

Matt Crowe sets  
off on a flathead  
hunt in Pittsburgh.



# How to Be a Fish Bum

**Quit your job**  
and just go fishing.  
It's worked out for  
these six dream-  
living guys

By  
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Photographs by  
Tom M. Johnson



It's Monday morning. After five hits of the snooze button, you finally get up. Maybe you start scrolling through Instagram over your rushed cup of coffee. Maybe you look at Facebook while on the toilet. Or perhaps the first half hour of your actual workday consists of social media catch-up before you start doing the actual work someone is paying you to do. It makes no difference. Within the first few swipes of your finger, he'll be there, posting a sunrise-over-the-water shot captioned "another day at the office." By the time you grab your bag lunch from the break room fridge, he'll have bagged another trout, or smallmouth, or catfish. He is the fish bum. He's the guy that—whether by professional or lifestyle choice—is always on the water while you are not. He's tied in when you're tied up. He's the guy you love to hate, because he's the guy you'd love to be.

Or would you?

To be a true fish bum, fish have to come first. That means things like a steady paycheck, health benefits, or a social life come second. Ask yourself: Do I like eating Ramen noodles? Am I okay with driving a truck that could die at any second? Could I handle the pressure of putting paying customers on fish day in and day out? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might have what it takes to live this lifestyle. If you're still on the fence, we tracked down six die-hard fish bums from across the country to find out what it's really like living hookset to hookset. They've quit steady jobs to stay on the bite, schlepped across the globe to keep lines tight, and downright hustled to stay bent. Do you make more money than them? Probably, but they're having a hell of a lot more fun.





**What's the most reliable piece of tackle in your arsenal?** I bought a pair of Abu Garcia 10000s 10 years ago. I fish hard, and I've never had to replace a part. —M.C.



Clockwise from left: Crowe baits up with a channel cat; on the tracks to a honey hole; hoisting a 38-pound flathead.

## MATT CROWE

THE CATFISHING QUINT

**HOME WATER:** OHIO RIVER, PA

**PRIMARY TARGET:** FLATHEAD CATFISH

**Y**ou can't be afraid of the dark—or the crazies that lurk within it—if you fish like Matt Crowe. He's lent his cell phone to a disheveled transvestite and her date at 2 in the morning. He's had a .22 pistol shoved

in his face during an attempted robbery. Fishing in unsavory parts of Pittsburgh might scare most people, but Crowe, 33, accepted the risks long ago. He has tailored every part of his life to the pursuit of flatheads, and a big bump on a rod is worth dealing with any other bumps in the night.

Crowe was born in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and lived for a stint in Knoxville, Tenn., before landing in Pittsburgh with his family in 1993. Their home was within walking distance of the Emsworth Dam on the Ohio River, where Crowe would fish almost daily. When he was in 10th grade, a 12-pound flathead latched on to the beef he was soaking for channel cats. At the time, he didn't even know the



**What's the worst off-season job you ever picked up?**

I was a busboy at a country club. But I'm not cultured. People would ask me if a dish was good, and I'd be like, 'I don't know. I never ate that.' I was constantly getting yelled at for swearing. —M.C.

species existed in the river. Within the next few years, his obsession with them would change his entire life.

"When I was in high school, I did a lot of partying. But as I got more into flatheads, I decided I didn't wanna drink on Friday nights, I wanted to fish," Crowe says. "By the time I was in my early 20s, I was working at landscaping. And I remember thinking I was busting my ass for some other guy to get ahead. I thought that if I put this same amount of effort into my fishing, I could get really good at it."

Crowe talked his way into a schedule that allowed him to fish five days and work only two. When the sun was up, he focused all his energy on catching bait to

fill the livewell that lived in the kitchen of his tiny apartment. From dusk to dawn, he was on the river, grabbing bits of sleep in a folding chair here and there. If he could find a friend to tag along, he was grateful for the company, but many of those nights were spent alone. His passion eventually boiled over when he walked off a landscaping job just so he could fish during the pre-spawn for five consecutive days without ever leaving the river.

