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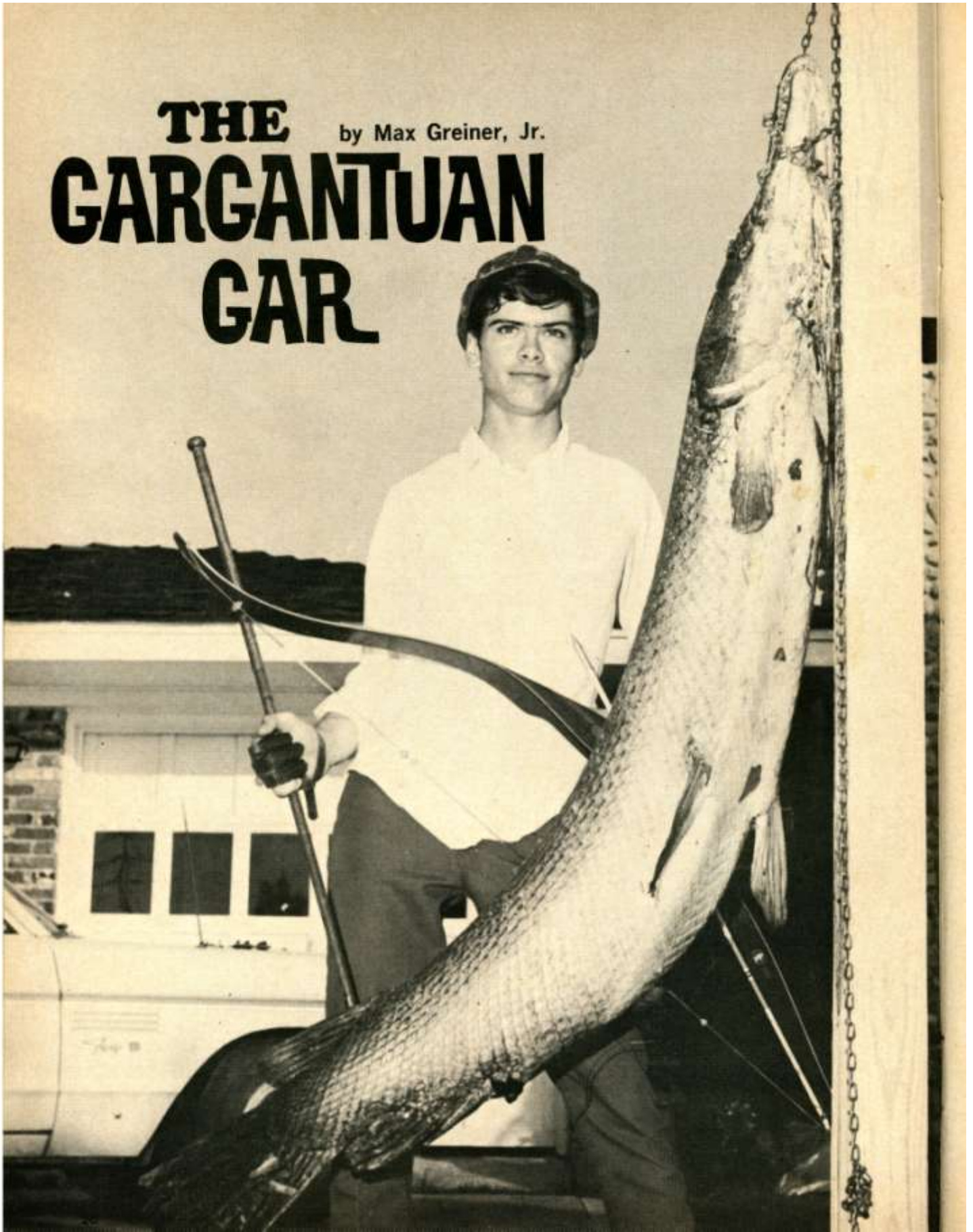
The GARGANTUAN Garfish

BOWHUNTING BASICS: Part II

GOSPEL FOR BEAR HUNTING

THE GARGANTUAN GAR

by Max Greiner, Jr.



WITHIN SECONDS, I was being dragged and jerked across a recently flooded field in Port Arthur, Texas. It was all I could do to stay on my feet. I was being pulled by one of the largest fish a bowman can go after, one that was bigger than I was. No, this is not one of those Texas tall tales.

