

Outdoor Oklahoma

MARCH / APRIL 2026 — ONLY \$10 A YEAR



A PUBLICATION OF THE OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION



PANORAMAS



Marni Loftis

Think you have to leave Oklahoma to find the best fish and wildlife law enforcement training in the U.S.? Think again. The Oklahoma Game Warden Academy is officially raising the bar for the entire nation. In just six years, the program has grown into a powerhouse of elite instruction. New recruits face a grueling 11-week gauntlet featuring 406 hours of CLEET-accredited training tailored for game wardens.

Seven new hires recently started training. After graduating from the ODWC Game Warden Academy in early May, they will attend 16 weeks of training with the Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training for their basic peace officer certification and then launch into a 13-week field training program to learn alongside veteran game wardens on the job. That's a total of 40 weeks — 10 months — of training!

Game wardens possess extensive law enforcement capabilities among peace officers in Oklahoma. They are certified to enforce laws across the entire state, just like Oklahoma Highway Patrol officers. But they are also cross-commissioned to enforce federal wildlife laws when needed.

Recruits are instructed on topics you would expect, such as wildlife and fisheries laws; wildlife, waterfowl, and fisheries enforcement techniques; search and seizure; and firearms. Other topics include snake ID, precision boating, wildlife forensics, blood- and man-tracking, defensive tactics, water survival, and trauma first aid.

This year's academy expansion represents a shift toward specialized excellence, ensuring every graduate goes afield not just as a game warden but as a true subject-matter expert in conservation law enforcement.

Among this year's advancements is a modernization of **hunting incident response**. Following specialized "train-the-trainer" instruction from the International Hunter Education Association, two lead instructors have returned to coordinate a comprehensive, certified, 32-hour **Hunter Incident Investigator Academy**. This equips new game wardens with the forensic tools needed to analyze complex hunting incidents with pinpoint accuracy.

Other enhancements include:

- Integrating 24 hours of **wildlife forensics** and **wildlife-human conflict investigation** training. This ensures wardens can navigate the delicate intersection of investigation, wildlife management, and public relations with scientific precision.
- Additional **defensive-tactics** instructors received specialized G.R.A.C.I.E. training to better train new hires.
- New wardens are learning specialized **interview and interrogation** techniques.
- New wardens are being certified in standardized **field sobriety testing** taught directly by Oklahoma Highway Patrol drug recognition experts.
- New modules include **narcotics and vehicle searches**, and **traffic stops**, which provide the foundational skills required for high-stakes roadside encounters.

Recognizing Oklahoma's vast waterways, the academy has enhanced last year's 32 hours of certified **inland boat operator** and **marine patrol training**. This segment is anchored by three dedicated instructors who completed a rigorous course with the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, ensuring ODWC's waterborne enforcement meets the highest national standards.

Creating this in-house training academy was among my initial goals when I became the full-time training coordinator in ODWC's Law Enforcement Division. It is more than just a series of classes; it is a commitment to the public and the resources.

Game wardens are often the "public face" of ODWC. By investing in growing this training academy, ODWC is ensuring that its game wardens remain the premier authority where the blacktop ends — in the woods and on the water, or anywhere they go. ♡

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Marni Loftis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small heart symbol at the end.

Marni Loftis, Operations Manager, Law Enforcement Division, ODWC

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Micah Holmes, Chief, Communication and Education Division

Don P. Brown, Managing Editor

CONTRIBUTING STAFF

Kelly Adams, Brooklyn Bloomfield, Brandon Brown, Allen Couch, Heather Del Moral, Jena Donnell, Wade Free, Colby Gainer, Austin Griffin, Matt Hensley, Tell Judkins, Lance Meek, Kendall Robbins, Kayleen Sugianto, Jacob Tison, Jonathan West, Betsy York.

PHONE
405-521-3856


WEBSITE
www.wildlifedepartment.com

E-MAIL
donald.brown@odwc.ok.gov

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ON THE COVER:

Fishing in Oklahoma can be great year-round. Here, a dad and his daughter share a celebratory high-five for a successful catch. But the real trophy is the time spent together on the water in Outdoor Oklahoma. Read more about fishing across the state in the 2026 Anglers' Guide, starting on Page 16.

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OFF THE BEATEN PATH

NOTES ON WILDLIFE • OUTDOOR TIPS • READERS' LETTERS • ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS
COMPILED BY DON P. BROWN



Campers practice archery skills during last year's Wildlife Youth Camp.

TEENS CAN APPLY FOR WEEKLONG WILDLIFE YOUTH CAMP

Know anyone ages 14-16 who is interested in a career as a game warden or a fisheries or wildlife biologist? The annual Wildlife Youth Camp is a great opportunity to get a taste of what it's like.

A week full of fun outdoor activities, conservation education and camaraderie is in store for up to three dozen lucky teens selected for this weeklong event hosted by the Oklahoma State Game Wardens Association and supported by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Applications are now being accepted for this summer's once-in-a-lifetime event. **Deadline to apply is April 13.**

The in-residence camp will be June 14-19 at Goddard Youth Camp at Lake of the Arbuckles. Activities are supervised and include archery, wildlife identification, rifle/shotgun shooting, fishing, ropes course, self-defense, wildlife law enforcement scenarios, wildlife and fisheries management education, and deer/

turkey/waterfowl law enforcement techniques.

And the five-day camp is free for the youngsters!

Applicants must be Oklahoma residents who will be 14 to 16 years old as of June 14,

2026. Prospective campers must fill out an application form and write a 75-word essay describing why they want to attend the camp, why they should be selected, and what they expect to learn. Also, they must furnish a letter of recommendation from someone other than a family member, and a recent photo showing the applicant participating in an outdoor-related event or activity. ♡

To apply, go to wildlifedepartment.com/education/youth-opp/wildlife-youth-camp.





IT'S ADVENTURE TIME!

TICKETS ON SALE FOR OUTDOOR OKLAHOMA ADVENTURES RAFFLE



Would you like to win a custom camper from UkanCamp? Set your sights on a bull elk in Oklahoma? Go on a guided turkey hunt? Or how about winning a lifetime Oklahoma hunting and fishing license?

These prizes, and more, are up for grabs during this year's **Outdoor Oklahoma Adventures Raffle** fund-raising campaign, now administered through the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Foundation. Get your tickets online at my.onecause.com.

They are on sale now for \$10 each, and there's no limit to the number of tickets you can buy. Anyone can enter the drawings, whether or not you have a hunting or fishing license.

Other raffle prizes are a pair of guided Oklahoma fishing trips, a Polaris ATV, and a custom hunting knife set from Handle Bar Bladeworx.

Raffle proceeds will help the Foundation support the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to fund fish and wildlife conservation, and public hunting and fishing opportunities for everyone to enjoy.

Here is a reality many don't realize: **The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) receives \$0 in state tax appropriations.** ODWC's vital work depends entirely on license sales, excise tax, federal grants and the generosity of people like you.



WHY YOUR SUPPORT MATTERS

As the sole 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to supporting the ODWC, the Foundation ensures every dollar you spend stays right here in Oklahoma. We aren't just maintaining what we have; we are building a legacy.

Ready to take your shot at winning amazing prizes? Don't miss out on these incredible outdoor experiences and high-end gear packages. Your passion for the outdoors is what drives this mission forward.

To see all the details of each Outdoor Oklahoma Adventure and buy your raffle tickets, go to <https://bit.ly/4amUOKT> or scan the code.



The Outdoor Oklahoma Adventures Raffle isn't just a chance to win the gear or the trip of a lifetime; it is a direct investment in the future of our wilderness.

By purchasing a ticket, you are directly funding:

- **Youth Programs:** Cultivating the next generation of sportsmen and women through shooting sports and education.
- **Essential Services:** Supporting our Game Wardens and programs like Hunters Against Hunger.
- **Public Access:** Expanding and maintaining high-quality hunting and fishing locations for everyone.
- **Conservation Research:** Ensuring our habitats remain healthy and resilient for years to come.

GAME BAG

A COLLECTION OF LETTERS TO THE WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

We'd like to hear from you! Send your letters to **Outdoor Oklahoma Letters**, P.O. Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK 73152-3465, or send e-mail to donald.brown@odwc.ok.gov.

Dear Michael Bergin,
Communication and Education
Senior Specialist,

I wanted to thank you for taking the time to speak with me for my outdoor recreation economy course project. I'm grateful for the thoughtful and detailed conversation.

Your explanation of how hunting and fishing sustain Oklahoma's outdoor recreation economy and conservation programs was both fascinating and eye-opening. I especially valued learning how license sales, excise taxes and outreach initiatives like "Hunters in the Know ... Take a Doe!" directly support wildlife management.

Hearing about education programs such as Fishing in the Schools and the National Archery in the Schools Program further demonstrated the Wildlife Department's commitment to connecting Oklahomans of all ages with the outdoors.

As someone pursuing a career that bridges communication, education and sustainability in outdoor recreation, I found your leadership perspective truly inspiring. Thank you for sharing your experience and insights, and for the important work you do to promote conservation across our state.



Michael Bergin

Mike Brence

Dear Wade Free, ODWC Director,
and Nathan Erdman,
Chief of Law Enforcement,

I would like to give praise and support to Game Warden **Tim Campbell**, based in Oklahoma County, for his dedication and diligence in working on a case that resulted in a citation for two individuals who trespassed on my managed property to hunt deer illegally.

Recently, I received a call from a surveyor working on my property near Portland Avenue and Memorial Road. He stumbled onto them in tree stands on land where no hunting or trespassing is allowed. I had the surveyor to collect information from both people. I called Tim to give him details of the trespassers. Campbell called back quickly to report that he had made contact and to ask if my company intended to file a complaint.

Harper-Lytle LLC was so impressed with Campbell that I felt compelled to give him a pat on the back and wanted to send this letter on the company's behalf to say thanks to Campbell and the rest of the Game Wardens at the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

George Moore, property manager, Harper-Lytle LLC



Tim Campbell

Dear Editor,

The article in the November/December 2025 issue of Outdoor Oklahoma by Dalton Dennis, "Fields Off Bender Road Flush With Birds and Memories," was, for me, a delightful contribution to the magazine. His vivid recounting of a bird hunting trip to the field with friends opened my memory of such trips and how, when the leaves begin to turn and the winds shift to the north, we hunters and our dogs are instinctively ready for the field. Dennis has a gift of writing, especially with his use of metaphors, to engage the reader and bring us along on the hunt.

Paul Thomson, Edmond

NATUREWORKS ART SHOW RETURNS TO TULSA FOR 2026



At the annual NatureWorks Art Show and Sale, art lovers can browse paintings, sculptures and wooden carvings by the top wildlife, Western and landscape artists from across the United States.

This year, 31 artists and sculptors are expected to gather for the event. Art and nature lovers can browse and even buy incredible artwork while contributing to the conservation of Oklahoma wildlife.

The show will run from noon to 9 p.m. Saturday, March 7, and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, March 8, at the Marriott Tulsa Hotel Southern Hills, 1902 E 71 St. Tickets are \$10 at the door.

NatureWorks assists in the development and conservation of wildlife preserves. The group introduces wildlife into new habitats while providing education opportunities for adults and children on the values of sharing our land with wildlife.

With help from our volunteers and generous donors, we have been able to fund projects that have positively impacted northeastern Oklahoma and surrounding communities. ♡

SOONER “BOOMERS” STAKE TERRITORY CLAIM IN ARKANSAS

A dozen Oklahoma-born eastern collared lizards now call Arkansas home thanks to a partnership between the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Little Rock Zoo, Tulsa Zoo and the Collared Lizard Conservation Team. These transplants may be able to replenish a pocket of prime habitat in west-central Arkansas.

Eastern collared lizards, known as mountain boomers by many wildlife enthusiasts, are a species of greatest conservation need in Arkansas. They are large lizards, sometimes reaching 14 inches in length. Males possess vibrant yellow, green and teal markings, while females tend to be more muted, with reddish-orange accents.

These lizards have seen dramatic declines throughout much of their range in Arkansas as their preferred fire-tolerant habitats have been swallowed by cedars and other woody plants. Thanks to multi-agency partnerships and work funded through the State Wildlife Grant Program, aggressive habitat restoration in many key locations using prescribed fire and cedar removal have restored some of this habitat.

The lizards were captured with the help of Casey Brewster of the Collared Lizard Conservation Team under access and permits granted through Wildlife Senior Biologist Mark Howery at ODWC. Kay Backues at the Tulsa Zoo and staff at the Little Rock Zoo screened the reptiles to ensure they were free of diseases and parasites before relocating them.

AGFC Herpetologist Amanda Bryant said the lizards were transplanted to a portion of private land



The male eastern collared lizard displays vibrant yellow and teal colors while the female is a more subdued brown and green overall.

that historically had one of the largest monitored populations of the species in Arkansas but experienced a population crash in 2024.

“We want to re-establish a population at that site because it has so much quality habitat for the species,” Bryant said. “We do not know the cause of the crash, so we are starting with a modest number and monitoring closely.”

— Randy Zellers, AGFC

RACK MADNESS EVENT SCORES BIG WITH BIG GAME HUNTERS

Mark your calendar for Wednesday, March 4, to attend the annual Rack Madness scoring event at the John D. Groendyke Wildlife Conservation Building, 1801 N. Lincoln Blvd. in Oklahoma City.

This family-friendly event welcomes anyone to bring their deer/elk antlers, antelope horns or bear skulls for professional scoring by ODWC personnel.

Participants should pre-register online at Go Outdoors Oklahoma. Scoring will be on a first-come, first-served basis. There is a two-item scoring limit per registrant. Antlers must both be attached to the skull plate, whether mounted or unmounted. Harvest must have occurred in Oklahoma.

Anyone who registers and brings in an item to be scored will be entered into a drawing for a lifetime combination hunting and fishing license donated by the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Foundation. Only those who bring an item to be scored will be eligible for this prize.

