

DEPARTMENTS

THE WINTER 2026 ISSUE



PHOTO COURTESY OF SIERRA NEVADA BREWING CO.

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THE SOUND

Todd Snider's final album arrived just weeks before the beloved Nashville folk troubadour died at 59, closing a storied career defined by witty storytelling, raw vulnerability and decades of influence on Americana music.

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WINTER GEAR GUIDE

Our Winter 2026 gear guide highlights a holiday-ready lineup of outdoor essentials—from alpine boots and waterproof speakers to camo boil stoves, saltwater wading shoes and rugged cold-weather layers—all designed to deliver comfort, durability and adventure all season long.

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RAISE A GLASS

This roundup of standout non-alcoholic ("NA") beers from Virginia and nearby breweries spotlights crisp, hoppy and refreshing options perfect for Dry January or holiday unwinding without the buzz.

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FROM THE FIELD

This Thanksgiving-season story follows a father, his two college-age sons and their Llewellyn Setter as a shared upland hunt becomes the start of a new family tradition—blending heritage, connection and the timeless magic of a good bird dog.

ON THE COVER

Featured on Our Winter 2026 cover is Madeleine Bunbury, captured mid-air as she and her horse sail over a jump—a moment that reflects both her athleticism in the saddle and her deep love of the equestrian world that inspires her paintings.

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DESTINATION

A long-awaited return to Belize leads artist-angler Alberto Rey through Mayan ruins, vibrant coastal communities and world-class flats where culture, conservation and the thrill of chasing tarpon, permit and bonefish converge in a deeply personal journey.



ALBERTO REY RELEASES A BONEFISH IN BELIZE. PHOTO BY ALBERTO REY

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WELL FED

Hank Shaw's slow-roast duck recipe revives an old-school, fat-rendering method that delivers crispy skin, rich flavor, and gravy-worthy drippings—perfect holiday comfort food for any fat, store-bought or well-marbled wild duck.

The Winter 2026 Issue

ESQUIRE ENTERTAINMENT STYLE LIFESTYLE SHOPPING NEWS & POLITICS

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The New Filson x Wrangler Collaboration Is Very, Very Good

West meets Northwest, and the result is a few incredible pieces of rugged menswear.

By Luke Gullory PUBLISHED: OCT 01, 2025 4:55 PM EDT

SAVE ARTICLE

This is something of a dream pairing for me. On this website, I've professed my love of both [Wrangler jeans](#) and [Filson jackets](#) and everything those two brands are built on. At the launch party for this collaboration, held at Filson's New York City flagship, I was the guy saying the store could "smell more authentic." (Too many Lone Stars, apologies.) I was the guy digging through the propped magazine racks to see how well the Filson corporate designers are making this metropolitan flagship feel like an Alaskan fishing outpost. (They get *Backcountry Journal* and *Virginia Sportsman* delivered to the store, but I'd like to see some copies of *The Drake* or a bit of *Field & Stream*, especially the vintage copies.) I digress.

What I actually want to say is that the clothes are incredible. The campaign tagline is "West x Northwest," and it's exactly that. It's denim meets waxed cotton and blanket linings, clothing you'd imagine seeing in *The Hateful Eight* or in pictures of the bounty hunters that went to grab outlaws like Boone Helm that ran for Canada, not Mexico. It's workwear, yeah, but around here [waxed jackets](#) and [denim](#) are regarded as highly as the high-fashion stuff.

AN ESQUIRE WRITER ENCOUNTERED COPIES OF THE VIRGINIA SPORTSMAN AT FILSON'S FLAGSHIP NEW YORK CITY STORE IN AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED BY ESQUIRE MAGAZINE ON OCT. 1, 2025.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Recognition comes in many forms. Sometimes it arrives quietly, the way a bird dog leans against your leg after a long day afield. Other times it arrives with fanfare—like when *Esquire* recently spotlighted *The Virginia Sportsman* when the writer noticed it in Filson's flagship store in New York City. That recognition felt less like a pat on the back and more like a reminder: what we shine a light on matters, and the people and places we celebrate deserve to be seen.

This issue continues that spirit.

