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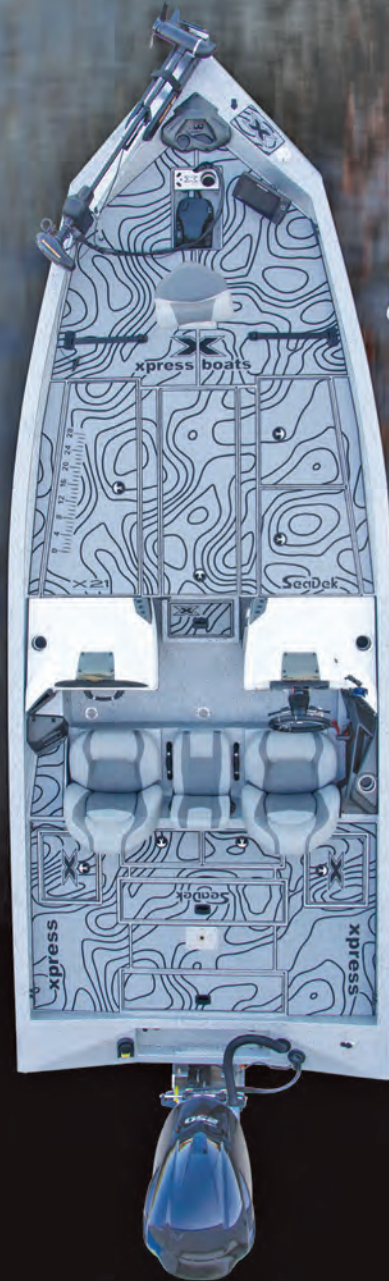
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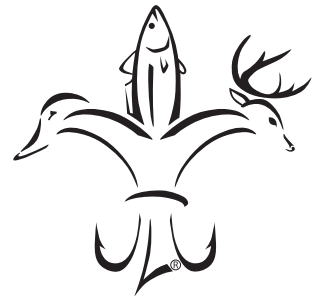
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FEBRUARY: AN IN-BETWEEN TIME



Dan Kibler is managing editor of *Carolina Sportsman* magazine. If every fish were a redfish and every big-game animal a wild turkey, he wouldn't ever complain.

Dan Kibler

HUNTING WINDING DOWN, FISHING WINDING UP AS WINTER WANES

February is a month that has more to offer than most sportsmen give it credit. Yes, deer season has been long gone, and duck season ended in late January. Squirrel hunters are still in the woods, a few waterfowl hunters are killing a few geese, and the old-line rabbit and quail hunters who love their sports enough to keep dogs are getting in a few more days afield before their seasons end at month's end.

On the hunting end of things, there's still more to think about. Plenty of deer hunters do some post-season scouting to try and get an idea about where those deer disappeared to before the season ended. A key is continuing to monitor trail cameras to get an idea of what bucks survived the 2018 season.

And February is an excellent month to work on your hunting property. There might not be a better month for the controlled burning that improves wildlife habitat. And as Jeff Burleson writes in his Greener Pastures column this month, it's a great time to plan where you might want to put food plots this year, and what to put in them. My son and I are planning to establish mineral sites on the 50-acre farm we lease to see if we can help that 130-inch 9-pointer that survived the season grow another 10 or 15 inches of horn this year.

I start my turkey scouting in late February, doing a lot of walking and looking for turkey sign: freshly scratched areas, dusting places, feathers — any indication that birds are using or travelling through an area. I'll wait until on into March to sneak out into the woods a morning or two to listen for birds gobbling so I'll have an idea where they're roosting.

I can't wait for this season, because illness cut my season short last year, and because in my possession is a trail-camera photo of 19 birds — seven longbeards, five jakes and seven hens — feeding in a clover patch in front of my deer stand, 40 yards from the spot where I called a gobbler in for a novice hunter last opening day.

As the days get longer, fish and fishermen start to stir. Crappie are really beginning to move, setting up outside the spawning flats they'll flood onto in March. And bass won't be far behind. Many fishermen are surprised at how bass set up in

February at the first warming change in the weather, and the big girls are usually the first to move.

Hopefully, we won't get a late-winter storm that devastates the speckled trout population along the coast of the two Carolinas as the storms in January 2018 did. Trout need a couple of friendly winters to rebuild their numbers are a big cold-stun/cold-kill event. ■

Lee Jones of Greene County, N.C., saw this unusual fox squirrel in a trail-camera photo on Dec. 1 and decided the gray/white body and multicolored tail made it a real trophy. He put up his deer rifle, got out his 12-gauge shotgun and hunted the squirrel until he killed it on Dec. 26.



ORANGE COUNTY BUCK WINS BAG-A-BUCK PRIZES

Who says you have to have hundreds of acres to kill nice deer?

Jeremy Shirley, a Sgt. First Class with the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Bragg, dropped a fantastic buck on a 6-acre tract in Orange County he says he's been hunting for 20 years.

The 10-point, 220-pound buck's rack, rough-scored at 164 inches (Boone & Crockett), was killed on Dec. 4. Shirley entered it in *Carolina Sportsman's* Bag-A-Buck contest several days later, and his entry was drawn as the winner of the magazine's monthly contest for December.

All subscribers to *Carolina Sportsman* are eligible to enter Bag-A-Buck, which is divided into four monthly contests (August-September, October, November and December) with prizes that include a \$25 gift certificate to the online Sportsman's Store and a free, one-year subscription to the *Sportsman*.

The grand-prize winner, to be announced in March from all entries, will receive a prize-package including a two-day deer/hog combination hunt for two people at Cherokee Run Hunting Lodge in Chesterfield County, S.C., a \$50 gift certificate to



Sgt. Jeremy Shirley of Fayetteville, N.C., won the December Bag-A-Buck contest with this Orange County trophy.

the online Sportsman's Store and a free, three-year subscription to *Carolina Sportsman*.

Shirley had a trail-camera photo of the buck on opening day of archery season, then it showed back up regularly around Thanksgiving, getting closer and closer to legal hunting time every day.

Shirley was in a box blind 20 feet off the ground in a patch of hardwoods overlooking a cornpile the morning of Dec. 4, when the buck showed up at 7:15 a.m. He anchored him with a single shot from his 7mm Magnum.

"He was dead before he hit the ground," Shirley said. ■

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NC SAYS NO TO STOCKING REDFISH IN HYCO LAKE

Field reporter Craig Holt of Snow Camp, N.C., posted this story on www.CarolinaSportsman.com on Jan. 2.

The three-year experiment to stock redfish in Hyco Lake has ended because of a hardness problem.

Not hard as in difficult, but hard as in hard water, which describes a deficiency of calcium and magnesium in the water of the 3,750-acre Duke Energy lake in Person County, N.C.

However, Corey Oakley, a fisheries biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, aid the Commission still plans to find another sportfish species that anglers can catch, will control tilapia numbers and will help return submerged underwater vegetation to the lake.

"We had an idea about putting red drum in Hyco Lake in 2015," Oakley said. After a public hearing in March 2016, the Commission decided to investigate the possibilities.

"Partly it was to make a unique fishery for that part of the state," he said. "The other part was to do something for habitat restoration. That's hard to do when tilapias are eating up (underwater vegetation)."

Redfish can survive in some freshwater lakes. Years ago, Texas placed red drum in some freshwater lakes, which gave Commission biologists a similar idea for Hyco. ■



This Hyde County black bear, found dead Dec. 17, died of rabies.

RABID BLACK BEAR FOUND DEAD IN NORTH CAROLINA

Field reporter Mike Marsh of Wilmington, N.C., posted this story on www.CarolinaSportsman.com on Dec. 31, 2018.

A black bear found dead on Dec. 17, 2018, in Hyde County, N.C., has tested positive for rabies.

Johnnie Dale, a hunting guide and operator of Buffalo Creek Guide Service, had to undergo immunization and antibiotic treatments after handling the bear one day before its death. Dale first found the black bear on Dec. 16, 2018.

"I was filling feeders with corn and peanuts, and he was lying beside one of them," Dale said. "He weighed 85 to 90 pounds and was alive but non-responsive: no leg, mouth or other movements. I checked him again at 7 p.m. He was breathing and moving his eyes but otherwise wasn't moving. I pulled out his tongue to check his throat and checked for diarrhea but couldn't find anything wrong."

The next day, when Dale checked, the bear was dead, and he called Colleen Olfenbuttel, the bear biologist for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. The bear's body was taken to the Commission's Denton office, where Chris Turner, another biologist, performed a necropsy. Turner sent samples to the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study on Dec. 19. Two days later, the SCWDS notified the NCWRC that the bear had rabies.

"Rarely is a black bear's death disease-related," Olfenbuttel said. "Maryland had a positive rabies test in a black bear in 2007, and Maryland had one in 2012. New York reported two positives in 1999 and 2003."

Dale told an official with the Hyde County Health Department that he had placed his hand in the bear's mouth without gloves, and she advised him to go to a hospital immediately because it had been five days since he handled the bear. Rabies immunizations are only effective if started within five days of exposure. He was treated at Johnson Memorial Hospital, which took blood samples, gave Dale antibiotics and his first round of shots. ■

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HUNTERS IN BOTH CAROLINAS TAGGED PLENTY OF TROPHY BUCKS DURING THE 2018 SEASON.

Here are some of the best.

It's usually pretty easy to tell when the acorn crop in the Carolinas is sub-par; the deer harvest is generally higher, and the number of big bucks killed typically appears to rise, because deer have to travel farther to find food and are more likely to wind up in front of a hunter with a rifle or shotgun and dreams of venison and antlers.

There must not have been many acorns on the forest floor last fall, because hunters in the two states took a bumper crop of trophy bucks, including several that might threaten the Boone & Crockett Club's all-time record book, and another handful of deer that anybody would consider tremen-

dous — even folks who hunt Ohio, Canada and Kansas.

One South Carolina buck may actually threaten the long-standing state record, and two North Carolina bucks are on the edge of the Boone & Crockett club's minimum of 170 typical inches.

Here are short stories about some of the best bucks killed in the Carolinas last season, eight big typicals and two big non-typical. To read longer stories about these or any of the bucks featured in the accompanying photographs, visit www.carolinasporthunter.com/category/hunting/deer-hunting/



WHERE'S WALDO?

James Sims of Blythewood, S.C., got to know a big Fairfield County buck intimately over a period of four years, nicknaming him “Waldo” — as in “Where’s Waldo?”

Sims had plenty of trail-camera photos of the buck, almost all after dark, until he ran into him on Dec. 7, 2018, and killed him.

The 13-point buck — with a 5x6 typical rack, one sticker point and a split brow tine — green-scored 188 gross inches. If it nets better than 176

inches after the 60-day drying period, it could knock off William C. Wyatt's state-record buck taken in Pickens County in 1994.

Sims shot the buck at 120 yards just after legal shooting hours began the morning of Dec. 7.

The buck had a 19-inch inside spread, main beams measuring 28½ and 27¾ inches, and four tines longer than 8 inches. The heavy rack had circumference measurements better than 5 inches.

TRUANT TROPHY

Alek Knight of Danbury, N.C., flirted with the Boone & Crockett Club's all-time record book — and North Carolina's state archery record — when he arrowed a



Alek Knight of Danbury, N.C., arrowed this huge Stokes County buck on Sept. 24.

huge Stokes County buck on Sept. 24.

Knight's deer green-scored 175% and 165% net inches. It is a main-frame 6x6 with four stickers.

The buck weighed 240 pounds, had an inside spread of 18½ inches, three tines longer than 9 inches, main beams better than 25 inches and circumference measurements between 4½ and 6 inches.

Knight talked his mother into letting stay home from school at North Stokes High School after getting a daylight trail-

camera photo of the buck the previous morning. The buck arrived early again, following a smaller 8-point buck to a corn pile. Knight arrowed him at 32 yards with a Mathews Halon bow and 4-bladed Muzzy broadhead.

FOURTH TIME THE CHARM

Phillip McBryde of Matthews, N.C., was a very patient hunter the morning of Nov. 11 on a Veterans Day hunt in Anson County.

He had a huge buck — chasing a doe — run three circles around him before he could get a shot on the fourth trip. He didn't miss, dropping an extremely tall 10-point buck that has been scored at 170% typical inches.

McBryde's buck arrived at 8:24 a.m., trailing a big doe that made three loops around McBryde's stand and grunting repeatedly. He finally got a clear shot and dropped the buck at 75 yards with his .308.

McBryde stayed in his stand for two hours before getting down for an up-



Anson County spit out this 170-inch whitetail for Phillip McBryde of Matthews, N.C.

close look at the buck.

"Every so often, I'd pick up my rifle, peek at him through my scope, and make certain he was still there and that I wasn't dreaming," he said.

>

BY THE CALENDAR

CarolinaSportsman.com profiled a lot of big bucks taken this year across North Carolina and South Carolina. Here is a gallery of trophies that measured at least 140 inches, arranged by the date of the kill. For full stories on each buck, visit www.carolinasportsman.com/category/hunting/deer-hunting/



Zachary Dinkins
Allendale County, S.C.
140 typical
Aug. 15.



Chip Veach
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HIGH, BUT NOT TOO HIGH

Brian Davis of Anderson, S.C., wondered if he'd ever see a huge buck after getting



Brian Davis of Anderson, S.C., had two years of trail-camera photos of this huge buck before killing it on Oct. 31.

two years worth of trail-camera photos.

When he finally saw the buck in person, late in the evening on Oct. 31, it was too dark to make a good shot, so Davis passed on the buck and hoped for another chance. He got it the next morning, when it showed up trailing a doe at 75 yards and gave him a clean, open shot with his .270.

"I got lucky with the shot, because a few days earlier, I dropped my rifle and the scope was the first thing to hit the ground," Davis said. "I didn't think it hurt it, but that shot was definitely high.

Luckily, it was just high enough to break the deer's back and not miss. I sighted in my scope later, and sure enough, it was a little high," he said.

The 10-point buck, which had a wide, heavy rack with a 24-inch inside spread, was green-scored at 172 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches.

SECOND-CHANCE TROPHY

Hunter Schulz of Pittsboro, N.C., and one of his neighbors both got chances to arrow a 167-inch Chatham County buck last September on adjoining properties.

The neighbor put an arrow in the buck's neck but only wounded it on Sept. 8, opening day of North Carolina's statewide archery season. Schulz got his shot on Sept. 25 — on his first hunt of the season — and he put the buck down for good.

Schulz heard grunting in the woods to the side of his stand as he watched two does feed on a corn pile around 7:05 p.m. The buck showed up a few minutes later, and Schulz ranged him at 22 yards with



Hunter Schulz of Pittsboro, N.C., dropped this 167-inch buck 19 days after a neighbor wounded it on an adjoining property.

a rangefinder. He finally got a shot with his Mathews Mission Craze bow and put a 100-grain Rage Hypodermic broadhead through both lungs.

Schulz's buck — a main-frame 5x5 with three sticker points — had an inside spread of 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, main beams better than 25 inches long and tines longer than 10 inches.

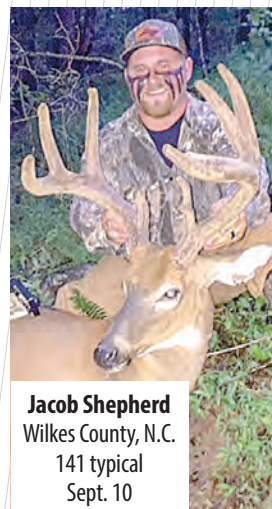
BY THE CALENDAR



Matt Atkinson
Aiken, S.C.
140 typical
Sept. 8



Heath Rayfield
Chesterfield County, S.C.
140 non-typical
Sept. 8



Jacob Shepherd
Wilkes County, N.C.
141 typical
Sept. 10



R.J. Seiler
Rockingham County, N.C.
140 typical, Sept. 10



Jason Carter
 Alamance County, N.C.
 158 typical
 Sept. 21



Tory Pegg
 Forsyth County, N.C.
 151 typical
 Sept. 23



Jerry Lee
 Florence County, S.C.
 150 typical
 Oct. 10



Carson Lee
 Williamsburg County, S.C.
 150 typical
 Oct. 11



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'FALL BREAK' BUCK

Walker Smith of Ridgeway, S.C., took some time during his fall break from school last October to deer hunt in Jasper County. Smith, 13, wound up killing a buck that green-scored 166½ inches.

Smith was sitting in a box stand with a friend when the buck popped out in a cornfield, chasing a doe. He shot the buck at 120 yards with a 7mm-08. The buck ran about 60 yards, just



Walker Smith's huge Jasper County buck scored 166½ inches.

making it to the tree line before collapsing.

Canada Smith, Walker Smith's father, said, "We were really just in shock at the size of the buck. We've had a few sightings of what I think may have been this buck, but we never got a really good look at it. To see it up close like that was astonishing."

SECOND-DAY SUCCESS

Elijah Evans, 12, of Mebane, N.C., didn't wait long this past season to take the deer of a lifetime, a 13-point crossbow buck that scored 164½ inches.

Evans took the Alamance County buck on Sept. 9, the second day of North Carolina's archery season. He killed the buck with a Parker crossbow around 7:40 p.m.

Jimmy Evans, Elijah's grandfather, was in the two-seat tower

stand with him on the hunt, and he had to discourage the young hunter from shooting a smaller deer earlier in the day.

"He wanted to shoot a small-rack buck earlier, but I wouldn't let him," Jimmy Evans said. "I'd seen this buck July 30 and another day this summer. I also had some trail camera pictures that showed his rack in velvet."

The buck carried a 4x5 main-frame rack with four sticker points.



Elijah Evans, 12, took this 164½-inch Alamance County buck with a crossbow on Sept. 9.

BY THE CALENDAR



John McDonald
Spartanburg County, S.C.
150 typical
Oct. 14



Jason Lindler
Newberry County, S.C.
140 typical, Oct. 26



Clay Hall
Rockingham County, N.C.
150 typical, Oct. 27



Andrew Purcell
Orange County, N.C.,
162 typical, Oct. 28

BY THE CALENDAR

For full stories on each buck, visit www.carolinasportsman.com/category/hunting/deer-hunting/



Alec Kearns
Granville County, N.C.
145 non-typical, Oct. 28



Mark Tinsley
Allendale County, S.C.
147 typical
Nov. 4



Jeremy Howard
Chesterfield County, S.C.
149 typical, Nov. 8



Matt Isley
Rockingham County, N.C.
142 typical, Nov. 8



Kayson Ard
Lee County, S.C.
148% typical, Nov. 9



Greg Robertson
Stokes County, N.C.
157 typical, Nov. 10



Dale Morgan
Harnett County, N.C.
153 typical
Nov. 10



Chase Watson
Granville County, N.C.
150 typical
Nov. 10



Syrus Dellinger
Anson County, N.C.
140 typical, Nov. 11



Karley Davidson
Moore County, N.C.
150 typical, Nov. 13



Travis Manuel
Forsyth County, N.C.
147 typical, Nov. 16



Jonathan Chermak
Mecklenburg County, N.C.
143 typical, Nov. 17



Jason Dunn
Alamance County, N.C.
141 typical, Nov. 21



Eric Nance
Anson County, N.C.
143% typical
Nov. 23



Thomas Cook
Moore County
144 typical
Nov. 24

HOLLER AT HIM!

