

EDITOR'S CHOICES ♦ GREAT BUYS ♦ INNOVATIONS

# GEAR

FIELD TEST

## TACKLE TEST 2015

+ OUR ANNUAL ON-THE-WATER EVALUATION REVEALS WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE NEWEST RODS AND REELS  
BY TODD KUHN



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Over the last decade, the fishing industry has experienced explosive technological growth. Today's bass fishermen electronically see under docks in vivid, three-dimensional detail. Pro anglers pre-fish tournaments on screens from their cockpit seats, practically eliminating the need to wet a line.

When it comes to science-driven enhancements, tackle makers are hustling to stay in step with the competition. Rod designers manipulate carbon on a supramolecular scale, and their work lets us cast farther and with greater accuracy than ever before. Advancements in metallurgy and materials science have produced substances from which smoother, quieter fishing reel gear trains and drags have been created.

Such changes aren't just for show. These products are all lighter and more ergonomic, which means we can fish longer with less fatigue.

For 2015, rod and reel manufacturers have once again eclipsed the previous year's innovations. Here's our take on the best of what's new.

# THE WINNERS: REELS

## SPINNING

### PFLUEGER PATRIARCH XT

\$250 / PFLUEGERFISHING.COM



Weighing 6.1 ounces, the Pflueger Patriarch XT is billed as the lightest spinning reel on the market. That claim can be attributed to the use of magnesium and carbon parts (instead of aluminum) and extensive CNC machining to lighten non-ferrous components.

The reel's low weight is great, but it was the Patriarch's on-the-water performance that turned heads. Rotating on 10 shielded bearings, the XT has an incredibly fluid retrieve. A sealed drag impedes the intrusion of water and grime, virtually eliminating the chance of fade. A solid titanium main shaft provides ample backbone for a driveline that will stand up to any fish.

Saltwater is the kryptonite of magnesium reels; however, the Patriarch's sealed finish keeps its corrosive effects at bay and makes the reel as capable in-shore as it is in freshwater.

### LEW'S TOURNAMENT PRO TP300HP

\$100 / LEWS.COM



The TP300HP packs plenty of high-end features into a cost-conscious package. For starters, the chassis is made of high-strength C40 carbon, which provides a flex-free platform. A skeletal graphite rotor mitigates the weight typically associated with large-spool reels.

A sealed main body—a feature typically found only on high-priced reels—keeps undesirable stuff out of the gearing, and a threaded lube port lets the user keep the guts greased and turning smoothly.

A large titanium roller and hollow stainless bail wire manage line chores neatly. Internally, a machined solid-brass pinion gear and a stainless-steel main shaft combine for potent 6.1:1 cranking power on a 10-bearing system. A beefy carbon-Teflon multi-disc drag handles stubborn fish without much effort.

## BAITCASTING

### DUCKETT FISHING 360 SERIES

\$249 / DUCKETTFISHING.COM



Conventional manufacturing wisdom dictates that great reels aren't born—they're bred. It's supposed to take years of trial and error to produce a quality piece. Contrary to this thinking, rod maker Duckett Fishing has struck gold with its first attempt at a reel.

It could be argued the 360 is underpriced, as it has the accoutrements of the most expensive casting reels, and clad in bright-white gloss and candy-red anodizing, it looks as good as it performs. The one-piece die-cast machined frame is rock-solid, and the carbon-composite sideplates reduce weight and tuck nicely into the palm.

Eleven ball bearings and a finely meshed gear train produce smooth cranking, while a capable carbon-based drag offers up to 14 pounds of resistance. Available in 5.3:1, 6.3:1, and 7.1:1 retrieves, there's a 360 for any assignment.

### SHIMANO CURADO 200I

\$180 / FISH.SHIMANO.COM



Given the Curado's reputation as the gold standard of affordably priced, bulletproof baitcasters, it's likely that there are more of these reels in bass boat rod lockers than any other make. And the latest iteration, the 200I, should continue that legacy.

The Curado gets its iconic smoothness from dual bearings that support the pinion and main gear, keeping everything aligned and turning in perfect concert. A three-level cast-control system lets the user dial up the ideal setting for long casts, while an external control on the lower side of the palming plate monitors casting tension, allowing for adjustment while holding the reel.

