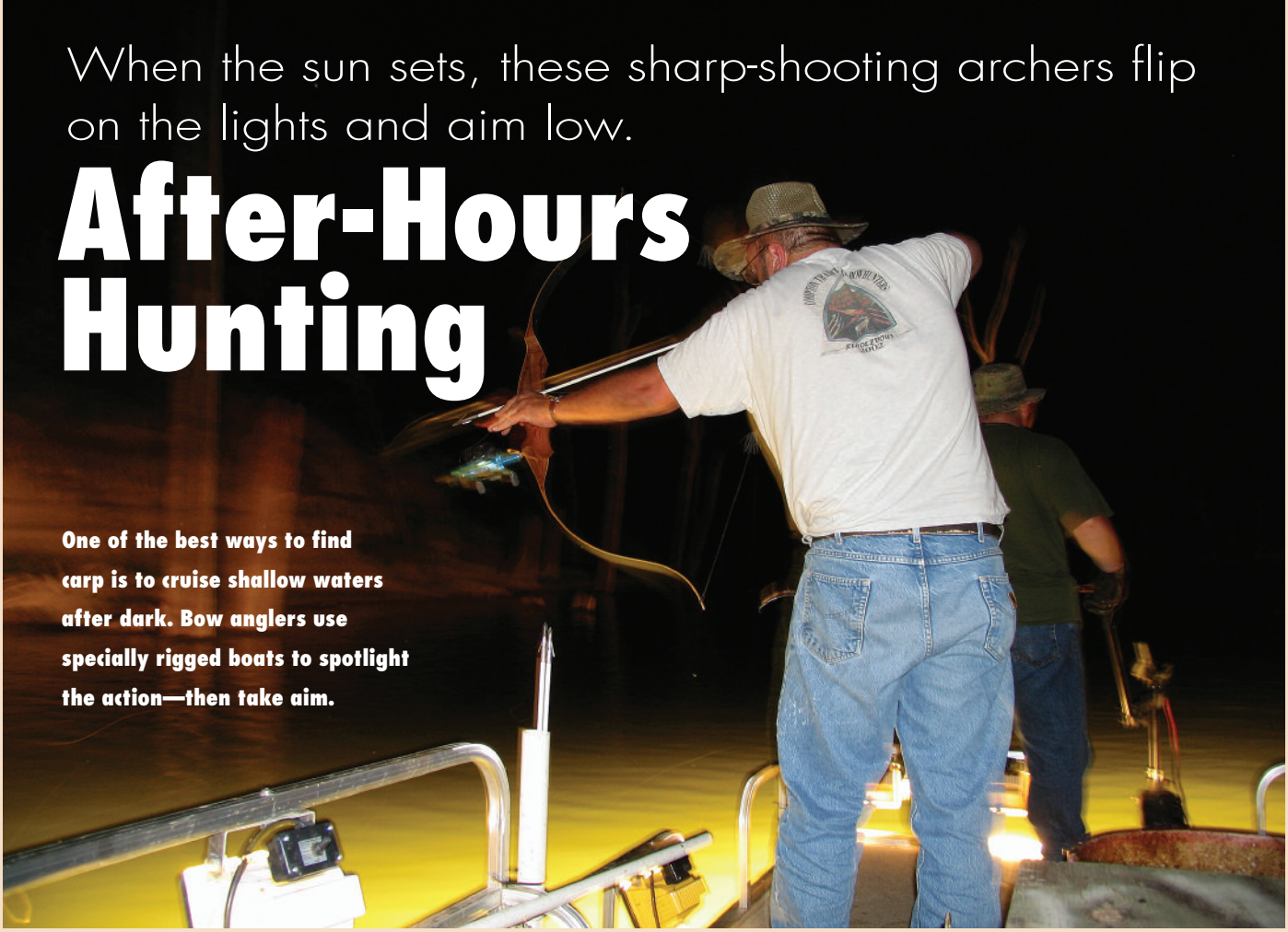
When the sun sets, these sharp-shooting archers flip on the lights and aim low.

After-Hours Hunting



One of the best ways to find carp is to cruise shallow waters after dark. Bow anglers use specially rigged boats to spotlight the action—then take aim.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

For a man who absolutely loves to fish, it might seem rather unfortunate that Kendall Carrigan hasn't made a cast in years. Despite the fact Carrigan lives near great fishing opportunities, his minnow bucket remains perfectly dry, his tackle box forgotten.

