



ROGUE WEEK

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Rogue Notions

Noah Weil
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Welcome back to Limited Information! I hope everyone enjoyed Dave Guskin's work [last week](#). Remember these articles exist to determine who will be heading LI in the near future. If you want to see a particular author be sure to say so on the boards or by email.

But for this week, you've got yours truly and the gallery of Rogues. Rogues in general, if you haven't had the pleasure, are incredibly fun to work with. There always seems to be a sneaky plan, or perhaps some hidden scroll, whenever Rogues are around. They're a breed of fun and profit no question, but that's not to say putting together a solid Rogue package is a simple task. As you may expect from decks predominantly blue and black, things become a little complicated at the drafting table and beyond. Hopefully this week's examination of the Rogue archetype in detail, as well as a discussion of some particular cards, will make the process more manageable and enticing. The rewards for pulling off a Rogue deck are extraordinary; practically no other archetype can win faster or more overwhelmingly than a well-executed rogue build. Treacherously, a bad Rogue deck comes up painfully short, with practically no other archetype falling as hard. Certainly Rogues are a gamble, but considering the source material, they wouldn't want it any other way.

The Rogue Philosophy

Despite their sneaky-type flavors, the true Rogue Limited deck is as upfront as can be: hit 'em fast and hit 'em hard. The reason the Rogue deck can win so spectacularly is that it's perpetual. One hit begets another. That's awfully tough for an opponent who's trying to stabilize, especially when prowl cards give hefty bonuses to cost and card advantage. The true Rogue deck has no interest in defense because it turns off too many bonuses. Rogues want to keep laying out beats and until a dead opponent emerges. Effective, and not incidentally, quite a bit of fun.

How does the deck actually play? You're probably black-blue. Your deck is going to have a very fine curve, with as many two- and three-drops as possible, with a few ones and maybe some late game heavy hitters. Defensive or high-end cards like [Dreamspoiler](#) [Witches](#) or [Æthersnipe](#) won't be as highly sought after, since they take up too much mana for ephemeral gain (although they are still strong in the general sense). Since your goal is to overwhelm, your cheap guys and tricks are paramount. [Pestermite](#) is absolutely gigantic in the archetype, as is [Whirlpool Whelm](#) and often [Wings of Velis Vel](#). All this is to trigger prowl (née Backstab née Skillz That Killz), allowing you to keep up the heat. Your opponent will put a defense together eventually, but by that time he'll be so low in life that your tricks and an alpha rush will finish it off. Cards like [Noggin Whack](#) and [Oona's Blackguard](#) keep them reeling, and just like that, you've taken the match with 45 minutes to get lunch. Simple, right?

The dangers when playing the deck are twofold: bad draws for you and good draws from them. Overcoming the first danger requires some luck, but mostly a tight awareness of your plan during the draft. Splitting your focus on what you're trying to do is going to end really badly. Rogue decks at their core require a certain progression. Mucking around with Glen Endra Pranksters instead of [Skeletal Changeling](#) or [Inkfathom Divers](#) instead of [Paperfin Rascal](#) is going to make your cutthroat advantages far harder to attain.

The second risk is that your opponent has a particularly good start. Without a doubt, the worst thing for a Rogue deck to be doing is blocking. For one, your guys are probably smaller, so the trades will be lopsided. For another, it means you're not attacking, which means something has gone wrong. Your advantage, tenuous though it might be, revolves around continuous semi-incremental damage. As soon as you stop swinging, your cards double in price and/or halve in effectiveness. That's a Bad Thing. When it works though...



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How to Acquire

I barely ever sit down to a table and think "today I'm going to draft [Rogues]." This has nothing to do with the quality of [Rogues]; my style is simply more reactive. It's a rare format where a drafter can plumb a powerful and underutilized archetype (although the [Handservant deck](#) came close). Rather, I'll be looking at the packs and taking strong cards, with an eye towards jumping in if colors and neighbors cooperate. Somewhat by design, within the blue-black sphere the Rogue deck overlaps with Goblins, Faeries, and Merfolk. That means it's not too difficult to get a piece, but quite tough to corner the market.

For the record, you don't *have* to make a Rogue deck black and blue, but it helps. At the very least, don't expect your nonblue, nonblack color to help with the theme. Black and blue provide some excellent evasive creatures in both sets, as well as the bounce and removal to get them through. Generally, in combinations other than black-blue, the Rogue theme is just a bonus to normally strong stuff, like **Noggin Whack** or **Latchkey Faerie**. Even then though, being aware of the potential of Rogue action in *Morningtide* should be in your head with the *Lorwyn* portion.

