76, of Mason City, joined this legion of comfort-seekers last year after careful consideration. He and a friend jumped on their chance to buy a chateau of their own during a fishing trip in Wisconsin. Now they move often in search of fish on Clear Lake, and are glad they made the decision. "It's so easy, you just pull up and in no time you're ready to fish," Venske says. He sums up the changing times with, "My father would roll over in his grave if he knew we were fishing like this." 🐟





# MISSISSIPPI MAS\*H



Biologists' on-boat surgeries to radio track **Northern Pike**  
Yield Critical Data to Improve Populations

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE WILKINSON

**O**n a Mississippi River backwater, Royce Bowman carefully shuffles across 7 inches of ice.

Cradled in one arm is a radio receiver; his other arm aims a small antenna down the Sny Magill bottoms upstream from Guttenberg.

The staccato "blip" from the receiver chirps louder as it points toward fish number 48.195—a 26-inch, 4-pound northern pike. As the antenna strays from the location, the volume drops. "This antenna is directional. Once we locate a fish, we come at it from different angles," Bowman explains. "I approach fish real quietly. By turning the volume down, we get a better direction. When I get right on top of it, I'll drill a hole and start to collect data."

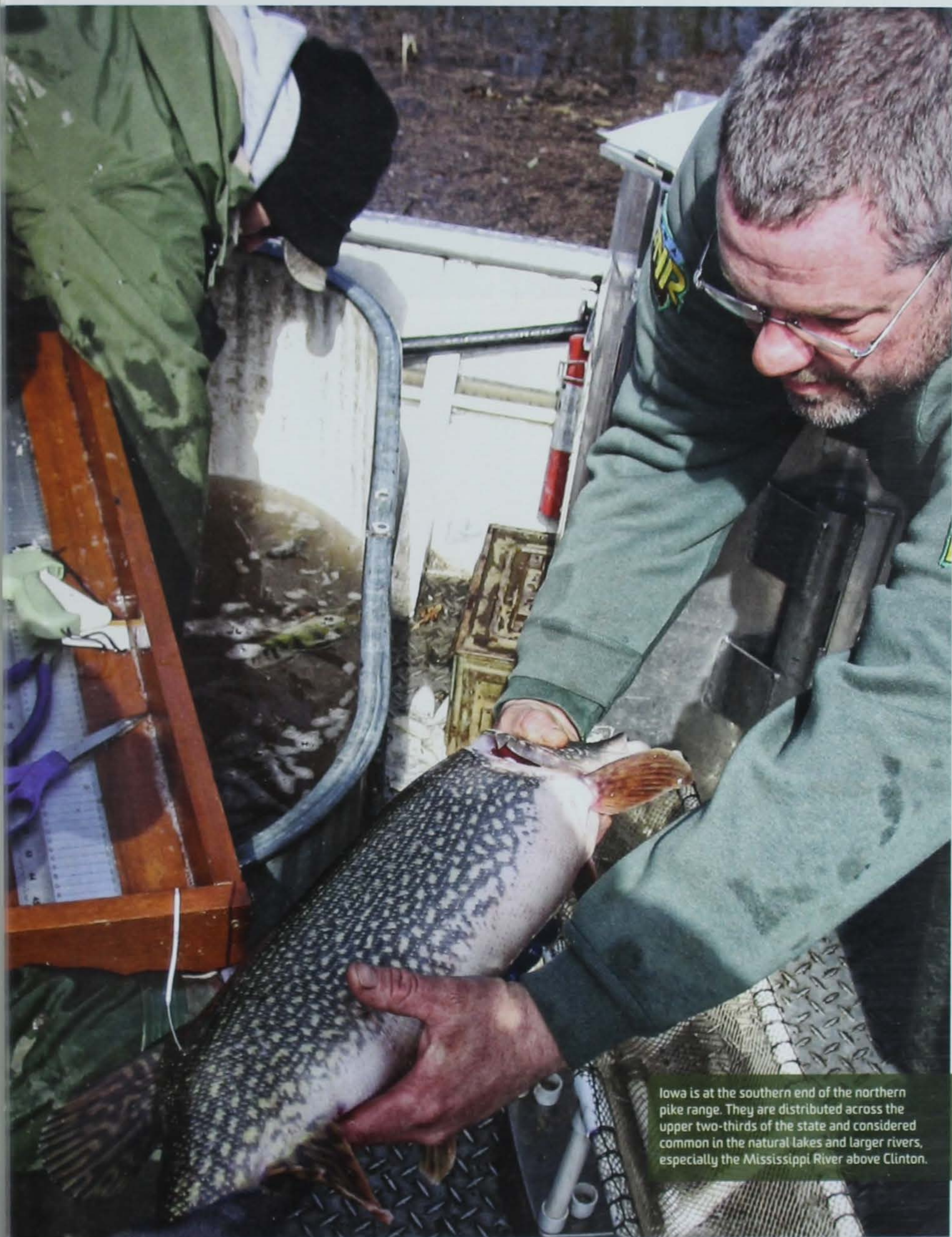
Across the sheet of January ice, Denny Weiss is the

"catch up crew." It's all part of a DNR study out of Bellevue. Researchers quickly learn that footsteps on the ice can send 48.195 darting away, ruining a couple hours of work.

"By following these fish year around, we learn what kind of habitat is important to them during the winter," says Weiss. "We know winter habitat is a factor here on the river. A lot of backwaters are filling in with sediment. If we spend money to dredge, we want to ensure we do it in the right spots."

As the four-year project wraps up this year, fisheries workers will establish more than just where fish go in winter. By tracking movement of transmitter-fitted northern pikes, studying data from a couple thousand others fitted with less intrusive "floy tags," researchers determine growth, mortality, size, age structure, seasonal





Iowa is at the southern end of the northern pike range. They are distributed across the upper two-thirds of the state and considered common in the natural lakes and larger rivers, especially the Mississippi River above Clinton.





DNR fisheries technician Travis Kueter



movement and habitat preference by season. Then, a management plan on the Upper Mississippi River can be developed.

But, to track northern pike, you have to catch them. That is done most effectively in spring, right after “ice out.” When water temperatures edge into the upper 30s, pike seek shallow Mississippi backwaters to spawn.

DNR fisheries crews beat them to the preferred shallows, setting out large fyke nets staked to shore. Crews sort the catch—weighing, measuring, recording gender—as they follow the fish for the next couple years.

Bigger fish—more than 4 pounds—are candidates for a little “on boat surgery.” Anesthetized, a fish is secured in a PVC pipe “sleeve,” where the steadiest hand on the boat makes a belly incision. The scalpel slices through muscle, guided by a second tool which blocks it from cutting deep and hitting vital organs. A transmitter—roughly the size and shape of a shotgun shell—is worked into the incision. After a few quick sutures, a little antibiotic and post-op TLC, the fish is slipped back into the water. The transmitter lasts three years.

Originally, the team radio-tagged 30 fish in Pool 10 upstream from the lock and dam at Guttenberg, and another 30 in Pool 13 above Clinton.

From that point, each fish has an identification number and no more privacy. Every two weeks, year-round, crews set out—by boat, hovercraft or foot—to listen for location-identifying blips. Occasionally, a fish is caught by an angler or recaptured in the spring nets. Signs at boat ramps ask anglers to return transmitters or release fish, if possible.

Less intrusive wire “floy tags” were attached near the dorsal fin on 682 fish in Pool 10 (52 were recaptured and 13 were reported harvested) and on 770 fish in Pool 13 (97 recaptures and seven harvests). Anglers catching one are asked to relay the tag number and where they caught the fish to the research team. When the team recaptures a fish—or gets a report from an angler—it learns more than just location.