Lee Thomas of Leesville, S.C., saw a buck last Nov. 25 that was worth hollering about.

Thomas actually yelled at the 11-point buck three times as it ran across a field in front of him, trailing a doe. The first



Lee Thomas took this 164-inch buck in Orangeburg County on Nov. 25.

two times, the buck ignored him, but the third time, the buck stopped long enough for Thomas to run a bullet from his .30-06 through its chest.

Thomas's buck, taken about 20 minutes before dark, had an inside spread of 16¾ inches, but its tall tines — several better than 10 inches — were a big part of the 164½-inch score it received at Great

Outdoor Taxidermy in Bowman.

Thomas killed the buck at about 60 yards after it first appeared 300 yards away, taking the same path that a doe and 6-point buck took.

WORTH THE WAIT

As soon as Dylan Martin of Stoneville, N.C., saw one big buck on a trail-camera photo, he knew it was a special animal.

"He was already big in July, and he had a lot of growing left to do. He gave me anxiety all summer long," Martin said.

Worried that he might spook the buck going to his stand before daylight on Sept. 8, opening day of North Carolina's archery season, Martin decided to wait until the afternoon to get in his deer stand.

The buck was worth the wait. It showed up about 7:45 p.m., at the tail end of a group of bachelor bucks, following a doe to a cornpile.

Shortly thereafter, the buck gave Martin



Dylan Martin took his 171-inch non-typical on Sept. 8.

a broadside shot, and he took it, slamming a bolt and Rage broadhead from his crossbow through the buck, which ran 60 yards before falling.

The buck, whose full-velvet rack carried 20 scoreable points, measured 171½ non-typical inches, in the neighborhood of North Carolina's crossbow record.

BY THE CALENDAR



Zach Laws
Avery County, N.C.
169 typical
Nov. 29



Jake Williams
Richmond County, N.C., 154 typical
Dec. 25



Caleb Alcorn
Alamance County, N.C., 168 typical
Dec. 29

WET AND WONDERFUL

Comfort was a factor that played into Brian Barnhill's decision on which stand to hunt on the afternoon of Nov. 7 in Horry County, S.C.

Barnhill, of Ketchuptown, S.C., said he spent an hour under a shelter waiting for the rain to stop, and that when he emerged, he didn't have enough time to head to a stand on another piece of property where he had spotted a big buck.

Instead, he headed to a stand overlooking a 10-acre soybean field.

"This stand was the closest one I could get to in a short time," Barnhill said. "The beans are high in this field, and I could slip into the stand late if I had to without making too much commotion. I knew that I had to hunt this 10-acre soybean field if I wanted to hunt at all that afternoon."



Brian Barnhill's 15-point non-typical trophy measured 164 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches.

Barnhill had only been in the stand for 10 minutes when five does started into the field about 160 yards away. Behind them appeared a big buck.

Barnhill took the first good shot he had. The deer ran out of the field, but Barnhill found him later, its antler sticking out of the water in a ditch.

The buck carried a 15-point, non-typical rack that scored 164 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. ■



Dan Kibler of Winston-Salem, N.C., is managing editor of Carolina Sportsman magazine. He has covered the outdoors full-time since 1985.

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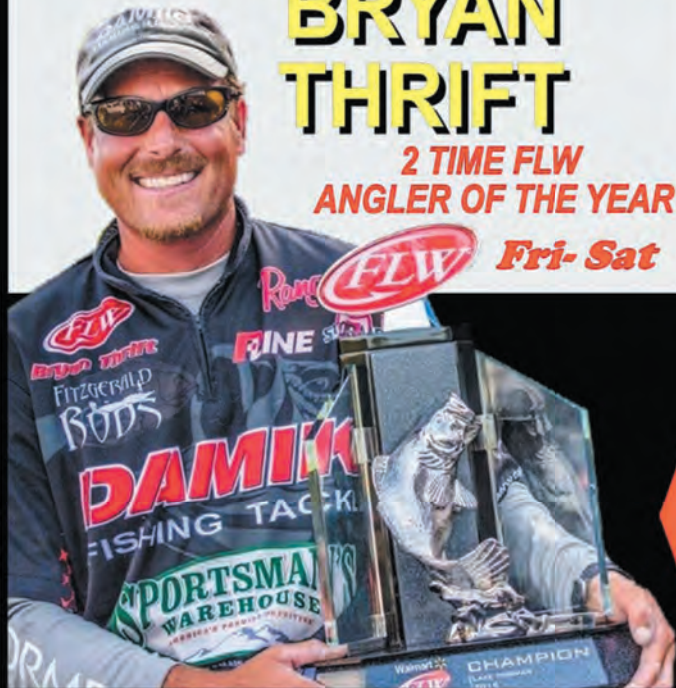
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STRAIGHT-DOWN

SLAB TACTICS

When crappie go deep during extremely cold weather to find suitable water conditions, try this vertical trolling tactic.

■ By Phillip Gentry

This time of year, consistently finding and catching crappie can be a challenge. On many lakes and reservoirs across the Carolinas, crappie are typically deeper but ready to head shallow as soon as the weather breaks, and that can make the fishing tough.

The reason many anglers struggle with catching numbers of fish in deeper water has very little to do with the fish. Fortunately, crappie maintain a higher metabolism than most other gamefish species, which means if you can locate them and put something down there that gets their attention, you can catch them.

Before the term “spider-rigging” became a household word among crappie anglers, old-time anglers like William “Bud” Chambers of Kinards, S.C., were slow-trolling vertically in deep water where few anglers ever thought to look for crappie, much less during the winter.





“This time of year, we’d always do what I called ‘deep fishing,’” *Chambers said.*

“There’s two things I can accomplish by getting several baits down deep and slowly pushing them around for crappie. First, I’m watching my graph while I fish, and I can usually pick out a pattern where the fish are located that day. Might be a particular depth, might be some other feature, like a ditch or some old stumps, even if they are scattered over one particular area. The second is, I can put a bait right in his face.”

Chambers uses long rods for his deep-water fishing, usually 12-footers. He rigs each rod with a 1- to 1½-ounce bank sinker at the end of his line, then ties a jig onto each dropper loop in the line, about two feet apart and one foot above the weight.

Most of the time, he uses live bait, hooking a minnow onto a marabou or hair jig that he threaded onto the line when he tied the rig. When the bite is steady, he may use a rubber tube jig just for the larger variety of colors, but when the bite gets slow, he’ll opt for the marabou or hair jig.

“I use a homemade marabou jig made by this guy up around Rock Hill,” he said. “I like bright colors if the water is clear and dark colors on the jig if the water is muddy.”

To position his rods and baits, Chambers uses two sets of rodholders around the bow of his boat. He uses two homemade T-bars and has two individual Driftmaster rodholders on each side of the T-bars.

The weighted jigs are pushing out in front of his boat, and he can feel his way along with the trolling rods. He said the heavy weights will slide over old wooden cover. He runs the majority of his baits close to the bottom but insists on hand-counting the line out to the preferred depth rather than just dropping to the bottom and reeling up a little.

“I put a piece of tape on my rod exactly 2 feet from my reel” he explained. “I count off the depth pulling off 2-foot sections of line. I don’t like to drop the rig to the bottom and reel up even if I’m fishing just off the bottom, because I don’t like to slam the baits into the mud on the bottom. The hair will pick up mud and slime, and all I want in there is that fresh minnow scent.”



Bud Chambers eases along over deep water while watching his graph. He said many fish are right on the bottom and may not be visible on sonar.





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Chambers' home lake is Lake Greenwood, but he fishes Lake Wateree and the smaller Catawba chain lakes: Fishing Creek and Stumpy Pond. He said all are great late-winter crappie lakes if you understand how the fish behave in cold water.

He said the smaller lakes are great for deep-trolling because they are more riverine systems, but most of the major creek channels have silted in, which creates large expanses of deep water mud flats in the 20- to 35-foot depth range with some stain to the water, especially in the winter.

He said he'd much rather find the right depth on a stained lake than to troll a deeper, clearer lake. The gently sloping mud flats are a plus for his deep, vertical-trolling methods.

"A lot of times these fish will just be laying in the mud; I guess it's warmer for them doing that," he said. "It's not unusual to catch crappie with muddy bellies and tails. Most people never know they're there, but if you drag across an area you'll pick one or two up here and there and most of these will be good fish." ■



Phillip Gentry of Simpsonville, S.C., is host of "Upstate Outdoors," a weekly radio show that can be heard on Saturdays at noon on WORD 106.3 FM.

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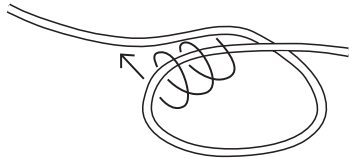
HOW TO TIE A DROPPER LOOP KNOT

Many anglers shy away from using a true loop knot because it involves cutting the line. Most anglers simply make a loop in the main line and tie a Figure 8 knot to create the loop. However, a true loop knot allows you to make a single-strand dropper out of each loop rather than a double-line loop. Using a single-strand greatly increases the sensitivity to a bite, especially when fishing for crappie in cold water.

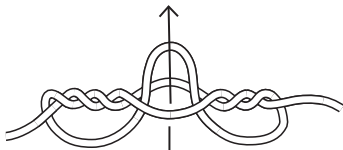
A loop-knot rig goes by a number of names including bottom-bouncing rig, Kentucky rig and sharecropper rig. The rig is tied using a heavy bell or bank-casting sinker as a dropper weight to keep the rig vertical in the water even when being pushed with the trolling motor.

To tie the rig, form a loop in the main line, then wrap the out-

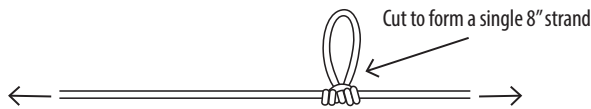
HOW TO TIE A DROPPER LOOP KNOT



Form a loop in the line and then wrap the outside loop around the inside loop 5-6 times.



Split the coils and insert the uncoiled side through the split. Line should be loose enough to form a 4 inch bow.



Wet the knot and tighten the coils down flush with the main line then cut the loop near the knot to form a single strand.

side loop around the inside loop six times. Next, split the coiled line and insert the uncoiled line through the split in the line. Leave enough line to make a 4- to 5-inch loop, which will produce an 8- to 10-inch dropper. Wet the knot and tighten the coils down flush with the main line. Cut the loop close to the knot on one side to make the single strand dropper.

"If you tie this right, meaning you get it cinched down good where the line bites into the line, it's near impossible to break," veteran angler Bud Chambers said. "I've broken off hooks before I've had the knot break. It's that strong."

Chambers' choice of line is 15-pound Berkeley Big Game. He saves time by using the heavy line to pull frequent hang-ups loose by straightening the light-wire jig hooks rather than retie broken rigs. He also said that the 15-pound line cuts through the water better than other lines of comparable diameter. ■

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FALLS LAKE CRAPPIE

will move shallow in warm-weather spells

According to veteran fisherman Rod King of Durham, N.C., crappie fishing at Falls of the Neuse Lake this month hinges on sunlight and wind direction. While persistent cold fronts will keep fish buried in the river channel, King looks for three or four days of south wind and sunshine to move slabs into the creek arms much earlier than many anglers might think.

"I don't care how cold it is outside," said King, who directs The Big Eye Crappie Man tournament series. "The sun does wonders to that water. With the sun low in the sky and the days getting longer, it's going to heat up the north-facing creeks like Ledge Rock faster, and the south wind will blow that warmed water back up into those creeks."

When this happens, King heads to the back of one these creeks — normally in the mid-lake section between the Cheek Road bridge and NC 50 — to check water temperatures. If he reads 40 to 44 degrees, King puts out an 8- to 16-rod tight-line spread of 16-foot rods. Staying close to the middle of the creek, he may start in as little as 2 to 3 feet of water, catching crappie sunning like a snake on a rock, taking advantage of the warmest water in the lake. Although the water is temptingly shallow, crappie will not begin to spawn until the temperature is much warmer.



Crappie pro Rod King said slabs get surprisingly shallow in February on Falls of Neuse Lake — and mostly they stay shallow until he spawn.

Dusty Wilson

King "oozes", as he says, running his trolling motor just high enough to make forward progress so the crappie have enough time to grab his 1/8- to 1/6-ounce jigs and minnows, which will hang straight down despite the light weight. King prefers char-

treuse or orange jigheads on sunny days and black or blue in darker weather.

"They might stay back there a couple of weeks, and in comes a cold front that runs them out," he said. "They may try to go back to 15 or 20 feet, but they aren't going be able to stay, because their air bladder has gotten used to being in 3 to 5 feet. They'll run all the way out to the river channel and still be 3 to 5 feet deep. If the cold fronts continue, they'll slowly sink back down."

King will run his rigs in the shallow stump fields lining the river channel until the crappie move deeper into the channel. Then, he continues as he did before the warm front, going low and slow as he maneuvers his jigs a couple of feet above the crappie he's marking in 15 to 20 feet of water, typically in the channel bends. ■

— Dusty Wilson

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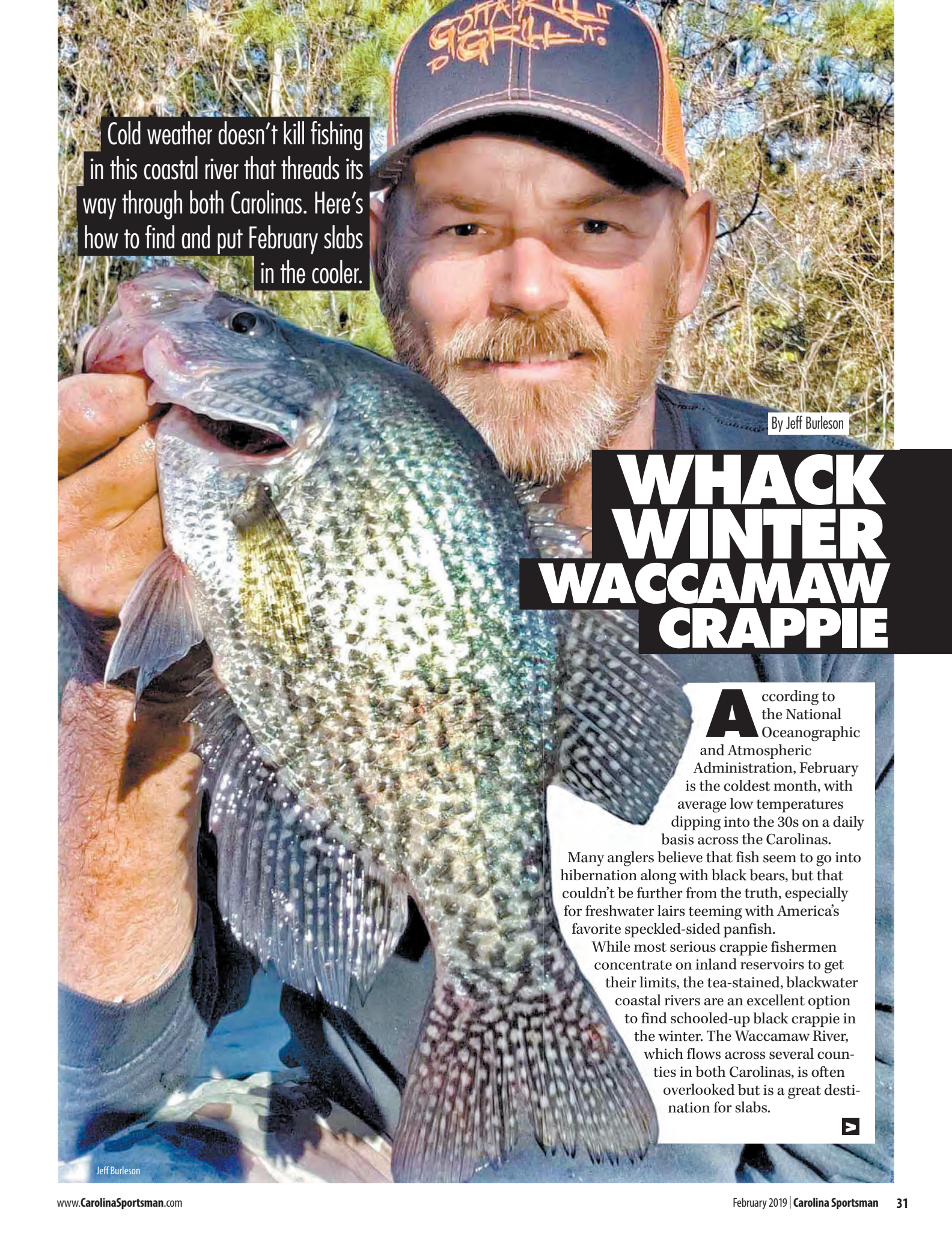
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A man with a beard and a baseball cap is holding a large crappie fish. The background shows a river and some vegetation. The man is wearing a dark cap with orange text that says "GOTTA KILL IT".

Cold weather doesn't kill fishing in this coastal river that threads its way through both Carolinas. Here's how to find and put February slabs in the cooler.

By Jeff Burleson

WHACK WINTER WACCAMAW CRAPPIE

According to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, February is the coldest month, with average low temperatures dipping into the 30s on a daily basis across the Carolinas.

Many anglers believe that fish seem to go into hibernation along with black bears, but that couldn't be further from the truth, especially for freshwater lairs teeming with America's favorite speckled-sided panfish.

While most serious crappie fishermen concentrate on inland reservoirs to get their limits, the tea-stained, blackwater coastal rivers are an excellent option to find schooled-up black crappie in the winter. The Waccamaw River, which flows across several counties in both Carolinas, is often overlooked but is a great destination for slabs.



Jeff Burleson



The Waccamaw is full of fan favorites, including catfish, largemouth bass, bream and crappie.

It is extremely fertile, with excellent habitat. Draining more than 1,100 square miles, the river originates in southeastern North Carolina, beginning as a small stream coming out of Lake Waccamaw and a massive collection of Carolina bays within its headwaters. Along its course, the river runs along the boundary between North Carolina's Columbus and Brunswick counties and then bisects South Carolina's Horry County through Conway to empty in Winyah Bay and the Atlantic Ocean in Georgetown County.

Along its route, the river twists and turns through ancient, cypress/gum swamps that have created a system of braided channels, well-developed interstream divides, and healthy oxbow lakes that make ideal homes for crappie.

Guide Todd Vick of Freshwater Fishing Charters of Socastee, S.C., is a premier crappie-fishing expert along the Waccamaw system. He targets slab in the river from above Conway to Sandy Island near Pawleys Island, and said chilly conditions concentrate crappie in smaller areas of the river.

"When the water temperatures dip below 50 degrees, the fish start looking for a more stable environment in deep holes without much current," Vick said. "Crappie avoid current in winter so they can sit idle and use the least amount of energy as possible."

The Waccamaw may not be as deep as other rivers in North Carolina's Piedmont and South Carolina's Midlands and Upstate, but deep channels and oxbow lakes with sufficient depths support the desires of a wintering crappie population.