The big winners for the rogue archetype from the *Lorwyn* side are **Boggart Loggers**, **Paperfin Rascal**, and **Deeptread Merrow** (we'll get to **Nightshade Stinger** in a bit). Each of these three had their uses, but were hardly high picks in triple *Lorwyn*. At best, they were welcome sideboard cards or curve-fillers. Now that *Morningtide* is in, all three shoot up significantly. They still have all their tribal and sideboard bonuses from before, with the additional mise potential of helping gel a sick Rogue concoction.

Which brings us to a big danger of Rogue drafting. It may not come together! Reliance on the gifts of the third pack is dangerous ground. You are highly vulnerable to the contents of the packs and the whims of the people around you. Don't be too dissuaded though—even if Rogues don't happen per se, you're probably in fine shape for Faeries or the 'folk. It will be up to you how much your drafting is going to *depend* on Rogue effects, rather than simply being very grateful for them. This is why those three cards above are so appealing now; they start at a decent base and are potentially part of something awesome.

Basically the Rogue deck occurs half out of awareness, half because of precision, and half from luck, with a third dedicated to rogue math. The careful drafter will dip their toe here and there, and when the time is right, fully commit to the core plan: quick and dirty beats. Where that tipping point hits is anyone's guess, but after you've decided to take the plunge, don't go back. Of course once you've decided to enter the Rogue kingdom, you need to figure out some key cards to the deck. We can help you with that.



Cards of Note

Violet Pall: Besides being the strongest common in *Morningtide* by far, this **Seize the Soul** redux beats out a lot of uncommons in the Rogue deck as well. The power of this card is through the roof, which is why any black deck will happily take it, and many others will take it and splash for it anyway. In the Rogue deck it shines not just as an automatic prowl enabler, but as a quasi-defensive card that doesn't actually make you stop attacking. In theory you may draft such a dedicated prowl deck that you would rather have a **Stinkdrinker Devil** or **Auntie's Snitch** instead. In practice, it's rare to know the rogue deck came together that well by pack 3, pick 1, and you're not seeing Palls by pick 6. There are times when it is correct to take a truly dedicated Rogue piece over **Violet Pall**, but not often. **Violet Pall** is just so flexible, without conceding power, I can't help but adore it.

Nightshade Stinger: An interesting case. While **Nightshade Stinger** had a mild value in LLL, it was mostly a 12th–15th pick, and rightfully so. Yet NS has been heralded as an auto pick 1–3 now, a must-kill, and upon receiving 5th, a signal that Rogues are wide open. But I'm skeptical. It's just an enabler, right?

Enablers are the lubrication of a deck. Enablers make what you want to do (rewards) easier to accomplish. But although they make the gears turn smoother, they themselves are not driving forces. A good enabler makes an opponent cringe *because of what's coming next*, not the enabler itself. For example, let's look at a close prowl cousin: **Affinity**.

Affinity, you may or may not recall, was brokenly good in Constructed. Although harder to pull off, **Affinity** was also quite powerful in Limited. Get a few artifact lands, then power out cheap **Myr Enforcers** and **Somber Hoverguards**. The three-mana **Myr Enforcers** was the reward for your bevy of **artifact land** and **Spellbomb** enablers. The only problem was the difficulty of securing both rewards and enablers. Both were in high demand for their abundant synergy. There were probably more reward-cards than desirable enabler-cards in *Mirrodin*, yet you'd always want to start with a reward card first. **Myr Enforcer** the hard way is still a 4/4 creature, even if it costs as much as **Durkwood Boars** under **Feroz's Ban**. But a deck of all artifact lands and nothing to do with them simply made you **Tanglewalker**-walkable. There was *minimal* gain in decks with only rewards, but there was *no* gain in decks with only enablers. There are plenty of enablers these days that are so omni-useful that the rewards are default, e.g.



Fertile Ground. But even then you (almost) never take **Fertile Ground** first pick. In the beginning it goes rewards > enablers. Later on you tune as you see fit.

Under this model, the Stinger is an enabler yet has to be taken before any reward! I've got an issue with that, or at least blowing a high pick on it. Remember, Rogues are not guaranteed, even with the perfect base. Pack 3 can be a cruel mistress. That being said, I've heard a lot of support for the Stinger around the water cooler. To resolve this, I asked a few players to share their views on the Stinger and Rogues in LLM.