The best information comes from repeated “hits” on transmitter-fitted pike. In the lower end of Norwegian Slough, Bowman locked in 48.195’s location at Sny Magill. Weiss rumbles up in the hovercraft.

By then, the fish was long gone, proof you must tread lightly. Even footsteps shuffling across the ice can send it swimming. Good information, too, for ice anglers setting “tip ups” to catch northerns.

The hovercraft carries equipment to reveal more. On that winter day, the fish is in a little more than 2 feet of water,



Making an incision for the transmitter.



A transmitter and antennae wire.

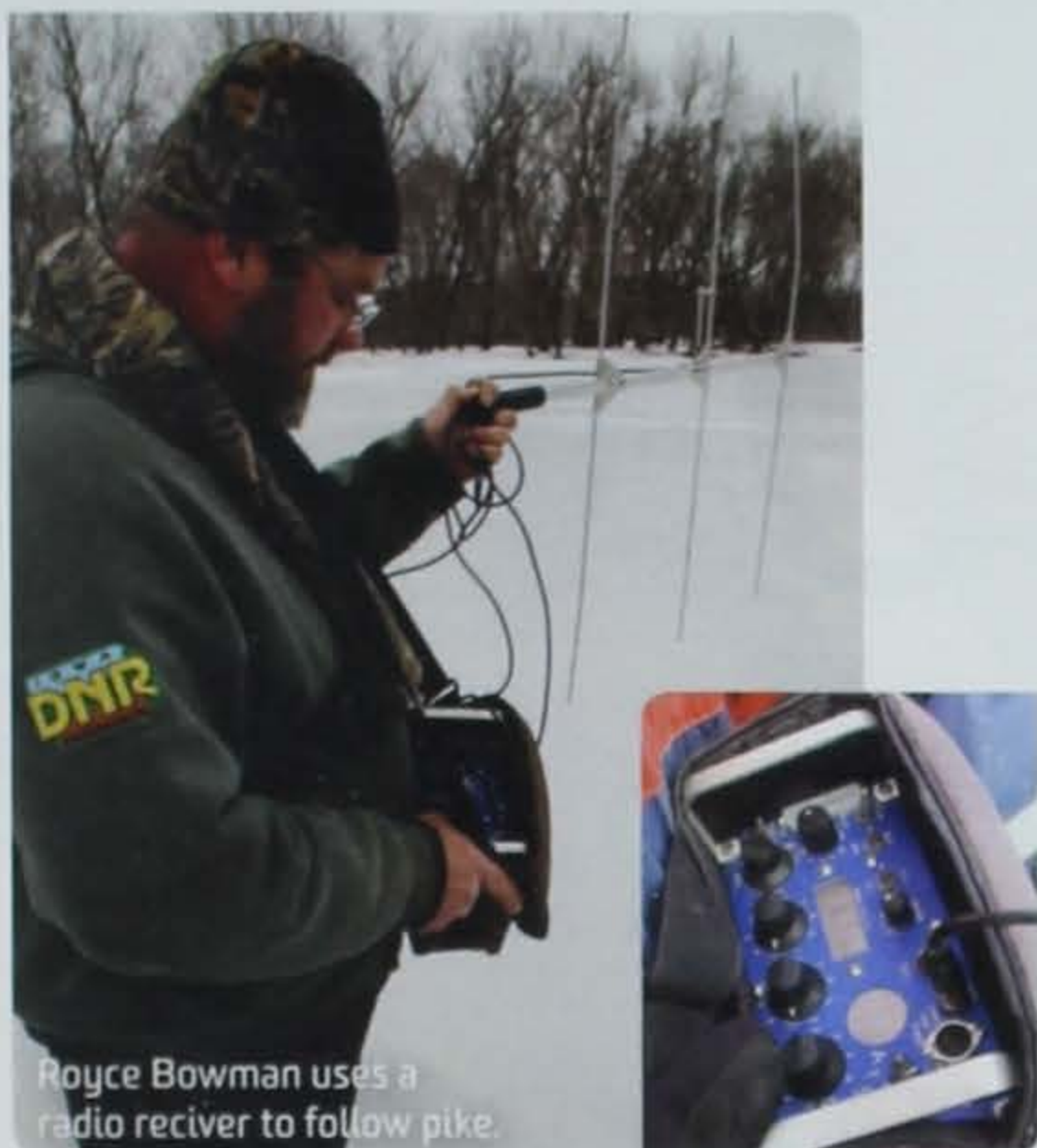


A fitted transmitter.



Suturing the incision.





Royce Bowman uses a radio receiver to follow pike.

Larger northern pike are fitted with radio transmitters to track movement year-round. Fish are anesthetized, incisions are made and transmitters inserted, their heads and gills remaining underwater at all times. After a little on-board TLC, the fish are released back to the river. While the data provides critical information on seasonal habitat needs—which guide future pike management decisions—it also tells anglers where to fish at varying times and conditions.



A recaptured pike.



Injecting a floy tag.



A floy-tagged fish ready for release.

with adequate dissolved oxygen and virtually no current. GPS coordinates are logged, as well as temperature, clarity, vegetation or other hints.

The crew “dials up” another radio frequency and heads off in search of the next fish. In the thousands of acres of backwaters, islands, shoreline and river channel, being off by 10—or 100 feet—can paint an entirely different pike preference picture.

Old fishermen—and fishing stories—tell you a lot about fish and fishing. A lot of it is true. But this study brings science to the table. Results will manage this top-of-the-food-chain predator. In a world of tight financial resources, science directs dollars to best uses.

### Lessons From The Depths

Northern pike are at the southern edge of their range in Iowa, especially as the study moves downstream on the Mississippi River. Only a few large pike are netted in the Quad Cities area.

During periods of high water, pike use flooded terrestrial habitats. Pike are found in backwaters, most frequently in areas less than 4 feet and typically in heavy aquatic vegetation.

Mortality is high due to temperature spikes. Still, populations remain steady. “In summer of 2012, water temperatures exceeded 90 degrees, and widespread reports of pike mortality occurred up and down the river,” says Bowman. “Heat-related mortality for radio-tagged fish is 26 percent in Pool 10, and dead pike were observed from north of La Crosse to the Quad Cities.” Heat mortality, though, does not seem to indicate catch rates.

Angler surveys show the northern pike fishery appears more consumptive than catch-and-release, but some anglers are trophy fishing. The biggest fish sampled thus far in the study was 38 inches. A cool water fish, northern pike seek trout streams and other cold water trickles entering the Mississippi. Smart anglers recognize that.

Overall, anglers in the northern pools are satisfied with fish they catch. Those on Pool 13 up through Pool 10 say they have great pike fishing. Harvest is heavy in summer, particularly where smart anglers find that cooler water. Anglers downstream of Pool 17 enjoy fishing for them, but go north to do it.

In the winter in Pool 10, northerns are quite often found in 4 feet of water or less, usually in proximity to vegetation. If calm backwaters are unavailable, they’ll hang out in side sloughs with minimal water velocity. In Pool 13, several overwintered in the slough in low-velocity deeper holes, probably because of fewer backwaters with adequate depth and oxygen for overwinter conditions.

Radio-tagged fish show little movement from original tagging locations. Some move to a different backwater to spawn, and then return. The longest movement was 30 miles.