"I will go from fishing the 8-foot dock line in the fall to 26-foot holes on high tide," he said.

continues on page 34

DON'T GET JIGGY WITH IT!

Fishing for crappie in winter isn't for everybody — unless anglers want to catch slab-sized fish on every trip. Cold weather will soon be forgotten when the fish start coming aboard.

Small jigs and soft-plastic baits are the go-to lures for catching crappie for most of the year, including the winter. But be careful to use the word "jig" only as a noun, not as a verb.

Guide Todd Vick of Freshwater Fishing Charters out of Socastee, S.C., said a lure's action — or lack thereof — is the most-important aspect to becoming a successful crappie angler in winter.

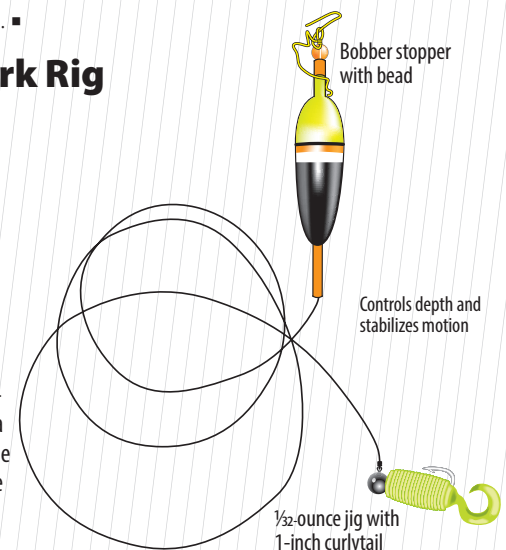
"You should be vertically jigging this time of year, but you shouldn't be actually jigging the lure," Vick said. "The natural movement of the boat is all you need. Just hold it still and let the fish come to the bait."

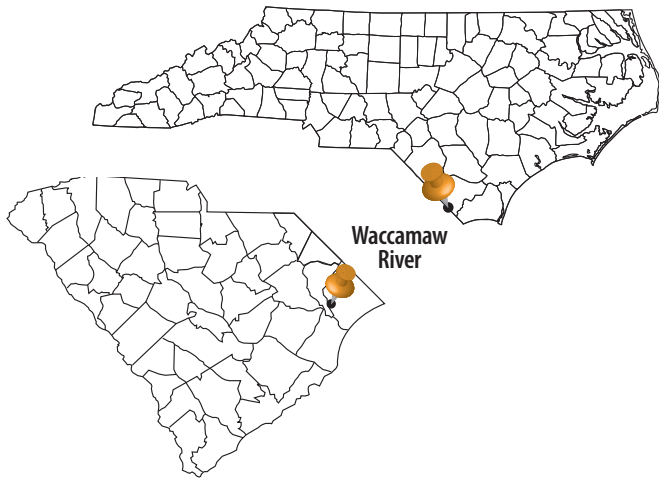
Vick will sometimes fish his jigs under a slip cork to control his depth effectively and to keep the bait as still possible.

"A bobber is a good way to slow the jig down and reduce movement. Let the action of the water work the lure," he said. ■

Slip Cork Rig

Rigging a tiny crappie jig and soft-plastic grub below a slip cork can help the bait hang still at the correct depth: just above the fish.





DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — The Waccamaw River is easily accessible between Georgetown and Conway, S.C., and upstream into North Carolina, with nearly a dozen public boat landings along its length. For specific locations of landings, visit www2.dnr.sc.gov/ManagedLands/boatramp/boatrampsearch.

WHEN TO GO — The winter crappie bite begins around Christmas when the water temperatures dip into the low 50s and will continue until the water temperatures warm in the spring.

BEST TECHNIQUES — Look for fish in deep holes in oxbows or other places along the river where there is little or no current. Crappie will bite extremely small jigs in winter, 1/32- to 1/64-ounce, with 1-inch tubes, curlytail or paddletail grubs. Productive colors include black/chartreuse, white/chartreuse, blue/chartreuse, chartreuse and pink/white. Drop jigs slightly above depth crappie are holding. Keep your bait still; slip corks can be used to fish the correct depths and to keep baits still. Use light, sensitive rods and reels spooled with 6-pound monofilament.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Todd Vick, Fishin' Freshwater Charters, 843-333-8200. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Hampton Inn, Murrells Inlet, S.C., 843-651-6687; Best Western, Conway, S.C., 843-234-1678; Myrtle Beach Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, www.visitmyrtlebeach.com.

MAPS — DeLorme's S.C. Atlas & Gazetteer, 207-846-7000, www.delorme.com.

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“You can see them on the graph, and when you find them, they will be in packed in there, practically blacking out the bottom half of the screen,” he said.

High-definition and side-scanning units like Humminbird’s Solix Mega Series allow anglers to see in great detail what is below and on each side of their boats out to 100 feet. You can make one pass across a deep spot and can see fish and structure anywhere if they’re under the boat or out to 50 feet to the port or starboard sides, helpful because winter crappie will hold in tight schools on specific spots, especially with good structure or cover.

“If you have structure in these holes, it’s an added bonus; fish will associate with the structure,” he said.

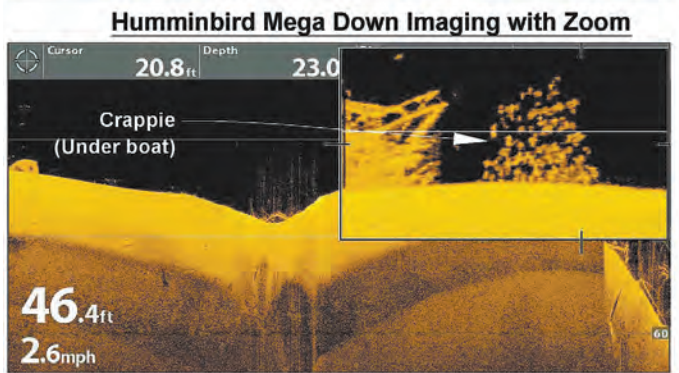
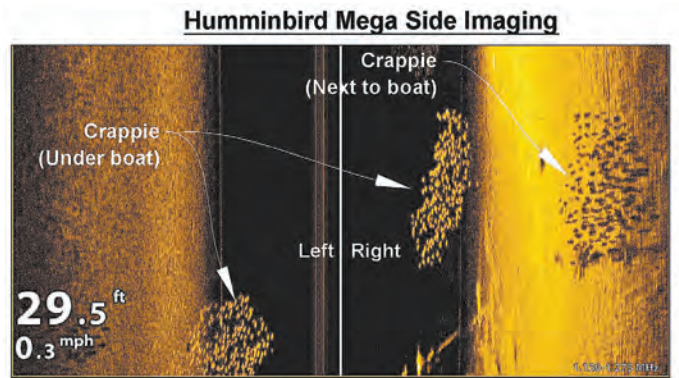
In addition to finding places that are holding fish, electronics can identify the depth fish are holding. Typically, crappie will be lying at or near the bottom in the winter, but changes in conditions can cause fish to move temporarily to the middle section of the water column.

“Crappie only look up to feed. If you get below them, you will not get any bites. I like to be 6 inches to a foot above them,” said Vick. “Typically, they are on the bottom this time of year; that makes it easier to fish above them.”

Even when acting sluggish in cold water, crappie will feed whenever an easy meal shows up, and small minnows and small jigs will produce the best results.

“I like to downsize my bait in the winter,” Vick said. “Crappie can be finicky, and even more so in the winter. I use from 1/32- to 1/64-ounce jigs with 1-inch soft plastics. You need to make it as appetizing as possible, and they turn on to smaller-sized presentations.”

Vick said he’ll alternate between using only a jig and soft plastic, a jig tipped with a small minnow or just a minnow on a hook.

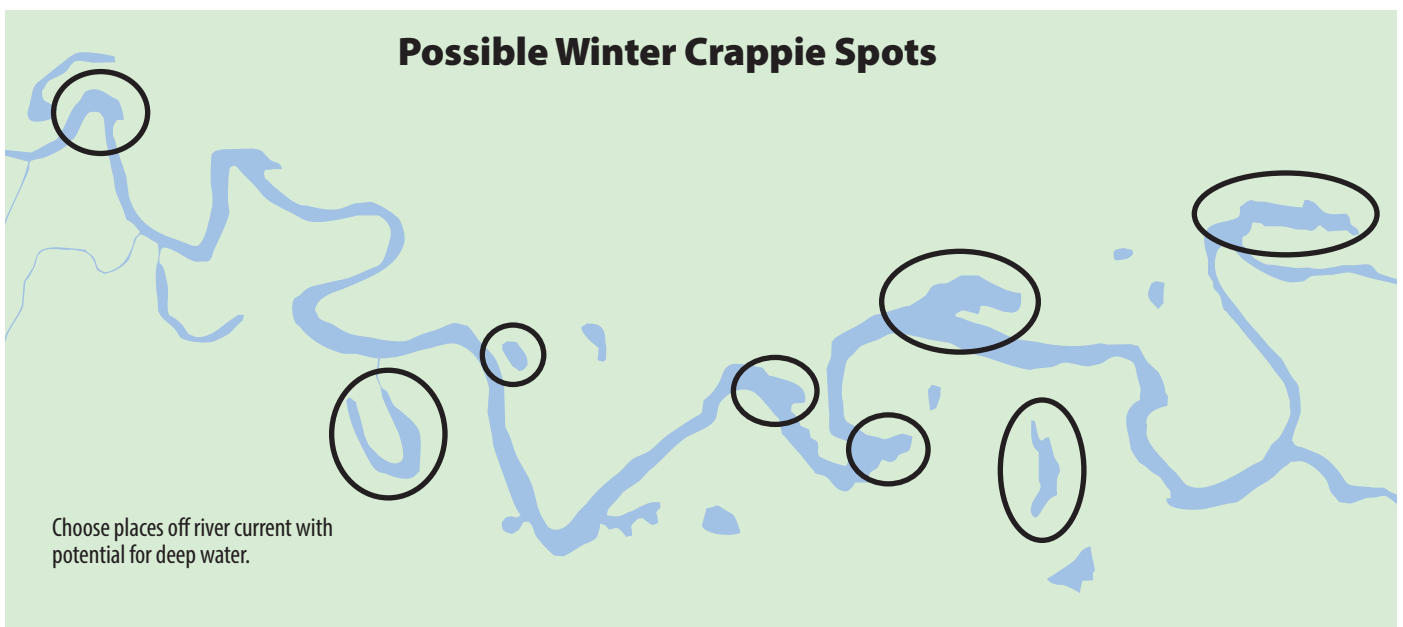


“I will experiment with different setups and colors until they take the bait. When they eat, you can follow that same technique and load up on them. But don’t be scared to experiment to find that perfect combination,” he said. ■



Jeff Burleson is a native of Lumberton, N.C., who lives in Myrtle Beach, S.C. He graduated from N.C. State University with a degree in fisheries and wildlife sciences and is a certified biologist and professional forester for Southern Palmetto Environmental Consulting.

Possible Winter Crappie Spots





THE LAKE OF THE SAME NAME

Larry Williamson sat in his johnboat, a paddle in one hand and a pole in the other. Sculling gently, he inched the boat along the shoreline of Lake Waccamaw.

"I move the boat just enough to keep the lines straight," he said. "I guess I am an old-school crappie fisherman. I don't pull minnows along. They should swim naturally to get the attention of big crappie."

Williamson, 71, from Hallsboro, N.C., fishes three days a week for crappie at Lake Waccamaw, an 8,938-acre Carolina Bay lake in Columbus County, N.C., from which the Waccamaw River originates. He said the winter is great for fishing.

"There aren't as many fishermen out when it's cold," he said. "But crappie like cold water."

Williamson's johnboat trailed four, inch-long cork bobbers under carbon-fiber poles: 13-foot Black Widows. Occasionally, he lifted a rod, checked a wriggling shiner on a No. 6

gold hook and lobbed it back gently.

A bobber went down as a crappie made off with a minnow. Williamson lifted the rod gently, and the fish put a big bend in the rod. It struggled while he held it in place, not pulling too hard or bringing it to the boat too fast so it could not pull out the hook. He kept lifting the rod until the fish was beside the boat. Dipping it from the water with a small landing net, he unhooked it and held it by its lower jaw.

"That's a real rooster," he said. "It will top 2 pounds."

Williamson often catches more than a dozen black crappie on a winter trip to Lake Waccamaw, especially when he finds them ganged up around brush piles.

"I fish the canals all around the lake and the lake itself," he said. "A lot of boat docks have trees tied under them. You can see ropes tying the trees to the docks. Some fishermen put trees in plastic buckets filled with concrete and sink them out in the lake. Any manmade structure attracts crappie because the lake doesn't have much natural cover." ■



Mike Marsh

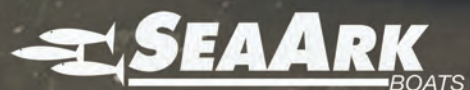
Angler Larry Williamson loves to catch crappie during the winter on Lake Waccamaw in southeastern North Carolina.

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FULL FRONTAL ASSAULT

By Mike Marsh

**TIMING A WEATHER
FRONT IS THE KEY TO
CATCHING WINTER
SPECKLED TROUT**

Allen Jernigan launched his 18-foot tunnel-hull skiff and pointed the bow into the channel of a coastal river. The wind was calm, the water slick. Within minutes, he turned out of the main channel and headed into a shallow bay. “The weatherman said a cold front is coming,” Jernigan said. “When a cold front hits, the fishing can be epic, or it might be a flop. You never know unless you go.”

Jernigan, from Swansboro, N.C., dropped his trolling motor and began cruising down the bank. From the bow, he could see the propeller whirling scant inches above the sandy bottom. “I am looking for a ledge or drop-off that falls 2 to 4 feet,” he said. “That’s where you find speckled trout ahead of a front.”

Mike Marsh

Jernigan found a likely looking spot, and he also saw something disturbing the water just under the surface, which made it look even better. He began casting a MirrOlure MR17 MirrOdine suspending twitchbait, allowing the lure to sink for a few seconds before beginning his retrieve, the rhythm of which consisted of a few turns of the reel handle to take up the slack followed by a pause to let the lure stop, dead still. Then, he twitched it gently before taking up the slack again.

“You have to fish the lure all the way to the boat,” he said. “Sometimes a speck will nail it right as you are taking it out of the water. You also have to vary the retrieve until you find the sequence that works best.

“You can fish right beside your buddy, using the same lure, and you are catching all the fish while he is not catching anything. The smallest difference in your retrieve makes all the difference in the world.”

While he was casting, Jernigan kept an eye on the sky. A solid wall of clouds was rolling toward him, stretching from the water’s surface on the horizon to thousands of feet high in the sky.

“That is the front moving in,” he said. “The fishing is usually best right before the wind hits, so we need to find the sweet spots, fast.”

Jernigan made another cast. As he let the lure sit after a twitch, a trout struck.

“There he is,” he said. “He’s a good one, too. Let’s see if we can upgrade to a bigger fish.”

Putting a 2-pound trout into his livewell, he fished the spot slowly, moving a few feet and stopping whenever he caught a fish to make a few more casts to the same spot. He caught several small trout along with a couple of keepers. Since time was of the essence, he switched rods, picking up one that had an artificial shrimp tied to the leader.

“I like using the Storm Shrimp

because the trout like it,” he said. “When the weather turns cold, most fishermen use live shrimp. I catch more trout using artificial lures without the expense of buying live bait.”

Jernigan caught a 4-pound trout on his first cast, fishing the shrimp very slowly, allowing it to sink to the bottom before lifting the rod tip and giving it a twitch.

“You have to make an artificial shrimp look alive, but move it slowly enough to make it easy

for a trout to catch,” he said. “Some fish will take the lure all the way down their throats because it fools them so well. When that happens, you know you are fishing it slowly enough.”

He caught a fish on nearly every cast until the

bite tapered off and he moved to another deeper spot. This time, he began casting a soft-plastic Bass Assassin rigged Texas-style with a weighted hook that had a spring-keeper to secure the lure’s nose.

“The spring-keeper hook gives the lure more freedom of movement than a standard jighead,” he said. “When I am fishing this slowly, I want to make the lure look alive with the least amount of movement possible.”

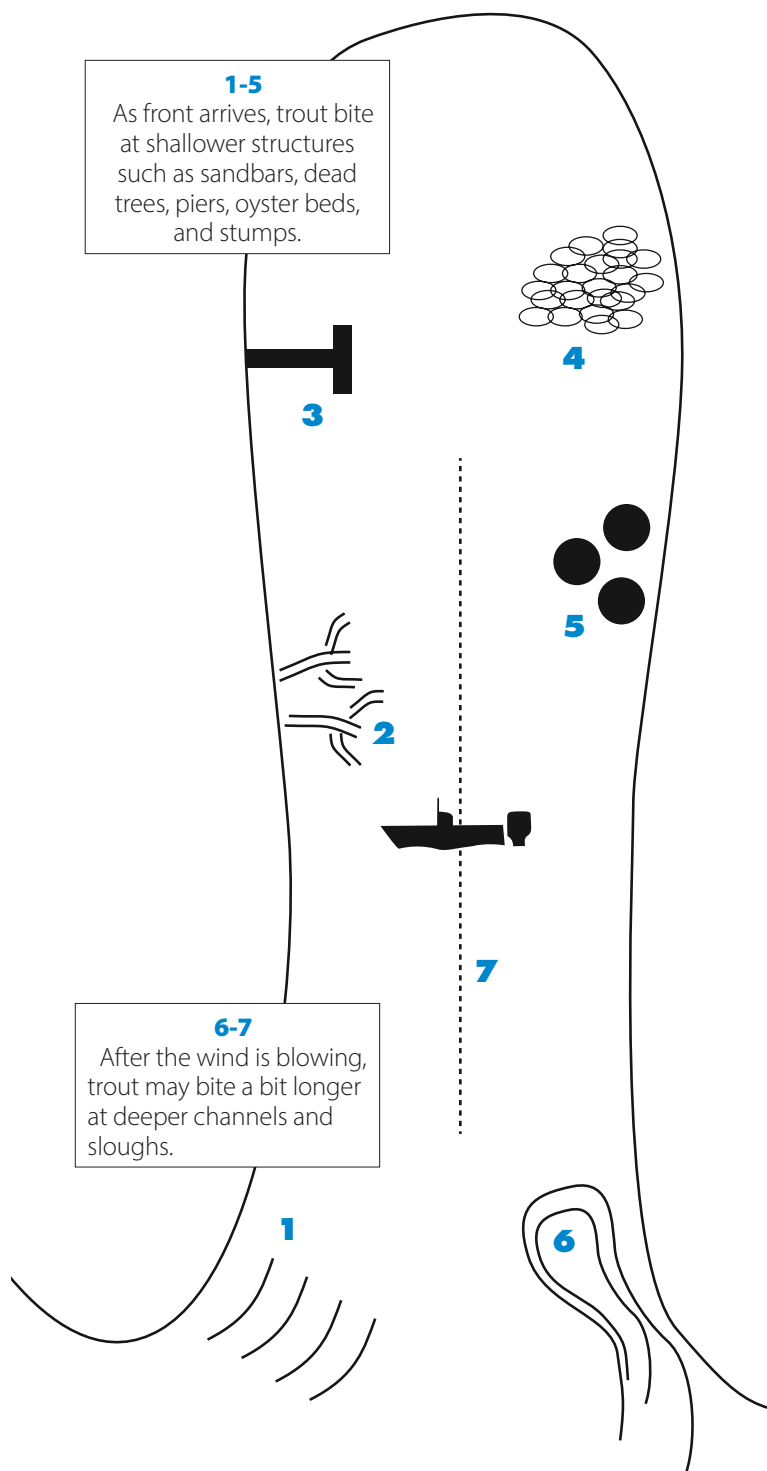
continues on page 42



Allen Jernigan landed this bragging-sized speckled trout just hours before a winter cold front arrived.

