



# NYSOWA Awards

May 2026



Inside...

- Eleven categories of writing and photographic awards

Sponsored by:



# 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."

### ⊕ Jack Burnett

Jack Burnett retired as Managing Editor of The Old Farmer's Almanac, a publication for which he had worked for 24 years. 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.

### ⊕ 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.

## MAGAZINE COLUMN

### ⊕ Jeff Davis

Jeff Davis is the retired Editor 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.

### ⊕ 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 multiple 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 past President of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and a member of the Society for American Travel Writers.

### ⊕ 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.

## NEWSPAPER FEATURE

### ⊕ Phil Bloom

Phil Bloom is the retired outdoors editor for the Fort Wayne (Indiana) Journal Gazette, which twice won the Best Outdoors Page Contest by the Outdoor Writers Association of America. He has received dozens of awards for his outdoors and sports reporting. He is the author of two books – Hiking Indiana and Scenic Driving Indiana. He was a two-time past president of OWAA and the Hoosier Outdoor Writers, and a former board member of the Association for Conservation Information. He also served 10 years as Communications Director for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

### ⊕ 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.

### ⊕ 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.

## NEWSPAPER COLUMN

### ⊕ 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.

### ⊕ 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.

### ⊕ 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.

## ONLINE PUBLICATION

### ⊕ John L. Beath

John Beath's YouTube channel, Let's Talk Outdoors ([www.youtube.com/jbeath](http://www.youtube.com/jbeath)), has had more than 3.5 million video views. His primary online writing sites are [halibutchronicles.com](http://halibutchronicles.com) and [salmonchronicles.com](http://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.

### ⊕ 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.

## BOOK

### ⊕ 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.

### ⊕ 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.



## A message from our PRESIDENT

**Debbie Brosen**

On behalf of the officers and Board of Directors of the NYSOWA, it is my pleasure to congratulate all members who have received an award in the 2026 Excellence in Craft (EIC) and Janice M. Keesler Memorial Photo Awards program.

Each year all NYSOWA member have an opportunity to submit their work in various categories to compete for prizes, recognizing them as among the best writers and photographers in the association.

Every submission is carefully reviewed by a panel of professional judges for a selection of the top three in each category.

In addition, I would like to thank all the amazing writers, editors and photographers who served as judges for these competitions, members Glenn Sapir and Chris Paparo who oversee the Excellence in Craft program, Stephen George for preparing the checks for the awards, and Greg Foster for designing and putting our awards publication together.

Thanks as well to our sponsors: the National Shooting Sports Foundation for sponsoring our awards banquet; and Redding Reloading Equipment and Ducks Unlimited for co-sponsoring the awards program.

The awards program could not exist if it weren't for this amazing group of people.

I greatly appreciate the NYSOWA members who participated in these programs for taking the time to submit their work. As chairperson of the photography competition, I am always amazed at the beauty and creativity of the photos submitted. Our members do not make judging easy in either of the competitions. So, again, congratulations to all who have won an award, and if you haven't previously submitted your work in the past, we hope to hear from you in the future!

*Debbie Brosen, President, NYSOWA*

# Award Winners for work published in 2025

## Magazine Feature

First place

Glenn Sapir  
*Remedy for Regret*  
Mule Deer Foundation, Summer 2025



"Regrets, I have a few, but then again too few to mention." Frank Sinatra sang those words. What he didn't include in his hit song was the message that even if you don't mention your regrets, they don't go away. In fact, they can haunt you. I had such a regret, and it took a mule deer hunt in Montana to help lessen the guilt and grief and supplant it with joy and gratitude.

Norm Strung was a New York native who yearned to live in mule deer country. So, after high school he enrolled in Montana State University in Bozeman and never left. In fact, he and his wife, Sil, settled in Bozeman. His postal address was "Up Cottonwood Canyon." From his cabin there, Norm established a career as one of the nation's premier outdoor writers.

As an editor working out of *Field & Stream's* New York headquarters, I frequently dealt with Norm over the phone, discussing assignments for the parent magazine, as well as for its hunting and fishing annuals. The conversations were always fun. His work was always professional.

Though I spoke to Norm over the phone often, the annual Outdoor Writers Association of America's Conference was the one opportunity I actually had to spend time with Norm. Both he and I were active members of the organization. During the day we might see each other at workshops or meals. At night, I would sit and stomp my feet to his spontaneous musical combo. You never knew who would show up to jam, but you could at least count on Norm strumming on the banjo and Sil playing on a galvanized washtub.

Norm was a joy to be around, and I wish I had been around him more often. During every OWAA conference, Norm would ask me, "When are you going to come out and hunt or fish with me?" His invitation was heartfelt.

My typical reply, "Someday," was not as sincere. Sure, I would have loved to venture from my New York office to spend time in the Rockies with this man, but I just didn't

foresee my work and personal schedule allowing it.

When I arrived at the OWAA conference in Niagara Falls, New York, in June of 1991, I was looking forward to seeing the hundreds in attendance, many of whom I counted among my friends. John Barness, a Montanan like Strung and one of Norm's proteges, informed me, however, that Norm couldn't make it to the conference.

"He has a hernia," John told me. "He is unable to travel." Later, I learned that the "hernia" was a malignant mass. Only a few months later, I got news of Norm's death.

My immediate reaction, of course, was to grieve for Norm and Sil. High school sweethearts, they were a devoted couple. They never had children. They simply had each other.

Then, I confronted my regret, not only of Norm's untimely death at age 49, but of the fact that I had never taken him up on his invitation to come out and hunt with him. I missed out on an opportunity that I could never have again. So, instead, I thought of other friends in the profession with whom I had a similar relationship to the one that Norm and I had enjoyed and who had invited me to visit them.

My thoughts turned to Bill McRae. Bill was an iron worker from Wisconsin whose outdoor yearnings, like Norm's, also pushed him west to Montana. In addition to his day job, Bill became a pastor in his local church. Eventually, he fiddled with photography, ultimately becoming one of the most sought-after wildlife photographers of western game and hunting scenes. As an editor, I often would be contacting him for photographs of big game animals to complement articles we were running in *Field & Stream*.

Later, Bill tried his hand at writing, and he proved to be an excellent contributor to the magazine, not only with his photos, but with his words as well.

Bill, like Norm, was also very active in OWAA. He was not loud and robust like Norm Strung had been. Bill was gentle and soft-spoken, but when he spoke at the Association's Board of Directors meetings, his words resonated. His comments demonstrated his intelligence, and, sitting next to him at these meetings, I also caught the genius of his sense of humor as he whispered and mumbled barbs and jokes inaudible to others.

So, a few weeks after Norm Strung's death, I called Bill McRae.

"Let's go deer hunting next fall. I don't care what or where we hunt, but I want to spend some time hunting with you," I said.

On November 7, a year after my call to him, Bill was greeting me at the Great Falls, Montana, airport.

"Good to see you," we said simultaneously as we shook hands with our right and hugged with our left.