Hoop, or fyke, nets collect all sizes of pike as crews decide on gear to use for future northern pike management or research work. Electroshocking does not work well for management and study as pike are observed swimming away from electric currents.

A game fish at the edge of its range, knowing more about their seasonal movement, growth, size and age structure will allow fisheries biologists to develop recommendations for managing northern pike in the Upper Mississippi River. It’s also providing valuable clues on where to target this toothy predator from ice-out to ice fishing. 🐟



A person wearing a dark winter jacket and a helmet is seen from behind, sitting on an iceboat. The iceboat is on a vast, flat, snow-covered landscape under a cloudy sky. The person's reflection is visible in the snow in the foreground.

# STOKED ON SNOW

## Get Out There!

*Winter offers spectacular scenery, challenging fitness sports and wildlife galore. Try an activity new to you.*

STORY BY MINDY KRALICEK

**W**hen snowflakes lightly blow across the blanketed landscape with icicles twinkling at rooflines, don't cower next to the fireplace.

Pack a thermos of steaming hot cocoa or soup and snacks in a backpack, dress in layers, grab the hat and mittens and head out to partake in an underutilized season.

### Ice boating

Winter's strong winds are prime for sailing iceboats. Adrenaline-seeking ice boaters look for open spaces where winds sweep across miles of frozen lakes to take boats up to 60 miles an hour. Ice must be at least 4 inches thick and free of holes, heaves and fissures.

Iceboats are mounted on skate-like runners. The pressure of the stainless steel blades creates a thin layer of water to glide on. Look for ice boaters in Clear Lake, Heron Lake at Raccoon River Park (West Des Moines) and at Lake MacBride near Coralville.

If you get an opportunity, wear layers of winter insulation, coveralls, insulated boots, thick gloves and a snowmobile helmet with a full face mask. Carry an ice pick, in case you have to haul yourself out of water.

### Sled for free or a small fee

You don't have to be young to thrill at sledding down a slippery slope. Some areas even help you get back uphill.

Sledding at **Moorehead Pioneer Park in Ida County** has a tow rope operated Sundays from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30





p.m. A lift ticket is \$2. A relocated train depot serves as a warming house. Named for the Moorehead family that operated a stagecoach inn in the 1850s, the park features the inn, hand-hewn barn with wood-pegged timbers and the Grant Center Schoolhouse. For snow reports or tours of historical buildings, call [712-364-3300](tel:712-364-3300).


**Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawattamie County.** Bring your sleds and inner tubes to "The Chute"—a notorious, incredibly steep hill. Snowshoes available at lodge, with more than 4 inches of snow. Guided hikes too. Cabin rental available. (Heated, but no water. Sleeps five. \$47.25 per night.) 27792 Ski Hill Loop, Honey Creek, [712-545-3283](tel:712-545-3283). From I-29 take the Crescent exit and travel east to The Old Lincoln Highway. Located five

miles north of Crescent off of The Old Lincoln Highway. Entrance fee is \$2 per vehicle; free sledding.

**Horse Bend Recreation Area in Dickinson County** offers tube rentals and tow rope return for \$8 per person per day. Located at 19244 240th Street, Milford. 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Drive three miles south of Milford on Highway 71 and 3 miles west on 240th Street. Restroom facilities. Opens Christmas break and every weekend after, weather permitting. Call [712-338-4786 Ext. 3](tel:712-338-4786) for conditions.

**Seven Hills Park in Greene County** has a free rope tow Saturdays and Sundays from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. when there is at least 4 inches of snow cover. The 80-acre forested park has an enclosed shelter house and pit latrine. One mile south of Jefferson on Grimmell Road





Sledding "The Chute" at Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawattamie County. The notoriously steep hill with banked sides aids keeping sleds and inner tubes on course.

and one mile south on M Avenue; [515-386-5674](tel:515-386-5674).

## Mush!

If you've ever thought about dog sledding, make an appointment with Ginger Plummer of Howling Hills Canine Campus near Cumming in Warren County at [515-981-5120](tel:515-981-5120). Of course, it's all contingent on weather—cold, but not too cold, and enough snow. Here's your chance to indulge without the labor of keeping a team of dogs.

## Fitness

### Try cross-country skiing

Iowa offers great terrain for cross-country skiing, and the scenery is especially beautiful in parks. Many state and county parks offer clinics and rent skis to introduce folks to the sport. Here's a sample:

**Gilbertson Conservation Education Area east of Elgin in Fayette County** offers clinics in January. Reserve at [563-426-5740](tel:563-426-5740) or [gncfccb@alpinecom.net](mailto:gncfccb@alpinecom.net). Rental is \$1. While there, pick up your National Park Service (NPS) Passport Stamp. Gilbertson Conservation Education Area is part of the NPS Visitor Program.

Hamilton County Conservation Board skiing and snowshoeing clinics at **Briggs Woods Park near Webster City**. Call [515-832-9570](tel:515-832-9570) to reserve.

**Prairie Springs XC Ski Trails Cresco** unit combs track on the main recreation trail set among views and superb

displays of nature. Start at Prairie's Edge Nature Center two miles south of Cresco on Valley Avenue.

**George Wyth Memorial State Park in Waterloo in Blackhawk County** has three miles of groomed skate ski trails. Big Creek State Park on the northwest side of Polk City in Polk County has two and a half miles of trails groomed for skate and Nordic-style skiing.

## Trek winter wonderlands on snowshoes

A snowshoe walk in the woods during snowfall is the closest thing to absolute peace in this world. Get an up-close look at nature and exercise in any snowy public area.

With many snowshoe styles for different terrains, it's best to borrow or rent. The first time, head out for 30 to 45 minutes, take a five minute break, then follow your own trail back to your starting point.

Many county parks rent gear and give guided snowshoe hikes, so call county conservation boards for details.

## Ice skating

What's more special than holding hands with a special someone under starlit nights, or helping a helmeted 4- or 5-year-old keep their balance on ice? Whether you prefer figure skates or hockey action, skating is an invigorating connection to the winter season.

Great outdoor skating includes the 15-acre lake at



Outdoor skating beats indoor rinks for starry skies or a shot of mood-lifting sun during day. From the downtown Des Moines Brenton Skating Plaza with skyline, river and eagle views to quiet ponds statewide, fresh winter air is always invigorating.



**Pilot Knob State Park in Hancock County**, four miles east of Forest City; **Ellis Park in downtown Cedar Rapids**; and **Red Haw State Park near Chariton in Lucas County**.

In **Clear Lake**, **Marian Park** at 2nd Ave. N and N. 12th St. has a public skating rink and warming house. Clear Lake Parks and Recreation **641-357-7010**.

**Brenton Skating Plaza in downtown Des Moines** rents skates for \$3.50. Weekdays cost \$4.50 for adults, \$3 for children (6-12) and seniors. Weekend fees are \$6 for adults and \$4.50 for children and seniors. To register for their broomball league, go to [brentonplaza.com/broomball](http://brentonplaza.com/broomball) or call **515-284-1000**.

For skating hours at the outdoor **Grotto Ice Rink in West Bend**, call **515-887-RINK**. \$3 per person, children ages 4 and under are free; family rate is \$8 a session. [westbendiowa.com/recreation.htm](http://westbendiowa.com/recreation.htm)

## Wildlife Tracking

In daylight, follow animal tracks in the snow to find their watering holes, where they've slept—even what they've eaten by trailside scat. Look for wing prints in the snow, as well as hoof, feet and paw prints.

