



NYSOWA Awards

May 2025



Inside...

- Eleven categories of writing and photographic awards

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Excellence in Craft writing awards Judges:



MAGAZINE FEATURE

⊕ Chris Batin

Chris Batin is the long-time Alaska Editor for TravelAge West magazine and has worked as founding Editor and Publisher of Alaska Angler/Alaska Hunter Publications for 47 years. He has written 10 books, filmed and produced six DVDs and has won in excess of 200 national and regional awards for writing and photography. During the last 10 years he has won five Column of the Year awards from the Northwest Outdoor Writers Association and one from OWAA, and during his career has won 11 OWAA EIC first-place awards for magazine features. Chris received the Enos Bradner Award from NOWA based on lifetime achievement and upholding the high professional standards of outdoor journalism. A chapter of Doug Kelly's book, "Alaska's Greatest Outdoor Legends," is devoted to him. His latest book is "Advanced Alaska Fly Fishing Techniques."

⊕ Jay Cassell

Jay Cassell most recently served as Editorial Consultant for Skyhorse Publishing. Recipient of the Excellence in Craft Award from OWAA in 2009, Cassell has been published in Time, Business Week, Popular Mechanics, and most major outdoor magazines, and has written or edited seven books. He has served on the editorial staffs of Field & Stream, Outdoor Life and Sports Afield magazines. He graduated from Syracuse University with an MA in communications and has lived in New York State his entire life.

⊕ Vin T. Sparano

Vin Sparano has been an outdoor editor and writer for more than 50 years. He is Editor Emeritus of Outdoor Life magazine, having served as Editor-in-Chief in 1990-1995 and as Executive Editor for more than 10 years prior to that appointment. His professional experience includes syndicated features for USA Today and Gannett Newspapers. He has written 20 books, including his Complete Outdoors Encyclopedia, winner of the Professional Outdoor Media Association Pinnacle Book Award in 2015. In fact, his books won Pinnacle Awards for three consecutive years. Vin is listed in Who's Who in America.

MAGAZINE COLUMN

⊕ Tim Christie

Tim Christie began his communications career as a photographer, placing a front cover photo in American Hunter Magazine in 1981, and in the ensuing 40-plus years his images have appeared on over 600 magazine covers and in calendars, advertising campaigns, billboards and corporate reports and catalogs. His first magazine article was published in the 1990 Field & Stream Hunting Annual, and since then his articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including Outdoor Life, Wyoming Wildlife and Colorado Outdoors. Tim received the OWAA Excellence in Craft award for both his writing and photography in 2015.

⊕ Amy Kapp

Amy Kapp has served for more than a decade as the Editor-in-Chief of Rails to Trails magazine and the TrailBlog and as the Editorial Director for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), where she's overseen the creation of 17 trail guidebooks. She was previously a freelancer, a writer for Parks & Recreation magazine and a communication strategist for the National Recreation

and Parks Association. She is the current President of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and a member of the Society for American Travel Writers.

⊕ Steve Waters

Steve Waters is the Outdoors Writer for the Miami Herald and also contributes features to Salt Water Sportsman magazine, SportFishingMag.com, The Parklander and JAKES Country. He has written and produced online videos about the outdoors for the South Florida Sun Sentinel newspaper. He was the co-host of The Weekly Fisherman radio show for 14 ½ years on Miami's WINZ 940-AM. Steve served as the assistant sports director for WCFT-TV, where he produced numerous outdoors features for the CBS affiliate in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and worked on a local outdoors TV show as a producer, writer and cameraman.

NEWSPAPER FEATURE

⊕ Bill Monroe

Bill Monroe is the retired Outdoor Writer for The Oregonian and continues contributing to that newspaper as a contract freelancer. He is a past president of both the Outdoor Writers Association of America and Northwest Outdoor Writers Association and has won numerous writing and photography awards.

⊕ Matt Stewart

Matt Stewart is the editor for the National Wild Turkey Federation's Turkey Call and JAKES Country magazines, serving in that role since 2018. He is the NWTF coordinator for the Grand National Calling Championships, the Super Bowl of wild turkey calling contests. Previously he worked with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and has written for multiple newspapers in the Southeast.

NEWSPAPER COLUMN

⊕ Laurie Lee Dovey

Laurie Lee Dovey is a highly awarded writer and photographer, with work published in scores of magazines and newspapers. She is also a media consultant and mentor. Laurie Lee is a past president of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. She was a founder of the Professional Outdoor Media Association and served as the organization's Executive Director for 10 years.

⊕ Mark Taylor

Mark Taylor is Eastern Communications Director for Trout Unlimited. He was formerly the Outdoors Editor of The Roanoke (Va.) Times. He is past president of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and former chair of its Newspaper Section.

⊕ Slaton White

Slaton White is the Editor of SHOT Business magazine, the largest-circulated trade magazine in the shooting industry. He was formerly the Editor of Field & Stream magazine.

ONLINE PUBLICATION

⊕ Jack Burnett

Jack Burnett is recently retired as Managing Editor of The Old Farmer's Almanac, a publication for which he

had worked for 24 of the 49 years he has been a writer and editor. A New Hampshire resident now, Jack grew up in New York State, where he learned to hunt, fish and trap amidst the forests, fields and streams of Rensselaer County.

⊕ Jeff Davis

Jeff Davis retired last year from the Editorship of Whitetails Unlimited Magazine, for which he served for more than 20 years. He previously worked as a freelance photojournalist for 25 years, producing images for more than 300 newspapers, magazines, and corporations. He is a member of the Professional Outdoor Media Association and has served as president of the Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers.

⊕ Steve Griffin

Freelancer Steve Griffin was for more than four decades the outdoor columnist for the Midland (Mich.) Daily News and is a field editor and columnist for Michigan Outdoor News, as well as a regular contributor to Boating magazine. Steve has also crafted museum text and taught courses in newspaper/magazine feature writing at the college level as an adjunct instructor. He is a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America, the Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers and the Michigan Outdoor Writers Association.

TV, RADIO, VIDEO & AUDIO

⊕ John L. Beath

John Beath's YouTube channel, Let's Talk Outdoors (www.youtube.com/jbeath), has had more than 3.5 million video views. His primary online writing sites are halibutchronicles.com and salmonchronicles.com. He has served as an editor of Western Outdoors, has syndicated newspaper outdoor and travel columns and hosted a syndicated radio program. He also was the Editor of GoFishMagazine.com. He is a past president of the Outdoor Writers Association of America.