Mike Marsh

PLACES TO FISH FOR SPECKLED TROUT AT THE START OF A COLD FRONT



1-5
As front arrives, trout bite at shallower structures such as sandbars, dead trees, piers, oyster beds, and stumps.

6-7
After the wind is blowing, trout may bite a bit longer at deeper channels and sloughs.

PLAY THE WEATHER, BUT STAY WARM

While high winds and bitter cold in the weather forecast may make some faint-of-heart anglers stay at home, anglers who pay acute attention to weather reports and prepare for them can use these fast-moving cold fronts to their advantage.

The speckled trout bite can be extremely aggressive as the barometer begins to fall and just before the wind starts blowing with arrival of the front. The bite may last from a few minutes to a couple of hours. After the front has surfed into the area on a chilly wind, the bite can die just as suddenly as it began.

Anglers must be sure to fish in places protected by high banks or other areas that are safe during high winds and make sure they have secure anchoring devices. Devices such as the shallow-water anchors and trolling motors may not be adequate to keep the boat stable for the best casting angles, so anglers should also consider having manual anchors onboard as well.

Make sure you bring plenty of clothes, too. The rapid change in temperature accompanying an approaching cold front will cause anglers to pull on an extra sweatshirt, jacket or coat to meet the conditions. ■

Weather conditions in February can vary to extremes during a single fishing trip, so dress accordingly and carry the correct clothing.



Mike Marsh

FULL FRONTAL ASSAULT

Jernigan fished a stretch of a hundred yards, stopping whenever he caught a trout. In total, he caught more than three dozen, including several that weighed more than 4 pounds, before a fog bank surfed into a cove on a powerful wind. He zipped up his foul-weather coat against the chill and headed for the downwind side of a high bank.

“The fish usually stop biting when the wind hits,” he said. “But I will keep trying for a while. Sometimes they move from shallow water to deeper water or orient around a particular piece of structure.”

Jernigan kept casting, switching rods and lures as the temperature dropped 20 degrees. He found a deep spot with downed trees along the bank. Several stumps protruded above the water or had tops visible just beneath the surface. The first fish he caught was a red drum.

“If drum are here, trout are, too,” he said. “We will keep trying to see what happens.”

After fishing for another hour, he had landed only three more trout. What had been an epic bite was suddenly over, blown away by the wind. ■



Mike Marsh is a freelance outdoor writer from Wilmington, N.C. His latest book, *Fishing North Carolina*, and other titles, are available at www.mikemarshoutdoors.com.

DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Sneads Ferry is in Onslow County, inshore from New River Inlet, on the west bank of the New River, on NC 172. A popular public ramp is Fulcher Landing on SR 1541.

WHEN TO GO — The cold fronts of December, January, February and March stack up the fish in shallow water.

BEST TACKLE — TTF Gun Dog, 7-foot medium or fast-action rod, Shimano Sahara 300 reel, 10-pound FINS braid with 20-pound fluoro-carbon leader, Storm Wildeye Live shrimp in pinks, or Mirrolure 17MR Mirrodine suspending bait in 808 pattern (black back/silver sides/orange belly).

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Allen Jernigan, Breadman Ventures, 910-467-1482. See also Guides and Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Hampton Inn and Suites, Jacksonville, 910-347-3400. Best Western Courtyard Resort, Jacksonville, 888-944-8835; Days Inn, Jacksonville, 910-467-8271.

MAPS — Capt. Segull's Nautical Charts, 888-473-4855, captainsegull-charts.com; Sealake Fishing Guides, 800-411-0185, thegoodspots.com.



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A man wearing a blue and white baseball cap with a logo, sunglasses, and a blue jacket is smiling and holding a large largemouth bass. The fish is held vertically, showing its head, gills, and scales. The background is a bright blue sky and a body of water with a forested shoreline in the distance.

Many anglers wait for March to break out their tackle, but they're missing out on some great action, especially for the gigantic bass that cruise Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion.

DON'T MISS SANTEE'S
**FEBRUARY
BASS
BITE**

By Terry Madewell

Many anglers wait on March to begin fishing for the Santee Cooper lakes' huge largemouth bass, but while they're spooling reels and painting lures, some anglers are already cashing in on the big bass bonanza.

Brett Mitchell, a guide and tournament fisherman, said anglers not fishing in February are missing prime big-bass fishing in shallow water.

"By mid-January and through February, some of the biggest bass of the year are caught," Mitchell said. "I think the biggest bass in these lakes make their prespawn move early, and right now is the time to catch them."

Mitchell, 52, from Timmonsville, S.C., has fished Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion most of his life, and his passion for early season fishing is well-founded; the biggest bass of his life, 14 pounds, came from Lake Marion on Feb. 16, 1986.



Terry Madewell



Mitchell fishes both Marion and Moultrie, depending the best seasonal fishing.

He's developed a game plan for these early season bass, and his focus is on water 8 feet and shallower.

"Plenty of huge bass are in this range of water, and on some days, the fattest bass are in the skinniest water," he said "But only a small percentage of water is going to be productive right now."

Mitchell said his top areas have depressions, wood and rocks.

Depressions are found throughout both lakes in the shallow flats, coves or creeks. All depressions are not created equal and no "one-type-is-best" blueprint exists.

"The fish want to be shallow, but they find the deepest shallow water in the area," he said. "Some depressions may be 6 feet deep, ringed by a shallow flat perhaps 3 feet deep. But depressions much less dramatic in depth change work well, with the depth difference the key."

Mitchell said one difference maker in productive spots is the availability of forage, with scattered pods of shad excellent. The slightly deeper water is a haven for shad, and the presence of underwater cover such as stumps or brush enhances a specific depression by giving bass an ambush point and Mitchell a defined target.

"Sometimes, I'll mark shad on the graph, but because they're usually in small, scattered pods, it can be difficult," he said. "I key on the presence of loons. If they're consistently in a specific depression, it's because they have something to eat."

Mitchell fishes the entire depression from the edge where the bottom drops slightly and targets any wood in the area. He also looks for bass roaming the depression following shad, so he'll fish in a grid-like pattern until he finds fish or moves to the next target.

UMBRELLA RIGS HIGHLY EFFECTIVE FOR WINTER BASS

Brett Mitchell's arsenal of lures for winter fishing is extensive but the umbrella rig, aka Alabama rig, is one he works into his presentation on a daily basis.

"The umbrella rig is overlooked on these lakes at this time of year," he said. "I use this rig every day when fishing the early season. I often find when conditions are right for the crankbaits and spinnerbaits to produce, but if they're not, the umbrella rig will trigger the bite."

Mitchell said the umbrella rig is ideal for fishing depressions, rocks, ledges and funnels.

- Lipless crankbaits are great for targeting
- specific pieces of cover in shallow water, but
- accuracy in casting is required.



Terry Madewell

"The rig seems to trigger a competitive response to what appears to be a small school of baitfish moving by," he said. "This is a big-bass bait this time of year. Some days, I'll work it all day."

Mitchell is selective where he uses the rig because of its expense, but when he identifies a pattern, he'll quickly fish multiple similar situations on a "milk run" with high expectations of a fish or two at each spot.

His umbrella rig is one he describes as medium-size, basic rig with 1/8- or 1/4-ounce jigheads based on water depth fished. If the water is 4 feet or less, he uses the 1/8-ounce and the 1/4-ounce for deeper water.

"I like the Keitech Swing Impact 4-inch worms in the Sight Flash pattern, but again, water color will impact my choice," he said. ■

His "homerun" target is a depression with cypress trees along the edge where the flat drops into deeper water, with woody cover and shad in the interior.

"I use multiple lures when working depressions, with twin-bladed spinnerbaits being a

favorite; size varies with the depth fished," he said. "Lipless and shallow-running crankbaits rank high. I prefer some wind when fishing this type target, but if the water is calm, I'll often go to soft plastics."

Mitchell said fishing trees is good year-round, but they are often overlooked in February.

"I prefer trees that are slightly deeper for holding really big bass," he said. "Trees well back on a flat in 1 1/2 feet of water are usually bypassed until March and April. I like fishing trees in water that's 2 1/2 feet deep or deeper in February. That's not a magic number, but I've found fishing trees in water that deep produces more big fish."

"Casting accuracy is directly related to catching big fish on trees at this time of the year," he said. "If a big bass is holding tight and wants a lure 2 inches from a tree and you get it to 3 inches, you may not get the bite. Work on your casting until you can hit a tiny target."



Dan Kibler

Small crankbaits with diving lips are great lures to deflect off wooden cover when bass have moved out of deep water.



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Mitchell prefers isolated trees over clumps in February, and he'll work any woody cover with two baits before moving. A spinnerbait and a soft-plastic lure are good examples.

Lure colors will vary with water conditions, with bright colors such as chartreuse in dingy water and natural shad patterns when the water is clear.

"The bright 'clown' colors such as chartreuse and orange work well for me in dingy water conditions," he said. "Also, the solid-color patterns on crankbaits are best in dirty water, and the translucent lures in basic, shad patterns are my choice in clear water."

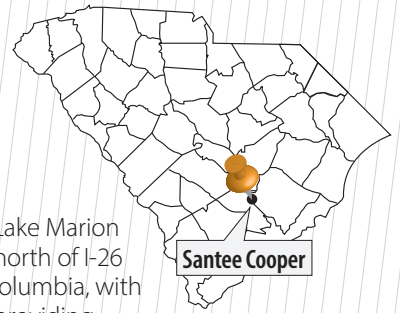
Mitchell also targets rocks, and his idea of fishing rocks is working areas with a combination of rocks and current flow creating eddies where bass can hold and ambush prey.

"The Diversion Canal area is a prime place to find these types of situations," he said. "These features form a reliable early season pattern. I'll generally fish spinnerbaits, lipless crankbaits and umbrella rigs in this situation. I'll usually find drops that fall from 3 feet down to 6 feet or deeper, and these rocky edgelines are big fish magnets."

Mitchell said patience and perseverance are important and to remember this is the time of year to catch a fish of a lifetime.

"Reasonable expectations on numbers of bites are necessary, but February is big-bass time," he said. "We don't catch numbers compared to later in the spring, but the big-fish potential is off the charts. Any cast can produce an 8-pound or larger fish on Marion or Moultrie, sometimes much larger." ■

SANTEE COOPER IS 'BIG-BASS' DESTINATION UP NEXT >



DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie are just north of I-26 between Charleston and Columbia, with I-95 crossing Lake Marion, providing access to fishing camps on both sides of the lakes. The Diversion Canal connects the two lakes and is a prime area for fishing either lake with numerous fishing camps available for lodging, boat access and tackle supplies. For complete details visit www.santeecoopercountry.org.

WHEN TO GO — February and March are prime months to catch trophy largemouth bass on the Santee Cooper lakes.

BEST TECHNIQUES — Find deeper depressions on relatively shallow flats. Try to locate wooden or rocky cover. Fish a shallow-running crankbait, lipless crankbait, soft plastics or an umbrella rig, aka Alabama rig.

FISHING INFO/GUIDES — Brett Mitchell (803-379-7029); Santee Cooper Country, 800-227-8510, www.santeecoopercountry.org. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Blacks Camp, 843-753-2231; Santee Cooper Country, 800-227-8510, www.santeecoopercountry.org.

MAPS — Fishing Hotspots, 800-338-5957; Kingfisher Maps, 800-326-0257, www.kfmaps.com; DeLorme's South Carolina Atlas & Gazetteer, 207-846-7000, www.delorme.com.

- A slight depression ringed by cypress
- trees is a great place to find big, prespawn
- female bass hanging out in February.



Terry Madewell

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SAMPLING DATA CONFIRMS
SANTÉE COOPER IS
**'BIG-BASS'
DESTINATION**

Big bass on the Santee Cooper lakes are not just a fisherman's dream, they are backed by scientific fisheries data. Levi Kaczka, a biologist with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, said the past two springs of bass sampling confirm that the lakes are classified as "big-bass" systems.

Kaczka said this designation refers to the proportional or relative stock-density metric, which assigns a qualitative descriptor such as "big bass" to the



Terry Madewell

- Big spinnerbaits are key lures
- on the Santee Cooper lakes in
- February and March.

sampled fishery. The descriptor is based on the proportion of big bass in the sample.

He said the complex forage base in Santee Cooper is one reason bass are doing so well in both lakes.

"Management strategies that lead to a 'big-bass' designation on a farm pond may prevent the abundance of large panfish due to bass predation," he said. "But the complexity of the food web and availability of alternative forage resources on the Santee Cooper lakes allows the system to achieve a "big bass" designation while also providing catches of large sized panfish.

"The relative abundance of these size fish in our samples, as well as visual observations of spawning fish, nests and recently hatched fry, indicate successful reproduction and recruitment for largemouth bass in the system as well, leading to an overall stable fishery." ■

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Terry Madewell of Ridgeway, S.C., has been an outdoors writer for more than 30 years. He has a degree in wildlife and fisheries management and has a long career as a professional wildlife biologist/natural resources manager.

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David Fritts

Go slow, and you might get to tangle with a nice largemouth bass this month before many anglers know it's possible.



WINTER BASS WORTH WORK

THEY MIGHT BE SLUGGISH, BUT THEY BITE

Andy Crawford

I know a lot of fishermen who miss out on February, but it's a great month in the Carolinas to get your bass boat out on the lake and chase green fish. In North Carolina and South Carolina, February is a prespawn month, and depending on the weather, the fishing can be really good or really bad. In warm spells in February, it can be great.

In February, fish are starting to come up and stage. Regardless of the weather, they'll be in 10 feet of water or less, and they're going to be close to some deep water: on a sharp break, a deep bank or a sharp-breaking point. You're looking for rocks or riprap, and the perfect spot would be one where you can be sitting in your boat in 20 feet of water, casting to the bank. That is a good pattern to fish.

The other thing you need to look for, especially if the water is cold — under 50 degrees — is the clearest water around. Dirty, cold water is not where you want to be. Those two don't go together with good fishing.

I usually start out on the lower to middle section of a lake. Most of the fish will be up in the creeks. A lot of fish winter on the main lake, but a lot winter in the creeks in deep water. You can normally catch fish in February from the mouth back to where it starts to shallow up. When March comes, they'll move back and spread out and get on secondary stuff. You can also catch them on the main-lake, usually on main-lake points, channel swings and riprap.

THE THREE AMIGOS

There are three main tools you're going to use to catch these fish: a crankbait, a jerkbait and a lipless bait. You're going to fish them as slowly as possible. And I can't overstate exactly how slowly your retrieve needs to be. I fish these baits on my 6-foot-8, Lews David Fritts Perfect Crankbait Rod and a Lews BB1 reel with a 5.1-to-1 gear ratio. That reel gets back only 21 inches of line with each turn of the handle. That's very, very important in

cold water, because bass are so sluggish, but they'll still bite if they don't have to chase. It's difficult to get your retrieve slow enough with a faster reel, even with a 6.4-to-1 or 6.8-to-1 reel; it's hard to slow down enough.

February is one of my favorite months, but you won't be seeing bass on your electronics because they're usually so tight to cover. You just have to find them on some real abrupt drops. They will get on a river-channel swing or a riprap bank



Berkley Warpig

with a dropoff. You won't find them on flat points — that's later in the spring.

I'm going to throw these baits: a Bad Shad, a Digger 8.5 — those are Berkley crankbaits — then a 110 Cutter jerkbait and a ½- or ¾-ounce Warpig, which is a lipless bit. Except for the Warpig, the colder the water, the slower you need to retrieve them. With the War Pig, you wind it back as hard as you can, especially if the water is warmer. If the water is below 50 degrees, I'll fish a No. 5 Bad Shad; if it's above 50, I'll fish a No. 7. Everything I throw is going to be crawfish-colored.

These fish will be ganged up, so when you find 'em, you have a chance to catch more than one. But you have to find them, and part of that is making plenty of casts to a good-looking spot, and especially making them from different angles. It's difficult sometimes to figure out which way these fish are positioning on a dropoff. A lot of times, the angle of your cast will make a big difference. I can remember

going down a riprap bank one day and not catching a thing, then turning around and coming down the same bank and catching four — just because I was throwing and retrieving in a different direction. Make sure you make casts from different directions when you go down a bank or around a point.

One other thing is, when fishing the Cutter or any other jerkbait, you need it to suspended longer between jerks. One thing that helps is fishing with fluorocarbon; the line is a little heavier and will help the bait suspended longer. Most of the time, I'm spooling up with 10-pound Sensation or Trilene. On the smaller baits, you may get by with 8-pound.

So don't let the calendar saying it's February scare you into staying home when you get a pretty day or two. The bass are out there; they still have to eat, and they might just want to eat a lure you put in front of them. ■



David Fritts is a 62-year-old pro bass fisherman from Lexington, N.C. He won the 1993 Bassmasters Classic championship and the 1997 FLW Tour Championship, and he was the 1994 BASS Angler of the Year. He is sponsored by Ranger boats, Evinrude outboards, Lew's, Minnkota, and Berkley.



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COOPER RIVER BASS are caught better on deep-water structure

Brian Cope

February in the Carolinas can mean some brutally cold weather, but that doesn't mean anglers can't catch bass. South Carolina's Cooper River holds plenty of lunkers that will give you a reason to get off the couch.

Marc Deschenes of V.I.P. Adventures in Summerville, S.C., said, cold weather is a great time for catching bass in the river, especially on big spinnerbaits and large Texas-rigged worms. And while some anglers will stick to fishing the banks, Deschenes (843-708-5473) looks for structure in deeper water this month.

"You've got to find the structure with your electronics, then get the boat in position to make good casts," he said. "Once I've done that, I'll throw a 1-ounce spinnerbait past the brush pile, stump, or sunken logs, then slowly reel it in. The key is you want your lure to hit the structure on the retrieve. Too many anglers worry about getting hung up. Most are

surprised at how thick into it they can get a spinnerbait without getting hung up. I want to hit the structure every time."

While many anglers complain about the challenge of fishing a tidal river, Deschenes finds that's not a big factor when fishing deeper water as opposed to fishing shallow.

"You'll find plenty of bass on submerged structure, no matter what the tide is doing," said Deschenes, who does cautions anglers from spending too much time on a single piece of structure if it doesn't produce bites pretty quickly.

"I make a cast to one side of the structure and reel it in, aiming to bump the structure," he said. "Then, I make a cast over the center and hit it again on the retrieve. Then I make a third cast to the other side of the structure in the same manner. If I don't get bit on any of those casts, I cast a big Texas-rigged worm, let it sink, then work it back to me. I'm still trying to hit

the structure on every retrieve."