Night walks are about sounds. You'll likely hear hoots of owls as they warn others to avoid claimed hunting grounds. Hear coyote calls to gather the family pack. As they gather, more voices join with yips, yelps, barks and whines. If you get too close to a deer family bedded

for the night, one will snort to warn others. Raccoons too, are active and vocal. Hear them purr, coo, chirp, whimper, snarl, growl, hiss, scream or whinny. An opossum may hiss if you cross its waddling path. Bobcats have a low-pitched growl and high pitched scream—rare to hear—as their great night vision and hearing allows them to vacate long before you near.

## Winter destinations

**Whiterock Conservancy in northern Guthrie County** is popular for winter family gatherings with a five-bedroom home, rooms at the Garst Farmhouse and two cottages. Children enjoy the historic farm and pond areas. Trails are easy to walk and wildlife evident. See snowy tracks of deer, rabbits, beaver, river otter, birds, field mice and waterfowl. Cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and hiking allowed on trails. View their bison herd clad in thick winter coats. For details or reservations, go to [whiterockconservancy.org](http://whiterockconservancy.org) or **712-684-2697**.

**Honey Creek Resort State Park at Lake Rathbun** in Appanoose County features cozy getaways. Kids relish the indoor water park and wildlife watching. Check schedules for ice fishing classes, or fish the boat docks where de-icers keep water open. Explore 47 miles of lakeside snowmobile trails that lead to the resort. Guided hikes include birding, animal caches and "winter wonderland." A fireside program, "Nature Tales,"



Double-up on insulated ground pads, snuggle in a winter-rated mummy bag and experience sleep at its deepest. It takes skill, practice and know-how, but once mastered, winter camping is rugged, good fun.



gives families a chance to enjoy a story while making s'mores—held outdoors weather permitting, or around the indoor fireplace. Monthly stargazing classes are held under clear winter skies.

A holiday buffet brunch on Christmas Day is open to the public. Call 641-724-1430 for reservations. A family night in the indoor waterpark for guests is held New Year's Eve (pizza and beverages included). A day-long "Kids at the Creek" event is held in January. For reservations or special email offers go to [honeycreekresort.com](http://honeycreekresort.com) or 1-877-677-3344.

## Winter camping

No bugs, no poison ivy and few people describes winter camping. With a four-season tent to shed snow and wind, a mummy bag, an insulating, closed-cell foam ground pad and a fleece hat while asleep, winter camping can be comfortable—with great star viewing.

Yellow River State Forest in Allamakee County at 729 State Forest Road, Harpers Ferry, offers year-round camping at non-electric sites. The Paint Creek Unit has equestrian accommodations, fishing, hunting and more than 25 miles of trails for hiking, equestrian, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. Ski the Luster Heights Unit's groomed trails or backcountry ski through forest. Jan. 1 to March 31, nightly rates are \$6 (equestrian campsites \$9). [lowadnr.gov](http://lowadnr.gov) or call 563-586-2254.

Other parks for winter camping include:

Scott County Park near Eldridge (563-328-3282)

Wildcat Den State Park near Muscatine (563-263-4337)

Eden Valley Refuge near Baldwin (563-847-7207)

Pike's Peak State Park near McGregor (563-873-2341)

## Scenic Views

### Horse Trail Rides

Gazing across snowy fields, hills and forests from horseback is blissful. For a list of parks and forests that welcome equestrians and phone numbers to check trail conditions, search "equestrian" at [lowadnr.gov](http://lowadnr.gov).

Jester Park Equestrian Center in Polk County near Granger offers guided and unguided trail rides, and wagon and sleigh rides. Call 515-999-2918 or visit [polkcountyiowa.gov](http://polkcountyiowa.gov) and click Jester Park Equestrian Center.

## Learn new skills

### Build a fishing rod in February

A rod building course is offered at Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Center in Toddville. Custom rod builder Chuck Ungs leads participants through the process in three evening sessions from 6:30 p.m.–9:30 p.m. Feb. 12, 19 and 26. Cost varies depending on your rod choice: either a St. Croix or Rainshadow spinning rod. Contact Ungs at 319-892-6485 or [LinnCountyParks.com](http://LinnCountyParks.com). Registration required by Jan. 20.



Never been ice fishing? No problem! Clinics, classes and outings abound to put you right on top of the fish to bring home the catch of the day.



#### Take fly-tying classes

Wait for cold weather to pass while tying flies with the statewide **Hawkeye Fly Fishing Association**. Make new friends, learn about fly fishing and discover new places to fish through outings, the annual meeting and tying sessions. [hawkeyeflyfishing.com](http://hawkeyeflyfishing.com).

#### Take a buddy ice fishing

Walleyes, northern pike, crappies, bluegills, trout, yellow perch and even catfish are as exciting to catch in winter as any other season. Ice should be at least 4 inches thick, children should have adults with them, and never fish alone.

If weather and conditions allow, an introduction to ice fishing clinic is offered by **Hamilton County Conservation on Little Wall Lake Park near Jewell**. Call [515-832-9570](tel:515-832-9570) for dates and to reserve a spot. Bring your own ice fishing gear. Some fishing poles are available.

**Polk County Conservation** offers three-hour ice fishing clinics. Call [515-323-5300](tel:515-323-5300) for details.

Most ice-fishing classes are held in northern Iowa. Check with county conservation boards or local fishing guides to find outings.

#### A Little of Everything Winter Festivals

Attend an outdoor winter festival to celebrate the season, breathe fresh air and rejuvenate.

Jan. 23-25 **University of Okoboji Winter Games at Lake Okoboji**: broomball, softball and flag football on ice, bag tournament, ice hockey, chili cook off and more. Fireworks Saturday at 6:30 p.m. For details, visit [uafowintergames.com](http://uafowintergames.com).

Jan. 24 **Winterfest Amana**: wine walk, scavenger hunt, ham throwing, log-sawing, run/walk, snowshoeing, best beard contest, ice sculptures, storytelling and schnitzel-sampling. Go to [festivalsinamana.com](http://festivalsinamana.com) to learn more.

Jan. 29-31 **7th Annual Frostbite Olympics in Algona**: snowmobile rides, ice races, snow kickball and treasure mountain for kids. Go to [http://algona.org/frostbite\\_olympics](http://algona.org/frostbite_olympics) for details.

Feb. 21 **Color the Wind Kite Festival in Clear Lake**, 11 a.m.–4 p.m. Kites from many states fly massive, colorful kites of all kinds. Stunt fliers perform routines choreographed to music. Go to [clearlakelowa.com](http://clearlakelowa.com) and click on “events” or visit [colarthewind.org](http://colarthewind.org) to see photos from last year’s festival.

**Winter Fun Day at Wapsi River Center in Scott County**, 9 a.m.–6:30 p.m. This February family event includes a cross-country ski clinic, snowshoe nature hike, talks on winter birds, mammals and fur trapping, a chili cook-off and the Frostbite Star Party at an observatory. Space limited. Call [563-328-3286](tel:563-328-3286) or go to [scottcountylowa.com/conservation/calendar.php](http://scottcountylowa.com/conservation/calendar.php) for details and reservations. 🐾



## BURN FUEL, NOT MONEY

Stay warm, save cash with heating tips and improvements.

### Fireplace

Keep your fireplace damper closed unless a fire is going. An open damper is like leaving a window open, allowing heated air to escape up the flue.

Check the seal on fireplace flue dampers. Make it as snug as possible. Many dampers use generations-old designs that fail to create tight seals, costing homeowners about \$200 per year in lost energy. A professionally installed retrofit damper features leak-tight silicon-rubber gaskets and can pay for itself in one to three years. Learn more and find installers at [locktop.com](http://locktop.com) or 1-866-466-3728. (Cost \$200-\$600 installed.)