⊕ Tim Lesmeister

Tim Lesmeister is a full-time freelance outdoor writer, photographer and radio host. He began writing about outdoor pursuits in 1977 and made it a full-time career in 1987. Tim was President of the Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers (AGLOW) and was the 2013 recipient of AGLOW's highest honor, its lifetime achievement Golden Glow Excellence in Craft Award. He is currently a columnist for Outdoor News and host of Outdoor News Radio and was inducted into the 2020 class of the Minnesota Fishing Hall of Fame. Tim is the Chairman of the International Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame Selection Committee and is a member of the Southeast Outdoor Press Association.

⊕ Brett Prettyman

Brett Prettyman most recently served as Intermountain Communications Director for Trout Unlimited. Prior to that he was the outdoor editor and environmental writer for the Salt Lake (Utah) Tribune and covered outdoor-related issues for that newspaper for 25 years. He has written three outdoor-related books and has received two Emmys for his work as producer, writer and host of the "Utah Bucket List" television show. Brett is a past president of the Outdoor Writers Association of America.



A message from our PRESIDENT

Deb Brosen

It is an honor to be able to congratulate the winners of the 2025 New York State Outdoor Writers Association Excellence in Craft Awards and the Janice M. Keesler Memorial Photo Awards. Each year our members participate in these two craft improvement competitions, where the top three entries are selected for an award. Feedback from our prestigious judges

helps each of our members improve their skills in the competition areas.

I would like to thank the judges for taking the time to review each entry for the ultimate selection of the top three submissions. Even though they use a scoring mechanism to do this, they still have a tough, subjective job. Their time, dedication to NYSOWA and their expertise are greatly appreciated. We would not be able to hold these competitions if it were not for them and our wonderful members who enter. Thank you to all members who entered this year. All entries were certainly worthy of award consideration.

I would also like to thank Redding Reloading Equipment and Ducks Unlimited for sponsoring the Excellence in Craft and Janice M. Keesler Memorial Photo Awards, and the National Shooting Sports Foundation for sponsoring the awards banquet at our annual conference.

I coordinate the photo awards program. It is a lot of work, but I love doing it, so from that experience, I want to say a special thank you to Glenn Sapir and Chris Paparo for their organization of the Excellence in Craft Awards. This is a huge challenge, and they do a wonderful job! Thank you, also, to Stephen George, Treasurer, for preparing the checks for the awardees.

Again, huge congratulations to all of the recipients of this year's awards!

Deb Brosen, President, NYSOWA

Award Winners for work published in 2024 (TV, Radio, Video and Audio in 2023 and 2024)

Magazine Feature

First place

Angela Colangelo
Making The Bait
How Larry Welcome Spun A
Career Out Of Wood
NorthForker, May 2024



With its 1,600 miles of shoreline, it makes sense that the largest island in the contiguous United States — Long Island — breeds an abundance of saltwater fishermen. It also happens to be right in the migratory path of striped bass, creating a niche of fisherman so hyper-focused on the mid-Atlantic fish that the term “striper widow” was coined.

After thousands of casts, fishing tides at all hours of the day and night forges the “striper sharpie,” a fisherman whose line is tight when all others lay slack. And using bait doesn't count: Anyone can catch with a hunk of meat on the hook. The true purist casts only plugs, pieces of wood shaped and painted to look and act like a fleeing baitfish.

Sharpies use plugs, and many use bespoke plugs that were designed and built right here on the North Fork—in Cutchogue by Larry Welcome.

Need Breeds Ingenuity

Welcome is the designer, builder and proprietor of not one but two fishing plug companies: Northbar Tackle and Sporting Wood Lures. Judging by the fishing awards



Larry Welcome used to take trips to Montauk to fish, but now stays on the North Fork. “The fishing's good local,” he says.

wallpapering his shop, Welcome is a striper sharpie in his own right, although he balks at the notion. His ancestors might beg to differ: his family history in the sea goes back generations—and his great-great-great grandfather? That would be none other than Mr. Moby Dick himself, Herman Melville.

Welcome has been selling fishing lures since 1990, but he got hooked on fishing early on. Growing up in the beach and fishing community of Long Beach, N.Y., his family lived in a one-room apartment with a bathroom shared by the entire floor. Welcome found relief from cramped quarters outdoors and started creating fishing lures at a young age, since he couldn't buy them. Before he and his sister hit double digits, he saw her napping one day and had an idea. He cut a lock of hair from the top of her resting head and tied it onto a jig that had shed its bucktail (a commonly used fishing lure made in part from deer tail hair that, when wet, smooths out and looks like a bait-fish) because he had fished it so much. His sister woke to find herself with a new hairdo reminiscent of Alfalfa's from “The Little Rascals.” It's been 50 years and Welcome says his sister has yet to forgive him, but the ingenuity he showed back then spawned a life's work.

That early ability to see raw materials and their potential served him well as a beginner plug builder. When he needed new poppers—a lure designed to “pop” along the surface to get fish's attention—Welcome used broom and mop handles. Some of his earliest designs started out as staircase balusters.

Years later, when he was employed as a technician on a team building superconducting magnets at Brookhaven National Lab, he came upon the lure that would define him. On lunch breaks, Welcome began building plugs using metal-working machinery. It was an early bottle plug build snafu that resulted in the lure Welcome eventually patented.

“I screwed one up. I made the body too thin and the neck too thick,” he recalls. Staring at it, trying to think of how to salvage his materials and time, he saw how further adjustments in shape and weight could create an entirely new plug. Once he swam it and saw it in action, he named it the now famous bottle darter.

Lured to the East End

Welcome's path to the North Fork followed a similar intuitive tug on a line. One of his first jobs as a young adult employed him as a sheet metal worker in New York City in the early '70s. One fateful weekend, Welcome ventured out to OBI East, later known as Canoe Place Inn, in Hampton Bays. He met a woman there from a place he'd never heard of: the North Fork. Both she (now his wife, Ann) and the place would change his life.

“I came out to visit Mattituck, looked around and I'm like, I'm never leaving,” he says. “This is it. This is where I want to be.”

Years later, when Welcome had roots down on the North Fork and was turning plugs for himself and friends as a hobby, he was driving his niece and a friend home. The friend noticed the fishing paraphernalia about Welcome's car and mentioned that her dad liked fishing too. He offered her a plug to give to him.