The Oklahoma State Game Warden Association will hold a separate drawing to award a lifetime license to one person who harvested a doe during the 2025-26 season. To enter, visit the Game Thief Trailer on site and check in with the game wardens.

Lifetime drawing winners must be eligible to hold a lifetime license but can transfer it to an eligible recipient. Drawings will be held at 5:45 p.m., and participants don't need to be present to win. Check-ins after 5:30 p.m. are ineligible.

Hourly prize drawings will also take place, and the winners must be present.



A young hunter follows along as his deer mount is measured during a recent Rack Madness scoring event.

GAME WARDEN'S JOURNAL

ACCOUNTS FROM THE FIELD BY THE PUBLIC SERVANTS WHO ENFORCE THE FISH AND WILDLIFE LAWS OF OKLAHOMA.



The night of Nov. 13, Game Warden **Jacob Harriet**, based in Lincoln County, received a call from a neighbor reporting spotlighting into his field, and the truck was driving toward Harriet's property. Harriet drove to the end of his driveway, hid his truck, walked to a hilltop then watched as the spotlights shined a field. Harriet's driveway and truck was also spotlighted. Harriet jumped into his truck, drove up behind them and activated his emergency lights and siren. The suspect truck left the area at high speed down the not-very-well-maintained Lincoln County dirt roads. In the bed of the truck was a man who could now possibly be a superstar bull rider. After four miles, the truck stopped and the driver ran into the woods with a rifle. An hours-long manhunt involving multiple agencies began. The man in the bed of the truck with a rifle and a spotlight was the driver's father. The driver's girlfriend was in the cab of the truck and said she shot a deer with her boyfriend and then checked it in with the dad's license. The driver was a convicted felon who was on the phone with his parole officer vowing he would not go back to prison. He was later apprehended.

IT'S THE LAW:

It is unlawful to fish upon the land of another without consent of the owner, lessee or occupant of that land. Anglers must obtain permission to enter any posted or occupied land or land primarily devoted to farming, ranching or forestry purposes, including lands with rivers and/or creeks running through them. 🦆

Oklahoma Game Warden Honor Guard members have been busy honoring fallen brothers who died in the line of duty. Wreaths were laid at the grave sites for **Charles Estes**, **Melvin "Buck" Garrison** and **Johnny Maisano**.

Garrison's story was recently featured in a popular podcast titled "Bear Grease," which is part of



the "Meateater" series. Give it a listen at this link: <http://bit.ly/4qrFuHO>.

Game Warden **Jaylen Flynn** based in Blaine County, investigated a report of a man shooting a deer from the road. The eyewitness identified the vehicle as a work truck with a company name on it. Flynn contacted the nearest company field office. A company representative said all of their trucks had GPS units and was able to track who was at that location. The suspect was identified and his supervisors were on their way to fire him. The suspect later met with Flynn to collect citations.

About 1 p.m. Friday, Dec. 19, 2025, two men tossed 18 ducks in a private trash bin belonging to Staples in Ponca City. Game Warden **Spencer Grace**, based in Kay County, is seeking any information on the two men. Please call (580) 761-6565, and you can remain anonymous and possibly receive a reward.

Area Game Wardens are also investigating two other illegal disposal cases involving waterfowl. In both cases, birds were dumped in the ditch off of main roads.

These types of events give all hunters a black eye. Please dispose of harvested game correctly. If convicted of illegal disposal, mandatory revocation of hunting privileges is required.

Game Wardens in Cherokee County are investigating a case of illegal trash dumping on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers land near Fort Gibson Public Hunting Area. Materials illegally dumped near Clear Creek Road, just north of State Highway 51 west of Hulbert, include sheetrock, plastic sheets, buckets, paint buckets, and other materials.

Please call Game Wardens **Cody Youngblood** at (918) 431-2552, or **David Garrett** at (918) 431-2562.

(Reports from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation-Game Wardens Facebook page.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please help make a difference! When violators break the law, they steal fish and wildlife from you! Report violations anonymously by calling Operation Game Thief at (800) 522-8039. You could earn a cash reward.

WELCOME TO THE TAILGATE!

Is the hunting good? You bet! Step up to **The Tailgate** and check out some great harvests during recent seasons by hunters in Oklahoma. Here's a few we thought you would enjoy! To submit your photo of a successful hunting trip, or to see what others have harvested, go to wildlifedepartment.com/hunting/tailgate or scan the code:



Colin H., white-tailed deer, Nov. 9, 2025, OLAP land.



Campbell Moore, white-tailed deer, Nov. 30, 2025, Oklahoma County.



Dakota Gordon, raccoon, Jan. 6, 2026, Latimer County.



Cassidy A., white-tailed deer, Nov. 22, 2025, Garfield County.



Tate Homer, white-tailed deer, Dec. 13, 2025, Canadian County.



Dallas Walton, white-tailed deer, Nov. 24, 2025, Oklahoma County.

WILD ABOUT COOKING

SLOW COOKER WILD SIDE BURGOO

What wild game is still in your freezer? If you have a variety, this stew is a great way to clear out some freezer space, and it's as easy as "set it and forget it" using a slow cooker. And if you don't have wild game meat, you can always substitute chicken, beef and pork. This recipe makes 12 savory servings.



PLANEATMOVE.COM

INGREDIENTS

- 4 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 cup cooked rabbit or chicken, cubed
- 1 cup cooked venison or beef, cubed
- 1 cup cooked squirrel or pork, cubed
- 1 cup cooked lima beans (or 1 15-ounce can, drained)
- 1 cup whole kernel corn (or 1 15-ounce can, drained)
- 3 1/4 cups chopped tomatoes (or 1 28-ounce can, undrained)
- 1 1/2 cups cabbage, shredded
- 1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons vinegar
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground pepper
- 3 cups water

INSTRUCTIONS

- Wash potatoes with a clean vegetable brush under running water before preparing.
- Combine all ingredients in a 6-quart slow cooker. Stir to blend.
- Cover with lid and cook on low for 8 hours.
- Refrigerate any leftovers within 2 hours after slow cooker is turned off. Divide leftovers into smaller containers to allow quick cooling.

Source: Adapted from "Slow Cooker Mount St. Joseph Burgoo" from "Pride of Kentucky" by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension and Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

Serving size: 1 cup.

Nutrition facts per serving: 210 calories; 3.5g total fat; 1g saturated fat; 0g trans-fat; 50mg cholesterol; 460mg sodium; 25g total carbohydrate; 4g dietary fiber; 5g sugars; 0g added sugars; 20g protein; 0% daily value of vitamin D; 6% daily value of calcium; 15% daily value of iron; 10% daily value of potassium.

2025 CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

"WHAT MATTERED WAS THAT I WAS THERE"

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and Oklahoma Station Chapter Safari Club International sponsor a creative writing contest for middle and high school students. Boy and girl winners are chosen from two age divisions. Students' essay theme can be "Hunting: Sharing the Heritage" or "Archery: What I Like About Archery in the Schools and Bowhunting." Winners in the age 15-17 category receive a guided oryx hunt at Rockin S Ranch in Texas, and winners in the 11-14 age category receive a hunting trip with Rack Attack Outfitters of Fairview (or similar) and a scholarship to the Outdoor Texas Camp. In this issue, Outdoor Oklahoma honors junior male winner Taytum Buck, 12, from Depew Public Schools.



By Taytum Buck

The stillness of the early morning was broken by the sound of a coyote howling in the distance and the screeching of an owl as their nightly routines came to an end. To say that the morning air was crisp with Old Man Winter's chill would be an understatement. But there I sat in the river bottom slough with my dad and two friends on my first duck hunting trip.

That morning not too long ago was truly a life-changing moment for me. I found a new world that has changed the path of my life. I had only heard about kids my age going on hunting trips. I really couldn't have imagined going on one myself. Yet there I was, getting an experience of a lifetime.

It all started with two of my mom and papa's students. My mom is Depew's Ag Ed/FFA teacher, and my papa has taught Ag Ed/FFA there for 40 years. They have a lot of Deep Fork River bottom hunting students in their program. Two seniors, Cale McKinzie and Brock McDaniel, decided to take time to teach me how to duck hunt.

Picture this: It was me, my dad, my two guides, a beautiful trained Labrador named Preacher along with fancy decoys, special duck guns, a blind, and so much camo we were almost invisible. All this in

the cold muddy waters of the slough.

It didn't matter that there weren't many ducks that morning. It didn't matter that instead of a limit, I only managed to harvest a pair of ducks. What mattered was that I was there. What mattered was my dad was with me sharing in my new passion. What mattered was the relationship I established with Cale, Brock and even the dog, Preacher. What mattered were these lifelong bonds we were making.

How is this life-changing? At 12 years old, I have completed a hunter safety course and own a Youth Super License to hunt ducks, turkey and deer. I have now learned about the role of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife. Today, I own a Stoeger and Franchi shotguns as well as a .243-caliber rifle. I have completed a successful turkey hunt with the same two friends and harvested a nice tom. And I currently have trail cameras looking for deer. I am on my FFA sporting clays, trap and archery teams. I believe this would not be a part of my world without that first duck hunt.

On an early morning in the cold muddy waters of the Deep Fork slough, with the bonds of lifelong friendships made and my values being shaped, I can say that I now understand this essay's theme: "Hunting: Sharing the Heritage." 🦌



OUTDOOR CALENDAR

FOR THE LATEST UPDATES, GO ONLINE TO LICENSE.
GOOUTDOORSOKLAHOMA.COM/EVENT/EVENTS.ASPX

NOTICE: Events were scheduled at press time; they are subject to change.

MARCH 2026

- 1 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Post-season scouting; Learn to Hunt, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 2 Okla. Wildlife Conservation Commission meets, 9 a.m., Oklahoma City. Livestream: [YouTube.com/@Okwildfedept](https://www.youtube.com/@Okwildfedept).
 - 4 Rack Madness, 1-6 p.m., ODWC Headquarters, Oklahoma City. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx.
 - 6-8 NatureWorks Art Show and Sale, Tulsa Marriott Southern Hills; natureworks.org/art-show.
 - 7 Third Annual Crappie 101 Fishing Workshop, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., ODWC Arcadia Learning Center, 7201 E 33 St., Edmond. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx. OKC Free Fishing Day, no city permit required.
 - 8 Daylight Saving Time begins.
 - "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Blind Fishing Clinic, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 15 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Smallmouth Float Trip; Canoe/Kayak How-to, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 21 Spring Bird Walk, 8:30 and 10 a.m., Arcadia Conservation Education Area, 7201 E 33 St., Edmond. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Oklahoma River Chapter banquet, 5-9 p.m., Coal Creek Winery, Tuttle. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx.
 - 22 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Streams Savant, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 28 OSU Wildlife Society Beast Feast, 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Stonecloud Taproom, Stillwater. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx.
 - 29 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Veliger Sampling; Field Notes; Reel Talk, Real Tips, 8 a.m., OETA.
- Ducks Unlimited events (date) in Duncan (5), Guthrie (7), Broken Arrow (27). Info: ducks.org/events.
 - National Wild Turkey Federation events (date) in Duncan (7), Wagoner (14), Muskogee (26), Shawnee (28). Info: your.nwtf.org/members/events.
 - Delta Waterfowl event (date) in Tulsa (13). Info: deltawaterfowl.org/events/.
 - Hunter Education Class locations (date) in Blanchard (28).

APRIL 2026

- 3 Fly Fishing Film Tour, 7:30 p.m., Will Rogers Theater, Oklahoma City; flyfilmtour.com.
 - 4 Turkey Hunting 101 Workshop, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., ODWC Arcadia Learning Center, 7201 E 33 St., Edmond. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx. OKC Free Fishing Day, no city permit required.
 - 5 Easter.
 - "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Bird-calling Kid, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 6 Okla. Wildlife Conservation Commission meets, 9 a.m., Oklahoma City. Livestream: [YouTube.com/@Okwildfedept](https://www.youtube.com/@Okwildfedept).
 - 11 Packsaddle WMA Field Day, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx.
 - 12 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Noodling With Jacob, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 19 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Tick Diseases, 8 a.m., OETA.
 - 22 Earth Day.
 - 25 Birding Open House, 7-10:30 a.m., Hackberry Flat WMA. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx.
 - 26 "Outdoor Oklahoma" TV, Game Warden Stories, 8 a.m., OETA.
- Ducks Unlimited events (date) in Cushing (4), Tulsa (10), Eufaula (17), Poteau (24), Weatherford (25). Info: ducks.org/events.
 - National Wild Turkey Federation event (date) in Tuttle (18). Info: your.nwtf.org/members/events.

** FOR HUNTING SEASON DATES, GO TO
www.wildlifedepartment.com/hunting/seasons **

WELCOME TO THE DOCK!



Are the fish biting? You bet! Step onto The Dock and take a gander at some great catches made recently by Oklahoma anglers. Here's a few we thought you would enjoy! To see more or submit a photo of your catch, go to www.wildlifedepartment.com/fishing/the_dock or scan the code.



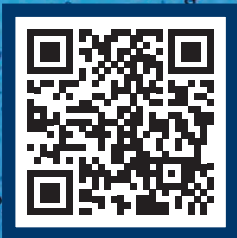
Kail Crenshaw, white crappie, Nov. 28, 2025, Payne County.



Bryan Suchy, largemouth bass, Dec. 2, 2025, Latimer County.



Michael Sosa, paddlefish, Dec. 4, 2025, Grand Lake O' the Cherokees.