Gerry Thompson: "Prowl reminds me a lot of the guild scenario in *Ravnica*. In RRG, do you force blue-red and hope you get hooked up in pack 3? What if you have an insane blue-red deck if pack 3 has ANYTHING of value and then the packs are just blank? It's kind of the same thing with prowl in *Morningtide*. I don't think you should just move in prowl cards like the Stinger because they might not make your deck if pack 3 doesn't give you the goods. It's fine to take Stinger a little higher than normal though with the intent to play it if you get a decent amount of prowl stuff. Overall just take it 6-8 knowing that it might not make your deck."

Zvi Moshowitz: "I think **Nightshade Stinger** is now an early pick but only for the Rogue deck. I think a player looking in that direction can reach for it, sometimes as early as 4th or 5th in a poor pack, but you're taking a risk because if you draft a different deck or the prowl doesn't come then you're out in the cold. It's a pure win to have it instead of not have it, if you're going there. I also think it's a strong card to counterdraft later on especially for black mages since the replacement card involves fear. In terms of killing it, I would have to know that my opponent got there. It's too likely that he either has a lot of enablers (including slower ones) and can't be stopped or doesn't have much to do. If I knew the deck in detail that could easily change things, but there's too big a risk otherwise. Of course, players have to realize there's no shame in burning a **Tarfire** on it if the situation calls for it."

Antoine Ruel: "I don't like playing too many "@\$^#%*" cards in my deck. You never really know if the good Rogue motor is gonna show up, and if it is, the 1/1 fear is good in my opinion. I will pick the **Nightshade Stinger** if there is nothing left in the pack, but I'd rather have a less explosive but more reliable deck..."

Jon Finkel: "I think it might be the card whose value most increased with the addition of *Morningtide*. It went from unplayable to a key part of the Rogue deck. I've been wheeling them the second time around, which is also nice because it confirms no one in the few seats to your right is going Rogues... if they don't wheel, maybe you go Wizards, or play with legitimately good cards."

I like Jon's comment in particular, since it revolves around a table's intentions rather than some intrinsic potency. The sentiment seems to be clear though, **Nightshade Stinger** is a fine card in Rogue decks, but the deck itself doesn't come together as often as one would like. Antoine's comment on **Prickly Boggart** is accurate as well, although I've found with people taking the good prowl stuff early, Prickly can get the hate draft later on.

Oona's Blackguard: Cool art, absolutely fearsome effect on the board. Generally stronger than **Cloak and Dagger**, a sick card in its own right, the Blackguard turns your little people into bigger people and rips the opponent's hand to shreds along the way. It's a classic "kill me or die" card, and it comes down quickly enough to have a decent shot at survival. You are never upset to open this.

Stinkdrinker Bandit / Notorious Throng: These two cards are tied together as particularly powerful cards in the Rogue archetype, comparable to the Blackguard. In general, they're also quite risky. These two cards have a massive range of effectiveness from out-and-out game winners to being grotesquely overcosted, or worse, useless. Don't let their potential for impotence turn you off on them; these two are among the strongest incentives to be in the pure-Rogue domain. Cards that can dominate a game at these prices are few and far between, thankfully. As anyone who's been on the back-end of a prowled **Notorious Throng** will tell you, rare isn't rare enough for a card that creates **Time Walk + Army**.

But again, thankfully, these cards do require some precision from their owner, if not in play than in the drafting stage. To demonstrate, let's explore a simple **Magic** maxim: "The player who is winning on turn four is more likely to be winning on turn six, and is more likely to be winning on turn eight, etc." This isn't a hard and fast rule, if it were there would be no come-from-behind victories, and **Magic** would be a dull game (note: there are and it's not). But you'll notice "come-from-behind" does mean "behind"; as in an uphill fight. As far as averages are concerned, the people that start ahead end ahead. Common sense perhaps, but a tenet exceptionally relevant to Limited play.

Why are cards like **Wrath of God** valued so highly? Because they let you divert this trait. Any kind of unequal fight is suddenly struck down, or more often, an utter reversal of each player's position. From having a 5-0 creature advantage, the **Wrathed** player is suddenly -5 on card advantage. That is gigantic. The **Wrath** player doesn't have to cast their spell when, for example, they're winning. In that case the player is on -1 card advantage but... they're winning. We know how that state usually ends.

Magic, especially in Limited, is a game of momentum. When you've got it, you want to keep it, exploit it. The best way to win a game of **Magic** is simply to get in a winning position and stay there. Now what defines "winning



position" is a little more complicated and beyond the scope of our work today. It has remarkably little to do with life totals.