Beyond its impressive mechanical performance, the Curado 200I is an ergonomic dream, with a profile that nestles neatly in the hand for stress-free fishing.

## ★ HOW WE TEST

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE PROVING GROUNDS OF THE NEWEST FISHING GEAR

Like baseball's postseason and pumpkin-flavored everything, the *Outdoor Life* Tackle Test has become a rite of October. Once again last fall we ventured south to Cajun Fishing Adventures in Buras, Louisiana, to pit the latest rods and reels against the redfish that swim in the marshes at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Some 42 rods and reels made up our largest field in recent memory.

Over the course of several days, all of our

testers—OL editors and CFA guides alike—spent quality time with each piece of tackle and then drew upon that on-the-water experience to make informed scores in 10 different categories. The average of each tester's scores in each category, plus a cumulative overall score, are reflected in the chart on p. 27.

As always, the rods and reels that finished with the highest overall scores were deemed our Editor's Choices, while the tackle with the top Value scores took home the Great Buy awards.



LEW'S

DUCKETT

SHIMANO

PFLUEGER

# INNOVATIONS

FIVE TACKLE DESIGN IDEAS THAT AREN'T ONLY CLEVER, BUT WILL ALSO ENHANCE YOUR OVERALL ANGLING EXPERIENCE

## 1 DUAL MAGNETIC CONTROLS

The use of both magnetic and friction casting controls has been standard on many bait-casting reels for decades. In fact, reels that feature one or the other have become less common than those that tout both. However, the **Bass Pro Shops CarbonLite's** dual magnetic casting controls—in addition to a separate friction control—allow fishermen to dial their line-management precision to a whole other level.



## 2 TRIGGER HOOK KEEPER

Few things are as frustrating as a poorly positioned hook keeper (see "Our Pet Peeves," p. 26). By placing it in the tip of the handle trigger on their new casting rods, **Lew's and Wright & McGill** have eliminated the chance of it getting in the way when you're fishing.



## 3 LINE-WEIGHT INDICATOR

Remembering which pound-test line is on a particular rod can be a challenge, especially for tournament fishermen in the heat of competition. The line-weight indicator dial on the butt sections of the **Bass Pro Shops Johnny Morris Signature Series** and **Quantum Smoke PT** rods makes the line weight easily visible at a glance.

## 4 SKELETAL GRIP

Sensitivity is everything in a fishing rod, and **Wright & McGill** has essentially eliminated the fore grip on its **Skeet Reese Victory Pro** spinning rods to offer direct access to the blank. You'll feel every tick and nibble.



## 5 CARBON HANDLES

Carbon is used extensively in rod blanks and reels for its unmatched strength-to-weight ratio, but it's also a remarkably sensitive material. The carbon handles of the **Edge** rods allow fishermen to be in constant contact with the blank.



## MOST IMPROVED

WRIGHT & MCGILL STEPS UP ITS GAME

Stan Wright and Drew McGill began offering hand-tied flies on their newly designed Eagle Claw hooks in the late 1920s. In the decades since, the Wright & McGill brand has been associated with tackle of varying levels of quality. For 2015, the Skeet Reese Victory Pro Carbon line of rods and reels represents a dramatic increase in quality over recent years' offerings.

Clad in the bass pro's signature black-and-yellow motif, the rods impressed with their ability to adeptly finesse baits one minute and whip giant red-fish the next. The line includes 10 technique-specific offerings; we tested the 6-foot 11-inch Shakey Head/Finesse Worm spinning rod (medium-fast action) and the 7-foot Spinner Bait/Worm casting rod (fast action).

The reels, with their extensive use of carbon, were rigid and virtually devoid of flex, their retrieves were silky, and their drags were more than capable of managing stubborn fish. We tested the size-30 spinning reel and the 6.4:1 caster.



## BOUTIQUE TACKLE

SMALL MANUFACTURERS THAT MAKE BIG-TIME RODS AND REELS

**1** Searching for a workhorse spinning rod? Look no further than the **Sewell S1 In-shore** (\$140; [SEWELLRODS.COM](http://SEWELLRODS.COM)). The 7-footer (medium action with a fast taper) sports a MicroWave guide system and is capable of throwing lures weighing between  $\frac{3}{8}$  and 1 ounce on 10- to 20-pound-test line.