### Forced-air furnaces

According to ENERGY STAR, about 25 percent of furnaces are more than 20 years old. Many range in efficiency from 56 to 70 percent, versus the best new models that are up to 97 percent efficient. Upgrades can cut heating bills by as much as half—and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 1.5 tons for gas heat or 2.5 tons with oil heat. Look for an AFUE rating more than 90. These cost-effective gas- or oil-fired units use electronic ignitions instead of continuous pilot lights and sealed combustion chambers to bring fresh outside air to the burner through one pipe and vent exhaust

through another pipe instead of creating drafts in the home.

### Change Air Filters Regularly

Dirty furnace filters hinder air flow to make systems work harder and waste energy. A clean filter prevents dust build up in the system, which can lead to costly maintenance and reduced furnace longevity. Check filters monthly. If it looks dirty, change it. At a minimum, change filters every 3 months.

### Tips for Service Checks

Have a heating technician do an annual service check to maintain furnaces, prevent future problems and maximize peak efficiency. According to ENERGY STAR, a typical maintenance check-up should include:

**HAVE A CONTRACTOR TIGHTEN ALL ELECTRICAL CONNECTIONS AND MEASURE VOLTAGE AND CURRENT ON MOTORS.** Faulty connections can cause unsafe operation and reduce component

life. Lubricate all moving parts to reduce friction and save electricity. Vacuum the blower and adjust belts.

**CHECK AND INSPECT CONDENSATE DRAIN.** A plugged drain can cause water damage and affect humidity levels.

**CHECK SYSTEM CONTROLS TO ENSURE PROPER AND SAFE OPERATION.** Check starting cycle to assure system starts, operates and shuts off properly.

**CHECK ALL GAS CONNECTIONS, GAS PRESSURE, BURNER COMBUSTION AND HEAT EXCHANGER.** Improperly operating gas connections are a fire



hazard and can contribute to health problems. A dirty burner or cracked heat exchanger causes improper operation. Either can cause equipment to operate less safely and efficiently.

### Install a programmable thermostat

A programmable thermostat is ideal when away from home for set periods of time. Through use of pre-programmed settings, its use can save about \$180 every year in energy costs. Check thermostat settings to ensure the furnace keeps you comfortable when home and saves energy when away.

### Seal heating and cooling ducts

Ducts that move air to and from forced air furnaces are often big energy wasters. Sealing leaks and poor connections and insulating ducts can improve efficiency by as much as 20 percent—and sometimes more.

Focus first on sealing ducts that run through the attic, crawlspace, unheated basement or garage. Use duct sealant (mastic) or metal-backed foil tape to seal seams and connections. Ironically, duct tape, just about good for everything, is not long lasting on duct work. Ensure connections at vents and registers are well-sealed where they meet floors, walls and ceiling. After sealing, wrap ducts in insulation to keep them from getting hot in the summer or cold in the winter.





# Myth Busters

BY JESSIE BROWN

GOT A QUESTION?  
SEND TO: [AskTheExperts@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:AskTheExperts@dnr.iowa.gov)

## COLD-BLOODED ANIMALS DO NOT GET CANCER

Cold-blooded animals like snakes, fish and sharks do get cancer, likely from polluted waters and foreign substances. While many questions still surround this issue, scientists hope the unique ways these animals deal with cancer might give hope for cancer treatments and possible cures in humans.

We don't know much about how often these animals develop cancer, as it's difficult to sample a large population, but we do know they suffer from the disease. Still, it appears sharks have a remarkable defense against cancer that could prove useful in learning how to beat cancer in humans.

Scientists have studied how new blood vessels appear to feed cancerous tumors with oxygen and nutrients. Find a way to prevent those new vessels from developing, and you've found a way to stop the tumor from growing. Shark cartilage does just that—it has a compound that keeps new blood vessels from forming, which starves the tumor.

Following that thinking, people have sold shark cartilage supplements for years, touting them as a way to prevent or cure cancer. Studies have not shown that swallowing a pill of ground-up shark cartilage does anything to prevent cancer, and this increased demand for shark cartilage can have harmful effects on shark

populations. Researchers do, however, continue to look to sharks for clues on how to treat human cancers, reinforcing the importance of keeping shark populations, as well as populations of other cold blooded animals, healthy to allow further research.

Researchers are also looking at the naked mole rat, an east African mammal whose body temperature matches ambient temperatures. It does not get cancer in later life. A sugar substance found in the rodent's tissues, which may give it flexible skin, aids in tissue repair and may protect it from developing cancer.

So while cold-blooded animals may not be completely cancer immune, their powerful defenses may prove beneficial in treating people. Another lesson? That a fully functioning, healthy ecosystem resplendent with all its animal populations is valuable for humans, too.

## Ask The Expert

BY SHELENE CODNER

Tom in Cedar Falls asks: *If bluebirds eat insects, what do they eat in Iowa in winter?"*

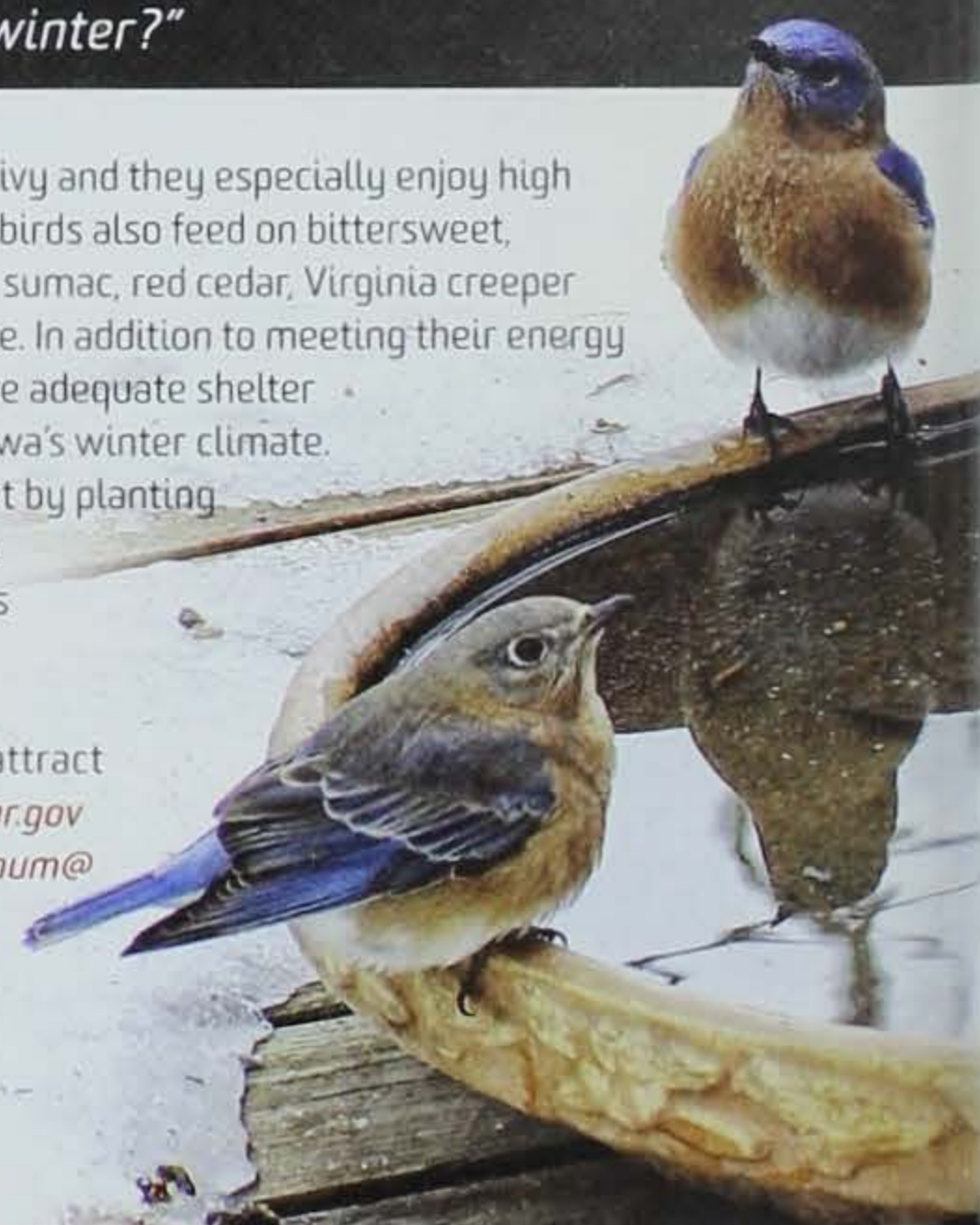
For some, hanging mistletoe in homes during the holiday season is a time-honored tradition. The fruit bearing plant also has significant value in sustaining Iowa's natural resources before and after the holiday season. In addition to the plant's ability to potentially attract a kiss from the anticipating soul standing beneath, it also possesses the ability to attract wintering bluebirds to your yards and gardens.