The next day Welcome received a call from Ronnie Dietrich, a well-known surf fishing gear innovator from Southold with a house on the Sound. After catching 50 striped bass in his backyard on Welcome's bottle darter, he placed an order for 350 lures to sell in his direct-mail fishing tackle catalog.

That order forced Welcome to design and build production tooling—some of which he still uses today—and head on down to Riverhead Town Hall to officially do the paperwork to create the business, Northbar Tackle.



Welcome's workshop includes proprietary tools to craft his special lures.

Spinning Wood (and Plastic) into Gold

Having both companies—Northbar Tackle and Sporting Wood Lures—gives Welcome an interesting insight into the recreational fishing industry, which generates billions in retail sales annually.

“When I see fluctuations in the [demand for] plastic, it's because of whether or not there's fish around,” Welcome says. “When I see fluctuations in the wood, it's because of fluctuations in the market.”

But doing both, and doing them with the attention of a fine craftsman, has made Welcome's good reputation.

As a rule, fishermen value tackle made in the United States, and they have plenty of options when purchasing it. Welcome says they shell out \$40 a plug for his wood lures (and around \$25 for the plastic versions) because “it's a niche, and it's for purists or it's because they want something made by someone they know, as opposed to manufactured in China somewhere.”





Welcome hand-sands a lure to get it ready for painting.

When it comes to plastic, be it for lures or packaging, that can be tricky. But Welcome sources most of his parts domestically, even for his plastic lures, aside from very few scant materials from France and China. “My packaging is all done in the Carolinas,” he notes. “My manufacturing is all done in Massachusetts.”

And instead of a number that goes to a random call center, his direct contact information is right on the packaging. Many customers email him directly for tips and tricks to swimming his plugs. It was yet another chance meeting that eventually led Welcome to split the business into both wood and plastic lures. At a social at Mattituck Presbyterian Church, a little boy, Rob Kotch, overheard Welcome and a friend talking about weakfish. Kotch begged Welcome to take him fishing.

“He was really excited and asking all the right questions,” Welcome says. “But I couldn’t just take him fishing.”

Welcome asked permission from Kotch’s mother, who, knowing her son’s tenacious need to cast a line in the water, eagerly agreed. They caught schoolie stripers and bluefish together in New Suffolk, and the two became fishing buddies.

Kotch went off to college and came home a licensed practical engineer doing 3D design work. In the early 2000s, the two formed a partnership, Kotch wrote the file for the mold and Northbar Tackle LLC started making Welcome lures in plastic.

The wooden lures take a different, more painstaking trajectory. Every wooden lure Welcome makes starts as one of the 18-foot boards he has piled up in his shop hallway. He uses Eastern white pine because of its light weight. “A lot of guys use different woods,” he says, such as Alaskan yellow cedar or maple. “Pine works best because it’s so light that I’m free to weight it any way I want.”

The boards are cut down to sheets, then to blocks, all pre-measured. The blocks are then shaped into consistent lures using profiles Welcome made himself. While the lure is still spinning in the lathe, he takes varying grains of sandpaper to it to smooth it out.

The lip of the lure is made using a similar process, but it’s where the build gets tricky. “It’s something that takes repetition to learn it properly,” he says. “When you do your first few, it’s not as scien-terrific. Then, after that it gets down to the point where you’ve done hundreds, in my case tens of thousands, you get it.”

Welcome drills holes completely through the plug lengthwise, makes some holes for the eyes and makes some for the belly weights. He pours his own lead for the weights, too.

Drilled and sanded lures are then brought into his paint shop just across the hall. He adds wood flour to his thinned epoxy to seal the lures prior to painting. “The epoxy goes from honey to thinner than water and turns a soft pine lure into rock maple,” he says.

Lures Catch Fish, Colors Catch Fishermen

Welcome sticks to seven paint schemes: blurple (black over purple), yellow, white belly, parrot (a bright green, but not quite chartreuse), white, sand eel (olive with pink haze) and bunker (brownish with spots).

“I know what works. Every color that I make, catches,” he says. He explains that each color scheme mimics a kind of baitfish. For instance, alewife or herring are a pink haze, with a blue back and silver belly, while yellow and white mimic squid, a striper’s favorite food. “Parrot and blurple are mysteries,” he chuckles. “But they work.”

The assembly of painted lures goes quickly thanks to Welcome’s ingenuity. He’s designed and built a proprietary tool he uses to finish off the through-wire. He says this mysterious, secret tool streamlines his process to about two seconds, rather than five minutes by hand.

Gentleman Larry

In 2009 a couple of fishing buddies approached Welcome to start a fishing club, North Fork Anglers. He hesitated.

“I don’t really like fishing clubs. I don’t like joining things. I didn’t even join my wife’s church,” Welcome says with a laugh.

He agreed, however, with the stipulation that he could write the bylaws. They include no foul language, no politics and no talking about your wife.

“My idea was, we’re gonna talk about fishing, and go fishing and we’re only going to invite friends. It’s a gentleman’s fishing club. With women also,” outlines Welcome. He explains that members must be environmentally conscious and not abuse the land or the fishery. He aims to keep it at a level where everyone gets along.

“The club started with 10 guys, our own little clique,” he says. “Other clubs are fading away; ours is growing.” The club currently has 51 members.

Even though Welcome knows the ins and outs of striper fishing so well that he’s made a career of it, his wife is no striper widow.

He fishes one day a week in the spring and late fall, not at all in the summer and up to five days a week in October during the peak striped bass migration.

“No more Montauk,” he says of his former days fishing out at the End. “The fishing’s good local.”

The days and weeks between casts are spent playing tennis and golf and spending time with his grandchildren.

“I’m not [obsessed with fishing],” he says. “I like fishing. I don’t have to fish. I really enjoy it, but I don’t have to.”

But for those who are obsessed, it’s Welcome’s lures or nothing. He estimates that 75% of all striper surfcasters carry at least one of his lures in their plug bags, from those that fish up in New England on Cape Cod, down to Cape May in New Jersey—hotspots along the striper coast.