"I never wanted a lot of stuff. I still don't," Crowe says. "I'm very minimalist. I'm fine just making enough to pay rent and support my catfish addiction."

Crowe still uses a flip phone and doesn't own a computer. His girlfriend has a smartphone. Crowe says he's dropped hundreds of pins on her Google Maps, all places within a four-hour radius of Pittsburgh that he believes might be good flathead spots. He claims if it's been written about flatheads, he's read it. And if "the book" says it can't be done, he'll try it. His hunger to learn and better his skills has led him to a personal-best 65-pound flathead in Ohio during a routine weekend-long flathead camp-out. Catching catfish may never pay Crowe's bills, but he treats it like a job.

"I think a lot of people wonder why they're on the Earth or what they're supposed to do with their life," he says. "I don't have to ask myself that question. I'm here to catfish. I've found my happiness."

KOMIENKO ALEXANDR/ALAMY (DISHES); COURTESY OF MATT CROWE (CATFISH)

## DAVID BURGHER

THE TROUT NOMAD

**HOME WATERS:** RIVERS OF COLORADO AND CHILE

**PRIMARY TARGET:** TROUT

**B**eing in one place for too long drives David Burgher crazy. He's the kind of guy who's cool with living in a tent alongside a river for a month if the fishing's good. At 30, he is the epitome of the dude who goes where opportunity and fishing take him, and his lack of roots has allowed him to immerse himself in trout scenes most people would kill to fish for a single day. Being a professional guide and full-time wanderer, however, is not exactly what Burgher's conservative Texas family had in mind for him.

"I was studying architecture at the University of Arkansas in 2007. It was super stressful," he says. "One day I had a flashback to flyfishing as a kid with a family friend and decided to pick it back up as a way to de-stress. That's when everything changed."

Burgher switched to a less taxing major and became fluent in the Arkansas streamer game, thanks to a mentor on the Little Red River.



Burgher mugs it up with a massive Argentine brown.



**What's the one piece of gear you can't live without?**

I wear prescription sunglasses. Without them I'm legally blind, so if I ever lose them on the water, I'm in trouble. —D.B.

By his senior year, he was running guide trips all over the state. The day after graduation, he shocked his family by telling them he was leaving for the Catskill Mountains in New York.

"There weren't great hatches in Arkansas, and I needed to learn about bugs," Burgher says. "I had a buddy who was managing a lodge on the Delaware, and he asked me if I wanted to intern. He had me running around the river with a butterfly net catching bugs. I looked like a moron, but I learned entomology."

Thanks to his connections, Burgher's next move took him to Alaska. The only problem was that he felt the fishing was essentially too easy there. He was

spending too much time standing on the bank with a net while the salmon often seemed to "hook themselves." Wanting to get more proficient at nymphing and to be more engaged with guide clients, Burgher's next jump took him to Colorado, where he worked on the Roaring Fork and Gunnison, among many other rivers. But it was during this time that his Alaska stint paid off.

"The days are so long in Alaska that to make it there, you can't be allergic to work," Burgher says. "I always wanted to guide in Chile, and the outfitters down there really like seeing Alaska on a résumé."

In the winter of 2014, Burgher scored his dream gig. A friend that

had been working in Chile couldn't sign on for that season but recommended Burgher to the boss. It was his ticket to what he calls Disneyland for trout freaks.

He still guides in Chile every winter, spending the rest of his season in Colorado. If the mood strikes him, he may drift off with a tent for a while to another unexplored river. He says he's not opposed to settling down for good but won't consider it until he's checked more places off his to-fish list. Aspiring guides hound Burgher for advice, and his best piece is simple.

"Fish your ass off and don't ever stop learning," he says. "If you're catching fish on a fly, you know it works. Cut it off and try a different fly."



**Who should be sponsoring you?**

Pedialyte and Krazy Glue. One keeps me hydrated, and the other stops me from going to the hospital. —D.B.