Earlier that spring day at school I planned a gar hunt with several of my bowhunting friends. Recent rains and high tides in the area had caused the bayous, canals, rivers and ditches to overflow and flood surrounding lowlands. When this happens, the gar and carp start spawning, and the bowfisherman is in for some great sport. For a period of about three to four days, once a year, in the spring, these rough fish make their spawning runs into shallow waterways. Four of us planned to hunt together that afternoon.

Clifford Gouner, 18, and I headed directly after school to the flooded hunting grounds in hopes of getting some shots at gar and carp. We had planned to meet Mike Imhoff, 17, and Pete Herlin, 18 but they weren't there yet. The day before, I had killed ten gar averaging around two and a half feet in an hour's time. I was ready for more.

It was a warm clear April afternoon, so we didn't use any rubber waders. As soon as Gouner and I reached the water we split up. I waded forty yards in the knee-deep water before I killed my first gar. It was of average size. At the time, I was shooting my forty-five-pound Bear Kodiak Hunter with a Bear tape-on fishing reel and about sixty feet of ninety-pound nylon test line. My arrow was solid fiberglass with a screw-on harpoon head. I had just shot another, gar when I saw water flying six feet in the air, sixty yards away from me.

I started running as fast as I could toward the action, straight for the gar. When I was thirty yards away I slowed down and started to stalk the large fish. I came within twenty feet of what turned out to be five large alligator gar swimming side by side.

I picked out the largest one, aimed at the only part of it I could see, took a quick look at my line to make sure it wasn't tangled, and let her fly. The instant the solid glass arrow slammed into the armor hard scales, the water exploded. Gar went everywhere. My shot hit the back, which meant I was in for quite a battle.

Suddenly my nylon line whipped off my reel before I could do anything about it. From past experience I knew not to put any strong pressure against the gar. All I could do was steer the gar in a circle, hoping to keep it from getting to deep water. My line survived the gar's first burst of speed which usually is when the garfisherman loses his haul. He blazed a trail right

through a ten-foot stand of cane, never slowing.

I yelled at Gouner, who was already on his way. Before he got to me he spotted one of the other gar I had spooked and shot it. For about two minutes both of us were running

Bowfishing Texas Style Provides Tall Thrills

around yelling for help. His gar managed to get loose, leaving the head of his arrow still embedded in its tough hide. He ran over to me, and I told him to run to the car to get the long heavy steel part of the tire jack. The car just happened to be about a half a mile away, and most of the distance was covered by knee-deep water. One important item we forgot to bring was a gaff. It seemed like forever before Gouner returned with the long part of the tire jack.

By the time he reached me the gar had stopped its rampage. All three of us rested a second, while Gouner and I planned how to kill the gar. Our plan was for Gouner to sneak up on the fish and hit it over the head, while I held on to the line. He got in place, reared the bar back and bashed the gar, cracking a small part of its skull. The water exploded again, soaking us.