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**



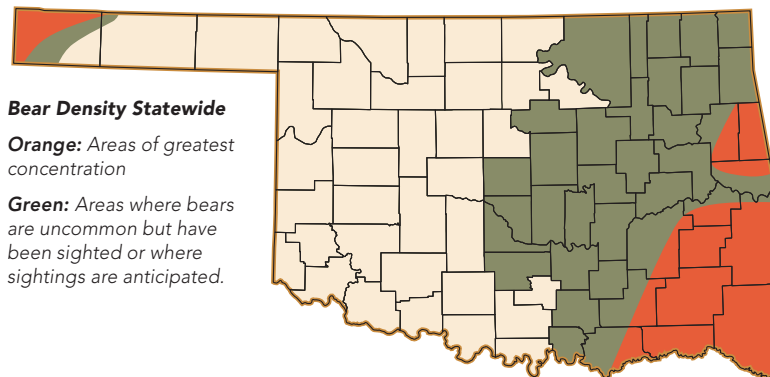
Produced under a grant from the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund, administered by the U.S. Coast Guard.





BEARS ARE STIRRING AFTER WINTER NAP

BY MATT HENSLEY, WILDLIFE SENIOR BIOLOGIST



It's the time of year when Oklahoma's black bears are waking up and wandering the woods.

Eastern Oklahoma is home to two growing populations of black bears that have been expanding and dispersing westward out of Arkansas for more than 20 years. Black bears once inhabited all of what is now the state of Oklahoma. However, by the early 1900s bear sightings had become rare. Habitat fragmentation in combination with overharvest had put Oklahoma's black bear population in danger of extirpation.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, about 250 black bears from northern Minnesota and Manitoba, Canada, were translocated to the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains of western Arkansas by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. The newly introduced population took root and expanded into southwestern Missouri and eastern Oklahoma. That project is still viewed as one of the most successful reintroductions of large carnivores in the world.

The larger population is well-established in and around the Ouachita Mountain range in the southeastern Oklahoma, and a much smaller population resides in some of the favorable habitat found in the Ozark Mountain range in northeastern Oklahoma.

According to research, the black bear population in southeastern Oklahoma, referred to as the Ouachita population, is still growing. The most recent abundance estimate reported by researchers in 2023 was about 1,550 bears, with a much higher concentration along the Oklahoma-Arkansas border. The core area of the Ouachita population lies primarily in southern Le Flore County and reaches slightly down into northern McCurtain County.

Black bears may turn up anywhere east of Interstate 35, as animals from the core eastern areas continue to venture westward. In recent years, black bears have been seen in Ada and Wewoka, as far north as Grove, and as far west as Wayne. Black bears are also occasionally seen in the western end of Oklahoma's Panhandle.

HUNTING THE BLACK BEAR

The tremendous success of Arkansas' translocation program led to a renewed black bear hunting season there in 1980. In 2009, Oklahoma's bear population allowed the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to open the state's first bear hunting season, with a total harvest quota of 20 bears for Latimer, Le Flore, McCurtain and Pushmataha counties. That year, 19 bears were harvested.

In 2010 and 2011, the 20-bear quota was still in place yet 32 and 31 bears were harvested, respectively, within 48 hours of opening day those seasons. In 2012 the 20-bear quota was removed for the archery season, and hunters took 66 bears. In 2013, a year of high mast yields when hunting proved more challenging, the harvest dropped to 28.

In 2019, the hunting zone for black bears was expanded to include the area south of Interstate 40 and east of U.S. 69.

In 2022, the Choctaw Nation began issuing bear licenses to tribal members and added eight bears to the harvest total of 60 for 2022. Black bear hunters in Oklahoma had a record-breaking hunting season in 2023, taking 86 bears, the highest harvest since the previous record of 85 bears set in 2018.

In 2024, all lifetime hunting license holders became exempt from needing to buy a separate bear license. Despite the heavy mast crops in some core areas, hunters took 77 bears that year.

Overall, with increasing popularity of bear hunting and additional participation opportunities, the harvest trend is steadily climbing.

The state's next black bear archery season will run from Oct. 1-18, 2026, and the bear muzzleloader season will run from Oct. 24 to Nov. 1, 2026.

HUMAN/BEAR CONFLICT

While naturally shy of people and urban areas, bears will sometimes travel many miles when searching for food, mates or new terri-



DESIREE BRANSON CLINE/RFS 2019

tory, and they can wind up in some unexpected places. Most bear sightings are in some way food-related and occur in spring and summer months.

While bears are omnivores and will eat almost anything with calories, their diet consists of mostly plants. After spending about three months in a den without eating, bears are emerging and leaving their



VERMONT FISH/WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

dens in April with a lot of winter weight loss to regain.

Later in May and June, adult males are traveling for miles to breed, juveniles are dispersing from their mothers, and nursing sows are working hard for extra calories to produce milk for cubs.



BEARWISE.ORG VIA FACEBOOK

Identifying Black Bear Tracks

Generally, the stride of a walking black bear establishes sets of tracks 11 to 12 inches apart.



Left Hind



Left Front



Right Hind



Right Front

In July and August, as vegetation begins to wither from the seasonal heat and regular rainfall becomes scarce, bears become easily receptive to food sources that originate with people.

Bears have an amazing sense of smell and can easily detect natural food sources as well as unnatural food opportunities such as trash containers, corn feeders, bird feeders or pet food left on a porch. When bears are lured in by these temptations, it can at first seem like a positive encounter. The bear receives a charitable handout, and the property owner gets a cool story and photo opportunity.

However, bears can easily become habituated to these types of easy food sources and can lose their natural wariness of people as they begin to associate the sights, smells and sounds of people with free snacks. When this happens, there is potential for human/bear conflicts.

Biologists have learned that relocating a habituated bear does not erase the bear's memory of the free food, nor does the bear typically adopt the new location. In most cases, even after being moved many miles away, they will return to their home territory within a few days.

The most effective way to manage human/bear conflict is through prevention. Secure anything that might attract a hungry bear out of the woods and into the yard. Simple practices like not leaving excess pet food or full trash containers sitting out overnight, keeping your outdoor grill clean, and shutting down bird feeders during summer are great ways to keep bears from developing harmful habits and avoiding a detrimental experience for bears and property owners.

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation is a member of an education and outreach organization called BearWise that is dedicated to helping people live safely and responsibly with bears. For advice about making your property a safer place and coexisting with bears, go online to bearwise.org or facebook.com/BearWise.org. 🐾



Dogs + Bears = Trouble

Tips for Hiking / Camping with Dogs

By nature, black bears are neither confrontational nor aggressive, but dog behavior is more complex.

Dogs are involved in the majority of all physical encounters involving people and black bears.

If your dog gets into an encounter with a bear, there's about a fifty percent chance it will be injured or killed. And an even higher chance you'll be injured if you intervene.

PLEASE REMEMBER:

Bears will protect their food and defend their cubs.

Bears don't like to be cornered.

If your dog runs after a bear, it may bring the bear back to you.

- ◆ Keep your dog on a non-retractable leash at all times.
- ◆ Carry bear spray and know how to use it.
- ◆ Stay alert; music and phones are distracting.
- ◆ Avoid walking at dawn, dusk or at night in areas with known bear activity.
- ◆ If you see a bear, turn around and leave.
- ◆ Don't let your dog bark at, harass, chase, or corner a bear.
- ◆ If your dog gets into a fight with a bear, don't rescue it. You will get injured. Use bear spray; it works from 30 feet away.
- ◆ An air horn will alert others in the area that you need help, and may startle or distract both dog and bear.

Making the right choices can keep dogs and people safe, and bears wild.

Making the wrong choices can have serious consequences for all.



Letting your dog off leash in the campground or the woods is usually illegal and always dangerous. It may be tempting to let your dog run free, but don't put your dog and yourself at risk. **PLEASE, LEASH UP.**



Learn More: **BearWise.org**



© 2023

2026 ANGLERS' GUIDE



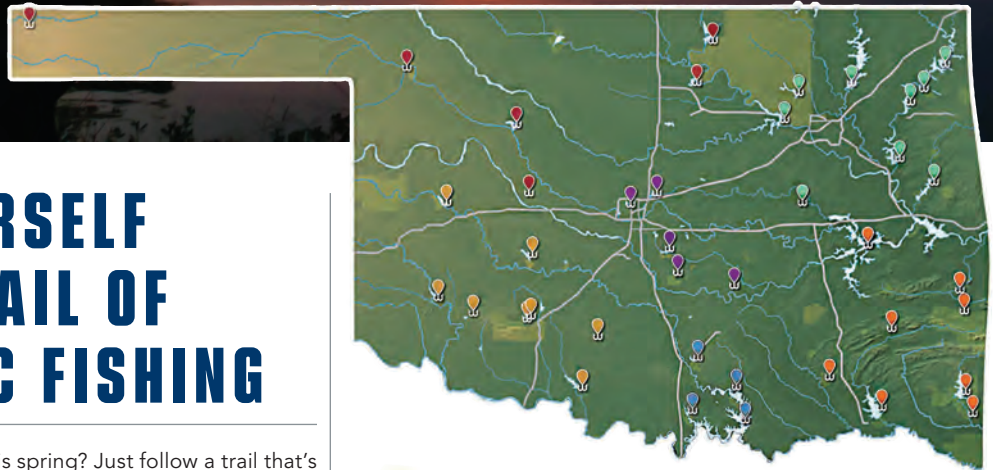
PROVIDED BY JUDY WINCHESTER BETIA

LOOP YOURSELF INTO A TRAIL OF FANTASTIC FISHING

Want to become a trail boss this spring? Just follow a trail that's wet, not dusty.

Welcome to the Oklahoma Fishing Trail, a place for all anglers to find the spots that make Oklahoma a premier fishing destination. The bite is on, and the Trail is waiting.

Oklahoma's vast resources make it a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts, especially anglers. The state's waters are home to a diverse number of fish species, including favorites like bass, crappie and catfish along with unusual species like paddlefish. Oklahoma has more miles of shoreline than the U.S. East and Gulf coasts combined and plenty of attractions along the way that make the trip unforgettable.



The Oklahoma Fishing Trail is designed to highlight the best of Oklahoma fishing. It's divided into six loops, covering the entire state. Each loop is organized by lake and suggested target species, so no matter your fishing ambitions, you'll find a loop that's perfect for you. Come fish for yourself!

The Trail was created in 2019 as a collaborative effort of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department to showcase the state's remarkable fishing opportunities. Among those are Grand Lake O' the Cherokees and Lake Texoma, which both consistently

rank among the nation's best bass fishing sites.

In recent years, Oklahoma has hosted the Bassmaster Classic fishing tournament, the "Super Bowl" of competitive fishing, three times.

The Trail highlights 38 of Oklahoma's top fishing lakes and rivers and an additional 20 fishing experiences that are part of the Wildlife Department's "Close to Home Fishing" program.

Each Oklahoma Fishing Trail loop includes a variety of fish to catch.

So, how do you become an Oklahoma Fishing Trail boss? Just complete the Trail's Grand Slam Challenge. Anglers can complete the challenge by catching five of the many species found in Oklahoma waterways and submitting photos of their catches online at TravelOK.com/GrandSlam. Scores of anglers have completed the Grand Slam Challenge and earned an exclusive Oklahoma Fishing Trail Grand Slam decal.

The Grand Slam challenge designated species are bass, catfish, crappie, sunfish, and one other species of choice. Then you snap a photo, upload it to the correct category, fill out the contact form, click "Submit" and that's it!

We'd also love to hear more about your Grand Slam catches. Feel free to include size, weight, location and even a cool story about each of your submissions.

And as you're making tracks across the state, why not invite someone to tag along. The Fishing Trail is a great "hook" to get new people interested in the traditional American pastime of fishing. It takes one to make one! So, do your part to pass along the joys of fishing to the next generation by serving as a mentor to a new angler.

Find out more about how and where to fish, regulations and license requirements online at wildlifedepartment.com/fishing.



PROVIDED BY JONATHAN HICKS



NORTHEASTERN LOOP

Anglers searching for the elusive paddlefish are invited to start off their Northeastern Loop experience at the Neosho and Grand rivers before heading over to Grand Lake O' the Cherokees, Lake Hudson and Spavinaw Lake in search of largemouth bass. Skiatook Lake grants anglers plenty of potential for reeling in smallmouth bass and hybrid striped bass, while crappie is the main specialty at Lake Eufaula and Lake Tenkiller. For hotspots teeming with catfish, bring a boat out on Keystone Lake and Oologah Lake.

Catfish

- Grand Lake O' the Cherokees
- Keystone Lake
- Oologah Lake

Paddlefish

- Fort Gibson Lake
- Grand Lake O' the Cherokees
- Keystone Lake

Crappie

- Fort Gibson Lake
- Grand Lake O' the Cherokees
- Lake Eufaula
- Lake Tenkiller

Smallmouth bass

- Lake Tenkiller
- Skiatook Lake

Striped bass hybrids

- Lake Tenkiller
- Skiatook Lake

Largemouth bass

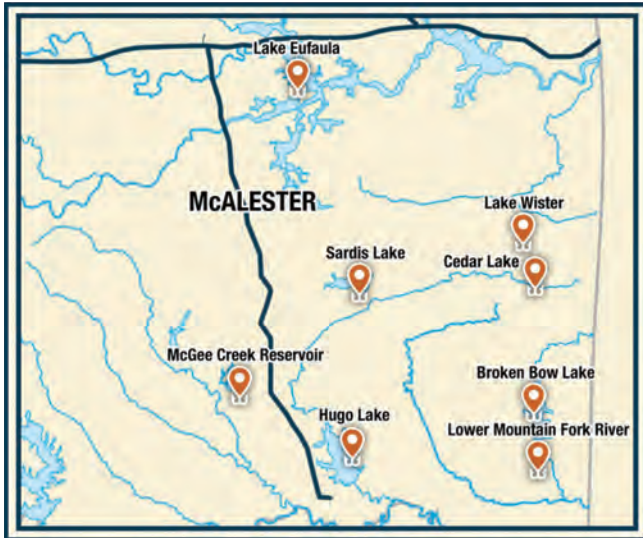
- Dripping Springs Lake
- Fort Gibson Lake
- Grand Lake O' the Cherokees
- Lake Hudson
- Spavinaw Lake

White bass

- Lake Eufaula

PROVIDED BY MATT ALLEN





SOUTHEASTERN LOOP

Get back into nature with trips to the region's finest fishing spots from the Ouachita Mountains' sparkling lakes to the Kiamichi Mountains' cedar-lined bayous. It's easier than ever to go fishing — even if you're a newbie — with convenient rental and guide services available. Record your catches to complete this off-the-hook fishing trail loop.