In "Off to the Harness Races at Shenandoah Downs," John Kelly captures the thunder and community that define fall and spring weekends in Woodstock, Virginia. Thanks to the longtime partnership between the Shenandoah County Fair Association and the Virginia Equine Alliance (VEA), Shenandoah Downs has evolved into one of the East Coast's most important harness racing hubs. The VEA's recent investments, including a new \$2 million, 165-stall barn, built to replace the old tented structures, aren't merely infrastructure upgrades; they're a commitment to safety, professionalism and the horsemen who make this sport possible. Their work deserves recognition, and you'll feel that pride in every turn around the half-mile track.

We also welcome a new contributor, Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley, whose debut feature explores the life and work of equine artist Madeleine Bunbury. Her profile captures the painter's uncanny ability

to draw out not just the form but the very spirit of horses—a fitting addition to an issue rooted in connection, lineage and devotion.

From there, the stories widen like a rising tide. Alberto Rey returns "Belize... Finally," blending angling, culture and conservation with the eye of an artist. We explore how a trio of Danish-American designers built the cult-favorite GiantMouse knife brand. Our Winter Gear Guide assembles cold-weather essentials built for holidays and hard miles. We raise a glass to stand out non-alcoholic beers, and we step into a Thanksgiving-season upland hunt where family ties are strengthened one covey at a time. And Hank Shaw brings back the slow-roast duck, a dish made for winter, gatherings and gratitude.

Before closing, a special note of appreciation: Melissa Gessler, our longtime business manager, is retiring after many years of steadfast service to *The Virginia Sportsman*. Her dedication, good humor and behind-the-scenes mastery have carried this magazine through countless issues, deadlines and transitions. We are deeply grateful for everything she has done for us—and for you, our readers.

Recognition is ultimately about paying attention. Thank you for paying attention to these stories, these landscapes and this community. And thank you for letting us continue to tell the tales that matter. Happy Holidays!

Shields



AUTHOR, ARTIST AND ANGLER ALBERTO REY
ENJOYS AN AERIAL SHOT OF BELIZE AS HE
APPROACHES HIS ACTION-PACKED DESTINATION.

Belize ... Finally

STORY AND IMAGES BY ALBERTO REY

I'm trying to listen to Cory Richards's "Color of Everything," but I'm distracted by the chatter of great kiskadees and white-fronted parrots just outside my bedroom door. They sound surprisingly like a couple arguing in an unrecognizable language. The audiobook is about the author's reflections on mental illness, fine art, adventure climbing and marketing. As hard as it is to admit, my time for living dangerously has passed, so I enjoy living

vicariously through publications like this that remind me of times in my own life when luck was on my side and my limbs seemed to endure most mishaps.

I am waiting for my wife, Janeil, to arrive from her delayed flight from Buffalo while I recline in a queen-sized bed that is covered by a worn, green-striped quilted blanket. The stitching runs along the length of the pattern. I lay back looking up at the ceiling tiles that have been painted in dark ochre to hide some

old stains caused by leaks from the floor above. The walls are a pale variation of the same color. The room is on the second third floor of a freshly painted white colonial building that glistens in the bright Belizean sun. I arrived a couple of hours ago from Miami where I was visiting my mother who had tripped over a box while avoiding her Roomba floor vacuum. She is recuperating slowly from two fractured vertebrae, and I still feel guilty leaving her to continue with this

pre-arranged trip.

I find myself recalling the factors that brought me to this third-world Central American city. As with everything in my life, it revolves around either fly fishing or art, and usually a combination of both. Janeil is returning to Belize after being away for a decade. She had regularly brought her education students here to expose them to an array of teaching philosophies and to bring supplies to schools. I stayed home during those seven years and took care of our two children but dreamt of one day being able to experience the Mayan ruins and fly fish near San Pedro, the quaint fishing village across the bay on Ambergris

Caye. Our opportunity finally arrived last year, after our children finished college then moved away, and I retired. We had planned to start our five-month around-the-world trip in Belize, but I was diagnosed with COVID the day before our flight and had to reschedule that portion of our journey until now.