**2** **13 Fishing**—a company that got its start making fishing rod components—has produced one of the finest baitcasting reels on the market: the **Concept E** (\$380; [13FISHING.COM](http://13FISHING.COM)). Ceramic spool bearings spin in perfect concert as a six-way centrifugal cast control feathers line fluidly.

**3** **Fitzgerald Rods** offers a multipurpose 7-foot spinner that impressed with its versatility. The **Stunner HD** (\$170; [FITZGERALDRODS.COM](http://FITZGERALDRODS.COM)), with its medium action and  $\frac{1}{4}$ - to  $\frac{5}{8}$ -ounce rating (6- to 12-pound-test), is an all-day fishing machine.

**4** **Duckett Fishing's** line of super-popular rods has made them a top semi-custom rod builder. Their new **Duckett 360** bait-caster is proof they're serious about the reel game, too (see "The Winners," p. 20).

**5** The new **Edge** brand of rods is the latest brainchild of legendary rod maker Gary Loomis. Handmade in the U.S., the **First Strike** (\$400; [EDGERODS.COM](http://EDGERODS.COM)) and **Black Widow** (\$550) lines include a combined 16 rods that feature nothing but state-of-the-art materials.



# THE WINNERS: RODS

## SPINNING

### MEGABASS STINGER SHOT

\$275 / MEGABASSUSA.COM



The Orochi XX Stinger Shot might be the finest finesse spinning rod ever crafted. It controls baits like it's an extension of the angler's arm, and it helps him systematically carve up a piece of water with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel.

When working finesse-style baits, feel is key and the blank dictates performance. No spinning rod that we've tested in recent years has the sensitivity of the Stinger Shot. The low-resin, four-axis butt-to-midsection carbon wrap provides a solid foundation for managing husky fish, while the ultrafast taper provides real-time lure feedback. Billed as a "drop-shot" rod, the Stinger Shot is perfectly suited for any light-lining assignment and is sure to impress even the most discerning angler.

### NO. 8 TACKLE HELLBENT INSHORE

\$60 / NO8TACKLE.COM



Newcomer No. 8 is the budget-minded sister brand of 13 Fishing, and their HellBent Inshore rod is built for the serious angler who isn't flush with cash. Quality components abound, starting with a delightful 24-ton graphite blank that has ample backbone to muscle fish, yet a light tip that induces strikes with an enticing twitch.

The soft-touch reel seat is thoughtfully shaped to comfortably accommodate fingers, and a full-length cork handle is perfect for throwing large lures to hungry fish (interestingly, the rod is rated for 3/8- to 3/4-ounce baits despite its medium action). Nine black, single-foot stainless-steel guides with tough zirconium inserts keep the line running true. For just \$60, the HellBent is a heck of a lot of rod.

## BAITCASTING

### G. LOOMIS IMX

\$295 / GLOOMIS.COM



Introduced some three decades ago, the IMX comes in an astounding 38 models designed for every technique imaginable, from shaky heads to punching.

Today's IMX is 15 percent lighter than previous builds, and is well appointed with top-shelf components like Fuji K-Frame running guides (which reduce weight while improving rod balance) and an ACS-II reel seat that offers great feel.

A slender, full-length grade-A cork grip gives the rod a retro feel and is large enough for comfortable two-handed casts. Manufactured in the U.S., the IMX has a rich, dipped finish, and gorgeous guide wraps that are a testament to G.Loomis' enduring commitment to quality. A limited lifetime warranty makes this a solid investment.

### KISTLER MAGNESIUM TS

\$160 / KISTLERRODS.COM



Trey Kistler has been producing high-quality semi-custom and custom rods for years. The Magnesium TS (Technique Specific) delivers that same Kistler quality, but at a very palatable price. Despite its stout appearance, the rod is all-day light and possesses a delicate balance and sublime action. The light tip shines, offering plenty of give when coaxing heavy fish buttoned to light-gauge wire hooks.

The Magnesium TS's blank is super responsive, bringing baits to life in the water and perfectly telegraphing their behavior back to the angler. While these rods are advertised as technique-specific, they are in fact extremely versatile. The crankbait rod we tested would be equally capable of throwing shaky heads, light Carolina rigs, or jerkbaits.