Catfish

Hugo Lake

Crappie

Lake Eufaula
Lake Wister

Largemouth bass

Broken Bow Lake
Cedar Lake
McGee Creek Reservoir
Sardis Lake

Striped bass hybrids

Broken Bow Lake

Trout

Lower Mountain Fork River

Walleye

Broken Bow Lake

White bass

Lake Eufaula



SOUTH CENTRAL LOOP

From the sprawling waters at Lake Texoma to the rushing rapids at Blue River, south-central Oklahoma offers a diverse range of fishing options where you can score stripers, largemouth bass, crappie and rainbow trout in droves. Keep reading to discover four fishing hotspots where you can reel in the big one by day and explore top dining and attractions by night.

Catfish

Lake Texoma

Crappie

Lake of the Arbuckles
Lake Texoma

Largemouth bass

Lake Murray
Lake of the Arbuckles
Lake Texoma

Striped bass

Lake Texoma

Trout

Blue River

HEAR ABOUT ALL THINGS FISHING ON ODWC PODCAST


"Reel Talk, Real Tips" is the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's fishing podcast, created to help anglers of all skill levels catch more fish. It focuses on practical, easy-to-understand advice that Oklahoma anglers can actually use, whether they're fishing a neighborhood pond, a local lake, or one of the state's rivers. Each episode is designed to be informative and understandable using real Oklahoma fishing experiences.

Podcast topics range across many fish species. Tune in and learn about seasonal patterns, bait and lure selection, habitat preferences, and proven techniques that work in Oklahoma. By focusing on local fisheries and conditions, "Reel Talk, Real Tips" helps anglers prepare and build confidence before they heading out.

Many episodes feature conversations with biologists and exper-

rienced anglers from across the state. Hosts often dive deeper into species behavior, management practices, and location-specific strategies with experts. Field footage and in-depth discussions make the podcast a trusted resource for learning how to fish smarter, fish locally, and fish while enjoying Oklahoma's outdoors.

Some episodes give viewers a firsthand look at how ODWC staff and guests target different species. It's a hands-on approach that takes much of the guesswork out of fishing.

Watch "Reel Talk, Real Tips" on the Outdoor Oklahoma YouTube channel; simply scan the QR code. 

— **Jacob Tison**, *Communication and Education Specialist*





CENTRAL LOOP

Don't let the urban landscape of central Oklahoma deter you from exploring the excellent fishing opportunities found in and around Oklahoma City. From large lakes right in the middle of the city to tiny lakes off the beaten path, this guide will help you find the best largemouth bass, catfish, saugeye and crappie in Norman, Slaughterville, Edmond and Oklahoma City.

Catfish

- Lake Hefner
- Lake Konawa
- Lake Thunderbird

Saugeye

- Lake Thunderbird

White bass

- Lake Konawa

Crappie

- Arcadia Lake

Largemouth bass

- Dahlgren Lake
- Lake Thunderbird



PROVIDED BY PAUL SHELLEN



SOUTHWESTERN LOOP

Southwestern Oklahoma offers exciting diversity in nature, adventure and culture, donning a distinctive Old West appeal. Reel in a wealth of largemouth and white bass in this area, along with crappie and catfish. Swim at sandy beaches, hike on rolling hills, learn about Native American landmarks and feast on authentic German cuisine. This loop's rich ecosystem, excellent eats and crowd-pleasing attractions will enrich any fishing trip.

Catfish

- Tom Steed Lake
- Waurika Lake

Saugeye

- Fort Cobb Reservoir

Smallmouth bass

- Lake Lawtonka

Crappie

- Fort Cobb Reservoir
- Tom Steed Lake

Striped bass hybrids

- Foss Lake

Largemouth bass

- Lake Elmer Thomas
- Lake Humphreys
- Lake Lawtonka

Walleye

- Lake Altus-Lugert



PROVIDED BY JACK TRAMEL



NORTHWESTERN LOOP

Northwest Oklahoma offers some of the state’s most diverse fishing opportunities, from a warm water reservoir to a remote, 100-acre lake that’s well off the beaten path. Pack your rod and reel, then use this guide to discover where to find the best catfish, largemouth bass, crappie and walleye in Kaw City, Geary, Red Rock, Fort Supply and Canton.

Catfish

- Kaw Lake
- Lake Carl Etling

Crappie

- Fort Supply Lake
- Kaw Lake

Largemouth bass

- American Horse Lake
- Kaw Lake
- Sooner Lake

Walleye

- Canton Lake



PROVIDED BY KURTIS CHAWFORD



DARRIN HILL/DWIC

Lake Carl Etling



PROVIDED BY BRIAN VANZANT



DARRIN HILL/DWIC

Lake Altus-Lugert

Six

Ways fishing is healthy.

1

Low-Impact Exercise

Walking to fishing spots, casting, and reeling give your arms, shoulders, and core a gentle workout. (Some fishing types, like paddlefishing, are more intense.)



2

Stress Reduction

The calm water, rhythmic casting, and quiet surroundings help lower stress and anxiety levels.



3

Fresh, Nutritious Food

Many Oklahoma fish (like bass, crappie, or catfish) are good sources of lean protein, Omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamins.



4

Improved Focus & Patience

Fishing sharpens attention, hand-eye coordination, and problem-solving skills.

5

Time in Nature

Sunshine and fresh air support vitamin D production, mood balance, and overall mental well-being.



6

Social & Family Bonding

Fishing trips offer shared experiences that strengthen friendships and family connections.



For more information on fishing, scan the QR code and create some memories today!





ODWC staff conducts a catfish survey on Pauls Valley Lake.

RESEARCHERS PUT “LOW ENERGY” INTO CATFISH PROJECTS

Blue and flathead catfish are vital sportfish that drive a large segment of the state’s angling culture. They are known as potential trophy size fish and excellent table fare. Across the state, it is common for both species to exceed 30 pounds.

To ensure the best management of these populations, fisheries biologists with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation are constantly on the water, employing high-tech methods and collaborative efforts to monitor the health, age and movements of these species.

Recent efforts at Pauls Valley, Oologah, and Grand lakes have provided a wealth of data that help shape management strategies while engaging the public in the fascinating science of fisheries management.

Low-Frequency Electrofishing

Measuring a catfish population is a far more complex task than traditional bass or sunfish sampling. While standard sampling uses high-frequency electricity, catfish respond uniquely to low-frequency electrofishing (LFE).

During an LFE survey, an electrofishing boat equipped with a generator and dipper applies electricity to the water, while two chase boats cruise the area to recover fish. Unlike other species that pop up right next to the boat, stunned catfish may surface

100 feet away or more. These surveys are conducted in the heat of summer when high water temperatures make the fish more responsive to the electrical current.

While LFE is highly efficient, research conducted at the Oklahoma Fishery Research Laboratory suggests it may not tell the whole story. Tank experiments and mark-recapture studies indicate that LFE often under-represents fish over 30 inches. To combat this bias, biologists combine LFE with gillnetting and jug-lining to ensure they have a representative sample of all size classes, growth rates, and mortality levels.



ODWC staff conducts a catfish survey on Pauls Valley Lake.

Pauls Valley Lake: A Long-lived Population

At Pauls Valley Lake, the Central Region fisheries staff, including biologists Doug Zentner and Alexis Whiles, conducted an intensive survey this past July. The initial LFE results brought in 63 blue catfish, with an average size of 14.5 inches. While the catch rate was roughly half the statewide average, the body condition of the fish was satisfactory.

To get a clearer picture of the older, larger fish of the lake, the team returned in December for large-mesh gillnetting. The results were starkly different. The winter sample yielded fish averaging 26 inches, with some reaching up to 41 inches. The heavyweight of the survey was a 27-pound female.

By removing and analyzing otoliths (small ear bones used to determine age), biologists discovered that these fish ranged from 9 to 19 years old. Interestingly, nearly half the sample consisted of 12-year-old fish. This suggests that while mortality is low, successful spawning in Pauls Valley is sporadic. In this system, the blue catfish population appears to grow episodically, meaning the population relies on a few very successful years rather than steady annual growth.

Oologah Lake: Dramatic Expansion

The blue catfish population in Oologah Lake has seen a dramatic expansion over the past 20 years. Once a rarity in standardized samples, the lake now boasts a premier catfish fishery. However, a growing population brings new challenges. In late 2024, reports of skinny, unhealthy-looking fish emerged, prompting ODWC to investigate the overall health of the system.



PROVIDED BY COLBY GAINER/ODWC



KAYLEEN SUGIANTO/ODWC

A small catfish is weighed during a survey on Pauls Valley Lake.



PROVIDED BY COLBY GAINER/ODWC

The Department launched a two-pronged attack using gill netting and LFE. The gill netting phase confirmed that while some individuals were thin, the population as a whole was in good condition. This was a relief for managers who must balance the catfish population with the available shad supply, which also supports stocked species like hybrid striped bass and saugeye.

The LFE phase involved staff from various ODWC division from across the state. A total of 575 blue catfish were collected in just 20 five-minute samples. The data was impressive: a catch rate of 172 fish per hour.

An exciting find at Oologah was the presence of true trophy fish. Several fish measured nearly 4 feet long and weighed over 50 pounds. The management takeaway is clear: There are abundant blue catfish under 25 inches. ODWC encourages anglers to harvest these smaller fish, which frees up nutrients and habitat for the remaining catfish that could grow into the 50-plus-pound trophies.



PROVIDED BY KENDALL ROBBINS/ODWC

Grand Lake: Tracking the Flathead Frontier

While blue catfish are highly visible, the flathead catfish is an important native sportfish that often remains a mystery due to its solitary nature. At Grand Lake, Northeast Region fisheries staff have embarked on a dedicated study to understand the movement, spawning habits, and recruitment of these predators.

Starting in 2023, staff began estimating age and growth rates. By the end of 2025, they had collected 261 flatheads, discovering a wide range of ages from 2 to 35 years old. The growth data was particularly interesting: one 35-year-old fish weighed only 22 pounds, while a 16-year-old fish weighed a staggering 64 pounds. This highlights how individual growth can vary greatly based on habitat and food availability.

The project has moved into a mark-recapture phase. Biologists record exact GPS coordinates for every fish caught and release them with a modified Carlin dangler tag. To date, 288 fish have been tagged.

Citizen Science

Success at Grand depends heavily on the public to report tagged fish. While 30 fish have been recaptured by staff, just four have been reported by local anglers.

This citizen science is crucial. ODWC is asking anyone who catches a tagged fish in Grand Lake to report the catch by calling or texting (918) 504-2303. Anglers may harvest these fish or release them as they desire. These reports help biologists understand how far these elusive fish travel and how often they are being harvested.

So, whether it is through reporting a tag or harvesting a limit of smaller fish, Oklahoma anglers play a direct role in the mission to keep catfish populations thriving for generations to come. ♡

(Contributing: Senior Fisheries Biologist Austin Griffin, Fisheries Biologist Colby Gainer, Fisheries Technician Kendall Robbins)



PROVIDED BY COLBY GAINER/ODWC



PROVIDED BY COLBY GAINER/ODWC



Unhatched channel catfish eggs in jars.

HATCHERY'S CATFISH EFFORT FINDING BARRELS OF SUCCESS

Since the early 2000s, Holdenville State Fish Hatchery and Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery worked together to produce channel catfish for stocking in waters across Oklahoma. Catfish eggs were harvested from the Holdenville broodstock pond and then taken to Tishomingo to be hatched.

In 2022, the Holdenville hatchery acquired a 20-jar recirculation aquaculture system (RAS) to help in the process, with the goal to eventually produce all channel catfish in-house for the Wildlife Department.

Channel catfish production begins each year by putting 30 blue plastic barrels in the broodstock pond at the end of May. The catfish then go into the barrels, clean out all debris and lay eggs in a

mass. We check the barrels three times a week and if any spawns are present, they are harvested, weighed and put in the RAS jars.

Jars are cleaned daily of any unfertilized and floating eggs by siphoning them out. Over the course of a week, the eggs turn from a bright yellow to a pinkish-brown color in the jar.

After hatching, the fry are put into troughs and fed twice a day until they reach an inch long. They are sampled and transferred to a hatchery pond for the various catfish programs we operate. Farm pond fish are raised to 3 inches; grow-outs are raised to either 7, 9 or 12-plus inches and are stocked throughout the state according to biologists' requests.

In the hatchery's first trial year, about 8,000 fry were hatched. This past year, over 100,000 fry were hatched. Significant improvements to water quality have been made with a drum filter, and heat pumps have been added to the hatchery room so as to lower the air temperature for optimal hatching success. Staff is hoping the hatchery will be able to produce more than 250,000 fry this production season. 

—By Alex Talbert, Fisheries Assistant Hatchery Manager



A mass of channel catfish eggs is collected from a blue barrel.



Hatched channel catfish in a jar.



SLINGIN' FOR SMALLIES ON THE UPPER ILLINOIS RIVER

For most people, the Illinois River in northeastern Oklahoma means summertime float trips, sunshine, and memories made drifting downstream.

But while many come to float, bass anglers like me come with purpose. Beneath its surface, this scenic river tells a different story. It's current carries more than just canoes.

It carries the chance of landing a trophy smallmouth bass.