If he doesn't get a strike, Deschenes moves on.

"There's plenty of structure on this river. Bass are going to be around it somewhere," he said. "Some days, you'll find bass on every one you fish. Other days, you'll find them on only a handful. If you're not getting bit, you need to cover water. Don't be afraid to go back to structure you've already fished after an hour or so."

The area known as Cypress Gardens is one of the better spots on this river, and Deschenes said that's no secret.

"You'll never have trouble finding anglers in there this time of year," he said. "But many of them are beating the banks. I'm not saying they don't catch anything, but if you really want to catch them consistently this time of year, you need to fish the deeper structure. ■

— Brian Cope

FEED A WINTER BASS A SHINER

BIG LIVE BAITS TEMPT BIG BASS

By Phillip Gentry

Live shiner fishing for trophy sized largemouth bass came to fame in the 1980s and 1990s, when Florida anglers learned that big bass could be caught in the winter by offering one big bait to tempt fish that may feed only once



or twice per day in colder water. 20-pound class, providing abrasion resistance if the bait is pulled through wood or rocky cover. Tie the leader to a quality barrel swivel to prevent line twist that is inherent with trolling. Main line in the 15- to 20-pound class is typically sufficient.

Trolling allows better boat control than drifting, but care should be exercised to not troll faster than 1.0 to 1.5 mph. In cooler water, shiners will stay lively and active for extended periods, but bass will not chase them far.

Using no weight on the free-line rig will allow the bait to find its own depth and reduces the chance of snagging or fouling, especially if aquatic vegetation is present. In more

obstruction-free water, a bullet weight, split-shot or egg sinker up to a quarter ounce can be added to get the bait down. ■

In more open-water areas, bass may be holding relatively deep, so drifting or trolling the bait is typically the best way to present it in a natural manner to fish that may be holding along a channel edge or drop off.

Typically known as live-lining or free-lining, a 6- to 8-inch or even larger bait is hooked through the nose using a 3/0 or 4/0 circle or kahle hook. The hook is attached to a 3- to 4-foot section of fluoro-carbon leader in the 15- to



A big live bait will tempt a winter bass that feeds only one or two times a day. **LEFT:** Golden shiners are the primary baitfish that anglers use in cold weather.

Terry Madewell

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A big American shad is the kind of target that plenty of South Carolina anglers pursue in the Cooper River every February and March.



SHAD MAKE FEBRUARY GREAT

RUNS UP COASTAL RIVERS GIVE CAROLINA ANGLERS A PLACE TO START THIS MONTH

Jeff Burleson

February is a tough month for saltwater anglers. The weather can be brutal, and the sea can be unpredictable. Strangely, the month's most-predictable saltwater fish makes a big move into freshwater, and plenty of salty anglers follow them.

Shad make their annual pilgrimage to reproduce in the same waters in which they were born, and that includes South Carolina and North Carolina rivers that empty into the Atlantic Ocean.

Anglers, many of whom have been chasing large schools of redfish for the past month, turn to these rivers for various reasons. Some like the taste of shad, some like to eat shad roe, some are collecting shad as bait to use for bull redfish and sharks in the coming months. They all agree that these fish are just plain fun to catch.

Capt. Joel Campbell of Charleston Gigging (843-270-5545) loves this time of

year, and shad fishing is a big reason.

"In South Carolina rivers, especially the Santee and the Cooper, we have American shad," he said. "As you cross over into North Carolina, you've got American shad and also hickory shad. They're all fun to catch, especially on light and ultralight gear. Fishing for them this time of year is a lot like fishing during the salmon run in Alaska, except we don't have to deal with bears."

Campbell said once you set a hook into a shad, you'll never look down at or underestimate these fish.

"These fish get up to 4 pounds and even larger," he said. "With the right gear, they fight just as hard and put up as much of a fight as any other species of fish."

For many anglers who fish for shad on these rivers this time of year, it's the only time they aren't fishing in saltwater.

"You'll see plenty of shallow-water skiffs, bay boats and other craft that

are usually only thought of as saltwater boats. I fish for shad out of my 23-foot Avenger, which I generally use for inshore and offshore fishing trips," he said.

KEEP IT SMALL

Anglers catch shad on any number of lures, but Campbell is partial to small crappie jigs. He said Sabiki rigs and flies are also popular. He uses 1/16-ounce jigheads unless the current is running too strong, then he sizes up. For the rest of his gear, he uses 7-foot-2 Bull Bay ultralight rods, 1000-series spinning reels spooled with 6-pound braid and 10-pound fluorocarbon leaders.

"You want a rod with a very sensitive tip and a strong backbone," Campbell said. "You can break a rod doing this if you're not properly equipped."

Campbell said most anglers anchor their boats, cast upriver, then retrieve their lures as they drifts with the current.

On some days, the shad can be picky and want the lure at a certain speed or depth. Other days, you'll catch them no matter what you do.

Jonathan Grady of the Hobie Fishing Team targets shad from his kayak in North Carolina's Cape Fear River. He loves fishing an area without anchoring, which his kayak's peddle-drive system allows him to do, leaving his hands free for fishing. This allows him to stay put or make slight moves without ever having to pull up anchor.

Of the three locks and dams on the river between Wilmington and Fayetteville, Grady said a boat launch is within 100 yards of each one, providing easy access to some of the hottest fishing you'll find anywhere.

Grady uses 1000-series spinning reels that he pairs with a 7-foot, light-action rod. He uses 6-pound line on his reels and a 12-pound leader. He likes using tandem rigs with 2-inch chartreuse curlytail grubs or shad darts.

For pure fish-catching action, Grady said shad fishing on the Cape Fear and similar rivers is the most-productive fishing you'll find in North Carolina this time of year. For youngsters, fishing newcomers and seasoned anglers alike, he said this fishery is simply an absolute blast.

Campbell and Grady both agree that the water flow is very important when shad fishing. Too much current is never good, and a complete lack of current is even worse. Anglers can check the river flow in the areas they'd like to fish by visiting the U.S. Geological Survey's website and inputting the specific areas of the rivers they'd like to fish at <https://waterdata.usgs.gov>. ■



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Brian Cope of Edisto Island, S.C., is a retired Air Force combat communications technician. He has a B.A. in English Literature from the University of South Carolina and has been writing about the outdoors since 2006. He's spent half his life hunting and fishing. The rest, he said, has been wasted.



IT'S TIME TO MAKE FOOD-PLOT PLANS

GET YOUR GOALS, IDEAS FOR '19 DOWN ON PAPER

February is a time for rest and relaxation after a long deer season in the Carolinas. Sleep-deprived hunters should take some time off from the woods and early morning rituals to gain some much-needed sleep and couch time.

And while reminiscing about the past season, hunters can review their logs and scribble out a new food-plot plan for 2019 that includes improvements to soil, weed control, seed selection and other activities for better results.

Planting food plots isn't exactly rocket science. Anybody can grow a hearty crop with preferred conditions and all the right stuff. It's basic chemistry, and there are plenty of planting guides available that are tailored for every region of the country. But Mother Nature isn't always cooperative, and a crop failure every now and then is part of the game that all food-plot players get to experience at some point.

Food-plot seeds and planting guides give great advice that can help a new or experienced food plotter get a good plot going. However, every site is different with respect to soil chemistry, drainage and overall suitability. Every season will provide a good education on what to change the next year and what to keep the same. A conscientious program will include a complete record of each manipulative activity and the conditions before, during and after.

The root cause of poor performance needs to be identified before any changes are made to the plan. Quite often, a problem is blamed on something different than the primary cause. Food plotters need to make sure they understand what went wrong before they make changes.

THE PH FACTOR

Unfortunately, failures are very possible when the soil pH isn't suitable for the selected plants. On a chemical level, the

soil pH controls certain reactions that can make fertilizer applications usable or non-usable for plants. An unsuitable soil pH is usually the root cause of most plot failures, and everything trickles down from there. In order to have thriving and attractive food plots, the basic ingredients must be combined, and it all starts with the soil pH. Acid-base correction should never be avoided. Test the soil in late January or early February before too many changes to the plot plan are developed.

Even though soil pH is the primary factor, there are other adjustments that need attention too. Fertilizer timing, application rate and fertilizer mix can make a direct improvement on plant growth and sustainability.

THE WEED PROBLEM

Weed control is another big factor, especially in warm-season plots. Weeds can be super aggressive, outcompeting

USE RESOURCES TO LOCATE NEW SITES FOR FOOD PLOTS

Many new food plots are placed by opportunity. Hunters identify an open area that can be accessed with a disk or tiller and gets enough sunlight to turn some seeds into a reliable food source. While many of these spots turn into good food-plot locations, it doesn't always work as planned. For hunting, the most-productive plots are placed in areas that provide deer and other wildlife unencumbered feeding opportunities. But these areas need to also be located in the right soil, drainage class and location for adequate growth. When flexibility is available, these areas can be tailored under the right conditions to produce the best results.

Luckily, there is a wealth of electronic resources on the internet that provide land managers with the necessary tools to locate a new plot. In addition to online aerial photos and USGS Topography maps, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has published soil surveys for all counties of the United States over the last century, and they can be downloaded as an Adobe PDF free of charge. The soil surveys provide the soil type with specific descriptions of each soil type that can help answer questions about suitability for a new plot.

In addition to downloading these relic paper documents, the NRCS has a very unique website called the Web Soil Survey (WSS) (<https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>). It provides the largest natural resource information system in the world. It allows the user to easily navigate to the property, draw an area-of-interest polygon and produce a customized soil map with no cost to the user. Additionally, the program provides soil characteristics, suitability summary, vegetative productivity rating, yield potential, etc., for each of the soils located within the specified area of interest or survey area. For experienced and new people to the game, the WSS is



Map Unit Symbol	Map Unit Name	Acres In AOI	Percent of AOI
Fo	Foreston loamy sand	1.5	1.1%
GbA	Goldsboro sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes	39.4	29.2%
JO	Johnston mucky loam	7.6	5.6%
Ly	Lynn Haven and Torhunta soils	1.4	1.0%
NoA	Norfolk loamy fine sand, 0 to 2 percent slopes	26.6	19.8%
NoB	Norfolk loamy fine sand, 2 to 6 percent slopes	1.1	0.8%
Oc	Ocilla loamy sand	0.4	0.3%
Pe	Pantego loam	1.1	0.8%
RaA	Rains fine sandy loam, 0 to 2 percent slopes, Southern Coastal Plain	2.7	2.0%
St	Stallings loamy sand	5.9	4.4%
Tr	Torhunta mucky sandy loam	2.2	1.6%
WaB	Wagram fine sand, 0 to 6 percent slope	4.6	3.4%
Wo	Woodington loamy sand	40.2	29.8%
Totals for Area of Interest		134.8	100.0%

a valuable tool to use to learn about the soils on the site for future and existing food plots. ■

planted vegetation. Weed competition can be easily reduced by pre-plant herbicides, Round-up Ready seed with post-planting herbicides, and/or modifications in planting methods.

Planting methodology can make a major impact on the success of any food plot, with seed depth being most critical. Seeds only need the minimum depth for germination. Beyond depth, the timing of planting around rain events can make a difference in productivity.

Finally, some of the warm-season crops — soybeans

continues on page 58

Beaver

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GREENER PASTURES

continued

and sunflowers, for example — need protection during early growth. Deer will eradicate a planting of soybeans and sunflowers very quickly, months before its time. And while many plants can re-sprout after depredation, some can't handle heavy browsing during the early stages of growth. It can be exciting when the deer and turkeys show up soon after planting, but they can be very destructive, and many plots need plot-browsing protection months before the crops mature.

February sure isn't the time to plant, but hunters can still devote time to food plots that will be some of the most-important hours they invest all year. While nature can sometimes ruin the results, most food-plot failures result from poor decision-making early in the process. Poor weed control, failure

Phosphorous is a key element of many fertilizer treatments because it is the element that drives plant growth.

to correct soil pH, nutrient deficiency, premature browsing, improper planting conditions or improper planting can singly or collectively create less-than-desired results.

If land managers are concerned about a cool-season, warm-season or 365-day plot program, planting logs and plan reviews are critical to perfect a plot. It's time to review these activities and make adjustments where changes are needed. Any adjustment should always be reduced to writing. These log books will be responsible for remedying issues and producing the best food plots around.

Food plots can be costly, but spending money in the right places at the right times can make it all worth it in a deer stand when a 12-point buck walks out to feast on the tender vittles. ■



THE IMPORTANCE OF PHOSPHOROUS

Phosphorus is one of the big three macronutrients — nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium — that plants require for growth and sustainability. Phosphorus is the "P" in "NPK" — the phosphorus percentage is the middle number of a fertilizer treatment, like in the general purpose fertilizer 10-10-10.

Phosphorus is directly responsible for the protein synthesis in plants that is needed for cell division, tissue development and energy storage. Also, phosphorus promotes root growth that helps plants uptake water and nutrients from within the soil.

Luckily, many soils are high

in elemental phosphorus, so costs associated with phosphorus amendments can be avoided. But it must be present in sufficient amounts for growth. Phosphorus deficiency can be identified by a darkening of mature plants and a slight yellowing in young plants similar to nitrogen deficiency.

Ironically, phosphorus is responsible for root growth and is also the origin where the phosphorus particles enter the plant's vascular system. It must be introduced via the root system and in a soluble form.

Phosphorus occurs naturally in phosphate rock and is always part of another elemental compound. It is rarely available in its pure form due to its explosive nature when in contact with air. Farmers and food plotters apply phosphate as triple super-phosphate (46-percent phosphorus) combined with an application of nitrogen or with a combination fertilizer containing nitrogen or as ammonium phosphate. Phosphate combined with ammonium allows the phosphorus to be soluble and available to plants. Phosphorus is also routinely combined with nitrogen and


potassium to form a general fertilizer mix. ■

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BAITFISH, PREDATORS WILL FLOCK TO WARMER WATER

Phillip Gentry

Sage advice for kayak anglers looking for fish during the heat of summer is to look for cooler water inflows — creeks, under-water springs, ditches with rain runoff, that sort of thing. The cooler water draws fish.

The same scenario works during the dead of winter, too, only in reverse. When the water temperature of an entire body of water is in the mid to low 40s, fish become relatively dormant. Find an area where the water is just a few degrees warmer, and you're likely to find a hot spot. Find an area that's 10 degrees or more warmer, and you've found a power-plant discharge.

Artificially heated water manifests itself

in a number of ways, the most common being a public energy plant, maybe a nuclear power station or simply a coal fired station where steam is used to create energy then the resulting hot water is cycled into a reservoir.

Industrial warm-water discharge areas are well-known fish producers, especially during the winter when the surrounding water is seasonably cold. The warm water first attracts photoplankton and then baitfish and on down the line predator fish like bass, catfish, crappie, stripers and a host of others.

Warm-water discharge areas may all have similar characteristics. At the source of the discharge, the water may be released into a canal or other area to help

cool it down before dispersing into the main body of water. The discharge area may even be gated off from public access for security or safety reasons.

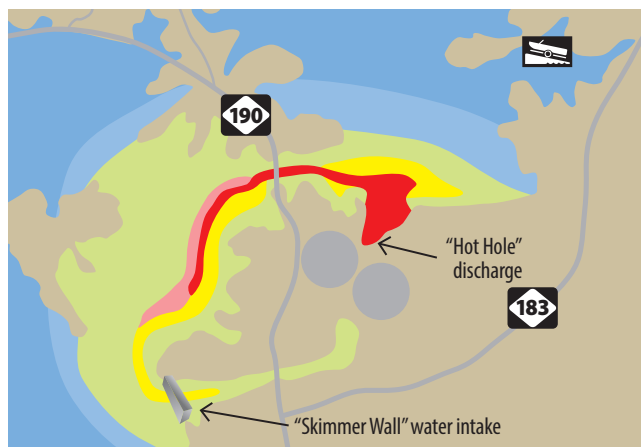
Many discharge areas have a circular warm-water pattern, particularly if the discharge and intake areas are relatively close together.

Another common characteristic is that warm-water discharges have current as the water is pumped back into the lake.

While many anglers flock to the source of the warm water and current, seasoned anglers know larger fish hang back downcurrent, away from the entry point. That's how they got to be large fish.

Kayak anglers can take advantage of warm-water discharge areas if access is somewhat limited — so long as it's legal — by using public road right-of-ways to dump in and fish. Typically, if this area is permissible to fish from land, it's also permissible to use as a dump-in area.

Because baitfish tend to flock to warm-water discharge areas, kayak anglers tend to focus their on lures that imitate baitfish. Crankbaits, soft plastics and live bait all work well in these areas, but so do other baits because the attraction is not all about baitfish, but warmer water in general, which affects all aquatic life. ■



Phillip Gentry of Simpsonville, S.C., is host of "Upstate Outdoors," a weekly radio show that can be heard on Saturdays at noon on WORD 106.3 FM.

CLOSE ENOUGH FOR COMFORT

Kal Summers of Easley, S.C., learned one of his most-valuable winter fishing lessons in the area around the Duke Energy Nuclear Power plant on South Carolina's Lake Keowee. He knew the area around the discharge as "The Hot Hole", where large numbers of spotted bass moved into the area to feed on baitfish.

The downside to kayak-fishing is competition from powerboat anglers who have an advantage when trying to position in the swift current. After catching a few 12- to 14-inch spots, Summers let his kayak drift and worked the bottom with a drop-shot rig.

After drifting out of the area toward the SC 183 bridge, he noticed on his depth finder that the water temperatures dropped out of the 70-degree range quickly but was well above the mid-40s that was common elsewhere in the lake. He paddled over and immediately began marking fish on the graph.

"I put the drop-shot back down, expecting to catch a pound- and-a-quarter spotted bass and hooked into a 4-pound largemouth," he said. "I switched over to a deep-diving crankbait and worked the riprap area and caught another almost 3-pound largemouth and a big spot that I lost at the boat."

Summers caught largemouths, spots, crappie and even a 14-pound blue catfish by working the area with different baits.

"It was like a perfect prespawn pattern," he said. "The water was still in the upper 50s, which made me think of prespawn fishing, and the fish must have been thinking the same thing."

What was his takeaway from that day on the lake?

"Let the crowds have the discharge area," he said. "Right around the corner, I still had decent current that made boat control manageable, and the fish behaved just like they would in pre-spawn." ■

FEBRUARY'S BEST FISHING BETS

North Carolina

What — Hybrid striped (Bodie) bass

Where — Lake Norman

How — Hybrids can be found in large numbers near the warm-water discharge areas at the lake's two Duke Energy power station. Cast anything that mimics a shad. The faster and noisier the bait, the better.

Launch — The closest public ramp to Duke Energy's Marshall coal-fired power station is at Hager Creek, but there are closer dump-in areas. The closest public ramp to the McGuire nuclear station is at Beatties Ford, but again, there are closer dump-in areas.

Insider tip — Hybrids will devour large 2- to 3-inch shiners trailed behind your kayak while you cast for schooling fish.