What does this rhetoric have to do with the two cards above? They both epitomize the rogue strategy, which is gain some momentum or tempo (or whatever) and maximize it. But *prowl* makes the point even finer. Because like the maxim above, we can envision in the probability sense that if you're hitting your opponent with an evasive creature *this turn*, you are likely going to be able to do it *next turn*. Admittedly **Notorious Throng's** *prowl* turns the "likely" into "definitely," so let's look at **Stinkdrinker Bandit**.

Stinky Drinky can come down in one of three ways: off *prowl*, hardcast pre-combat, and hardcast post-combat. Of those three, the last one is terrible. *Prowl* is fine, because again it meant you hit them once and are therefore likely to get the bonus on the subsequent turn. Needless to say, base power + 2 creates some very hard hits, especially if you're able to get multiple guys through. But **Stinkdrinker Bandit's** really dangerous option is door number two, which blindsides an opponent with 2–8 extra damage out of nowhere. We can assume you will pick the choice that best fits the game you're playing. Having the option is simply gravy.

But here's the flipside. **Stinkdrinker Bandit** is hideously bad as any kind of attacker. Sure, if you're somehow able to *prowl* cards out *via* **Stinkdrinker** you're doing something right. The threat of its 4 damage on the return strike is not inconsequential. But if you're not able to reliably apply its bonuses or *vis-à-vis* not reliably able to *prowl* it out, then its value drops like a stone. This is true for almost any card of course. How reliably are you able to exploit what its trying to do? Again though, these two are on the extreme end. If you're drafting the deck with Rogues in mind, both of these are exceptionally high picks. Its those instances where your deck has taken a different turn, maybe you're on the fence, you need to make that critical analysis and determine what in all likelihood **Stinkdrinker Bandit** or **Notorious Throng** will likely be able to do for you.

Speaking of **Stinkdrinker Bandit**, I've been asked a few times why it gives +2/+1, instead of the more obvious +2/+0. After all, who needs a toughness boost for unblocked creatures? It's a good question. There are two reasons why **Stinks** gives that extraneous-seeming toughness boost.

The first reason is simple, if a bit dry. What card would care about toughness at that point? The popular "timeshifted" land **Desert** of course! At the time, **Desert** was a highly played card in FFL, the internal Wizards testing league, especially with Faeries and Rogues getting major boosts in power. **Stinkdrinker** was given the toughness enhancement as a kind of trace buster buster to push these themes along. But there's another reason as well:



Remember this little gem from *Future Sight*? **Stinkdrinker** giving +2/+0 would effectively be granting rogues frenzy 2. It would be strange to introduce the frenzy keyword on a single card in the block. But it's also strange to spell out the ability and not use the keyword so recently introduced. We decided to approach the issue laterally and change the effect slightly to the printed version. In this way the card was materially unaffected, while frenzy was conserved for its proper introduction.

Morsel Theft: Ah **Morsel Theft**, the little **Soul Feast** that could. This one has generated quite a bit of reaction since the *Morningtide* release. Despite the hype, **Morsel Theft** has not been a major performer in the Rogue archetype as of yet. It's not a *bad* card, but considering the potential to "live the dream," **Morsel Theft** hasn't quite made the grade. Let's see what **Morsel Theft** offers to the Rogue player, and consequently, what it doesn't.

Your base effect is a 6-point life swing for one card. That's not bad, but it's not amazing. While either half has its uses, it's fairly rare to want to spend a card to gain life or spend a card to make them lose life. You're not *against* the kicker portion of course, it's just not your main thrust. As an easy example, if they're at 3 life, you want to deal three damage to them. The lifegain is completely extraneous. Sometimes you just want 3 life, and the 3 damage, while welcome, is not *why* you play the card when you did. As a card plus kicker, **Morsel Theft** is a little costly. You get your flexibility, but it's not free. Rarer still are those times where you're genuinely interested in dealing 3 and gaining 3; simply put, it's unusual to be winning

and losing at the same time. Then again, that may be what we call a race. Let's explore that.

You and your opponent are in this race, trading hits back and forth. Maybe you're a little ahead, maybe they're a little ahead, but whoever is in the lead the other person is one turn behind. Any little card could tip the scales the other way. **Morsel Theft** is clearly killer in the situation, but honestly, what isn't? "Any little card" means a good blocker, a piece of removal, what have you. Comparing **Morsel Theft** to removal is a little unfair; I don't know anyone passing **Violet Pall** for **Morsel Theft**. But you can see that the situations where Theft is truly maximized, that is side A and side B are both relevant, are fairly unusual. Cards with unreliability get a strike in my book.