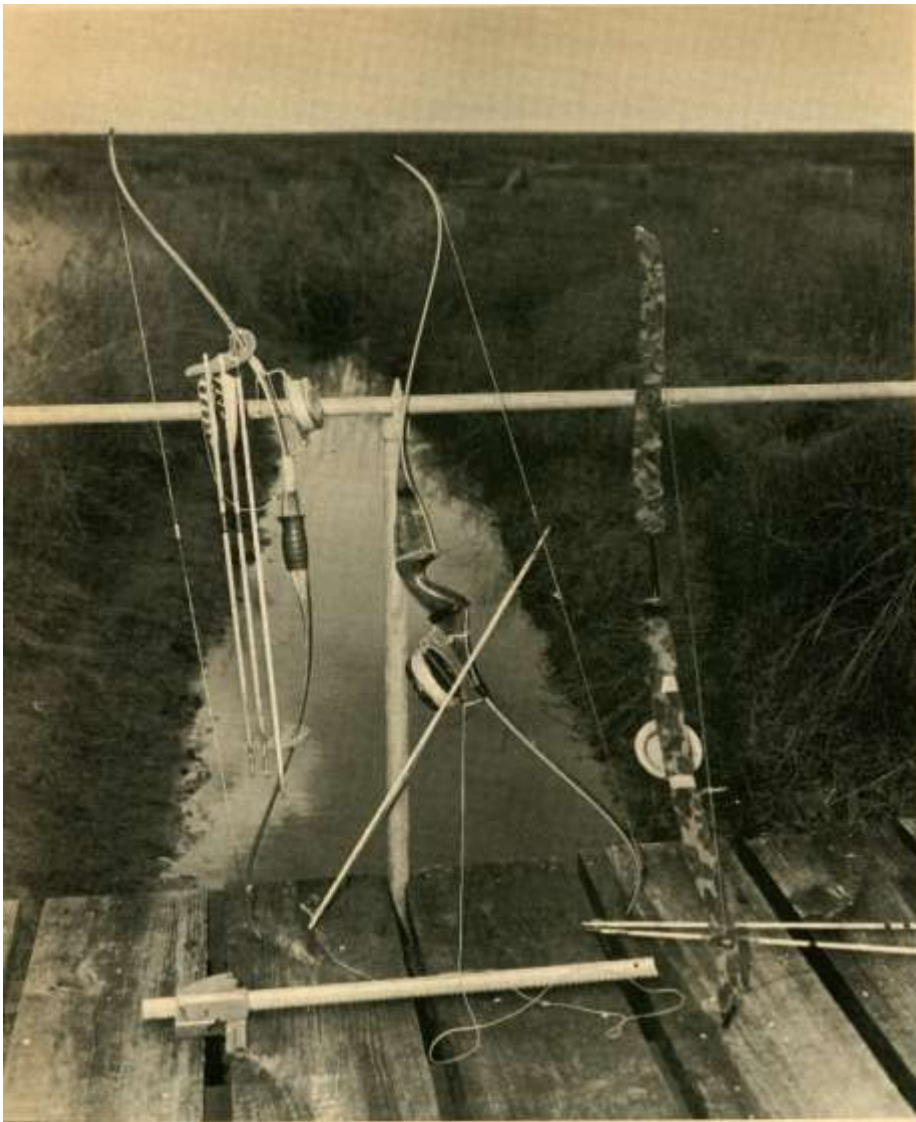
I decided to steer the gar around in a circle again. By the time the alligator gar had made another complete circle it was slowing down. Gouner had stationed himself for another strike. The gar went the circle route again, and Gouner hit it again. Gouner and the gar kept this up until the gar finally rolled over dead. The whole battle lasted an hour. In all my seventeen years I had never had so much fun hunting.

It wasn't long until my other friends showed up. They remembered to bring a gaff which made it possible for me to drag my gar through the water to the car. After pulling my gar for about a hundred yards through the water to the bank, I went for my car and brought it as close in as I could. With help from everyone we managed to load my catch on the tailgate. We had three extremely large garfish.

On the way home we had a big time

Author and his bowfishing companions edge into marshlands of South Texas, where the giant garfish thrive and spawn.





Here's the equipment that went into this adventure. The types of bows varied widely, although fish points were favored on the arrow shafts. The jack was an afterthought, but needed.

gar was one of the largest ever killed with a bow in our area. Blake Bergman, 18, another good friend of mine, had gone gar fishing the same afternoon and killed an alligator gar the same size as mine. He had been hunting about a mile away from me in another flooded field.

Every year, during spring, the bowfisherman gets a chance to go after really great bowfishing, but this is not where it stops. All during the warm summer months garfish float on the surface of the water in bayous and canals on still nights. This is when we do most of our bowfishing. One summer I killed ninety-nine gar hunting this way. The average was about fifteen gar a night.

The way we hunt on summer nights is with a boat, small motor, headlights, and gas lantern with a reflector. One important thing to remember when shooting a large gar is to get as many fishing arrows into it as quickly as possible. We lost a giant gar one night, because we could not do this. This gar happened to surface next to our twelve-foot aluminum boat.

We estimated his length at around seven feet. We got one arrow in this gar and for about two minutes that gar pulled our boat around the bayou before it broke our heavy fishing line.