I had the chance to float the Illinois with Tony Rodger, a fisheries biologist formerly with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and someone who knows this river as well

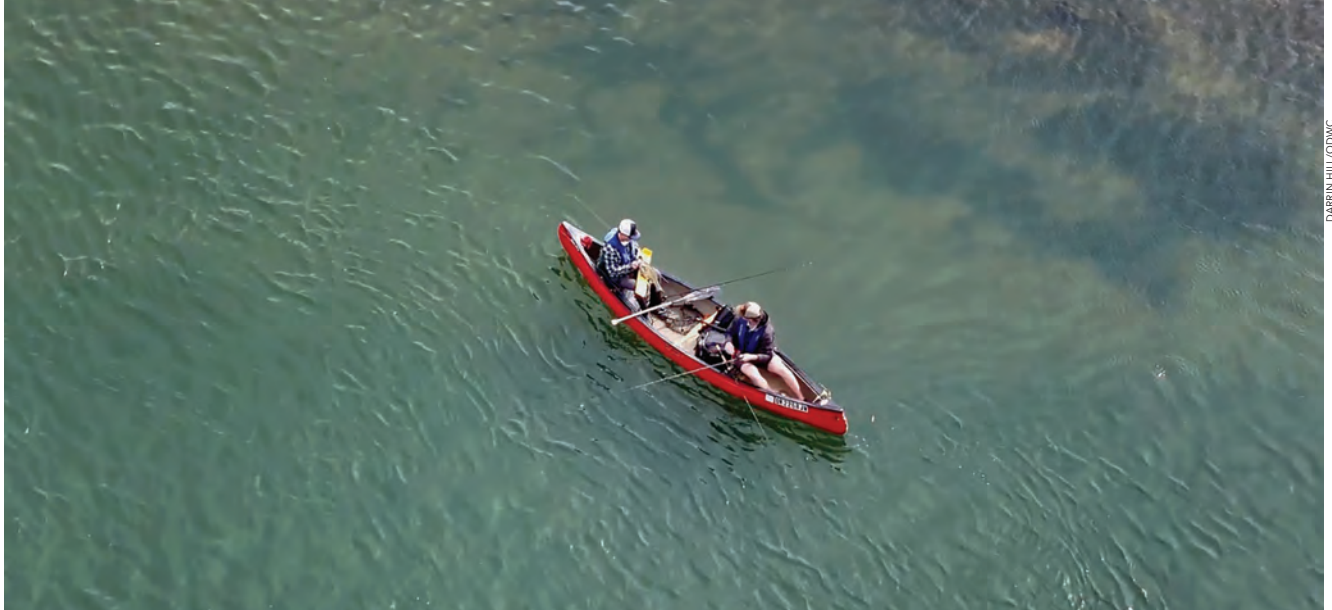
as anyone. Rodger has spent years chasing smallmouth here, and in the 2010s, he helped lead a team of biologists studying the smallmouth and Neosho bass that call this river home.

With us was a crew from the Outdoor Oklahoma TV show to document our adventure.

During our time on the river, Rodger and I were able to talk about the research he did while working at ODWC. Some of this research indicates that Oklahoma has one of the fastest growing populations of smallmouth bass in the United States.

Our trip was in early spring, and the water temperature was still quite cold. The weather hadn't yet to made up its mind, and there was a chance of rain. But not a big enough chance for us to cancel the float. We loaded up the canoes, grabbed our fishing rods, and hit the water.

The float started slowly with only one or two fish in the first few



DARRIN HILL/ODWC



DARRIN HILL/ODWC

hours, but hopes remained high. My first fish of the day was in the slow water on the back side of a stump. It was about a pound-and-a-half smallmouth, caught using an ultra-light rod with a Ned rig attached. I enjoy catching bass on smaller rods because it makes the fight feel much harder, even on a smaller fish like this one.

Not long after that, Rodger caught a nice longnose gar on a jerkbait, of all lures.


A few hours into the trip, it started to rain quite a bit, and Rodger caught a 19-inch smallmouth hanging out in the current behind a large sunken tree.

With the rain and driving wind, the videographers' canoe hit a log and rolled. But let's be honest; no float trip is ever complete without tipping a canoe. Still, the float trip must go on.

We battled the rain and wind to make it to lunchtime. I had caught one smallmouth to Tony's four, so I was getting a lit-



TUNE IN

Watch Jacob Tison and Tony Rodger float the Illinois River and catch some smallies on Outdoor Oklahoma TV! Just scan the QR code. 





DARRIN HILL/DOWC

Tony Rodger



DARRIN HILL/DOWC

Jacob Tison

tle discouraged. Finally, the rain and wind died down, and we stopped along a gravel bar for a while to dry out and have some lunch. This had to be one of the most beautiful lunch locations I've ever been!

After lunch, we decided to make a few casts into a deep pool that was next to our lunch spot, and Rodger hooked into a giant. This fish had been eating well and ended up being 20.25 inches.

Once we started floating again, I spotted a sizable boulder under the surface. In the back of my mind, I knew there had to be a fish using that rock. I gave a cast about 5 feet behind the boulder and slowly drug my swimbait through the slow water behind it. Before I knew it, a decent largemouth devoured my bait.

As we continued our float, Rodger continued to get into some beautiful fish. Using his swimbait in a deeper pool of water, he connected with a beautiful 20-inch smallmouth. A little while later, I caught a nice spotted bass. This was super cool because it meant that on this one float, I had caught Oklahoma's three main bass species: largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass.

We continued down the river, approaching the last large bend and the final stretch. I noticed some boulders creating a large pool, so I made a final cast in hopes of landing that trophy smallmouth I was looking for.

I let my swimbait fly to the back of the pool and began to slowly work it toward me when suddenly a huge fish took my bait. In my mind, I knew this was the fish I was looking for. I asked Rodger to grab the net as I began to haul in the biggest smallmouth I've ever had on the end of my line.

With a bit of teamwork, we got the fish in the canoe. This smallmouth measured 20.5 inches and we estimated its weight at

around four and a half pounds, which set a new personal best for me. What a way to end an awesome fishing float trip!

The Illinois had given us more than a float. It delivered everything it promised: scenic beauty, a variety of fish species, trophy smallmouth, a personal best, and a day with friends that reminded us why adventures like these keep calling us back into Outdoor Oklahoma. 

—By **Jacob Tison**, Communication and Education Specialist



DARRIN HILL/DOWC

CHECK OUT ODWC'S "HIDDEN GEMS" OF FISHING

Oklahoma offers some of the best fishing opportunities anywhere. The state is known for its huge reservoirs, but did you know the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) actually owns and manages its very own assortment of smaller fishing lakes?

ODWC owns and manages 17 lakes across the state specifically for public fishing and recreation. These waters are maintained to ensure healthy fish populations and quality fishing experiences for anglers of all ages and skill levels.

In the 1950s and '60s, ODWC began building Department fishing lakes. They were designed to be smaller and easier to fish from the bank. The program grew steadily over the years.

Most Department-owned lakes offer various conveniences:


- Fishing piers and docks: Many lakes have ADA-accessible docks, making it easy for everyone to reach the water.
- Fish attractors: ODWC sinks brush piles or spider blocks underwater. These act like underwater playgrounds where fish love to hide.
- Boat ramps: If you have a small boat or a kayak, most lakes have a ramp to get you in the water.
- Picnic and camping areas.

ODWC regularly stocks these lakes with channel catfish, sunfish and largemouth bass to make sure there are plenty of chances to catch fish.

Access to these lakes is easy, but here are some things to remember:

- Fishing licenses: Almost everyone age 19 and older needs an Oklahoma fishing license. You can carry a paper copy or use the Go Outdoors Oklahoma app on your mobile phone.
- New for 2026: If you are visiting from out of state (a nonresident), you are required to "check in" and "check out" using the mobile app when you visit Department-managed areas.
- Foot traffic: Some areas around the lakes are "walk-in only" to protect the habitat, so be prepared for a little hike to find that perfect fishing hole.

All anglers must follow state fishing regulations, but special rules may apply to certain waters. Anglers are urged to check the Oklahoma Fishing and Hunting Regulations and special area rules before they visit.

Fishing at ODWC-managed lakes is not only recreational, it also helps support wildlife conservation. License fees and other contributions fund the management and protection of Oklahoma's natural resources, ensuring these lakes and other habitats across the state remain healthy and accessible for future generations. 



Lake Name	County	Year Built / Opened
Lake Hall	Harmon	1954
Lake Burtschi	Grady	1954
Lake Dahlgren	Cleveland	1955
Lake Watonga	Blaine	1955
Lake Nanih Waiya	Pushmataha	1958
Lake Ozzie Cobb	Pushmataha	1958
Lake Elmer	Kingfisher	1962
Lake Vincent	Ellis	1962
Lake Carl Etling	Cimarron	1964
Lake Raymond Gary	Choctaw	1964
Lake Schooler	Choctaw	1964
Lake American Horse	Blaine	1966
Lake Wayne Wallace	Latimer	1969
Lake Vanderwork	Washita	1970
Lake Jap Beaver	Jefferson	1971
Lake Evans Chambers	Beaver	1972
Lake Doc Hollis	Harmon	1997



An angler enjoys a peaceful visit to Lake Schooler in Choctaw County, one of 17 smaller fishing lakes owned by the Wildlife Department.

KELLY ADAMS/ODWC

NOT MUCH TIME? GO FISHING "CLOSE TO HOME"



Look nearby for some fishing fun at a "Close to Home" Fishing location.

"CLOSE TO HOME"
FISHING PUTS THE
FISH MUCH CLOSER TO
YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

Have you ever wanted to go fishing but didn't want to drive for hours to find a big lake? In many locations across Oklahoma, you don't have to! A program called "Close to Home" Fishing (CTH) puts the fish much closer to your neighborhood.

CTH is a team effort between the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and local cities and towns. They work together to turn small ponds and city lakes into great fishing spots. These spots are perfect for people who only have an hour or two to spare.

You don't need a boat or fancy gear to have a good time. The state also makes sure these ponds are well cared for so they stay clean and safe for everyone.

The program started in the late 1980s to increase public access to fishing. CTH is designed for all ages, from toddlers catching their first fish to grandparents who have been fishing for years.

Here are the CTH locations organized by regions:

CENTRAL REGION

- **Oklahoma City:** Crystal Lake, Dolese Youth Park Pond, Edwards Park Fishing Lake, Kids Lake, Kitchen Lake, Route 66 Park Ponds, South Lakes Park Ponds and Zoo Lake (east shoreline only).
- **Edmond:** Mitch Park and Bickham-Rudkin Park.
- **Norman:** George M. Sutton Urban Wilderness Area, Northeast Lions Park and Griffin Community Park.
- **Moore:** Little River Park and Buck Thomas Park Pond.
- **Midwest City/Del City/Choctaw:** Eagle

Lake (Del City), Choctaw Creek Park and Ten Acre Park.

- **Guthrie:** Mineral Wells Park and Hudson Pond in Highland Park.
- **Yukon:** Mulvey Pond, Welch Park and Dale Robertson Activity Center Pond.
- **Mustang:** Wild Horse Park Pond.
- **Newcastle:** Veterans Park Pond.
- **Blanchard:** Crystal Lake Park.
- **Jones:** Beaty-Mulhausen Park.
- **Harrah:** Heritage Park.

NORTHEAST REGION

- **Tulsa:** Turkey Mountain Urban Wilderness Area ponds, Hunter Park Pond, Braden Park Pond and Mohawk Park Ponds (2).
- **Jenks:** Veterans Park Pond.
- **Bartlesville:** Lee Lake.
- **Sapulpa:** Kelly Lane Park.

NORTHWEST REGION

- **Enid:** Meadowlake Park, Government Springs North Park, Crosslin Park, and City of Enid Water Works.
- **El Reno:** Legion Park, Southern Hills North and Southern Hills South.

SOUTHWEST REGION

- **Lawton:** Elmer Thomas Park (Lake Helen), Liberty Lake, and Skyline Pond.
- **Medicine Park:** Medicine Creek (from Gondola Dam to the State Highway 49 bridge).

Here are some things to keep in mind about CTH locations:

- **Check locally:** While a state fishing license is required unless you are exempt, many of these cities also require a local city fishing permit.
- **Pole limits:** Most "Close to Home" locations have a one-pole limit to keep the fishing fair for everyone.
- **Catch limits:** Largemouth and smallmouth bass are often catch-and-release only at these sites, while there is typically a combined limit of three for sunfish, trout and channel catfish.

The next time you have a free afternoon, why not check out a nearby CTH location? You might just land a big one right near your own backyard. 🍷



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HIDDEN COST OF A HOOKSET: RESEARCHING STATE'S TROUT STREAMS, ANGLERS

The Lower Mountain Fork River (LMFR) is a liquid contradiction. Tucked into the lush, pine-laden landscape of McCurtain County, it is a cold-water oasis in a state known for red dirt and blistering summers. For the thousands of anglers who descend upon its banks each year, it is a slice of fly-fishing paradise. But for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) and researchers at Oklahoma State University (OSU), it is the subject of a high-stakes puzzle: how do you manage a world-class fish-



The Lower Mountain Fork River attracts anglers from across the nation, especially the heavy metro areas of Texas and Oklahoma, as shown by the red dots on the map.

ery when each stocked fish can potentially cost the state more than a gallon of gas?

As the sun rises over the mist-covered waters of Beaver's Bend, Drew Dunlap watches the river with more than just an angler's eye. A lifelong trout fisherman and an OSU Master's student, Dunlap has spent the last year and a half spearheading a major research project aimed at understanding the heartbeat of this river. The goal? A comprehensive creel survey — the first of its kind on the LMFR since 1996 — designed to determine if the state's current stocking strategies are actually hitting the mark.

THE ECONOMICS OF THE CAST

To better understand why this study matters, consider the math. In the United States, rainbow trout are the fifth most popular gamefish. In 2006, nearly 79 million were stocked nationwide. In Oklahoma, the LMFR is the crown jewel, but it is a jewel with a hefty price tag.