“You wouldn’t believe,” he says, “how many guys have caught their personal best on my stuff.” ■

Second Place

⊕ **Matt Haeffner**
Mid-Shore Mahi
Angler’s Almanac, 2024

Third Place

⊕ **Angela Colangelo**
Starry Nights
NorthForker, Oct. 2024

Magazine Column

First place

Steve Piatt
*Outdoor Adventures:
The Perfect Fishing Buddy*
PennLines, July 2024



One of my favorite fishing buddies checks all the boxes when it comes to angling companions. Never runs late. Lets me choose which water. Doesn’t care what I play on the radio; doesn’t even mind my singing. I get first cast at every hole. And my pal agrees with my philosophy that when the day is over, we’re required to hit the first McDonald’s drive-thru we encounter.

It’s been that way for several years since I learned our now 9-year-old Labrador retriever Finn is not only a superb hunting dog, but also a fine fishing companion.

It’s a rarity for a souped-up hunting Lab, but Finn understands the game and her role as she dutifully observes my fly-fishing, allowing me to catch a trout or two before I turn her loose for a quick swim. Then it’s upstream to the next likely spot where we repeat the scenario.

Admittedly, it doesn’t work just anywhere, on any stream. Finn certainly stays home on the opening day of trout season and any other time we may encounter other anglers. She’s simply too friendly and wouldn’t be able to help herself, splashing up to each and every fisherman to say hello and, in the process, probably blowing up the hole. It wouldn’t be pretty.

And even when we do head out, there’s a process for prepping Finn for a day on the water. A couple of streams we fish with some regularity are remote enough to be prefaced with a hike of a mile or two, enough to burn off some of



A hunter by birth, Finn also looks forward to summer days at the fishing hole, where she enjoys splashing around in the water and later stopping for a cheeseburger on the way home.

Finn’s boundless energy and settle her in for our fish-and-swim routine.

On the rare occasion we do encounter other anglers, they’ve been, to this point, more than happy to receive Finn’s inevitable greeting, and there haven’t really been any “incidents.”

I’ve learned a little about Finn’s fishing style over the years as well. She prefers that I fish with dry flies, allowing her to follow the cast and see the strike, which typically sends her into a tap-dancing whine but never launches her into the water. Using dries hasn’t been a problem; I like to fish with them as well, and this is usually a mid-June or July outing. By then, most other anglers have shifted their attention to Susquehanna River smallmouths or started pond hopping for largemouth bass. We’re perfectly fine with that.

So, I tie on a hopper pattern, something along the lines of a Dave’s or Joe’s hopper, maybe even a Chubby Chernobyl pattern in size 12, that allows Finn to watch and is also, admittedly, a concession to my aging eyes.

Although I thoroughly enjoy plying the waters of one of Pennsylvania’s many trickles loaded with wild brook and —

sometimes — wild brown trout, Finn prefers the bigger streams. Not because they hold larger fish, including some hefty state-stocked trout, but because the swimming is much better. Turning her loose on a mountain stream often leads to a look of disappointment with the lack of swimming water.

So, we usually hit the wider waters, where the casting is simpler, the trout bigger and the holes deeper. Occasionally, our outing allows us to do both, jumping up into a feeder stream for some wild trout after catching a few stocked fish on the main stem.

When we’re done for the day, it’s my call. Finn usually takes one or two more laps in our final fishing hole before we head to the truck Boots come off, rod is stored back in its tube, Gatorade is chugged and Finn gets towed off for the ride home.

It’s been a long day and she’s tired, but still excited. There’s a McDonald’s drive-thru a half hour up the road, and it’s time for a cheeseburger. ■

Second Place

⊕ **Steve Piatt**
*Outdoor Adventures:
Fleeing Florida, Heading Home*
PennLines, May 2024

Third Place

⊕ **Charles Witek**
*Scuttlebutt:
Generational Conflict—Our Differing Views*
The Drake, Summer 2024

Newspaper Feature

First place

Steve Featherstone
*How Pain, Ducks
 and a Young
 Hunter's First Buck Bonded
 Two Families Coping with Loss*
 The Post-Standard, March 31, 2024



Wyatt Farwell, 15, looked out the back door of his home in LaFayette, holding his father's rifle at his hip. Somewhere in the cold winter woods beyond the chicken coop lurked a fox that had recently killed five of his chickens and a duck.

Wyatt's mother, Brooke, watched from the dining room. "Wyatt always wanted ducks," she said. "Ducks, ducks, ducks."

Wyatt leaned his rifle against the wall and sat down next to his mother. "I think it was just because Pa had them when he was a kid," he said.

Wyatt started raising ducks in first grade, Brooke said, "following in his father's footsteps." Later, they added chickens and turkeys to the flock and built a coop and pens to hold them all. One of Wyatt's Pekin ducks even won Grand Champion at the New York State Fair.

But raising poultry wasn't all blue ribbons and fuzzy chicks. They often lost birds to hungry foxes and coyotes, Wyatt said. Sometimes the killing seemed wanton and cruel, like the time a fisher slaughtered 60 of their chickens in a single night. And sometimes birds just died.



When he was in first grade, Wyatt Farwell began keeping ducks, chickens following in his father's footsteps. He later added pigeons.



Wyatt Farwell (right) poses with a buck that his father, Aaron Farwell (left), harvested in 2018.

Wyatt understood all that. That's simply how life was at the Farwell homestead, the place at the end of a dead-end country road with a chicken coop out back, janky vehicles in front, and on occasion, deer carcasses hanging from the swing set.

Life was always a little off the rails around here, Brooke said, but beneath the chaos everything had a purpose — with one exception: the death of her husband, Aaron Farwell, or Pa as they called him. He died suddenly at home two and a half years ago. He was only 47 years old.

"Sometimes it doesn't seem real," said Brooke, adding that her dreams often felt more real than her thoughts. "It's almost worse when I dream about it," she said. "It's almost like reliving it."

"I don't really dream that much now," said Wyatt. "But every once in a while I have a dream about him, that I'm still with him, working or hunting."

A Rite of Passage

Aaron had COVID in early October 2021, but he recovered in time to take Wyatt out for the annual youth hunt on Columbus Day weekend. He was determined to get Wyatt his first buck, an important milestone in the life of any deer hunter. But they came home empty handed. A month later Aaron was dead.

Aaron grew up hunting, but he never pushed it on his boys. Levi, now 11 years old, has so far shown little interest in it; Wyatt, on the other hand, went so far in the other direction that he acquired Aaron's knack for falling asleep in the woods.