## BALANCE ON A BUDGET

THREE PERFECTLY MATCHED—AND PRICED—ROD-AND-REEL PAIRINGS

**1 NO. 8 BLACKOUT AND DAIWA AIRD** The Blackout's (\$80; [no8tackle.com](http://no8tackle.com)) medium action and fast taper (rated for 10- to 17-pound-test and 1/4- to 3/8-ounce lures) give it a "just-right" feel that's perfect for crankbaits, jerkbaits, weightless soft plastics, and light blade baits. The AIRD (\$80; [daiwa.com](http://daiwa.com)) syncs with it nicely, providing a utilitarian 6.3:1 retrieve. Dual casting controls, an oversize handle, and a stout drag round out a solid, value-packed reel.

**2 ST. CROIX TRIUMPH X AND BASS PRO SHOPS PRO QUALIFIER** Here's a versatile rig for a wide range of techniques, from crawling soft plastics to twitching topwaters to yanking jerkbaits. The 7-foot medium-action Triumph X (\$100; [stcroixrods.com](http://stcroixrods.com)) carries the aspirational St. Croix moniker at an attainable price. The Pro Qualifier (\$80; [basspro.com](http://basspro.com)) comes with two spools—great for quickly changing line style or poundage as the situation dictates.

**3 LAMIGLAS EXCEL II AND OKUMA CERROS** The quality EXCEL II (\$120; [lamiglas.com](http://lamiglas.com)) features an 11-piece guide train, a comfortable split grip, and a soft action. The Cerros (\$120; [okumafishing.com](http://okumafishing.com)) boasts a fast 7.3:1 retrieve and a capable drag. The rod's gentle action, matched with the reel's speedy retrieve, results in a combo that is great for burning lippered or lipless crankbaits when searching for active fish, or for pulling buzzbaits.



## OUR PET PEEVES

PESKY DESIGN FLAWS THAT WE WISH WOULD GO AWAY

After literally hundreds of hours testing tackle over the years, we've assembled a list of tackle design gripes. To wit:

### ✘ EXPOSED THREADS

Nothing is more distracting when fighting a fish than a fistful of reel-seat threads. Is it so difficult to cover the fore part of the reel seat with EVA or cork?

### ✘ OVERSIZE SPOOLS

Do we really need a spool that holds 200-plus yards of very expensive line? And since when do the fish these reels are designed to fight make runs the length of two football fields? The drag is your friend, people. Learn to use it.

### ✘ IRKSOME CASTING SPOOLS

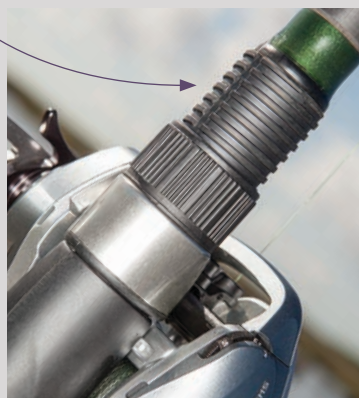
Too many baitcasting reels lack a place on the spool to tie off the line. Please, designers of reels, either wrap the spool with a strip of rubber or drill two holes through which we can thread our line.

### ✘ INACCURATE ROD RATINGS

Without fail, in every Tackle Test there's at least one rod (though usually more) that's rated medium but fishes like a flipping stick.

### ✘ ILL-PLACED HOOK KEEPERS

We've suffered more than a few sliced fingers over the years as a result of sharp, badly placed hook keepers.



## ACTION VS. POWER

### ROD-RATING TERMINOLOGY EXPLAINED

When it comes to rod ratings, many anglers erroneously use the terms "action" and "power" interchangeably.

A rod's action describes where a rod bends when weight is imparted on the tip. A rod that is described as "fast" bends in the top third of the blank (and an "extra-fast" rod bends even higher). Medium-action rods bend in the top half or so, while slow-action rods bend along the entire length of the blank, starting in the lower third. The Edge First Strike, with a nimble tip living up to its "extra fast" rating, had the truest action of our test rods.

"Power" describes a rod's lifting strength, and the rating is typically either heavy, medium-heavy, medium, medium-light, or light. A rod's power correlates to its suggested line weight (e.g., heavy rods work best with heavier pound-test line). Daiwa's Zillion rods, with their radially wrapped, heavy-power blanks, could probably lift a piano out of the Mariana Trench.