While it is true that the largest populations of bluebirds are present and viewed during the warmer months, according to Pat Schlarbaum with the DNR wildlife unit in Boone, approximately one-third of Iowa's bluebirds opt to forego migration and reside in the state during winter. In order for our feathered friends to meet their nutritional needs and to survive subzero temperatures, they must switch from feeding on their usual insects to feeding on fruits and berries.

According to Schlarbaum, "Bluebirds eat everything from

honeysuckle to poison ivy and they especially enjoy high bush cranberries." Bluebirds also feed on bittersweet, hackberry, hawthorne, sumac, red cedar, Virginia creeper and of course, mistletoe. In addition to meeting their energy needs, bluebirds require adequate shelter and water to survive Iowa's winter climate. These needs can be met by planting windbreaks, putting up insulated nesting boxes and installing heated birdbaths or waterers.

For more ways to attract bluebirds, visit [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov) or contact [Pat.Schlarbaum@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:Pat.Schlarbaum@dnr.iowa.gov) (515) 432-2823.



BLUEBIRD PHOTO BY JESSICA ROSENER; FISH PHOTO BY JAKE ZWEIBOHMER



## A RETROSPECTIVE ON STORIES FROM DECADES PAST

# THE 80 MPH ICY PLUMMET

A wind-splitting dive at Fort Defiance State Park

Times were different in 1938, when the gutsy Iowa Conservation Commission built a 1,240-foot wooden toboggan run down a north-facing hill behind the lodge at Ft. Defiance State Park near Estherville. In today's age of hyperactive lawsuits, fear of liability and risk-management ethos, you'd never find this. But, after emerging from the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, people wanted to rock and roll even before the genre existed.

"The story goes that somebody was badly hurt or killed and they did away with it," says current park manager Heath Gravert. But it was a smashing good time while it lasted, as evidenced by thousands that appeared on Sundays and holidays to careen down the chute made fast, hard and icy by water poured from the lodge.

Fast means 60 to 80 miles per hour.

"I like to hear them yell," said park custodian Gene Harrison, quoted in the *Estherville Daily News* in 1940. "Because I know they're having a lot of fun. It's the silent, white-faced riders who hang on with stiffened arms that worry me." He said they were more likely to move or jerk the toboggan and cause it to jump track and "wind up in a spill."

Helmets? Nope. Sign a waiver? Nope. Just hang on.

The rules were simple: Don't wear glasses—too prone to flying from the face; don't reach for your hat if it flies off; don't make jerky moves; sit tight with your knuckles turned in on the toboggan ropes.

Another oddity of the time,



compared to today, was smoking advice. "Don't smoke a cigarette." One fellow did, reports the paper, and an ember struck his cheek. The wind pressure burned a dime-sized hole in his skin. Not a "Lucky Strike."

The paper added "Girls and women fare better as they bind their hair back while men reach for hats and cause the toboggan to crash."

There was no charge to use the run. Patrons could rent a toboggan for 50 cents an hour or bring their

own. (Minimum wage was 30 cents per hour.) It could take 20 minutes waiting in line to make the 10- to 13-second plunge. A fast walker could trudge back uphill in five minutes.

By 1940, floodlights were installed for "safety." No word on whether that was to help tobogganists or aid finding a sled and crew after hurling off the track. It isn't known the precise year the fun ended, or if today's kid would prefer this original toboggan run versus an on-line, video game version.



# Wild Cuisine KITCHENSIDE

BY ALAN FOSTER PHOTOS BY JAKE ZWEIBOHMER





# Two Favorites a World Apart Meet At Bata's

Any community ravished by tragedy—like the Iowa floods of 2008—is only as strong as its citizens, businesses and industry that stand up, dust off and put boots to the ground to rebuild. Cedar Rapids is the epitome of that strength, where flood waters submerged 100 city blocks, forced the evacuation of 10,000 people and drew visits from the President and other officials. But Cedar Rapids bounced back—BIG—rebuilding into a stronger, more diverse community. Out of muddy rubble emerged Bata's Restaurant, a uniquely family-style yet upscale eatery in the New Bohemian district. Serving what some describe as "fusion" food, Bata's is all about comfort food from around the world. Flatbread pizza is a favorite, but there is something to be said about the angel pork rib wings—served as both appetizer and full meal. Pair them with the house specialty—caramelized sweet potato strips—and you have a meal the menu touts as "To die for." Add a little kick to a Midwest favorite by following this special recipe featuring venison brats and Asian kimchi, created just for *Iowa Outdoors* readers.

## VENISON BRATWURST AND KIMCHI VEGETABLES

2 pounds venison bratwurst  
1 12-ounce bottle amber beer  
6 to 8 flour tortillas  
2 cups kimchi vegetables  
(store-bought or homemade)  
1 teaspoon olive oil  
Salt and pepper to taste.

Place brats in a 10-inch skillet and add beer. Cook over medium heat eight to 10 minutes, turning once. Drain, allow to cool slightly, cut into half-inch slices and set aside. Add oil, then kimchi vegetables to skillet and cook over medium-high heat three to four minutes, stirring often. Add brats and cook an additional three to four minutes. Reduce to warm. Lightly brown tortillas over low gas stove flame

or dry skillet. Spoon brat and kimchi mixture into tortillas, season to taste and add hot sauce or salsa, if desired.