South Carolina

What — Spotted Bass

Where — Lake Keowee

How — The warm-water discharge at the Oconee Nuclear Power station accumulates a lot of bait and a lot of spotted bass in February. Cast surface lures early in the morning and deep-diving crankbaits during the day.

Launch — Warpath Landing in Pickens County off SC 183 is a just across the lake from the warm water discharge

Insider tip — The discharge and intake make for a circular flow of warm water in the area of the nuclear plant. The bridge pilings at SC 183 often produce better quality fish than the discharge area.

continues on page 62

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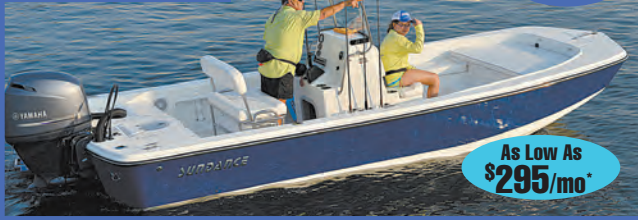
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COOKING ON THE WILD SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver

MR. BOB GOES WELL WITH RICE

THIS WONDERFUL QUAIL DISH IS A BIRD HUNTER'S DELIGHT

The rice, relish and quail in this recipe can be served in a variety of ways. **INSET:** Quail halves go in the pan first, before being joined by the rice for 40 to 45 minutes.



There is something special about following bird dogs. Unfortunately, the numbers of wild quail and areas to hunt them continue to dwindle. Our country would be in much better shape if youngsters grew up seeing the loping stride of a big, ranging pointer or setter, the thorough inspection of every leaf by a Brittany spaniel, the grin on a proud bird dog's face as it delivered a quail to hand and the vibrating wag of a spaniel or German shorthair's tail just before it locks on point.

Yep, a lot of lessons could be learned by spending days afield searching for Mr. Bob. The manners and respect of bird dogs honoring and backing points is something we could all take to heart. The manner and thoroughness of the work during the hunt and the relaxation with friends are memories and lessons to last a lifetime. Even cleaning the birds, with feathers sticking to your fingers, is an exercise in patience many folks could learn.

Though hunters enjoy it, a quail hunt is for the dogs. The genetics of a strong bird dog line are impossible to deny. It shows by them shaking with excitement once out of the vehicle, then explodes with raw enthusiasm once given the command to hunt.

This recipe is about what the hunter does after his faithful companion has finished its role in the day's activities and delivered the bird to hand. Mr. Bob is a small creature, barely more than a morsel, but after the day's activities have come to a close, it's only fitting to prepare these little feathered chunks in a way that recognizes their importance to the hunter(s) and the bird dog(s).

One of my good friends, always a dedicated quail hunter, recently admitted to occasionally visiting a hunting preserve or buying and

placing quail on his farm to be sure there were quail for his dogs to find. This is the attitude of most of my friends. It isn't about filling a limit, but spending time with family, friends and watching the dogs work.

All the walking during a quail hunt can be demanding, but it can also be amazingly relaxing. This recipe is a good one for when your hunt was fun and produced quail for dinner, but not a limit. I believe you will find it an easy way to prepare a few quail from a day's hunt. Hopefully, you also find it tasty. ■

EZ QUAIL AND RICE WITH RELISH

After following a pair of bird dogs for most of a day, a meal of fresh quail hits the spot. Many folks fry them, while others use their grills, and both are excellent. However, I try to avoid fried food as much as possible, and some days just aren't right for grilling, so here's another option.

Some days you just don't find a lot of wild birds, and — heaven forbid — some days, your pattern always seems to be in places the birds aren't. This recipe is a good one to help stretch a few birds into a meal. It also helps when the birds insist on flying into the heart of your pattern and you're preparing partial birds. Rice served with similar relishes has saved the day more than once, and the relish creates good taste without having to add gravy.

This relish is simple and adaptable. It begins with bacon to make sure everyone likes it. Consider bacon, onions and mushrooms as a start and feel free to add whatever vegetables and seasonings you like. I sometimes sprinkle on a little ground, smoked chipotle peppers to spice it up a little. For those with milder palates, a little more Cavender's gives more flavor without any heat. One of my friends adds a touch of sugar to make it sweeter, and another sautés the vegs in butter rather than the bacon drippings.

PREPARATION:

Dress the quail. I skin them, but this is a personal preference. Cut the quail into halves. Season the quail to taste with Cavender's and pepper. Spray a baking pan with non-stick cooking spray. Place the quail halves breast up in the bottom of a baking pan. I don't use a casserole dish, as the ceramic or glass gets too hot.

Sprinkle the rice around the pan, concentrating on the spaces between pieces of quail. Pour broth into pan. Preheat oven to 350. Bake for approximately 40 to 45 minutes until the liquid is gone and the rice is cooked. Be careful not to overcook the quail. Remove from oven and allow to sit for several minutes.

RELISH

Chop the mushrooms and onion. Cut the bacon into ½- to 1-inch pieces. Cook the bacon and remove from pan. Pour off and save excess bacon drippings. Sauté mushrooms and onions in bacon drippings with a dusting of Cavender's and pepper. Watch the pan closely, and don't let it get too dry. If needed, add some of the saved

I think this relish mix handles experimentation really well.

The quail are the guests of honor in this recipe, and you must pay attention not to overcook them. They will get tough and chewy if overcooked. However, the rice needs to cook long enough to be tender. Quail are thin and are usually almost or even fully covered with the broth to begin, and this helps keep them moist and prevents overcooking. I've tried this with wild rice, and it just takes too long to cook. If the quail get ahead of the rice in cooking, lay a piece of aluminum foil across the pan, but leave a corner or two exposed, and don't seal it.

I serve the quail on the rice, with the relish on the side, and let folks eat it as they like. I eat the quail separately and mix the relish with the rice, but I have friends who eat the relish with the quail and even one that picks the meat from the quail and mixes it with the rice and relish. However you prefer, if you like quail, I think you'll like this. Enjoy! ■

bacon drippings. Crumble bacon. Mix bacon crumbles into sautéed onions and mushrooms and remove from heat.

Serve the quail halves on top of the rice with relish around or between them. This goes well with a green vegetable, garden salad or green salad. Fresh, steamed broccoli is an excellent choice for the vegetable, but green beans and others also accompany it well. I like salads and will often begin or end with one, even if serving it with a green vegetable. A lettuce wedge with Bacon Chipotle Ranch dressing hits the spot for me — even as dessert. Fresh, hot, hearty bread is always a good addition. Enjoy. ■

TIP!

Covering any kind of meat with broth while cooking will help keep it from overcooking.

INGREDIENTS:

4 quail
3 slices thin bacon
1 cup uncooked rice
1½ cups chicken broth (or bullion)
¾ cup mushrooms (chopped)
¾ cup sweet onion (chopped)
Coarse ground black pepper
Cavender's All Purpose Greek Seasoning
Non-stick cooking spray



The author cuts bacon as part of the preparation of the relish that accompanies the quail and rice.



Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island, N.C., is a freelance writer, as well as a former national king mackerel champion fisherman. Readers are encouraged to send their favorite recipes and a photo of the completed dish to possibly be used in a future issue of the magazine. E-mail the recipes and photos to Jerry.Dilsaver@captainjerry.com.

SANTEE STRINGER

Terry Madewell

Guide Bobby Winters caught this big winter blue catfish from Lake Marion.



IS IT TIME YET FOR THE BIG MOVE?

FEBRUARY IS WINTER, BUT IT'S A TRANSITION MONTH

Terry Madewell

Fishermen on the Santee Cooper lakes deal with February's cold weather, but as the month progresses, the general pattern is a slow, upward trend in water temperatures. An arctic front or two may cause temporary dips in the water temperature or conditions, but Ol' Man Winter will be getting further in the rearview mirror as the weeks pass.

And this waning of winter begins a trend of better fishing on Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie.

Not all fish are in the same places, but a variety of favored species have most of the water column covered. Largemouth bass are making shallow-water moves, and crappie are moving to mid-depths to stage before the spawn. Stripers are biting in open water and in the Diversion Canal, while some begin the uplake migration for the spawning run. Catfish start deep but often trend toward shallower water as March approaches.

SHALLOW STUFF

Largemouth bass can be found in a variety of depths, but most anglers will be working in 8 feet of water or less for most of February. An assortment of lures

can produce, with spinnerbaits, lipless crankbaits, shallow-running crankbaits and soft plastics all good choices.

As the end of the month approaches, bass will typically begin to make a move to shallower water. If conditions are right, some spawning can occur in late-February. Many big bass will be staging shallow, and if the water temperature pushes past 55 degrees, up to 58 degrees, the bass may move to spawning sites.

Guide Kevin Davis, who owns Blacks Camp, said this first push to the shallows usually includes some of the largest bass in the lakes.

"We don't get a February spawn every year, but it's something every bass angler needs to check on late in the month," said Davis (843-312-3080). "When water conditions are right for a spawn, some of the biggest bass of the year are caught."

Because of typically dingy and cool water, bass may bed slightly deeper in an early season spawn than they will later, he said.

MID-DEPTH MOVES

Crappie usually suspend over deep brush, but as February progresses and water warms, they will begin to move

shallower. By mid- to late February, anglers are working brush and woody cover in the 10- to 15-foot depth range or even shallower. Many of these crappies are huge, roe-laden sows.

Guide Dave Hilton said these prespawn fish will be staging on cover, waiting for the right water temperature to spawn. Also, some are very likely to spawn in these same deeper areas, especially if water conditions are unstable for shallow spawning.

Hilton (843-870-4734) said tight-lining minnows — or jigs tipped with minnows — over deeper, woody cover, are top producers for this prespawn bite.

Striper action is mixed, but these fish will be on the move in the open water.

Guide Bobby Winters said February stripers will transition from deep water near both dams and spread out to more areas. The Diversion Canal typically begins to produce very good fishing as the month progresses.

"Current flow is crucial in the Diversion Canal, but usually in February and March, that's not an issue," Winters said. "This current seems to attract forage, and that help hold the stripers."

Winters (843-709-0626) said using live



Terry Madewell

GETTING READY:

Crappie on the Santee Cooper lakes will usually spend much of February in 10 to 15 feet of water, staging, waiting for water temperatures to rise enough to send them swarming into shallow water for the spawn. If conditions aren't conducive to shallow spawning, they may spawn around brush in the same mid-depths.

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bait over drops, deep holes, around points and pockets and underwater objects creating eddies are good targets. Also casting bucktails or jigs with soft plastics around the deeper rocky areas are prime spots.

By the end of February, some stripers are making a big move to the upper end of Lake Marion for the annual spawning process. Some quality fish are often caught around the Packs Landing area and up to the confluence of the Congaree and Wateree rivers.

DEEPWATER DRAMA

The drama is all about the big-fish bite, and hooking a big catfish in deep water creates plenty of drama and anxiety. With ample forage still in deep water early in the month, the bite is good by drift-fishing these forage-rich environments or vertical fishing around the pods of bait.

Winters said February is productive for big catfish, as well as decent numbers, but patience can be the key. The bite may be in extremely deep water early in the month, but as water warms, catfish may move shallower. When the saltwater herring begin to enter the lake and spread onto the shallower flats, the big catfish follow. The transition can begin in late February and soon, some big catfish may be in the shallows.

Winters said prime baits include cut chunks of the big migratory herring, plus shad and white perch. ■



Terry Madewell, of Ridgeway, S.C., has been an outdoors writer for more than 30 years. He has a degree in wildlife and fisheries management and has a long career as a professional wildlife biologist/natural resources manager.



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Photo: Cajun Guide Service

www.santeecoopercountry.org

HEAD FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Robert Satterwhite

Elk are frequent visitors to the campground in Cataloochee Valley, which contains Cataloochee Creek.

CATALOOCHEE CREEK IS A REAL KEEPER

BROOK TROUT, ELK ARE THE DRAW IN THIS SCENIC AREA

Wesley Satterwhite

Few places exist where you can fish for trout with elk looking over your shoulder, and few streams in western North Carolina contain more brook trout than rainbows or brown trout. Cataloochee Creek in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is such a place.

Cataloochee Creek is in Cataloochee Valley, beginning at the junction of Palmer Creek and Caldwell Fork in Haywood County and flowing south-east and east for about 16 miles into Waterville Lake on the Pigeon River.

It is a mid-sized valley stream, with long stretches of still water interspersed with swift runs, ideal for fly-fishing. The stretch from the bridge near the campground to the bridge at the entrance to the group campground is the best fishing, most of it wadable. It contains most of the brook trout, and Cataloochee's are larger than brook trout in other park streams, averaging 7 and 8 inches, with an occasional brookie up to 10 inches. Rainbows are in the same size range.

Steve Moore, retired chief fishery biologist for the Park, rates Cataloochee as one of the best native brook trout streams in the park. Brook trout out-

number rainbow trout almost 2-to-1. Although one of the largest brown trout ever caught in the park — 32½ inches long, 15½ pounds — came out of Cataloochee Creek, brown trout numbers have declined in recent years. Anglers who frequently fish Cataloochee say they rarely see browns of any size.

Elk were introduced in the valley in 2001, and they thrive in its lush, large, open grassy fields. The herd numbers around 60, and elk have free run of the valley, often wandering into the campground, to the dismay of some campers and the delight of others. Once native to the area, elk were extirpated in the late 1800s due to over-hunting and loss of habitat. Their introduction was one of the park's more successful ventures in reintroducing native species.

Best fishing seasons for Cataloochee and its tributaries are spring and fall. Terrestrials, particularly hoppers and inchworms, are very effective in late spring, early summer and early fall. Mayfly hatches are prolific in the spring. October is one of the prime times to visit the area. Not only are the fish biting, but the bull elk are bugling. Summer fishing is less productive but can be rewarding with patience. Elevation in the park is 2,600 feet, and with heavy bank foliage, the stream stays cool even in the hottest weather.

CAMPGROUND FISH

Palmer Creek and Caldwell Fork, the two small streams that form Cataloochee Creek just above the campground, also offer good fishing. The fish, mostly rain-

Cataloochee Creek holds some great brook trout fishing, with plenty of fish from 7 to 10 inches long.

Wesley Satterwhite



bows, are small but plentiful. Cataloochee gets moderate fishing pressure, but Palmer Creek and Caldwell Fork get light pressure because most anglers prefer the big waters.

The campground is one of the most popular in the park, primarily because of the elk. It is small, only 27 sites, and well laid out, with most sites providing adequate privacy and tall poplars, maples and oaks providing ample shade for all sites. The campground has no electric or sewage outlets. Each site has a large tent-pad, a fire-ring, and a picnic table. Fresh drinking water outlets are close to all sites. The campground has one comfort station with flush toilets.

Sites must be reserved; walk-ins are not available at any time. Sites may be reserved by calling 877-444-6777 or online at www.recreation.gov. If sites are available, they may be reserved the same day of the visit.

The campground is open from May 15-Oct. 27. Sites are \$25 per night.

The entrance road to Cataloochee Valley is not for the faint-hearted. It is a winding, narrow gravel road with steep drop-offs and no guard rails. Drivers may be required to stop or back their vehicles up to allow oncoming motorists to pass. Horse-trailer traffic also may be encountered on the road.

The most direct route into the valley is Cove Creek Road. From I-40 west, take exit No. 20, go left 0.2 miles on US 276, turn right on Cove Creek Road and follow the signs about 11 miles to the valley. The access road is paved except for the last three miles. The road in the valley is paved. ■



Bob Satterwhite has been writing about the outdoors, particularly trout fishing, for more than 25 years. A native of Morganton, N.C., he lives in Cullowhee, N.C., close to the Tuckasee River, Caney Fork, Moses Creek, and several other prime trout streams.

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Hunting/Fishing SCRAPBOOK



Elijah Hales

Elijah Hales of Wake Forest, N.C., landed this bass from a local farm pond on June 3, 2018; it hit a piece of hot dog.



Ann Whitehurst

Ann Whitehurst caught, kissed and released this chunk of a smallmouth bass in the Broad River near Columbia, S.C.



Ben Gibson

Ben Gibson caught this Spanish mackerel out of Carolina Beach, N.C., in early June 2018, one of 33 caught that day.



Amber Butner

Amber Butner of Wilmington, N.C., caught this 22-inch brown trout on May 25, 2018, her 15th birthday, on Middle Fork Creek.



Will Keith

Will Keith of Hampstead, N.C., boated this upper-slot red drum fishing near his home.

GOT PHOTOS? WE WANT 'EM

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Digital images must be at least 200KB and in jpeg format. Print photos cannot be returned.



Jeff Cole

Jeff Cole had a good morning on North Carolina's Lake Tillery; on May 2, 2018; he caught 42- and 49-pound flatheads.



Todd Huntley

Todd Huntley of Cross Anchor, S.C., killed this nice 10-point buck during the 2018 season.



Carrie Christenbury Spencer

Carrie Christenbury Spencer of Mooresville, N.C., caught this fine speckled trout fishing with friends and family in the surf at Carolina Beach, N.C., on Nov. 24, 2017.



Lane Bivins

Lane Bivins caught his biggest crappie ever on June 19, 2018, at North Carolina's High Rock Lake.



Kylie Shepherd-Finley

Kylie Shepherd Finley, 9, caught this nice bass in South Carolina's Four Holes Swamp.



Ashley Robson

Ashley Robson killed this nice 8-point buck on Oct. 20, 2017, in Onslow County, N.C.



Jacob Lucas

Jacob Lucas of Cary, N.C., killed his first turkey on April 7, 2018, in Greene County.



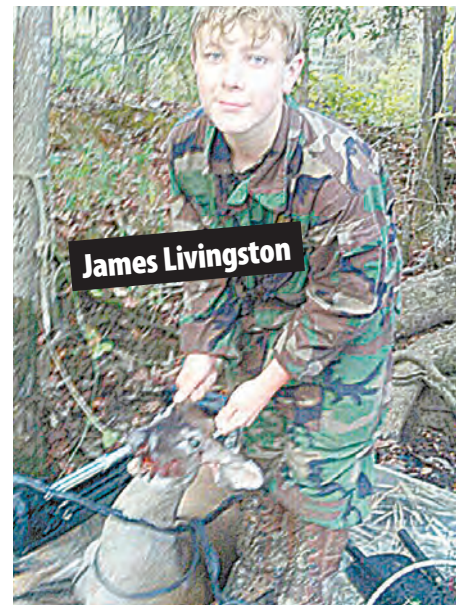
Hunter Dove

Hunter Dove caught his first striped bass on South Carolina's Lake Murray on July 28, 2018.



Hunt Brinson

Hunt Brinson, 10, got his best buck on Oct. 21, 2017, near Maysville, N.C.



James Livingston

James Livingston, 12, killed his first buck on Oct. 29, 2017, on public land in Santee S.C.



Cody Mew

Cody Mew, 12, of York, S.C., killed this 10-point, 187-pound buck in Barnwell County.



Seth Morgan

Seth Morgan, 8, killed this pintail in Nash County, N.C., last Feb. 11, with a .410 shotgun.



Bob Powell

Bob Powell caught this striper on April 16, 2017, in North Carolina's Roanoke Rapids Lake.