We split up my luggage and toted it out to Bill's big four-wheel drive, then headed east on Highway 200 in a wet snowfall.

For five hours we talked. That year the presidential campaign was recent history, so we spoke a lot about the state of the country. I discovered that Bill belonged to the same political party as I, that we had voted for the same candidate, and that we shared a lot of the same views on how to cure the country's ills. I learned about the tragic death of his son in a riverboat accident in Alaska, and we talked about how his wife Mary's new Postal Service job was working out. We also trod on less weighty topics, and, as we always did when together, we unmercifully shot good-natured barbs at each other. Such conversation doesn't come up when an editor's request is an article on binoculars or a slide of bighorn rams from a contributor — and that, more than a trophy mule deer, is why I went to Montana.

We pulled into Keith Atcheson's Sand Springs trailer camp just shy of midnight. The snow hadn't let up since we first set out, and I could sense tension unwind from Bill's neck and shoulders as he pulled off the slick, wet highway and eased out of the vehicle.

Our eventual destination was the Missouri Breaks, an hour or two northeast of Sand Springs. We were scheduled to head for camp the next day, but when morning came, Keith passed



1973, Norman Strung conducts a backpacking workshop at the OWAA conference, Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

down word to Bill, me, and the other three hunters.

"We can't get into the Breaks today," said Keith. "The mud just won't let us do it."

The area had experienced an unusual amount of precipitation, and the normally hard soil had become Missouri River gumbo, a thick, black mud.

So, leaving our guns in camp, we drove the highway looking for deer and pronghorns in the rolling prairie parted by the paved road. Bill told me about a game he used to play with his kids when taking long drives.

"Deer and antelope were worth \$0.25, grizzly bears \$5.00," he explained, with a touch of nostalgia fueling his smile. "Whoever spotted them first earned that amount."

Bill spotting a couple of herds of pronghorn offset the few mulies I'd first seen and quickly put Bill up a couple of dollars.

Next day, despite the muddy conditions, Keith decided to move the caravan of 4WDs into the Breaks.

Mother Nature showed her strength when she created the Missouri Breaks. Greeting us was the rugged topography that borders the Missouri River in eastern Montana. It looked like the result of muscular fingers squeezing a ball of hard mud.

Actually, it was the great glacier and volcanic action that shaped this stark wonderland. Wildlife adapted to this broken pattern of buttes, coulees, draws, landslides, parks, ravines, and gullies. Its rugged features harbor mule deer, some growing to trophy proportions, little pressured by human hunters.

Travel toward camp was slow once we left the hardtop, and even with chains strapped around the tires, Bill's vehicle threatened to leave the road a couple of times. When we finally pulled into our M\*A\*S\*H\* tent camp, Bill and I moved our gear into the simply-furnished tent, then took a sightseeing hike while the guides got camp up to snuff.

Camp was a mile or two from the Missouri River, or, more properly, Fort Peck Reservoir, which the nearest dammed stretch of the Missouri is called.

Though the rolling hills began to take on harsher and more abrupt changes in elevation, they gave only an occasional hint of the severely broken topography that lay closer to the water and gave the Missouri Breaks their name.

When we got back to camp, Bill Drew informed Bill and me that he'd be guiding us for the couple of hours left before nightfall. Shouldering our packs and rifles, Bill and I followed Drew, who showed no mercy for the slow of foot. We covered ground quickly, and I was tempted to whisper to the guide that Bill, who was 58 at the time, 14 years my senior and actually in top physical shape, had a heart condition or some other fictional ailment by which I could enjoy an adjustment to the pace without incurring any of the blame.



Norman Strung



(From left) Glenn Sapir with mule deer buck. Sapirs buck.

"This is remote country," Drew said. "It is not very accessible, and it's only for the hunter in fairly good shape."

The next 24 hours would demonstrate that I might not be cut out for such a hunt, but the longer we walked that evening, the easier it was to keep pace. We spotted mule deer literally miles away, but too far for a stalk that evening. With darkness threatening, we worked our way back to camp.

Next morning, at first light, Nate Nehls, Atcheson's outfitting partner, ferried Drew and me across Fort Peck Reservoir in one of the jetboats he had brought upriver before the season. Bill would hunt with Keith's dad, the world-famous outfitter, Jack Atcheson.

When I stepped off the jetboat onto "dry" land, I found myself in an old Farmer Gray cartoon of my youth, where that oaf would step on fly paper and, try as he might, not be able to dislodge it as it stuck to one boot and then the other. Except, in my case, the fly paper was Missouri River gumbo, and when I would try to scrape it off one boot with the other, that clean boot would attract the mud like a magnet. Soon, I was trailing pounds of mud with every step, and I was tiring quickly.

Add to that the ruggedness of the trail. All dreams of a bucket list hunt for sheep or goats went out the window when Drew led me on a path that narrowed to perhaps three feet. Chalk out lines three feet apart for the entire length of a football field, and I think I could hop between the lines on one foot without fear of going out of bounds. Here, however, was a yard-wide precipice that in my mind could spell death. So, what did I do?

Let's just say I was embarrassed when Drew looked back and saw me crawling on all fours for the 20 treacherous feet of this trail.

Hunting was demanding all day, and we hadn't seen anything by the time Nehls and his hunter picked up Drew and me on the shore for the return to camp. Just before darkness sneaked up on us, from the boat the guides spotted a buck on a black gumbo hillside on the southern shore a few hundred yards from the water.

Beaching the boat around the bend from the animal's view, we all sneaked along for a better look, waddling through the thick, black mud that clings to everything that touches it and does not let go.

"It's a 3x3 or 3x4, and its antlers spread well beyond its ears," whispered Drew as he examined the deer through his binoculars. Though this was not the trophy buck I had dreamed of, I was satisfied that the deer could offer a first-day, yet hard-earned conclusion to a long-planned hunt.

Folding down the Harris Engineering bipod that Keith had recommended for steadying my .270, then lying down in the gumbo that a dry cleaner back home later likened to cement when he tried to clean the pants I wore, I confidently took the 300-yard shot.

"Shoot again," Nate barked as he watched through his binoculars. "No, he's down." The shot had been perfectly placed.

I felt a sense of pride in the shot taken from the prone position, so much so that I didn't even sense the bit of blood trickling down my nose where the scope had recoiled.

Bill was there waiting for the boat to pull into camp; Nate's radio had forewarned him that I'd downed a deer. Bill greeted me with a smile and a handshake, similar to when we first started our trip at the airport. Back at camp, I recollected my hunt, first over a welcomed dinner and then as we lay on our cots before lights out.

The next day, I hung around camp while Bill hunted. At day's end, he came back to camp with his tag still unfilled.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to head out with you tomorrow morning," I said.

I sought more of Bill's company in the field, and I hoped I'd be there when he connected. So, the next morning I joined Bill, this time guided by Keith.

Not long after dawn, Keith spotted two bucks 250 yards away, skylining a ridge. They were visible to my naked eye. One was a big 4x4, the other a smaller 3x3.