# JON MARTIN

THE FALL GUY

HOME WATER: TRASK RIVER, OR

PRIMARY TARGET: SALMON

**J**on Martin's father was a salmon junkie, and when you live outside Portland, Ore., it's easy to get your fix. There are dozens of coastal rivers to choose from, most of which Martin knew like the back of his hand before he could ever drive a car. His parents were divorced, and when he was with his dad every other weekend, he was on the

water. When he was with his mom, he'd sneak off to one of the smaller trout streams closer to her house. The fishing-fiend seed was planted early, but Martin, 34, credits his first taste of independence as the true catalyst for his undying devotion to the anadromous brutes of the Pacific Northwest.

"When I got my first truck at 16, I spent every weekend that I possibly could fishing and exploring," he says. "You don't realize how much you



**What's the most reliable piece of tackle in your arsenal?**

I have a few old lamiglas bobber rods that have been with me for a long time. I still use them, but every time I do, I think about how sad I'm gonna be when one finally breaks.  
—J.M.

love it until you get older and pick it up on your own."

The average college student wants the summer off. That didn't work for Martin. Fall was salmon season, so he tailored his class schedule in a way that allowed him to spend six days a week on the water from September through November. When he wasn't waiting for floats to drop, he studied. In 2006, an opportunity came along that cut even further into his school time.

"Some friends of my dad bought a lodge in Alaska. They knew me and my abilities," he says. "That was really fortunate, because when they asked me to come up to work, I got to skip being the camp hand and got thrown right into guid-

ing on the Nushigak."

Martin spent the next three summers in Alaska, honing both the conventional tackle and fly skills that would make him an even better angler back in Oregon. Between it all, he ended up graduating with a degree in accounting and finance. With the economy so bad at the time, he figured he wouldn't have trouble finding work.

"I took an accounting job right out of school. Then I decided I wanted to be a fishing guide and quit," Martin says. "I didn't plan that out well. I left the job in August and needed to start running trips in September. I just kind of spent every day on the water whether I had clients or not. If I didn't have a trip, I'd take friends, and the business just started to grow from word of mouth."

According to Martin, guide competition is fierce in Oregon, but thanks to his drive and his personality, business boomed. Problem was, after a few years, he realized his dream job was starting to feel too much like work. In 2014, he made the call to make guiding a part-time gig, falling back on his financial chops to pay the bulk of the bills. Of course, he worked his schedule to allow him to spend at least four days a week on the water during the salmon and winter steelhead seasons.

"When fishing became a job, I suddenly wasn't as excited to go," he says. "Now I'm back to being sleepless the nights before I fish because I'm so pumped."

COURTESY OF JON MARTIN (MARTIN)

# KELLY WATSON

THE FISH SMOKER

HOME WATERS: GULF AND INLAND WATERS OF NEW ORLEANS

PRIMARY TARGETS: REDFISH, SEATROUT, LARGEMOUTH BASS



**W**hen Kelly Watson goes fishing, he takes exactly one rod. On the off chance that it breaks, he doesn't get upset. He paddles his kayak back to his truck, hits the drive-thru at one of the daiquiri shacks found on nearly every corner in New Orleans, and goes home. Maybe that night he'll catch a good live band. Maybe not. His life is as free-form as the jazz music he loves so much, with all the notes arranged around being able to fish as much as possible. To create the ultimate harmony, Watson, 48, has come to learn that fishing can't be work. Like everything he does, fishing has to be laid-back.

"Twenty years ago, I was a canoe guide for bass in the Texas hill

country," he says. "And then it decided not to rain for two years, and all the rivers dried up. I could have learned new waters, but I decided to move to New Orleans and start a new thing. I was done guiding. To do that here I'd have to go to the next level. I've always been kind of a poor, cash-only boy. I couldn't go to the bank and say I needed a loan for a \$50,000 boat."