Terry Dobson

Terry Dobson caught this 21-inch sheepshead off Edisto Island, S.C., on June 16, 2018.



Syler Sodl-Goriva

Syler Sodl-Goriva caught his first catfish on the Cape Fear River downstream of Lock and Dam No. 3. Shad was the bait.



Micah Woodall

Micah Woodall of Raleigh, N.C., killed this big Franklin County 8-pointer in November 2017.

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HUNTING SEASONS

SPECIES	SEASON DATES (PRIVATE LAND)	BAG LIMIT	POSSESSION LIMIT
Doves	Sept. 1-Oct. 13, Nov. 10-24 Dec. 15-Jan. 15, 2019	15	45
Crow	Nov. 1-March 1, 2019	No limits	
Quail	Nov. 20-March 1, 2019	12	36
Rabbit	Nov. 23-March 1, 2019	5	15
Squirrel	Oct. 1-March 1, 2019	10	30
Fox	Nov. 23-March 1, 2019	No limits	
Grouse	Nov. 23-March 1, 2019 (Game Zone 1 only)	3	9
Raccoon/ Opossum	Sept. 15-March 15, 2019 (statewide) Sept. 15-March 15, 2019 (Game Zones 3, 6)	3 raccoons per party No limits	
Other furbearers	Nov. 26-March 1, 2019 (bobcat, otter, weasel, mink, muskrat, skunk)	No limits	
Bear	Oct. 17-23 (still hunting only) (Game Zone 1 only) Oct. 24-30 (dogs), (Game Zone 1 only) Oct. 17-30 (Horry, Georgetown, Williamsburg counties)	1 5 per party 1	 (permit only)
Rails	Oct. 6-10		
King & Clapper	Nov. 3-Jan. 6, 2018	15	45
Sora & Virginia		25	75
Gallinules (common/purple)	Nov. 3-Jan. 6, 2018	15	45
Snipe	Nov. 14 - Feb. 28, 2019	8	24
Woodcock	Dec. 18 - Jan. 31, 2019	3	9
Wild Turkey	March 20-May 5, 2019 (statewide private land) April 1-May 5, 2019 (statewide WMAs)	3 3	

DEER SEASON

ZONE	ARCHERY	PRIM WEAPON	GUNS
1		Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan. 1, 2019
2	Sept. 15-30	Oct. 1-10	Oct. 11-Jan.1, 2019
3			Aug. 15-Jan. 1, 2019
4	Aug 15-31		Sept. 1-Jan. 1, 2019
Youth Day			Jan. 6, 2019

WATERFOWL SEASONS

SPECIES	DATES	BAG LIMIT
Duck	Teal only: Sept. 15-30 Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019	6 6
Canada geese	Sept. 1-30, Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019 Feb. 13-28, 2019	15
Blue/snow (light) geese	Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019, Feb. 13-28, 2019	25
Brant	Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019	2
Sea ducks	Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019	6
Mergansers	Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019	5 (1 hooded)
Coots	Nov. 17-24, Dec. 8-Jan. 27, 2019	15

HUNTING SEASONS

DEER

Region	Weapon	Season
Western	Bowhunting	Sept. 8-30 Oct. 14-Nov. 18 Dec. 9-Jan. 1, 2019 (bucks only)
	Muzzleloader Gun	Oct. 1-13 Nov. 19-Dec. 8
Northwestern	Bowhunting	Sept. 9-Nov. 2
	Muzzleloader Gun	Nov. 3-16 Nov. 19-Jan. 1, 2019
Central	Bowhunting	Sept. 8-Oct. 26
	Muzzleloader	Oct 27-Nov. 9
	Gun	Nov. 10-Jan. 1, 2019
Northeastern/ Southeastern	Bowhunting	Sept. 8-28
	Muzzleloader	Sept. 29-Oct.12
	Gun	Oct. 13-Jan. 1, 2019

BEAR

Oct. 15-Nov. 17 & Dec. 10-Jan. 1, 2019:	In and west of Surry, Wilkes, Caldwell, Burke and Cleveland counties
Nov. 10-Jan. 1, 2019:	Alamance, Anson, Cabarrus, Caswell, Chatham, Davidson, Durham, Granville, Guilford, Lee, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Orange, Person, Randolph, Rockingham, Rowan, Stanly, Union counties
Oct. 13-Jan. 1, 2019:	Franklin, Harnett, Johnston, Hoke, Moore, Richmond, Scotland, Vance, Warren, Wake counties
Nov. 17-Jan. 1, 2019:	Alexander, Catawba, Davie, Forsyth, Gaston, Iredell Lincoln, Stokes, Yadkin counties
Nov.12-Jan. 1, 2019:	Bladen, Brunswick, Carteret, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico, Pender, Robeson, Sampson counties
Nov. 10-25, Dec. 8-23:	Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell counties
Nov. 10-18, Dec. 8-23:	Currituck, Gates, Perquimans counties
Nov. 9-18, Dec. 8-23:	Camden, Chowan, Pasquotank counties
Nov. 17-Dec. 16:	Beaufort, Bertie, Craven, Hertford, Jones, Martin, Washington counties
Nov. 17-Dec. 16:	Edgecombe, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Nash, Northampton, Pitt, Wayne, Wilson counties

SQUIRREL

Oct. 16-Feb. 28, 2018 (gray & red squirrels)
Oct. 16-Dec. 31 (fox squirrels) in Alleghany, Edgecombe, Moore, Scotland, Anson, Greene, New Hanover, Stokes, Ashe, Harnett, Onslow, Surry, Bladen, Hoke, Pender, Watauga, Brunswick, Johnston, Pitt, Wayne, Cumberland, Jones, Richmond, Wilkes, Duplin, Lenoir, Sampson

RABBIT & QUAIL

Nov. 18-Feb. 28, 2019

GROUSE

Oct. 16-Feb. 28, 2019

WILD TURKEY

April 13-May 11, 2019 (Youth Only: April 6-12, 2019)

RAILS

(KING, SORA, VIRGINIA, CLAPPER)

Sept. 1-Oct. 13, Oct. 22-Nov. 28

(GALLINULES, MOORHENS)

Sept. 1-Oct. 13, Oct. 22-Nov. 28

CANADA GEESE

Resident zone, Oct. 3-13, Nov. 10-Dec. 1, Dec. 15-Feb. 9.

SNOW, BLUE, ROSS GEESE

Statewide: Sept. 1-30
NE Zone, Jan. 11-26, permit only

DUCKS

Oct. 9-Feb. 9, 2019, Feb. 11-March 30, 2019 (permit)

EARLY TEAL

Oct. 3-6, Nov. 10-Dec. 1, Dec. 15-Jan. 26, 2019

SEA DUCKS

Sept. 12-29 (east of US 17 only)

SEA DUCKS

Nov. 19-Jan. 26, 2019

BRANT

Dec. 15-Jan. 26, 2019

DOVE

Sept. 1-Oct. 6, Nov. 17-Jan. 1, 2019; Dec. 10-Jan. 31, 2019

TUNDRA SWAN

Nov. 10-Jan. 29, 2019. Bag limit 1, by permit only.

RACCOON, OPOSSUM

Oct. 16 (at sunrise)-Feb. 28, 2018

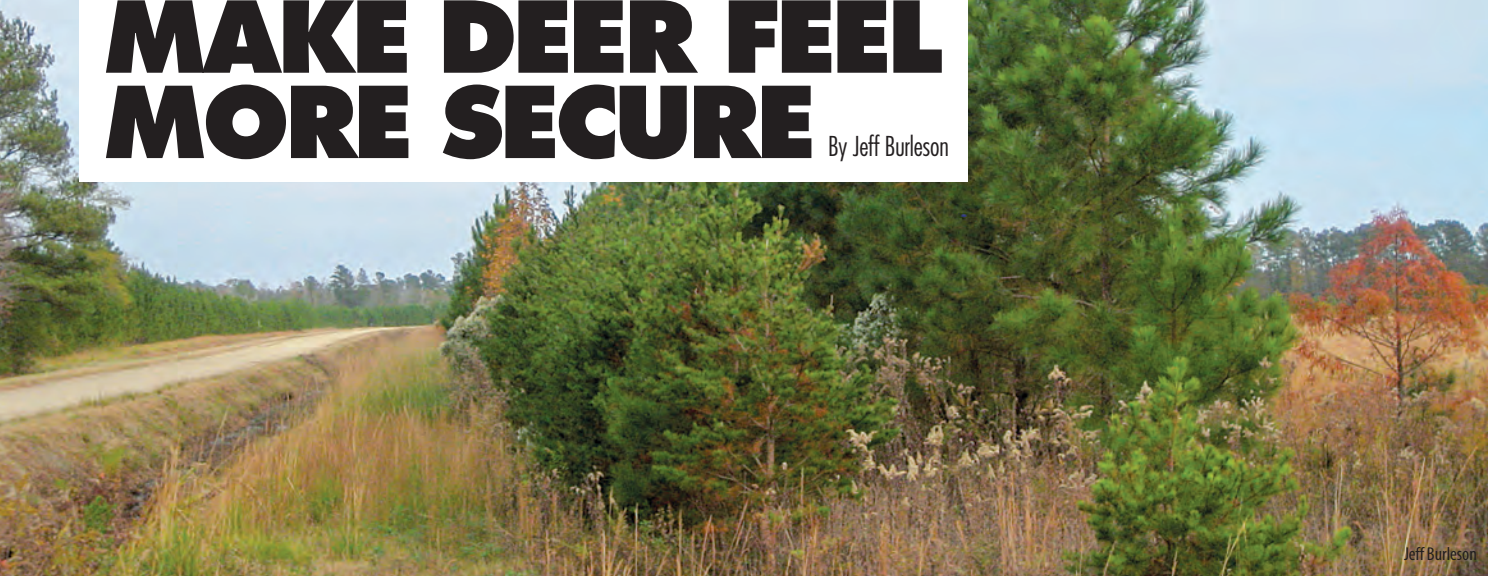
WOODCOCK

Dec. 8-Jan. 29, 2019

Planting and cultivating a buffer of thick trees or bushes around a popular feeding area for deer can give animals a little more security to venture into the picture during daylight hours.

MAKE DEER FEEL MORE SECURE

By Jeff Burleson



Jeff Burleson

PLANT BUFFERS GIVE WHITETAILS A SENSE OF PROTECTION

With long seasons in most southeastern states, deer hunters have an extended period to target trophy bucks, which makes consistent disturbance from hunting pressure and other factors a real issue.

Hunters can improve their chances with a little buffering and protection around attractive sites on their properties, and winter is a perfect time to beef up buffers around agricultural fields or food plots to provide deer a better sense of security.

Care should be taken to shield these areas from unnecessary disturbance; that will promote their use by deer any time of day, when often, they are more likely to use them after dark.

Many agriculture fields are located along highways, and many food plots are created from existing agriculture fields. While deer may become adapted to the constant traffic, a traveling motorist will frequently pull off to take a peek, flushing the deer back into the forest cover.

Even when food plots are miles away from a public highway, they will frequently be created adjacent to a heavily-traveled woods road, which usually lacks significant cover to shield grazing wildlife from curious onlookers passing by.

Security is the key to keep deer on food sources during daylight hours. Planting forested buffers along any travel corridors

will significantly improve the productivity of food plots and prime agriculture fields during hunting season.

The width of buffers should be directly related to the level of disturbance expected along the travel corridor. Highly traveled roadways need wider buffer strips than a small dirt road bordering a food plot deep in the wilds. Buffers should be at least 25 feet wide, but 75 to 125 feet is ideal to fully protect these animals from unnatural disturbances.

BUFFERING PLANTS

The best buffers have a combination of trees, shrubs and brushy materials. The intent of any buffer is to provide 100-percent visual blockage and as much sound protection as possible.

The preferred way to establish these buffers is from a combination of planting and volunteer recruitment. Unfortunately, buffer establishment can be a lengthy process. Tree plantings should be the start of these buffers, with volunteer shrub and brushy species following afterwards. Pines and other evergreen species susceptible to rapid growth should be selected to jump-start these buffers. Selecting evergreen trees also prevents any period of leaf fall compromising the buffer's integrity as well.

On most sites, loblolly pine is the choice

for rapid height growth. On sites that feature particularly dry conditions, longleaf pines should replace loblollies for a higher survival rate. Planting a combination of loblolly and shortleaf or Virginia pine will accelerate the coverage. While loblolly is known for growing tall quickly, the shortleaf and Virginia pine will have more lateral growth to cover the lower stratum.

Loblolly pines should be planted a minimum of three to five rows deep. Trees should be spaced 6 to 8 feet apart along rows, and rows should be 10 feet apart. Shortleaf or Virginia pine should be planted along the roadway or in the interior of the buffer in their own rows, but in voids of the loblolly pine to complete buffer coverage. As the trees grow, other volunteer species will contribute to the buffer. In addition to planting trees, shrubs such as wax myrtle can be planted to jump-start the lower stratum.

While buffers can be created any time of year, all plantings in these buffers should be confined to the December-through-March period. To further encourage buffer growth, seasonal fertilization can be helpful. A balanced fertilizer of equal parts phosphate, nitrogen and potash can be broadcast over the buffers in the spring and summer. ■

CLEAN AT LAST

HERE'S HOW TO PUT THAT GUN AWAY UNTIL NEXT SEASON

By Gordon Hutchinson

A buddy with a new shotgun still in the box stored it in the trunk of a vehicle for a week or two, and when he retrieved it, he found a thin patina of rust on the metal parts, perhaps the result of humid conditions in the trunk.

That brought up the subject of giving guns a good cleaning before you put them away for a while — like the end of deer, duck, squirrel, rabbit or bird season. First off, no WD-40!

Countless gunsmiths say, to a man, do

not put WD-40 on your guns. Some jokingly say don't even have it in the same room with your guns, so you won't be tempted.

A gun coated with WD-40 instead of a good oil will rust — in an amazingly quick time. Yet duck hunters and other outdoorsmen who regularly hunt in wet environments will spray their guns down with WD-40 and forget about them. And days later, they will be shocked at the amount of surface rust they find on their fine firearms.

An excellent start to cleaning any firearm is to spray it down with a cleanser that removes oils, grease, burned powders, etc. In the military, rifles and parts were often cleaned with lighter fluid. Once the fluid washed the steel clean, it evaporated, leaving a clean, unprotected surface. Then, everything would be wiped down with an oily rag, with a lightly oiled patch run through the bore.

Nowadays, aerosol cans

from gun stores do just that for you — with the ease of a powerful stream of cleanser shooting out of the can, knocking the filth, oils and greases off the surface of your guns. These products are extremely effective and costly.

An excellent substitute is plain automotive brake parts cleaner, inexpensively obtained at any auto parts counter. It works exactly the same way at considerably less cost. Be warned; do not use carburetor cleaners for this job. These petroleum distillates will eat finishes on wooden grips and stocks, and they may melt plastic handgun grips.

Once you have cleaned the burnt powder and accumulated gunk trapped with the old grease and oils, wipe the gun down with an oily rag soaked with a good firearms protectant/lubricant, run a lightly-oiled rag through the bore and put your baby to rest for the long sleep until next hunting season. ■

ABOVE: Brushing out the barrel of a bolt-action rifle is one of the first steps in an end-of-season cleaning job. **LEFT:** After cleaning all grease, oils, powder and gunk from your gun, wipe metal surfaces with a lightly oiled rag. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Automotive brake cleaner makes a great cleaning agent.



ANCHORS AWEIGH!

By Jerry Dilsaver

CHOOSE YOUR BOTTOM-HOLDING DEVICES WITH SITUATIONS IN MIND

When it comes to fishing, anglers often need to have skills and knowledge other than casting and retrieving in order to be successful. Some are apparent: the ability to throw a cast net to collect live bait. Others, including the ability to anchor quickly, quietly and successfully, aren't often at the forefront of fishermen's thoughts.

All it takes is a few minutes of looking through a marine retailer's catalog or visiting an Internet website to see an abundance of anchor designs. Each touts some feature or situation that claims superior service. Certain bottoms or fishing situations call for one style or anchor over others.

1 THE DANFORTH ANCHOR

The Danforth, blade-style anchor is one of the best-holding anchors, regardless of bottom type, when used with an appropriate weight and enough anchor chain. The blades dig into the bottom to hold a boat steady. Holding power increases as heavier anchors are used, but it also can be increased by adding a longer and heavier length of chain.

When rigged correctly, it will seek out a hold even on shell bottom and almost always digs its way to a secure hold.

Many fishermen use the least-expensive anchor rated for their boats and one of the 3-foot pieces of chain that come in packages, complete with a pair of shackles for attaching it to the anchor and anchor line. They often must use the full 7-to-1 scope recommended by the Coast Guard. With harder bottoms in any current, the hold is precarious at best.

Many bottom-fishermen use an anchor at least one weight heavier than suggested for their boats and add 20 to 30 feet of chain. They can usually anchor with a scope of 2-to-1 or less.

In general, for deeper water, higher currents and harder bottoms, Danforth-style anchors, with extra chain are excellent holding anchors. If they work so well in these extremes, why not use them everywhere?

They are not easy to untangle when they get hung on bottom structure, and they're noisy. The shank and flukes rotate and clank, and the chain clinks against everything it touches.



2 NAVY STYLE ANCHOR

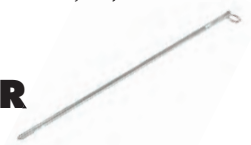
When the current isn't too strong and the bottom isn't too hard, a rubber-coated Navy style anchor is amazingly quiet and brings a high-degree of stealth to anchoring when you're fishing for speckled trout or red drum in coastal creeks. This anchor can be used without any chain.

Navy style anchors bite well in soft bottoms, but they slip on rock or shell bottoms. Mushroom-shaped river anchors work to a point for this application, but I've found the Navy-style anchor works better in more situations.

3 'CAJUN' ANCHOR

Cajun anchors have been gaining popularity with shallow-water fishermen, but they have a few limitations. Cajun anchors are simply long, steel poles with an eye on one end and a slight point on the other. Tied to the boat, they can be pushed into the bottom in shallow water or dropped over the side where their weight holds the boat.

Cajun anchors work well for staking out in softer bottoms, but so does a push pole, which is longer, serves a dual purpose and can work in deeper water. If there is much current, a Cajun anchor laid on anything but the softest mud bottom will drag.




4 WRECK ANCHOR

As the name suggests, wreck anchors work well at wrecks and also are a good choice at many other kinds of underwater structure. These anchors consist of a 2- to 3-foot heavy, steel center bar with three or four grapnel hooks of lighter material welded to the bottom.

The grapnel hooks grab in the structure and hold while anglers fish, but they can be pulled hard to straighten and release from the bottom.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Danforth-style anchor is a good all-around choice. Mushroom anchors are great when holding a soft bottom. Cajun anchors, aka anchor pins or shallow-water anchors, are great for holding boats in place in marshes. Wreck anchors are great for holding onto uneven bottom structure; the grapnels will straighten out when pulling it loose is needed.

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Sportsman FISHING HOTSPOTS

Big wahoo are common visitors to Gulf Stream temperature breaks off the coast of the Carolinas, especially out of Little River.