"I haven't picked up a rod and reel in four years," this central Illinois tool-and-dye maker announced recently, shortly before heading out to the lake to go fishing.

He really can't get enough of his favorite pastime.

Carrigan, like a growing number of Illinois sportsmen, is totally hooked on a wildly challenging and addictive brand of fishing—bowfishing for carp under the cover of darkness, complete with tricked-out stealth boats and formal competitions from a host of fellow sharpshooters. There are even clubs for Illinois bowfishers, with events held everywhere in Illinois. Collectively, these self-described rough fish eradicators can haul away hundreds of pounds from carp-filled lakes in a single night.

"Most people are very receptive to what we do," Carrigan said. "People realize what we're doing not only doesn't harm the resource but it really can be beneficial."

Indeed, at places like Evergreen Lake in Bloomington (once dubbed "Evercarp Lake"), Carrigan and fellow members of his 2-year-old Illinois Bowfishers club keep non-native European carp at bay—or give it a good shot. With Web sites, electronic newsletters and cash tournaments, these fish hunters are hauling the ancient art of bowfishing into the modern world. A July tournament at Clinton Lake delivered $1,000 to the top archer, while the Evergreen shoot raised monies for the Illinois Sportsmen Against Hunger program.

The attraction isn't just a guy thing, either.

Christine Appleberg, president of the Illinois Bowfishers, said anyone, regardless of background, can get hooked.

Simple recurve bows with a reel attached make bowfishing an easy-to-afford pastime.

Illinois Bowfishers President Christine Appleberg says the increasing popularity of bowfishing tournaments means archers can haul in cash and prizes—including more gear.

"Anyone can get started for $20 or $30," Appleberg said. "Cost is not a big issue."

Take an old, simple, recurve bow ("A 40- or 50-pound bow is fine," Carrigan said.), add a basic reel for retrieving the string line, a couple of arrows with fishing tips, and you're set. Just like any other form of sportfishing, a valid Illinois sportfishing license is required for bowfishing, unless you're exempt.

Another rule: Archery anglers always aim low. The image you see in the water is slightly higher than where that object really is. But once shooters figure out the light-refracting water, the only trouble is deciding when to quit.

"It's a lot more action than sitting on a bank," Carrigan pointed out. "With bowfishing, you're hunting fish, instead of waiting for the fish to come to you... there's stalking involved."

Bowfishers might shoot upwards of 100 shots per trip. That leads to increased confidence in other archery pursuits, such as bowhunting for deer.

"The tendency is that people who were already bowhunters are the ones who get into bowfishing," Appleberg noted. But regular anglers join in too, she said.

Carrigan is in deep. He scrapped his 1970s bass boat to upgrade to a 16-foot pontoon boat rigged specifically for bowfishing. His floating palace, dubbed the Central Illinois Rough Fish Control Unit, is short enough to maneuver into narrow coves while floating high enough to slip into shallows where carp hang out after dark.

Ten halogen bulbs blast a flood of light. A new, gas-powered generator keeps the 225-watt beams burning strong until the late hours.

"And the railing around the front is low enough to shoot over," Carrigan pointed out, adding that each bowfisher modifies his or her rig to suit specific priorities.

Whatever rig suits your needs, bowfishing can result in a lot of fish. And putting all of those fish to good use remains a high priority among Illinois bowfishing groups.

Carrigan gives away fresh fish to carp anglers he might encounter; he also donates tons of fish to a wildlife rehabilitator who uses the free food for injured wildlife. Appleberg says the legendary properties of fish to fertilize soils means her tomato and squash plants thrive without resorting to expensive chemicals.

"They're pretty high in nitrogen, so you don't want to put too many in the garden," Appleberg said. "But they really do make great fertilizer."

Whether they're pulling in a single fish or trucking away a load after a tournament, experts say bowfishing can have a positive impact on troubled waters.

"They're definitely not hurting the resource," explained Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Scott Stuewe, who said European carp are chronic troublemakers. "Carp can totally change the quality of any body of water, uprooting vegetation, which can muddy-up water, leading to a host of problems."

Stuewe said even steady bowfishing pressure likely won't hold numbers down for long.

"In reality, they're probably not going to stop carp from being a problem. But if enough bowfishing occurs, it can make a difference."

For more information about site specific bowfishing regulations in Illinois, consult the 2006 *Illinois Fishing Information* booklet or visit www.dnr.state.il.us.

Also, see illinoisbowfishers.com and illinoisstatebowfishers.com.

"It's a great combination of hunting and fishing," says Kendall Carrigan.