When shooting big gar the perfect shot is one in the air bladder, right

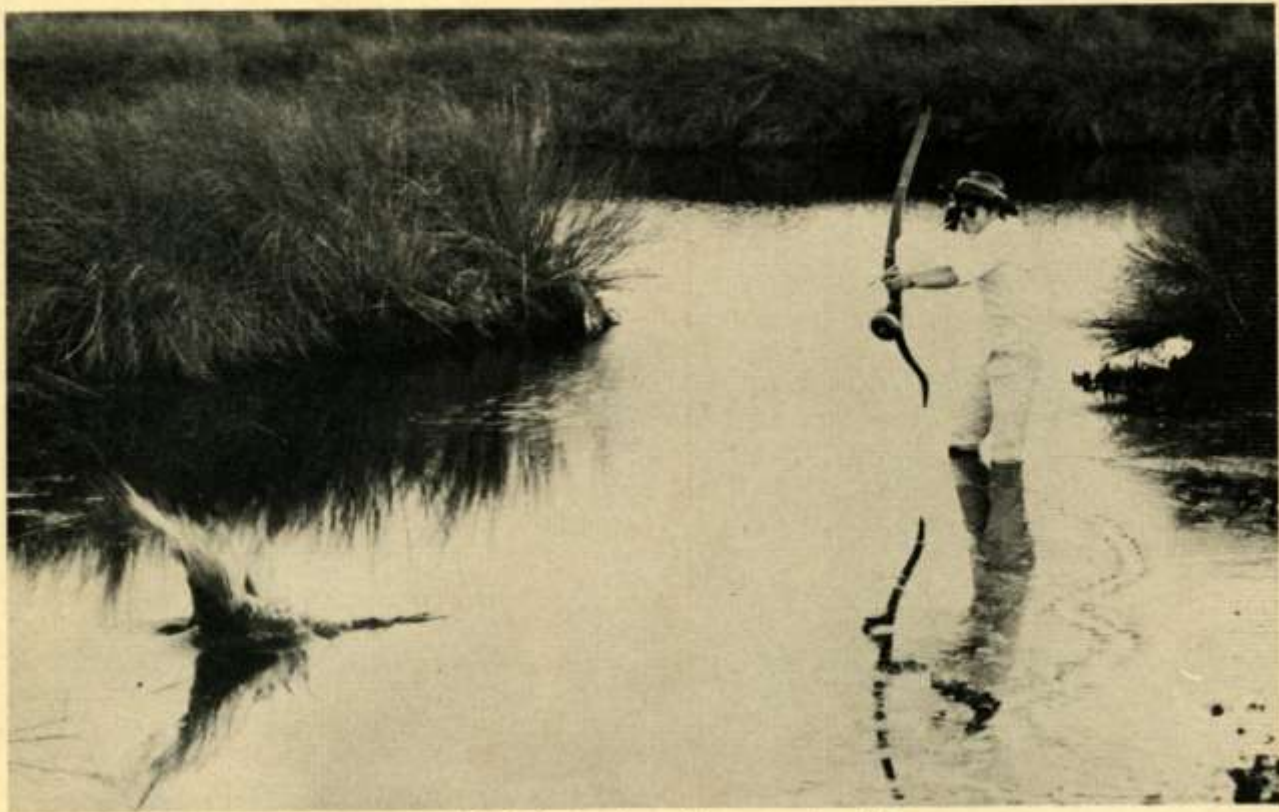
The fisherman waded into the shallow water, seeking their targets, which float close to surface in bayous.

watching people stare at my gar which was hanging a foot over on both sides of the tailgate. When Gouner and I reached home, we measured my alligator gar and hung it on the basketball goal post. It took four people struggling with that gar for ten minutes to hang it. My gar measured five feet, 11½ inches, nose to tail, eight inches between the eyes, and its largest teeth measured three-quarters of an inch.

We had no way to weigh my gar as my mother wouldn't let me use the bathroom scales. However, I did ask some experts on big alligator gar, and they all agreed it would go over a hundred pounds.

I found out the next day that my





As one of the fishermen looses his arrow, action is the keynote. Giant gar begins to splash the brackish water.

behind the gills. A shot here will drown a big gar. Just remember not to put any pressure against the line when you've got a big gar.

There is another method of handling big gar. When you have

arrowed one, take the end of your line and tie it to a large plastic jug, then throw the jug overboard. It is a good idea to mark the jug with reflecting paint.

A fisherman should treat a large gar

with respect because of its large teeth. If a gar gets a chance while arrowed, it might take a bite out of a careless fisherman's leg. I know of several instances where hunters have been bitten by large gar and put in the hospital.

Bowfishing is popular in this area, because of the many public waterways available to the bowfisherman. It is common to see gar hunters on the bridges near Port Arthur hunting on any warm summer night. Sport is not the only reason for garfishing. Part of the garfish's diet is good game fish. The garfish in turn is eaten by us in the form of meat balls or barbecue.

The alligator gar, largest member of the gar family, is found only in the coastal southern states. The world's record gar was caught by a rod and reel on the Rio Grande River in Texas. It weighed 279 pounds and measured 7 feet, 7½ inches. Big gar are rare. I have killed only two big ones in two years of hard hunting, but it isn't impossible to dream of killing a gar of over eight feet and 300 pounds. There is a lot of fun in store for the toxophilite in this area. You can kill a lot of smaller gar any night during the summer. If you are lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time during the gar spawn, you are in for the thrill of a lifetime in bowfishing. Tales come tall in Texas — but so do garfish! ←

When the tides are out, the canals and bayous turn into nothing more than mud flats, fish going with the tide.