WAHOO! IT'S TIME TO HEAD OFFSHORE

Boats out of Little River have great winter fishing to north, south

It may be chilly, the coldest month around these parts, but there is always something to chase along the coast. In February, it's hard to beat the offshore wahoo action out of South Carolina's Little River Inlet.

The cold weather chills down ocean waters to their annual lows. The icy waters join the warm Gulf Stream current and draw plenty of attention from predators. It's a virtual dinner table for schools of toothy wahoo with big appetites.

Tripp Hooks of Captain Hook Outdoors routinely runs trips to the Gulf Stream throughout the year. Even though he catches them year-round, he prefers the winter for wahoo.

"Over the past few years, the better wahoo bite has been in the late fall through winter," said Hooks (910-540-7332). "The Gulf Stream creates a perfect temperature break this time of year, and that is the key to finding wahoo. The spot doesn't matter as much as the water temperature."

Hooks will fish between 65 and 80 miles offshore out of Little River Inlet at the

North Carolina-South Carolina border, heading a northerly or southerly direction depending on his latest sea surface temperature report.

"We get a recent (report) before we head out to see if we need to head towards the Winyah Scarp to the south or the Black-jack to the north," said Hooks, who looks for water temperatures above 73 degrees — and the tighter the temperature break the better. The temperature breaks stack up baitfish, and wahoo and other predator fish will be right on top of them.

Hooks trolls rigged ballyhoo with different colored skirts on both flat lines and deep lines. And the deep-running lines are critical to his spread and success.

"The key is the two planer lines we have mixed in our eight-rod set up," he said. "The planer lines are almost always the winners. A lot of people use trolling weights, but they don't get as deep as our heavy duty planers. We use a No. 24 on one side and a No. 32 on the other that gets our bait down to 25 to 30 feet with 100 feet of leader out," he said.

Color makes a difference on different

days, according to Hooks, who prefers dark combinations including red/black, purple/black, green/black and any other combination with black.

While the wahoo grounds may not necessarily be within sight of land, the trek may be well worth the price of admission when an 80-pound brute takes off for the horizon. ■

— Jeff Burseson

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Lake Wylie's blue catfish will move shallow once the sun warms the water in February.

REVERSE THINKING makes for good Lake Wylie catfish action

Guide Rodger Taylor of Rock Hill, S.C., thinks in reverse during the winter to catch Lake Wylie's big blue catfish.

Most fishermen work the shallows in the morning, then move deeper as the sun gets well up in the sky. Taylor, who operates Catfish ON Guide Service (www.catfishon.com), said it's just the reverse at Wylie, on the North Carolina-South Carolina border.

"In the morning, the coldest water — often in the mid-40s — is in the shallows, while the warmer water is 25 to 40 feet deep," he said. "Later, the reverse is true. When the sun comes up and warms the shallows, I'll catch blue cats bottom-fishing in 2 to 5 feet of water."

Taylor starts his morning search by looking for diving birds that indicates forage being driven to the surface by predators. Blue cats will be feeding upon the scraps left behind by other fish. Taylor motors to the area and checks his sonar for baitfish and cats along flats, channel ledges and points.

Once he finds a good area, Taylor drifts, moving along in 20 to 30 feet of water, setting out six medium-action Shakespeare Ugly Stik rods mated with Ambassador 6500 reels spooled with 20-pound monofilament. He employs Santee rigs with 30-inch, 50-pound monofilament leaders tied to barrel swivels, with an in-line float 6 to 12 inches from the No. 6/0 to 8/0 circle hooks. He uses a specially made, 1-ounce sleeve sinker filled with buckshot as a weight. He favors freshly cut, 4- to 6-inch gizzard shad. If need be, he uses a drift sock.

"In the winter, it's important to drift slowly, usually one-half mile per hour or less, because fish are not that active" he said. "I'll use a drift sock to slow down if it's windy."

Once the sun warms the shallows and Taylor locates fish, he'll anchor in the shallows, setting out 8 to 10 light-action Shakespeare Tiger rods around his boat in spider fashion for bottom fishing. He said current improves the bite while water color isn't much of a factor.

"I fish the lower end of the lake where it's difficult to detect any current, but it's a plus if the lake is being pulled," he said. "Water color, on the other hand, doesn't affect blue cats. If they're there, they'll bite."

Taylor's winter fishing grounds include Crowder and Big Allison creeks and the main-river channel. ■

— Tony Garitta



Tony Garitta

Hartwell up next >

HARTWELL STRIPERS

can be fooled several
different ways



Guide Chip Hamilton looks for Lake Hartwell's striped bass this month in the upper end of the lake.

Pat Robertson

Striper fishing on South Carolina's Lake Hartwell in February can be described in three words: challenging, fantastic, unpredictable.

Fishing can be tough or wide open, but it is always unpredictable, according to guide Chip Hamilton of Easley, S.C. It all depends on water temperature, as the weather can fluctuate from winter to summer and back in a two- to three-day period.

"February is one of those months where it is up and down with the weather," he said. "We are affected a lot more by weather fronts in the winter and spring than we are in summer and fall."

Hamilton (864-304-9011) said fishing can change in the wink of

the eye if the weather is unseasonably warm for a few days and then plummets if the lake is blind-sided by a frigid northeaster blowing down from Canada, bringing snow and sleet.

"If the water temperatures stay in the 50s, then fishing can be pretty good," he said. "But if it gets down into 40s, fishing gets a lot more challenging."

The fishing patterns are more like January than March, he said, and there are several different ways to catch fish.

"A lot of times fish will get in main creek channels and river channels up the rivers, at least halfway up and further. The fish are not even thinking about spawning. They are in the channels

because the bait is in the channels," he said.

"If you go into a creek and don't graph any bait at all, leave. It doesn't mean there are not any fish, but they are scattered. If you do find baitfish, put live herring down 20 to 25 feet and put free lines out and slowly troll around the shallow bait pods."

You might not be marking fish on the graph, he said, but they will come from out of sonar range to catch a quick meal.

"Another pattern that a lot of the really avid guys like to fish this time of year is taking advantage of a really aggressive afternoon bite with fish that are holding on a point or around shoal signs," Hamilton said. "If you see fish on the graph in about 30 feet of water, drop baits down to them."

A third pattern that works best in the afternoons on

breezy days, he said, involves casting artificials towards the banks while pulling live blueback herring on free lines and planer boards.

"The water warms in the afternoons and pulls in the larger fish. You will probably catch smaller fish throwing jigs to the

bank, but when a bigger fish sees the baits 40 yards behind the boat, he will run out there to get a quick meal." ■

— Pat Robertson

Fort Fisher up next >

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FORT FISHER BAYS

hold plenty of redfish for winter anglers

Warm, shallow waters in three bays between Fort Fisher and Bald Head Island are popular winter spots for redfish.

Jerry Dilsaver

Fort Fisher, on the peninsula between the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean southeast of Wilmington, N.C., was a Confederate stronghold during the Civil War until its capture in 1865. There are still battles being fought at Fort Fisher, but between fishermen and fish.

During the 1800s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a rock wall that extends from Fort Fisher to Bald Head Island, preventing the Cape Fear river channel from flowing out of New and Corncake inlets, which started shoaling and were filled in by 1998.

What remains between the rock wall and the ocean is a thin strip of land, three shallow bays and a marsh creek system that hold fish all year. The Basin is closest to Fort Fisher, then Second Bay and Buzzard Bay closest to Bald Head Island.

Separated from the Cape Fear River by

the rocks protects them from the wind chop, swells and ship wakes of the river. They also stay noticeably warmer than all of the surrounding water and have become favorite hangouts for winter redfish and the fishermen that chase them.

The easiest access is from the Federal Point ramp at the end of US 421 in the basin, which gives good access for shallow-draft boats and kayaks through Second Bay and Buzzard Bay. Access from the Cape Fear River behind Bald Head Island is through several creeks into Buzzard Bay, then on to the other bays.

The bays are shallow, and most of the bottom is dark, soft mud. Oyster rocks are scattered throughout, and oysters and mud flats are exposed to the sun at low tide. The sun warms the exposed bottom, which warms the water. The warmer

water holds more baitfish and crabs, and the fish are more active. This is a popular winter fishing spot with many guides from Carolina Beach and Southport, and fish are pressured and may be spooky.

The primary winter fish are red drum, but with some black drum mixed in and some speckled trout in scattered deeper holes. Occasionally, someone even catches a flounder that warmed enough to feed.

Soft plastics are the preferred method of fishing here and slow is the retrieve speed. Either rig them on light jigheads or use swimbait hooks to tuck the hook and make it weedless. There is bottom growth and lots of snags. There are also hungry fish for those with the patience to locate them. ■

— Jerry Dilsaver

TAR RIVER SHAD RUN

cranks up in February before March peak

For anglers in eastern North Carolina, the harbinger of spring isn't the arrival of robins in February, but hickory and American shad in almost every major river and creek.

Fishing can be fast and produce some surprising specimens, particularly American (white) shad on light tackle or fly rods.

"In February, both kinds show up," said guide Richard Andrews. "The hickories arrive first, followed by white shad. People look forward to it because it marks the beginning of a new season."

Shad migrations begin as a trickle in January, pick up speed during February and are roaring by March.

Hickory shad have protruding lower jaws; American shad's jaws are the same length.

"People in Tarboro, where I grew up, didn't call the third month 'March Madness' but instead 'March Shadness,'" said Andrews (252-945-9715).

Catches of 100 or more fish per day are commonplace.

Anglers rarely catch shad in the Pamlico River downstream from Washington because they spawn in shallower waters. But upstream, it's a different story. The Tar River feeds the Pamlico and begins above the US 17 bridge at Washington. Northwest toward Greenville, Tarboro and Rocky Mount,

the Tar is a smaller stream with many easily-fished tributaries. Best spots are creek mouths and at blowdowns.

"Falkland, Greenland and Old Sparrow creeks are good places to fish" Andrews said. "In fact, anywhere between Falkland



American shad aren't as common as hickory-shad during the spring run, but they are usually much larger, approaching 5 to 7 pounds.

and Greenville is a good place to find shad."

Hickory shad between 1 and 2 pounds fill most creeks, while chances to catch American shad increase nearer Rocky Mount.

"Hickories can weigh 1 to 3 pounds, but American shad can weigh up to 7 pounds," said Andrews, who regularly has 50-fish days that will include one or two American shad.

Anglers mainly use ultralight spinning rods with double-drop 1/8-ounce jigs with soft-plastic crappie curlytails or tandem shad darts. Anglers also sometimes tie a dropper line and jig or dart 1 1/2 feet above a small shad spoon.

Many anglers usually choose 4-pound monofilament, but Andrews likes 4-pound braid with a short monofilament leader.

"You're gonna get hung up, and braid lets you straighten out snagged light-wire hooks," he said.

"I like green, but pink or white may work some days," said Andrews, who believes lure color is crucial. "I also enjoy fly fishing and use double flies, usually two marabou feather jigs I cast with a 4-weight (rod) and 150-grain sinking line. ■

— Craig Holt

Georgetown up next >



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The marshes south and east of Georgetown, S.C., are full of schooling reds through the winter.

GEORGETOWN REDS have plenty of places to roam in winter

Fall in coastal estuaries means big catches of speckled trout, redfish, black drum and even a few door-mat flounder. It's the preferred time to fish for most, unless anglers are after golden, spot-tailed prey, because winter redfish are the true pinnacle in coastal Carolina marshes. The pristine marshes around Georgetown, S.C., are prime places to attack big schools of reds in February.

Luckily, redfish feed year-round, and most anglers with a basic knowledge of inshore fishing can double up on redfish in many coastal areas. Reds are the pigs of the sea, known for eating about just anything from a lively swimming fish to chunks of dead bait rolling across the sea floor. But when many fish evacuate the estuaries in search of greener pastures, redfish do exactly the opposite. They pack up into massive schools in the skinniest waters back in the heart of the tidal estuaries.

Georgetown is home to the massive area of marshes south of the Waccamaw Neck and the famed Winyah Bay area that includes North Inlet, Santee Delta and Winyah Bay. The area is filled with thousands of acres of nursery habitat and top-tiered redfish wintering habitat, and Jordan Pate of Carolina Guide Service is geared up and ready for the winter smackdown.

"February is one of my favorite times to fish for redfish, when they are well settled in their winter pattern," said Pate (843-814-7900). "Redfish gang up in the shallows in big schools and are eager to eat."

Pate, from Pawleys Island, fishes for reds from Murrells Inlet south to Bulls Bay. Winyah Bay is one of his favorite places to fish because of the fabulous fishing and the abundance of places he can go to find pooled up reds.

"Redfish remain in the same vicinity for weeks at a time and sometimes all winter long, but they can often move to the adjoining creek. I will often scout out new places and go up new creeks," he said.

Pate fishes on both low and high tides; both offer anglers an advantage. Low tide will concentrate fish in tight places, but fish can be spooky when there isn't much water available. On high water, fish have access to more ground but are more likely to eat.

Bait and lure choice is simple. Live bait on a light jighead is a dead ringer for a strong bite, but Pate will often use soft plastics and have high success.

"Matrix shad and Gulp on a light jighead are my go-to lures for these winter fish," Pate said. "I like to cast them and work them very slowly along the bottom. The fish will often pick it up off the bottom even when dead stuck this time of year." ■

— Jeff Bureson



Jordan Pate

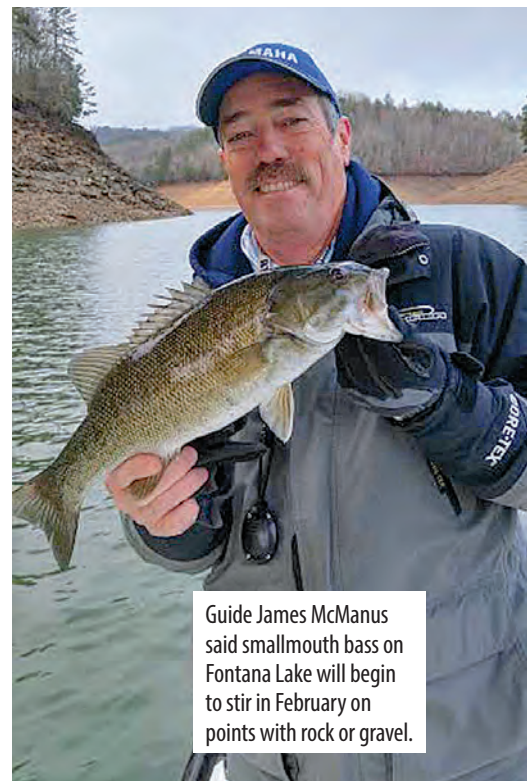
BIG SMALLMOUTHS are ready to feed up on Fontana Lake

Guide James McManus of 153 Charters said that despite the unpredictable February weather, one certainty is that fishermen on North Carolina's Fontana Lake have a great chance to catching their biggest smallmouth bass ever.

"While the weather can dictate anything from shirt sleeves to snow skis, if there's a warming trend toward the end of the month, the big girls are cruising the banks, looking for that perfect gravel/rock point to set up housekeeping," said McManus (153charters@gmail.com), who pointed to fish gorging themselves to put on weight before the spawn.

Despite the heavy rains, McManus said the Tennessee Valley Authority will keep the water level low enough that fishermen can easily spot banks and points that hold fish.

"Look for gently sloping, rounded points with plenty of



Guide James McManus said smallmouth bass on Fontana Lake will begin to stir in February on points with rock or gravel.

James McManus

scattered rock and a mix of gravel and sand," he said. "Early in the month, they may still be schooled up towards the backs of coves or smaller creeks. Any indentation on a rocky bank or dead-end creek flat like Chambers Creek will hold schools."

McManus said these schools often consist of 10 to 50 fish suspended 20 to 50 feet deep in water 80 feet deep. To find them, he looks for wispy clouds of baitfish on his sonar rather than solid masses of bait.

"Solid bait masses mean they aren't being chased or hassled," said McManus, who said marked fish may not bite at first, even if a fisherman drops a lure in front of them.

"Just hang with it for several minutes," said McManus. "They are like cats; sometimes you have to aggravate them into eating. Being patient, especially on bluebird days, puts fish in the boat."

For shallow fishing or for fish driving bait to the surface, McManus uses Shad Raps, jerkbaits, small spoons and jigs. Smallmouth may also move as deep as 80 feet. For these fish, McManus uses an ice jig or heavy spoon. The key is marking the fish on your electronics before dropping down a bait.

If you aren't getting bites but are marking fish, always go smaller," he said. "Shad that hatched late may still be just an inch long, and that's what you have to match."

McManus favors the lower end of the lake because it has more schools of quality smallmouth than schools of spotted bass.

Because of the growing number of spotted bass in Fontana, McManus releases all of the smallmouths he catches to help them maintain their numbers, a practice he would like to see other fishermen follow.

McManus also cautions fishermen to be aware of weather changes and to dress in layers. ■

— Tony Garitta

Wateree up next >

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Guide Rodger Taylor works from the mouth of creeks into backwaters looking for Lake Wateree's blue catfish in February.



Pat Robertson

WATEREE BLUE CATS

moving back and forth in creeks this month

One thing about the weather in February: it is reactive, filled with wet, cool days, buffeted by cold, north winds pushing one front after another, then jolted with a freakish day or two when temperatures spike into the 80s. That variability can make for unpredictable fishing — unpredictably good for catfish at South Carolina's Lake Wateree.

"My approach to fishing Wateree this time of year is much more

consistent than the weather but takes account of its variability," said guide Rodger Taylor of Rock Hill, S.C. "Water temperatures in the main channel generally are in the mid-40s in February. The shallow water, however, is colder in the early morning and warmer in the afternoon, given a decent sunny day. Shallow-water fishing often comes into play, because fish move back with bait when temperatures rise."





Taylor normally starts out in the early morning fishing the deeper water near the mouth of a creek, fan-casting cut gizzard shad from an anchored position into 15 to 30 feet of water. Then, as the sun rises and temperatures start to warm the backs of the creeks, he moves to shallow water and fishes 3 to 6 feet deep.

"Shallow-water fishing is my favorite. It is very productive. The average fish is 6 to 14 pounds, but we also catch much larger fish," said Taylor, who noted that Wateree is blessed with lots of large, shallow, backwater areas, particularly on its western side.

"Some of my favorites include Wateree, Taylor, Dutchman and Colonel creeks, but a word of warning: Dutchman and Wateree creeks are full of large stumps, so navigate in there with care."

On a fairly sunny day, even if the air is frigid, Taylor (803-517-7828) said the shallow backwaters will warm a few degrees higher than the main channel. Just a small temperature change will draw bait and fish to the shallows.

"Sea gulls, cormorants and herons are a sign that bait and fish are present, particularly if they are actively feeding. Screaming gulls can be heard from a great distance and usually they are there in great numbers — and that's a positive sign," he said.

Back in the shallows the approach is basic bottom-fishing with 10 to 12 rods cast all around the boat to cover a large area.

"The scent from all that fresh cut shad will diffuse into the water. Some patience is required but blues often will come in schools and fishing can be fast and furious," Taylor said. "The bite of blues in shallow water is very exciting. You really get a chance to see how much speed they can generate when they want to." ■

— Pat Robertson

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