# STELLAAAAA!

THE ULTIMATE "MONEY IS NO OBJECT" FISHING REEL

→ Including the Shimano Stella FI in our field of spinning reels would have been like testing a Bugatti Veyron against mid-size sedans. However, this marvel of engineering (priced like a work of fine art at \$790) deserves a few words.

Seeking unparalleled smoothness, project engineers placed bearings on or polished every friction-producing surface in the reel, resulting in a nearly effortless retrieve. Meanwhile, the reinforced frame eliminates power-robbing flexure when fighting fish. Oversize, precision-ground polished gears transfer power from the handle through the transmission with no energy loss, thanks to the seemingly impossibly tight tolerances and fit. Large drag washers support the spool, while a proprietary wave spring applies consistent pressure. The result is absurdly good resolution across the full drag friction curve for the best payout system you'll find on a spinner. Twelve triple-containment gaskets seal the reel, keeping out any water and crud that could negatively affect performance.

The bottom line: The Shimano Stella is liquid-metal smooth and, without question, the finest spinning reel money can buy.

SPINNING REELS	PRICE	CONTROLS	DURABILITY	APPLICABILITY	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	MATERIALS	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	INNOVATION	VALUE	OVERALL
PFLUEGER PATRIARCH XT <small>EDITOR'S CHOICE</small>	\$250	8.2	8.2	8.6	8.4	8.8	8.6	8.2	8.6	6.8	7.6	82
DAIWA BALLISTIC EX	\$200	7.8	7.6	7.8	7.8	7.8	8	8	8	6.6	6.4	75.8
WRIGHT & MCGILL SKEET REESE VICTORY PRO CARBON	\$160	7.2	7	7.4	6.8	7	7.2	7.2	7.8	6.6	7.4	71.6
QUANTUM SMOKE SPEED FREAK	\$179	6.4	6.2	6	7	6.2	7	6.8	7.8	5.8	6	65.2
LEW'S TOURNAMENT PRO TP300HP <small>GREAT BUY</small>	\$100	6.6	6.4	6.3	6	5.8	6.2	6.4	6.2	5.6	9	64.5
BASS PRO SHOPS PRO QUALIFIER	\$80	6.6	6.6	6.6	6.4	6.4	6	6.2	5.8	5	8.4	64

BAITCASTING REELS	PRICE	CONTROLS	DURABILITY	APPLICABILITY	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	MATERIALS	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	INNOVATION	VALUE	OVERALL
DUCKETT FISHING 360 SERIES <small>EDITOR'S CHOICE</small>	\$249	8.8	8.5	8.8	9	9.3	8.8	9	9	7.8	8.2	87.2
SHIMANO CURADO 200I <small>GREAT BUY</small>	\$180	8.4	8.6	9	9.2	8.8	8.8	9	8.5	8	8.6	86.9
13 FISHING CONCEPT E	\$380	7.8	7.9	8.4	8.8	9.4	8.7	8.8	8.8	9	7	84.6
DAIWA AIRD	\$80	7.7	7.6	7.8	7.7	7.3	7.5	7.3	7.8	6	8.4	75.1
BASS PRO SHOPS CARBONLITE	\$130	7.4	7	7.4	7.6	7.2	7	7	7	7	7.8	72.4
WRIGHT & MCGILL SKEET REESE VICTORY PRO CARBON	\$160	7.2	6.8	7.2	7.2	7	7	6.8	7.2	5.8	7	69.2
OKUMA CERROS	\$100	7	6.4	6.8	6.8	6.8	7	6.8	6.8	5.8	7.8	68
LEW'S LITE SPEED SPOOL TFS	\$240	7.2	6.8	7	7	7	7	6.8	6.2	5.8	6.4	67.2
CABELA'S VERANO	\$150	6.8	6.6	6.6	7	6.6	6.6	6.8	6.8	5.6	7.2	66.6
ABU GARCIA REVO BEAST	\$350	7	6.4	7.4	6.6	6.6	6.8	6.8	7.2	5.8	5.6	66.2