It has been almost two decades since I had that initial Belizean dream, but here we were in Belize City ready to explore the Ancient Mayan archeological site of Xunantunich before spending a week at El Pescador Lodge fly fishing the flats and mangroves near San Pedro. As sacrilegious as it may sound to most anglers, I was almost as excited to do a

watercolor of El Castillo, a 1,275-year-old Mayan temple, as I was searching for bonefish, tarpon and permit...almost.

Our first morning, we met Griffin, my wife's old friend, who drove us two and a half hours to the Mayan ruins. After taking a hand-operated ferry across the Mopan River, we climbed the hill to the architectural site, where the dark gray silhouette of El Castillo rose high above the tropical rainforest into the bright blue sky. We climbed 130 feet up its steep deteriorated steps to the top platform where we could see the lush green countryside around us, Guatemala around a half mile away and several of the 26 structures that made up the site. I

REY SKETCHES WHILE ON THE TOP OF EL CASTILLO, A 1,275-YEAR-OLD MAYAN TEMPLE.
PHOTO BY THEBIRDFILMING.COM





REY CREATES A WATERCOLOR AMONG THE MAYAN RUINS OF BELIZE.

removed my camera and my sketchbook from my backpack and started composing the drawing in my mind. The one thing that I always forget while envisioning these trips back home is how difficult it is to stop being a sightseer and shift to being an artist. The romantic vision I had months ago of creating watercolor in front of an ancient temple was withering away in the 90-degree humidity as mosquitoes and ants began crawling on my sweaty arms and legs.

Nonetheless, I finished the drawing and climbed back down the temple to find another location where I could create the watercolor of the temple in the next hour. In the end, the difficulty in trying to incorporate what I had learned over the past four decades and the time spent looking at every detail of the temple is what would make the watercolor interesting and the experience so memorable. The watercolor and drawing would be the portal through which I could experience it all again in the future.

The following day, Griffin took us to the airport where we caught a bumpy 15-minute flight to San Pedro. We collected our luggage and walked out into the middle of San Pedro, a bustling little town that over the past decade had been overrun with golf carts. Two smiling El Pescador Lodge representatives greeted and escorted us to a covered boat that took us to the lodge. They were both wearing lodge t-shirts that had "FAMILY" printed on the back where one would expect to see "STAFF." I initially found the difference in text endearing, but by the end of the week, we realized that his small difference in wording reflected how the workers were perceived and treated by the owners. There seemed to be a genuine sense of contentment amongst the staff. Periodically we would see workers with their children on the grounds and could hear laughter in the kitchen and work areas. It made for a warm inviting environment.

The lodge employs approximately 60 locals and provides housing for most of them. El Pescador also has 20 guides from San Pedro on call on any given day. Many of these locals are third-generation guides whose families have worked at the lodge over the past 50 years. The lodge has become an important part of the community.



REY IS AN ARTIST AND A LENS MAN. TOP LEFT: REY CAPTURES A SNOOK UNDERWATER. BOTTOM LEFT: REY RELEASES A BONEFISH. ABOVE: A TARPON SWIMS IN THE MANGROVES.

During our stay, we enjoyed the company of three different guides and appreciated experiencing their contrasting approaches to fly fishing, the different regions that each preferred, the variations in how they interacted with clients and the unique stories they shared. All of them were intuitively connected to the fishery. This was due in large part to their understanding of the complexity of their home waters after guiding around 300 days a year.

The fishery is rich with tarpon, bones, permit and snook that are available year-round. So, if your dream is to cast and ultimately hold one or more of these species in your hands, there is a good chance that could happen. If your dreams are a bit more ambitious like getting a grand slam (landing a tarpon, permit and

bonefish in one day), a super grand slam (add a snook) or a double grand slam, those can also occur any month of the year. This is evident in the lodge's Wall of Fame, which boasts 400 metal plaques dedicated to the anglers who have achieved these distinctions.

The mangroves directly behind the lodge are a nursery for tarpon, bones and snook, and can easily be accessed with a canoe and a guide. You can land larger tarpon throughout the flats near islands, the coastline of Ambergris Caye and the mainland.