That new thing was working sales for a local lure company that was on the fast track to success. Then the BP oil spill happened in 2010, crushing every saltwater fishing-related industry in the New Orleans area. The job Watson thought would be long-term was short lived, but his minimal-



**Have you ever bartered fishing for other services?**

I messed up my truck once and I knew I could fix it, but I didn't have the right tools. A few days later, a buddy said his family wanted to fish. They were in the hardware business. I took them out for a beautiful new mega set of tools. —K.W.

Watson with a late-night redfish hooked just outside of New Orleans.

ist lifestyle and ability to roll with the punches saw him through.

What made a move to New Orleans so appealing to Watson was the variety of fish he could target in the area, his passion for music, and his love of good food. He quickly found a home boiling crawfish and running the smoker at a buddy's barbecue joint and has been there for the past seven years. Part-time, of course.

"I'm on the water at least three days a week, and I fish at night a lot," Watson says. "I love catching seatrout under dock lights, but my real passion is shallow-water redfish, because



**What's the one piece of gear you can't live without?**

I got a free Watershed dry bag in 1999. That bag has gone on every trip I've been on since. I call it my purse. —K.W.

my specialty in Texas was sight-fishing for smallmouths. I get to use those skills here. But there is so much diversity around New Orleans. We have amazing largemouth bass fishing. There's phenomenal blue cat fishing in the river right downtown. I can go offshore for tuna, snapper, and amberjack."

How Watson is fishing is hardly important so long as he's on the water. He might wade a flat, hit a dock, drop his kayak, jump on a friend's boat, or splash his aluminum poling skiff—which he's quick to admit is "beat up and not super reliable." But it suits him, because Watson is a firm believer in having only what you need to pursue your passion. He doesn't do excess or waste. He was proud of a largemouth he'd recently caught on a purple worm pulled from a pack he bought nearly 30 years ago in high school. He'd never bought another pack of purple worms because he had those in his tackle box, and there was nothing wrong with them. That frugality is what helps Watson maintain his care-free fishing life while guys with thousands of dollars' worth of new tackle—and a lot of debt in many cases—probably don't fish a fraction as often.

"Doing things any other way is not an option. This is in my blood," Watson says. "I have fun every day of my life, whether I'm catching fish or boiling crawfish."

COURTESY OF KELLY WATSON (WATSON); SERGIO AZENHA/ALAMY (WRENCH)



Martin with a pair of Oregon salmon—the species he lives to catch.





# TRAVIS EDENS

THE COUNTRY PUNK

HOME WATER:  
SHENANDOAH RIVER, WV

PRIMARY TARGET:  
SMALLMOUTH BASS

S ometimes it's the smallest things that provide the biggest inspiration. If you've ever saved a fortune from a fortune cookie, you understand. More than 20 years ago, Travis Edens found a fortune worth saving in the back of a fishing magazine. All these years later, he doesn't even remember the name of the periodical, but the short story on the back page has never left him.

"It was about a guide up in Canada that was this old, kind of gnarly local dude that just fished that area forever," Edens recalls. "I wanted to be that guy where I lived. I wanted to become the wise old-timer that knew his water better than any other local."

Edens, 47, was born and raised in the West Virginia panhandle near Harpers Ferry. His twinge of twang and

country-boy ruggedness belie his love of the '80s-era punk bands he grew up seeing in Washington, D.C., the bustle of which lies just over an hour east of the rural Shenandoah Valley where Edens spends more than 200 days a year rowing his clients to heavy bronzebacks. He is one of only three full-time guides in the area, and that low number ties directly to Edens' deep-rooted love of his home water.

"The Shenandoah gets overlooked because we're so close to the Susquehanna and the New," he says. "But its beauty



**What's the worst off-season job you ever picked up?**  
The Amazon fulfillment center. I was inside all day long, walking on concrete. Controlled climates are just unnatural, dude. —T.E.

**Who should be sponsoring you?**  
RC Cola. I drink about a case a week. The flavors of Coke and Pepsi have changed over the years. RC's flavor hasn't. It's old-school, man. —T.E.