Unlike Aaron, Brooke didn't grow up in a hunting family. When they began dating in 1989, her "mindset was, it's just about killing," she said.

But she changed her mind after Aaron chastised her once for not swerving to avoid a squirrel in the road. That's when she realized that he loved animals, and hunting was a big part of that.

What pains her now is knowing that Wyatt will never get to experience certain rites of passage, like getting his first buck with his dad. Even if she knew how, it wouldn't be the same if she took Wyatt hunting.

"As a mom, you have a role," Brooke said. "And it's not like women can't do it, but there's something different about guy time. And I appreciate that, I understand that."

Brooke enlisted Aaron's friend, Chris Hagan, for help initiating Wyatt into the fraternity of deer hunters. Aaron had first met Chris one day after church. He was looking for a



Wyatt Farwell (right), his brother, Levi (middle), and their mother, Brooke, at their home in LaFayette. Also pictured is Indiana Bones, their coonhound.

carpenter; Chris was looking for a plumber. They agreed on a work exchange and hit it off.

After Aaron died, Chris and his wife, Keisha, were there for Brooke. They didn't avoid her out of some misguided sense of propriety, or give her questionable advice, like getting rid of Aaron's old truck, as some had suggested.

"They're just very stable, steady people," Brooke said. "They've gone through loss themselves."

Chris and Keisha's son, Donovan, died as an infant. They have two girls now, but had Donovan lived, he would have been the same age as Wyatt. Brooke believed that putting Wyatt and Chris together might fulfill a need each of them had beyond whatever obligations they felt toward Aaron.

Her instinct proved right last November when Wyatt finally got his first buck.

'A Fatherly Figure Thing'

Chris, it must be noted, had taken Wyatt hunting many times since Aaron's death, including overnight trips to Pennsylvania. The experience made him question whether hunting was really Wyatt's thing.

During hunts, Wyatt was "wicked fidgety," Chris observed recently over pizza at Brooke's house. Or Wyatt would fall asleep or get distracted by an old propane cylinder lying in the weeds. And for reasons Chris simply cannot fathom, Wyatt had a weird aversion to pooping in the woods.

"I spent three years wondering if Wyatt was doing something Aaron would want him to do," said Chris. "There's a fine line there where it starts becoming work."

On Nov. 24, 2023, one week into gun season, Chris decided to give Wyatt one more shot. He and his buddy, Casey, took Wyatt deer hunting on private land near Weedsport. They each vowed not to baby him.

"I feel like that's a fatherly figure thing," Chris explained. "If he wants it, we'll help him, and if he doesn't want it, we're going to find out real quick."

The Hunt

They climbed into an elevated blind before sunup and ate some sandwiches; then Wyatt took a two-hour nap. Around midday, Chris nudged Wyatt as a four-point buck approached the blind. Wyatt got ready to shoot it, but Chris didn't want to risk pissing off the landowner by taking a young buck.

So they waited for something bigger to come along. Instead, another hunter unwittingly strolled through their entire set, kicking up a doe and ruining any chance they had of seeing another buck.

"Oh, I was ticked!" Chris said. "I'm sitting there fuming, and two minutes later Wyatt is elbowing me."

Wyatt pointed toward a field about 200 yards away where a buck was trailing behind the kicked-up doe. Even from that distance they could tell it was a monster. The buck disappeared into a tree line and reappeared moments later moving up a trail toward their blind.

Wyatt put his eye to the scope of the rifle Chris had set up on a tripod, but the angle was off. He couldn't get a line on the buck, which was now barreling right at them, its massive eight-point rack weaving between the trees.

Without exchanging a word, Chris handed Wyatt another rifle — Aaron's .30-30 Thompson Center Contender — and Wyatt swung it to his shoulder.

"In my memory, I tossed him the gun," Chris joked.

Brooke laughed. "Like an old western." "I went to pull the hammer back, and it was already done," Wyatt said.





Chris Hagan (left) and Wyatt Farwell pose with Wyatt's first buck, a 203-pound eight-pointer that Wyatt harvested last fall on private land near Weedsport. Chris Hagan, a friend of Wyatt's dad, lost his own son as an infant. He would have been Wyatt's age.

Wyatt squeezed off a shot. The buck didn't shrug or kick. It just spun around and ran in the opposite direction. Chris thought Wyatt had missed — "I wanted to cry, dude," he said — until the buck dropped 40 yards away.

Brooke was working at Target when she got a text from Chris telling her to go find a place to cry. She put down the clothes she was folding and fought back tears as photos of Wyatt and his buck pinged her phone.

This was Wyatt's favorite part of the hands around his mouth and let out a long, plaintive howl.

Brooke narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't think I howled."

"The whole store heard you," said Wyatt, bouncing out of his chair, "and your coworkers came and checked on you!"

"I had a couple tears," Brooke said. "I was holding it back really good. Then I went back to work."

Chris was so pumped that he dragged the enormous buck to the four-wheeler by himself, breaking the unwritten rule that relegates deer-dragging to the youngest, least-experienced hunters in the party.

Brooke pointed at Chris and said, "You babied him!"

Chris acknowledged that he'd broken his vow, but he had a good reason. Every so often

he had moments that made him stop and think, "I didn't get to do this with my son," he said. Dragging Wyatt's deer was such a moment.

Chris turned to Wyatt. "I couldn't be more proud of you in that moment than if you were my son," he said. "I was like, all right, dude, I'll drag this thing to Kansas if I have to."

The Stars Aligned

They had to cut the feet off Wyatt's buck so it would fit on the scale at Chris's pole barn. It weighed 203 pounds, "the biggest deer I ever laid hands on, by far," said Chris. The taxidermist he later brought it to estimated that its rack scored around 160 points.

Everybody who sees pictures of Wyatt's buck agrees that it's special. But the best hunting stories are rarely about the size of a deer, or how many points it scored. For the small group gathered in Brooke's dining room, Wyatt's hunting story would forever bind them together.

"The stars aligned," Brooke said. "It just all worked out."

"I don't believe in destiny," said Chris. "But man, I felt like we had somebody..." He swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah, there was some help on that one, dude."

Keisha had given Brooke an album of photos from the hunt. The last page makes Brooke tear up every time. It's a composite photo of Wyatt standing in a field, holding his buck by its antlers. Behind Wyatt, just over his shoulder, is Aaron. Their smiles are identical.