"I see it," Bill said, and then meticulously unshouldered his rifle, laid down his backpack to serve as a rest, hunkered down and took aim. I was impressed with his unhurried demeanor, the sign, I thought, of an experienced hunter.

The 4x4 looked record-book size. Bill fired. Down went the 3x3.

Incredulous, I asked. "How come you shot the smaller buck?"

"I didn't see a bigger one," he answered.

If his 3x3 meant as much to him as the one I shot had meant to me, then not shooting the trophy buck really didn't matter. Both of our bucks were valued in our minds.

The hunting trip ended with my desires fulfilled: I enjoyed the company of a special friend, and I shot a memorable mule deer buck. No, the deer wouldn't make the record book, maybe not even a lot of hunters' walls, but for me it would be a reminder of a worthy challenge, new acquaintances, and a strengthened bond between me and a friend. In fact, after that hunt, we

unabashedly signed off every subsequent phone conversation with "I love you."

Our hunt took place more than 30 years ago. Bill McRae passed away last year. On learning of his passing, I thought about not only Bill, but also of Norm Strung. I realized how important the hunt I shared with Bill had meant to me, allowing an unerasable regret to be joined by memories of an invitation that wasn't put off for "someday." ■

## Second Place (Tie)



**John Jarzynski**

*Beagles & the Sounds of Autumn*  
American Field, Fall 2025

## Second Place (Tie)



**Paula Piatt**

*Auror-Awe: Searching the Sky for Elusive Lights*  
Mountain Home Magazine, Oct. 2025

# Magazine Column

## First place

**Steve Piatt**  
*Outdoor Adventures:  
Birth of a Turkey Hunter*  
PennLines, May 2025



The first gobble of a wild turkey I ever heard was in the late 1970s, on a Sunday morning in May.

I was holding a fishing rod when a gobbler casually strolled across on the other side of the farm pond. At that point I forgot all about fishing, instead listening and watching the morning unfold as hens called below me and several toms thundered a response.

I was mesmerized; I knew it was spring gobbler season and knew I had to see what it was all about.

Back then, the turkey-hunting craze had yet to explode across the Keystone State, perhaps because turkey numbers themselves hadn't yet taken off. In our town, either there weren't many spring gobbler hunters or they were keeping things to themselves, happily pursuing toms without others squeezing into their hotspots.

I eventually met up with one willing to share his knowledge. Dick Allyn, a noted wildlife photographer, sat me down at his Sheshequin Township home in Bradford County one evening, gave me a few basics and handed me a Quaker Boy kee-kee mouth call. It took a bit of work, but before I left I could gag my way into a passable yelp.

"You'll call birds," he said as I thanked him repeatedly, not knowing that years later there would be times I would jokingly curse him for leading me into this obsession.

I needed more help, however. I was just back from college, and my firearm lineup was sadly lacking. But Dan Barrett, a young lawyer (and later district attorney of our county), loaned me his Harrington & Richardson 10-gauge, a hefty implement that gave me a workout as I toted it up and down ridge and valley.

It was already well into the season — third week, if I



TAKEN WITH TURKEYS: Since the 1970s, Steve Piatt has been obsessed with turkey hunting, thanks to a little help from some friends along the way.

recall — when I took some time off work as a young newspaper reporter and headed into the woods.

As the sun slowly rose on a beautiful spring morning, I played the only card I had.

I yelped.

I couldn't believe it when a turkey gobbled.

Now, after nearly five decades as a turkey hunter and so many birds harvested (and too many missed), I realize the morning standoff was likely the product of the bird not wanting to leave his strut zone or his hens.

But back then, all I knew how to do was yelp. And so I did, for several hours until legal shooting hours ended at noon. Neither of us budged, and I wondered if the gobbler

was getting dizzy from sounding off because I was getting light-headed from yelping all morning.

We repeated the scenario for the next two days. I set up in the same spot, and the gobbler erupted from the same hollow below until it was time for me to head home.

The next day, I set up in a different location. I'm not sure why, but I know it wasn't some strategic decision on my part. Maybe I just needed a change of scenery.

The gobbler may have needed one, too. Eventually, I could tell he was advancing my way. And when he first came into view, strutting and gobbling, he was downright glowing in the morning sun.

It took a couple minutes before I realized I had a shotgun in my lap, and when the longbeard stepped behind a big oak, I hoisted the heavy 10-gauge onto my shoulder and fired.

Moments later I was admiring my first gobbler, not knowing then how my life would change, how many more memories would be made, and how this amazing bird would lead me to so many states and allow me to make so many friends across the country.

In my excitement, I carried the big bird off the wrong side of the hill, working myself into a dehydration headache before hitching a ride back to my car.

I didn't care. I was, in my mind, a turkey hunter. ■

## Second Place



**John Jarzynski**

*Poor Sally*  
American Field, Winter 2025

## Third Place



**Steve Piatt**

*Outdoor Adventures:  
Reading, Dreaming, Experiencing*  
PennLines, Nov. 2025

# Newspaper Feature

## First place

Steve Featherstone

*They've Got Grit: Salmon River Steelhead  
and the Anglers Who Love Them*

The Post-Standard, Feb. 23, 2025



Shane Muckey is a self-avowed steelhead addict with the Salmon River just five minutes from his front door. He loves nothing better than pulling on waders, bracing against the bitter cold and trudging through snow to the riverbank to go one-on-one with a feisty fish. "I like the hardness of it," he says. "With steelhead, you just grind and grind and grind in the worst weather you've ever seen. Blizzards and high winds and below zero temperatures." And Muckey isn't the only one.



Shane Muckey stands in a stretch of the Salmon River in Altmar where the current is strong and the water is cold, about 34 degrees. Downstream, it gets even colder – to the point where slush and ice form and some parts freeze over completely. Photos by Steve Featherstone, [sfeathers1One@syracuse.com](mailto:sfeathers1One@syracuse.com)

Winter is Shane Muckey's favorite time of year for one reason: Salmon River steelhead. Muckey, 56, owns Altmar Outfitters lodge and fish cleaning station, a local landmark familiar to thousands of salmon anglers. The Salmon River is a five-minute stroll from his front door, which is why he bought the place in 1993 and the reason why he'll probably never leave. But there's no demand for room rentals or fish cleaning in the dead of winter. Salmon, and the angler hordes who chase them, won't return until September. Around here, February belongs to hardcore steelheaders like Muckey who wait all year for steelhead trout to migrate upstream from Lake Ontario. On a recent weekday afternoon, Muckey strapped on a pair of waders and grabbed his spinning rod. He frowned at the thermometer outside his door: 25 degrees, warm enough to bring out the fair-weather steelheaders. "It gets very crowded on the river now," he complained, "so I gotta pick these tiny windows when there's no people."



If a run doesn't produce a bite in a few casts, Shane Muckey moves to another. Reading the water is critical to steelhead fishing.

### 'You're Addicted To Catching Nothing'

Muckey trudded across a snowy field on a narrow path he'd shoveled himself. The path connected to another well-trod path running along the bank of the Salmon River.