Edens shows off a hefty Shenandoah River bronzeback.

bad, and it wasn't going to get any better unless I did something about it for myself."

Devoting yourself to a fishery might erase the 9-to-5 scheduling, but it comes with a new grind. Rafts need constant mending and cleaning. Lunches need to be made. The clock doesn't stop when you're off the water, and in between the trips that pay the bills, Edens still wants to be on the river. He prefers not to fish on a schedule. He gets closer to his goal of being the sage local when he can try new spots, fish a hole as long as he wants, and experiment with new lures and flies he's not tying on for clients. At 47, he says he still needs more time to become that guy, but he's getting there. He's sure he'll be rowing the Shenandoah when he's 60, and still partaking in his favorite winter pastime: "Wishing it was summer."

and potential are incredible. If I had the chance to guide somewhere else for more money, I'm gonna sit right here. There's so much more for me to learn."

Edens has been learning the "Doah" his entire life. Two decades ago, he was guiding it on the side while working in the nursery business. When the economy bottomed out in 2008, he decided he was done "working for the man" and began guiding full-time.

"When the bubble burst, I said, screw it, I'm taking the leap," Edens says. "Stuff had gotten

JOE CERMELE (EDENS); MICHAEL BURRELL/ALAMY (BOX)

# ERIC KERBER

THE STRIPER  
SNOWBIRD

HOME WATERS:  
NEW JERSEY COAST AND  
FLORIDA KEYS

PRIMARY TARGETS:  
STRIPED BASS, TUNA,  
SNOOK

The striped bass tattoo that covers Eric Kerber's forearm tells his story. It's a flag that flies for the Jersey coast where his salty roots took hold. It pays homage to the species that lit an unquenchable fire that would eventually consume his life. Whether it's buried under a heavy jacket on a frigid December day in New Jersey or getting more sun-bleached as he poles a skiff in the Florida Keys, that bass is a reminder of the long road to becoming a successful captain on two of the most competitive pieces of coastline in the country.

"I owned a landscaping business from 1999 to 2007," Kerber says. "I was making really good money. But I just couldn't stand getting calls about a bite going



off while I was mowing somebody's lawn."

The decision to switch from leaf blowers to outboards didn't come without consequences. Above all, money concerns strained relationships with loved ones.

"Most people would have been really scared to start over, but I thought it was exciting," he says. "A lot of people told me I was crazy, so I was determined to prove them wrong."

Within two years, Kerber, 39, had solidified his reputation as one of the top striped bass captains in New Jersey, largely because he fished whether he was getting paid or not. The amount of time he spent on the water gave him a back pocket full of one-off humps and rockpiles



**What's your best money-saving hack?**  
Don't ever cut more leader off the spool than you need. People always tie a knot and cut off 8 inches of tag end or more. Leader is expensive, and those tag ends add up fast. —E.K.

that would produce a striper or three while everyone else struggled. In the winter he worked in a tackle shop, mostly so he could drum up more charter customers. It was a constant hustle to grow the business, though when an offer to work in Islamorada, Fla., in the winter came his way in 2013, that hustle reached new levels.

"I was itching to learn new fisheries, but you have to remember the best captains in the world fish in the Keys," Kerber says. "Nobody gave me the time of day that first year. I had to prove I could fish all over again. And I had to prove I could drink 30 beers in a sitting with those guys."

On days when there were no clients on the

Kerber with a heavy striper on New Jersey's Raritan Bay.

big boat he was working for, he took the owner's small skiff into the backcountry, venturing farther each time, decoding more skinny-water secrets. By the following winter, he was taking paying customers out for everything from snook to tarpon. He'd also earned the respect of his new "Keys family."

The lack of sleep takes a toll, Kerber admits. He wishes he could spend more time with his family. There is always the stress of knowing a week of bad weather can keep bills from being paid, but he'll never quit. "There's never a day I don't want to go to work," he says. 🍷🍷🍷