## KIMCHI VEGETABLES

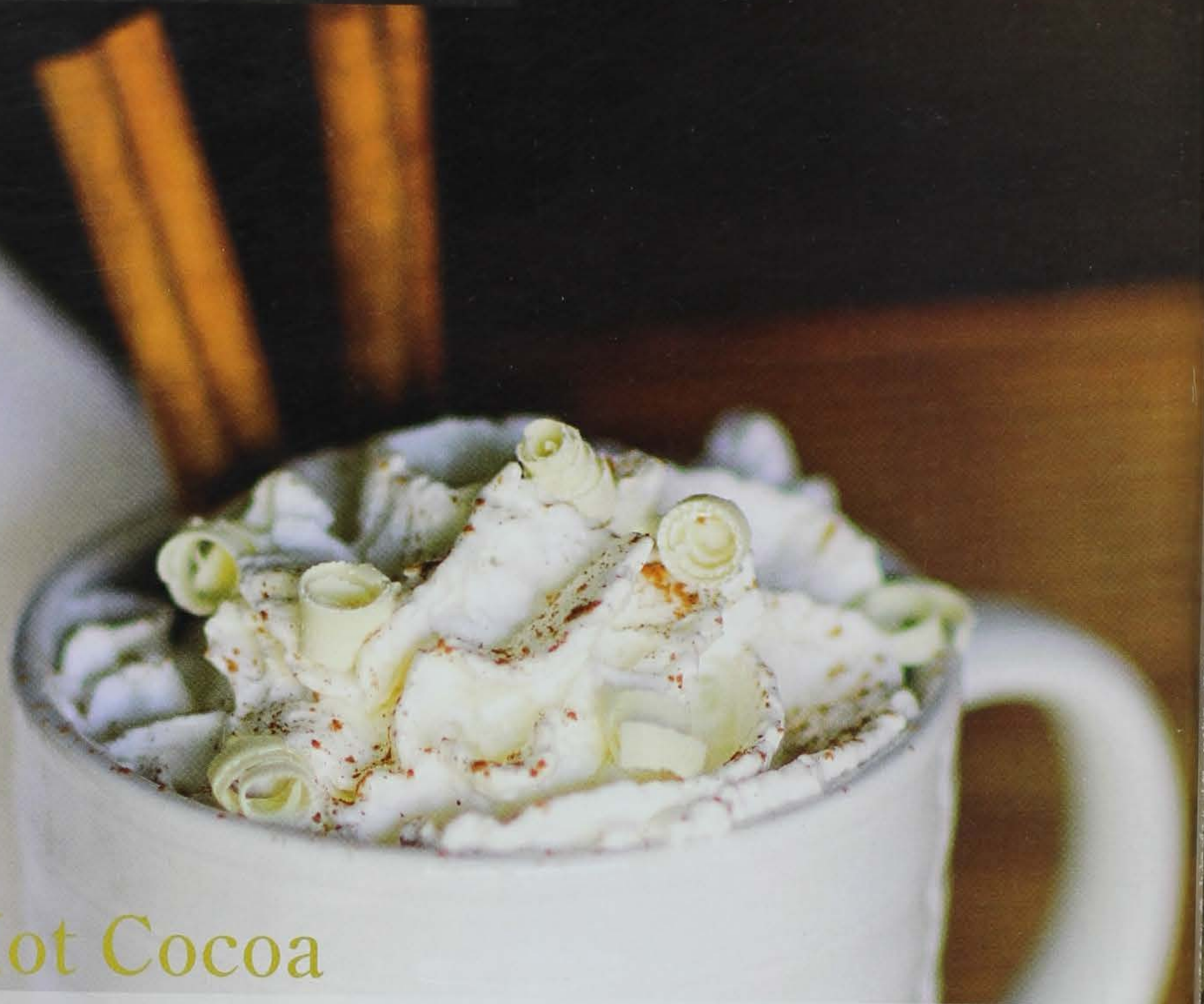
1 (2-pound) napa cabbage  
1/2 cup kosher salt  
12 cups water  
8-ounces daikon radish or red radishes,  
peeled and cut into 2-inch matchsticks  
1 medium white onion, diced  
1/2 cup red pepper sauce, or more to taste  
1/4 cup fish sauce (found in Asian markets)  
1/4 cup peeled, minced ginger  
(about a 2-ounce piece)  
1 tablespoon minced garlic  
(6 to 8 medium cloves)  
1.5 teaspoons sugar  
Red pepper flakes to taste

Kimchi is a staple Korean side dish of fermented vegetables and seasonings. Originally made of just cabbage and beef stock, once the New World red chili was discovered in the 16th century, it became a staple ingredient. Today, cabbage, Asian daikon radishes and cucumbers are oft-used ingredients. Allowed to ferment in jars underground for months, it is both spicy and tangy.

Cut cabbage in 2-inch pieces. Place in large bowl, sprinkle with salt and toss until coated. Add water to cover. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature at least 12 hours, up to 24. Drain cabbage and rinse with cold water, squeeze out any excess liquid and transfer to medium-sized bowl. Place remaining ingredients in large bowl and mix. Add cabbage and toss until thoroughly coated. Pack mixture tightly into a 2-quart glass jar. Seal tightly. Let sit in cool, dark place for 24 hours. Open jar to release gas, reseal and refrigerate at least 48 hours. Best if allowed to ferment for one week. Refrigerate for up to a month.







## Hot Cocoa

Just because the mercury dips below freezing and the snowflakes are flying doesn't mean outdoor activities should cease. Winter is one of the most peaceful times to hit the woods, trails and hard water (see pages 52-57 for winter activity ideas). And nothing staves off outdoor chill better than a steaming, frothy cup of rich hot cocoa. While pre-made mixes may be convenient, they cannot match the intense chocolate goodness of homemade.

This slow cooker version is perfect for active winter families. Hit the slopes, ice or trails on a crisp, winter day knowing a rich mug of soothing, warm cocoa will be ready as soon as you get home. Try something different with white chocolate, or use your favorite candy bar.

### CREAMY WHITE CHOCOLATE COCOA

12 ounces white chocolate (almond bark, cooking squares or chips)  
4 cups milk  
4 cups heavy whipping cream  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
2 cinnamon sticks  
Whipped cream, marshmallows, cinnamon, etc for topping

Place first five ingredients in slow cooker on low for 2.5 to 3 hours. Stir occasionally. Skim off any film. Serve with favorite cocoa toppings.

Nothing compliments the richness of chocolate quite like a little heat. Chili pepper subdues the sweetness of the chocolate, and the chocolate knocks down some of the heat.

Together they produce a complex flavor structure. Next time, put a little kick in your cocoa with this easy Mexican hot chocolate recipe.

### MEXICAN "HOT" CHOCOLATE

4 cups milk  
1/4 cup unsweetened, 100 percent cocoa  
1/4 cup sugar  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
1/2 teaspoon vanilla  
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper, chili powder or chipotle pepper (or to taste)

Combine all ingredients and cook over medium-low heat until simmering, stirring frequently. Serve with favorite hot chocolate toppings.



## Crinoids: "Lilies" of Iowa's Ancient Seas

Crinoids, delicate fossilized animals, lay across what was an ancient Iowa sea. Their flexible stems are commonly found in limestone. Their beauty and diversity have attracted many to study Iowa fossils. Crinoids are Echinoderms, which includes sea stars, urchins and sea cucumbers. These spiny-skinned animals have skeletal parts made of calcareous, or limy plates. About 600 species are extinct, but these well-adapted filter feeders still live in the world's oceans in shallow water and depths as great as 20,000 feet. Some attach to the seabed and others free swim.

### FINDING ANCIENT REMAINS

Shown at right, individual segments of fossilized stem are commonly found in sand and gravel bars along rivers. Often they are mislabeled "Indian beads" or buttons. Shown below and left, these slabs from Le Grande in Marshall County holds crinoid remains that died 350 million years ago. At that time, Iowa was located near the equator, submerged under a warm sea.