The Fox and the Flock

The story of Wyatt's first buck is bittersweet for Brooke. While it should've been Aaron with him that day, she said, she knows he will always be a part of that story. He always has been — and always will be — a guiding force for Levi and Wyatt, long after they've grown into men.

Brooke came to this realization four months after Aaron's death, on her first wedding anniversary alone, cooped up at home with Wyatt and Levi, sick with COVID and bereft with grief. Making matters worse, a fox had been prowling around again.

"The stinking fox kept taking the birds that we had raised with Aaron," Brooke said.

"It really was upsetting," said Wyatt. He remembers grabbing his dad's rifle, slipping outside and shooting the fox. "I don't even know how I hit it," he said. "I couldn't even see through the scope."

Brooke keeps a video on her phone of Wyatt running through the snow toward the house, holding the dead fox by the tail and grinning ear to ear. "Good job, bud!" she shouts in the video.

Something shifted in Brooke that day. What Wyatt did for the birds, for his family — for her — was a gift of sorts, she said. Seeing him step into a role for which Aaron had prepared him took away a bit of her pain and sadness.

"He was protecting the flock," she said. "He knew what to do." ■

Second Place

⊕ **Tom Schlichter**
Hooked on Kayaks
Newsday, Sept. 1, 2024

Third Place

⊕ **Tom Schlichter**
Bucket List
Newsday, March 17, 2024

Newspaper Column

First place

Steve Piatt
Out There: The Old Turkey Hunter

New York Outdoor News, June 14, 2024



Spring gobbler season is, quite literally, a painful reminder that I'm now the same age as old people.

Yet I still hunt, and my pre-season scouting runs essentially turn May Madness into a two-month or longer effort, rising each morning without benefit or need of an alarm clock, the passion still firmly intact even if the body is not.

In the sports jargon of today, I would be described daily as a "game time decision," dealing with a "lower body injury" that will at some point be addressed, but not until after the season. Not unlike a National Hockey League player who ignores both pain and injury until the grueling run toward the Stanley Cup has ended, either with disappointment or pure elation.

I see both during the course of the turkey season. Certainly not on the scale of a professional athlete, but you get the idea. Members of the spring gobbler hunting fraternity understand completely. And those who have entered my age demographic understand, especially if they hunt or fish.

Like veteran baseball pitchers who have lost a bit on their fastball but can still get batters out, our successes take the form of a longbeard, a whitetail buck, a couple pheasants, or maybe a few trout or smallmouth bass.

We hunt smarter, not harder, drawing upon decades of experience in the field and on the water, still pushing our limits even as we realize they are no longer limitless. Advil becomes as an important part of our arsenal as our shotgun, rifle, or fly rod. We schedule doctor's visits around hunting and fishing seasons. A full morning pursuing spring gobblers or backcountry brook trout is followed by the drive home, but often not before a nap in the cab of the pickup warmed

by the sun.

We might be a bit forgetful these days: at least once during the course of the spring gobbler marathon I'll arrive at my hunting spot only to realize I've left my shotgun home. I no longer recall which is my "good knee" and which is my "bad knee." And usually, in mid-summer, I'll drive past a hunting spot I totally forgot to visit during the spring and kick myself for not giving it a look.

But there is so much we do remember. So many sporting memories, of thunderous longbeards gobbling in the timber, of exhausting spring turkey trips to multiple states (Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, South Dakota, and Florida), of superb breakfasts in small-town diners as we celebrate success with a bird in the bed of the pickup, of laughs with hunting buddies as we dodge thunderstorms or encounters with curious — or sometimes angry — cattle.

And, of course, we remember the misses. Those we recall with more clarity than the turkeys we've tagged. They haunt us, but also remind us there are no guarantees in this game — including whether there will be one more bird in our future.

We hunt with more appreciation these days than we did when we were younger and hard-charging our way through the turkey woods, concerned only with filling a tag and securing our place in the local turkey-hunting hierarchy. We slow down, out of necessity but also out of enjoyment of the experience. We take time to admire and delight in everything out there: the varied call of the wood thrush, a newborn fawn curled up in the sunlight, its dappled coat its only defense, all the sights and sounds we ignored in our younger days as we frantically scrambled to bag a bird.

We hope to harvest, but success these days is often measured by other things, like the sighting of a black bear with cubs, or a few more mushrooms, or an intense conversation with a stubborn gobbler that showed itself just out of shooting range.

And when we do harvest a gobbler, we take a few more moments to admire this grand bird. Not because we know we now have to tote it over our shoulder back to the truck, but because these days every longbeard is special. We stroke its feathers and marvel at its radiant beauty in the morning sun, thankful we're still able to do this.

A great breakfast at a local diner awaits, as does a nap later in the day.

And a couple Advil. ■



Although aging poses some challenges, retired NYON Editor Steve Piatt still rises early morning to pursue spring gobblers.

Second Place

⊕ **Steve Piatt**
Still Out There: Spoiled by the Aurora
Morning Times, Oct. 9, 2004

Third Place

⊕ **Glenn Sapir**
Here and There, Now and Then: The Hunter/Angler's Home Office Cave
New York Outdoor News, Aug. 23, 2024

Online Publication

First place

Angelo Peluso
*Debunking Dog Day Dogma:
 Late Summer
 Lunker Largemouth*
 The Fisherman Magazine Online, Aug. 2024



It was a very hot, bluebird day, typical of mid-summer in the Northeast. I had the kayak loaded atop my SUV and my freshwater bass gear stowed inside. I have never been one to shy away from the heat of late July and August, since some of my biggest largemouth bass have been caught on sweltering summer days. I was looking forward to getting on the pond and enticing a few bass out from their late summer haunts. At this time of year, many freshwater bass anglers will avoid ponds and lakes that are overly weed-ridden, and covered in dense patches of lily pads, because the fishing can be tough. But heavy cover, especially in shallow bodies of water, provides a safe-haven for bass, and effective ambush points for predators lying in wait.



The 7-pound, 14-ounce bucketmouth caught by the author was the icing on the cake to debunking the dog day theory.