Since 2004, the cost of stocking catchable-size rainbow trout has skyrocketed by 130%. Today, ODWC pays about \$7 on average for each trout that it must buy to put into the water. When you are stocking thousands of fish monthly, the bill adds up fast. "If you are spending the money to stock, you want those fish caught," Dunlap said.

The study, a collaborative effort involving USGS researchers at the Oklahoma Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, ODWC and OSU, is titled *Evaluating Socioeconomic Responses by Anglers to Alternative Stocking Strategies for Maintaining Trout Fishing at the Lower Mountain Fork River*. The research team is looking at more than just biology; they are also considering the \$25 million economic impact that fishing brings to southeastern Oklahoma.

A TOURIST JUGGERNAUT

The research team recently wrapped up a grueling 14-month survey period, concluding at the end of August 2025. The sheer scale of the data is staggering. They conducted about 2,600 angler interviews, including nearly 200 repeat surveys.

While the river runs through the heart of McCurtain County, only 2% of surveyed anglers were local residents. The vast majority, over 75%, traveled from out of state, primarily from the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and beyond.

"It is a very tourist-driven fishery," Dunlap said. "The river gets pounded with usage."

Interestingly, for many, the LMFR is an entry point into the sport. A majority of those surveyed were first-time trout anglers. This high-volume, high-turnover crowd brings significant money to the

region. Using the travel-cost method, researchers estimate the average angler spends roughly \$178 per trip just to get to the river.

THE PARADOX OF MORE

One of the most surprising revelations from the study involves the relationship between the number of fish stocked and the number of fish caught. Common sense suggests that more fish in the water equals more fish on the hook. The data, however, say otherwise.

Statistical analyses finalized in December showed that "utilization" (the percentage of stocked fish caught by anglers) was highly variable and often counter-intuitive.

Season/Month	Fish Stocked	Utilization (Catch Rate)
January	14,698 (Highest)	53% (Lowest)
Spring (Apr–Jun)	3,907 (Lowest)	256% (Highest)

How can a catch rate be 256%? This occurs when the same fish is caught and released multiple times. In spring, when stocking numbers were at their lowest, the fish were being "recycled" by eager anglers at an incredible rate. Conversely, in January, when the river received nearly 15,000 trout, the catch rate plummeted.

Based on those findings, the stocking of more fish does not necessarily increase catch or harvest. In fact, during the high-stocking months of early winter, the harvest rate (fish kept by anglers) averaged only 16%.



ODWC hatchery-raised rainbow trout fry.

WILD OR HATCHED?

A critical part of the survey was asking anglers what they actually value. The LMFR is unique; it is a year-round trout fishery in Oklahoma with the potential to support a wild, self-sustaining population. OSU is currently awaiting genetic data to determine whether the rainbow trout represent a wild, self-reproducing strain.

When researchers informed anglers that wild trout were present, 45% reported an increased interest in fishing the river. However, the pull of the hatchery is still strong: 75% reported increased interest when told the river was stocked with "catchable-size" hatchery fish.

But the data revealed a deep divide in the angling community:

- Casual non-fly anglers were more likely to prefer hatchery-stocked fish and were significantly more likely to harvest (keep) their catch.
- Avid fly anglers fished about four times more frequently than non-fly anglers. This group, along with frequent visitors, was significantly more likely to express a preference for "stream-raised" or wild trout.
- Harvest rates have plummeted compared to surveys from the late '80s and early '90s, likely due to the growing "catch and release" practice. Today's angler is less interested in filling a cooler and more interested in the experience and the catch rate itself.

Fly anglers also showed a higher willingness to contribute funding, suggesting that even if trip costs increased or stocking strategies shifted, the most dedicated fishermen would still find their way to the Mountain Fork.

HOPE IN THE FIN-CLIP

While the cost of stocking large fish is a burden, ODWC has been experimenting with a middle ground. The Department recently stocked 40,000 hatchery-raised trout fingerlings, juvenile fish that are much cheaper to produce. By clipping the adipose fin of these small trout, researchers have been able to track their survival.

Early findings indicate that some of these fingerlings are surviving into catchable size, effectively "growing up" in the river. This hybrid approach of letting smaller, cheaper fish become "wild-ish" could be the key to maintaining high catch rates while slashing the trout stocking bill.

A TALE OF TWO RIVERS: THE LOWER ILLINOIS

The Mountain Fork isn't the only river under the microscope. A sister study is examining the Lower Illinois River, where researchers like Will Sims are tracking the efficacy of stockings following major dam repairs at Tenkiller.




Angler Zack Johnson shows off a decent rainbow trout he caught at the Lower Mountain Fork River.

The Illinois has seen a surge in participation since hydropower generation resumed. To date, researchers have tagged thousands of fish, seeing 50 tags returned by anglers within just 10 days of stocking. These parallel studies will eventually provide ODWC with a comprehensive map for trout management state-wide, ensuring that each river is managed according to its unique water quality and angler demographics.

THE FINAL CAST

As the LMFR study enters its wrap-up stages, the team is deep in data analysis. While field observations confirmed that angling effort and catch rates dip significantly during the sweltering Oklahoma summers, the final report will provide data to drive the state's trout fisheries management.

The goal isn't just to save money; it's also ensure the long-term viability of the fishery. Once the LMFR creel report is finalized, it will be posted to the ODWC website after publication as a full article.

Meanwhile, the water continues to flow, the data continue to crunch, and the fish are still biting. The future of the Lower Mountain Fork may look a little more "wild" in the years to come, but the misty mornings and the thrill of the hookset remain to be enjoyed in southeastern Oklahoma. 



Anglers at the Lower Mountain Fork River are beginning to catch ODWC hatchery-raised rainbow trout, which can be identified by a clipped adipose fin.

(The LMFR study was funded by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through Wildlife Restoration Grant F23AF02793. The LIR study was funded by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through Wildlife Restoration Grant F23AF02790. Contributing: James M. Long, Unit Leader and Adjunct Professor, Oklahoma Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Oklahoma State University, writing in Wildlife Management Institute's Outdoor News Bulletin.)

ARP: NEW WAY TO CELEBRATE BIG CATCH COMING SOON



Challenge coin front (final design may differ).



Challenge coin back (final design may differ).

Oklahoma anglers, it's time to double-check your measuring tapes and keep your cameras ready. A brand-new era of angler recognition is about to cast off!

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation is gearing up to launch the **Oklahoma Angler Recognition Program (ARP)**, a fresh way to honor anglers who land exceptional fish in Sooner State waters.


Tentatively scheduled to launch in mid-March, the program is designed for everyone. Whether you are a lifelong resident or a visitor enjoying our world-class fisheries, your next trophy fish could earn you more than just bragging rights.

"I'm genuinely excited to provide Oklahoma anglers with an opportunity to make their time on the water even more meaningful," said Program Coordinator and Fisheries Biologist Jon West. "I want to offer something tangible that fosters community, celebrates achievement, and lets folks know that ODWC is committed to enhancing their fishing experience."

The program features two tiers of prestige:

- **Trophy Angler Award:** Catch a fish that meets or exceeds the minimum length for its species as listed in the program's rules. Eligible catches will include bass, catfish, crappie, sunfish, and several other species. Winners receive a digital certificate and a spot on the official ODWC website.
- **Master Angler Award:** If you land five or more qualifying Trophy Angler fish, you can apply for Master status. Along with a certificate, you'll receive a challenge coin unique to the program.

To qualify, fish must be legally caught in Oklahoma waters on hook and line (including trotlines and juglines) and measured on a flat surface from nose to the end of the pressed tail. Applications will require a clear photo of the fish against a measuring device and must be submitted within 30 days of the catch.

We are putting the finishing touches on the digital submission portal and the final species length tables. This program is coming soon, so be sure to keep a close eye on the ODWC website for the official launch date and full details. 

Conservation

for Kids!

Fun Outdoors!

It's easy and fun to take a bird census in your own backyard! Sit outside with binoculars, a notepad, and a bird identification guide. Then just watch. Whenever you see a bird, use the guide to make a positive species ID, then log your sighting on the notepad. Set a time limit, then count the number of different bird species you've spotted!

Hunting Tip

Make a note to apply for controlled hunt drawings when the application period opens April 1. There are youth hunt categories for turkey and deer. But youths may also apply for the regular deer and turkey hunts, along with elk and pronghorn. With a lucky draw, you might be all set up for next year's hunt!

Fishing Tip

When you see the redbud trees begin to bloom, then you know it's a great time to go fishing – especially for white bass. Find a place where you have permission to fish along a wide creek or small river. This time of spring is when the white bass will swim upstream into the smaller creeks and streams in order to spawn. And when you find them, you'll be in for some fast fishing action!

Word Search: Gear Up for Fishing

I	U	W	A	K	C	O	L	C	P	H	P	A	U	W	W
M	P	C	K	M	A	C	I	S	N	U	K	D	Q	O	I
K	K	F	Y	C	S	H	T	M	E	Q	N	W	N	B	M
M	S	M	K	R	W	R	V	Z	B	Y	E	N	R	M	V
Y	Q	I	V	A	I	L	E	Z	R	O	I	H	R	S	M
U	C	N	T	N	J	W	B	D	E	M	B	O	M	A	B
U	E	F	G	K	Z	L	A	Y	K	Y	W	B	O	A	T
Q	A	E	R	B	W	Z	C	U	N	C	T	J	E	X	X
K	R	Y	S	A	U	X	D	V	I	M	A	F	M	R	Z
T	W	P	V	I	D	D	E	T	S	A	C	J	D	O	H
U	S	L	R	T	T	Q	S	Z	X	H	K	T	L	U	W
M	O	Y	V	H	Z	A	J	C	P	P	L	Q	A	C	B
I	V	P	R	E	L	U	R	P	J	B	E	P	G	S	C
S	U	U	Z	P	Z	W	U	V	B	K	B	D	F	E	O
J	K	B	J	J	Z	L	E	E	R	R	O	D	P	U	W
G	P	T	S	E	H	C	E	C	I	K	X	Z	M	I	H

Find and circle these words that name various things you might use while fishing.

CRANKBAIT

PLASTIC WORM

TACKLE BOX

REEL

ROD

BOAT

SINKER

BOBBER

MINNOW

STRINGER

ICE CHEST

RULER

COOL FACTS About White Bass:

- White bass (*Morone chrysops*), often called “sand bass,” is the official state fish of Oklahoma.
- Unlike largemouth or smallmouth bass (which are sunfish), white bass are “true” temperate bass, making them close relatives of striped bass and yellow bass.
- White bass are migratory open-water fish that travel in large schools.
- A single female can produce up to a million eggs in a season.



NICK LOVELAND/NATURALIST.COM/CCO

- They reach sexual maturity in 2-3 years and live an average of 4-5 years.
- The rod-and-line record for white bass in Oklahoma is 5 pounds 1 ounce, set in 1976 on the Verdigris River by R.R. Karch.
- There is no daily harvest limit and no size limit for white bass in most Oklahoma waters.
- When water temperature reaches 50-60 degrees F (often when redbud trees bloom), white bass begin a “spawning run” in large numbers from reservoirs into inflowing creeks and rivers.
- Anglers harvest an estimated 1.5 million pounds of white bass from Oklahoma waters annually.
- They have an arched back and a single tongue patch. (Striped bass and hybrids have two patches).



Color a Critter: White Bass



MINNESOTA DNR



TINY CREATURES CAN TRIGGER BIG PROBLEMS

OKLAHOMA'S TICKS CAN CARRY SERIOUS DISEASES

BY DON P. BROWN, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION SPECIALIST

Most Oklahomans have had this experience: You've just arrived back home from a great time spent outdoors hiking or camping, fishing or hunting, and you discover a small bug attached to your skin? If so, you've more than likely met one of the state's most unwelcome residents: the tick.

These little bugs might seem harmless, but they can cause some serious health problems. Let's explore what makes ticks so important to understand and how you can stay safe.

Ticks and Their Life Cycle

Ticks aren't insects. They're actually more closely related to spiders! Like spiders, adult ticks and nymphs (young ticks) have eight legs, though the tiniest baby ticks, called larvae, have only six. Ticks don't have a distinct head or body segments like insects do. Instead, they have mouthparts that stick out from their body, which they use to attach to animals and people.

Ticks go through four life stages: egg, larva, nymph, and adult. The larvae are so small they're called "seed ticks" because they're tinier than a pinhead. As they grow, they get bigger, and an adult female tick that's full of blood can swell to the size of a large olive!

Here's something amazing and a little creepy: some ticks can survive for years without eating. They're incredibly tough, with a hard outer shell that protects them from

harsh weather. Most of their life is spent waiting in grass or leaves for an animal or person to walk by.

Oklahoma is home to several types of ticks, but three are especially important because they can spread diseases to humans: The American dog tick, the lone star tick, and the black-legged tick.

Tick-Borne Diseases in Oklahoma

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is Oklahoma's biggest tick threat. Despite its name, Rocky Mountain spotted fever is now most common in southern states, and Oklahoma consistently ranks among the top states for reported cases. This serious disease is caused by bacteria that the American dog tick carries.

The good news: Experts say only a tiny percentage of ticks (less than 1 in 1,000) actually carry the disease. The bacteria usually can't be transmitted until a tick has been attached and feeding for many hours, possibly 24 hours or more. That's why checking yourself for ticks regularly is very important.

Symptoms of RMSF typically appear three to 14 days after a tick bite. They include sudden fever, chills, muscle aches and severe headaches. About half of patients develop a distinctive spotted rash on their hands and feet within two to three days of the fever starting. The rash may spread to other parts of the body.

The disease mainly affects eastern Oklahoma, where American dog ticks are most common, and most cases

happen between April and September (peak tick season). Two-thirds of all RMSF cases occur in children younger than 15. If caught early, RMSF can be effectively treated with antibiotics and patients usually recover completely. But if left untreated, it can be deadly in up to 20% of cases. That's why it's crucial to see a doctor quickly if you develop symptoms after a tick bite.