Mike Chyrywat comes from Sherrill once or twice a week to fish for Salmon River steelhead.

Steelheaders bear only a superficial resemblance to other anglers. Their idea of a good time is measured in snow and ice and suffering and sometimes, if they're lucky, fish.

"I like the hardness of it," Muckey said. "With steelhead, you just grind and grind and grind in the worst weather you've ever seen. Blizzards and high winds and below zero temperatures."

Most anglers would get discouraged and give up, and many do after shivering in the middle of an icy stream for two hours with nothing to show for it.

"You're addicted to catching nothing for hours just to get that one tug," Muckey said. "I'm addicted to them. They're like crack."

Muckey stood in 4 feet of snow, glancing up and down the river bank. Apart from two anglers about 150 yards downstream, this stretch of the river belonged to Muckey alone – just the way he liked it.

"If you're a fisherman, I live in a helluva place, man," he said with a gleeful cackle. "Thirty-two years just walking over here whenever I want!"

He slid down a snow drift, pushed against the current and planted himself in the middle of the stream, a silhouette standing in black water flowing through a white landscape under a gray sky.

### What Are Steelhead?

Native to the West Coast, steelhead are anadromous, or migratory, rainbow trout capable of living in both fresh and salt water. Ordinary rainbow trout live only in freshwater and are generally smaller.



Bill Smith, of Kingston, has been coming up to the Salmon River for 15 years to fish for steelhead trout. He recently caught this nice 3-year-old steelie near Altmar.

Steelhead were first brought to New York state in 1874 and are now found in all the Great Lakes. DEC raises 750,000 steelhead fingerlings at its Salmon River Fish Hatchery in Altmar to stock Lake Ontario tributaries.

Great Lakes steelhead live in tributaries for a year or two before migrating to big water. Once there, they fatten up on baitfish for a couple more years before returning to their home streams to spawn.

Some argue that Great Lakes steelhead aren't true steelhead because they never taste salt water. Maybe so, but any steelhead angler will tell you the fish is a fantastic fighter no matter where it comes from.

Bill Smith enjoys fishing for feisty rainbow trout in creeks near his home in the Hudson Valley, but every winter for the past 15 years he's come up to the Salmon River to battle steelhead.

"I love the cold," Smith joked after releasing a steelie

he'd landed. "No, it's just the fight – the fight's everything."

Smith's guide, Bill Short of Shorty's Steelhead Adventures, wholeheartedly agreed.

"Steelhead have twice the pull of any freshwater fish you're going to get," he said.

"It's the hardest fighting trout," said Mike Chyrywat, who comes from Sherrill every week to fish for Salmon River steelhead.

"It just kind of gets in the blood."

Muckey compared the challenge of catching steelhead to fishing for muskie, famously called the "fish of 10,000 casts" because they're so hard to catch.

"Muskie fishermen and winter steelhead fishermen are a lot alike," he said. "Hours and hours and hours, tons of casts to get one hookup. I think that's why we get addicted to it."



Shane Muckey takes a well-deserved fishing break against a snowbank on the upper Salmon River.

### Where To Find Steelhead

Winter-run steelhead are found in many Lake Ontario and Lake Erie tributaries from late October through November. Less common summer-run steelhead head upstream from June to September.

It's hard to beat the Salmon River in the fall for Lake Ontario steelhead. That's when waves of fresh, silver-slabbed fish enter the river to gobble up eggs deposited there by spawning salmon.

Anglers can't go wrong mimicking this cornucopia by using colored beads and egg sacs on a drift rig or under a float. That's the bait Muckey uses into early December.

In the heart of winter, long after they've vacuumed up all the salmon eggs they can scrounge, steelhead will eat a variety of things until the bead bite picks up again in April when they're actively spawning, Muckey said.

In spring, steelhead drop back into Lake Ontario to feast on baitfish again. These so-called drop backs make good targets as they feed aggressively on their journey downstream.

### Reading The Water

It's easier to catch winter steelhead than it is to find them. And to do that you need to know how to read water.

To the untrained eye, the river looked as hard and impenetrable as obsidian. The dark flow was only 3 to 4 feet deep most places, but it was impossible to see your boots scraping the bottom.

Muckey could see right through it. He's been staring at moving water since he was a kid with a fishing pole in his school locker, a teen sleeping on a \$5 cot in Pulaski during salmon season and now a self-avowed steelhead addict with the Salmon River in his front yard.

"People that know how to read water can go anywhere and fish," he said. "People that don't understand how to read water? They got a life of misery of not catching a lot of fish."

Muckey scanned the surface for seams, riffles and flats that gave clues to the invisible structure beneath, the boulders and holes where steelhead might be hunkering down.

He zeroed in on a good run, flipped a pink worm into the current and landed a steelhead within minutes of his first cast.



Muckey uses a spinning rod to fish for steelhead. He prefers a style of drift fishing, or bottom bouncing, that uses split shot to keep bait suspended near the bottom.

**Heaven**

The fish was a tail-slapping 4-pounder that broke the surface multiple times. Muckey refers to fish of that size as "cookie cutters" because they make up the bulk of each year's run.

Last year saw a banner run on the Salmon River for 3-year-old cookie cutters, Muckey said, the most he's seen since he began fishing here in 1978.

That means more than the usual number of 4-year old fish have returned this season. And some are whoppers. The previous day he landed a 13-pounder and a 14-pounder.

"It's been a lot of years since I got one that big," he said.

Lake Ontario's declining baitfish population has led to smaller steelhead, Muckey said. Over the years he's landed 14 trophy steelhead weighing over 20 pounds, the last one in 2001.

"You just don't see monsters anymore," he said. "You see somebody catch a 17-pounder, that would be like catching a 21-pounder back in the day."

After releasing the cookie cutter steelhead, Muckey leaned against a snow drift and lit a cigarette. He pulled a can of non-alcoholic beer from his coat pocket and cracked the tab.

"Deep snow, hard-fighting steelhead – it's heaven," he said, taking a deep swig. Then he waded back into the river for Round 2.

**Styles Of Steelhead Fishing**

There are several styles of steelhead fishing: fly, float and drift.

The current was deceptively strong, and cold – just 34 degrees. Combined with the subfreezing air temps, it was too cold for fly fishing gear.

Even Muckey's spinning rod was icing up. Every so often he whipped the tip back and forth to clear the eyelets.

Float fishing uses a type of bobber that drifts naturally with the current, pulling submerged bait behind it. When a steelhead strikes, the bobber goes under. That's how you know when to set the hook.

Drift fishing, or bottom bouncing as Muckey calls it, is all about feel. Bait drifts with the current on a leader weighted down by sinkers that bounce against the bottom.

The trick to drift fishing is using just the right amount of split shot so that the line ticks lightly off the bottom without getting snagged.

"It's really technical trying to get that perfect drift and not getting snagged on every cast," he said. "If you've never fished a hole before and you can do 10 casts without getting snagged, that's a huge accomplishment in itself."