SPINNING RODS	PRICE	ACTION	DURABILITY	APPLICABILITY	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	MATERIALS	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	INNOVATION	VALUE	OVERALL
MEGABASS OROCHI XX STINGER SHOT <small>EDITOR'S CHOICE</small>	\$275	9.6	8.8	9	9.2	9	9.2	9.2	9	8.6	7.8	89.4
NO. 8 TACKLE HELLBENT INSHORE <small>GREAT BUY</small>	\$60	8.4	8.8	7.8	8	8.2	8.2	8.2	8.4	6.4	9.8	82.2
SHIMANO CRUCIAL DROP SHOT	\$180	8.2	8.4	8.4	8	8.4	8.2	8.4	8.4	6.8	7.6	80.8
EDGE BLACK WIDOW	\$550	8	7.2	7.8	8.2	7.2	8.2	7.8	8	7.8	6.8	77
DUCKETT MICRO MAGIC PRO	\$159	7.6	7.8	7.6	8.2	7.6	7.6	7.8	8.2	6.4	7.4	76.2
LAMIGALS XLS	\$230	8	7.6	8	6.8	8	7.4	7.2	7.6	6.2	6.4	73.2
ST. CROIX TRIUMPH X	\$100	7.4	7.4	7.6	7	7.2	7.4	7.4	7.2	6.2	8.4	73.2
FITZGERALD STUNNER HD	\$170	7.4	7.6	7.4	7	7	7.4	7.2	7.2	6	7	71.2
SEWELL S1 INSHORE	\$140	6.2	7.2	7	7.2	7.8	7.6	7.4	7.4	6.2	7.2	71.2
WRIGHT & MCGILL SKEET REESE VICTORY PRO CARBON SHAKEY HEAD/FINESSE WORM	\$160	8.2	7	7.2	7	7.4	7.4	7	7	6.4	6.6	71.2
QUANTUM SMOKE PT	\$140	7	7	7	7	6.8	7	6.6	8.2	7.2	7	70.8
DENALI J2 DROPSHOT	\$99	7.4	7	7.4	7.2	7.2	6.8	6.8	6.6	5.8	7.4	69.6
BASS PRO SHOPS JOHNNY MORRIS SIGNATURE SERIES	\$150	7	6.6	6.6	7	7	7.2	7	7.2	5.6	6.6	67.8

BAITCASTING RODS	PRICE	ACTION	DURABILITY	APPLICABILITY	ERGONOMICS	FISHABILITY	MATERIALS	CONSTRUCTION	AESTHETICS	INNOVATION	VALUE	OVERALL
G.LOOMIS IMX 803C JWR <small>EDITOR'S CHOICE</small>	\$295	8.6	9.2	9	9.4	9.2	9.4	9.4	8.8	6.9	7.1	87.0
MEGABASS OROCHI XX DIABLO SPEC-R	\$289	8.8	8.8	9	9	9.2	9.2	9	9	7.2	7.6	86.8
KISTLER MAGNESIUM TS CRANK BAIT <small>GREAT BUY</small>	\$160	8.4	8.4	9	8.8	8.8	8.8	9	7.8	7.2	9.4	85.6
NO. 8 TACKLE BLACKOUT	\$80	8.8	8.2	8.6	8.8	8.8	8.2	8.4	8.4	7	9.2	84.4
LAMIGLAS EXCEL II	\$120	7.8	7.8	7.8	8.3	8	7.5	8	7.5	6.8	8	77.3
DUCKETT TEREX	\$149	8.2	7.8	7.8	7.6	7.4	7	7.8	7.8	6	7.6	75
FENWICK ELITE TECH	\$150	8	7.4	7.2	7.8	7.6	7.8	7.6	8	6.2	7.4	75
OKUMA SCOTT MARTIN TCS	\$140	7.6	7.6	7.6	8	7.4	7.2	7.4	8.2	5.8	7.4	74.2
FALCON CARA ST	\$250	8	8	8	7.8	7.8	7.4	7.4	7.8	6.2	5.6	74
EDGE FIRST STRIKE	\$400	9	7.4	7.4	6.6	7	7.8	7.6	7.4	7.6	5.6	73.4
DAIWA ZILLION	\$180	7.3	7.7	7.3	6.3	7.3	7.3	8	8	6.7	6.3	72.3
FITZGERALD STUNNER HD	\$170	7.2	7.6	7.2	6.6	7.2	7.6	7.6	7.2	6.4	7.2	71.8
WRIGHT & MCGILL SKEET REESE VICTORY PRO CARBON SPINNERBAIT/WORM	\$160	8	7.8	7.4	6.2	6.4	7.2	7	7.4	7	7.2	71.6