Each guide has their own favorite location for each species and many prefer to guide in the Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Bacalar Chico Channel, which separates Mexico from Belize, is the

only way to reach the ocean from the bay. It was dug by hand over a 300-year period by the Mayans thousands of years ago. What was once a major trading route is now, in some places, a narrow opening through a mangrove forest that is slightly larger than a boat. Sinkholes are found throughout these mangroves and provide cool deeper water for tarpon during the warmest part of the day and serve as a spawning refuge between May and October.

While some believe that large adult tarpons migrate from Florida during these months, Dr. Aaron Adams, Director of Science and Conservation for the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, mentioned in an interview that out of more than 10,000 tagged tarpons from the United States, none have ever been tracked to Central America. Additionally, Dr. Addiel Perez, the

Belize-Mexico Program Manager of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, believes that the tarpon you will find in Ambergris Caye are a distinct subpopulation of residential tarpon that live in and around the deep waters off Mexico and Belize. Because they are residential species and are finite in number, they are incredibly important to the ecosystem and the economy and need to be protected. It is important to adhere to proper catch and release practices to assure their survival.

Perez's research suggests that tarpon follow bait fish throughout the year and begin migrating and congregating into large pods in deep waters off the Mesoamerican Reef, the second largest reef in the world, during the spawning months. Tarpon practice broadcast spawning, which includes having the

eggs fertilized by the milt (semen) as they mix in the water column. Here, tarpon periodically move into the shallower waters to feed and become more accessible to coastal anglers. Dr. Perez admits more research is needed on tarpon migration in Belize and Mexico because there is little funding to cover the \$10,000 needed to tag and track each tarpon. The last tagging in the region was done 10 years ago by the University of Miami. Their data, although limited, also confirmed that the tarpon are residential.

Bonefish, which are plentiful in the region, also practice broadcast spawning, but in much shallower waters. They tend to congregate between November through February and wait together in large pods for ideal conditions before they spawn. While they usually don't move further

than a half-mile from their home waters during the rest of year, they will migrate much further to spawn. Permit also use similar spawning methods between March and May. While they usually don't travel further than three miles from their home waters, it is unknown how far they will migrate to spawn. Because bonefish and permit are residential, any disturbance to their environment by development or climate change can be detrimental to their survival. There is little data available on the range of migration for Belizean/Mexican tarpon within their home waters or during spawning periods.

Our fishing experience was limited to the week we spent at the Lodge in January, but it was certainly positive; I landed many bones, tarpon and snook. I casted to several large pods of permit



CATCH AND RELEASE: REY RETURNS A BONEFISH TO THE WILD.

without success, most likely due to operator error (me). Bones are abundant year-round, and we saw groups of over 200 that did not seem to be bothered by our presence as they circled our boat.

Most guides prefer to use the same flies for these species. Toads (marabou flies) and bunnies (rabbit strip flies) patterned in green, white, yellow and dark purple colors are preferred by tarpon and snook. Each pattern uses large heads that pulsate when stripped. For bones, guides carry a selection of tan Gotcha-type patterns in different weights and use a slightly larger and

heavier patterns with red striped rubber legs and black plastic eyes when fly fishing permit.

As with most trips, the more time I spend in a location, the more I realize how much there is left to explore. I left Belize embarrassed at how little of the country I had experienced and how much of productive water had not been fished. I look forward to my return and spending more days investigating Mayan temples and more of the secluded islands and flats while enjoying the evenings feasting on delicious grilled lobster tails, Belizean stew, Belikin beer and Painkiller cocktails. ☺

Alberto Rey is a fly fisher, retired educator, painter, writer and filmmaker who has run a youth fly-fishing program for 30 years. Rey's paintings can be found in over 20 museum collections and have been in over 200 exhibitions. His films and videos have been screened internationally, and his illustrated articles and artwork have graced the covers and pages of *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Art of Angling Journal*, *Fish and Fly Magazine*, *American Angler*, *Fly Fishing International Magazine*, *The Drake*, *Saltwater Fisherman*, *Anglers Journal* and *Buffalo Spree*. Learn more at albertorey.com.