Muckey prefers drift fishing due to a shoulder injury and because he enjoys the subtle challenge of connecting with a steelhead when it takes drifted bait.

"It's not like a big tug, like when a walleye hits it or something," Muckey said. "The line just stops moving. We feel it in our hands."

**Last Call**

Despite their elusive reputation, Muckey landed another steelhead soon after his first one. He made it look easy. Working the fish to the bank, he was locked in like a predator chasing game.

But as soon as he pulled the hook out, his demeanor changed. He cradled the fish in his hands like a baby before releasing it.

"Oh, he's just a nice spunky little silver guy," he cooed.

The bite slowed down as light drained from the landscape and the air turned colder. It was just Muckey on the river now.

The other anglers downstream had gone home.

Muckey landed and released a third steelhead, but sensed it was probably his last one. The fish were turning off, going dormant. And one of his boots had sprung a leak. Maybe it was time to pack it in.

"I could cast for an hour before I get another bite," he said, taking a swig of beer. He wedged the can in the snow and lit a cigarette, staring into the water as he weighed his options. Then he swung his legs into the current.

"I guess we can do one more!" ■

**Second Place**

⊕ **Dave Figura**

*CNY Artist Makes Dress Entirely Out of Shotgun*

*Shells for the Holidays*

New York Outdoor News, Dec. 26, 2025

**Third Place**

⊕ **Tom Schlichter**

*Trophy Fish*

Newsday, Aug. 3, 2025

**Newspaper Column**

**First place**

Steve Featherstone  
*The Secret to Landing Your First  
Salmon River Beauty*  
The Post-Standard, Nov. 23, 2025



My fishing guide, Shiloh Patterson, vividly remembers the first time he hooked a king salmon back in 1997. The fight lasted only 10 seconds before his line snapped, but it was all he could talk about on the long drive home and for weeks afterward.

"I don't get excited very often when it comes to big fish anymore, but I get to relive my first time every day with a new guy," Patterson said. "I've helped guys who've been coming up here for years get their first salmon."

He handed me a fly rod and pointed to a spot in the Salmon River where he wanted me to cast.

I'd done a little fly fishing, but this wasn't fly fishing. In fact, it was nothing like any kind of fishing I was used to. But after a few dozen casts, I started to get the hang of it.

Patterson looked up from a knot in a fishing line he was biting with bared teeth.

"Hey," he said. "Roll over your left shoulder."

He picked up a rod and levered his right arm across the left side of his body in one fluid motion. Line unfurled across the rushing water as smooth as a cowboy's lasso.

Left shoulder. Roll. Got it. I cast again. My line slapped the water like a dead snake dropped from an airplane.

"What you're doing right now is like 'A River Runs Through It' fly fishing," Patterson said. "We ain't doing that."

I didn't need to be reminded that I wasn't Brad Pitt nor that I wasn't standing in an immaculate Montana mountain stream on a golden summer evening instead of a river in Upstate New York on a drizzly October morning.



Salmon River fishing guide Shiloh Patterson rigs up a new line. He jokes that he's not a professional angler, but rather "a professional bobber watcher and hook tier."

But I understood Patterson's point. Salmon fishing on the Salmon River is its own thing with its own set of rules, techniques and gear. That's why newbies like me needed a guide to sort it all out.

True to his word, Patterson helped me catch my first salmon that day, but I did it in the most unconventional, least "A River Runs Through It" way possible.

**A Tricky Run**

It was an off year for the spawn. Drought kept the river low and warm through much of the season. spurts of migrating salmon trickled upriver, but the big push never arrived.

As we walked to our spot, Patterson scanned the water, lamenting the absence of fish. He put some of the blame on New York state for excavating key spawning grounds to improve river flows.

"They've destroyed these gravel beds," he said, gesturing toward a wide, flat stretch of water where a handful of anglers stood shin deep. "These guys should be hammering them in that hole, but fish aren't staying here now."

The overcast sky didn't help our chances. The lack of sunlight meant salmon wouldn't hunker down for long. They were on the move. I caught glimpses of salmon finning in the shallows.

We waded across the river and dropped our gear at a pinch point where fast water funneled through boulders in the middle of the stream.

It was a tricky run for even the most experienced anglers, Patterson said, but he'd had good luck there lately.

"There's lots of snags," he cautioned. "It's very frustrating. Probably got hundreds of hooks in there. And most of them are probably mine." He handed me one of three rods he kept in constant rotation over the next few hours, re-tying them every time I snapped a line in that tackle-chewing run.

**A Fresh, Pretty Hen**

Patterson hooked the first salmon of the day and immediately handed me his rod. He insisted I needed to practice landing a salmon so I'd know what to do when I hooked one of my own.

The rod curled into a horseshoe as the salmon tore upstream. I could feel its raw power surging through my arms and shoulders. Instinctively, I reached for the reel.

"You grab that reel, you're gonna break him off," Patterson warned. "You only got 10-pound test. We're just gonna let him play, all right? You're not going to make him do anything he doesn't want to do. They ain't called king salmon for nothing."

I gripped the handle with both hands and let the rod do the work, dancing a kind of jig as Patterson called out the steps: move back, reel reel reel, now go forward, stay behind him, tip up up up...

Judging by the way the rod bucked, Patterson guessed the fish was foul-hooked, meaning it wasn't hooked in the mouth. It was illegal to keep foul-hooked fish, but they usually broke off before you could land them anyway.

"We're not trying to snag fish, they're so big it just happens," Patterson said. "You're gonna lose far more than you're gonna land in this game."

I managed to work the salmon, a pretty 18-pound female, into the shallows where Patterson netted her. It was only the second hen he'd seen this season.

"She's very fresh from the lake, within the last day or two," Patterson said. "She's still got that greenish color and her dots are real pronounced."

We snapped a few photos and released her.

**The Dark Ages**

The '70s and '80s were the Dark Ages on the Salmon River. A common salmon rig resembled a medieval cat o' nine tails: a spinning rod spooled with heavy line tipped with a large, three-pronged treble hook weighted with a thick blob of lead.

Anglers flailed the water with this instrument of pain until a hook ripped into the flesh of a passing salmon. Belly, tail, side, it didn't matter. The tactic was called snagging, and it was brutally indiscriminate. It was banned in 1995, but snaggers adapted to the new regulations.



This angler claimed prime real estate in the middle of the Salmon River near the Short Bridge Pool.



Steve Featherstone, left, uses a fly rod to cast a plastic bead into fast-moving current on a stretch of the upper Salmon River. Photos by N. Scott Trimble

"They learned that you could floss and do it legally," Patterson said, referring to a method still practiced today that involves blindly drifting a line into a salmon's mouth and yanking.

Still, Patterson believes things have changed for the better during his 30 years on the Salmon River. Now there are many ways to catch salmon legitimately and ethically.

Anglers can throw plugs from a drift boat, or float skein (cured salmon eggs) from the riverbank, or bottom bounce beads. Pure fly anglers have a zone all to themselves.