Ehrlichiosis is another disease spread by lone star ticks. It's probably as common as RMSF in Oklahoma. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, muscle and joint pain, loss of appetite, and sometimes nausea. Unlike some tick diseases, ehrlichiosis rarely causes a rash. This disease responds well to antibiotic treatment when caught early.

Lyme disease gets a lot of attention in the news, but it's actually quite rare in Oklahoma. The prevalence of the disease in Oklahoma is consistently near zero, according to the Oklahoma Health Department and the CDC. Only 19 cases have been reported here in the past 25 years.



Rocky Mountain spotted fever rash on the wrist and hand.

US CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL

AMERICAN DOG TICK



KARL KRÖGERER/NATURALIST CC-BY-NC4

This tick is colorful, with spots of white, gray, and silver mixed with brown and black. Despite its name, it doesn't just bite dogs. It's happy to feed on people too, especially in wooded areas. This tick is most active in spring and early summer and is the only tick in Oklahoma that spreads Rocky Mountain spotted fever.



LONE STAR TICK



KARL KRÖGERER/NATURALIST CC-BY-NC4

This tick isn't named for Texas. It gets its name from the large white spot on the female's back, which resembles a star. This is the tick you're most likely to encounter if you're hiking, camping, or playing in Oklahoma's forests. It's active from early spring through late fall and has longer mouthparts than other ticks. The lone star tick is responsible for spreading several diseases, including a strange condition that can make people allergic to red meat.



Why is Lyme disease rare here? It comes down to what the young ticks eat. In Oklahoma, black-legged tick larvae and nymphs prefer to feed on lizards rather than field mice, which are the main carriers of the Lyme disease bacteria in other states. Without mice in the picture, the disease cycle is broken.

However, Oklahoma does have a similar condition called **Southern Tick-associated Rash Illness (STARI)**, which is caused by lone star tick bites. STARI produces a red, expanding bull's-eye rash similar to Lyme disease, along with fatigue, fever, headache and muscle aches. Unlike Lyme disease, STARI doesn't lead to long-term joint, nerve or heart problems. Scientists still don't know exactly what causes STARI.

Heartland virus is a newly discovered disease. Scientists only identified it in 2012. It's transmitted by lone star ticks and causes flu-like symptoms similar to ehrlichiosis. What makes doctors suspicious of Heartland virus is when

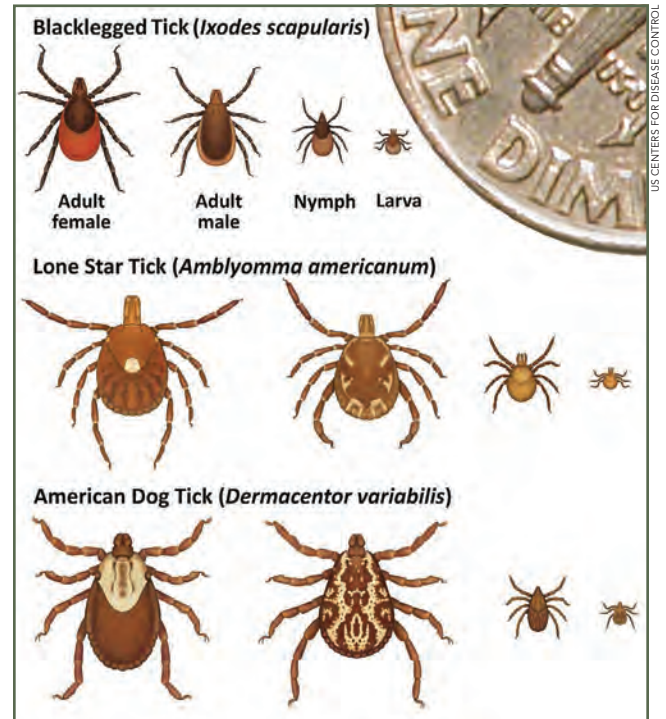
patients don't improve after a week of antibiotic treatment. As of 2014, only 10 cases had been identified in Missouri, Tennessee and Oklahoma, with two deaths. Because this virus was discovered so recently, scientists are still learning about it.

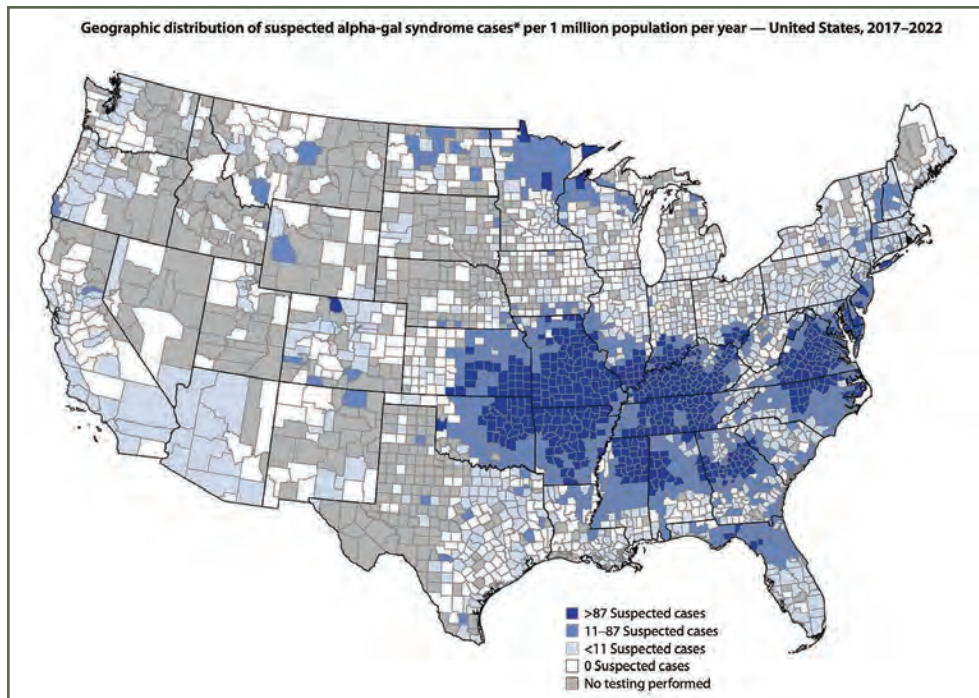
Tularemia, sometimes called rabbit fever, can be spread by tick bites or by handling infected rabbits. It causes severe flu-like illness with fever that can come and go over

BLACK-LEGGED TICK



Sometimes called a deer tick, this one is plain-looking without colorful markings. It's most active in late fall, winter, and early spring. While this tick can carry Lyme disease and does in other parts of the country, Lyme disease is rare in Oklahoma because the young ticks here feed on lizards and snakes instead of mice that carry the disease-causing bacteria.



two weeks, along with swollen lymph nodes. Cases are sporadic in Oklahoma, with most occurring in the eastern part of the state.

The Red Meat Allergy Mystery

One of the strangest tick-related problems is called alpha-gal syndrome, or AGS. This condition is triggered by the bite of the lone star tick and can make people severely allergic to red meat from mammals like beef, pork, and lamb.

Imagine suddenly being unable to eat a hamburger, bacon, or steak without getting sick! People with AGS can have serious allergic reactions hours after eating red meat, including hives, stomach problems, and even life-threatening breathing difficulties. But people with AGS can still eat chicken, turkey, fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables, and grains.

Oklahoma (especially the northeastern and central parts of the state) has some of the highest rates of alpha-gal syndrome in the country. More than 90,000 suspected cases were identified across the United States between 2017-21, and the numbers keep growing each year. Scientists don't fully understand why lone star tick bites cause this allergy, and unfortunately, there's no cure yet. The only treatment is avoiding red meat.

Protecting Yourself from Ticks

The best defense against tick-borne diseases is preventing tick bites in the first place. Before you go outside, wear light-colored clothing so ticks are easy to spot. Tuck your pants into your socks or boots. Use insect repellent containing DEET (20-40% concentration works best) on your skin. You can also spray permethrin insecticide on your clothes (but never directly on skin). It stays effective through three at-home washings. Stay on cleared trails and avoid tall grass, bushes and areas with a lot of leaves on the ground.

Check yourself for ticks every 2-3 hours when outside. Pay special attention to your hairline, behind your ears, your waistline, and anywhere clothing fits tightly. Remember: crawling ticks that haven't attached yet cannot transmit disease.

When you get home, do a full body tick check, including your hair. Check your pets, too, because they can bring ticks inside. Throw your clothes in the dryer on high heat for 10 minutes to kill any hidden ticks.

If you find an attached tick, don't panic. Use tweezers to grab the tick as close to your skin as possible. Pull straight out with slow, steady pressure but don't twist. Don't use matches, alcohol, or petroleum jelly; these old folk remedies don't work and can be dangerous. Save the tick in a plastic bag in your freezer, and write down the date you removed it. Watch for any symptoms over the next two weeks. If you develop fever, rash or feel sick, see a doctor immediately and take the tick with you for identification.

Don't panic if the tick's mouthparts stay in your skin. Your body will heal the wound naturally. The important thing is getting the tick's body off so it stops releasing any disease-causing bacteria.

Stay Safe and Enjoy the Outdoors

Ticks are a fact of life in Oklahoma, especially in the eastern part of the state. But understanding these tiny creatures and taking simple precautions can help keep you safe. Remember that most ticks don't carry disease, and even disease-carrying ticks usually need to feed for many hours before they can make you sick.

Stay Safe and Enjoy the Outdoors

Don't let fear of ticks keep you from enjoying the beauty of Outdoor Oklahoma! Just be tick-smart when in the field or forest, and check for hitchhikers when you come back in. Most importantly, see a doctor right away if you get sick after a tick bite. 🛡️

This article is based on information from the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

GAME WARDEN'S TICK-BORNE DISEASE NEARLY FATAL

BY DON P. BROWN, COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SPECIALIST

For Capt. Marni Loftis, the Law Division's operations manager with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, the outdoors wasn't just an office — it was just like home. Growing up, ticks were simply a part of the landscape, a minor nuisance that never warranted much of her concern. That changed on a single afternoon in 2008 when she responded to a nuisance bear report at Grand Lake.

At the time, black bears were a rarity in northeastern Oklahoma. When a small bear wandered into a wooded area between residential streets near the lake, it drew a crowd of curious people. As the only game warden on the scene, Loftis spent hours traipsing through the brush, focused on keeping the public safe from the bear.

"When I got home, I was covered with ticks," she said. She pulled them off and moved on, unaware that her life was about to shift.

A month later, the "nuisance" began to manifest as a medical mystery. At just 30 years old, Loftis noticed her joints tightening and her body swelling. She dismissed it as water weight, ignoring the low-grade fever that made her feel constantly overheated.

The breaking point came on her own front porch. Her vision began to spin, and she collapsed to the ground, unable to stand. Embarrassed but desperate, she dialed 911. The dispatcher's first question was a premonition: "Have you been bitten by a tick?"

Loftis was hospitalized and diagnosed with ehrlichiosis, commonly known as tick fever. Despite aggressive antibiotics and a consultation with a specialist in Tulsa, her health continued to decline for the next four years. "That doctor said if I could stand, I was OK," she said, but the reality wasn't like that. She eventually required a PICC line to pump antibiotics into her body, was forced off work for a



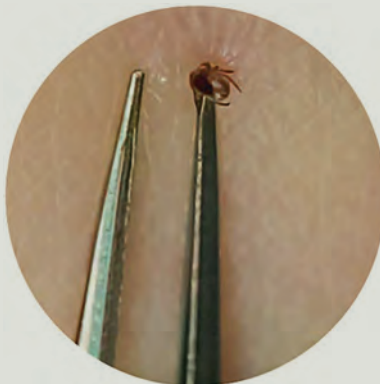
Game Warden Capt. Marni Loftis, right, oversees training of game warden recruits for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Early in her career, Loftis was infected with several tick-borne diseases, which she struggled for years to overcome.

TICK REMOVAL INSTRUCTIONS

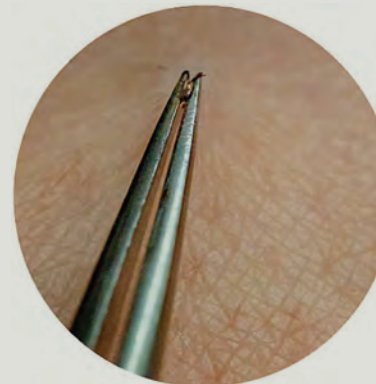
1. Use fine-tipped tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin's surface as possible. The key is to remove the tick as soon as possible. Avoid using nail polish, petroleum jelly, or heat to make the tick detach from the skin.
2. Pull upward with steady, even pressure. Don't twist or jerk the tick; this can cause the mouth parts to break off and remain in the skin. If you are unable to remove the mouth parts easily, leave them alone and let the skin heal.
3. After removing the tick, thoroughly clean the bite area and your hands with rubbing alcohol, an iodine scrub, or soap and water.



EMBEDDED TICK



TICK REMOVAL, STEP 1



TICK REMOVAL, STEP 2

MIKE WREN, NY STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

MIKE WREN, NY STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

year, and — at her lowest point — lost the ability to speak.

It wasn't until she sought an out-of-state specialist that the full picture emerged: She had Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. The infection had become so severe that the nerves in her brain had begun to demyelinate.

Her painful and trying path might have been shortened had the state of medical knowledge about tick-borne diseases been more advanced. Many doctors, then and now, don't have a great understanding about the tick vectors that can spread various diseases all across the country.

"I got a dose of junk, obviously (from one of those ticks)" Loftis said. Now she uses her experience to bridge the knowledge gap for other outdoor enthusiasts.