Heavy Cover Hog

Upon arriving at the pond, it was immediately apparent that it was going to be a day of fishing among the lily pads and other aquatic growth. No doubt this could be a daunting and challenging outing, but with persistence, the rewards of a good bass or two would be possible. My decision regarding baits involved mostly an array of soft plastics. Easily rigged weedless, these baits can be effectively fished in and among the thickest weed cover. I had one rod rigged with plastic frog, and three other outfits rigged respectively with a paddle tail, a creature bait and a Senko. I tend to fish ponds and small lakes in counter-clockwise manner. Not that it really matters, it's just a preference that has developed over the years. In the case of the pond that I was on, moving in this direction resulted in the kayak initially entering a very dense section of lily pads. It would take some time to thoroughly fish the area in a manner that would provide the

best opportunity to entice some strikes. I began casting and working the pads at about 8:30 a.m. with no bites for almost an hour and a half. But my luck was about to change. I made a long cast with the paddle tail, and it landed upon a lily pad. I jiggled the bait a bit and then worked it off pad, swimming it toward the next patch of pads.

After working the retrieve about half way back to the kayak, I observed a substantial up-welling of the water and pads directly behind the path of the paddle tail. It was time to slightly accelerate the retrieve of the bait to further draw in the bass that apparently was on track to intercept the paddletail. The fish followed the bait, and at the point where the lure was about to exit from the last clump of pads, the bass struck, and I set the hook. It was a heavy take with much surface commotion. Fortunately, the big bass did not turn back into the heavy cover, but rather swam into open water. And fortunately, it did not jump, but instead made dogged dives to deeper water. The bass was strong, and it turned the bow of the kayak in its direction. I then started to breathe a bit heavier, and silently prayed to the fishing gods to keep this fish on the hook. With no net, I had to carefully lip this bass when the opportunity presented itself. That opening occurred as the bass tired and the kayak drifted closer to it. Once the fish rolled to its side, it was ready to be subdued. Gripping the bass by the lower jaw, I instantly realized how big it was, since both hands fit in the maw of the fish. It was a brute of a northern bass, tipping the scale at 7 pounds, 14 ounces.

Tactics & Technique

When I look back on that fish, I realized that a few tactics and techniques contributed to its capture. Firstly, I thoroughly worked over that section of pads, returning to it several times before the bass was motivated to strike. The fish could have either been hunkered down in that area the entire time, or it could have moved into the area looking for a meal. Its aggressiveness towards the bait, has me leaning in the direction of a cruising and feeding fish. Either way, the lesson learned is to be persistent with your efforts to methodically prospect an area of thick cover, and to even return to it during the course of an outing. It may be just a matter of timing or a change of bait that will stimulate a reaction or feeding strike. Secondly, if a fish shows interest in your bait, and homes in on its track, manipulate that bait in a manner that replicates fleeing or injured prey. Very often just continuing a steady retrieve is all that it takes to get the big bite, but I prefer imparting some additional tantalizing and seductive action. That tends to provide the extra impetus for the fish to eat.

I have many other examples of successfully fishing the "dog days," yet one specific experience highlights just how productive those supposed lackluster days can be. This outing took place on a typically sweltering August day. The pond, as expected, had significant aquatic growth and sections of thick lily pads. Small bass were quite active throughout most of the morning, and were aggressively feeding on abundant dragon flies. I spent most of my time sight casting plastic baits to bass rising to the flies.

Much of this action was taking place among the openings between sections of lily pads. When that feeding behavior ceased, I moved the kayak out from among the pads and began fishing the edges of the pads at points where they were adjacent to deeper water. I then made several passes up and down the 50-yard stretch of water. It was about 1 p.m. when the first of three quality bass hit a Texas-rigged worm. Within the following 45 minutes, two other largemouth bass hit the same artificial bait. All three bass were lying on the edge of the pads where the vegetation met with deep water. And each of those bass was over five pounds.

If that event doesn't debunk the stigma of summer "dog days," then I don't know what does. Those bass were obviously on the feed, and it mattered not the time of day, the intense heat of midday, or the temperature of the water. What did matter was overcoming those conditions, maintaining a positive attitude that bass would eventually feed, and remain persistent. After many years of fishing small lakes and ponds, it has become very evident that



Using a canoe allowed the author to reach productive summertime waters in the Long Island pond.

cycling back to previously fished spots has its benefits.

There are windows of opportunity when a location that might seemingly have appeared devoid of any fish, turns on. Freshwater bass do migrate during the course of a day from resting areas where they exhibit neutral activity to locations where they search for food. It might seem to some that during the summer month's bass will only actively feed during the early morning or late evening into the darkness of night. I have found that not to be the case. Many of the largest black bass that I have caught in the summer have been taken during a time window of between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. If you can identify summer migration and feeding patterns, there will be no restrictions on when you can fish.

Summer Pond Tackle

Regarding tackle, it is best to choose medium to medium/heavy spinning or casting gear. Bass will often dig down into the root systems of the lily pads or other cover, and very often the angler will need to muscle fish out from those tangles. Braid is a good line choice, although I prefer hybrid fluoro/mono line. Plastic baits like worms, paddle tails, creature baits, jigs and frogs are ideal for this form of fishing. Rig them weedless. Hard baits in the form of spinnerbaits, chatterbaits are also very effective when fish through openings in the vegetation or along the edges of lily pad or weed lines.

In the final analysis, the best time to go fishing is when you can. So don't let the hot summer weather deter you from what could be some of the best outings of the season. ■

Second Place

⊕ **Tom Schlichter**
Turks & Caicos Adventure
 White Water Blog, Jan. 14, 2024

Third Place

⊕ **Steve Piatt**
Ausable's West Branch: A Pickpocket's Dream
 Dark Skies Fly Fishing, Spring 2024

TV, Radio, Video and Audio

First place

Joseph Gary Crance
*An Exceptional Hound: Book II
 of the Ryland Creek Saga*
 Audible.com, Sept. 25, 2023



An Exceptional Hound: Book I of the Ryland Creek Saga, is the story of the coonhound Seth, first introduced in The Last Coon Hunter.