"We got king salmon, coho salmon, brown trout, steelhead, Atlantic salmon, all running this river all about the same time," Patterson said. "It really is a world-class fishery, and we're lucky to have it in our backyard."



Steve Featherstone hooked and landed his first salmon, a 15-pound female Chinook, on the Salmon River with help from ace fishing guide Shiloh Patterson.

### Rod And Reel

Patterson used 11-foot, medium-weight fly rods designed specifically to handle the rigors of the Salmon River, a fishery famous for breaking equipment.

"When we first started coming out here with our Ugly Sticks, we used to make fun of guys with their expensive Orvis fly rods," Patterson said.

Once he tried a fly rod, though, he left his spinning gear at home. The fight was a lot more fun. But having the right rod and reel combo was only half the equation. The other half was rigging your line right.

Patterson spooled his reels with three kinds of line of varying strength, knotted together in such a way that getting snagged didn't mean losing the whole rig, ideally just the hook, a dainty

size 6 that seemed more appropriate for half-pound crappie, not 30-pound king salmon.

Weight was the most important factor. The depth and speed of the current determined the number of sinkers needed to bounce the bead just above the river bottom where the salmon were. Too much weight guaranteed snags; not enough, and the bead floated over the fish.

Using the tip of his rod, Patterson traced an invisible path in the middle of the current that he wanted me to fish. Not an inch above or below it.

"These fish are using the whole river side to side," Patterson said, "but you only need to fish these little pockets right in front of you. They're laying in them rocks, I promise."

### Eating Vs. Biting

Trying to catch a spawning salmon is a paradox. They're interested in only one thing, and it's not eating.

So how do you entice a fish to bite that won't eat?

"There's a difference between eating and biting," Patterson said. "They bite out of aggression — other fish, frogs, minnows, anything. They'll literally bully every living organism out of that river."

After snagging was banned, anglers started baiting their hooks with bits of sponge, and later, plastic beads or skein.

"Salmon are gonna pop any loose eggs as they're moving up because they want their own eggs to survive," Patterson said. "They're looking for eggs to destroy."

I cast my fake blue egg into a riffle and swept it through a 15-foot drift, matching the speed of the current. Then I pulled up and flipped the bead to the top of the riffle again. The whole sequence took less than 10 seconds.

If the line dangled too long or drifted too far, it snagged. Sometimes I popped it loose, but more often I snapped it, prompting Patterson to hand me a fresh rod like a relay runner handing off a baton.

After a while I began to learn the subtle properties of my drift: where the sinkers ticked the bottom, where the current slackened, where I needed to sweep faster to keep up with it.

Each swing felt like pulling the arm on a slot machine. One of these times I was going to hit the jackpot. But the odds weren't in my favor.

The main problem was I had no idea when to set the hook. I assumed the bite would be a sharp tug, but it was far more subtle than that, Patterson explained.

"Usually the line just comes to a dead stop," he said. "In that split second they'll pop the egg, spit it and you got to be there to set the hook."

I asked him how that was different from flossing. He assured me it wasn't flossing if a hangry, irritated salmon was snapping at my hook. It came down to intention.

"If it feels goofy, set the hook," Patterson said. "Hook sets are free. We'll deal with it afterwards."

### Dumb Luck

By midday my right forearm ached from repetitive casting. But I was more aggressive now about setting the hook. Twice I fought a salmon for a few seconds before it broke off. What was I doing wrong?

"You grabbed your reel like I told you not to," Patterson said.

"I don't even remember doing that."

"Yup, I watched," Patterson said. "It's the same mistake everybody makes. You hooked up, grabbed your reel, probably thought you were snagged on bottom. Broke him right off."

As I replayed the moment in my head, I dropped my line into the shallows near my feet. When I picked it up again to cast, it was snagged yet again.

I swore and jerked on the line in spasm of frustration. But instead of popping loose or snapping, the line shot upstream like a bullet from a gun.

I was stunned by the absurdity of the situation. While mulling over how I lost the last fish I'd hooked, I hooked another fish by accidentally dropping my tackle on top of it. It would've been less impressive had I grabbed it with my bare hands.

I splashed up and down the riverbank, except this time I knew the dance. When the fish suddenly turned downstream, I got behind it. I zigged when it zagged, keeping steady pressure on it and letting the rod do the work.

After a 10-minute battle, Patterson pulled it from the net and handed it to me. It was another female king salmon, a bit smaller than the first hen, but every bit as fresh and pretty. I stroked her bulging gold-flecked belly. Pale orange eggs spilled into the water.

It was humbling to know this magnificent creature, literally bursting with life, would soon be dead. Call it dumb luck, call it fate, I caught her before that could happen. In some sense, she was mine.

As if answering this specious claim, the salmon torqued out of my grip with one powerful twist of her body and plunged into the dark current to finish the sacred mission with which Mother Nature had entrusted her. ■

## Second Place

⊕ **Steve Featherstone**

*Fleet 2004 Enjoys the Hobie Way of Life on Oneida Lake*

The Post-Standard, Aug. 31, 2025

## Third Place

⊕ **Glenn Sapir**

*Here and There, Now and Then:*

*Adding Color to the Outdoors*  
New York Outdoor News, Oct. 17, 2025

# Online Publication

## First place

Charles Witek

*False Albacore:*

*Practicing Precaution*

Marine Conservation Network, April 7, 2025



For a very long time, the false albacore was a sort of fishy pariah.

There was no significant market for their bloody, strong-tasting meat, which was also a turnoff to anglers, who cursed when the fish crashed lures meant for one of the better-tasting tunas. A few recreational fishermen enjoyed their hard fight, but at a time when small, "school" bluefin still swarmed just few miles offshore, Atlantic bonito were common, and inshore anglers could find plenty of striped bass, red drum, and bluefish, false albacore weren't many anglers' favorite species.

They were even identified by what they were not, called "false" albacore, to contrast them with what anglers deemed "true" or "longfin" albacore, a tasty, white-meat tuna that just about every fisherman was happy to ice and take home. If anyone down on the docks had referred to them by their proper name, "little tunny," they would have just gotten most folks confused.

But things changed.

Saltwater fly fishing and light-tackle angling became more and more popular, and anglers who employed such gear began to widen their horizons, willing to cast to any sort of fish that ran fast and pulled hard. False albacore certainly fit the bill, and in places like Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, Montauk, New York, and Harker's Island, North Carolina, a new industry sprung up that saw charter boat captains taking to the water in small, fast boats, to chase down schools of false albacore that could be

caught, and subsequently released, on their clients' favored gear. These charter boat captains often called themselves "light tackle guides" to distinguish their operations from those of the traditional "sixpack" fleet that ground away with sturdy rods and heavy lines, in an effort to kill and keep as many fish as possible.

Suddenly, false albacore were in the spotlight. Anglers were willing to travel hundreds of miles, and spend thousands of dollars, just to cast a fly or toss a lure to fish that went all but ignored a few years before.