### COLORFUL FILTERS

Fan-like arms, covered in a sticky secretion, filter tiny marine life and funnel it to their mouth. Oxygen is absorbed through thin tissue near the base of the stem. Lacking a true stomach, food passes directly into a U-shaped intestine and waste is excreted near the mouth. The intestine does not travel down the stem, which is made of disks held together by flexible fibers. The world record for longest fossilized stem is 130 feet long.

### BLASTED FREE

A micro-blasting technique developed in Iowa prepared the sample shown above by air blasting fine particles of dolomite and glass to clean away stone to expose delicate fossil structures.

### PERFECTLY PRESERVED

Hidden within a quarry near Le Grand were clusters of preserved crinoids. Their bodies gently settled onto mud, and layers of lime covered and preserved them. These nearly intact crinoids were likely uprooted during a storm, deposited together and quickly buried by sediments. Iowa crinoid fossils are in museums around the world.

### IOWANS OF KNOWLEDGE

Three Iowans gained national prominence by studying crinoids. Charles Wachsmuth, Frank Springer and Burnice H. Beane came from different backgrounds but shared a passionate quest for knowledge about ancient crinoid fossils found in Iowa sediments in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many species of Iowa crinoids are named for these early world-renowned experts.



# Warden's Diary

BY ERIKA BILLERBECK



# What If?

It was late, but I decided to take a spin through the wildlife area. As I patrolled, a car approached, blinding me with high beams. It passed without dimming its lights, giving me probable cause to make a traffic stop. The young female driver squinted into the glare of my flashlight and handed me her driver's license. After discussing the car's broken low-beams with "Karen," and the use of high beams, I began assessing why she and her two male passengers were at a wildlife area late at night.

The backseat passenger, wearing a cowboy hat with a blue felt ribbon, told me he was at a bar earlier where he met "some nice bikers" who later joined them at the wildlife area for a bonfire. But, after getting into a fight (his explanation was that "bikers" didn't get along well with "cowboys"), he called his fiancée, Karen, to pick him up. This didn't come as a surprise—I could easily imagine a guy in a fancy cowboy hat with blue felt ribbon getting into trouble with a group of bikers.

Cowboy Hat and the other male passenger didn't have any identification, but Cowboy Hat said his name was "Samuel King," with a date of birth that made him 20 years old. He said he was from Iowa, but was temporarily living in Nebraska. I checked his information through state radio and the physical description given to me by the dispatcher seemed to match. I decided to send them on their way.

I continued west until I reached a boat ramp. As I swung my truck around in the parking lot, my headlights caught the reflection of a car parked down the ramp. The car was cockeyed with its wheels perilously close to the mud bordering the ramp edge. A young woman was

outside the car talking on a cell phone. I experienced a sinking feeling...something wasn't right.

The 19-year-old girl explained she had been on a date with a guy she met online. She pulled onto the ramp seeking a romantic place to "talk." When they decided to leave, the car wouldn't move. It was out of gas. In a panic, her date began calling people, trying to find someone to come pick him up. Finally, he simply walked away, leaving his young date alone. Classy.

"Did he happen to be wearing a cowboy hat with a blue ribbon?" I asked. She nodded. Yep, I'd been had. When I asked her for his name, she said, "Scott." She had picked him up from his apartment in Cedar Rapids. The address matched the one on Karen's driver's license.

I knew before calling dispatch that Cowboy Hat Scott would have a warrant for his arrest. That warrant explained why he gave me a false name and his decision to call his fiancée to rescue him from his date with his non-fiancée. He must have weighed his options and decided it would be easier to fool Karen into thinking he was at a bonfire than to fool a cop assisting a stranded motorist that he was innocent cowboy Samuel King. He had obviously dealt with officers a bit sharper than me.

I looked up both Scott and Samuel King on Facebook. It became apparent that Scott had given me his slightly younger brother's information. The vague physical descriptors given on his brother's drivers license pretty much matched Scott's appearance.

The dispatcher called a few minutes later. Cowboy Hat Scott had a skeleton in his closet—a felony arrest warrant from southwest Iowa for first degree burglary. The



warrant called for "statewide pick up," which meant the county he was wanted in would extradite him back from anywhere within Iowa.

I told the dispatcher to broadcast an "Attempt to Locate." How hard could it be to find a car that shines highbeams on every cop it passes? I wanted desperately to race out of the parking lot and chase him, but decided I shouldn't leave a 19-year-old girl alone with a broken-down car late at night.

The girl's help arrived a half hour later, bearing a can of fuel. I decided to drive to Cedar Rapids and check the apartment complex. If I found the car, I would call the Cedar Rapids Police Department to back me up and help make the arrest.

Now it was the wee hours of the morning, I was no longer tired—I was mad at myself. By this time, Scott and Karen would have had time to drop off their other friend and return to Cedar Rapids.

I pulled into the parking lot of the apartment bordered by woods and a railroad track. The car was nowhere. I pulled back onto the street and parked. I self-imposed a five-minute time limit. If the car didn't arrive, I was going to head home to lie awake and kick myself.

Four minutes later, Karen's car turned onto the street, highbeams shining. Adrenaline surged as I pulled behind the car. Karen, the sole occupant, got out and looked at me in surprise. I told her I needed to speak with "Samuel."

"He's in the house," she replied. I told her she needed to go get him, and as she opened the apartment door, I told her I'd come inside with her. She said I would do no such thing, and shut the door in my face. Karen opened the door a minute later and told me Samuel was passed out. "Wake him up," I told her. She slammed the door again. As time passed, my heart began pounding harder. What were they doing behind the closed door? What if...

I stepped to the side of the door and began pounding it with my fist. Scott came to the door and stepped outside. After talking briefly, I ordered him to turn around and put his hands behind his back. Scott shoved his way past me back into the apartment. As he attempted to get into the doorway I grabbed his upper arm. As soon as I had his bicep in my hand I knew my chances of winning a hand-to-hand fight were slim. Despite the decorative blue ribbon cowboy hat, Scott was no pansy and would probably rather fight than go to jail. He ripped his arm free and bolted for a back room.

At that moment time seemed to slow.  
WHAT IF HE'S GOING FOR A GUN? I

shielded myself by moving back toward some cars in the parking lot.

It became evident Cowboy Hat wasn't going for a gun. Instead, he wrenched open a back window and bailed. By the time I made it to the back of the building, I could hear him crashing through the woods. Gone.

After returning to my truck, I contacted state radio, who contacted the Cedar Rapids Police Department. They arrived in force, and with a K-9 unit, searched the woods, coming up empty. I was upset with myself. The CRPD sergeant tried unsuccessfully to reassure me these things happen to him weekly...that I shouldn't lose sleep over it.

I made it home at 3:30 a.m. The "What Ifs" haunted me. What if things hadn't happened so fast? What if I had done things differently? What if I hadn't been so gullible? What if I would have had a Taser? The "What Ifs" kept me awake until my kids clamored up the stairs for breakfast.

As soon as I heard their voices the only important "What if" became distinctly clear. What if it had been a gun he was running for? What if he had fought me? WHAT IF I hadn't made it home at all?

Later that day I told my story to several people. Each tried to reassure me Scott's actions would catch up with him. They were right. The following night he was caught in western Iowa as Karen attempted to help him flee the state. Scott's own weary mother found out he was headed to Nebraska and called in the tip.

I admit it gave me satisfaction knowing that while I was safely home pouring milk over my kids' cereal and vowing never to be so gullible again, Scott was lying in his jail cell wearing an outfit that no longer included a fancy cowboy hat with a blue felt ribbon. 🐮





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