This installment in the Ryland Creek series fills in part of

the 7-year gap between the last two chapters of *The Last Coon Hunter* and borrows from the Iroquoian legend of the Great Bear. ■



Second Place

⊕ **Mike Joyner**
*Tales from the Turkey Woods:
 Mornings of My Better Days*
 Amazon/ACX, Feb. 23, 2024

Third Place

⊕ **Terry Belke**
*2 the Outdoors:
 A Celebration of Life for Gerry Rising*
 WCRZ-TV, Feb. 26, 2023



Janice M. Keesler Memorial Photo Awards Recipients Judges:

⊕ Don Andrews

Don Andrews has dedicated his life to capturing the essence of nature through his lens. With a passion for hiking, backpacking, skiing and mountaineering, he has traveled to some of the most remote and beautiful areas of our country. From Alaska to the Adirondacks, he has taken countless photographs of wildlife and landscapes, with each frame telling a unique story. He specializes in capturing the beauty of the great outdoors in a way that makes people fall in love with nature all over again. Don has made more than 75 trips to Yellowstone, Grand Teton and Glacier National Parks. He is currently working on a new website, DonAndrewsPhotography.com.

⊕ Mark Bowie

Mark Bowie is a professional nature photographer, writer and much sought-after public speaker. He is a frequent contributor to *Adirondack Life* magazine and his work has been published internationally in books, on calendars and posters and in advertising media. His first two coffee table books, *Adirondack Waters: Spirit of the Mountains* and *In Stoddard's Footsteps: The Adirondacks Then & Now*, have become landmark regional publications. They were followed by *The Adirondacks: In Celebration of the Seasons*. He is an expert on night photography and has written two comprehensive e-books on the subject: *The Light of Midnight: Photographing the Landscape at Night*; and *After Midnight: Night Photography by Example*. Mark is a staff instructor for the Adirondack Photography Institute, leading digital photography workshops and tours.

⊕ Kurt Gardner

Kurt Gardner, a Rochester native, spent his childhood in the Adirondack Park. His family spent summers, weekends and every other opportunity there to enjoy the beauty of this area. The time spent and memories made as a child helped shape the lens that created the love he tries to display in his photographs. Kurt has been a professional in fashion and advertising photography. After a severe medical setback in 2014, he began his recovery process with the aid of a friend who escorted him—and his camera—often into the Adirondack wilderness. The beauty of his surroundings helped to heal his spirit and body.

⊕ Colleen Miniuk

Colleen Miniuk is a corporate-America escapee turned full-time outdoor photographer, writer, publisher, instructor, and speaker from Chandler, Arizona. Her credits include National Geographic calendars, Arizona Highways, AAA Via, National Parks Traveler, On Landscape and a variety of other publications. After serving three times as an Artist-in-Residence with Acadia National Park, she authored the award-winning guidebook, *Photographing Acadia National Park: The Essential Guide to When, Where, and How*. She is also the author of *Wild in Arizona: Photographing Arizona's Wildflowers*, *Seeing the Light in Outdoor Photography*, and *The Current Flows: Water in the Arid West*. She writes an online photography-advice column called "Dear Bubbles" and leads photography workshops, women's photography retreats (called "Sheography™"), and online sessions for camera clubs, outdoor organizations, and private clients. Learn more at www.colleenminiuk.com.

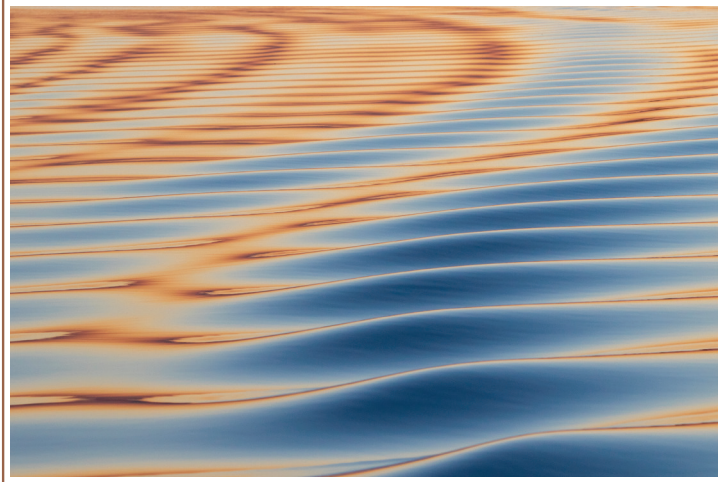
⊕ Dan Sylvester

Dan Sylvester is an award-winning, freelance photographer and artist living his dream of exploring beautiful and wild places with the goal of capturing unique photographs that evoke emotion and drama. Dan's work can be found in galleries and featured in calendars depicting the beauty of national parks. As an avid outdoorsman, nature and the rugged outdoors are always calling to him to explore unique experiences and new destinations.



The Photo Award Recipients

Outdoor Scenic



First Place (Picture)

⊕ Chris Paparo

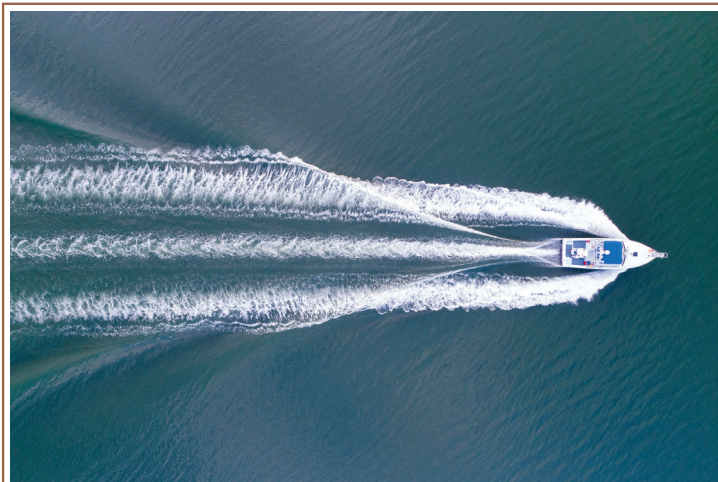
Second Place

⊕ Richard Redman

Third Place

⊕ Glenn Sapir

Outdoor Action



First Place (Picture)

⊕ Chris Paparo

Second Place

⊕ Glenn Sapir

Third Place

⊕ Glenn Sapir

Wildlife



First Place (Picture)

⊕ Chris Paparo

Second Place

⊕ Angelo Peluso

Third Place

⊕ Richard Redman

Hunting & Fishing



First Place (Picture)

⊕ Angelo Peluso

Second Place

⊕ Chris Paparo

Third Place

⊕ Richard Redman

People



First Place (Picture)

⊕ Chris Paparo

Second Place

⊕ Bill Hilt, Jr.

Third Place

⊕ Angelo Peluso

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