As the striped bass population declined and bluefish grew scarcer, the ability to put clients on false albacore became even more important. Nearly a decade ago, Capt. David Blinken, a long-time Montauk guide, asked that the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Mid-Atlantic Council) provide false albacore some protection, noting that "albies give us a shot at diversity. Since the demise of the striped bass fishery we rely on them to satisfy our clients."

The Mid-Atlantic Council did not heed his call. Since then, the striped bass fishing has only gotten worse, which has made false albacore even more important to the recreational fishing industry.

But an issue lurked in the background. Although false albacore range along much of the East Coast, from Massachusetts to Florida and then throughout the Gulf of Mexico, and are very common outside the United States as well, not much was known about them. For a while, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council) included them in its Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan, but in 2011 they were removed from that plan because the South Atlantic Council no longer believed that the stock was "in need of conservation and management," as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. No other regional or national management body had attempted to govern the fishery.

No one knew whether the false albacore caught off New England, New York, North Carolina, and Florida were part of the same stock of fish, or belonged to reproductively distinct populations. And no one had any idea whether increasing fishing pressure in the southeast might affect fish elsewhere on the coast.

That became an issue, because commercial fisheries for

false albacore slowly began to develop.

Although the meat wasn't traditionally eaten in the United States, it was consumed elsewhere in the western hemisphere; similar species also swim in the Pacific Ocean, and support fisheries there. Thus, as people from those areas came to the U.S., market demand for false albacore increased. False albacore has also become a popular bait that is cut into pieces to catch dolphin, snapper, and other smaller fish, or sliced into long strips to attract bigger species such as swordfish, sharks, and goliath grouper.

From 1950 through 1994, commercial false albacore landings were scattered among the various East Coast states, although only North Carolina had annual landings exceeding 100,000 pounds on a regular basis. Beginning in 1995, Florida began recording significant landings, and was soon exceeding 300,000 pounds per year, while North Carolina's annual landings generally remained between 100,000 and 200,000 pounds. In 2003, Florida's commercial false albacore landings exceeded 1,000,000 pounds for the first time, and although the state's landings fell back substantially after that, Florida remains the dominant player in the commercial false albacore fishery, with North Carolina not too far behind.

Both anglers and the guides whom they fished with grew concerned that the commercial landings might harm the recreational false albacore fishery, but they had no data that they could use to either justify or allay their concerns.

The American Saltwater Guides Association (ASGA), which had already seen its members hurt by a decline in striped bass and bluefish abundance, recognized that "Our guides and fishing-related businesses on the Atlantic coast can't afford to lose another species," and became the false albacore's primary, and arguably only, advocate.

ASGA's efforts began in 2022, after it found a group of sponsors willing to fund a tagging study that would be conducted by Dr. Jeff Kneebone of the New England Aquarium. Working from boats operated by ASGA members, Dr. Kneebone's team implanted 50 acoustic tags in false albacore caught in Nantucket Sound during the first year of the study. Another 97 false albacore were tagged in 2023.

Scientists, working on many different projects, have deployed acoustic receiver arrays all along the coast between



False albacore. Photo by John McMurray

southern Canada and the U.S./Mexico border, and typically share their data. Whenever one of the tagged false albacore passes near an array, its tag will transmit a unique identifier to the receiver, and Dr. Kneebone will be notified. That will eventually provide him with important information on the timing and extent of false albacore migrations, and also help him to determine whether all of the false albacore on the coast belong to a single stock, or whether they constitute separate regional populations.

ASGA also worked with the National Marine Fisheries Service's Southeast Fisheries Science Center (Science Center) to develop a tagging program using conventional "spaghetti" tags, streamers of plastic that are anchored in the muscle of the false albacore. Each tag is imprinted with a unique number, along with brief instructions on how to return it to the Science Center.

Spaghetti tags are cheap, particularly when compared to acoustic tags that cost hundreds of dollars apiece, and so large numbers of them can be deployed. Such volume is necessary, because unlike acoustic tags, which need only pass by a receiver to record a fish's movements, spaghetti tags require that the tagged fish be recaptured and reported by a fisherman; that only happens with a small minority of the fish tagged. Thanks to ASGA's widespread membership, there were many guides, located in ports between New England and Florida, who were willing to help out and tag their clients' false albacore and so contribute to the false albacore study.

The tagging efforts are already showing results. It appears that all of the false albacore on the U.S. East Coast constitute a single stock, as fish tagged in Nantucket Sound have been detected by receivers as far away as the southernmost tip of the Florida Keys, with particular concentrations off southern New England, eastern Long Island, North Carolina, and southeast Florida.

A DNA study, also supported by ASGA, lent additional credence to the single-stock hypothesis. Researcher Steven Bogdanowicz analyzed samples provided from false albacore caught off Massachusetts, New York, and North Carolina, utilizing two different software packages to evaluate the results. He noted that, "we didn't set out to determine whether fish from MNNY/NC were different from each other; rather we're asking 'If we take a sample of albies from a pretty broad area at about the same time, how many genetic groups do we see?'"

As it turned out, both software packages suggested that, in the entire expanse of coastal sea between Massachusetts and North Carolina, all false albacore belonged to the same genetic group. Thus, should overfishing occur anywhere along the coast, it could impact the entire false albacore population.

With that information in hand, ASGA began to advocate for precautionary false albacore management.

It first approached the South Atlantic Council, which had, for a brief time, managed the species. ASGA argued that the South Atlantic Council's 2011 finding that the stock was not in need of conservation and management was outdated, and should be reconsidered. In response, the South Atlantic Council's Mackerel-Cobia Committee (Committee) drafted a white paper which was intended to be a preliminary examination of whether the species met Magnuson-Stevens' ten criteria for management.

The analysis suggested that false albacore met four of the ten criteria, and may have met a few others, but that the stock "has not been assessed and as a result the stock condition is not well understood. However, there is no other available information suggesting that the stocks may be in a depleted or otherwise diminished condition, or that management is necessary to address such conditions."

In the end, the Committee directed South Atlantic Council staff to provide a Fishery Performance Report for false albacore every three years, which would allow the Committee to keep a closer watch on the fishery, and perhaps spur action if fishing mortality spiked.

After that modest success, ASGA encouraged the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to consider false albacore management. The issue was first discussed at the February 2, 2023 meeting of ASMFC's Interstate Fishery Management Program Policy Board (Policy Board), where it received the support of some state fisheries directors. The Policy Board's then chairman, "Spud" Woodward, the Governor's appointee from Georgia,

noted that both false albacore and Atlantic bonito "are sort of in this, what I would call under-loved tunas' category right now," and opined that "We really need to look at both of them, because the South Atlantic Council was approached by the American Saltwater Guides Association about bringing both of them under Magnuson-Stevens Act management. .. There really wasn't any appetite, because most of the fishery is occurring in state waters ... we probably need to consider both of these species, if we're going to move forward."