Based on her years of recovery and research, Loftis offers these essential tips for staying safe:

Prevention is the Best Medicine

- **Permethrin is king:** "I wear OFF! like perfume," she joked, but noted that while DEET repels, it doesn't kill. Permethrin is the superior choice; it kills ticks on contact and can last on clothing through several washings.
- **Professional treatment:** Consider having your outdoor gear professionally treated for long-lasting protection.

Proper Tick Removal

Most people become infected with diseases because they remove ticks incorrectly. "Ticks are like a syringe," Loftis said. "If you squeeze the body, you force them to

regurgitate their stomach contents into your blood."

- **The Technique:** Use the pointiest tweezers available. Reach under the body, grasp the tick right at the head, and pull up gently.
- **The Success Rate:** Nine out of ten ticks will release cleanly using this method.
- **Seed Ticks:** For tiny seed ticks, duct tape is an effective tool for removal.

Know the Risks

- **Regional hotspots:** Eastern Oklahoma is a known hotspot for tick-borne illnesses.
- **Species matter:** Different ticks carry different threats. Deer ticks (black-legged ticks) are the primary vectors for Lyme disease, while the Lone Star tick can carry alpha-gal syndrome (a red meat allergy).

Despite her harrowing journey, Loftis' message isn't one of fear. After a local newspaper told her story, she was flooded with calls from others suffering in silence, and she realized then how common these struggles are.

"For people who love the outdoors, don't be afraid of ticks," she said. They are a manageable risk. Her advice is simple: If your health declines after a bite, find a "tick-educated" doctor and join an online support group. With the right preventive actions and prompt, correct removal of ticks, the outdoors remains a place to be enjoyed, not feared. 🛡️

WANT A GREAT HUNTING PARTNER?

START NOW WITH PUPPY SCHOOL



Ask hunters why they take to the woods or marshes, and the answers will be as varied as the seasons. For many, the "why" of hunting is a persistent pull that lies just beyond the reach of a simple explanation. It is an activity that they say is inherently good for the soul.

Yet, if that same question is posed to a hunter who has raised a canine partner, the hesitation vanishes. The answer is almost always the same: "I love to see my dog work."

More Than a Tool

Most hunters initially enter the world of dog ownership for practical reasons. In many disciplines, a dog is not just an asset but an absolute essential. Consider quail hunting. While it is possible to jump-shoot quail, the pace is often too slow for finding birds and too fast when the flush finally happens.

A quail hunter either secures a dog or finds a friend who owns one. Similarly, raccoon hunting without hounds is often a futile exercise, akin to chasing shadows in the dark.

In other arenas, a dog may not be a strict necessity but having one offers a massive advantage. A sturdy retriever saves a hunter from sloshing through icy marshes for a downed mallard or beating through chigger-infested brush for a lost dove.

More importantly, a dog ensures fewer crippled birds are lost, putting more game on the table and honoring the animal's harvest.

However, the owner soon discovers that a dog is far more than a living game finder. Unlike a set of decoys or a favorite shotgun, a dog is a companion in the field and at home. The canine becomes the focus of the hunt. The hunter's primary satisfaction shifts from the harvest itself to the joy of seeing the dog doing what it does best.

Choosing the Right Breed

Acquiring a hunting dog represents a significant commitment to a specific sport. Because hunting dogs are bred for specialized instincts, the choice must align with the hunter's preferred game. If the main interest is quail in open country, a wide-ranging pointer like an English setter is a logical choice. Conversely, in dense cover where a close-working partner is required, a Brittany or German short-haired pointer may be more effective.

While there is overlap between breeds, performance depends heavily on the individual dog and its training. Personal preference for certain temperaments plays a role, but the dog must be suited to the job. One should not expect a basset hound to retrieve a mallard from the center of a lake.

The Path to Training

Once a breed is selected, a hunter wanting a competent four-legged partner faces three paths: buying a fully trained adult; sending a pup to a professional; or training the dog personally.

Professional training is the most expensive route, but it will provide a finished product shaped by expertise. But most hunters choose the do-it-yourself method. This path offers the greatest sense of accomplishment when the dog finally performs as intended.

The training journey begins with proper housing. Many hunting dogs used to be kept in outside kennels, large enough for exercise and equipped with a concrete run for easy cleaning. Shade and a weatherproof doghouse are essentials.



BETSY YORK/ODWC



WADE FREL/ODWC



An older school of thought suggested that keeping a dog inside the home ruined its hunting drive. But many modern hunters say that allowing a dog into the home fosters a closer bond, which forms a solid foundation for serious field work.

A balance is probably best, as an outside kennel helps a dog build resistance to the elements it will



face during the hunting season. But in recent years, some states and cities (including Oklahoma City) have created ordinances requiring animals to be brought inside or provided with heating.

The law in Oklahoma City says dogs may not be left outside unattended for more than 30 minutes if the temperature is 32 degrees F or lower. An unheated doghouse is considered "outside" in the ordinance. In Tulsa, dogs must be moved to a temperature-controlled space when the temperature is 25 degrees F or below.

The Philosophy of Training

Successful training requires patience, persistence, and an understanding that training is not about creating something from nothing. Instead, it is a routine designed to bring out desirable instincts that the dog already possesses through its lineage.

A trainer does not try to make a pointer out of a Russian wolfhound; rather, they encourage the natural hunting drive the dog was born with.

It is much simpler to stop a dog from doing something unwanted than it is to instill an instinct that is missing. For instance, a young retriever may be so eager that it breaks for the water as soon as a shot is fired. This lack of steadiness can be corrected later. However, if the dog lacks the innate desire to find birds, the trainer faces a much deeper problem.

A novice trainer must avoid the temptation to expect too much too soon. Pushing a young dog too fast can cause it to "stale" and lose its enthusiasm. Training should be fun and appropriately paced for the dog's natural rate of development.

Discipline and Reward

The foundation of a successful hunting partnership is mutual understanding. A trainer must recognize a dog's specific abilities and short-



comings. This clarity only comes through close contact, including work, play and simple proximity.

Obedience is the responsibility of the trainer. A well-trained dog obeys its master, while an uncontrolled dog is a burden to the entire hunting party.

Expert hunting dog trainers hold varying views on punishment, generally divided between a "traditional/balanced" philosophy and a modern "force-free" approach.

Historically, hunting dog training often relied on firm discipline to ensure reliability in the field. Many veteran trainers endorse punishment only when a dog understands what is being expected and willfully defies a known command.

The modern e-collar is often viewed as a more humane replacement for older, harsher methods when it is used sparingly to provide guidance rather than pain.

A growing movement of hunting and gun dog trainers emphasizes that punishment can be counterproductive and damaging to the working relationship. Punishment can create fear, anxiety, and distrust, potentially leading to avoidance behaviors or aggression.

A common expert critique is that punishment only teaches a dog what not to do, whereas positive reinforcement proactively teaches the specific desired behavior.

Despite differences in philosophy, most experts agree on these points:

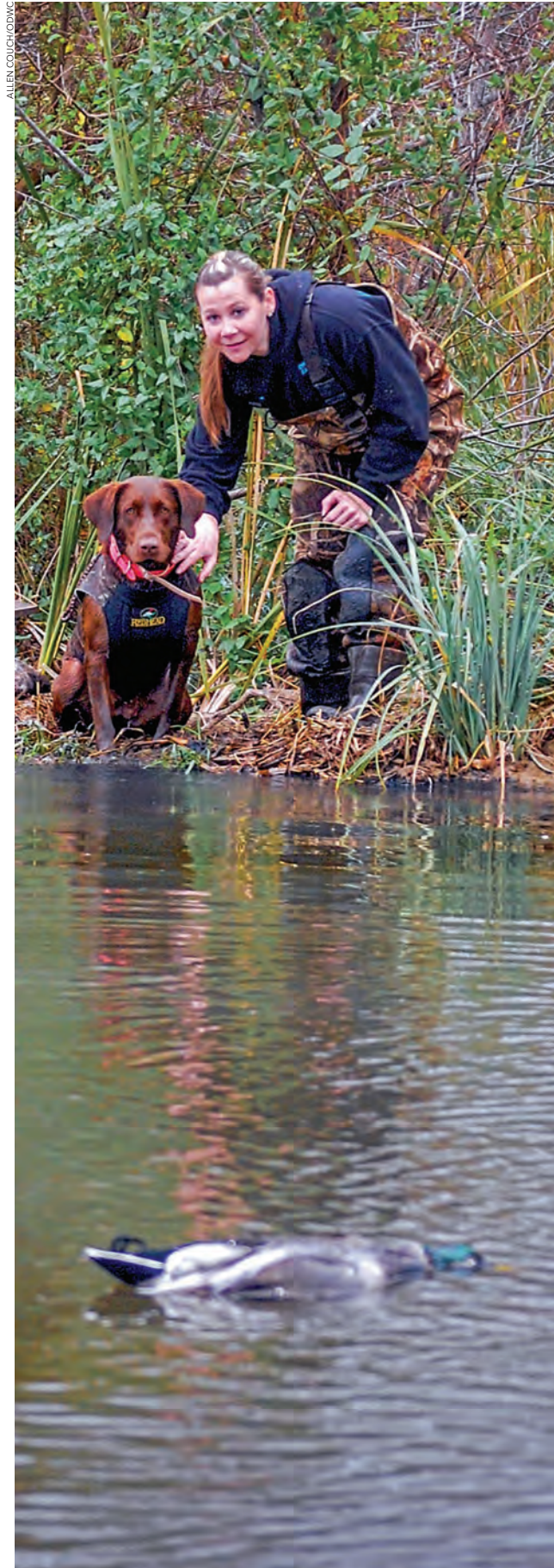
- Never punish in anger: Discipline delivered out of frustration is considered abusive and ineffective.
- No punishment for coming: Never punish a dog that has just returned to you, as they will associate the punishment with returning.
- Praise should be lavish: Reward-based encouragement should always outweigh corrections to keep the dog working cheerfully.

From the Yard to the Field

Repetition is the heartbeat of training. Only through doing the same thing over and over will a dog adopt consistent habits. To avoid boredom, drills should be kept short and varied. If training becomes drudgery, the dog will learn slowly, and the trainer will lose interest.

Once basic control is established, the best classroom is the field itself. Actual hunting experience is where disjointed exercises finally snap into place. The dog discovers that wild birds smell more enticing than pen-raised ones and that a real duck is far more exciting to retrieve than an artificial dummy. In these moments, the hours of effort fade away, and both the hunter and the dog realize exactly what they were meant to do together. 🍷

(This article is based on one that appeared in the March 1978 issue of Outdoor Oklahoma.)



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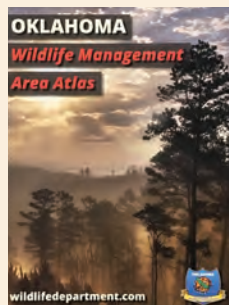
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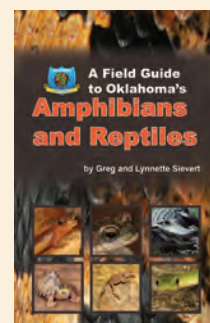
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MEXICAN FREE-TAILED BAT

BY BROOKLYN BLOOMFIELD, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION INTERN

Like most bats, the Mexican free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) is active at night and hunt insects using echolocation. Among bat species, it is considered medium-sized at about 4.5 ounces, and has dark brown or dark gray fur, rounded forward pointing ears, and long narrow wings that extend to about a foot in span.

This bat gets its name from its unusual tail. Most bats have tails that are completely enclosed by the tail membrane,

but the Mexican free-tailed bat's tail extends past the membrane and is exposed.

The Mexican free-tailed bat is among 24 species of bats found in Oklahoma. In 2006, it was approved as the official state flying mammal of Oklahoma. They spend the winter in Mexico and Central America but start migrating

north in February. Also known as Brazilian free-tailed bats, they can live up to 18 years.

In Oklahoma, these bats can be found in western regions near gypsum formations in caves, tunnels, mines and under bridges. They are considered species of greatest conservation need in the state.

They use specific sites to give birth and raise their pups; these are called maternity caves. These caves typically have high ceilings and large entrances, stay warm throughout the night, and are

near a water source. The water attracts insects such as moths, wasps and leaf beetles, which the Mexican free-tailed bat will eat. The water also gives the bats a source of drinking water that isn't too far away.

Only four Mexican free-tailed bat maternity caves are known to exist in Western Oklahoma. These caves can attract up to a half-million pregnant female bats. In late June, that number can reach up to 1 million, since each mother can give birth to one pup per year.

Just before dark, the female bats begin flying out of the cave to feed during the night. As they fly from about 15 feet up to 10,000 feet above the ground, they feed by swallowing insects in midair. The nightly exodus will often be captured on weather radar screens, looking like a large circle expanding for miles outward from a maternity cave site.

The mother bats leave the cave first and fly the farthest distance away to feed, leaving the areas closer to the cave for the young bats to use. The young bats are able to fly at about six weeks of age.

Mexican free-tailed bat colonies are among the largest gatherings of mammals in the world. It will take an hour or more for all the bats to exit the cave to feed.

Male bats form their own bachelor colonies during spring and summer, which are separate from the females and pups.

The free-tails will begin migrating south by the end of August.

Predators of the Mexican free-tailed bat include snakes, cats and owls. Some predators will occasionally gain access to the maternity cave and will prey on flightless pups that have taken a fall from the cave ceiling. ♡

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JUAN CRUZADO/CONTRASTO/GETTY IMAGES



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RANDY SANDER/READERS' PHOTO SHOWCASE 2019

Southeastern Oklahoma's Lower Mountain Fork River awakens on a misty morning, ready to deliver another amazing day of angling to visitors from throughout the nation. The Wildlife Department is wrapping up a three-year study of the river and those who enjoy it for trout fishing. Learn about some of the early findings inside this issue of Outdoor Oklahoma.

Outdoor Oklahoma