But then there's that prowl feature. Half the cost and drawing a card is a huge bargain! If the cost of a cantrip on a card is +2 mana, then you've practically gotten a free **Scorched Ruins** out of prowling **Morsel Theft**. A sweet deal, but unfortunately it contradicts the purpose of cards like **Morsel Theft** entirely! A first-turn **Prickly Boggart** into a second turn **Morsel Theft** seems good, but honestly you've done very little. It's the nature of these spells.



Cards like **Morsel Theft** and **Lava Axe** and **Soul Feast** are finisher cards, in that you want them to finish the game. Speaking for myself, I'm always doing the math in a game, calculating how many attacks I can withstand and how much I need to dish out. Presuming good opponents with good draw and good decks, these are usually very close numbers. Most quality players are aggressive, which means a lot of back and forth hits and close games. Check out some of the [coverage from Kuala Lumpur](#) to see examples of this. Cards like **Lava Axe** are a secret. You're doing math and they're doing math, but only you know their true life total is -5 from whatever they're thinking. The later in the game it is, the more relevant this secret life total is. Which makes sense, as both players have invested many turns and resources into working with these purported life totals. **Soul Feast** or **Searing Flesh** or whatever gives its owner confidence and lets him or her make extremely aggressive attacks, like giving up 3 life to take away 2. Most opponents are happy to make this trade, which fits into the "Let me Axe you a question" plan just fine.

So a prowled **Morsel Theft** on the second or third turn derails this plan completely. Remembering how hard it is to reverse course after so many turns of racing has gone by, it's quite easy to alter your focus before any committal of resources. A final-turn **Lava Spike** is a far different animal than a first-turn one. I would have no issues making the necessary adjustments if my opponent goes from 20 life to 23. Being at 5 life against a rogue player? That's a little more nerve wracking. Which ends up not in favor of **Morsel Theft**. Prowling it out ASAP, when you're most likely to be able to prowl at all, is when it's at its worst, but any other time you're already winning or its overpriced. **Morsel Theft** attacks the game in a lot of different directions, but the cost of that flexibility is effectiveness. I don't dislike **Morsel Theft** in my Rogue decks per se, but considering how fond other players seem to be of it, I don't get to play them too often. Frankly, that's okay by me.

Earwig Squad: Similar to **Morsel Theft**, this card provides an effect you want with a kicker attached. Unlike the Theft, the kicker is quite strong, occasionally a game winner. Earwig is a reward card and fights with other three-drops, but you're happy to get it. I don't think I need to convince people to draft a rare though, so trust your instincts and pick him up if you regularly prowl it out. Quick note though: even when you're losing, don't forget the last ditch information dump, i.e. prowl-search-concede. So often I see players scoop up their cards without maximizing their info for games 2 and 3. Yes, losing sucks and you want to move on as quick as possible, but next time see if you can wring a little moisture from that damp towel and snag a few drops of intel. Once in a while, it makes a difference.



Finally, here's a sample Rogue deck to get the gears turning. It has some staying power, but mostly it's just quick guy into quick prowl, and keeping the pressure on.

Essence of Roguery		
Lorwyn-Lorwyn-Morningtide Draft Deck		
Main Deck 40 cards		
8 Island	1 Boggart Loggers	1 Broken Ambitions
9 Swamp	2 Deepthread Merrow	1 Eyeblight's Ending
17 lands	1 Dewdrop Spy	1 Morsel Theft
	1 Faerie Harbinger	1 Noggin Whack
	1 Final-Sting Faerie	1 Peppersmoke
	1 Ghostly Changeling	1 Revive the Fallen
	2 Latchkey Faerie	1 Violet Pall
	1 Mulldrifter	1 Whirlpool Whelm
	1 Oona's Blackguard	
	1 Oona's Prowler	8 other spells
	1 Paperfin Rascal	

- 1 [Pestermite](#)
- 1 [Prickly Boggart](#)

15 creatures

Drafting Rogues is dangerous, with big rewards and big risks. In short, it's a lot of fun. I hope you all get the chance at some point to give the archetype a spin. Next week looks like another guest piece, this time from an old **Magic** luminary. Again, feedback is appreciated and important. Enjoy the rest of Rogue Week and thanks for reading.



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