However, the Policy Board walked away from the issue at its May 3, 2023 meeting. The ASMFC's fisheries policy director, Toni Kearns, warned that if the ASMFC was asked to manage any additional species, "We would probably either need to have another ISMFP staff member, and possibly a new stock assessment scientist, or we would need to have measurable changes in the current species priorities for both management and stock assessments." Erika Burgess, a Florida fisheries manager, noted that Florida was responsible for more than half of all false albacore landings, had looked at the management issue multiple times, and saw no need for managing the species, whether through the ASMFC or otherwise. Other state representatives also voiced their opposition.

In the end, the Policy Board took no action, and left the matter up to the states.

And, over the past few months, the states have accepted the challenge.

North Carolina was the first to act. On March 12, 2025, after holding a series of meetings and receiving extensive public comment, much of it driven by ASGA's advocacy efforts in favor of precautionary false albacore management measures, the North Carolina Marine Resources Commission voted 5-4 to adopt new regulations to protect false albacore.

The new rules do not immediately create new restrictions on the false albacore fishery. Instead, should landings in any year rise above 200 percent of the average combined commercial and recreational landings for the years 2018 through 2022, the director of the Division of Marine Fisheries may issue a proclamation establishing a 3,500-pound trip limit for commercial vessels and a recreational bag limit of 1 O false albacore per person, and no more than 30 false albacore per recreational vessel.

While such regulations seem lenient, they are sufficient to prevent false albacore from succumbing to an explosive increase in landings. As the first significant restrictions on false albacore landings anywhere along the coast, they constitute an important precedent for future management action. But in Massachusetts, fisheries managers are moving toward much more conservative management.

Dan McKiernan, the director of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, has long been concerned with maintaining the health of the Atlantic bonito stock. He first raised the issue at the February 2, 2023 meeting of the Policy Board, initiating the discussion which eventually led to the Policy Board's short-lived consideration of false albacore management. Thus, it was hardly surprising when Massachusetts, urged on by ASGA and other concerned recreational fishermen, began to consider regulations to limit the harvest of both species.

Nor was it surprising that, on March 27, 2025, the Division of Marine Fisheries approved regulations which established a five-fish aggregate bag limit for false albacore and Atlantic bonito (with an exception for fish caught by commercial mackerel-jigging vessels) as well as a 16-inch (fork length) minimum size for both species. While such regulations are not yet final, and must progress through Massachusetts' rulemaking process, there is no reason to believe that they will not be put in place.

False albacore regulation is expected to gain momentum, particularly in the Northeast. ASGA has spoken to a number of state fisheries managers, and has generally found a good reception.

At the March 11, 2025 meeting of New York's Marine Resources Advisory Council, Martin Gary, the director of the Department of Environmental Conservation's Marine Resources Division, broached the topic, hoping to get the councilors' initial reactions. The discussion was short, with one councilor representing the recreational sector strongly in favor, and one commercial councilor largely indifferent (although he thought that a 16-inch size limit for Atlantic bonito might be too high). The only opposition came from a party boat captain notorious for opposing any efforts to regulate fisheries, who deemed false albacore management a waste of time.

Despite such naysayers, the growing importance of false albacore to the recreational fishing industry can't be denied. As other important sport fisheries decline, it only makes sense to adopt precautionary measures intended to maintain the health of the false albacore stock. For as ASGA has already noted, "guides and fishing-related businesses on the Atlantic coast can't afford to lose another species."

Effective, precautionary management, adopted in time, can help to ensure that they won't. ■

## Second Place

⊕ **Charles Witek**

*ASMFC Stalls Striped Bass Rebuilding Efforts*  
Marine Conservation Network, Jan. 7, 2025

## Third Place

⊕ **Bill Hilts, Jr.**

*The Future of Fishing Looks Bright Behind Young Anglers Like the Noon Boys from New York*  
New York Outdoor News.com, Feb. 27, 2025

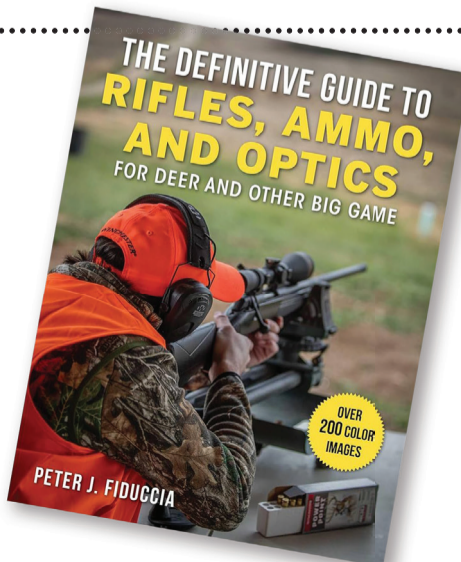
## Book

### First place

**Peter Fiduccia**

*The Definitive Guide to Rifles, Ammo and Optics for Deer and Other Big Game*

Skyhorse Publishing, Nov. 25, 2025



## Second Place

⊕ **Joe Grance**

*Return to Ryland Creek: Book V of the Ryland Creek Saga*  
Nov. 28, 2025

## Third Place

⊕ **Mike Joyner**

*Tales from the Roost: Roost 'n Time Tales*  
Joyner Outdoor Media, April 8, 2025



# Janice M. Keesler Memorial Photo Awards

# Judges:

## ⊕ 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 opportunity to ski, hike, swim and 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.

Though his background is in fashion and advertising photography, while living and working in New York City for over 20 years, his love for the Adirondacks changed his life's trajectory. After a severe medical setback in 2014, he turned to nature photography for inspiration and healing, losing himself in the beauty and resilience of the Adirondacks.

## ⊕ Chris Murray

Chris Murray is a photographic artist, instructor and writer working primarily in the landscape of the woods, lakes, mountains, and streams of New York State. His work has appeared in several magazines, including *On Landscape*, *Popular Photography*, *Adirondack Life*, *Life in the Finger Lakes* and *New York State Conservationist*, among others. Chris leads photography workshops through the Adirondack Photography Institute.



# The Photo Award Recipients

## Outdoor Scenic



First Place (Pictured)

⊕ Dan Ladd

Second Place

⊕ Stephen George

Third Place

⊕ Dave Figura

## Hunting & Fishing



First Place (Pictured)

⊕ Dave Figura

Second Place

⊕ Paul Schnell

Third Place

⊕ Dan Ladd

## Outdoor Action



First Place (Pictured)

⊕ Paul Schnell

Second Place

⊕ Stephen George

Third Place

⊕ Glenn Sapir

## People



First Place (Pictured)

⊕ Charles Witek

Second Place

⊕ Dan Ladd

Third Place

⊕ Dave Figura

## Wildlife



First Place (Pictured)

⊕ Glenn Sapir

Second Place

⊕ Paul Schnell

Third Place

⊕ Mike Joyner

Special thanks to our awards sponsors, Redding Reloading Equipment, Inc., and Ducks Unlimited, and to our awards banquet sponsor, the National Shooting Sports Foundation